



## GARDEN IV. IN AFGHANISTAN

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Much of Afghanistan consists of treeless craggy mountains, dry sandy deserts, or semi-desert plains. The people inhabiting this land have consequently cherished all forms of gardens, which have become an integral part of Afghan culture. Villagers hold meetings and socialize in their orchards, middle-class urbanites delight in visiting outlying gardens, and the wealthy most often have large gardens inside their walled compounds. Some maintain gardens outside the cities, with or without structures, to which they repair on weekends and holidays.

*Pre-Mughal gardens.* Since the time the Achaemenids began their eastward expansion in the sixth century B.C., the Afghan area has periodically come under the rule of empires originating in Iran, Central Asia, and India, all of which nurtured garden traditions. Because these earliest gardens were destroyed by the passage of conquering armies one must turn to descriptions by ancient writers or the findings of archeologists in order to glean any information about them. For instance, in 1151 A.D. 'Alā'-al-Dīn Ġūrī destroyed the garden-palaces of the Ghaznavids (977/1186) in Ġaznī (see the summary report on the Italian Archeological Mission in Afghanistan by A. Bombaci and U. Scerrato in *East and West*, N.S. 10, 1959, pp. 3-56) as well as those at Bost and Laškari Bāzār (D. Schlumberger, "Lashkari Bazar," in *MDAFA* 18, 1963, p. 80). The armies of Jengiz Khan (1220) and Tīmūr (Tamerlane; 1281) wrought much havoc (Klaus Fischer, *Nimruz*, Bonn, I, 1976; II, 1974), but their Timurid and Mughal successors, ruling at Herat and Kabul, initiated a cultural renaissance which touched the entire Indo-Iranian region. Gardens were



celebrated components of this florescence.

In Herat, the gardens at Gāzargāh tended by Tīmūr's son, Šāhroḡ (d. 1447) and those at Taḡt-e Safar created by the grandson of Tīmūr's son 'Omar, Sultan Ḥosayn Bāyqarā (d. 1506), have lost all semblance to their original Persian garden forms but their names remain, recalling a golden age.

*Mughal gardens.* Kabul was taken in 1504 by a young fugitive from Farḡāna, a descendant of both Jengiz Khan and Tīmūr who was destined to become the emperor Bābor (r. 1526-30), founder of the Mughal empire of India (1526-1857). The adornment of Kabul and its environs became his lifelong passion. In his memoirs, the *Bābor-nāma* (tr. A. Beveridge, London, 1917), Bābor writes that scarcely a year after his takeover he purchased a garden with "great plane (*čēnār*) trees" at Estālef, a hillside village 34 miles north of Kabul. Here he built a *taḡt* under the *čēnār* and made the "zig-zag" water channels "straight and orderly" to conform to the ideals of a Persian garden (p. 216). Just below this garden he enclosed the spring of Kṽāja Seh Yārān (Three friends) in mortared stone-work so as to better admire the *arḡavān* (Judas tree or red bud; p. 217). The *taḡt* with its *čēnār* and the spring with its *arḡavān* continued to be popular picnic spots up until the end of the 1970s when war ravaged the area.

Bābor mentions over twelve gardens outside the walled city of Kabul where he met envoys and distributed robes of honor (*Čēnār-bāḡ*, p. 401), cavorted with friends at all-night, all-day wine-drinking parties (*Bāḡ-e Banafša* [Violet garden]; pp. 395, 414), or recuperated (*Čār-bāḡ*; p. 254). In India he remembered the gardens fondly and continued to send letters concerning their upkeep until the time of his death (p. 645).

Bābor's will directed that his body be returned to a garden in Kabul, but the original name is unknown. The emperor Jahāngīr's (r. 1569-1627) memoirs, the *Tūzok-e jahāngīrī* (tr. A. Rogers, London, 1914) lists seven famous Kabul gardens he "perambulated" in 1607 (p. 106), but gives no name to the garden where he visited Bābor's tomb and distributed alms (p. 110). The *Pādšāh-nāma* lists ten gardens in Kabul at the time of Shah Jahān's (r. 1627-58) visit in 1638, and gives details of the orders he gave for embellishing the tomb site, but no name of the garden is specified (appendix V in *Baburnama*, tr.).

Nevertheless, this account describes the garden as being 500 yards long with 15 terraces 30 yards apart, and 12 waterfalls cascading into marbled



reservoirs on the tenth and ninth terraces, and at the entrance at the bottom of the slope. Shah Jahān ordered the tomb on the fourteenth terrace to be surrounded by a pierced-marble screen and a marble mosque built on the terrace below. It was completed in 1640 (inscription).

This fits the configuration of Bāḡ-e Bābor today, but only the general form, the terraces, three venerable *čenār*, the mosque and tomb are recognizable. In 1883 when Amir ‘Abd-al-Raḥmān gave up residence in the old city of Kabul (Fayz Moḥammad, *Serāj al-tawārīk*, Kabul, 1915, p. 379), he constructed a pavilion with a wooden-pillared verandah over the reservoir on the tenth terrace, and a large *ḥaram-sarāy* nearby. The gardens then gradually assumed the form of an English garden much favored by later royal families. Ladies’ *mēlas* (fairs) and other festive occasions were held here, including the coronation of Amir Ḥabīb-Allāh (r. 1901-19; K. Seraj and N. H. Dupree, *The KES Collection of Vintage Photographs*, New York, 1979, nos. 90-93).

The pavilion and the *ḥaram-sarāy* were later used as residences for foreigners (A. Hamilton, *Afghanistan*, London, 1906, pp. 354, 375) and embassies (O. von Niedermayer, *Afghanistan*, Leipzig, 1925, pp. 31-32; E. Trinkler, *Through the Heart of Afghanistan*, tr. B. Featherston, London, 1928, p. 176). Finally, Bāḡ-e Bābor became a public park and swimming pools were added, but the complex was increasingly neglected during the 1960s when the pavilion became a hospital and the *ḥaram-sarāy* a boarding school for tribal boys. The Italian archeological mission (IsMEO) began the restoration of the mosque in 1964 and in 1970 a survey considered the possibility of reconstructing the gardens in the Mughal style (M. Parpagliolo, *Kabul: The Bagh-i-Babur*, Rome, 1972). These plans were never implemented.

The only Mughal garden in Afghanistan retaining any of its original appearance is the garden at Nemla, 26 miles west of Jalālābād on the old road to Kabul. Local lore credits Nūr Jahān, wife of Emperor Jahāngīr who was renowned for her gardens, with its creation. In his memoirs the emperor speaks of creating the Jahānārā (World-adorning) garden in Kabul in 1607 (p. 106), but makes no mention of a garden at Nemla although he describes a grand hunt in its vicinity on their way back to India (p. 125). Architectural details suggest a date between the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries, however (M. Parpagliolo, p. 2, n. 3).

The enclosed garden is 400 square yards and contains many classic Mughal elements including an orderly grid pattern of intersecting water channels



lined with cypress interspersed with poplar and fruit trees. One waterfall wall is honeycombed with deep niches in which candles were placed behind the cascade, a favorite detail of the period. The bungalow now at its center was built by Amir Ḥabīb-Allāh (r. 1901-19).

*Post-Mughal gardens.* The next period of extensive garden building began at the end of the nineteenth century under Amir ‘Abd-al-Raḥmān (r. 1880-1901) whose palaces were set in walled park-like gardens about which he writes movingly in his autobiography (*The Life of Abdur Rahman: Amir of Afghanistan*, ed. Sultan Mahomed Khan, London, 1900, II, p. 104). The amir retained an English gardener from Yorkshire named Wild (J. A. Gray, *At the Court of the Amir*, London, 1895, p. 482) to oversee these gardens filled with trellises, arbors, reflecting pools, sculptured fountains, and tall gas lamps, features which became prominent in subsequent periods (K. Seraj, no. 89, dated 1900).

Outside the walled city of Kabul, west of the river, the amir built a massive 500-yard square citadel (Arg; ca. 1882) with “a garden nearly as large as the whole city of Kabul around it” (*The Life of Abdur Rahman II*, p. 61). Spacious courtyard gardens were planted throughout the complex, and the amir’s private pavilion, the Kot-e Bāḡča (House of the Little Garden), was surrounded with fragrant flowers (Hamilton, p. 350). The Arg continues to be the seat of government, but buildings have encroached on most of the outer garden space. The amir was proud of his building program (*ibid.*, p. 68) and many of his palaces are still in use, although somewhat altered. Bāḡ-e Šāhī with its adjoining *ḥaram-sarāy* in Bāḡ-e Kawkab (Star garden; begun 1300/1883, completed 1303/1887, Fayḏ Moḥammad, pp. 424, 489) in the eastern town of Jalālābād, the winter capital, has been in continuous use and the eleven acres of lush gardens at Bāḡ-e Šāhī were meticulously maintained. It has rarely been open to the public. Manzel-bāḡ (begun 1300/1883, completed 1302/1884; Fayḏ Moḥammad, p. 417) in a 20-acre walled garden one stage (*manzel*) east of the southern city of Qandahār, has served variously as a hotel, a cinema, and a tractor depot so the gardens are largely depleted but still retain vestiges of their former state. The massive Bāḡ-e Jahānārā palace at Kōlm (begun 1307/1889, completed 1309/1892; Fayḏ Moḥammad, p. 784) in the north was highlighted by stately firs, fruit trees, terraced gardens, and a reflecting pool. Restored in 1975 as a museum, it was rendered uninhabitable by an earthquake in 1976.

In Kabul, the 30-acre garden surrounding the Čehel-sotūn (Forty pillars) palace



(1880; inscription) are still well-maintained. Outside the south gate of the Arg there were two garden-sarais, Būstān (Garden) and Golestān (Rose-garden). Named after works by the renowned thirteenth-century poet, Sa'dī, often quoted by Bābor, these sarais had once belonged to Oloğ Beg Kābolī, an uncle of Bābor's who ruled Kabul and Ġaznī from ca. 1464-1501 (*Baburnama*, pp. 95, 251). Here Amir 'Abd-al-Raḥmān built a palace with adjoining *ḥaram-sarāy* (1893; inscription). The amir's palace in the Būstān-sarāy eventually became his mausoleum, and in 1964 the surrounding walls were removed to create Kabul's newest public garden called Zarnegār (Adorned with gold).

The many-domed and arcuated palace at Bāğ-e Bālā (1893; Gray, p. 498) located on a high, vine-covered hill some 2.5 miles west of Kabul best represents the amir's garden-palaces. It has been accessible to the public since it became a fashionable restaurant after restoration in 1966. The plan, clearly derived from the Central Asian Islamic tradition, utilizes a square with two spacious high-domed halls at the center and four small-domed rooms at each corner connected by wide colonnaded verandahs.

The exterior is finished in gleaming white gypsum plaster. The whitewashed interior ornamentation, in both impressed and carved plasterwork, is classically Islamic, depicting arabesques and a variety of floral patterns; patera painted in bold colors are set with mirrors. Arched openings between rooms were hung with embroidered hangings in place of doors, and the rooms were provided with such novelties as wall-fireplaces, wall-lighting fixtures, and massive imported crystal chandeliers. A Mughal-style fountain originally in the entrance hall was not included in the restoration, but the reflecting pool occupying a high terrace on the east was retained. The amir presided over *darbārs* from a window overlooking the pool (*The Life of Abdur Rahman II*, frontispiece) and died in the same room at midnight on 2 October 1901.

'Abd-al-Raḥmān's son, Amir Ḥabīb-Allāh, built lavish palaces largely in British colonial style, but the next garden-building surge occurred under his son, King Amān-Allāh (r. 1919-29). The garden landscaping at the center of Dār al-Amān (1923), a new city six miles south of Kabul, caused some western visitors to "gasp" (J. Fleming, *Asia* 29/4, p. 328). Amān-Allāh advocated tearing down garden walls and opened the first public garden, Bāğ-e 'Omūmī, at the site of Bābor's Ćār-bāğ along the Kabul river. It gradually gave way to buildings, but the landscaped complex of terraces forming Amān-Allāh's Bāğ-e 'Omūmī in the hill resort of Pağmān, 12 miles west of Kabul, continued to be popular until the current hostilities erupted in 1979. It was furnished with fountains, a cafe, a



band stand, a cinema/theater, and an amphitheater forming the core of an ambitious building program carefully regulated by the *Nezām-nāma-ye ta'mīrāt-e Paḡmān* (July, 1922). Article 4 of this building code required all structures to be fronted with “gardens of willows, *čēnārs*, and other flowering shrubs” so that the entire town might resemble a garden. The last Afghan monarch, Moḡammad Ṣahīr Shah (r. 1922-73) was an avid horticulturist and continually embellished the more formal public gardens at the Tapa (King’s garden), also in Paḡmān.

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