



Red between the lines: The making of Delhi

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Having defeated Ibrahim Lodi at Panipat, Babur did not proceed immediately to the Lodi capital at Agra. Instead, he stopped a few days at Delhi, which he referred to in his memoir, Baburnama, as the “capital of Hindustan”.

He was acutely aware that though Ibrahim Lodi’s predecessor, his father Sikandar Lodi, had moved his capital to Agra a little over two decades earlier, Delhi had a long history as the capital of an empire: the Delhi Sultanate. The two cities would alternately serve as Mughal capitals, over the next 331 years. Delhi in particular, which was the seat of the Mughal dynasty in its last couple of centuries, still bears its stamp.

The era of Mughal rule was a formative period in the culture of India, and one aspect of this culture was language. The language spoken in the region around Delhi eventually came to enjoy a very special status. It had been slowly evolving and absorbing words from other languages, particularly from Persian, which was the official administrative language of the vast multi-linguistic Mughal empire.

During Mughal rule, this language, known as “khadi boli” Hindi, emerged as a literary language. Poetry in it was referred to as rekhta.

In the 18th century, as the Mughal empire declined and its sphere of direct control shrank to the region around Delhi, the time was ripe for Hindi to replace Persian as the official language of the Mughal court. It was dignified with the appellation “zaban e urdu e moalla e Shahjahanabad”, or “the language of the exalted court at Shahjahanabad”. This in time was shortened to “zaban e urdu”, and eventually just Urdu.

The patronage of the later Mughals played an important role in the development of Urdu literature, with many leading poets of their time being those from Delhi: Mir Taqi “Mir”, Mirza Muhammad Rafi “Sauda”, Mirza “Ghalib”, “Dagh” Dehlvi and of course the last Mughal emperor himself, Bahadur Shah “Zafar” (this being the pen name under which he wrote his verse).

Developments in the 19th century would lead to the bifurcation of this language into two distinct forms, Hindi and Urdu, the former shedding much of the Persian vocabulary present in the latter. Delhi continued to be an important centre for the literature of both. The popular annual festival Jashn-e-Rekhta, now more than a decade old, celebrates Urdu in the 21st century.



The Mughal empire was a vast multicultural entity, and the diversity of its people was reflected in the society and culture of its capital city too.

Sujan Rai Bhandari, a historian writing in the 17th century, emphasised the convivial cosmopolitanism, noting: “Men of Turkey, Zanzibar, Syria, the English, the Dutch, men of Yemen, Arabia, Iraq, Khorasan, Khwarizm, Turkmenistan, Kabul, Cathay, Khotan, China, Kashgar, Tibet and Kashmir, and other provinces of Hindustan have chosen to reside in this metropolis... and are employed in their respective work and professions. These different classes of people live together like sentences in a passage of prose, and their manners harmonise like the verses of a poem”.

The Mughals took active steps to maintain this harmony. The culture of the court and the royal household reflected the diverse traditions of the land, with the celebration of both Hindu and Muslim religious occasions. Annual Ram Leela performances recounted the battle between Ram and Ravana over days, at venues erected on the



(Above) A painting of Delhi’s Red Fort created for the British East India Company between the 17th and 19th centuries. (Left) Krishna and Nikumbha as depicted in a Harivamsa (c. 1590) commissioned by Akbar; a collection of tales drawn from the Mahabharat. (Extreme left) A Family of Cheetahs in a Rocky Landscape, a miniature by Akbar’s court artist Basawan. IMAGES VIA DAG, V&A MUSEUM, CHRISTIE’S



sands of the Yamuna next to the Red Fort, so the emperor and the rest of the royal family could watch from their windows.

An integral part of the Ram Leela was the tesus: effigies representing the Mahabharat warrior Barbareek (grandson of Bhima). Pahalwans or wrestlers from the many akharas of Delhi, most of them Muslim, would create the tesus — each akhara making its own — and take them out in processions to the accompaniment of music.

One very distinctive Delhi festival originated in the early-19th century: Phoolwalon ki Sair (Procession of Flower-Sellers). This annual monsoon festival, held in Mehrauli in the vicinity of the Qutub Minar, was actively patronised by the last Mughal emperors. The festival of cultural events and recreational activities attracted many from the city, who would then spend several days in Mehrauli.

The core event was the offering of a coverlet of flowers at the dargah of the Sufi saint Qutubuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki, and of pankhas or fans at the temple of Jogmaya (sister of Krishna; a site associated with the Mahabharat). With the departure of the Mughals, the Ram Leela celebrations moved to other locations, away from the sands below the fort walls, and the tesu became a tradition associated with children. The Phoolwalon ki Sair has continued, with some modifications and interruptions, a powerful reminder of the syncretic traditions of the city that developed under these emperors.

Another important legacy is the unusually green metropolis that Delhi still is. One of Babur’s early acts in Agra

was the laying out of a garden on the banks of the Yamuna there. Many other gardens followed, until there was a line of these along one bank of the river. The pattern followed in Delhi was slightly different.

When Shah Jahan planned a new city here, Shahjahanabad, in the 1630s, large gardens were incorporated into the main urban area. There were expansive gardens in the northern parts of both the city (north of Chandni Chowk) and the palace citadel, or Red Fort. Gardens were laid out outside the city walls too, and some of these still exist, notably Roshanara Bagh, Shalimar Bagh, Qudsia Bagh and Talkatora Bagh.

This pattern of development informed the subsequent development of Delhi, which remains a city of parks within residential areas, low-rise housing set amid green spaces, and shaded avenues.

The Mughals have also left a powerful architectural legacy, the most prominent examples of which are to be found in the two capitals: Delhi and Agra. The red sandstone-covered walls of the Red Fort at Delhi are to this day a strong symbol of political power, and the site of the prime minister’s annual Independence Day address to the nation. So powerful was this connection between state power and the red walls of the Mughal fort that, when the British built New Delhi, red sandstone was used for the base of the government buildings on Raisina Hill. We continue to use red sandstone, as in the new parliament building.

If anything, we might be overdoing it. In Delhi, red sandstone is shorthand for “power” and “heritage”, and so we use the material unthinkingly, not only for cladding in new buildings but also for paving and boundary walls. There are even red sandstone garbage bins at some monuments. It is possible we are using more of this material than the Mughals did!

Given today’s sustainability concerns, we should probably rethink the rate at which we mine this beautiful resource.

And so it is that, between 1526 and 1857, the Mughals were transformed from Chagatai Turks to Indians, through conscious acculturation, marriage and descent, even as India was in turn transformed during their rule.

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