

# Discover India

April 2000

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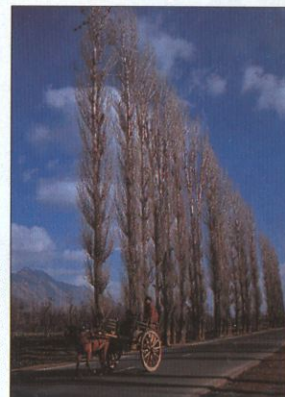
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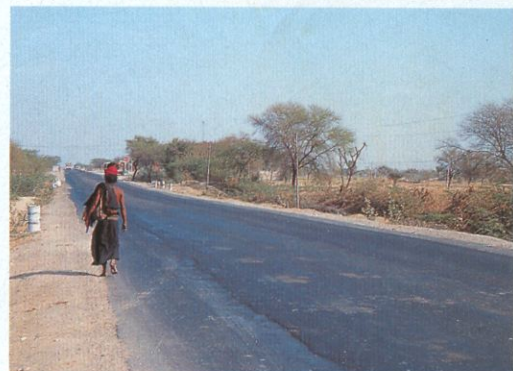
VOLUME 13, NO. 4 APRIL 2000

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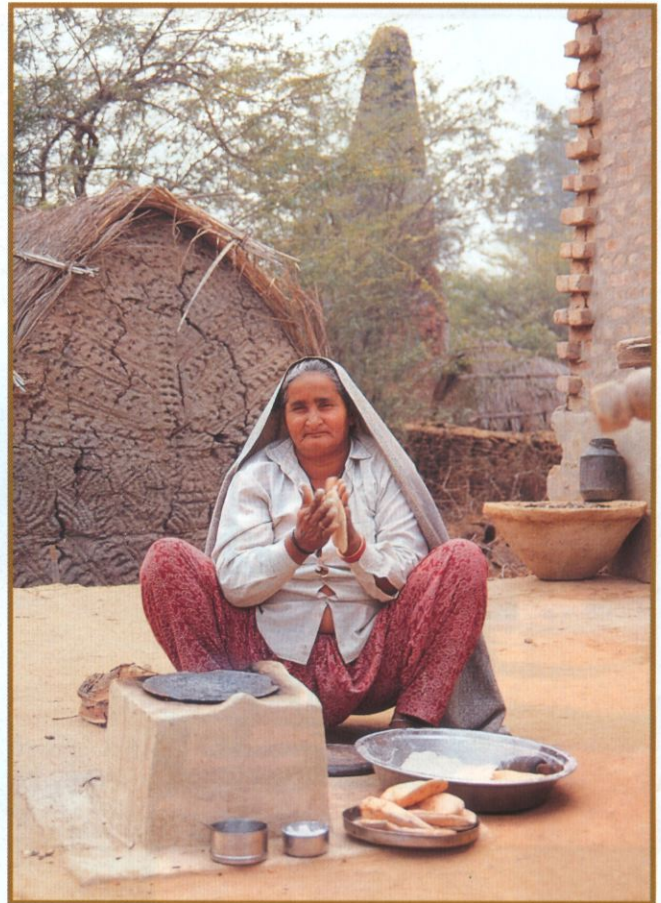
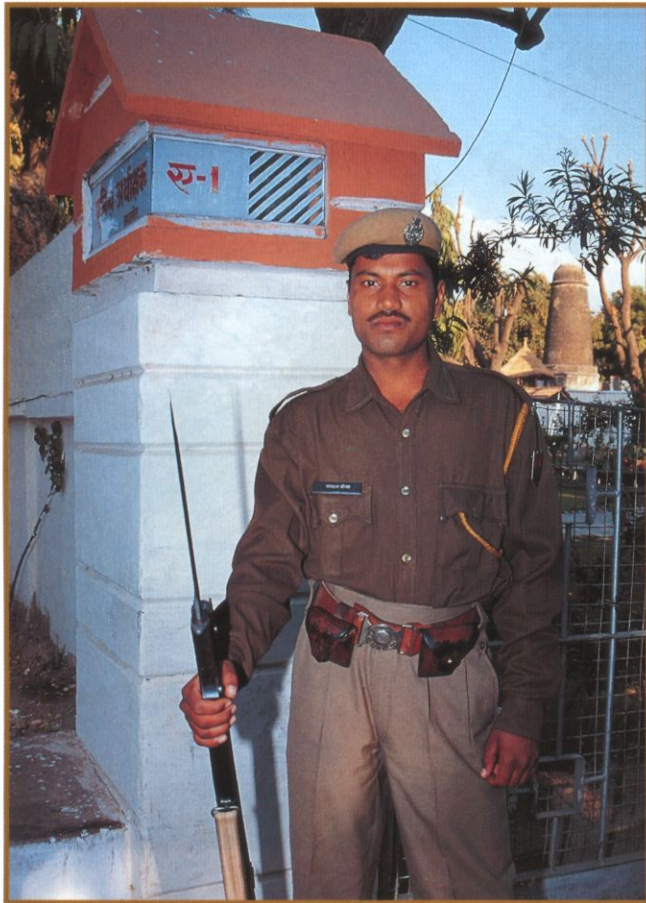


A 'healthy' Kos Minar in  
Delhi Zoological garden.  
Impressions of floral  
motifs and design can still  
be seen at the top end of  
the massive milepost

# KOS MINARS

MILESTONES OF THE  
**MUGHALS**

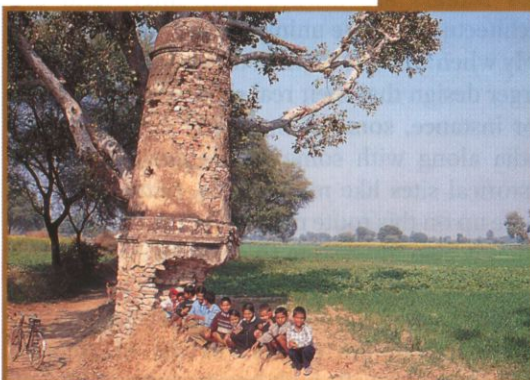




*Left: The privilege of being the most protected Kos Minar perhaps goes to this one that stands within the precincts of the official residence of the Superintendent of Police of Ajmer City. Right: Although a witness to great changes, Kos Minars survive along with the continuity of some traditions. Ganga Devi makes chappatis in much the same way as it was done when Kos Minars were made*

**SPEEDING ALONG THE HIGHWAY BETWEEN DELHI AND AGRA, ONE OFTEN SEES THEM FLASH PAST THE ROADSIDE OR PICKS THEM OUT, STANDING SOME DISTANCE AWAY IN THE FIELDS. ALTHOUGH QUITE CONSPICUOUS, THESE MASSIVE MASONRY PILLARS ARE OF NO ARCHITECTURAL MERIT TO WARRANT A SECOND, CLOSER LOOK. YET, AS THEY MAKE THEIR RECURRING RHYTHMIC APPEARANCE, ONE GENERALLY BECOMES CURIOUS TO KNOW WHAT THESE MONOLITHS ARE, WHO MADE THEM, WHEN AND WHY.**

*With its base almost missing, this one is precariously positioned in the village, Nagal Lath.*



These are the *Kos Minars* — milestones made by the Mughal monarchs (1556-1707). Literally, “Kos” is a medieval measurement of distance denoting approximately 3 kilometres and “Minar” is a Persian word for tower.

Measuring over thirty feet, the Kos Minars were once erected by the Mughals marking their royal route from Agra to Ajmer via Jaipur in the west, from Agra to Lahore via Delhi in the north and from Agra to Mandu via Shivpuri in the south. Nearly four hundred years later modern highways have come up much along the same route as the one delineated by the Kos Minars.

Abul Fazl, Mughal emperor Akbar’s faithful chronicler recorded in his *Akbarnama* that in the year 1575, for the comfort of the travellers, Akbar issued an order that at every *Kos* of the way from Agra to Ajmer, a pillar (Kos Minar) should be erected so that those



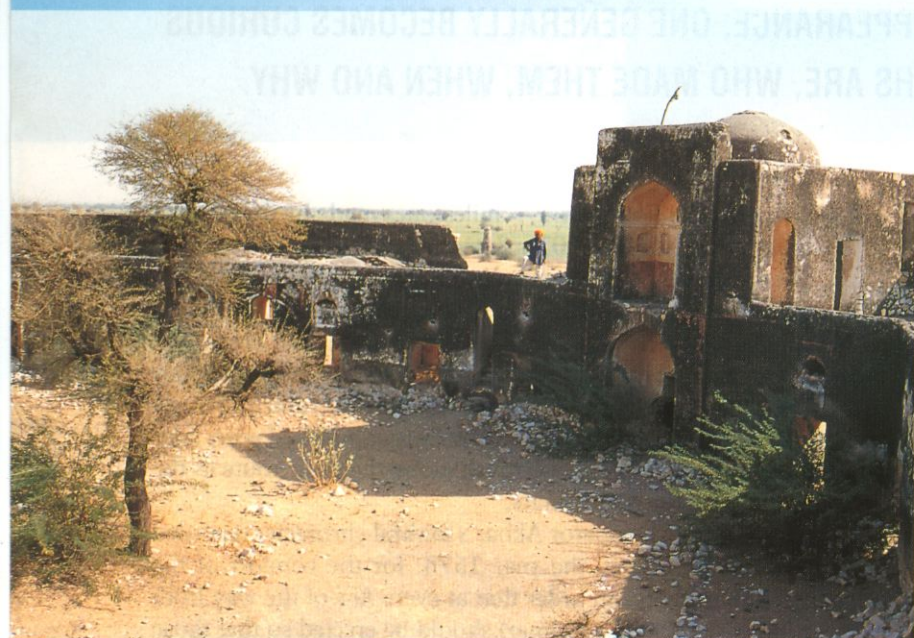


*Above: Lost in the obscurity of rural hinterlands, the sad part of the Kos Minar story is that we do not even know how many really exist today*  
*Below: It is said that the Mughals made a 'mahal' every 12 Kos or 36 km on their highway. Made in typical Islamic architecture, there is evidence of several such en route encampments between Agra and Ajmer.*

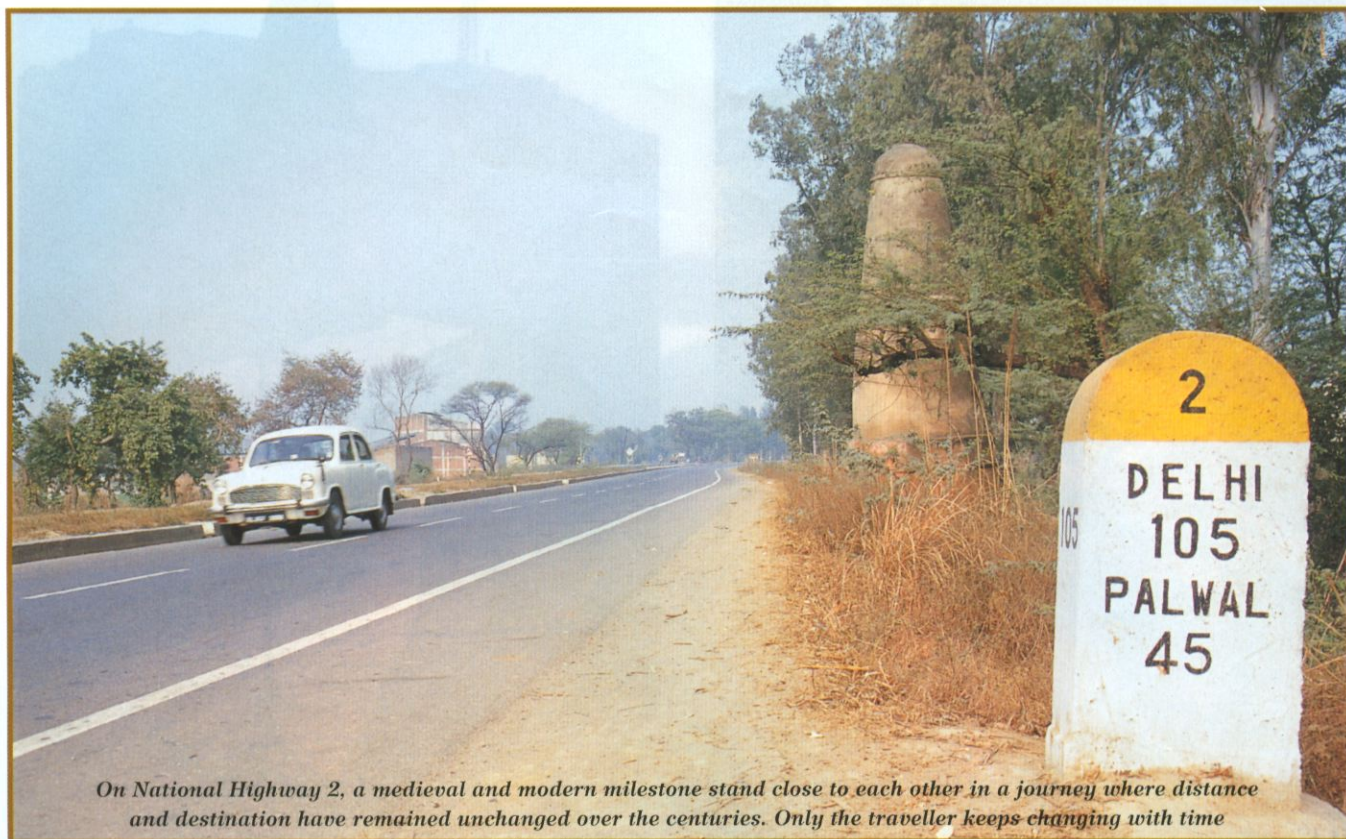


who had lost their way might have a mark and "that strength might be given to the fatigued." And so it was. Standing on a masonry platform, these solid rotund pillars were built with bricks and plastered over with lime. It is believed that Akbar derived inspiration to build Kos Minars from his predecessor, Sher Shah (1540-45), the Afghan ruler of Delhi who built many roads and repaired and revived the ancient route of the Mauryas henceforth termed the Grand Trunk Road. Kos Minars became an institution during the rule of the Mughals as after Akbar, his son and grandson, emperor Jehangir and Shah Jahan, both added to the existing network of Kos Minars. In the north they were extended as far as Peshawar and in the east to Bengal via Kanauj.

This geographic span makes for nearly three thousand kilometres of Mughal highways, accounting for nearly 1,000 Kos Minars (i.e. one every Kos or 3 km) aligned across the Indian subcontinent! Yet no systematic study has ever been undertaken so far to find out how many of them survive. The problem perhaps is that the Kos Minars are always seen singly and are architecturally quite unimpressive structures. It is only when we view them in the entirety of a much larger design that their real significance emerges. For instance, some of the major cities of north India along with some of the most important historical sites like monuments, battlefields etc. come up on this route marked by the Kos Minars. What is also interesting to discover is a network of medieval caravansarai or traveller's lodge from the Mughal times a few of them still extant today. Besides, there are periods *bavdis* or stepped drinking water wells built beside some of the Kos







*On National Highway 2, a medieval and modern milestone stand close to each other in a journey where distance and destination have remained unchanged over the centuries. Only the traveller keeps changing with time*

Minars for the benefit of travellers.

There are no historical references to tell us exactly what role Kos Minars played in the administration of the Mughal Empire. Some say that they proved critical in the business of governance as there was a horse, a rider, a drummer posted at every Kos Minar and royal messages were relayed back and forth with great speed. Others maintain that they were principally made to facilitate transportation and not communications. Those were the days when the Mughal emperors travelled on elephant back, in a royal entourage that included more than a thousand people consisting of bodyguards, personal retainers, tent erectors, cooks, foot soldiers and cavalry. Whatever the reasons, the Kos Minars present a great travel story and it would indeed be a worthwhile exercise to check their present status.

Lining the highway on either side, the most visible presence of the Kos Minars is between Agra and Delhi. What is interesting to note is that the modern highway is running almost on the same route as that of the Mughals. From Agra we see them along the road to Fatehpur Sikri but lose them before we arrive at Akbar's capital city in red sandstone. While the modern day highway goes past the Keoladeo National Park to Bharatpur the Kos Minars take a more older and historic route via Bayana and Khanua (where Babur fought Rana Sanga) into Rajasthan.

Between Agra and Jaipur, the Kos Minars run their parallel route along the highway, at least 15 to 20 kilometres in the hinterlands, coming closer as the road approaches Jaipur. While the highway goes straight through a hill pass into the modern city of Jaipur, the Kos Minars cross over the road to make their way to Amber where Akbar was married to a Rajput princess. In the shadow of Amber Fort, not far from Akbari Masjid or Mosque, stands a Kos Minar in reduced circumstances, sadly watching the elephants lug tourists, when once, it was an exclusive royal preserve.

From Amber, the Kos Minars make their way towards Sanganer, an old town just south of Jaipur and finally meet up with the modern highway near Bagru, en route Ajmer. After making their presence felt on the highway with two quick appearances in succession, the Kos Minars cross over from the right to the left side of the road. A couple of kilometres from the road, they run their parallel course in the countryside, rejoining the highway just before Ajmer shrine city of Chisti — Sufi mystic and the patron saint of the Mughals. Three kilometres away from the Durgah of Chisti is the last Kos Minar on that route that is located inside the bungalow of the Superintendent of Police. Without any doubt this is the most secure Kos Minar that one will ever come across!

In a country where there is so much architectural heritage crying

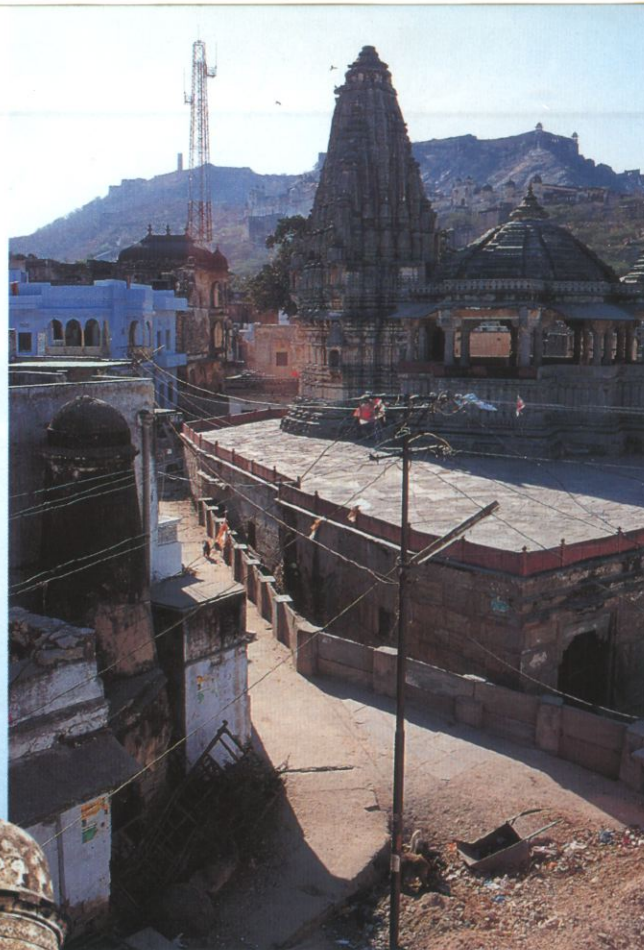
*Young Rukmini with her unconcerned and yet-to-be-named friend in arms, poses before the period pillar at village Binjolav near Dudu on the route to Ajmer*







*Camouflaged by a canopy of a giant "jamun" tree, this Kos Minar stands in the precincts of the Govind Devji ka Mandir in the outskirts of Jaipur*



*Under the shadow of Amber Fort, this Kos Minar which recalls much better days, now seems to be on the verge of being pushed out of its place!*

for attention, the Kos Minars seems to have not only forfeited their importance but are also literally lost in the obscurity of the countryside. The business of locating Kos Minars can bring a pioneer's sense of discovery as one finds them in the most unlikely of places today. At the periphery of a thermal power plant. Inside somebody's home. In the middle of a village. Surrounded by an urban housing complex. Camouflaged by a leafy canopy of a huge Jamun tree. Within the premises of a hospital, a factory, a temple... By and large, the local people knew that these pillars were some kind of milestones made by the "Mughal Badshahs" but they had no idea of their continuity beyond perhaps one or two more Kos Minars in the contiguous area. Also, people from different areas identified Kos Minars by different names like *Madara*, *Munyara*, *Shahi Minar*. Because of general apathy, most of the Kos Minars are in a state of disrepair. Weather beaten and broken in places, they are gradually crumbling away. Sita Ramji, priest of a temple near Savarda on the Ajmer route, took me to a heap of rubble where, he said, a Kos Minar was struck by lightning two years ago. Local people scavenged the bricks leaving no trace of its existence. As one goes along, one sees many Kos Minars that are on the verge of collapse or simply threatened by bludgeoning development around them. In fact, they have been razed down whenever they have come in the way of personal self-interest of the people. One hears many stories of them being pulled down by the people under whose private property the Kos Minar happened to come. But there

are also quite a few examples where enlightened local bureaucrats or concerned public have taken the initiative to save a Kos Minar from falling apart. In what seems a much larger project, the Government of Uttar Pradesh also undertook restoration of the Kos Minars within its borders several years ago. But it's a shame the way the works were carried out, without any sense for its original shape and dimensions. In their disfigured look, the Kos Minars seem to lose their unique character. One of the best-preserved specimens of Kos Minars is to be found inside the Delhi Zoo. Here we can still see what was the original look of a Kos Minar with embellishments of a floral frieze and quotations from the Koran on the rounded top. This well-preserved specimen should serve as a model for those that need restoration.

Once upon a time, these phallic shaped pillars, stood proudly as symbol of Imperial power. Emasculated by time, today they stand as silent sentinels from a bygone era. It is fascinating to see them dotting the countryside — forsaken and forlorn. A home to parrots that live in its broken niches. A perch for a preening peacock. An observation post for the falcon. But still standing. They have done remarkably well over the centuries, braving the elements. But they may not fare so well now when the forces of development in both urban and rural areas threaten to demolish anything that comes in its way. Before we abandon them to the forces of rapid modernization, we should at least get to research and retell their extraordinary story.