

Timeless Tales of Pragpur-Garli: Unveiling the Heritage Legacy of India's First Heritage VillagesDeeksha Rana¹, Shweta Rana¹ and Dr. Seema Choudhary²¹Research Scholars, Department of Geography, Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla (171005)²Assistant Professor, Dept of Geography, Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla (171005)

Received : 15-01-2026

Accepted : 16-02-2026

Abstract

Pragpur-Garli often known as twin villages are the first heritage villages of India. They have got this status in 1997 by the State Govt. of Himachal Pradesh. These villages are the living museums of rich cultural history and built heritage. The buildings standing in these villages were built three centuries ago. A quite interesting feature of these villages is internal connectivity through cobbled lanes which are well planned, drainage and water system mechanism as well. Therefore, the present study tries to describe the rich cultural history and built heritage of these villages. The village offers an insight into the past and imparts knowledge about the fusion of different architectural styles. The study also tries to investigate the current status of these heritage buildings and suggest measures to conserve and use them in such a way that they can be beneficial for the local community.

Keywords: Heritage, Cultural richness, conservation, management, tourism, sustainability.

Introduction:

Heritage encompasses the traditions, practices, art, architecture, and cultural expressions that have been handed down through generations, contributing to the collective legacy of humanity (Millar, 1989). It functions as a conduit between the past and the present, ensuring the preservation of the essence of civilisations and providing a sense of cohesion and identity. According to the definition given by UNESCO, cultural and natural heritage are both invaluable sources of life and inspiration (Barrientos et al., 2021). In Indian context, heritage is a tapestry that is interwoven with layers of history, moulded by diverse factors, and built upon centuries-old practices. Traditional village dwellings exemplify vernacular architecture, crafted by locals and often referred to as architecture without architects (Ballard, 1966). India's heritage is a living testament to its cultural richness and historical depth, ranging from monumental architectural marvels to intangible customs.

Among India's immense historical landscape, several lesser-known but equally magnificent sites serve as silent storytellers of past. Pragpur and Garli, twin villages in Himachal Pradesh's Kangra

Valley, are an example of a heritage asset. These villages, designated as India's first heritage villages in 1997, represent a distinct fusion of traditional Himachali culture and imperial architectural styles. The villages are more than just historical remnants; they are living heritage sites where communities continue to uphold age-old traditions, demonstrating a harmonious integration of the past and present. Rural heritage plays an important part in giving a village its identity and helping it grow and remain sustainable (Badri, 2022). Cultural heritage holds significance not only for its owners or residents of historic properties but also contributes to the welfare and standard of life of communities, aids in alleviating the effects of cultural globalisation, and serves as a catalyst for sustainable development (Gražulevičiūtė, 2006).

This study seeks to decipher Pragpur-Garli's heritage legacy by delving into its architectural grandeur, cultural relevance, and efforts to maintain its timeless appeal. Through the prism of these villagers, it investigates the greater significance of heritage conservation and the function such efforts play in preserving a country's cultural integrity. By uncovering the stories inscribed in the walls, streets, and traditions of Pragpur-Garli, the current endeavour attempts to commemorate India's varied legacy and its lasting significance in the present era. Cultural heritage in rural regions encompasses historical rural buildings, village landscapes, as well as intangible cultural assets (Sardaro, 2021).

Historical significance of Pragpur-Garli and their Architectural Features

Pragpur-Garli, commonly referred to as twin villages, are situated in the Kangra district of Himachal Pradesh. In Sanskrit, "Prag" signifies pollen, thus "Pragpur" denotes a state of being ablaze with blossoms throughout spring. The village is located at the point where two khads, which are seasonal water channels, meet at Nakki. These khads are the Sehri Khad and the lag-Baliana Khad. Prayag, which literally translates to "where two water courses meet," is the name given to this location, which later evolved into Pragpur.

The 'hill Soods' or fifty-two original Garli-Pragpur residents who are attributed with building the Portuguese town-houses that gave the area the designation of heritage villages is seldom known. Consequently, economic history is a valuable instrument for reconstructing the historical significance of the region in the absence of genealogical records (Gautam et al., 2021). During the 17th century, the villages were part of the Jaswan Kingdom, which was a lineage of the Kangra Katoch dynasty. The area was chosen to honour the triumph of Princess Prag Dei against the advancing bands, utilising Shashtras and benefiting from the auspicious astral blessings of the three nearby Shaktipeeths (Brajeshwari, Chintpurni, and Jawalamukhi) for millennia (Katoch, 2021).

The region of medieval Kangra, which includes present-day districts of Hamirpur and Kangra, was governed in the early nineteenth century by Maharaja Sansar Chand II of the Katoch dynasty (1765-1823 CE) until its fragmentation and eventual incorporation into the Empire of Maharaja Ranjit Singh after 1823 CE. According to the available documentation, the Karars or Soodsare believed to have arrived in the region after 1750, likely motivated by the *Kanhaiya Misl* (Katoch, 2021). The political transition did not affect the trade and Sood's community was dominant in these twin villages.

Pragpur-Garli's architecture is attributed to this community of merchants who adopted this style of architecture from Portuguese merchants they claimed to have come into touch with. The assertion is corroborated by the numerous similarities between the dwellings of these villages and Portuguese town houses. The primary similarity is enhanced air circulation and optimisation of solar energy during winter through south and west-facing balconies. Furthermore, the vital significance of thermal design, a crucial element of Portuguese townhouses, is evident in the structures of Pragpur-Garli. The thermal notion aids in keeping the structure cool during summer, warm and humid in monsoon, and maximising solar exposure in summer. In addition, Portuguese architecture exhibited resilience to seismic activity, hence augmenting its appropriateness in Pragpur-Garli, which is classified within Zone V of seismic risk (Katoch, 2021).

Presently twin villages are renowned for their architecture, well-planned streets, drainage, and water supply systems, all of which date back to the British era. These settlements' natural surroundings, the Dhaura Dhar range, and its rich biological diversity also contribute to their distinctiveness. Climate is pleasant throughout the year to visit these villages.

Built Heritage of Pragpur and Garli:

Pragpur and Garli are well-known for the fact that their social structure, architecture, and customs that stretch back centuries have been preserved in a remarkable manner. The villages function as a living museum, providing visitors with an opportunity to get insight into the culture of Himachal Pradesh and the colonial era. Each of the buildings is double-storeyed. The walls of the houses are made of local stone and sun-dried mud bricks that are made of mud mortar. The ceilings are low, and the rooms on the ground level are modest, with mud floors that have been nicely preserved. Tulsi is a sacred plant that is planted and worshipped in the middle of the aangan. It is possible to view the splendour of the houses in the photographs that have been taken below. The houses have a modern appearance and have a sense of resemblance to the mediaeval era.

Mud plastered walls are a fantastic example of how people in ancient times constructed their homes using materials that were readily available in nature. The dwellings are constructed with pressed clay walls. Wood has traditionally been utilised for the construction of doors and windows. The wood of the *tuni*, *ber*, and *simbal* trees is typically utilised for the construction of doors and windows. Floral and geometric motifs are intricately carved into the door frames, which are quite stunning. Wood has traditionally been utilised for the construction of doors and windows. The wood of the *tuni*, *ber*, and *simbal* trees is typically utilised for the construction of doors and windows. Floral and geometric motifs are intricately carved into the door frames, which are quite stunning. The villages' residences are connected by cobblestone pathways that are exceedingly comfortable to walk. They are capacious and have been constructed using traditional stones in a variety of patterns.

The Ancient Water System:

Situated in the heart of the village, surrounded by a multitude of historic houses, is the "Taal," a small pond of water located in Pragpur (Fig.1). The Taal or pond and Nakki was constructed before 1868 in order to address the ongoing water scarcity issues that were common at that time period. The Rerumal family devised Nakki. Even now, the villagers' needs are being met by this tank. The tank is also equipped with bio-filters to ensure a continuous flow and prevent stagnation. The Nehar Vikas Samiti is in charge of its construction, with documents dating back to 1864. They continue to observe its upkeep even now (Katoch, 2021). The pipelines of the Taal have not been altered since their installation. The pipes remain durable and require minimal maintenance.



Fig.1 “The Taal” Pragpur



Fig.2 “The Taal” Garli

(Source: Clicked by author)

The Taal became an essential part of everyday life, providing water for irrigation, domestic use, and livestock. Over time, it became a gathering place and a symbol of communal unity. Local festivities and rituals frequently take place around the Taal, cementing its status as a common space. Garli has a Taal, identical to Pragpur. According to residents, this taal constitutes of seven wells (Fig. 2). The water of this Taal is used for irrigation, washing, cleaning only. Presently, it is not used for domestic purposes.

The Judge's Court of Pragpur

Judge's court is the key attraction in Pragpur village. Mr. Justice Sir Jai Lal, a prominent attorney and judge of the Lahore High Court, was the one who initiated the establishment of the Judges court. The Indo-European architectural style was used in the construction of the mansion, which served as the residence of his family. The building is a well-known heritage property that is currently being used as a heritage hotel (Fig. 3). It provides guests with a genuine experience of the colonial era, combining the elegant grandeur of the Kangra valley with the rustic allure of the region. Sloped slate roofs, massive verandas, lofty ceilings and arched doors are some of the architectural aspects that are a combination of colonial and Indian styles that can be found featured in the building. The use of stained-glass windows further enhances its attraction. Stained glass windows, jharokhas are common features of the buildings of Pragpur village.



Fig.3 The Judge's Court

(Source: Clicked by author)

Pragpur's legacy is greatly preserved in part by the judges' Court. In order to ensure that it continues to be an essential component of the cultural identity of the village, its restoration and maintenance are carried out in accordance with sustainable principles. By fostering ecotourism and supporting local livelihoods, it aids in the preservation of Pragpur's heritage. The hotel is more than simply a place to stay; it is a window into the history, architecture, and culture of Himachal Pradesh, making it an essential destination for people who are interested in heritage and nature experiences.

According to Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), there are seventy-two buildings in Pragpur which are part of the rich heritage of Pragpur. However, these buildings are not working like the Judges Court as they are either used by the owners for themselves or are in dilapidated condition.

Butail Niwas

It was constructed by Lala Buta Mal, a descendant of the Chaujjar Sood clan. It comprises six identical apartments constructed for his six sons. These are positioned around a lowered courtyard. During warmer conditions, this courtyard is inundated with water to facilitate cooling. The water for this has been transported by the Butails from the nearby Khad, supplying drinking water to multiple villages along the route.

Chateau Garli

Lala Mela Ram Sud built Chateau in Garli village in 1921. A combination of Tudor and Victorian styles of architecture was used in the construction of Chateau Garli. Tudor houses are supposed to seem like the simple English residences that were common in the 16th century, but they are decorated in a more contemporary style. There is a strong emphasis placed on craftsmanship and attention to detail in this style.

Due to the fact that no one had been to the house for the past twenty years, it had fallen into a condition of ruin. Great grandson of Lala Mela Ram Sud, Amish Sud spent a week at Garli in September 2012 and rediscovered the place's potential, beauty, and historical significance. Following that, Yatish C. Sud, who is the grandson of Lala mela Ram Sud, and Amish Sud (great grandson) took up the restoration work and outfitted it with contemporary conveniences in order to transform it into a heritage hotel (Fig. 4). The proprietors of Château Garli preserved the fundamental characteristics of the historic edifice while incorporating contemporary conveniences to accommodate modern tourists.



Fig. 4 Chateau Garli

(Source: Clicked by author)

Bishnu Niwas

Bishnu Niwas, which is one of the oldest structures in the hamlet, has left an indelible impression on the community. The astounding facades of this building are a true reflection of a variety of architectural styles, most commonly Hindu architecture. This mansion is well-known for the presence of two santris, or guards, who are stationed at each corner of the front facade. Their purpose is to



Fig. 5 Bishnu Niwas

(Source: Clicked by author)

protect the house from any potential dangers. The residents of the area gave the dwelling the name "*santri vali kothi*" because of this particular reason. There are a number of window screens that allow light to enter inside premises. Indo-Sarcentic architecture (Fig. 5) is characterised by the presence of decorative motifs and a variety of designs painted on railings and pillars.

Naurang Yatri Niwas

To make their stay more comfortable, Rai Bahadur Mohan Lal constructed Naurang Yatri Niwas. It was built in 1912. Subsequently, it transformed into lodging for visitors and merchants who arrived in Garli to conduct their commerce. In the mid-1940s, it fell into disuse and was ransacked by the forces of nature. However, it was revived by the Atul who is the grandson of Rai Bahadur Lal. Currently, Naurang Yatri Niwas is serving as heritage hotel in Grali village (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6 Naurang Yatri Niwas

(Source: Clicked by author)

Brick was used in the construction of the front facade. A massive archway serves as the entrance. In the foyer, which is located at the entrance to the building, there is a barrel vault ceiling. The

entrance to the foyer leads to an open courtyard that is encircled by residences. There are open drains that can be seen flowing all the way around the courtyard. Brick was used in the construction of the entire structure, while slate was used for the roofing material. The building has two stories. Roofing structure made of timber has been completed. Individuals who are interested in architecture will find the structure to be a great attraction. Numerous architectural elements, derived from a wide range of architectural styles, are utilised.

Mohan Niwas

Mr. Mohan Lal Sood is the owner of one of the oldest residential buildings in the village, which is known as Mohan Niwas. Originally constructed in the year 1887, this building is of outstanding architectural significance and belongs to the world of architecture altogether. A massive doorway that is surrounded on both sides by foliated archway serves as the entrance to the site. A water storage facility was constructed near the site's entrance.

It is a well-known building of village Garli with clearly expressed architectural elements of several styles. The building is a sight to behold due to its wooden carvings on the walls and pitched roofs.

Bhagwan Niwas

A charming mansion in the town of Garli was built by Narendra Sood for his stay in 1920. Brick was used in the construction of the lower floor of this two-story house, while timber was used in the construction of the top floor.

Within the village, it is considered to be one of the most magnificent buildings (Fig. 7). The entrance is highlighted by a foliated arch that leads to an open porch in front of the building. The construction of this mansion is a prime example of the Tudor style of architecture in British regions. Architectural styles such as Tudor, Victorian, Mughal, and native Himachali are among those that are included in its composition. Roof framework is completed with timber. For those who are interested in architecture, the structure is a spectacular attraction.



Fig. 7 Bhagwan Niwas

(Source: Clicked by author)

The Need for Built Heritage Management

The buildings of Pragpur and Garli are built three centuries ago. However, their style, architecture and planning showcase the tremendous knowledge that the ancestors uphold. They are the living examples of rich cultural history of India. Being India's first heritage village, the villages showcase the amalgamation of different architectures while exemplifying the old living styles, traditions and cultures. It is important to safeguard these heritage villages as they present a very good example of architecture style that is standing from three centuries. In present world, sustainable development is the need. These buildings standing tall since last three centuries put forth best practices of using locally available material while dealing with issue of seismicity as well. It is to be noticed that mere granting these villages the status of heritage is not enough. They need to be preserved with the help of community as well. Community could play a vital role in preserving this heritage. It is so because some of these buildings are owned privately as well. Hence, a combined effort is required.

Many buildings are in dilapidated condition in both the villages (Fig. 8 and 9). Their repairment and maintenance is important. It has been observed that some buildings have been converted into hotels like Naurang Yatri Niwas, Chateau Garli. It is one of the best ways to utilise these structures and

to preserve this heritage(Chathle,2024).Though lack of infrastructure and insufficient advertisement acts as a roadblock in this path. The support from government and associated authorities is required so that this heritage can be utilised for the socio-economic development of residents. If tourism is boosted, it will help in creating job opportunities and infrastructure development as well.

Shimla is famous international tourists' destination because of its pleasant climate and the presence of built heritage of colonial times. Though, built heritage is also present in these villages but still they have been left alone and tourism has not been harnessed here. These untouched buildings and villages give a touch of living in proximity to nature. In the present times, where every location has transformed a lot, these villages will provide a soothing and refreshing experience.

Dilapidated Buildings



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

Source: Clicked by author

It is important that before increasing the flow of tourists in these villages, it is important to create a plan about to take tourism forward in a sustainable manner. This plan should try to incorporate local people in tourism activities and outside people should not be allowed to convert it in any form to mass tourism. The ethnic feeling of the villages should not be deteriorated. The villages are blessed with traditional arts and crafts like *tokra*, *chabbru*, *pakhi*, *chajj*, *pattal*, *duna*, *biinato* name a few which are often used daily and sustainable in their making. These can also be used while promoting tourism. There is presence of many instruments which were used in ancient times for amusements. Also, traditional utensils could also be showcased to attract tourism (Fig. 10).

**Fig. 10**

(Source: Clicked by author)

All these aspects, if harnessed efficiently, will offer a taste of cultural legacy of Kangra. An inventory should be created which presents the type of material used and location and characteristics of buildings present in the village. These villages offer a different kind of tourism and should be harnessed so that heritage could be preserved, present and future generations could learn from it and residents could reap the social economic benefits as well.

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