

## Lost in transition. A case of Delhi.

Most Indian cities, like life in India have a dualistic -“schizoid”- character. Traditional values are put to test in a struggle with the contemporary global forces of change. Layer upon layer of distinctive culture in the time zone overlap, merge, interact and assimilate fusing into a continuum of inexplicable complexity.

Not many metros of the world escape the socio-cultural and economic asymmetries brought about by global transformation. Cities with a historic past all the more so.

The historic city of Delhi, capital of at least ten different dynasties at different times, has forever lived in a state of political turmoil but the stress that afflicts it today is of a different type. The skyline of this historic city is being transformed on account of the steady economic transformation witnessed through the last decade or so. Glittering concrete and steel structures have overshadowed the forts, mosques and temples. Boxlike houses and the oft recurring insufferable neo rich house – a potpourri of international styles adopted to the whims of the user, have replaced the *Haveli* (the traditional courtyard house).

‘Urbanism’ manifests itself in ways which is quite unique to the socio-cultural conditioning of a city but ‘Globalisation’ has induced some very universal distortions in our cities. To that effect the capital of the country today seeks a cultural identity of its own. All the prosperity and all the wealth acquired by the citizens has not contributed in the same measure to the social maturity of the city. If at all it has seemingly made the situation worse.

It will not be wrong to assume that Delhi, the historic center of significant events on its way to becoming the global city has lost its traditional historic and cultural identity somewhere along the way.

The paper will take a stock of the cultural traits of present day Delhi.

### ***The Historical Context***

The present Delhi is the eleventh in the lineage as recorded in history, capitals made on the same site. The ninth Delhi was built by Shahahajehan in 1639, the grandson of Akbar the Great and the builder of Taj Mahal, when he decided to move his capital from Agra. He displayed the traditional Mughal weakness, his liking for water, by placing the red Fort adjacent to the river. The rest of the city faced and developed inwards.

Known as Shahajanabad, in the honor of the Mughal king, it was not designed or executed in accordance with the tenets of “*Shilpa Shastras*” the principles of city planning as stipulated by the saint Manasara in Hindu vedic texts. Being a Muslim king perhaps that was not even expected of him. However, in the symbiotic understanding of the city-monarchical relationship it embodied the spirit of the entire universe in no less a significant way than any other city in the world.

‘In ancient India the capital city, home of the king and site of the Brahminic ritual was sacred. the king was himself the *axis mundi*, the centre of the universe.’

‘In Sahajahanabad the Mughal emperor was the symbolic centre of both the city and the empire the man who encompassed within himself and his household both capital and the state. The Emperor was a pivot of a hierarchical, nested series of realms; centre of household, city and empire. Each individual realm encompassed and embodied those beyond it.’<sup>1</sup>

Sahajahanabad must have been quite an impressive city. Ibn Battuta, the Moroccan traveler in 1325 and in 1666 the French traveler and the personal physician of Aurangzeb, Francois Burnier have paid glowing tribute to it. Water flowed into the several canals and baolis (step wells) mosques and dargahs coexisted with temples and the famous oriental bazaar ‘*Chandni Chowk*’ (moonlight square) was a landmark known far and wide. A massive wall protected the city from the threat of external attacks. Ironically most of it has fallen, bit by bit,

at the hands of the later administrators -first the British and later the Indian government for reasons of city expansions.

In effect the reign of the Mughals had ushered in a long period of stability which the city of Delhi badly needed. This period saw Delhi once again rise as the centre of art, culture and commerce with scholars from all over the world, specially Iran, visiting regularly and contributing to its growth.

The last days of the Mughal empire saw the decline not only of the royal household but of the entire city/ state. Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last significant Mughal emperor and a poet of repute has lamented about the decline of the city in his poetry. The British, who had gained entry in to the country as traders, were growing from strength to strength and soon decided to take over control from a declining Mughal empire. They set their eyes on Delhi, just like nine different empires earlier, to set up their capital here. Prior to this they were administering India from Calcutta as their capital.

### ***A neo Delhi***

The City that the British built had a special purpose. Besides being the capital '...It is not a cantonment we are building but an Imperial symbol of British Raj in India and it must, like Rome, be built for eternity ...' 2. The British needed an image of lasting stability and that was provided by Edwyn Lutyens and Herbert Baker at an estimated cost of Rs. 760 M (Pound Sterling 9.5 M in 1935) 2

New Delhi did not deviate at all from the feudal principles governing Indian life. In fact with all the British prejudices at his command, Edwin Lutyens evolved a working model of a city structure that not only projected the British might but at the same time legitimized the concepts of exclusiveness. Space segregated on the basis of social and political hierarchy. This concept of spatial segregation based on class, it may be recalled, was also the central theme of the different types of layouts propagated in the *Shilpa Shastras*. It appealed very much to the Indian psyche and has been with us ever since.

Another major contribution of the British was in the field of administration. The traditional Mughal system of *Zamindari* was gradually displaced by a bureaucratic setup which was raised mainly to manage the affairs of the state, including the most important work of revenue collection. The bureaucrats were the lesser '*Maharajas*'. Long after the British departed this legacy of the bureaucracy continues. Delhi, steeped in a feudal culture, readily accepted this transformed setup wherein the power had seamlessly been transferred to a different set of rulers.

Corruption is a universal and a timeless phenomenon. In this regard India is not any different. There is reference to how to deal with corruption both political and cultural, in Vedic Hindu texts. Manu and Kautilya have written about it. The British rule in India was actually a grand design of total exploitation yet the public face of British administration was projected as clean.

In fact all through its legendary past, India has celebrated heroes who have been larger than life. So deeply entrenched in to the Indian system is this culture of 'master-slave' tradition ("*maai-baap*" a traditional phrase often used meaning 'mother father be all'.) that the government official had little difficulty elbowing his own way in to a key position of power. Delhi surely must be one of the first cities to have introduced the concept of VVIP (very very important person). The cast system of India rejuvenated in a new avatar.

### ***From British Raj to 'Control Raj'***

The economic policy of prohibitive controls on trade and industry in post independence era till pre globalization, referred to as the 'control raj', coupled with a rising culture of corruption created a powerful monster out of the '*babu*' (the clerk in charge). File pushing in Government offices was to emerge as one of the most lucrative, money making activity.

The predictable fallout of this oppressive system was the *dalal* (a middle man) . There was a dalal for all seasons ! Omnipresent.

The later part of post independent India witnessed a steady decline in the morals of men in public life as well as general loss of value system. Law and order recorded a gradual decline. Unfortunate political developments such as the infamous era of the imposition of 'emergency' in 1975-77 by the late Indira Gandhi ushered in a virtual police state in the infamous years.

'In the worst cases, Government itself becomes an excuse in predation, without any pretence of providing public goods, including public safety. Public office in such cases becomes a license to loot.' 3

A large number of sincere and honest workers got overshadowed by the minority of insincere workers. Needless to say ,quite a few of the Government positions got converted in to lucrative opportunities to make wealth at the cost of public service. Politics however was not the only factor responsible for the decay. Changing times-urbanization, growing population the get rich quick culture, the emergence of 'parallel' economy and 'connectivity' (in Delhi whom you know matters more that what you know). All this was often seen as the inevitable price one has to pay in order to accept urbanization as an unavoidable – irreversible

global phenomenon and was therefore an inherent part of the evolving culture of the city.

In the bureaucratic setup the British ,unwittingly, had handed over to their Delhi counterparts a most potent weapon to control their own citizens . A model which was readily picked up by most other states besides Delhi. It would not be very wrong to assume that the same trend was followed in other British colonies as well.

### ***The partition and the Punjabi.***

The plight of Delhi as we know it today goes back to the troubled times of the partition of the country ,into India and Pakistan, in 1947. Political turmoil saw floods of immigrants pouring into the city . It is estimated that the population of Delhi in the decade 1941-1951 went up by 90.0 % (the population of Delhi in 1951 was 1744072) Huge rehabilitation colonies Lajpat Nagar, Kingsway Camp,Karol Bagh Lodhi Colony came up almost overnight. As time went by the refugee residents of these colonies tried their best to recreate the areas in Pakistan that they had left behind. Much later as their economic condition was to improve with time ,these residents became the pioneers in opening up new frontiers, in the then far flung locations of Delhi, which are today known as the exclusive abode of the rich.

In order to control and plan for ,what was even then a turbulent future, the parliament passed the Delhi Development Act and cleared the way to the setting up of the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) in 1957. The area of Delhi which was 43.25 Sq Km in 1901 grew to 624 Sq Km in 1991.

It is most significant to record a few words about the refugees Hindu population, the Punjabis, who came in to fill the void left behind by the retreating Muslims in the turbulent years of 1947.An estimated 390,000 Muslims left Delhi and were replaced by 495,000 Hindu migrants This exchange created some unique problems Firstly the houses vacated by the outgoing Muslims were occupied by the new migrants leading to legal property disputes. But the more profound economic effect was seen in the fact that the out going Muslim population was mainly artisans, petty traders and laborers whereas the Punjabis were mainly non cultivating landlords ,money lenders, doctors lawyers ,teachers and small shopkeepers. This transformation of population brought about a striking change in the economy of Delhi as refugees took up the jobs of vendors, hawkers ,mechanics, carpenters etc. With their urban background the Punjabis were most interested in trade and commerce. Since a lot of them had come with little assets they were interested in small trade which promised a quick return. Industrial involvement came later on. With the passing of time some 'refugees' have built a name and a reputation that commands respect. The Volga and the Kwality restaurants ,Bhatia opticians, Escorts tractors ,Atlas cycles ,Frick India refrigeration and air conditioning, Bharat steel tubes, Ranbaxy laboratory and countless

small and medium trade establishments in Chandni Chowk, Connaught Place, Ajmal Khan road, Panchkuian road, Lajpat Nagar, Rajenda Nagar, South Extension and many other places in Delhi are a tribute to the toil and rigor of the Punjabi 'refugee' spirit. 4

Sadly the same cannot be said of the second generation of a lot of these pioneers. Reaping the benefits of the struggle of their elder generation and having acquired a built up enterprise they are rich, reckless and arrogant. They tend to lead life on their own terms, hitting the headlines for all the wrong reasons.

It is most noteworthy that the Punjabi who came with little but his resolve and determination to start life all over and the never-say-die spirit so infected the entire city in times to come, that the rest of India came to know the *Delhiwalla* (the citizen of Delhi) as somewhat a self centered, arrogant, above the law category of a mercenary achiever -no matter what. This typical Punjabi trait combined in Delhi with an atmosphere of years of survival in the face of treachery, political uncertainty and vulnerability has made the resident very defiant and suspicious. The laws are violated with impunity in the capital. This has in turn created a reputation of Delhi as a 'rude, uncivilized, uncouth and uncultured' city. 5 This definition has come to stick.

### ***Economic plans for economically strong***

In post independence India there have been significant events that have had direct and indirect effects on the ways of thinking and on value systems, on ways of living and consequently on our cities and public behavior. The process of urbanisation, as an inevitable fallout of the level of industrialisation set into motion by leaders such as Prime minister Nehru (1963) "...dams and industries are the temples of modern India..." ushered in the 'city culture' in India. Not to say that urban centers did not exist in India earlier but 'Urbanism' brought in some hitherto unknown transformations.

The first master plan, marked a transformation in the character of Delhi from the administrative and diplomatic city as was envisaged by the British to an Industrial city. Urbanisation was then treated as synonymous with industrialisation and industrial development was essential for generating employment and for the economic upliftment of the population. Also the emerging economic importance in the whole of north India prompted the Delhi planners to encourage industry.

It was soon realized that in a controlled economy, it was a better option to locate industry in close proximity to the centre of political power.

An estimated 3,00,000 persons migrate into Delhi, annually. Approx. 45% of the migrating population is uneducated adding to an ever growing pool of unskilled labor. The capitalistic mode of production requires highly trained and skilled manpower, so the prevailing employment market pushes these immigrants to seek or create their own jobs. This huge sector is unregulated, unrecognized and uninsured. It is aptly referred to as "informal" sector.

Many seek out low level jobs in the service sector or are self employed jobs such as rickshaw pullers, hawkers, vendors, tea stalls, construction labor, domestic help, security guards, gardeners, tailors, garbage removers, scavengers and drivers and cleaners of a huge fleet of private buses of Delhi. The practice of the weekly *Haat-Bazaar* (the informal open air market) is still alive in many parts of the city and services a large part of the population.

A most baffling paradox is that in the formal "Master plans" there is but a fleeting reference to this huge 'informal' sector. In fact "to reach India's poor the Finance minister has to rely on a bureaucracy whose inefficiency helped perpetuate the problem of poverty in the first place.", 6 It is not clear that it is by design or default that this sector is seen by the administration as the goose that lays golden eggs. The threat of the authority and police to make it go away yields an estimated, unaccounted annual income of Rs. 490/- M ( \$ 120 M ). 7 It is a sad commentary on a city system that has no mechanism to provide jobs to

such a large number of persons and actually does everything in its power to see that they do not get self employed –or pay for their survival.

### ***Regulating the police***

The Delhi police has such an unfriendly image that they have had to invent a convincing slogan for their force “*For you, with you, always.*” Needless to say, they fool no one It is seen as an active collaborator in most antisocial activities. In case after case they seem to side with the criminal. No ordinary citizen would ever like to get involved with them.

A large part of the police force is composed of immigrants from the adjoining state of Haryana, which is known more for its wrestling and agriculture rather than for its art and culture.

A recent phenomenon (again justified due to urbanization) is that of road rage. Unruly and uncivilized behavior of drivers on the road. Delhi has the maximum number of registered vehicles in any city in India, 3.475 M in 2000 (*Motor transport statistics of India 1999-2000, Min . of road transport and highways, Govt. Of India*) The average speed on the road is 14-39 km/hr. According to a survey conducted in 2006 it was found that 70% of the drivers on the roads of Delhi were unfit to drive. 8 The private buses operating as the infamous ‘blue line’ is called the ‘killer line’ service due to the reckless drivers who are difficult to tame. The three wheeler ,other mode of para mass transport, as a practice do not use the fare meters. The plight of the common traveler can be gauged from the fact that nearly 50% of the residents cannot afford any mode other than non motorized transport (cycle rickshaws) unless it is heavily subsidized. 9 Nearly 5 persons lose their lives on the roads of Delhi every day.

The Delhi metro will hopefully change some of that.

To find a parking place during the day in CBD’s like Connaught Place is an impossibility which is resolved only by the ingenuity of the parking attendants( again from the pool of informal workers) who constantly shuffle cars up and down any conceivable space to actually double the available parking capacity. All this does not deter the booming car market to announce newer models of their cars at prices which are unattainable by the common man in one lifetime. Of course, there is the banking sector awaiting any opportunity to thrust a loan on any prospective customer.

Delhi is a picture of dualistic character, the formal and the informal, the fast disappearing traditional and the modern, the natural ( the river Yamuna, the ridge, the trees and the greenery –all under environmental threat) and the man made, the poverty ridden and the affluence, the traditional neighborhood and the aloofness of newer developments and the new found arrogance that comes with wealth.

The burgeoning population on the one hand promotes competition and thus raises standards while on the other hand provides for a perfect setting of anonymity for all anti social and criminal activity.

### ***Rich man poor man***

The economic profile of Delhi indicates that 34% population belongs to the ‘poor’ class 48% to the middle and 18% to the rich and very rich group. 10

So with nearly 82% population in the middle-low class and the highest per capita income (Rs 43,000 in 2001-2002 which was nearly twice the national average) only reaffirms the richness of the rich population of Delhi.

In the last four decades Delhi has been one of the fastest growing cities in India. Even though nearly 45% of the population lives in ‘slums’ the policies of the government clearly tilt in the favor of the rich/super rich.

How this group of rich and mighty control the city was apparent recently .In response to the growing public outcry against unauthorized and unapproved construction proliferating in the

entire city, the Supreme court ordered severe action including the sealing of, heavy penalty and in many cases demolition of such property. The MCD (Municipal corporation of Delhi) which was entrusted with executing this order, generally went about it slowly and as some critics said, selectively. As the press probed deeper into the affair it became clear that most of the top defaulters were MP's (member of parliament) and MLA's (member of legislative Assembly) of all political parties besides rich and connected people. This threat to their property became one of the rare occasions for all such leaders to cut across party quibbling to unite in a rare show of solidarity to get the assembly to pass a legislation 'regularising' the violations and thereby rendering the master plan defunct. Gradually the parliament was pressurized to move an ordinance legalizing the unauthorized construction prompting the press to label the parliament as the 'ordinance factory' 11. Such ordinance had been passed once too often, a similar case being that of a satellite town of Mumbai called Ullhasnagar.

This act was followed up with the legalization of 'Farmhouses' (huge residences built on farm lands) The dubious role of the high and the mighty in these and several such acts are an indication of the profound impact the rich have on the general policy of the Government.

### ***It's a man's world***

A predominantly male dominated society Delhi presents some of the most perplexing situations to outsiders. Women are little more than sexual objects. For lot of male residents respect and equality for women are text book concepts. Whereas an incident of eve teasing can spark off public lynching in Kolkatta, or draw reprimand from general public in Mumbai it is a matter of amusement in Delhi. For fear of vengeance, the by passers would rather not get involved. Seats reserved for women in buses are almost never made available to them. It does not stop there. The motorcycle riders of Delhi are expected to wear helmets for safety reasons but for some inexplicable reasons women are not expected to, nor do they wear helmets. On a family outing the male folks walk a few steps ahead of the females. All major decisions, specially in low and middle class society including those about female employment are taken by the male folks. Delhi is an outright dangerous place for the lonely- or new- women after dark. Rape victims have to go through a traumatic time rather than the perpetrator of the crime as they are promptly labeled as women of 'loose virtue'.

Standing in a queue is not a virtue that comes naturally to the citizens of Delhi –except when they are

lining up to purchase liquor at the shops.

The system of criminal and civil justice has eroded to an alarming level. Justice comes in fits and starts. Mainly to those who have the power. Money power and political muscle.

Delhi is clearly a place held hostage by different interest groups. An unprecedented economic boom has revealed the unpleasant side of socio-cultural identity of this city. The cultural conditioning of the population makes this city one of the most difficult to govern. It is said of Delhi that there are no 'residents' of Delhi. The entire population is in transition. This belief springs from the fact that Delhi being the seat of power with numerous offices and headquarters located here had its share of immigrant residents needed to handle the scores of Government jobs and other key installations over the years. Several of these immigrants decided to settle in Delhi after retirement.

There are many reasons for the current state of affairs. One major factor that has contributed to the socio-economic inequality, and hence a plethora of cultural conflicts, has undoubtedly been the aspect of land. Land ownership, land pricing, land use and land planning. And the quick and abundant profit to be made from land dealings.

### ***Physical planning.***

In order to understand fully the transformation of a society from a routine "walled city" to "World city" it is essential to examine and understand the role played by the infusion of the western mode of planning introduced and superimposed on the existing walled, post-colonial and traditional mixed use city structure. The master plan of Delhi was first prepared

for the period 1961-1981 with the help of experts from Ford foundation who informed our planners that the city is not a hotch potch of forts ,mosques ,bazaars streets, *mohallas* (neighbourhoods) mixed land use and public and private spaces overlapping at random, mixing work and residential areas creating unexpected spatial, work and living experiences.

The western view was that there should be some order in the city . The city is rather like a pastry shop with different flavors of cakes and pastries neatly cut and packed separately. Work centers and living areas needed to be separated.

Thus was introduced in the Indian mainstream the concept of multi nodal planning and segregated land use. The socio cultural fallout of creating huge residential areas based entirely on economic conditions has begun to be felt very seriously by the residents. The residents, all unknown to each other, do not have a common social cause to rally around. The character of the city encourages self survival at the cost of the neighbor- and in fact creates conflicting situations. Parking space ,water ,security concerns ,grabbing of public land become points of contention. Many residents convert the place of residence to offices or shops changing the entire residential character of the colony to the annoyance of the non beneficiary residents. After nearly five decades of the practice of the alien land use planning system, the mixed land use is now being seriously considered as the most viable option in the Indian condition.

It must –however be said of many residential societies in the recent times that the Resident Welfare Association (RWA's) are beginning to emerge as a significant unit of the city. In many of these RWA's women have taken a leading role. It is important to note however, that the RAW is still not an officially recognized entity in city administration setup.

The Master plan has already been revised twice with target dates being 2001 and 2021. Every revision is seen as a rehash of the earlier one diluting it further in favor of violations, powerful players and bigger land deals gradually elbowing out the green belt, the urban poor .the lower class commuter and other disadvantaged groups. The DDA as the main custodian of land (acquisition and disposal) has sent the land prices sky rocketing. All this is justified in the name of globalization, NRI (non resident Indian) investment, FDI (foreign direct investment)and forthcoming international events such as the Commonwealth games. The common man has all but been excluded from a position of owning property, having a say in the administration or having avenues of appeal where justice of any kind is assured in his favor. The natural outcome of such a plan, in tune with turning Delhi in to a 'Global' city is the ushering in of spectacular projects-malls, IT parks, five star hotels, golf courses , luxury housing ,multilevel parking and of late large scale acquisition of acres of land for the creation of SEZ(special economic zones).

The Government is often accused of promoting prosperity at a huge social cost. Grandiose plan takes precedence over common man. A recently constructed Mega Temple ,built at a cost of millions of Rupees, located on supposedly unauthorized/unsuitable land and built bye passing the regular procedure of taking necessary approvals was inaugurated by one of the highest public figures. At a stone's throw from this site lay the spot from where the Delhi Govt . forcefully shifted about 100,000 slum dwellers for relocation to an alternative site 25 Km away. They have been promised a plot of land 12.5 Sq.M per family. 12 These residents had settled here since late 1980's. One of the main reasons for this delayed police action was the fact that all these slums were located on the prime movement spine for the forthcoming Commonwealth games. All these slum residents are an integral part of the service economy of the city and yet against whom the rich residential enclaves ,in order to feel secured , gate themselves at night .

Let all this not mislead anyone into believing that Delhi is unlivable. A visitor to Delhi will not fail to notice a positive shift in the very spirit of the city. As if spurred on by Mumbai, this city has begun a journey of self discovery. It is a tribute to the allure of Delhi that millions abandon their place of stay in favor of a fling at making it in Delhi. Just goes to prove that it remains high on the list of places of hope. Any city that can raise hope is not all hype.

Besides- it still has trees and flowers that bloom in spring and pleasant winter days that bring back the hint of what the Mughals would have seen in this place worth settling down. The wide roads are an envy of many a citizens outside of Delhi. It still has some of the best cuisines and a wide selection of foods, fruit and vegetables and shopping . In true royal style it has not succumbed to the global work culture of hectic office activity nearly all around the clock, except in the 'call centres' where the global time difference drives them to work at night. Delhi still works by the clock. Shops close at respectable time in the evening and nothing starts working till late in the day. The lunch breaks are still held sacred. A bit of 'an overgrown village' .

The one time that Delhiwallas get serious is when they have to enjoy themselves. Weddings ,political rallies, parties and a lot of festivals. Ramleela, Durga puja, Guru Nanak's birthday, Eid- all call for serious involvement Delhi is fast emerging as an international conference centre, giving a fillip to the hospitality industry. Mughal ,Lodhi and other gardens by the DDA, specially those attached to the monuments are still a huge draw for public outings and morning walks. The biggest exhibition ground in India,'Prgati Maidan' provides opportunity for many national and international expose in a year. Innovative ideas anywhere in the world are picked up by the enterprising Delhi entrepreneur, Traditional crafts like kite making and flying have been preserved by a handful of persons in old Delhi also known for it's Mughlai food. Several NGOs are working tirelessly in the fields of child and women welfare ,prevention and rehabilitation of drug and AIDS affected, conservation of heritage and cleaning of the Yamuna. In fact, in spite of the failure of the Government on many fronts the enterprising private sector never lets the citizen down . Be it health, education, entertainment or services ,malls, multiplex, IMAX, theme park ,vintage cars as well as horse racing, golf courses-the works. Delhi has also arrived on the fashion scene. !

It appears that the time has come for the residents to realize that all the physical attributes of a beautiful city are present in Delhi. What is missing is the human and behavioral inputs. Slow and painful as it may be ,this input will assure that Delhi is back to it's past historic glory.

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-One US \$ = Aprox Rs 47.00 ( June 2006)

- One British Pound Sterling= Aprox. Rs 80 (June 2006)