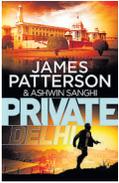


Crime in the capital



PRIVATE DELHI
Ashwin Sanghi &
James Patterson
Penguin
2017, pp 380
₹ 299

A serial killer is on the loose in Delhi, murdering carefully selected victims in carefully chosen ways. A grisly laboratory, with human remains in it, is discovered in a house in an up-market locality in the same city. It turns out the house is owned by the government. The story is hushed up. In parallel, Santosh Wagh of the detective agency Private is asked by a senior government official to discreetly look into the matter. Santosh, whom we first met in *Private India*, has relocated to Delhi in an attempt to restart his life after the events of that book. Now some of the aspects of this new case hit rather too close to home for him and his trusted lieutenants in Private.

Private Delhi opens with a fairly hackneyed scene of the serial killer murdering his next victim, but it starts to get interesting when the politics of the capital city make an appearance. It turns out that the chief minister and the lieutenant governor are at odds, and each have their own loyalists. Santosh, and Private, are brought in partly to find out the facts of the case, but also to allow one politician to score brownie points over the other. Without naming any parties, Ashwin Sanghi makes sly references to the recent real-life situations in the Delhi government.

A third thread adds spice to the mix — that of an organ donation racket, stretching from posh hospitals to the slums, and all the way across the world. The serial killer seems somehow involved in this

racket — or is he?

The various players in the action feel realistic and drawn from current events — corrupt cops, selfish doctors and administrators, the self-aggrandising news anchor, the hardworking, honest workers who just want to get on with their jobs. The politicians, too, are made real with brief histories of how they got to their posts. Santosh and his coworkers, Neel and Nisha, are well fleshed out, with detailed backstories and motivations. They have all suffered losses before, and they have their weaknesses that make them human.

Jack Morgan, the head of Private — who also features in the other books of the series set in other countries — makes brief appearances, thinking typical touristy thoughts about India's energy, lawlessness and the strength of his coworkers.

Sanghi and Patterson are good at piling on the suspense and keeping the story moving at a fast clip. The pages go by effortlessly, the thrills keep coming.

Where the book might throw Indian readers off is the over-explanation of the locale. The locations are chosen to be “exotic Indian” rather than realistic — a hos-



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pital is named Delhi Memorial Hospital, Mehrauli is explained as being ‘next to the twelfth-century Qutub Minar tower.’ Things well known to every Indian are explained for the benefit of foreign readers. “In that moment, Nisha was the embodiment of *Shakti* — female power,” for example, or “he had worn a white turban because white is the colour of mourning”. Thankfully, there isn’t much description or mention — of Delhi foods or clothing.

Also, what is it with the serial killer fascination? The whole thing has been done before, and better, and it just seems like the overall plot could have been more interesting and topical had it focused on the organ-donor conspiracy and the political storyline.

The editorial reason for these trade-offs is clear given the background for this book. It is part of a larger series focused on Private, the secretive detective agency, with offices worldwide. Different country-focused books are written by authors from those countries — Ashwin Sanghi is the author from India, and probably vetted by Patterson to some extent. So the series as a whole is meant to be a generic one, not too deep into any specific culture. Only concepts that are well known worldwide are to be included. It’s a comment on the small extent of India’s cultural reach: the Qutub Minar, for example, needs to be explained, while an ‘OBE’ is not expanded in the included excerpt from *Private Royals*, a Britain-themed book.

Private India suffers from the flaws endemic to every thriller ‘series’. You know the main characters are going to be safe, and that the whole adventure will be more or less ‘a day in the life of’, instead of life-changing for them. Given these limitations, though, Sanghi does add in some hair-raising experiences and backstory for Santosh and his team.

Overall, this is a fast-paced thriller that is a fun one-time read.

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