

**WHERE DELHI IS STILL QUITE FAR:
HAZRAT NIZAMUDDIN AULIYA AND THE
MAKING OF THE NIZAMUDDIN *BASTI*¹**

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ABSTRACT:

This study aims to examine the nature of the relationship between the dargah of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya and the neighborhood that surrounds it, the Nizamuddin *basti*. The paper begins with an explanation of the life and history of the Saint himself before moving on to a consideration of activities at the shrine, especially the thoughts and practices of devotees, and their ways of connecting to the figure of the venerated Saint. The experience of the devotee is divided into two sections, the first dealing with the devotees' connection to the historical figure of the Saint himself, the second with the significance of the dargah's physical location in the Saint's teachings and the practices of his devotees.

Having examined the Saint and his dargah, the essay moves on to an analytical look at the historical circumstances surrounding the development of the Nizamuddin *basti*, from its early stages as a miniscule settlement for the caretakers of the shrine, to its current, denser condition. The historical conditions surrounding the formation of the *basti* are then related to its form today and the ways in which it sustains itself as an urban unit. Through the entire discussion, I suggest that connection to community, land, and place is the unifying link between the life and teachings of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya, and the *basti* that took his name.

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Introduction

In the midst of the historical monuments and posh colonies of South Delhi, the dense tangle of streets known as the Nizamuddin *basti* is an anomaly. As one approaches from Lodhi Road to the West, the *basti* presents a worn but determined face of crooked brown houses, pushing out over the dried up *nallah*, or storm drain, that forms the Western boundary of the neighborhood. From this vantage point, the crowded assemblage of narrow buildings appears no more penetrable than the locked, gated, and guarded walls of the wealthy colonies along Lodhi Road. That the Nizamuddin *basti* is its own, self-contained world, something apart from the Delhi that surrounds it, is obvious at first glance. I embarked on this project in the hopes of discovering how the dargah at Nizamuddin has remained one of the city's most-visited holy places. This investigation led me, perhaps inevitably, to an examination of the neighborhood that surrounds it. How does a place like the *basti* survive in the heart of modern Delhi? What has produced it? What holds it together?

Every question about the *basti* leads eventually to the dargah that sits at its centre and the life of the Saint buried therein. The dargah of Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia is the unquestionable historic, religious, and geographic origin of the neighborhood, the reason it came into existence, and the reason it continues to draw visitors from the world over; its survival through fully seven hundred years of Delhi's turbulent history parallels the *basti's* survival through gentrification in neighboring colonies, the Delhi Development Authority's fight against haphazard construction, and the neighborhood's confused, liminal status in the DDA's development plan. Researching the Saint led always back to the place where he lived; researching the *basti* led continuously to the foundations laid there by the Saint. The essay that follows presents the histories of the Saint and the *basti* as parallels, both sharing the important thread of connection to place and community.

I began by exploring the Saint both as a historical figure and as an object of veneration for modern devotees, using when possible first-hand interviews with them. I supplemented my own interviews, which were of course restricted by my inability to converse in Urdu, with secondary source materials that recorded the experiences of other devotees at the dargah, as well as some that dealt directly with its history. After speaking to the custodians of the dargah, I was given an English translation of a diary purportedly written in the Saint's lifetime. Despite encountering other such documents, I used this as my central historic text simply because it was chosen by a

devotee as exemplary of the Saint's teachings.

Despite the fact that the Saint died some seven centuries ago and the *basti* continues to thrive today, tracking the history of the *basti* proved far more challenging than uncovering that of the Saint himself, requiring both the testimonies of residents, as well as the knowledge and expertise of scholars. When possible, I spoke to residents of the *basti*, otherwise using the information gathered by consultants at the Aga Khan Foundation who, in their work for that organization's development project in the *basti*, have conducted extensive interviews with members of the community otherwise difficult for me to access. Textual sources dealing extensively with the history of the *basti* were difficult to come by as most historians have preferred to focus on the dargah itself, while other sources that might have proved useful were largely in other languages. Most importantly, though, the history of the Nizamuddin *basti* has taken on a life of its own in the minds of its residents and visitors, a life as complex, as cloaked in mystery, and as reverentially guarded as the life of the Saint. The past of the Nizamuddin *basti* is preserved not through history, but through hagiography.

It has been my aim neither to reveal a central truth nor to make overarching claims about the neighborhood I have studied. I have merely tried to point out similarities and confluences between the world of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya's dargah and the neighborhood that surrounds it. In so doing, I have concluded that, even as the dargah becomes less and less relevant to the daily lives of the *basti's* inhabitants, the teachings of the saint persist, as generative now in the production of an identity for the Nizamuddin *basti* as they were seven centuries. The importance of place and community, of syncretism and hospitality, of resistance to invasion remain omnipresent in the deep devotion of the *basti's* residents to the land on which they live and, more importantly, the community that sustains them.

Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya

"Nizamuddin Auliya was one of the pillars of Islam."

"Not was. *Is* one of the pillars of Islam."²

My two interlocutors at the *'urs*—celebrated on the anniversary of the Saint's death—were not really disagreeing, nor were they debating some minor theological quibble. The continued life of the holy man is a central feature of his spiritual importance,

² Anonymous Sufis, conversation with author, 15 April 2009, Nizamuddin dargah, New Delhi, India.

and yet this celebration, the most important of the year for any Sufi Saint, commemorates the day of his physical death. The day before when I had visited the Dargah to speak with its custodians, two members of the Nizami group of families who claim direct descent from the Saint's sister, I described the *'urs* as a death anniversary. Syed Tahir Nizami corrected me: "It is a wedding anniversary—the day the beloved is united with Allah."³ These two features of the Sufi Saint—his eternal presence in the world and his intensely loving relationship with the divine—are essential for the community of worshippers at his tomb today. It is because the Saint's spirit persists at the dargah that the faithful feel they can communicate with him, and because of the Saint's special closeness with the divine that they feel their prayers will be heard more clearly by Allah through him. During the *'urs* people travel from all over the world to visit the place of the Saint's burial; the Saint, despite his special status as intermediary between humanity and the divine, remains grounded in the place of his burial, where his *earthly* body remains. It is a historical figure buried here to whom people pray, and coming here to pray is an act of historical as well as spiritual connection.

The Historical Figure and his Teachings

Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya was born in Badayun, Uttar Pradesh to parents that had migrated from Bokhara in Central Asia.⁴ Among the first important Sufi Saints born on the subcontinent,⁵ Nizamuddin Auliya encouraged the development and spread of medieval Sufi practices amongst Hindus of North India through his emphasis on equality, charity, and religious syncretism. By incorporating traditional ritual practices of the subcontinent—most famously the use of music in worship—Nizamuddin and other great Saints of the Chishti order indigenized Islam on the subcontinent, so much so that scholars and religious figures, both those sympathetic to and those opposed to Sufi practices, have attempted to trace its origins to India.⁶ The Saint's popularity across the subcontinent has not abated in the intervening centuries; indeed, the dargah has survived as an actively worshipped site even through the constant political and geographic upheavals that have shaped Delhi's long history.⁷ The Saint came to the environs of Delhi, specifically the

³ Syed Tahir Nizami and Farid Nizami, interview by author, 14 April 2009, Nizamuddin dargah, New Delhi, India.

⁴ H. Sajun, trans., *A Diary of a Disciple of Nizamuddin Aulia* (Lahore: Talifat-e-Shalidi, 2001), 30.

⁵ Iqtidar Husain Siddiqui, "The Early Chishti Dargahs," in *Muslim Shrines in India: Their Character, History and Significance*, ed. Christian W. Troll (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 3.

⁶ Sir Richard Burton, "The Sufis of Sindh," in *The Sufi Mystery*, ed. Nathaniel P. Archer (New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2007), 137.

⁷ Siddiqui. *Muslim Shrines in India*, 18.

town of Ghiyaspur on the outskirts of the Sultanate city at Siri, and established his *kanqah* (or “hospice”⁸) after being directed there by his predecessor in the Chishti *silsilah*, Sheikh Baba Farid in Ajodhan.⁹ Hazrat Nizamuddin stayed in Ghiyaspur for the remainder of his life, drawing disciples to his *kanqah* through miraculous acts and teachings of the basic Chishti tenets: “love and devotion to God, cultivation of moral virtues, and selfless service to humanity.”¹⁰ His success amongst all populations and his openness to followers of all religious backgrounds has lent to his reputation as a great missionary in the name of Islam.¹¹ Some specifics of these teachings have been preserved in several texts from the period including the Diary of Rajkumar Hardev, a Deccani Prince-cum-disciple, and the *Fawa'id al Fu'ad*, an important text in the *maljuzat* tradition, texts recording conversations between Sufi saints and their disciples.¹²

The former example does more to recount the social world surrounding the *kanqah* of Nizamuddin Auliya than anything else, and yet in so doing it captures the atmosphere of divinity, charity, and religious conciliation around the Saint at its center. Hagiographic tales like “The Miraculous Handkerchief” and “The Story of the *Halwa*,”¹³ deal with the Saint’s extraordinary powers, but more importantly demonstrate his wisdom, his beneficence, and his position of authority even amongst powerful political figures. As a document composed by a Hindu Prince who becomes a disciple of this humble Muslim teacher, the *Diary* gives pride of place to the Saint’s teaching on religious tolerance and cultural syncretism. In an episode early in the text, the Saint encourages his favorite disciple, the poet Amir Khusro, “to write in the Hindi language so that the Muslims may feel inclined toward the Hindus in their everyday speech.”¹⁴ Even today Hindus familiar with Khusro’s poetry will point out that almost all of it is written in Hindi or a related dialect rather than Persian¹⁵ (though this ‘fact’ has been vehemently contested).¹⁶

⁸ A. R. Saiyed, “Saints and Dargahs in the Indian Subcontinent: A Review,” in *Muslim Shrines in India: Their Character, History and Significance*, ed. Christian W. Troll (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 242.

⁹ Sajun, *Diary of a Disciple*, 31.

¹⁰ Abdur Rahman Momin, “Delhi: Dargah of Shaykh Nizmauddin Awliya,” *Marg* 56:1 (2004), 15.

¹¹ Siddiqui, *Muslim Shrines in India*, 11.

¹² Joel Lee, “Sayyid, Sweeper, Butcher, Pir: Hierarchy and Inclusivity in a Fourteenth Century Sufi Text” (unpublished essay, Columbia University) 9.

¹³ Sajun, *Diary of a Disciple*, 85-6, 89.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁵ Soni Suvarna Goswami, conversation with author, 10 April 2009, Jai Singh Ghera Ashram, Vrindavan, India.

¹⁶ Dr. Mohammad Wahid Mirza, *The Life and Works of Amer Khusrau* (Lahore: Panjab University Press, 1962), 5.

In fact, this instance of linguistic diplomacy is secondary compared to the religiously syncretic move that preceded it, namely the acceptance and inclusion of song in Chishti religious practice. In the 13th-14th centuries, the use of music in Muslim religious practice was tremendously controversial, illustrated by the episode near the conclusion of the *Diary* when an emissary of the King interrupts an evening of *qawwali*—the devotional music developed by the Chishti order—crying “ ‘By the King’s command, under punishment by the sword, stop this non-*Sharia* practice! [...] I know that you are a favorite servant of God, but now you are committing a sin and I have been appointed by the King to stop this sin.’ ”¹⁷ As this passage demonstrates, the use of song in devotional practice, derived from the indigenous musical-religious traditions of the sub-continent, stood far outside the orthodoxy of contemporary Muslim practice.¹⁸ By the end of the episode, the King’s emissary has cut all of the ropes that hold up the tent, but it does not collapse, a miraculous occurrence that the Saint explains thus: “ ‘I along with my companions were absorbed in the remembrance of God through this *qawwali*, and it is God who has held up this tent without its ropes.’ ”¹⁹ This episode highlights three of the most important features of the Saint, all of which remain important for the modern life of the dargah, namely his miraculous closeness with the Divine, his disregard for religious orthodoxy in favor of syncretic religious practice, and his flouting of political authority.

While the first two points—the miraculous and the syncretic—are more apparently important for worship at the dargah today, the political overtones of the episode described above, and several others in the *Diary*, should neither be overlooked nor discounted in relation to the modern dargah. In a celebrated story, Nizamuddin Aulia is believed to have said (and I paraphrase here), “My *kanqah* has two doors. If the Emperor enters through one, I will leave through the other.”²⁰ (In the case of King Sultan Mohammed Tuglaq, who famously visited the Saint’s *kanqah*, the Saint supposedly predicted his royal ascendancy, so his relationship with him is that of teacher to follower, rather than subject to King.²¹) The Saint used political resistance as a vehicle for his messages of humility, mercy, and religious tolerance. The story of the Miraculous Handkerchief, in which the Saint’s used handkerchief allows the reigning monarch to see into the homes of his subjects, not only reveals the Saint’s

¹⁷ Sajun, *Diary of a Disciple*, 153.

¹⁸ Amar Nath Khana, *Pilgrim Shrines of India* (New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2003), 72.

¹⁹ Sajun, *Diary of a Disciple*, 153

²⁰ Kamaal Hassan, conversation with author, 7 March 2009, dargah of Sheikh Ala Uddin Sabir, Khaliyar, Uttarakhand, India; Interview with Syed Tahir Nizami, 15 April 2009, Nizamuddin dargah, New Delhi.

²¹ Sajun, *Diary of a Disciple*, 184.

miraculous powers but also his compassion when he says “man is quick to embark on the wrong path. I gave him the handkerchief so that he might become aware of the oppressed and the needy people’s problems and so he could protect them from oppression.”²² In another episode, the Saint’s rejection of the notion of *zimmi*—a non-Muslim under the protection and control of a Muslim ruler—carries both political and religious resonance: “‘We are all God’s *Zimmis*. No human being can be another’s *Zimmi*.’”²³ This political element in the Saint’s teachings appealed directly to oppressed classes, making his *kanqah* a haven for people of low social status, the poor, and, in the case of the *Diary*’s writer, even Hindus, who found themselves subordinated under Muslim rule. Though the Saint’s position vis-à-vis hierarchical social structures is hardly cut and dry, the overarching message of his teaching as it has survived into the present deliberately disregards class distinctions.

Connecting to the Man

Even the least complex draw to the dargah—the miraculous—has as its basis a human connection to the person of the Saint. Many devotees, including devotedly monotheistic Muslims, come to the dargah due to the Saint’s reputed ability to grant wishes and desires, yet these Muslim devotees make an important distinction between the Saint’s role and Allah’s in performing the miracles they seek. For the devotees to whom I spoke, the Saint acted as intercessor, hearing the prayers offered at the dargah and taking them directly to Allah, who actually grants them. It is not uncommon for visitors to seek a cure to infertility or illnesses; others come seeking exorcisms. It is worth repeating that it is specifically through the Saint’s privileged connection to Allah that he is able to perform these miracles. As Nizamuddin Auliya said himself in a story related above, he does not perform miracles, per se, Allah performs them on the behalf of him and his followers. In an article on the dargah and its devotees, Desiderio Pinto relates an exemplary statement made by a worshipper at the dargah: “‘He was a man like us. Therefore he is able to take our case to God, intercede on our behalf, and make us more acceptable to him.’”²⁴ The Saint’s humanity—importantly *not* divinity, allows his devotees closer connection to him, and it is by this connection to the mortal that the miraculous can occur. As Pinto points out, though, many devotees—perhaps even *most*—“visit the dargah on a regular basis [...] without the intention of acquiring

²² Ibid., 86.

²³ Ibid., 21.

²⁴ Desiderio Pinto, “The Mystery of the Nizamuddin Dargah: The Accounts of Pilgrims” in *Muslim Shrines in India: Their Character History and Significance*, ed. Christian W. Troll (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 122.

anything from the saints, the pirs and pirzades”;²⁵ the miraculous is secondary to the spirit of connection and love experienced at the dargah. The devotee prays, then, via a kind of divine social network that begins with what devotees describe as a personal, individual, loving relationship between themselves and the Saint.²⁶

Prayer is but one means by which a devotee can enter into this Sufi network. By its very nature, the Sufi tradition functions as an ancient chain of historical figures stretching back to the Prophet himself. Referred to as a *silsilah*, this genealogy passes from one Sufi *Pir* (teacher) to his *kaliph* (disciple) in an enormous family tree, with orders and branches within orders proliferating through a series of Saints, disciples, and devotees down to the present day. In her book on *qanwali*, Regula Qureshi notes that, even as a Westerner and a woman (doubly an outsider in the inner circles of Sufi tradition), “once part of the Sufi ‘network’ that extends all over the subcontinent” she gained access to participate in events and practices nearly anywhere she wished. She had become part of the extended Sufi family.²⁷ I experienced a similar kind of initiation at the ‘urs of Sheikh Alauddin Sabir in Khaliyar. While sitting amongst a group of Sufis in the expansive *kanqah* that had been formed around the dargah for the several days of celebration, one of several Sufi elders, clearly esteemed by those around him, began divesting himself of his many necklaces. When he placed the last of them around my neck, he repeated to me several times that the stone in the necklace (the same as the stone in his ring) was my connection to him specifically, and to the Sufi tradition, more broadly; it was, he said, my “life stone.”²⁸

One does not typically enter the social order on a mere whim, or merely by being present at the dargah (my situation was unique, and, I expect more a gesture of hospitality than of initiation). A full initiation into a Sufi *silsilah* requires intent and the permission of the *pir*, a process described in Rajkumar Hardev’s *Diary*, and which, according to those Sufis to whom I spoke at the dargah, remains more or less the same today. In fact, the process itself is not particularly complicated. On more than one occasion I was reminded that entering the Chishti *silsilah* (the largest Sufi order in South Asia) requires neither intricate rituals nor formal conversion. Instead, a devotee asks his *pir* for *baiat*, which, according to one *pir* that I met during the ‘urs in Nizamuddin, can be translated as

²⁵ Ibid., 117.

²⁶ Ibid., 119.

²⁷ Regula Qureshi, *Sufi Music of India and Pakistan: Sound, Context, and Meaning in Qanwali* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), xv.

²⁸ Anonymous *Pir*, conversation with author, dargah of Sheikh Ala Uddin Sabir, 7 March 2009, Khaliyar, Uttarakhand, India.

“connection.”²⁹ Usually performed with a simple joining of hands, *baiat* initiates the devotee into the line of teachers and pupils who keep alive the esoteric teachings of the various Sufi *silsilabs*. The teachings and traditions of the order are passed by a simple act of intellectual, spiritual, and physical connection. Today, physical presence is not necessary for the pledging of *baiat*, but connection via another *pir* is. Uzma, a Pakistani woman who has lived in Austria for twenty years whom I met at the *'urs* in Nizamuddin, has her *pir* in Jabalpur (a small city not far from Delhi in Uttarakhand), a place she had not visited until the day before I met her. Instead, she met with a *pir* in Pakistan who connected her with his *pir* in Jabalpur. In spite of the physical remove, the symbolic act of connection must still be undertaken by the disciple, in Uzma's case via another *pir*.³⁰ Sufi saints, then, do not float in a sacred vacuum, but rather are historically embedded in a time and a place within the line of teachers and disciples. This historical thrust is manifest in the structure of the Dargah itself, where the Saint's tomb occupies a central place and is surrounded by the graves of his disciples, which receive varying levels of devotion depending on their respective historical statures. When devotees pray at the dargah, they are praying to a specific historical figure who remains connected to the place and the time in which he lived.

Connecting to the Land

Though modern global realities have opened up possibilities of geographic remove, physical presence with the *pir* remains ideal, as evidenced by Uzma's trip to India; clearly the draw of place still plays importantly in the sacred grammar of worship at the dargah of Nizamuddin Auliya. Though Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya remains among the most prominent figures in South Asian Islam, the major holy spot associated with him is the dargah at the heart of his namesake neighborhood, the place of his burial, the place where his *physical* remains lay. Of course, it is the persistence of the Saint's *spirit* that draws worshippers and disciples to the dargah, yet it is due to the presence of his bodily remains, the fact that this is the place where he chose to be buried, that devotees think of the dargah as “the place where he is ‘most certainly present.’”³¹ Worshippers travel great distances to this and other Sufi shrines, particularly at the time of the *'urs* when homes are opened to traveling devotees, and food, or *langah*, is provided in great quantities to any who want it. These periods of pilgrimage, in fact, have a transformative effect on the

²⁹ Pir Mohammad A. Awan, interview by Author, 15 April 2009, Nizamuddin dargah, New Delhi, India.

³⁰ Uzma Zafar, interview by author, 15 April 2009, Nizmauddin dargah, New Delhi, India.

³¹ Pinto, “Mystery of the Nizamuddin Dargah,” 118.

neighborhood, and not an entirely positive one. The dargah in Nizamuddin actually sees its busiest time in October when it becomes an important stopping point on the route to Ajmer, where the *‘urs* of Shaikh Mu‘inuddin Chishti is celebrated. During this period immense crowds descend on the neighborhood, crowds so large as to put a considerable strain on the area’s resources and infrastructure.³²

On my visits to the Dargah during the Saint’s *‘urs* in mid-April, during which the crowds are somewhat smaller, though still formidable, I encountered a delegation from Pakistan (many visiting Delhi for the first time), a couple that has lived in Austria for the last twenty years, and a man from Northern Virginia. By some means or another, each of these far-flung individuals traces his or her spiritual lineage to the man buried here in Nizamuddin. The traditions of hospitality still practiced at the *‘urs*, and the event’s ability to draw thousands of people from across India, the subcontinent, and the world,³³ come directly from the historical figure of the Saint. Now as then, the Saint’s reputation for generosity and hospitality is known across the subcontinent. As was the case with Rajkumar Hardev, visitors of many backgrounds come from great distances and are offered hospitality and food by the Saint and those who make their residence nearby. Coming to the Saint’s dargah today is, in a sense, equivalent to attending his *kanqah* in the fourteenth century; the devotee comes to be in the presence of the saint, to seek his aid, and to offer respect.

The tomb of the Saint, which has been built, rebuilt, and renovated over the centuries under the patronage of aristocrats, sultans, and kings, exerts a sort of gravitational pull on the neighborhood, the dargah complex, and the people that occupy both. The closer one gets to Nizamuddin, the greater the density of tombs and graves. From the monumental structures of the Lodhi Gardens, to Humayun’s tomb and its adjacent graveyard, to the numerous small dargahs and anonymous graves dotting the neighborhood itself, these tombs were built on these sites primarily for their closeness to the sacred energy of the Saint.³⁴ “It was a basically a shortcut to heaven if you were buried close to the Saint,” explained Shveta Mathur, a consultant for the Aga Khan Foundation’s revitalization and preservation project in Nizamuddin, adding that the entire area was once one large graveyard.³⁵ Similarly, a walk through the

³² Shveta Mathur, interview by author, 30 April 2009, Aga Khan Foundation Offices, Jangpura, New Delhi, India.

³³ Sajun, *Diary of a Disciple*, 70.

³⁴ Dr. Mary Storm, on-site lecture, 9 March 2009, Humayun’s Tomb, New Delhi, India.

³⁵ Mathur, interview by author, 30 April 2009.

neighborhood of Nizamuddin finds the density of population and commerce increasing the nearer one gets to the dargah.

Inside the dargah complex, the 16th century, Mughal-built marble dome occupies the same place in relation to the 14th century Jama'at Khanah Mosque—claimed by some to be the oldest active mosque in Delhi³⁶—as the pool of sacred water used for ablutions in Mughal period mosques. Surmounted by a lotus, the dome even resembles a delicate fountain. Though I do not want to make too much of the symbolism embedded in this architectural gesture—after all, the Mosque is not a Mughal period mosque—it is interesting to note that, just as the faithful purify themselves through ablutions before approaching Allah in prayer, so too do devotees say that the Saint “is able to take our case to God, intercede on our behalf, and make us more acceptable to him.”³⁷ The Saint effectively becomes the sacred font, purifying the prayers of his devotees such that God will hear them. At any time of day other than the five standard prayer times, a visitor to the dargah will find most devotees facing the tomb of the Saint rather than Mecca to the west. Trance-inducing *qawwali* is always performed facing the dargah. Once during the evening prayer, I observed a member of the Nizami family offer his prayers facing Mecca as tradition dictates, but finish by turning to face the tomb and offer his prayers in that direction as well. The saint and his tomb fulfill an important role in the geographic symbolism of the faith practiced at the dargah, never superceding Mecca or the Prophet (the dome of the tomb, for example, is lower than the highest point of the adjacent mosque), but functioning in a similar way, drawing its devotees with a magnetic force second only to that of Mecca itself. The dargah, and the Saint buried there, act as an axis, or *qutb* (also an honorific for a Sufi holy man) connecting the earthly world to the divine. When devotees touch the grave itself—or in the case of women, the marble screen surrounding it—they are touching an axis that runs from the tangible earth to the heavens, connecting themselves to the divine through the Saint, thus realizing the individual connection to the divine, and the presence of the divine in every person, so essential in Sufi thought.³⁸

The Nizamuddin Basti

What is the relationship between the modern place surrounding the dargah, and the historical structure and person that form its center? It goes without saying that the historical location to which devotees are so drawn is far from the same place it was when

³⁶ Khana, *Pilgrim Shines of India*, 74.

³⁷ Pinto, “Mystery of the Nizamuddin Dargah,” 122.

³⁸ A.M.A Shusherry, “Philosophy, Training, Orders, and Ethics,” in *The Sufi Mystery*, ed. Nathaniel P. Archer (New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2007), 65.

Nizamuddin himself lived there. Once a humble town outside the imperial city to its south, Ghiyaspur—which, according to the popular mythology, became Nizamuddin immediately following the Saint’s death—now stands at Delhi’s geographic and cultural heart. In the intervening centuries, tombs, mosques, forts, and capitals have risen on all sides of Nizamuddin, and often next door. In the 16th century the Purana Qila sprung up just to the north, and not long after, the Emperor who began it added his grandiose and celebrated tomb to the graves of those that sought burial within the auspicious environs of the Saint’s final resting place. Shahjahanabad, Lutyens’ New Delhi, the post-Independence colonies, and now the seemingly endless urban development sprawling across Haryana and Uttar Pradesh—Nizamuddin’s dargah has borne witness to all this over 700 years of Delhi’s history. There is a famous tale that was repeated to me on multiple occasions, although it does not appear exactly this way in Hardev’s *Diary*. The Saint decided to construct a *baoli*, or step-well, near the site of what would later be his dargah, which involved men who were also working on the construction of the Emperor’s new city at Tughluqabad. Seeing the Saint as competition, the Emperor ordered Nizamuddin to desist in his project. According to Kamaal Hassan, my first contact at the dargah, the Saint refused by saying, ‘your city will be a ruin, but my well will still be here.’ Kamaal relayed this story to me while we stood looking down into that well, which is adjacent to the dargah. “He was right,” he said. “Here is Hazrat’s well, and Tughluqabad is in ruins.”³⁹ He neglected to point out that the restoration work currently underway thanks to the Aga Khan Foundation only started when one of the *baoli*’s walls began to collapse; this was irrelevant. The continuity of the place was the central point.

A Village, a Slum, a Master Plan

Ironically, despite the fact that residents of Nizamuddin will often tell you that their neighborhood is one of the oldest in Delhi, the settlement now known as the Nizamuddin *basti*—the village-like tangle of alleys directly surrounding the dargah—has only existed in its present form for about sixty years.⁴⁰ A photograph displayed prominently in the Jangpura offices of the Aga Khan Foundation, taken from the dome of Humayun’s Tomb in the mid-19th century, shows a view over the ruins of the surrounding area (Appendix A). The many-domed skyline of this photograph reveals a plethora of buildings, many still standing, others long since lost. Noticeably absent from the photograph are the modern colonies of South Delhi,

³⁹ Kamaal Hassan, conversation with author, 19 February 2009, Nizamuddin dargah, New Delhi.

⁴⁰ Tara Sharma, interview by author, Aga Khan Foundation offices, 30 April 2009, New Delhi.

and any indication of permanent settlement around the Dargah. Given the frequent claims of the antiquity of the neighborhood, and the labyrinthine streets most nearly akin to those found in Delhi's medieval neighborhoods, I was surprised to discover that the Nizamuddin *basti* is, in fact, a very recent phenomenon. While the dargah itself has existed in some form or another for seven centuries, worshipped continuously, and attracting the patronage and veneration of kings, it was not until the flood of refugees following Partition that a major settlement around the dargah appeared on Delhi's map.⁴¹ For centuries, the area surrounding the dargah was essentially a graveyard with a small settlement occupied exclusively by the *pirzade*, families claiming descent from the Saint. In the years preceding Partition, no one outside the *pirzade* community could enter the settlement, let alone live there.⁴² According to development consultants at the Aga Khan Foundation, major development around the dargah—the kind visible in the *basti* today—did not appear on maps of Delhi until the early 1940s, and even then only as small *pucca* houses.⁴³

The confusion surrounding the historical status of the settlement at the Nizmauddin *basti* has undoubtedly been exacerbated by similar confusion over the area's status in Delhi's developmental plans. Following 1962, the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) set into motion a plan that divided the city into self-sufficient zones, each with areas designated for commercial, residential, and public uses, and allowances made for those preexisting settlements that would be absorbed in the massively expanded city.⁴⁴ Since the implementation of the first Master Plan, Delhi has engulfed nearly 400 of these settlements, officially classified as 'urban villages.' Though the 1999 DDA Zonal Plan for the New Delhi area refers to the Nizamuddin *basti* as an old village, the map shows no such special designation for the area (see Appendix B).⁴⁵ In fact, the map does not distinguish in any way between the *basti* and the wealthy colony of Nizamuddin West that merges with it to the South.⁴⁶ Neither does the Nizamuddin *basti* appear on the DDA Land Management webpage's list of acquired villages.⁴⁷ My contacts at the Aga Khan

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Patricia Jeffrey, *Frogs in a Well: Indian Women in Purdah* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2000), 10.

⁴³ Sharma, interview by author, 30 April 2009.

⁴⁴ Ranjana Sengupta, *Delhi metropolitan* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2007) 45-6.

⁴⁵ Delhi Development Authority, "Zonal Development Plan: Zone (Division-'D' New Delhi)," http://www.dda.org.in/planning/zonal_plans.htm (accessed April 23, 2009).

⁴⁶ R.S. Gusain, *Zonal Development Plan: Zone (Division-'D' New Delhi)* (New Delhi: Delhi Development Authority, 1999), 65.

⁴⁷ Delhi Development Authority, "Village and Khasara Details," <http://www.dda.org.in/ddausers/LMIS/default.aspx> (accessed April 23, 2009).

Foundation were both under the impression that the *basti* qualified as an urban village. They cited the unrestricted building in the area as evidence that it must be exempt from standard New Delhi residential building codes. Conversely, a 1990 article in *Economic and Political Weekly* states clearly, “Nizamuddin is not ‘*laldora* land’, a status that enables a Delhi ‘village’ to claim beneficial commercial subsidies and to build without restrictions common in Delhi’s planned sectors.”⁴⁸ Much of the character of the settlement as it appears today is the direct result of its strange, liminal status in Delhi’s urban bureaucracy.

The commercial life of the *basti*, focused almost exclusively on sales relating to Islamic religious life, and limited to only a few locations, seems to support *Economic and Political Weekly*’s assessment. A look at the DDA’s most recent Zonal Plan classifies “Hazrat Nizamuddin (East and West)” as areas where “no retail shops or household industry are to be allowed.”⁴⁹ Note that here, as elsewhere, the DDA fails to differentiate between the *basti* and its wealthier neighbors. Without acknowledging the *basti* as a separate geographical or social unit, the DDA implicitly applies the same restrictions to all three neighborhoods. The only commercial areas in the *basti* can be found on the lane leading to the dargah, and the street directly in front of the center for the Tablighi Jama’at, a conservative religious organization that competes with the dargah for dominance in Nizamuddin’s religious life. These shops deal almost exclusively in specifically religious goods—copies of the Quran, and recordings of *qammali*—with some small eateries mixed in. The type of commerce that typically springs up in South Delhi’s urban villages—“mechanical workshops, petty offices, Xerox shops”—is largely absent from Nizamuddin.⁵⁰ According to Mr. Shabi Ahmad, a consultant with the Indian Council of Historical Research and a forty-year *basti* resident, only the street near the Tablighi Jama’at is zoned for commercial use. Mr. Ahmad told me that, as far as he knows, the *basti* actually falls under the auspices of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi’s Slums Division, despite the Aga Khan Foundation’s researchers’ finding that the majority of residents there actually live above the poverty line.⁵¹ Mr. Ahmad explained that this apparent discrepancy has something to do with revenue reports appearing in the Gazetteer of Delhi produced by the English some 200 years ago.⁵² Exactly how and why the neighborhood’s current status is related to a centuries-old, colonial report was not entirely clear to me, nor did it seem particularly clear to Mr. Adhmad himself.

⁴⁸ Pradip Datta, et. al., “Understanding Communal Violence: Nizamuddin Riots,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 25:45 (Nov. 10, 1990), 2489.

⁴⁹ Gusain, *Zonal Development Plan*, 25.

⁵⁰ Datta, et. al., “Communal Violence,” 2488.

⁵¹ Mathur, interview by author, 30 April 2009.

⁵² Shabi Ahmad, interview by author, 2 May 2009, Nizmauddin *basti*, New Delhi.

The Modern Making of an Ancient Town

Nizamuddin's strange absence from Delhi's urban plan notwithstanding, Mr. Ahmad, like many *basti* residents, insists on the presence of a settlement in the area since the time of the Saint's death. Sitting with me in his living room, hidden at the end of a lane in the heart of the *basti*, Mr. Ahmad pulled a tattered book from his shelf, an Urdu translation of the Persian *Seru Manazil*, penned by Sangin Baig in 1827 after a commission from Charles Metcalfe and William Fraser. Mr. Ahmad opened the book and translated for me from the Urdu into English: "There is a rainwater drain behind Abki-Sarai and *kotla* Nizamuddin *abadi*.' *Kotla* means settlement, *abadi* means population. There must have been a settlement even in 1830."⁵³ Mr. Ahmad pointed also to the presence of ancient mosques and wells in the neighborhood, all of which date back at least 100 years, as clear indicators of permanent settlement. Such structures, he believes, would only have sprung up in an area with at least some settlement.⁵⁴ The *kotla* mentioned by Baig was probably the *pirzade* settlement, which, according to Mr. Ahmad, would have housed no more than a few hundred people—perhaps a small enough settlement not to show up in the photograph at Aga Khan's offices. If this is the case, then the idea of the Nizamuddin *basti* proposed to me by residents does not necessarily contradict that forwarded by Ms. Sharma and Ms. Mathur at the Agha Khan Foundation. So long as a handful of families can trace their roots back to the dargah, so long as ancient mosques, wells, and graveyards dot the landscape, the whole neighborhood will remain ancient in the historical imagination of its inhabitants.

Ms. Mathur, Ms. Sharma, and Mr. Ahmad agree that the current character of the *basti* is indeed a modern phenomenon. Starting in the Partition era, and continuing to this day, a steady flow of immigration has ensured Nizamuddin's regular growth. Walking with me down the narrow lanes leading to his house, Mr. Ahmad described the neighborhood as it was when his family first settled there in 1966: "All of this was open space or graveyard. There were two or three families on this lane. There has been a lot of vertical development in the last twenty years."⁵⁵ Though the area has certainly grown considerably since Mr. Ahmad first arrived in the mid-60s, by then the Muslim personality of the area, had been solidly forged—like so much of Delhi's character today—in the crucible of Partition. With the eruption of communal violence across Delhi, and

⁵³ Sangin Baig, *Seru Manazil*, trans by Shabi Ahmed during interview by author, 2 May 2009, interviewee's home, Nizamuddin *basti*, New Delhi.

⁵⁴ Ahmad, interviews by author, 2 May 2009.

⁵⁵ Shabi Ahmad, interview by author, 1 May 2009, Nizamuddin *basti*, New Delhi.

the mass exodus of Muslims to Pakistan, many of the Muslim families that chose to remain in Delhi abandoned their homes and fled to refugee colonies. One of the most populous of these colonies was in the area that we now know as the Nizamuddin *basti*.⁵⁶ Though written first-hand accounts are largely unavailable, it is clear enough that Nizamuddin was chosen as a safe haven for Muslim families at the time due to the powerful presence of the dargah, and the perceived safety lent by an area with strong historic associations with Islam. Whether or not immigrants at the time chose Nizamuddin for explicitly religious reasons, to one extent or another the dargah exerted a kind of protective force for Delhi's suddenly endangered Muslim population. As these migrants settled precariously on the tiny patch of land around the dargah, the areas just to the east—the neighborhoods that are now Nizamuddin East and West—were acquired by the government for sale to incoming Hindu families fleeing from communal violence in the Punjab.⁵⁷ These neighborhoods have since become “the most upmarket of the erstwhile refugee colonies.”⁵⁸

According to Mr. Ahmad, the two major population booms of Nizamuddin occurred in the wake of Partition, and in the 1980s,⁵⁹ a time, as Patricia Jeffrey notes in the introduction to her book *Frogs in a Well*, “when ‘communal’ politics took centre stage to a degree that had not been seen since the troubled period leading up to the events of 1947.”⁶⁰ These spikes in communal tension apparently coincide with major periods of growth in Nizamuddin's population. Without a full knowledge of the historical circumstances surrounding the growing population of the neighborhood, I cannot assert a definite causal relationship between increased communal tensions and migration of Muslim families to Nizamuddin, yet the correspondence between the two is striking. Though communal tension has only once led to violence in Nizamuddin (in a minor skirmish in 1990), it remains very much alive in the national psyche, a constant looming threat that seems to inform nearly every political, social, and religious reality, particularly for the marginalized Muslim community. No wonder, then, that the population boom, beginning in the 1980s with that second spike in communal tension, has still not abated.⁶¹ As in the time of Partition, Muslim families threatened in their home communities by violence, or by social and economic systems that make upward mobility an impossibility, continue to seek out Nizamuddin when they arrive in Delhi, at least in part due to its

⁵⁶ Sengupta, *Delhi Metropolitan*, 74.

⁵⁷ Jeffrey, *Frogs in a Well*, vii.

⁵⁸ Sengupta 82.

⁵⁹ Ahmad, interview by author, 1 May 2009.

⁶⁰ Jeffrey, *Frogs in a Well*, viii

⁶¹ Ahmad, interview by author, 1 May 2009.

historically Muslim identity.⁶²

While Muslim identity certainly played a large part in the development of Nizamuddin following Partition, Ms. Mathur emphasized repeatedly the importance of Nizamuddin's location in attracting large migrant communities.⁶³ As we have seen, location was hardly incidental to the Saint himself. As I have already discussed, settling in Ghiyaspur, with its close proximity to, and equally important independence from, the Sultanate city of Delhi placed the Saint and his often-controversial teachings⁶⁴ at an important political crossroads. Regardless of Delhi's status within the politics of the subcontinent, it has always held a central place in the political movement across North India. This high traffic level has long helped to keep the dargah alive; even when Delhi was abandoned under the reign of Muhammad-bin-Tughluq, the dargah at Nizamuddin attracted followers.⁶⁵ Today, the accessibility of Nizamuddin's dargah continues to distinguish it from others around North India, and even those elsewhere in Delhi. When I visited the dargah at Khaliyar in Uttarakhand, its remoteness was sited as an important point of distinction between it and the better-known dargah of Nizamuddin. The hagiography of the Saint buried there actually explicates its remoteness by saying that the Saint's passionate and fiery power—his *jalah*—prevented even birds from flying over his burial place for more than three hundred years.⁶⁶ Conversely, Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya's generosity and kindness made him the perpetual center of a social circle, amongst devotees at his *kanqah* in his lifetime, and amongst the visitors at his dargah in death. More recently, Delhi's rapid expansion to the South has found Nizamuddin directly in the city's center. Within walking distance of major train and bus stations, Nizamuddin *basti* is among the most easily accessible locations in Delhi. According to Ms. Mathur, many residents of the neighborhood have cited accessibility of transportation as an important reason for remaining in the Nizamuddin *basti* in spite of growing space and sanitation concerns.⁶⁷ From Nizamuddin, one can easily reach any part of Delhi, or North India. Interestingly, one of the custodians at the dargah cites this practical accessibility as one of the reasons for the dargah's popularity above those of the other major Chishti Saints in Delhi.⁶⁸ Connection, always important to the Saint, has now taken on a distinctly modern

⁶² Datta, et. al., "Communal Violence," 2491.

⁶³ Mathur, interview by author, 30 April 2009.

⁶⁴ Dalrymple, *City of Djinn*s, 276

⁶⁵ Siddiqui, *Muslim Shrines in India*, 18-19.

⁶⁶ Hassan, interview by author, 7 March 2009.

⁶⁷ Mathur, interview by author, 30 April 2009.

⁶⁸ Scott Kugle and Bruce Lawrence, "Delhi Dargahs: the Chishti Strategy for Survival in 21st Century India" (unpublished article, Henry Martyn Institute, 2009) 8.

vehicular valence.

Connection and community have been the primary productive forces in the Nizamuddin *basti* from the first. The authors of the article in *Economic and Political Weekly* observe: “the layout of the graveyards around the dargah [...] suggests a sense of community among the dead, a community that is linked to the living through a shared desire for *barkat* (grace) from the saint.”⁶⁹ Thus, ‘community’ of one kind or another—be it amongst the living or the dead—has existed at the dargah whether or not we can find historical agreement on when, or in what kind of settlement, that community developed there. The contingent factors that have shaped that community over the years resemble nothing more than the central institution of the Saint’s lifetime: his *kanqah*. Though Nizamuddin always kept with him a close circle of preferred disciples—analogous to their supposed descendents who constituted the first small settlement around the tomb—descriptions of the perpetually crowded *kanqah* refer often to ‘visitors’ and ‘guests.’⁷⁰ (In his account of the Saint, William Dalrymple says “he likened his own role among his disciples to that of a well-mannered host towards a group of simple guests.”⁷¹) In its formative years, the Nizamuddin *basti* was formed by an influx of such ‘guests,’ refugees seeking shelter in the safety of a Muslim locale. Like Rajkumar Hardev before them, these numerous new residents began as guests but, in settling in Nizamuddin and committing themselves to the place by permanent construction, were not only accepted into a community, but were granted access to, and even possession of, its historic past. Today, the living and the dead, the Sufi and the orthodox, even the Hindu and Muslim share Nizamuddin together, but by one circumstance or another it seems that most of them have been drawn there by the dargah, which continues to occupy its central place in the life and imagination of the Nizamuddin *basti*.

Nizamuddin’s Open Door

On the larger scale of modern Delhi, the recreation of the *kanqah* requires more than evoking a spiritual ‘home’, as *kanqah* was translated for me several times.⁷² In its newer form, the Nizamuddin ‘*kanqah*’ has had to embrace many from outside, including those that have not come voluntarily to seek the Saint’s grace—visitors as well as immigrants of all religions, origins, and socio-economic backgrounds turn up regularly at the Saint’s door. Today, patterns of migration to Nizamuddin continue in much the same way that they

⁶⁹ Datta, et. al., “Communal Violence,” 2488.

⁷⁰ Sajun, *Diary of a Disciple*, 8.

⁷¹ Dalrymple, *City of Djinn*s, 275.

⁷² Awan, interview by author, 15 April 2009.

have for decades, though now those seeking refuge in the neighborhood regularly come from Bihar and Bangladesh, seeking improved socio-economic opportunity rather than protection from violent communal frenzy. Generally, these new immigrants live on the periphery of the community, squatting on median strips, constructing *jbuggi* villages in parks, and, until a large-scale clearing project two years ago, making homes in the *nallah*, or drain, that runs along the western edge of the neighborhood.⁷³ One such area nearby has developed around the site of two possibly Mughal-era Sufi tombs, with the thirty or so families living there—mostly migrants from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh—employed in the construction of a new dargah. The draw of the Saint, which led these two Sufis to seek burial in the area, has now obliquely attracted thirty new families, though it is impossible to say how many will remain once construction is complete. It would be excessive to color acceptance of such settlements as hospitality on the part of *basti* residents. Still, in the past, the *pirzada* and other inhabitants of the *basti* have allowed poor immigrant communities to continue settling in their vicinity without charging rent, and without alerting the government to their highly illegal presence.⁷⁴

More often the *basti's* hospitality applies to visiting worshippers. In the tradition of the Saint, whose *kanqah*, according to Hardev's *Diary*, played constant host to those passing through on the way into or out of the capital,⁷⁵ Nizamuddin puts on its most vibrant face for those visitors drawn to the dargah from around the city, country, and world. Ms. Sharma suggested, based on her observations of practices at the dargah, that the majority of devotees there now are actually from outside the *basti* area,⁷⁶ a suggestion confirmed with assurance by Mr. Ahmad, who says that relatively few of the neighborhood's residents actually use the dargah as their primary religious center.⁷⁷ Though as of now there are no statistics tracking how many worshippers at the dargah come from within the community and how many from without, on a recent visit to the *basti* on a Thursday night—the most popular at the dargah—Ms. Sharma and Mr. Ahmad's assertion seemed particularly plausible based on the hugely increased number of cars parked around the neighborhood's periphery (easily double the usual number), and the crowds of people moving directly from the gates of the dargah toward the two or three primary points of exit from the *basti* back into greater Delhi. The significantly increased presence of merchants for those few hours on Thursday nights points also to the increased traffic of visitors come

⁷³ Mathur, interview by author, 30 April 2009.

⁷⁴ Datta, et. al., "Communal Violence," 2491.

⁷⁵ Sajun, *Diary of a Disciple*, 51, 74, 85, 90, 103, 107, 126, 144, 174.

⁷⁶ Sharma, interview by author, 30 April 2009.

⁷⁷ Ahmad, interview with author, 2 May 2009.

to worship at the dargah. In recent years, the popularity of worship on Thursday nights at the Tablighi Jama'at Masjid has also added to the increased congestion of the *basti* on those evenings.

Though the primary draw of Nizamuddin has always been its Muslim identity and the great institution of the dargah that helped to forge it, residents to whom I have spoken pride themselves on the near absence of communal violence from their neighborhood, and the approximately 10% of the population that is Hindu living amongst them.⁷⁸ Conversely, upon finding out that I was living near and doing my research on the Nizamuddin *basti*, one or two wealthier inhabitants of other parts of Delhi have ominously said 'there are a lot of Muslims there [in Nizamuddin],' with the implicit observation that there are *not* a lot of Muslims here (wherever that may be). The population of Nizamuddin West, largely comprised of Partition-era Punjabi migrant families who have accumulated considerable wealth,⁷⁹ has even attempted to keep the small number of wealthy Muslim families in the neighborhood from participating in residents' committees and other civic activities.⁸⁰ The difference in tone between residents of the typical (read: Hindu, affluent), South Delhi colony, and the dense, ramshackle *basti* is remarkable. More remarkable, perhaps, is the extent to which the Nizamuddin dargah actually lives up to its claims of universal appeal and openness. On any given day, Muslims pray alongside Hindus and Christians, while the inner courtyard teems with seemingly equal numbers of beggars, itinerants, and visitors from various social strata.

A Different Communal Difference

If any kind of internal tension predominates in the Nizamuddin *basti*, it is that between competing Muslim groups. In the 1930s the Tablighi Jama'at established its center on the lane that connects what is now the major thoroughfare of Mathura Road directly to the dargah. With its conservative push for a return to traditional Islam—or 're-conversion' to Islam—the Tablighi requires a turn away from the syncretic traditions of Sufism,⁸¹ and stands in direct opposition to the institution of the dargah. In an as yet-unpublished article, Drs. Scott Kugle and Bruce Lawrence suggest that "Tablighi popularity can be imagined as "parasitic" on the esteem Sufis enjoy," using the thoroughfares, commercial structures, and constant flow of visitors produced by the dargah as a means to

⁷⁸ Kamal Hassan, Syed Tahir Nizami, various conversations, Nizamuddin dargah, New Delhi; Datta, et. al., 2488; Mathur, interview by author, 30 April 2009.

⁷⁹ Sengupta, *Delhi Metropolitan*, 82.

⁸⁰ Datta, et. al., "Communal Violence," 2489.

⁸¹ Kugle et al., "Delhi Dargahs," 20.

spread a conservative message.⁸² Despite an apparently adversarial relationship to the dargah, the Tablighi's choice to establish itself in Nizamuddin in the 1930s was motivated by proximity to the dargah and its magnetic draw on Muslim communities across India, as evidenced by the Tablighi's tactical use of rhetoric drawn from the Saint. Much scholarship has credited Sufism with the rapid spread of Islam in South Asia, with Nizamuddin Auliya as one of the most revered missionary forces of the medieval period.⁸³ The Tablighi Jama'at, for whom public preaching and the rhetoric of conversion play a central role, claim, according to Mr. Ahmad, " 'we preach Islam, so we are the true descendents of Nizamuddin Auliya.' ”⁸⁴ Thus, even an organization positioning itself against the syncretic Sufi tradition of the dargah has attached itself to the historical figure buried there to legitimize its place in the community.

Despite any such in-fighting in Nizamuddin's Muslim community, the *basti* is ultimately just that: a community. Although *Economic and Political Weekly* states “the widely assumed concept of a coherent, unified, organised Muslim community remain[s] widely unrealised,”⁸⁵ Islam, in some form or another, has undoubtedly been the single greatest force in shaping the Nizamuddin *basti* as it exists today. It was because of the presence and draw of the dargah that, following Partition, the land now known as the *basti* superceded other historic settlements in the vicinity as a refuge for Muslim migrants.⁸⁶ As both the Aga Khan Foundation and Mr. Ahmad have confirmed, any habitation around the *basti* preceding Partition would have been reserved for those directly associated with the dargah, lending the area its reputation as historically Muslim. The original character of the area has survived primarily in the form of tombs and mosques, all of which were built there because of the dargah. It was this history, so deeply tied to Islam, that drew the first migrant communities to the neighborhood, transforming it into one of the most important centers of the Muslim community in modern Delhi. Today, Mr. Ahmad suspects, only about one third of the neighborhood's permanent residents depend on the dargah for their livelihood (the Aga Khan Foundation estimates even fewer), and probably fewer still pray there regularly.⁸⁷ More strikingly, the presence of the Tablighis—easily spotted by their particular mode of dress⁸⁸—appears to overwhelm the neighborhood. In reality, the Tablighi population is largely a floating one, drawn to the center for short periods, with relatively few residents of the *basti* permanently

⁸² Kugle et al., “Delhi Dargahs,” 22.

⁸³ Siddiqui, *Muslim Shrines of India*, 19.

⁸⁴ Ahmad, interview by author, 2 May 2009.

⁸⁵ Datta, et. al., “Communal Violence,” 2491.

⁸⁶ Ahmad, interview by author, 2 May 2009.

⁸⁷ Ahmad, interview by author, 2 May 2009.

⁸⁸ Kugle et al., “Delhi Dargahs,” 22.

associated with the organization.⁸⁹ Yet even if we include this floating population in an analysis of the *basti*, I would argue that neither the growing power of the Tablighi Jama'at, nor the apparent indifference of many *basti* residents to the dargah, can ultimately detract from the its centrality to the neighborhood. Though at most a handful of families can claim ancestral antecedents in the *basti*, anyone that has settled there for its Muslim character has entered into a history generated by and around the dargah. Even those adversaries of Sufism contextualize themselves in the *basti* via the personality of the Saint.

Sleeping in the Monuments, Living for the Land

Still, the general population of the Nizamuddin *basti* is not preoccupied with the neighborhood's past. When I asked Mr. Ahmad if residents of the *basti* cared particularly about the history of their neighborhood, he shook his head no: "They have no sense of history. They sleep in the monuments."⁹⁰ While visitors from outside the *basti* flock there to connect to the Saint, the neighborhood itself is sustained more by a connection to place. Despite the neighborhood's problems with congestion, sanitation, access to health care, and education (all problems the Aga Khan Foundation hopes to tackle in coming years), most residents of the *basti* would not leave if given the option.⁹¹ Many of the reasons for this are practical. As I discussed before, the neighborhood's location has played an important part in its development and sustenance over the years. Today, Nizamuddin offers unparalleled access to other parts of the city and the country, and despite the neighborhood's appearance of poverty, the majority of the *basti*'s permanent residents live above the poverty line.⁹² In fact, due to its location, the *basti* actually has considerably better access to utilities than far more luxurious neighborhoods elsewhere in the city, with twenty-four-hour access to water nearly all year long, and a minimum of power cuts.⁹³ "In some ways," Shveta Mathur said to me, laughing, "the quality of life is far batter in the *basti* than in lots of East Delhi."

More importantly, a unifying sense of community engenders deep feelings of security for residents of the *basti* unique in notoriously dangerous Delhi. In the Nizamuddin *basti* people know one another. Walking with me through the congested alleys of the *basti*, Kamaal would stop constantly to speak with his friends and neighbors; I never saw this conviviality replicated in Nizamuddin's

⁸⁹ Ahmad, interview by author, 2 May 2009.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Mathur, interview by author, 30 April 2009

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

wealthier, more spacious neighbors. So far as I could tell, the only place in Nizamuddin West that appeared to draw any crowd of ‘regulars’ was the tea shop near the market where, perhaps not surprisingly, the clientele was comprised predominantly of Muslim residents of the crowded, social streets of the *basti*. In her chapter on urban villages, Sengupta records an interviewee from Chiragh Delhi saying “that the village [is] by and large safer than other parts of Delhi because it [is] smaller and because ‘everyone knows your family.’”⁹⁴ According to Mathur, who has done extensive interviews in the neighborhood, even women say that they feel safe, an uncommon state of affairs in greater Delhi. Those outside often view the neighborhood suspiciously, some because of its publicly Muslim majority, others because of the impoverished populations living on its periphery, which give the area a reputation amongst some for illicit drug activity.⁹⁵ While traditionally the *basti* residents have allowed these communities to set up on the periphery of their neighborhood, there is always a clear distinction between those that live in the *basti* itself and those that subside on its fringes.⁹⁶

Even these peripheral groups generally share in the unifying Muslim identity of the neighborhood. Though Muslim identity has caused the neighborhood’s growth over the decades while helping to preserve its timeless quality, “Nizamuddin’s stability is not simply self-generating; it is enforced by an implicit communal bias in urban planning.”⁹⁷ Though I have focused thus far on the generative aspects of Muslim identity in Nizamuddin, negative communal realities have also informed the *basti*’s growth. Like so many of Delhi’s predominantly Muslim neighborhoods, Nizamuddin remains considerably poorer than any of the surrounding, Hindu-majority neighborhoods. And communal injustice has not gone unnoticed. At a political rally for the BSP held near the Tablighi Jama’at Center in April of 2009, a series of speakers appealed to the collective sense of disenfranchisement amongst the neighborhood’s Muslims in India’s current political establishment. The people to whom I was able to speak at the rally, when asked why they were voting for the BSP, gave as their primary explanation the fact that the party had nominated a Muslim candidate.⁹⁸ One of the speakers at the rally—the favorite of the evening, based on the crowd’s reception—built his speech around the repeated refrain “*Here, we are a majority!*” appealing to the solidarity of a community whose Muslim identity has

⁹⁴ Sengupta, *Delhi Metropolitan*, 150.

⁹⁵ Mathur, interview by author, 30 April 2009; Tapan Chakravarty, interview by author, 30 April 2009, New Delhi.

⁹⁶ Datta, et. al., “Communal Violence,” 2491.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2488

⁹⁸ Observers at BSP political rally, conversations with author, 27 April 2009, Nizamuddin, New Delhi.

long defined it.⁹⁹ This seems at odds initially with residents' pride in the communal harmony of their neighborhood. But more than an appeal to religious identity, the speech was an appeal to place, to people who feel their home has not been fairly represented in the political arena. When I spoke to Kamaal after the rally, he explained to me that the BSP (as he understood it) planned to appoint candidates that represented the communities from which they came—"a Muslim in a Muslim community, a Brahmin in a Brahmin community." Several days later, when Kamaal and I spoke again about the rally, he told me he planned on running for local office in the next election. Though he planned to vote this time for the Muslim candidate to represent Nizamuddin, he expressed disappointment at the lack of a representative from the neighborhood itself. He believes that, if he runs in the future, the community will eagerly band together to vote for one of their own.

Though the *basti* plays constant host to outsiders coming in to pray, there seems to be deep suspicion of those whose intentions are less clear. Often these suspicions and fears tend to be couched in terms of the land the *basti* occupies. In the small communal riots of March 1990, all of the instigators came from outside the community;¹⁰⁰ what was by all appearances an issue of religion was in fact an issue of invasion. Even in the legal disputes that preceded and followed the riots (a dispute over a piece of land between an ancient Muslim graveyard and a more recent Hindu cremation ground), "there is repeated citation of legal land rights,"¹⁰¹ notably *not* citation of violated religious rights. For the residents of Nizamuddin, the community depends on the religious, cultural, and historical heritage of the land that it occupies, thus it is the fear of encroachment from outside that motivates it to action, and such encroachment need not be Hindu. After my conversation with the consultants at the Aga Khan Foundation, I was surprised to find that many residents of the neighborhood are suspicious of the foundation's plans for their land. Shamim Khan, the managing editor of a local Urdu newspaper, expressed the fears that he shares with his fellow *basti* residents that the Aga Khan Foundation, along with the Archeological Survey of India, would attempt to "capture" the historic landmarks of the neighborhood.¹⁰² Similarly, many poorer members of the community fear that Aga Khan plans to demolish their houses and develop them commercially. A blog started by the Hazrat Nizamuddin Residents Association enumerates in detail the community's suspicions and

⁹⁹ BSP political rally speech, trans. Kamaal Hassan, Nizamuddin *basti*, April 2009.

¹⁰⁰ Datta et. al., "Communal Violence," 2487.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 2489.

¹⁰² Shamim A. Khan, Managing Director Parwaz Express Urdu Daily, conversation with author, 30 April 2009, Nizamuddin West, New Delhi.

concerns regarding the development project helmed by Aga Khan. Though the document is extensive and complicated, a theme that emerges time and again is the fear of losing the distinctive character of the neighborhood to an aggressive outside force.¹⁰³ The Nizamuddin *basti* is on the defensive. Though the rhetoric of politicized Islam can be heard with increasing frequency on its streets, violated *religious* territory is not the issue; as in the 1990 riots, the issue is the violation of the land from outside. Whether they have lived on their plots for sixty or six hundred years, residents of the *basti* today know that they do not want to see their neighborhood changed or ‘captured’. Like the tomb of the Saint himself, the land seems also to act as a *qutb*, connecting the residents of the *basti* not to the divine, but to the traditions of unity, security, and community that so many lost in Partition.

The Saint’s Place

Following the political rally, party organizers provided food for anyone who wanted to partake—I attended along with one or two other acquaintances whom I knew not to be BSP supporters. The event reminded me particularly of the several *kanqahs* that I had attended in the preceding months. Whether or not the allusion was intended, the resonance with Sufi tradition could not have gone unnoticed in Nizamuddin where the Saint’s spirit remains omnipresent. At the conclusion of her essay on Delhi’s urban villages, Ranjana Sengupta says, “the inhabitants of urban villages [...] have—some of them—lived in the same spot for 200 years. Yet their loyalty is not to Delhi, for which many express contempt. It is to their land and community.”¹⁰⁴ In the Nizamuddin *basti* this is not, strictly speaking, the case. Most families living in Nizamuddin have been there no more than sixty years. Whether or not they actively participate in the life of the dargah, these families participate in a community that has the dargah as its ever-present historical backdrop. Equally embedded in the community of the *basti* is the spirit of connection preached by, and embodied in Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya. What had at first appeared a political rally appealing primarily to religious sentiment turned out to be just another *kanqah*, the manifestation of Nizamuddin’s deeply felt sense of community expressed through the great traditions of the Saint whose tomb still sits at the neighborhood’s center.

The above example of the dinner following the political rally, it seems to me, effectively expresses the nature of the relationship

¹⁰³ Hazrat Nizamuddin Residents Association, www.hnra.blogspot.com (accessed May 1, 2009).

¹⁰⁴ Sengupta, *Delhi Metropolitan*, 154.

between the Saint's dargah, and the neighborhood that surrounds it. While Nizamuddin Auliya and his celebrated tomb may not form the center of religious life for the residents of the *basti*, his presence can still be felt everywhere. It was because of the Saint that the neighborhood came into existence, because of the Saint's presence that the neighborhood's particular historic character was established, and because of the dargah that most of the current inhabitants came to live there. Though I would not go so far as to suggest that the community's contemporary connection to its land *derives* from the Saint's own emphasis on connection and community, it seems clear that there is a continuity between the present shape of the Nizamuddin *basti* and the religious and ritual principals that are so important to the institution that defined it. The residents of the *basti* may no longer worship at the dargah; indeed, many of the people found in the *basti* on a given day would likely describe the rituals at the dargah as heterodox. Nevertheless, the Spirit of the Saint is immanent.

Just as the Saint's greatest adversary was the unjust encroachment of political power on the spirit of equality, humility, and love that characterized his *kanqah*, so today do the residents of the Nizamuddin *basti* perceive the intrusion of outside forces as the greatest threat to the continued survival of their neighborhood as they know it—ancient, harmonious, small, and safe. Whether by the productive internal force of the community, or by the negative exterior force of religious bias, Nizamuddin has remained its own, despite the vigor of Delhi's expansion. Today Nizamuddin faces many challenges, perhaps first among them maintaining its character and its community without losing hold of its cherished traditions of hospitality and syncretism. One need only set foot in the dargah to see these traditions alive and well, with 'outsiders' from nearly every one of Delhi's communities finding a place. Residents of the *basti* may not typically participate in the life of the dargah, but so long as they preserve their connection to their neighborhood and their community, they can look out to the colonies that surround them and heave a sigh of relief with a version of the Saint's famous words in their heads: despite everything, "Delhi is still quite far."¹⁰⁵

Conclusion

I have attempted here to understand the dynamic between a modern neighborhood and the historical monument at its heart. Through my research I have discovered just how complicated these

¹⁰⁵ Sajun, *Diary of a Disciple*, 170.

terms really are in a place as multilayered and historically complex as the Nizmauddin *basti*. The history of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya, though easily accessible for anyone who cares to look, is not history in a conventional sense; it is a hagiography. This I expected. What had not occurred to me was the possibility that a *neighborhood* could have a hagiography, a history of mutually exclusive truths, contradictory evidence, and a ‘reality’ as evasive as that of any Saint. In both cases, I decided to accept hagiographical history as relevant—if not strictly accurate—to the thrust of my research. Thus my inquiry ceased to examine the historical birth of a neighborhood, focusing instead on the way a neighborhood lives in the minds of its residents. So two equally elusive and nebulous figures came to occupy my attention: Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya, and the Nizamuddin *basti*. Much to my surprise, the latter, which I experienced first hand on a daily basis, was by far the more difficult to understand.

It is facile to say that the dargah and the *basti* are mutually sustaining, and neither does it capture the full complexity of their relationship. The dargah, I can say with certainty, was the generative force behind the Nizamuddin *basti*, whatever we may regard as the first form of that neighborhood. From that time, the man and the ideals enshrined there have persisted in the *basti*, in its continued Muslim character, in its pride in communal harmony, its openness to like-minded visitors, and its resistance to unwelcome external forces, be they political or otherwise. It is my contention that, even if residents of the *basti* no longer constitute the primary community of the Saint’s devotees, it is through their deep sense of connection, to their land, to their history, and to their community, that the Saint’s teachings continue to live.

Appendix A

Detail of Nizamuddin dargah and basti area.



*Dome of Jama'at
Khanna Masjid*

Subz Burj

Appendix B

Delhi Development Authority, Zonal Development Plan, Zone-D Map

