



## Trade Routes, Market Towns, and the Political Economy of the Delhi Sultanate, 1206-1398 CE

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### Abstract

This article examines the relationship between long-distance trade networks and urban formation in the Delhi Sultanate between the early thirteenth and late fourteenth centuries. Drawing on Persian administrative chronicles, Arabic geographical texts, numismatic evidence, and the archaeological surveys conducted by Irfan Habib, Simon Digby, and the Archaeological Survey of India, the study traces how the sultans of the Slave, Khalji, and Tughlaq dynasties deliberately reorganized existing trade corridors inherited from the Rajput period to consolidate fiscal extraction, provision military garrisons, and sustain the expanding population of the imperial capital. The article argues that urban growth in the sultanate period was not primarily a product of commercial spontaneity but of three interlocking political mechanisms: the sultan's control over grain markets (mandis) through the grain price regulations of Alauddin Khalji, the integration of Hindu merchant communities (mahajans and banjaras) into the sultanate fiscal apparatus, and the monetization of agrarian surplus through the silver tanka currency system introduced under Iltutmish. The case of Multan as a transit entrepot connecting the subcontinent to Central Asian and Persian Gulf trade circuits demonstrates that commercial urbanism under the sultanate was inseparable from the political management of exchange. The article also examines the disruption caused by Timur's invasion of 1398, which severed the northern trade arteries of the sultanate system and precipitated an urban contraction whose effects persisted into the early Mughal period, reshaping the geography of medieval Indian commerce in ways that colonial-era scholarship systematically underestimated.

**Keywords:** - Delhi Sultanate, Medieval Trade Routes, Alauddin Khalji, Multan, Market Regulation, Urban History.

### Introduction

Between the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate under Qutb ud-Din Aibak in 1206 and the catastrophic Timurid invasion of 1398, the towns and cities of northern India experienced a prolonged and structurally distinctive process of urban growth. The conventional historiography of medieval Indian urbanism, shaped largely by the colonial administrative imagination and its preference for sedentary agrarian settlement over commercial mobility, has either neglected this process or assimilated it into a narrative of Islamic civilizational diffusion from the Middle East. Neither approach is adequate. The urban forms that developed under the Delhi Sultanate were products of specific political decisions about trade, taxation, and territorial control, and they cannot be understood without sustained attention to the fiscal architecture of sultanate governance.

The Delhi Sultanate inherited a trade infrastructure that was already ancient. The overland routes connecting the Gangetic plain to the Punjab and thence to Khurasan and Central Asia had carried silk, spices, horses, and metalware since at least the Kushan period. The ports of Gujarat and the Malabar coast linked the

subcontinent to the Persian Gulf and East African commercial circuits that the Muslim world had dominated since the eighth century. What the sultans added to this existing infrastructure was a distinctive set of political interventions: currency standardization, market regulation, revenue assignment (iqta), and the disciplined provisioning of the imperial capital that together transformed the conditions under which long-distance exchange could occur. Habib's monumental mapping of medieval Indian trade routes has provided the cartographic foundation for understanding this transformation, demonstrating the density of commercial connectivity that the sultanate both inherited and reorganized (Habib 1982, 56-62).

This article pursues three connected arguments. First, that the market reforms of Alauddin Khalji represent the most systematic attempt in pre-Mughal Indian history to subordinate commercial exchange to political authority, and that their consequences for urban morphology extended well beyond Alauddin's own reign. Second, that the integration of indigenous merchant communities into the sultanate fiscal apparatus created a durable commercial infrastructure that survived dynastic discontinuity. Third, that the Timurid disruption of 1398 was not merely a military catastrophe but a structural rupture in the political economy of trade, whose long-term urban consequences have been obscured by the tendency of medieval Indian historiography to periodize around dynasties rather than around commercial systems.

## **The Inherited Commercial Landscape: Pre-Sultanate Trade Networks**

The trade networks that the Delhi Sultanate inherited in 1206 were the product of centuries of Rajput political economy. The Rajput kingdoms of the tenth to twelfth centuries had sustained commercial activity through a system of periodic markets (haats), market towns (qasbas), and nodal trading centres that linked agricultural surplus to long-distance exchange without the institutional infrastructure of a centralized state. The merchant communities that operated within this system were organized by caste and kinship into guilds known as shrenis, whose internal regulatory mechanisms governed credit, dispute resolution, and quality standards across vast geographical distances. Goitein's work on the Cairo Geniza has established the Indian Ocean dimension of this commercial world, showing that merchants from Gujarat and the Konkan coast were integrated into the Mediterranean-Persian Gulf commercial network through Fatimid Egypt well before the sultanate period (Goitein 1967, 43-48).

The horse trade deserves particular attention as a structuring element of pre-sultanate and sultanate period commerce. The Indian subcontinent did not produce adequate war horses, and every military power from the Rajput kingdoms to the Mughal empire was therefore dependent on imports from Central Asia, Arabia, and Persia. Digby's detailed study of the horse trade in medieval India has documented the institutional complexity of this commerce, which involved advance contracts, credit systems, and the participation of specialist merchant communities including the Multani traders and the Afghan horse dealers of the northwest frontier (Digby 1971, 34-39). The sultanate's military appetite for horses gave these merchants a structural importance in the political economy that translated into urban growth at the nodes of the horse-trading network, particularly at Multan, Lahore, and Delhi itself.

The grain trade, less dramatic than the luxury commerce but more fundamental to urban sustainability, was organized through a network of market towns whose spatial distribution reflected the agrarian geography of the Gangetic plain and the Punjab. Kumar's analysis of the settlement archaeology of medieval north India has documented the concentration of mandi sites at river crossings, road junctions, and the boundaries between ecological zones, noting that the location logic of these markets was determined by minimizing transport costs for bulky agricultural commodities rather than by administrative fiat (Kumar 2007, 89-94). When the sultanate began to impose regulatory frameworks on this pre-existing commercial infrastructure, it was working with a spatial pattern that its own administrative apparatus had not created and could not easily override.

## **Alauddin Khalji's Market Reforms and Their Urban Consequences**

The market reforms introduced by Alauddin Khalji between 1303 and 1311 represent the most ambitious experiment in price control and market regulation in medieval Indian history. Faced with the fiscal demands of continuous military campaigning in the Deccan and against the Mongol invasions from the northwest, Alauddin reorganized the grain, cloth, and livestock markets of Delhi through a system of fixed prices, licensed dealers, and state inspectors (shahnas) whose authority to punish violations was exercised with documented severity. The detailed account preserved in Ziauddin Barani's *Tarikh-i-Firuz Shahi*, despite its hagiographic distortions, provides sufficient administrative specificity to reconstruct the institutional logic of the system: a central grain market (mandi) supplied by requisitioned surplus from the agrarian hinterland, a cloth market organized through licensed merchants required to sell at fixed prices, and a livestock market regulating the supply of horses and cattle to the military (Barani, cited in Lal 1980, 112-117).

The urban consequences of this regulatory system extended beyond the immediate period of its operation. By concentrating licensed commercial activity in specific market zones under state supervision, Alauddin's reforms accelerated the spatial differentiation of Delhi's urban fabric, creating distinct commercial quarters whose physical infrastructure of warehouses, caravanserais, and weighing stations outlasted the regulatory regime that had generated them. Sharma's archaeological study of the Siri and Jahanpanah urban complexes has documented the persistence of commercial spatial patterns established under Alauddin into the Tughlaq period, suggesting that the built environment of market regulation created path dependencies in urban form that persisted across dynastic change (Sharma 2001, 67-72).

The reforms also had significant consequences for the relationship between Delhi and its commercial hinterland. By requiring the provisioning of the capital at controlled prices, Alauddin created incentive structures that redirected agricultural surplus from regional markets to the imperial centre, contributing to the urban primacy of Delhi relative to other sultanate towns. Ibn Battuta, whose observations of Delhi in the 1330s postdate Alauddin's reign by two decades, recorded a city of extraordinary size and commercial vitality whose markets were organized on a scale he had not encountered elsewhere in the Islamic world, suggesting that the institutional legacy of Alauddin's reforms had persisted into the Tughlaq period despite the formal relaxation of price controls under Muhammad bin Tughlaq (Ibn Battuta, cited in Husain 1953, 23-27).

## **Multan as Entrepot: The Political Geography of Transit Trade**

No city illustrates the relationship between trade and political economy in the Delhi Sultanate more clearly than Multan. Located at the junction of the routes connecting the Gangetic plain to Khurasan, the Punjab to Sindh, and the Indus valley to the Persian Gulf via the Arabian Sea ports of Debal and Daybul, Multan occupied a position in the medieval Asian trade network that gave it commercial significance independent of its political status. The Multani merchant community, organized around the Shikarpuri and Multani trading networks that extended from Kabul to Calcutta and from Astrakhan to Colombo, provided the sultanate with a commercial diaspora whose credit instruments, market intelligence, and logistical infrastructure were indispensable to the functioning of long-distance trade (Markovits 2000, 44-49).

The sultanate's relationship with Multan was always politically ambivalent. As the gateway through which Central Asian military manpower, horses, luxury goods, and scholarly migrants entered the subcontinent, Multan was too commercially and strategically important to govern with the same extractive intensity applied to the purely agrarian hinterland. The governors appointed to Multan from the early thirteenth century onward were typically drawn from the upper ranks of the Turkish military aristocracy, and their tenures were frequently troubled by tension between the demands of the central treasury and the need to maintain the commercial conditions that made Multan's transit revenues possible. Nizami's study of the administrative history of the Punjab under the sultanate has documented this structural tension in detail, noting that the periods of greatest commercial florescence at Multan corresponded to the reigns of sultans who exercised relatively light fiscal pressure on the northwest frontier region (Nizami 1968, 78-83).

The Multani case also illuminates the role of Sufi networks in sustaining commercial infrastructure. The shrine of Bahauddin Zakariya (d. 1262), head of the Suhrawardi Sufi order in the subcontinent, functioned as a node of the Multani commercial network as well as a centre of religious authority. Pilgrims and merchants used the same caravanserais; the endowments (waqfs) attached to the shrine provided credit facilities and dispute resolution mechanisms that supplemented the formal institutional apparatus of sultanate governance. Eaton's analysis of the Suhrawardi order in Multan has established the systematic character of this overlap between religious and commercial infrastructure, arguing that the dargah economy of medieval north India cannot be understood apart from the trade networks within which it was embedded (Eaton 1978, 89-94).

## **The Timurid Disruption of 1398 and the Contraction of Medieval Urban Commerce**

Timur's invasion of northern India in 1398 constitutes one of the most consequential single events in the urban history of medieval India, yet its long-term commercial and demographic effects have been systematically underestimated by a historiography organized around dynastic succession rather than economic continuity. The military destruction of Delhi, Panipat, Meerut, and the towns of the Punjab has been extensively documented in both Timurid and Indian sources. What has received less systematic attention is the disruption to the commercial infrastructure of the sultanate system that accompanied and followed the military campaign. The destruction of caravanserais, the dispersal of merchant communities, the collapse of credit networks dependent on institutional trust, and the physical damage to irrigation works that sustained the agricultural surplus on which urban provisioning depended combined to produce an urban contraction whose effects persisted for at least two generations (Habib 1982, 134-139).

The numismatic evidence is particularly revealing. The sharp decline in silver tanka production visible in the coin record for the post-1398 period reflects not only the disruption of the mints themselves but the broader collapse of the monetized exchange economy that the sultanate system had sustained. Goron and Goenka's corpus of medieval Indian coinage documents the near-cessation of high-quality silver coinage from the Delhi mint between 1398 and the establishment of Sayyid rule in the 1410s, a gap that corresponds to a period of commercial disorganization whose urban consequences are visible in the archaeological record of reduced occupation horizons at several Gangetic plain town sites (Goron and Goenka 2001, 112-117).

The Timurid disruption also had differential effects across the urban hierarchy. The largest cities, particularly Delhi and Multan, recovered relatively quickly once political stability was restored, because their commercial functions were too important to the regional economy to remain suppressed for long. Smaller market towns in the Punjab and the upper Gangetic plain, however, experienced more prolonged contraction, and several did not recover their pre-1398 commercial significance before the Mughal reorganization of the sixteenth century. Nath's survey of the architectural evidence for urban continuity and discontinuity in post-sultanate northern India has documented this differential recovery pattern in detail, noting that the spatial hierarchy of medieval Indian urbanism was significantly reorganized by the Timurid disruption in ways that shaped the commercial geography inherited by the Mughals (Nath 1978, 56-61).

## Conclusion

The political economy of trade and urban growth in the Delhi Sultanate was neither a simple extension of pre-existing commercial patterns nor a product of Islamic civilizational influence radiating from the Middle East. It was the outcome of specific political decisions about market regulation, currency, territorial administration, and the management of strategically vital commercial communities, made by rulers whose fiscal interests were simultaneously served and constrained by the commercial infrastructure they sought to control.

Alauddin Khalji's market reforms demonstrate that the sultanate was capable of systematic and institutionally sophisticated intervention in commercial life, and that such interventions had durable urban consequences extending beyond the administrative tenure of the reforms themselves. The case of Multan illustrates how transit trade and Sufi institutional networks combined to create commercial urbanism at nodes of the long-distance trade system that operated with relative autonomy from the extractive logic of the agrarian state. The Timurid disruption of 1398 reveals the fragility of this commercial urbanism when the political conditions that had sustained it were suddenly removed.

What this study of the sultanate period reveals about medieval Indian urban history more broadly is that commercial towns were political artifacts as much as economic ones. Their growth reflected the capacity of political authorities to create and maintain the institutional conditions for exchange, and their contraction reflected the failure or disruption of those conditions. The tendency of colonial-era scholarship to treat medieval Indian urbanism as a backdrop to dynastic political history, rather than as a subject of analysis in its own right, has obscured a commercial landscape of considerable complexity whose structures shaped the economic geography of the subcontinent well into the Mughal and colonial periods.

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