# Understanding the Qualities of Social Spaces of the Indian Neighbourhoods

Venkata Ravi Kumar Veluru, Tej Kumar Karki

*Abstract*—Indian traditional neighbourhoods are socially active and sometimes intrusive communities, which are losing their qualities due to Western influences, undermining the traditional Indian values by blind adaption of neighbourhood concepts since the western scale is not suitable to the Indian context. The main aim is to understand the qualities of Indian traditional neighbourhoods by evaluating a traditional neighbourhood of Jaipur, and comparing it with the modern planned neighbourhood of Chandigarh, (designed by a foreign planner, in the neighbourhood concept of the Western world), to find out the special qualities of traditional Indian neighbourhoods as compared to Western concepts based on social spaces, using methods such as physical observation of selected neighbourhoods and residents structured perception survey. A combined analysis found that social spaces are abundantly available in traditional neighbourhoods which are missing in modern neighbourhoods. The quality of traditional neighbourhoods is interactions that aim toward the formation of social capital. The qualities of traditional neighbourhoods have to be considered while designing new neighbourhoods in India.

*Keywords*—Indian Neighbourhoods, modern neighbourhoods, neighbourhood planning, social spaces, traditional neighbourhoods.

## I. INTRODUCTION

IN recent times, high-end residential areas have become a trend in India with high returns to the builders, class segregated communities [33], (mostly car-oriented, highly unsustainable) [30], and do not support the traditional energy and vitality of urban life [10]. These neighbourhoods segregate rather than integrate a diverse mix of social groups [17]. The nature of such neighbourhoods is often low-density, single-family, and highly car-dependent. The traditional neighbourhoods have social spaces which are pedestrian friendly, enhancing not only the walkability but also interactions for all age groups at the junctions that are crucial meeting places [3].

Recently, Western influence and lifestyle are on trend, in both housing and neighbourhood planning [13]. The blind adoption of the Western neighbourhood concepts does not suit Indian neighbourhoods, as the western scale is larger [29]. They hinder social interactions and have costly community services [5], [9], [40], [42]. Though scholars have tried to incorporate the concept of neighbourhood planning in India, an in-depth study is needed to understand the qualities of the Indian neighbourhoods.

### A. Traditional Indian Neighbourhoods

The traditional neighbourhoods are socially active, intrusive, and sustainable. Indians are warm-hearted and vibrant beings, where relationships matter and social bonding is at its peak. The Indian neighbourhoods have their own characteristics and are evolved over time [40], where people are residing since they want to [28]. The traditional characteristics of "Mohalla", (Indian counterpart to a neighbourhood in its general meaning), are rich in social interaction, intuitiveness having an adverse mix of people and professions [28], [32].

The traditional Indian neighbourhoods are mixed-use, denser and compact in their form, which promotes walkability, making them less auto-dependent as work and home are located in the same place. The neighbourhoods are lively and vibrant and the distances are shorter [9], [31], [28]. These traditional areas have on-street economic activity, with wholesalers, retailers, the informal sector, artisans, and tiny factories, occupying the locality. The streets are commercial and the residents are located behind the shops, making them lively. The spaces are used in different modes at different times of the day [25], [15]. The Indian traditional neighbourhoods, in longer durations of simultaneous growth, depicted intrinsic qualities of social cohesion [10]. The physical layouts are compact in an urban form, characterised by the clustering of buildings, each juxtaposed with the other, and the balconies overlooking the streets. The courtyards provide a meeting place within the house, and a row of terraces with houses having public and private spaces [14] act as spaces for the interaction of all age groups. These traditional neighbourhoods are characterised by tight-knit social bonds, mixed populations in terms of class and ethnicity, and vibrant street life [19].

### B. Modern Indian Neighbourhoods

Various cities were designed by the planners of the developed world, in the post-independent Indian period of 1947-1965 (called the development era), using the concepts of neighbourhood planning developed in the Western world. This concept has been adopted as a trend in city planning by the planners and designers of India, in full or with some modifications to the concept [24], [34]. Despite the good virtues of traditional neighbourhoods [12], [13], the development trend at work is to create neighbourhoods and gated developments by direct application of Western concepts. The size and social characteristics are different and do not suit Indian neighbourhoods.

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World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology
International Journal of Urban and Civil Engineering
Vol:18, No:3, 2024

Pandey points out that 'these gated communities have no social interactions with the local communities, where the inmates spend the week in their offices, and weekends at noisy confines of the pubs, due to which they ignore the city and city ignores them' [26]. This paper goes in-depth to study the qualities of Indian neighbourhoods and make use of the strengths of Indian traditional neighbourhoods. This paper circumvents the blind copying of the Western models of neighbourhood planning and helps promote good values in Indian neighbourhoods.

### Research Problem

The Indian traditional neighbourhoods have unique social characteristics, which are being ignored and are slowly disappearing in the event of copying Western lifestyles. One needs to adopt the qualities of traditional neighbourhoods into new planning and identify what is unique to India.

## II. LITERATURE

### A. Neighbourhood Planning

Neighbourhoods are sub-units of urban or rural settlements [20], with the spatial attributes of residences and their affiliation to the land uses, (housing, schools, parks, shops, and other civic facilities) [11]. These neighbourhoods have abundant social relations within their self-contained places rather than just housing [16], [28]. No two neighbourhoods are similar, as size, boundaries, social aspects and facilities differ from each other. These cannot be compared as they are unique in history, culture, socio-economic characteristics, political administration, and size [39]. Among the various lenses used to look into neighbourhood planning, proximity to services and social spaces are important attributes, that define the quality of life in a neighbourhood. The literature on neighbourhood planning is more elaborate in the developed world, while there is thin research in the Indian context [8].

### B. Proximity and Connectivity

*Proximity* is the distance travelled by an individual to amenities from the house for daily needs (geographic contiguity, propinquity) [38]. *Connectivity* is the directness of a route to a destination that has been associated with walking, usually from the centre ('walkability'). The satisfaction and liveability in a neighbourhood are increased, with the increase in proximity to services and their geographic location [1]-[3]. Amenities are important aspects of the quality of life, making the place satisfactory to live and work. Amenities have to meet the demand of population densities to attain neighbourhood satisfaction [12]. This will result in increased social interactions [43]. Informal social structures offer more extended social support in ethnic neighbourhoods where the residents feel at home with shared backgrounds [27].

### C. Traditional Indian Neighbourhood

The traditional Indian neighbourhoods have people of different occupations grouped with facilities like religious spaces (temples, mosques, churches etc.), community spaces, and convenience stores to serve the community within its vicinity. The neighbourhoods are pedestrian in scale, which encourages people to interact with each other [8], [14]. Spatial planning of the traditional neighbourhoods of India is suitably planned for harsh and dry climates, with a compact form, high density, low-rise, narrow roads shading the pedestrians, vernacular in design, and built with locally available sustainable material. These neighbourhoods have enhanced social cohesion in the community [29]. The streets are not just for transport but are also used for processions, as places for festivities such as Ganesh (Indian God) *pandals* (a stage for idol placement) (Fig. 1), and religious gatherings.



Fig. 1 A Lord Ganesh Pandal during the Diwali festival

The streets remain vibrant with activities, where people congregate and celebrate [36], [23]. In the example of Jaipur, the facades had 'Gokhdas' (platforms in front of houses) (Fig. 2), which are a series of sitting spaces near the entrances for socialising.

The residents maintain a strong attachment to religious systems and structures, streets, 'Havelis' (Indian traditional bungalows) traditional trades, food stalls, and traditional crafts prevalent in the area. The areas are also named after the tradesmen [6] present in that area, giving them an identity [31], [41]. The multi-usage of spaces is seen with small business establishments such as tea shops, and snack stalls acting as meeting places and socialising spaces [7]. These spaces are often shared at different points of time such as parking areas during the night, informal sitting and eating areas and business areas in the morning [39]. These traditional Indian neighbourhoods have an identity of their own, with special eateries, crafts etc. One can find interactions between people at various neighbourhood points while using these informal public spaces.

World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology
International Journal of Urban and Civil Engineering
Vol:18, No:3, 2024

Fig. 2 Gokhdas (Sitting Place) near a house

The literature related to individual traditional neighbourhoods is available, but literature comparing modern neighbourhood planning is not fully taken up [5].

### D. Indian Modern Neighbourhoods of the Post-Independent India

The literature on the modern neighbourhoods (planned by Westerners in India) is an important aspect to be considered as post-Independent India has undergone large-scale development of towns and cities during [37] 1947–1965 (called the development era). This period is very important since it was during this time that many new towns were built and key institutions supporting urban growth for the next several decades were established [4], [36]. The neighbourhood unit, in one form or another, has been adapted as a tool for city planning and has been incorporated into the planning of new cities in India. In the early years of post-independent India, [22], [35], the concept of the neighbourhood was followed in the development of a new town or a city by planners and architects [42]. Various other cities, such as Guwahati and Jamshedpur, are followers of identical concepts of neighbourhood planning [25], [30], [42].

Chandigarh was the best-planned city planned on the neighbourhood principles of Perry, similarly laid out on a strong, symmetrical grid, characterised by broad roads, vast open spaces, and divided into rectangular "sectors" or self-sufficient residential neighbourhoods. The sector was the outcome of combining the neighbourhood unit and the hierarchical classification of urban street concepts that gained popularity in the mid-20th century [21]. Gandhinagar, Bhubaneswar, and Jamshedpur were built in the post-Independent era. Though these towns were built fairly recently with the best planning norms, they still lack input from the traditional Indian neighbourhoods.

In most cases, modern neighbourhood planning was imposed on these areas without considering the social and cultural context of the traditional units. The urban spatial elements of traditional units enhanced the inclusivity and sustainability [20]. There is a need for a better understanding of traditional neighbourhood qualities and correlating them with modern planning.

### Research Gap

There is limited research on what the unique qualities of Indian Neighbourhoods are and how they differ from Western neighbourhoods.

Though some Indian scholars have tried to incorporate Indian neighbourhood values in neighbourhood design [22], [35], in-depth studies on how traditional Indian neighbourhoods are positioned in terms of their social characteristics, and how they differ from the Western neighbourhood concepts and values are rare.

There have been some works on locating well-designed neighbourhood spaces in India [38], however, their primary task was to focus on neighbourhood spaces, and not on convenience, or social spaces (chowks, informal sitting, eating, meeting places, and religious places) which enhance interactions. This research aims to meet this gap, by evaluating the social spaces of neighbourhoods of historical and modern cities (Jaipur and Chandigarh).

### Research Question

What are the qualities of Indian traditional neighbourhoods?

## III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### A. Research Methodology

The research methodology used is a mixed method. Even though it is qualitative in its approach, some aspects of demographics such as distances are quantitative supporting the qualitative approach.

### B. Research Method

To answer the above research question and meet the research objective, this research evaluates the social attributes of the traditional neighbourhood of Jaipur (Fig. 3), compared with the modern planned neighbourhood of Chandigarh (Fig. 4). The parameters under the study are informal public spaces such as chowks, informal eating and sitting places, religious places, (temples gurudwaras, mosques or churches), informal markets (Hatt Bazaars or open farmer's markets), informal enterprises such as informal trades (cobbler, tailor, chat Bandi (Indian fast-food vehicle)), along with the availability of specialist trades (bag makers, brass working shops, goldsmiths) which gives the place an identity.

The physical observations and structured random surveys of residents of the traditional *Modi khana Chowkri* (Fig. 3) neighbourhood of Jaipur and the modern neighbourhood of *Sector 20* (Fig. 4) of Chandigarh highlight the qualities of a traditional neighbourhood in terms of social space availability and proximity.

### C. Selected Neighbourhoods

The method includes the physical observations of selected neighbourhoods and conducting structured surveys of residents in both traditional and modern planned cities.

World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology
International Journal of Urban and Civil Engineering
Vol:18, No:3, 2024

The traditional city of Jaipur has the distinction of best planned Indian city under the Vastu Shastra (Indian treatise traditional of planning principles) with the Modikhana Chowkri neighbourhood selected for study (Fig. 3). The modern neighbourhood of Chandigarh has the distinction of the best-planned city with its Sector 20 as the neighbourhood for study (Fig. 4).



Fig. 3 Jaipur-Modi khana chowki neighbourhood: Hyderabad Metropolitan Development Authority (HMDA0), map annotated by the author
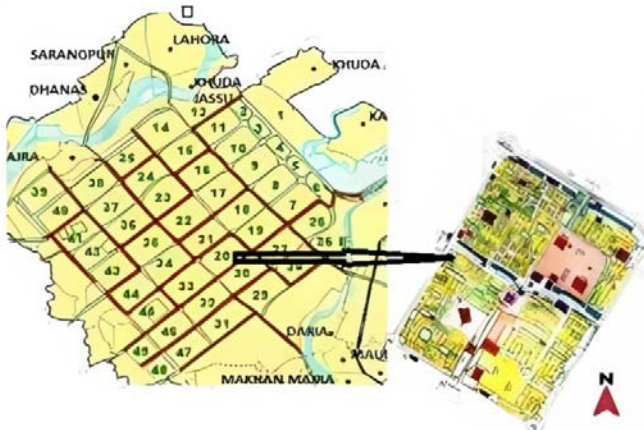


Fig. 4 Chandigarh Sector 20 Neighbourhoods: Chandīgarh Development Authority (CDA) map annotated by the author

### D. Parameters for Physical Observation and Resident Survey

Important parameters include informal social spaces (chowks) for informal social interactions, informal sitting and eating places, religious spaces and weekly or occasional Haat Bazaars (specialized markets), informal enterprises and specialist trades.

### E. Structured Random Survey of Residents

This qualitative research carried out a structured survey of randomly selected 30 available residents at the time of the survey, in each of the two selected neighbourhoods by selecting from the four quadrants, and the centre of the neighbourhood, adjusting numbers based on physical observation of the layout (Fig. 5).
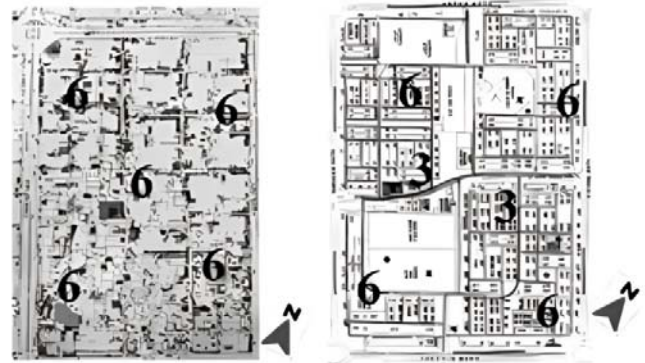


Fig. 5 Selections of residents for the survey
Source: Jaipur Development Authority, (JDA), CDA, annotated by the author

### Limitations of the Study

This qualitative study is based on two cities, one traditional and one modern, with a resident's structured survey of 30 residents in each neighbourhood. The purpose of this study is an Indian neighbourhood case study keeping all neighbourhood literature, theories, and principles of the Western world in perspective.

## IV. RESULTS-FINDINGS FROM SURVEYS

### A. Findings from Field Observation of Neighbourhoods

Jaipur's Modikhana chowkri neighbourhood has informal public spaces spread out evenly throughout the neighbourhood, with a hierarchy of meeting places, such as platforms ('Gokhdas') near houses and shop frontages, chowks near the junctions of streets, and platforms near religious places, which act as informal meeting and sitting places (Fig. 6). These junctions of streets have open spaces (chowks) used generally for informal meetings, informal eating places (Figs. 7 and 8). Informal traders such as food vendors, cobblers, clothes ironing, tailors, etc., are seen along the road, attracting lively interactions. These spaces are for people to eat, meet and interact with residents and visitors, making them lively and adding to the safety of the residents.

The informal market is available in Jaipur on a daily basis selling vegetables. These informal markets offer goods at lower prices to residents and also act as places of interaction that enhance social cohesion.

Jaipur has religious places acting as important interaction places, often with a tree and a platform, a well, and a fountain to serve the residents and visitors, using them as meeting and greeting places. The open spaces are used in multiple ways i.e., children cycling, playing, elders interacting, and also used as pandals (Stages) during festivities.

Chandigarh neighbourhood does not have informal sitting and eating places within the neighbourhoods, as they are part of the marketplace (Fig. 9). The parks with furniture are the main interaction areas. An informal farmer's market is not available within the neighbourhood. The religious spaces are at designated places and are not conveniently located in the

World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology
International Journal of Urban and Civil Engineering
Vol:18, No:3, 2024

interiors, as a result, smaller religious places were built by residents in the interiors of the neighbourhood. These neighbourhoods have planned parks and plazas which are located in the market (Fig. 8).

stalls, samosa and kachori (Indian street food) stalls, traditional food stalls, Tiffin centres, bakery products, etc. (Tables I-III). The chowks are used as informal eating places. The streets are used by children for cycling and elders to interact and sometimes used for overnight parking of vehicles. Sitting places include Gokhdas, chowks, and platforms near religious places, around trees, and shops with platforms outside. Religious places are evenly spread out in the neighbourhood, a tree with a platform a well, etc. Farmer's informal markets are found in Jaipur as daily markets, selling exclusive goods (Figs. 12-16).
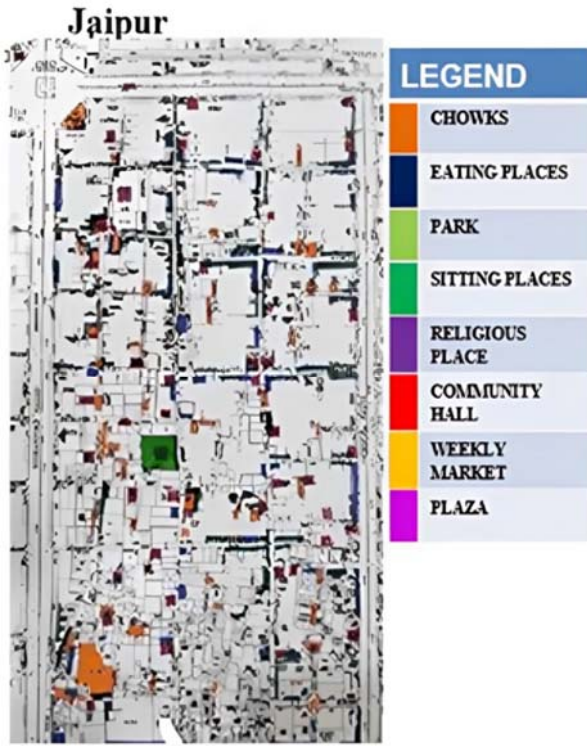


Fig. 6 Social spaces in Jaipur



Fig. 8 Temple with tree and platform in Jaipur



Fig. 7 Informal eating space in a street in Jaipur

*B. Findings from the Residents' Questionnaire Survey*

Jaipur has small informal public places such as chowks at junctions and streets, where the street widens. These chowks have benches for informal seating. Informal eating places are conveniently located within a walkable distance of 1-10 minutes, spread out evenly in the neighbourhood such as tea
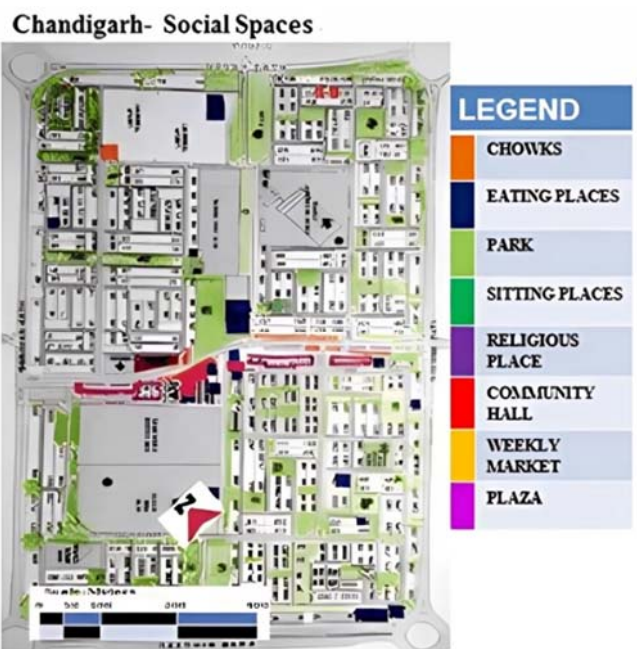


Fig. 9 Social spaces in Chandigarh neighbourhood

World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology
International Journal of Urban and Civil Engineering
Vol:18, No:3, 2024

Chandigarh's Sector 20 does not have informal public spaces such as informal eating, and sitting places in the neighbourhood as these are only located near the marketplace (Fig 10) (showing encroached place of an eatery). Farmer's daily/ weekly markets are not found in Chandigarh. Religious places are at designated sites and are not convenient, hence the residents added smaller religious places within the neighbourhoods later (Fig. 11). Tables I-IV show results from the survey.



Fig. 10 Informal eating places in Chandigarh



Fig. 11 A small religious set up by residents in the interiors

TABLE I
AVAILABILITY OF CHOWKS

| S. No | City | Availability | Percentage of Respondents |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Chandigarh | Yes | 3 |
| | | No | 97 |
| 2 | Jaipur | Yes | 97 |
| | | No | 3 |

TABLE II
AVAILABILITY OF INFORMAL EATING PLACES

| S. No | City | Availability | Percentage of Respondents |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Chandigarh | Yes | 17 |
| | | No | 83 |
| 2 | Jaipur | Yes | 97 |
| | | No | 3 |

TABLE III
AVAILABILITY OF SITTING PLACES

| S. No | City | Availability | Percentage of Respondents |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Chandigarh | Yes | 7 |
| | | No | 93 |
| 2 | Jaipur | Yes | 97 |
| | | No | 3 |

TABLE IV
PROXIMITY TO WEEKLY MARKET (PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS RESPONDING TO WALKABLE DISTANCE)

| S.No | City | 1-10 Minute Walkability | 11-20 Minute Walkability | > 20 Minute Walkability | Not Available |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Chandigarh | 20 | 10 | 0 | 70 |
| 2 | Jaipur | 23 | 3 | 0 | 73 |

TABLE V
COMBINED FINDINGS ON SOCIAL SPACES

| Social Spaces | Field Observation | Residents' Questionnaire Survey | Remarks |
|---|---|---|---|
| Informal Public Spaces | | | |
| Chowks | Convenient in the Traditional neighbourhoods | Convenient in the Traditional neighbourhoods | Not Available in the Modern Neighbourhood |
| Informal Sitting Places | Convenient in the Traditional neighbourhoods | Convenient in the Traditional neighbourhoods | Part of Market in Modern the Neighbourhoods |
| Informal Eating Places | Convenient in the Traditional neighbourhoods | Convenient in the Traditional neighbourhoods | Part of Market in the Modern Neighbourhoods |
| Religious Places | Convenient in the Traditional neighbourhoods | Convenient in the Traditional neighbourhoods | Designated and Large in the Modern Neighbourhood and Are not Convenient |
| Weekly Market | Convenient in the Traditional neighbourhoods | Convenient as a Daily Market in the Traditional neighbourhoods | Not Available in the Modern Neighbourhoods |
| Formal Public Places | | | |
| Parks and Market Plazas | Not Convenient in the Traditional neighbourhoods | Not Convenient in the Traditional neighbourhoods | Designed with Parks and Plazas |
| Informal Enterprise and Special Trades | Abundant | Distributed Throughout the Neighbourhood Conveniently | Not Available and not Designed for Modern Neighbourhoods |

## V. CONCLUSION

Combined observation reflects that social spaces are more convenient in traditional neighbourhoods when compared to modern ones. Informal public spaces are convenient in the traditional neighbourhood of Jaipur (Table IV) used for informal meetings, sitting, and eating.

The modern Chandigarh neighbourhood does not have informal public spaces in the interiors as they are part of the market plazas. The interior places of modern neighbourhoods remain just as housing due to the non-availability of interactive spaces within the neighbourhoods.

Modern neighbourhoods have been designed for specific populations and land uses, whereas the traditional ones have mixed uses and populations. Informal public spaces such as informal sitting and eating spaces, spiritual spaces, and informal markets are not found in modern neighbourhoods

World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology
International Journal of Urban and Civil Engineering
Vol:18, No:3, 2024

which helps to create interactive, social, and lively neighbourhoods. The modern neighbourhoods miss out on small formal traders, such as tailors, cobblers, ironing services, beauticians etc., within the neighbourhood. Modern neighbourhoods do not have specialist trades which give identity to a neighbourhood (Table IV, Fig. 12).



Fig. 12 Specialty trades -An artisan working with brass- in Jaipur.



Fig. 13 Chowk being developed in Jaipur

## VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

Planners should consider promoting informal enterprise and trades within the neighbourhood, such as a space for a tailor, a barber, a food cart etc. in a planned way, promoting interactions between residents and attaining the best convenience. The newer neighbourhood planning should incorporate planned social spaces within the neighbourhoods. Planners must allow planned informal trades and activities within the neighbourhood by way of creating informal public spaces which provide vibrancy and watch and ward to a neighbourhood.

Planning of chowks (Fig 13) with scope for informal activities enhances vibrancy. The provision for weekly farmer's markets or Haat Bazaar in a planned way will benefit residents by offering goods at a lower price and add to social cohesion. The religious places, (small and big) are to be introduced within the neighbourhood in a planned way since it is a way of life in Indian neighbourhoods. Planners should encourage specialist trades to provide identity to the neighbourhood.

Planners should not create communities with facilities just at the centre, but should plan for mixed-use, interactive social communities, with more interactive informal public spaces in the neighbourhood. They should plan to promote identity and provide better transport facilities. The main focus is to be on the formation of social capital rather than bedroom communities.

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