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In the Shadow of the Taj

A Portrait of Agra

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PENGUIN BOOKS

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The Agra Fort contained more than 500 buildings. It was a city in itself, with well laid-out streets and many different categories of structures. There were imperial palaces, accommodations for the enormous retinue, offices for the central government and its innumerable departments, billets for soldiers, and stables. Space was also set aside for Akbar's much loved and vast menagerie of animals ranging from elephants to deer and antelope, rhinoceroses, lions, tigers and panthers, hunting cheetahs to hawks and hounds.

Of all his animals Akbar loved elephants best. He was fearless and could ride ones that others feared, stepping on their tusks and mounting them, even when they were in *musth*, rut. Of the 6,000 in the imperial stables, 101 were reserved for the emperor's personal use. Five men tended each elephant, feeding them generous portions of rice, sugar, milk and ghee every day, as well as 300 sugarcanes each during winter, when the cane ripened. A superintendent reported on the condition of each elephant to the emperor every day, and answered Akbar's detailed inquiries on any indisposition.

Only around thirty buildings remain. Many, especially on the northern segment of the Fort, were replaced by British barracks. These are now occupied by the Indian Army, and the area is currently off limits to visitors. Plans to vacate the Fort are being discussed, after which the area must be carefully landscaped. The Delhi Gate, which was earlier the main entrance to the Fort, should then also be reopened. Visitors could linger in the gardens and a method could be devised to regulate entry to the Fort, thus averting overcrowding.

Among the palaces that remain is Akbari Mahal, one of the first built by Akbar at the extreme south-west edge of the Fort. Its deserted and scarcely visited chambers were sited—

as were other palaces constructed under Akbar's instructions—overlooking the Yamuna river. The Akbari Mahal is a simple structure of red sandstone built around a courtyard with what seems to be an assembly hall on one side, behind which a deep verandah faces the river. Construction is in the Hindu idiom, with pillars and beams held by carved brackets. The only decorations that survive are fretted stone lattices, though the ceilings must have been decorated and perhaps even gilded.

I look out over towards the Yamuna now in the distance, its landscape and environment dramatically altered from Akbar's time. Forests have been cut down to make more and more land available for agriculture, and these same tracts of land are now being converted into housing. But previously, great swathes of jungle and tall grasslands crowded the banks of the river. The roar of traffic and the impatient horns of today fade, as I imagine other sounds, the alarm calls of monkeys, the barking of chital deer and in the distance, the sawing of a leopard.

Akbar probably sat on this very verandah, looking out over the river, dreaming dreams of empire that would make him one of the greatest rulers of north India. Perhaps it was here that he pondered ways to bring reconciliation to what Tennyson called 'the warring world of Hindustan' in his poem, 'Akbar's Dream'. Akbar realized that to effectively rule the subcontinent, he must win over the Hindus who were the majority of his subjects. Despite enormous losses in revenue, he abolished discriminative taxes that had long irked them. With marvellous insight, Tennyson has Akbar saying:

I hate the rancour of their castes and creeds,
I let them worship as they will, I reap
No revenue from the field of unbelief,