

Gandhi Colony

Delhi

People leave home for many reasons. Mine, perhaps, is one of the oldest. It was the desire to reinvent myself that brought me to Delhi in the summer of 1990. I'd been nowhere near a big city, let alone one that was the nation's capital, and knew nothing about living anywhere except in my hometown of Ashaghar. And I didn't care. All I wanted was to leave Ashaghar.

Ashaghar means the home of hope in Hindi. To this day I don't know whether to think of that as a travesty or a cruel joke. The place would've been situated right in the middle of one of India's poorest states, Bihar, if it had shown up on a map. It never did. The administrators shoved us even more firmly into insignificance by placing the nearest bus stand almost thirty kilometres away and the nearest railway station almost a hundred. There were no television signals or newspapers. No one had home phones. The outside world came in through the post office or the radio and our news went out through letters and telegrams.

We existed in a warren of lanes spread out over a few square kilometres. Within that space was a crumbling school, a ramshackle hospital, a stinky cinema, a dilapidated post office, a

run-down bank, and lines of old shops and houses jammed shoulder to shoulder. We were a bicycle town, with a bicycle rickshaw being the only means of public transport. Some people had jeeps or scooters. The hospital had one broken-down ambulance that took forever to get anywhere. The school and bank had a van each. Nobody owned a car and if they had they wouldn't have known where to drive it since all the roads were unpaved. When the rains failed, which they did most of the time, all that was green and moist fled and a dusty haze settled in the sky. The heat was remorseless. It left you addled, scratchy, fly-bitten, ill-humoured. What it never did was leave you in peace.

Who, in their right mind, would want to spend their lives in such a place?

It took me eighteen years to find a way out of Ashaghar. In the winter of 1989, I applied for a scholarship to study English literature at a famous college in Delhi University. My head told me that I was wasting my time; which swanky college would indulge a hick from the back of beyond. When the letter arrived in spring, I opened it with trepidation. I was sure I had failed. But the words told a different story. I stared at them in disbelief for a few seconds. Then I exploded as if I'd won a gold medal at the Olympics. Ignoring my mother's stricken face, I ran about the house as if I were doing a victory lap with the letter held high above my head like a banner. My obvious joy neutralized the pain my parents must have felt about sending their only child away from home. I was on my way before the new term commenced in July. Half the neighbourhood turned out to see me off at the station. I was heaped with blessings and garlands. The women queued up to do *aarti*. I stood with folded hands as steel plates circled my face and fingers marked my forehead with vermillion paste. By the time the train was ready to pull out, everyone was crying. I, too, got caught up in the hysteria. The tears were forgotten an hour into the journey, as the excitement of going to Delhi once again consumed me.

I spent my first night in Delhi in a hostel near the railway station. The noise of the street batted away well into the night. There were horns blaring in choked traffic, people yelling at each other, stray dogs howling at the moon...I didn't get a moment's sleep. I was glad when it was finally morning. After a quick breakfast, I sought out a real estate broker to enquire about a room to rent. The brokerage was down the street from the hostel. A sole proprietorship run by a chunky, bespectacled man, with a handlebar moustache, who worked from behind a scarred desk. When I said I was looking to rent a room, he asked me my name. Once I told him, he fished out a list from a dusty drawer. After slapping away the dust, he studied the list by holding it close to his nose. He crossed out some of the options with a blue ballpoint pen before handing it to me. These are not for you, he said. I was in too much of a hurry to enquire how he'd come to such a conclusion on the basis of my name. Later, I learned those rooms were located in Muslim neighbourhoods. No city comes without its walls. That day I carried one of Delhi's in my trouser pocket.

The anticipation surging through me was such that this could have been my first real date. I'd landed in a new city, had little money, and had never lived on my own. Yet I was euphoric. Not so long ago, I'd been staring at life in a place that even the rain had trouble remembering. Now I had a future to behold in the nation's capital. But that wasn't the only source of my giddiness. I was feeling Delhi in a way I'd never felt Ashaghar.

Delhi, in the 1990s, was a city of transplants. If you went back two generations, hardly anybody was from Delhi. First came the waves of Hindus and Sikhs fleeing ethnic cleansing in Pakistan during Partition. Then refugees of every stripe from all over India—the ones escaping poverty, the ones hungry for opportunity, the ones driven out by political violence...Flight was deeply embedded in Delhi's soul and had turned it into a place where people re-made lives. I was

a small-town boy eager to re-imagine himself as a city sophisticate. I embraced this restless urge for reinvention in a way I could never embrace Ashaghar's yearning for continuity.

On that first day, I stayed away from auto rickshaws and taxis in a bid to save money. Instead, I squeezed myself in and out of DTC buses that were yet to be air-conditioned and were packed with sweaty bodies crushed against each other. The mop of black hair on my head was soon drenched with sweat. The searing breeze stung my face, and my throat parched no matter how much water I downed. Yet I flowed with an enthusiasm as irrepressible as the Delhi dust that refuses to settle even on a still day.

By that afternoon, I needed every bit of that enthusiasm. I'd been told that my potential lodgings were within my budget of five hundred rupees a month. I quickly discovered that wasn't the case. When I tried to talk the rent down, I was informed that this was Delhi not the back of beyond. Where the rent wasn't an issue, the fact that I was a college student was. College students didn't make for desirable tenants. They partied too much, went out at odd hours of the night—they were trouble.

Round mid-afternoon, I encountered a home owner who inspected me with hooded eyes. "Are you a Sikh?" he asked.

I was surprised. I didn't have a turban or a beard. "Do I look like a Sikh?"

"These days many of them are pretending to be normal people, cutting off their hair, shaving off their beards. One must be careful. The last thing I want in my house is a terrorist."

That was my first inkling of how much Delhi had come to resent its Sikhs. There wasn't a single Sikh in Ashaghar. There the Sikh militancy existed as a remote news item that sounded on the radio when a bomb went off or someone important was gunned down. In Delhi, it was as palpable as a gun held to your head. Less than a decade had passed since Prime Minister Indira

Gandhi had been assassinated by two Sikh bodyguards in the heart of Delhi. A day after the assassination, an army of vengeful goons took to the streets to teach the Sikhs a lesson. Within a few days, they massacred thousands and burned down their homes and businesses. Delhi had borne the brunt of militant anger since then. Gun-toting policemen prowled its streets. Metal detectors frisked outside its buildings. Police barricades sprang up after dark.

“I’m not a Sikh,” I said.

But the man had made up his mind. He said no with a shake of his head.

As I made my way to the next place on my list, I decided to point out that I wasn’t a Sikh from the outset by indicating that I didn’t come from Punjab.

“I’m from Bihar,” I told my potential landlord.

He glared at me. “You Biharis are a bunch of thugs. Get going before I have you thrown out.”

As I gawked at him, he mistook my amazement for obstinacy. “Purshottam, Suresh,” he called out.

I beat it before the reinforcements arrived.

I might have anticipated such a rebuke if I were older and more travelled. The poor are belittled all over the world, and Bihar was dirt-poor even by Indian standards. Biharis were taunted wherever they went. They were denounced as grasping, uncouth, unlettered, or, as the man said, *a bunch of thugs*. Most of them remained silent in the face of such insults. Like migrants everywhere, survival weighed more heavily on them than jibes. Some, like me, sought to make ourselves invisible. In order to sound cosmopolitan, I’d already started working on my Bihari accent where five became *pibe* and shout *sout*. That encounter made me even more determined to evict the last trace of it from my mouth.

Evening had begun to gather in the sky by the time I reached Gandhi Colony. The place wasn't on my list. I went there thanks to a maid in the last house where I was rejected in Jawahar Nagar. She must have seen a day's worth of disappointment bearing down on my shoulders and taken pity. "The place is not high class like this neighbourhood," she said. "But you will get a room there."

By then I didn't give a damn about how classy the neighbourhood was. I simply wanted to find a place to live. I asked her if it was far. She shook her head. "Go there and ask for Jogi," she told me.

A narrow dirt track, no more than twenty metres long, separated Gandhi Colony from Jawahar Nagar. I crossed it with weary legs to find myself in the colony's main alley.

The colony was shaped like a comb whose teeth stick out on both sides from a spine in the middle. The main alley was that spine. From there alleys branched out to the right and left.

The main alley was dusty and unpaved like every other alley in Gandhi Colony. Over the years, it had morphed into a market. Two lines of shops stood facing each other across a path running between them. The shops were housed in squat wooden sheds or shelters of tarpaulin supported by bamboo sticks. The path that ran between them was chewed up on both sides by street vendors selling produce from wooden carts shored up by bicycle tyres. When I arrived, the heat was receding, with evening settling in, and the market was filling with people. I had to jump out of the way of jangling bicycles and belching scooters squeezing through the crowd. One driver swung around to admonish me. "Do you have eyes or buttons? If you want to die, go die somewhere else." I held up a hand in apology and edged forward the best I could.

Halfway down the alley was a skeletal arjun tree shorn of leaves. A low concrete platform encircled the tree trunk. A picture of the god Ram was propped up against the trunk. The image resembled the actor who had played him in the television show based on *The Ramayana*. Fresh marigold garlands swathed the picture and diyas flickered in front of it. People were pausing to fold their hands before going round the tree. It felt strange to see a tree named after a character in *The Mahabharata* housing a temple dedicated to a god from *The Ramayana*. I wondered if someone had got their epics mixed up. I didn't get to wonder for long. A prod in the back told me to get going.

A man with an emphatic tilak on his forehead accosted me right after I passed the arjun tree. He was dressed in the saffron robe of a sadhu and was waving an orange pamphlet in my face. Another man dressed in white—kurta, pyjama and skull cap—arrived to thrust a green pamphlet at me. Both men were rakishly thin with pointy heads, long noses and beady eyes. Even their unsuccessful attempts at growing a beard were identical right down to the wispieness of the fuzz. It would've been hard to tell them apart if they didn't dress so differently.