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Travel Commentary: City of Victory

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City of Victory

by Robert A. Cole

S

hould good fortune ever find you in India, plan a stop at Agra if at all possible. This is where the Taj Mahal is located, its fluid lines and gentle symmetry perpetuating the love of Shah Jahan for his deceased wife, Mumtaz Mahal. The pure white elegance of the Taj proclaims it as, perhaps, the most "famous" building in the world, and I doubt that any feeling person could by unmoved by it. Stand in the middle of its 'Paradise Garden' at moonrise one evening. Simply look... and surely the experience will evoke the delight of both senses and intellect. Modest judgment will be crowded out by wonder, and you might easily be convinced that the moment has been one that no other person has ever approached.

The Taj Mahal elevates our notions about human accomplishment, but as it does it offers ironic commentary on our species' yearning for 'perfection.' It inspires because it is truly and unalterably beautiful. But it is a tomb, after all, and it underscores the morality of both its builders and all who travel far to admire it.

Twenty-three miles outside of Agra is yet another reminder of the transient greatness of Moghul India, and a place that no thought traveler should miss. It is called Fatehpur Sikri, and was once the capital of the Moghul Empire. Deserted since 1685, the site is now a "ghost city," of sorts, and it is undisturbed by all but a relatively few locals and tourists.

As with the Taj Mahal, the origins of Fatehpur Sikri seem to spring more from legend and romance than from the bruising experience of history. They are rooted in both the energies and eccentricities of Jalal ad-Din Akbar (r.-1556-1605), grandfather of Shah Jahan, and one of India's most interesting rulers. When Akbar the Great came to power in the middle of the sixteenth century, England was about to enter her Elizabethan Age. Micheangelo had carved his "Pieta," Thomas More had published Utopia, and a number of European adventurers had explored New England's coast. By the end of the following decade Akbar had made scores of reforms in Indian society, and had added considerably to the territories of the Moghul Empire.

A Muslim by birth and education, Akbar seemed to grow somewhat disillusioned with orthodox Islam as he approached middle age. On the other hand, he displayed a remarkable tolerance for other faiths, thereby showing his countrymen some of the nobler possibilities of life in a pluralistic culture. He was troubled, however, over the thought of not providing the Empire with a male heir, and thus he came to consult Shaikh Salim Chisti, a Sufi mystic who lived in the small village of Sikri. Having journeyed the thirty-seven kilometers southwest of Agra to receive the blessings of the holy man, Akbar soon departed, confident of his prospects. In time his Hindu wife bore him a son who would one day rule India under the name Jahangir. In gratitude Akbar ordered that a new city be built upon the site of Salim Chisti's retreat, and to reflect its imperial character he added the word Fatehpur —"Victory."

Construction of the planned city of Fatehpur Sikri began in 1570, much of the work being done in marble and fine sandstone slabs cut from local quarries. Akbar's court biographer wrote that the Emperor put "the work of his mind and heart into the garment of stone and clay," and as the city began to take shape it reflected both the Emperor's curiosity and his broadness of mind. Hindu cupolas and Persian domes were set in exotic yet harmonious mix with places inspired by Buddhist temples. No streets were built on the rocky bluff upon which the central city was situated, but the site was lavished with beautiful open spaces. One even included a large outdoor parchisi board whose living "pieces" added both color and good humor to a diversion which typified the gentility of Akbar's court.

The Emperor attracted all manner of people at his new capital, and here he presided over an ongoing intellectual dialogue which frequently centered on the world's major religions. Many of his guests engaged in lively theological discourse and, given the fact that Akbar had great respect for "Nazarene sages," one would be as apt to see an ordained Catholic in the city as a mullah or Hindu priest.

Akbar held court in the Diwan-i-Khas, a single vaulted building which appears from the outside to have two stories. Here in this "Hall of Public Audience" the Emperor sat upon a marble platform supported by a large decorative central column. From each of the upper corners of the structure four passageways with intricately carved rails reached inward to Akbar's central position. A unique but essentially modest building, the Diwan-i-Khas is an eloquent architectural testament to the accessibility of the Emperor, both physically and intellectually. Advisors and distinguished visitors conversed with him from their places in the upper galleries, while courtiers listened to the exchanges from their positions below at ground level.

For close to fifteen years Fatehpur Sikri was the scene of a great many achievements in scientific studies, aesthetics and the practical problem-solving good government requires. Akbar even attempted to hammer together a spiritual synthesis through the formal establishment of his own religion, the Din-i-llahi. With him as a type of cultic "Holy Magnifying Glass of the Divine," Akbar's strange new religion was a mixed bag of princely metaphysics and ethical zeal. Few devout Hindus or Muslims were able to make this spiritual leap with their ruler, and the new "faith" did not survive the Emperor's death in 1605.

Fatehpur Sikri was deserted in 1585, and the city was never inhabited again. It had been described by Ralph Fitch, an early English traveler, as being "much greater than London and very populous." However, William Finch, a fellow countryman who visited the site at about the time that the Jamestown colony was being established in Virginia, commented that:

"the buildings [were] lying waste without Inhabitants; much of the ground being now converted to Gardens and much sowed with nill and other graine, that a man standing there would little thinke he were in the middest of a Citie."

This same individual offered an explanation for the departure of the imperial court by noting that the water supply had turned "brackish and fretting [i.e. corrosive]."
With its supply of fresh water in jeopardy, Akbar left Fatehpur Sikri to conduct a military campaign in the north, and he never returned. His lovely city was soon to slide into the backwash of Mughul affairs. Its cultural and commercial dynamism withered and much of its population moved on. What remains of the metropolis is only the complex of shrines, palaces and public buildings perched on their rocky outcrop overlooking a broad north Indian plain.

I had the very good fortune to visit Fatehpur Sikri in the Summer of 1984. As one of fourteen New England educators I had received a Fulbright grant under the sponsorship of the College. My colleagues and I journeyed across India as participants in a cultural and academic program directed by Professor Abraham Thomas. The broader experience was of course wonderful, but in quiet moments since that time I have return often to impressions redolent of special nostalgia, to images that persisted and much of it have honed over the intervening months. Time has been clear.

Like others privileged to visit this majestic place, our group ascended its heights by passing through the Buland Darwaza. A pale rose arch 134’ high, the south gateway of Fatehpur Sikri is the largest structure of its kind in Asia, and it carries an inscription that typifies Akbar's spiritual quest:

Jesu son of Mary (on Whom be peace) said:

'The world is a bridge—pass over it, but build no houses upon it.
He who hopes for an hour, hopes for eternity.
The world is but an hour.
Spend it in prayer for the rest is unseen.'

Our guide was an engaging old Muslim. His beard was oddly trussed in a folded bandana, and dyed with henna to indicate that he had made the "Haj to the "holy city." There was a touch of taunting in his bearing but it was thawned by flourishes of gracious humor, and one could tell his eyes were used to an honest smile. That he loved his work was apparent, and his informal lecture was filled with equal amounts of Mughul history and affectionate lore. However, he was soon gone, and we were left to the complete tranquility of the site and to the urging of our own curiosity.

I separated myself from my companions, wandering self-absorbed through the silent "acropolis." Walking beyond the great arch, I made my way to the Diwan-i-Khas, and climbed to its roof. As the July sun began to set it seemed to apologize for the heat that the day had sent. On the horizon a band of syrupy yellow light was pressed against the sharp edge of a patchwork of sandstone buildings. Light gave way to shadows. Reds and magentas of moments earlier proceeded in dulled halftones to dusty purple and black. Day had ended, and Fatehpur Sikri rested in the melancholy of history's inevitable movement toward change and new directions. But as they have for so long, the forms and textures of Mughul civilization had outlasted the day, and I was left wondering at the unique cultural procession that Akbar had set in motion. I thought of all those Indians and outlanders who had come to this place: Muslim and Hindu philosophers, Confucian scholar from China and earnest black-robed Jesuits, Buddhist monks of Sri Lanka, Jain, Parsees and Levantine Jews. Listening for the muted echoes of their passage on the courtyard below, I struggled to bring into focus those poignant images of India that Walt Whitman has left to us:

- You lofty and dazzling towers, pinnacled, red as roses, burnish'd with gold!
- Towers of fables immortal fashion'd from mortal dreams.

When I left Fatehpur Sikri to continue my travels I was much aware that I had been given a valuable opportunity to actively confront not only India's past, but a present marked by angry particularism. Today Moghul palaces still rise up in affectionate memories, and on occasion they make it a bit difficult to pass judgement on a country that I have come to admire. Time and distance have allowed the exhilaration of monumental India to subside, however, at least to a level my professional training in history can contain. Yet its essence remains, and it lingers there at that balance point within where my academic discipline begins to make its own special demands.

These days when I read about Sikh-Hindu clashes, I wonder if a young Prime Minister can provide the solutions needed to diffuse India's communal and regional tensions. More than once I have thought that in Akbar's syncretism he might find trusted civic formulas and a worthy historical model. Guided by obvious constitutional restraints he might do worse than search out a volume of Abul Fazl, the Great Moghul's friend and court chronicler, who once wrote in the 'City of Victory':

- "Thousands find rest in the love of the king and sectarian differences do not raise the dust of strife. In his wisdom the king will understand the spirit of the age and shape his plans accordingly."

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