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## Delhi 6

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# Delhi 6

## **Abstract**

This is a review of *Delhi 6* (2009).

There is no shortage of movies that consider various aspects of inter-religious violence in India. What sets *Delhi 6* apart is its celebration of the religious diversity and harmony that often prevail on the streets of the walled city of old Delhi (postal code 6), the Chandni Chowk neighborhood in which director, writer, and producer Rakesh Omprakash Mehra spent his childhood. This is combined with a sobering look at how fragile that harmony can be, in a story that uses a real news event (the Kaala Bandhar or Black Monkey scare of 2001) as a symbolic base for a modern parable.

The story centers on Roshan Mehra (Abhishek Bachchan), a young American with Indian parents who is bringing his ailing grandmother (Waheeda Rehman) back to India so that she can die in her old neighborhood. We see Delhi as Roshan explores it, snapping pictures with his cell phone, with expressions of curiosity, disbelief, delight, and horror crossing his face in rapid succession. Roshan's parents left India because their marriage (a Hindu man to a Muslim woman) was not acceptable to their families. They have no desire to return. Now he enters the Hindu community that welcomes his grandmother home with immense affection and support, but he also identifies with the Muslim community, and seeks to learn more about both aspects of his heritage. The scene in which he attends Jumma at the Jamah Masjid does a wonderful job of catching the beauty of a community at worship.

Roshan's grandmother takes him to an open air performance of an artistically superb Ram Leela, the reenactment of the *Ramayana* performed during Navratri over a period of ten days. Because only snippets of this play are shown, often signaling major plot developments, prior familiarity with the broad outlines of the *Ramayana* narrative will help viewers follow the ways in which the Ram Leela and the plot of the movie progress and interact.

Mehra has assembled a cast of well known actors, including Om Puri, Rishi Kapoor, Divya Dutta and others, who give excellent performances in a series of vignettes that give a picture of life in Old Delhi. Rather than tying up all the loose ends, we get glimpses. As in real life, we see enough of a situation to understand a part of what is happening, but we neither learn the beginning nor discover the end: a woman is having an affair; another is being forced into sex; a feud between two brothers does not completely divide their families. We see a bit of the life of an untouchable street-sweeper, a man who is mentally challenged, and a Muslim sweet seller.

The many unfinished stories provide a backdrop for the central story, in which wild rumors of a giant black monkey, with springs on his feet and lightbulbs on his chest, terrorize the neighborhood and bring it to the edge of inter-religious rioting while Roshan Mehra struggles with his reactions to the community, and ultimately decides that his life is bound to this place and these people. As the movie

quotes the poet Zauq, “Who can ever wish to leave Delhi’s lanes?” Ultimately, the Black Monkey is used as a metaphor for the violence in people’s hearts. “The devil is perched on their shoulders.” “Not the devil. A monkey.” In the final scene of the movie, a black monkey mask burns along with the effigy of Ravanna in the festival of Dussehra’s annual reminder of the need for the destruction of the evil that lies within us.

For a movie that explores inter-religious violence, *Delhi 6* is quite upbeat. The religious tension teeters on the brink without erupting into massacres. While there is a severe beating, the lack of massacre scenes may make the film easier to show to some audiences. There are two versions of this movie. An original happy ending has been revised for release at the Venice Film Festival. This second ending may be more artistically satisfying - with either ending this is a movie that preaches hope and is potentially useful for helping students begin to think about religious diversity and the sources of religious violence.