



ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE OF CULTURAL HERITAGE - A VALUE BASED APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

Pilgrimage and worship to sacred places hold immense cultural significance in India. The sacred places are invigorate minds, purify the heart and soul by creating an interface where finite human meets the infinite God. These sacred spaces no longer remain mere religious places, but transform into a cosmos embedded with belief and life activity. They are also now referred to as exemplary Cultural Heritage as they enliven the associated legends and traditions that were practiced years ago and continue to influence us today. This paper uses Value Assessment approach to delve into critical analysis of various values associated with any Cultural Heritage to aid Heritage Conservation. This has been done in accordance with the review of various International Charters dedicated to heritage conservation. Value assessment is a method or an approach to investigate the values associated with a heritage site that has rich cultural importance.

The paper attempts to bring into light the heritage values associated with Shaktipitha Naina Devi. This Shakti temple is an important pilgrimage site in Himachal Pradesh, India along

with four others (Chintpurni Temple, Jwalaji Temple, Bajreshwari Temple and Chamunda Temple). The value assessment helps to manage, sustain and valorise cultural heritage and helps to select an apt conservation approach. Preservation of cultural heritage is vital as these sacred spaces have the power to transform human beings with the sacred experience offered and complete their pilgrimage in true aspects.

Keywords: *cultural heritage; pilgrimage; Shaktipitha; Shakti; value based approach.*

THE POWER OF PILGRIMAGE

Of all the world religions, Hinduism tends to be the oldest and in fact the third most followed religion in the whole world [2]. Hinduism is considered to be a rich conglomeration of ideas related to religion, culture and philosophy and to ancient practices of India. It is strongly associated with the belief of re-embodiment, the belief of one absolute Divine with several manifestations and the desire to unfetter from the birth and death cycle. Hindu pilgrimage places are associated with various Gods and Goddesses belonging to four major traditions *Shaivism*¹, *Vaishnavism*², *Smartism*³ and *Shaktism* [2]. *Shaktism* is a denomination of Hinduism which led to the evolution of many places of worship all over India and in other parts of the world like Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh as seats of Goddess named *Shakti* which is termed as Shaktipithas commonly called Shakti Temples. The followers of this sect are *Shaktas*. Pilgrimage to these Shaktipithas is a practice prevalent from ages. Hindu scriptures regard pilgrimages as a moral duty to be performed by Hindus during their lifetime. Pilgrimage makes us see and experience places of devout importance, meet and interact with others who are on the same religious path. It helps to acknowledge oneself by strengthening their associations with others, and enhancing their spiritual knowledge and realizations to re-orient our lives and make spiritual progress. The cyclic frame of pilgrimage termed as “*Pilgrimage Mandala*” (Singh, 2011)[5] also reconfirms that pilgrimage is not mere a sacred journey, but a process of learning and transformation by allowing oneself to experience and visualize the infinite power and then share those experiences with all.

SACRED PLACE - A CULTURAL HERITAGE

The term ‘sacred place’ embraces areas of special spiritual significance to people and communities. A sacred place is considered ‘sacred’ because of natural landscape formations

¹*Shaivism* is a tradition of Hinduism, which reveres Hindu God Shiva as the Supreme Being.

²*Vaishnavism* is a tradition of Hinduism too, that reveres Hindu God Vishnu as the Supreme Being.

³*Smartism*, the tradition, in which the Hindus worship many Gods and Goddesses.

like volcanic peaks, caves/caves with holy springs, ancient groves of trees, etc. and also due to the architectural works which have been erected on them. The physical, social and cultural attributes enhance the holiness of the site and make the sacred space, a special space. The sacred experiences captured in such places which are attained during our short timed physical visits to these powerful places, or by participating in the rituals of that place, like taking holy dips or performing special prayers help to cleanse and enliven ourselves and instill a profound understanding of life. In short, pilgrimage is truly accomplished by associating with holy people, exchanging ideas and knowledge and then visiting sacred places which is enriched with memories of that God's pastimes. The foremost is the visual experience obtained by seeing the Supreme, during the process of offering prayers to the deity, where one's mind is at peace and ready to accept invisible power. The pilgrimage journey and the site circumambulation are equally important as they bring about radical changes in attitude and behavior of people. All this finally unites to transform a sacred space to a cultural heritage or to a place of great bonding.

Cultural heritage, as stated by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), is a demonstration of the life style developed by any community/sect that can be transported from one generation to its next and then further. This includes living traditions, customs practiced, actual places, entities, or any artistic manifestations and values which are precious and elusive to a community (ICOMOS, 2002) [4]. Cultural Heritage is not restricted alone to buildings and artifacts, but also encompasses the various cultural traditions which are live expressions of inheritance. They can be in the form of art, folklore, group practices, rituals, festivities, knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts (UNESCO, 2003) [15]. The religious places are unsurpassed examples of our cultural heritage as they are the foremost places which give birth to traditions, practices, rituals and also the most significant ones to be passed on to keep alive such customs and practices.

The Significance of Cultural Heritage

Values help to assess the significance of a heritage site. "Every place/ building/ site is distinct and has different values" [7]. A culturally significant site is associated with a rich combination of values. The values considered in value assessment have been differently stated by various experts like the art historians, archaeologists, architects, and others like stakeholders. Value is the underlying reason behind the entire notion of heritage conservation because every society will make efforts to conserve what it values the most. A given heritage site, building, or object with different values ascribed to it, helps to establish its cultural heritage significance.

In the past few years, the notion of heritage has widened and grown because new groups of people from diverse fields have become more aware and have joined in for its identification.

These include various citizens, experts from allied fields, and some individuals who have their independent opinions and their own perception of ‘values’. This aperture has brought new considerations and has made the identification process much more complex. In this changing scenario, the assessment and understanding of this value based approach have become more important. It will act as guiding principle to the decisions being taken and strategies being made for conservation of heritage and in deciding ‘what’ and ‘how’ to be conserved along with setting priorities and handling conflicts. ‘Values’ associated with cultural heritage refer to its qualities, characteristic features or potential intrinsic aspects. Value suggests usefulness and benefits. The significance of cultural heritage of a place largely means identifying its attributes like aesthetic qualities, architectural uses, historical purviews, scientific importance, social or any other significance to the mankind in the past or in coming future. This significance assessment of ‘Cultural Heritage’ is crucial to recognize the ancient inherited places which are worthwhile and need to be conserved for generations to come.

VALUES.... THE START OF A NEW PARADIGM

The categorization of values helps to identify the typology of values that are most commonly associated with various heritage sites or if any overlaps too. But particularly values are project specific which does not mean that each heritage site has different values or each site will have all the values (Table 1). The two broad classification of values that are most accepted ones are socio-cultural (a mix of aesthetic, historic, social, cultural) and economic (market values and public/ non-market values) [7, 13, 14]. Economic values and socio-cultural values help to understand and label the various heritage values. Many a times, values overlap which is natural but the important concern is the different tool and methodology used to identify them.

Table 1: Values associated with Cultural Heritage [6,7,13,14]

No.	Heritage Significance	Criterion	Significance Indicators
1.	Aesthetic Value	Noteworthy or significant aesthetical characteristics	i. Important for distinctive aesthetic attributes ii. Important for its creativity in design or technical advancement iii. Possesses landmark quality iv. Importance for contribution to streetscape character

No.	Heritage Significance	Criterion	Significance Indicators
2.	Historical Value	A strong association of life, events or activities of a person/clan/organization	i. Associated with a significant event or historic phase ii. Maintains or shows the continuity of a historical process or activity iii. Associated with person/s whose life, career or acts hold strong historical significance
3.	Social Value	Any community or group important for spiritual, social, Or cultural reasons	i. A place of high value for a community or an entire group on account of social, cultural or spiritual grounds ii. Contributing to a sense of identity for a community
4.	Spiritual Value	The place has strong religious context	i. Has a religious context or any secular importance owing to inner qualities or as believed to be spiritual
5.	Scientific Value	The place has the potential to add to information that will enhance human understanding of the natural, historical and aspects and culture of the region	i. Large scale use of the site to act a model for research or teaching ii. Easy and in depth understanding of the site's history. iii. Also of the human occupation of that area
6.	Symbolic/ Cultural Value	The place displays those combined meanings that are related to its past and explore the meanings of site	i. All cultural values that are passed through materials and habits are a part of the heritage

Source: Author(s)

RESEARCH AREA: SHAKTIPITHA NAINA DEVI

Dedicated to Goddess named Durga or Shakti, it is one of the highly venerated Shakti Temples in India, often referred to as Sidha-Shaktipitha (a place famous for spiritual attainments). The temple attracts hundred thousand of devotees who come here every year to attain peace and happiness. Naina Temple lies in Bilaspur, in the state of Himachal Pradesh, in North India. The place gained popularity owing to the temple, and became to be known as Naina Devi town. It is 20 km away from the town of Bilaspur, on a hill top.

Aesthetic Value

Aesthetic value refers to a lot of qualities. The prime attention goes to the visual features which are the qualities of heritage like the design and evolution of the building, object, or site; landmark quality; and/ or contribution to streetscape character which characterizes places as heritage. Aesthetic quality is also referred to as a measure of various senses like the power to smell, hear sound, feel and see. Thus, a heritage site is significant from the point of view of experience it offers to its visitors. The significance indicators include:

Location Attribute

The famous Naina Temple, as a crown, overlooks the sacred Sikh pilgrimage Anandpur Sahib and Gobind Sagar Lake on its either sides. The temple enjoys landmark quality in the area and is approached through road that curves round the hill and unfolds the temple step by step. The location offers beautiful views of the natural landscape around.

Temple - the Generator of the Town

In olden times, as the temple started gaining popularity and the number of pilgrims increased, the place saw tremendous growth of economic activities. So, the area around the temple started developing, which is today popularly known as Naina Devi town.

The Streetscape

The road to the temple is lined with small temporary/ permanent shops selling food items offered in the temple, religious idols and objects, artifacts, which all start dominating your senses as you move further. They add to your memories and the sacred experience of the place. These small shops create a streetscape which is a characteristic feature found around temples in India.

Historical Value

Historical value is the outlining feature of identifying heritage. A heritage is deemed to have a significant historical value along with others like aesthetic, architectural, scientific or social value. Historical value can be accessed in many ways like from the age of material used, the chronological events in its associated history or from its unique character, from its technological advancements, or from any other source like any archival record or documentary. The historic value adds to its educational value as the place continues to spread knowledge regarding its rich past in the years to come. The historical value also expresses the life-conditions at the time the building was built. This helps to maintain strong continuity with our rich past. The significance indicators are:

Famous Shaktipitha

The *Shaktipithas* are holy places of worship dedicated to the Goddess Sati, the female absolute power of Hinduism and the supreme deity of the sect following it and so are called Shaktas. *Shaktas* conceive the Goddess as the ultimate power with source of all creation and energy in the world. These temples are found in large numbers in and around India. The *Shaktipithas* vary in number as per descriptions by different Hindu texts which are 18, 51, 52 or 108 in number. The common underlying factor is that each site is associated with a particular part of the body of the Goddess. *Shaktas* represent a strong group of followers who practise *Shaktism*, one of the three primary schools of Hinduism from the *Vedic* Age. Naina Devi Temple is one of the listed 51 *Shaktipithas* in India [10].

Legends Associated with Temple

Legends are a symbolic representation of beliefs and collective experiences and serve as a reaffirmation of commonly held values. The most famous legend attached to this *Shaktipitha* is that when Lord Vishnu had cut Shakti's body, and her eyes fell down at the same place where the present Naina Temple can be seen. Naina Temple is also associated with the legend of *Mahishasura* (a demon). The powerful demon Mahishasura was bestowed with a boon of immortality that he could only be vanquished by a woman. *Mahishasura* unleashed an era of terror on the Gods who in order to save themselves combined their powers to create a goddess powerful enough to defeat the demon. Enamoured by her beauty the demon wanted to marry her. She told him that she would do so if he would defeat her in battle. In the ensuing battle the Goddess did not only defeat Mahishasura and his army but she plucked out both his eyes and was hailed by the Gods as 'Victorious Naina'.

History of Temple

The temple was built by a King called Bir Chand. It is believed that during his reign Naina, a cattle raiser, was once rearing cattle on top of a hill when to his surprise he saw that his cows dropping milk on a stone placed under a banyan tree. Subsequently, the Goddess appeared in his dreams and revealed to him that the stone was synonym of her form. He informed the King, who built a temple on the spot and enshrined the stone in it. The temple was forthwith called Naina Devi. The original temple was built in 8th century by King Bir Chand. The present temple is relatively new as the earlier one was buried in the landslide of 1880.

Social Value

The social value enables and builds social connections with that site. It includes making networks and relations by putting the site to a potential use for social gatherings, festival celebrations or performing activities that build a relationship between the public and space instilling shared-space qualities. This strengthens and develops cordial relations among the associated groups bringing them closer from families to neighbourhood reaching out to larger ethnic groups. Social value actually builds attachment of people to a place forming social cohesion, creating identity of different communities or other feelings of bonding with each other. The significance indicators are:

Religious Fair

The temple is the venue for colourful fairs held thrice a year during *Navratras*, the main festival of all Hindus which is celebrated for eight days and nights, in the month of *April* as '*Chaitra Navaratras*', as *Shravan Navaratras* (July-August) and as *Asuj Navaratras* (September-October). In Naina Devi Fair, folk cultural programmes are organized and celebrations go on for these eight days and nights. Large numbers of visitors throng the temple to participate and celebrate the festival with joy and delight. Many a times, the number of visitors during the fair reaches to 20,000-25,000 per day.

Miscellaneous Celebrations

Along with these special fairs, some other Indian festivals which are celebrated in Naina Temple are Holi, Diwali, Dusshehra, Ram Nawami, Makarsakranti (January) and Janmashtami (August-September). During these festivals, the number of visitors rises significantly. The temple is decorated beautifully and there is maximum rush of devotees as special prayers and other special rituals are performed many times a day.

Spiritual/ Religious Value

Heritage sites of religious nature convey strong spiritual meanings. These values can originate from any source like the existing beliefs and teachings of that religion. The religious value always has attached secular experiences of surprise which leave people awestruck or makes them wonder. The various shrines in the temple complex and the other sacred components generate spiritual feelings and add to the pilgrim's sacred experience. The significance indicators are:

Shrines

Goddess Shrine, the primary shrine, in accordance with circulation trend in all *Shaktipithas*, this temple also has Shakti (Goddess) shrine as the first sacred space approached through the main courtyard of temple complex succeeding the main entrance. Shiny brass railings have been provided for the devotees to queue and wait for their turn to enter in the main arena. The main shrine has an assembly hall for pilgrims and the main sanctum for deity. The doors are gilded in silver. The roof is a pyramidal structure with small gold domes at various corners. At the either side of the main entrance, there are two life sized, milky-white marble lions standing as guards to the Goddess (believed to be the vehicle of the Goddess). This Shrine has Goddess idol in form of a stone and is heavily decorated with silver and gold.

After offering prayers to the Goddess, devotees move further to her masculine consort, the Shiva Shrine. It is placed right in a very small compartment. It is a custom to offer prayers first in the Goddess shrine and then in Shiva shrine as Shiva and Shakti reside together in Shaktipithas.

Secondary shrines also exist in the temple complex like Lakshmi Narayan shrine in this temple, where devotees pray and seek prosperity.

Other Sacred Components

There are many other sacred components in the temple which are visited and worshipped by the pilgrims which include the Gate to God, sacred tree, a sacred cave and a number of temple where rituals are performed.

Gate to God is placed on one side of the main Goddess Shrine. It is a huge traditional gate (Figure 1) which is believed to be the 'Gate to God of Death – Yamraj - to decide the destiny of dead that he would now go to heaven or hell'. In olden times, animal sacrifices were done here and offered to the Goddess at this place. The door offers breathtaking view of the valley around as the temple is situated on a hilltop. People with faith tie threads on this gate to attain salvation.



Figure 1: The Gate to God to tie threads and seek wishes.

Source: Author(s)

Fire spaces for offerings are used for special prayers performed by sitting around live fires (an important ritual as per Hinduism) in the temple on everyday basis, where offerings are put into fire as a ritual. Devotees ask the priests to perform a special prayer for their family's well being. It is said that these prayers are performed ever since the temple existed, but the ashes from these fire spaces have never been picked but settle down by God's grace. The ashes are taken home by pilgrims considering it to be very pious (Figure 2).



Figure 2: The special prayers being performed by putting offerings in fire.

Source: Author(s)

A magnificent sacred tree (*Ficus Religiosa*), is situated in the centre of the temple courtyard and is said to be age old. Pilgrims tie red cloth and sacred threads and seek a wish from the Goddess and later come and untie the threads when their wishes are fulfilled.

The sacred pond was once used by devotees for taking a spiritual dip to cleanse their body, mind and soul is now lying vacant and unmaintained. After offering prayers in both shrines, the devotees move in a ring pattern around the Goddess Shrine as circumambulation, which is an important ritual in the temple. Some people crawl through this path to get their wishes fulfilled and seek blessings.

A few kilometres from the temple is the sacred cave, where the Goddess had meditated for many years. It is a very sacred place which pilgrims visit. It is a difficult journey as the cave is entered through an underground tunnel almost 20 feet deep down. The tunnel is very narrow, barely enough for a single person to pass.

A number of rituals are performed in the temple like the holy bath of the idol, decoration of idol after ritual bath, singing hymns to God, which is done generally twice a day in the morning and evening, and offering food to Goddess which is later distributed as blessings to all present in the temple. Some special prayers are held in festival times which hold lot of significance for pilgrims, who visit in large numbers at those times to see and participate.

Cultural / Symbolic Value

The cultural aspects of any heritage are the core elements to be studied before assessing any other value. It demonstrates the perceptions, facts, materials and living style, habits which have been passed over time so cultural values are un-detachable part of a site and like historical value, form a part of heritage. Heritage cannot exist without its cultural value. So cultural or symbolic value includes various shared meanings common to historical aspects too. The significance indicators are:

Naina

It is the symbol of Goddess's eyes. The Goddesses at all *Shaktipithas* (in Indian sub-continent and abroad) are believed to be manifestations of the one Goddess - Shakti or Durga, in different forms. The tradition of 51 *Shaktipithas* is related to a mythology that clearly affirms that all places where the temples stand today are actually the places where different body parts or ornaments of Goddess Sati had fallen in past. These eventually became her preaching places and came to be known as *Shaktipithas*. The Naina Devi Shaktipitha is the only place symbolic of Goddess's eyes where her eyes fell allegedly.

The word 'Naina' is synonymous with Goddesses eyes. The temple is therefore believed to have healing powers for any disease related to eyes and so pilgrims offer eyes made of silver along with other offerings to the Goddess. The Goddess here is also in stone form with big golden eyes.

Sidha-Shaktipitha

In the long list of *Shaktipithas*, some are called Siddha-Shaktipithas because they are believed to be strong places where Shakti/ Shiva mediated for long, hence are considered highly effective for the attainment of spiritual powers. Naina Temple is also referred to as Siddha-Shaktipitha because the Goddess meditated here in the cave which is at an approachable distance from the main temple.

Shaktipitha Pilgrimage Circuit

Five of the famous Shaktipithas are located in Himachal Pradesh namely Naina, Chintpurni, Jwalaji, Bajreshwari and the Chamunda temples. Every year, over one hundred thousands of pilgrims visit these temples. These five *Shaktipithas* form a popular pilgrimage circuit. Outstation pilgrims usually visit all the five when they come to the state of Himachal Pradesh especially during the most popular festival of *Navaratri*.

Cultural Unity

The temple is considered sacred by Sikhs⁴ as well, since their tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, visited it before embarking on one of his military campaigns against the *Mughals*. Therefore, the temple is visited both by Hindus and Sikhs in large numbers and represents an example of cultural unity and a heritage sacred to many.

Threats to Heritage Values

Shaktipithas and other such sacred sites which hold importance due to their rich past, cultural connections or associations with significant past events or person/ group, represent our cultural heritage and the continuity of the original functions on site today gives it the status of 'Living Heritage' [3]. These act as places that make us proud, give us an identity and keep us in constant touch with our past, keeping us at present, and delving into our future. They promote cordial social relations, promote a sense of belonging and awaken us of our responsibility as a member of one or different group of communities and help us to be part of this larger society, the world as a whole. Such sacred sites no longer

⁴ The followers of another popular religion *Sikhism*

remain sacred entities, but become our valued cultural heritages which can be seen under threat, owing to fast spreading globalisation and some cultural homogenisation. The lack of support, affection and man to man's understanding is further deteriorating the situation. Certain issues noted at site are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Heritage Values at Shaktipitha Naina Devi and Possible Threats

S.No.	Heirtage Value	Possible Threats
1.	Aesthetic Value	The locational attribute (1,100 m above MSL) created a feeling of awe amongst pilgrims as they stepped gradually towards the hilltop, but with time, the roads have been widened and cars allowed till the gates of the temple. Few years back, cable cars were installed to cut the travel time. The aspect of journey associated with pilgrimage is almost vanishing.
2.	Historical Value	The history of the temple, place and the <i>Shakta</i> cult is not known to many and there are no means or measures adopted at the temple to make this known to the visitors to enforce its cultural significance.
3.	Social Value	The miscellaneous celebrations on the site have huge inflow of pilgrims which becomes unmanageable by the temple staff (25,000 per day approx.). So the local police is given the security arrangements who just manage the traffic and force visitors to move in line, offer prayers hurriedly and keep moving without actually experiencing feeling of faith and sanctity.
4.	Spiritual/ Religious Value	The religious significance of shrines, gates and many rituals is unknown to many visitors . There are no means to apprise visitors of any religious signifincance of the temple or rituals performed here. So first time visitors or foreign tourists just roam around the place and go back without even knowing of the rich cultural significance of the place.
5.	Cultural/ Symbolic Value	The rich cultural past lies unknown or known to very few which will soon die.

Source: Author(s)

Certain issues at site which are further deteriorating the aesthetic and religious values of the site include rise in number of shops, haphazard arrangement of shops along the movement spine disrupting pedestrian movement (Figure 3). New developments springing

in and around the temple complex like guesthouses, hotels, etc. are modern RCC buildings clad with variety of materials. They are highly insensitive to the temple architectural character of the temple. Lack of maintenance, exposed wiring (Figure 4), blackening of temple walls, the sacred pool lying empty, are some other issues which need attention.



Figure 3: The shops encroaching the passage to the main shrine



Figure 4: The exposed wiring and lack of maintenance in the temple.

CONCLUSIONS

The heritage, when not taken care of or acknowledged, is at risk of becoming lost forever, or becoming stagnant forever. Heritage Conservation, in true sense, strengthens future generations by keeping the rich past alive and intact, giving it freedom to change and adapt. So, to safeguard and pass all heritages in safe hands, we need to opt different measures and measures which are far more sensitive than the ones used for conserving buildings or natural sites because these places are extraordinary. They have the power to transform human beings. The Hindu tradition reinstates that a pilgrim's journey to a place is a process which establishes an unending relation between a pilgrim and his God, thus forming a spiritual concern. Hence, it becomes a dire need to safeguard these Living Heritages. Methodological assessment of heritage values is very important as the values keep changing with time, but are strongly affected by various contextual factors, like social lifestyles and economic trends. The fact that these values often overlap and clear lines of distinction cannot be drawn have to be considered and so wide variety of methodologies and tools need to be devised for assessing these values. The right assessment of values will help in devising better conservation strategies which will not be generalized rather will be project specific.

Value based Approach leads to integrating all assessment approaches, establishing policy frameworks and developing suitable conservation strategies. This paper is a step in the direction to promote conservation of these *Shaktipithas* by acknowledging one and all of the significance of this noted cultural heritage by using the Value based Approach.

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