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# Temple Guardians

## A community's initiative in conserving its sacred heritage

TARA SHARMA AND MARK WEBER

### ABSTRACT

*The conservation of a community's cultural or natural resources across much of rural India and indeed Asia is closely linked with the function that heritage continues to perform for the community. Traditional management systems have been developed to preserve these resources over the centuries. However, as these resources become increasingly vulnerable, in an era of climatic change and globalisation, traditional communities have to cope with a whole new range of issues. In rare cases, they are able to make the leap by forming new partnerships and developing new models of development that help to carry their traditional way of life into the future. The initiatives undertaken at Basgo in Ladakh have become a well known example of community stewardship in the preservation of their heritage.*

### INTRODUCTION

Linking a people's heritage with contemporary culture is the key to ensuring its survival. Sustaining these linkages in their intangible

forms essentially are often the most difficult part of a preservation programme. Yet, in many areas of the world and certainly in many rural parts of Asia, continued use and relevance of heritage in contemporary community life has ensured the survival of heritage in some of the world's most inhospitable terrains. Ladakh, located in the north Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir is one such region. Flanked by two of the world's highest mountain ranges, the Karakoram and the Himalayas, the area is essentially a cold arid desert where temperatures plummet in winter to  $-35^{\circ}\text{C}$  and can rise in summer to over  $30^{\circ}\text{C}$ . Till recent years, the region received relatively little rainfall in the summer.

As climate change begins to affect these remote regions of the earth the situation is changing. Periods of heavy rainfall or increased snowfall followed by sudden rise in temperatures causing glaciers to melt at a rapid rate have led to increased incidents of flooding in recent years. For the traditional adobe construction in the region it has proved fairly disastrous. Increased precipitation means increasing the frequency of maintenance cycles. In some cases it means having to

adapt the traditional systems so that it is able to cope with the changing times. Most importantly, it results in more vigilance and effort by the traditional custodians to ensure that problems are addressed as they arise.

The role of traditional stewardship remains the most vital component of any preservation effort in Ladakh. Villages across the region have over the centuries developed their own systems to maintain their tangible and intangible heritage. Traditional management systems have ensured that community assets, both built and natural, are constantly maintained, repaired and in some cases renewed so that they continue to serve the needs of the community. The process of renewal, repair and restoration is often preceded with religious rituals carried out to ensure that sacred spirits that reside all around are not disturbed. Thus, rituals associated with the renewal such as the blessing of the land and appeasement of underworld spirits, the de-consecration of paintings and sculptures depicting Buddhist deities prior to carrying out any conservation works form an important element of the process as they reinforce links associated with the function.



*14<sup>th</sup> century citadel that looms over the present day village of Basgo*

### BASGO: CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

The village of Basgo is dominated by an ancient citadel which dates back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century when Basgo served as the capital of Ladakh. The citadel was built using indigenous technologies and materials, primarily sun dried mud brick, stone and some timber. The fort contained the royal palace, stables and residences for the nobility and three temples dedicated to the Maitreya or the Future Buddha. The citadel was finally abandoned in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when it was heavily damaged by an invasion from the neighbouring region of Kashmir. The temples however, continued to be used in worship and were maintained in some manner by the traditional leadership of the village headed by the headman and representatives from the different hamlets that comprise the village. Each hamlet is represented by a member and the collective body is headed by the Goba<sup>1</sup>. The Goba carries out community activities including the repair and restoration of endangered built heritage with the help of these members. Clearing of snow from the roofs of temples, periodic lime washing of the exterior walls, laying additional layers of mud on the roof to prevent ingress of water were some

of the activities carried out by this body through the mobilisation of the villagers who would contribute their time or make donations to carry out the work. Regular meetings were convened by the village leaders with the village community to seek these contributions.

The temples gradually began to deteriorate sometime around the 1970's with increased erosion of the hill on which the temples rest. As access to the temples deteriorated, regular maintenance became impossible. Some repairs to the temple roofs were carried out by the villagers to arrest further damage to the temples. To collect funds for these repairs, the local youth dramatics club performed tales from the Jatakas (Buddhist fables) and other folk stories to touring neighbouring villages to collect money and donations in material. However, as the foundations continued to deteriorate it became critical to address the larger threats facing the site.

In the 1990's the members of the youth dramatics club came together to form the Basgo Welfare Committee (BWC), a formally instituted society which would aid village elders in the task of preserving the village's common heritage. The group is led by a young engineer



*Villagers volunteer to carry stone up to the citadel. Source: Tsering Angchok*

under whose guidance the community began a long term conservation programme for the temples. The first task was to stabilise the rapidly eroding hill on which the temples were built. Work commenced with a ritual prayer led by a *rinpoche* (abbot) to placate the *lu* (deities of the underworld) who are prone to become violent and cause harm when disturbed when the earth is dug. With the blessing of the land, the task of constructing a massive retaining wall around the main temple, the Chamba Lhakhang, began.

The task of restoring the temple itself became an act of merit. The accumulation of good karma through various acts of merit is seen as the first step towards enlightenment. Villagers came forward to contribute; voluntary labour poured in with villagers forming human chains to cart stone to the site, appeals were sent to the village and neighbouring villages requesting for support in safeguarding their endangered temples. Material contributions in terms of grain, timber were made which were sold and proceeds used in the conservation programme. Donations also poured in from farther afield; trucks were provided to carry stone from the quarry site to the village, funds were provided by local institutions and charity dinners organised to raise money. The efforts were also encouraged by the patron of BWC, Dr. Lobzang Jamspal, a well respected scholar teaching at the Tibetan Classics Translators Guild in New York.

As work progressed it became clear to the BWC that both funds and further conservation expertise would be needed to complete the conservation works on these temple. In 2000 the Maitreya temples were nominated and listed to the World Monuments Watch list of Hundred Most Endangered Sites with the support of the Tibetan Classics Translators Guild. Shortly after, the BWC joined hands with a regional non governmental organisation, the Namgyal Institute for Research on Ladakhi Art and Culture (NIRLAC) to source expertise needed to preserve the temples particularly in the task of preserving the exquisite murals that bore the brunt of the deterioration. A team of wall painting conservators, conservation architects and structural engineers thus joined forces with the village crafts persons and artists to being a multiyear conservation programme. The programme meanwhile received support from the World Monuments Fund (WMF) that enabled work to commence on the largest temple. Through an initial grant provided by WMF, work on the retaining wall was completed around this temple. A second grant was provided through the ‘Robert Wilson Challenge to Preserve our Heritage’, where voluntary efforts of

the villagers were recognised and quantified for the first time and a matching grant awarded to enable the conservation of the Chamba Lhakhang.

#### CONSERVATION OF THE CHAMBA LAKHANG TEMPLE

The 15<sup>th</sup> century temple of Chamba Lhakhang is an exquisite temple, housing a colossal clay gilded statue of the seated Maitreya in the centre. The walls are beautifully embellished with paintings that were



*The important de consecration ceremony held at the Chamba Lhakhang by H H the late Ven Stakna Rinpoche*

executed over several centuries depicting a range of Buddhist deities, spiritual lineages and royal patrons. The paintings had been badly damaged as the roof had decayed and water seeped into the fragile mud brick walls. Timber beams had rotted and at least one column had tilted out of plumb with structural movement in the foundation. The traditional mud roof had been weighed down by additional layers of mud applied regularly to prevent water seepage into the temple. This had caused further structural distress to the temple walls.

While the conservation plan was developed by the experts and crafts persons, the villagers began the related task of preparing the temple for the conservation programme. A ceremony<sup>2</sup> was organised to de consecrate the temple to ensure that the spiritual essence of this place of worship is not damaged during the physical repairs. Following special prayers led by a senior abbot, the powerful ceremony involved the extraction of the sacred spirit from the paintings depicting the Buddhist benevolent and fierce deities all of whom guard the faith. The sacred essence is captured in a mirror by the Rinpoche with the continuous incantation of religious texts. The mirror,

carefully wrapped in a *khadag* (white silk scarf) with the mystical mantra ‘*Om Mane Padme Hung*’ written on it, was then placed in a cabinet within the temple to ensure that it could be worshipped by the villagers without being harmed in any way by the conservation works. The ceremony was led by a senior monk and involved the removal of the sacred spirit from the paintings and the colossal stucco sculpture. Once the temple was deconsecrated work could begin on the architectural conservation.

The working season in Ladakh is limited, beginning in May and ending in September before the onset of the harsh winters. Planning for the work was critical as materials needed to be transported to site before the mountain passes were snowed in and roads closed. Timber and birch bark, traditionally used in the roof, had to be brought from Kashmir, a season ahead of time. Adequate provisions had to be made to ensure that the wall paintings were protected once the roof was opened in the event of unseasonal rainfall. With constant discussions between the craftspeople, village elders and the architects the major conservation issues were addressed.

Decayed timber members were replaced, the tilted column corrected and the roof relaid. Introduction of new materials were kept to a minimum with the proviso that they would be monitored in the future as part of the maintenance cycle to check their efficacy.

The visual presentation of the wall paintings posed its own philosophical challenge. While the general approach to the conservation of a work of art is to carry out minimal reconstruction of damaged or missing elements in a mural painting, the same philosophy could not be adopted for a living religious site. Damaged figures of deities (lacunae and voids in the painting surface resulting from structural damage and moisture penetration) could not be worshipped if these were incomplete as the deities symbolise the perfection of different qualities all of which are represented in their depictions. An incomplete depiction would be considered imperfect and thereby cannot be worshipped. Initial plans by the community to completely repaint the damaged figures were discussed with the community and monks and contemporary conservation practices debated. Consensus was finally reached on the visual reintegration of areas



*The murals are re-consecrated after restoration. Source: Art Conservation Solutions*



*Badly damaged temple murals depicting the Buddhist pantheon had to be restored to reinstate the spiritual sanctity of the images*

of loss. A range of techniques were adopted for the paintings which included processes, such as *trattegio* or *rigatoni*<sup>3</sup>, chromatic selection, neutral colour infill and invisible retouching, based on the viewers' field of vision and iconographic importance of the image for the community.

It was agreed that areas of total loss of major figures such as the face of a Buddha that had been painted over an earlier historic layer would be completed by local artists working under the supervision of painting conservators to ensure that the correct iconography is followed. Supervision by the conservators ensured that the new painting was distinguishable from the original on close examination, yet to the untrained eye was integrated within the overall scheme.

On completion of the painting conservation, the village people organised an elaborate ceremony to re-consecrate the site. H H Stakna Rinpoche who had previously carried out the de-consecration ceremony led

the ceremony on this occasion too. Following special prayers offered by the Rinpoche, the mirror sheathed in the folds of the *khadag* was carefully unwrapped and carried along the painted walls returning the sacred essence back to each image. After reinstalling the sacred spirit within the paintings and the colossal statue, the local community offered prayers once again inside the recently restored temple.

Training programmes for specific skills were also held during the course of the project. A 10 day workshop on the conservation of historic earthen structures was held in Basgo as part of a larger UNESCO-NIRLAC training initiative. The workshop provided an opportunity for participants both from India and from the neighbouring Himalayan regions of Nepal and Bhutan to understand the major issues concerning the preservation of historic mud structures today.

In the course of the three seasons during which the conservation works at the Chamba Lhakhang were

carried, a simultaneous programme to restore the wall paintings of the smallest temple, the Chamchung were also undertaken through a grant from UNESCO. The Chamchung temple had been previously restored by the Basgo Welfare Committee when it had been in a severe state of deterioration.

In 2007 following a particularly harsh winter with heavy snowfall, leakages appeared in the roof of the Chamba Lhakhang. Cracks on the compacted mud roof were noticed. After consulting senior masons in Basgo and neighbouring villages a fresh layer of mud, with traditional additives such as cow dung and silt was applied on the roof. This additional layer has worked well for the past three winters and no further leakages have been reported even during the heavy rains experienced last summer. It is important that further work be carried out to strengthen the traditional mud roof's capacity to cope with increased precipitation using appropriate materials that are sustainable and easily available.

As climatic patterns change and there is an increase in precipitation in the region it is crucial that specific measures to protect the earthen construction be developed. The traditional mud roofs over most of these historic buildings need more regular maintenance and renewal, a reason contributing to the replacement of the mud roof with corrugated galvanised iron sheets or cement plaster in many instances.

#### **SUSTAINABLE INITIATIVES**

The village committee continues to fulfil its responsibility of preserving the village's cultural resources. To support these larger efforts, World Monuments Fund collaborated with the committee in preparing a long term sustainable development plan for the village. The plan addressed a range of issues including restoration and re use of several historic buildings within the village and citadel, management of the community's natural resources particularly the springs which emerge in the high pastures and provide water to the village. Some other aspects covered are revival of traditional crafts such as weaving and setting up of craft groups, organising the marketing and sale of local agricultural produce and fruits such as apricots, setting up of home stays and guest houses, reviving traditional performing arts in the village as well as the traditional '*amchi*' system of medicine. The plan was drawn up by the Basgo Welfare Committee with the assistance of several local non governmental organisations and experts from the region.

A consultative workshop with the villagers was held to discuss the sustainable development plan.

Several projects outlined in the plan have been implemented by the committee including the revival of the traditional recharge pond located in the high pastures and restoration of several *chorten* (Buddhist shrines) in the village. A part of the old palace located within the citadel was restored and reused as a library for the many ancient religious texts housed in the temples. The texts had been damaged when the citadel was invaded and ransacked in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Several leaves from the texts had been destroyed while others were jumbled and in disarray. The Buddhist texts were carefully sorted by the village elders and are now being housed in the newly rebuilt library.

The plan also sought to raise much needed resources for the continued maintenance of the temples and other heritage structures by channelling some of the income generated from activities such as the home stays into a village fund. In addition, heritage village walks are being developed in Basgo this year. Local unemployed youth are being trained to conduct these walks that will include elements of traditional hospitality such as a Ladakhi meal prepared by the village youth. Part of the proceeds from these walks will help generate some income for the continued maintenance of the temples.

The BWC continues its vigil over the temples as it prepares to commence work on the third Maitreya temple, the Serzang Lhakhang. Through the local initiative funds were raised to carry out some repairs to the ancillary chambers adjoining the Serzang Lhakhang as well as consolidating the foundations with the construction of retaining walls in the vulnerable areas. Efforts are now on to raise the resources needed to preserve the historic wall paintings in the temple, some of the most beautiful paintings in Ladakh.

#### **CONCLUSION**

In 2007, the project for the restoration of the Maitreya temples at Basgo won the UNESCO Asia Pacific Heritage Award of Excellence in recognition of the community's stewardship of its heritage. The citation stated:

The Award of Excellence winner, the Maitreya Temples complex in Ladakh, India, sets a regional standard for conservation that combines grass-roots advocacy with the highest levels of technical excellence. The sustained efforts by the Basgo Welfare Committee to underpin development with heritage conservation have placed

culture at the centre of community revitalization; while the contributions of the local community, in terms of both skills and resources, have allowed for the safeguarding of an iconic, but endangered part of the heritage of the Himalayan region.

The award has helped to reaffirm the community's commitment to preserving its heritage. At the award presentation ceremony the monks from Hemis monastery (the Chamba Lhakhang is under the purview of Hemis monastery) lauded the efforts of the villagers and the team. The monk concluded by stating that the efforts made in restoring these temples dedicated to the Maitreya (the Future Buddha) will be blessed and 'may all of us meet once again in Tusita heaven (the abode of the Maitreya), to hear the Buddha preach.' This sums up the essence of the conservation programme where the act of preservation itself is seen as an act of merit, ensuring sustainability of the heritage resources.



*Ceremonial scarves (khadag) are offered to the Secretary of the Basgo Welfare Committee, who spearheaded the initiative, by the community at the UNESCO award ceremony. Source: Tsering Angchuk*

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#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Goba is a Ladakhi village headman.
- <sup>2</sup> The ceremony is known as 'argapochog'.
- <sup>3</sup> Italian word for use of regular and equal sized vertical brushstrokes or hatching.