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Note:

*This article is based solely on an individual's observations in Delhi, India over a five-week period, and does not represent a complete picture of the city.*

## DELHI, INDIA THROUGH THE EYES OF AN AMERICAN PLANNER

SCOTT HARMSTEAD

*Scott Harmstead, a recent graduate from CRP's BSCR program, writes about his recent trip to Delhi, India, under the sponsorship of Rotary Club's Group Study International Program. The trip exposed him to the effects of over-population, rapid growth, lack of resources, and cultural conflicts in Delhi but also to the immense potential represented by a hard-working, forward looking, and entrepreneurial population with a culture that reaches back to millenia.*

My childhood images of India were limited to popular myths such as marching elephants and people experiencing sacred bathing rituals in the Ganges River. My actual visit to Delhi proved how naïve my images were, and how incredibly diverse, complex, and at the same time modern and traditional, that city and India can be. Roughly on the other side of the world from California, Delhi is India's second largest city and the seat of national government, with a population of about 18 million people in 2010, but census figures indicate an increase of about 1 million a year! As my plane flew into Delhi I was astounded by the city's morphology, a patchwork of streets including everything from perfect grids to organic almost medieval types throughout the sprawling metropolis. Delhi is caught between straight-lined and right-angled western urban development, the complex layers of thousands of years of local culture and religious expressions, and an extremely large and dense population, most of it living in severe conditions of scarcity. As a planner working for a local County government in California, efficiency and organization was my mantra, and I was familiar with large cities such as New York, Paris, Buenos Aires, and many other western metropolises. However, Delhi revealed to me a whole different world where east and west, north and south meet.

I had been selected as a member of a team of young professionals to be sent to India as part of the Group Study Exchange program, or GSE, an international service program sponsored by Rotary International. The program focuses on three core aspects: vocational exchange, cultural exchange, and Rotary humanitarian projects in the country visited. When the trip was confirmed, I surfed the internet filled with the curiosity of a child, scrolling through the history, maps, religion, and culture of a completely foreign history, way of life, and way of thinking. I pulled up Google Earth and panned over Delhi, its jam-packed streets and open spaces as gaps in the midst of buildings of all shapes and sizes. Juxtaposed with this apparent organic urban tissue were broad boulevards in park-like settings leading to spacious roundabouts. The maps and images revealed a cityscape seemingly fused between old informal urban development probably reflecting local culture in ways that were totally foreign to me. and a western penchant for efficient street systems and uniform building setbacks.

After traveling on multiple airplanes for a combined 24 hours, our team of young westerners arrived in Indira Gandhi International Airport. The airport's cleanliness and order gave way as soon as we reached the exit and our guides quickly jammed us through an opening in the dense crowd outside, including the pack of shouting cab drivers, overseen by machine gun-strapped security guards that keep the crowd from the doors. Outside, motorized rickshaws, buses, and taxicabs came ripping out of the thick fog (Delhi is shrouded by a cool fog in January, much like California's Central Valley). The night pulsated with an incessant barrage of shouts, honks, beeps, roaring engines, and whistles.

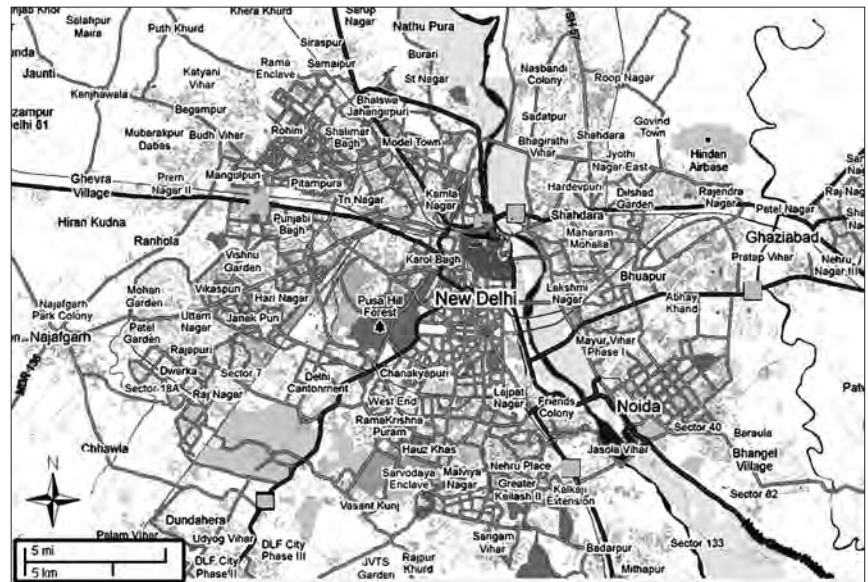
As we gazed upon the confusing scene of bustling traffic and honking vehicles, we were whisked onto the Delhi flyovers (known as freeways in California). In comparison to California drivers, we were surprised by the lack of respect for basic traffic laws. The six-lane flyover became eight or nine lanes as smaller cars

and motorbikes fit in between trucks, on the side of the road, or just simply split the traffic lanes. Honking is the preferred method of alerting other drivers of your presence and parking is allowed anywhere there is room. Motorbike helmets are required for motorbike drivers (but not for Sikhs on religious grounds as they are required to wear a large cloth turban at all times); yet carrying your baby in one hand while driving your motorbike seems acceptable.

Around midnight in our jet-lagged stupor, we stumbled into the Vikram Hotel, which is located in the Defence Colony, a neighborhood largely built and settled after the Partition (the violent division of the country at Independence into two separate countries named Pakistan and India in 1947). The hotel property is gated with at least one armed guard designated to inspect incoming vehicles. Most of the residential properties in the Delhi area are surrounded by fences or solid walls for extra security but result in an extremely unfriendly pedestrian environment. This is particularly true in areas developed after the Partition. A typical street cross section can be described as a security wall, a short strip of dirt for parking and walking, pavement with travel lanes, and the same repeated on the opposite side. The key difference denoting wealthy neighborhoods from lower to middle class neighborhoods is the presence of trees - a myriad of shade-giving trees including beech, chestnut, Indian cork, and an assortment of other species from semi-tropical and temperate areas.

I was greeted with the soft coos of pigeons on the first dawn in Delhi. Excited, I opened my blinds to a foggy sky and, looking upon trees below, I was surprised to behold a dull green hue. It turns out that the city's dry season from October through June robs the city of Mother Nature's cleanser—rain. As I was escorted by my first Indian host, Ravi ("sun" in Hindi), in a Toyota Corolla, I noticed the thick dust or soot covering everything in sight. A number of sources, including the World Bank and many international firms, rank Delhi as one of the most polluted cities in all of Asia, including China. Everything seemed to fade in and out of the sooty fog as Ravi drove along. Trees merged into a gray blur as cows, bicycles, motorbikes, road side stands, and little campfires came in and out of focus—it all seemed like a dream.

I was assigned to stay with Ravi and his wife Jyotsna ("veiled moon" in Hindi), because of our closely related professional backgrounds. Ravi is an architect and Jyotsna a landscape architect. A key component of the exchange program involves vocational time to learn of your profession in a foreign country. Ravi turned to me in my jet-lagged stupor



**Figure 1**  
Map of Delhi, showing the original new town grid designed by Edwin Lutyens from 1912 to 1930 as the capital of the British Empire in India.

**Figure 2**  
The center of Delhi, showing one a building designed by E. Lutyens. (photo by the author)



and asked, “have you heard of Habitat?” I must confess I didn’t have a clue what he was referring to, but learned that it is a branch of the United Nations organization that mostly deals with housing. Off the throbbing Delhi street Ravi turned into a large gate and into a compound with a number of large modern buildings huddled together. Ravi explained to me that this was an innovative mixed use hub fit with an event center, hotel, theatre, and restaurants. Beyond Ravi’s description of the Habitat Center, I later came to find out that the Center has an overall goal to promote environmentally- and people conscious development, involving a number of institutions to further this goal—definitely a worthy mission in a country faced with seemingly insurmountable hurdles to sustainability.

The next vocational opportunity came a few days later with a visit to Dwarka, a master-planned suburb of Delhi. After becoming a bit more acquainted with navigating old Delhi’s seemingly haywire street system, the streets all of a sudden gained a Western suburban uniformity. We pulled off a main arterial and stopped at sign labeled “Delhi Development Authority, Sector 6” where a map showed the land uses within the sector. This “sub-city” comprised 29 sectors, each sector housing roughly 60,000 people complete with recreational space, schools, commercial services, and other services needed to support each sector. The Delhi Development Authority ensured that Dwarka was planned well in advance with metro connections, police, fire stations, sewer, water, and other services generally accepted as basic in the United States. Driving into Sector 6, we pulled off the road beside an empty lot overlooking most of the development area. As I looked out over a large park gazing at the uniform rows of residential towers, I could not help thinking of a future such as those portrayed in sci-fi novels where the “unclean” outside world is kept separated from an egalitarian society living in an environment developed to ensure uniformity.

As we navigated the city’s tangle of streets and flyovers back to Ravi’s home, I noticed new construction everywhere occurring at a frenzied pace—whole streets closed, pathways dozed through developments, columns lifting up new rail lines, stones ready to be installed for new curb and gutter, and new sidewalks. Ravi revealed to me that all the construction was for the Commonwealth Games, a sporting event held between 54 nations, all a part of the former British Empire. Throughout my stay in Delhi, all of my hosts and drivers would talk proudly of the games, and the selection of the city to hold them was India’s first opportunity to host this major event, renew the capital, and show off a new image to the world. I was witnessing a city being transformed: grand sidewalks, massive sporting and event centers, improved transportation with extended flyovers and, most importantly, the Delhi Metro. Actually, when engaged on a conversation with any Indian on the subject of the

**Figure 3 & 4**  
Dwarka, a gated  
master planned suburb,  
developed by the Delhi  
Development Authority.  
(photos by the author)



Delhi Metro, a feeling of pride was obvious in the ability to undertake such a feat ahead of schedule, under budget, and without any accusations of corruption involving politicians that usually inundate the media there.

To me, as a Californian planner not accustomed to that intensity of development, nonstop traffic, noise, pollution, and new construction, Delhi resembled chaos. But underlying any conversation with an Indian about these everyday problems was a sense of surety about a bright future—that these “problem” areas are a necessary inconvenience on the way to a promising future. The general sentiment among Delhiites is that a path is currently being laid for India to become an industrialized nation much like the United States, with a higher quality of life and all of the economic benefits therein.

Indeed, as I look back, I see a country with a bright future. India is full of young people, plenty of entrepreneurship, and a fertile business environment. While a positive sentiment does exist in regards to India’s future, a serious question remains to how urban growth will take place. Just how will India provide for better living and housing conditions for its booming population of nearly 1.2 billion (three times that of the United States), and not only the poor, but the new middle class as well? As far as Delhi is concerned, the recent population trends involve massive migration to the city in hopes for work and a better life. Delhi is a metropolis facing a population growth that is expected to be 46.31% by the end of the year --double the country’s rate-- and there are about 1,000 new cars in the streets every single day! Almost 20% of Delhi’s population lives in slum, and the health care and support infrastructure is not enough for, and evidently is unable to grow at the same rate as, the population. The unstoppable population increase—both by migration and birth— and the incredible influx of cars seem to me to be the most difficult planning issues in Delhi.

With all of the City’s rapid growth and new found wealth, the division between a large segment of the city, the working poor, and the middle to upper class had become ever more apparent. For instance, near construction sites makeshift shacks lined the road which my hosts indicated belonged to transient laborers from the poorest parts of India in search of work. As the laborers came and went their features were noticeable—some of their faces were covered in dust, no one smiled, many were without shoes, and many carried loads of materials in large baskets or in stacks on their heads. The migrant laborers on the fringe simply have yet to be accounted for, much less managed.

The government is left attempting to provide essential services such as clean water, sewer, electricity, and decent roads. Meanwhile, at a much faster pace, new slums and labor camps keep emerging in forgotten corners and edges of the city, and many lack those essential services. And as I reflect on my stay in Delhi, I realize the true reason for a place like Dwarka and all of its benefits for those living there. This development might be an exception to the rule, but it is a good demonstration project of what the government would like to attain. For now, the limited amount of resources and the lack of affordability limit more places like Dwarka from becoming a remedy to many of the urban problems affecting Delhi’s population.



**Figure 5**  
*Poor children collecting drinkable water from a community tap to take home. (photo by the author)*