

At the Taj Mahal, slingshots chase off monkey menaces

NEW DELHI

The wild animals pose serious threat to tourists, but they are protected

BY HARI KUMAR

Outside the white marble facade of the imposing Taj Mahal, tourists are facing a menace: gangs of hungry, rosy-bottomed monkeys. They bite. They scratch. Occasionally, they kill.

Now, Indian security guards are cracking down, taking to the streets of Agra, India, where the monument is, to scare off the animals. Their weapon of choice?

Slingshots.

"Foreign tourists get very excited to see the monkeys," said Dineshor Tongbram, the deputy commandant of a security force for the Taj Mahal. "They try to go closer to them and become victims."

The threat of an attack is real. Last May, two French tourists were reportedly confronted by a mob of monkeys and bitten. In November, a monkey snatched a local baby from his mother, bit him and then dumped him on a

neighbor's roof. The boy later died.

"There are too many monkeys in the area," the child's uncle, Dharendra Kumar, told the BBC. "We live in fear."

Every day, about 25,000 tourists visit the Taj Mahal, a 17th-century mausoleum built by the Muslim emperor Shah Jahan for his favorite wife, Mumtaz Mahal. The monument is on the banks of the Yamuna River, where the monkeys gather and scavenge for food.

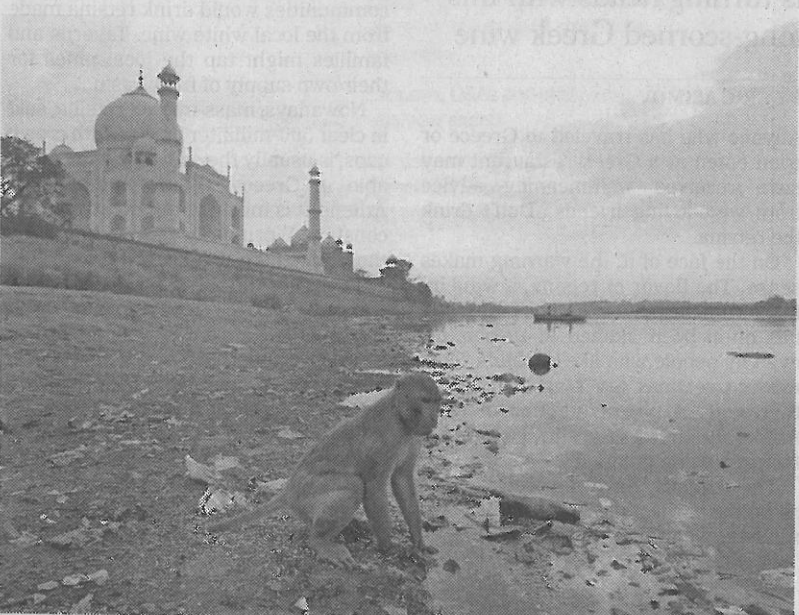
Tourists are not allowed to carry food into the Taj Mahal, and many dump containers in trash cans near its entry gates, attracting the monkeys. At least one or two attacks take place every month, Mr. Tongbram said.

Recently, members of the Archaeological Survey of India wrote to the city authorities in Agra and urged them to tackle the monkey problem.

But certain rules are inflexible, Mr. Tongbram said. India's Wildlife Protection Act prohibits harming wild animals, so the slingshots are used just to chase pests away. Some other Indian cities use trained langurs, fierce, black-faced monkeys, but they are not permitted near the Taj Mahal.

Officials say the slingshots are a start. And they offered an insider tip, too.

"Monkeys get angry when they see empty-handed tourists," Mr. Tongbram said.



SAUMYA KHANDELWAL/REUTERS

A monkey scavenges for food on the banks of the Yamuna River in Agra, India. Behind the monkey is the Taj Mahal, which receives 25,000 visits a day from tourists.