

# Colonial Urban Planning in Delhi: The Case of Karol Bagh-WEA in the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century

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## Abstract

*Karol Bagh, known to many as the refugee neighborhood populated by refugees from the India-Pakistan partition is also a bustling and crowded commercial area of Delhi. One of the first planned extensions in Delhi was called the Western Extension Area (WEA) and was developed pre-independence as one of the first and largest city extensions in Delhi. Few know that this coincided with the building of the Imperial Capital of “New” Delhi in the early half of the twentieth century. Proposed as one of the largest city extensions by the Delhi Improvement Trust (DIT), to respond to the overcrowding of the walled city of Delhi, the development of this area, however, tells a story quite contrary to the making of the grand Imperial Delhi – built primarily for the British and Europeans. Colonial architecture and urban planning have a long legacy in many Indian cities particularly Delhi. But often ignored behind the grand avenues, colonial bungalows and monumental official buildings of New Delhi is the planning of the native parts of the city which were as much an outcome of colonial rule as the making of its imperial buildings and European quarters. With the example of WEA as the first planned extension of the city for its native population, this paper critically examines and decodes archival records, communication and data from 1900–1940, to examine how colonial control of urban resources and the techniques of governance, facilitated spatial segregation and inequality in the city that continue to carry an imprint in the city space even today.*

**Keywords:** Urban history, Delhi, colonial ideology, improvements, Karol Bagh-western extension

## INTRODUCTION

The major metropolis in almost every newly industrializing nation is not a single unified city, but in fact, two quite different cities, physically juxtaposed but architecturally and socially distinct. These dual cities have usually been a legacy from the colonial past (Abu-Loghod, 1965) [1]. Delhi grew exponentially in the years after 1911 [1–18]. Since the 1860s emerging as an important railway junction and later in 1911 with the decision of shifting the British Imperial Capital from Calcutta to Delhi, in a matter of just 50 years, the population of the city doubled to 3,47,592 in 1931 (Delhi Gazetteer, 1912) [13]. The five converging railway lines had already made it a commercial junction by 1890s and then with the building of the new Capital from 1911–1931 it attracted labor from around the region with other classes of people like traders, merchants, administrators and industrialists also migrating to Delhi. As the city grew in political and commercial importance, these migrations created a new and fractured geography of the colonizers and the colonized, in the manner that they lived and worked, by the amount of land they occupied and by the density of occupation.

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Karol Bagh-Western Extension was one such urban neighborhood that emerged and later planned as an extension to the already congested city of

Shahjahanabad. Even though it was planned to accommodate the expected growth that the city was bound to attract as the new Capital, however, unlike the grandiose plans for New Delhi, WEA was planned and executed with extreme limitations of funds, resources and attention. The urban municipality that had been formed by the 1860s and the collection of heavy taxes and octroi by the colonial government for over a century did not alter the narrative of lack of funds to provide even basic services to this rapidly expanding city of the natives contrasted acutely with the detailed plans and budget allocations for a city that was going to be inhabited almost exclusively by British and Europeans and a handful of their princely Indian allies. The planned population density of Karol Bagh was over 100 people per acre vs that of New Delhi of under 3 per acre.

Two themes are used to present this argument with a critical reading and decoding of archival documents: First the control of land around the city that was achieved through a mix of outright annexation, re-categorization of land titles and tenures and creating laws for land acquisition for public purposes. And secondly, the colonial narrative of “improvements” of both, the morality of the natives and the productivity of land, with techniques of planning by Improvement Trusts that produced a landscape of segregation and inequality.

### Acquisition of Suburban Land

The early 1900s revealed a rise in suburban land value across larger cities in India like Calcutta, Bombay and Madras, alerting the colonial government to the potential of land value that could be capitalized for generating profit. Prior to this, even though the suburban population of Delhi (outside the then walled city), had been growing and was already half of that of the walled city by 1884, it was overlooked and neglected by the Government. The suburban land around Delhi had been annexed by the British after the 1857 Revolt, however it was not of much value and importance as the prime focus was on the Port cities of the sub-continent for transportation, and the raw material producing agrarian rural areas. Over the years between 1857–1908, several administrators to Delhi called for extensions to the city, but the only small, scattered efforts of growth in the suburban land permitted by the Government were for European residential and leisure facilities in the Civil Lines, the many Railways lines and yards, their junctions and stations, commercial areas, military cantonments. The two existing settlements of Paharganj, Sabzi Mandi and newer Sadar Bazaar became clusters of perpetual growth as the only options for native migrants in the city to stay. The growing city population started expanding into the suburban areas but without any planning for native needs. Fast congesting city and suburban settlements needed attention and the Commissioner of Delhi alert to this, in 1874, said,

“Some of the finest properties to be found anywhere, properties which could be immensely prized in any European Capital and which are capable not only of being made a great source of *future profit*, but the *improvement* of which will vastly increase the *comfort and health of people* in Delhi and its neighborhood and add to the attractions of the city which so many travelers visit from all parts of the world.” (emphasis mine) (Hume, 1935) [15].

These words are an early precursor to legislations that get formalized four decades later as an improvement trust in Delhi. What is important to note here in this description of the lands outside the city of Delhi, infused with the beauty and nostalgia of its rustic landscape, is the idea of “improvement” and “the comfort and health of people in Delhi”, which somewhat obscures the goal of “future profit” which could be tapped into, by controlling the expansion of urban land and property.

The suburban lands outside Delhi originally belonged to the Mughal rulers were annexed by the British in 1803 and after the Revolt of 1857 became “Crown property” called the Crown or *Nazul* Lands. The population of the city was just over a lakh and a half in 1874 when these lands did not have much value with municipal collections in revenue or rents a meagre Rs. 10,600 annually even though we see in this 1884 map (Figure 1), the area covered was quite large (Hume, 1935) [15]. Of little value and considered a nuisance due to encroachments and unclear policy for administration, their management was handed over to the Municipal Committee.

By the turn of the century, only 30 years later, things changed dramatically. Land value in the scattered suburban settlements had escalated by 200–700% in areas of Sadar Bazaar, Sabzi Mandi and Pahargunj. This drew the Government’s attention to the potential profits from these vast tracts of lands which had been in a messy administrative state, with multiple ownerships, irregularities in leases and rents, *maufis* and encroachments, none or incomplete maps and plans. The rising land value also brought to attention to the Government’s control on land and hence it was “inadvisable to give powers of such lands to Municipal Councils’ since the Councils also had, even if with very limited authority, native members. With the Government finally in agreement, the Deputy Commissioner of Delhi, Mr. Humphrey, commissioned a special officer, Mr. R B Whitehead in 1908 to survey the Crown lands after several failed efforts of having local administrators who had tried to take stock of the rural and urban *nazul* and *taiul* lands (Whitehead, 1908) [18].

Almost all records had been destroyed in the 1857 Revolt and when in 1908 Mr. R. B. Whitehead was commissioned to take stock of the Crown lands, the Report had to be pieced together from incomplete records found with local *Patwaris* and whatever was still available in the North-Western Provincial offices. While these messy records were repeatedly blamed as a fact of the mismanagement of the Municipality in several reports and official communication over the decades to follow, it is useful to investigate further what and who was responsible for the multiple ownerships on these lands that had earlier been claimed as Crown property after the Revolt.

### Authoritative Colonial Claims and Defiant Native Occupation

After the Revolt of 1857 or what was called the Mutiny by the British, Delhi was cleared out of all its people by the Company to teach the mutineers a lesson. They were dispossessed off their properties and only those who could prove their allegiance and loyalty to the British were allowed to re-enter the walled city (Gupta, 1981) [3]. In addition, one-third of the city’s buildings were demolished by making a 500-yard clearing around the Fort and Palace. People fled the city, many settling in the western suburbs of the city where the Grand Trunk Road as a major artery on the West towards Kabul and the NW Province already had settlements, markets like Paharganj, Subzi Mandi and several *serias*.

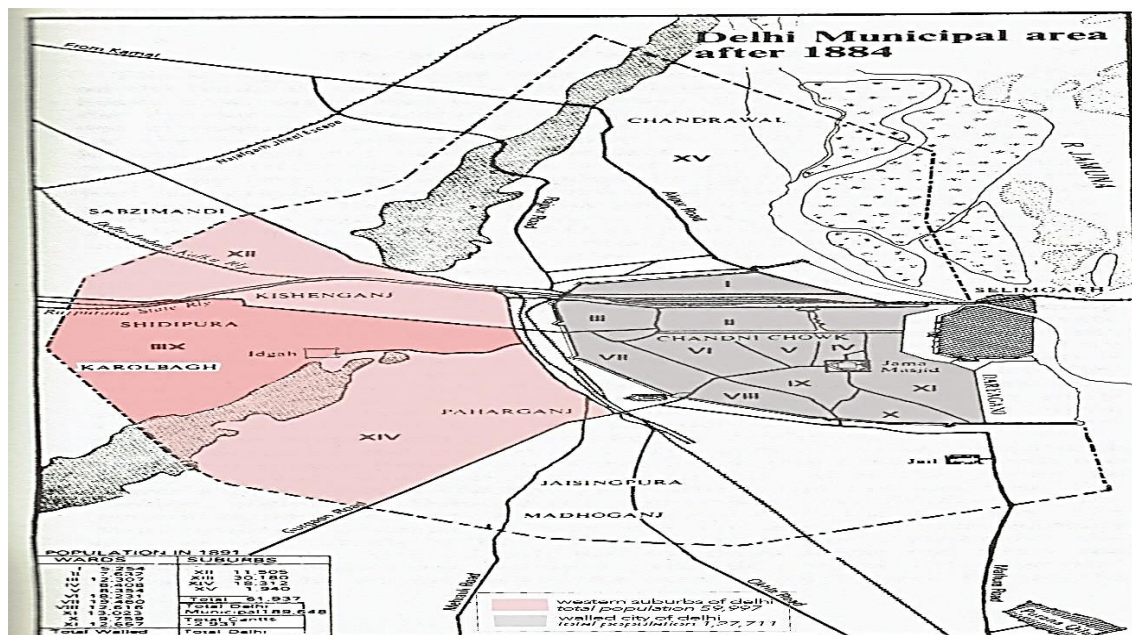


Figure 1. Western suburbs of Delhi. Delhi Municipal Area after 1884.

Source: Author edited Archival Map.

Before the British arrived, Delhi’s Moghul rulers had given lands outside the walled city of Shahjahanabad to their main allies, like the Nawabs of Jhajjar, Loharu and Rajas of Ballabgarh, Jaipur

and Kishengarh. On these estates, there were older village settlements with their *abadi*, agricultural, forest, grazing and from several centuries of rulers in Delhi other sacred structures like mosques, dargahs and shrines. Officially, in the 1908 Whitehead Report, of the 14 villages it enumerates, only two comprised the main suburban areas and were identified as Jahan Numa and Khandrat Kalan on the northwest and south of the walled city center of Shahjahanabad, respectively. These were assumed to be as under the “ownership” to the King of Delhi since 1803, and confiscated after the 1857 Revolt, taken under the ownership of the Crown.

The uniform categories that were assigned to these lands administratively, however, claimed to serve the colonial political economy, even though it ignored several socio-cultural, ecological, historic realities of the area. Besides the historic diversity of land tenures, and categories, the existence of a landscape of historic religious and social structures, there were also settlements that had come up during British administration that were later disregarded with changing governing policies, further alienating the native people from their land. One such case is the land occupation by the British military after the 1857 Revolt. Troops had been posted at various places within the walls and outside the city to maintain order. One such camp was in a desolate spot on the ridge in Jahan Numah area, near the old Idgah on the western side of the city. The Cantonment Magistrate, Major Trevelyan (not confused with Mr. C. E. Trevelyan) found, it was necessary to form a market for his camp and invited shopkeepers for the daily needs of the soldiers, to settle on “Government waste land” to the east of Pahari Dhiraj. The Report recounts Major Trevelyan’s claim while granting the land: “It is certain that the colony will remain here forever. In case the Sadar Bazar is removed from this place or if a road is made through it, no compensation will be paid. No one will be allowed to sell shop to anyone else. Whitehead’s Report on the Administration of the Crown Lands in 1908 refers to these people who were officially allotted land and paid rents for 50 years supporting the British Troops – as “Major Trevelyan’s *squatters*” – taking away in a swift sweep of the word “squatter” – the right these people were granted by a previous British officer.

Records of settlements created by British officers like Trevelyan and Major Trevelyan’s “squatters”, including pre-British land ownerships, show a history of land ownership in the suburban Nazul lands to be complicated not only due to pre-British land systems but even after it fell into British control, officially transformed into reality through Government documentation. For instance, Whitehead’s Report mentions that the Settlement Report of 1864 claimed and recorded without much ground evidence, the Government to be the owner of all lands in Jahan Numah and Khandrat Kala. Authoritatively reiterated again in 1876, Mr. Leslie Smith, Assistant Commissioner’s enquiry of rural and urban Delhi by the Settlement Department in connection with the *maufi* tenures stated.

“It is directed that the propriety right of the Government should be asserted in each case, and recorded in the Settlement papers, that a suitable rent should be fixed and in cases where Government right is not accepted the holder should be ejected” (Whitehead, 1908) [18].

### **The Making of New Delhi**

In 1913, a significant part of Khandrat Kalan and a smaller area of Jahan Numa was selected as the site for building the new Capital in Delhi. With no idea of this impending future the Whitehead’s Report in 1908, only 5 years prior, states, “A large amount of landed property in this neighborhood was sold by the Deputy Commissioner after the Mutiny, but many purchasers had subsequently added enormously to their holdings by encroachment. The occupants of Khandrat were mostly squatters and had no good title to land.” It also states that “the greater part of the land outside the *abadi* in *mauzas* Khandrat and Jahan Numa was held in *maufi* tenures (Whitehead, 1908) [18].” Of the 152 arable, pasture and garden land recorded by an Assistant Commissioners attempts at recording land tenures in these two villages (*mauzas*), “142 related to *maufi* tenure.” There were grants of land for services by natives to the colonial officers or for loyalty demonstrated during the Mutiny but as stated in Whitehead’s recordings, many were also the lands granted in 1830s by Mr. Trevelyan. These quotations

reveal the contradictions inherent on the one hand of assertions of landownership and on the other, of sale of lands by a government officials. Blaming the Government's actions on lost records and disputes of land titles on a "messy affair", while labelling the native people "squatters", and rebuking the Municipality's ineptitude in suburban land management, to justify the transfer of control and ownership to the Government. It is no coincidence that a few years before commissioning this report it had been recorded in 1902 that the value of some of these suburban lands had gone up by 700% in Sadar Bazar, 400% in Paharganj and 300% in Sabzi Mandi, exposing the huge potential profits that could be made from the value of suburban land that, I claim, was at the heart of the Imperial Government's assertion on suburban lands (Whitehead, 1908) [18].

### Improvements and Land Acquisition

In 1912, Beadon had argued for an Improvement trust for Delhi, as had Muhammad Asaf Ali, in the 1924 requisition for the Town Improvement Act to be extended to the capital city. Improvement Trusts had already been introduced three decades earlier in other parts of the country to address the problem of diseases and congestion due to overcrowding and unsanitary living conditions in large cities. After an at least 35 years delay, with several rejected proposals to bring an improvement trust to Delhi, it was only in 1936 that it was finally agreed on. Given the constant fund shortage that was projected by the colonial government, the hesitation to bring improvement trust to Delhi was based on its experience of the large budget and expenditure it necessitated given the state of complete neglect and filth that all cities in India and since a century most industrial cities around the world had reached.

The Western Extension Area (WEA) of the city was originally part of the Imperial Capital Project meant to provide for the much-needed city expansion and urban services for the native city people. But yet again the budgets exceeded what the Government found acceptable, and the Secretary of State sanctioned it to be treated as separate and managed locally, administered by Delhi Municipality under a separate account head. Subsequently, with the rise in land values, certain kinds of improvement projects with commercial interest were more profitable (see Table 1). Again, it is evident that sharing surplus with the Municipality for putting it back into the city needs would reduce the gains of the Imperial Government and it was decided that all Nazul lands, revenues and Improvement schemes would be withdrawn from Municipal control. In 1925, the Deputy Commissioner was given direct charge of the Nazul land, overtly blaming the incompetence of the Municipality thus far, even though the mismanagement of the Nazul areas was blamed as much on the government's responses over the years (Whitehead, 1908) [18]. Further, despite the Chief Commissioner's proposal for water supply and drainage provisions in the Western Extension, nothing had been done till 1931. A sub-committee in 1931, noted that Karol Bagh or WEA is yet unfortunately devoid of water supply or drainage. Hume's report states that the "melancholy history of the Western Extension colonies created by the government in 1913 and still lacking the most ordinary amenities of life.

**Table 1.** Government Profits from Improvement Schemes up to 1936, Hume Report, 1936.

Road	Grant from Govt. unto 1936	Income Received by Govt. up to 1936	Profit
Burn Bastion Road	1,22,000	8,06,155	6,84,155
Garstin Bastion Road	2,50,000	5,82,083	3,32,083
Jhandewala Road	47,404	1,27,199	79,795
Idgah	1,13,279	27,529	-85,750
Idgah Extension	7,200	-	-7,200
Mundhewala	2,46,032	13,611	-2,32,361
<i>Total</i>	7,85,915	15,56,657	7,70,722

This blame-game between the Government and the Municipality lasted over a decade, eventually settled by a Bombay Court judgement that, "while legally a municipality could not compel Government as estate owner to supply particular services, neither could the Government compel the Municipality to provide the necessary money." Based on this, the Government agreed that in the case of Western

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Extensions, it would incur the cost of basic services but capped it to a maximum of 10 lakh. Inadequate even for the existing inhabited area of Western Extension another 13 lakh for even basic services would be needed for the new additions.

The Cost for building the New Capital, on the other hand, was uncompromised. As a comparison, some of the expenses incurred only in the first three years for the planning of the new Capital between 1911–1914 were: Rs 47 lakhs on the cost of land acquisition and 1.7 lakhs in the salaries paid for this work. The expense of the entire work for New Delhi was estimated at a staggering 5-million-pound sterling, in this report of 1914, with only the annual establishment (staff salary) expenses being Rs 9 lakh (Proceedings, 1914) [16]. Built unencumbered by meagre discussions of profits or investment constraints, a ten square mile area was built with generous 300-foot-wide roads lined with wide green avenues. The romantic imagery of being built amidst “ancient ruins” (while displacing many living villages and agricultural lands), with every detail planned with precision like water supply with multiple alternative sources, a water-borne sewerage system, even an elaborate arboriculture plan for forests and gardens generously watered by bypassing the needs of the many in the old city and its extensions. It was a city meant for 20,000 people only, with no room for the poor, not even the Indian clerks employed in this new city. They were left to their means to find room in the already congested Old City (Legg, 2007) [7]. Despite the congestion of the Old City and to keep its polluted, unsanitary population and space at bay large open, green, buffer areas were planned between the two cities for adequate segregation on the south side and the railways acquired land on the immediate west of the wall.

After two decades, in 1935, A.P. Hume was commissioned to Report on the Congestion of Delhi. The Report highlighted an immediate excess population of 1,00,000 people and a probable increase of 133,000 in the next 15 years. It recommended the possibility of housing and shops for 41000 in the 416 acres available on vacant government land and further acquisition of 1100 acres for the 106,000 people (a planned density of 100/acre). It also highlighted the importance of addressing the slum clearance and re-accommodation problem to ameliorate insanitary conditions.

This Report finally led to the formation of the Delhi Improvement Trust in 1936. Unfortunately, the solutions and work done by the Trust remained piecemeal and far from adequate. As these archival records have shown projects were considered and chosen and executed when their financial success was possible, not really for improvement of the “lives of the people of Delhi”. Slum clearances were taken up to allow the acquisition of precious city land but relocation and housing for the displaced were never fulfilled. Improvement of the conditions of the worst parts of the city were turned into capture of land and housing developments focused on middle- and higher-income groups.

On the other hand, large scale acquisition of land was an immediate priority for the building of the New Capital. According to the Land Acquisition Act of 1894, the Lieutenant Governor of Punjab and its dependencies declared in 1912 that the land is required by Government for the public purpose, namely for the New Capital of India at Delhi (DC File#12, 1913). Land was acquired under two categories – Imperial and Delhi City Expansion of 110 villages of which two thirds were thriving agricultural lands, some irrigated and others not. Beadon the special Acquisition officer in his Report on acquisition in 1912 states that, “(the Government) not only has the *legal* power to acquire agricultural land at the agricultural market value (enhanced at 15%) but also the *executive* power to develop and urbanize by locating on the land a large office establishment which must bring in its train numerous unofficial population. While most were bought at agricultural rates with some correction for proximity to the city, they were sold at much higher rates to private players, other departments and the report goes on to recommend acquiring the ‘probable tracts’ even though they did not need them by financial analysis and large profits it would eventually return. Acquiring Paharganj, populated by over 15,000 people on the other hand, was not profitable as it was not agricultural and relocating the urban people even though living in overcrowded slum like conditions was not worth their while” (Beadon, 1912).



Additionally, land was classified and assessed based on its future market value. Class I and II for official buildings and residence were classified unproductive land and Class III and IV meant for the Zamindars, and rich Indian classes was considered “productive”. Commissioner Craddock earlier proposed the latter two classes be sold at Rs 300 and Rs 2500 per acre. However, only a month later special acquisition officer Col. Beadon increased this to 1000 and 10,000 per acre respectively! (Kataria, 2019) [5] The Western Extensions that were originally made for the poor classes were later marked for Class III and IV for receipt of higher returns. Several commercial projects also with higher returns were also taken up by the Improvement Trust. The conceptualizer and first Chairman of the Trust, Hume, eventually frustrated with the intentions and workings of the Trust, wrote to his father, “He quotes Hume’s lament to his father “Old Delhi was hemmed in on all sides and been congested for years... already waited twenty years in squalor and slums for improvement while the Government poured its gold into the Imperial New Capital.”

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper has attempted to show how planning and the ideas of improvement used together in a surreptitious way towards very different ends in the native and European parts during British colonial rule. After decades of neglecting urban upgradations, service and infrastructural provision for basic sanitary needs and even 70 years after the formation of a Municipal Council, the Delhi Improvement Trust came 40 years late even after recorded warnings from British and native officers highlighting the urgent need to decongesting the native city, and planning extensions to it for its growing population particularly for its poor and for resettling slums dwellers. Neglecting the needs of the native city people were justified by the need to make financially profitable sense to the Imperial Government. Careful reading of the archival records presented in this paper reveals the lapses and the starkly unequal treatment of natives and Europeans producing an urban space that is ironically opposite of its stated benevolent intentions – of improving the lives of its people. The reality however, on unravelling this history of the tussle between the Imperial Government and Municipality, land acquisition and annexation through seemingly liberal laws and in the interest of creating value, had quite the opposite impact. Narratives of helping the natives and improving their lives were but euphemisms of capitalizing on land value through its acquisition and control.

Karol Bagh and WEA, even as a planned city extension, continues today as an overcrowded under-serviced area with some hidden examples of housing and commercial enclaves of rich art deco and colonial architecture of the middle and upper class that came up almost a hundred years ago. Its current overcrowded nature however is not only due to the burden of population and post-partition influx as many know, nor only due to the mismanagement or lack of funds of the post-independence administration. It is due to the historic disinterest in providing for the poor classes and a baggage of policies and ideologies instituted then, that continue today in our independent nation still ill-equipped to provide for the poor but very capable of creating large-budget and mega-scale designs to support the upper classes in the name of public good. The grand New Delhi continues to be the beautiful, green city center, even today with the highest funding for its Municipal corporation compared to other parts of the city. Exposing such urban colonial histories that have yet to be acknowledged in our system or even in the narrative of development, brings forth the drawbacks of the lingering colonial patterns, that maintain the “difference” between the powerful or rich and the poor in our cities even today.

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