

THE MUGHAL GARDENS OF KASHMIR VALLEY

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ABSTRACT:

The Mughal Gardens which are so frequently encountered around Srinagar and throughout the Valley represent an abiding contribution of the culture of Iran and Central Asia to Kashmir. They are the creation of the Mughal Emperors, who originally came from Central Asia, and it was Babar, the first of them, who introduced India to the delights of the enclosed garden planted out with flowers and shrubs and trees arranged in symmetrical plots and kept green with cascades and fountains. Kashmir, however, owes its superb gardens, the best examples in India, principally to Jahangir and his queen, Nur Jahan, and to his son, Shah Jahan, the fifth Emperor. The majestic and beautiful gardens of Nasim Bagh, Shalimar, Nishat, Cheshmai Shahi, Achabal etc. were built during the period of the great Mughals. Large number of tourists started visiting these gardens in the 2nd half of the nineteenth century and thereby becoming the major tourism products of Kashmir valley.

Keywords: - Mughal gardens, Central Asia, Jahangir, Shalimar, Nishat, Tourism products etc.

INTRODUCTION:

While commenting on the beauty of Kashmir Jahangir, the Mughal Emperor said, “Kashmir is a garden of eternal spring or an iron fort to a palace of kings- a delightful bed and a heart expanding heritage for dervishes. 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”. He summed up his description with these words, “If one were to take to praise Kashmir whole books would have to be written^b”. Bernier writing in 1665, says, “In truth, the kingdom surpasses in beauty all that my warmest imagination had anticipated”. He calls the valley of Kashmir the Paradise of Indies. As per German Baron, Charles Hugel, the most wonderful objects in the world, are the Taj Mahal and Kashmir.

Similarly Thomas Moore in his “Lalla Rookh” in the middle of the 19th century provoked the curiosity of many travelers about Kashmir.

Kashmir under Mughals witnessed the improvements of tourist infrastructure and sites, particularly the Gardens. They evinced keen interest in the scenic beauty and grandeur of natural beauties. Impressed by its immense intrinsic potential, they laid out many gardens and thus added to the beauty of Kashmir. Under the Emperor Akbar, Kashmir was conquered and became a part of the Mughal Empire, being classed as a Sarkar or division of the province of Kabul. Akbar’s historian Abul Fazl describes Kashmir as an enchanting country, fit to be called a garden of perpetual spring. Jahangir (1606- 1628), Akbar’s son and successor, in this connection deserves a special mention. He visited the valley six times, twice as Prince Salim, and four times as Emperor. We learn from Bernier that Jahangir became as enamored of the Vale of Kashmir as to make it “The place of his favorite abode, and he often declared that he would rather be deprived of every province of his mighty empire than loose Kachemire”ⁱⁱ. His visits to the valley brought an era of splendor and prosperity of Srinagar. He laid out numerous gardens and built up many health resorts, wherever he found a hill slopping or a grove of Chinars. He systematically got planted Chinar trees at different points so as to provide shelter and shade to the visitors from the heat of the sun. Shalimar, verinag and Nishat gardens, with their gushing water, were dressed upon by him. Shah Jahan, the successor of Jahangir laid out Cheshmai Shahi garden and added to the beauty of Shalimar by decorating it with fountains, cascades and also made an extension to it. Nurjahan, Dara Shikoh and Jahan Ara also contributed a lot in the beautification of Kashmir valley. The owners, the nobles of the court, were certain to follow the example of their master in making full use of the facilities that Kashmir so readily offers for pleasure seeking and enjoymentⁱⁱⁱ. They laid out innumerable gardens in Srinagar and its vicinity. It is said there were about 700 gardens in Srinagar alone on the eve of the establishment of the Afghan rule in 1753. The idea of picnics and excursions by the citizens of Srinagar also originated in the city during the Mughal times^{iv}.

THE MUGHALS AND THEIR GARDENS:

Flowers and plants have been admired and cultivated in India from the very early times. There are many references to gardens in the old Buddhist literature and the Sanskrit plays. The sacred groves round the Buddhist shrines were probably among the earliest forms of gardening. But it was from the north, from Central Asia and Iran, says Mrs. Stuart, that the splendid garden traditions, as also the rose (Gulab) were introduced into India, and encouraged under the various Muslim rulers, and later developed into a native style^v. The culmination of these measures led to the construction of the beautiful Gardens of Kashmir by Jahangir, Nurjahan, Shahjahan, Asif Khan and Dara Shikoh^{vi}. The Mughal gardens of Kashmir according to Mrs. Stuart are copied from the earliest

gardens of Turkistan and Iran. These gardens are generally square or rectangular in shape, their area being divided into a series of smaller square parterres. The gardens are enclosed by a high wall in which there is one central entrance and several subordinate gates at different places. The purpose of the wall was to ensure privacy, and its great height and solid nature with no openings, served this purpose admirably. The members of the Zenana could disport themselves in the open in the uppermost terrace usually reserved for them, yet be perfectly free from outside observation^{vii}. The water runs in brick edged canal down the whole length, falling from level to level in smooth cascade. In these gardens there are shady walks, pergolas of vines and flowers, open squares of turf shaded by large trees planted at the corners or having one central Chenar surrounded by a raised platform of masonry or grass which forms a free space for feasts, picnics and excursions^{viii}.

Shalimar Bagh (The Abode Of Love):- According to a legend, Pravarsena (ii), the founder of the city of Srinagar, had built a villa on the edge of the Dal lake in its north-eastern corner, calling it Shalimar which in Sanskrit means ‘the abode of love’. The king used to go often to visit a saint, named Sukarma-swami, living near Harwan, and took rest in this villa on his way to, and from that place. In course of time this villa vanished and then the village that had sprung up in its neighborhood was called Shalimar after the name of villa^{ix}. Mughal emperor Jahangir accordingly laid out a garden on this same old site in 1620 A.D and called it Farah Bakhsh or delightful^x. It is the same garden where Jahangir often held his summer court^{xi}.

In 1630 A.D Zafar khan, a Mughal governor of Kashmir, made an extension to this garden towards its north by order of Shah Jahan and the new portion was called Faiz bakhsh or bountiful^{xii}. But strangely enough Farah Bakhsh and Faiz Bakhsh lost their own names and assumed the name of locality of Shalimar of much older construction. Francois Bernier, who visited Kashmir during the reign of Aurangzeb says, “The most beautiful of all these gardens is one belonging to the king, called Chahlimar. The entrance from the lake is through a spacious canal bordered with green turf and running between two rows of poplars. Its length is about 500 paces, and it leads to a large summer house placed in the middle of the garden. A second canal, still finer than the first one, conducts to another summer house at the end of the garden. The canal is paved with large blocks of stone and its sloping sides are covered with the same. In the middle is a long row of fountains, fifteen paces apart; besides which there are here and there large circular basins or reservoirs out of which arise other fountains, formed into a variety of shapes and figures.^{xiii}”

Shalimar Bagh lies 18 kms to the east of Srinagar. The garden, built in four terraces with the traditional water channel running down the middle, measures 540 meters by 183 meters. On the grass grown terraces huge Chinar trees cast their cool shadows. Their serrated leaves take on a golden hue during the autumn, as they carpet the

earth down below. As per Baron Charles Hugel, the garden was a favorite resort of the Sikh ruler, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, who frequently passed a day or two in this place^{xiv}. Sir Francis Younghusband in his Kashmir wrote, “It would be hard to find a more beautiful garden than the Shalimar on an autumn evening, when the great avenue of Chenar trees is tinged with gold and russet, when the lofty mountains which rise behind it take on every shade of blue and purple, and the long lines of fountains running through the avenue sparkle in the sunshine”^{xv}. The garden also became famous among Europeans through Thomas Moore, who in his oriental romance Lalla Rookh used this garden as his principal scene^{xvi}. He places the scene of his romantic picture of the quarrel between Jahangir and Nurjahan and their reconciliation at the feast of roses in this garden.

Nishat Bagh (The Pleasure Garden):- It is situated at a distance of eleven kms to the east of Srinagar, on the bank of Dal Lake with Zabarwan at the back. The garden was designed in 1633 by Asif Khan, emperor Jahangir’s brother in law, and follow the same pattern as the Shalimar garden with a polished stone channel running down the centre and a series of terraces. It is the largest of the Mughal gardens, measuring 548 meters by 338 meters, and often the most crowded. The garden comprised nine terraces and the remains of some Mughal period buildings including a double storey pavilion enclosed on two sides by latticed windows^{xvii}. The lowest terrace, which touched the waters of the Dal Lake, has been cut off by the modern circular road, as it has similarly done so in the Shalimar garden. The most gaudily painted barahdari or pavilion on the third terrace was introduced by Wazir Pannu, Governor of Kashmir, in the reign of Maharaja Ranbir Singh, who took special interest to restore the principal Mughal gardens to their original pristine glory. Nishat is the best preserved of all the gardens in Kashmir, and its immense Chenars and Tulips, are its noteworthy features. The poet has truly said^{xviii}:

صُبْحِ دَرِ بَاغِ نَشَاطِ وَ شَامِ دَرِ بَاغِ نَسِيمِ
شَالِه مَارِ وَ لَالِه زَارِ وَ سِيرِ كَشْمِيرِ اسْتِ وَ بَسِ

Morning at the Nashat Bagh and evening at the Nasim Bagh, Shalimar, And flower gardens these are the places of excursion in Kashmir and none else.

Chashma Shahi (Royal Spring):- The Chashma Shahi garden 9 kms from Srinagar is the smallest of all the Mughal gardens in Kashmir, measuring just 108 meters by 38 meters. The Chashma Shahi garden shows that a Mughal garden need not necessarily be large to be attractive. This garden is perched daintily on a hill overlooking the lotus fields of the Dal Lake. Ali Mardan Khan, the Mughal governor of Kashmir laid it in 1632, as advised by Shah Jahan the Mughal Emperor^{xix}.

Shah Jahan planned it parallel to the Nishat though on a small scale. The garden includes three terraces round about the spring of ice-cold water, famous for its medicinal properties. The water from the spring supplies the fountains then goes through the floor of the pavilion and falls to the lower terrace.

Naseem Bagh (The Garden Of Breezes Or Bliss):- About half a mile from Hazratbal mosque, is the Nasim bagh, laid out by Emperor Akbar, and improved and enlarged by Ali Mardan Khan during the reign of Shahjahan^{xx}. It was a perfect camping site during Dogra period and large numbers of Europeans were seen camping there in an autumn season. Naseem was not a garden in the strict sense, as there were no flowers, no orchards, no fountains and no water channels. It was a vast grassy land dotted with huge Chenar trees. In the autumn the Naseem bagh was more beautiful, for then the Chenars were in all the richness of their autumn foliage.^{xxi}

Pari Mahal (Fairies Palace):- An old ruined garden palace, standing grandly on a spur of the Zabarwan mountain on the southern side of the Dal lake was a residential school of Astrology and Sufism built by Mughal Prince Dara Shikoh at the instance of his tutor, Akhund Mulla Muhammad Shah Badakhshani. It is about a mile from the margin of the lake and terraced up the hill side. Pari Mahal differed from other Kashmir gardens in that it did not possess any cascade, though it seems probable that there were fountains in the tanks. The garden consisted of six terraces with a total length of about 400 feet^{xxii}.

Achhabal: - The ancient name of Achhabal was Aksavala after the legendary king Aksha (486-426 B.C)^{xxiii}. It was not only an ancient tirtha rooted in the earliest known belief of Kashmir- Naga cult, but it was also a delightful place of the Kings/Emperors who had planted Chenars, poplars and flowers in it. Its fame as a place of pleasure had reached far and wide and indeed attracted both Mughal Emperors Akbar and Jahangir to visit the place^{xxiv}. However it was Nur- Jahan who redesigned this ancient pleasure garden and named it Begamabad. It was also called as Sahibabad. However, like Shalimar, the garden became popular by the ancient place name of Achval^{xxv}.

This small garden is located at the south-eastern end of the Kashmir valley in the town of Achhabal of district Anantnag. The garden was 467 feet long and 45 feet broad and was surrounded by a stone wall and some very large Chenars and a 'Hamam' (Turkish bath). The place was noted for its spring, whose water flowed through the garden which was traversed by three canals. The garden had many cascades and fountains which enhanced the beauty of the garden. Bernier writing in 1665 says, "The beauty of this place is a fountain, whose waters disperse themselves into a hundred canals round the house, which is by no means unsightly and throughout the gardens.

The spring gushes out of the earth with violence, as if it issued from the bottom of some well, and the water is so abundant that it might rather be called a river than a fountain. It is excellent water and cold as ice. The garden is very handsome, laid out in regular walks, and full of fruit trees- apple, pear, plum, apricot and cherry.^{xxvi}

Dara Shikoh Garden: - The garden at Bijbehara in district Anantnag, on the banks of river Jhelum was the creation of Dara Shikoh. His design was unlike all the other Mughal gardens of Kashmir for he built it on opposite banks of the river so that the terraces faced each other across the water, and a stone bridge connected the two halves. Some of the great Chenar trees he planted are still there to bear witness to this most original garden^{xxvii}.

Verinag: - Close to the foot of the Pir Panjal range lays Verinag, a village famous for its spring. The spring is situated at the bottom of hill covered by pine trees, evergreen plants and Chenar which stand along the magnificent size. With the Mughal emperors, verinag attained its zenith of popularity. It was particularly associated with Jahangir who visited it several times. He seems to have been considerably impressed, as he refers to verinag in his memoirs on several occasions^{xxviii}. He built an octagonal stone basin at the spring in 1612 A.D. A fine garden, with fountains and a cascade in front of the spring was laid by Shah- Jahan in about 1619 A.D^{xxix}.

To sum up it can be said that the tourism products of the valley, particularly the gardens were by and large constructed during the Mughal period. These gardens later on became the major pull factors for the valley so far as tourism industry of Kashmir is concerned.

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The author has completed his **M. Phil** and **Ph. D degrees** from the Department of history, university of Kashmir, Srinagar. Moreover the author has also qualified **JRF NET** and **SET** conducted by university Grants Commission. Presently he is working as an Assistant Professor on Academic arrangement in a college.

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