

Colonial Churches of Shimla: Public Archaeology as a Tool for Engagement and Outreach

Simran Kaur Saini and Vanshika Poddar

Introduction

Mountain landscapes in India became a popular retreat among the British colonial officers, serving as an escape during the hot summers of Indian plains. Colonisation of the uplands brought in substantial changes in the landscape of mountain cities. As a result, several colonial structures, such as churches, were built in areas that functioned as sacred groves (Bansal and Chhabra, 2019). Built during the 19th and 20th centuries, the churches function as passive remainders of the colonial past and are largely neglected by the local populace at present (Singh, 2021). It is here that a closer look at the theoretical currents behind management of heritage sites and the disjuncture in the practical applications becomes important in order to investigate the archaeologies of colonialism (Gosden, 2007).

The paper aims to undertake the study of colonial churches in the state of Himachal Pradesh, built in the 19th and early 20th centuries, through Public Archaeology. The main objective of this study is to understand how the various approaches under public archaeology can aid in a wider engagement of the public(s) with the colonial built heritage structures. It attempts to, therefore, also look at the practical challenges that arise from the various ways through which colonial heritage sites are interpreted and presented to the public. For the purpose of this paper, three colonial churches in and around Shimla (31.1048° N, 77.1734° E), the capital of Himachal Pradesh, namely such as St. Michael's Cathedral near the DC Office, St. Crispin's Church at Mashobra, and the Christ Church on the Mall Road have been taken as primary case studies. These will be analysed in the paper along with comparative case studies of churches in Kasauli, Himachal Pradesh, to better understand how to improve the public's involvement in the site as stakeholders. The conclusions drawn from this study would aid in making these sites relevant for the local community while also ensuring their holistic incorporation in the tourism circuit. Both primary documentation and secondary data in the form of available records have been used for this paper.

Archaeology of Uplands: Construction of Colonial Built Structures in Himachal Pradesh

Constant change, consisting of conflicting socio-cultural processes, is one of the fundamental characteristics of landscapes (Turner *et al.*, 2020). The mountainous landscape of Himachal Pradesh during the colonial period brings to fore the transformation as well as continuance of the built environment in the region (cf. Miles-Watson, 2021). The mountains in the Himalayan landscape have been associated with sacred and cosmological motifs in both the Hindu and local mythology, with the mountains being perceived as living sacred beings (Channa, 2020). This association with the sacred landscape prior to the coming in of the colonial occupation is evident in how the origin myths regarding Shimla hills highlight an association with the goddesses and the subsequent removal of the divine by the British (Buck, 1904). Shimla is a city in Himachal Pradesh, located on the northern mountains of India (Directorate of Census Operations, 2011). A transitioning of the landscape into a hill station occurred around 1820s, with the construction of built structures as well as changes in the natural environment which reconciled the landscape of the colonial home back in England with the native landscape (cf. Sharma *et al.*, 2022; Vohra, 2016; Bhattacharya, 2021). By the end of the 19th century, given the increasing European, Christian population in the hill stations, there was a need for construction of churches that were closer to the places of worship back in Europe rather than temporary worship sites located on the outskirts of the city, thus leading to the creation of a church landscape (Miles-Watson, 2021). The landscape of Shimla has undergone several changes in terms of shifting populations, wherein the European population entered and departed, the local population increased due to the migration of people from different parts of India, as well as a significant increase in the tourist numbers. It is against such a background that one attempts to undertake the study of colonial heritage in a post-colonial context.

Colonial Churches of Shimla

The buildings constructed at the summer capital were reminiscent of the Tudorbethan and Neo-Gothic styles prevalent in contemporary England, which led to several structures designed in European styles being built in the city from the late 19th century onwards (Sharma, 2018). The resultant church landscape, a reminder of the colonial past, caters to the city's sizable Christian population at present (Bhandari, 2017). However, these churches have also been neglected and increasingly removed from the public sphere (Singh, 2021).

It is here that one looks at the St. Michael's Cathedral, St. Crispin's Church, and the Christ Church. Although these structures are mostly present in busy spaces and are easily accessible, the public engagement with these structures in terms of their management is very less. St. Michael's Church, for example, is a structure made of dressed stone and has fine stained-glass designs, and is situated in close proximity to the District Courts (Vohra, 2016). Similarly, the Christ Church, a bright yellow structure imitating the Gothic cathedrals of Northern Europe, is an active place of worship and houses the largest pipe-organ in India (Miles-Watson, 2021). St. Crispin's, situated in the rural hamlet of Mashobra, served as a shrine for the martyrs of World War I. Though located on the outskirts of Shimla, this church has been advertised as an ideal strolling area for tourists in the pamphlets, given the large number of oak and pine trees in the region. Although these churches are present as tourist attractions in many handbooks and pamphlets, their interactions with the local community is limited and insufficient (Nag, 2013). As a result, the churches remain largely removed from their social, public context in terms of the management and upkeep of the sites.

Churches of Kasauli: Comparative Case Study

Situated within the Solan district of Himachal Pradesh is Kasauli (30.9013° N, 76.9649° E), a Cantonment Boards city with a relatively small population (Directorate of census operations, 2011). It has a few churches of its own, which are popular tourist attractions for visitors (Ministry of Tourism, 2011-12). Of the most well-known churches in the town is the Christ Church, an Anglican Church built in the Neo-Gothic style in 1853 (Bhandari, 2017). The clock placed on the clock-tower of this church, donated in 1860 by Colonel Dumbleton, had stopped working at an undetermined time, but was repaired through collective public efforts in 2015 (The Tribune, February 2023; Hindustan Times, 2016). Public demand for repairs led to the Christian Community reaching out to the State Tourism department with demands of repair, and a grant from the World Bank was reportedly received for the same (Hindustan Times, 2016).

Public Archaeology and Engagement with Colonial Heritage

Public engagement and outreach at heritage sites stems from the ethical consideration of making the past accessible to the public while also ensuring that the public is empowered to critically

engage with the interpreted past (Jameson, 1997). Presentation of heritage and archaeological sites to the public refers to the communication of the archaeological resource to different audiences through a range of activities, interpretative information, and accessible infrastructure (Grima, 2017). An ambivalent attitude exists in regards to the colonial heritage in India, as seen in the case of Shimla, where on one hand, the churches represent the markers of colonial rule and occupation while on the other function as places of worship or just touristic sites that are devoid of their historical context (cf. Jorgensen, 2019). Such an attitude of neglect towards the conservation and management of heritage sites by the local community also arises from the colonial monument-centric approach of conservation, still present in the conservation policies today that seeks to remove the structure from its wider socio-cultural surroundings (Avikunthak, 2021). Public interpretation of sites serves as an important aspect of management and conservation of heritage (Moshenska, 2017). Thus, the heritage and historical meanings attached to a site are affected largely by the exclusion or inclusion of locals from the management process, and therefore, strategies needed to be adopted in order to better involve the local community in the maintenance of the churches.

Way Forward

The adoption of non-Christian forms of worship at the Christ Church, Shimla in the form of *satsangs* and *qawaalis* (a form of worship through singing) highlights how the site is still an active place of meaning-making (cf. Miles-Watson, 2021). As stated above, while the churches discussed here are popular tourist attractions, an emphasis has to be placed on a collaborative management framework wherein the diverse stakeholders such as the local community are actively encouraged and empowered to co-create interpretation at a site and also contribute to its upkeep (cf. Holtorf, 2007). The approaches laid out by Okamura and Matsuda (2011), such as the public relations, education, critical, and multivocal approach, serve to make heritage and archaeological sites more relevant to the public. Considering that public archaeology as a theoretical discipline has only recently started receiving attention in Indian archaeology, it becomes imperative to devise strategies that gear towards educational and public outreach. As the churches function as both sacred and secular spaces for various publics, a hybrid stakeholder relationship model can be imagined wherein programs could be run that focus on the contemporary concerns and issues of the local community (cf. Asbagh and Tümer, 2022). Thus,

the churches in Shimla could be used as spaces to hold activities such as guided tours, talks, temporary exhibitions, or cultural events such as book readings that can aid in making the locals more aware about the relevance of the structure for both the past and the future. Given that no proper documentation or information about these churches exists in public domain, multipurpose use of the church space becomes imperative to educate the local people about the structures more (cf. Grima, 2017).

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