Travelogue, Delhi-Beijing

Pallavi Aiyar

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive
Part of the Asian History Commons, Asian Studies Commons, Chinese Studies Commons, and the International Relations Commons

https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive/748

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the China Beat Archive at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012 by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.
The plane burps to a halt and almost immediately everyone is on their feet, jostling to open the overhead lockers, reaching high for their strolleys. My head feels stuffed with lead and I marvel at the nimble alacrity of my fellow travellers, at 3:00 in the morning. Slowly we shuffle off the Air China flight and make it into the inadequately-air conditioned environs of Indira Gandhi International Airport.

As we walk towards immigration, I glimpse the sleepy desperation on the faces of those waiting in the departure hall. Large parts of the airport are cordoned off with cheap cardboard contraptions decorated with blithe apologies for “inconvenience” while a “world class” airport is being constructed. Just above the escalator leading down to passport control a lone, worn out sign creaks back and forth, seemingly propelled by an invisible ill wind. “Welcome to India,” it says before ominously continuing, “You will never forget it.”

I cast my mind back to where I had begun this journey—Beijing airport’s impossibly modern, impossibly large, impossibly shiny new terminal 3. For the millionth time I wonder at the infrastructural chasm between Beijing, the city that is my temporal domicile and Delhi, the womb to which I always return.

A sneaking shame at the visibility of Indian poverty and the puniness of its constructions follows me all the way home, wafting in the warm breeze alongside the car. Home is in Nizamuddin East at the border of central and south Delhi. The bulbous outline of Humayun’s tomb cuts a graceful figure in the inky sky. At its foot lie the bundled, huddled, anonymous bodies of the dregs of the world’s humanity: refugees, drug-addicts, madmen.

Once home, my seventeen-year-old dog, a marvel of canine geriatrics, is roused enough by my arrival to attempt a welcoming leap at my neck, but her gently arthritic hind-legs are not quite up to it. There is laughter and chatter and exchanging of presents until sleep can no longer be held at bay and the house retires for the few hours it can.

I am woken up the next morning by the braying of the neighbourhood sabziwallah. “Aloohaibainganhaigobhihaishalgamhai,” he shrieks at the top of his hoarse lungs. The sounds of various cars revving up to take our various neighbours to work leak through the walls. Bougainvilleas send swirls of colour across the garden. The geriatric dog is being scolded for having made a mess in the drawing room again. She wags her tail lazily in response.

I get ready for the day; down a cup of cold coffee whipped up in an old Nestle shaker, a product that had once been an object of great desire and novelty. I step outside and bump into various “aunties” and “uncles” who predictably cluck at how grown up I look. One particularly rotund aunty from the house opposite asks how I like China. “Do they all eat dog?” she queries her eyes wide-open with fascinated horror.

The lane has changed since I first lived there in the mid-eighties. The Nizamuddin railway station next door has steadily grown in size; some of the bungalows have been knocked down and converted into 4-storey high builder’s flats; a gate and security guard have made an appearance at the entrance; the number and price-tags of the cars belonging to the families have spiked.

But when compared to the vertiginous pace of change in Beijing, a city that in the six years I have lived there has literally been razed to the ground and built anew, there is a sense of stasis and continuity amongst the froth of transformation in Nizamuddin. I find this soothing.

Beijing’s remorseless embrace of modernity has erased memory. Just before my trip back to Delhi I visited Sanlitun, a neighbourhood that was a favourite haunt back in 2002 when I first moved to the Chinese capital. At the time it was a block of 1960s-era socialist style housing, interspersed with little
communal green areas where locals gathered to play mah-jong or practice tai chi. A British expat had started a bookshop and lending library in one of the dwellings. The red brick of the houses was faded and some of the windows cracked but on a summer’s day the weeping of willows in the interspersing courtyards cooled even the most heated of nerves.

Six years later the entire neighbourhood had been supplanted by a glass and chrome creature called The Village. This new mall had just appeared, as if from nowhere; a context-less, place-less, platonic ideal of a mall. It boasted the largest Adidas store in the world, bang opposite yet another Starbucks coffee house. This tree-less, mahjong-less, temple to consumerism was part of the New Beijing that the Olympics had been used as a rallying cry to create. What was frightening was the ability to walk through this space and not find a single link to the thriving community of people and places that had occupied the same geography for decades, only a year or so ago. A slate had been wiped clean.

In contrast, the changes I note around Nizamuddin as I take a quick walk around are Lilliputian. Humayun’s tomb had undergone a facelift a couple of years ago and gleamed in freshly scrubbed splendour. Khan-i-Khana’s tomb is likewise spruced up and a moustached guard at the entrance demands a Rs 10 fee for me to enter. I try arguing with him and explain that I have walked my dog in the overgrown lawns of the tomb for some two decades without ever having paid a paisa for it—but to no avail.

I give up and walk away shaking my head and then suddenly I am overwhelmed with the wondrousness of having grown up in this hybrid neighbourhood and the sense of multiple identities it has engendered in me.

Something that would have been impossible in China.

Chinese culture is one that values homogeneity and proselytises uniformity, a tendency that finds expression in its architecture. In imperial times the hutong alleyways of Beijing were all lined in the same grey brick, and topped off with the same pagoda-style sloping roofs. In more recent years the concrete block-shaped housing apartments of the socialist-era continued the trend of featureless sameness and even the hyper modernity of Olympics—China tends to a glass and chrome monotony.

How different this is from Delhi’s infinite heterogeneity. Only in Delhi could my personal geography embrace at once, the ghosts of Ghalib and Lutyons; of Lodhis and Sufis; of BBC foreign correspondents and imperious Mughals. Nizamuddin, I realise is more than a place to me; it’s a concept and a refuge. It reinforces a belief in making “the other,” your own.

It is here that I feel most myself: a Delhite, an English speaker, half a Tamilian, a Hindu culturally, an atheist by choice, a Muslim by heritage. And it is here that the identity that threads these multiplicities together—at once the most powerful and most amorphous—that of being an Indian, feels most alive and in need of expression.

I return home, hot and sweaty and elated, to find the house plunged in darkness and lots of animated talk about load shedding and invertors. My elation subsides a bit and through an open window a gust of China-envy blows in once again. But then I take a long sip of a proffered nimbu-pani and simply allow the gust to blow over and away.

Pallavi Aiyar is an award-winning Indian journalist and author of Smoke and Mirrors: An Experience of China. After a six-year-long stint in Beijing she now lives in Brussels where she reports on Europe for the Business Standard. She is currently working on her first novel.

Tags: China-India