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A History of Delhi

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** The Land and its Legends: Indraprastha and Prehistoric Delhi
- **Chapter 2** From Khandavaprastha to Indrapatta: Delhi in the Ancient Period
- **Chapter 3** Early Political Centers: The Mauryans, Kushans, and Guptas
- **Chapter 4** Rajput Ascendancy: The Tomars and the Founding of Lal Kot
- **Chapter 5** Qila Rai Pithora: The Reign and Legacy of Prithviraj Chauhan
- **Chapter 6** The Ghurid Invasion and the Advent of Muslim Rule
- **Chapter 7** The Mamluks: Builders of the Delhi Sultanate
- **Chapter 8** The Khalji Dynasty: Expansion, Architecture, and Reform
- **Chapter 9** Tughlaqs and the Shifting Capitals: Tughlaqabad, Jahanpanah, and Firozabad
- **Chapter 10** Timur's Invasion and the Sayyid Dynasty: An Age of Upheaval
- **Chapter 11** The Lodis: Last Sultans of Delhi
- **Chapter 12** The Dawn of the Mughals: Babur and the Fall of the Sultanate
- **Chapter 13** Humayun, Sher Shah, and the Cities of Dreams: Dinpanah and Shergarh
- **Chapter 14** Akbar to Jahangir: Delhi Between Agra and the Mughal Court
- **Chapter 15** Shahjahanabad: The Magnificence of Mughal Delhi
- **Chapter 16** Decline and Plunder: Aurangzeb to Nader Shah
- **Chapter 17** The 18th Century: Marathas, Afghans, and Changing Power
- **Chapter 18** British Ascendancy: The Fall of the Mughals and Delhi in Transition
- **Chapter 19** The 1857 Revolt: Siege, Suffering, and Aftermath
- **Chapter 20** Lutyens' Delhi: Building the British Imperial Capital
- **Chapter 21** Delhi in the Freedom Struggle: Nationalism and Protest
- **Chapter 22** Partition and Refuge: 1947 and the Transformation of Delhi
- **Chapter 23** Resettlement and Growth: Shaping the Postcolonial City
- **Chapter 24** Governance and Politics: From Union Territory to National Capital Territory
- **Chapter 25** Delhi Today: A Global Metropolis Facing Tomorrow

Introduction

Delhi stands as a city eternally at the crossroads of India's history—a metropolis where myth, memory, and modernity converge. Its location by the banks of the Yamuna, opening into the fertile tracts of the Gangetic plains, ensured it would be coveted by rulers and shaped by the ambitions of empires. Over millennia, Delhi has been built and rebuilt, destroyed and revived, each new chapter adding another layer to its intricate historical palimpsest. From ancient legend to contemporary reality, Delhi's story is both unique and emblematic of the wider subcontinent's journey.

Throughout its long existence, Delhi has borne witness to, and often taken center stage in, the major political, cultural, and religious transformations of the Indian subcontinent. Its earliest identity, perhaps shrouded in the legends of Indraprastha, echoes with the grand tales of the Mahabharata, suggesting a nexus of power and spirituality stretching into prehistory. Subsequent centuries saw it transformed by dynasties whose ambitions reached across northern India and beyond, weaving an ever richer tapestry of culture, architecture, and governance.

The city's status as an imperial capital reached its first great zenith during the Delhi Sultanate, when a succession of dynasties made Delhi their seat of rule between the 13th and 16th centuries. The layered remnants of those times—fortifications, minarets, and tombs—endure alongside the later splendors wrought by the Mughal emperors. Under the Mughals, particularly Shah Jahan, Delhi blossomed into a city of marble palaces, grand mosques, and literary genius, a beacon of courtly magnificence whose legacy still pulses in the bylanes of Old Delhi.

Yet Delhi's story is also one of turmoil and resilience. The city repeatedly endured invasions and sackings—by Timur, by Nader Shah, by the tides of Marathas and Afghans—and each blow threatened to extinguish its brilliance. Still, Delhi persevered and reinvented itself under new rulers and in changing political landscapes. The British Raj transformed Delhi yet again, culminating in the construction of imperial New Delhi in the early twentieth century, an architectural statement to enduring ambitions of power.

Perhaps the most transformative era in Delhi's history came with the partition of India. The trauma of 1947 reshaped the city's demography, its neighborhoods, and its cultural sensibility. Massive waves of migrants seeking refuge turned Delhi into a living microcosm of a nation being reborn and redefined. Since independence, the city's relentless expansion has continued, bringing with it the joys and challenges of modern urban life, rapid growth, and evolving governance.

Today, Delhi is a city of contrasts—ancient ruins set beside glass towers, centuries-old markets humming alongside sprawling expressways, tradition and modernity intertwined. Through the following chapters, this book seeks to trace the remarkable journey of Delhi from the earliest settlements through the rise and fall of empires, colonial transformations, the tumult of independence, and into its vibrant present. In doing so, it aspires to capture not just the events, but the character and spirit of a city that remains, even now, the heart of India.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Land and its Legends: Indraprastha and Prehistoric Delhi

Long before the grand fortresses and sprawling metropolises that define its modern identity, the land upon which Delhi stands was shaped by geography and the slow march of time. Situated strategically where the Aravalli hills meet the fertile expanse of the Gangetic plains, and bisected by the life-giving Yamuna River, this location possessed an innate appeal for early human settlement. The river provided water, the ridge offered some natural defence and elevation, and the surrounding land promised sustenance, whether through hunting, gathering, or eventually, agriculture. It was a place destined to be inhabited, contested, and transformed, even in the deepest mists of prehistory.

The earliest whispers of settlement in the Delhi region reach back not through archaeological certainty, but through the resonant echoes of ancient Indian epic. The Mahabharata, a foundational text of Indian culture, speaks of a place called Khandavaprastha, a vast forest requiring immense effort to clear. It is within this legendary forest that the Pandava brothers, central figures in the epic, are said to have established their magnificent capital: Indraprastha, the "City of the God Indra." This tale, woven into the fabric of Indian consciousness for millennia, provides the first, albeit mythical, claim to the land's significance.

The narrative describes the Pandavas, having received this difficult terrain from their Kaurava cousins, enlisting the help of the divine architect Vishwakarma or, in some versions, the demon Maya, to transform the wilderness into a glorious city. This wasn't just any city; it was depicted as a place of unparalleled beauty, wealth, and architectural marvels, reflecting the high status and divine favour of the Pandavas. It served as their seat of power during the period leading up to the great Kurukshetra War, the epic's central conflict.

The legend of Indraprastha thus imbues the Delhi area with a lineage stretching back to a time indistinguishable from myth, a period often placed speculatively around 1400 BCE or earlier by scholars attempting to date the Mahabharata's events. It ties the very ground to heroes, gods, and a foundational moment in Indian history, establishing a deep sense of historical importance, even if the boundary between historical fact and mythological narrative remains blurred.

For generations, the mound on which the Purana Qila, or Old Fort, now stands has been traditionally associated with the site of this legendary Indraprastha. This association is powerful culturally, serving as a physical anchor for the ancient story in

the modern landscape. Visitors to the Purana Qila are often told that they are walking on ground that once hosted epic heroes and possibly a city built by divine hands or magical beings.

However, turning from the realm of epic to the more grounded discipline of archaeology, the quest to definitively prove the existence of a city matching the Mahabharata's description at a date as early as 1400 BCE faces significant challenges. Archaeological layers build up over millennia, and the deepest, oldest levels are often the most difficult to access and interpret. Traces of early human habitation can be ephemeral – post holes, scattered pottery shards, hearth remnants – easily disturbed or destroyed by subsequent building phases and the passage of time.

Excavations at the Purana Qila have indeed revealed evidence of ancient habitation, but the story they tell is necessarily fragmentary and open to interpretation, particularly regarding the earliest periods. Digs have uncovered "painted greyware" pottery, a distinctive ceramic type associated with settlements in the Gangetic plain dating roughly from 1000 BCE to 600 BCE. The presence of this pottery suggests human activity on the site around that time, aligning in a very general sense with the later proposed dates for the Mahabharata era, but not definitively proving a grand capital city.

Some pottery fragments found in the deepest layers have even been tentatively dated by some archaeologists to around 1000 BCE or perhaps slightly earlier. While these finds push back the timeline of human presence at this specific location, they speak of early, possibly small-scale settlements rather than the magnificent urban centre described in the epic. They are whispers from the past, hinting at people living by the Yamuna, perhaps farming, perhaps engaged in simple crafts, but not yet erecting the monumental structures of legend.

These earliest inhabitants likely lived in simple dwellings made of perishable materials like mud, wood, and thatch. Their lives would have been closely tied to the river and the surrounding environment – hunting the wildlife of the Khandavaprastha forest before it was cleared, fishing in the Yamuna, and perhaps cultivating early grains. The landscape would have been far less altered than the one we see today, a mix of riverine ecology and thorn scrub or open woodland depending on the exact period and climate conditions.

The presence of painted greyware pottery is significant because it indicates a cultural phase known from other sites in northern India, suggesting these early Delhi dwellers were part of a wider network of early Iron Age communities. This pottery is typically fine-grained and wheel-made, often decorated with simple geometric patterns in black paint, suggesting a degree of craftsmanship beyond crude handmade wares. Finding it here places Delhi within the context of early settled life in the region.

Interpreting these sparse earliest finds requires careful consideration. A few pottery shards or evidence of rudimentary structures don't paint a full picture of a society. They are clues that suggest continuous or intermittent occupation over long periods, laying the foundation, literally and figuratively, for the cities that would later rise on this spot. They demonstrate that the strategic importance of the location was recognised by people thousands of years before historical records began.

The transition from these scattered early settlements to more discernible habitation layers is gradual in the archaeological record. As centuries passed, the settlements likely grew, became more permanent, and left clearer traces. But the initial period remains elusive, a time when the reality of life was perhaps humble and challenging, far removed from the opulent descriptions of epic poetry. Yet, it was these early footsteps that first trod the soil that would eventually become Delhi.

Despite the lack of hard archaeological proof for the epic's version of events, the legend of Indraprastha holds immense cultural weight. It provides Delhi with a deep, albeit mythical, antiquity that predates most other major historical cities in the region whose origins are tied to later, more documented periods. It gives a sense of continuity and a connection to a revered past, a heroic age that continues to inspire and provide a narrative for the city's ancient origins.

Thus, Chapter One begins not with concrete dates and confirmed rulers, but with the land itself and the powerful stories attached to it. It explores the fertile ground between myth and the faint archaeological hints of early life, setting the stage for the long and complex history that unfolds on this enduring piece of earth by the Yamuna. From the legendary forests and fabled city of Indraprastha to the humble traces of painted greyware, the area around modern Delhi has been a magnet for human activity for thousands of years, its story beginning in a time known through legend and the patient uncovering of archaeology's deepest layers.

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