

# BABUR AND THE TIMURID CHAR BAGH

## Use and Meaning

While residing in the Char Bagh of Andijan, Babur received the news of his father's accidental death. Babur was then only 11, but destined to become the first Timurid emperor of India and founder of the Mughal dynasty.<sup>1</sup> His father, Umar Shaikh Mirza, ruler of the small principality of Ferghana, died when a terrace on which he was watching his pigeons collapsed.<sup>2</sup> The young Babur's immediate concern was to maintain his rightful inheritance, the Ferghana throne. Even at this age he was fully aware that uncles more powerful than he would claim this territory as their own.<sup>3</sup> The need to assert himself as a legitimate ruler set the stage for the rest of Babur's life and at least in part dictated his use of gardens.

Our knowledge of Babur rests primarily on his own remarkable memoirs, a work that is intensely autobiographical, bringing to life the complex fabric of sixteenth-century Central Asian life.<sup>4</sup> Although Babur never states outright why he wrote this work, he makes clear that he considered it a history (*tarikh*). More specifically it is the tale of the last independent Timurid prince struggling for conquest and rule.<sup>5</sup> His memoirs, known today as the *Babur Nama*, were born of frustration.<sup>6</sup> The struggling prince was recognized neither by his Timurid relations nor by those descended from Chingiz Khan's second son (known as Chaghatai Mughals) as having a legitimate right to rule. The *Babur Nama*, Maria Subtelny argues convincingly, was intended to set the record right; it is, in essence, a legitimizing document. This point is crucial to understanding Babur's recorded use of gardens.

### *Babur before his Conquest of India*

Born in what is today Uzbekistan, Babur inherited Ferghana in 1494. Descended from Timur on his father's side and Chingiz Khan on his mother's, Babur considered himself a rightful claimant to the Timurid throne. Matrilineal descent disqualified any claim he might make on the Chaghatai Mughal side. He was highly educated in Turki, Persian and Arabic, but lived a nomadic existence as an adroit soldier. By 1512 he thrice had held neighboring Samarqand, albeit briefly; he had made an unsuccessful bid for Bukhara, but he did manage to hold Kabul. Throughout this time, he found that his quest for a throne was manipulated and often thwarted largely by two rival groups, the Timurids and the

Chaghatai Mughals.<sup>7</sup> Loyalties shifted quickly; during these troubled times Babur himself reports frequent changes of loyalty among his own family members and followers.<sup>8</sup>

In spite of difficulties in maintaining sovereignty and loyalty, the impact of his short time in Samarqand was profound, shaping his attitude toward landscape. Samarqand, embellished by Timur and his immediate successors with splendid *char baghs* (four-part gardens), mosques, madrasas (theological colleges) and tombs, was one of the wonders of the fifteenth century. Babur was also deeply impressed by the gardens and buildings of Herat, the seat of most cultured Timurid princes, which he had visited in 1507.<sup>9</sup> It thus comes as no surprise that among Babur's first enterprises in the province of Kabul was the layout of terraced, planted gardens with running streams.<sup>10</sup> These doubtless were inspired by the gardens of Samarqand and Herat, and reflected Babur's deep love of nature.

A true Timurid in spirit, Babur preferred to camp in gardens than to reside in any permanently constructed palace. Throughout his small principality, he either refurbished already existing gardens or created new ones. However, the creation of such gardens was not simply an indulgence in personal pleasure or a whimsical pastime. They were used as camp sites; situated at a day's or half-day's horse ride from one another in the manner that other rulers built serais. The fruit of the gardens was consumed by Babur and his men, for frequently he refers to bananas, oranges or pomegranates eaten by his followers or given as special gifts.

Many of these gardens, such as the ones at Nimla, Istalif and the Bagh-i Wafa, are known from Babur's writings as well as those of Zain Khan, one of Babur's closest associates, but today none of them exists in its original state.<sup>11</sup> Babur indicates the types of trees, flowers and fruit that grew in these terraced settings. Natural springs were formalized with stone edgings, streams were diverted through man-made watercourses, and pavilions were constructed for the joy of the beholder.

### *Babur's Conquest of India*

Babur long had contemplated a conquest of India. As early as 1505 he made an initial foray as far as the Indus River, but until 1514 he largely aspired to retake his Central Asian

territories. His plans, however, were never successfully fulfilled. He could not command the correct respect, thus support, from his Timurid relatives. And in spite of his close relationship with his Chaghatai Mughal uncles and cousins, Babur could not muster their support — vital for any lasting success in his Central Asian homeland. Their lack of support was not due to disaffection, but because he was not descended from Chingiz Khan on his father's side, the side that counted. Only those paternally descended had the right to rule. Realizing his aspirations quashed, Babur's thoughts turned again toward India where descent was of less significance.<sup>12</sup>

Between 1514 and 1526, Babur engaged a Turkish artillery-man and fortified his army with guns, weapons his Indian opponents lacked. He secured Qandahar, necessary in order to protect Kabul during long absences, and invaded India five times. Using innovative military tactics, Babur's army defeated Sultan Ibrahim Lodi's more numerous foot and cavalry forces. Babur killed the Indian Sultan Ibrahim Lodi at the Battle of Panipat in April, 1526. He declared himself *padshah* (emperor) of Hindustan and established Agra as his capital.<sup>13</sup> His first and most serious opponent was a Rajput Hindu, Rana Sangam of Mewar, leader of a largely Hindu-Rajput confederacy. A renowned warrior, Rana Sangam, too, had aspired to replace the Lodi sultans. His troops were defeated by Babur in March, 1527. In celebration of this victory, elaborate step wells were built. In Agra and other locales, Babur constructed Timurid type *char baghs*, a way of underscoring his Central Asian heritage.<sup>14</sup> Until his death in 1530, Babur was devoted to expanding his Indian domain. When he died, Babur bequeathed to his oldest son, Humayun, a shaky and as yet unconsolidated empire that extended from Afghanistan into Bihar.

### *Babur's Perception of the Timurid Garden: Visions of Paradise*

In Kabul and India, Babur gave high priority to the construction of gardens, hardly surprising given his Timurid heritage. He had used the gardens of others probably since birth, and certainly since the age of 11 as he tells us in his own memoirs. These gardens, if we may judge from Persian poetry, were conceived with paradisaical imagery in mind.<sup>15</sup> The gardens of Mughal India, originally inspired by Timurid ones, were

similarly associated with paradisaical imagery. That is the case, for example, with gardens such as the one in which the famed Taj Mahal sits or the Shalimar garden of Kashmir.<sup>16</sup> Like all Mughal gardens, these are ultimately modeled on Timurid ones. However, we cannot precisely define the relationship between Mughal and Timurid gardens since no Timurid garden survives intact; our knowledge of them rests on textual references, incomplete remains and contemporary paintings. In Mughal India, too, written references indicate that gardens constructed by Babur's son and successor, Humayun (1566-40; 1555-56), were associated with mysticism and paradise.<sup>17</sup> The tomb built for Humayun under the auspices of his son and successor, Akbar (1556-1605), sits in a four-part garden which, most concur, was built with conscious paradisaical imagery in mind.<sup>18</sup>

For Babur, however, paradisaical imagery may not have been especially important. Although he named one of his Agra gardens *Hasht Behisht*, that is, the Garden of the Eight Paradises, in fact, his own writings give no sense that to him it or any other garden possessed paradisaical overtones. It is only in Zain Khan's Persian work that Babur's gardens are associated with visions of paradise.<sup>19</sup> This suggests that the general notion of equating gardens with paradise, an on-going Iranian tradition, little concerned Babur.

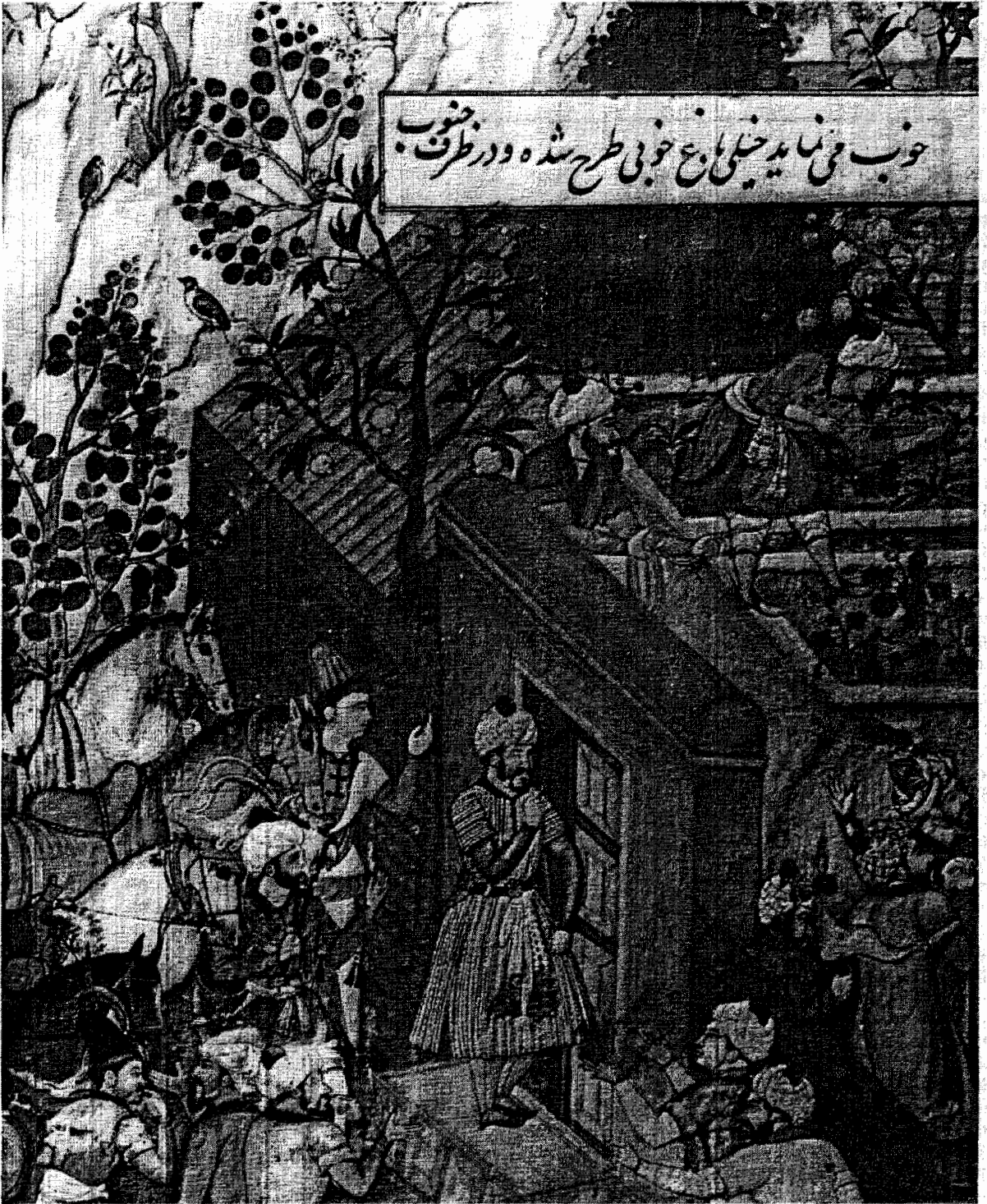
### *Babur's References to Gardens*

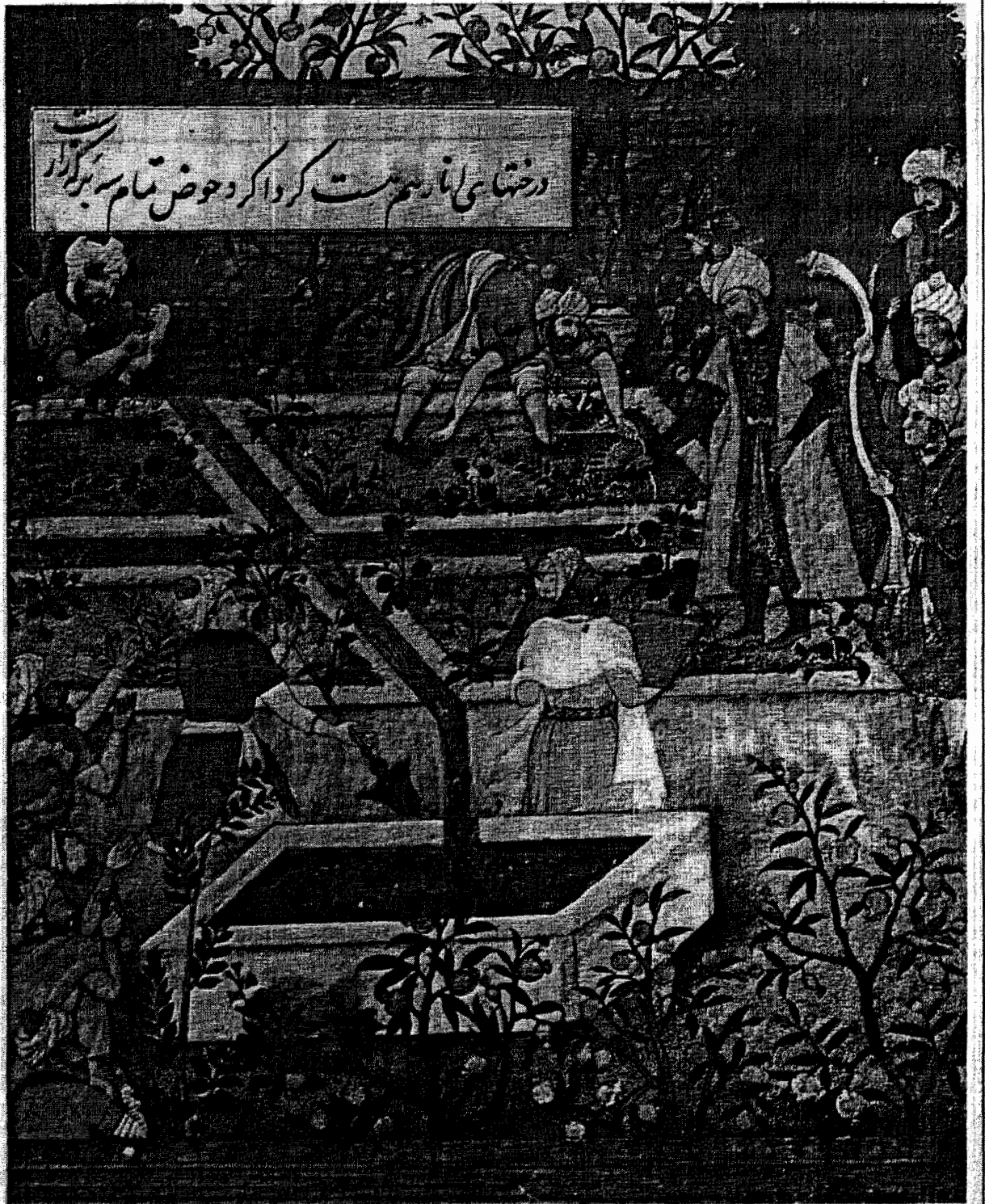
It has been suggested that under Babur the garden was the context for every major social event.<sup>20</sup> Yet in Babur's memoirs we only have reference to a limited range of activities that transpired there. Of course, he used gardens as residences and camps, well established Timurid practices. In addition, he only describes using them for death and religious rites, audiences and wine parties. There is, for example, no reference to marriages, circumcision celebrations or births that occur in gardens. Almost certainly they did, but this is not what interests Babur in a document which, we should recall, is essentially a legitimizing one.

### *Death Ritual*

Babur's earliest reference to garden use is the *Char Bagh* of Andijan, where he was

خوب می نماید خیلی مانع خوبی طرح شده و در ظرف خوب





dwelling when he learned of his father's death. For Babur, then, as subsequently for his Mughal heirs, the four-part garden was associated with death. He notes that with the permission of the owner, he buried his mother in the New Year's garden in Kabul and performed her death rituals there.<sup>21</sup> His daughter, Gulbadan Begum, adds that 1,000 silver coins were given for this right.<sup>22</sup> It is not clear if burial in a garden continued Timurid custom. Most Timurid tombs seem to have been placed in cemeteries, although the Shrine of Sayyid Hasan-i Waqaf in Afush-teh (1425-65) bears an inscription that describes its complex as a garden or orchard with running water and trees.<sup>23</sup> Subsequently, though not so clearly during Babur's reign, the garden became the characteristic Mughal setting for tombs. Its paradisaical imagery, culminating in the Taj Mahal, the ultimate vision of paradise, makes this the obvious eternal setting for the deceased.

#### *Audience: Legitimacy and Alliance*

Throughout Babur's life, the garden played a major role in symbolizing his quest for a permanent kingdom. However, in order to affirm his patrimony, he quickly left the garden in which he had learned of his father's death. Looking for safe refuge, his most pressing concern was to assert his own claim to the throne, fearing its usurpation by his father's brothers.

A little later, aware of the need for allies, Babur approached Sultan Mahmud Khan Chaghatai, his maternal uncle, who earlier had opposed him.<sup>24</sup> Babur writes:

*I waited on the Khan in the garden Haidar Kukuldash had made outside Shahrukhiya. He was seated in a large four-doored tent set up in the middle of it. Having entered the tent, I knelt three times, he for his part rising to do me honor. We looked one another in the eyes; and he returned to his seat. After I had knelt, he called me to his side and shewed me much affection and friendliness.*<sup>25</sup>

The garden setting, although described briefly, conforms to other Timurid princely ones, with its centrally placed tent used as a royal audience hall.<sup>26</sup> Here we have a sense of courtly interaction between two men, related but differing in rank. While Babur kneels three times in the presence of his senior, their gaze is one of mutual understanding.<sup>27</sup>

Babur records receiving others in a garden, for example, meeting Sultanim Begum, whom he likens to his "honored elder sister".<sup>28</sup> Out of respect for one another each advanced half the way; he then bent his knee before her; she responded similarly. He writes, "We always observed the same ceremony afterwards",<sup>29</sup> suggesting a fluidity in court ceremony. Such fluidity is maintained into Akbar's period.<sup>30</sup>

At yet another meeting in a garden, the interaction was far less hospitable. It was in the garden once belonging to Babur's grandmother that his uncle, Mahmud Khan Chaghatai, abruptly confiscated Babur's lands, even though earlier he had pledged support. The lands were given to Sultan Ahmad Khan, yet another of Babur's uncles.<sup>31</sup>

Thus the garden for Babur was a center of power, a dwelling and imperial seat. Subsequently, then, it was here that he held his own audience, mentioned rarely; more significantly, it was here that Babur submitted to those more powerful, those who had the power to bolster or destroy his ambitions for kingship. In Babur's early years, these purveyors of power were almost invariably Chaghatai and Timurid relatives, and Babur's recorded conversations with them often took place in a garden setting. In time, Babur sought an alternative power base, and so developed a coterie of new supporters. But the garden remained central to interaction with these new supporters.

#### *Wine Parties*

Most often when Babur describes garden use, he refers to wine parties.<sup>32</sup> Wine drinking and parties were a well-established part of the complicated etiquette and ritual of the late Timurid court which Babur called "common custom".<sup>33</sup> All the same, we have no record of Babur indulging in drink until 1519. In 1507 he explicitly states that he did not drink or participate in wine parties, but on one occasion made an exception for his close associates since the host was like a father or elder brother to him.<sup>34</sup> Since the beginning of his indulgence in wine may be related to certain changes in Babur's support group, it is important to determine when Babur first participated in wine parties. This likely occurred soon after 1507, though there is a lacuna in his memoirs from the middle of 1508 to the beginning of 1519. By the time his memoirs resume, he clearly participated in these par-

ties. Since already in 1507 he was contemplating wine drinking,<sup>35</sup> it seems probable that he first consumed it closer to 1508 than to 1519.

Babur's observations of most wine parties were those of a sober man;<sup>36</sup> when he did over-indulge, he records it freely. Babur was revolted by drunkards, excluding them at times from his gatherings, and felt strongly that no pressure should be exerted on those who did not drink.<sup>37</sup> Seemingly in accordance with established practice, Babur allowed drinking only on certain days.<sup>38</sup> Early in 1527, after his victories at Panipat and over the Rana Sangam, he renounced wine altogether; after this we have no record of further wine parties.<sup>39</sup>

Babur gives us little insight as to why he began hosting wine parties. Nevertheless, his persistent record of these events, often in a garden setting, suggests a substantive reason. These gatherings included only males who were close associates.<sup>40</sup> Those named correspond frequently to those serving in pivotal positions in his Afghan and Indian campaigns.<sup>41</sup>

At the beginning of his career Babur had tremendous difficulty maintaining the loyalty of his troops and relatives, to a large degree accounting for his failure in his Central Asia homeland. Commencing with his conquest of Kabul in 1504, Babur began to overcome these problems. By the time he conquered India, he had developed special and effective ties with his most prominent retainers through blood, milk,<sup>42</sup> household service and marriage.<sup>43</sup> He added the Timurid custom of garden wine parties, sometime between 1508 and 1519, that is, during his years in Afghanistan, corresponding to the very time that he was developing close and binding ties with his followers. These wine parties, carefully recorded in a legitimizing document, the *Babur Nama*, probably were part of this bonding process. His renunciation of wine seems to have been largely a personal and spiritual matter.<sup>44</sup> But it is possible that after two major victories in India, he no longer felt the need for participation in ritual wine parties to insure loyalty.

### *Religious Rite*

While the times of prayer are frequently mentioned as temporal and event markers, Babur makes little reference to the actual observance of religious rite. There is, in fact, only

one mention of the celebration of religious rite in a garden, the celebration of Ramadan in his Indian garden at Sikri.<sup>45</sup> Significantly, this event of 1527 dates to his post Indian conquest period, when he had added the establishment of Islam to the mission of his rule. He referred to Hindus as *kafirs*, that is, pagans or infidels, and war against his greatest Indian threat, Rana Sangam, was termed jihad or holy war.<sup>46</sup> Shortly after his victory over Rana Sangam, Babur assumed the title Ghazi, that is, a warrior dedicated to the cause of Islam, and wrote a verse stating his resolve to defeat Hindus and pagans.<sup>47</sup> All this rhetoric followed the long-established practice of Islamic rulers conquering non-Islamic lands.

Gardens were given a role in Babur's attempt to insure the success of Islam in India. Religious rite such as the celebration of Ramadan took place there. Babur's reference to it in a legitimizing text such as his memoirs underscores his sense that the celebration in a garden was part of this new dimension of his role as Indian ruler. Besides his memoirs, inscriptions show that Babur insured daily religious ritual in a garden by placing his enormous Panipat mosque in a large *char bagh*.<sup>48</sup> This mosque commemorates his decisive victory over Sultan Ibrahim Lodi there and thus the Mughal conquest of Hindustan. The placement of his mosque in an ordered garden was new in India and gave additional symbolic import to the Mughal *char bagh*.

### *Babur's Gardens*

We have seen that Babur's recorded use of gardens, excluding their general use as residences and camps, falls into four categories. The first anticipates future developments in the Mughal funerary tradition. Three of these categories — gardens used for audience, gardens as a site of wine parties, and gardens as a site of religious rite — are closely associated with Babur's personal struggle for empire and legitimacy. The matter to be considered now is how Babur's construction of *char baghs*, not simply the recorded use of gardens, reflects this same concern.

Through the construction of *char-baghs* Babur placed his imprimatur upon the land. Even before the Battle of Panipat, Babur considered the Punjab, that is, the north-western territory between Delhi and Kabul, rightfully his since earlier it had been conquered by his

A HUMAYUN-PERIOD PAINTING ON CLOTH COMMONLY KNOWN AS THE "PRINCES OF THE HOUSE OF TIMUR", CA. 1550 WITH 17th CENTURY ADDITIONS COURTESY OF THE TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM



ancestor, Timur. There on a bitter cold, rainy day in February 1526, two months before his victory over the Lodis, Babur discovered a site near the Ghaggar River that he deemed ideal for a *char bagh*.<sup>49</sup> The garden, which he designed himself, was finished in 1528-29. Although the garden no longer survives, literary reports indicate that Babur's first Indian garden was built around a natural spring and that the garden itself was situated in a narrow mountain valley, a terrain close to that of Babur's own Kabul. In essence Babur was commencing the process of transforming India into a Timurid realm. As he advanced into the Delhi — Agra heartland, gardens to mark his territorial conquest would follow in Panipat, Agra, Gwalior, Fatehpur Sikri and Dholpur. In addition, Babur issued orders that regular, symmetrical gardens and orchards were to be laid out in all large cities.<sup>50</sup> That these four-part, ordered gardens represented a Timurid tradition, even in the eyes of Babur's Indian subjects, may be surmised from their names. The area in Agra developed under Babur's nobles was called Kabul by local inhabitants;<sup>51</sup> and still today the area in Panipat where Babur's garden originally stood is still called Kabuli Bagh. Babur makes clear that by constructing gardens he manipulates natural, untamed landscape into a rational, ordered creation.<sup>52</sup> For example, he describes his renovations to the garden at Istalif (Kabul) in this manner:

*Formerly its course was zig-zag and irregular; I had made it straight and orderly; so the place became very beautiful.*<sup>53</sup>

While Babur detested the heat, dust, flies and violent winds of the Indian summers, he responded to the climate by building gardens and baths. Gardens, ordered and regular, could shape the terrain of what he called "disorderly Hind"<sup>54</sup> to Babur's own liking and expectations. Running water, required for all Mughal gardens, was supplied by constructing Persian water wheels in conjunction with deep stepped wells, called *baolis* or *wains*. Baths piped with hot and cold water were built in these gardens, for as Babur states, inside such baths the heat and flying dust are shut out.<sup>55</sup> His famous passages on the transformation of ugly Agra to a site of beauty by the construction of *char baghs* also reflect these same concerns, stating that the people of Hind had never seen anything so orderly.<sup>56</sup> The construction of gardens for Babur probably had a significance beyond mere territorial conquest and the introduction of a new ordered aesthetic. That is, on one level it was

for Babur a metaphor of his ability to govern. Underscoring this is the allusion by Babur's faithful noble, Zain Khan, to "the garden of his [Babur's] powerful state", using other garden and floral imagery to proclaim Babur's regal character.<sup>57</sup> This reference is bolstered when we recall that Babur's memoirs reveal his deep personal involvement with the cultivation of plants and flowers for his own gardens. In short, Babur knew all potential plantings for his gardens, and he demonstrated himself ultimate master and creator of each garden. Recalling that Zain Khan uses the garden metaphor for Babur's state, Babur's portrayal of himself as its master assumes special significance.

The association of Babur with the garden metaphor appears to have appealed to Humayun and Akbar as well. For example, in illustrations commissioned by Akbar for copies of the *Babur Nama*, Babur is often shown personally supervising the construction of a garden as if the emperor were synonymous with a master gardener.<sup>58</sup>

Perhaps the most powerful use of the garden metaphor is found in one of the most important paintings of Humayun's reign, the so-called *Princes of the House of Timur*.<sup>59</sup> It was likely painted in Kabul around 1550, after Humayun left the court of the Safavid Shah Tahmasp and before the Mughal emperor's victorious return to India. This large cloth painting, originally over four feet high, depicts Humayun and his Timurid ancestors seated in an ordered garden recalling Zain Khan's garden metaphor for Babur's powerful state. Humayun is seated in a central pavilion; Timur likely was included originally in the position where his descendants, Akbar, Jahangir and Shah Jahan, were added later.

The painting's unusually large size suggests that it was used for display at court, recalling earlier Islamic practice under the Fatimids, who hung a silk banner depicting all the rulers of the world, expressing the Fatimid claim to belong to the family of kings.<sup>60</sup> The depiction of Humayun in a garden setting is hardly surprising given his Timurid heritage. However, when considered in the context of Babur's own gardens and the meaning gardens had for him, we must see this work as taking on a metaphoric quality — one that equates Humayun, too, with master gardener status. This becomes all the more likely when we recall that it was Humayun who carried with him and preserved his father's handwritten text today known as the *Babur Nama*.

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BABUR ENJOYING A FEAST GIVEN BY THE MIRZAS OF HERAT FROM THE BABUR/NAMA  
(COURTESY OF NATIONAL MUSEUM, NEW DELHI)

