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New Delhi on Film and Television

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** Why Delhi on Screen Matters
- **Chapter 2** The City as Palimpsest: Old Delhi, New Delhi, and the NCR
- **Chapter 3** Media Timelines: From Doordarshan to Streaming Platforms
- **Chapter 4** The Politics of Location: Permits, Policing, and Power
- **Chapter 5** Corridors of the Nation: Raisina Hill and Lutyens' Delhi
- **Chapter 6** Walled City Realism: Bazaars, By-lanes, and Oral Histories
- **Chapter 7** Edge City Imaginaries: Gurgaon, Noida, and the New Middle Class
- **Chapter 8** Transit Aesthetics: Metro, Highways, and Moving Cameras
- **Chapter 9** Gendered Geographies: Safety, Mobility, and the Night City
- **Chapter 10** Class, Caste, and the Everyday Capital
- **Chapter 11** Protest on Camera: Jantar Mantar, India Gate, and Publics
- **Chapter 12** Crime and Investigation: Policing Narratives Across Formats
- **Chapter 13** Love Among Ruins: Monuments as Emotional Architecture
- **Chapter 14** Bureaucracy on Screen: Offices, Files, and Slow Time
- **Chapter 15** Tongues of Delhi: Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, English, and Hinglish
- **Chapter 16** City as Protagonist, City as Antagonist
- **Chapter 17** Sounding Delhi: Noise, Music, and Memory
- **Chapter 18** Foodways and Festivals: Taste as Narrative Device
- **Chapter 19** From Frame to Footfall: Screen Tourism in the Capital
- **Chapter 20** Delhi for the World: Foreign Films, Newsreels, and Documentaries
- **Chapter 21** Diasporic and Transnational Gazes
- **Chapter 22** Designing Power: Production Design, Sets, and Protocol
- **Chapter 23** Platform Politics: Algorithms, Censorship, and Distribution
- **Chapter 24** Mapping the Reel City: An Annotated Guide for Location Scouts
- **Chapter 25** Working in Delhi: Filmmaker Interviews and On-Set Realities

Introduction

New Delhi is more than a backdrop; it is a narrative engine whose architectures, accents, and anxieties shape the stories told about the nation and, increasingly, to the world. This book asks how cinema, television, and streaming platforms have imagined the city—and how those imaginations, in turn, inform how publics navigate, remember, market, and visit it. To track Delhi on screen is to trace the evolving grammar of Indian modernity: the choreography of protest and protocol around India Gate, the rhythmic density of Shahjahanabad, the staged transparency of glass-and-steel offices, and the gliding neutrality of the Metro. Each of these spaces carries with it a politics of access and a palette of emotions that artists, commissioners, censors, and algorithms negotiate in real time.

Our approach blends close textual analysis with production studies, urban geography, and media history. We examine how legacy broadcast institutions and new platforms cultivate particular ways of seeing—what this book calls the Raisina gaze (power framed through national symbolism), the bazaar gaze (the intimate bustle of the old city), and the periphery gaze (the aspirational vistas of the NCR edge). Location politics sit at the center of this inquiry: permits and policing decide what can be filmed and when; bureaucratic routines leave their stamp on *mise-en-scène*; and security protocols choreograph both camera movement and crowd control. These constraints are not merely obstacles but structuring forces that shape narratives, genres, and even acting styles.

Representation is also a matter of texture—of sound, language, and rhythm. Delhi's multilingual everyday—Hindi layered with Urdu poetics, Punjabi exuberance, English corporate speak, and the elastic ease of Hinglish—gives its screens a distinctive polyphony. We ask what happens when this linguistic richness is compressed for national syndication or global discovery on streaming menus. Soundscapes matter too: the hiss of pressure cookers, the peal of temple bells, the call to prayer, the drill of a parade, the constant motor of traffic. Such sonic cues anchor viewers in place, mobilizing memory and mood to produce a sense of “Delhi-ness” even when images are shot elsewhere and stitched together in post-production.

The city's social cartography—gender, class, caste—threads through these chapters. Media often maps Delhi as a city of risk after dark, a trope that can both surface and stereotype women's experiences of safety and freedom. Crime serials, reality policing formats, and investigative dramas cultivate an ambient sense of vulnerability that competes with romcom fantasies of gardens and ruins. At the same time, the office comedy, the student hostel caper, and the festival film render the everyday capital: forms of waiting, hustling, and negotiating that define urban life but rarely headline

tourism campaigns. Bringing these strands together, the book tracks how familiar shortcuts—“VIP Delhi,” “heritage Delhi,” “startup Delhi”—stabilize into formulas, and how filmmakers resist or reinvent them.

Delhi’s image is now firmly transnational. International news crews, documentary filmmakers, and diasporic productions bring external frames that can amplify or challenge domestic narratives. The result is a feedback loop: images made for foreign audiences return to local screens and civic debates, while domestic hits enlist global streaming infrastructures to address dispersed publics. One measurable outcome is screen tourism: the circulation of itineraries patterned on shows and films, the branding of neighborhoods through iconic shots, and the municipal desire to be “shoot-friendly.” This book parses the promises and perils of that economy, asking who benefits, who is displaced, and how authenticity is performed for the camera and for visitors alike.

Research for this study combines archival work, location mapping, and interviews with directors, showrunners, location managers, production designers, and fixers. Their testimonies—about negotiating permissions, re-dressing spaces under tight schedules, working around protests or state events, and caring for crews and communities—anchor the analysis in practical knowledge. An annotated catalogue of frequently used and overlooked locations offers a field guide for future shoots, highlighting logistical constraints, ambient noise profiles, light conditions, and neighborhood dynamics. Together, these methods aim to connect the aesthetics of Delhi on screen to the infrastructures and institutions that make those images possible.

Finally, the chapters are arranged to move from foundational frames to specific terrains, then outward to global circuits and practical toolkits. They can be read sequentially or consulted selectively, depending on whether one’s interest is in monuments as emotional architecture, platform-era distribution, the ethics of filming protest, or the craft of designing power for the camera. Across them all runs a core proposition: that the ways Delhi is pictured do not merely mirror the city; they participate in building it—shaping routes we take, places we value, and futures we can imagine.

CHAPTER ONE: Why Delhi on Screen Matters

New Delhi, a city that often feels like a carefully curated diorama of national aspirations and historical weight, holds a peculiar fascination for the moving image. It's a city where every corner, from the sprawling lawns of India Gate to the labyrinthine alleys of Chandni Chowk, seems to hum with a narrative waiting to unfold. This intrinsic drama, coupled with its status as the nation's capital, makes Delhi a compelling, and at times, inescapable character in Indian and international media. But why does this cinematic and televisual portrayal of Delhi matter beyond mere aesthetics or plot devices? The answer lies in the profound way these on-screen depictions don't just reflect the city but actively sculpt our understanding of it, shaping public perception, influencing urban development, and even steering the footfall of tourists.

Think of Delhi not just as a location, but as a vast, living soundstage where the everyday plays out against a backdrop of monumental history and relentless modernity. When a film chooses to set a pivotal scene at Humayun's Tomb, or a gritty crime series navigates the chaotic traffic of ITO, these choices are rarely incidental. They are deliberate acts of storytelling that tap into a collective consciousness about what Delhi represents. The city on screen becomes a shorthand, a visual cue that can evoke power, tradition, struggle, or aspiration in an instant. For audiences, especially those who may never set foot in the capital, these mediated experiences form the bedrock of their knowledge and emotional connection to Delhi.

The sheer volume of content set in Delhi across various platforms underscores its significance. From the early days of Doordarshan, where grainy images of Republic Day parades cemented a national identity, to the slick, globally distributed series on Netflix and Amazon Prime Video, Delhi has consistently offered a rich tapestry for storytellers. This continuous stream of imagery and narrative has imbued specific landmarks, neighborhoods, and even character archetypes with a cultural resonance that transcends their physical reality. The stately bungalows of Lutyens' Delhi become synonymous with political intrigue, while the bustling markets of Old Delhi symbolize an authentic, often romanticized, sense of tradition. These associations, meticulously built over decades of media portrayal, demonstrate the deep interplay between screen culture and urban identity.

The stakes are particularly high because Delhi is not just any metropolis; it is the administrative and political heart of India. What happens on screen here carries implications for how the nation sees itself and how the world sees India. The cinematic gaze on Delhi is often implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, a gaze on India itself. A story about corruption in a Delhi government office can, for some viewers, become a

commentary on systemic issues facing the entire country. Similarly, a heartwarming tale of resilience set in a Delhi slum can humanize the struggles of millions, fostering empathy and understanding. The city thus acts as a metonym, a powerful symbol that distills complex national narratives into digestible, relatable visual forms.

Moreover, the persistent portrayal of Delhi in popular media actively contributes to its public identity, influencing everything from urban planning discourse to investment decisions. When a film showcases the burgeoning tech hubs of Gurgaon, it inadvertently contributes to the narrative of the National Capital Region (NCR) as a locus of economic opportunity and modern development. Conversely, if a series consistently highlights issues of crime or urban decay, it can shape negative perceptions, impacting everything from tourism revenue to the confidence of potential residents. This feedback loop, where media representation shapes reality and reality, in turn, inspires further representation, is a crucial aspect of why Delhi on screen matters so profoundly. It's a dynamic, ever-evolving dialogue between the city and its mediated image.

The tourism effect, a phenomenon increasingly studied in urban geography, is particularly potent in Delhi. Films and television shows serve as powerful, often subconscious, marketing tools. Viewers, captivated by a romantic subplot unfolding against the backdrop of Lodhi Garden or intrigued by a historical drama set within the Red Fort, are often inspired to visit these locations themselves. This phenomenon, dubbed "screen tourism," transforms fictional narratives into tangible economic and cultural impacts. The desire to walk in the footsteps of beloved characters, to experience the atmosphere depicted on screen, drives significant footfall, creating new economies around these cinematic landmarks and shifting the urban experience for both residents and visitors. The curated reality of the screen often becomes the desired reality of the tourist, leading to a fascinating interplay between the imagined and the actual.

Beyond the grand narratives, the intimate details of Delhi life, as captured on screen, also hold significant weight. The way characters speak—the blend of Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, and English that forms the city's unique linguistic tapestry—or the depiction of its diverse culinary scene, contribute to a sense of authenticity and regional flavor. These seemingly minor elements, when repeatedly presented through popular media, become integral to the cultural fabric of the city. They help define what it means to be "Dilliwalla" (a resident of Delhi) and contribute to the rich, multifaceted identity of the capital. It's in these subtle yet pervasive elements that the screen truly matters, shaping not just how the city is seen, but how it is felt and understood at a deeper, more personal level.

The power of media to shape public imagination also extends to how Delhi grapples with its own past and present. Historical dramas set in Mughal Delhi, or contemporary films addressing socio-political issues in the capital, all contribute to an ongoing public

conversation about the city's identity and future. These narratives can reinforce existing myths, challenge dominant perceptions, or even introduce entirely new ways of understanding Delhi's complex heritage. For a city with such a layered history, where ancient ruins stand sentinel next to gleaming skyscrapers, the media provides a crucial lens through which to process this rich and often contradictory urban experience. It offers a space for reflection, critique, and reimagination, making the screen a vital arena for Delhi's evolving self-perception.

Ultimately, studying Delhi on screen is not just an academic exercise; it's an exploration of how a city is actively constructed and understood in the modern world. It's about tracing the lines between fictional portrayals and lived experiences, between planned urban development and the spontaneous narratives that emerge from its streets. The camera, whether wielded by a Bollywood blockbuster director or an independent documentary filmmaker, acts as a powerful witness and an even more powerful shaper of reality. By dissecting these cinematic and televisual representations, we gain a deeper appreciation for the complex relationship between media, urbanism, and the collective imagination, revealing why, for Delhi, its image on screen truly matters.

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