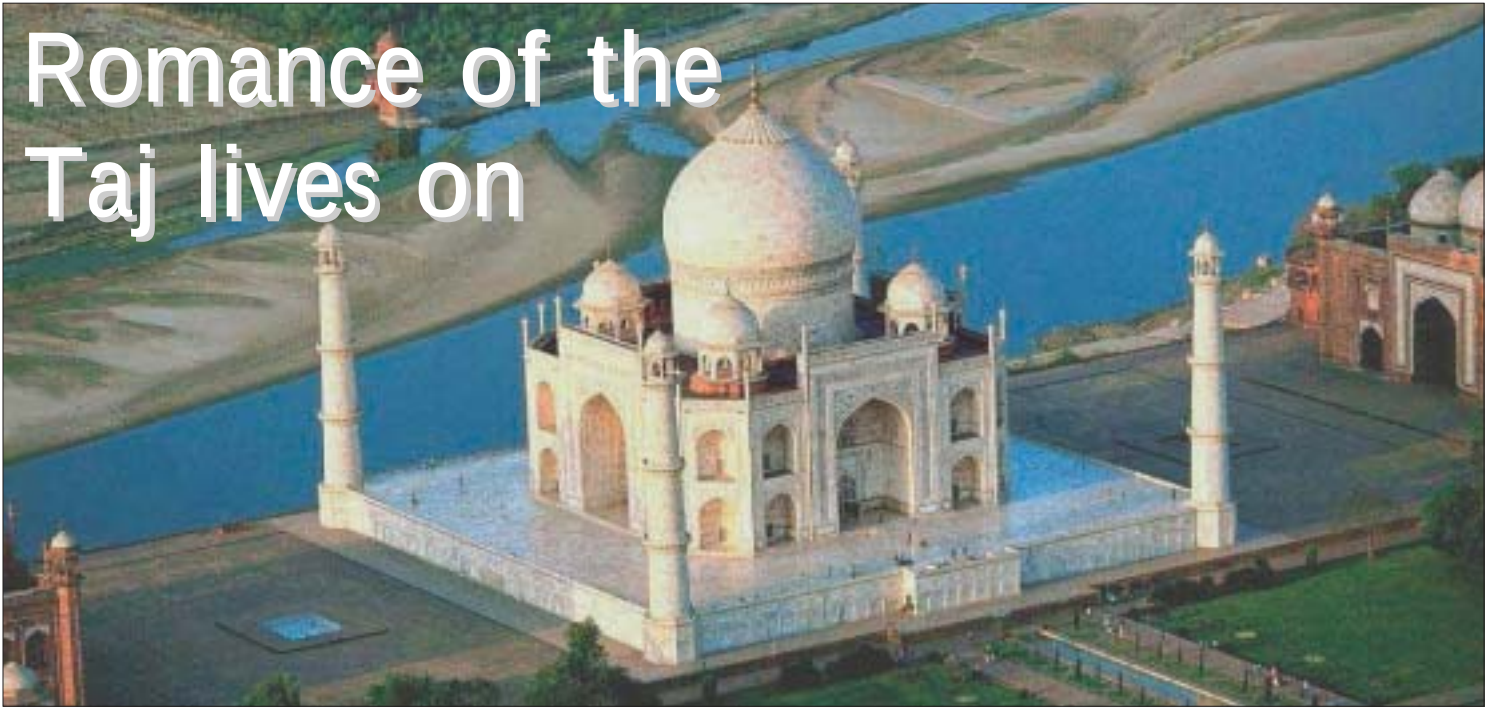


# Romance of the Taj lives on



**I**t took 20,000 artisans 17 years to build the magnificent Taj Mahal, Mughal emperor Shahjahan's ode to love for his wife. More than 350 years later, the exquisite craftsmanship that went into making the marble mausoleum is being diligently kept alive by thousands of families in India's city of the Taj, Agra.

The secrets of their work have been handed down from generation to generation, right since the 17th century when Shahjahan built the pearly white monument — with its intricate jewelled inlay work, marble filigree and calligraphic inscriptions from the Quran — in memory of his wife Mumtaz Mahal. The onion domed Taj with its four minarets still invokes a gasp of awe from visitors, as much for the first look of the imposing structure from afar as for the delicate work seen up close.

An estimated 7,000, mostly Muslim, families spread all over Agra are engaged in the unique craft of carving on marble. Hundreds of marble products get sold all around the Taj every day. Many more are sent out to all parts of India and abroad. While Taj Mahal in countless sizes tops the list of favourites, there are assorted products like boxes of all shapes, chessboards, penholders, tabletops, coasters, tiles, vases and wall hangings too. The craft includes shaping and cutting marble rocks to make the products with floral designs or other patterns. It is an art that never ceases to amaze tourists — Indians and foreigners alike.

Hafiz Ahmed, 72, says he is a descendant from one of the artisans who crafted the Taj Mahal. The national award winner has recently made a 12-foot model of the Taj, weighing five tonnes and replicating the finest details of the original, including the verses of the Quran and the jewelled inlay work.

Many of the craftsmen in Agra have been trained under his watchful eye and graduated from his *karkhana* or factory. Ahmed, who is deeply concerned about the use of synthetic marble from Japan which gives Agra a poor name, says the city is home to 12,000 artisans working in 500 *karkhanas*.

"Art, the real kind, is becoming extinct," bemoans the master craftsman. His colleague and another maestro, Fazal Mohammed, 72, who collaborated with two others for three years to make a Taj Mahal replica valued at about \$8,000 can only agree. "I am particularly keen that the art traditions of Agra should be kept alive and for this I am willing to teach even my enemies," says the artist who has been awarded a

*Padma Shri*, a civilian honour, by the Indian government.

While the craft itself is centuries old, the techniques and equipment have modernised and the younger generation is getting involved as well. Imtiaz Mohammed is 47 and his brothers Chand, Jan and Bobby are in their 20s. It is hard work, says Imtiaz, where skill upgrade is necessary. Knowledge of geometry, drawing, tracing and exact calculations are important.

"Now German instruments are being used for accurate measurements. We are trying to pass on the skills to the younger generation. Above all, our chief requirement as artists is that the city should remain peaceful and calm so that tourists continue to visit and have a good time," he says.

It is also good business.

Like for Abhinav Jain, 42, a leading manufacturer and exporter of marble products, whose products sell heavily in the West. The ninth generation member of an Agra family who loves marble as much as he adores the works of Tolstoy and Maxim Gorky, Jain says it's a pleasure to watch his Muslim craftsmen at work.

The products look simple and easy to make. But they are not.

"They involve tremendous concentration, to start with," points out Jain. "I am not exaggerating if I say that the kind of work being done in Agra by our artisans is unmatched in the world, in any country."

"It is intricate work. The slicing of marble, the inlay work, the stone cutting, the correct placement of semi-precious stones, everything demands absolute and total concentration. Nothing should go wrong even by a millimetre. And this they do day after day."

"First, they learn the craft in childhood. They work on it. And then the art form never leaves the households. Mind you, there is no cataloguing of the craft. It is passed on from one generation to another, through word of mouth," Jain says.

In what is an example of India's secular traditions, the essentially Muslim craftsmen in Agra are also working on chiselling replicas of shivlings, the icon of the Hindu god Shiva, and various gods and goddesses.

Working under the shadow of the matchless Taj Mahal, India's best tourist draw, these artists are perpetuating the spirit of excellence that the monument represents. The world may never see another Shahjahan, but his timeless sense of romance lives on — and Agra's artists help in giving it concrete shape. ■