



Heritage of India

A series of explorations of the World Heritage sites of India as adjudged by the World Heritage Committee of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisations (UNESCO).



The Taj Mahal ("crown of palaces") is widely recognized as "the jewel of Muslim art in India and one of the universally admired masterpieces of the world's heritage. It represents the finest and most sophisticated example of Mughal architecture.

The Taj Mahal was built by a Muslim, Emperor Shah Jahan in the memory of his dear wife and queen Mumtaz Mahal. In 1631, Shah Jahan, emperor during the Mughal empire's period of greatest prosperity, was grief-stricken when his third wife, Mumtaz Mahal, died during the birth of their 14th child, Gauhara Begum. The queen before her death extracted four promises from her husband (a) to build a memorial of their undying love, (b) he should

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Quick Facts

The time taken to build the Taj Mahal was 22 years by about 20,000 workers
Total Cost on the Construction of Taj Mahal Rupees 32 Crore at that time.

When finished, Shah Jahan visited Taj only twice

British soldiers ripped off many precious stones and Lapis Lazuli (a semi-precious stone) from its walls during the Indian rebellion of 1857.

No evidence exists for claims that describe, often in horrific detail, the deaths, dismemberments and mutilations that Shah Jahan supposedly inflicted on various architects and craftsmen associated with the tomb.

No evidence exists for claims that Lord William Bentinck, governor-general of India in the 1830s, supposedly planned to demolish the Taj Mahal and auction off the marble. Bentinck's biographer John Rosselli says that the story arose from Bentinck's fund-raising sale of discarded marble from Agra Fort

Taj Mahal attracts 2-4 million visitors annually with over 200,000 from overseas.



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remarry after her death,) take every care of her children and d) he should visit the memorial every year on her death anniversary. The undying love and wild passion of Shah Jahan for his beloved wife, led him to erect the Taj Mahal - a memorial in pristine marble.

In 1983, the Taj Mahal became a UNESCO World Heritage Site. While the white domed marble mausoleum is the most familiar component, the Taj Mahal is an extensive complex of buildings and gardens that extends over 55.5 acres and includes subsidiary tombs, waterworks infrastructure, the small town of 'Taj Ganji' and a 'moonlight garden' to the north of the river.

The focal point of the monument is constructed in white marble extravagantly inlaid with semi-precious stones and with calligraphed verses from the Quran (Koran). Major parts of the surrounding construction are built from sandstone, distinctively coloured red, in keeping with many other notable buildings of the district and period. The architectural style is Persian but possibly surpasses any other of similar style at any time, in any part of the world, displaying an incredible intricacy of form and decoration throughout its huge entirety.

Taj Mahal Site

The site of the Taj was originally the residence of Raja Man Singh, and was acquired by Shah Jahan from his grandson, Raja Jai Singh in exchange for four mansions in the city. The site "from the point of view of loftiness and pleasantness appeared to be worthy of the burial of that one who dwells in paradise". Construction began in 1632, and was completed in about sixteen years, though work around the complex went on for some more years. Cost was no consideration as Shah Jahan pursued perfection. Peter Mundy, who visited the site when the building was in its early stage, reports that, "gold and silver (were) esteemed common metal, and Marble but as ordinary stone." An endowment of thirty hamlets yielding 200,000 rupees annually was established for the maintenance of the mausoleum and its garden.

The foundations of the Taj represented the biggest technical challenge to be overcome by the Mughal builders. In order to support the considerable load resulting from the mausoleum, the sands of the riverbank needed to be stabilised. To this end, wells were sunk and then cased in timber and finally filled with rubble, iron and mortar - essentially acting as augured piles.

Trees were planted almost immediately to allow them to mature as work progressed. The Taj Mahal was constructed using materials from all over India and Asia. The buildings are constructed with walls of brick and rubble inner cores faced with either marble or sandstone locked together with iron dowels and clamps. Some of the walls of the mausoleum are several meters thick. Over 1,000 elephants were used to

transport building materials during the construction. The bricks were fired locally and the sandstone was quarried 28 miles away near Fatehpur Sikri. The white marble was brought 250 miles from quarries belonging to Raja Jai Singh in Makrana, Rajasthan.

In all, 28 types of precious and semi-precious stones were inlaid into the white marble. The jasper was sourced from the Punjab and the jade and crystal from China. The turquoise was from Tibet and the Lapis lazuli from Afghanistan, while the sapphire came from Sri Lanka and the carnelian from Arabia.

According to Austrian art historian Ebba Koch who spent a decade digging to the very beginnings of the famous monument and measuring every inch of the vast

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Mumtaz Mahal

Mumtaz Mahal (April 1593 - 17 June 1631) meaning "the chosen one of the palace") born as Arjumand Banu Begum was chief consort of emperor Shah Jahan. In 1607 AD Shah Jahan, was betrothed to Arjumand Banu Begum who was just 14 years old at the time. She would become the unquestioned love of his life. They would, however, have to wait five years before they were married in 1612 AD on a date selected by the court astrologers as most conducive to ensuring a happy marriage. After their wedding celebrations, Shah Jahan "finding her in appearance and character elect among all the women of the time", gave her the title 'Mumtaz Mahal' Begum (Chosen One of the Palace)



Begam Mumtaz Mahal

Mumtaz Mahal had a very deep and loving marriage with Shah Jahan. Even during her lifetime, poets would extol her beauty, grace and compassion. Mumtaz Mahal was Shah Jahan's trusted companion, travelling with him all over the Mughal Empire. His trust in her was so great that he even gave her his imperial seal, the Muhr Uzah. Mumtaz was portrayed as the perfect wife with no aspirations to political power in contrast to her aunt, Empress Nur Jahan, the wife of 4th Emperor, Jahangir who had wielded considerable influence in the previous reign

Apparently after her death, Shah Jahan went into secluded mourning for a year. When he appeared again, his hair had turned white, his back was bent, and his face worn. Shah Jahan's eldest daughter, the devoted Jahanara Begum, gradually brought him out of grief and took the place of Mumtaz at court. Since Mumtaz had died on Wednesday, all entertainments were banned on that day. Shah Jahan gave up listening to music, wearing jewellery or rich and colourful clothes and using perfumes for two years. So concerned were the imperial family that an honouree uncle wrote to say that "if he continued to abandon himself to his mourning, Mumtaz might think of giving up the joys of Paradise to come back to earth, this place of misery - and he should also consider the children she had left to his care."

When Mumtaz Mahal died, she was just 39 years old. She had given birth to fourteen children of whom only four sons and three daughters survived. Her personal fortune (valued at 10,000,000 rupees) was divided by Shah Jahan. Jahanara Begum, her favourite daughter, received half and the rest went to the rest of Mumtaz Mahal's surviving children.



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complex and then wrote the book, “**The Complete Taj Mahal**”, the Taj Mahal may have been inspired by love or rather grief for Shah Jahan's dead begum but the real reason for building the Taj Mahal was Shah Jahan's ambition to go down in history as the world's best builder.

Shah Jahan set about constructing his "masterpiece for ages to come", Koch says, with utmost deliberation. Just the selection of the site, for instance, took him nearly six months. "Shah Jahan knew nothing makes an impression stronger than sheer size, so he decided to build a complex that was almost a kilometre long," Koch says. "It's the biggest mausoleum if not in the world, at least in Asia."

There was of course a price to be paid for such extravagance. And that price was paid by the common people whose poverty and wretchedness contrasts dismally with the opulence of the Mughal ruling class.

The condition of the lower orders was hard. They could have no sufficient clothing; and woollen garments and shoes were above their means. As their other demands were few, they did not suffer from want of ordinary food under normal conditions; but, in times of famine and scarcity, their miseries must have been very great. Francisco Pelsaert writes with the experience of seven years that there were in his time, "three classes of people who are indeed nominally free but whose status differs very little from voluntary slavery workmen, peons or servants and shopkeepers." Their work was not voluntary, wages were low, food and houses poor, and they were subject to the oppression of the imperial officers. The shopkeepers, though sometimes rich and respected, generally kept their wealth hidden, or, as Pelsaert writes, "they will be victims of a trumped-up charge, and whatever they have will be confiscated in legal form, because informers swarm like flies round the governors and make no difference between friends and enemies, perjuring themselves when necessary in order to remain in favour". Towards the end of Shah Jahan's reign, the peasants were



The famous dome of the Taj Mahal

more harassed by the provincial governors, their condition became worse, and the evil of pauperism increased.

The sufferings of the peasants knew no bounds during the frequent outbreaks of famine, caused by the failure of seasonal rains, Especially because the Mughul State then made no systematic and prolonged efforts to provide relief and effected no substantial remissions in revenue collection. The little that they did was insufficient to alleviate the acute miseries of the myriads of people who died of starvation

and the pestilence that closely followed it. A terrible famine broke out in 1556-1557 in the neighbourhood of Agra and Biyana, and Badauni "with his own eyes witnessed the fact that men ate their own kind and the appearance of the famished sufferers was so hideous that one could scarcely look upon them. . . . The whole country was a desert, and no husbandman remained to till the ground". Gujarat, one of the richest provinces in India, was stricken with famine and pestilence in 1573-1574, so that "the inhabitants rich and poor, fled from the country and were scattered abroad" ■

The Cenotaphs Of Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal



The Cenotaphs or false tombs of Mumtaz Mahal and Shah Jahan are located in the main chamber of the Taj Mahal mausoleum immediately above their real tombs. The cenotaphs are empty tombs and Mumtaz Mahal's cenotaph is located at the geometric center of the building. The base material used for the cenotaphs are marble and they are surrounded by a screen or jali with intricate design also made of marble. The cenotaphs mirror the placement of the tombs

below and are exact duplicates of the grave stones. Mumtaz Mahal's cenotaph at the center of the inner chamber has calligraphic inscriptions that identify and praise her. On the lid of the casket is a raised rectangular lozenge meant to suggest a writing tablet. Shah Jahan's cenotaph is beside Mumtaz Mahal's to the western side. It is asymmetric to the entire complex since Shah Jahan was buried at a later date. His cenotaph is bigger than Mumtaz Mahal's, but reflects the same elements and calligraphy. On the lid of this casket is a sculpture of a small pen box which decorates men's caskets according to Mughal funerary tradition. Both of Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal's caskets are elaborately inlaid with precious and semiprecious stones.



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The last years of Shah Jahan

Based upon extracts from the book "Emperors of the Peacock Throne" by Abraham Eraly

Shah Jahan was probably the wealthiest man in the world in his time. "In order to preserve with great security the immense wealth, which tributes and extortions augment every year, he (Shah Jahan) caused to be constructed, under his palace of Dely, two deep caves, supported by vast marble pillars," says Bernier. "Piles of gold were stored in one, and of silver in the other, and to render more difficult any attempt to carry away his treasure, he caused, of both metals, pieces to be made of so prodigious a size as to render them useless for the purposes of commerce."

But undeniably the élan of the Mughal empire, so striking under Akbar, was missing in the reign of Shah Jahan. In every respect, the Mughal empire was apparently at its most brilliant, the light within was beginning to fade.

The last years

Soon after the Taj Mahal's completion, Shah Jahan was deposed by his son Aurangzeb and put under house arrest at the nearby Agra Fort where he remained a prisoner in his marble palace until his death. But it is not a harsh life for him. "Although Aurangzeb kept his father closely confined in the fortress of Agra and neglected no precaution to prevent his escape, yet the deposed monarch was otherwise treated with indulgence and respect", says Bernier. "He was permitted to occupy his former apartments, and to enjoy the society of Begum-Sahib (Jahanara) and the whole of his female establishment, including the singing and dancing women, cooks, and others. In these respects no request was ever denied to him; and as the old man became wonderously devout, certain Mullahs were allowed to enter his apartment and read the Koran."

The loss of power could not have troubled Shah Jahan much, for he had been long weary of the burden of government, and had, even before the civil war, delegated his powers to Dara, his eldest son. It was



Shah Jahan seated on Peacock throne

wounded pride that grieved him, but he stoically bore his misfortune, though initially he seems to have tried to incite Muraj and Shuja-as well as Muhammad Sultan-against Aurangzeb, and, according to Tavernier, himself once made an attempt to escape.

As prisoner in the Agra fort during his last days, Shahjahan fell terribly ill. His parched throat could hardly swallow a few drops of sherbat. Nicola Manucci relates a tale that a faqir in Bijapur had warned Shahjahan that the day his hands stopped smelling of apples he would die. Shahjahan recalled the words and smelt his hands. A sigh escaped his dry lips. He casted his last lingering glance at the Taj Mahal from his bed and his tired eyelids closed on a shattered heart forever.

And so died on January 31, 1666 "Abu'l Muzaffer Shihab-al-Din Muhammad Sahib-i-Qiran-Sani, Shahjahan Padshah Ghazi son of Nur-al-Din Jehangir Padshah, son of Akbar Padshah, son of Humayun Padshah, son of Babar Padshah, son of Oma Sheikh Mirza, son of Sultan Abu Sa'id son of Sultan Muhammad Mirza, son of Miraza Shah, son

of Amir Timur Sahib-i-Qiran."

Soon after Shah Jahan passed away, his chaplain, Sayyid Muhammad Qanuji, and Kazi Qurban of Agra were summoned to the fort, and they shifted his body to an adjoining hall, bathed and shrouded it, and placed it in a sandalwood coffin. Jahanara planned a funeral procession befitting the grand Mughal. She was herself a prisoner hence she couldn't order people. A small number of insignificant menials carried the body through the small Watergate to the river.

Quietly Shahjahan's body left the fort where he had embellished the magnificent marble palaces and pavilions. In the early hours of the day his body was entered into the crypt. A rather poignant end for the fifth Mughal Emperor. It is said Shahjahan's favorite elephant Khaliqdad sensing the tragedy also died as the burial was in progress.

Shah Jahan's forlorn death did not assuage Aurangzeb's bitterness towards him. Aurangzeb had not seen his father for fourteen years, since the day he took leave of him in Kabul in 1652 to go to the Deccan, and had not cared to visit him in his illness or to attend is funeral. It was only late in February, a month after Shah Jahan's death, that Aurangzeb went to Agra, and even then his main object seems to have been to make up with his sister Jahanara rather than to visit his father's grave.

Nicola Manucci, the Italian traveller, adds a spicy tale of Aurangzeb's reaction to Shah Jahan's death. Aurangzeb "sent a trusted man to pass a heated iron over his father's feet, and if the body did not stir, then to pierce the skull down to the throat to make sure that he was really dead. Orders were sent to I'tibar Khan not to allow his burial until the arrival of Aurangzeb in person." Once Shahjahan had escaped Bijapur in a coffin to reach Agra. The son remembered the tricks his father could play. But court chronicles mention that Aurangzeb reached Agra 25 days after the burial when all he did was to enact a brief scene of simulated grief, and offer fake condolences to Jahanara as a ploy to snatch jewels in her possession.