

From Indraprastha to Delhi: The Cityscape as Sediment of Memories

Hina Nandrajog, University of Delhi, India

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Abstract

Urban centres evolve due to the convergence of large swathes of people in search of better opportunities; or cataclysmic events in the history of a nation may transform the demography of a place, leading to mutation in its culture. Cities become melting pots for diverse cultures and tend to be more cosmopolitan and eclectic in character. With an assortment of stimuli jostling for space, the processes of accommodation and assimilation that seethe under its vibrancy may be glimpsed through a study of cities. A ‘million mutinies’ threaten the cohesive social fabric of a city and it negotiates these by accommodating, embracing, or overwhelming diversity. This may enable an understanding of ways to resolve larger conflicts. The paper attempts to trace the stamp of various influences on the city of Delhi that has survived successive onslaughts through the ages as depicted in literature, including the most recent of tumultuous demographic change wrought upon the city at the time of independence and partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. Through a reading of English fiction about Delhi, the paper traces the changes in the fabric of the city wrought over the ages to explore the ways in which chaos is charted and may be negotiated by a city to sustain itself as a vital life force of a nation.

Keywords: diversity, accommodation, assimilation

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Introduction

Delhi which was once the Jewel of the world,
Where dwelt only the loved ones of Fate,
Which has now been ruined by the hand of Time,
I'm a resident of that storm-tossed place.... Meer Taqi Meer (Ali, 1940, p. 4-5)

Urban centres usually evolve due to the convergence of large swathes of people in search of better opportunities to earn a livelihood. In addition, cataclysmic events in the history of a nation may transform the demography of a place, leading to mutation in its culture.¹ Large scale human migration to a place results in diverse people bringing their unique individual cultures into play. As the migrant and the host culture come into contact with each other, one's native culture mediates between the two to adjust to the emotional and social dissonance that might be caused. With an assortment of stimuli jostling for space, the processes of accommodation and assimilation that churn under its vibrancy may be glimpsed through a study of urban centres or cities. A 'million mutinies', to use V.S. Naipaul's coinage, continuously threaten the cohesive social fabric of a city and it negotiates these by accommodating, embracing, and sometimes, subduing diversity. The article attempts to trace the imprint of various influences on the city of Delhi that has survived successive onslaughts through its three thousand year old history as depicted in literature, including the most recent of tumultuous demographic change wrought upon the city at the time of independence and partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. It proposes to show how varied interactions enabled different, even inimical, communities to arrive at a workable solution for coexistence, and may offer pointers to resolution of conflict. This is traced through vignettes of the city from a few literary texts – Khushwant Singh's *Delhi: A Novel* (1990), William Dalrymple's *City of Djinns: A Year in Delhi* (1993), and Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* (1940).

Change, Continuity and Connections...

In *Twilight in Delhi*, Ahmed Ali says, "... the city of Delhi, built hundreds of years ago, fought for, died for, coveted and desired, built, destroyed and rebuilt, for five and six and seven times, mourned and sung, raped and conquered, yet whole and alive.... the city stands still intact, as do many more forts and tombs and monuments, remnants and reminders of old Delhi, holding on to life with a tenacity and purpose which is beyond comprehension and belief" (1940, p. 3). Over the millennia, a large number of invaders carved a path through the north-western range of mountains to traverse the broad bosom of the north Indian plains with Delhi as a nucleus.² It endured pillage and plunder, massacres, destruction of buildings, forcible evacuation of populations twice – one as recently as 1947; and yet managed to limp back to life time and again. This has created the city's quintessentially resilient character in the face of recurrent violent turmoil. Some of the invaders made it their home and enriched the cultural ethos with their distinctive cultural practices. Even those invaders who made brief incursions stamped their influence on the landscape and the mindscape of the subcontinent. This

¹ The migration of a large number of people to escape persecution, poverty and starvation is a tragedy that unfolds every day even today.

² By and large, the city has remained contained within the Delhi Triangle – the Aravalli range of mountains in the south and west and the river Yamuna in the east.

has given rise to a hybrid culture, commonly known as the Ganga-Jamni tehzeeb – suggesting the confluence of two great rivers.³

The narrator in Khushwant Singh's *Delhi* is an ageing, rancoteuring roué, whose sexual escapades with various women are interspersed with his love-hate relationship with Bhagmati, a transgender that mirrors his relationship to Delhi. In the opening sentence of the reminiscences, he says, "I return to Delhi as I return to my mistress Bhagmati when I have had my fill of whoring in foreign lands. Delhi and Bhagmati have a lot in common. Having been long misused by rough people they have learnt to conceal their seductive charms under a mask of repulsive ugliness. It is only to their lovers, among whom I count myself, that they reveal their true selves" (1990, p. 1-2). Waxing eloquent over how Delhi is perceived once one has accepted it, he says, "Then the skies over Delhi's marbled palaces turn an aquamarine blue; its domed mosques and pencil-like minarets are spanned by rainbows, the earth exudes the earthy aroma of *khas*⁴, of jasmine, and of *maulsari*⁵. Then the dusky Bhagmati glides towards you swaying her ample hips like a temple dancer; her mouth smells of fresh cloves and she speaks like her Imperial Majesty the Empress of Hindustan" (Ibid.). It is, he says, "a simple formula: use your heart not your head, your emotion and not your reason" (Ibid.).

William Dalrymple's travelogue, *City of Djinns* recounts his stay in Delhi over a period of one year in 1989 after falling in love with it during a visit in 1984. He runs through the entire gamut of the extremities of the weather from the onset of the Indian autumn that heralds respite from the sticky heat of the monsoons to the blistering cold; and then the balmy spring season that rapidly metamorphs into the scorching heat of the summer. He peels Delhi's history layer by layer, harking to the rumblings of the djinns in every era as he burrows further and further into the recesses of time.

Both these texts offer a panoramic view of Delhi, albeit they narrate it from opposite ends of the timeline. Dalrymple starts from the present, and then moves back into its successive pasts in an inverse order to Singh's *Delhi*, that travels from the remotest past to the present. This could be because Singh's connection with the city is intimate, having spent the better part of his life there. Dalrymple, on the other hand, arrives as a foreign traveller who peels the city's thick patina one layer at a time as he gradually grasps the city's rich past. While Dalrymple's account is in the first person, in Singh's account, the present is narrated through the first person and the past is presented in diverse narratorial voices – of a conqueror, ruler, invader, subaltern, poet, among others. Both accounts oscillate between the past and the present to relieve the grimness of the past as well as to demonstrate how things have changed (or not). The two texts dovetail into each other quite serendipitously and an anecdote in one text, at times, highlights an aspect of the other.⁶ *Twilight in Delhi*, written in 1940 at the cusp of the decade of independence and partition of the Indian subcontinent into India and

³ This is somewhat different from the melting pot theory.

⁴ Botanical name: *Vetiveria Zizanoides*, a kind of fragrant grass and widely used for various purposes.

⁵ Botanical name: *Mimusops Elengi*, a tree with fragrant flowers, and used in medicines.

⁶ For example, the same incident of the Sufi saint, Khwaja Nizammudin not being willing to entertain kings is given in both texts.

Pakistan, also reflects upon the city at the time of the first war of independence against British rule in 1857; it is a plaintive account of a dying culture – both Muslim and the Ganga-Jamni tehzeeb of the country.

Several remarkable points about Delhi emerge from these accounts that trace and illustrate the history of Delhi through the ruins of the myriad monuments dotting the city landscape. Making a lewd comment at a lady, Singh quotes a well-known line, “Ruins proclaim the past splendour of an ancient monument” (1990, p. 25). The first feature of the city, indeed of the Indian civilization as a whole, has been assimilation of diverse thought, even if inimical, and a synthesis of both. The rambling, haphazard Hindu temples gave way to the imposition of order of the Mughal gardens and the grandeur of their palaces and forts, which yet fused the ancient Hindu architecture to create a unique Indo-Islamic style. This, in turn, yielded to Indo-Saranic architecture of British imperialism that assimilated features from indigenous tradition.⁷ Each time the city was reborn, new monuments were built as an assertion of imperial power but the past managed to stay alive, sometimes in unexpected ways. Rather than comprehensive destruction of the one, or the total rejection of the other, the new catalyzed with the old to make something different. This served both to maintain harmony and to create a beautiful, enriched heritage for the subcontinent. This also bred an unprecedented ethic of tolerance for the diverse.

The twist in the tale is that the melody of the present is infused with the echoes of the past. Rather than clear-cut successive layers as they occurred chronologically, the strata have coalesced into an amalgamation, where the features remain distinctive and visible simultaneously. Successive patinas of the past shine through the present as cultures and ruins from different eras co-exist instead of being phased out in the course of time. Dalrymple says, “The djinns – (ghosts of this “groaning necropolis, a graveyard of dynasties”) – are the metaphorical presence of all successive ages of the history of Delhi in simultaneous co-existence, awkwardly, if not harmoniously” (1993, p. 8).

Not only do different eras co-exist, their continuity, almost unbroken, may be glimpsed even today in the city. The oldest legends about Delhi continue to be relevant to a large number of people, as if to stubbornly assert their right to space in modernity. Dalrymple says, “Somehow different areas of Delhi seemed to have preserved intact different centuries, even different millennia. The Punjabi immigrants were a touchstone to the present day; with their nippy Maruti cars and fascination with all things new, they formed a lifeline to the 1980s, the old majors you would meet strolling in the Lodhi Gardens were pickled perhaps half a century earlier. Their walrus moustaches and Ealing comedy accents hinted that they had somehow got stuck in about 1946. The eunuchs in the Old City, some speaking courtly Urdu, might not have looked so out of place under the dais of the Great Mogul. The *sadhus* at Nigambodh Ghat I imagined as stranded citizens of Indraprastha, the legendary first Delhi of the *Mahabharata*, the great Indian epic” (1993, p. 8-9).

Delhi is believed to have originated in myth and celebrated in the Indian epic, *Mahabharata*, as the capital of the kingdom ruled by the Pandavas and was known as

⁷ These changes permeated other aspects of life as well – customs, language, food, clothing, etc.

Indraprastha, or in Pali 'Indapatta'.⁸ Evidence is inconclusive but excavations have revealed Painted Grey Pottery that is dated before 900 BCE and points to habitation there.⁹ After emerging victorious from the battle at Kurukshetra, the Pandavas performed the ashwamedha yagna¹⁰ at the banks of the river Jamuna, further north.¹¹

Though there is continuity in history since its mythical origin, the texts under study pick up the strand of history from the seventh and eighth century onwards.¹² The red sandstone fort, Lal Kot, of the Tomara, further fortified by Prithviraj Chauhan and

⁸ As with all things Indian there is an exuberant multiplicity even in the name of the city – it has been known by a variety of appellations – Yoginipura, Indapatta (in Pali), Indraprastha, Dilli, Dehli, and now Delhi and New Delhi. There are various theories as to how the term 'Delhi' came into existence. The most common belief is that this originated from a Raja Dhilu or Dilu of the Mauryan Dynasty who ruled in the first century BCE. Dihlika, Delhi or Dili has been derived from his name. Another story is that a nail was hammered in the ground that was believed to have gone right down to the underworld. But it was loose, so it was 'dheeli' killi ('loose' nail). Yet another popular story according to historians is that the word *Dili* is derived from *dehleez* or *dehali*, i.e. 'threshold' in Hindi-Urdu. This looks at Delhi as the gateway to the Indo-Gangetic Plain. What is interesting is that none of these theories cancel out the other; all of them illustrate differing truths.

⁹ The reputed archaeologist, B.B. Lal believes it to have been a rustic one and not the grand, sophisticated one as portrayed in the *Mahabharata*; which he ascribes to the poetic license exercised by the author. Till as recent as 1913, a village called Inderpat existed around what was regarded as the original spot of Indraprastha.

¹⁰ A ritual performed by ancient Hindu kings to prove their supremacy. A horse, accompanied by the King's soldiers was allowed to wander all over the territory. If it was challenged, a battle would ensue to establish sovereignty. If the horse returned alive after one year, it would be sacrificed and the King's supremacy would be considered undisputed.

¹¹ The place to perform the ashwamedha yagna to celebrate their victory in the battle in Kurukshetra was chosen by them because of an even older myth. At the end of Dwaparyuga, the third yuga in Hindu mythology (the Hindu notion of cosmology of time epochs – four age cycles – a complete yuga starts with Satya, goes through Treta, Dwapar and Kali. Dwaparayuga ended in 3102 BCE when the Kurukshetra war ended). Brahma, the Creator, is believed to have suffered a fit of divine amnesia and forgotten all the *Vedas* and sacred scriptures soon after the creation of the world. He performed a series of yogic exercises and austerities and dived into the Jumna. Soon afterwards, during the monsoon when the waters were in full spate, the flooded river miraculously threw up the sacred texts on the right bank of the river, and this place was named Nigambodh Ghat, the Bank of Sacred Knowledge.

¹² Dalrymple says "... trying to disentangle the history of pre-Muslim Delhi was like penetrating deeper and deeper into a midsummer dust storm: the larger landmarks stood out, but the details were all obliterated" (1993, p. 320-321). Singh, too, eschews the mythical birth of the city and starts his tale from the thirteenth century CE, "633 Hijri corresponding to the year 1265 of the Christian calendar. It was the beginning of the reign of Sultan Ghiasuddin Balban" (1990, p. 50).

renamed Qila Rai Pithora (now Mehrauli), was burnt down in 1192 by Mohammed Ghori, heralding Muslim rule in the country. Ghurid, Mamluk, Khilji, Tughlaq rule followed; after which the Mughal Empire was established. Delhi underwent further avatars as Siri, Tughlagabad, Jahanpanah, Feroze Shah Kotla, Dinpanah, Shahjahanabad, after which the British built what is known as Lutyens' Delhi. In 1947, the landscape and the demography were transformed due to the massive influx of Hindu and Sikh refugees and the exodus of Muslim refugees.

The advent of Islam in India was not a peaceful one. An early example from the two histories of Delhi under study is the building of the first mosque, Quwwat-ul-Islam, around 1192 for which twenty-seven Hindu and Jain temples were destroyed. Local craftsmen were engaged to build a tower of victory, the Qutub Minar, in the same complex and they recycled the vandalized columns to do so. Since iconography was not permitted in Islam, the carvings and inscriptions were plastered over. Later, the plaster flaked off to reveal the original carvings. The fifth century CE iron pillar, earlier installed in Lal Kot in the tenth century, was brought here. The pillar still stands there; a metaphor for how the ancient remains couched through several epochs, sometimes in an unexpected way even when the attempt is to stamp it out.¹³ Domes and arches, virtually unknown before the influence of Islamic architecture, henceforth dominated the landscape of Delhi in majestic glory. Skilled workforce trained in Indian traditions incorporated indigenous features; for example, use of traditional stone masonry instead of brick. The use of ornate overhanging balconies or jharokhas, and pillared pavilions or chhatris was reminiscent of Rajasthani architecture.

The British too built over the Mughal structures, without destroying them entirely.¹⁴ The British Residency was built on the ruins of Dara Shikoh's library not by knocking it down; they "merely erected a classical façade over a Mughal substructure" (Dalrymple, 1993, p. 111).¹⁵ The process of building the city anew began in 1911 when the capital was shifted from Calcutta to Delhi.¹⁶ British architects, Edwin Lutyens and Herbert Baker used the original point of Indraprastha as a landmark to

¹³ In Singh's account, the narrator picks up a stone lying on the ground in the Qutab Minar complex. It has "a swastika on top, two lotus flowers on either side with 'Allah' inscribed on it in Arabic" (1990, p. 49) suggesting the mesh of identities. A subaltern living in those times, a young Hindu scribe, "Musaddi Lal, son of Lala Chagan Lal, Hindu Kayastha of Mehrauli in the city of Delhi..." takes his wife to visit the Qutab Minar complex where they see a slab with an inscription, *Sri Visvakarme Prasade Rachita* (conceived with the grace of Vishwakarma, the Hindu deity of creative power) (Ibid., p. 53).

¹⁴ *Twilight in Delhi* is a melancholic account of the anger that is felt by the residents of Delhi at not only what the British were doing to its landscape, but at the imminent demise of a culture and a way of life with the construction of a new Delhi outside the old city.

¹⁵ Similarly, Dalrymple says about the Indophile, William Fraser's grave, "The design, suitably enough, had a European form, but its substance, Mughal marble inlay, was wholly Indian" (1993, p. 146).

¹⁶ "The transfer of the capital to Delhi was widely welcomed.... Delhi had always been the capital of Hindustan. It was closer to the heart of the country" (Singh, 1990, p. 320).

map the new imperial city.¹⁷ Lord Hardinge, the Viceroy, wished some “eastern features” to be included so that the architecture was palatable and familiarly imperial to the people (Metcalf, 1985, p. 395). Lutyens incorporated several elements from indigenous architecture despite his professed contempt for it. A Buddhist dome was used to crown the Viceroy’s residence (now the Rashtrapati Bhavan), and as R G Irving says in his article, “Architecture for Empire’s Sake: Lutyens’s Palace for Delhi,” “the hues and shadows of Mughal facades were married to the sculptural massing and subtle proportions of European architecture.... To the visitor, Lutyens’s creation seems to be at one and the same time a giant Indian bungalow, embattled Rajput fortress, and Mughal tomb....” (1982, p. 4) Still another characteristic Indian architectural element acts as a crucial unifying feature of Lutyens’s palace: “the chajja, a beetling, downswept stone cornice common in Mughal buildings and found in Indo-Aryan temples as early as the eleventh century, to protect palace interiors from what Lutyens called the ‘tremendous violence’ of Indian light”” (Ibid., p. 4-5). The dome “... married past and present, linking the legacy of the Roman, Asokan, and Mughal empires with Britain’s physical and spiritual heritage.... [t]he dome became an ecumenical metaphor in stone, a transcendent symbol for that supreme synthesis of cultures, the British Empire” (Ibid., p. 9).

The eclecticism of monuments with sediment of memories of several epochs of history has ensured their enduring legacy and significance for the present. For example, Purana Qila or the Old Fort built around Indraprastha and used later by the British as a reference point for the new city, became a refuge for a large number of Muslim refugees en route to Pakistan in August 1947. Similarly, the Red Fort and Jama Masjid built as part of Shahjahanabad in the seventeenth century, symbols of the might of the Mughals, epitomised anti-imperialism during British rule by recognising the last Mughal, Bahadur Shah Zafar, as the rightful king. Almost a century later, in 1945, the (in)famous Red Fort public trials of the Generals of Subhash Chandra Bose’s Indian National Army fighting British rule were held there; the nationalist heroes were finally acquitted and released due to public protests over their arrests.¹⁸ It is from here that Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru made his ‘tryst with destiny’ Independence Speech as the tricolour was hoisted on 15 August 1947; as it is on every subsequent Independence Day. “It is a site where the past and the present coalesced to mark a newly independent nation’s step towards the future. On every Independence Day, as the prime minister speaks from the rampart of the Red Fort in what is a formal, choreographed event, the site itself shimmers with the sheen of an inclusive memory, like a talisman” (Sinha, 2017). Today British-era buildings are seats of power for the government of independent India. Originally conceived as the ultimate symbol of the might of the British Raj over a vast geography of the subcontinent and even beyond, the Viceregal House is now the official residence of the President of India.

¹⁷ Anyone who builds a new city is believed to be cursed with a short rule. The British rule, too, came to a close in just over thirty years after building the imperial buildings that had seemed to exemplify ‘the Empire on which the sun never sets’ at the time of their construction.

¹⁸ A popular slogan of the times was, “*Chalis crore-on ki awaaz! Sehgal, Dhillon, Shah Nawaz!!*” i.e. “Forty crore people shout in unison! Sehgal, Dhillon, Shah Nawaz!!” These three were the Generals in the INA – a Hindu, a Sikh, and a Muslim – symbolic of the religious integration of the country.

In Singh's *Delhi*, this medley of architectural features is summed up in the musing of a soldier as landmarks are pointed to an English officer, Hodson Sahib. About Firoze Shah's fort built around 1354, he is told, "That Sahib is a Buddhist pillar on top of the palace of Firoze Shah" (1990, p. 302). A soldier wonders, 'I ask you what can a Buddhist pillar be doing on top of a Mussalman king's palace?' (Ibid.) "We pass very high walls of an ancient fort.... This sir, is the Purana Qila – the old fort – said to have been first built by the Aryans and was known as Indraprastha. Inside there is a mosque of Sher Shah Suri and the library of Emperor Humayun.' Who is to tell the Sahib that there cannot be a mosque inside a Hindu fort!" (Ibid.).

The architectural mesh of features from diverse sources epitomises the social and cultural adjustment and assimilation that took place. Musaddi Lal shows how ordinary Hindus adjusted to the new regime by learning Arabic, Turki, and Persian and served under the new rulers.¹⁹ Though he did not convert, he adopted their dress and some of their customs. He and his wife became "members of a community which worshipped both in Hindu temples and in Sufi hospices.... celebrated Hindu festivals as well as the Muslim.... (Singh, 1990, p. 61). He brought up his son as a Hindu and named him Kamal – that meant 'lotus flower' in Hindi and 'excellence' in Arabic, when pronounced as 'Kamaal'. If asked if they were Hindu or Muslim, "we would reply we were both" (Ibid., 62). He did feel discriminated against at times, but was resigned to it. "I realized that I belonged neither to the Hindus nor to the Mussalmans.... Indeed, I was like a *hijda* who was neither one thing nor another but could be misused by everyone" (Ibid., p. 71). The subaltern's view is significant as the fight for supremacy is amongst the elite; the common people only wish to be allowed to lead their lives in peace. Hundreds of years later, Punjab Singh, Dalrymple's driver's father, echoes the same sentiment at their forced migration in 1947. "We had heard about the idea of Pakistan, but we thought it would make no difference to us. We realized a Mahomedan government would take over from the Britishers. But in our Punjab governments often come and go. Usually such things make no difference to the poor man in his village" (1993, p. 40).

The fusion of religious thought was one of the most remarkable features. Even before the advent of outside influences, the ritualistic Vedantism that the originally amorphous Hinduism had succumbed to, gave birth to two indigenous responses – Jainism and Buddhism – to articulate resistance to orthodox codification and engineer a social revolution. And as Islam and later Christianity came to India, there were efforts to engage with it and absorb some of their elements.²⁰ New influences became

¹⁹ He says, "The Hindus hatred of the Mussalmans did not make sense to me. The Muslims had conquered Hindustan.... They were quite willing to let us Hindus live our lives as we wanted to provided we recognized them as our rulers. But the Hindus were full of foolish pride. 'This is our country!' they said.... The Hindus lived on the stale diet of past glory" (Singh, 1990, p. 54).

²⁰ Emperor Akbar frequently held discussions with priests of various religions and advocated a new religion, *Din-i-ilahi* in the sixteenth century that fused all that he thought was best in every religion. Even the orthodox Aurangzeb is known to have given grants to build Hindu and Sikh temples. Shah Jahan's eldest son, Dara Shikoh, an erudite scholar in Persian and Sanskrit had Hindu religious texts "... had the Hindu *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Yoga-Vashishta* translated into Persian and himself composed religious and mystical treatises. The most remarkable was the

diffused into people's lives, but they did not erase the old way of life which retained its distinctiveness and gleamed through, much like the Hindu temple pillars that were co-opted into the symbol of Muslim victory. As Meer, Singh records, "Like other Muslims I went to the mosque every Friday. Like Hindus I had drawn castemarks on my forehead, worshipped in temples of idolatory and ages ago abandoned Islam" (1990, p. 224).

A significant development during these centuries was the emergence of the Sufi sect within Islam that created bridges across cultural and religious chasms. Liddle notes that by locating the city in Delhi that exuded royal power, "Shah Jahan was drawing on the strong traditions of spiritual and temporal power that the populace associated with the site" (2017, p. 5). Mystic saints like Qutubuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki and Khwaja Hazrat Nizamuddin stood like apostles of peace and unity; a Sufi was an "... umbrella against the burning sun of Muslim bigotry and the downpour of Hindu contempt" (Singh, 1990, p. 62). Throughout the ages, Sufis upheld service to mankind as the noblest ideal and the idea of One God. "There are innumerable ways of approaching Him.... His path may lead to the mosque or the tabernacle, to a temple full of idols or to a solitary cave in the wilderness" (Ibid., p. 67). Their appeal is enduring as people believe that mystic benevolence is more potent than worldly power; kings come and go but saints are immortal. "The saints do not die.... They merely disappear behind a veil" (Dalrymple, 1993, p. 294). That is why even though the palaces and forts of kings lie in ruins, people still throng the dargahs of penniless saints to seek blessings. Dalrymple endorses this when he visits a shrine in Daulatabad, "... the shrine of the penniless dervish had survived – maintained and venerated – while the palaces of his rich and powerful contemporaries had decayed into roofless ruins" (Ibid., p. 297). As their message of love proved stronger than that of bigotry practiced by some rulers, they influenced even non-Muslim population, because, as Dr. Jaffrey explains, people were "impatient for the divine. They want to see in this life a glimpse of the face of God" (Ibid., p. 280). It did not matter that the face of God that they would see would be different.²¹ Typically, and perhaps, inevitably, they became fused with Hindu legends. Dalrymple gives an example of Khizr Khan, the Green Sufi, who was soon believed to be an incarnation of Vishnu! (Ibid., p. 300).²²

Majmua-ul-Baharain ('*The Mingling of the Two Oceans*'), a comparative study of Hinduism and Islam which emphasised the compatibility of the two faiths and the common source of their divine revelations" (Dalrymple, 1993, p. 196).

²¹ Dr. Jaffrey narrates an anecdote told by Jala-ud-din Rumi about a city of blind men who came back with different interpretations after groping different parts of an elephant. "All three men stuck by their stories and for the rest of their lives they refused to speak to each other. Each professed that they and only they knew the whole truth. So it is with us. We see Allah one way, the Hindus have a different conception, and the Christians have a third. To us, all our different visions seem incompatible and irreconcilable. But what we forget is that before God we are like blind men stumbling around in total blackness...." (Dalrymple, 1993, p. 280-281).

The beheading of Sarmad, a Sufi mystic during Aurangzeb's time was an indication of the fear that even the rulers felt about the power of the Sufis.

²² Khwaja Khizr was regarded as a saviour of all Sufis and believed to be still alive, wandering all over the earth. He is assimilated into native lore and becomes Raja Khidar, God of Boatmen; ... propitiated by feeding Brahmins. Dalrymple searches for the Khizr tradition in Delhi and is able to locate it in the Mehrauli Idgah. His

The spot where the Pandavas were supposed to have performed the ashwamedha yagna at Nighambodh Ghat is commemorated by an ancient temple dedicated to Lord Shiva that stands to this day. It is known as Nili Chattri temple, literally 'Blue Umbrella'.²³ The temple is a Mughal tomb, yet it has been cherished and held sacred for aeons by Hindus. Over centuries of co-existence, the festivals of the two faiths have long become confused and mingled. Dalrymple notices people praying at a tomb and placing oil lamps and hanging garland of marigold at a Sufi shrine at Diwali, a Hindu festival.²⁴

The characteristics of fusion, simultaneity and continuity may be glimpsed in other areas as well. A new language, Urdu, was born out of the interaction of the Turks with the natives of the people of Delhi. Urdu borrowed from the local as well as the invader's vocabulary and adopted the scripts of both. Later, the eighteenth century witnessed the zenith of the confluence of the Hindu and Muslim culture, especially in the rich repertoire of Urdu poetry and literature. Meer Taqi Meer, Ghalib, Zauq...²⁵ The rulers introduced their own languages like Arabic and Persian into Indian administration. The existing Indian languages such as Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, Tamil, Gujarati etc. were considerably influenced by Persian, Arabic and Turkish languages of the Muslim community. In this process of linguistic intermingling, the literary tradition of the country underwent a sea-change. Many Indian texts were translated into Persian and Arabic and vice versa. With the advent of English, another process of assimilation and absorption transformed both English and the other languages of the subcontinent that it came in contact with. After 1947, Punjabi became a major language in Delhi and was acknowledged as a state language; today in Delhi, all sign posts are in four languages – English, Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi!²⁶

companion, Dr. Jaffery explains that nowadays it was very difficult to be able to summon the spirit of Khizr due to living in the age of spiritual decay – echoing the Hindu belief of the Kali Yuga – epoch of destruction after the epoch of creation. (Dalrymple, 1993, p. 304).

²³ The name derives from its dome originally ornamented with blue caustic tiles (a feature of Mughal architecture) as it is said to be the tomb of Naubat Khan, a state official during Akbar's time, built in 1565.

²⁴ An enduring example of the amity between two of the largest religious groups is the observance of '*Phool Walon Ki Sair*' or '*Sair-e-Gul Faroshan*' meaning "procession of the florists." A procession of people, accompanied by musicians and dancers and carrying large floral fans offer them to the dargah of the thirteenth century Sufi saint, Khwaja Bakhtiyar Kaki and to Yogmaya Temple (Even before the ancient dwelling of the Pandavas, an area to the south of their Indraprastha was believed to be the abode of yoginis, or female ascetics, known as Yoginipura). It was discontinued after the British Mutiny and revived by the first Prime Minister of independent India in the 1960s. Today it is an emblem of national unification of diverse peoples.

²⁵ This period has been described as the "Delhi Renaissance. The city was 'magnificent' and 'celebrated' and it was a time of prosperity, urban growth, and cultural and religious harmony; an age rich in the arts when the Court was 'a school of manners' for India and had 'a cultural influence of great value'" (Baig, n.d., p.127).

²⁶ The eclecticism of Akbar and the orthodoxy of Aurangzeb have become a part of popular lore (even though historical accounts demonstrate that the latter gave grants to build Hindu and Sikh temples). Similarly, due to the frequent raids by Ahmed Shah

Conclusion

The idea of urban heritage as an ideal suggests a space for a harmonious symphony of multifarious voices. These accounts offer a glimpse into the taut, tenuous balance that is maintained between conflicting impulses as the texture of the city accommodates diversity. The danger of the destructive impulse overwhelming the Other is ever-present, however. Dr. Jaffery says that in Delhi ‘culture and civilization have always been very thin dresses. It does not take much for that dress to be torn off and for what lies beneath to be revealed’ (Ibid., p. 190).²⁷

Delhi, too, has witnessed the disabling of the ethic of assimilation and adjustment from time to time. The last major conflagration discussed in these texts was the 1984 anti-Sikh riots after the assassination of the then Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Dalrymple notes a “new intolerance which, like an unstable lump of phosphorus, could quite suddenly burst into flames” (Ibid., p. 25). After independence, Delhi has witnessed the degeneration of the confluence of cultures that has enriched generations of Indians. Prejudice is extended against the refugees of partition in 1947, and later migrants, too. A colleague tells a Sikh migrant, “It is no longer the Delhi I grew up in and loved. You Punjabis who invaded us in 1947 have bugged it out of shape” (Singh, 1990, p. 379) In turn, the Sikh answers, ‘It is the others coming in every day who are creating the problems. Do you know 70,000 pour into Delhi every year from all over India? As if Delhi is the nation’s orphanage’ (Ibid., p. 379-380). Thus the resentment is turned towards Indians from other states swarming into Delhi.

The silver lining is that these bursts of frenzy are followed by feelings of compassion. Memories that endure are of shared harmony rather than those of the violence and displacement suffered in 1947, as Dalrymple finds to his surprise. The rehabilitation has reduced the pain of the latter, but the pang of the former lingers.²⁸ Even after the

Abdali, the very attitude of the Punjabi towards life underwent a change because to spend money was preferable to saving it for Abdali to plunder; and to this day, open-handedness is seen as a Punjabi trait. (A saying in Punjab is, ‘Eat, drink and be merry, all the rest Ahmed Shah will carry’). Apart from this, though a well-meaning king, Tughlaq’s ruthlessness in imposing his will has turned him, in popular discourse, into a metaphor for whimsical, arbitrary power. Noted film actor and playwright, Girish Karnad has a play by this name to show the chasm between good intentions and disastrous implementation. Dalrymple gives the example of Brigadier General John Nickolson, ‘the Lion of the Punjab,’ who was killed in the storming of Delhi in 1857 but who was still worshipped long afterwards as a hero by the British and as a god by a Punjabi sect called the Nikalsini” (1993, p. 115).

²⁷ Dr Jaffery: ‘My parents lived in an area that had always been traditionally Hindu. During Partition they went into hiding, and for a fortnight their good Hindu friends brought them food and water. But one day they were betrayed; a mob came I the night and burned the house down. We learned later that the traitor was a neighbour of my father’s. My father had helped him financially. This was how the man repaid him...’ (Ibid., p. 190).

²⁸ Dalrymple’s taxi driver, Balwinder’s father, Punjab Singh, who faced the 1984 riots too, remembers the time of their displacement from their village in Samundra, in district Lyallpur, now in Pakistan. He remembers with affectionate nostalgia their

1984 riots, Dalrymple finds there is little visible bitterness. When Sohan Singh, who watched his family members being killed during the 1984 riots is asked if he feared that it might happen again; and the latter answers, “No: now we are no longer worried. I am still the granthi of the Gurdwara. I give langar (food) to the poor Hindus; the rich Hindus give us offerings. These wounds are healed now” (Dalrymple, 1993, p. 35). At the end, it is examples of inter-faith tolerance that endure and make life at all possible. Redemption lies, as it has in the past, in embracing an ethic of forgiveness, despite intermittent senseless violence or the petty, trifling mean and debasing irritants in daily interaction.

In the Delhi of today, too, tensions abound, yet every day, ordinary people perform acts of extraordinary empathy and courage to let the subterranean flow of oneness nourish the city. Singh says, “Herds of Hindu women in white carrying brass plates full of flowers and coconuts are shuffling along towards the Jamna.... A weary oil-lamp flickers on the headstone of Sarmad’s grave.... Hundreds of RSS boys drill with staves under the podium in the wide acres of the Ram Leela ground.... We pass the massive equestrian statue of Shivaji brandishing his sword towards New Delhi” (Singh, 1990, p. 119). The buildings created by Lutyens to imprint imperial power are today populated by the postcolonial (or neo-colonial) power. (Perhaps some things don’t change after all!). As migrants from different states flood Delhi, space, not just physical, has expanded to absorb customs and festivals and culinary and sartorial diversity more than ever before.²⁹ The city shall endure because, as Pavan Varma says, “the strength of New Delhi lies in the *plurality* of its character, its vibrant cosmopolitanism.... In the years gone by, Delhi sought to mould the territories it governed in its own image. Today, the country it governs has sought to recreate it in *her own mould*” (2001, p. 215).

The article has tried to explore the ways in which chaos is charted and may be negotiated by a city to sustain itself as a vital life force of a nation. The journey reveals the enmeshing of successive layers of archaeological time as an example of how the land and the culture has been enriched and fertilized over millennia. As it is borne upon one how the DNA of many cultures permeates one’s blood, one can

shared harmony before partition. Even after having lived through the 1984 riots, he is reasonably happy with his life.

²⁹As a migrant group gains ascendancy because of their strong demographic and economic presence, it becomes imperative to accommodate their point of view. Festivals such as Durga Puja, traditionally celebrated by Bengalis, Chhatt Puja, mostly by the people of Bihar are common now in Delhi, as is Ganeshotsav, which was earlier largely confined to Maharashtra.

comprehend the imperative to seek, and to create space for contesting beliefs and ways of life rather than a wishful desire for blending in seamlessly. Acknowledging legitimate compulsions of diverse peoples to accommodate them enriches the city as a whole. The only remedy is to engage – proactively and creatively. As Dalrymple says in the Preface, “The symbol which Delhi has represented down through the ages is the symbol of empire; and, therewith, it remains today the symbol of pan-Indian nationalization and unification” (1993, p. xii).

The message of the poet strikes a resonant note:

I have gone beyond the temple and the mosque,
I have made my heart my sanctuary;
On this thorn-strewn path end
All my wandering and my journey. -Meer Taqi Meer (Singh, 1990, p. 224).

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Contact Email: hndrajog@gmail.com