

Amir Habib Allah Khan in Qandahar, 1907

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On May 21, 1907, Amir Habib Allah Khan arrived in Qandahar and took up residence at Manzel Bagh,¹ long the royal residence and guest house for visiting dignitaries.² According to Fayz Muhammad the amir stayed for twenty-seven days before departing for Herat. It was a busy four weeks. Besides honoring various citizens, looking after the military garrison, and drafting letters to the viceroy in India concerning the troublesome Zakha Khayl Afridi tribe, the amir spent considerable time rebuilding infrastructure. Fufalza'i found a detailed account written by a certain Mir Muhsin Āqa-yi Pishīnī of the amir's projects inspired by his May-June stay in the city. Although he provides no indication of where or if the account was published, he does relate that the author died on the seventeenth of Shawwal 1341 / 2 June 1923 and is buried in Qandahar giving us a terminus ad quem for the projects. According to Fufalza'i, Mir Muhsin Āqa was a scholar and a fine calligrapher, although he does not include him in his biography of Afghanistan's calligraphers.³ He was also the first cousin (*pasar-i kākā*) of Shāh 'Abd al-'Azīm Pishīnīs known as "Shāh Āqā-yi Qal'fiah-i Qāzī" of Kabul.⁴ Mir Muhsin's eyewitness account as summarized by Fufalza'i is detailed and well worth giving verbatim:

(after long honorifics) Siraj al-millah wa'l-Din was always spending large sums on improving royal structures of the country. As soon as he came to Qandahar (in 1907) he undertook many projects that need to be mentioned here. First he rebuilt the walls of Qandahar that over the course of time had been breached here and there so that they would be pristine and beautiful and the envy of the world [K 21-24]. Other projects were [whether new or renovated are not always clear]: the citadel (Arg), the *salāmkhānah* (reception hall), the Burj Palace and a new *kūti* (palace) in the citadel, as well as flowerbeds (*guldānī*), and fountains (*fawārah-hā*) in the citadel [K 01]. He completely refurbished the market streets (bazaars) [K 06], and holy places. For example, he expanded the courtyard of the Shrine of the Cloak, buying serais (courtyard houses, mansions) to the east and bringing them within its perimeter. He built vestibules (*dālān-hā*) on its south side and he appointed an imam, muezzin, custodial staff, professor, and students [K 02-04].

¹ - R.D. McChesney; M.M. Khorrami [Eds.] (2016): *The history of Afghanistan, Fayz Muhammad Katib Hazarah's Siraj al-tawarikh*, Vol. 4, Part 4, p. 1150.

² When C. E. Yate arrived in Qandahar in April 1893, en route to Herat as border commissioner to try and settle Afghan-Russian disputes over water and then to assume the position of consul-general in Mashhad, he was put up in Qandahar at Manzel Bagh and left the following description of it. "The Bagh-i-Manzil, which had been assigned to me as my residence during my stay, was a new garden-house constructed by order of the Amir [fiAbd al-Rahman Khan] just behind the village of Deh Khojah, the scene of our sortie during the siege of 1880. The house itself was a large square building. The lower storey consisted of vaulted kitchens and servants' rooms. Mounting the stairs we found ourselves in a huge hall, in the shape of a Maltese cross, with a small room at each corner and another room above each of those again. The garden was full of apricot, peach, pomegranate, and quince trees, giving a green and pleasant prospect, while a cuckoo was calling loudly, and there were lots of small birds around, giving life to the place." (Yate, *Khurasan and Sistan*, p. 3.)

³ Fufalza'i 1963 : 'Aziz al-Dīn Wakīlī, *Hunar-i Khaṭṭ dar Afghānistān dar dū qarn-i akhīr*, 11 Mīzān 1342 (October 1, 1963)..

⁴ Fufalza'i 1988 : 'Aziz al-Dīn Wakīlī (Pūpalzā'i), *Tārīkh-i khirqah-i sharīfah*, 1367/1988, p. 105, note.

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He expanded the footprint of Masjid-i Jāmi‘-i Shāh, which had been built by Ahmad Shah, by adding purchased and crown land to its north. The northern vestibules of the latter mosque he completely rebuilt (*az sar naw ta ‘mīr namūdand*) [K 07-09]. He also purchased serais (courtyard houses or mansions) that stood to the northwest of the Masjid-i Jāmi‘ built by the late Sardar Kuhandil Khan for a high price, thereby doubling the size of the mosque and its grounds, and made the Pātāb Canal flow through the middle of its grounds [K 10-14].

He built 200 shops, which in fact formed a long bazaar [K 43/7-8], to cover the expenses (of the Sardar Kuhandil Khan Friday Mosque) and he placed the hair of the Prophet in (the mosque). He rebuilt (*ta ‘mīr*) the ‘Usmanabad Mosque located in Shikarpur Bazaar and other mosques [K 19-20]. He built Kuhkaran Palace [K 29-31] (*‘imārat-i kūhkarān*) and a new koti in Manzel Bagh [K 25-27] which is adorned with a royal throne [K 28]. (Other projects were the palaces of) Kūtī Yakhchāl and Kūtī Sarband and the cleaning of canals, road building [K 43/5], and street cleaning. He also had the Nahr-i Sirajiyah trunk canal [K 38-39] dug from the Helmand River, which, over the course of four years, employed 8,000 men [K 43/1-3] before it was finished. It is one of the great public works of the Siraji period and one of the fine results of his trip during which he left some major public work at every stop. The trunk canal project was largely carried through by the governor Sardar Muhammad Usman Khan, *nā’ib-sālār-i mulkī* (civil deputy field marshal) and a *sardār* of the second degree [K 43/3].

Mir Muhsin Aqa’s account, though invaluable, raises questions. Obviously, this did not all occur during the twenty-seven days the amir stayed in Qandahar. Some of the work was begun while he was in Qandahar, some started after he had left, and some did not begin until years after he was there. The only thing one can say for certain is that the work had at least begun by the time ‘Abd al-Samad took the photographs assembled in this album and had been more or less completed when Mir Muhsin Aqa died in 1923.

My conclusions rely on the biographical information about the man identified as the chief architect chosen by Amir Habib Allah Khan to do the work and on some assumptions about the dates of the photographs. Fufalza’i, without providing any source for this information, tells us that when the amir reached Herat he sent back to Qandahar from there a group of artisans headed by one Sufi ‘Abd al-Hamid, a noted calligrapher and architect.

In 1907, the amir took one of his photographers, ‘Abd al-Samad, on his circuit of the country. The following year, in 1908, he sent ‘Abd al-Samad again to Kandahar and instructed him to take photographs of the progress of the work he had ordered at the occasion of his visit there. One of the photographs taken of the shrine bears the caption “photo by ‘Abd al-Samad.”⁵ Some of the photographs were published in *Sirāj al-akhbār* in 1913.⁶ These photographs show the shrine and its related buildings in the state Amir Habib Allah Khan had ordered them renovated or built.

⁵ SA 3 (1913), no. 18, p. 5 [K 04 + K 05].

⁶ SA 3 (1913), no. 18, p. 5 [K 04 + K 05] and no. 20, p. 6 [K 03].