

Srushti Sharma

**TRANSLATING NOSTALGIA IN CONTEMPORARY DELHI:
REPRESENTATIONS OF *TAWAIFS* AND EXPERIENCE OF
RICKSHAW-PULLERS**

Thesis submitted to the Department of Historical Studies,
Central European University Private University, in partial fulfillment of the
requirements of the Master of Arts degree in Historical Studies

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Author's Declaration

I, the undersigned, **Srushti Sharma**, candidate for the MA degree in Historical Studies declare herewith that the present thesis titled *Translating Nostalgia in Contemporary Delhi: Representations of Tawaifs and Experience of Rickshaw-Pullers* is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright.

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Vienna, 28/05/2025

Srushti Sharma

Abstract

This thesis tries to apply the emotion of nostalgia, which has no Hindi equivalent to the context of Contemporary Delhi. It is an attempt to demonstrate the centrality of social class in the conceptualization of the emotion and generation of different affective responses. Svetlana Boym's categorization of restorative and reflective nostalgia, that was developed in the Eastern European context seems to hold little value in contemporary Delhi. Instead, I offer alternative explanations, describing the interplay of nostalgia, commodification, and informal labor precarity in the context of two marginalized groups: tawaifs and the rickshaw-pullers. While translating the emotion of nostalgia into the context of contemporary Delhi, I give primacy to the historical processes that have shaped the contemporary form of nostalgia, as experienced and aspired by different social classes.

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Introduction

The word *Bazar* (marketplace) has been associated with Delhi's urban landscape from the seventeenth century if not from before.¹ Ataullah uses contemporary travelers' accounts to reiterate that in the eighteenth century, *Bazaars* in Delhi symbolized vibrancy, trade, and entertainment.² The word marketplace continues to suit contemporary Delhi except what the contemporary *bazar* symbolizes depends on the subjectivity of vantage. What is traded in the marketplace and how it is traded depends on whose Delhi we are talking about. This subjectivity comes into the center-stage when seen from the lens of an emotion which ties the long duration of time and two different social groups in the thesis together, nostalgia.

One of the most seminal conceptualizations of nostalgia has been given by Svetlana Boym.³ Boym defines nostalgia as “fantasies of the past determined by needs of the present that have a direct impact on realities of the future”.⁴ She places nostalgia at the center stage, characterizing the emotion almost as a prime mover when she argues that “nostalgia produces subjective visions of afflicted imagination that tend to colonize the realm of politics, history, and everyday perception.”⁵ This conceptualization is my starting point of enquiry to understand the interplay of nostalgia, commodification, and informal labor precarity in contemporary Delhi.

Treating nostalgia as an emotion has not been a general default choice in the past as it is in the present. Boym highlights how Nostalgia has not been seen as an emotion in the Western European context but rather as a disease in the 17th century.⁶ She also underlines, “Historians

¹François Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire, A.D. 1656–1668*, trans. Irving Brock, annotated by Archibald Constable (London: Constable, 1891), 258.

²Ataullah, “Economy of the City of Delhi: 1707–1761,” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 66 (2005): 471. The author goes by just Ataullah (no last name).

³Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

⁴*Ibid.*, 16.

⁵ Svetlana Boym, “Nostalgia and Its Discontents,” *The Hedgehog Review* 9, no. 2 (Summer 2007), <https://hedgehogreview.com/issues/the-uses-of-the-past/articles/nostalgia-and-its-discontents>.

⁶ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 14.

often consider ‘nostalgia’ to be a negative word, or an affectionate insult at best.” In the thesis, I treat nostalgia as an emotion subject to historical enquiry. My toolkit is the same as the one employed by the historians of emotions. As Barabara Rosenwein points out, “The new narrative (of emotions) will recognize various emotional styles, emotional communities, emotional outlets, and emotional restraints in every period, and it will consider how and why these have changed over time.”⁷ The contemporary nostalgia is nothing but an object of time and is seen against a historical process in the thesis.

I specifically deal with two social groups who occupy a significant place in the nostalgic sensibilities of Delhi’s residents. These groups are *tawaifs*⁸ and rickshaw-pullers of Old Delhi. Schofield highlights the etymology of the word *tawaif* which was used to describe a group of women who danced, sang, and performed. The word can be loosely translated as courtesan. Research by Schofield has shown that *tawaifs* exercised immense control over economic, political, and social capital during the Mughal rule in India (16th- 19th century), especially since the rule of Aurangzeb (1658-1707).⁹ Their position deteriorated significantly after the Revolt of 1857, which began as a sepoy mutiny in Meerut, Eastern India against the British chain of command and soon spread to the rest of North India. Lata Singh highlights how the extension of Britain’s Contagious Disease Act to *tawaifs*, the “material penalties” extracted from them for their participation in the revolt of 1857, and the loss of court patronage resulted in their general cultural debasement.¹⁰ The surveillance that the *tawaifs* were subjected to in the form of a regular inspection by *dhais* or female nurses is also discussed by Legg.¹¹ As of the present,

⁷ Barbara H. Rosenwein, “Worrying about Emotions in History,” *The American Historical Review* 107, no. 3 (June 2002): 845.

⁸ The word is a plural form of the Arabic word, *ta’ife*. This means a social group or a class. In line with the practices observed in contemporary scholarship, I use the word *tawaifs* in a plural sense.

⁹ Katherine Butler Schofield, “The Courtesan Tale: Female Musicians and Dancers in Mughal Historical Chronicles, c.1556–1748,” *Gender & History* 24, no. 1 (2012): 150.

¹⁰ Lata Singh, “Visibilising the ‘Other’ in History: Courtesans and the Revolt,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no. 19 (2007): 1677–80.

¹¹ Stephen Legg, “Governing Prostitution in Colonial Delhi: From Cantonment Regulations to International Hygiene (1864–1939),” *Social History* 34, no. 4 (2009): 454.

no traces of *tawaifs* are found in Chawri Bazaar, Old Delhi where they lived and performed during the time of the Mughal Empire.¹² There is a red-light area between Ajmeri Gate and Lahori Gate of Old Delhi, on the Garstin Bastion (G.B.) Road where sex-work is practiced, and brothels continue to dominate the landscape there. Some women fashioning themselves as *tawaifs* can be found working there today; however, the status, practices, and refinement of these women are markedly different than their position in the past.

The nostalgia for *tawaifs* is invoked by heritage tourism companies who offer *tawaif*-based heritage walks, mostly to the local clientele of Delhi's residents. I encode seventy-five Instagram advertisements of five such *tawaif*-based heritage walks and use them as my primary sources to understand how nostalgia is commodified by the heritage companies to attract maximum number of visitors in these walks. What historical factors make this commodification possible? Who are the audiences that these advertisements are trying to target?

Tawaifs can be characterized as the subaltern owing to the gendered marginalization they witnessed since the Revolt of 1857. The second social group of concern has a relatively recent history of marginalization. As my second social group, I focus on the rickshaw-pullers of Old Delhi who are mostly migrants from eastern parts of India and find themselves placed at the intersection of informal labor economy on one hand and bureaucratic arbitrariness on the other hand.¹³ There are contested nostalgic sensibilities in the case of the rickshaw-pullers. It is contemporary newspaper articles that reveal how the middle class and upper middle-class

¹² Sutapa Dutta and Shivangini Tandon, eds., *Making the 'Woman': Discourses of Gender in 18th-19th Century India* (London: Routledge, 2023), 144.

¹³ A rickshaw is a three-wheeled cycle with a seat on back, drawn by a man, used to transport people or goods. For more on the precarious situations of rickshaw-pullers, see- Madhu Kishwar, "When Victims Are Defamed: The Interdependence of Rickshaw Pullers and Owners," *Manushi*, no. 137 (July–August 2003): 13, accessed May 27, 2025, <https://madhukishwar.in/when-victims-are-defamed-the-interdependence-of-rickshaw-pullers-and-owners/>.

residents of the city remember them. Do they remember them at all? What makes their memory nostalgic?

I then use nine oral history interviews of the rickshaw-pullers to compare the city's nostalgia for them with their lived experience of nostalgia. The contrast between the city's nostalgia and the lived experience of nostalgia is not the explanation; it is the engine of explanation. In other words, while dealing with the rickshaw-pullers of Old Delhi, my primary question is to understand the classed nature of the lived experience of the pullers. The peculiar nature of the lived experience is best highlighted by how it is different from the city's nostalgic memory of the rickshaws.

Each of the two marginalized groups present a specific snapshot of marginality- *tawaifs* representing gendered marginalization and the rickshaw-pullers facing class-based marginalization. I hope to prove by the end of the thesis that in contemporary Delhi, nostalgia cannot be separated from different classed interests. In post-liberalization Delhi, nostalgia is a way for the rickshaw-pullers to navigate through their survival-driven material present. For the heritage tourism companies, it becomes a tool to attract middle class and upper middle-class residents to their *tawaif*-based heritage walks through commodification.

The thesis consists of two chapters, each focusing on one of the subaltern groups. In the first chapter on *tawaifs*, marginality is being packaged in nostalgia and sold to a specific class, while in the second chapter, marginality is experienced through nostalgia. The first chapter on *tawaifs* uses writings of progressive writers like Allama Iqbal and Akbar Allahabadi to better understand the commodified nostalgia of contemporary times. It traces the construct of *tawaifs* from 1857 till present for a similar purpose. On the other hand, the history of rickshaw-pullers is a relatively recent one and thus such longer contextualization is not required. However, I do

trace the 20th century history of the spatial development of Old Delhi where the rickshaw-pullers run rickshaws (1914-present).

Although the two chapters employ very different methodologies, the objective is to make them speak to each other. The object of study in each chapter represents the nostalgia of each social class of contemporary Delhi- the marginalized in the second chapter; and the upper-middle class in the first. Despite being in the same contemporary context, are the two sets of nostalgic sensibilities different from each other? Although the upper middle class's nostalgia is in the context of *tawaifs* and the rickshaw-pullers are concerned more with the material aspects of their past and present, what nature of longings do they represent? Despite being nostalgic about different objects, can the different set of nostalgic sensibilities exhibited by the upper middle class in chapter one and the subaltern group in chapter two be explained by a common historical process? At a more fundamental and conceptual level, is the definition of nostalgia propounded by Boym compatible with both cases.

While explaining his project *Provincializing Europe*, Dipesh Chakravorty argues that “The problem of capitalist modernity cannot any longer be seen simply as a sociological problem of historical transition (as in the famous ‘transition debates’ in European history) but as a problem of translation as well...To challenge the model of ‘rough translation’ is to pay critical and unrelenting attention to the very process of translation.”¹⁴

There is no Hindi equivalent of the English word Nostalgia. Eve Tignol and Margrit Pernau have worked on nostalgia in the Indian context.¹⁵ They have analyzed the literary reactions of educated Muslim class post the revolt of 1857. Pernau has used the Western framework of

¹⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 17.

¹⁵ Margrit Pernau, “Tears of Blood for a Lost World,” in *Emotions and Modernity in Colonial India: From Balance to Fervor* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2019), 212–242; Eve Tignol, “Nostalgia and the City: Urdu Shahr Āshob Poetry in the Aftermath of 1857,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 27, no. 4 (2017): 559–573.

nostalgia as propounded by the likes of Boym and Fritzsche.¹⁶ Tignol has similarly applied the concept of nostalgia without questioning the conceptual translation of the same.¹⁷ Existing scholarship has thus dealt more with the application of nostalgia than with the conceptual questioning of it.

Similarly, Ajay Gandhi and Sanjay Srivastava have worked in an anthropological style on the interaction of nostalgia with the urban landscape of Delhi from the perspective of class tensions.¹⁸ The gap in the literature here relates to the general perception of the anthropologist's time, which is seen in short duration and is largely linear. This makes contextualization difficult and neglects larger trends. Secondly, in these works, nostalgia is again taken at the face value without critically seeing the translation of the same.

It is amidst these gaps in the scholarship that the thesis tries to complicate the understanding of nostalgia by the two specific case studies. Boym differentiates between two types of nostalgia, restorative and reflective. She explains, "Restorative nostalgia puts emphasis on *nostos* (homecoming) and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps. Reflective nostalgia dwells in *algia* (longing), in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance."¹⁹ The former rests on a return to the lost home, while the latter is more about disjointed individual and collective memory. When a heritage company is using unrelated Bollywood songs from the 1970s to advertise walks based on *tawaifs* who lived in much earlier centuries, it neither promises its audience a return to the lost home, nor does it trigger the collective or individual memory about *tawaifs* or the times they lived in. Amnesia regarding the cultural role of *tawaifs* preceded the rise of tourism/heritage industry- *tawaifs* were equated

¹⁶ Pernau, *Emotions and Modernity in Colonial India*, 198.

¹⁷ Tignol, "Nostalgia and the City."

¹⁸ Sanjay Srivastava, *Entangled Urbanism: Slum, Gated Community and Shopping Mall in Delhi and Gurgaon* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015); Ajay Gandhi, "Delicious Delhi: Nostalgia, Consumption and the Old City," *Identities* 23, no. 3 (2016): 345–361

¹⁹ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 41.

with sex workers. Instead, as I will argue in the first chapter, nostalgia is packaged as a hollowed-out object and the way it is evoked does not trigger a specific time or space. Where can we place a nostalgia like this in Boym's conceptual framework?

Similarly, when a rickshaw-puller experiences a temporal dislocation, a vivid transfer to a past temporal frame when questioned about certain events of the past, he does not want to return to that time (restorative nostalgia) nor is he longing for the time (reflective nostalgia). Where will this subaltern experience of nostalgia be placed in Boym's conceptualization? What makes it nostalgic if not a rhetoric of restoration or reflection? By answering these questions, I try to translate Boym's conceptualization of nostalgia in the Eastern European context to the case of contemporary Delhi.

In the first chapter, I try to understand where were *tawaiifs* placed post the revolt of 1857 when Urdu writers were grieving their traditions and fearing change as the British expanded from being traders to the administrators. The deteriorating position of *tawaiifs* is reflected in the progressive writings of the 20th century, which is then examined in the chapter. By the 20th century, there was an amnesia regarding the cultural role of *tawaiifs*, which was understood as exhibiting courtly etiquettes and mannerisms. The next development that is analyzed is the rise of tourism/heritage industry in Delhi against the background of economic liberalization. I then explain how the heritage walks are advertised. What elements of nostalgia do these advertisements use? How do these advertisements become commodities? How does the historic construct of *tawaiifs* and the 20th century amnesia generate an intrigue amidst the attendees of the walks regarding the sexual-cultural role of *tawaiifs*? How is this capitalized? I end this chapter by summarizing the features of nostalgia evoked by the advertisements to attract Delhi's upper middle class and how do these differ/affirm to Boym's definition and categorization of nostalgia.

I start the second chapter by describing how does the city remembers the rickshaws and what is nostalgic about this memory. Then, I move onto the spatial development of Delhi that has put the erstwhile royal street of Chandni Chowk onto the fringe, where the rickshaw-pullers run rickshaws. The nine interviews are then analyzed in a thematic manner. This chapter also ends with rethinking Boym's definition of nostalgia while highlighting the classed nature of the rickshaw-pullers' lived experience of nostalgia.

Chapter 1: Commodified Nostalgia in Delhi's *Tawaif*-based Heritage Walks

The first chapter of the thesis sets the stage of historical enquiry by focusing on one of the two subaltern groups in question- the *tawaifs* (courtesans). The motive here is to contextualize and understand the contemporary (2014-present) commodification of nostalgia as evident in the *tawaif*-centered heritage walks in Delhi. This understanding and contextualization will reveal how Delhi's upper-middle class and middle class are aspiring for an alternative modernity in post-liberalization Delhi. Heritage tourism companies cater to these aspirations by packaging nostalgia as a commodity characterized by vagueness carrying no particular meaning. The nostalgia in the advertisements of these *tawaif*-based seem to be like Boym's conceptualization of restorative nostalgia, but a deeper engagement reveals that commodification better characterizes the nature of this nostalgia.²⁰

The courtesan culture in India can be traced back to centuries before the advent of the Mughals with scholars like Doris M. Srinivasan highlighting the reference to courtesans in texts like *Kamasutra* (dated between early Christian era and fourth and fifth centuries A.D according to Srinivasan) and *Arthshastra* (dated perhaps to first or second centuries A.D according to Srinivasan).²¹ Since I deal with contemporary nostalgia, I am concerned with the *tawaifs* in the Mughal empire and the construction and reconstruction of their image in the 19th-21st century.

One cannot make sense of the contemporary commodification of nostalgia without understanding how history has unfolded to generate an amnesia amidst the residents of the city regarding the cultural role of *tawaifs* as exhibiting courtly mannerisms and etiquettes. Thus, the

²⁰ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 41.

²¹ Doris M. Srinivasan, "Royalty's Courtesans and God's Mortal Wives: Keepers of Culture in Precolonial India," in *The Courtesan's Arts: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Martha Feldman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 161–81.

first two subheadings deal with the evolving constructs of *tawaifs* ultimately generating amnesia amidst the city's residents. This amnesia is then used by the rising heritage tourism industry who package nostalgia as a commodity to sell it to Delhi's upper-middle class and middle-class populace.

***Tawaifs* in Post-1857 Literary Grieving**

It is a good idea to start the historical narrative with the revolt of 1857, which started as a sepoy mutiny in Bengal Army regiment of the British East India Company on the 29th of March in 1857 and soon turned into a revolt with mutineers taking over Delhi by the 11th of May in 1857. Habib reinstates that the Meerut mutineers signalled the general uprising of the entire Bengal Army after taking over Delhi.²² On the 9th of June in 1857, W.J. Shepherd mentions, that the state of Kanpur seemed to the inhabitants as “the day of judgement.”²³ He states that the mob mostly consisted of the labouring class and “*budmashes*” (hooligans) who plundered English property and drank English wine and liquors.²⁴

The revolt was, however, not merely about the sepoy-peasant nexus and the mass rural discontent against the company.²⁵ In the context of emotions, Eve Tignol has aptly established that the poems of “*Fughan-e-Dehli*” (The Lament of Delhi) “both construct 1857 as cultural trauma through the use of powerful literary devices and the performance of collective grief as well as re-channel memory and melancholy into the urban landscape.”²⁶

²² Irfan Habib, “The Coming of 1857,” *Social Scientist* 26, no. 1/4 (1998): 6–15.

²³ W. J. Shepherd, *A Personal Narrative of the Outbreak and Massacre at Cawnpore, during the Sepoy Revolt of 1857* (London: The London Printing Press, 1879), 50–51.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Mukherjee, Rudrangshu. *The Year of Blood: Essays on the Revolt of 1857*. London: Routledge, 2017. Habib, Irfan. “The Coming of 1857.” *Social Scientist* 26, no. 1/4 (1998): 6–15.

²⁶ Tignol, “Nostalgia and the City,” 559–73.

One of the many Urdu writers²⁷ reflecting this anxiety concerning the coming of a new age and changing nature of value systems after the revolt was Akbar Allahabadi (1846-1921). He openly talks about “Europe”²⁸ and figures associated with the British East India Company²⁹ in his verses, often with evident tones of critique. Jalil treats him along with another Urdu poet Iqbal Ahmed as the crucial bearers of literary change in Urdu writing fraternity.³⁰

Many of these anxieties relate to women’s honour , which is perceived to be at stake in the new age, the new *tahzib* (mannerisms) symbolizing women coming out of the veil.³¹ Following is a couplet from Allahabadi’s *Nai Tahzib* (New Mannerisms) that imagines how the new mannerisms will look like.³²

*“Na khātūnoñ meñ rah jā.egī parde kī ye pābandī
na ghūñghaT is tarah se hājib-e-rū-e-sanam hoñge”*

*Neither the restriction of veil will remain in women
Nor the beloved will be in veil*³³

²⁷ As for the case of Urdu writers, please note that I have used different authors’ works as listed and digitized on the website of a trusted Indian Urdu digitizing mission called Rekhta, which has the Romanized collection of Urdu writers’ works. The citations, thus, include the website’s details and not the details of the book.

²⁸ Akbar Allahabadi, “Bhulta Jata Hai Europe Asmani Baap Ko,” *Rekhta*, accessed May 27, 2025, <https://www.rekhta.org/rubaai/bhuultaa-jaataa-hai-europe-aasmaanii-baap-ko-akbar-allahabadi-rubaai>.

²⁹ Akbar Allahabadi, “Jalwa-e-Darbar-Delhi,” *Rekhta*, accessed December 18, 2024, verse 26 <https://www.rekhta.org/nazms/jalwa-e-darbaar-e-dehlii-sar-men-shauq-kaa-saudaa-dekhaa-akbar-allahabadi-nazms>;

———, “Na Ruh-e-Mazhab Na Qalb-e-Arif Na Shairana Zaban Baqi,” *Rekhta*, accessed December 18, 2024, verse 7 <https://www.rekhta.org/ghazals/na-ruuh-e-mazhab-na-qalb-e-arif-na-shaairana-zabaan-baaqii-akbar-allahabadi-ghazals>;

———, “Nai Tahzib se Saqi ne Aisi Garm-Joshi Ki,” *Rekhta*, accessed December 18, 2024, verse 2 <https://www.rekhta.org/ghazals/nai-tahzib-se-saaqii-ne-aisii-garm-joshii-kii-akbar-allahabadi-ghazals>.

³⁰ Rakhshanda Jalil, “The Linkages between Social Change and Urdu Literature: From 1850s till 1920s,” in *Liking Progress, Loving Change: A Literary History of the Progressive Writers’ Movement in Urdu*, ed. Rakhshanda Jalil (Oxford University Press, 2014), 69.

³¹ Akbar Allahabadi, “Bithai Jaengi Parde mein Bibayan Kab tak,” *Rekhta*, accessed December 18, 2024, <https://www.rekhta.org/ghazals/bithaaii-jaaengii-parde-men-biibayaan-kab-tak-akbar-allahabadi-ghazals>;

———, “Nai Tahzib,” *Rekhta*, accessed December 18, 2024.

³² Allahabadi, “Nai Tahzib,” verse 3.

³³ Translation by the author using digitized works of Allahabadi from Rekhta.

In Allahabadi's works, the new mannerisms are not merely an attack on men or women but rather on what makes men masculine and women feminine. While it was veiling for women, it is respect/knowledge for men. In his *nazm* (can be loosely translated as poem) *Bithayi Jayengi Parde mei Bibiya Kab tak* (Till When the Women Can Be Made to Sit in the Veil), Allahabadi takes a jibe on the changing times and expresses his anxiety over the coming end of the old mannerisms.³⁴

“miyāñ se biibī haiñ parda hai un ko farz magar

miyāñ kā ilm hī utthā to phir miyāñ kab tak”

Though it is a woman's duty to be veiled for a man but

A man is no more a man without his respect

Assuming that Allahabadi's verses are somewhat representative of the larger emotional sensibilities of the society immediately after the revolt, particularly about the changing norms of masculinity and femininity, I see that anxieties and grief after the revolt concerned women who were veiled or fitted the societal norms in some way. Courtesans were not a part of the “shared past.” This is ironic since a staunch opposition to the British East India Company and a dedicated support to the mutineers was provided by the courtesans who did not fit the idea of a veiled woman. Talwar Oldenberg's research brings attention on how the courtesans' property was confiscated “for their proven involvement in the siege of Lucknow and the rebellion against British rule.”³⁵

Schofield highlights the etymology of the word *tawaif* which was used to describe a group of women who danced, sang, and performed. The word can be loosely translated as courtesan.

³⁴ Allahabadi, “Bithai Jaengi Parde mein Bibayan Kab tak,” verse 3.

³⁵ Veena Talwar Oldenburg, “Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow, India,” *Feminist Studies* 16, no. 2 (1990): 259.

Research by Schofield has shown that *tawaifs* exercised immense control over economic, political, and social capital during the Mughal rule in India, especially since the rule of Aurangzeb.³⁶ Talwar Oldenberg's works have proved a continuity of this trend. She found *tawaifs* to be in the highest tax paying bracket in the civic tax ledgers of British Municipal Corporation between 1858-77.³⁷

The 20th-Century *Tawaif* in Literature

Their position deteriorated significantly after the revolt. Lata Singh highlights how the extension of Britain's Contagious Disease Act to *tawaifs*, the "material penalties" extracted from them for their participation in the revolt of 1857, and the loss of court patronage resulted in their general cultural debasement.³⁸ The surveillance that the *tawaifs* were subjected to by a regular inspection by *dhais* or female nurses is also discussed by Legg.³⁹

Urdu poet Allama Iqbal's son Javed Iqbal recalled one encounter his father had with a friend and editor of a newspaper *Vatan* (Nation).⁴⁰ The *qissa* (incident) goes back to the time when Allama Iqbal used to live in Anarkali Bazar of Lahore, which was infamous for large number of *tawaifs*.⁴¹ The police arrested these *tawaifs*, since the "municipal committee" chose a separate place for them to live in. Inshallah Khan, the editor of *Vatan*, had been wanting to see Iqbal for a while and continuously visited his place but could not catch a hold of him. One day, he finally saw Iqbal at his place and asked him "Dr. *Saheb (Sir)*! Since the *tawaifs* have left Anarkali

³⁶ Schofield, "The Courtesan Tale," 150.

³⁷ Oldenburg, "Lifestyle as Resistance," 259.

³⁸ Singh, "Visibilising the 'Other' in History," 1677–80.

³⁹ Legg, "Governing Prostitution in Colonial Delhi," 454.

⁴⁰ Allama Iqbal, "Tawaif se Rishta," *Rekhta*, accessed May 27, 2025, <https://www.rekhta.org/latiife/tawaif-se-rishta-allama-iqbal-latiife?lang=hi>.

⁴¹ It is important to remember that this was the time when the revolt had already happened, and post-revolt actions had already been taken by the Raj. Rekhta (one of India's leading Urdu digitizing initiatives) mentions the life frame of Allama Iqbal to be from 1877 to 1938.

Bazar, it seems like you do not find Anarkali Bazar interesting enough.” To this, Iqbal replied, “*Maulavi*⁴² *Saheb*, what to do? The *tawaifs* are after all the sisters of “*Vatan*” too.

If we were to engage in a close reading of this incident, it suggests that after the revolt, *tawaifs* undoubtedly lost social security, as evident in the police displacing them from their original houses. Their political autonomy deteriorated, and they had to bear the cliché brunt of patriarchal gaze. But what is important to us is that they were still discussed in the public sphere and written by the likes of Iqbal. They were remembered not for the power and culture they once represented but in a classic colonial perspective, where they were now seen as mere objects of pleasure. It is not farfetched to argue that there was an amnesia regarding their role as the embodiments of *adab* (grace) and *tehzib* (mannerisms) from the collective conscience.⁴³

One of the authors who most admiringly talked about *tawaifs* was Saadat Hasan Manto (1912-1955). In his short story *Kaali Shalwar* (black trousers), the protagonist Tawaif Sultana is indeed in a state of destitution.⁴⁴ She and her lover have moved from Ambala to Delhi and since then, she had been unsuccessful in finding clients for herself unlike in Ambala wherein she would have no dearth of British men regularly visiting her. The situation was so bad that she had to sell her bangles for sustenance and her hands were bare, which saddened her. Despite this, she was still adamant about getting a pair of black trousers (*kaali shalwar*) for Muharram.⁴⁵

The early 20th century *tawaif* appears to be at the margins of society, navigating livelihood in a new, unknown, and dynamic colonial market where displacement was the reality of her residential life. In contemporary historiographical discourses, *tawaifs* have found a voice in

⁴² Used for scholars of Islam.

⁴³ For an understanding of amnesia in the context of the Indian public sphere, see Leela Fernandes, “The Politics of Forgetting: Class Politics, State Power and the Restructuring of Urban Space in India,” *Urban Studies* 41, no. 12 (November 1, 2004): 2415–30, cited in Ajay Gandhi, “Delicious Delhi: Nostalgia, Consumption and the Old City,” *Identities* 23, no. 3 (May 3, 2016): 345–61.

⁴⁴ Saadat Hasan Manto, “Kaali Shalwar,” *Rekhta*, accessed May 27, 2025, <https://www.rekhta.org/stories/kaali-shalwaar-saadat-hasan-manto-stories>.

⁴⁵ An important festival in the Shia sect of Islam where the defeat of Ali in the Battle of Karbala is mourned by all, men carry *tazkiras* (mourning processions) and everyone wears black.

frameworks relating to subaltern and microhistories⁴⁶ and on the other hand, they are perceived as figures embodying nostalgia of the lost times, mostly equated with royalty. The latter is reflected in media⁴⁷ but more relevant is the employment of them in the Indian heritage/tourism industry⁴⁸. A leading heritage and tourism industry in India claims to have started “Tawaif Walks” in Old Delhi, which “transports the participants in an era bygone where women of such skill in dancing, singing, and writing were considered scholars and cultural banners.”⁴⁹

The *tawaifs* are mostly seen in the context of the revolt causing the downfall of their social position. Another heritage/tourism company advertising the walk on social media asks, “So what led to their downfall from *tawaifs* to nautch girls?”⁵⁰

The question then is why does the nostalgic reconstruction of pre-modern India, instigated by the revolt of 1857, not include the long-lost power of *tawaifs*? The bigger question is what has resulted in the prominence of this perception of *tawaifs* in contemporary market of history, heritage, and tourism? And what does it tell us about nostalgia? While the first question has been answered by scholars the latter ones largely remain to be underexplored perhaps because it concerns contemporary times, which may not fit the aesthetic sensibilities of what constitutes the “past.”⁵¹

⁴⁶ Oldenburg, “Lifestyle as Resistance.”

⁴⁷ See, Heeramandi: The Diamond Bazaar (TV Series), Mughal-e-Azam (Movie), Umrao Jaan (Movie), Pakeezah (Movie).

⁴⁸ Enroute Indian History (@enroute_indian_history), https://www.instagram.com/enroute_indian_history/?hl=en; The Delhinama (@thedelhinama), <https://www.instagram.com/thedelhinama/reels/>; Delhi Walks (@delhiwalks), <https://www.instagram.com/delhiwalks/?hl=en>.

⁴⁹ Enroute Indian History, *Instagram post*, “Tawaif and Kotha is a heritage conceptual walk where...,” posted September 30, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/enroute_indian_history/p/DAiifXjBgrB/?img_index=1.

⁵⁰ The Delhinama, *Instagram post*, “The Tawaifs, the courtesans of Delhi were a repository of dance and music in the field of entertainment...,” posted April 15, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/thedelhinama/p/C5yf0rAy4-b/?hl=en&img_index=1.

⁵¹ Singh, “Visibilising the ‘Other’ in History,” 1677. *Tawaifs* neither fit the standards of Victorian chastity nor the traditional familial values propounded by the 19th century social reformers in North India.

These questions must be seen in the larger trend of heritage consumption in Delhi. Ajay Gandhi has rightly pointed the dilemma of Delhi's upper class who consider Old Delhi⁵² to be unhygienic to engage with but at the same time find it as "a shared touchstone, a guarantor of common feeling."⁵³ In order to achieve this "cultural intimacy", symbols from the old city are often used in "hygienic" and regulated spaces.⁵⁴ The making of an entry fee based supervised market Delhi *Haat* (market) and the expansion of Karim's restaurant in various places of the city as a fine-dine place, the author argues, are the examples of the same.⁵⁵

I ask, what is this "common feeling"? Can the connection between Delhi's upper class and Old Delhi be explained merely as a matter of shared legacy? My argument is that the consumption of heritage that is splendidly described by Gandhi is driven by evoking nostalgia, an emotion which is as much about the present as it is about the past. The actors who evoke this nostalgia can be different in different contexts, but in the context of *tawaifs*, evoking nostalgia to attract consumers is best exemplified by the heritage tourism companies when they advertise their *tawaif*-based heritage walks.

Rise of Tourism/Heritage Industry in Delhi

Let us take an example of the five heritage tourism companies that offer *tawaif*-based heritage walks. I have chosen these companies here and for later analysis because they were the first ones to appear on Google when I typed key search words like *tawaifs* or heritage. This indicates their popularity in a scenario where almost all bookings of these walks are done through social media. Furthermore, while advertising their respective *tawaif*-based heritage walks, all five companies have used some element of nostalgia, which I have explored later in the chapter.

⁵² Shahjahanabad, the Mughal capital, has been referred to as Old Delhi. Put crudely, it contains the imperial Red Fort, Jama Masjid, and the historic lane of Chandni Chowk.

⁵³ Gandhi, "Delicious Delhi," 348.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 348.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 356-358.

It is important to note that the major attendees on the *tawaif*-based heritage walks of these companies are domestic clientele rather than international tourists.⁵⁶ Therefore, unlike the standard tours designed for international tourists offering the consumers the coverage of Delhi in a “half-day” tour or in a “full-day tour”, *tawaif*-based heritage walks promise something else—upper class and upper-middle class of Delhi do not want to “cover” Delhi, they want to feel “connected” to Delhi and be “transported to the by-gone eras”.⁵⁷

Enroute Indian History started in 2019, while The Delhinama was founded in 2021.⁵⁸ The company Tales of City evolved from Purani Dilli Walo ki Baatein began in 2014.⁵⁹ Similarly, Unzip Delhi was founded in 2018.⁶⁰ While the exact date of Demythify Delhi’s founding is not specified, the company joined Instagram in 2020.⁶¹ So, for contextualization, we can note that the history of heritage tourism companies selling *tawaif*-based heritage walks to domestic clientele does not go before 2014.

One of the ways to explain the rise of the heritage industry in Delhi is to understand the origin of the demand for these walks. This demand needs to be contextualized in post-liberalization India. On the 24th of July 1991, the then Finance Minister of India Manmohan Singh announced in the annual budget, “We have, therefore, decided to liberalize the policy regime for direct

⁵⁶Enroute Indian History, *Instagram reel*, “We’re thrilled to share the fantastic feedback...,” posted April 6, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/enroute_indian_history_/reel/C5a_XiDy3Yx/. It is explained later how these walks meet the aspirations of a certain section of Delhi’s society.

⁵⁷Examples of touristically designed heritage tours: “Popular Tours,” *Enroute Indian History*, accessed May 16, 2025, <https://enrouteindianhistory.com/popular-tours/>. Many of these insights regarding the audience and categorizations of these tours also come from my personal experience as a heritage walk leader between 2023 and 2024. An example of *tawaif*-based heritage walks promising the audience a transport to a bygone era: Enroute Indian History, *Instagram post*, “Tawaif and Kotha is a heritage ...,” posted July 1, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/enroute_indian_history_/p/C84OJPcyvBl/?img_index=1.

⁵⁸“Meet the Team,” Enroute Indian History, accessed May 16, 2025, <https://enrouteindianhistory.com/meet-the-team/>. The Delhinama, *LinkedIn page*, “Delhinama, launched in 2021, was born from a passion for...,” accessed May 16, 2025, <https://www.linkedin.com/company/thedelhinama/about/>.

⁵⁹“Home”, Tales of City, accessed May 16, 2025, <https://www.talesofcity.com/>.

⁶⁰Unzip Delhi, *Instagram Post*, “Yesterday I completed 4 years since I,” February 10, 2022, https://www.instagram.com/unzip_delhi/p/CZzenMNPaWH/?img_index=1.

⁶¹Demythify Delhi (@demythifydelhi), Instagram, created in February 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/demythifydelhi/>.

foreign investment...”⁶² The finance minister asked to “welcome foreign investments rather than fear them”.⁶³ “For the founding fathers of our Republic, a public sector that would be vibrant, modern, competitive, and capable of generating large surpluses was a vital element in the strategy of development. The public sector has made an important contribution to the diversification of our industrial economy. But there have been several shortcomings.” continues the budget speech.⁶⁴ An arrangement like this did not merely provide an incentive for foreign investors but naturally the disengagement of the public sector created a vacuum that was filled by entrepreneurial stakes. Thomas Cowan calls this India’s own “urban revolution”, which in the context of Delhi led to the development of Gurgaon among other things.⁶⁵

Gurgaon is a satellite city at the borders of the Indian state, Haryana and Delhi. It is the hub of a range of Multinational Company offices, shopping malls, and other elements associated with neoliberal architecture. The city became a popular choice of real-estate developers and other actors interested in capital investment owing to the Haryana government’s developer-friendly building regulations in the 1970s and 80s but as highlighted by Cowan, the domination of real-estate sector happened in the city only post-liberalization of 1991.⁶⁶ Cowan highlights that the population of Gurgaon has increased 20-fold in the past decade.⁶⁷ I argue that the increase in the population of Gurgaon and the rise of our heritage companies is not co-incidental.

Cowan flags Yadav’s point that “...Gurgaon has been celebrated as symbolic of Indian modernity and a representation of an emboldened and emerging new middle-class spatial identity...”⁶⁸ A significant number of attendees on heritage walks are the residents of Gurgaon,

⁶² Manmohan Singh, *Final Budget Speech of Finance for the Year 1991–92*, July 24, 1991, in *Lok Sabha Debates*, Parliament of India, p. 1267, <https://eparlib.nic.in/handle/123456789/111>.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Thomas Cowan, *Fragmented Citizenships in Gurgaon*, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, Vol. 45, No. 6 (2021): 64.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

trying to connect to their culture and shared legacy , which is not found in the modernity represented by Gurgaon.⁶⁹ These heritage walks emerge as symbolizing an idea of an alternative modernity. By attending these heritage walks, the attendees get a snapshot of “their” culture while they continue to live in the concrete jungle that is Gurgaon- they exercise some control over how, when, and for how long do they want to engage with culture. Attending heritage walks is a way of bringing affective culture in a regulated environment with a “walk leader” helping one navigate the chaotic streets of Old Delhi, the site of *tawaif*-based heritage walks. Thus, one of the clear reasons for the rise in Delhi’s heritage industry is the middle-class and upper-middle class’s search for an alternative modernity that helps them stay connected with their culture *on their own terms*. The aspirations of this class are best reflected in the Gurgaon-based attendees of the heritage walks.

Something similar has also been propounded by Sanjay Srivastava in the context of the ‘High Street’ , which is a “national lifestyle highway” in a shopping mall in Pune (Western India), “The affective dimension of Indian high street lies in the fact that it re-introduces shoppers to the culture of the ‘Indian street’ through a transnational aesthetic that will, putatively, capture the essence of the street, while simultaneously keeping out its smells, crowds and other discomforts.”⁷⁰ In certain ways described above, the similarities between heritage walk and the high street cannot be neglected.

One of the attendees of Enroute Indian History’s heritage walk in Delhi’s Old Fort remarks that she came here with her son to give him a taste of “Delhi’s flavor.”⁷¹ Another attendee of the

⁶⁹ Author’s personal experience as a heritage walk leader in Delhi, 2023-2024. This has also been discussed in the earlier section through the arguments provided by Ajay Gandhi. Furthermore, a note of caution here is to not see the Gurgaon-residing elite as the only participants of these walks. Migrants and new-comers (middle-class and upper middle-class) are regular attendees of these walks as well.

⁷⁰ Sanjay Srivastava, *Entangled Urbanism: Slum, Gated Community and Shopping Mall in Delhi and Gurgaon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 222, in chapter 6, “High Streets, Low Places, and Indian Roots.”

⁷¹ Enroute Indian History, *Instagram Reel*, “A feedback video of our haunted walk...,” posted on March 22, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/enroute_indian_history_/reel/DHfk3gZvH24/.

walk organized by the same company in Delhi's Mehrauli reiterated the same thing when he said that the heritage walk is "for people who would want to get a wholesome flavor of all the monuments you will find in Delhi."⁷² What else is this search for Delhi's flavor if it is not an attempt to carve out a niche for alternative modernity in post-liberalization Delhi? Now that the historical context of *tawaif*-based heritage walks is well in place, let us move to the primary object of this chapter, the contemporary commodification of nostalgia as evident in the advertisements of these walks posted on social media of the five discussed companies mentioned above.

Amnesia and Intrigue

While the rise of the heritage companies may appear to be relatively recent, one can make sense of their success only in a longer historical context. In my understanding, what is happening in the case of *Tawaif*-based heritage walks is the capitalization of intrigue. The amnesia preceding earlier decades had almost equated prostitutes with *tawaifs*, with red-light areas becoming some of the most poorly planned parts of the city. This amnesia about the cultural role of *tawaifs* has helped tourism and heritage companies to generate an intrigue in the audiences about the same. To use this intrigue for attracting maximum consumers to their walks is precisely what I call capitalization of intrigue. The capitalization of intrigue seems to be like the tonalities of sexual innuendo since the amnesia concerns itself with the sexual roles of *tawaifs* as much as their cultural role.

⁷² Enroute Indian History, *Instagram Reel*, "We're thrilled to share the heartwarming feedback...", posted March 9, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C4SypLKylie/>.

It is not unusual to see heritage companies starting the advertisements of their *Tawaif* Walks with a classic “Did you know?” tonality or to warn the readers of the post not to confuse *tawaifs* with the sex-worker.⁷³

On October 26, 2023, The Delhinama posted one such walk with a caption that read- “Tawaifs, the courtesans of Delhi were a repository of dance and music in the field of entertainment back in the 17th century. Chawri Bazar was the famous street that brought many Kings, Nawabs, Sahibs and even Poets to the doorstep of the mansions of the Tawaifs. So, what led to their downfall from *Tawaifs* to nautch girls?”⁷⁴

An interesting social media post by Enroute Indian History tries to dismantle people’s expectations from their *Tawaif* Walk and one of the post’s slides alarm the participants not to expect to “meet prostitutes at GB Road (a red-light area of New Delhi)” or to see the Mughal-styled *kotha* as popularized by media series”.⁷⁵ The fact that people were expecting to “meet prostitutes at GB Road” on these walks is nothing but a testament to the total amnesia that prevails regarding the role of *tawaifs*. The second possibility reveals another scenario when the consumers take the advertisements promising a transportation to bygone era literally at its face. Note that the company posted this warning only around four years after its *Tawaif* Walks got popularized, reflecting that it did play on the intrigue for the first four years, before it diversified the range of its heritage walks.

It is important to situate the contemporary commodified nostalgia in *tawaif*-based heritage walks against the amnesia created regarding the cultural roles of *tawaifs* following the revolt of

⁷³ “The Courtesy of Courtesans”, Delhi Walks, accessed May 15, 2025, <https://delhiwalks.in/tour/the-courtesy-of-courtesans/>.

⁷⁴ The Delhinama, Instagram Post, “Tawaifs, the courtesans of Delhi were a...”, October 26, 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/thedelhinama/reel/Cy2cx1VSdNw/>.

⁷⁵ Enroute Indian History, *Instagram post*, “What tawaif is NOT about vs What it is actually about,” posted October 06, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/DAXcFPDSSZf/?hl=en&img_index=1.

1857. In the post-revolt context, *tawaifs* were neither respected in anti-colonial grieving nor by the civic laws of the time. By the 20th century, they were drawn to the margins of society and that of the city. By associating labels of culture and royalty with *tawaifs*, heritage/tourism companies capitalized on this amnesia by creating an intrigue. This association finds its audiences amongst upper middle-class populations, settled in satellite cities like that of Gurgaon, searching for identities in the cultural past.

But how does this capitalization of intrigue get communicated to the upper-middle class and middle-class residents of the city? How is amnesia *triggered* in a manner that the specific classes want to attend these heritage walks? By using social media advertisements of *tawaif*-based heritage walks in the next section, I show that there are more reasons for the popularity of these heritage walks apart from the companies' attempts to associate labels of royalty and grandeur with *tawaifs*. It is precisely in this context that nostalgia comes into play. Heritage companies sell *tawaif*-based heritage walks to their audiences by packaging nostalgia as a commodity in their advertisements of these walks.

Advertising *Tawaif*-based Heritage Walks

Before delving into the specific nature of commodification exhibited by the advertisements of the *tawaif*-based heritage walks, it is important to understand the methodology employed to analyze the social media advertisements of these companies. It is not uncommon for heritage tourism companies to post more than ten advertisements in a week on their Instagram handles. Instagram, especially for certain companies like Enroute Indian History, is their primary channel of public outreach. Between May 5 and May 11, 2025 (7days), Enroute Indian History has posted twenty-four indirect or direct advertisements that are either a call for the readers to join their heritage walk directly or an informative post meant to increase their social media

reach.⁷⁶ To have a reasonable number of advertisements in a systematic way thus becomes a prerequisite to analyze the commodification of nostalgia done by these companies, as encapsulated in the social media advertisements.⁷⁷

For precisely this reason, I encoded seventy-five Instagram advertisements of five heritage tourism companies in an Excel sheet. Enroute Indian History, The Delhinama, Unzip Delhi, Tales of City, and Demythify Delhi are the five companies. These companies have the most amount of *tawaif*-based heritage walks advertised on their Instagram, thus explaining the choice. Following are the used variables- Serial Number, Name of Company, Date of Post (DD/MM/YYYY), Nostalgia Present (0/1), Element of Nostalgia (Visual, Sonar, Linguistic, Visual and Sonar, Sonar and Linguistic, Visual and Linguistic, No Nostalgia, Visual Linguistic and Sonar), Engagement (Number of Likes), Ad Link, and Qualitative Notes.⁷⁸ Visual elements usually relate to vintage-styled editing, use of old pictures, etc. Songs used in short-video advertisements come into the category of sonar. Linguistic elements are about words or phrases that attempt to evoke nostalgic sensibilities in the viewers.

The rationale behind having these advertisements in the form of a data frame was to avoid generalizing based on a select few advertisements, a selection which could very well have been governed by my own assumptions and biases. This is not to say that these seventy-five advertisements represent the reality of the entire nostalgia-based advertising strategy adopted by the five companies. I have relied on search algorithms of Google and Instagram, meaning

⁷⁶ *Enroute Indian History* (@enroute_indian_history_), Instagram, accessed May 11, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/enroute_indian_history/

⁷⁷ The process of this commodification is described later in the chapter. In short, I borrow the definition of commodification as defined by Richard Terdiman by highlighting Theodor Adorno's concept of "hollowed-out" objects. Commodification is a process by which an object is separated from its past, what lies in front of the consumers is the present of an object, a commodity, a "hollowed-out object" available for investment of all sorts of meaning but "organically connected with none at all". Richard Terdiman, *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 12.

⁷⁸ The data frame can be found in the appendix of the thesis. The reason for having different combinations of the variables was owing to encoding reasons, having a drop-down list of all possible combinations makes encoding faster.

that the advertisements that are encoded in the data frame are the ones which appeared when I typed the keyword “*tawaif*” along with company name and site name (Instagram) on Google and similarly typed the hashtag *tawaif* on Instagram. The algorithms of Google and Instagram work on logics that are not transparent and thus one cannot trust the fairness of these algorithms either. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the sample size is not big enough to make statistical conclusions, but it provides us with a direction in qualitative analysis- what elements of nostalgia seem to be most provoked? Can an observation be generalized for most of the ads or is it an exception?

Nonetheless, it can be gleamed from the appendix that patterns did emerge in the encoded advertisements spanning from the year 2021 to 2025. First off, the popularity of *tawaif*-based heritage walks is reflected from the fact that even when tourism/heritage companies are not advertising about these specific heritage walks but are talking about some other thematic or location-based heritage walk, they continue to use a hashtag of *tawaif* or *tawaif culture*.⁷⁹ Out of 75 encoded advertisements, 66 of them contain some element of nostalgia (visual, sonar, linguistic, or a combination of these) while 8 of them do not necessarily show a display of some element of nostalgia. Figure 1 is a simple bar plot created using Excel showing the number of advertisements with their respective elements of evoked nostalgia:

⁷⁹ Based on the compiled data of the *tawaif*-based heritage walks advertisements on Instagram. See Appendix for the entire data frame.

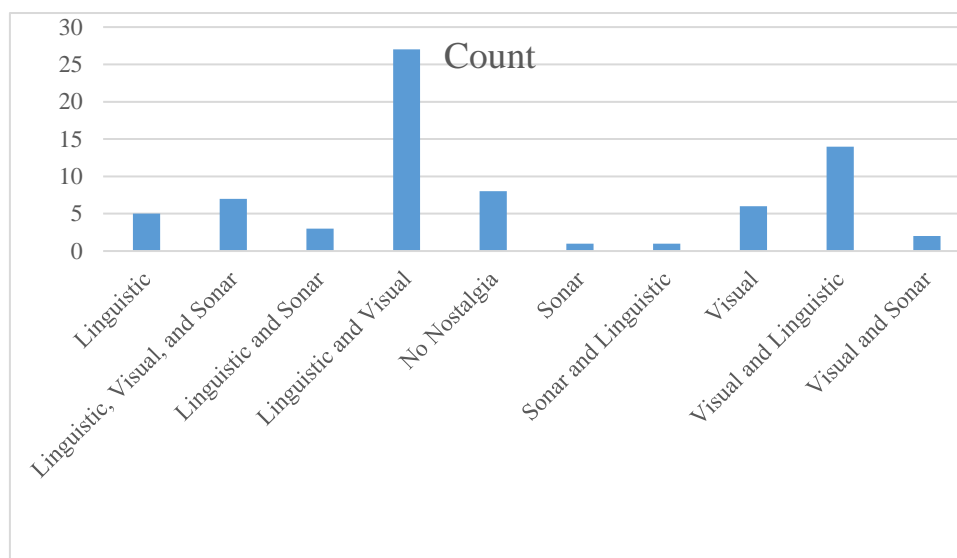


Figure 1: Proportion of advertisements employing different elements of nostalgia

Now that we have some idea of the structure of this collection of advertisements, it is crucial to pick up the elements of nostalgia evident in the highest number of advertisements- visual and linguistic combined. A black and white image of *tawaifs* was used in a range of these advertisements (figure 2).⁸⁰ Early modern miniature paintings depicting women wearing Mughal-styled ornaments and clothes (lose pants, *angrakha* or a tunic-like top, and head jewelry) also became an object of the advertisements (figure 3).⁸¹ Who are these women? Who is the artist? What is the painting revealing? Is this real or fictional? None of the posts even faintly touch these questions. It is left to the imagination of the viewers to give meaning to these paintings.

⁸⁰Enroute Indian History and The Delhinama, *Instagram posts*, “Tawaif and Kotha is a heritage conceptual walk where...,” “Join us and register for our Tawaif and Kotha walk...,” and “The Tawaifs, the courtesans of Delhi were a repository of dance and music...,” posted November 13, 2023; January 31, 2024; and February 19, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CzlvuvXyJos/>, https://www.instagram.com/thedelhinama/p/C2xkUHbywwm/?img_index=5, and <https://www.instagram.com/p/C3hwcniSw8m/>.

⁸¹ The Delhinama and Enroute Indian History, *Instagram posts*, “Tawaifs, the courtesans of Delhi were a repository of dance and music...” and “Tawaif and Kotha is a heritage conceptual walk where we...,” posted November 14, 2023; and January 29, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CzoBELiytiJ/> and https://www.instagram.com/p/C2rrwByyDHt/?img_index=1.

If the pictures are themselves not specifically about a different temporal scale than the present, like the medieval paintings or pictures of dancing women in black and white- vintage-styled editing fills the absence (figure 4).⁸²

Advertisements also tend to use cinematic stills of women who have acted as *Tawaifs* in the Indian cinema- actor Rekha in and as *Umrao Jaan* (1981) and actor Meena Kumari in the 1972 movie *Pakeezah* are popular choices of the heritage tourism companies (figure 5). Other used visuals are Mughal arches and *havelis*- residential houses of the Mughal elite in Old Delhi.⁸³ Short videos advertising *tawaif*-based heritage walks also use songs from 1970s-80s that may not have any direct relation with the construct of *tawaifs*.⁸⁴

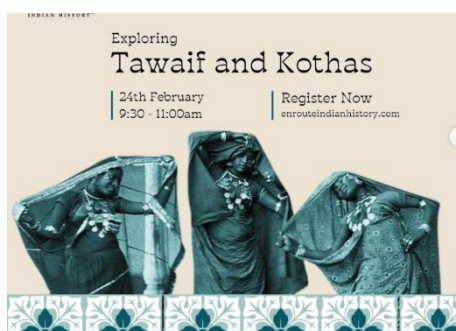


Figure 2: A picture of dancing women in black and white used as an advertisement of one of the heritage walks. No description of the artist, the time-frame of the picture or any other details of the picture are provided.

⁸² Tales of City and Enroute Indian History, *Instagram posts*, “A journey through Old Delhi’s courtesan culture...”, “Do you know the tawaif culture has a historical association...”, and “Tawaif and Kotha is a heritage conceptual walk...”, posted September 15, 2024; September 15, 2023; and March 23, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/talesofcityofficial/p/C_8qqUgBIUe/?img_index=2, and <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CxNAedHSIf/>, https://www.instagram.com/p/C42uuY7yxWu/?img_index=2.

⁸³ Tales of City Official and Enroute Indian History, *Instagram posts*, “Funoon-e-Latif ki Dilli”, “Close the chapter of 2023 with a touch of...”, and “The city of Shahjahanabad was a...”, posted September 15, 2024; December 23, 2023; and October 25, 2023, https://www.instagram.com/talesofcityofficial/p/C_8qqUgBIUe/?img_index=1, https://www.instagram.com/p/C1MdJyeSjGg/?img_index=1, https://www.instagram.com/p/Cy0fxDhI3y9/?img_index=1.

⁸⁴ Enroute Indian History, *Instagram posts*, “Always wanted to attend...”, “Have you ever taken...”, “Tawaif and Kotha is a...”, posted August 7, 2023; March 26, 2024; and May 31, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/reel/CvolbEVNK6n/?utm_source=ig_embed&ig_rid=39724c82-0820-4bde-9dc7-75e646602379&ig_mid=8E939E43-D4FE-4B72-BAD3-4ED5EFF55FAD, https://www.instagram.com/enroute_indian_history/reel/C497GnRSMkR/, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C7n21LxSzM/>.



Figure 3: Another advertisement using this early modern miniature painting without any description of the same.



Figure 4: A picture taken in the present, edited in vintage style with a filter; used by one of the companies while urging its viewers to stay tuned for more cultural experiences.

Nostalgic yearning for the past is linguistically exemplified at two levels- 1) in the names given to these heritage walks, and 2) in the captions of these advertisements. Names like Badass Begums (Enroute Indian History), Bordello to Brothel (The Delhinama), *Tehzeeb-e-Tawaif* (meaning the Etiquette of Tawaifs by The Delhinama), *Tawaifbaazi* (meaning Tawaifness by Demythify Delhi), Tales of *Tawaif* (Unzip Delhi) are given to these *tawaif*-based heritage trails by the companies.⁸⁵ The usage of Persian-Urdu words like *Tehzeeb* (etiquettes) or attempts to define the heritage walk in Persian Urdu mannerisms like *Tawaifbaazi* (Tawaifness) are

⁸⁵ The Delhinama, Enroute Indian History, Unzip Delhi, and Demythify Delhi, *Instagram posts*, “Tehzeeb-E-Tawaif, Bordello to Brothel...”, “Our Badass Begums Heritage Walk...”, “Tales of Tawaifs”, and “A Game in which hearts were traded...”, posted February 28, 2024; July 7, 2024; November 29, 2024; and November 13, 2022, https://www.instagram.com/thedelhinama/p/C35W5B2SoAG/?img_index=1, https://www.instagram.com/enroute_indian_history_/p/C9IJA05yFRp/?img_index=1, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DC9YyFFzXu5/>, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CkP1-Cty4q4/>.

constant attempts to situate these walks in a time-frame different than the present, evoking the sentiments of those who want to experience these fantasies of the past.⁸⁶

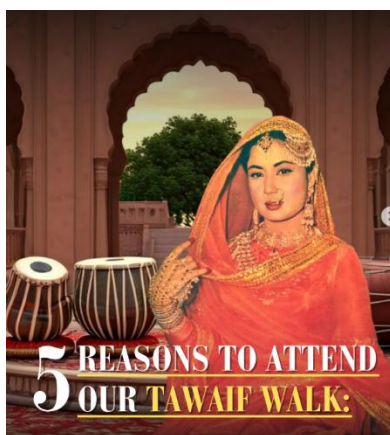


Figure 5: A picture of the actor Meena Kumari who played as a Tawaif in the movie Pakeezah being used by one of the heritage tourism companies.

The captions of the advertisements again rest on an image of the past contrastingly different from the present. “Discover the once-iconic kothas (bordellos) where Tawaifs performed...Let history unfold as you walk through the enchanting tales of grace, art, and resilience” reads a post by Enroute Indian History dated January 13, 2025.⁸⁷ Another post by the same company promises that the walk transports its attendees “to bygone era where women of such skill in dancing, singing, and writing were considered scholars and cultural banners.”⁸⁸

One may confuse the difference between the performance of heritage and the nostalgia revealed in these advertisements. I think that it is the temporality factor that separates the two. The performance of heritage becomes nostalgic when the promise becomes a transportation to a bygone era.

⁸⁶ Persian-Urdu is barely used by a common person in India in normal conversations and is often associated with the culture of past.

⁸⁷ Enroute Indian History, *Instagram Post*, “Tawaif & Kothas: Ek Shaan Ek Mehfil”, posted January 13, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/enroute_indian_history_/p/DExAPYBT-0u/?locale=ko&img_index=1.

⁸⁸ Enroute Indian History, *Instagram Post*, “Tawaif and Kotha is a heritage ...”, posted July 1, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/enroute_indian_history_/p/C84OJPcyvBl/?img_index=1.

It is a valid question to ask here that how can the audiences be nostalgic about something they have not witnessed? After all, the attendees of these walks range from students enthusiastic to get a taste of Delhi's past to adults trying to connect to their legacies- not all of them have lived the 80s and seen the movies or listened to the songs used in the ads.⁸⁹ Certainly none of them have seen the times showed by the black and white pictures of dancing women in these advertisements. I argue that this is where commodification comes into being. That, the audiences' nostalgia is being driven by their own conditions of the present rather than being nostalgic about the past of *tawaifs*.

The way in which these advertisements are designed is exactly how Richard Terdiman reminds us of what commodities are. The nostalgia revealed in the advertisements through visual, sonar, or linguistic mediums is often unrelated to *tawaifs*, we do not know why an unrelated song from the 1980s is used as a background in short videos advertising these heritage walks. We do not know why vintage-style editing is used in different advertisements and what does it have to do with *tawaifs* whose present can still be uncovered. An unrelated Medieval styled painting has barely gotten anything to do with *tawaifs*.

Yes, the advertisements often use cinematic stills of women playing as *tawaifs*, but these can very well evoke other nostalgic sensibilities in people, perhaps people can look at these ads and be nostalgic of the times in which that movie was made or that song was released, the nostalgia is not exclusively specific to the past of *tawaifs*. Furthermore, the history of these nostalgic elements be it old songs, vintage editing, or a modern painting made in medieval-style is erased. Its past is open to investment of meaning by the audiences.

⁸⁹ I have given a description of the kind of audience attending these walks based on my experience as a heritage walk leader for a year between 2022 and 2023.

In a case like this nostalgia becomes a commodity, a hollowed-out object. As reiterated by Terdiman, these objects, snatched away of their pasts, are characterized by a peculiar vagueness which makes them “available for investment by any meaning but organically connected with none at all.”⁹⁰ If invoking visual, sonar, and linguistic nostalgia is what can be amply found in the advertisements, a present of the *tawaifs* is never discussed in the ads. Out of the seventy-five encoded ads, neither one talked about the current situation of the *tawaifs*. No comparisons are drawn between the sex-workers of present times collectively living in G.B road of Old Delhi tracing their genealogies to the *tawaifs* who were once associated with royalty, etiquette, and grandeur. In one of the client feedback videos, an attendee remarks that the history of *tawaifs* is different from what we see today.⁹¹

The negation of the present reaches its epitome when the company itself asks not to expect G.B. Road prostitutes on the walk. The present of the *tawaifs* clashes with the vagueness of the commodified nostalgia used to make profits by the companies. It gives a face to the unclear idea of the *tawaifs*’ past.

The idea that Indian consumers want a sanitized environment, which aestheticizes their cultural legacy has been propounded by Gandhi and Srivastava. Srivastava talks about it in the context of shopping malls while Gandhi talks about it in the context of Old Delhi. This distinction, however, does not happen only in spatial terms. It is not merely about creating a sanitized sterile space for consumption away from the site of “authentic” heritage. It is about a separation between time too, separating the past from the present.

⁹⁰ Terdiman, *Present Past*, 12.

⁹¹ Enroute Indian History, *Instagram Reel*, “Experience history through the eyes of our participants...,” posted July 13, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C9Wk4xSSnfA/?locale=zh_CN&hl=am-et.

Ironically, this separation of the past and the present is done using the emotion that is central to the past itself- nostalgia. A preliminary analysis of the *tawaif*-based advertisements may suggest that it is Boym's reflective nostalgia which is at play here. Be it the language of the caption evoking the "grace, art, and resilience" of the past or the Persianized names of the heritage walks, there seemed to be a disjointed and fragmented yearning for the past time where *tawaifs* used to sing and perform, the yearning is disjointed and fragmented because neither the specificity of the times nor the *tawaifs* are mentioned, it is merely romanticized yearning. However, a further investigation of other elements of nostalgia that are evoked by these advertisements reveal that it is not this disjointed and fragmented yearning which defines the central character of nostalgia.

I argue that it is commodification that characterizes the packaging of nostalgia in these heritage walks. Nostalgia is evoked through often related old songs, vintage pictures, cinematic stills of old actresses deliberately so that it appeals to the aspirations of the lost middle-class and upper-middle class Delhi's residents looking to connect with their culture. Even when advertisements use a reflective language of nostalgia mentioned in the earlier paragraph, it is often contrasted with some visual vagueness, mostly either the cinematic stills of the old actresses or the black and white image of dancing women. It is a point worth noting that out of seventy-five ads, only five of them just use the linguistic mode of evoking nostalgia, which is even less than the proportion of advertisements using just visuals to evoke nostalgic sensibilities in their viewers.⁹² The numbers suggest that the language of reflective nostalgia, of disjointed and fragmented yearning for the past, alone is used by the companies in rare occasions. It is often juxtaposed by vagueness of unrelated songs and visuals. This further strengthens my argument

⁹² Refer to the figure 1 of the thesis.

that it is commodification and not reflection that describes the packaging of nostalgia in *tawaif*-based heritage walks by the five companies.

Chapter 2: Experience of Nostalgia in Contemporary Rickshaw-Pullers of Old Delhi

The temporal-spatial focus of the earlier chapter continues to be of central importance in this chapter too. The context of post-liberalization Delhi is again examined from the lens of nostalgia, but this time not from the vantage point of the upper-middle class/middle class and the style of nostalgia that appeals to their aspirations. I, instead, turn to the lived experience of a marginalized group whose marginality is not sold through the packaging of nostalgia but rather lived. The lived experience of marginality shapes the experience of nostalgia here.

A rickshaw is a three-wheeled cycle with a seat on back, drawn by a man, used to transport people or goods. The chapter focuses on the men who pull these rickshaws in Old Delhi, using their lived experience of nostalgia and understanding the classed nature of the same. I hope to show by the end of the chapter that the informal labor precarity that surrounds the lives of rickshaw-pullers is not merely affecting their survival in the present but also affects their nostalgic perceptions of the past.

I conducted nine oral history interviews of the rickshaw-pullers, and the nostalgic sensibilities revealed in their answers have a peculiar character of their own, which can be deciphered only with an apt contextual analysis. The nostalgia revealed in the answers is also juxtaposed with Boym's categorization of restorative and reflective nostalgia since it does not neatly fit into either of the categories.

I start the chapter with highlighting relevant scholarly works that help us understand where the rickshaw-pullers are placed in the urban ethos of contemporary Delhi. Contemporary newspaper articles also give a sense of how the city's middle class and upper middle-class residents nostalgically remember the rickshaws. I then trace a brief history of spatial

development in Delhi, which was informed by colonial neglect. This spatial development also helps us make sense of the nostalgia that the city's residents have for the rickshaws. Finally, I move onto deciphering the oral history interviews to understand how the lived experience of marginality interacts with nostalgic experience of the past. There are several themes that emerge in the interview answers and are analyzed later in the chapter.

How Does the City Remember the Rickshaw-Pullers?

The rickshaw-pullers dominate the traffic-milieu of Chandni Chowk, the principal street in Old Delhi.⁹³ To avoid congestion on this street, the Government of India banned any other vehicle except rickshaws, e-rickshaws, and carts on the street between 9.00 AM and 9.00 PM.⁹⁴ Shail Mayaram rightly categorises the rickshaw pullers of Old Delhi into the category of the sub-subaltern and highlights their socio-economic vulnerability at the intersection of government regulation and mass displacement.⁹⁵

Madhu Kishwar is the founder of an NGO Manushi that works against the Municipal Corporation of Delhi's oppressive and arbitrary policies against the rickshaw-pullers. Kishwar has written widely on the precarious conditions of the rickshaw-pullers in Manushi's editorial issues.⁹⁶ She has highlighted the unrealistic quotas on the total number of rickshaws in Delhi since 1960. This, according to her, leads to a system of "license raj", which on one hand confiscates rickshaws of the pullers who do not have licenses but on the other hand, is extremely hesitant to actively grant licenses to the rickshaw-pullers. The corruption and arbitrariness,

⁹³ More about Chandni Chowk and Old Delhi is described in the next section. But for now, we can remind ourselves that Shahjahnabad, the capital of the erstwhile Mughal Empire (16th- 19th century), is now called Old Delhi.

⁹⁴ Hindustan Times, "Ban on Motor Vehicles in Delhi's Chandni Chowk: Pedestrians, Cycle and E-Rickshaws to Be Allowed," *Hindustan Times*, August 8, 2018, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/delhi-news/ban-on-motor-vehicles-in-delhi-s-chandni-chowk-pedestrians-cycle-and-e-rickshaws-to-be-allowed/story-e6ajVIGQ3sn95Y2A2HiRIM.html>.

⁹⁵ Shail Mayaram, "Of Marginality: Poverty, Migration and Memory in the Megacity: Special Comment," *Socio-Legal Review* 1 (2005): 7.

⁹⁶ *Manushi*, no. 126, Manushi Sangathan, accessed April 25, 2025, <https://www.manushi-india.org/back-issues/issue-126>. See pages 92–93 and 126.

which is bred by this system is what defines “license raj”. It is duly underlined by Kishwar how traffic police inspectors or Municipal Corporation’s officers confiscate rickshaws of duly licensed pullers to extort bribes for them, further requiring them to prove that the vehicle belongs to the driver, which is not really the case with the pullers. Most of the pullers rent their rickshaws since the cost of purchase is too high.⁹⁷

Amita Baviskar argues that rickshaws do not fit the modern idea of a world- class Delhi, envisioned by the city’s bourgeoisie and the Delhi Government.⁹⁸ Given this context, a valid question to ask is, is the city even nostalgic about the rickshaw-pullers? Does it even care about them?

Nostalgia is best highlighted during transitions, changes, discontinuities- when people are clinging onto a different temporality owing to a change in their current one. As Boym puts it, “For instance, former East Germans launched a campaign to save their old traffic signs representing a funny man in a cute hat, Ampelmann, which was supplanted by a more pragmatic West German image. No body payed much attention to Ampelmann before, but once he vanished from the street signs, he suddenly became a beloved of the whole nation.”⁹⁹ In 2007, a complaint was filed in the high court by a traders' association of Chandni Chowk. In response to this, but for reasons of human dignity, the high court “passed an order May 17, directing Municipal Corporation of Delhi not to grant any license for plying cycle rickshaws on the roads of Delhi and demanded a complete ban on them in the Chandni Chowk area.”¹⁰⁰ Publishing in this context in Hindustan Times, Azera Rahman writes, “An entire way of life is on its way out

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Amita Baviskar, “Cows, Cars and Rickshaws: Bourgeois Environmentalism and the Battle for Delhi’s Streets,” in *Elite and Everyman: The Cultural Politics of the Indian Middle Classes*, ed. Amita Baviskar and Raka Ray (New Delhi: Routledge, 2011), 410–11.

⁹⁹ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 54.

¹⁰⁰ Azera Rahman, “Chandni Chowk Moves On, Sans the Rickshaws,” *Hindustan Times*, June 13, 2007, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/delhi/chandni-chowk-moves-on-sans-the-rickshaws/story-K6S5V3uhyMfOyzuAOILEsL.html>.

in the national capital's historic Chandni Chowk area with the ubiquitous rickshaws that took many a traveler through its congested lanes being replaced by CNG buses and thousands of people being rendered jobless.”¹⁰¹

A Times Now article clearly associates cycle-rickshaws with other symbols of history and nostalgia like the *tongas*- horse-driven vehicle.¹⁰² Neither of the two newspaper articles talk about a return to the “earlier lifestyle” or history. There is merely an aestheticization of the longing. Reflection, instead of restoration can be used to explain the character of nostalgia displayed here based on Boym’s works.¹⁰³ It is important to note that when the residents talk in nostalgic sentiments, they often refer to the rickshaws and not the pullers. I could not find descriptions of rickshaw-pullers in contemporary sources that can be associated with emotions of nostalgia.

Colonial Politics of Space in Delhi

The stage of historical enquiry was set in the last chapter- post-liberalization Delhi (1991-present), characterized by its upper-middle class and middle class trying to carve spaces of alternative modernity by consuming culture in the form of regulated heritage walks. But like it was in the case of *tawaifs*, to make sense of the contemporary nostalgia surrounding the figure of *tawaifs*, we needed to understand how the relevant historical processes have unfolded in a longer duration of time. Similarly, to understand the nostalgia reflected in the lived experiences

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Indrani Basu and Esha Mahajan, “No Time for Nostalgia on Crowded Roads,” , *Times of India* , December 10, 2011, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/delhis-century/top-stories/no-time-for-nostalgia-on-crowded-roads/articleshow/11058102.cms>. I chose contemporary newspaper articles to understand the question about how the city remembers the rickshaw-pullers for a reason. Even if there is a discrepancy between the citizen’s account and the journalistic description of the same, the very fact that an article like that is published indicates some level of resonance between the editorial piece and the readers, the residents of the city.

¹⁰³ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 18.

of rickshaw-pullers and the nostalgia that the city has for the rickshaws, we need to make sense of the space of Chandni Chowk, the place of livelihood for these rickshaw-pullers.

One can note to contextualize that the fifth Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan constructed the seventh city of Delhi Shahjahanabad whose foundation was laid in May 1639.¹⁰⁴ Chandni Chowk was the principal street of Shahjahanabad.¹⁰⁵ During the Delhi Durbar (Assembly) of 1911 in Coronation Park, King George V announced the British decision to shift the capital from Calcutta to Delhi and to make Delhi its imperial capital.¹⁰⁶ It was inaugurated on 13 February 1931.¹⁰⁷

Nalini Singh and Shaheen Islamuddin highlight that by shifting the capital from Calcutta to Delhi, the British wanted to assert dominance over the erstwhile Mughal empire (whose capital was also Delhi), in whose name the revolt of 1857 was carried out.¹⁰⁸ Singh and Islamuddin's argument is that in a way, the British have been preparing their capital since immediately after the revolt of 1857, a noteworthy development of this preparation being the inauguration of Municipality in 1863.¹⁰⁹ The scholars further note how the British railways cut right through the royal Shahjahanabad, which would have been considered as a disgrace by the inhabitants of Delhi.¹¹⁰ Singh and Islamuddin also underline how the British carried out the demolition of the city's walls and gates since "the fortification of Shahjahanabad seem to be more disturbing or fearful for the British officers as they very often remembered the out of control calamity of 1857 within Shahjahanabad."¹¹¹ These steps taken by the British officers served as a trigger

¹⁰⁴ S. Nurul Hasan, "The Morphology of a Mediaeval Indian City: A Case Study of Shahjahanabad in the 18th and Early 19th Century," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 43 (1982): 307.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 310.

¹⁰⁶ David A. Johnson, "A British Empire for the Twentieth Century: The Inauguration of New Delhi, 1931," *Urban History* 35, no. 3 (2008): 462–63.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Nalini Singh and Shaheen Islamuddin, "The Making of New Delhi: A Study of Destruction of Pre-Colonial Settlements and Memories (1860s–1920s)," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 78 (2017): 528.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 530.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 528.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 530.

and generated feelings of loss and grief amidst the residents who were pre-colonial urban landscape with nostalgia. The nature of this nostalgia is analyzed in detail by Margrit Pernau.¹¹²

The “end of a lifestyle” rhetoric exhibited in the journalistic piece by the contemporary Hindustan Times writer, which is explored in the previous section is not new in the context of Chandni Chowk. Since the second half of the 19th century, the space of Chandni Chowk was seen as the symbol of the lost culture and the emotion of nostalgia attached to the elements of this space like the walls and gates that eventually were changed by the British officers. The nostalgia that the citizens carry for the rickshaws, the “lifestyle” that they argue rickshaws symbolize, can very well be a continued nostalgia for the lost city of Shahjahanabad, now Old Delhi. From my understanding, the middle-class residents of the city, the readers of the newspapers quoted in the previous section, seem to have no nostalgia for the rickshaw-pullers as a group. What they seem to be nostalgic about is the space of Chandni Chowk owing to its historical transformation from a historic center to the one at periphery during the 19th-20th century.

The nostalgia that the residents exhibited for Chandni Chowk and its ethos was best exemplified when an element of this ethos was on the verge of extinction, when the High Court of Delhi decided to put a ban on these rickshaws.¹¹³ Rickshaws are a way to navigate the contemporary lanes and by-lanes of Chandni Chowk, a street which can otherwise appear to be a chaotic and overwhelming space owing to its congestion. The functionality of these rickshaws in the congested and narrow lanes of Chandni Chowk makes them a convenient choice and a suitable fit for the middle-class residents to be nostalgic about. In other words, this functionality makes them smoothly blend in the urban ethos of the space that is being nostalgically missed by the residents. However, the history of Chandni Chowk is not merely the history of imperial decline

¹¹² Pernau, “Tears of Blood for a Lost World,” 212-242.

¹¹³ Refer to the earlier section of the chapter for more on the High Court order.

and development of nostalgia; it is also a history of constant state (colonial) neglect and marginalization.

The first town planning committee's report on the choice of a site for the new British imperial capital mentions that Delhi's population in 1911 was divided roughly into two halves: half of them living inside the walled city (the erstwhile Shahjahanabad) and the other half in the northern civil station between the walled city and the Ridge, in the irregular suburbs in the west and south to the walled city.¹¹⁴ These suburbs were called Sabzi Mandi, Sadar Bazaar, and Paharganj.¹¹⁵ All of these areas soon became "Old Delhi" as the Raisina Hills situated to the South of the walled city was chosen by the British to make their imperial capital.

With the example of Andrew Parker Hume who was asked by the Government of India to investigate the relief of congestion in Delhi, Stephen Legg highlights how funds were disproportionately divided between New Delhi and Old Delhi by the British municipal authorities and Hume constantly faced this problem during this investigation.¹¹⁶ Hume writes and Legg highlights, "Old Delhi has waited over 20 years for the Govnt. of India to take pity on its squalor and slums while they poured out their gold on the Imperial New Capital".¹¹⁷ Hume's most important contribution, as reiterated by Legg, lies in the mapping of intensity maps, which showed the state of overpopulation and congestion in Old Delhi in 1931.¹¹⁸

Legg argues that although sanitation drives were carried to tackle malaria and sewage issues by the responsible British municipal authorities, these failed to address the problem of

¹¹⁴ George S. C. Swinton, *The First Report of the Delhi Town Planning Committee on the Choice of a Site for the New Imperial Capital* (London: HM Stationery Office, 1913), 2.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Stephen Legg, *Spaces of Colonialism: Delhi's Urban Governmentalities* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 164.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 164.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 166.

congestion.¹¹⁹ The incentive for the drives were also to attend to the possible spread of the diseases to the not-so-far parts of New Delhi.¹²⁰

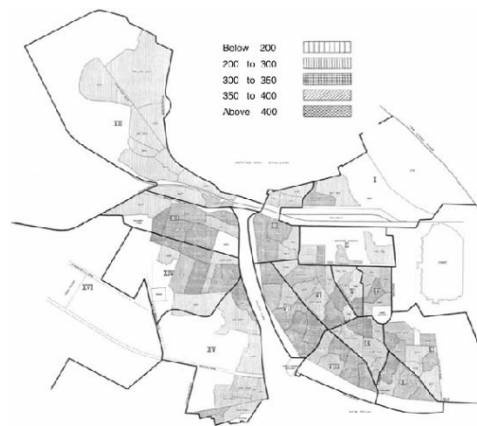


Figure 6: Hume's Congestion Map.¹²¹

The changes that Chandni Chowk witnessed in its spatial ethos in the 19th-20th century were further accompanied by demographic changes in the city too. The Census of India, 1931 mentions that between 1911 to 1921, the population of the Delhi Province rose by eighteen percent, which is significantly higher compared to less than ten percent increase of earlier two decades.¹²² The Census of India, 1931 rationalizes this increase by various approaches: by the obvious outnumbering of birth rates over death rates, agricultural patterns, patterns of wages and prices, state of trade and industry, costs of living, etc.¹²³ However, from the point of view of the rickshaw-pullers, I consider migration to be a factor worth giving attention to.

The Census of 1931 mentions that the migrant laborers in Old Delhi came from the Punjab and United Provinces (north and east of Delhi respectively) as artisans, laborers, and periodic or semi-permanent migrants.¹²⁴ The census discusses the occupations of the migrants in the then

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 170.

¹²¹ Ibid., 167.

¹²² Khan Ahmed Hasan Khan, *Census of India, 1931, vol. 16* (Lahore: Civil and Military Gazette Press, 1933), 12.

¹²³ Ibid., 16-21.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 43.

Delhi Province - “income from the rent of land, transport, public force, public administration, domestic service, field labor, laborers unspecified, agents and managers of landed estates, and beggars and prostitutes, etc.”¹²⁵ Majority of the field workers in the then Delhi Province came from the United Provinces (eastern part of India) and were engaged in building work in the city in their leisure time apart from practicing agriculture in their home towns.¹²⁶ This pattern of migration, of working in Delhi while the family continues to be in the eastern states, is also a characteristic feature of the rickshaw-pullers I interviewed. However, in the details provided about the occupations of the migrants, the census does not mention anything about rickshaws.

A report on rickshaw-pullers was compiled by Ahmad Mukhtar and others in 1945-46, which suggests an increase in the number of rickshaw-pullers in the early 1940s.¹²⁷ The report further mentions that indebtedness and poor housing characterized the lives of the rickshaw-pullers in Shimla, Calcutta, Madras, Delhi, and other cities.¹²⁸ My understanding is that there is a possibility that the “field workers” mentioned in the census of 1931 who engaged in building work might have shifted to the profession of rickshaw-pulling as the project of making New Delhi was coming to an end by then.¹²⁹ By tracing the possible origin of the profession of rickshaw-pulling, I have tried to set the context that will help me contextualize the contemporary experience of nostalgia revealed in the interviews with rickshaw-pullers. The poor living conditions and migratory patterns associated with contemporary rickshaw-pullers have a longer history that dates to the 20th century. Tracing histories of oppression helps one make sense of the rickshaw-pullers’ nostalgia not only in terms of their contemporary material

¹²⁵ Ibid., 45.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 46.

¹²⁷ D. V. Rege, S. D. Deshpande, Ahmad Mukhtar, B. P. Adarkar, and Teja Singh Sahani, *Report on Rickshaw Pullers* (Delhi: Labour Investigation Committee, Government of India, 1946), 59.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 60-61.

¹²⁹ For reference, New Delhi was inaugurated in 1931. Johnson, “A British Empire for the Twentieth Century,” 465.

precarity but also with respect to continued neglect that might have shaped their affective responses.

In this section, I have shown how the colonial spatial development of Chandni Chowk generated nostalgia amidst the then residents of the area. This nostalgia continues to find its resonance in the middle class and upper middle-class residents of contemporary Delhi who associate rickshaws with the lost ethos of Chandni Chowk. But the 20th-century colonial neglect also rendered the space of Chandni Chowk as congested with the migrants from the United Provinces being abandoned in this space of congestion. As stated earlier, there is a sound possibility that a section of these migrants turned into the profession of rickshaw-pulling.

Interviewing Rickshaw-Pullers from the Lens of Nostalgia¹³⁰

As stated in the beginning, this chapter concerns itself with the nostalgic perception of the past in the lived experience of the rickshaw-pullers. I chose oral history as my methodology to get the closest understanding of these lived experiences. Conducting oral history interviews also provides one a chance to adapt their questions based on the feedback received on initial questions- a dynamic interaction with the “source” is possible.

I conducted a total of nine interviews- eight of them in-person and one over audio call. All of my interviewees were migrants. Either the interviewees migrated to Delhi ostly from the eastern states of India , or their fathers did in search of better livelihoods. Just to have a cursory idea of the interviewees’ profile, one can note that six of them were Muslims while three were Hindus.

¹³⁰ The oral history interviews conducted for this chapter have been anonymized by removing the part of the recordings where I mention the interviewees’ names and ask for their consent for conducting the interviews. However, I still have the separate audio consent of all the nine interviews. Voice distortion has been applied to protect participant identities. These recordings are not publicly available but can be accessed for research purposes by contacting the author directly via email (@srushtisharma566@gmail.com).

Six of them, both Hindus and Muslims, live alone in Delhi while three live with their wives and/or children in various localities of the city.

My primary point of contact was Javed who has been running a rickshaw in Old Delhi since more than 15 years.¹³¹ His father and grandfather were also in the same profession. He has migrated from Bihar, a state in the eastern part of India. My rapport with him developed during my year as a heritage walk leader in Delhi (2023-2024). It was him who got me in contact with eight other rickshaw-pullers in Old Delhi. I took an online interview of Javed when I was in Vienna, and he was in Old Delhi. The interview was in the format of a recorded audio call. Platforms like Zoom and Skype might have appeared to be intimidating to him in an era of digital divide in India hence the choice of an audio call.

All interviews were conducted in Hindi. One of the major challenges for me was to make the interviewees understand nostalgia, which has no Hindi synonym. I tried using certain words/concepts to understand their perceptions of their own past- that of “history of rickshaw-pullers”, “change,” and “olden days.”¹³² I have reflected on this challenge and what it means for the conceptualization of nostalgia by the end of this chapter.

As for the data management, all interviews are stored on the SD card of my laptop- this is well known to the interviewees, and they have agreed with the same. I took recorded oral consent of all interviewees before the interview, since I did not want to intimidate them with the written word. While taking the oral consent, I decided to mention only the most vital details of the interview- where will it be used and stored? Will the names be anonymised and the voices distorted? I further explained the interviewees their rights during the interview, of how they can ask me to stop the recording whenever they feel like. I tried to use an extremely simple and

¹³¹ All interviewee names cited in the chapter are anonymized.

¹³² This aspect is further explored in the analysis.

understandable language and genuinely tried to make them understand the future of this interview. This was done as an attempt to share the authority with them over the future of the interview- its usage and storage. Furthermore, I have seen that transparent communication like this often helps in building a relationship of trust between the interviewees and interviewers. Clarity of motivations and expectations was at the center stage for me while building the rapport with the interviewees.

I transferred twelve Euros to each interviewee's bank account for their time and efforts before the interview. This motivated them to speak to me and think about issues that do not take a significant space in their regular mental-emotional routine. I recorded the confirmation of the receipt of this payment by the interviewees while taking their oral consent.

Apart from reasons for incentive, compensation is also required for consideration of fairness. There is a growing consensus amongst oral history practitioners to compensate their interviewees, especially when they are migrants and do not have a strong socio-economic standing.¹³³

Despite these efforts to eliminate unequal power relations, I realize that it is not possible to completely do so. I am a woman from an upper middle class background interviewing men categorized into the sub-subaltern section of Indian society about nostalgia, a word which cannot be even translated into Hindi. In a situation like this, there is always the dangerous possibility that the answers are constructed and cannot be taken as the lived experience of the interviewees. Nonetheless, by providing fair compensation and ensuring incentive, using simple language, and evoking familiar visuals while questioning, I did try to minimize the comprehension gap arising out of unequal power relations.

¹³³ Fanny Julissa García and Nara Milanich, "Money Talks: Narrator Compensation in Oral History," *The Oral History Review* 50, no. 2 (2023): 187–204.

Joan Scott argues that the ultimate step to historicize the experience is to track the appropriation of the language. It is “by situating and contextualizing the language that one historicizes the terms by which experience is represented” that one can historicize the experience.¹³⁴ It is along these lines that I have tried to anchor my analysis of the interviews, and it was because of this reason that I have tried to present an understanding of the space of Chandni Chowk in the earlier section- to contextualize the experience of marginality better so that an ultimate examination concerning the conceptualization can be made.

The Migration Rhetoric of Betterment

The rhetoric of “betterment” was vivid in the answers of all interviewees when I asked them about what has changed from olden days (*purane din*) to now in the lives of rickshaw-pullers. In all nine interviews, my first strategy would be to set the stage of my first question relating to the changes observed from then (olden days) to now. I did this by stating the number of years the interviewees have spent pulling rickshaws. The idea here was to evoke a sense of time in their thinking, to make them realize that they themselves have been a part of a historical process by pulling rickshaws for years, to provide a justification regarding why I am asking them about old days of rickshaw-pulling.

When I asked this question to Mohammad Aslan, he stated how the income of the rickshaw-pullers is a “lakh times better” currently as opposed to the olden times.¹³⁵ A similar assertion was made by Javed in reply to the question on change, about what has changed from before to now for the rickshaw-pullers. Javed iterated that what sets apart the “*purane din*” (olden days) from present is the rise in income of the rickshaw-pullers. He argues this while acknowledging that the rise in income has been accompanied by a general rise in the price of commodities

¹³⁴ Joan W. Scott, “Experience,” in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), 37.

¹³⁵ Md. Aslan, interview by Srushti Sharma, Old Delhi, April 14, 2025, timestamp 14:40.

too.¹³⁶ Similarly, Salman also argues that although the income of the rickshaw-pullers has risen, eating food was not this expensive earlier.¹³⁷

Another interviewee, Fawad recalls how the coming of metro trains has helped in reducing congestion and the overall time that was required to travel from one place to another from the rickshaw, the point being that in the same money, distances can be covered faster now as opposed to the “olden days”.¹³⁸ A similar narrative of the olden days symbolizing traffic and congestion was propounded by Bhagwath.¹³⁹

All the interviewees mentioned above except Bhagwath are migrants from Bihar, the eastern state of India. While Fawad and Salim migrated to Delhi, it was Javed’s grandfather who moved to the city. The reason I still categorize Javed as a migrant is because his family continues to live in Bihar where he visits them one-two times a year, and it is Bihar that he chooses to call “home”¹⁴⁰

Remembering the olden days with congestion and low-income can also be a part of the larger migration rhetoric of betterment- wherein the past is associated with hardships and the story of migration from Bihar to Delhi is story of better livelihood. As Javed puts it, “We are worker people, we do not have jobs in our village. Whatever we earn from pulling rickshaws, we send them home and that is how our families are fed.”¹⁴¹ What I mean is that there is a possibility that the migration rhetoric of betterment is projected onto the question of change too. The boundaries between time and space seem to get blurred in the thought processes of the rickshaw-

¹³⁶ Javed, interviewed by Srushti Sharma, audio call, timestamp 7:38.

¹³⁷ Salman, interview by Srushti Sharma, Old Delhi, April 15, 2025, timestamp 2:22.

¹³⁸ Fawad, interview by Srushti Sharma, Old Delhi, April 14, 2025, timestamp 6:15.

¹³⁹ Bhagwath, interview by Srushti Sharma, Old Delhi, April 15, 2025, timestamp 1:26.

¹⁴⁰ Javed, interview, timestamp 19:05.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 18:35.

pullers. In other words, it does not appear to be a logical leap to draw parallels between the story of Bihar to Delhi and the story of olden days to now- the transition signifying betterment.

A somewhat contradictory narrative was provided by Noor Shehbaz who kept comparing the price of food items to argue that the olden days were better in terms of prices of commodities and that the Covid-19 lockdown has significantly affected the pace of the business.¹⁴² This answer, however, needs to be viewed against the profile of Noor Shehbaz. He comes from Murshidabad, a town in the eastern Indian state of Bengal. From Murshidabad, Shehbaz came to Delhi and then went to Riyadh in Saudi Arabia and then again moved to Delhi.¹⁴³ Thus, the migration rhetoric of betterment is not as striking in his answer as in the others. Perhaps, if the same question was asked to him during his earlier stay in Delhi, the answer would be what Javed, or the others, said about the olden days and now.

Sajjeed worked as a cap-maker in Sadar Bazaar of Old Delhi before he decided to switch to rickshaw-pulling, which he has been doing for 5 years now.¹⁴⁴ When I asked him why he shifted to the profession of rickshaw-pulling, he said there was not a lot of “profit” in cap-making.¹⁴⁵ He further mentions that while the “rate” has increased in rickshaw-pulling from the earlier times, there is still no “profit”.¹⁴⁶ It is noteworthy here that unlike Javed and Salman who have been pulling rickshaws for more than 15 years now, Sajjeed is relatively new to the profession and his idea of olden days is not after all that old. Furthermore, rickshaw-pulling is not the first job he picked up after migrating from Bihar to Delhi- it was cap-making. These points may explain why the migration rhetoric of betterment is not as prominent in his answers as the others.

¹⁴² Noor Shehbaz, interview by Srushti Sharma, Old Delhi, April 14, 2025, timestamp 12:38. On March 24, 2020, the Prime Minister of India announced a nationwide lockdown for 21 days due to rising COVID-19 cases; the lockdown was extended until May 30, with continued restrictions in public spaces, especially in containment zones.

¹⁴³ Ibid., timestamp 1.16.

¹⁴⁴ Sajjeed, interview by Srushti Sharma, Old Delhi, April 14, 2025, timestamp 1:10.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., timestamp 1.30.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., timestamp 1.39.

In general, it is sound to point out the possibility of the story of migration being conflated with the story of change- the present symbolizes betterment than the olden days like how migration was the need for better livelihoods. However, the answers are still perceptions of the past, an insight into the thought process of the rickshaw-pullers than their nostalgia.

Towards a Different Temporality

Aslan remarks that when after 9.00 PM, he sees the no-entry barricade being removed and vehicles other than the hand-pulled rickshaw allowed on the street of Chandni Chowk, he says to himself that the olden days are back.¹⁴⁷ He recalls how in the olden days, there used to be a bus next to the Sisganj gurudwara.¹⁴⁸ He further goes on to say that he realizes it is the “new days” when there is barely any congestion on the streets and only rickshaws run on Chandni Chowk.¹⁴⁹ For Aslan, what is different about the present than the olden days is the changed spatial ethos of Chandni Chowk, particularly in terms of congestion, which he describes in vivid detail in his answers.

As stated earlier, considering the rising cases of COVID-19 in India, the Prime Minister announced a strict nationwide lockdown on 24 March 2020 for 21 days- this eventually was extended until 30 May. When I asked Aslan how the time of lockdown for him was, he was mentally and emotionally transferred to a time different than the present. While sobbing, he remarked that “let alone humans, even animals died of hunger during the lockdown”.¹⁵⁰ He was constantly describing the present in opposition to “those days” of lockdown, as if reassuring himself that the worst is over.¹⁵¹ This reassurance was a way for Aslan to come back to the present, to stop crying and getting emotional about the lockdown- a different temporality he

¹⁴⁷ Md. Aslan, interview, timestamp 3:28.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., timestamp 4:07.

¹⁴⁹ Refer to the earlier part mentioning how only rickshaws are allowed to run on the main street of Chandni Chowk between 9.00 AM and 9.00 PM.

¹⁵⁰ Md. Aslan, interview, timestamp 4:07.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., timestamp 9.10.

was transferred to while talking about the lockdown. My question was an open-ended one, “How were the days of lockdown for you?” During my interactions with any of the interviewees, I did not insinuate that I am looking for specific answers. The general tonality of the interview was causal, in which I attempted to give space to the interviewees to speak in whatever terms they prefer to.

The question over Lockdown also evoked similar emotional sensibilities in Bhagwat who argued that the police made sure that no rickshaw-puller was on the street during the time when he replied to the similar question, I asked Aslan. He could barely earn 50-100 rupees in the lockdown and got his and his children’s meals from a school serving free food in Lal Kuan, Old Delhi. This scheme was funded by Akshay Patra (a charity foundation). Like Aslan, he reassured himself and remarked that may God never bring that time again.¹⁵² Even when Bhagwat was talking about a different temporality, almost getting transferred to it, his concerns continued to be centered around the survival logic- how did he feed himself and his children?

A transfer to a different temporality was evident when I asked the rickshaw-pullers if they had ever seen a *Mundi* Rickshaw. I got to know about this type of rickshaw from my first interview with Javed when I asked him, “do you think rickshaw has a history? When you guys talk amongst yourself, does this topic ever come up?”¹⁵³ He then told me about this specific type of rickshaw, which is no longer in use. After the interview, Javed even sent me an old picture of this rickshaw.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² Bhagwath, interview, timestamp 9:12.

¹⁵³ Javed, interview, timestamp 15.03.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., timestamp 15.15.



Figure 7: A picture of munda rickshaw that Javed sent me after his interview.

During the interview with Javed, reflexivity in his answers was a key observation. When asked about the history of the rickshaw-pullers, Javed first immediately remarked that “there is no history of rickshaw-pullers” but then started talking about the *munda* rickshaws with tonalities that were transferring him to a different temporality with extraordinary vividness.¹⁵⁵ I believe this was the most important instance in the entire interview. Even while being nostalgic, his narrative was largely driven by the detailing of the object (*munda* rickshaws) rather than about his feelings about the same.

When I mentioned *munda* rickshaw during a question to Fawad, he got excited and immediately remarked how he has driven a *munda* rickshaw for a price of 2 rupees per person in his 32 years of experience in pulling hand-driven rickshaws.¹⁵⁶ When asked about his old memories of the city, Bhagwath recalls coming to Old Delhi with his father on a *munda* rickshaw.¹⁵⁷ I cannot find the mention of *munda* rickshaws in any written source so far.

When I asked Fawad if he remembers any political events in Delhi, like the national emergency, that were important to the lives of rickshaw-pullers, he argued that whenever any political event occurs in Delhi, the rickshaw-pullers are asked to vacate/run away.¹⁵⁸ Fawad further recalls that

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Fawad, interview, timestamp 3:30.

¹⁵⁷ Bhagwath, interview, timestamp 5:05.

¹⁵⁸ National Emergency (here) was imposed in India in 1971 by the then Prime Minister of India Indira Gandhi under which the state had unchecked constitutional power and all civil liberties were curtailed.

when the main road of Chandni Chowk was under construction under the Chandni Chowk Redevelopment Project, a temple of a Hindu deity was demolished overnight. This hurt the religious sentiments of some people, and the shopkeepers of the locality then protested, which was followed by riots. These events were followed by the local authorities barricading the main road of Chandni Chowk, the main street where the rickshaw-pullers run rickshaws. This time, according to Fawad, was a very tumultuous one for the rickshaw-pullers and his recalling of this again entailed a transfer to a different temporality than the present.¹⁵⁹

Fawad associated Delhi's old days with its seasons. He was recalling how winters were longer in Delhi earlier- lasting until March and how there is no fog anymore during Delhi's winters.¹⁶⁰ Interestingly, this was indeed a one-line passing comment, a matter-of-fact statement. He did not have details to add for the seasonal change nor was he remembering the old seasons vividly.

When asked about the olden days in Delhi, Bhagwath recalls seeing *Ramlila* (an Indian epic inspired play) in the open ground of Red Fort and listening to politicians at Delhi Gate.¹⁶¹ Again, this answer came when I was constantly pushing Bhagwath to tell something about the "old days". Bhagwath's insights into watching the play with his father appeared more as a matter-of-fact statement than something detailed. Salman associated the old days with eating at an old hotel in Old Delhi- Shiv Charan Dhaba for a nominal price of 5 rupees.¹⁶² No further details about the hotel or the time then were given by him- this was his one-liner answer when I asked him if he remembers any old places of eating in Old Delhi.

¹⁵⁹ Fawad, interview, timestamp 8:10–9:00.

¹⁶⁰ Fawad, interview, timestamp 14:05–14:45.

¹⁶¹ Bhagwath, interview, timestamp 7:59.

¹⁶² Salman, interview, timestamp 12:38.

When asked about the kind of problems faced by the rickshaw-pullers in contemporary times, Aslan's constant argument was that he has no problems with anyone and that he has no issues with either the MCD or any other committee since his rickshaw is registered and he has a valid driver's license.¹⁶³ Another interviewee, Fawad argued that there are no problems in the lives of rickshaw-pullers. In fact, he went on to assert that rickshaw-pullers cause problems in their own lives by not driving properly and causing congestion.¹⁶⁴ It is important to note that it would have been difficult for the interviewees to take a strong stance against the Municipal Corporation of Delhi in a recorded interview- given the arbitrary nature with which MCD works and the threat it may pose to their livelihoods if the MCD gets to know somehow that an interview like this was given.¹⁶⁵

The Aslan who claims to have no issues with MCD is the same Aslan who associated the olden days with congestion in Old Delhi. This raises the possibility of olden days perceived as being worse than the present in the interviews because of the interviewees' inability to express the present's hardships owing to the threat this expression poses. The only interviewee who argued that the Municipal Corporation of Delhi confiscates the "extra" illegal rickshaws running in Chandni Chowk was Bhagwath.¹⁶⁶ But, the solution he suggested was to reduce the number of rickshaws unlike the activist-scholar Kishwar who asked for increasing the quotas.¹⁶⁷

When I asked Noor Shehbaz if he knows about *mundi* rickshaws, he enthusiastically agreed to the existence of the same. He recalled the pricing he would ask customers to sit on the *mundi* rickshaw. After revealing the pricing of the *mundi* rickshaws, Shehbaz recalled the cost of food in Chandni Chowk in olden days, which to him was Delhi before his temporary visit to

¹⁶³ Md. Aslan, interview, timestamp 14:25.

¹⁶⁴ Fawad, interview, timestamp 2:00.

¹⁶⁵ For a better understanding of the MCD-rickshaw-puller dynamic, refer to Madhu Kishwar's arguments detailed in earlier sections.

¹⁶⁶ Bhagwath, interview, timestamp 6:40.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., timestamp 7.04.

Riyadh.¹⁶⁸ I asked Noor if he remembers any political event of the past- demolitions, emergency, etc. affecting the lives of rickshaw-pullers.

Even while talking about the political demolitions in Jamuna Bazaar (a locality in Delhi), the first thing Noor recalled was the price he paid for food during that time- 20 rupees. After recalling this, he chooses to talk about how he rented his CNG rickshaw during that time from a renter called Adil and how congestion and people abusing each other owing to the lack of space was so famous back then.¹⁶⁹

This was extremely striking to me both during the interview and the analysis. Even while being a witness to something brutal like the demolitions, which cost people the literal shelter over their head, Noor remembers about nothing but his material condition then.

When I asked Noor about the changes he observed in Delhi as a city, his answer described his rent in the olden days and how he was a ragpicker then. He passingly mentioned that when his *jhuggi* (hut) was demolished by the authorities, he went to his village and then came back and lived in Geeta Colony, a locality in the eastern part of Delhi.¹⁷⁰

Similarly, when I asked Salman about the history of rickshaw-pullers by taking the Republic Day as an example of celebration of the nation's history, he answered that the 26th of January marks the wastage of half a day's earnings since on that day, the main road of Chandni Chowk is closed till noon. I asked after giving the example that "do you think just like there is a display of history on the 26th of January, there is a history of rickshaw too" to which he replied yes "the history of rickshaw is that the roads are closed on the 26th of January" and then went about how it is a waste of half a day's earnings.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁸ Noor Shehbaz, interview, timestamp 5:45.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, timestamp 9.23.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, timestamp 10.52.

¹⁷¹ Salman, interview, timestamp 3:25.

My argument is that the material precarity of the rickshaw-pullers, characterized by low income and the threat of facing bureaucratic arbitrariness like confiscation of the rickshaws by the Municipal corporation of Delhi, not only affects their present but is also the driving force behind how they perceive their past nostalgically.¹⁷² In this section, certain triggers came into light, triggers that transfer the interviewees into a different temporal scale. These are the Covid-19 lockdown, *mundi* rickshaws, 26th January, and political events. These triggers are all material.

I argue that the temporal dislocation that the rickshaw-pullers faced by these triggers is driven by conditions of the present than fantasies of the past. *Mundi* rickshaws transfer them to a different temporality not because the rickshaws represent a different time, but because the rickshaws continue to be the central part of their livelihoods in the present. Covid-19 is remembered as the “worst being over” because survival is the logic of the present, delving onto the hardships of the lost time is not. That political event Fawad recalled was to highlight the plight of the rickshaw-pullers in the present, to iterate that whenever anything political happens in Chandni Chowk the rickshaw-pullers are asked to vacate. There is a reason why Noor Shehbaz remembers the exact money he paid for food in the past or the pricing he would ask customers to pay while he drove *mundi* rickshaws or the rent he paid in the “olden days” even when asked about thematically different questions like the political demolitions, or the changes he observed in Delhi. It is remembering the exact figures of money that help him navigate through the material hardships of the present. Salman can recall the republic day only in terms of what it means for the earnings of the rickshaw-pullers because it is what concerns his present, it *is* the history of rickshaw-pullers for him.

What was evident in the answers was a survival-centered logic that gives primacy to the present while being triggered by material questions of the past. This logic must be seen against the

¹⁷² What is nostalgic about these answers is deciphered in the next section of the chapter.

backdrop of colonial neglect of Chandni Chowk, which left the rickshaw-pullers in a congested area with barely any regulatory apparatus. The logic, which is a result of a long history of marginalization, is highlighted when the rickshaw-pullers experience a temporal dislocation. This transfer to a different temporality or temporal dislocation experienced by the rickshaw-pullers is what I call their lived experience of nostalgia in this chapter.

Making Sense of Nostalgia

The temporal dislocation that the rickshaw-pullers experience does not fit into the categorizations of nostalgia suggested by Boym. The rickshaw-pullers are not longing to go back to the lost home, *nostos* as Boym calls it in the case of restorative nostalgia.¹⁷³ There is no attempt to “transhistorically reconstruct the lost home”. For the rickshaw-pullers, whatever is lost is a thing of the days gone and no matter how hard it is, it is not worth paying attention to.

Then, is it the longing which is a characteristic feature of their nostalgia? Boym argues, “reflective nostalgia cherishes shattered fragments of memory and temporalizes space”.¹⁷⁴ But, cherishing is the last thing that the rickshaw-pullers talk about in their answers neither is there a longing for the *mundi* rickshaws or for the republic day.

Does this mean that the rickshaw-pullers are not nostalgic about their past? I argue otherwise. Boym’s works developed in the Eastern European context and did not consider the class of the people who are experiencing nostalgia. The temporal dislocation that the rickshaw-pullers experienced while answering was characterized by extraordinary details of the past and certainly had an affective side to it. Just because their answers did not follow either the rhetoric of restoration or reflection does not indicate the lack of nostalgic sensibilities in them. I have highlighted the precarious conditions of the rickshaw-pullers in the past and the present, which

¹⁷³ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 18.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 49.

has resulted in their nostalgia being *translated* into material terms, driven by the survival-logic of present, and without a rhetoric of restoration or reflection.

Conclusion

I began this thesis by asking two primary questions: what can a nostalgia-centered analysis of two marginalized groups reveal about post-liberalization contemporary Delhi; and how can a concept like nostalgia, which lacks a direct Hindi equivalent at the etymological level, be conceived in the context of the city today?

By using nostalgia as a lens to explore the contemporary urban landscape of Delhi, focusing on the experiences and representations of rickshaw-pullers and *tawaifs* respectfully, I have proved that the style of nostalgia depends on the social class who is experiencing it or on the social class to whom the nostalgic evoking is targeted to. In the first chapter, nostalgia was packaged as a hollowed-out object, as a commodity. Unrelated vintage visuals and old songs are used to evoke this nostalgia. Anything which has the potential to give a clear face to this vague nostalgia, like the present condition of sex workers in G.B. Road, is actively neglected. To commodify nostalgia has been made possible only because of the historical context, which has erased the cultural role of *tawaifs* from the collective memory of Delhi's residents. Commodification of nostalgia best serves the interests of the upper-middle class of Delhi who want to engage with culture on their own terms and are looking for an alternative modernity. The success of vague nostalgia rests on the feeling of nostalgia favored by the upper-middle residents.

In the second chapter, I turn the tables in the same context of post-liberalization Delhi with the upper middle-class's aspirations of an alternative modernity. The city continues to be nostalgic about the rickshaws, particularly because these rickshaws run on Chandni Chowk, the street associated with loss and grieving as the colonial politics of space unfolded. To better understand the classed nature of this emotion, I enquire about it from the experience of the marginalized themselves. Their version of nostalgia is a non-romanticized recalling of the past done in

material terms. Even when asked about affective questions like do you miss home, the rickshaw-pullers answered in material terms by remarking that even if they miss home rickshaw-pulling is their livelihood and it is what feeds their “home”. Whenever a temporal dislocation was experienced by the rickshaw-pullers, it was neither a longing for the lost time nor did they derive pleasure from the yearning. In fact, they constantly reminded themselves that the past days are over and now are the better times, especially when asked about Covid-19 or “olden days”. The rickshaw-pullers’ nostalgia was explained in material terms, gave primacy to the present, and was based on the logic of survival.

Based on the specific historical context, the emotion of nostalgia has shaped its form depending on whose nostalgia we are talking about. This contrasting nature of emotion has naturally raised a question about what can qualify as nostalgia in contemporary Delhi? I have tried to show that the concept of nostalgia must be adapted according to the social classes and the context in question. The binary between restorative and reflective nostalgia does not explain how the emotion works in different social contexts. I have provided alternative explanations in both the chapters, explaining the nature of nostalgia at play. In the case of *tawaif*-based heritage walks, it is commodification of nostalgia that best explains how heritage companies sell these heritage walks. The temporal dislocation experienced by the rickshaw-pullers in material terms is explained by the historical nature of their precarious conditions which forces them to think of their past based on the survival-logic of the present.

Through this thesis, I have thus tried to translate the concept of nostalgia developed in the Eastern European context by Boym to the case of contemporary Delhi. Boym has done a temporal analysis of nostalgia while I have used time to explain the nostalgia, which is primarily driven by class in the context of Delhi. Furthermore, through this exercise of translation, I have tried to prove the centrality of social class in evoking affective responses in the context of contemporary Delhi.

Undoubtedly, the analysis here is not exhaustive. The answers given by the rickshaw-pullers can be constructed and may not have represented their true lived experience, especially because of the class and gender differences between me as an interviewer and them as interviewees. A small sample of seventy-five advertisements may not reveal all facets of nostalgia employed by the heritage companies. Nonetheless, I hope I have shown how the stratification in contemporary Delhi can be best understood by focusing on the nostalgic experience and representation of the two marginalized groups.

Appendix

Data Frame of 75 Tawaif-Themed Heritage Walk Advertisements and Their Encoded Nostalgic Elements

S. No.	Name of Company	Date of Post (DD/MM/YY YY)	Nostalgia Present (0/1)	Element of Nostalgia	Engagement (Number of Likes)	Ad Link
1	Enroute Indian History	19-02-2024	1	Linguistic and Visual	Hidden	https://www.instagram.com/p/C3hwcnlSw8m/
2	Enroute Indian History	30-09-2024	1	Linguistic and Visual	36	https://www.instagram.com/enroute_indian_history_/p/DAiifXjBgrB/?img_index=1
3	Enroute Indian History	03-10-2024	1	Visual	343	https://www.instagram.com/p/DAqQ2e-Ra8Y/?img_index=1

4	Enroute Indian History	01-09-2024	1	Linguistic and Visual	74	https://www.instagram.com/enroute_indian_history_/p/C84OJPcyvBl/?img_index=2
5	Enroute Indian History	29-01-2024	1	Visual and Sonar	529	https://www.instagram.com/enroute_indian_history_/p/C2ruVnMSD4E/div-e-into-the-cinematic-world-of-tawaifs-and-kothas-with-these-five-captivating-/?img_index=3
6	Enroute Indian History	13-01-2025	1	Linguistic and Visual	Hidden	https://www.instagram.com/enroute_indian_history_/p/DExAPYBT-0u/?locale=ko
7	Enroute Indian History	05-01-2025	0	No Nostalgia	639	https://www.instagram.com/enroute_indian_history_/reel/DEchZYdPPTz/

8	Enroute Indian History	18-06-2024	1	Linguistic and Visual	42	https://www.instagram.com/reel/C8W8mbzyFFk/
9	Enroute Indian History	26-08-2024	1	Linguistic	77	https://www.instagram.com/enroute_indian_history_/p/C1oc65yQ4I/?img_index=1
10	Enroute Indian History	16-02-2025	1	Linguistic and Visual	29	https://www.instagram.com/enroute_indian_history_/p/DGldAomSv5E/?img_index=4
11	Enroute Indian History	05-03-2024	1	Linguistic	8714	https://www.instagram.com/reel/C4H2GfJS0PJ/
12	Enroute Indian History	13-11-2023	1	Linguistic and Visual	193	https://www.instagram.com/enroute_indian_history_/p/CzlvuvXyJos/?img_index=5
13	Enroute Indian History	12-02-2024	1	Linguistic and Visual	195	https://www.instagram.com/enroute_indian_history_/p/C3QABn4SBm-/?img_index=6
14	Enroute Indian History	17-10-2024	1	Linguistic Visual and Sonar	740	https://www.instagram.com/enroute_indian_history_/reel/DBNxuH4uZda/

15	Enroute Indian History	28-01-2025	0	No Nostalgia	435	https://www.instagram.com/enroute_indian_history/reel/DFUayF9Sn1z/
16	Enroute Indian History	07-08-2023	1	Linguistic Visual and Sonar	997	https://www.instagram.com/reel/CvolbEVNK6n/?utm_source=ig_embed&ig_rid=39724c82-0820-4bde-9dc7-75e646602379&ig_mid=8E939E43-D4FE-4B72-BAD3-4ED5EFF55FAD
17	Enroute Indian History	26-03-2024	1	Sonar	827	https://www.instagram.com/enroute_indian_history/reel/C497GnRSMkR/
18	Enroute Indian History	13-07-2024	0	No Nostalgia	80	https://www.instagram.com/p/C9Wk4xSSnfA/?locale=zh_CN&hl=am-et

19	Enroute Indian History	19-02-2025	1	Linguistic Visual and Sonar	906	https://www.instagram.com/enroute_indian_history/reel/DGQFz_2vtNc/?locale=ru&hl=am-et
20	Enroute Indian History	17-01-2025	1	Linguistic	1061	https://www.instagram.com/enroute_indian_history/reel/DE6q4zXzIXW/
21	Enroute Indian History	23-03-2025	1	Visual and Sonar	79	https://www.instagram.com/enroute_indian_history/reel/C428GFESTWC/
22	Enroute Indian history	03-07-2024	1	Linguistic	1145	https://www.instagram.com/p/C89kmAkSQop/?locale=zh_CN
23	Enroute Indian History	08-03-2024	1	Linguistic Visual and Sonar	2438	https://www.instagram.com/reel/C4QUk4TSW7f/
24	The Delhinama	14-11-2023	1	Linguistic and Visual	116	https://www.instagram.com/p/CzoBEliytjI/
25	The Delhinama	31-01-2024	1	Linguistic and Visual	56	https://www.instagram.com/the_delhinama/p/C2xkUHbywwm/?img_index=5

26	The Delhinama	17-02-2025	1	Linguistic and Visual	150	https://www.instagram.com/the-delhinama/p/DGLBwa3P0Re/?img_index=4
27	The Delhinama	05-05-2024	1	Visual	1,05,832	https://www.instagram.com/p/C6lZalOSyz9L/
28	The Delhinama	15-04-2024	1	Linguistic and Visual	61	https://www.instagram.com/the-delhinama/p/C5yf0rAy4-b/?img_index=1
29	The Delhinama	17-04-2023	1	Linguistic and Visual	161	https://www.instagram.com/the-delhinama/p/CrJlpfoSWel/?img_index=2
30	The Delhinama	27-09-2024	0	No Nostalgia	40	https://www.instagram.com/p/DAbVFo9yozL/?locale=FUN88%2BRETURO%E2%9C%94%EFB8%8Ffun88.mx%E2%9C%94%EFB8%8Fbono%2Bdenida%2Bdel%2B100%25.pvt&hl=ml
31	The Delhinama	04-01-2025	1	Linguistic Visual and Sonar	51	https://www.instagram.com/the-delhinama/reel/DEZu2givdvv/

32	The Delhinama	29-05-2024	1	Visual	161	https://www.instagram.com/reel/C7j3rIgyvA6/
33	Enroute Indian History	29-01-2024	1	Linguistic and Visual	Hidden	https://www.instagram.com/p/C2rrwByyDHt/?img_index=1
34	Enroute Indian History	21-02-2024	1	Linguistic and Sonar	473	https://www.instagram.com/enrouteindianhistory/reel/C3mYJwsSfFX/
35	Tales of City	15-09-2024	1	Linguistic and Visual	220	https://www.instagram.com/talesofcityofficial/p/C8qqUgBIUe/?img_index=15
36	The Delhinama	12-09-2024	1	Linguistic and Visual	55	https://www.instagram.com/p/C0ir2cSdFc/?img_index=5
37	Unzip Delhi	29-11-2024	1	Linguistic and Visual	1801	https://www.instagram.com/p/DC9YuFFzXu5/
38	The Delhinama	26-10-2023	1	Linguistic Visual and Sonar	117	https://www.instagram.com/theDelhinama/reel/Cy2cx1VSdNw/

39	Tales of City	10-09-2024	1	Linguistic and Visual	49	https://www.instagram.com/talesofcityofficial/p/CuU-rkvEKF/?locale=th-TH&hl=en
40	Demythify Delhi	11-02-2022	1	Linguistic and Visual	121	https://www.instagram.com/p/CZ14T66PVJL/
41	Demythify Delhi	17-11-2021	1	Linguistic and Visual	147	https://www.instagram.com/p/CWY1aVSBzrI/
42	Demythify Delhi	28-10-2021	1	Linguistic and Visual	143	https://www.instagram.com/p/CVj433ePXqU/
43	Demythify Delhi	25-11-2021	1	Linguistic and Visual	134	https://www.instagram.com/p/CWsCnLIP2mD/
44	Demythify Delhi	26-11-2021	1	Linguistic and Visual	135	https://www.instagram.com/p/CWsCnLIP2mD/
45	The Delhinama	18-11-2023	1	Visual	328	https://www.instagram.com/the-delhinama/p/Czy2NA6ypKT/?local_e=en-us&img_index=6
46	The Delhinama	05-12-2022	1	Linguistic and Visual	164	https://www.instagram.com/p/ClyUcJySgKSL/

47	The Delhinama	24-04-2024	0	No Nostalgia	142	https://www.instagram.com/the_delhinama/reel/C6JehaRSMld/?locale=es_ES%2F
48	Enroute Indian History	31-05-2024	1	Linguistic and Sonar	408	https://www.instagram.com/reel/C7n21LxSzM/
49	Enroute Indian History	06-04-2024	1	Linguistic and Visual	Hidden	https://www.instagram.com/enroute_indian_history/p/C5axziSpB/?img_index=1
50	Enroute Indian History	30-04-2024	1	Linguistic and Sonar	32, 898	https://www.instagram.com/enroute_indian_history/reel/C6YEcGNy2GD/
51	Enroute Indian History	23-04-2024	1	Linguistic and Visual	142	https://www.instagram.com/enroute_indian_history/reel/C6GAfxfSFO9/
52	Enroute Indian History	15-09-2023	1	Linguistic Visual and Sonar	1357	https://www.instagram.com/reel/CxNAedHSlfr/

53	The Delhinama	13-11-2023	1	Linguistic and Visual	152	https://www.instagram.com/p/CzmEX3pykvb/?img_index=1
54	Enroute Indian History	14-09-2024	0	No Nostalgia	122	https://www.instagram.com/p/C4y9pzSvUB/?locale=ru
55	Enroute Indian History	16-05-2023	1	Visual and Linguistic	1356	https://www.instagram.com/p/CsTWZcvyb68/
56	The Delhinama	28-02-2024	0	No Nostalgia	123	https://www.instagram.com/the-delhinama/p/C35W5B2SoAG/?locale=zh_CN&img_index=6
57	Enroute Indian History	17-10-2023	0	No Nostalgia	443	https://www.instagram.com/enrouteindianhistory/reel/CyfZnP5yRrv/
58	Enroute Indian History	28-11-2023	1	Sonar and Linguistic	84, 732	https://www.instagram.com/reel/COLfuBJyWEG/
59	Enroute Indian History	09-12-2023	1	Linguistic	484	https://www.instagram.com/enrouteindianhistory/reel/COn0UdnS80K/
60	Enroute Indian History	01-08-2023	1	Visual and Linguistic	123	https://www.instagram.com/p/CvZnJVBjQqY/

61	Enroute Indian History	29-04-2024	1	Visual and Linguistic	Hidden	https://www.instagram.com/p/C6WAJfSpXS/
62	Demythify Delhi	12-11-2021	1	Visual and Linguistic	125	https://www.instagram.com/p/CWKwX5UvSMD/
63	Enroute Indian History	27-05-2024	1	Visual and Linguistic	208	https://www.instagram.com/p/C7eGY1PSolx/
64	Enroute Indian History	23-03-2024	1	Visual and Linguistic	133	https://www.instagram.com/p/C42uuY7yxWu/
65	Enroute Indian History	09-10-2023	1	Visual and Linguistic	433	https://www.instagram.com/p/CyKzzwdyTCjL/
66	Enroute Indian History	27-03-2024	1	Visual and Linguistic	137	https://www.instagram.com/p/C5BB7FmyJwW/
67	Enroute Indian History	05-08-2024	1	Visual and Linguistic	80	https://www.instagram.com/p/C-SV_r4SJLu/
68	Enroute Indian History	27-08-2024	1	Visual	40	https://www.instagram.com/p/C_LUJn9vwGz/
69	Enroute Indian History	31-12-2023	1	Visual and Linguistic	404	https://www.instagram.com/p/C1hAtNXSSVm/

70	Enroute Indian History	09-09-2024	1	Visual	154	https://www.instagram.com/p/C9NGnfayzRC/
71	Enroute Indian History	17-02-2023	1	Visual and Linguistic	26	https://www.instagram.com/p/CowT_Zyabj/
72	Enroute Indian History	23-12-2023	1	Visual and Linguistic	154	https://www.instagram.com/p/C1MdJyeSjGg/
73	Enroute Indian History	05-10-2023	1	Visual and Linguistic	115	https://www.instagram.com/p/Cy0fxDhI3y9L/
74	Enroute Indian History	26-07-2023	1	Visual and Linguistic	413	https://www.instagram.com/p/CvKmwWMYVgL/

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