



From Centre to Periphery: Changing Fortunes of the Lal Qila

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Abstract

The development of cities from ancient times to the present can be attributed to the dynamic interaction between socio-economic and technological advancements, leading to the emergence of urban settlements. These urban centres served not only as focal points for trade and governance but also represented cultural, artistic, and intellectual pursuits that left a lasting impact on future urban landscapes. Many cities possess distinct cultural identifiers and symbols, which are expressed through religious structures, statues, or street names, conveying their cultural beliefs and values. This paper, employing the aforementioned frameworks, examines how the significance of the Lal Qila or Qila Mubarak in Shahjahanabad (today known as the Red Fort or Lal Qila), as the heart of the city, has evolved in tandem with changes in urban culture and power dynamics. Throughout its history, the Red Fort has been intimately linked with pivotal events in Delhi's past, including the zenith of the Mughal empire, its subsequent decline, British rule in Delhi, the 1857 mutiny, the partition, and India's independence. It serves as a silent observer of both the optimism and challenges associated with these historic occurrences, continually reminding people of the intricacies within India's history.

Keywords: Qila Mubarak, Red Fort, Lal Qila, Shahjahanabad, Old Delhi.

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The development of cities throughout history can be attributed to the complex interplay of socio-economic and technological advancements, which have given rise to urban settlements. Early urban centres evolved into expansive metropolises during the Middle Ages, laying the foundations for modern urban life. Today's cities reflect comprehensive development and modernization driven by socio-economic, political necessities, and a desire for an improved quality of life. The first urban cities emerged around 3500 BCE in Mesopotamia and exhibited distinctive features such as high population density, centralized governance systems, extensive infrastructure, and significant architectural achievements. Similarly, river valley civilizations like the Nile and Indus valleys, as well as the establishment of Greek and Roman city-states, played pivotal roles in shaping cultural and political landscapes. For instance, the Roman Empire revolutionized urban planning, with cities like Rome accommodating over a million people at its peak. These cities boasted grid layouts, aqueducts, and monumental structures like the Colosseum, showcasing an unprecedented level of urban sophistication. Athens featured an Agora, a public meeting place central to civic life, while Sparta integrated military and community life within its city-state framework. Athens and Sparta epitomized distinct urban forms in ancient Greece. Medieval cities were influenced by factors like feudalism, trade, and the rise of religious institutions. Typical features included city walls, narrow winding streets, and central marketplaces, similar to what we find in cities like London, Paris, Florence, as well as Islamic cities such as Baghdad, Cordoba, and Cairo. These cities facilitated rich cultural exchanges and intellectual progress, serving as crucibles of innovation, commerce, craft guilds, religious centres, marketplaces, and the establishment of universities. They epitomized the multifaceted nature of urban life, where cities were not just hubs of commerce and governance but also centres of cultural, artistic, and intellectual pursuits that influenced future urban landscapes.

Nodes and the City

Urban thinker Mumford (1961) believed that cities were humanity's greatest creations and should be viewed as dynamic and organic entities, not merely collections of buildings and infrastructure. Cities are a product of human endeavours, shaped by the past and projecting into the future. To understand cities better, one can interpret them as texts, examining their physical, social, and cultural aspects as if they were written or symbolic texts. Cities can be analysed in terms of semiotics, including signs and symbols, to understand streets, buildings, graffiti, public art, and the people who inhabit them. As narratives or stories, cities reveal their histories, developments, and the lives of their residents, creating unique urban expressions. Each layer of a city's history, represented by its architecture, culture, and society, tells a different story, uncovering various aspects of the city's identity. Cities also interact with their surroundings and neighbourhoods, presenting different interpretations of their relationships with neighbouring areas. Urban planning decisions and zoning laws reflect power dynamics within a city and can be studied as sites of power struggles and political expressions. A

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multimodal analysis of a city, combining texts, images, and various modes of communication like architecture, public spaces, and transportation systems, yields different narratives about the city.

However, the interpretation of a city can be subjective and context-dependent, varying depending on the experiences, backgrounds, and perspectives of those analysing it. Therefore, an interdisciplinary approach involving urban planners, architects, historians, sociologists, and cultural theorists is essential to comprehensively understand a city as a text. It is also crucial to involve the local community in interpreting the city, as they play a role in urban development and represent the city's aspirations. Many cities possess unique cultural codes and symbols, expressed through religious buildings, statues, or street names, reflecting cultural beliefs and values. This paper, applying the aforementioned frameworks, explores how the meaning of the Red Fort as the city's focal point has evolved over time, in response to changes in urban culture and power structures.

Centrality of the Qila in Shahjahanabad

In the early 17th century, during the reign of Mughal Emperor Shahjahan, the city of Shahjahanabad was meticulously designed and built. This city encompassed the famous Red Fort, known as the Qila Mubarak at that time, along with the surrounding walled area. Shahjahan's ambitious urban project was a magnificent symbol of Mughal authority and grandeur. Notably, the Red Fort stood out as a pinnacle of architectural brilliance and served a dual purpose as a formidable defensive stronghold. Its robust red sandstone walls and imposing gates were constructed to withstand potential invasions. Strategically situated on the banks of the Yamuna River, the Red Fort occupied a central location in Delhi, providing natural fortification against external threats. Furthermore, its location along important trade routes made it a crucial hub for trade, commerce, and governance. Shah Jahan's decision to return to Delhi and build this new city was motivated by the challenge of creating a majestic ceremonial pathway amidst the chaotic and disorganized city of Agra. Shah Jahan, often referred to as the "engineer king" due to his astute understanding of architecture, had a preference for using marble rather than sandstone in his constructions. In Agra, he had already made significant modifications to the Fort and constructed the iconic Taj Mahal, which is considered his masterpiece. However, these individual structures did not fully satisfy his refined architectural sensibilities. Haunted by the emotional turmoil caused by the loss of Mumtaz Mahal and constrained by the limitations of Agra, Shah Jahan searched for a new site to establish Shahjahanabad. Delhi proved to be the ideal choice due to its more favorable climate, abundant water sources, and access to construction materials from nearby ruins. The establishment of this new capital served two primary objectives: it showcased Shah Jahan's sophisticated architectural taste and displayed the opulence of an empire at its zenith. In this ambitious undertaking, Shah Jahan had ample resources at his disposal, both in terms of finances and labor, within his flourishing realm. On April 29, 1639, at an astrologically auspicious moment, Ghairat Khan, the Subahadar of Delhi, entrusted the renowned builders Ustad Hamid and Ustad Ahmad with the task of constructing the new capital, underscoring Shah Jahan's unwavering commitment to architectural perfection.

According to the assessment by Samuel V. Noe, it is likely that Shah Jahan's vision for his capital was influenced by reports of the magnificent capital of Shah Abbas in Isfahan. Noe suggests that considering the Persian orientation of the Mughal court in general and Shah Jahan in particular, the excellence of Isfahan would have presented an intriguing ideal (Noe, 1986, 2002, p. 237). Despite several challenges such as the presence of two rocky hills in an otherwise flat landscape, a winding river, the remnants of two prior cities, the nearby Salimgarh fortress, and an extensive network of frequently used long-distance roads, the architects managed to achieve an almost perfect symmetry in line with Persian formalism. Stephen P. Blake identifies another potential influence that might have played a role in the planning of Shahjahanabad. He suggests that the plan of Shahjahanabad seems to have been based on a design found in ancient Hindu texts on architecture. These texts, known as the *vastu sastras* (rules for architecture), were part of a larger body of Sanskrit texts called the *silpa sastras* (rules for manual arts). The *Manasara*, a *vastu sastra* dating back to around A.D. 400-600, listed a semi-elliptical design called *karmuka* (bow) as one of the settlement shapes. Such a plan was particularly suitable for a site facing a river or a seashore (Blake, 1986, 2002, p. 71). In Hindu towns following the *karmuka* plan, the holiest location was the point where two perpendicular streets intersected, typically housing a temple dedicated to either Shiva or Vishnu. However, in Islamic Shahjahanabad, this central point was occupied by the Palace Fortress. The Islamic city, as described by Thomas Krafft, adheres to a formal pattern featuring a centrally located Friday Mosque, a surrounding marketplace, distinct social and economic zones from the city center to its outskirts, an irregular street layout, city walls, a citadel, inner urban districts, and narrow dead-end streets as typical elements. This layout establishes specific urban-hinterland relationships characterized by a rent-capitalist nature (Ehlers-Krafft, 1993). Krafft notes that unlike other cities in the Islamic world, the bazaars in Islamic Indian cities do not have distinct differentiations. Instead, retailing, manufacturing, and living form a close symbiosis. Bazaars are characterized by linear patterns, preventing the development of central-peripheral gradients (Ehlers-Krafft, 1993, p. 22). Highlighting another crucial aspect of the city, Jamal Malik suggests that the creators of Shahjahanabad crafted an architectural representation of what has often been referred to as the "patrimonial system" at its zenith (Malik, 1993). However, as Narayani Gupta clarifies, while Shahjahanabad may exhibit the predominant form of a Mughal city, "its way of life was predominantly shaped by its residents. The influx of people, both individuals and communities, over many centuries, contributed to its distinctive ambiance and character" (Gupta, 1993, p. 31).

The Mughal Court established a culture characterized by lavish displays and performances to assert its political authority. Visiting the King was a demanding and expensive endeavor, not only because the King expected valuable gifts but also because his officials required offerings known as "*nazranas*." Although valuable items were presented to the King, he would accept only a select few and return the rest. The King also bestowed "*khilats*" or robes upon visiting ambassadors, nobles, or rulers, who were expected to present themselves dressed in these robes. Visitors were received with elaborate ceremonies, and they were expected to adhere to intricate court etiquettes. Every noble was obliged to attend the King's Darbar (court) twice daily, and both nobles and court visitors were prohibited from sitting. They had to stand in their designated positions within the hierarchical structure until the King had concluded his affairs for the day. Any form of misconduct was severely penalized. The King was addressed with honorific titles such as *Alam Panah*, *Qibla-i-Din-i-Jahan*, *Qibla-Din-wa-Duniya*,

and Hazrat Salaamat. Greetings to the King took various forms, including *Kornish*, *Taslim*, *Sijdah*, and *Paibos*. However, Aurangzeb prohibited all these forms of salutation as they were considered forms of idolatry, allowing only the simple Islamic greeting of saying "*al-salaam-aleikum*." The formalities of the Court extended to ordinary people, and the same meticulous procedures were observed in homes and everyday interactions on the streets. Social gatherings were typically limited to men, as women often stayed within the confines of their homes. Customs such as salutations, gift-giving, the manner of receiving guests, showing respect based on status and age, polite conduct in personal and public settings, and proper etiquette were all influenced by the courtly setting. While political legitimacy in the Sultanate was rooted in Islam, in the Mughal realm, the principle of the patrimonial bureaucratic state was paramount. Some scholars, like Ebba Koch (1991) and Amina Okada (2010), have emphasized the role of Mughal art in securing legitimacy. Others, like Urvashi Dalal, see the pursuit of legitimacy embedded in the design of Shahjahanabad. In the 20th century, Francis William Buckler's theory of corporate kingship had a significant influence, attributing Mughal sovereignty to practices like the bestowing of '*khilats*', which integrated the nobles into the distinct folds of the "court society." As demonstrated by Harbans Mukhia, Islam was just one of several enduring sources of legitimacy operating at intellectual, political, and popular levels (Harbans Mukhia, 2004, p. 16). Writes Mukhia:

If the intellectual and cultural ambience at the court bore the impress of Islam's considerable presence, the rulers themselves frequently invoked Islamic idiom and jargon to legitimize their actions. With some of them it might have been merely a political maneuver; with some others of conviction, even vehemence, shaded a part of the exigency. (Mukhia, 2004, p.17)

The Qila and the Mosque: Stately Symbols of Shahjahanabad Iconography

The city of Shahjahanabad had two central focal points: the Palace Fort and the Jama Masjid. It was enclosed by a formidable stone wall, standing at 27 feet in height, 12 feet in thickness, and stretching approximately 3.8 miles in length. This wall, constructed between 1651 and 1658, featured 27 towers and several gates (for further details, see Safvi, 2019). Among the main entrances to the city were the Kashmiri Gate, Mori Gate, Kabuli Gate, Lahori Gate, Ajmeri Gate, Turkomani Gate, and Akbarabadi Gate. On the riverfront side, access points to the river were provided through Nigambodh Ghat, Qila Ghat, and Raj Ghat. In addition to these major gates, numerous smaller entrances were located near significant mansions, markets, or mosques. Chandni Chowk was the most prominent public thoroughfare in the city, stretching from Lahori Gate to Fatehpuri Masjid. This boulevard featured a central canal known as Nahar-i-bihisht, tree-lined streets, and various markets, including Ashrafi Bazaar, Urdu Bazaar, and Fatehpuri Bazaar. Along this street, one could find coffee houses, gardens, bathhouses, and inns. Another market area developed near Akbarabadi Gate, eventually known as Faiz Bazar. Khas Bazar was situated on the street connecting the Palace Fort to the Jama Masjid. Secondary roads also had their own specialized bazaars, often associated with nearby workshops. Various neighborhoods (*mohallas*) had their local bazaars as well. The Fort, primarily constructed from red sandstone sourced from the vicinity of Fatehpur Sikri, had an octagonal shape with a perimeter of nearly two miles, measuring 3,100 feet by 1,650 feet. Its axes were aligned with the cardinal points of the compass. On the landward side, a moat, 75 feet wide and 30 feet deep, provided protection. The Fort was divided into two sections: the river-facing half served as the center of domestic and official activities. Within this area, the southern portion contained the harim

(women's mansions), accessible only to sons and husbands. The Imtiaz or Mumtaz Mahal, later known as the Rang Mahal, was the largest building and served as a venue for the daily activities of the Fort's residents. Shah Jahan retired to this space after his daily schedule in the Diwan-i-aam. Adjacent to this area were the Aramgah or Khwabgah (sleeping quarters) and the emperor's *jharokha* (balcony) in the Mussaman Burj (Octagonal Tower), where petitioners and subjects gathered for daily darshan (audience). The northern half of the river-facing section contained the more public buildings of the court. The Diwan-i-aam (Hall of Public Audience) was a large open pavilion with forty pillars divided into two sections. One section was for princes, distinguished *amirs*, ambassadors, and dignitaries, while the other was for lesser *amirs*, nobles, and officers. The emperor himself sat in an eastern wall balcony six feet above the ground, with officers conducting routine financial, military, and administrative affairs below on a marble platform. Surrounding the three sides of the Diwan-i-aam was a courtyard with rooms designated for the seating of the standing guard's *amirs*. Adjacent to this was a *naqqarkhana* (Place of Drums), where musicians played martial music. On the riverfront side of the Diwan-i-aam was the most opulent building of the Fort, the Diwan-i-khaas (Hall of Private Audience) or the Shah Mahal (Emperor's Palace). This chamber was adorned with bejeweled marble decor featuring extensive use of precious metals and glass, making it a dazzling space. It also housed the world's most expensive throne, the Peacock throne. The Royal Hamam or *ghusalkhana* (Bath) was situated nearby and was lavishly furnished with three stories, each serving different functions such as dressing, hot water, and cold water. The Shah Burj (King's Tower) marked the northeastern corner of the river-facing landmarks within the Fort. To the west of the imperial quarters lay another densely populated area known as the *jilaukhana*, adjacent to the *naqqarkhana*. This area was where members of the royal family, *amirs*, officers, and petitioners gathered while awaiting entry. An unusual feature of the Fort was the covered Bazaar-i-musqaaf, a market not commonly found in India at the time but prevalent in West Asia. A significant portion of the palace grounds was dedicated to gardens, including the Mahtab Gardens and Hayat Bakhsh Gardens. Beyond the Fort, past the moat that separated it from the rest of the city, stretched beautiful gardens like the Anguri, Buland, and Gulabi gardens. Since Shah Jahan attended the Jama Masjid, which he had built, there was no mosque within the Fort itself. The Moti Masjid in the Fort was later constructed by his son, Aurangzeb. The road connecting the Akbarabadi Gate to the Salimgarh Gate within the Fort was lined with residences, offices, stables, workshops, and other facilities to cater to the needs of the royal household. Younger and less established princes resided within the Fort, while more established ones lived outside in mansions assigned to them.

Shahjahan issued a royal *farmaan* (order) to ensure the construction of mosques throughout his capital city. Alongside other Islamic places of worship like Dargahs, Khanqahs, Imambarahs, and Idgahs, the city was adorned with Masjids of various sizes and importance, ranging from grand congregational mosques to neighborhood prayer places. The Jama Masjid, also known as the Masjid-i-Jami (Friday Mosque), held a central and significant role as the grand congregational mosque where the principal weekly religious service took place. Construction of this magnificent mosque commenced in 1650 under the supervision of Fazil Khan, the *khan saman*, and Sadullah Khan, the *wazir*. It took six years and one million rupees to complete this remarkable structure. Perched atop one of the cliffs within the plains of Shahjahanabad, known as Bhujalal Pahari, the mosque's grandeur was enhanced by a steep flight of steps leading to its massive doorways on three sides. The Masjid symbolically represented the religious and vertical counterpart to the political and horizontal prominence

of the Fort in Shahjahanabad's symbolism. The steps flanking the Masjid on three sides were lined with bazaars selling various goods, creating a vibrant and bustling atmosphere. On the western side, where the flight of steps was absent, a *dawakhana* (hospital) and a madrasa (Islamic school) funded by the emperor were situated. Shah Jahan himself used the eastern side for his own entry. The royal procession enroute to the Jama Masjid passed through Khass Bazaar, inhabited by dancers, astrologers, storytellers, and healers. The Masjid itself was situated on the second floor, following the common practice of multistoried mosques. The prayer hall was a spacious square with three large domes above it. The mosque featured *mihrabs* (recesses indicating the direction of Mecca), minarets, and a central fountain, highlighting its elegant simplicity. Due to its size and magnificence, the Jama Masjid attracted worshipers from all parts of the city and was regarded as the most significant or Padshahi (Sovereign) mosque of Shahjahanabad.

Lanes and Bylanes in Shahjahanabad

The area immediately outside the Fort was designated for the residence of royalty and nobility, and a similar pattern emerged around Chandni Chowk later on. This concentration of wealth and power in these regions became apparent. While the Fort area was carefully planned to avoid the urban chaos seen in cities like Agra and Lahore, urban planning gradually became more disorganized and arbitrary as one moved away from the Fort. This was mainly because most efforts were focused on developing the central axis that symbolized the emperor's glory, while the rest of the city followed the social and economic dynamics of its inhabitants. One crucial aspect was the location of mansions owned by royalty and nobility, which served as microcosms of the Fort itself. These mansions, often referred to as *qasrs* (fortresses), not only replicated the design but also the political and economic influence of the Fort. Havelis or *nashimans* (large mansions) contained architectural features similar to those found in the Fort, including massive walls, *idgah* (prayer ground), *hamam* (bathhouse), *mehal sarai* (family quarters), *diwankhana* (hall for audiences), *sardkhana* (cool chambers for summer retreat), *tekhkhana* (underground chambers), *karkhana* (workshops), *naqqarkhana* (musical hall), *jilau khana* (waiting area), and *khanahbagh* (garden). The dependents and workers of these mansions began residing in thatched huts outside, giving rise to the *mohalla* system of population distribution. As suggested by Stephen P. Blake, other principles of organization such as caste, origin, and trade also influenced the formation of *mohallas* (Blake, 1986, 2002).

According to Sharia values, the city was divided into private spaces (*havelis* or mansions), public spaces (thoroughfares, secondary roads, bazaars), and semi-private spaces (alleys within *mohallas*, which were enclosed and homogenous units with entry through city gates). This hierarchical urban organization allowed for a diverse population to coexist. The internal hierarchy was an integral part of the city, as evidenced by land allocation to the *shurafa* (elite) and the construction of mosques from east to west in alignment with the royal perspective. By the 18th century, the spatial order in Shahjahanabad had led to its segregation into three rough categories. To the north of Chandni Chowk, the gentry resided in palaces, mansions, and gardens. Moving closer to Chandni Chowk, one would find traders dealing in various goods, including huqqa makers, fabrics, meats, fish, luxury items, and in proximity to the imperial residence. Along Chandni Chowk, luxury shops selling the finest ready-made goods lined the street. In the *mohallas* around Khari Baoli, specialists in products such as pomegranates, butter oil, perfumes, flowers, and tobacco could be found. This region was economically prosperous. North of this area was the Punjabi Katrah, inhabited by ambitious workers and traders. As one

moved from the city's outskirts toward the center, specialization was evident, reflecting consumption patterns and the availability of raw materials and labor.

Christian missionaries and Europeans established their presence in Daryaganj, situated to the southeast of Shahjahanabad. The working-class population, mostly belonging to various trades, resided predominantly to the south of Chandni Chowk, including areas like Gali Rodgaran, which was home to gut workers. The poorest segments of society, such as oil extractors, cobblers, washermen, butchers, and potters, primarily lived close to the city gates. Some exceptions to this pattern included the Kashmiri Gate, Lahori Gate, the Kabuli Gate, as well as the eastern entrances of the city, and even some communities outside the city walls. Dancing girls had their own neighborhood known as Gali Kanchne ki. Certain professions, like barbers and tanners, did not have dedicated mohallas but were situated on the outskirts of various mohallas. There was a total of 91 mohalla mosques, with many located within amiri mansions. Islamic law mandated public access to these mosques. Lower-ranking tradesmen lived along the southern and southwestern perimeter of the city walls, and they had mosques associated with their professions, such as coalers', masons', potters', metalworkers', shepherds', and washermen's mosques. Closer to the city's core, there were mosques for oil extractors, weavers, horse traders, and wool producers, as these were socially respected professions concentrated in that area. Along the primary streets, mosques were designated for the muhtasib (censor of public morality) and karori (collector of taxes). Professional groups located north of the axis of Kucha-e Sayyid Qasim Khan and Sitaram Bazar included hairdressers, basket weavers, spinners, bangle makers, money changers, potters, shoemakers, gardeners, dyers, and carpenters, each having its own mosque. Constructing mosques was considered virtuous, and mohalla mosques were built, maintained, and promoted with *amiri* (aristocratic) patronage. These mosques were sustained through income generated from waqf (dedications for mosque management by the builder), donations, or rent from rooms within the mosques used as musafirkhanas (lodges).

To support his argument that each Islamic tradition within the city could be linked to specific areas of origin and development, Jamal Malik provides the following evidence:

By establishing a closed unit with its variety of social groups, complementing each other, with schools, stores for essential goods, etc., each mohalla gave an incentive for a life in seclusion and devotion to God, thereby forming a moral community. Trans-mohalla movement was thus not necessary in this strictly demarcated cultural framework. ... The identity of the quarter was thus marked out by its economic and social contacts as well as religious affiliations and therefore often served as a first port of call for new arrivals to the city."

Religious scholars embodied the tradition of spiritual and vocational purity by adhering to the practice of not leaving their designated mohallas. Consequently, they played a central role in the spiritual life of their respective mohallas. This role involved facilitating and presiding over recurring religious ceremonies and celebrations, serving as a unifying force within the mohalla. Their presence and guidance helped forge a shared social and ritual identity among the mohalla's inhabitants, fostering a sense of belonging and connection to a common spiritual and ceremonial realm (Jamal Malik, p. 73).

The city could also be roughly divided along religious lines, with distinct neighborhoods predominantly inhabited by Hindus and Muslims. Hindus predominantly resided in Chhipiwara, located to the west of the Jama Masjid, and in North Ballimaran, situated southeast of Fatehpuri Masjid. In contrast, the majority of Muslims

settled in Haweli Haider Quli Khan, South Ballimaran, and Lal Quan, and in close proximity to the large mosques. Shahjahanabad had one central police station or Kotwali located in Chandni Chowk, which oversaw the administration of the city. There were twelve thanas (police precincts) under thanadars (police officers) responsible for collecting taxes and duties, maintaining population registers, policing the area, and controlling the markets. The thanas were further subdivided into mohallas, which were distinct residential quarters within the city. The mohallas were typically named after prominent or dominant residents or the primary vocation of the people living there. These mohallas followed a pattern of differentiated quarters and were socially cohesive, with no clear separation between areas of economic activity and residential spaces. As Jamal Malik notes, "The quarters are embedded in a complex texture with their norms relating not only to economic necessities but also to manifold social interweaving." This integration of various aspects of life within the mohallas made them socially and economically vibrant. The mohallas mostly bore the imprint of the chief service sector present there, such as traders, artisans, or specific ethnic groups. This is evident from the names of mohallas, which often included references to the predominant profession or ethnic identity, like jatwara, katrah-e marwari, punjabi, gadariyan (shepherds), suiwalan (needle makers), rikkab (stirrup holders/cupbearers), teliyan (oil extractors), muftiyan (religious scholars), sawdagar (traders), mohalla-e dhobiyan (washermen) and so on. These different social and ethnic groups coexisted in a symbiotic relationship, with their buildings and adjacent streets often aligned in a mutually beneficial manner. Within the mohallas, there were katrahs, which were commercial emporiums that also offered lodging facilities at their center. Radiating out from the katrah were small alleys known as galis or kuchahs, which could be categorized as primary, secondary, or tertiary streets depending on their distance from the katrah. Both katrahs and kuchahs often bore names corresponding to the professions or ethnic groups associated with them. The farther one moved from the katrah, the greater the diversity, but it also led to increased social anonymity. Narayani Gupta (1993) provides a compelling explanation as to why a large number of people could live together in this compact area without generating social tension. She suggests that urban society in Shahjahanabad was highly regulated, akin to a hierarchy of Chinese boxes, ranging from the city wall to the curtained private quarters of individual houses. This hierarchical organization and regulation helped maintain social harmony and cohesion within the city.

The entropy of the Mughal Twilight

The decline of the Mughal Empire, as symbolized by Shahjahanabad, was a complex process that unfolded over the 18th century. This decline began with the reign of Aurangzeb when he had to leave Delhi in 1679 to focus on his campaigns in the Deccan, particularly against the Marathas. The empire faced both internal and external challenges during this time.

After Aurangzeb's death in 1707, the Mughal Empire experienced a brief period of relative stability under Bahadur Shah, Jahandar Shah, and others. While the empire had lost some of its prestige and faced administrative challenges, its army remained formidable, and the Maratha threat was primarily limited to the South. However, effective leadership was lacking. The decline escalated dramatically in 1739 when Nadir Shah of Persia invaded and sacked Delhi. This invasion led to widespread massacres and the plunder of the royal treasury, including the famous Koh-i-Noor diamond and the Peacock Throne. Muhammad Shah, who ruled during this time, was more interested in courtly pleasures than addressing the empire's impending challenges.

Subsequent years saw further turmoil and external attacks on Delhi. Shah Alam II fled from Delhi and proclaimed himself emperor in 1759. Delhi was attacked and plundered by various forces, including Suraj Mal in 1764, and the city underwent a period of great instability known as the "Great Anarchy" from 1751 to 1761. By 1785, Delhi became an appendage to the domain of the Maratha leader Sindia. Ghulam Qadir's intrusion into Delhi in 1787 further highlighted the city's vulnerability and decline. Shah Alam II, despite being physically disabled, was kept on the throne as a pawn under Sindia's control. The final blow to the Mughal Empire in Delhi came in 1803 during the Battle of Delhi, where the British East India Company, led by Lord Lake, defeated the Marathas. Following this victory, Shah Alam II turned to the British for protection, marking the end of the Maratha influence in Delhi. From 1803 until 1857, the Mughal emperors in the Qila served as symbolic political figures with little actual power. The decline of the Mughal Empire, as witnessed in Shahjahanabad, was marked by a series of internal conflicts, external invasions, and changing power dynamics that ultimately led to its downfall.

The centrifugal movement continues during Pax Britannica

The British occupation of Delhi in 1803 marked a significant turning point in the city's history, bringing about substantial changes across various facets, such as urban development, politics, and society. Shah Alam II, the Mughal emperor, found himself confined within the Qila Mualla, while the British East India Company established its administrative authority outside the fort. Notably, the early British Residents, including figures like Sir David Ochterlony, Archibald Seton, and Charles Metcalf, pursued a policy of respectful engagement with the Mughal emperor within the fort while simultaneously exerting their influence beyond its walls. This approach involved courtesy and the presentation of tributes during their interactions with the emperor. Consequently, there was no immediate need for drastic measures in dealing with the Mughal ruler. Subsequently, the succession of Shah Alam II by Akbar Shah II and later Bahadur Shah II in 1837 defined the rule of the last three Mughal emperors, who are often mischaracterized in history. Historian Percival Spear, however, provides insights into their true character: Shah Alam, though brave and cultured, proved an unsuccessful ruler; Akbar, while dignified and cultured, had less significance than his father; and Bahadur Shah was characterized by his cultured and upright nature. Simultaneously, the physical landscape of Delhi, as described by Franklin, a surveyor for the East India Company in 1795, had significantly deteriorated. The once magnificent city had transformed into a chaotic collection of ruins, with remnants of aristocratic mansions, rural residences, bazaars, streets, and gardens scattered throughout the area.

Despite the turbulent conditions in Delhi, particularly the waning political influence of the Qila Mualla, the city remained a hub for cultural patronage. The painting atelier in Delhi, initially established and nurtured by Shah Jahan, continued to produce remarkable artworks, even spanning the rule of Aurangzeb and beyond. Emperors like Farrukhsiyar, Jahandar Shah, and Bahadur Shah I actively supported and encouraged painters, who developed distinctive styles often characterized by intricate and expert techniques in miniature figural representation. Despite the fluctuating political landscape, Delhi's artistic tradition continued to flourish, yielding masterpieces. William Dalrymple, in acknowledging the art produced during the reign of the Later Mughals, highlights that despite the diminishing resources, the later emperors displayed discerning patronage toward remarkable artists and poets. Recent scholarship has also recognized the innovative and intriguing work produced during this period, placing it on par with the art of their more celebrated predecessors.

Scholars such as Percival Spear and C.F. Andrews have documented a thriving intellectual, literary, and academic movement fueled by cultural patronage in Delhi. The city's cultural scene thrived, with art, music, poetry, and painting receiving support from the court, nobility, and emerging affluent groups. Although Delhi was once a center of Persian scholarship, it was now fostering a new literary medium: Urdu (or Hindawi). The popularity of Urdu poetry represented the culmination of a liberal culture that had been evolving since the reign of Akbar, transcending class and religious boundaries. Renowned poets like Nazir Akbarabadi, Mir Dard, Mir Taqi Mir, Mirza Rafi Sauda, and Shah Hatim celebrated the city's beauty and lamented the suffering it endured due to constant invasions. They explored the liberalism and humanism of the age, as well as its unpredictability and ingratitude. Mirza Farhatullah Baig's work, "Dehli ki Aakhiri Shama" (The Last Mushaira of Delhi), recounted the final grand poetry gathering in Zafar's Delhi, held at the haveli of Mubarak Begum, the widow of Ochterlony. This event featured forty other Delhi poets alongside poet-princes from the royal house, with prominent poets including Mir, Shefta, Sahbai, Daghi, Azad, Zauq (the poet laureate), and Ghalib—Ghalib assuming the poet laureateship only after Zauq's passing in 1854. Bahadur Shah Zafar, in addition to being a devoted patron of the arts who supported accomplished artists like the sitarist Himmat Khan and the ghazal singer Tanras Khan, was also a prolific poet under the pen name 'Zafar.' He excelled in various fields, including marksmanship, archery, riding, linguistics, and calligraphy, earning recognition as a Renaissance man known for his ascetic lifestyle, mysticism, and tolerance. Even as Urdu poetry reached new heights of artistic expression, Delhi College played a pivotal role in fostering an interest in Western learning, particularly in the physical and life sciences. Notably, Delhi was home to distinguished teachers, scholars, mystics, and theologians during the period from Mohammad Shah Rangila to Bahadur Shah Zafar. Within an Islamic context, Delhi held a prominent place and was often referred to as Hazrat Dilli and Markaz-i-daira-Islam (circle of Islam) due to the presence of revered pilgrimage Sufi shrines and grand mosques. The courtly life itself served as a cultural ideal celebrated and emulated not only in Delhi but also in other cultural centres like Hyderabad and Awadh. The court influenced various aspects of society, including forms of address, behavioral conventions, ceremonial dress, displays of affluence, merrymaking, wine drinking, festivals, fairs, marriage customs, and social rituals. Despite the emergence of early 19th-century revivalist and puritanical voices, Delhi society at large exhibited eclecticism and synthesis. In essence, the British occupation of Delhi in 1803 heralded a profound transformation in the city's trajectory, with a shifting political landscape, urban decay, but also the preservation of a vibrant cultural and intellectual legacy.

The Devastation and Dislocation of the Mutiny

The serene atmosphere of British rule in Delhi, as described by Mittal in 2013, was abruptly disrupted in 1857 when British forces arrived in the city. The arrival of these soldiers from Meerut, initially observed by Bahadur Shah as they stormed across the Yamuna River on a bridge of boats, caught both him and the entire city off guard. The aftermath of the revolt that followed was a grim tale of retaliatory destruction, targeting not only the city's inhabitants but also its physical structures, including the fort. Princes and other members of the royal family who were seen as offenders were executed near Delhi Gate at a location known as Khooni Darwaza, with the exception of Bahadur Shah himself. Although he was put on trial, his life was spared, and he, along with his wife Zeenat Mahal, his son Jivan Bakht, and a few other immediate family members, was sent into exile in Rangoon (modern-day Yangon). The British retaliation aimed for nothing less than the complete

obliteration of the city as retribution for the suffering they endured on the Ridge, the mistreatment and agony inflicted upon their women and children, the audacious challenge to their authority in establishing an alternate power, and the loss of many soldiers, including prominent figures like Nicholson, whose memorial was erected near the Ridge in 1870. As Narayani Gupta aptly expressed it, "Delhi was made to forget that it was a Mughal City." The fierce battles fought in the streets of Delhi had already inflicted irreparable damage. The magazine or arsenal within the walled city had exploded on May 11, 1857, and St. George's Church had been desecrated by the rebels. During the British reoccupation, houses were searched for treasures, and initially, there was a call to demolish the entire city in the aftermath of their victory. However, after the initial excitement subsided, more measured steps were taken to assert control over the city. As Noe has noted,

About 80 percent of the interior of the fort was destroyed (an area of about 120 acres). This had been densely covered with elaborate royal pavilions, gardens, store-rooms, barracks, and quarters of artisans and other court functionaries. Displacing a substantial residential population, the British converted the fort into a military garrison. To help protect it from assault they cleared a field for artillery fire an area 300-400 yards broad around its western and southern perimeter. ... The additional destruction resulted in the elimination of many of the more prestigious *mohallas* of the city, a number of the richest and most active bazaars, one of the largest mosques in the city, and several important charitable institutions. Assuming a population density of around 100 persons per acre..., the clearance around the fort resulted in the displacement of 10,000-12,000 residents. These figures do not include the seizure and, in some cases, demolition of the *havelis* of important officials ... (Noe, 1986, 2002, p. 237-249)

In total, many prestigious neighbourhoods of the city, several of the wealthiest and most active marketplaces, one of the largest mosques in the city, and numerous charitable institutions were eliminated. This resulted in the displacement of 10,000-12,000 residents, not including the seizure and, in some cases, demolition of the residences of important officials. The royal palace and the fort bore the brunt of British conquest fervor. Initially, Governor General Canning had ordered the preservation of isolated buildings of architectural or historic significance. However, as Percival Spear noted, the preservation efforts were often lacking in taste. In practice, only the Diwan-i-khas managed to avoid significant British alterations. Mosques were regarded with suspicion as potential centres of conspiracy, and while Jama Masjid was initially occupied by British troops, it was later handed back to a restoration committee under Maulvi Sayyid Ahmed, five years after its capture. Following the recapture of the city, British soldiers were accommodated in various buildings, including Colonel Skinner's house, Ahmad Ali Khan's haveli, Khan Mohammad's residence, Bara Hindu Rao, the Jama Masjid, the Delhi College, the Idgah, and the Fort. Over time, the Fort lost its centrality as Delhi was declared the new capital of the British Empire during the 1911 Darbar. The construction of New Delhi, with its expansion around Raisina Hill and the proliferation of railway lines, led to westward and northward urban expansion. This shift, combined with a general disregard for the civic conditions, historical significance, and Indian character of the former Shahjahanabad, resulted in the Fort and the surrounding settlements being relegated to what eventually became known as the 'Old City.'

Independent India: New Centres and Peripheries

The Red Fort, also known as Lal Qila, holds significant importance in the history of independent India for several compelling reasons. Although not centrally located within independent India's capital, it carries immense historical weight. On August 15, 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, delivered his iconic speech from the Red Fort's ramparts, officially proclaiming India's independence. This momentous occasion marked the culmination of British colonial rule in India and the dawn of a new era for the nation. The Red Fort, with its iconic architecture and historical resonance, provided a poignant backdrop for this pivotal declaration. The partition of India, accompanied by widespread violence, communal riots, and the mass migration of millions of people between India and Pakistan, is a critical chapter in this history. The Radcliffe Line, named after the British lawyer Cyril Radcliffe, delineated the boundary that separated the two newly formed nations. This line's announcement, on August 17, 1947, two days after independence, took place at the Red Fort. As a symbol of India's unity and rich cultural heritage, the Red Fort bore witness to the emotional and political turbulence surrounding the partition. While it stood as a place of jubilation on Independence Day, it also served as a poignant reminder of the divisions and challenges that accompanied this historical event. The partition led to the massive displacement and suffering of countless individuals, and the Red Fort stands as a tangible testament to the complexity and historical significance of this period. This colossal population movement, one of the largest and most tragic in history, resulted in the migration of millions of people. During this tumultuous time, the Red Fort often functioned as a temporary refuge for refugees. Every year, the iconic moment of India's independence is celebrated on August 15, with the Red Fort serving as the focal point of these celebrations. Additionally, it hosts Republic Day festivities, including an elaborate parade that showcases India's military prowess, cultural diversity, and achievements. The Red Fort has been designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, emphasizing its national and international importance. Independent India has undertaken extensive measures to protect and conserve this historic monument, ensuring that it remains a source of pride for the nation. Today, the Red Fort is a major tourist attraction in Delhi, drawing millions of visitors from around the world annually. It serves as an educational site where people can learn about India's history and its arduous struggle for independence. The fort's museums and exhibitions house artifacts and historical materials related to India's journey to independence. Furthermore, the Red Fort plays host to numerous cultural events and celebrations throughout the year. Thus, the Red Fort is intricately linked to India's partition and independence, serving as a living witness to both the optimism and the hardships that accompanied this historic event. It continues to remind people of the intricate nature of India's history.

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