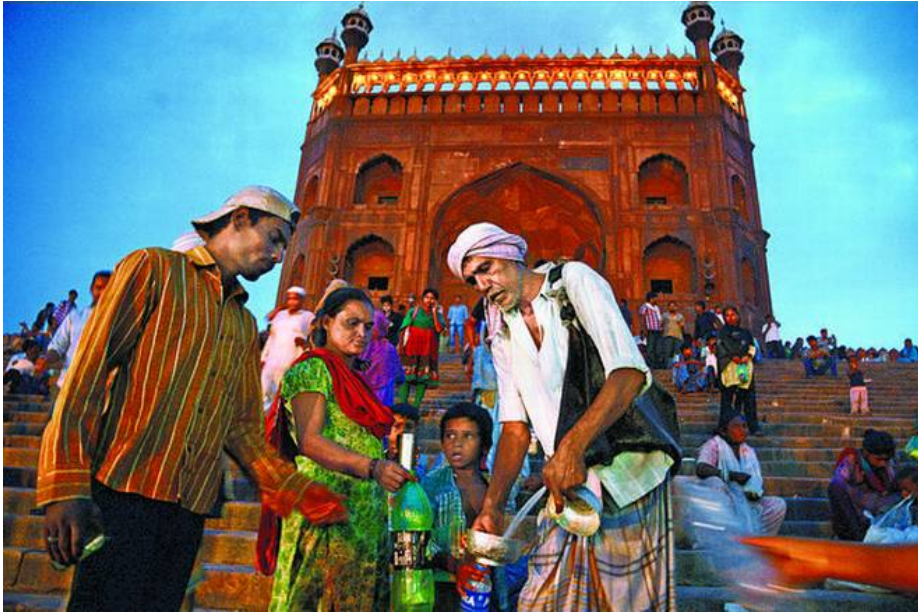


# A bhisti ruled an empire once

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**Fluid legacy A bishti serving water at Jama Masjid in Old Delhi; (below) Mohammed Ismail, one of Old Delhi's last bishtis, at Jadid Qabristan Ahle Islam.S. Subramaniam & R.V. MoorthyS\_Subramaniam**

**A water carrier changed the history of India by saving Humayun from drowning, but the remaining bhistis of Old Delhi will soon be part of history**

Jadid Qabristan is just a birdsong away from Delhi Gate. The quiet lane leading to the cemetery is lined with playing squirrels and beggars sleeping under frayed blankets. The smells of meats, mangoes and muskmelons from the bazaar slowly give way to the forest smells of pilkhan, whose wind-stirred aerial roots curtain the cemetery entrance. Within are neatly arranged rows of numbered graves shaded under a canopy of neem and amaltas and an odd temple tree. This 100-year-old cemetery is where the dead of Old Delhi find the peace they desired in life. Mohammed Ismail, wearing an undershirt stencilled with Old Glory, is asleep on the floor of a mosque inside. An ancient cooler, recently painted green, directs a little cool air and plenty of noise towards him. Mohammed sleeps through it all. When he wakes, he tells me why he needs his long afternoon nap — he wakes up quite early and, after namaaz, takes his leather satchel, fills it to capacity with 35 litres of water, hoists it on his back and walks around the 45-acre compound, watering the dead. Before he retires for lunch, he makes 15 trips with his satchel, delivering 525 litres — what an average middle-class Delhi home easily uses in a single day. Mohammed is one of Old Delhi's last few bhistis — water carriers — a relic of a profession that is perhaps older than the city itself. In 1897, British naturalist Edward Aitken explained the word 'bhisti' in his book *Behind the Bungalows*: "Behisht in the Persian tongue means Paradise, and a Bihishtee is, therefore, an inhabitant of Paradise, a cherub, a seraph, an angel of mercy. He has no wings; the painters have misconceived him, but his back is bowed down with the burden of a great goat-skin swollen to bursting with the elixir of life." Mohammed lives in a tidy shanty on the cemetery's eastern edge. We sit on the uneven, grainy floor that's covered with a plastic sheet with orange and blue geometric patterns. He lights up a filter-tipped beedi and offers me a puff; the fan hanging precariously from the makeshift ceiling swirls a wispy cloud of smoke around us. --- Bhistis claim divinity from a hazy past. In the epic battle of Karbala, fought on the banks of the Euphrates in 680 CE, an enemy arrow pierced a water-skin meant for the thirsty army of Prophet Muhammad's grandson, Hussein. The loss of the water and its bearer hastened the end of a lopsided battle. Today, Shia Muslims commemorate the defeat and death of Hussein during Muharram, with ritual bloodletting in street processions. And before the days of water tankers, the bhisti was tasked with cleaning the blood off the streets. As Mohammed tells the tale, sunlight slants through the narrow holes of an apology for a ventilator. Our conversation is punctuated with the metallic call of a coppersmith barbet. "It's been 30 years since I have been watering the graves," Mohammed says. "Nothing has changed, not even the way people look at me". "How do they look at you?" "I never get any respect," he says, face tightening. "People think I am a small man who lives in a graveyard." It was a bhisti who changed the history of India by saving the life of Humayun, the second Mughal emperor, as he was about to drown in the Ganga during a campaign against the Afghans. Nizam, a bhisti, inflated his goatskin satchel, the mashaq, and used it as a float for Humayun to cross the river. In gratitude, Humayun granted Nizam the throne of Agra for a day. During his diurnal reign, Nizam cut his mashaq into small strips and had them gilded and stamped — recording his name and date of coronation — and issued as currency. A bhisti thus ruled an empire once, if only for a day. As the sun starts to lose its edge, Mohammed picks up his mashaq and steps outside, nodding at me to follow him. He holds the satchel's mouth under the tap, and it swells and eerily resurrects the dead animal. As the rusty brown goatskin expands, numerous knotted and gnarled lumps become visible on the surface, oddly similar to the calluses on Mohammed's hands, as if the man has become one with his instrument. "Shall I try it," I ask, as he lifts it and starts walking. "Better not," he says. I insist. The hubris becomes apparent a few metres later. My wrists and shoulders strain against the cold, heavy, water-filled goatskin, which weighs me down at every step. I give up. Mohammed takes the mashaq back from me with a wry smile. Graves close to the main path are easily watered, not the endless rows behind them. But Mohammed has mapped this cemetery with his feet, and he drifts through an uneven obstacle course, his grace counterpointed by my awkward gait. With great agility, he slides the mashaq from his back to his waist, grips the mouth and tilts it towards the grave, controlling the flow of water by lifting one finger and closing the other, as if playing the flute. But the clumpy ochre earth demands more. As he walks back for a refill, I ask: "Isn't there an easier way?" "Nothing else works," he says. "A bucket or drum would be impossible to bring to each grave as there's no path. I could connect a long pipe, but it would be expensive. It will take ages to lay it out and roll it up and drag it to the graves. Maintaining it won't be easy." Modernity may prefer metal and plastic over muscle, but in this graveyard, and other such places in India, it's muscle and skin that challenge the inevitability of change. --- The mashaq that waters the dead is born from death. The festival of Bakr-Id, when countless goats are slaughtered, produces the choicest goatskins. The selected ones are, as in an ancient Egyptian embalming ritual, plunged into a large cast-iron vat in which the bark of the kikar tree (*Acacia arabica*), a species that came from North Africa, has been boiled repeatedly. The bark secretes organic chemicals, including tannin, which remove odours and germs and convert skin into leather. The skin is soaked for 20 days, then dried and its surface rubbed with buffalo fat for waterproofing. Expert mashaq makers then stitch the leather painstakingly by hand, using thick white

threads polished with beeswax, which ensures the thread doesn't damage the waterproofing as it sutures through the skin. The mashaq is a product of history, pieced together with skills acquired over a millennium. Mohammed doesn't share my romanticism. He is used to throwing his mashaq away every four months and buying a new one for Rs. 2,500 from Shakeel Ahmad in Old Delhi's Meena Bazaar. Shakeel is his go-to person for anything related to a mashaq, from repairs to purchase. Mohammed directs me to the shop. "When you meet him, tell him I will come to him soon," he says. "My mashaq has a leak and I need him to fix it". --- Shakeel is easier to locate on the Internet than in his shop in Meena Bazaar. I walk through the narrow streets of Old Delhi, contracted further by parked rickshaws, pushcarts, cars, vendors, and the crowds emerging from the red octagonal sandstone gates of Jama Masjid. The tangled mess of cables overhead seems to mirror the frenzied streets below. Meena Bazaar, which used to be a women-only shopping zone during Mughal times, is jammed with men. I walk under a kaleidoscope of multi-coloured cloths canoping the narrow aisle between the endless array of shops on both sides selling everything from white musk ittar to golden high-heels. The shop is pressed against the wall of a concealed entrance to the dargah of Sufi saint Hare Bhare Shah. It is flanked by a tea stall and a shop selling audio cassettes and CDs of Islamic music and sermons. Even in this hubbub, Shakeel, one of Old Delhi's last bhists, is unmissable — dressed in chalk white from head to waist, with a blue chequered lungi below. He looks exactly as he does in the many news stories about him in newspapers and TV shows. And Shakeel commands a price for his time. His online glamour never translated into more than the 300-odd rupees he makes after a hard day's work. To make ends meet, he charges money now from the hundred or more visitors who come each year to see him and follow him around with their cameras. He was about to step out with his mashaq when he noticed a leak in one of its corners and decided to fix it. When I arrive, he has taken out his mending box, packed with awls, needles and chisels of different sizes, a fist-sized lump of yellowish green beeswax, and small bundles of white, purple and yellow strings. He thoughtfully shuffles around this mess, like a doctor his pillbox, and takes out a small purple strip of leather. With a few deft strokes of the chisel, he pares it into a perfect circle, as if recreating Nizam's self-minted currency from 600 years ago. He then borrows a tumbler of water from the tea-shop and drops the patch into it. Every few minutes, he pushes it in gently with the tip of his forefinger, then takes it out and twists and yanks it to check for softness. After 15 minutes, he seems satisfied. I watch with fascination as this doctor of dead skin, dressed in white, in this medieval mortuary with hides dangling around him from a blood-red wall, grafts one piece of skin on another. Shakeel is immersed in his work, distracted only when people walking into the dargah use the water from the well inside to wash. This annoys him. The well is tucked away in a corner, just a few footsteps from the emerald interiors of the dargah, and is believed to be 450 years old. "The well is 80 feet deep. Nowhere in Delhi will you find water at this depth," says Shakeel. --- The well is more celebrated in talk than in text, its fluid history buried deep in the young alluvium aquifer that hosts whatever remains of Delhi's fragile groundwater reserves. It is said to be blessed by Hare Bhare Shah himself — so the well never runs out of water and the faithful believe it's a cure for ailments. At its mouth is a metallic pulley with a bucket fashioned out of a discarded automobile tyre. Shakeel plunges it in, and after a few moments of silence, a distinct thunk echoes upwards. The water is hauled out and poured into a medium-sized cement tank fitted with taps. Anybody can use the water from here, but only the bhists can directly use the well, so Shakeel's watchful eye keeps the crowds away from the sacred waters. Meena Bazaar has never been served by piped water — a bizarre oddity nobody can explain. The sacred well was the only source of drinking water here, till a pushcart with water jugs arrived a few years ago, considerably eroding Shakeel's customer base. The second time modernity intruded was during the subterranean burrowing for Delhi's Metro Rail, which left the well almost dry. When the water level revived within a year, it vindicated the belief in its divinity, and Old Delhi reclaimed some of its magic and mysticism. Every Friday, before and after the evening namaz at Jama Masjid, one of the Ahmad brothers, Jamil, Khalil, Shakeel or Mohammed Umar — the last bhisti family of Old Delhi — stands on the steps of the main gate offering a free cup of divine well water to the thirsty. As the sun sets behind the white onion dome, the long shadow of the finial points to the old ways, when water was sacred and walked the streets of Delhi. --- There is perhaps no greater joy than watching a flameback woodpecker on an amaltas tree in a summer afternoon in Delhi. Protected by the dead, Jadid Qabristan is a secret Eden in the heart of what could be the world's most polluted city. A familiar voice stirs me out of my reverie. "I was expecting you," Mohammed says with a smile. "Did you meet Shakeel?" "I did," I say. "He is quite something, isn't he?" He laughs in response. "Are you done?" "Yes, I finished early," he says, and offers me a cigarette. "I was actually looking forward to that beedi I had yesterday," I say in jest. Mohammed doesn't reply. He seems a bit lost. He hasn't been well, he tells me. "My right leg is acting up again, the doctor told me it's because of carrying too much weight." Three decades of walking with water has left him with a backache and limp. It's getting worse now, and his doctor wants him to stop carrying the mashaq. "I've tried to leave this job so many times, but each time, I thought of my children and held on. Now they're all grown up; I can finally let go," he says. Mohammed was 14 when he left Durganagar in Cooch Behar district, where the borders of West Bengal and Assam nestle against Bangladesh. Identities here are as fluid as the borders that shift like the sands of the free-spirited Teesta and Torsha rivers which flood this area from both sides. In 1985, the year when a pogrom against Sikhs left Delhi smelling of burnt flesh and tyres, Mohammed arrived at the New Delhi railway station after a 36-hour train journey, his first. Looking back, he wishes he had completed his schooling. It could have given him the life of dignity he craves. His children might still get it. Mohammed's daughter has a degree in business administration and is married to a software engineer in Delhi. His son is completing his graduation. For all the talk of the sanctity and piety of giving water, bhists, like other manual labourers in the subcontinent, are mostly Dalits, irrespective of their religion. The term bhisti itself, steeped in feudal and colonial romanticism, was considered derogatory. In 1916, R.V. Russell noted this disapproval in his treatise, *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India*. Talking to me, a 102 years later, Shakeel reveals the same discomfort. "I don't know why people keep calling us bhists. My family name is Abbasi, and we prefer being called that." Like water, which blurs boundaries, bhists muddled caste and religious divides. As unimaginable as it is today, Dalit Muslims — once considered untouchables — supplied drinking water to Hindus and Muslims of all castes, from their leather satchels. Bhists also remind us of an urban past when water was intimate, local and sacred. Unlike the pipelines that bring water from hundreds of miles away, water once walked into homes, with supply regulating demand and not the other way around. In today's thirsty cities, people no longer know their water. I get up to leave. Mohammed asks, "When will you come back?" "Not sure," I say. "Next month, probably". "If you want to come again, call first. Who knows if you will find me here..." It strikes me that this is probably the last time I would see him with a mashaq. A bhisti at the sunset of his vocation. There is no nostalgia, no romance, no reminiscence — just a nonchalant anticipation of disappearance. Mohammed gets up slowly, winces, rubs his right knee with his callused palm, looks upwards and sighs. The muscles that carried water to 3,000 dead souls every day for 30 years have finally worn down. It is time for him to leave the dead and return to the living. First published by **The Hindu** on August 5, 2018