

feature

With the Qutb Shahi tombs, the world's largest necropolis being restored, they are back in news. WOW! looks at the heritage structure for the detailed restoration work being carried out under the aegis of the Aga Khan Foundation

Bringing the tombs BACK TO LIFE

TEXT AND PHOTOS: LAKSHMI PRABHALA

BADI BAOLI - THE 400-YEAR-OLD STEP WELL THAT COLLAPSED IN 2013 NOW COLLECTS ENOUGH WATER TO FULFILL THE NEEDS OF THE RESTORATION ACTIVITIES AT THE SITE

The three years of painstaking restoration work has infused life into the weather beaten mausoleums at the Quli Qutb Shahi tombs complex near Golconda fort. The sparkling white domes of the renovated structures are a contrast to the older monuments that patiently await their turn for a makeover.

Although the Quli Qutb Shah tombs' complex is commonly referred to as 'Saat Gumbaz' or 'Seven tombs', it encompasses a total of 75 structures comprising 40 mausoleums, 23 mosques, six *baolis* (step-wells), a *hamam* (mortuary bath), an *Idgah*, pavilions, garden structures and enclosure walls spread across an expanse of 108 acres.

The complex is an example of rare architectural splendor and was selected for conservation by the Government of Telangana. The objective was to restore the grandeur of the site and develop it as an urban archaeological park called Quli Qutb Shah Archaeological Park. The aim was to showcase and ensure long term preservation as well as enhance understanding of the monuments that stand within its boundaries.

It all started in January 2013 when, under a non-profit public-private partnership venture, an MoU was signed between the Department of Archaeology and Museums, Government of Andhra Pradesh (now Government of Telangana), Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation, the Quli Qutb Shah Urban Development Authority, the Aga Khan Foundation, and the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, to take up this major conservation and landscape restoration effort.

The restoration is phased over a 10-year period, and planned in a manner that the visitors would be able to move freely within the unrestricted areas. Architecturally, the Qutb Shahi monuments are a remarkable blend of Persian, Pathan and Hindu styles. A majority of these structures were built with the locally available granite and ornamentation was done by decorating the surfaces with intricate plaster work and glazed tile work as can be seen on the external walls of Ibrahim Quli Qutb Shah's tomb.

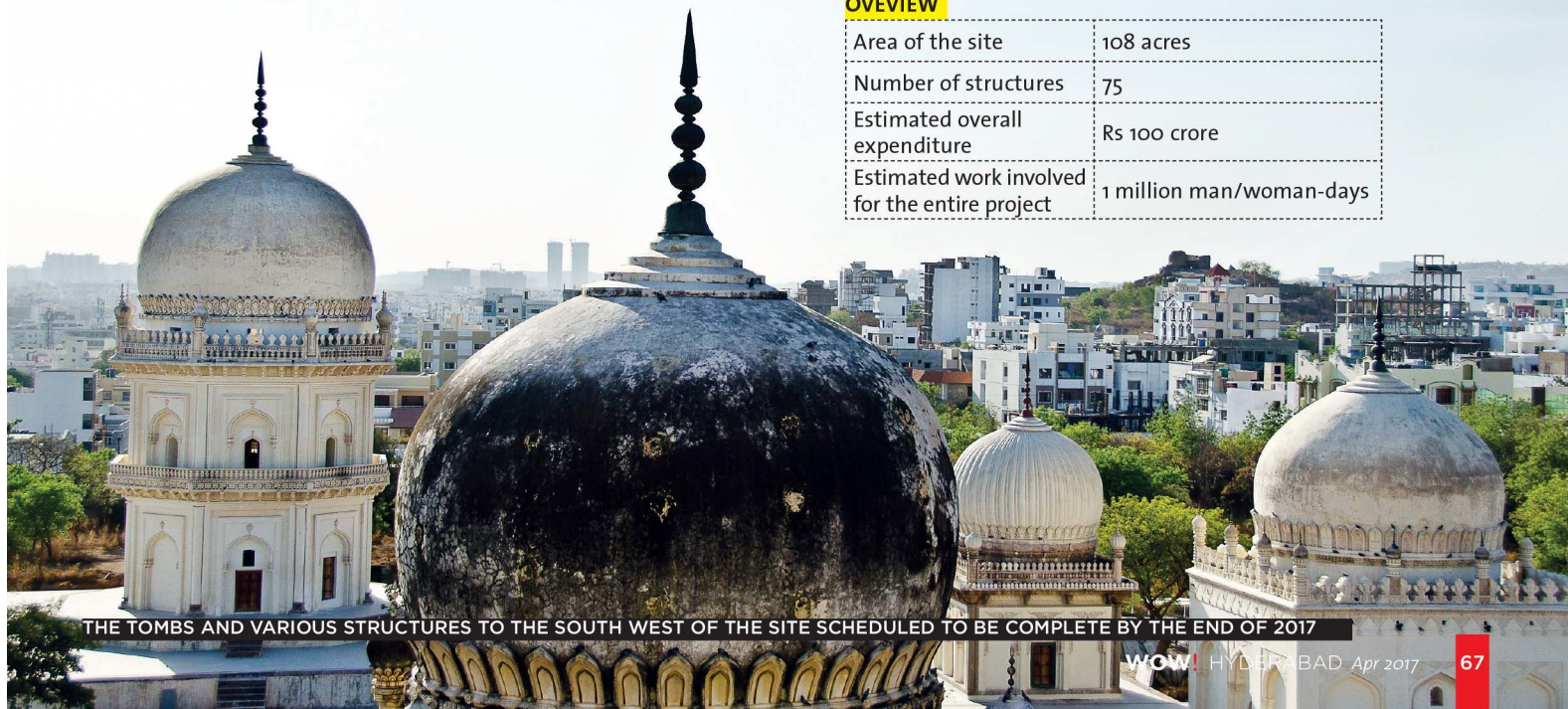
The main aim of the project is to ensure long term preservation of the monuments which is achieved by using traditional materials and craftsmen. Only traditional building materials like lime mortar and stone are used. Over 40 layers of paint were painstakingly removed by conservators to reveal the original 16th century plaster medallions at the *Idgah*.



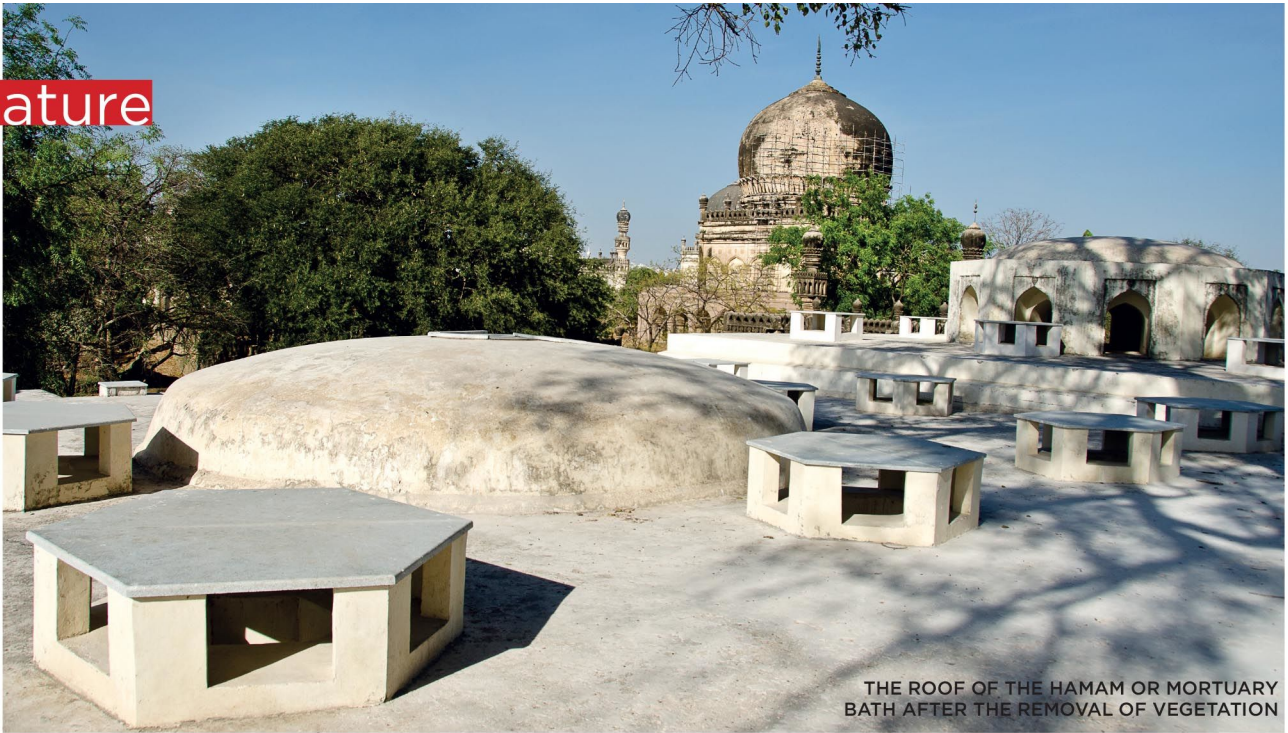
THE TOMB OF MOHAMMED QULI QUTB SHAH, THE FOUNDER OF HYDERABAD, STANDS ON A LARGE PAVILION

OVERVIEW

Area of the site	108 acres
Number of structures	75
Estimated overall expenditure	Rs 100 crore
Estimated work involved for the entire project	1 million man/woman-days



THE TOMBS AND VARIOUS STRUCTURES TO THE SOUTH WEST OF THE SITE SCHEDULED TO BE COMPLETE BY THE END OF 2017



THE ROOF OF THE HAMAM OR MORTUARY BATH AFTER THE REMOVAL OF VEGETATION

The restoration project also envisages landscaping in about 15 acres as part of the Qutb Shah Heritage Park. Activities like tree and bird mapping have been conducted and various species of both have been identified. These studies will help improve the bio-diversity of the Heritage Park as well as aid in creating an ecological zone with the introduction of suitable tree species and development of a bird habitat typical of the region.

BADI BAOLI

The revival of *Badi Baoli*, one of the six step-wells within the complex, is probably as remarkable as the 400-year-old quadrangular structure used for water storage. In a span of three years, starting from a collapsed condition in 2013, it has become completely functional and collected about 33 lakh liters of water during the monsoon of 2016, which is now used within the site for the restoration activities.

SOUTH PROCESSIONAL GATEWAY TO THE TOMBS

It is common belief that a body was brought to the tomb complex for burial from Golconda through an underground passage. An archival photograph suggested the possibility of a processional path way connecting the Golconda Fort with the tomb complex.

Excavations were conducted at a depression found south of Ibrahim Quli Qutb Shah's tomb that revealed an arched gateway. This gate over which a mosque stands, would have been the processional path that was preferred for entry to the tombs during burial ceremonies.

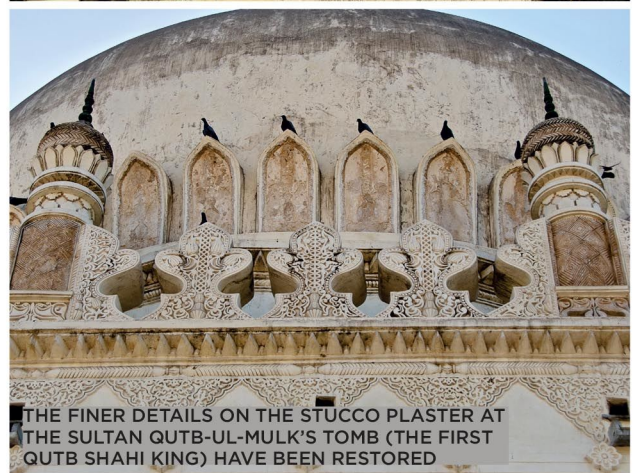
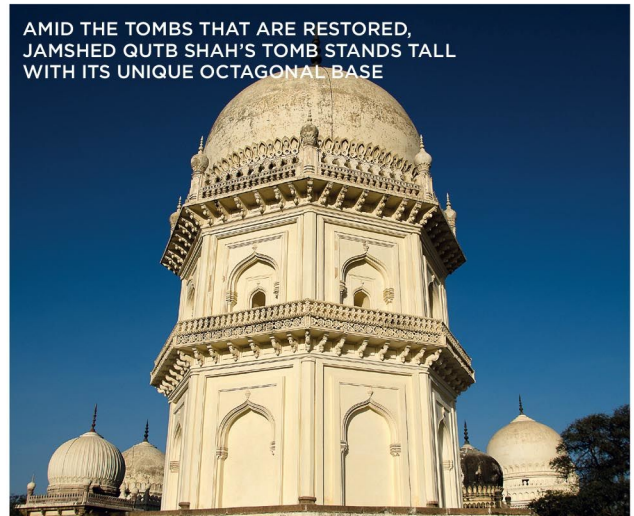
SITE EXHIBIT

Currently, a site exhibit close to the entrance gives a complete overview of the complex; the geography, the Qutb Shahi dynasty and the restoration project with help from a well-curated series of panels. It was created to enhance visitor experience and share the intent of the conservation and landscape restoration.

Additionally, information panels have been put up beside the major monuments where conservation works have commenced. Both the exhibit and signage panels are continuously updated to provide information related to the project.

With each passing day, one can see the transformation of the royal necropolis being restored to its former glory. The diligent restoration work coupled with the natural beauty of the premises ensure that on a trip to the tombs, one wonders if it is 2017 we are living in!

AMID THE TOMBS THAT ARE RESTORED, JAMSHED QUTB SHAH'S TOMB STANDS TALL WITH ITS UNIQUE OCTAGONAL BASE



THE FINER DETAILS ON THE STUCCO PLASTER AT THE SULTAN QUTB-UL-MULK'S TOMB (THE FIRST QUTB SHAHI KING) HAVE BEEN RESTORED

‘CONSERVATION OF THE TOMBS IS A MEGA PROJECT’

“We now know that like the Mughals, the Qutb Shahi kings too built the tombs within enclosed gardens”



RATISH NANDA



THE IDGAH STANDING TO THE SOUTH OF MOHAMMED QULI QUTB SHAH'S TOMB, IS ONE OF THE EARLIEST STRUCTURE CONSTRUCTED BY SULTAN QULI QUTB SHAH

The Qutb Shahi Heritage Park stands out for its grandeur and scale. It is also proposed to be nominated to the World Heritage list with Golconda Fort. Ratish Nanda, Conservation Architect and CEO of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture in India, in an exclusive interview talks about the restoration

Why Qutb Shahi tombs for renovation?

Why not? These tombs were an obvious choice in considering a mega conservation project that would have significant impact nationally and internationally and serve as a model or case study for other similar efforts. At the Qutb Shahi tombs, conservation works are to be coupled with landscape restoration and integration of presently segregated sites to create a major urban open space of international significance.

What were the major challenges that you faced or the road blocks you encountered?

The principal challenge has been the scale of the project – never before attempted in India – with 75 structures – tombs, mosques, step-wells, garden structures standing within the Qutb Shahi Heritage Park. Another challenge has been the litigation by vested interests in the Wakf Tribunal that held up conservation works for almost a year at the onset of the project. However, the strong partnership with the Department of Archaeology and Museums and resulting frequent interactions has ensured that there are no ‘road blocks’. The interest, support, involvement and guidance of the officers

– both, at the Culture department at the Government of Telangana and the Department of Archaeology has made it possible for us to concentrate only on technical matters without any red tape.

What would you consider the biggest achievement of the entire project so far?

Technically, the conservation of the *Badi Baoli*, that had collapsed before the commencement of conservation works was a huge relief.

What was the most interesting or unexpected find during your work at the Qutb Shahi tombs?

The research, archaeological programme and the conservation effort over the last five years have significantly enhanced our understanding of the monuments, the site and of the Qutb Shahi dynasty. We now know of the alterations made to the site during the Salarjung era; that, like the Mughals, the Qutb Shahi kings too built the tombs within enclosed gardens; and that, there was a residential settlement at the site prior to the tomb building. We will publish this research at the completion of the project.

Is there any other site or structure within Hyderabad that you would wish to work on in future?

The Director, Department of Archaeology has requested our assistance towards the conservation of the Paigah Tombs. We remain available to assist the efforts of the Government of Telangana. ■