UNIT 21  SULTANATE CAPITAL CITIES IN THE DELHI RIVERINE PLAIN*

Structure
21.1  Introduction
21.2  Why So Many Cities and Capitals?
21.3  The Emergence of Dihlī-i kuhna as Sultanate Capital
21.4  The Politics of Constructing Dispensations, Military Redoubts and Cities
21.5  Constructing Cities: Conflicts Amongst and Within Dispensations
21.6  Summary
21.7  Exercises
21.8  References

21.1  INTRODUCTION

The present Unit questions whether there were some special social and political characteristics present in the 13th and 14th century Sultanate which made the Sultans of Delhi go through cycles of building, leaving, returning, and/or rebuilding? As newly enthroned monarchs sought to consolidate their authority through the recruitment and deployment of military personnel, there was an urgent need to “house” the new political dispensation as well. In other words, in the competitive politics of the thirteenth and fourteenth century, any effort at consolidating authority implied both, the deployment of a military cadre loyal to the new monarch and an ambitious building programme where the newly constituted court could assemble. By correlating construction activity with the turbulent politics of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, it is argued that it is possible to notice how the reproduction of new capitals and courts in the Delhi region was not just a part of the period’s cultural expectations; it was a necessity dictated by the ways in which society and politics were structured at this time.

21.2  WHY SO MANY CITIES AND CAPITALS?

Any historical study of Delhi inevitably mentions the presence of several cities of Delhi, seven, being a relatively consensual, but incorrect figure. The seven cities usually mentioned include from north to south: Shāhjahānābād, Fīrūzābād, Dīnpanah, Sīrī, Jahānpanah, Dihlī-i kuhna and Tughluqābād (see Table 1). Irrespective of the final count, Delhi’s ‘many’ cities are generally seen as one of its characteristic features. Why there were so many cities and capitals in the riverine plain of Delhi, on the other hand, has not received careful historical attention. Scholars usually provide a mix of commonsensical assumptions regarding shortage of water due to a burgeoning population, strategic considerations of security, and the ostentatious display of power by newly

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arrived [insecure] Sultans as explanations for the need to move the city (Ali, 1986). Some others extrapolate explanations from Mughal contexts – thus, Shāh Jahān’s decision to construct a new capital in Delhi because Agra was too congested and disorderly, or the commonly held assumption that shortage of water led Akbar to abandon Fatehpur Sīkri – to suggest that these problems afflicted, more generally, all medieval cities (Fanshawe, 1991: 288). Certainly, in the argument of Athar Ali, some of these problems – such as access to a greater volume of water – also had a larger economic dimension: ‘enormous settlements set on the Aravalli rocks, away from the river, must have meant an extra drain of revenue, to meet the extra cost of water supply and expense of transporting grain and goods. ...There was therefore good reason for a shift [during Fīrūz Tughluq’s reign (1351-88)] to an economically more suitable position, i.e. along the river, from the one set on the upper rocky grounds’ (Ali, 1986: 41).

It is important to keep in mind that, expenses notwithstanding, post-Tughluq Sultans, continued to invest in construction activity in the interior of the Delhi plain. Soon after Fīrūz Tughluq constructed Fīrūzābād, Mubārak Shāh Sayyid (1421-35) built his new capital at Mubārakpur, not on the banks of the Yamuna, but inland, to the north of Sīrī. Equally significant is the continued patronage of construction activity by the Tughluqs, the later Lōdī and the Sūrs on sites very distant from the riverfront. The siting of the Tughluq Kalan and Khirki mosques in Jahānpanah, the Lōdī Moth ki masjid south of Mubārakpur, the baolis, mosques and constructions in the Mehrauli region and around Bakhtiyār Kākī’s grave shrine, and the grand Sayyid and Lōdī mausoleum complex at Khairpur, all occurred after the construction of Fīrūzābād. These were built in areas distant from the Yamuna riverfront. The histories of Yahyā Sirhindī and Bihāmad Khānī also confirm that areas inland from the river were extremely important population settlements into the fifteenth century. They narrate, for example, how Delhi’s four cities – Fīrūzābād, Sīrī, Jahānpanah and Dihlī-i kuhna [‘old Delhi’] – were competing centres of power during and after Timur’s invasion (1398-99) at the end of the fourteenth and into the early fifteenth century.

Delhi’s urban settlements may warrant a further look at the old question: why did the Delhi Sultans construct so many cities and armed encampments in the Delhi riverine plain? As I turn to this subject here, I realise that it is an ambitious project where it is easy to get lost in the episodes of coups, internecine conflicts and shifting of Sultanate settlements, even if it is only in the plain of Delhi. In that context, if I do get into the history of events, coups and conflicts, I do so to draw attention to the structures of Sultanate politics that had a significant impact in the longer duration and have received little historiographical attention. These structural patterns remained relatively stable through the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. This might help us place the more évènementielle episodes of city construction within larger contexts.

21.3 THE EMERGENCE OF DIHLI-I KUHNA AS SULTANATE CAPITAL

In the present section, I examine the emergence and impact of Dihlī-i kuhna [area around Qutb Delhi] on Sultanate politics and the ways in which the political and social structuring of the regime in Iltutmish’s lifetime cast a long shadow on a significant part of the thirteenth century. To begin with, let me turn to a brief overview of Iltutmish’s reign and the years shortly after to understand the ways in which we can schematise the structuring of Sultanate political culture through the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.
Seven Cities of Delhi

Urbanisation in Medieval India - 1

There has been considerable debate regarding the choice of Dihlī-i kuhna as the capital of the fledgling Sultanate. To Athar Ali’s surprise, its natural resources notwithstanding, Delhi’s “importance in the historical period should date only from the twelfth century” (Ali, 1986: 34). Perhaps it is important to keep in mind that Lahore and not Dihlī-i kuhna was the first choice of capital for Sultan Qumb al-Dīn (1206-10) and Ārām Shāh (1210). The area around Dihlī-i kuhna had been an important garrison town of Qumb al-Dīn when he was a Ghūrid military commander; but at that time (1192-1210), he was only one amongst some others. Iltutmish chose Dihlī-i kuhna as his capital initially because the notables of the city supported his bid to the throne and he had lost Lahore anyway to his political competitors, first Ildūz/Yalduz and then Qubacha. He retained Dihlī-i kuhna as capital in the long duration because it was, to begin with, conveniently distant from the turbulent politics of Ghazni and the Punjab. The city’s geo-political advantages were even more apparent once the north-west tracts suffered Khwārazmī invasions, followed very quickly by the fearful Chinggisid onslaught (1221) (Jackson, 1990). The Punjab and Haryana belt then became an extremely useful buffer against marauders from the north-west. It had subcontinental advantages as well since it was located at an important commercial centre with an eponymous coinage, the dehlivālī, and access routes to the Gangetic plain, northern Rajasthan and central India. Clearly, Iltutmish did not spend too much time considering Dihlī-i kuhna as a second choice. Through the course of his reign, his interest in the old Ghūrid dominions were replaced with greater investment in the Sindh, Punjab, Haryana, northern Rajasthan, central India and the Yamuna-Ganga riverine belt. He moved energetically to consolidate his position, besting the residual Ghūrid commanders and his Qutbī peers in Delhi, Lahore, Multan, Uchch, Bayana and Avadh (Kumar, 1990).

It is important to consider Iltutmish’s interventions in the politics of the Sultanate for their impact on the future of Delhi and north India. The most immediate and apparent intervention came from the construction of a formidable military force around a nucleus of old and tested slave military commanders, the bandagān-i khāss (elite slaves of the Sultan) whose deracination was underlined in their individual and collective identities: the Shamsīs. Iltutmish had started purchasing military slaves, many of whom were of Turkish ethnicity, before his accession, and he continued accumulating them throughout his reign (Kumar, 1994). Minhaj-i Siraj Jūzjānī speaks at length about their mode of training and fostering which made his khāss slaves the bulwark of his dispensation. Together with his sons, the slaves commanded the strategic towns of the Sultanate – Lahore, Multan, Uchch, Lakhnauti, Budaun, Avadh and Gwalior (Kumar, 2007: 154-157 [Table 1]). The Shamsī bandagān were the dominating element in the central core of the army, the qalb, and the capital was their main redoubt. It was here that the bandagān-i khāss drilled their juniors to fight as a military unit and acculturate them in courtly conduct. At the beginning of their career, they served as domestics and playmates to the Sultan’s children; a socialising that created deep bonds of affection and loyalty between master and servant. A Persian chronicler felicitously described how these sentiments made the Shamsī slaves especially close to the monarch. Interpersonal ties of this nature served to weld distant garrison outposts in Bengal and Sindh to Dihlī-i kuhna. It populated the city with a military elite who would cast a long shadow on the politics of Delhi and north India.

Iltutmish also moved energetically to refurbish Dihlī-i kuhna in a way that might reflect its arrival as a significant player in the politics of north India. The devastation of the Persianate world of Transoxiana, Khurasan, and Afghanistan by the Chinggisid marauders and the rush of immigrants that flooded north India from the 1220s helped in this transformation. Dihlī-i kuhna became a sanctuary for traders, literati and artisans. Perhaps
even more significantly, the city came to possess historians and litterateurs that were fashioning its pedigree in their narratives – even though Jūzjānī’s historical masterpiece was still in the future, Fakhr-i Mudabbir (Adab al-Harbwa’l-Shujā’a) and Hasan Nizāmī’s (Taj al-Maasir) texts had already won acclaim; future scholars would cite and emulate their literary craft for centuries (Alam, 2003: 131-98; Kumar, 2007: 362-77). As a sign of its axial role in the politics of north India, Iltutmish reconstructed and expanded Dihlī-i kuhna’s masjid-i jāmi’ and minaret to dimensions that would remain unmatched. The Delhi monarch also won considerable probity for his piety by excavating a huge reservoir on the plateau of the hill adjacent to the city, the waters of which sustained the city’s increasing population (Kumar, 2001: 140-82; Flood, 2009). Tales of the monarch’s dream and the miraculous events surrounding its founding would be the subject of folk tales in the future. Within an incredibly short space of time, Iltutmish and the conjuncture of events surrounding his reign, gained for Dihlī-i kuhna a significance missing in other Sultanate cities. From its early history as one of the frontier outposts in the Ghūrid north Indian domains, Iltutmish’s city was extolled as the Qubba-i Islām in the eastern hemisphere, ceremoniously hosting the emissary of the ʿAbbāsid Caliph in 1229 (Kumar, 2007: 362-77).

Qub Complex
Source: Photo by Bikashrd https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/3b/Qutub_Minar_in_the_monsoons.jpg

Hauz Shamsi

Sultanate Capital Cities in The Delhi Riverine Plain
Urbanisation in Medieval India - 1

Iltutmish’s interventions created an aura around the city, especially bewitching when it seemed that much of the world was facing the holocaust of Mongol depredations of unmatched dimensions. It is for this reason that political competitors with ambitions of controlling north India, at least through the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, conceived of Dihlī-i kuhna and its environs as a significant prize. It was a paradoxical legacy: it seemed that many monarchs preferred not to stay in Dihlī-i kuhna, but if they did move, it was always within the riverine plain of Delhi.

While Iltutmish’s career might help to contextualise the events that led to the great significance attached to Dihlī-i kuhna, we need to keep in mind that it was also a part of the deep structures that shaped the nature of settlement patterns in the thirteenth and fourteenth century. The Delhi Sultans established six other settlements in the riverine plain (Table 1): Kilōkhri, Sīri, Tughluqābād, ‘Adilābād, Jahānpanah and Fīrūzābād. Some cities like Dihlī-i kuhna, Kilōkhri, Sīri, and Fīrūzābād were the capitals of successive Sultans, sometimes serially, at other times after a gap of several years, others like Tughluqābād or Jahānpanah remained settled but were the capitals of only one Sultan. And there was also ‘Adilābād, inhabited very briefly, really more of a citadel, than a city. What elements link these together?

21.4 THE POLITICS OF CONSTRUCTING DISPENSATIONS, MILITARY REDOUTS AND CITIES

One of the striking features of Barani’s insightful and controversial history of the Delhi Sultans, the Tā rīkh-i Fīrūz Shāhī (1357), is the way in which the narrative of each monarch carries in its introduction a brief enumeration of the great notables of the realm. Although such an enumeration, literally a recalling (tuzkīrāt) of the great elites of the realm, was not unique amongst medieval Persian chronicles, Baranī’s text was interesting for the rare repetition of names from one regnal list to another. Interestingly, military service in the Delhi Sultanate was normatively a one-generation affair: each ruler dispensed power to a select body of supporters during his (and in the one solitary instance, her) reign and this dispensation of power replaced the preceding ruler’s cohort. (Kumar, 2006: 83-114) This was largely because the core cadre in a Sultan’s dispensation consisted of military slaves. In relying upon handagān to consolidate his realm, Sultan Iltutmish was therefore hardly unusual in Sultanate politics. Although slaves of Turkish ethnicity declined in numbers in the fourteenth century, monarchs like ‘Alī al-Dīn Khalajī, Muhāmmad and Fīrūz Tughluq, still had formidable slave retinues in their dispensations (Jackson, 1990: 340-58; Jackson, 1999: 174-6, 183, 187).

Rather than merely relying upon military slaves, however, the Delhi Sultans also recruited a variety of other personnel, many of whom were of humble origins, people that the urbane litterateurs of the Delhi Sultans regarded as ‘social menials’. Persian chronicler Barani describes these new recruits patronised by Muhāmmad Tughluq in exaggerated, supercilious terms — ‘lowest and basest of the low and base born’. Clearly, the urban literati were not impressed with the direction of the Sultan’s patronage and wanted to underline the assorted humble backgrounds of the new recruits who included individuals and groups like mahouts (Rukn al-Dīn), Afghans (Balban), ‘new-Muslim’ Mongols (Kayqubād), a trader (‘Alī al-Dīn Khalajī), a wine-distiller, a barber, a cook, and gardeners (Muhāmmad Tughluq) (Kumar, 2006: 97, 102). Although the recruitment of such personnel appeared as an inversion of social hierarchy to the cultured elite, the logic in the deployment of slaves and ‘social menials’ actually lay in the incongruity between their high political appointment and their low social status. As Delhi Sultans
sought to consolidate their authority, they were extremely judicious of recruiting people of high lineage and entrenched social status. Instead, they sought a body of people whose social subordination was conducive to the production of a dependent, reliable cohort. Cohesion within these groups varied and since stakes were high, aspirants seeking to control the Sultanate made assiduous attempts to cultivate strong, dyadic, personal bonds between themselves and their servants.

Since an aspiring Delhi Sultan’s survival was largely dependent upon the coherence of his dispensation and its capacity to withstand challenge from competitors, it was also important for the monarch to create a physical space to house his/her cohort. In other words, the construction of a site that housed the Sultan and his dispensation helped in maintaining the integrity of the group, providing it protection and distance from its many competitors in the Delhi plain. In the context of this political world, establishing a distinct settlement carried deep public, political resonances.

This was certainly a cross cutting feature amongst the political dispensations of the thirteenth and fourteenth century Delhi Sultans. To my mind, a term such as ‘bandagānī’ encapsulates some of the characteristics of this period, not as a marker of a ‘slave society’ but as an adjective that captures the sensibilities of a political culture where denatalisation and deracination were extremely important in the self-identity of political groups and their interrelationships. (Kumar, forthcoming) It might be worth asking then, how these ‘deep [social and political] structures’ that characterised the thirteenth and fourteenth century Sultanate realm were manifest in the frequent episodes of construction and movement of capitals and encampments in the Delhi plain?

21.5 CONSTRUCTING CITIES: CONFLICTS AMONGST AND WITHIN DISPENSATIONS

In the present section, I study the cities of Delhi in the century and a half after Balban’s death, when the Sultans of Delhi constructed their many settlements and capitals in the Delhi riverine plain. I will conclude this section with a broader survey of what such a structural analysis of Sultanate habitations might suggest for the writing of a history of the thirteenth and fourteenth century history.

It is important to notice that every succession in the two centuries of authority commanded by the rulers of the Shamsī and Ghīyāsī slave lineages, the Khalajī lineages of the Jalālīs and ‘Alā’īs, the Barwārid interregnum, and the Tughluq lineages of the Ghīyāsīs and Fīrūzīs was either contested or quickly devolved into violence. Most frequent in this political world were conflicts amongst the political dispensations – between the old dispensation of power-holders who resisted their political marginalisation by the supporters of the new Sultan. I refer to these as ‘inter-dispensational’ conflicts.

These inter-dispensational conflicts also had spatial dimensions. The first time that the capital shifted from Dīhī-i kuhna was immediately after the death of Iltutmish and the succession of his oldest son, Rukn al-Dīn, in 1236. Rukn al- Dīn was an ambitious young sovereign and before his accession had served several years as a governor in his father’s dispensation, first at Budaun and then Lahore. His household included a large military retinue and secretarial help and these personnel stayed with him when he became Sultan. (Kumar, 2007: 181-5, 256-9) Managing such a large household also provides us with a sense of the fiscal resources available to him as governor and the confidence that it might have allowed him when facing the challenges of governing Delhi. Writing in the middle of the fourteenth century ‘Īsām had very astutely understood Rukn al-Dīn’s intentions: ‘within three or four months, rather than following his father’s customs, he followed his own conclusions... I have heard that towards his father’s slaves, each of
whom was a world conqueror, he adopted an angry and arrogant demeanour’. To establish his independence, Rukn al-Dīn established a new settlement at Kīlōkhri, situated on a low hillock by the banks of the River Yamuna, a day’s march to the northeast of the old city. Sultan Rukn al-Dīn augmented his troops here and started a long-distance interference in the politics of the ‘old city’: he had siblings executed and attempted to attract junior Shamsī commanders to join the Ruknī dispensation. The Shamsī bandagān responded quickly to the challenge: in the ensuing inter-dispensational conflict, they seized and executed Rukn al-Dīn, placed a new Sultan on the throne in Dihlī-i kuhna, terminating the brief attempts of a rival dispensation to construct a new settlement.

Inter-dispensational conflicts, in other words, frequently lead to the founding of a new settlement and the making of a new dispensation. But it need not. For example, after the death of Rukn al-Dīn, the succeeding two Sultans, Razkya (1236-40) and Mu’izz al-Dīn (1240-42) were appointed by the Shamsīs. Both monarchs tried to raise independent retinues, provoking fresh inter-dispensational conflicts with the Shamsīs. Neither of the monarchs won their battles nor did they construct a new settlement. They remained in Dihlī-i kuhna, for all practical purposes prisoners of the old city and its entrenched elites (Jackson, 1998: 81-97; Kumar, 2007: 261-66).

In 1287, the capital did move from Dihlī-i kuhna, once again to Kīlōkhri, after the death of Ghiyās al-Dīn Balban. At that time, the Ghiyāsī retinue controlled Dihlī-i kuhna, but the young Sultan Mu’izz al-Dīn Kayqubād was able to cobble together a sufficiently coherent following to warrant a move out of the old city. That he chose to go to Kīlōkhri, a settlement that had not declined in the years after Rukn al-Dīn’s unceremonious dethronement is interesting. In the context of celebrations held in Dihlī-i kuhna in 1258, some years before Balban’s accession, Jūzjānī described Kīlōkhri as shahr-i nau (the new town). When Sultan Kayqubād also established his capital at Kīlōkhri, Barāni used identical terms – shahr-i nau – to describe the young monarch’s capital. The persistence of the name, however, does suggest continued habitation in the area, contradicting the sufi saint Nizām al-Dīn Auliyā’s more polemical remarks about its desolated nature. In the preparations to receive Mongol ambassadors in the ‘old city’, the ‘new city’ had functioned as one of its outlying suburbs. Investments required for its refurbishment as a capital would not be on the same scale than actually constructing a new site for the monarch. In the course of Kayqubād’s reign Kīlōkhri transformed into a bustling town. The ‘new city’ was attached but independent from the old. Kayqubād nevertheless continued to face hostility from members of the Ghiyāsī dispensation from Dihlī-i kuhna, but his youthful excesses notwithstanding, he continued to recruit military personnel of sufficient standing to protect him in his new capital for the duration of his short reign. One of these was Jalāl al-Dīn Khalajī, recruited because he was a military commander from Samana and ‘foreign’ to the court politics of Delhi. He was therefore dependent upon Kayqubād for his rise to prominence. This dependence did not last for long. Jalāl al-Dīn Khalajī established his camp near Kīlōkhri on Bhōgal Pahārī, consolidating his position and intervening in the politics of Kīlōkhri only when challenged by the other commanders of Kayqubād. When he seized power it was not so much from Kayqubād, but the monarch’s generals. By that time he was master of Kīlōkhri and established that as his base.

The Sultanate capital remained in Kīlōkhri for some years and moved only in 1296 with the accession of ‘Alī’ al-Dīn the governor of Kara. He murdered Jalāl al-Dīn Khalajī, his uncle, and marched towards Delhi, which at that time had two rival settlements, Dihlī-i kuhna and Kīlōkhri. The former was still under the influence of the Ghiyāsīs and the latter housed the retinue of the murdered Jalāl al-Dīn. Of the two available choices to him, the new monarch chose Dihlī-i kuhna as his capital. This choice was not surprising. Barānī had explained that the deposed monarch, Jalāl al-Dīn Khalajī had visited Dihlī-
i kuhna but never felt welcome there. As the commander responsible for ending that monarch’s reign ‘Alā’ al-Dīn had reason to hope for a different response from the old city. In any case, the new monarch left little to chance. Although ‘Alā’ al-Dīn marched to Delhi with his retinue from Kara, Barānī describes the new monarch’s generous gifts to the residents of Dīhlī-i kuhna, his accommodation of the remnant Ghiyāsī and Jalālī notables at the outset of his reign when his dispensation was extremely inclusive. But very quickly, first the Jalālīs and then the Ghiyāsīs were purged, and as Barānī noted with horror, monarchical favour eventually turned towards the ‘base-born’ (Jackson, 1999:171-3).

This was the high noon of the ‘Alā’ī dispensation when large-scale construction activity in the city altered the face of Dīhlī-i kuhna. ‘Alā’ al-Dīn had Delhi’s first congregational mosque expanded until it was double in size to the old Shamsī masjid-i jāmī’ (Kumar, 2000: 37-65). He ordered for the repair and extension of the fortifications of the old city; the dredging of the old ‘Sultan’s [Shamsī] reservoir’ (hauz-i Sultanī), the excavation of a new and larger one (hauz-i khas). New markets and price regulations were instituted and an army cantonment – Sīrī – constructed just outside the ‘old city’ (Jackson, 1986:18-33). ‘Alā’ al-Dīn was not constructing a new capital; he was reconstructing the old.

And yet, despite his energetic interventions ‘Alā’ al-Dīn was unable to marginalise the elite households in the ‘old city’ or silence opposition to his authoritarian rule. It is important to note that despite his investments in Dīhlī-i kuhna, Barānī mentioned that ‘Alā’ al-Dīn did not like living in the ‘old city’. Tired with the resistance that he faced from its old households, he chose to live outside the city at a palace that Barānī describes as Hazār Sutūn. This was very near Sīrī, a new military cantonment (lashkargāh) and served as an alternate residence (Jackson, 1986: 18-33). Hazār Sutūn and Sīrī were critical in preserving ‘Ala’ al-Din’s authority: Hazār Sutūn gave him the distance that he desired from Dīhlī-i kuhna. Sīrī became the cantonment where he garrisoned his huge standing army, a defensive outpost to counter the threat of Mongol invasions and a redoubt for monitoring politics in the ‘old city’.
Remains of the Siri Fort Wall
Source: Photos by Varun Shiv Kapur

It would take ‘Alā’ al-Dīn’s death in 1316, an intervening bloody civil war for Mubārak Shāh Khalajī to eventually bring the Sultanate capital to Siri. The decimation of many ‘Alā’ī commanders during the civil war made the establishment of power easier for Mubārak Shāh and he moved quickly to establish a reliable cohort of military slaves described as Barw ārī/Parwārī. With the support of his new dispensation led by his khāsī slave, Khusrau Khān, the Sultan left Dihlī-i kuhna, built a new masjid-i jāmī’, took the grandiose title of Khalīf and underlined the transformation that he had ushered by referring to his new capital as Dār al-Khilāfat, ‘the residence of the Khalīf’.

The Sultanate capital would eventually shift from Siri after another inter-dispensational conflict, in 1320, this time between the Barwārī/Parwārīs led by Khusrau Khān and the old ‘Alā’ī commander on the northwest frontier, Ghiyās al-Dīn Tughluq. Ghiyās al-Dīn’s chroniclers note how the frontier commander’s retinue were ‘from the upper lands [iqlīm-i bālā – Khurasan and Transoxiana] not the region around Delhi [Hindūstān]’ and included pastoral elements like the Ghuzz, Turks and Mongols from Rūm and Rūs, Khokars, Afghans and some Tajiks, a motley group also known for their past animosity to the forces of Delhi. (Kumar, 2009: 45-77) Ostensibly, Ghiyās al-Dīn marched to Delhi to avenge his Khalajī masters and rescue Delhi from the Barwārī/Parwārīs. He stayed on as Sultan, residing in Siri out of affection for his master’s memory and honouring his ‘Alā’ī comrades with high posts. This inclusive phase ended quickly enough. By 1323, construction in his new capital of Tughluqābād had progressed sufficiently for Ghiyās al-Dīn to shift his court there. The significance of imperial construction projects was not lost on the great ‘Alā’ī commanders of Siri who sensed their gradual marginalisation in the Ghiyāsī dispensation. While campaigning in South India they were ready to believe a rumour that the Sultan had ordered their execution. The ‘Alā’ī commanders rebelled, were captured and executed.

Tughluqābād was the capital of the Ghiyāsīs for just over a year. (Shokoohy, 2007) Ghiyās al-Dīn’s sudden death brought his son Muḥammad Tughluq to the throne. Ibn Batūtah mentioned rumours that Muḥammad Tughluq might have orchestrated his father’s death. There is little corroborative evidence, but Ibn Batūtah also mentioned that Muḥammad Tughluq’s secret acquisition of slaves had gravely displeased Ghiyās al-Dīn. Muḥammad Tughluq’s actions after succession certainly suggest that he was not comfortable residing in his father’s capital. He had a substantial retinue of his own in Delhi and he constructed the citadel of ‘Adilābād to house them. (Waddington, 1946: 60-76)
‘Adilābād was in the shadow of Tughluqābād, close enough to oversee his father’s household in Tughluqābād and sufficiently secure to withstand their challenge. Muhāammad Tughluq’s campaigns in South India had also refurbished his treasury and Delhi witnessed some of the most ambitious constructions during his reign. Much of the construction in Tughluqābād that we see today might have been envisaged by Ghiyās al-Dīn, but had remained incomplete because of his sudden death. The massive walls that girdle the city of Tughluqābād date instead from Muhāammad Tughluq’s reign and were probably constructed at the same time as ‘Adilābād. He also constructed defensive walls connecting Dihī-ī kuhna and Sīrī, refurbished the old residence and court of hazār sutūn built by ‘Alā’ al-Dīn which fell within it and eventually made this area his capital. He named the newly enclosed city, somewhat grandly but given his ambitions, perhaps appropriately, Jahānpanah, the sanctuary of the world. (Welch, 1983: 123-66)
Muḥammad Tughluq was powerful and ambitious, and many of his political measures were in synchrony with the authoritarian interventions of other monarchs of his age. (Jackson, 1975:118-156) More than most Delhi monarchs, however, Muhammad Tughluq took on the entrenched elite of Delhi’s capitals and that was at least one reason
why he had a terrible press. Not only was he scorned for patronising ‘social menials’ but many of his projects were described in exaggerated bewilderment. Ibn Bammūma who visited his capital in the first decade of his reign, probably sometime after the construction of the city walls of Tughluqābād and before the completion of the Jahānpanah walls, commented in astonishment that the monarch wanted to girdle all the cities in the Delhi riverine plain. Amongst his other measures was the reputed shift of Delhi’s population to Daulatabad in the Deccan. As Jackson has meticulously explained, this was yet another exaggeration and Ibn Bammūma’s description of Sīr and Jahānpanah during his visit contradicts these narratives. (Jackson, 1986) Muhammad Tughluq did evict the residents of Dihlī-i kuhna and used the city as a garrison for the huge standing army mustered for his campaigns into Qarachil and Transoxiana (Jackson, 1975:118-157).

To comprehend Muhammad Tughluq’s measures against the residents of the ‘old city’ we have to recall the continuing animosity of its elites against the new political groups that appeared in the Delhi plain. The old city’s elites were the descendents of the great families – the ‘debris of dispensations’ if you wish – who had suffered increasing marginalisation as the city and its politics had shifted out of its precincts. (Kumar, 2006) Their disgruntlement was evident in their continuing hostility to Rukn al-Dīn, Kayqubād, Jalāl al-Dīn, ‘Alī al-Dīn, and Mubārak Shāh Khalajī in the past. The disgruntlement of the old city’s residents was a huge problem for successive generations of monarchs. There were skills possessed by members of these old elite families, particularly if they were secretaries and civil administrators (more generally, the people of the pen – ahl-i qalam) and these led to their occasional appointments to high offices in the chanceries of the state and in the court. While in service, many of them, like the great historian Ziyā’ al-Dīn Barānī, protested their loyalty to the incumbent monarch and, as in the case of the poet Amīr Khusrau, had no qualms in exchanging masters (Habib, 1974; Habib, 1981, 1999; Hardy, 1957, 1966; Mirza, 1974; Sharma, 2005).

As the Sultanate matured from the middle of the thirteenth century, the remnants of these old multi-generational families of Sultanate personnel also increased. It is extremely difficult to resurrect the genealogies of old elite families from records that reported on a political system which was paradigmatically ‘one-generational’, geared to patronising deracines and which remained to the end, extremely wary of those with claims of a birthright to social influence. Their hostility provoked Muhammad Tughluq to evict them from the ‘old city’ and to treat it like a cantonment to house his newly mustered forces. This was similar to ‘Alī al-Dīn’s establishment of Sīr to house his huge standing army. The difference lay in the great bitterness with which many of the litterateurs recorded this event (Jackson, 1986, 1999: 255-77). It was recorded most bitterly by people like ‘Isāmī, a descendent of a family of Shaikhs who had settled in Dihlī-i kuhna in the 1220s, and whose grandfather was forced to travel to Daulatabad in the Deccan. Although described in these records as an authoritarian measure of an unstable despot, Muhammad Tughluq was operating completely within the political traditions present in thirteenth and fourteenth century Delhi. So too was the movement of the capital from Jahānpanah to Firūzābād at the death of Muhammad Tughluq. In the disputed succession, Firuz Shāh Tughluq triumphed with the help of his followers. Chroniclers like Barani and ‘Affī underline the gentle, peaceable persona of the new monarch, a characterisation that was in harmony with his personal testimony inscribed in a long epigraph in his palace. These discursive formulations, however, appear out of character to the record of many of his actions. Firuz Shāh may not have had full control of the army at the time of his accession, but he refused to suffer residence in Jahānpanah for long.
Urbanisation in Medieval India - 1

Firuzabad 1860
Source: Photo by Samuel Bourne; Courtesy British Library Open Source
http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/apac/photocoll/t/019pho000000394u00045000.html
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/15/Ashoka_Pillar_at_Firoze_Shah_Kotla%2C_Delhi.jpg

Firuzabad, 2012
Source Photo by Vu2sga
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7c/Ashokan_Pillar_at_Feroz_Shah_Kotla%2C_New_Delhi.jpg
The chronology of his reign is uncertain but two of his actions were part of prior precedent: he constructed a new capital eponymously named Fīrūzābād and he also raised a huge retinue of military slaves who were deployed in the city and as provincial governors (Jackson, 1999: 296-311). Like Balban, he also rewarded loyalty by appointing sons to their father’s positions, most famously the two Khân Jahâns, father and son, who succeeded each other as viziers. His control over the old Sultanate provinces atrophied through his reign, but not so his sway over the riverine Delhi plain. Here he stamped his presence with an ambitious construction activity that rivalled Muhammad Tughluq, but won him far greater renown (Welch, 1983; 1993:311-322). He and his vizier sponsored the construction of new mosques in Jahâñpanah, the restoration of Dihlî-i kuhna’s old congregational mosque and minaret, the dredging of the old reservoirs in Delhi, and the refurbishment of old mausoleums. Equally important was his marking of the suburbs with his signature hunting lodges and the construction of a huge festival ground outside Fīrūzābād together with the holy shrine of the Prophet’s footmark. By all accounts, the monarch and his dispensation had the capacity to leave a firm imprint on Delhi’s cities and its neighbourhoods.

In an effort to better comprehend the impact of Fīrūz Shâh’s interventions we can usefully compare the conflicts that raged in Delhi after his death with those that had occurred at the demise of Mu’izz al-Dîn Bahram Shâh (1242) and Mu’izz al-Dîn Kayqubâd (1290). At the death of all three of these monarchs, there was no inter-dispensational conflict; in the absence of any effective challenge from a rival dispensation, competition was instead ‘intra-dispensational’, between the members of the same cohort. Here, as we have already noticed, the followers of Mu’izz al-Dîn Kayqubâd were somewhat exceptional. Despite the bitter conflict within Kayqubâd’s dispensation, there was an unequal balance of power amongst its members allowing one of them, Jalâl al-Dîn Khâlalî, to very quickly gain the upper hand. Jalâl al-Dîn’s own Khalajî followers swept away their competitors and seized Kilöökhrî very rapidly. With the control of Kayqubâd’s capital, the master’s redoubt became the home of the new Jalâlî dispensation.

Similarly, somewhat earlier, with the dethronement of Mu’izz al-Dîn Bahram Shâh in 1242, there was no external threat to the Shamsî dispensation from the followers of the [puppet] descendents of Iltutmish. Instead there was a balance of power amidst the Shamsî bandagân. This meant that only a protracted ‘intra-dispensational’ conflict would eventually throw up a final victor. The intra-dispensational conflict raged in Dihlî-i kuhna between 1242 and 1266, during the reigns of ‘Alî’ al-Dîn Mas’ûd Shâh (1242-46) and Nâshî al-Dîn Mahmûd (1246-66) (Kumar, 2007: Chapter 5). It took a long while for Balban to dominate the Shamsî dispensation. His influence was finally evident by 1254, but even then, it was not until 1266 that he was sure that its members had exchanged their old Shamsî identity for a new Ghiyâsî one. In 1266 when he finally seized the throne, his dispensation controlled Dihlî-i kuhna. He, therefore, did not need to move his capital to assert his authority.

Towards the end of the fourteenth century, in the 1380s, as Fīrūz Shâh Tughluq aged, members of the Fīrūzî dispensation looked for opportunities to extend their influence in Delhi and the Sultanate provinces. Within the Delhi region, the leading competitors asserted their authority through a control of the monarch’s sons and grandsons. Although very similar to the ‘intra-dispensational’ conflicts amongst the Shamsîs, its late-fourteenth century context meant the conflict was no longer over the control of one capital. Delhi had many settlements now, and many of them had been refurbished by Fīrūz Shâh. As a result, the intra-dispensational conflict spilt over into the other Sultanate settlements as well. Not only were the Fīrūzîs at war with each other, but Fīrūzâbâd, Sîrî-Jahâñpanah...
Urbanisation in Medieval India - 1

and Dihlí-i kuhna constituted rival encampments for the members of the Fīrūzī dispensation (Hambly, 1986: 45-62; 1971: 74-82). Just as the Sultanate’s provinces were parcelled amidst the Fīrūzīs, so too the city. Quite unlike the case of Balban who took over the Shamsī mantle, no Fīrūzī commander could dominate the Fīrūzī dispensation or the Delhi plain for any length of time. Timur’s invasion did not immediately alter this status quo.

When the protracted intra-dispensational conflict and the Fīrūzī dispensation finally ended, it was at the hands of someone from outside the Delhi plain, Khızır Khān Sayyid (1414-21), a Timurid confederate. And yet, what we need to appreciate is the resilience of the Fīrūzī dispensation which was far more temporally and spatially extensive than many of its predecessors. The rise and fall of political dispensations and Sultanate settlements notwithstanding, through it all, the undercutting logic in the political patterning, its deep structures remained unchanged through the two centuries.

21.6 SUMMARY

As promised, narrating the history of Delhi’s Sultanate settlements almost inevitably becomes a litany of coups and internecine conflict involving a myriad of competitors. Cutting through this narrative, I tried to bring out how these wars would remain insensible to our comprehension unless we paid attention to the social and political ties that gave coherence and a sense of identity to the various participants. The presence of these identities was evident in the names of many participants – they carried eponymous identifiers such as Shamśī, Ruknī, Ghiyāsī, ‘Alāʾī, Fīrūzī. These suggested that their titles and public positions were dispensed to them by their masters. Lest it be misunderstood as a practice somewhat akin to a public declaration of feudal allegiance, it needs to be stressed that the offices and positions dispensed to these personnel were for the duration of their lives; these were not the birthright of the high elites of the realm. The children of high officers could succeed to the position of their father only through the very carefully considered patronage of their master. The sense then of Sultanate military elites constituting a ‘nobility’, a social group whose status was inherited and inviolate, and protected by law as it was in medieval Europe is certainly inapplicable for Sultanate society. As an alternative, I use the term ‘dispensations of authority’ or its contracted form ‘dispensations’ to refer to the body of personnel empowered by different Delhi Sultans, enumerated, for example, in the tāzikrīt provided by Barānī in his Tā’rikh at the onset of each monarch’s reign.

As an extension of the idea of dispensations of authority that each monarch tried to create at the onset of his/her reign was the resistance that this effort faced from entrenched elite(s). I referred to these episodes as ‘inter-dispensational’ and ‘intra-dispensational’ conflicts. While there is a mechanistic, structural tone to the characterisation of the wide ranging conflicts of the thirteenth and fourteenth century Sultanate, and hence an element of synchronicity, let me hasten to add that there was an increasing complexity to these military engagements over the passage of years, a complexity which should never be elided. It is here, that a spatial plotting of these inter-generation dispensational conflicts in the riverine plain of Delhi can be very useful.

If we recognise that by the middle of the thirteenth century, the Ghiyāsī dispensation dominated Dihlí-i kuhna and this body of elites continued to offer resistance to the Jalālīn in Kilḵūrī and the ‘Alā’īs into the turn of the century, we can appreciate the great tenacity with which military households might have resisted marginalisation. In other words, defeat in battle, or the denial of high offices and patronage did not in itself imply the complete expulsion of these personnel from the politics of the Sultanate. Their successors lingered and in recalling the khailkhānas of the maulāzādgān, the households
of the ‘sons of slaves’ Baranī was recognising the influence that the ‘debris of dispensations’ could still play in the politics of the Sultanate.

As we move our gaze into the mid and late fourteenth century, it is to discover that Delhi Sultans found it no longer sufficient to merely win ‘inter-dispensational’ and ‘intra-dispensational’ conflicts and establish their own capitals. The riverine plain of Delhi was suffused with these settlements and the detritus of past rivals. The new Sultan had to script his authority not just by the construction of a new capital, but through the possession of the old. We can understand then the energetic intervention of Muhammad Tughluq in Dihli-i kuhna by enforcing the evacuation of its residents, and the construction activity of Fīrūz Tughluq in the old Sultanate capitals and the suburbs, the deployment of his service men as governors of these areas. ‘Inter’ and ‘intra-dispensational conflicts’ were far more complicated by the end of the fourteenth century and were already getting to be unwieldy to characterise the new modes of political organisation that were also appearing in the Delhi plain. These developments were to become increasingly manifest under the Lodīs, the ‘regional’ Sultanates in the fifteenth century, and the Mughals. But by that time Delhi was not the sole Sultanate capital. In the seventeenth century, when the capital of a paramount political system of subcontinental proportions, did return to the riverine plain of Delhi, the structural features of the polity and its society had transformed. As a result, the seventeenth century capital was also quite different from the Qubba-i Islām of the thirteenth.

### 21.7 EXERCISES

1) Critically examine politics of the establishment of many Sultnate capital cities?

2) What were the factors that led to the establishment of many capital cities during the Sultanate period?

3) What was the politics of conflicts and dispensations in the establishment of the capital cities in Delhi riverine plains?

4) What were the preferences of the Delhi Sultans for the riverine plains? State which capital cities were outside the riverine belt and why?