

The Need for Community Involvement in Preventing and Responding to Heritage Emergencies in Jammu and Kashmir

Aparna Tandon

Representing ICCROM

Curator

Amar Mahal Museum and Library

India

Resumen

La necesidad de lograr la participación de la comunidad en la tarea de preservar el patrimonio cultural en el estado indio de Jammu-Cachemira

El valle de Cachemira, situado en el Estado indio de Jammu-Cachemira, ha sido escenario de graves crisis políticas y de sus correspondientes secuelas: conflictos militares y étnicos que han acarreado una ruptura de la estabilidad social y política. La identidad espiritual y cultural de la población de este valle es una emanación de las influencias ejercidas por el budismo, el hinduismo y el sufismo. No obstante, hace ya cinco siglos que una gran parte de los habitantes son de confesión musulmana, y esta circunstancia ha provocado tensiones religiosas considerables en la región. Los conflictos derivados de esas tensiones han provocado ya la destrucción de algunos sitios históricos y ponen en peligro la integridad de otros. Además, la ruptura de la estabilidad sociopolítica ha tenido como consecuencia la marginación del papel de las comunidades en la protección de los bienes culturales, así como en su participación en las respuestas contra los posibles riesgos que éstos puedan correr. Para poner un término a las destrucciones y daños del patrimonio cultural, es fundamental sensibilizar a la población para que efectúe una distinción entre el patrimonio y los aspectos políticos vinculados a la religión.

Résumé

Le besoin de faire participer la communauté à la préservation du patrimoine en danger dans l'État indien "Jammu-Cachemire"

La vallée du Cachemire dans l'État indien "Jammu-Cachemire" a été le témoin d'une profonde crise politique marquée par des conflits militaires et ethniques entraînant la rupture de l'ordre politique. L'identité de la population de cette vallée est issue d'influences bouddhiste, hindouiste et soufiste ; cependant depuis cinq siècles une grande partie des habitants de la vallée est musulmane créant dans cette zone des tensions religieuses importantes. Ces oppositions ont provoqué la destruction de lieux historiques et en menacent d'autres. En outre, cette rupture socio-politique de la vallée a marginalisé le rôle des communautés dans la prévention et les réponses face aux risques qui menacent les biens culturels. Afin d'arrêter le processus de perte et de dommage il est essentiel de sensibiliser la population à la séparation entre patrimoine et politique religieuse.

Increased community awareness of its cultural heritage helps in defining and promoting cultural identity, yet internal conflicts rooted in competing claims about identity and ownership can result in the destruction of cultural property as witnessed in former Yugoslavia and, closer to home, with the demolition of a sixteenth century mosque, Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, India.

The preservation of heritage in areas of conflict encompasses challenges that extend far beyond technical ones. Sustainable preservation mechanisms for such sites can only be developed by building consensus among the different stakeholders, thereby ensuring their active participation.

Set against the backdrop of such conflicts in the State of Jammu and Kashmir, where the clash of political ideologies has eroded the homogeneous ethno-cultural identity of the people, this paper makes a strong case for community involvement in preventing and responding to the destruction of the composite heritage of the region.

Background

For the past fourteen years the Kashmir valley in the Indian State of Jammu and Kashmir has experienced a situation of deep political crisis marked by militancy, ethnic cleansing and a breakdown of political order. Although the reasons for the political crisis are beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to understand that the politics of militancy and separatism have been largely responsible for the annihilation of the concept of Kashmiriyat, an amalgamated cultural ethos; this, in turn, has led to the destruction of cultural property in the valley.

It is commonly acknowledged that traditional Kashmiri culture had an inherent openness that allowed relative freedom of religious and philosophical beliefs. The influences of Buddhism, Hinduism (Shaivism) and Sufism made the Kashmiri identity distinct and special.

A large part of the population of the valley converted to Islam during five centuries of Muslim rule. The Sufi order of Rishis played a key role, not only in popularising Islam in Kashmir, but also in laying down the humanist foundations of Islam as a religion. The order of Rishis had its roots in the teachings of Sheikh Noor-ud-din, said to have been initiated into mysticism by Lal Ded, the Hindu mystic poetess from Kashmir. Sheikh Noor-ud-din, popularly known as Nand Rishi, had his following among all religions and sects in the valley. The 15th century shrine of Sheikh Noor-ud-din at Charar-i-sharif was therefore a symbol of cultural harmony and embodied the spirit of Kashmiriyat.

Identifying Risks and Assessing Damage

In the first week of March 1995, Charar-i-sharif shrine was seized by a group of foreign Islamic militants who threatened to desecrate it. Local militant groups supporting the separatist struggle and the community in general opposed the foreign militants. The shrine was set ablaze by the foreign militants on May 1995. They also burned approximately eight hundred shops and houses in the neighbourhood. The destruction of the shrine was followed by the demolition of historic temples and communal tensions in the region.

The shared heritage of the Kashmir valley thus became the primary target for fundamentalists who wanted the armed separatist struggle in Kashmir to become part of the larger Pan-Islamic movement. In 1999, while addressing the State Legislative Assembly, the Home Minister of the Jammu and Kashmir Government stated that 170 religious shrines had been gutted since 1989, but these figures are not complete as militant groups have also been targeting temples and shrines in other parts of the State, e.g. the attacks on Ragunath Temple which houses a world-renowned library of Sanskrit manuscripts and Shahdra Sharif in Jammu Division.

As the state government is concentrating on the protection of human life, comparatively less attention and lower priority have been given to the protection of heritage sites, thus exposing them to many other risks such as fire, looting, theft and vandalism, as well as the threat of militancy.

Some of the popular sites of the valley exposed to such risks are listed below:

Hari Parbat Fort

Hari Parbat is a hill on one side of Srinagar city, crowned by a pre-Mughal fort which was later occupied by the Mughal King Akbar. The armed forces are stationed in the fort. The presence of the Hindu temple, Chakreshwari, the Muslim shrine, Makhdoom Sahib, and the Sikh shrine, Chatti Padshahi, in the vicinity add to the significance of the fort.

Khanqah of Shah Hamdan

This religious edifice was built to commemorate the visit of Mir Sayyid Ali Hamdani. It stands on the bank of the river Jhelum and is mentioned in the biography of the Mughal king, Akbar. Its exact date is not known, but both Hindus and Muslims revere it. An idol of the goddess Kali stands at the back of the monument. This shrine has suffered due to neglect over the past fourteen years and is also threatened by flash floods.

Tomb of Zain-ul-Abidin's Mother

This mausoleum was built by Zain-ul-Abidin (A.D. 1421-1472) to entomb the mortal remains of his mother. He was also called Bad-Shah, or the great King, and the tomb site is known by the same name.

Harwan

The archaeological site of Harwan dates back to circa A.D. 300. It is an important Buddhist site and was discovered through excavations uncovering the base of a Stupa, plus figurative tiled paving around it and the walls of rooms used as residential quarters. It is an open site and therefore exposed to many risks.

Sun Temple at Martand

The 8th century Sun temple at Martand in Kashmir is a magnificent example of ancient Indian temple architecture. Despite being a protected monument, stone blocks from the site have been removed.

The Role of the Community

The breakdown of socio-political order in the valley has marginalized the role of the community in preventing and responding to risks posed to

cultural property. Government and public apathy has led to vandalism of heritage sites. Government agencies such as the Archaeological Survey of India have tried to prevent damage to heritage sites, but their access to them is limited because of the ongoing armed conflict.

Non-governmental organisations working to protect both tangible and intangible heritage in the region strongly feel that there is potential for community action to stop the process causing the loss and to bring about change in the valley.

To mobilize community support, the government agencies concerned, in coordination with non-governmental organisations and the armed forces, need to assert the collective and intergenerational character of heritage, marking it in the minds of the people. The concept of Kashmiriyat needs to be revived to bridge ethnic divides.

To stop the process of loss and damage, awareness must be raised on the need to dissociate heritage from religious politics. An inventory of the endangered sites should be prepared; the inventory should also include sites, shrines, temples and mosques damaged over the past fourteen years.

Workshops involving policymakers, separatists, heritage professionals and the community need to be organised to create greater awareness of the emergency situations which threaten cultural property and to develop mechanisms for preventing and responding to identified risks.

Conclusion

Heritage sites and collections of cultural heritage artefacts continue to be threatened by acts of terrorism, fire, vandalism, theft, looting and illicit trafficking. The lack of guidelines and absence of networks between different organisations responsible for emergency preparedness and response have increased the risks even further. There is also a need for a regulatory body for the preservation and presentation of heritage.