Introduction
What Is Delhi?

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Ik roz apni rooh se poocha, ki Dilli kya hai?
Tho yun jawab mein keh gaye: yeh duniya mano jism hai, aur Dilli uski jaan

—Ghalib

One day I asked my soul, what is Dilli?
It replied: Imagine the world is the body, then Dilli is its life force.

—Translation by author

Mirza Ghalib, the eternal poet laureate of Delhi, wrote these words around the time of the Sepoy Rebellion in 1857. The ethos of that time—of *shaiyari* and *ghazal* and *kabootarbaazi*—has been imaginatively explored in popular works such as William Dalrymple's *City of Djinns* and *The Last Mughal*. One hundred and fifty years later, however, Delhi evoked other emotions and names by close observers. In 2000, Denis Vidal, Emma Tarlo, and Veronique DuPont declared Delhi an "unloved city."[1] In 2019, Amita Baviskar named it an "uncivil city."[2] Other contemporary reporters such as Aman Sethi in *A Free Man*, Rana Dasgupta in *Capital*, and Aravind Adiga in *The White Tiger* seem to agree. Sethi writes about the city as a "giant construction site" of perpetual dislocations and hysteria; Adiga and Dasgupta see rampant inequality, corruption, greed, excess, and murderousness spreading from the city to its shiny new borderlands like Gurgaon.

When Ghalib composed his paean of love, there were about 150,000 residents in Delhi, and the city occupied more or less the same area as what is now called Shahjahanabad (Purani Dilli). When Delhi's unlovable new names began to become known in the academic world at the turn of the millennium, the population of the National Capital Territory (NCT), which

is now commonly thought of as the city of Delhi, was a little under 14 million. The population of the National Capital Region (NCR), which we can think of as Delhi metropolis, was about 20.5 million. In the next 10 years, by 2011, the city (the NCT) grew by 3 million and the metropolitan region (the NCR) by 6 million. At this moment of writing, the next census of 2021 is still one year away, but estimates suggest that the population of the NCT (Delhi city) is over 20 million and that of the NCR (Delhi metropolis) more than 30 million.

The "unloved and uncivil" city's population *grew* by 20 of Ghalib's beloved Dillis in each of the previous two decades. About 200 Dillis of Ghalib's time now populate the Delhi metropolis. Delhi, rather than Dilli, is now an urban giant—such as Tokyo, Shanghai, Beijing, Jakarta, and Manila—the likes of which the world had scarcely seen before this millennium.

It is time to ask Ghalib's question again: "What is Delhi?" This book is an attempt at an answer. It is the outcome of a large project that began in 2013. At that conceptualization stage, the leaders were the editors of this book and key contributors like Devesh Kapur and Milan Vaishnav. Eventually, over 20 scholars were involved in it at different points, plus a large group that designed a survey and collected data for the project. Despite this considerable effort of thousands of person-hours, the answer provided here is partial. Perhaps, that is inevitable given Delhi's size and complexity; perhaps, all answers to this question are necessarily incomplete. We believe, however, that what is offered here is (at least) original because the angle or perspective from which we look at Delhi is one that has not been used before. This claim is explained in the following paragraphs.

For the prime movers of this project, Ghalib's question was foremost a territorial one. Where does Delhi begin and end? Before making claims about a place, it is necessary to know exactly what is included in its boundaries. By and large, most scholars of Delhi focus on the NCT, which is a union territory with a fixed boundary, or a sub-area inside it. This is the usual view. We took the position that this view is, in several respects, rather limited. City boundaries are notoriously arbitrary. For example, the city of San Francisco in California had about 880,000 people in 2010, whereas the San Francisco Bay Area (technically, the San Jose–San Francisco–Oakland Combined Statistical Area in the US census) was tenfold larger, with 8.8 million residents. People live and work in the San Francisco Bay Area by crossing municipal boundaries every day. Rarely are they aware that they are doing so. These municipal boundaries do not matter much for the economic or social behavior of people or firms in the region.

We take the view that the Delhi metropolitan region is much the same. People crisscross every day between the NCT, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh—especially Gurgaon, Ghaziabad, Faridabad, and Noida—for work or leisure. They vote in different jurisdictions but live and work in the same region. For practical reasons—because there are now government actions and documents that establish it—we took that larger region to be the NCR.

It is possible that most residents of this region do not know the name "NCR," nor its boundaries, but the same is likely true of all major metropolitan regions in the world—from San Francisco to Jakarta (Jabodetabek is the current official terminology for Greater Jakarta). One cannot fault the residents for not knowing because not only is the NCR a planning region (hence a notional one, that does not collect taxes nor has an elected body) but it also does not have a fixed boundary. After its creation in 1985, new districts were added to the NCR in 2013 and 2015. In this book, we use the 2013 definition of the NCR. This is a contiguous area of about 46,000 square kilometers that had a population of close to 30 million in 2016. It includes the NCT plus 19 districts in Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan.

Our starting point, therefore, is the most literal answer to the basic question "What is Delhi?" Delhi is India's National Capital Region. We note that this initial answer—that identifies our zone of interest as the metropolitan region—itself separates our approach from the usual analysis of Delhi, which is at the scale of the city or the NCT alone.

Facts

This initial answer may be geographically expansive but it is not poetic. Neither does it say anything about the content—the innards—of this growing body. It is this, the metaphorical anatomy of the organic region called Delhi that interests us. Ghalib's Dilli has been transformed not only in size but also in social composition. To stay with the biological metaphor, what was a simple unicellular organism like paramecium has become a complex organism of many different types of cells that can be distinguished by size and function. We know that it is possible to differentiate social groups in Delhi by economic class, social identity (of religion and caste), education, language, and migration status: Jat and Dalit, Sikh and Muslim, Bengali and Tamil, Haryanvi and Purvanchali, members of resident welfare associations (RWAs) and their security guards and maids, recent migrants who are college students or village brides, and daily wage laborers for Maruti Suzuki and members of parliament. We also know

that the metropolis is a tapestry of spaces—neighborhoods, ghettoes, residential enclaves, institutional areas (for example, the Indian Institute of Technology and Jawaharlal Nehru University campuses), planned and unplanned and authorized and unauthorized colonies—and these spaces can be as distinct as separate cities. Therefore, even the most casual observer of Delhi knows that it is an agglomeration of a vast variety of identities and physical spaces.

All this is common, if somewhat unspecific, knowledge. The reason for the lack of specificity is that the state of expert knowledge on Delhi—its facts, patterns, and explanations—is rather limited, and given the size and significance of the metropolis, especially as the capital city of one-sixth of humanity, not a little surprising. The "facts" of Delhi are not nonexistent, but they are thinner than one should expect. The Indian system of data collection—the decennial censuses and many more rounds of sample surveys (72 when this book was written)—does provide basic demographic information, but it is either insufficient in detail or at too aggregate a scale to seriously interrogate our question at hand.

There are three crucial problems with government data on Delhi (which also apply to all of India and all Indian cities). First, there is limited information on social identity (the only identifiers reported in government data are religion and whether an individual belongs to any Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe) and bare-bones information on education, transportation, migration, and so on. Moreover, even this limited information (say, on education or commute to work) has hardly been analyzed for the NCT or the NCR. Second, all the available information is geographically aggregated (to wards in cities); as a result, all urban data are spatially over-bounded to the extent that there is not much that can be investigated at what is typically considered a disaggregate urban scale (say neighborhoods or housing enclaves). Third, there is no statistically valid or reliable information on social attitudes, that is, what the citizens think about important questions on identity, behavior, community, and politics.

We considered it necessary, therefore, to begin our investigations from a stronger foundation of facts that would allow us to make robust statements on the makeup of Delhi. Before we could seek patterns or explanations about its social and physical spaces, before we could provide some summary judgment—that Delhi is like this or Delhi is like that—it was necessary to know what was being summarized. There are two sets of overarching questions.

First, there are questions on subjects on which the Indian government does collect data, but at insufficient detail. There is some information on these questions, but not enough: Who lives where? Where did they come from, and when, and why? What do they do during the day? What do they own? How

do they move around? How much education do they have—by age, by gender, by quality? What is the condition of housing? The slums and *jhuggi jhopri*s? The authorized and unauthorized settlements? Other physical infrastructure (power, roads, water)? Social infrastructure (education, health care)? Services? Crime? Energy?

Second, there are questions about social and political identities and attitudes that are never asked by the government, nor, as far as we are aware, have they been asked by any nongovernmental organization at the metropolitan scale. What communities do people belong to? Who are their neighbors? How do they get along with other communities (religions, castes)? Whom do they marry? Whom do their children marry? Whom do they eat with? Whom do they not eat with? How has Delhi—and living in an urban milieu—changed them? Men? Women? Religions? Castes? The relations between them? Between generations? Or has Delhi changed them at all? What kinds of problems do people face and how do they solve them? Who are their civic and political representatives, their *neta*s? How are the different social identities of the people (of religion, caste, class, language, migration, education, gender, and age) reflected in party politics?

The Center for the Advanced Study of India–National Capital Region Survey

A very large part of the effort that has gone into this book was in unearthing these facts. It involved the implementation of a large survey to collect information about households in Delhi. To the best of our knowledge, no survey of comparable scale, breadth, and academic rigor has been carried out for Delhi; probably, the only comparable undertaking in India is Janaagraha's survey of Bangalore. As is true of all surveys, it was not possible to ask all the questions that the investigative team wanted, but enough were asked to answer some of the more important questions of fact on the lives and perceptions of the residents of Delhi. The survey was funded by the Center for the Advanced Study of India (CASI) at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, and was carried out on the ground from late 2015 to early 2016. We call it the CASI–NCR Survey in this book.

The CASI–NCR Survey sample included 5,477 households with 24,693 individual members. Approximately, 61 percent of the sample was from the NCT, 23 percent from Uttar Pradesh, 13 percent from Haryana, and 3 percent from Rajasthan. The bulk of the sample was drawn from the 2014 electoral

rolls (with a "random walk" constituting roughly 15 percent of the sample to capture households that may have been missing from the electoral rolls, perhaps because they were very recent migrants). Voting booths served as the primary sampling unit and voter lists as the sample frame (except for the "random walk" element). The data were collected on tablets, concurrent data checks were conducted in real time, and verification/corrections were done using follow-up calls to respondents. The "Statistical Appendix" has some more important details on the design, implementation, coverage, questions, and key methodological features of the CASI–NCR Survey.

Table A.1 in the "Statistical Appendix" shows how the CASI–NCR sample compares with the 2011 Census and National Sample Survey data for the NCT. The closeness of the match suggests that our sample was representative; that conclusions about Delhi can be drawn from it. As discussed later in detail in this chapter, we surely missed some proportion of the population—the well-to-do upper tail of income earners—but that population (whose size we are unable to estimate) is missing from all surveys in India. The CASI–NCR Survey was the mother lode of information that was mined in different ways in 10 of the chapters in this volume. In addition to these data-based analyses, this volume includes four contributions by other established scholars of Delhi who were not associated with the survey. Together, the survey-based and independent analysts have written what we hope are some of the most compelling stories of contemporary Delhi.

Some Missing Pieces

We should note that this is not a comprehensive study. It is limited both by methodology and coverage. Our contributors draw on ideas and methods from several disciplines—from political science, economics, sociology, and geography—on human capital, inequality, demography, migration, marriage, environment, gender, elections, mapping, survey methods, modeling, and so on. But there is the dominance of one method (the CASI–NCR Survey which is attuned to economics and sociology) over others (especially anthropological methods like ethnography and mixed methods like focus groups or interviews). And several important subjects are simply not taken into account.

The survey methodology itself has some inbuilt limitations. Surveys can only provide information on what the respondents know or think, not what is outside these domains, such as expert matters on law or policy, or statistical facts on industry or the economy. Some of these issues—such as laws and policies

on housing and infrastructure—are dealt with by this volume's contributors using some (but limited) information from the survey and other sources. Other issues—such as statistics on industry and the economy—are not discussed in this book because our survey did not ask those questions (nor were we able to commission an external expert to carry it out). Therefore, one big gap in our study relates to industry and commerce in Delhi NCR. As a result, the discussions in the following 14 chapters provide some information on the labor market but little on the structure of commerce or industry in the NCR.

The second major subject we did not investigate separately is the land market of Delhi and its land uses. Two of the chapters (Chapters 3 and 11)—on settlements by Heller, Mukhopadhyay, Sheikh, and Banda, and on spatial politics by Srivastava—refer to land issues at some length, but not as central features. We sidestepped the subject of land despite our strong conviction that land use and land markets are essential features of urban form, even perhaps because of it. We argue that to carry out a land-oriented analysis was a different project that required a fundamentally different approach than the one used by us.

The land market in India and Delhi is very important, primarily because land prices in the country are arguably the highest in the world (when we compare similar settings). For example, the peak price of land in Delhi (in its most desirable areas) is twice as high as the peak price in Washington, DC. What is much more remarkable is that the average price of land in the NCT is over 30 times the average price in Washington, DC. These extraordinary prices fundamentally influence land use (that is, who gets to use what land for what purpose), which, in turn, influences access to housing and public goods.

The price of land is, in many ways, the most powerful factor shaping the physical structure of contemporary Delhi and the quality of life for its residents—from the well-to-do, who can and do participate in this market, to the poor, who effectively pay a large tax for sharing the city with an upper-class minority that sets prices that only it can afford. This is true of not only Delhi but almost all Indian cities, especially the large ones. This condition has been exacerbated from about 2000 onward, when the prices began to spike. Before that, prices were what could be called "high" for a low-income nation but not extraordinary as they are now.[3]

Our position, therefore, is not that Delhi's land market is not important; on the contrary, it is, and very much so. In fact, many of the most topical stories about Delhi—such as Gurgaon and Noida, DLF and Unitech, drunken louts in high-class hotels, and *Khosla ka Ghosla*—are indeed about its land

market.[4] It may be fair to say that in the social gatherings and watering holes of the city, there is no other subject (other than politics) that occupies more discussion space. But, before we began this project, when we were designing the analytical frame, we agreed that to analyze Delhi from the perspective of its land market would require a different approach than the one we wanted (and different investigators) and would produce a rather different set of findings and book. In addition, because the extraordinariness of the land market is of relatively recent vintage—it is less than two decades old—its effects may not be fully in play yet and may still be dominated by government policies (such as the government's considerable ownership of land in Delhi and its sizable involvement in producing housing stock). Our commitment to the survey method was, at the same time, a turn away from a land-based investigation.

The Structure of the Book

The following 14 chapters in this volume are organized in two parts. Part 1 is the "State of the Metropolis." It has seven chapters on what can be called the material reality of Delhi. Part 2—"Social and Political Change"—has seven chapters on social and political conditions and attitudes, with an emphasis on the transformation (or lack thereof) of social and political behaviors and views.

Part 1 begins with Chapter 1, in which Shrobona Karkun lays out the evolution of the *geography* and *demography* of the city and metropolis using data from the census, satellite images, and historic maps. Neelanjan Sircar studies the ownership of *assets* in Chapter 2; he devises a new index of asset distribution to show the extent of material inequality in the metropolis. In Chapter 3, Patrick Heller, Partha Mukhopadhyay, Shahana Sheikh, and Subhadra Banda, a group that has been working on Indian urban issues at the Centre for Policy Research for several years, provide their insights on Delhi's different forms of *housing* settlements, especially the marginal and unauthorized types. In Chapter 4, Shamindra Nath Roy builds on this to describe and analyze the condition of inequality in key infrastructure *services* (such as access to sewerage, water supply, and roads). In Chapter 5, Khusdeep Malhotra quantifies and analyzes *migration* in the region and shows that it is an exclusionary process that creates a "spatial disadvantage" for recent migrants. Radhika Khosla studies *energy* consumption in Chapter 6, in the context of the specter of rising energy demand in Indian cities. In Chapter 7, Milan Vaishnav and Matthew Lillehaugen analyze *crime* victimization in Delhi in terms of perception, reality, police responses, and consequences.

Part 2 begins with Chapter 8 on *social change* by Sumitra Badrinathan and Devesh Kapur, with a focus on understanding how social groups that are differentiated by religion, caste, and economic class interact with each other through the practice of sharing food (they do not!). Chapter 9, by Megan Reed, continues the examination by looking at *marriage* practices ("arranged," "inter-caste," or "inter-religion") through multiple generations. Chapter 10 is on *education*, in which Deepaboli Chatterjee, Babu Lal, and Rimjhim Saxena present detailed information on educational attainment by age, gender, generation, and labor force participation. In Chapter 11, Sanjay Srivastava examines, at an anthropological scale, how citizenship and *community* are constituted in settings as far apart as demolished slums and high-end RWAs in Gurgaon. Neelanjan Sircar continues that micro-scale approach in his Chapter 12 study of local *neta*s (political intermediaries) and how they solve problems (or not) for a wide range of class constituencies. Adnan Farooqui studies *party politics* at the scale of the NCT in Chapter 13, with an emphasis on the rise of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and the influx of Purvanchali migrants (from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh). In Chapter 14, Awadhendra Sharan brings a long lens and deep knowledge to outline the evolution of the politics and policies on Delhi's air, its one resource that cannot be parceled out by social identity or class or housing type.

Many of the findings and explanations are genuinely new and surprising, even to us, and to many of the Delhi experts before whom we presented some of this material at conferences and workshops. All these contributions—survey-based or not—together create a collection of stories that reflect the richness, diversity, and inequality of material conditions and human experience in Delhi. As a result, our second attempt to answer the question "What is Delhi?" leads to an obvious conclusion: Delhi is not one thing, but many. It is a predictable and banal conclusion, especially for a metropolis as big as Delhi, with as long a history, that is a capital city for arguably the most diverse society in the world, and, as we show later, one that is deeply unequal.

Theories

Our core question—Ghalib's question—seems to demand more. It seems to beg the narration of a meta-story, a story that accounts for all stories. In short, a theory. If we assume that Delhi is not the "life force" of the world (as Mirza Ghalib would have it)—an assumption shared by all our contributors and worldly readers—then is it something else? If it is, what is it? Can we make

claims about Delhi that are generalizable? If yes, generalizable to what scale: all cities, all Asian cities, all large cities, capital cities, urban India, or all of India? Is there some international group of cities within which we can place Delhi, is this city merely a large Indian one, or is it unique?

To begin to address these questions, it is necessary to wade into a contentious debate about "urban theory" in international, especially Euro-American, scholarship in urban studies. The core question animating this debate is whether it is possible to have a single approach to understanding cities and urbanization around the world, and if it is possible to do so, what that approach should be. This is the sort of question and issue—global and totalizing—that is important to analysts located in the high citadels of social theory. Let us examine (briefly) how much relevance this has for us.

According to Helga Leitner and Eric Sheppard, leading figures in the movement to "provincialize" urban theory and thereby to decolonize it from Euro-American power over discourse and analysis, "no single theory suffices to account for the variegated nature of urbanization and cities across the world."[5] On the other side are eminent analysts such as Michael Storper and Allen Scott who accuse the post-colonialists of "convoluted philosophical and epistemological abstractions that actually present barriers to any understanding of the urban as a concrete social phenomenon." They argue that despite the obvious dissimilarities between them, "cities are everywhere characterized by agglomeration involving the gravitational pull of people, economic activities … into interlocking, high-density, nodal blocks of land use."[6]

Before we take sides in this debate, it is necessary to ask a basic question: Who is theory for? Who consumes it? In other words, what is the market for "theory"? My assumption here is that the target audience plays a large role in guiding the content of theory. Just as much as Chetan Bhagat writes for a particular readership, and does Arundhati Roy, and, for that matter, do Haruki Murakami and J. K. Rowling, so do urban theorists write for a readership of people like themselves, academics in other Euro-American institutions, who use language and categories that may mean something to each other, but not necessarily to the rest of the world. Theirs is a view from far above. Whether that view yields patterns (as Storper and Scott argue) or not (as Leitner and Sheppard insist), the framework is always global and comparative. In this view, Delhi can often become nothing more than simply another data point whose details of history, society, and politics are not particularly important.

It is surely not unreasonable to suggest that there is some validity in both approaches. All cities are unique, but all cities also have commonalities. All