

# Preserving Mughal Heritage: A Historical Analysis of Humayun's Tomb Conservation

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**Abstract:** *Humayun's Tomb, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is located in Delhi, India. This monument exemplifies the significant Mughal architectural style and was constructed in the mid-16th century. It is recognized as the first grand dynastic mausoleum on the Indian Subcontinent. This research article investigates the conservation history of the tomb, spanning from its Mughal origins to the colonial era, which was characterized by British rule. This study examines the historical progression of its maintenance, emphasizing the shift from imperial patronage to a phase of decline, followed by adaptive reuse. Subsequently, restoration efforts were initiated. This research employs archival records, with historical accounts offering significant insights and contemporary reports providing supplementary details. The key phases are highlighted. The initial construction was undertaken during the reign of Akbar, and maintenance continued under subsequent Mughal rulers. Deterioration increased during the 17th and 18th centuries, coinciding with imperial decline, which led to gradual decay. British modifications included alterations to gardens. Restorations in the early 20th century were led by the Viceroy Lord Curzon. The analysis underscores several interconnected factors, with the preservation of cultural heritage being paramount. Political transformations have impacted preservation efforts, and socio-economic elements have played significant roles. The tomb has experienced a symbolic evolution, initially representing Mughal authority, subsequently becoming a site of colonial leisure, and ultimately undergoing systematic conservation efforts. The complexities inherent in this process are thoroughly examined, with urban encroachment posing significant threats. The influx of refugees occurred during partition. Material degradation adversely affects structures. Philosophical debates have emerged regarding various approaches. Authenticity must be balanced with the historical layers. This study contributes to the field of heritage studies by emphasizing conservation rooted in context. Adaptation is necessary in postcolonial contexts. International charters inform these practices, while Indian traditions guide their adaptations. The findings synthesize primary sources, including traveler accounts such as that of William Finch in 1611 and official ASI documents. Secondary literature supplements this analysis in the following ways. Data from UNESCO and AKTC projects were also utilized. The study concludes with implications, highlighting the need for ongoing preservation efforts in the region. Integrated urban renewal is advocated because such sites face contemporary threats.*

**Keywords:** Charbagh, Colonial interventions, Conservation history, Delhi monuments, Heritage preservation, Humayun's Tomb, Mughal architecture, Tomb and UNESCO World Heritage etc.

## 1. Introduction

The Mughal Empire extended over several centuries, from the early 16th to the mid- 19th centuries, leaving a lasting impact on Indian architecture. The empire's architectural legacy is characterized by grand tombs and gardens inspired by Islamic motifs of paradise (7), (5). A seminal example is Humayun's Tomb, commissioned by Empress Bega Begum following Humayun's death in 1556 and completed in 1572. Emperor Akbar provided patronage for the project, which cost 1.5 million rupees. Persian architects led the design, initially under Mirak Mirza Ghiyas and subsequently by his son, Sayyid Muhammad (13). The tomb introduced innovative elements, notably the double dome, and extensively utilized red sandstones (2). The Charbagh garden layout, divided into quadrants, symbolizes the Quranic rivers of paradise (1). Primarily serving as Humayun's resting place, the monument evolved into a dynastic mausoleum, housing over 150 members of the Mughal dynasty, earning it the epithet "Dormitory of the Mughals (5) (6)." The conservation history of the tomb reflects the transformations

brought about by socio- political changes in India, with the Mughal zenith marked by the royal oversight. Regular visits ensured the site's splendor, and maintenance efforts preserved its pristine condition. However, during the 17th and 18th centuries, the empire experienced a decline, leading to financial constraints and neglect (5). Once lush gardens have been converted for agricultural use. With the advent of British colonial rule in the 19th century, new dynamics emerged rapidly. The tomb became associated with the 1857 Mutiny, as Bahadur Shah Zafar sought refuge there, ultimately facing capture and exile in the process (7). Colonial authorities repurposed the gardens, replacing the original design with an English style, and leasing allowed for cultivation (9). The complex was transformed into a leisure space, and the sacred mausoleum was transformed into a utilitarian site. This article examines the trail from the Mughal to the colonial periods, highlighting how preservation efforts were influenced by shifting power structures. The Mughal era focused on organic maintenance, and imperial prestige was closely associated with colonial interventions, which often combined neglect with paternalistic restoration. Lord Curzon's project, which



**Figure 1:** Humayun Tomb Source: AKTC

spanned 1903 to 1909, serves as a prime example of this approach 34, (9). Post-colonial reflections frequently reference UNESCO, with a significant designation in 1993 and collaborations with the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) commencing in 1997(5), (9). Current debates emphasize authenticity, necessitating consideration of historical layering. The methodology employed is a historical-analytical approach, synthesizing primary sources such as the Ain-i-Akbari and colonial gazetteers, alongside secondary analyses from scholarly papers and conservation reports. The significance of this study lies in understanding the evolution of conservation practices, which have transformed over time, offering valuable lessons for heritage preservation. Delhi faces the challenges of rapid urbanization. The scope of this study is limited to specific historical periods, namely the Mughal era (1526-1857) and colonial era (1857-1947). This study primarily focuses on the post-independence period, with contextual references permitted only. This temporal focus facilitates an in-depth exploration of the transitions from the pre-modern to the modern era. Archival evidence is crucial for the analysis, and

site-specific interventions are thoroughly examined. This article presents a compelling argument that conservation efforts are not solely technical in nature. Instead, cultural narratives were deeply inter-twined, and economic factors significantly influenced the outcomes. Political narratives have played a pivotal role in shaping these efforts.

## 2. Literature Review

Scholarly discourse has evolved significantly, transitioning from architectural analyses to the predominance of interdisciplinary heritage studies. Emphasis is now placed on conservation, amidst change. Early contributions include Percy Brown's 1942 publication, which addressed the Islamic period. The tomb is identified as a prototype mausoleum, with Persian influences prominently highlighted, marking a departure from traditional Indo-Islamic architecture. Brown's focus is on innovations, such as the double dome



**Figure 2:** Before Conservation

measuring 42.5 meters and the use of stone inlays work 1). The integrity of the original design is understood, which informs conservation debates. The discipline of narrative history has faced several challenges. UNESCO reports emphasize its significance, with the 1993 inscription being pivotal to this (4). Periodic evaluations, such as those conducted in 2018, highlight the Outstanding Universal Value as a symbol. However, urban development poses a threat to the site, and neglect has been noted. Shankar IAS's 2025 overview connects various frameworks, including the Ancient Monuments Act of 1958, which has colonial origins in Curzon's policies (6). Recent studies have incorporated multiple dimensions, including socio-cultural aspects, as evidenced by Nanda's undated work. The zone contains over 50 structures, with Humayun's Tomb and the Sunder Nursery being notable examples (2). Community involvement is emphasized, particularly in post-colonial projects. Mehta's

2022 paper examines the decline, noting Charbagh's roots in Mughal systems and the colonial practice of vegetable cultivation (5), (2), (14), (3). There are evident gaps in the literature, particularly regarding the economic aspects of maintenance and the underexplored areas of the Mughal and colonial leasing. This article aims to address these gaps by synthesizing sources and contributing a chronological narrative with analytical depth.

### 3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative methodology, utilizing a historical-analytical approach. The foundation of this study is archival research, with a comprehensive document analysis. Secondary sources have been meticulously synthesized, while primary data include



**Figure 3:** During Restoration Source: AgaKhan Trust



**Figure 4:** Refugee at Himyun tomb 1947

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texts such as the Ain-i-Akbari William Finch's 1611 account, and colonial records such as Curzon's letter. The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) provides additional details. Secondary sources include academic papers, UNESCO documents, and publications from the Aga Khan Trust or Culture (AKTC). Digital repositories such as Research Gate and Academia.edu were accessed for data collection, which involved targeted searches using keywords like "Humayun's Tomb conservation Mughal colonial." Databases such as Google Scholar and JSTOR were utilized alongside heritage sites such as UNESCO and ASI. The analysis employed thematic coding, with phases clearly categorized into construction, maintenance, decline, colonial reuse, and restoration. Ethical considerations were rigorously observed, ensuring accurate attribution and avoiding cultural bias, in alignment with the ICOMOS guidelines. This study acknowledges its limitations, including reliance on translated sources and archival gaps due to historical record losses.

#### 4. Mughal Period: Construction and Early Conservation (1526- 1707)

The conservation and construction of the tomb were intricately linked to Mughal imperial patronage motivated by religious devotion. Bega Begum commissioned the tomb following her return from Hajj in 1558, choosing a location near the spiritually significant dargah of Nizamuddin Auliya (11) (2), (6). This patronage emphasized the tomb's sanctity and ensured its early maintenance, with Emperor Akbar personally overseeing its progress and paying homage to it. The tomb was designed by Persian architects from Herat and Bukhara, reflecting a strong Persian influence (32), (25). The structure features a chamfered plan platform measuring 47 m, with a prominent central dome that served as a prototype for subsequent Mughal mausoleums. The use of red sandstone imported from Rajasthan and white marble from Makrana highlights the material choices that signify Mughal aesthetic preferences. The tomb is situated within Charbagh gardens, a Persian-style quadrilateral garden that symbolizes paradise. The gardens included meticulously engineered water channels fed by the Yamuna River, with a precise slope of 1:4000 to ensure a natural flow. Wells and aqueducts supported irrigation, underscoring the importance of water management in garden design and maintenance. The interior was lavishly appointed, with carpets covering floors, copies of the Quran placed inside, and artifacts such as swords, reflecting the tomb's religious and cultural significance. These elements reinforce the tomb's role as a sacred space and symbol of eternal paradise (5), (7). Subsequent emperors Jahangir and Shah Jahan added burials and minor architectural enhancements, including blue-tiled chhatris and stone inlays, which maintained the tomb's sanctity and aesthetic coherence (7). Fiscal strain caused by wars during Aurangzeb's rule led to reduced upkeep. The intensive irrigation needs of the gardens and labor demands became burdensome. The Mughal capital's shift to Lahore and Agra contributed to neglect, with initial

encroachments indicating the beginning of a deeper decline. These features collectively illustrate the Mughal era's architectural innovation, religious symbolism, and imperial patronage embedded in Humayun's Tomb, establishing it as a foundational monument in the Mughal heritage and conservation discourse (42), (40), (34).

#### 5. Decline and Transition in Late Mughal Era (1707-1857)

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there was a marked decline in the region, characterized by accelerated fragmentation. The power of the Mughal Empire significantly weakened, particularly following the invasions after Aurangzeb's reign. Notably, Nadir Shah invaded in 1739, followed by Ahmad Shah Abdali's invasion in 1757 (37), (11), (5). As resources were diverted elsewhere, the tomb was left vulnerable to looting. Settlers began to occupy the enclosure, and the Charbagh quadrants were converted into vegetable farms by the early 1700s (6). The water systems became clogged, leading to the gradual withering of the plantings. The emperors who followed were weaker, such as Muhammad Shah, who reigned from 1719 to 1748, and his successors. Site maintenance became sporadic and relied on local endowments. Despite this, the dynastic role of the site persisted, with burials continuing, including that of Dara Shikoh in 1659 (44), (45), (6). The structural integrity of the site suffered due to weathering and neglect, which accelerated its deterioration. By the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, under Zafar's rule, the tomb had lost much of its former glory, symbolizing the twilight of the imperial era. The Rebellion of 1857 marked a turning point, during which Zafar sought refuge in the tomb before surrendering to Captain Hodson on September 20, 1857 (36), 34. This event marked the end of Mughal rule, and the site was subsequently transferred to British control, signifying a complete shift in authority over the site.

#### 6. Colonial Period: Neglect, Reuse, and Restoration (1857-1947)

During British rule, new practices were introduced, leading to the emergence of ambivalent conservation, in which exploitation was intertwined with preservation. Following the events of 1857, the tomb was secured and declared Crown property. In 1860, the gardens were altered to adopt an English style. Water pools were replaced, circular flower beds were installed, and trees were planted informally, creating picnic grounds that reflected the Victorian aesthetics. This disrupted the symmetrical Charbagh design of the garden (34). In 1882, an enclosure was leased to cultivators, including descendants, to grow crops such as tobacco, a common treatment of farmland. Lord Curzon, who served as the Viceroy from 1899 to 1905, criticized this state of affairs, notably commenting on the cultivation of turnips in 1905. The garden was subsequently leased



**Figure 5:** Enclosure was leased to cultivators at Humayun tomb

to a native who undertook restoration efforts from 1903 to 1909, reinstating Mughal elements (34), (5), (2). The gardens were replanted with care, channels were lined with sandstone, and trees were aligned along the axes, with completion by 1915. This was part of a broader monument policy that established precedents for the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). In the 1920s, pragmatic additions were made, such as concrete roofing to prevent leakage, although this added structural stress and was later removed entirely (2). Following the Partition in 1947, the site housed refugees for five years, resulting in vandalism and significant damage to the gardens, with broken channels and cenotaphs bricked for protection, epitomizing colonial-era damage. This led to a transition in the ASI management (2), (35), (4), (37).

## 7. Analysis of Conservation Approaches

Post-independence, there has been a shift in conservation approaches. Mughal conservation is holistic, with spiritual integration and aesthetic maintenance as central elements. In contrast, colonial efforts focused on aesthetic revival and utilitarian reuse. Curzon's interventions were restorative; however, British interpretations often imposed changes that sometimes erased Mughal nuances, leading to ongoing debates about authenticity (22), (23), (26), (26). The Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) removed colonial layers, highlighting the tension between Community and Cultural memory. Economic factors were crucial for survival, with Mughal waqfs providing funding and colonial leasing practices being significant. Funding plays a critical role.

## 8. Conclusion

The conservation history of Humayun's Tomb illustrates remarkable resilience, reflecting the changes navigated across different eras, from the Mughal period to colonial

interventions. Akbar's patronage established the site's grandeur, while Curzon's colonial-era restorations played a crucial role in reviving its significance. The tomb has experienced cycles of decline and revival, embodying the broader cultural shifts over time. Modern heritage management offers clear lessons, emphasizing the essential role of community engagement and the need for adaptive strategies to address the challenges posed by urbanization. Future research should focus on exploring intangible heritage connections, which are vital for sustaining a site's cultural significance. As a Mughal jewel, Humayun's Tomb must endure as a testament to the historical and living heritage.

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