

PRACTICE

Understanding Traditional Architecture of Himachal Pradesh: An Unconventional Approach

Neha Raje

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ABSTRACT

This essay describes some of the concerns, motivations and methods adopted by a young conservation practice – SARAHAN, led by Ar. Neha Raje. She uses the case of traditional temples built in Himachal Pradesh in a characteristic kathkuni mode of composite construction of timber and stone. The method of understanding this heritage follows a community centric approach rather solely relying on tangible dimensions of the buildings. This then informs the strategies best suited for continued preservation of this uniquely local built heritage.



Neha Raje is a conservation architect and Assistant Professor at Lokmanya Tilak Institute of Architecture & Design studies, Navi Mumbai. She has been keenly involved in various conservation, documentation, architectural and interior projects. She has been actively involved in heritage listing and documentation for Mumbai with Adarkar Associates. Having conducted conservation electives in various Architectural colleges across Mumbai, she has been spreading awareness about built and un-built heritage to the students. She is frequently engaged in documenting various palaces in Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh. With Grassroots research and consultancy, she has worked on projects for Asian Development Bank (ADB) on Infrastructure Development Investment Program for Tourism- Himachal Pradesh and Tourism-Uttarakhand.

n.rajbhole@gmail.com

Introduction

For over a decade, our team SARAHAN has been engaged in studying the traditional '*kathkumni*' style of architecture by visiting different places in the Himalayan state of Himachal Pradesh, India. This style is predominantly found in the south-eastern parts of the state. In *kathkumni* style of construction, timber members are arranged in alternate/intermediate courses at right angles in an interlocking manner. Between the timber framework is dry masonry using slate stone. The structures thus remain elastic in its nature of masonry and absorbs the impact of earthquake in these regions, which fall under zones 4 and 5 of seismic activity. This time-tested indigenous technology has evolved from practice over centuries (Figure 1).

We often shortlist those places for our study which have unique cultural set-ups surrounding a significant vernacular structure or site for detailed study. Most of these sites are the nuclei of heritage settlements having historical and socio-cultural significance, which is visible either in stark nakedness or is hidden within the underlying layers of multiple histories over the centuries. The soul of any village or town lies in its residents, traditions, day to day lifestyle, network of trade and communications within and with the outside world. This combined with the built-forms of the place establishes its character. It is only a matter of time till one gets in discussions with the local inhabitants that the extraordinary narratives regarding the history, architecture, myths and culture are revealed. While the tangible aspect can be easily figured out by measured drawings, photographs and archival images, these oral narratives needless to say form the crux of the intangible aspect of heritage associated with the site.

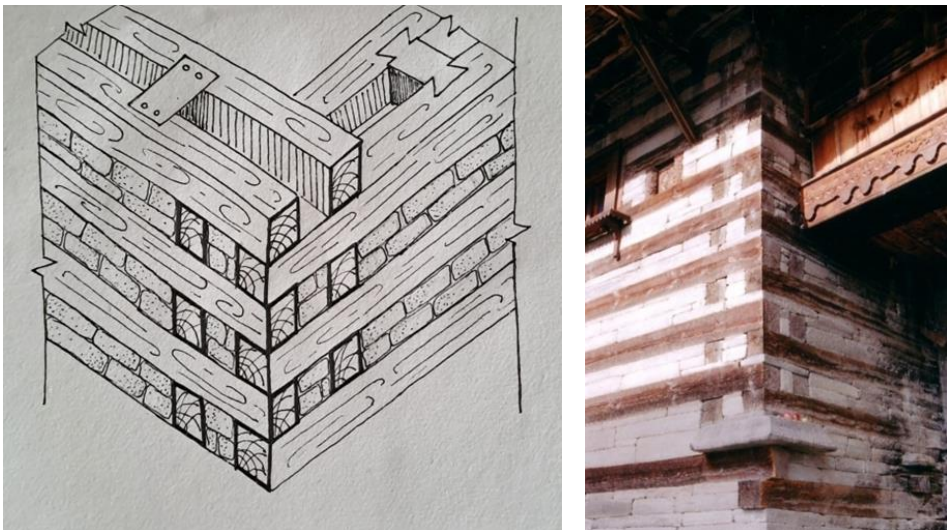


Figure 1: Illustrations of *kath-kumni* masonry (Photo Courtesy: SARAHAN, Mumbai)

The Objectives and Parameters of Conducting the Site Study

In all probability the heritage that exists today may partially or fully vanish in next 100 odd years if not conserved in proper manner. Our efforts today aim at recording/ documenting as many heritage sites as possible, thereafter formulating and initiating conservation proposals for handful of iconic sites. This shall remain as the evidence of these architectural marvels so as they shall not disappear from the memories of the traditional landscape. Because as a society we cannot build a viable future without acknowledging the essence of our past.

In this essay I aim to portray the parameters that we considered in the processes of our site work, which led us in gaining better understanding of the significant aspects of the heritage sites. This enables us for formulating a holistic project proposal as per the site requirements instead of making blanket policies or proposals which are very generic and hence not suitable for all sites.

To elaborate further our efforts towards understanding heritage sites in Himachal Pradesh, I shall compare two sites which shall showcase similarities in certain parameters like architectural typology, construction technology and scale; but are completely contrasting when it comes to their present day usage and hence the reception by the stakeholders. Architecture is incomplete without contemplating its connection with the lives and minds of surrounding people panning age groups and genders. Some of the parameters discussed in this essay are location, accessibility and spatial bonding with the users.

The two sites chosen for discussion are as follows:

- 1) Mahamaya Devi Mandir at Pangna (Mandi district)
- 2) Gondhla Fort at Gondhla village (Lahaul and Spiti district)



Figure 2: Map showing locations of Mahamaya Mandir and Gondhla Fort

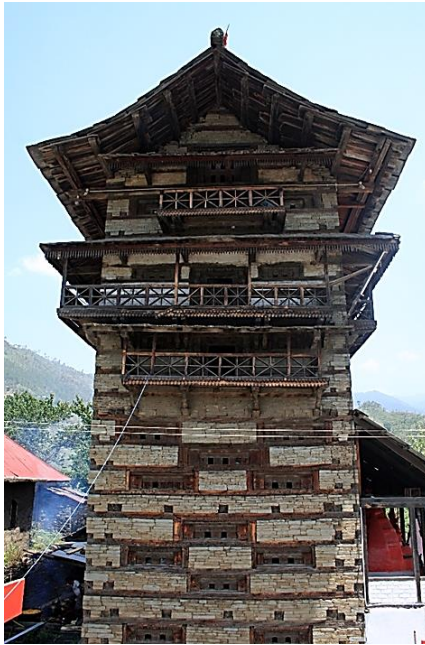


Figure 3: Mahamaya Devi Mandir at Pangna

Mahamaya Devi Mandir at Pangna

Pangna was the then capital of erstwhile Suket kingdom, now known as Sundernagar. Pangna lies in Karsog tehsil in Mandi district and is 102 km away from Shimla. It is situated at an elevation of 2065 meters above M.S.L. By common belief, the village is supposed to have been visited by the Pandavas at the time of Mahabharat. Pangna Fort was built by Raja Bir Sen after defeating the Thakur of Haryana as a sign of his victory. Now it is popularly known as the Mahamaya Devi Mandir. According to records, the fort was built in 11th century A.D., which makes it oldest standing fort in Himachal. Standing high and tall, the fort overlooks the entire Pangna village. It is said that there were six such more structures which served as '*sainik chavnis*'. The last one remaining is a six storeyed structure constructed in traditional Pahadi architecture. Remnants of the old plinth indicates the existence of a huge fort complex surrounding this one.

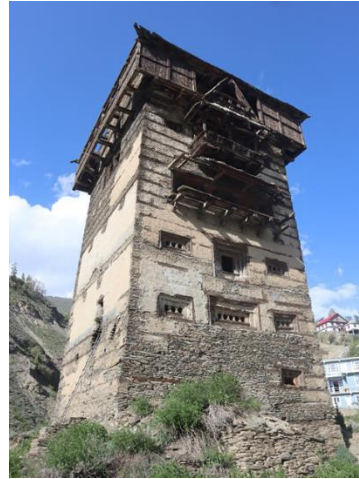


Figure 4: Archival image of Gondhla fort taken in 1912 (Source: Thakur family of Gondhla), and present day image by the author

Gondhla Fort

Village Gondhla in Lahaul and Spiti district is a small village set in the valley overlooking the Chandra river. The fort at Gondhla is at 3160 m from M.S.L. The fort complex was built in 18th century by Raja Man Singh of Kullu after his daughter was married to the Thakur of Gondhla. The fort complex comprised of the six storeyed tower in *kathkumni* along with more structures adjoining to the tower. Almost all other buildings have given away to the ravages of time due to negligence and abandonment. One can see only the remains of some of these structures. It is only the tower that exists even today, although somewhat deteriorated.

The most significant feature of the Gondhla fort is that it is the only monument built in *kathkumni* construction technology in the entire Lahaul and Spiti region, which is otherwise dominated by mud structures.

Let us proceed to look at the various parameters pertaining to both the sites that showcase their enticing characteristics which go way beyond the basic commonalities of scale, technology and typology.

Location

The Mahamaya Devi mandir is centrally located in village Pangna on a hillock such that it is visible from all places within the village. Narrow winding pathway takes one to this village nucleus. A long flight of steps then leads to the temple complex. Since it was originally built as a Fort precinct there are ancillary structures within the premises- a prison, an entrance gate and a few storerooms. The chosen location of the then fort is strategic in terms of



Figure 5: Location of Mahamaya Devi Mandir in the center of village Pangna



Figure 6: Location of Gondhla fort in the valley

having a high point for observing surrounding areas. In earlier times, when all seven towers must have stood tall, it must have dominated the landscape thereby reflecting the might of the erstwhile Suket kingdom's ruler.

Gondhla fort, on the contrary is situated in the valley overlooking the pristine Chandra river. Along the road which leads from Sissu to Keylong and further to Leh, was an important route even in earlier times. But until unless one takes the detour towards Gondhla village set in the valley, one cannot possibly spot the Fort precinct. This obscurity maintains an element of surprise till one almost reaches the village boundary.

Accessibility

In Gondhla, while we were carrying out the documentation exercise, the fort doors were opened for 4 days to provide internal access to our team. This also became a point of intrigue for the local residents, for whom the Gondhla fort remained inaccessible for over three decades. And they all came in small groups along with school children, woman folk and senior citizens to quench the thirst of their curiosity about the fort. They all had different reactions to the place- suddenly they were viewing something from inside, that they had been viewing from the outside for a very long time. At the same time, their connection with the fort suddenly seemed to be magnified. And this was when we realized the vital importance of taking their opinion into consideration before formulating the project proposal for the Fort precinct. One common thing that everyone suggested was that the new proposal for the fort should allow unrestricted access to one and all. A place which hitherto seemed out of common man's reach needed to be opened up so that it could revive the sentiments in senior generation and secure a place in the hearts of the younger generation too.

As for the Mahamaya Devi Mandir of Pangna, the deity resides on the upper most level of the six-storeyed structure. The access to this uppermost storey is permitted only to certain members of the hindu priest's (*poojary*) family in the village who have been entrusted with the daily task of worshipping the deity since centuries. Before starting the onsite work of measured drawings, we had to justify the need and seek permission from the resident Goddess herself to proceed with the task. Here although people are not allowed entry inside the tower temple, when it came to discussing the project proposal, this aspect never played as a prime concern in the minds of the villagers. Their perspective on conservation had more to do with the historical significance of the place: the site where their beloved princess choose death due to a misunderstanding by her father (the then king). Also the fact that the Mahamaya mandir remains as a sole testimony of a fort complex which is recorded to be the oldest in Himachal. Of the seven original towers within the fortified area, the one converted into the temple of Mahamaya goddess is the only existing one. Thus, it becomes extremely crucial to safeguard this last standing sentinel.

Spatial bonding with users:

The Mahamaya Devi mandir complex which is centrally located in the Pangna village, has a spacious foreground from where the temple can be viewed from all sides. Even religiously and spiritually it holds a central position in the minds of its inhabitants. Right from small rituals to pompous ceremonies are celebrated in the frontyard of the temple. The rear side has 2 *baolis*, the area around which is used for setting up of *langar* which provides for the *bhog* during these occasions. This open space in front of the temple also acts as resting place for travelers, pilgrims and other visitors all year long.

As in case of Gondhla, the winter months are covered with stagnant snow such that the access to the fort complex is an invincible task. But during the summer, the fort precinct acts as the village center buzzing with activities- old men gather around for gossip, women



Figure 7: Backyard of Mahamaya Devi Mandir used for preparing bhog, and Women knitting woolens while basking in the sun at Gondhla

from different households come together for knitting socks and sweaters to be used during winters. Children roam around playfully on their way to and from school. In some way or the others, this place acts as an ideal place to soak up the summer sun.

Scope For Intervention in Future

The intervention ideas lie in understanding the crux of situation and consequently proposing for preservation of buildings or restoring the site with appropriate measures suiting the present circumstances and also something that shall cater to the future. In either case the approach shall aim towards conservation of the intangible as well as the tangible values of the heritage site. In short, application of any method that shall prolong the life of the structure and maintain the sanctity of the place. Such proposal could be short term or long term based depending upon the available funds and hence prioritizing the tasks which need to be undertaken on urgent basis.

Proposals shall aim at value addition to the site along with prolonging the life of the existing entities, artefacts and rural settings within the immediate vicinity. In addition to this there shall be deliberate effort towards bringing about economy generation for the regular maintenance in future with a conservation management plan in place. And last but not the least, there has to be a rigorous involvement of the local community. Only then shall the future generations cherish the history etched in their hometowns.

Summary of Interventions

The proposed conservation strategy for the Mahamaya Devi mandir complex aims at removing the later added R.C.C. enclosures abutting the temple building. Along with this, the revival of 2 *baolis* (water bodies) is an intrinsic part of the proposal to revive the age-old system of water conservation. The conservation proposal also includes a set of guidelines of future development in immediate vicinity of the temple so as to maintain its integrity.

The Gondhla Fort falls along the tourist circuit as it is located along the Manali-Leh highway. The interventions for this site explore its potential of becoming a pause-point for the travelers along this route. The proposed interventions aim at opening it up for the tourists whereby they can absorb a piece of history along their journey.

Conclusion

Both these sites with their existing structures have surpassed the test of time for over a few centuries. With Pangna being the oldest recorded fort and Gondhla fort being the sole example of *kathkunni* in Lahaul, it becomes extremely critical to understand the potential of both these seemingly similar yet drastically contrasting sites. While one exudes pious sentiments to its stakeholders due to the presence of village goddess, the other has an old world charm probably due to its long term existence of being used as a fort belonging to a royal family. These sites which act majorly as storehouses of local histories, in present times these are the catalysts to numerous conglomeration activities. The parameters that we used for our purpose of our study helped us to realize the significance of the sites not only in historical times but also in day to day life of different types of stakeholders. And this information plays a vital role in defining the future scope of the site. ■

Photo Credits: Team SARAHAN, Mumbai (unless otherwise specified)

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