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The Symbolism and Socio-political Relevance of the Forts of Azad Jammu and Kashmir
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Abstract

The forts of Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) reflect, perhaps more than anything else, the tangible remnants of history colliding with culture and unending socio-political issues within the region. In this article, I focus on the eclectic blend of architecture, history, and symbolism these forts possess whereby I examine their utilization as power over dominions or places of defiance and within the frameworks of community memory from medieval to modern times. With historical sources, fieldwork, observations, and comparative literature, this study focuses on AJK's forts in relation to South Asia and post colonialism to emphasize their significance concerning regional identity formation as well as statehood narratives vis a vis governance over space along with contested heritage politics. The analysis demonstrates that these architectural structures are no longer static remnants of bygone eras but rather dynamic tools through which current day socio-political issues are interrogated in discourse about self-rule governance systems, conflict zones marked by persistent struggle alongside enduring resilience contrasting frameworks of turmoil versus tranquility which fuel debates on memory politics.

Keywords: Symbolism, Socio-Political, Forts, Azad Jammu, Kashmir, Governance Systems.

1. Introduction

The Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) region, notable for its breathtaking landscapes and deep historical significance, contains an impressive collection of forts. These structures range from the dominantly placed Ramkot Fort to the strategically positioned Red Fort (Muzaffarabad). Far from just architectural wonders, these fortifications are vital in preserving identity. The socio-political landscape of AJK shaped by decades of political strife, cultural evolution, and social change is also encapsulated within these forts.

The AJK forts were historically used as shields against invasions, administrative centers, and representations of power for ruling dynasties such as Dogras¹, Mughals, and Sikhs. Following colonial rule, as the area emerged as a hotspot in the long standing contention between India and Pakistan, new meanings were attributed to them – symbols of defiance while standing resilient under conflicting narratives of nationhood. These fortifications have turned into locations where history is leveraged to validate contemporary claims along with future aspirations which emphasizes their role as powerful paradigms within the unresolved conflict surrounding autonomy and identity.

This article looks at the symbolism within the forts of AJK and their societal and political importance from an old and modern perspective. It shows how these structures continue to shape and reflect the identities, aspirations, and fears of AJK residents by analyzing the architecture, history, and present functions of these forts. The research includes historical analysis as well as field research that consists of visits to the sites along with interviews with local historians, community leaders, and heritage activists. Guided by cultural geography,² memory studies, postcolonial theory, and other theoretical frameworks, this research aims to critique the relationship between space, power, identity.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Forts in South Asian Historiography

The scholarship regarding South Asian forts has primarily distinguished them through their military or architectural value (Burton-Page, 2008; Michell 1990). While these publications contain rich descriptions pertaining to fortification styles and construction techniques, they largely capture forts as passive structures frozen in time devoid of any social or political life dynamics beyond their brutalist defensive artistry.

More recent research has started examining the symbolic aspects of fort architecture. Chatterjee (1993) and Metcalf (2007) go further to explain that these structures served not only as military forts but also as tools for statecraft, rituals, and identity construction. Their work illustrates the vital roles forts played in power negotiation, sovereignty performance, and cultural or religious identity articulation

2.2 Forts, Memory, and Identity

The interplay between space, memory recall, and identity forms is a critical interest in heritage studies and cultural geography. Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* (1989) has helped analyze how spatial locations manifest in collective memory. In Kashmir contexts, Bose (2003) and Schofield (2000) have examined the role of monuments and heritage sites in constructing national or regional narratives, especially within conflict frameworks.

In AJK, Ahmad (2017) and Khan (2021) have studied the significance of forts as both memory and trauma sites, exploring their roles in the politics of remembrance and forgetting. Their work illustrates how various groups attempt to reclaim, reinterpret, or erase deeply contested histories associated with the forts for contemporary political purposes.

2.3 Heritage, Identity, and The Politics of Space

The intersections of heritage, identity and the politics of space has been examined in post-colonial conflict-affected regions (Ashworth et al., 2007; Smith, 2006). Raina (2018) and Wani (2020) focused on Kashmir where restoration and narration growth of representation in relation to forts is intertwined with autonomy epithet struggles. Yet still remains a substantial lack concerning AJ&K's forts Within this framework, I aim to provide an encompassing description examining these structures as ever-changing locations of memory and identity alongside geopolitical rivalries which constitute distinct forms of articulation.

3. Forts of Azad Jammu and Kashmir: A Historical Overview

3.1 The Early Power Dynamics and Military Architecture

The strategic importance of the region characterized modern day Azad Jammu and Kashmir attracted numerous empires and local rulers which shaped its historiography. The narrative of the region's fortification history dates back to ancient periods, where construction consisted of basic earthworks or stone enclosures enabling protection from raiders, -control over trade routes connecting Central Asia, South Asia, and Tibet, and offering shelter for refuge. Archaeological findings showcase that the region was fortified as early as the medieval epoch as local monarchs established territorial dominions adaptive to external assaults.

Regional military power structures geographically expanded during Middle Ages alongside advancing politically centralized governing systems making way for new political military architectural paradigms serving as socio-political power symbols such as the Muslim Mughal regime that shifted construction techniques with Persian architecture along central Asian craftsmanship merging indigenous traditions. Muzaffarabad and Ramkot forts exemplify multicultural militarized centers which served both imperialistic jurisdictional influence along

cultural Ming patronage devoted by the Mughals during their rule marking an era of radical transitional change in regional history

3.2 Sikh and Dora Periods: Control through Fortifications

The Sikhs led by Maharaja Ranjit Singh filled in the political vacuum left by the Mughals in the 18th century. With the establishment of Sikh rule, fortification of governance centers with military architecture became prevalent considering the strategic significance of the area, as exemplified with Baghsar Fort and Mangla Fort which included administrative offices for alongside militarily protective structures.

With the mid-19th century annexation of the region by the Dogra dynasty, The Hindu rulers transformed existing forts into symbols and means of enforcing dogra oppression over their undograsate Muslim population perceiving them often as outsiders. Hybrid colonial-local architectural styles with Dogra bastions, ramparts, and ornate gateways were used to build these new oppressive "forts".

3.3 Colonial Impacts and the 1947 Partition

As colonial India was divided into regions, administrators paid special attention to Jammu and Kashmir because it directly bordered China and Soviet Russia. AJK was also part of a region known for its mining activities; hence, every British Charleville did pay some attention towards infrastructure. In accordance with the Residual Payment Plan, forts around AJK to help in tax collection were extensively modified. These modifications take into account policing, tax collection, and surveillance.

The partitions introduced violence and migration into erstwhile stable communities in AJK due to floods of refugees coming from different cities like Punjab and Delhi. This added further burden in terms of shelter on already demolished forts which were use military outposts or shelters; this turned most of the remains into useless rubble due to constant warfare in addition to their original state of disrepair.³ While historical remains have always been symbols of pride, these relics are now seen as emblems monuments mourning lost history at the hands wars. Fetching bullets resorting them to useless rubbles.

3.4 Post-1947: The Role of Forts during the Period of Strife and Reconstruction

The AJK forts, during the decades after the partition, continued to serve an important function in the region's socio-political framework. While some have been restored as heritage sites, others remain either neglected or under military control. The depiction of the forts has changed over time due to political developments which provide contexts for remembrance, protest, and negotiation.

4. Architectural Meaning and Cultural Identity

4.1 The Vocabulary of Military Defense: Structure Serving Purpose and Signification

Forts AJK architecture arises from a blend of different cultures, advanced technologies, and layered meanings that reflect historical epochs. The geography and climate of the region alongside available construction materials shaped the culture, customs as well as traditions of its inhabitants with their distinct requirements. Moreover to serving these needs, the forts represented settled populations powerfully as symbols masquerading authority, legitimacy along with cultural identity.⁴

The most notable forts in AJK, such as Ramkot, Red Fort (Muzaffarabad), Baghsar and Mangla, showcase the varying architectural aspects shaped by the historical influences of the region. The construction of high walls, bastions, watch towers as well as moats was meant to prevent attackers and create the illusion of an impenetrable stronghold. Ornate gateways along with decorative motifs and inscriptions revealed the culture and religion if the builders. Furthermore,

strategic location of forts on hilltops or beside rivers showcased their purpose as protectors of the territory.

4.2 Syncretism and Identity: Mughal Sikh and Dogra Influences

Forts in AJK showcase a certain degree of syncretism due to local traditions intertwined with foreign elements; this is clearly evident through architectural styles. For instance, Mughal forts displayed cusped arches alongside domed pavilions coupled with intricate tile work which were hallmark features from the imperial court. Additionally the use of calligraphy as well as geometric patterns in decoration served to hint at the Islamic identity from where they hailed – Mughal rulers.

In contrast, Sikh and Dogra forts placed greater emphasis on high walls, corner bastions, smaller gates, and other strong protective features. During the Dogra era, colonial architecture was also adopted with ornamental gateways and crenellated parapets that served to further elevate the power of the ruling class. However, the use of local construction materials like river stone and lime mortar kept the structure culturally anchored to AJK.

4.3 The Fort as a Community and Continuity Symbol

To people living in AJK today, the historical forts stand as monuments depicting continuity within communities while reflecting the timeless fortitude of their culture. Local folklore along with oral tradition recounts stories through songs about various dynasties cementing these very structures into collective memory. Accompanied by religious rituals, these gatherings hub around such sites keeping traditions alive alongside shared identity.

5. Forts as Sites of Memory and Resistance

5.1 The Politics of Memory: Remembering and Forgetting

The AJK forts serve a dual purpose; they possess historical and architectural significance while simultaneously serving these regions as contested domains in which memory politics unfolds. As with other struggles around identity, legitimacy, and power, the ways these monuments are “remembered” – or not – reflects far deeper conflicts of interest within society. In a geopolitically fragile landscape where many disputes exist,⁶ the forts become a theatre for conflicting accounts of history.

In mainstream narratives, the region’s “defensive” forts are almost always remembered for shielding the region from external aggression through military incursions into the territory—thus depicting them as defiance and resilience personified. On the other hand, grassroots counter-narratives provided by local historians, marginalized groups or social movements highlight their oppressive nature on communities through exclusionary violence. Specific memories of the Dogra regime, for instance, are frequently recalled when critiquing injustice in contemporary governance structures to justify failing policies – claiming to represent autonomy and self-determination from imposed rule.

5.2 Sites of Resistance: The Forts in Popular Imagination

The symbolic power within the forts’ context is most evident when considered as sites of resistance. The AJK forts have provided sanctuary to rebels, dissidents, and freedom fighters throughout history. For instance, during the anti-Dogra uprisings in the early part of the twentieth century, the forts served as strongholds where numerous state opponents were sheltered and strategically supported.

In this post 1947 period, while continuing to serve as symbols of resistance across the Kashmir region, the struggles depicted by these forts also represent local fights for recognition within predominantly contested narratives. Destruction or restoration of a fort often acquires political significance reflecting allegorically on communal or national aspiration and reality. The spaces

thus become sites which enable mobilization from past to contest present reality and envision possible futures.

5.3 The Fort as a Place of Trauma and Healing

Most people would describe the forts as monuments to commemorate persistence and strength, But in reality, they are also places of anguish and grief. Many have experienced violence, suffering, and even displacement these structures. Conflicts alone make these events worse. There is tangible evidence in the physical fabric of forts that demonstrate such events took place—scorched walls mark wounds not only to the structure but to humanity itself, while bullet holes serve as haunting reminders of relentless violence inflicted.

On the other hand however, working towards healing has also brought with it attempts towards restorative action. As conflicts raged on documenting their impact was one step towards healing. Such efforts alongside restoration often lead towards preserving painful history left behind by conflict which can aid in civil reflection deep enough for personal integration into society devoid of discord alongside acceptance of responsibility where needed. Through fostering spaces meant for quiet contemplation permitting remembered thoughts as a process guided gradually facilitates awakening conducive to genuinely shared experiences fostering healing crucial to reconciliation required for peace building processes across regions involved toward sustainable outcomes rooted beyond resolution on foundational harmony tranquility lasting timelessly undisturbed layering extending threads binding invisible between spirits freely flying forevermore at peace safe sheltered recalibrated shaken nevermore rerouted weary sheltered unbreakable beyond norms locked tended infinitely breathed anew embracing blissfully bordered yet boundless essence engulfed tremendously whole wondrous ethereal eternally ageless sacred awaiting embraced unearth origins lost wherever once trampled litany steps forgotten whispered timeless cast aside..."⁷

6. Socio-political Importance in Current Event AJK

6.1 The Fort and the Politics of Identity

In modern AJK, the forts still retain their significance within the socio-political landscape of identity politics. They are a source of heritage, culture, and regional pride and are used as an emblem in debates regarding autonomy and self-determination. Political figures, social activists, and community bodies predominantly draw upon the imagery of the forts to articulate their demands and garner support for their causes.

The forts also act as venues where everyday life practices perform identity rituals that are both mundane and extraordinary such as political routines. Certain aspects of these public events—the Common Cultural Tribute or Independence Day Celebrations—are conducted at the forts which strengthens their association with communal aspiration thus reinforcing its collective status symbols . In this way, this enables fortresses to transform into stages where identity is negotiated politically

6.2 The Forts and the Politics of Space

As noted earlier, the relevance of socio-political issues intersects with the ways the forts structure and organizes space. The geopolitics surrounding the location, access to, and control over these sites reflect even deeper historical struggles over territory, resources as well as power relations. Control over some of these military or state forts elevate local community restrictions on use and engagement, while others managed by heritage or community groups focus on reclaiming and repurposing these spaces for public benefit.⁹

The politics around such uses is further entangled in space because of its nature as a contested area. It suffices to say that most forts fall under proximity of the Line of Control (LoC), which

serves as a border between Indian-Pakistani administered Kashmir. Their militarily strategic location makes them subjects to military operations and line level surveillance; simultaneously their symbolic perception are nationalist and separatist foci united due to one emblematic cause or another.

6.3 The Forts and the Politics of Development

The forts of AJK are also implicated in the politics of development. As places of historical and cultural importance, they tend to attract conservation efforts as well as tourism initiatives which are justified on grounds of economic development and welfare growth. Those initiatives are controversial—some critics raise concerns over commodification of heritage which causes displacement of local people, erasure of subaltern counter-narratives, and solidification hegemonic discourses.

Simultaneously, the restoration and preservation activities associated with the forts can stimulate community participation strategies that lead to capacity building and empowerment. If interested parties are engaged in the management and interpretation process, it is possible through development initiative to change patterns where local community withdrew their feelings towards ownership control autonomy – thus allowing socio-political regulations within framework of social justice sustainable resilient development become achievable.”

7. Forts in the Discourse of Nationalism and Regionalism

7.1 The Forts and the Construction of National Narratives

The history and identity narrative associated with AJK’s forts is contested within Pakistan, as well as in the broader context of the Kashmir dispute. In official narratives, these forts are positioned as representing Islam's legacy in the region, along with its historical resistance to foreign dominance and later assimilation into Pakistani nationalism. Their imagery serves to convey narratives which blend devotion, conflict, togetherness, and destiny in school curricula, popular culture, and state-sponsored architecture.

In parallel, the forts also serve as a space for alternative history countering official history to create contestation. Many people from AJK see the forts as an expression of regional identity based on the History, Culture, and lived experiences of Kashmiri People. The assertion of this identity is frequently expressed as a denial to both Indian and Pakistani claims demonstrating the complicated nature of Nationalism within this region.

7.2 The Forts and the Politics of Regionalism

The regional politics surrounding the quest for autonomy through the assertion of self-identity, as in the case of resisting outside control, hinges significantly on the forts. In AJK, especially regarding calls for more self-governance, political representation, and recognition regionally, there is a conspicuous element of fort utilization as symbols for pride and heritage which arguably galvanizes mobilization processes.

The depiction of historical symbolism associated with resorts is capitalized upon by many regionalists to argue their claims as well as rally backing. This justifies why restoration, maintenance, or beauty treatment given to these bastions are viewed disparagingly through the lens of ‘cultural activism’ where nostalgia meets distinction reconstruction doused with resistance to reclaiming history. Henceforth, greater portions becomes reality to all divergence actively competing to determine essence behind unity-bastion contradiction forts define clashes over activism disguised through walls.

7.3 The Forts and the International Politics of Kashmir

The forts are relevant in the international relations of the dispute over Kashmir. They feature regularly in diplomatic activities, reporting, and advocacy work as symbols of the region’s

contested nature and its quest for self-determination. The depiction of the forts in global debates is part of the contest over recognition and representation in the conflict.

This gap makes it more significant than it would be otherwise by virtue of its inclusion in heritage lists, intellectual works, or cultural diplomacy. Advocates portray them as primary symbols crafting a compelling narrative for international attention in order to encourage appropriate action on their behalf. Thus, these forts have also become powerful emblems not only of transnational belonging but also localistic nationality and community identity.

8. Preservation, Heritage and Politics of Conservation

8.1 Issues in Heritage Preservation

The preservation of the AJK forts faces numerous technical and political challenges. Fortified structures face severe threats from disrepair, lack of maintenance, environmental harm, urban pressure, and rampant development. Other factors impeding effective conservation effort include lack of financial resources, specialized human capital, and lack of institutional support as well as inadequate infrastructure.

With regard to preservation issues intertwined with political instability and an unrecognized region borders further link unresolved ethnic tensions complicating access to these regions. Unfortunately historical contexts such through wars of aggression cause difficulties access undergo control restriction zone which adds additional challenge because there are many different parties involved; over the years countless organization aiming achieving preserving cultural values have shrunk down population in clashes within armed forces sociologists architects which raises levels conflicting purposes needs towards dissatisfaction that comes beyond appeal divert dealing chaos multitude organizations like serving government military cultural institution where all those aim optics heritage along local residents tempered polarization violence neglect confusion multitude diaspora global diverse disparate range putting everything need balance into on thumb joint compression toward resolve carve out satisfy jumble goals driving social limbo fur diluted cluster out avoid too clamp guided ruthless assembly pliable framework fill.

8.2 The Politics of Conservation: Whose Heritage?

The struggle surrounding heritage discourse is particularly salient in the case of building preservation. Every restoration decision on a certain fort's narrative, and its management structure, entails intricate political processes that touch on deeper conflicts over identity, validation, and control. Designating some forts as heritage sites can promote "official" versions of history while ignoring alternative narratives. On the other hand, exclusion creates injustice and marginalization.¹⁰

To enable dialogue and avert conflict driven by power disparities due to inequality of narrative voices within socio-political systems embedded in the forts' heritage management structures, attempts to include local communities are critical. Moreover, incorporating democracy at the grassroots level requires sensitive meaning-making through multi-initiative narration built by all levels of society. The urgency for this remains unresolved.

8.3 Heritage, Tourism, and Sustainable Development

Advocacy for the forts to be used as heritage tourism sites is justified by projecting economic growth and cultural rejuvenation.¹¹ Indeed, tourism can enhance income generation, job creation, foster intercultural interactions, and achieve sustainable development goals. The negative side to this is that commoditization of heritage may lead to cultural appropriation, environmental harms, or reinforce dominant narratives.

To mitigate the risks posed to local communities alongside protecting the historical integrity of the forts during heritage tourism development, it is crucial to implement robust models focusing

on inclusion alongside sustainability.¹² this includes proactive measures on infrastructure and capacity building together with community engagement featuring responsible tourism which curtails nuisances while boosting benefits.

9. Conclusion

The Azad Jammu and Kashmir region's historical forts are not simple architectural artifacts; rather they embody the intricate history that defines the geo-political contours and socio-political conflicts shaping contemporary cultural identity of the region¹³ They reflect fundamental struggles concerning power relations such as domination and resistance defining conflict alongside other layers of identity reconstructing life in AJK exercising collective memory over recent memories.

The architecture, history, and contemporary significance of the forts reveal complex multilayered meanings. They are seen not only as symbols of local and regional identity and pride, heritage, and nationalism but also as spaces where identity politics play out on social landscapes and where narratives of history clash. Furthermore, the forts are embroiled in the discourse surrounding nationalism versus regionalism in India as well as the global conversations about Kashmir.¹⁴

The advancement of initiatives to conserve and promote these sites comes with intricate obstacles intertwined within cultural, ethical, political domains along with social justice. Striking a balance is essential while planning for development and restoration. Community engagement fosters interpretive collaboration that acknowledges diverse historical narratives which allows for dialogue. Therefore, the aim could then shift toward making the forts catalysts towards reconciliation and sustainable development instead of conflict zones¹⁵

In the area characterized by turmoil and struggle, the forts of AJK represent major symbols; at once, they recollect a divided past and illuminate optimism for a Pluralistic and tranquil tomorrow. It is important to grasp their symbolism and socio-political relevance not merely for heritage conservation but also as a means to foster dialogue and reconciliation in a region that is still coping with the burdens of history coupled with contemporary realities.

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