

Words and sights: What do Delhi's present landscapes hold for its future?

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File photo of construction workers walking past a hoarding featuring India's new Parliament building outside its construction site in New Delhi. | Adnan Abidi/ Reuters

“Main na khush-o-bezar hun mar-mar ki silon se,
mere liye mitti ka haram aur bana do”
[I am sick and tired of marble arches,
Build a sanctum of clay just for me]

— *Allama Iqbal, translation Shad Naved*

In a Russian folktale I read, there was a monster who, when he saw a hut, destroyed it, when he saw a mountain, smashed it. He went after everything – roads, forests, rivers, people, memories, books and graves. His insatiable desire to destroy kept giving it more power, altering his form and also that of the world around him. He himself became a patchwork of destructions, stamped across his ever-growing body, like the paper Ravana's built in Delhi during Dussehra. The monster became nothing but a whole without parts, a man without qualities, looming over the horizon of the land like shapeless clay and one day falling to pieces and dust.

Today, a similar monster looms, repeating its face across every billboard, every newspaper and every aspect of our psyches, tempering Delhi's permanent horizon. Resurrected on the scaffolding of Hindutva, its appetite for destruction spans eating buildings, histories, lands, communities and forms of the nation state. It also feeds on the minds of people, on

democracy, on human rights, on livelihoods and citizenship, making itself stronger and stronger as it goes about its destructions of the present, in the process grafting for the city and the nation an absolute and closed future.

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Cities are set in pasts that constantly create their presents. Sunil Kumar's book *The Present in Delhi's Pasts* (2017) points to both monumental and ordinary architectures and built environments of the city, which represent not only different eras, kingdoms and villages but also the fate of the capital city intertwined with the fate of the nation.

From hidden shrines in forests and Sultanate and Mughal architecture to the neocolonial modernist monumentality of Nehru, Delhi's present is today set within many pasts – pasts that provide a sense of everyday belonging, mnemonic markers of the self, both concrete and crumbling in their manifoldness.

These pasts also are recast in the contemporary as both ideological and political exercises that seep into the destructions of the everyday. Destructions materialise with sudden and overnight removals of buildings and public spaces, with world-class metro stations that eat into street corners that were chai shops, playgrounds or cruising spaces, and with “authentic” restorations that recast an ordinary public park-like Sundar Nursery into an imagined Mughal garden that is amenable to serve as a global site of consumption.

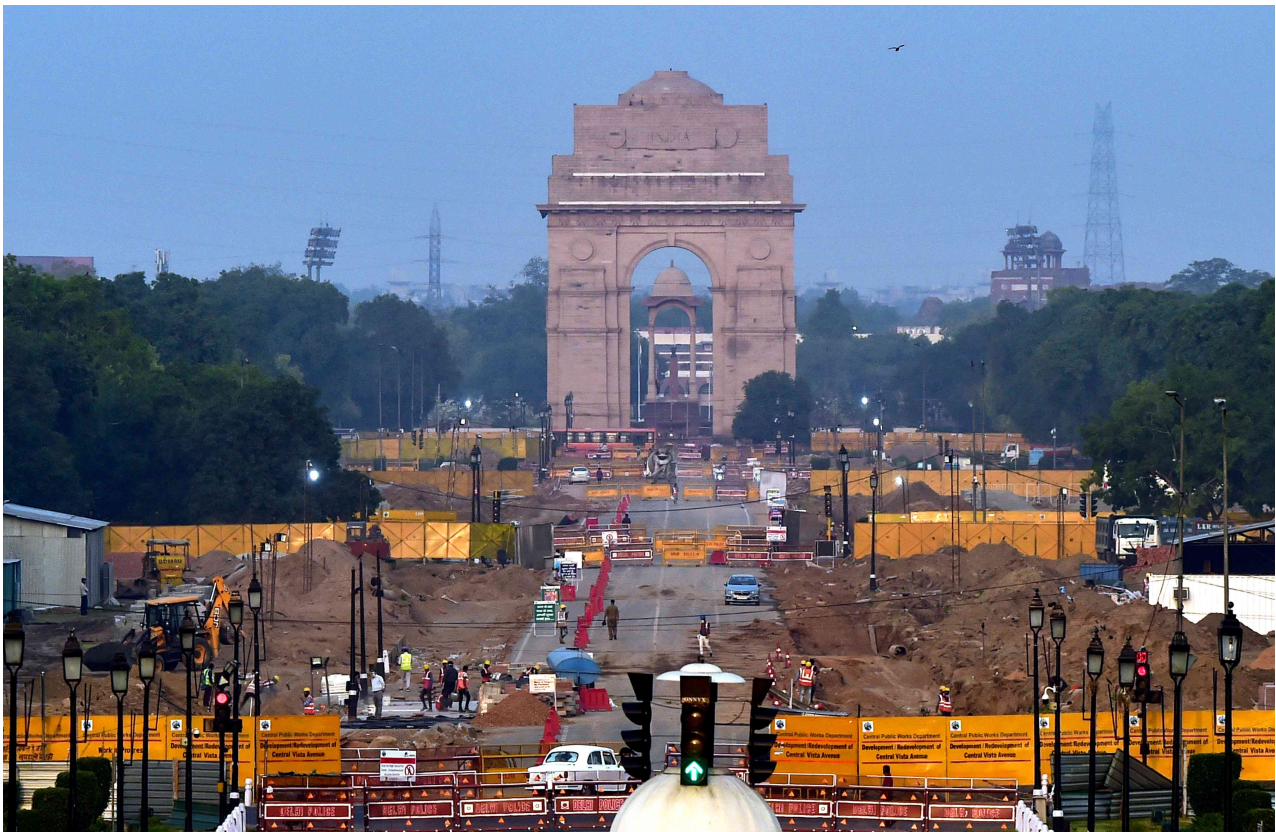
Different parts of the city hold different meanings for those who come to live in it. The footpath to a bus stop in East Delhi, the view of Purana Qila from a “mudrika”, the first ice cream at India Gate, a market, a park, a housing colony, a route or a stop accumulate to make the city for us and in strange and invisible ways also make us.

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Yet, we continue to exist in ourselves and in cities in this constant play of the visible and ever-changing present, jousting constantly with our memories and our present navigating through a place. This play provides us a contemporariness that constantly creates the city and us, and sometimes eludes us in its continuously new forms and presences. This contemporariness adheres a temporal closeness of being caught in “a” time where one is also caught in its disjunctions and distances.

The road down the street where one cycled to have sugar cane juice and crossed the same tree is now an underpass, a walkway or a metro station. It is caught in simultaneous times, none of which have settled into our bodies.

Today Delhi's contemporariness has come to formulate itself through not only this non-time but also mnemonic violence and speed, where in the era of high capitalism, the Mughal monument is consumed as a commodity fetish and ideologically driven landscapes begin to emerge through street corner lynchings, totalitarian laws and new forms of monumental architecture such as the Central Vista. This pace – of metro speed rails, destructions and restorations and totalitarian landscapes of the contemporary – produces a flattened monolithic future to our presents, with such intense violence that we do not know what the city and we have become.



File photo of construction work for the Central Vista Project Underway at Rajpath in Delhi. Photo credit: Manvender Vashist/ PTI

Hannah Arendt in her seminal work *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1973) explains the forms in which ideology renders us disconnected from the world of lived experience, creating a simulacrum of histories and of the present. Ideology feeds the life world with forms of control, logical procedures and laws, which explain the “what is” rather than “what becomes”.

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A screen of “truer reality” conceals the world of perceptible things, lived lives and forms of the self and nationhood. It also renders a distinct loneliness in people, constantly alienated from the self and from others, feeding on isolation, hurt and sometimes inaction.

Most of all, it closes off the experience with the presence of an incessant semiotic loop of jingoistic, nationalistic, personality-cult-driven explanations and rationalisations led by a singular ideologue amplifying to the people what they need to do and feel and how the nation needs to look. The alterations of the city, the self and the nation align through the material, the symbolic and the real of everyday life. The future is being continuously recast, narrated and rewritten in the present, making the present irretrievable and fixed.

Future as destruction

I am standing at the chowk in a riot-torn neighbourhood of northeast Delhi. It is the February of 2020. As I wait for a friend to appear through the chaos of people I am surrounded with, my eyes are on the maze of lanes flanked by incremental houses in front

of me. The smell of roses wafts through the odour of pollution. I am not sure if I have actually smelled the roses or not, and I turn my head around.

Just behind me is a small 8x6 foot structure, a square, covered in tiles and soot, partly broken, damaged, wounded. Women are walking past it, some bowing their heads and peering into the square. The structure looks familiar. I had seen the same shrine in the newspaper – it had been attacked in the riots the previous week.

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It had looked darker, more smashed and more burnt in the images – now it looks only like a sombre ruin. Some of the women are whispering prayers and saying “sab kuch theek ho jayega” (everything will be okay) to the caretaker, who covered in soot, is sitting by the grave and cleaning the railing with locks attached to it. He is trying out keys to open some of the locks, cleaning the locks and nodding and speaking to the women.

People put locks on shrines to ask for boons, something simple like getting a job, passing exams or making a beloved agree for love. Locks always remind me of bridges in Europe – such a non-Protestant aesthetic in a Protestant capitalist world.

“Locks are wish holders – lovers come and put them here,” someone had explained as we walked over a bridge in a small town in Germany. I watch the caretaker cleaning the locks covered with soot. He tells me that the whole shrine was set on fire, yet the grave remained unscathed.

I notice a green shroud covering the grave of the shrine. The caretaker extends his story to it, “Everything else burned, but the shroud did not catch fire.” I want to believe him. More women come to the threshold of the shrine – their heads are covered with their saree *pallus*. They move their hands from their heart centres to their foreheads where their bindis are placed. Everything is slowing down, the chaos and traffic – the riot control police and their vans are fading into the lanes, while police sirens are coming together to this axis, this burnt, broken and tired shrine.



Burnt-out and damaged residential premises and shops after the Delhi riots in February 2020. Photo credit: Sajjad Hussain/ AFP

The façade of the shrine has cheap bathroom tiles, and now half-wiped soot. The caretaker gets up and starts cleaning the soot with his bare hands. A man appears at the shrine and the caretaker tells me about him, “He is a mad man. He does not even know if he is Hindu or Muslim. He just comes to sleep at the shrine at night. Why did they hit his hands?”

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The caretaker shows me the hands of the man. Other women standing around are looking worried, wondering why anyone would want to burn their local shrine. Down the road from here, everything is burnt, displaced, smashed – the local bakery, tyre shops, the ordinary everyday.

The communal riot, the monster of the mob attack, always attacks the ordinary. It eats into households, neighbourhoods, our minds – it throws open wounds we did not know existed, it slices open households, families, shops and streets. I wonder what axis this shrine has provided to this area, if at all? Did it morph a horizon in this working-class neighbourhood, where people’s livelihoods were under constant precarity and destruction? Did it entangle itself into the daily hopes, aspirations and desires of the people who went past it, or did it just stand there as a direction marker? Was it a land grab, a road marker or just another shrine in this city of graves?

The soot of the burnt shrine, the broken street and the simmering nation state has gotten onto my hands and clothes. I am wondering how I will clean this. How will we build back any of this? I do not sleep that night and many nights after. The broken tile pieces from the shrine lie in a box in my house, mixing with my words, myself and my loneliness.

Future as ideology

Ideologies of destruction draw straight lines across people, identities and spaces. They beckon forms of destruction, which are grafted into our bodies, our histories and our futures.

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During the second wave of Covid in India, when the national capital had run out of oxygen cylinders and hospital beds for its citizens, with hundreds dying due to lack of state support and care, the regime in power began the construction of the Central Vista “redevelopment” project.

The aim of this Rs-13,450 crore project is to destroy and reconstruct the 3-km stretch from Rashtrapati Bhawan to India Gate and to revamp the central administrative area around Raisina Hill in Lutyen’s Delhi. The irreverent, ideologically driven political leadership has singled out this space towards its own distinctively marked and manufactured future.

We can draw a straight line from the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya to this destruction. Apparatuses of ideology have modes of manifestation and of embedding themselves into existing institutional structures. In the course of the Babri Masjid–Ram Janmabhoomi dispute, the demolished mosque was made invisible by marking it as “disputed property”, while a real legal entity emerged of the mythical god “Ram Lalla”, in the name of whom the legal case was fought.

The drive for destruction and self-creation in the regime which laid its foundations in the death of history continues in its current form, where it wishes to regraft the historical through its speedy construction drive. The question to ask is not if all regimes have done this before but how this is different from what others have done.

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This line of destruction based on ideology seeps into banal architectural plans as Vastu compliant and as a memorial to the future of the city and the country. It is the categorical arrival of Hindutva and Ram Rajya, and the establishment of the nation state and its symbols on this order.

Another set of apparatuses was put into motion by the current regime to progress with the work on the Central Vista – speedy and secretively undertaken tenders, complete impertinence towards heritage laws, and a closed-door decision made by the Delhi

Development Authority on use of public parks and public spaces. Regimes render with smooth banality rules, laws and dictates, which alter the way the world can look around us. They normalise control and surveillance through relentless identity cards and random barricading of roads and security checks. One is constantly being made to imagine an enemy, which may not exist in reality, but is conjured up as an entity.

The architectural world, running asunder with its focus on facts rather than values, has been swirling with a buzz on the Central Vista plans. Innumerable discussions and arguments around the plans range from “it is similar to what the British did to the capital city” and “it is best for the use and comfort of the Central Secretariat staff and politicians” to “the old plan could not accommodate enough people” and “if we do not do it, then who will?”.

Based on arguments of expertise and utilitarianism, the discourse of architecture entirely bypasses the ideological underpinnings that any construction of this scale holds within it. Projecting itself as the all-important axis of this pervasive and persuasive landscape of destructions, the discourse scaffolds a future for the city based on “architectural gigantism and grim territorial finality”. In working with the ideological, it makes invisible to itself new lines of control, new forms of power and deeply embedded fabrications of a singular future.

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Architecture has always served political regimes to mark their presence in the spaces and psyches of people, with the intent of grafting the future in the present. Yet, it is important to understand that the specific syntagmatic performance of architecture under the current regime is based on Hindutva and its apparatuses of ideology in destroying the built, the imagined and the lived spaces of the country.

Future as present

On a cold January morning, I take my mother to Nizamuddin East, an area where she lived for nearly 25 years of her life in Delhi. As we turn in from Khan-i-Khanan’s tomb, she asks me where we are, not recognizing the newly restored monument. Her memory, already in the blur of aging, is even more confused as we drive past some of the restored, shiny monuments now interlaced with pillars for new bridges and the metro.

She cannot recognise the domes, understand the turns we are taking or the general sense of the place. Houses have been demolished and rebuilt, parks have been fixed with new landscapes, back lanes do not feel like back lanes and front roads seem to open to new galleries of monumental spaces. In a strange way, the future is already here, and my mother is unable to hold any of her mnemonic markers to it.

Eventually, as we drive around the area and I point to little markers of my childhood walks through the area, such as the Pir Patte Shah shrine, the railway phataks on the back and the very transformed Sundar Nursery, she finally accepts that we are indeed in

Nizamuddin East.

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When she asks about her friends who once lived here, I have to do the brutal disservice as her daughter of informing her that most of them have now died or moved far away. She is lost again, and pauses and asks, “Dargah toh bachee hai na? [The dargah is still there, no?]” referring to Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya’s shrine. I nod and say, “Yes, it is still here.” But then I think in my head, “Is it, and for how long?”

What happens to cities, to streets, to people and to us as they transform into new aspirations, forms and ideologies? What does something look like before? Or should we ask, what does it become after? After what? After restoration, after city planning, after ideology, after nation states, after childhoods or after time? Do we wither through this life, this endless loneliness and distance from our pasts and our presents, scaffolded in overnight transformations by regimes and their apparatuses? If the future is here, where is it? And how do I find my way back home?

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