

Gardens, landscape of Muslim era

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By Rabia Shahid

As most gardens and landscapes are usually associated with major buildings, the study of them is intricately bound up with the history of architecture. Most of the buildings surviving from pre-Islamic times are temples because till a fairly late period temples were generally the only buildings built of stone. The remains of some palaces exist, particularly their stone foundations.

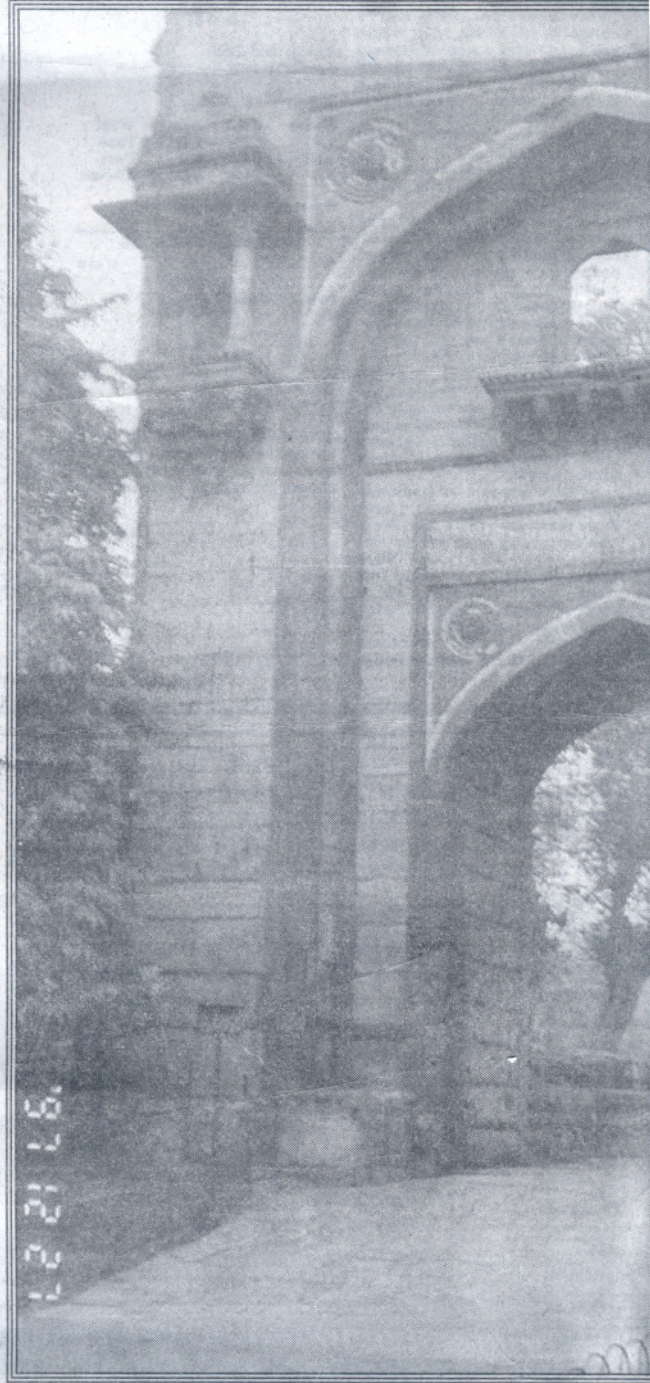
The basis for the construction of a temple is a mandala. The mandala and the temple are representations of the world or the cosmos. A classic view of the world has Mount Meru at its centre, with the mounting standing in the island of Jambudvīpa, itself set within an ocean. Meru or Mount Kailasha is represented by the temple Shikara itself, Jambudvīpa by the temple and its base or the compound, and the ocean by a tank. The basic plan of a temple is a square or rectangle, though this can sometimes be reduced to a linear axis. Where a temple is found within an enclosed space, this is in most cases a rectangular space aligned with the temple. In many cases water is found, often as a tank within the temple compound. The alignment of the temple with the compass directions emphasises its basis in the world. The rectangular layout of the land around a temple is still the rule.

Unfortunately there are no longer traces of the gardens of the Sultanate period. Some pre-Mughal monuments, which have survived, contain artificial arrangement of water chiefly in the palatial apartments. During the Sultanate period Feroz Shah is known for his taste for buildings. He is said to have built 100

gardens, as of other geometrical gardens in the Islamic tradition, may be traced back to forms evolved for the careful husbanding of water resources and the productive use of land, embodied in the cultural landscape of ancient Persia. Enclosed baghs or orchards and other horticultural plots were irrigated by narrow runnels flowing from one to the other, with water brought with great difficulty and extraordinary engineering skill, from the mountains to the dry plain, by underground and surface canals.

Though these formal or paradise gardens are commonly associated with Islamic symbolism, they are also referred to as Islamic gardens, the origin of this distinctive form is acknowledged by scholars to lie in a time even more remote. In other earlier cultural contexts, it is not improbable that their symbolic meaning was quite different to the one attributed during the centuries of Muslim dominance (10th to 17th century), when this style of landscape design was most widespread. To quote Sylvia Crow, an authority on Mughal gardens: "...while Persian tradition has been one of the main forces in the evolution of the paradise garden, its origins are far older than the Persian Empire. It is indeed described in the Book of Genesis: And a river went out of Eden to water the garden and from thence it was parted and became into four heads."

The concepts of appropriate Islamic architecture and landscape are not rigid and are, therefore, adaptive to pre-existing concepts and forms of architecture. As a result, the Islamic garden, also called the oasis or paradise garden, is an ensemble of Islamic ideals and local traditions and varies according to the historical and geographical context in which



Gateway to the garden...

ings. He is said to have built 100 gardens around the city of Delhi. Each garden is found. Most of the gardens of the various Is-

Sheila Hay Wood comments in her book Gardens of Mughal India, "The Muslims by contrast brought with them a culture rooted in the desert and oasis. It was compounded from abstract principles of order, mathematics and law, above all from a profound belief in the unity of God. Their designs were geometric, relying on calculated division and subdivisions, and upon enclosures from a hostile environment. In decoration, flowers and calligraphy were woven into abstract patterns while colours were clear and brilliant. Human and animal figures were unacceptable on religious buildings and rare upon others. The meeting of these two fundamentally different conceptions of life and art resulted in a fusion of Indo-Islamic themes from which the Mughals in turn enriched their own designs."

Sultanate dynasty crumbled in 1526 and Mughals conquered the subcontinent. However, in terms of gardens a much more important date to remember is 1526 when the Mughal emperors of Turkish descent arrived and set up a dynasty. Here as-

lamicised cultures are traditionally lumped together under the title "Islamic gardens."

Although most of the Persian-Islamic garden elements seem to have existed prior to the Islamic Empire, the Muslims

Gateway to Humayun's Tomb.

did contribute to it, mostly in the form of garden metaphors. One such contribution is the idea of the garden as Paradise. The description of Paradise in the Quran served as the basis for design of garden all over the Muslim world. The most famous description of paradise is found in Surat-ar-Rehman. Paradise, or gardens of heaven, are often depicted in Quranic verses in which it is stated that the gardens of Paradise have fountains of running water, two kinds of every fruit, and couches from which the believers can rest and view this all from. This sort of description of Paradise comes up several times in the Quran so it seems only logical that Muslims, seeing that these elements exist in some form in Persian gardens, would incorporate them into the new Islamic gardens that purposefully represent their version of Paradise. In addition to this, concept of the garden is also meant to be an oasis. The Arab-Muslims that conquered Persia were accustomed to a harsh desert life and very little water. The garden was meant as an escape from these realities of the outside world in addition to a protection from them. This meant that Islamic gardens were often very secluded and private and were contained within high walls or an actual building, courtyards.

The first type of garden, the

one contained within walls in Persia is referred to as chahar bagh. Chahar bagh for four gardens because of its division of the garden into four quarters often done by the intersection of four avenues. An example of this type is Hasht Behisht (eight paradises) of Isfahan built during the Safavid period.

The Mughal gardens derive their inspiration from the gardens of Persia. However, the Islamic ideals behind these gardens clashed with the Hindu taste for art. John Brookes, in his book "Gardens of Paradise" states the differences between these ideologies saying: "Islamic art was the very antithesis of Hindu art: for Hindu adornment was individualistic, irregular and symbiotic, while Islamic decoration was mathematical, continuous and abstract."

The first known walled tomb garden in India is Sikander Lodhi's tomb in Delhi, predating the Mughal tomb gardens. The chahar bagh as seen in India is a square or rectangular enclosure, quartered by water channels that are said to represent the four rivers flowing out of Eden. Examples of these include the principal Mughal tombs in Sikandra, Taj Mahal, Humayun's tomb and Jehangir's tomb.

Two more examples are the Chashma Shahi and the Anguri bagh. The Chashma Shahi or

scapes

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Current research lays emphasis on the close link between Mughal gardens and agriculture, that the gardens though usually interpreted in aesthetic terms as symbolic of paradise, had their basis a vitally significant productive dimension.

The thematic connections within the broad range of gardens categorised as "Islamic" are three-fold: the presence of flowing water as an absolute necessity, the strategic siting of the garden at a place with convenient access to a water source and thus already geographically identifiable.

The use of a grid — plotted internal spaces for many functions — for ceremony, recreation and sensory stimulation as well as horticultural production.

At the heart of the design is the idea that the bagh should be alive with the continuous flow of water, whose primary purpose is to irrigate the garden and maintain its health. The garden contains a wide array of water-related elements and structures to provide a considerable aesthetic dimension to this ordinary task, by enhancing and modulating in many subtle ways the movement, appearance and sound of water. Familiar examples include, for instance, falls negotiating large differences in level, from one terrace to the next in thick sheets, their sound recalling the soothing rumble of waterfalls in nature. Or, in another interesting technique, inclined stone cascades engraved with patterns to create a white sheet of foaming water (the chadar), especially effective when viewed by moonlight. Gravity-fed fountain jets, integrated into the carefully engineered system of channels and ponds complete the picture. In the best examples, the entire ensemble is imbued with a delicacy of concept and elegantly precise execution,



Royal Spring is located on the mountainside of Lake Dal had a pavilion at the top of the garden in which the water first emerged. From there it fell to other terraced parts of the garden until it arrived at a pool at the bottom. Anguri Bagh looks similar to a quartered garden. In the centre of intersecting pathways is the marble central tank and in each quarter were at one time brightly colored flowers. The central tank is linked to another tank in front of the Khas Mahal building by the use of marble cascading, again showing an acknowledgement of the central axis used in many of the Mughal gardens of Kashmir.

Shah Jehan's most famous building is the Taj Mahal in Agra. According to MC Joshi in Taj Mahal "The Taj marks the culmination of Mughal architecture and expresses a synthesis of various structural traditions." These traditions include Persian and Central Asian as well as Pre-Mughal Indian architecture, although one can even find European motifs in details.

The essential theme common to all these gardens is the balancing and combination of certain dualities within the same space — for instance, utility and ornamentation, productive and aesthetic values, a rigid framework overlaid with unrestrained organic growth, enclosure and prospect, movement and stillness.

and elegantly precise execution whose overall effect when everything was "functioning" could only be imagined as poetic.

These gardens today are without many of the features which imparted a living vibrancy and character; on looking at them now one has to imagine the presence of these missing elements to appreciate their true genius. The dense, freely flowering orchards have gone and the water systems are defunct. Landscape within the garden enclosure is reduced to a desolate pastiche of the Victorian gardenesque public park — bald water-logged grass lawns, hedges, ragged or otherwise and flowerbeds disposed here and there at the discretion of the head-mali. Everything is incongruous and make-shift, without dignity or reference to the artistic heritage and historical context.

The urgent need to conserve and perhaps revitalise the spatial and heritage resource that these gardens represent is now being recognised, though the effort on the ground is piecemeal and limited to one or two prominent sites.

From being oases in a largely hostile landscape, they have become precincts within the city fabric, always in danger of encroachment.

From being scenes of ceremony and the indulgence of royal pleasures, they today fulfill a limited role as tourist attractions and public space.