



The Making of the Taj Mahal – Shantanu Bhagwat

“In a 1982 booklet on Taj Mahal titled Taj Museum, on page 4 of the slim volume, we find this sentence: “The site selected for the burial was an extremely pleasant and lofty land situated to the south of the city on which, till then stood the mansion of Raja Man Singh and which was, at that time, in possession of the latter’s grandson, Raja Jai Singh.” Guess who published this booklet? The Archaeological Survey of India!” – Shantanu Bhagwat

Part One: Re-examining history

This article is the first in a series in which I intend to probe some of the odd “facts” about [Taj Mahal](#) — the iconic structure that has become symbolic of grandeur & beauty in medieval Indian architecture. This series will largely draw on the seminal research and study of primary sources & contemporary accounts by Dr V S Godbole during the years 1981 – 1996, condensed in his book, [Taj Mahal: Analysis of a Great Deception](#).

In the first part, a closer look at the effort that went into construction of the Taj Mahal, specifically the oft-cited figures of “20,000 men” who worked on it “incessantly for 22 years.” The [official](#)

[website of the monument](#) mentions that "... the construction of the Taj Complex began about 1631 AD. The principal mausoleum was completed in 1648 AD by employing thousands of artisans and craftsmen, whereas, the outlying buildings and gardens were finished five years later in 1653 AD. ... A labour force of about twenty thousand workers was recruited from across the Northern India. What is the basis for this "fact"? Where did it come from?

The figures are first mentioned in the book, [Travels in India](#) by [J B Tavernier](#), a French jewel merchant who made five voyages to India in the 17th century. He wrote, "I witnessed the commencement and accomplishment of this great work, on which twenty-two years have been spent, during which twenty thousand men worked incessantly."

Interestingly, Tavernier did not say when the construction began nor when it finished.

More interestingly, while [Tavernier's first visit to Agra was only in 1640](#), almost every account of the Taj states that its construction began in 1631-1632.

So it is highly unlikely that Tavernier could have seen the commencement "of this great work." His second visit to Agra was in 1665, by which time almost all historians agree that the construction had completed. The duration of 22 years is therefore almost certainly based on hear-say. Oddly, the translator of Tavernier's accounts, [Dr Ball](#) makes no mention of (much less explain) this discrepancy. And no one doubts the veracity of the account.

Although Dr Ball's translation of Tavernier's book was only published in 1889, these numbers were beginning to get quoted by other historians and writers. In the early part of 20th century, they began to acquire a life of their own.

Here is [E B Havell](#), Principal of the Government School of Arts, Calcutta writing in, [A Handbook to Agra and the Taj](#) (1904), "The master-builders came from many different parts. ... Twenty thousand men were employed in the construction, which took seventeen years to complete." Havell did note the discrepancy in number of years in a footnote, "Tavernier says twenty-two years, probably including all the accessory buildings."

Here is [Vincent Smith](#) in his book [History of Fine Arts in India and Ceylon](#) (1911), "... We know ... from Tavernier who witnessed both the commencement and completion of the buildings that operations did not cease finally until 1653 nearly 22 years after they had begun."

The figures were now well on their way to becoming accepted facts. The list of books in which these were quoted, grew in number over the years, from Major Thorn's *Memoir of War in India*, (1813) through to [India Discovered](#) by [John Keay](#) (1981).

But was Tavernier the only foreign traveler in India during the time the Taj was being constructed? Or were there others? Turns out there were.

Did they write about their travels? Yes, they did.

Did they visit Agra during their journey? Yes, at least a few did.

Surely they must have written about this remarkable structure being constructed? And written about its grandeur? And mentioned the number of men working on it?

Let's find out what they had to say.

One such traveller was Fray Sebastian Manrique, a Portuguese missionary who was in Agra for four weeks in Dec-Jan 1640-1641. His eye-witness account (one of the rare ones that actually mentions the construction) talks about "... a vast, lofty, circular structure" inside "a huge square-shaped enclosure".

How many people do you think he found working on the site?

"On this building, as well as other works, a thousand men were usually engaged."

Read that again: "A thousand men."

The figure is odd not just because of the wide divergence from the number cited by Tavernier but also because of what these men were doing, namely, "... many were occupied in laying out ingenious gardens, others planting shady groves and ornamental avenues; while the rest were making roads and those receptacles for crystal water, without which their labour could not be carried out."

Strangely, no mention of masons. Or bricklayers, or stone cutters or the thousands supposedly working on the actual building. This even as the building was "... still incomplete, the greater part of it remaining to be done."

If true, this was an awkward fact. Especially because both Tavernier and Manrique were apparently in Agra at around the same time and had travelled by the same road from Dacca.

How do historians explain this discrepancy?

Vincent Smith writes, "... The number (20,000) rests on Tavernier's excellent authority. According to Manrique, the staff of workmen numbered only 1,000 in 1640. No doubt the numbers varied much from time to time."

The translators of Manrique's travels say, "Manrique's figure is certainly a rough one. ... Tavernier says 20,000 men worked incessantly. Manrique, however is writing long after and without notes and again his visit seems to have been but cursory."

But we know that Manrique wrote his account within a year of returning from his travels in 1641. So it certainly was not "long after". As for cursory, it is not clear what was the basis of this statement. Was it because the number was so much at odds with the 20,000 figure?

But perhaps Manrique was not so reliable after all. Were there any other travelers? There were.

One of them was [Albert de Mandelslo](#), a German who was in Agra in October-November 1638. Surely he too must have witnessed the building and the construction activity – now in its sixth year?

What does he say about it?

Nothing.

That is right, absolutely nothing. – ([The Times of India](#), 6 July 2014)

Part Two: The making of the Taj

Yesterday, we noted how Albert de Mandelslo, a German traveller who was in Agra in October-November 1638 made absolutely no mention of the building or its construction activity in his account of travels in India and Agra.

As Dr Godbole notes in his book, “He, however, describes Red Fort of Agra in detail. He describes the Mughal treasure ... (of) ... diamonds, rubies, emeralds, statues of gold, brass, copper, brocades, books, artillery, horses, elephants and other valuables.”

“He tells us of king’s ministers and their duties, gives details of cavalry, artillery, guards ... describes celebrations of Nauros and king’s birthday. He even describes the fights of lions, bulls, elephants, tigers and leopards arranged by Shah Jahan.”

But no mention of Taj Mahal at all. Let alone any construction activity.

Don’t any historians refer to Mandelslo? Some do, but keep quiet about that fact that he says nothing about Taj Mahal.

Others try and explain it away, e.g. here’s [Fergus Nicoll](#), “Despite providing detailed observations on life in Agra, Mandelslo apparently did not visit the Taj Mahal (then in its sixth year of construction). The omission may be explained by his premature departure from the city, prompted by a chance meeting with the relative of a man he had killed in Persia, fearing reprisals (and notwithstanding the efforts of servants and colleagues to lie on his behalf), he retreated to Lahore before continuing his journey to the Far East.”

In short, we are asked to believe that a man who provided “detailed observations on life in Agra” – and was certainly present in Agra when the construction was going on, did not visit the building or saw any activity, since he had to flee from a relative of someone he had killed in Persia, even though servants and colleagues were prepared to “lie on his behalf!”

So we have one historical account which appears to be unreliable, another that does not square up to the first and a third which makes no mention of this remarkable structure.

Were there any other travellers? There were.

We have at least one more eye-witness account of the activity around the construction of this masterful edifice.

This account comes from [Peter Mundy](#), a merchant of the (English) East India Company, who was stationed at Agra. [Peter Mundy’s account](#) is useful since he was in Agra at the time of [Mumtaz Mahal](#)’s death.

Oddly, he makes no mention of the death (or to be more precise, the news of her death). For such a beloved queen, one would expect shock at the news of her passing away and even public mourning. But Peter Mundy makes no mention of this.

Surely Mundy must have seen the beginning of the construction? What does he say about Taj Mahal?

“(In Agra) places of noate ... are the Castle, King Ecbars [Akbar’s] Tombe, Tage Moholls Tombe, Gardens and Bazare.”

Isn’t it odd that a tomb whose construction had begun only a few months back was already a “place of note?”

But wait, “This Kinge is now buildinge a Sepulchre for his late deceased Queene Tage Moholl,” he writes.

Looks like we do have evidence of the building being constructed after all. Except that there is a slight complication – or two.

Mundy goes on to describe the scene at the site thus, “The buildinge is begun and goes on with excessive labour and cost, prosecuted with extraordinary diligence, Gold and silver esteemed comon Mettall, and Marble but as ordinarie stones.”

Mundy does not say at what date he saw this but it would be fair to assume that this was in early 1633, after Shah Jahan’s return to Agra (in June 1632). It is very unlikely that construction could have begun before October 1632 due to the monsoon rains.

And yet neither Peter Mundy nor Albert Mandelslo mention any digging of foundations – in spite of the fact that a structure of this size would typically require massive support.

Of course, Taj Mahal does have foundations – in the form of masonry wells. But only one historian has made specific reference to them. Why did Mundy not notice these wells or foundations being dug? Or did they already exist at the site?

There is a second complication in Mundy’s account. Did you notice the reference to “marble” being used as “ordinarie stones?”

Well, isn’t the Taj Mahal made of marble?

Actually not.

Contrary to popular perception, the entire construction is of brick and red sandstone. It is only the lining that is of marble.

So how did Mundy notice men working with marble, barely a few months into the construction of the edifice – which by then was already a “place of note”, counted alongside the Red Fort and Akbar’s tomb?

One final oddity.

As some of you would know, the (English) [East India Company](#) had a factory at Agra from 1618 to 1655. This was also the period during which the Taj Mahal was supposedly built. “And yet there is no mention of the Taj Mahal, Mumtaz Mahal or tomb of the queen of Shah Jahan ... in their records.”

No historian has so far referred to the [Dutch East India Company](#) records. So it is safe to surmise that they do not contain any information about the Taj Mahal either. Isn’t this odd? Very odd?

And thus, one is compelled to wonder whether the brickwork of the central edifice, the foundations, the layout, indeed the entire structure, was already complete when Shah Jahan started to “build” the Taj Mahal?

Next in the series, we will examine whether the Taj was an extant structure that predates Mumtaz Mahal’s death in 1631. – ([The Times of India](#), 7 July 2014)

Part Three: The leaking domes and clueless master builders

Continuing our series, today we dig deeper into the strange story of a leaking Taj Mahal. That’s right, “leaking.” Well, you might expect a 350-year old building to leak after these many years, right? Except that the leaks we are talking about, started appearing earlier. Much, much earlier. We are talking about a report from more than 350 years ago – from 1652, the 21st year of Taj Mahal’s “construction.”

The report is actually a letter from Prince Aurangzeb to Shah Jahan. In the letter, Aurangzeb writes, “the dome of the holy tomb leaked in two places towards the north during the rainy season and so also the fair semi-domed arches, many of the galleries on the second storey, the four smaller domes, the four northern compartments and the seven arched underground chambers which have developed cracks.”

“During the rains last year the terrace over the main dome also leaked in two or three places.”

Further, “The domes of the Mosque and Jama’at Khana leaked during the rains and were made watertight. The master builders are of the opinion that if the roof of the second storey is re-opened and dismantled and treated afresh, ... the galleries and the smaller domes will probably become watertight, but they say that they are unable to suggest any measures of repairs to the main dome...”

This is hard to believe. So we have to ask ourselves, is the letter authentic? Is it credible? How could such a remarkable example of architecture and design start leaking even as it was being constructed?

Let’s check the authenticity and reliability of this “letter.” The letter was published in *Muraqqa-i-Akabarabadi* edited by Said Ahmad of Agra in 1931 (page 43, footnote 2). A translation by M S Vats, a superintendent in ASI appeared in a publication by [Archaeological Survey of India](#), titled, [Ancient India](#), in 1946, Volume I (Pages 4-7) in 1946.

Strangely, the letter finds no mention in some of the major publications on this subject since then (including, for example the books by Sir [Mortimer Wheeler](#), [Bamber Gascoigne](#) or John Keay).

It does however find a brief mention in [The Peacock Throne](#) by Waldemar Hansen on page 181 but is not explored further.

We do find other, scattered references to this letter. For instance, [this news-report about a book on Taj Mahal](#). It is therefore, safe to assume that the letter exists and is credible.

The letter is odd for several reasons. A few of these oddities are worth highlighting.

First, the very fact that such a structure could begin to leak merely a few months, or at best a few years after its construction was ‘complete’ (if we take the period of 17 years, the monument was complete by 1648) is difficult to believe.

Second, the leaks had started appearing much earlier. They were noticed “last year...” too.

Third, they appear to be extensive and not localized. But the strangest bit is this sentence:

“... The master builders ... are unable to suggest any measures of repairs to the main dome.”

Read that again: “The master builders ... are unable to suggest any measures of repairs....”

Which begs the question, were these “master builders” the original designers and builders of this monument? Or were they clueless since they had no awareness or knowledge of the original structure?

But perhaps the leaks were just symptomatic of poor design? Or poor maintenance? Or a freak design fault? Perhaps they were. And however tempting it might be, by themselves they are not enough to establish the fact of an extant structure.

We need more evidence before we can seriously consider this possibility. Is there anything else?

Turns out there is. Again, not conclusive, but reason enough to raise serious doubts about the story of the Taj, as we are told in history books. What is this piece of evidence? What oddity is it that can cause such serious concern?

This is where we come to [Badshahnama](#) (also referred to as *Padshahnama*), a collection of volumes that detail events during the reign of Shah Jahan by [Abdul Hamid Lahori](#) – and one of the most authoritative accounts of the regime.

In the next part, the awkward reference in *Badshahnama* and how the story gets “curiouser and curiouser.” – ([The Times of India](#), 15 July 2014)

Part Four: The Taj & Badshahnama: Is this the smoking gun?

In the earlier parts of this series on Taj Mahal, we noted how [accounts of its construction are few, sketchy and generally unreliable](#). We also noted how the magnificent edifice had [extensive leaks when it was in its last phases of “construction”](#). This led me to wonder, does the Taj Mahal predate Mahal’s death? Is it an extant structure that was modified by Shah Jahan?

The smoking gun — in a manner of speaking — in this case comes from *Badshahnama*, the most complete & comprehensive account of the reign of Shah Jahan.

The Persian text of these accounts was published by the [Asiatic Society of Bengal](#) in 1867. Extracts from the text, translated in English, were published in 1877 in [History of India as Told by its Own Historians](#).

Strangely, these extracts (all of 168) pages have only a fleeting reference to the passing away of Mumtaz Mahal. Even more strangely, they make no mention at all of either the Taj Mahal or any

massive construction at Agra.* Unfortunately, the full text of the *Badshahnama* has still not been translated in English. So we have no means to conclusively say (as yet) whether these records of the court and the reign of Shah Jahan mention the construction and other details of Taj Mahal or not.

But we do have references to this text in other books. One such book is [Agra—Historical and Descriptive](#) by Syed Muhammad Latif, published in 1896.

Latif's book is notable not because of its reference to the *Badshahnama*, but for a seemingly casual sentence that nevertheless is remarkable in contradicting everything we are told about the structure. On page 105 of the book, [Latif, referring to Badshahnama](#), writes, "The site selected for the mausoleum was to the south of the City. It was originally a palace of [Raja Man Singh](#), but it was the property of his grandson, [Raja Jai Singh](#)."

Read that again. Slowly. "The site selected for the mausoleum was ... originally a palace of Raja Man Singh." This is odd, to say the least, and raises a number of difficult questions.

If this extract from the *Badshahnama* is true, what happened to the palace? Was it demolished? Or was it re-designed and converted into the marvel we see today? Or is the palace itself what we call the Taj today?

But before anything else, we need to establish the credibility of this sentence – particularly since it appears to turn the entire story about this "labour of love" on its head.

Does it appear in any other accounts? Is it referred by any other writer? Or writers?

Our next exhibit in this curious tale – which alludes to this very same fact – is a most unlikely source, published almost a 100 years after Latif's book. It is a 1982 booklet on Taj Mahal titled *Taj Museum*. On page 4 of this slim volume, we find this sentence, "The site selected for the burial was an extremely pleasant and lofty land situated to the south of the city on which, till then stood the mansion (*manzil*) of Raja Man Singh and which was, at that time, in possession of the latter's grandson, Raja Jai Singh."

Guess [who published this booklet](#)? The Archaeological Survey of India!

The [reference in Badshahnama](#) would have probably gone unnoticed – until at least such time as the full translation of the text was not done – had it not been for the work of [P N Oak](#), who published a book in 1968 titled, [Taj Mahal was a Rajput Palace](#). In that book, he reproduced two pages from the *Badshahnama*, along with the translation. In those two pages, he identified the sentence, "Raja Mansingh's palace, at that time owned by Raja Jaisingh (grandson of Raja Mansingh) was selected for burial of Arjumand Banu Begum alias Mumtaz-ul-Zamani."

Unfortunately P N Oak's work was discredited soon after it was published, largely due to some of his hypothesis that appeared to be far-fetched and in the realm of fantasy. The source of the translation – or the translation itself – was never challenged, to the best of my knowledge.

Critics usually counter this by pointing to the fact that there is a mention of a "foundation was laid" towards the end of the extract, although no further details of the work, labour and costs related to this "foundation" are available.

There is at least one more account which mentions the “*manzil*” of Raja Jai Singh. It is a book titled, [Jehangir’s India](#) by W H Moreland, published in 1925. Although the title mentions [Jehangir](#), the book has little to do with Jehangir. It is actually a translation of [a Dutch trading officer’s](#) account of the times. It is “primarily a commercial document, but, fortunately for posterity, [Pelsaert](#) included in it a detailed account of the social and administrative environment (of the time).”

Pelsaert was posted to India in 1620. “He reached Surat in December ... and was forthwith sent to Agra, where he remained until the end of 1627”. Moreland tells us that “There can be no question that he had an accurate ear (and) ... that he had mastered the language of the country.”

In his description of Agra, Pelsaert wrote, “The breadth of the city is by no means so great as the length, because everyone has tried to be close to the river bank, and consequently the water-front is occupied by the costly palaces of all the famous lords, which make it appear very gay and magnificent. ... I will record the chief of these palaces in order.”

“After passing the Fort, there is the Nakhas, a great market, where in the morning horses, camels, oxen, tents, cotton goods, and many other things are sold. Beyond it lie the houses of some great lords, such as Mirza Abdulla, son of Khan Azam (3000 horse); Aga Nur, provost of the King’s army (3000 horse); Jahan Khan (2000 horse); Mirza Khurram son of Khan Azam (2000 horse); Mahabat Khan (8000 horse); Khan Alam (5000 horse); Raja Bet Singh 1 (3000 horse); the late Raja Man Singh (5000 horse); Raja Madho Singh (2000 horse).”

We know that several of these palaces (which were also noticed by other travellers e.g. Bernier, the French Doctor who stayed at Aurangzeb’s court between 1658-1665) survived well into the 19th century although most were in ruins by then.

Pelsaert had already left India by the time of Mumtaz Mahal’s death. So we cannot say for certain – at least based on this evidence – that the palace of Raja Man Singh which Pelsaert mentioned, is what we know today as the “Taj Mahal.”

But there are now enough reasons to doubt the credibility of the claim that Shah Jahan started the construction of this magnificent piece of architecture.

The list of these reasons is now getting longer. And the inconvenient facts keep accumulating.

For instance, the mention of an extant palace (*manzil*) on the same site where the Taj stands today. The implausible pace of construction, the lack of eye-witness accounts, the lack of details in *Badshahnama*, the wide discrepancy in contemporary accounts by foreign travellers. The damning mention of extensive leaks in the structure which puzzled the ‘master-builders’ etc., etc.

How does one reconcile these inconvenient pieces of evidence with the “history” that we read? Are these reasons not enough to warrant a deeper investigation, a fresh look at the whole “history” of this monument?

In the final part of this series, we will examine additional evidence and features of this building which suggest that the edifice may have been originally designed for purposes other than to serve as a mausoleum. Stay tuned. – ([The Times of India](#), 19 July 2014)

* Note that the monument was not called “Taj Mahal” during medieval times but the extracts have no mention of any of its alternative names — *Rauza-e-Mumtaz Mahal*, *Rauza-i-Munauwara*, *Rauza-i-Muqqadas* or *Imarat-i-Rauza-i-Mutahhara* — either.

Part Five: Was the Taj Mahal really built to be a tomb?

In the earlier parts of this series, I mentioned how there were now enough reasons to warrant a deeper investigation and a fresh look at the whole “history” of Taj.

The list of reasons included the mention of an extant palace (*manzil*) on the very same site where the Taj stands today, the implausible pace of construction, the [lack of eye-witness accounts](#), the [lack of details in *Badshahnama*](#) and the extensive leaks in the structure which puzzled the ‘master-builders’.

In this concluding part, I will outline evidence & incongruities regarding design & architectural features which makes one wonder whether the building was really built to be tomb? As it happens, quite a number of these features are readily apparent.

For instance the four towers that are mistakenly labelled as “minarets.” Unlike a traditional “*minar*”, these towers are all equal in height. Oddly, they are shorter than the main dome and do not rise from the walls of the mausoleum. Their character is more that of a watch tower than a *minar*. Strangely the “*masjid*” in the Taj complex itself has no *minars*!

Or the mosque and its counter-part on the other side, the so-called “*jawab*”. Why would a mosque need a counter-part? Was it really built as a counter-part or did it have some purpose? Aurangzeb refers to it as “Jamait Khana” — a guest house, which would be more appropriate in the context of temple or a palace, but why would a tomb need a guest house? And why does the mosque not face in the direction of Mecca? Is it because it was an extant ‘secular’ building?

Or the underground chambers which are clearly visible if one ever descends to the river bank and looks up at the Taj. Strangely, while these were noticed by numerous chroniclers, few bothered to explore the purpose of their construction. Those that did, found their presence puzzling, e.g. “The real object of building them remains a mystery.”

Or the numerous rooms that are hidden from view and are no longer accessible to visitors, including the eight rooms on each storey around the cenotaph, the rooms under the marble plinth, the rooms under the mosque and the “*jawab*”. Why were they built? Why were some of them sealed? Why are some locked? Why is it that none are accessible to the public? What dark secrets do they harbour? What is there to hide?

Or the unexplained structures, for instance the well-documented large well (*baoli*) in one of the towers near the mosque? Or the presence of *nakkar-khanas* (drum houses), guest rooms, *gaushala*, stables, pavilion for elephants and horses. What was the point of having all these in a solemn place of burial? Or the odd stairs on the platform on the sides leading down to the river. For what purpose? Or the repeated reference to the pinnade as “*kalas*”, a Sanskrit term, in an account by a Muslim author. Was this a throwback to a past that is deliberately not spoken of?

Or the revelation from dimensional analysis suggesting that “Taj Mahal complex was executed using the [traditional measurement units mentioned in the Arthashastra](#)”? Or the numerous Hindu symbolisms detailed in [The Question of the Taj Mahal](#), by P S Bhat and A L Athawale? Or the lack of elaborate records referring to the construction. I could easily list a few more but I don’t think it’s necessary. This exploration of the history of Taj has been a wonderful learning experience. Unfortunately it has left me with more questions than answers.

Although speculation is always dangerous in such situations, it is becoming increasingly hard to avoid the conclusion that the original structure of the Taj (and the surrounding complex of buildings) predates Shah Jahan. The original structure was most likely a palace-temple complex. It may have been in disuse for a few years before the death of Mumtaz and had probably suffered some neglect. It certainly needed some maintenance (as we know from the extensive leaks). It is very likely that Shah Jahan undertook extensive renovations and restoration of the building, even as he changed the very nature of the structure. It is almost certain that the marble overlay on the exterior was ordered by him, as were the floral motifs, the marble screen and the inscription of verses from the *Quran*. It is likely that extensive records relating to its construction do not exist since the building was not built during Mughal times.

But we shall never know unless we dig deeper, metaphorically speaking. The history of this monument should not be decided on hearsay or on the basis of speculation. It will need serious research and extensive exploration of the surroundings. Until that happens, the mystery of the Taj will remain.

P.S. As for the ‘story’ behind the Taj, here is [Wayne Begley writing in 1979](#), “this (that it was Shah Jahan’s great love for Mumtaz that inspired the Taj) ... can be shown to be essentially a myth — a myth which ignores a great deal of evidence to the contrary... A serious reassessment of this important monument is long overdue”. I rest my case. – ([The Times of India](#), 22 August 2014)

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