



CULTURAL HERITAGE CONSERVATION PRACTICES AND CHALLENGES: A CASE STUDY OF ANCIENT ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES IN KASHMIR

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Abstract: *Cultural heritage resources are valuable commons that reflect the human heritage of the past. Cultural heritage is the legacy of tangible and intangible elements of a society inherited from previous generations and preserved in the present for the benefit of future generations. The Kashmir valley boasts a rich and diverse cultural heritage. This study attempts to examine the practices and challenges of cultural heritage, with special reference to the ancient archaeological sites in Kashmir. The study revealed that the ancient archaeological sites in Kashmir are in a poor state of preservation. The precious cultural wealth of Kashmir is dwindling at an alarming rate as a result of increasing urbanisation, vandalism, theft, ineffective conservation measures, and, above all, the indifference of the authorities.*

Keywords: *Heritage, archaeology, preservation, antiquities, excavation, terracotta art.*

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Introduction

The Kashmir valley has a rich historical past, as evidenced by the numerous archaeological sites in the region. The antiquity of the human settlements in Kashmir goes back to prehistoric times. In 1969, H. D. Sankalia found evidence of the earliest human habitations in the Liddar valley, in south Kashmir (Sankalia: 1971: 558-562). Sankalia recovered a few stone tools and attributed them to the earliest Palaeoliths in Asia. Subsequently, the upper palaeolithic tools were found at Sombur in Pulwama; the principal tool types found there are burins, points, and borers (Pant et al: 1982: 35-40). Similar evidence came from Bomai (Sopore), where a huge rock shelter with engravings and a hand axe was discovered

by Aijaz A. Bandy (Bandy: 2003: 10-12). The fascinating discovery of these petroglyphs was the first of its kind in Kashmir. The various depictions on this rock include animals, human figures in the form of linear bodies, and multiple concentric circles (Kumar and Mishra: 2014: 106-112). Moreover, the excavated cultural sequence from Gufkral (Sharma: 2013: 19-206), Burzahom (Fonia: 2021: 1-410), Kanispur (Mani: 2000: 4-11), and the cultural remains from nearly four dozen locations suggested widespread neolithic activities in Kashmir (IAR 1961-62: 98; IAR 1962-63: 09; IAR 1976-77: 75; IAR 1981-82: 17).

The neolithic-megalithic period, as reported from Gufkral and Burzahom, came to an end sometime around the beginning of the first millennium BCE. What happened thereafter and before the advent of the Kushanas in Kashmir was unknown until the excavations at Semthan (Anantnag district). The excavation at Semthan has given a sequence of cultures from the middle of the first millennium BCE up to late medieval times (Gaur: 1987: 327-337). Semthan excavation bridged the gap, in a manner of speaking, between the neolithic-megalithic period and historical period. The excavation at Semthan proved to be a significant breakthrough as it provided valuable information about two hitherto unknown cultures in Kashmir, namely the pre-NBPW and NBPW. It was during early historical times that the valley for the first time saw the rise of urban centres, as was witnessed at Semthan and other places.

The arrival of Kushanas in Kashmir was an important aspect of the cultural processes during the early historic period. Even though no serious archaeological investigations have been carried out in Kashmir, about six dozen sites bearing Kushana material culture have been identified. Among these, partial excavations were conducted at Semthan (Gaur: 1987: 327-337), Harwan (Kak: 1933: 105-111), Kanispur (Mani: 2000: 4-11), and Ushkar (Kak: 1923: 11-26; Shali: 2001: 160-175). The excavation work at other key sites,

such as Kutbal, Hoinar-Lidroo, Doin-Pather, Yaren-Yander, Ahan, Gurwet, and Wangdora has not advanced beyond trial trenches. The available evidence suggests that the valley of Kashmir witnessed the emergence of a terracotta school of art during the rule of Kushanas. This is attested by the discovery of massively decorated terracotta tiles, terracotta figurines of humans and animals, terracotta beads, and other miscellaneous terracotta objects throughout the length and breadth of the valley. A well-known feature of the Kushana period in Kashmir was the diaper pebble style of construction and the paving of Buddhist Stupa courtyards with decorated terracotta tiles (Kak: 1933: 105-111). Two types of settlements were encountered in Kashmir. In one case, only the terracotta tile pavements were discovered, of which mention may be made of Kutbal, Hoinar-Lidroo, Takiya Bal, Doen-Pather, Ahan, Kralchak, and Gurwait (Bhan: 2010: 43-51). In another case, terracotta tile pavements were found in association with the pebble and diaper pebble style of walls. Such settlements were unearthed at Harwan, Ushkar, Kanispur, Hutmur and Semthan (Kak: 1933: 105-111; Kak: 1923: 11-26; Gaur: 1987: 327-337). Moreover, the present landscape of Kashmir is dotted by an innumerable number of ancient monumental ruins, which reflect the creative faculty of the artists of the ancient period in Kashmir. The style of architecture of the period under review is reflected in many Hindu temples. The prominent ones are Shankarachariya temple, Payar temple, Buniyar temple, Laduv temple, Avantisvara temple, Avantisvamin temple, Parihaspora temple, Martand temple, and others.

Archaeological Heritage of Kashmir during Dogra Rule (1846-1947)

The systematic and sustained archaeological exploration of Kashmir did not commence until the early 20th century CE. Throughout the 19th century CE, few accounts of European travelers existed that contained valuable information pertaining

to the people, culture, and ruined monuments of the Kashmir Valley. The prominent amongst them were George Forster, William Moorcroft and Treback, Godfrey Thomas Vigne, Charles Hugel, Alexander Cunningham, W. G. Cowie, Henry Hardy Cole, George Buhler, and M. A. Stein. Such explorers undertook antiquarian, archaeological, scientific and geological works in and around Kashmir (Sofi: 2024: 16-30). Their monumental works are still regarded as integral to the study of the archaeology of Kashmir. However, the attitude of Dogra rulers as well as the people of Kashmir was indifferent towards the archaeological heritage of the State, towards the second half of the 19th century CE. The indifference of the Dogra rulers towards the archaeological heritage can be gauged from the fact that George Buhler visited Kashmir in 1877 in search of old Sanskrit manuscripts (Buhler: 1877: 01). He claimed, to have ‘obtained an order from the Darbar empowering me to make the excavations wherever I thought fit’ (Buhler: 1877: 07). Subsequently, he conducted excavations at the village of Bahirkut. How an Indologist who was hardly acquainted with the required skill was entrusted with such a crucial task? The archaeological sites were made further deplorable by the indiscriminate excavations carried out by so-called explorers or travelers who visited Kashmir during the 19th Century. One such case was in the year 1865 when Bishioip Cotton carried out an excavation at Avantipora in which a few sculptures were unearthed (Bamzai: 2007: 59). The same was the case at Ushkar (one of the early historic sites in district Baramulla) where Garrick conducted extensive excavations in 1882 (Lawrence: 1895: 162). The indiscriminate excavation completely leveled the Stupa to the ground, without giving the proper details of his work. In this way erased the most important information which could have been the archaeological treasure for the future generations. Its original position can be seen in the photograph taken by Henry Hardy Cole (Fig.8.1)

(Cole: 1869: 28). Lawrence had reported the presence of valuable antiquities almost in every village (Lawrence: 1895: 162). However, when he inquired about these ruins, the people could provide little information beyond vague guesses, that they were the works of the Buddhists or the Pandus (Lawrence: 1895: 162). Additionally, M. A. Stein, in 1896 brought the attention of the Kashmir Durbar an incident that stones were stolen from the archaeological site at Parihaspora (Vogel: 1904: 25).

It was only after colonial intervention that archaeological efforts were started in Kashmir, towards the beginning of 20th century CE. Significant excavations were carried at numerous locations in which mention may be made of Avantipora, Parihaspora, Pandrethan, Ushkar, Harwan, Kakapur, Zihanpur, Badambag, Kuther and Martand (Sahni: 1918: 49-62; Kak: 1933: 105-111; IAR 1923-24: 130; IAR 1925-26: 186). These excavations largely contributed to a deeper understanding of archaeological landscape and cultural heritage of Kashmir. However, these excavations were conducted in a haphazard manner. R. C. Kak’s excavation work at Harwan lacked proper methodology, including the proper sequencing of unearthed artifacts. Furthermore, the Department of Archaeology, established in 1904, was reduced and reconstituted multiple times by Dogra rulers.

Thus up to 1947, Archaeology seems to have been only a marginal activity in the Princely State of Jammu and Kashmir. Even the annual grants made for the conservation of the archaeological heritage, for the most part, were re-appropriated for different purposes (Kak: 1923: 01; Lahiri: 2005: 168).

Archaeological Undertakings in Kashmir after 1947

Following Indian independence, Abul Kalam Azad, the minister of Education, visited Kashmir. He believed that for the advancement of

educational and cultural activities it is important to revive the Department of Archaeology in Jammu and Kashmir. He also suggested transforming the Sri Pratap Singh Museum from a mere store house into living institution capable of radiating knowledge into different aspects (Archival File 3-39/50-A2: 1949: 10). For this purpose Deputy Director General of Archaeological Survey of India M. S. Vats was deputed to Kashmir (Archival File 3-39/50-A2: 1949: 10). Vats stayed in Kashmir for a period of only forty one days. Vats assessed the past activities of the Department of Archaeology and its future needs. He submitted a comprehensive report with detailed conservation notes on the Mughal gardens and several important monuments (Archival File 3-39/50-A2: 1949: 9-142). He also recommended the remodeling of the Archaeological section of Sri Pratap Singh Museum. However, practical implementation of these recommendations delayed despite the urgency of the situation (Archival File 418 AM/562: 1954: 03). The position of the historical monuments in Jammu and Kashmir even after independence continued to be in a deteriorated condition. In 1954, the Food Control Department illegally encroached upon the monumental area at Pattan belonging to the Department of Archaeology by converting it into a granary store (Archival File 537-AM/379: 1954: 5). Over the past six decades, numerous archaeological settlements ranging from palaeolithic to modern times were identified in Kashmir. However, systematic excavations were conducted only at few sites including Burzahom, Gufkral, Semthan, and Kanisapur.

Burzahom, the famous neolithic site was systematically excavated from 1960 to 1971 and in this way became the first scientifically excavated archaeological site of its kind in Jammu and Kashmir (Fonia: 2021). Not going into the detailed excavation report, the site served as a remarkable source for the comprehensive story about the lives of neolithic-megalithic

people of the valley. But unfortunately, the site was left unprotected after excavating the site for a decade. Presently the site is encroached on all sides and a part of the mound has been cut for the construction of a road that too leading to the top of the archaeological mound (Sharma: 2000: 02) which violated the Ancient Monuments and Ancient Archaeological sites act 1959. Since it just takes five minutes from the main road to reach the archaeological mound at Burzahom, what was the need of a road to be constructed for it? This shows the unprofessionalism and carelessness in the field of heritage management.

The condition of other archaeological sites in Kashmir is more or less similar. Gufkral is another neolithic site in Kashmir. Gufkral, locally known as *Kral Wudur* is situated between 33°53'45.67" N 75°5'40.54" E at an elevation of 1671 m, adjacent to Bonmir village. The site is occupied by army bunkers from northern side, and the elevated surface of the mound is presently used as a helipad by army helicopters. A school building and a water tank have been constructed on the southernmost edge and in the middle of the archaeological mound to provide drinking water supplies to the village. These structures have greatly affected the site.

The minimal conservation work carried out in Kashmir is full of flaws. New material has been used to reconstruct the old structures afresh without concern for heritage conservation ethics (Fig. 8.2). Same is the case with the Martand temple at Mattan. The concerned department's Lack of professionalism and carelessness is reflected in the conservation work carried out at the site. Two bases of subsidiary shrines on either side of the main temple are constructed afresh with new material. Surprisingly, a stone block depicting a seated figure from the main temple has been fixed out of context on one of the bases. One can see in Figure 8.3 and 8.4 how the so-called conservation work damaged the images of deities carved on the walls of the temple by constructing

new walls and, in some cases, putting the original stone blocks out of order. The amateur officials of the concerned department caused further damage to the archaeological heritage of Kashmir. Several early historic sites in Kashmir are extremely rich in terms of their material culture, particularly terracotta art. But unfortunately, these sites were deserted and left unprotected after a brief salvage. It is worth mentioning here how the archaeological site at Letpor has fallen prey to the robbers, while the Department of Archives, Archaeology, and Museums Srinagar conducted only a few trial diggings at the site (Naveed: 2004: 01). The site was excavated by M. S. Zahid the Deputy Director, Archives, Archaeology, and Museums Srinagar) and his associates in 2004 (Naveed: 2004:1). The excavation yielded important antiquities in the form of terracotta heads, lotus petals, broken pendants, and terracotta beads. The excavation work was unsystematic, and no care was taken for stratigraphy. Even after excavation, the site has been left unprotected, and artefacts were stolen from the site. Many of the artefacts were legally exhumed by the concerned authorities, while a few of the terracotta heads unearthed here are also displayed in the Central Asian Museum of Kashmir University. How these artefacts got there is something to ponder.

The same is the case with the early historic site of Kutbal. The site is located on the top of a hill near Sheikhpura in Anantnag district. The Deputy Director of Archives, Archaeology, and Museums and his team carried out a brief unsystematic excavation at Kutbal in 2005 after some rare antiquities belonging to Kushans were reported at the site (Ahmad: 2005: 156). The excavation exposed the magnificent stamped tile pavement. There were different types of motifs on these tiles, and the centre of the pavement was marked by a lotus design (Ahmad: 2005: 156). Unfortunately, the excavation work at this site was halted following the dispute with the land owner, and the site was deserted thereafter. During

my recent field visit to the site, a lot of cultural remains in the form of terracotta tiles, potshards, and plain brick tiles were noticed scattered over a large area; even some brick tiles of tremendous archaeological importance are being used by the Gujar community for their walls.

The situation is further worsened by the illicit trafficking of antiquities into the international art markets of affluent countries. The international art market's 'lure of Indian objects of artistic, traditional, and antiquarian interest, which are much in demand, leads to the adoption of clandestine methods for plunder and illicit export' (Patil and Mishra: 1997: 68). In Kashmir, particularly the unprotected archaeological sites, people are more prone to such crimes. Often, innocent and poor people aid educated thieves in their illegitimate endeavors by taking a small amount in return for the antiquities they possess. The apparent next step is to sell them at high prices, and this happens in most cases in the international art markets (Patil and Mishra: 1997: 68). Jammu and Kashmir is no exception to this illicit trafficking of antiquities of tremendous importance. As is noticed at Semthan, Martand, and other places, people prefer to sell the antiquities in their possession to the antique dealers rather than preserve this precious heritage for posterity. People often feel insecure about showing the antiquities in their possession because of the possible apprehensions of the government's takeover. To stop this plunder of cultural heritage, the need of the hour is to educate the common masses to preserve and protect their cultural heritage.

Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed that the practices of archaeological heritage conservation in the state of Jammu and Kashmir were very low throughout the Dogra period and even after 1947. Following the transfer of the Department of Archaeology of the State to the Archaeological Survey of India at the centre, archaeological activities in the form of

excavation and exploration ushered in Kashmir. However, the conservation and protection of the archaeological wealth of the state did not receive the attention and emphasis that they deserved. Many potential archaeological sites were obliterated by vandalism that could have been archaeological treasures for posterity. Even the minimal conservation work being done in

the state of Jammu and Kashmir is riddled with flaws. Lack of interest among the people, lack of heritage professionals and archaeologists, promotion of tourism, and finally the indifferent attitude of the authorities towards archaeological heritage are the main factors affecting the practices of archaeological conservation in the study area.

Illustrations

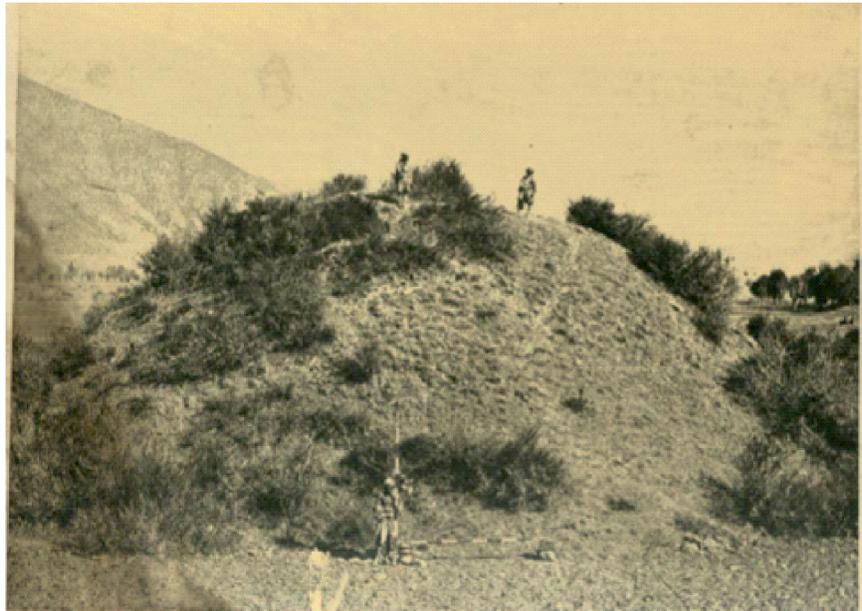


Fig. 8.1: View of the Ushkar before Garrick's indiscriminate Excavation.
(Source: Cole, H. H., 1869)



Fig. 8.2: Base of the Subsidiary shrine with new material at Mattan (Image credit: Author)



Fig. 8.3: New Material used in Martand temple (Image credit: Author)



Fig. 8.4: New Material used in Martand Temple (Image credit: Author)

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