

The ongoing construction trends in Shaktipithas of Himachal Pradesh-symbols of living religious heritage

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Abstract

Shaktipithas represent India's rich cultural heritage. The continuity of functions at these sites further reinstates their significance as Living Religious Heritage. Their spiritual value is central to hundreds of millions of people who visit them every year. The growing population, boost in commerce, advancements in construction technology has impacted the construction trends in all spheres and typologies of architecture. Temples, the religious heritage of the country, are being widely affected by this new movement in architecture. These temples were built years ago using characteristic elements from Indian traditional temple styles or regional vernacular elements. With growth in population and rising number of pilgrims, these complexes face shortfall of infrastructure facilities. To accommodate large inflow of pilgrims especially on festivals large scale construction activities are in full swing on these sites. This paper tends to present a thorough insight into the ongoing developments at some popular sites in Himachal Pradesh, India which are in contemporary style using modern methods of construction. It is highly insensitive to the existing character of our religious heritage and deteriorates the built environment. So the need arises to conserve our cultural heritage, take timely measures to make these places sustainable pilgrimage destinations and keep alive their distinct sacred visual impact.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage; Himachal Temple styles; Living Religious Heritage; Shaktas; Shaktipithas.

1. Himachal Pradesh-the Devabhoomi

Sacred groves are spread across the nation, and are famous by different names in diverse corners of India. Indian sacred groves are associated with temples, monasteries, or with burial grounds (CPREEC ENVIS, 2008 [1]). It is quite evident that most of the groves are related to a "presiding deity" of which maximum numbers of these sacred deities are associated with Hinduism. Amongst the various states of India, Himachal Pradesh tops the list of states with maximum number of sacred groves. The number can be seen below (Fig.1), is as high as 5000 [1] and the state is also referred to as 'Devabhoomi' or the 'Abode of Gods'.

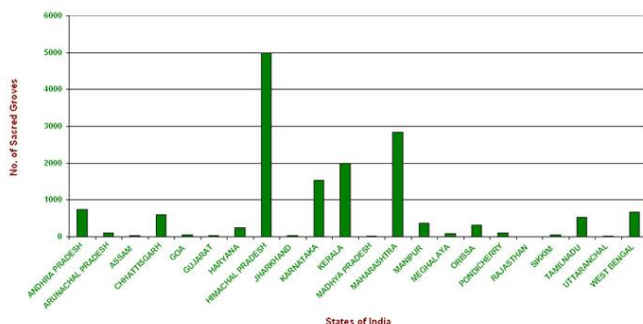


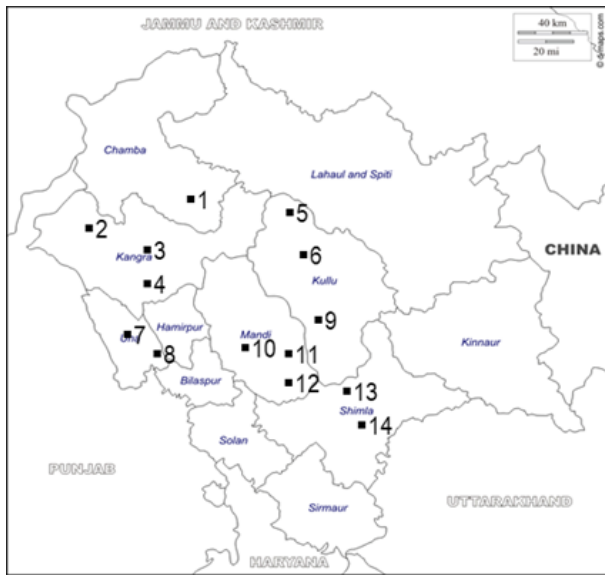
Fig.1: Distribution of Sacred Groves in India
(Source: Ecoheritage.cpreec.org [1])

The incredible height of the Himalayan ranges (approx. 8,848meters above sea level) and its immense picturesque beauty with its soothing spiritual calm makes it a home of the Gods since ages. The state is firmly entrenched in popular beliefs as a land of high mountains and lush valleys, of deep, fast-flowing rivers and quiet hill stations. Approximately more than 95% of the population of the state adheres to Hindu religion to this day [2]. The state boasts of 2000 temples and sacred sites spread across the state. Due to its difficult geographical terrain, in olden times the state had been somewhat isolated from the rest of India and hence, has preserved very ancient Hindu customs. The mountainous region remained a bastion of Hindu religion even though when the plains were captured by Islamic rulers.

2. Hindu sects in Himachal Pradesh

The main strands of worship in Himachal Pradesh are similar to those across the country, which include four schools of Hinduism namely Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Shaktism and Smartism (Hinduism Today, 2008 [3]). Vaishnavism centers on worship of Lord Vishnu and temples dedicated to him were built. Shaivism promotes worship of Lord Shiva and temples dedicated to his various forms were built throughout India. Shaktism is a sect that considers Goddess Shakti as supreme power and temples dedicated to her are spread all over India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. The temples dedicated to Goddess Shakti are called Shaktipithas. Himachal though has a number of local Goddess Temples and pan India Goddess temples but the state boasts of five famous Shaktipithas (Naina Devi Temple, Chintpurni Temple, Jwalamukhi Temple,

Bajreshwari Temple and Chamunda Temple) which attract pilgrims from across India and also forms one of the favourite pilgrimage circuit taken during Navratras, their biggest festival and some other celebrations. Smartism is a sect whose followers worship Indian Gods in any one of the popular six forms namely Ganesha, Shiva, Shakti, Vishnu, Surya and Skanda.



Map Legend	
1	Chattari Temple
2	Chamunda Temple
3	Bajreshwari Temple
4	Jwalamukhi Temple
5	Dhoongri Temple
6	Tripura Sundari Temple
7	Chintpurni Temple
8	Naina Devi Temple
9	Hanogi Maa Temple
10	Koyla maa Temple
11	Tarna Devi Temple
12	Shikari devi Temple
13	Bhimakali Temple
14	Hatkoti Temple

Map 1: Location of some Popular Goddess Temples in HP state (Source: <http://www.d-maps.com>) (Map adapted by author)

3. Shaktipithas: the living religious heritage

Shaktas, a prominent community practicing Hinduism, follow worship of Goddess Durga or Shakti as the greatest power and believe all other forms of Goddess are incarnations of this supreme power. They consider 'Shakti', as the dynamic feminine power- the Supreme Divine and her masculine aspect 'Shiva' is considered solely transcendent. Their doctrine is termed as Shaktism. Shaktas worship at various seats of Goddess which are worldly known as Shaktipithas. These Shaktipithas are associated with a specific body part of Goddess and are believed to be built at places where her body parts and ornaments fell. Their number varies from 51 to 108 (as per Hindu scriptures) while some others are also regarded as Shaktipithas owing to local, regional and pan India beliefs (Singh, Rana et al., 2010[4]). Five important Shaktipithas lie in Himachal Pradesh which were built ages ago in accordance with the legend of Goddess Shakti's body being cut by the spinning wheel of Lord Krishna as believed in Hinduism and written in Hindu and Shakta scriptures. All the five temples are associated with a specific body part of the Goddess and are believed to have miraculous healing powers for women who visit them.

3.1. Naina-devi temple

This temple is situated on a hilltop, 34 km from Bilaspur and Kiratpur. A popular fair called 'Shravana Ashtami Mela' takes place here every year in July-August which is visited by innumerable pilgrims. It is a popular site visited by Hindus and Sikhs both because of close proximity to Kiratpur sahib, the famous Sikh shrine. It is associated with 'eyes' of the Goddess and so replica of pair of eyes made in silver is offered to the Goddess in the shrine as part of the offerings.

3.2. Chintpurni temple

A narrow road leads to this temple which is dedicated to Goddess Chintpurni. The Goddess is believed to grant all wishes and frees you from worldly problems. The temple is associated with 'feet' of the Goddess. A popular place of pilgrimage, it lies 75 km from the town of Una. This temple is very popular as a site for performing 'Mundan' ceremony (the first hair removing ritual of infants), an important Hindu ritual.

3.3. Jwalamukhi temple

This popular pilgrimage destination is situated 30 km from Kangra. The temple sanctum has flames of fire that erupt from hollow rock and continuously burn which are considered the manifestation of the goddess. It is believed that the tongue of the Goddess fell here. During the months of March-April and September-October every year, special celebrations and fairs are held in the temple.

3.4 Bajreshwari temple

The temple is built on outskirts of the Kangra and is dedicated to Goddess Bajreshwari. The temple was once very popular for its legendary wealth but was completely destroyed in 1905 by an earthquake and was rebuilt in 1920. It continues to be a visited pilgrimage place known as a Shakti temple that is associated with the left breast of the Goddess.

3.5. Chamunda temple

It lies close to Dharamshala town. This famous temple is attributed to Goddess Chamunda who killed the demons Chand and Mund and was renamed Chamunda later. During Navratras (common Hindu festival) a special prayer called 'Shat Chandi Path' is done in which 64 priests sit and perform special prayers which is a unique celebration done only in this temple. It is associated with the trunk of the Goddess.

Shaktipithas like such represent Living Heritage as they continue to serve humanity. As stated by International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) Living Heritage is always characterised by its concept of continuity of functions at a particular heritage site (ICCROM, 2003[5]). The original functions for which the site has been known for ages and when those functions are continued for years they symbolize the continuity of community connections despite of changing circumstances. Such sites become living heritage and for spiritual sites the continuity of religious functions for years makes them Living Religious Heritage. These sacred sites are not only noteworthy of their spiritual significance to architectural edifices constructed on them but are also rich places which are associated with traditions, beliefs and values of the past. Shaktipithas are not mere sacred sites but are Sacred Cultural Landscapes as they are always viewed in terms of their relationship to surrounding linear landscapes. Moreover, these extraordinary places have been or believed to be a witness to various past events, miracles and cultural expressions which continue even today to be significant to millions and give them a sense of identity and unity and so are designated as Cultural Heritage [6]. This

continuity of functions for which the site was originally built which includes the religious practices and rituals since its date of creation as the place is important to a community/sect makes the religious place a more significant heritage termed as Living Religious Heritage.

Pilgrimage to Shaktipithas is an age-old fact which is evident from the huge number of pilgrims to Shaktipithas. 32 lakh visitors go to Shakti temple, Trilokpur every year (Himachal Plus, 2008 [7]). On an average 32,000-35,000 visitors have been recorded per day at each of these five Shaktipithas during Navratras. Tourist inflow to various districts of HP reveal that after Shimla and Kullu, the Kangra valley receives third maximum number of visitors and the survey done proved that 86% of visitors that visit Kangra, come to the above listed five Shaktipithas (Vohra and Kashyap, 2014 [8]).

4. Architectural style of Himachal temples

The state's architecture is a product of its topography and how its shrines embody the deep spirituality nurtured by its various mountains and rivers. The understanding of the architecture of the land deepens the appreciation of its natural wonders as the state is a repository of architectural heritage. The architectural style seen in the state can be broadly categorized under two building types: Religious Structures and Non-Religious Structures.

4.1 Religious structures

The state is dotted with shrines dedicated to God Vishnu, Shiva and Goddess Shakti in addition to many local Gods and Goddesses. Each temple is built in a distinctive style. The genesis of these religious edifices in this state could be owed to diverse reasons like the geography and the climate forced people to believe in forces of nature and thus construct temples dedicated to local Gods and Goddesses. Secondly, the mighty backdrop of Himalayas served as ideal locations for spiritual attainments. Thirdly infusion of new races with the older ones gave birth to new religious beliefs. Religious architectural style in Hindu Temples in Himachal Pradesh is characterized on basis of roof forms prevalent (Nagar, 1990 [9]). Different types of roof forms exist.

4.1.1. Curvilinear roof (shikhara) temples

'Shikhara' is the name given to an inverted bell like tower which serves as the roof to the main sanctum in a temple and is built of stone and decorated with carvings. Shikhara style was very popular in North Indian temples. Shikhara temples are further classified into Pyramidal type and Latika typed temples. The Pyramidal Shikhara temples have a roof of pyramidal shape, with an amalaka (melon shaped member) at the top, crowned with a chhatra or a Kalasa (the finial). The Latika type temples have pyramidal roof erected in tiered form. The main shrine of Chamunda Temple has pyramidal shikhara. The famous Naina Devi Temple has curvilinear pyramidal shikhara in tiered form topped with a finial and multiple smaller pyramidal units are present all sides of the main shikhara.

4.1.2. Wooden roof temples

Many ancient wooden temples in the state can be seen which are exclusively adorned with wooden carvings and most of them belong to the Gupta dynasty. These traditional wooden temples served as role models for many stone edifices built later. They are of two types-Pent roof type and Pagoda type. Pent Roof Temples are rectangular stone and wood temples with the sloping wooden roof covered with stone tiles. Since these are the oldest temples mostly, the roof needs repair frequently, while the lower part, which is generally made in solid stone have preserved their originality. The original Chamunda Temple, known as Adi Himani Chamunda lies at an altitude of 10500 feet from the sea level and shows the

characteristic pent roof with stone slates and has managed to keep the old superstructure alive for more than 700 years ago. The original temple faces heavy snowfall throughout the year and the route is opened to visitors only for two months June and July. Since the temple was difficult to access, a strong legend is associated with the relocation of the temple to the present location near Dharamshala, Kangra (as stated above). Pagoda type Temples are structures built in stone and wood with multiple roofs that are place one above the other and are also common in hills.

4.1.3. Domical roof temples

These temples have bulbous domical roofs and they belong to quiet later periods and show Muslim influences in their designs too. These temples were made in brick with lime mortar as compared to stone or wood used abundantly in those times. The famous Shaktipitha Jwalamukhi temple has gilded dome with many traces of a mix of Sikh and Rajput architecture and the Bajreshwari temple also shows a hybrid roof style. Three different types of roofs have been used which show Hindu Dravidian roof forms, Bengaldar roof and domical Sikh roof, which is quite rare. Similarly, the Chintpurni temple also has gilded domical roof.

4.2 Non-religious structures

Non-religious structures majorly include the residences of local people and the civic buildings of the place like post offices, government offices and others. In olden times the residences of people settled in smaller villages of Himachal state showed the characteristic vernacular traits and used local materials and the indigenous construction techniques. The vernacular buildings were more climate-friendly and showed better response to the earthquakes and other natural hazards. The traditional constructions show use of sloping roofs with stone slates. Sloping roofs were a solution to the climatic needs also as the area is prone to heavy rainfall and snowfall. Stone slates were used widely as the region is abundant in stone. Some of the oldest houses in region still have mud walls with sloping roofs made of stone slates. The sloping roofs are supported on a wooden framework of bamboos and the slates were nailed to it. The roofs are high pitched in high altitudinal areas which receive heavy snowfall throughout the year. Other types of construction can also be seen in the region like stone houses which use the dry construction techniques where no binding material is used between the stone slabs. With passage of time the construction trends changed and new constructions coming up in these areas also moved away from vernacular skills to the so called contemporary modernism. The houses of poor people now show use of brick walls with sloping roofs while those of high stature have rebuild their old houses as 3-4 storey RCC constructions with flat roofs. Most of the people have shifted to newly build flat roofed brick houses and old structures are either lying vacant or converted to other functional use like shops, etc as the residents now do not like to stay in old constructions. In addition to residences the other upcoming civic structures in the area also show a mixed trait. Some have sloping roofs while most of them are modern flat roof structures.

5. Current trends in Shaktipithas

Shaktipithas pull thousands of devotees from India and abroad during festivals and celebrations. The small towns which once housed these five Shaktipithas have today grown to commercial centres with large potential for revenue generation. The development and growth has been so widespread that the small temples have now become generator of these big towns that the towns are known by the name of these temples like the Chamunda town housing the Chamunda Temple and the Chintpurni town housing the Chintpurni temple and so on.

With the increasing number of pilgrim's year after year the pressure on the temple infrastructural facilities led to large scale

developments in the temple complexes. The boundaries of the temples extended and the temple precincts grew in size to accommodate the new structures and spaces. Change and growth is inevitable but these new developments built inside the temple complexes are all modern RCC buildings being made with new construction materials and technology. No trace of any vernacular style is evident anywhere. Moreover, the buildings present a striking contrast to the prevalent temple styles that the sacred environment of the temple complex is also deteriorating day by day. At times the new constructions are higher and more prominent that they tend to overpower the temple buildings.

5.1. Commercialisation

The Naina Devi temple witnessed a major stampede in 2008 where 3000 people were reported to be inside the temple at one point of time and many were killed and injured. With time the daily numbers have multiplied and so the infrastructure facilities to house this large number of pilgrims are also growing day by day. The commercial shops lined on the roads to reach the temple, the new accommodation facilities like guest houses and budget hotels aligned along the roads are all modern constructions 2 to 4 storey high buildings with designer overhangs above windows, facades clad with tiles or painted in bright colours (Fig.2).

5.2. RCC constructions

Chintpurni Temple is the second most visited temple of North India after Vaishno Devi as claimed by the temple officials, Chintpurni trust. The winding road that goes to the temple has now been pedestrianised seeing the visitor flow and the visitors have to park their cars in the parking lot situated 1.5 km away from the temple. The road is dotted with shops selling religious items and other utility items, food joints, saloons, toy shops, etc and various types of pilgrim accommodations like lodges and hotels. All new construction can be seen as flat roof RCC constructions with column beam structures (Fig.2).

5.3. Absence of vernacular traits

The road leading to the Jwalamukhi temple is very congested, narrow and encroached by the shops. The shops are either temporary shabby structures or RCC flat roof constructions (Fig.3) and encroach the roads reducing the road width for pedestrians. No traces of any regional architecture or vernacular characteristics of the temple like sloping roofs can be seen.

5.4. Striking built forms

The Bajreshwari temple was reconstructed so the temple architecture shows blend of traditional styles but the other functional components built inside the temple premises next to the main shrine like the temple offices and the building that houses the Hawan Kund have two completely different façade treatments and are flat roof constructions (Fig.3). The temple office building has cement plaster on brick walls while the other one has stone cladding. The colour contrast, architectural features, and façade treatment everything is in strong contrast to the existing main shrine.

The Chamunda temple has seen maximum growth in and around its periphery. The buildings built in surrounding areas of the temple are 3-4 storey's high with striking features have started dominating the main shrine. The buildings built inside the complex include a Langar hall (Fig.3), prayer hall, a new toilet block and many other buildings. All buildings show use of latest materials, well plastered and painted facades with flat roofs. The new toilet block is a 4-storey building with a double height porch too.

5.5. Loss of sacred environment

Such developments in and around the temple precincts deteriorate the sacredness of the built environment at such places which otherwise is a place associated with immense spiritual power. Also, the visual impact of a religious place is affected largely. The wide spread unplanned developments also bring into light the lack of awareness regarding the values associated to this cultural heritage. Another aspect that needs attention is that these modern constructions are not climate friendly and their seismic response is much less a compared to the vernacular construction practices. Though resorting back completely to vernacular practices is also not possible in current scenario as the area has become short of wood. But yet, integrating and adapting vernacular principles and methods in a more sustainable way can lead to a new direction.



Fig.2: Naina Devi temple (top) and Chintpurni temple(bottom)

(Image Source: Author)



Fig.3: Bajreshwari Temple(top), Chamunda Temple (bottom left) and Jwalamukhi Temple (bottom right)

(Image Source: Author)

6. Temples- the originator of socio-economic life

Temples in India have played a significant role in shaping the society since ages. They are not mere religious institutions but have influenced various facets of human life and activity and therefore need to be viewed and studied as a part of social and economic life of a given place. The significance of social and economic functions of temples is noteworthy and has played an important role in the dominantly rural and agrarian economy of Himachal Pradesh. These numerous temples located in different districts of the state are popular among Indian pilgrims and international tourists for their religious values, architectural grandeur, fascinating legends and surrounding beauty. At majority of places the temples were built first at the highest altitudinal points owing to religious beliefs

and rituals while the settlements around the temple grew later at a lower altitude. In that case the temple became the generator of all activities around and so the economic life and social life of the residents depended totally on temple activities and celebrations. The temples were associated with various functions like (Thakur, 1996 [10])-

6.1. Temples acted as governors of land

The common people of Himachal were agriculture dependant while the temples flourished under the patronage of kings and lords. The land for temple construction was either granted by these rich people or was chosen on grounds of religious merit associated. Sometimes the land was granted in lieu of temple service to the priests.

6.2. Temples served as record house

All gifts, grants and endowments by the kings and their families were either engraved on the idols or the walls or on the copperplates and loose stone slabs which today tell the stories of the past.

6.3. Temples served as centres of art

Temples were one of the main centres of decorative and performing arts in ancient and medieval times. The various dance-sculptures as depicted on the walls and façades of the temples confirm the fact that various performances took place in the temples. The temple fairs and festivals also attracted large crowds. Exchange of ideas among the artisans during such gatherings contributed to produce different types of art objects at different places. The musicians were paid in kind by the temple committees and various arts like sculpture, paintings and bronze-casting also received encouragement in the temples.

6.4. Temples were the providers of employment

The temples provided ample opportunities to different sections of the society and till date they involve huge number of people in various capacities involving religious, administrative and non-religious auxiliary functions. There were different categories of employees engaged in temple services firstly like the Brahmans or the priests who performed worship in the temple. Various craftsmen and artisans were also engaged in the temple building activities. They were provided land, besides food-offerings for such services. There are various references in history of the tradition of gifting of animals like cows, sheep, goats and buffaloes, cash or articles to the temples by the rich. A number of personnel were entrusted on behalf of temple to take care of these animals. In return, they supplied a special amount of curd and ghee to the temple. Today the various officials who are a part of the temple trust and manage the entire premises have added to this employment list. With the passage of time, the requirements of temples have increased substantially and offerings are made both in cash and kind.

6.5. Temple acted as centres of learning

The temples were also a centre of learning and education as schools were located in the premises of temples. These places were centres of Vedic studies from the very beginning. Kangra was probably the biggest seat of learning. The Chamunda temple still runs a school for teaching Sanskrit language to children.

7. Conclusion

The temples are rich repertoire of Cultural Heritage. As stated in ICOMOS, 2003 declaration Cultural heritage has widened its gamut in past years to include Tangible heritage and Intangible heritage

both in its spectrum [11]. The Tangible heritage consists of the architectural wonders while Intangible heritage includes all the beliefs, practices and oral traditions that have been witnessed and practiced by past generations and which today continue to shape our beliefs and society. These temples possess immense tangible as well as intangible values and which need to be conserved and passed on to future generations to keep the relationship of future with past intact. The conservation of temples or architectural monuments alone is not sufficient as the celebrations, fairs, festivals which pull huge crowds to these sites actually make them popular and the legends and practices heighten the cultural significance of these sites making them—Living Heritage.

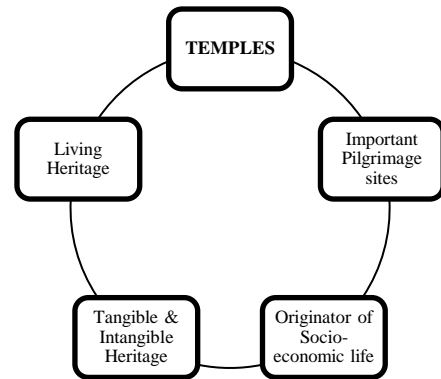


Fig.4: Temples the symbols of our values
(Image source: Author)

Conclusively, Temples have been our important pilgrimage sites with attached socio, economic, cultural, historic and aesthetic values. They were the generators of all activities and life around the temple complex. They are true epitomes of tangible and intangible heritage where celebrations and activities have been taking place from ages and continue to bind together people from diverse cultural backgrounds, thereby serving as examples of Living Religious Heritage. So, the need arises to create awareness regarding heritage and values associated to it, propagate its conservation and devise strategies for future planned sustainable developments at these sites. The random or unplanned series of developments degrade the built environment and hamper with its heritage value. It is very important that the new developments must adopt sustainable construction practices so as to merge well with the surroundings and add to its sacred value. Though it is not practically possible to revert back completely to vernacular practices but integrating or adapting vernacular principles to make the new developments sustainable is the need of the hour as the loss of regional identity needs to be completely stopped to upgrade the sacred environment at such sacred places and also maintain its heritage value.

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