Episodes from the Social Life of the Delhi Metro

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Reviewed: Rashmi Sadana, *The Moving City: Scenes from the Delhi Metro and the Social Life of Infrastructure*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2021

What is the impact of a new metro on a large and growing city? As new metros are cropping up across Asia, Rashmi Sadana documents the changes brought to the city of Delhi by a sprawling new transportation system. She shows that the Delhi metro is both similar to other subways of the world and unique in its inscription in a distinctive cultural landscape.

Infrastructures straddle the line between large, shiny artefacts imposed on urban landscapes marking modernity, and the backdrop for scenes of everyday life of mobility, habits, and convenience for urban publics. "Their peculiar ontology lies in the facts that they are things and also the relation between things" (Larkin 2013, p. 329). Cultural anthropologist Rashmi Sadana's *The Moving City* is a bricolage of storytelling of these things and the relation between things that are involved in the social life of the Delhi Metro—a massive, state-sponsored mobility infrastructure project that consists of nine lines and 285 stations (and growing) built over three construction phases (p. 3). The Metro, while accounting for only 5% or less of the trips made in the city, is significant in the city's imaginary to those who support it, ride it, and oppose it or observe it from a distance.

The book offers a "street-level ethnographic view" (p. 2) of the Delhi Metro and of Delhi itself, written as a series of "hopscotch" (p. 204) vignettes, which initially read as chaotic and sometimes disconnected, but eventually come to reflect the Metro itself as an "ongoing and recurring narrative, one with stops and starts, and loads of unfinished business" (p. 203) and as "both history and fortune-telling" (p. 94). Through these vignettes, organized into three primary sections, the book focuses not on the historical narrative of the creation of the infrastructure itself, but on some of the infinite relational moments through which "people were making individual journeys but also understanding their city and themselves in a new way" (p. 10)—an examination of the social impact of this mobility infrastructure on the everyday lives of the people who come into contact with it.

The three parts that categorize the many vignettes in the book—Crowded, Expanding, and Visible—reflect what Sadana defines as the "three principles" (p. 23) at work on the Metro. They represent both the three main phases of construction of the Metro network itself as well as the acts of collecting, defining, and dispersing the urban crowd. "Part One: Crowded" introduces readers to the first few stations built on the Metro, the new seams created at the edges where the stations meet the city's roads, buses, rickshaws, and pedestrians, and the new "embodied experiences" (p. 24) of riding the Metro that didn't previously exist. "Part Two: Expanding" tells the story of the expansion of the Metro network and the perceived "cultural change" (p. 99) accompanying it, embodying the social divisions of the street in new ways through public narratives around the Metro being a "public good" (p. 102) and a "social equalizer" (p. 169). It also narrates the disparate conceptions of the Metro as architectural marvel and "statistical architecture" (p. 142, citing Mehrotra 2011) by the

different urban agencies and institutions involved in its making. "Part Three: Visible" describes the new urban relationships created by the mostly elevated—visible—lines of the third phase of the Metro network, and how the private lives of *Dilliwalas* (Delhiites) often become public in the public space of the Metro.

Sadana's writing is vivid and rich with detail, peppered with sensory descriptions, photographs, and Delhi colloquialisms that made me feel like I was riding the Metro with her, day after day. The book is part observation, and part conversation, with some of the former bordering on a romanticization, perhaps an attempt at poetic interludes to juxtapose the gritty realities of the everyday social life of the Metro. The narrative is primarily what Sadana calls a "study across" (p. 15)—"across the city, across platforms, across a broad spectrum of working- and middle-class people" (p. 15) that she interacted with through the ethnographic project, with a few intersections of conversations with Metro officials, politicians, bureaucrats, and professionals involved in the design, development, and operation of the infrastructure.

Geographies: new internal spaces, seams with the street, and transnational ecosystems

Three significant geographies form the sites for the primary narratives of the book: the new, internal geography of the Metro trains and stations themselves, the interfaces or seams between the Metro network and the street, and the transnational ecosystems that inform the infrastructural narrative of the Metro.

The smooth, climate-controlled, safe, and surveilled trains and stations provide a more ordered alternative to the grimy street: one where people have to pay and go through several checkpoints to enter. Focusing on "female gazes" (p. 2), throughout the book, Sadana uses scenes from the women's coach to highlight the "gendered social mobility" (p. 2) enabled by the Metro. The women's coach provides a backdrop for different interpretations of women's safety, behavior and interactions. The gangway, or the gap between the women's coach and the general coaches, is marked as an invisible threshold—one which marks a boundary but also a safe space.

The Delhi Metro is "a distinct environment, cut off from what lies above it, and yet the Metro and the street also form a contiguous space" (p. 58). The book tells the stories of mobility through the Metro, but also adjacent to it—the networks of cycle rickshaws, e-rickshaws, buses, cars, etc., that provide last-mile connectivity for the Metro, and which for some continue to be the only affordable transportation options. It shares the varied reactions of local residents to the imminent arrival of Metro lines, the moments of conflict and control that arise when the ordered space of the Metro meets the energy of the street, and the debates around who gets to occupy the most space on the street.

The book also illuminates the public perception of the Metro, the city's "darling" (p. 145)—an undeniable public good—as a symbol of modernity and a way for *Dilliwalas* to experience something that could previously only be experienced abroad. It describes how the "Metro is a success story; it marks Delhi as a global city and conveys prestige through its technology and the way in which it was planned and now operates" (p. 79). The conversations with professionals involved in the development of the Metro network also yield narratives around transnational exchange of ideas, experiences, and funding—naming the global stakeholders in the making of the Delhi Metro.

Publics: institutions, civic sensibilities, and public space

Throughout the book, Sadana explains the many institutional entities and processes that are responsible for building, governing, and maintaining the Metro network. These entities and processes include the new professional work culture that defines the smooth functioning of the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC), in contrast to the entrenched bureaucracy of older

institutions such as the Indian Railways or the Delhi Central Public Works Department; the "science of sizing" (p. 65); and the emphasis on "technical management" (p. 141) and "cost-effectiveness" (p. 109) that governs station design. Sadana also describes the tense relationships between the DMRC and other local urban agencies, and the role of international consultants in the project. The book also tells a few stories of the many Metro workers, and of the many prominent politicians, experts and bureaucrats that are involved in the decision-making surrounding the project.

The book identifies the many processes that are involved in creating and maintaining the "urban public" (p. 77)—the rule-following, non-littering, ordered, primarily middle-class public of the Delhi Metro—and the few moments where the orderliness of that public gets disrupted, where the seams between genders, classes, castes, and races begin to show. The book shares the experiences and varied perspectives of women—their gender and the perceived safety of riding the Metro being two of the only commonalities among their narratives.

Sadana tells many stories of displacement of the poor (who still rely on the cheaper bus network for travel) that have been caused by the development of the Metro, alongside the (sometimes successful) resistance by middle- and upper-class *Dilliwalas* to the imminent impacts of the Metro on their localities. It disrupts the common rhetoric pushed by the local media of the Metro as being a "social binder" (p. 102) and "social leveler" (p. 140) by showing how the goal of elites in Delhi has been focused on the "separation of classes of people" (p. 66) in public spaces.

The book also outlines the many ways in which the "Metro has become a framing device" (p. 169): a site where private lives become exposed to the public eye, such as when people commit suicide by jumping on to the tracks, marking the Metro as a "recurrent site of trauma for all involved" (p. 173).

The landscape of subway ethnography

Sadana's book offers a deeply textural window into the infrastructural lives of Delhi's residents—both those who ride the Metro and those missing from the Metro's new landscape. Similar to Marc Augé's writings on the Paris metro, Sadana's vignettes demonstrate a "cartography of affect" (Conley 2002). However, where Augé (2002) situates himself autobiographically within his writing, Sadana centers the narratives of the many people she interacts with in her role as ethnographer. Unlike most other subway ethnographers, Sadana, in the primary text of this book, does not situate the narratives of the Delhi Metro within scholarly literature, nor does she attempt to extrapolate generalizations towards theory or concept. Most of these discussions are instead relegated to the extensive and detailed "Notes" section of the book, thus ensuring that the book itself reads more as the telling of many diverging and converging stories: "thick descriptions" (Geertz 1973) that collectively define a Delhi Metro culture.

Sadana's book also adds to the scholarly inquiry on the role of gender in the experience of the subway network. Similar to explorations by Tonnelat and Kornblum (2017) and Fedorenko (2021), Sadana asks questions that aim to reveal how women experience and negotiate the different spaces of the subway and beyond during different times of the day. However, the methods deployed by these scholars differ. While Sadana relies on a combination of observations, and interviews and conversations with subway riders, Tonnelat and Kornblum use a combination of personal field notes and subway diaries of high-schoolers, and Fedorenko complements participant observations with an analysis of online communities and mass-media coverage.

In reviewing Marc Augé's 2002 work on the Paris metro, Motte (2003) writes: "the subway is not specific to Paris, or London, or New York: figuratively speaking at least, every society has its metro" (p. 112), which is reflected in the similarity of themes that emerge from several ethnographic works, including Sadana's, focused on metro or subway rail networks. These themes, such as the role of institutions and politics in shaping urban infrastructure, the subway as a unique public space, the semiotic landscape created by metro signages and artefacts, and the imposed

public order and expected public behavior when riding the subway, are also visible in the ethnographic account of New York's 7 line by Tonnelat and Kornblum (2017), writings on the Taipei rail network by Lee (2021) and Lee and Tung (2011), and Cockain's (2018) ethnography of the Shanghai metro. However, while shared themes emerge, subway ethnographic projects are also unique and distinct. They are situated and "distinctively mediated" (p. 478) by local history and politics (Lee 2021). This emphasis on local embeddedness is what makes Sadana's project an important contribution to the field—she emphasizes the uniqueness of the Delhi Metro by centering the voices of the many people who make up its daily life.

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