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MUGHAL GARDENS: MEANING AND SYMBOLISM

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ABSTRACT

The Mughals were a ruling dynasty of Central Asian origin that ruled portions of the Indian subcontinent from 1526 to 1857. It was founded by Babur (1526–30), a prince descended from Timur and Genghis Khan. Babur defeated Ibrahim Lodi in the First battle of Panipat in 1526 and thereby laid the foundations of the dynasty. The dynasty ruled in its full glory till the end of Aurangzeb's reign in 1707. Babur and his successors were well-known in history because of their great interest in arts and arc
hitecture. In his memoirs, the Babur-Nama, Babur expressed his lifelong interest in horticulture and his attraction as a young man with the gardens of the Timurid capitals in Samarkand and Herat. Babur himself laid out gardens and built palaces after his conquest of India. Babur thus began the tradition which was continued by his successors as several gardens or Bagh were built by the Mughals. The traditional view was that most of these gardens were constructed from an utilitarian view-point of producing fruits and flowers directly for use of emperors, prince and nobles in their in their own establishments. The present paper is an attempt to argue that Mughal gardens served as centers of social life, positions of territorial control and loci of legitimization.

Keywords: Charbagh, Mughal Garden, Babur- Nama, Legitimisation, Paradise Garden

1. INTRODUCTION

The Mughal dynasty was founded by Babur after the battle of Panipat in 1526 and the dynasty endured in an attenuated form till 1857. Babur the first of the great Mughals was a Mongol from his mother's side and a Turkish from his father's side. Babur was the sixth in the line of descent from Tamerlane while his mother was a descendant of Chingez. The blood of two great conquerors of Asia thus comingled to produce a third conqueror- Babur. However Babur was not just only a soldier but was a highly complex and accomplished product of a great civilization in its zenith. In his memoirs, the *Babur-Nama*, Babur expressed his lifelong interest in horticulture and his attraction as a young man with the gardens of the Timurid capitals in Samarkand and Herat. Babur was born in what is today modern day Uzbekistan in 1483 to Umar Shaikh Mirza and inherited the small principality of Farghana in 1494 following the death of his father. Descended from Timur on his father's side he considered himself to be the rightful claimant to the Timurid throne. Babur was highly educated in Turki, Persian and Arabic but lived the nomadic life of an adroit soldier. In fact in 1504 he had conquered Kabul and by 1512 had thrice held neighbouring Samarkand although for brief periods. In this entire period Babur

discovered that his quest for a throne was manipulated and thwarted by the two rival groups- the Timurids and the Chaghatai Mughals.[1]

In spite of all these difficulties in maintaining his sovereignty and hold the impact of his short stay in Samarkand was profound in shaping his attitude towards landscape and architecture. The city of Samarkand had been embellished by Timur and his immediate successors with splendid *Char Baghs*, mosques, madrasas and tombs and was considered one of the wonders of the 15th Century. In fact the Timurid's inclination for fighting was equalled by their enthusiasm for building and in the century following the death of Timur in 1405 the forms of architecture and ornamentation became even more refined. The magnificent and glittering city of Samarkand with its great *Baghs* caught the imagination of Babur. A vivid description of Timur's residential gardens is provided by Ruy de Gonzales de Clavijo, the Spanish ambassador to Timur's court.[2] Large enclosures with fragrant fourfold gardens, coursing water, brimming pools and plantation of trees with colourful pavilions became a Timurid tradition. Donald Wilbur has related these Timurid enclosures with Persian *bustan* or orchard.[3] In 1506, Babur spent forty days visiting his royal relatives in Herat shortly after the death of sultan Husain Baiqara (1468-1506) who had presided over the city's golden era of prosperity and artistic achievements. The *Bagh-i Jahan Ara* of Sultan Husain had the greatest influence on Babur.

Babur after his conquest of India is credited with introducing here- the Indo-Gangetic plain- the timurid form of *Chaharbagh*. The term Chaharbagh is generally used to describe a Persianate walled-in garden divided by intersecting walkways, usually but not necessarily into four compartments.[4] contemporary accounts are more or less silent about Babur's construction of gardens. A little light is thrown on the matter by Ahmed Yadgar who in the 1570's wrote a history on the Afghan dynasties of India and their struggle against the invading Mughals. Ahmad Yadgar informs us that a *tarh-bandi-yi khiyaban* or "plan with walkways" was the most salient and revolutionary feature of Babur's gardens in India.[5] Babur was a true Timurid in spirit who preferred to camp in gardens than to reside in a permanent constructed palace. Throughout his small principality Babur constructed new gardens or refurbished old ones. Many of these gardens such as the ones at Nimla, Istalif near Kabul and the Bagh-i Wafa near Jalalabad in present-day Afghanisthan are known from the writings of Babur.[6] Babur indicates the type of trees, flowers and fruits that grew in these terraced settings. He also repeatedly draws our attention to the fact that they were symmetrically planned and well-laid out- features were new and unique in Indian context. Zain Khan one of the close associates of Babur has also described the gardens built by Babur in Afghanistan.[7] In Agra and other locales Babur constructed Timurid type *Char baghs*. However none of the gardens laid by Babur now exists in its original state and only the remains of *Bagh-i-Nilufor* carved between 1527 and 1529 near the rocky outcrops of Dholpur can be seen.[8] Thus, in Kabul and India Babur gave high priority to the construction of gardens in order to underscore his Central Asian heritage.

The gardens of Babur or for that matter Mughal Gardens were often constructed with a paradisiacal imagery in mind which was borrowed from Persian poetry.[9] The gardens of Mughal India were originally inspired by the Timurid ones which were also similarly inspired by the paradisiacal imagery. E.g. the famous Shalimar Garden in Kashmir or the garden in Agra in which the Taj Mahal sits were all constructed with this imagery in mind.[10] The tomb built for Humayun under the auspices of his son and successor, Akbar (1556-1605) is situated in a four-part garden which according to most scholars was built with the paradisiacal imagery in mind. However there is nothing to suggest that this imagery was particularly important for Babur. It is true that he named one of his gardens in Agra *Hasht-Behisht* or the Garden of the Eight Paradises but his own writings give no sense that to him they had any paradisiacal overtones. In any case the paradise symbolism of Islamic gardens was often accompanied by or being gradually replaced by political, economic and dynastic connotations. Another aspect of the Mughal gardens which has been always in the shadow of their symbolic values is their economic functions. In fact, Irfan Habib focuses on the utilitarian aspect of the Mughal Gardens as according to him "most of the gardens of the emperor, princes, and nobles must have been designed to produce fruits

1 Subtelny, Maria (1989), "Babur's Rival Relations: A Study of Kinship and Conflict in 15th-16th Century Central Asia" in *Der Islam*, Vol. 66, p. 116.
2 Clavijo Ruy (1928), *Embassy to Tamerlane 1403-06*, Trans. Guy Le Strange, London.
3 Wilbur Donald (1979), *Persian Gardens and Garden Pavilions*, Washington D.C., p. 76.
4 Wilson, Ralph (1976) "The Persian Garden: Bagh and Chahar Bagh" in *The Islamic Garden* Washington D.C., p. 79.
5 Yadgar Ahmad (ed. M. Hidayat Husayn 1939) "*Tarikh-i-Shahi*" Asiatic society of Bengal.
6 Beveridge Annette (1922) *The Baburnama in English* London pp 208-09, 216-17.
7 Khan Zain (trans. S.H. Askari 1982) "*Tabaqat-i-Baburi"* Delhi pp 3-5.
8 Moynihan Elizabeth (1988) "The Lotus Garden Palace of Zahir al-Din Muhammad Babur" in *Muqarnas* 5 pp. 135-52.
9 Wilbur Donald, op. Cit., pp. 15-20.
10 Begley Wayne (1979), "The Myth of the Taj Mahal and a new theory of its Symbolic Meaning" in *Art Bulletin* LVI, pp. 7-37.

and flowers directly for use in their own establishments."[11] But recent research suggests that the Mughal Gardens served as centres of social life, symbols of territorial control and signs of legitimisation.[12]

Gardens in the early 16th Century served as positions of territorial control where territoriality is often defined as "a strategy, whereby an individual or group attempts to affect, influence or control people by delimiting and asserting control over a geographic area."[13] They were considered loci of intense territorial experience or the place to celebrate victory over a larger region, to enjoy a famous landscape or a place to take refuge when defeated. Finally they were considered emblems or markers of territorial identity, e.g. Timurid cities or newly acquired Timurid territory. The expanding role of the gardens as funerary spaces, beginning with Humayun's tomb exemplifies how the heightened symbolic significance was coupled with diminished functional significance in day-to-day imperial activity. Akbar's visit to Humayun's tomb seldom describes it as a garden.

Babur in his autobiography describes the construction of gardens as there are several references to gardens among wondrous images of irrigation, fauna, fruits and flowers. In fact, an illustrated version of *Babur-Nama*, shows how carefully he controlled his craftsmen and architects who were laying out a *chaharbagh*. Babur's memoirs demonstrate that he was an intelligent leader who was aware of Timur's cultural interests such as gardens and probably tried to keep them as a heritage. Babur never got settled and continued Timur's nomadic life, mainly because he was always involved in military campaigns. This phenomenon changed their perception of place. In fact, for the nomadic people, "place" had mobility qualities and garden was something which should have the enough room (and spatial flexibility) to fit in their army. Babur, who had inherited this practise from Timur, designed his gardens in a way that they could be filled by army tents. [14] Such capability led him and his architects to reduce the density of planted areas (to increase void spaces) in their gardens. This trend however changed after the 17th century because of the increasing power of Mughals and their getting settled in subcontinent. In that respect gardens were for Babur calm places which could make him and his soldiers mentally prepared for wars.

There were four different recorded uses of the garden in the early Mughal history under Babur. The first anticipates the future development in Mughal architectural history by putting the garden to funereal use. While the founding of gardens by Mughal kings was not a new fashion in India, it seems that these kings should be credited for the integration of funerary architecture in a *chaharbagh* setting.[15] The pre-Islamic Persians invented the concept of *chaharbagh* but it was Mughal kings who were the first to discover a functional way of such integration (between *chaharbagh* and pardise). Dickie states, "Burial in a garden amounts to a material anticipation of immaterial bliss, and the closer the garden approximates to the Koranic model the more effective is the analogy."[16] In that sense, according to Fergusson, "the usual procedure for the erection of these structures is for the king or noble who intends to provide himself with a tomb to enclose a garden outside the city walls, generally with high, crenulated walls, and with one or more splendid gateways and in centre erect a square or octagonal building. [17]

Gardens were also associated with audience-giving, as a site of wine parties and as a site of religious rites. The last three are in turn closely associated with Babur's struggle for empire and legitimacy. Babur's earliest reference to garden use is the *Char Bagh* at Andijan where he was residing when he learnt about the death of his father. For Babur and his heirs subsequently the garden became associated with death as Babur notes in his autobiography that with the permission of the owner he buried his mother in the New Years garden in Kabul.[18] Later on the garden became the characteristic Mughal setting for tombs which culminated in the construction of Taj Mahal, the ultimate vision of paradise. The gardens played an important role in symbolizing Babur's quest for a permanent kingdom. Following the death of his father Babur's most immediate concern was to assert his claim to the throne as he feared usurpation by his father's brothers. In this he was in need of allies and met his maternal uncle Sultan Mahmud Khan in the garden of *Haidar*

11 Habib, Irfan (1996) "Economic and Social Aspects of Mughal Gardens," in *Mughal Gardens*, edited by J. Wescoat and J. Wolschke-Bulmahn, Washington D.C. p. 132.
12 Asher, Catherine (1985) "Babur and the Timurid Char Bagh" in *Environmental Design*, nos. 1 and 2 pp. 46-55.
13 Sack, Robert (1986), *Human Territoriality: Its Theory and History* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 19.
14 The influence of nomadic life-style on the garden design goes back to early years of Islamic invasion of Arab nomads, Turkish Seljuks, and Mongols. But the integration of nomadic ideas into garden design became more pronounced when these nomadic tribes such as Mongols and Timurids got interested in constructing gardens as places to stay in certain periods of the year. Such tradition was not limited to nomadic tribes.
15 The symbolic meaning behind this tradition was to reach peace and tranquility after life.
16 J. Dickie, (1985). "The Mughal Garden: Gateway to Paradise," in *Muqarnas: An Annual on Islamic Art and Architecture*, Vo. III, edited by Oleg Grabar, Leiden: E.J. Brill, p. 131.
17 J. Fergusson, (1910), *History of Oriental Architecture*, London, pp. 289-290.
18 Babur Nama, op.cit. p.246.

Kukuldash.[19] The garden setting although described briefly gives a picture of courtly interaction between two men related but differing in rank. Babur also records receiving others in a garden such as Sultanim Begum whom he describes as his honoured elder sister. Thus the garden for Babur was a centre of power, a dwelling place and imperial seat. It was here that Babur submitted to his more powerful relatives and later when Babur built his own support base and coterie the garden remained central to interaction with these new supporters.

Babur while describing garden use refers to wine parties. Wine drinking and parties were often a part of the complicated etiquette and ritual of late Timurid court which Babur described as "common custom". [20] Babur's recording of these events often in a garden setting suggests that there were substantial reasons. These gatherings included only males who were close associates. In fact, at the beginning of his career Babur had great difficulty in maintaining the loyalty of his troops mainly on account of his failures in Central Asian campaigns. So, the Timurid custom of holding garden wine parties was started most probably in between 1508 and 1519 or during his stay in Afghanistan. The very fact that these wine parties are recorded in a legitimising document like the *Babur-Nama* indicates that the parties held in the gardens were part of a bonding process. Babur makes mention of the celebration of Ramadan in his Indian garden at Sikri. [21] Gardens were given a role in Babur's attempts to ensure the success of Islam in India. Religious rites such as the celebration of Ramadan took place in a garden. Moreover Babur sought to ensure daily religious ritual in a garden by placing his humungous Panipat mosque in a *Char bagh*. [22] This mosque commemorated Babur's decisive victory over Sultan Ibrahim Lodi there and his conquest of Hindustan. The placement of his mosque in an ordered garden was new in India and gave a symbolic import to the Mughal *Char bagh*.

Finally, the construction of these gardens was intended as a symbol of territorial control. Babur through the construction of gardens sought to place his imprimatur upon the land of his conquest. In fact, even before the Battle of Panipat, Babur considered the territory of Punjab to be rightfully his as it had been conquered by his ancestor Timur earlier. In Feb. 1526 Babur discovered a site near the Ghaggar River which he deemed fit for the construction of *Char bagh*. [23] The garden which no longer survives was completed in 1528-29. As Babur advanced into the Indian heartland gardens were constructed to mark his territorial conquests at Panipat, Agra, Gwalior, Fatehpur Sikri and Dholpur. Babur also issued orders that regular, symmetrical gardens and orchards were to be laid in all large cities. These four-part, ordered gardens were to be laid out which were representative of the Timurid tradition. In fact by constructing these gardens he sought to manipulate the natural, untamed landscape of India into a rational, ordered creation and also assert his claims over a newly-conquered region.[24] Gardens, ordered and regular, were intended to shape the terrain of what Babur described as "disorderly Hind" [25] to his own liking. However the construction of gardens had significance beyond the mere aesthetic but signified assertion of sovereignty over a newly conquered land.

The biography of Akbar i.e. *Akbarnama* although sparse in detail in this matter sheds important light on the transition of Mughal gardens. Garden events in the first decade of Akbar's rule (1556-66) were varied in substance and significance. Akbar's aunt Gulbadan Begum recounted that when Humayun was betrayed and in flight he took shelter in gardens. [26] The construction of Humayun's monumental tomb garden in Delhi symbolised an important break in design of early Mughal gardens in India. It initiated a shift away from active territorial construction directed from garden encampments and towards the formal symbolic use of gardens as emblems of territorial authority. Gardens were considered more than material resources. Carrying a spiritual meaning, gardens were designed on metaphors and meanings which were mainly based on the perfection of earthly gardens as reflections of the paradise. The integration of such spiritual beliefs and gardens and their relation to Islamic concept of paradise has motivated some scholars such as Ettinghausen to categorize these gardens as "Islamic gardens."[27]

19 Babur Nama, op. Cit. p. 54.
20 Lowry Glenn (1969), *Timur and the Princely Vision*, Los Angeles, p. 360.
21 Babur Nama, p. 584.
22 Asher Catherine (1992), *Mughal India*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 25-28.
23 Khan Zain, op. Cit., pp. 66-68.
24 Moynihan Elizabeth (1979), *Paradise as a Garden*, London, pp.96-110.
25 Babur Nama, p. 532.
26 Gulbadan Begum (1987), *Humayaun-Nama*, Trans. Annette Beveridge, p.83.
27 R. Ettinghausen, (1976). "Introduction." in *The Islamic Garden*, edited by R. Ettinghausen, Washington D.C., Dumbarton Oaks and Trustees for Harvard University, p. 3.

From the above discussion we can say without any shade of doubt that although Mughal gardens form an area that has been extensively studied but they have a purpose which goes well beyond their aesthetic and functional aspects. Gardens were associated paradisical imagery, entombment, refuge and territoriality.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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