On the Delhi Metro: An Ethnographic View

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The idea of a “mental landscape” is associated with a spatial understanding of modernity that has long been central to the scholarship on cities and to urban ethnography. In this essay, the focus on space is threefold and includes: (1) the new cultural geography that is created by the physical imposition of the metro edifice on Delhi’s landscape; (2) the spaces created within the metro itself (on trains and in stations) and the practices associated with those new spaces; and (3) the spatial imaginaries experienced by individual riders.

The Metro will totally transform our social culture giving us a sense of discipline, cleanliness and enhance multifold development of this cosmopolitan city.
– Delhi Metro Managing Director, Elattuvalapil Sreedharan (Joshi 2001).

The train to Dwarka is very crowded even on a Sunday early in the afternoon. I stand on the platform for some time, letting trains go by, and then get on. Central Delhi may be more still, and the road traffic less, but inside the metro there are throngs of people going places. Sometimes they crush into one another, as at rush hour. On any weekday at Rajiv Chowk – the metro station and hub beneath Connaught Place – commuters line up in neat rows waiting for the Dwarka train, only to dissolve into a mass once the train arrives and the doors slide open. The logic of entering and exiting the train is whichever side has more people wins, like a scrimmage. These are head on collisions as people push past each other. The spoils are there for all to see: for those coming in, a shiny seat; for those going out, their destination in record time and comfort.

Inside, nothing divides the cars of the train in what resembles a long metal centipede. I have become accustomed to watching the chrome bars align and realign to the sinuous movements of the train, travelling 80 kilometres an hour nearly 13 metres underground in the darkness. At Chawri Bazaar, the deepest station, I emerge from the engineering marvel into a thick landscape of vendors, vehicles, and crumbling facades, where electrical cords hang from above and wires seem to be strewn across the sky.

Heading west, above ground, to Rithala or Dwarka – the new sub-cities of Delhi – the city opens up and peters out; circling birds, low-level dwellings, institutes, and the occasional shopping mall make up the landscape. On the Rithala train, your eye grazes the tops of buildings as you travel from one station to the next. On the way to Dwarka, you seem to be even higher up and see more of the expanse. The east-west lines are for commuters; the trains go above ground soon after Connaught Place, and people tend to stay on for more than a few stops. There is time to relax and settle in. On one ride, I watch a few young men in their early 20s sit cross-legged on the floor, talking and laughing. Three younger boys, 13- or 14-year-old, stand in front of them, doing pull-ups on the high bar, joking, trying to get the attention of the young men by entertaining them with curiosities pulled from their pockets. One says he has Afghan currency and is parading it around. It is a scene you might see almost anywhere in the city, an approximation of the street below, and yet completely removed from it.

Many people are hooked up to music players or talking on their mobiles. Men carry goods in tightly packed cartons; toddlers lie on the seats or stand up on them to look out the window, delighting at
their own reflection. People mostly sit quietly; they do not eat or drink or spit. Most noticeable is what is missing: heat, sweat, food, smell, trash. The elements have been reordered, enabling a different view of this city of 14 million. Sometimes passengers just look around, almost as if there is not enough to notice. Curiously, people look, but do not stare, even the multiple packs of young men in slim jeans.

On the platform there is a rush around the escalators. A wide circle forms at the bottom of each one. It slowly shrinks as people move up. A smaller group waits for the elevator. “Stay Fit, Use the Stairs” signs are posted at each exit, placed there, it turns out, not to keep the populace in shape, but to encourage the able-bodied to leave room in the elevators for others. And then, once upstairs (or downstairs, if at an overground station) you pass through the electronic gates once more and are out of the station. Some walk, others look for a bus or an auto or cycle rickshaw. Outside the Jahangirpuri station, I walk for 45 minutes along a dusty path through low-income housing and see nothing resembling central Delhi. This is a working-class community that all of a sudden feels included in the city, connected to this gleaming train. Women living here have stated that they feel safe to venture on the metro alone, and for the first time will go to India Gate without their husbands. And as I sit outside the station one afternoon, I see these women coming and going, with suitcases and parcels, or just with each other. A cycle rickshaw driver outside the station tells me that now most of his trips involve ferrying people to and from the metro. It has been good for his business, though he has yet to ride it himself. Where would I leave my rickshaw, he asks?

A documentary on V S Naipaul features footage from his most recent trip to Delhi, one that included a ride on the metro. What does the man, who was infamous for having expounded on the filth and disorder of Indian cities, have to say? “Very nice, very nice”, he can be heard muttering as he passes through the electronic gate.

Naipaul’s response to the metro is akin to countless others I had heard, and to what I myself had experienced. Who could not be impressed? The ordered space and gleaming surfaces are nothing if not a crucible of the city’s modernity. The metro is a marvel, something to marvel at, for anyone who visits Delhi, but also, and especially so, for its residents. It goes against every-thing they know. It is shiny, cool and clean, but it was also built on time, within budget, and without the infamous corruption that stalls or derails so many public and private sector projects.

When Naipaul exits the metro, chatting with the filmmaker, he remarks on the “endless announcements” in the trains, and how people are “behaving with great dignity”; they were “following the rules”. And then he speculates that the experience of riding the metro will, over time, “make them more civil”. Here he seems to be back in Naipaulian territory: to what extents do bodily actions and repetitions make the man or woman? It was the distinction he made long ago in An Area of Darkness (1964) on watching a sweeper at work: there was the act of sweeping and there was the condition of being a sweeper. In the latter, Naipaul saw the social ills of a deeply hierarchical society, and went on to make his pronouncements about Indian stagnation among other things. One day as I pull into Ramesh Nagar Station, a man pushing a wide broom moves slowly across the empty platform. He is not a sweeper, but a uniformed metro worker who works for a company to which the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) has outsourced its “housekeeping”.

Of the metro Naipaul makes the following observation: The pas-sengers are trying to match the metro with their own behaviour (Low 2008). It is an old postulation, and one I have continually heard in relation to the metro, about how new forms and ways of being are taking hold in society, and how the environment of the metro makes people “more sophisticated”. What is it about the metro that makes people act in certain ways? Are Dilliwallas proud of the metro and so of themselves? Are they, in fact, more civil because the surroundings are new and clean, and full of security and cctv cameras? And who would be a better spokesperson for this grand neoliberal vision – of individuals who gain autonomy as they “freely” subject themselves to new rules and regulations – than Naipaul?

The question of behaviour in public spaces and notions of civili-ty and cleanliness is linked to the history of urbanisation and colonialism, most often as articulated through issues of caste and class. In his discussion of the colonial-era bazaars and parks of Calcutta, Dipesh Chakrabarty describes a colonialist/nationalist “call to discipline, public health, and public order” in public spaces that went unheeded by most Indians, spurring him to ask: “Can one read this as a refusal to become citizens of an ideal, bourgeois order?” (Chakrabarty 2002: 77). In the case of the metro, which is a highly managed space, there is little scope for “refusal”.

A New Urban Landscape

Since the 1990s, the rise of middle class consumer culture and the dynamism of global capital positions Delhi as a cosmopolitan city. Yet this image belies a host of competing interests for resources in the city. Since Delhi became the colonial capital in 1911, the city’s planning and architecture have highlighted competing modernist visions, the competition for resources, and essentially, who should live in the city (who it is made for and who it accommodates), as well as how people should live in it. Today, it is transportation (how people move through the city) that has become the centre of many of those visions, narratives, and competitions.

Much attention has been paid to the fact that the Delhi metro was completed on time and under budget (Lakshman 2007); and, like many subway systems the world over, a narrative of optimism and achievement (Brooks 1997) has dominated the planning and construction phases of this mega-project. Delhi’s legendary traffic has made it infamous as a dangerous and disorderly urban space, and it is often stated that the city has more cars than Mumbai, Kolkata, and Chennai combined. It is also a city of great elegance and order, with its magisterial Mughal-era monuments and gardens, leafy middle class colonies, and broad tree-lined roads of Lutyen’s New Delhi. As a symbol alone, the metro has already gone some way to dismantle this paradox and is seen as unambiguous evidence of progress and development; it is seen as proof that Delhi is indeed a “world-class” city. However, what this means and whose world it contains is up for debate. Like shopping malls, Café Coffee Days and Baristas, the Delhi metro provides a new, all-encompassing sensory and spatial experience with its air-conditioned comfort and hi-tech surveillance. But the metro is open to a much wider spectrum of people. It is as much about commuting and finding new routes for a variety of activities as it is about consuming.

78
For some, the aspirers and admirers, it means that you can be on the metro and imagine you are anywhere in the world. And indeed, the metro can take you to new places; this new mental landscape is as significant as what the metro is forging on the ground. The idea of a “mental landscape” is associated with a spatial understanding of modernity that has long been central to the scholarship on cities and to urban ethnography. In this essay, my focus on space is threefold and includes: (1) the new cultural geography that is created by the physical imposition of the metro edifice on Delhi’s landscape; (2) the spaces created within the metro itself (on trains and in stations) and the practices associated with those new spaces; and (3) the spatial imaginaries experienced by individual riders, as understood through my interviews with riders and as represented in popular Hindi films featuring the Delhi metro.

Delhi’s Built Environment

Major public transit systems have long been a way not only to assess modernity (Berman 1988), but, more specifically, to determine the “health” of cities (Cudhay 2003). Yet, as Marc Augé (2002) has shown in his ethnography of the Paris metro, there is an everyday life underground that puts into relief the urban condition as much as it changes it. The metro is seen by some as a “cure” to the urban ills of pollution, stress, accidents, and death itself—a clean, smooth, fast, cheap, air-conditioned alternative to hot, bumpy roads jammed with cars, mopeds, bicycles, cycle and auto rickshaws, carts, buses, and taxis. Newspapers offer a running account of Delhi’s traffic woes, reports of accidents on higher speed newly built flyovers and expressways, of Blueline buses knocking over motorcyclists or ploughing through a line of waiting passengers; of drivers absconding in the aftermath of crashes. New campaigns on billboards and in newspaper ads warn people not to drink and drive and to obey traffic rules, or else be subjected to a dreaded traffic ticket or challan.

Anyone who saw Connaught Place as the metro was being built, or has travelled through south Delhi in the last few years, knows that the construction of the metro has depended on a lot of destruction. During the first phase of the massive project, numerous neighbourhoods that the metro would soon pass through first became construction zones piled high with dust, corrugated metal sheets, cement, and cranes. Traffic was re-routed and city-dwellers in many areas suffered from what one urban planner called “a tidal wave of physical destruction and social disorientation” (Siemiatycki 2006: 286). Then these same areas were restored and even embellished, as dislocation became relocation. Above ground, in the wave of physical destruction and social disorientation “cultural”, or based on values, lifestyles, livelihoods, and a host of other not easily categorisable ways of being. In this vein, James Holston and Arjun Appadurai (1999) have written of a liberal citizenship that produces “citizens who are predominately passive in their citizenship” and who are “for the most part, spectators who vote”. Much of the debate about the existence or non-existence of a “public” in Delhi who can contest or approve of the metro revolves around this point in particular as articulated by Holston and Appadurai: “…without active participation in the business of rule, they are citizens whose citizenship is managed, for better or worse, by an unelected bureaucracy” (1999: 7).

The Delhi Metro Rail Corporation

In promotional videos made by the dmrc, the narrative of the metro is clear: Delhi used to be clean before Independence, but went on to become the fourth most polluted city in the world. The need for a metro was an urgent one. One public relations representative from the dmrc told me in no uncertain terms that the city was “on the brink of collapse” before the metro arrived. Now with the metro, there is a new order and discipline that is taking the city forward. And, in this sense, the discourse around the metro highlights the most recent narrative about the “new” India, a nation that is “rising” and being recognised as a formidable presence on the global political, economic, and cultural stage. Even as the major daily newspapers in India and around the world reported the embarrassments due to the lack of preparation for the Commonwealth Games, the metro which was hurriedly being finished and whose Airport Line is still to open was by contrast still heralded for its superior planning and execution.

The metro is a global venture in that it was built with Japanese loans, South Korean technology, and partnerships with a number of...
countries, including Germany and Sweden, where the first trains were built. JAICO (the conglomerate that has given the Japanese loan to the Indian government to make the metro) is an organisation that one outside consultant described to me as being a combination of “touchy-feely ngo types who want to help societies” and “bankers who want a return on their investment”. Oriental Consultants is meant to critique the project, to show what is and what is not happening. But they are not meant to question the viability of the metro itself. What they may question is if “stockholders” are being served; stockholders are the Indian public who use or are affected in any way by the metro. Are they getting compensated if they had to move out of the metro’s way, for instance? Is there a forum or procedure for them to air grievances? It is in this manner that we can begin to think about how the construction of the metro has created new publics, both real and imagined. And it is where Delhi-based NGOs such as the Hazards Centre have stepped in to document and address the needs of those who have been displaced by the metro.

Despite all the foreign capital, the Delhi metro’s production is being increasingly indigenised. Trains are now being manufactured in Bangalore and Gujarat. And, it is the DMRC whose expertise is going global – from Ireland to Indonesia – as it is being asked by these and other cities around the world to consult on their metro projects. This is good news for the DMRC since it takes Rs 100 crore on average to build a kilometre of the metro. Many urban activists and planners not working with the DMRC have questioned the kind of investment the metro is (Mohan 2008; Roy 2009). The much-maligned Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) route that crosses south Delhi, by comparison, takes Rs 15 crore a kilometre to build. But the BRT is hardly the darling of the city the way the metro is. It is not only because of the gleaming trains, however. The metro is part of the larger package of the DMRC, which has been heralded for its Indian efficiency, largely due to the management skills of its director, E Sreedharan who has been called nothing less than a “miracle-worker” (Lakshman 2007). Sreedharan is heralded not merely for his vision, but the personal discipline and focus that he has been able to ingrain in the 4,000 workers of the DMRC. Most crucially, however, he is able to get things done because he has the complete confidence and support of the DMRC Board of Directors. Without him, I was often told, the entire project would simply stall.

**Carefully Managed Image**

The image of the DMRC is a carefully managed one, and you only need to look at the many interviews with Sreedharan on CNN-iBN and a host of other television channels to see that these interviews and features are really hagiographies. It is hard not to be swayed by Sreedharan’s discipline and energy; as we watch him at the age of 76, in an orange vest climbing the stairs at metro construction sites faster than the young reporters trying to catch up to him. There is no hint of irony when the reporters talk about Sreedharan’s ability to convince people to sell their land, and how he has the foresight to send packers and movers to those who are moving out of the metro’s way. In July 2009, after a dramatic accident at an overground metro construction site in south Delhi that left six workers dead and 14 injured, Sreedharan resigned, citing his moral responsibility for the accident. However, the Delhi government, headed by Sheila Dixit, would not accept his resignation, and Sreedharan was back on the job within 48 hours. Most recently, the nation watched as Sreedharan suffered a heart attack, made a full recovery, and within two months returned to his full duties. Now he is set to retire by the end of this year but even that date may be delayed by at least a couple of months.

I made numerous visits over a 15-month period to the Public Relations department at the Metro Bhavan, the DMRC’s new headquarters just off Barakhamba Road in Connaught Place. I was always kindly greeted and offered a number of DMRC publications to purchase. They kept asking me to give them my survey, and I kept telling them that I wanted to talk to people instead. I knew this might not be easy in a corporation where everyone was not only busy but also cautious about the image being created.

Now, as the DMRC becomes a major brand in Indian efficiency, there is what can only be called a pan-Indian desire for the metro. Numerous other Indian cities – including Chennai and Bangalore – have begun projects; and smaller cities, from Cochin to Ludhiana – are considering them. Everyone, it would seem, would like to get on board. Sreedharan himself has said that any Indian city with a population of three million or more should have a metro. There are 30 Indian cities that would qualify on that basis alone.

The DMRC is not shy about touting its fabled work ethic in its own promotional materials, from posters in their own workplace, to ads in the metro, pamphlets, and hardback volumes available for purchase. Posters at the new Metro Bhavan proclaim their professional work culture as a combination of accountability, transparency, teamwork, and time-bound commitments. The Metro Bhavan itself sets the tone with its vast, airy lobby and edifice made of warm grey stone, and glass elevator shafts allowing you to see the cables at work.

The workers – many of whom came from the Indian Railways – do yoga and value time, we are told. The Metro Museum at Patel Chowk station features photographs of metro workers en masse in yoga poses alongside the trains themselves. The message throughout is that individual discipline, focus, and transparency have made the metro. But in the Metro Museum, the most popular display is a map of the system, illuminating the parts of the metro that are in operation with moving coloured lights representing the yellow, blue, and red lines. People stand transfixed in front of the display. The metro is moving the city and being moved by it.

The new work culture and the values associated with the metro are now being promoted more widely, even beyond the plans for metros in other cities. Sreedharan himself has spearheaded a new group called the Foundation for the Restoration of National Values (FRNV) based on the teachings of his guru, Swami Bhoomananda Tirtha. The group asserts that it does not mean to promote religious views or one religion over another, but instead has a more secular coupling of “administrative might” with “spiritual elegance”, largely coming from universal ethical values as described in the Bhagavad Gita. What FRNV seeks to address is a contradiction they see between India’s “growing economic competence” yet “failing ethical conduct”, as described in their own brochures and website (Tirtha 2008). I attended a two-day meeting they held in Delhi in November 2008 where the work ethic of the metro was meant to inspire new forms of ethical practice in areas such as education, healthcare, and the media. A roster of high-profile speakers on multiple panels took on the issue of values and ethics in their respective fields. The goal is nothing less than transforming Indian society and its institutions in
the image of the DMRC, one that is efficient and free of corruption. It would seem the metro is not only a form of transport, but also a way forward for society more generally. It has become part of a larger platform for change as directed by the techno-managerial class. And, it is in this respect that we may see the metro as a crucible for an entirely new form of “cultural citizenship”, that is, the ways in which nation-building and identity-formation intersect with day to day civic belonging (Rosaldo 2003; Ong 1999).

Not surprisingly, the discourse on the metro has also become a referendum on Delhi politicians. Parties and individual politicians take credit for it, while it has also become a symbol of relating to the general public. So in the 2009 general election, we saw politicians riding the metro in high-profile journeys to meet constituents and give speeches. Something similar is happening in the city of Taipei with their relatively new metro and the government entity known as the MRT (Mass Rapid Transit) that runs it; the metro there has come to represent a locus of feelings about the government more generally (Lee 2007); and even in New York City, with its 100-year-old clanking subway system, the 2009 proposal to raise fares by 25% has prompted all kind of outcries against the New York City government. Yes, metro systems are about the health of cities, but they are also much more than that. As Alaina Lemon has written in her study of the Moscow metro, “Talking about transit, its practices and infrastructures, really concerns who should be included in the city, in the nation” (Lemon 2000: 35). In this vein, I would suggest that the Delhi metro marks the arrival not merely of a new form of transport, but for new definitions of expertise and notions of the civic. The metro blurs some lines of exclusion even as it solidifies others.

**Delhi Up-Down**

The metro can seem like a great leveller, as riders of different social and economic backgrounds sit side by side, all subject to a new transportation regime directed by the hand of the state in the form of the DMRC. At Rs 8 to 30 a ride, riding the Delhi metro proves to be one of the cheapest metro rides in the world, though it is still more than double the cost of riding the bus, and I spoke with many people on buses who said they would not take the metro because of the cost.

The lines of exclusion and inclusion on the metro have much to do with the kinds of spatial relations created between the metro and other parts of the city. The metro is certainly modern in David Harvey’s sense of time-space compression (Harvey 1995). The space of the city has contracted as time has speeded up; distances between opposite ends of town have shrunk to a third or even fourth of what they once were. In the process, Delhi’s “hinterlands” are becoming part of an ever-expanding and “mappable” city. There is a new level of abstraction that one experiences as one looks at the city rather than experiencing it on the ground. It allows, what Sunila, a mid-20s commuter from Dwarka described to me as: “Delhi up-down”. I had struck up a conversation with her one afternoon as we were waiting on the platform for a train. She did not talk about the city in this way when she used to ride the bus; then, her route was not direct and not as fast. It was not “Delhi up-down”. Now she goes from Dwarka to Uttam Nagar East where she works, but travels elsewhere on it as well.

Anyone who has taken auto rickshaws in Delhi knows that auto drivers are not accustomed to looking at maps and often do not know how to get from one place to another. This is partly because many drivers come from other cities and towns and learn on the job once they arrive in Delhi. But it is also because Delhi is not a map city – people do not imagine it as a city with defined borders and a discernible shape. The metro is changing this, by its very physicality, an edifice that is spreading across the city’s landscape and in some cases creating it anew. And with the naming of each station, it is creating a shorthand for thinking across the city. All of a sudden places like Shadara, Jhandewalan, Dwarka, Rohini, and Rithala have become places that exist as people are seeing those names reproduced on map after map; new outer suburbs emerge and “old” places, such as Karol Bagh, Chawri Bazaar, and Chandini Chowk have become new. Some were always places to go to, but now they have been plotted out in a visual reference that is the metro map. The outer sub-cities, made of resettlement colonies, vast tracts of apartment buildings, schools, restaurants, and malls, meanwhile are forging the city in new directions. The metro is augmenting Delhi’s language of urban expansion comprised of phases, parks, sectors, pockets, apartments, camps, vihars, nagars, settlements, flats, enclaves, and extensions. It is the metro that is now in some sense the city’s master plan, as it demands further densification along its lines. In some cases, the city is being built up and around the metro lines.

**Space, Place, Gender**

The metro could be viewed as a modern disciplinary institution in that it allows people greater autonomy and freer movement, while it also puts citizens under more surveillance as they learn to subject themselves to new rules. This autonomy and surveillance are both made possible by the kinds of spaces being demarcated and created within the metro trains and at its stations.

A new space is a new set of boundaries. The most obvious of these for riders is the entrance to the metro – featuring the security check, ticket booth, and automated entry. These areas are bounded by physical objects: electronic gates and doors, uniformed security guards, metal detectors, stairwells, potted plants, glass dividers, and metal handrails. At the Dwarka Sector 9 station, I notice a sheet of paper posted at the security-curtained area on the side of the metal detector, listing what cannot be brought on to the train: dried blood; human corpse; animal carcasses; any part of human skeleton; manure. I wonder if this has something to do with this station being at the end of the line, almost reaching out to the hinterlands. These items are listed as being not as dangerous, but as “offensive materials”.

At Chandni Chowk Station at 3:30 in the afternoon there is always a long line of men waiting to go through the metal detector. It is not that their security search takes any longer, but there are just so many more of them who are going somewhere. I know by now to cut across the line to the “ladies” metal detector where there are never more than a few women waiting in line. I walk through and go behind a small circular curtain to be frisked and “wanded” by another woman in a security guard uniform and neatly braided hair. This curtained space is a replication of many other curtained security areas in many other places, not only airports, but also movie theatres.
Still, the metro itself is hardly a “non-place” (non-lieux), Marc Augé’s term for the non-contiguous spaces of airports, hotel rooms, and supermarkets. He calls these interstitial, transient places that lack historical and relational specificity and are examples of a “supermodernity” (Augé 1995). The metro is a space of transport that is recognisable in many other faraway places all over the world. Yet, it is an identity marker, and perhaps maker, for its riders, one that forges new historical and relational connections within the city itself. These connections begin with the spaces within the metro and the new kinds of behaviours they require and encourage.

For instance, there are new forms of security and surveillance that are now ubiquitous precisely because there are and will be so many stations, dozens and dozens of them all over the city. There are not only visible cameras watching you at all of these stations (though not inside the trains themselves), but there are signs reminding you that cameras are watching you. To what extent has safety, and what it takes to have it, become a public good? Are people only on their best behaviour when faced with cameras or new technologies they might not fully comprehend?

The metro was first heralded as a safe space for women (Batra 2003); women reported that they were not being eve-teased. Now that is starting to change as the trains get more and more crowded during rush hours, and people may be gaining some measure of “invisibility” among the crowds pushing into and out of trains.

Similar codes of behaviour can be found on the city buses, but the feel of them is quite different; they are more intimate in a physical sense, the space is more constricted, and people routinely speak to one another, often to cajole, scold, harass, or flirt. The key figure on the bus is the ticket collector. He does not only take money, give out tickets, and return change; he manages the crowd, and with a slap of his hand on the side of the bus he cues the driver on when to start moving. He shouts at people, telling them what to do, and how to behave, admonishing them for “acting like children” or “holding everyone up”. He both surveys and manages the crowd. And at the bus stops other riders give you information about which lines go where and which are good lines; there is a continual sharing of information and advice, as well as collective grief over late buses or non-existent ones.

On the metro there is no ticket collector to complain to if something goes wrong or if someone gets out of line, for this is an automated environment. Many were shocked, for instance, when a contracted metro worker was directing people who were boarding a train got his hand stuck in the door as it was closing and was dragged to the next station while clutching to the outside of the train. Passengers on board watched in amazement and horror, but did not know how to hit the emergency bell. The driver, did not cross her mind. It only changed with the rude awakening and painful experience of her husband leaving her and taking the family car with him. She was lost at first, especially since she worked in Pitampura in the north-east of the city, and lived in south Delhi beyond the Outer Ring Road; and then a friend suggested she start taking the metro, even though it required her to take an auto rickshaw until Central Secretariat, almost half the distance. The commute did not make sense at one level, but she did it anyway. “The metro became part of my day-to-day”, she told me. “You have to walk fast, you can’t waddle along. You can get jostled a bit. But within several days, riding it made me a different person. It was a novelty, but it also took my mind off things.” She not only started taking it to the college where she worked, but to Tis Hazari court as well, which happened to be on the same line. By then she was involved in three court cases against her husband and had to make regular trips to Tis Hazari for proceedings in what had become a messy divorce. “I could see it from the train”, she said, “It gave me a different angle on my life to see the court from there, to be getting there by taking the metro”.

The Metro in Hindi Films

The image of the metro as a liberating space has become part of Indian popular culture, even cinematic shorthand for the development of characters. In the movie, Delhi-6 (6 is postal code for Old Delhi), the female lead, played by Sonam Kapoor, is a young Muslim girl who lives with her family in an old haveli. She is trying to forge her own identity, a personal journey that is partly shown through her trips on the metro. As she moves away from her family home and neighbourhood and makes forays into the city, she sheds her salwar-kameez for belly button revealing tight tops. She pulls her hair back with a bandanna and paints her lips red. We then see her at a photographer’s studio creating a portfolio of sassy poses to send to the judges of the television show “Indian Idol”. These scenes are framed by her going into and out of metro stations. In the train, she looks out the window, and we witness her aloneness in this in-between space, but then see her sense of anticipation and defiance as she glides up an escalator into Connaught Place. The metro allows her to get away and feel anonymous in the city, while it also shuttles her back to her family and the old city. This narrative of liberation does not threaten her place
in her family and so, in good family film fashion, she does not change too much. Delhi-6 offers a conventional story of gendered liberation. The more experimental Hindi movie Dev D, by Anurag Kashyap, came out at the same time offering a much edgier portrayal of the city. Abhay Deol’s title character does not always know where he is going or what he aspires to. Seeing him on the metro symbolises the possibility of adventure, unpredictability, and even danger, matching the aimless wandering of his own troubled soul.

**Conclusions**

On the way to Rithala one day, a large mall comes into view from the train; its faded colours stand out in the otherwise brownish landscape. Once outside the station – the end of the line – cycle rickshaw drivers ferry people between the metro and the mall. They ride up to the entrance of the vast parking lot of the mall, but are not allowed entry beyond this point, where a few security guards are assembled. The cycle rickshaw, with its squeaky metal parts, and the driver in his dirty clothes, are antithetical to the space of the mall, where heavy-set women in salwar-kameez, and young boys and girls in jeans, come to stroll. The shops are ice-cold. And there might be more shop assistants than customers. The mall is adjacent to an “Adventureland” amusement park, and at first it is hard to tell where the mall ends and the park begins. Then a narrow pedestrian bridge over a small fake lake comes into view. Small food stalls sell popcorn and “authentic” chaat. Mechanical rides rise up towards the horizon. On the mall side, amid one of the concrete concourses, there is an island of short green grass, a lawn not more than three feet by five feet, demarcated by a raised concrete curb. An old man – the mali – sits crouched there, rubbing dirt between his fingers as he tends to the sprouts. When I am ready to leave the mall, I walk the length of the parking lot to the outer entrance, past the security guards to the waiting cycle rickshaw drivers. From here there is a direct view to the metro, a concrete edifice extending across the skyline. Between the mall and the metro lies a large construction site. A cycle rickshaw driver tells me, with a mixture of awe and disdain, that the half-made structure in front of us is to be a five-star hotel. Some of these hotels as well as rr parks are owned and being built by the dmrc itself, which has to diversify in order to maintain its own fiscal sustainability.

Meanwhile, this new India – the spaces of consumption of both goods and experience – are for the moneyed classes, professionals, and aspirers. It is true that metro stations have created desirable routes for cycle rickshaws, and that drivers sometimes make a few rupees more per kilometre than they are used to as they ply back and forth from the metro to the mall. And it turns out they too are part of Delhi’s Master Plan for 2021, page 149 of the “Reader Friendly” version; it points out that unlike other forms of transport, they are non-polluting. But ultimately the place of cycle rickshaw drivers is only being reinscribed on the new urban landscape as they encircle more spaces to which they are not allowed entry.

**NOTES**

1. I use the word “cosmopolitan” rather than “global” since Delhi is not global in the strict sense of being a node in the financial capital network in the way, for instance, that Mumbai may claim to be, or as described in the classic formulation by Saskia Sassen (1991). By using the word “cosmopolitan” I also want to emphasise the class, consumer, and citizenship-making aspects of Delhi’s urban modernity.

2. The hierarchy and indexing of cities based on European notions of modernity is of course central to the understanding of both the “global” and the “world” in common parlance, not to mention, notions of development and progress. Recent scholarship has begun to theorise non-Western cities not only in terms of “traditional” forms or their exceptionality, but also as contributing to and defining modern and contemporary urbanity more generally, or, as Jenny Robinson claims, in terms of the “ordinary” (Robinson 2006).

3. These issues are not new to Delhi, but are being replayed on a larger scale with the arrival of the metro. See A G Krishna Menon (2000) and Nandini Gupta (2000) on contemporary debates over urban planning and architecture in Delhi. See Dinesh Mohan (2008) for a transportation study of the Delhi metro illustrating its cost inefficiency. In his analysis of the economics of the metro as compared to other forms of public transport, Mohan questions the “public good” of the metro, one that has depended on the government’s sale of “public” land to the DMRC.

4. And, as documented in Wolfgang Schivelbusch’s (1977) classic monograph on the “industrialisation of time and space” that occurred with the advent of the railways in Europe. Especially relevant to the changes being wrought by the metro in Delhi is Schivelbusch’s description of how people’s perceptions of space changed, as “space was both diminished and expanded” (Schivelbusch 1977: 31).

5. The names of all interviewees have been changed.

**REFERENCES**


