



Book Review

Shama Mitra Chenoy. (2023). *Delhi and Its Environs Before 1857: The Account of Ramji Das, Sarishtadar* (Trans. & Anno.). New Delhi: Primus Books. Pp. xviii+204. Price: ₹ 1295. ISBN: 9789358520217. Hardcover.

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Over decades, the Revolt of 1857 has been closely scrutinized and thoroughly examined from various angles by umpteen number of historians and history enthusiasts. In fact, the various perspectives shedding light on different facets of the 1857 uprising has only enriched the study of this period. With political authority shifting from the East India Company (EIC) to the British Crown in 1858, the Revolt of 1857 did indeed mark an important disjuncture in the history of modern India. While there are several diaries, travelogues and memoirs penned by the local population as well as by colonial officials and their family members, which chronicle the Revolt as it happened, records throwing light on the life of cities like, among others, Delhi and Lucknow, are not too many. Interestingly, the few works of this type belong primarily to the genre of historical fiction with Farhatullah Beg's *Delhi Ka Aakri Mushaira* (1845) being the most popular. The present book, Ramji Das's *Zikr-e-Umurat-e Am Zila-e Dehli* (henceforth the *Zikr*), translated by Shama Mitra Chenoy was originally written in Urdu in 1854. Authored barely three years before the Revolt of 1857, the text is unique—instead of studying Delhi and its vicinities through its people—it makes an attempt to delineate it through the religious and secular buildings and monuments of the city. Given that most of the structures described by Das were ruthlessly destroyed by the colonial state as retribution following the crushing of the Revolt, the *Zikr* assumes great importance as an archival source. Besides shedding important light on a bygone era, it provides important insights into the socio-cultural praxis associated with many of the Mughal as well non-Mughal structures of the 18th and mid-19th centuries.

Interest in the history of pre-colonial India was to an extent a by-product of the British colonial state's political interests. To govern its territories better, the East India Company (subsequently the British government) wanted its officials to collect all kinds of information pertaining to areas located in its territorial domain that included Delhi. The notion of power was deeply entrenched in this production of knowledge. The present text of Ramji Das should be specially read against this backdrop. Das, of course, was not the only one who wrote about Delhi. Between the 18th and the early 20th centuries, quite a few scholars of repute studied Delhi along with its various facets: examples such as Mirza Sangin Beg's *Sair-ul-Manazil* (1821), Saiyid Ahmed Khan's two volume *Asar-us-Sanadid* (1847 and 1854), and Bashiruddin Ahmad Khan's *Waqiat-e Dar-ul Hukumat-e Dehli* (1918-1919) are some works that focus almost entirely on Delhi, celebrating its spaces, structures, and people. Like his predecessors, Ramji Das, as Chenoy notes, focused primarily on the religious and non-religious structures located in and around Delhi, and he attempted to study the history of the region mainly through its monuments. To make his work more accessible, he moreover chose to write in Urdu, rather than Persian. And in this regard he followed in the footsteps of Sir Saiyid Ahmed Khan, who also wrote his *Asar-us-Sanadid* in Urdu. Ramji Das greatly admired Sir Saiyid Ahmed Khan and as a matter of fact even dedicated his work to the erudite scholar. Das, describing Khan in glorious terms, wrote (p. 51):

In the city of Delhi in colonial India the first accomplished historian, Saiyid Ahmad Khan, who on account of his social and communal familiarity and convictions, made a historic creation and alongside this service not only has written the first

history of Delhi *Asar-us-Sanadid* but has also made a wonderful beginning by writing the history of Delhi in Urdu language.

Shama Mitra Chenoy's work comprises of three parts. While the first part is the introduction, the second and third parts contain the translation of the text and the original text in Urdu. In a short but crisp introductory section, the author discusses the historical importance of Das's work at some length. Though the *Zikr*, much like its contemporaries, studied the structures of Delhi in detail, it was unique in that in addition to the more well-known areas of the region, it took into account "even the remote areas of Delhi that were completely rural" (p. xv). Through a comprehensive study of such areas, Das introduced his readers to 'several structures and cultures that were associated with these spaces about which there was no documentation except perhaps in revenue records (p. xv). The author stresses on the fact that this sort of thorough study of structures of Delhi is absent in almost the works written on Delhi between the 19th and 20th centuries and before.

Rather than merely collating the names of the more popular structures and narrating albeit briefly, the anecdotes associated with them—a model followed by Mirza Sangin Beg in *Sair-ul-Manazil*—Das's text makes an attempt to study the structures of Delhi in a historical context. Moreover, treating structures as palimpsests, the *Zikr* tries to study them in their present context. Das, thus, brings the structures alive. In this regard, his descriptions of *sarais*, *dargahs* and temples, to name a few, are quite revealing. At these places he encountered the modern habitations of *zamindars*, policemen, and the common people. In addition to this, he became familiarised with the religious ceremonies of religious institutions and the fiscal restrictions imposed on such places by the colonial government. Das also highlights the creation of new civic amenities and the repair work undertaken for older buildings at such religious and non-religious sites. Again, being a thinker, the author provides a long-term and coherent view of Delhi and its development. His work sheds important light on the urbanization process witnessed by colonial Delhi as well as the growth of urban centres of the region. Moreover, from his work it is clear that Das possessed intricate knowledge about the topographical contours of Delhi's geographical regions. It was, perhaps, due to this, as Chenoy notes, that he was able to appreciate "the placement of various dams and catchment areas" (p. xvi). In fact, he was the only writer in the 18th and the 20th centuries who understood the effects that rivers like the Sahibi river (Sabi river) had while enroute the Jamuna river in Delhi. In this regard, *Zikr-e-Umrat-e Am Zila-e Dehli* is, indeed, a treasure trove especially as far as the historical reconstruction of Delhi is concerned. Das, by providing a thorough glossary for those terms, especially in dialects, that appeared in revenue records provides excellent guidance to his readers through his work.

Ramji Das was associated with the British colonial government as a Deputy *Sarishtadar* or a record keeper and for his work, appeared regularly in the office of the Collectorate. It may be mentioned here that as far as locals were concerned, there was a glass ceiling in the bureaucratic order of the British Indian government with the post of a *sarishtadar* being the highest administrative position that an Indian could aspire to. Being a Deputy *Sarishtadar* allowed Das to observe Delhi, its architecture, its people as well as its socio-economic developments from close quarters. Apart from administering Delhi and collecting revenue from the people of the city, the Department of the Collectorate was also responsible for renovating old structures and constructing new ones. Given his association with this department, Das regularly visited many of the areas where such structures were located. In addition to this, being a resident of Delhi, he was quite familiar with Delhi's topography. It was perhaps, because of this familiarity that he realized the importance of structures located in areas beyond the boundaries of the city and made them a part of his discussions.

Chenoy notes in the introductory section that though Ramji Das was a “meticulous officer, a keen observer, exceptionally well versed with administrative details and modifications carried out by the British government in the city and possessed an enviable knowledge about Delhi” (p. 17), he was not adept at describing structures. However, the support that he received from his superior, Colonel George William Hamilton, the Chief of the Revenue Department in Delhi, encouraged Das to take up this project. Moreover, the presence of a text like *Asar-us-Sanadid* by Saiyid Ahmed Khan, also helped Ramji Das to write the *Zikr*. It is not surprising that, given the extent to which Khan’s work influenced Das, his years in the Revenue Department taught him to write with brevity. This tendency continued after he retired from the department and began writing the *Zikr*, which provides clear, brief, and crisp descriptions of structures.

Ramji Das followed Sir Saiyid Ahmed Khan framework with respect to sites and their descriptions. This becomes evident from his account of Mehrauli. Like Khan, Das delineates the continuing importance of the place in contemporary society. Again since he was posted in Mehrauli, he had an in-depth knowledge of the area and its environs. His account of frequent visits of the ‘Badshah of Delhi’ and his family in Mehrauli are quite fascinating, as he mentions sites like *Dargah Qutb Mian* and the *Hauz-e Shamsi* that functioned as important monsoon retreats for the royal entourage. Das also mentions the popularity of festivals like *Sair-e-Gul Farroshan*, annually organized in Mehrauli. While facets associated with this festival, like the *juloos* and the *chahariyan mela* were organized primarily in the ‘core’ area of Mehrauli, structures on Mehrauli’s outskirts were not part of the festivities. A case in point is the Jog Maya Temple. That structures like these were never part of the celebrations held in this area is attested to by other contemporary works such as *Asar-us Sanadid*. From Das’s work it becomes clear that after Shahjahanabad, it was Mehrauli that witnessed activities in the late Mughal and early colonial periods. In this respect, Mehrauli enjoyed a distinct status compared to other contemporary sites like Bawana and Palam.

Ramji Das’s *Zikr* is an important historical source providing readers with critical insights into other socio-economic, political, and religious developments that took place in Delhi between the 18th and the early 19th centuries. In addition to discussing extensive renovation works which were undertaken by the East India Company throughout the length and breadth of Delhi, Das also wrote about the migration of various communities into Delhi during the 18th and the early 19th centuries. In this sense, the *Zikr* is also a social history of Delhi. A reading of the text allows us to realize that the East India Company went out of its way to provide water to Delhi’s population, with a major portion of the text shedding light on the numerous canals, wells, and dams in the region that were constructed and renovated by the British administration. The work also alludes to how, in order to facilitate smooth movement and communication, the Delhi administration initiated several infrastructural projects. Das’s exceptional knowledge of the old and new administrative divisions of Delhi ranging from Akbar’s time in 1523 to the year when the British colonial government changed the existing administrative divisions, allowed him to discuss at length the contemporary spatial divisions and nomenclature of each of them. Further, it is quite evident from the *Zikr* that Ramji Das was influenced by the British colonial government. His in-depth discussions about the prevailing system of revenue collection in Delhi bears testimony to this, with the *Zikr* peppered with anecdotes. A majority of the anecdotes are related to one or the other structures, and significantly, while narrating anecdotes, Das does not restrict himself to the late Mughal and early colonial periods. As a matter of fact, there are several stories in the text that pertain to the pre Mughal period as well, especially the Tughlaq era. Anecdotes relating to construction works undertaken during the reign of Firuz Shah Tughlaq are in fact quite fascinating. Similarly, bits of information such as the transfer of the Siri fort by Muhammed Tughlaq to the successors of the Abbasi Caliph (following which Delhi was considered a *Qubba* or sanctuary of Islam), or the degeneration of the Tughlaqabad fort (a refuge of Gujjars or pastoralists, robbers, cotton carders, as well as

petty criminals), are quite unorthodox and distinct. These little known pieces of information are scattered throughout the *Zikr* making the text all the more engaging.

It must however be said that the *Zikr* has not come down to us in an unabridged form. There are several pages that are missing from the text leading to gaps in Das's ideas and writings. So while he begins the work by describing Inderpat and the beginnings of Delhi, and subsequently moves to writing about Qila Shahjahani, there is a big gap in the chronology. The developments in the centuries between the establishment of Inderpat (Indraprastha) and Qila Shahjahani (Shahjahanabad) are completely missing from the text. Significantly, even though, Chenoy notes, Ramji Das was well-versed with multiple almanacs including Hijri, *Bikramjit Sambat*, *Fasli* and Gregorian calendars, he, as evident from the text, confused calculations pertaining to the dates of construction of various structures and establishment of areas. To cite an instance, Qila-e Mu'alla or Red Fort was built in the 17th century by Mughal Emperor Shahjahan; however, according to Das its construction predated the Emperor. This calculation is obviously off the mark. Similarly, Das confuses the dates of construction of the Purana Qila and Qila Rai Pithora. Even though a treasure trove, Ramji Das's *Zikr* is not bereft of flaws. He lacked clarity about various places and their names, for instance, using names Firuzabad, Kotla Gadai (beggar's or mendicant's fort), and Kotla Firuz Shah interchangeably. Significantly, Kotla Gadai, according to extant sources had never been part of any other contemporary records. Similarly, many structures built by Alauddin Khalji had earlier been attributed to Jalaluddin Khalji and that too with incongruous dates. Surprisingly, despite some areas on the eastern side of Jamuna being part of Delhi's environs, Das does not write anything about them.

Shama Mitra Chenoy's *Delhi and Its Environs Before 1857* makes for an exciting and engaging read. Having previously translated Mirza Sangin Beg's *Sair-ul-Manazil*, Chenoy is able to highlight the salient features of Ramji Das's work and at the same time demonstrate, rather succinctly, the academic importance of the *Zikr* vis à vis *Asar-us Sanadid* and *Sair-ul-Manazil*. Of course, given the gaps and incongruity in the text, Das is in no way as thorough and precise as Mirza Sangin Beg and Sir Saiyid Ahmed Khan. Besides providing the translation of the text, along with the original Urdu version, Chenoy in an insightful introductory section, interestingly examines terms such as *Quwwat-ul Islam* and *qaum*. Terms like these were used in a completely different sense in Das's work, bereft of any religious connotations. It is only in the post-independence era that these terms have been misconstrued. Written in easy to understand language, Chenoy has tried her best to adhere as closely as possible to the original Urdu text. And indeed she has done a commendable job. Given the expansive view of Chenoy's book and the fascinating glimpse of a lost Delhi which it provides, *Delhi and Its Environs Before 1857* will be of interest to scholars and students of history and also to those unfamiliar with the historian's craft!