

4. Delhi the Power Capital- History

Delhi became the power capital of India. December 12 holds historical significance as it marks the anniversary of the 1911 announcement by King George V during the Delhi Durbar, declaring the transfer of the capital of British India from Calcutta to Delhi. This decision laid the foundation for modern India's political center and reshaped the administrative geography of the subcontinent.

Geographical and Historical Context

Delhi's selection was not arbitrary but rooted in its strategic location and historical depth.

Strategic Location- Situated in northern India, bordered by Uttar Pradesh and Haryana. Occupies a vital position along the left bank of the Yamuna River. Historically served as the natural focal point for political power and administration in the subcontinent.

A "Palimpsest" of Cities- Delhi is described as a historical palimpsest (a manuscript where earlier text has been effaced to make room for later text), reflecting over 3,500 years of continuous urban history. It is not a single city but a collection of nearly fourteen capital cities built, abandoned, and rebuilt within a compact area of 60 square miles. Prominent capitals emerged primarily between the 12th and 17th centuries.

The Mughal Legacy- Shahjahanabad

Among the historical capitals, Shahjahanabad, founded by Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan in 1639, remains the most magnificent precursor to modern Delhi.

Urban Planning- Designed as an imperial capital with a distinct fort-palace complex and an adjoining civilian city.

Red Fort (Lal Qila)- Built of red sandstone, it served as the royal residence and seat of power.

Walled City- Located to the west of the fort, protected by fourteen gates.

Key Infrastructure

Chandni Chowk & Faiz Bazaar- Major arterial roads designed to be wide enough for royal processions.

Canal System- A canal ran through the center of Chandni Chowk, aiding cooling and aesthetics.

Cultural Hub- The city flourished as a center of Sufi culture, dotted with dargahs, khanqahs, and idgahs. The urban fabric was integrated through open squares, water channels, and winding residential lanes.

The British Connection- Imperial Durbars

Before shifting the capital, the British utilized Delhi's imperial aura for ceremonial assemblies known as Durbars. The British chose Delhi for these events to leverage its long-standing association with legitimate imperial power in the eyes of the Indian public.

Timeline of Durbars

1. 1877 Durbar- Organized by Lord Lytton to proclaim Queen Victoria as Empress of India.
2. 1903 Durbar- Held under Lord Curzon to celebrate the coronation of King Edward VII.
3. 1911 Durbar- The most significant event where King George V announced the capital shift from Calcutta to Delhi.

Reasons for Shifting Capital (Calcutta to Delhi)

The decision to relocate was driven by a mix of political necessity and administrative strategy.

Political Unrest in Bengal- The Partition of Bengal (1905) triggered massive nationalist protests and unrest, making Calcutta a volatile base for administration. The British sought a safer, more central location.

Administrative Reorganization- Constitutional reforms introduced under the Indian Councils Act, 1909 (Morley-Minto Reforms) necessitated a reorganization of administrative structures.

Historical Legitimacy- Delhi's central geographical location made governance easier. Its historical status as the seat of Mughal and Sultanate power gave the British rule a sense of continuity and legitimacy.

The Making of New Delhi

The shift was not just about moving files; it involved constructing an entirely new city to project British imperial might.

Architectural Vision- Edwin Lutyens and Herbert Baker, renowned British architects, were commissioned

to design the new capital. The city was planned around Raisina Hill, envisioned as the new power corridor (Acropolis) of British India.

Key Monuments

Viceroy's House– Now Rashtrapati Bhavan, the residence of the Head of State.

Council House– Now the old Parliament House, the seat of legislation.

All-India War Memorial– Now India Gate, unveiled as one of the final ceremonial acts.

Challenges and Timeline

Foundation– Stone laid in 1911.

Delays– Construction was severely hampered by World War I, which caused funding shortages and labor constraints.

Completion– The project regained momentum post-war, and New Delhi was formally inaugurated in **1931**, nearly two decades later.

Delhi in Independent India

Post-1947, Delhi seamlessly transitioned from an imperial capital to a democratic hub.

Continuity of Power– It retained its central role as the seat of the Parliament, Presidency, and Executive.

Modern Identity– The city evolved to blend its ancient heritage and colonial architecture with the requirements of modern democratic governance.

Conclusion

Delhi's journey is a testament to the continuity of power in the Indian subcontinent. From the ancient "14 cities" and the grandeur of Shahjahanabad to the colonial planning of 1911 and its modern status, Delhi stands as a symbol of India's evolving political identity—blending a rich historical legacy with the vibrancy of modern democratic institutions.

Source– <https://www.firstpost.com/explainers/history-today-how-delhi-became-the-power-capital-of-india-13958131.html>

