



ASI's Stance on Religious Practices at Monuments

For Prelims: [Archaeological Survey of India](#), [Indian Heritage Sites](#)

For Mains: Balancing Heritage and Worship, Issues Related to Heritage Conservation in India, Solutions For Effective Heritage Management

Source: IE

Why in News?

A recent report on '*Issues relating to Untraceable Monuments and Protection of Monuments in India*' presented by a [parliament committee](#) recommends significant changes in the [Archaeological Survey of India's \(ASI\)](#) approach towards religious activities at protected monuments.

- Earlier, in May 2022, prayers at the 8th century [Martand Sun Temple in Jammu and Kashmir](#) sparked concerns from the ASI, operating under the Ministry of Culture, citing a violation of regulations.

What is the Current Policy on Worship at ASI Monuments?

- As of now, the ASI allows worship and rituals only at monuments where such traditions were **ongoing at the time the ASI took custody**.
 - The best-known example of a living ASI monument is the [Taj Mahal](#) where namaz is held every Friday.
 - Other notable living monuments include **three mosques in Kannauj, the Roman Catholic Church in Meerut, the Nila Mosque in Delhi's Hauz Khas Village and several Buddhist monasteries in Ladakh**.
- This restriction aims to preserve the historical and cultural integrity of the monuments.
- No religious rituals can be conducted at **non-living monuments** where there has been no continuity of worship since it became an ASI-protected site.
 - The policy decision prohibits the revival of worship in cases where it was not in practice at the time of protection or has been abandoned for an extended period.
- Out of the **3,693 centrally protected monuments** and archaeological sites managed by the ASI, around a **fourth (820) include places of worship**, while the rest are considered non-living monuments where no new religious rituals can be started or conducted.
 - These sites encompass a diverse range of religious structures, such as temples, mosques, dargahs, and churches.
- The Martand Sun Temple, commissioned by **King Lalitaditya Muktapida of the Karkota dynasty, was once a thriving place of worship**. However, it was destroyed in the 14th century.
 - ASI took control in the 20th century for conservation, **no puja or Hindu ritual was being held there**. Recent pujas in 2022, led by devotees, were deemed a **violation of ASI norms for non-living monuments**.

What are the Committee's Recommendations on Worship at ASI Monuments?

▪ Recommendations:

- The committee suggests exploring the possibility of permitting prayers and worship at ASI-protected monuments with religious significance.
 - This potential shift in policy raises questions about its implications for various religious sites.
- Recommends that the Ministry of Culture and ASI conduct surveys to identify monuments promptly and make the results public, stressing the importance of transparency and accountability in addressing critical issues related to monument protection.

▪ Concerns Against the Committee's Recommendations:

- Allowing religious activities at protected monuments **may pose a threat to the integrity, authenticity and historical value of the monuments**, as they may be subjected to alterations, additions, modifications or damage by the devotees or the authorities.
- Allowing religious activities at protected monuments may also create conflicts and **disputes among different religious groups**, who may claim ownership or rights over the monuments, or object to the activities of other groups.

Archaeological Survey of India (ASI)

- ASI, under **the Ministry of Culture**, is the **premier organization for the archaeological research and protection of the cultural heritage** of the nation.
- It administers more than 3650 ancient monuments, archaeological sites and remains of national importance.
- Its activities **include carrying out surveys of antiquarian remains, exploration and excavation of archaeological sites, conservation and maintenance** of protected monuments etc.
- It was **founded in 1861 by Alexander Cunningham**- the first Director-General of ASI. Alexander Cunningham is also known as the **“Father of Indian Archaeology”**.
- It oversees all archaeological undertakings within the nation by the [Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, of 1958](#).

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Question (PYQ)

Mains

Q.1 Safeguarding the Indian Art Heritage is the need of the moment. Discuss. (2018)

Q.2 Indian Philosophy and tradition played a significant role in conceiving and shaping the monuments and their art in India. Discuss. (2020)