

CHAPTER 1

Urban Cultural Heritage of the Seven Cities of Delhi: Challenges and Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

The paper "Urban Cultural Heritage of the Seven Cities of Delhi: Challenges and Opportunities" by Gaurav Kumar Pal examines the impact of rapid urbanization and construction on Delhi's cultural heritage. Over the past century, Delhi's population has surged from 1 million to 15 million, leading to significant unplanned development that threatens the city's historical monuments. The study highlights the paradox of heritage conservation versus development, emphasizing the need for a model that integrates urban planning with heritage management. It provides a detailed analysis of the seven historical cities of Delhi—Qila Rai Pithora, Siri, Tughlaqabad, Jahanpanah, Firozabad, Shahjahanabad, and New Delhi—examining the current state of their monuments, the challenges they face, and potential conservation strategies. The paper argues for the preservation of these historical structures, not just as relics of the past but as integral parts of the urban landscape that reflect the city's historical interaction with nature. It calls for community involvement and sustainable urban governance to protect Delhi's rich cultural heritage amid modern growth.

Keywords: *Urbanization, Heritage Conservation, Delhi, Historical Monuments, Urban Planning*

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INTRODUCTION

Rapid population surges and incessant construction have led to urban chaos in Delhi. Over the last century, population has gone from 1 million to about 15 million with massive scale planned and unplanned development. The need for relentless fabrication of pace for the common man to thrive has stricken off respect for topography and nature which were the core elements on which the ancient and medieval cities of Delhi prospered. It's an alarming fact that such rapid growth over a century can destruct large scale monuments of over a millennia. More than half of the city's heritage is dead to give life to new zones for livelihood. Heritage and development is a never ending paradox but proper analysis of land of the past and present can solve many issues. We don't deserve to have the remnants of monuments if we merely see them as something of the past.

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These edifices are live proofs of the way of life people used to live, their ways of water management systems, their ways to interact with nature in the most resourceful yet harmless manner. A fitting reply to these matters would be to promote a model which links urbanity to heritage management. Conservation and restoration should infuse as much history as it can to come up with consistency.

As we go further into the culture of Delhi and its contemporary customs, it is important that we see Delhi as a whole which will only be possible after knowing the developments of each of the seven cities which have shaped in the present Delhi we live in.

Qila Rai Pithora

Constructed near the ridge of Aravalli ranges, the fortifications of Qila Rai Pithora were historically important as they were made to stop Muslim invaders. The remains of the oldest of the seven cities lie in the residential and office space at Saket, Qutub Institutional Area, Kishangarh, Vasant Kunj etc. It's hard to call as to when the original face of the fortification lost its face. From the point of structural heritage a large chunk of the buildings still remain but grossly in undesired manner. What's left is just brick masonry in a state of ignorance and wasteful matter with no character and thus no takers. But a deeper analysis of the present site shows that barring the destructions during the medieval period the present situation of the fortifications of Qila Rai and Lal Kot could have been avoided. It's a strange fact that there is little or no sense of culture in the popular imagination as well as among the locals of the first city of Delhi.

Lack of commitment by the authorities to preserve them has made sure that the original identity of Delhi is being lost in front of us. One can say that all the limelight is taken away by the adjacent Qutub Minar. However, this doesn't make for a reason for not preserving the serious deterioration that is going on here on a daily basis. Encroachments, irregular development, neglecting cultural importance and dearth of community involvement are some of the causes of this state. The backdrop of the fortifications still presents an opportunity to imbibe these ruined structures into a cherished heritage but at the same time, the unplanned urbanisation taking place in its vicinity makes it a challenge.

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It is important that no further deterioration of these thousand-year-old structures take place and the present state is well conserved as well as secured. The green and rocky landscape around Sanjay Van which is around the falling structures of Qila Rai can be included in preparing a plan to preserve the cultural importance of these structures. Creating trails which are safe and culturally informative is one of the simplest ways to involve community. The walls are 10 metre thick and 20 metre high and inclusivity in urban spaces of these walls will not only help in ease of preservation but also building a sense of belongingness in the neighbourhood. The re-use of cultural or physical landscape of an old ruined site is a success in many countries of Europe and even in many other cities of India.

Siri

Siri was the first city built by Muslims in Delhi. Allaudin Khilji, the most efficient ruler of the Khilji Dynasty constructed the city at a distance of five kilometres north-east of Qutub Minar. Siri was made using some of the most advanced architectural technology at that time and the use of hydraulic system at Hauz Khas stands testimony to that. The plan of the city was oval and had as many as seven entry and exit points. Currently, only the south-eastern gate exists while only 1.7 km² area remain out of the total. Most of it comes in the region of Siri Fort Sports Complex, Asiad Village, Shahpur Jat and Panchsheel Park.

Despite the forts, palaces, mosques and tombs, the most highlighted feature of Siri was the Hauz Khas tank. The tank addressed the problem of water which was also a subject to be dealt with in the previous reigns. Today, South Delhi is seeking solutions to water problems something which was a cause of suffrage in cities before Siri. When we talk about heritage conservation of a site, it is important to learn how people interacted with nature and geophysical attributes which were the core reasons for their opulence. A fine example is the Hauz Khas tank was constructed to utilize rainwater and channelize that to people through a natural drainage system with south to north stream. Stream analysis shows that there were two drains with which water was distributed – one towards the current JNU area and the other through Katwaria Sarai making up for an 11.2-kilometre square catchment area. Rich knowledge of this can be used by urban planners to come up with the restoration of ancient drainage systems and incorporate them into current use with modern redresses.

Most of the ruined walls are inside Siri Fort Sports Complex or Asiad Village (1982). Siri Fort Auditorium is built within the Siri Fort area. The auditorium hosts film festivals, dance performances, theatre etc. with a seating capacity of 2500. Such integration of historical sites for community space is something we should look up for heritage places. Reusing the space for community interaction and at the same time preserving it is a fine balance of work that must be adopted everywhere. However, during the construction of Asiad Village, many excavation sites of Siri were buried. The same happened during Common Wealth Games (2010). Either haphazard conservation was done or sites were buried. Recent excavation programmes by ASI is still a hope.

Tughlaqabad

Ghiyasuddin Tughlaq, the first ruler of the Tughlaq Dynasty built Tughlaqabad Fort – a strong and sturdy fortification with slanting walls on a massive scale. Ironically, the same could not be said for Tughlaqabad as a city as it was deserted after mere 15 years. Whether it was due to an improper water management system or the curse of Nizamuddin Auliya predicting that either the site of Tughlaqabad would be deserted or herdsmen would wander around the city, the early decline has made it the most ill-fated city of Delhi.

ASI and other competent bodies have not been able to protect and conserve the ramparts of this city. Today, the area has developed into Tughlaqabad Village, almost occupying half of the remnants of the fort. The neighbourhood of the city is shrinking and cramping the space with encroachments, which has been the point of contention for years now. The development of illegal societies around the city is many in number that the government cannot demolish it, which leaves nothing for the old. Absence of any sort of demarcations on the monument sites have led to total loss of integrity and life of the city.

The complex of the fort and Ghiyasuddin's tomb witness scarce tourism despite having unique features in their architecture, stories and the terrain. The scale of the fort is nothing short of Qutub Complex or that of Red Fort but the political history of the region in the last century has prohibited the significance of Tughlaqabad from matching that of any of the World Heritage Sites in Delhi. The urban villages around the fort have done nothing but cause further deterioration to the site. The fort is brimming with foliage, thorny vegetation and grazing cattle.

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Even though a lot is lost due to the surge in settlements, a lot can still be achieved. Without community involvement, it is almost impossible to make any sense of conserving the true legacy of this site. Effective heritage management and urban governance can contribute to infusing life to the site.

Jahanpanah

It may not be wrong to say that Jahanpanah was the weakest of the seven cities of Delhi. Weakest in terms of value or importance rather than architectural features because as far as the latter is concerned Jahanpanah added unique styles to the already established architectural norms of the Tughlaqs. The reason for the downfall of the city goes to its creator, Mohammad Bin Tughlaq for deserting the place of Daulatabad in search of a better possibility of resources only to return later. The to and fro journey from Delhi sucked the life of its people. Today, Jahanpanah fort and mosques are in withering condition and not too much is left of it. South Delhi regions like Kalu Sarai, Hauz Khas, Saket, Malviya Nagar, and Panchsheel Park give physical evidences of the 4th city of Delhi. Only a handful of monuments have able to withstand the tides of time. Satpula, Bijay Mandal and Khirki Mosque are few scattered monuments of the city that showcase no life. Although Khirki Mosque gives ample evidence of its unique features such as being one of the only closed mosques in India and 81 cupolas surmounted at the terrace. It is now surrounded by bustling and ever-expanding urbanity. In the race for development in South Delhi, these rare masterpieces have long lost their characteristics. Keeping in mind the harsh reality of urban growth, it would be futile to hope for conserving Jahanpanah as a city with just ruins but individual monuments such as Khidki Mosque can be taken up for care and maintenance.

Firozabad

The fifth city Firozabad was the first one to be established on the banks of the Yamuna River. It extends from Hauz Khas to Pir Ghaib and North Ridge. Such a step was taken to overcome the water problem that was the core reason for the downfall of two earlier cities of Tughlaq's reign, Tughlaqabad and Jahanpanah. Firozabad or Firoz Shah Kotla was built by the third ruler of the Tughlaq Dynasty Firoz Shah Tughlaq. He had a vision for architectural supremacy in the capital city. Although he did not construct massive fortification as Tughlaqabad Fort, his distinctions, resourcefulness and use of architectural knowledge set him apart from his contemporaries or his

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ancestors. Firozabad was built on a rectangular plan embracing the royal palace, Baolis, Jami masjid, Ashok Lat, gardens etc.

Perhaps the study of Firoz Shah Tughlaq and his achievements as a ruler who gave tremendous significance to conservation is what is now desired in the field of urban heritage conservation. He was a lover of architecture and connected to it spiritually. Understanding the importance of ancient monuments, he commissioned the repair and maintenance of structures made before him. Passionately repairing Tomar era Surajkund to its original state, Firoz Shah mended the western Yamuna channel as well which was built 400 years from that time. He put great weight on the importance of the drainage system and restarted the Hauz Khaz tank, only making it much more efficient this time. He maintained the integrity of Qutub Minar whilst he restored and added two more floors to it. The work done by him at that time towards conservation and at the same time urbanizing his city is the apt route that we need to take today.

During the second half of the 20th century, Firoz Shah Kotla created a culture within its colossal ruins. After the emergency of 1977, people gathered here every Thursday to put letters and photographs as a petition to the Djinns (spirits) due to a myth created at that time. The point is even today locals come to fulfil their wishes at the ruins. At the same time, these ruins are nothing more than haunting places for the classes proving again that culture flows where belief escalates.

Purana Qila

Purana Qila was built at the shores of Yamuna River following up with Firozabad. The site has witnessed the rise and fall of two dominant rulers in the middle of the 16th century – Sher Shah and Humayun. It's a fascinating statistic that neither of them was able to reign for a longer period in Delhi yet their architectural work is a precursor to many more to come. In the present day, a comprehensive urban development plan keeping the heritage and its originality intact is something that this city is enjoying. Going by the current scenarios of other ancient cities, it's a rarity to see Purana Qila strengthening its heritage values and becoming the soul of the city.

The urban landscape developments around the city since the independence is a major cause that Purana Qila is blossoming. A thriving zoological park, Bairon Temple teeming with people and a posh society of Sunder Nagar are the immediate neighbours of Purana Qila. Hence the

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context of Purana Qila is now felt in the relevant urban spaces as well. A well-connected transit in Metro rail with major intersections of roads leading to Court Houses and Government Houses of New Delhi along the lines of this city is also a boost for its inclusivity in space augmentation. It's big contrast when we take a look at the immediate surrounding of Tughlaqabad which happens to be barren land, encroached villages and cramped space. Recently, NBCC (National Buildings Construction Corporation Ltd) has taken up the conservation and maintenance project of Purana Qila. It has recreated the moat area near the main entrance of the Qila which has historical as well as cultural significance. Boating across the peripheries of the Qila is coming as a major attraction for the visitors. There is a facility-cum-interpretation centre provided for the visitors. This along with green features and energy-efficient lighting to light up the Qila in the evening are some innovative work which is an inspiration for other monuments. Cultural Festivals like the ASEAN Music Festival hosted by the Ministry of Culture is adding all the more zest to this place.

Shahjahanabad

Shah Jahan brought the Mughal Capital back to Delhi in the middle of the 17th century with the dream to create a marvel city. Yamuna River bank with a bow-shaped feature was chosen to create an unparalleled planned city. Shahjahanabad or Chandni Chowk as it is currently popular boasts of structures like Red Fort, Chandni Chowk market, Fatehpuri Masjid, Jama Masjid, Digambar Jain Mandir and multitudes of wholesale markets. Chandni Chowk Complex has a crumbling space with a chaotic display of rickshaw pullers, overcrowded shops, dilapidated buildings of pre-independence, traffic snarls, dangling electric wires and possibly everything which has the potential to ruin a heritage of such magnanimity.

Shahjahanabad offers amplitude multiplicities and diversities in terms of historical sites and space to people that a mere clean-up of the site would change its visual dimension. Shockingly, that is the most challenging part when it comes to the revitalisation of the cultural heritage of the area. For decades Chandni Chowk has confined its space to wholesale markets and street vendors who have eaten up space and life. Lack of knowledge, neglect of rare culture and overpopulation is swallowing up the space in Chandni Chowk leaving little or nothing for neither the urban planners nor the heritage conservators.

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Government initiatives such as Shahjahanabad Redevelopment Corporation (SRC) are trying to declutter the space and surrounding the area. However, there are deep challenges to that. The current development of creating a pedestrian space between Red Fort and Fatehpuri Masjid is facing harsh criticism from historians as it was used as an underground water channel during the time of Shah Jahan. Community involvement has never been as much important as in this case. There are countless Havelis which come under heritage and the owners are either unaware or careless of the fact. Historical markets like Dariba Kalan and Katra Neel are coping with the limited and catastrophic thin space. The precinct of Jama Masjid is showcasing a shoddy neighbourhood and streets.

Clearly, a lot of effort is required to cater to the needs of Chandni Chowk. No government plan includes the residence of Delhi 6 in its plan which is a severity. Heritage Walks and tourism in Chandni Chowk are at an all-time high but with no real efforts to revamp the much-needed problem of urban heritage settlement, these recent advancements would merely be a puff of air and a superficial solution to a highly frenetic problem.

Conclusion

Heritage conservation of a site deals with many on-ground studies. Development around Purana Qila has shown that there must be an inclusive agenda for diverse bodies whereas Hauz Khas tank in Siri points out that water and heritage go long back and one needs to find the waterways to truly develop a programme worthy of urban conservation. Out of the seven cities, Shahjahanabad and Firozabad cater to public engagement and perception. There should be an underlying fact that a sense of a place must never be lost. It is something that gives value for future environments.

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