chapter 4

The Serâjiya Capital, 1901–1919

On the death of Amir ‘Abd or-Rahmân Khân, Sardâr Habibollâh Khân (r. 1901–1919) succeeded to the throne in Kabul without opposition.¹ Like his father he had an appreciation for architecture, designing some plans himself as well as overseeing construction projects. He exercised his talents as an architect both in Kabul and in the provinces, in Laghmân and Kohestân² and particularly in Jalâlâbâd and Paghmân, which became the winter and summer capitals, respectively, during his reign. During their own times, the Sadôzay kings had adopted the Mughal tradition of making Peshawar a winter capital but when it fell into the hands first of the Sikhs and then the English, their Mohammadzay successors were unable to do likewise. Once in Kabul, Amir ‘Abd or-Rahmân Khân had also sought escape from the extreme temperatures of the capital. He had an imposing palace, Bâgh-e Shâhi, erected in Jalâlâbâd where winters were mild and in the Paghmân valley he developed a shade garden, Sâya Bâgh, as summer headquarters. For Habibollâh Khân these semi-annual migrations became the norm. Leaving one of the princes in Kabul in charge of the government, he would happily spend several months each winter in Jalâlâbâd where he undertook more building projects and substantially developed the gardens there. And in Paghmân he soon had at his disposal no fewer than three summer residences.³

In Kabul itself, Habibollâh Khân devoted a great deal of time to a new arrangement of the Arg, the conversion of certain palaces, and the creation and development of places for relaxation and celebration. The emir took no account of the cost if he liked something—and there were many things that he liked.⁴ The Arg was the private space which, referring to the inventions of western technology which interested him as “progress” and “civilization,” he threw himself into furnishing and decorating, importing quantities of objects which satisfied his personal needs and fantasies. Unlike the attention he lavished on his provincial projects, he showed a complete lack of interest in the other palaces of the capital. This gave these places a new role, particularly as accommodations for foreign guests.

The old historic center of the city had no more attraction for Amir Habibollâh Khân than it had for Amir ‘Abd or-Rahmân Khân. Henceforth, it was the urban project whose foundations were laid by his father that sustained his interest. Under Amir Habibollâh Khân’s program, Kabul’s left-bank expanded with the outline of a new town centered around the Naghârakhâna, a residential quarter in Deh Afgânân, a military zone at Shêrpur, and an industrial park at ‘Âlamganj. For the basic infrastructure, water was brought from Paghmân,

¹ His authoritarian ruling manner earned Amir Habibollâh Khân the enmity of a small group of students and professors, advocates of a constitutional regime, and two assassination attempts. He succumbed to a third on February 20, 1919 while on a hunting trip. On his reign see Ballard (1983), 554; Dupree (1973), 430 ff.; and Gregorian (1969), 181 ff.

² For a fortified palace of his, Qa‘a-ye Seraj-e Lomqân, in Laghmân see SA IV/22 (1915), 6, photo and Souvenir d’Afghanistan (1925), series 1, pls. 35, 37, 39 and for another, Seraj ol-amsâr in Kohestân, see Jewett Bell (1948), [53], photos and 127.

³ In Jalâlâbâd, Amir Habibollâh Khân had a palace, Serâj ol-emârat, and a golf course. He also had an artificial lake excavated in the old royal gardens, see Jewett Bell (1948), [139], photo; SA VI/18 (1917), 6, photo; and Souvenir d’Afghanistan (1925), series 1, pls. 20, 22, 25 and series 2, pl. 85v. In Paghmân and Bêgtut, the summer houses were Bayt os-Sayf, Sohayl, and Setâra, see SA III/6 (1913), 8, photo, and III/19 (1914), 11, photo; and Souvenir d’Afghanistan, series 2, pl. 14v.

⁴ Baker (1915), 536; and Martin (1907), 141.
electricity from Jabal Serâj, and roads were laid out throughout this new town.

Thanks to the amnesty granted by the emir to Afghans exiled by the previous regime, during his reign many foreign influences made their way to the court in Kabul. Some of the men who had lived in British India and the Ottoman Empire—Mahmud Tarzi was one of these brought back things of different cultures to which the emir was receptive, being himself attracted by what he already knew of the West and by what he had seen of western ways during his trip to India at the beginning of 1907. Thus, during the first two decades of the twentieth century some signs of westernization appeared in Kabul simultaneously, in the urban plan being developed, in the way of life of the royal entourage, and in Kabul’s educational, military, industrial, and medical facilities.

The Remodeled Arg’s New Style

Amir Habibollâh Khân’s program revolved principally around his own person. The palace-citadel was the object of much of his attention and all sorts of building projects were carried out there. At mid-reign, these were already sufficiently advanced for Serâj ol-akhbâr to draw up a list of them. In the private space of the Arg, Darun-e Arg, it was not only a question of new buildings but also of very personal developments which certain passions of the sovereign—for furniture, flowers, and music—led to. As a prince, Habibollâh Khân became interested in photography and studied it; when he became the emir, he set up a photo studio (ʿakkâshkhâna-ye shâhi) in several of the rooms assigned to the household staff, we are told, on the second floor of the north wing of the Arg. Photographic equipment and supplies were imported at great cost from India. Surrounded by assistants chosen from among his pages (gholâm-bachagân), the sovereign happily spent much time working there. The princes and the court notables, those who received salaries, were ordered to come and be photographed for a fee, the profits going to support the orphanage which the emir founded.

The existing buildings of the Arg were redecorated and two new edifices, a winter palace and a mosque, were built, thereby considerably reducing the area of the gardens. By contrast, in the outer perimeter, Birun-e Arg, there was plenty of places to build while still maintaining a large park. To the two gates already piercing the east wall—one being the main entry, the other leading to the great audience hall—he added a third to provide access, at the end of a lane, to a new palace named Delkoshâ. In this same eastern part of the grounds, a clock tower was erected. In the western part of Birun-e Arg, another palace named

5 Mahmud Tarzi (1865–1933), son of the Mohammadzay Sardâr Gholâm Mohammad Khân, a poet known by the nom de plume of “Tarzi” (the Stylist) was exiled with his entire family not long after the accession of Amir ʿAbd or-Rahmân Khân to the throne of Kabul, and spent his youth between Damascus and Istanbul where he followed at one time the teaching of Sayyed Jamal od-Dîn “al-Afghânî.” On his return to Afghanistan, his influence in the process of westernization was profound: a militant nationalist, he nurtured the idea that progress was compatible with the precepts of Islam. He gathered a group of “Young Afghans” around him who were dedicated to serving the nation. As a journalist, he exerted every effort through his newspaper, Serâj ol-akhbâr, to promote the opening of people’s minds to the modern world. A politician and diplomat, Tarzi was minister of foreign affairs (1919–1928) before being exiled again at the end of the Amâniya era this time to the new Turkey. A man of culture, Tarzi created an oeuvre as a writer, poet, and translator from Turkish. See Adamec (1975), 185–186, and table 77; idem, (1987), 27, 190–91; and Schinasi (1979), 47–61. On the journal, see Âhang (1970) 44–63; and Schinasi (1979).

6 SA I/19 (1912), 2a and 11/8 (1912), 1–3a.

7 Thornton (1910), 57–58.

8 ST (2011), vol. 4/3, 468. It is not clear where that studio was exactly. For one thing, ST does not specify on the first floor of which building the studio was installed and for another, Gharghasht (1966), 308 sites it in the garden of the outer Arg near Stôr palace.