



Chandni Chowk is arguably Delhi's most iconic market, replete with narrow lanes, red sandstone bollards, benches and a wide central verge.

NEARLY FOUR CENTURIES OLD, **CHANDNI CHOWK**,
ONE OF THE MOST POPULAR MARKETS IN THE CAPITAL
CITY UNDERGOES A REVAMP

BY PALLAVI PASRICHA
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ABHISHEK HAJELA

The blare of honking cars and auto rickshaws has fallen silent; the ugly mesh of overhanging wires has disappeared underground; and red sandstone benches beckon me to sit down and soak in the view of the old buildings that line Chandni Chowk—arguably Delhi’s most historic market.

I ignore the row of rickshaws vying for my attention and duck into the newly-made central verge dotted with patches of greenery. It has taken three years to restore the heart and soul of the main thoroughfare that runs 1.4 kilometres from Shri Digambar Jain Lal Mandir to Fatehpuri Masjid. For the first time, I have a clear view of the sky (thankfully blue) and the majestic Red Fort as I step into the commercial heart of the city, built by Mughal emperor Shah Jahan nearly 400 years ago.

Road tiles and a row of bollards are fitted with red sandstone to keep in harmony with the 17th-century monument. Motorised vehicles have been banned from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., allowing pedestrians to stroll down a wide central verge. Come night, black poles with hanging lamps on either side light up the stretch.

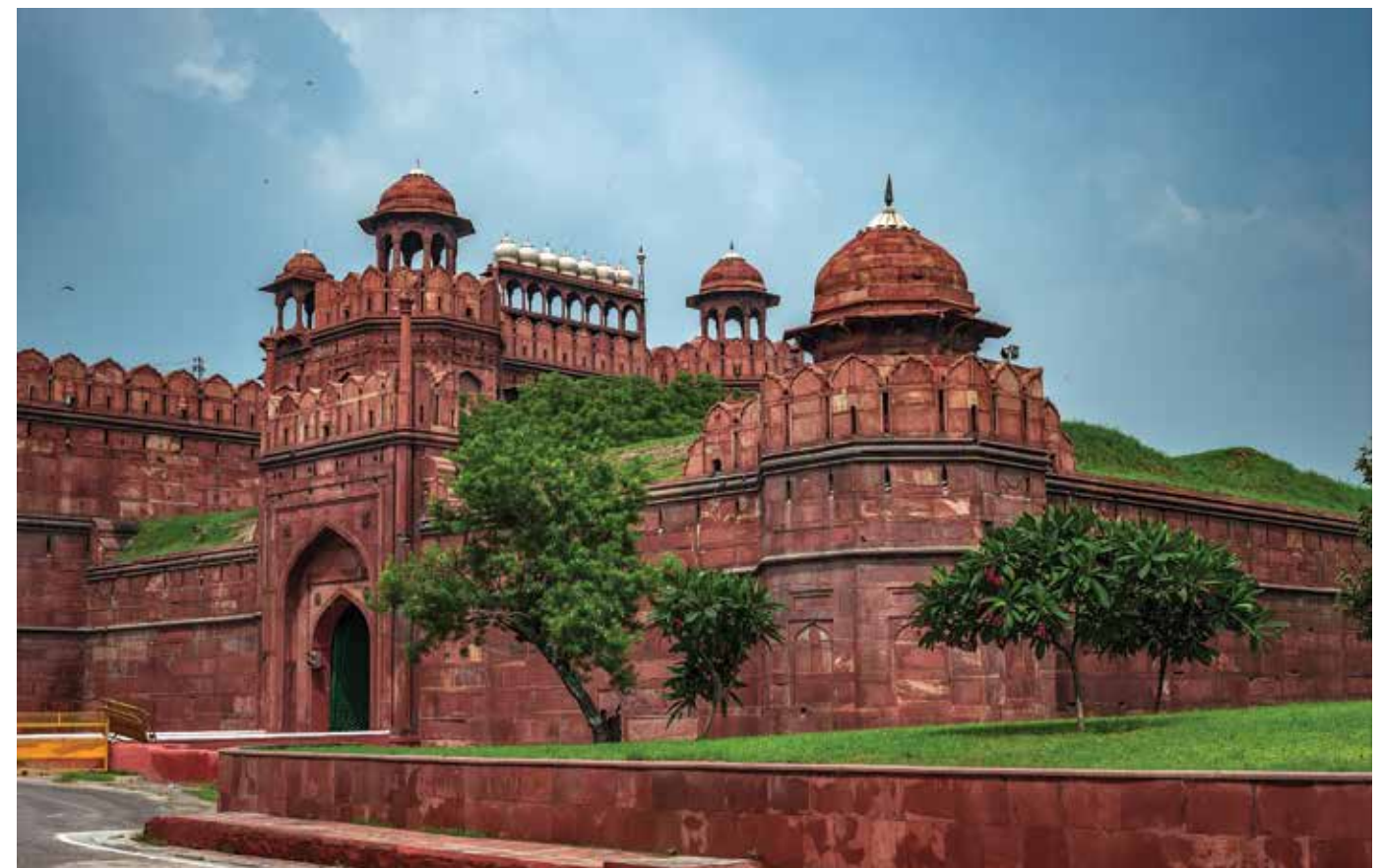
“This city used to rival the likes of Rome and others in Europe. In fact, many travellers at that time described this as one of the best cities that they had seen,” says historian Rana Safvi, author of the book *Shahjahanabad: The Living City of Old Delhi*.

The redevelopment project has changed a lot, but much still remains the same. Signboards in Hindi, English, Urdu and Gurmukhi make it easier to navigate its famed galis, where the narrow maze of lanes flanked by commercial joints still coexists. The hustle and bustle of shoppers, jostling each other or being ferried down the road by an endless stream of rickshaw pullers, is still intact.

As I walk the Gurdwara Sis Ganj Sahib, I pass by a procession of Nihang Sikhs—clad in bright blue robes, marching purposefully down the road—and realise that this was nearly impossible earlier owing to chock-a-block traffic. Hand carts laden with goods no longer have to dart adroitly past cars. I close my eyes, sit on the bench and imagine what life would have been like in the days when Shahjahanabad was built.

Its commercial heart, Chandni Chowk, was designed by Jahanara Begum, Shah Jahan’s daughter, when the ruler shifted his capital from Agra to Delhi. Its name came from the moonlight that reflected in a pool of water in the market. Soon, it became one of Asia’s largest wholesale markets in its most glorious days. It is believed that people from as far as Turkey and China would come on camels to shop for jewellery, spices and cloth. Its allure never faded. Even today, a

Signboards (bottom) in English, Hindi, Urdu and Gurmukhi make it easier to navigate the 17th-century market. Facing page: Colourful murals (top) uplift temple facades. Historians, conservationists and locals have welcomed the effort to restore the heritage of the 400-year-old commercial hub; The 17th-century Red Fort (bottom) serves as a cultural landmark in Delhi and is inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.





THE CITY'S COMMERCIAL HEART, CHANDNI CHOWK, WAS DESIGNED BY MUGHAL EMPEROR SHAH JAHAN'S DAUGHTER, JAHANARA BEGUM, WHEN HE SHIFTED HIS CAPITAL FROM AGRA TO DELHI

bride in New Delhi is unlikely to complete her trousseau without a visit to Chandni Chowk. And its delicious street food remains the stuff of legends.

The restoration project has been welcomed by both shop owners and historians, but they hope it marks the start of a much larger conservation effort. "This is an excellent move but it covers just one stretch. The whole of Shahjahanabad is crying for help," says Safvi. "There are so many heritage buildings around. It should be showcased as some kind of a heritage city," she adds.

Dewan Chand Chhabra, who runs almost a century-old saree shop, recalls the chaotic traffic and black fumes that vehicles spewed all through the day. "It looks pretty and I can breathe cleaner air. It is a great move for the next generation," he approves.

I make my way to Parathe Wali Gali, where its celebrated food joints have been making deep-fried parathas for hundreds of years. In this narrow alley, electric wires still dangerously dangle overhead in contrast to the main thoroughfare. As I chomp on a paratha, I get talking to Manish Sharma, the sixth generation owner of the 1872-established Pt. Gaya Prasad Shiv Charan. The no-frills space with basic tables and benches dishes out more than 20 varieties of parathas.

The Chandni Chowk resident loves stepping into the lit-up road in the evenings when it is largely devoid of traffic. The 41-year-old waits for the day when the project will have been widened to include other areas. "They should redevelop the inside lanes as well. What is the point otherwise?" he questions.

I realise that there are many more milestones to be achieved as I step out from the cramped lane into the main thoroughfare, but this restored stretch raises my hopes. It is certainly a step in the right direction. I'll take it for starters. ■

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