

Delhi RISING

With its open-arms and open-heart mantra, Delhi is the pulse of the new India. And its beat echoes with a magnetic subcontinental frequency

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Almost any local will tell you that Delhi is the “City of Hearts” – Dilli is the original Hindi spelling and “Dil” literally translates as “heart.” After spending time in the sprawling epicenter of the Indian subcontinent you begin to experience a certain cardiovascular pull. The combined forces of mother nature, human nature and a noticeably higher level of non-western consciousness, become like daily gifts and lessons in cultural amalgamation. The lush expansiveness and seemingly innate codes of welcome – “guest is god,” and “work is worship” are the mantras – make it difficult not to fall in love upon arrival. If India is the diamond, then the northern metropolis of Delhi is not merely the city of hearts, it is the heart-center, the pulse and the crossroads of the fabled jewel in the crown.

Delhi is also the capital – it shifted from Kolkata in 1911. The current population is approximately 13 million. Some five million migrant workers commute every day to make up the majority of the service industry. Although Delhi is one of the oldest continually inhabited cities in the world, the enclave of New Delhi – built as an administrative quarter during the British Raj - is less than 100 years old. Perhaps because of the mass migration, the spiraling spaciousness (as opposed to the more compressed confines of Mumbai) and the progressive attitude of the local *Dilliwallahs*, the city's essence is strikingly cosmopolitan, with a vast ethnic melting pot offset by a large expatriate population. The “open arms, open heart” policy not only blurs the insider-outsider status, it renders the distinction almost obsolete. During the two weeks I spent in the city, I met a wide array of Delhites (featured in this Citescape), including a Punjabi-Bengali-Spanish painter, a fashion designer from Mumbai, a Kashmiri music producer, a British-originated composer and an American-born organic foods trader. Although more intercontinental than international, this heady mix of young creatives shed valuable insight on the communal mindshare and unquenchable personality of India's capital city. As Ayesha Sood, a young half-Bengali filmmaker explained, “No one who lives in Delhi comes from Delhi. The automatic assumption is that everyone is from somewhere else.”

This sense of cultural and physical plurality infiltrates everything from the cuisine – Italian, Chinese, South Indian and Mediterranean compete for popularity – to the language, Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu and English. It is the same for fashion, where the ancient and folkloric magically commingle with the ultra modern. But the most telling, and in my experience the most resonant, trademark of the city lies in the fabric of the streets. My drive from the airport to the Imperial Hotel on the night of my arrival swept me past a battery of images. There were lumbering, hand-painted Tata trucks, young Sikhs on mopeds wearing bandanas and sunglasses to protect against the dust, young women dressed in immaculate, brightly-dyed saris sitting side-saddle behind them, mule-driven carts, man-peddled rickshaws, air-conditioned BMWs and a solitary cow ambling majestically in its own forcefield of sacredness. The sheer tribal triangulation of this visual feast soon became my daily addiction, especially at night, when the veil of dust through the taxi headlights refracted the countless pedestrian silhouettes and Hindi traffic signs flashing like neon lace in the dark.



“**[Delhi]** HAS SO MANY LAYERS,
HISTORICALLY, ARTISTICALLY,
ARCHITECTURALLY – AND IT TAKES
TIME TO GET THROUGH ALL
THOSE LAYERS.”

– AVESHA SOOD

“It wasn’t until I left Delhi to study at the Art Institute in Boston and came back that I really appreciated it that much more,” recalled painter Blanca Dixit Peralta. “There are the colors, the multi-faceted culturalism, the patient impatience, the strange beauty and all the random crazy people you meet in the streets. And yet out of all of this chaos comes the right form, the right order.” We were having dinner and I was describing my trip to the India Gate a few nights prior with my traveling companion, Dhiraj Arora. It had been a spontaneous outing. Our jet lag had rerouted our sleep schedule so that following a post-midnight feast of carrot-ginger soup, shaag paneer and chicken tikka, we found ourselves milling outside the hotel gates around 3am. An auto-rickshaw, which is engine-powered as opposed to the traditionally “peddled” rickshaws, pulled up alongside us with a slender young driver folded into its compact green and yellow frame. After a ten-minute cruise through clouds of dust blended with the scent of gasoline and cow manure in the feverish night air, we arrived at our destination. The monolithic arch, a monument commemorating all the Indian soldiers who died in World War I and the Afghan Wars, seemed to expand before our eyes as if it were on a giant projection screen. The spotlights surrounding its base outlined the shadows of the floating apparitions of fellow off-hours on-lookers. When I made a passing comment about all the “romantic picnickers” spread out on blankets on the great lawns lining either side, Dhiraj corrected me. “A lot of homeless people come here to sleep,” he said. “Pimps, prostitutes, orphaned kids, dogs.” But despite the dust and fumes and plethora of public squatters, Blanca was right. There was an internal order, a prescribed code of respect. There was also a sense of complete serenity as we rode back to our hotel; the blank symphony of horns from our rush hour arrival had been replaced by the silent purr of humanity.





“INDIANS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN STYLISH.
WE’VE HAD **CENTURIES OF PRACTICE.**”

– MANISH ARORA

Over the course of the next several days, I visited the high and the low, the luxuriously posh and the gut-bracingly modest, and experienced waves of confusion, euphoria, curiosity and a sublime sense of never having been so far away from familiar ground, and yet never having been so close to home. At the Sarojini Nagar market I found everything from a rock bottom priced Marc Jacobs’ jacket, the latest French fashion magazines, to gold-framed portraits of Indian gods. At the clothing stalls in the INA market I waited while a resolute salesman custom tailored a kurta pajama for me. At a local bookstore, I found comprehensive collections of Proust, Hesse, Hemingway and Gandhi. At the shopping malls I watched teenagers line up at the Dunkin Donuts and Domino’s food chains – neither of which existed in India less than 10 years ago. At the Lodhi Gardens (a plot of paradise named after the Muslim Lodhi dynasty), I witnessed a couple covertly kissing and a pack of dogs nearly tear each other to shreds. At the hotspot Shalom, I ate a savory Middle Eastern meal to the backdrop of a sexy crowd and universally chic tunes. At the Elevate nightclub I waited in line for an hour with a throng of sweating, incensed club goers queuing up to listen to British beat-banger Paul Oakenfold.

One day in particular stands out though. It was while we were shooting Ayesha, who, being a filmmaker by trade, had already scouted out several choice locations. After donning robes, removing our shoes and attempting to shoot under the blistering 115-degree sun at the historic Jama Masjid Mosque, we took shelter in the nearby Dariba Kalan (“The Street of the Incomparable Pearl”), one of the age-old alleyway marketplaces in Old Delhi, filled with jewelry stalls. We convinced a rickshaw driver to let Ayesha give his vehicle a test drive. As we followed her fragile frame through the narrow street, a haze of inquisitive glances fluttered among a crowd of cramped on-lookers. It seemed that a woman dressed in distinctly non-traditional gear coupled with the fact that she was operating a rickshaw was more than a controversial anomaly. When one young admirer offered Ayesha his hand in marriage, she gave him a friendly wink and continued peddling through the crowd.

Later that day I went to see designer Manish Arora at his showroom in the buzzing eco-friendly mini-city of Noida, just outside of Delhi proper. At one point during our conversation, I described how I was enraptured by the traffic, mainly by the young Sikhs on mopeds whose style made them the baddest fashion bandits I’d encountered. Manish nodded in agreement but insisted it was something I would “grow used to” if I ever chose to live in Delhi. He told me about the new Fish Fry shop he launched with Reebok, as well as his new men’s line called Get Laid. We were interrupted by a brownout – a flair of flame-spewing sparks erupted on one of the electric wires just outside his office window – after which Manish admitted that indeed the streets had influenced his creative process on more than one

occasion. "I'd say the Indian fashion industry is about seven years old," he said, eyeing his employees' blank computer screens. "But Indians as a people have always been stylish. We've had centuries of practice."

Aside from the stunning visual wallpaper that became a kind of textbook guide to the hybrid *mezitaze* of cultures, ethnicities, class and even time periods, the real secret to Delhi, as I would come to understand over glasses of Tequila with Dhiraj at the Rodeo Bar (the first Mexican establishment in India, according to the menu), was the strange paradox that you are simultaneously traveling backwards and forwards in time. "My uncles always say traveling on the highway reminds them that India, like parts of Ethiopia and Egypt, is one of the last bastions of civilization," Dhiraj told me. "You have every form of transportation available to man operating side by side." As the capital, there is a lot of talk about how Delhi is poised to become one of the major hubs of the new luxury industry that is driving India economically, as well as an IT mega-center. On the other hand, with falling groundwater and rising population density, Delhi faces severely acute water shortage. During a drive to the outskirts of the city, I saw medieval, helmet-shaped farmers huts dotting the mutant brown of the rice fields. In the town of Amabala, I met Dhiraj's 15-year-old cousin who wants to be a fashion designer and whose cell phone ring tone is R&B singer Akon's "Smack That." The whole experience of India is an odd feeling of flux, like looking at the world through some hidden window of experience. I felt like I'd been inserted into someone else's drastically aromatic fantasy.

As I was riding back to the hotel after my meeting with Manish in one of my hotel's 2007 S500 Mercedes courtesy cars – one of three available in North India at the moment - with the air conditioning blasting and the turbaned sardharji driver nodding his head to the Massive Attack CD I'd brought on my trip - I thought of something Ayesha had said about Delhi being like an infinite onion: "It has so many layers, historically, artistically, architecturally, economically – and it takes time and willpower to get through all those layers." As we drove past a custom-built temple made entirely of mirrors sitting alongside the highway, I thought of something the author Arundhati Roy, who is a resident of Delhi, wrote in her Booker-prize winning novel *The God of Small Things*: "Without admitting it to each other or themselves, they linked their fates, their futures (their Love, their Madness, their Hope, their Infnate Joy), to his. They fretted over his frailty. His smallness. The adequacy of his camouflage. His seemingly self-destructive pride." As we arrived into the thick of rush hour in New Delhi, I watched a parcel of young boys selling wreaths of fresh jasmine and caught one of them in a smiling regard. As he came closer, I looked at the shining brown orbs of his eyes with globes of light dancing behind them and thought, so this is Delhi. This is that other home.

AYESHA SOOD

Location/time/temperature:
Chandni Chowk, Old Delhi/
4pm/ 110 degrees

Age: 31

Occupation: Filmmaker

Family origin: father from Himachal; mother Bengali

Place of birth: Delhi

What is the most personal quality about Delhi?

It has so many layers, historically, socially, artistically, architecturally, economically. If you can pull yourself out of your loop then you can access them.

What makes you feel most loyal to the city?

The weather

Most disloyal? The people

What sets you apart professionally? I'm working on six documentaries on subaltern culture in Delhi for ND TV. The one I've just been shooting is about a slum in Delhi called Shadipur Depot, where there are lots of acrobats. They travel all over the world and represent India but live in a shithole.

How would you define passion? Raw, sweaty sex

How would you define love? The biggest mountain to climb, happiness. [Love] is so fleeting but if you experience all the ups and downs you become more sensitive to it.

What has been your biggest challenge to date?

[Being] able to say what I want to say in the field I'm in.

If you could rename the city what would you call it?

Dil because "Dil" means "heart" in Hindi.



MANISH ARORA

Location/time/temperature: INA
Market/ 10am/ 91 degrees

Age: 34

Occupation: Clothing designer

Family origin: mother Punjabi

Place of birth: Mumbai

What is the most personal quality about Delhi? The space, which you don't find in many cities. Also there is a lot of Indian culture, a lot of tradition.

What makes you feel most loyal to the city?

I started my business here. My schooling and my clientele is here.

Most disloyal? I like Delhi too much to be disloyal

What sets you apart professionally? My style of work, which is very inspired by India but is also very contemporary. People say, "This guy is from India but he's definitely not traditional!"

How would you define passion? Passion is my profession.

I only do it because I love it.

How would you define love? Love is a very important part of life but it doesn't rule my life.

What has been your biggest challenge to date? Everyday is a challenge. I'm doing so many projects...with Reebok, with Mac in Summer 2008. But for me a challenge is exciting. It's what I live for.

Describe your most intense experience. My most intense moment was a Spring-Summer show I did in Delhi. Everyone had tears in their eyes, even the models, even me!

If you could rename the city what would you call it? Fish Fry





GAURAV RAINA

Location/time/temperature: Jor Bagh Garden/
8pm/ 97 degrees

Age: 32 **Occupation:** producer, Midival Punditz **Family origin:** Kashmir **Place of birth:** Lucknow

What is the most personal quality about Delhi? It's got a lot of space, unlike Mumbai, which is really crammed up.

What makes you feel most loyal to the city? The fact that I've spent 80 percent of my life here. I feel like I'm a part of the city because I've contributed to it.

Most disloyal? Problems like crime and the disrespect of women and moneycentric pests.

What sets you apart professionally? We do what we love and we've always kept to that, musically speaking.

How would you define passion? Passion is what your heart and soul desires.

How would you define love? Love is the answer to the call.

What has been your biggest challenge to date? To be able to become a successful musician in the society that I exist in, which has to do primarily with the parents normally dictating what the child should become... the usual engineer, doctor, lawyer, pilot.

Describe your most intense experience. The first time we met all of our fellow artist friends, Ajay Naidu, Karsh Kale, so many, in London in 1999. We developed a bond with each and every one of them.

If you could rename the city what would you call it? It's got the perfect name. It's the city of hearts.

TAPAN RAJ

Location/time/temperature: Jor Bagh Garden/
6pm/ 100 degrees



Age: 32 **Occupation:** Musician: Midival Punditz **Family origin:** Delhi **Place of birth:** Delhi

What is the most personal quality about Delhi? You travel all over the world but Delhi is always home.

What makes you feel most loyal to the city? If you compare it with other places in India, the concept of friendship and family is very strong in here.

What sets you apart professionally? Our music represents the past, using traditional folk music, as well as the future and present, which is electronica.

How would you define passion? Something you want to do for your heart that's not associated with any commercial aspect.

How would you define love? Love is when your heart tells you it's the right thing to do.

What has been your biggest challenge to date? I have a good girlfriend, a nice family...I can't ask for much more except a hit record.

Describe your most intense experience. Playing with Karsh Kale and Zakir Hussain on a tour with Tabla Beat Science.

We were performing with the best of the best.

If you could rename the city what would you call it? Delhi is the heart of India. I wouldn't change it at all.

KARSH KALE

Location/time/temperature: Qutab Institutional Area/ South Delhi/
6pm/ 84 degrees

Occupation: Musician/Producer/Composer/DJ

Family origin: India, England, America

Place of birth: West Bromwich, England

What is the most personal quality about Delhi? Delhi has become a second home to me because of the relationships and friendships I have fostered through music.

What makes you feel most loyal to the city? My friendships keep me loyal to the city.

Most disloyal? The only [way] I can say I am disloyal is that I do not live [here] and tend to feel comfortable in many different cities, although my relationship with Delhi remains special.

What sets you apart professionally? I would say my music defines me. It is the most eloquent way I can express myself. I recently scored the film *Ode*, written by Ghalib Dhalia and produced by Bharat Shah. I have also been involved in lots of collaborations with some killer artists from Delhi and NYC. Recently I released a cover of The Police's "Synchronicity 2," with the Midival Punditz, which we will debut live at the Glastonbury Festival. I also have an album coming out with Anoushka Shankar called "Breathing Under Water," featuring Sting, Ravi Shankar, Norah Jones, the Punditz and a whole lot more.

How would you define passion? Passion is what drives us to act beyond our control. It is intoxication beyond control. It is in this chaos that the creation is made possible.

How would you define love? Love is an unconditional connection to another human being or soul. In its purest form I guess it's like chi or a force; it exists for us to harness as it defines the spaces between us and how we interact within them.

What has been your biggest challenge to date? I have chosen a path that has created many challenges to navigate. Some days are harder than others, and some days are defined by overcoming those challenges.

Describe your most intense experience. I would not know where to begin with the list of intense experiences my life has given me.

If you could rename the city what would you call it? Swing City





DHIRAJ ARORA

Location/time/temperature: Greater Kallash (GK) 1 N Block Market/ 5pm/ 118 degrees

Age: 32 **Occupation:** Global Organic Foods trader **Family origin:** Punjabi **Place of birth:** Kingston, New Jersey

What is the most personal quality about Delhi? Delhi is the beginning of India for me in all aspects of my life.

What makes you feel most loyal to the city? I feel it embraced me as its son. But also it's got the action. It is one of the big cities in India.

What sets you apart professionally? We are the first company ever – Arora Creations Inc. -- to bring organic Indian food to America. When I came to the table with that it solidified our presence in the industry for generations to come, not only in organic food but also in terms of an ethnic concept in food.

How would you define passion? I am the definition of passion...stay tuned.

How would you define love? It's the feeling you have after telling your lady you're on your way home, knowing that you're three flights and 26 hours away...

What has been your biggest challenge to date? Learning to say no.

Describe your most intense experience. Some of the energies that I experienced from the yoga discipline. The heat, the strength, the creativity, the love and the war.

If you could rename the city what would you call it? Brooklyn

BLANCA DIXIT PERALTA

Location/time/temperature: Green Park Main Market/ 7:30pm/ 100 degrees



Age: 24 **Occupation:** Artist **Family origin:** mother half-Bengali, half-Punjabi; father from Madrid, Spain **Place of birth:** Delhi, Sainik Farms

What is the most personal quality about Delhi? The colors, the multi-faceted culturalism, the patient impatience, the strange beauty and all the random crazy people you meet in the streets.

What makes you feel most loyal to the city? The comfort. I would be disoriented in another place.

Most disloyal? Being a fair-skinned young woman on the streets can be disconcerting but I've found my way around it somehow.

What sets you apart professionally? Being exactly who I am.

How would you define passion? My work is my passion. It's my joy, my trance, my mediation.

How would you define love? It's when you do something because you really want to and you don't expect anything in return.

What has been your biggest challenge to date? Trying to paint with a broken finger.

If you could rename the city what would you call it? Home Away From Home

JITEN THUKRAL & SUMIR TAGRA

Location/time/temperature: Greater Kallash,
Savitri main road: 9pm: 98 degrees

Age: 30, 27

Occupation: Artists/Designers

Family origin: Jalandhar: Delhi

Place of birth: Jalandhar: New Delhi

What is the most personal quality about Delhi? (Jiten & Sumir) From a heritage capital to a Cosmo Delhi, it definitely holds a lot more than a five letter word.

What makes you feel most loyal to the city? There is a constant effort to improve the city. We were born and brought up here so we are very connected and happy to see it improving.

What sets you apart professionally? What sets us apart is our way of thinking and our approach to doing our work. We are currently working on projects like PUT IT ON, Bosedk and Somonium Genero.

How would you define passion? Passion is nothing but a madness which is infectious.

How would you define love? Love is passion.

What has been your biggest challenge to date? To be more famous than Damien Hirst!

Describe your most intense experience. The project PUT IT ON was one of the most powerful experiences. It was a research project to study HIV/AIDS and find alternative media to help develop awareness of the epidemic.

If you could rename the city what would you call it? We like "New Delhi" because it defines the new face of Delhi.

