

# Death, Poetry and Dynastic Identity: Reimagining the Gardens at the Taj Mahal

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To *my family* who have provided unconditional support,  
To *my friends* who have been patient, kind, and the most excellent distractions,  
To the *Mughal Gardens of India* that fill me with childlike fascination,  
And to the *Taj Mahal* for exceeding all expectations.

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سب کہاں کچھ لالہ و گل میں نمایاں ہو گئیں  
خاک میں کیا صورتیں ہوں گی کہ پنہاں ہو گئیں

सब कहाँ कुछ लाला-ओ-गुल में नुमायाँ हो गईं  
खाक में क्या सूरतें होंगी कि पिन्हाँ हो गईं

sab kahāñ kuchh lāla-o-gul meñ numāyāñ ho ga.iĩñ,  
ḵhaak meñ kyā sūrateñ hoñgī ki pinhāñ ho ga.iĩñ

Where are they all? Some bloom again as tulips or as roses  
There in the dust how many forms forever lie concealed!<sup>1</sup>

-Mirza Ghalib

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<sup>1</sup> Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib, *The Famous Ghalib*, trans. Ralph Russell, (New Delhi: Lotus Collection, 2000), 51.

## ABSTRACT

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**Title:** Death, Poetry and Dynastic Identity: Reimagining the Gardens at the Taj Mahal

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Mughal Emperors were great patrons of art and architecture. Their dynastic roots instilled in them a fondness for Persian poetry and its imaginary landscapes as well as the construction of physical gardens. The rulers had keen interest in building forts, palaces, tombs and new towns, all of which are still largely preserved in South Asia. Of note, most of these sites also had elaborate gardens, spaces that served a multitude of functions, ranging from the political to pleasure. These gardens are part of a long-celebrated tradition of Mughals and their predecessors, but the legacy of Mughal landscape design has almost disappeared from historical sites in South Asia.

The Taj represents the zenith of Mughal culture and is a glorious bookend to the empire's decline. The Taj Mahal, considered to be the crowning architectural achievement of the Empire, would have encapsulated the largest funerary *charbagh* of a single mausoleum in South Asia. The decline of the empire to the British Raj is nowhere more physically present in the landscape than at the Taj Mahal. The image of the complex today represents an erasure of Mughal design principles and a culture repackaged by English ideals of beauty. It is a cruel irony that this very version of the Taj Mahal is the one sold to the Indian public and the world as something that is quintessentially "Indian."

The gardens would have been not only representative of Quranic paradise but also symbolic of the culture and power of the Empire at the time. For the Mughals, architecture included both landscape and construction of buildings. The experience of the gardens and the Taj complex would have been informed by two traditions of garden making concepts – one of historical and dynastic importance, and the other of religious and secular literary traditions. Thus, something such as the creation of lawns could be construed as a colonial representation of the British attempt to tame and control the continent, and thus morph the Mughal landscape into something more palatable, more suitable to English garden tastes.

Funerary gardens such as the Taj were spaces in which dynastic identities and literary culture entwined to form a physical landscape. I argue that the experience of the Taj through its gardens is not as singular as prior scholarship has suggested. Instead, a visitor would have experienced a landscape that was evocative not only of Quranic paradise but also of the power of the emperor and the imaginary garden landscapes of love, longing, and separation as created in Persian poetry. In studying the cultural memory of the Mughals and encompassing their patronage of both physical and imaginary gardens, it is evident that viewing the gardens simply through the conventional lens of a paradise garden and its attributes of shade and flowing water makes for an incomplete picture. In this thesis, I argue for a new way to reinterpret the gardens at the Taj Mahal, while considering the ambiguity between secular and religious and physical and imaginary landscapes, in which plantings, perspective, and sensory engagement are paramount. These categories allow dynastic identity, cultural memory, and quranic paradise to interact, making the process of reimagining the gardens more fruitful and *experience* focused.

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عشق پر زور نہیں ہے یہ وہ آتش غالب  
کہ لگائے نہ لگے اور بجھائے نہ بنے

इश्क़ पर ज़ोर नहीं है ये वो आतिश 'ग़ालिब'  
कि लगाए न लगे और बुझाए न बने

ishq par zor nahīn hai ye vo ātish 'ghālib'  
ki lagā.e na lage aur bujhā.e na bane

Love is not in your control, it is a fire which  
Cannot be made to ignite, nor can it be put out at will.<sup>1</sup>

-Mirza Ghalib

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<sup>1</sup> Mirza Ghalib, "Nukta-Chin hai Gham-e-Dil Usko Sunae Na Bane," trans. Seton Uhlhorn, Rekhta, accessed May 02, 2019, <https://www.rekhta.org/ghazals/nukta-chiin-hai-gam-e-dil-us-ko-sunae-na-bane-mirza-ghalib-ghazals?lang=hi>.

## INTRODUCTION

Most of us first encounter the Taj Mahal through photographs: its luminous white-marble dome at the center flanked by four tall minarets juxtaposed against a vibrant blue sky. Others might first see the Taj on a packet of tea: the image has been commodified by many and used to evoke marvel, wonder, and sublimity in consumers. It stands as one of the most celebrated pieces of architecture in the world. Other buildings may have achieved fame, but none attract such consistent love and admiration as the Taj. For both international visitors and Indians, the Taj has grown to be a symbol of India. Built during the Mughal reign, the complex is an outstanding example of Mughal material culture, in which Persian, Islamic, and Indian design styles merge to form a truly unique mausoleum.

The Mughal emperors were great patrons of art and architecture. Their dynastic roots instilled in them a fondness for Persian poetry and its imaginary landscapes as well as the construction of physical gardens. They had keen interest in building forts, palaces, tombs and new towns, which are still largely preserved in South Asia. However, most of these sites also had elaborate gardens, a long celebrated tradition of Mughals and their predecessors serving a multitude of functions ranging from pleasurable to political. Their contributions to landscape design have almost entirely been cleared from historical sites.

The Taj represents the zenith of Mughal culture and is a glorious crescendo before the empire's decline. The Taj Mahal, considered to be the crowning architectural achievement of the empire, would have included the largest funerary *charbagh* of a single mausoleum in South Asia. The decline of the Mughal empire and its replacement by the

British Raj is nowhere more physically present in the landscape than at the Taj Mahal. The image of the complex today represents an erasure of Mughal design principles and culture repackaged through the use of English ideals of beauty and sold to the Indian public and citizens of the world as something that is uniquely “Indian.”

The gardens would have been representative of Quranic paradise but also symbolic of the culture and power of the empire at the time. For the Mughals, architecture included both landscape and construction of buildings. The experience of the gardens and the Taj complex were informed by two traditions of garden making: one of historical and dynastic importance and the other of religious and secular literary traditions. The creation of lawns is political and represents the British attempts to tame and control the subcontinent, to morph it into something more palatable, more suitable to their tastes. The renovation of the Taj gardens is rarely talked about outside of garden history and conservation related academia. More often than not, the way we experience the Taj is determined by who we choose to listen to. The Taj has multiple narratives surrounding it, but the most captivating for many is a seventeenth-century love story.

Walking through the Taj complex, you are bound to hear overzealous guides’ passionate stories of true love falling upon the ears of tourists. The site has become popular amongst lovers and honeymooners; people from all over the world travel to see the world’s largest gesture of love. The love story behind the Taj Mahal may have ended in 1631, but for many lives on in its luminous glow, standing as a symbol of eternal love. While parts, particularly the beginning, of this story are disputed historically, the below retelling is common to how many people choose to remember the legacy of the Taj.

In 1607 Prince Khurram, later crowned Shah Jahan, first met his beloved in a royal bazaar. Sixteen-year-old Prince Khurram caught a glimpse of Arjumand Banu Begum and instantly fell in love. Arjumand Banu Begum was the fifteen-year-old daughter of a Persian noble and the niece of Jahangir's wife, Nur Jahan.<sup>2</sup> Although it was love at first sight for both of them, they were not allowed to marry right away and had to wait for court astrologers to decide on a worthy date for the marriage. Five years after this encounter, Nur Jahan arranged the marriage. Arjumand Banu Begum was his second wife of three, but legend holds it that Shah Jahan loved her the most.<sup>3</sup>

Not only did his betrothal to Arjumand Banu Begum, later named Mumtaz Mahal, give him great political power and eventually allow him to claim the throne, but she also bore him fourteen children, seven of whom survived into adulthood. His two other wives only provided him with two other offspring. Mumtaz Mahal, although pregnant for much of her husband's reign, did not play the part of an idle wife. She served as a crucial advisor and confidante to Shah Jahan and traveled with him on all of his military campaigns. On June 17, 1631, in their nineteenth year of marriage, the pregnant couple were traveling to Burhanpur on military campaign.<sup>4</sup> While giving birth to her fourteenth child, Gauhara Begum, Mumtaz Mahal died of postpartum hemorrhage after extremely long labor.

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<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Rosenberg, "The History and Love Story of the Taj Mahal," ThoughtCo. August 15, 2018, accessed April 17, 2019; <https://www.thoughtco.com/the-taj-mahal-1434536>.

<sup>3</sup> "Taj Mahal Story," Taj Mahal Story - Love Story Behind Taj Mahal Agra - The True Story of Taj Mahal India, accessed April 17, 2019, <https://www.tajmahal.org.uk/story.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Inayat Khan, W. E. Begley, and Ziyaud-Din A. Desai, *The Shah Jahan Nama of Inayat Khan: An Abridged History of the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan*, (Delhi: Oxford University, 1990), 647.

3Shah Jahan was emotionally paralyzed by her death. He retreated to his tent and cried for eight days straight. Upon emerging, it is said that he had rapidly aged in appearance, his beard turning completely grey. He reportedly never took pleasure in anything ever again. She was buried in Burhanpur, near the encampment, according to Islamic traditions. But soon Shah Jahan would design a plan to exquisitely commemorate his beloved wife. In December of that year, Shah Jahan had the remains of Mumtaz moved from Burhanpur to Agra, a distance of at least 700 km.<sup>5</sup>

With the employment of 20,000 artisans and laborers under the guidance of lead architect Ustad Ahman Lahauri and the instructions of Shah Jahan, construction for a grand mausoleum began in 1632.<sup>6</sup> Materials were sourced from all over India and Asia: marble from Rajasthan, jasper from Punjab, jade and crystal from China, turquoise from Tibet, lapis from Afghanistan, and sapphire from Sri Lanka. The plinth and tomb took 12 years to complete and the rest of the complex took an additional 10 years. By 1643 the majority of the complex was complete and the memory of Mumtaz Mahal was permanently fixed on the banks of the Yamuna river.<sup>7</sup>

The love of Mumtaz and Shah Jahan is the central narrative for many who visit the site, but certainly not the only one. Some right-wing Hindus believe that the Taj Mahal is a Hindu temple for Shiva that has been inaccurately ascribed to Muslim rule.

The most famous of these theories was proposed by Purushottam Nagesh Oak in 1981.

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<sup>5</sup> Jennifer Rosenberg, "The History and Love Story of the Taj Mahal."

<sup>6</sup> Wayne E. Begley, "The Myth of the Taj Mahal and a New Theory of its Symbolic Meaning," *The Art Bulletin* 61, no. 1 (1979), 9.

<sup>7</sup> For architectural history and analysis of Mughal architecture and the Taj Mahal, see: Catherine B. Asher, *Architecture of Mughal India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), and Ebba Koch and Richard André Barraud, *The Complete Taj Mahal: and the Riverfront Gardens of Agra* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2006).

He holds that the Taj Mahal, originally called the *Tejo Mahalaya* (today known as *Tejo Mandir*) was originally a Shiva temple and a Rajput palace built by Jai Singh I. He argues that the octagonal shape has Hindu significance for the eight directions and the celestial guards assigned to them and that the *tamga*, the official stamp / seal of the Mughal empire, featured as the finial of the dome, is actually a *trishula*, a sacred Hindu motif of a trident carried by Lord Shiva. The theory that the Taj Mahal was a Hindu monument infuriatingly appropriated by Muslims has continued to gain traction with the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party. The theory was raised in the Supreme Court by Oak in 2000 and was quickly thrown out, but legal ruling has not stopped people from taking action on their belief. On June 19, 2018, two dozen members of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad tore down a 10-by-11 foot steel gate that was installed for ticket collection at the Taj.<sup>8</sup>

For other right-wing Hindus, the Taj is a “blot on Indian culture” built by “traitors.”<sup>9</sup> Although for a large majority of Indians the Taj Mahal is seen as a secular symbol of Incredible India, for some it is a permanent reminder of Muslim violence and control of a Hindu majority. The Mughals fail to be regarded as Indian rulers and are instead viewed as “foreign invaders” whose colonial legacy is a direct threat to Hindu glory even more so than the remnants of the British Raj.

In 2017, this line of thought hit a new high when the government of Uttar Pradesh released a 32 page tourism booklet chock full of famous Hindu and Buddhist sites but

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<sup>8</sup> “Taj Mahal Vandalized as Hindu Nationalists Dispute Site's Muslim Origins,” Religion News Service, June 19, 2018, <https://religionnews.com/2018/06/19/taj-mahal-vandalized-as-hindu-nationalists-dispute-sites-muslim-origins/>.

<sup>9</sup> “Indian Politician: 'Taj Mahal Built by Traitors’,” BBC News, October 16, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-41635770>.

missing the largest and most economically successful tourist attraction in India, the Taj Mahal. Yogi Adityanath, the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh and proud BJP member, was the reason for the exclusion, as he believes that the Taj is not a symbol of India's culture. Some erupted in outrage at the situation, claiming that this action is one of many in a growing pile of sectarian political agendas in India. Others were indeed glad that a Muslim monument, that has stolen the spotlight for years, was sent backstage allowing for *true* Indian culture to take center stage in U.P.

Most recently a new debate has formed around the Taj. The marble has begun to turn yellow and green due to heavy air pollution and the mounds of debris continue to pile up along the banks of the Yamuna river. For years, historians and conservationists have warned of the ill effects soot and fumes could have on the monument. The situation has escalated to the point of potential irreversibility leaving the press to wonder *if* the Taj can be saved. Questions of conservation circle around the Taj Mahal and fingers are pointed this way and that as government officials refuse to take blame. Caught up in a debate over responsibility, no long term solution has been formulated. In 2015, much to the dismay of eager tourists, scaffolding was put up around the minarets to remove the grime discoloring the Taj. To date, the most successful combatant of pollution's effect on the Taj has been to give it a mud bath. Using Fuller earth, a mud that soaks up all the soot and pollution, conservationists have found a temporary way of keeping the monument gleaming white.

The Taj, whether one loves or hates it, is neither one thing or the other, but instead exists though multiple narratives. Layered beneath the tales of love, the stories of

oppression, a world heritage site in environmental despair, and the thousands of images taken and sold of the mausoleum is a different narrative, whose prominence was lost during the British Raj. This story of the Taj is not a monologue performed by the white marbled structure but rather a two way conversation between it and its landscape.

It is commonly believed that Taj Mahal was named after Mumtaz Mahal. Some have argued that “taj” was the shortened form of Mumtaz; however, this doesn’t hold that much validity because “taj” on its own is a Persian word meaning “crown.” Together, Taj Mahal means Crown Palace. Taj Mahal was not the site’s given name but instead was first used by François Bernier and other European travelers. From their usage of the name, it is clear that they thought the tomb was named after Mumtaz, whom they believed to have been named “Taj Mahal.”

The Mughal imperial name for the site, as documented by Abdul Hamid Lahauri in the *Padshanama*, is “*rauza-i-munawwara*” meaning illuminated tomb.<sup>10</sup> The inclusion of *rauza* is interesting because it means more than a tomb in the traditional sense. It is derived from the Arabic word *rauda* meaning garden.<sup>11</sup> It was used by the Mughals to differentiate garden tombs from other forms of tombs like *mazār*, *maqbara* or *dargah*. This distinction is important; the use of the word *rauza* directly ties the site to its landscape and its inclusion in the name of the complex demonstrates that the garden is a fundamental part of the design. This meaning is entirely lost from its current name. The “Taj Mahal” for centuries has conjured up images of white marble ethereally emerging from obscurity, the crowning achievement of the Mughal empire, and its gardens have

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<sup>10</sup> Tillotson, *Taj Mahal*, 14.

<sup>11</sup> Tillotson, *Taj Mahal*, 14.

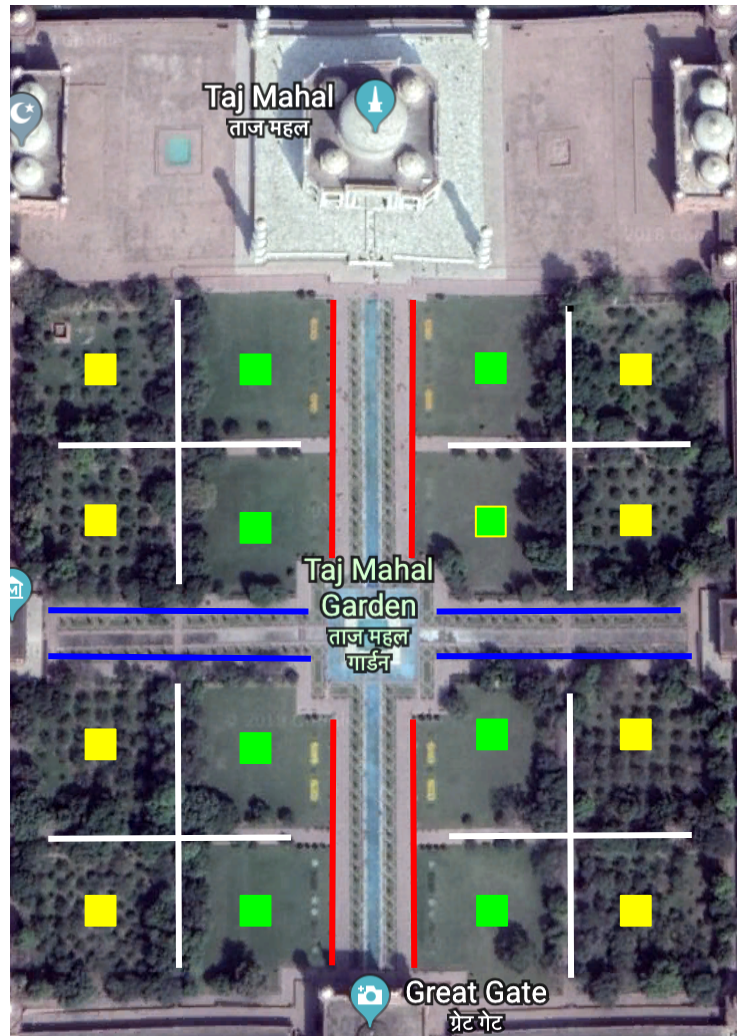


unfortunately become an afterthought. The mausoleum and its surrounding architectural structures have been given visual precedence over the gardens. The lawns lie in obedient submission like a subject to his queen.

Historically, the gardens of the Taj have been categorized as a paradise garden in the *charbagh* style. *Charbagh*, meaning four-gardens, is a Persian, Indo-Persian and Islamic quadrilateral garden layout based on the four gardens of Quranic paradise. Enclosed or walled, these gardens often contained features like running water and fruiting trees added to its paradise like landscape. The contemporary gardens are still called a paradise garden by many. If you are lucky enough to have a tour guide mention the gardens, he will accurately summarize their Quranic symbolism but the garden presented today only roughly resembles a paradise garden. It superficially contains the qualities of a traditional paradise garden but the effect and experience of the landscape has suffered notable degradation.

The Taj landscape of today is largely characterized by two rows of neatly groomed cypresses running the length of the main channel (**Figure 1**: in the center of the red lines). Underneath their trunks are geometric parterres with finely mowed lawn between the stones. Radiating out from the main channel (red) are four square gardens, each of which is divided further into four ( see the white lines). To each side of the main channel are eight of these gardens (marked with green). Depending on the season, within these lawns there maybe a parterre with flowers, varying in vibrant shades and arranged meticulously. These gardens, running south-north (green), are composed mainly of mowed lawns and are free of tree plantings except for plantings bordering the north-south

division (white) and sparsely boarding the secondary east-west walkways (white). The eight garden plots that border the enclosure on the east and west sides (yellow) are completely filled with trees.



**Figure 1:** Aerial view of Taj Mahal gardens. The Mausoleum is on the North end of the site and the Great Gate marks the southmost side of the garden.

In the western peripheral plots (yellow) are groves of amala / Indian gooseberry and in the eastern plots are other fruiting trees like orange, guava, sweet and lemon. The site boasts a large variety of plant life, most of which was introduced during British rule: African Tulip / Flame tree (native of equatorial Africa), Indian sandalwood, sago palm,

mahogany (native to the Caribbean islands). Among the native trees are khirni, kadam, bombox, Spanish cherry, bahera. Some of the contemporary plantings have documented usage amongst the Mughals, other seem to have a greater patronage in Ayurvedic traditions. The site also has some fragrant plants including kanak champa, gardenia, and jasmine.<sup>12</sup>

The gardens of the Taj, in their present form, are less of a Mughal landscape with paradise gardens and, instead, are more representative of British garden ideals of the late nineteenth century. Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India, played a major role in the “renovations” of the gardens. During his term as Viceroy, his most cherished project was the preservation and restoration of India’s ancient monuments. The Taj Mahal, of course, was his highest priority. In 1898, one year before becoming viceroy, Lord Curzon visited the Taj for the first time and fell in love with the funerary garden. What he saw is unarguably different than what we see today. After his first viewing of the Taj he wrote:

The Taj is incomparable, designed like a palace and finished like a jewel—a snow-white emanation starting from a bed of cypresses and backed by a turquoise sky, pure, perfect, and unutterably lovely. One feels the same sensation as in gazing at a beautiful woman, one who has that mixture of loveliness and sadness which is essential to the highest beauty... I stood there and gazed long upon the entrancing spectacle, the singular loveliness of it pouring in waves over my soul flooding my inner consciousness till the cup of satiety was full, and I had to shut my eyes and pause and think.<sup>13</sup>

From the front gate, the view of the mausoleum itself would have been shrouded by dense foliage. The mausoleum would have slowly revealed itself to a person as they

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<sup>12</sup> “Taj Mahal,” ASI Horticulture Branch, accessed March 22, 2019, [http://www.asihorticulture.com/taj\\_mahal.html](http://www.asihorticulture.com/taj_mahal.html).

<sup>13</sup> Eugenia W. Herbert, “The Taj and the Raj: Garden Imperialism in India,” *Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes* 25, no. 4 (2005): 250.

progressed through the gardens. From the entrance today, there is an expanse of lawn that draws your eyes to the mausoleum in its totality. The reveal is instantaneous, but this was not the case for Curzon and many others prior to the British Raj. Curzon describes the mausoleum as emanating from the cypresses; today's mausoleum emerges from a freshly manicured lawn.

Eighteenth and nineteenth-century photographic and pictorial depictions of the Taj show a garden that is far from what we see today. For Curzon, it was “difficult to exaggerate the extent to which the beauty of the garden contributes to and enhances that of the Taj. Alone it would be one of the loveliest gardens anywhere to be seen, being divided into numerous parterres, and detached lawns and plots, planted with brilliant flowers and shrubs and gloriously shaded by the foliage of ancestral and umbrageous trees.”<sup>14</sup> From his description we can imagine the Taj complex as being densely planted with mature trees that provided strong shade and would have undoubtedly obscured the view of the mausoleum.

The following year, 1899, Lord Curzon assumed the position of Viceroy of India and his most urgent mission became the restoration of India's great monuments. In 1905 before leaving India, Lord Curzon said of the Taj, “I have learned to love this place more than any other spot in India. Here it is always peaceful and always beautiful.”<sup>15</sup> Perhaps it was not beautiful enough for the Viceroy because he undertook extensive renovation that forever altered the experience of the site.

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<sup>14</sup> Eugenia W. Herbert, "Curzon Nostalgia: Landscaping Historical Monuments in India," *Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes* 32, no. 4 (2012): 284.

<sup>15</sup> Herbert, "The Taj and the Raj," 251.

Curzon didn't act alone. He left the actual work of restoration of the Taj and its gardens to the Archaeological Survey of India but was still highly involved in directing the projects. The Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India, J. H. Marshall, was appointed by Curzon and helped significantly in carrying out the landscape renovation. By December 1899, Curzon's desire to micromanage the project led by the Archaeological Survey of India becomes clear:

[I] expressed a wish that the cypresses should be replanted, not, as before, at the sides or edges of the beds on either side of the stone causeway, nor in the two rows on each side, but in a single row on either side, the trees being placed in the middle of the beds. Thus, there will be a single cypress avenue framing the Taj at the end. The garish English flowers which now fill these beds should be removed, and suitable dark shrubs or plants should be planted round the base of the cypresses. On either side of the central tank trellised archways have been made, the sides of which consist of red sandstone blocks standing on end, and the roof of creepers trained on wires. A visitor to the Taj, subsequent to my tour, told me that it was in contemplation to remove these. This should not be done. I never hinted at their removal, and they are pretty, even if not very correct.<sup>16</sup>

Prior to Curzon, the cypresses were growing at either edge of the beds of the main channel. They stood tall in maturation. His orders required their removal and replanting but not in the way he had found it. For Curzon it was not in the least bit important to sacrifice his personal taste for accuracy.

He continued to dole out orders during the restoration saying, "I think the removal of the flowers and the substitution of simple grass in the plots bordering the water-channel in the Taj is an improvement; but I think the cypresses are planted too thickly." It was important "to preserve the essential character of the original" in restoring the

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<sup>16</sup> Herbert, "The Taj and the Raj," 251.

gardens but it was “not necessary to attempt to reproduce with pedantic accuracy the original appearance of the garden in all its particular.” And it was perfectly all right to replace flower beds and trees with “a far more beautiful lawn of grass.”<sup>17</sup> If it was an obscured view that so intoxicated the Viceroy, why, then, did he turn the Taj gardens into what resembles an English park, “with a low avenue of cypresses and shrubs leading the eye along the primary, north-south water channel to the mausoleum, and above all with large expanses of lawn dotted with occasional trees and occasional trees and only modest beds of flowers?”<sup>18</sup>

Like Curzon, J. H. Marshall was not too concerned with the accuracy of the restoration, but rather he thought it was more noble to please the taste of modern [Western] visitors. Marshall, the Director General of the Archaeological Survey states, in regards to garden restoration in his Conservation Manual (1923) that the renovations should match the demands and desires of modern and consequentially western, tastes: <sup>19</sup>

Since the days of the Mughal (to which period most of the old Indian garden belong) horticulture has made immense progress, and now-a-days it would be absurd to refuse to grow Marechal Niel or other modern roses in a Mughal garden on the ground that such roses were not known to the Mughals, as it would be to substitute the old fashioned Indian beaten earth [?] in place of a far more beautiful lawn of grass. In these matters, concessions are rightly to be made to modern taste and the wishes of the community who frequent the gardens. Archaeological officers should, therefore, endeavour to observe the happy mean between antiquarian accuracy on the one hand and aesthetic beauty on the other.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Herbert, “The Taj and the Raj,” 252.

<sup>18</sup> Herbert, “The Taj and the Raj,” 253.

<sup>19</sup> Herbert, “The Taj and the Raj,” 252.

<sup>20</sup> Herbert, “Curzon Nostalgia,” 288.

The two of them agreed that the Taj's gardens were different than they would have been originally and that they were perhaps even better now than what the Mughals could have achieved. When Governor MacDonnell questioned some of Lord Curzon's landscaping decisions, Curzon reassured him the changes were an improvement, stating, "In my opinion, the present arrangement of greenswards is infinitely preferred [to that described by Bernier]." <sup>21</sup> And at the completion of the project he said that "The Taj Mahal, in particular, with its garden and surrounding building, can hardly have looked more effective in the days of Mogul Emperors than it does now." <sup>22</sup>

It is important to note that Lord Curzon truly believed he was restoring the monument to its former glory. Of his restoration he said, "Every building in the garden enclosure of the Taj has been scrupulously repaired, and the discovery of old plans has enabled us to restore the water-channels and flower beds of the garden more exactly to their original state." <sup>23</sup> He had the best of intentions, but even the best of intentions means nothing when the renovations being done are led purely by cultural and personal preference.

From the work done by the Viceroy, it can be inferred that he was greatly influenced by British landscaping trends. In early eighteenth-century Britain, there was a dramatic change in idealized landscapes. Formal gardens, highly groomed and manicured, were tossed aside and natural, pastoral landscapes became the preferred. The shift was at its height with Capability Brown (1716-1783), a landscape architect. His

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<sup>21</sup> Herbert, "The Taj and the Raj," 252.

<sup>22</sup> Herbert, "The Taj and the Raj," 252.

<sup>23</sup> Herbert, "The Taj and the Raj," 251.

landscapes were characterized by a “gardenless” effect, reliant on large swaths of grasses leading up to a home or architectural feature wherein there would be clumps of scattered trees.

The restorations did succeed in maintaining the outline of the Mughal garden design; however, they ended up “exaggerating the rigidity of its geometry... without the softening effect of thicker plantings.”<sup>24</sup> The lawns that replaced the thicker plantings are reminiscent of the Capability Brown style, which historically used lawns with scattered and natural appearing clumps of trees to draw the visitor’s eye to an architectural feature of the garden like a family home or a faux ancient structure. This would have felt familiar and appropriate to Lord Curzon, whose family estate in Derbyshire, Kedleston Hall, has a landscape inspired by Capability Brown but created by a lesser known landscape architect, William Emes.<sup>25</sup>

Once in perfect harmony, the revisions under Curzon repressed the voice of the garden, giving the stage away to architecture. With a reimagined garden at the Taj Mahal, the visitor would hear the conversation “between architecture, garden and, decoration, all offering their testimony to the theme of life, death, regeneration, and Islamic paradise” more clearly. <sup>26</sup>

The narrative propagated around the complex might be entirely different if the gardens were properly conserved. Even so, I believe the Taj would continue to be a symbol of the love of Shah Jahan for his empress who died in childbirth, and for some

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<sup>24</sup> Herbert, “The Taj and the Raj,” 259.

<sup>25</sup> Herbert, “Curzon Nostalgia,” 287.

<sup>26</sup> Herbert, “The Taj and the Raj,” 252.



others it would remain a symbol of hate or environmental despair, yet perhaps a narrative in which the gardens are bestowed greater importance would be given its own space. The landscape at the Taj was never solely ornamental. Just as architecture and art are the embodiment of culture, so too are man-made landscapes. Funerary gardens like the Taj were spaces in which dynastic identities and literary culture entwined to form a physical landscape. By accounting for dynastic identity and literary culture, I will argue that the experience of the Taj through its gardens is not as singular as prior scholarship has suggested. Instead, a visitor would have experienced a landscape that was evocative not only of Quranic paradise but also of the power of the emperor and of imaginary gardens of love, longing, and separation as created in Persian poetry. By studying the cultural memory of the Mughals and encompassing their patronage of both physical and imaginary gardens, it will become evident that viewing the gardens simply through the lens of a paradise garden is incomplete. In light of the ambiguity between secular and religious landscapes, I argue for a new way of reinterpreting the gardens at the Taj Mahal in which plantings, perspective, and sensory engagement are paramount.

جس سر کو غرور آج ہے یاں تاجوری کا  
کل اس پہ یہیں شور ہے پھر نوحہ گری کا

जिस सर को गुरुर आज है याँ तज-वरी का  
कल उस पे यहीं शोर है फिर नौहागरी का

jis sar ko ghurūr aaj hai yaañ tāj-varī kā  
kal us pe yahīñ shor hai phir nauhagarī kā

The head that's held high today because it wears a crown,  
Tomorrow, here itself, will in lamentation drown<sup>27</sup>  
- Mir Taqi Mir

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<sup>27</sup> Mir Taqi Mir, “Jis Sar ko Ghurūr Aaj hai Yaañ Tāj-varī kā”, trans. Rekhta, Rekhta, <https://www.rekhta.org/ghazals/jis-sar-ko-guruur-aaj-hai-yaan-taaj-varii-kaa-mir-taqi-mir-ghazals?lang=ur>

## Chapter One: DYNASTIC IDENTITY

In order to reimagine the *charbagh* at the Taj Mahal, it is important to become acquainted with the Indo-Persian garden tradition beginning with Babur, the first Mughal emperor of Hindustan. Most Mughal gardens are meant to mirror the garden of Eden and the garden that awaits the faithful on Judgment Day. A walled enclosure is a symbolic separation of the chaos of the earthly world from the heavenly paradise that is enclosed. The quartering of the garden known as *charbagh* is one of the most recognizable types of Mughal gardens. It symbolizes the partitioning of the universe by four sacred rivers that emanate out from a central water tank, tomb, mountain or pavilion. The plantings in the garden carry their own symbolism that is deeply entwined with Islamic notions of death, life, and paradise.

While most *charbaghs* built by the Mughals were constructed to be paradise gardens, it must be acknowledged that the functions and purposes of a garden are dynamic and anything but singular. Previous scholarship has considered some functions and symbols of gardens, have been well considered, such as the courtly function, environmental function, and political symbolism, as I will explain in the following paragraphs.

For royalty and nobility, Mughal gardens served as sites for major rituals—birthdays, marriages, coronations, entombment—and thus served a courtly function.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> James L. Wescoat Jr. and Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn, “Sources, Places, Representations, and Prospects: A Perspective of Mughal Gardens,” in *Mughal Gardens: Sources, Places, Representations, and Prospects*, ed. J. L. Wescoat Jr. and J. Wolschke-Bulmahn (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1996), 25.

They were places of comfort and recreation but also were characterized by exclusivity. They structured the patterns of interaction among members of society and defined status in Mughal society. In the early Mughal period, gardens were often occupied by army encampments, elite visitors of the court, and, for princes like Babur, offered refuge.

The design of the gardens created a sort of oasis in the hot, dry, and dusty climate of North India. Pavilions were built to capitalize on the circulation of the breeze so as to provide relief from the heat and humidity and produce the perfect area to enjoy midsummer monsoons. Trees provided shade from the intense summer sun and water features helped in decreasing temperatures. The annual traverse of the later Mughal emperors from the North Indian plains to the Kashmiri gardens, fleeing a harsh climate to take refuge in a more temperate climate, shows the importance of the environmental function of gardens to these rulers.

To say that Mughal gardens are strictly symbolic of Islamic paradise would be a great oversimplification of their function. Much of the scholarship on Mughal gardens has pigeon-holed funerary gardens into this Quranic function. While that may be a main function of the gardens, it is certainly not the only one. Historically, Mughal gardens were used to symbolize territorial claims and dynastic claims. Dynastic claims of space often manifested in the form of palace/pleasure gardens and tomb-gardens. Tomb-gardens, like that of Humayun and the Taj Mahal, most clearly demonstrate dynastic claims by asserting legitimacy to the throne and divine kingship. Palace gardens and pleasure gardens, on the other hand, were an environment for conducting politics for the emperors. Both types of gardens, palace/pleasure and funerary, served to mark territories

and thus their creation was particularly important during times of conquest. In this way, they showed possession of territory but also projected a sense of spatial order in unknown lands through idyllic man-made landscape.

While the courtly, environmental, and political functions of gardens have been well recognized and studied, one aspect remains to be explored further: cultural memory. For Mughal emperors, gardens were also a way of connecting to the past, defining the present, and creating prospects for the future. Culture as seen through the gardens is dynamic. It roots itself in the past, mimicking the familiar concepts of the idealism of their Persian forefathers. It yearns to honor this history, but at the same time must acknowledge that there are tangible differences in the present. The climate of the North Indian plains forced Mughal garden design to change and adapt. Some things that grew in their homeland could not grow in India's harsher climate. Like Mughal architectural designs, the Persian idea of garden spaces synthesized with local practices—reflecting the way Mughal culture and identity converged with native culture and identity. Lastly, gardens, particularly tomb-gardens, seek to carve out space in the future so that the identity and memory of individual rulers and a collective empire could be reflected on. The most concrete example of this sort of reflection is the longstanding tradition that successors perform pilgrimage “to a dynastic tomb when entering or leaving a city,”<sup>29</sup> In doing so they not only paid homage to those who came before but also forged new dynastic identities for themselves and future successors by creating new culture, conquering new lands, and building upon Mughal cultural memory. While Persianate

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<sup>29</sup> Wescoat and Wolschke-Bulmahn, “Sources, Places, Representations, and Prospects,” 25.

culture was the political standard, Thomas Lentz points out that “it was the garden and its cloister spaces where this memory could have been preserved and honored with far greater freedom and meaning.”<sup>30</sup>

No garden served solely one function. Instead, each garden has a complex history in which many of these dimensions of design, function, and symbolism are integrated with one another. Through the processes of integration, no form can be executed fully. Therefore, it is to be expected that each form can only be carried out partially—both in the reality of the history of the gardens and their prospects in conservation.

The common thread binding all of these gardens together is the embodiment of cultural memory, where the Mughal emperor seeks to honor his heritage and forefather’s tradition while simultaneously forging new cultural identities in Hindustan, whose climate and people were far different than Central Asia where the garden tradition first grew strong among the nobility. The story of tradition and cultural memory begins with Babur, the first Mughal ruler, who set a precedent for his successors for garden construction in Hindustan. He was largely influenced by his ancestor, Timur, the founder of the Timurid empire.

### **BABUR AND THE TIMURID TRADITION:**

Although we could trace paradise gardens back to the garden of Babylon or even the Gardens of Eden, in discussing Mughal gardens, particularly those of the Taj Mahal, the first clear antecedents are those of the Timurid tradition.<sup>31</sup> According to James

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<sup>30</sup> Thomas W. Lentz, "Memory and Ideology in the Timurid Garden," in *Mughal Gardens Sources, Places, Representations, and Prospects*, ed. J. Wescoat, Jr. and J. Wolschke-Bulmahn (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1996), 53.

<sup>31</sup> James L. Wescoat Jr., "The Changing Cultural Space of Mughal Gardens," in *A Companion to Asian Art and Architecture*, ed. Rebecca M. Brown and Deborah Hutton (London: John Wiley, 2011).

Wescoat, Babur experienced three types of Timurid gardens— those of his childhood, those of Samarkand, and those of Herat—that later influenced the creation of Mughal gardens in India.

Babur (r.1526-1530) was a descendant of the Timurid emperors who was born in Andijan, in the Fergana valley of modern Uzbekistan.<sup>32</sup> It is there in the central plains of Asia that he would have first encountered gardens. In the rural Fergana valley, small gardens were built along a central stream and were meant to be both beautiful and productive with plots of fruit trees and vibrant flowers.<sup>33</sup> Samarkand, the capital of the Timurid empire, was also known for its gardens. The gardens of Samarkand surrounded the city. For his ancestor, Timur (r. 1370-1405), gardens served a significant political function. It was said that when Timur destroyed a great city during conquest he would build gardens and palaces in their place. Typically after a conquest, Timur would take all of his newfound riches and treasures back to Samarkand to decorate his gardens. As such, his gardens grew to represent his successes as a conqueror and an emperor. Instead of residing in a palace, when the weather was suitable Timur chose to live in the beautiful gardens he built in Samarkand and frequently moved from one to another.<sup>34</sup>

By the time Babur was born in 1486, much of the splendor of Timur's Samarkand had waned. The provinces of Central Asia had split into dozens of city-states, whose princes were in constant competition. In Babur's attempts to take Samarkand, in order to

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<sup>32</sup> For political history of the Mughal empire, see: J. F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) and Michael Fisher, *Short History of the Mughal Empire* (S.I.: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

<sup>33</sup> Wescoat Jr, "The Changing Cultural Space of Mughal Gardens," 206.

<sup>34</sup> Elizabeth B. Moynihan, *Paradise as a Garden: In Persia and Mughal India* (London: Scolar Press, 1982), 72.

ascend the throne, “he attacked it from various garden encampments that were little more than cleared meadows that sometimes had a running stream, wildflowers that captured Babur’s attention, and occasionally an extent pavilion.”<sup>35</sup> Babur won the city, by utilizing his garden encampments, but this was one of his few great military successes. In the years following after a series of conquests and defeats, Babur permanently lost his home province of Fergana and Samarkand. Homeless, Babur was forced to seek his fortune elsewhere. Eventually, with a small band of followers, he took Kabul in 1504, an area that would grow to have great importance for him. Babur continued his military use of gardens throughout his conquests in Afghanistan and Hindustan. For the early Mughal soldiers, gardens were primarily places of refuge and rest from the battlefield.

It was in Kabul that Babur first started experimenting with garden design. His cousins from Herat in modern Afghanistan were constructing gardens that mirrored the former glory of Samarkand. Like the gardens of Samarkand, Herat’s gardens surrounded the citadel. Herat’s gardens, however, were aligned along elaborate networks of irrigation canals. On visits to Herat, Babur developed a great fondness for water terracing, reportedly never building a garden without it that feature.

Babur had spent much of his life on the move, traveling from one land to another on military campaign. Like his forefather, Timur, Babur preferred to live in his *charbaghs*. When in Kabul, the severe winter forced him to stay put, but with the coming of spring, “in keeping with the old central Asian practice, he had moved to great encampments in gardens and meadows without the city.”<sup>36</sup> One of the most famous

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<sup>35</sup> Wescoat, “The Changing Cultural Space of Mughal Gardens,” 206.

<sup>36</sup> Moynihan, *Paradise as a Garden*, 72.



*charbaghs* built by Babur was the Bagh-i-wafa, whose location although debated is generally described as being in the greater Kabul province.

In 904 [1508-09 CE], I had constructed a charbagh garden called Bagh-i-Wafa on a rise to the south of the Adinapur fortress. It overlooks the river, which flows between the fortress and the garden. It yields many oranges, citrons, and pomegranates. [In 1524], the year I defeated Pahar Khan and conquered Lahore and Dipalpur, I had a banana tree brought and planted. It thrived. The year before that, sugarcane had been planted, some of which was being sent to Badakhshan and Bukhara. The ground is high, with constant running water, and the weather is mild in winter. In the middle of the garden is a small hill from which a one-mill stream always flows through the garden... In the southwest portion of the garden is a ten-by-ten pool surrounded by orange trees and some pomegranate trees. All around the pool is a clover meadow. The best place in the garden is there. When the oranges turn yellow it is a beautiful sight—really handsomely laid out.<sup>37</sup>

From his description, Bagh-i-wafa is a small *charbagh* complete with the most integral parts: running water, shade and fruit. This account also shows that the plantings were not permanent and could change at the whim of the designer and season. While plantains and sugarcane seem like odd choices for a pleasure garden, one of the functions of *charbaghs* is to have a productive garden. Decades after he settled in Kabul, Babur and his court moved further east into the lands of Hindustan as the first Mughal emperor (r. 1526-1530).

When he first arrived in India from Kabul, he found the climate and culture of Hindustan unbearable and he longed for the familiarity of the Central Asia. In his memoirs he laments:

Most of the provinces of Hindustan are located on flat terrain. So many cities and so many provinces – yet there is no running water anywhere.

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<sup>37</sup> Babur, *The Baburnama*, trans. W. M. Thackston, (London: Folio Society, 2013), 173.

The only running water is in the large rivers. There are still waters in some place, and even in cities that have the capability of digging channels for running water they do not do so. This may be for several reasons. One is that the agriculture and orchards have absolutely no need for water. Fall crops are watered by the monsoon rains, and strangely the spring crops come even if there is no rain.<sup>38</sup>

The cities and provinces of Hindustan are all unpleasant. All cities, all locales are alike. The gardens have no walls, and most places are flat as boards. On the banks of some large rivers and riverbeds, due to monsoon rains, are gullies that prevent passage. In some places in the plains are forests of thorny trees in which the people of those districts hole up and obstinately refuse to pay tribute.<sup>39</sup>

Hindustan is a place of little charm. There is no beauty in its people, no graceful social intercourse, no poetic talent or understanding, no etiquette, nobility, or manliness. The arts and crafts have no harmony or symmetry. There are no good horses, meat, grapes, melons, or other fruits. There is no ice, cold water, good food or bread in the markets. There are no baths and no madrasa. There are no candles, torches, or candlesticks.<sup>40</sup>

It is safe to say that Hindustan was initially a great disappointment to Babur. One of his major complaints was the lack of running water in the region. Even though there were already impressive hydraulic works created by the Delhi Sultanate, none were familiar to him and thus none were suitable. The rivers and the yearly monsoon were also distressing, making it hard to navigate along the river banks. The lack of first rate fruit made Babur homesick for the Ferghana valley and Kabul. His numerous complaints can be summarized into one: that he lacked control over his newly conquered landscape and its people. As time went on, Babur grew to love the land beyond the Indus and he quickly learned the many benefits to the climate and environment of Hindustan for gardening.

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<sup>38</sup> Babur, *The Baburnama*, trans. Thackston, 333.

<sup>39</sup> Babur, *The Baburnama*, trans. Thackston, 334.

<sup>40</sup> Babur, *The Baburnama*, trans. Thackston, 350.

Hindustan lies in the first, second, and third climes, with none of it in the fourth clime. It is a strange country. Compared to ours, it is another world. Its mountains, rivers, forests, and wilderness, its villages and provinces, animals and plants, people and languages, even its rain and winds are all together different. Even if Kabul dependencies that have warm climates bear a resemblance to Hindustan in some aspects, in others they do not. Once you cross the Indus, the land, water, trees, stones, people, tribes, manners, and customs are all of the Hindustani fashion.<sup>41</sup>

Though initially displeased by the climate and native fruits of Hindustan, Babur quickly came to realize the joy of gardens that could be enjoyed all year round. Unlike the gardens of Central Asia, he would not have to give up recreation in the gardens due to bitter winters. The nature of seasons in Hindustan allowed Babur to create gardens that bloomed all year and gave him new fruits like citrons and mangoes to replace the ones he could no longer obtain like cherry, apricots, melons, and grapes. Over time, the landscape that was once unbearable become a new home, where new identities, tastes, and traditions took shape.

Although we know Babur to have built *charbaghs*, most of his gardens in Hindustan did not take this form. Most of Babur's designed landscapes were small in size with a 10 by 10 *gaz* ablution tank (one Mughal *gaz* is approximately 30 to 32 inches long and is translated as cubit or yard), a single stream channel, and a bench for viewing the landscape. His early gardens in Hindustan were equally endeavors to create physical beauty and construct political spaces.<sup>42</sup>

The first Mughal gardens in India were, therefore, gardens of conquests. Although they were physically small, the amount of human control exerted in such small spaces

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<sup>41</sup> Babur, *The Baburnama*, trans. Thackston, 332.

<sup>42</sup> Wescoat, "The Changing Cultural Space of Mughal Gardens," 210.

carried great imperial symbolism. In Hindustan, the walled and terraced *charbaghs* that Babur built resembled open-air palaces with terraces. Every terrace corresponds to a certain room within the palace and included baths and mosques. The garden was central to Babur's life as ruler, a military leader, and cultural exemplar. Hence according to Wescoat, "in his gardens, Babur planned military campaigns, held public audiences, wrote his memoirs, composed poetry, and music, entertained and reveled with his friends."<sup>43</sup>

### **HUMAYUN:**

Humayun (r. 1530-1540, 1555-1556) was neither a great conqueror nor a good enough military mind to maintain the territories given to him after his accession to the throne. When opposed by Sher Shah in India, Humayun had to retreat and seek exile in Persia. In his years of exile, like his father, he spent time traveling from one Timurid-style paradise garden to another. Humayun had his son circumcised in a garden, held reunions and negotiations with his brothers in them, and often showered his guests with drinks and delight in garden spaces.

As Humayun grew more and more dependent on opium, he is said to have become increasingly superstitious. His superstition manifested most beautifully in garden symbolism. He drew from mysticism and numerology when constructing the *chahar taq* garden in Agra. The garden had four octagonal pavilions stitched together to frame a central octagonal pool.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Moynihan, *Paradise as a Garden*, 97.

<sup>44</sup> Moynihan, *Paradise as a Garden*, 210.

Humayun's contribution to the Mughal garden tradition in India comes after his death. His tomb, commissioned by his widow, Haji Begum, drew from his *chahar taq* garden and thus carried numerological and mystic symbolism that was important to him in life through the duration of his afterlife. Humayun's tomb was not the first enclosed tomb in North India. Previous rulers of Delhi had constructed a variety of enclosed tombs. His forefathers, Babur and the Timurid rulers, also had enclosed tombs. What made the Mughal tomb unique, aside from its symbolism connected to numerology and mysticism, was its central placement within a *charbagh* and its large domed mausoleum. Elizabeth Moynihan states that "the designs of the tomb and garden were treated as one; the setting enhanced the beauty of the monument."<sup>45</sup>

This is the first and last time before the construction of the Taj Mahal that a Mughal tomb was enclosed in a domed mausoleum. The shape recalls the cosmic mountain: an image long connected with the watercourses in the gardens and favored by Central Asians.<sup>46</sup> Humayun would have taken great pleasure in this cosmic symbolism, as he was enamored with mystical beliefs. The addition of a domed tomb within a paradise garden is reflective of both the tombs of the Timurid dynasty and the Mughal ideal landscape of Central Asia, where rivers flow through fertile valleys.

Moynihan says of the complex's design that "the large square enclosure, divided with geometric precisions, was the ordered universe; in the center, the tomb itself rose like the cosmic mountain above four rivers which were represented by the water channels. In the perpetual growing season of Hindustan, there were eternal flowers and

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<sup>45</sup> Moynihan, *Paradise as a Garden*, 111.

<sup>46</sup> Moynihan, *Paradise as a Garden*, 112.

fruit, water and the perfume of Paradise.”<sup>47</sup> In the centuries following, Humayun's successors would emulate this design and its symbolism through their own commissioning of tomb-garden complexes, especially Shah Jahan in constructing the Taj Mahal. The tomb garden in Mughal India represents the empire’s nomadic past, the desire to settle in new lands, and dynastic memory, a theme that would be carried on through the duration of Mughal rule in Hindustan.

The design of this mausoleum was a clear departure from Babur’s modest tomb garden in Kabul. The style of architecture is based on the *Gul-e-Amir*, the tomb of Timur in Samarkand, but is far grander in size. The desire to create such a large monument was in part to recall their Timurid lineage but also to assert their dominance and power as rulers of their own empire. Prior to the construction of Humayun’s tomb, Sher Shah Suri’s tomb was the largest Indo-Islamic tomb in the subcontinent. After losing the throne for 15 years and regaining it just before death, Akbar, Babur’s wife, and Mughal nobles likely thought it fitting that the Mughal empire should reign supreme both in life and in death and thus created a tomb complex greater in size than their dead rival’s.

### **JAHANGIR:**

During Akbar’s rule (1556-1605) the emperor was much more concerned with urban architecture than constructing gardens. The reign of Jahangir (1605-1627) revitalized the importance of garden aesthetics. Like his great-grandfather, Babur, Jahangir was infatuated with nature, often compiling a list of all the flora and fauna of his travels to aid in his garden projects.<sup>48</sup> He cared so much for the documentation of

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<sup>47</sup> Moynihan, *Paradise as a Garden*, 112.

<sup>48</sup> Wescoat, “The Changing Cultural Space of Mughal Gardens,” 212.

landscapes that he commissioned paintings of Kashmiri wildlife by his favorite painters, among whom was Ustad Mansur, who created more than 100 works.<sup>49</sup>

Jahangir's fervor for nature is evident through almost all of his architectural projects. Before his accession to the throne, the prince built the Hiran Minar at a water complex near the Sheikhpura Fort in Punjab, Pakistan. The minaret, which stands at the edge of a man-made water tank, was named after his beloved pet antelope named Minaj, who, for easy hunting, had been trained to lure other animals to the tank.<sup>50</sup>

By Jahangir's reign, the Mughals had been in India for around eight decades, and therefore the Central Asian landscapes had become a somewhat distant past. In 1611, Jahangir married a widow Mehr-un-Nisaa, later given the title Nur Jahan. Jahangir's marriage to Nur Jahan would bring a stronger influence of Persianate culture into the Mughal court and garden culture. Nur Jahan was the second daughter of Persian noble Mirza Ghiyas Beg, who would eventually bear the title Itimad-ud- Daula. The presence of Nur Jahan and her father in the Mughal court brought a renewed focus on gardens as an expression of Mughal dynastic identity.<sup>51</sup>

Nur Jahan is credited with starting the riverfront garden trend in Agra along the Yamuna, by creating the Ram Bagh and the tomb-garden of her father Itimad ud-Daula, which undoubtedly is a precedent for the Taj Mahal complex. Now referred to as the "baby Taj" by locals and tourists, her father's tomb-garden is a traditional *charbagh*, just downstream from the Ram Bagh on the Yamuna riverfront. The garden is delineated by

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<sup>49</sup> Wescoat, "The Changing Cultural Space of Mughal Gardens," 212.

<sup>50</sup> Wescoat, "The Changing Cultural Space of Mughal Gardens," 213.

<sup>51</sup> Wescoat, "The Changing Cultural Space of Mughal Gardens," 215.

raised walkways and water channels with a white mausoleum in the center. Her greatest garden creations were the tomb-gardens for her brother, her husband, and eventually herself at the Shahdara tomb-garden complex—the largest and most extensive multi-garden funerary complex in the Indo-Islamic world.<sup>52</sup> Like her gardens in Agra, the Shahdara complex is also positioned alongside a river, the Ravi, across from the Lahore Fort.

Jahangir also constructed a grand tomb-garden complex, just like his wife had. Built in the village of Sikandra for his own father, Akbar, it was an enclosed *charbagh* with a centrally located tomb. The gardens were filled with cypress, pine, plane and palm and had wildlife like blackbucks and peacocks roaming about, as they still are today.

Jahangir and his nobles were extraordinarily fond of Kashmir, for its natural landscape in the mountains and valleys of the Himalayas lent itself well to pleasure and recreation, particularly during warmer months. The climate was cool and running water was abundant, perfect for creating terraced gardens with watercourses. Aside from pure pleasure, Jahangir and Nur Jahan also placed value on producing economically valuable crops like saffron and rose essence in their gardens. Their greatest accomplishment, aside from their respective tomb-garden complexes, was the gardens at Shalimar gardens. All together, Jahangir, Nur Jahan, and her family created and renovated a reputed 777 gardens in Kashmir, covering the lakesides and mountain slopes.<sup>53</sup> According to Jahangir, cherry and apricots were brought by Akbar to Kashmir from Kabul. Bordering the paths of *charbaghs* would have been apple trees and plums, which thrived in the cool climate

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<sup>52</sup> Wescoat, “The Changing Cultural Space of Mughal Gardens,” 215.

<sup>53</sup> Moynihan, *Paradise as a Garden*, 123.



of Kashmir better than citrons. *Chenar* trees that grew thick and tall stood in majestic rows in the gardens. White and various purple shades of iris and lilac shrubs were favorite planting combinations.<sup>54</sup>

### **SHAH JAHAN:**

The construction of the Taj Mahal was the first and most celebrated creation of Shah Jahan (r. 1628-1658). The *charbagh* at the Taj is unique among all others because the mausoleum is not centrally located. Instead, the white marble structure is positioned at the back of the gardens along the banks of the Yamuna river, a departure from the tradition which dictates that the structure, whether it be a water pool or a tomb, should be the center point of the garden where all four rivers meet. The shift in style of the Taj gardens baffled people for centuries. Shah Jahan's intentions for the garden design would not be fully realized until 1993 with the re-discovery of the Mahtab Bagh.

For years the Taj mausoleum's mysterious and untraditional placement at the end of the gardens baffled the public and scholars. With the discovery of the Mahtab Bagh, much of Shah Jahan's original plan for the complex became clear. The gardens at the Mahtab Bagh were a *charbagh* placed at the opposite side of the Yamuna river and are directly related in size and proportion to the gardens of the Taj. Together, the two gardens extend from the mausoleum and make its placement central, as in all Mughal funerary gardens built previously. The Mahtab Bagh gardens were all but forgotten for centuries after Shah Jahan's reign.

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<sup>54</sup> Moynihan, *Paradise as a Garden*, 122.

This is because, unlike the Taj gardens, the Mahtab Bagh was particularly susceptible to floods. Even today, although the Yamuna River has been depleted, the current can flood the Mahtab Bagh during strong monsoons. A letter from Aurangzeb to Shah Jahan from October 9, 1652, illustrates that the Mahtab Bagh has been vulnerable to floods since its inception:

The Mahtab Garden was completely inundated, and therefore it has lost its charm, but it will regain its verdancy. The octagonal pool and the pavilion (*Bangla*) around it are in splendid condition. It is surprising to hear that the waters of Jumna have overflowed their banks because at the present the river is moving back to its old course and is about to regain it.<sup>55</sup>

The flooding described in the letter must have taken place shortly after the gardens were built. Similar to other problems one might encounter in Mughal garden studies, the Mahtab Bagh gardens lack literary references. This letter not only offers an explanation as to why the gardens had been forgotten but also gives us the knowledge to accurately date the garden back to Shah Jahan's reign. Records indicate that the garden was abandoned up until the time of the British Raj, when it was then used as a camping grounds.<sup>56</sup>

For years, the only tangible evidence of a garden on the other side of the Yamuna from the Taj were the architectural structures that survived flooding. Early Archaeological Survey of India reports contain references to garden pavilions, but they were oblivious to the octagonal pool on the riverside terrace that was buried under three meters of silt up until the excavation in 1993.

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<sup>55</sup> Elizabeth B. Moynihan, *The Moonlight Garden: New Discoveries at the Taj Mahal*, (Washington, D.C.: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution and the University of Washington Press, Seattle and London, 2000), 28.

<sup>56</sup> Moynihan, *The Moonlight Garden*, 30.

The placement of the tomb at the end of the Taj complex allows for the gardens, both of the Taj Mahal and the Mahtab Bagh, to take center-stage. Wayne Begley says that “such a controlled placement of the mausoleum and its subsidiary structures around the perimeter of an unobstructed garden reflects a sophisticated concern for the visual unity and total planning and results in a dramatic [garden] vista.”<sup>57</sup> This design, in which two gardens extend perpendicularly from a true river, not just a metaphorical one, brings a whole new dimension to the idea of a *charbagh* and paradise garden. From both gardens there would have been a spectacular view of the mausoleum and pools of perfect reflection. Additionally, from the Mahtab Bagh, the tomb is reflected in great size in the waters of the Yamuna river.

Unlike the gardens at the Taj, the Mahtab Bagh has undergone modern conservation. In 2014, the World Monuments Fund and the Archaeological Survey of India embarked on a mission to restore Agra’s riverfront gardens to their former glory. In the last few years, saplings have matured to form a young orchard that frames the architecture of the Taj in the way the Mughal Emperor would have intended.

The Taj Mahal is perhaps the exemplar for dynastic identity amongst all Mughal gardens. Catherine Asher has pointed this out well, by drawing connections between the Taj architecture and prior Mughal architectural achievements. Like Humayun’s tomb, the Taj draws from the *Gul-e-Amir*, Timur’s tomb, and has a cosmic dome and four minarets at each corner.<sup>58</sup> Shah Jahan upon accession to the throne adopted the titles used by

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<sup>57</sup> Wayne Begley, “The Garden of the Taj Mahal: A Case Study of Mughal Architectural Planning and Symbolism,” in *Mughal Gardens: Sources, Places, Representations, and Prospects*, ed. J. Wescoat and J. Wolschke-Buhlmahn (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1996), 213.

<sup>58</sup> Asher, *Architecture of Mughal India*, 46.

Timur, demonstrating his pride in his ancestry.<sup>59</sup> In addition to the inspiration taken from Akbar and Humayun, the Taj Mahal recalls the design decisions made by Shah Jahan's father. The placement of the tomb and its gardens is an elaboration of the trend of river-front gardens put in place by Jahangir and Nur Jahan. The name that Shah Jahan bestows on the Taj Mahal, *rauza-i-munawwara* (The Illuminated Tomb), also offers of insight into his construction of dynastic identity. While the name is interesting because it refers directly to garden and landscapes, it also suggests how highly Shah Jahan thought of himself and his empire. While we typically think of the Taj as being constructed primarily for Mumtaz Mahal, it is quietly likely that Shah Jahan knew that this space would be his final resting grounds as well. *Rauza-i-munawwara* is an epithet that is shared with Prophet Muhammad's tomb in Medina. Shah Jahan's use of this name reveals that he perceived himself as of similar stature to the Prophet Muhammad, since it suggests that Shah Jahan was not just King of men, but the King of Kings.<sup>60</sup>

The Taj, although certainly remembered as the greatest achievement of Shah Jahan, was only one of his major architectural projects. In the following years of his reign, Shah Jahan would build a new city, inspired by his grandfather Akbar. Called Shahjahanabad, the new city spanned almost two square miles of what is now called to be Old Delhi. The red fort was part of this expansive city design. Adorning the landscape directly outside of the Red Fort were gardens, and inside the fort were more formal gardens accompanying long pavilions. The largest of these gardens was known as Hayat

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<sup>59</sup> Asher, *Architecture of Mughal India*, 213.

<sup>60</sup> Catherine B. Asher and Cynthia Talbot, *India before Europe* (New Delhi: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008), 195.

Baksh Bagh, or the life-bestowing garden. It once contained dignified rows of cypress trees, plots of saffron, and flower beds filled with crimson and purple flowers which was a favorite combination in the Timurid *charbaghs*.<sup>61</sup> Today, like most Mughal gardens, the Hayat Baksh Bagh has lawns with low clipped hedges and flower beds.

For many years the gardens at Mughal palaces were largely designed and cared for by the women of the *zenana*, the part of the palace reserved for women of the house, who came from numerous backgrounds including Hindu families. Beginning with the reign of Akbar, Mughal emperors started marrying Indian princesses to make political alliances with local rulers.<sup>62</sup> Indian women were able to introduce their local tastes and preferences as they became more involved with life at court.<sup>63</sup> The pleasure garden became a tradition that was both built and tended by Indian artisans and workers.

Although Shah Jahan did not marry any Hindu women, their effect on floral and garden traditions in his palace were still strong. The Mughals adopted adorning doorways with a hanging string of ashoka or mango leaves, an auspicious Hindu sign for welcome. The women of the *zenana* wove into their hair fragrant champa blooms and made necklaces of jasmine in the Indian custom.

The Mughals were patrons of the landscape. From newly conquered lands to the creation of new citadels Mughal emperors upheld the tradition of making gardens for centuries. Their creation represents many things: a desire to control a foreign and unfamiliar land, a yearning for the gardens of the past and of Central Asia, the aspiration

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<sup>61</sup> Moynihan, *Paradise as a Garden*, 136.

<sup>62</sup> Giles H. R. Tillotson, *Mughal India* (London: Viking Penguin, 1991), 12.

<sup>63</sup> Moynihan, *The Moonlight Garden*, 43.

to honor and improve upon the work of their forefathers, and the need to form a new dynastic identity in India. The *charbagh* took many forms over the years and served a multitude of functions, but all gardens were born from a desire to honor and add to cultural memory and the identity of their dynasty.

The garden tradition amongst the Mughals changed over time and varied widely due to location, primary function, and imperial vision. The one thing that remained most constant among the gardens was the tradition itself. Each new construction of a garden was an act of remembrance, of the Mughals who ruled before and of their Central Asian roots in the Timurid dynasty. However, the intent was not to directly create a landscape of the past but rather to pay homage to the tradition through the construction and design of a new garden. The gardens were the embodiment of the cultural memory of the Mughals, a tradition that created a narrative picture of the past from which a dynastic identity was created. Memory is often mistaken to be something firmly rooted in the past. In the case of cultural memory, memory spans all three points of time. The creation of the garden refers to the traditions of the past but it is made in the present capturing a specific point in time. It also looks to the future: each emperor's unique contribution to garden design signals a slight departure from the past. These additions contribute to the memory of the tradition, which inevitably would be reflected on as the past by successors in the future. Mughal history and memory of the garden tradition represent the past, but for them, it also was a means of creating their cultural identity in the present and envisioning the future of the dynasty.

بلبل کے کاروبار پہ ہیں خندہ ہائے گل  
کہتے ہیں جس کو عشق خلل ہے دماغ کا

بुलबुल के कारोबार पे हैं खंदा-हा-ए-गुल  
कहते हैं जिस को इश्क़ खलल है दिमाग का

bulbul ke kārobār pe haiñ ḵhanda-hā-e-gul  
kahte haiñ jis ko ishq ḵhalal hai dimāgh kā

All that the nightingale can do provokes the rose's laughter  
What we call love is really a derangement of the mind.<sup>64</sup>  
-Mirza Ghalib

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<sup>64</sup> Ghalib, *The Famous Ghalib*, 14.

## Chapter Two: GARDENS OF THE IMAGINATION

To fully understand the Mughal garden we must not mistake it for a tradition that only occurred between man and his land. Just as the tradition of garden making extends back centuries so too does the tradition of imagined gardens. Imagined gardens, or gardens constructed in Persian and Mughal literary or artistic traditions, can be traced back all the way to Quranic descriptions of paradise.

When speaking of Mughal gardens, particularly funerary gardens, the narrative has remained fairly singular throughout scholarship. From this perspective, funerary gardens are the nothing more than the embodiment of Quranic paradise. Quranic descriptions of paradise certainly play a role in the function and shape of the gardens, but their design is not solely influenced by Islamic thought. In this section, I will discuss the verses of the Quran that contribute to the idea of paradise and the gardens of the heavens. From this, the physical architecture of a *charbagh* begins to take shape and two key features of the garden form: water and shade. With these attributes we can add a lot of meaning and structure to the physical gardens of the Mughals, but strictly using the lens of Quranic paradise is limiting. In order to get a more complete picture, conceptions of paradise in Indo-Persian become key to further understanding the landscape design of Mughal gardens and eventually reimagining the experience of the gardens at the Taj.

Because so many of the descriptions of Mughal Gardens were written by European travelers, whose garden and aesthetic traditions were different from the Mughals, it would be foolish to rely solely on their perspective and their experience.



Obviously accounts that detail the sort of plantings present are helpful, but they lack the sort of context that a Mughal or Indian account could provide. To take a stark religious approach would also be inaccurate, for although gardens did evoke Quranic descriptions of paradise this was not their sole function. By examining the concept of paradise in literature and poetry, a centuries long tradition of imaginary landscapes is uncovered. Through studying Indo-Persian poetry, the concept of paradise expands beyond what is described in the Quran. From the poetic tradition the importance of sensory engagement and the symbolism of individual plantings help to create a garden space that is rooted in experience—demonstrating a direct dialogue between the visitor and the landscape.

#### **QURAN:**

The idea of a paradise garden certainly outdates Islam and the two other monotheistic religious traditions of Judaism and Christianity. Some have suggested that the origin of the paradise garden can be traced all the way back to the Epic of Gilgamesh (2700 BC) in which the garden of the Gods, filled with trees and water, is a refuge from the harsh Mesopotamian climate.<sup>65</sup> Two indispensable aspects of a paradise garden remain constant over the centuries—water and shade. In the Islamic context these are the most important features of the paradise garden with a secondary aspect, by extension, of fruiting plants.

In Islam, *jannah/jannat*, meaning paradise garden/ gardens, is the final resting place of the righteous and also the garden of Eden, where Adam and Hawwa dwelt. There are around 120 references to gardens in the Quran, and the name used most frequently is

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<sup>65</sup> Samuel Noah Kramer, *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture, and Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 148.

*jannat al firdaws*, meaning gardens of paradise.<sup>66</sup> Throughout the Quran there are descriptions of *jannah*, the paradise garden. They detail who can get in and what its landscape promises. God promises *jannah* as a reward to those who believe and those who do good deeds. The most prominent descriptions amongst *ayat* (verses) dealing with *jannah* are of flowing streams.

God has promised the believers, both men and women, Gardens graced with flowing streams where they will remain; good, peaceful homes in Gardens of lasting bliss; and— greatest of all— God’s good pleasure. That is the supreme triumph.<sup>67</sup>

For the People of the Book living in dry and arid lands, water would have been greatly valued. Water creates a calming environment, providing the perfect atmosphere for escaping the harsh climate of the outside world. The most recurring phrase about gardens in the Quran is *Jannat tajri min tahtiha al-anhar* which means “Gardens underneath rivers flow.”<sup>68</sup> The idea of rivers running beneath the gardens can be interpreted more literally as the gardens being irrigated by flowing streams, but in a more religious context could be understood as the gardens within the soul being nurtured and purified by the waters of the spirit. The presence of water cools the body and environment in high temperatures and allows for spiritual reflection. Flowing water is traditionally symbolic of God’s mercy.<sup>69</sup> In the Quranic verse quoted above, the gardens

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<sup>66</sup> Sebastian Günther, Benjamin Todd Lawson, and Christian Mauder, *Roads to Paradise: Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam* Vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 103.

<sup>67</sup> *Qur’an: English Translation with Parallel Arabic Text*, Surah al-Tawba: 72 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), accessed March 2, 2019, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>68</sup> Abdul Rehman, *Earthly Paradise: The Garden in the Times of the Great Muslim Empires*, (Lahore: Habib ur Rehman Research Foundation, 2001), 14.

<sup>69</sup> “Underneath Which Rivers Flow: The Symbolism of the Islamic Garden,” *The Islamic Monthly*, January 26, 2005, accessed March 23, 2019, <https://www.theislamicmonthly.com/underneath-which-rivers-flow-the-symbolism-of-the-islamic-garden/>.

are “graced” with flowing waters. The importance of flowing streams to *jannah* is evident through the fact that the gardens are always mentioned as having some sort of water feature. In Surah al-Nisa’ 57, flowing streams are mentioned again but this verse adds another critical Quranic element to the paradise garden: shade.

As for those who believe and do good deeds, We shall admit them into Gardens graced with flowing streams and there they will remain forever. They will have pure spouses there, and We shall admit them into cool refreshing shade.<sup>70</sup>

Shade, also a cooling element, adds to the relaxing environment of the paradise gardens. Most *ayat* do not go into depth about of what sorts of trees produce shade, but the believer is promised great relaxation and enjoyment of virginal maidens in the cool of the shade. The longest description of *jannah* is found in Surah al-Rahman. This selection of verse gives a few more details of what the paradise garden include and emphasizes fruits more than most other verses on *jannah*. Every odd numbered verse has been excluded from this excerpt because they are a refrain that asks “Which, then of your Lord’s blessings do you both deny?”

46: For those who fear [the time when they will] stand before their lord there are two gardens.  
48: With shading branches.  
50: With a pair of flowing springs.  
52: With every kind of fruit in pairs.  
54: They will sit on couches upholstered with brocade, the fruit of both gardens within easy reach.  
56: There will be maidens restraining their glances, untouched before by man or jinn  
58: Like rubies and brilliant pearls.  
60: Shall the reward of good be anything but good?  
62: As well as those two there will be two other gardens.

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<sup>70</sup> *Qur’an: English translation*, Surah al-Nisa’: 57.

- 64: Both of the deepest green.
- 66: With a pair of gushing springs.
- 68: With fruits—date palms and pomegranate trees.
- 70: There are good natured, beautiful maidens.
- 72: Dark eyed, sheltered in pavilions.
- 74: Untouched beforehand by man or jinn.
- 76: They will sit on green cushions and fine carpets.<sup>71</sup>

This is the collection of verses that has been largely used to rationalize the *charbagh* garden format and symbolism. While we have no written evidence that the Mughals or their predecessors consciously mimicked the gardens of this description, the *charbaghs* of the Indo-Indo-Persian tradition do bear quite a resemblance. The beginning describes two gardens filled with shade, slowing springs and a new element, fruiting trees. Fruit trees represent life after death and fertility. In this particularly *surah*, fruit has great importance as its availability demonstrates the bounty of heaven and the generosity of God. In verse 62, the Quran says that beside these two gardens are two more gardens which are of the deepest green and also contain fruit such as dates and pomegranates. When compiled together the verses create a vision of a four-fold garden filled with shade, fruit, and springs, which became the prototype for the *charbagh* (four-garden) Indo-Persian garden. In this paradise, the lower pair of gardens are the Garden of the Soul and the Garden of the Heart, which are reserved for the righteous, and the upper gardens are the gardens are the Garden of the Spirit and the Garden of the Essence, which are reserved for the foremost.<sup>72</sup> The imagined paradise takes further shape when a second verse is considered from Surah Muhammad:

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<sup>71</sup> *Qur'an: English translation*, Sarah al-Rahman: 46-76.

<sup>72</sup> "Underneath Which Rivers Flow," The Islamic Monthly.

Here is a picture of the Garden promised to the pious: rivers of water forever pure, rivers of milk forever fresh, rivers of wine, a delight for those who drink, rivers of honey clarified and pure, [all] flow in it; there they will find fruit of every kind.<sup>73</sup>

In Surah al-Rahman we come to know that paradise has four gardens and four springs. The verse from Surah Muhammad adds more to this description by giving the four springs of the garden greater symbolism. The four springs carry pure water, milk, wine, and honey for God's faithful to delight in after death. Combining these two descriptions of the four gardens of paradise, we can conclude that the four gardens are divided by the four springs to create a fourfold garden or *charbagh*. The number four hold great prominence in Islamic thought as it is a reflection of the order of the universe—the four elements and four cardinal directions. The focus on the number four is best demonstrated by the symbolism of the Ka'ba which literally means cube. The cube itself represents the House of God and the center of the world, while its four sides point in the four cardinal directions thereby emphasizing the order of the earth. Through circumambulation of the Ka'ba during Hajj the square of the Ka'ba is wrapped in a circle. The circle, representing the divine which has no clear beginning or end, surrounding a square is symbolic of the meeting of heaven and earth.<sup>74</sup> This idea will be further explored in the next chapter regarding the Taj Mahal.

A defining theme of gardens as described in the Quran are that they are separate from this world, with its harshness and chaos. The garden is a private place used for refuge, prayer, and contemplation. In the creation of physical embodiments of Quranic

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<sup>73</sup> *Qur'an: English translation*, Surah Muhammad: 15.

<sup>74</sup> "Underneath Which Rivers Flow," *The Islamic Monthly*.

paradise this translates to the gardens being enclosed both to add social privacy and to provide a physical barrier from the elements. The gardens of paradise in the Quran are exclusive to those who are righteous and among them only some people are given access to further gardens. Exclusion thus also becomes an important aspect of the construction of paradise gardens.

From Quranic descriptions of paradise it is evident that shade and water are the most important elements and by extension so are the foliage and fruit of the shade trees. Prior scholarship has almost exclusively related the Mughal Garden to the paradise gardens as described by the Quran. While there is merit in doing so and there are significant resemblances between the two, a solely religious lens is limiting. Studying Indo-Persian literary traditions expands the list of crucial elements to include the importance of sensory engagement and individual plantings.

### **INDO-PERSIAN LITERARY TRADITIONS:**

A space exists between the religious landscape and the landscape as interpreted by the foreigner: the cultural landscape. Indo-Persian literary traditions provide us access to this cultural landscape, where plants take on new symbolism and evoke metaphors. Beginning with Babur, the Mughal dynasty held fast to the high Persianate culture of their ancestors, which was “predicated upon the classics of Persian poetry and an elite of Sufi masters as educators.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Wheeler M. Thackston, "Mughal Gardens in Persian Poetry," in *Mughal Gardens: Sources, Places, Representations, and Prospects*, ed. J. Wescoat and J. Wolschke-Bulmahn (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1996), 233.

Although highly abstracted, the landscapes of Indo-Persian poetry can be used to establish both an idyllic landscape and add an additional layer of meaning to a physical landscape that allows us to imagine how certain plants in the landscape might evoke centuries-long traditions to the Mughal on-looker. To suggest a more explicit connection between the imagined garden and the historic garden, beyond Babur, is not far fetched. One function of the Mughal garden was courtly recreation and celebration. They were sites for major rituals, like marriage, birthdays, and circumcisions, as well as recreation from casual pleasure to formal events. At these events courtly poets were bound to be present, reciting couplets of significance for the pleasure of all attendees.

For the emperors, gardens were not just a matter of constructing impressive and aesthetically pleasing designs. It was about communing with a landscape that held recognizable and meaningful significance. When Babur first arrived, the landscape of Hindustan he confronted was frustratingly unfamiliar, and thus worth changing. He was unimpressed by the landscapes and architectural marvels constructed by the Delhi Sultanate like Hauz Khas and the Lodi Gardens. Thackston says that what these gardens lacked “was a Persianate garden vocabulary with complex meaning nurtured by informal structure.”<sup>76</sup> In order to understand this Persianate vocabulary, one must be acquainted with the Indo-Persian literary tradition in regards to garden and paradisiacal imagery. What follows is a brief exploration of Indo-Persian literature from the tenth century to the late nineteenth century.

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<sup>76</sup> Anthony Welch, "Gardens That Babur Did Not Like: Landscape, Water, and Architecture for the Sultans of Delhi," in *Mughal Gardens: Sources, Places, Representations, and Prospects*, ed. J. Wescoat and J. Wolschke-Bulmahn (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1996), 66.

The greatest epic of Persian literature is the *Shahnameh*, or “The Book of Kings.” It was written between 977 and 1010 CE by the Persian poet Abu’l-Qasim, who adopted the name Ferdowsi from the Arabic word *firdaws*, which is the highest garden of paradise in the Quran. During the time of Mughal rule in Hindustan, the *Shahnameh* was used as a princely manual on wise and just kingship. The website of the Fitzwilliam Museum notes that the *Shahnameh* “offered splendid opportunities for the portrayal of Mughal rulers and courtiers engaged in hunting, fighting, diplomatic ceremonies, feasts and amorous affairs.”<sup>77</sup> Within the narrative of eternal strife between good and evil, the epic poem is full of colorful garden imagery. In the following excerpt, a young woman’s beauty is described:

Her cheeks are like pomegranate blossoms, she hath cherry lips,  
Her silvern breast bear two pomegranate-grains,  
Her eyes are twin narcissi in a garden,  
Their lashes blackness rapt from raven’s plumes,  
Her brows are like two bows made at Taraz,  
Whipped with the purest musk. If thou wouldst seek  
A moon, there is her face; if thou wouldst scent  
The musk, there is her hair. From head to foot  
She is as Paradise—all music, charm,  
And beauty.<sup>78</sup>

The use of similes to liken the woman’s to fruit is a demonstration of her youthfulness and beauty. She is the embodiment of paradise in sight, sound, scent, and charm. While this passage does not describe an imaginary landscape per se, the idea of paradise as being denoted by sight, sound, scent, and charm is something that is directly

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<sup>77</sup> “The Shahnameh: A Persian Cultural Emblem and a Timeless Masterpiece The Shahnameh in India”, The Fitzwilliam Museum News, accessed April 15, 2019, <https://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/gallery/shahnameh/vgallery/section5.html>.

<sup>78</sup> Firdausi, *Shahnama of Firdausi vol. 1* trans. Arthur George Warner, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013): 257.



transferable to the physical landscapes of the Indo-Persian tradition, where the appeal to sensation remains a fundamental aspect of the garden. The verse also mentions specific plants: narcissi, pomegranate, plumes, and cherries. Due to their prominence in literary works, we can assume that certain plants held cultural importance in imaginary landscapes and physical ones— specifically in regards to beauty and the idea of paradise.

The performance of poetry known as *musha'ira* often took place in garden settings. A *musha'ira* is a gathering in which numerous poets assemble to recite their *ghazals*. The early Mughal assemblies were dominated by Persian poetry but over time Urdu gained more prominence amongst poets and the court. Whether it be in Persian or Urdu, the topoi and symbolism remain very similar.

In *Mughal Gardens in Persian Poetry*, W. M. Thackston delves into Indo-Persian poetic traditions and analyzes *ghazals* and *qasidas* in view of their usage of floral imagery. A *ghazal* commonly consists of between five and fifteen couplets, which stand independent of each other, but are linked strictly in their poetic form and more abstractly in their theme. Most ghazals have between seven and twelve *shers*, or couplets. The *qasida* is a longer form of poetry usually written in praise of someone, a sort of panegyric. Like the *ghazal* it also follows a strict meter and rhyming structure. Thackston notes that “neither the Mughals nor anyone else had the slightest interest in changing what was by then a centuries-old tradition, the weight of which was so heavy that the allowable topoi and images of most genres had become frozen and immutable.”<sup>79</sup> This means that the meaning evoked by certain images was not debated and was well

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<sup>79</sup> Thackston, "Mughal Gardens in Persian Poetry," 233.

understood by the audience. Common flowers to the imagined *bagh* of Indo-Persian poetry are the rose, tulip, hyacinth violet, narcissus and jasmine, while the common trees are the cypresses, plane (chennar), popular, boxwood, pine, willow, and redbud. Each one of these plants carries one or more topoi, which are set by the tradition with only room enough for elaboration. Thackston explains the rigidity of the tradition well through the examples of the rose and nightingale:

The topos of the rose and nightingale, for example, in which the rose is the uncaring, unfeeling, unconcerned beloved upon whose beauty the tragic, suffering nightingale-lover dotes, wailing hopelessly through the night, was repeated with endless elaboration and subtle twits, but the traditions simply did not allow a poet to substitute, say, the Indian cuckoo and the hibiscus for the rose and the nightingale.<sup>80</sup>

Other topoi include the tulip being likened to a wine goblet, the hyacinth likened to the curly tresses of the beloved, and in reference to its striated appearance, the anemone is thought to be scarred or branded.<sup>81</sup> The use of floral imagery permeated Indo-Persian poetry, and through metaphor and symbolism, it conveys themes of love and longing as well as images of power and mystical messages.<sup>82</sup>

While Thackston primarily spoke of Persian poets, like Saadi and Hafez of the eleventh and twelfth century respectively, the tradition and themes remain consistent in Indo-Persian poetry and eventually Urdu poetry created during the Mughal empire. In what follows, I will focus primarily on the singular poet, whose work and life parallels that of the Taj Mahal. Ghalib was born in Agra in 1797, just a century after the construction of the Taj Mahal. He is often thought to be the last great Mughal poet. Just

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<sup>80</sup> Thackston, "Mughal Gardens in Persian Poetry," 233.

<sup>81</sup> Thackston, "Mughal Gardens in Persian Poetry," 234.

<sup>82</sup> Welch, "Gardens That Babur Did Not Like," 66.

as the Taj is the pinnacle of Mughal architecture, so is Ghalib of Indo-Persian poetry. They also share a similar timeline. Ghalib's life and work bore witness to the decline of the Mughal empire and the transition to the British Raj just as the Taj gardens did. As the Taj is the zenith of Mughal culture and one of the last great architectural achievements of the empire, Ghalib, to many, was the last great Indo-Persian poet. Both Ghalib and the Taj represent the way in which Indo-Persian culture was degraded by colonialism. The use of Ghalib is deliberate because of this shared relation to the Taj and Mughal culture, but also because on a more practical level, the use of an eighteenth-century poet shows how the tradition of the imagined garden remained strong in Indo-Persian memory for centuries. The nightingale and rose topoi were just as popular during Ghalib's time as they were during the eleventh-century Saadi's, as we see from the following verse by Ghalib:

All that the nightingale can do provokes the rose's laughter  
What we call love is really a derangement of the mind.<sup>83</sup>

While it is clear that physical gardens were not built to mimic the landscape of imaginary ones, the gardens that existed in the minds of many people in *ghazal* or *sher* form would have shaped how one experienced a physical landscape. Seeing a rose would most certainly evoke thoughts of the beloved or a narcissus of the beloved's eyes. Indo-Persian poetry can therefore serve as a guide to how a Mughal-era person might have read and experienced a landscape.

A second theme in Indo-Persian poetry, that of the assembly itself, serves to demonstrate the atmosphere of the imagined literary space. While the assembly can take on many forms, including spaces in which garden imagery abounds, but is typically a

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<sup>83</sup> Ghalib, *The Famous Ghalib*, 14.

shorthand for the world, in which the lover-of-life can feel included, or lonely in exclusion, or deeply saddened by the idea of having to leave. God typically enjoys watching the events unfold and observing how the lovers are caught up in world matters.<sup>84</sup> Much like the in the physical settings of poetic assemblies, in the imagined assembly space sensory engagement is again paramount. The assembly is designed to appeal to all senses: music plays, flower petals are scattered across lavish carpets, candles flicker, and for all of those present wine flows abundantly. Here is how the eighteenth-century Urdu and Persian poet Ghalib describes a poetic assembly:

Newcomers to the assembly of the heart's desires  
Beware, if it is wine and music that you seek!

Look well at me, if only you have eyes to see  
Listen to me, if you have ears to hear me speak

The saki's charm will steal away your faith, your wits,  
The minstrel's song will rob you of your sense, your powers.

At night you see the carpet laden all with bloom –  
A gardener's apron, filled with fresh, sweet-scented flowers

The saki walks, the flute plays on enchantingly,  
Heaven to the eyes, paradise to the ears of all.

Come in the morning: Look at the assembly then,  
Life, joy, wine, music – all are gone beyond recall

Bearing the scar of parting from its erstwhile friends,  
One candle stands, burnt out. Know: this is how it ends.<sup>85</sup>

In literary gardens and in actually built sites, gardens were more often than not an impious environment where all worldly desires could be fulfilled: staging political

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<sup>84</sup> Ralph Russell and Marion Molteno, *The Famous Ghalib: The Sound of My Moving Pen*, New Delhi: Lotus Collection, Roli Books, 2016. Kindle.

<sup>85</sup> Ghalib, *The Famous Ghalib*, 87-89.

conquests, drinking wine, and having sexual encounters.<sup>86</sup> In the above ghazal by Ghalib, an eighteenth-century Urdu and Persian poet, the description of the assembly is a warning to newcomers. Ghalib urges them to remember that the night of pleasure will end and the flames of passion will burn out. While it is unclear whether this particular assembly actually occurred, this ghazal is useful in further defining paradise in the Indo-Persian cultural mindset. The environment of the assembly is full of floral imagery; the group is gathered in a space where each corner is likened to the gardener's garments and flower-filled hands. The words of the original Urdu and the English translation evoke the idea of a space filled with the sight and smell of flowers. Sound also plays an important role in the ambience, for part of the disappointment of the morning is the absence of music. The *saki* or wine cupbearer, who was likely a young boy, is likened to paradise because of the visual pleasure he brings to the assembly as well as the auditory element he adds with flute playing. In another *sher* by Ghalib fragrance and wine are of utmost importance in paradise, two things that are also mentioned in the Quran:

One thing alone gives Paradise some value in my eyes  
What else, if not the wine, red as the rose, fragrant as musk?<sup>87</sup>

Fragrance and floral imagery are undoubtedly important in conceptions of paradise in both religious and more secular/cultural realms. Auditory engagement is also very important. In the *ghazal*, the music of the flute is what brought joy to the assembly but pleasurable sounds are not limited to those played or strummed. In the case of imagined gardens, the sound that is most often described is that of the birds:

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<sup>86</sup> D. Fairchild Ruggles, *Islamic Gardens and Landscapes*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 90.

<sup>87</sup> Ghalib, *The Famous Ghalib*, 102.

I went into the garden, and it seemed a school assembled  
The nightingales heard my laments, then sang their songs of love.<sup>88</sup>

From the Quranic verses the paradise garden takes shape and is given a set of physical attributes: a four-fold garden divided by intersecting streams in which there is ample shade. This approach alone would be limiting, as it leaves much to the imagination of the garden conservator. What kind of trees produce shade? What fruits would have been used? How are plants arranged and managed? How best could we recreate the experience of the garden?

The process of understanding poetic verse in which one must look at the choice of individual words and phrases as well as the overall effect and impression of the verse, lends itself well to answering some of these questions. To understand a *ghazal* or *sher*, one must know it inside and out, and from all angles. It is not enough to know the vocabulary. One must understand how words and phrases interact with each other, as well as the context. Similarly, it is not enough to say a *charbagh* is a Quranic paradise landscape; to do so only acknowledges the grammar and general vocabulary of the space, which manifests itself in the physical organization of space. The *ras*, or essence of the landscape is better captured with greater context. In the case of my study, dynastic identity and Indo-Persian poetry serve to shine light on aspects and experiences of the gardens at the Taj that are neglected when adopting the singular lens approach of identifying them with Quranic paradise. From a survey of the traditions it become evident

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<sup>88</sup> Ghalib, *The Famous Ghalib*, 53.

that alongside shade and water elements, specific plants embody certain associations and thus hold implicit value in cultural memory of both physical and imaginary landscapes.

بخشے ہے جلوۂ گل ذوق تماشا غالب  
چشم کو چاہئے ہر رنگ میں وا ہو جانا

बख़्शे है जल्वा-ए-गुल ज़ौक-ए-तमाशा 'ग़ालिब'  
चश्म को चाहिए हर रंग में वा हो जाना

baḵhshe hai jalva-e-gul zauq-e-tamāshā 'ghālib'  
chashm ko chāhiye har rañg meñ vā ho jaanā

Ghalib, it is the rose's beauty teaches us to gaze  
No matter what the scene, no one should ever close his eyes.<sup>89</sup>

-Mirza Ghalib

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<sup>89</sup> Ghalib, *The Famous Ghalib*, 17.



### **Chapter Three:** **EXPERIENCING THE GARDENS AT THE TAJ**

Most previous research on Mughal funerary gardens has sought to imagine them as solely paradise gardens. In doing so, scholars heavily relied on Quranic concepts of paradise leaving no room for our imagination to extend beyond the verses that directly inspired the *charbagh*. These analyses focused on the the two primary attributes of a Quranic paradise: shade and flowing water. While I agree that these are very important aspects of a paradise garden and a Mughal funerary garden, it is difficult to reconstruct the experience of the garden outside of these features. By adopting other lenses like that of dynastic identity and Indo-Persian poetry, the way in which the garden interacts with the viewer and the physical architecture becomes clearer, and a reimagined garden starts to take shape. Two effects of the garden and its individual plants arise from its interaction with the physical architecture of the complex: perspective and sensory engagement—in order to remain true to the spirit of the original gardens, these two effects are paramount.

The first step in re-envisioning the gardens at the Taj Mahal is to recount the history of the plantings, a task that might seem simple at first but proves to be quite challenging. Although there are ample details available from Mughal-era documents pertaining to the construction, material sourcing, and the dimensions of the Taj Mahal complex, little to nothing of value is said concerning the gardens. In the following section, I will present the history of the Taj gardens through descriptions of their plantings. From this, we can conclude that most plantings were chosen for their religious or cultural symbolism. Beyond the symbolic, plants were also chosen based on their

climate adaptiveness and the texture they could provide in the plots. Some plants that were a part of the Persianate garden tradition could not fare the weather in Agra, so some traditional plantings would not have been present at the Taj.

The history of the plantings at the Taj Mahal was affected by more than just Shah Jahan and Lord Curzon. Despite its passing through multiple hands, the garden did not lose key attributes until Curzon's renovations. For example, between the time the Mughals controlled the monument and when it was overseen by Curzon, the Taj became a ground for cultivating rare plants, a change that upon first consideration appears to be far from the original symbolism of the site. Yet the Taj, although designed as a funerary space, also functioned as a symbol of the power of Shah Jahan and the greatness of his empire. Even after it was longer in Mughal control, rare plants would have added to the opulence and power of the monument that stood as a symbol for Shah Jahan's reign and the glory of the Mughal empire. This use is reminiscent of Timur's gardens, where he brought back objects and plants from all of his new conquests to demonstrate the greatness of his reign. Even though the Taj gardens' functions changed over the years leading up to Curzon's renovations, the plantings and the effect they gave still remained faithful to the supposed original.

There are three possible ways of envisioning the planting at the Taj during Shah Jahan's time in theory. The first is by drawing upon the limited documentation of the Taj garden during this time, the second and probably most useful is through relying on the evidence from the plantings at other imperial gardens at Agra during the Mughal era, and the last is by contextualizing and analyzing the floral decoration on the mausoleum itself.

I have chosen several images for my discussion of the history of the Taj gardens. The first of these are artistic representations of the Taj as it was during eighteenth century. Many Taj landscape representations from Western artists during the eighteenth century tend to over-idealize and romanticize the landscape. The paintings I have chosen are instead more realistic interpretations of the landscape. Early photographs have also been used to show the gardens as they were right before Curzon's renovations. While many agree that the garden was overgrown at this time, its key attributes remained intact.

### **PLANTINGS:**

Saleh Kamboh, the official bibliographer of Shah Jahan and the author of the *Shah Jahan Nama*, provides us with a guiding insight by describing the Taj as containing "various kinds of fruit-bearing trees."<sup>90</sup> Much like the descriptions of the paradise garden in the Quran, Saleh Kamboh does not specify which sorts of fruit-bearing trees existed in the gardens. Since there is so little specific information from Shah Jahan's time, perhaps the best way of envisioning the original plantings of the Taj is by exploring descriptions of other imperial gardens in Agra during the reign of Shah Jahan. In *The Travels of Peter Mundy in Europe and Asia, 1609-1667*, Mundy describes the fruits of an unnamed garden in Agra as containing apples, oranges, mangoes, coconut palms, mulberries, and figs. He also describes lines of cypress and oriental trees.<sup>91</sup> It is possible that the garden he described was at the Taj, but equally possible it was not. Nonetheless his account tells us the sorts of plants favored by the Mughals. One of Shah Jahan's court poets, Kalim,

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<sup>90</sup> Patrick Bowe, "The Taj Mahal Garden: A Changing Planting Policy," *Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes* 27, no. 3 (2007): 229.

<sup>91</sup> Bowe, "The Taj Mahal Garden: A Changing Planting Policy," 229.

provided details of Bagh-i-Jahanara, the imperial garden of the royal princess Jahanara Begum, which is also located in Agra. The trees mentioned included: screw pine (*Pandanus odoratissimus*), monkey pod tree (*Samanea saman*), champa (*Michelia champaca*), maulsari (*Mimusops elengi*), neem (*Azadirachta indica*) and willow trees (probably *Salix alba*), all native trees.<sup>92</sup> This assortment of trees boasts a wide array of blossom colors, fruit, and texture. The broad and wide canopy of the monkey pod tree stands in stark contrast to the screw pine which is a palm-like shrub, with a stubby trunk and long, slim leaves. Kalim also described the Bagh-i-Jahanara as having cypress trees (*Cupressus sempervirens*), a tree that has great importance in the history of *charbaghs* and paradise gardens, but one not native to the South Asian subcontinent.

The trees were the most integral part of the garden's symbolism. Two types of trees were bound to be present: the cypress and fruit-bearing trees. Cypress since antiquity has been associated with death, in part because it fails to regenerate when cut back too severely. For the Persians and the Mughals, the cypress was representative of death and by extension eternity or life after death. Additionally, the cypress stood as a symbol of the male principle. Its complementary half is the fruit-bearing tree, the female principle that represents spring and the renewal of life as well as the abundance found in the afterlife.<sup>93</sup> Fruit giving trees also offered shade, scent and colorful flowers that were all indispensable to Mughal garden design. In both Persian and Mughal miniatures, cypress and fruit-bearing trees are shown together with the branches of the fruit tree

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<sup>92</sup> Bowe, "The Taj Mahal Garden: A Changing Planting Policy," 229.

<sup>93</sup> "Underneath Which Rivers Flow" The Islamic Monthly.

wrapping around the cypress tree, “symbolic of both the entwining of the lovers and the union of the heavenly eternal world with the earthly changing world.”<sup>94</sup>

Aside from trees, the Taj gardens are described as containing aromatic herbs and smaller plantings, like roses.<sup>95</sup> Other small plantings at the imperial gardens in Shah Jahan’s Agra that were described by Peter Mundy and Kalim include various types of marigolds, red poppies, white carnations, sunflowers, narcissus, double poppies, gillyflowers and cockscombs.<sup>96</sup> Also present in the Mughal chronicles are other flowers like tuberose, balsam, anemones, and violets.<sup>97</sup> These smaller plantings would have offered a great diversity of scent, color, and shape in the garden. They were likely chosen because of their cultural significance stemming from both the physical and imagined gardens traditions, more so than their religious symbolism. The anemones, violets, and white carnations derive from a centuries long tradition of avidly using purples and whites within formal gardens. Flowers like narcissus and red poppies were extremely important tropes in Indo-Persian poetry, where the narcissus is representative of the beautiful eyes of the beloved and the red poppy is a symbol of a person who died for love, a rather appropriate addition for a funerary complex for Mumtaz, who died giving birth to her fourteenth child.

Researchers have yet to conduct an archaeobotanical survey at the Taj and thus compiling a potential planting list has historically been difficult. Rina Kamenetsky, Jules Janick, and Sumangala Puttaswamy in *Horticulture of the Taj Mahal: Gardens of the*

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<sup>94</sup> Emma Clark, “The Symbolism of the Islamic Garden,” *Islamic Arts*, October 20, 2011, accessed January 23, 2019, <http://islamic-arts.org/2011/the-symbolism-of-the-islamic-garden/>.

<sup>95</sup> Bowe, “The Taj Mahal Garden: A Changing Planting Policy,” 229.

<sup>96</sup> Bowe, “The Taj Mahal Garden: A Changing Planting Policy,” 229.

<sup>97</sup> Herbert, “The Taj and the Raj: Garden Imperialism in India,” 257.

*Imagination* worked to decode the sorts of flowers featured on the decorations of the mausoleum, as a possible clue to the nature of the original plantings. The stone inlays were easiest to identify botanically because they represent the entire plant and, although stylized, are naturalistic. Bellflower, chrysanthemum, columbine, crown imperial, daffodil, gloriosa, honeysuckle, various lilies, lotus, pomegranate, poppy, primrose, tulip, and anemone were among the flowers represented. The reliefs were more difficult to identify because their form is stylized with mirror symmetry and often the leaves on the plant did not match the flower. The reliefs, similar to the inlays, include various lilies, tulips, narcissus, poppy, columbine, peony, rose, and iris. To a certain extent, the floral decorations on the Taj reflect the horticultural knowledge of the Mughal Empire. Many of the plants depicted, like lilies, iris, tulip, and narcissus are indigenous to India and the Middle East and for centuries were frequently illustrated in Persian and Mughal paintings and rugs.<sup>98</sup>

There were many plants depicted on the monument that the researchers failed to identify because they are largely imaginative. Many agree that the naturalistic marble reliefs in the tomb include “fantasy plants based on the artist’s imagination or composites influenced by Western florilegia.”<sup>99</sup> These Western style splays of flowers were adapted to fit Mughal ideals, particularly symmetry. Such a seamless incorporation of foreign decoration shows a highly developed form of Mughal design that was willing to take inspiration from the cosmopolitan empire.

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<sup>98</sup> Jules Janick, Rina Kamenetsky, and Sumangala Puttaswamy, “Horticulture of the Taj Mahal Gardens of the Imagination,” *Chronica Horticulturae*, v. 50, no. 3, (2010): 30-33.

<sup>99</sup> Janick, Kamenetsky, and Puttaswamy, “Horticulture of the Taj Mahal Gardens of the Imagination,” 30-33.

This research provides concrete data on the sort of flowers that were associated with the Taj gardens since they appeared in the decoration of the mausoleum. While it is possible that not every flower depicted on the mausoleum was featured in the gardens, their presence does show that they were favored by the Mughal imperials and were a part of their horticultural knowledge. The flowers all vary in color, ranging from bright yellows to deep violets. Some are low and small ground covers like the windflower with its tiny flowers dotting the earth. Others, like the crown imperial, stand tall, with a downward angle so that its flowers are looking down at the other smaller plantings below. Such a variety in the height and shape of smaller plantings would have created immense texture (**Figure 2 and 3**).



**Figure 2:** Crown imperials stand fairly tall amongst other small plantings. These unique flowers that face down would have added intrigue to the gardens design.



**Figure 3:** As the visitor walked above the garden beds, the low lying anemones or windflowers surrounding the base of the trees would have created a lush green carpet like those mentioned in the Quran.

Moreover, the floral decoration on the mausoleum permanently reflects the part of Mughal culture that has been lost in the gardens. The flowers depicted, like the rose, narcissus and tulip, are widely used in Indo-Persian poetry in association with paradise but perhaps more importantly they are the flowers used to describe the beloved.

Catherine Asher says that "the beloved on the most profound level is a metaphor for God and also might refer to the beloved of the emperor, his deceased wife."<sup>100</sup>

One of the most highly quoted descriptions of the Taj gardens comes from François Bernier in 1659. He said that "to the right and left of that dome [of the mausoleum] on a lower surface you observe several garden walks covered with trees and many parterres full of flowers."<sup>101</sup> His description, although recorded during the time of Shah Jahan, is not particularly useful at recounting the original Taj gardens as it leaves a lot to the imagination. What can be extracted from his description is that the smaller plantings seemed to have been arranged into a pattern or within an existing structural pattern of the garden.

Historically, researchers have taken the Mughal's known love for symmetry and applied it to every form of design without question. When it comes to gardens, solely focusing on the geometric nature of planting and the geometry of the architectural feature of a garden misses an important aspect of its design. The trees and flowers may have been arranged in the ground in geometric patterns but what grew above ground and its shape was largely left to the will of nature.

Travelers' accounts of the Taj from when it was under Mughal control are limited in number. Aside from Bernier, there are no records that have helpful descriptions of the gardens while under Mughal rule. What we learn from studying the Taj is that a garden's history is not static. Plants are living creatures whose health and size are determined partially by their keepers but ultimately submit to the will of time and nature. In 1761,

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<sup>100</sup> Asher, *Architecture of Mughal India*, Cambridge, 244.

<sup>101</sup> François Bernier, *Bernier's Travels in the Mogul Empire*, (Washington, DC: Ross & Perry, 2001), 296.



during the reign of Shah Alam II, the city of Agra, including all of its heritage sites, was ceded to the Jats of Bharatpur. Although the Taj held less importance for the rulers of this kingdom, the hereditary caretakers who were responsible for maintaining the complex for decades were allowed to continue their work. By this point, the trees in the garden had grown to maturity and the plots of the *charbagh* were dense. A north-facing view of the garden by William Hodges from the late eighteenth century shows a well planted garden with thick plantings (**Figure 4**).<sup>102</sup> However, the cypresses lining the main entrance are so small as to suggest that they are replacements.



**Figure 4:** Sketched over one hundred years after the Taj was complete, the smallness of the cypresses suggests that they are not the originals but replacements. The dense foliage in the plots alongside the main walkways created an obscuring effect so the mausoleum is slowly revealed to the visitor on his journey through the garden.

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<sup>102</sup> Bowe, "The Taj Mahal Garden: A Changing Planting Policy," 230.

Two decades later, in 1785, the Jats were forced to hand over Agra to the kingdom of the Mahrattas of Scindia. It is during this era that the descriptions of the gardens at the Taj become more evocative. In 1794, Thomas Twinning of the British East India Company visited the Taj and reported that the garden complex contained “thousands of orange trees, with their ripe fruit upon them.”<sup>103</sup> An early nineteenth-century plan of the complex shows the garden as boasting oranges, “pineapples or pomegranates (the map is unclear), bananas, pomelos, limes or lemons (again the map is unclear), guavas and apples.”<sup>104</sup> In 1803, the Mahrattas were stripped of their control of Agra by the British. From thereafter, the Taj and its gardens were looked after by a committee, which included the Magistrate, the Collector and the Commanding Officer at Agra.<sup>105</sup>

Whereas during the reign of Shah Jahan and his predecessors the Taj served as a means of paying respect to Mumtaz, while passing through the hands of multiple powers, the complex had grown to be a place of recreation of people from all walks of life, not just Imperials. A visit to the Taj in 1815 by Lord Hastings, the Governor General and the chief representative of the British East India Company in India, proved to have a great impact on the maintenance of the gardens for decades to follow. Lord Hastings was the first to complain that the maturity of the trees in the garden was obstructive to the view of the mausoleum, a complaint that would be made again, decades later, by his fellow countryman, Lord Curzon. In an 1820 Company painting, drawn for Lord Hasting’s wife, the dense foliage flanking the main walkway from the south entrance blocks most of the

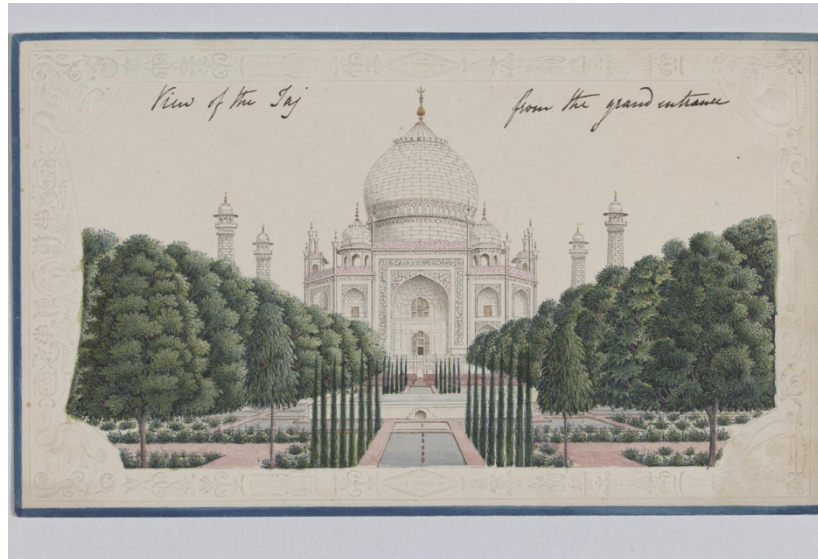
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<sup>103</sup> Herbert, “The Taj and the Raj: Garden Imperialism in India,” 257.

<sup>104</sup> Bowe, “The Taj Mahal Garden: A Changing Planting Policy,” 230.

<sup>105</sup> Bowe, “The Taj Mahal Garden: A Changing Planting Policy,” 230.

minarets and the entire view of the mosque and its counterpart on the opposite side  
(Figure 5).



**Figure 5:** This company painting of the Taj shows cypresses of moderate size along the main channel and thick plots of trees to either side. Accompanying the large plantings are smaller plantings around their base. This is an example of how plants that varied height and texture added to the visual appeal of the garden.

Hastings was concerned by the progressively obscured perspective the garden created, but he was most worried about the future of the garden. He believed that a garden should not only be maintained for aesthetic and recreational reasons but also for economic reasons as well. His desire for an economically valuable garden led to the introduction, acclimatization and distribution of plants of economic, medicinal and ornamental value at the Taj.<sup>106</sup>

The number of exotic plants at the Taj had already increased by 1844, as documented by the *Catalogue of Plants Found in and about Agra*. Teak trees, sago palm (native to Japan), the traveler's tree of Madagascar, and sweet-scented passion flower of

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<sup>106</sup> Bowe, "The Taj Mahal Garden: A Changing Planting Policy," 230.

tropical America were among the plants imported and collected at the Taj complex.<sup>107</sup>The function of the gardens and the complex had clearly changed, but further research into the history of the garden indicates that there was consistency in the plantings and maintenance of the Taj. In *The Handbook of the Taj* (1854), we glean that fruit-bearing trees, like Bombay mangoes, guavas, oranges, limes, loquats, and palms, were still integral to the garden's designs, thus the paradise symbolism was left largely intact.<sup>108</sup> Some plants were now grown for economic value but, based on photographic evidence from the following decade, no fruit trees or cypress had been cleared. Thus the paradise symbolism endured despite the changes made to the garden.

As more and more visitors came to the Taj, the purpose of planting slightly shifted. It was no longer enough to just maintain the gardens as they were but, instead, the entertainment and amusement of the visitors also became a consideration. The sort of plantings found at the complex also changed quite a bit and “by the end of the nineteenth century, the garden boasted a succulent garden, a chrysanthemum garden, and a conservatory that doubled as an aviary, a fern house, and pot garden.”<sup>109</sup>

In the 1860s the first photographs of the Taj were taken. Samuel Bourne's aerial shot from the south entrance gate (**Figure 6**) shows the density of the foliage. The cypresses lining the main channel have grown to maturity (the average height of a cypress is 25 meters) and some even tower above the canopies of trees in adjacent plots. In a second image by Samuel Bourne (**Figure 7**), the bulk of the mausoleum is obscured

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<sup>107</sup> Bowe, "The Taj Mahal Garden: A Changing Planting Policy," 230.

<sup>108</sup> Bowe, "The Taj Mahal Garden: A Changing Planting Policy," 229.

<sup>109</sup> Bowe, "The Taj Mahal Garden: A Changing Planting Policy," 233.

by foliage—one tree’s canopy extends so far as to cover the entire width of the walkway. In Eugene Clutterbuck Impey’s photograph (**Figure 8**), we are given an alternative view from the garden. The size of the trees bordering both sides of the photograph (left: unidentified, right: cypress) indicate that plantings were not often trimmed or pruned, but instead left to grow in any direction they pleased even if their branches obstructed the views. Lining the walkway are potted plants suggesting a great variety of flora and confirming that the Taj was being used, in part, as a nursery to produce exotic plants for use at the Taj and/ or economic reasons as mentioned in the *Catalogue of Plants Found in and about Agra*.

These photographs were taken after the Indian Rebellion of 1857. From 1857 to around 1871, the British Raj had little enthusiasm for the maintenance of Indian historical monuments and thus the gardens are likely overgrown.<sup>110</sup> For this reason, we cannot use the photographs to represent what the Taj would have been like during the reign of Shah Jahan in the seventeenth century. However, the garden still embodies what the original would have: varied plant life and fruiting trees enhancing the sensory experience and foliage that lets the view of the Taj slowly unfold as the visitor journeys through the garden.

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<sup>110</sup> Bowe, "The Taj Mahal Garden: A Changing Planting Policy," 230.



**Figure 6 (Top):** This aerial photo shows a garden that had likely been left to overgrow during the Indian Rebellion, nonetheless it shows that historically the plots directly opposite to the channel contained trees. **Figure 7 (Left):** This photo shows the obscured view that Curzon and perhaps Bernier would have been familiar. **Figure 8 (Right):** Around the main channel are potted plants. Prior to the renovations by Curzon, the Taj had become a nursery for interesting plants. The foliage over the walkways along the main channel would have created the shaded environment that is important to all Mughal Paradise Gardens.

**PERSPECTIVE:**

Now that we have a sense of what individual plantings would have been like, we can move on to another key aspect of experiencing the Taj and its gardens: perspective. Perspective in this section largely means how a visitor would encounter the gardens in their totality rather than as individual plants. Perspective also includes how the gardens

interact with the physical architecture to form a different impression on the visitor than what is created by the lawns today. The first view to consider is that of Shah Jahan, the emperor, who visited the Taj to mourn and pay respects to his dear wife.

***View of Emperor:***

Popular imagination holds the view from the south gate of the Taj to be the only one worth noting; plastered on posters and postcards, this is the view we are accustomed to. However, Shah Jahan would have never entered the complex from the south. Amita Baig astutely stated that “if we were to see the Taj Mahal through the emperor’s eyes, one would realize that the northern wall along the waterfront is the only external wall so richly embellished, clearly in recognition that this was the emperor’s entrance.”<sup>111</sup> His vantage point was from the Yamuna River at the northern end of the complex. At this site of arrival, the Taj’s reflection would linger in the waters of the Yamuna and the gardens across the bank at the Mahtab Bagh would have been an altogether inviting and pleasing sight. Arriving through the northern entrance, the emperor would first experience the gardens from the tomb itself as he faced the south gate. Positioned high above the gardens, he would have an excellent view of the entirety of the paradise garden, one that would certainly cause pause and reflection on life, death, and what lies in the hereafter.

***View of the Gardens looking South:***

Since most people approach the Taj from the south, the northern view of the garden is almost entirely forgotten. When visiting other Mughal tomb-gardens, like Humayun’s tomb, whose mausoleums are centrally located, the visitor, after completing

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<sup>111</sup> Amita Baig and Rahul Mehrotra, *Taj Mahal: Multiple Narratives* (New Delhi: Om Books International, 2018), 24.

the journey through the garden and touring the inside of the mausoleum, inevitably walks around the terrace looking on to the garden from all angles. Due to the position of the mausoleum at the Taj, we have thought of it as a linear experience, the final destination being the view of the inside of the mausoleum. Occasionally, tourists stop at the north side of the terrace to view the Yamuna, the Mahtab Bagh and the Red Fort in the distance, but rarely do they look back to the gardens they just passed through. When taking into consideration the actual breadth of the complex, including the Mahtab Bagh across the river and the power of symbolism in the gardens themselves, the position of the mausoleum would have begged the visitor to take pause and reflect both facing south towards the gardens already walked and facing north toward the Yamuna and the Mahtab Bagh across the way. The view that created reflection on life, death and the afterlife onto the south-facing view of the Taj complex has been silenced by bare lawns that seek to take no attention away from the physical architecture and only add to the narrative which proclaims that the Taj is merely what is clad in white.

***Design and Hierarchical Composition in Shah Jahan's Court:***

In *Visual Strategies of Imperial Self Representation*, Ebba Koch argues that under Shah Jahan's rule there were visual strategies and compositional principles in paintings that are not found amongst any other previous emperors depictions of *darbar*, or assembly around the throne from which the emperor would hold audiences. Shah Jahan is remembered as having a heavy hand in the creation of art in his court. He was the supreme ruler of all aspects of political and courtly life and thus oversaw all of his artists, artisans, and architects, functioning as his own creative director. His artists developed

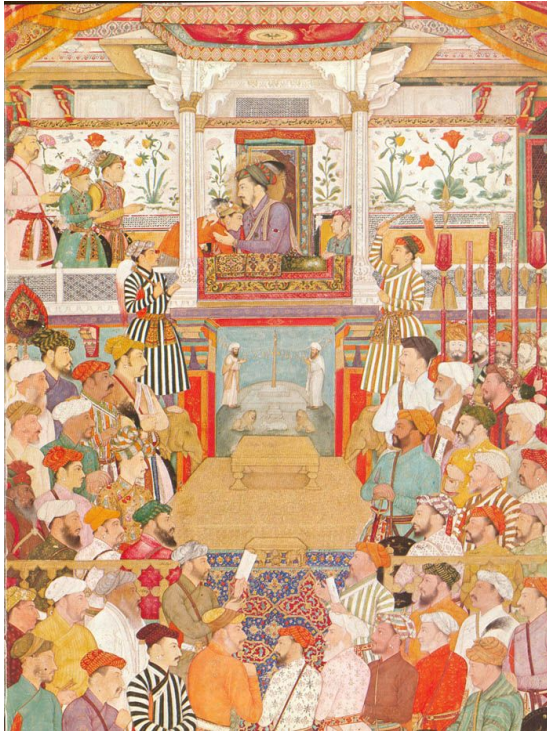


representations of the emperor and his court and courtiers that followed strict compositional principles that could be used to understand the southern, obstructed view of the Taj and its gardens.

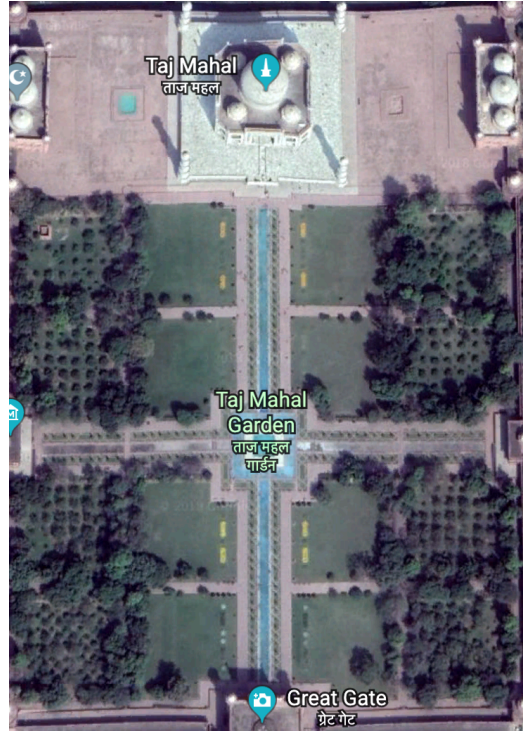
Ebba Koch describes the different forms of visual hierarchy in the painting where both Shah Jahan and his court are depicted. In these images, Shah Jahan is always at the top of the painting in the center, while the courtiers and the built environment adhere to the principle of *qarina*, the ideal bilateral symmetry. Much as in the garden, the physical architecture in these paintings functions like a grid to organize the composition. His courtiers, placed in order of their status in the court, are positioned on both sides leading up the seat of the emperor. The crowd of courtiers is visually chaotic, with overlapping bodies, but ultimately leads the eye to and frames the seat of the Shah Jahan (**Figure 9**). The lower half of the painting, where the courtiers stand, is filled with color and texture, and their bilateral organization serves to strengthen sense of the Shah Jahan's righteousness and the justice of his government.

This visual organization of the paintings of Shah Jahan's court aligns with that of the mausoleum's position in the garden complex (**Figure 10**). If we take the mausoleum to be an allusion to the throne and the gardens to be its court, the view of the mausoleum from the south of the gardens would be obstructed by the foliage of the garden, just as the view of the throne would be partially blocked from a position further down in the King's court. The closer you approached the mausoleum, or the king's throne, the better you would be able to see it. Employing this visual hierarchy, the view from the north, or the emperor's view, could be interpreted not only as a moment for

reflection on life and death but also an expression of Shah Jahan's identity as the political and cultural ruler of the court.



**Figure 9:** Shah Jahan holding court in *darbar*, a balcony type throne. The formal composition and position of the throne is similar to the Taj Mahal complex.



**Figure 10:** Google Earth image showing the layout of the Taj complex from an aerial perspective. The gardens are bilaterally aligned and draw the eye to the mausoleum.

### ***Journey of Tourist Pre- Curzon:***

The Taj was almost exclusively for imperial use until the late eighteenth century, particularly for remembrance of Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal on their death anniversaries. The British “discovered” the Taj in the late eighteenth century and started the cult of tourism that we see today. Before this new colonial tradition, many would only encounter the Taj at a great distance. From their rooftop in Agra or from the banks of Yamuna, only parts of the Taj would be seen by commoners. Much like the emperor

himself and the way he would appear to the public for display from a distance, the Taj was private, but wasn't entirely hidden from the public eye. Its sheer size and location on the Yamuna helped to ensure that, although access to the Taj was restricted to imperials, everyone was afforded a taste, albeit distant, of its presence and extravagance.

Until the late nineteenth century, there was a bazaar and four caravanserais (travelers' inns) in front of the forecourt (*jilawkhana*) where the South Gate is located (**Figure 11**). For some earlier travelers and people of Agra, the bazaar was as close to the imperial tomb as they would ever get. This marketplace, originally designed as a part of the Taj complex, was one way for the commoner, in lieu of the exclusive experience of divine paradise within the complex, to get an impression of the greatness of the empire through witnessing the fruits of its flourishing trade networks.

For those who could get into the complex in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the walk to journey to the Taj mausoleum would have not begun at the south gate as it does for modern tourists, but instead would have begun from this bazaar. The bazaar was cross-shaped and delineated into four parts, reminiscent of the *charbagh* that lay just beyond the South Gate. It was formed by open and intersecting streets (12c, 12d, 12e, 12f) with four caravanserais (16a, 16b, 16d) which together corresponded to the walkways and plots of the garden.<sup>112</sup>

Walking through the bazaar, a traveler would have been confronted with all sorts of sights, sounds, and scents, some undoubtedly unpleasant especially during peak trade seasons. The streets, likely crowded and chaotic, led tourists and traders to stalls of some

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<sup>112</sup> Ebba Koch, "The Taj Mahal: Architecture, Symbolism, And Urban Significance," *Muqarnas Online* 22, no. 1 (2005): 136.

of the world's finest goods: two markets (16b, 16c) known as the Katra Fulel and Katra Reshman were abundant in perfume and silk respectively. Despite any unpleasantness encountered, the bazaar represented all the riches and wealth of the earthly world and the strength and power of the Mughal Empire, which had access to such an array of divine goods. The bazaar was mirrored and contrasted in the gardens just further north in the complex.

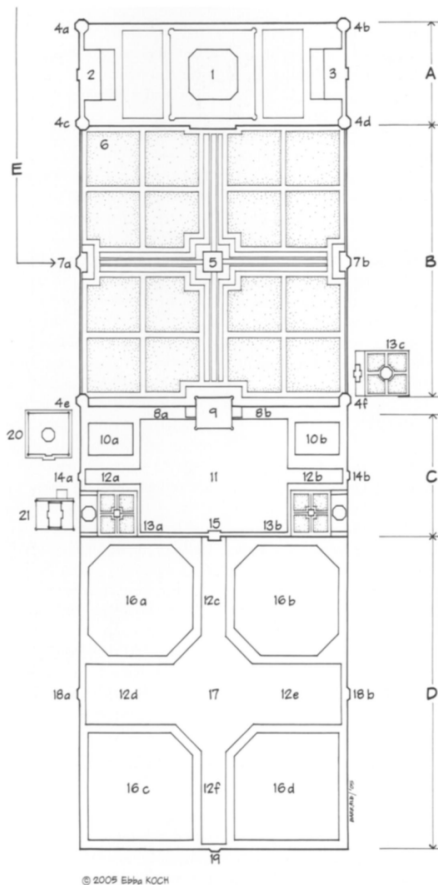


Figure 11:

Site plan of the Taj Mahal with terms derived from the Persian descriptions by Lahwri and Kanbu of 1643: A. river-front terrace (kursi), B. tomb garden (bagh), C. complex of the forecourt (jilawkhana), D. complex with cross-shaped (char-su) bazaar and four caravanserais (sara'r), 1. Mausoleum (rawza), 2. Mosque (masjid), 3. Assembly hall (mehman khana), 4a-f. Wall towers (burj), 5. pool (hawz), 6. First temporary burial site of Mumtaz Mahal, 7a-b. Garden wall pavilions ('imarat) popularly called Naubat Khana (Drum House), 8. Double arcaded galleries to the south of the garden (iwan dar iwan) 9. Gate (darwaza), 10a-b. Quarters for tomb attendants (khawasspura), 11. **Forecourt (jilawkhana)**, 12a-f. **Bazaar streets (bazar)** 13 a-c. Subsidiary tombs (maqbara) all popularly called Saheli Burj (tower of the female Friend), 14. Gates (darwaza): 14a. Popularly called Fatehpuri Gate, 14b popularly called Fatehabad Gate, 15. Gate (darwaza) popularly called Sirhi Darwaza, 16. **Caravanserai (sara'i) known since the eighteenth century as 16a: Katra (Market Omar Khan, 16 b Katra Fulel (market of Perfumes), 16c Katra Resham (silk market), 16d. Katra Jogidas**, 17. Central square (chawk), 18 a-b west and east gates of the bazaar and western tomb, 21. Mosque popularly called Fatepuri Masjid.

For later, eighteenth-century (primarily Western) tourists, the passage through the bazaar and arrival at the first entrance of the Taj Mahal was integral to understanding and experiencing the symbolism of the complex and its gardens especially. The garden enclosed and separated itself from the chaos of the outside world. In one way it echoed

the riches and sensory experience of the bazaar as it too was filled with bounties of valued fruits and fragrance. But the experience of the bazaar was worldly. Bustling with all walks of life, disorganized and chaotic, the bazaar stood in stark contrast to the gardens, whose layout was designed to be the ultimate display of divine paradise. The gardens were key to understanding the Taj complex as being separate from the world. Walking through the garden was not just a means of arriving at the mausoleum but represented an obvious passage from the earth to paradise. The lawns obliterated any opportunity for the visitor to understand this. The manicured grass only asks the tourist to travel from one end of the walkway to the other. Such instructions have decontextualized the mausoleum from its environment resulting in the promotion of an image that is only half complete.

***Journey of Modern Tourist:***

For the average visitor, the journey to the Taj is travelled on foot from the south. Arriving at the South Gate a long north-south axis travels through the *charbagh* and continues past the mausoleum to the Yamuna river and its opposite banks, which we have come to understand as the Mahtab Bagh. Along this axis are several thresholds and gateways that frame and reflect the Taj.<sup>113</sup> Amita Sinha writes that “the sighting of the building [the mausoleum] at each pause, whether at the Taj Ganj Gateway or south gateway, the pool in the center of the garden, or along the axial pathways, is an experience of complete visual unity.”<sup>114</sup> The journey through the garden from the South

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<sup>113</sup> Amita Sinha and Terence Harkness, “Views of the Taj--Figure in the Landscape,” *Landscape Journal*, vol. 28, no. 2, (2009): 200.

<sup>114</sup> Sinha and Harkness, “Views of the Taj--Figure in the Landscape,” 200.

Gate across this axial pathway perhaps offers the most views worthy of pause, with its reflective pools and raised central viewing point. What is missing in the modern view is, of course, the unveiling of the mausoleum through the foliage as one progresses through the garden.

***Planting and Perspective:***

The perspective provided by the journey through the garden and the physical placement of plants in relation to the viewer was without a doubt intentional. Bernier noted that the main walkway of the Taj was approximately eight feet (about 2.5 meters) above the garden. The viewer would have been looking down at the majority of the plantings, excluding tall, mature trees. The patches of green and clover with an overlay of flowers dispersed between larger shrubs and trees would have given the impression of a lush, floral carpet from the raised walkways mimicking the green carpets of paradise as described in the Quran.<sup>115</sup> Apart from its religious symbolism, the carpet like effect of the raised walkways calls to mind the floral carpets of the Mughals and their ubiquitous presence in everyday life and in particular, their importance in the settings of *musha'iras*. Thus, much like the Indo-Persian topoi of the individual plantings in the garden, the raised walkways help to create the idea of a poetic landscape in the complex.

Simultaneously above the low growing garden and underneath the canopies of mature trees, the journey through the gardens represents the liminal space between earth and the heavens. This is a perspective missing for the modern Taj viewer, as the walkways have been lowered and patches of greenery and carpet like beds of flowers

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<sup>115</sup> Herbert, "The Taj and the Raj: Garden Imperialism in India," 259.

have been replaced by lawns. One can experience the feeling of being above a Mughal garden at the tomb of Itimad-ud-Daulah, where the gardens as restored by the World Monuments Fund offer this perspective (**Figure 12**).



**Figure 12:** The gardens at the Tomb of Itimad-ud-Daulah, now restored, have raised walkways. Planted along the main channel are large shrubs but for the visitor the majority of plants are below the walkway and create a carpet like effect.

A site plan shows the symmetrical nature of the complex in its most extreme. The site, like all *charbaghs*, is dominated by the perpendicular lines that carve out the four gardens and map the center of the site. Mughal art and architecture are undoubtedly famous for their emphasis on symmetry and use of geometric shapes and patterns. The focus on geometry and symmetry in the Islamic world alludes to the cosmic perfection and power of God, grounded in beauty and order. Although well documented in terms of art and architecture, less analysis has been done on how symmetry affected man-made landscapes like that of the Taj Mahal.

Historically, conservators of Mughal complexes have treated the physical buildings and features as “art objects,” isolated from their surroundings. Modern scholarship has sought to challenge this idea. The landscape of the site and the architecture are two parts that make up a whole. With fieldwork and conservation being conducted on the relationship between the Taj and both the Mahtab Garden and the garden at Humayun’s tomb, attitudes have shifted. But the way in which the landscape should harmonize with the building has been less avidly explored.

Through the study of Persian and Mughal depictions of *charbaghs*, an argument could be made that the gardens were designed to oppose their rigid, geometric, structures. Symmetry on its own serves to bring visual balance to a building or structure. But a building cannot be separated from its physical context, its surrounding landscape. Therefore, in Mughal tomb complexes, the garden must serve to balance out the symmetry of the formal structure and layout.

The push and pull between two opposite design features in Mughal art and architecture are not unfounded. For example, the use of octagons is frequent in Mughal design and often found in the center of a *charbagh* as a pool for a fountain. The octagon is inclusive of a square and a circle, one of which is constructed through the use of four lines and the other of a continuous line which appears to have neither a beginning nor an end. Circles are representative of unity and heaven. Squares are interpreted as symbolic of the earth. When combined to form an octagon, the two shapes merge to form one symbol of the transition between earth and heavenly paradise.<sup>116</sup>

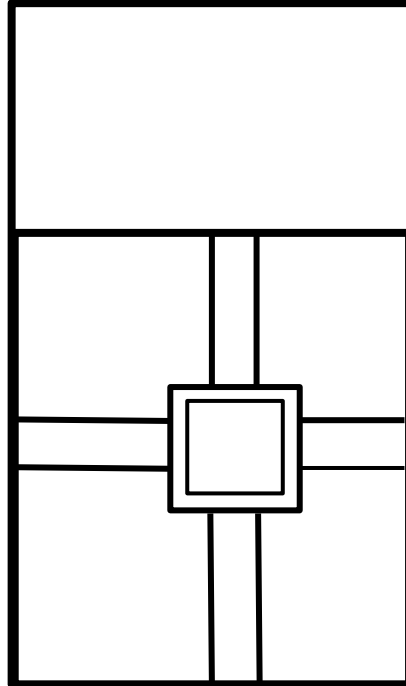
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<sup>116</sup> Emma Clark, “The Symbolism of the Islamic Garden.”





**Figure 13:** The Bagh-e-wafa shows the wild nature of the plantings. Plants were not pruned or shaped to match the geometric style of the architectural features of the garden.



**Figure 14 :** This figure shows the contrast of a strictly geometric interpretation of the *charbagh* with the Bagh-e-Wafa. Without the shape of the plantings, the garden is rigid and lacks balance.

In a similar sense, the rigid geometry of the layout of the garden in conjunction with the soft and wild lines of the plantings combine to create the experience of passing to paradise. In this way, the landscape acts to balance the formality of the plan. The above figures are a painting of a *charbagh* from the *Baburnama* and an outline of the garden layout (**Figures 13 and 14**). At the center of the *charbagh* is a pool and fountain from which four “rivers” are joined. Focusing solely on the perpendicular axes, the formal structure, would not tell the entire story. The slim branched, red blooming trees found near the borders of each plot protrude out, softening the north-south axis. The palm in the lower left plot does the same by camouflaging a portion of the intersection point between the axes. The rounded edges of the mango trees and their fruit add a softness to

each, otherwise strictly rectangular, plot. A similar phenomenon between landscape and geometry composition happens frequently in Persian and Mughal miniatures where the foliage of trees protrudes out and softens the borders of the painting.



**Figure 15:** The inlay work on the Taj Mahal embodies the balance between natural lines and geometric patterns.

The interplay between formal geometric patterns and softer more natural lines is also evident in the decoration on the mausoleum. On a panel of inlay and relief work from the Taj Mahal, we see a natural portrayal of flowers in the center (**Figure 15**). There is a slight emphasis on symmetry but when compared to the design that borders it, the center flowers are far less geometrical.

### **SENSORY ENGAGEMENT:**

Mughal gardens were intended to appeal to all of the senses, and the Taj was not an exception. Flowing water in the channels through the *charbagh* along with fountains spurting and spluttering down the main channel would have added a lot to the sensory experience. The sound of water and its reflective and cooling properties alone could tantalize the faculties of sight, hearing and touch. Wildlife, particularly birds, also added to the visual and auditory experience. But the experience of fragrance, which holds

special importance, could have only been achieved through one means: fragrant trees, plants, and herbs.

Of the gardens at Agra Fort, Fray Manrique in 1640 said: “I saw several trees exhaling the sweetest odor and laden with many and varied flowers, whose sweetness fell most pleasingly on the sense of smell of all who entered.”<sup>117</sup> We can imagine the scent at the Taj gardens to be equally, if not more, pleasing.

Fanny Parkes, the wife of a British official, brings to life the gardens in her early nineteenth-century travelogue on India titled *Begums, Thugs & Englishmen*. She recounts the festival of Eid held at the Taj where the “crowds of gaily-dressed and most picturesque natives were seen in all directions passing through the avenue of fine trees and by the side of the fountains to the tomb.”<sup>118</sup> According to her, fairs at the Taj complex were commonplace, happening every Sunday evening. During such times, the fountains and a band would play, and the people were free to roam about the garden as they pleased.

The sensory experience of the garden at this time was intact. She describes the garden as being well maintained with bountiful fruit of great value. She portrays the Taj as a playground for the senses through her description of a normal evening at the Taj, saying that “when the fountains are playing, and the odour of exotic flowers is on the air, the fall of the water has a delightful effect both on the eye and ear: it is really an Indian paradise.”<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Herbert, “The Taj and the Raj: Garden Imperialism in India,” 259.

<sup>118</sup> Fanny Parkes Parlby and William Dalrymple, *Begums, Thugs and White Mughals: The Journals of Fanny Parkes* (New Delhi: Eland Publishing), Kindle Edition.

<sup>119</sup> Parlby and Dalrymple, *Begums, Thugs and White Mughals*, Kindle Edition.

Her accounts makes it evident that the Taj was no longer a place for commemorating Mumtaz Mahal and Shah Jahan. For the most part, activities at the Taj were but fun and games for Englishmen and natives alike. Fanny recalls one instance of fun at the Taj complex being taken to an extreme; with little reverence for the tomb, one woman met a tragic fate:

European ladies and gentlemen have the band to play on the marble terrace, and dance quadrilles in front of the tomb! It was over the parapet of this terrace a lady fell a few months ago, the depth of twenty feet, to the inlaid pavement below. Her husband beheld this dreadful accident from the top of the minaret he had just ascended.<sup>120</sup>



**Figure 16:** This eighteenth-century painting captures the spirit of the garden. The dense foliage frames architecture. The garden has a great deal of variation in texture and color. The water fountain and birds add to its auditory engagement. European travelers are seen dancing on the mausoleum with the locals.

Fanny Parkes's scene is one that can be reimaged in an eighteenth-century manuscript painting by Amal-Salih (**Figure 16**). The European sightseers, accompanied

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<sup>120</sup> Parlby and Dalrymple, *Begums, Thugs and White Mughals*, Kindle Edition

by locals, seem to be joyously admiring the site. One man, who has perhaps smoked too much opium, drunk too much wine, or simply was dumbfounded by the magnificence of complex, has fallen; an occurrence all too common historically at Mughal sites. Aside from an intriguing back story, this miniature gives a unique Mughal style interpretation of the garden during the eighteenth century. With its flowing water, spurting fountain and a thick garden with diversity in shape, color and size we can imagine the complex's sensory experience being very close to the original that Shah Jahan had intended.

The one thing that is missing from this depiction and all depictions is the smell. Emperor Jahangir said that "India is preferable to anywhere else in the inhabited part of the world... from the view of herbs and fragrant flowers."<sup>121</sup> He claimed that the blossoms from a single champa "could perfume a whole garden."<sup>122</sup> A garden complex the size of the Taj would have had many champa plants alongside other fragrant plantings like the rose, sweet basil, and hyacinth whose fragrances would mingle in the air, completing the visitor's escape from the harsh climate of the outside world. Unlike the cooler climates of the Central Asia, where one might need to be fairly close to a fragrant plant to smell it, the heat of Agra would have further intensified the fragrance of the garden. The smell would change throughout the day as plants have different times for emitting their fragrances. For example, roses smell strongest on mild and humid mornings and champa, jasmine and honeysuckle are most fragrant on warm summer

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<sup>121</sup> Herbert, "The Taj and the Raj: Garden Imperialism in India," 257.

<sup>122</sup> Herbert, "The Taj and the Raj: Garden Imperialism in India," 257.

evenings.<sup>123</sup> Thus the sensory experience of the Taj would not be the same all year round but instead would vary with the seasons and even the time of day.

The gardens' individual aspects and means of engaging the viewer create moments, moments for the visitor that otherwise would not exist at the complex. In addition to playful scents and visual textures, a complete garden would create a more layered experience of light and sound. Much like the garden of paradise as mentioned in the Quran, the dense foliage and flowing streams would create a distinctly more refreshing environment, marking the separation from the outside world. The shade produced by the trees provides refuge from the beating sun, but more than that it creates a means for experiencing light. Through the leaves of a canopy, the sun beams and creates a mixed pattern of shadows and light on the walkway, much like the way *jalis*, latticed screens, were used in Indo-Islamic architecture to diffuse light. The sound of even a mild wind is enhanced as it blows through branches and leaves. Light would also be diffused through the presence of moving water. The spurting water fountains down the main channel would provide a less direct image of the mausoleum and, on a windy day, a sprinkle of water may fall on the visitor. And while all these details and moments may seem small and insignificant, when each moment as created by a complete garden adds up, the entire experience is far more engaging; layered in religious and cultural meaning, it would be a playground for sensory enjoyment.

Traditionally, a *charbagh*'s most important features are flowing water and shade.

While these are undoubtedly important facets of *charbaghs*, viewing the gardens of the

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<sup>123</sup> "Scents of Time: The Rose Garden," Martha Stewart, September 20, 2018, Accessed February 15, 2019, <https://www.marthastewart.com/264143/scents-of-time-the-rose-garden>.

Taj in this way not only limits the value of the physical plantings but also separates the landscape from its surrounding architecture and disconnects the physical reality of the garden from the experience of the viewer. These forms of separation are no better than the colonial subordination of Mughal gardens to their tombs. In the case of the Taj, the manner in which the plants interact with each other and the physical architecture provides a new way of understanding the gardens and thus creates an experience of the complex in which Mughal dynastic identity and patronage of Indo-Persian poetry can be heard alongside the voice of the physical architecture.

ہم نے مانا کہ تغافل نہ کرو گے لیکن  
خاک ہو جائیں گے ہم تم کو خبر ہوتے تک

ہم نے مانا کہ تغافل نہ کرو گے لیکن  
خاک ہو جائیں گے ہم تم کو خبر ہوتے تک

ham ne maanā ki taġhāful na karoge lekin  
ḵhaak ho jā.eñge ham tum ko ḵhabar hote tak

We knew that you would not ignore us  
But by the time news reached you, we will have but turned to dust. <sup>124</sup>

-Mirza Ghalib

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<sup>124</sup> Mirza Ghalib, "Aah Ko Chahiye Ek Umr Asar Hote Tak," trans. Seton Uhlhorn, Rekhta, accessed May 02, 2019, <https://www.rekhta.org/ghazals/aah-ko-chaahiye-ik-umr-asar-hote-tak-mirza-ghalib-ghazals>.



## CONCLUSION:

To create a greater understanding of the Taj gardens beyond the traditional attributes of shade and flowing water, one must seek out the Mughal garden as a form of dynastic identity, by which the Mughal imperial family held fast to their Persianate and Central Asian roots. In this garden tradition, Mughal emperors not only patronized the construction of physical gardens but also imaginary ones through literature and poetry. Between these two cultures lies the spirit of a *charbagh*, an experience not fully defined by Quranic depictions of paradise but rather informed by multiple facets of religion, culture, and dynastic identity.

The Taj Mahal gardens we know today could never be made to perfectly resemble the gardens of Shah Jahan's *rauza-i-munawwara*. Still, I believe they deserve more attention and should be a greater part of the narratives surrounding the Taj Mahal. If so, the gardens could help strengthen the narrative of a love story, as some of the historical plantings would have created a landscape of love and longing between separated lovers. A heavier emphasis on the gardens as the Islamic idea of paradise could dispel or at least soften the myth that the Taj was a Hindu temple. Moreover, the gardens deserve the same sort of care and treatment as the architecture and art of the Mughals. If a beautiful, jewel-encrusted Mughal knife were to have been stripped of its jewels during colonialism, would we not try to restore it? Would we present it in a museum and say that is was greatest example of Mughal weaponry without explaining any of its degradation?

In the early 2000s, a committee was formed to oversee the conservation plan for the Taj Mahal. At the beginning of the endeavor, all efforts were put towards restoring the

gardens.<sup>125</sup> It was eventually decided that the task of restoring the gardens was too large and daunting and thus the task was placed to the side and left for the future generation. In regards to this, Amita Baig writes:

We felt that the time was not right perhaps to question and challenge the perceived authenticity of the gardens and their relationship to the Taj Mahal. Strategically, therefore, we decided it should, for now, take on the form of an exhibition in the visitors centres, with the hope that another generation would have the confidence and the will to reverse the beautification that Lord Curzon had imposed on the Taj Mahal at the turn of the 20th century.

Nearly two decades have passed since then and as the Taj is facing environmental disaster and at risk of being appropriated (or abandoned) by Hindu-nationalism, it is time to take action. While proposing a new landscape at least two questions should be considered:

**1. Could the gardens be designed to uphold the ideals and attributes of a true Mughal funerary garden and be environmentally sustainable?**

When considering this question several secondary questions arise: Does increased tree population around the Taj help with air pollution? What is the cost of maintenance? Can maintenance cost be mitigated through the selling of produce from the gardens as was done before Curzon? Increased trees would likely bring increased wildlife (birds, monkeys), would the Taj complex be ready for this?

**2. How would the proposed landscape affect tourism?**

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<sup>125</sup> Baig and Mehrotra, *Taj Mahal: Multiple Narratives*, 9.

Secondary question to consider for this question are: If hypothesized that the construction of the garden and the view it imposes would decrease tourism, is that a bad thing for the conservation of the totality of the Taj complex (less foot traffic means less damage to the marble)? Did the conservation efforts and publicity of the tomb of Itimad-ud-Daulah and Mahtab Bagh create an environment where garden conservation at the Taj would be accepted by the public?

In the age of the selfie, I am not sure that an obscured view of the Taj due to the conserved gardens would be “ideal” for social media. As more and more people are traveling and “exploring” simply for “aesthetic” photos, taking away the view of the Taj that they are most familiar with might cause Western visitors to forego going to the Taj. For them, the view with gardens may not be worth the steep price of entrance. In addition, I worry that a complete garden designed without sustainability and the environment in mind would require too much water, and with the Yamuna river in environmental despair this may only add to the issue. Perhaps the compromise between wanting a properly conserved monument, wanting to sustain tourism, and needing to consider the environmental impacts would be the implementation of an augmented reality (AR) tourism app. In such app, the user could use their smartphone camera around the complex to see a virtually designed garden imposed onto the existing landscape. Much like the eighteenth-century garden shown in the previous chapter (**Figure 16**), the virtual reality gardens could be full of color no matter the season, and water channels and fountains could be flowing without worry of environmental impact. In the long run, this

endeavor would be far less expensive and require less maintenance than a real garden. Bringing technology into the experience of the garden may help in education around the monument as users would be on their phone regardless. The implementation of AR would be cutting edge in the conservation world. The implementation of it at one of India's top tourist sites would further the public perception of India as a technological powerhouse. Additionally, this approach could be used to gauge tourist interest in the garden before deciding whether or not to do a physical conservation.

Aside from issues surrounding the feasibility of conservation, I think it would be fruitful to do a comparative study of physical gardens and imaginary garden patronage amongst different Islamic empires. Was the Indo-Persian tradition of building gardens and elaborate literary gardens unique, or can the same fervor be found elsewhere? The chapter on Gardens of the Imagination in the Indo-Persian tradition leaves a lot of room for expansion. I briefly cover gardens and the literary landscape, and this topic could be more intensively researched. It would be interesting to include in this study artistic representations of gardens and paradise into the realm of poetry and literature. The Mughals had a long standing tradition of creating miniatures with garden depictions, carpets, and floral textiles, all of which could add to the complexity of the intersection between physical and imaginary landscapes.

Whatever action we take for the gardens, I hope that the approach accounts for the pluralistic nature of symbolism in the Mughal garden tradition. In this thesis, I have tried to disrupt the singular viewing lens of funerary gardens, particularly that of the Taj Mahal as something that was primarily influenced by Quranic verses. By using multiple lens to

view the garden, like dynastic identity, Quranic verses, and the Indo-Persian poetic tradition the idea of the funerary garden goes from being skeletal to something more tangible. While we could never duplicate the gardens in their original forms, by applying these lenses one can conserve the Taj Mahal gardens while honoring the history and context of the site as well as the intended experience of the gardens in relation to sensory engagement and perspective of the viewer. Properly restored gardens would restore harmony between the gardens, architecture, and decoration, all of which, when working together, offer their insights into the themes of life, longing, kingship, death, and the afterlife in paradise.

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Seton Uhlhorn in Mahtab Bagh in Agra opposite of the Taj Mahal in the winter of 2017.

Seton Uhlhorn is a graduating senior at the University of Texas as a Asian Studies and Plan II Honors major focusing on Hindi and Urdu. Since being introduced to the Mughal Empire in 2016, she has become obsessed with the early modern period in North India. Aside from her love of Mughal gardens, Seton loves Mughal miniature paintings, textiles and, of course, Mughlai food. She dreams of one day owning an illustrated copy of the Baburnama. In her spare time, Seton enjoys beekeeping, keeping up with Indian and Pakistani meme culture on Facebook and researching niche YouTube communities. Seton hopes to go to graduate school to further her language studies and hopes to incorporate her love of landscape into her research as well. Next year, she will tick off another box on her bucket list and return to Lucknow, India to study Mughal Persian.