

History, memory, and contestation

Challenges in preserving Amritsar's diverse heritage

Gurmeet S. Rai and Churnjeet Mahn

Introduction

The city of Amritsar in the Indian state of Punjab was founded by the fourth Sikh Guru, Guru Ram Das, in 1577 and since then has become one of the holiest and most recognised sites associated with the Sikh faith. The surrounding area was home to other sacred sites, such as the Ram Teerath, and contemporary Amritsar houses various religious monuments, illustrating the diversity of worship in the region. The narrative of Amritsar's significance, however, has been dominated by historical events in the 20th century, namely the massacre of a congregation in Jallianwala Bagh in 1919, violence in the aftermath of Partition in 1947, and the attack on the Golden Temple known as Operation Blue Star in 1984. Jallianwala Bagh and the Golden Temple have remained at the centre of the city's self-presentation of its heritage to tourists, the majority of whom come specifically to visit the temple.

In the past decade several initiatives have come together to investigate how to diversify and enhance the presentation and preservation of Amritsar's rich history. In 2008, for example, after much persuasion by the state government, Gobindgarh Fort was handed over by the Prime Minister of India to the civil government for its protection and conservation. In 2016, the Arts and Cultural Heritage Trust set up what has been called the world's first Partition museum which is housed in the conserved town hall. And most significantly, in 2015, the Government of India set up the National Heritage City Development and Augmentation Yojana (HRIDAY), a scheme which

identified 12 historic Indian cities, including Amritsar, for investment. This investment related to how inclusive practices of heritage conservation could be developed in conjunction with sympathetic urban infrastructure development for historic sites. The authors collaborated in Punjab to experiment with developing inclusive heritage practice. This chapter offers a snapshot of that work, designed to investigate how to bring ‘forgotten’ histories, people, and legacies into mainstream heritage narratives.

Challenges at Amritsar

As a city, Amritsar has found itself at a series of crossroads. The artisans and craft guilds brought to the city by Guru Ram Das in turn brought with them a diversity of skills, faiths, and cultures. The community actively participated in the building of the Golden Temple as the followers of Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth Sikh Guru. The site has been evolving and adapting to its socio-political, religious, and cultural context since that time. Through the colonial period, Amritsar continued to be a site of syncretic religious practice and pluralistic approaches to community and identity.¹ This vision of a pluralistic city was most seriously challenged by the Partition of India into India and Pakistan in 1947, marking the end of British colonial rule. Amritsar was at the frontlines of religious and political violence due primarily to its proximity to the new national border. The religious divide caused by partition has had lasting impacts on the city,

¹ A growing body of work has demonstrated the complexity of cultural and religious practice in Punjab during the history of Sikhism. The instigation of the Colonial State and subsequent nationalism has worked to harden the borders between identities, especially around issues of caste and religious identity. For a comprehensive discussion of how Punjabi as a language became subjected to this linguistic politics, see Mir (2010).

especially in terms of localised articulations of cultural heritage, and memorialisation (due to the displacement of communities with historical ties to the city).

Further, the events of 1984 at the Golden Temple have variously been described in the language of terrorism, massacre, and genocide. However, they may be interpreted or framed, the events clearly demonstrate the increasingly tense relationship between faith and nation, which has helped reorient Amritsar's history as synonymous with Sikhism at the cost of a 'messier' or more complex narrative. As the home of the Golden Temple, Amritsar has become a spiritual centre for Sikhs across the world thereby making it a site benefitting from both pilgrimage and tourism.

The most recent recognition of this has been the significant investment by the Government of Punjab in beautifying the main road leading to the temple and creating a 'Heritage Street' to enhance the experience of pilgrims and tourists, a project completed in 2016. The Heritage Street in Amritsar is a 500m stretch connecting the Golden Temple with the town hall and attempts to showcase aspects of Punjabi heritage through food and folk culture, alongside selected national symbols. Life-size statues of bhangra dancers sit near grand statues of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and Dr B R Ambedkar. Over 170 shops have been redeveloped along the street with standardised frontages and improved urban infrastructure. Uniform architecture has been an underlining imperative for the project, which received strong support and funding from the then chief minister of Punjab. The alignment of Punjabi culture, the Sikh Empire and the Indian secular state appears seamless but carries with it a clear message: Punjabi heritage can and should be read in the context of the Indian nation state. Heritage Street is an initiative which has drawn significant criticism for its simplistic presentation of heritage that draws its architectural inspiration from Jaipur rather than Punjab, making 'uniformity' another word for culturally insensitive and inappropriate standardisation (Dutt 2016).

The selection of shops which line Heritage Street self-consciously display 'authentic' Punjabi culture, from food to wares primarily for tourists; the newly fashioned facades of Heritage Street mask the traditional markets surrounding the temple.

To step outside of Heritage Street is to re-enter the traditional bazaar of the city which now sits in stark contrast to the homogenised architectural aesthetics of the street with large promenades, visually connected to the Golden Temple through prominent LCD screens projecting a live-stream from the temple. Beyond the Heritage Street, Hindu shrines and temples co-exist with historical mosques and an active bazaar that features trades, crafts, skills, and wares demonstrating Amritsar's position as a site of particularly deep cultural and religious confluence.²

The Heritage Street has struggled to offer a model of heritage conservation that is sympathetic to its context, however it demonstrates an increasing desire from government agencies to integrate everyday heritage with city planning – a step in the right direction, which offer opportunities to expand the current heritage management practices in India which have primarily been 'monument-centric'. The collaboration between the authors under the project 'Creative Interruptions' attempted at imagining entirely different processes and outcomes for the Heritage Street as an alternative to the existing state-sanctioned representation and development around the Golden Temple. The following discussion traces part of the project's work through two sites: Rambagh Gate and Rambagh Garden that are connected to the Heritage Street and the Golden Temple but which are now entirely excluded from the Golden Temple's self-presentation of its history and heritage. The project proposes an inclusive approach to

² Key historical examples include the Durgiana Temple and the Khairuddin Mosque.

heritage management that engages communities to build capacity around conservation areas and values local knowledge as vital and a form of intangible heritage.

Case study: Rambagh Garden

As the Cultural Resource Conservation Initiative (CRCI) developed the City HRIDAY plan for Amritsar based on cultural heritage mapping, five heritage zones were identified for improvement of infrastructure: physical, social, and/or institutional. The CRCI identified several projects which contributed to the enhancement of both natural and cultural heritage while ensuring that these sites and buildings would contribute to improved quality of life for its inhabitants. A key example of this was the conservation of the Rambagh Gate. When Maharaja Ranjit Singh resided in the Summer Palace in the garden, his visit to the Golden Temple involved a procession through the Rambagh Gate. There was an unbroken line of sight between these two landmarks, which is now completely obscured by the contemporary growth of the city (including a railway line in the colonial period and a contemporary flyover). Metaphorically, the new spatial juxtaposition of old and new demonstrates the ways in which lines of real and imagined connection and mobility across Amritsar have been disconnected, circumvented, and re-routed.

The Rambagh Garden is an 80-acre garden complex organised into four quads and centred around the Summer Palace of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Built in the early 19th century, the garden served the dual role as the capital seat of governance and a residence in proximity to the Golden Temple. Structures at the intersections of the quads served different purposes from entertainment areas to residence, with the Summer Palace as a central structure (see Figures 6.1 and 6.2). The garden did not exist in isolation: a road was designed to lead directly to the Golden Temple which passed through the Rambagh Gate, which formed part of the wall around the city of Amritsar.

Therefore, the structure cannot be read in isolation, it is part of the 19th century city planning and geometry of Amritsar. Unfortunately, the original layout of Rambagh Garden and its historical importance have been steadily eroded. Taxi drivers and locals know the site as 'Company Bagh' after the East India Company who changed its form to various offices and members' clubs inside the gardens. The garden is currently protected by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and offers a rare open space in a city struggling under the pressures of rapid urbanisation.

Walkers have access to portions of the site although they remain unaware of its importance in Sikh and Punjabi history and culture. The Rambagh Garden in its original iteration did not last long; with the commencement of colonial rule in 1858, the 'open' site of the garden was used by the British to build three clubs: Amritsar, Service, and Lumsden Clubs. Vehicular roads were added within the complex for ease of movement across two busy roads, the four structures across the east-west and north-south axes were given new uses by the British; the eastern gate housed a municipal library and an aquarium (which gave it the name of *machi-ghar*), the western structure (that housed the *darbar* of Maharaja Ranjit Singh) was altered extensively to house the office of civil defence. The northern structure was leased to the service club for their administrative offices. The southern gate came to be protected by the ASI much earlier than the entire garden site, which received ASI protection in 2004. The colonial-era clubs were built in two of the quads while the third is located on the northern edge (partially within the quadripartite garden and partially outside). The walls of the Rambagh Garden were demolished during the British period, however the corner pavilions on raised bastions were retained, hence the form of the garden palace can be determined by their presence. The lease period of the clubs expired in the late 20th century and several civil society bodies (most prominently by Amritsar Vikas Manch) made an appeal to the Punjab and

Haryana High Court for the removal of the clubs from the garden precinct. The clubs have now lain their own claim to the site, with their management arguing that they have become part of its historical fabric. The act of conserving the Rambagh Garden offers a case study for the larger issues in conservation in Punjab. It forces a consideration of how new kinds of dynamic processes and dialogues are required to address the challenges of what counts as 'heritage' in Punjab and who its intended beneficiaries are.

Conservation challenges at Rambagh Gate and Garden

The Rambagh Gate (see Figures 6.3 and 6.4) is the only surviving 19th-century gateway built by Maharaja Ranjit Singh (the other 11 were replaced during the colonial period). The police station located in the gate was vacated in 2007 to allow for conservation work and tourism related use. The CRCI undertook the project; its first phase was funded by the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India and implemented by the Department of Tourism, Government of Punjab. The project involved removal of the incompatible material additions and elements of the structure to restore its architectural and structural integrity. In its current state, the Rambagh Gate is surrounded by a bazaar (temporary shops built by Municipal Corporation of Amritsar and given on lease to local residents, many of whom relocated in Amritsar at the time of the Partition of India in 1947). On the rampart there is a printing press that has been in operation since the early 20th century, alongside a government school. The structures housing the two uses of the printing press and the school were built in the early 20th century (with building materials obtained from the earlier period buildings).

The questions related to heritage and cultural narratives of the community were as follows: should the conservation of the gate and rampart involve removal of the colonial period additions and uses, which would include the printing press and the school? Does 'good conservation practice' of the gate mean 'monumentalising' the

structure, thereby creating a 'dead edifice', even if it is not feasible to activate the gate structure as a working thoroughfare. Should urban renewal in the setting of the gate, which is part of the heritage zone of HRIDAY, involve removal and relocation of the shops and the bazaars? The perception and association of the local community with the gate structure has been an ongoing question and negotiation – do they see the gate as 'their heritage' worthy of conservation?

This conservation project for the Rambagh Gate was revived as part of the HRIDAY programme. This phase of the project addressed the completion of the conservation of the gate and the rampart along with the printing press and the school. The project team comprising of authors, oral historians, and conservation architects in consultation with the workers in the bazaar adjoining the gate determined how conservation could take place without long-term displacement or disruption of the school, printing press, or bazaar. The first stage of this work involved a team conducting a series of interviews with people working in the immediate vicinity of the Rambagh Gate, where there is a small bazaar. Along with interviews, cultural mapping was conducted to map the types of wares sold across the bazaar, and document the range of existing skills and crafts in the area. Consultations were undertaken to understand the association of the community with the gate. All this information helped to generate the adaptive reuse brief for the gate and propose some specially commissioned interventions into the existing arts and crafts in the Rambagh Gate area to connect the site back to the cultural fabric of the city.

The exhibits within the gate tell the story of the cultural history of the city with a special focus on vernacular creativity, which is reflected in the title of the museum: Lok Virsa (Museum for the People's Culture). A cultural/recreational zone around the Rambagh Garden and the gate was envisaged from where it could be networked with

sites such as the Thakur Singh Art Gallery, the Shahidi Bor (the banyan tree associated with the Kuka Movement), the local foods and crafts complex at the refurbished Guru Tegh Bahadur Hospital, Rambagh Police Station Interpretation Centre (to be housed in the conserved historic wall of the city), Christ Church Cathedral and others sites of local history, culture, and living traditions.

Conservation interventions in the Rambagh Garden required the removal of the vehicular movement to recover the garden as a pedestrian space (with parking lots on the periphery). Investigations were undertaken in the garden to determine the historic layout of the quadripartite garden after obtaining approval from the ASI. While the original water channels recovered through excavations and were restored, new pathways were laid in two of the quarters to revive the 'spirit of the garden'. This was possible on one half of the garden enclosure as the other half is occupied by the clubs. The building of the Summer Palace, structures on the east-west axis and the corner pavilions were restored. As part of the HRIDAY project, 'stub walls' (low walls) with pathways are in the process of being built on the footprint of the fortification enclosure of the palace garden (demolished by the British). Efforts are being made to recover the garden palace as a historical edifice to Maharaja Ranjit Singh as the site owes its significance to this historical narrative. These have been the first few steps to begin the conversation between the various stakeholders and community about this site. The stakeholders include the Municipal Corporation of Amritsar (the owners of the property), the ASI (as the site is protected under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, amended and validated 2010), the Department of Cultural Affairs, Archaeology, and Museums (Government of Punjab, who manage the Maharaja Ranjit Singh Museum housed in the Summer Palace), as well as the three private clubs.

In the recent past, the Improvement Trust of Amritsar made several interventions in Rambagh Garden by way of large car parks and a zoo for stuffed animals on the site without seeking any approvals or consultations from the ASI, thus compromising the integrity of the garden. On the other hand, a project undertaken under the HRIDAY program, with the permission of the ASI, to define the edges of the historic garden introduced stub walls on the original footprint of the walled enclosure with a 5.0 metre-wide pathway along these walls, so as to recall the memory of the fortified quadripartite garden complex.

In the absence of a shared vision and a conservation management plan for the site which recognises the elements of value and needs of the community, the interventions of the Improvement Trust are unsympathetic to all that is of value on this site. There remains the need for a shared vision that can be facilitated through a platform for dialogue but who should lead this? Would a legal framework better enable this effort? How should it be imagined in the absence of the municipal authorities and the ASI interest in participatory processes?

The importance of history, memory, and heritage

There has been a significant body of writing on forms of cultural amnesia, memory and memorialisation in Punjab, especially around partition.³ Increasingly, studies have focused on the reverberations of partition that continue into the present, from government policies to religious and cultural tensions with the nation state (Kaul 2001; Zamindar 2010; Mahn and Murphy 2017). However, it is also important to remember the ways in which pre-partition history can be selectively deployed to align with the

³ For an overview of how cultural amnesia can be understood as a cultural phenomenon in this context see, Kabir (2013).

interests of the present, namely through foregrounding a Sikh narrative. Not engaging the story of a pluralistic Amritsar is a choice rather than a reflection of historical evidence of settlement. The role of colonial history here is also significant, and the remnants of colonial architecture in the city's lesser-known and unrecognised industrial (and institutional) heritage for instance in the former powerhouse on the Upper Bari Doab Canal, and the pump house in the park known as the 40 *khuh* (40 wells), offers an opportunity to identify different contextual frames to presenting the history of British intervention alongside sites such as the private members' clubs in the Rambagh Garden.⁴

As part of a recent project, conservation architects from the CRCI conducted surveys and interviews around several heritage sites in Amritsar including the Rambagh Garden and the Rambagh Gate. Surveys around the Rambagh Gate were undertaken to understand the way the sellers in the bazaar adjoining the site perceive the gate and its history. Talking about and discussing heritage was designed as a process of inclusion, but also of learning for the CRCI team. The following excerpt is from a CRCI report on this survey in relation to the history of Amritsar around the gate which responds to the question: how do the shopkeepers around the gate view this slice of history in their midst?

People have various levels of historical understanding [of Amritsar], and all of them agree on three points – that the Gate was made by Maharaja Ranjit Singh, that the bazaar grew during British times, and also that the area was predominantly a Muslim area before the Partition, and drawing from this point [...] On the matter of history and memory, I am of the opinion that more strong

⁴ Sikhism's close historical connections to the faiths in the north-west of the Indian subcontinent is particularly important as it demonstrates key points of cultural and philosophical interchange. See Singh (2004).

and rooted traditions don't exist and the connection to history is almost secondary because the inhabitants of the place don't trace a lineage of more than three generations at this place because of the Partition. (Cultural Mapping in Amritsar 2017)

The different routes to historical veracity (from empirical studies to forms of vernacular truth) compete in defining the space and its historic association and significance. The lack of lineage in the extract is complex to read: as a microcosm for diversity in northwest India, Amritsar's history offers multiple points of entry into cultural belonging. To say its history is heterogeneous is hardly controversial, what is controversial, however is the increasing homogenisation of Amritsar's historic interpretation through heritage sites. What are the challenges and rewards of opening heritage and conservation practices to more inclusive conversations, especially when those may be at odds with competing historical 'truths'? In their discussion of community inclusion in heritage, Emma Waterton and Laurajane Smith offer an overview of how radically different perspectives have the potential to produce incompatible views of conservation:

Not only are many people overlooked as authorities capable of adjudicating their own sense of heritage, so too is their lack of access to necessary resources. They are, in effect, subordinated and impeded because they do not hold the title 'heritage expert', as well as lacking the resources assumed necessary to participate in heritage projects (Western schooling, economic means, etc.), and also potentially 'lacking' a particular vision or understanding of heritage and the accepted values that underpin this vision (universality, national and aesthetic values, etc.) (Waterton and Smith 2010, 10)

The CRCI's philosophy and practice has been informed by traditionally marginalised or ignored voices in heritage management. In Punjab it is not remarkable to see Dalit Sikhs taking part in Christmas processions, Sikhs going to *dargahs*, or Christians looking after *dargahs*. There is a gap between the complexity of lived practices and the discourses people adopt to match their own identity. An inclusive practice of heritage management in this context involves a reciprocal process of

learning where an area undergoing conservation does not harm or destroy an organic and vital community life around it, in this case the bazaar surrounding the gate.

Especially in this case, safeguarding forms of intangible heritage (including speciality foods and goods) alongside tangible heritage (the gate) is a way of ensuring the site remains relevant and open to the community currently associated with it.

One of the processes the CRCI have engaged in is allowing heritage narratives and opinions to be expressed without immediate judgement. This, necessarily, introduces new agendas and imperatives. It would be wrong to believe that community voices are automatically part of the authentic heritage of a place, but it does not mean that the economic or social and cultural aspirations of those voices are not authentic. For example, when questioned about the possibility of turning the conserved Rambagh Gate into a People's Museum, the shopkeepers of the bazaar had a variety of opinions.

On the matter of cultural representation, all people agreed to the idea of the museum. They believed that a museum will profit them all. On being told about the museum, they imagined a space like Heritage Street, which according to them will attract a lot of tourists and will be a boost to the businesses. They also believed that the area will then become more 'clean' and 'ordered'. Some of the shopkeepers expected that the municipality shops around Rambagh Gate have to be removed. But when it came to contents of the museum, the people were divided on whether they want it to represent and glorify Ranjit Singh, or whether they want it to document the history of the bazaar ('Cultural Mapping in Amritsar' 2017).

The shopkeepers around the Rambagh Gate were keenly aware of the financial opportunities presented through the commodification of heritage, but the mixed opinions around presenting the story of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and offering a history of the bazaar offers routes into seeing, presenting, and displaying Amritsar's history in

ways that connect across its historical spectrum including stories of occupation, migration, and a localised sense of belonging in the post-partition decades. The city of Amritsar offers the material evidence to share various stories about *Punjabiya*.⁵ However, finding the balance in their articulation and giving space to diversity demanded the project include the missing voices of women's groups and younger generations.

Conclusion: democratising conservation practices in Amritsar

The challenge in recovering the Rambagh Garden demands creative dialogues between different stakeholders including communities and organisations associated with it. However, to re-situate the garden more meaningfully in the fabric of Amritsar involves imagining a reconnection to the Rambagh Gate from the Golden Temple to clarify the historical significance of the heritage sites and the route connecting them. The reimagining of this historical link and route into Amritsar, if only through historical consciousness, will help bring these sites into a new relief in the city. To avoid the narrow aesthetic vision of Heritage Street which is not sympathetic to local architectural style or cultural influences, the involvement of local shops, craftspeople, and communities needs to be at the heart of consultation rather than physically and culturally marginalised by the forces of an imagined aesthetic for 'heritage tourists'. It is, however, difficult to integrate the diversity of these voices so that the conversation is not dominated by the short-term financial interest of the minority.

⁵ The *Punjabiya* can be variously read as a political project based on a Punjabi nationalism that sidesteps Sikh nationalism, and a utopian project to read Punjabi identity across the Indo-Pak border. See Singh (2014).

Heritage can be viewed as an enterprise, but its value is impossible to quantify. Identifying and including a broader range of voices and ensuring representation across genders, castes, and faiths is an important next step for all work in heritage practice in Amritsar. The challenge of this kind of intervention is that it must balance the economic opportunities generated through projects like the Heritage Street with a conservation approach which is sympathetic to local architectural typologies and can present diverse narratives in a city. The current work at the Rambagh Garden and Rambagh Gate does not provide easy solutions to the challenge of creating truly inclusive practices of heritage and conservation management. However, it does demand an interruption to the state's disproportionate investment in a few sites for religious, ideological, and economic imperatives, which strategically disinvests in, and devalues, the rest of Amritsar's heritage.

References

1. "Cultural Mapping in Amritsar". 2017. *Cultural Resource Conservation Initiative*. New Delhi.
2. Dutt, Nirupama. 2016. "Amritsar's Makeover: Golden Grandeur with a Heritage Tinge." *Hindustan Times*, 24 October. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/punjab/ht-special-amritsar-gets-a-majestic-makeover-golden-grandeur-with-a-heritage-tinge/story-0GisnbT7dbOtJj4l6fG2aI.html>.
3. Kabir, Ananya Jahanara. 2013. *Partition's Post-Amnesias: 1947, 1971 and Modern South Asia*. New Delhi: Women Unlimited.
4. Kaul, Suvir, Eds. 2001. *The Partitions of Memory*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
5. Mahn, Churnjeet and Anne Murphy, Eds. 2017. *Partition and the Practice of Memory*. London: Palgrave.

6. Mir, Farina. 2010. *The Social Space of Language: Vernacular Culture in British Colonial Punjab*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
7. Singh, Khushwant. 2004. *A History of the Sikhs: 1469–1838*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
8. Singh, Pritam. 2014. “Class, National and Religion: Changing nature of Akali Dal politics in Punjab, India.” *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 52 (1): 55–77.
10. Waterton, Emma and Laurajane Smith. 2010. “The Recognition and Misrecognition of Community Heritage.” *International Journal of Heritage Management* 16 (1–2): 4–15.
11. Zamindar, Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali. 2007. *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Figure 6.1 Conservation map of Rambagh Garden, 2017, Cultural Resource Conservation Initiative, New Delhi.

Figure 6.2 Summer Palace under conservation, Rambagh garden, 2017, Cultural Resource Conservation Initiative, New Delhi.

Figure 6.3 Rambagh Gate under conservation, 2017, Cultural Resource Conservation Initiative, New Delhi.

Figure 6.4 Rambagh Gate bazaar, 2017. Cultural Resource Conservation Initiative, New Delhi.