

Discovering the City and its Environs Ramji Das and his *Tareekh-o Aasar-e Dehli*

Shama Mitra Chenoy

Shivaji College, University of Delhi

Email: shamamitrachenoy@shivaji.du.ac.in



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ABSTRACT

In 1854, Ramji Das, a retired officer from the Collectorate of Delhi penned a small, wonderful work, at the behest of Colonel Hamilton, called **Tareekh-o Aasar-e Dehli**, introducing to us several typologies of structures focussed partially on the city and the rest in its environs, including villages. He used the structures to highlight three to four important issues. The names of the builders, the purpose of the structures, their present state and the colloquialisms, anecdotes and popular cultures associated with them. The underlying theme of all structures was that they were for the benefit of large numbers of people. The author of this book apprised the readers of the newly created administrative divisions in the geographical region of Delhi. Ramji Das's work was contemporaneous with Saiyid Ahmad Khan's second edited version of *Asar-us Sanadid*, yet it has a relevance, importance and uniqueness of its own. Only one manuscript copy has been located recently, that too after nearly 165 years and it is now a published text in Urdu.

KEY WORDS

English East India Company, Delhi, Environs, Dams, Ponds, Hunting lodges

While the Mughal Badshah sat on his throne in *Diwan- i Khas* of the *Qila-i Mu'alla* or Red Fort, it was the English East India Company government that controlled and administered the city of Delhi and its environs from 1803 CE onwards.

Ramji Das was an administrator in the office of the collectorate of the environs of Delhi. He occupied the post of a deputy and going by his leanings reflected in his writings he may also be involved in public works department. At the time of his superannuation in 1854 he was inspired to write about structures of Delhi by Colonel George William Hamilton, either the head of his parent department or someone known to him. Since his principal work was the collection of revenue, he had an inordinate understanding and knowledge of the far- flung areas within the geographical region of Delhi. He was able to compile his work *Tareekh- o- Aasar- e Dehli*¹ or [*The History and Relics of Delhi*], in 1854 itself, in Urdu, contemporaneously with the publication of the second version of Saiyid Ahmad Khan's *Asar-us Sanadid*². In fact Ramji Das was deeply inspired by him that he even dedicated his work to Saiyid Ahmad Khan.

Although it is difficult to gauge the intent of this compiler behind the exercise of this work, particularly since a detailed work had been

published by Saiyid Ahmad Khan, it is also true that it never saw the light of day and was in all possibility given/ gifted to some British officer, maybe even Hamilton³, and it then surfaced most recently through the efforts of Dr. Moinuddin Aqil⁴ at the John Ryland Library in Manchester. Dr. Aqil has so far been able to locate only this copy of the manuscript and he has edited it and it has been published in Urdu from Delhi and is available to the readers for the first time. According to the editor, Ramji Das has left no information about himself and the only things that may be gleaned about him are the year of his superannuation from service, Colonel Hamilton as the inspiration behind the work, and the fact that sometimes he wrote about things based on information derived not only in his official capacity but also on his own personal experience⁵.

While a lot of information given by him is also to be located in *Asar-us Sanadid* and there was no novelty in the typologies of structures he wrote of, Forts; Mosques; Tombs; Sarai Gates; Dams; Bridges; Sarai; Ponds; Dargahs; Temples⁶; yet he brought to the forefront many structures never heard or read of before, and some uncommon information, connecting it as much as possible, to the popular cultures prevalent in the suburbs and villages of Delhi as well. His knowledge remains unparalleled in comparison with all other historiographical works on the environs of Delhi. Other than the revenue records pertaining to the environs Ramji Das was possibly the only officer who informed of the administrative divisions⁷ created by the English East India Company government from 1823 onwards, which were as follows: Till 1823 all of Delhi was administered from one office. Then Delhi was divided into districts and parganas: Zila Delhi Khas; Zila Delhi West; Zila Delhi North; Zila Delhi South and the 3 parganas: Haveli Bawana; Haveli Mehrauli; Haveli Najafgarh. The old names had been abandoned. Of these one was Palam, of old vintage, going

back to the time of Pandavas⁸. Although Ramji Das used the word zila here he seldom used it in his writing of the structures and instead popularly used the word pargana; south pargana, north pargana and west pargana.

Ramji Das's small work is full of unique and novel insights into the administration of the larger geographical region of Delhi. This distinct treatise begins with a succinct political history of Delhi starting with the Pandavas and culminating in the cost of construction of the various structures in *Qila-i Mubarak*, including the reigns of other rulers and dynasties. The editor found several missing pages in this manuscript, particularly from this section.

Ramji Das's style of writing enables us to glean the fact that the English East India Company government administered the environs very closely and collected rent from the numerous villages most assiduously.

He wrote of structures and aspects of life in the parganas and havelis of Delhi which no one else did. His work has a uniqueness of subject as he dealt with many structures located in far-flung parganas and did not write much about the *Shahr* part of the city. His renderings bring to light how structures made by the city people in the vast environs were owned by the people in the villages in the manner that they wove their own set of popular and interesting bits of anecdotes around them.

Ramji Das's language for compilation was Urdu with a smattering of Persian, but he thought and wrote in an administrator's language with the use of certain technical words and complicated construction of sentences.

The people of Delhi in medieval and later medieval times, used the suburbs as an integral part of the city to acquire space and use it fruitfully for varieties of pursuits such as the construction of places of worship, entertainment, hunting, charity, tombs, gardens, manufactories,

jostling with the already existing wholesale marts, localities, structures, cemeteries of earlier vintage, etc. The environs of the city were profusely dotted with structures associated with philanthropy and benevolence to benefit greater number of people, viz., sarais, bridges, dams and water bodies. A thorough look at the works of welfare brings to light efforts of the state and its officers and private persons. However, it was in the reign of two rulers of the medieval period viz., Firuz Shah Tughlaq [1351-88] and Muhammad Shah [1719-48] that enormous works of charity were carried out by both the rulers and their nobility and some prosperous persons. Officers of the English East India Company and their employees followed this practice, either through self-volition or as part of official duty, to carry forward or maintain structures and accoutrements for similar purposes.

There is an entire segment on sarais constructed to provide safety, security, boarding and lodging to merchants, officials and travellers. Most of the sarais Ramji Das informed us of were built by the Khwaja saras and is reflective of the fact that eunuchs were well integrated into society and could rise to high positions and patronize works of charity. The sarais had over time, with the turn in mentalities and concerns become much less populous and were generally occupied in the time of the author by a bhatiyara or two, the zamindar of the village and occasionally by the Police Officer⁹ or the police post of that area.

Providing for water was regarded as a sacred duty amongst all cultures. Medieval times were full of these acts of charity through wells, tanks, reservoirs, dams and bridges. These welfare measures were carried out periodically by the state and by individuals as *Dharmarth* or *Khairat*.

Ramji Das devoted an entire part in his work to waterbodies, natural and manmade

structures that facilitated their use. These structures bring to light the maximum utilisation of good, sweet, rain and river water through dams, reservoirs and ponds in the environs of the city. It also throws light on the understanding people had in medieval times of the topography of the environs of the city, particularly towards north, west and south, areas adjoining Haryana. This advantaged people to place the ponds, reservoirs and tanks in places where there were natural catchment areas and water collected effortlessly and the use of slopes and dams for water egress and ingress. Sarais, dams and bridges were also placed most judiciously to facilitate people and the economy.

Ramji Das's work accounted for such facilities and their partial or complete obsolescence on account of lack of promptness in carrying out maintenance and repairs. There was also a sense of abandonment of structures that others had made.

*Hauz-i Shamsi*¹⁰: in the district of Mehrauli there is extant a fantastic reservoir. It was built by Sultan Iltutmish during his reign. There are now about 1276 portions of land in it and earlier it was very deep and strong on all sides. It has collapsed now. Towards east of this Firuz Shah had a dam built where the water would collect and then flow to the moat of Tughlaqabad. After a long time the water stopped flowing there and began to spill aimlessly. At the spring along the Hauz, Nawab Ghaziuddin Khan built an egress for water and made a reservoir and channels beyond that. The water would fall into the reservoir and flow out through the channels. It is called *Jharna*¹¹. And adjoining this, royal palaces came up and every year the Badshah, during the rains, moves there for a vacation. In the month of *Sawan-Bhadon*, an exalted fair is held there and is called '*Mela Sair-i-Gul Farroshan*'¹² and the flower sellers etc., and different people make fans of fragrant flowers

and other things at the *Jharna* and offer them at the Dargah Qutb and this is an excuse for enjoyment. After a couple of days the people go back by themselves.

Tal Katora¹³: it is a *shikargah*¹⁴ and Muhammad Shah Badshah had laid out an elegant Bagh¹⁵ here. One pond was made over the hill-ock and water would collect here and flow down like a spring. Below this, a Bagh and structures were made and [Muhammad Shah] would often go there for hunting. It is extant in the boundary of Raisina and in south pargana, at a distance of 1 *kos* from Shahjahanabad.

Band¹⁶:

Hasht Band¹⁷: adjoining Chirag Dehli and the Khirki mosque. This structure is above a dam. Towards south of this there are several big runnels of water. With this dam the water was stopped here and this bridge of 7 arches was made to take it out. All those arches seem to be on a large platform. The facts that came to be known of this were that when in 776 AH, Fath Khan, the Badshah Firuz Shah' son died, the ruler was extremely saddened. With the intention of reducing his sorrow he decided to make a *shikargah* for passing his time of leisure and this kept the Badshah busy. And this dam is on a stable wall and is close to the boundary of Lado Sarai and is joined to the wall that is stretched till Tughlaqabad but there seems to be no imperial structure left there. There are however some ruins, maybe those are of the palace of the Badshah. Now the high officers have repaired and strengthened this dam and have allowed the water to collect so that it may provide for the water needs of a few villages.

Band Firuz Shah¹⁸: the environs which extend from Rajpur and Sidhaura Kalan¹⁹ to Sarai Ruhullah adjoining Kali Pahari [Anand Parbat]. There is no information about it in any written source. Amongst the populace this is famous as the *Band* of Firuz Shah. Some people say that

the river which drags along from the side of Jai-pur [highly unlikely, must be Jamuna] and flows into the Najafgarh Jheel used to overflow so much that the habitation of the area around the *Band* would be inundated. Hence Firuz Shah Badshah had the dam constructed. No one was aware of this voluntary act of religion but when enquiry was made, then, at one place 3 arches were visible in which there is provision for the inlet and outlet of water, on the ground towards the west where the water flows out is through a descent, a slope. Towards Delhi there are other bastions constructed here and there for harmony on this side. [and] On this side are large pits to break the rush of water and curves are made for safety. It seems that the dam was constructed to break the flow of water which at the present comes from a runnel.

At present this runnel can be located inside the surroundings and other than the above mentioned chief dam structure there seems to be another outlet of water, and it is believable that this was also a wall of Firuz Shah Badshah's *shikargah*. There is also a structure on the dam where the habitation of Sidhaura Kalan was earlier located [and] it is a peculiar and a complex maze and it seems that such a forceful structure like this could be nothing else other than a hunting lodge, and at some period of time the habitation of Sidhaura Kalan would have resided here. This enclosure is not the only structure in the village, there is a big, high gate on this, and on its west are two sets of staircases for climbing down. In that place there must have been a very sharp drag of water hence the staircase was made.

Some even say that boats were hitched here and this gate was a ghat²⁰ for people to come and go. It is not unbelievable that when the water here rose to a great height and gave rise to fountains and whirlwinds, as there are whirlwinds in Najafgarh Jheel, and there was fear of it on the west side, with a lot of wailing and

lamenting. The papers show exemption of payment of revenue. So if there is method, in reality the correct version would be that with the dam built by Firuz Shah in Chiragh Dehli, after the tragedy of his son, he also built a *shikargah*. That *shikargah* is this one and it was mentioned in *Tarikh-i Firishhta*²¹ that at a distance of several *kos* he made a stone wall, to make a hunting lodge in *Dehli Nau* and that *Dehli Nau* was on this side, so undoubtedly this is the same *shikargah*.

Bhuli Bhatyari Ka Mahal²²: this is a strong palace on top of a hillock in the boundary of the village of Banskauli in the south pargana. Nothing could be gleaned from any written source. It is common belief that Bu Ali Bhatti was some personage, and this is his haveli²³. Adjoining and associated with this is a dam with strong walls on 2 sides and in the middle, it is chiefly of mud and is not very long. In the centre of the hillock is an ascent and a descent to stop water and there is also an arch with turnings to let out the water. To stop this water for sowing and tilling is not profitable as this was prepared for hunting. The person who built this palace was also the one who built this dam and established it as a place of pleasure.

Nai ka Mahal²⁴: this is a haveli adjoining Bagh Faulad Nagar²⁵, towards south, amongst the habitation of Siddipura, in the boundary of Banskauli? [and] associated with south pargana. Information about this is also unavailable in any written text. The populace understands it as a palace of a Rajput named 'Nigahi'. It looks like a structure of the Pathan period²⁶. On the north and south of it there is a big, strong wall for the purpose of damming, and it is 500 yards in length. Both the mansion and the dam seem like a *shikargah* and the water of the hillock is stopped by the dam. The water of this is advantageous for Bagh Faulad Khan. Bagh Faulad Khan is now under the control of the heirs of

Hakim Mansur Khan. earlier it was with the heirs of Siddi Faulad Khan.

Near the corner of the Bagh the wall of the dam was broken and beyond this there is no evidence left of it. At the place of the water exit there is a wall with perforations, made by Manuel Sahib who had the Bagh in his possession for some years, so that the water goes out slowly.

Haal Pulo ka²⁷:

Pul Tughlaqabad²⁸: there were many bridges in both old and new Delhi. Although broken they are still extant. Tughlaqabad bridge is completely extant. This bridge was made by Firuz Shah Badshah and was built from the Fort of Tughlaqabad to the Tomb of Tughlaq Shah. There is water there and hence, this bridge was made to go back and forth to the tomb. This is located in the boundary of Tughlaqabad, associated with the Raja of Ballabgarh.

Baran Pula²⁹: [is] located in the boundary of the villages of Hogal [sic] [Bhogal] hillock and Bahlolpur in the south pargana at a distance of 3.5 *kos* from Delhi towards south, along the road that goes to Agra. It was built in the reign of Nuruddin Jahangir Badshah in 1021 AH [1611-12 AD]. It was built by Agha Mihr Banu Khwaja Sara. It is very strong and stable. The water of many runnels collects here. This bridge has 11 arches. It either derived its name Bara Pula because of rain [Baran] or because it had 12 piers [forming 11 arches]. It is a very advantageous bridge and is worthy of being protected. Some years ago, it was repaired at the instance of the government by the collector of Delhi.

Pul Salimgarh³⁰: this bridge is now located between the fort of Salimgarh and the fort of Shahjahan. It was built by the above-mentioned ruler [Jahangir]. A channel of the Jamuna flows under it. It is a very stable and strong bridge.

Ek Pul³¹: Ek Pul is a very big bridge in the boundary of Wazirabad along the Jamuna. It has 9 arches and towards north there are 3 separate arches with some perforations in them. This bridge is for the exit of water of the Najafgarh Jheel. No information about it was available from any written source but from the zamindar of Wazirabad it has come to be known that an old mosque attached to the bridge was built along with it. On the *mimbar*³² of the mosque something was written with inlay, and one person had read it in 1816 AD. It was from this, it became known that this mosque and bridge were made by Badshah Ghorī. The inscription has now rubbed off. In reality this structure is very old.

Do Pul³³: the two bridges are en route to Faridabad, one in the environs of Badarpur and the other in the environs of Tajpul in south pargana. The Badarpur bridge has been repaired at the instance of the collector of Badarpur. It was not possible to ascertain in which year it was constructed or how old it is.

Ek Pul Sarak Qutb Par³⁴: [it is] a bridge on the Qutb road in the boundary of Khanpur Maqbulabad in south pargana attached to Dhanwali? [Dhaua?] Kuan and made by Marwan Ikram's spouse. Other than this many more new bridges on the road to Gurgaon have been made over runnels at the orders of the government and these have been of great comfort and ease for the merchants etc.

Ek Pul Jheel Najafgarh Ka³⁵: there is a bridge on the Najafgarh Lake attached to the village of Kakrauli in south pargana and was made in the time of Mr. John Lawrence Sahib Bahadur Collector at the cost of at least Rupees 1 thousand in 1846. In the course of completion of this the plaster of the bridge remained contorted and the side railings could also not be made. Now, some other arrangements regarding the jheel are being made and a canal 2 yards wide and 2 yards deep will be dug. In this situation this

bridge may become useless and collapse and a new one may be made. A verse was composed with the date of its construction and it was intended to be inscribed on the bridge. 'Verse, 1846'

Lal Diggi³⁶: about 2 years ago, adjoining the fort of Shahjahan towards west, the people of the exalted government³⁷ had a large and full reservoir made with red sandstone walls and bastions. To get the water into this, which will come from the Shah Nahr and at the edge of the turn will flow into the moat, and then fill the reservoir. The egress was towards the river. This haуз provided a lot of relief and comfort to the people.

Zikr Talabo Ka³⁸: other than Talab Shamsi which has been written about. In the region of south pargana some reservoirs have become dry, for instance, Talab Kishan Das and a couple of ponds which are located adjoining Badarpur and 2 ponds in the area of the north, one in Pipal Thala adjoining Sarai Baoli, just along the road. It has broken down completely and is full of mud. If there is water in it, it is salty because of its adjacency to [the cultivation of] jowar which makes the soil very salty. When there is water in it, it is very bitter and tasteless. In spite of this, the travellers use this water and this talab was made by Raja Kishan Das, qaum Khatri, in the reign of Muhammad Shah Badshah as *banarth*³⁹ [sic]

One talab is attached to Tarbale, in the boundary of Ma'amure. It is along the road to Karnal at a distance of 12 *kos* from Delhi. Water does not stay in this. It was made by Qamruddin Khan⁴⁰.

ENDNOTES

All excerpts taken from Ramji Das, *Tareekh-o Aasar-e Dehli* have been translated by the author of this article

1. Ramji Das was an employee of the British government in Delhi and retired in 1854. He wrote his

- work, *Tareekh- o-Aasar-e Dehli, (The History and Relics of Delhi The History and Relics of Delhi, the History of the common structures of Delhi)*, edited by Moinuddin Aqil; Editor's Manuscript, under publication by Anjuman Taraqqi Urdu (Hind), New Delhi, 2019. Henceforth, *Tareekh*
2. Saiyid Ahmad Khan, *Asar- us Sanadid- 1847*, ed., Dr. Tanvir Ahmad Alvi, Urdu Academy, Delhi 2000; This print- 2011
 3. Colonel George William Hamilton (1807-1868) served in India from 1823 to 1867 latterly as Commissioner in Delhi. The road north of the Old Delhi Railway Station is named after him.
 4. According to Dr. Moinuddin Aqeel, Dean of the Faculty of Languages and Literature, International Islamic University, Islamabad, the editor of *Tareekh- o-Aasar-e Dehli (The History and Relics of Delhi)*, there seems to be only one manuscript copy so far and the work is incredible but was unknown till now and is being made conspicuous for the first time. I express my deep gratitude to Dr. Aqil who discovered the manuscript in the John Rylands Library (23/27) at Manchester for sharing his editor's copy with me before it was published.
I am grateful to Dr. Laila Abidi Khojasteh, University of Tehran, for facilitating the transfer of information between Professor Aqil and myself.
 5. *Tareekh*, 'Editor's Introduction', p. 15
 6. *Tareekh*, pp. 5- 10
 7. *Tareekh*, pp. 51-53
 8. *Tareekh*, p. 52
 9. *Tareekh*, pp. 42-45
 10. *Tareekh*, p. 37
 11. Dargah Quli Khan, *Risalah- i Salar Jung*, Persian text, Muzaffar Husain ed., *Muraqqa- e Dehli*, Hyderabad 1926; annotated English translation, Chander Shekhar and Shama Mitra Chenoy, *Muraqqa- e Dehli The Mughal Capital In Muhammad Shah's Time*; Deputy Publication, Delhi, 1989. p. 7
 12. Shama Mitra Chenoy, *Delhi in Transition 1821 and Beyond Mirza Sangin Beg's Sair-ul Manazil*, Oxford University Press, Delhi 2018. pp. lvii and 134
 13. *Tareekh*, p. 37
 14. A hunting lodge or a palace. It is usually a complex structure with a palace, a water body, and some other structure of a minar or a dam
 15. Bagh or garden is generally a large enclosed area with trees, fruit trees, walks, and water body and some light, gazebo like structures
 16. *Tareekh*, pp. 38-40; Dam
 17. *Tareekh*, p. 38; a dam with 8 piers
 18. *Tareekh*, pp. 38-39
 19. the entire stretch known as Gulabi Bagh between Shakti Nagar and Anand Parbat; Sidhaura is the name of a village and it is Kalan or big and there is a Sidhaura Khurd as well, that is, small
 20. a river bank
 21. Muhammad Qasim Firishta, *Tarikh- i Firishta*, transl., John Briggs, Mahomed Kasim Firishta, *History of the Rise of Mahomedan Power in India*, 4 volumes
 22. *Tareekh*, p. 39
 23. mansion
 24. *Tareekh*, p. 40; the Barber's Palace
 25. inhabited by Siddi Faulad Khan the Kotwal of Delhi in the reign of Muhammad Shah. He was regarded as highly corrupt and Sauda wrote satirical poems about him. See Muhammad Sadiq's *History of Urdu Literature*, OUP, Delhi, 1984. Pp. 104- 125
 26. during the period of Lodi or Sur dynasty
 27. *Tareekh*, pp. 40-42; bridges
 28. *Tareekh*, p. 40
 29. *Tareekh*, p. 40; Rain bridge
 30. *Tareekh*, p. 40
 31. *Tareekh*, p. 41, one bridge
 32. Pulpit
 33. *Tareekh*, p. 41; two bridges
 34. *Tareekh*, p. 41
 35. *Tareekh*, pp. 41-42
 36. *Tareekh*, p. 42
 37. English East India Company's government
 38. *Tareekh*, p. 45; ponds
 39. *Dharmarth- charity*
 40. Wazir of Muhammad Shah