

# The Taj Mahal

## Islamic Scriptural-Architectural Allegory

by Kamal Quadir

Throughout history, art and architecture played a crucial role in religion in revealing divine messages. Islam is no exception in that process. During the Mughal rule in India Islamic art reached its apex. They brought to the subcontinent an array of rich Persian tradition of art and culture, and these when incorporated into the indigenous Indian culture, gave birth to a rich and unique artistic identity: that of the Mughals. Among the Mughals, Shah Jahan, the fifth Mughal, is known as the greatest patron of the most skillful and talented Islamic artisans of his time. Some of the most exquisite and grandiose Islamic architectures of the Mughal era are built during his reign. Among them, the Taj Mahal is the most famous one. The Taj is famous not only because of its immense beauty and historic background but also because of its symbolic representation of divine messages. Divine verses of *Sura Ya Sin* inscribed on the arches of the Taj describe the Day of Resurrection, when the dead will arise and proceed to the place of judgment beneath the divine throne. The Taj itself could be conceived as a vast allegory of the Day of Judgment. In the following discussion, an attempt has been made to analyze the selected parts of *Sura Ya Sin* which decorate the four vast *ivan* arches of the Taj. Quranic scriptures inscribed on the Taj as well as the architectural framework to examine how they reinforce the suggested allegorical interpretation of the Taj.



It is well known that *Sura Ya Sin* is popularly regarded as the "heart" of the Quran. The *sura* opens with the word *Ya Sin* itself. It is not certain that the inner meaning of the word *Ya Sin* is. According to Hajrat Ibnay Abbas it means: mankind. However, Hajrat Ibnay Hanifa differed and believed that it is one of the names of the Prophet Muhammad (SM) an exemplar of mankind. In any case, it is certain that the context of the *sura* is profound in carrying the fundamental messages of Islam to mankind — the Day of Resurrection. Inscribed on the south arch of the Taj which contains the first twenty-one verses the *sura* portrays the sufferings of the unfaithful:

"We have put carcasses round their necks reaching to their chins, so that their heads are forced up."

And we have put a barrier in front of them and a barrier behind them: and further, we have covered them up so that they cannot see." (XXXVI: 8-9)

Here a primary question arises to inquire why *Sura Ya Sin* with such imagery was selected for the arches of the Taj which is popularly seen as a romantic mausoleum built for the emperor's beloved wife. As one examines the *sura* one would notice that the answer is partially given at the very beginning. The *sura* states, "It is a Revelation sent down of the All-mighty, the All-merciful. That thou mayest admonish a people whose father were never warned, who, there-

fore, remained heedless." (XXXVI: 5-6) The *suras* appearance on the arches reinforces the message of the Day of Resurrection that serves to remind the people the consequences of their deeds. Since it does not fully explain why the *suras* inscribed on the arches of the Taj, one would find it necessary to scrutinize why such a romantic edifice built to glorify the tender romance and love of an emperor for his wife carries such horrifying messages?

According to the *Mishkat al-Masabih* collection of Hadith that was popular during Mughal India, the three *Suras*, "The Folding Up", "The Cleaving Asunder" and "The Rending Asunder" were to be recited by anyone who would like to look at the Day of Resurrection as though it were before his eyes. Because of their terrifying notes, these three *suras* summoned a vividly real vision of the cataclysm of the Resurrection Day in the reciter's mind. In fact there is a Hadith that is related to this subject in a peculiar context that the Prophet Muhammad's hair turned gray after hearing and pondering the fearful words of the *sura Al-Takwir*, "The Folding Up". Therefore, from a traditional point of view, the recitation of these three *suras* is capable of summoning up a vision of the Resurrection, along with a concomitant vision of paradise and the divine throne, upon which God will be seated in a majestic pose during the Day of Judgment.

Interestingly, these three *Suras* are inscribed over the south, west and north doorways to the Taj Mahal. The appearance of the three *Suras* and their traditional context clarify their attempt of invoking a keen vision of the moment of Resurrection. Therefore, it can be said that the Taj was not meant to be solely seen as a monument of affection to one's beloved wife but also as an attempt to convey divine messages.

The west arch contains verses 22 to 44 of the *sura Ya Sin* that glorify God's position and his omnipotent role as the creator and the protector. The *suras* states, "A sign for them is the land that is dead: We do give it life, and produce grain therefrom, of which they do eat." (XXXVI: 33) "It is not in their hand that made this (fruit), will they not then give thanks?" (XXXVI: 35) These messages convey the most essential duty that Islam prescribes of worshipping God to maintain a balance between God's benevolent gifts to mankind and mankind's sole responsibilities in abiding by His tenets. In other words, accepting all that has been created for them and showing gratitude to God in return. This fundamental issue of Islam has been confirmed by all sorts of Islamic scriptures.

Not associating anything with God is another poignant belief of Islam, because it reassures the fact that whatever is seen and can not be seen is the creation of God. As a result, He

may not be compared or associated with His own creation due to the fact that He is the creator. Again on this west arch the *sura Ya Sin* further portrays the condition of the faithful. "Shall I take other gods besides Him? If the All-merciful should intend some adversity for me, their intercession will not avail me anything, nor can they deliver me." (XXXVI: 23) This scriptural prescription of not associating anything with God leads to the spiritual realization of His omnipotency. As verses of the *sura Ya Sin* inscribed on the west arch are analyzed, they reveal the very same message of the Day of Resurrection discussed earlier. *Sura Ya Sin* justifies the worshipping of God by referring to the faithful, "For what reason should I not serve Him who created me? For unto Him shall ye all be brought back." (XXXVI: 22) Interestingly enough here again the Day of Resurrection is reminded, when everyone will proceed to the place of judgment.

It is inscribed in the verses of the *sura Ya Sin* on the north arch, where the most vivid image of God's promise to be the fair Judge on the Day of Judgment is conveyed. The *suras* states, "The Trumpet shall be sounded, when behold they will all be assembled before Us!" (XXXVI: 51) The scene that is depicted here may be transformed into reality when the Trumpet player, Angel Israfil, loudly declares the end of the world

and the Day of Judgment hence commences, where the Judge shall be All-mighty Himself. "All be assembled" confirms the religious belief of Islam that the assembly will be held regardless of any individual's fancying belief or religion. The next verse states "This is what All-merciful promised, and true was the word of the messengers!" (XXXVI: 52) This verse not only reassures God's promise, but also like many other *suras* of the Quran that support the messengers of God who were sent forth to establish this prophecy. As to the prophet Muhammad, it was an essential support at the early days of Islam, when he was struggling to show people this brilliant truth. At the same time the plural form of the word "messenger" changed to messengers reconfirms the acknowledgment of the other prophets of Islam along with the prophet Muhammad were sent forth to convey the impending consummation of God's promise. God promises the faithful an award by proclaiming, "Verily the inhabitants of paradise shall that Day be given over to rejoicing!" (XXXVI: 55) The verse, "Peace!" — such is their greeting from the Lord All-merciful (XXXVI: 58) known as the "heart" of the *sura Ya Sin*, directly alludes to the ultimate fulfillment of God's promise to the faithful by delivering them to Paradise, and this verse is the only place in the Quran where the actual words will be used to address those who will be in paradise are recorded. In the context of the Taj,

its creation is an attempt to visualize that promise under symbolic representation.

Under further architectural scrutiny: the gateways and gardens of the Taj are symbolic replicas of the gateway and gardens of the celestial paradise. In the Quran, references to paradise include mentioning of the lofty gates that from the entrance to the gardens of paradise, *Dajanna*, where the rivers of water, honey, milk and wine flow, and large and beautiful trees provide fruits, shade and comfort for the faithful. The four water channels in the garden of the Taj Mahal are the representation of those four heavenly rivers. The raised marble tank at the centre represents the celestial tank of abundance, *Al-Kawthar*. The great domed outline of the Taj appearing almost to float on the horizon, suspended majestically between Heaven and earth — calling to mind the supposed words of Muhammad (SM) at the time of ascension: "I saw there His throne, which seemed joined to heaven in such a manner that it appeared heaven and the throne were created together."

In Islamic cosmology the number eight is very significant, as paradise is described as a succession of eight stages. Paradise is said to be located under the throne of God, above the eighth Heaven. The "highest heaven" is the eighth level of Heaven, the loftiest in a hierarchy of eight. Traditional accounts of *meraj* of the

Prophet Muhammad which distinguish this eight level of paradise, *Firdaws*, as reached through the eight principal gates. The number eight, thus, takes on greater significance in Islamic theology, so that most of the burial chambers of the Mughals are octagonal, eight sided, in shape as well, including the burial chamber of the Taj. The octagon is an angular circle, the circle of which is supposed to symbolize eternal perfection, at the centre lay the square: symbolizes earthly order. Sitting atop the octagonal chamber of the tomb, the dome of the Taj, considered as one of the most perfect domes ever constructed, may be considered a symbolic representation of the heavenly throne of God. Under the dome, in the octagonal chamber, lies the remains of Shah Jahan and his beloved wife Mumtaz Mahal: a symbolic attempt of placing them in the highest sphere of paradise. The tomb covers the large expanses of land, and rises several stories above the ground signifying the various levels of the Islamic concept of paradise.

The south facade of the main gateway displays the entire *sura Al-Faazr*. "The Break of Day," whose theme is that of the Day of Judgment. The allegory of paradise and the Day of Resurrection become explicit by careful examination of its verses. The *sura* warns that God will punish the wicked and the thoughtless, and promises paradise to the

faithful. The *sura* ends stating: "But O thou soul at peace, Return thou unto thy Lord, well-pleased, and well-pleasing unto Him. Enter thou among my servants, And enter thou My Paradise." (LXXXIX: 27-30)

The Taj is an attempt to symbolize that Islamic paradise.

On the east arch contains the last seventeen verses of the *sura*. One point is brought out particularly lucid and eloquently stated through crystal-clear logical justification, of the process whereby each individual is created and how he survives. The *sura* states, "It is not He Who created the heavens and the earth able to create the like thereof?—Yea, indeed! For He is the Supreme Creator, All-knowing" (81:XXXVI) It is clear that the same God Who has the power of creating all the individuals from nothingness, also has the power to cause the final Resurrection. *Sura Ya Sin* ends by stating, "So glory be to Him in whose hands is the Dominion of all things, and unto whom ye shall be returned!" (83:XXXVI) this enhances the final reassurance of the Day of Resurrection.

The *suras* inscribed on the Taj and its architectural framework appear to bear out the allegorical interpretation discussed above the thesis; and they remind everyone of the terrible finality of the Day of Judgment and the pleasure of paradise that God promised as the reward for the faithful.



The colourful Takayama Festival in Gifu Prefecture

# Amazing Japan

by Arshad-uz Zaman

THE Japanese archipelago, lying off the eastern coast of the Asian continent, stretches in a narrow arc, nearly 4000 kms long and has a total area of 377,875 sq. kms, slightly larger than those other famous islands — the United Kingdom. Whereas in the British Isles, one has a feeling of being not far from land mass in Japan the feeling of isolation is real. (The island status of Britain may have been lost forever by the recent opening of the Channel Tunnel linking Britain with France — something Napoleon had dreamt but never succeeded.)

**A Bit of History**

Isolation as a state policy was practised by the Japanese during their long recorded history. It started with the Jomon period nearly 800 years ago. Those islands remained closed from the gaze of curious Gaijin (foreigner) as late as 1853, when Commodore Matthew C. Perry of the US entered Tokyo Bay with a squadron of four ships. The capital of Japan had moved to Edo (present name Tokyo) in 1603 from Kyoto in the west, which was the capital for a 1000 years. Commodore Perry signed a Treaty of Friendship with Japan and this was followed by similar treaties with Russia, Britain and the Netherlands. The arrival of the Americans and the opening of Japan for the first time marked the beginning of the period, known as Meiji Restoration.

Japanese historians have described Meiji Restoration as a bursting of a dam behind which had accumulated energies and forces of centuries Japan started becoming First in quick succession. In Russo-Japanese War of 1904, Japan became the first Asian nation to defeat an European nation. Japan started modernizing and industrializing at breath taking speed. She became the First Asian nation to do so. Emperor Hirohito ascended the Throne in 1926. Along with industrial power Japan acquired fantastic military muscle and her arms a power to reckon with.

The second World War saw Japan fighting on the side of Hitler's Germany. Japan virtually overran the entire East Asia like a lightning. As a

young university student in Calcutta, I vividly recall those years. Freedom movement in India was nearing climax. A Bengali nationalist leader Subhas Chandra Bose, had escaped from British jail and gone to Berlin, where he broadcast anti-allies propaganda under Goebbels. After Germany he went to Japan, where he received military training. He started what was known as Indian National Army, which was composed of Indian officers and men, who deserted the British Indian Army and joined the forces of Subhas Bose. I recall Japanese advance close to our borders in Burma and bombing of Calcutta by them. The Atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, ended Japanese dream of domination of East Asia.

As you fly into Tokyo, there is no trace of that War, which so totally traumatized the Japanese. All the damaged buildings in Tokyo have been rebuilt. In fact the Japanese have done one better. The modern buildings are earthquake proof. In fact one of the most disagreeable feelings in Japan for any visitor, is this regular earthquake. Mercifully most tremors are of low intensity, but for those who go there for the first time, it is unpleasant, to say the least. The achievements of the Japanese are a living proof that human will can conquer almost anything. From the natural resources point of view, those islands are the least endowed, many islands are volcanic and prone to earthquakes. Typhoon is a regular feature. With all these handicaps, Japan has emerged as the economic giant of our times.

**A Blending of the Traditional and the Modern**

Tokyo and for that matter Japan as a whole is a wonderful blending of the traditional with modern. Nearly thirty years ago I knew a Japanese gentleman named Shoriki, who was eighty years old. He had built an economic cum industrial empire before the Second World War. After the defeat he was totally stripped. Yet within less than twenty years he had not only rebuilt his economic Empire but added a beautiful park called Yomiuriland (inspired by Disneyland

of the US). He was a profound Buddhist and had built a beautiful temple within his Yomiuriland and we from Bangladesh offered him a Holy Hair of Lord Buddha. He is the type of indomitable Japanese, who has made the Japan of today.

He entrusted his son Toru Shoriki to raise the first baseball team in Japan to beat the Americans in their own game. Baseball has not replaced the traditional Japanese Sumo wrestling, but is quite popular. I attended a Tea ceremony of Shoriki. You sit on the matted floor (tatami), in total silence. The white stockinged feet of the girls preparing tea make no noise. Indeed the silence in that room is so total that the guests should be able to hear the boiling water. The girls slide across the floor and place tiny cups in front of the guests. The tea has a greenish colour and a thick paste stays at the bottom of the cup. I must confess that although I found the ceremony interesting, I did not really care for the taste of the tea.

A visitor to Japan must beware of the fact that there are really no road signs in Japan. Very few large avenues have names and the buildings no numbers. I recall once I had been invited to a party. As is customary in Tokyo, the host had sent a road map. Tokyo is the only city I have seen, where foreigners attach their name plates on electric poles, running sometimes for more than 1 km and which indicate the address. For my party I started well ahead of time. It was raining hard. The address was in the Shibuya district, which is quite central. As usual I got lost. I entered a police station. The thorough Japanese took out huge maps and drew out an elaborate map for me. Since I was sure to lose my way on that rainy evening, I literally forced the policeman in my car (the Japanese are too polite to say no). We went losing our way and by the time the policemen left me in front of the house of the host, the party was nearly over.

Monarchy has blended beautifully with the Japanese way of life. Indeed the Imperial Palace is right in the heart of the city and there is a moat which surrounds it. It is a flowing architecture and very simple inside.



Across the palace is the famous Ginza, famous for shopping and entertainment and very bright lights. There is Tokyo Tower nearby, which is taller than Eiffel Tower of Paris, but is far less known than the Persian Tower.

**Visiting Japan**

Kyoto, the old capital of Japan is truly idyllic. There is an ambience of tranquility amidst those palaces and gardens, that transports you to another era long past. Japanese gardens with their Bonsai (dwarfed trees) are unique Kamkura, within a short distance of Tokyo, has the largest statue of Lord Buddha, which stands 11.5 metres and was built in 1252. In Kamkura I also saw the statue of a dog, which was erected by the people of that town to remember the faithfulness of the dog. The story ran thus — the dog accompanied his master daily from the house to the station,

where he took the train daily to Tokyo. The dog would wait at the station for his master, when he would return from work. The man died. The dog continued his journey to the station and back alone until he died. I thought it was a very well deserved statue.

Mikimoto pearl is world famous. Although it is artificial. It can be more expensive than real pearls. A visit to the Mikimoto island is certainly worthwhile. You can watch the whole process beginning with the divers who dive in the sea, bring up the pearls and the pearls go through an intricate process before becoming the shiny objects, which adorn the necks of ladies. Japan produced the fastest train called Bullet train and they claim that there is no vibration and you can put a glass of water by your side and there is no danger of

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