

# Delhi *by heart*

Impressions  
of a Pakistani  
Traveller

Raza Rumi

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*HarperCollins Publishers India*

*For my parents*  
*Bilquis and Sheikh Riaz Ahmed*

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## *About the Author*

*I have always wanted to be an author. This, an unintended and unplanned book, is my first attempt at trying to be one. And while not unaccustomed to writing per se, I must confess I was quite unsure how the book would shape up until the publisher gave her approval to the initial draft.*

*Delhi by Heart was written between 2007 and 2009 as a testament to my discovery of Delhi and its multi-layered history. By no means is this venture an academic one, nor is it a journalist's 'contemporary' account. It is in many ways an internalized dialogue with a bit of research and occasional interviews. In other ways, it is a great leap into the unknown.*

*As a Pakistani who was born into textbook nationalism, the process of viewing the 'other' and what separated us from British India in 1947 has been an arduous one. I grew up and lived in a milieu that conditioned me to resent India, especially its role in dismembering the Pakistani state in 1971. At the same time, I also lived in the semi-schizophrenic state of being part of the 'enemy' landscape. The cultural references, historical threads and many other bonds were far too strong. These bonds became stronger as I went abroad for my studies and befriended many Indians in neutral territory. A Kashmiri Pandit, a Calcuttabased Punjabi and many a Dilli-wala humanized the vision that had been imposed on me. Unlearning was a rare gift that I am tremendously thankful for. I think my Indian friends must have gone through a similar process when we were twenty-somethings attempting to understand the world.*

*My second meeting with Indians took place when I worked in Kosovo as part of the UN peacekeeping mission during 2000–02. As an officer of the administrative service, the Indian civil servants in Kosovo were my friends and there was far too much in common between us, given how we were all, at the end of the day, cogs in unwieldy post-colonial states to be ignored or wished away. My entry into the Asian Development Bank in 2002 again brought me in contact with dozens of Indian colleagues, their spouses and families, who represented another variant of India's multitudinal reality.*

*It was during those days that I arrived in Delhi for work. There were frequent visits as a staffer of an international organization, and the work entailed interaction with different segments of Delhi society. This was also the time when I was fascinated by the city and that is when the idea of this book first took root. However, writing this book as a full-time civil servant was not easy. In 2008, my life took another turn when I decided to treat myself to a well-deserved sabbatical, returned to Pakistan, and started a career in journalism and freelance policy work. I was free to travel and open to meeting more people; it was during this period that I discovered the countless interconnected worlds that exist across the border.*

*Since then I have also been part of several peace initiatives, both on the Track II diplomatic side as well as cultural cooperation between the two countries. Therefore, the seeming chaos in the organization of this book and its occasionally rambling tone are reflective of diverse influences, scattered notes and raw memories. As I read the draft before it went to the publishers I could not help notice how awestruck I appeared in some of my initial reactions, especially in the early days, and instead of changing them I have let the original emotion remain.*

*Delhi has undergone several changes over the past few years. People and places have changed too. The book might seem a little dated in places but I would like to remind the readers that*

*was written four years ago. Updating it would have been a bit unfair to the spirit in which it was authored.*

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*By no means is this an exhaustive travel guide. These are impressions of a foreigner—a ‘outsider’—who has obviously selected moments and histories of his liking and penned them down. In that sense, I admit its partiality and perhaps a sense of incompleteness. I do fervently hope that my views are appreciated as that of a faint voice that wants to transcend boundaries and borders and reject the ills of jingoism spun by nationstate narratives, which permeate our troubled consciousness. I hope, also, that it will be received by readers on both sides in its true spirit.*

## The City and I

*Under the overcast Delhi sky, I turn my face towards the monsoon breeze. The faint scent of champa flowers seems hauntingly familiar. Somewhere within me I am plagued by the fact that this, my very first trip to Delhi, is an official one. But with more visits, coming ashore has become more and more easy. I am always excited, never tired of coming to Delhi.*

*It is my first day in the city, a Saturday. I am without a guide book—I have always been averse to these travel instruments. I did not want to use the hotel tourism services either. They are expensive and soulless, herding travellers into a minibus with maverick guides spouting orientalist phraseology. As a Pakistani I feel that I am not lonely on planet Delhi.*

*My earliest memory of the city is mingled with the image of the Hazrat Nizamuddin shrine dedicated to the Sufi saint, Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya, and discovering a muse that now seems little pre-arranged by the stars—not that I have ever believed in the immutability of destiny or of pre-ordained occurrences. I dig for the little scrap of paper hidden somewhere in my laptop bag. I find a little note with the name ‘Sadia Dehvi’ and then a telephone number. I have a femme fatale image of Sadia stuck in my memory from Khushwant Singh’s book, *Women and Men in my Life* and, of course, from knowing the family of her late Pakistani husband, a man much older than her who loved her with cavernous passion. My questions on the telephone are routine—what is the best time to go to the shrine, how do I get there etc. She tells me that I should go there around the time of maghreb.*

*A yellow-black Ambassador taxi takes me to the shrine. We go through the shady boulevards of Chanakyapuri, the posh diplomatic suburb of Delhi. It feels remarkably like another serene neighbourhood of Lahore, my home town, especially when the monsoon rains have washed away the layers of dust that clings to the trees during the arid heat of Delhi’s summers.*

*Accident of history turned Delhi into a sacred space for Muslims during the medieval period. Its centrality as the cultural heartland for South Asia’s Muslim past is well known. It emerged as a grand city during the several years of Muslim rule to be known as the ‘city of cities’. Much contemporary north Indian cuisine, manners and language evolved within the precincts of Delhi.*

*The legendary twenty-two Sufis sleeping under its urban mass turned the city and its environs into an unmatched place of reverence. Termed as ‘Little Mecca’<sup>1</sup> by medieval and colonial tazkiras of the subcontinent, Delhi’s primacy as the Sufi capital was unchallenged except in Ajmer, cited as ‘Little Medina’<sup>2</sup> by the biographers of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti. And in medieval times, this was best summed up by these lines in a mathnawi of Khusrau:*

*Noble Delhi, shelter of religion and treasure  
It is the Garden of Eden, may it last forever.  
A veritable earthly Paradise in all its qualities  
May Allah protect it from calamities.  
If it but heard the tale of this garden,  
Mecca would make a pilgrimage to Hindustan.<sup>3</sup>*

*Apart from the spiritual solace they provide, the tombs of Muslim emperors and saints in Delhi can be seen as transitional spaces between the temporal and after-world of Muslims. But more*

significantly, they are markers of Muslim identity in India. Grave visitations and associated events turn into informal statements of local communal memory and the substantive content such personal and communal statements as well.

In Pakistan, with Delhi and Ajmer having been lost to the arbitrary line drawn by Radcliffe, Lahore was to acquire this status in the new Muslim state. Data Darbar, the shrine of Ali Hujweri in Lahore, is now the equivalent of Little Mecca and Little Medina in India.

These jumbled thoughts surface and disappear as Delhi's tombs merge with the chaos of the city traffic.



Delhi's international airport is named after the late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, famous for her parentage, mourned for her tragic assassination and reviled for the emergency she imposed on a stubborn democracy. For a second, the name made me a little nervous because of her trumpet role in 'breaking' Pakistan. Pakistani sensibilities can be offended easily, especially when you are brainwashed about the 'other'. The Haj Terminal, an appeasement carrot for the Muslim minority, is boldly displayed among the signages. This, of course, comes as a surprise to a sceptical Pakistani.

When I first visited the Indira Gandhi International Airport, its lifeless architecture and shoddy facilities nearly shocked me (the new terminal, T3, was a later development). In contrast, Lahore's glitzy airport named after the poet Allama Iqbal, with swanky interiors and polished floors, speaks of the Pakistani elite's quest for grandeur. Immigration queues are long with languishing non-resident Indians and foreign tourists. But for a Pakistani, it is an entry into a highly guarded domain protected by quirks of history and ideology rife with suspicion. Pakistanis need to report at a separate counter to fill up a rather banal form detailing where in India one intends to visit, and that one has to inform the government if there is a change in the duration of stay. Of late, Pakistanis are viewed as terrorists; I am sure the feelings are mutual at Pakistani airports too.

I encounter a colonial anachronism—a specific form for Pakistani nationals, entailing a procedure reminiscent of the snail-paced era of Raj officialdom. But it is not all that unpleasant. The immigration officials are helpful, but only after the usual barrage of questions and visa inquiries. The Sikh gentleman at the counter hears my Punjabi and his attitude undergoes a noticeable shift from curtness towards familiarity; he immediately asks me where I am from. He tells me that his parents were from 'western' Punjab. I find it difficult to conceptualize the west and the east of what I have known all my life as the Punjab.

Deep down, I am excited and terrified and stand in a world that hitherto existed only in books, discussions and images. A part of me also inappropriately remembers the poem of a Pakistani poet, Neelma Naheed Durrani:

*I have come to see the city  
Longing for which my elders left this world  
In their graves, in Lahore's Mominpura graveyard  
My father and grandfather must be saying joyfully  
Our daughter has gone to our city, Amritsar.*

Well, here is a son and this is not Amritsar, does it make any difference?

My mother's family migrated from Amritsar and I knew what it meant to her elder sister whose best childhood and adult moments were spent in that holy town also known for its thriving



commerce. But memory can be treacherous. Amritsar was remembered in the golden sunlight of my memory that constantly brightened my aunt's existence. I had promised her at the dawn of the new millennium that we would travel to Amritsar. Her husband's family had little interest in revisiting the city as the burden of dislocation was solely hers. She died a few years before I stood at this conveyor belt, waiting for my luggage.

Ah, this luggage. If not picked up in time, it turns into a lifelong trial.



Navigating through Delhi's traffic, I reach Mathura Road in less than an hour. Very soon, I wade into a distinctly medieval ambience—labyrinthine alleys, crowds of beggars and street-vendors, a distinct bazaar atmosphere. As I walk towards the Hazrat Nizamuddin shrine, I spot a board pointing towards Ghalib's mazar. This is a traditional Muslim area—there are several advertisements offering pilgrimage packages to Mecca and Ajmer, identifying places where Pakistani currency can be exchanged and many signboards are in Urdu. The stereotype of the marginalized Indian Muslim seems somewhat obvious here. I try not to notice all that and walk around until Ghalib's tomb appears. Having been fixated on Ghalib and his poetry for the better part of my life, I am a little disappointed by the matter-of-factness of the place. Even though the tomb has recently been renovated after a court order, it is still a little bit of a disappointment. Ironically, on the signage, 'Ministry of Tourism' is more visible than the name 'Ghalib', and the addition of the latter looks almost like an apologetic afterthought.

Nevertheless, the area retains a unique atmosphere and the structure surrounding the tomb appears intriguing. I am late and rush to Hazrat Nizamuddin's dargah. I am as much a victim of 'shrine commerce' as the next person and the scent of desi roses (a native variety known for its crimson hue and heady scent) wafts up until I find my way to the tomb.

The narrow lanes and hugely crowded alleys open up into a set of courtyards linked to each other. Inside the dargah compound, calm prevails despite the growing number of visitors. Surrounded by old buildings and congested houses, the tombs of Amir Khusrau and Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya keep the twelfth century intact in the heart of a teeming metropolis. This is a sort of homecoming even though I do not belong. The predominantly Muslim locality reminds me that this part of the city is at the core of my cultural heritage. For a second I am not an alien even though I have filled in the form some hours ago under a law that regulates foreigners of Pakistani origin. I am there yet not there. Elemental yet separate.

The sajjadah-nashins of the tomb have mastered the art of making one's entire experience commercial. There are issues of maintenance of the dargah, arrangements for regular langars for the poor, but over time, this has turned into an industry by itself. Among other things, we share this curse with the dargahs of Lahore. Thus, I have to guard myself from solicitations and offers of intermediation with the saints. This offer can quickly metamorphose into intimidation if not tackled with indifference. So I just walk straight and look for Sadia.

Incidentally, the place where Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya's tomb is located is not where he established his khanqah. When he arrived in Delhi, he had ambitions of becoming a qazi. However, the spiritual world of the Sufis, especially the Chishtiya order, attracted him, and soon he joined Baba Fariduddin Ganj-e-Shakar's khanqah in Ajodhan, Punjab (now in Pakistan). After spending a few years with Baba Farid, he returned to Delhi as a Chishti ambassador and made his home near the river Jamuna, about a kilometre east of the present-day dargah. This is where he prayed, meditated, and attracted the inhabitants of Delhi. The place has changed, and

as I find out later, relegated to the footnotes of history books.

~~I ask around for the tomb of Amir Khusrau, Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya's most prominent devotee, who lies buried close to his beloved saint. The convention is that you have to first pay your respects to Khusrau before offering your salaam to the saint. I have been an unabashed admirer of Khusrau since I became familiar with Urdu and Persian poetry. Sadly, though, his contribution to the evolution of Urdu and modern Hindustani is still under-acknowledged. He was truly an avant-garde, using modern idiom and imagery in medieval India.~~

Amir Khusrau's domed marble tomb dates back to the early sixteenth century. Intricate red sandstone jalis displaying the refined nuances of Mughal aesthetics enclose the room with the tombstone reportedly constructed by a Mughal courtier. The illustrious keeper of the dargah, Hasan Nizami, in the early twentieth century, unearthed the dates in Persian etched on the sandstone. The marble jalis, however, cannot be fully cleaned, given that they have been whitewashed over the centuries and now embrace hundreds of coloured threads that devotees thread through the fine filligree to fulfil their fleeting wishes.

Overawed by the mood of this setting, I wait for Sadia. What a place this must have been, given the deep effect it had on language and multi-cultural-inter-faith communication and the evolution of north Indian musicology.

Sadia and I meet outside Hazrat Nizamuddin's tomb, where a qawwali is being performed in the courtyard and hundreds of people of diverse faiths—Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs—are present. While I imbibe the mellow notes of a taan prior to a full-scale performance, Sadia introduces me to the local sajjadahnasheen; Sadia and her eccentric, loveable mother are lifelong devotees and know everyone here.

That this first meeting was going to turn into a deep friendship was not known to me till later. It was from the very start a hit, as we clicked with the very first joke about Muslims. To recall the little epitaph to our conversation, 'yes, we are at liberty to joke about ourselves', what is better than the ability to be irreverent about one's own self? And this is what Sadia and I share as we were to discover in due course. We sit with the affable, plump shrine keeper, Pir Hasnain, who offers us masala chips and a much needed cup of tea. Being Pakistani, I am the recipient of extraordinary attention from the visitors at his gaddi. I get a sense of what is likely to come in questions about my exotic Pakistani identity, questions about Musharraf, jihad, and other stereotypes that occupy the Indian mind pedalled by the media. I pander to this discourse as far as possible until I can take it no more, reminding myself that Pakistani textbook representations of the wily, untrustworthy Hindu are mirror images of this syndrome.

Pir Hasnain ushers me into the tomb and I follow the motions. There is extended dua and I am presented with a chadar (in fact, the chadar is tied around my head much to the envy of many other visitors). There is an intrinsic profundity in the small space. The interior of the tomb is quiet despite the human traffic. My senses are heavy. I wonder if it has to do with the climate or my own psychological disposition at the time.

I am overwhelmed by the feeling that the place is incredibly enchanting. It is a magical kingdom bereft of symbols of worldly power and one which weaves a spell of peace and forgetting.

The qawwali resumes after the maghreb prayers and the place echoes with the lyrics:

Colour me in your hue, my love,  
You are my master, oh beloved of the Almighty;  
Colour me in your hue.  
My scarf and the beloved's turban,  
Both ought to be dyed in the hue of spring...

*The evening turns into a 'happening' inside the dargah compound. The sheer number of people loitering about, sitting, praying and crying is mind-boggling. Shrines are metaphors of the complexity of human woes and desires. Here, the thronging multitudes wish to connect without conditions, free of orthodoxy's linear worldview of conformity and suffering for penance, a psychological social arena reflecting joys and sorrows in a single space where strangers appear to be familiar and the solemn air subsumes inner agitations.*

*To me, Hazrat Nizamuddin's compound is the ultimate metaphor of Delhi and its lost past. From the medieval tombs of the Mughals—Princess Jahanara, Atagah Khan, Emperor Akbar's minister, and the unfortunate Emperor Mohammad Shah Rangeela—to contemporary concrete rooms and hideous taps, this was the essence of what I had imagined Delhi to be. Apart from the Sufi trappings, this place could offer a captivating look through the rusty windows of history, sociology and music.*

*At the end of the first day's spiritual excursion, I discover that Sadia and I share the same gateway to Islam. Our respective ancestors were converted by the same wandering 'shams' of Multan. Apa, my grandmother's amazing sister, would have loved to meet Sadia and hear her own version of her family history. Apa told me it was to Benares where our ancestors were heading before they were converted by a wandering Sufi. I too, like my ancestors, have to go to the shores of the Ganga to complete that truncated journey of my Hindu forefathers—a sojourn that was interrupted by a hiatus of six centuries.*

*But I am not in Benares, I am in Delhi or at least halfway there. Alas, these are not the ethereal shores of the Ganga but the banks of the dirty Jamuna. I am comforted that along its downstream course, the Jamuna merges with the Ganga somewhere near Allahabad.*



*Old Lahore's Shah Alam was inhabited mostly by Hindus. Named after the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam, this neighbourhood was akin to Delhi's walled city. Also known as 'Shahalmi' to the Punjabi, this locality suffered colossal rioting, plunder and near annihilation during Partition. Most of the houses and buildings were set ablaze. My paternal grandmother's family lived there too. They left their house for a Muslim locality and by the time they returned after the bloodbath, most of the neighbours had left including the extended family of Sorayya, the legendary actress. The grey swirl of the ashes of burning houses mixed with dust made everything invisible. Buried in the thick air that traumatized the narrow alleys, there must have been some euphoria somewhere for now there was a new country for India's Muslims.*

*Bibiji, my paternal grandmother, and her elder sister, Apa, were almost synonymous with Shahalmi during most of my childhood years. In the 1960s, Bibiji with her children had moved to an emerging posh suburb called Model Town that is now famous for its association with Pakistan's former Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, who built luxury bungalows and upgraded Model Town. But Bibiji could not get the sheher, which literally meant 'city' but in this case, the 'old city' out of her system, making feeble excuses each week to travel to the walled city. Sometimes it was to buy 'better' quality spices such as crisp cumin seeds and at other times it would be a 'urgent' need to see her doctor who lived there. The witty doctor, Abdullah, was more of a friend to my grandmother than a physician.*

*Bibiji would pack her little basket for an emotional picnic in Shahalmi and I would trail her on the street till she had no option but to take me along. We would ride a bus, sometimes to Ran Mahal and then take a tonga to Shahalmi. The entire journey was a fascinating series of stops*

halts, haggling and finding your way into Old Lahore's labyrinth. Tongas would not go beyond the entrance of the Shahalmi gate; one had to dismount and trundle along the time-frozen lanes to get to Apa's house.

Apa was an Old Lahore agony aunt of sorts, seeking and furnishing advice, offering emotional succour or reciting folk stories, anecdotes and Urdu couplets in her thick Lahori accent. In the accent, the 'r's and the 'd's were pronounced in a peculiar way that made me laugh. So conversations with Apa, however serious, had this little humour tagged on like the loveable noise of old gramophones.

Apa was my gateway to the past. My parents were more interested in inculcating an urban post-colonial idiom in our lives—correct Urdu and English, contemporary table manners, westernized etiquette. But Apa, as I slept on her grand old bed, would narrate tales of the Shahalmi that was, and of her long lost neighbours.

It was on this bed that, at the age of eight, I learnt how our Hindu ancestors had been converted by a wandering dervish named Shams Sabzwari, erroneously confused with Rumi's master Shams Tabrez; how he was the beacon of a new egalitarian faith and lifestyle that evidently attracted my surely caste-challenged ancestors. So we were Sheikhs and precisely Shamsi Sheikhs.

The elusive Shah Shams Sabzwari is also claimed by the Ismailis as their celebrated dai. His life, like that of his namesake, the fabled Shams who changed Rumi's life, remains a mystery. What is known for certain is that he arrived in Multan, in southern Punjab, and joined the other saints living there. The year of Shah Shams's death, or in Sufi parlance, his re-union with the beloved creator, is recorded, courtesy his tomb in Multan, as 1276.

Shams's collection of poetry tells us that he spent his early years in a medieval Persian town called Sabzwar and travelled widely. He is supposed to have roamed around India and converted many people in Kashmir, Sindh, Gujarat and Little Tibet before moving to Punjab, where Sufi mythology holds that he performed the miracle of restoring someone to life.

This is when Apa's narrative would move into an intimate fictional mode. I remember the dark winter night when the old high ceiling turned into a canvas for my imagination. Apa had a longish rendition of how her forefathers had set out from Lahore on a pilgrimage to Benares. Halfway there, their caravan was looted and the poor families found shelter in the humble khanqah of Shah Shams. They stayed there for a few weeks until they resumed their journey. But during those lingering medieval days and nights, the miracles and conduct of the saint inspired the Lahore travellers to investigate the saint-master's foreign, mysterious faith more closely. Some low-caste Hindus found the freedom to chant the name of Ram that they could not perhaps do near a Brahmin.

The Lahoris set out again for Benares. But the magnetism of Shams pulled them back to him. They never did reach Benares. A mass conversion took place and an expansive, invisible, loving and sometimes stern God filled their spiritual space. I remember how the dark emptiness of Apa's room became my metaphor of an amorphous, fathomless God. Apa was perhaps unaware that in the nineteenth century, Ghalib, the Turk-Muslim poet who lived in Delhi, had stayed in Benares for a month and that he, in some ways, circled the narrative of religious identities.

From this discreet moment in the lives of my imagined distant family, began a generational devotion, like that of countless other families, to khanqahs and shrines. Over the centuries, the temporal powers of sultans and emperors were seen to be getting blurred by the lasting legacy of Sufi saints who came to India. This was also the time when Amir Khusrau was experimenting



with a new language. He wrote, 'Though Hindus do not believe in the religion in which we do, in many matters they and we believe in the same thing.'<sup>4</sup> And his beloved master, Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya was attracting the population of Delhi and beyond to the inclusive vision of the Chishti Sufis. Thus, my childhood visions of Delhi were that of mysterious environs with sultans and their lashkars moving about, shrines and tombs warming up to devotees and a grand cultural mingling.

Apa, however, had no respect for the linearity of historical annals. She would jump nimbly to the Partition telling me how her friends and neighbours fled Shahalmi and how, by the time she returned to a burnt mohallah, all the neighbours had left. She had never been so jolted in her life as when she saw those empty homes, some of them burnt and others looted. She had also lost her jewellery, mortgaged with the legendary moneylender, Bhulaki Mal Shah. She would remember with some sorrow, how her dowry had been gobbled up by Partition and bequeathed to the Hadis of history and politics.

A faceless, nameless ghost thus lived in Apa's house. She sort of nurtured it, and since no one was interested, locked it in her teakwood almira to guard her empty ivory-inlaid jewellery box and a copy of the family tree that uncomfortably harked back to a Hindu name. Poor Apa, the brief spell of illness before she died, made her a trifle delusional. She would mutter the names of her childhood friends ending with 'Kumari' or 'Devi'. These names sounded distant to my extended cousins who tended her during her last days; these were also stereotypical textbook names that were heard on TV, when an attempt at cultural amity was beamed via unregulated Doordarshan programmes, Doordarshan being the national Indian television channel.

When I was thirteen, I took Bibiji and Apa to have passport-sized pictures taken for Indian visas. There were no relatives, no split families. This was a yearning to re-visit the shrines of Delhi and Ajmer. Ironically, my father's employment with a state institution ended up as a big hurdle in our visa quest.

Bibiji died, her longing unfulfilled.



*The seven climes are in its every lane  
Does Delhi have its equal anywhere?*<sup>5</sup>

I was twenty years old when I visited India for the first time and arrived in Bombay. I was an excited backpacker and this my gateway to our enemy land, an enemy meticulously inserted into our mental landscape through school curricula and textbooks. Thanks to a spirited history teacher at school and direct interaction with Indian students in London, India and Indianness acquired a nuanced status in my consciousness that defied the textbook enemy-ness. However, this brief visit to Bombay, mostly spent hanging out with some upper middle-class kids, fun as it was, failed to quench my desire to visit Delhi.

Delhi was not just the capital of India or the repository of Mughal monuments. There was a deeper and more far-reaching symbolism in my journey towards it. This was to be a kind of inner voyage, a milestone that had to be achieved given that the road was proverbially long and potholed by upheavals of history.

Reclaiming one's past is messy business. Whilst scores of milestones of pre-Pakistan history survive and live in my country, the sudden chopping off of an entity known as 'British India' and the creation of two new states based on ideology, power and politics, has led to half a story made invisible—a mythical ploy, such as the taking away of the vision of one eye or putting a little

divider in the middle of the brain. It makes up a story that the other half can read but never comprehend fully.

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*In Punjabi folklore and Sufi poetry there is a river to be crossed—a fictionalized boundary of sorts. This crossing is the test of endurance, of love and life. This ancient mythical river rarely has a destination and holds mysterious dangers, but it is eternal. At the same time, the river's inner boundary defines home. Life on the other side can be vaguely forbidding. However, it is the fascination with the unknown that prompts the crossing of this river. As a young civil servant could never get a visa.*

*Standing on the other side of history, it wasn't clear to me where I wanted to be. To reach Delhi, the threshold of twentytwo Sufis or to discover the ground where Indraprastha was built. Or was it an odyssey to the seat of the Islamicate that ruled India for no less than a thousand years? Was this crossing to end in Mir and Ghalib's Delhi or Lutyens's architectural feat for the new Empire? Indeed, the possibilities of Delhi were infinite and more so for those who make an endeavour to unearth the layers of history. Where else in the world could a conurbation of mysticism exist under the ground that still bears the marks of Indraprastha, the pre-historic mythical capital?*

*So it took fifteen years to get to Delhi.*



*Exhausted and exhilarated, I return to my hotel—just a single day and what a fabulously minute introduction to Delhi's soul! As I look outside the glass window at the expanse of Lutyens's Delhi and some other modern structures hidden by thick green foliage, I realize that Hazrat Nizamuddin is just a fraction of this vast metropolis that is trying hard to forget its past. It is tragic that most of Delhi has turned its back on Hazrat Nizamuddin. The peculiarity of Delhi's evolution is that it is a tale of forgetting and moving on with the march of history.*

*Taking advantage of the Sunday and since my work-related meetings did not start before midday, I return to the Nizamuddin Basti. I am irritated with my posh and plush room; how could I be staying here when there are places far more enticing? This is what I resent most about luxury hotels in developing countries—the sense of disconnectedness and lack of character wilfully designed by highly paid designers who end up mocking what seems real.*

*My thoughts in a jumble, I catch a taxi to Hazrat Nizamuddin. It is early morning and the otherwise cluttered roads are free and I find myself simply merging with the glorious morning—the trees, the tombs and roads, everything looks serene. I manage to see some of the striking symbols of the 'New' Delhi—the India Gate, imposing, wide boulevards signifying the grandeur of the Raj and the distinctive hybrid architecture with its colonial bungalows.*

*My great grandfather, Dr Allah Bux, was in Delhi in December 1911. The occasion was the Third Royal Durbar to commemorate the coronation of King George V and Queen Mary, Emperor and Empress of India. A lone porcelain mug with an unflattering portrait of the King survives in the family silver. It has the words 'Delhi Durbar' inscribed on it and rests in complete disharmony with the other objects on the shelf.*

*Dr Bux, an employee of the Jammu and Kashmir state medical service, had emigrated from Lahore in the late nineteenth century. He only returned to Lahore after his retirement in the 1930s. Prior to this final relocation, he had travelled across India. His medical education was in Calcutta and his employment took him to splendid Kashmir where he served as a medical professional in Srinagar, Baramulla, Sopore, Shopian and so on—places that are now infamous*

for violence and blood-letting in the name of nationalism, liberation, secularism and, of course, 'Islam'.

Nearly a century later, at a little gathering in Delhi, his great grandson was destined to find out how several empty spaces in Kashmir had turned into collective graveyards and there were few homes there that had not confronted the taste of death or at least its fearful imminence.

Dr Bux owed his attendance at the Durbar to being part of the entourage of the Maharaja of Kashmir. He was dressed in a special tailor-made suit, mingled with many a sahib and even carried a cigar. But cigar smoking was alien to him. He choked a little and hated the acrid aftertaste. However, the glory of the Durbar did enchant him. For several years, Dr Bux had been visiting Delhi mainly to pay his respect to the saints but this was a different kind of event. It had nothing of the dargah ambience or culture, and to him the Red Fort now glowed with the radiance of imperial power that represented both modernity and the echoes of the shrieks of hundreds and thousands who died or were dispossessed after the 1857 Mutiny or the mythologized 'War of Independence' at the same location. Ruling princes, nobles and the socially engineered gentry of India were present to offer obeisance to the sovereigns. In keeping with the pomp of their predecessors, the royals also made an appearance for public darshan at the marble jharoka of the Red Fort. Dr Bux was one of the half a million or more attendees of this event, though his employment enabled him to be in the exclusive part of the crowd.

The Delhi Durbar of 1911 bestowed on Delhi its due place by announcing the shifting of the capital from Calcutta. Thus, the seat of the Empire had once again shifted. Millions were spent on this occasion while famine ravaged the areas surrounding Delhi. Dr Bux had no idea perhaps; he was coming from Kashmir and he was no revolutionary.

After his return to Lahore, this connection with Kashmir came to an end and the family retreated into its Lahori world. But his visits to the Delhi and Sirhind<sup>6</sup> shrines continued. My father, as a child, accompanied his father and grandfather and had faint memories when I would ask him questions. However, in the 1940s, what had been immediate and accessible now required passports and visas. This discontinuity was nothing compared to what millions experienced and struggled combined with the painful journey of forgetting.

But I hold no bitterness. My personal experience is not stained by blood-letting. I do not even remember the 1971 war and I condemned the Kargil adventure like several others in the subcontinent. I still feel that the connection can be restored and broken threads picked up when they were left off by my ancestors.



I notice the Sabz Burj (Green Dome) standing rather oddly in the middle of the road. Nobody really knows whose tomb it is. Also known as the Neela Gumbad, it stands awkwardly on a green patch at the intersection of Lodi Road and Mathura Road, very close to Nizamuddin Basti. I stop near the intersection, get rid of the taxi and walk up the few steps that culminate on a platform where the tomb rests.

Its structure is quite Central Asian, octagonal in shape much like the tombs in Multan, Pakistan. The eight sides are alternately wide and narrow and each has a recessed arch adorned with a pattern of chiselled plaster and glazed tiles. Its now ruined appearance fails to conceal what beauty it must have been. Built in the earlier half of the sixteenth century, it was later used as a police post under British rule. The Archaeological Survey of India took control of the structure after Independence and undertook its conservation, giving the dome its current blue look.



*opposed to the original green I had read somewhere. I cannot help wondering why the Islamic green was made into blue. Conspiracy theories come to the surface but I have no time to waste. The wristwatch stares at me and I push myself away from the tower even though I want to go in. Despite the gate being locked, I do get a brief glimpse inside. The ceiling is ornamented with faded and typically Persian geometric designs in red and blue.*



*Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya was born around the year 1243 and lived for nearly eighty-two years. Originally from Badayun (located in north-central Uttar Pradesh), he moved to Delhi with his mother in 1274 for better education. However, once in Delhi, he moved from place to place for eleven years until he settled in Ghiyaspur which was later renamed Nizamuddin after him. It is situated outside the main city, where the messy basti stands today.*

*This settlement, Nizamuddin, grew organically around his khanqah and later his tomb in Ghiyaspur, at that time, a jungle on the banks of the Sitari, an offshoot of the Jamuna, was identified as a quiet place to meditate and continue with the tariqa. Initially, he lived in a hut with a thatched roof amid fisherfolk. Later, his devotees and some nobles helped build the khanqah for him which still exists. And subsequent kings continued to embellish and add to his tomb, creating the web of buildings and facilities that define his dargah today.*

*The Nizamuddin Basti presents the face of the quintessential Muslim ghetto of today's India. Congested, unkempt and stinking in parts, it retains a medieval air. Here is a burqa-clad woman and there, shops selling meat with hundreds of flies buzzing around. But its architectural grandeur juxtaposed with rickshaw-walas, vendors and beggars make it an amazing amalgam of the old and the new with tradition refusing to leave the cultural canvas.*

*Trails of the old and infirm meet the eye as one walks towards the dargah. The narrow warren-like alleys are colourful; fresh desi rose petals and incense are sold in overcrowded stalls, and sometimes, hard to miss, the sewage hits you hard. The arches, steps and even some of the walls are old.*

*The basti, circumambulating like concentric circles around the dargah boasts several structures of historical and cultural significance. For instance, towards the west of it is the red sandstone Jamat Khana Mosque constructed in the fourteenth century. It is a composite structure of three domes over three bays, the central one being the largest. One cannot miss the marble lotus buds that fringe the mosque's arches, which are designed in such a manner that the square bays appear octagonal.*

*The octagonal shape has a particular significance. In Islamic architecture, this shape is a symbol of ascent to heaven by the Prophet and by man. The octagonal structure is a step in the mathematical series going from a square (symbolizing fixity of the earthly manifestation) to a circle (symbolizing the perfection of heaven). Traditional baptismal fonts are also of this shape. However, in the tombs erected for saints, the lower part is square with an octagonal drum inserted as a transition between the cube and the dome, to symbolize the saint as the link between man and God. The octagonal structure of Jerusalem's Dome of the Rock became the model for domed sanctuaries and saints' tombs from Morocco to China.*

*Within the basti, there is a now filthy but lovingly designed baoli, now almost a septic tank, closed to the public. The young men of the settlement had used it as a communal swimming pool. It was built during the reign of Sultan Feroze Tughlaq. His predecessor Ghiyasuddin Tughlaq disliked the saint Hazrat Nizamuddin and had forbidden the construction of the baoli. But the*



medieval labour union, which was also working on Ghiyasuddin's fort, chose to build the baoli at night using oil lamps for illumination. Oral records suggest that the Sultan was furious at the defiance and ordered that shops should not sell oil to the people of Ghiyaspur.

Legend speaks of a miracle connected to this decree. Hazrat Nizamuddin instructed one of his favourite disciples to use the water from the baoli to light the lamps and it is said that the water began to burn as oil. This disciple was no other than the one who is buried far from the basti in a locality that is now known as Chirag Dilli after his title of Hazrat Chiragh Dilli (Delhi's Lamp).

I walk back from the dargah, halting at the Chaunsath Khambe (sixty-four pillars), another monument behind Ghalib's mausoleum. This lonesome structure, built centuries after Hazrat Nizamuddin's time, is Mirza Shamsuddin's tomb. Shamsuddin was the brother of Mirza Asaf Khan and their mother was the foster mother of Emperor Akbar. The monument, simple and squarish in design, was built by Akbar. I am amazed at how a few hundred metres were turning into time-travel steps. Centuries are covered with one's humdrum visual experience.

The wine-loving Ghalib's mazar now faces the Indian Tableeghi Jamat's markaz where you see Muslim brethren, drunk on piety, loitering about. Tableeghis have grown in numbers and influence both in Pakistan and Bangladesh. The markaz, as I discover during subsequent visits, is also a place with its own story. The site of this present-day centre of Islamic puritanism was once a garden named Baghicha-e-Anarkali. This garden with a stunning pavilion was built by two rich Delhi nobles, the brothers, Mir Taqi and Mir Naqi. Once upon a time, the Sitari stream, branching off from the Jamuna, would lazily flow and nurture this garden. This was also a place where riverine commerce took place and these brothers must have built the set-up for a few moments of leisure amidst their businesses. Known as bangla, this must have been a modern structure in the nineteenth century. Under the rule of Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal, the place came under official control and a mosque known as 'Banglewali Masjid' was built.

And now, this structure hosts the offices and living quarters of pious and preachy Muslims who do not necessarily share the eclecticism offered by the Sufi environs. But then, Muslims are not homogenous as a community and nurture all shades of beliefs and cultural practices. Indeed, the basti houses a disparate community that, as a whole, appears to have withdrawn unto itself and reeling under a psychological siege defying generalizations. Nizamuddin Basti seems to have closed its ranks to the outside world, including modernity and education.

The basti, however, awakens from its slumber during the urs celebrations of Hazrat Nizamuddin and Amir Khusrau. Known as Mahboob-e-llahi (Beloved of God), Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya's pull has lasted for centuries. The basti is also the arena where the hallmark Indo-Muslim cuisine developed and Urdu or Hindustani as the lingua franca of Northern India originated and blossomed into what we speak and hear from Delhi to Lahore and from Karachi to Lucknow.

As I pass by the kulcha tandoor, I ponder over the culinary influences that central Asians and Turks brought to India and whether the global clientele of the ubiquitous 'Indian' restaurants are aware that the kababs and naans they just ordered once took birth in this dilapidated basti. In Nizamuddin, meat reigns supreme. And sweets—kulfis and jalebis among others—are the essential endings to a meal (I hear jalebis were invented in Nizamuddin too; however, many say that jalebis did exist in ancient India). Several dishes, now served in dhabas and makeshift restaurants, were once the secretly guarded intellectual property of the cooks of the Sultans and Mughals. Over the centuries, these recipes have reached commoners with the increasing availability and affordability of ingredients.

*The music of the basti takes on myriad shapes—from Bollywood songs to Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's global stardom and the self-conscious and increasingly popular South Asian Sufi music. The qawwal families living here have contributed to the meandering journey of Indian classical music, sometimes singing the melodies of Tansen of Akbar's court and at others, the khayal.*

*The basti is a relic but neither abandoned nor ruined. It breathes with real people large and small, dependent on the cash economy generated by thousands of devotees across India. Dargah worship thus remains a source of livelihood for the basti; it is an unwitting continuation of a community and its culture, striking for its quaintness and heart-rending for its marginality.*

*Hazrat Nizamuddin's dargah compound, encompassing years of Sufi tradition, open to all, irrespective of caste, creed, religion, or class, (though not always gender), twenty-four hours a day, continues to challenge Hindu and Muslim orthodoxies. It was deviant then and it is deviant now, a bit odd in today's age of Islamism and Hindutva. In medieval Delhi, where dominant Hindu practices must have been defined by caste hierarchies and exclusion, Hazrat Nizamuddin was the refuge of the lowly. Even as the Muslim clergy with its supremacist and mainstream discourse was justifying the Sultanate rule, Hazrat Nizamuddin and his circle of Chishti saints were creating a parallel history through their acceptance of people without labels and religious identities.*

*Ghiyaspur, the ancestral basti grew to be an alternative society. Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya maintained a noticeable distance from the power politics of the court. Demonstrating a simple lifestyle, his patronage of music and assimilation of local and foreign traditions took him closer to the people of Delhi and outside. Thus the khanqah, and later his shrine, assumed the status of a personal space for healing and fulfilment. This is why this sanctuary is still visited by thousands of ordinary and often, afflicted souls. My outsider-ness crumbles here as the magic of the place uncannily makes me feel at home.*

*However, the irony of the present cannot go unnoticed. The time-warped basti has unwittingly retained its 'alternative' status in the otherwise 'shining' Delhi. The more we ignore history the more it leaps at us. In due course, I meet several Delhi residents who have never been to the dargah, let alone the ghetto known as Nizamuddin Basti.*

## Realm of the Sufis

*The Holy Quran states: 'He loveth them and they love Him' (5.59). This verse encapsulates Islamic mysticism known as Sufism. A confluence of two spiritual streams—the ascetic and devotional—took birth in Sufi thought and practice. By the twelfth century, multiple Sufi orders had emerged in the Islamic world. Between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, coinciding with the expansion of Muslim rule, five great Sufi orders migrated from Central Asia and Persia into north India. The Chishti, Suharwardi, Naqshbandi, Qadri and Firdausi schools flourished in what we now know as Indo-Pakistan.*

*The Chishti school of Sufism was immensely influential in northern India and dominated Delhi. Using the Quran and teachings of Prophet Mohammad as the guiding light, a small number of mystic manuals such as the Kashf-ul-Mahjoob (The Unveiling of the Veiled) by Sheikh Ahmad Raza Hujwari, formed the ideological basis of Sufi practice. Hujwari, one of the early Sufis, travelled to Lahore during Mohammad Ghazni's time and settled there. Through his teachings we learn about the intimate, personal experience of mystical elation. Sufism is about achieving an intense personal relationship with the Divine based on realizing God's attributes within oneself. It focuses on loving God through the service of mankind and establishing harmony with all of creation. Known as tasawwuf in Arabic<sup>1</sup> Sufism, it teaches ways of achieving tazkiya, purification of the mind, body and soul.*

*Countless Sufi establishments or khanqahs dotting the Indian spiritual landscape with deep entrenched pilgrimage networks were the major means that brought the masses into the fold of Islam. These khanqahs blended local tradition with Islamic values and provided a caste-less monotheistic version of spirituality where the charisma and wisdom of the pir or his descendants served as powerful elements to attract the local population. Indeed, the formal rites at these locations were backed by the inner journeys<sup>2</sup> of the Sufis that constitute the ultimate mystical experience. At the popular level, the pir was the face of spirituality and for the 'initiated', the gateway to inner peace.*

*In medieval India, the evolution of Sufism was not an isolated occurrence. Sufism in its diverse manifestations became the locus of potential religious syncretism. India was a fertile ground for the evolution of mystic practices, given that the people of India were already oriented towards mysticism. The Vedas and the Upanishads contained tenets for spiritual practices. For instance, the Rig Veda stated that divine reality was one and that poets had assigned different names to it. The Sufis sat under the same pipal trees that were already resonating to the chants from the Chandogya Upanishad that claimed that 'variations' were only issues of words and names.*

*The innate unity of all beings as expounded by the Advaita philosophy was re-scripted in another context by the Arab philosopher, Ibn-ul-Arabi. In India, following the Persian variant, this was to be known as hama-oost. As the Mughal Prince, Dara Shikoh, and many others were documented much later, Aham Brahmasmi of Advaita Vedanta and the Wahdatul Wajud—the inspiration for Chishti saints in particular—had much in common. For centuries, the postulations have continued to bedevil and challenge extremists and purists on both sides.*

*Sheikh Hamid-ud-din Nagauri, a distinguished disciple of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti*

*Ajmer, did not permit his disciples to use the categories of kafir and momin as the basis of a social discrimination. For instance, Sheikh Abdul Quddus of Gangoh, a renowned Chishti saint of the sixteenth century, thus admonished his disciples in a letter:*

*Why this meaningless talk about the believer,  
the kafir, the obedient, the sinner,  
the rightly guided, the misdirected, the Muslim,  
the pious, the infidel, the fire worshipper?  
All are like beads in a rosary.<sup>3</sup>*

*In this melting, rich milieu of medieval India, the Bhakti movement was to grow and spread across the religion of the people, away from the confines of narrow rituals and institutionalized obligations to God. The Sufis of medieval India explored Hindu thought processes and its 'peculiar' beliefs such as selfnegation that had survived centuries. Several Sufis and their followers concluded that Ram, Krishna and the Buddha were, in all probability, prophets who preached monotheism, for in the Quran, God assures that there was never a time when He did not send prophets to people of different nations in their own language. A south Indian Bhakti folk song thus echoes feelings of universal peace and brotherhood:*

*Into the bosom of the one great sea  
Flow streams that come from hills on every side.  
Their names are various as their springs,  
And thus in every land do men bow down  
To one great God, though known by many names.<sup>4</sup>*

*Chaitanya, Kabir and Guru Nanak were aware of Sufi thought and this dynamic cross-fertilization of spirituality led to the evolution of regional languages, cults and syncretic creeds. Eminent Indian historian, Romila Thapar, who has painstakingly researched on this issue, explores how Sufi and Bhakti thought and practice coalesced at different points of history. Both strands propagated the primal belief of uniting with God, and love was articulated as the basis of such a relationship with the Creator. Similarly, during the initial stages on the mystical path, both Sufi and Bhakti movements advocated the acceptance of a guru or a pir.*

*However, it has always been the intervention of the ruling classes that splintered common concerns and peoples' faith in co-existence, turning tradition into a limiting device. Today, we are faced with militant and politicized forms of the reinvented tradition in public domains across South Asia. The communal vision is inward looking and exclusive and defeats the breadth of both Sufi and Bhakti traditions. Interestingly, Sufi practice interacted as well as challenged the sociology of Hinduism as it had evolved over the centuries. However, adherence to the Islamic creed was a personal, regional and local process and did not stem from a central control or strategy.*

*Sufis were often castigated by Muslim orthodoxy and their traditions like using music to achieve mystical states were branded as heresy.*

*As Romila Thapar writes:*

*India, with its earlier experience of asceticism, the philosophy of the Upanishads and the devotional cults, provided a sympathetic atmosphere for the Sufis. The Sufis in India dissociated themselves from the established centres of orthodoxy, often as a protest against what they believed to be a misinterpretation of the Quran by the Ulema. They believed that the Ulema, by combining religious with political policy and cooperating with the Sultanate, were deviating from the original democratic and egalitarian principles of the Quran. The Ulema denounced the Sufis for their liberal ideas and the Sufis accused the Ulema of having succumbed to temporal temptations. Sufis were never deeply committed to the idea of rebellion since they were both, in theory and practice, isolated from those conditions which they opposed. The existence of recluses living apart from their fellows*

was familiar in India and Sufis were thus part of an established tradition.<sup>5</sup> It is not surprising then that Sufi pirs were as much revered by the Hindus as were Hindu gurus and ascetics, all of them being regarded by Hindus as being of the same mould.

Around 1221, Khwaja Qutubuddin Bakhtiar Kaki established one of the early khanqahs in Delhi. Kaki had been sent to Delhi by Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti or Gharib Nawaz of Ajmer. Gharib Nawaz taught that the highest form of devotion to God was, 'to develop a river-like generosity, sun-like bounty and earthlike hospitality'. Sultan Iltutmish's Qutub Minar perpetuated his memory.

Khwaja Bakhtiar Kaki's chief disciple was Baba Farid, the primal Sufi poet of Punjab, whose shrine is in Pakpattan (Pakistan). Baba Farid's khalifa was Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya, who witnessed three dynasties of seven Delhi sultans rise and fall. He remained an anti-establishment figure by being detached from the court and holding a parallel peoples' assembly each day at his khanqah. Hazrat Nizamuddin preached that 'bringing happiness to the human heart was the essence of religion' and often said, 'on the day of resurrection amongst those who will be favoured most by God are the ones who have tended to a broken heart'. His successor, Hazrat Nasiruddin Mahmood, who came to be known as Chiragh Dilli, furthered the teachings of the Chishti Sufi order.

The Chishti Sufis of Delhi were generally anti-establishment and had a troubled relationship with the Sultanate. Delhi Sufis were non-conformist, peoples' leaders and rarely met the Sultan, even though the official court always sought their allegiance for legitimacy. It was not just the urban population that was getting inspired by Sufism. In fact, the message of equality of all humans also brought them into contact with the rural masses. Thus, the Sufis became more effective religious leaders for peasants than the distant Ulema. In addition to its obvious attraction for the non-conformist elements in society, Sufi thought also inspired rationalist forces since it differed from standard religious escapism. For instance, Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya dabbled in an investigation on the 'laws of movement' in one of his texts that follows an uncanny line of empirical thought. But Sufis were not the pioneers of this trend. They were mere extensions of the deeper philosophical Indian traditions that had blossomed over the centuries.



'The Sufis of Delhi,' Sadia Dehlvi reminds me, 'had a significant role in the religious and cultural history of South Asia. In the light of the hadith,<sup>6</sup> "God is Beautiful and loves Beauty", they encouraged beauty in religious expression and became patrons of art, literature, architecture, music and language. They considered local dialects as immediate and intimate modes of communication with the Divine and a way of nurturing love and amity amongst people. Delhi has been traditionally known as Bais khwaja ki chaukhat or the threshold of twenty-two Sufi orders, although the important dargahs of the city far exceed this number.'

A healthy exchange of ideas between Sufi practitioners and Hindu yogis included the borrowing of concentration and meditation techniques from the latter. Sufi culture in Delhi embodied the religious tolerance for which Indian society strives even today. Sadia's mother loves to say, 'Sufi dargahs stand witness to our multi-cultural identity with people from various faiths continuing to seek solace and blessings at the threshold of these exalted Divines. Everyone who comes is blessed, no one goes khaali haath.'

Yet, at the khanqahs, a subtle pressure towards 'Islamizing' was also ever-present. The Ulema and the orthodoxy, tied as they were to the Sultanate and Mughal courts, were also shaping the discourse from the top. Over time, the Sufi movement was to absorb some elements of such



conservatism. For example, to be fully acceptable into Muslim society, a Hindu convert had to shed his Hindu identity and cultural moorings. But this was difficult and has remained unachievable. An intense cultural amalgamation was at the core of society and separateness was impossible.

There was, of course, the economic compulsion as well. Conversion to Islam opened up new avenues of employment and economic advancement under the Muslim state, as well as relief from severe taxes.

Thus currents and crosscurrents of politics, sociology and economics resulted in substantial numbers of Indians changing their religious identity. There was continuity at one level of the Vedic ethos, yet discontinuity with socio-religious hierarchies. History was never to be the same again. A permanent shift was taking place—irreversibly plural and factious in character and relentless in its interaction with what was imagined to be the 'local' India. Sufi khanqahs played a major role in promoting the message of equality and tolerance and later the Muslim state provided incentives of sorts.



There are few urban neighbourhoods that can match the magic of Nizamuddin East. Located opposite the Nizamuddin Basti and sandwiched between the ethereal Humayun's Tomb at one end and the noisy Nizamuddin railway station on the other, it is a better surviving metaphor for a Delhi that was. One morning, when I took a walk, I was completely spellbound by the atmosphere. It was not the colonial elegance of the Raj homes of Lahore or the modern opulence of contemporary cities. Here tombs appear from nowhere. So, an entry through the gates of the neighbourhood gives one a full view of the tomb of Abd-al-Rahim Khan-i-Khanan (1626), renowned general under Akbar and Jehangir. It is said that Abd-al-Rahim commissioned the translation of ancient Hindu texts into Persian and thereby laid the foundation for an inclusive court. A large-domed structure erected on a square garden, the tomb has the usual red sandstone and white marble trimming. It seems to be a lesser version of Humayun's Tomb. The garden is not just a flat tended lawn with attractive palm trees. It is said that the marble from this lonely tomb was ripped off and used to adorn a Mughal noble's and Prime Minister Safdarjung's tomb (1754).

Facing the abandoned tomb of Abd-al-Rahim, the numbered gates of this colony lead you into densely tree-lined narrow lanes with a housing stock that is about to explode. But the overpopulation is well concealed by the shade and the crisscrossing of small parks where old couples stroll and kids run around. There are neem trees, old and stocky, with layers of mythical shade that led to enlightenment and self-knowledge in bygone eras. The amaltas trees burn a yellow that morning as I was looking for Sadia's house. Pipal, pilkhan, palm and ashoka trees define the horizon.

I spot a gardener and ask him for directions. Taking advantage of this unplanned encounter, I ask him to name the trees. Most of them turn out to have the same names that they have in Pakistan. I chide myself for my silly assumption that somehow trees would change their names if they were to move out of Lahore. He mentions neem, aam, sagwan, sheesham, mursari and so on. And there are chandni hedges at the roundabouts, randomly grafted but well kept after a fashion.

I am not sure what pilkhan means but I see this huge tree just before the enclave where Sadia lives. Pilkhan's botanical name is *Ficus rumphii* as I find out later, and having seen it in Dhaka and Karachi it was familiar to me. By the time I get to Sadia's residence, I have walked under an interesting jungle jalebi, a rogue kabuli keekar, clusters of gulmohars, papris and, of course, the

jamuns that are empty of fruits which have been plucked this monsoon. There are little champans everywhere with blooming flowers and their characteristic scent. Nankuram, the gardener of Khan-i-Khanan's tomb has been very kind. I return the favour with a small tip that makes him smile.

Nizamuddin East is imbued with a somewhat medieval air despite its new structures that include some sleek apartments defined by long rows of flashy cars on the small streets. Some of India's best-known editors, journalists, artists and authors live in Nizamuddin East. This is my own miniature vision of Delhi which refuses to go away even as I explore the rest of the city. It is simply amazing to buy a phone card while standing next to Humayun's Tomb or to pick up flowers in front of Khan-i-Khanan's tomb.

With little ado and Nankuram's guidance I reach the destination. Sadia Dehlvi, as her name suggests, indeed personifies Delhi in all its dimensions—the old, the contemporary, evanescent and permanent. 'I am a true Dilli-wali,' she says, 'one who lives and breathes Delhi, relishing every moment of it. I cannot be anywhere else but Delhi, I hope to die here as well and be buried in one of the graveyards in Hazrat Nizamuddin. A good neighbourhood is important both in this world and the hereafter.' Sadia shot to fame in the 1980s—a young, gorgeous, media person whose spitfire writings on women and minority issues won her the journalism award in 1989. In those days, few Muslim women were visible on the capital scene and perhaps this made Sadia something of a novelty.

Sadia is a scion of the Dehlvi khandaan, publishers of Shama, an Urdu literary and film monthly that achieved great popularity even in Pakistan. Her grand plans of preserving the Urdu language and its culture are temporarily on the backburner as her energies are now devoted to presenting an alternative narrative of Islam. During my years of travelling in Delhi, Sadia's book evolved and I am proud to have been her muse. She laments that one of the prices of Partition paid by Indian Muslims was the decline of Urdu as soon as Pakistan adopted it as its official language. However, she ensures it is the language spoken in her home and has a tutor come home to teach her son Urdu. She constantly lectures her son about how Urdu is essentially about the refinement of one's sensibilities.

The much-bemoaned state of the Urdu language in India is no secret. By all accounts, its status is turning into somewhat of a relic with declining numbers of Urdu readers and speakers. For decades, Bollywood had kept it alive by employing lyricists and scriptwriters who shaped mainstream Urdu-esque idiom for cinema. I found that the Hindustani now spoken and understood stands somewhere between classical Urdu and a 'pure' Hindi influenced by Sanskrit.

I agree with Sadia. Bollywood, possibly the last flag-bearer of Urdu, now uses urban street lingo in its songs. It has jettisoned poetry and more and more lyricists use slang so that songs can appeal to young people. I remind Sadia that this is the 'Dard-edisco' phenomenon. The days of 'Kabhi kabhi mere dil mein'<sup>7</sup> are perhaps over.

'I am so Dilli-inspired, each nook and corner of the city has a story to tell,' Sadia always announces flatly. We stroll on the rooftop of her flat which overlooks Humayun's majestic tomb. As we discuss the myriad facets of Delhi, her profile, unaffected by age, merges into the skyline. She is also very Muslim, I discover. She begins her day with fajr and a half-hour recitation of the Quran. This is followed by a yoga routine including the head stand. 'I'm then equipped emotionally and physically to battle with the daily stress of city life,' she says. She is also a self-confessed diwani of the twenty-two khwajas who 'protect and bless my city. Little is known about some very important dargahs that lie here. Sufism is a message of love and peace, the answer to religious intolerance.'

and extreme behaviour.' On Thursday evenings, this regular celebrity party face, once flashed frequently on Page 3 of city newspapers, is to be found lighting candles and listening to qawwalis at Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya's dargah. A hazri at the tombs of Qutub Sahab Bakhtiyar Kari and Hazrat Shah Farhad is a weekend must. Sadia does not see any conflict in her eclectic lifestyle and seems comfortable with what most would perceive as a contradiction. We sit in her living room adorned by fabulous artworks that she has collected over time. Sadia is a fulsome woman with manic energy and charisma that is hard to miss. A femme fatale of yore, I meet her more sober version in Delhi this time.

Sadia lived in Pakistan for a little over a year. 'The best gift from Pakistan is my son, Arman who was born in 1992 at the Lady Dufferin Hospital in Karachi,' she says fondly. However, she says that Islamabad 'is pretty oppressive and limited for one used to living in buzzing metro where so much is happening all the time. I made many friends and possibly even some enemies! I have loads of family and friends with whom I am in touch all the time.' Sadia liked Karachi though, for she found a number of 'independent women' there and liked its relative nonjudgmental atmosphere.

Arman was born, as Sadia believes, through a mannat at Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti's dargah in Ajmer. His date of birth coincides with the great saint's urs on the sixth of Rajab<sup>8</sup> and Sadia firmly believes that Arman's extraordinary musical talents are a gift from this Sufi saint. Starting his training from the age of three, Arman is quite the little maestro at the tabla, harmonium and electric guitar. He is a student of the Dilli Gharana style of classical singing. At twenty, Arman already has many concerts to his credit. Like his mother, he is as comfortable singing verses from Khusrau and Ghalib as he is with heavy metal and rock. Later, Arman renders a few verses from Ghalib's poem Hazaron khawshishain aisee. He gets Urdu and Quran lessons at home and has become a great favourite at Delhi's milad mehfilis for naatkhwani and qirat.

Dinner consists of mouthwatering food from Al-Kausar owned by Sadia's family. Not content with contributions to the cultural landscape of Delhi, Sadia is equally passionate about Delhi's dastarkhwan or spread of food. She says, 'There are few real Dilliwalas left in Delhi, which has now become a multicultural city.' With 'fusion' food taking over, special efforts have to be made to keep the culinary traditions of our city alive. Thirty years ago, Sadia created the first kaba-eatery kiosk on the streets of New Delhi. Earlier, authentic Delhi cuisine was only available in the gulleys of the old city. Al-Kausar's menu includes classic Delhi barbecues and Dilli ki biryani and qorma. For over three decades it has been the Delhi elite's favourite little dhaba.

In one of her irreverent moments, of which there are many in one day, she confesses, 'Other than sharing emotions and a similar culture, living in India and Pakistan is very different. In Pakistan, I never really found the space to exist freely as one does in India. Pakistan is about conformity and I have always been a non-conformist. I'm used to a diverse culture. Every time I landed at Delhi, I used to feel comforted at the sight of turbaned Sikhs at the airport. Thank God my grandparents chose to remain in Delhi!' Minority status and the baggage of Partition have created a fragile environment for Indian Muslims but they continue to make their mark in every field.

An old friend and disciple of the iconic Indian writer Khushwant Singh, Sadia appears frequently in his writings. Singh's book, Not a Nice Man to Know, a compilation of some of his most well-known works, carries the dedication, 'To Sadia Dehlvi, who gave me more affection and notoriety than I deserve.' Sadia also appears on the cover of Singh's infamous Women and Men in my Life.



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