# The abode of love

Choosing the most beautiful country in the world, for this searching traveler at least, is an impossible task and yet, old Tom Moore might be right. There is something rare and intoxicating in the soul-stirring beauty of Kashmir, as it is now spelt. Nestling between two majestic Himalayan mountain ranges, faceted with clear lakes, rushing streams and waterfalls, the valley sparkles like a brilliant jewel in the northwest corner of diamond-shaped India.

Despite its recent troubled history as an area of contention between India and Pakistan, Kashmir gives the visitor a feeling of a sanctuary serene, a sky-high emerald-green valley isolated from the world by towering snow-mantled peaks. Yet less than four hundred kilometers away loom the restricted, warily guarded frontiers of Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and the Soviet Union.

Here is the very heart of Asia, where processions of conquerors and recurrent conflicts have bloodied the pages of history. But in the so-called "Happy Valley" of Kashmir, a sense of the romantic imbues the land. Quaintly festooned shikaras — gondola-like skiffs paddled with heart-shaped oars — gently ply the lakes, shy young honeymooners seclude themselves snugly in rented houseboats, and breathtaking iridescent sunsets flood the sky. Most romantic of all in Kashmir is the ethereal magic of the centuries-old Garden of Shalimar.

Overlooking the calm waters of Dal Lake on the outskirts of Srinagar, the dreamy Kashmiri capital, the Garden of Shalimar is the creation of the seventeenth century Moghul emperor, Jahangir. A des-

"Who has not heard of the Vale
of Cashmere
With its roses the brightest that
earth ever gave."

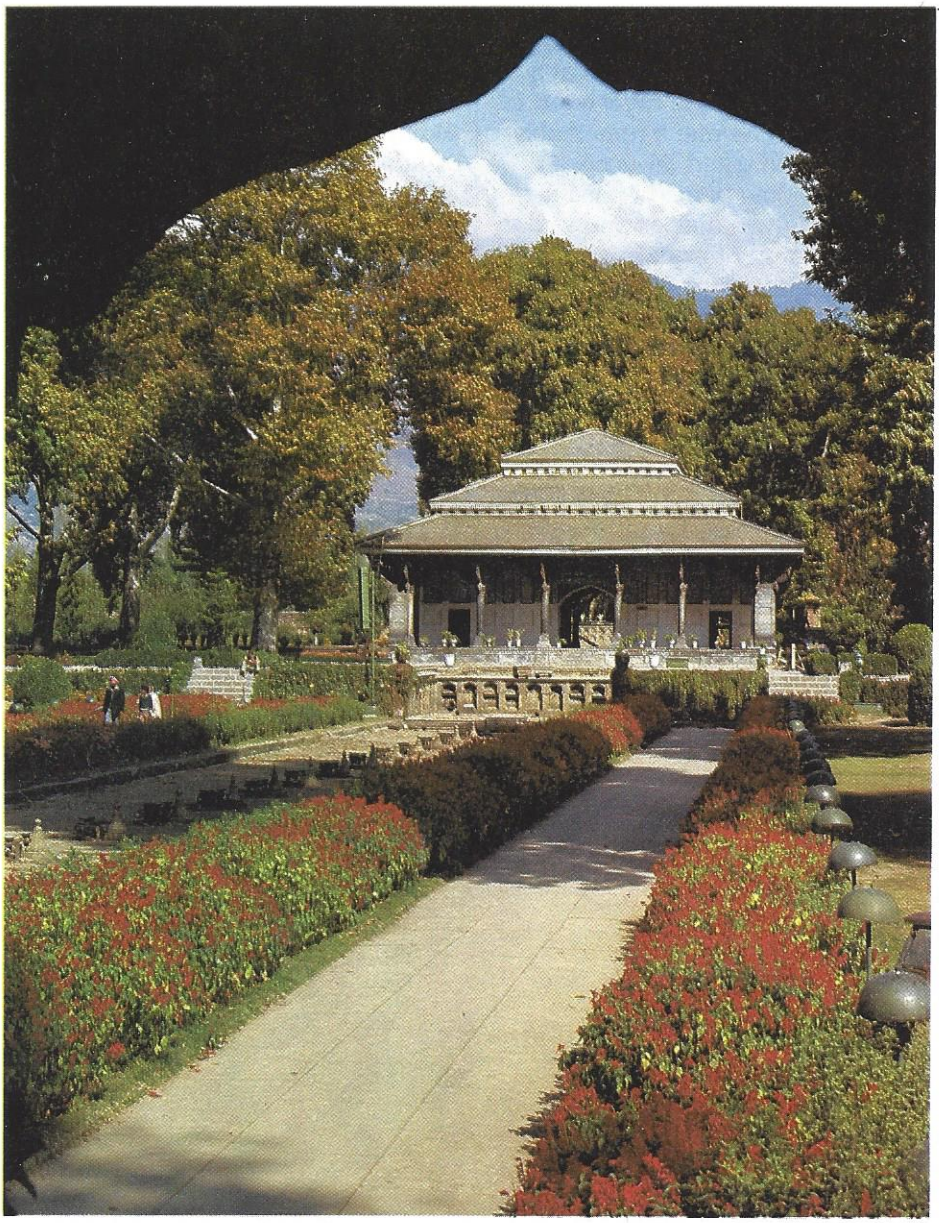
* * *

". . . see it by moonlight when
mellowly shines
The light o'er its palaces,
gardens and shrines."

*Lalla Rookh*
Thomas Moore



*Jahangir and Nur Jahan.*



*The Marble Throne Pavilion in the Garden; Spring brings out the picnickers.*

hul capital, Agra, sweltering one thousand kilometers to the south in the Hindustan plains. Here they could shed the burdens of the court and its protocol. Here they could find delight in each other in a setting Jahangir called "the abode of love".

Jahangir designed the garden in the symmetrical pattern of a classic Persian carpet. On a site six hundred meters long by two hundred meters wide, Shalimar was laid out in the traditional formal style so admired by the Moghuls. Large squares of greenery were arranged on sloping terraces for easy watering. Each terrace, divided into four smaller squares in a char-bagh, or four-part plot, produced an array of rectangles and straight lines that fitted together in an overall harmony.

The central core of Shalimar was an inclined marble-lined watercourse into which were channeled the little streams that emerged from the Himalayan foothills nearby. As the water rolled from terrace to terrace in its descent towards the lake, it rippled past flowering shrubs and plants, cascaded over stone ledges that turned the quiet flow into sheets of glass seemingly suspended in mid-air, and eventually widened into artificial pools dotted with rows of gushing fountains in the shape of lotus buds.

Jahangir believed that every great work of art should have its crowning touch. In Shalimar it was the elegant marble pavilions, their domed roofs supported by graceful stone columns. Surrounded by pools and screened by fountains, the classic buildings appeared to float on the water. In the time of Jahangir and Nur Jahan, these pavilions housed suites of apartments painted in gold, each with a salon and adjoining rooms where attendants prepared sherbets, coffee and hookah waterpipes. Prominently inscribed in ornamental Persian script on the walls was the immortal paean to Shalimar attributed to Jahangir, "If there is heaven on earth, it is here! It is here! It is here!"

cendant of both the Mongol conqueror, Genghis Khan, and the Turkish warlord, Tamerlane, Jahangir inherited from his father, Akbar the Great, a mighty empire that stretched from Afghanistan in the west to the Bay of Bengal in the east.

Akbar, most powerful and enlightened of the Muslim Moghul kings, also bequeathed to his son a devotion to the fine arts and a tolerance for all religions. On his own, however, Jahangir developed a volatile temperament and a sensitive love of nature. A notoriously heavy drinker (he is depicted on coins with goblet in hand) and a one-time opium addict, he was capable of both savage cruelty and tender compassion. He enjoyed attending the executions of men torn to pieces by elephants yet he also built a vast drinking tank for animals in memory of his favorite deer.

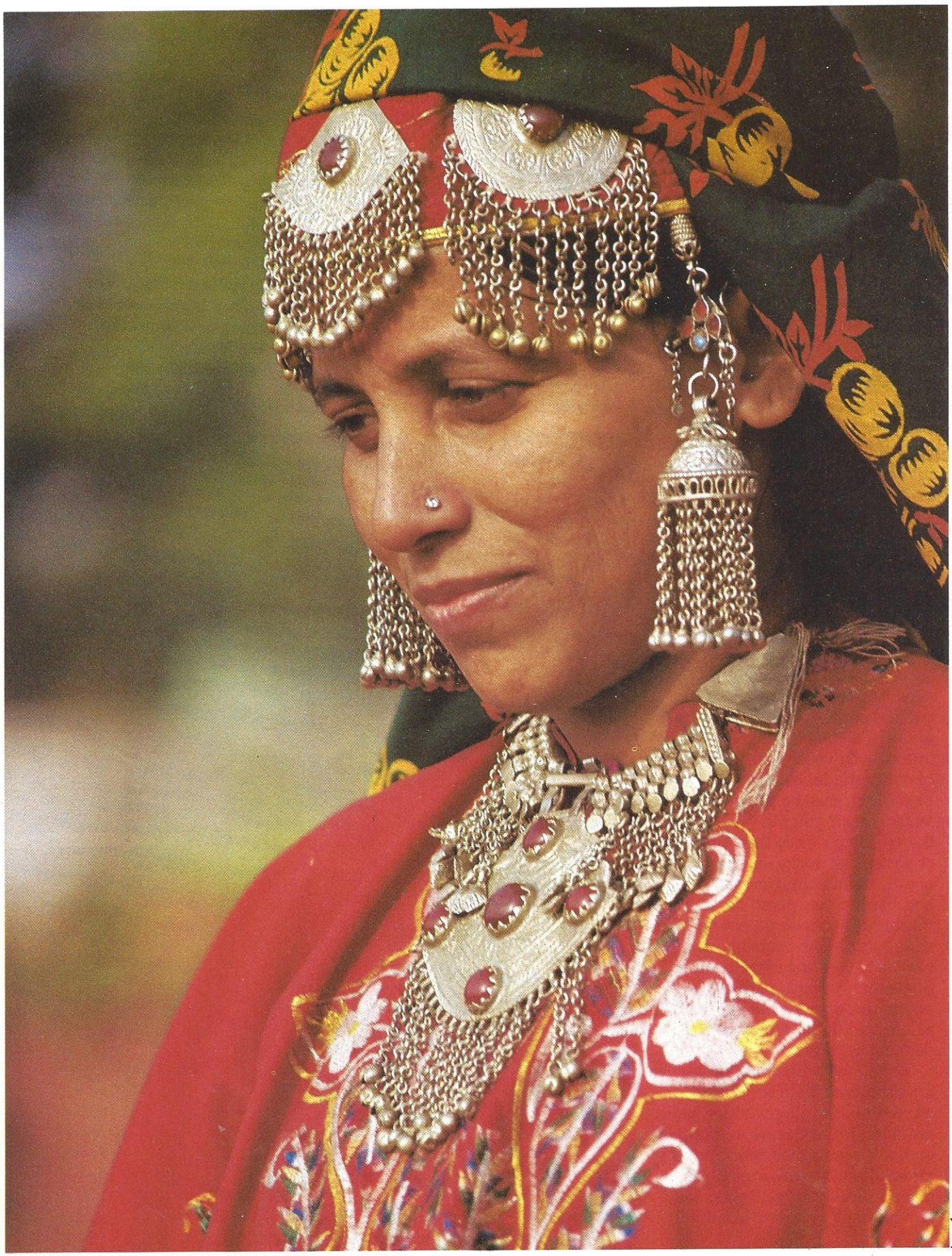
The greatest thing that ever happened to Jahangir occurred at a Spring festival of the royal court in 1611, when he met a remarkably beautiful and gifted 34-year-old Persian widow named Mihr-un-Nisa. Forty-two himself and said to have a harem of eight hundred women at that time, Jahangir fell deeply in love with her and they were married soon afterwards.

Mihr-un-Nisa became the Empress Nur Jahan (Light of the World). With long black hair and intense eyes, this intelligent and ambitious woman who wrote poetry, designed fabrics and was an excellent markswoman (she once killed a tiger with a single shot), soon came to wield a powerful influence over her husband. This influence was felt in the far reaches of the Moghul empire, for a noticeable change came over Jahangir after his marriage. He settled down, curtailed his drinking and opium habits. Nur Jahan was totally devoted to him, looking after him with great care. She actively aided him in encouraging the work of artists, scholars and musicians, and in contributions to charity.

The story of the legendary love of Jahangir and Nur Jahan is still retold today in Shalimar Garden in a son et lumière presentation on summer nights before hundreds of spectators seated amidst the fragrant flowers and splashing fountains. Spellbinding voices of Indian actors and tremulous strains of plucked sitars effectively transport the audience back over three centuries to the heyday of Moghul splendor.

In 1619, inspired by the grandeur of the Himalayan backdrop and the sweeping vista of Dal Lake, Jahangir chose this idyllic spot as an elysian retreat for himself and his beloved. Here they could escape the torrid summer heat of the Mog-

*The foothills of the Himalayas provide a stunning backdrop to the Garden of Shalimar.*



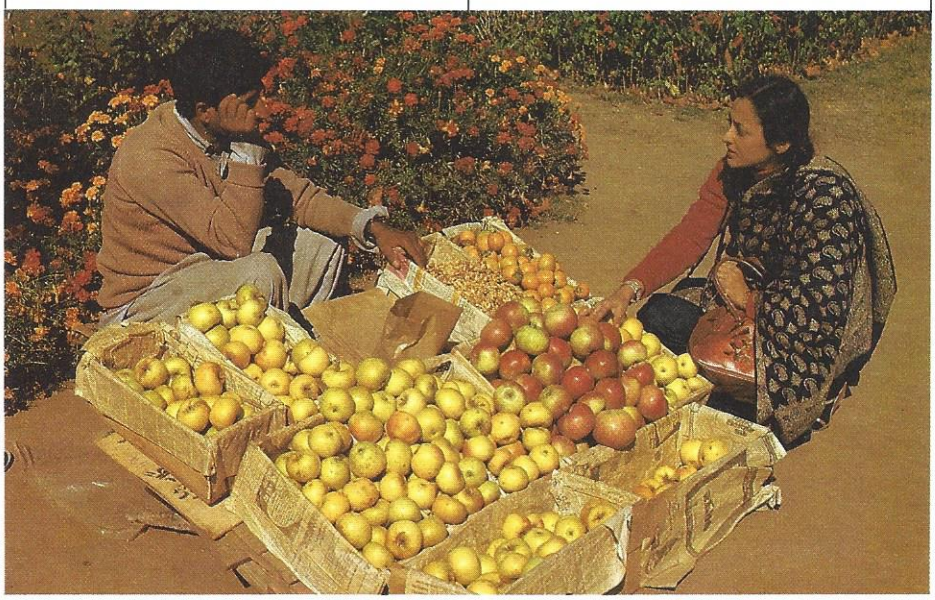
*Dressed in a strikingly beautiful Kashmiri costume.*

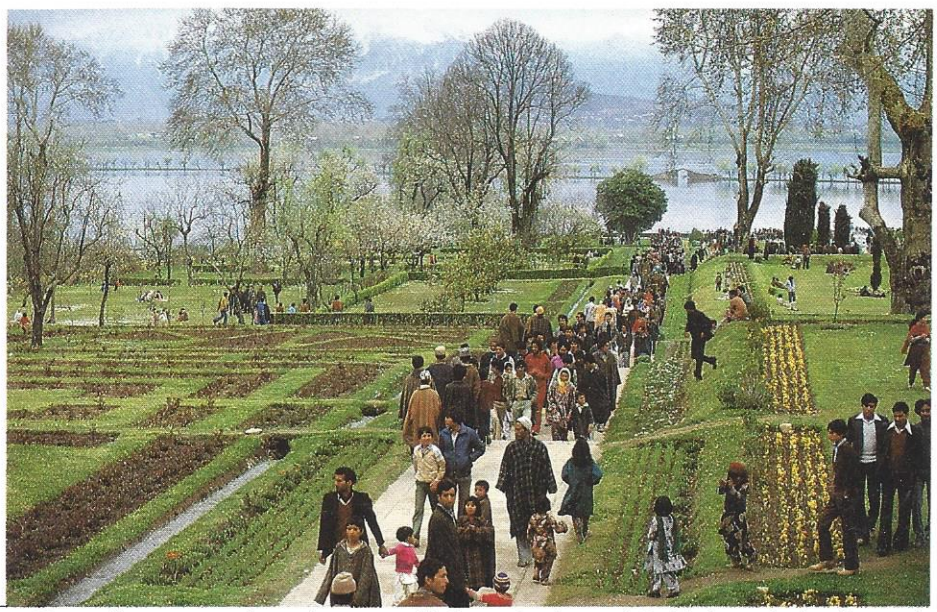
Today, close to the white flagstoned walkways bordering the water channel, many of the huge chenar trees planted by Jahangir still stand as lofty sentinels. Tall poplars, arrow-straight cypresses and neatly trimmed acacia bushes grace the verdant landscape. But it is the flowers, in great profusion, that are the soul of Shalimar. Galaxies of lovingly nurtured flowerbeds blazon their vivid colors and heady perfumes in all corners of the garden. Larkspurs, chrysanthemums, snapdragons, geraniums, iris, dahlias, pansies and, of course, the fabled roses that so captivated Thomas Moore. In Shalimar, it is said, "the fragrance of flowers never sleeps".

On the green lawns blue-uniformed schoolchildren sitting in circles stare with friendly brown eyes at this stranger. Responding to my greeting, they giggle and cheerfully wave back. Whole families picnic under the chenar trees, brewing tea in brass pots on kerosene burners. Along the footpaths Kashmiri men stroll in western dress and in loose-fitting phiran robes, baggy salwar trousers, turbans and topi caps, sporting mustaches of every cut and style. Raven-haired women, some clad in black burqas and heavily veiled, others in saris of every shade and pattern, watch as children play by the water, challenging each other to tip-toe across the stepping stones that span the channel. Fat ducks wander freely about, yellow-billed mynah birds and black crows perch on little mushroom-shaped pathlamps, installed just a few years ago when electricity was first introduced to Shalimar. An ambiance of quiet decorum pervades the garden as if all are mindful of the royal residence it once was.

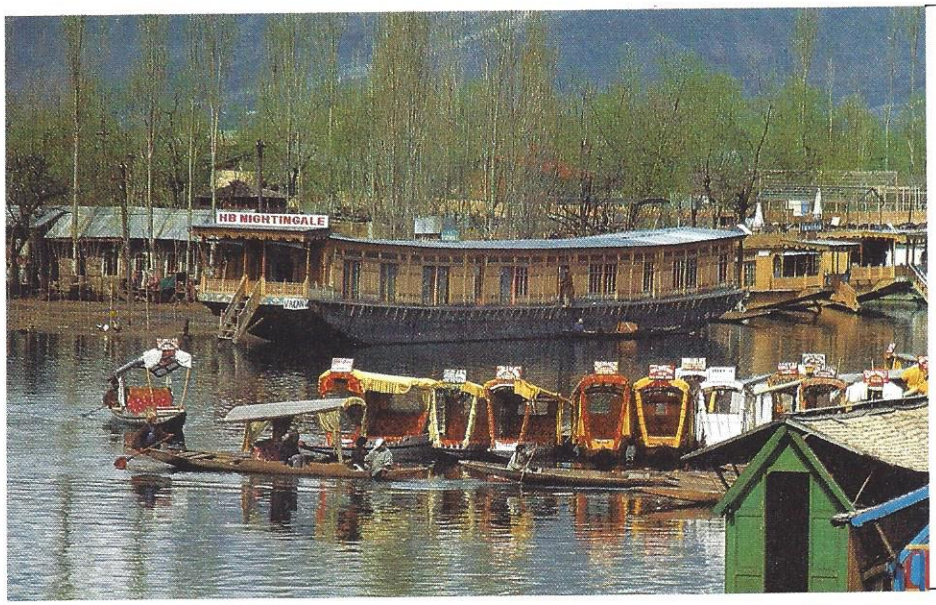
Today, with Shalimar no longer an exclusive bower for the privileged nobility, the wooden gates are open for everyone to enjoy the garden's scenic pleasures and to muse upon the romance of its storied past. Four gardeners (Jahangir employed nine hundred) labor long hours to keep the grounds beautiful. The government of the State of Jammu and Kashmir strives to restore and maintain the aesthetic standards of earlier times. For many years vandalism and neglect had eroded Shalimar's pristine magnificence and charm. When the era of the Moghuls ended — it lasted only two hundred years — Pathan and Sikh rulers continued to luxuriate in the joys of the garden. Later on, the British empire-builders spent their summer holidays there. The stately buildings decayed and repairs became a constant necessity. Old marble domes gave way to shingled pyramidal roofs. Gilded interiors were covered with coats of whitewash. The dramatic view of Dal Lake became obstructed by an enclosing stone wall.

This evening, as enveloping dusk settles over Shalimar and the lake breeze ruffles the leaves of Jahangir's chenar trees, visions from the ancient past materialize before me. Seated on adjacent back marble thrones at the water's edge, I see Jahangir and Nur Jahan. Eyes widely set apart, thick handlebar mustache curling upward and pearled dagger at his belt, Jahangir smiles and caresses the hand of his handsomely regal wife as she listens intently to an ode recited by a court poet. What a strange and





*Fruit-sellers are popular with visitors; Shalimar Garden with Dal Lake in the background.*



As summer drew to a close in 1627, the twenty-second year of his reign, Jahangir, in frail health, reluctantly left Shalimar for the last time. En route to Agra in the royal caravan, he became gravely ill. Surrounded by distressed court attendants and an anguished Nur Jahan at his side, the emperor, just before departing this world, uttered one last wish — to go back to his earthly heaven, Shalimar, his "abode of love" ●

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Photographs by
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Philippine Airlines flies from Manila to Karachi every Monday, Tuesday, Friday and Saturday and from Karachi to Manila every Wednesday and Sunday. Easy connections are available from Karachi to Srinagar.

complex pair, this loving royal couple for whom Shalimar was a private paradise. Jahangir, connoisseur of beauty and patron of the arts, who placed a gold bell and chain outside his palace for anyone to ring should he feel himself a victim of injustice; whom a British diplomat once found sharing the food of a filthy beggar, the emperor embracing the man, a holy fakir, and calling him "father". Jahangir, who entrusted to his wife the authority to conduct affairs of state, saying he only wanted for himself "a quart of wine and a pound of flesh". Yet history remembers him also as one of the most human and culturally talented of the Moghul kings.

And Nur Jahan, the sophisticated and strong-willed queen of great intellect and sound common sense, who so loved the arts, music and poetry; who intrigued with court cliques, generals and heirs presumptive to extend her power; who is said to have given dowry money from her own purse to hundreds of needy brides. Nur Jahan, whose name was joined to her husband's on coins, unheard of in Muslim tradition. History credits her with having brought out the best in her husband's character, her faithful love consoling him for the disloyalty and open rebellion of his own sons.

*Shikaras and houseboats for hire on Dal Lake; An itinerant flower stall; Jahangir, the man who created all this beauty.*