

THE TAJ MAHAL: A DREAM IN MARBLE

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Abstract

The Taj Mahal, one of the wonders of the world has amazed every eye who watches it. Lot of controversies have been attached to it as some say that it was a temple. This study shows the history and the grandeur of this symbol of love. The architecture used in this edifice, the gardens surrounding it, its builder, its workmen etc. The quotes of the travellers who visited the Taj had created the thirst among the listeners to once visit this Crown of Architecture once in their life.

Keywords: Taj Mahal, grandeur, architecture, edifice, crown.

Even at so late a date as this, the world holds in profusion, numerous remains of the rare and magnificent edifices which Islam raised in the palmy days and which fortunately have escaped the ravages of time. They supply clear evidence of the wonderful skill of the muslim artists of by gone days. Some of them are indeed, marvels of architecture, the perfect and ingenious workmanship of which baffles the critical accumen of the greatest connoisseurs of modern art. The traveller meets them, mostly in ruins by the roadside at Agra and at Delhi. They tell the story-a sad story of the grandeur, the splendour and the power of the Mohammadan potentates who erected them. Anyone who having visited these architectural wonders comes to see the marvellous mausoleum of Mumtaz Mahal, The Taj, would surely exclaim with the oriental poet;

Of Graces all doth none compare
With thee, thou fairest of the fair.

The merits which all the rest of Muslim edifices possess individually _ the flowering and painting which distinguished the Persian buildings; the remarkable purity, the style and the design, that form the prominent features of the Egyptian mosques, the mosaics, the ornamentation, the decorations, the brilliant colouring, the polish and the finish, which characterize the palaces and the buildings of Spain _ are all combined in

the Taj, which may, in literal sense of the name be called "The Crown Of Architecture". Several reasons have been assigned for the erection of this mausoleum. Some historians are of the opinion that it was raised by Shahjahan at the cost of so much labour and money simply in compliance with the last wishes of his queen. Others think that the mausoleum was built because the monarch had a natural taste for architecture. There are other buildings of high degree of beauty of design but the excellence of Taj is, most probably, due to the fact that it was the first of the buildings erected by Shahjahan at the zenith of his power and under the

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influence of his tender passion for Mumtaz. For this affection that Shahjahan had for his beloved Mumtaz Mahal which made him to built such a wonderful tomb on his beloveds grave earned the Taj some beautiful names like "A monument of Eternal love" or "A materialised vision of Loveliness".

For the construction of this unrivalled specimen of mughal architecture, Shahjahan invited to his court all the eminent architects and masons and artists in his own territories as well as from foreign countries; such as Persia, Arabia and Turkey. Master Isa Afandi; The designer, Amanat Khan Shirazi; Tughra writer, Ismail Khan; The dome maker from Turkey, Muhammad Khan; The calligrapher from Shiraz, Kazim Khan of Lahore as Kalas maker, the superintendent of masons was Mohammad Hanif of Akbarabad, Mohan Lal, Manohar Singh and Manoo Lal Mosaicists from Lahore. In short, the services of the most skillful men of the age in Asia were secured. The preparation of the plan of the intended building was entrusted to masters of the

art from distant lands. Several designs were prepared, but none met with the approval till the ingenious Afandi presented his. Muhammad Isa Afandi made the plans and designs. First a model in wood was constructed and in 1630, the very year of Mumtaz Mahals death, commenced the building of mausoleum. The whole gang of laborers and workmen numbered about 20,000 men completed the building in 20 years.

ARCHITECTURE OF TAJ

Gate:-

In front of the gate there is a spacious platform, 211 1/2 feet in length and 86 1/4 feet in width. The gate rises to a height of 100 feet. The text of whole chapter of "*Walfajr*" (The day break) in the Holy Quran is inscribed along the front and the sides in big letters of black stone set in marble with extreme elegance. The surface is so smooth and polished that they look as if the chisel had not touched them but they were caste in mould. The merit for the execution of this artistic work belongs chiefly to Amanat Khan, whose magical chisel has wrought a talisman

that puzzles the beholder. Their height from the ground produces no diminution in the size of letters. They do not look any bigger at the bottom than they are at the top. The calligrapher was surely a perfect master of practical optics.² The gate is made of an alloy composed of eight different metals, and is studded with brass nails hammered in.

The four smaller sides have each a staircase leading upto to the story above. The whole entrance is a masonry dome, the inside of which is red with an intricate net like painting in white__ a sort of fresco. In the Taj same kind of ornamentation in mosaic and the materials used are marble and precious stones. The pieces are so skillfully cemented that time has failed to affect their cohesion. The towers are crowned with cupolas topped with brass Kalases still dazzling the eye with there brightness. Originally all of them had a coating of gold, But jats despoiled them of it during there sway. The top roof had four bouquets, 22 turrets and four towers. The inner gate struck one with the marvelous performance of Amanat Khan Shirazi. The sides of gate are sanctified by the text "*wad-duha*" (The brightness) on the right and "*wat-tin*" (The fig) on the left and the front with "*Alam-nashrah*" (Have we not opened) ending in "finished with the help of the Most high, 1057 Hijri", corresponding with 1647 A.D.

² Ahmad Moinuddin, The Taj and its environments with illustrations from photographs one map and four plans, 1924, Agra, pg. 31

Garden:-

Two canals 16 1/4 feet wide run along in the middle of the garden straight to the foot of the terrace of the mausoleum. These springs were of full of crystal clear water. Fountains play in

them. The canals have on either side stone footpaths. A reservoir was made of marble in centre of garden which added beauty to the beautiful. Fishes of different colours were swimming in the clear water of reservoir. The reservoir had to its right and left two gay edifices, three stories high abutting upon the rampart. The garden had plants of rare excellence. Delicious fruits and fragrant flowers delighted the senses. On either bank of the aqueduct stood tall cypresses like grenadiers watching over the fairy prospect around. *Bela, Jasmine, Motia, Champa, Harsinghar, Jooi, Ketki, Maulsiri, Keora, Rose, Marigold, Dandi, Gul-i-abbas,*

Gulmehdi, Nazboo, Gul-i-farang, Gul-i-chandni, Gulshabboo, Seoti, Gul-i-rana, Suraj-Mukhi(Sun-Flower), Sumbul, Sausan, Nargis etc. loaded the breezes with their aromatic odours. The garden produced a variety of fruit excelling those of Kabul in sweetness; *Grape, Pomegranate, Plantain, Apple, Pear, Lemon, Orange, Quinee, Pineapple, mango, Blackberry, Guava, Khirni, Falsa, Mulberry, Fig, Peach, Walnut* and others. The oldest tree was one near to eastern wall. It was called "*Senbhal*" (*The cotton tree*).

Terrace of the Mausoleum:-

The first terrace of the mausoleum is made of red stone extending to the rampart east and west. The Jumna and the garden form its northern and southern boundaries. In the midst of the red stone terrace is the marble one elevated 20 feet; on which stands mausoleum itself. The marble terrace is a square where sides are 328 feet 3 inches. Each side of the marble terrace has arches with the striking feature that each of them has been built of five pieces only, all in equal size. The edifice is surrounded by a chequered platform, as a continuation of the red stone one. At the extremities of the margin of the arabesque that overlooks the Jumna are two staircases, one towards the mosque and the other towards the cloister. At the foot of former has a row of fourteen

rooms in which perpetual darkness prevails. The real object of building them is a mystery. To the west of them is situated a mosque with the cloisters having paved yards or platforms. The platform of the mosque is of red stone. It has 3 arches. In the Centre is an inlaid slab of polished marble which reflects the mausoleum. The floor is paved with brilliant stone that looks like shining red silken velvet. It has room for a congregation of 539 souls. The seats are marked out by pieces of black stone inserted in the shape of arches in the parament. Almost on the whole building the words and surahs of Holy Quran are inscribed in Tughra character. To the left of mosque near the large well is a staircase which carries one to the top of the roof. At the four corners rise octagonal towers. There are three beautiful Domes on a terrace. The largest is middle one. Adjacent to the back wall of the mosque there are on both sides halls with their stairs abutting upon the northern and the southern walls of the mosque

and the rampart. Those on the northern side take up to the Bassai tower. This tower has two companions a hall and another tower to the south of the mosque. On the north of the mosque a staircase descends from the tower to the river. As the Rauza has a mosque on its west, so it has a Prayer Hall of similar construction at the opposite end. Whatever is to be seen in the mosque has been repeated in the hall, excepting that the latter has no seats of prayer, no pulpit, no tughra decorations and no ornamental rings or inscriptions. Otherwise

it possesses all the artistic beauties of the mosque and even excels its rival in the splendour of its floral ornamentation on the walls and the underpart of the roof which is executed in white on red ground.

The Mausoleum:-

Two sets of stairs led one to the place where stately mausoleum stands in all its glory. The beholder is filled with wonder and admiration at the sight of this ideal sublimity and beauty never pictured by him in his dreams. It is, so to speak a visible embodiment of what may have been related in myths or legends. The eye is delighted with its soft beauty and the soul is charmed with its exquisite workmanship, which seems as if wrought by the hand of the angels.

The eye is loth to withdraw from it, so attractive is the sight from top to bottom, within and without and around it is uniformly superb, fascinating to both the knowing and the ignorant. The style, the form, the materials and the artistic refinements of the building beggar description. A variety of sciences, geometry, trigonometry, mechanics, mensuration, painting, sculpture and many others are laid under contribution to complete this architectural model of art.

Lofty minarets stand at the four corners. No structure of the kind can compare with these in beauty and shape. In elegance of workmanship they match the best in the world. They are covered on the outside with marble slabs united with a streak of black stone between, which sets off their beauty admirably.

Maqbura (Sepulchral Shrine):-

is an irregular octagon on a plinth. Of the eight sides, four are larger than the others. Each of the larger sides has a large arch with a smaller one in the shape of a recess of a niche inside opposite to it. The front and the sides of the four large arches are adorned with the text of " Ya Sin" in bold elegant letters. These inscriptions display the skill of the extraordinary calligrapher, Amanat Khan Shirazi. They are uncommonly beautiful. They look as if they had been worked with a machine. The Blackstone in the marble has a charm produced by the Grecian chisel. The niches or recesses are similarly beautiful with extracts from the Holy Quran.

The interior is indeed very remarkable. The building is an irregular octagon. On the four smaller sides are the four eight sided rooms. The floor is paved with octagonal pieces of marble most elegantly set in. The four large ones have square rooms. Both sets of rooms communicate with each other by a kind of gallery or verandas. The rooms are so regularly built that when one walks through all the rooms, starting from the central one, he at last comes back to it. The rooms as well as passages are of pure marble polished and shining. The mosaics and arabesques are seen here in their ideal perfection. Marble and gems have been worked into plant life and bouquets with uncommon precision. They fill one with admiration of the masters of the art that lived in bygone days. In the Centre of all these structures lie the receptacles which hold the ashes of Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal. These are the most

admirable objects of all. Here the artist seems to have exhausted all his ingenuity and skill. It is the most perfect piece of all his work. The mosaics, arabesques, the frescoes, the painting, the inscription, the calligraphy have all been done most exquisitely.

The arches are furnished with screens composed of pieces of glass for the admission of light. The four side doors have square screens. The whole has a curious appearance. It looks

like a 'glass house'. There are two circles containing inscriptions about the room. These rings of holy inscriptions add to the beauty of the room, which is replete with ornaments. The common idea that the text of the whole Quran has been inscribed in the Taj is incorrect. A careful scrutiny reveals that only fourteen chapters of the Holy Quran are strewn here and there throughout the

mass of structures. In the middle of the hall, there is an enclosure of network done in marble most elegantly. It is called *Muhajir*, an arabic word equivalent to the english word enclosure. The marble of the arched doors is the best and most valuable. When the rays of light fall on it, it looks as if thinly coated with gold. A closure inspection shows that particles of gold are set in, in its texture. Floral ornamentation of an excellent character is all over the enclosure. The gay and the bright flowers, all of the same valuable stone-- are perfect imitations of nature. They please the eye as if they were real.

The Badshah Nama tells us that a gold railing set in costly gems was prepared in the year 1042 A.H.(1632 A.D).³ It served as a protection of the tomb. This attractive railing was removed in 1642 A.D. It was replaced by a marble enclosure which is seen to this day. According to Badshah Nama, the enclosure was completed in the years at a

cost of 50,000 rupees. It had a door of Jasper which cost ten thousand rupees.⁴ In the heart of it has the grave mound. The slab over the grave mound is inscribed with the texts from Holy Quran. A covering of pearl-strings worth lacs of rupees was prepared for the tomb. It was spread over it each Friday or the anniversary of her death.⁵ Shah Jahan also lies in the same vault. Both the tomb-stones are profusely ornamented with mosaic and floral decorations particularly that of Shah Jahans.

Varandah contains a staircase descending into an underground chamber. The entrance had once a silver door, which was taken away by the Jats. In the centre of chamber was interred the corpse of Mumtaz. The middle portion covered by the tomb-stone is as large as that of Shah Jahans tomb. It has inscriptions from the Quran inscribed on it. The distance between the two graves is six inches. The tomb were adorned with precious gems. These were taken away by the cruel Vandals. The chamber is made of marble. During Shah Jahans life time the chamber was opened once a year on the occasion when the solemn rites commemorating the death of Mumtaz were performed. Men of other faith had no admission.

On both sides of varandah there are octagonal rooms, in both of which there is a staircase which lead us to the roof, which is very lofty. The centre of roof is occupied by a grand dome,

matchless in beauty, size and elevation. The dome is covered with floral ornamentation. On the lowest part is inscribed the first formula of the Muslim faith. At the four corners of the roof there are turrets, Each having eight doors. The roof is decorated with eight splendid stone bouquets.

"In regard to colour and design, the interior of the Taj may rank first in the world for purely decorative workmanship; while the perfect symmetry of its exterior, once seen, can never be forgotten, nor the aerial grace of its domes rising like marble bubbles into the clear sky. The Taj represents the most highly elaborated stage of ornamentation reached by the Indo-Muhammadan builders--the stage at which the architect ends and jeweller begins."⁶

G.W. Forrest says that 'No building has been more often described, drawn and

³ Hamid, Mulla Abdul, Badshah Nama, vol. I, p. 487.

⁴ Hamid, Mulla Abdul; Badshah Nama, Vol. II, p. 325-326.

⁵ Khafi Khan; Muntakhib-ul-Lubab, Vol. II, p. 837.

⁶ Imperial Gazetteer of India by W. W. Hunter, Vol. I, p. 74.

photographed. But no drawing or photograph can give any idea of so rich and poetical a subject. No description can shadow forth the whole, combined out of marble dome, fair minarets, and fragrant garden. Words cannot express the multitudinous richness of its ornamentation, perfection of form, and minuteness of decoration, each lending assistance to the other. This is true charm of the Taj. It is like unto one of those daughters of Gods who were most divinely fair. What has been said of Keats St. Agnes Eve may be applied to the Taj- A monody of dreamy richness.⁷

Lord Roberts has rightly said, "I now for the first time saw the lovely Taj Mahal-- that beautiful, world-famed memorial of a man's devotion to a woman, a husband's undying love for a dead wife. I will not attempt to describe the indescribable. Neither words nor pencil could give the most imaginative reader the slightest idea of the all-

satisfying beauty and purity of this glorious conception. To those who have not already seen it, I would say: Go to India. The Taj alone is well worth the journey."⁸

Shah Jahan, proud of the monument erected to perpetuate the memory of his beloved consort, composed a Persian couplet in praise of the building. Though simple, it well expresses his feelings;-

"Time has wrought this dome passing fine
To show the art and skill divine".

⁷ Forrest.G.W.;Cities of India,C.I.E.Ex. Director of records,Government of India,p.194.

⁸ Forty-one years in India by field Marshall Lord Roberts of kandhar,V.C., K.P., G.C.B., C.S.I., G.C.I.E., p.154.,1898.

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