

Monumental Legacy of Mughal Women



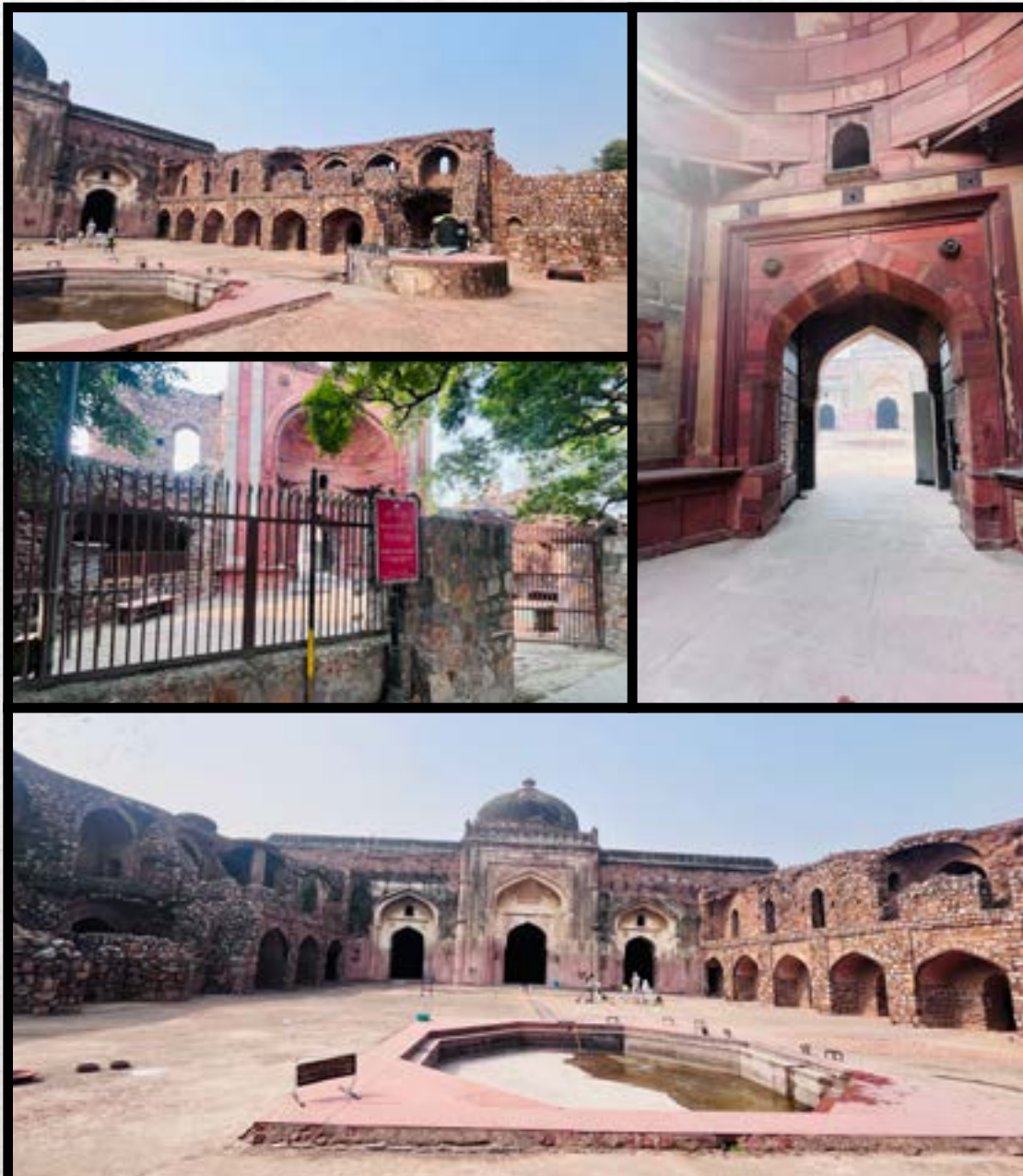
*Dr. Aradhana Singh**

History students and enthusiasts know it quite well that monuments are not mere structures of stone and rubble, but great storytellers. They all offer a unique narrative and a glimpse into the life of their patrons and audiences. The present day region of Delhi-National Capital Region is infused with innumerable such masterpieces, some much celebrated and enjoying the limelight, while others still waiting to be “discovered”, in the true sense of the term. The present article in the series, ‘Women in Indian History’, traces the story of a few such monuments in the region, commissioned by Mughal women. These female builders and entrepreneurs, as I prefer to call them, come from different sections of society, and commission these buildings for a variety of purposes. Women were in a position to inherit and own property and wealth during the Mughal times. Most of them therefore used it to patronise art and architecture, something they were deeply interested in and in hindsight, the only means to give them a sort of permanency on the historical landscape. Let us delve into the details of some of them, to be in a better position to situate these in the socio-economic and gender dynamics of the times.

Most people are aware of the history of the Purana Qila or Old Fort, and the several incidents that the structure bore witness to, Humayun’s fall from the stairs of his library and subsequent death, for example. However, not many know that the beautiful tall-standing masjid, the ‘Khair-ul-Manazil’, situated right opposite the Purana Qila, was built by emperor Akbar’s Turkish wet-nurse, Maham Anga. A marble plaque on the central arch clearly assigns this structure to Maham Anga. With its name translating into the ‘best of houses’, the letters in Persian script also give out a numerical value, signifying the year of its construction, i.e. 1561-62 CE. Maham Anga was an influential

* Assistant Professor, Department of Ancient History
C.M.P. Degree College, Prayagraj, UP

figure in the politics and administration of the time, especially when emperor Akbar was coming of age, operating as no more than a figurehead. Her influence was so great that historians have referred to the time as “petticoat government”, signifying the important place a female held in the administrative set up. This imposing, two-storey structure is testament to her power and influence. Moreover, the location chosen by Mahan Anga to construct this mosque, near a large fort complex, which witnessed a lot of political upheavals in the preceding decades, is further indicative of her shrewdness and understanding of the deeper political connections during the age.



Khair-ul-Manazil | Pictures Clicked by Ankit Verma

Shah Jahan's love for Mumtaz Mahal is immortalised in history and memory in the form of the majestic Taj Mahal, but the structure itself derives its design and architectural features from the first garden-tomb complex on the Indian subcontinent, the Humayun's Tomb. Interestingly, the Humayun's Tomb is also a monument commemorating love, this time around though, its the Chief Queen, Bega Begum's love for her posthumous husband and Emperor Humayun. Sprawling over an approximately 27 ha grand complex including other sixteenth century garden-tombs, Humayun's tomb was built in the 1560s. Also known as Haji Begum, she was a Persian from Khorasan who was encouraged in this architectural endeavour by Akbar, who became Emperor on Humayun's death. It is believed that she went to Haj more than once in her lifetime, and had also brought Arab craftsmen with her on one of these trips to work at the tomb. Humayun's Tomb introduced major elements of Persian architecture in India, the domed mausoleum surrounded by charbagh garden being the most significant. Mirak Mirza Ghiyath, a Persian, was the chief architect of this structure in red sandstone and white marble. He ensured an aesthetic combination of Persian and Indian architectural elements here. Bega Begum is also buried in the same complex near her beloved husband.



Humayun Tomb | Pictures Clicked by Dr. Peeyush Jain



Humayun Tomb | Pictures Clicked by Dr. Peeyush Jain

Right in the heart of the city, overlooking the magnificent Red Fort, is situated the second largest mosque in Delhi, the Fatehpuri Masjid, built by one of Emperor Shah Jahan's wives, Fatehpuri Begum in 1650. Built in red sandstone, the mosque is a beautiful specimen of Mughal architectural style and finesse. A dominant single dome, plastered intelligently to almost resemble a marble one, is flanked by towering minarets on all sides. The interiors of the mosque are even more breathtaking, painted with bright colours and calligraphic inscriptions. The region became especially active during 1857 Revolt, and the mosque was used as a storehouse for a few years, before being returned to the Muslims in 1877. Although the husband is renowned for his architectural endeavours, be it the Taj Mahal or the Red Fort, where thousands of people visit each day, we come across only sketchy information on Fatehpuri Begum, or any of his other wives for that matter, except the famous Mumtaz Mahal. The neglect in turn throws significant light on the likely tensions prevalent in polygamous households, wherein women had to cope with neglect and abandonment on a regular basis. Interestingly, alongside Akbarabadi Begum, Fatehpuri Begum commissioned her tomb near the Taj Mahal's forecourt. As the Emperor spent a major part of his life planning his tribute to Mumtaz Mahal, they probably thought of leaving their marks too in the history of the Mughal Empire and staying close to him in life and death. But unfortunately just a few visitors ever spare a thought for these lesser-known occupants or come looking for them. With few takers, these structures have also suffered neglect at the hands of the authorities who have now banned entry into these tombs.



Fatehpuri Masjid | Pictures Clicked by Ankit Verma

When discussing enthusiastic patrons of art and architecture one cannot miss the great contribution of Qudsiya Begum, queen of Mughal emperor Muhammad Shah “Rangeela” (1702-1748). Earlier known as Udham Bai, she was a dancing girl before emperor Muhammad Shah decided to marry her. She exercised great influence on the affairs of the state, especially between 1748-1754 as a regent monarch of her son, Ahmed Shah Bahadur. History remembers her for the beautiful palace-garden complex known as Qudsiya Bagh. Situated on the busy Sham Nath Road near Kashmere Gate, Qudsiya Bagh was built in 1748 and suffered the ravages of the 1857 Revolt, resulting in the demolishment or modification of a lot of structures within the complex. Numerous early sketches of the garden-complex and its surroundings offer a glimpse into the architectural and aesthetic appeal of the structure. Situated along the bank of the Yamuna river, and boasting a great variety of flora, the palace has often been described as ‘paradise-like’. Built in classic Charbagh pattern, it is believed to have been deeply influenced by Persian architectural features like fountains, orchards and water channels. The British siege of Delhi in 1857 took away the splendour of the structures present here, but their soul still resonates with the tales of this powerful and enterprising Begum.



Quidsiya Bagh | Pictures Clicked by Dr. Peeyush Jain

Mentioned above are just a few examples of the successful monumental feats commissioned by wives, daughters, concubines, mothers, dancers, etc, during Mughal times. One can add to the list the names of Jahanara, Roshanara, Akbarabadi Begum, Zeb-un-Nissa, Zeenat Mahal, and so on, and what we have towards the end is an entire gamut of enterprising and strong women, who used architecture, literature, painting and music to express themselves. These structures commissioned by them belong to different time periods, and were constructed for varying purposes, but one thing that appears to be common is their will to create a legacy of their own, where they will be remembered for generations to come. They were undoubtedly an integral part of the politico-administrative and cultural structures of the time, and therefore merit our

attention. Our greatest homage to their creative spirit would be to bring them out of the shadows of their male counterparts, and celebrate their untold stories, not as agents of pleasure, but as independent, strong-willed and foresighted women.

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