MUGHAL AGRA: A RIVERFRONT GARDEN CITY

Ebba Koch

Introduction

The contribution of the Mughals to the “Islamic city” is as yet not sufficiently understood, the attention of scholars having been focused on Shah Jahan’s Shahjahanabad laid out from 1639 onwards in the area of Delhi, the old capital of the sultans.1 (Gaborieau in this volume.) It is suggested here that Agra, the first capital of the Mughal empire, represented the most original urban planning achievement of the Mughals, in a consistently developed scheme, which has the riverfront garden as a modular unit.

Agra, the city of the Taj Mahal, was founded long before the Lodi Sultans made it their seat of government in 1505.2 Twenty years later, in 1526, when the Mughals established themselves in Hindustan, Agra became the first capital of the Mughal empire and acquired during this period its distinctive character as a riverfront garden city. The Mughals, coming from Central Asia via Kabul were used to reside in formally planned gardens. Babur, the founder of the Mughal dynasty, and his followers, began to lay out gardens “on the model of Khurasani edifices” along the available water source at Agra, the large slow flowing river Yamuna, Jamna, or Jawn, as the Mughals called it.3 The Timurid


concept of a formally planned garden was creatively adapted to a riverfront situation.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, Mughal Agra was “a wonder of the age—as much a centre of the arteries of trade both by land and water as a meeting-place of saints, sages and scholars from all Asia...a veritable lodestar for artistic workmanship, literary talent and spiritual worth.” The English observer John Jourdain who saw it in 1611 considered “This City of Agra,” as “one of the biggest in the world” and “by reporte farre greater then Grand Cairo.” The German traveller Johann Albrecht von Mandelslo judged it in 1638 “at least twice as big as Ispahan”; its population was then estimated to 700,000.

The nucleus of Agra was formed of gardens lining the river Jamna on both sides; the remaining city encircled the waterfront scheme in the west. The gardens constituted the residences of the imperial family and the highest-ranked nobles, some of the sites had been transformed into funerary gardens. It has not been fully understood by previous scholars that the centre of the city had, thus, a suburban character; and that the waterfront garden represented the microscopic module of this urban landscape. No individual or prominent site was chosen for the Taj Mahal, it was integrated into the riverfront scheme. The city reflected the concept of the garden as primordial residence of the Mughal dynasty and in a wider ideological sense served as a symbol of the bloom of Hindustan under the just rule of Shah Jahan.

---

4 Abdul Aziz, “City of Agra,” 129.
8 See e.g. Gupta, Urban Glimpses, 15, 19–20, 69, also his maps 1 and 2 should be used with caution. I began to analyze the riverfront scheme in several publications for which see note 30 below. The fullest treatment is provided in Chapter I of my The Complete Taj Mahal and the Riverfront Gardens of Agra (London: Thames and Hudson, 2006) 29–81.