



Delhi: Adventures in a Megacity

Sam Miller

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A provocative portrait of one of the world's largest cities, delving behind the tourist facade to illustrate the people and places beyond the realms of the conventional travelogue

Sam Miller set out to discover the real Delhi, a city he describes as “India’s dreamtown—and its purgatory.” He treads the city streets, making his way through the city and its suburbs, visiting its less celebrated destinations—Nehru Place, Rohini, Ghazipur, and Gurgaon—which most writers and travelers ignore. His quest is the here and now, the unexpected, the overlooked, and the eccentric. All the obvious ports of call make appearances: the ancient monuments, the imperial buildings, and the celebrities of modern Delhi. But it is through his encounters with Delhi’s people—from a professor of astrophysics to a crematorium attendant, from ragpickers to members of a police brass band—that Miller creates this richly entertaining portrait of what Delhi means to its residents, and of what the city is becoming.

Miller, like so many of the people he meets, is a migrant in one of the world’s fastest growing megapolises, and the Delhi he depicts is one whose future concerns us all. He possesses an intense curiosity; he has an infallible eye for life’s diversities, for all the marvelous and sublime moments that illuminate people’s lives. This is a generous, original, humorous portrait of a great city; one that unerringly locates the humanity beneath the mundane, the unsung, and the unfamiliar.

Delhi: Adventures in a Megacity Details

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Joey says

This book took me on a bit of critical roller-coaster. At first, I couldn't understand what Miller was getting at -- is this really just a travelogue of his wander through Delhi? Then, I was flummoxed by the seemingly random changes in tense. Sometimes he'll switch from past to present tense, back and forth, several times in the same story. I was little disappointed a hundred pages in, but still thoroughly entertained, if one can feel both ways at the same time.

Gradually though, Miller's scattered, disjointed vignettes began to congeal into a portrait of Delhi, musings on its character, past, present, and future -- whether this was his intention or not it's a bit difficult to say. His tone slowly shifts throughout the book from cheeky commentary on revolting restaurants, haphazard car parks, non-sensical children's gardens, and scheming poop squirters, to thoughtful commentary on what Delhi stands for, how it retains its soul as it explodes into, quite possibly, the world's largest city, and how its residents interface with all of the city's contrasts -- its opulence and poverty.

I started out with low expectations that, early on, I didn't think would be met. But I ended up finishing the book and looking online for what else Miller has to say about Delhi and India. This is a good, insightful read (probably not for copyeditors, however, as it's frustratingly messy in places).

Kerri says

I've never read a "travelogue" before; this one just popped out at me at the library so I picked it up. I loved the idea: walking through the city in a spiral to see all of the variation within it. And Delhi is so jam-packed, there is a lot you can see. The stories he told were generally interesting, sometimes funny, sometimes sad, and always with that sense of Truth, that "yeah, that could happen" quality. The further I got, though, the less he seemed to be in an "observer" role and the more he seemed to want to romanticize. There's a lot to learn about how Delhi was in 2009, though how applicable it still is I have no way of telling.

Bhaswati says

If Delhi ever needed a geometric metaphor, it would have to be the circle. From the different dynasties and political parties that rose and descended along its Ferris wheel of power to the 'ring' roads that serve as the arteries for navigating the city, Delhi's circularity is both ancient and modern. In 'Delhi: Adventures in a Megacity', Sam Miller redefines this circle in an entirely refreshing way. A modern-day flâneur, he sets out to explore Delhi in spirals and with no fixed agenda. His resultant experiences range anywhere between the hilarious and the blood curdling.

Written in a voice that's at once empathetic and snarky, the book is a delightful mix of travelogue, memoir, reportage and social commentary. Miller's discoveries are unique, foreign not only to transient tourists but even to many old-time residents. His insider-outsider worldview lends his vignettes a special lens.

Tarun Bahuguna says

The author and I share the same passion which is walking. The best part about Delhi is that you get to see both extremes of the world, rich and poor. His decision to explore the city by feet was the wisest and the looks Delhiites gave him on hearing the same was extremely hilarious but true.

As born and raised in this city, I guess, I already knew most of the places he visited but the insights he gave was refreshing and his humour was intact. I love the fact when author portrayed how Delhiites are trying so hard to look and behave like westerners, while this gora (foreigner) was trying equally hard to settle-in in without being an outsider.

The historical monuments which are often ignored by its people were nicely written on the basis of which he threw some light on the history of Delhi.

I wish he could display more about the diversity of culture which Delhi holds and their frame of reference through which they see the city. It is one of those very few cities in India which is home to almost all religion. caste and creed in the country.

The show-se-baazi is second to none in its people. You will find it hard to distinguish people on the basis of their looks about their socio-economic status, as everyone likes to flaunt and that too a little loudly. We could go out without taking a bath (pun intended) but not without the brands we like to show-off.

Please note, Delhi also have much more beautiful sights and people, which makes it quite an incredible place you could ever encounter in your life.

Ronit Konch says

Enjoyed the book immensely. As someone who has lived in Delhi for the last few years, and visited some of the places the author mentions, it was a delight to read about the author's travels through Delhi, especially to the oft-ignored regions. The author's humour also makes the book a delightful read, making the pages just flow. However, at times, I was not able to connect with the author due to the time gap separating me from the book. Though the author's experiences in the book are at the most a decade old there is already a vast change in how we live our lives, courtesy of the greater globalisation of Delhi, smartphones and apps.

Camille McCarthy says

I really enjoyed this book. It was already special to me since the author was the keynote speaker at my graduation in Delhi, but on reading it, I wish I had known more about him before I had seen him speak. At the time I didn't know much about him except that he had not been very positive about our school in his book, so I knew a few people were questioning why he spoke at our graduation, but after reading the book I understand. He really loves Delhi, and not just the posh parts of Delhi or the history behind it but all of it. This is very clear from the way he took the time to walk around the entire city in a spiral formation when walking in Delhi is usually not so easy and is a bit dangerous, and his knee injury made it even more

difficult. It is also clear from the way he describes the people and the scenery around him; he sees humor all around him, but unlike a lot of foreigners his humor isn't full of mocking. He obviously cares deeply for the people of Delhi, most especially the poor, who have little voice and are often taken advantage of. He also cares about Delhi's future, as well as its past. There was so much history in this book, and it was really nice to revisit Delhi through the places in this book.

This book also tries to address the issues of modernity and globalization in a very open way. The author doesn't think he has the answers to these problems or that we should just stop time now and not let Delhi move into the modern age, but he also points out that if Delhi becomes ultra modern, it might end up feeling just like every other city in the world, and lose its character and personality. People want shopping malls, yet they take up space that once was unique and might have been the site of a Mughal mosque.

I also like the way Miller was able to speak to the poor in this book, and not just look at them and make his own faulty assumptions. It is priceless to be able to communicate with someone so different from yourself. I especially like the part where he sees the rag pickers at the garbage dump and at first has all these assumptions about how awful their lives are until he actually talks to some of them and learns that this is actually a pretty good job and the people who do it are normal people with children that even go to college and everything.

A really enjoyable book. Even if you never go to Delhi, it is still a great read.

Chaundra says

I love walking in cities and reading about other people walking in their favourite cities. Flaneurs of the world unite! I read it right before a trip to Delhi in 2017 and it became very obvious how much the city has changed in the 7 years since this book was published. Still it was a delightful read and interesting way to get to know this city through another's eyes.

Rajiv Chopra says

This is a surprisingly good book. It is not long, and the manner in which the book has been written makes it a pleasure to read. I like the tool of using "intermissions" between chapters, and this makes it refreshing.

There is a lot of good information about Delhi, and about some more stuff as well. I figured that I know Delhi well, and I do, but there were enough surprises that were thrown up from time to time.

Sam evidently does have a feel for Delhi, and a lot of "positive energy" towards the city. This comes through very clearly, and it shows even when he writes about the not so savory parts of the city.

A good read indeed!

Adrian says

Miller decides to explore his adopted city on foot by starting at its centre, Connaught Place, and working outwards in ever increasing circles. He deserves full marks for sticktoitiveness, Delhi is not a city built for walking. It is, despite the author's fondness for it, quite awful. He runs into open sewers, ponds of water where mosquitoes pass on dengue fever, an open-air abattoir and oh yes, falls into an open manhole. Delhi

continues to grow and the economic miracle of the 1990s puts middle class housing and shopping cheek-by-jowl with the very poor. Miller visits the famous rubbish mountain and its resident rag pickers. Just outside of Delhi proper is a mammoth, western-style suburb called Gurgaon with shopping malls, skyscrapers and zooming highways. Miller, finding no street life here, hates it. India, fascinating in all its guises, is opened wide in this book.

David P says

This is an offbeat but delightful book about Delhi, capital of India. Sam Miller is British (even when his passport states "Person of Indian Origin"), married to an Indian, a resident of Delhi conversant in Hindi. Here he guides the reader on a walking tour around the city, along segments of a large spiral path unwinding from its center. Some travelogues may be padded for extra bulk, but not this one, chockfull of charming encounters, unpredictable incidents and unconventional landmarks. After a slow start the book levels at a hectic pace: better read just one chapter at a sitting, or you could overdose on trivia, footnotes and web links. In a way, each chapter is a separate story.

Miller writes in an informal, homespun style, illustrated by crude hand-drawn maps and grainy black-and-white photographs. Delhi is an ancient city, at one time arguably the largest on Earth, a title it now seems anxious to regain, although rivalry for that questionable distinction is steep, especially from Chongqing in China. Between then and now Delhi has survived but did not thrive. The most recent blow was the collapse of the Great Indian Mutiny of 1857 (aka "the first India war of independence"), when British soldiers conquered Delhi, deposed the Mogul and shifted the country's capital to Calcutta. Delhi's eminence was restored at the "Great Durbar" of 1911, when Britain's King George the 5th visited Delhi. The British then built "New Delhi" outside the old walls, later swallowed by a megalopolis expanding at half a million per year.

A walk around Delhi is a good introduction to India's people, to India's culture and to the many quirks of its society. One reads of modern crematoria maintained by the government but hardly used, because most Indians believe that unless a body is properly cremated on a pyre of wood, its soul is not reincarnated but roams the world as a disembodied ghost. The country is in the midst of a great transition: villages empty into cities, bullock carts are replaced by urban rapid transit, office buildings adjoin open sewers (Delhi's Yamuna river is one), and personal enterprise thrives next to a giant civil service.

The culture is ancient and diverse. Numbers, for instance: India gave us not only the concept of zero, but its language includes 'sava' meaning one and a quarter, 'derh' is one and a half, 'dhai' two and a half, 'lakh' hundred thousand and 'crore' ten millions, making the city's reported population around derh crore. English is an official language, since none of the ethnic languages was ready to yield first place to another one. The city has beautiful temples and monuments, also numerous ancient forts, as well as a forested ridge in its midst, where the prince and princes of Oudh dwell in genteel poverty. Also a giant masonry sundial, the Jantar Mantar (its name has come to denote "abracadabra" in Hindi), where a geocache site waits to be located by explorers with receivers of the GPS (global positioning system), but it is just a virtual site because of roaming goats.

Need one go on with this deadpan weirdness? Where else does one encounter a man pushing a handcart filled with severed cattle ears, telling the author they are "for a factory"? Swastikas are good-luck symbols, the embassy of Togo is in an automobile showroom, a "traffic park" teaches children to obey traffic signals as they walk its paths, and a pay-phone service hooked to a satellite is run from an outdoor table by an enterprising individual?

Yes, there is great poverty and too many people lead a marginal existence, but violence is relatively rare, and individuality simmers everywhere. This is a remarkable snapshot of a style of life which may change completely within the span of a generation: hard to predict where it is heading, but for the visitor at least, its current state is fascinating.

Debamitra says

For a person who enjoys walking and discovering places...this book was an amazing read. I found nodding my head vigorously when the author mentions that Delhi-ites never walk and it is true. I have always wondered why people who live in a city which is full of things, people and places to discover, never bother to do so. Anyway, it was an enjoyable read though a lot has changed in the city from the time the book was written and yet many things still remain the same ! Sam Miller takes a humorous look at the wonderful city of Delhi without the normal condescending tone adopted by westerners when writing about things Indian, but for his surname and the colour of his skin, he could easily have been an Indian from another part of the country exploring this paradoxical city which is our capital.

Suhit says

Nice read about the author's experiences in Delhi. I liked his unique way of spiralling across Delhi, starting from CP. I wanted to know about contemporary Delhi, this book provided me an insight. Well, the experiences Sam Miller had were at times not believable, but well, I don't know about Delhi's hidden corners. He talks about many pleasant and unpleasant experiences. The unpleasant ones tends to hurt Delhiite sentiments. Many a times there are quite humorous incidents that keeps the reading light and enjoyable. Overall I think the book portrays a very unbiased opinion on Delhi.

Todd Tyrle says

Very entertaining. I started reading it some time before my first trip to India then had to take it back to the library. Finished it after returning and really enjoyed the "visit back". Now I want to go back again. The method of exploring a city - in spiral format, is a really interesting idea and makes me wonder how it would be to do that in my own city on foot, or in a bigger project, by bike.

Pradhuman Bhati says

A must read for all People who live in Delhi but know so little about their city.

Daren says

The author is an Englishman living in, and having had a reasonably lengthy association with Delhi, takes the

approach of a 18th century French *flaneur* - someone who walks aimlessly around a city. Although not quite aimlessly - he navigates Delhi on foot in a spiral pattern, starting at Connaught Place, working his way out, anti-clockwise. On the way he visits many places - some appear to be on a 'must see' itinerary, others are random and minor - and many people. Most are interesting, some he makes only a short connection with, others a more lengthy interaction. All of these contribute to a flavour of Delhi.

I was surprised to only enjoy this book as far as 3 stars. The premise for the book is great, most of the individual anecdotes are interesting, the interludes are relevant and interesting. It just didn't grab me. There is nothing here that makes me want to explore Delhi more than say, Mumbai, or Chennai, or Bangalore (all four are Indian cities I haven't been to).

However, it was enjoyable, and likable book, and very easy to read - I worked through it in a couple of days.
