

Lalbagh: an Incomplete Depiction of Mughal Garden in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Lalbagh Fort Complex is one of the extravagant examples built by the Mughal Empire in Bangladesh, documented in UNESCO World Heritage tentative List. While there are several Mughal structures found in the Indian sub-continent, this incomplete fort is the only footprint of encamped Mughal garden style that remains in the capital of Bengal, Jahangirnagar (now Dhaka). The fort complex is a combination of three buildings (the mosque, the tomb of Bibi Pari and the Diwan-i-Aam), with two gateways and a portion of the partly damaged fortification wall articulating Charbagh style garden area. Charbagh is the concept of Persian garden adapted by Mughal. The following area is situated in densely populated neighborhood in old portion of Dhaka city. Rapid organic urban development along the following area is becoming a threat to the structure. Demand for the surrounding buffer zone, poor maintenance, uncontrolled users etc. are creating existential crises over these vulnerable structures. This study is aimed for analyzing the eccentricity and similarity with Charbagh/Mughal garden style and the challenges which it is facing. The research follows methodological approach of case study by analyzing secondary data collection, historical maps, literature review and observation. This paper highlights the strategic proposition for its protection as well as documentation on landscape aesthetics.

Introduction

The Indian sub-continent was under Mughal control during 16th and 17th century. The Lalbagh Fort Complex is one of the most extravagant examples from 17th century built by the Mughal Empire in Bangladesh. During the reign of Mughal Emperor Jahangir, Dhaka (now capital of Bangladesh) was declared as capital of Bengal in 1610, named as ‘Jahangir Nagar’ (City of Jahangir) (Karim 1964; Dani 1962; Ahmed 1986). After transformation to the capital, this city became one of the prime locations of significant Mughal structures such as mosques, forts, monuments, tombs. These structures were indicative of Mughal architecture which is a blend of Islamic, Persian and Indian Architecture. Lalbagh Fort is a great specimen of Mughal Architecture which was built along the Buriganga River in Dhaka. In the chronicles of time, the river has changed its route away from the fort. But this incomplete fort hasn’t lost its prominence over the surroundings of the old city. This fort complex is considered as some of the only public open space that remains in this old part of the city. This ‘Charbagh’ styled garden fortified complex is a symbol of Dhaka’s rich Mughal Heritage. It has been documented in UNESCO Tentative List in 1999 (WHC). Unfortunately, uncontrolled urbanization has brought a significant transformation in the historical urban fabric of the city as well the entity of this fort. This study is aimed at analyzing the eccentricity and similarity with Charbagh/Mughal garden style and the challenges which it is facing. This study is

conducted for academic purpose for specific focus on ‘Design for nature’ to highlight the challenges facing heritage landscapes.

Background and Literature Review

Under the Mughal rule, Dhaka gained its prominence as a capital of Bengal. In the hundredth year of their rule, different successive Governors and princely Viceroys ruled this province and made a mark of their flourish region with magnificent structures, palaces, mosques, tombs fortification and gardens. Mughal prince Muhammad Azam Shah, son of Emperor Aurangzeb was appointed as Subahdar in Bengal. According to the Mughal administrative system, Subahdar was an employee of the Empire who was accountable for regional administration to the Emperor. During his rule, he started to construct his ambitious project ‘Fort Aurangabad’ beside Buriganga river southwest of Dhaka in 1678 AD (Rahman 2012). It was named after his father. The Prince had to return because of the war with the Marathas, Sikhs and Rajputs. Later, his successor Shaista Khan continued with the construction of the fort. There are several speculations by architectural historians about the reason behind the abandonment of the project. It is believed that the unfortunate death of his daughter and Prince Azam’s betrothed Iran Dukht Rahmat Banu (titled Bibi Pari), led him to perceive the fort inauspicious and to later stop the construction (Hasan 1903). The burial of Bibi Pari was constructed in the middle of the fort. Consequently, the fort had remained abandoned and had taken the name as “Lalbagh”. During the British colonial period, this place was used by British East India Company. They built administrative structures inside the fort and occupied the garden area. During Sepoy Revolt, 1857, the crushing of a soldier uprising against the British, known as ‘First independence war,’ happened there and they used its secret tunnel as an escape route. Archeological excavation started in 1974 by Department of Archeology, Bangladesh. They removed all the unnecessary structures. Later, they built the north and eastern wall to articulate the whole area. Nowadays, this place remains open for public and one of the few green public open space that remains in this densely populated area. Moreover, the whole area is an evidence of Mughal period in Bengal. The fort complex is documented in UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List in 1999.



Figure 2 Top: Left: Painting: "The South Gate of the Lalbagh Fort" (1787) Image courtesy of Ben Elwes Fine Art; Right: Painting: "View from river" (1814); Down: Left: Photograph: "South Gate of The Lalbagh Fort" (1885); Right: Photograph: "North gate of the Lalbagh Fort" (1904) Source: The British Library bl.uk

Goals and Objectives

The goal of this study was to complete course work of a seminal study on Heritage landscape and its existing challenges. The objectives of this research are as follows,

- Exploration of this heritage landscape and its behind design concept incorporating with nature.
- Identification of the arising issues and challenges against its existence.
- To develop an outlook for its protection and dealing with its conservation process.

Methods

The methodology of this research is developed based on empirical evidence collected from the site and extensive literature review. Therefore, the research method depends on qualitative data through direct observation and secondary source as in case study method. The research is developed in three steps.

Firstly, extensive literature review has been conducted on several documents such as books, journals, websites, newspaper article etc. The spiritual and historical outlook about the site has been expanded following study materials. Mughal dynasty in Bengal and their style of architecture are explored through this extensive study. The process helps to learn about the concept behind the Mughal landscape garden style as well.

Secondly, a field survey of site and its surroundings is conducted in weekday and weekends to find out its conditions and uses. A thorough observation of the existing conditions of the site, state of the existing structures and garden were the main priority for the field survey. Different challenges which are affecting the site are identified. Photographic evidences were collected for further research purpose.

Finally, findings both from observational study and literature review are analyzed. Several recommendations are proposed for change scenario of the site and possible improvements.

Results

The Lalbagh Fort Complex is a combination of three buildings (the mosque, the tomb of Bibi Pari and the Diwan-i-Aam), with two gateways and a portion of the partly damaged fortified wall. The whole complex covers about 18 acres. The landscape inside the wall is replicating “Charbagh” style. Mughal emperors brought Persian garden style ‘Charbagh’ to the Indian subcontinent where Persian and Islamic concept of garden transform into contextual realization. Charbagh or Chaharbagh means four Garden. According to the Quran, Islamic holy book, garden of paradise is described as “Garden underneath which rivers flow” (Ali 2011; Islamic Arts and Architecture 2016). There are four flowing channels of water, honey, wine and milk mentioned in the Quran. A quadrilateral garden with hierarchy of buildings and surrounding by fortress as Charbagh was depicted in Lalbagh Fort Complex. A roof garden with water features and Islamic patterns was discovered recently which is an eccentric addition to the Mughal garden style. The long lost plantation’s pattern cannot be found. Usually, trees in Mughal gardens were used at the periphery of the quadrants of Char Bagh and along the water channel (Ali 2011, Petruccioli 1998). The use of the area was conceived by the historian as a place of assembly because the proximity of the Palace ‘Katra’ from the site. So, it seems that the ground would have been more like an open field rather than plantation area. According to the existing plan, the landscape of the site is adopted to the climate and topography of Dhaka. The southern wall was built for protection along the river line which has changed its course away from the site with time.

The continuity of the main fort walls, eastward, below Shaishta Khan Road was revealed, such that the existing area of fort complex might be a representation of half of Prince Azam Khan’s plan. The gate at the southeast (adjacent to Lalbagh Shahi Masjid), as per requirement, fits properly as the Central Gate in the middle of Fort. The other half to the east, might be planned for administrative purpose which is incomplete or extinct long ago. Meanwhile the walls on the north and eastward side are built to articulate the fort under the Fort restoration Project.

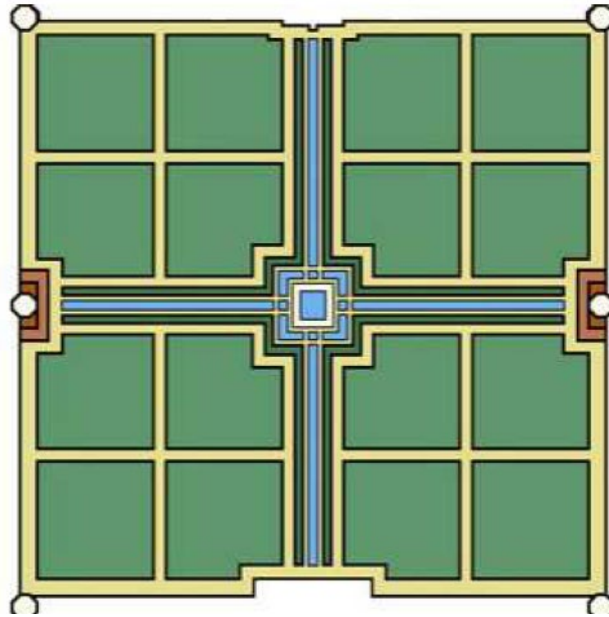


Figure 3 'Charbagh' Garden Style; Source: Unknown



Figure 4 The Lalbagh Fort Complex; Source: google earth map

These 400 years old structures need proper maintenance regularly, whether its structure or the garden. The following heritage landscape is facing several challenges for its survival. In a highly dense city, like Dhaka, such old structures remain protected under department of Archeology, Bangladesh but affected by several issues. Firstly, unplanned organic urbanization around the site area overpower the surroundings. Encroachment near the fort wall makes the place endangered. The south and west walls are surrounded by modern high-rise buildings which is separated by a three feet/1 meter setback. The southern gate has

been obscured from view by the Ansar camp and extension of adjacent Mosque. Because of buffer zone scarcity, the fort has not been nominated as a World Heritage site.

Secondly, the fort complex is used as a museum and public park. The only remaining public green space in this densely populated area is a prominent attraction for, not only its neighborhood dwellers, but also the tourist and day tripper. The light and sound show is organized for people. The activity and approach towards the site of ordinary people can sometimes be harmful. They write their names on the structures to show the marks of their presences. Sometimes, the outer side of the fort wall is used to glue posters for election campaign, movie promotion etc. These several activities affect the old structures.

Lastly, though maintenance of the fort area has been improved, maintenance of dead zone of the site and its surroundings is still poor. Effects of climate change proceed the decay of the structural elements. Several water features structure are found broken. There is no initiative to repair them. After archeological excavation, projects for restoration and conservation took place, but it shows lack of professional follow up. The northern fort wall was built without considering historical original construction. Later, demolition of one side of the north wall for parking purpose was a discontinuity of the restoration project and a threat against historical remains. The replacement water features use terracotta pipes, but the modern metal pipes are exposed. The plantation pattern is not followed by proper professional supervision and historical research. Monitoring of these aspects should have taken place regularly.



Figure 5. Encroachment along the South wall and Gate (Source: author)



Figure 6. Outer Wall Covered with posters (Source: author)



Figure 7 Broken structure, No maintenance (Source: author)

Discussion and Conclusion

These strategies should have been taken considering the implementation. The short term strategies could be started with improving maintenance quality and monitoring. Due to this purpose, more manpower can be employed. Therefore, security and monitoring can be increased both inside and outside of the fort. Community involvement also improves the monitoring and maintenance quality. Different social awareness programs, such as advertisement, seminar and workshop could be arranged for improving public approach towards historic elements. Some board of memories or book for comments would be helpful to stop writing on the structures.

The mid-term strategies could be formation of multi-disciplinary team (i.e. Archeologist, Landscape Architect, Conservation Architect, Historian etc.) which can take care of repairing broken structure and

retrofitting of existing remains according to historical evidence. Department of Archeology, Bangladesh should initiate this formation.

The long-term strategies include a professional team for conducting proper conservation projects which would be followed up the conservation process by Government. As well, the Government should take initiatives to enlist surrounding land occupation and acquire the area for creating buffer zone under Heritage Protection rules. They can develop the whole old city area as a touristic sight to boost up tourism sector. Their approach could have brought this Mughal Fort Complex the glory of being listed as UNSECO World Heritage site.

The need of proper conservation cannot be fulfilled without proper administrative approach. The professionals should be involved in the process to make sure about the authenticity of replication for retrofitting and renovation process. Impact of climate change should not be ignored as well. The history can remain alive in the urban fabric if the attempt to save is more constructive and well received. Thus, the responsibility is ours for the protection of our history and culture.

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