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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Patriarchitecture: The Women Written Out of How India Builds

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HISTORY & CULTURE

GS1

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THE LIFT LINE

The buildings we call our heritage were paid for, planned and lived in by women as much as by men, yet the story we tell of who builds India has quietly edited them out, so that the record in stone reads as if architecture were a world without women.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

India's architectural history is usually narrated through kings, emperors and named male masters, while the women who commissioned monuments, shaped domestic space and, in our own time, design cities have been left in the margins. This is not only a gap in memory but a distortion of the record. Some of the finest works of medieval and early-modern India were patronised by women, and the profession of architecture today still under-represents and under-credits them, a pattern that has been called patriarchitecture, the writing of women out of the built environment. To recover this history is to read heritage as a gendered record, which sharpens the candidate's grasp of Indian art, culture and society and adds a dimension the standard monument-by-monument account misses.

GS Paper 1: Indian art, architecture and culture from ancient to modern times; the role and status of women in society and the ways their contribution has been recorded or erased.

For **Prelims**, hold the specifics: Rani ki Vav, the eleventh-century stepwell at Patan in Gujarat, commissioned by Queen Udayamati in memory of the Solanki ruler Bhima I, a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2014 and depicted on the reverse of the hundred-rupee note; the tradition of women's **patronage** (<https://ujjyari.com/vocab/patronage/>) in the Mughal period, including gardens and tomb complexes associated with figures such as Nur Jahan, who is credited with patronising the tomb of her father Itmad-ud-Daulah at Agra, often called the

“Baby Taj”; and the broad idea that patronage, the act of commissioning and funding a monument, is itself a form of authorship. For **Mains**, argue that a fuller history of Indian architecture must count patrons and users, not only builders, and must recover the women whose agency the canon has obscured.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The way architectural history is written tends to reward two figures, the ruler under whom a monument rose and, occasionally, the master builder credited with it. Both are usually assumed to be men. Yet patronage, the decision to commission a work, the funds to build it and the intent that shaped it, is a form of authorship, and in India women exercised it repeatedly. Queens raised stepwells and temples, noblewomen endowed gardens and tombs, and across ordinary life women shaped the courtyards, thresholds and interiors that make up the lived built environment.

That agency has been dimmed by the habit of naming monuments after male rulers and by a profession that, until recently, offered women little formal entry. The result is a canon in which women appear, if at all, as subjects memorialised in stone rather than as agents who made things happen. Reading the record more carefully restores them to it.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

Patrons as authors

To commission a building is to shape it, its purpose, its form and its place in the landscape. Rani ki Vav, an inverted temple in the form of a stepwell with hundreds of sculpted panels, stands as a monument commissioned by a queen, Udayamati, and is among the most celebrated works of its kind in India. Patronage of this order is authorship, and it was often a woman's.

The Mughal record of women's patronage

Mughal women of rank were active patrons of gardens, tombs and public works. The tomb of Itmad-ud-Daulah at Agra, associated with the patronage of Nur Jahan for her father, is a landmark in the shift towards white marble and fine inlay that would culminate in later imperial architecture. Naming the monuments only after emperors hides this layer of agency.

LAYER OF THE BUILT WORLD	HOW THE CANON HAS RECORDED IT	WHAT A FULLER READING RECOVERS
Patronage	Attributed to male rulers	Queens and noblewomen who commissioned works
Design and craft	Named male masters, often anonymous otherwise	The unnamed hands, and today women architects
Domestic space	Largely ignored	Women who shaped courtyards, thresholds, interiors
The profession today	Under-represents and under-credits women	Women designing homes, campuses and cities

The profession and the canon today

In the modern profession, women study and practise architecture in large numbers yet remain under-represented in credited leadership and in the histories written of the discipline. The invisibility of the past is thus mirrored in the present, a continuity worth naming.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Read a monument not as a single object but as a set of authors, the one who commissioned it, the ones who designed and built it, and the ones who used and inhabited it. The transferable frame for GS1 is that heritage is a record, and every record reflects who was allowed to be named in it. Ask, of any building, who paid for it, who shaped it and whose lives it held, and the women appear. The examiner rewards the candidate who moves beyond the dynastic-label account of Indian architecture to a reading that recovers patronage, use and the gendered structure of the built environment. Handled factually and with respect, this reframes heritage as a fuller, more honest inheritance rather than a gallery of kings.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Architectural history told through male rulers and masters -> patronage and use by women left unrecorded -> monuments labelled only by the emperor or king -> women who commissioned stepwells, gardens and tombs made invisible -> the same erasure repeated in today's profession (patriarchitecture) -> reframe: count patrons and users, not only builders -> recover Rani ki Vav (Queen Udayamati), Mughal women's garden and tomb patronage -> heritage read as a gendered record -> a fuller, more honest history of how India builds

WAY FORWARD

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- ① **Credit patrons in the record.** Museums, signage and textbooks should name the women who commissioned monuments alongside the rulers they honoured, so that patronage is recognised as a form of authorship.
- ② **Broaden how heritage is read.** Conservation and interpretation should include domestic and everyday spaces, courtyards, stepwells and gardens, where women's agency is most visible, not only imperial set-pieces.
- ③ **Correct the profession's imbalance.** Architecture education and practice should track and address the under-crediting of women in leadership and in the histories of the discipline, so that the present does not repeat the erasure of the past.
- ④ **Fund gendered heritage scholarship.** Support archival and field research that recovers women patrons, builders and users across regions and periods, giving the fuller record an evidentiary base.
- ⑤ **Tell the story respectfully and accurately.** Public history should present these recoveries with careful sourcing and without overstatement, so that restoring women to the record strengthens rather than politicises the shared inheritance.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has asked about Indian architecture, the features of stepwells and Mughal monuments, and the social history of women. This editorial joins those strands, reading the built heritage as a record shaped by patronage and gender, which is exactly the integrative, culture-and-society analysis the examiner rewards over a list of monuments and their features.

Practice question: “A fuller history of Indian architecture must recover the women who patronised, shaped and inhabited its monuments.” Discuss with suitable examples from medieval and early-modern India. (250 words, 15 marks)

Sources: The Indian Express (<https://indianexpress.com/>), *Archaeological Survey of India* (<https://asi.nic.in/>), *UNESCO World Heritage Centre* (<https://whc.unesco.org/>)

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