

# Dhaka Attack of another kind

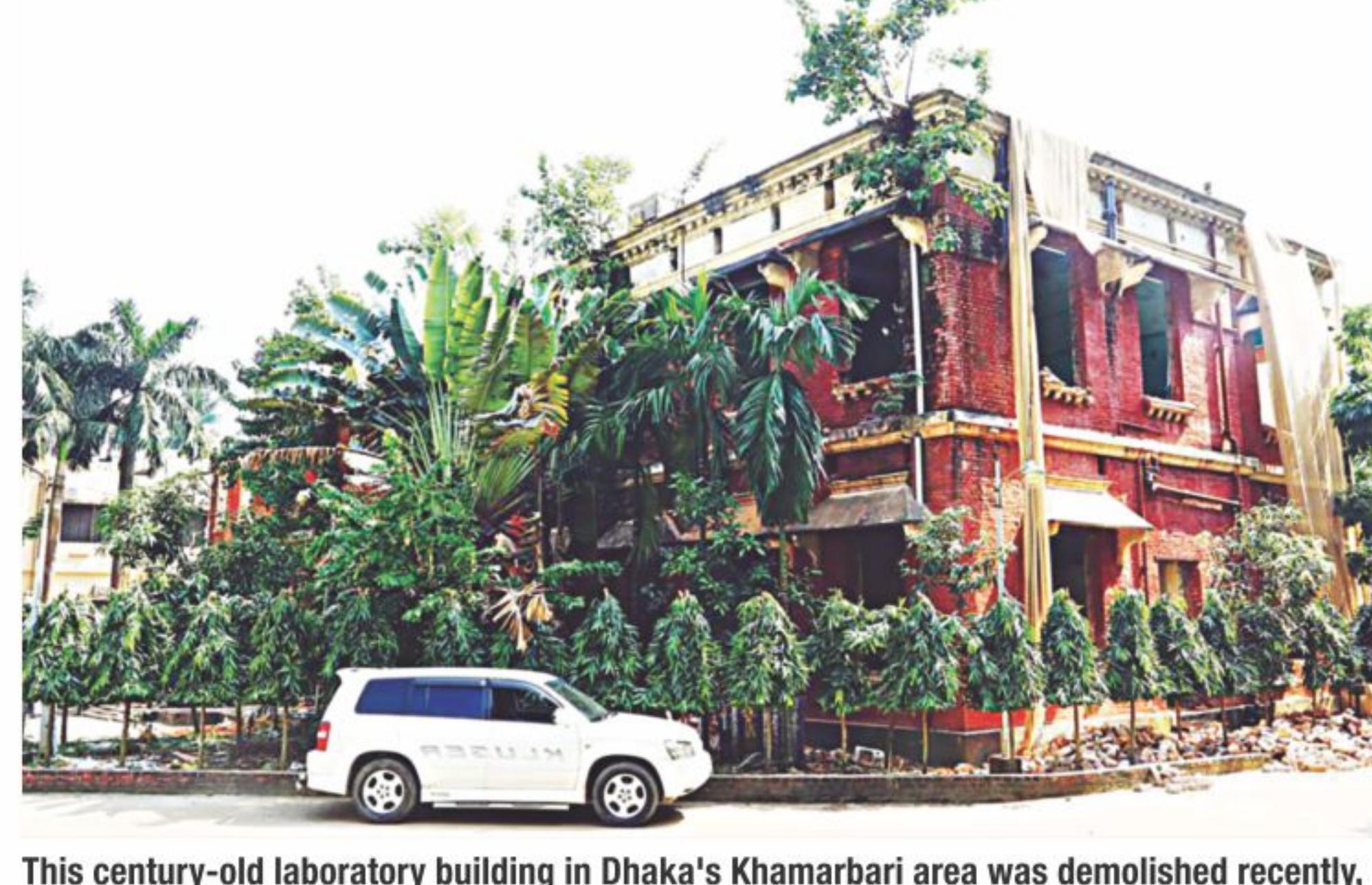
*Destruction of country's heritage should be considered a crime*

**W**HILE this year's hit Bangla movie *Dhaka Attack* was running to packed audiences, there was another kind of attack going on in the heart of Bangladesh's 400-year-old capital city. A demolition team,

engaged by the Public Works Department, wasrazing to the ground a magnificent edifice built in 1909 for agricultural research, known as the Laboratory—the first of its kind in this part of Bengal. A High Court bench had issued an order on October 26, Thursday, to halt demolition until the next Tuesday.

Disregarding the order, demolition continued during the weekend at an astonishing speed. On Saturday afternoon, with more than half of the building still intact, a bulldozer was brought in. Within hours, its brutal blades reduced the 108-year-old structure to rubble. To any observer, the whole action would appear as one executed with monstrous rage to inflict maximum possible damage that makes the idea of re-building an utterly nonsensical one.

Rewind ten years to 2007. This time the site was Narinda in Old Dhaka. Binat Bibi Mosque, Dhaka's oldest surviving mosque built during 1454-1457, was being demolished to make space for a larger, multi-storied one. The initiative was taken by none other than the "Mosque Committee." The custodians had earlier been shown at least seven different architectural design proposals—extension schemes that did not require destruction of the historic structure. For reasons unknown, none of these were accepted. The Department of Archaeology, the government agency designated to identify and protect all things relevant to the history and culture of the land, could not stop the merciless tearing down of the 550-year-old mosque. This, as the Department was reported to have



**This century-old laboratory building in Dhaka's Khamarbari area was demolished recently, despite a High Court order halting the demolition work.**

PHOTO: STAR

said at that time, was "not a protected site." Ironically, neither was the Laboratory.

A little over a month ago, a 200-year-old two-storyed house built by Armenian merchant Nicholas Pogose was partly demolished before conservationists obtained a court order to prevent it. Niki Shaheb er Kuthi is of significant archaeological importance, but not listed as such. Last year, the 300-year-old Azimpur Old Graveyard Mosque was all but destroyed to give way to a newer edifice. The mosque was stated to be the last surviving example of an Ottoman-influenced structure with single dome and flanking half-domed vaults. This, again, was not a protected structure. In 2015, a 300-year-old Mughal-era residential building in Shakhari Bazar was almost razed before DoA intervened. Known as Holding No 64, the building was among the 142 buildings listed for protection in the area. During the past seven years, as *The Guardian* reported in March 2017, more than 500 such historic buildings in Old Dhaka have been demolished.

The same report made a chilling prediction about the surviving ones—that Dhaka's "building frenzy would happily claim the rest."

Dhaka appears set to become a city without memories, a city that claims to have 400 years of history but retains little architectural evidence to support it. As our heritage faces a two-pronged attack—from the government and individual owners—there is little doubt that a tragic cultural bankruptcy awaits us.

Unfortunately, the demolitions seldom make headlines in the press, or generate active, sustained protest from the people. It is always a small group of conservationists and conscientious citizens leading the often-futile resistance. Their actions at times trigger hostile reactions, and as seen in the Laboratory case, prompt the bulldozers to work double time. The contemporary society, with its architects and artists, poets and politicians, maintains a blasé indifference to the authenticity of a conservationist's arguments. Judges and jour-

nalists are, therefore, his last resort.

But when and how did this corrosive nihilism creep into our collective psyche? Is this phenomenon an inevitable consequence of our destruction of political institutions? Or is it the economy? Whatever the reason, it is a fact that we are comfortable with a depleted state of mind that values money over memories.

Speaking of facts, let us admit that the owners of historic buildings are often in a financial quagmire. With no government initiative to transform a heritage into financially rewarding usage, an inherited property loses its development potential when declared as "protected." The owners feel unjustly deprived and attempt to get the buildings certified as "unsafe" that merit demolition. A sustained campaign over the years to create earthquake impact awareness has not helped the cause of conservation. Often, those leading such campaigns are unacquainted with, or insensitive to, the cultural importance of an area or a building, and hastily prescribe demolition instead of retrofitting.

At the institutional level, there is something terribly amiss with our mindset. Heritage buildings are not held in high esteem. The British can afford to build a new Parliament. Harvard University can take down the 300-year-old Massachusetts Hall to build a high rise. Maharashtra government can opt for a smart communication hub in place of Victoria Terminus. Instead, they have learnt to utilise heritage as a capital. In Dhaka, schools having buildings that date back to early or mid-20th century are attempting to tear them down. The owners of the now-demolished Laboratory building had acres of land at their disposal to develop a master plan with new buildings while proudly highlighting the historic ones. But, evidently, they have no regard for the jewels they possess. The architects working for the government, people who are expected to be sensitive about such issues, did not, or could not, deter the owners either, and instead played the role of a strong supporting cast.

So, is there a win-win solution that can save Dhaka from sinking into heritage bankruptcy?

Certainly, there is. Conservation strategists do not need to reinvent the wheel as there are effective tools in use all over the world. One such tool is the concept of Transfer of Development Rights [TDR]. It is a programme that encourages owners of properties marked protected from development to voluntarily sell the development rights to another person or entity, who will then be allowed to utilise the rights to build more than normally permitted at another location. A plot owner in Dhanmondi can buy the development rights of a historic building in Shakhari Bazar and obtain permission from the government to build certain additional floors. The owner of the Shakhari Bazar building retains the ownership of land and can continue using it without further development.

In cities with skyrocketing property prices like New York and Mumbai, TDR is put into use not only to protect heritage sites, but also to protect farmlands and slums. It is unfortunate that many precious years have passed since RAJUK was introduced to the concept of TDR. Dhaka keeps on paying the price in terms of lost heritage as RAJUK delays inserting TDR provisions in the Imaar Nirmam Bidhimala.

"National pride is to countries what self-respect is to individuals: a necessary condition for self-improvement," wrote the philosopher Richard Rorty in 1998. As Bangladesh continues to advance on the economic front, a wanton disregard in preserving its heritage only hurts our national pride. The diabolic antihero of the *Dhaka Attack* movie wanted to blow up Dhaka's landmark buildings, like the National Assembly and High Court, only to be thwarted by the antics of two brave law enforcers. One only hopes that RAJUK and the Department of Archaeology will act heroically to save our historically significant buildings from demolition by the senseless quarters. Buildings are poignant palettes of national identity, history and memories. We should not lose them.

Mamnoon Murshed Chowdhury is an architect based in Dhaka.

## Will the Taj Mahal face the same fate as Babri Mosque?

**A**N anti-Muslim communal storm kicked off recently in India involving the Taj Mahal. On September 27, while observing World Tourism Day, Uttar Pradesh Tourism Minister Rita Bahuguna Joshi

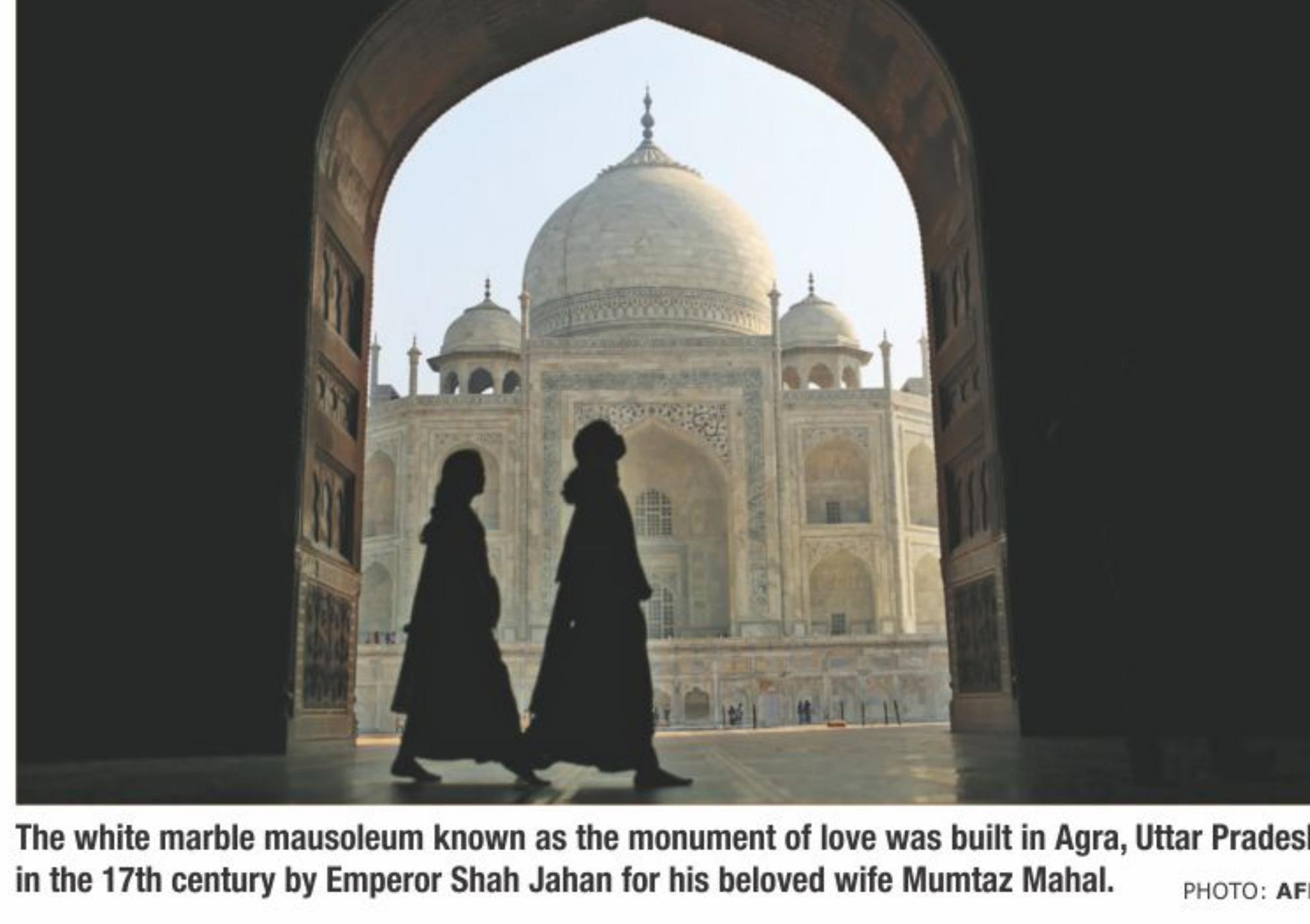
used to be a Shivling there which had water dripping on it from up top. That ling was removed and a mausoleum built there". Katiyar was actually trying to resurrect maniacal historian PN Oak's theory that the Taj Mahal was originally "Tejo Mahal, Lord Shiva's temple". Clearly, Katiyar's rhetoric was based on wilful dementia.

Interestingly, the controversy surrounding the Taj Mahal has been going on, especially among Hindu zealots, since Oak published his book on it in 1989. Before Oak died in 2007, he took his claim to the Indian Supreme Court in 2000, where it was thrown out as no more than a "bee in his bonnet". Some of Oak's ludicrous findings were—Westminster Abbey is a temple to Shiva; Arabian Peninsula was part of the Indian empire of King Vikramaditya; the Holy Kaaba was originally a Hindu temple, etc.

Another UP MLA, Sangeet Som, twisted history and described the Taj as a "blot" on Indian culture that had been "built by traitors (Shah Jahan)...who wanted to wipe out Hindus...the Ramayana and the Gita represent Indian culture and the Taj Mahal doesn't...I guarantee that history will be changed". Som's rhetoric meant that since Shah Jahan was bad, the mausoleum is also bad and "should be erased from history".

The secular Indian media denounced these bigoted anti-Muslim rhetoric of marginalised BJP legislators. The controversy was quickly picked up by the international media. Many condemning the communal attitude of the UP government went into investigative journalism to establish that the Taj was never a Hindu temple site. Twitterites described the omission as "Taj ki Chori" and one post said, "Who cares about the Taj Mahal? People around the world want to see world class Gaushala (cowshed) in UP"—in reference to India's cow vigilanism.

To contain the damage, Chief Minister



**The white marble mausoleum known as the monument of love was built in Agra, Uttar Pradesh in the 17th century by Emperor Shah Jahan for his beloved wife Mumtaz Mahal.**

PHOTO: AFP

saffron-robed Yogi Adityanath (44) came out with a statement saying, "It does not matter who built it and for what reason; it was built by blood and sweat of Indian labourers". This was actually an opinionated remark under-scoring the Indian labourer and denigrating the Mughal emperor who built it. The controversy was not long in coming. In June Adityanath (44) said he was glad that visiting dignitaries were no longer being presented small replicas of the Taj as mementos as it did not "reflect Indian culture". Hindutva firebrand Yogi is well known for his anti-Muslim prejudices.

In 2015, six lawyers filed a suit in the Civil

Court of Agra, where upon the Union Ministry of Culture, and the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) categorically stated that no temple of Shiv Linga ever existed on the site of the Taj Mahal. The property was not usurped but was obtained by Emperor Shah Jahan in exchange from Raja Jai Singh. Not surprisingly though, many BJP legislators still believe Oak's theory that the Taj Mahal was a temple.

The recent uproar by extremist Hindu hardliners has frustrated historians. Leading historian R Nath said, "It is absolutely wrong and absurd. The history of Taj is among the best chronicled of any Indian monument. We know exactly how the land was acquired, how

the foundations were laid and how it was built. There is not a single piece of evidence to support the theory that it was a Shiva temple", said Nath.

Realising the damage that the debate was doing, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said, "Nations cannot develop if they don't take pride in their history and heritage. If they do, they are sure to lose their identity over a period of time". Modi's remark is open to interpretation as he did not make any reference to the Taj.

Some have raised questions whether Modi will raise the tricolour from the ramparts of the Red Fort, also built by Shah Jahan, on Independence Day. Opposition Congress party spokesman Singhvi said, "At one level it is a joke and at another level it is tragic. Such pettiness diminishes India."

The wider RSS strategy is to erase the history and heritage of India from during the Muslim period as a period of extreme exploitation, barbarism and intolerance of other faiths and denigrate Muslims questioning their "Indian-ness". RSS wants to ban Muslims offering Friday prayers at the Taj mosque and allow Hindus to perform puja inside the Taj. The problem is that the Taj is a Muslim mausoleum and it cannot be "Hinduised" or secularised.

The Taj Mahal, the 7th wonder of the world with its extremely sophisticated architecture and extraordinary beauty, is already going through bad times. The BJP government's neglect (no funds to preserve it), coupled with pollution turning its white marble yellow, will probably lead to the monument dying a natural death, if Hindu fanatics do not demolish it before that, like they did the Babri mosque in 1992.

Mahmood Hasan is former Ambassador and Secretary.

### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS	32 Set right	7 Craig who plays 007
1 Phone downloads	34 "Roses – red"	8 Diverts
5 Fragrant wood	35 Zodiac cat	9 Baby's toy
10 Stories	36 Had dinner	11 Enjoyed the rink
12 Andean animal	40 Fire remnants	14 Criminal
13 Ice cream flavor	41 Take as one's own	19 Turn away
15 Capp and Capone	42 Marsh croakers	20 Physicist Enrico
16 Pitcher's pride	43 Addition column	24 Moon of Jupiter
17 Follower's suffix	47 Take a – (try)	25 Singer Enrico
18 Soup choice	26 Singer Franklin	27 Singer Franklin
20 Grope	1 Ready to hit	29 Sailing signal
21 Baltimore pro	2 Lack of color	30 Recorded
22 Otherwise	3 Blood component	33 Scout shelters
23 Yard tool	4 Brief time	35 Reduced amount
25 Wound reminder	5 Chowder chunk	38 Tv's Danson
28 Disney elephant	6 Building wing	39 Tokyo's old name
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### YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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### BEETLE BAILEY



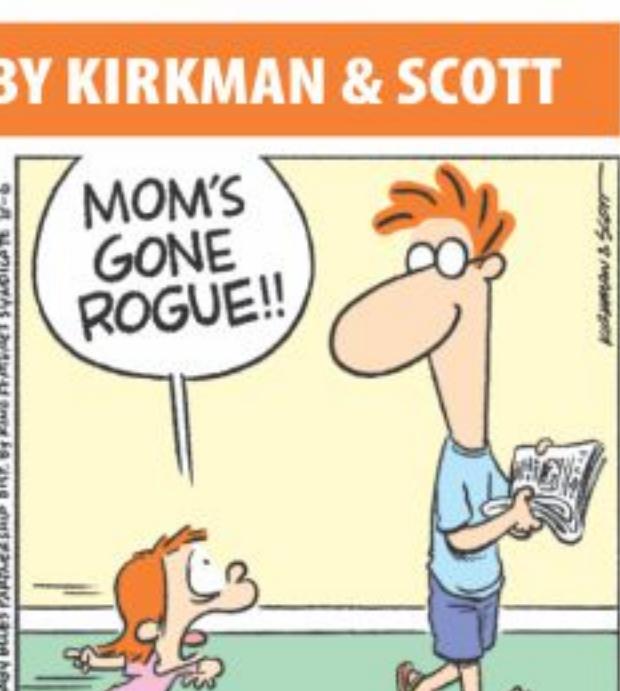
### BY MORT WALKER



### BABY BLUES



### BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT



### Quotable Quote



**JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU**  
FRANCOPHONE GENEVAN PHILOSOPHER, WRITER,  
AND COMPOSER OF THE 18TH CENTURY

*Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains. One Man thinks himself the master of others, but remains more of a slave than they are.*