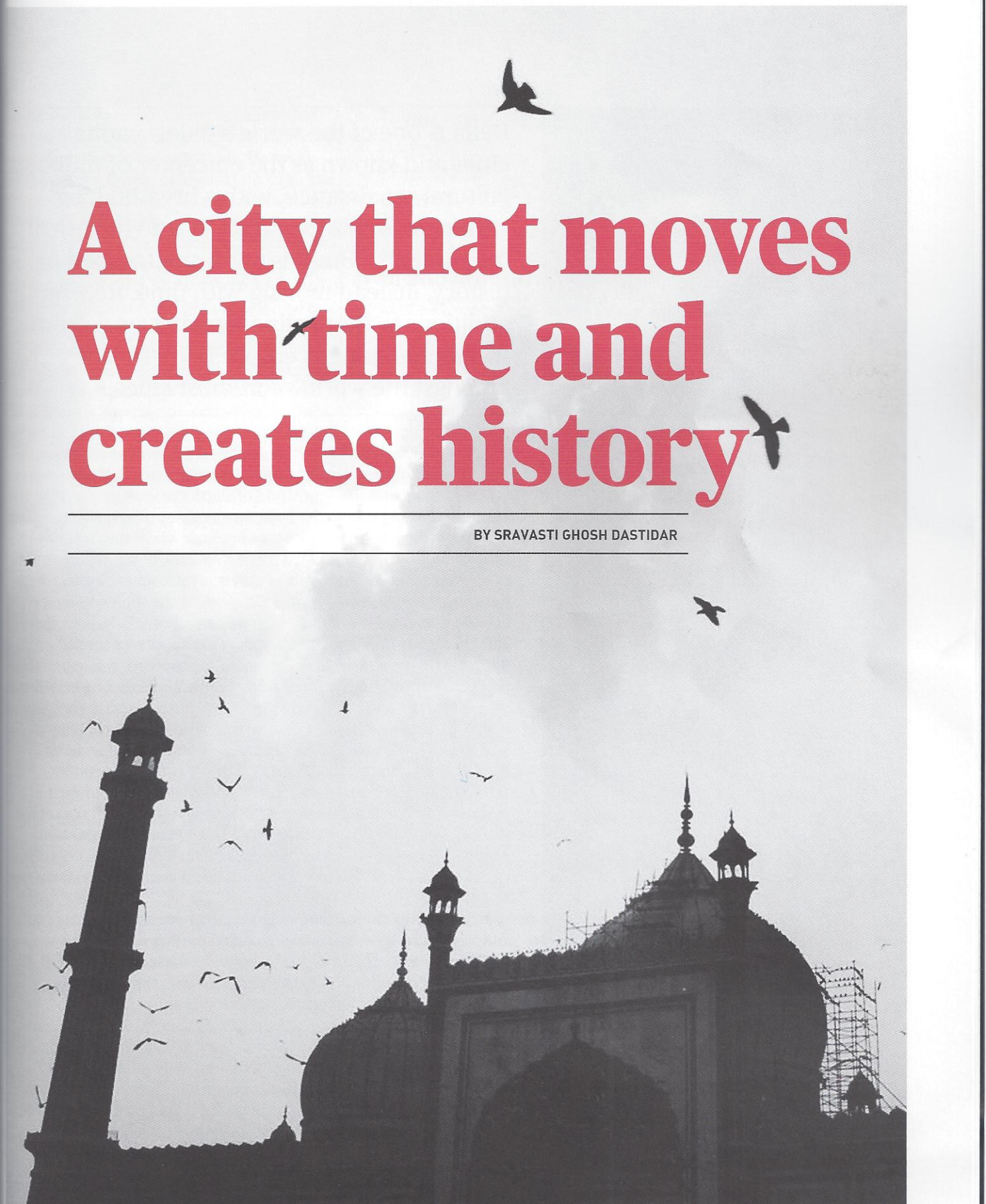
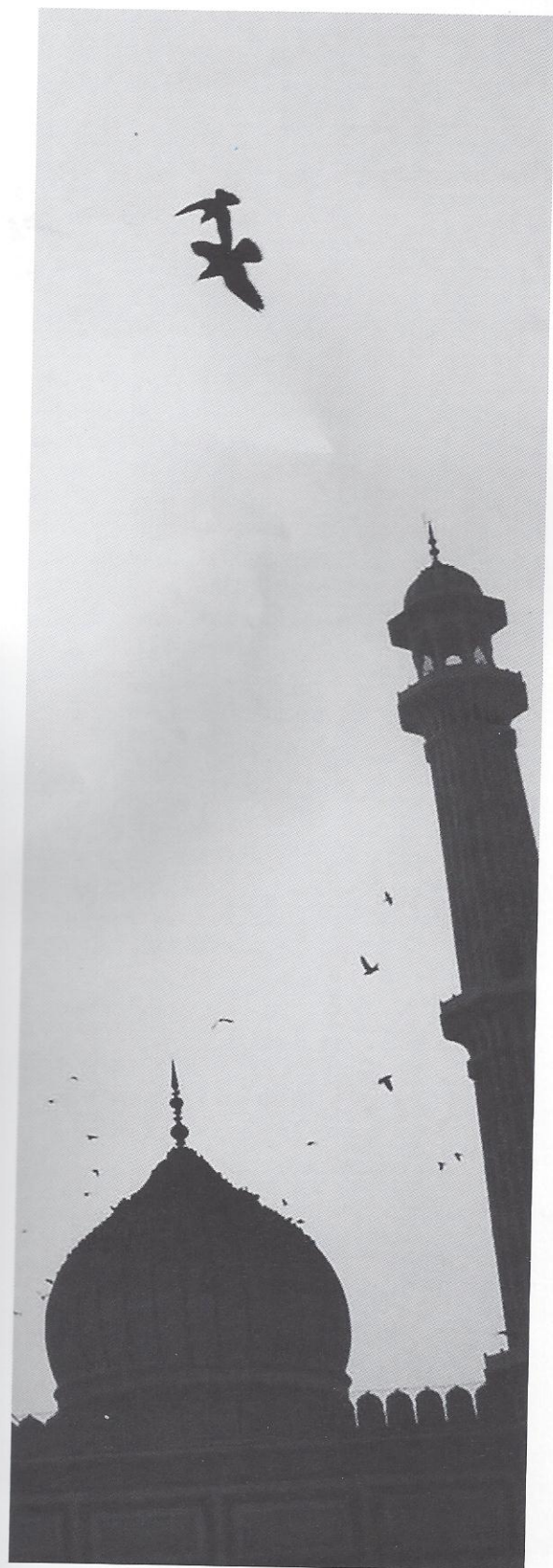


Life

A city that moves with time and creates history

BY SRAVASTI GHOSH DASTIDAR





Delhi is one of the world's oldest capital cities and known as the epicenter of Indian cultural renaissance, with a breathtaking variety of architectural styles and historical monuments. But it is not a city trapped in history, instead moving with time. Recent additions to the skyline, moving away from traditional designs ensure Delhi's place amongst the world's foremost cities.

As I watch the Hindi film 'Madras Café', in a puny cinema in Colpetty, my mind roams the larger world of politics and countries - the world of elections, strategies and the dangers courted by politicians to wrest power. Power, which will propel them to the coveted thrones, from where they will rule their constituencies, their states, their countries, or maybe the world.

The film takes me to the seat of power of my country, India, where the general elections are just months away - to the stupendous city of Delhi. Inhabited continually from the 6th century B.C., how many cities in the world can boast of being the capital city for myriad dynasties, rulers and parties? How many metropolises can match the number of times Delhi has undergone captures, plundering and been rebuilt over the centuries? It has even been a part of mythology, a part of one of the most intriguing epics of the world - the Mahabharata.

Known as Indraprastha, the legendary capital of the Pandavas Delhi has, time and again, reinvented herself as the major political, cultural and commercial capital of India, especially during the medieval period. Different historical periods had different names for this city - Indraprastha, Hastinapur, Lal Kot, Qila Rai Pithora, Dilli Sultanate, Shahjahanabad and Lutyens's Delhi. It was the link between Central Asia, the northwest and the rest of the country but not the hot seat of power till the Muslim rule started.

Its metropolitan area comprises a number of cities including Old and New Delhi, for which it is often called the City of cities. It has been the epicenter of the Indian cultural renaissance, resulting in the fusion of Indo-Muslim cultures evident to date in the architectural remains, arts, music, literature, religion and clothing.

Though Old Delhi had been the capital for the Muslim rulers, the British preferred to rule from Calcutta (now Kolkata) till King George V founded New Delhi in 1911. Lord Irwin inaugurated it as the new capital in 1931. The famous British architects, Sir Edwin Lutyens and Sir Herbert Baker, designed New Delhi. After independence, the 1982 Asian Games acted as an important catalyst in the makeover of the city in its current avatar.

I have seen New Delhi developing rapidly since my first visit in 1991. Being the capital city of an emerging economy has also helped

in its transformation, more than any other city in India. Every visit brings new sights and sounds to the senses, new roads, flyovers, expressways, hotels, malls and buildings. The Metro or the underground rail service being the latest addition since the Commonwealth Games held in 2010. International games and conferences do play a significant role in the revamping of cities, all over the world, don't they? Development and beautification take place at jet speed during these times.

What have, however, remained constant are the historical monuments, in and around the city, as witnesses of Time and its games.

If there is anything that draws me to Delhi, apart from the delectable Punjabi and Mughal cuisines, is its history and architecture. A story - so intrinsically intertwined with the history of the country. The Delhi chronicle dates back to the second millennium BC. It was a city of cities even in those days, as remains of eight major cities have been excavated in Delhi.

Wandering through Delhi's streets and alleys, I remember lines from the 18th century Urdu poet Mir Taqi Mir - 'Koochey nahin dilli ke, auraaq-e-musaw-wir hain / Jo shakl nazar aayi, tasveer nazar aayi. (These are

What have, however, remained constant are the historical monuments, in and around the city, as witnesses of Time and its games.

not Delhi by-lanes, these are artist's canvas / Every sight I see looks like a painting)

Modernity has robbed Delhi of many of its painting-like streets, yet I chance upon architectural jewels, neglected by popular travel journals informing about the treasure chest that is Delhi. There are ancient ruins in almost every corner.

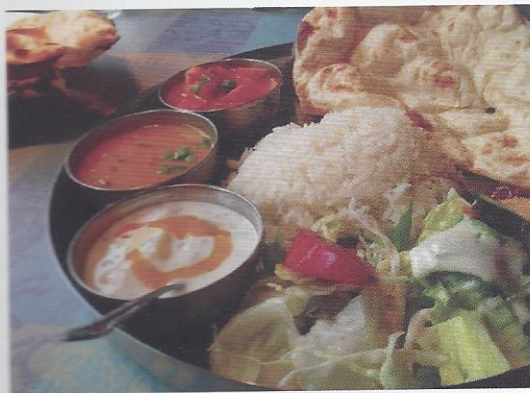
I stroll into an inconspicuous lane off Haileys Road and find one such gem, right in the heart of the political centre of Delhi. It is an incredibly structured step well - 60m long and 15m wide with 103 steps and four levels, three of which are visible. The fourth level is usually submerged in water. Each level is lined with arched niches on both sides, which served as cool retreats during the scorching summers. Now, they are inhabited by pigeons and frequented by lovers. It is called Agrasen or Ugrasen ki Baoli (Ugrasen's step well) and might have been built by a legendary king Agrasen, during the Mahabharata period and rebuilt in the 14th century by one of his descendants of the Agrawal community. Though constructed by a Hindu family, it has a rare Tughlaqi architecture and there is also an unused mosque in the premises.

I also find remnants of the bygone eras in the Lodhi Gardens, the posh Delhi Golf Club and the Hauz Khas (the Royal Tank). The Hauz Khas has a water tank or lake, a mosque and a tomb belonging to Alauddin Khilji's reign. It has the Hauz Khas village which houses boutiques of well-known fashion designers, restaurants, bars, pubs and cafes.

When I venture into the busiest and oldest market in Old Delhi, Chandni Chowk (literally moonlit square or market) housing approximately 2,500 shops, I am struck by the colours of history seeping through the walls of the buildings. Built during Shah Jahan's rule, the Chowk stands at the crossroad of cultures where tradition and modernity jostle with the multitudes that throng the market.

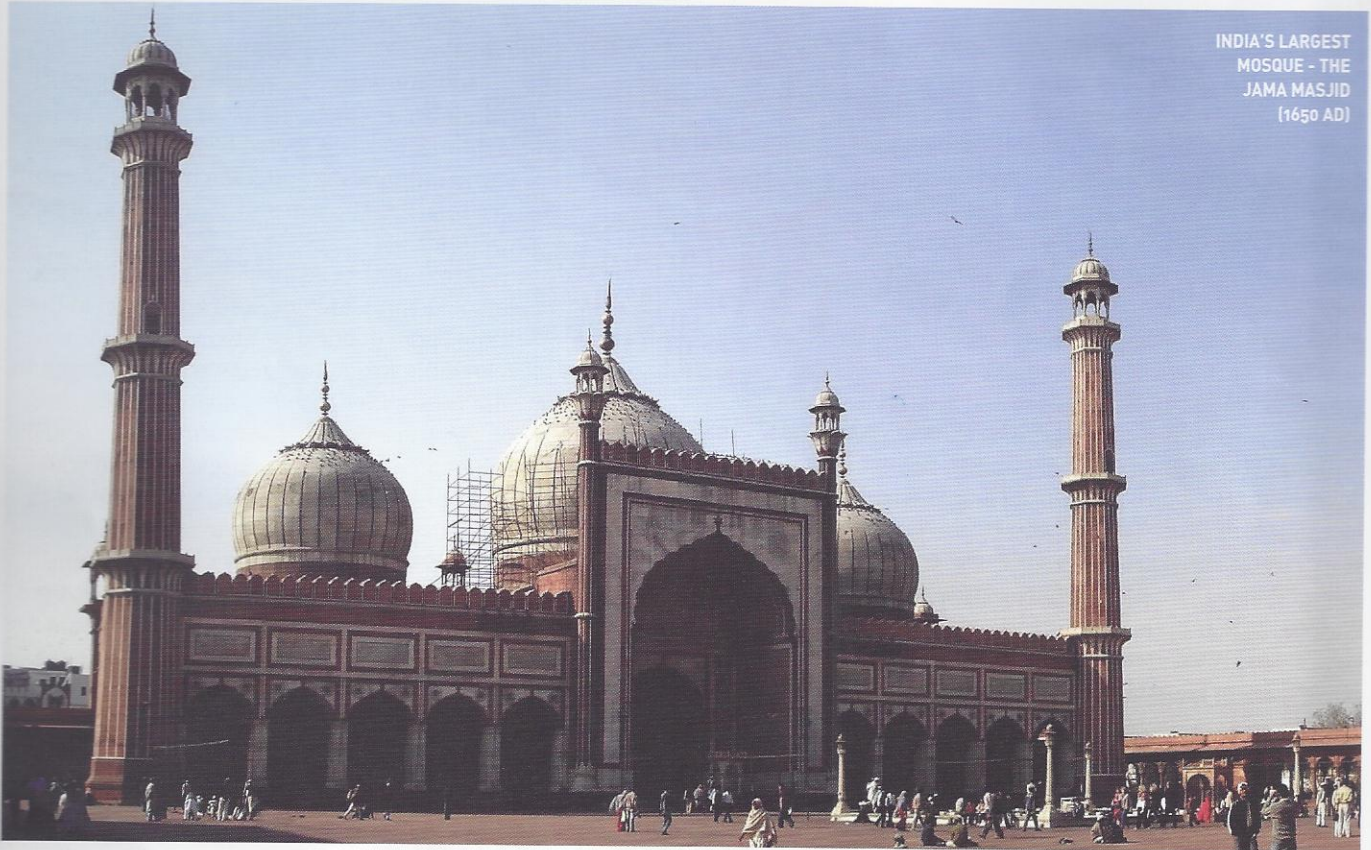
India's largest mosque - the Jama Masjid (1650 AD.), the Lahori Darwaza or the Lahore Gate and the Hazrat Nizamuddin Dargah where mesmerizing qawali is performed every Thursday evening, are dominating features of this congested bazaar.

Along with mosques and dargahs in Chandni Chowk, I discover the Sri Digambar Jain Lal



DELECTABLE PUNJABI AND MUGHAL CUISINES ARE AMONG DELHI ATTRACTIONS ALONG WITH ARCHITECTURE; REMNANTS OF A BYGONE ERA - THE HAUZ KHAS (ROYAL TANK) WHICH A WATER TANK, MOSQUE AND A TOMB





INDIA'S LARGEST
MOSQUE - THE
JAMA MAS JID
(1650 AD)

Temple (1656 AD), the Hindu Gauri Shankar Temple (1761 AD), Sikh Gurudwara Sish Ganj Sahib (1783 AD) and the Central Baptist Church (1814 AD). What an amazing amalgamation of architecture and religions!

What could have brought about this vast array of architectural splendours, spanning over centuries?

Ruled by the Hindu Tomar Rajputs and Chauhan Rajputs 736 to 1192 A.D, Delhi was won over by Mohammad Ghorī, the harbinger of Muslim rule in India. After the Ghoris, the Slave Dynasty under Qutub-ud-din Aibak took over. Then on, commenced Delhi's march towards prominence. It retained the status of the capital city for subsequent dynasties of the Khiljis, Tughlaqs, Lodhis, Suris, and the Mughals. While the later Mughals were seated on the throne of Delhi, the British ruled India from Calcutta (1757-1911). Delhi won the favour of the British, post-1911.

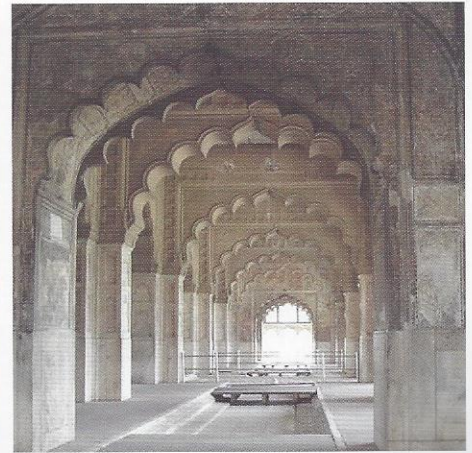
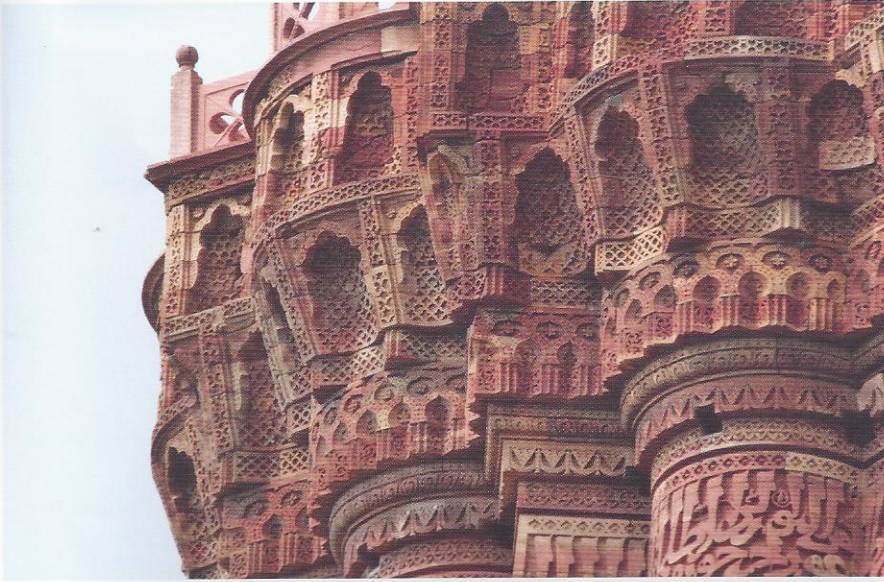
Independence, in 1947, led to the rule of political parties and saw a different face of elected dynastic rule. The Indian National

As the faces of rulers changed, so did the styles of design and architecture. Each ruler had his trademark technique of building, which is quite fascinating.

Congress, Janata Party, Bharatiya Janata Party have occupied the 'throne' during different phases. Time and tide for single-party rule have turned and since 1999, no single party has won the majority, thereby leading to coalition governments.

As the faces of rulers changed, so did the styles of design and architecture. Each ruler had his trademark technique of building, which is quite fascinating. Each ruler wanted to put his seal of authority on this city, for posterity. The best way to do it was by building memorials. It is also interesting to note that many of the Muslim architectural sites were originally monuments built by the Hindu rulers but gained fame under Muslim rule.

Standing tall among the monuments of the pre-Mughal era, is the red sandstone and marble structure of the Qutb Minar built by the Slave Dynasty, on the ruins of Lal Kot Fort of the Tomars. It is the world's tallest freestanding brick monument. It is a pleasure to be within the premises during



JAMALI KAMALI MOSQUE (ABOVE) AND THE RED SANDSTONE AND MARBLE STRUCTURE OF THE QUTB MINAR BUILT BY THE SLAVE DYNASTY (LEFT)

sunset, with flocks of parrots resting on the niches and carvings of the monument and the ruins around it, before retiring for the day.

The construction of this victory tower marked the end of Hindu kingdoms in North India and the beginning of Muslim rule. The Qutb complex initially had twenty-seven Hindu and Jain temples, which were destroyed, and the material was used to build the minar. Qutubuddin Aibak and Iltutmish, Firoz Shah Tughlaq, Allauddin Khilji and even the British have added to this complex, which remains surrounded by the Jain temple ruins.

Tughlaquabad, Firoz Shah Kotla, Humayun's Tomb, Safdarjung's Tomb, and the Lodhi Gardens - all belong to the golden age of Islamic architecture in India.

The Mehrauli Archeological Park is an honest attempt to preserve these invaluable structures. It consists of over 100 historically important monuments under its wide umbrella. Alauddin Khilji's Tomb, Tomb of Quli Khan, the Jamali Kamali Mosque, the Tomb of Balban and Rajan ki Baoli are some of them.

Although the 17th century Red Fort or Lal Qila (Old Delhi) is more famous, the Old Fort or Purana Qila (New Delhi), situated on the banks of the river Yamuna, is the oldest known structure in the city. Arguably, the Pandavas constructed it. It later became Humayun's capital but was wrested from him by Sher Shah Suri. Made of red and buff sandstone, the Purana Qila is an outstanding model of secular architecture with seam-

Although the 17th century Red Fort or Lal Qila (Old Delhi) is more famous, the Old Fort or Purana Qila (New Delhi), situated on the banks of the river Yamuna, is the oldest known structure in the city.

less blend of Rajasthani and Lodhi styles. The mausoleums are octagonal in plan and have verandahs around them, surmounted by huge domes. The verandahs have three smaller domes on each side. Legend goes that the fort was unlucky for its occupants as Humayun, Sher Shah Suri and Hemu had very short stints when they ruled from the fort.

Akbar shunned Purana Qila and Shah Jahan built the octagonal Red Fort with red sandstone, instead. Every year, the current head of the ruling party, our Prime Minister, hoists our national flag from the Red Fort, on Independence Day. The Lal Qila is a synthesis of Persian, European and Indian art forms that was known as the Shahajahani style, an offshoot of the Mughal style.

Mughal architecture is an amalgamation of Islamic, Persian, Turkish, Byzantine and Indian architecture. Few of the buildings erected by Babur, the founder of the Mughal Dynasty, have survived. Akbar's reign witnessed a vigorous growth in the construction of buildings. However, apart from Humayun's Tomb, most of the monuments of Akbar's era were in Agra. Mughal architecture reached its zenith during Shah Jahan's reign and started its decline from Aurangzeb's rule.

This style is broadly characterized by the pre-dominant use of 'Iwans' or vaulted space enclosed by three walls and an opening, one or multiple domes, arches, calligraphy, gardens, fountain and pools - all laid out in perfect symmetry. Sometimes, the buildings had equal numbers of minarets, arches and pillars. The pools and gardens were, often,

designed in a similar style, creating a mirror-like effect.

Hindu architectural influence can be seen in the carvings and decorations on the structures. Motifs of flowers were commonly used in Hinduism. So, the flower-inspired inlaid decorations and minarets that look like stalks of flowers were definitely the result of Indian influence. The grooves in the arches signify influence directly taken from older structures in India as opposed to bump-free curves of the Persian style.

If Mughal architecture had borrowed elements from the Hindu designs and if many of the Islamic structures were built on ruins of Hindu monuments, then there must be some brilliant specimens of Hindu engineering, too.

The rust and corrosion-resistant Iron Pillar, in the Qutub complex, is an exquisite example of scientific craftsmanship. It belongs to the Hindu Gupta Dynasty (320 - 540 AD) and may have been originally located elsewhere. The red terracotta Jantar Mantar, built by Maharaja Jai Singh of Jaipur in 1724, is an observatory consisting of 13 architectural astronomy instruments dominated by a huge sundial. The Gurudwara Bangla Sahib with its gold onion domes and large water tank was built on the site where the eighth Sikh Guru Harkishen Dev had stayed in 1664.

The British were not far behind in stamping their style on the soil of Delhi. They planned and established an entirely new city, that of New Delhi. It was designed to be a symbol of British power and supremacy, and therefore, constructed in the British Classical or Palladian style, fused with elements from other indigenous sources.

New Delhi is structured around two ceremonial promenades called the Rajpath (the King's Way) and the Janpath (the People's Path). The Rajpath is similar to the Champs-Élysées in Paris. This stately boulevard lined by lawns, canals and trees, flanked by the North and South Blocks of the New Secretariat, leads to the highlight of English architecture - the Rashtrapati Bhavan or the President's House which has 340 rooms. The Mughal Gardens in the Rashtrapati Bhavan is a visual treat of Mughal and English landscaping styles and is open to the public in February and March.

If Mughal architecture had borrowed elements from the Hindu designs and if many of the Islamic structures were built on ruins of Hindu monuments, then there must be some brilliant specimens of Hindu engineering, too

The India Gate (inspired by the French Arc de Triomphe) - a sandstone memorial in honour of the Indian soldiers killed in World War I, the Teen Murti Bhavan - where our first Prime Minister Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru resided, Hotel Imperial - where Pt. Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi, Jinnah, and Lord Mountbatten met to discuss the partition of India and the birth of Pakistan, Connaught Place - the commercial centre, and the cream and red sandstone circular structure of the Parliament House or Lok Sabha, are a few of the buildings belonging to the Colonial Raj. The Lok Sabha is also the House of Power from where our elected politicians debate on the country's policies, not always amicably.

Post-independence Delhi has seen the construction of the Supreme Court, the National Museum, Bahai Lotus Temple, Chanakyapuri or the diplomatic enclave, the institutional buildings like the Krishi Bhavan, Udyog Bhavan and the State Houses. These were built with rough-hewn stone, brick and plasters, keeping in mind the durability, cost and ease of maintenance, yet the designs are in step with the traditional Indian motifs and the current modernist theories of form and function.

The stone, steel and mirror structural buildings like the Vikas Minar, the Pragati Maidan, the National Crafts Museum, the LIC building, etc., designed by new-age architects like Charles Correa and Tor Russell, are more in line with Ayn Rand's Howard Roark style. The recent additions, to the Delhi skyline, have steadily moved away from traditional designs. These and the Metro Railway have ensured Delhi's place amongst the foremost cities of the world. It is not a city which is trapped in history. On the contrary, it is a city, which moves with time and creates history.

It is difficult to isolate the buildings of Delhi from its rulers. It is more difficult to separate rulers from power and their thirst for more power. In the bid to show authority, some rulers build monuments (and nations), some destroy, and some rebuild on destruction. I wonder who will be in power next; and what he or she will build - some memorial buildings and statues and/or a balanced, humanitarian and corruption-free nation? ■