

The Legacy of Babur's Favourite Garden

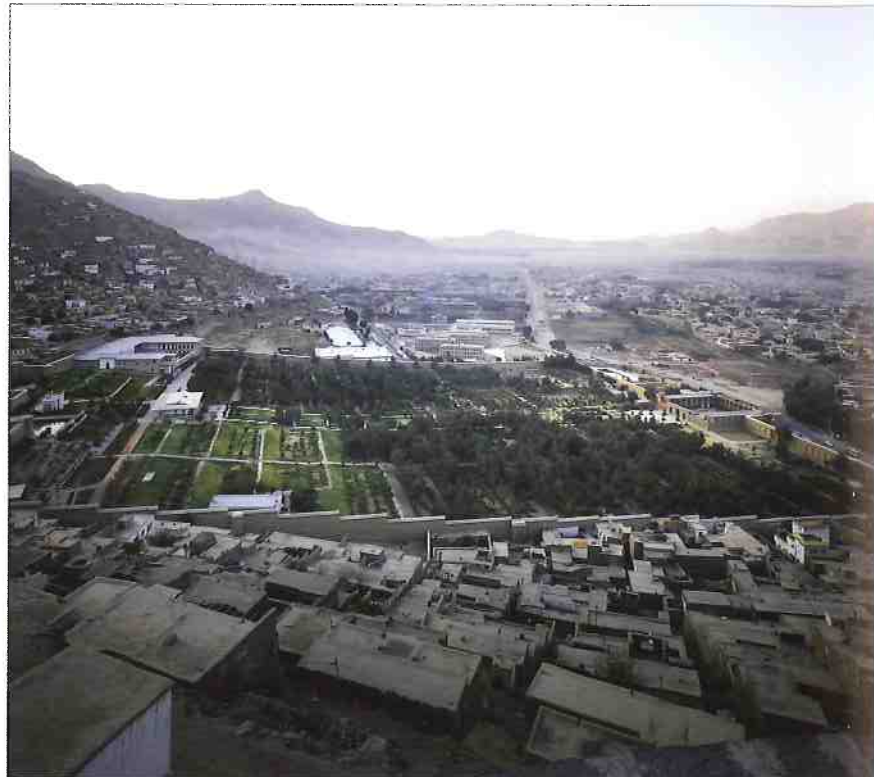
Aga Khan Trust for Culture – Afghanistan

THE GARDEN OF BABUR (BAGH-E BABUR) was laid out in the early sixteenth century by the emperor Zahir ad-Din Muhammad Babur Padshah Ghazi, the founder of the Mughal Dynasty whose rule extended from central Asia to India. A detailed account of Babur's life and conquests is provided in his memoirs, the *Baburnama*, in which he mentions being influenced by the Timurid gardens he visited in Samarkand and Herat. Upon capturing Kabul in 1504 CE, Babur set about building his Garden above the fertile Chardehi Plain, using it to plan and launch military campaigns and celebrate victories, hold royal audiences, dispense punishments, read poetry and entertain.

When Babur died in Agra in 1530, in accordance with his wishes his body was exhumed and transported to Kabul, where his remains were buried on an upper terrace of the Garden in 1540. His successors came to pay their respects to the grave, with Babur's great-grandson Jahangir instructing that a platform, or *chabutra*, be laid around the grave, an inscribed headstone be erected and that the Garden be enclosed by walls during a visit in 1607. Shah Jahan later dedicated a marble mosque during a visit to the site in 1647.

In the late nineteenth century, Amir Abdur Rahman Khan constructed a number of buildings for his court in the Garden, thereby transforming an environment that had until then been defined largely by trees and water. The Bagh-e Babur was much transformed and in a poor state of repair by the time that inter-factional fighting broke out in Kabul in 1992. The conflict quickly engulfed the area around the Garden, which lay on the front-lines between the factional fighters, and the latter cut down the trees to limit cover, stripped and set fire to the buildings and looted the water pumps.

In March 2002, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) signed a 'Memorandum of Agreement' with the then Transitional Administration of Afghanistan



for a comprehensive programme of rehabilitation of the Babur Garden. The project was carried out through the AKTC's Historic Cities Programme (HCP), with co-funding from the Governments of Germany, the United States and Norway. The goal was to restore the original character of the landscape and to conserve key buildings, while at the same time ensuring that the Garden, the largest public open space in Kabul, would continue to be a focus for recreation and cultural programmes for the inhabitants of the city.

The restoration work was carried out within the context of a wider area development project initiated in early 2004 that aimed at improving the

Fig. 1 | The 11 ha Garden of Babur, situated along the western slopes of the Sher Darwaza Mountain in Kabul, is the city's largest green public space and one of its most important historic sites.

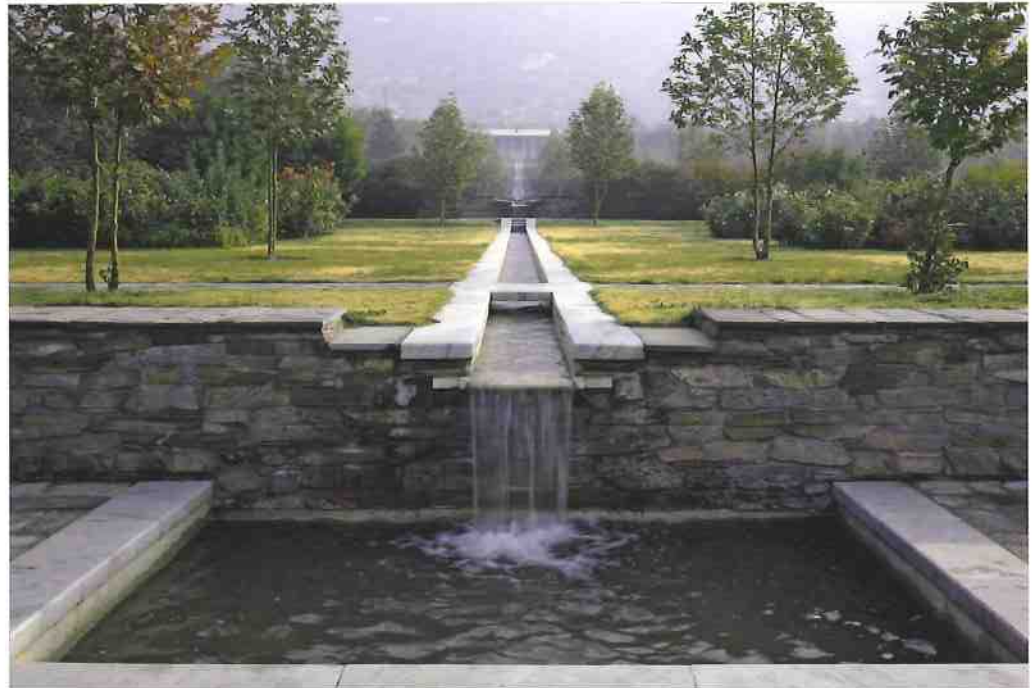
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Fig. 2 | The water channel at the heart of the Garden was reconstructed following the extensive archaeological remains. Due in part to its religious and symbolic associations with paradise, it might have influenced the Moghul emperor's wish to be laid to rest in this site.

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Fig. 3 | Visited by more than two million Afghans since the completion of the restoration work in 2008, the historic landscape and complex of monuments has been maintained to international standards by the personnel of the Bagh-e Babur Trust.

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living conditions of the 10,000 or so people living in the immediate vicinity of the Bagh-e Babur through improving storm water drainage, water supplies and access. An important aspect of the work was to build the capacity of key municipal staff at the district level, so that they would be in a better position to oversee current and future upgrading initiatives. Upon the completion of the landscaping, conservation and upgrading work in early 2008, more than 735,000 man/days of work had been generated, employing on average 350 skilled and unskilled labourers from the surrounding communities while providing on-the-job training for hundreds of Afghans.

Since the management of the restored Garden posed further challenges, a tripartite 'Memorandum of Understanding' was signed in 2008 between the Kabul Municipality, the Afghan Ministry of Information and Culture and the AKTC, which established the independent Bagh-e Babur Trust (BBT). Tasked with overall responsibility for effectively managing and maintaining the site, the 80 full-time staff of the BBT have ensured that the Bagh-e Babur remains accessible to the more than two million Afghan and international visitors that have visited it since 2008 and that revenue collected through such visits and the hire of facilities is reinvested in the operation of the site. This has resulted in the financial self-sustainability of operations since 2010.

Aiming to ensure that the historic landscape and buildings of the Garden are safeguarded for future generations, the Bagh-e Babur rehabilitation programme has also helped foster a better understanding of the integrated approach to cultural-heritage preservation and wider socio-economic regeneration. Many visitors to the Bagh-e Babur today remark on how the site represents for them a symbol of the cultural recovery of Afghanistan. The challenge is to retain the unique character of the landscape and monuments, while at the same time ensuring continued access for the public. ■