

# **Managing India's Archaeological Heritage: A Brief Overview**

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## **Abstract**

This write-up explores the challenges and strategies in preserving India's cultural heritage amid rapid urban development and population growth. It discusses the role of the Archaeological Survey of India in safeguarding and maintaining monuments and sites of national importance, alongside evolving conservation practices influenced by international charters and the pressures of modernization.

**Keywords:** Cultural Heritage Conservation; Archaeological Survey of India (ASI); World Heritage Sites; Urban Development Impact; Heritage Legislation; Monument Preservation

The world today has to choose between so many extremes that it is difficult to say what the present world would be like after a quarter of a century. The past, with its miraculous achievements and emphasis on mass production, should have paved the way to greater human happiness, but far from it, it has devised new ways and means to a more complicated life. This has adversely affected the world heritage, and India is also not out of it.

India has the privilege of having 40 Cultural, Natural, and Mixed sites inscribed in the World Heritage List of UNESCO, out of which most of the Cultural Sites are under the purview of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). The ASI, established in 1861, is the nodal agency for World Heritage in India, entrusted with the responsibility of protecting and maintaining monuments and archaeological sites declared to be of National Importance under the relevant provisions of the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act of 1904, the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act of 1958, and the AMASR (Amendment and Validation) Act of 2010.

With the publication of the Conservation Manual in 1922 by the then Director General of the ASI, John Marshall, the principles, methods, and approach to conserving monuments were codified for guidance and execution of works. The manual is still relevant and followed. However, considering the subsequent adoption of various international charters and conventions, such as the Venice Charter (1964), Hague Convention (1954), and other regulations, the approach towards the conservation of heritage has been modified. Importance is now given to maintaining the authenticity and integrity of monuments and protecting their outstanding value. Over the last few decades, efforts have been made to facilitate visitors, particularly in larger groups of monuments or areas visited by more tourists. Comprehensive Conservation Management Plans and visitors' movement plans are being prepared and implemented for such monuments, including those inscribed in the World Heritage List. Additionally, visitors' facilities of international standards are being provided.

Due to rapid urban growth and population increase, many ancient sites have suffered in the past, with some being entirely eclipsed due to constructions or leveling of mounds for construction or farming. There is an urgent need to complete the unprotected monuments and sites database so that state governments can earmark them to halt further damage. Recognizing this importance, a National Mission of Monuments and Antiquities has been set up by the Ministry of Culture, working under the ASI, to prepare a national heritage register. Salvage operations to retrieve monumental remains and antiquarian wealth are being promoted, and regular meetings of the Central Advisory Board of Archaeology (CABA) are urgently needed to implement the protection of our heritage.

Understanding the monument in its various aspects relating to history, archaeology, art, architecture, styles, and technology of construction is essential. Civil engineers within the ASI can comprehend construction techniques after proper training and field experience. Additionally,

involving conservation architects has become necessary, and successful attempts have been made in recent years. These professionals are expected to possess basic and practical experience as general architects, along with knowledge of early building technology and the ability to identify and interpret a building's original fabric and later additions.

There is sometimes confusion about why archaeologists are tasked with heading the circles responsible for conserving protected monuments. An example from my personal experience as head of the Delhi Circle in 1992 sheds light on this. During repairs to the Kashmiri Gate in Delhi, the conservation assistant was about to plug holes and repair damaged parts, but upon inspection, it was realized that these holes and damages were caused during the Revolt of 1857, serving as direct evidence of a significant historical event. This incident highlights why archaeologists are crucial for directing conservation works, ensuring that evidence is retained while monuments are conserved.

Throughout tenures in Aurangabad, Delhi, and Srinagar Circles, various situations reinforced the conviction regarding the necessity of archaeologists in conservation efforts. For instance, amongst different army barracks of Red Fort, Delhi, the hall where the INA Trial of the three INA heroes was held in 1945 had not been identified. By carefully examining a photograph of the trial scene, a missing part of the wooden frame of the arch of a closed door and impressions of electric switchboards on the walls were observed. This led to the identification of the hall, demonstrating how such efforts aid in the identification, documentation, and preservation of evidence during conservation works.

In recent times, emphasis has been placed on two significant aspects of the study of archaeological sites: "Problem-Oriented" surveys and "Salvage Operations." Several examples illustrate this:

Kasi, the ancient city of Mahajanapada, also known as Varanasi, situated at the confluence of the Ganga, Varana, and Asi rivers, underwent excavations by the ASI in 1940 at the Rajghat site. Extensive work by the BHU team from 1960 to 1967 revealed a continuous sequence from pre-NBPW to medieval times. Further excavations in 2013-14 by ASI and Jnana-Pravaha aimed to study the culture sequence and revise periodization. C14 dates from the site now determine its antiquity around 1600 BCE.

Another significant sacred city site is Kapilavastu, represented by the Piprahwa-Ganwaria complex in Siddharthnagar district, Uttar Pradesh. Excavations in the 1970s by the ASI provided evidence of Kapilavastu's location, while excavations in 2012-13 revealed early dates through radiocarbon dating. Pre-NBPW dates from Kapilavastu include  $2360 \pm 230$  BCE,  $1740 \pm 140$  BCE, and  $1100 \pm 200$  BCE, with two early NBPW dates of  $1070 \pm 70$  BCE and  $700 \pm 70$  BCE.

Excavations at the disputed site of Ayodhya (2002-03) revealed a continuous cultural sequence spanning about 10.80 meters and divided into nine cultural periods. The excavations provided evidence of the early introduction and continuity of NBPW, dated at least 500 years earlier than previously thought. Seven consistent NBPW dates span about 1250 to 200 BCE.

Problem-oriented surveys include the excavation at Sarnath, where previous archaeologists believed the site came into existence only after Asoka. Excavations in 2013-14 revealed evidence of human activity dating back to 385 BCE, suggesting activity more than a hundred years before Asoka.

I am also reminded of Kanishkapur or Kanispur in Kashmir, which Kalhana mentioned in his Rajatarangini as the city established by Kushan emperor Kanishka. Based on this premise, the site was excavated in 1998-99, revealing archaeological evidence of the city's establishment during Kushan times.

Regarding salvage operations, three sites in Haryana deserve mention: Bohr Majra, Muhammad Nagar, and Harnol. The mound of Bohr Majra in Rohtak was being damaged for the establishment of a housing colony. ASI intervened, excavating the site and discovering an early medieval mint site, yielding numerous coin moulds, crucibles, and the structure of the complex. Muhammad Nagar and Harnol were similarly affected, with the local Public Works Department excavating earth from the mounds for road construction. Subsequent excavations revealed Pre-Painted Gray Ware culture through early historic and PGW remains at both sites, contributing to our understanding of the region's history.

These are just a few indicative sites among many where salvage operations have been conducted. It is essential to prioritize both problem-oriented surveys and salvage operations to preserve our heritage for posterity and increase our knowledge, recognizing that it may not be feasible to protect every archaeological site in the country.