

Sideways on a Scooter: Life and Love in India

By Miranda Kennedy

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When twentysomething reporter Miranda Kennedy leaves her job in New York City and travels to India with no employment prospects, she longs to immerse herself in the turmoil and excitement of a rapidly developing country. What she quickly learns in Delhi about renting an apartment as a single woman—it's next to impossible—and the proper way for women in India to ride scooters—perched sideways—are early signs that life here is less Westernized than she'd counted on.

Living in Delhi for more than five years, and finding a city pulsing with possibility and hope, Kennedy experiences friendships, love affairs, and losses that open a window onto the opaque world of Indian politics and culture—and alter her own attitudes about everything from food and clothes to marriage and family. Along the way, Kennedy is drawn into the lives of several Indian women, including her charismatic friend Geeta—a self-described "modern girl" who attempts to squeeze herself into the traditional role of wife and mother; Radha, a proud Brahmin widow who denies herself simple pleasures in order to live by high-caste Hindu principles; and Parvati, who defiantly chain-smokes and drinks whiskey, yet feels compelled to keep her boyfriend a secret from her family.

In her effort to understand the hopes and dreams that motivate her new friends, Kennedy peels back India's globalized image as a land of call centers and fast-food chains and finds an ancient place where, in many ways, women's lives have scarcely changed for centuries. Incisive, witty, and written with a keen eye for the lush vibrancy of the country that Kennedy comes to love, Sideways on a Scooter is both a remarkable memoir and a cultural revelation.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Editorial Review

About the Author
Miranda Kennedy was a New Delhi–based correspondent for American Public Media's *Marketplace* and National Public Radio for five years. Her articles have appeared in *The Washington Post, The Boston Globe,* and *The Nation,* and on Slate. Before moving to India, Kennedy worked as a magazine editor and a public radio reporter in New York, where she covered, among other things, the September 11 attacks. She moved to Washington, D.C., to work as an editor at National Public Radio's *Morning Edition*, and returns frequently to India.

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Chapter 1

Are You Alone?

Delhi's stale April air caught in my throat. Each breath had already been recycled through millions of Indian mouths, I imagined, growing hotter and thicker with each exhale. This is what it must feel like inside a burka: It was as though I was enclosed from head to toe in black cotton and inhaling the fabric that covered my mouth as I tried to scoop the dusty soup into my lungs.

"Natural air-conditionings, madam! Full breeze-open like a helicopter!"

When a three-wheeled auto-rickshaw slowed to a sputter alongside me, I was uncomfortable enough to pay attention to the driver's offer. I'd only been in India for a couple of weeks, but I'd already learned that most of Delhi's rickshaw drivers choose to nap away as much of the seven-month hot season as they can, sprawled across their backseats in a pool of sweat. When the temperature sails above a hundred degrees, they hike their fares to ensure that the predatory customers leave them to nap in peace. This driver must have been especially hard up. He gave me an exaggerated salesman's smile, disturbing the too-small pair of plastic glasses jammed onto his face, and agreed to a reasonable fare without arguing. I scrambled in, immediately grateful for the relief his rickshaw's flimsy canvas top provided from the sun, and for the slight breeze of his "helicopter" with two open sides.

The peppery smell of areca nut stung my nostrils as my driver dug a leaf-wrapped packet of paan out of a metal box and pulled it open with his teeth. Paan, a strong stimulant like chewing tobacco, reddens the teeth and lips of laborers, delivery boys, and shopkeepers across India. When my mother had first come to South Asia, she'd assumed the men were all dying of tuberculosis, spitting blood onto the streets. She had been only twenty-three-younger and even more naïve than I was when I first arrived, at twenty-seven. In fact, paan is a relatively innocuous vice, "the working man's way of getting through the day," as one friend later described it. If the middle class relies on air- conditioning and chauffeur-driven cars to endure the disorder and discomfort of Indian city life, everyone else blunts its frustrations with cheaper and more accessible aids, such as paan, hand-rolled cigarettes called bidis, and Bollywood films.

The rickshaw spluttered through Paharganj, a seedy district for low- budget tourists where British accents jostle with the guava sellers' Hindi cries and the shouts of the aggressive red-shirted porters at the railway station nearby. Adjacent to New Delhi Station, this area is the landing point for Israelis letting off steam after their mandatory military service, and for lost European souls in search of Afghan heroin or Russian prostitutes, or both. It's a little ironic that it is also where those in search of spiritual awakening come to lay

their yoga mats. Paharganj isn't the "real India," but it was the version my parents would have seen when they made their way along the hippie trail to India back in the seventies. This, the spiritualized, photogenic India sought out by Western wanderers, didn't really parse with the globalizing India that I'd read about, of cable TV and McDonald's McAloo Tikkis.

Although I have been known to do yoga, I wasn't especially interested in a New Age-y ashram experience of India. However, there was no getting around the fact that I'd shown up in Delhi dressed the part. It took me longer than it probably should have to realize that outfits such as a long, wrinkled beaded skirt and tight black cotton eyelet top weren't doing me any favors in India, where neatness is sometimes the only way to tell the slightly poor from the desperately impoverished. Compared to Delhi's ladies-impeccable in freshly ironed silk saris and tiny beaded slippers, and radiating a fragrance of baby powder and palm oil-I looked like a sloppy hippie.

A few hours earlier, in the breakfast room of the Lord's Hotel, I had looked down at the strips of papaya and clumpy yogurt in front of me and tried to concentrate on my goals for the day. Half watching the translucent geckos skitter across the walls, I reviewed the list of interviews I wanted to set up, the apartment search I needed to embark on. It seemed overambitious and strangely irrelevant when I considered my surroundings: a cheap druggy traveler's hotel in a chaotic city that would seethe its way through the day no matter what I did with mine. I sighed in frustration and turned my attention to the geckos. Through their bodies I could see the cheery red and pink frescoes of Hindu gods.

I was determined to be more than a casual visitor to India. I'd been saving everything I earned at my job as a producer at a public radio show so that I could pick up and go overseas to try my hand at becoming a freelance foreign correspondent. The lack of transcendent, transformative experiences in my life so far had disappointed me: My days seemed a blur of headlines and deadlines. And even though it was a nineteenth-century idea, I couldn't help but worry that I needed to make a dramatic gesture to convince my New York boyfriend to stick it out with me. As much as I wished I could stride into the world without caring about such things, it wasn't that simple. I hoped that by taking myself off to the farthest, most exotic place I could imagine, I'd make myself more appealing to him.

There was never any question in my mind that India was where I'd go to do it. My family's fascination with the place dates back to 1930, when my British great-aunt Edith traveled there as a Christian missionary. My mother's side of the family is a small, close-knit group of wanderers, and I'd always expected that I would be like the rest of them. Going to India was like a rite of passage, entwined with my very idea of myself. Although the decision didn't make much sense to my friends, I had an idea that I would become my fullest, most interesting self there.

Moving around was also just a part of who I was. When I ask my mother to list the cities we lived in when I was young, she has to pull out a pen and paper to keep them straight. I think I went to four different first grades, beginning in England, where my mother comes from. Unlike some families, who are forced to change cities by circumstance or jobs, moving was itself the goal for my parents. Often, they would create the reason to leave. My father, a theater studies professor, seemed equally compelled by the drama of a life lived on the move as by practicalities such as career development or earning a good salary. Living in many places was important enough to them that they decided we'd never buy a new refrigerator or car. My mother was frugal by nature anyway; she'd half joke when telling us to eat our apple cores that this was how we'd be able to afford plane tickets to see her family in England.

My great-aunt Edith died when I was eleven, and all I have left of her is a family of brass elephants and a few leather-bound books of photographs carefully mounted onto wax paper. As a teenager in Pittsburgh-

where my parents settled long enough for me to attend middle and high school-I would look at the three elephants lined up on my windowsill, each one slightly larger than the next, and imagine the life I would have. In every photo, Edith is wearing sensible black lace-up shoes and a dour Victorian expression. She and her missionary sisters look out of place, to say the least, under groves of South Indian palm trees, or floating on elaborately decorated wooden Kashmiri houseboats on Srinagar's Dal Lake.

In one picture, Edith is being carried by several underfed Indians in a covered sedan chair through a mountain passageway. Transported through Kashmir like a princess in a palanquin to her summertime retreat in the cool hills! To my adolescent self, stuck in an utterly unromantic postindustrial town, these images were reason enough to consider becoming a missionary. We rarely went to church and I didn't believe in God, so my mother had a good point when she suggested that I might want to consider something that required less religion-such as being a foreign correspondent, perhaps.

Even if the grass isn't always greener, it is always worth checking just to be sure-that is my father's belief, and I inherited it. Early on, I learned that it was easy enough to make friends and not get too attached to any of them; it was okay, my parents taught us, because we had one another. Committing to a group of friends and learning to belong to a school or a neighborhood-we didn't do that in my family. I was the kind of teenager who kept a running tally of the European cities I'd visited and asserted my opinions about world affairs over the dinner table. When my father was offered a position in Ireland, at the University of Dublin, it seemed natural to transfer my college credits there and go along for the ride; I didn't want to miss out on any of my family's cool international adventures.

After college, I wanted to outdo my parents and crisscross the globe again, this time of my own accord. New York yielded me all the things I'd hoped it would: It helped me realize what I wanted to do with my life, and it gave me a boyfriend who believed in the poetry of adventure, as I did. I found a cockroach-studded apartment in a rent- stabilized building in Brooklyn that was cheap enough that after several years of working at magazines and radio programs, I could buy myself a ticket to India.

My friends were right to be skeptical about my tripping off. New York was full of opportunities for an aspiring writer, and my developing- world country of choice offered nothing in the way of career assurances. Although we knew plenty of journalists who'd decided to freelance overseas, they'd chosen higher-profile regions, such as the Middle East, where their reporting was actually likely to generate some attention. India's economy was booming, but it wasn't a major story. When I talked to editors about my plans, their eyes lit up when I mentioned Pakistan and Afghanistan. I said I was interested in reporting from those places, too, but I was quite sure that I didn't want to get slated as a war-on-terror correspondent.

When the September 11 attacks happened, I was at the radio studio, right below Canal Street, a few blocks away from the World Trade Center. I didn't leave for the next two weeks. We slept and ate and worked in the studio-afraid that if we left Ground Zero, the police wouldn't allow us back in. I spent every night down among the rescue workers. It was amazing to witness to such an important part of history, but it also helped me realize how difficult it was to burrow inside a major event like that and pull out the sad, quirky, and untold moments, as I like to. Part of me wanted to follow the story to Afghanistan; but I also wanted to get away from all the elbow-jostling of daily news reporters and go to the place I cared about most.

I got a small grant to train radio reporters in South Asia, which gave me enough money to get started. Other than that, though, I had no guarantee of work-just expressions of interest from editors at National Public Radio and a few other news outlets. My friends advised that if I stuck it out in the New York media world, I'd eventually work my way up to a job as a foreign correspondent. Even if they were right, I didn't want to wait. I thought I needed to kick my way out of the claustrophobia of normalcy and show the world that I

could become a foreign correspondent on my own, rather than waiting for an employer to hand me the job.

I'd started to feel at home in New York, and that was exactly the problem. I'd lie awake at night working myself into a panic as I imagined myself ten years hence: working a slightly better job, living in a slightly nicer apartment-a scheduled, comfortable life that my parents would consider mundane. Now that I was a slightly rebellious, itinerant adult, resisting the urge to claim a community as my own, India had taken on an almost legendary aspect. Far away and unfamiliar, it had become a kind of resting place in my mind. On some level, I knew that it was where I would go to define myself as a journalist, an adventurer, a woman.

Before any of that could happen, I had to find somewhere to set up my laptop and improvise a recording studio so I could start filing my stories. Most important, I needed an address so I could print up business cards, which I'd quickly discovered were a mandatory accessory in India; without a card to present at the beginning of an interview, no one seemed to believe that I was real. I was already having enough difficulty convincing Indian officials and intellectuals to take me seriously as I made the rounds of their offices, trying to form intelligent interview questions about the opaque world of Indian politics and culture.

In status-obsessed India, my interviewees had reason to be skeptical of an unaffiliated reporter girl in inappropriate clothes. They were accustomed to meeting foreign correspondents of a different stripe- those who had been dispatched by their news organizations and lived a rather plusher Delhi life than I did. The New York Times's correspondents, for instance, take up residence in a spacious colonial- era bungalow that the paper has owned for decades. Inside are the facilities they need to acclimatize and be as efficient as you can be in India-which is to say, not very, but every little thing helps: a full-time translator to lead them around the city, a car and driver, an imported washing machine. The Times's bungalow is equipped with a permanent staff, including a gardener to beautify the outside spaces for entertaining.

When I found an inexpensive room for rent in the newspaper listings, the receptionist at the Lord's Hotel was emphatic in his recommendation of the area: "A-one neighborhood, madam, top class." So I was surprised when, looking out of the side of the rickshaw, I saw yet another Delhi neighborhood filled with vegetable vendors and the teeming impermanence of poverty. The smells of gutter rot and frying spices fused together into a heady brew. No wonder Indians laugh at Americans and Europeans who stroll across Delhi as though it were a pretty little New England town, I thought. The city is a flat outstretched plain of traffic and beggars; traffic circle after traffic circle, lush with hot pink bougainvillea bushes; and then this, chaotic markets choked with too many choices on which to settle your eye.

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