

Post-colonial towns called Deoria

SHAHID AMIN

Prologue

To live in today's Delhi is to breathe the absence of a rejuvenating culture. The language that walks the streets is of the *Humko Binnies Mangta*¹ variety, mauling the vernacular and replicating sans irony our colonial masters' compounding of *mangana* - demand and order with *chahana* - desire and affection. Our passions are ruled by copywriters, our early morning thinking conditioned increasingly by admen-columnists.

As identities are soldered in the fast-paced age of globalisation, everyday signs are no longer 'of the times', but products of familiar, outlandish climes. Unhinged from its immediate moorings, culture is now produced by distant sponsors. And so the *longue duree* of the present becomes the defining moment of a homogenising public culture, high and low. As that American whiskey advertisement on Indian TV had it: "Tradition? Tradition is not what it used to be".

Differences in wealth and sensibilities no doubt remain. The small-town *panwaris* (betel-leaf sellers), their long-legged kiosks located strategically beside electricity poles to better facilitate the wiping clean of paan-smeared fingers, do not relay the message of MTV as loudly as they did film songs and toothpaste ads from Radio Ceylon in the pre-1968 days before All India Radio went commercial. Cable television is not *de rigueur* with the betel-leaf sellers of the present century, but an incongruous 'Polo mint' poster displayed in the winter of 1995 on *paan* kiosks in U.P. small towns hinted at the shape of things to come. Huge hoardings went up in the new year trumpeting the arrival of *paan*-flavoured Polo mint to Hindustan, a land whose civilisational ambit was once memorably etched by a leading Medievalist in terms, inter alia, of a unisex betel-leaf culture!² *Fin de siecle* metropolitan India managed to ward off this culture-specific mint-savouring assault.

But just about. In the globalising India of today words as long as they are recognizably English need not be meaningful in their entirety and immediacy; they defer instead to a world of logos and brand names, with its flamboyant relationship to the here and now. In the district town of Bahaich, bordering Nepal, I recently saw a devotee enter the shrine of Syed Salar Masaud Ghazi (died 1034 A.D.), a hugely popular Muslim warrior saint of north India, wearing a jacket with the dreaded RDX emblazoned on it. A few miles away in the *gasba* of Hathile, home to the shrine of Salar Masaud's martyred nephew, a young lad flaunted a T-shirt with the difficult word 'vasectomy' screen-printed across his chest. One wonders whether there would be any takers, even 25 years after the excesses of the state of Emergency, for export-quality reject clothing with the Hindi cognate *nasbandi* embossed across them!

1

In times past, north Indian towns were not the receptacle of such free-floating signifiers.³ Both the cultural artefacts and the manufactures of pre-colonial and colonial Uttar Pradesh in Upper India were forged, to be sure, in its *qasbas* and larger towns. Agriculture claimed the countryside and the *tahsil* (lit. to collect), the land revenue; the *jhant sahib* (joint magistrate) ruled the sub-division and the Collector the district. Till 1947, the year of Independence, the district town was not what mattered the most in terms of the intellectual, industrial, or indeed propertied development; *zila* headquarters or *Sadr* stations as these towns were called, were largely the seats of colonial collections and imperial governance.

Not that district towns such as Badaun, Sultanpur, Azamgarh and Gorakhpur were rootless colonial outposts with only the Civil Lines and the District Jail, the Collector and the *kotwal* to commend for them. Highly popular compositions, both within and outside the Bombay film industry, of poets such as Shakeel Badauni, Majrooh Sultanpuri, Kaifi Azmi and Firaq Gorakhpuri testify eloquently to the cultural effervescence of these central and eastern U.P. towns where literary production, far from being parasitic on official patronage, was quite often in opposition to the will of the colonial masters. Several of these famous poets, their extended *nom de plume* serving as latitudinal markers so to speak of their U.P. identity, moved out of their districts to Bombay or Allahabad in the 1940s and 1950s. They left a cultural and intellectual void behind them that has been inadequately filled by the purveyors of Urdu and Hindi rhyme and by state-run district libraries devoid of books. As for the much vaunted *qasbas* - Amroha and Sandila, Malihabad and Rudauli, places which bring to mind the finer tastes (*nafasat*) of U.P., be it in films like Kamal Amrohi's *Pakeeza*, the *dasehri* mangoes of Malihabad or the couplets of the *muhajir* (émigré) poet Josh, languishing in the enervating oasis of Islamabad - by the late 1970s these organic smaller towns had lost their distinctive personality.

The *qasbas* have now been truly globalised. A carefully swept *imambara*, a functional old *kothi*, periodic assemblage of aspiring local poets, even the occasional production of local lore, legends and histories are poor substitutes for the lost world of the *qasbas*⁴ - a world that revolved round patriarchal landlords (*zamindars*), subordinate artisans and the cultivation of the finer arts of polite conversation and poetical craftsmanship, with aspiring versifiers submitting their first draft poems to an *ustad* for improvement and a final go ahead. What now distinguishes the *qasbas* from villages are dish antennas of cable operators and the ubiquitous STD/ISD telephone booths, offering direct-dial facilities to cash-earning towns in India and to relatives in the El Dorado of the Middle East and the Gulf.

Post-independence, a few new district towns came into being, and somehow even these began to matter. Deoria, tucked away in the north-eastern corner of the province, was one such *Sadr* station of a new district carved out from the sprawling Gorakhpur, if memory serves me right, in 1949; as children we were told that both electricity and the Collector came to Deoria in the same year. Strange and predictable are the ways of memory: our new district was officially sawed off from Gorakhpur in 1946, but it took some time to take shape. The town received its power supply very definitely in 1949, and it is the difference made to quotidian and civic life by the 60-watt GEC bulb that cast its shadow on the remembered inexactitude that of us Deoria-born midnight children.

Even in the mid-50's, a minion of the municipality would routinely clamber up a portable ladder, the sort that paid electoral publicists carry on bicycles for high-density poster warfare, to replenish and light the glass - encased oil-lamps stuck on bamboo poles at the head of the smaller lanes. We associated these light (*battis*) with the word 'public': such was our adolescent 'municipal' consciousness in an inadequately lit Deoria of the 1950s.

The other sign of the early maturity of Deoria town was the well-swept, red brick-and-tiled K. E. Higher Secondary School; the initials originally stood for King Edward VII, but by the early 1950s King Emperor had been reduced to his initials by a linguistic artifice of post-coloniality. The abbreviation, when rendered into the local language was meaningless, unless one chose to indigenise it as the Hindi word *kaee*, meaning not one but several. The singularity of that imperial school, one each for every dusty district, was lost on us first generation post-colonials, as we subordinated an historic nomenclature to the freedoms of juvenile word-play.

2

The town electrified, the Indian Collector moved into his official residence on *Kachahri* (Court) Road on a highway that made its way to Barhaji, the important riverine mart, and *teertha* on the banks of the river Saryu-Ghaghra. It was on and off this *pakki* (metalled) road that the Courts and the Magistrate's offices came up, giving rise to a *nai* (new) colony where the Police Lines, the District Hospital and bungalows for the bureaucrats were to get sited. The much older *tahsil* building, further away from the highway and towards the old town, faced the railway station. Outside the Collector Sahib's Bungalow, the sprawling compound carefully tended with wheat and cauliflowers, stood a whitewashed angular pillar which listed the exact distance to Calcutta and Madras, Delhi and Lucknow. Litigants making their way to the courts further down the road took as much notice of this long-distance milestone, as Mauryan peasants would have done of the Prakrit homiletics of *Devanampriya Priyadarshi*, King Ashoka, bill boarded on ancient Indian trade routes.

The district distance-marker stood for the fact that a large-sized *tahsil* town had attained administrative puberty. It was telling us - but we schoolchildren did not care - how far our Collector's bungalow was from each of the several significant towns and cities of independent India. A second-class *sadr* station loathed by the bureaucracy for its insalubrious climate was in the moment of its birth being imbricated with the nation and the state.

The metre gauge railway track however meant that Deoria did not have a direct line of access to those distant places which were on the broad gauge. Delhi or Aligarh meant a change at Lucknow's Charbagh station; Howrah and Bombay a switch at Banaras and Allahabad. For long, I, a Deoria-born, remained envious of a Sultanpur or a Bara Banki, which had higher platforms and king-size rail carriages. Our premier super-fast train - the Awadh-Tirhut Mail - which curled all the way up to Siliguri in distant Assam - was poor substitute, I felt, for the inadequate width of our railway track! It was only in the 80's when Deoria station got an uplift and a new set of broad rails that my sense of having been worsted personally in the 'battle of the gauges' diminished slowly. Even now, when I am told that my hometown is connected directly to Delhi-Bombay-Cochin, I am not quite prepared to believe it. Deoria *Sadr* has come a long way from the day that the PWD (Public Works Department) stuck that all-India phallic milestone outside the District Magistrate's bungalow.

3

As an old *tahsil* town, Deoria had a rudimentary armature of the colonial state well before it became the headquarters of a new district on the eve of Partition-Independence. Selected as the headquarters of a new administrative subdivision in 1905,⁵ this small-time centre place with a population of 2000+, well below the average big village, had already a specialized bureaucratic and mercantile leavening. "In addition to the tahsil buildings, Deoria contains the court-house and lock-up of the sub-divisional officer, the munsif's court, a registration office, a combined post and telegraph office, a dispensary, an inspection bungalow, an Anglo-vernacular school, an upper primary school, a school for girls and a cattle pound", noted the *District Gazetteer* in 1909. The *tahsil* and the sub-divisional courts had attracted a fair sprinkling of *mukhtars* and pleaders from the *qasba* of Machlishahr in Jaunpur, the long-settled locale of an important regional kingdom during the 14th-16th centuries. In its initial stages this was a forced migration to virgin areas in the same cultural zone in the aftermath of the Great Revolt of 1857. The locally dominant Brahmins and *Thakurs* supplied the bulk of the lawyers once the district courts became functional from the early 1950s.

The town was a leading retail centre of Manchester cloth; the advent of the railways in 1885 added further to the number and strength of mercantile-Marwari traders of Deoria. The older metalled road connecting the productive Kasia-Padrauna area in the northeast to the entrepot town Barhaj on the Ghaghra passed through the older bazaar and was "flanked by the shops of wealthy Marwari merchants" who had built a dharamshala in the town and a fine masonry tank - *Lacchi Ram ka Pokhra* - named after the main benefactor. The railway line while pushing the Marwari masonry tank on to the wrong side of the track, brought the traders in closer proximity to warehouse at the station. The modern bazaar now began literally at the mouth of the railway godown at the crossroads called *Rameshwar Lal ka Chauraha*, named after a prominent Marwari cloth merchant. By 1900s Deoria had emerged as the centre of the wholesale trade in cloth and cotton stuffs on the eastern section of the BNW railway line, between Banaras and Gorakhpur.⁶

Marwaris provided an important financial and social support to the cultural, linguistic and communitarian initiatives that reached Deoria from Banaras and Allahabad in the 1890s and early 1910s.⁷ The militant Cow Protection Leagues, the concerted (and successful) attempts to win for Devnagari Hindi the status of a language of the courts, the *Sewa Samitis* of the 1910s which ran Sanskrit *Pathshalas*, organized discourses on the *Bhagavad Geeta*, streamlined the organization of Hindu fairs and festivals - were funded largely by the *Marwaris*.⁸ Marwari wealth and charity both came wrapped in bolts of fine and coarse cloth. "*Eh Marwari, khola kewari, tohre ghar mein lugga sari*" ("Oh Marwari, open up, there are dhotis and saris stacked in your house") was an old rhyme that was perhaps thought up by those knocking at the doors of cloth-bound charity.

Manufacturing was marginal to the generation of wealth in Deoria. A major centre of indigenous sugar production, a *qasba* called Rampur, was just five miles away across the railway tracks on the Little Gandak that had connected it via the Ghaghra to the riverine corridor of upper India all the way down to Calcutta⁹. Deoria town was host neither to cotton weaving nor to the boiling down of cane juice into *desi* or indigenously made sugar.

The early 1930s saw the hurried erection of two sugar mills, one opposite the railway station, to the home market that the colonial government had created by slapping prohibitively high protective duties on foreign, notably Javan sugar. The station sugar factory, the Sindhi mill as it was called after those who had floated it, buying up second hand machinery, it was said, from a Java factory forced into liquidation by the loss of the India market, was well and truly 'sick'-and-dead by the late 1950s.¹⁰

4

The violence of Partition sent a few Punjabi refugees even to our part of India, 750 miles distant from the new-and-permanent western borders of 1947. Not that this was the first contact between *purabiyas* (easterners) and Punjabis. Another historic convulsion - the Great Rebellion of 1857 and its suppression - had brought east-U.P. peasants face to face with Sikh landholders from the Amritsar village of Majitha, on a sprawling estate which included the famous riot-torn town of Chauri Chaura, 15 miles west from Deoria¹¹. The Majithias turned out to be the improving landlords that Cornwallis (buried in Ghazipur) had dreamt of in Calcutta in 1793. They improved drainage and irrigation, cultivated sugarcane and set up a large sugar mill and a rum distillery.¹²

The Punjabi partition refugees that came to Deoria - the Nandas who graduated from selling bread and butter to a profitable photography business, Iqbal Singh who fast emerged as the most important 'general merchant', the Chopras who made their mark at the far end of the modern or *nauki* bazaar as fruiterers, and most importantly the Aroras, who by the 1960s had set up a cold storage and a truck transport network - all these migrants from and into a new nation impinged very directly on our district town. We bought our fruit from the Chopras, the youngest of whom gave private tuition to schoolboys of K.E., the *Sewa Samiti* and the Marwari School.

Iqbal Singh's store was the source of Eveready batteries for that novel contraption of the early 1960s - the National Panasonic two-band transistor that someone had gifted to me from America, and which was well worth it even if it could not catch Radio Ceylon on 25 metre band quite as well as that durable piece of acoustic furniture, the multi-valve, full-size Philips radio. Popular Hindi film music and catchy ad-jingles were banned on the austere All India Radio, and it was the Trade Department of Radio Ceylon, barely outside the 12 mile territorial waters of the Union of India, that had stepped into the breach to provide us first generation post-colonials with the short-wave joys of 'hit' Bombay film songs.

5

After the assassination of Indira Gandhi in late October 1984, the cane fields of the Majithias were set afire, and the shop of Iqbal Singh in Deoria bazaar looted. Both these Sikhs, one a notable agro-industrialist, the other a hard seller of Knight Queen mosquito repellent, Clinic anti-dandruff shampoo, Maggie 2-minute-noodles and TV-friendly Uncle Chips, suffered their losses and went back to their businesses, acutely aware of the violent pedagogy of majoritarian nationalism, 'Teach these minority bastards a lesson'. After 'the incidents of December 6 1992', or the 'martyrdom of the Babri mosque' (as the other perspective has it), the killings in Ayodhya, Surat and Bombay were to teach the same lesson to the puta-

tive descendants of the first Mughal emperor Babur in Deoria - through Distance Education, so to speak.

In November 1984 Deoria was as much a part of a hideous national vendetta as was Trilokpuri in trans-Jamuna Delhi. One wonders whether it was the transmission of the stilled visage of Indira Gandhi from Teen Murti House, the residence of independent India's first Prime Minister, that was solely responsible for that macabre unification of India, linking Patparganj where I live to Deoria Sadr, 520 miles distant, on a direct route over the Nizamuddin railway bridge to New Delhi, the capital of the nation.

NOTES

- 1 Literally, 'To me wants Binnie's potato chips!'
- 2 "On the fundamental unity of our country - the sacred land where the black gazelle graze and the munja grass grows and the paan-leaf is eaten... - there has been no difference between the Indian intelligentsia at any time." This was how Professor Mohammad Habib invoked an uncluttered idea of India on the morrow of independence and partition in his Presidential address to the Indian History Congress in December 1947. See *Politics and Society during the Early Medieval Period. Collected Works of Professor Mohammad Habib*, Vol.I, ed. K.A. Nizami (Aligarh/New Delhi, 1974), pp. 113-14.
- 3 For an evocative account of present-day small town north India, see *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana*, Pankaj Mishra.
- 4 For an excellent example of present-day *qasba*-based histories, see *Apni Yaaden, Rudauli ki Baaten*, Chaudhuri Syed Mohammad Ali (Rudauli, Bara Banki, 1977)
- 5 *Gorakhpur: A Gazetteer being Volume XXXI of the District Gazetteers of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh*, compiled and edited by H.R. Nevill (Allahabad, second edn. 1929, first published, 1909), pp. 222-23.
- 6 See "Returns showing the outwards and inwards [rail freight] traffic on each station of Gorakhpur district from January 1885 to June 1889", App. iv/13 MS, *Gorakhpur Settlement Report*, 1889, District Records, Gorakhpur; Gazetteer of Gorakhpur, p. 22
- 7 For details see "Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, Eastern U.P., 1920-21", Shahid Amin, in Ranajit Guha ed., *Subaltern Studies*, iii (Delhi, 1984), pp. 7-14. For Allahabad and eastern U.P. more generally, see "Piety and Politics", C.A. Bayly, in John Gallagher, Gordon Johnson and Anil Seal eds., *Locality, Province and Nation* (Cambridge, 1973).
- 8 See letter by Shri Ram Rungta to the Gorakhpur weekly newspaper *Swadesh*, 19.9.1920, p. 8; *Swadesh*, 26.12.1920, pp. 11-12; *Swadesh*, 19.12.1920, p. 8.
- 9 For Rampur Karkhana, see *Sugarcane and Sugar in Gorakhpur: An Inquiry into Peasant Production for Capitalist Enterprise in Colonial India*, Shahid Amin (Delhi, 1984), pp.38, 38, 62, 81-4, 121-2.
- 10 *Sugarcane and Sugar in Gorakhpur*, Amin, ch. 4.
- 11 For the property revolution in these parts in the aftermath of 1857, see *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1922-1992*, Shahid Amin (Delhi & Berkeley, 1995), pp. 31; 136-37.
- 12 I discuss the Sikh Majithias as pioneer cane capitalists in my *Sugarcane and Sugar in Gorakhpur*, pp. 105-06; 131-3; 175-7; 222.