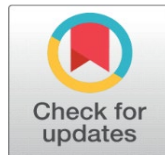
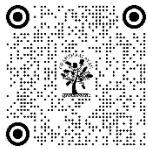


# CITYSCAPES OF THE DELHI SULTANATE: A STUDY OF URBANIZATION AND ITS IMPACT

Pallavi Nisha <sup>1</sup>✉,

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of History V.B.M. College, Siwan, J.P. University, Chapra, Bihar, India



## Corresponding Author

Pallavi Nisha,  
[pallavijatashankar@gmail.com](mailto:pallavijatashankar@gmail.com)

## DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i7.2024.4418](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i7.2024.4418)

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

**Copyright:** © 2024 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



## ABSTRACT

The Delhi Sultanate marked a transformative period in India's urban history, characterized by the expansion of cities, the establishment of new urban centers, and the revival of older settlements. With the rise of successive dynasties Mamluks, Khaljis, Tughlaqs, Sayyids, and Lodis—the subcontinent witnessed rapid urbanization driven by administrative needs, military strategies, economic growth, and cultural exchange.<sup>1</sup> The influx of Persian, Central Asian, and Arab influences played a significant role in shaping the architecture, trade networks, and social fabric of these cities. Delhi, the capital of the Sultanate, emerged as a vibrant metropolis, reflecting the grandeur of Islamic urban planning and governance. Other cities such as Lahore, Jaunpur, Daulatabad, and Lakhnauti flourished as regional power centers.<sup>2</sup> These cities were strategically developed with fortifications, mosques, madrasas, caravanserais, and bustling markets that facilitated trade and commerce. Economic activities played a crucial role in urban expansion, with the introduction of a monetized economy, market regulations, and improved trade routes connecting India with the Middle East, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia.<sup>3</sup> The Sultanate encouraged the growth of specialized artisan communities, guilds, and commercial establishments, fostering a vibrant economic environment.

The urbanization under the Delhi Sultanate also had a profound socio-political impact. The cities became centers of political authority, military organization, and religious patronage. The architectural legacy of the period, including iconic structures like the Qutub Minar, Alai Darwaza, Hauz Khas Complex, and Tughlaqabad Fort, continues to define India's historical landscape.<sup>4</sup> Despite the prosperity of these urban centers, challenges such as frequent Mongol invasions, shifting capitals, and agrarian dependencies influenced the stability of urban life. Nevertheless, the urbanization initiated during the Sultanate period laid the foundation for the flourishing cities of the Mughal era and beyond, leaving a lasting imprint on India's historical and cultural development.<sup>5</sup>

**Keywords:** Urbanization, Delhi Sultanate, Mamluks, Khaljis, Tughlaqs, Sayyids, Lodis

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Urbanization during the Delhi Sultanate (1206–1526) significantly transformed India's economic, social, and political landscapes. The establishment of Turkish rule introduced new administrative frameworks, leading to the development of fortified cities and commercial hubs. Delhi, as the capital, emerged as a prominent urban center, witnessing extensive construction of mosques, palaces, markets (bazaars), and madrasas. Other significant cities such as Lahore, Multan, Jaunpur, Badaun, and Daulatabad flourished as administrative and trade centers. The expansion of urban spaces was driven by the influx of Persian, Central Asian, and Arab traders, scholars, and artisans, contributing to the cosmopolitan character of these cities.<sup>6</sup> The introduction of the iqta system, where land was assigned to nobles in exchange for military service, facilitated revenue collection and economic development, indirectly promoting urbanization. Trade and commerce thrived due to improved road networks, linking cities with major trade routes such as the Silk Road and maritime connections via Gujarat and Bengal. Markets became vibrant centers of economic activity,

dealing in textiles, spices, horses, and handicrafts. Artisans and craftsmen settled in urban areas, forming guild-like organizations that regulated production and trade.<sup>7</sup>

During the Mamluk (Slave) Dynasty (1206–1290), Delhi was established as the capital, transforming it into a prominent urban hub. Significant constructions from this era include the Qutb Minar and the Quwwat-ul-Islam Mosque, exemplifying early Indo-Islamic architectural styles. Lahore also gained importance as an administrative center during this period.<sup>8</sup>

Under the Khalji Dynasty (1290–1320), Alauddin Khalji expanded Delhi by constructing the fortified city of Siri to protect against Mongol invasions. Siri featured the Hazar Sutan palace and was characterized by its oval shape with seven gates. The establishment of Siri marked a significant phase in Delhi's urban expansion.<sup>9</sup>

The Tughlaq Dynasty (1320–1414) witnessed ambitious urban projects. Ghiyasuddin Tughlaq founded Tughlaqabad, a massive fortified city. His successor, Muhammad bin Tughlaq, attempted to shift the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad (in present-day Maharashtra), aiming to control the Deccan more effectively. This move led to the development of Daulatabad as a significant urban center, though the plan was eventually abandoned. Later, Firoz Shah Tughlaq established multiple cities, including Firozabad and Jaunpur, and focused on infrastructure projects like canals and rest houses, facilitating urban growth.<sup>10</sup>

During the Sayyid (1414–1451) and Lodi (1451–1526) Dynasties, urban development faced challenges due to political instability. However, cities like Agra gained prominence under Sikandar Lodi, who shifted the capital there from Delhi, fostering its growth into a major urban center. Lahore also experienced a resurgence, regaining its status as a vital administrative and cultural hub.<sup>11</sup>

Throughout the Sultanate era, the establishment of institutions such as khanqahs (Sufi hospices), sarais (inns), thanas (military outposts), and madrasas (educational institutions) played pivotal roles in urbanization.<sup>12</sup> These establishments attracted scholars, traders, and artisans, contributing to the socio-economic and cultural development of urban centers.<sup>13</sup> In summary, the Delhi Sultanate's urbanization was marked by the founding of new cities, infrastructural advancements, and the establishment of institutions that collectively transformed the urban landscape of medieval India.

The period of the Delhi Sultanate (1206–1526) witnessed significant urbanization, transforming India's economic, social, cultural, and administrative landscape. The expansion of cities like Delhi, Lahore, Multan, Jaunpur, Badaun, and Daulatabad played a crucial role in trade, governance, and cultural exchange. This process was driven by military conquests, economic policies, migration of skilled artisans and traders, and the introduction of new administrative systems. Urbanization not only contributed to economic prosperity but also introduced challenges such as resource depletion, class disparities, and political instability.

Urban centers flourished as commercial hubs, significantly boosting trade and industries. The establishment of markets (bazaars) and trade guilds helped regulate commerce, and cities became centers for the production of textiles, metalwork, and luxury goods. The influx of Persian, Central Asian, and Arab traders facilitated the exchange of goods such as spices, horses, textiles, and handicrafts.<sup>14</sup> The introduction of the iqta system allowed nobles to control land revenue, which encouraged economic activity and supported the development of cities.

Improved road networks connected cities to major trade routes, including the Silk Road and maritime trade routes via Gujarat and Bengal, further strengthening economic ties.<sup>15</sup> Trade routes facilitated economic exchanges between India and foreign markets in Persia, the Middle East, and Central Asia, ensuring a steady inflow of wealth and luxury goods.<sup>16</sup>

The rapid urbanization led to a more structured social hierarchy in cities. The ruling elite, including the sultans, nobles, and military commanders, occupied the highest positions in society, followed by traders, scholars, artisans, and laborers. The migration of Persian, Turkish, and Afghan scholars, traders, and craftsmen contributed to the cosmopolitan nature of cities, fostering cultural exchanges.<sup>17</sup> The growth of cities led to the establishment of urban amenities such as mosques, madrasas (educational institutions), sarais (inns), and hospitals, which enhanced the quality of life for urban dwellers.<sup>18</sup> However, urbanization also created social inequalities. The nobility and merchants enjoyed a lavish lifestyle, while the lower classes, including laborers and slaves, faced hardships due to overcrowding and economic disparities.<sup>19</sup>

Urbanization during the Sultanate period led to the blending of Indo-Islamic cultural traditions. The construction of mosques, madrasas, and Sufi khanqahs contributed to the spread of Islamic education and spirituality. The establishment of cities like Siri (by Alauddin Khalji) and Tughlaqabad (by Ghiyasuddin Tughlaq) reflected advancements in urban

planning and defensive architecture.<sup>20</sup> The development of madrasas helped in the dissemination of Persian and Arabic knowledge, attracting scholars and students from across the Islamic world.<sup>21</sup> The influence of Persian art and literature enriched India's cultural heritage, as seen in the flourishing of Indo-Persian poetry, calligraphy, and architecture.<sup>22</sup>

The Sultanate's urbanization efforts were closely tied to its administrative policies. Cities became centers of governance, with fortified walls, military barracks, and government offices ensuring administrative control. The establishment of military outposts (thanas) and administrative headquarters in major cities strengthened the Sultanate's authority. The forced migration of people to new cities, such as Muhammad bin Tughlaq's transfer of the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad, showcased the challenges of rapid urbanization, as it led to depopulation and economic distress. Despite the setbacks, urban centers remained crucial in maintaining the Sultanate's administrative structure, influencing the urban policies of later dynasties, especially the Mughals.

While urbanization led to economic growth and cultural advancements, it also posed several challenges related to resource management and infrastructure. Rapid population growth in cities caused pressure on water supplies, leading to the construction of step-wells and reservoirs.<sup>25</sup> The expansion of fortified cities required significant labor and resources, often leading to economic strain and dissatisfaction among the common people.<sup>26</sup> Disease outbreaks and sanitation issues became more prevalent due to overcrowding, though efforts were made to develop public baths, drainage systems, and rest houses for travelers.

Urbanization under the Delhi Sultanate had a profound political impact, shaping governance, military strategies, and diplomatic relations. The expansion of cities like Delhi, Multan, Lahore, Jaunpur, and Badaun allowed for greater centralization of power, as these urban centers became hubs of administration and military control. The establishment of fortified cities such as Siri by Alauddin Khalji and Tughlaqabad by Ghiyasuddin Tughlaq reinforced the Sultanate's defense mechanisms against Mongol invasions and internal rebellions.<sup>27</sup> The implementation of the iqta system, where nobles were granted land assignments in exchange for military service, enabled the Sultans to govern efficiently while ensuring the financial stability of urban centers.<sup>28</sup> Administrative institutions such as courts (dar-ul-qaza), military outposts (thanas), and revenue offices were established in cities to maintain law and order.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, urbanization facilitated the rise of political elites, including wealthy merchants, scholars, and religious leaders, who played a crucial role in governance. The Sultanate relied on Persian and Central Asian administrators, while Sufi saints and religious institutions (khanqahs) influenced political decisions and legitimacy.<sup>30</sup>

The presence of foreign embassies and trade delegations in major cities fostered diplomatic exchanges with the Mongols, the Persian court, and other neighboring powers. However, rapid urbanization also posed challenges, including overpopulation, food shortages, and political instability. The forced migration of people from Delhi to Daulatabad under Muhammad bin Tughlaq caused severe distress and weakened the Sultanate's control over both regions. Additionally, factional conflicts among nobles and rebellions in urban centers destabilized the later Tughlaq and Lodi administrations.<sup>31</sup> Despite these challenges, the political framework established through urbanization laid the foundation for the Mughal rulers, who further expanded the role of cities in governance, military organization, and economic prosperity.

Urbanization under the Delhi Sultanate had a lasting impact on India's historical trajectory. The growth of trade, emergence of new cities, cultural exchanges, and administrative centralization shaped medieval Indian society. Despite challenges like economic inequality, forced migrations, and resource shortages, urbanization contributed to the Sultanate's legacy, influencing subsequent rulers, particularly the Mughals, who further expanded upon the urban foundations laid during this period. The cities established during the Sultanate era continued to thrive, becoming integral parts of India's socio-economic and political framework.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

## REFERENCES

- Habib, Irfan, *Medieval India: The Study of a Civilization*, Delhi University Press, Delhi, 1984, pp. 120–145.
- Qureshi, Ishtiaq Hussain, *The Administration of the Sultanate of Delhi*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1942, pp. 85–89.
- Eaton, Richard M., *India in the Persianate Age: 1000–1765*, Allen Lane, London, 2019, p. 82.
- Chandra, Satish, *Medieval India: From Sultanate to the Mughals (1206–1526)*, Har-Anand Publications, New Delhi, 1997, pp. 160–165.
- Kumar, Sunil, *The Emergence of the Delhi Sultanate: 1192–1286*, Permanent Black, Ranikhet, 2007, p.102.
- Habib, Irfan, op.cit., p. 120–123.
- Qureshi, Ishtiaq Hussain, op.cit., p. 85.
- Mishra, B.N., *Economic History of the Delhi Sultanate*, Publication Division, New Delhi, 1995, p. 97.
- Altekar, A.S., *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, Motilal Banarsidass, Varanasi, 1959, p. 213.
- Siddiqui, Afzal Hussain, *The Delhi Sultanate: Urban Economy and Social Structure*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2001, p.70.
- Chattopadhyay, Bipin Chandra, *Economic History of Medieval India*, Mani Publications, Kolkata, 1987, pp. 175–185.
- Nizami, Khaliq Ahmad, *The Rise and Fall of the Delhi Sultanate*, Munir Publications, Aligarh, 1972, p. 58.
- Ali, Muhammad Habib, *Delhi Under the Sultans*, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1976, pp. 150-151.
- Habib, Irfan, op.cit., p. 125.
- Qureshi, Ishtiaq Hussain, op.cit., p. 88.
- Siddiqui, Afzal Hussain, op.cit., pp. 67.
- Ali, Muhammad Habib, op.cit., p. 137.
- Nizami, Khaliq Ahmad, op.cit., pp.74.
- Mishra, B.N., op.cit., p. 95.
- Ibid, p.87.
- Siddiqui, Afzal Hussain, op.cit., pp. 63.
- Chattopadhyay, Bipin Chandra, *Economic History of Medieval India*, Mani Publications, Kolkata, 1987, pp. 173-180.
- Ibid, p.87.
- Ibid, p.91.
- Nizami, Khaliq Ahmad, op.cit., p. 56.
- Altekar, A.S., op.cit., pp. 210–11.
- Ali, Muhammad Habib, op.cit., pp. 135–36.
- Qureshi, Ishtiaq Hussain, op.cit., pp. 89-90.
- Habib, Irfan, op.cit., p. 127.
- Ibid, p.560.
- Siddiqui, Afzal Hussain, op.cit., p.33.
- Mishra, B.N., op.cit., pp. 95-98