Encyclopædia Iranica

BAZAR IV. IN AFGHANISTAN
Article by **Erwin F. Grötzbach**

Published: December 15, 1989
Last Updated: April 18, 2013

BAZAR IV. IN AFGHANISTAN

BAZAR

iv. The Bāzārs in Afghanistan

In Afghanistan a *bāzār* is a collection of shops and workshops forming a topographic unit. As regards size and layout, however, there can be great differences. The name *bāzār* is given (1) to a relatively small group of shops in a country town or large village or in a suburb, (2) to the traditional business district of a city, (3) to a section, usually a single street or part of a street, of a city *bāzār* occupied by practitioners of a particular trade, e.g., *bāzār-e āhangarān* (blacksmiths' *bāzār*), *bāzār-e bāzzāzī* (drapery *bāzār*).

A *bāzār* does not normally contain living quarters. In some modernized *bāzār*s, however, the top floors of multi-story commercial buildings are used as residential apartments, and in some small *bāzār*s a shop may have an attached room in which the nonresident shopkeeper can spend the night.

The buildings comprised in the *bāzār*s fall into three main categories: retail shops and small workshops, both called *dokkān*; commercial buildings in courtyards, called *sarāy*; and markets, called *manday*.

The traditional *dokkān* is a small covered space, open to the street, in which the retailer sits amid his stock or the craftsman produces his wares. Some large *bāzār*s, e.g., at Kabul, Herat, Mazār-e Šarīf, and Qandahār, also contain modern shops equipped with display windows, doors, and counters. Shops

selling western-style clothes, household appliances, and electrical gear, and also pharmacies, are generally of this type. Only at Kabul, however, has commercial bipolarization (as defined by Wirth) taken place. There the modern shopping center in Šahr-e Now served westernized Afghans and foreigners, while the *bāzār* in the old town, which underwent only limited modernization, was frequented by the traditionally minded and poorer urban classes and also by rural customers (Hahn, 1964).

A *sarāy* is a complex of buildings set around a square or rectangular courtyard and accessible by a single passageway. In *bāzār*s in country towns a *sarāy* is still often used in part as an inn (*kārvānsarāy*), offering accommodation for visitors and their mounts and pack animals. The *sarāy*s in the big *bāzār*s are large-scale commercial establishments providing either a number of shops, workshops, and storerooms or, less frequently, office and warehouse space for wholesale merchants. In some cases the top floors are used as residential apartments. *Sarāy*s are often reserved for particular branches of business, e.g., at Kabul for carpets, imported textiles, secondhand clothes, and currency exchange. Frequently also a *sarāy* is shared by traders who have a particular ethnic affinity or regional origin (Wiebe, 1973). A new and widespread type is the *motor-sarāy* consisting of repair garages and automotive parts stores. *Sarāy*s are particularly numerous in the *bāzār*s of northern Afghanistan, perhaps as a result of the local importance of market days. In the late 1970s, 2.5-5 percent of all *bāzār* businesses (including handicrafts and services) in the north were housed in *sarāy*s, as against 1.5 percent or thereabouts at Kabul and Qandahār, 0.2-0.6 percent at Farāh, Gerešk, Ḡaznī, Gardīz, and Ḵōst, and nil in the new town of Laškargāh (Grötzbach, 1979, table 7).

The center of the *bāzār* in many towns was, until recently, a domed structure forming a sort of hall in which shops selling high-value goods were accommodated; if situated at the intersection of the *bāzār*'s four (or in some cases three) principal streets, as at Kabul, Herat, Qandahār, Ḡaznī, and Ḵānābād, it was called the *čahārsūq*. Another term, used at Tāšqorḡān and Sar-e Pol, was *tīm*. Most of the *čahārsūq*s and *tīm*s have been demolished in urban reconstruction schemes, but the old terms remain in use to denote the now unroofed *bāzār* centers. Only at Tāšqorḡān (Ḵolm) was the *tīm*, dating from 1264/1845, kept intact under a conservation order.

Another component of a *bāzār* is the market, which the Afghans call the *manday*. While the small *bāzār*s most often have only single markets for grain, fruit, and vegetables (as well as a cattle market outside the *bāzār* area), the

large *bāzār*s have special markets for particular commodities such as wheat, rice, timber and firewood, fruit, etc.

Many *bāzār*s contain small mosques which the shopkeepers and craftsmen and their customers frequent. The principal mosque (*masjed-e jāme'*) is usually located near the *bāzār* but seldom forms its central point. This is the case at Kabul, Herat, and Qandahār. At Mazār-e Šarīf, however, the *bāzār* grew around the mosque in which the remains of ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭāleb are believed to be buried.

In many Afghan *bāzār*s, even those of recent construction such as the one at Ṭālaqān built since 1960, a more or less clear spatial segregation of the shops and workshops engaged in particular trades can be seen. This may be due to municipal street-planning (*rāstabandī*), to action by the traders and craftsmen themselves through their guilds (*aṣnāf*) or to promptings from the landlords or rent collectors. The traditional *bāzār* centers are still occupied by shops which supply expensive goods, including traditional textiles, garments, calpacs, turban cloths, shoes, etc. Suppliers of modern requirements, such as electrical appliances and western-style clothes, pharmacists, and sellers of goods sought by tourists, such as traditional jewelry, antiques, leather goods, lambskin jackets, embroideries, and carpets, tend to group themselves close to the old *bāzār* centers, but the centers themselves are in many cases still occupied by sellers of traditional merchandise.

The handicraft businesses show a pattern of spatial distribution even more marked than that of the retail trades. Silversmiths and goldsmiths (both called *zargar*) have their workshops not far from the *bāzār* center, coppersmiths and tinsmiths farther away, blacksmiths in the outer fringe. Joiners, shoemakers, saddlers, dyers, and the like also congregate on the periphery, while tailors are to be found in central locations near the drapers. It must be added that there are great differences among the country's cities as regards the importance of their handicrafts and numbers of their craftsmen. Craft industries are of more than average importance in the *bāzār*s of the big regional centers like Qandahār, Herat, and Mazār-e Šarīf and of certain production centers like Tāšqorḡān, where superior metalworking, turnery, and shoemaking have been developed (Centlivres, 1972; Charpentier, 1972); Čarīkār where fine metal-work, particularly cutlery, and textiles are produced; and Ḡaznī, whose silversmiths and makers of lambskin vests and jackets (*pūstīṇča*) are reputed.

In the five or six decades up to 1979, Afghanistan's cities and *bāzār*s

underwent profound changes. Several crafts and trades declined, with resulting falls in the numbers of coppersmiths, tinsmiths, makers of old-style shoes, and sellers of traditional clothes, while other businesses prospered or began to take root, such as pharmacy, car and truck servicing, watch repair, and sale of plastic utensils, rubber-soled canvas shoes, and imported secondhand clothes. Furthermore, from the 1930s onward, state-directed urban reconstruction schemes wholly or partly changed the character of many *bāzār*s, as at Mazār-e Šarīf, Qondūz, Ḵānābād, Maymana, and Jalālābād, where the old roofed streets of small adobe buildings were demolished and replaced with large, sometimes multi-story concrete structures. In other towns, such as Ḡaznī, Āqča, Andḵūy, and Ṭālaqān, the old *bāzār*s were abandoned and entirely new ones built. Only in a small number of *bāzār*s do the old buildings and traditional features remain intact, e.g., at Tāšqorḡān (Ḵolm), Fayżābād, Rūstāq, and Čahārbāḡ near Jalālābād.

As regards opening times, Afghan *bāzār*s fall into two distinct categories: very large *bāzār*s open for business on all days of the week and others open on one or two days only. The market day tradition is particularly strong in northern Afghanistan, where the general practice is still to hold markets twice a week, usually on Mondays and Thursdays. In southern and eastern Afghanistan this practice is less widespread and, insofar as it is maintained, less important.

The above data relate to the period before the Soviet military intervention in 1979.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

P. Centlivres, *Un bazar d'Asie centrale. Forme et organisation du bazar de Tashqurghan (Afghanistan)*, Wiesbaden, 1972.

Idem, "Structure et évolution des bazars du Nord afghan," in E. Grötzbach, ed., *Aktuelle Probleme der Regionalentwicklung und Stadtgeographie Afghanistan*, Afghanische Studien 14, Meisenheim am Glan, 1976.

C.-J. Charpentier, *Bazar-e Tashqurghan: Ethnographical Studies in an Afghan*

Traditional Bazaar, Studia Ethnographica Upsaliensia 35, Uppsala, 1972.

E. Grötzbach, "Periodische Märkte in Afghanistan," *Erdkunde* 30, 1976, pp. 15-19.

Idem, *Städte and Basare in Afghanistan: Eine stadtgeographische Untersuchung*, Beihefte zum Tübinger Atlas des Vorderen Orients, Reihe B, no. 16, Wiesbaden, 1979.

H. Hahn, *Die Stadt Kabul (Afghanistan) und ihr Umland* I: *Gestaltwandel einer orientalischen Stadt*, Bonner Geographische Abhandlungen 34, Bonn, 1964.

D. Wiebe, "Struktur und Funktion eines Sarais in der Altstadt von Kabul," in R. Stewig and H.-G. Wagner, eds., *Kulturgeographische Untersuchungen im islamischen Orient*, Schriften des Geographischen Instituts der Universität Kiel 38, Kiel, 1973, pp. 213-40.

Idem, *Stadtstruktur and kulturgeographischer Wandel in Kandahar and Südafghanistan*, Kieler Geographische Schriften 48, Kiel, 1978.

E. Wirth, "Strukturwandlungen und Entwicklungstendenzen der orientalischen Stadt," *Erdkunde* 22, 1968, pp. 101-28.