

‘Roots & Routes Method’ in Urban History: Situating South Asia in the Global Context

The way people move across landscapes not only reveals the historical connections between space and place¹ but also helps explain how traditions, ideas, and languages spread and evolve over time. Previous research has positioned South Asia as a ‘crossroad’ of routes within Asia² where the ‘intersection’³ of these routes has led to the emergence of new urban centres or expansion of existing ones. The intersections at changing topographies—of mountains and plains, of land and sea, and of deserts and hills—have functioned as gateways for the practice of syncretic styles of city-building practices within South Asia. There exists a dynamic interplay between cultural interactions and the evolution of urban forms. The study of routes contributes to the study of cultural history in the context of South Asia.⁴ Cities have experienced significant changes in their morphology and spatial assembly over time; while some layers have diminished to accommodate new developments, others persist as morphological determinants of the built environment.

Over the past decade (2011-2021), my professional focus as an educator has centred on teaching undergraduate and master’s students in the fields of architecture and urban regeneration. Specifically, I have concentrated on teaching the urban and architectural history of South Asia spanning from the twelfth to the nineteenth century. The fertile basin of South Asia, extending from the Indus River to the Ganges and Krishna, has served as a cradle for numerous empires and dynasties, each leaving indelible imprints through ancient cities, architectural marvels, artistic expressions, and cultural traditions. These elements played a pivotal role in shaping the enduring built environment and cultural heritage of South Asia. A primary factor driving this continuous evolution was the exchange of ideas and inspirations, either adopted or adapted from various landscapes, cultures and built environments. This phenomenon is particularly evident in South Asia, where numerous cross-cultural exchanges—both within and beyond its geographic boundaries, notably with Central and Middle Eastern Asia, Africa, and the Mediterranean—have profoundly influenced its urban development resulting in new regional orders of city planning.

This paper aims to introduce a methodology that was introduced to undergraduate and master's degree students of urban studies, with a focus on medieval and early modern South Asia (1192-1857). However, this approach can also be applied by instructors of world history and heritage practitioners, across urban centres, of the medieval and early modern period, that have experienced corridors of intense movements connecting the area to the broader geography, characterized by multiple empires, trade exchanges, and travel routes.

In the medieval period, the intersection of moving elements—ideas, skills, and styles⁵—led to the formation of cultural spaces that ultimately shaped the urban environment. There was an interplay of power, geography and culture. As political power and cultural expressions moved across changing landscapes, they encountered geographical challenges that necessitated adaptation and transformation of city models and building practices. Consequently, while the foundational ideologies and intentions behind built environments may remain consistent, their manifestations are inherently influenced and modified by the specific characteristics of the new locations they inhabit. Thus, the vocabulary of architecture and urban design was shaped by the distinct geographical and cultural context of each place, illustrating the profound interconnectedness between political authority, cultural expression, and the physical landscape. This perspective emphasizes the importance of understanding how local geographical conditions shape the adaptation and evolution of political and cultural forms within diverse environments. The complexity of South Asian cities, resulting from large-scale mobility of empires, traders, and travellers and their interaction with the local populace, necessitated the introduction of a tool to students of urban history that would facilitate their understanding of the layering of city form, across time and scale, and its relationship to urban spatial patterns.⁶

Central to my teaching approach was the integration of urban areas into a broader global historical framework, considering the extensive exchanges that characterized the region until the British colonial period. In the context of urban development and city formation within the period of Delhi Sultanate (1192-1526) and the Mughal Empire (1526-1857) I developed the '*Roots and Routes Method*,' of teaching urban history. It aimed at systematically contextualising South Asia within a global context of city building. In a region characterized by the existing structures of landforms and rivers, specifically the Himalayas and the river systems of the Indus and Ganges-Yamuna doab, which significantly influenced the pattern of urban settlement within the local geography, the interaction with a broader 'cultural order' through terrestrial and maritime routes governed its 'spatial arrangements'⁷ within the global context. This approach enriched student's understanding by linking local developments to broader historical processes, fostering a nuanced appreciation of urban development within South Asia.

The methodology encompassed a range of investigative studies examining cities and their surrounding areas through the lens of interconnected 'routes' of travellers, empires, and trade. These routes were analysed for their transformative effects on urban layout, architectural design, and cultural shifts over extended

periods of interaction and development. In this approach, 'roots' signified the origin of regions from which travellers, empires, or trade routes emerged, including the cultural, historical, and physical elements they embodied. These components also comprised native construction methods, local materials, and regional aesthetic principles that had been practised over centuries. 'Routes' symbolized the pathways of movement for travellers, empires, and trade, functioning as channels for exchange—including migration trends and networks of cultural interplay—that enabled the dissemination of concepts, technologies, and design preferences across diverse geographical areas.

The methodology encompassed a four-step process that focused on introducing each type of route, with its origin (root) and its termination at urban centres in South Asia, used by travellers, empires, and traders. The first step focused on exposing students to explorers who had journeyed into or through South Asia. This process included familiarizing the students with the written accounts of historical travellers. Each student was given a page from a traveller's diary to read, selected for its content comparing South Asian cities or architecture with those of the traveller's native or 'root' places, or based on the comparisons drawn from urban centres encountered enroute to South Asia. Subsequently, students traced the movement patterns across geographies from their origins, or 'roots,' to the socio-cultural landscapes encountered by these travellers. This methodology enabled students to develop a nuanced understanding of the diverse landscapes, urban forms, material vocabularies, and architectural styles experienced by historical travellers.

For this exercise, students were asked to select a historical traveller of their preference. After studying a portion of the chosen traveller's written account, each student was required to map the explorer's route, beginning from their starting location and including all South Asian cities they visited during their journey. Utilizing Google Earth satellite imagery, students analysed terrains, climatic zones, and material environments of the regions traversed. For instance, by tracing Ibn Battuta's journey from Morocco to India via Tabriz, Samarqand, and Balkh, students explored the varied landscapes, urban characteristics, and architectural styles encountered by the traveller (1325-1354).⁸ Similarly, examining Marco Polo's route from Venice to India through Jerusalem, Kashgar, and Beijing (1271-1295)⁹ or Al-Beruni's path from Baghdad to India via Khwarizm and Ghazni (1017), provided insights into the distinct regions and cultures encountered along these journeys.¹⁰ Other travellers included Abdur Razak (1442-1445), Thomas Roe (1615), Peter Mundy (1628-1631), Tavernier (1630-1688) and Bernier (1658-1670). Compiling all the routes of these travellers onto a single world map, students were able to visualize the diverse landscapes and pathways leading to South Asia. This exercise aimed to illustrate the development of vocabularies of global history and demonstrated how these can be employed to situate South Asia's urbanism and built practices within a wider global context.

The subsequent step involved examining the routes of empires that expanded into South Asia, such as the Ghurids, Ghaznavids, the sovereigns of the Delhi

Sultanate, and the Mughal Empire. Initially, the study focused on the origin of the empires, the 'root,' where the geographies, cultures, and built practices are analysed. This was followed by a detailed discussion and mapping of the routes these empires took to reach South Asia. Students were assigned specific empires that were contemporaneous with the travellers studied in the previous assignment. Similar to the earlier exercise, all route maps were overlaid onto a single map. The urban planning and architectural features of cities and structures encountered or built by these empires during their expansion into South Asia were subsequently analysed. Major urban hubs like Firuzkuh and Ghur (associated with the Seljuks, Ghurids, and Ghaznavids), Ghazna (linked to the Ghaznavids), Balkh (connected to the Timurids, Safavids, and Mughals), Herat (related to the Ghurids, Ghaznavids, Timurids, and Mughals), Qandahar (tied to the Safavids and Mughals) and Lahore (of the Delhi Sultanate and Mughals) were examined for their tripartite-urban layouts¹¹ and adaptive design approaches implemented to address topographical and hydrology-related challenges. The study also examined the architectural principles of imperial garden layouts and construction techniques. This investigation encompassed various structures, including the Jam Minaret, fortress designs in Qandahar, Herat, and Firuzkuh, as well as gardens from the Timurid and Mughal eras. Furthermore, the research analysed tomb architecture in Herat, Balkh, Kabul, and Lahore.

In addition to urban centres, the broader region and its resources were discussed. The nature of conquests is often linked to resource acquisition, encompassing hydrological, ecological, or agrarian aspects of South Asia. Discussions focused on the local and global characteristics of city morphologies, their form determinants, assembly techniques, styles, and materials. This exercise aimed to read cities, exploring their similarities, terrain-responsive designs, and the influences and adaptations arising from different landscapes. The introduction of traveling vocabularies resulted in the understanding of syncretic built expressions in South Asian cities. By examining similar terminology used in architecture and urban development, students sought to identify patterns that may have been incorporated or modified within the South Asian context. This approach aimed to shed light on the shared elements of building design and city planning across the region.

The third and arguably most crucial route is the trade route. Unlike the routes of travellers and empires, which may overlap to some extent, trade routes have historically served as the primary medium for the exchange of ideas, cultures, and designs. The strategic location of South Asia positions it at the intersection of several key trade routes, both overland, notably the Silk Road, and maritime, such as the Spice Route, which connected its coastal regions to Africa in the west and China in the east.

The robust maritime trade connections of South Asia with Europe also played a pivotal role in attracting the colonization efforts of various European powers, including the Portuguese, Dutch, French, Danish, Armenians, and British. This historical phenomenon underscores South Asia's unique position as a region colonized by multiple competing imperial powers. The maritime trade routes also

attracted Greeks to Kolkata, evident from the construction of churches and cemeteries in areas like Amratollah Street and Phoolbagan in the late eighteenth century.¹² Additionally, craftsmen from China, Baghdadi-Jewish traders, and Scottish industrialists played pivotal roles in establishing jute mills along the riverbanks of the city. These mills facilitated connections between Kolkata and Juteopolis in Dundee, which was renowned as the world's largest jute manufacturing center.¹³

The positioning of cities along the trade route connecting South Asia to the Silk Road, known as the *Badshahi Sadak*—referred to as Uttarapath during the Mauryan Empire, *Sadak-i-Azam* during the Sur Empire, and subsequently designated as the Grand Trunk Road during the colonial era—facilitated the exchange of cultural practices and architectural influences between the subcontinent and Central Asia. This trade route extended from the Balkh Province in Afghanistan (a significant node on the Silk Road) to Chittagong in Bengal, traversing notable Mughal capitals such as Kabul, Peshawar, Lahore, and Agra, spanning diverse terrains and landscapes. The subcontinent's connection with the Silk Route substantially enhanced the region's exchange of ideas, practices, and traditions with Central Asia. A salient feature of the *Badshahi Sadak* was the presence of caravan serais, gardens, and water infrastructure, which constituted a microcosm of neighbourhood management practices¹⁴ of the larger geographies to which they were connected.

In her analysis of the demography and layout of seventeenth-century Delhi, Chenoy¹⁵ identifies groups originating from Turkey, Khorasan, and Khwarizm (present-day Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan). Bernier, the French physician and traveller during Shahjahan's reign,¹⁶ documents his encounters with Turki horses, dry fruit merchants from Persia, Balkh, Bukhara, and Samarkand, Shiraz wine sellers from Bunder Abbas in Iran, and sporting dogs from Uzbekistan. He specifically notes the caravanserais that housed Persians and Uzbeks. These caravanserais were supported by an infrastructure comprising wells, canals, streams, drinking fountains, reservoirs, and water tanks, reflecting water management practices not only from these regions but also linking them to other significant connected centres.

The cities building practices in South Asia, during the medieval and early modern period, thus represent a profound manifestation of syncretic urbanism, continually reimagined within the context of these 'roots' and 'routes.' Here, the concepts of roots and routes are introduced as 'thinking' and 'experiential' tools to map 'materiality' and 'connectivity.'¹⁷ Cities and architecture become embodiments of multiple geographies as well as imperial identities. It is imperative to understand the formation of their vocabularies within a global context.

The final step of the exercise involved the overlaying of the three routes—travel, empire, and trade—along with the corresponding roots and halting points enroute to South Asia. Major settlements were compiled into a matrix that included key determinants of urban morphologies, encompassing their patterns, whether

geometric or organic, and their assembly, considering aspects such as use-based form grammar and built hierarchies. Additionally, the architectural styles, including volumetric expression, scale and proportions, and form and order, were systematically documented. This comprehensive vocabulary was then compared with urban centres in South Asia that interacted with these routes and empires, providing a nuanced understanding of the cultural and architectural exchanges that have shaped the region.

By employing the framework of roots and routes, this exercise aimed to illustrate how South Asian cities and architecture are not isolated phenomena but are deeply interconnected with broader global historical processes. These interactions have led to the emergence of a syncretic urbanism, characterized by the integration and adaptation of diverse influences. The resulting urban and architectural forms are thus products of both local traditions and external influences, reflecting a dynamic and hybridized cultural landscape. The analysis of a single urban entity in South Asia reveals broader spatial patterns and influences shaping the collective urban and architectural expressions, existing in multiple times and geographies encompassing Asia and the Near East.

The *'Roots and Routes Method'* is intended to serve as a preliminary approach for contextualizing medieval urban centres within a global framework. This method aims to offer an engaging and visual way to teach world history to students, while also providing heritage professionals with a means to document travelling patterns and styles across medieval geographical areas. By implementing this method, educators and practitioners can enhance their understanding and presentation of historical urban landscapes within a broader global perspective.

Understanding the formation of cities in a global context necessitates a multi-dimensional approach, integrating historical trajectories, cultural exchanges, and material practices. This comprehensive perspective enables a nuanced analysis of the evolution of urbanism in South Asia. Historical trajectories reveal how past events influence contemporary urban forms. Cultural exchanges underscore the role of intercultural interactions in shaping unique architectural vocabularies. Material practices shed light on the practical constraints and innovations in construction. Collectively, these dimensions highlight the significance of cross-cultural interactions and the dynamic processes that have shaped South Asia's historical urbanism practices.

Appendix of Supplementary Sources on South Asian Urbanism

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Iqtedar Alam is currently a PhD Candidate at the Department of Archaeology, University of Cambridge. Prior to arrival in the UK, Alam was working as an Assistant Professor of Architecture at the Department of Architecture at Jamia Millia Islamia in New Delhi, India from 2011 to 2021. His most recent publication is “Towards an Architecture of the Indian Ocean: Mapping the Syncretic Grammar of Coastal Cities and Architecture through Ibn Battuta’s Water Journeys (1342–47)” in *Cosmopolitan Cultures and Oceanic Thought*, Ed. by Dilip Menon and Nishat Zaidi, Routledge India, 152-167 (March 2023), DOI: 10.4324/9781003300939-13. He can be reached at alam.iqtedar@gmail.com.

Notes

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