

# Mehrauli city

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**In news**– Delhi Development Authority (DDA) is undertaking a drive to clear unauthorised encroachments on government land in the Mehrauli and Ladha Sarai villages.

## **History of Mehrauli city-**

- Mehrauli is widely considered to be the oldest 'city' of Delhi and is the oldest area of the metropolis to be continuously inhabited.
- Little more than an urban village today, Mehrauli has survived and thrived over the years as a spiritual centre, a trading post, a wholesale market and now, as a destination housing multiple high-end boutiques.
- Like any city, Mehrauli has witnessed multiple cycles of building and rebuilding over the centuries.
- First founded as Lalkot in the 11th century by Anangpal II, a ruler of the Rajput Tomar dynasty, remains of the earliest version of the city can be found around Sanjay Van and the Qutab Golf Course.
- This was later christened 'Quila Rai Pithora' by Mughal court historian Abu'l Fazl in his epic hagiography, 'Ain-i-Akbari'.
- This city passed hands from the Tomars to the Chauhans, who are credited to have further fortified the complex.
- The city fell into the hands of the Mamluk dynasty (Slave dynasty) in 1192.
- Under ruler Qutubudin Aibak, the first ruler of the Slave dynasty, the next round of construction began in the area.
- Notably, he began the building of the Qutub Minar to commemorate his victory (though other explanations also exist to his motivations) as well as the Quwwat-al-Islam (Might of Islam) mosque, the oldest known mosque in north India (India's oldest mosque – Cheraman Juma – was

**built by Arab merchants in Kerala).**

- In the **next century**, a slew of building activities took place in the region with **tombs, baolis (step wells), palaces** and other fortifications built in the **reigns of Iltutmish, Razia Sultan and Alauddin Khilji**.
- Even as the newer cities came up and the seat of power shifted northwards, Mehrauli witnessed building activity as late as the Mughal and British periods.
- **Due to its location on the lap of the Aravallis hills, the area was preferred as a summer retreat.**
- **Two Mughal summer palaces (Zafar Mahal and Jahaz Mahal) and a summer abode of Sir Thomas Metcalfe (Dilkhusha) are situated here.**
- **Mehrauli lay on a historic trade route, as the number of sarais (Ladho Sarai, Ber Sarai, Neb Sarai) around the area would suggest.**
- **A sarai was a resthouse for weary travellers.**
- In 'Atlas of the Mughal Empire', historian Irfan Habib writes that the area would have been along the trading route connecting Bara Pullah (a Mughal-era bridge in Delhi) to Pataudi, Rewari and Narnaul (in present-day Haryana).
- As per the historians, **Jalaluddin Khilji's (1290-1296) built the bazaar (market) in Mehrauli.**
- He settled the merchants within the walls – a grain market/mandi by Mandavi Darwaza of Mehrauli and a cloth market known as Sara-E-Adl near Badaun Gate. Both gates do not exist any longer.
- Like much of the rest of Delhi, the Partition brought many changes to Mehrauli too. Many refugees from the West found sanctuary here.
- **Today, Mehrauli is famous for a wholesale mandi (market) where one can find all kinds of products, dehati hookahs to exotic dragon fruits.**
- It also houses multiple designer boutiques where elites of Delhi flock to buy their wedding costumes and some new eateries, which heavily lean into "the heritage" of

the original Old Delhi.

### The cosmopolitanism of Mehrauli-

- Mehrauli is also a **spiritual centre, home to both Hindu and Muslim shrines.**
- **Sufi saint Hazrat Qutubuddin Bakhtiar Kaki (1173 -1235 AD) was buried in the city and his dargah remains popular till date, across religious lines.**
- Some historians cite the dargah as a reason for the city surviving the test of time – despite power shifting elsewhere, the dargah remained a revered destination for pilgrims far and wide.
- **Another spiritual centre for the community is the Yogmaya mandir, believed to be one of the oldest in the city.**
- Yoginis (semi-divine deities) have been an integral part of Indian folklore and this temple dedicated to them is believed to have been constructed by the Pandavas.
- The cosmopolitan spirit and secular heritage of Mehrauli are perhaps best expressed in the annual community celebration of **'Phool Walon ki Sair' or Sair-e-Gulfaroshan (walk of the flowers).**
- **This 19th-century Mughal-era festival was revived in 1962 by India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, and has become the symbol of the city's communal harmony since then.**
- The three-day festival includes processions and festivities led by shehnai players and dancers.
- An offering of pankhas (large floral fans) is made to the Yogmaya Temple and a chadar is offered at the dargah of Khwaja Bakhtiyar Kaki.
- However, Mehrauli has also seen sectarian tensions.

### The seven cities of Delhi-

- What we today know as Purani Dilli (Old Delhi) is actually a misnomer.

- The **city's history far predates Shahjahanabad**, with the oldest evidence of habitation – painted grey ware fragments found in Purana Quila – dating back to the Iron Age (circa 1100-800 BC).
- **Historians identify seven cities of Delhi, dating from the 11th century onwards:** Lalkot/Quila Rai Pithora/Mehrauli, Siri, Tughlaqabad, Firozabad, Shergarh (present-day Old Fort), Shahjahanabad and New Delhi.
- Depending on how one counts and what one considers 'a city', this number can be as high as 11.