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The Nizamuddin area is today recognized as one of the densest ensemble's of medieval Islamic buildings anywhere in India. Almost every dynasty to have ruled Delhi has built here; the Il Bari Turks (also known as the Slave dynasty), the Khaljis, the Tughlaqs, the Lodis, the Surs and, of course, the Mughals built some of the finest buildings of their reigns in this small geographical area that stood along the River Yamuna, until the river receded eastwards in the nineteenth century.

Ghiyas ud din Balban built his palace here in the mid thirteenth century, before he ascended the throne in 1265, giving the area the name of Ghiyaspur. Lal Mahal, as his palace came to be known, was a fine building with a central dome and is today the earliest surviving Islamic palace building in India. At Lal Mahal the first recorded use in the country of the dome and true arch was employed. The famed traveller Ibn Batutta stayed at Lal Mahal for a part of his stay in Delhi. Today Lal Mahal serves as a residence, with portions of the building demolished in 2008–09 to make way for a new mosque.

The significance of the area today derives from Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya, the revered fourteenth-century Sufi saint who chose to establish his *khanqah* in Ghiyaspur. The grand Jamaat Khana mosque built here during Alauddin Khalji's reign (1295–1315), to royal scale, remains, to date, one of the grandest structures in the complex. The construction of the mosque and that of the Baoli in 1320 would signify the presence of a significant population in Ghiyaspur or even a large volume of pilgrims visiting here to seek the blessings of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya. The Baoli would have served not only the drinking water needs of the local community and pilgrims but would also have been used for *wuzu* or ablutions prior to prayers at the mosque.

On his death, the saint was buried in the courtyard of the Jamaat Khana mosque, and the Ghiyaspur area began to be



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- [1] The revered Sufi saint, Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya, with his favoured disciple, Amir Khusrau, whose influence on Hindustani culture – a fine synthesis of Hindu and Muslim elements into a synergetic whole – is dominant even today.
- [2] The Jamaat Khana mosque within the Dargah enclosure is now undergoing conservation work by AKTC on the request of the traditional keepers of the shrine.





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known after him as “Nizamuddin”. For almost seven hundred years, pilgrims have been visiting the shrine of the saint and since it is considered auspicious to be buried near a saint’s grave seven centuries of tomb building can now be seen here. Within six months of the death of the saint, his favourite disciple, the great poet Amir Khusrau, also died, unable to bear the grief of the loss of his spiritual master. Hazrat Amir Khusrau (1253–1325) has, till today, maintained his position as a revered figure in the Indo-Persian cultural landscape of the South Asian subcontinent for over seven hundred years. In keeping with Sufi pluralistic traditions, he was, without doubt, the most popular proponent of what has come to be called Hindustani culture, a fine synthesis of Hindu and Muslim elements into a synergetic whole. He was a devout follower of the Chishti order while being

associated with the courts of at least seven kings of Delhi, straddling the spiritual and materialistic worlds with ease and spreading the Sufi message of pluralism.

Structures were built surrounding the Baoli of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya up till late Mughal times with the southern arcade dating from 1379–80. Following partial collapse of the Baoli in 2008, a major conservation initiative is now underway, where eighteen families living on the top of the southern arcade have been provided alternate housing by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC).

The spate of tomb building in the area continued through the Lodi period and, even though some of the significant royal tombs of the Lodi dynasty were built almost a mile east of the Dargah of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya, structures such as the

[3] The entrance to the Dargah of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya.

[4] Barah Khambha, a 16th-century tomb and its park setting, is presently being restored in partnership with the Delhi Development Authority.





tomb known as Barakhambha, Gol Gumbad and Do Siriha Gumbad were built within Hazrat Nizamuddin Basti.

It was with the coming of the Mughals that the Nizamuddin area was dotted with garden-tombs; in fact, the earliest buildings of the Mughal dynasty were built here. The blue-domed Nila Gumbad is, without doubt, the earliest building of the Mughal era to have been built in Delhi. Located a few yards south of Hazrat Nizamuddin's *chillgah*, on a river island, the dome, tile work and plasterwork are all reminiscent of Persian influence. Though it seems later burial in Nila Gumbad continued, and as such created confusion about the date of the structure, it is the Nizamuddin area that defined pre-Shahjahanabad Mughal Delhi. Sabz Burj, literally 'green dome', now standing in a traffic island on Mathura Road, is possibly contemporary to Nila Gumbad, pre-dating Humayun's Tomb.

The Nizamuddin Basti is densely populated and though boasting of seven centuries of living culture and built heritage

the quality of life of residents has been poor with high malnutrition rates among children, lack of health, education and sanitation infrastructure, low employment rates with under one per cent of women employed and limited access to urban services and access to parks.

AKTC's effort here has thus followed an urban landscape approach pioneered by AKTC in similar initiatives in Cairo, Kabul and Zanzibar, among other cities, and the focus on the context of built heritage has meant that the preservation of living culture represented by music, food, rituals and craft has been coupled with the conservation of the built heritage.

With thousands inhabiting the densely populated Hazrat Nizamuddin Basti, major efforts to improve the quality of life of inhabitants has led to a socio-economic programme that today directly benefits seventy per cent of residents and several thousand pilgrims from across India and other parts of the world. The project has demonstrated that conservation and development



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initiatives can and should be part of a single process. Major improvements in health, education, water and sanitation infrastructure have been undertaken. Urban improvements have also included repaving streets, landscaping neighbourhood parks, housing improvement, rubbish collection and management and, more recently, developing byelaws for the heritage zone.

Community involvement in the conservation effort, through training of tour guides, vocational training and the creation of women's craft production groups, has also instilled a sense of pride in the community.

Art and culture festivals and heritage walks have, since 2009, attracted thousands of first-time visitors, especially school groups, from across Delhi to the Basti, helping those concerned to better understand the pluralistic nature of the Islam preached and practiced here since the fourteenth century.

Conservation works in the Basti have to date focused on the fourteenth-century Baoli and the Mughal-era mausoleum known as Chausath Khamba. Works are planned for other Mughal-era structures, such as Atgah Khan's Tomb and Barakhambha.

[5] Preceding pages: Qawwali performance at the Dargah of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya.

[6] Community health workers visit door-to-door to ensure health-seeking behaviour among women improves.

[7] With under 1% of women employed, the project has emphasized vocational training for economic opportunities, such as embroidery.

[8] One of the neighbourhood parks has been designed for the exclusive use of the women who live in one of Delhi's most densely populated neighbourhoods.

[9] Musical traditions, such as Qawwali, were fostered and developed here at Hazrat Nizamuddin's Dargah. AKTC has created performance spaces as well as worked with musicians to document, disseminate and train.

[10] Young people of the Hazrat Nizamuddin Basti have carried out a cultural mapping of the area and been trained as guides. They provide educational tours to over 5000 school children annually.

Baoli

At the Nizamuddin Baoli, following the collapse of one of the walls, major conservation works have been carried out since 2009. The Baoli was hemmed in with modern construction, which led to its partial collapse in July 2008. A major conservation programme was undertaken involving the repair and consolidation of the monument coupled with cleaning the well of seven hundred years of accumulated deposits requiring 8000 man-days of work. This was followed with a series of consultations with local community representatives and families residing over the structure. Nineteen families have been provided alternate homes and support in ensuring health care, education opportunities for children and vocational training for employment to these families. The works at the Baoli aimed not only at restoring the architectural character of the monument but also at enhancing the setting of the fourteenth-century step-well and so four monuments standing on its edge have been conserved, including two in private ownership.

Chausath Khamba

The tomb of Mirza Aziz Kokaltash, the son of Atgah Khan, stands on a high plinth within an enclosure with a forecourt and is entered through an impressive gateway, mostly stripped of its

stone cladding. It is known as Chausath Khamba, on account of its sixty-four pillars supporting the twenty-five domed bays.

Today hemmed in within Hazrat Nizamuddin Basti, the tomb is a 'pillared/arcaded hall' built entirely of marble and thus could have served as an inspiration to Emperor Shah Jahan for his pillared halls of audience comprising foliated arches and for his favoured use of marble.

Each of the marble blocks used in the domes is unique, with blocks varying from one another on account of horizontal and vertical curvature, and the length and thickness of the stone. Furthermore each ring is of varying width. The Mughal builders used iron clamps to fix the marble blocks with adjoining stones. Over the centuries, water ingress, noticed at the onset of the project, from each dome, led these clamps to corrode and expand, thus causing severe damage and bursting of the marble blocks. Until as recently as 2004, repairs to the burst marble blocks comprised infill with white cement mortar that matched the colour when applied but neither retarded the deterioration process nor ensured structural stability.

With co-funding from the German Embassy, a complex conservation programme commenced in 2010. Following exhaustive documentation of each of the domes and the condition assessment of each individual stone, the conservation process



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[11] Atgah Khan's Tomb has unique inlay work that will require careful restoration by master craftsmen.

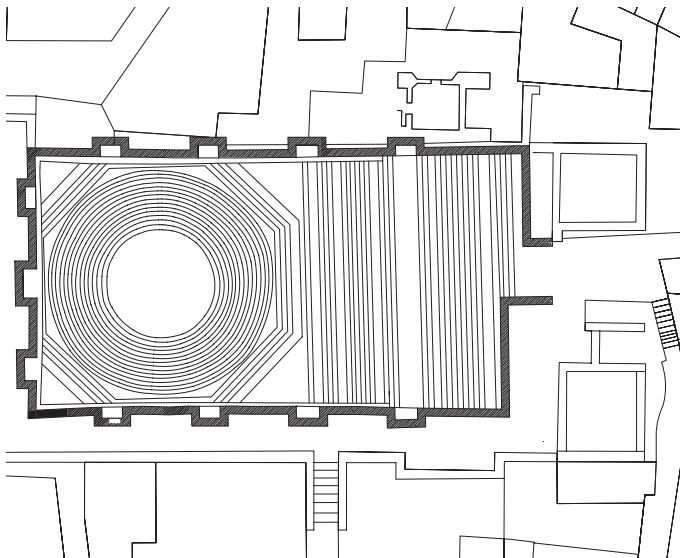
[12] The Hazrat Nizamuddin Baoli partially collapsed in 2008 requiring AKTC to undertake urgent conservation work that also meant providing alternate dwelling units for 18 displaced families.

[13] The community requested that prior to restoring collapsed portions of the 14th-century Baoli, or stepwell, it be emptied of 700 years of accumulated deposit that had reached a depth of more than 10 metres. This had to be manually removed, requiring 8000 man-days of work.

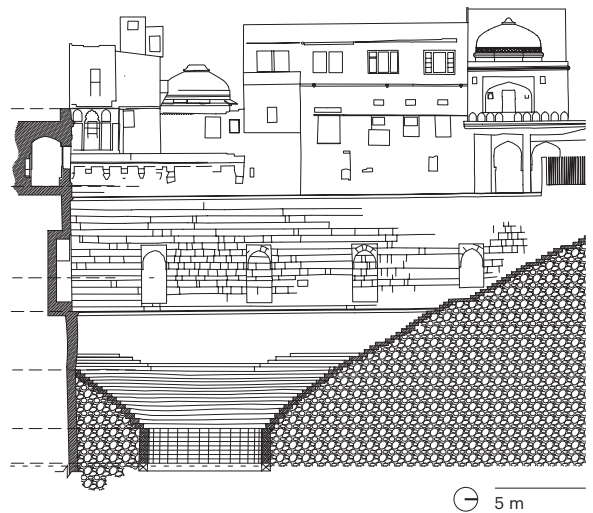
[14] The plan and section of the Baoli, today hemmed in by modern constructions.



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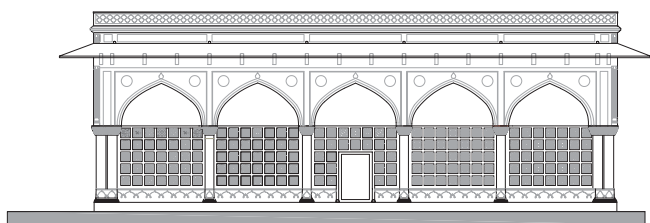
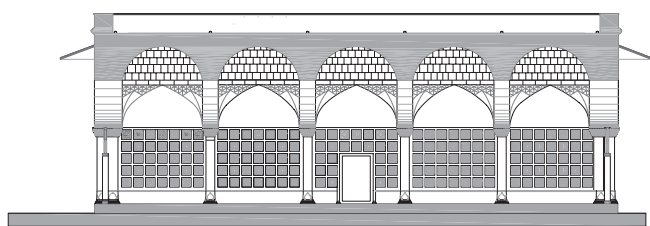


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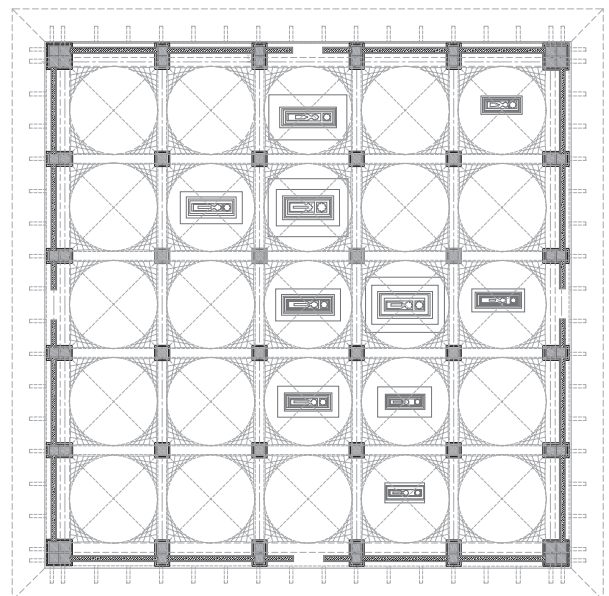




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- [15] Craftsmen using traditional tools and building techniques repaired the marble blocks of the Chausath Khamba over a four-year period.
- [16] The section, elevation and ground plan of the Chausath Khamba, built entirely of marble.
- [17] At the Chausath Khamba, each one of the 25 domes had to be stripped of its marble cladding in order to repair cracks and to replace iron dowels with non-corrosive stainless-steel dowels.

required dismantling each of the twenty-five marble domes. This allowed deep and profuse cracking in the brick masonry to be addressed and repaired, as well as the damaged marble blocks to be carefully renovated. Marble repairs mostly required that broken edges, damaged by corroding iron clamps, be restored by indenting matching marble of the required shape, thickness and profile.

In carrying out these repairs, it was essential to ensure that the keystone remained in place with support from a specially fabricated framework. The repaired stone blocks were restored to their precise original location and fixed with non-corroding stainless-steel clamps. No similar conservation effort requiring such large-scale dismantling for repair and relying solely on traditional building craft techniques has been recorded elsewhere. Once the repair methodology was finalized and renovation on the first dome completed over an eight-month period, the roof was made watertight by removing cement and laying a traditional lime-concrete layer to adequate slope.

Coupled with the conservation works, the forecourt was sensitively landscaped to serve as an open-air amphitheatre, and three international music festivals have now been organized to celebrate seven centuries of the Qawwali music traditions

created here in Nizamuddin by the saint's favoured disciple, the fourteenth-century poet-courtier Amir Khusrau, in praise of the saint.

Atgah Khan's Tomb

The mausoleum of Atgah Khan, Emperor Akbar's minister, is a jewel-like structure that today stands dwarfed by modern buildings at the edge of the Dargah complex. Though small in scale, the tomb is one of the most significant Mughal-era structures in the Nizamuddin area and begins to employ the red sandstone-white marble contrast used to such great effect on Humayun's mausoleum. Here, however, the profuse ornamentation is unique in Delhi, with glazed ceramic tiles being used as inlay in marble panels, a gesture that is rare, even in Persia. The external walls up to the dado level are comprised of sandstone blocks with exquisite marble inlay. Both sandstone and marble panels have ornamental carvings of geometric motifs.

The interior surfaces of the tomb chamber have been stripped of sandstone and marble panels that could have been similarly ornamental. These appear to have been removed for the antiques market – as has been the case of decorative stone elements from several other monuments in the project area. The domed ceiling would have been striking, with coloured incised plasterwork, of which only a few small patches remain.

The crypt of the tomb is today occupied and lived in by several families, who have chipped away at the thick masonry walls to increase living space – in turn causing severe structural risk to the monument and endangering their own lives.

Conservation works can possibly commence here only once the families have been provided alternate accommodation. The dado-level sandstone panels on the facade would require replacement as past conservation works have obliterated original details and defaced the panels, which will need to be removed to a secure museum space. Restoration of the incised plasterwork of the ceiling is dependent on studies to reveal the original patterns.

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