



The Achievers Journal

Volume 4, Issue 3

ISSN (ONLINE): 2395-0897 / ISSN (PRINT): 2454-2296 July-September, 2018

Ethics in Conservation of Religious Heritage Sites of Leh – Ladakh

Masooma Rizvi

Phd Student - Lovely Professional University

Mob No: 9971018476

Email-masoomar@gmail.com

Heritage sites of Ladakh and Leh are under constant threat from many dangers and are in urgent need for conservation. Many stakeholders are part of the conservation process and it requires a multi layered and close ties. Ladakh's cultural heritage is phenomenal and incredibly diverse. The constant contact with the cultures of its neighbouring regions for centuries has resulted in a high degree of influence on the indigenous cultures and traditions. There is a visible Tibetan contribution, which has manifested in its monasteries, monuments, art forms, oral cultural traditions, folklore, festivals, and language. The earliest Buddhist heritage of Ladakh comprises of petroglyphs, stupas, ancient rock carvings, and inscriptions that are found scattered throughout the region. Monastic establishments, fortresses, Thangka paintings, manuscripts, ritual objects, and decorative elements in architecture, particularly wall paintings. These have to be conserved and preserved for the generations to come. These have major challenges as the faith and local stakeholders need to be involved. This paper discusses these challenges and the way forward for conserving such heritage places where religion is practised.

Keywords: conservation; heritage; petroglyphs; rituals; indigenous cultures

Ladakh is an ancient Tibetan kingdom that became part of India around 19th century. Ladakh has a medley of heritage, which is a part Buddhist culture and similar influence of Kashmir and Central Asia. Ladakh's neighbouring regions of Kashmir and Central Asia saw



The Achievers Journal

Volume 4, Issue 3

ISSN (ONLINE): 2395-0897 / ISSN (PRINT): 2454-2296 July-September, 2018

cultural upheavals after which relations with these regions remained an important source of cultural inspiration.

Leh, the capital city of Ladakh, has diverse faiths. During the summer months when the tourist season is at its peak, people from all over the world come for tourism and with it commercial activities increase manifold. Ladakh has many heritage sites, which are mostly in ruins, completely overlooked and due to their isolation, plundered and vandalised. The sad part is that local people are not aware of their significant heritage and its tangible and intangible value to world heritage. The various stupas show such poor restoration and many seem to be losing out on precious heritage by predators who know the value of the art and artefacts. In some instances greed and ignorance is causing major irretrievable losses.

"As cultures encompass lifestyles, different ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs, the protection and promotion of their rich diversity invite us to rise to new challenges at the local, national and international levels. This will involve integrating the principles of dialogue and mutual knowledge in all policies, particularly education, science, culture and communication policies, in the hope of correcting flawed cultural representations, values and stereotypes."
(UNESCO 1)

Buddhist Stupa's and places of worship and living quarters for monks are spread all over this areas. The hierarchy of spaces is defined by the size of the establishment in these practises.



The Achievers Journal

Volume 4, Issue 3

ISSN (ONLINE): 2395-0897 / ISSN (PRINT): 2454-2296 July-September, 2018

Each unit works under a religious head and it also has its structure of administrative heads and a finely oiled system of people and their responsibilities. In olden days this was very important as communication was a problem, so each place was self sufficient and run like an independent unit.

Art doesn't exist or survive on its own. It is the upmost fruit of the human production, often assimilated as luxury, but it is also the most fundamental one because it creates our identity. Artefacts are generated by the association of talent and means. Their preservation is the same: any artefact has to be recorded and documented for it not to disappear. The continuing of its existence requires protectors and people with the science of its survival.

Wall paintings are an important part of Buddhist Heritage. The walls of all Buddhist places were used as a canvas to paint and spread the message of Buddhism. Compared to Tibet, where many paintings and buildings were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, Leh-Ladakh due to its remoteness still has a treasure trove of early paintings. Thangkas are an important part of our heritage and are complex in both iconography and technical construction. Conservation is, therefore, somewhat flexible in its approach to accommodate all the issues relevant to the Thangkas. (Gupta 61)

The choice of this paper is because 'religious heritage' sites or sites wherein religious practises and rituals still take place, differ from other forms of heritage sites in many ways, and



The Achievers Journal

Volume 4, Issue 3

ISSN (ONLINE): 2395-0897 / ISSN (PRINT): 2454-2296 July-September, 2018

therefore their conservation might also be done with respect to these different considerations. These religious sites come with unique challenges and problems due to the religious essence carried by a '*Stupa*' as is the case in Leh, Ladakh symbolising the living Buddha. These have a different religious and ethical connotation and can only be done by a process of spiritual and religious renewal of the Stupa - not merely its restoration, repair or conservation. It is not merely conservation but a respect of tradition and local faith best handled with religious leaders and the locals as a part of the solution. This paper is written after visiting many such sites and understanding these issues. It is done pictorially and with a write up of the issues highlighted by the locals and leaders of the community.

Thus, heritage and its correct conservation are flagged as issues of major concerns in the saving of culture and identity for generations to come; this is especially in India wherein a large number of old sites have religious significance with locals still practising their rituals in them. Despite so much advancement of practises of conservation and advancements of restoration and materials, the important aspect of religious sentiments, rituals and superstitions, the conservation practices lag behind. The cultural connotations and uniqueness of each place is an important aspect which is often neglected. The one solution fits all is an impossible solution if it comes to sites that are practising religious sites. Here in the local customs, traditions and religious practises also lead to a deterioration due to age old customs and rituals. In India we have conservators from different ethnic groups and states and cultural practises further adding to the



The Achievers Journal

Volume 4, Issue 3

ISSN (ONLINE): 2395-0897 / ISSN (PRINT): 2454-2296 July-September, 2018

problems. The conservation of any form of heritage property like monuments, architecture, archaeological sites and landscapes is very new.

Conservation has to have a multi-prong approach - based on not just scientific but also keeping local sentiments in mind. A solution can be found only after that. The need for conservation more important than creating new things and we need to start looking into it as an immediate requirement. Conservation thus helps in not just conserving, but in its future propagation and longevity. If heritage is lost, an important part of our history, culture and spoken and unspoken traditions are lost. Given that protection of sacred places stems from freedom of religion, religious law and tradition play a fundamental role that cannot be neglected. (Ferrari and Benzo 23)

While 'living' means a place where religious activities are held and community is linked closely to it, here conservation will embrace a heart overhead approach that is an emotion and attachment of stakeholders as paramount to restoration and thus making them equal participants in any change, so as to keep their sentiments in the study details and execution of work.

Religion, heritage, culture and tradition have all been subjected to an assault of information and an exchange of ideas and views due to electronic media. The generations have been subjected to a fast paced change. This causes people to think and react in negative and



The Achievers Journal

Volume 4, Issue 3

ISSN (ONLINE): 2395-0897 / ISSN (PRINT): 2454-2296 July-September, 2018

positive ways. However, the quick ways of spreading truths or fallacies or superstitions and ritualistic issues is a reality and conservation too will need to keep up with it. Such heritage with religious practises in the building has a very challenging pattern of conserving and each is different to the people and region. While significant conservation issues are best dealt with in terms of a country's or group's own cultural traditions, established conservation principles expressed through the various charters and standards of representative organizations can guide intervention (Matero 16).

The effectiveness of conservation treatments is totally dependent on what we can do to make a road map, have a committee of different stakeholders that include religious leaders, locals history experts, art and science students along with conservators. Time, budget and expertise are the backbone of conservation. Decisions regarding which monument to conserve, the methodology and the way forward if decided from the time of inception, the treasures of the arts can be kept for future generations with the same respect and having the same religious significance. Not redesigning of what is tradition is a very dangerous concept, as we will lose our indigenous culture to a new modern pop culture that is pseudo-authentic. With the increasing development and tourist attractions and increase in footfall at the heritage sites; for recreational, economic, and political purposes, the input of conservation teams is critical.

The challenge faced by conservators during conservation and the requirements need to be discussed and debated and a road map made to overcome them.



The Achievers Journal

Volume 4, Issue 3

ISSN (ONLINE): 2395-0897 / ISSN (PRINT): 2454-2296 July-September, 2018

- Changes in way of worship, deterioration, increased human traffic may need a structural change in the buildings, it could even be to move altars.
- Equally, changing functional need, as they become viable tourist spots or research places, global warming and heavy footfall, puts unusual demands of modern day amenities onto an old structure, which earlier was in sync with climate equilibrium.
- The people and visitors for purpose of tourism add a different dimension to the conservation needs. The number worshippers are less than casual visitors who are non-believers. The challenge is to maintain the sanctity while allowing public interest to continue. To manage the sacred values and heritage character while allowing casual visitors the access is an important parameter.
- Balancing religious belief, superstition with conservation is difficult when there are two or more faiths which hold sacred a particular heritage place, but cannot reconcile their own beliefs – then to mediate between communities, make peace and ensure restoration and conservation with shared use of such sites, is a major problem.

Another concern is how to deal with situations when sacred places or objects are deconsecrated and structures become museums and sacred objects enter museum collections. A good example is the monasteries of Ladakh that are now being converted into museums and tourists spots. There are many examples of beautifully exhibited religious objects in tasteful and



The Achievers Journal

Volume 4, Issue 3

ISSN (ONLINE): 2395-0897 / ISSN (PRINT): 2454-2296 July-September, 2018

well-interpreted museum displays. What has happened to the intrinsic religious meaning of the object in such cases? Then how do we maintain the sacred values in museum setting? We can take help from other places of similar cultural and religious values and learn from their experiences as in a study done with various stakeholders, which was of great benefit. The same problems, seeing the solutions, results, and getting in touch with colleagues in the other institutions was very helpful (ICCROM 7).

- In addition, a full adherence to the guiding laws of some religions may impose certain limitations on the use of conventional conservation treatments and materials.



Masked Dance



The Audience



The Achievers Journal

Volume 4, Issue 3

ISSN (ONLINE): 2395-0897 / ISSN (PRINT): 2454-2296 July-September, 2018



A sacred Religious and Cultural Ceremony that has become a huge Tourist Attraction

At a conference held on “Preserving and developing living religious heritage: the case of the Church of Saint Bishai and Saint Bigol” - the questions asked in this conference were relevant to all religious sites – “How do we help people accept different ways of understanding their religious buildings and the objects of art and sculpture? How can the religious buildings be presented with respect to the art as well as the faith? How can religious and secular tourism co-exist? How do we monitor and protect the fragile environment? How can advocates of good stewardship influence the future preservation of this area? What can we do to modify the church to receive large numbers of visitors? And perhaps the most difficult question of all: What is the wish of the owner?” (ARCE 1)

In certain places, including our country, the term conservation is distinct, yet very confusing, misunderstood concept - more like a jargon. The aim is the protection of cultural



The Achievers Journal

Volume 4, Issue 3

ISSN (ONLINE): 2395-0897 / ISSN (PRINT): 2454-2296 July-September, 2018

heritage. This is to be done without changing the religious or historical value of the monument. Conservation seeks to maintain the site through controlled change, rooted in the past through the documentation, identification, research, and protection of that which is considered culturally valuable.

For our country that is full of religious sites, to humanise this term is important if we need to take this forward, as this term is taken as anti-ethical to the role of continuing traditions. Even though tradition is critical to ensuring cultural identity, tradition is as evolving as cultural change itself. Only by recognising the changing nature of tradition as intangible memory, can we manage the present and future of our heritage. Conservation, like history, is a commitment to the future and our cultural continuity.

Conservation is a science and the steps ensure least amount of personalisation by the people. Conservation and faith must be together in an atmosphere of mutual trust, for mutual benefit. The interaction sustaining religious values and still doing conservation of the religious place is also examined with reference to Buddhist sites in Ladakh.

Heritage buildings in which rituals are done, the faith and conservation has to be of many facets. It is tangible and intangible of the many and diverse faiths, which have shaped human existence since times immemorial. Religions have many avatars, which are formalised into beliefs and then structured into religion or are just rituals and beliefs or plain superstitions. These include the written rituals to those handed down over a period of time and these too are as



The Achievers Journal

Volume 4, Issue 3

ISSN (ONLINE): 2395-0897 / ISSN (PRINT): 2454-2296 July-September, 2018

important to the communities. All, in their intertwined development, are a roadmap of a culture and a civilisations core value system embodied in a religion. These are also a sum total of hand me down values or educational beliefs or even scientific based religiously spoken anecdotes and do's and don't's of a culture. This is what defines a human race and teaches us how nomadic races settled and also is a reflection of their geographical and economic times.

Thus heritage is seen and represented in cultural material: the tangible structures, objects and works of art done to sustain, propagate and pictorially depict religion. Along with rituals, celebrations and religious activities, the tangible and intangible effects of heritage carry it forward, and this is of great importance for the communities. The UNESCO International Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage has implemented it in ways that strengthen the ties between the tangible forms and intangible values.

The aspirations of the religious communities sometimes is in conflict with the conservation authorities for conserving heritage. Finding a medium and a consolatory path is important for conservation, as long life of living religious heritage can only be if it does not get lost. The religious heads share responsibility for living religious heritage with conservationist as both have the same goals of maintaining our heritage. The strengthening of dialogue between conservationists and the religious community will help them speak with one voice.

Ethics in conservation is a hotly debated subject with perceptions of level of restoration, how much to conserve, make the monument new or keep it in its present form is a major point of



The Achievers Journal

Volume 4, Issue 3

ISSN (ONLINE): 2395-0897 / ISSN (PRINT): 2454-2296 July-September, 2018

division between conservationists. Policy decisions need to be taken to ensure sites are documented, studied and understood before conservation is started.

The ethics of conservation are simple in order to minimise the element of subjectivity of the restorer and thereby to achieve maximum uniformity and originality. One should, therefore, take into account all aspects of preventive conservation before deciding on interactive conservation. When non- intervention best serves the purpose of preservation, it is appropriate that no treatment is performed. Before any Interactive Conservation these are important ground rules.

- Documentation: It gives the future generations to build their own interpretations about the object. All conservation procedures should be documented and as reversible as possible, and all alterations should be clearly distinguishable from the original object or specimen.
- Cleaning
- Reinforcement
- Integration of Losses

Since no individual is an expert in all aspects of the object, wherever necessary or appropriate, the Conservator should collaborate with other concerned professionals such as archaeologist, historians, curators and artists to decide adequate conservation treatment.



The Achievers Journal

Volume 4, Issue 3

ISSN (ONLINE): 2395-0897 / ISSN (PRINT): 2454-2296 July-September, 2018

Conservation of art works should be so designed that these are brought to their original appearance, as intended by their creators, without tampering with its originality.

The Buddhist monasteries of Ladakh are living heritage sites where every day rites and

Old wall paintings have been painted over with white emulsion and local artists are painting afresh - a true example of the traditional desire of resident monks to renew painted surfaces that can sometimes conflict with official conservation policy



rituals are performed. The mornings in each monastery start with religious chants by the monks. Lighting of oil lamps and burning juniper incense for purification of the space is an imperative part of daily ritual. Although these rituals are important to keep the religious space alive, they often have detrimental effects on heritage materials.

Burning oil lamps inside the temples and shrines is a custom that originates from a long tradition. It is a practice to invoke the spirits residing in the temples, but the smoke from these oil lamps bonds as soot on the surfaces of the artefacts and paintings.



The Achievers Journal

Volume 4, Issue 3

ISSN (ONLINE): 2395-0897 / ISSN (PRINT): 2454-2296 July-September, 2018



A separate room has been made for lighting oil lamps so as to conserve the Tangkhas and other artefacts within the Alchi Monastery

By involving the religious heads, a separate room was created to burn lamps, hence the conservation aspect was taken care of by the monks themselves without any heartburn. This is only possible if conservators and religious leaders work together to protect their heritage and also their rituals and practises in a manner useful to both.

In cataloguing the correct care for heritage, religious heritage is in India the largest category to be found. These have been exempted from guidelines and charters, leading to a loss of culture. There is an urgent need to prepare doctrinal texts, for the monasteries of Leh/Ladakh and encourage the resident monks themselves to create, with the help of professionals, a conservation charter. This will lead to less tension between different stakeholders and it is best addressed through following UNESCO's goal of instituting dialogues among cultures by 'promoting shared knowledge and reciprocal esteem that contribute towards peace among



The Achievers Journal

Volume 4, Issue 3

ISSN (ONLINE): 2395-0897 / ISSN (PRINT): 2454-2296 July-September, 2018

people'. Also using digital media to protect our tangible and intangible heritage too can be done as was seen in a pilot project 'Hampi'. There are few initiatives started for virtual heritage conservation in Indian context from both, musicological and pure visual communication design intervention. 'Place-Hampi Project' and 'Google Art Project' are some example of virtual interactive museums. (Kolay 313).

If the stakeholders – both religious and scientific, are not taken into the equation of conservation then it results in loss of heritage as seen in the pictures taken by the author in a monastery in Leh where the old wall paintings have been painted over in the name of restoration. This is seen in many of the monasteries here.

Thus the goal of this paper has been to bring together solutions where this can be achieved or where the scope is relevant. The aim of conservation is to retain the cultural significance of the place, and it must include all provisions for security, maintenance, and its future. Respect for the existing heritage with minimal physical intervention, especially with regard to traces of alterations related to the history and use of the thing or place.

For any religious heritage sites the places need to be looked from a perspective of addition as it is necessary to recognise the fact that these places have passed down from generations with their original values intact - to a large extent and linked to their communities. In India we have many religious sites other than Leh Ladakh, especially in the state of Punjab. Same issues are seen there as well.



The Achievers Journal

Volume 4, Issue 3

ISSN (ONLINE): 2395-0897 / ISSN (PRINT): 2454-2296 July-September, 2018

The effectiveness of conservation treatments depends on our ability to define clearly heritage values and to design treatments around respect for the values. It is stressed that the differences between 'religious heritage' and 'heritage' by noting that religious heritage has been born with its values in place, while with other forms of heritage, we need time and distance to be able to ascribe values to heritage (Stovel et al 23).

Thus heritage belongs to the present, and the present generation has a right to use, but not misuse it. This comes with a responsibility of safeguarding it for the future. We need strong laws and political will to regulate conservation in India to achieve this purpose. It is not impossible to merge and unite religious use and practise with conservation needs.

Works Cited

ARCE. Preserving and Developing Living Religious Heritage: The Case of the Church of

Saint Bishai and Saint Bigol, 2012, accessed at <http://archive.arce.org/news/2013/01/u91/preserving-and-developing-living-religious-heritage-the-case-of-the-church-of-saint-bishai-and-saint-bigol>



The Achievers Journal

Volume 4, Issue 3

ISSN (ONLINE): 2395-0897 / ISSN (PRINT): 2454-2296 July-September, 2018

Ferrari, Silvio; Benzo, Andrea. *Between Cultural Diversity and Common Heritage, Legal and Religious Perspectives on the Sacred Places of the Mediterranean*, 1st Edition, 2014

Gupta, Kamlesh Kumar. *Conservation of Thangkas in the National Museum, New Delhi, Forum on the Conservation of Thangkas, Special Session of the ICOM-CC 15th Triennial Conference, New Delhi, India, September 26, 2008*

Kolay, Saptarshi. *Cultural Heritage Preservation of Traditional Indian Art through Virtual New-media*, 2015, accessed at <http://daneshyari.com/article/preview/1107656.pdf>

Matero, Frank G. *The Conservation of Immovable Cultural Property: Ethical and Practical Dilemmas* Source: *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Spring, 1993), Published by The American Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works Stable accessed at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3179648>.

Putt, Neil, and Slade Sarah. *Teamwork for Preventive conservation*, ICCROM e-doc 2004/01



The Achievers Journal

Volume 4, Issue 3

ISSN (ONLINE): 2395-0897 / ISSN (PRINT): 2454-2296 July-September, 2018

vers. 1.0 released 12/02/04 accessed at <https://www.iccrom.org/sites/default/files/>

ICCROM_01_Teamwork_en.pdf

Stovel, Herb, Stanley-Price, Nicholas, and Killick, Robert. Conservation of Living

Religious Heritage, Papers from the ICCRoM 2003 forum on Living Religious Heritage:

conserving the Sacred; 2003

UNESCO Initiative on Heritage of Religious Interest, United Nations International Year for

the Rapprochement of Cultures Heritage of Religious Interest, 2010, accessed at

<https://whc.unesco.org/en/religious-sacred-heritage/>