

FROM THE BYLANES OF DELHI, AGRA & JAIPUR

Ronald Vivian Smith

Foreword

Ronald Vivian Smith has been Delhi's most faithful and constant chronicler for nearly six decades. In column after column and essay after essay, he has introduced his readers to sights and sounds not to mention people and places that we would have remained blithely unaware of, not the least because many of those sights and sounds, and people and places have been sacrificed at the altar of urban renewal. They live only in Smith's prodigious memory and, by extension, through his indefatigable writings.

Were it not for Smith Sahib and that treasure trove that is his memory, we would have been *mehroom*, bereft, of the story behind the Pir of Bachon ka Ghar, or the New Year festivities at Ludlow Castle, or who was the Thakur's Sleek Beauty, or what's the mystery behind the Owls for Slaughter, or what and where is the Hell on Dunghill. It is these and scores of such tales that find mention in this book. Saved from being lost forever, given the short life newspaper columns have, and especially in the age before the internet when old articles never made it to the archives, collections such as these acquire great significance.

Having walked the streets of Delhi since he first came to live here in 1961, Smith knows Delhi's past better than anyone else. And not just the city's parks and tombs and serais and mosques, he knows the gossip and legends that spilled over in its streets, the whispers that once floated down its lanes and bylanes, the stories he once heard either directly or from those who had, in turn, heard them from older denizens of Delhi. His history is not culled from dusty history books or air-conditioned reference rooms. Instead, it is distilled from the city's heat and dust, its scents and sounds. When mixed with dollops of piquant humour and a generous world view his version of history is, in a word, humane.

Smith speaks as he writes. Reading his columns, and I must say I have been an avid reader for years and, still, read them faithfully at every opportunity I get, I still find myself charmed by the easy intimacy

to his writings about the past. He sounds like a chatty but prodigiously knowledgeable and wise family elder. He has been answering all our questions about our city, questions we wouldn't know who to ask, whose answers we are unlikely to find in conventional books of history.

For instance, what is '*Masihi shairi*'? Which is the fort with the 'weird' history? What is the secret of '*purani haveli*'? What is the 'legal eagle's odyssey'? What was a Delhi Christmas like in the 1890s? More importantly, how was New Year's eve celebrated in 1857 after the siege and slaughter of the spirited Indians?

It is these and other micro-histories that paint the small picture, like Jane Austen's proverbial two-inches of ivory, that add nuance to our understanding of the city that so many of us are happy to call home. Like the city flaneurs, the word being derived from the French noun *flâneur*, means 'stroller', 'lounger', 'saunterer', or 'loafer' Smith's seemingly aimless ramblings over six decades have yielded a rich crop of memories: vivid, colourful, detailed, graphic to the point of photographic recall. The painter with the pen, the urban explorer, the connoisseur of the street, R V Smith is all this and more. May he live long and continue to enthrall us with his word pictures for many years to come.

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A Castle Old And Grey

I never see a castle
That is gaunt and grey and grim,
But my thoughts at once go backward
To the past so misty and dim.

If I climb the broken stairway,
Where the stone is smooth and fine,
I hear a rustle and whisper,
And footsteps in front of mine.

Only the grey old castle,
Of crumbling stone and lime,
Still stands to speak of the ages,
And the iron footsteps of Time.

—Alexander Anderson

The Dal's Lament

'*YEH mooh aur masoor ki dal*' One of the pulses that became the favourite of Queen Victoria, who liked its soup and lent her name to it so that it became famous as *Malika Masoor*.

No wonder the snub that not every mouth could savour masoor dal has held good ever since it seems.

Now this dal is selling at 100 rupees a kilo, while arhar dal, which once formed part of the poor man's daily meal, is touching Rs 230. *Ghar ki murghi dal barabar* (a domestic hen is just as cheap as a dal) is an old saying.

But now it seems to have been reversed because even chicken is less costly than arhar dal. Incidentally, moong-ki-dal was known as *Badshah Pasand* as Bahadur Shah Zafar was fond of it and chana dal as *Tote-ki-dal* as it was cheap and fed to parrots and pigeons. Moong is now Rs 112 a kg and chana dal Rs 80.

What actually happened to make dals expensive? The bad monsoon is cited as a reason, though the truth may be that pulses are being hoarded by unscrupulous traders and the government faces the jibe

whether this was what the much-vaunted *Acche Din* slogan meant. Forgetting the political nitty-gritty, one would like to delve a bit more into history.

Biblical Esau sold his birthright to his twin brother, Jacob for a pot of dal. Birbal taught Akbar a lesson by cooking *masoor dal khichri* on a slowly burning fire, while Cleopatra blossomed on Egyptian pulses (now being imported). When Edward VII succeeded Victoria, an Urdu poet composed a verse with twenty-one blessings on the emperor but since Edward did not reign long enough the blessings were diverted to his son George V, who came to India for the Delhi Durbar in 1911-12. Each blessing ended with *Elahi Salamat rahe Badshah* (Oh God, may the king remain safe).

A blind man, Lucas born in the same year as Jawaharlal Nehru, was one of the few who could recite the twenty-one blessings by heart in a highly emotional voice. Ashraf Mamu, eccentric as he was, would knock at a house at random and demand rotis. When they were offered to him he would tell the housewife or maid to remove the top and bottom rotis. He would then take only the ones in between to eat with dal cooked by him in the porch outside an abandoned house.

Whenever anybody called him *Mamu* (maternal uncle) he would let out a volley of abuses. But if addressed as *Chacha* (father's brother) he would lapse into nostalgia about the visit of George V. *Wah beta,*

yaad hai, badshah salamat aaye the, kaise mithai bati thi (remember how sweets were distributed when the king came)!

Abid Bhai never entered his ancestral Nizam's haveli, but cooked dal in an outside verandah. He had been an Excise Commissioner, who went about mounted on a horse, until he fell in love with a courtesan. When she ditched him, he lost his mind. His wife also left him while Abid Bhai went about with a policeman's baton in hand demanding uncooked dal at certain houses only.

But coming back to Lucas, besides recounting *Badshah-ki Barkatein* with a bowl of *Keoti dal* (mixed pulses), he was also noted for reciting a long-forgotten poem, *Dal-ki-Fariyad* (The Dal's Plea, but actually lament).

It started off with the words,

Ek ladki bagharti hai dal

Dal kehte hai

Main kabhi hare-bhare kheton main lehrati thi

A girl was seasoning the dal. The dal said, I once swayed in the breeze in green fields and then went on to lament that one day the dal crop was harvested and a cruel contractor came and took away the pulses, which he locked up in a godown and sold at high prices when the demand was great.

The dal then tells the girl, 'Alas, what a day has come! After frolicking in the fields today I am boiling in a pot on a roasting fire and you are adding to my misery by giving me a *baghar* (*tadka*, twang with ghee and cut onions) to make me tastier to the palate'.

The girl hears the dal's lament and bursts into tears as its plight has hit a tender chord in her heart. She stops applying the *tadka* and sits down to write a poem on what the dal had gone through. It was so touching a poem that it came to be known as *Dal-ki-Baghar* instead of *Dal-ki-Fariyad*. Those who think that only slaughtered animals, fish and table birds (like chicken) feel pain and that dal can be safely consumed may have second thoughts on hearing its *fariyad*.

Ashraf Mamu, Abid Bhai and Lucas are long dead and probably no modern book contains *Dal-ki-Fariyad* but some old-timers still cannot forget the lament, more so now when dal prices are skyrocketing not because Hollywood actresses have learnt to relish dal-chawal!