



## **Origin and Growth of Urban Centers: A Study of Pokhara Metropolitan City, Nepal**

**Khagendra Raj Poudel**

Department of Geography, Tribhuvan University, Prithvi Narayan Campus, Pokhara, Nepal

Corresponding E-mail: [krpoudel@pncampus.tu.edu.np](mailto:krpoudel@pncampus.tu.edu.np)

---

Received: 01 April, 2025, Accepted: 02 May, 2025, Published 15 May, 2025



The journal is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

---

### **Abstract**

*This research examines the origin and growth of Pokhara Metropolitan City within the broader framework of urbanization in Nepal. The study aims to analyze how historical, geographical, political, and socio-economic factors have shaped Pokhara's transformation from a small trade settlement into a major urban center. It focuses on administrative expansion, population growth, and infrastructure development across different political regimes. A qualitative case study method was employed, using historical records, census data (1961–2021), policy documents, and academic literature. Spatial and demographic analyses were conducted to trace changes in municipal boundaries, ward distribution, and population density over time. Findings highlight that Pokhara's urban development has been driven by its strategic location in the Himalayan foothills, proximity to eight lakes (especially Phewa and Begnas), the construction of highways and an international airport, the growth of tourism, and political restructuring. The city's evolution from municipality in 1962 to metropolitan status in 2017 reflects the combined influence of natural geography, migration, infrastructure, and decentralization policies. This study contributes to understanding the drivers of urban growth in Nepal and provides relevant insights for planners and policymakers addressing the challenges and opportunities of rapidly expanding secondary cities.*

**Keywords:** Urbanization, Spatial Growth, Migration, Infrastructure, Political Restructuring, Nepal

### **Introduction**

According to historical records, cities first began to develop in Mesopotamia around 4000 BCE, near the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. The first urban city appeared in lower Mesopotamia about 6000 years ago and had a population of around 60,000

people. Around 3000 BCE, cities also started to grow along the Nile River in Egypt. In China, cities were built near the Yellow River around 2000 BCE. Closer to our region, the Indus Valley Civilization was formed around 2500 BCE in places like Mohenjo Daro and Harappa, which are now in Pakistan (Brunn et al., 2020). In India, urban settlements began as early as 2500 BCE with the Indus Valley Civilization, which included highly organized cities like Harappa and Mohenjo Daro. Later, during the Maurya and Gupta periods (around 4th century BCE to 6th century CE), cities such as Pataliputra, Kanauj and Ujjain flourished as major political and trade centers (Chakrabarti, 2021). Around early century of Christian Era (CE), urban settlements in Kathmandu Valley were developed. Several stone scripts during the period of Lichhavi Dynasty were marked the urban settlements in Kathmandu. Handigaun, Budhanilkhantha, Kisipidi (Thankot and Satungal) were reported for dense settlement with urban functions (Vajracharya, 1973). The Valley was developed as a commercial center even before 600 B.C. during the time of Kirati dynasty (Malla 1978). Zurink and Karan (1999) have mentioned that the history of settlement of Kathmandu Valley goes back to as early as fifth century A.D. Urban sprawl of Kathmandu Valley is also reported in a number of studies (Shrestha and Malla, 1970; Malla, 1978;; ICIMOD, 2007; Haack and Khatiwada, 2007; Poudel, 2012 ).

In the global to local arena, urbanization has seen rapid growth over the past two centuries. In the 1800s, only about 3% of the world's population lived in urban areas with populations of 5,000 or more (Figure 1). By the 1900s, this number rose to over 13%, with around 1.25 billion people living in cities. Historically, while cities developed as powerful centers of trade, culture, and governance, many were part of large empires such as the Ottoman, Safavid, Byzantine, Mogul, Aztec, and Inca empires. Despite competition among cities, cooperation played a key role in their survival (Ramirez-Faria, 2007).

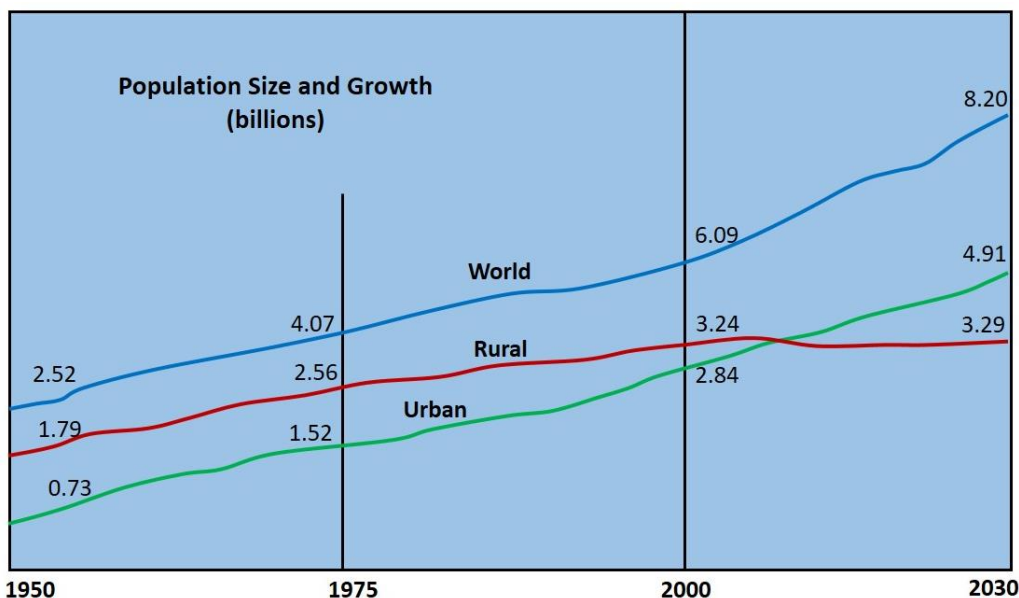
As city management improved and globalization progressed, the urban population continued to grow. By 2000, around 47% of the global population lived in cities, and this reached 50% by 2007. Improved transportation, communication, and economic opportunities encouraged rural-to-urban migration. According to Graybill et al. (2018), the rural population is expected to decline from 3.4 billion in 2020 to 3.2 billion by 2050. In contrast, the urban population is projected to reach 6.3 billion about 62% of the total global population-by the 2050s, with an annual growth rate of 1.3%.

In the past, Nepal was remained predominantly an agro-based rural settlement country. It had self-sufficient agrarian production systems. People hardly needed market. Salt and kerosene were the major market items. During the farming off-season, local villagers used to fetch those items from the market centres of either from Bhote (Tibete) or from Indian border markets. They usually travelled in a folk of

porters following main trail. *Hatiyas* were the location developed along the main trails with a purpose to give services to the passersby and also goods of demand of local villagers (Poudel and Paudel, 2023).

### Figure 1

*Growth of World and Urban Population (1950–2030)*



Source: UN, World Urbanization Prospects: 2005 and Graybill et al. (2016)

But with the pace of time, urbanization in Nepal has followed a gradual but transformative path, shaped by its rugged topography, historical settlement patterns, and political changes. Until the mid-20th century, Nepal remained largely rural, with only a few established urban centers like Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur, which grew around religious and administrative functions. The expansion of roads, internal migration, and decentralization policies in the post-Rana period opened the way for newer urban centers to emerge across the country. Among them, Pokhara represents one of the most dynamic examples of urban growth out side the Kathmandu Valley.

Pokhara is strategically positioned between the mid-hills and the Himalayan range in the heart of Gandaki Province,. Favorable climate, abundant natural resources, and scenic beauty, including eight lakes, the Seti River, and views of the Annapurna and Machhapuchhre (Fishtail) mountains have contributed to its development as a major tourism destination. However, the city's growth is not only natural or scenic, it is also rooted in history, trade, and state planning. From its early development as a trade post following the settlement of Newar artisans in the 18th

century by the initiation of King of Kaskikot (Gurung, H. 2065), Pokhara gradually evolved into a service-oriented city with the expansion of roads, military pension camps, schools, hospitals, and eventually, air transport infrastructure including a newly opened international airport.

The designation of Pokhara as a Metropolitan City in 2017 through successive boundary expansions and merging of small and rural municipalities i.e. Lekhnath, Nirmal Pokharai, Kristi, Pumdi-Bhumdi, Chapakot, Sharangkot, Hemja et., reflects broader patterns of urbanization occurring across Nepal. As the population continues to grow and spatial structures change, Pokhara exemplifies both the opportunities and challenges of urban transition. This study investigates the origin and growth of Pokhara's urban landscape, offering insights into how historical forces, natural settings, and policy decisions collectively shape the transformation of urban centers in Nepal.

## **Methods and Materials**

This study employed a qualitative, case-study-based methodology to examine the origin and growth of Pokhara as an urban center within the broader context of Nepal's urbanization. A combination of historical analysis, policy review, and spatial-demographic data interpretation was applied to understand the transformation of Pokhara from a small hill town to a metropolitan city.

## **Historical and Archival Analysis**

To explore the historical foundation of Pokhara's urban development, primary and secondary sources such as historical texts, travelogues, and local studies were examined. Historical records from Hamilton (1819), Oldfield (1880), and Kawaguchi (1909) provided early external observations of Pokhara's settlement and natural features. Archival materials and accounts from Gurung (1965, 1986) and Shrestha and Kshetry (2008) were used to trace the settlement of Newar communities and the early formation of trade-based urban cores.

## **Policy and Institutional Review**

This study reviewed administrative policies and planning documents to assess the influence of national governance structures on urban reclassification and expansion. Government records, such as the Census of Nepal (1961–2021), the Fourth Five-Year Plan (1970–1975), and regional planning documents, were examined to trace political transitions and institutional changes that contributed to urban restructuring (PEIP, 2000; CBS, 2012;).

## **Spatial and Demographic Assessment**

Changes in ward numbers, municipal boundaries, and spatial distribution were analyzed using official topographic maps (Survey Department, 1998), ward-level population data, and WorldPop spatial datasets. Population growth from 1962 to 2021 was correlated with political periods Panchayat regime (1969-1989), multiparty reform (1990-2005), and federal restructuring (2006-2024) to assess how demographic pressure and governance reshaped Pokhara's urban form (Bhattarai et al., 2023; NSO, 2021).

## **Case Focus on Pokhara**

Pokhara was selected as a representative case due to its geographic distinctiveness, tourism-based economy, and transition to metropolitan status in 2017. Particular emphasis was given to the role of Phewa and Begnas Lakes, the establishment of British and Indian pension camps, the Baidam–Lakeside tourism corridor, and transportation infrastructure, including Prithvi Highway, Siddhartha Highway, and the new Pokhara International Airport (Poudel & Shrestha, 2025).

## **Literature Review and Theoretical Context**

Secondary literature on urbanization and historical urban centers including works by Brunn et al. (2020), Chakrabarti (2021), and Ramirez-Faria (2007) was consulted to situate Pokhara's development within global and South Asian urban patterns. These sources provided comparative insights and helped frame the urban dynamics of Pokhara in relation to broader trends of planned and unplanned urban expansion.

## **History of Urbanization in Nepal: The Context of Kathmandu Valley**

Kathmandu Valley has been the historic heart of Nepal's urbanization for over 2000 years, characterized by a distinctive cultural and architectural style. Its fertile land, strategic location on the Indo-Tibetan trade route, and rich culture fostered early urban growth. The geography of valley, a bowl-shaped basin averaging 1340m elevation from the mean sea level (msl) surrounded by high mountains – shaped its development. Settlements grew around religious shrines, constructed and rebuilt in brick or stone by authorities and merchants. These complexes featured cardinally oriented entrances, high protective walls (resisting earthquakes and securing treasures), artistic embellishments, pillared halls, and administrative offices, creating secure urban cores centered on deities (Champakalakshmi 1996; Shanmugam 2000).

Historically isolated seasonally – cut off from India by Tarai malaria (March-Sept) and from Tibet by snow (Oct-Feb) – the Valley thrived as a major Himalayan

commercial hub through annual trade rhythms along mountain paths. This isolation fostered unique urban development within the Valley.

Three primary commercial centers emerged, forming the core of Nepal's early urban network:

- Patan (Lalitapura or *Yala*): Likely the earliest major settlement south of the Bagmati River, defined by four ancient stupas, now its downtown Mangal Bazaar.
- Kathmandu (Kasthamandap): Developed north of the Bagmati and east of the Bishnumati along the Pataliputra-Tibet route.
- Bhaktapur (Bhadgaon): Grew 25 km east along the Arniko Highway to Tibet, expanding from an upper to a lower town.

Political unification under the Lichchhavi and Malla dynasties forged a unified cultural and linguistic milieu across the Valley. By the 17th century, Malla divisions led to three rival capitals (Kathmandu, Patan, Bhaktapur), each becoming an architectural and artistic jewel through royal patronage. This period cemented the Valley's dominance in Nepal's urban landscape.

From the 18th century, Kathmandu, as the national capital, expanded extensively, creating a metropolitan region encompassing Patan and Bhaktapur. While these satellite cities retain ancient practices and identities (evident in ongoing festivals), Kathmandu's growth exemplifies the centralizing force of the capital in Nepal's modern urbanization. Sacred spaces and elite areas were integral from the cities' origins, while other settlements grew rapidly at commercial crossroads (Chowks), highlighting the enduring link between trade, administration, and Nepal's urban form centered historically on the Kathmandu Valley.

### **Origins of Nepal's Urban Centers: Key Drivers**

Urban development in Nepal has followed a gradual, layered path influenced by geography, trade, class, and state intervention. Historically, urban growth was concentrated in key regions—particularly the Kathmandu Valley, the mid-hills, and later the Tarai plains. In the mid-hills, state involvement was often limited to building palaces or temple complexes, while in the Tarai Region, urbanization clustered around road intersections called Chowks. These intersections became focal points for commerce, giving rise to urban centers such as Biratnagar, Rajbiraj, Janakpur, Birgunj, Butwal, Krishnanagar, Nepalgunj, and Mahendranagar (Bhattarai & Conway, 2021b). Property around these Chowks was expensive, accessible primarily to affluent families. Buildings in these areas were multifunctional, combining

residences, shops, clinics, offices, and restaurants, despite the risks associated with such mixed-use structures.

In almost every urban center, especially the older city cores or bazaars, land use was a vibrant blend of retail, wholesale, and informal economic activities. Ground floors were typically occupied by shops and eateries, while upper stories were leased as offices or resident. This dense and commercially driven layout was similar to von Thünen's model of central place theory. Business-specific clusters (e.g., pawnshops, vegetable sellers, and jewelers) operated side by side, with sidewalk vendors completing the vibrant street economy. After the unification of Nepal in 1768, Kathmandu emerged as the capital, housing 80% of the urban population until the 1950s (Bhattarai & Conway, 2021b)

Rivers played a crucial role in urban expansion. Just as Kathmandu developed along the Bagmati and Bishnumati rivers, other cities like Butwal (Tinau River), Mahendranagar (Mahakali River), Narayanghat and Triveni (Narayani River), and especially Pokhara (Seti River) flourished along their respective water bodies. The post-1960 malaria eradication opened up the Tarai plains for rapid settlement and agricultural expansion. By the late 1980s, the Tarai had become the economic backbone of Nepal with 65% of the cultivated land, 34% of road infrastructure, and 62 industries.

Many towns developed along the junctions of East-West (Mahendra) Highway and North-South Corridor roads and highways in the southern Tarai and Inner Tarai region of the country. From the east - Birtamod, Itahari, Lahan, Dhalkewar, Bardibas, Hetaunda, Narayanghat, Kawasoti, Butwal, Chandrouta, Lamahi, Kohalpur, Lamki, Attariya, and Mahendra Nagar are developed. In the mid-hills too some old market centres are established in the historical, commercial and administrative and health, education and commercial center at first and gradually connected with infrastructures developed – like Surkhet, Pokhara, Tansen, Dhankuta etc. Mostly in the mountain region tourist destinations are gradually developing market centers like Namche Bazar, Dhunche bazaar, Chame, Jomsom etc.

Almost all urban centers developed at highway junctions or along major roads, growing through trade, agricultural exchange, pilgrimage, and administrative functions. Public inns provided basic accommodations, while new urban settlements emerged along trekking routes and religious paths, opening Nepal to the external world after the 1950s. However, this rapid and often unplanned urban growth brought serious challenges. Poor urban planning resulted in severe housing shortages, inadequate infrastructure, insufficient water supply, limited open spaces, and underdeveloped transportation and sewer systems. Social segregation based on caste

and class persisted, while unemployment and poverty became widespread. As a result, many urban youths became disillusioned and vulnerable to political unrest.

Pokhara stands out among Nepal's urban centers due to its unique blend of natural beauty, strategic connectivity, and diverse development drivers (Gurung, 1986; Poudel & Shrestha, 2025). While its location along the Seti River played a role in early settlement, Pokhara's urban growth has been shaped by a combination of geographic, economic, and infrastructural factors. Surrounded by the Himalayan landscape, including panoramic views of the Annapurna and Machhapuchhre ranges, Pokhara is also home to eight lakes, of which Phewa Lake and Begnas Lake are the most significant. These lakes have not only boosted tourism but have also influenced settlement patterns, recreation zones, and hospitality industries. In addition to its natural attractions like caves (e.g., Mahendra, Bat, and Gupteshwor caves), waterfalls, and river gorges, Pokhara's rapid growth has been significantly supported by its strategic location at the crossroads of major national highways Prithvi Highway (linking to Kathmandu), Siddhartha Highway (connecting to the Tarai and Indian border), and Baglung Highway (connecting western hill districts). These roadways have transformed Pokhara into a key transit and trade hub, facilitating the movement of people, goods, and services.

Unlike traditional Chowk-based cities (road junction) in the Tarai, Pokhara's urban structure developed through tourism-led expansion, interlaced with educational institutions, health services, and administrative offices. This has allowed for a more spacious and aesthetically pleasing urban layout. However, despite its advantages, Pokhara is not immune to the problems of unplanned urbanization—such as rising real estate prices, infrastructure pressure, water management challenges, and ecological threats to its lakes and hillsides. Nonetheless, Pokhara remains a dynamic example of how natural landscapes, infrastructure, and commerce can jointly shape urban development in contemporary Nepal.

### **Reclassifications of Urban Centers in Nepal**

Political agendas and administrative organization, not spontaneous or economic factors, have been the main drivers of urbanization in Nepal. The growth of urban municipalities directly results from state restructuring, political power devolution and decentralization policies. Changes in political regimes have profoundly impacted urbanization patterns. Data supporting this, including urban municipality counts and reclassification dates since 1981, is provided in Table 1.



**Table 1:**

*Brief Review of Urbanization*

Period	Announcem ent (Year)	Added municipa- lities between two period	Total no. of urban municipalities	Urbanizat ion rate
1. Party less <i>Panchayat</i> regime	Until 1981	-	23	6.2
2. The period of multi-party political reform	1991 2001	10 25	33 58	9.2 13.9
3. The period of political resurgence	2011 2014 (May) 2014 (December) 2015 (September)	0 72 61 26	58 130 191 217	17.1 27.2 38.2 41.6
4. Establishment of the Nepalese Federal State	2017 (February) Later 2017	76 - -	293 293	62.4 66.08

Source: (Agergaard et al., 2022; Bhattarai et al., 2023; CBS, 2012; Poudel, 2013).

**Party-less Panchayat Rule (Up to 1981):**

In this period, urban growth was slow with just 23 municipalities classified as urban. The rate of urbanization was still at 6.2%, indicating minimal expansion of infrastructure, planned development centered on the government, and little emphasis put on urban administration. There was no massive investment or policy direction that would spur the growth of cities in this period, and thus urban growth was slow.

**Multi-Party Democratic Era (1991–2001):**

Following the restoration of democratic government in 1990, Nepal experienced the first wave of urbanization by official state classification. The urban municipalities grew from 33 to 58 between 1991 and 2001, while the rate of urbanization grew from 9.2% to 13.9%. This was the onset of policy focus on urban centers despite the relatively low rate of growth. The development can be explained by the decentralization policy and the Local Self-Governance Act of 1999, which provided powers to the local governments.

### **Political Resurgence and Transitional Federalism (2011–2015):**

This period witnessed a rapid expansion of urban cities: It was 17.1% urbanized in 2011 with 58 municipalities. The figure increased to 130 by May 2014, and the rate was 27.2%. By the end of 2014, it covered 191 municipalities, leading to a growth in urban population to 38.2%. In September 2015, the addition of 217 municipalities increased the rate of urbanization to 41.6%. Much of the quick expansion observed was due to administrative reclassification rather than population movement. Numerous rural settlements were announced as municipalities without satisfying conventional urban standards. The announcements were politically motivated, partly to fulfill local aspirations and partly to adapt administration amidst Nepal's transition from a unitary to a federal system. This is the genesis of "statistical urbanization," in which places can have urban status in name but do not function as urban places.

### **Federalization and the 2017 Restructuring:**

The most significant enhancement came with the formal creation of the Federal Democratic Republic in 2017, which led to the addition of 76 new municipalities, bringing the total to 293, and the overall rate of urbanization to 62.4%. This drastic rise was part of Nepal's constitutional reconfiguration, which sought to provide balanced development and representation to the provinces. Yet, this reconfiguration also laid concerns regarding: Inadequate infrastructure to cater to newly developed urban centers Lack of capacity to govern cities, environmental stress induced by quick urbanization.

Nepal became one of Asia's fastest-urbanizing nations after 2015. In contrast to the global trends of urbanization and economic growth that accompany industrialization, Nepal's rate of urbanization is distinct, with the proportion of people classified as urban dwellers rising from 17% in 2011 to 66.08% in 2017 (NSO, 2021) without the industrialization pace to support the expanding urban population following suit. When the new constitution was enacted in 2015, the number of municipalities increased from 217 in 2014 to 293 in 2015, indicating Nepal's distinct rate of urbanization (Bhattarai & Conway, 2021a). A number of hazy borders between the expanding urban areas and rural villages have been established as the extent of officially designated urban regions have expanded (Bhattarai et al., 2023).

### **Historical and Urban Development of Pokhara: A Concise Overview**

Because of its historical development, geographic advantage, and centuries-long infrastructure development, Pokhara has emerged as a major metropolitan center. Initially overshadowed by surrounding hill fort settlements during the medieval period, Pokhara gained urban momentum only after the mid-18th century. Early

*The Himalayan Geographers, Silver Jubilee Special Issue: Vol. 15, 45-63, May, 2025 « 54 »*

settlement patterns reveal that localities like Batulechaur, Bindhyabasini, Matepani, Nadipur, Kundahar etc. were known but underdeveloped due to limited access via foot trails and the absence of political focus.

A major shift occurred in 1752, when the Kaski king resettled Newar communities from Bhadgaon (present-day Bhaktapur) to Pokhara. These Newars, skilled in metalwork and trade, laid the foundation for urban identity of Pokhara. Their initial settlement, Chhabis Kuria, grew into multiple neighborhoods such as Bhairab Tol, Ganesh Tol, and Ramkrishna Tol. The bazaar centered around Bhimsen Tol, dedicated to their patron goddess, became the urban nucleus. Their influence extended beyond commerce, shaping the town's architecture and spatial organization with pagoda-style homes, temples, and paved streets marking the earliest organized form of urbanism in Pokhara.

### **Figure 1**

*Development of Ramkrishna Tol: (a) Ramkrishna tole (Harka Gurung, 1963); (b) Photo by author, 2023)*



By the early 19th century, Pokhara had grown into a bustling trade hub, as noted by travelers like Hamilton (1819) and Oldfield (1880). It connected commercial routes between Kathmandu, Palpa, and Malebum, known for its grain trade and copper craft. In 1909, the Japanese monk Kawaguchi said that Pokhara was the most beautiful Himalayan town he had ever seen because of its natural beauty.

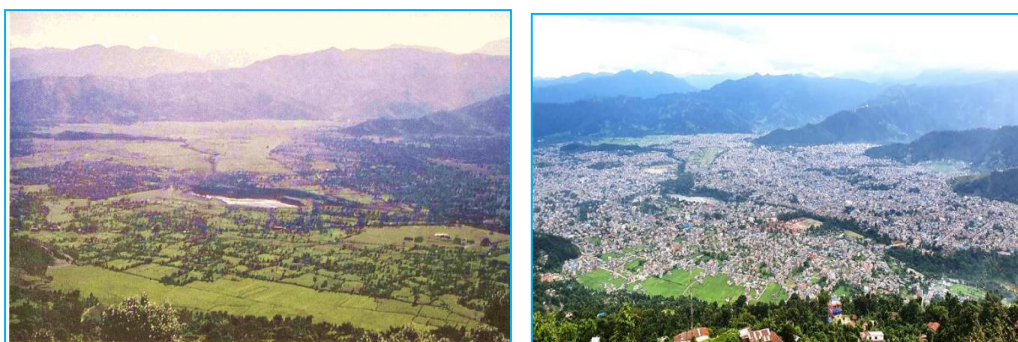
Alongside Newars, other caste and occupational groups such as Brahmin, Chhetri, Khadgi, Damai, Sarki, and Kami settled in Pokhara. Each community contributed distinct roles: religious services, artisan work, agriculture, and administration. The social and spatial fabric reflected a complex interplay of function and caste hierarchy. Infrastructure, however, remained basic for much of the early 20th century. Education was limited to traditional Sanskrit Pathshalas, and healthcare

depended on Vaidyas and shamans. Public amenities included *Pauwa-patis* (rest houses), *Chautaras* (tree shelters), and ponds.

A turning point came after 1950, with the fall of the Rana regime, helping in modernization. Pokhara Municipality was officially declared in 1962, with a population of about 5,000. Influenced by geographer Harka Gurung's Gandaki Regional Development Plan, Pokhara was positioned as a central node in Nepal's development framework. Significant educational and healthcare institutions were established during the Fourth Five-Year Plan (1970–75), including Prithvi Narayan Campus and government and missionary hospitals.

### **Figure 3:**

*Development of Settlement Pattern of Pokhara Center: (a) Harka Gurung, 1965 (b) Bishwo Shakya, 2018*



(a)

(b)

Connectivity greatly improved with the construction of Siddhartha Highway (1966) and Prithvi Highway (1971), linking Pokhara with Bhairahawa and Kathmandu. This infrastructure boom catalyzed urbanization, resulting in the establishment of institutions like the British Pension Camp, Indian Army Pension Office, and an industrial estate in Kundahar. These developments spurred population growth in neighborhoods such as Rambazar. Meanwhile, institutions like the Leprosy Hospital, SOS Hermann Gmeiner School, and the Institute of Forestry reinforced role of Pokhara as a regional hub. Secondary road networks such as Pokhara-Baglung and Pokhara-Ambu-Gorkha highways reshaped settlement patterns, transitioning the city from dirt roads to paved urban corridors.

### **Boundary Expansion and Demographic Growth of Pokhara**

Different stages of boundary extensions turned Pokhara into a Metropolitan City (Table 2 & Figure 2). The administrative evolution of Pokhara from a modest hill town to a Metropolitan City is deeply intertwined with Nepal's political transitions

and urbanization process. The journey began during the party-less Panchayat regime (1962–1981), when Pokhara was first declared a municipality in 1962 with only 13 wards and a population of 5,413. Though limited in infrastructure and governance capacity, the early municipality laid the foundation for urban growth. By 1981, the city had expanded to 18 wards and nearly 50 sq. km in area, accommodating a population of 46,642. This phase reflected slow but steady migration-driven expansion, as Pokhara began emerging as a regional service center.

**Table 2**

*Changes from Pokhara City to Pokhara Metropolitan City since 1962 Period*

Period	Announcement (Year)	Total Wards	Area (Sq.km)	Population Size
1. Party less Panchayat regime	1962	13	27.38	5,413
	1971	13	27.38	20,611
	1976	16	49.88	
	1981	18	49.88	46,642
2. The period of multi-party political reform	1992	18	55.49	95,286
3. The period of political resurgence	2014	29	222.60	402,995*
4. Establishment of the Nepalese Federal State	2017	33	464.24	513,504

Source: Population census report 1961 to 2011 and 2021. \* Pokhara sub-metropolitan city, 2015.

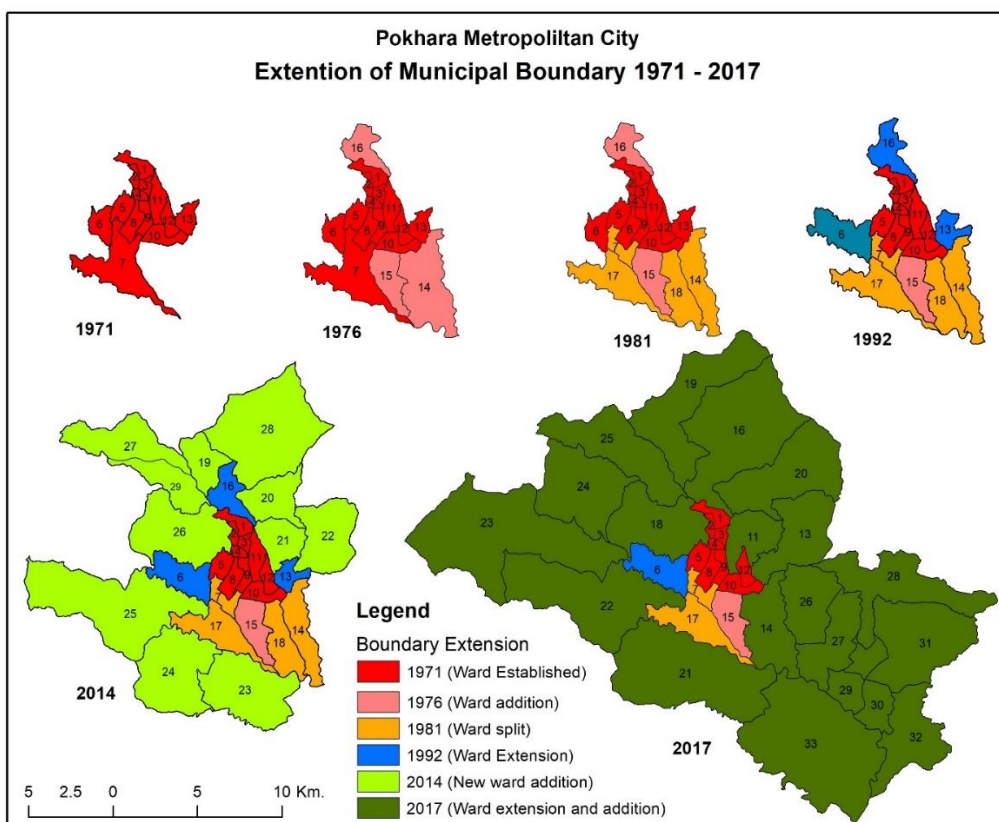
With the restoration of democracy in the multi-party reform period of 1992, the city continued to expand both spatially and demographically. The municipal boundary extended to 55.49 sq. km, and the population nearly doubled to 95,286. This period coincided with increased administrative freedom, planning initiatives, and investments in education, infrastructure, and tourism. However, the governance structure still functioned under the status of a city-level municipality, unable to fully manage the growing complexities of service demand, migration, and spatial expansion.

A significant turning point came during the political resurgence of 2014, when Pokhara underwent a major administrative restructuring. The city grew to 29 wards and over 222 sq. km by absorbing nearby rural and semi-urban areas. The population,

exceeding 400,000, reflected the city's emergence as a major urban hub in western Nepal. This expansion was not merely a redrawing of boundaries but a response to increasing urban pressures and the need to prepare Pokhara for a higher urban governance status.

**Figure 2**

*Extension of Municipal Boundary*



Finally, with the establishment of the federal democratic republic in 2017, Pokhara was officially upgraded to a Metropolitan City, marking the culmination of decades of demographic, spatial, and political growth. The city's area expanded to 464.24 sq. km, encompassing vast rural hinterlands, smaller municipalities like Lekhnath, and previously unincorporated settlements. The population surpassed half a million. This transition to metropolitan status was not symbolic, it reflected functional reality of Pokhara as a regional capital of tourism, trade, education, and administration.

Each phase of administrative restructuring from municipality in 1962 to metropolitan city in 2017, mirrors a parallel growth in population, infrastructure, *The Himalayan Geographers, Silver Jubilee Special Issue: Vol. 15, 45-63, May, 2025* « 58 »

service demand, and urban complexity. The shift to metropolitan status was essential to ensure effective governance, spatial planning, and inclusive development. The transformation illustrates how political change, migration, and infrastructure investments collectively shaped Pokhara, rise from a small city to a metropolitan center of national significance.

## **Factors behind Urban Growth**

The transformation of Pokhara into a flourishing metropolitan city has been driven by a combination of historical, geographical, economic, administrative, and infrastructural factors:

**Geographic Advantage** - Pokhara is uniquely situated in the Himalayan foothills, surrounded by scenic mountains, lush valleys, and an exceptional natural environment. The presence of eight lakes, particularly Phewa and Begnas, not only enhanced the city's ecological appeal but also played a vital role in shaping its urban form and boosting tourism-based economic activities. The clean air, fertile land, and panoramic views of the Annapurna and Machhapuchhre ranges have made it a preferred place for residence, tourism, and long-term settlement.

**Transportation Infrastructure** - The development of Prithvi Highway (linking to Kathmandu), Siddhartha Highway (connecting to the Tarai), and Baglung Highway (connecting western hill districts) established Pokhara as a vital transport and trade node in Nepal. This road connectivity stimulated trade, eased mobility, and attracted investments.

Furthermore, Pokhara Domestic Airport played a crucial role in linking the city to the rest of the country, particularly Kathmandu and other remote districts. The recent opening of the Pokhara International Airport has significantly elevated the city's status by connecting it to international destinations, enhancing its role as a global tourism and commercial hub.

**Tourism and Hospitality Economy** - Natural beauty and proximity to the Annapurna trekking circuit from Pokhara made it Nepal's premier tourist destination. The Baidam and Lakeside area, adjacent to Phewa Lake, developed into a vibrant tourism hub, with hotels, restaurants, cafes, travel agencies, souvenir shops, and nightlife options attracting both domestic and international tourists. This influx of visitors generated employment and stimulated secondary businesses, fueling continuous urban growth and infrastructure expansion in the surrounding areas.

**Administrative and Institutional Development-** Pokhara's designation as the headquarters of the Western Development Region in 1974 was a major administrative milestone. It brought numerous regional government offices, public services, and infrastructure investments to the city. Educational institutions such as Prithvi Narayan Campus, Institute of Forestry, and SOS Hermann Gmeiner School, as well as healthcare facilities like the government hospital, missionary hospital, and leprosy hospital, made the city a center for education and health services in western Nepal.

**Federal Restructuring and Boundary Expansion-** The 2017 upgrade to Metropolitan City status was part of Nepal's national restructuring under the federal system. This move incorporated extensive rural hinterlands and smaller municipalities (e.g., Lekhnath), expanding the urban territory to 464.24 sq. km. This allowed for integrated urban-rural planning, better service delivery, and strategic development across the city's diverse landscape.

**Establish Pension Paying Camp-** The establishment of a British Gurkha Army and Indian Army Pension Office in Pokhara had also significant demographic and economic effects. Retired Gurkha soldiers (Lahures) settled in and around Pokhara, especially in areas like Deep, Bagar, Rambazar areas bringing with them foreign pensions, which improved household incomes, increased property demand, and encouraged the development of real estate, services, and businesses.

**Migration and Demographic Pressure-** From the 1970s onward, rural-to-urban migration fueled rapid population growth in Pokhara. Migrants were drawn by job opportunities, better education, healthcare, and the overall quality of life. This migration surge significantly increased demand for housing, services, and infrastructure, prompting the city's boundary expansion and spatial transformation.

## **Conclusion**

The urban development of Pokhara Metropolitan City presents a dynamic example of how historical, geographical, political, and socio-economic factors converge to shape the growth of urban centers in Nepal. From its humble beginnings as a trading post in the 18th century, following the settlement of Newar communities, Pokhara gradually evolved into a key regional hub. Its early urban form was shaped by trade, religious significance, and the craftsmanship of artisan communities, particularly around the Bhimsen Tol bazaar area. Over time, the settlement expanded outward, integrating multiple neighborhoods and caste-based occupational groups, laying the foundation for a diverse and functional urban structure.



The political history of Nepal played a central role in this transformation. From the Panchayat era to the federal restructuring of 2017, changes in governance triggered multiple phases of administrative and spatial expansion. Each reclassification, from municipality in 1962 to sub-metropolitan city in 2014 and metropolitan city in 2017, mirrored population growth, infrastructure needs, and governance demands. Major infrastructure developments such as the Prithvi, Siddhartha, and Baglung highways, as well as the construction of Pokhara International Airport, have significantly improved connectivity, trade, and tourism, making the city a major economic and cultural center.

Unique geographic setting of Pokhara with eight lakes, the Seti River, and the Himalayan backdrop, continues to attract both domestic migrants and international visitors. The Baidam–Lakeside area, in particular, has emerged as a vibrant tourism hub. Likewise, the presence of British and Indian Pension Camps contributed to the local economy, migration, and urban expansion.

Despite its many strengths, Pokhara also reflects the challenges faced by fast-growing cities in developing countries. Issues such as unplanned settlement, rising land prices, infrastructure strain, and ecological pressures, especially around lake zones, demand sustainable urban planning and environmental management. The spatial distribution of population density further reveals a centralized urban core, with moderate and low-density zones expanding into peri-urban and rural areas.

The transformation of Pokhara from a traditional hamlet to a major metropolis reflects Nepal's larger urbanization trends, which are influenced by a confluence of demographic shifts, historical legacies, state policies, and natural landscapes. As Pokhara continues to grow, its experience offers valuable insights for planning inclusive, resilient, and sustainable urban futures in similar rapidly urbanizing contexts.

## **References**

- Agergaard, J., Subedi, B. P., & Brøgger, D. (2022). Political geographies of urban demarcation: Learning from Nepal's state-restructuring process. *Political Geography*, 96(January). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2022.102605>
- Bajracharya, D.V. (1973). *Lichhavigalin Anhilekha, Nepal and Asiali Anushandhan Kendra*, Kathmandu.
- Bhattarai, K., & Conway, D. (2021a). *Contemporary Environmental Problems in Nepal: Geographic Perspectives*. In *Advances in Asian Human-Environmental Research*.
- Bhattarai, K., & Conway, D. (2021b). *Urban Growth*. In *Advances in Asian Human-Environmental Research*. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-50168-6\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-50168-6_4)
- The Himalayan Geographers, Silver Jubilee Special Issue: Vol. 15, 45-63, May, 2025* « 61 »

- Bhattarai, K., Adhikari, A. P., & Gautam, S. P. (2023). State of urbanization in Nepal: The official definition and reality. *Environmental Challenges*, 13(August), 100776. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envc.2023.100776>
- Brunn, S. D., Zeigler, D. J., Hays-Mitchell, M., & Graybill, J. K. (Eds.). (2020). *Cities of the world: regional patterns and urban environments*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- CBS. (2012). *National Population and Housing Census 2011* (Major Highlights). In Central Bureau of Statistics, Nepal (Vol. 01). <https://censusnepal.cbs.gov.np/Home/Details?tpid=5&dcid=a3b4c609-5cc5-4971-97da-674f999ef4f1&tfsid=1>
- Chakrabarti, D. K. (2021). Nationalism in the study of ancient Indian history. *National Security*, 4(1), 29-50.
- Gurung, H. (1986). *Development of small towns in Gandaki growth axis, Central Nepal*. International Development Research Center (IDRC), Kathmandu, Nepal. <https://idl-bnc-idrc.dspacedirect.org/handle/10625/3699>
- ICIMOD. (2007). *Kathmandu Valley Environment Outlook*. Kathmandu: International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD).
- Malla, U.M. (1978). "Settlement Geography of Kathmandu Valley from 600 B.C. to 1000 A.D". *Geographical Journal of Nepal*. Vol.1 (1). Pp28-36.
- Management Support for Town Panchayat Project (MSTPP). (1987). *Pokhara Revised Physical Development Plan, 1987 -2002*: Pokhara.
- NSO. (2021). *National Population and Housing Census 2021* (National Report). In National Statistics Office (Vol. 39, Issue 1). <https://censusnepal.cbs.gov.np/results/downloads/national>
- Poudel, K. P. (2013). *National development plan and urbanization in Nepal*. 12th International Asian Urbanization Conference on Urban Dynamics, Environment and Health: Challenges for the Twenty First Century. Department of Geography, Banaras Hindu University, India, December 2013, 1–16.
- Poudel, K. P. and Paudel, U., (2023). Urbanization and Its Challenges in Nepal. In B. R. K. Sinha (ed.), *Urban Dynamics, Environment and Health*, Springer Nature Singapore Pp. 107-131. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-5744-6\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-5744-6_3)
- Poudel, K. R., & Shrestha, S. (2025). Urban Spatial Growth and Geo-Environmental Risk in Pokhara Metropolitan City : A Geospatial Analysis. *Nepal Journal of Environmental Science*, 13(1), 15–28. <https://doi.org/10.3126/njes.v13i1.71842> ISSN

- Poudel, K.P. (2012). *Urban Sprawl and Socioeconomic Change in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal*. In Ashok K. Dutt, Vandana Wadhwa, Baleshwar Thakur and Frank J. Costa (Eds.) *Facets of Social Geography: International and Indian Perspectives*. New Delhi. Cambridge University Press, Pp 237-251.
- Ramirez-Faria, C. (2007). *Concise Encyclopedia of World History*. Atlantic Publishers & Dist.
- Robson, B. T. (1973). *Urban Growth, An Approach*. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd.
- Shrestha, C.B. and Malla, U.M. (1969-1970). "Urban Centers of the Kathmandu Valley". *The Himalayan Review (Nepal Geographical Society)*. Vol 2-3. Pp 33-38.
- Zurink, D. and Karan, P. P. (1999). *Life on the Edge of the World Himalaya*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press

\*\*\*