A Punjabi Palimpsest: Cultural Memory and Amnesia at the Aam Khas Bagh

Dr Churnjeet Mahn

Executive Summary

This project focussed on a 16th century garden-serai complex in Sirhind, Punjab. Sirhind is a key site along the Grand Trunk Road, one of the world’s oldest and most important highways for the transmission of knowledge, trade and people. The area has seen settlements from Buddhists, Jains, Hindus and more recently, Sikhs and Muslims. Major Sikh and Muslim monuments exist in the area alongside archaeological discoveries from previous cultures and civilisations. After the partition of India, the once significant Muslim population of the region moved to Pakistan. This project focussed on local perceptions of Sirhind’s cultural heritage as well as attempting to empower local people in the heritage management of their area. It achieved this through a focussed study on one site, the Aam Khas Bagh, a secular site which had been subjected to anti-Muslim vandalism despite being a popular place for local people to explore and visit. We explored the complex texture of Sirhind’s history by recruiting young people to co-produce an exhibition on Sirhind’s heritage with a special focus on memory. The final public event was attended by over 400 people from the local area. It received broad attention from the local media and opened a public space of dialogue about cultural and religious conflicts faced in heritage management, especially in relation to sites with an Islamic/Mughal-era connection. A research workshop in the UK allowed us to disseminate some of our findings. A website connected to the project has also been published.

Researchers and Project Partners

Churnjeet Mahn (University of Surrey, PI)
Key role/skills: academic with literature and heritage background, co-ordinating the project.

Gurmeet S Rai (Director of the Cultural Resource and Conservation Initiative, India)
Key role/skills: in-depth expertise and experience of heritage management in Punjab.

Ioanna Manoussaki-Adamopoulou (Independent Researcher based in London)
Key role/skills: expertise in facilitating film-making sessions.

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Simran Chopra (Independent Researcher based in Chandigarh)
Key role/skills: expertise in interactive design, especially in heritage contexts.

Summary report
Please provide details of the collaborations that have developed during the project, whether planned or serendipitous, especially your Indian collaborations. How have these collaborations brought added value?

Mata Gugri College and Sri Guru Granth Sahib World University

By collaborating with a local college and university, we were given unique access to a group of young people from across Northern India who were interested in exploring ideas of shared cultural heritage. They came from a variety of backgrounds including engineering, journalism and computing. We were provided with classrooms and computers free of charge and were supported by local teachers who helped the project team to access local knowledge. Without this support it would have been difficult to carry out the research and we would not have been able to access the range of communities we had contact with.

The Punjab Research Group (UK)

This research group has offered a means of dissemination, as well as allowing the project to help initiate broader discussions within the research community about the tensions and conflicts in Punjabi heritage (especially in the context of India and Pakistan).

Please describe how the project has evolved over the period of funding.

The project had a clear outline from the outset as it was partially designed to fit into a broader project being undertaken by CRCI. It was also a direct continuation of work undertaken during the Unbox Fellowships. However, during the grant we became involved with a much broader range of partner organisations and had to adapt some of our processes. We did not anticipate the level of local interest in our activities and over time, as our network grew, it was clear that the project easily had the potential to be much larger. We incorporated some of this additional interest by scaling up the public event planned at the conclusion of our time in India. We originally thought 30-50 people might attend, and this was seen by the team as a good level of outreach. However, it became clear that many more would attend and that there was a level of expectation about how the event should be organised. Adapting our exhibition plans was an ongoing challenge as the pre-planning had to be abandoned. The event was a success in the end as we were able to rapidly build new relationships with key agents who could
help/facilitate our goals. We originally designed the project to have workshops in the UK with schools. However, the religious tensions raised during the period of the grant meant we lacked the adequate time and resources to sensitively address this. To achieve our aims, we expanded our final project workshop to include education groups and teachers to discuss how to address these issues in the classroom.

**What lessons have been learnt during the project?**

We were working in an area of Punjab which has been visited by international research teams, but not in the context in heritage. Research groups on water security have visited the area, but have had relatively little contact with the local community. Our project was outward facing and attempted to engage with a range of people visiting the Aam Khas Bagh. This drew a lot of curiosity, especially as the team was perceived to be made up of ‘outsiders’. Comprehensively dealing with the impact of our own histories, cultures, accents and bodies in the field was something that we had discussed, but not dealt with in enough detail. Although the team was predominantly female and it became difficult to access communities of local women, especially those working in the home. Project members who were Indian/from an Indian background were held to different cultural standards than other members of the group, which facilitated/prevented certain types of access.

The partition of knowledge/research into Punjab (its Indian and Pakistani sides) is partially due to the difficulty in traversing the border, and partially because of religious/national conflicts. This presents real challenges in building dialogues between religious groups about heritage management. The lesson from this is to reduce the scope and ambition of future projects: the practical issues of crossing the Indo-Pak border is indicative of the absolute lines of difference that some groups/organisations subscribe to.

**What future plans have developed out of the research?**

The following plans have developed:

- Our growing academic network/emerging discussions offer a strong base for an international network grant. We will approach either the AHRC or the Leverhulme for this project.

- We are working towards an enhanced website on the Grand Trunk Road. This is part of CRCI’s larger project with UNESCO.

**Please describe the methods of dissemination and outreach you have used during your project.**
Young People in Sirhind, Punjab: We organised two-week workshops around three themes (history, film and design). We advertised places on the workshop through our academic partners in Sirhind. Over a hundred students were interested. They were asked to put together a brief profile and to explain why they would like to attend the workshops. Twenty students were selected for the final workshop schedule. These students worked in three separate groups with three project leaders. All three groups were trained in basic skills in oral history, film-making and interactive design during the first week. In the second week they were tasked to produce an original element of a final exhibition that would be open to the public. All groups met their targets under the supervision of their project leaders. The core method in the second week of these workshops was participatory research.

Policy-makers in Punjab: In order to gain access to the Aam Khas Bagh we had to seek permission from the Government of Punjab. This was arranged through a formal interview with a Culture Minister. We were able to brief him about the project and to highlight some of the critical conservation and heritage issues at the site.

Academics/heritage experts in India: We were invited by Punjab Tourism (the official government agency dealing with tourism) to exhibit at an international heritage/conservation conference held in Chandigarh. We took part of our public exhibition to the event as well as some of the young people who had helped to generate the exhibition. We presented to a series of key figures including senior representatives from UNESCO.

Academics/community groups in the UK: We co-organised a two-day workshop with the Punjab Research Group that was open to community groups/organisations. Participants included a range of Sikh education groups/councils across the UK. The method of dissemination was through a traditional conference-style event.

Please describe the impacts or potential impacts that your project has had (these could be within the areas of people development, collaborations and knowledge exchange or the creative economy/economic impact)

- Contributing to a policy report conducted by CRCI on behalf of the Government of Punjab offering an overview and policy recommendations of Punjab’s heritage sites.
- Assisting in underlining the cultural importance of the site with CRCI.
- Raising awareness of the Aam Khas Bagh’s cultural importance through local news outlets (TV news and print journalism) as well as nationally-circulated broadsheets (Chandigarh Tribune).
• Inclusion of 20 students in Punjab in a series of workshops concentrating on site-interpretation and heritage with a special focus on creating peace between communities in conflict (Sikh and Muslim).
• Exposure of 20 students in Punjab to new skills in design, oral history and documentary film-making.
• Creation of a community event featuring student work at a medieval serai in Punjab which was attended by 400 people.
• Contribution to an international conference attended primarily by senior government officials, policy-makers and civil servants in Chandigarh, Punjab.
• Substantial contribution of data to a new website on the Grand Trunk Road.
• An international workshop held in co-ordination with the Punjab Research Group (PRG, UK) on the theme of memory. The event was attended by over 70 people and was the largest collection of Punjabi scholars in the UK over the past 10 years.
• A special edition of the journal *Punjab Studies* (UC, Santa Barbara) has been commissioned for publication in 2015 on the theme of memory. It will be co-edited by Dr Churnjeet Mahn and Dr Pippa Virdee (Director of the Punjab Research Group).

**References and external links**

[Project website](#) (in development)

Interior of Aam Khas Bagh showing disused electrical sockets
Interior of Aam Khas Bagh showing abandoned government files

Detail from exterior of the Daulat Khanna showing disused fountains

Detail of family visiting exhibition at the Aam Khas Bagh
Detail of family using interactive panels at the Aam Khas Bagh exhibition
The UnBox Booster funding scheme aimed to enable teams who have met through the UnBox fellowships to sustain, develop and expand creatively upon the collaborations formed.

Dr Emma Wakelin, Associate Director at the AHRC said:

‘The AHRC was delighted to work with the British Council, UnBox and the Science and Innovation Network India to support the UnBox festival 2013. Finding new ways to support UK researchers in the arts and humanities to work in collaboration with partners in the creative and cultural sectors is one of our priorities, as is encouraging international networks.

We were particularly pleased that all five UnBox Fellows in 2013 were successful in gaining AHRC booster funding, enabling them to continue to develop the collaborative projects and the fruitful partnerships they began during their time in India, and which they showcased along with their creative sector partners from the UK and India at the UnBox festival in Delhi in February 2013. This funding was intended to support the researchers to continue the innovative worked inspired by UnBox, to build on the valuable and creative networks initiated in India, and to explore research ideas that will have a tangible impact and would not otherwise have been possible.’