

Historians oppose Monuments Bill

Cause for concern: A file picture of Akbar's tomb in Sikandra.

Historians and archaeologists have expressed concern over amendments proposed to the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act (1958). If the related Bill is passed in the Upper House, it could have disastrous consequences for historical monuments, they fear.

The Act, which originally instituted conservation measures and banned construction activities near protected monuments, is now sought to be amended so that public works could be allowed within the 100 m prohibited zone. The Lok Sabha passed the amendments to the Act on January 3. But the Bill is yet to be cleared by the Rajya Sabha.

"You cannot talk about conserving ancient heritage and culture and then frame laws that go against their very preservation," historian of ancient India Romila Thapar told *The Hindu*.

"A historical monument has to be conserved by leaving enough space around it; otherwise the monument itself may decay once you allow buildings to come up next to it. If you want people to appreciate the monument you should allow visitors to associate it with its neighbourhood by leaving space around the structure," she said.

Urbanisation pressures

Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) officials told *The Hindu* that the pressure to bring in this amendment came when the ASI declined permission for a six-lane highway to come up on the Delhi-Kanpur highway near Akbar's tomb in Sikandra, Uttar Pradesh.

An ASI official, who also teaches history at a central university, said on condition of anonymity: "The ASI always takes the blame when it comes to upkeep of historical monuments, but when such laws are passed; nobody questions their local MPs as to what they were up to when such drastic changes were being made."

Recounting an incident, he said that in 2010, when the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains (Amendment and Validation) Act, 2010, was passed to ban constructions around monuments, residents living near protected sites in Aurangabad protested against the move, with the ASI having to take the blame for it, while the local MP remained silent.

"The pressures of urban development have meant that more and more historical monuments are coming under threat due to development activities around them," he said.

The ASI official further said that rapid urbanisation also threatened many sites of historical importance, for example megalithic sites (Iron Age burials) en route Chengalpattu from Chennai.

Neolithic site missing

"Even a Neolithic site near the Murugan temple in a hillock in Kundrathur is now missing due to urban settlements springing up there," he said.

In 2013, after a CAG report raised an alarm that 92 historical monuments had gone "missing" due to development activities around them, the ASI started a ground survey to verify them, and found that 21 had indeed become untraceable.

Citing a Cabinet note, Congress leader and Lok Sabha MP Shashi Tharoor informed Parliament recently that plans were afoot to construct a railway line next to Rani ki Vaw, an ancient step well in Patan, Gujarat, which had been recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2014.

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