



Dilli ka Qakhiri Deedar

The Last Glimpse of Dilli

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Syed Wazir Hasan Dehlvi was the son of Maulvi Ahmed Hasan Mohaddis and grandson of the famous Deputy Allama Ahmed Dehlvi, known popularly as Deputy Nazir Ahmed. His upbringing was in an atmosphere of learning, steeped in the culture of the Delhi of yore. Though he didn't see life under the Mughals himself, he grew up hearing about it. His writing is replete with colloquial idioms and the language of nineteenth-century Delhi.

Dilli ka Aakhiri Deedar was published in 1934, by Dilli Printing Press, Delhi. It was edited by Shahid Ahmed Dehlvi, the editor of *Saqi-o-Shah Jahan*. Shahid Ahmed also wrote the preface to the volume in which he says, 'Syed Wazir Hasan Dehlvi has showcased Delhi's Ganga–Jamuni *tehzeeb*,¹ communal amity, the colourful festivals, and the cordial relations between the Qila inhabitants and the general public. He has described the etiquette of assemblies along with a description of the manners and way of the gentry and noblemen. No one who reads it can stop himself or herself from weeping tears of blood.'



1. 'Ganga–Jamuna *tehzeeb* is a name given to syncretic culture wherein two strains meet and mingle yet retain their identity.



*Zafar, the universe is ever-changing,
Witness the colours that prevail now,
the hues that were before*

The world marches forward, and if anyone wants to make a better city than Dilli, they can succeed. The required bricks and stones are all available, and construction methods have now improved. But Dilli was never a city of just bricks and stones. Although the Haveli², the Jama Masjid and many other buildings of Dilli are still standing, the life and the soul of the city are dead. The elements that made Dilli into the city 'Dilli' are no more; the spirit that gave life to this city has disappeared. Dilli was bred on the milk of royal culture, brought up in the lap of kings, and reached maturity in an atmosphere of learning and knowledge. Its life-blood was its majesty and dignity, and it has seen the many hues of life from Raja Bharat to the Timurid kings. Its citizens were examples of a higher culture and the personification of inherited courtesies.

Hindus and Muslims lived as brothers. If one fondly called the other 'mijanji'³ he responded with an affectionate 'lalaji'.⁴ They were

2. Here, the Red Fort, popularly known as the Lal Haveli (red mansion) or Lal Qila because of its red sandstone walls and buildings.

3. An address expressive of kindness or respect, meaning sir, used for Muslims.

4. A term of respect for Hindus.

comrades-in-arms and participated in each other's joys and sorrows. They lived in harmony, like peas in a pod, steeped in learning and culture. They were religious and worldly; in other words, they were humans, and not the wolves in human garb that we meet today.

Not even the unlettered and lower classes were uncouth or uncultured. Unconsciously they had imbibed the way of life of the upper classes.

It was as if:

*The rich are happy in their riches
and the poor in their skins*

These were the times when every day was Eid and every night was Shab-e-Barat⁵. Then fate took a turn for the worse and the good times disappeared. Friends turned strangers and the bonhomie vanished. It was as if good sense had been forsaken and people could no longer think straight, and this weakness of the mind increased by the day. Those who had been eyeing this golden bird were waiting for an opportunity to pounce on it.

The year 1857 rang the death knell for the old way of life, when monarchy breathed its last in the lap of Bahadur Shah and the lamp of Timur was extinguished forever. Some who loved Dilli escaped from it, never to return, while many were killed. The few who were left behind were inconsequential to the city's fate. This beautiful city was destroyed in the twinkling of an eye – the chessboard of Mughal culture was overturned. When the Dilliwalas didn't remain, how could Dilli survive? All that's left now is the name of Allah.

5. Shab-e-Barat is the night between the fourteenth and fifteenth months of the Islamic month of Shaban. According to Islamic belief, it is the night of salvation, when God forgives sinners who repent sincerely, when fortunes are written for the coming year and a time when people also pray for the deliverance of their deceased ancestors.

It's the nature of the world that whatever goes up must also come down. The world has always seen such ups and downs – the advent and exit of rulers and dynasties. It will always be so.

And so, Dilli's unique natural personality and grace were snatched away. The dynasty's wealth was looted, the city's fervour and spirit were ground into the dust, its resolution and aspirations dampened, and its strength of mind faded away into nothing. The storm swiftly changed the city's course and wrecked everything in its path.

Now, only a glimpse of that culture is to be found either in books, or on the lips of elders who have become repositories of the treasures of a lost world. I want to hear these stories from them and laugh and weep with them. I want to thread these scattered pearls into a book so that the coming generations may find them easily. I know that the books (which have already been written) will always remain, but since they are not in one place, it's not going to be an easy task to access them. The most important point is that many of the people from the older generation have passed away. Those who live are like flickering lamps and no one knows when their lives may be snuffed out. It shouldn't be that they take to their graves all the tales of the interesting times they lived in. We must gather the stories that they have heard, have been part of, or have witnessed, and preserve them for posterity – for time waits for no one. Just as the good days didn't remain, their memories too will fade away. We have to ensure they are preserved, so that they aren't destroyed as the good old days have been.

Dilli's life was in its dignity!

Dilli's heart lay in its character, illuminated by its gaiety and liveliness. Every little nuance added to the culture, which was encouraged by the Emperor and spread throughout the city by the prevailing ambience. High and low, rich and poor, old and young,

educated and illiterate – everyone was cheerful, well dressed and fond of the good things in life. There was always a ready excuse for celebration, with frequent fairs, festivals, dancing and singing.

Though the Badshah in the Qila was a king only in name, he was the lamp that, though flickering, gave light to the city and its people. Anyone who wants to know more about Dilli of those days has to first make a study of the Qila and its royal residents. It was this attar, this perfume, that made Hindustan fragrant.



When the new year's sun casts its pink rays in the sky, everyone – from the Emperor to the fakir – celebrates Nauroz. The Diwan-e-Aam, Diwan-e-Khas, Chota Rang Mahal, Bada Rang Mahal, Khas Mahal, Hira Mahal, Moti Mahal, Bagh-e-Hayat Baksh, Mehtab Bagh, Sawan Bhado'n⁶ – are all decorated. The walls and the minarets are freshly painted. The flowers are blooming and the water flowing in the Nahr-e-Bahist is as pure and pristine as if it were a stream of light. Gulabi Bagh and Angoori Bagh under the *jharoka*⁷ are decorated like brides. Tents are put up; shamianas are strung up with silver and gold tassels and glittering crests. The shamianas are embroidered with *mukaish*⁸ and lace designs, giving the impression that stars have alighted on them. Brocade, satin, and silk are wrapped around the poles and held there with silver and gold pegs. Small flags flutter in the breeze.

On the flowing Jamuna, boats are seen waiting for royal passengers. The boats are decorated in the colour of Nauroz, which

6. These are names of buildings inside the fort. Of these, the British demolished Moti Mahal, while the rest still stand.

7. The balcony overlooking the river Yamuna in the Musamman Burj of the Qila. Today there's a garden under it, with the building of Mahatma Gandhi Road having displaced the Yamuna farther to the east.

8. Embroidery with thin metal strips, usually made of silver.

is decided by astrologers every year. In some years, the buildings of the Qila and its residents⁹ are dressed from top to toe in pink; in other years, in purple or saffron.

Once the durbar is ready, the Jahanpanah – the Refuge of the World – appears in a delicate, silver chair, known as *hawadar*, an open palanquin borne on four silver poles, which was a movable throne. A cushion embroidered with gold thread supports his back and silk bolsters tied with silk tassels line the sides. Two Ganga–Jamuni quivers and one bow dangle in front of the cushions. The Emperor reaches the Diwan-e-Khas – according to Ferguson¹⁰ the world’s most beautiful palace – in this fashion. The Diwan-e-Khas’s marble arches, walls and columns are decorated with *pietra dura* and embedded with precious stones such as agate and coral. Its floral patterns shimmer, while the portion above the dado is completely gilded. In front of the Diwan-e-Khas is a beautiful square marble enclosure with a sparkling silver ceiling. The Nahr-e-Bahist flows through it, and it appears as if the moon is shining its light on the enclosure.

In the centre of the Diwan-e-Khas is an octagonal marble platform on which the Takht-e-Taos¹¹ is kept. There are attractive arches on all sides of the throne. The Takht is adorned with beautifully embroidered bolsters. Three elegant steps allow the Emperor to climb on to it. The throne has a golden canopy fitted with golden finials. The legs of the Takht are decorated with colourful floral designs. Two peacocks standing across each other on the canopy hold pearl rosaries in their beaks.

9. The royalty and the employees.

10. James Ferguson (1808–1886), a Scottish architect who has written many books on Indian architecture.

11. The Peacock Throne. The original that was made for Shah Jahan was taken away by Nadir Shah, the Persian invader, and later dismantled and probably sold in pieces for its gold and precious stones. The later Mughals used a replica.

The durbar begins with offerings and prayers. Poets read qasidas¹² and are rewarded with robes of honour. Princes are presented with turbans, aigrettes and crests, and nobles with *goshwara*.¹³ After that, oblations are offered to Hazrat Ali¹⁴ and everyone is served a piece of the consecrated food. Once the ceremonial whisking of the *pankha* is over, gold and silver coins are thrown in the air, and money for various charities distributed. In the afternoon, everyone goes for a boat ride along the gardens.

On the anniversary of the Emperor's coronation, these rituals are even more grand. The celebrations last for forty days. Trays of food are distributed among the nobles, in keeping with their ranks, ten days before the ceremony. Guests begin to reach Dilli four days in advance; princesses and noble ladies fill the palaces. There is a new function almost every day. The air resounds with drums beats and robes of honour are awarded to the deserving. Offerings and tributes are presented to the Badshah, and for forty days, the sound of festivities fill the air.

The celebrations that start from the Haveli reach every part of the city. During such days, the Haveli is a blessed river that makes everything along its banks fertile and verdant. From Muharram to Bakr-Eid, every child of Dilli experiences a similar wave of emotions. During the month of mourning, everyone – from the Badshah to the lowly fakir – becomes Imam Hasan's and Imam Hussain's fakir.¹⁵

12. Panegyric poems.

13. A brocade ribbon with a gem fitted in the front and tied round the turban.

14. The cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, who was the fourth caliph of Islam and acknowledged as the first imam of the Shias.

15. This is a custom which continues to date. On particular days in the month of Muharram, men of all ages dress up in green clothes and ask for alms. They are called Imam Hasan's and Imam Hussain's fakirs, commemorating the brothers' great sacrifice for the religion.

*Sabeels*¹⁶ are set up as a pious duty and sherbet distributed. Majlis¹⁷ and *marsiya*¹⁸ assemblies are set up. *Alam*¹⁹ and *taziya*²⁰ processions are organized. During the month of Muharram, Dilli turns into a beautiful maiden – with windswept, uncombed hair and fair, dainty wrists devoid of bangles – mourning her beloved.

The *aakhiri chahar shamba*, the last Wednesday²¹ of the Islamic month of Safar,²² comes in *Terah Tezi*.^{23,24} As *aakhiri chahar shamba*

16. During the battle of Karbala, the family of Imam Hussain was deprived of water. During Muharram people put up stalls or stations to distribute water and sherbet as a pious duty.

17. Congregations to describe the martyrdom of Imam Hussain.

18. Elegies recited to honour the martyrs of Karbala, describing their tribulations and sacrifice.

19. The standard used by Hazrat Abbas, the commander of Imam Hussain's army, at the Battle of Karbala.

20. Replica of the shrine of Imam Hussain.

21. The Persian week starts with Saturday and the names for the days are: Saturday – Shamba; Sunday – Yekshamba; Monday – Doshamba; Tuesday – Sehshamba; Wednesday – Chaharshamba; Thursday – Panjshamba; and Friday – Juma.

22. As per belief, it was on this day that the Prophet recovered from a prolonged illness and found himself well enough to walk. It is also the day on which Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya was born. Even now, his birthday celebrations start on the last Wednesday of the month, irrespective of the Hijri date.

23. The Prophet walked on the thirteenth day of Safar after an illness, which lasted the first twelve days of Safar. This is celebrated as *Terah* (thirteen) *Tezi*. The first twelve days of Safar are said to be very inauspicious.

24. The rulers of Dilli referred to the Islamic months by the names of the festivals that were celebrated in it. Thus, the month of Safar became *Terah Tezi*, while Rabi-ul Awwal was *Barawafat* (the Prophet's birthday), Rabi-us Sani was *Meeranji* (the *urs* ceremony of Sheikh Abdul Qadir Jilani), Jamadi-ul Awwal was *Madar* (the *urs* of Syed Badiuddin Zinda Shah Madar whose dargah is in Kanpur), Jamadi-us Sani was *Khwaja Moinuddin* (the *urs* of Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti of Ajmer), Shabaan was *Shab-e-Barat*, Shawaal was *Eid* (Eid

approaches, fairs are set up in and around the Qila. Boiled black grams sprinkled with salt and chilli and boiled wheat sprinkled with poppy seeds and sugar candy are served. The food is consecrated in the Prophet's name and distributed along with gold and silver rings and bands. In the afternoons, everyone steps out into the gardens. On the occasion of Barawafat, qawwali *mehfils*²⁵ in the various shrines brighten the atmosphere. *Mashaikhs*²⁶ and mullahs are fed twice a day inside the Qila itself.

On the fourteenth of the month,²⁷ the *urs*²⁸ of Qutub Saheb is held with great fanfare. Accompanied by practically the entire population of the city, the Badshah goes to Khwaja Saheb's dargah in Mehraul and offers flowers, a cover, sandal and attar at the blessed shrine. Before departing the next day, everyone attends the *khatm*.²⁹ In the month of Meeranji, a grand ceremony is held in honour of Hazrat Ghaus-ul-Azam with accompanying fireworks. On *satarvi*,³⁰ the *urs* of Sultanji or Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya is celebrated. The qawwali begins at night, and the Badshah comes and pays his respects in the morning. The *khadims*, the hereditary caretakers of the dargah, tie green turbans on their heads, and everyone who makes an offering at the dargah is given a small gift as a symbol of their blessings. While

ul Fitr), Zil Qada was Khali (*khali*, or empty, as no festivals are celebrated), and Zil Hijja was Bakr-Eid.

25. Musical concerts.

26. Sufi saints.

27. Rabi-ul Awwal.

28. *Urs* literally means 'wedding' in Arabic and is the term given to the death anniversary of a Sufi saint in South Asia. The concept of death as a *urs* or a wedding anniversary has been taken from the Hadith. A Hadith (Mishkat) says, 'The angels say to the pious in the grave, "Sleep with restfulness and comfort, just like a bride".'

29. The peroration of the Quran.

30. The seventeenth day of the Islamic month of Rabi-us Sani.

some of the visitors swim in the *baoli* attached to the dargah, others bathe on its steps. Young boys dive in to retrieve the money that princes and noblemen have thrown into the water.

The bazaar is teeming with people, their shoulders brushing each other's as they pass. All kinds of sweets and savouries are sold. The sky is dotted with flying kites. As afternoon sets in, calls of the royal mace bearers of 'Give way! Move!' fill the market. The Badshah is going to Humayun's tomb, and the entire crowd goes with him. Everyone is singing or dancing at the mela in the tomb complex, and some fly kites till the evening.

In the month of Madar, the Chharhiyo'n ka mela³¹ takes place in the Qila. The Emperor offers a tall and imposing standard with a shimmering silver flagpole at the venerable dargah. Drummers accompany the standard. Trays full of maleeda³² are sent. The Emperor appears wearing a garland and walks with the procession for a while, before rewarding the drummers and sending them on their way. The *meidinis*³³ carrying the *chharhiya'n*³⁴ assemble³⁵ on the fourteenth of the month of Khwaja Moinuddin and leave for Ajmer Sharif on the sixteenth. Once they return, their relatives send *chaab*, made from sesame, rice and sugar, to their houses as felicitation. The *meidinis* send back sandalwood combs, rosaries, flowered muslin, Jaipur chadors,³⁶ scarves,

31. The name given to the occasion when decorated poles are taken by mendicants to Ajmer for the *urs* of Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti.

32. A sweet made by mixing cooked flour breads with ghee and sugar.

33. The word *meidini* means one who walks with a swinging gait and refers to all the pilgrims who gather to go to Ajmer Sharif for the *urs*. This custom continues to date.

34. Flagpoles with banners.

35. Near Jama Masjid in Shahjahanabad.

36. A floral or brocade cover (when made as an offering) or a shawl or cloak (when part of the raiment).

handkerchiefs, stoles, hookah pipes and bottles of attar from the Dargah Sharif.

During the month of Rajab, sweet breads made of flour and ghee are cooked in the tandoor. These are garnished with fennel and poppy seeds, consecrated in memory of the dead and in the name of Hazrat Jalal Bukhari and distributed. On Shab-e-Barat, another grand celebration is held, and various sweets and savouries are cooked and consecrated in the names of Hazrat Amir Hamza,³⁷ Hazrat Bibi Fatima,³⁸ Babur Badshah, and other ancestors. Milk is consecrated in the names of innocent children who have died. Only ladies are allowed to eat the food consecrated in the name of Hazrat Bibi Fatima; that which is consecrated in the name of Babur is eaten only by his direct descendants. The rest is distributed to everyone, as fireworks are set off and the sounds of musical instruments such as *naubat*³⁹ and *naqqara*⁴⁰, echo everywhere. In the evenings, the Badshah comes into the *imambara*⁴¹ and lights candles after tasting millet kheer and distributing a spoonful of it to everyone.

As the month of Ramzan draws near, celebrations begin, which go on for the full month. Everyone lives off the savings from their previous months. The Hindus too respect the sanctity of this month. Guns announce the hours of *sehri* and *iftari*.⁴² After pledging to keep

37. The Prophet's uncle, martyred in the battle of Uhud.

38. The Prophet's daughter.

39. Drum.

40. Kettledrum.

41. A congregation hall or building for holding assemblies where Imam Hussain is mourned. The Awadh nawabs built very large and beautiful *imambara* complexes in Lucknow, but it can be just a room in a house. *Imambaras* are decorated for the first ten days of Muharram with *alams* and *taziyas* and are usually used for holding *majlis* (assemblies) during the months of Muharram and Safar.

42. While fasting, the people have a morning meal before sunrise (*sehri*) following which they eat only after sunset (*iftari*). No water or food is allowed in between.

a fast at *sehri*, some people read the Quran and other prayers, some take a nap and, after the dawn prayers, some go for boat rides or walk along the riverbanks to cool themselves. Some go off to the jungles with cages of pheasants and quails, while some go to the dargahs. Once the sun is out, the whole city glows. As the morning progresses, the bazaars start buzzing with activity. The clanking of pots and pans fill the air, while the fragrance of freshly cooked food wafts through the market.

When the time comes for breaking the fast, *dastarkhwans*⁴³ are spread and set up with sherbet of various types, tukhm-e-raihan,⁴⁴ falooda, lemonade, savouries such as dahi bare and laungchira.⁴⁵ Fish kebabs, fried gram balls and other savouries are laid out in trays.

Once the sun sets and the Badshah gives a sign, the messenger waves the flag and a cannon is set off to signal the end of the fast. The *azan*⁴⁶ rings out everywhere, and devoties break their fast with *aab-e-zamzam*⁴⁷ and dried dates from Mecca. Sherbet and a few morsels of food are tasted before it is time for the evening prayers. At night, the *taraweeh*⁴⁸ is recited with great devotion and every masjid in the city resonates with sounds of the Quran being read.

Once the *taraweeh* is over, everyone rests till around 1.30 a.m., when the chowkidars wake them up with their cries: 'Those who are fasting are dear to God. O you pious ones, awake,' or 'Awake, it's in your best interests. Those who wake up will find God.'

43. Tablecloths.

44. A cooling drink made from the seed of the holy basil.

45. A dish prepared from pea flour made into balls and then fried.

46. The call to prayer by the muezzin.

47. The Mughals only drank water from the Ganga and called it *Zamzam* after the sacred spring in Mecca. It is also called *aab-e-hayat*.

48. Supererogatory prayers recited at night during the month of Ramzan.