# Red Fort and Delhi - Symbols and Narratives of Power

## What is the issue?

- On the Republic Day, the extension of farmers' protest witnessed scenes of violence on the ramparts of the Red Fort.
- In this context, here is a look at symbols and narratives of power down the ages in relation with Red Fort and Delhi.

## How did Delhi evolve as the 'Capital of Hindustan'?

- Before the 13th century, Delhi (or 'Dilli') was, politically speaking, a moderately significant town.
- It was for long the capital of the modestly sized kingdom of the Rajput Tomar dynasty.
- By the mid 12th century it was conquered by the Rajput Chauhans who, however, ruled from Ajmer.
- It was the conquest by Ghurid Turks in the late 12th century that put Delhi on the map as a centre of power.
- As the capital of the Sultanate, Delhi gradually developed an aura of power.
- Gradually, in the popular imagination, it came to be associated with a dominant power in the subcontinent.
- Babur, having defeated Ibrahim Lodi at Panipat in 1526, headed for Delhi, which he described as "the capital of all Hindustan."
- This was even though the Lodis had ruled from Agra for the previous two decades.

## How did it work as the seat of Mughal power?

- During the first century or so of Mughal rule, Agra was the capital for longer than Delhi.
- Still, the Mughals continued to be seen as rulers of Delhi.
- A Sanskrit inscription from 1607 refers to Akbar as "Dillishvara", the lord of Delhi, though he had ruled from Delhi for a very short time.
- In a Persian inscription dated 1621 on the Salimgarh Bridge adjoining the Red Fort, Jahangir, who never reigned from Delhi, was described as "Shahanshah e Dehli", the emperor of Delhi.
- It was only in the reign of Shah Jahan (1628-58) that the Mughal connection to Delhi was given concrete form.

- This happened with the founding of the city of Shahjahanabad and the inauguration of its palace citadel, the Red Fort, in 1648.
- From that date to the end of Mughal rule in 1857, Delhi was the formal capital of the Mughal empire.
- There was another important feature of the Delhi of these two centuries.
    - From the 13th century, the capital had been located at a number of different sites.
    - These included Mehrauli, Kilugarhi, Siri, Tughlaqabad, Jahanpanah, Firozabad, and Dinpanah.
    - But by now, it came to be settled permanently in Shahjahanabad, with the emperor's seat being in the Red Fort.

## What happened from the 18th century?

- With political developments in the 18th century, the Mughal Empire started on the long road to decline.
- Erstwhile Mughal provinces such as Bengal, Awadh, and Hyderabad broke away, and new forces like the Sikhs and the Marathas arose.
- The Mughal territories shrank and the Mughal emperor became increasingly ineffectual even within them.
- However, his symbolic significance as the source of legitimate sovereign authority continued.
- So, many of these new states, including a newcomer, the East India Company, continued to rule in his name, and to issue coins in his name until well into the 19th century.
- The control over the emperor and of Delhi was, therefore, a prize worth fighting for.
    - Safdar Jang, the Nawab of Awadh, fought a civil war in an attempt to keep his position as Prime Minister of the Mughal emperor.
    - The Sikhs had their ambitions, and came up to the walls of the city in 1783 before retreating.
    - The Marathas met with greater success the following year, when Mahadji Sindhia became the power behind the throne.
    - Finally, the East India Company defeated the Maratha forces in 1803, and went on to control Delhi and the emperor for the next 54 years.
- In the popular imagination, legitimate rule was associated with the Mughal emperor.
- This was true to the extent that when the country broke out in revolt in 1857, the mutinous soldiers made their way to Delhi, seeking his leadership.
- When the revolt in Delhi had been crushed, the British army occupied the Red Fort.

- The British colonial government had sought to inscribe its power and might at the Red Fort.

## What is the post-independence scenario?

- With the coming of Independence, it was necessary that the site of Red Fort be symbolically reclaimed for the Indian people.
- It was for this reason, that after the first hoisting of the national flag at India Gate on August 15, 1947, the next day, the Prime Minister hoisted it on the ramparts of the Red Fort.
- This was to then become India's lasting Independence Day tradition.

**Source: The Indian Express**

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