

In Search of Delhi: A Translation of Brij Krishan Chandiwala's Dilli ki Khoj

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Review of *In Search of Delhi: A Translation of Brij Krishan Chandiwala's Dilli ki Khoj*

Translated with Notes.

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In her afterword to the translation of Shri Brij Krishan Chandiwalla's *Dilli ki Khoj*, Prof. Narayani Gupta the foremost historian of the city of Delhi, asks a very pertinent question – why are books written generally and what was the specific compulsion to write this book? Brij Krishan Chandiwalla or Bhaiji, as he was called, had a full career marked by his devotion to Mahatma Gandhi, to the national freedom struggle, to social service and the cause of education. But despite this he found time to pen books and reports, leaving for posterity a record of solid work accomplished with quiet diligence and without fanfare. His interests and interventions ranged from setting up the Brij Krishan Chandiwalla Smarak Trust, which manages educational institutions like Janki Devi Memorial College that were to provide skill and hope to women, to being the founder member of the Bharat Sewak Samaj that worked towards alleviating the conditions of slum dwellers of Delhi. Busy with all this, he found time to pen texts as different as memoirs about *Bapu ki Dilli Diary*¹ to a *Report on the Slums of Old*

Delhi.² Along with these multifarious interests, he also wrote about his beloved city, in the throes of yet another change at the time in the middle of the 20th century.

Brij Krishan Chandiwalla's life from 1900 to 1986 spanned the age of momentous transformation of the city. Delhi in his lifetime had changed from a small mofussil town, still under the shadow of the brutal British vengeance after quelling the uprising of 1857. This city that had been a glittering capital for centuries, was almost demolished out of existence. Administratively it was attached to the province of Punjab and relegated to the status of a humble provincial town to deliberately strip the city of the memories of its glorious past. Delhi would regain its stature as a capital city in 1911, but through the first three decades of the century, this new Imperial capital was a lonely bureaucratic entity, away from the beloved old *Shahjahanabad* of the *Dilliwalas*. As it moved towards becoming the modern capital of India—Brij Krishan ji documented all that made the city lovable, and liveable, calling it the *dil* or heart of Independent India. The last section of the book on post independence Delhi has the flavour of a witness account by a proud participant in the transformation of his city.

The book is an encyclopedic survey of the political history of Delhi, from the legendary Indraprastha to the glittering New Delhi, the capital of India, told through a story of eighteen Delhis. The editors Jitender Gill and Namita Sethi have divided this into five chapters, keeping to the categorisation of the original book. The confabulation of the ancient medieval and modern periods of history with Hindu, Muslim and British ruling dynasties does depict the colonial strategy of communalised periodisation of Indian history. However, the text easily debunks the notion that religious identification meant constant opposition. Indeed one finds

little rancour in the Bhajji's narration, which stands as a testament to the catholic outlook of its author.

Dilli ki Khoj is about how the city was lived and experienced by its dwellers. Bhajji chose to write about the dynasties, rulers and monuments of Delhi, but interspersed his text with nuggets about ecology, culture and cuisine, language and manners - He thus presents a multi-layered historical panorama of the many pasts of his city, bringing the narrative up to his immediate present, with barely concealed pride about the transformations being accomplished by the independent state. He joins a long list of writers who had been enthralled by the city, and who wrote about it in a register that could be understood by all. In the 19th century, poets of the city like Mir, Sauda, Dagh and Ghalib wrote lovingly of their city, its streets and foods, the cultural efflorescence before 1857 and its destruction after that. Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan was the pioneer historian of city stories. As Prof. Narayani Gupta noted, he was not the first writer to describe Delhi, but when he compiled his book the *Asar-us-Sanadid*, he chose to write not in Farsi but in the accessible Urdu. A year into Independence, even professional historians like Surendra Nath Sen succumbed to writing Delhi and its Monuments, a traveller's guide kind of short, crisp history of the city. Litterateurs like Maheshwar Dayal and Intezar Hussain also wrote loving accounts of the city in the 50s and 70s. Their vignettes of the city brought out its shared cultural values. Today we have Swapna Liddle, Sohail Hashmi, Rana Safvi and Mayank Austen Soofi among many others who have written about Delhi as they have traversed its histories and heritage as historians, flaneurs, bloggers and walkers. Indeed *In Search of Delhi* also ends with a guide to traversing the city – a peregrination around the city.

Bhaiji claimed that he was no historian and that his book was based on secondary sources like Carr Stephen and F. C Fanshaw. He makes it his purpose to pen a similar account in Hindi, that could be understood by an ordinary Dilliwalla. His text is at ease with histories, legends, myths, memoirs, and stories from the street. However every piece of information is annotated with how he came to know about it – where the evidence is clear, he states it, where it is uncertain, he mentions that too. The result is a presentation that remains surprisingly contemporary since it does not claim to be a final statement, just what is best known at the time. For a city that has had a bloodied history, there is no evidence of any kind of resentment in the text. Change is a continuum, and hope is the only way forward here. Even when he is writing about Gandhi's life and assassination, there is deep sadness, rather than anger, as he goes about describing the sites of the city where Gandhi had walked, stayed, prayed and died.

His fast was bound to have an impact. The riots did cease, however the poison in the hearts could not be washed away, the rifts remained intact. This resulted in an event that is an indelible blot to our nation, a sin that can never be washed away. At 5:17 pm on the evening of 30 January, when Gandhiji was about to reach the prayer meet, a Hindu Brahmin shot and killed him. The whole nation was sunk in sorrow. What was the point of crying over spilt milk and to repent and grieve after the event? Nothing could bring him back.

Dilli ki Khoj narrates the continuous history of the city, nourished by new infusions. Political history, the overlapping cities and forts, and the increasingly sophisticated architecture were counterbalanced with accounts of temples, mosques, dargahs and gardens. Political spaces are confronted with sacred spaces and given equal importance. But what shines through is the

introduction to the book, which describes the Delhi of Bhajji time. Here the author pens a portrait of a vibrant urban culture—and its reflection in music, poetry and dance, food—the animated bazaars, and the daily humdrum life, as lived in the shadow of momentous change.

Like *Asar us Sanadid*, *Dilli ki Khoj* surveyed Hindu, Muslim, and British periods, practices and monuments alike, in the Hindustani idiom of the city. This itself was significant. That idiom can increasingly be searched for only in the pages of books like these. We rarely find a text now where a *teej mela* and a *phool waalon ki sair* could be mentioned in the same breath – in conjoined sentences. For this reason alone this text is immensely valuable. Delhi has witnessed a considerable decay and significant loss not only of its architectural inheritance but also of its linguistic and cultural heritage since the writing of the *Dilli ki Khoj*. This translation would hopefully lead some more people to think beyond the binary oppositions that structure our present narratives.

The sociologist Ravi Sundaram has talked about the ‘social’ city of the 1950s, - Delhi of the 1950s was the site where the problem of home, urban identity, and a public sphere were fashioned through concerns about sovereignty and social justice.³ Bhri Krishan Chandiwala was a crucial interlocuter arguing for a humane city – a city that does not treat the problem of slums as an urban issue but as a human issue. His report on *Slums of Old Delhi* did not have as its objective the improvement of the city per se, but of the lives and livelihood of the city dwellers. This understanding that cities are as human, as physical and cultural entities is a remarkable aspect of Brij Kishan Chandiwala’s oeuvre.

In Search of Delhi acquaints us with the many remarkable sites and stories of the city; it is a very visual description, bringing the city alive. It is remarkable that while this history of the city organised around its centres of power, the author starts not by focusing on the rulers and their stone palaces, but with an engaging account of streets, bazaar, havelis, ancient mandirs, neighbourhood mosques, gardens, *sarais*, food, dress and language of Delhi the author lived in. Maybe in a city where even kings' fortunes were uncertain, the ephemera of the every day provided a refuge, and indeed a celebration. Delhi of Ghalib and Mir, or Maheshwar Dayal and Intizar Hussain and indeed of Bhaiji was not just a city but an experience. That experience of Delhi has been translated by Dr Jitender Gill and Dr. Namita Sethi, making us present Dilliwalas, thankful, nostalgic and wistful.

¹ Brij Krishan Chandiwala, *Bapu ke Charano Mein: Ek Shradhanjali*, Sasta Sahitya Mandal, 1949 ; Gandhiki Ki Dilli Diary, Vols. 1-3, Gandhi Smarak Nidhi

² *Slums of Old Delhi: Report of the Socio-Economic Survey of the Slum Dwellers of New Delhi*, conducted by Bharat Sewak Samaj Delhi Pradesh, Atma Ram and Sons, 1958

³ Ravi Sundaram, *Pirate Modernity: Delhi's Media Urbanism*, Routledge, 2010