SEEING CHANDNI CHOWK

Umesh Gaur and Swapna Liddle

Photographs by Umesh Gaur, Margarita Mavromichalis and Harvey Stein

Photo Editor Allison Morley

First published in India in 2026 by

Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd
706 Kaivanna, Panchvati, Ellisbridge
Ahmedabad 380006 INDIA
T: +91 79 40 228 228
E: mapin@mapinpub.com
www.mapinpub.com

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ISBN 978-93-94501-18-8

Copyediting: / Mapin Editorial
Proofreading: / Mapin Editorial
Design: Nidhi Sah / Mapin Design Studio
Production: / Mapin Design Studio
Printed in India

A street vendor selling *dal moth*

Nai Sarak book market

Khari Baoli spice market

Gauri Shankar Mandir

FRONT COVER To come, dummy caption

PAGE 1 Children playing on rooftops.

PAGES 2-3 To come, dummy caption.

PAGES 4-5 To come, dummy caption

PAGE 6 To come, dummy caption

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Dr. Chase F. Robinson
Dame Jillian Sackler Director
Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art

Introduction and Acknowledgements

Umesh Gaur

This book is a testament to my enduring love for Chandni Chowk, a place that has been a part of my life for decades. It is not just a place I have photographed; it is where my story begins, a place that holds a special place in my heart.

My mother, Jagrani Gaur, was born in Haveli Haider Quli in Chandni Chowk. My father, Harish Gaur, came from a modest village on the outskirts of Delhi. He rose to become the Dean of the Science Faculty at the University of Delhi. He joined the university in the 1950s, during an era when waves of young scholars traveled to the U.S. for further postdoctoral research. While he was in the U.S. for two years, my mother, my sister and I lived with my mother's parents in Chandni Chowk. It was during these years, while walking the streets of Chandni Chowk and savouring Old Delhi's street food, that I formed a lifelong bond with Chandni Chowk.

My father's love for America and photography was infectious. He brought back two cameras, one of which he gave me. On Sundays, we would venture into Old Delhi together, capturing the essence of Chandni Chowk through our lenses. Under his guidance, I developed a passion for photography, particularly for Chandni Chowk, a place I have been photographing for over five decades.

I followed in my father's footsteps and came to America for graduate studies in the 1970s. After obtaining a doctorate and a short career in chemical sciences, I founded my asset management firm in the 1990s, which continues to thrive today. Owning my own business gave me the time and resources to pursue serious photography while travelling around the world.

It was during this period that my wife, Sunanda, and I also began collecting modern and contemporary Indian art. In the 1990s, as important works by senior Indian modernists appeared at New York auction houses, we assembled a substantial collection. In 2004, the collection was nationally recognized when *Arts & Antiques* magazine named us among the "Top 100 Collectors" in America.

As the collection gained visibility, we began working closely with museums. One formative experience was a major exhibition of contemporary Indian photography at the Newark Museum in 2007, which I helped organize. Collaborating with curators on this project reshaped my understanding of photography as an art form, and we also began collecting photography.

One of the earliest works we acquired was a series of photographs by Atul Bhalla, documenting the *piau*s, public water faucets in Chandni Chowk. Over the years, the collection grew into one of the most significant of its kind in the United States. In 2017, we donated the majority of this collection to the Smithsonian National Museum of Asian Art, which has since organized two major exhibitions drawn from this gift. Looking back, this period of collecting and curatorial collaboration laid the groundwork for my own return to photography as a practitioner.

Nevertheless, gifting our photographs was somewhat bittersweet. Although we were thrilled that our collection would be researched, exhibited, and preserved in the museum, I missed having them at home. My wife gently suggested I print my own photographs. Pulling out my old negatives, however, led to a humbling realization: my own photographs were by no means a match for the works of photography we had collected! It was time for me to get some formal photography training.

I began taking courses at the International Center of Photography (ICP) in New York to deepen my photographic practice. After completing a few foundational classes, I enrolled in a portraiture course taught by Harvey Stein. On the very first day, Harvey made a remark that instantly caught my attention. "*There are two kinds of people in the world,*" he said, "*those who have been to India and those who have not.*" I nearly fell out of my chair. I had found not just a teacher, but a mentor—someone whose relationship with India was sustained, reflective, and deeply informed by long-term engagement.

Harvey's approach to photography is grounded in patience, respect, and an ethical attentiveness to the people he photographs. His portraits emerge through time spent observing, waiting, and allowing the encounter to unfold naturally. This sensibility became central to how we would later work in Chandni Chowk, where trust, humility, and repeated visits mattered far more than speed or spectacle.

Through Harvey, I met Margarita Mavromichalis, a Greek photographer whose relationship with India has been shaped by decades of return visits and prolonged stays. Her practice is built on listening, on entering spaces gently, and on allowing familiarity to develop before lifting the camera. In Chandni Chowk, this translated into access not only to streets and markets, but to interiors—homes, workshops, and courtyards.

Around this time, I also read Swapna Liddle's book on the history of Chandni Chowk, which reignited my desire to revisit these streets through a more informed, deliberate photographic lens, as I became aware that despite its importance, Chandni Chowk had never been the subject of a sustained contemporary photographic study that combined historical awareness with lived experience. What began as a personal response to Swapna's work gradually evolved into the idea of a long-term collaborative project, and ultimately into this book, which I am honoured to coauthor with her. I am deeply grateful for her insight, generosity, and intellectual companionship.

SEEING CHANDNI CHOWK

Swapna Liddle

Fig. 1 A British artist's conjectural view of the city of Shahjahanabad, from 1858

The City of Delhi Before the Siege. Wood engraving. Artist unknown. The Illustrated London News, 16 Jan 1858. Image courtesy The History Collective Visual Archive.

On the night of 29 April 1639, a momentous ceremony took place beside the river Yamuna, just north of a vast ground on which successive cities had been built over the course of several centuries. These cities had been the capitals of dynasties that had claimed imperial status over large parts of the Indian subcontinent, and eventually came to be subsumed under the name 'Delhi'. On this night, the first steps were being taken to take this imperial legacy forward. At a moment decreed auspicious by the royal astrologers, markings began to be drawn on the ground, delineating the foundations of the imperial palace which would form the core of a new city. The city was to be called Shahjahanabad – named after its founder, the Mughal emperor Shahjahan.

The ruler of one of the richest and most powerful empires of its time did not just choose a historic spot to build his capital. Shahjahan was the ultimate patron of architecture. The proof of his good taste and ability to marshal talent had already reached an acme in the Taj Mahal, the superlative tomb built over the remains of his chief consort, Mumtaz Mahal. In Shahjahanabad, he put to work his most talented architects, Ustad Ahmad and Ustad Hamid, whose work in designing the palace complex he personally supervised. Witness to these events was the court chronicler Inayat Khan, who noted, "skilled artisans were summoned from all parts of the imperial dominions, wherever artificers could be found – whether plain stone-cutters, ornamental sculptors, masons, or carpenters. ... and multitudes of common labourers were employed in the work."[1]

The court chroniclers wrote about imperial projects, most notably the palace complex that would later be known as Red Fort; the congregational mosque or Jama Masjid; and the wall that encircled and protected the city. These grand structures not only stood as testament to the power, wealth and refinement of the Mughal emperor and the establishment he commanded; they conveyed other powerful messages. So, several of the gates in the city wall took their names from the provinces of the empire they faced – Kashmir, Kabul, Lahore, Ajmer. Everyone in the capital would be reminded that the roads leading from these gates connected far-flung regions to the heart of the empire of which they were integral parts.

The decorative schemes within the courts in the palace had messages for the people of this vast realm. In his most intimate court, known as the Khas Mahal, the emperor administered the empire, seated under a panel carved with the scales of justice, symbolically projecting him as the fount of justice for all his subjects. In his largest court of audience, known as the Diwan e Aam, his throne was placed under a panel that depicted the Greek god Orpheus playing to the beasts. This conveyed the message that the Mughal empire was one

Fig. 2 The palace complex, Red Fort, overlooking the river Yamuna

Delhi. Palace of the King. Colour lithograph. James Duffield Harding (after Charles Stewart Hardinge). Thomas M'Lean, *Recollections of India* (London, 1847), plate 4. Image courtesy The History Collective Visual Archive.

CHANDNI CHOWK

A Photographer’s Paradise Across Time

Umesh Gaur

PHOTO EDITOR Allison Morley

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Red Fort, 1880-1890, Lala Deen Dayal.

For nearly four centuries, travellers, merchants, poets, administrators, and historians have attempted to describe Chandni Chowk. Each encountered a different city. François Bernier saw an imperial capital. Dargah Quli Khan discovered a city of poets, musicians, coffee houses, and public performance. Twentieth-century visitors encountered a bustling commercial district shaped by migration, modernity, and political change. Today visitors record their impressions through mobile phones and social media, but the impulse remains remarkably familiar: to make sense of one of the world's most complex urban landscapes.

Photographers inherited this long tradition of looking. Over the past century and a half they too have attempted to describe Chandni Chowk and, like the observers who preceded them, discovered not one city but many. Founded in the seventeenth century as the ceremonial and commercial spine of Shahjahanabad, the avenue and the dense network of streets surrounding it have exercised a powerful hold on the photographic imagination. Few places in India offer such a remarkable concentration of history, architecture, commerce, ritual, and human theatre within so compact a geography. It is perhaps for this reason that Chandni Chowk has become a photographer's paradise across generations.

Each generation has encountered a different Chandni Chowk, and each has left behind a distinct visual interpretation of the neighbourhood. For some it became an imperial capital or an architectural monument; for others a theatre of everyday life, a sacred landscape, a marketplace, a social ecosystem, or a repository of memory. The pages that follow do not attempt a comprehensive history of photography in Old Delhi, nor a survey of every photographer who has worked there. Rather, they trace a series of encounters between Chandni Chowk and the photographic imagination across more than a century and a half. The photographers discussed here approached the neighbourhood with very different concerns: architecture, nationalism, street life, religion, memory, infrastructure, and urban change. Taken together, their work reveals not simply the evolution of photography, but the extraordinary capacity of Chandni Chowk to generate multiple and often contradictory visions of itself.

LALA DEEN DAYAL: THE MONUMENTAL CITY

The photographic history of Chandni Chowk begins with monuments that gave Shahjahanabad its imperial identity. Working in the late nineteenth century, Lala Deen Dayal approached Delhi primarily as an architectural subject. Among the earliest and

most celebrated Indian photographers, and one of the first Indians to establish a major professional photographic practice, he brought to his work the precision of a surveyor and the sensibility of an archaeologist.[1] His photograph of the Red Fort presents the great Mughal citadel not as a backdrop to urban life but as an object of study and admiration—isolated, monumental, and timeless. The road approaching the fort is largely empty, interrupted only by a few figures whose presence serves principally to establish scale. In Deen Dayal's photographs, the city remains subordinate to architecture; the human drama that would later fascinate generations of street photographers has not yet entered the frame. His work belongs to an earlier moment in the history of photography, when the camera was still being used to catalogue, document, and preserve the monumental heritage of India's past.

HOMAI VYARAWALLA: A NATION IN TRANSITION

For Homai Vyarawalla, Delhi was the capital of a newly independent nation finding its identity in the aftermath of Partition. Best known for her photographs of political leaders and the public life of the Nehru era, she also occasionally turned her camera toward the streets and ordinary citizens who inhabited this changing city.[2]

Old Delhi, 1950s, Homai Vyarawalla.

Her photograph of a family travelling through Chandni Chowk by cycle rickshaw captures an India in motion. Unlike the architectural grandeur sought by nineteenth-century photographers or the dramatic moments favoured by later photojournalists, Vyarawalla's images often reveal the quieter textures of social transition.

HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON — PHOTOGRAPHY LOOKING AT ITSELF

Among the many photographers who passed through Delhi, few cast a longer shadow than Henri Cartier-Bresson. His photographs of India following Independence – particularly his documentation of Mahatma Gandhi's final days and funeral in 1948 – occupy an iconic place in twentieth-century photojournalism.[3] Yet his engagement with Chandni Chowk appears to have been remarkably modest.

The single image included here is therefore especially intriguing. Rather than photographing the crowds, monuments, or street life for which Old Delhi is famous, Cartier-Bresson turned his camera toward a street portrait photographer resting beside his box camera and painted backdrop. The resulting image becomes almost self-referential: photography observing photography.

Street Photographer, Old City, Delhi, 1966, Henri Cartier-Bresson.

THE ICONIC MARKETS OF CHANDNI CHOWK

A shopkeeper in Kinari Bazaar, where merchants have long supplied the decorations, ornaments, and ceremonial items that accompany weddings, festivals, and family celebrations throughout North India.

Chandni Chowk is a collection of markets, each with its own personality. From the bustling lanes of Kinari Bazaar selling wedding goods, to the intense smells of spices in Khari Baoli, to the maze of shops specializing in sanitary hardware in Chawri Bazaar, to the iconic book market at Nai Sarak, these markets are the heart of Chandni Chowk's busy life.

The origins of these markets go back to Jahanara Begum, the daughter of Emperor Shahjahan. In the seventeenth century, she commissioned the octagonal chowk in front of what is now the Town Hall. This central square became so renowned that, over time, the entire street on which it stood came to be called Chandni Chowk, a name that today often refers to much of Old Delhi itself. Traders from across the world were drawn here, bringing silk, spices, perfumes, and jewels to a marketplace that thrived under royal patronage and was frequented by the Mughal court.

Over the centuries, these markets have evolved into specialized areas of trade and expertise, where people, not just from Delhi but from various parts of the world, continue to come to shop. The same families have owned and operated some iconic shops for generations. Many are tiny, tucked shops within narrow winding streets. Still, within them, you encounter the skills, the pride, and traditions of people who run them. Whether it is *zari* borders, books, perfumes, or light fixtures, many shopkeepers have been selling the same goods for decades.

What is most remarkable about Chandni Chowk's markets is the human connection between seller and buyer. Shopkeepers often know their customers by name. They never rush the buyers, and the deals are made over chai and friendly chats.

Most of these markets are embedded in crowded, narrow lanes that are inaccessible to cars and trucks. Consequently, the goods are moved in and out of the lanes in the old-fashioned way. *Thela wallah*s (men pulling wooden carts) and porters carry large bundles seamlessly through the crowds. These are the workers who make these markets function. They move everything from wedding clothes to electrical supplies. Still, they are rarely acknowledged – their labour woven invisibly into the fabric of the bazaar.

Each market, besides having a specialty, has its own rhythm, its own sounds, and its own character. Together, they create a lively, colourful world where you shop the old-fashioned way—by touching, seeing, smelling, and negotiating.

KINARI BAZAAR: WHERE INDIAN WEDDING DREAMS BEGIN

Indian weddings are grand affairs, often spanning several days, and sometimes even weeks. Several traditional rituals, parties, and celebrations precede the main wedding day. All of these events require a special outfit; it is customary for wedding guests to acquire several new outfits for these occasions. This trend is also spreading across the Indian American community in the US. Nowadays, the parents of the bride and groom frequently travel to India to purchase wedding outfits, not just for the bride and groom but also for family members and friends. For many, the first stop is Kinari Bazaar in Chandni Chowk. Brides-to-be, fashion designers, tailors, and families all come here with the same goal: to find that one right embellishment that will make their outfit special.

Kinari Bazaar is the oldest and most famous wedding market not only in Delhi but in all of India. You can find every imaginable trim, lace, and embellishment used to decorate traditional Indian formal clothing. For generations, brides, grooms, tailors, and designers have made their way here to source *zari* and *gota* lace, sequins, beads, velvets, brocades, tassels, and more to design custom wedding outfits. The market is filled with small shops, each glowing with its specialty. There's even a store entirely dedicated to buttons.

A few years ago, I went to Kinari Bazaar with my brother and his wife, Swati, who was putting together her outfit for an upcoming wedding. As we stepped into the bazaar, it felt like entering a world that shimmered and sparkled. Swati visited many shops in search of the perfect hand-embroidered border, glittering sequins, and special buttons. Every shopkeeper was proud to show us their seemingly limitless collection of beautiful adornments.

While I took photographs, my brother and sister-in-law picked out fabrics, trims, sequins, and buttons. Each item was thoughtfully selected and matched so that her outfit gradually came together, built from the treasures of Kinari Bazaar.

Visiting Kinari Bazaar is more than just a shopping trip. For some families, it is itself one of the wedding rituals, a prelude shimmering with anticipation.

KHARI BAOLI: THE HEART OF INDIA'S SPICE TRADE

I moved to the U.S. in the 1970s, when the Indian immigrant community was still small and finding Indian groceries was a real challenge. I remember driving over 100 miles to Queens, New York, to buy a few basic spices. Today, in New Jersey, where we live, there are hundreds of Indian grocery stores. You can find almost everything now. But if you're looking for the brightest red chilies, the creamiest cashews, or the freshest spices, there's one place you must go: Khari Baoli in Chandni Chowk.

Khari Baoli is Asia's largest spice and dry goods market. Everywhere you look, there are sacks and piles of spices: turmeric, cardamom, cumin, saffron, nutmeg, dried rose petals, and more. The air is thick with fragrance—sharp, sweet, pungent, earthy. Kashmiri almonds, Afghan apricots, Iranian pistachios, and giant flavourful cashews from South India flood the street. Walking through the lanes, one sees red chilies stacked high, yellow lentils in baskets, rare Ayurvedic herbs, and blocks of asafoetida. Traders shout out prices, buyers bargain, and *thela wallah*s and porters weave through the crowds.

A porter in Khari Baoli.

I am most impressed by the stores that specialize in just red chilies. They offer chilies ranging from mild to ultra-spicy, each offering a unique sensory experience. Some vary in fragrance, adding another layer of intrigue to their appeal. Others even impart a different red hue to dishes—dark ruby or glowing orange-red. The large mounds of these dried red chilies, sitting directly on the floor, are a sight to behold. They glow like heaps of burning embers, with their wrinkled skin catching the light to create a visual spectacle, a treat for the photographer's eyes.

One special aspect of Khari Baoli is its unusually wide main road, something rare in the Chandni Chowk area, where most streets are narrow. The market, established during the Mughal era in the 1600s, expanded rapidly, with carts laden with goods and caravans travelling via the overland route now known as the Grand Trunk Road. Some say the road was widened by demolishing buildings and pushing them back, but this has never been reliably established. What is beyond doubt is that Khari Baoli grew into the great artery of the spice trade, carrying an unstoppable tide of aromas and commodities into the city. What makes Khari Baoli truly special isn't just the people who know the trade inside and out, but the way a single sniff can tell them everything about a spice. It's the smell of fresh spices clinging to your clothes and the sense of history that lingers in the air that make it an unforgettable experience.

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PRECEDING PAGES Vendors, shoppers, and transport workers share a bustling public square in Chandni Chowk. Such open market spaces continue the centuries-old traditions of commerce that have defined Shahjahanabad since its founding.

ABOVE A shopkeeper sits amid a dazzling display of wedding ornaments, decorative trims, and ceremonial embellishments in Kinari Bazaar.

OPPOSITE Stacks of *zari* trims, ribbons, and ornamental borders line a Kinari Bazaar shop.

The street near Fatehpuri Mosque.

PLACE, MEMORY, AND ENCOUNTER IN THE OLD CITY

Carol K. Huh

Led by Umesh Gaur and accompanied by Ashok Mathur's patient commentary, I navigated the crowds and rickshaws at the brisk pace of those well familiar with Old Delhi and its movements. This fleeting introduction to Chandni Chowk seemed a blur of entering and exiting the flow of people and goods while listening to fragments of history and personal memories. Zooming my eyes in and out, I looked to the horizon to grasp this extraordinary urban space and homed in to the details of a richly layered place. My overwhelming yet limited experience with Chandni Chowk posed an interesting challenge when I was asked to study the work of three photographers gathered over many years and visits. After viewing hundreds of images and the inevitable overlap in subjects and sites, I asked each photographer to select a maximum of ten images that stood out in his or her body of work. What follows is a closer look at examples drawn from this group to explore the differing sensibilities and approaches that inform each photographer's way of perceiving a singular place.

BIRD'S EYE VIEW

Revisiting familiar locations "dense with memories"[1] lies at the core of Umesh Gaur's photography. Moving from bird's eye views to street-level studies, Gaur seeks to share the experiences of one who feels a deep bond with the people and public spaces of Chandni Chowk. His particular sense of place is most effectively conveyed in street and landscape views, while the choice of subject matter often relates to childhood memories. His representational tendencies reflect a fascination with how the unique urban environment shapes the rhythms of daily life.

Gaur often employs wide views, dramatic cropping, and diagonal axes to capture the disorienting scale, flow, and density of the city. The high vantage point of one photograph, for instance, encompasses an avenue from a tree-lined curve in the distance before descending into narrower, congested streets and alleys. The horizon disappears in a second image and the bird's eye view is filled with an overall pattern of stacked goods and people. In a third shot, a commercial building overflows the frame at a tilt, accentuating the chaotic appearance of the façade that seems to teeter high above.

Shifting perspectives again, a pair of photographs quietly evokes the mystery and wonder of Chandni Chowk. Recalling his fascination with the idea of communicating across great distances, Gaur rises above the city to visit Mr. Gopal, a longtime resident of the neighbourhood. Against the bright blue sky, Mr. Gopal's gesture hangs in the air as he directs his flock of homing pigeons, which he has been releasing into the sky above Delhi