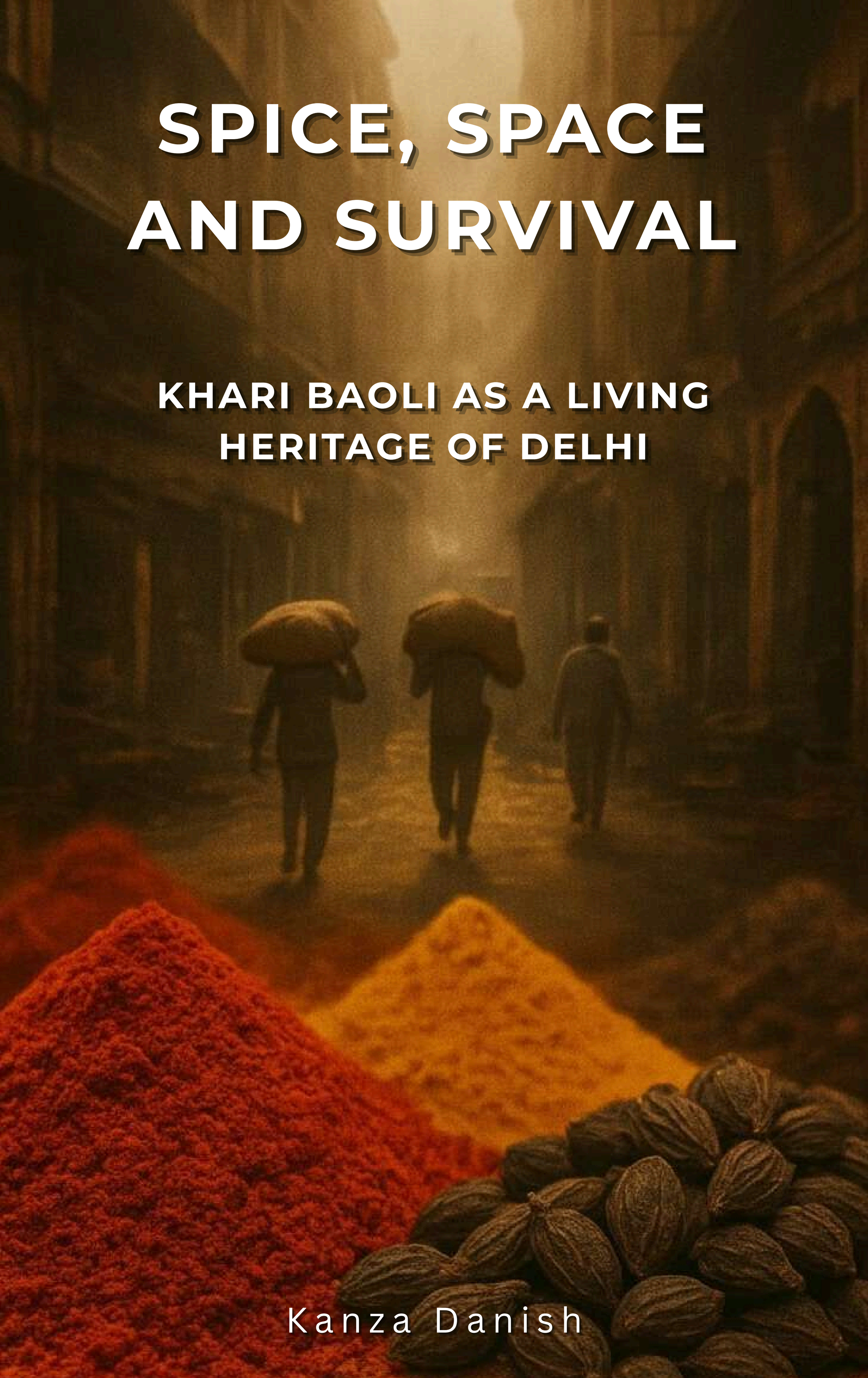
SPICE, SPACE AND SURVIVAL

KHARI BAOLI AS A LIVING HERITAGE OF DELHI



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Abstract

Asia's largest spice market, Khari Baoli, located in the tangled lanes of Old Delhi, is more than just a centuries-old spice market. It is a dynamic archive of Delhi's trade, taste and traditions. The market is full of movement, and the air is heavy, not just with spices but also stories that breathe life into its bustling history. Even with all the chaos, there's a deep sense of familiarity that holds everything together. In today's world, where readymade spice blends are available in every store and online deliveries are on the rise, Khari Baoli's survival might seem unlikely. Yet the market continues to thrive in its own way. This project takes the spice market as an entry point to think about how older, traditional spaces continue to stay relevant in rapidly modernising cities. It focuses on how Khari Baoli adapts, quietly but consistently, to shifting times. This study is more concerned with how the place works by focusing on the systems, the relationships, and the ways people adjust to change while holding on to certain values and routines. This project sees Khari Baoli as a manifestation of lived space, and not merely a historical landmark or a commercial hub. It is a dynamic entity shaped by the practices and experiences of its traders, workers, and visitors. While the physical market remains, its essence has been created through the sensory landscape of spices, the rhythms of its trade, and the nuanced social exchanges that define its character. It shows that the market isn't "stuck in the past," but adapts, persists, and carries forward its unique cultural and economic life through everyday actions.

1. Introduction

Khari Baoli in Old Delhi stands as Asia's largest spice market and functions in many ways as a living archive of the city's trade, taste, traditions, and tenacity. The market is organized around narrow, winding alleys that seem to shift shape with every turn. Stalls display mounds of turmeric, coriander, cumin, and chili peppers heaped in wicker baskets or stretched across wooden counters. From the first light of dawn until late into the evening the air is heavy with aroma, foot traffic, and the constant chatter of haggling voices. In an age when supermarket aisles offer neatly packaged spice blends and mobile apps promise doorstep delivery within hours, Khari Baoli continues to draw both habitual patrons and first-time visitors. Its survival raises an urgent question: how does a centuries-old, open-air market remain relevant and vital in a rapidly modernizing urban environment.

1.1 Problem Definition

The popularity of pre-packaged spices and online ordering platforms has transformed consumer expectations and supplier practices in markets around the world. Many traditional bazaars have seen their customer base shrink or their core practices eroded. Global supply chains prioritize uniformity and branding rather than sensory richness and local knowledge. If Khari Baoli relied solely on its historic pedigree it might likewise struggle. Yet the market shows no signs of decline. Faced with modern competitors it adapts, innovates, and still

preserves its familiar rhythms. This study tackles the central problem of understanding the mechanisms by which Khari Baoli negotiates between convenience and tradition. In particular I aim to uncover the practical strategies that vendors and customers use in daily life to integrate new technologies and products without losing the market's defining sensory and social character.

1.2 Gaps in the Literature

Existing scholarship on urban markets often emphasizes regulatory frameworks, architectural heritage, or broad economic data. Historical studies of Khari Baoli focus on its evolution under successive regimes or its role in regional trade networks. Economic analyses document volume and price trends. But there is remarkably little attention to the fine-grained, sensory and social dimensions of how the market actually functions day by day. What do traders smell, touch, or hear as they grind and package spices? How do customers learn shortcuts for judging quality by aroma or texture? How are informal apprenticeships structured and what rituals sustain trust between vendors and longtime clients? These questions remain largely unexplored. By leaving the "lived experience" in the shadows, the literature overlooks the very practices that constitute the market as a cultural and economic organism.

1.3 Problem Solution and Study Motivation

This research proposes to fill these gaps through a sensory ethnography of Khari Baoli that emphasizes non-participant observation, systematic documentation of sensory landscapes, and conversations with both traders and customers. Rather than imposing rigid interview. My motivation comes from a personal history of visiting this market with my mother as a child and from an academic interest in bridging theory and practice. I want to demonstrate how

ethnographic attention to detail can inform heritage preservation and urban planning in rapidly changing cities.

1.4 Significance and Advantages of This Work

By focusing on sensory and social practices rather than solely on material or institutional heritage, this study offers a novel perspective for scholars of urban culture, policy-makers concerned with heritage management, and local stakeholders aiming to sustain traditional markets. The findings will provide concrete recommendations for preserving not just buildings but the everyday behaviours and sensory experiences that define Khari Baoli. For example an understanding of which aromas or textures customers value most could guide municipal decisions about stall regulations or pedestrian access. Documenting informal apprenticeship rituals may inform community-led training initiatives.

Moreover this project demonstrates how a mixed-method sensory ethnography can serve as a model for studying other historic markets worldwide. In documenting Khari Baoli's adaptive strategies it highlights the generative potential of tradition and showing that heritage sites need not fossilize but can evolve through the creative practices of those who inhabit them. Finally, by situating my personal experience alongside academic inquiry, this research underscores the importance of reflexivity and positionality in producing knowledge that is both rigorous and resonant with lived realities.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The research design for this project is based on a qualitative, ethnographic approach aimed at understanding Khari Baoli as a living cultural and commercial space. Since the focus is on everyday practices, sensory experiences, and adaptive strategies, the design combines multiple methods that allow for in-depth, nuanced documentation rather than relying on large-scale quantitative data.

2.2 Nature of the Study

This is an exploratory study that views Khari Baoli not just as a marketplace but as an evolving social ecosystem. The research seeks to capture how traders, workers, and customers interact with each other and with the physical environment of the market. It will investigate how spatial arrangements, sensory cues, and routine negotiations contribute to the market's survival amidst modern shifts such as online deliveries and packaged spices.

2.3 Fieldwork Site

The field site is Khari Baoli and its immediate lanes, which include spice shops, storage areas, loading spaces, and surrounding tea stalls where traders often gather. These

micro-locations will form the units of observation. Spending extended time within these spaces will help in noting variations between peak trading hours, quieter afternoons, and festival seasons.

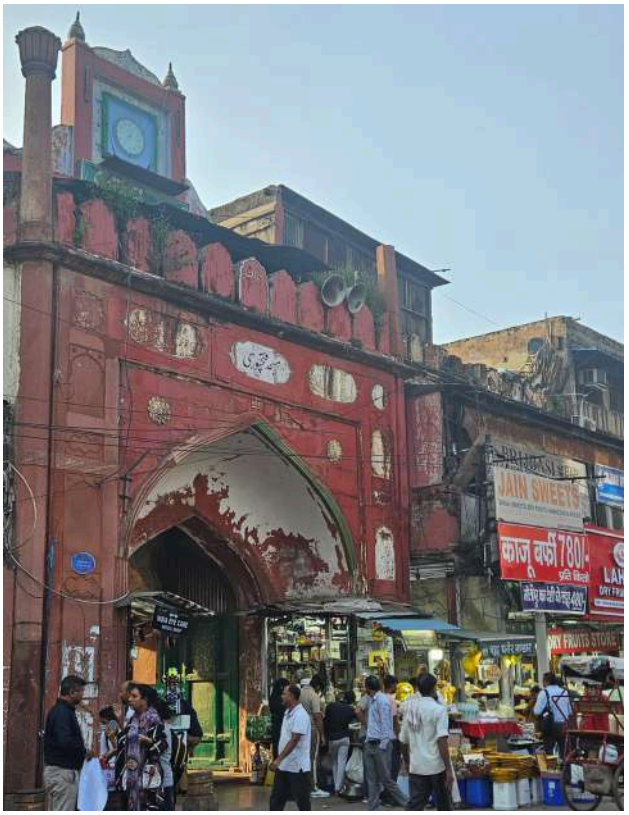
Walking from Chandni Chowk Gate to Khari Baoli isn't just getting from point A to point B; it's a little adventure, full of history, food, culture, and cinematic moments all packed into a few hundred meters. When you reach Chandni Chowk, right outside the gate, the first thing you'll notice is the Jain Mandir.

From here, you have a choice—you can hop onto one of the cycle rickshaws that zip through this route, or you can simply walk. It's a straight path, easy to follow, and walking gives you time to soak it all in.

A little further along, you'll come across the Gurudwara Sisganj Sahib. You might see people offering food in the langar, adding a warm, welcoming feeling to the hustle around it. It's a peaceful checkpoint in the middle of the buzzing streets. Next, you hit Ballimaran, a lively street full of shops and narrow lanes. It's famous, and you might recognize it from the song "Kajra Re", which mentions Ballimaran and the nearby Dariba Kalan, which is just a few steps away. The streets are packed, the air filled with chatter, and you can feel the energy of Old Delhi with every step. After that, you reach *Paranthe Wali Gali*, a food lover's dream. The smell of frying parathas hits you instantly. Stuffed with potatoes, paneer, or more elaborate fillings, these parathas are the stuff of legends. This lane is so famous it even appeared in Akshay Kumar's movie *Chandni Chowk to China*. The vendors flip parathas with

skill while customers squeeze past each other, and it's a playful, chaotic, and utterly delicious scene.

Then, you arrive at Katra Neel, a narrow shopping arcade lined with small shops selling textiles, everyday items, and little treasures. The lanes, colourful displays, and constant movement give a hint of the sensory overload waiting for you in Khari Baoli, the spice market at the end of this walk. By the time you reach Khari Baoli, your senses are already awake. The sights, smells, sounds, and even the taste of a quick snack along the way prepare you for the vibrant chaos of the spice market that came up around the Fatehpuri Masjid,



which was built in 1650 by Fatehpuri Begum, one of Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan's wives. During Shah Jahan's reign it came to be known as Khari Baoli (from *Baoli*, meaning step well, and Khari or Khara, meaning salty) from a saline water stepwell used for animals and for bathing. It was constructed along with a fortified gateway on its western end popularly known as Lahori Gate, one of the fourteen gates of the fortified city of Delhi or Shahjahanabad, named so because a road through it led to the city of Lahore, now in Pakistan. However, today there is no trace of either the well or the gateway here, which now lie buried under the main road of the market.

2.4 Data Collection Methods

a) Participant Observation & Sensory Mapping

b) Semi-Structured Interviews - All interviews were conducted in Hindi with

c) Visual Documentation

2.5 Ethical Considerations

a) Consent obtained prior to each interview; names anonymized in transcripts.

b) Non-intrusive observation: avoided disrupting commercial activities, kept cameras out of direct faces unless invited.

c) Reflexivity: ongoing note of my own biases

3. Researcher Positionality

This project is informed by my position as someone who has both a personal connection with Delhi's cultural spaces and an academic responsibility to study them with rigour. Growing up in Delhi meant that Khari Baoli was not an unknown or intimidating place, rather it was seen as a part of the city's collective vocabulary, often mentioned in conversations about food, festivals, and grocery shopping trips. I remember early visits where I was more interested in the chaos and colours than in its deeper meanings. Those memories now inform my sense of attachment and curiosity but also pose the challenge of ensuring that I do not rely on nostalgia alone as evidence. To counter this, I have consciously maintained reflexive notes that separate emotional impressions from analytical observations.

As a sociology student, I enter the market with access to certain frameworks, tools, and questions that help me interpret everyday practices. My ability to speak both Hindi and English gives me a certain flexibility in how I interact with traders and customers, moving between colloquial conversations and semi-structured interviews with ease. However, I remain aware that my presence is temporary, and my livelihood does not depend on the daily uncertainties faced by the people I am studying. This socio-economic privilege shapes how I am perceived and how much I can relate to the market's working realities.

Gender and age add further complexity to my fieldwork. Being a young woman means that my presence is often first understood through the lens of consumer behaviour rather than research. While this sometimes makes vendors more approachable, it can also limit the depth of conversations unless trust is slowly built. I have tried to respect these dynamics by listening more than speaking, waiting for moments when questions do not interrupt work, and treating every shared story as a gift rather than data extracted for my benefit.

Acknowledging these intersections of familiarity, privilege, and difference is central to how I frame this project. I see Khari Baoli not as a neutral site waiting to be “discovered” but as a place where my own background and biases inevitably shape what I notice, record, and interpret. By embracing reflexivity and transparency in this process, I hope to ensure that my work reflects the lived realities of the traders, helpers, and customers who keep this market alive, rather than letting my perspective overshadow theirs.

4. Khari Baoli: Market, Memory, and Material Life

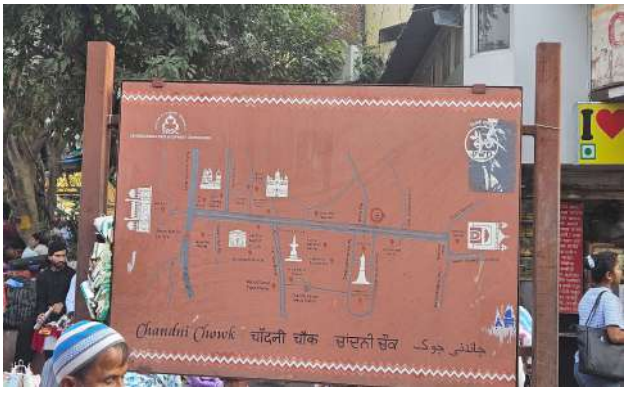
Khari Baoli is more than a market, it is a space where the city's economic life, cultural traditions, and everyday routines intersect. Its crowded lanes, the smell of freshly ground spices, the vibrant colours of stacked goods, and the sounds of bargaining all come together to form an environment that is at once commercial and deeply social. To understand Khari Baoli is to pay attention not only to its shops and commodities but also to its networks of people, the stories they tell, and the practices that give the space its meaning. As Henri Lefebvre reminds us, space is socially produced, and Khari Baoli is a vivid example of how economic transactions, sensory experiences, and social relationships come together to create lived space.

This chapter situates Khari Baoli within the larger urban and cultural landscape of Old Delhi. It explores the market not only as a physical space but also as a social one, where relationships, negotiations, and rituals take place. It also examines how sensory experiences such as the market's smellscape, soundscape, and everyday rhythms form a collective memory and shape how people engage with the space. Paul Connerton's notion of embodied memory is particularly relevant here, since the market's everyday practices are performed, repeated, and thus remembered in the body.

4.1 Mapping the Bazaar as a Spatial and Social Entity

The lanes of Khari Baoli are not random or chaotic, though they may appear so to a first-time visitor. The bazaar is organised into clusters, with certain lanes or stretches specialising in particular goods like turmeric and cumin in one section, dry fruits in another, lentils and rice in yet another. The shops are tightly packed, often just a few feet wide but extending deep inside, with wooden shelves stacked to the ceiling.

Spatially, Khari Baoli blurs the line between public and private space. Goods often spill out into the lane, and customers walk through narrow passages where transactions take place within earshot of dozens of others. Porters carrying massive sacks weave through the lanes, creating a rhythm of movement that repeats every day. Socially, the market operates on a logic of trust and familiarity. Many traders know their customers by name, and credit is extended based on long-term relationships rather than formal paperwork.



Mapping Khari Baoli is therefore not just a cartographic exercise but also an attempt to understand how people relate to one another through space. A spatial map reveals where goods are stored and sold, but a social map shows who talks to whom, who holds authority, and how disputes are resolved. The bazaar is simultaneously a marketplace, a workplace, and a site of sociality. Lefebvre's argument that space is a product of social relations is useful here since Khari Baoli's lanes are more than physical coordinates, they are pathways where trust, memory, and power circulate.

4.2 Between Trade and Tradition: A Living Cultural Site

Khari Baoli is a space where commerce and tradition are intertwined. The act of selling spices here is not purely transactional; it is embedded within cultural and ritual practices. Many traders describe their work as a form of seva (service), particularly when dealing with ingredients used for religious rituals, weddings, and festivals.

Generational continuity is visible everywhere. Family businesses display faded photographs of founders, and some shops still use manual weighing scales alongside digital ones. Oral histories from traders often include memories of their fathers opening the shop at sunrise or teaching them to identify the quality of spices by smell and touch. This transmission of knowledge keeps the market tied to its past even as it adapts to contemporary demands such as online orders and bulk corporate supply.

Khari Baoli thus becomes a living cultural site and not just a museum piece frozen in time but a place where tradition is performed daily. Judith Butler's ideas about performativity help us see these practices not as fixed rituals but as acts that continuously recreate and reaffirm the market's identity. It is through these repeated performances that cultural memory is reinforced and transmitted to the next generation.

4.3 Smellscapes, Soundscapes, and the Rhythms of Everyday Life

The sensory dimension of Khari Baoli is central to its identity. Long before one enters the market, the smell of chilli, turmeric, and asafoetida drifts into the air, guiding the senses toward the bazaar. The spice-laden air is thick

and sometimes overwhelming, making first-time visitors sneeze or tear up, but for regulars it is a familiar and even comforting presence. MerleauPonty's phenomenology of perception reminds us that knowing a place is not just about seeing it but about inhabiting it through the whole body, which is precisely what happens in Khari Baoli.

Sound is equally important: the rhythmic scraping of metal scoops, the rumble of handcarts, the bargaining between shopkeepers and customers, the occasional call to porters. All of these together form an acoustic texture that signals the market's vitality. These sounds are not random noise; they are part of the market's working rhythm, indicating the times of delivery, peak sale hours, and closing routines.

The everyday life of Khari Baoli follows a temporal rhythm that repeats daily yet is punctuated by weekly and seasonal variations. Mondays might be slower, while the days before festivals see frenzied activity and overflowing lanes. These rhythms are embodied by the people who work here, the porters whose steps match the pace of the crowd, the shopkeepers who multitask between weighing goods and answering customer queries, and the apprentices who learn by silently observing. Derrida's reflections on trace helps us to think about these layers as more than physical structures — they hold traces of past negotiations, past exchanges, and past presences that give the market its historical density

5. Field Encounters and Observations

Khari Baoli reveals itself most clearly when one slows down enough to watch and listen. This chapter gathers impressions from multiple site visits, turning attention to the way people move, interact, and create meaning within the space. These observations are not just descriptive but interpretive, offering insights into how the market sustains its vitality, following insights from Geertz on thick description and Massey on the social production of space.

5.1 Walking the Space: Observational Sketches

Walking through Khari Baoli is an act of constant negotiation. The lanes are narrow, and one must often step aside to let a porter carrying a hundred-kilo sack pass, or squeeze between two shopfronts where goods spill into the walking path. On one of my first visits,

I noticed how quickly my body adapted to the pace, making my steps became shorter, my eyes darted left and right to anticipate approaching carts, and I learned to flatten myself against the wall when a particularly wide load came through. The market is a choreography of movement, echoing Appadurai's understanding of everyday practices. The porters bend and lift in a single swift motion, balancing sacks on their backs with a jute strap across the forehead.

Shopkeepers lean casually on weighing scales while scanning the crowd for potential customers. Children run errands from one shop to another, carrying small packets or messages. The flow of people resembles a current which is fast but not chaotic, guided by an unspoken understanding of who has the right of way. Architecturally, Khari Baoli feels like a layered

space. The front-facing shops are bright and lined with pyramids of red chillies, yellow turmeric, and green herbs, while the interiors are darker and quieter, lined with sacks that form narrow aisles. Overhead, wires crisscross and the smell of spices mixes with the faint scent of burning incense from a small shrine tucked into a wall. These physical details are not mere backdrop; they shape how people act and interact, influencing where conversations happen, where goods are exchanged, and where moments of pause are possible, supporting Low's arguments on the social life of urban spaces.

5.2 Conversations and Encounters in the Market

5.2.1 Entering the Field: Timing and Context

My fieldwork at Khari Baoli took place during one of the busiest times of the year — the period between *Durga Puja* and *Diwali*. The market, already dense and active on an ordinary day, was now charged with a different intensity. Shopkeepers were surrounded by sacks piled to the ceiling, porters moved constantly through narrow lanes, and the air carried a sharper

concentration of spice dust and anticipation. In this festive rush, time itself seemed compressed; transactions happened faster, voices were louder, and every gesture was directed towards efficiency.

It was in this atmosphere that I attempted to conduct my interviews. The plan of holding detailed, extended conversations quickly gave way to the reality of the field: traders had almost no time to pause, and even a few minutes of attention felt like a privilege. The interactions that did happen were brief, interspersed with weighing, packing, shouting orders, and attending to customers. Yet, within these interruptions, meaning emerged through fragments of sentences, pauses between transactions, and the gestures that accompanied their words.

All three shopkeepers I spoke to chose anonymity. They were generous enough to share their time amid the chaos, often speaking while their hands continued to work. Their willingness to talk while conducting business offered a vivid glimpse into the embodied multitasking that defines Khari Baoli's everyday rhythm.

5.2.2 The Difficulty of Conversation in Motion

Doing fieldwork in Khari Baoli during the festive season meant learning to listen in motion. Traders rarely stopped moving; conversations unfolded between weighing spices and shouting out rates. As one of them remarked while handing over a receipt to a customer, *"Yahan kaam aur baat dono saath hi hoti hain."* The line captured the essence of the field that work and dialogue were inseparable, not competing activities.

Instead of formal interviews, what emerged were *conversational encounters*, moments of exchange shaped by the rhythm of labor. This method echoed Henri Lefebvre's understanding of *the everyday as lived time* that are structured by repetition, yet never identical. Each conversation was embedded in the noise, movement, and dust of the market, reminding me that ethnographic knowledge is often gathered not in silence, but amidst the hum of activity.

At times, my role as a researcher was blurred by the market's rhythm. Traders gestured for me to step aside as porters passed or paused mid-sentence to weigh goods. The interruptions themselves became data — revealing the spatial and temporal pressures of running a shop in one of Asia's busiest spice markets.

5.2.3 What the Traders Said

Even within short exchanges, the traders articulated concerns that extended beyond business. One common thread was the visible decline in customer footfall in recent years. One of them observed, *"Ab log phone se masale mangwa lete hain, bazaar aane ki zarurat hi nahi samajhte."*

He spoke without bitterness, but his tone carried quiet resignation. The shift towards online purchasing especially with same-day delivery and packaged blends, has affected Khari Baoli's smaller traders most. They spoke of how quick e-commerce services have redefined convenience and altered shopping habits, making the market less central to daily life.

Another trader spoke about the gendered aspect of the market space, something that might easily go unnoticed amidst its masculine public face. He explained that many of his regular customers were women who visited for bulk purchases, often spending long hours comparing quality and prices. Yet, he noted the absence of basic infrastructure for them. *"Ladies ke liye koi suvidha nahi hai. Isiliye maine apni dukan ke upar ek washroom banwaya."* He said this almost casually, between attending to a queue of customers. The remark reflected both his empathy and the unplanned way in which traders improvise to make the market more hospitable.

In these fragments — one about technological disruption and the other about embodied care — we glimpse how Khari Baoli continues to evolve, not just through commerce but through small, human adjustments. These conversations show that the traders are not merely passive participants in economic change; they are constantly negotiating between tradition and necessity, adapting their practices to maintain relevance in a shifting city.

5.2.4 The Encounter That Did Not Happen

While walking the crowded lanes of the market, I came across a tourist group, I carefully approached them. They seemed fascinated by the colors and scents, photographing every corner with enthusiasm. When I introduced myself and briefly explained that I was conducting research on Khari Baoli's everyday life, they were open to talking. Before the conversation could develop, however, their tour guide intervened sharply, questioning my purpose and insisting that I step away.

This episode, though brief, revealed an important aspect of *access and authority*. The market, while physically public it is also socially layered and the entry and legitimacy are constantly negotiated. The guide's interruption underscored the way knowledge about such spaces is

often mediated and controlled. As Derrida might suggest, the market operates through visible and invisible boundaries of who can speak and who is allowed to listen.

The tourists' interest and the guide's defensiveness also pointed to different forms of belonging — for them, the market was an aesthetic experience; for him, it was a professional domain. For me, it became a reminder that ethnographic fieldwork often unfolds in unpredictable ways, shaped as much by encounters that happen as by those that are prevented.

5.2.5 Reading Between Fragments

These field encounters though incomplete, interrupted, and fleeting nevertheless form the core of my understanding of Khari Baoli. They reinforce Merleau-Ponty's idea that perception and knowledge are embodied and partial. The noise, the smells, the gestures, and the pauses all carry meaning that cannot be captured through structured questioning alone.

What emerges from these fragmented interactions is a portrait of the market as both vulnerable and resilient. The traders' reflections on declining footfall reveal the pressures of modernization, yet their improvisations — such as creating a washroom for customers or combining conversation with work — demonstrate adaptability and care.

Every spoken line, every unfinished sentence, carries traces of the larger story: of continuity, adjustment, and the will to persist. These are not simply "responses" to questions but lived expressions of a marketplace that is constantly reconstituting itself through practice.

Khari Baoli, even in its most crowded moments, continues to speak — through the laughter of porters, the hurried tone of traders, and the faint aroma that clings to one's clothes long after leaving. The words of one shopkeeper linger in memory: *"Yeh bazaar kabhi khatam*

nahi hoga. Thoda badlega, lekin chalega zarur." In his quiet confidence lies the essence of Khari Baoli — a marketplace that endures not in spite of change, but because it keeps changing just enough to survive.

5.3 Smellscapes of Khari Baoli: Breathing the Market

The encounter with Khari Baoli begins not with sight but with smell. Long before one reaches the main lane, the air near Fatehpuri Masjid begins to change. It grows dense, textured, and alive — carrying with it the unmistakable sharpness of red chilli, the warm undertone of turmeric, and faint sweet traces of fennel and cardamom. The smells are so tightly packed in the air that they seem almost visible, forming an invisible cloud that envelops the senses.

Even for someone familiar with the market, this moment never loses its intensity. Though I have been visiting Khari Baoli for a few years now, each visit still triggers a tingling in my nose — a physical reminder of the air's density and composition. On this particular visit, when the market was busier than usual with Diwali approaching, the air felt especially heavy. Spices were being unloaded in bulk, and the atmosphere was saturated with competing scents. The pungency of red chillies stood out most strongly; after nearly twenty minutes of walking through the lanes and then stepping outside, I sneezed repeatedly. It struck me how this bodily reaction had become almost a rite of passage for anyone entering the market for the first time. Regular traders joked about it; for newcomers, it marked their initiation into the bazaar's sensory world.

The olfactory experience of Khari Baoli is not static — it shifts as one moves through the space. Near the outer gates, the air is filled with the sharpness of chilli and asafoetida. A few steps in, cumin and coriander mellow the mix, giving the air an earthy calm.

Deeper inside, cloves, cinnamon, and fennel add sweetness, creating a sudden relief after the initial sting. Each lane has its own olfactory signature, shaped by what is being stored, ground, or packed there. These micro–smellscapes overlap and merge, creating what can only be described as an aromatic rhythm — rising and falling in intensity with each turn.

The smell is also a form of memory. It lingers long after leaving the market, clinging to clothes, notebooks, and hair. Hours after my visit, I could still detect traces of chilli and saunf on my scarf. This lingering quality turns smell into a carrier of place — a portable fragment of Khari Baoli that travels with you. It is through smell that the market continues to exist beyond its physical boundaries, reminding the body of where it has been.

Smell also structures how people move and behave. Traders who have worked there for decades no longer notice it consciously; the sensory overload that overwhelms first-time visitors has, for them, become part of the background hum of daily life. Their bodies have adapted to the space in ways that reflect what Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes as *embodied knowing* — an understanding that resides not in words but in the senses. The market's air, thick with aroma and dust, thus becomes a medium of habit and familiarity, shaping how its people breathe, move, and live.

For outsiders, however, the smell announces itself forcefully. It does not wait to be discovered; it insists on being felt. The market seems to introduce itself through the nose — demanding attention before sight or sound can even register. It is a visceral welcome, one that the body cannot ignore. In that moment of tingling and sneezing, the visitor is reminded that Khari Baoli is not merely seen or studied — it is inhaled.

6. Adaptation and Informal Resilience

Khari Baoli endures as a thriving market because of its constant capacity to adjust and reorganize in response to the daily ebb and flow of activity. Its vitality emerges not from formal rules or planning but from the lived practices of the people who inhabit it. Vendors, porters, and customers collectively navigate constraints posed by narrow lanes, overflowing goods, and fluctuating demand, creating a system that is flexible, responsive, and deeply intertwined with the rhythms of daily life. Beyond movement and trade, sensory experience is central to how the market is understood and navigated. The smells, sounds, textures, and even the heat of the crowded lanes influence how people act, adapt, and survive. This section examines how resilience manifests in improvisation, evolving trade practices, and creative negotiation of space, enriched by the embodied engagement of all participants.

6.1 The Logic of Survival in an Informal Marketplace: Everyday Practices, Adaptive Strategies, and Bodily Navigation

Everyday survival in Khari Baoli depends on a keen awareness of timing, movement, and coordination. Porters carrying heavy sacks adjust their pace to the flow of pedestrians, pausing or sidestepping as needed to avoid collisions. Vendors constantly rearrange their goods, stacking and restacking spices, pulses, and grains to ensure visibility while leaving narrow pathways open for movement. Children dart between shops carrying packets or messages, seamlessly integrating into the rhythm of the market. The body itself becomes a tool of adaptation: eyes scan for obstacles, feet learn to step precisely, and hands instinctively shift or push aside objects. Even small gestures—lifting a bag slightly to allow a passerby, retracting a cart, or sweeping spilled spices—contribute to the smooth functioning

of this densely populated space. These improvisations are not only practical responses but also a form of collective understanding, a tacit agreement about how the market functions and how space is shared.

6.2 Pre-Packaged Spices and Changing Consumer Culture: Sensory Awareness in Hybrid Trade Practices

Alongside traditional bulk trade, pre-packaged spices and ready-to-use blends have become increasingly common, catering to urban customers seeking convenience, hygiene, and standardized quantities. Vendors maintain both systems simultaneously, selling open sacks and packaged items side by side. The negotiation between price, quantity, and freshness now extends to packaging, brand, and presentation. Sensory experience continues to shape interaction: customers pause to inhale the rich aroma of turmeric, cumin, or cinnamon before comparing packaged alternatives, and touch remains central as they feel the texture of dry seeds or crushed spices. Even the sound of tin containers being opened or metal scoops against jars guides the rhythm of shopping. The coexistence of bulk and packaged goods creates a layered sensory environment, in which adaptation is experienced through smell, touch, sight, and sound simultaneously.

6.3 Negotiating Space and Managing Congestion: Dynamic Use of Alleys, Shopfronts, and Embodied Knowledge of Place

Space in Khari Baoli is constantly contested and renegotiated. Narrow alleys, uneven pavements, and overflowing goods demand that everyone—shopkeepers, porters, and

shoppers—remain alert to their surroundings. Vendors extend their displays into the aisles during quieter moments and retract them when crowds swell. Handcarts and delivery trolleys weave through the lanes with practiced precision, and children or errand-bearers anticipate gaps before they appear. Sensory cues guide this movement: the aroma of spices signals the presence of a busy stall, the clanging of metal scoops indicates active trade, and the shift of body heat in dense areas alerts individuals to congestion ahead. Overhead, low-hanging wires, spice garlands, and uneven shopfronts create additional obstacles that the body learns to anticipate. This dynamic spatial management ensures that commerce continues even under conditions that might otherwise appear chaotic. Adaptation here is both practical and embodied—the market's resilience is woven into its textures, sounds, and smells, as much as in the coordination of its people.

7. Discussion and Reflections

Khari Baoli resists any single framing. Over the course of repeated visits, careful listening, and the slow accretion of small notes and impressions, the market resolves itself into many overlapping narratives. Some of these narratives are visible and noisy: the unloading of sacks, the bargaining, the visible layering of packages and open bins. Others reside in quieter registers: the scent that lingers on a vendor's clothes, the habitual gesture of a porter shifting a load, the look exchanged between a shopkeeper and a regular customer. Taken together, these traces form an archive that is at once material and ephemeral, public and private, immediate and durational. The following discussion teases out three linked strands that emerged from the fieldwork, namely the market as a living archive, the entanglement of heritage and everyday life, and the constraints and silences that shape what can be observed and recorded. Each strand explores how memory, materiality, and social practice co-produce the meaning and persistence of Khari Baoli.

7.1 The Market as a Living Archive

Khari Baoli archives itself in ways that conventional repositories do not. Its records are not confined to ledgers placed in cabinets but are embodied across sight, smell, sound, and touch. Crates with faded shop names, hand-scrawled price lists, staples of older packaging, and the particular pattern of stains on a wooden slab used for weighing all act as palimpsests of commercial history. These materials trace patterns of continuity and change. Old sacks inked with manufacturer marks sit beside bright new packets with barcodes; weathered scales keep time with the rhythm of business even as cashless payment screens blink beside them.

This archive is living because it is continuously rewritten. Each delivery, each customer interaction, and each seasonal reorder adds a new page. The smell of a stall on a humid afternoon may recall harvests from a previous year; a vendor's insistence on a particular cut of ginger carries practices negotiated across decades. Memory in Khari Baoli is rarely spoken as nostalgia; instead it is practical. A vendor may reach for a spice in a slightly different place on the shelf because that is how a buyer from a neighbouring state expects it presented. Such gestures encode history as usability rather than as museum display.

The market's oral archive is equally important. Stories circulate, for example about sources of certain spices, about old owners and sudden closures, and about customary arrangements for when the mosque hosts a festival and trade rhythms shift. These stories function as informal documentation: they provide provenance for goods, explain customary practices, and mediate trust. Trust itself acts as a form of archival capital. Regular customers rely on remembered patterns of trade, such as who weighs more generously, who will set aside a favoured grade of pepper, and whose sample is consistently fresh. In this sense, reputational memory supports the material archive.

Photographs and written fieldnotes capture only a fraction of what the market stores. A single photograph of a stacked pile of chillies cannot transmit the heat in the nostrils, nor can a ledger reveal the tactile skill of choosing the right sack for a particular order. That is why attending to embodied memory is essential.

The market's archive is enacted: it is rehearsed by hands, smelled by noses, and felt in the soles of shoes. Recording it requires methods that attend to these senses, including detailed smell notes, repeated walk-throughs at different times of the day, and careful attention to the small practical recipes that vendors use to maintain product quality.

7.2 Heritage, Memory, and the Everyday

Heritage debates often pit preservation against use. In Khari Baoli, heritage is not an abstract set of artifacts to be placed on display; it is daily practice. The everyday rituals, such as opening crates at dawn, bargaining over measures, the midday pause when business slows, and the evening routines of packing and locking, operate as living heritage. These practices sustain continuity and give the place its recognizable tempo. Protecting the market, then, is not simply a matter of conserving facades; it is about safeguarding the conditions under which these practices can persist.

Memory plays a double role here. On the one hand, memory provides continuity: practices are passed down, family businesses hand over trading habits to the next generation, and habitual suppliers continue relationships across years. On the other hand, memory is selective. Who gets to remember and whose memories are preserved often align with economic and social standing. Longer-standing shop owners may narrate histories that foreground their own lines of continuity, while itinerant labourers, younger workers, and temporary stallholders contribute practices that are vital but less likely to be formalized.

Everyday life in the market also produces impromptu forms of commemoration. Anniversaries of a shop's founding are sometimes marked by small gatherings; an especially influential vendor may be remembered in stories told over tea; recipes that travel between households become living memorials to particular suppliers. These practices make memory communal rather than bureaucratic. They also shape the market's sense of identity. Visitors who come seeking a "historic" experience often encounter a space that is not frozen but actively maintained through routine.

Yet heritage designation and tourism introduce new pressures. Efforts to formalize the market, for example through signage, hygiene regulations, or tourism-oriented pathways, can reconfigure the very conditions that sustain everyday practice. For example, a requirement for standardized packaging might raise the profile of certain products while marginalizing vendors who rely on bulk trade and flexible quantities. A curatorial framing that highlights aesthetic features for tourists can shift pedestrian flows, change who stops and buys, and alter the rhythms that vendors depend on. Thus, heritage interventions must navigate a delicate balance. They can bring recognition and resources, but they can also disrupt quotidian economies and practices that constitute the market's living memory.

7.3 Constraints, Contradictions, and What Remains Unsaid

Every ethnographic field is structured by constraints. In Khari Baoli those constraints are physical, economic, and social. Physically, the narrow lanes and cramped interiors limit circulation and shape patterns of interaction. Economically, margins are often thin and subject to price volatility; vendors must constantly juggle inventory, cash flow, and supplier relationships. Socially, hierarchies and informal norms determine access to space and capital. These constraints produce adaptive tactics, including early-morning unloading to avoid peak crowds, sharing storage to reduce costs, and informal credit arrangements to bridge cash shortages.

But constraints also give rise to contradictions. The market is praised for its authenticity and simultaneously critiqued for its informality. Calls for cleanliness and regulation can sit uneasily alongside the market's dependence on improvisation. Efforts to increase safety by rationalizing vendor layouts may restrict the very flexibility that allows traders to respond to

demand spikes. Similarly, initiatives that aim to boost tourism can increase footfall but also change customer profiles, creating pressure for standardized products that may erode the personalised bargaining culture.

There are also deep silences. Not all voices are equally audible in public observation. Labour that undergirds the market, such as porters, cleaner staff, and night-time loaders, often remains under-documented because their work happens in transitory moments or at hours when researchers are not present. Women's roles in the market may be overlooked when their participation is confined to backroom tasks, cash handling within households, or intermittent seasonal work. Power relations, for example between landlords and tenants, between long-established families and new entrants, and between regulatory authorities and vendors, may govern decisions that shape the market but remain unspoken in everyday transactions.

Political economic forces operate in the background. Policy decisions about urban redevelopment, waste management, and transport infrastructure have ripple effects that are not always visible in the market itself until they have produced significant change. Market actors may speak of these forces indirectly, for example through worries about rent, anecdotes about raids or inspections, or cautious planning for potential relocation, and yet the full implications often remain unsaid and are deferred in everyday conversation.

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