

Fractured Forest, Quartzite City

A History of Delhi and its Ridge

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Introduction


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Delhi. A chilly mid-November morning in India's capital city. Still groggy from sleep, I step out onto my terrace. Big flakes of snow are falling gracefully in looping, swirling arcs. But something is wrong. The snow is gray and black, and it leaves dark stains on the tiled floor of the terrace. The "snow", I suddenly realize, is sooty, half-burned newspaper, drifting onto my terrace from a nearby garbage fire.

Delhi has not always been this polluted, I am told. Especially not Mehrauli, the area where I live. Mehrauli is Delhi's oldest continuously inhabited neighborhood, home to human settlements since the eleventh century, and perhaps even earlier. In traditional Delhi lore, it is said that seven cities have risen and fallen in Delhi. Mehrauli is the first.

Although Mehrauli lost its role as a center of imperial power in the late thirteenth century, it remained a popular place of residence, in part because of its verdure and natural beauty. It is located on the low, undulating hills of the Aravalli mountain range, and the contours of the land make for dramatic views, with Qutb Minar¹—the world's tallest brick minaret, and India's most visited tourist site—as the focal point. The neighborhood was particularly prized by the Mughal emperors, whose own capital city was located roughly fifteen kilometers away. The Mughals saw Mehrauli as a pleasant refuge, a peaceful green getaway from the hubbub of city life.

The epitome of this pastoral beauty was a place commonly known as the *jharna* (waterfall). Built in 1700 by a Mughal nobleman, the *jharna* channeled overflow water from a huge man-made lake. The water tumbled down an immense wall before passing through the perforated roof of an elaborate sandstone structure. An admiring observer described the waterfall at night, when lamps illuminated the structure: "it seemed as if someone had set the water on fire, as if there was a heavy shower of melting gold."² The water then flowed into an intricate



series of canals and pools before reaching a dense mango orchard. In one spot, the water was diverted so that it poured down a smooth flat stone, which was used as a makeshift water slide.

In its heyday, the *jharna*, with its orchards and pools, its slippery stones and its magical roofs, was frequented by the nobility and the common citizen alike. When I visited it in 2012 though, it was eerily quiet and empty. No water flowed through the canals; they were choked with garbage-filled sludge.

Behind the *jharna*, there actually was running water, in the form of a small stream flowing around the base of a low hill. The stream gurgled pleasantly, but its banks were caked with sewage and plastic, the water oddly discolored. Beyond the stream was a small working-class settlement. From a distance, it looked like a village, with tiny picturesque huts on the hillside and trees in the background. But this too was an illusion. The houses were largely made of thin, crumbling brick, with tin roofing and makeshift plastic sheeting to shore up leaky walls.

The sooty snow, the stagnant, putrid stream: Delhi's landscape is mocking its citizens, or shaming them. It presents an ironic inversion of idyllic rural scenes, with seemingly beautiful natural features that reveal themselves to be dangerously toxic. This is the paradox of Delhi: it is the world's most polluted green city.

It has the highest levels of air pollution in the world, at least according to much-publicized 2014 World Health Organization findings.³ It's not just the air. Delhi has dangerously polluted water bodies, unnerving noise pollution, overflowing landfills and mountains of electronic waste.

And yet Delhi is also remarkably green, especially for a megacity with a population of 17 million, as of the 2011 census (and this is almost certainly an underestimate). The city has an expansive network of small neighborhood parks and big public gardens. The centerpiece of green Delhi is an eighty-square-kilometer zone that the government has set aside as Reserved Forest. This zone is clustered around the Aravalli hills that cradle Mehrauli and several other historic sites in Delhi. It is referred to colloquially as "The Ridge".


Exploring the Ridge

What, exactly, is the Ridge? The book in your hands is an attempt to answer this seemingly simple question. When I started researching the Ridge in 2010, I thought the answer too was simple: it's the city's green lung, its ecological lifeblood, a much-needed forest in the midst of an ever-expanding megacity. The newspaper reports I read gave a clear-cut account of the Ridge's benefits: it purifies Delhi's air, protects it from the hot desert winds of nearby Rajasthan and provides an escape from the madness and speed of urban life. Because of its crucial ecological functions, the Ridge must be preserved "in its pristine glory", to use the words of the government's Master Plan for Delhi.⁴

But this is not the full story. The more I learned about the Ridge, the more complexities I encountered. The seeds I had planted with my initial research began to put down tenacious roots, and to sprout interlocking, entangled branches. The research project was becoming, I feared, an impenetrable thicket of ideas.

A chief confusion was how to define the Ridge. Government reports and environmental groups have emphasized the Ridge's functions as a forest, but the very name of the Ridge suggests that it is, at its core, a geological phenomenon. And indeed, most of the Reserved Forest zone in Delhi corresponds with the Aravalli hills. But there are discrepancies. For instance, there are parts of the Delhi Aravallis that host no trees, let alone a full-fledged forest. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is Mehrauli, which now houses a population of roughly 250,000, packed into multi-story apartments that line labyrinthine streets.

Poring over Ridge-related documents, I began to realize that phrases like "pristine glory" and "the harmony of nature" are serious impediments to understanding the Ridge, since they imply that both its ecology and geology have remained unchanged since time immemorial. The problem with this line of thought is not just the existence of centuries-old settlements like Mehrauli. The problem is also that the forest itself, where it exists, is generally quite new and is dominated by invasive species. What is more, the densest stands of present-day forest are largely located on a pockmarked landscape where, for many decades, quarrying gashed holes in the hills.



The problem, in short, is history. To invoke a timeless balance of nature on the Ridge is to erase its history. But it is precisely in the realm of history that one can discover how the Ridge's geology and ecology have co-evolved, and, even more crucially, how the Ridge and the city of Delhi have shaped each other over the course of hundreds and thousands of years.

My aim, then, is to recover the lost history of the Ridge, and, in the process, to tell a story of Delhi that puts its environment front and center. While there has been no dearth of writing on Delhi, the city's chroniclers often ignore its ecological features. But Delhi looks different when viewed from the heights of its hills, or from the depths of its old mining pits, or from the thickets of its newly grown woodlands.

Every city depends on its geological and ecological foundations, but Delhi's relationship with its Ridge has been particularly long, complex and fraught. Because of the unique breadth and depth of Delhi's history, the tale of the Ridge is one that resonates far beyond the boundaries of India's capital. At various points, Delhi has been a crucial hub of politics, warfare, trade and religious expansion on a regional and even global level. The Ridge offers a crucial vantage point for viewing these historical and geographical interconnections.

A thriving city with millennia of history, Delhi has long attracted people from all over the world, myself included. In an age when refugees are demonized, when xenophobia is on the rise, the history of the Delhi Ridge offers a lesson about the value, and indeed the absolute necessity, of migrants for building a vibrant metropolis. It is an oft-noted fact that Delhi is a city of migrants. This is largely a reference to the flood of refugees who came to the city in 1947 during the trauma of Partition and gave the city its post-Independence flavor. But the proliferation of migrants to Delhi, and specifically to the Ridge, has a much longer history—even into paleolithic times, 100,000 years ago, when the first humans (technically, hominids, but that's a story for a later chapter) ventured into north India, continuing their ancestors' journey out of Africa.

The migrants drawn to Delhi have been a motley mix, including warrior yogis, star-crossed lovers, bandit shepherds and Sufi stoners. And that's just the humans. There are also mischievous monkeys,

thirsty foreign trees, and—if one has a taste for the supernatural—a wide range of ghosts, spirits and demons. These migrants have been an integral part of an increasingly complex set of systems—geological, ecological, political, economic and religious (the subject matter of Chapters 1 through 5, respectively)—that have intertwined to create the Delhis of the past and the present.

The Ridge has played a crucial role in all these systems. Though its ecological functions may be foregrounded today, these are just one part of a much larger whole. The Ridge’s trees can’t be separated from the stones below them, nor the cities that rose and fell around them. Environmental and social history blur. Only with this perspective does a clear picture of the Ridge, and of Delhi as a whole, emerge.

A Tour through the Ridge’s History

Those who focus exclusively on the Ridge’s ecology usually do so to argue for the protection of its Reserved Forests. In this context, the Ridge’s “pristine glory” is frequently evoked, though often more rhetorically than literally. Delhi’s environmentalists recognize that, in a real historical sense, the Ridge is far from untouched. They seem to realize the shakiness of the “pristine glory” logic.

And yet this logic keeps on reappearing in discussions about the Ridge, not least in crucial court cases and powerful planning documents. The persistence of this logic suggests the necessity of refuting it, especially since the language of untouched glory is easily appropriated by the state to justify, for instance, the demolition of informal, low-income housing that has “sullied” the pristine Ridge (an all-too-common phenomenon).

A whirlwind tour through Delhi’s history is enough to show the flawed logic of “pristine glory” in the Ridge; it also has the added benefit of showing the bewildering complexities of the Ridge and the city. Such a tour brings home a profound truth: there is no static baseline to which we can return. Only by recognizing this, and dropping the rhetoric of a pristine past, can the Ridge be sustained in a just way.

Our tour begins in the 1930s, when Mirza Farhatullah Beg, an author from noble Mughal stock, bemoaned the degraded state of

Delhi's environment. Beg described Mehrauli's idyllic *jharna* with great nostalgia, contrasting its glory days with its twentieth-century state of disrepair. His lament is a familiar one:

*Now, the pleasantness no longer exists.... No longer does the water trickle down. The canals have dried up. The cisterns are filled with the rubble of the ruined buildings. Trees bear no fruit and most of them have been cut down. The slippery stone has broken into pieces. Only a few buildings still stand. In a few days, however, even those will be gone.*⁵

Perhaps Delhi's environment was better in the nineteenth century? A report by a prominent environmental organization has traced the Ridge's fall from grace to the establishment of the British New Delhi in 1911: "with the transfer of capital of India from Calcutta to Delhi during British times, developmental activity started in the city. The Ridge... started losing [its] natural state... The perfect balance and harmony of nature had been disturbed."⁶

But it is hard to discern any balance and harmony in nineteenth-century Delhi. Most obvious are the traumatic events of 1857; in that tumultuous year, the British government, after repressing the great anti-colonial uprising with considerable difficulty, cut down trees on the Ridge and throughout Delhi. This was both a form of revenge and a way of ensuring clear lines of sight for surveying the rebellious population.

Maybe the good years were before British rule and the violence of imperial interventions? But then....

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thomas Crowley has spent over a decade researching and writing about environmental politics and history in India. From 2010 to 2017, he conducted intensive research on the Delhi Ridge for the NGO Intercultural Resources, as well as for the “City as Studio” fellowship program at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), New Delhi.

Crowley received his B.A. in Philosophy from Yale University in 2007, completed a Fulbright Scholarship at the University of Pune from 2008–2009, and served as a Social Science Fellow at the Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart, Germany from 2016–2017. He has written extensively on Indian politics for *Jacobin* magazine. He has also written for *Kafila*, as well as for peer-reviewed academic journals, including *Emotion, Space and Ecology* and *Ethics and the Environment*. He is currently researching the politics of water and caste in Maharashtra as a doctoral candidate in the Department of Geography, Rutgers University (USA).

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