

SHAHJAHAN'S FASCINATING CITY



Delhi's Poet Laureate— Ghalib

This is an absorbing book, of excellent and meticulous scholarship, something one does not come across often in our publications. I had seen the young Cambridge historians, men, like Baker and Bayley, under the guidance of Professor Stokes, open up a complete new vista of historical research. Bayley's studies of the towns of the Gangetic plain and its inhabitants are indeed notable for their learning and thoroughness. Narayani Gupta's book on Del-

DELHI BETWEEN TWO EMPIRES, 1803-1931 by Narayani Gupta. Oxford University Press, New Delhi. Pp. 260. Rs 90.

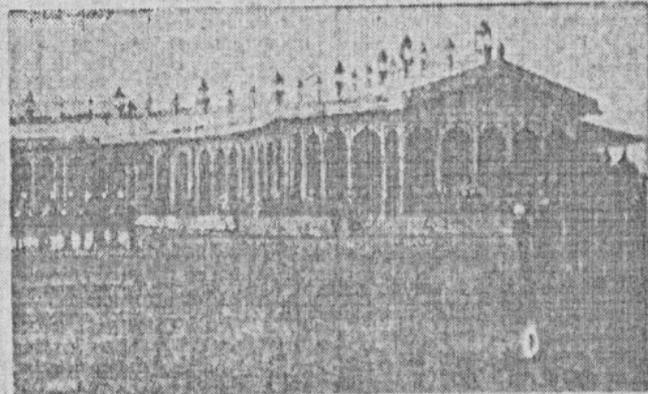
hi between 1803-1931 too is a remarkable and erudite work.

"A city", said Paneth, "is as much a personality as a human being. . . . There are cities whose histories are always an expression of violence. There are others which are renowned for their breadth of mind, others for their industry, yet others for their skill and craftsmanship and so on, until you begin to see in the mind's eye a picture of the . . . inner life of the city long before you visit it." Delhi, with its many

layers of habitation, going back thousands of years, is indeed a city which encompasses within it a breadth of mind, craftsmanship and skill and a vision of urban living of which Paneth speaks.

Professor Gupta's study brings out the many facets of Delhi in fascinating detail. The period of 50 years prior to the Mutiny was perhaps the most fruitful in the city's cultural life.

As Professor Gupta records: "The character of Delhi city emerges clearly in the tranquil years before 1857—a civilised, cultured community with non-competing and mutually respecting elites. There was a close rapport between different sections of society, because Muslim umara, Hindu kayasths, Muslim and Hindu merchants, European and Indian intellectuals, even some British officials, partook of the common diet of Delhi's Urdu culture. The narrow two-dimensional Victorian vision of some Englishmen led them to paint a dismal picture of a 'decadent' Mughal court in the years 1803-57. This was far from true. Bahadur Shah's long reign, particularly, saw a vigorous flowering of Delhi's Urdu literature. His pensioner's existence and the political security led the Court to develop as a cultural centre, a surrogate for political power".



A view of the durbar held in 1903.

The Mutiny disrupted this life and added tremendous damage to the cultural life of the city. The book records in careful detail the rebuilding of the city and its spirit, and the slow growth of municipal government. The tensions of the post-Mutiny period, with the vandalism at the Red Fort leading to the construction of hideous British barracks, and the sale of the Fatehpuri mosque to Lala Chunna Mal, slowly gave way to a more sober understanding.

The founding of the capital in New Delhi added a new dimension to the life of the city. It is interesting to study the various stages of the debate on the growth of education, municipal government, and the spirit of nationalism.

This book will be of great interest to those who live in the

national capital and those who have an interest in its harmonious growth and management. The meticulous history of municipal government brought out by Dr Gupta should help the administrators to reduce their mistakes in city management and planning. The book points once again to the wealth of history that lies buried in Delhi and its archives. All of it needs to be carefully preserved, and displayed in an artistic fashion.

The haphazard growth of colonies in post-Independence India, often obliterating historical sites and monuments, is something which needs to be checked.

A reading of Dr Gupta's book should make those who run Delhi more aware of their duties to the city of Shahjahan.

— Manohar Singh Gill