The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) was founded in 1861 and Alexander Cunningham appointed its first Director-General (1861-1885), barely three years after colonial rule had been established in the subcontinent. The setting up of the ASI coincided with another major activity of the colonial state, namely, the extensive railway and road-building period, with the railway contractors being responsible for the greatest damage to archaeological sites. In the nineteenth century, conservation and repair, which were looked after by local governments, had formed no part of the ASI’s responsibilities, even though several laws had been enacted for the protection of archaeological remains in the country, starting with the 1810 Bengal Regulation Act. The Ancient Monuments Preservation Act was passed in 1904 under Lord Curzon, “to provide for the preservation of ancient monuments, for the exercise of control over traffic in antiquities and over excavation in certain places and for the protection and acquisition in certain cases of ancient monuments and of objects of archaeological, historical or artistic interest”. This paper examines the implications of this early twentieth century legislation for archaeological research in the subcontinent and the new challenges and pressures of the present century.

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