

Capital letters

Time Out flips through the recent sheaf of writing about Delhi.

Modern Delhi is a thing of fascination for writers and publishers, if only because so many of them live in the thick of its mean, mad multiplicity. A latest crop of Delhi books takes as many forms as the city itself.

Some of them adopt the maxim that this is a city you need to laugh at to survive. Tarquin Hall's *The Case of the Man Who Died Laughing* is an affectionate account of Delhi's absurdity. His hero Vish Puri prides himself on being the capital's ace detective, able to solve any case – until he starts to investigate the murder of a rationalist, slain by no one less than Goddess Kali on the India Gate lawns. Hall peppers the book with dark Delhi humour, glibly capturing the city's mannerisms.

Reeti Gadekar strikes out toward blacker comedy with *Bottom of the Heap*, which takes us to the rough villages at Delhi's outskirts – places that appear often in the news in real life, thanks to their enthusiasm for honour killings. Her police caper introduces us to Inspector Juneja, whose mountainous domestic troubles are capped with being despatched to Arse to investigate a "road scam". Arse, a barren, peripheral village, is the perfect breeding ground for scamsters and goons who molest development funds, public utilities and women with equal abandon.

On a more serious note, graphic novelist Vishwajyoti Ghosh looks back at the rough times of the Emergency. In *Delhi Calm*, Ghosh explores not only the politics but the mid-'70s way of life. "I was trying to recreate the Delhi I grew up in," he said. "The streets, the houses, the hoardings and the people. I went looking for structures where there are none. I used our collective memories, the visual iconography of those times to recreate a Delhi that does not exist anymore." It isn't just visual memory that Ghosh wants to stir. "Film narratives, radio, old Hindi film songs, painting, advertising – you name it, it's there," he said.

For designer Supriya Sahai, however, the visual is dominant. For *Delhi on the Road*, she travelled all over the city, sketching both its tumbledown monuments and contemporary tableaux. Being a history buff, Sahai expended the most ink on Delhi's ruins, which left her even more fascinated by their exquisite geometry. "When you replicating the detail on paper, you realise how much effort each bit of carving or inlay would've taken," she said. "Just try and trace – not even draw freehand, but trace – any one screen on Humayun's tomb. The effort will make you appreciate it so much more." Although *Delhi on the Road* is skewed towards history, its contemporary scenes are the more fresh and intriguing.

What does make local history fresh and intriguing is *Celebrating*

Delhi, a compilation of lectures given in the 2006 Sir Sobha Singh Memorial series. The speakers were quintessential Dilliwalas such as historians Narayani Gupta and William Dalrymple, publisher Ravi Dayal and writer Khushwant Singh.

Singh's contribution draws from his own memories as the son of Sobha Singh, the original great builder of New Delhi. It revisits the capital when it was more brick kilns than buildings and "contracts were going a-begging". Other chapters layer detail onto the city that Sobha Singh built. Narayani Gupta explores how it was named (pointing out that the nationalist upsurge in the '20s led to names which linked British rule to foregoing rulers: Prithviraj Road, Ashoka Road, Aurangzeb Road). Environmentalist Pradip Krishen explores how it was planted ("No native species are planted on any of its avenues," he notes. "Not a single species of tree that can be called a Delhi native").

Celebrating Delhi is a great example of how Delhi's history, which is abundant, can be fed into its living folklore. For Delhi to be livable, or lovable, that will be more important than flyovers. All these books will do their part. *Bottom of the Heap*, HarperCollins, ₹250; *Celebrating Delhi*, Penguin-Ravi Dayal, ₹350; *Delhi Calm*, HarperCollins, ₹499; *Delhi on the Road*, HarperCollins, ₹299; *The Case of the Man Who Died Laughing*, Hutchinson, ₹550.



Growth spurt The Hanuman statue by the Metro line near Jhandewala, a sketch from Supriya Sahai's *Delhi on the Road*