

# A monumental scandal

PRARTHNA GAHILOTE

JUNE 19, 7 am. Delhi-Mathura highway. It's a hot summer morning and a long way to go. There is news that the Taj is threatened. We are not sure. Only feelers from some faceless, nameless officials that lend a glimmer of hope for a good story.

A journey of two-and-a-half hours. Yet, Agra seems to be far. I'd rather be where the action is. Sanjay Sharma, the photographer from my newspaper, *The Indian Express*, knows how to beat the ennui of the distance. He goes off to sleep. I can't. Just never can, when I travel. Agra seems even further that way. The road is choking with traffic. One jam after the other. If this is how tourists get to reach Agra, then God only help. The terrain outside does not offer much that would romance the eye. The Badarpur border is dotted with ugly concrete. Buildings crawling out onto the highway, hoardings crowding the sides, police barricades carelessly thrown around. People everywhere. On foot, cycles, two-wheelers and the ever-so-reckless cars and trucks. The other deterrent in our speed are the local buses, blocking traffic at all possible turns.

Up ahead, where sweeping stretches of land take over, the land is barren. The rains have been elusive and the otherwise green patches are dry. Strange, puzzled, irritated commuters stare into our small Indica cab, trying to convey something. I fail to understand what. My concerns lie a little away. In Agra, to be precise. Anxiety rises. I am still far from where the story is. Imagination runs havoc with images of construction activity. But Agra is still away.

There are sheets of paper in my bag to keep me company. They have sketchy details on the conservation plans slotted for the Taj Mahal and the Agra Fort, both World Heritage Sites (WHS) under the Unesco. Both are also protected heritage sites under the Archaeological Survey of India's Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act of 1958. Court rulings define 100 meters of the area around a protected site as prohibited area and 200 meters of land around such a site, regulated area. According to the judiciary no construction activity can take place within such areas. The court defines that. The offence is punishable under a court of law.

But at Agra, things seem to follow a different ritual all together. Reports from 'never to be named' sources and the Union ministry of tourism and culture, directly responsible for the heritage sites in the country, confirm that Taj is threatened. Also, my only hope to justify the visit to distant Agra.

**I**n Agra, no one seems to know about this monumental blunder. At least not on the streets. Queries by the roadside come to a naught. Agra city is a mess. No traffic sense among commuters, no policing and most of all no patience. The sun is scorching and tempers fraying. Sanjay is still asleep. The only remotely 'chilled out' person around is our Himachali driver, regaling me with stories from the mountainous state up-North. But

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he too, despite a visit a week to Agra has not heard anything about the construction work near the Taj. (In journalism, they say, this section of people are the best sources for any stories. I must be really unlucky.) I slowly grow nervous.

May be, at the Taj, I think. What better than the 17th century bastion of Mughal romance telling its sad tale of neglect and apathy itself. Sanjay and I enter the Taj. The white marble floor is burning. With pride or angst, I shall soon find out. We walk straight up to the backyard. No signs of construction. We squint in the sun. Nothing. My hopes dashed. But then, at The Express, they say, 'never give up'. There is always a story, tucked in somewhere. The photographer wonders aloud if I have the right tip-off. I secretly hope, I do.

55-year-old Lal Singh is a god-send. Dressed in the regular khaki *vardi*, sporting a stubble, Singh, an ASI attendant at the Taj, is a kind man. He climbs down the many steps of the monument adjacent to Taj to answer my queries. His demeanour is warm and everything he says comes with a smile. 'There is an ASI office at the entrance,' he tells me. I have not told him that we represent the press. 'Where are you people from,' he asks. 'Delhi,' short and crisp. Singh helps me with addresses of the Agra Development Authority (ADA), the Agra City Municipal Corporation and the ASI main office.

'Do you belong to Delhi,' he asks. I decline. Thereafter begins an avalanche of questions. Singh however is happy to know I belong to his tribe. The one thing that gets people talking anywhere in the world is 'common ground' of any sort. Singh is simply impressed with a Rajput girl working as a scribe. Rapport established, I ask him if he has heard of any construction happening around the monument. Singh points out. In the distance, a patch of red is what Singh describes as 'construction which is not happening any more.' My happiness knows no bounds.

Singh walks us to the ASI office, fetches us water and even vantage seats inside the ASI office at Taj. Inside this little office, things seem to be calm. No signs of any worry about the construction work so near a World Heritage Site. The ASI officials are busy. They have work to handle. You quiz them about the construction and they deny any knowledge of it. Or so they pretend. The official word here, about development plans and conservation work around the Taj is, 'We will not be able to tell you.' It requires much goading and polite conversation to get some people talking. And when they do, it is a volcano ready to erupt. The Taj is in grave danger closer than imagination would permit.

We rush off to the site. A distance of two kilometers. At the base of the Agra Fort. The fort, built in red sandstone, looks brilliant in the afternoon sun. Huge and imposing, it is everything that a heritage lover would be proud of. But that is not our destination. The cab pulls up a little before the fort. Sanjay and I climb out of the car, jump a wall and step on 12 feet high hard ground. The Yamuna, once upon a time. It is now the site of construction. The chosen patch for the Rs 175 crore Taj Heritage Corridor.

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The kilometer stretch of the Yamuna bed between the Agra Fort and the Taj Mahal has recently been filled up. With 40 lakh cubic meter of soil, the 72 acres of the Yamuna here now exists as a 12 feet high solid base of soil. There are tractors ferrying soil. Rumbling on the new soil base. About 800 odd labourers can be seen working on the site as construction work for the *pushta*, or the five feet high wall, goes on full swing at the site.

This 1600 meter long wall that extends right from the Ram Bagh bridge near the Agra Fort to the 'shamshan ghat' close to the Taj Mahal, popularly known as 'protection work', is being constructed to stop the river from sweeping the newly-filled soil away.

This stretch is supposed to house what is called the Heritage Corridor – a beautification plan of the Yamuna bed complete with shopping malls, parks, restaurants and entertainment centres, being undertaken by the Uttar Pradesh government.

Sanjay is ready with his camera. Trigger-happy, he clicks one damning frame after the other. We move forward to get a closer look at the wall. It's thick and high. Labourers around look at us with suspicion. Sanjay unloads his camera and gives me the roll. 'Hide it somewhere,' he says. I shove it down my socks, hoping no one saw. 'Say nothing about the story or against Maywati,' he instructs me. Sanjay has been through rough weather over stories before. This is just his word of caution to me. There is movement from within the tents put up in the distance. We see two men come our way and ask, 'Who are you? Where are you from?' Pat comes Sanjay's reply, 'We are writing about the beautification happening here. It is such good work. Must get all the publicity possible.' Argument accepted. The two men leave us to our business and walk off. We have our pictures.

We move back to the roadside and spot some labourers. Thirty-eight year old Dev Kumar from Bilaspur in Madhya Pardesh, has been at the task for four months now. Without salary. His family members and other friends at the site have also not been paid as yet. 'We have been filling the river bed for four months now,' he says, quickly adding, 'we haven't been paid.' Kumar gives us some details of the kind of work going on. First the filling up of the river bed and then the buidling of the *pushta*. The *pushta* should be complete in another months time. It is only after the wall is constructed, ensuring that the monsoon water does not wash the sand away, will work at the corridor begin.

We look for the consultants of the project. None in sight. A few rounds to the tents in the area fetch us information that the officials are out for lunch. We will have to come back. A faded blue board outside the site announces the Taj Heritage Corridor, being built by the National Projects Construction Corporation (NPCC), a Government of India undertaking. We decide to use the interlude to catch up with the officials from the civic bodies.

First, the Agra City Municipal Corporation (ACMC). The commissioner is away. May not come back for the day. It is 3 pm and junior officials say that senior officers will only

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be available in the first half of the day. We decide to come back and try our luck. At the Agra Development Authority (ADA) we are luckier. The vice chairman, Anil Kumar is in, but refuses to meet us. Much deliberation gets us inside the office. Kumar refuses to talk about the project. We insist. 'The plans came approved from the Uttar Pradesh Chief Secretary, D.S. Bagga's office and therefore no permission from any other agency for the construction plan was required,' he relents. Adding, 'We have nothing to do with it. We have not passed the plans.'

Kumar further explains, 'The Yamuna river bed falls under the Mission Management Board under the Taj Protection Mission Board headed by the chief secretary, Uttar Pradesh. The Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) presented a concept paper on the development of the Yamuna bed in August last year to the Mission Board. A little later the concept paper was approved and work on the site began. The idea has come straight from the chief secretary's office.' Senior officials at the ADA further confirm, 'Since the project was approved by the chief secretary's office, no civic body in Agra thought it necessary to ask for construction plans.'

**A**n alarming revelation. No civic authority in Agra has a clue about who passed the construction plans. Even as construction is going on in full swing, senior officials of the Agra Development Authority (ADA), the Agra City Municipal Corporation (ACMC) and the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), Agra circle, have decided to wash their hands off the whole issue.

We rush back to the Agra City Municipal Corporation. Additional Municipal Commissioner, Janardan Barnwal promptly says, 'Construction work does not fall under our jurisdiction. We have nothing to do with it and have not passed the plans. It must be the ADA office. You could find out details there.'

**M**eanwhile, senior officials at the ASI, Agra circle, steer clear of the violations at the site. 'We are told that the construction work does not violate the ASI's Ancient Monument and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act of 1958.' They add, 'The construction, we are told, is 500 metres away from the Taj Mahal in accordance with the Supreme Court ruling and 300 metres away from the Agra Fort which is also protected. It, therefore, does not violate the regulated and prohibited area regulation of the ASI and does not fall under our jurisdiction.' The officials add that the Superintendent Archaeologist (SA) of the Agra circle is in Delhi with detailed reports on the issue to discuss the matter with the Union Minister for Tourism and Culture, Jagmohan.

We rush back to the site. This time there are people. Sated. Back from lunch. Project Engineer, Rakesh, from the NPCC that has undertaken the beautification project, shows us around. 'We have approval from the CPCB. We started filling the Yamuna bed in November last year and the construction of the pushta began in February 2003.'

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Rakesh adds, 'The 1600-meter-long pushta will be complete in a month after which we will start greening the area.' The Rs 175 crore project is slated to be complete in two years time, he adds.

Rakesh takes us further on the filled-up portions. 'Look at the Taj from here. Could you ever see the Taj from this angle before this stretch was filled up,' he asks us. It is a feather in his cap. The Taj does look awesome from here. Pristine white, it revels in the evening sunset. The sky is full with a haunting reddish hue; the Taj looks even more magnificent against this setting. Birds winging homewards are flying past the Taj, as if saying goodbye. Behind us is the Agra Fort. A window in the fort wall looks out at the Taj. It is from here that Emperor Shahjahan looked at the Taj in the last days of his life. He had been imprisoned here by his son. If the corridor ever comes up, then Shahjahan perhaps will never be able to wet his eyes.

**S**tory in hand, we start our journey homewards. Incessant rain lashes against the windscreen. The driver, tired after a day's run, complains about missing his lunch. We have to humour him. A 15-minute stop is all we can afford at a roadside joint. The drive back to Delhi is tough. The rains know no ebbing. We drive through. The Delhi office is waiting for the story.

11 pm. We reach office. Union Minister for Tourism and Culture, Jagmohan is enraged. Speaking to us about the corridor at the zero-hour he says, 'I have called a meeting of senior officials from Uttar Pradesh but it is still not clear who sanctioned the plan. I will not let this happen. It is appalling and will completely ruin the environment and the aesthetics of the area.'

CPCB head Dilip Biswas confirms, 'We have not passed the project and have submitted a detailed report stating this to the ministry. It is not clear who has sanctioned this project. In fact, the Supreme Court even directed the construction agencies to stop work on the site. If they are still carrying on construction, then it is a sheer violation of the Supreme Court order.'

Allegations fly thick after our first reports on the corridor appear in print on June 20. Union Minister Jagmohan shoots off a letter to Chief Minister Mayawati, demanding an explanation. Chief Secretary D.S. Bagga telephones Jagmohan to say that the construction work has been stopped. Media reports say otherwise.

**O**n June 21, a fuming Jagmohan decides to visit Agra. Senior officials from Agra face his ire over the illegal construction. Another round of letters follows. Jagmohan tells the UP government to 'undo the damage done.' Bagga confirms that the construction activity was not ordered by his office. The work is illegal and has been stopped. UP Chief Minister, Mayawati orders a probe. The Uttar Pradesh government pins the responsibility of the project on state environment secretary R.K. Sharma. On July 1, Sharma is suspended for releasing Rs 17 crore for the project. An additional sum of Rs 20 crore was

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to be released for the project soon after, which got stalled under the media glare. On July 3, Jagmohan holds a high-level meeting at his office in Delhi. Senior officials from the UP government, Union ministry of culture and tourism, Union ministry for environment and forests, Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), ASI and National Projects Construction Corporation (NPCC) – the government agency undertaking construction work, attend the meeting.

Meanwhile, Uttar Pradesh's former state counsel, Ajay Aggarwal raises a stink. In a letter to the Supreme Court and Chief Secretary Bagga, he claims to have been threatened by R.K. Sharma. The apex court gives Aggarwal security.

On July 14, the apex court declares that 'something is wrong somewhere' and hints at a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) enquiry. A CBI enquiry is directed by the Supreme Court on July 16 to probe into the 'irregularities and illegalities of the project work.'

While Uttar Pradesh simmers with controversy and scandal, in Delhi the wait grows longer. On July 28, Chief Minister Mayawati demands Jagmohan's resignation in a fit of fury, only to be chided by the prime minister. The CBI prepares an interim report naming a number of high-profile officials, both from the state and the Union machinery. The report is kept confidential. A joint-bench of Justice M.B. Shah and Justice A.R. Lakshamanan refuse that it be made public. The CBI goes head hunting. Those questioned include Uttar Pradesh Chief Secretary Bagga, state Environment Secretary Sharma, Union Environment Secretary K.C. Mishra, UP Environment Minister Nasim-ud-Idn Siddiqui, Chief Secretary to Mayawati, P.L. Punia, Principal Secretary, Finance, UP, N.C. Bajpai and Chairman, NPCC, S.C. Bali.

**S**eptember 2003. The Supreme Court awaits a final report on the Taj Heritage Corridor. to be submitted on September 11. Mayawati has lost her seat of power in Uttar Pradesh and has reportedly resigned her Assembly seat. The labourers at the Agra site of the Taj Heritage Corridor have been paid and packed off. The NPCC has gone to the court asking for payment of money spent on the project. The Yamuna in Agra remains filled up. A good monsoon shower has brought the water dangerously close to the Taj Mahal. Experts say that it will find its way to the foundation of the Taj, damaging it considerably. No effort to remove the already constructed portions of the corridor have been made or ordered by any agencies. The Taj remains a mute spectator to scandal, money-swindling and apathy. It has nothing to do but wait. Its future shrouded in doubt and danger.