

## Was Mumtaz really buried at Taj Mahal?

Even as the world excitedly talks about the recently discovered mummy believed to be of Egyptian queen Hatshepsut, in India the mystery surrounding Mumtaz Mahal's burial at the Taj Mahal has deepened with several Mughal historians asserting that her body was not mummified.

Mughal emperor Shah Jahan built the 17th century Taj Mahal in memory of his beloved wife Mumtaz Mahal who died delivering their 14th child in Burhanpur, a town in Maharashtra.

The queen's body was buried in Burhanpur itself but was believed to have been recovered for transportation to Agra where it was reburied in a grave in the Taj Mahal complex for at least 12 years to be again shifted to her final resting place in the basement of the monument.

As there is no detailed description or reference to any kind of treatment given to the body to keep it in recognisable shape for more than 12 years, two conjectures are now being offered.

One, the body remained buried in Burhanpur, only some symbolic relics were brought to Agra in a lead coffin. Two, the body decomposed and virtually vanished, leaving behind some bones and perhaps the bare skeleton.

'Obviously the coffin was not opened, otherwise we would have had some account of what remained inside it,' says R. Nath, a Mughal historian. 'In any case, how does it matter what state the body was in.'

Afzal Khan, a historian of Aligarh Muslim University, says: 'It is possible that the body might have been thoroughly decomposed, given the long duration for which it was kept outside and the time taken to transport it from the south to Agra. Since there are no accounts of how the whole process was carried out, one can only guess what could have happened to the body of Mumtaz.'

A senior guide, 75-year-old S.K. Tripathi, says the body is believed to have been placed in a lead and copper coffin, which was air tight and sealed. It was kept at the Taj Mahal premises for a little over 12 years and was shifted as soon as more than half the edifice was constructed. The real graves of the two are in the basement, totally sealed.

'No one has gone there to see what state they are in now,' he adds.

Archaeological Survey of India officials in Agra say they have no idea when was the last time someone had a close look at the basement and the foundation of the Taj Mahal, let alone the original graves of Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal.

'We have no records of any such inspection,' says one official.

The one little passage near the stair case leading to the main marble edifice was sealed more than a decade ago with a brick wall, which means there is now no way one can enter the sealed chambers below the Taj.

R.C. Sharma, a historian, says the body of Mumtaz Mahal was buried in Burhanpur. 'What came to Agra must have been just bones in a coffin which was again reburied in the Taj complex.'

From historical records available this was a unique feat. 'Mumtaz was buried thrice at three different places,' says Amit Mukherjea, who heads the history department of St John's College here.

Most people do not know that the foundation of the Taj was actually laid in Burhanpur but because of the problems and costs involved in the transportation of marble from Rajasthan, Agra became the final choice.

'It was in Ahu Khana in Burhanpur on the bank of the Tapti river that her body was buried to be later transferred to Agra,' according to K.K. Mohammed of ASI.

But the question relating to the technique of embalming and preservation remains unanswered.

Afsar Ahmed, a media researcher deeply interested in Mughal history, told IANS: 'You might find it difficult to believe but there's a possibility that the body of Mumtaz Mahal is still preserved in the Taj Mahal in the same condition as she was when she passed away. Mumtaz Mahal was buried six months after she passed away in June 1631. She was, however, buried in Jan 1632.'

The question that arises now is: how was her body preserved? Ahmed quotes a report prepared by Armanul Haq, the curator in the Museum of History and Medicine in the Jamia Hamdard University, who claims that Mumtaz Mahal's body was preserved according to Unani techniques.

The process was used because cutting a body after death is prohibited in Islam. That is why when Mumtaz Mahal passed away in 1631 in Burhanpur, her body was kept in a tin box filled with such herbs as would stop the decay of flesh.

'The airtight tin box was filled with herbs like the ash of Babul tree (acacia), Mehendi (henna), Kapoor crystals (camphor), sandalwood ash, and then again camphor applied in layers upon layers. These herbs would have created a vacuum inside the box and prevented the decay of the body. A point to be noted here is that none of these herbs were put inside Mumtaz Mahal's body,' says Ahmed.

If her body is still preserved and in fine shape, shall we call it the success of the Indian technique of mummification?

*Brij Khandelwal (© IANS / India eNews)*