

# Introduction

When you get off at the elevated Mundka station, a line of small white vans waits for passengers at the bottom of the escalator. Young men call out place-names for destinations all across the Haryana state border. Cow dung patties dry in the sun to one side of the station escalator; jagged lines of cars and buses jostle on the other. Half-built Metro stanchions leading to future stations rise up in the distance. Leaving Mundka, Raveena, a slim woman in her twenties, gets on the women-only coach of the Metro. We start to chat, and she tells me that her father drops her off and picks her up at the station each day. She takes the Metro a few stops eastward to Paschim Vihar to attend college. She is certain that she would not be on the Metro at all if it were not for “the ladies’ coach.”

“After Mundka, it’s good,” she says, “but before Mundka, it’s very bad, the crowd and all.” For Raveena, “crowd” is about place, about where you are from and the attitudes you may hold. It is an imagined likeness and social reality but perhaps more a public than an actual crowd. It is also, of course, a manner of speaking.

“Haryana is not good, not good for girls. Men are not good, even boys. They stare at me, sometimes they vent at me. I can’t do anything,” she explains. “Vent” is typical Delhi-speak to describe when someone lashes

out in a stream of verbal abuse erupting like a volcano. On the street they see her as a species rather than a person. What are they angry about? That she is a girl in public, that she moves with confidence, that she is protected, that she studies, that they don't have girlfriends, that they don't have jobs, that, ironically enough, there aren't more women around. On the Metro, the crowd is simply more "neutral," Raveena says, and I also see that it allows her to imagine, and perhaps enact, a future beyond it.<sup>1</sup>

Delhi has been notorious as a place where women not only get harassed on the street but also may be subjected to the grisliest of crimes. These stories and statistics feed into a larger narrative about girls' and women's safety and their proper place in the city (usually at home).<sup>2</sup> The safety discourse teaches women from a young age that it is their fault if anything happens to them and that they need male protectors and guardians to get through life—and public space. And yet on the streets and lanes of Delhi, you see women everywhere; they have places to go and things to do, from moving bricks at construction sites to leading the city as top-ranking public officials. As state-sponsored infrastructure, the Delhi Metro has given women in particular a new way into the city, as a site of purpose, aspiration, and pleasure. One out of four Metro riders is female, which is similar to the percentage of women who work outside the home in India.<sup>3</sup> As a street-level ethnographic view of the city, this book documents women and men in public places: how people flow into and out of trains and the new embodied experience of that flow; how they melt into the crowds yet emerge with individual experiences; how urban life comes to be narrated through the Metro. It recounts diverse experiences of the city and especially reveals what becomes visible through female gazes.

The arrival of the Delhi Metro—an ultra-modern, high-tech, and highly surveilled urban rail system, and South Asia's first large-scale, multilane metro—has become a touchstone for discussions of urban development, gendered social mobility, and India's increasingly aspirational culture. The Metro is also a set of places and a facet of everyday urban life. Even though it shares many of the same features and feel of metro and subway systems around the world, the Metro is forced to take up the city as much as it overlays its own concreteness on it. Inside the trains, many of the social meanings and distinctions of Delhi society are transported and sometimes transformed. The Metro may be a highly regulated system, and its riders

may have specific purposes and destinations in mind, but it is also a new concentration of strangers in an expansive social space where people are learning new things about their own desires. At the peripheral edges of the city, where the Metro meets more rural sensibilities, ideas of the urban are created and contested.

The first line of the Delhi Metro, the Red Line, opened on December 24, 2002. Since then eight more lines (Yellow, Blue, Green, Violet, Orange, Magenta, Pink, Grey) and a total of 285 stations (and counting) have been built over three construction phases. A fourth phase is currently underway. The Metro covers close to 400 kilometers of Delhi's National Capital Region, extending into the states of Uttar Pradesh and Haryana, making it one of the largest urban rail networks in the world. With the now ubiquitous Delhi Metro map, the system offers a new and dominant paradigm for thinking about and traveling across the city. Both a visual rhetoric and abstraction of space, the map is part of the new surveillance that comes with the system. It orders the city not only for Metro riding but for governing as well.<sup>4</sup> And yet the Metro also unleashes a web of connections—social, economic, political—that are difficult to map or pin down. The system represents solidity and the mastery of time over space, even as it operates in a fluid, circulatory manner. It is a built environment and a moving one.



I first got on the Metro in 2006 at Central Secretariat station near India Gate, which was as far south as the Yellow Line went at the time. The train tilted and turned through dark tunnels. Inside it was like any metro system in the world: bright lights, sleek flooring, and the rhythmic sound of sliding doors. Announcers on the PA system spoke in Hindi and English to remind you about the gap. Known places—Chawri Bazar, Chandni Chowk, Kashmere Gate—became destinations newly lined up and ordered.<sup>5</sup> Unknown places become names on the Metro map, possibilities of knowing, of going to, of reaching like never before. It felt like a revelation. Seven stops later, at Civil Lines, I exited through a glass cube-like station. The trip felt more like a ride; it almost didn't matter where I was going. I was, like so many in the city, a first timer, a joyrider.



*Figure 1.* Civil Lines station, Yellow Line, 2006.

For some Dilliwalas, or Delhiites, the novelty of riding the Metro came from the fact that it was in India, and they could compare it to what they had only ever experienced abroad, in cities like London or Singapore. For most in the city, it was their first experience of high-speed underground rail travel. For still others, it was the first time they had ridden an escalator. For all, the system had rearranged city space and their experience of time. In this solid state-of-the-art structure, a new form of fleetingness took shape, a multitude of instances, a moving city.

Delhi is a desert city in a bowl, in the vast Indo-Gangetic Plain. The Aravalli mountain range lies to the southwest of the city, gaining stature as it breaks away from the Ridge, a monkey-filled, forested area in north Delhi where people stroll in the mornings and evenings, sticks in hand. With the Ridge and the city's many parks and green spaces, Delhi can feel both lush and dry depending on the season and where you are in the city. Delhi has the largest square acreage of any city in India, incorporating villages and wildlife, as well as diverse sensibilities, from rural mind-sets

to middle-class aspirations and globalized consumerism. The Metro joins and cuts across these spaces.

Delhi has a population of twenty million, but it is not a crowded city in the way that Mumbai, Hong Kong, and New York are. Or at least it doesn't feel that way. It's not bounded by oceans or bays but rather crossed by a dwindling river, the Yamuna, that cuts through the city instead of creating a border around it. The city is spread out. And it keeps going. It has no natural limit, only other cities at its far perimeters—Gurugram (formerly Gurgaon), Ghaziabad, Noida, Faridabad, Bahadurgarh, and Sonipat.<sup>6</sup>

Landlocked, Delhi has always been at the crossroads of cultures and commerce as well as ideas and beliefs. Yet modern narratives of the city tend toward the historical, focusing on the 1857 war of independence from the British, the 1911 establishment of the colonial capital, and the range of events related to the Indian nationalist, anticolonial movement, leading to the nation's independence and the partition of the subcontinent in 1947. While informed and often moved by the historical, my curiosity about Delhi was spurred by what I was seeing and experiencing in the here and now and the everyday, a large part of which related to getting around.

The Delhi Metro has not only given new shape and definition to the ever-expanding megacity but also gives Dilliwalas themselves a greater awareness of those who live, and work in, and depend on it. Those who rush by and those absorbing the atmosphere at a slower pace, sitting on staircases, strolling to cafés, waiting on platforms. The different modes and paces I noticed across stations and hubs in my anthropology of the city enabled me to see the Metro as a place for transit and *flânerie*. And to see, at this intersection of concrete and crowds, how the Metro spurs new forms of sociality in the city. The Metro is a distinctive space, and it is also a set of new spatial dynamics and coordinates that reframe social life and the image of the city. A system in a set of linked, enclosed spaces, the Metro provides a kind of cohesiveness, even if it is illusory. These new pathways set the stage for repeated journeys, a deepening of grooves, the city as map, picture, place.

The central areas of Delhi have always been for the rich or powerful—politicians, bureaucrats, lawyers, and the like. These areas form an elite geography cordoned off by large roadways and roundabouts, big bungalows and imposing monuments. On the streets you see hawkers and

office workers, but it's clear they are there to do the bidding of the more powerful. Older market areas like Karol Bagh or the lanes off Chandni Chowk in the old city are markedly different in that they teem with people, activity, and a vast array of specialized markets for spices, paper, cloth, and electronics—domains far removed from the office crowd. The Metro connects these two worlds: the older markets and the newer malls and offices. Riding it can be a revelation for not only who you see—the people, the crowds—but also how they connect to different parts of the city and the new cultural geographies that are laid bare.<sup>7</sup>

Delhi's most recognizable public spaces have long been its monuments, not just for their historical value or sublime architecture but for the kind of places they are in the everyday life of the city.<sup>8</sup> In most cases these are people-friendly places for all classes, ones that allure and create publics: the central vista from Rashtrapati Bhavan to India Gate to Purana Qila, Lodi Gardens, Jantar Mantar, Jama Masjid, Akshardham Temple, the memorial ghats on the Yamuna River, as well as more practical spaces for large public gatherings and conventions such as Ramlila Maidan and Pragati Maidan. I would add the Delhi Metro to this list, for it is not only the single largest set of public spaces in the city, a place to *be* as much as to journey through, but also a zone that is carefully managed by the state. It adds to the city's image as it connects existing structures and reframes them by overlaying its own structure on what was already there. The system has both a singular impact and an all-encompassing “renewing” effect on the urban landscape.<sup>9</sup>

In India, where urban transport is a site of status and contestation, the Metro is a place where “the people” come to be defined and molded. This kind of place is significant in the liberalized era, where public space has been shrinking as there are more and more paid social spaces in the city, from restaurants and eating parks to gardens and malls. These experience-heavy destinations aim at making Delhi more global and more exclusive.

The Metro offers a new grid and key to the city. Its platforms and stations provide a sense of certainty in a city where traffic times are hard to predict, and other forms of transport are not always reliable. There is a bus system but not enough buses. There are auto rickshaws and taxis, but you have to find one and then fix a price with the driver. Phone apps such as Ola Cabs and Uber have changed the taxi landscape, but even

with global positioning systems, you often still have to negotiate last-mile directions: they still have to find you.

My interest in Delhi's Metro stems from what I saw as a seismic shift in how the city was being experienced and perceived from the late 2000s. I was living and commuting in Delhi at the time and taking the Metro most days. The Metro wasn't an integrated system then; it was in a state of becoming. It was the recognizable high-tech system you see in other cities, just as clean and ordered, often more so, just as fast and efficient; but outside, the seams were still showing where the stations and the city met.

I came to think of these seams as the interface between the city and the Metro, a system which I soon learned *was* built as a stand-alone artifact. To become an effective metro system, I also knew that the Metro would have to be integrated with "the city"—its roads, its people, and its other forms of transit (buses, vans, jeeps, cycle rickshaws, auto rickshaws, taxis). In a highly developed and densely populated city like Delhi, this process was both exciting and unnerving to watch. I started to contemplate the nature of "the urban" and to ask: When will these seams dissolve? And what is at stake in this transformation, this integration?

I used ethnographic research methods to study the Metro, meaning I rode the trains as much as I could, on all lines and to all stations, clocking over four thousand hours in all. I observed, interacted with, and talked to people on trains, at stations, and around stations, once I got over the strangeness of talking to strangers on public transport. Going around the city in this way helped me to focus on it as a gendered space; for instance, the way darkness signals when women should not be on the streets. In this case, the Metro's bright lights counter this gendered assumption and practice, since it's always daytime in the system; and in fact, many women told me that the Metro is the only form of public transport they feel is a legitimate urban space for them at night. But space is not only a physical location or set of coordinates; it is also a sense of possibility, a mental pose, a kind of social permission.<sup>10</sup> I also interviewed a range of Metro officials, planners, architects, bureaucrats, and politicians, usually in their offices or home offices. Moving between the spaces of transit and the office spaces of people planning transit, I found both connection and disconnection.



The Metro began as a management structure in the form of the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation, or DMRC, set up in 1995. The DMRC is a half central government of India, half Delhi state government agency that built and manages the system; it is a management company and brand that links to five hundred private contractors. The Delhi Metro is an example of the public-private partnerships and transnational capital flows of the neoliberalized era. The system is a space produced by those flows. The majority of its workers are nonunionized and contractual, even as they have safer working conditions compared to other major construction sites in the country. In India this era was launched by the liberalization reforms of the Indian economy from the late 1980s onward.

The Metro has become emblematic of the new kinds of social mobility people imagine and plan for in this new economy. In this way, Delhi's urbanism speaks to the future as much as, if not more than, the grand cities of industrial modernity such as Paris, London, and New York.<sup>11</sup> This future includes the pleasures and powers of rising, consumerist middle classes, ethical questions around modernity and sustainable development, and the persistent inequalities of living, gulfs really, that point directly to the control of resources and infrastructures.

Even though the Metro only accounts for 5 percent of individual trips in the city (the majority are by bus, followed by motorcycles, scooters, taxis, and cars), the Metro's expansive network of stations and viaducts drives the city's property development and is a new site for the production of dreams, tastes, and desires. The Metro is not reducible to the new middle-class consumer culture in the way that shopping malls or gated communities might be; it is a more complex and multifarious urban space.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, the Metro is most definitely a class-making space and an example of aspirational infrastructure for its three million daily riders.<sup>13</sup> The Metro offers a globally identifiable, middle-class experience, with its visible high technology, quick commuting times, and comfortable, climate-controlled ride, that is both everyday and embodied. The globalized aspect of a transnationally produced infrastructure elevates its aspirational quality. The Metro carries the moral dimension of middle-classness in terms of how one should behave but also what one should be aspiring to: certain kinds of jobs, education, and lifestyles.<sup>14</sup> Many see the Metro as an effective social leveler precisely because of the rules that

people must follow to ride it. The implication in some of the discourse on the Metro is that the “unruly” and “unwashed” laboring classes will have to reform in order to blend in while riding the Metro. So the system is a social leveler by offering a relatively low-cost access to urban space and a new way to perform and be in that space. However, as urban infrastructure, the system creates more inequality by determining future property values and the city’s financial obligations for its ongoing maintenance and operation. The system transforms urban space, and also takes up a lot of space with its stations, tracks, and viaducts, as well as offices, warehouses, workshops, plants, machineries, sheds, and depots—all fixed to the landscape. The system as a material object expands its own space of profit as a property developer, with kiosks, shopping malls, and thirty-year lease commercial and residential developments, as a way to pay for the Metro along with passenger fares. It is a capital project more than a people project, and its meaning and symbolic value lie in the contradictions inherent in this dual role.<sup>15</sup>

Delhi’s Metro was made with enormous political will behind it; it is a joint venture between the Indian and Japanese governments, the latter of which supported 65 percent of the Metro construction in the form of loans. As one Metro consultant put it to me, “The Japanese have chosen to invest in India in a major way, whereas before they avoided it. Now it is ‘less China, more India,’ which reflects their political interests and history.” The Metro is in fact one of many infrastructure projects funded by the Japanese across India. It is perhaps the shiniest and most “people-facing,” but one where the viability of the project is not and was never up for public debate.

The Metro comes under the auspices of the central government’s Ministry of Urban Development and operates under the Metro Act of 2002, giving it powers to acquire, hold, dispose of, improve, develop, and alter all kinds of properties and assets.<sup>16</sup> A metro system is the kind of infrastructure that creates a new relationship and promise between governments on the one hand and with ordinary citizens on the other. These citizens are “stakeholders” in the world of infrastructural finance schemes. Throughout this book I highlight instances of this citizen-state relationship (one of capital and knowledge flows) and the new kinds of “Metro publics” (new forms of citizenship) that emerge. In an era where the idea

and practice of citizenship is being hotly contested and fought over in the streets, a study of urban citizenship in the space of public transit points to the everyday, often slight, nuances of belonging and not belonging.<sup>17</sup>

*The Moving City* is not a historical narrative of the Metro's making but rather an examination of points of connection between grand-scale planning and the thinking behind it, and the daily movements and activity of Metro commuters. How do people's miniature expanses—of thought, experience—connect to the mega-ness of public transport? What do people see through the innumerable new frames on the city the Metro provides, through station exits and entrances and windows in every coach? What does all this seeing do?

An anthropological approach to a metro system sees it as infrastructure—a physical network enabling transport—but sees infrastructure as more than the function it serves. Infrastructure is a “collective fantasy” that both reveals a particular constitution of the political and addresses a new set of publics. Infrastructures put matter, substances, and people in motion and in relation. High-speed urban rail transport—both a hallmark of the industrial age *and* a contemporary symbol of globalized culture and transnationally produced mega-infrastructure—is nothing if not a statement of social and technological change in the form of new habits and ways of being and thinking.<sup>18</sup>

This book is a consideration of what it means to study the urban in a twenty-first-century megacity—the kinds of crowds and compressions, expansions and possibilities, visibilities and invisibilities that come to the fore. The more I rode the trains and visited stations, the more Metro officials I talked to, and the more commuters I interacted with, the more I came to see that to understand the Metro's social impact was to see how the particular and the individual related to the whole (“the whole” being the Metro system but also the city of Delhi); how the system and ideas about the system impacted each station and each journey; how people were making individual journeys but also understanding their city and themselves in a new way. I was struck by the relatedness and connections on the Metro but also by its randomness and anonymity. The Metro as a system both draws in (people, places, ideas) and doles out (its own systematics).

To match what I was seeing, my research became radically multisited

within a single city. To exit a station, reenter it, and go back from where I had come, if I so desired. To make triangular journeys in the city or quadrangular ones. To crisscross it and pass by hundreds of people at a time, in seas and waves and trickles. I gave in to my own randomized itineraries and embraced the contingencies of the ethnographic on an urban scale. At the same time, I started to connect diverse places (Metro stations as well as places where Metro riders told me they were coming from) with people's everyday experiences and ideas. And I started to see the growth of existing lines not only in terms of construction but also in terms of the changing idea of the urban in Delhi—from the perspective of those living in the city, people planning the city, and also those coming into the city. The connective thread of my study and this book is the Metro in all its concreteness (trains, viaducts, stations) but also in its symbolics: what it means and represents as a global emblem of technological modernity and a master urban plan.

The Delhi Metro is also one of the few spaces in the city, and certainly the largest, that offers a measure of equal access across many lines of social division. It is one of the cheapest metros in the world to ride, with one-way fares ranging by distance from 10 to 60 rupees (14 to 84 cents), in a city where the per capita monthly income is 25,256 rupees (334 USD), but where nearly a quarter of the population lives below the poverty line.<sup>19</sup> The Metro is a space where no one technically benefits from having a higher social or economic status, even if riding it does not erase what people feel inside (though at times it might do that); it is a space where social differences subside from ticket entry point to exit gate. It is an accessible space in a highly uneven city, uneven in terms of one's footing on the road and one's social status. This semblance of equal access makes the Metro an especially potent symbol in a city of stark social and economic divides. The idea of public transport as a social leveler is nothing new, but how the leveling out happens and doesn't happen in particular instances and situations reveals much about a place. The access, the equality is ephemeral, it comes and goes like the trains. Yet the repetition has some substance to it, some weight.<sup>20</sup>

There are multiple constituencies served by the Metro, but the system has been especially consequential for women. The ladies' coach of the Metro has become a site of social and political significance, not only