

## **Mughal Gardens Around the Dal Lake – The Cultural Documents of Mughal Aesthetics**

Farooq Fayaz

With the widening of historic spectrum in the recent past, there came such subjects within the ambit of historical investigation, which until recently were considered unhistroic or were treated exclusively of literary nature. Aesthetics is one such subject which entered the realm of historical research very recently. It has been aptly said that it is in its gardens that the history of the country finds a true and living reflection. The gardens symbolize the aesthetic and cultural ideas of a nation more picturesquely and in more subtle manner than is ever possible in the case of its architectural monuments. The gardens of Kashmir mirror the outlook and taste of their builders in a truly elegant style.

Babur, the first Mughal ruler of India who carved out a first sovereign empire in Hindustan, found himself in a different geoclimatic setting, which to him did not offer any delightful and excited attraction. To set rest their emotional crises, and satiate their aesthetic urge, Mughal rulers set in motion the process of laying out beautiful gardens in Hindustan after Persian and Central Asian models. The first attempt in this regard was made by no less a person than Babur himself by laying out a pleasure garden at the banks of river Yamuna.

Unlike European concept of gardening, in India and other parts of the eastern world, traditions, country and religion have played a significant role in ordering and planting of the gardens. Not only the design, but each flower and tree had originally its symbolic meaning and method of arrangement to the life and tradition of their builders. It is not simple enough to understand and appreciate any dimension of eastern art, unless its underlying sym-



bolism is kept in sight. The Mughal and the Hindus who belonged to the line of eastern nations were interested in art and enjoyed beauty, not for its own sake but for the religious and traditional ideas which they represented.

India has a rich tradition of flowers and their cultivation. We come across scores of references in the old Buddhist literature and Sanskrit plays about the variety of ornamental flowers and plants. The sacred groves round the Buddhist shrines were, no doubt, among the earliest forms of gardening which in later times developed into well known charming landscape sites of China and Japan.

But it was from the north, Central Asia and Persia that the splendid garden traditions penetrated into India, taking root here under various Muslim rulers and developed into a native style which culminated into beautiful Kāshmir gardens built by various Mughal emperors and their governors.

The scenic background of Persian and Central Asian country side has fired the creative impulse of artists and poets and intense craving and appreciation of flowers became an integral element of their national psyche. Nowhere in the world as in eastern and western mountainous neighboring regions of Persia, a region offers so wonderful and contrasting shades of different climes – summer's heat and waters cold alternatively strip the country bare of colour, a brief spring, only a few weeks, into which is crowded all the flowering season of the year with a wealth of bloom hardly to be realized in none equable climes. In the backdrop of colourful climatic contrasts and variations, the spring and summer flowers grow, glance and decay in such a captivating manner,

The beauty in sight not only captivated the hearts of the Persian royalty but it fired the imagination of Persian poets as well. The portion of the Persian poetry which sings of its physical beauty constituted one of the most attractive literary treasures of Persian



poetry. This is evidenced by the poetic narration of celebrated Persian poets. The gulistans – rose gardens of Saadi, bloomed long ago. The rose garden is the actual title of the poet Saadi's most famous work and in his preface he writes:

"Mature consideration as to the arrangements of the book made me deem it expedient that this delicate garden, and this densely worded grove should, like paradise, be divided into eight parts in order that it may become the less likely to fatigue."

The concept of eight parts of terraces seems to have been derived from the Quranic explanation of *janat* or paradise. Hafiz is another melodious singer through whose songs the beautiful gardens of Shiraz are well known and Omar Khayyam of Khurasan has immortalized Persian poetry by giving metaphoric illustrations of Persian landscape beauty. These fragrant gardens of Gul-Bulbul and all the poetic imagery they transpired hold true to unending beauty spots of Kashmir. It is in fact the similarity of Kashmir with Persian scenic spots that led rulers of Mughal to surpass one another in identifying the beautiful places and inspired them to lay out beautiful summer spots in the form of majestic Mughal gardens.

Kashmir is defined as the treasure of greenery placed in the lap of three mountainous ranges within the lesser Himalayas. Its sparkling streams, transparent lakes and snow capped mountains beguile with their pristine charm. The principle character of the land is its multitude of water bodies in the form of lakes, springs, rivers and streams, contrasting mountain summits, lush green forests, fertile carved alluvial belts, which offered a lovely background to add to the aesthetic tastes of Mughal crown, aristocracy and nobility.

Yet another charm of Kashmir rests in the very presence of ever-changing horizons. Sheltered on all sides by ranges of snowy peaks, the landscape like a sea of white waves that reflects



the trinitis of the rising and setting sun. Forests, grassy meadows, mountains, lakes, wild flowers and hill birds offered a pleasurable background for satiating Mughal elite aesthetics.

In spring the fields of yellow mustard provide a golden blaze against the backdrop of blue skies and snow covered peaks. Trees that change colour with the passing of seasons add grace and elegance to Kashmir's landscape. The illustration of paradise as drawn in Quran refers to it as a garden with cool, delicate green pasture watered by running transparent streams. Since the Mughals, it must be remembered, came from the cooler climes of Farghana and Samarkand, and aesthetically the hot, dusty plains of India held no charm for them. By the time, Kashmir became the part of Mughal Empire, the formal plain of the Mughal garden had been perfected, and was merely transferred to Kashmir. What imbues Kashmir's Mughal gardens with distinction is first and foremost, the natural setting. Lakes and mountains make splendid backdrops, slopes facilitate the building of terraces and springs and mountainous streams provide the focal point of a garden in paradise, running water, trees permitted a slight departure from the plan of a Mughal garden elsewhere in India with a row of imposing chinars, there was no need to have a surrounding wall, cypress and fruit trees grew abundantly in the valley. Just as well, because in the context of the garden, the former symbolized immortality and the latter, the renewal of life. Flowers too, had their specific place in the organization of well designed garden. They could not be planted to grow wild unattended, without consideration of colour and season. Beds of flowers need to be arranged systematically to provide continuity of colours.

True to their aesthetic refinement, Mughals dotted spectacular spots all round the valley and particularly around the famous Dal Lake and set into motion the tradition of laying out the Mughal gardens. Guided by Persian aesthetic tastes, the Mughals



in Kashmir selected most beautiful spots around the Dal and laid couple of beautiful gardens like Nagin Bagh, Shalimar Bagh, Cheshmashahi, Habak and Bag-i-Sadiq etc. etc. The bewitching backdrop landscape beauty of Mughal gardens on the banks of Dal Lake is verified so beautifully in the following lines:

نہی چوں پای بر تخت سلیمان    بہ بنی کا شمر یکسر گلستان  
سوادش را چو چشم ز باغ بنی    ہزاراں باغ را باغ بنی  
کنار ڈل بسی باغات شاہی    بفر دوس برین گشتہ مہینی

Akbar was first Mughal emperor to have entered Kashmir. Bewitched by the valley of breezes, he laid out a garden in the eastern side of Kohi-Maran to give a picturesque look to walled city of Nager Nager. This is known by the name of Jaroga\_Shahi in the Mughal texts. There remain now only the ruins and the very ruins speak of Akbar's aesthetic sublime.

Jahangir and his art loving consort Nur Jahan laid out the world famous garden at Shalimar, Achabal and Verinag. The emperor immortalized his love for empress Nur Jahan in the Shalimar Garden. The site guarded at its back by the Kohi-sabaz facing frontally the transparent sheets of Dal Waters and projecting high amid silent waters the the spectacular scenic beauty of Sona Lank and Ropa Lank – the spot was chosen for its natural stream flow that could be channeled to form a waterfall. The entire Bagh is crafted in a terrace design, each serving separate purpose. The lower terraces being the public gardens, followed by the Emperor's own garden and finally the lady's enclosure. Marble pavilions and gushing fountain squares provide additional colour and beauty to the garden. One of the portion meant for public audience suggests that



Shalimar was not merely a pleasure garden meant for occasional evening stroll, but almost an open air palace. The garden is said to have laid by Emperor Jahangir in the year 1619.

“The Shalimar is a royal garden and it continues to show the charming old plan of a Mughal imperial summer residence. The present enclosure is five hundred and ninety yards long by about two hundred and sixty seven yards broad, divided as was usual in royal pleasure gardens into three separate parts. The outer garden, the central or Emeoperor’s garden and the last and the most beautiful of the three, the garden for the special use of the empress and her ladies”. The outer or the public garden, starting with the grand wide canal leading from the lake, terminates at the first large pavilion – the Diwan-i-Aam. The small black marble throne still stands over the waterfall in the centre of the canal which flow’s through the buildings into the tank below. The second garden is slightly broader, consisting of two green terraces with the Diwan-i-Khas in the centre. In the third pavilion the whole effect culminates with the beautiful black marble pavilion which still stands in the midst of its fountain spring; the green glitter of the water shining on the smooth, polished marble, the deep rich tone of which is repeated in the old cypress trees. Round the baradari the whole colour and perfume of the garden is concentrated, with the frozen snows of Mahadev for a background. How well the Mughals understood the principal that the garden, like every other work of art, should have a climax. In the words of Stuart:

*“A subtle air of lessure and repose, a romantic indefinable spell, pervades the royal Shalimar: this leafy garden of dim vistas, shallow terraces, smooth sheets of falling water, and wide canals with calm reflections broken only by the stepping stones across the stream”. The Persian perceives the dream project in the following verses.*



ز عشق شد چو رونق بخش کشمیر	شنیدم شاه روشن دل جهانگیر
بسوی شالمار استاد را ہش	چو شد دامن دریا جلوہ گاہش
تہراوار عمارات و گلستان	فضائی دید چوں روی عروسان
زدیوار عمارات تحل و گلزار	زنہر و آبشار و حوض و فوار
چنین باغی فلک ہرگز ندیدہ	بہشتی دو جہاں شد آفریدہ

*Oh, Shalimar! Oh, Shalimar!*

*A rhythmic sound in thy name sings*

*A dreamy cadence from a far, within those syllables which sing*

*To use of love and joyous days;*

*To cast their spell on all who gaze, upon this handiwork of love –*

*Reared in Jehangir's proudest days*

*Homage for **Nur-Mahal** to prove.*

Nur Jahan's brother Asaf Khan laid out, what is perhaps the most spectacular of the Mughal gardens in Kashmir- the Nishat Bagh (the garden of delight). While the Shalimar has three main divisions, the Nishat has only two. Though built on much the same plan as its neighbour, the Nishat differs in some important respects. It is also called the Garden of terraces, as it has as merely as twelve of them, rising one above the other, flanked by bright rows of seasonal flowers, relieved at intervals by magnificent Chinar trees affording shade to the lawns and also by slender cypresses standing like sentinels to guard, as it were, the purity of the water in the central water channel.

*"With lavishness of space, and of height beyond height to the overwhelming lines of the mountains, the Nishat rises in a series of twelve important terraces from the waters edge and is of a size and stateliness befitting the Mughal court at the height of its splendor.*



*The great terraces, as superb in their dignity, and in their proportions; one can not fail to admire the art with which they were designed to convey the impression of infinity – one gets mesmerized to watch beds of brilliant flowers – roses which not only droop under the weight of their own bloom but sustain the fame of Kashmir by their perfection and luxuriant growth. The hot sunlight, and the gently zephyrs of the garden as they come, bloom in ripples across the lake, combine to provide you for with Elysian climate, while the roaring fountains fill the garden with a mist, upon which there are graven all the colours of the prism. Beautiful at all times when autumn lights up the poplars in clear gold and the big chinars burn red against the dark blue rocky background; there are few more brilliant, more breathlessly entrancing sights than this first view of Asaf Khans garden of gladness.”*

Enchanted by gushing spring of sweet water enclosed by superb natural beauty setting in the lap of the Kuntilon, Shah Jahan laid out a beautiful bagh at Chasma Shahi. (The royal spring) situated high above the level of the lake has fewer terraces than Nishat and Shalimar gardens. It was in 1632, a pavilion and a little garden with flowers and waterfalls in terraces lifted high above other was laid out inconsonance with Mughal royal aesthetics and taste. Comparatively a small garden, it has terraces and the central aqueduct, tanks, waterfalls and fountains fed by the sparkling water gushing out of the spring from a lotus basin, with the same unfailing abundance as it must have in the great Mughul days.

Groomed in an exemplary Mughal royal fashion, Jahangir cultivated a sharp sense of creative aesthetics and was always seen in search of beauty and refinement so that this inborn artistic urge gets expression in a colourful pleasing manner that suits his royal stature and lovable nature. During his repeated royal visits to Kashmir along with his queen consort – the fashion setting lady Nur-Jahan, Jahangir virtually found himself in the lap of a paradise. A



lover of nature par-excellence Jahangir made a number of sojourns to Kashmir to fly “from power and pomp and the trophies of war” as the Irish poet Thomas More put it in “Lalla Rukh”. Jahangir admittedly loved Kashmir more than any other province of the Mughul empire.

In the valley love haunts, many of which he and his beautiful consort Nur Jahan beautified with Mughul gardens and other constructions, the royal lovers found abundant opportunities to indulge their passion for nature and to feast their eyes and ears on the incomparable sights and sounds that the terrestrial paradise alone could vouchsafe them.

Some of the most flored passages in Jahangir’s memories Tuzak-i-Jehangiri record the beauty of the valley in the following manner:

*“If one were to take to praise Kashmir, whole books will have to be written—Kashmir is a garden of eternal spring- a delightful flower bed.....Its pleasant meads and enchanting cascades are beyond all description. There are running streams and fountains beyond count. Wherever the eye reaches, there are verdure and running water.....the red rose, the violet and the narcissus grow of themselves, in the fields there are all kinds of flowers and all sorts of sweet scented herbs, more than can be calculated. In the soul enchanting spring, the hills and plains are filled with blossoms. The finest inflorescence is that of almond and the peach”.*

It is this unbroken chain of spectacular scenic sights, spread across the entire valley of Kashmir that ignited the aesthetic zeal of Mughul royalty which resulted in the laying out of most magnificent and heart captivating Mughul gardens. The gardens further symbolize the immortality of love episodes of Mughul royalty. These gardens possessed every kind of delight and gladness that was needed to add fragrance to Mughul crown – during the days at distance from royal court. No doubt, nature has been generous enough to endow Kashmir with its exemplary physical charm and



beauty but the way Mughul emperors and their nobility added to its beauty against the back drop of natural setting, turned it among the most preferred tourist destinations of the world. The Pari Mahal or the palace of the farries is built on the slopes of the hill to the southeast of Dal Lake. Here, Dara Shikoh and his sister Jahan Ara often engrossed themselves in philosophical experimentation. This seven terraced seminary-cum-library was ordered to be built for Akhoon Mulla Shah, by his pupil, the Mughul prince Dara Shikoh. He named it after his wife Pari Bagum. Originally, the garden was conceived in a terraced fashion and each terrace was provided either with a baradari or tank in the centre of the terrace with provision of underground water connectivity. The terraces having baradari were utilized by the members of the royal family.

Designed in six terrace style after Mughul fashion, the top most terrace of the garden was made by leveling the slope of the hill and erecting a pavilion. Here the water spring was channeled and the water was taken down to lower terrace. In the side walls steps were provided. In the second terrace on either side of the central arch, there were a series of ten arches. This architectural pattern of recessed arches in the wall provided a pleasing look to the building. In the third terrace, a pavilion is built at the centre. From the pavilion one could view the Dal for and wide. On the fourth terrace a water tank is built for maintaining the fountain. The fifth was conceived in a different manner. Here a tank with a pavilion was built. The upper half of the pavilion is provided with perforated square holes, probably meant for pigeons. Some believe that holes were meant for placing lamps for illuminating the terrace during certain occasions and others believe that it was the expression of Dara Shikoh's love for birds and meant for pigeons. The traces of the seventh terrace indicated that from here water was allowed to flow to Dal through forest. From Pari Mahal one can have a magnificent view of the whole city of Srinagar, with the Dal Lake, orchards



in the foreground.

Not to talk of those who visited the Valley and captured its beauty and charm in lense or on canvas, but the tales of its matchless beauty, grandour and elegance have fired the artistic imagination of those lively souls who have never visited the Valley at all. For away from Indian aesthetic theatre, the unmatched beauty of Mughul pleasure gardens and their surroundings set ablaze the poetic imagination of European Romantic writers as well.

Taking clues from Bernier's travel accounts, memories of Jahangir, *Abul Fazl's Ain Akbari* which abound in reference and details about Kashmir's beauty, Romantic poets like Shelly, Keats, Wordsworth, William Jones, Coleridge, and Thomas More made Kashmir beauty as a recurrent motif of their writings.

Thomas More, in addition to the travelogues of Tavernier, and Bernier, Gladwin's rendering of *Ain-i-Akbari* and Matrice's *History of Hindustan* has also studied *Tuzuk-i-Jehangir*, translated by James Anderson. This might be the reason why the Mughul glory charmed him so much that it became the keynote of the *Lalla Rukh* whose tales have the journeys to Kashmir as the connecting thread. Though Kashmir is present in the work from the outset the occasion for its description arises in the beginning of the last tale "the light of Haram."

"Who has not heard of the vale of cashmere,  
With its roses the brightness that earth ever gave,  
Its temples and grottos, and formation as dear  
As the love lighted ages that handover her wave!  
Oh! to see it at sun set,-when warm over the lake  
When the shrines through the foliage are gleaming half shown  
Or to see it by moonlight,- when melody shines;  
When the waterfalls gleam like a quick fair of stars;  
Or at morn, when the magic of the daylight awakes;



A new wonder each minute, as slowly it breaks”.

There seems to be a very close proximity between Bernier’s beauty account of Kashmir and Shelly’s poetic explanation in his literary work entitled ‘Alastor’. Here Kashmir seems to have sunk so deep into his psyche as to have become indiligestable part of it. The poem relates the sad tale of an idealistic young poet who wants to know the secrets of the universe and undertakes his journey through the regions of time and space but his thirst remains unquenched. Classic learning as well as the sensual charms of an Arab maiden leave him unsatisfied until he arrives in Kashmir.

In Coleridge we find reverberations of Bernier’s account of Kashmir beauty combined with its awe inspiring mystery.

*“Returning from Sendebrary I turned a little aside from the road to go and lie at Achiavel which is an house of pleasure of the ancient kings of Kashmir, and at present of the great Mongol. That which most adorns it is a fountain – it breaks out of the earth, as if by some violence.....21”*

The most beautiful of these gardens is Chalimar (Shalimar). The entrance from the lake is through a spacious canal borded with green turf. Apart from the gardens laid out around the glassy Dal banks, Jahangir and his consort followed by a roll of Mughul aristocracy showed equal interest in other beauty sports, situated in distant quarters of rural Kashmir.

Nur Jehan busied herself with planning a delightful garden at Achabal, the theme of which was water. Shaded by giant chinars, and adorned with a marble pavilion, the garden has distinctly the feminine quality.

However, it was Verinag, with yet another spring that captured the fancy of royal couple. The spring held sacred for centuries, culminates into a pool of crystal clear water. Towering around it are hills thickly covered with fine forests. The royal couple enclosed the spring with an octagonal reservoir made of brick and



lime composition.

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