The Growth of Medieval Delhi

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The names associated with a city may often tell us much about its history. Delhi's name may have come from Raja Dillu's *Dilli* (100 BC), or from *Dhilba* founded by the Tomar Rajputs (736 AD). And some say it came from the medieval town of *Dhillika* located near present day *Mehrauli*. Clearly the city has an ancient past. Other settlements which have left their imprint on the land are the forts of *Qila Lal Kot* (1024 AD), built by Anangpal, and *Qila Rai Pithora* (1170 AD) of Prithviraj Chauhan. Qutb-ud-din Aibak built his citadel and the *Qutb Minar* in the same area in 1199. All these cities were built on the *Kohi* (hilly) area in the south where the northern end of the long Aravali ridge intrudes into the Gangetic plain as a series of rocky outcrops. Thus, the town planner of that time was obviously strategically locating for defence, as well as looking for sources of water that could be entrapped.

It was in 1302 that Ala-ud-din Khilji cautiously descended from the Aravali uplands into the more fertile basin to the north and built a new capital at *Siri*. But for the water supply to his new city his engineers had to also construct the imaginative *Hauz Khas* on one of the many streams leading into the Yamuna. Perhaps this city was plagued by problems of defence, because in 1320 Ghiyas-ud-din Tughluq moved back south on to the *Kohi* and built *Tughluqabad* with its massive fortifications. However, the Tughluqs had to abandon this fort within five years because of a shortage of water, and Muhammad Shah Tughluq moved back to the area lying between *Siri* and *Rai Pithora*, constructed connecting fortifications, and thus built the city of *Jahanpanah* in 1334. His son, Firoz Shah Tughluq, conceived of the idea of diverting the water of the Yamuna into an old bed of the river and bringing it all the way south, irrigating prime agricultural land up to the Sahibi nadi and adding considerably to the revenues of the state. It was perhaps in order to be closer to this productive venture that his planners created *Firozabad* in the north in a wedge between the river and the Ridge of the Aravalis.

In 1530, Humayun, the second of the Moghuls, built his *Deenpanah* (*Purana Qila*), on top of a mound immediately south of *Firozabad* where the river provided a first line of defence and water was available in wells. The Afghan King, Sher Shah Suri, settled his *Dilli* next to this fort in 1542. Shahjahan moved further north into the apex of the wedge to build *Shahjahanabad* between 1638-44 with the *Lal Qila*, or Red Fort, as its fulcrum and a ring of satellite forts at *Tihar*, *Palam*, and *Patparganj* to protect the trade routes. For water, the planners of the city constructed a series of tanks and wells and extended the old Tughluq canal all the way into the heart of the city at *Chandni Chowk*. All these cities felt secure enough not to retreat back into the *Kohi* but the necessities of defence, trade, revenue, and water kept them located within the strategic basin to the east of the Ridge. These cities had elaborate layouts and considerable engineering but we do not know enough about the principles of city planning in that period. However, much could possibly be interpreted from what remains of the original constructions, particularly in the old city of *Shahjahanabad* and its surrounding hinterland.

Hauz Khas

All these cities depended upon the Aravali to afford some protection from raiders. Strong walls were also built to protect both the royal palace and the city. The ruins of these walls can still be seen in some places. However, the other great need was that of water. Once again, it was the Aravali that provided the source of this water. Tanks were constructed at each of these places to collect the rainwater and the remains of those tanks can still be seen - best preserved in *Surajkund* and *Mehrauli*. It was only in 1302 AD that the first ruler summoned the spirit to descend from the *Kohi* towards the fertile basin created by the Yamuna. This was the *Khadar* and it was here that the food was grown for the city and the revenue generated for the ruling house. But the new city of *Siri* needed a source of water too. So Ala-ud-din Khilji built the tank called the *Hauz Khas* or *Hauz-i-Alai* at a distance of almost 4 km from the city. This was a long distance in those times and a special canal had to be constructed to bring the water from the *Hauz* to *Siri*.

Thus the *Hauz Khas* provides a fulcrum around which events moved for almost 200 years. It was not only a source of water but also a seat of learning. And in the area in and around the *Hauz* one can see the technological developments that made the growth of cities possible. In fact, it was probably to advance the knowledge base that the *madarsa* was built here. For instance, the dam that gave birth to the *Hauz* required the knowledge of how to build foundations and masonry structures that would hold the water and not allow it to seep through. The gates had to be big enough to increase the capacity of the *Hauz* and, at the same time, light enough to be lifted by animal power.

The site for the reservoir must have been chosen very carefully because the fractured rock of the Aravali allows water to percolate through the fissures very rapidly. The canal to *Siri* was a technological feat for that time as it had to carry water for a long distance without losses to the ground and the air. And the old buildings and monuments still existing around the *Hauz* show the range of experimentation that went in to construct roofs, walls, and plinths. In fact, it was this experimentation that laid the basis for the huge schemes of the future including Firoz Shah Tughluq's Yamuna canal, Shahjahan's *Shahjahanabad* with the *Lal Qila* and the *Diwan-e-khas*, and Akbar's *Fatehpur Sikri* with its *Buland Darwaza*.

The *madarsa* must have played a very important role in this growth. It probably had visitors from far and wide who shared their experiences. The documentation of this experience provided the basis for experimenting further with materials, concepts, designs, and the literature that always accompanies such creativity. It was, in a sense, a kind of multi-disciplinary university with a strong thrust in research.

These historical roots should be compared with what is happening in the *Hauz Khas* area today. How many of the buildings, the street architecture, the galleries, the shops, the art galleries, the eateries, and the gardens and parks match up to the creativity and durability of the past? - a past that still survives after 700 years of wear and tear!

Colonial Delhi

By the end of the eighteenth century the East India Company had begun making its deep inroads into the territories of *Mughal* India. This necessitated the planning and construction of barracks and Company quarters near every large town. The confluence of the newly-commissioned Grand Trunk road and Bombay-Agra road made Delhi a place of crucial military importance. The aftermath of the Mutiny of 1857 led to further enforcement of control and the area around the Red Fort was cleared to enable the military to assert its supremacy. Civil administration was centred around the Secretariat built next to the northern Ridge within the safe confines of the Civil Lines. The new Viceregal Lodge with its protective barracks was built at an even safer distance across the ridge on the old alluvial plain of the Yamuna. Thus, the imperatives of colonial rule began to fashion the rules of town planning. This was reflected in the formation of the Delhi Municipal Committee in 1874. In the next decade the Committee proposed construction of a commercial square outside *Lahori Gate*, continuing into a new commercial quarter between the Gate and *Sadar Bazar*. These were supposed to be profitable enterprises in the tradition of the East India Company. The close of the century also saw the intrusion of the railway line as it thrust through the ramparts of the Red Fort and *Shahjahanabad*. This new mode of transport began displacing the old trade routes with their *sarais*, since it generally followed the same alignments.

The railways continued their expansion in the beginning of the twentieth century and, in the process, the new planners pulled down the bastions of the Walled City and filled the city's protective ditches and canals. Thus, *Delhi Sadar* station was constructed between the old town and *Sadar Bazar*, disrupting the organic linkage between the two, while a Mercantile Boulevard was proposed between the *Kabui* and *Ajmeri Gates*. A second city began rapidly growing in *Pahargunj*, *Sadar Bazar*, and *Sabzi Mandi* across the railway tracks. This led to the appointment of an Assistant Commissioner in 1908 as Officer on Special Duty to "plan the future expansion of Delhi on an orderly basis". This officer promptly recommended the westward expansion of the city across the ridge and the "improvement" of the older areas. By 1912 the dream of an Imperial city at Delhi was transformed into reality and a Town Planning Committee was appointed for the purpose.

This Committee oversaw the acquisition of extensive areas in the southern basin for the construction of New Delhi. The architects Baker and Lutyens located the new Viceregal palace on the imposing height of *Raisina* hill with the new city spread out at its feet. Huge acreages were laid aside for the bureaucracy and ruling elite with spacious avenues and parks dominating the landscape. In the process much of the earlier drainage pattern, which had taken the run-off from the Aravalis to the tombs and gardens of the earlier rulers, was destroyed to make way for a new regime of stormwater drains. The Committee also assigned the Western Extension Area (WEA) for expansion, particularly for settling the "poorer classes". It decided to completely demolish the remaining city wall "to provide access of air to the congested area". For the first time land was acquired on the east bank of the river next to the railway line.

Deterioration and Review

We get a glimpse of the gap between planners and reality when, in 1924, the *Harphool Singh* slum clearance project was sanctioned to forcibly move the poor population to the WEA. But three years later, in 1927, it began to be reported that there was a population of 15,000 in the WEA living "in much discomfort owing to lack of services". Consequently, a northern expansion was recommended, beyond Civil Lines and across the Grand Trunk Road, on the outskirts of the old *Sabzi Mandi*. In spite of this, the Government had to agree to sanctioning 10 lakh rupees in 1930 for services in the WEA (although as much as 23 lakhs were required). Several new roads had been built into the new areas to ensure good communications and each one of these showed good financial returns. However, civic conditions continued to deteriorate so much that, in 1936, an ICS officer was specially appointed to go into the whole question of "congestion in Delhi" and suggest appropriate measures.

The recommendations of this officer eventually formed the basis for a further expansion of the city towards the Agricultural Institute in the west with adjacent industrial areas next to the railways. For this purpose, the *Najafgarh jheel* had to be drained and this was accomplished by digging a cut through the northern tip of the ridge. In tandem, the Western Yamuna canal was filled up to the *Andha Mughal* bridge across the *Sahibi* (now reborn as the *Najafgarh nullah*). This also enabled a push into the north to the new University through the new colonies of Shaktinagar and Roshanara Extension, specially meant for the poor. These poor were evicted from "evil slum areas" of the Walled City (now no longer with walls). Other areas from where the poor were displaced were the *Mohtaj Khana* next to the *Sabzi Mandi*, *Rehgarpura* in *Karol Bagh*, and *Kala Pahar* near *Sarai Rohilla*. The lands they vacated were converted gradually into middle-class residential areas. A vast area of prime agricultural land south of the Agricultural Institute was reserved for the army and there was even a minor thrust eastwards to found an industrial estate at *Shahdara*. All these developments were naturally shaped by the alignment of the railway lines and roads and the needs of security and trade.