History of Garden of Dreams

In the midst of downtown Kathmandu’s urban bustle, the tranquil oasis of the Kaiser Mahal Garden stands as an enduring legacy of the extraordinary vision and talent of one man – Late Field Marshall Kaiser Shumsher Jung Bahadur Rana (1892 - 1964).

Located just across the street from the former Royal Palace at the entrance to the Thamel tourist area, the Garden was neglected for decades. Its neo-classical pavilions paying homage to Nepal’s six seasons were crumbling. The stately garden paths were overgrown, and the rich variety of subtropical flora was disappearing beneath a jumble of weeds. Now, with the support of Austrian Development Aid and in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, Government of Nepal, this national treasure has been restored and can once again assume its rightful place among the great landscape monuments of South Asia.

The Garden is now open for all who wish to experience and enjoy Kaiser Shumsher's extraordinary legacy to Nepal. This magnificent neo-classical garden is typical of the wide-ranging interests of the remarkable Rana aristocrat. A statesman, scholar, linguist, and connoisseur of horticulture, art, and literature, Kaiser Shumsher created a masterpiece that, in its design and literary allusions, is inextricably linked to the collections of books about gardening, architecture, and literature in his impressive library.

While a dozen European-style gardens of similar caliber can be found in India, Kaiser Shumsher's extreme refinement and his personal adaptations of the landscape and architecture, together with the Garden's connection to a historically significant figure, make this one of the great and unique landscaping monuments of South Asia.

The Garden of Dreams is adjacent to the former Royal Palace (now a museum) built in 1895. The then Prime Minister Chandra Shumsher obtained the palace for his son Kaiser. Within the Garden walls Kaiser Shumsher created an exquisite ensemble of pavilions, fountains, decorative garden furniture, and European-inspired pergolas, balustrades, urns, and statues. He erected six impressive freestanding pavilions, each dedicated to one of the six seasons of Nepal. These pavilions provided the Garden's architectural framework and lent a cosmopolitan flavor to the formal arrangements of flowers, shrubs, and trees.

The Garden's design has much in common with formal European gardens: paved perimeter paths, punctuated by pavilions, trellises, and various planting areas, surrounded by a sunken flower garden with a large pond at its center. It is an architectural landscape that encourages the visitor to stroll around and discover the Garden's treasures from many different vantage points. In a typically Edwardian manner, the formal and axial arrangement of the Garden's architectural features stands in contrast to its more informal and natural planting - a juxtaposition consistent with that of the gardens created in England during the reign of Edward VII.

In fact, the Garden was remarkably up to date for its time, comparable to the latest garden designs in the first quarter of the 20th century. Considering Kaiser Shumsher's impressive book collection this is not surprising. Unfortunately, many of the original volumes in the library have been lost over time, making an analysis of printed sources difficult. However, the architectural sophistication of the individual pavilions suggests that they were inspired by pattern books, with minor local adaptations.

Kishore Narsingh, an architect to Kaiser Shumsher's father, the Maharaja, was responsible for the detailed layout and execution of the Garden, following the instructions of his distinguished client. Narsingh, together with his architect brother, had designed and supervised the construction in 1907 of Singha Darbar - one of Asia's most ambitious palaces - for Maharaja Chandra Shumsher. Narsingh's experience with the Darbar, combined with Kaiser Shumsher's sophistication, may well explain the extraordinary refinement of the Garden of Dreams.