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the mughals: taj revealed

The Man Of Marble

New insights on the fascinating Taj Mahal, wonder of the world

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Taj Trivia

- Shah Jahan picked the site for Taj for its great view from Raja Jai Singh of Amber, in exchange for four mansions
- Mumtaz Mahal's body was moved thrice: from Zainabad garden to the Taj complex and finally inside the Taj
- She shares the Taj complex with two begums Shah Jahan married after her death
- When finished, Shah Jahan visited Taj only twice. His own burial was not grand—he was taken quietly by two men by boat and laid beside Mumtaz.

Emperor Shah Jahan would have been tickled: the monument he built for his beloved Mumtaz Mahal is a finalist in the biggest global poll ever to pick the world's New Seven Wonders—as against the ancient list that the Greeks came up with 2,200 years ago. The results of the seven-year-long poll, in which over 19 million have voted so far, will be declared next July in Lisbon. But Austrian art historian Ebba Koch says in her new book, *The Complete Taj Mahal*, that the first votes for the Taj were pouring in over three and a half centuries ago, in Shah Jahan's own lifetime. There was the French physician Francois Bernier, for example, who declared the Taj a sure winner for a place among the seven wonders. "I decidedly think that this monument deserves much more to be numbered among the wonders of the world than the pyramids of Egypt, those unshapen masses which when I had seen them twice yielded me no satisfaction," he wrote in his *Voyages* way back in 1699.

And should his readers accuse him of being an incurable Indophile, Bernier takes pains to mention that he went to see the Taj with a merchant from France "who, like myself, did not tire of looking at it". The French merchant agreed with Bernier that "he had seen nothing in Europe so grandiose and daring."

According to Koch, who spent a decade digging to the very beginnings of the famous monument and measuring every inch of the vast complex, this was exactly what the building-obsessed emperor had wanted to create: a monument that would be unrivalled in beauty and grandeur for all generations to come. "It will," in the words of his court historian Muhammad Amin Qazwini, "be a masterpiece for ages to come, increasing the amazement of all humanity."

The monument, now famous for its soap-operatic legend of an emperor's tribute to his beloved, may have been inspired by love—or rather grief for his dead begum. He had Mumtaz's body carried from Berhanpur where she was originally buried to the site he finally picked for her tomb, and she was buried for a third time in her final resting place nearly 12 years later when the Taj was completed. By that time, Koch says, the emperor had enough time to work out his grief. The real passion, however, was Shah Jahan's ambition to go down in history as the world's best builder. "As a historian I was a little sceptical about the love angle," confesses Koch. But his biography, *Padshahnama*—written by a series of carefully chosen historians—goes into extraordinary detail about the emperor's broken heart, including how his beard turned white overnight and how he shared with his begum not just passion but a meeting of minds as well. But that did not stop the emperor from marrying twice after her, Koch points out. Both these later wives—Akbarabadi Mahal and Fatehbad Begum—ended up sharing not only the emperor's heart but also Mumtaz Mahal's tomb garden.

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. The prevailing

fashion in the royal capital Agra was for riverfront havelis to be turned into garden tombs—the noblemen were erecting these to dodge property laws that decreed that a haveli would revert to the state after the noble's death. But the Taj wasn't going to be just one of the scores of garden tombs. "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."



The other thing the emperor aimed for during the daily meetings with his team of architects, poring over blueprints, making innumerable small changes, was classical symmetry. "Every element in the tomb complex played a vital role in its composition. Take away even one element from it and the whole harmony is destroyed," says Koch. He must have turned in his grave, feels Koch, at the way his successor Aurangzeb raised a cenotaph for him next to Mumtaz Mahal's, disturbing the harmony of the inner chamber's carefully engineered symmetry.

Shah Jahan also took great pains to ensure that his Taj would last forever. Contemporary sources have recorded how wooden wells were sunk into the ground to replace the sand with gravel and concrete to reinforce the foundations of the building. So well did he succeed at erecting a building that could withstand earthquakes and floods that conservationists today are awestruck at its extraordinary stability. Then there is the appeal to our senses by covering the entire tomb in white marble. Koch says she stood at the gate of the Taj and took photographs every hour to document the change of light. She understood the feeling that it aroused in Bernier that he could look at it without ever tiring. "It was meant to make a powerful impression at any point of the day," says Koch.

But the Taj gets Koch's vote as the top wonder of the world because of its seamless fusion of many different architectural traditions. There is the Hindu concept adapted from the vaastu shastras of using only two colours: brahmanical white and kshatriya red. "With this Shah Jahan was declaring that the Mughals were the new brahmins and kshatriyas of India," Koch says. Then there's the European pietra dura work that surpasses in its ingenious crafting the original from Italy. And, of course, the Islamic elements. It's because of this incredible fusion of so many styles that has given birth to innumerable claims about its origins: the early myths about how the architect was an Italian goldsmith named Geronimo Veroneo and how in the eighteenth century a Brahmin priest in Suraj Mal's court suggested converting the Taj into a temple, not to speak of P.N. Oak's more recent claim that the tomb is really Tejo-Mahalaya, a Shiva temple.

But the most startling revelation Koch has unearthed is a caravanserai— four open-air squares, where travellers could pitch their tents and unhitch their animals—edged with shopping arcades. "I don't think there is a monument anywhere in the world of its age or even later which had these tourist facilities." The idea was to finance the upkeep of the Taj with the revenue from the shops and provide shelter for travellers who would come to admire his masterpiece. When Shah Jahan decided to build a monument of love, it's anyone's guess who he really had in mind: Mumtaz Mahal or the tourists of the 21st century, or ever after.

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