

The Islamic Perspective on Public Parks in Muslim Urban Neighborhoods

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ABSTRACT

Designers contribute to assisting the community towards a sustained Islamic lifestyle, their prime responsibility unfolds service for the wellbeing through the concept of an Islamist society. Public parks offer the enjoyment of cultural and social activities. In densely populated areas of Pakistan, people depend on parks for physical and social recreation. There is high visitation during moderate and cold weather with a greater number of females and children. Though it is a space where visitors should feel secure and relaxed, most of the parks do not offer convivial conditions for female visitors because of inefficient privacy, accessibility, and hygiene. This paper has assessed the quality of public parks of Peshawar city, by empirically evaluating their meaningfulness, safety, comfort, and pleasurability through a cultural and religious perspective. The visitation data of two frequently visited public parks of Peshawar are examined for this study. Islamic values such as modesty, cooperation, and justice have been discussed to assess the quality of space. The result of the study can contribute to framing an appropriate planning guideline for open space distress in a Muslim society. The improvement of public parks requires contemplation of privacy, accessibility, and hygiene according to the Islamic teachings for various visitor types.

Introduction

Public parks through the Islamic perspective

Parks are spaces usually owned by the state or the city, for the public from all demographic groups of a community to enjoy healthy social and physical activities in an open natural environment. They are one of the public realm places in urban societies. They begin as secular endeavors, stemming from the practical need to organize the surrounding space, tame nature and enhance the earth's yield, to offer a healthy green environment (Evaluating Public Space, 2014).

The importance of such public spaces and recreational sites like parks can be determined by three tenets of Islam:

Parks and gardens are designed where one can enjoy free time in the fresh air with family, friends or even alone. They facilitate healthy activities. Living a healthy life is one of Islam's teachings related to hapoos un nufs. Health is declared a blessing from Allah. As Prophet Mohammad said: "Ask Allah (SWT) for forgiveness and health, for after being granted certainty, one is given nothing better than health." related in Tirmidhi

No one will be allowed to move from his position on the Day of Judgement until he has been asked how he spent his life, how he used his knowledge, how he earned and spent his money and in what pursuits he used his health", related in Tirmidhi.

So, to thank him for His blessings and to consume them sensitively is one's responsibility because the man will be asked about it on the Day of Judgment.

Meaning of health in Islam is extended to complete physical, social, mental and spiritual wellbeing. Since the teaching of Islam about morality, has been associated with the illness of heart not in terms of physical but spiritual context, "In their heart is a disease, and God increases their disease; for them is a painful chastisement because of the lies they were telling." (2:10).

To become spiritually healthy all three; mental, ethical and healthy practices are needed. Parks are places which can offer an alluring platform in this regard if they serve a clean, green and safe environment.

Parks and other public attraction sites facilitate the observance of nature. Many Muslims can relate to God more when they are close to nature, and when they travel. Islamic doctrine encourages travel for two reasons. One is to learn a lesson from past nations as Allah says, "[O Muhammad], Travel through the land and observe how was the end of the criminals." (Al Naml 69). The other reason is to observe nature to realize Allah as the only Creator thus the only one who shall be prayed to. As in the Quran it is stated, "[O Muhammad], "Travel through the land and observe how He began creation. Then Allah will produce the final creation. Indeed Allah, over all things, is competent."

The kinship is a social aspect of Islamic teachings that support the need to easily accessible open natural environments as a facilitator to spend quality time with family, friends, and neighbors. Islam supports social interaction with family, neighbors, and friends. It enhances focus on

socializing to enhance cooperation and deeds on community welfare. It is mentioned in the Quran; "Worship Allah and associate nothing with Him, and to parents do good, and to relatives, orphans, the needy, the near neighbor, the neighbor farther away, the companion at your side, the traveler, and those whom your right hands possess. Indeed, Allah does not like those who are self-deluding and boastful" (Al Nisa 36)

So, we can say that parks can be places which put forward the public realm to enhance one's spiritual and physical capability to acknowledge Allah's blessings by observing nature and participating in healthy activities. As prophet Mohammad (PBUH) said: "Bread feeds the body, indeed, Hut flowers feed also the soul".

Heaven: the ultimate garden

There are more than a hundred and twenty citations in Quran mentioning "garden". Sura Al-Rehman contains the most comprehensive explanation of garden mentioning four types of gardens categorized in two sets where the higher level is Garden of the Spirit and the Garden of the Essence while Garden of the soul and the Garden of the Heart are lower levels. Muslim scholars have categorized eight levels of paradise based on the names given by Quran which are as under:

Jannatu-al-khuld (al-furqan, 25:15) can be called "Garden of eternity" or "the Garden of Immortality"

Darul-as-salam (al-anam, 6:127), can be called "the Abode of Peace"

Daru-al-Qarar (alMu'min, 40:42), can be called "the Garden" or "the Garden of Bliss"

Jannat-ul-and (al-Bara'ah, 9:72-73), can be called as “the Garden of Eden” or “the Garden of Everlasting Bliss)

Jannat-ul-Ma'wa (al-Sajdah, 32:19), can be called “the Garden of Retreat” or “the Garden of Hospitable homes”

Jannat-ul-nain (al-Maidah, 5:70), can be called “Paradise” or “Heaven”

Illiyyin (al-tatfif, 83:18), can be called the same.

Jannat-ul-Firdous (al-kahf, 18:107), can be called “the Garden of Paradise”

The above translations indicate that Paradise, on all levels, is a garden. The Garden which the destination of all humans who conduct their worldly life in a way described as pious in the Holly book.

Islamic Principles for a Public Park

Keeping in view the above description, public parks hold a significant place in urban planning and community well-being, offering spaces for recreation, social interaction, and environmental sustainability. From an Islamic perspective, these spaces are not only important for their aesthetic and recreational value but also for their role in fostering community cohesion, promoting health, and reflecting the principles of stewardship and social justice. Islamic teachings emphasize the importance of public welfare and community well-being. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) highlighted the value of communal spaces through his actions and sayings. For instance, he encouraged the creation and maintenance of public areas, such as markets and gardens, ensuring they were accessible and beneficial to all members of the community. This tradition underscores the Islamic view that public spaces, including parks, should serve the common

good and be designed with inclusivity in mind.

The concept of public parks holds four key concepts i.e. health and well-being, stewardship and environmental responsibility, aesthetics and spiritual value, and social justice and inclusivity. These concepts are concluded as:

Health and Well-Being

Islam advocates for the physical and mental well-being of individuals. Public parks offer opportunities for physical activities such as walking, jogging, and sports, which are essential for maintaining health. Additionally, these spaces provide a serene environment that can help reduce stress and promote mental wellness. The emphasis on health in Islam aligns with the benefits provided by parks, making them valuable assets in Muslim urban neighborhoods.

Stewardship and Environmental Responsibility

The concept of stewardship (Khalifah) in Islam places a responsibility on humans to care for the Earth and its resources. Public parks, like green spaces, embody this principle by preserving natural landscapes, providing habitats for wildlife, and improving air quality. They serve as reminders of Allah's creation and the duty Muslims must protect and maintain the environment. By integrating green spaces within urban settings, Muslim communities can demonstrate their commitment to environmental stewardship.

Aesthetic and Spiritual Value

In Islamic culture, gardens and green spaces are often seen as reflections of paradise. The Quran describes gardens with flowing rivers and lush vegetation, symbolizing peace and tranquility. Public parks, with their natural

beauty, can evoke these spiritual associations and provide spaces for reflection and contemplation. They can also serve as venues for community events and religious gatherings, fostering a sense of unity and spiritual connection.

Social Justice and Inclusivity

Islamic teachings stress the importance of social justice and the equitable distribution of resources. Public parks should be accessible to everyone, regardless of socioeconomic status, age, or ability. They are places where people from diverse backgrounds can gather, interact, and build a sense of community. Ensuring that parks are safe and welcoming for all reflects the Islamic principles of fairness and inclusivity.

History of Gardens in Muslim Society

It is pertinent that parks are an important feature of a city. Parks and Gardens have always been an important social and recreational place in every civilization since antiquity. The Islamic world has some great examples of Gardens in history of Islamic architecture like Nishat Bagh in Jammu and Kashmir India, Shalimar Bagh in Srinagar India, Shalimar Gardens in Lahore, Pakistan, Alcázar of Seville in Seville Spain, Lalbagh Fort in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The role of the gardens in the earlier and contemporary life of Muslim originates from the conception of Paradise, the ideal garden, as portrayed in the Quran.

Islam shares this impression of heaven as a garden with Christianity and Judaism while other religions have been referring to gardens where gods live. The Muslim world also received inspiration from the hanging gardens of Babylon mentioning large trees and water bodies.

Muslim society has always been imagining heaven by interpreting Quran

mentioning flowing water, singing birds, fruit-bearing trees and numerous types of streams. Due to the dry climate zone of Arabs, the Quran mentions rain (water) as a symbol of mercy. In early Muslim Society, Islam was the basis for the love of gardening like it was for all other branches of Muslim intellect. As it is mentioned in the Quran: 51/15, "Surely the God-fearing shall be among gardens and fountains."

In Islamic architecture, parks were designed according to the visualization of Quranic and Hadith references of heaven. These gardens were divided into quadric rectangles with watercourses aligned by fruit trees at both sides symbolized early imagery of paradise, influenced by Persian elements which were conquered in 7th Century A (Glick, 2005 p. 54) Central Asia and Spain in 8th Century AD.

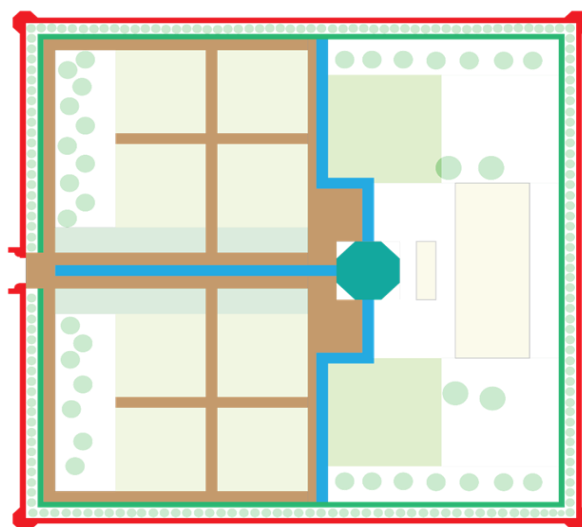


Figure 1. A Chahar-Bagh, considered to be a prototype of Islamic gardens all over the world. Source: The Authors rendition.

Nevertheless, garden in Muslim societies symbolizes beyond a mere recreational place or the earthly image of paradise. It is also affiliated to death (eternal rest), represents the flowering of the human

spirit and the transformation of the soul into an aromatic garden offering flowers and fruits. Consequently, it is quite normal for Muslims to phrase ‘win the Garden’ to indicate self-realization of piousness.

Evolution and Elements of Islamic Gardens

Since the beginning of Islam gardens were developed across the Islamic world. Muslims took inspiration from the region wherever they got settled. The harsh climate and need for food lead to the development of scientific agriculture. When Muslim cities became self-sustainable the huge construction projects were launched symbolizing their prosperity, wealth and intellect bringing up Bostan and Gulistan. Eventually, the garden also became an element of individual houses e.g. courtyard garden, fountain, etc. ultimately became a salient feature of Urban Planning in the Muslim World (Ruggles, 2008). Syrian Umayyad Palace is the earliest example of Chahar-Bagh in which a raised pavilion is provided at the junction of walkways in an irregular enclosure. Afterward, a typical quadric plan (fig 2 and 3) was incorporated across the Muslim World culminating the great gardens of Persia and Mughals in the 16th century. Fig 4 and 5 show the painterly expression of Mughal gardens of the time by miniature painters of that era.

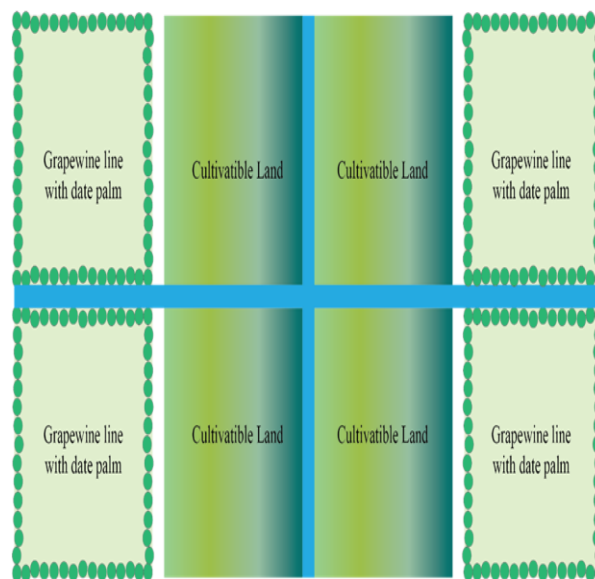


Figure 2. The plan of the lands of 2 people as described in the Holy Quran, Source: The author rendition.

In Muslim Persia, the garden was divided into four through water channels representing four rivers of paradise with plantations flanking on each side walkways. A typical Persian and Mughal Garden is located on a sloped site, surrounded by a perimeter boundary, water channels running in the middle dividing the garden into four partitions gradually merged into a pavilion or a building in the middle. Straight paved walkways flanked by fruit trees and rose-bushes from both sides are intricate play. Use of sound from water falling and chirping birds is a mesmerizing unifying concept in all the Mughal gardens.

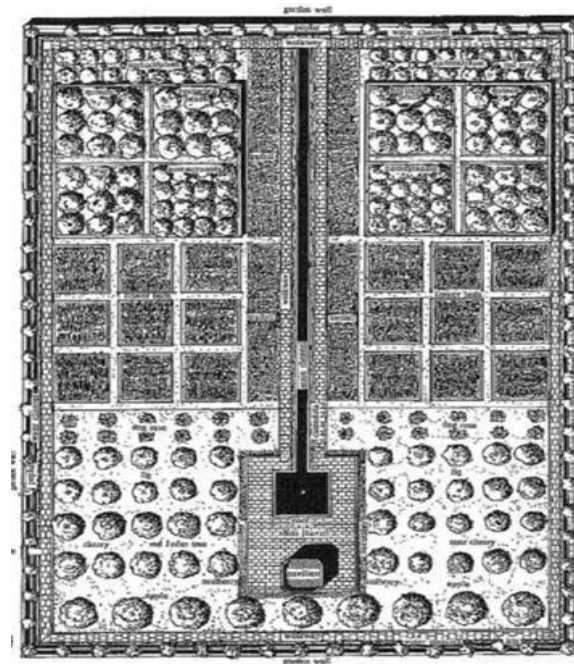


Figure 3. The reconstruction of the Timurid Chahar-bagh. Source: Based on Irshad-al-Zira; drawn by Wiktor Moskaliuk, plan extracted from the document ‘Agriculture and Timurid Chahar-bagh’



Figure 4. Bagh-e-Wafa- Babur's first Garden in Kabul: 1508-1509. Source: Islamic Gardens and Landscapes by Dr. Fairchild Ruggles.

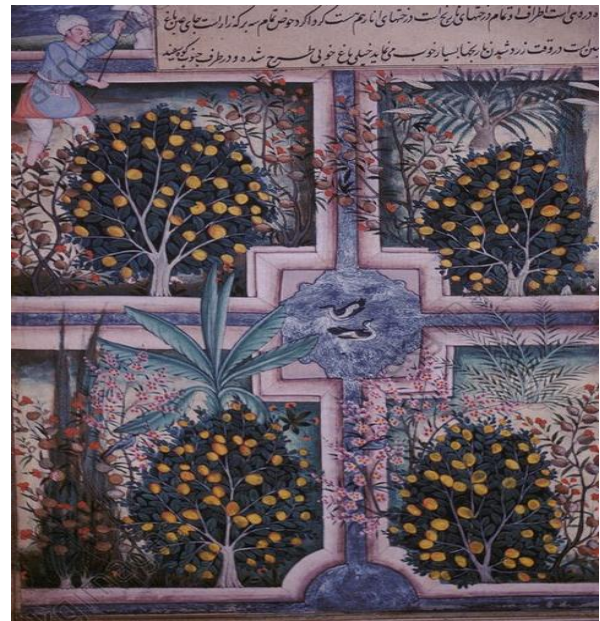


Figure 5. A view of Shalimar Bagh, Srinagar, Lucknow, circa 1780. Source: Islamic Gardens and Landscapes by Dr. Fairchild Ruggles.

The primary role of parks in contemporary society

Public parks being a part of public spaces are places which are “publicly accessible places where people go for group or individual activities” (Francis and Rivlin n.d.) (Nasution and Zahrah 2014). Unlike the social and civic functions of parks in old times. The prime role of the park has shifted to pleasurability in an open green environment because of many indoor public spaces for socializing, indoor theatres and technology-driven domestic and public means of entertainment (Khairussalleh, Hussain, and Ujang 2018). That means a well-designed park would have the ability to support, facilitate and promote our need for communication, play and relaxation. Even when public space is completely accessible to all, certain user groups tend to discourage others. Although public space is referred to as a space of participation and amicable

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social behaviors, it is also a contested territory between various groups, between private and public (Mehta 2014). According to Lee (2021) parks are acknowledged as essential urban public spaces that can enhance the value of nearby neighborhoods. Safety is a crucial indicator of a neighborhood park's success and, consequently, a significant aspect of its social value.

Since parks are spaces of the public realm, the quality of the environment would be evaluated to the degree of relaxation, comfort, safety, and pleurability to diverse user groups with their respective rationale of safety and comfort. Figure 6 explains the dependency of a natural public park's environment on these variables. These services concern physical and psychological requirements.

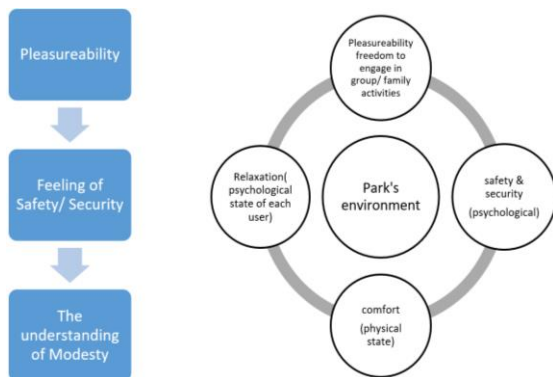


Figure 6. Relationship of park services. Source: The authors.

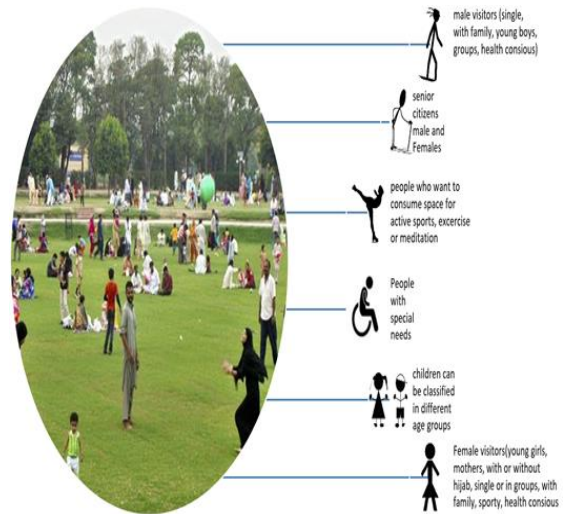


Figure 7. User demographics. Source: The authors.

The quality of the park's environment is dependent on the degree of fulfillment of services it claims under; universal demographic user groups, recreation, clean and green. Since Public Park addresses a variety of user groups (fig. 7) with miscellaneous physical and psychological needs, it is not possible to design these environments effectively without consideration on socio-cultural influences. The culture of a Muslim society carries many significant values which are different from the Western world, for example, the concept of veil and modesty. Though Muslim societies have opted a lot from western societies and people religious believes are an important factor in forming the culture of a community (YILMAZ 2014). But modesty is that integral part of Islamic teachings which is commonly practiced in various frequencies. Thus, the influences of Islamic teachings on Modesty are reflected in cultural practices.

Public Parks in Pakistan- Contextualizing our contemporary Muslim world***A case study of Peshawar City***

In Pakistan, much like many nations in the Middle East and North Africa, Islam forms the bedrock of society, culture, and law, deeply influencing the lifestyle of most of the population. This context raises important questions about the current state of public parks in Pakistan and the extent to which Islamic norms should be integrated into their design. Before delving into this topic, it is essential to contextualize public parks within Pakistan's contemporary urban lifestyle. Modernization has significantly altered lifestyles, leading to the emergence of secular approaches among some communities, while a majority continues to uphold traditional values and culture. The period from 2015 to 2018 saw protests reflecting both liberal and conservative religious sentiments, highlighting the sharp contrasts within the population.

Pakistan's societal landscape is marked by stark contrasts in cultural and ethnographic patterns, particularly in terms of literacy and economic conditions. The country's literacy rate has fallen from 60 percent to 58 percent, though private and international schools continue to produce excellent results. A significant portion of the population, around 39 percent, lives in multidimensional poverty, with the highest rates in regions like FATA and Balochistan. Urban areas have a lower poverty rate of 9.3 percent compared to 54.6 percent in rural areas, prompting significant migration to cities. This migration exacerbates the cultural and social diversity in urban centers like Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad. Cities such as Peshawar and Quetta, which have low poverty indices and literacy rates, are particularly notable for their diverse

communities. Peshawar was selected for a case study due to its pronounced cultural dynamics within the urban setting.

Fear of being alone Vs unease of being crowded

The parks in urban areas do not provide a comfortable environment for the people visiting with families and females because of the diametric culture of the cities with their perceptions of modesty. Like (Jorgensen, Ellis, and Ruddell 2013) mentions that features of the social and environmental qualities of outdoor spaces, such as parks, may create fearful conditions, especially among women. Individuals in public settings also rely on the presence of other people as cues that might increase or decrease fear (Fear Perceptions in Public Parks, 2013).

Some prefer such female-only spaces out of religious faith or cultural preferences, others are held back from going out by their conservative-minded families.

In 2012 a park was opened in Lahore only for female visitors named as Fatima Jinnah Park which received a high flow of visitors over the years. This popularity of women-centric park also explains a more troubling issue that many women fear harassment from men, something that can be a real problem in Pakistan's public spaces.

Research Methodology

A mixed-method approach for collecting primary data was adopted i.e. park visitation data from local municipality, layout comparison from its master plan and on-site observation, and a comparative checklist derived from the literature review. The two parks were selected based on geographical location to cover densely populated areas of the city to identify the factors which should be considered in designing Public Park in a

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Muslim society. One is Shahi Bagh in Peshawar city, and the other is Hayatabad Park in the newly planned urban area of Peshawar. A comparative study of the flow of visitors has been formed. The presence or absence of comparative features of park space planning has been observed.



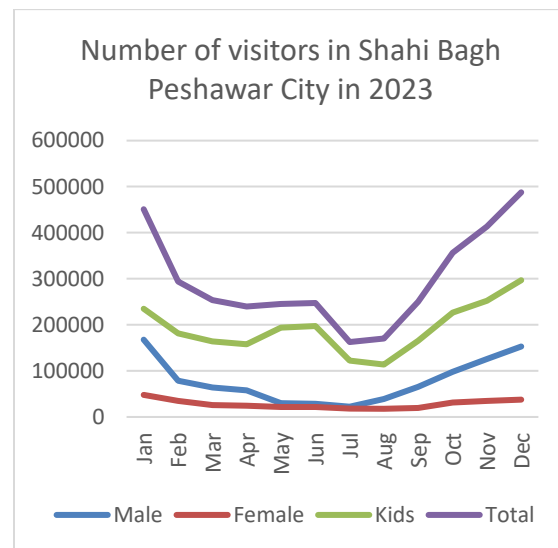
Figure 8. Shahi Bagh Peshawar. Source: Google Map



Figure 9. Bagh-e-Naran Peshawar. Source: Google Map.

The two parks were selected from the city on the following basis.

- Geographic location: they cover the two most populated areas in the eastern and western part of the city.
- Social structure: Bagh-e-Naran is situated in an urban contemporary settlement whereas Shahi- Bagh is a Historical site and surrounded by rather old settlements. It follows the Chahar Bagh layout as well.
- The settlements around Shahi Bagh are low-middle income groups. The life economic status of residents in Hayatabad, around Bagh-e-Naran, is an upper middle to the high-income group.



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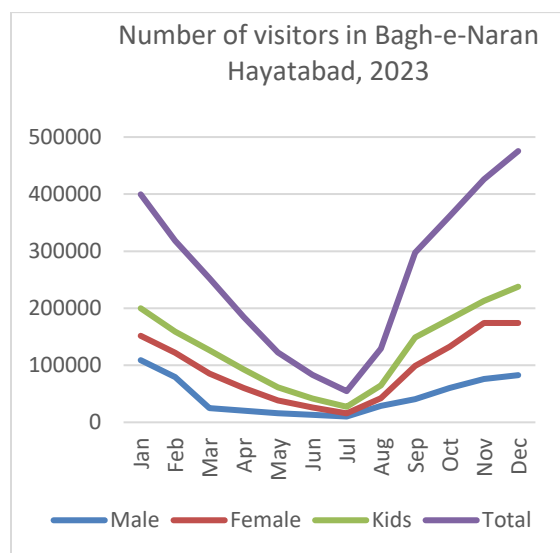


Figure 10. Comparison between the two Parks. Source: The authors.

Table 1: Comparison of Shahi Bagh and Bagh-e-Naran

#	Design Features	Shahi Bagh	Bagh-e-Naran
1	Does the park have a separate entrance for male and female?	Yes	No
2	Does the park reserve a separate place for females and families?	Yes	No
3	Does the plan follow quadric layout?	Yes	No
4	Is Park is maintained and clean?	No	Yes
5	Is the park located near residences of high and upper middle-income group?	Low income	High income
6	The park has more visitors than its competitor	Yes	No
7	Is the percentage of people feeling fear as discomfort is high?	61%	82%

Discussion

The data collected from both parks revealed thought-provoking aspects. A comparison Table 1 explains the differences between both parks. Shahi Bagh has a greater number of visitors despite that it is situated in an area with more rural settlers, and it is

less maintained in terms of hygiene, cleanliness, and plantation. However, the has some features which facilitate female visitors and families, for example, some of the park enclaves are only for female visitors and some are dedicated to families. The park also offers a separate entrance gate for female visitors who want to approach female enclave directly. The park's layout is designed on the concept of "Chahar Bagh" with visual (pathways and water channel) and physical divisions (vegetation and hedges) in the layout to facilitate personal space and privacy.

The flow of visitors during the year 2017 was observed for both parks. The data is organized in three groups of visitor male, female and children. Generally, both parks were visited mostly by children and females. The peak months for visitation exclude June, July, and August because of weather conditions. However, the flow of visitors is high in Shahi Bagh despite its weak upkeep.

It may indicate that more visitation is caused by separate area for Females, Park's quadric layout is supportive for families and grouped.

Quadric plans followed by the historic Islamic Gardens facilitate comfort and sense of security in public parks.

People with low-income groups avail the opportunity for recreation through parks as a place of the public realm. So, these places can play an important role in the peace and prosperity of the community as well as can be utilized for activities related to community development and education.

Conclusion

This research has investigated the importance of public recreational activities examined from an Islamic perspective to understand the significance of better space

planning for such areas, especially in Muslim-majority cultures. Public spaces in the Muslim world should offer services that align with Islamic culture and values. Muslim urban planners, architects, and landscape designers should see themselves as servants (‘abd) of Allah and vicegerents (Khalifa). The values of modesty and Parda (veil) need careful consideration when designing public spaces. Public parks should balance the need for comfort and safety with the enjoyment of freedom and openness. Privacy in these spaces varies between individuals and groups, requiring flexible space planning, adequate space, and effective landscaping. Historically, the Chahar Bagh concept offers a model for space planning with dedicated areas for specific user groups or sub-communities. Including certain trees and plants linked to Islamic culture in public parks can enhance comfort and evoke the perception of heaven.

Moreover, the role of public recreational activities and tourism should also be explored from an Islamic viewpoint. The Quran advises observing and contemplating Allah's creations, which can be facilitated through well-designed public parks. These spaces can promote community well-being by providing opportunities for physical activities, social interaction, and mental relaxation, reflecting Islamic principles of health, stewardship, aesthetics, and social justice. Public parks should be inclusive and accessible, ensuring that people from diverse backgrounds feel welcome. This approach not only fosters community cohesion but also upholds the values of fairness and inclusivity central to Islamic teachings. Thus, integrating these principles into the design of public parks can create environments that support the physical, mental, and spiritual well-being of Muslim communities.

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