

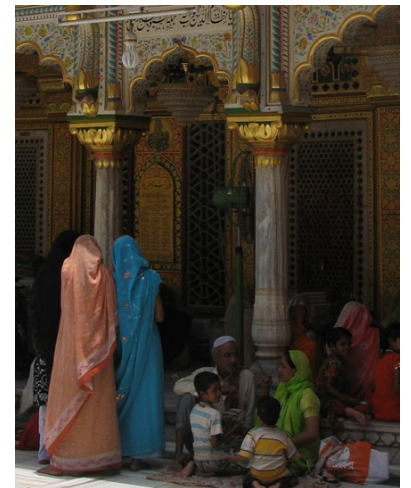
The Shrine of Saint Nizamuddin at Delhi: An Introduction

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Delhi's historic shrine of the 13th century saint Nizamuddin is a popular Muslim pilgrimage centre, attracting thousands of pilgrims of many faiths from all over India and abroad for last 800 years. Besides being a hub of religious pilgrimage, it is also a minor tourist attraction, visited by many tourists looking for an Indo-Muslim past of Delhi, especially while visiting the nearby Humayun's tomb and Lodi garden, some of Delhi's more famous landmarks. Although debatable, the popularity of this shrine among international tourists could be gauged by the fact that the popular tourist guide *Lonely Planet*, in its list of '164 most essential things to do' in Delhi, ranks a visit to the Nizamuddin dargah at 37; and among the heritage sites listed in it, the shrine is the ninth most popular tourist spot of Delhi!



Nizamuddin Aulia (1240-1325) and his shrine have had an impact on the development of Delhi's history as well as geography in several ways. Nizamuddin Aulia and his hospice had a great following of devotees even during his lifetime. Due to the supposed sacrality of the shrine, many Muslim kings, courtiers and even ordinary citizens who lived and died in Delhi after Nizamuddin Aulia, wished to be buried next to his grave. Thus, the neighbourhood around his shrine was used as a large and growing cemetery for seven centuries. The construction of several grave complexes such as Lodhi tombs, Humayun's tomb, Jorbagh Karbala, Safdarjang's tomb and hundreds of odd graves in between (many of which have disappeared since early 20th century) are a testimony to the importance of Nizamuddin shrine.



One enters the dargah Nizamuddin area from New Delhi's Mathura Road and finds a distinctly medieval ambience: labyrinthine alleys, crowds of beggars and street-vendors, bazaars with cheap eateries selling *kababs* and other delicacies, people selling caps, rosaries, religious posters, and so on. One of the lanes on the left leads to the well-known Mughlai



restaurant Dastarkhwan-e-Kareem, which is frequented by anyone interested in the choicest of non-vegetarian foods in Delhi.

Further ahead is the modern building of the Ghalib Academy, established to honour the 19th century Urdu poet Mirza Ghalib. It has a well-stocked library and museum, and an adjoining grave compound where Ghalib is buried. As the road narrows, one meets flower-sellers who pester the visitors to buy a tray of flowers, sweets, or a *chadur* (cloth) to offer at the Sufi tombs. Before entering the dargah premises, you have to remove your shoes and preferably cover your head. A medieval archway leads to a veranda that faces the tomb of Amir Khusrau, customarily visited first. Here one will find many people claiming to be the *sajjadah-nashins* (keepers) of the mausoleum, requesting money for the prayers they can perform for you. Some of these caretakers sit in their *hujras* or rooms and perform spiritual healing practices. At various locations within the shrine, one can also see tiny shops selling flowers and other devotional ephemera. The maintenance and upkeep of the dargah, including a daily *langar* (community meal) for the poor is run with the help of alms and offerings here. A visit to the shrine of Nizamuddin will not be complete without taking a look at the ancient *baoli* or stepwell which was constructed during the saint's time.

Although currently it has deteriorated a lot due to misuse, the water reservoir was used by young male visitors in the past to take a dive into it as a feat worth watching by other visitors. Beyond the *baoli* is located a second entrance to the shrine which opens towards the Lodhi Road.

Besides the main tomb, the shrine has other venerable sites such as the poet Amir Khusrau's tomb, *hujra-e qadeem* (the ancient room), *langar khana* (hall for community food), *Urs mahal* (concert stage for qawwalis), *Chilla* of Nizamuddin (saint's meditation room) and so on, some of which a pilgrim is supposed to visit ritually for specific ceremonies, especially during the annual urs of the saint. Many of these were constructed or added in later periods, and have constantly been painted over or repaired with different materials. Among other heritage buildings in the vicinity are Atgha Khan's tomb, Kalan masjid (also called Kali masjid) from 14th century, Lal mahal (that has been partly demolished and encroached upon recently), and *Chaunsath khamba* (64-pillars building) that houses the tomb of Mughal courtier Mirza Aziz Kokaltash.



The neighbourhood immediately surrounding the tomb is densely populated today by mostly Muslim residents in unplanned housing clusters with hundreds of small shops selling all sorts of items from religious books and music CDs to attar, spicy food and raw meat. In this maze of heritage buildings, smelly shops and fakirs, the name and blessings of the saint Nizamuddin is the most important feature for the residents and visitors here. Even though Delhi has tombs of many great kings and rulers spread throughout the city – even in the shrine’s vicinity – the local residents believe that they are all deserted (or seen as relics) while the tomb of Nizamuddin is a living space - always crowded with devotees. Interestingly, the area also houses several



other Islamic religious institutions, such as *Tableeghi jama't* (an orthodox movement of Islam's promotion that does not favour the hybrid culture of Sufi shrines) and an international centre connected with a 20th century Sufi Inayat Khan who had following in Europe and America. Another important tomb is that of Khwaja Hasan Nizami, an early 20th-century Sufi and author in Urdu, whose son, Hasan Sani Nizami maintains his shrine along with the Khwaja Hall that is used for religious and literary gatherings on important occasions. With so many significant institutions and heritage buildings, the region of Nizamuddin is like a tiny window into the mediaeval past of Delhi that needs special attention.

Watch a 15 minutes introductory video film *Tasveer-e Aqeedat* about Nizamuddin shrine and its popular visuality on this link:

<https://youtube.com/watch?v= 1EjFSou010>

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