

Ramgarh Shekhawati- An Analytical Study of Medieval Settlement

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Abstract:

Ramgarh Shekhawati known as “Ramgarh Sethan” is a town located in the Shekhawati region of Rajasthan, India. The town was settled by Poddars in medieval era. The town is known for its settlement pattern, havelis (mansions), chattries and frescoes. The town is characterized by its narrow streets, which are lined with havelis and other traditional buildings. The town's layout having grid pattern, with a central market area surrounded by residential neighbourhoods. The settlement study reveals about the evolution & planning of town of medieval town based on geographical, water management, security aspects, trading activities, environmental & socio-cultural aspects. As Ramgarh also lies in silk route in medieval era, this aspect has also played an important role in planning of the town. Overall, the settlement study of Ramgarh Shekhawati reveals a historic and culturally rich town, with a distinctive architectural style and a strong sense of community. Further the study illustrates the major zones at macro level along with the layout & functionality aspects of various urban elements. At macro level clusters are having their unique identity based on socio-cultural, urban fabric, functionality, street character & environmental aspects; based on these aspects clusters are planned with Grid iron pattern, chowk pattern & branch pattern. Town has four entry gateways which lead to the central chowk & ramgarh fort. All the basic basic amenities like dharmshala, temple, step well were constructed near to the entry gateways of town to avail the basic facilities to the traders & visitors.

Keywords: Medieval towns; settlement; sustainability; Urban Morphology

Introduction

Ramgarh was one of the richest towns in 19th century India. Ramgarh was recognized by their Seths, that's why Ramgarh is also known as "ramgarh sethan" (the ramgarh of the wealthy bankers). The town is surrounded by sand dunes & lies in Sikar district which is north-west part of Rajasthan in India. Initially Ramgarh was in the thikana of the rao raja of Sikar, in Jaipur state. It was a centre of learning and was also known as doosra Kashi (second Varanasi).

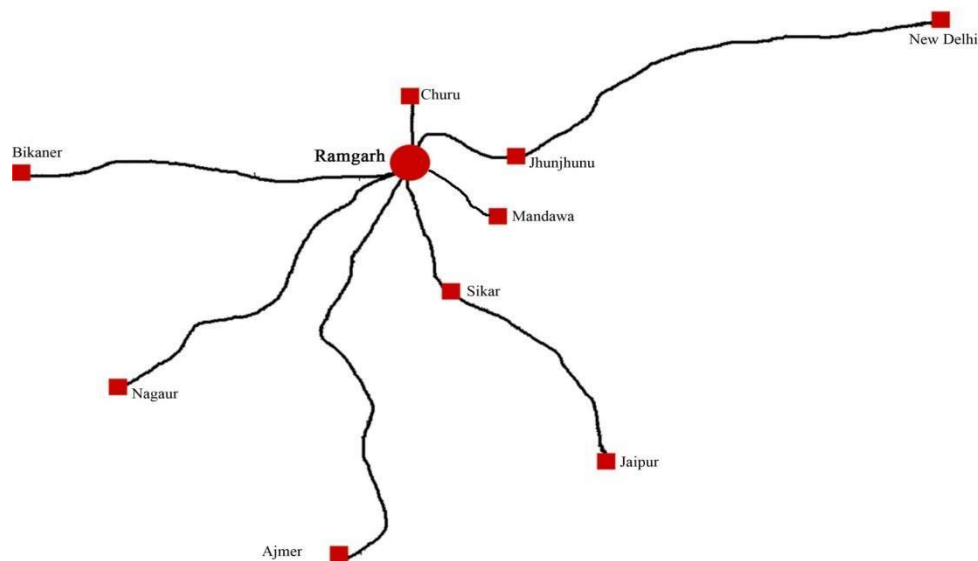


Figure 1. Map showing connectivity of Ramgarh with various cities.

Ramgarh was considered as a trade route in ancient times. Till now the main merchant families trading in woollen products. Trade was the main occupation of the marwaris of shekhawati. Ramgarh is also famous for the business of handicrafts, there are more than 30 handicraft industries in Ramgarh.

Main occupation of people are:

- (1) Trade handicraft- johari families
- (2) Agriculture
- (3) Trade of woollen production- merchants

Town and its evolution

Sikar Ravraja formed Ramgarh Shekhawati in 1848 AD to settle Ramgarh city by bringing 21 Mahajan merchant families from Churu. Vikram Sawant was the founder of this organisation. Nasa ki Dhani was the previous name for this town. Ramgarh Sethan (Ramgarh) was developed & settled by Poddar families. The Seth families settled in Ramgarh Shekhawati at the time of its founding, and when residents of any caste or religion arrived from other towns of Shekhawati, the Seth households made arrangements for food, clothing, and housing at that time. For this reason, Ramgarh at that time was known as Ramgarh Sethan and attracted people from every caste and social group. Here, the Ramgarh Seth families had their holy temples, huge mansions, and canopies with wall paintings built. This is the cause of their continued popularity with both domestic and international tourists. Due to the reputation of its Sanskrit educational system, Ramgarh Shekhawati, a historical town at the far end of the Sikar district, has also been referred to as the second Kashi. (Source- Ramgarh shekhawati nagar palika webpage).

Geographical aspect:

The Shekhawati region is an outlying area of the semi-arid Thar desert. The area experiences harsh weather conditions and face the water shortage issue. Due to this, low-lying areas around settlements will typically have a water storage facility like mane made stepwells, johads etc.

Planning of the medieval town

Ramgarh's town plan is based on grid-iron mandala-based planning. The planning in Jaipur served as inspiration for this. Town had a protective wall surrounding it. Four defensive gates were placed in each of the four cardinal directions, and eight smaller openings were made in the defensive wall to allow for passage at night. Ramgarh town has a garh (Ramgarh fort) as the nucleus with habitation all around enclosed by fortification. Town has four entrance gates in the four different directions, fatehpur gate, churu gate, bissau gate and bikaneri gate and in the middle of town Ramgarh fort lies & has access from all four gateways. Now only the three gates exist; all these four different gates are named as per the neighbouring towns. On the roadside of the main east-west axis, there are planned commercial and residential areas. Streets are categorised into two categories, i.e. Primary street & secondary street. Primary streets are directly connected to the main entry gates of town & approx. 7 meter wide & having commercial areas on both sides for merchants & traders. Whereas secondary streets are 3-4 meter wide having residential zones consisting havelis on both sides. Different castes were spatially organised according to status and religion. Similar caste individuals formed a close-knit community that gave rise to different neighbourhoods or mohallas. The fort's main street served as the neighborhood's commercial core, while the remaining streets were residential. havelis were compactly constructed in the town by the trading community. In honour of the ancestors, chattris, or memorial structures, are constructed on the outer margins. The mediaeval town has been planned as per natural topography. The urban settlement of the town has low line areas in its outer surroundings, where rain water harvesting structures (Step wells, also known as Bowri in Local language) has been made to store rain water; as the town lies in hot & dry climate where water is the main concern. So town has been planned as per sustainability factors.



Figure 2. Map showing zoning & planning of Ramgarh town, along with low line area (Source: drawn by author)



Figure 3. Map showing settlement pattern of Ramgarh town (Source: Master plan 2011-31, Town planning department, Rajasthan)

As ramgarh was laying in the trade route in medieval era, so town was planned by considering the various aspects of trading as well. At the entrance parts of town at gateways, dharamshala along with well, temple have been planned to serve as an accommodation facility for visitors. Also these entry gates leads to the main commercial streets in the town for various commercial & trading activities for the merchants. Intersection of these commercial streets forms Central chowks of town having basic amenity spaces for the public. Chowks have also served as an informal interactive or gathering space where certain festive occasions are also celebrated.

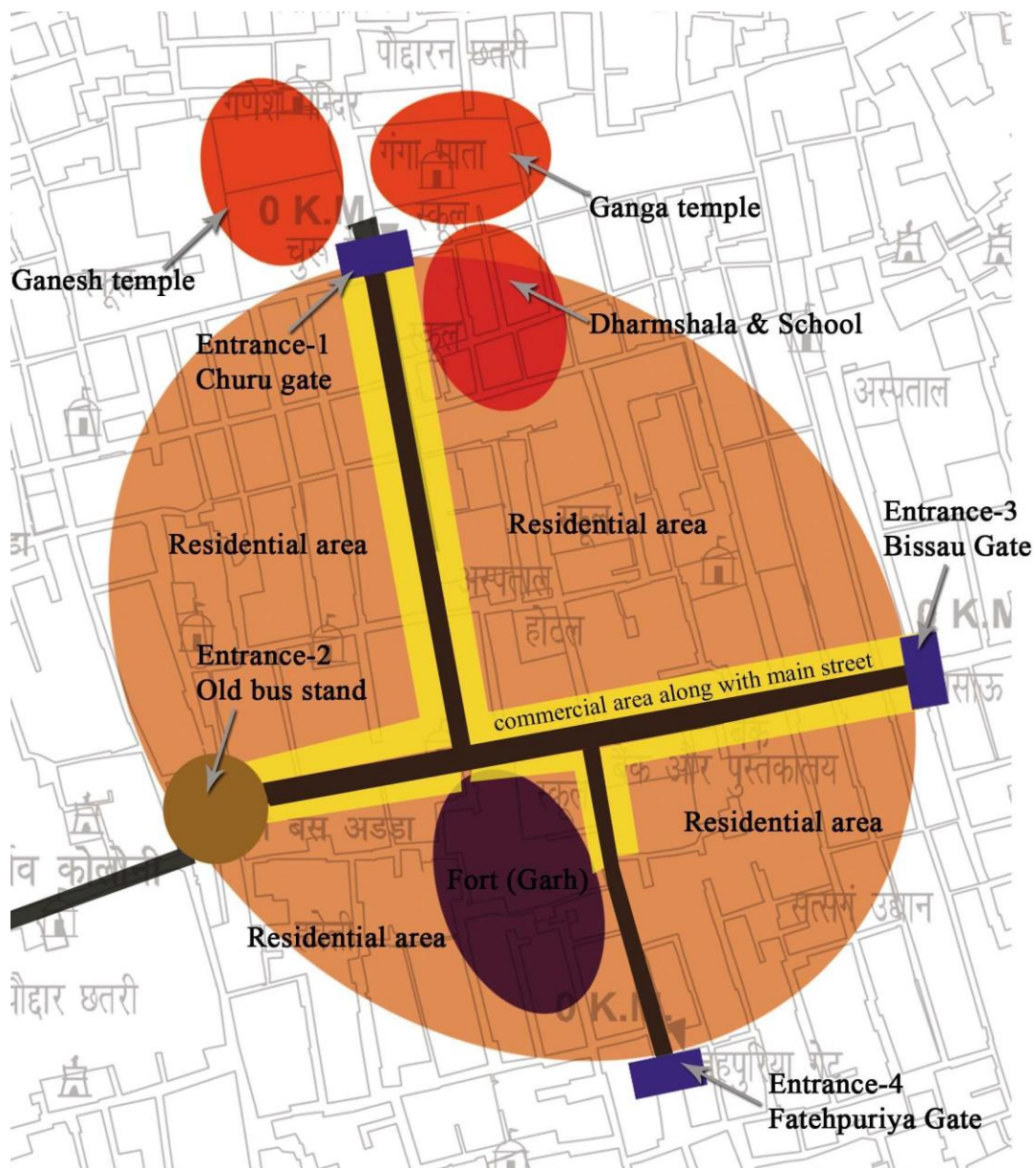


Figure 4. Zoning of central part of Ramgarh. (Source: drawn by author)

Cluster patterns in settlement planning:

Clusters with Grid iron pattern:

Clusters were planned based on the various functionality aspects. Central part of the town is the oldest settlement & planned in a grid iron pattern, inspired by the planning of Jaipur. where all primary streets are parallel and intersect with secondary residential streets in perpendicular angles (90 degree). Primary streets which have commercial spaces on both sides are much wider than residential streets; which remains partially shaded during daytime by the surrounding building envelope. Secondary streets are the residential streets which are narrow in comparison to primary streets and have residential habitats (Havelies) on both sides. Both types of streets have drainage channels (Naali) in both edges. Drainage channels are covered by raised platforms which are used as seating spaces. Because of the narrow width of streets & the compact planning of residential zones, the circulation spaces are being shaded during day time by mutual shadings of building blocks & projections.

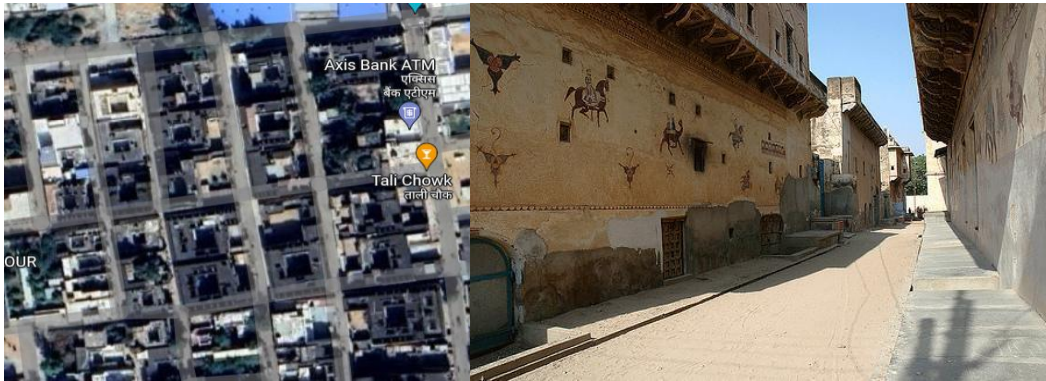


Figure 5. Residential clusters with grid iron pattern. (Source: Google map data)

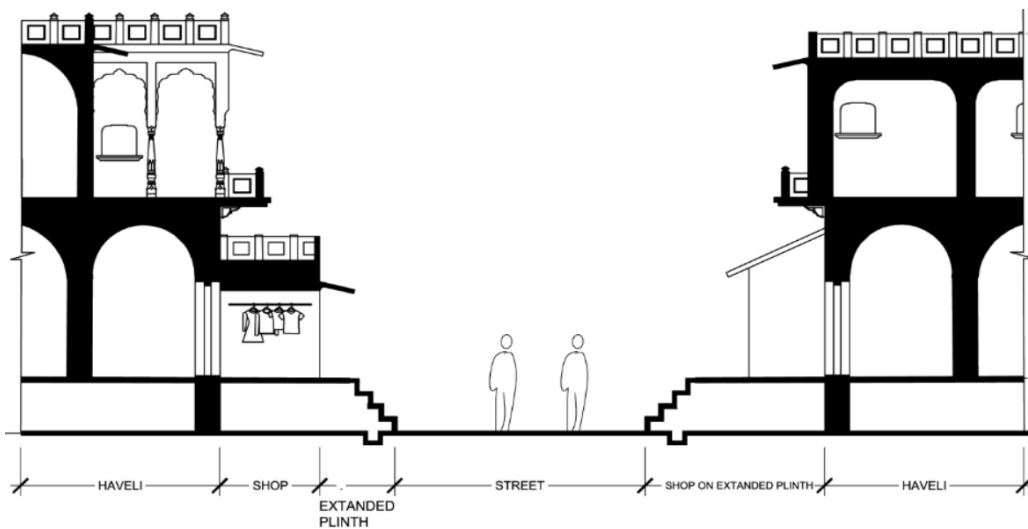


Figure 6. Commercial street having shops (one side permanent structure and another side temporary structure in setback area) with extended plinth for display of selling items. (Source: Drawn by author)

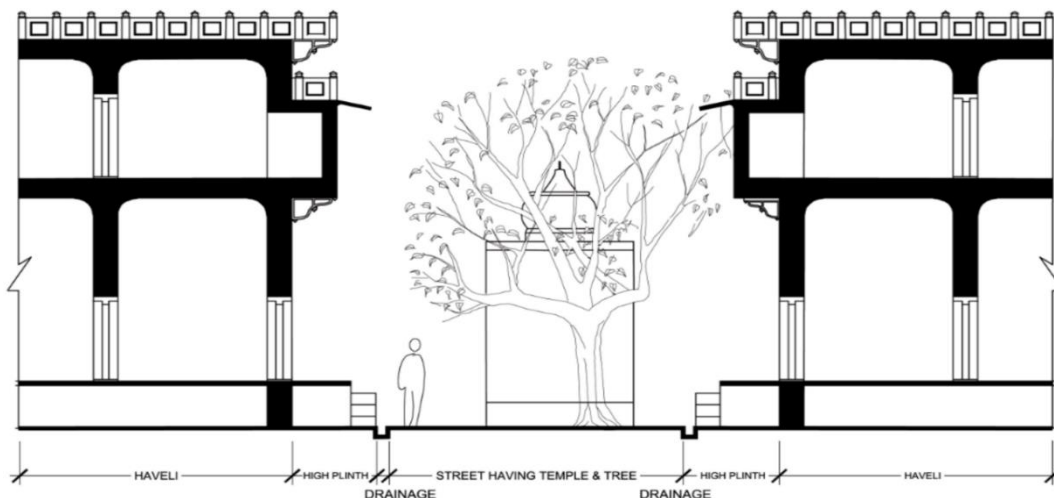


Figure 7. Residential street with small temple at intersection point with other street, for religious activities and both sides of street is surrounded with havelies & projections of upper floors on street to create shaded circulation area. (Source: Drawn by author)

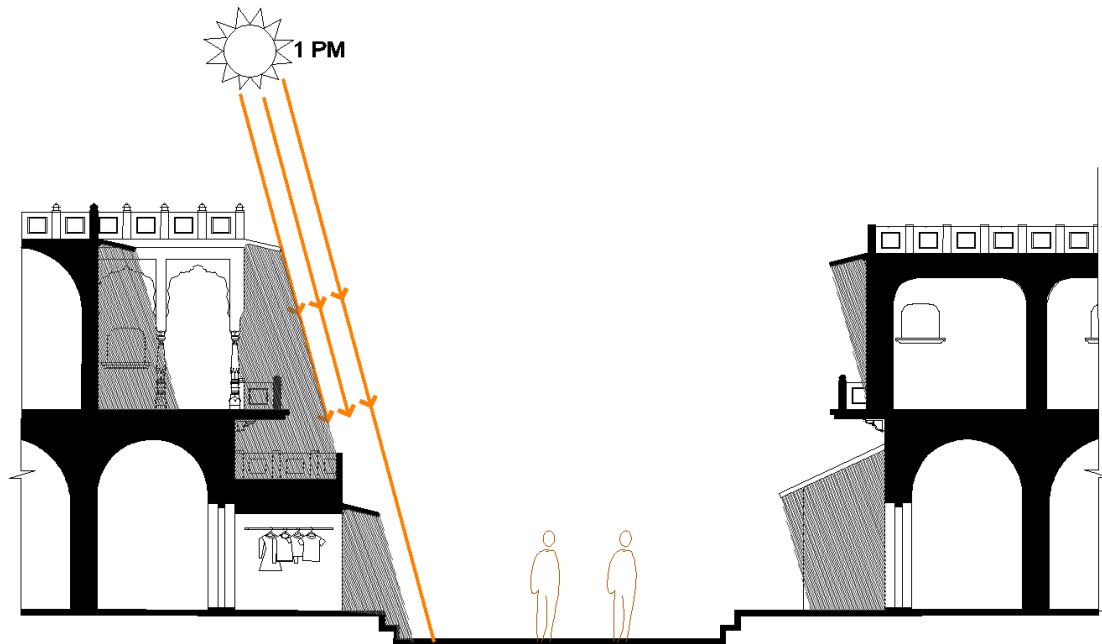


Figure 8. Figure showing shadow analysis where every floor have projections (500 mm to 650 mm) at roof level, which provide shading during day time to openings & open terrace areas. Massing of street facing external facades are created as per sun angle to provide mutual shading within the facades & to shade the open/ semi open sitting areas. The sectional drawing showing the shadow analysis at 1:00 pm during summer season; where raised platform which is used for sitting is shaded through overhead projection & open terrace at first floor is shaded by projection at roof level & arches.

Clusters with Chowk pattern:

In ramgarh town chowks are the main junction points of all streets, where all streets intersect with each other and create a large open space which is used for social gathering or interaction space of local people of town. In sekhawati towns usually chowk is also used as a stoppage space for public transportation like bus stands; because chowk is the main connecting point for all surrounding residential habitats & other amenities. Chowks are surrounded with public spaces, socio-cultural spaces & commercial spaces along with basic amenities. In sekhawati villages chowk consists of a banyan tree with raised platform, which is used by old aged people for informal interaction & and also they spend their day time playing traditional games like tash patti. As inner clusters are planned in compact planning so chowks also acts as a medium for fresh air circulation & proper ventilation in all intersecting streets.



Figure 9. Basic layout of chowk pattern in settlement pattern. Where the intersection point of streets is having a large open area with banyan trees with raised platforms used as a social interaction space

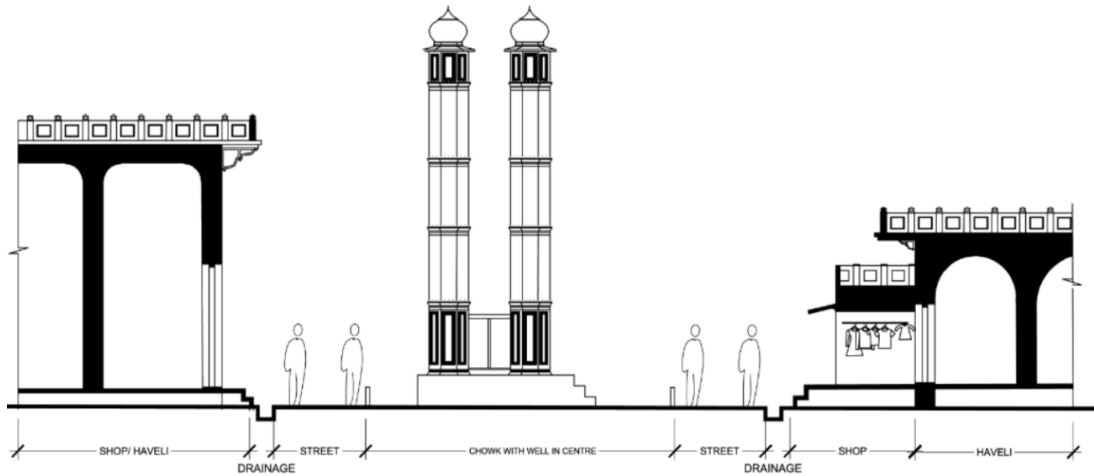


Figure 10. Mix use streets having central chowk with well (known as kuan in regional language) & raised platform at intersection point. This raised platform is used for drinking water facility & sitting space for elderly people. These chowks are used for social gatherings & celebrations of festivals like Holi & gangaur. Central chowk of Ramgarh town consists of a clock tower, which is the highest structure in town. (Source: Drawn by author)

Clusters with Branch pattern:

Branch pattern is basically an organic circulation morphology in which streets do not consist of particular angles; streets are planned as per natural topography & constraints as per availability of spaces. Usually branch patterns of streets are more dominantly found in outer areas or surrounding rural areas of Ramgarh town, for example in villages & dhaanies- small settlements near town. Branch pattern also acts as a medium for wind circulation with various wind pressure differences in residential streets.

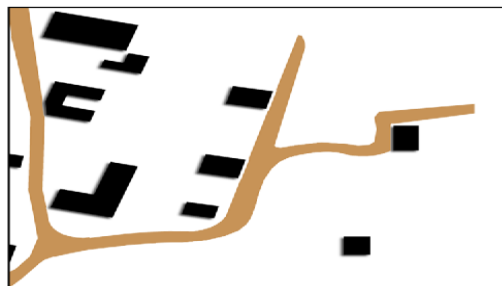


Figure 11. Basic layout of branch pattern where streets were developed in organic pattern in outer areas of town.

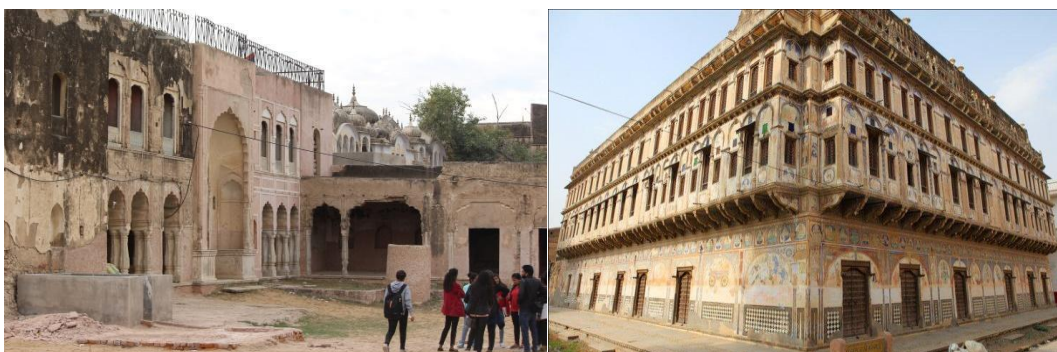




Figure 12. Major urban elements (i.e. Garh, Haveli, Chattri, gateway to town) in settlement of Ramgarh.

Conclusion

The medieval town was planned based on sustainability aspects. Where low line area was kept open for rain water collection & settlement was planned in a grid iron pattern which was inspired by planning of Jaipur old city. Overall settlement is planned in compact manner to create mutual or self-shading within the streets & surrounding buildings. Various factors like trading activities, socio-cultural activities, environmental & functional aspects were played a key role in settlement planning of Ramgarh town. Macro level settlement clusters were based on the street characters & socio-cultural aspects. Central part of town was planned based on grid pattern which forms an central chowk at intersecting point. Later on developments are planned in organic pattern which forms an branch pattern. Urban elements like Dharmshala, Temple, chattries, step-well were planned on main routes to show wealth of town.

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