

VALUE ASSESSMENT OF SHAKTIPITHAS – An aid to Conservation

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ABSTRACT

India, a land of vivid Heritages, where Shaktipithas represent prominent living religious heritage. Pilgrimage is deeply embedded in Indian roots that millions of people visit them from centuries. Shaktipithas have valuable tangible and intangible heritage. This research paper delves into critical analysis of tangible and intangible heritage associated with Shaktipithas to reinstate their cultural significance and further enlists the potential threats to them highlighting the need for their conservation. Naina Devi Temple, Himachal Pradesh, India cited here represents one of the many Shaktipithas spread all over India whose value assessment will aid the process of conservation of such Cultural Heritages. They have inherent power to purify humans and are transformational spaces which invigorate past traditions in the present. Adopting suitable conservation measures will keep alive their distinct visual and spiritual character and safeguard our heritage.

Key Words: Living Religious Heritage; Shaktipitha; tangible and intangible heritage; Value assessment.

1.0 Living Religious Heritage

Religious sites are the best representatives of different cultures and traditions that exist all over the world. They are often associated with past historical events/activities/ person/s and owe their significance to the rituals and celebrations performed on these sites today. All such sites become our 'Living Religious Heritage' as they manifest the power to keep our heritage 'living' and pass it sustainably to our future generations [2]. The World Heritage Convention (WHC) by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), the most authentic global document on conservation, lists down all heritage properties that have Outstanding Universal Value (OUV¹) for the entire world under significant heritage categories and the Religious Heritage has been listed under the 'Cultural Heritage' category [7].

2.0 Cultural Heritage and its Dimensions

The WHC has developed criterions called "Operational Guidelines" for conservation of world heritage globally. The Article 1 of the WHC defines "Cultural Heritage" to consist of 'monuments comprising architectural/sculptural works, buildings or building clusters placed harmoniously in surrounding landscapes or creations resulting from joint action of man and nature like archaeological sites all with OUV [7]. Cultural heritage is defined as "an expression of the lifestyle of a community which is passed on to generations, through traditional practices, customs, places, objects and all forms of artistic expressions" (ICOMOS, 2002). Cultural Heritage over the years has gained a broad spectrum and has been further categorised into -

1. *Tangible Cultural Heritage* which comprises all moveable heritage like manuscripts, writings, paintings, sculpture, etc and immovable heritage like buildings, monuments, archaeological sites, landscapes, underwater cities, etc.

2. *Intangible Cultural Heritage* which includes oral traditions, skills, specialised performing arts or any rituals which speak unsaid stories [1].

While the rich past manifested in buildings/monuments or sites is tangible heritage, the skills, rituals and folklore of a community forms its intangible heritage. Actually, the intangible gives life to the tangible rendering it the character of living heritage.

3.0 Shaktipitha Naina Devi-A Living Heritage site

The Naina Devi Temple is one of the listed 51 Shaktipithas in India [5]. Shaktipithas are believed to be 51 /108 temples allocated to Goddess Shakti as per Shaktism² all over India and in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal,

¹ Outstanding Universal Value means the overall significance of heritage which is unique and exemplary for human generations.

² A denomination of Hinduism

and Bangladesh. They are places where body parts of the Goddess fell after her body was cut into pieces in ancient times. This temple is believed to be the place where her eyes fell. It lies 20 km from Bilaspur in Himachal Pradesh, India (Fig.1). The temple attracts lakhs of devotees every year and almost 60,000 visitors a day on its biggest fair, held on Shraavan Ashtami³.



Fig. 1: Map showing location of Naina Devi Temple, in Himachal Pradesh in India

Source: <http://www.maps-india.com/>

3.1 Tangible and Intangible Heritage

The temple complex, 2000 years old, has various components (Table 1) along the central courtyard and the Goddess shrine dominates placed axially opposite to the main entrance.

Tangible Heritage		
S	Components	Description
1	Shakti Shrine	The Goddess shrine, the main sanctum, has her idol with an assembly area in the front.
2	Shiva Shrine	Placed next to the Goddess shrine and visited after the Goddess.
3	Yam Dwar	A huge gate believed to be “Gate to Heaven” that decides whether one would go to heaven or hell after death. In olden times animal sacrifices were offered here. Today people tie threads and seek blessings.
4	HawanKund⁴	It is believed to be blessed as the ashes of wood burnt here since ages have never been removed and settle down on its own. The fires are lit every day for last so many centuries.
5	Secondary shrines	Smaller shrines include shrines of Lakshmi Narayan, Lord Hanuman, where devotees offer prayers.
6	Peepal tree	A magnificent sacred tree, in the center of the courtyard, to which the visitors tie bells/threads and seek their wishes. Once the wishes are fulfilled they come back to untie the threads.
7	Kripali Kund	The water pool used by devotees for spiritual cleansing.
8	Goddess Gufa	A deep narrow cave, near the temple, where the Goddess meditated for years and which is religious to devotees now.
Intangible Heritage		
9	Legends and Mythological stories	The interwoven legends defined by Hindu scriptures like- i. Falling of eyes of the Goddess at the place where temple stands today ii. Temple is also known as Mahishapitha because of the legend of a powerful demon Mahishasur killed by Goddess

³A festival celebrated according to Hindu calendar in monsoon season in August.

⁴Hawan is a sacred ritual in Hinduism that involves doing prayers by making offerings in fire. Hawankund is the sacrificial fire lit for those offerings.

10	Celebrations and rituals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Various celebrations and rituals like prayers, hawans, group chanting's and fairs. ii. Various daily rituals performed like Aarti⁵, bhog⁶, sanan⁷ which are mandatory.
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Table 1: Temple's tangible and intangible Cultural Heritage

4.0 Value Assessment

Value is the fundamental reason which dictates conservation 'as one conserves what it values the most' [4]. The values assigned to a site, building, or object help to establish its cultural heritage significance. Many a times values overlap or are project specific but value assessment is an important tool for conservation and in deciding 'what' and 'how' to be conserved. "Values" refer to its qualities or features and suggest its usefulness. The significance of Cultural Heritage depends on its associated values like aesthetic qualities, architectural uses, historical purviews, scientific importance, social or any other significance in the past or in future. The most widely used values in value assessment are socio-cultural values (Table 2) [4, 6].

Value Typology	Characteristic Significance
Historical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Associated with a significant event/historic phase ii. Maintains or shows continuity of a historical process/activity; iii. Associated with person/s whose life, career or acts hold strong historical significance
Cultural/Symbolic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. The place displays combined meanings related to its past and hidden meanings ii. All cultural values passed through materials and habits
Spiritual/Religious	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Has a religious context or any secular importance due to intrinsic qualities and believed to be religious
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Highly significant for a community/group on social, cultural or spiritual grounds ii. Contributing to a sense of identity for a community
Aesthetic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Important for its design creativity or technical advancement ii. Possesses landmark quality iii. Importance for contribution to streetscape character

Table 2: Sociocultural values defined by International Charters [4,6]

A critical analysis of the values associated with Shaktipitha Naina Devi (Table 3) -

Value Associated	Description
Historical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. One of the listed 51/108 Shaktipithas in India ii. Legends associated with eyes of Goddess and demon Mahishasur iii. Temple dates back to 8th century
Cultural/Symbolic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. 'Naina' means 'eyes' and so eyes made of silver are offered to the Goddess ii. Believed to be a Siddha-Shaktipitha as the Goddess meditated here for years iii. Religious fairs spanning ten days are held twice a year that witness 55,000-60,000 pilgrims/day iv. Many annual celebrations witness 20,000-25,000 pilgrims/day

⁵ Morning and evening prayers

⁶ The ritual of offering food to deity.

⁷ The ritual bath of the deity, done twice a day, and after which Goddess idol is decorated with accessories.

Spiritual/ Religious	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Shiva-Shakti shrine, other shrines and sacred components ii. Daily rituals performed
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Sacred to Shakta community ii. Imbibes cultural unity among Hindus and Sikhs. The tenth Sikh Guru holds strong associations with the place.
Aesthetic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Landmark quality as placed on the hilltop ii. Popularity of temple led to growth of town, named after it iii. Streetscape of the shops along approach route gives pilgrims sensory experiences

Table 3: Sociocultural values associated with temple (source: author)

5.0 Potential threats to Heritage of Naina Devi

Shaktipithas are designated as living religious heritage due to their rich cultural connections with significant past events/person/group which are kept alive through continuity of the original functions on site. Such sacred sites are not only sacred entities but are our valued cultural heritages which are getting inflicted to trends of urbanization. The lack of awareness and understanding for heritage is further deteriorating them. With time, the tangible and intangible heritage of temple is subjected to contemporary pressures of commercialisation, widespread constructions and haphazard planning of new functions (Fig 2), etc., which are deteriorating and degrading the sacred built environment. Some significant threats to heritage values include-



Fig 2: New haphazard development near temple entrance

Fig 3: Smoke from hawan is blackening the surfaces

Aesthetic Value is under threat as the locational attribute (1100 m above sea level) generated an element of surprise as pilgrims climbed the hilltop but the widening of roads with vehicular access, starting of cable cars and mechanization is harming the natural beauty of the place. Lack of maintenance is spoiling the aesthetic beauty of structures (Fig 3).

Historical Value is under threat of getting lost as the historiographical significance of the temple remains unknown and no measures are being taken to acquaint the visitors of its significance.

Social Value is declining as the miscellaneous celebrations have huge inflow of pilgrims which becomes unmanageable (Fig 4) and strict security arrangements forces visitors to offer prayers hurriedly harming their sacred experience.



Fig 6: The sacred KripaliKund has dried

Spiritual Value of shrines, components and many rituals are unknown. Sacred pool (Fig 6) and the main temple complex (Fig 5) lies in state of neglect.

Cultural Value will cease soon as the rich cultural past lies unknown or known to very few.

6.0 Conclusion

A significant cultural heritage of the country inflicted to multiple threats is at the risk of becoming lost or stagnant forever. Cultural sites are repositories of rich past that need to be safeguarded for future generations. The dire need arises to opt measures for conserving tangible and intangible aspects both. The conservation measures should be site specific, provide opportunities for heritage awareness through use of modern, descriptive forms of technology; continuous assessment of all developments and their impact on the particular place and the regular upkeep of temple is necessary. The local associated community should participate in heritage interpretation and maintenance to generate viable solutions for enriching the visitor experience. This research is a small step to ignite the cause of conservation for all such Shaktipithas that are unknown or in state of neglect in the country.

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Constant effort and frequent mistakes are the stepping stones to genius.

~ Elbert Hubbard