



# Development of Historic City Centres

*Ratish Nanda*

*India's monuments are irreplaceable and significant asset for the nation and its people with associated emotional, religious, economical, historic, architectural, and archaeological values amongst others. Their conservation efforts require craftsmen using traditional materials, tools, and building techniques and can also become a significant employer. Unlike the West, we in India are fortunate that our craft traditions have survived to the present times, and it is recommended an emphasis on a craft-based approach to conservation as well as modern public buildings.*

**I**ndia boasts of several millennia of built heritage and living culture represented in the traditional architectural crafts. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it may now be time to reflect on a truly Indian approach to conservation, one that allows leveraging our historical assets to improve socio-economic conditions of residents of our historic cities.

The residents of our numerous historic city centres can benefit from greater integration of preservation and conservation efforts with public policies and schemes for development measures. To demonstrate such an approach, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture in partnership with the Archaeological Survey of India, Central Public Works Department and the Municipal Corporation of Delhi have undertaken a 15-year urban renewal project at the Humayun's Tomb–Nizamuddin area in Delhi. Here, conservation efforts have incorporated local area development through employment generation, boosting local crafts and arts, building of infrastructure, environmental conservation, and landscaping.

The Archaeological Survey of India is taking several steps to ensure long term, sustainable preservation of our nation's heritage in a manner that is based on increased awareness amongst the public of the significance of our heritage and increased involvement of civil society in the preservation effort. Over the last two decades there has been increased awareness of the value of the urban setting of our sites in ensuring that the historic character is retained. This led to guidelines issued in 1992 and the formation of the National Monument Authority, mandated to create guidelines for new buildings in the setting of each one of nation's protected monuments. However, rather than be prohibitive, the guidelines should stress on improvement measures and incentives that enable improving of the historic urban environment as well improvement of the quality of life for local residents.



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*The 90-acre Sunder Nursery Park attracted over 700,000 visitors in 2021. With six UNESCO World heritage structures, 30 acres of wilderness zone, and facilities like amphitheater, children play zones situated here, the park is one of the top tourist attractions of Delhi.*

In 1997, on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of India's independence, the garden restoration of Humayun's Tomb—a designated World Heritage Site was initiated. After the project was completed in 2003, within a few months, after the restoration of the Mughal Garden and flowing water, it led to a 1000% increase in visitor numbers to Humayun's Tomb. Following the success of the garden restoration, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) was asked, by the Government of India, to undertake further work in India and it was agreed that AKTC would build up on the garden restoration to undertake a large urban renewal project that would include conservation of several monuments coupled with major initiatives in socio-economic development focused on the residential communities of the adjoining Hazrat Nizamuddin Basti as well as landscaping over 200 acres of a designated district park with a focus on ecological restoration.

Building archaeology of the Humayun's Tomb World Heritage Site, a precursor to the more famed Taj Mahal, revealed that the building had suffered over a century of inappropriate conservation work. A million kilos of concrete was required to be removed from the roof—laid here in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to prevent rainwater ingress; over 200,000 square feet of cement plaster was similarly required to be removed and replaced with traditional lime plaster. Original doors had been removed for firewood in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the remnant tilework on the interiors removed and replaced with plain plaster.

Similar treatment was meted out to many of India's monuments where well-meaning past repairs were carried out using inappropriate modern materials not only compromised the original design intention but also set in a process of accelerated decay. At Humayun's Tomb, the Conservation Plan prepared and agreed at the onset with the Archaeological Survey of India, established the intent of the AKTC conservation initiative to remove inappropriate past repairs and replace these with authentic repairs using traditional materials used with traditional building techniques by master craftsmen.

It is well established that using traditional building materials—stone, earth, bamboo, timber, brick—our forefathers built splendid structures, from modest residences in wonderful cities to grand palaces, monasteries, temples, tombs, stupas, amongst others. For anyone who bothers to compare buildings built only a few decades ago to what is mushrooming in Indian cities today, it is not easy to understand how our design and craft capabilities were lost

within a few years of materials such as cement, steel, and glass becoming easily available. In the shift from the traditional to the 'cheap' modern, we have lost architectural craft skills that had the capability of creating millions of man-days of employment while ensuring that our cities had both a unique identity as well as a higher quality of life.

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Unlike the West, we in India are fortunate that our craft traditions have survived to the present times, and it is recommended an emphasis on a craft-based approach to conservation as well as modern public buildings. With stone carvers, plasterers, masons, carpenters, bricklayers, who take great pride in replicating the work of their forefathers, being at the forefront of building conservation the design intention of the original builders will be respected and the understanding of significance and interest in our built heritage amongst visitors will be retained. The craftsmen should also once again become stakeholders in the preservation effort and continue to impart traditional skills to their future generations who are moving to other trades in large numbers.

India's national monuments are irreplaceable and significant asset for the nation and its people with associated emotional, religious, economical, historic, architectural and archaeological values amongst others. These assets are however under threat from the pressures of urbanisation. To achieve conservation and development objectives, different agencies of the government need to partner with academic institutes/civil society and local communities. It has already been demonstrated that any resources invested in such an endeavour leads to multiple returns as well as fulfilling multiple government objectives.

Several of our monuments stand amidst dense urban inhabitation in our many historic cities. Also, often the communities residing around monuments in these dense

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urban centres are poor and often deprived of even the most basic urban infrastructure. The success of the Nizamuddin Urban Renewal has demonstrated a model approach for community-based conservation. Not only have several protected monuments in the dense Hazrat Nizamuddin Basti undergone conservation but the conservation effort has been coupled with providing education, health services, vocational training to create economic opportunities for local youth and women, sanitation, urban improvements including landscaping neighbourhood parks and street improvements, revival of a 700-year living culture centred around Sufism and Qawwali, creating performance spaces, amongst other aspects. It is hoped that the community of Hazrat Nizamuddin Basti will now play a pivotal role in the preservation of the built heritage that stands amidst their neighbourhood and that conservation/

culture can be used a tool for development in several other similar historic urban areas of India.

For the Nizamuddin model for 'Conservation led Development' to be replicated requires significant public-private partnership with NGO's, Resident Welfare Associations, grant making organisations, corporate sectors, Municipal Councils/Corporations to come together with a long-term vision. The initiative has global lessons but has been possible with a multi-disciplinary team creating customised, contextual and local solutions all aimed at improving the quality of life for inhabitants with heritage assets restored and well taken care of.

At many of popular sites, the need for Museums/ Interpretation Centres either located within existing buildings or in new sensitively designed structures, is now strongly felt. In order to enhance visitor experience and attract younger generation of visitors to major sites or ensembles of monuments state-of-art displays using new media are planned. Examples from across the world demonstrate that significant modern architecture can revitalise the economy and generate major visitor interest in heritage sites. At present the Aga Khan Trust for Culture is engaged in building museums at both the Humayun's Tomb as well as the Qutub Shahi Tombs at Golconda, Hyderabad; the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India has provided funds for both these projects.

Conservation and development should go hand-in-hand, but conservation interest must remain paramount if any such development is to be sustainable in perpetuity. □



*View of the 14th-century Nizamuddin Baoli, which is set amidst historical monuments all around. A major urban conservation programme was undertaken here, after its collapse in July 2008 where apart from the conservation of this structure and over 10 monuments in the complex, Basti youth were trained to conduct heritage walks in the area.*