

City of Djinns

A year in Delhi

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Dalrymple, now an author of many popular books on Indian 18th and 19th century and the European confrontation with the Mughal empire, was once a young man, spending time in India. The present book is a retrospective of his year in Delhi and his exploration of the past of that city augmented with historical vignettes amplified by interviews and archival reading. A past that the India of today is not terribly keen on remembering, let alone preserving, letting it go to rot and disappearing under the onslaught of glitzy modernity. But the present neglect is just one in a long row, in fact the physical site of Delhi has been continually occupied through a thousand years or two, the one calamity following upon the other, not yet being able to quench misfortune and assert the spirit of defiant continuity. Life must go on, even if the forms that very life assumes, will have to change.

Recent calamities of the capital involve the massacre of Sikhs following upon the murder of Indira Gandhi back in 1984. The lady was mowed down by her Sikh life-guards, yet did not die on the spot. The ambulance which normally would have taken her in case of an emergency, was out of action as the driver had taken a tea-break, instead her daughter-in-law had to improvise something, and the Prime minister was dead upon arrival. Thousands and thousands of Sikhs got murdered by furious Hindus, their homes burnt to the ground in a may-fire of a flagration lasting for days before being quenched. But of course it made little mark on the physical face of the city, abandoned real-estate soon being occupied by the ever swelling population. More momentous was partition back in 1947, following upon independence. A large part of the Muslim population of Delhi was driven away, and their vacated properties taken on by recent Punjab immigrants, including Sikhs. The result was that many of the finer mansions of the former days were allowed to go into decline, and that particular Moslem Delhi culture, with its refined Urdu language, had to repatriate itself to Karachi, where it withered, and now only survives in the memories of a dwindling set of expatriates. Dalrymple in particular lauds the novel - 'Twilight in Delhi' by Ali, as the final evocation of a world forever vanished. And the author Ali himself still survives at the writing of the book, be it as merely a embittered presence in Karachi, the major city of an artificial construction - Pakistan. And before that there was also the presence of the British Raj, its imperial architecture and heroic monuments. Dalrymple likens the ambition and the scale of those British colonial extravaganzas, to those of Nazi-Germany, remarking though that the British architect Lutyens was superior to Spree, as if that would really make any significant difference. That presence, still nostalgically evoked in Britain at the time of writing, is also being buried and forgotten. In fact to the author, the references in modern India to the period of the Raj seem as distant and irrelevant as references to the Roman world in the West, although plenty of people are still surviving

from that era, if mostly in dotage, and only intermittently able to give testimony. But the real onslaught on Delhi in modern times was the British razing of the last remnants of the Mughal empire in the so called Sepoy mutiny in 1857. Admittedly it was not English against the Natives, on the contrary, the colonial forces owed their strength to the great number of Indians fighting on their side; yet it did inaugurate the British military supremacy as well as its rule, and did away for many generation, the former attitude of tolerance, not to say aloofness, that had characterized the growing British commercial presence. After the crushing of the Sepoy rebellion and the disposal of the last Mughal, racial superiority was more or less a foregone conclusion. Obviously there were atrocities committed on both sides, but the ruthlessness of the British reaction makes any reflective observer compare with the Nazi movement some eighty years later, a movement having more in common with the British ambitions than the latter would ever really care to admit. As some Swedish observers have noted, what shocked people about Hitler was that he was willing to treat Europeans in the same way Colonials treated their subjugate populations.

The Mughal empire, at its heyday boasting of an opulence making European courts look like those of paupers (and thus maybe to some extent responsible for the notion of Oriental splendor), with its magnificent architecture, had for all intents and purposes come to an effective end long before 1857, yet its outer magnificence had been preserved. The vengeance of the British did not only involve lakhs of slaughtered Natives, but also the destructive disfigurement of the splendid Red Fort, which was reduced to an army barracks. Many of the buildings contributing to its grandeur were razed to the ground, and what remains, impressive as it may still be, is but a shadow of what once was, and singularly un-evocative. Some ruins of the past are still able to convey not only their former grandeur but also the spirit that gave life to them. Not so the ruins of the Mughal courts, they are but empty shells, dead and life-less, giving little if any feed to the sympathetic imagination, as opposed to the purely aesthetic one. At least according to the author, who spends a significant portion of his time in Delhi to track down those very buildings hiding in the general debris of urban excrescence.

What was the Mughal court like? A splendid period spanning a few centuries, lead by able and long-reigning emperors, the list of which is never given, although should be common knowledge. Able and long-reigning, but also singularly ruthless. The internal strifes among the rulers the pretenders to rule, were gothic horrors, dwarfing its western-European equivalents in sheer terribleness and cruelty. Even in the west there were fights and deaths, but not quite the same sadistic pleasure in decapitation and unusual and original forms of studied cruelty. Some inklings of the life at the courts have come down to us through contemporary European travelers, as well as from other intermittent indigenous sources. They bespeak of a culture of refinement, of poetry and pleasure, not the least the carnal ones, as well as martial obsession; but a culture of striking superficiality, where appearances counted for much more than substance, obsession with social standing and respect overriding most other concerns, except for the rulers themselves for whom the aptitude for warfare must have taken first place. Warfare itself must have been a spectacle, not at least an aesthetic one, with splendid uniforms, gallant formations of horses, and intimidating squadrons of elephants docked in silks and with tusks enhanced by metal sheathings, the better to play their roles as formidable killing-machines. The number of

troops involved would have dwarfed European stagings, at least until the advent of late Napoleonic wars. But by that time Mughal supremacy were being eroded by internal strifes, in which European adventurers, like Fraser a distant forefather of the authors wife, could take active part. Still by the beginning of the 19th century, it was not unusual for the Europeans to adopt native ways, including the keeping of harems, bringing up scores of dark-skinned half-breeds with no vestige of Christian education. In fact, to the horror of the sincere, those men, the white mughals of a later book by Dalrymple, shed their Christian identities with remarkable ease. But of course as the century progressed, the moral fiber of the colonizers were stiffened along with growing intolerance and expanding prejudice.

But Delhi had suffered earlier setbacks, being conquered by predecessors to the Mughals, yet another nomadic Central Asian tribe of Turks, to build an empire. The city had been sacked many a time and suffered badly, yet always able to rise out of the ashes, if not always not for the worse. Still earlier in the 14th century it was ruled by yet another Oriental despot - Tughluk, a Muslim ruler running an early totalitarian society with informers and secret police. A despot is as liable to show striking generosity as well as ruthless revenge if displeased, not seldom more or less coinciding. Where do the propensity to be found in fairy-tales for kings and rulers to chop off heads at the flimsiest of pretexts, if not from stories provoked by such men as Tughluk? A Marroccon traveller of the 14th century, dwarfing the exploits of a Marco Polo, likewise provides an account of life under a psychopathic ruler. He was able both to prosper handsomely from the generosity of the monarch as well as invite his displeasure, only to be taken back into confidence and entrusted with a mission to China (which floundered badly), finally to escape. Tughluk himself became captive to his own paranoia, a fate not unusual to those who feed its motivating sources. He ordered the capital to be dismantled and it was evacuated of its population, which was forcibly marched far down to Decca to have it rebuilt on different location, and in the process drastically dwindling.

But the tale of Delhi goes further back than its Muslim incarnation, with which we mostly associate it; before this it was a Hindu town, and its ultimate roots may go back to the times of the epic tales of Mahabharata, the Hindu analogy to the Homeric sagas, not to say the Bible, except being far more extensive in text¹. This cycle of tales provide the Hindus with their roots, and indeed a recent serialization of the epic, got a large percentage of the Indian population glued to the TV screen for almost one hundred episodes. The author wonders whether there is some factual truths to those stories, in the same way that the Homeric tales are based on some real historical events (as are the tales of the Bible). Archeology does indeed provide some suggestive evidence that there may be, although most of the story, especially its description of opulence, is but poetic elaboration and license.

The evocative reconstruction of a past hidden under the surface of modern day Delhi provides the intellectual justification of this travel-log, the background to the trivial mundane events of a quotidian nature which permeates every engaging travel-story. A story of travel needs to give a sense of immediacy, produce in its reader a sense of presence, which can only be conveyed through the trivial but telling detail, too banal to have any

¹ Still, as the author recalls with some incredulity, until recently it was not unusual to have men who could recite the entire epic by heart, such feats of memory becoming more and more obsolete

importance in the big scheme of things, yet crucial to anchor the author and reader in a shared reality. The history of human thought and action is of course one of momentous events, yet each single one of those were born within its own matrix of daily flux, giving to those a particular flavor and fragrance, soon to be dispersed. It is the business of the travel-writer not only to inform, instruct and educate, but also to bring up those evanescent details of existence so much the more precious for being so ephemeral. Now the actual examples of such may not be to the taste of every reader, I am thinking of the antics of the landlady and her demented husband, to die during the sojourn; as well as the lecherous cab-driver, the surviving Sikh, who takes the young intrepid author around. In addition to those hapless elements of a story, there are more deliberate ones, such as the seeking out of eunuchs, maybe more to satisfy the conceived curiosity of the prospective reader than the author himself. Nor may everyone join in the various hardships suffered by spoilt Western brats. The power-shortages, the oppressive heat and all that, although that might give some food for reflection. On the other hand any reader fascinated by the lingering traces left of ancient ways may savour the expeditions the author does in uncovering a whole hidden stratum of society stuck in medieval ways, catering as well to the unbelieving Hindu as to the pious Muslim. The author starts out by explaining that Delhi is really a city of Djinns, i.e. of invisible spirits which engage in the daily life of all proper Delhians. You do not really have to believe them literally, this would be hard for a modern mind to carry off, yet you can respect their imaginative presence, and the undeniable impact they have on the minds of the many. Belief is part conviction and part ritual and artistic license. To believe in djinns literally is only within the capability of the innocent, but to believe in them artistically is also in the power of the sophisticated.

Finally every intrepid explorer needs a mentor and a guide, especially when descending to the nether worlds. In the case of young Dalrymple that successor of Vergil is played by the Persian scholar Dr. Jaffrey, a believing Muslim, who when pressed, likens God to an Elephant, each blind faith fastening on some particular aspect of the deity, without realizing that they are talking about the same being. What is God? This is an old question, and clearly any intelligent and sophisticated being, must provide a rather abstract answer. The ultimate abstraction is of course to identify God with Truth, not that God is Truth, but that Truth itself is God, as apparently was the revelation of Gandhi. And no doubt 'discovered' by many before and after him.

Is Dalrymple the best travel-writer of the generation? The criteria for such have changed drastically in recent generation. No longer is there any latitude for real exploration, there are no longer any white spots on the map, and as far as the geography of the world is concerned, there really is nothing more to discover. What is left for the intrepid to do, is to accept being a tourist, to go over well-trodden territory, but try to make it come alive as if for the first time, because that is what happens whenever an impressionable temperament is confronted with new experiences. The world is now a second hand store, everything has been worn at least once; what remains is some sort of sophisticated regurgitation, of whipping the old off its dust and try to have us look at it as a new thing.