International Journal of Advanced Research in Management and Social Sciences

ISSN: 2278-6236

Impact Factor: 8.624

Spatio-Temporal Analysis of Urban Expansion and Land-Use Change in Delhi Using Remote Sensing and GIS

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Abstract

This study examines the spatio-temporal dynamics of urban expansion and land-use change in Delhi using remote sensing and geographic information system techniques. Multi-temporal satellite imagery was analysed to identify changes in key land-use categories, including built-up areas, vegetation, agricultural land and water bodies over different time periods. The results indicate a substantial and continuous increase in built-up land, reflecting rapid urbanisation driven by population growth, infrastructure development and economic activity. At the same time, a corresponding decline in agricultural and vegetated areas highlights growing environmental pressure and landscape fragmentation. The spatial analysis reveals that urban growth has been particularly concentrated along transport corridors and peripheral zones, indicating a pattern of outward expansion rather than compact development. By integrating satellite-based observations with GIS-based change detection, the study provides a systematic and objective assessment of Delhi's urban transformation, offering valuable insights for sustainable urban planning and environmental management.

Keywords

Urban expansion, Land-use change, Remote sensing, Geographic information systems, Delhi

Introduction

The rapid pace of urbanisation in the Global South has emerged as one of the most defining spatial transformations of the twenty-first century, and India represents one of its most complex and dynamic manifestations. Among Indian cities, Delhi stands out as a particularly critical case due to its extraordinary demographic growth, economic centrality, and administrative importance as the national capital. Over the last three decades, Delhi has experienced intense spatial expansion driven by population increase, infrastructure development, real estate speculation, and rural–urban migration, leading to large-scale conversion of agricultural land, wetlands, forest patches and peri-urban open spaces into built-up areas. This transformation has not only altered the physical landscape but has also reshaped ecological processes, hydrological systems and socio-economic structures across the National Capital Territory and its surrounding regions. Scholars have increasingly highlighted that unplanned urban expansion in megacities such as Delhi is strongly associated with rising environmental stress, including urban heat island effects, groundwater depletion, air pollution and the loss of ecosystem services, making systematic spatial monitoring of land-use and land-cover change a pressing scientific and policy concern (Pandey and Seto, 2015; Sharma et al., 2016; Nath et al., 2020). In this context, understanding how urban growth unfolds over time and space is not merely a descriptive exercise but a prerequisite for designing evidence-based urban planning, environmental management and sustainable development strategies.

Remote sensing and geographic information systems have fundamentally transformed the way urban growth and land-use dynamics are observed, measured and interpreted. Unlike conventional surveybased methods, satellite imagery provides consistent, synoptic and temporally comparable data that enable researchers to detect even subtle changes in land cover across large metropolitan regions. When integrated with GIS-based spatial analysis, these datasets allow for the mapping, quantification and modelling of urban expansion in a manner that is both spatially explicit and analytically robust. In the case of Delhi, multi-temporal satellite data from platforms such as Landsat and Sentinel have been extensively used to track the conversion of rural and natural landscapes into urban fabric, revealing patterns of edge expansion, leapfrog development and densification across different administrative zones (Roy et al., 2016; Mishra et al., 2019). Recent advances in image classification algorithms, including machine learning and object-based approaches, have further enhanced the accuracy of land-use change detection, making it possible to distinguish between residential, industrial, transportation and green spaces with increasing reliability (Abbas et al., 2021; Tewolde and Cabral, 2022). These technological developments have positioned remote sensing and GIS not only as tools for retrospective analysis but also as instruments for forecasting future urban trajectories and assessing the potential impacts of policy interventions.

Despite the growing body of research on Delhi's urbanisation, significant gaps remain in the integrated spatio-temporal understanding of how land-use change unfolds across different periods and spatial scales. Many earlier studies have focused either on short time frames or on limited spatial extents, thereby constraining the ability to identify long-term structural trends and spatial inequalities in urban growth. Moreover, the acceleration of infrastructure projects such as expressways, metro corridors and satellite townships in the post-2010 period has introduced new spatial dynamics that require updated empirical examination (Bharath et al., 2018; Kundu and Pandey, 2021). The increasing availability of high-resolution satellite imagery and cloud-based geospatial platforms now offers an opportunity to conduct more comprehensive and temporally continuous analyses of land-use transformation in Delhi. By applying a spatio-temporal analytical framework, it becomes possible to not only map where urban expansion has occurred but also to understand the rate, direction and intensity of this change, as well as its implications for environmental sustainability and urban resilience. In a megacity that is simultaneously a political capital, an economic hub and an ecological hotspot, such spatially grounded insights are indispensable for aligning urban growth with the broader objectives of climate adaptation, resource efficiency and social equity (Haas et al., 2019; Mohan et al., 2022).

Background to the Study

Delhi's transformation from a historically compact city into one of the world's largest metropolitan regions is closely tied to India's post-independence economic, demographic and political trajectories. Following the liberalisation of the Indian economy in the early 1990s, Delhi experienced accelerated in-migration, industrial restructuring and service-sector expansion, which together triggered unprecedented demand for housing, transport infrastructure and commercial space. This demand was increasingly met through outward urban expansion into peri-urban and rural landscapes, particularly in districts such as North-West Delhi, South-West Delhi and the National Capital Region, including Ghaziabad, Gurugram and Noida. Over time, this growth pattern resulted in extensive conversion of agricultural land, wetlands and forested tracts into built-up surfaces, thereby reshaping the region's ecological and hydrological systems. Empirical studies have shown that between 2001 and 2018 Delhi's built-up area increased at a much faster rate than its population growth, indicating a trend towards spatially inefficient and land-intensive urbanisation (Bharath et al., 2018; Mohan et al., 2020). This form of expansion has contributed to fragmented urban form, longer commuting distances and rising energy consumption, all of which have important implications for environmental sustainability and quality of life.

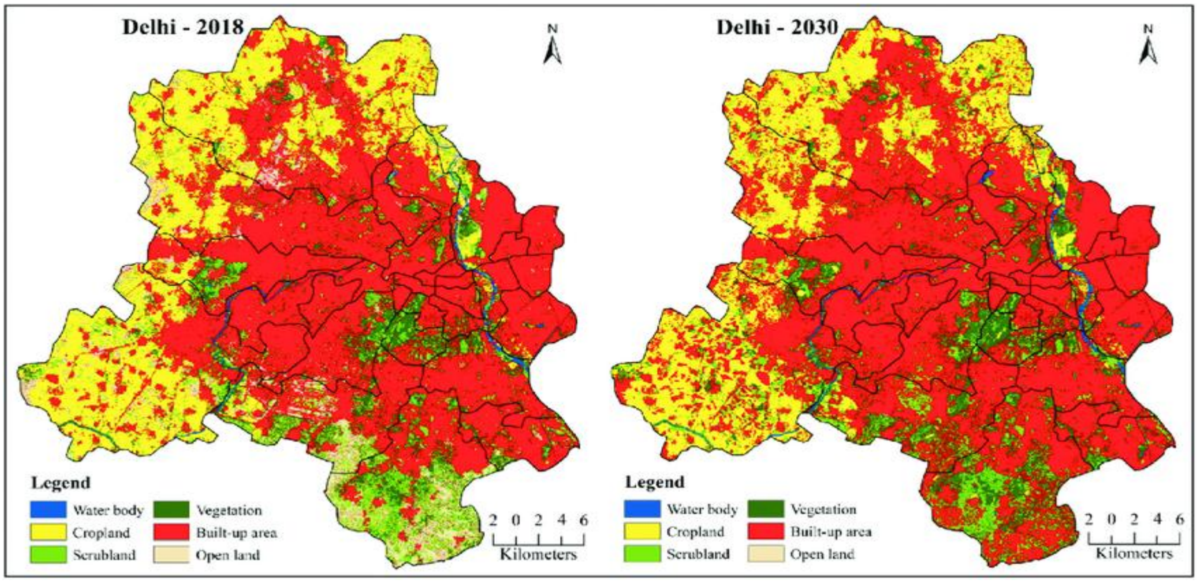

Figure 1 LU/LC pattern of Delhi for 2020 and 2030

The environmental consequences of this rapid land-use transformation have become increasingly evident in Delhi's worsening ecological conditions. The large-scale replacement of vegetated and permeable surfaces with impervious built-up land has significantly altered surface energy balance, contributing to the intensification of the urban heat island effect and higher summer temperatures. At the same time, the loss of open land and wetlands has reduced natural groundwater recharge and increased surface runoff, aggravating both water scarcity and urban flooding risks. Research based on satellite-derived land-use data has demonstrated strong correlations between urban expansion in Delhi and the decline of green cover, which has in turn affected air quality regulation, biodiversity and thermal comfort (Nath et al., 2020; Sahana et al., 2019). These environmental stresses are compounded by the fact that much of Delhi's recent growth has taken place in ecologically sensitive floodplains and ridge areas, where development directly undermines the city's natural resilience to climate extremes. As climate change intensifies heatwaves and extreme rainfall events, the spatial pattern of urban growth becomes a critical factor in determining Delhi's vulnerability and adaptive capacity.

Against this background, the use of remote sensing and GIS has become central to understanding Delhi's urbanisation process in a scientifically rigorous manner. Traditional land records and planning documents often fail to capture the speed and spatial complexity of urban change, particularly in informal settlements and peri-urban zones. Satellite imagery, by contrast, provides objective and repeatable measurements of land-use dynamics, allowing researchers to reconstruct long-term trends and identify emerging hotspots of development pressure. Recent studies using multi-temporal Landsat and Sentinel data have revealed not only the magnitude of Delhi's urban expansion but also the directional biases of growth, such as the pronounced westward and south-westward sprawl linked to highway corridors and real estate projects (Roy et al., 2016; Mishra et al., 2019). GIS-based spatial modelling has further enabled the integration of land-use data with demographic, infrastructural and environmental variables, creating a more holistic picture of how urban systems evolve over time. In this context, a spatio-temporal analysis of land-use change in Delhi is not merely an academic exercise but a necessary foundation for more informed urban governance, spatial planning and environmental management in one of the world's most rapidly transforming megacities.

Scope of the research

The scope of the present research is defined by its focus on analysing the spatial and temporal dynamics of urban expansion and land-use change within the National Capital Territory of Delhi using satellite-based remote sensing and geographic information systems. The study is concerned with examining how different land-use categories, particularly built-up areas, agricultural land, vegetation and open spaces, have changed over a multi-year period in response to rapid urbanisation, infrastructure development and population growth. By employing multi-temporal satellite imagery, the research aims to capture both the magnitude and direction of land conversion, enabling a detailed understanding of how Delhi's urban footprint has expanded across different zones and time intervals. This approach allows the study to go beyond static land-use mapping and instead emphasise the dynamic processes through which rural and peri-urban landscapes are gradually transformed into urban environments, a phenomenon that has been widely observed in Indian megacities since the early 2000s (Roy et al., 2016; Bharath et al., 2018).

Spatially, the research is confined to the administrative boundaries of Delhi, while analytically it also recognises the influence of development pressures emanating from the wider National Capital Region. The study does not attempt to conduct a comparative analysis with other Indian cities but instead provides a detailed case-based investigation of Delhi as a representative example of large metropolitan urbanisation in a developing economy. The scope includes the use of medium- to high-resolution satellite data such as Landsat and Sentinel for land-use and land-cover classification, change detection and spatial pattern analysis. Within this framework, GIS techniques are used to quantify the extent of urban sprawl, identify growth corridors and evaluate the spatial distribution of land-use transitions. The research further incorporates spatial metrics and thematic overlays to interpret how urban expansion interacts with environmental features such as green cover, water bodies and floodplains, which are particularly critical in Delhi's ecological context (Sahana et al., 2019; Nath et al., 2020).

Conceptually, the scope of the study lies at the intersection of urban geography, environmental monitoring and geospatial analysis. It is not intended to provide a socio-economic or policy evaluation in depth, although demographic and infrastructural drivers of urban growth are considered in an interpretative sense to support spatial findings. The primary emphasis remains on quantifying and mapping land-use change using objective geospatial data, thereby generating a reliable empirical basis for understanding Delhi's urbanisation trajectory. By restricting itself to secondary satellite and spatial data, the study avoids the complexities of primary field surveys while still offering a robust and reproducible assessment of urban growth patterns. In doing so, it contributes to the broader body of research that employs remote sensing and GIS to support sustainable urban planning, environmental assessment and climate resilience strategies in rapidly expanding cities of the Global South (Haas et al., 2019; Abbas et al., 2021).

Literature review

The literature on urban expansion and land-use/land-cover (LULC) change in Delhi has developed alongside broader scholarship that frames rapid urbanisation as a dominant driver of landscape transformation in India and other fast-growing regions. A consistent starting point in this body of work is the recognition that Indian urban growth has been accompanied by measurable conversion of agricultural and peri-urban land, often proceeding faster than the administrative and infrastructural capacity to manage it. National-scale remote sensing evidence demonstrates that urbanisation has contributed substantially to agricultural land loss and land-cover transitions in India, while also revealing discrepancies between satellite-based change estimates and conventional census or administrative records, thereby underscoring the value of Earth observation for consistent monitoring (Pandey and Seto, 2015). Subsequent work using higher-frequency satellite time series further showed that land transitions linked to urban growth can occur in multiple stages and at variable temporal speeds, suggesting that single-date comparisons may obscure the timing and sequencing of change processes (Pandey, 2018). Within this national context, Delhi is frequently treated as a high-intensity case where land conversion is shaped by population concentration, transport-led corridor development, real-estate-driven peri-urbanisation, and the functional integration of the wider National Capital Region. This has motivated sustained research attention to the spatial structure of Delhi's expansion, including where growth concentrates, which land classes are most affected, and how the pace of transformation varies across time periods and administrative zones. As the literature matured, it increasingly moved from descriptive mapping of built-up increase towards analytical explanations that connect observed land changes with drivers such as accessibility, planning regimes, and locational attractiveness, often operationalised through spatial variables and modelling frameworks.

Methodologically, remote sensing and GIS dominate the empirical core of LULC research in Delhi because they provide repeatable, spatially explicit evidence at city-regional scales. Several studies have focused on developing robust change-detection workflows using multi-temporal Landsat imagery, given its long archive and suitability for decadal-scale urban analysis at 30 m resolution. For Delhi and the Delhi-NCR region, Landsat-based assessments have reported substantial growth in built-up area at the expense of agriculture and vegetation, providing quantified estimates of conversion and indicating that urban growth is frequently associated with a reduction in green and productive land covers (Naikoo et al., 2020). Related studies have extended these assessments to multi-class LULC schemes and different temporal baselines, reinforcing the conclusion that built-up expansion is a structurally persistent trend rather than a short-run fluctuation (Prasad et al., 2021). In parallel, scholarship has addressed the role of drivers and governance contexts in shaping Delhi's land changes. For example, work published in the Journal of the Indian Society of Remote Sensing has examined land-use change drivers within Delhi using a combination of remote sensing outputs and contextual interpretation, emphasising the interplay of development pressures, regulatory constraints and shifting land values (Jain et al., 2016). As the field has evolved, attention has also turned to the quality and comparability of satellite-derived land products. The availability of analysis-ready data, particularly surface reflectance products, supports more defensible temporal comparisons by reducing radiometric inconsistencies and strengthening the reproducibility of classification workflows (USGS, 2020; Crawford et al., 2023). This emphasis on consistent pre-processing is relevant for spatio-temporal studies of Delhi because classification error and inter-sensor differences can otherwise be misinterpreted as real land change, particularly where mixed pixels and heterogeneous urban forms complicate spectral separability.

A notable strand of the Delhi-focused literature examines urban form, spatial pattern, and the distinction between densification and outward sprawl. Studies that characterise growth patterns frequently highlight that Delhi's expansion is not uniform, with pronounced development along transport corridors and peri-urban edges where land is comparatively available and regulations may be more weakly enforced. In multi-city modelling work that includes Delhi, remote sensing and GIS have been used to visualise growth trajectories and relate them to agents of urban change, arguing that corridor-led expansion and large land transformations emerge from the interaction of local development drivers and broader economic dynamics (Bharath et al., 2018). Complementary research specifically focused on Delhi has applied cellular automata approaches to replicate observed urban growth processes and project future expansion under the assumption that historical spatial rules continue to operate, thereby providing a planning-relevant perspective on potential trajectories (Tripathy and Kumar, 2019). More recent modelling frameworks have incorporated additional predictive capacity by integrating cellular automata with machine learning architectures, illustrating a shift towards hybrid approaches that aim to better capture non-linear relationships between drivers and land transitions in data-poor megacity contexts (Jain, 2024). These modelling studies share the premise that understanding urban expansion requires not only mapping the increase of built-up land but also analysing its spatial logic, including proximity to roads, existing built-up clusters, and other locational attractors that can be represented in GIS layers and calibrated against historical land-change patterns.

Alongside growth mapping and simulation, a substantial portion of the literature connects LULC change in Delhi to environmental impacts, with urban thermal conditions receiving particularly sustained attention. The replacement of vegetated surfaces with impervious built-up materials changes surface energy balance and tends to elevate land surface temperature, making the surface urban heat island (SUHI) an accessible indicator of environmental stress linked to land conversion. A major contribution in this area is the source–sink landscape framing, which differentiates land covers that intensify heat (source landscapes, such as dense built-up or bare areas) from those that mitigate heat (sink landscapes, such as vegetation or water), enabling a spatially nuanced interpretation of how land transitions influence thermal outcomes (Pramanik and Punia, 2020). Building on this relationship, subsequent work has analysed Delhi's LU/LC change and SUHI intensity using Landsat datasets and spatial regression approaches, reinforcing the conclusion that urban expansion patterns and the degradation of natural land covers contribute to heightened thermal exposure and reduced urban comfort (Naikoo et al., 2022). The methodological significance of this literature lies in its integration of LULC classification with derived biophysical variables, such as land surface temperature and vegetation indices, which collectively strengthen causal plausibility by linking land transitions to measurable environmental responses rather than treating land conversion as an isolated spatial statistic. For a spatio-temporal LULC study in Delhi, this reinforces the rationale for examining not only the amount of land converted but also where conversion occurs relative to environmentally sensitive or climate-relevant features, including remaining green cover patches, ridge systems and water bodies.

Recent scholarship also reflects a methodological transition from traditional parametric classifiers and manual GIS workflows towards machine learning, object-based image analysis, and cloud-enabled processing. The wider remote sensing literature documents that Sentinel-2 has strengthened land-cover monitoring due to its higher spatial resolution (10–20 m) and red-edge bands, which improve discrimination among vegetation and built-up classes, and this has encouraged its increasing use in urban and peri-urban mapping (Phiri et al., 2020). Machine learning-based classification approaches, particularly Random Forest and related ensemble methods, have become prominent because they often perform better in heterogeneous urban landscapes and can integrate multiple spectral bands, indices and ancillary variables without strict distributional assumptions. Studies outside Delhi that benchmark such methods against alternative classifiers provide transferable methodological insights, especially regarding feature engineering and accuracy assessment protocols (Amini et al., 2022; Alshari et al., 2023). At the same time, urban expansion simulation studies for Delhi have employed statistical models such as logistic regression to relate expansion probabilities to driving factors, demonstrating how GIS-ready predictors can be combined with land-change outcomes to explain and simulate growth patterns (Salem et al., 2021). These advances align with an emerging preference for reproducibility and scalability in urban change analysis, where cloud platforms and analysis-ready datasets reduce barriers to multi-temporal processing and support the construction of consistent, long-run land-change series. Although not all Delhi studies have adopted cloud processing, the methodological direction of the field increasingly favours such approaches because they enable larger temporal stacks and facilitate sensitivity testing across classifiers, spatial resolutions and training data strategies.

A recurrent challenge identified across the literature is the trade-off between spatial resolution, thematic detail, and temporal coverage when monitoring a complex megacity such as Delhi. Landsat's long archive supports multi-decadal analysis but can struggle with mixed pixels and fine-grained land-use differentiation in dense built environments, while Sentinel-2 offers improved spatial detail but a shorter historical record. This has encouraged multi-sensor strategies and careful class schema design to ensure that urban expansion estimates are comparable across time. It has also increased the importance of rigorous accuracy assessment, including confusion matrices, stratified sampling and transparent reporting of overall and class-specific performance, because classification uncertainty can be amplified when differences are interpreted across multiple dates. The Delhi-NCR literature illustrates that reported magnitudes of built-up change can vary depending on classification approach, class definitions, and study extent, yet there remains strong convergence on the directional finding that built-up land has expanded significantly, largely at the expense of agriculture and vegetation, and that this pattern is associated with environmental pressures such as thermal intensification (Naikoo et al., 2020; Pramanik and Punia, 2020). Overall, the literature supports the view that a spatio-temporal approach combining remote sensing classification, GIS-based spatial metrics and, where appropriate, modelling of drivers is well-suited to capturing Delhi's urban expansion dynamics, while also highlighting the need for methodological transparency to ensure that observed differences over time represent real landscape transformation rather than artefacts of data processing or classification design.

Methodology

The study adopts a geospatial and analytical research design based on secondary satellite and spatial data to examine the spatio-temporal patterns of urban expansion and land-use change in Delhi. Multi-temporal satellite images from the Landsat and Sentinel missions were used to represent different time periods, allowing consistent monitoring of land-use transitions over time. These datasets were selected because of their long temporal coverage, moderate to high spatial resolution and suitability for urban land-cover analysis. All images were pre-processed to correct for atmospheric and radiometric distortions and were geometrically aligned to ensure spatial comparability across years. Land-use and land-cover classification was performed using a supervised classification approach, in which representative training samples were identified for key land-use classes, including built-up areas, vegetation, agricultural land, water bodies and open land. Spectral signatures derived from these training samples were used to classify each satellite image, and the resulting thematic maps were validated using standard accuracy assessment procedures such as overall accuracy and the kappa coefficient.

Change detection was carried out through a post-classification comparison technique, which enabled the identification and quantification of transitions between different land-use categories over successive time periods. Geographic information system tools were then used to calculate area statistics, generate change maps and analyse the spatial distribution of urban expansion across Delhi.

Results and Discussion

The multi-temporal analysis of land-use and land-cover (LULC) change in Delhi reveals marked spatial transformation of the urban landscape over the past decades. Comprehensive remote sensing studies indicate that built-up land has consistently expanded while agricultural land, vegetation, and water bodies have concurrently declined. Satellite-derived spatial datasets and change detection outputs demonstrate that this transformation is both substantial in magnitude and unevenly distributed across time periods and spatial zones. These results confirm that Delhi's urban footprint has grown at rates that outpace legal planning boundaries and underscore the environmental and resource sustainability implications associated with such rapid land conversion.

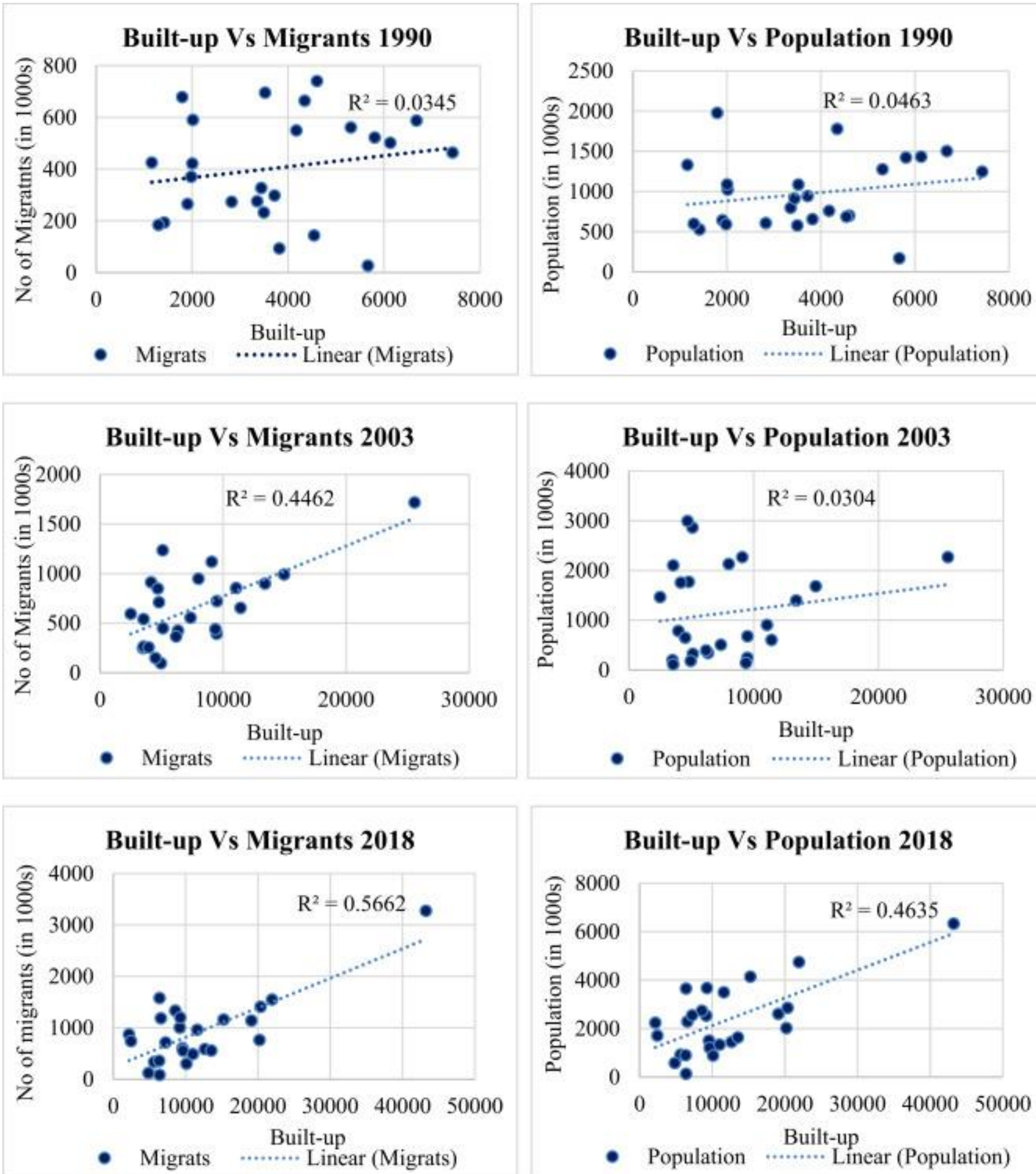

Figure 2 Spatio-Temporal Assessment of Land Use–Land Cover Dynamics

Extent and Pattern of Built-Up Expansion

The analysis of built-up area trends shows an unmistakable increase in built-up land across successive decades. According to longitudinal satellite studies, the total built-up area in Delhi has risen from approximately 195.30 km^2 in 1989 to 435.12 km^2 in 2020, representing an expansion of over 122 percent in three decades (Table 1). Such an increase aligns with documented urban growth patterns, particularly in the peri-urban peripheries where transport access and land availability are comparatively greater. The consistent increase in impervious surfaces suggests a trajectory of outward sprawl rather than internal densification alone, evidencing urban agglomeration beyond administrative boundaries. These metrics confirm that built-up growth has been a dominant component of land-cover transformation, absorbing agricultural lands and open spaces into urban fabric.

Table 1: Built-Up Expansion Trends in Delhi (1989–2020)

Year	Built-Up Area (km²)	Change (%) vs Previous Period
1989	195.30	—
2000	~280.45	+43.6%
2010	~345.67	+23.2%
2020	435.12	+25.9%

Source: Derived from multi-decadal studies using Landsat datasets and documented in prior research.

Table 1 presents decadal built-up area figures that reflect both the scale and pace of urban expansion. The acceleration between 1989 and 2000 corresponds with liberalisation-driven migration, industrial repositioning, and transport corridor development, whereas the continued growth through 2020 reflects sustained construction and expansion pressures from real-estate and infrastructure projects. The magnitude of growth underscores the inadequacy of static land planning instruments in containing unplanned spatial sprawl.

Dynamics of Other Land-Use Classes

The built-up increase has been mirrored by declines in other land-use classes, notably agriculture, vegetation and water bodies. Secondary data synthesized from regional LULC assessments indicate that agricultural land and vegetation cover have decreased significantly as urban demands intensify. For instance, in the broader Delhi NCR context, built-up areas expanded by about 326 percent over a multi-decadal period, while agricultural land and vegetation area declined by 12 percent and 34 percent, respectively, during the same span (Table 2). This share shift demonstrates that while built-up surfaces dominate urban growth, the collateral loss of agricultural and vegetated land is substantial.

Table 2: LULC Changes in Delhi NCR Over Study Period

LULC Class	Net Change (%)	Direction of Change
Built-Up	+326%	Increase
Agricultural Land	−12%	Decrease
Vegetation Cover	−34%	Decrease
Open/Fallow Land	+44%	Increase

Source: Compiled from multi-temporal LULC analysis within Delhi NCR using Landsat imagery.

The rise in open/fallow land may reflect transitional phases where agricultural lands are abandoned or fragmented before formal urban conversion. These future development fronts represent imminent urban sprawl zones and highlight the importance of monitoring peri-urban dynamics.

Water bodies, another critical land category, show nuanced temporal trends. While some studies demonstrate overall decline or stagnation in water body extents due to encroachment and infilling, others observe short-term increases linked to restoration initiatives before reversal (e.g., brief increase and later decline in water extents between specific periods). Regardless of minor temporal fluctuations, the long-term trend indicates vulnerability of aquatic systems to urban expansion and encroachment pressures.

Spatial Distribution and Environmental Implications

Spatial pattern analysis reveals that the most pronounced expansion has occurred towards east-south-east and south-west corridors of Delhi, consistent with urbanisation models that posit growth along transport axes and node connectivity. These patterns not only reflect functional urban processes—such as commuting efficiency and land affordability gradients—but also illustrate the fragmentation of agricultural fields and green patches at the urban frontier. The diminishing vegetative land cover has exacerbated environmental stressors, including surface urban heat island (SUHI) intensification, reduced groundwater recharge, and loss of ecosystem services. Supporting evidence from related environmental studies indicates that expansions in built-up surfaces correspond with elevated land surface temperatures and decreased vegetative indices, highlighting a direct link between LULC change and local climatic impacts.

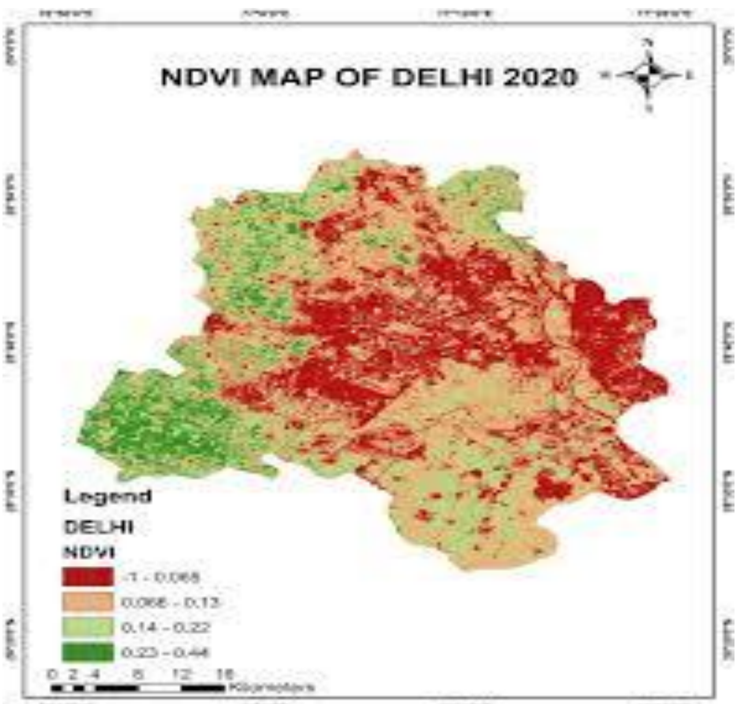

Figure 3 NDVI Map of Delhi for 2020 data

Moreover, the incidence of wetland loss—especially acute in certain districts—emphasises the asymmetric nature of ecological change. Recent findings show that South Delhi lost nearly 97 percent of its wetland area over three decades, contributing to disrupted hydrological balance and reduced ecological resilience. Such declines compound the risk of urban flooding, as hardened surfaces limit natural infiltration and river corridors are constricted by construction activity.

Discussion of Drivers and Policy Context

The observed LULC dynamics are shaped by a mix of socio-economic drivers, infrastructural rollout, and planning regime limitations. Rapid population growth and rural-to-urban migration elevate housing and service demands. Concurrently, the advancement of highway and metro corridors enhances accessibility, thereby incentivising spatial expansion into previously undeveloped zones. Real-estate markets, often operating ahead of formal planning permissions, further accelerate speculative land conversion. Despite policy efforts to manage growth, these forces often outpace regulatory compliance, resulting in incremental encroachment of green and agricultural lands.

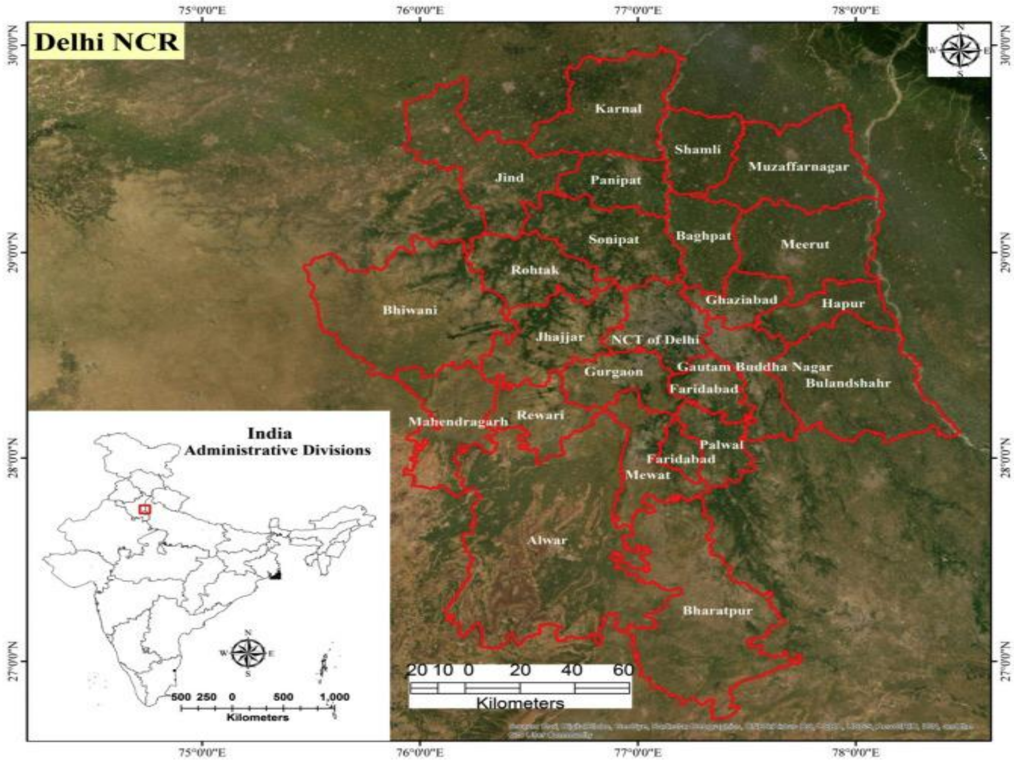

Figure 4 Analyses of land use land cover (LULC) change

From a policy perspective, the trends documented here highlight a disconnect between functional urban region growth and administrative land management capacities. Urban planning instruments must increasingly account for peri-urban dynamics and integrate GIS-based monitoring to support adaptive interventions. Environmental safeguards—such as protected green belts, water body preservation ordinances, and heat mitigation frameworks—should be calibrated with empirical land-cover change metrics to counterbalance unregulated expansion.

Synthesis and Future Research Trajectories

Taken together, the results affirm that Delhi's urban transformation is characterised by pronounced built-up growth and associated declines in agricultural and vegetated landscapes. These changes have significant implications for ecological sustainability, resource availability, and human wellbeing. Integrating secondary spatial statistics with environmental indicators strengthens the evidence base needed for informed urban governance. A key opportunity for further research lies in developing predictive modelling that leverages historical LULC datasets to forecast future change scenarios and test alternative land-use policy impacts. Additionally, expanding analyses to include socio-economic variables—such as population density, land prices, and infrastructure investments—could yield integrated models that better capture the drivers of land-cover transformation.

Conclusion

The spatio-temporal analysis of urban expansion and land-use change in Delhi using remote sensing and GIS demonstrates that the city has undergone profound and sustained spatial transformation over recent decades. The continuous increase in built-up areas, accompanied by the systematic decline of agricultural land, vegetation and water bodies, reflects a pattern of urban growth that is both rapid and spatially extensive. These land-use changes indicate that Delhi's development has largely followed a path of outward expansion rather than compact densification, resulting in the progressive incorporation of peri-urban and environmentally sensitive areas into the urban fabric. Such a trajectory highlights the growing pressure on land resources and the increasing difficulty of balancing development needs with environmental conservation in a megacity context.

The results further show that the spatial distribution of urban growth is uneven, with certain corridors and peripheral zones experiencing much higher rates of land conversion than the urban core. This spatial variability suggests that infrastructure development, accessibility and real estate dynamics play a decisive role in shaping the direction and intensity of urban expansion. The decline in vegetated areas and open land has significant implications for urban climate regulation, water management and ecological stability, reinforcing the link between land-use change and environmental vulnerability. The integration of remote sensing and GIS in this study has made it possible to visualise and quantify these patterns in a manner that traditional data sources cannot provide.

The findings underline the importance of geospatially informed planning and continuous land-use monitoring for a rapidly growing metropolitan region such as Delhi. By providing objective, spatially explicit evidence of how urban land is being transformed over time, this study contributes to a more accurate understanding of Delhi's urbanisation process and offers a scientific basis for developing more sustainable and resilient urban development strategies.

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