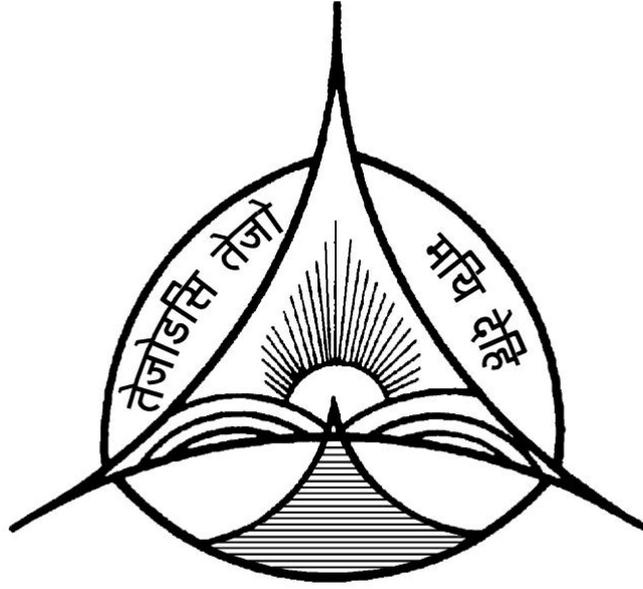


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Building Histories: The Archival and Affective Lives of Five Monuments in Modern Delhi by Mrinalini Rajagopalan, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016, pp. 272, ₹ 4647.00. ISBN 9780226283470

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This book is a creative and ambitious attempt to write a new kind of architectural history by studying five medieval monuments built between the 12th and the 17th centuries and located in the city of Delhi—the iconic Red Fort, the Jama Masjid, the Purana Qila, the Qutb Complex, and the relatively less known small Sufi shrine, the Rasul Numa Dargah. Mrinalini Rajagopalan moves beyond the conventional preoccupations of her discipline that focuses on origins, patrons and the stylistic features of built heritage to look instead at the emotive relationship between people and monuments. Thus, her interest lies in the ‘the continuous production of historic symbolism and cultural appropriation of these monuments outside of their state-sanctioned and institutionally regulated meanings’ (p. 2). She argues that indigenous actors imbued these monuments with powerful affect, interrupting and interrogating the meanings sanctioned for them by the state in the form of institutions like the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). At the same time, she emphasises that the colonial and post-colonial state’s representations of these sites are not neutral, objective, archival truths; these are complex, even anxious, narratives that uphold particular understandings of empire, and later, of the nation. Central to this analysis is the notion of affect itself. Using the insights of cultural theory and anthropology, Rajagopalan sees affect as not merely confined to the private world of emotions. These are sentiments, often unexpected and frequently ephemeral, which are manifested within, and between, bodies, both human and non-human.

In Chapter 1, Rajagopalan looks at the physical and symbolic representation of the Red Fort by the British from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century. The structure was transformed from the seat of the Mughal empire to a British garrison camp that continued to visually commemorate English trauma and loss; however, this relationship with the rebellion and, consequently, the memory of the defeat suffered by the British at the hands of the rebels, was downplayed as the fort was turned into a historical artifact for Indian visitors in the early 20th century. The second chapter on the Rasul Numa Dargah—officially designated as an unimportant monument not warranting preservation—is perhaps the most interesting of the case studies that Rajagopalan presents in her book. In sharp contrast to the colonial government’s contention that Indians were disinterested in the preservation and maintenance of heritage, the local caretakers of the shrine launched a successful campaign in 1918 to save it from expropriation by the colonial state, which viewed it as an anomaly in the modern city of New Delhi. Indeed, this movement, one of many by the city’s denizens to save monuments that were considered dispensable by the preservation project of the state, resulted in the ASI creating a category of ‘living monuments’. Chapter 3 reads the Jama Masjid as not merely a religious space, but a powerful, autonomous locale for anti-colonial expression in 1857, and later, during the course of the freedom struggle. Chapter 4 discusses how monuments were central to the imagining of the new nation. Partition saw Purana Qila, like other monuments, being used a refugee camp; subsequently with the loss of major Indus Valley sites to Pakistan, the ASI began (unsuccessful) excavations there to discover the Hindu origins of Delhi, and the nation. The last chapter looks at the multiple meanings of the Qutb complex—

designated a 'world heritage monument' and upheld as symbolic of a secular nation. At the same time, Rajagopalan argues that the colonial fragmentation and classification of the elements in the complex into 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' have meant it is read by Hindu nationalists as evidence of the medieval Islamic violence inflicted on India.

Beautifully produced and illustrated with arresting visuals including maps and photographs, the more capacious histories of monuments that Rajagopalan explores have room to conceptually accommodate the relationships of a non-scholarly, non-official world with these structures. Are there other ways of reading affective appropriation of these monuments than those suggested by Rajagopalan? In her narrative, apart from the Rasul Numa Dargah, the alternative understandings of these sites by non-state actors all appear to lie in the articulation of expressions of nationalism, whether anti-colonial or Hindu. Are there more intimate, local relationships with these monuments to be discovered? Can affect be understood as a manifestation of a more material relationship with monuments, given that the daily livelihoods, and even residences of many ordinary Indians, are bound up with them? At this level, affective relationships (informed no doubt by other social markers like gender or class) would not be sequestered from dominant representations, and appropriations of the sites, but they would allow us to move away from the nation as the singular source of these emotive ties.

Finally, as the debate about the guardianship and maintenance of heritage rages in India, this book gives us much food for thought.¹ Rajagopalan suggests that her framework has relevance beyond the world of scholarship, for administrators and policy-makers. Thus, for instance, local initiatives, like the call to preserve Rasul Numa Dargah, should be taken on board in official projects that define a historical cannon, rather than ignoring these voices or seeing them as disruptive. I would argue that while this is a commendable thought, it is also a potentially problematic one. While scholars can and should take cognisance of the plural understandings of these sites, there is no guarantee that these will represent positions that are always reconcilable with values like secularism or tolerance. In the recognition of affect, it is difficult to argue that those who called for the preservation of the Dargah, for instance, are more authentic than members of the public who insist that Delhi's Islamic heritage is a marker of the traumatic violence of Muslim rule.

¹ In April this year, the government of India announced its decision to hand over the maintenance of the Red Fort to the Bharat Dalmia group. Other monuments will similarly be handed over to the highest bidding corporate groups.