

Preface

His Highness the Aga Khan

In 1526, Emperor Babur established Mughal rule in a territory that today extends across parts of Afghanistan, Pakistan and northern India. The Mughal Empire continued until 1857, leaving behind an architectural and artistic legacy of the highest importance, but also an intangible heritage based on the acceptance of different points of view. Succeeding his father Humayun at the age of fourteen, Jalal-ud-din Muhammad Akbar became the Mughal emperor in 1556. He expanded the empire across northern India, and beyond, to the areas of modern Odisha in the east and Gujarat to the west. Successful in politics and diplomacy, Akbar the Great was known as a patron of the arts, and for promoting religious tolerance among his subjects, most of whom were Hindus. He encouraged theological discussions between scholars of different faiths in the Ibadat Khana (House of Worship) built in 1575 at Fatehpur Sikri. Monuments are in some sense the incarnation of ideas, and, where the broad inspiration of the architecture and art of the Mughal Empire is concerned, the words “tolerance” and “pluralism” take on a particular significance in today’s world.

The different organizations of the Aga Khan Development Network have long been active in the lands of the former Mughal Empire. Beginning in 2002, a broadly based initiative was launched in Afghanistan to address some of the problems of post-war reconstruction. Social and economic issues were at the forefront, but the Aga Khan Trust for Culture took on several important cultural projects as an integral component of the overall effort, beginning with the restoration of the historic gardens – Bagh-e Babur – the burial site of the founder of the Mughal Empire.

Our experience in other locations as diverse as the remote parts of northern Pakistan, to Delhi, Zanzibar and central Cairo, is that the restoration of historic communities and important





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cultural assets can serve as a stimulus for sustainable economic development. The restoration activity is a source of direct employment for workers and skilled craftsmen, many of whom live in adjacent neighbourhoods. The refurbished facilities themselves become an attraction for tourists, generating more opportunities. And as the residents of surrounding areas find themselves with new sources of income, they spend some of it improving their own homes and neighbourhoods.

These are the pragmatic reasons for revitalizing a nation's cultural assets. But equally, and perhaps more importantly, these activities restore and preserve historic identity. Afghanistan's rich pluralist heritage has suffered extraordinary stresses in recent decades. Its historic, geographic place at the intersection of the flow of goods, ideas, faiths and cultures between East and West is the very essence of Afghanistan's international distinctiveness. It is also a heritage for the world to cherish.

Conceived in 1997 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of India's independence, the restoration of the gardens of Humayun's Tomb in New Delhi was formalized two years later.

Implementation began in 2001 and was completed in 2003. This first initiative of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture in India was followed by a more extensive area programme that has embraced not only the cultural heritage of the area surrounding Humayun's Tomb but also broader social and economic repercussions.

The Humayun's Tomb/Sunder Nursery/Hazrat Nizamuddin Basti Urban Renewal Project, in the heart of Delhi, combines cultural heritage projects with socio-economic initiatives. The overall objective of the scheme is to improve the quality of life for residents in the area while creating an important new green space for the people of Delhi and beyond. In a first application of such principles in India for a cultural project, public, private and institutional partners came together to fund and implement these endeavours. In addition, the vital connection between past, present and future in the built environment was emphasized by such events as the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, held in Delhi in 2004.

The efforts of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture were also joined in Pakistan by local governments, private partners and such organizations as the World Bank in support of a project for the regeneration, renewal and conservation of Lahore's Walled City, which assumed much of its form during the reign of Emperor Akbar. Furthermore, the Trust held its first Award for Architecture Ceremony in the Shalimar Gardens, in Lahore, in 1980, in recognition of the historic status of the city and its numerous landmark sites.

Whether through neglect or wilful destruction, the disappearance of the physical traces of the past deprives us of more than memories. Spaces that embody historic realities remind us of the lessons of earlier eras. As we witnessed in Afghanistan and other countries, the very survival of so much of this heritage is today in jeopardy. What, then, of the deeper values that we risk abandoning under the dust of our own indifference or that might be crushed to rubble by our own destructive force? The tolerance, openness and understanding towards other peoples' cultures, social structures, values and faiths, seen at the height of the Mughal Empire, are now essential to the very survival of an interdependent world. Pluralism is no longer simply an asset or a prerequisite for progress and development, it is vital to our existence. Investing in cultural initiatives represents an opportunity to improve the quality of life for people who live in the vicinity of the remarkable heritage of great civilizations of the past.

[1] Humayun's Tomb, Delhi, India.

[2] A view of the restored plinth of Humayun's Tomb.