

1857

The Siege of Delhi





It all began on a Monday morning.

On the 11th of May, 1857, a group of angry sepoy's marched out of Meerut, a direct act of disobedience against their commanding officers, and their oppressors - the British.

Unsure of what lay ahead, this group instigated what later came to be known as India's First War of Independence.

Most parts of India felt the tremors as gradually the uprising spread across Northern India.



Where were these sepoys marching to?

To the 'heart of India', the seat of the Mughals and the centre of all political affairs - Delhi.

After three long months of shelling, firing, violence and bloodshed, the walls of Delhi were breached, and the British finally conquered the 'grand object', this magnificent Mughal capital.

This tale is about the chaos, the crumbling structures and the unsettled violence that changed the fate of Delhi and later, India.

UNEXPECTED VISITORS

May 11, 1857

The tranquil waters of the Yamuna were disturbed, as an army of Indian soldiers - sepoys - crossed the Bridge of Boats to reach the doors of the Red Fort - the official residence of the Mughal Emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar.



The sepoys from Meerut had marched a whole day and now demanded an audience with the Emperor.

They had one demand - for Bahadur Shah Zafar to lead them in their efforts to oust the East India Company from the land.

The Bridge of Boats across the river Yamuna, 1858

Image Courtesy British Library

As the sepoys addressed their King, the Europeans of the city - mostly women and children - had fled from the walled city, especially from the neighbourhood of Daryaganj, to take refuge in the Flagstaff Tower.



" We are off. "

That day, the telegraph office near the Flagstaff Tower sent out a final message to the British officials at Ambala.

A DAY OF CHAOS

The city was shaken - not just by the arrival of the men from Meerut, but by an explosion.

It sent tremors through the city. The roar of the explosion could be heard as far away as Meerut.

The Magazine - the largest ammunition store in all of North India, had just been destroyed.





The sepoys from Meerut had had their eyes on the magazine. Capturing the magazine would have meant taking over all the ammunition that the British possessed, it was a chance to overpower the enemy, an opportunity to win a decisive victory.

When Lieutenant Willoughby - the man in charge of the magazine - realised that he was losing control of the situation, he blew up the magazine, killing hundreds of sepoys.

THE RETURN OF THE KING

May 12, 1857

The sepoys had, by now, occupied the Fort and the streets of Shahjahanabad. The elderly Emperor hesitantly agreed to lead the revolution.



In an elaborate procession - the first in many years - the Emperor announced his support for the sepoys to the people of Delhi.

Some semblance of the old days returned to the Red Fort, as for the first time since Nadir Shah's invasion in 1739, the Daily Audiences - or *Durbars* - resumed.

With the Emperor's support, the sepoy's found themselves one step closer to their goal - to overthrow the British.

Now that they had control over Shahjahanabad, the sepoy's made some changes.



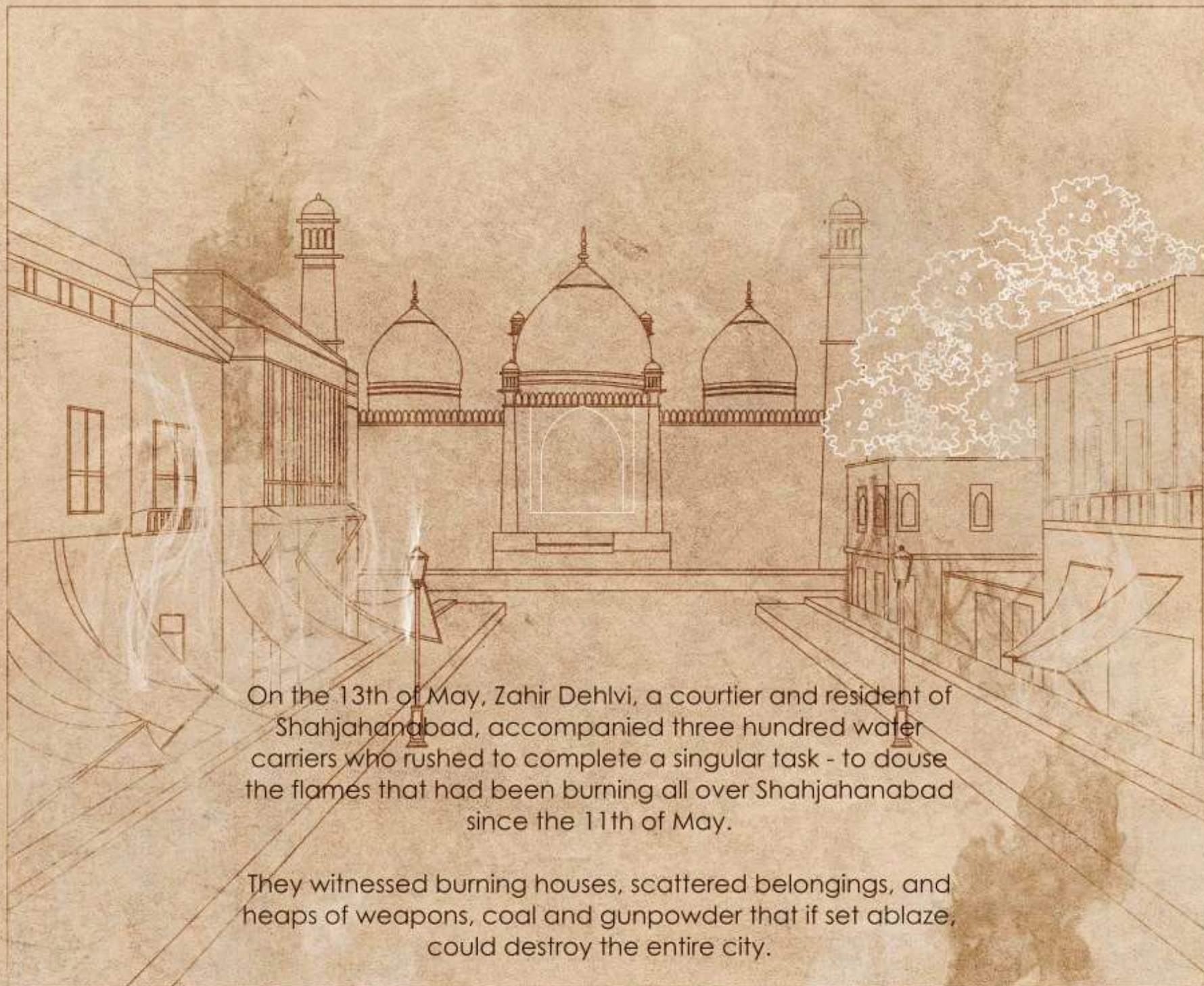
The elegant 19th-century building that had once belonged to the influential Begum Samru, and in 1857 housed the Delhi Bank, was turned into a temporary magazine. Over 250 people were employed to manufacture gunpowder.

A CITY IN FLAMES

May 13, 1857

*“I thought that if, God forbid, the
remaining gunpowder catches fire, then
before long the whole town will be ablaze.”*

- Zahir Dehlvi, May 1857



On the 13th of May, Zahir Dehlvi, a courtier and resident of Shahjahanabad, accompanied three hundred water carriers who rushed to complete a singular task - to douse the flames that had been burning all over Shahjahanabad since the 11th of May.

They witnessed burning houses, scattered belongings, and heaps of weapons, coal and gunpowder that if set ablaze, could destroy the entire city.

Simla

Back in Simla, where a majority of the British population had moved to escape the scorching summer sun, people waited desperately for messages from Delhi regarding the recent events.

Delhi

May 14, 1857

"Late last night a message came from Delhi saying that all regiments there had turned against their officers. The magazine on the banks of the river was blown up, it seems, by one of our sergeants, who sacrificed himself to prevent all the ammunition from falling into the hands of the sepoys.

...Government will now, too late, see the folly of leaving a large Native city like Delhi without any British troops, with the magazine - I believe the very largest in India - in the heart of the city. Of course they have taken that and seized upon all the arms."

- Mrs Keith Young ,to her sister

MARCH TOWARDS DELHI

May 24, 1857

Ambala

“..Our Queen's birthday - a good day for commencement...”

While the situation in Shahjahanabad worsened, the British troop under the command of Sir Harry Bernard marched out of Ambala, towards Delhi.

Delhi





24th May was considered a 'good day' for the commencement of the march, for it was their Monarch - Queen Victoria's birthday.

A portrait of Queen Victoria, commissioned in 1858.

MARCH TOWARDS DELHI

May 26, 1857

Lahore

"Waiting for the siege train... it is expected tomorrow or the next day..."

All over the city, the stranded British population spent the next few days waiting hopefully for the siege train to arrive from Lahore.

The train did not arrive that month.

Delhi



MARCH TOWARDS DELHI

June 7, 1857

As May turned into June, the British forces that had set out from Meerut and Ambala finally met at Alipur, a day's march from the walled city.

The combined forces marched on further southwards, towards the walled city.

A letter, sent from the Alipur Camp, read:

“It is settled that a march tonight towards Delhi, taking up our position tomorrow at Hindu Rao’s House - The place with lots of deer and tiger.”



BATTLE AT BADLI

June 8, 1857

The British troops marched on southwards towards the walled city.

They were intercepted at Badli ki Sarai, by a force of Indian sepoy.

What followed was the fierce Battle of Badli ki Sarai.

While the British faced tough resistance, they eventually won the battle and made their way towards the Ridge in Delhi.





"We carried their guns and then advanced driving the enemy from the Ridge on which stand the Flagstaff Tower and Hindu Rao's House, these we occupy in force."



By now, the British had taken over the Ridge outside the walled city. They had taken control of Hindu Rao's house and the Flagstaff Tower - the highest points on the Ridge.



Ludlow Castle
12th September



Metcalfe House
10th June



These strongholds gave the British easy access to target the Red Fort - the residence of the Emperor.

BATTLE AT BADLI

June 10, 1857

Camp, Delhi Cantonments

“General Wilson’s force joined us because Delhi is our grand object, and that taken, our task afterwards will be an easy one.”

SIEGE OF DELHI

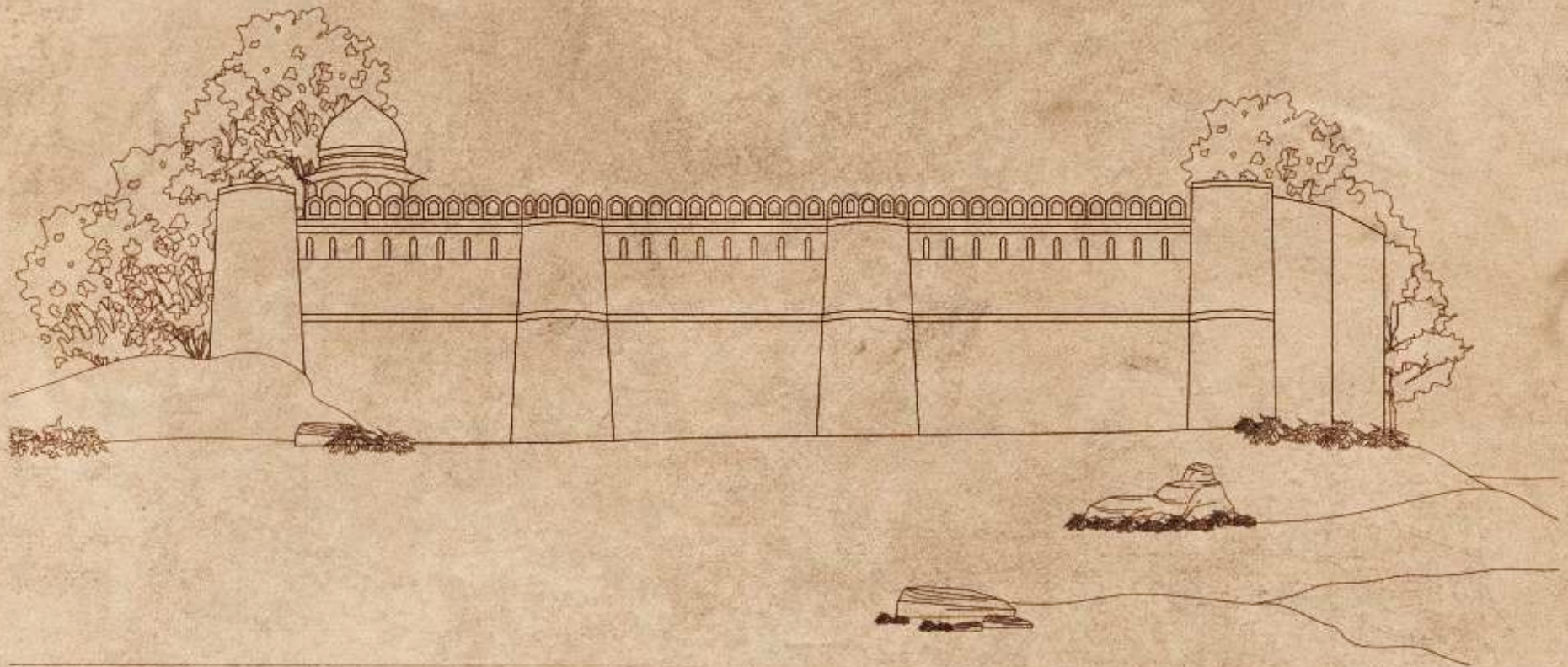
1857

Feet
1000 2000 3000



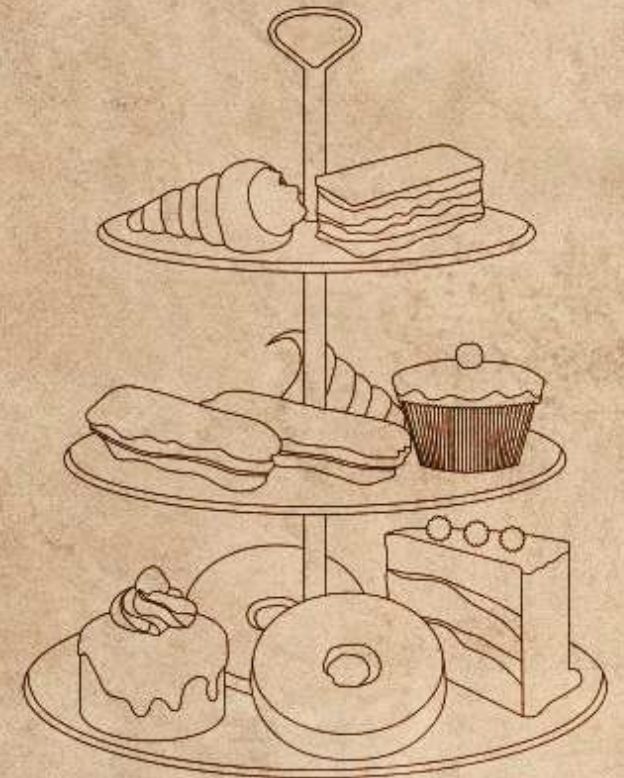
June 15, 1857

As the British took control of the areas outside the walled city of Shahjahanabad, the reports that came in from the city were tragic. More sepoys joined in from different parts of India, and with no ration, no food to survive, loot and plunder was all that could be relied on.



While some starved to death, some others plundered Salimgarh in search of valuables to help them survive a few more days.

“As to our living, we could not dine more luxuriously than we do if we were quietly located at Simla, and I have not seen better gram-fed mutton anywhere, and you will be amused when I tell you that the pastry at the mess is about the best I have come across in India - it seems that the Artillery mess cook or confectioner is famous for his skill. I give you all these little details that you may know we are not utterly miserable.”



While this letter paints a rather cheery picture of the situation, it was not really so.

As fear and uncertainty swept through the city, and the fighting continued, the Europeans who had taken refuge at the Flagstaff Tower could do little but wait to be rescued.

THE SIEGE TRAIN ARRIVES

September 04, 1857

*"Another grand arrival this morning, or rather during the night,
was the siege train.*

*A pretty fine sight the large, heavy guns and mortars, each with
a couple of elephants harnessed to them; and they walked along
as if they had only a little child's small cart to pull."*





Image Courtesy : National Army Museum

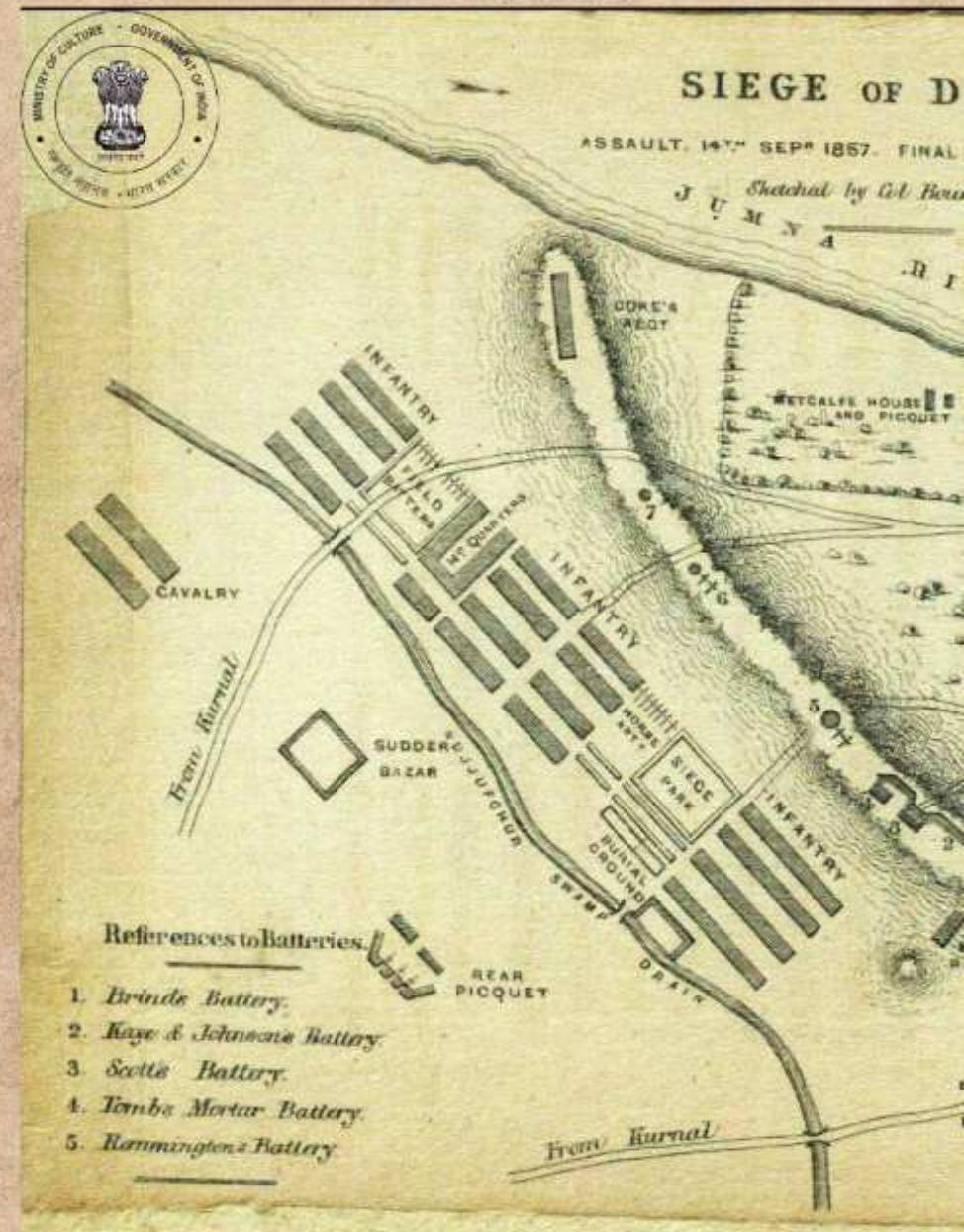
"The Rifles and Artillerymen are a march behind, it being thought desirable not to hurry them as they will not be required for a day or two, as a few preparations are necessary before the guns can be placed in battery."

Now there was no turning back for the British.

First week of September, 1857

From the ridge, the British moved closer to the city walls, occupying two more points, Ludlow Castle and Qudsia Bagh. The aim of the British was to attack the Northern wall of the city - Kashmere Gate.

The mission was to set up batteries at these points to breach the tough walls that protected the city.





However, setting up batteries was not an easy task. The Indian sepoy tried to combat every move and it took the British four long nights to set up three batteries.

Eventually, the batteries were erected - one near the Castle, another near the Water Bastion and, the last at Qudsia Bagh.

TOWARDS THE WALLED CITY

September 11, 1857

Two months since the beginning of the siege - the British finally had a strategy in place, they were ready to enter the city of Delhi (Shahjahanabad).

Delhi was stormed by four columns under Brigadier General Nicholson, Brigadier Jones, Colonel Campbell and Major Reid.





This four-fold attack wasn't as successful as the British had anticipated. Their march from Qudsia Bagh to the walls of the city was made longer, as each column faced fierce resistance from the Indian sepoy.

September 14, 1857

From the now-ruined massive gateway of Kashmere Gate, one of the columns marched into the city. The British had stormed their way into 'Delhi'.

The British were now stationed at St. James Church and later shifted to Skinner's House.

“By God's grace here we are, safe within the walls of Delhi, and all of our Staff party have escaped unharmed.”



September 15, 1857

Though the British had taken over parts of the city, it was not as per their plan.

With all the major changes in and around the city, letters written by British officials saw some changes too. They now read 'Delhi' instead of 'Delhi Cantonments'.

September 15, Delhi

"I have not yet told you how it was that we didn't get possession of the whole of the city yesterday, as it was expected and intended we should have done.

It was all owing to that wretched Cashmere contingent, which formed a part of Reid's Column, which was to have cleared out the Suburbs of Kissengunj and then have entered the city by the Lahore Gate. The contingent ran off immediately as the enemy's guns opened on them, abandoning three of their own guns. Reid was wounded and the column was obliged to return to Hindu Rao's without effecting their object; and the consequence was that our columns in the city were obliged to pull up in the positions we now hold."

September 16, 1857

"Taken over the magazine, which was stormed soon after the daybreak. In the magazine were found about one hundred and twenty guns and mortars with lots of shot and shell; and several mortars which had been placed in position to fire at us, have now been turned round to play upon the Palace and Salimgarh. I shall not be surprised if tomorrow we find both the Palace and Fort evacuated."

With the magazine now in British hands, the sepoys' stronghold over Shahjahanabad wavered.

September 18, 1857

The 18th of September was a dark day - quite literally.

A solar eclipse shrouded the city in shadows. Many of its inhabitants read this phenomenon as a prophecy of doom, and rushed to evacuate what was left of their homes.



September 19, 1857

"We have made considerable progress since yesterday in the direction of the Palace and are now within three or four hundred yards of it; whether it will be necessary to breach the walls seems doubtful, but preparations are being made for batteries in case it is. The impression is that the Palace and Salimgarh, both are abandoned, not a gun having been fired from either all today."



As the British forces poured into the city, stepping over the debris of collapsed bastions and walls, the sepoys' stronghold over Delhi wavered, and then collapsed, like a house of cards.



City streets that were once overcrowded by angry sepoys now witnessed uniformed officials controlling and capturing structures - especially the havelis (mansions) of the wealthy merchants.

"The house is beautifully-furnished - Chandeliers, large mirrors, couches. I was amused when I went over to the house (it belongs to a Native Noble, Ahmed Ali Khan) to see most of the men of the Rifles lying on nice Mirzapore carpets. The Prize Agents will, however, take possession of all these in time. The Agents elected are Colonel Seaton, Sir Edward Campbell and Captain Wriford."



PRIZE AGENTS EXTRACTING TREASURE

Image Courtesy National Army Museum

Along with troops came the specially appointed British representatives called the 'Prize Agents'. They were a group of three, who were assigned the task of collecting, evaluating and taking in possession the valuables that were left behind by the inhabitants of the city.

THE SIEGE OF DELHI

September 20, 1857

*"Entire possession of the city, Palace and fort.
All were evacuated this morning or during the
night."*



The British had crept into the Red Fort, killing everybody who came their way. After two months and nine days, they had officially taken full possession of the city. However, the Emperor - Bahadur Shah Zafar - seemed to be missing.

THE HUNT FOR THE EMPEROR



The Fort

"The King, unfortunately has gone away, so I suppose the first thing will be to try and catch him; he is said to be either at Humayun's or Nizamuddin Tomb and whether the mutineers are with him or not I don't know. I have just been all over the palace, which is now occupied by us in large force."



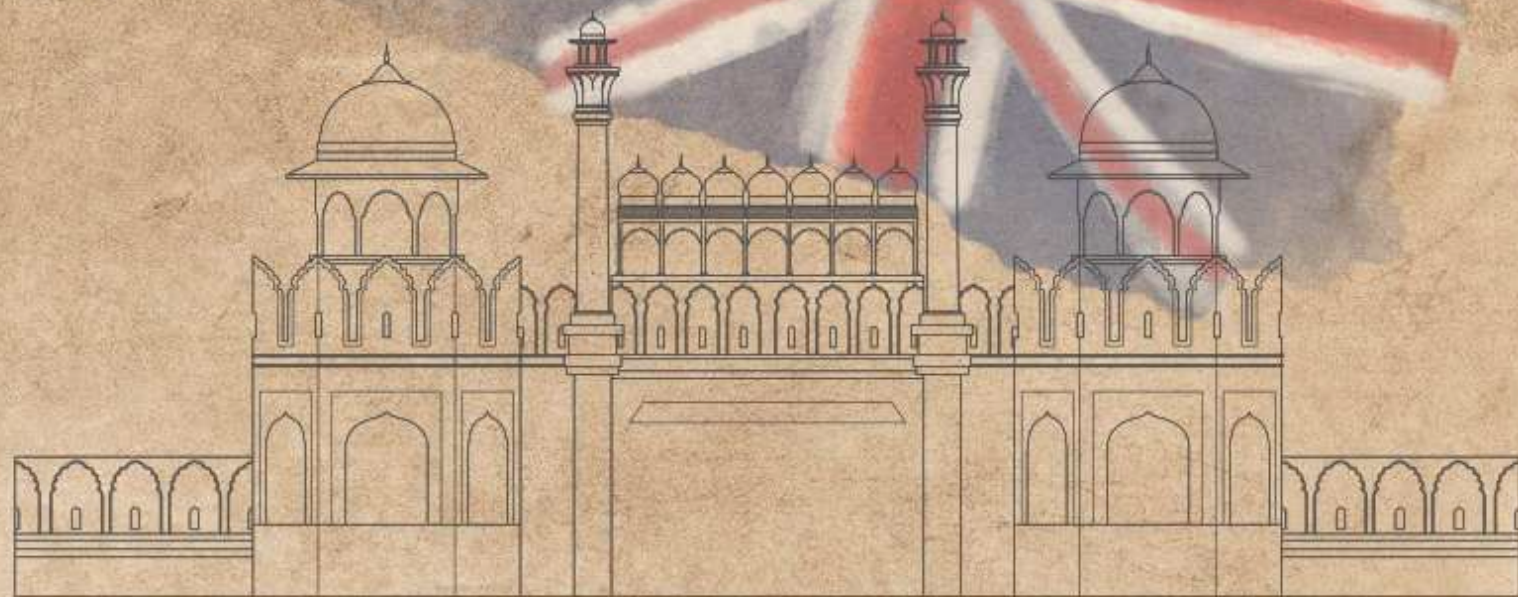
Humayun's Tomb

THE HUNT FOR THE EMPEROR

September 21, 1857

As the rays of the sun swept over the Delhi sky, they found the Union Jack- the flag of Britain - fluttering from a post within the palace.

This was a signal that the British had won Delhi.



Bahadur Shah Zafar had taken refuge at Humayun's Tomb.



A British officer named William Hodson was ordered to get hold of Bahadur Shah Zafar. On the 21st, Zafar surrendered to Hodson on the condition that his life be spared.

THE ROYAL PRISONERS



CAPTURE OF THE KING OF DELHI BY CAPTAIN HODSON.

September 22, 1857

Hodson and his troop again made rounds of Humayun's Tomb. This time to capture Zafar's sons - Mirza Mughal and Mirza Khizr Sultan - and his grandson, Mirza Abu Bakr.

The three were taken prisoners and on their way to Shahjahanabad, they were stopped near Delhi Gate, where a large crowd had gathered. Fearing that the crowd would rescue the three prisoners, Hodson mercilessly shot them one by one at what is today known as the Khooni - or *bloody* - Darwaza.

Their corpses were taken to Kotwali - the police station at Chandni Chowk. Stripped of clothes, the corpses were laid on a stone slab before they were buried.

Crowds gathered and witnessed the brutality of the British.



This was a message - that the three months that had gone by were just the beginning of what lay ahead.

AN OCEAN OF BLOOD

*“ Here there is a vast ocean of blood before me,
God alone knows what more I have still to
behold. Thousands of my friends died. Whom
should I remember and to whom should I
complain? Perhaps none is left even to shed tears
on my death. ”*

- Mirza Ghalib





AN OCEAN OF BLOOD



The city of Delhi had new masters.

At the Kotwali, gallows were set up where at least five corpses were hung everyday for the public to view - a clear warning to anyone that dared to disrupt this new order of things.



Locals had
someday
the door
again, co



had fled in a hurry, hoping that
they would walk back through
the ruins of their houses and, once
back in all this city their home.



The vibrant streets of Shahjahanabad were now stained in red, the walls were breached and structures shelled. The British had entered a city that was ripped of its charm, its culture and its people.

This glorious capital city that had once been home to poetry and music, intellect and talent, was now little more than ruins and rubble. Of the people who had called this city home, less than one-fourth remained, and they could do little as they watched this much-celebrated, dazzling Mughal capital collapse and plunge into darkness.



نہیں حال دلی سنانے کے قابل
 یہ قصہ ہے رونے رلانے کے قابل
 اجاڑے لٹیروں نے وہ قصر اسکے
 جو تھے دیکھنے اور دکھانے کے قابل
 نہ گھر ہے نہ در ہے رہا اک ظفر ہے
 فقط حال دہلی سنانے کے قابل
 Nahin haal-e-Dilli sunaane ke kaabil,
 ye kissa hai rone aur rulaane ke kaabil,
 ujaade looteron ne wo mehel iske,
 jo thay dekhne aur dikhaane ke kaabil,
 naa ghar hai naa dar hai raha ek Zafar
 hai,
 fakat haal-e-Dilli sunaane ke kaabil.



The condition of Delhi is not worth recounting
 These tales are cause for lamentation
 Robbers ransacked its wonderous palaces
 Which were worthy of adulation
 No homes, no gateways, nothing but Zafar
 Remains to tell the Tale of Delhi