

Creating the City of Delhi

Stories of Strong Women and Weak Walls

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1. Introduction

Situated in the Gangetic plain of northern India, Delhi has been of major economic, military and cultural importance since at least three millennia. In popular portrayal Delhi's history is conceived of as a successive layering of seven, or more, cities. In India's great epic, the Mahābhārata, we find reference to the possible first city, Indraprastha, the mythical capital of the Pāṇḍhavaḥ kingdom, popularly believed to be situated between India Gate and New Delhi Zoo. Painted Grey Ware pottery was excavated between 1954 and 1971 at this site, suggesting the existence of human settlements at around 1000 BCE; yet the factual existence of Indraprastha remains debatable.¹ It becomes apparent from the Mahābhārata description that the city was imagined to have witnessed in-migration from different social milieus – this is not rendered as being necessarily a problematic or chaotic thing:

“When the city was built, there came, O king, numerous Brahmanas well-acquainted with all the *Vedas* and conversant with every language, wishing to dwell there. And there came also unto that town numerous merchants from every direction, in the hope of earning wealth. There also came numerous persons well-skilled in all the arts, wishing to take up their abode there.”²

Although this passage suggests a clearly defined social hierarchy or classification, the diversity of social milieus is presented as a vital, or at least a normal,

1 Cf. SINGH, 2009, p. 19.

2 GANGULI, 1970, Mahābhārata Book I, Section CCIX, ital. i.o.

feature of a functional city. Similarly, Danu Roy, in his stimulating essay *City makers and city breakers*, makes the somewhat obvious, but oft-forgotten, observation that cities and built environments are always the collective oeuvre of diverse social groups:

“The visible structure of the city is always imposed upon its social foundations. For instance, when even a casual visitor looks up at the imposing walls of the forts built by the Tughlaqs and the Mughals, it could occur to him that these walls could not have been ‘built’ by the kings. There must have been masons and stonecutters, water carriers and sand loaders, mixers and helpers, woodcutters and carpenters, ironsmiths and potters, labouring men and women and donkeys by the thousands who did the actual work. So where, in the pages of history, did they all disappear?”³

Roy’s observation surely alleviates a one-dimensional perception of Delhi’s history as a subsequent accomplishment of great kings, emperors, city planners and politicians and calls to put the actual workers, the city makers, into the focus.

However, the near absence of these city makers in historical sources and the overrepresentation of the ‘grand’ figures like rulers and famous architects leaves us with the difficult task to reconstruct from available sources the astonishing life-stories of the more ‘mundane’ individuals of history. The status of sources has surely improved in modern times, but still the overwhelming majority of scholarly work (except for perhaps literary studies and ethnographies) makes use of official documents, colonial sources and documented historical caesuras (like wars, or political decisions) and other accounts of those who are and have been powerful. In the first part of this article, exactly such an approach will be presented: we are drawing on official documents of city planning and academic/journalistic writings about the city’s management of urban poverty. In the second part, this viewpoint will then be contrasted with insights of modern Hindi literature, which will foreground the lived experiences of the individual social actors in the financially poorer milieus of Delhi.

2. Pre-independence Delhi and the creation of ‘slums’

Over the three millennia after Indraprastha, several cities were constructed in the area of contemporary Delhi, first several bastions of indigenous kings, later

3 Roy, 2010, p. 144.

fortified cities of Muslim rulers, who were invading the region from central Asia. The most recent of those fortified Muslim cities is Shāhjahānābād, which was founded by the Moghul emperor Shāh Jahān in 1648. After Moghul power began to wane in the late 18th century, the British took possession of the walled city of Shāhjahānābād in 1803, and the control of the Moghul emperors was confined to the palace, the so-called Red Fort.

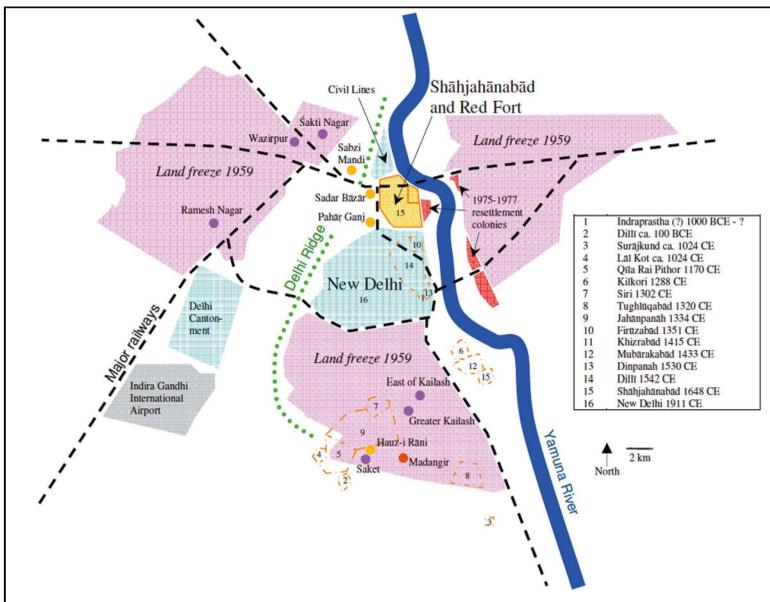


Figure 1: Schematic map of Delhi (adapted from descriptions/map in KACKER, 2005, p. 70, and map in CHADHA, 2005, p. 94).

The Indian Mutiny of 1857, an unsuccessful but yet traumatic military upheaval against British rule (the Raj), was a consequential event for Shāhjahānābād. Batra and Mehra regard the Mutiny as something like the founding myth of slums in Delhi. During the skirmishes, the British increasingly regarded the city’s small lanes and narrow back alleys, the *mohullas*, as dangerous, unruly and potentially threatening. After the Mutiny, these experienced anxieties were ideologically linked to notions of dirt:⁴

4 HOSAGRAHAR, 2005, p. 87, notes: “The events of 1857 had seriously influenced colonial perceptions of disease, dirt, and disloyalty. During the period immediately

“‘Native’ culture was now admonished for its inferiority, its propensity for dirt, filth, dampness and congestion, and an effort was made to introduce contemporary European ideas of city order and planning to ameliorate the poor condition of the city and its inhabitants.”⁵

The British began to demolish almost one third⁶ of the seemingly impenetrable housing structures to ensure better surveillance and control (see also Ghalib’s accounts in section 4.1). Attempts were even made to raze the entire city of Shāhjahānābād to the ground, but luckily not enough explosive was accessible at the time.⁷ Instead, the British removed themselves from the native population and created their own quarter, Civil Lines, north of the walled city of Shāhjahānābād. After the massive clearances following the Mutiny, the area outside the western city walls became increasingly urbanized (Sabzī Mandī, Sadār Bāzār and Pahār Ganj). This created a major concern for colonial city planners in the second half of the 19th century, who endeavoured to plan the western extension in an orderly way.⁸

In 1911, at the height of their imperial power in India, the British decided to transfer the capital of their Indian Empire from Kolkata (spelled ‘Calcutta’ at the time) to Delhi. A vast area south of Shāhjahānābād was selected to build the imperial city New Delhi, which was completed in 1931. The imperial vision of the British architects Sir Edward Lutyens and Sir Herbert Baker created an imposing assemblage of octagonal axes and broad avenues, inspired by Versailles and Washington, D.C., and monumental buildings in the architectural traditions of classicism and historicism, while maintaining an ‘oriental’ flavour by incorporating decorative ornaments of Mughal and Hindu architecture; this stylistic pluralism was meant to symbolize British superiority and rationality, and staged New Delhi as the apex of Indian civilization, and perhaps of civilization in general.

New Delhi starkly differs in appearance from Shāhjahānābād, or Old Delhi, as it is now often called. What is more, in spite of its allusions to rationality and orderliness, the creation of New Delhi was itself a cause for further congestion and ‘slummifying’ of other – now neglected and further enclosed – parts of the

following the rebellion, the inhabitants’ houses, streets, and ways of living appeared to be even more unclean and diseased than before it.”

5 BATRA/MEHRA, 2008, p. 393.

6 Cf. HOSAGRAHAR, 2005, p. 85.

7 Cf. ROY, 2010, p. 145.

8 Cf. HOSAGRAHAR, 2005, p. 115-142.

city. Hosagrahar comments: “In less than a century after they had taken over, colonial officials declared Delhi, the home of Emperors and princes, the mystical and exotic city of the Orient, an uncivilized ‘slum.’”⁹ In 1936, the entire walled city of Old Delhi was catalogued as ‘slum’ in the city’s planning codes¹⁰ and in more recent documents of city planning, Old Delhi and its adjoining neighbourhoods to the west were dubbed ‘Special Area’.¹¹

3. A historical outline of city planning of post-independence Delhi

The colonial dichotomies of order – disorder, (western) rationality – (oriental) irregularity and slum – non-slum were taken up in the independent Indian Republic. Chandigarh, the newly created joint capital of the Indian states of Panjāb and Haryāna, is one drastic example: a hyper-order of square blocks and straight axes, create functionally separated sectors (e.g. a sector for shopping, a sector for restaurants, residence sectors etc.). However, the architectural mastermind behind Chandigarh was not an Indian, but the Swiss-French modernist Le Corbusier. Likewise, the heads behind Delhi’s first master plan (MPD-62) were the American architect and city planner Albert Mayer and a committee of members of the Ford Foundation. These international inputs helped India to overcome colonial associations of a nostalgic ‘Orient’, while simultaneously maintaining the colonial legacy of rationality.

The post-independence strategies of city planning in Delhi can be roughly structured into three phases: the 1950s and 1960s saw modernist and socialist attempts of centralized city planning and expansion. In the 1970s and 1980s, more pragmatic and rigorous endeavours of coping with the challenges of informal settlements and urban poverty came to the fore. From the 1990s onwards, a globalized alignment of India integrated the corporate and capitalist world-system into city planning. Thus we observe a paradigm shift from what could be described as ‘rationalist’ to ‘cleaning-up’ to ‘neo-liberalist’. The three phases/mindsets are not necessarily in harmony with each other, and we can actually observe how the ‘rationalist’ phase of the 1950/60s was in effect overturned by the ‘cleaning-up’ phase of the 1970/80s, which in turn was rearranged to a degree by the more recent ‘neo-liberalist’ phase. This development parallels

9 IBID., p. 149.

10 Cf. BATRA/MEHRA, 2008, p. 393.

11 Cf. DMP-2001, p. 4; DMP-2021, p. 45.

India's political, economic and societal transition from a socialist to a capitalist system, epitomized in the liberalization of the markets in the early 1990s. It becomes apparent, however, that processes of Delhi's city planning of the pre-1990 era foreshadowed India's capitalist alignment. It is exactly this overlapping and intertwining of the three phases/mindsets that carries a potential for ideological justifications, for example by drawing on historical traditions of city planning on the one hand and by projecting futuristic visions of a 'world-class city' on the other.

3.1 A city for everybody: The rationalist mindset of the Nehruvian era

When New Delhi became the national capital of the Republic of India in 1947, the city witnessed an unprecedented rate of in-migration. With a decennial population growth rate of 90 percent, Delhi's urban population mushroomed from under 700,000 in 1941 to 1.4 million in 1951,¹² almost doubling the density of persons per square kilometre from 613 to 1174 persons.¹³ It can be assumed that most migrants were refugees from north-west India, escaping the civil wars during the India-Pakistan Partition in 1947/48.¹⁴ In addition, the bureaucratic and administrative apparatus, foreign missions and other institutions attracted many civil servants, administrators, functionaries and other professionals. Finally, after Lahore had been included into Pakistan, the trade and wholesale business of northern India concentrated on Delhi, and specifically on the already congested Shāhjahānābād/Old Delhi.

In the 1950s two governmental agencies, the Ministry of Rehabilitation and the Delhi Improvement Trust, were created to restore order and provide adequate housing for the emergent metropolis. Together with numerous private land colonizing companies, the government acquired vast areas in the west, the east and in the south of the city and created housing colonies and, moreover, transformed areas inhabited by 'tribal communities' into middle-class neighbourhoods. Despite these efforts, housing for all Delhiites remained unattainable. Large portions of the city's population lived in unserviced illegal squatter settlements with no prospect of betterment. What is more, in 1955, an outbreak of jaundice, due

12 Cf. GAZETTEER, 1976, p. 120. These figures represent the urban population of the Delhi territory. The rural population of the time was ca. 220,000 in 1941 and ca. 306,000 in 1951. Cf. Figure 2 for an overview.

13 Cf. *IBID.*, p. 125. Again, these figures represent Delhi's urban population.

14 Cf. also in the following KACKER, 2005, p. 69.

to inadequate sanitation measures in some of the new colonies, killed approximately 700 people, mainly in the affluent areas of New Delhi and Civil Lines.¹⁵ The government was forced to react, and in 1957 the newly created Delhi Development Authority (DDA) set out to devise a Master Plan for Delhi which came to be known as the MPD-62.

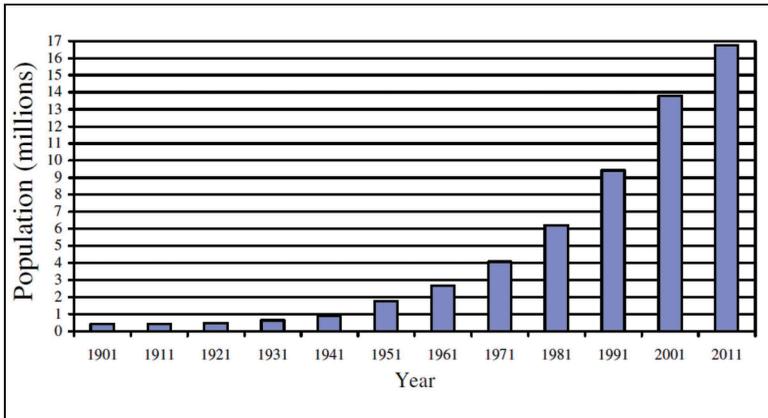


Figure 2: Population of Delhi from 1901 to 2011. Figures are for total population of the National Capital Territory, i.e. Delhi's rural and urban population (adapted from GOVERNMENT OF INDIA, Census of India 2011).

The MPD-62 predicted that the city's population would increase to over five million by 1981.¹⁶ The plan estimated approximately 50,000 "dwelling units in bustis¹⁷ scattered all over the city"¹⁸ and suggested to relocate these squatters to "various parts of the urban area so that they are integrated into the neighborhood community"¹⁹ which, however, should not be "too far away from major work centres".²⁰ These plans seemed to acknowledge the vital function of squatters

15 Cf. ROY, 2010, p. 149

16 Cf. MASTER PLANS FOR DELHI. MPD-62, p. i.

17 A *bustī* or *basī* is a north Indian term for 'informal settlement.' Other words that are used in the MASTER PLANS FOR DELHI. MPD-62, are '*jughhie jhonpari*' or '*JJ Cluster*' and 'slum.'

18 MASTER PLANS FOR DELHI. MPD-62, p. 5.

19 IBID., p. ii.

20 IBID., p. 27.

and low-income groups, who constitute the majority of workforce in small-scale industries, domestic labour and other low-wage duties.

Such plans were nurtured – on a more ideational level – by the newly established government under Jawaharlal Nehru, which envisaged a ‘city for everybody’ and announced to subsidise housing for low-income groups.²¹ The idea seemed persuasive: to eliminate private speculation and rising land prices, in 1959 the government froze on all vacant or undeveloped land around the city limits, making the land available on reasonable prices at any given time; the DDA would then develop this land and sell or rent 50 percent of the housing plots on the free market, acquiring revenue, which would then be used both to purchase new land and to subsidise the remaining 50 percent of plots for low-income groups.²²

3.2 Time for some action: The politics of eviction

After Nehru’s death in 1964, however, it became apparent that his vision was unattainable: only eleven percent of the plots had reached lower-income groups, while most plots were openly auctioned with the aim to maximize profits: “Land was released in a staggered manner, and plots in developed areas were deliberately withheld, to push prices up.”²³ By the 1970s it became clear that the size of the city’s population would significantly surpass the DDA’s predictions and that attempts to provide housing for low-income groups and labouring squatters had drastically failed. In a “frenetic burst of activity, the administrative machinery swung into action”²⁴ and between 1975 and 1977 around one million squatters were forcibly relocated from the city centres to the low-lying flood plains on the eastern bank of the Yamuna River. Each family was entitled to a 25-square-yard plot with common water, electricity and sanitation services. The vacated spaces in the city were used for building an infrastructure required for the Asian Games, which Delhi was to host in 1982.

Paradoxically, to construct all the necessary roads, flyovers, hotels, offices, apartments and stadiums, around one million migrant workers immigrated to the city during 1979 and 1982, squatting on the construction sites or nearby,²⁵ and making up, as it were, for the one million squatters who had been relocated

21 Cf. KACKER, 2005, p. 73.

22 Cf. IBID., p. 74.

23 IBID.

24 Also in the following ROY, 2010, p. 151.

25 Cf. BATRA/MEHRA, 2008, p. 398.

a few years earlier. Moreover, most of these workers stayed in the city after the games, inflating the population of Delhi to over six million in 1981.

The radical resettlement politics of the 1970s were in fact rather attempts to demolish informal settlements than to relocate them in an ordered or rational manner as the MPD-62 proposed. Batra and Mehra (2008) call this the 'Emergency Period'²⁶ and the authors provide some insights of how the processes of slum demolitions work in practice:²⁷ first, a notice is given to the local *pradhāns*, the spokespersons or 'strong men' of an informal settlement. These then might or might not pass on this information to the local residents. Several practices are employed that divide the residents along various lines. For instance, a certain cut-off date is usually announced, which is perhaps set 15 or 20 years prior to the eviction. The residents who stayed in the settlement before this cut-off date are either exempt from demolition or can claim for reparation or a plot in the resettlement area. Such residents are sometimes in support of demolition, either covertly or overtly, in hope of acquiring more plots or gaining financial benefits. Others, often under assistance of non-governmental organizations, launch legal cases and instigate public protests in order to prevent or delay the arrival of the demolition squads. This short glimpse into the potential communal conflicts resulting from the politics of eviction shows that we cannot conceive of dwellers of informal settlements as monolithic groups, but rather we deal with actors who have different beliefs about and interests in the settlement which are created *inter alia* by individual biographies and differing socio-economic statuses. In Section 4 of this chapter we will provide a discussion of some accounts of such local and personal life-stories of residents in informal settlements in modern Indian literature. First, however, we would like to outline the more recent developments of the politics of city planning in Delhi.

3.3 Visions of a world-class city: The neo-liberalist strategy of city planning

A second Master Plan was drafted in 1985, and notified in 1990, this plan came to be known as the DMP-2001. In 1988, a cholera outbreak, again due to inadequate sanitation measures contaminating the groundwater, killed ca. 1500 people, but unlike in the jaundice epidemic of 1955, the 1988 victims were all from the 1975-77 resettlement areas across the Yamuna River and from other

26 *IBID.*, p. 397.

27 *Cf. IBID.* p. 407, also in the following.

illegal squatter settlements.²⁸ And unlike 1955, the cholera disaster of 1988 did not prompt the DDA to react. Instead the DDA concentrated on constructing spaces that were to become visible emblems of India's modernity and that catered predominantly for the emerging middle classes.²⁹

Sunil Kumar provides us with an example. His ethnography in the South Delhi medieval village Hauz-i Rāni describes how the village was suddenly surrounded by the middle-class housing colonies Saket and Puşp Vihār. The village, which was first mentioned in Persian documents in 1246, is inhabited predominantly by a traditional Muslim population, who used the *hauz* (a large water reservoir), after it has been silted in the 19th century, as a graveyard for their community.³⁰ When the Delhi authorities acquired the land surrounding Hauz-i Rāni and the DDA started constructing the housing colony Saket in the mid-1970s, half of the area of the *hauz* was turned into a sports complex. At first, this sports complex was nothing more than three large fields without any barriers, thus the area was accessible for both Hauz-i Rāni villagers and Saket residents. Kumar observed how children from Saket played football against their Hauz-i Rāni peers and he notes that the “very absence of a structured sports regime allowed for an unregulated fraternising between the residents of the two neighbourhoods.”³¹ In 1990, however, the DDA constructed the ‘Saket Sports Complex’, with facilities for more up-scale sports like badminton, squash, tennis and aerobics, and upon Kumar’s inquiry the DDA engineers were forthright in saying that the facilities were oriented towards the middle-class neighbourhood of Saket. Furthermore, the Muslim graveyard was seen as a disturbing, unclean ‘problem’ which the Hindu engineers of the DDA found repulsive. The Hauz-i Rāni villagers perceived this exclusion and denial of access as accentuating the distance and mistrust between the communities. In turn they began to build buffalo and goat pens on their half of the *hauz*, to emphasize their stake and they barricaded all paths to their area with thorn and bistle bushes; they also put up placards that underlined the historicity of the village and the graveyard and constructed the inhabitants as *Sayyads* (descendents of the Prophet Mohammed), again emphasizing their right to occupy the space.

This example shows how city development can produce communal conflict and alienation. In the post-1990 era, India’s rural and poorer population has been drastically othered and made redundant in the country’s scramble for mo-

28 Cf. ROY, 2010, p. 153.

29 Cf. KACKER, 2005, p. 76f.

30 Cf. also in the following KUMAR, 1999, p. 160-169.

31 IBID., p. 168.

dernity. A globalized and capitalist vision has created – and still creates – spaces for consumption, business, service, ‘high’-culture and recreation, which can be showcased to national and international visitors and construct the nation’s capital as an epitome of the new India. In 2004, for instance, the Yamuna resettlement area mentioned above has been ‘cleared’ in order to ‘develop’ the area.³² Some of the large-scale restructurings completed until now are: the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation headquarters, the colossal Akṣardhām Temple, the Yamuna bio-diversity park and the games village for athletes and officials who were participating in the 2010 Commonwealth Games, for which the city, mirroring the developments before the 1982 Asian Games, delved into a massive urban renewal programme.³³

Although the liberalization of the Indian markets in the early 1990s has allowed for wide-ranging investments of the (multinational) private sector, the vision of a world-class city is not only a market-driven process, it is also pressed forward by both grassroots organizations and state institutions. Under the banner of democratic rights, environmentalism, urban development and beautification, middle-class lobbying associations increasingly petition for urban renewal, all too often with drastic consequences for inhabitants of informal settlements. These petitioners take advantage of new procedures introduced to legal redressal in India. In the so-called ‘Public Interest Litigations’ basically anyone, from powerful trade or industrial interest groups to residents’ associations to ‘concerned’ individual citizens, can use the legal apparatus to put forward claims about urban ‘problems’. The Public Interest Litigation is not a regular legal case, in which two parties have equal voice; rather it is a proactive investigation, in which courts constitute committees of specialists to present evidence which, however, is never assessed in cross-examination.³⁴ This process “brings together city officials, court commissions and amicus curiae on a democratically non-accountable platform to administratively and logistically work out solutions to the urban ‘problems’”.³⁵ The voices of the affected parties, those who will lose their dwellings, their belongings and their right to centrality, are lost in the legal apparatus.

Although the Public Interest Litigations clearly mark a paradigm shift in the practices of Indian state institutions, the courts surprisingly use the MPD-62 as

32 Cf. MASTER PLANS FOR DELHI, MPD-2021, p. 118.

33 Cf. BATRA/MEHRA, 2008, p. 404f.

34 Cf. IBID., p. 403, refer to Vandenhoe, 2000.

35 IBID., also in the following.

an “imaginary reference”³⁶ and ordered to demolish all ‘illegal’ housing structures and ‘polluting’ small industries. Sundaram comments:

“Egged on by sympathetic media and advocacy groups, courts appointed special committees spread over every aspect of civic life, causing terror and fear in the neighborhoods they visited. A phantom civic subject emerged in this very public legal discourse, identifiable middle-class, post-political, and projected as the injured legatee of the urban body.”³⁷

The latest of the Master Plans (DMP-2021) accentuates this post-political, and consumption-oriented activism of the model middle-class citizens. To upgrade the physical structure of Delhi, the plan proposes ‘user pays’ facilities and public-private partnership models for managing investments and calls for more community participation and decentralization.³⁸ The effects of the latest Master Plan are still unclear. With the globalized, post-political ideologies that are emerging currently, any centralized master planning appears superfluous. The state can do hardly more than provide the best possible legal and economic options for citizens and organizations to plan and construct ‘their own’ cities, according to their aspirations and needs. As it appears until now, the emphasis has been put on middle-class life modes and the multinational cooperate world; the general model, in theory, would however allow for *any* group to participate in the processes of city planning. It is possibly the cultural differences between the underprivileged and the powerful that are incommensurable and that have excluded the underprivileged from participation. In the next part, we will illustrate some aspects of these cultures of urban poverty as they are represented in modern Hindi literature, and we thereby provide one avenue for understanding and perhaps overcoming the discrepancies of participation in the planning and construction of Indian cities like Delhi.

4. The capital in Hindi-literature

In this part of the chapter we shall first pay a visit to the observations of the destruction of parts of Delhi in the time after the Mutiny as communicated in some letters of an Urdu and Persian writing poet. The section to follow is devoted

36 SUNDARAM, 2010, p. 247.

37 IBID., p. 248.

38 Cf. DMP-2021, p. 181.

to novels and short stories dealing with the life of the inhabitants of informal settlements.

4.1 Delhi after the Mutiny

The famous poet Ghalib (1797-1869) who spent many years of his life in Delhi, comments in his letters on the proceeding destruction of Shāhjahānābād after the Mutiny:

“Agha Baqir’s Imambara [...] is an ancient foundation of exalted fame. Who would not grieve at its destruction? [...] More than that, barracks for the British soldiers are to be built in the city, and in front of the Fort, where Lal Diggi is, there is to be a great area of open ground. It will take in the whole area right up to the Khas Bazaar [...]. Put it this way: from Ammu Jan’s Gate to the moat of the Fort, except for Lal Diggi and one or two wells, no trace of any building will remain. Today they have begun demolishing the houses of Jan Nisar Khan Chatta.”³⁹

Six months later he notes:

“All the buildings in Fil-Khana, and Falak Paira and around Lal Diggi have been pulled down. The fate of Bulaqi Begam’s Lane is still undecided. The military is for pulling it down, but the civil authorities want to preserve it.”⁴⁰

One year later he draws a picture of utter desolateness:

“[...] in all the wells in Lal Diggi the water has suddenly turned brackish. [...] I tell you without exaggeration that from the Jama Masjid to the Rajghat Gate is a barren wilderness, and if the bricks piled here and there were taken away it would be absolutely bare. [...] Now they have cleared a path for the railway from the Calcutta Gate to the Kabuli Gate. Panjabi Katra, Dhobi Wara, Ramji Ganj, Saadat Khan’s Katra, Jarnail ki Bibi ki Haveli... [and other localities] – you won’t find a trace of them. In short the city has become a desert, and now that the wells are gone and water is something rare and precious, it will

39 GHALIB, 1969, p. 213 (dated July 26, 1859). We want to thank Arnd Bruns M.A., Institute for Indology, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, for drawing our attention to this publication.

40 IBID. p. 225 (dated December 16, 1859).

be a desert like that of Karbala.⁴¹ [...] Delhi is no more a city, but a camp, a cantonment. No Fort, no city, no bazaars, no watercourses [...].⁴²

4.2 Post-independence Hindi-literature and urbanization

In her study on three novels of Bhisham Sahni, Ines Fornell outlines the development of the progressive literary movement in India which is held in high esteem. It was in the 1930s that the term '*pragativād*,' lit. 'progressivism,' was coined in the context of Hindi literature. Fornell emphasizes the fact that literates such as Premchand had taken up social issues of the poor already before the emergence of this movement. The first All India Progressive Writer's Conference took place in April 1936 in Lucknow. One of its prominent participants, though never member, was Premchand. In his keynote address which was published as an essay titled *Sāhitya kā uddeśya* (The objective of literature), he explained his ideas on matters of style, theme, (such as ordinary worker's and peasant's lives, and his conception of literature as criticism of life, '*jīvan kī ālocanā*.'

Mishra, in his study on modern Hindi fiction, acknowledges the influence of the prerevolutionary Russian author Anton Chekhov on the development of the Hindi short story and its authors,⁴³ while Knirsch observes the relevance of social and humanitarian issues in the development of the Hindi short stories after 1960 up to the end of the second millennium.⁴⁴ However, one should not forget that the majority of India's population is until today rural rather than urban,⁴⁵ a fact which is reflected in the phenomenon of regionalism in Indian literature.

The capital of Bhārat, India, happens to be situated in a Hindi-speaking region. Thus Delhi is the location of many novels and short stories written in this language. Following the phases of city planning in post-independence Delhi as outlined in the previous sections (3), the following part deals with literary works reflecting everyday lives of the city's less well-off inhabitants.

41 [Fn. 1]: "The place where Husain and his companions were martyred, after their access to water had been cut off."

42 IBID. p. 252 (dated January 11, 1861).

43 Cf. MISHRA, 1983, p. 2-3 and 26.

44 Cf. KNIRSCH, 2012, p. 58-99.

45 Cf. THE WORLD FACT BOOK. SOUTH ASIA. INDIA: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/in.html>, 07.05.2013.

4.2.1 Heading towards the capital

Young Yashpal became a revolutionary.⁴⁶ Born in 1903 in Firozpur, Panjāb, he graduated at Lahore. After trying to assassinate a leading British official in 1929 he was arrested in 1932. It was then that he devoted himself to writing. In 1938 he was released. During his life he published more than 50 books, mainly collections of short stories, novels, and essays. Yashpal died in 1976, as the recipient of that year's Sahitya Academy Award conferred to him for his Hindi-novel *Merī Terī Uskī Bāt*.

In the short story *Devī kī līlā, The game of the goddess*, Yashpal introduces his readers to the life of Devīlāl, a man originating from Jālandhar (Panjāb), the region the clerks working in the Accounting Department of New Delhi's Central Secretariat usually come from. Housing prices are exorbitantly high in Delhi. Thus he gave up the idea to find a room in Pahār Ganj and took a room for his wife and himself in a compound inhabited by people from his native region, situated in Śakti Nagar about six miles away from his place of employment. Having to spend 40 Rupees on monthly rent, he regrets paying another 19 Rupees on bus fares in order to get to work. Though he never envied the great *Sāhibs* driving along in their own cars, he dreams of joining the *Bābūs* (clerks) who ride home on their pushbikes. Selling her golden bangles, his wife makes her husband's dream of an own bicycle come true.

It could be interpreted as a clash of village life with city life that Devīlāl leaves his new bicycle standing at a bus stop, when unaware for a moment, chatting with a colleague and entering the bus that he used to catch until this day. After realizing a few moments later, he immediately gets down from the bus and heads back to the bus stop. Luckily he finds the cycle still there, takes it and goes to worship in the Devī's temple in order to thank the great Goddess for having spared him the loss of the valuable means of transportation, but ironically his new unlocked cycle gets stolen from the entrance.

46 Cf. also in the following, MEISIG, 2001, p.120-127; SAHITYA ACADEMY AWARDS. YASHPAL: http://indiapicks.com/Literature/Sahitya_Academy/Hindi/Hindi-1976.htm, 07.05.2013; THE HINDU. 07.05.2006: <http://www.hindu.com/lr/2006/05/07/stories/2006050700010200.htm>, 07.05.2013.

4.2.2 Accepting one's fate in silent rebellion: Basanti and Anaro

Basanti

Bhisham Sahni was born in 1915. In the times of disturbance that woke after gaining independence from the Raj, the famous Hindi author, originating from Rawalpindi (what was to become part of Pakistan in 1947), shifted with his family to India. He published his novel *Basanti* in 1980.

The story is set out between two instances of slum eviction. The protagonist is the young woman Basanti living in a *bastī*, in Delhi. Her father, the barber Chaudhri, belongs to a caste, onto which the leading Rājput members of the community look down as inferior. However, this time the imminent danger of eviction cannot be averted by a delegation of theirs. Clad into their traditional Rājasthāni clothes the men return empty handed from meeting an influential *Sāhib* who turns the group over to his deputy rather than listening to its cause himself.

In the introduction to his translation of Bhisham Sahni's *Basanti*, Jaidev elaborates:

“[...] even their modest basti in Delhi is never secure. Any day, it can be busted by a callous state apparatus which holds out to them nothing more than bogus promises. There is no going back home (the novelist doesn't waste even a line on spurious nostalgia of the countryside), but even in Delhi displacement returns inevitably, like seasons. A basti is built, only to be pulled down by the administration, another is built, that too is going to be demolished one day [...].”⁴⁷

Jaidev elucidates the capital's attitude towards its recently immigrated inhabitants:⁴⁸ “In its relentless urge for expansion, the city of Delhi sucks in the labour and lives of people whom it soon discards as dirt.” In this case the huts of the *bastī*, “near Ramesh Nagar remained intact even after that colony was ready. This happened because they did not touch it but were built upon an uninhabited mound in between two forking roads.”⁴⁹ Since its male inhabitants are masons and artisans, the place evolves to resemble a Rājasthāni town. The women have taken up relations with the neighbouring middle-class settlements doing house-

47 JAIDEV, 1997, p. xi.

48 Cf. IBID., p. x.

49 SAHNI, 1997, p. 6.

hold-scores in a communal framework which the translator refers to in a preceding note: “Hindi and Urdu words for which there are no equivalents in English have been retained as such. For example, *chauka-bartan* is not simply washing dishes or performing household scores, let alone handling the kitchen work.”⁵⁰ Though the settlement is “far from being a slum”,⁵¹ its lack regarding legality keeps up a state of uncertainty and insecurity that rests on its inhabitants.

Again Jaidev explains that things are not as plain as one might expect them to be:

“Within this overall frame where survival is posited as the lone virtue for the victims of an inequitable class system, the novelist introduces a variety of complex threads. For the *basti* is not a simple, homogenized class space. It is split from inside along caste and gender lines. What the administration and its *Sahibs*, with the help of law and police, do to the *basti*, the *basti Rajputs* do to those below them in the caste hierarchy, and in turn the latter do the same to their daughters and wives.”⁵²

Thus her father treats Basanti as a kind of commodity, marrying her off for an attractive sum to an old tailor – a marriage Basanti refuses not in open rebellion but rather she runs away from what was supposed to be her home.

Chance has it, that Basanti is saved from this marriage. Her father and the tailor had the date fixed spontaneously, yet at this very morning police and trucks arrive at the site in order to clear the *basti* that is meant to be torn down. Everybody grabs whatever household-goods the families are able to take along with them. Basanti’s father treats his wife as if she was a pack mule and he just bothers not waking up his young son whom he carries protectively in his own arms. Meanwhile some of the unemployed inhabitants of the *basti* are paid to lay hand on what used to be their own homes.

Regarding Basanti Jaidev remarks:

“Even before she is sixteen, she has seen enough of men, families, classes. [...] It is a homage to her resilience and natural vivacity that she can take in all these blasts of wisdom without shedding her spontaneous laughter, her delicate dreams, or her zest for living.”⁵³

50 JAIDEV, 1997, p. xvii.

51 SAHNI, 1997, p. 5.

52 JAIDEV, 1997, p. xi.

53 IBID.

Anaro

Mañjul Bhāgat (Manjul Bhagat) was born in 1936 in Meerut, but brought up in Delhi where she devoted herself to writing. She died in 1998. *Anaro* is a short Hindi novel that was published in 1977 and laid the foundation for Bhagat's fame as an awarded writer. It was translated into several languages; the author herself translated it into English.

Anaro is the tough mother of a girl and a boy. Her husband, Nandlal, a mechanic, had brought her from Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh, to Delhi at the age of 14. During his wife's first pregnancy, he had started a relationship with a mistress. He either lives on Anaro's costs or runs off and vanishes for months. Anaro scratches a living out of doing household scores at several middle-class homes situated at Greater Kailash and East of Kailash.

“Anaro was still ignorant of the mysteries of married life, when she conceived Ganji. That winter, all of them had to shift to Madangir. The Golden Bridge slum settlement was being demolished. Each hut was in shambles. They were all bundled on to a waiting truck and left standing on the bare grounds of Madangir. Nandlal was on one of his sprees. He had vanished days earlier. For a couple of days she had a covered cot, standing close to her head to shield her from the icy winds. Then she could bear it no longer. She collected torn bits of tarpaulin, straw, tin, wood and jute rags, and proceeded to build a hut. The neighbours lent a hand. Thereafter, she built and rebuilt her little hut into a stronger home, never asking her husband for help.”⁵⁴

Living in Madangir, she brings up her children alone. She managed to fix a concrete roof on her hut that does not ever leak even during the monsoon. Though illiterate, she holds a saving account. She yet ends up with almost unlimited obligations to all those households from which she borrowed money in order to meet her sense of duty of what is traditionally supposed to be taken care of by the bride's parents. Her life's aim is to see her daughter married decently and she readily even ruins her health to achieve this goal. She fulfils what should be a father's duty, making her husband return from Mumbai only for the sake of formality. She devotes herself to this task, striving to fulfil what she considers to be done to keep up pride and honour, ever willing to stick to caste rules. In doing so she transcends the framework of the role model of a traditional wife without ever reflecting on this point. At the end of the novel Nandlal acknowledges his

54 BHAGAT, 2001, p. 55.

wife's capabilities by assigning her an imaginary place of honour traditionally reserved to males:

“Listen! Listen to me, all of you gathered here. This day, I honour my wife, declaring my deep-felt admiration for her. She is indeed not my wife... but my elder brother. I am proud that she has so enhanced my prestige in the community.”⁵⁵

4.2.3 In times of disillusionment: Pollution

The author Gaurinath was born in 1972, holds an M.A. degree in Hindi and worked for several years as an Assistant Editor for the monthly magazine *Haris* in which the short story *Pradūṣaṇ* was published in 1998.⁵⁶ Its protagonist is Manoramā, a young woman born in a village and brought to Delhi by her husband Vinay.

The story begins with memories of her first encounter with Delhi. For a start the young couple lived in a small room in Wazirpur. Reaching there the place gave her an impression as if entering a mound of dirt and garbage, the acidic air had caused her coughing. As for that first home Manoramā remembers a horrible mixture of dust, dirt, saliva and slime with acid as soon as she set her foot in front of the door of their room, the stinking drainage and the factory noise added to the nuisance caused by a complete lack of facilities such like a toilet, a decent space for having a bath or washing clothes. Feeling ashamed to defecate openly in public, her husband had to accompany her in the darkness of early mornings or after the setting of the sun, to do so at the faeces besmeared banks of a nearby drain ditch. Adding to these difficulties Vinay worked far away from Wazirpur at a shop behind Old Delhi Railway Station near Chandni Chowk. In the following month they had shifted to Sīlampur where living conditions were perceptibly better and both of them could make use of the nearby public toilets. But in spite of the improvement of the outward living conditions, the mother of a now four-year-old daughter experiences another kind of pollution: Santosh, a far off relative of her husband's, tries to court her during the head of the household's absence. The main part of the short story deals with these temptations that Manoramā somehow manages to resist. Thereby she also resists the social

55 IBID., p. 62.

56 GAURINĀTH (GAURI NATH), p. 42: <http://in.linkedin.com/pub/gouri-nath/33/a82/72b,07.05.2013>.

‘pollution’ of urban poverty. The social organization of the urban settlement is far removed from what the inhabitants were used to from their villages.

5. Conclusion

In this contribution we have first outlined a post-colonial history of Delhi’s official management of urban poverty. We have identified three major trends in this management: an idealistic approach of the 1950s and 1960s, a hasty interventional phase of the 1970s and 1980s, and finally the contemporary neo-liberalist strategy. These phases represent India’s grapple with coming to terms with both its colonial past and its place in a globalized modernity, in which Delhi certainly takes a principal position. Urban poverty is somewhat orthogonal to these developments and the double standards that emerge from dealing with it are manifestations of Delhi’s paradoxical disposition. The literary accounts that we have presented show how individuals themselves deal with this situation; for instance when Anaro tries to reconcile her sense of duty with her disintegrating family structures, or when Manoramā for time being effectively resists Santosh’s courtship and thereby saves her family from splitting up. The role of strong women in these literary accounts is perhaps no coincidence. It appears as such Anaros, Basantis and Manoramās, are an integral element in keeping families and communities functioning; although their incredible efforts and their careful manoeuvres remain largely veiled behind the grand designs of official city planners, politicians and other ‘strong men.’ We hope our contribution alleviates such misrepresentations to a degree.

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