

# This Year/This City

[Internal] This Year, This City

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- > If you think about it, a year is the 1,811 casualties that entered the signboard of traffic related mortality statistics at the ITO crossing on the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2001.
- > A year is the now forgotten summer of the Monkey Man. When East Delhi stayed awake to battle a simian cyborg adversary that rose from the city's unconscious.
- > A year is the drive to displace small industrial units, to make for a cleaner city that put hundreds of thousands of jobs on the line.
- > A year is the record number of slum demolitions that might have surpassed even the demolitions of the emergency in 1975.
- > A year is the assassination of Phoolan Devi at her doorstep as she came home for lunch from the Parliament.
- > A year is the slowly advancing bridge of the Metro and the dug up roads – with signs advertising a “Dream Coming True”.
- > A year is the mushrooming of coffee bars.
- > A year is the shootout outside the Parliament on the 13<sup>th</sup> of December
- > A year is the gradual drawing up of a net of surveillance in the city, in the wake of the Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance and the transplantation of the Maharashtra Combat of Organised Crime Act on to Delhi.
- > A year is the killing of a man in a midnight raid in Okhla, in the wake of the attack on the Red Fort on the evidence that he frequented cyber cafés too often.

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- > A year is the feeling, ever since September 11, and then December 13, that New Delhi begins where New York ends.
- > A year is the drive by the Delhi police to collect information about tenants and outsiders.
- > A year is a year of identification of Afghan refugees and Bangladeshi immigrants.
- > A year is a year of overnight queues of Auto Rickshas for CNG outside petrol pumps.
- > A year is a year of looking at multiplexes mushroom and cinema halls crumble.
- > A year is a year of the enactment of a law that prohibits posters, hand-bills, banners and graffiti on the walls of public buildings, flyovers and on electric poles in Delhi
- > A year is a year of Internet surfing rates reaching the all time low of Rs. 10 per half-hour.
- > A year is the growth in the number of installations of Linux machines in people's homes.
- > A year is the time we have spent talking to people at street corners, in cinema halls, to the young people in the LNJP *basti*, to ourselves.
- > A year is a year of talking about and listening to people and the television talk about war.
- > A year is all this, and a short time in the life of a city that has been around for more than a thousand years.

**From: Supreet Sethi <supreet@sarai.net>**

One of the events that marked the last year is Internet connectivity by local cable *wallas*. These are a bunch of TV cable providers joining hands with some ISPs to provide Internet connectivity in neighbourhoods. Most of these providers are using Ethernet network which has a potential bandwidth of 10 Mbps (roughly 20 times the ordinary 56 kbps of connection). These Ethernet based infrastructures have a potential which hasn't been exploited yet. The most interesting part of this network is that a content once saved in a certain machine in this network can be retrieved at a very high speed. An example could be video content that would be downloaded once and then others could access that movie on demand. This way people can share the pool bandwidth for efficiency. This could also lead to formation of a social network on the basis of need, i.e. an efficient use of Internet access. People could actually start using various open-source tools for generation, storage and retrieval of content. This would provide for viewing pleasure of users and it could, potentially, also lead to the generation of much more interesting content.

## Ethernet based infrastructures have a potential which hasn't been exploited yet

**From: Joy Chatterjee <joy@sarai.net>**

Last year on a winter night after half an hour of net surfing I was walking in the streets in front of my house. Two teenagers were walking in front of me. Each of them was trying to describe the size of their home.

"How big is your room, is it smaller than my *paan* shop?"

"No, it is much smaller, and how big is yours? Is it bigger than my kitchen?"

"It is smaller than your toilet". And they continued.

I said to myself, yes, the world is truly becoming smaller and smaller.

## yes, the world is truly becoming smaller and smaller and smaller and smaller and smaller

**From: Ranita Chatterjee <ranita@sarai.net>**

I guess I'd finally figured out last year (like most *Dilliwallas* do), that you *cannot* live with a daily fear of violence... there's got to be a point when you get comfortable with it and go about your lives.

This comfortable existence was shattered after 12/13, not by what actually happened, but by my law-fearing landlord who suddenly demanded a fresh account of my 'activities' and my background. His reasoning was simple – the Delhi Police demanded that all tenants had to be verified!

Totally offended, I tried to explain that he'd known me, and of my 'activities', for the past one and a half years that I had been renting his premises. These protestations went completely unheard.

It 's been more that a decade since I've made Delhi my home. But to be suddenly told that I was, after all, an outsider – that I needed to prove that I was a legal domicile – came as a rude shock.

I've got the papers to justify my presence within the city – but I wonder why I have to go through it all only to be able to go home.

## my law-fearing landlord who suddenly demanded a fresh account of my 'activities' and my background

**From: Tripta Chandola <tripta@sarai.net>**

I was driving back after a late night show. The drive from Chanakya was enveloped in silence. Just after crossing the Nehru Place flyover my senses were jolted by flaring lights from the opposite direction.

"Delhi people! I tell you, have to drive on high beam".

As we approached the light, I knew something was wrong. Got the feeling. Could not articulate it. Could not avoid it either.

There, being saluted by the headlights of a Police Enfield motorcycle and guarded by roadside bricks on the deserted road, lay a man not yet dead but dead enough.

Next morning while driving to work, the ISBT crossing greeted me with

...Died Yesterday

...Since Jan 1 2001

You could be a figure hung on the board. You could be someone lying on the road. Always a part of the city but never enough to claim your right.

It is the shadow cast over the city which defines its dynamics.  
Between the do's and the don'ts. Between the limits and the limitations.  
Between the haves and have-nots. Between the real and the reality.  
Between the real and the rational. Welcome to the city!

## You could be a figure hung on the board. You could be someone lying on the road

**From: Pankaj Kaushal <pankaj@sarai.net>**

10 o'clock in the morning on a long and lonesome highway east of Dhaula Kuan (bless Bob Segar). A young guy (me) boards an almost empty bus. And the bus is ten minutes earlier than it should be. He wonders why?

He has forgotten that it is the 26<sup>th</sup> of January. The city is on Red Alert for Republic Day. And he is just a citizen in a Sovereign Democratic Republic with a Constitution to guide the Republic's destiny.

The empty, early bus passes the empty Dhaula Kuan roundabout. He gets off to switch routes, and just then a cop asks him "Yahan kya kar rehe ho?" ("What are you doing here?").

The cop is suspicious. He wants to know what the boy is doing out at 10:20 in the morning on a major city roundabout when he should be celebrating Republic Day at home, in front of the TV, like everybody else.

The empty city at standstill for the Republic on TV. Ironic.

## The empty city at standstill for the Republic on TV

**From: Jeebesh Bagchi <jeebesh@sarai.net>**

Delhi in the last few months has become a place where every time you seek to represent it, you encounter men in uniform asking for credentials. Simple polite questions: Why are you shooting? Where are you from? What's your car number? Do you have any authorisation?

Sometimes these questions lead to conversations.

On 31<sup>st</sup> December we thought we would shoot the plaque at ITO that lists accident numbers. It was late afternoon. A tall and distinguished policeman started, expectedly, with a question. Over the next

half-hour I learnt that the displayed numbers are primarily about 'spot deaths' (later deaths are not 'accounted'), the winter fog kills more people on the train lines than on roads (light and sound become asynchronous in the fog), all big car owners seem to be related to the higher police bureaucracy, politeness is a sign of inadequate authority, and the colour difference that the taking off of a pollution mask produces on one's face makes one look like a monkey!

**Why are you shooting? Where are you from?  
What's your car number?  
Do you have any authorisation?**

**From: Monica Narula <monica@sarai.net>**

She is an attractive 28-year-old, who has already been in jail for 5 years, but her case is nowhere near closure. She does not know yet if she will be out soon, or in for life (which by law is incarceration for 20 years, almost always commuted to 14). She is jailed as an accomplice to murder. The story is long and messy, and it will take me a while to find out its contours.

When I first meet her, I know nothing. She sees me, a woman of the same age, and a similar background, and starts talking. She speaks of things that are familiar to both her and me. Days spent in Delhi University, restaurants, so on. She is simultaneously reserved about her life and very open. Life in the prison is tough, not because the food is inedible, or of other physical hardship – these are myths of jail before her time – but because "there is no one who comes enough from a world like yours to become a friend, and because in jail you stop planning for tomorrow".

**"in jail you stop planning for tomorrow"**

**From: Ravikant <ravikant@sarai.net>**

One way of feeling your city is to get out of it. I like to wander away from Delhi, and enjoy the difference. The clean air, the lack of noise, the stars in the night, the languid existence, the identity you acquire in another place as *Dilliwalla* – all of this is fascinating and instructive at the same time. It is a special relationship of envy you come to form with

other city *wallas*. You mourn the loss of everything that your city does not have anymore and they seem to be admiring everything you have come to acquire. You dig deeper and start comparing notes about the relative advantages and disadvantages. You go further and wonder if you could exchange places and immediately realise that it is not really a choice.

Away from the basic sentiments of nostalgia and longing such comparisons usually evoke, my newspaper reading sensibilities received a severe jolt in Bhopal recently, by a news item placed prominently in a box on the front page, which reported a stabbing incident. The CISF guard from Eastern UP who was taking us around confirmed this: "There hasn't been a single incident of murder here in the last one and a half years".

What a contrast to this city's calendar of this year.

You mourn the loss of everything that your city does not have anymore and they seem to be admiring everything you have come to acquire

**From: Shveta Sarda <shveta@sarai.net>**

I returned, after two years, to a Delhi where strangers speak with one another. Strangers in buses, on whether I've heard the prediction that following 9/11, India will be the next superpower. Auto drivers on the lines for CNG and the metro affecting their lives. Strangers in the mushrooming coffee houses, about their work, and life in general.

Is it that the spaces where people meet have altered? or the changing landscape? events of earth shaking relevance that have forced people out of their shells? or just me, returning home from afar?

a Delhi where strangers speak with one another

**From: Bhrigu <bhrigu@sarai.net>**

I returned to Delhi in late September 2001, having been away for exactly one year. I couldn't help but marvel at the transformation – the speed at which things had slowed down in this one year for the promise of a faster, cleaner, safer future. Space, time and people are at loggerheads here because Delhi 2001 is a city in transit.

Overheard conversations have changed too. People are more interested in international relations now and a lot surer of the malevolence of the enemy. Sunny Deol had bravely taken on the mantle in the meantime, of protecting our dystopian borders. He stares at me threateningly every morning, eyes bulging, from an occasional hoarding or newspaper.

I dealt with the shock of the new by clinging to the familiar. I sighed with relief when Minto Bridge still flooded at the slightest hint of rain, celebrated my bourgeois-dom in Khan Market, ate oily mutton *korma* at Kareem's, drank over-sweet *chai* at Mandi House, relieved myself on the long corner wall heading to bus *adda* and on the way back home watched the conductor of the 502 abuse an overtaking Blueline bus.

Past imperfect is present continuous in millennial Delhi.

## People are more interested in international relations now and a lot surer of the malevolence of the enemy

**From: Parvati Sharma <parvati@sarai.net>**

On the 28<sup>th</sup> of December 2001, I spent 13 hours in the Indira Gandhi International Airport. Every half-hour a crackling voice instructed us to await future announcements. Every half-hour a smoker challenged the signs that proclaim smoking a punishable offence, until eventually the airport staff began bumming cigarettes off dazed passengers. I spent 4 of those 13 hours in the plane: both the meal and *Gadar* were served before take-off.

A steward explained:

"We are waiting for a pilot – our pilot has refused to fly, you see. And it is now evening: at 6:30, it's difficult to find a pilot who hasn't started drinking".

Airports in Singapore, Hong Kong are transit lands, located nowhere. IGI is located in New Delhi.

## it is now evening: at 6:30, it's difficult to find a pilot who hasn't started drinking

**From: Awadhendra Sharan <sharan@sarai.net>**

The arrogance of city power brokers coupled with anxieties of 'security', radically refashioned our experience of the everyday over the last year. But there was hope too. As I travel home from Sarai to East Delhi, I witness the steady progress of the Metro. I know not what shape this public transport will take (personally, whether it will provide opportunities to read and reflect while on commute). But what I do see is a remarkable economy of operations, silence despite constant work, an absence of dust despite mounds of mud, and smooth traffic flows despite long stretches of barricades with the word Metro neatly displayed on mellow yellow boards. And this gives me hope, of the possibility of working in another fashion, of combining change with dignity and of creating a new Delhi without doing violence to the old.

**possibility of combining change  
with dignity and of creating a new Delhi  
without doing violence to the old**