Hidden Delhi: Stories and Secrets Behind the City’s Living History

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Introduction

Delhi is more than a city — it is a palimpsest, where epochs are inscribed atop one another, and every lane or stone may hide whispers from ages past. Empires have risen and vanished upon its soil: their ambitions, victories, and heartbreaks scrawled across the labyrinth of its streets, mosques, havelis, gardens, and crumbling fortresses. Even as Delhi constantly reshapes itself, it remains rooted in stories, rituals, and communities that have withstood centuries of change.

Most visitors encounter Delhi through its grand, well-known icons — the Red Fort, Qutub Minar, Humayun's Tomb — or through the frenetic bustle of Connaught Place and Chandni Chowk. Yet beyond these emblems lies a far richer, subtler city, woven through with tales that rarely make it into guidebooks: a baoli hidden behind an unremarkable wall, an ancient tree once revered by Sufi saints, or a mural painted under cover of darkness by an artist reclaiming forgotten space.

This book is an invitation to journey into the heart of hidden Delhi — a living city layered with curiosity and contradiction. Over the following chapters, we leave the broad avenues and tour buses behind to wander down old alleys and neglected ruins, listen to the rhythms of the bazaar, and sit at food stalls where recipes are both memory and inheritance. We'll share the struggles and celebrations of those who call Delhi home: rickshaw drivers and conservationists, poets and chefs, artisans, youth activists, and entrepreneurs. Each story, each voice, each scent and stone is part of the city's constantly evolving portrait.

Our exploration will move from tales of vanished dynasties and mysteriously abandoned stepwells, through Old Delhi's living traditions and family businesses, to the contemporary pulse of art, music, and new cultural identities. We will savor dishes that anchor communities, linger in sacred spaces carved out over centuries, and uncover the quiet heroics of those preserving heritage against the odds. Along the way, sidebars provide practical notes for explorers eager to follow these trails themselves.

Above all, this is a book for the endlessly curious armchair traveler, for the history lover seeking nuance, for locals hoping to see their city anew, and for anyone who believes a city's true treasures lie not only in monuments, but in the lived experiences of its people — and in the stories waiting just below the surface.

Come along, then, into Delhi's hidden heart: where living history reveals itself in fragments, flavors, melodies, and memories, inviting all of us to pause, look closer, and listen.

CHAPTER ONE: Faded Footprints: Tracing the Rulers Before the Mughals

Before the grand Mughal emperors etched their architectural signatures across Delhi’s landscape, and long before the British laid out the wide avenues of New Delhi, older, equally compelling narratives shaped this ancient city. To truly understand Delhi, one must peel back these later layers and venture into the pre-Mughal past, a time when powerful dynasties vied for control, leaving behind remnants that whisper of a vibrant, often turbulent, bygone era. These faded footprints offer a tantalizing glimpse into Delhi's enduring spirit, a city repeatedly built, destroyed, and rebuilt upon its own ashes.

Our journey begins in Mehrauli, a southern expanse of Delhi that serves as an open-air museum of these forgotten eras. Here, amidst sprawling archaeological parks and encroaching modern development, lie the earliest known foundations of Delhi. The Tomara Rajputs, credited with founding Delhi, established Lal Kot in the 8th century, marking the city's emergence as a significant political center. This was Delhi’s first known fortification, a defensive structure that laid the groundwork for future empires. Remnants of Lal Kot's formidable rubble walls and ramparts can still be discerned in the Mehrauli Archaeological Park, standing as silent witnesses to centuries of change.

Within the same historical precinct stands a remarkable anomaly: the Iron Pillar. Today located within the Qutub Complex, this 7.21-meter-high metal structure, weighing over six tonnes, has puzzled historians and metallurgists for centuries. Constructed by Chandragupta II between 375 and 415 CE, the pillar is renowned for its extraordinary resistance to rust, a testament to the advanced metallurgical skills of ancient Indian artisans. While its original location is debated, it is believed to have been moved to its current site in the 11th century by Anangpal Tomar, the Tomara ruler, who re-erected it. Its presence here, predating many of the surrounding Islamic structures, serves as a powerful symbol of Delhi's continuous, layered history.

The Tomaras’ reign eventually gave way to another powerful Rajput clan, the Chauhans. In the 12th century, Prithviraj Chauhan took control of Delhi, expanding Lal Kot into Qila Rai Pithora. This expansion transformed Lal Kot into a larger, more formidable military stronghold, encompassing a significant portion of what is now South Delhi. Though largely in ruins today, the ramparts of Qila Rai Pithora are still visible in areas around the Qutub Complex, Saket, and Vasant Kunj, offering a tangible connection to Delhi’s medieval past. This fortified city served as a crucial capital for over a century, a bustling hub of activity before the arrival of new powers.

The era of Rajput rule in Delhi concluded dramatically in the late 12th century. Following their victory over Prithviraj Chauhan in the Second Battle of Tarain in 1192, the Afghan forces, led by Muhammad Ghori and his general Qutb-ud-din Aibak, established Muslim rule in India. With Ghori's death, Qutb-ud-din Aibak, a Mamluk (enslaved soldier), asserted his authority, founding the Mamluk or Slave Dynasty and formally establishing Delhi as the capital of the Delhi Sultanate.

The Mamluks wasted no time in leaving their mark. Qutb-ud-din Aibak commissioned the construction of the Quwwat-ul-Islam Mosque, often referred to as the Qutub Mosque, in 1193 CE. This mosque holds the distinction of being the first mosque built in Delhi after the Islamic conquest. Adjacent to it, Aibak also initiated the construction of the towering Qutub Minar in 1192, a "victory tower" meant to commemorate the Muslim conquest of India.

The Qutub Minar, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, stands at an impressive 72.5 meters. Its construction, begun by Aibak, was continued by his successor and son-in-law, Iltutmish, and later completed by Firoz Shah Tughlaq in 1368 AD. The minar is composed of red sandstone and buff sandstone, adorned with intricate inscriptions in Arabic and Nagari characters. The Quwwat-ul-Islam Mosque itself was reportedly built using materials from 27 Hindu and Jain temples, a common practice during this period of transition. This repurposing of older structures is still visible in some of the columns within the mosque, where Hindu carvings can be seen beneath the later plasterwork, revealing the layered history of the site.

Following Aibak, Iltutmish, considered one of the most prominent Mamluk rulers, further solidified the Delhi Sultanate. He extended the original prayer hall screen of the Quwwat-ul-Islam Mosque, doubling its size. Iltutmish also introduced architectural advancements, particularly noticeable in the four-centered arches that became characteristic of later Indo-Islamic styles. The Delhi Sultanate under the Mamluks, despite its short lifespan of nearly a century, laid crucial foundations for future Islamic rule in India.

As the Mamluk dynasty waned, new powers emerged, each adding another layer to Delhi’s historical tapestry. The Khaljis succeeded the Mamluks, followed by the Tughlaqs. The Tughlaq dynasty, founded by Ghiyas-ud-din Tughlaq, gave Delhi one of its most imposing, yet mysteriously abandoned, structures: Tughlaqabad Fort. Built in 1321, this colossal fort was conceived as a formidable defense against Mongol invaders and intended to be a grand capital city. Spanning 6.5 kilometers with ramparts reaching almost 15 meters in height, Tughlaqabad was an ambitious project.

However, Tughlaqabad Fort’s story takes a turn towards the mystical. Legend has it that a feud erupted between Sultan Ghiyas-ud-din Tughlaq and the revered Sufi saint Sheikh Nizamuddin Auliya. The Sultan reportedly demanded that all laborers in Delhi

focus solely on building his fort, halting work on the saint's stepwell (baoli). Enraged, Nizamuddin Auliya is said to have cursed the city, proclaiming, "Ya rahe ujjar ya base gujjar," which translates to "it will either remain desolate or be occupied by herdsmen." Another version of the legend claims the saint cursed the Sultan, saying, "Hunuz Dilli dur ast" ("Delhi is still far away").

True to the legend, Ghiyas-ud-din Tughlaq never made it back to Delhi to see his grand fort completed, reportedly dying when a pavilion collapsed on him. The magnificent city of Tughlaqabad was abandoned by 1327, just six years after its inauguration, leaving it to crumble into the colossal ruins we see today. Its deserted vastness continues to echo the saint’s curse, a powerful reminder of how history and folklore intertwine in Delhi’s narrative. These pre-Mughal dynasties, though often overshadowed by later eras, laid the essential groundwork for Delhi’s enduring legacy as a city of cities, each layer holding its own faded footprints and compelling secrets.

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