CHAPTER I : Discussion of the Problem

This study is an attempt to decode the urban space of Delhi. Setha Low points out that anthropologists have begun to shift their perspective to foregrounding spatial dimensions of culture rather than treating them as background, so that the notion that all behavior is located in and is constructed of space has taken on new meaning. (Low & Zuriga, 2003: 1) In other words, anthropologists have begun to study space not simply as background but space in itself. In the current study, I also try to approach space itself. Specifically, this study is aimed to decode the spaces of Delhi focusing on the street landscapes.

People spend much time and take part in many kinds of social interactions in the streets. According to Lefebvre, the street is more than just a place for movement and circulation. It serves as a meeting place (topos) or a form of spontaneous theater. (2008: 606) However, the space of streets has been neglected in humanities and social science and it is also true that such a space is too diffuse to study with the traditional methodology of anthropology. Goffman refers to the discursiveness of streets as follows.

On public streets (and in other relatively unobstructed places) the region of space in which mutual presence can be said to prevail cannot be clearly drawn, since persons who are present at different point along the street may be able to observe, and be observed by, a slightly different set of others. (Goffman, 1963: 17-18)

Nowadays, several scholars have tried to explain the discursiveness of such a space by working to decode the landscapes. That is to say, they use the thinking tool of landscape as a breakthrough in such a study. These scholars distinctively define landscape from their own perspectives, but what most of them have in common is that they consider landscape as something beyond physical surroundings. Peet tells that landscape can be read as power systems that exert over the everyday behavior of
people and apply to people of all classes. (1996: 23) On the other hand, Mitchell emphasizes that landscape is ‘unstable’ and ‘opened to revision’ and that we can decode and rewrite it in our everyday cultural practices. (2008: 103) Furthermore, Lefebvre tells that a landscape presents any susceptible viewer with an image at once true and false like mirror and mirage of a creative capacity. (1991: 189) He also stresses that a landscape has the seductive power of all pictures, and this is especially true of an urban landscape. (Ibid.: 189) Even Roseman does not hesitate to use the expression of ‘the souls of the landscape’ in order to emphasize its meaning beyond physical setting. (1998: 111)

In this study, I will try to discover the interrelationship of spaces and practices through decoding the landscapes of Delhi. However, I have to say clearly that the study focuses more on practices that affect spaces than spaces that affect practices. Nowadays, a lot of people live in the urban space and they often feel themselves just a small part of a machine. Such a fear is well expressed in the famous movies like Modern Times (1936), Dark City (1998), the Matrix (1999), and so on. However, Lefebvre strongly argues that human subjectivity cannot be completely destroyed, in his famous book of the Production of Space. (1974) An empirical research by Iain Borden will help us to have easier understanding of Lefebvre’s discussion. Borden explains how skateboarders create new meaning of architecture in his thesis, ‘Speaking the City’. According to the study, skateboarding reproduces architecture, that is, re-editing it as series of surfaces, textures, and micro-objects. Skateboarders perceive urban structures with their own ways. For example, New York's Museum of National History has a new name, or “100 yards of Italian marble” that is used by them. They recognize the building not as a museum but as an awesome skate arena. It shows their talents to re-compose the meanings of spaces. Their subculture is related with imaginative experiences, social relations, compositional process, as well as physical buildings. In his study, Borden points out ordinary people’s insight and imaginative power to change the meanings of an urban space through their practices.

Today, we can see similar landscapes in many Asian metropolitan cities, such as Seoul, Tokyo, Beijing, Manila, and so on. For instance, people live in the forest of lofty buildings, put on Western style clothes, and walk fast. However, Delhi does keep
its unique colors in the streets. People enjoy putting on traditional costumes like kurta, sari, dhoti, and so on. A lot of buildings are decorated with traditional and religious items. Residents share spaces with animals and plants without too much complaint. There still exist a variety of street workers like nai (shaver), chamar (shoes Fixer), dhobi (washer man), or kumhari (potter) who have kept their traditional working methods. Sometimes, such a landscape is expressed with the idiom of ‘underdeveloped’ or ‘pre-modern’. But we already know that it is too much Western-centered.

The urban space of Delhi embraces its own characteristics, which is proper to study the interrelationship between space and practice. In the thesis, I try to narrate the street landscapes of Delhi and to decode its meanings. Here, ‘narrate’ means a discursive style of writing including descriptions of feelings, sound, experience, and so on. According to de Certeau, narration is characterized more by a way of exercising itself than by the thing it indicates. (De Certeau, 1984: 79) I choose such a writing to look into diverse perspectives of landscapes. I believe that such a work will contribute to trace out the tactical feature of practice and the discursiveness of space, and, as a result, to expanding our understanding about space.