

Urban Transport and the Politics of Sensation in Delhi

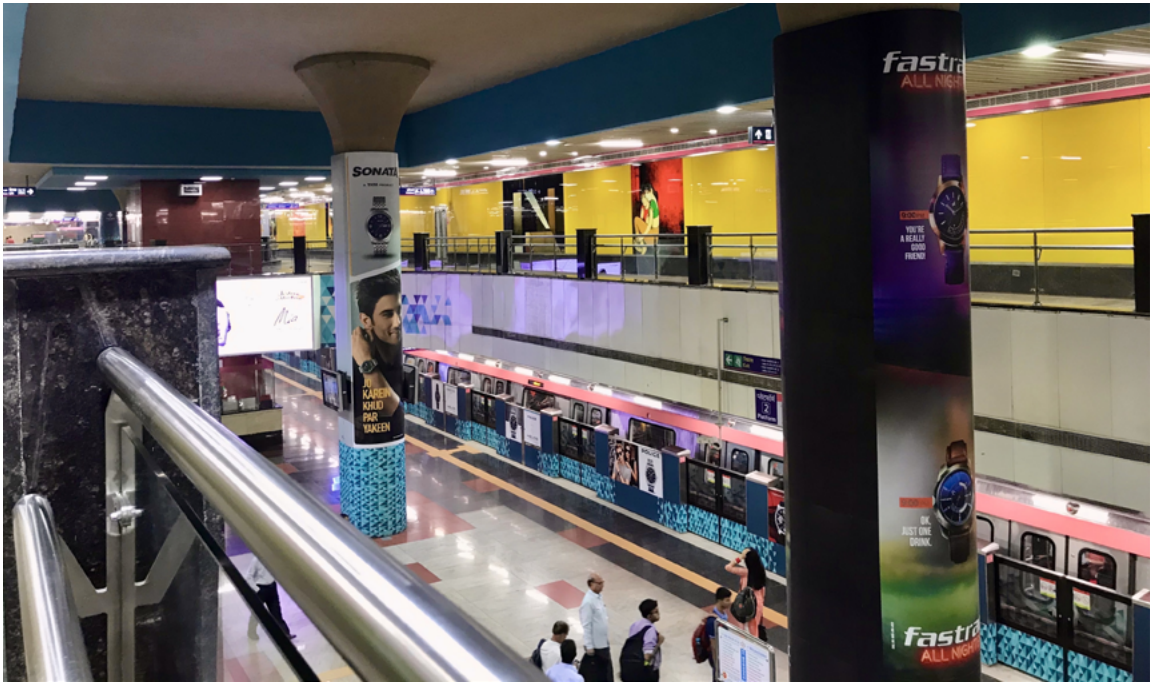
Rashmi Sadana

The Delhi Metro is South Asia's first multi-line, high-speed urban metro rail system, a sensorium of upward mobility in this city of twenty million. Outside most Delhi Metro stations, the din of traffic startles with the screech of tires on asphalt, sputtering motorcycle engines, honking horns and heaving buses.



The Metro hums by comparison. Other forms of transport in this city simply do not feel or sound this way. Trains enter and exit stations with a mechanized swish in your ears and a curtain-like breeze against your skin. There is a sensorial disjuncture smoothed out by your own movements through the system, with its sleek flooring, cool handrails and curved metal seats. Inside, continual announcements in crisp, pedagogic Hindi and English create an institutional vibe. Unlike with the noises outside, you feel you should be listening – even if you are not.





Sensing the inside versus outside, with all their disjunctive elements, tells you where you are, but also perhaps who you are. Who is invited into and who is excluded from the Metro sensorium? Delhi's is one of the cheapest metro systems in the world, transporting three million riders a day, yet it is also out of reach for the poor and for many working-class people, most of whom walk, bike or take the bus. What then are the politics of these inside–outside sensations? This essay argues that the Delhi Metro does not simply smooth things out (it is not just a leveler), whether based on class, gender or other social grouping; rather, it also amplifies social belonging and exclusion.

An array of shiny, smooth surfaces, from handrails, floors, walls and the trains themselves come together to help create the Metro's sensorium. Pink Line.

Photo: Rashmi Sadana, 2019.

The interface between Delhi's metro system, and the roads above and below it, offers a new way – materially, sensorially and socially – to think about and experience 'inside' and 'outside'. The Metro sensorium produces "the ambient conditions of everyday life" (Larkin 2013: 336) as well as an "affective atmosphere" making for a new built environment (Low 2017: 156). These conditions and atmosphere strike a sensual contrast with the streets of the city, where the smells of fumes, food, piss and the sounds of traffic, chirping birds and ringing bells are constant. On the Delhi Metro, you are at once at an acoustic remove. When you enter a station, a kind of quiet settles in as the regulated coolness seeps into your pores. You quickly adjust. Yet with its engulfing fluorescence, there is still more to the Metro than meets the eye. Entering the system can invoke a chamber effect, where voices echo as they bounce off the walls and people moving through attune to a new sensorial environment. The Metro is not just a technology but a mechanism, a way to and a way to be: a system that offers mobility but also a new angle from which to imagine oneself.

The Metro is most potent as an embodied experience, an aspect of modernity that people can sense and step into (Sadana 2022). With the drop of a token or the slide of a travel card, you gain entry to an elsewhere – a place whose sensorial cues make

you feel different than you do outside. Yet for many, this is also precisely why riding it can be alienating; not everyone feels this comfort is meant for them, and so the sensations can be unsettling. The only thing to do is listen and look – to see how others respond to and manage the sensorial situation. While many on the Metro talk over the mechanical drone, the ding-dongs of opening doors and the whining shush of a departing train, others tune out on devices, or just sit watching it all, engulfed in a sensory modernity that requires pause.



Switching on a 'live' photo from Delhi is to experience a blast of sound, reminding you where you have been, what you have recorded and the sensorial disjuncture of being on versus off the Metro. Outside Mundka station. Photo: Rashmi Sadana, 2018.

The sensation of who is in and who is out structures the Delhi Metro experience, even as there is a grey area in which the majority of people adjust and adapt. So, the Metro's sensorium is not a static experience; how you relate to it can change over time. The aspirational quality of the Metro is rooted in the immersive experience of the system. Over the many years I have ridden it, people have most often talked to me about the air conditioning, but nearly as frequently about the speed and the feeling of "going superfast" – a feeling rooted in the body. This is why you sit down or grab a handrail in a moving train. It affects your balance. The city moves around you and you move with it; the system is solid, but you are liquid.

Kamala, a beauty technician who I sometimes ride with on the Delhi Metro, tells me the Metro is "*undhar he undhar*," encompassed, enclosed, all inside. She works all day in other people's homes, taking care of their hair, skin, nails, but on the Metro she is the one who relaxes and enjoys the conditioned air. She does not ride in the ladies' coach – she does not need to, she is with other women all day. She does not want to be encased by their chatter, echoing a common perception of the ladies' coach, with its burst of colorful flowy fabrics and loud conversations.



The sensorial disjuncture of the Metro can be understood through people's gestures as they acclimate often warm, sweaty bodies to the inside environment. Blue Line.

Photo: Rashmi Sadana, 2015.



By contrast, the general (mixed) coach is calm and quiet, and no one bothers her.

Meanwhile, upper-class residents of several south Delhi neighborhoods had earlier led a campaign against the Metro coming into their communities on elevated viaducts. They feared the noise, among other things. Then, once the Metro came, they praised the soundproof mechanisms built into it. The Metro would not compromise the residents' sonic atmosphere after all. They would not have to hear it. Now it is actually the silence of the passing trains that these residents marvel over.



The clamor and clatter of water collection from a water truck beneath a viaduct. Seventy-five percent of the Delhi Metro system looms over the city on elevated tracks. Okhla, Violet Line.
Photo: Rashmi Sadana, 2015.

Built over the last twenty-four years, since the late 1990s, the Delhi Metro creates a new idea of inside and outside, while it also calibrates one's place in the city or distance from it in novel ways. In the everyday of the Metro, it is not the visual aspect of the train moving through the urban landscape that matters so much. Rather, it is the sensorial disjuncture one experiences upon entering the system, a disjuncture that, once smoothed out and regularized in the form of a commute, can also be personally transformative. And that is where the Metro's promise lies, in its literal and social mobility – even if it is a futile mobility for some, useless and leading nowhere.

Outside Okhla Metro station, under the viaduct locals gather around a municipal water truck. The informal settlement here beneath the Metro lacks consistent water infrastructure, even as state-of-the-art trains pass overhead. Most people in this neighborhood tell me they do not ride the Metro in their midst, because they do not have the kinds of jobs – in their minds, government jobs – that would require and enable them to take it. They only step into the Metro occasionally, yet they also live with it every day, as it cuts through their space, intones in the air. To hear versus to be heard. Many feel they have an infrastructure they do not need (the Metro), even as their water supply continues to be uneven and unpredictable.

The Metro, unlike water trucks, offers no goods. It gives an energy and potentiality, a forward motion for many; but it can also emphasize a kind of stagnation. The Metro

On a Metro platform, the comparative quiet enables phone absorption and the feeling of comfort provided by the clean floors, spurring some to slip off their shoes. Violet Line.

Photo: Rashmi Sadana, 2018.



enables a much wider swathe of the population to experience high-tech, efficient transport, yet the system raises questions too: Why can't more of the city's infrastructures be like the Metro? Why can't they bestow the feeling of smoothness, quiet and comfort?

Groups of local women who gather to sit and chat under trees on the Okhla station premises ask just such questions. Once a month, they take the Metro two stops to the Kalkaji Mandir. It is such a short distance that it would be cheaper and not that much slower to go by bus or even walk, but riding the Metro to the temple has become part of the experience, with the feel of steel and the train's vibrations. Non-visual sensations offer distinct spatial impressions, not only of the trains but also of the vastness of the city itself – an indirect perception that becomes part of one's experiential data (Tuan 1977: 16). On this journey, the women briefly attune themselves to the manufactured sounds of the system, which blend into the visit to the temple, one exalted state leading to another. The journey produces a feeling of inclusion, though not one of consequential mobility. What, then, are the foreclosed promises of the Metro's sensorium? Who can claim this comfort, be comforted?

Infrastructures are "open-ended structural forms" (Harvey and Knox 2015: 6). And we could think of the Delhi Metro in this way, for it continually leads into and out of the city streets and localities; it has many 'orifices'. Sensorially, it marks an inside and an outside, and yet offers numerous passageways from one to the other, making for a kind of flexibility and possibility in a system that is otherwise solid and immovable as a whole. *Infra* is Latin for 'below', suggesting that which cannot be seen but which essentially connects. The Metro is both above and below, linking different locations in the city, while the Metro sensorium itself takes travelers to a globalized space of transport, with international protocols. It is this latter kind of connection – to a global modernity – that elevates the Delhi Metro and those who ride it, making for a collective sensory encounter. 'Globalized' here does not mean Metro riders will necessarily take it to the Indira Gandhi International Airport and catch a flight (though they can do that via the Orange Line); rather, it is that they can claim this world-class-ness without leaving India.

Focusing on the sensations of the Delhi Metro enables us to see the system as a place, an "intense particularity" (Feld and Basso 1996: 11), and not just a form of urban transport or even global infrastructure. The place of the Metro is made by and emerges from the tissue of everyday life: the multi-sensory experiences of people, their perceptions and the activities those perceptions unleash. The Metro is hardly a blank canvas, an empty train, but rather encapsulates the power dynamics and tensions of the city, as symbol and material object. It registers sensorially both where people are coming from and where they might hope to go.

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