

Taj Mahal



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Introduction

The Taj's astonishing journey from memorial to monument in the last 375 years is the story of a remarkable building becoming a national icon and of many ways of seeing it. The Taj represented imperial Mughal power at its zenith in the Indian subcontinent and was intended to be a world famous masterpiece of human creation. Built by the Mughal Emperor Shahjahan as a mausoleum for his beloved wife Mumtaz Mahal, its primary function was commemorative, and it became his final resting place as well. The two, passionately in love, became inseparable companions since their marriage in 1612 until Mumtaz's death in 1631 after she gave birth to their fourteenth child. Mumtaz was her husband's confidante and advisor, patron of a riverfront garden in Agra, and was instrumental in supporting indigents and seeking pardon for the condemned (Koch 2006). She and her surviving seven children were the first family; she was bestowed with gifts and titles, and entrusted with the imperial seal even though Shahjahan had two other wives (Carroll 1972; Bano 2013). Shahjahan was devastated on her untimely death and soon after he resolved to

build the perfect mausoleum, a replica on earth of Mumtaz's house in paradise. Her body was brought from its temporary burial in a garden on the banks of the River Tapti in Burhanpur to its present site in Agra on the Yamuna Riverfront, not too far from the royal quarters in the fort palace. Construction began in 1632 and Taj was completed in just over a decade, although work on decoration continued until 1648. The first two anniversaries of Mumtaz's death were grandly celebrated by the Emperor and nobles by offering prayers for her soul and distributing money to the poor (Fig. 1). A *waqf* (endowment) was established for the upkeep of the memorial structure in perpetuity with revenues from 30 villages and tax from income generated in the shops and caravanserais of Taj Ganj.

Monument

The Taj outlasted the Mughals and lost its commemorative use with the advent of colonial rule in India. It acquired the status of a monument in keeping with the nineteenth-century European zeitgeist and began to be perceived as an object of great beauty and pinnacle of a historical architectural style. A monument's repertoire of meanings extends beyond its original function as a commemorative entity. The Taj too gathered many meanings over time as a symbol of eternal love of the Emperor Shahjahan for his beloved,