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Aditi Chandra, *Unruly Monuments: Disrupting the State at Delhi's Islamic Architecture*

Parshati Dutta

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Parshati Dutta is a final-year doctoral candidate in the Department of History of Art at the University of York, where she is supervised by Dr Richard P. McClary and advised by Professor Jason Edwards. Her thesis examines Mughal architectural matronage and has been supported by the university's Overseas PhD Scholarship and the British Institute of Persian Studies' Travel Grant. Parshati serves as Editorial Assistant for the *Journal of Islamic Art and Architecture*, and several of her articles on Islamic and South Asian architecture have been accepted, published, or are in press with journals such as *South Asia and Religions of South Asia*, as well as in edited volumes from Brill, Routledge, and Edinburgh University Press. Her book and exhibition reviews have appeared in the *International Journal of Islamic Architecture*, *Aspectus*, and the *Burlington Magazine*.



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In *Unruly Monuments: Disrupting the State at Delhi's Islamic Architecture*, Aditi Chandra examines India's modern public monuments, specifically some of the best-known Sultanate- and Mughal-era Islamic building complexes from the capital city of Delhi. In art historical scholarship, these monuments have often been analysed from the perspectives of form, function, and meaning as conceived during their construction. However, some scholars, notably Santhi Kavuri-Bauer and Mrinalini Rajagopalan, have recently expanded this approach to focus on the afterlives of monuments by investigating the macro- and micro-interventions made by institutions and individual human actors from later periods.¹ Contemplating the social evolution of monuments through the colonial and postcolonial periods and challenging readers with a new way to conceptualise them, Chandra's voice is an important addition to the latter approach, even as she departs from it in terms of sources and method. Aligning more closely with the former, her approach is grounded in object study and close looking at the monuments' material fabric, physical and spatial transformations, landscapes and on-site infrastructure, human interactions therein, and filmic representations thereof. However, in addition to using the monuments themselves as archives, Chandra also uses traditional institutional archives, albeit moving against the grain to reveal their inclusions as well as exclusions. Not only does she identify the dominant narratives desired from monuments by the state and constructed by government agents, but by parsing through what appears on the surface as mere records of frustration and annoyance from elite officials and tourists related to their encounters with subaltern actors—local inhabitants, farmers, mosque custodians, refugees—she successfully traces records of resistance from those being marginalised through the state's pursuit of shaping monuments as planned spaces of leisure, intellectual contemplation, and political legitimisation. By juxtaposing these hitherto disconnected public transcripts of the state with the hidden transcripts of the marginalised, Chandra successfully demonstrates the unruly behaviour exhibited by monuments when attempts are made to reduce their experience into politically convenient narratives, as they instead persist in allowing heterogeneous ways of engaging with and apprehending these sites.

In Chapter 1, Chandra examines the development of a picturesque landscape around the Sultanate-era Qutb Mosque complex that is culturally and temporally incongruent. The chapter analyses the colonial state's motives and methods—including the creation of a modern monument suited for elite aesthetic and intellectual pursuits by European visitors with the acquisition of lands, closure of public access roads, planting of trees and lawns, construction of guesthouses, and the development of circular approach roads like those of manor houses. Simultaneously, the voices of those disenfranchised by this process—native residents and farmers, Muslim clerics, and even a European woman challenging patriarchal

systems—are amplified using archival materials. The actions of these groups are shown to have disrupted the functions expected from the modern tourist monument by the colonial state.

Chapter 2 traces the museumisation of the Lal Qila under both British and Indian governments, emphasising their shared choice to exclude narratives and objects related to the fort's founders, the Mughals. At the same time, Chandra demonstrates how both governments positioned themselves as worthy successors to the great Mughal empire through a study of the bodily and sartorial performances during the Imperial Durbars held by the former, and the Independence Day speeches that continue to be delivered from the fort's ramparts by Indian prime ministers today. By analysing these tensions between the on-site museum displays and authoritative performances, along with examples of disorderly behaviour from non-elite visitors, the author establishes the Lal Qila as a disruptor of the state's construction of its history.

Deviating from architectural case studies, in Chapter 3, Chandra examines colonial postcards framing these historic structures instead, and compares their idyllic images with the actual lived experiences of tourists at these sites to pinpoint discrepancies between them. The contrast between the serenity promised to tourists by the postcards and the hostile encounters they face with locals at the same sites—whether recorded in the postcards themselves or in letters of complaints sent to authorities—reveals the partialities and inauthenticities of travel ephemera, showing them as tools of both forgetting and remembering.

In Chapter 4, the author returns to the analysis of the Mughal-Suri fort of Purana Qila, which served as Delhi's longest-running official refugee camp post-Partition. Evidence is presented to demonstrate the sustained efforts made by the Archaeological Survey of India and the Delhi Government to evict the refugees from the fort and restore it to its colonial-period imagination as a site for tourism. Following which the refugees' transformation and repurposing of historic buildings, engagement in non-touristic economic activities, and general refusal to vacate the site until the state provided acceptable alternative housing, highlights the fort as a space of protracted negotiations between state and non-state actors, a narrative of significance that otherwise remains unacknowledged in the dominant state-sponsored interpretations of the monument.

That nation-states use public monuments to legitimise their authority has been well established, in case of India by scholars cited above, but with Chandra's repeated emphasis on non-state actors' resistance to such hegemonic political fictions attached to the same monuments, these sites emerge not as static, isolated entities but as definitive, self-representative, and active forces of disruption. As much about the state and the subject, the elite and the subaltern, memorialised and forgotten, spoken and silenced, consolidated and destabilised, becoming and unbecoming, *Unruly Monuments* ultimately persuades readers not only to consider radically alternative interpretations of seemingly well-researched and familiar monuments, but also alerts them to the significance of their afterlives and persuades them to seek out their hidden transcripts. Finally, in the context of India's increasingly strained relationship with its Islamic monuments, the volume stands out as an exceptional work of original and rigorous research, and as one of notable scholarly and civic significance.

References

1. Santhi Kavuri-Bauer, *Monumental Matters: The Power, Subjectivity, and Space of India's Mughal Architecture*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011; Mrinalini Rajagopalan, *Building Histories: The Archival and Affective Lives of Five Monuments in Modern Delhi*, London: University of Chicago Press, 2016.