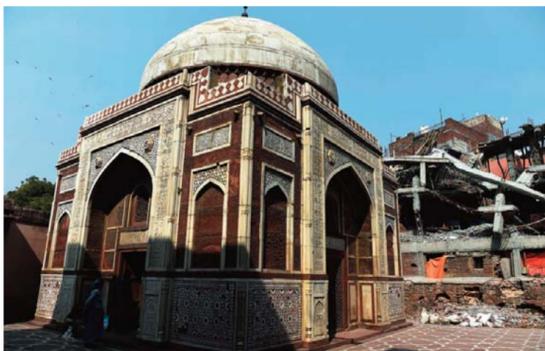




A man takes part in the International Fireworks Fair in Indaparapeo municipality, in Michoacan State, Mexico. — AFP



The remains of an illegally-constructed building that has been demolished are seen near the tomb of Atgah Khan in the Nizamuddin area.



An Indian Muslim sleeps at the entrance to the 16th century tomb of Chausanth Khamha (64 pillars) in the Nizamuddin.



An Indian laborer stands amidst ongoing construction inside the Zamait Khana Mosque at the Dargah of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya in the Nizamuddin area.



An Indian man sits inside the tomb of Atgah Khan in the Nizamuddin area of New Delhi.

Squatters barrier to protecting Delhi's ancient monuments

In the crypt of a 16th-century nationally protected tomb in New Delhi, a family is busy preparing a meal in their brightly painted kitchen that boasts a fridge and electricity. New Delhi, where emperors ruled for at least 2,000 years, is rich with ancient tombs, shrines and forts which are packed into almost every suburb of the Indian capital. But the city is also teeming with millions of desperately poor and homeless and with land at a premium, the ancient monuments have become valuable homes, making removal of so-called squatters a tough battle.

"There are far too many monuments and not enough resources. That means they are neglected and open to abuse and occupation," Delhi conservationist A.G.K Menon said. "Nobody occupies the Taj Mahal because it's looked after, but that's not the case for other precious monuments." Deep inside Delhi's packed Nizamuddin neighborhood, past the goats and snack vendors, the family of Sufi musicians has lived in the vaults of the Atgah Khan tomb, built in 1566, for generations. There are cupboards, rugs and aqua-coloured paint on the walls. "We are connected to the shrine. We have a duty to be here," said one woman, whose nephews perform at the nearby Nizamuddin Dargah, adding that they have not been asked to leave.

One floor up, a string of small homes have been built against the perimeter walls of the striking red sandstone and marble tomb, making any substantial conservation work difficult. Three months ago, men armed with sledge hammers and welding equipment started demolishing one of the occupied homes. Official warnings against undertaking extensions that might encroach on the tomb had gone unheeded, according to neighbors, forcing the destruction. But the 18-member family has defiantly continued to live in the ruins, setting up beds in the rubble, and hanging laundry from the now-exposed rafters. "If somebody thinks we are going to leave this place, they are very mistaken," said 75-year-old Shamama Khan who insists her family bought the land on which they built decades ago. Squatters-or encroachers as they are called in India-are just one of the many headaches facing conservationists as they endeavour to preserve the city's monuments.

'Heritage a burden'

More than 1,000 listed heritage sites are scattered in Delhi, where Mughal emperors and other rulers rose and fell for hundreds of years, before the British later moved in, with thousands more spread across India. But only 176 of those in Delhi are protected by the top government-funded Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) whose funds are limited. Cash-strapped city and state bodies are responsible for some, while others are not protected at all, and are

crumbling under the strain of the ever-expanding city of more than 16 million people.

Some have disappeared altogether under developers' bulldozers.

"It's a full-time job to protect the ones we have," ASI joint director general R.S Fonia told AFP when asked if more should be added to its list. At a sprawling archaeological park across town, Menon and his team from

uments are being used as seats around a campfire and few tourists are seen.

Ratish Nanda, a noted conservationist, and his team including of craftsmen and architects have restored several monuments inside Nizamuddin, including a 14th-century step-well considered holy by Muslim pilgrims. The Aga Khan Trust for Culture, of which Nanda is chief executive, is also credited with restoring the stunning World



A tomb at Mehrauli Archaeological Park in New Delhi. — AFP photos

INTACH, a non-governmental conservation organization, have worked hard to restore some of the 100-odd monuments dating back to the 11th century. INTACH received government funding to carry out the restoration work, but says the authorities failed to maintain the monuments after they were handed back.

"It is a waste of public money," says Menon, whose organization took legal action to try to force the authorities to act. The High Court last month ordered the Delhi Development Authority to erect a wall around parts of the park, spread over 80 hectares (200 acres), to keep out squatters. But a squabble over who owns the different monuments, and therefore should protect them, is ongoing. Inside the park meanwhile, broken blocks from mon-

Heritage-listed Humayun's Tomb, built in the 1560s for Mughal emperor Humayun, to which tourists flock. But Nanda says it's a constant struggle to convince a myriad of authorities, local communities and other stakeholders of the need to work together to preserve the past and treat their heritage as a valuable resource. "We don't understand the economic potential of our heritage. We could live off our heritage if attitudes changed and we decided to properly restore and protect our past. We are sitting on a gold mine," he said. "Instead we treat our heritage as a burden." — AFP



A tomb at Mehrauli Archaeological Park in New Delhi.



An Indian man stands beside the baoli or step-well in the Nizamuddin area.