

The Taj Trio

The ethereal Taj Mahal in Agra is world-famous but elsewhere in India stand two lesser-known monuments, one the inspiration for Shah Jahan's creation and the other inspired by it, that are as exquisite and mesmerising.

Words HEMA NARAYANAN

“Did you ever build a castle in the air? Here is one, brought down to earth and fixed for the wonder of ages,” said American novelist Bayard Taylor, referring to the Taj Mahal. Undoubtedly, this castle on Earth has cast an undying spell on the people of this planet. Everyone across the world knows about this monument to love in white marble. People travel across continents and oceans to visit this pearl. The Taj Mahal is a dedication of Mughal emperor Shah Jahan to the memory of his favourite wife, Mumtaz Mahal. He built this jewel of Islamic art between 1631 and 1648, using the finest

craftsmen of those times.

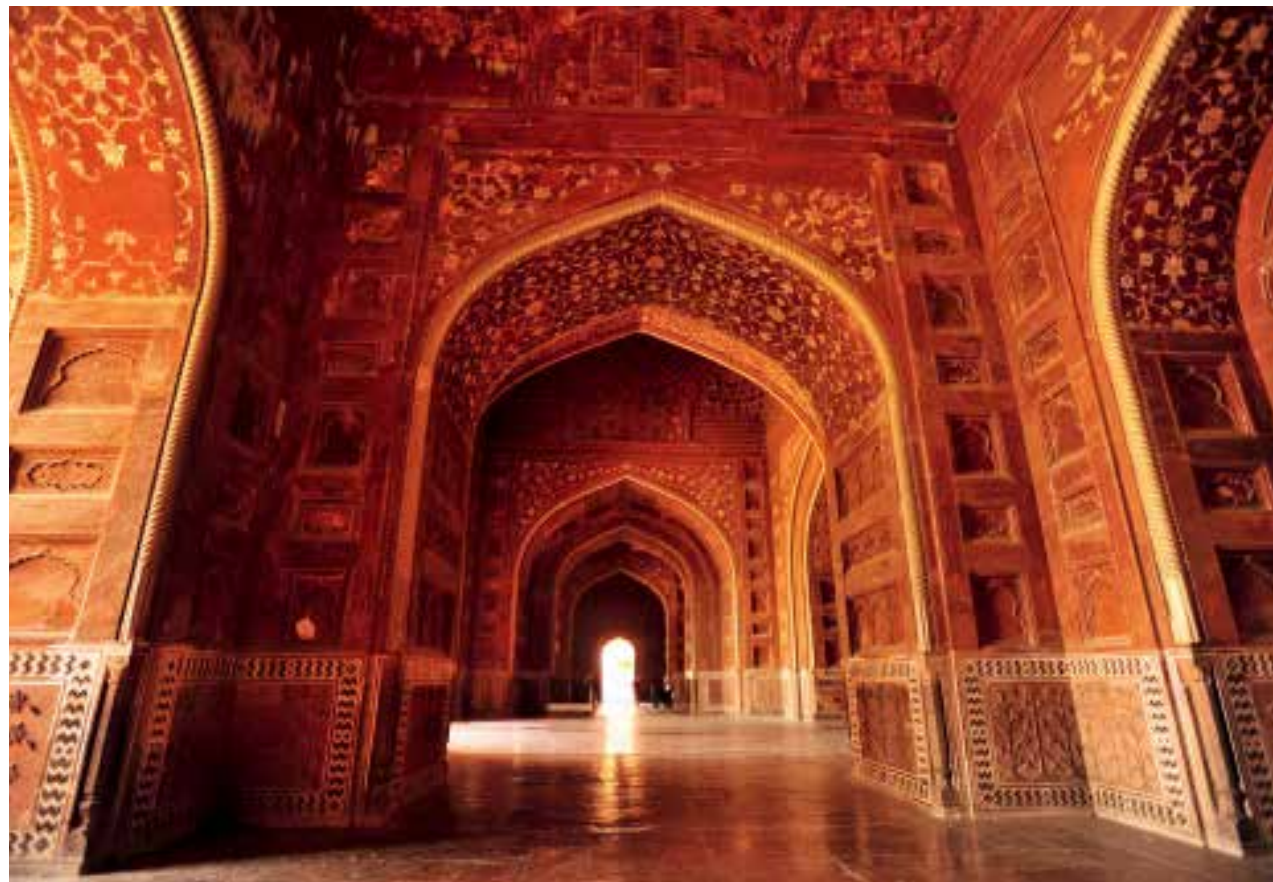
The existence of two other spectacular monuments in India, with a direct connection to the Taj Mahal, is less known. They are the Ibrahim Rauza and Bibi Ka Maqbara, built around the same time and of equal interest for their aura and hidden significance.

I knew nothing about the underlying historical connection when I visited these monuments. Each tomb captivated me with its grandiosity and I was overcome at the poignant ways in which kings of yore paid tribute to their beloved ones. The immaculate architecture stood out, but the similarities between the

tombs haunted me. I could sense a probable influence of one over the other.

All the mausoleums were built on a high, square platform with tall minar-shaped turrets or minarets at each corner of the tomb, approached by a flight of steps. The bulbous domes, the enormously ornamented upper storeys and the symmetry were striking commonalities. Research confirmed the theory lurking in my mind that there was indeed a connection between the Ibrahim Rauza, the Taj Mahal and the Bibi Ka Maqbara. One tomb had inspired the creation of another.

(This page) The Taj Mahal mosque, located on the western side of the Taj



THE TAJ MAHAL—A TIMELESS SAGA (1631-1648)

The Taj Mahal is a poem-in-marble that blossomed out of the eternal love of Shah Jahan. Beneath the dome of the Taj lies the jewel-inlaid cenotaph of Mumtaz Mahal. So exquisite is the workmanship of the architects that the Taj has been described as having been “designed by giants and finished by jewellers.” The only asymmetrical object I could see here was the casket of the emperor—beside the queen’s, as an afterthought.

My journeys to the three tombs ended with a revelation, that of the ‘Taj Connection.’ While the Ibrahim Rauza inspired the Taj, the Taj in turn inspired the Bibi Ka Maqbara—an architectural chain reaction, based on inspiration.

NAVIGATOR

By Air Fly into Delhi and reach Agra by taxi or train.

By Rail Trains run from Delhi to Agra.

By Road Hire a taxi or get on a bus from Delhi to Agra.

STAY

Tan Ganj, close to the Taj, is a good locality to find a hotel. Many options of lodges, hotels, B&Bs and guest-houses exist to suit every budget.

DO

Shop for miniature paintings, inlay work, marble souvenirs, carpets and leather products at Sadar Bazaar. Buy *petha* and *dalmoth* sweets and sample *chaats* and *paranths*. Visit the Agra Fort, Jama Masjid, Mehtab Bagh, tomb of Akbar and Fatehpur Sikri.



IBRAHIM RAUZA—THE BLACK TAJ (1580-1627)

Not many people know that the Taj Mahal was supposedly inspired by the Ibrahim Rauza. This tomb, located in Bijapur in North Karnataka, served as an inspiration to Shah Jahan and is therefore often referred to as the Black Taj.

A tribute to Ibrahim Adil Shah II, this garden tomb was constructed on a single rock bed and its features are perfectly symmetrical. Built

between 1580 and 1627, this palatial structure is a group of buildings in a square garden with two monuments—a tomb containing the remains of Sultan Ibrahim Adil Shah (to the east) and his mosque (to the west). His wife, Taj Sultana, is also buried here. Each wall on the interior is artistically built—with three arches, all embellished and panelled with floral, arabesque or inscriptional traceries. The

whole structure sits on a raised plinth with corner minarets above a basement that houses a secret passage and living quarters for the cavalry. I took a moment to stand in the spectacular mausoleum by the Sultan's grave and I distinctly heard the prayers chanted at the other end, in the mosque.

The story goes that, when Shah Jahan set out to build a monument for Mumtaz, he had his top architects

study the design of the finest monuments. From this arduous exercise emerged two designs that fascinated the Emperor: the Tomb of Mandu in Madhya Pradesh and the Ibrahim Rauza in Bijapur. Shah Jahan chose the latter, perhaps due to its elaborate style, exquisite detailing, striking carvings and symmetry. It is said that the structures built by the Adil Shahi dynasty have a

sense of mysticism about them. Adil Shah had chosen the iconic architect, Malik Sandal, for this task. The Ibrahim Rauza's minarets, parapets, cupolas and cornices are akin to those of the Taj. Its richly decorated walls and perforated stone windows are a delight. Considered one of the finest examples of Islamic ornamental decoration in India, its brilliance is accentuated at sunset.

NAVIGATOR

By Air Belgaum is the nearest airport to Bijapur (205 km).

By Rail Bijapur is connected to Bengaluru, Hyderabad and other cities.

By Road Buses ply from Bengaluru, Mumbai and other cities. Alternative: Take a bus to Belgaum and another to Bijapur.

Local Commute Autos are the popular mode; you can also hire a motorcycle, taxi or a cycle.

STAY Bijapur has B&Bs, inns and reasonably-priced hotels in the city centre (Hotel Basava Residency, Hotel Pearl, Hotel Kanishka International).

DO Shop at Gandhi Chowk and Bijapur Bazaar for artifacts. Visit the Gol Gumbaz, Asar Mahal, Bara Kaman, Jumma Masjid and Malik-e-Maidan.



BIBI KA MAQBARA—THE MINI TAJ (1651-1661)

DISCOVER THIS

- Look for the tomb of Malik Sandal (architect of the Ibrahim Rauza)—his grave lies within the courtyard, on request that he be buried close to the Sultan.
 - Look up at the dome of the Taj Mahal—it is a whopping 60 feet in diameter.
- Look at the reflection of the Bibi Ka Maqbara—it will seem as if you are seeing the reflection of the Taj in the pond.

This monument, which drew inspiration from the Taj, is located in Aurangabad, Maharashtra, and is known as the Mini Taj. The imposing structure stands in the middle of a spacious enclosure and is a remarkable miniature replica of the Taj Mahal. Built in memory of his mother, Dilras Banu Begum (the wife of Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb), by Prince Azam Shah, it was constructed between 1651 and 1661. He drew inspiration from his grandfather's creation and the title of Taj of the Deccan is well-deserved.

It is said that Azam intended his creation to rival the Taj, but did not have the same funds as his grandfather. There are differences between the Taj

and the Maqbara. While the former is made entirely of white marble, the Maqbara has its onion dome of marble with parts of it covered with a fine plaster, polished to give a marble-like finish. I noticed the Maqbara's walls are a little dusky in contrast, giving it a duller appearance comparatively.

A few theories exist on why the Maqbara has a diminutive status. Some say it is because of Aurangzeb's lack of interest in architecture. Regardless, its aura is spellbinding. It is an architectural marvel with intricate designs, carved motifs and a landscaped, Mughal-style garden, all created by its architects, Ataullah and Hanspat Rai. ♦

NAVIGATOR

By Air There are direct flights to Aurangabad from Mumbai, Delhi and Hyderabad.

By Rail Several trains from different Indian cities connect to Aurangabad Station.

By Road There are direct bus links from Hyderabad, Solapur, Kolhapur, Goa, Ahmedabad, Indore and other cities.

STAY There are a lot of stay options for varying budgets in Aurangabad.

DO Shop at Tower Centre, Nirula Bazaar, Gul Mandi or Connaught Market for Paithani silk sarees, *himroo* shawls, *mashroo* and *kimkhab* weaves, silverware and semi-precious stones. Visit the UNESCO World Heritage sites of the Ajanta and Ellora caves and Daulatabad Fort.