



Revisiting the City of Agra's Hidden Heritage: A Study of the Minor Monuments and Heritage Sites

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ABSTRACT

The historic city of Agra, situated on the banks of the river Yamuna, emerged as a major political centre under Sikandar Lodhi in the early sixteenth century and continued to dominate the imperial landscape during the Mughal period until the foundation of Shahjahanabad. Over more than a century and a half of sustained royal patronage, the city witnessed the construction of magnificent architectural complexes, gardens, noble residences, and funerary monuments that together shaped a rich and multilayered urban heritage. However, many subsidiary and lesser-known structures suffered destruction, neglect, or desecration during the early colonial period before limited preservation efforts began with the establishment of the Archaeological Survey of India in 1871.

While Agra is globally renowned for monumental sites such as the Taj Mahal, Agra Fort, and Fatehpur Sikri, this dominant focus has obscured a wider spectrum of minor monuments and overlooked heritage sites embedded within the city's historical fabric. This study revisits Agra's "hidden heritage" by examining the historical significance, patterns of neglect, and uneven conservation of these marginalized structures through archaeological reports, Persian chronicles, colonial gazetteers, travel accounts, and field-based observations. The paper argues for a more inclusive and historically sensitive conservation framework that recognizes lesser-known monuments as essential to understanding Agra's cultural identity and ensuring sustainable heritage preservation.

Keywords: Monuments, hidden, heritage, desecration, preservation, conservation, marginalized.

1. INTRODUCTION

The historic city of Agra, is situated primarily on the western banks of the river Yamuna, although the most ancient pre-historical city was probably settled on its eastern banks. It is one of the most important cultural units of ancient India, linguistically, a region of Braj Bhoomi, the playground of Lord Krishna. The Renuka Dham in the Runkata area confirm the historic existence of Agra. This site is traditionally revered as the birthplace of Lord Parshuram, the sixth incarnation of Lord Vishnu.

Over more than a century and a half of sustained royal patronage, the city witnessed the construction of magnificent architectural complexes, gardens, noble residences, and funerary monuments that together shaped a rich and multilayered urban heritage. Early Persian records from the Mughal era focused almost entirely on grand royal projects, rarely mentioning everyday buildings. Later, during British rule, colonial surveys documented many sites but mostly focused on the most beautiful or famous ones. Because of this, smaller tombs, mosques, and old houses were mostly ignored by scholars.

Many subsidiary and lesser-known structures suffered destruction, neglect, or desecration during the early colonial period before limited preservation efforts began with the establishment of the Archaeological Survey of India in 1861. Even after India's independence, researchers continued to focus on massive imperial structures. While recent studies have started to value these 'minor' sites for what they tell us about city life, there is still no major study that looks at Agra's smaller monuments as a group. Their neglect in historical writing and conservation policy has produced a distorted understanding of Agra as a city of only a few grand monuments rather than a dense architectural landscape.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Early historiography is dominated by Persian Court Chronicles (like the Akbarnama or Shahjahannama). These texts were essentially "Instruments of statecraft," focusing on how the books were used as tools to build power for the Emperors. They highlight the charbaghs (gardens), massive forts, and congregational mosques. They treat the city as a backdrop for the King, leaving the "minor" heritage of noblemen and commoners largely invisible.

The British approach was one of categorization and "curating" the past. During this period the key works were Alexander Cunningham's

Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) reports and District Gazetteers. Scholars like James Fergusson categorized Indian architecture through a Western lens, focusing on "monumentality" and "style. But if a building wasn't "grand" or "pure" in its style, it was often dismissed as "ruinous" or "insignificant." Modern scholars have shifted from looking at individual buildings to looking at the Urban Fabric. Ebba Koch's work on Mughal architecture and Agra's riverfront gardens moved the needle toward understanding the city as a system. Catherine Asher began looking at how regional and smaller mosques influenced the grander imperial style. James Wescoat is known for studying the water systems and smaller garden landscapes. While these scholars mention minor sites, they usually do so to explain the "Major" ones. Nevertheless, a focused historical study devoted specifically to Agra's minor monuments as a collective category remains largely absent—constituting the principal research gap addressed in this paper. The present study therefore shifts the focus deliberately toward minor and neglected monuments as primary historical evidence for reconstructing Agra's urban past. By examining minor monuments as primary historical evidence, the paper seeks to reconstruct Agra's broader architectural ecology and highlight the urgent need for their conservation.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is based on multi-disciplinary historical analysis and comparative methodology. It is based on both primary and secondary sources. Secondary information has been collected from books, research papers, archaeological reports and the works of contemporary and later historians and scholars related to the history and heritage of Agra. Primary information has been gathered by field visits to selected monument sites. The collected information has been analysed through historical and comparative methods, and facts have been ascertained and verified by comparing evidence from different sources.

4. HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE AND LESSER KNOWN HERITAGE

Sultanate Period

The initial reference to Agra in the Muhammadan period occurs in the account of Abdullah, the author of *Tarikh-i-Daudi*, who wrote about the Hindu origin of the city dating to the period of Raja Kans, the ruler of Mathura. The king, he writes confined everyone who incurred his displeasure in the fort of that place, i.e., Agra which became a State

prison. He further cites the destruction of the town in 1022 AD by the armies of Sultan Mahmud.

In the eleventh century Agra regained its importance as a Hindu principality under Raja Jaipal, the Chauhan ruler, as cited in the poems of Masud sad Salman, who wrote in praise of the Ghaznavide Sultans, Mahmud (great grandson of Mahmud Ghaznavi), Ibrahim and Bairamshah with the capture of the city by the forces of Mahmud. Later it was ruled by Badalsingh, who built the fort of Badalgarh, which is also mentioned by Abul Fazl, the court historian of Akbar. Agra mostly remained a part of the sarkar, or dependency of Bayana till the Sayyid period whence the authority of the sultans was reestablished for a short duration with the local rulers soon asserting their independence.

Agra emerged as a major political and cultural centre under Sikandar Lodhi in the early sixteenth century. It is now that Agra received royal attention in the new circumstances. It was considered to be the “Shiraz of India” and continued to dominate the imperial landscape during the Mughal period until the foundation of Shahjahanabad. Upon the revolt of Sultan Ashraf, Governor of Bayana, who held the fort on behalf of Azim Humayun, grandson of Sultan Bahlol, the new Sultan deputed Umar Khan Sherwani to take charge of the fort from the rebel. Upon the former’s decadence the king proceeded to Agra where gates of the fort were shut by Haibat Khan Jharoni on orders of Sultan Ashraf. The latter became a target of Sultan Sikandar’s fury resulting in his defeat and banishment to Gwalior and Bayana and Agra passed under the suzerainty of the Sultan. It was at this juncture that the Sultan decided to repeople the city of Agra. The original city of the Lodhis lay on the eastern banks of the Yamuna as cited by Niamatulla in his *Tarikh-i-Khan Jahan Lodhi* with a description of the foundation of Agra by Sultan Sikandar in 1505 AD along the western bank of the Yamuna. Of the two mounds which were situated on the spot earmarked for the Sultan’s inspection, Mehtar Mulla Khan commander of the Royal barge who was asked by the Sultan for his opinion pointed to the further one as Age-rah, or the one in advance (or Agra). The Sultan gave the sign with his hands held up in prayer and the city was founded at an auspicious hour anointed for the purpose. The portions of the villages, Pashi and Poya, Pargana Dulli, sarkar of Bayana were occupied for the purpose and Agra was made a separate pargana and added to the fifty-two parganas which comprised the sarkar of Bayana. The city grew as a political centre, with a growing population and became the seat of government for the sultans of Hind with orders for the construction of a fort and he proceeded to Dholpur. The royal residence was fixed at Agra (now the capital of the Empire which was earlier Bayana) on the eastern bank of the Yamuna which

was occupied by Babar in 1526, following his victory at Panipat, where he disembarked from the royal boat upon arrival from Delhi.

Sultan Sikandar held his court at Agra and it became the grand resort of learned men from Arabia and Persia, Hind and Bokhara, who came on the Sultan's invitation and took up residence at Agra which became the general dwelling place of the Sultan. The learned men included the renowned brothers from Multan, Sheikh Abdullah and Sheikh Azizullah, the former remaining at the capital whose classes the Sultan himself attended. It was from Agra that the Sultan issued many edicts for the prosperity and welfare of the people, suppression of crime and abominable usages in his dominions which has earned for him a distinctive position among the Muslim kings of the sultanate. Agra was visited by a destructive earthquake in 1505 resulting in the levelling of lofty buildings with the ground and several thousand inhabitants getting buried under them. The Sultan died on 14th December 1517 AD in his palace at Agra on the eve of launching a campaign against Gwalior.

Among the prominent historical remnants, apart from the fort, of his times is at Sikandra (got its name from the monarch) where he built fine two storied red stone summer house, the baradari or twelve doored or pillared pavilion with oblong and octagonal chhatris. Its monumental arched gateway on the north east with an octagonal platform on the top was encompassed in the plan of the church missionary society school building in the second half of the nineteenth century. The baradari itself became a resting place of Mariam Zamani (wrongly identified as Christian wife of Akbar by both Carlyle and Syad Latif, mother of emperor Jahangir (Ebba Koch does not allude to the building to be of Lodhi period which she described as square version of the Mughal platform tomb). The other remnant of Sultan's time as recorded by A C L Carlyle, one of General Cunningham's (the first Director General of the ASI) assistants during his tenure as Archaeological Surveyor to the Government of India from 1861 to 1865 comprised as identified by him was what he discovered as the Lodhi-Khan-ka-Tila. He has not mentioned the exact location of the Tila or mound which he said was visible in foundations and old walls built over with modern houses and streets. He is also not sure of his identification of the site connecting it to Khan Khanan or Khan Jahan Lodhi, both generals of the Mughal period. He is doubtful of the site being the residence of one of the royal family of the Lodhi dynasty or the site of Badalgarh but it seems it might be the site of the royal residence of the Lodhis on the eastern bank of the Yamuna where Babur disembarked first upon his arrival from Delhi. There is an octagonal structure a short distance to the south east of the

southern gate of the Akbar's tomb described as a Lodhi tomb and a Lodhi period mosque in the Sikandra suburbs.

Mughal Period

The initial Mughal interest with the arriving of Babar in Agra was in the laying of gardens on the eastern banks of the Yamuna which has been described well in my paper, *The Taj Corridor- Developing the Mughal Riverfront at Agra*. He was a naturalist and the tradition of laying gardens ran in his family traced back (in the above-mentioned paper) to his ancestor Timur and his successors in Samarqand and later on by himself in Kabul and Hindustan. These gardens served as places of public audience, feasting and entertainment, private retreat for Babar (Firdaus Makani) as well as Humayun (Jannat Ashiyani). Babur talked of retiring to his Char Bagh Garden sufficing with the services of an attendant and making over the kingdom to Humayun. The poisoning incident, his meeting with Humayun after the latter's return from Badakhshan facilitated by Maham and then his internment was in his garden. It was this garden centric tradition that was to earn for Agra the title of city of gardens and lay the foundations of beautifully landscaped medieval buildings in exquisite architectural styles of that period. The Bagh i Zar Afshan (gold scattering- chahar bagh padshahi) and Bagh i Gul Afshan (Rose scattering- chahar bagh dusarau padshahi later Aram Bagh and modern Ram Bagh as named under Marathas- the site of his tomb prior to the removal of his body to Kabul - also Garden palace of Nur Afshan in his memoirs and cited as Bagh-i Nur Afshan of Nur Jahan by Ebba Koch. It is clear from the description by Ebba Koch of the Panoramic scroll acquired by the British library that there were in all thirty-two buildings viz., palace gardens counting the Fort and the Taj on the right or west bank of the river. While there were in all sixteen palace gardens including the tomb of I'timad-ud-Daulah, Mehtab Bagh, Ram Bagh, Chini-ka-Rauzah (tomb named after its beautiful porcelain or glazed tiles and belongs to Afzal Khan or Shukrulla, who built it himself, a literary adventurer who entered the service of Jahangir in 1617 AD and with his exemplary service attained the office of Diwan under Shah Jahan and Chatri of Raja Jaswant Singh, on the left or eastern bank of the river (beautifully carved walls decorated with figures of vases and flowers as the Chini khana in the Bagichi Suraj bhan). Carlyle while reporting the riverfront gardens seen by him, mentioned and described the Mehtab Bagh; Babur's Char Bagh; Aram Bagh; Achanak Bagh; Zahara Bagh; Wazir Khan ka Bagh and Buland Bagh. He reported the remains of three different palaces in the neighborhood of the Taj with one nearest to the east side of the Taj enclosure with a wall running and a long range of ruined walls remaining on the very edge of the river bank. Of particular interest in his description of the remains of the Mehtab

Bagh (wrongly cited as Mehtab Khan ka Bagh by Carlyle) was the presence of two ornamental corner towers at a distance of 960 feet, surmounted by cupolas marking the riverfront extent of the garden, one of which he found to be in its original state and the other in ruins. He mentioned the village of Kachpura, a little west of Mehtab Bagh where Humayun built his mosque, irregular octagon with a central domed chamber on the ninefold plan. Carlyle has given the plan of the structure, its features, measurement and translation of inscriptions following the strict practice of General Cunningham's department. His discovery of the remains of a vast garden precinct with remains of fallen pavilions and several old wells near the river, a step well with inscription are again of particular interest as these have been taken to represent the ruins of the Char Bagh of Babur. He reported seven buildings and the remains of four towers along the wall with nine wells. Among the other significant historical remains of that period mentioned and described by Carlyle comprise the Battis Khambha (thirty two pillared) pavilion in the Buland Bagh or garden of Khwaja Buland Khan, chief eunuch, in the time of Jahangir; Achanak Bagh (with a lower storey having ruinous vaulted chambers, a domed building and remains of an entrance gateway on the rear side); Zahara or Zohra (Babur's daughter) Bagh (remains of a large square tank, broad ghat with plain low round buttress tower at each front corner and a fine octagonal-shaped tank); Dehra Bagh (Elephant stables and Kamal Khan's tomb with red sandstone pillars having squared shafts and Hindu bracket capitals of the Akbar and Jahangir period and the great well at the back of the Dargah). The remains of the historic city wall of Agra with the existing Changa Modi Gate and the Pul or bridge of the same name and Delhi Gate of its thirteen gates was vividly described by Carlyle in his survey report. Of the Havelis, Carlyle reported the ruins of Haveli Dara Shukoh (of extreme political significance as Emperor Shah Jahan used to reside here on his visits to Agra after having shifted the royal residence to Shahjahanabad, Delhi. Jahanara after having sustained severe burn injuries was taken by Shahjahan to the house of her brother for a change), Haveli Islam Khan Rumi, Haveli Asaf Khan and Haveli Azad Baksh.

5. INTERPRETATION AND FINDINGS

Now these structures mentioned above are mostly in ruins with some already effaced from history except some restorations like the Mehtab Bagh. Nevertheless, these attest to the rich historical heritage of Agra presenting the connecting links in the vast expanse of history and at the same time authenticate the contemporary historical accounts of that period. Of the later period beginning from Akbar there are again ruins of significant buildings as well as those which survived the times and could

be protected and preserved by the Archaeological department. The ruins of a significant building near the village of Khwaja ki Sarai between the Malpura suburb and Fatehpur Sikri road, identified as the mausoleum of Jodh Bai (daughter of Mota Raja Uday Singh of Jodhpur and wife of Jahangir, titled as Jagat Gosai and mother of Khurram - Both Carlyle and Syad Latif erroneously refer to it as the mausoleum of Jahangir's mother which is actually in Sikandra as mentioned earlier - blown up by the British in 1832 to make way for barracks in the cantonment. However, only the gates, walls and towers of the outer enclosure were pulled down save for the tomb which was of solid red stone and was a hard nut to crack in the words of J. D. Beglar (another of General Cunningham's assistants) and was left as it is after being blown up, a huge shapeless heap of massive fragments of masonry, which Beglar continued could neither be destroyed by the hammer of man or time. In the same manner, the grand mausoleum of Ladli Begum, sister of Abul Fazal, wife of Islam Khan grandson of Sheikh Salim Chishti) built entirely of marble in a walled enclosure of red sandstone with gateways and towers immediately behind the Qandhari Bagh, was pulled down by a Mathura Seth who had purchased the land from the government and built an ornamental pavilion on light arches in its place. This enclosure was of immense historical importance as it contained the tombs of Sheikh Mubarak and Faizi which were destroyed by the Mathura Seths. They were earlier buried in the Char bagh of Babar close to the mausoleum of Sheikh Alauddin Mazjub and later moved by Abul Fazal to this enclosure. There was a large well outside the main entrance gateway with a Baori beneath with broad and deep galleries to reach the underground chamber. Another tomb of immense historical significance is the tomb of Qandhari begum, wife of Shah Jahan and daughter of Muzaffar Hussain, grandson of Shah Ismail, king of Persia located in the Qandhari Bagh which became the town residence of erstwhile Maharaja of Bharatpur. The locality is presently known as Kandhari with the adjoining area of Bharatpur house. The tombs of Bakshi Salabat Khan, paymaster of Shah Jahan and that of Sadiq Khan, one of Akbar's Pirs, Mansabdar of 4000 and one of his best officers are well preserved but lie unnoticed on the Agra bye pass road. The former is a notable flat-roofed pavilion style structure without jalis with sixty-four pillars and the latter an octagonal domed building with a crypt. The Pahalwan's (celebrated wrestler of the time of Shah Jahan) tomb on the left of the Gwalior Road on a large square platform surmounted by a large dome with a cupola at each corner. The square platform has beautiful four pillared cupola of red sandstone at the four corners. At the right side of the Gwalior Road about the same distance as the Rauza Pahalwan is another mausoleum, exquisite and ornate of the early Mughal style which belongs to Feroz Khan (further evolution of the octagonal form of the platform tomb, the chief of eunuchs in the Court of Akbar. It is built on

an octagonal style, raised on a high platform with a decorated gateway on the east side, abundance of glazed tiles of various colours with fine sculptures of the richest and most elaborate style in relief. In the vicinity of Sikandra was the Sarai of Khwaja Itibar Khan or reported as Kachiki-Sarai by Carlyle (once an open summer house), the protected Stone horse and a tomb enclosure. Of the standing witnesses of the period in the city are the Akbari Masjid (Kinari bazar), Masjid of Motamid Khan, treasurer of Jahangir (Kashmiri bazar), Kali or Kalan (black domed) masjid at Sabun Katra opposite the Medical College with five domes, brick and mortar construction initially with sandstone facing and fine archways (founded by Muzaffar Hussain who held a rank of 5000 under Akbar), the Masjid of Eunuchs or Masjid Mukhan nisan (Loha mandi), a three domed mosque with an octagonal tower at each end of the front wall and two large windows to the west high up in the wall (qibla side) strikingly beautiful and elegant, the Dargah and mosque of Shah Alauddin Masjub or Shah Wilayat, son of Syed Suleiman of Medina (mohalla Nai ki Mandi) of the time of Pathan period built in the time of Salim Shah. The Hammam of Ali Wardi Khan (mohalla Chipitola), with its red sandstone richly carved arched doorway and notable for its skillfully constructed and arranged bathrooms in such a manner to maintain any required temperature. It also had two sets of chambers for use as Caravan sarais. The mosque of Alamgir (Aurangzeb) in Alamganj locality remodeled for use as Collector's office, Udinath Bagh of Jogi Udinath near Shahganj, the tomb of Shah-ab-ul-Allah in Wazirpura, the tomb of Nazir (famous poet of Urdu and contemporary of Ghalib, Zouk and Momin and Zaffar), the tomb of Samru, (Walter Reinhardt husband of Begam Samru, the founder of Sardhana near Meerut) and John Hessing's tomb, the last two in the Roman Catholic cemetery near Bhagwan Talkies crossing. Located in Nehru Nagar, Civil Lines, the light-filled and almost museum-like tombs here make up a cemetery that is no less than an architectural gem. The centerpiece of this enclave is the Hessing's tomb, the Red Taj built in red sandstone. This equally fascinating, yet small version of the iconic Taj Mahal, is a showstopper. Like the original marble teardrop on the banks of the Yamuna River, the Red Taj is an ode to love. There is a role reversal of sorts; quite unlike the Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal love story, this elegant monument was built by a grieving wife and her children, in memory of a Dutch soldier, Col John William Hessing. (Hessing died while defending Agra Fort against an attack by the British in 1803). Just like its more impressive cousin, the Red Taj also stands on a high plinth and within is a square platform with a crypt which contains the grave. The monumental tomb sports a bulbous double dome covered by a sheath of lotus petals and a kalash (pitcher), and arched niches on the façade and fluted turrets topped with square chhatris on four sides. The four elegant

minarets that frame Taj Mahal, however, are missing. This was because Hessing's wife, Ann, ran out of money and so decided to edit out the minarets. Though a Dutch tomb, it belongs essentially to Agra and to the Art of the Jamuna Chambal region. The first few graves in the cemetery are the tombs of Armenian merchants—simple and devoid of too much decoration. These merchants came to India in the 1500s—the tombs of other Europeans who died in northern India in the Mughal and colonial era were laid later. From 1500s to 1800s, India lured mercenaries, buccaneers, fortune hunters and the like; this was the land of milk and honey, and many soldiers of fortune commanded armies of their own and were hired by the Mughals and the Marathas to fend off local warlords.

6. CONCLUSION

The continued marginalization of these sites represents a significant gap in both scholarly discourse and conservation policy. As these "minor" structures succumb to urban encroachment and environmental decay, we lose the contextual connective tissue that gave the Great Mughals' grandest projects their meaning. Their disappearance threatens the survival of invaluable architectural evidence that speaks to the lives of commoners, artisans, and the secondary nobility who actually inhabited the imperial space.

Re-centering scholarly attention and policy frameworks on this overlooked heritage is no longer a matter of choice, but a conservation imperative. To safeguard Agra's holistic history, we must move toward:

- **Systematic Recognition:** Moving beyond "protected" lists to include vernacular and domestic structures.
- **Digital Documentation:** Utilizing modern mapping to preserve the memory of structures at risk of physical loss.
- **Integrated Preservation:** Viewing minor monuments not as isolated ruins, but as vital nodes in a living city.

Ultimately, the "lost" heritage of Agra serves as a silent witness to a more complex, nuanced past. Through dedicated preservation, these fragments can be meaningfully restored to our collective historical consciousness, ensuring that the legacy of the imperial capital is preserved not just in its peaks, but in its entirety, for generations to come

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