

[Transcript] The Rest Is History / 362. The Taj Mahal: Love and Death

You knew, Emperor of India, Shah Jahan, that life, youth, wealth, renown, all float away down the stream of time.

Your only dream was to preserve forever your heart's pain, the harsh thunder of imperial power would fade into sleep, like a sunset's crimson splendour, but it was your hope that at least a single eternally heaved sigh would stay to grieve the sky.

Though emeralds, rubies, pearls, are all but as the glitter of a rainbow tricking out empty air and must pass away, yet still, one solitary tear would hang on the cheek of time, in the form of this white and gleaming Taj Mahal.

So that, Dominic, was Rabendra Nath Tagore, the great Bengali writer, the first non-European, I think, to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, writing about one of the world's most famous buildings, the Taj Mahal.

And I guess it could be a candidate for the world's most famous building, definitely the world's most romantic building built for love.

It's sort of seen as a symbol, isn't it, of India, of romance, and of exoticism in the West, don't you think?

So the image of the Taj Mahal is one that newspaper travel supplement editors will always reach for when they're telling you about the trip of a lifetime or, you know, stretching your horizons, or it's the Taj Mahal that is always the building that is featured at the centre of that.

I mean, it is also very much a kind of shorthand for devotion, marital love, that kind of thing. You know, the famous person who utilised it to that effect was Princess Diana, who was it in 1992, went and sat directly in front of it on her own without Prince Charles as he then was kind of making a very public statement.

So it is absolutely a building that carries an entire freight of meaning, significations. And as you say, a symbol of India abroad, but also that, you know, it's a great Muslim building, built by Muslim emperors.

And so in contemporary India, not entirely uncontroversial.

So we thought it would be a kind of wonderful theme for an episode of The Rest is History. And we have the perfect person to guide us to the origins of the Taj, how it came to be built, history after its building.

And that's Dr.

Marine Cheedo-Razvi, who is the in-house editor for the Khalili collection of Islamic art, world expert on the art and architecture of the period of the emperors who built it, the Mughals.

Marine, welcome to the show.

Thank you so much for joining us.

Yeah, it's my absolute pleasure.

And what does the Taj mean to you?

To me, the Taj Mahal, it's one of these, it is an absolutely iconic building.

And it, for me, stands as a historical reminder of a period of history where the syncretic nature of the Mughal Empire and the Mughal court was very much on display. And it speaks to that.

And it's, yeah, as you mentioned, there are some contemporary issues surrounding it. So it stands as a reminder to a time where things might have been a little bit better

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than they are right now.

So give us a bit of context.

Tom said the Taj Mahal dates from the era of the Mughal emperors.

So for those of our listeners who are not incredibly familiar with Indian history, who are the Mughals?

Where do they come from?

What do they mean?

And whereabouts are we in history?

So the Mughal dynasty lasts from 1526 to 1858.

As you mentioned, this is a series of Muslim kings ruling over the region of South Asia.

They are of a Mongol line and they come from in this period, Central Asia.

So Babur, the founder of the Mughal dynasty, he is the ruler of a principality, the principality of Fergana.

The Fergana Valley is primarily located in today's Uzbekistan.

And so he's one of a series of Timurid princelings or the Great Empire of Timur.

His descendants are all vying for power in the Central Asian region.

And Babur comes out of Fergana with the idea of trying to reestablish Timur's Great Empire.

But he's not able to do so.

He's not militarily strong enough.

So he ends up taking the province of Kabul, establishing himself there.

And from Kabul, he looks into the region of South Asia as a potential area to conquer.

And in that, he's following Timur because Timur had sacked the Delhi Sultanate in 1398.

And so he has this idea in his mind that he can create a new empire for himself in that region.

So just to be clear, he is descended from Genghis Khan, the greatest conqueror in history, and from Timur, who maybe to people who are familiar with Elizabethan literature is better known as Tambelaine, the kind of the archetype of the Great Conqueror.

So they have an absolute track record of going out and conquering places.

And as I understand it, Babur wins his great victory that establishes himself in North India outside Delhi.

And then he goes on and he wins a battle at a place called Kanwar in 1527,

which is outside the city of Agra, which is where, in due course, the Taj Mahal will come to be built.

Does Agra have a kind of significance for the Mughals as a result of that, or is that just coincidence?

That's just coincidence.

Agra was already a very important city in the region.

Delhi actually had been, it was the capital of the Delhi Sultanate, the Islamic rulers of the region prior to the Mughals.

But Agra was an exceptionally important city.

And when Babur conquers the region of North Hindustan, as they called it, he sets up his first capital actually at Agra.

So he is all looking good for the Mughals.

And then it slightly goes wrong, doesn't it, under his son, who ends up in Persia, I think?

Yes, Humayun, who is Babur's eldest son, when he inherits this new region, he's not as strong a figure as his father had been.

He doesn't command the same loyalty as his father had done.

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And so there are contenders immediately trying to take this kingdom from him. And he's run out of Delhi in 1540, spends 15 years wandering, trying to get aid, and ultimately ends up at the court of the Safavid Shah in Iran.

And with his help, is able to come back and retake what had been his kingdom. And so does that introduce a kind of a Persian influence on the Mughal court?

Absolutely.

Helps to explain what will be done when they decide to build the Taj Mahal?

Absolutely.

So when Humayun is able to come back, in terms of the artistic production of the court, some of the best Safavid court artists come back with him, first to Kabul and then to Delhi.

And others join him there.

So in the area of painting, the Persian tradition is very strongly impacting what becomes Mughal.

But in terms of architecture, Babur, you know, having come out to Fergana trying to take Samarkand,

he spent time there, he spent time in Herat, and his his successors do as well.

So they know what imperial Timurid architecture looks like and what it's meant to look like.

And that also has a very strong impact in what becomes Mughal style.

So there's all this world of influences, Central Asia, there's Persia, there's Hindu architecture of India, there's the Muslim architecture of India.

The Mughals established themselves as the rulers of this kind of great swirl of influences and kingdoms.

So Humayun comes back, his son Akbar, he establishes himself much more securely.

And then his son Jahangir, he's the ruler, but he's basically an alcoholic and an opium addict, isn't he?

Is that unfair to describe him as that?

Yes, he is the ruler.

He is addicted to opium.

He is an alcoholic.

But that doesn't take away from his role as emperor.

He's he's gone down in history as one of these people who is completely ruled by his wife and he didn't do anything.

He was just, you know, interested in pleasure.

Spliffing up.

But he, I mean, he's my favorite Mughal emperor.

I think he's one of the most fascinating of them.

But he was imperial.

He was a proper ruler, despite his addiction to to drink and to drugs.

And he has a very impressive wife, wasn't he?

He does, yes.

Noor Jahan, his last and favorite wife, he marries her in 1612.

She had previously been married and had a daughter from that first marriage.

But after her first husband dies, she comes to the Mughal court and is an attendant on one of the elder royal ladies.

And so Jahangir meets her, falls deeply in love with her and they get married.

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And she's she's a very important politically influential woman.
And so this is important for the story of the Taj Mahal, because Jahangir's son, Shah Jahan, the man who will build the Taj Mahal, succeeds Jahangir.
And his favorite wife is Noor Jahan's niece.
Is that right?
I mean, this is all very kind of game of thrones.
It's a little bit incestuous.
Yeah. Yes.
So Shah Jahan, before he's titled Shah Jahan Prince Khurram, he's betrothed to Arjumman Banu Begum, who is Noor Jahan's niece.
And that betrothal takes place in 1605.
So actually before Noor Jahan is even at the court, because Noor Jahan's father is in the upper echelons of the court hierarchy and her brother as well.
So they're already an important family in the Mughal court administration.
Her father is effectively Jahangir.
He becomes effectively his prime minister.
And these marriages then between the royal family and this Khurasani family, they make the linkages between them even stronger.
So the marriage between Khurram and Arjumman Banu Begum, who's then titled Muthaz Mahal, that happens in 1612.
And Noor Jahan and Jahangir are married in 1611.
So can you give us some sense of the personality of Shah Jahan?
So he's more of an orthodox Muslim than his father, I think?
He is. He's a more orthodox figure.
He doesn't touch alcohol until he's basically forced to by his father on his, I think it's his 24th birthday.
Jahangir kind of makes him take a drink.
So no, he is a more orthodox figure, but he's not a fundamentalist.
And this turn towards, his internal turn towards orthodoxy, it's actually really interesting.
It doesn't very much affect how he rules his concept of rule.
And in fact, two of his children end up as practicing Sufis, and that's very tolerated and supported.
So yeah, he is a more orthodox figure.
And so he's a great warrior and his wife comes with him on campaign.
Is that normal? I mean, is that standard behavior or is that unusual?
It was more on the unusual side.
I mean, the Mughal court was a peripatetic, so it moved around.
It was never stationary for very extended periods of time.
And the the harem did move around with the emperor as well.
But for Mumtaz Mahal to accompany Shah Jahan on all his military campaigns and everywhere he went, that was unusual.
There was very much a deep connection between between the two of them.
So Mumtaz Mahal, this is the name that is given to his wife.

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And that means Select of the Palace. Is that right?
Yeah, the chosen one of the palace. Yes.
And is it, I mean, am I being too overly romantic?
If I ask, was she incredibly beautiful?
I mean, what did she have that made him so devoted to her,
that made him want to take her with him?
I mean, she gave him 14 children,
so there must have been quite a bond between them.
There was this an incredibly deep bond between them, for sure.
And yes, she had 14 children, seven of whom survived to adulthood.
The connection between them, what was it based on?
It's it's impossible to say because what we're told about her in the court histories,
which are all written by Shah Jahan's court historians,
it obviously her beauty is extolled,
her that the kindness of her personality is extolled, her loyalty is extolled.
She must have been beautiful, but that's not enough, right?
To to form the kind of bond that they had.
And, you know, so yeah, it's impossible for me to say.
But one of the things actually just on that, if I can quote one of his court historians,
we're talking about a Muslim dynasty,
you're talking about words written down for posterity.
And one of Shah Jahan's court historians,
when he's talking about actually the two of them,
he writes that the mutual affection and harmony between the two
had reached a degree never seen between a husband and wife,
among the classes of rulers or among the other people.
And this was not merely out of sexual passion,
the excellent qualities, pleasing habits, outward and inward virtues
and physical and spiritual compatibility on both sides caused great love and affection.
That's written, you know, by this court historian,
this is written with Shah Jahan's permission
because all of his histories, he approved what was being written in them.
And to write about them in that fashion is really out of the ordinary.
It's really remarkable that this idea of the bond is extolled to such a high degree
that there obviously was great sexual chemistry that's extolled, you know, in in these court histories.
So all of it speaks to, in a way, this exceptional nature
of the relationship between them.
And Shah Jahan did have two other official wives who he, you know,
he consummated the marriages, he had a child with the third wife.
But it was Mumtaz Mahal who got who got him,
who had his his time and his love and his devotion.
So it's reasonable to talk about this as a genuine love story.
It is. It is genuinely a love story, for sure.
She then dies while he's on campaign in the Deccan in southern India.

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Yes. On the 17th of June, 1631,
while giving birth to their 14th child and the scale of his grief.
I mean, firstly, his grief is something genuine and it is felt by one and all
that the scale of his grief is something exceptional, is it?
Yes. Again, from the the histories, we are told that he, you know,
for a week he withdrew from the court and was in in solitary mourning.
And this is remarkable because the court activities under Shah Jahan
achieved a very kind of rigid formulation.
There were certain ceremonial activities which took place on a daily basis
where he showed himself to the public, to his court.
He was present to take himself out of that and to, you know,
go away for a week.
It was it was an out of the ordinary circumstance and were told that he,
you know, when he did come out after that week,
he wore white, which is the color of mourning in Islam.
He wore white for a period of time.
His eyesight got so bad from the amount of tears he shed.
He had to start wearing spectacles.
Within a few years, his beard had gone completely white.
So there was a very strong emotional, you know,
reaction to her loss and it led to the creation of, you know,
this incredible monument that we're talking about today.
So she had obviously not died in Agra, but she'd been born there, right?
And so is that why he decides to take her body back to Agra?
No, at the time, Agra was the most important of the imperial capitals.
So Agra, Dili and Lahore, up until about 1643,
they are the three primary imperial capitals of the Mughal Empire.
Under Akbar, Fethipur Sikri is also one for a period of time.
So the capital city moved between these different cities.
And Agra, at the time of Muntaz Mahal's death, was where it was settled.
And so, you know, that was one of the reasons.
But then also very quickly, the concept of the Taj Mahal takes place
and the space that was needed for what was intended, the location,
you couldn't have had that idea of the space of the Taj constructed in Delhi.
It could have been Lahore, but Lahore was the least important
and also a bit more out of the central area of the empire.
So Agra had the location as well as the status.
And so what, I mean, this is a huge question.
It's the obvious question.
What is distinctive about the Taj Mahal?
And to what extent is it the expression of the entire culture of the Mughal Empire?
That is a huge question, Tom.
Yeah, it is. I'm sorry.
So what is important about the Taj Mahal?

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It is the culmination of the Mughal aesthetic of architecture.
It is the zenith of the classical style of Mughal architecture.
It is also layered with symbolism.
So the commemorative aspect of Mumtaz Mahal.
But it's equally a monument built to commemorate Shah Jahan.
There's there's layers of political symbolism associated with the monument as well.
It's the epitome of the idea of Mughal
funerary architecture being representative of paradise, paradise in the Koran.
So there's the layers of paradisaical symbolism associated with it as well.
And it has stood as a monument that has captivated all who've seen it.
So it is this, I think, grand expression of Mughal building design.
One of the other layers of symbolism as well is it's also speaking
to the dynastic legacy of the Mughals because the architecture
of the Taj Mahal draws very heavily on Humayun's mausoleum in Delhi,
which draws very heavily on Timurid antecedents in Central Asia.
So it's speaking to this long dynastic line and the political legitimacy of the line.
So there's so many different layers of symbolism tied up in this monument.
And so it takes 22 years to complete, is that right?
And involves a thousand elephants
bringing in materials from across the world.
Or is that all orientalist exoticizing?
Slightly exaggerated.
The construction of the actual mausoleum, the white structure, is four years, 1632 to 1636.
And the entirety of the complex, because the whole thing is planned as one unit.
Because there are gardens, aren't there?
Well, there's the mausoleum, the garden, a forecourt, a commercial space.
And then another garden across the river.
So the full complex is completed by 1643.
So what is that?
Eleven years is what it took to build the full complex.
At the time that it's being built, is it obvious that this is something in a different league
from previous mausoleums that have been built in previous tombs?
Or is this at the time, is it perceived as being part of a long tradition,
the standard thing that you do, all of this kind of stuff?
Both actually dominate, because it's in the tradition of monumental built
funerary structures by the moguls.
We only have four monumental imperial tombs.
And the Taj Mahal is the culmination of those, but it only ends up being an
imperial tomb because Shah Jahan is later buried there.
One of the things to remember is that this is this zenith of this tradition,
but it's built for a queen.
And in that aspect, there is a tradition of funerary monuments built for
the queens, the empresses.
But this is on a different scale for a female mausoleum.

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It surpasses the monumental emperors tombs that were built before it, the three that came earlier.

And it is just this expression of perfection and refinement encapsulated in the structure. But that is because of that double commemorative aspect. Commemorating Montaz Mahal, but equally and more importantly, commemorating Shah Jahan as this perfect king of this perfect kingdom.

Can I just ask you, so on the outer face of the southern gate that leads into the gardens, there's verses from the Quran.

Oh, thou soul which art at rest, return to thy Lord pleased and pleasing him. Enter thou among my servants and enter thou my paradise.

So it's a very devoutly Muslim expression of piety, of the yearning. I guess, to be reunited in the afterlife.

But I'm just wondering, is that seen by contemporary Muslim opinion as being a little bit excessive, this huge monument? Or is it seen as being an expression of piety?

So the use of Quranic phrases like that, it is an expression of piety. There's 22 verses of the Quran on the, you know, the structures of the complex, the tomb and the gateway.

Partly because of precedence, there is a longer tradition of associating Mughal funerary gardens with the gardens of paradise.

And this is across the Islamic world as well, but the Mughals take it to a different level.

Yeah.

And these particular Quranic phrases, which are saying, you know, as a believer, you enter the gardens of paradise.

It has, again, double symbolism.

It's not only about the religious duty of Muslims.

It's about the idea that you are walking into an earthly representation of the gardens of paradise.

And there's that association very strongly created with the use of these inscriptions at the Taj Mahal.

But there's a precedence also at Akbar's mausoleum in Secundra, which is outside of Agra, where the same kind of idea is presented.

Brilliant.

Okay, let's take a break now.

We'll come back after the break and we'll continue talking about the architecture and history of the Taj Mahal and the ways in which it has been perceived over the centuries.

See you in a minute.

Welcome back to the Restless History.

We're talking about the Taj Mahal with our guest, Marine Chida Razvi and Marine.

We haven't actually discussed what the Taj Mahal means.

So do we know what the name means?

So it means the crown of the palace.

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And it's not how the Mughals themselves refer to the monuments in their writings.

They refer to it as the Illuminatum.

But it was a contemporary name because we know it's referenced in certain European sources.

So it appears to be a corruption of Mumtaz Mahal's name being applied to the building.

Right.

And is it true that all the architects and the craftsmen were executed when they'd finished it so that they couldn't ever build again?

That's Arabian Nights.

Or is that, as I suspect, another Orientalist fantasy?

That is very much an Orientalist fantasy, Dominic.

The craftsmen and the architects and the supervisors are entirely too valuable for something like that to happen.

Right.

And this is an idea which gets applied to many buildings, famous buildings throughout history, right?

But there is this idea that the Oriental despot figure does this kind of thing on a regular basis.

But no, that's not true at all.

But the fact you have stories like that being spread by Europeans, the fact that they have their own name for the Taj Mahal, the name that the building comes to get, suggests that this is a building that is seen by foreigners as well as by the people in the Mughal Empire as being an exceptional structure.

And I would love to ask more about how European contemporaries, as the Taj Mahal is being built in the aftermath, sit.

But just before we come to that, could we just finish off the story of Shah Jahan, which is actually, I mean, it's tragic enough, he's lost his beloved wife, but it then goes even worse, doesn't it?

It does, yes.

So Shah Jahan falls ill in 1657 and quite ill.

There's a fear that he's not going to survive.

Now, he has four sons and one of them, the eldest, Dara Shako, had been designated the heir apparent.

So he is the one who has planned to succeed his father.

And he's the kind of Justin Trudeau, the Jacinda Arden of, he's kind of liberal.

He's, you know, multicultural, all that kind of thing.

Yes, liberal, multicultural.

He's a practicing Sufi and he has been, you know, raised and brought up with the intention, he was Shah Jahan's favorite, that he will be the next emperor.

But when Shah Jahan falls ill, a war of succession breaks out.

The other brothers, the other three decide they're not on board with Dara Shako becoming the next ruler.

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And so they start to gather their own forces.

And they make alliances between the three of them, Shah, Suja, Orangzeb and Murad Bakht.

They make alliances between them to get Dara Shako out of the picture.

And Orangzeb, the third son, he's, he's being very sneaky, let's say.

He's telling his other brothers, I'm not interested in being on the throne.

I will help you get there.

I will, you know, help you militarily because Orangzeb was a great military mind and together we'll work together to, you know, to make sure Dara Shako doesn't get on the throne.

So even after Shah Jahan gets better, he's, he's very ill for about a month.

And then he gets better.

But by then the, the wars between the brothers have already started.

It's kind of too, too late to pull back.

And what ultimately happens is that Orangzeb becomes the victor in this war.

With his brother's help, he is able to have Dara Shako captured and Dara Shako is then executed.

And kind of humiliated, isn't it?

He's led through the streets of Delhi and chains and.

Yeah.

Yeah.

There's the idea that, you know, you want to project this person who up until this point is adored and loved.

And it's known he's intended to be the next emperor.

And so to publicly humiliate him in, in a fashion is, is all part of this idea of then breaking down the, the myth of Dara Shako, because Orangzeb has a very clear, you know, idea that he's the next one on the throne and he needs to make sure that he's the one who commands the, the respect of the people.

So yeah, he then backstabs his other brothers and claims the throne for himself imprisoned Shah Jahan in the Fort in Algra where for the next eight years, he lives in the confines of the palace.

But then when he dies, Orangzeb has him buried in the Taj Mahal next to his mother.

Yes.

So when Shah Jahan dies, his body is taken by river.

So one of the other children, Jahanara, who was hand in glove with Dara Shako, she's also imprisoned in the Algra Fort with her father.

And actually after Mumtaz Mahal's death, she was the first lady of the empire.

She had the, the status of queen, even though she was a princess.

So her intention after Shah Jahan dies is that there will be grand processions, you know, through the streets to honor him as his body is taken to the Taj.

But instead it's taken at night by river to the mausoleum and buried there without really any pomp and ceremony.

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And it's not until Orangzeb himself comes to Algra, I think roughly a month after Shah Jahan dies that any kind of grand celebrations of mourning happen. But they happen now with him, but with Orangzeb as the emperor, without any kind of question about that, because his father's now dead.

And what about the story that comes from a French jeweler called Baptiste Ernie, who visited India in the, in the middle of the 17th century.

And he says that Shah Jahan had plans to build his own tomb on the other side of the river, but these were interrupted by the war.

And Orangzeb basically scrapped that idea and shoved him in the Taj Mahal.

So how much truth is there in that?

Archaeologically, there isn't any.

And historically, from the, from the Mughal perspective, there isn't any proof for this happening.

I mean, Shah Jahan was an incredible architectural patron and his, his histories are full of his different building projects and lots of kind of detailed information about them.

It's how we know so much about the history of construction of the Taj Mahal.

And there's no mention whatsoever of him planning a mausoleum for himself.

It's entirely possible he would have done so had he not been deposed by his son, but up until that point, there had not been any indication that he was planning to build his own tomb.

So Tavernier is the first to mention this idea.

And it's just, as you said, it's just that very brief few lines, right?

There's nothing about material.

There's nothing about it being a replica of the Taj.

So those are ideas which come about later.

And they were given further credence by the fact that, you know, I mentioned this was a one huge complex that was built and there was a garden across the river.

So that's the Metabag, the moonlight garden.

And it was created as a viewing area for the Taj Mahal because you then get this incredible view of the monument reflected in the river.

And you're in a garden and you're able to like see that and, you know, by the moonlight, the idea.

And there's an octagonal tank, water tank in the middle of that garden.

So when that was unearthed, it kind of made people think, oh, these are the foundations of the octagonal Taj Mahal that Shah Jahan intended.

But that's not the case.

They weren't foundations.

It was just a water tank.

So it's a lovely idea that he was intending a black Taj for himself.

Immediately opposite the Taj Mahal.

But there's no, no proof of that.

But it is fascinating how, you know, it's said at the beginning that it's not just people at Shah Jahan's court who recognize the power of it, that it is

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Europeans as well.

So there's another Frenchman.

There seem to be a lot of Frenchmen at this time, François Bernier, who is a physician.

And he's writing this as it's being constructed, that this monument deserves much more to be numbered among the wonders of the world than the pyramids of Egypt.

So that's an incredible thing to say about a building as it's being constructed.

And to what extent do you think the global fame of the Taj Mahal owes to foreign admiration? I mean, there's often the kind of tendency that foreigners admire things more than than people who live in the country.

Do you think that that foreign admiration was there right from the start?

It does appear that it was there from the start because we have accounts like Bernier's and to Bernier's.

And they're speaking to how incredibly striking and beautiful this monument.

And as you say, like saying, it's up there with the great, you know,

the great pyramids. But what's really, what's really interesting is that we have, you know, records, contemporary records of Europeans who are visiting and who are proclaiming about the beauty of the site and the magnificence of the site.

And one of them, you know, he's he's been in the empire and he writes about how it's one of the most beautiful buildings he's ever seen.

But then he kind of questions himself and he's like, Oh, is this because I've become, you know, used to the local aesthetic and maybe it's just in my head.

And it's not until a visitor comes and proclaims about the beauty and the immense singularity of the Taj Mahal that he's like, OK, it is as beautiful as I think.

Yeah. So lots of French people going on about how wonderful it is.

The British capture anchor in 1803.

It's now under their control.

There is one apocryphal story that one of the viceroy's.

I think it was Lord William Bentinck was planning to demolish it and auction off the marble, but apparently that's an absolute calumny.

He was no Lord Elgin.

But the viceroy who really becomes, I mean, becomes obsessed by it and does a great deal to preserve it is Lord Curzon, Dominic, who we've we had on our episode about domestic servants because he wanted to open a window and he couldn't there was no servant and he couldn't open the window.

So he threw a log through the pane of glass.

Oh, dear. Well, Curzon was the kind of epitome of Edwardian British

Otur, I suppose.

So he's eaten and baileal.

There's a famous verse that follows him around from his time at Oxford.

My name is George Nathaniel Curzon.

I'm a most superior person.

My cheek is pink.

My hair is sleek.

I dine at Blenheim once a week.

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And when he comes in as viceroy, so this is the I think he came in in 1899.

And Meharine, he he really appreciates the Taj Mahal, doesn't he?

I mean, Curson takes it very seriously.

He does.

He is the first to kind of take in a way to kind of take ownership and responsibility for the monument in terms of wanting to set forward a series of, you know, projects to conserve the monument, to restore the monument, to take care of it in a proper way that it hasn't been taken care of for a while.

Because there is a concept in Islamic societies, the concept of Waqf, which is an endowment deed, which is written for every construction.

And the Waqf for the Taj Mahal designated, you know, money for its upkeep and for the payment of the attendance and that kind of thing.

And that existed until 1803 when the British stopped the Waqf.

And so the upkeep of the Taj had started to decrease in the very early 19th century.

So when Curson comes, he recognizes it as a site which needs to be protected, which needs to be conserved.

And he puts a lot of effort into that.

I think it was something like he puts 40,000 rupees in a single year toward its conservation.

And in the previous like 20 years or something, it had been just a fraction of that.

So he really ups the amount of money which goes towards its upkeep.

And he commissions this kind of great lamp from lampmakers in Egypt to hang in the Taj, which is still there today.

He's quite a mogul figure, isn't he?

I mean, he obviously quite fancied himself as the heir of the moguls ruling India.

But there's also a sense in which into the 20th century, right the way up to independence, the Taj is quite an influence on the way

that the British start designing their imperial structures,

say the Victorian Memorial in Calcutta and then Edward Lutyens's designs for buildings in New Delhi.

Do you think that the Taj is an influence on that?

I don't know if I would say the Taj itself, but certainly mogul architecture,

the style of mogul architecture, the concept of their buildings,

because, you know, that point, Tom, it brings up the political power of architecture.

You're creating structures which are visual stamps of rulership and ownership, you know, on land.

And the mogul tradition of architecture is one which just projects imperial power, right, and strength.

And so when the British are now in a ruling position

and are creating their own structures, they're drawing very heavily on the mogul tradition of architecture.

And you end up with this, I hate the term, but quote, unquote, endocerosonic style of architecture,

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which is, yeah, kind of a British version, but drawing very heavily on the mogul tradition because of the symbolic associations of it.

And because the British take, because they value the building during the Second World War, it's covered in scaffolding, isn't it, to protect it from Japanese bombing.

And again, obviously that happens again in the wars between India and Pakistan in the late 1960s, early 1970s.

But when India becomes independent in 1947, the status of the Taj Mahal as a Muslim building means that it has an unusual position, doesn't it, in kind of Indian iconography?

It's the most famous Indian building.

It's a symbol of India abroad.

But it's obviously not a Hindu building.

No, but at that time, at the time of partition, in relation to the Taj Mahal and the other mogul monuments that didn't matter so much, because the moguls were, and I would say are, ingrained in Indian history. You wouldn't have had the modern country of India without this Muslim history that they're currently so eager to deny.

And so at partition, the Taj becomes this symbol of this new country.

But it's because it's considered a symbol of India.

The fact that it's a Muslim structure doesn't really play into its symbolic association with the country.

You know, at that point, it's just a symbol of the incredible historical power of the region of which the moguls were embedded in.

But has that, you hinted that it has, has that changed in recent years?

In very recent history, there's been a great push by the current B.J.P. government to.

So that's a kind of Hindu majoritarian government.

Yeah, it's a Hindu majority government, but they promote a very specific ideology, ideology of Hindutva, which places the Hindu past of India on a platform which is meant to crush the other pasts of the country, including Islam, including the Muslim past.

I don't think it's too strong to say that.

And one of the ways that they've gone about doing this is to actually try to erase the Muslim history of the region.

So the most famous building in India internationally.

I mean, I read that Taj Mahal is apparently the most popular name for Indian restaurants in Britain, for instance.

I mean, that's a kind of measure of its fame abroad.

What do you do with the building that famous?

I mean, one way it seems is I was kind of reading up on this, that there've been a number of court cases, one of which got taken to the Indian High Court, another to the Allahabad High Court, claiming that actually it was originally

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a Hindu palace, which seems implausible and in both cases was thrown out. So that obviously hasn't worked.

No, it hasn't worked.

But what's really frightening is that the court cases have proceeded to that extreme level where the idea.

So let me back up a little bit.

So these court cases, which have been undertaken, they've been undertaken by BJP leadership in order to have the Taj Mahal proclaimed a Hindu structure because in their non-factual version of history, this was a Hindu temple dedicated to Lord Shiva built in the 12th century and that it was stolen by Shah Jahan and turned into the Taj Mahal.

And this is complete fantasy fabrication.

Yeah, fantasy fabrication, trying to think of the nice term to use.

And what's really frightening is that you have government bodies which are pushing this new version of history.

So the court case that you were one of the ones you referred to, Tom, the one last year that went to the Allahabad court, there was a petition filed by one of the BJP leaders to have there's chambers in the platform of the Taj Mahal.

And there was a court case to have them opened because he was claiming that there were idols of Hindu gods in those rooms and that they had been there since the construction of the monument and therefore proving it was a Hindu temple.

And one of the supportive statements he made in this court case or one of the statements he made to support this claim came from the National Council of Educational Research and Training, which is the government body in India, which, you know, approves what goes into the history textbooks and that kind of thing. And that body said that there's no primary sources that exist to confirm Shah Jahan built the Taj Mahal, which is again, complete fantasy because we've got the Mughal documents. We've got documents from the library and the archives of the Rajas of Ambar, who are the ones who sold the land to Shah Jahan. And then also we're supplying the marble for the construction.

We have all the European sources, the contemporary sources speaking about what is happening at the time. And so it's really quite frightening that you have this entire mechanism underway at the moment to support the idea that this monument is not Muslim and that it was Hindu. And it actually has, it speaks to the incredible power of the visual, right? That you look at the structure, you think Mughal power, you think Shah Jahan, you think Montaz Mahal and what the BJP wants is to remove that association and give it a Hindu association. And the power of this monument was recognized, I mean, centuries ago. So in 1761, so this is post Aurangzeb, you're beginning to have the breakdown of centralized power in the Mughal court. And one of the Hindu Rajas takes the province of Agra in 1761. And his one of his court priests suggests at that time, turning the Taj Mahal into a temple. So to make it a Hindu monument. So there's no idea being projected that it was Hindu, but there is the idea that we should claim it and take it away. I suppose in a way it's a tribute to the incredible

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power and beauty of the Taj Mahal, that all kinds of people want to claim it. Yeah, absolutely. I mean, it is, it speaks to its incredible importance, it speaks to its singularity. And to its romance. I mean, the romance of the story, I agree, it's so important to whether it would be evident that it was a monument to love if you didn't know the backstory, I'm not sure, but the backstory definitely adds to the sense of wonder when you go to it. It definitely does.

We went and story it on a honeymoon. So I'm very committed to the idea that it is a monument to love.

No, no, it is for sure. And one of the, I don't know if you've come across this, but there is a, I don't know how far advanced it is, but there's a planned complex being built in Dubai, the Taj Arabia, which is centered around a replica of the Taj Mahal, except it's supposed to be three times larger. And it's being built as the wedding destination of the world replicating the quintessential monument to love.

And on that hideous note, maybe we should thank you for guiding us around this most wonderful and beautiful and romantic of buildings.

Thank you, Marine.

No, thank you. It was my pleasure to be here.

And thank you everyone for listening and we'll be back very soon. Bye bye.

Bye bye.