

IN QUEST OF NĀṢIR BĀGH: A LOST GARDEN OF THE LATE MUGHUL PERIOD IN PESHĀWAR

Ibrahim Shah & Shah Nazar Khan

Unlike the Mughul monuments at Āgra, Delhī and Lāhore, those at Peshāwar have gathered around them a host of problems. This may be due to two factors: firstly, most of the Peshāwar monuments have yielded meagre epigraphic evidence, and secondly, the contemporary annalists have overlooked the constructional projects at Peshāwar, the seat of deputy governor and winter headquarters of the 'Ṣūbah-e Kābul wa Peshāwar' (Kanbuh, Persian text, I:244). This phenomenon has grievously complicated the problems: such as that of attribution, exact location, date of laying foundation stone, date of completion and other relevant historical information regarding these monuments. Yet another factor that may equally be held responsible for the *lacuna* in the archaeo-historical profile of the Peshāwar valley is the disfiguring of the cultural heritage in the length and breadth of the valley by the Sikhs. Thus the untiring efforts of the researchers and their extensive and intensive archaeological investigations in the area have brought to light solution to some problems related to these monuments, for instance, the mosques of Mahābat Khān, Ganj 'Alī Khān, Qāsim Alī Khān, Dilāwar Khān, the tombs of Shaikh Sulṭān Bābā, Nawāb Sa'īd Khān, Qutb ad-Dīn, etc. Almost the same situation is confronted in the case of the Mughul gardens in and around the Peshāwar city. Very few are referred to in the original works of the contemporary chroniclers such as the Bāgh-i Peshāwar (Kanbuh, Persian text, III: 115), Bāgh-i Zafar Khān (*Ibid.* 391; for Zafar Khān, see Rām II:18-9; Bhakkari II:290-1; while Shāh 1993:150 states that he remained governor of this province from 1624 to 1628 in the reign of Jahāngīr; see Jahangir II:179-180, 311; Khan, Urdu trans. I:731-3), Wazīr Bāgh (Dani 178), Bāgh-i Sardār Khān (Ali *et al.*: 2002) and the famous Shālīmar garden (Elphinstone 1992: 97-8; Cf. Dani 20; Shah 2004).

The beautiful and lush green gardens of Peshāwar are generously admired in the accounts of the medieval and the British periods. If one takes into consideration Dr. Konow's interpretation "Puṣpa" (means flower) for the term "Poṣa" of the Ārā inscription, then it would supply the meaning of Peshāwar as "the city of flowers", a name which it justifiably deserves (Dani 28, 226, 3-5, 19-21; Cf. *Bābar Nāma*, Eng.trans. II, 393). In that case it will certainly push the antiquity of this phrasal term connected with Peshāwar back to the 2nd–3rd centuries AD. Attempt is made in this work to locate one of the lost gardens of Peshāwar in the northwest outskirts of the old fortified city that is traditionally attributed to Nāṣir Khān, governor of this province.

At the bus stop of the Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education, a small metalled road branches off northwards alongside the Warsak Canal leading to Police Colony, Khugyāni Afghān Refugees Camp and other villages of little fame located nearby. This road is generally called "Nāṣir Bāgh Road". It seems that the road must have once led to a pleasure garden associated with a certain Nāṣir Khān. Investigation into the matter brought to light that none of the modern gardens or orchards in the vicinity is known by this name. Nevertheless one may recall to mind the famous

square, located at a short distance southeast of the Qissa Khwānī Bāzār, which is called "Chauk Nāṣir Khān" (Raverty 19). The senior citizens of Peshawar hold that the said square is named after a certain "Hākīm" (or governor) of Peshāwar. His affection for the people of and his long association with this province is reflected in the fact that his grave also lies behind this Chauk in a small narrow corner covered by tall buildings (Iqbal 246-7). Surrounded by lofty buildings on the three sides, the grave is open to sky. Both the grave and the low *pardah* wall on the east side are constructed with burnt bricks of modern tradition set in cement mortar. A steel gate provides access to the grave enclosure. Like the burial of Mahābat Khān Mirzā Luhrāsp (lying in the Hazārkhwānī graveyard), the builder of the famous Mahābat Khān mosque in Peshawar (Shah 1995), most of the people even in the same locality are unaware of this grandiose personality lies buried herein.

While describing the village Sufaid Sang, located about 12 kilometre (7 *kos* in his account) northwest of Peshāwar city, Gopāl Dās (1874:163-4) mentions the name 'Mughul Bāgh' where he noticed ruins of a stone building. The present author undertook a brief and hasty survey of the area to check the veracity of the statement of Gopāl Dās¹. Local enquiries greatly helped in directing us to the solution of the problem. Fortunately, in close proximity eastwards is the village of "Burj Nāṣir Khān" where was constructed a *kachcha* watch tower or security post (locally called *burj*) in the British times (Dās *Ibid.*). Such posts are found in considerable number in the length and breadth of the district with the only difference of building material and slight change in the mode of construction. Local people further pointed to a ruined mosque lying at a short distance northwards. The author reached the spot and found that it was situated in the outskirts of the village Sufaid Sang. We noticed there the ruins of a small unpretentious mosque once built of locally available cobbles in addition to burnt bricks that were used only in the *mihrāb* vault and other small niches both in the prayer hall and the verandah. The precise date of this structure is not known. But it can be easily worked out on the basis of the use of British period bricks. Thus the mosque could only have been built not earlier than the 19th century AD.

Around the mosque were found low-lying heaps of the debris of mud houses. Both the remains of the mosque and houses are now lying in a wilderness of marshy land near the foot of the Warsak hills. To the local people this area that includes the locality of Gul-i Bāgh is known as Mughul Bāgh. These names provide us with significant clues to the mystery of locating the lost garden. If the structure just mentioned is the same as referred to by Gopāl Dās and was raised in the 19th century it is hardly consistent with the evidence of the above names. A Mughul Bāgh must be built in the Mughul period. It is obvious therefore that the mosque was built in the 19th century at the site of much earlier garden and that in the 19th century the garden was in ruins. The coincidence of "Nāṣir Bāgh Road", Nāṣir Khān Chauk, the village "Burj Nāṣir Khān" and the "Mughul Bāgh" and their historical and archaeological analysis lead one to suggest that Nāṣir Khān was the person who may be credited with the laying out of a garden in the suburbs of Peshāwar like his predecessors who also immortalised themselves either by erecting beautiful mosques and mausolea or by laying out gardens in and around Peshāwar.

The spot, selected by Nāṣir Khān for the garden, was not an unfrequented and desolate one, but lay on the medieval road running between Peshāwar and Kābul via the Khaibar Pass (Dani 188; Das 163-4). The point where it entered Peshāwar is known as *Qāfilah* Road in the western quarter

of the Defence Officers Colony to the north of Tahkāl (Imran 224). Exactly the same road in the same direction was functional in the medieval times, which might have been running past the present village of Tahkāl. The literary sources of the British period also affirm the trade route beyond the present Tahkāl approaching the peripheral area of Sufaid Saṅg where it took turn for approach to the foot of the Khaibar hills. The archaeological importance of Tahkāl is not hidden from the eyes of archaeologists.

The garden probably contained some building for the sojourn of the royal officers and the elite. The immediate cause of the abandonment and deterioration of the garden may be sought in the Sikh vandalism. Destruction inflicted on the cultural heritage of the valley is unanimously ascribed to the cruel hands of the Sikhs. Even most of the villages were burnt completely. A number of villages in the vicinity of Sufaid Saṅg, the nucleus area under review, Gopāl Dās (166 ff) records, were put to the fire on a number of occasions under the orders of General Avitabile, the Sikh governor of Peshāwar (Cf. Dani 14). Whatever was left from this havoc was brought to an ultimate end by the water action causing salinity and waterlogging thus turning most of the area into a marshy land.

Now who actually this Nāṣir Khān was still remains to be discussed in some details. The contemporary sources preserve mention of Nāṣirī Khān entitled Nāṣir Khān (or Nāṣir Khān II), son of Nāṣir Khān Muḥammad Amān (or Nāṣir Khān I) (Khan 1970:685). The latter remained governor of this province from 1709 to 1718 (Shah 1993). Sarbuland Khān succeeded him, who, after a year's stay, in 1720, was replaced by Nāṣir Khān II in the reign of Nāṣir ad-Dīn Muḥammad Shāh (1719-48) (*Ibid.*). He was confirmed in his office in the second regnal year of Muḥammad Shāh and the title of his deceased father (i.e. Nāṣir Khān) was also conferred on him (Khan *Ibid.*). Since his (i.e. Nāṣir Khān II) mother belonged to one of the frontier tribes, he greatly benefitted from his maternal relation with the local people. The local Afghāns openly extended cooperation to him, which consequently paved way for smooth running of the provincial government. Thus he enjoyed comparatively long tenure of his governorship for about 28 years. Apparently, he successfully administered the province with peace and tranquility till the invasion of Nādir Shāh in 1738. On the eve of Nādir's invasion, Nāṣir Khān II was in Peshāwar. He offered some resistance but soon submitted to the invader on November 18, 1738 (Shah 1998:81; Jaffar 1946:100). Nādir Shāh, having been impressed by the fidelity of Nāṣir Khān II, retained him in his office (Shah 1998). Later, Muḥammad Shāh ceded the territory west of the river Indus to Nādir Shāh as a token of treaty whence geo-politically the 'Ṣūbah-e Kābul wa Peshāwar' was annexed to the Persian Empire (Cf. Dani 92).

At the assassination of Nādir Shāh in 1747, Aḥmad Shāh Abdālī succeeded his master and founded the independent kingdom of Afghānistan. Having ascended the throne, he confirmed Nāṣir Khān II as governor of this province (Shah 1998). But the treacherous policies of the latter towards the Durrāni king and his favour for Muḥammad Shāh, the late Mughul emperor, invited the Durrāni onslaught. The local Afghāns openly sided with Aḥmad Shāh and Nāṣir Khān II was put to flight. The latter fled to Chhachh from where he found his way to the court of Muhammad Shāh. Thus ends the association of Nāṣir Khān II with Peshāwar and the withdrawal of his official patronage set in the withering of the Nāṣir Bāgh which, as a result of successive vicissitudes, disappeared for good and became only part of the local traditions.

Acknowledgment

The present writer pays heartiest gratitude to his kind teacher, Professor (Dr.) Abdur Rahman, for going through the draft of this paper and making necessary corrections therein. The author is also thankful to Professor (Dr.) Muhammad Farooq Swati, his honoured teacher, for his loving encouragement throughout his research work.

Note

¹ Gopāl Dās compiled his settlement report of Peshāwar district in 1870 and got it published in 1874 from Lahore

Bibliographic References

- Ali, T. *et al* 2002, "Historic Gardens of Peshawar City and its Environs", *The Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol.X, No.2, Peshawar, pp.67-77.
- Babar, Zahir ad-Din. 1987, *Bābar Nāmā*, Eng. trans. A Beveridge, Lahore repr.
- Bhakkari, Shaykh Farid 1974 *Dhakhīrat al-Khawānīn* (Persian text), 3 vols. (Ed. S. Moinul Haq), Vol.III, Karachi.
- Dani, A.H. 1969, *Peshawar: Historic City of the Frontier*, Peshawar.
- Elphinstone, M.1992, *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul* (2 vols.), Vol. I, Karachi repr.
- Gopal Das, 1874, *Tārīkh-i Peshāwar* (Urdū), Lahore.
- Imrān, Imrān Rashid, 2002, *Peshawar Sadar: Tārīkh ke Āine mein* (Urdu), Peshawar.
- Iqbāl, Qāri Javed, 2002, *Thaqāfat-i Sarhad: Tārīkh ke Āine mein* (Urdu), Lahore.
- Jaffar, S.M. 1946, *Peshawar: Past and Present*, Peshawar.
- Jahangir, *Tuzuk-i Jahāngīrī* (2 vols.), Urdu trans. I'jāz Al-Ḥaq Quddūsī, Lahore Vol. I: 1968, Vol. II: 1970.
- Kanbuh, M.S. 1971-74, *'Amal-i Šāleḥ (Shāh Jahān Nāmā)* Urdu trans. Nāzir Ḥasan Zaidi, Lahore (Vol.I:1971; Vols. II & III:1974)
- 1972, *'Amal-i Šāleḥ (Shāh Jahān Nāmā)*, (Persian text) Annotated by Ghulam Yazdani, Lahore, 2nd edn.
- Khan, Shah Nawaz. 1970, *Ma'āthir al-Umārā*, Urdū trans. Muḥammad Ayyūb Qādri, Vol. III, Lahore.
- Rām, K. 1991, *Tadhkirat al-Umārā* (Persian text), (2 vols.), (edited by S Moinul Haq and Ansar Zahid Khan), Karachi.
- Raverty, H.G. 1852, "Account of the City and Province of Peshawar", *Transactions of the Bombay Geographical Society*, Vol. X, Bombay.
- Shah, I. 2004, "Iranian Builders of the Mughal Monuments in Peshawar", *Pakistan-Iran Relations in Historical Perspective*, Peshawar, pp. 114-123.
- 1998, "Governors of Peshawar: Post Mughul Period 1738-1997", *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society*, Vol. XLVI, No. 3, Karachi, pp. 81-7.
- 1997, "A Brief Account of Archaeological Remains in Hazarkhwani Graveyard, Peshawar", *Journal of Central Asia*, Vol. XX, No.1, Islamabad, pp. 94-120
- 1993, "Mughal Governors of Šūba-e Kābul wa Peshāwar", *Ancient Pakistan*, Vol. VIII, Peshawar, pp. 149-59.