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violence to an end. In January 1948, many feared that south Asia would be sunk in civil war for decades. But in a tragic playing-out of the implications of his political argument, Gandhi's violent death shocked the conscience of political leaders – bringing the killing to an halt.

Gandhi had no straightforward political ideology. Instead, he offered tactics that aimed to limit violence, restrict domination, and give people the space to live self-governing lives. Those tactics were criticised at the time – and since – for being too conservative and for limiting radical change. Gandhi was no revolutionary. He was as willing to befriend capitalists as peasants. But his techniques have been put into practice in many places since his death, usually to good effect: in the land of his birth; by the civil rights movement in the United States; by community organisers in Britain and elsewhere. 🌐



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#### TAJ MAHAL

## Monumental debate

*The Taj Mahal, India's most famous sight, was built for love by a Muslim Mughal emperor. Yet today Hindu nationalists are attempting to co-opt its glories*

BY **AUDREY TRUSCHKE**

**T**he Taj Mahal has long been India's architectural pride. It was erected on the orders of Shah Jahan, a 17th-century Indo-Muslim emperor, to house the body of his wife of nearly two decades, Mumtaz Mahal, who died from complications after the birth of the couple's 14th child in 1631. Shah Jahan envisioned the monument as "a masterpiece for ages to come, increasing the amazement of all humanity". Over subsequent centuries, many have marvelled at the beauty of the Taj, lauding its detailed stone inlay work, its elegant domes, and the magical way the building appears to change colours with the rising and setting sun. It remains the most visited and well-known of India's many tourist attractions today.

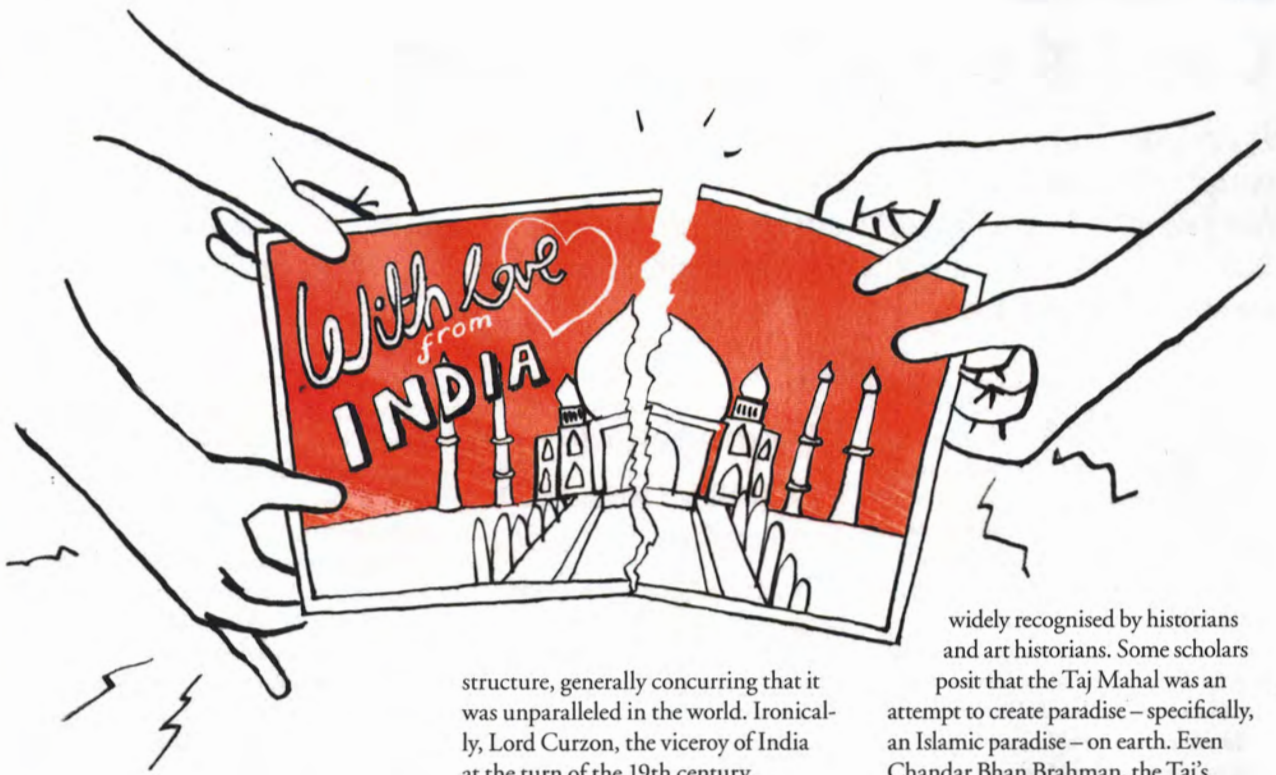
In recent years, however, the Taj has been a source of growing anxiety in India because of its Muslim origins. In autumn 2017, the Hindu-nationalist government of Uttar Pradesh – the state in which the Taj is located – omitted the monument from a state-produced booklet of tourism sites. A few weeks later, a politician in the same region maligned the Taj as a "blot on Indian culture" that was "built by traitors".

Recent years have also witnessed the flourishing of the Tejo Mahalaya theory, which denies that the Taj Mahal is a mausoleum built for a Muslim woman but instead posits that it was originally a temple devoted to the Hindu god Lord Shiva. This idea was propounded in the 1960s by PN Oak, an Indian journalist

with a penchant for claiming that world-famous buildings (including the Vatican, Westminster Abbey and the Kaaba) were originally Hindu. The idea ranks as little more than a joke among historians, but many non-historians have embraced Oak's theories about the Taj. State-sanctioned tour guides at the Taj Mahal repeat this story freely, and it even prompted a recent court case in which the Archaeological Survey of India was compelled to publicly debunk Tejo Mahalaya as a fantasy.

The chief fuel for these attacks on India's most lucrative tourist attraction is disdain for Indian Muslims. India is currently ruled by a Hindu nationalist party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (usually called simply BJP), which posits that Indian culture is, by definition, Hindu alone. This narrow vision does not chime

**Attacks on the Taj are a way of claiming that India's Muslims and their creations are not and cannot be Indian in any meaningful sense**



with India's pluralistic reality, especially the 14% of Indians who are Muslims and who are increasingly maligned as anti-national by virtue of their faith. India's culture wars are often waged on the battleground of history, and attacks on the Taj are a way of claiming that India's Muslims and their creations – past and present – are not and cannot be Indian in any meaningful sense.

Hindu nationalists have long been effective, but hardly original, in defaming Indo-Muslim rulers. From the 18th century the British vilified India's premodern Muslim kings as despots and bigots in order to depict colonial overlords as favourable by comparison. The Hindu right regurgitates this skewed perspective on pre-colonial India, and often erases syncretic aspects of Indo-Muslim rule such as the Mughal employment of Hindus, including in the construction of the Taj Mahal.

One difference, however, is that the British loved the Taj Mahal. Many colonial-era visitors wrote about the

structure, generally concurring that it was unparalleled in the world. Ironically, Lord Curzon, the viceroy of India at the turn of the 19th century, commissioned a large Egyptian lamp for the Taj's tomb chamber – an addition that underscores the Islamic nature of the monument and that still hangs there today.

The British also saw the Taj Mahal as a romantic gesture, a reading adopted by another sector of modern Indian society. Colonial-era English women, in particular, described the monument as a testament to "wedded love" and a "splendid trophy to a woman's praise". Independent India has long played on similar notions, the state-led Incredible India tourism campaign presenting the Taj as the ultimate Valentine's Day card. Rarely do those who espouse this view mention the Taj's more explicitly Islamic features, such as the mosque sited in its grounds and the Qur'anic verses inscribed in its walls.

Seeing the Taj as a love letter in stone is less politically volatile than the communal vision that claims it as a former Hindu temple. But neither view grapples with the Taj's Islamic resonances or imagery – aspects of the monument

widely recognised by historians and art historians. Some scholars posit that the Taj Mahal was an attempt to create paradise – specifically, an Islamic paradise – on earth. Even Chandar Bhan Brahman, the Taj's Hindu caretaker in the 1660s, grasped this connection, describing the Taj as "situated between this world and the hereafter".

There is no need to choose between recognising the Taj as an Islamic monument and celebrating it as an authentic and beautiful symbol of India's diverse cultural heritage. It is both. That neither the Taj Mahal's current champions nor its critics have found a way to embrace its multiple layers of imagery exposes bigoted assumptions regarding the place of Islam and Muslims in India. Such prejudice serves India poorly, in terms of both shaping the future and understanding the past. 🌐



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