

A Technical Analysis of Asar-ul-Sanadid: The Historiographical and Architectural Legacy of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan

Published: November 2, 2026 | Index ID: #973

The publication of **Asar-ul-Sanadid** (The Remnants of Ancient Heroes) in 1847 marked a pivotal moment in the intellectual history of South Asia. Authored by **Sayyid Ahmad Khan** (1817–1898) during his tenure as a munsif (sub-judge) in Delhi, the work represents one of the first comprehensive attempts by an Indian scholar to systematically document the architectural and archaeological heritage of Delhi using proto-modern historiographical methods. This treatise serves not merely as a catalogue of buildings but as a bridge between the traditional *tazkira* (biographical accounts) and the nascent discipline of archaeology as practiced by the British colonial administration.

The Historical Framework of 19th-Century Delhi Historiography

To understand the technical significance of **Asar-ul-Sanadid**, one must contextualize the era in which it was produced. The mid-19th century was a period of transition where the Mughal authority was fading and the British East India Company was consolidating administrative control. Sayyid Ahmad Khan's work emerged from this friction, blending indigenous knowledge of Delhi's topography with an increasing awareness of European scientific categorization.

The primary motivation behind the text was to preserve the memory of Delhi's physical identity, which was undergoing rapid transformation. Sir Sayyid did not merely rely on existing manuscripts like the **Mahabharata** or the **Rajatarangini** (as noted in some historical reviews); he engaged in rigorous **fieldwork**. This involved physically visiting sites, measuring structures, and deciphering epigraphic inscriptions that had long been ignored or misread. The result was a 600-page survey that remains a cornerstone for historians of the **Muslim community in nineteenth-century India**.

Textual Evolution: The 1847 vs. 1854 Editions

One of the most critical technical aspects of *Asar-ul-Sanadid* is the drastic divergence between its first (1847) and second (1854) editions. These two versions represent a fundamental shift in Sir Sayyid's intellectual trajectory and his approach to scientific communication.

1. The First Edition (1847)

The original publication was written in a highly ornate, flowery Urdu, characteristic of the *Lucknowi* and late *Mughal* courtly styles. It contained detailed sketches and focused heavily on the aesthetic and spiritual qualities of the monuments. From a technical standpoint, this edition was more inclusive of oral traditions and local legends, framing the buildings within a cultural and biographical narrative of the individuals who built them.

2. The Second Edition (1854)

Following his interactions with the **Royal Asiatic Society** and French orientalist like Garcin de Tassy, Sir Sayyid overhauled the text. He removed the ornate prose in favor of a direct, analytical, and more "scientific" Urdu. He also reorganized the data into chronological phases, attempting to align the history of Delhi with a linear timeline of

dynasties. This edition reflected his growing belief that for the Muslim community to progress, its scholarship had to adopt the rigorous empirical standards of the West.

The following table provides a technical comparison of the two editions:

Feature	1847 First Edition	1854 Second Edition
Linguistic Style	Ornate, Persianized Urdu (Dastan-style)	Simplified, analytical, proto-modern Urdu
Illustrations	Hand-drawn lithographic sketches (130+)	Reduced sketches, focused on text accuracy
Structure	Four chapters organized by monument type	Chronological/Dynastic organization
Methodological Focus	Cultural and biographical narrative	Archaeological and epigraphic data
Intended Audience	Local elite and literary circles	European orientalists and academic scholars

Core Mechanics of Site Documentation

Sir Sayyid's methodology involved several technical layers that were revolutionary for an Indian scholar at the time. His approach can be broken down into three core investigative pillars:

Epigraphic Decipherment

Before the widespread use of photography, reading inscriptions on high arches (like those of the **Qutub Minar**) required physical ingenuity. Historical records indicate that Sir Sayyid used a system of **suspended baskets** and pulleys to hoist himself or his assistants to the height of the inscriptions to copy the calligraphy accurately. This dedication to primary data collection differentiated *Asar-ul-Sanadid* from contemporary works that often relied on hearsay.

Architectural Classification

The book classifies Delhi's monuments into several categories, which served as a prototype for modern urban mapping. This included:

- Religious Structures: Detailed accounts of the Jami Masjid and various idgahs.
- Military Architecture: The fortifications of Lal Kot, Siri, and Tughlaqabad.
- Commemorative Monuments: Tombs of emperors and sufi saints (dargahs).
- Civic Engineering: Baolis (stepwells), bridges, and canals.

Chronological Mapping

In the second edition, Sir Sayyid attempted to divide Delhi's history into distinct periods: the **Hindu period**, the **Sultanate period**, and the **Mughal period**. While modern historians have nuanced these divisions, his attempt to correlate specific architectural styles with political regimes was a significant step toward modern architectural history.

Technical Analysis of Monument Descriptions

When analyzing a specific entry in *Asar-ul-Sanadid*, such as the **Mehrauli** complex, Sir Sayyid provides more than just a physical description. He integrates historical dates, the name of the patron, the specific stone used (e.g., red sandstone vs. marble), and the state of preservation. This structured data allows modern archaeologists to calculate the rate of decay over the last 170 years.

A typical entry in the 1854 edition follows this logical workflow:

1. Identification: Local name and official historical title.
2. Location: Geographical proximity to other major landmarks.
3. Patronage: The ruler or noble who commissioned the work.
4. Metric Analysis: Dimensions of the dome, height of the minarets, and thickness of the walls.
5. Condition Report: Assessment of whether the structure was intact, in ruins, or repurposed.

The Role of Translation in Modern Historiography

The technical value of the text has been revitalized through modern translations, most notably by **Rana Safvi** and **F. Quraishi**. Translating a 19th-century technical Urdu text presents unique challenges, as many architectural terms used by Sir Sayyid have fallen out of common usage or have been replaced by English technical terms.

Safvi's translation, *"Where Stones Speak,"* and other scholarly works help bridge the gap by providing a **cross-reference matrix** between Sir Sayyid's 19th-century observations and the current archaeological state of the monuments. This is essential for **Heritage Impact Assessments (HIA)** in modern urban planning within Delhi.

Comparative Evaluation: Sir Sayyid vs. The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI)

It is productive to compare Sir Sayyid's work with the later systematic surveys conducted by **Alexander Cunningham** (the first Director-General of the ASI). While Cunningham had the backing of the British Empire's resources, Sir Sayyid had the advantage of **linguistic and cultural proximity**.

Evaluation Metric	Sir Sayyid (Asar-ul-Sanadid)	Alexander Cunningham (ASI Reports)
Language of Inscriptions	Native proficiency in Persian/Arabic/Urdu	Reliance on translators/European lenses
Scope	Micro-level focus on Delhi specifically	Macro-level survey of Northern India
Oral History	Deep integration of local memory	Heavy skepticism toward oral traditions
Objective	Preservation of cultural identity	Administrative and historical mapping

Implementation: Using Asar-ul-Sanadid as a Field Guide

For modern researchers and heritage enthusiasts, *Asar-ul-Sanadid* functions as a "time-traveler's map." To use this text effectively for field research today, one should follow this structured procedure:

Step 1: Locational Verification

Many monuments described by Sir Sayyid have been swallowed by urban sprawl or renamed. Researchers must use the 1847 sketches to identify the **topographical footprint** of the monument relative to fixed points like the Yamuna River or the walls of Shahjahanabad.

Step 2: Epigraphic Comparison

Compare the transcriptions provided in the text with the current state of the inscriptions. This helps identify **erasure**, **restoration errors**, or the total loss of calligraphic panels over time.

Step 3: Architectural Audit

Using Sir Sayyid's descriptions of decorative elements (e.g., specific floral motifs or *pietra dura* work), researchers can identify which parts of a building are original and which were added during the British or post-independence restoration efforts.

Challenges in Interpreting Asar-ul-Sanadid

Despite its brilliance, the text presents several operational challenges for the modern historian. These include:

- **Historical Accuracy:** In the first edition, Sir Sayyid occasionally accepted legendary dates for certain pre-Islamic structures that have since been debunked by carbon dating and modern archaeology.
- **Linguistic Barrier:** The archaic Urdu of the first edition requires a high level of specialized linguistic knowledge to interpret the technical architectural metaphors.
- **Selective Omissions:** As a member of the elite (Ashraf) class, Sir Sayyid focused primarily on monumental architecture, often omitting the vernacular housing and smaller structures that housed the common citizens of 19th-century Delhi.

Case Study: The Transformation of the Qutub Minar Narrative

The treatment of the **Qutub Minar** in *Asar-ul-Sanadid* is a perfect case study of Sir Sayyid's evolving methodology. In the 1847 edition, he gave significant weight to the theory that the Minar was originally a Hindu structure (a *Prithvi Stambh*). However, by the 1854 edition, after more rigorous examination of the Arabic inscriptions and stylistic

comparisons with Ghori architecture, he corrected his stance, attributing it firmly to the Sultanate period. This self-correction illustrates the **scientific integrity** that Sir Sayyid sought to instill in Indian scholarship.

Operational Solutions for Modern Scholars

To overcome the challenges mentioned, digital humanities projects are now creating **Annotated Digital Versions** of the text. These projects integrate:

1. GIS Mapping: Linking every monument mentioned by Sir Sayyid to its exact GPS coordinates.
2. Bilingual Glossaries: Creating a technical bridge between his Urdu architectural terms and modern English equivalents (e.g., explaining kangura as battlement or mehrab as prayer niche).
3. Photogrammetric Overlays: Placing modern 3D scans of monuments over the lithographic sketches from the 1847 edition to visualize physical changes.

The enduring legacy of **Asar-ul-Sanadid** lies in its dual nature. It is both a primary historical document that captures the soul of a vanishing Delhi and a technical manual that paved the way for the institutionalization of archaeology in India. For Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, the monuments were not merely "stones that speak"; they were the evidence of a civilization's intellectual and technical capacity. By documenting them with such precision, he ensured that even as the physical structures might crumble, the **technical memory** of their existence would remain permanent. This work remains an indispensable resource for anyone seeking to understand the complex layers of Delhi's history and the birth of modern Indian historiography.

Ultimately, the transition from the first to the second edition of the text mirrors the broader transition of the 19th-century Indian mind—from a traditional, poetic understanding of the past to a more systematic, evidence-based engagement with history. This shift laid the groundwork for the **Aligarh Movement** and the subsequent modernization of education for the Muslim community in the subcontinent.

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