

## Interfaith Harmony Through the Ages: The Shiv Temple in Azad Kashmir and its Legacy from the Hindu Shahi Era (7<sup>th</sup> -11<sup>th</sup> Century)

**Ataullah Shah Amritsari**

Lecturer at the Baba Ghulam Shah Badshah University Rajouri (Indian-held Kashmir)

Email: [ataullahshah21@gmail.com](mailto:ataullahshah21@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

The Shiv Temple in Azad Kashmir boasts a rich historical legacy spanning centuries, serving as a revered site for worship among Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims alike. This shared historical narrative presents a unique avenue for advancing tourism in the region, promoting economic growth through the burgeoning tourist industry. This research investigates the examination of how the historical and cultural significance of the Shiv Temple can serve as a magnet for visitors hailing from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. The distinctive architectural features of the temple, coupled with the natural splendor surrounding Azad Kashmir, promise a rewarding experience for tourists. Initiatives to showcase the region's vibrant history and diverse cultural heritage, such as cultural festivals and guided tours, can further enhance the appeal to a broad spectrum of visitors.

A universally acknowledged truth is the essential role that tourism plays in generating employment opportunities, especially within the local hospitality and service sectors. In alignment with this premise, this study charts a course to fortify the local economy and alleviate poverty in the region. The promotion of tourism is posited not only to spur economic growth but also to catalyze the development of essential infrastructure and amenities, including hotels and restaurants, thereby amplifying the overall quality of the tourist experience and contributing to the sustainable growth of the local economy.

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## Introduction

The Shiv Temple at Barnal is a historic Hindu temple located in the Barnal village of the Bhimber district of Azad Kashmir. The temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva, one of the most revered gods in Hinduism. The Shiv Temple at Barnal is a significant religious and cultural site, attracting visitors from around the world (Khan, 2017). The temple is believed to have been built during the reign of the Hindu Shahi dynasty, which ruled over parts of present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> century CE. The Shiv Temple at Barnal is believed to be one of the oldest and most well-preserved examples of Hindu architecture from this period (Khan, 2017).

The temple is made of locally quarried sandstone and consists of a rectangular main hall with a shikhara (tower) on top. The shikhara is adorned with intricate carvings of Hindu deities and other mythical creatures. The interior of the temple contains a shrine dedicated to Lord Shiva, as well as several smaller shrines dedicated to other Hindu gods and goddesses (Khan, 2017).

The Shiv Temple at Barnal has survived several centuries of political and religious turmoil in the region. During the partition of India in 1947, many Hindus living in the area were forced to leave their homes and migrate to India. The Shiv Temple at Barnal remained largely abandoned for several decades, until it was rediscovered and restored by the local community in the 1990s (Khan, 2017). Today, the Shiv Temple at Barnal is a thriving center of Hindu worship and cultural heritage. It is visited by Hindus from around the world, as well as scholars and tourists interested in the history and architecture of the region. The temple is also a symbol of the rich cultural diversity that has characterized the Bhimber district for centuries (Hasan, 2008).

In recent years, there have been efforts to promote tourism to the Shiv Temple at Barnal and other historic sites in the Bhimber district. These efforts have helped to raise awareness of the region's cultural heritage and provide economic opportunities for local communities (Hasan, 2008).

For analyzing further about temple and its related facts, this study moves forward by analyzing why this temple was built in the Barnal village.

### **Factual History of Shiv Temple**

The Hindu Shahi Dynasty, which ruled parts of present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan between the 7th and 11th centuries, was known for its patronage of Hindu and Buddhist temples. The Shiv Temple in Barnal village, located in the Bhimber district of Azad Kashmir, is believed to have been built during the reign of the Hindu Shahi Dynasty (Khan, 2017).

The temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva, one of the principal deities in Hinduism, and features a large statue of the deity in the main sanctum. According to local legends, the temple was built by a wealthy merchant from the region who had a dream in which Lord Shiva appeared to him and instructed him to build a temple in his honor (Zahra, 2023).

The Shiv Temple in Barnal is considered to be one of the most important Hindu temples in the region and attracts devotees from all over Pakistan and India. It is especially revered by the local Hindu community, who have maintained the temple for centuries despite facing challenges and persecution from various rulers and regimes throughout history (Zahra, 2023). The temple complex is spread over several acres and features several smaller shrines dedicated to other deities such as Lord Ganesha and Goddess Durga. It also includes a large open-air pavilion used for community gatherings and religious festivals. Despite being located in a predominantly Muslim region, the Shiv Temple in Barnal remains an important symbol of the region's rich cultural and religious heritage. Its continued existence and popularity among Hindus and non-Hindus alike serve as a testament to the enduring legacy of the Hindu Shahi Dynasty and the resilience of the local Hindu community (Khan, 2017).

### **Demographics of Hindu Shahi Dynasty**

The Hindu Shahi dynasty ruled the Kabul Valley and present-day northwestern Pakistan, including parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, and Punjab provinces, from the mid-7th century until the early 11th

century. The dynasty was established by the Hindu Shahi rulers who claimed descent from the ancient rulers of the Indian subcontinent. The population of the Hindu Shahi dynasty was primarily Hindu, although there were also significant Buddhist and Jain populations. The rulers of the dynasty patronized all three religions and built temples and monasteries for Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains. Over time, however, the rulers and the population became increasingly Islamized, and the dynasty was eventually overthrown by the Ghaznavid Empire, which was led by Muslim rulers (History-Pakistan, 2023).

### **Current Azad Kashmir as an Historical Peaceful Part of Hindu Shahi Dynasty**

The historical records indicate that the Hindu Shahi dynasty ruled over the region that now covers Azad Kashmir from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> century CE. During this time, it is believed that Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains lived peacefully together in the region, as the dynasty was known for its tolerance towards different religions and beliefs. According to historical accounts, the Hindu Shahi kings supported various religions, and some of them even practiced multiple religions simultaneously. For example, the famous Hindu Shahi king, Jayapala, is known to have patronized both Buddhism and Hinduism, and his court had scholars from both religions (Petrie, 2020).

In addition, many historical sites and artifacts found in Azad Kashmir and the surrounding regions bear testimony to the presence of multiple religions during the Hindu Shahi dynasty. For instance, the Buddhist stupa at Sharda, which is now in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, is believed to have been built during the reign of the Hindu Shahi kings. While there may have been occasional conflicts between different religious groups during the Hindu Shahi dynasty, the general picture that emerges is one of peaceful coexistence between Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains in the region that now covers Azad Kashmir (Petrie, 2020).

### **A Question about Shiv Temple as a Joint Worship Place for Hindus and Buddhists**

There is no definitive answer to this question, as there is limited historical information available about the Shiv Temple at Barnal village. However, it is widely believed that the temple was constructed by the Hindu Shahi dynasty, which was known for its patronage of Hinduism and Buddhism. It could be possible that the Shiv Temple at Barnal village was a joint worship place of Hindus and Buddhists during that time. Both religions were practiced in the region for centuries, and it is likely that members of both communities would have visited the temple for religious purposes. However, without further historical evidence, it is difficult to determine the exact nature of the temple's worship practices during that time (Jeratha, 2000).

On the other hand, today, the Shiv Temple at Barnal village is primarily a place of worship for the local Hindu community, who make up a small percentage of the population of Azad Kashmir. While there is some evidence of religious militancy in the region, it is unclear whether this has had a significant impact on the ability of local Hindus to visit the temple (Jeratha, 2000).

### **Myths related to Shiv Temple**

There are several myths associated with the Shiv Temple, which are believed by the Hindu community. One of the most popular myths is that the temple was built by the Pandavas, the protagonists of the Hindu epic Mahabharata, during their exile. According to the myth, the Pandavas were passing through the region and decided to build a temple to seek blessings from Lord Shiva, the Hindu god of destruction (Paras, 2019).

Another myth associated with the Shiv Temple is that the idol of Lord Shiva in the temple is self-manifested, which means it appeared on its own. It is believed that the idol was discovered by a Hindu saint who was meditating in the area (Paras, 2019).

These myths and beliefs are not limited to the Hindu community, and many people in the region, including Muslims, also believe in them. The temple is considered a sacred site by the local population, and people from all religions visit it to seek blessings. However, there have been instances of tension and conflict between the Hindu and Muslim communities in the region over the Shiv Temple. In 2012, there were reports of vandalism and desecration of the temple by some Muslim individuals, which caused outrage and protests among the Hindu community (Paras, 2019).

### **Hindu Population Associated with the Shiv Temple**

According to the 1998 census, Hindus constitute less than 1% of the population of Azad Kashmir. However, it is believed that the actual number of Hindus in the region is much higher, as many Hindus have migrated to India and other countries over the years due to various reasons, including religious persecution (EFSAS, 2020).

As for the Shiv Temple in Barnal village, it is believed that a small number of local Hindus visit the temple occasionally, especially during important Hindu festivals such as Shivratri. However, due to the sensitive political and religious climate in the region, many Hindus are hesitant to visit the temple, fearing persecution or backlash from Muslim militants or extremist groups. The temple is also located in a remote area and lacks basic facilities, making it difficult for visitors to access and use (EFSAS, 2020).

In recent years, there have been reports of efforts by local Hindu and Sikh communities to restore and preserve the temple, and to encourage more people to visit and use it. However, the overall situation remains challenging, and the temple's future remains uncertain (EFSAS, 2020).

### **Conclusion**

In an age when Pakistan is suffering from religious militancy and intolerance, Shiv temple still attracts local and international Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and tourists from other religions in Barnal village due to many reasons, such as;

#### **1) Architecture**

The design and construction of the temple, especially the sculptures and carvings, can attract people from various religious and cultural backgrounds (DAWN, 2019) (AJK-Government, 2018).

#### **2) Religious Significance**

The Shiv temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva, who is one of the major deities in Hinduism. The temple's religious significance can attract not only Hindus but also people from other religions who are interested in learning about Hinduism (DAWN, 2019) (AJK-Government, 2018).

#### **3) Festivals and Celebrations**

Temples like Shiv temple in Barnal often hold festivals and celebrations that can attract a diverse range of people from different religions and cultures (DAWN, 2019) (AJK-Government, 2018).

#### **4) Cultural Experience**

Visiting a temple in a rural village can offer a unique cultural experience for tourists who are interested in exploring the local traditions and way of life (DAWN, 2019) (AJK-Government, 2018).

### 5) Spiritual and Religious Experience

People from different religions often visit temples to seek spiritual and religious experiences. The peaceful atmosphere and rituals performed in the Shiv temple can offer such experiences to visitors (DAWN, 2019) (AJK-Government, 2018).

Therefore, political economists perceive that the Shiv temple can be a rare part of tourist economy due to its multi-religious aspect for visitors, regardless of their social, racial or ethnic background.

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