

I returned to Delhi in the first week of January 2013 to begin fieldwork in earnest, just in time to bear witness to a fomenting moral panic. A few weeks prior to my arrival, a brutal rape and murder took place, now infamously referred to as *the* Delhi rape case. A young woman and her male friend had attended a film in a South Delhi movie theater located in a garish new mall that opened in 2007, just across the road from where several of the stories that follow in the pages ahead unfold. After watching the film, they went to the main road to find transportation to take them home. Instead of taking an auto-rickshaw, they opted to take an inexpensive minibus, the kind that operates in the peripheries of the city and provides transportation for domestic workers and service laborers whose jobs run into the night. That evening they were picked up by a group of six young men driving a small private bus. The young men operating the bus were all migrants to the city, hailing from various rural villages across the region. They ranged in age from sixteen to thirty and lived in South Delhi's informal housing settlements. To supplement their income, they used the bus to ferry passengers in the late evening. On this night, their entrepreneurial endeavor transformed into a violent encounter. These men, after picking up the young woman—referred to as Nirbhaya (fearless) in the media in the weeks and months that followed—proceeded to brutalize her: raping, torturing, and, finally, leaving her for dead on the side of the road.

Following the incident, candlelight vigils and protests erupted across India. When I arrived in the cold, smog-filled city in early January, India Gate was lit up like it was Diwali. The city's well-to-do as well as those aspiring

toward economic and social mobility had turned out in numbers in support of Nirbhaya as she lay in a hospital bed fighting for her life. They also came out to protest. People from all backgrounds and of all ages rallied to decry the toxic masculinity that produced the possibility for such violence as well as rage against the state and its inability to protect women.

Delhi elections were just around the corner and the rise of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP, Common Man's Party), which had come into being in November 2012 as an official political entity, was portended in the swell of people who rose up just after the Delhi rape case.¹ At the national level, the right-wing Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had not yet ascended to power. It would be roughly another two years before Narendra Modi would assume office as prime minister on the twin platform of development through privatization and the assertion of so-called Hindu values as central to a successful future India. But the discourse that catapulted both Modi and the BJP into power was on display after the violent incident.

The city, depicted through the Delhi rape case as a place of moral dissolution and a symbol of a failed liberal, secular India, offered a platform to voice another politic that had been lurking just under the surface. This discourse—which had emerged in key moments at local and regional levels since liberalization took hold in the 1990s but had not as yet been articulated at the scale of the national—was one that championed an ascendant Hindu Rashtra that would cleanse the country and its cities of their vices. The image of an unmarried couple going to see a film in the garish consumer space of the mall movie theater was part of the BJP's conservative critique, a way to shift the responsibility of the violence onto the victims by purporting a failure to uphold traditional (Hindu) norms. The figure of the young male perpetrator from a minority community was also mobilized to point to urban India's morass and capitalize on the collective rage, anxiety, and desire for action that the case generated.

Over the next several months, the six young men indicted in the Delhi rape case—their images, their testimonies, their histories—circulated in ways that cast the male migrant as a threat to the city's and the nation's present and future, a narrative that has a long history in postcolonial India.² The responsibility for the uptick in violence in cities, so the mediatized narrative went, could be squarely placed on young men like them, the poor, undereducated migrant males who preyed on victims in the public spaces of the city. In the wake of the case, the government of India commissioned a report to review and recommend new sexual assault laws. In this report, produced by a committee headed by former supreme court chief justice J. S. Verma, "young and

prospectless men . . . fighting for space in an economy that offers mainly casual work” were blamed for the uptick in sexual violence.³ The report effectively legitimized the media narrative about young migrant males in Delhi. Typified as backward, lacking the skills to participate in or contribute to a globalized Indian economy, and devoid of the right moral values, the specter of the feckless male outsider in the city became a ghost to be banished or reformed.⁴

As this shrill discourse demonizing the young, undereducated, and economically marginalized young men of Delhi was being broadcast far and wide, I began to get to know young men from the urban villages and informal settlements of South and West Delhi involved in Delhi’s burgeoning hip hop scene. These young men, for the most part, had arrived in the city with their families as young children in the early years of the twenty-first century, in a period when the city had begun to swell in size, both demographically and topographically.⁵

The young men who populate the pages ahead—whether originally from the rural hinterlands of the Gangetic plains, from the northeastern edges of the country, from the mountain villages of Garhwal, or from Afghanistan, Nigeria, Somalia, or Nepal—all contended in similar as well as in quite strikingly different ways with being cast in the media and in their everyday lives as Delhi’s Others, potentially destructive outsiders who live on the peripheries of vital change in the city. Yet as I got to know them, it became evident that these young men, like their upper-caste and well-to-do peers in the gated colonies that surround the informal housing settlements and urban villages where they live, were undeniably all part of the diverse, urban cross section of a millennial iteration of the Zippie generation.⁶

That is, despite economic and biographical differences, they were born in the late 1990s and came of age in urban India almost two decades after the nation opened its borders to capital.⁷ They are part of a generation of young people who have grown up in Delhi in an era when malls, the metro, and mobile phones are taken-for-granted lived realities. Moreover, they have come of age in an era where the interjection of global capital into urban India has brought economic, political, and social instability that at once produces the appearance that there are opportunities for mobility even as it generates deep anxiety and, in some instances, calamitous friction. Rather than being out of step or disconnected from processes of globalization and the subsequent intensification of urban development it has wrought, these young men saw themselves at the nexus of a changing Indian urbanity that is predicated on digitally enabled transnational connection, distinctive consumption, and creative self-production as key components of social belonging and the basis for potential futures.⁸

This book focuses on these young dancers, rappers, and graffiti artists and offers a different entry point to think through masculinity in Delhi than that of the common mediatized narrative that positions young men like those I got to know as lumpen and surplus labor that, at best, “timepass,” waiting for an otherwise seemingly foreclosed urban future to rupture and yield opportunity and, at worst, prey on those more vulnerable than them.⁹ To be clear from the outset, this book will not focus on their perspectives on sexual violence in Delhi, a city that has in recent years gained the dubious distinction of being called the rape capital of the world. Nor will it focus on the problematic debates that pit (Hindu) traditionalism in opposition to a secular (urban) modernity when it comes to prescribed gender roles in the city.¹⁰ Rather, the pages ahead offer an account of how a diverse cross section of young male migrants growing up in a globalizing Delhi become gendered, racialized, and classed subjects within a social, economic, and political context marked by uncertainty, anxiety, threat, and possibility—and the profound role that digital communications and media technology has in shaping them.

As importantly, this book tells the story of how these young men mobilize hip hop’s creative arts as a means to refashion their embodied difference and their spatial communities’ marked Otherness as productive sites of distinction. Throughout the book, I discuss how their creative endeavors in the offline and online worlds they frequented created new social and economic possibilities for them that make visible an alternate mapping of the city in ways that complicate the cloistering rhetoric of fear and threat that animate media depictions of Delhi. In so doing, I show how the top-down world-class city discourse that has reshaped Delhi’s spaces in the last decade is being unexpectedly inhabited and interrupted in the second decade of the twenty-first century.¹¹

While sexual violence is not at the center of the narrative that follows, the Delhi rape case unavoidably framed my interactions with the young men I met in the Delhi hip hop scene. In the pages that follow, I show how the rape case was explicitly deployed by the young people I got to know as a critique of their cohort living in their spatial communities. In other moments, I discuss how my interlocutors evoked it as a way of marking their own distinction, a way of narrating a masculine subjectivity that could never be like the men who committed such an atrocity.

The young men who populate this book, of course, were not the only young people in Delhi who grappled with the rape case and its implications. As Tara Atluri suggests, the case reframed how young people in the city

and the nation talked and thought about gender, age, and classed power in twenty-first-century India.¹² The case also opened up public discourse about urban in-migration, processes of dispossession, aspirations for the good life, and the ways in which these phenomena are linked. These conversations, as they were simultaneously staged in the media and during the everyday interactions that make up the life of the city, made evident the disjuncture between discourses that posited Delhi as a site of moral dissolution and social disintegration, and those that framed Delhi as a world-class city-in-the-making. They also brought to the foreground the fact that young people are crucial actors in the drama to define the present and future of Delhi and India, not in small part because the under-thirty-year-old demographic comprise a sizable and growing number of the city's and nation's population.¹³

It is my hope that this book, as it offers a take on contemporary Delhi as a site of masculine becoming and digital transformation, captures something of this historical moment and its unfoldings into the present. In the account that follows, the imagined and inhabited Delhi that I was privileged to witness emerging in the young men's articulated dreams, embodied practices, and audiovisual representations is inextricably linked to urbanities elsewhere and otherwise through digital hip hop.¹⁴