

## SHAHPUR JAT: AN URBAN VILLAGE IN FLUX

### Introduction

We were sitting in the office-cum-studio of Punit Jasuja, event manager and owner/curator of Second Floor Studio, furiously taking down notes as he chattered away enthusiastically on why he chose Shahpur Jat to anchor his ambitious and painstakingly curated business. We'd been told he was in the midst of planning an event for the President and we had exactly twelve minutes of his time. In the middle of his exposition, he remarked "In fact, it might aid your research to know that literally this month's *Vogue* has declared – Move over Hauz Khas Village, Shahpur Jat's taken over the title of design destination in the capital," he said, with full conviction. Indeed, *Vogue* had—and the strains of Mozart as we descended the stairs seemed to hammer in the finality of these words.

Mainstream coverage of Shahpur Jat had been along exactly these lines: charting its emergence as one of the leading creative centers of the capital, with one-of-a-kind concept stores, restaurants, and independent designers setting up business and setting themselves apart from assembly-line production of mall brands. The village's prime location in South Delhi, sandwiched as it is between the Asiad Village, Siri Fort Auditorium, and Panchsheel Park, cemented its rise as a commercial and lifestyle destination for discerning clientele. This carving out of a distinct aesthetic firmly rooted in the 'alternative' is essential to the dominant image of the village. However, upon entering Shahpur Jat, one is immediately struck by the coexistence of multiple spatial practices and economies. There are, along with these independent stores, numerous bridal boutiques, smaller tailoring and artisan units, individual dyers, design makers, dry cleaners, zari stores etc. How do these spaces challenge or problematize the alternative definition of the village? What cycles of urban renewal and change are triggered by the entry of boutiques into the village? How do the multiple and heterogeneous inhabitants of the village—which, at 421 houses, is far larger and more labyrinthine than its frequently compared cousin, Hauz Khas Village—negotiate space around their specific and coexistent needs? How have the changes brought about in the village affected their business and life practices? These are the questions we attempted to understand through our fieldwork.



Image 1.1 and 1.2: House No. 124, belonging to Rajinder Panwar, in the 1960s and today



Image 2: Map of Shahpur Jat (2013), a collaboration between boutique owners

## **Why Shahpur Jat?**

Our interest in Shahpur Jat arose precisely because of its image as the close cousin of Hauz Khas Village, promoting a similar aesthetic sensibility clearly oriented towards the unconventional and alternative. Interestingly, in the course of our field work, we found a number of store owners seemed to play upon this image of being alternative. Through conversations with them, what came across was not only their desire to project themselves as non-mainstream, but also the way in which the atmosphere of an urban village is an accomplice in such a projection. Moreover, what was evident in a few of the news reports about Hauz Khas Village was how its commercial movements and changes were influenced by the particular intersection of conditions found in an urban village: its location in the prime locale of South Delhi, the fact that it comes under Lal Dora jurisdiction and is hence exempt from most MCD construction and commercial by-laws. Shahpur Jat is embedded in a similar intersection of circumstances, multiplied several times over given Shahpur Jat's size. Not only does it influence the relationship between landlords and tenants in the village, in terms of legal ambiguity and arbitrary rent increase, it is also clearly reflected in the spatial organization of the village. It is this spatial organization and the heterogeneity of inhabitants (as interviewed below, in this report) that distinguishes it from a regulated DDA colony, or a market like Khan Market, or a shopping mall like Select City Walk, in Saket. What became evident, then, was that unlike the aforementioned urban spaces, the development of an urban village like Shahpur Jat, took place in a scattered and unplanned manner, leading to its current spatial characteristics, that have major impact on the lives of tenants as well as landlords. Therefore, we felt that our research would go a little way in trying to unpack the life-worlds of the inhabitants of urban villages in Delhi, wherein Shahpur Jat would act as a relevant example, a topic on which there is little academic literature.

## **Methodology**

Our methodology involved an in-depth qualitative analysis of our field. We conducted personal interviews over three weeks, ranging from five minutes to two hours in length, depending on their responsiveness. Our respondents include boutique owners, individual tailors and their units, artisans, the MCD counselor for Shahpur Jat (Meenu Panwar), men and women who worked at boutiques as salespeople who were living in the village as tenants, and members of the Panwar Jat community who own properties that they have leased out. Pictures were taken of building structures and features of the village.

While we had given in our proposal with the intention to study gentrification in Shahpur Jat, upon heading into the field we realized that gentrification was too loaded and limited a concept to fully examine in the limited time we had.



## History



**Image 3: Panwar nameplate**

Shahpur Jat is classified as one of the 135 urban villages in Delhi by the DDA. Upon entering the village, it's hard to miss that nearly every nameplate reads "Panwar". Several of the landlords we interviewed went over the history of the village with us. Ram Panwar, Meenu Panwar's father-in-law, quickly ran us through the sequence of events: the village is 800 years old, founded in 1442, the Government acquired their agricultural land under the Delhi Master Plan in 1962. Yoginder Panwar, another resident of the village, told us the Jats have been here for 730 years. They originally belonged to the 'Dagar' clan that hailed from Ujjain and forcefully captured this land. When the government acquired the land in 1962, the compensation rate was apparently Rs. 1.72 per acre. Interestingly, another respondent told us their main crop was *gobhi*, "*poori Dilli mein*

*mashur*", and tobacco. It is interesting to note that this history of the village was communicated through the male landlords. Given how kinship systems work, the female landlords we spoke to (Meenu Panwar, Rachana Sharma, Babita Panwar) all had their natal villages outside Shahpur Jat, and thus focused instead on contemporary issues facing women in the village.

One of the oldest retail establishments in Shahpur Jat was Dastkar, an NGO set up in the 1980s to support traditional Indian craftspeople. An interview with Laila Tyabji, a founding member of the organization, gave us a sense of the way in which Shahpur Jat has evolved since the first few commercial enterprises came up in the area. While small businesses run by *kaarigars* and supporting enterprises like *zari* shops, small eateries, etc. have been thriving in the interiors of Shahpur Jat for well over two decades, the coming in of institutions such as Dastkar was what initially 'put Shahpur Jat on the map' as a potential hub for alternative businesses.

Tyabji described Shahpur Jat as, initially, being a charming location with small plots and barely any buildings that were more than 2 storeys. She commented on the laid back attitude of its residents, stemming from its agrarian background that continued into recent times when their sources of income switched from agriculture to rent. The simple lifestyles that constituted of rearing cows, pigs, etc. was transformed as the livestock was replaced by fancy cars and the influx of new money meant that the residents no longer needed to take up other kinds of work to earn a livelihood. While huge sums of money were spent in renovating interiors, there was no sense of collaboration amongst the landlords, little coordination between the storeowners and barely any communication linking landlords and shop owners. This, then, has led to Shahpur Jat developing in a messy and unplanned manner with narrow, messy roads and small spaces that,

according to Tyabji, set it apart from locations such as Hauz Khas Village that are a lot more 'trendy and attractive'. She believes that with a joint effort on the part of the population of the area it could have evolved into something a lot better, but in the absence of such attempts, its large size and uneven development has meant that it cannot be created into something as upmarket as Hauz Khas Village.

In terms of the changes seen over the years, Tyabji recalls the existence of workshops run by designers such as Ritu Kumar as well as those belonging to graduates of design institutes such as Pearl Academy of Fashion and National Institute of Fashion Technology. This, undoubtedly, is a trend that has picked up today, with designers choosing to set up not only workshops but also stores in the locality. While this has led to an increase in rent prices in Shahpur Jat, causing many store owners to constantly move inwards, where the rents are lower, Laila Tyabji maintains that costs haven't really escalated, except in the front rows, which are easily accessible to those visiting the market. Dastkar, on the other hand, remained in the same building for the entire duration that it was located there, which seems to be the case with most of the oldest establishments in the area.

Shiva Carpets is another store that was set up in Shahpur Jat around the same time as Dastkar, and is still located there. In conversation with the manager, Manoj Mishra, who has been working there since its establishment, we discovered that the store had been in the same building for 17 years, and shifted to their new location 7 years ago. Mishra, who moved to Delhi in January of 2000 from Madhya Pradesh, with his sister, recalls Shahpur Jat as being dirty, with badly maintained streets and small shops, with fewer people and fewer stores. He views the changes in a positive light as not only improving the conditions of the locality, with the streets becoming cleaner and grocery shops and junk dealers being replaced by fancy showrooms, but also as opening up avenues for employment. He, however, does acknowledge the steep increase in rent and the steady decrease in the number of *kaarigars* residing and working in the village. Moreover, he talks about the changes in terms of smaller buildings being broken down and replaced by multi storeys and the influx of restaurants, jewelry and furnishing stores, alongside the clothing boutiques that began to come up around half a decade ago. He attributes the increase in footfall to the establishment of the Potbelly restaurant and The Wishing Chair, which is a home décor store and sees Shahpur Jat slowly becoming the next Hauz Khas Village.

While the majority of their clients are from Embassies or hear about their showroom through word of mouth, Mishra attributes the recent fall in business to the moving out of Dastkar from Shahpur Jat. He, however, is not the only one whose clientele has fallen after Dastkar shifted location. In the middle of store renovations when we met her, Rema Kumar, a textile designer, who has been running her store out of Shahpur Jat since 2001, is also disillusioned by the changes happening in the village. She attributes these to "diplomats wives moving into Dada Jungi House" to set up bridal boutiques, which she describes as being "too bling". Kumar, who worked closely with Dastkar, chose to set up shop here 14 years ago, not just because of the low rents, but also because she saw it

as an artsy hub. This, however, according to her, is no longer the case. While footfall in the village has increased because of cafes and trousseau shopping, it has also lost its earlier charm. Her shop is the only one, now, that works with ethnic designs and craftsmen, after Dastkar. The other options of Hauz Khas Village and Lado Sarai, however, are too expensive and with a desire to keep price margins on her products low, do not seem feasible for her. While she does feel pressurized to move out by her landlord, who is looking to get more rent, she has talked him out of it for now and plans to stay on in Shahpur Jat itself.

## Boutiques

Over the last decade, Shahpur Jat has become a nucleus for designers and small business owners who seek to set up their own boutiques and offices. While the first few boutiques that came up in the village were solely for trousseau shopping, Shahpur Jat is now seeing the entry of designer clothing, jewelry stores, and even creative home décor. The majority of the storeowners we spoke to seemed to have chosen Shahpur Jat over other possible markets due to the low rent prices. Moreover, there appeared to be a marked preference for a space like this urban village, over a mall, due to its status as an upcoming creative and alternative hub. As Sonam, the owner of one of the newer boutiques, informed us, “Since the market in Delhi is extremely scattered, it becomes convenient to have so many designers under one ‘roof.’” While her store was located more towards the interior of the market due to her budget, she nonetheless seemed optimistic about increasing footfall in the village. What also stood out was the advantage Shahpur Jat seemed to provide these boutique owners with, in terms of not only enough space to set up a workshop close to their stores, but also easy access to labour from the interiors of the village.

The reputation of Shahpur Jat as a trousseau market sets it apart from markets such as Hauz Khas Village. Bhumika, the owner of one of the oldest bridal boutiques in the village, started seven years ago, talked about choosing Shahpur Jat not only for its location but also because she felt that areas such Greater Kailash and Hauz Khas Village, did not cater to the wedding market. Since the setting up of her store, Shahpur Jat has seen many more bridal boutiques set up shop and several others close down. With the increase in footfall, competition has also increased. Bhumika tells us about purposely having her production unit in Saket, outside of Shahpur Jat, since “snatching of master jis and *kaarigars*” is not uncommon amongst the boutiques that are in competition with each other.

Many of the boutique owners, including Bhumika and Akshay Wadhwa, who also set up his bridal boutique around the same time as the former, seem to prefer Shahpur Jat for the kind of customer base it draws. While Wadhwa seems to believe that the “*crème-de-la-crème*” clientele is slowly dwindling, Bhumika appreciates the “genuine” buyers that visit the village, that are not merely window-shopping, like mall goers. While both old and new boutique owners acknowledge the fast changing conditions in the village, not everyone seems to

feel the same way about them. The increase in rent is something that has become an everyday reality for these storeowners. While most claim to have a decent relationship with their landlords, they also seem to be facing erratic increases in rent prices that have no regulations, owing to the fact that Shahpur Jat is a Lal Dora area. Moreover, while some boutique owners view Shahpur Jat as the next Hauz Khas Village, others like Bhumika dread the day that this should happen, and still others, believe that this is far from possible.

Many of the older boutique owners, such as Pooja Malik who set up shop in the village 11 years ago, describes the initial five years as being rather stagnant. It is in the past five years, according to her, that the village has become comparable with any other commercial area. Along with the random rent increments, however, she also feels that a majority of the new boutiques are not professional and in her words “don’t know cotton from georgette” and are only here to “turn black money into white money”. Malik also believes that ultimately, with all the progress its made, Shahpur Jat is better than Hauz Khas Village, since it has something for all kinds of budgets and the people behind the counters are the owners and creators of the products being sold.

Shahpur Jat has recently also become the focal point for a number of concept stores, be it the Wishing Chair, that has a huge following on social networking sites and has become one of the crowd pullers in the village, or Second Floor Studio, whose owner Punit believes that people are increasingly looking for alternative places to shop at. Many of the newer home décor and lifestyle stores, then, view Shahpur Jat as a location that fits into their branding of ‘alternative’. As Surbhi Kapoor, the owner of one such store reiterated, the village isn’t mainstream and its rustic character and the experience of walking through winding lanes, draws the creamier crowd. Her store, like many others, depends on publicity done by online portals such as Little Black Book Delhi and SoDelhi, which caters to a certain class of clientele that these boutiques depend upon.

Aside from stores that seek to utilize the growing popularity of the village to their advantage, Shahpur Jat is also home to a number of studios that are not necessarily located there for the footfall. While some of them, such as White Champa, would rather be “discovered”, others do not wish to use the space as a retail outlet. Jenjum Gadi, who has had a studio in Shahpur Jat for over 8 years told us about how he deliberately did not get involved with the Map Association, a group of boutique owners who had gotten together to create a map of all the stores in the village, because he did not want his studio to be put on this map, which would go on to be published in many magazines and websites. This, then, was his way of managing the footfall that his private studio received. .

Yet, being a boutique owner in the village is not just a breezy picture of boundless creativity and Condé Nast coverage. The pressures of rent, the lack of registered leases and thus the threat of eviction at any given moment, and the complete lack of any kind of traders’ association leads to a peculiar stress that’s persistently at the back of owners’ minds. Shruti, the owner of Lila, an organic clothing brand, pegs the situation as a catch-22, where Shahpur Jat is the only affordable place in town but also doesn’t give any returns. She went through the

cycle of investing all her capital in a space and sprucing it up from scratch, setting up her store, only to be told a few months after her store had become operational that the landlord would like to give it to a party that was offering a higher price. She argues that while the village is interesting from an cultural and architectural perspective, as a study in a unique urban fabric, it's ultimately inconvenient; the leases have no legal standing and the exemption from DDA construction laws due to it being a Lal Dora area mean that as a business owner, one is plagued by a sense of impermanence. The number of walk-ins is never anywhere close to constituting a steady stream of profit, yet the commercial profile of the place is rising fast enough to impact rents significantly. In her words, "The 'cool' is what brings people and what ruins this." She ultimately hopes to shift Lila, which runs akin to a charity, out of Shahpur Jat into an area that's legally much more sound.

### Residents:

### Tenants

The influx of boutiques in Shahpur Jat has had a huge impact on the lives of those who reside in the village. While the landlords have mostly benefitted by these changes, it is tenants who have had to bare the brunt of increments in rent caused by this pattern of gentrification. Twenty-year-old Lakhiya, who lives in Shahpur Jat with her parents and siblings, narrates the story of the changes that have engulfed the village and consequently made it extremely difficult to maintain a livelihood there. She recalls the days of her childhood, when Shahpur Jat was no more than a village and the landlords' and tenants' children attended the same school that was located in Dada Jungi Lane, but is no longer there. She acknowledges the development brought about by the coming in of the boutiques. According to her, the boutiques have brought with them "high class customers" and the surrounding areas have become increasingly cleaner. Moreover, women living in the village, who were once expected to stay at home, can now get jobs as salesgirls in these boutiques, that are close to home, and contribute to their household economies. Lakhiya herself works in one such boutique, while doing a correspondence course in Political Science, from the University of Delhi. She aspires to be a schoolteacher and believes it is what she is working towards, even while managing the counter in a boutique.

The supply, however, exceeds the demand here and she asserts that while in other markets, salesgirls easily make Rs. 10,000 per month, the salaries here do not exceed Rs. 6000-8000. She calls living in the village a 'challenge', with the ever increasing rents and constant need to shift houses, as and when the landlords decide to break down smaller rooms to build showrooms that can be rented out to boutiques for higher rent. Seema, who works as an embroider in one of the stores and has lived in Shahpur Jat for the majority of her life, tells of a similar situation, wherein the work provided by the influx of boutiques is appreciated,



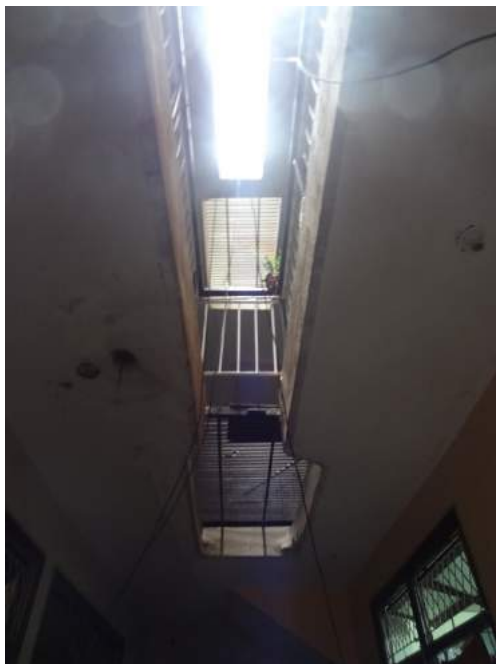
Image 4: Seema



however the increase in rent prices is also traced back to them, and has become a struggle for these tenants. In her words, “*Jab kiraya dena padhta hai to lagta hai ye boutiques kyun aa gaye, par jab tankha milti hai to lagta hai ki accha hai boutiques aa gayi.*” Apart from rent, living expenses such as water and electricity costs have also increased manifold. Lakhiya’s friend Poonam says that a household needs to have a minimum of three working members to survive in the village. Lakhiya, meanwhile, describes the increment in the prices of even the roadside eating stalls, which were once in abundance but now are only a handful, and that too priced very high. These stalls, once meant for the *kaarigars* and tenants who resided in the village but have started moving out due to extremely high rents, are now targeted towards the customers and boutique owners who visit the village on a daily basis.

The plight of the tenants does not stop at the high rent prices. Many like Aruna and Bina, who work in boutiques to support their families, and have homes within Shahpur Jat, claim to be continually harassed by their landlords. Aruna, who went to college in Calcutta and moved here after she got married, is only one of the many who face water shortages, electricity problems and unreasonable restrictions put forth by landlords. Many of these tenants seem to attribute these problems to a “Jat mentality”. While most boutique owners and even small business owners have stressed on the changes brought forth in the behaviour of the Jat community, becoming more open minded and tolerant, after the coming in of outsiders into the village, Aruna denies any such occurrence. She believes that the changes are only visible on the outside and any “standard” that has entered the village after the coming in of the boutiques, is just a cover up for the *dadagiri* of their Jat landlords. The latter, according to Aruna care only about the rent money, which they increase erratically, with no consideration for their tenants. In the same breath, Bina expresses her bafflement at the desire of people to open up boutiques ‘in such a place’.

As the landlords continually keep building and rebuilding spaces for an increase in rent, it is these tenants who are affected in a major way. Constantly moving from one room to another is an accepted trend amongst the tenants. Many like Braj Mohan Tiwari have moved at least 4 to 5 times in just a decade, and have seen their previous homes broken down to be turned into boutiques. Many “gareeb log”, as Seema says, have moved out altogether, especially if they have managed to buy small plots of land in Sangam Vihar or Aya Nagar. Moreover, as Lakhiya points out, the open spaces that once saw children playing have now been covered up. While the children have taken over the roads, which in itself she deems dangerous, the cramped localities have no safety mechanisms against natural disasters, such as earthquakes. Aruna, on the other hand, complains about the lack of sunlight due to the houses being built so close together that it is impossible to tell night from day.



**Image 5.1 and 5.2: Inner building complex**

Many of these families, despite the everyday stress of staying in Shahpur Jat, continue here for their children's education. For Aruna, Bina and even Lakhiya, moving out of Shahpur Jat or even back to their villages, would take away the easily accessible schools in and around Shahpur Jat. While those who work as *kaarigars* and live in Shahpur Jat without their families, may find ways to maneuver around the problems, small business owners and boutique salesgirls, who do not see adequate returns, talk about moving out rather frequently. Lakhiya's parents, who run a shop selling fruits and vegetables, say it is only a matter of time before they return to their village. They reassert the shared feeling among most small business owners that the number of *kaarigars* living in the village has decreased enormously over the years, due to the increase in rent. This, in turn, has affected their businesses and made it that much more difficult, for them to make ends meet and afford the high rents – Lakhiya's parents pay Rs. 6000-7000 per month on their single room flat and Rs. 9000 for their shop, and "us hisab se kamai bilkul bhi nahi hai."

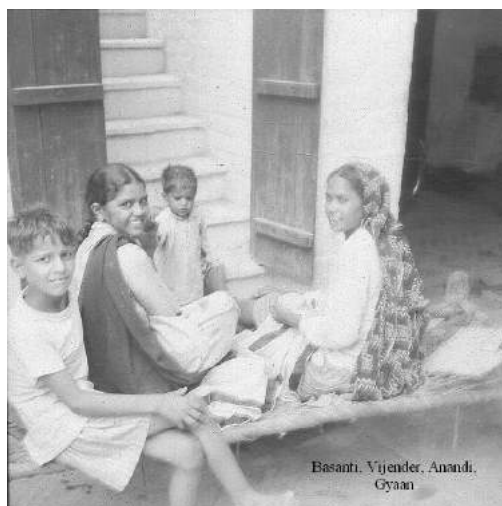
## Residents: Landlords



Image 6: Names of benefactors of Fashion Street

The group that has benefitted the most from the coming in of the boutiques is that of the landlords. With the influx of new money, which funds the constant construction of spaces to be given out or rent, as well as their increasingly lavish lifestyles, there have been a stream of changes in the village. These changes, on one hand have made life a lot easier for the Jats. On the other hand, however, not everyone in the village necessarily views these changes in a positive light. Members of the older generation reminisce about “simpler” times, and believe that the atmosphere of the village is going from bad to worse. Rajinder Panwar, who has seen the

village change overtime, sees the greed for rent as dismantling the brotherhood that once existed within the village. While he asserts that the residents of the village do not bother the boutiques and that the latter have deliberately been kept out of the residential areas, he also feels that the constant contact with outsiders has a negative effect on the younger generations of Jats. Panwar, in this respect, seemed most distressed by changes in women’s behavior. He told us how in earlier times, the ladies of the house would peruse a “*chhota hookah, char diwar ke andar.*” In contrast, he argues that women who dress “inappropriately” and are now seen smoking openly outdoors are behaving against their *sanskriti*, and that the elders sometimes speak up to them. He also felt that the since the villagers have upgraded from cycles to cars, little things like parking spaces, trigger off fights between them. It is, then, no longer the close-knit community it once was.



**Image 7.1, 7.2, 7.3: Jat women with hookah and Jat women's attire, circa 1960s**

Sanjay Sharma, who is from a family of Brahmins and has lived in Shahpur Jat all his life, reiterates the loss of community ties with the coming in of money. He claims that, what once was a simple, middle class neighborhood, is now 'upper-middle class'. Along with the influx of money, however, the education level has also increased, according to Sharma. These residents no longer send their children to government schools. However, he believes that once their children are sent to private schools, the Jats no longer feel the need to pay attention to them, and this in turn has led to the younger generations becoming more and more spoilt. He expresses concern at the degree with which the youngsters in the village are taking to alcoholism, and believes it is something that comes hand in hand with economic progress.

The younger generation, on the other, appreciates the "westernization" that has occurred in Shahpur Jat due to the constant interaction with outsiders. Lalit, who has grown up in the village, declares that Shahpur Jat is unlike other urban villages, where alcoholism and smoking *ganja* is widespread due to the existence



of bars and clubs. He tells us that he is proud of the fact that the residents of Shahpur Jat are respectful to women and he has never heard of incidents where the residents have bothered those coming into the village. He has noticed huge changes in the everyday lives of the residents in terms of dress and language-Haryanvi, which is the local dialect, is only used by the older generation, to converse with each other. The increase in educational qualifications and an inroad into the private sector, as opposed to government jobs, is something Lalit believes attributes to the development Shahpur Jat has undergone. He does, however, acknowledge the fact that the easy money coming in means that youngsters do not necessarily need to go out to look for jobs and thus drinking becomes a daily activity for these young people, in order to pass time. While the older people denied the existence of a Residential Welfare Association in Shahpur Jat, Lalit was quick to bring to our notice the existence of a Whatsapp group, called Shahpur Jat Progress, through which many of the issues in the village are addressed. This demonstrates the conflicting claims over public space in the village amongst the older and the younger generation of landlords. We, moreover, cannot speak of homogenized, unitary consensus over spaces and commercial practices in Shahpur Jat, given the increasingly rapid sense of 'loss of brotherhood' and growing competition reiterated by the older residents. This was further demonstrated by the projects undertaken by competing groups of landlords, which we will discuss in our section regarding 'space'.

Along with giving out spaces for rent, a few women from the village also ran their own boutiques or tailoring units. Rachana Sharma, who married into the village 15 years ago, was one such person. Using the space under her building as a tailoring unit, she employed around 10-12 tailors who, according to her, were constantly changing. While she supplied to buyers who had also opened up in the village around 4 years ago, she felt that the boutiques paid their *kaarigars* too much, which had become a nuisance in her business. This, however, was compensated by the hope that once the boutiques move towards the interiors of the village, she too will be able to draw large amounts of rent at their expense.

She saw herself as different from the other village folk, who according to her had not given up their old habits, despite the development in Shahpur Jat. While she recognized the lifestyle changes as well as the new thought process harboured by the new generation, she felt that alcoholism and *gundagardi* were things that were part and parcel of the life here. What had changed, in her view was the feeling of communal life that had once existed. While she proudly declared that she has never conformed to the ways of the people here, she feels real changes will not take place until women no longer have to wear the *purdah*, and men stop beating up and abusing their wives in their homes.

Babita Panwar was another landlady who owned a boutique in the interiors of Shahpur Jat. She married into the village 22 years ago and has been running this boutique that caters mainly to a number of constant customers from within the village, for around 17 years. While she does aspire to draw in customers from outside, which she believes will be possible once the other boutiques start moving inwards, she does not want to stock the same products as them. She sees them as being temporary establishments that have very few customers, which is



not the case with her store. Babita, like Rachana, believes that the changes in Shahpur Jat are only monetary. While the rents have increased, buildings have become taller and the residents desire to live in increasing amounts of comfort, the village itself is still dirty and unplanned. She asserts that while owning a cooler or a small colour TV was once a big deal, nowadays even a Hitachi 1.5 ton air conditioner and a large 3D isn't enough. At the same time, the *purdah* is something that women in the village still need to follow, and this for Babita holds back the development of Shahpur Jat.

### Individual Tailors and *Kaarigars*

While walking down the serpentine streets of Shahpur Jat and away from the wider boutique avenues, we noticed the proliferation of individual tailoring units, dyers, design makers, *zari* sellers, and various other outfits that catered to a parallel and thriving economy of its own. Tailored suits and trousers, large, manually operated dying vats, and strings upon strings of pearlescent beads spilled out onto the narrow avenues. The presence of *kaarigars'* labor in the village is vital in drawing in designers and boutiques. As cited above, Shahpur Jat has been a workshop venue for some of the earliest fashion houses like Ritu Kumar since the late 80s. The presence of *kaarigars*, particularly from Bengal, has been remarked upon by a number of respondents. Mir Husain (or Johnny, as he's popularly known), who owns a dry-cleaning unit since 2005, told us how Shahpur Jat developed from export surplus units to the opening of boutiques, and how this development was majorly facilitated by the Bengali workers – “*Shahpur Jat ko tarakki me lane wale Bengali log hain, jinki yahaan izzat nahi hai*”. He told us how the *Seths* previously employed children, usually younger than 14 years, whose hands were nimble and small enough for the finer work, and how they used to bribe the police to continue doing so. Now that the practice has been banned, it's no longer adhered to, but the number of *kaarigars* too has drastically reduced, an observation echoed by many other respondents (Lakhiya's parents pegged the exodus numbers at 10-15,000 people in the past year alone). The *kaarigars* and their language and culture are contrasted to “*Jat bhaasha*” and their agriculture-based livelihood. Bengali solidarity was highlighted – Johnny told us how they would band together if any of the laborers got beaten up post 7 a.m. by drunken landlords and that if any of them died, irrespective of his religion, they would all collect money to send the body back home. Johnny remarked on how his business has been staying afloat due to work from the boutiques (whose designers, he claims, have degrees from abroad but no knowledge about cloth), but he also



**Image 8: Mir Husain (Johnny) in front of his store**

acknowledged that business in general has been “*thap*”, with rent rise making life extremely difficult for laborers and small shop owners.

We asked Johnny if he could refer us to any *Seth* he knew of, and he directed us to Kibriya ji, at number 310. After several wrong turns, we entered a very narrow back lane where walk-in commercial outlets petered out at the entrance. As we walked further inwards, we passed several half-open doors with one-room workshops that had several lines of methodically laid out tailoring units and tailors, with no chatter save for the steadfast buzz of their machines. After stumbling a bit more and asking three people, we finally arrived at 310, surrounded by construction, and whose entrance would’ve been impossible to find had one not been looking for it with the help of locals. Indeed, it would’ve been impossible to find Golam Kibriya Sekh’s unit had he not been referred to us.



Image 9: Advertisements for *kaarigars*

We removed our shoes and sat down in his small room with three other artisans fast at work on their *zardozi* looms. Kibriya Sekh had been in Shahpur Jat for 22 years in his current location and was from West Bengal, and his work was wholesale and sold to buyers even in the UK. His relationship with his landlord is very good, so much so that when he’d gone to Calcutta to work in these 22 years and then sought to return in 2008, his landlord gave him the same space he’d been working out of and is still working out of now. He said that labor has decreased after the influx of boutiques, and that the *kaarigar* business has suffered, but they have a better experience with him since he offers not only money but board and shelter. This sentiment is echoed by Suleen, one of the artisans who has been working with Kibriyajaji for 15 years. He spoke to us on Sunday, his day off, and told us that he’d been recruited from the same village as Kibriya, The village network is what they use to recruit new artisans, and many people stay since the pay is much higher in the city. However, the expenditure in the city is just as high: he and his colleagues work for 15 hours a day, from 9 a.m to 12 a.m., but he rates have gone down from Rs. 500 to Rs. 300 per piece. Suleen insists his relationship with Kibriyajaji is excellent, and he mentions that if Kibriyajaji wants to move his unit back to Calcutta, he’d follow him there, as the kind of trust and financial security he enjoys with him is unparalleled. According to him, Shahpur Jat has mainly changed in terms of use and access of public spaces—earlier, the Jats would freely indulge in drinking and hash in the streets and men were beaten up and their money stolen in the park, but this doesn’t occur as much anymore. The competition has risen greatly due to the coming in of the boutiques—the general rule of whoever asks for the least price, gets the order, applies, save for a few

select patrons (and amongst these, the Midhapur kaarigars in particular have low rates, and according to Suleen, use small children for their work). He tells the entire building we're in is full of similar workshops like Kibriyaji's, and that the landlord lives on the third floor. Ultimately, he hopes to work and earn enough to build his own "*makaan*" in the village.



Image 10.1 and 10.2: Bharat and Rupa at their respective stores

Smaller tailoring stores have all felt the pinch of boutiques opening shop and pushing up rents. Bharat owns a tailoring store and has been in Delhi for 20 years. He remarks that there used to be a great amount of looting in Shahpur Jat earlier, where even Rs. 20 in the pocket used to get stolen (an anecdote that was repeated exactly as is by Johnny). Now, the "VIP boutiques" with black money have moved into the village and pay "*ant-shant kiraaye*". He used to employ seven tailors, but high prices and slowing business have led to the number dwindling to one. According to him, the earlier wave of Bengali *kaarigars*, with their "*kapdon ka shauk*", who were also his clients, have left, and there's now a schism between Hindu and Muslim tailors. He dislikes associations for this reason—the difference between "*Ram-Allah pujari*" is persistent, and he bemoans how the Muslim *kaarigars* complain about too much work and pocket money from the shop for themselves. Rupa, who runs her tailoring unit at the entry to Kibriya's lane, echoes many of Bharat's sentiments. Her store was situated on the main road earlier, and the influx of boutiques has pushed her inside and made her feel the pressure of rent rise. She told us too of Bengalis who were hand and machine embroiders, who've left due to rent, how only a quarter of the original number remain in the village. She recounts how after the 1992 Babri Masjid demolition, people were kept under threat of gunpoint to work here and not leave!



The zari sellers second the sentiment of dwindling business since the boutiques have set up store. Saud Ansari, a *zari* merchant from Bihar who has had his store in Shahpur Jat since 2002, said his business has been down for the last few years and that even if he sold his shop, he would go into loss. He traced the waves of *zari* sellers in the village: he came to Shahpur Jat through his cousins, and at the time the Bihari businessmen used to hold meetings to decide *chhuttis* and when to collectively close their stores. However, then several Rajasthani businessmen moved to the area and they would not follow the rules of the Bihari association, and gradually any kind of collective decision-making eroded. The collective solidarity amongst members of the same community is interesting to note, along with competition between communities. We also spoke to the first Rajasthani zari seller, Mangal Patel, who has been in Shahpur Jat for 10 years. He chose Shahpur Jat for its cleanliness and likes that there's no "*gaali-galoch*" in the neighborhood; he has a very cordial relationship with his landlord. He, too, describes the crowds earlier and thriving business, which has reduced greatly now due to the outflow of *kaarigars*. Saud Ansari even argued that the coming of the metro has hindered it further, since earlier he could charge a higher rate than at Chandni Chowk but now, with the yellow line, it's cheaper to send someone on the metro to Chandni Chowk and pick it up. Most of the dyers we tried to speak to shooed us while busy swilling their vats of dye, but Mohan, who has been running his dyeing unit in Shahpur Jat for 17 years, acknowledged the skyrocketing prices of rent, but also said that his work has fortunately managed to remain steady because of orders from boutiques and students from the nearby NIFT. In fact, the one designer we met, Samir, remarked that it was not the boutiques that were pushing prices up but the proliferation of small stores themselves, and he was glad that the boutiques were cropping up since that helped his business.

The story of Brij Mohan Mishra's (more popularly known as Panditji) little tea stall exemplifies the changes on both personal and commercial lives wreaked by the spatial changes accompanying gentrification. He told us how he moved three times because all of his previous landlords have broken down their houses and rebuilt multi-storey buildings that were then rented out for boutiques. Currently his stall occupies the makeshift space under a staircase, which also commands rent of Rs. 200 – 300. A common thread that runs through all these small business owners, however, is their stress of their preference to run their own establishments as opposed to working at jobs, as the freedom it gave them to 'be their own bossShi' was unparalleled.



Image 11: Panditji and his stall

On the part of the landlords, the *kaarigars* are often viewed as a nuisance. Ram Panwar, for instance, spoke of the immense water wastage caused by the workshops. He was quick to correct himself and say that this didn't mean that he wanted them all to leave, but that there should be just enough *kaarigars* to support the business of these boutiques, which he thinks are what actually sustain the village. Babita Panwar, on the other hand, believed it would be far more beneficial for boutiques to take over the spaces occupied by the *kaarigars* as that would aid in the cleanliness of the village. The idea of the *kaarigars* being 'dirty' came up in conversation with Rachana Sharma, as she said that one of the shortcomings of the village were the lack of adequate places to eat out at. The existing *dhabas* are 'dirty' where "*hamare jaise log khaane nahi jaate*" since they cater to *kaarigars*.

## Space

One of the major changes that have occurred in Shahpur Jat, due to the shift in the source of income from agriculture to rent has been the spatial rearrangement of the village. The tenants and landlords alike discussed with us the fast growing number of 4-5 storied buildings that have replaced the open spaces, once necessary for a population that survived through agriculture and animal husbandry. While tenants such as Lakhiya and Aruna pointed out the hazards of having to reside in such cramped spaces, the older generation of landlords, such as Rajinder Panwar and Sanjay Sharma reminisced about the open spaces that once marked the village. Panwar, recalls the unobstructed areas where men would lounge on their *charpais* and play cards. He goes on to say that doing so in today's scenario would effectively mean giving up on around Rs. 40,000 worth of rent, that is charged for showrooms, which have taken the place of these spaces. There is no longer any room, even within houses, for people to sit around and chat. This, for Panwar, can once again be attributed to the greed for more rent.



Image 12.1 and 12.2: View of area around Asiatic Tower – then (1960s) and now

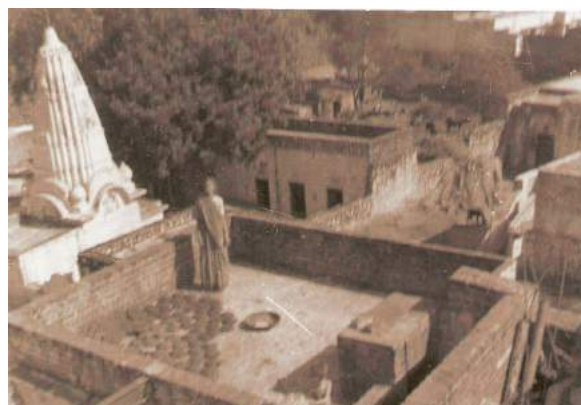


Rachana, while recalling the things her husband had told her about the village from his childhood, describes the lanes as once being wide enough to allow buses to come all the way to the central *chaupal*. Needless to say, we had to dodge people, motorcycles and even dogs through what are now extremely narrow streets. This resonates with the view that with the increasing rent prices, larger portions of the open spaces are taken up by landlords to be built upon.



**Image 13: Entry to Fashion Street**

An important theme that a lot of residents picked up on was the change in the horizon of Shahpur Jat. Many like Rachana pointed out that before the multi-storied buildings came up, one could easily spot Qutub Minar and Nehru Place from their terraces. Her husband, Sanjay Sharma, recalls taking his buffaloes to graze near what is now the Asiad Tower. Rajinder Panwar also talks about being able to see Uphar Cinema and Archana Cinema, from his doorstep, fondly recollecting the times when they would get caught going to the cinema by other village folk, who would complain to their parents.



**Image 14.1, 14.2, 14.3: Building level, then (1960s) and now**

In keeping with the feeling of a dwindling feeling of community within the village, Babita discusses the way in which the 4-5 storied buildings have led to decreasing interaction between the residents of Shahpur Jat. She says that back when houses had only one or two storeys, it was a daily practice to go into other people's houses, enquire about their day and even eat food with them. However, with the ever-increasing number of floors in every house, people no longer want to risk climbing so many stairs, just to find that the residents of that house may not be home. This, according to Babita, has led to a growing individualization within the village, with everyone keeping to themselves. Babita, who has put in a considerable amount of effort in expanding the 'front' of her boutique by installing glass walls and doors to draw in more customers, is a staunch believer in the need to connect and refurbish the interiors of the village. Apart from the ulterior motive of needing to attract more business, she also feels that it will benefit and bring together the villagers. She told us about her plans to rope in more residents and link the entire village through the installation of loud speakers that would blast the '*mandir ki aarti*' in every part. She also wants to install CCTV cameras and put up boards that have the names of the *galis* on them, which she was in the process of raising money for. However, one of her most important goals included the painting of walls of the entire *gali* in one colour, which she believed would be vital in guiding the shoppers to the interiors. While she was rather bitter about Meenu Panwar's *gali*, the Fashion Street, which the latter envisions as becoming a fashion hub, having already been painted in

orange, when we went back to Shahpur Jat after two weeks of finishing our fieldwork, the walls of Babita's street were also adorned with bright pink paint. This, then, also points to the sense of conflict and competition between landlords, discussed earlier.



**Image 15.1 and 15.2: Babita's pink street, before and after**

The increasing cleanliness and the efforts made by the landlords for the upkeep of the village were a steady theme in the conversations with most of our respondents. Seema tells us how Dada Jungi House used to have a signboard outside it that read, '*Yeh Aam Raasta Nahi Hai*'. Now, however, it is the most popular and sought-after lane in Shahpur Jat and there are even guards on the outside of its gates. Lakhiya describes how Malad House came up after observing the success that Dada Jungi House had seen, and while no one had heard of Shahpur Jat earlier, it is very common for tourists to show up nowadays, looking for stores within the village, with maps in their hands. Boutique owners such as Akshay Wadhwa appreciate the work put in by the landlords in cementing, putting streetlights and starting the no smoking campaign, which according to him makes Dada Jungi House comparable to the lanes in Paris. Punit also described the atmosphere of Shahpur Jat to be one of an open air shopping mall, which is quite contrary to the relationship that residential tenants like Seema have, to the space. The Shahpur Jat park that is utilized as an expanded parking space, is described as the *ganda* park by Seema, who recalls it doubling up as a toilet in earlier times for many of the residents. Pappu Kumar, who has been at Shahpur Jat since 1986 and currently works at a *dhaba*, remarks that one would



notice a lot more women in the inner lanes earlier, which could be attributed to the stronger community ties that the others have spoken of earlier. He also told us about a particular *gumbad*, which was demolished in order to create more space for building infrastructure (we couldn't verify this with anyone else). This, of course, becomes yet another example of the refurbishing of public space in Shahpur Jat.



**Image 16: Signboards for clean Shahpur Jat, an initiative by the landlords.**

## Emergent Themes and Limitations

At the end of this report, several key themes emerge:

- The difference between men and women's conception of space and the repurposing of public space.
- Rising rents and their connection to the economies of the working class, which coexist with designer boutiques.
- Architectural trends: houses being torn down and taller structures built in its place, streets becoming narrower, general cleanliness of the village, the designation of two 'Fashion Streets' to draw in customers.

However, we faced a number of setbacks that have hindered our study:

- We'd originally intended to do a spatial mapping of our respondents' movements within the village on an official map. We'd already procured a

copy of the most well known commercial map of the village, a collaborative effort between the boutique owners that had detailed directions to many of their stores and the various exits and surrounding infrastructure (like schools, the BHEL grid etc.). When we asked Ms. Panwar whether we could use a map of the village, this was the one she directed us to at first. When we inquired further about any official MCD map we could examine, she categorically told us we are not allowed to peruse the same. We tried some other avenues of getting in touch with the concerned authorities, but we had no response.

- Peacock Lane in Shahpur Jat is located towards the back, away from the commercial gates that open to the village. This lane is mostly populated by offices (of MARG, Raqs Media Collective etc.) and one or two boutiques (most notably Nikasha). We were told many were unavailable when we visited their showrooms and tried asking for an appointment over email, but we didn't hear back from any. This remains the only part of Shahpur Jat where we do not have an interview of any of the tenants/professionals using the space.
- Our access to *kaarigars* was severely limited by their demanding and tight schedules. Often, when we'd wait and ask they would say they have many orders to finish, that we must speak to the *maalik* if we need anything, and that they have no idea how Shahpur Jat has changed and to ask someone else. Additionally, many also claimed that since they only worked at Shahpur Jat and their interface with the village was limited to their workshop, they were in no position to comment on the change. The one set of artisans we could speak to were referred to us by one of our respondents.