

# Shadowed Splendor: Resurrecting Mughal Women's Monuments

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## Abstract

Indian architectural heritage reflects a dynamic past, and among its most striking contributions are the structures influenced or commissioned by Mughal women—figures who navigated patriarchal boundaries to leave enduring marks on Delhi's built landscape. Iconic sites such as Khair-ul-Manazil, Humayun's Tomb, and Zeenat Mahal Haveli not only embody architectural brilliance but also narrate the often-overlooked stories of female patronage. However, the current state of these monuments is one of increasing fragility. A combination of environmental threats such as air pollution and climate change, along with human-induced issues including neglect, urban encroachment, and inadequate preservation policies, has placed these structures under serious threat. This paper emphasizes the urgent need for focused conservation efforts, not merely as a means of protecting historic buildings, but as a necessary act of cultural remembrance. The degradation of these sites equates to the gradual erasure of the significant contributions Mughal women made to Delhi's urban and cultural history. Conservation is thus not only a technical challenge but a moral imperative—to preserve the legacy of women whose architectural patronage helped shape the city. By addressing current threats and proposing sustainable preservation strategies, this study calls for re-centering women in historical narratives through the restoration and protection of the monuments they inspired or commissioned. Heritage conservation must evolve to recognize and include gendered contributions to history, ensuring that these spaces continue to educate and inspire future generations.

**Keywords:** mughal architecture, female patronage, historical memory, cultural erosion, and architectural conservation.

## 1. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

This research work aimed to highlight the architectural contributions of Mughal royal women whose identities and legacies have been overshadowed in a patriarchal historical narrative. It focuses to bring public awareness to lesser-known monuments commissioned by women and the present condition of these monuments due to environmental and human induced challenges. This work also advocates for the safeguarding and recognition of these monuments as important cultural and historical sites reflecting women's agency in Mughal India.

This study uses a qualitative approach based on fieldwork, observation, and historical analysis. Informal interviews conducted with visitors to assess public awareness, revealing limited knowledge about female patrons the use of relevant literature, ASI reports, and historical sources reviewed to understand each monument's background. Visual documentation used to record structural damage and neglect.

## 2. INTRODUCTION

Monuments are not just stone and structure—they are storytellers that preserve the memory and legacy of their creators. While much of Mughal architecture is attributed to emperors and male patrons, the significant contributions of Mughal royal women are still largely underrepresented in historical narratives. The Zenana or harem, though often seen as a secluded space, was a powerful Center of influence in Mughal India. Despite their lives being confined within the zenana, influential women like Maham Anga, Bega Begum, Fatehpuri Begum, Jahanara, Roshanara, Zeenat Mahal, and Kaniz Fatima played a powerful role in shaping Delhi's architectural landscape. Royal women like Nur Jahan, Jahanara Begum, Roshanara Begum, Fatehpuri Begum, and Zeenat-un-Nisa used their status to commission mosques, gardens, and tombs across Delhi. Their patronage shaped the city's architectural heritage, turning the Zenana into a hub of cultural and political power often overlooked in history. These women used their wealth, political influence, and cultural vision to commission structures that served both religious and social purposes.

The monologue is in two sections, each examining three key monuments. The first section will focus on Khairul-Manazil, Humayun's Tomb, and Fatehpuri Mosque, exploring their architectural design, historical significance, the authority of the women behind them, and the threats they currently meet.

The second section will study Roshanara Bagh, Zeenat Mahal Haveli, and Fakhr-ul-Masjid, discussing their structural uniqueness, present condition, and conservation challenges. Through these detailed case studies, the research aims to highlight both the artistic legacy and the resilience of Mughal women, while advocating for the urgent preservation of their fading contributions to Delhi's rich heritage.

### SECTION-I KHAIR-UL-MANAZIL-MOSQUE (1561-62)

#### Commissioned by Maham Anga)

The beautiful tall standing Masjid, the khair-ul-manazil, is situated right opposite to the purana qila and next to Lal Darwaza on the grand truck road, it was built by emperor Akbar's Turkish wetnurse, Mahamanga in 1561 AD. Khairul masjid translates as the most auspicious house. It was commissioned by a woman, for women in India. It can also be considered as a women's ode to divinity because many scholars have suggested that maham Anga visited here every Friday for prayer and the mosque's high periphery was due to its function as a women's madrasa. Khair-ul-manazil manazil was also a theatre of conflict of Britishers and revolutionaries during the independence movement. We can also see its traces today in 21st century.

The most impressive feature features of this monument are an imposing gateway of red sandstone with an octagonal ablutions pool in the Centre and double storied cloisters, a bulbous dome decorated with lotus petal, a prayer hall, two surrounded rooms by a huge courtyard. The central arch of the mosque has marble plaque that mentions the name of Maham Anga. When we personally saw this mosque, we noticed that inspite of being under the archaeological survey of India, this mosque has lack of attention and preservation.



(Fig no- 1, khair ul Manzil mosque)



**Fig-2, Present condition of Mosque (Source: Pics by the author during field visit)**

The Khairul Manazil Mosque and madrasa, built in 1561–62 by Maham Anga, stands as a significant architectural and historical structure near Purana Qila in Delhi. The mosque is a Monument of National Importance<sup>1</sup>, administered and maintained by the Archaeological Survey of India<sup>2</sup>.

However, over time, it has suffered considerable deterioration due to a mix of environmental, structural, and human-made factors. Natural weathering, especially under Delhi's harsh climatic conditions — which include intense heat, humidity, and pollution — has taken a toll on the mosque's red sandstone structure and decorative elements. Cracking, delamination, bursting, crumbling, and chipping are common defects now visible in its walls and facades. The beautifully crafted tile work and Quranic inscriptions have faded, with substantial portions of the tiles having peeled off. Furthermore, the madrasa area within the mosque complex is in a particularly perilous condition, with its galleries now in ruins. Vegetation overgrowth, poor visibility due to encroachment and modern infrastructure like iron gates and nearby traffic, and neglect have all contributed to its decline. Historically, the mosque was also damaged during the Independence movement, when it was bombed — a blow that left lasting structural injuries.

To conserve Khairul Manazil, a multi-pronged approach is essential. First, regular structural assessments must be conducted to check damage and prevent further deterioration. Restoration should include careful replacement or stabilization of broken tiles and stone, using materials and methods consistent with the original construction. Cleaning and preservation of inscriptions and decorative motifs are also vital. The surrounding area should be cleared of overgrowth, and visual access to the mosque must be restored to re-establish its recorded context with.

Archived from the original on the Purana Qila. Public awareness and official support are crucial to maintain the site, by integrating it into heritage tourism programs. With such steps, this historically rich mosque can be protected for future generations.

## **HUMAYUN'S TOMB (1569) (Commissioned by Hamida Banu Begum)**

Humayun's tomb is an ancient monument of historic importance where the second Mughal emperor Humayun's was buried. It was built under the patronage of Hamida Banu Begum, also known as haji begum, to commemorate the death of her husband. It was built in 1569 AD. The tomb is considered as the

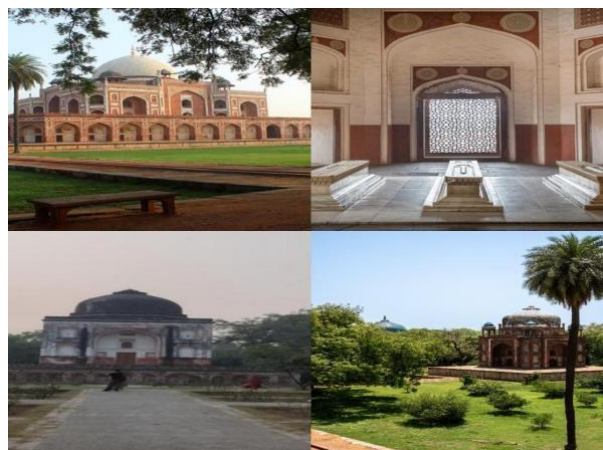
1. List of Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains of Delhi." Archaeological Survey of India. Retrieved 2 October 2018.
2. Driving past Khairul Manzil" Indian Express. Retrieved 26 October 2017.

first example of the Mughal style based on Persian architecture. Its bold execution, innovative form, and symbolic depth make it a landmark in Indian architectural history.

The Humayun's tomb was architected by Mirak Mirza Ghiyas. The dome is divided into two layers ;the outer layer supports the white marble's exterior appearance, while the inner layer defines the cave's inner volume. The tomb, which is 7 feet tall, is situated in the center of the plinth. Its central dome reaches a height of 140 meters above the ground.

There is vast room in the interior of Humayun's tomb with a symbolic object facing Mecca in the west and there is also a mihrab design on a marble lattice or jaali in the room. This room has a high ceiling and is made up of four huge octagonal rooms on two floors, aligned in diagonals with wooden shelves. There are a total of 124 rooms in the structure. The Humayun's tomb is a sophisticated, complicated structure. The AKTC (Aga khan trust for culture), ASI and INTAC played an incredibly significant role in the restoration of the tomb.

Humayun's Tomb, a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1993, faces several conservation challenges despite being well-maintained overall. One of the main threats to the site is commercialisation and urbanisation in the surrounding buffer zone. This unchecked development poses risks to the visual and environmental integrity of the monument. However, actions since 1992 have shown some positive outcomes in controlling these pressures. Vehicular pollution has also been identified as a harmful factor, particularly affecting the stone structures. Fortunately, pollution levels have decreased since 2002, contributing to better preservation conditions. Another concern is encroachment, although it is now reportedly under control with efforts underway to relocate inhabitants from the site's vicinity. Natural threats such as lightning have been addressed through the installation of lightning protection, and currently, there is no threat from floods or fire. While there is no immediate danger to the site, the absence of a formal emergency or risk preparedness plan is a notable gap in conservation efforts.



**Fig.3, Humayun's Tomb, and it is current situations (Source: Pics by Author)**

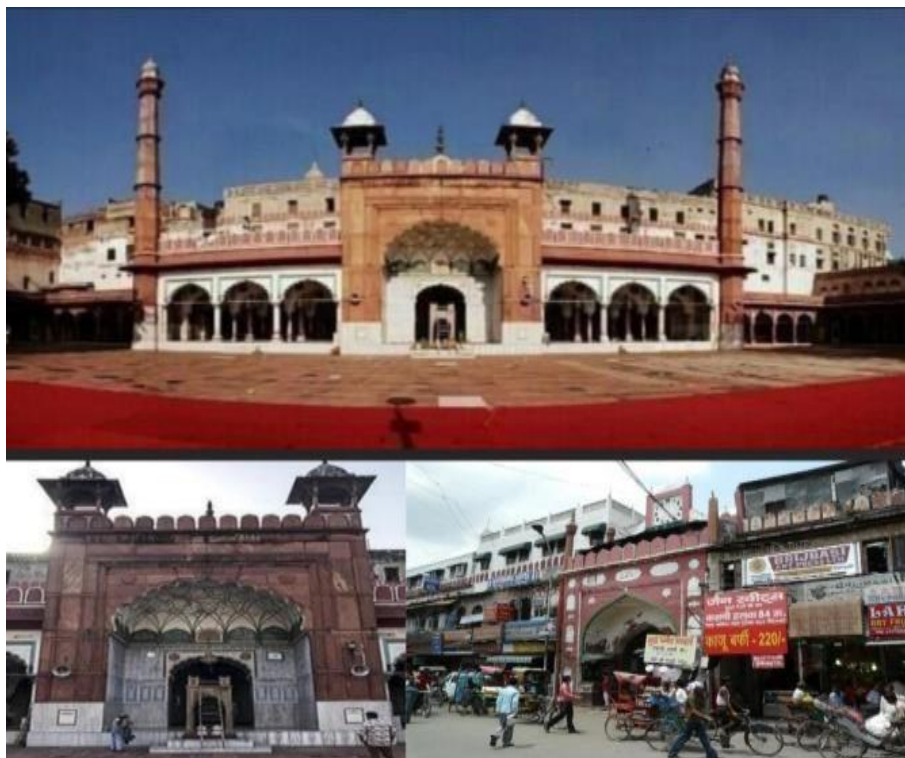
Moreover, development activities in the buffer zone still need tighter control and coordination to prevent indirect impacts on the site's structure and environment. The need for improved monitoring systems, including archival records and geographical indexing, is acknowledged but still in planning. In terms of site management, while staffing is considered sufficient, there is a lack of training in modern conservation techniques, visitor handling, and security technologies. Although financial support from the central government and the Agha Khan Trust has been adequate so far, there is a requirement for continued investment in visitor facilities and infrastructure upgrades to balance public engagement with heritage



protection. Overall, while the site's core values and authenticity Remain intact, proactive, and strategic measures are essential to mitigate current and potential threats effectively.

## **FATEHPURI MASJID (1650) Commissioned By Fatehpuri Begum**

Fatehpuri mosque, built in 1650 by Fatehpuri Begum, what of emperor Shah jahan's wives, is a significant 17th century monument located at the Western end of Chandni chowk, Delhi oldest Street. It is the second largest mosque in Delhi and striking example of Mughal Era architecture. Constructed using red sandstone, the mosque features a fluted dome adorned with mahapadma and kalash finials. Do structure is flanked by twin minarets, while it is prayer hall consist of seven beautiful arched openings. The interiors are equally breath-taking embellished with vibrant colours and intricate calligraphic inscriptions. Fatehpuri mosque has three and entrances: -one facing the Red fort at Chandni chowk, and the Other two leading to khari baoli in the north and Katra Bartan in the south. The masjid faces several environmental and urban threats that endanger its historical integrity. Chief among these is severe air pollution, a persistent problem in Delhi. The mosque, located in the heart of Old Delhi near Chandni Chowk, is constantly exposed to elevated levels of particulate matter (PM2.5 and PM10) and other atmospheric pollutants. These pollutants accelerate the weathering of red sandstone and other architectural features, leading to structural deterioration. In addition, the mosque is affected by noise and water pollution, both of which disrupt the sanctity and stability of its environment.



**(Fig-4, self taken, displays the Fatehpuri Mosque and its current condition)**

Urban decay presents another serious challenge to the preservation of the Fatehpuri Masjid. The surrounding area has seen increasing congestion, encroachment, and infrastructure neglect, all of which compromise the aesthetic and cultural significance of the monument. Conservation efforts must be multi-pronged—Delhi's air quality initiatives, including vehicle restrictions and promotion of cleaner

transportation, need to be reinforced. Additionally, urban renewal projects like the Chandni Chowk redevelopment plan should prioritize the integration of heritage conservation into city planning. Regular maintenance, structural restoration, and public awareness campaigns are also essential to safeguard this important symbol of Mughal heritage.

## SECTION -2

### ROSHANARA BAGH (1650s) Commissioned By Roshanara Begum

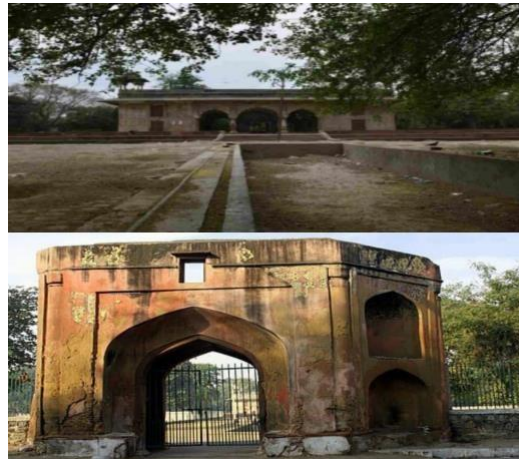
Roshanara Bagh <sup>roof</sup> the largest gardens in Old Delhi, was set up by princess Roshanara, the daughter of emperor Shah Jahan. Located in Shakti Nagar, near Kamla chowk Tower and the North campus of Delhi University, the garden was once a symbol of Mughal grandeur. Today, the only remaining structure from its original design is Roshanara's tomb. Roshanara was regarded as one of the most powerful and influential women of the Mughal Empire.

She has the prestigious title of mansabdar, high-ranking position in the imperial court, highlighting High political acumen and authority. The garden originally featured a raised canal lined with Flowering plants on both sides, creating a picturesque retreat. Today, Roshanara Bagh Houses a white marble pavilion built in her memory. Though the garden has changed overtime, it is still historical landmark, reflecting the legacy of remarkable Mughal princess.

The 17th-century Mughal Garden built by Princess Roshanara Begum in Delhi, is currently under threat from a range of environmental and human-induced factors. One of the most pressing concerns is the drying up of its central lake, historically sustained by a natural stream. Excessive and unsustainable groundwater extraction in the surrounding areas has led to the lake's desiccation, disrupting the ecological balance of the garden. Although plans like the Delhi government's "City of Lakes" project and interventions by the National Green Tribunal have proposed methods to rejuvenate the lake using treated water or seepage from Delhi Metro tunnels, implementation has been slow and inconsistent. Additionally, the tomb of Roshanara Begum, a protected heritage structure, suffers from neglect and damage due to inadequate maintenance and improper use of the site, such as people playing sports near the monument.



Fig-5, Pics by Author



**Fig -6, Pics showing deterioration**

Apart from water issues, the Bagh faces severe ecological and structural degradation. Invasive plant species like Vilaiti Keekar (*Prosopis juliflora*), *Lantana camara*, and *Parthenium* grass are overpowering the native flora, disrupting the natural biodiversity and sunlight availability. Urban encroachment and unregulated development around the park further threaten its tranquil character. The presence of garbage, dust, and crumbling built structures signal a lack of regular upkeep, while unchecked human activity and lack of security contribute to the damage. To conserve Roshanara Bagh, a multi-layered approach is necessary reviving the lake through sustainable water management, removing invasive species to restore native vegetation, ensuring regular structural maintenance, and integrating it into urban conservation programs. Strong coordination between the Delhi Jal Board, ASI, municipal bodies, and environmental groups will be key to preserving this historical and ecological heritage site.

## **HAVELI ZEENAT MAHAL (1846)**

### **Commissioned By Zinat-ul-Nissa Begum**

The Zeenat mahal haveli in old Delhi was a residence of Zeenat-ul-Nissa Begum, wife of Mughal emperor, Bahadur shah zafar. This haveli reflect the architectural style of the late Mughal period which marked by the blend of elegance, functionality, and simplicity. Zeenat mahal also played a significant role in the Mughal court and known for her influence over Bahadur shah zafar. Zeenat Mahal's haveli was considered as a symbol of Mughal sophistication and elite living in the declining years of Bahadur shah zafar's empire. The haveli followed a traditional Mughal courtyard that allowed ventilation and natural light. This haveli was a multi –storied structure which was made of red sandstone and brick, carved with beautiful carvings and design. The haveli also featured ornamental arches and large doorways. These wooden doors were carved with flored and geometric motifs. Jharokas were a prominent feature used for the ventilation and women of the haveli to see the outside view.

Once a grand palace reflecting the opulence of the Mughal era, the Zeenat Mahal Haveli<sup>3</sup> in Delhi now exists only in fragments. The original structure has been demolished, with only the main entrance and boundary walls being still—both in a neglected and crumbling state. The haveli is under constant environmental and structural threats. Air pollution caused by an unauthorized red chilly powder factory running within its premises poses severe health hazards, especially to nearby residents and school-going children. A complete lack of maintenance, encroachments, and unregulated commercial conversions into

3. Misra Rekha, women Mughal India (1526-1749), Munshiram Manoharlal; New Delhi; 1967, pp 51.

shops, guesthouses, and even a girls' school have further diminished its architectural and cultural integrity. Poor infrastructure, including overlapping electric wires, unmanaged waste, and littering, add to its rapid decay and have significantly undermined its heritage value.



**Fig-7, Haveli Zeenat Mahal: as clicked by the author.**

Conserving the Zeenat Mahal Haveli requires urgent and coordinated efforts. Firstly, the Public Works Department (PWD) must enforce regulations by removing unauthorized encroachments and shutting down illegal activities that damage the site. Restoration initiatives should focus on preserving the remaining architectural features and revitalizing the haveli through expert conservation. Community engagement through heritage walks, awareness campaigns, and local involvement can create a sense of responsibility towards its upkeep. Additionally, sustainable practices like rainwater harvesting and the promotion of green infrastructure can support a healthier environment around the site. Improvement in basic infrastructure, such as waste management and safe electrical wiring, would not only enhance the haveli's surroundings but also help reclaim its historical essence and cultural significance for

## FAKHR-UL-MASJID

### Commissioned by Zinnat-unnisa Begum

Fakhrool masjid<sup>4</sup> was built in 1728 AD, by Zinnat-unnisa Begum, a noblewoman and the wife of one of Aurangzeb's grantees. Within the enclosure of the Sarhandi Mosque, Zinnat-un-Nisa Begum, daughter of Aurangzeb, constructed a small tomb for herself. It is situated opposite to the church near Kashmiri gate. It is also known as Lal masjid. The mosque situated on a raised plinth of approximately 12.2 and 2.5 meters above the shop lined streets. The main complex of the mosque consists of three rooms which each has its own arched entryway. The center arch is mirrored by the mosque's two minarets. The inscription on the central arch recorded the reason for the building of mosque. The dome was decorated by black and white marbles and topped with gilded finials. but in today's time, those finials are damaged. The left wall of the mosque was damaged during the siege of Delhi in 1857.

4. Surendranath Sen, Delhi, and its monuments (1954), pp-34, Sri Gouranga Press Ltd.





**(Fig no-9, Fakhur-ul-Masjid, and its current situation)**

Fakhur-ul-Masjid, a 17th-century mosque located in Delhi, faces several threats that endanger its structural integrity and historical value. Over the years, the mosque has suffered from neglect, unauthorized encroachments, and lack of routine maintenance. Encroachment by nearby buildings and commercial structures has narrowed access to the mosque and altered its historical setting. Environmental factors such as air pollution, water seepage during monsoons, and vegetation growth in cracks have further weakened the structure. Vandalism, illegal constructions, and dumping of garbage around the site have also degraded the ambiance and dignity of this heritage monument.



**(Fig -10, showing its deterioration by human as well as environmental destruction)**

To preserve Fakhur-ul-Masjid, urgent steps are needed, including the removal of encroachments and the establishment of a clear boundary around the mosque. Conservation experts should assess the structural damage and restore the mosque using traditional building materials and techniques. The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) or local heritage bodies must take responsibility for its upkeep and security. Public awareness campaigns, especially among the local community, can help in protecting the site from further damage. Additionally, proper lighting, signage, and controlled access can improve the site's visibility and encourage respectful visitation, helping retain its religious and historical significance.

## FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

The architectural legacy of Mughal royal women in Delhi is far more than ornamental—it is an enduring assertion of agency within a patriarchal order. Through their patronage of mosques, madrasas, caravanserais, tombs, and gardens, these women asserted political, cultural, and spiritual authority.

1. **Agency under veiled power:** Despite seclusion in the zenana, figures like Nur Jahan, Jahanara Begum, and Bega Begum exercised tangible administrative and architectural influence—Nur Jahan oversaw the construction of her father's tomb and the I'timād-ud-Daulah in Agra, while Jahanara planned Chandni Chowk and built multiple edifices in Shahjahanabad.
  2. **Public curation of cultural identity:** These women shaped Delhi's skyline—notably Maham Anga's Khair-ul-Manazil (1561), Fatehpuri Begum's Mosque (1650), Zeenat-un-Nissa's Zeenat-ul-Masajid (c. 1700), etc. intertwining their spiritual devotion with civic ambition.
  3. **Patronage as legacy:** These structures exemplify Indo-Islamic architecture and served educational, religious, and social functions—libraries, madrasas, and caravanserais—making royal women not just patrons, but cultural stewards.
  4. **Heritage at risk:** Today, many such monuments—in disrepair due to environmental stress, neglect, and lack of awareness—warrant conservation efforts that go beyond mere preservation of stones; they demand recognition of gendered histories embedded in these spaces.
- **From Buildings to Broader Narrative:** Preserving these sites should be framed through a gender-sensitive lens that:
    - Highlights contextual histories, making visible the contributions of women behind each structure.
    - Promotes community engagement, where storytelling and signage foreground female patronage.
    - Integrates interdisciplinary conservation, combining structural restoration with socio-cultural conservation.

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