अभिनवधारा
ABHINAVDHARA
International Journal of Innovation in Indic Studies
ISSN: 2583-5149
SPECIAL EDITION -2, VOL- 3
SEPTEMBER 2026
www.ijiis-org.com
SHRIJANSHODH 2026: International Conference on Indian Knowledge Systems, Art, Design, Wellness, and Cultural Heritage Date: 29-30 August 2026
SRIJANSHODH2026-93

Augmenting the Sacred: How AR and VR Can Document Indian Temple Heritage - Insights from Hidimba Devi and Mahasu Devta Temples

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Abstract

The traditional temple architecture in India is the culmination of centuries of knowledge – sacred geometry, iconography, ritual symbolism and craftsmanship – expressed through its carvings, architecture and spatial concepts. With growing interest and opportunity in heritage documentation using Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) technology, much of the current work has focused on improving reconstruction techniques, virtual museums and heritage tourism experiences. Consideration for accurately representing the symbolism, spatial practices and sensorial experience of these living heritage sites – rooted in Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) has been limited. There is a need to explore how these technologies can support retention of cultural and spiritual symbolism to avoid creating merely hollow replicas that are technically accurate but lack inherent meaning. Through review of related literature and primary site observations of two unique living heritage temples in India – the Hidimba Devi Mandir in Manali (HP) and the Mahasu Devta Temple in Hanol (UK) – this paper explores how AR/VR could be used to document and study traditional temple heritage in meaningful ways that align with traditional principles. Both these temples were chosen due to their unique wooden pagoda-style structure, elaborate use of sacred geometry and iconography in their carvings, as well as ongoing cultural and ritual significance to the local community. Data collected from each site included architecture, symbolism, spatial practices and visitor experience. Concepts from Vastu Shastra and traditional iconography are used to frame a discussion on potential AR/VR interpretation of these sites across four themes: Architecture & Iconography, Symbolism & Storytelling, Sacred Geometry & Spatial Experience and User Experience. This paper presents a starting point for other heritage professionals and digital documentation researchers to approach AR/VR experiences of Indian cultural heritage sites from the perspective of Indian Knowledge Systems.

Keywords: *Augmented Reality, Virtual Reality, Indian Knowledge Systems, Temple Heritage, Sacred Architecture*.

Research Objectives:

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- To understand how/if existing AR/VR heritage applications have considered Indian temple heritage as constituted not just by technical forms, but also by symbolic, spatial and experiential frameworks.
- To analyze the architecture, iconography, and sacred-geometric programming of two study-site temples, Hidimba Devi Temple (Manali) and Mahasu Devta Temple (Hanol), to identify elements relevant to an IKS-grounded interpretation approach.
- To develop a proposed approach to AR/VR interpretation grounded in Indian Knowledge Systems, structured along the dimensions of architectural documentation; symbolic meaning/architecture; sacred geometry; and visitor experience.
- To understand if/how such an approach could be applied to heritage sites beyond these two case studies, to Himalayan temple heritage more broadly.

Methodology:

Study Design: Qualitative inquiry performed at two stages. The First Stage is literature review there are three domains — (a) Usage of AR/VR technologies in heritage and museum contexts, (b) Indian Knowledge Systems, especially as they relate to principles of sacred architecture, geometry, and temple iconography, (c) Best practices from heritage interpretation more generally and/or digital preservation of intangible heritage. Then comes to a second Stage is Site Observation (Case Study) This phase comprises direct observation at two user-selected Hindu temple sites. Sites were selected due to their nature as living heritage landmarks - that is, functioning temples with regular visitor access, maintained wood carving traditions, and unique architectural styles. These two sites were ***Hidimba Devi*** Temple at Manali, Himachal Pradesh and ***Mahasu Devta*** Temple at ***Hanol***, Uttarakhand. Both were chosen due to their striking wooden pagoda-style architecture and history of wood carving, while being situated in different Himalayan regions and serving unique patron temple deities. The user will visit each site and collect information on architectural dimensions, iconography, site layout and pilgrimage ritual, as well as visitor experience (movement through ritual sites, activities engaged in, etc.) as observed on their visits. This information will be recorded in good ethnographic research tradition through note-taking, photography, and short interviews when possible. After that the study focus on Data Analysis: Information from both the literature review and field study will be compiled into a brief report, organized around each of the four major themes. Major ideas and conclusions from each piece of information will be organized along each thematic axis to develop the proposed approach. As per Sampling Justification The study adopts a two-site case study methodology, opting for temples that, while exhibiting similar Himalayan architectural traits, also presented enough differences to allow for some degree of broader applicability.

1. Introduction

Indian temple architecture is the embodiment of the heritage of knowledge, craft, and culture, when elements such as geometry, iconography, symbolism, ritual, and space are critical. It is impossible to describe Indian temples solely as buildings since temple architecture is inevitably associated with the religious meaning, culture, heritage, knowledge, and practices. The emergence of the digital technologies offers new means of capturing, visualizing, preserving, and interpreting cultural heritage. Among the new possibilities provided by new technologies are Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR). AR and VR have been identified as important media in the context of interpreting cultural

heritage and experience. As it was stated by Ramtohul and Khedo (2024), AR system in the context of cultural heritage should not be viewed in the context of technological aspects only; the process of research should consider user learning, emotions, experience, presentation, and other aspects. In a similar way, Partarakis et al. (2026) integrate technological system, experience, and interpretation of cultural heritage in the context of immersive media.

AR and VR technologies could be considered complementary in the context of cultural heritage. Thanks to adding data digitally to the cultural heritage site's environment, AR can aid in visualizing architecture, history, iconography, and cultural heritage within its correct context. At the same time, the advantage of VR technology is that it can provide a tour of the cultural heritage site, including its architectural design. Therefore, AR and VR technologies are not only effective in providing digital images of monuments but can also aid in delivering the knowledge concerning cultural heritage (Ramtohul & Khedo, 2024; Partarakis et al., 2026). It is important for the discussion of temple heritage since the knowledge about a temple should not be limited to its exterior but include also the architecture and religion of that place.

The importance of the above theory becomes clear when Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) are considered. In Indian Architecture, aspects like geometry, proportioning, orientation, space designing, and spirituality have all been important for the process of designing architecture. The research studies conducted on the subject of Vāstu and Vāstu Puruṣa Maṇḍala have clearly shown that apart from being a method of planning, geometrical designs have also been associated with sacred space designs (Dutta & Adane, 2014; Majid et al., 2024). Any study of the Indian temples from the perspective of AR/VR needs to take into consideration these aspects of the architectural designs.

The architectural features of Himalayan temples are particularly essential in this research because the architecture of temples is formed in terms of geography, construction material, method, religion, and craftsmanship. According to Bhandari & Paul (2025), the unique characteristics of the architecture of Himachal Pradesh's temples compared to the architecture of other temples are distinctive styles, layer roofs, and the use of wooden and stone materials. The factors that need to be considered in relation to the architecture of temples in Himachal Pradesh include architectural style, proportions and planning, materials, culture and religion, iconography, and symbolism.

In this regard, one can mention the ***Hidimba Devi*** Temple located in Manali as an example for consideration in the field of architecture. As mentioned by Bhandari and Paul (2025), the ***Hidimba Devi*** Temple is the example of multi-tiered and wooden temples of Himachal Pradesh. The distinctive features of the ***Hidimba Devi*** Temple are associated with the multi-tiered roof with the steep slope, carvings on wood and stones (Bhandari & Paul, 2025). Thus, wooden construction, wood carving and roof canals make the temple an object of research in the field of architecture and iconography. In turn, the ***Mahasu Devta*** Temple, located in Hanol (Uttarakhand), is a good example of the unique Himalayan architecture and culture. In this respect, it should be pointed out that it is impossible to speak about the architectural construction without mentioning the living culture of the temple. In this regard, as mentioned by Vyas, Nagal, and Dhanda (2025), the ***Mahasu Devta*** culture is spiritual practice involving myths, legends, rituals, festivals, folk arts, music and dances.

Both temples have been chosen because both of them share the same religious culture and also they both have different features in terms of architecture and culture. ***Hidimba Devi*** temple helps in

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examining the wooden construction of multi-storeyed building, whereas ***Mahasu Devta*** temple helps in studying the stone-wooden construction along with its religious and cultural significance. The researcher visited both these temples to obtain information regarding their architecture and visitors.

2. Literature Review

2.1 AR/VR in Cultural Heritage

The use of AR, VR, and XR technologies for documentation, reconstruction, visualization, education, interpretation, and involvement of visitors in the field of cultural heritage is increasingly common. With AR, it is possible to combine digital content with the environment of cultural heritage, whereas with VR, it is possible to create a purely digital immersive environment in which it would be possible for users to explore the reconstructed or digitized cultural heritage site. The results of the studies related to AR that have been conducted in the field of cultural heritage showed that it is important to analyze the efficiency of this technology not only in terms of technical performance, but also in terms of other factors such as the learning process of users, their emotions and experience, used systems, presentation techniques and technical implementation of the process (Ramtohul & Khedo, 2024). It is relevant to mention this aspect in relation to more recent technologies of XR as well (Partarakis et al., 2026).

In this respect, Partarakis et al. (2026) say that "technological development in itself will not be enough; culturally relevant outcomes are possible through interaction design, evaluation and participatory process guided by ethical considerations." In other words, it is not enough only to use technological development, but it is also necessary to take into account interaction design, evaluation, and participation in order to reach the culturally relevant outcome. It is extremely important in case of interpretation of living temple heritage, since apart from creating a virtual replica of tangible heritage, it is also necessary to provide cultural meaning behind it. Therefore, while AR/VR studies are considered to be the basis for digital heritage interpretation, they still demonstrate the necessity of taking into account cultural context, interaction and participation.

2.2 Architecture and Iconography

Digital technology can also be used for the purpose of architectural visualization in cultural heritage. But having the proper digital rendering of the architecture would give no insight into the culture behind the structures. The research conducted to learn about the architecture of the temples of Himalayas showed that the architecture of the region was influenced by geography, climate, available building materials, construction techniques, craftwork, and religion. While conducting research about the architecture of temples of Himachal Pradesh, the ***Nagara*** style of architecture was found in addition to the Himalayan architecture. The use of wood and stone in the construction of temples has been emphasized by Bhandari & Paul (2025). Other aspects related to the architecture of temples in Himachal Pradesh include architectural form, planning, proportions, construction material, culture and religion, iconography, and symbolism.

In regard to the development of the temple architecture in Himachal Pradesh, Bhandari and Paul (2025) note that “the period of 15th and 16th centuries was characterized by the appearance of the architecture of multi-tiered timber temples, the main example of which is ***Hidimba Devi*** Temple located in Manali.” Moreover, according to Bhandari and Paul (2025), special attention needs to be paid to the slope roof and carvings made from wood and stones. Finally, it is necessary to note that the relationship between

the local architectural traditions and ***Kath-Khuni*** technique is mentioned in the article by Bhandari and Paul (2025).

The relevance of the discussed findings for the research is connected with the necessity to investigate the temple architecture from various angles. In particular, apart from the architectural characteristics of the ***Hidimba Devi*** Temple, it is necessary to discuss timber structure, roof form, carving techniques, materials, etc. Hence, AR/VR technology may be used for this purpose.

2.3 Symbolism and Storytelling

Architectural structures cannot be analyzed and especially cannot be reduced to their physicality as there is a lot in common between the architecture and religion, philosophy, cosmology and culture. As seen from the literature on the topic, the connection between geometry, cosmology, spirituality, proportion and spatial configuration in traditional architecture in India cannot be overlooked. Majid et al. (2024) states that "the architectural tradition of India was the knowledge system in which science, arts, philosophy and spirituality were integrated."

It is important to say that in this regard, it should be mentioned that, according to Majid et al. (2024), "architecture in India was never reduced to mere engineering but embodied a worldview that integrated science, art and spirituality." It means that the architecture in India could not be confined only to engineering as it included certain worldview in which science, art and spirituality were united. It is worth saying that this perspective is very important for analysis of the digital heritage because it means that visualization of the temple cannot be reduced to its physicality.

This becomes all the more significant when it comes to the instance of the discussion on the ***Mahasu Devta*** Temple of Hanol. The significance of ***Mahasu Devta***, from a cultural point of view, is not just limited to the temple but also extends to myths, legends, religion, festivals, folk art, music, dance, and community participation (Vyas, Nagal, & Dhanda, 2025). This means that while considering the application of augmented and virtual reality technologies for the interpretation of this heritage site, it is important to take into account both tangible and intangible heritage.

2.4 Sacred Geometry and Spatial Experience

Sacred geometry and the organization of space have a great role in the heritage of Indian temple architecture. Considering the point of view of the knowledge systems used in India, geometry, proportionality, orientation, and the organization of space have the connection with the ideas of cosmology and philosophy. Majid et al. (2024) talk about the link between mathematical precision and cosmological symbolism in the context of Indian architecture. Thus, it can be concluded that the geometry used in the sacred architecture is not only the instrument for construction but the component of the knowledge system as well. In addition, Bhandari and Paul (2025) highlight planning, proportion, architectural forms, building materials, and features of space as the most important factors of the temple architecture in the Himalayas. Nevertheless, the lack of studies is observed concerning the use of the traditional features of the spatial organization in the virtual environment. Although the three-dimensional digital model of the temple can illustrate its walls, roofs, carvings, and other visual details, it cannot show the connections between the architectural elements, movement inside the sacred space, orientation, and the qualities of space.

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Therefore, for future studies, it is crucial that AR/VR applications do not merely show what a temple looks like but also demonstrate how its architectural structure, spatial relationships, and organization influence the experience and understanding of the sacred space.

2.5 User Experience

User experience is another key component that can be considered in connection with the use of AR/VR technologies for the preservation of cultural heritage. It has been found that the use of immersive technologies could provide better engagement, learning, interaction, and interest related to the cultural heritage sites, but all these components of user experience are greatly dependent on certain factors such as usability, interaction design, accessibility, content quality, technology performance, and evaluation (Ramtohul & Khedo, 2024; Partarakis et al., 2026).

Nevertheless, it should be noted that Partarakis et al. (2026) argue that meaningful user experience in terms of cultural heritage sites cannot be provided only through technical development of technology. Issues related to usability, authenticity, accessibility, interpretation, and cultural responsibility should also be addressed. It is especially relevant for the temple heritage because the digital representation of cultural heritage sites could be viewed as an interpretation of the surrounding environment.

This means that in terms of the present study, user experience does not only consist of technical and immersive satisfactions but is more of a process in which the use of the AR/VR technology helps in gaining understanding of the architecture, iconography, the stories, space, and real connection with the heritage site.

2.6 Synthesis of Literature

From the above literature review, it is clear that the AR/VR technology holds many potentials in terms of cultural heritage with respect to documentation, visualization, education, interpretation, and participation. In addition, studies on the temples of the Himalayas and the Indian knowledge systems have been very instrumental in terms of learning the architecture, construction materials, craftsmanship, geometry, spirituality, and the culture.

It is clear from the literature review conducted that the reading of the digital heritage would be possible only by taking into account architecture and iconography, symbolism and narration, sacred geometry and space experience and user experience of them. It is especially true for the temple heritage which is alive because it is based on the combination of the structure, cultural narratives, indigenous knowledge, sacred space and user experience.

The comparative analysis of the ***Hidimba Devi*** Temple and the ***Mahasu Devta*** Temple will provide an interesting case of this research in terms of two very different Himalayas. Whereas the ***Hidimba Devi*** Temple is an inexhaustible source for the study of wooden architecture expression, tier structures, carving and iconography, the ***Mahasu Devta*** Temple can serve as an interesting case of studying the link between sacred architecture and living culture of Indian mythology, storytelling and rituals. All these elements together with the study of AR/VR will enable us to consider the possibility of using these technologies not for virtual imitations of temples but for culturally relevant interpretation of Indian temple heritage.

Discussion

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Our research about the temples devoted to different gods and goddesses of Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand during my trips to the region has been not only religious and tourist activity but has also become an important means of comprehending the cultural heritage, folk belief, architecture, sculpture, and oral tradition of the Himalayas. In fact, my trip to the ***Hidimba Devi*** Temple in Manali and ***Mahasu Devta*** Temple in ***Hanol*** proved to me that merely considering them as static religious shrines was insufficient. What made them culturally significant were their stories, local people's faith, temple architecture, images of gods, metal and wooden sculptures, rituals, and oral tradition.

Interactions with the locals and those involved with these temples at the time of my visit confirmed that the history of these locations goes beyond being written in books, but still has significant relevance in the culture and religion of the locals on a day-to-day basis. This observation aligns with the results obtained through the research conducted by Bansal, Thakur, and Sharma (2024), according to which the cult of deities in the ***Kullu*** valley goes beyond just temples and has a huge impact on the social and cultural lives of the locals. The locals residing in the ***Kullu*** valley consider the place to be the "***Devbhumi***" and "Tharah Kardu" (Bansal, Thakur & Sharma, 2024: 666–667).

Mahasu Devta Temple: Religious Faith, Architecture, and Living Tradition



Figure:1, Source: Author

The first and foremost thing I learned from our research on the ***Mahasu Devta*** Temple was that ***Mahasu*** is not any single individual. It has been believed and as per the documentation provided by the Uttarakhand government, ***Mahasu Devta*** symbolizes the four brothers including ***Bautha Mahasu, Basik Mahasu, Pabasi Mahasu***, and ***Chalda Mahasu***. However, it must be noted that according to Uttarakhand government documentation, ***Bautha Mahasu*** resides in ***Hanol, Basik Mahasu*** in ***Thadiyar, Pabasi Mahasu*** in Mahendrath and ***Chalda Mahasu*** is a moving god.

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Through the field study conducted by me, the discussions with the locals helped me gain knowledge about the myth behind these four brothers and their respective roles. It has become clear through the discussions with the locals that whereas the first three brothers have association with particular places, ***Chalda Mahasu*** is a moving god and he is not associated with any single place.

It can be concluded from the above-mentioned information that the process of migration is not peculiar to Uttarakhand only but also takes place in Himachal Pradesh. In this regard, the phenomenon of ***Chalda Mahasu*** does not relate only to the one temple and one area but also to the dynamic Himalayan culture. However, taking into account different opinions of locals about the tradition, it is possible to conclude that the concept of "six months in Uttarakhand and six months in Himachal" should be treated in this case as an oral tradition of locals.

However, there is also some additional information related to the described religious tradition. Firstly, it is necessary to say that concerning the architecture of ***Mahasu*** temple it is possible to state that it can be called ***Kath-Kuni*** or ***Koti-Banal*** architectural style. This is a typical architectural style for Himalayas due to the fact that construction in this area is usually built of local materials stone and wood.

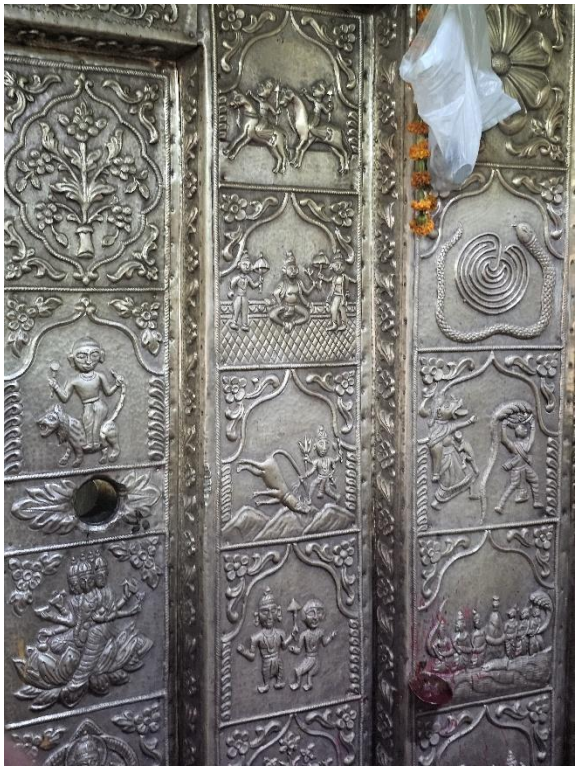


Figure:2

Source:https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mahasu_Devta_Temple_Silver_Wall_Embossing.jpg

According to my observations, as illustrated in figure 2, the entrance area of the temple and the decoration in the entrance doorway were very impressive. The metal sheets which were used in the temple entrance and decorated with different images of gods and other religious symbols seem to be one of the most important icons of the temple. Metal sheets should not be considered merely as a

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decorative material. According to my findings, the metal sheets not only carry different symbols and deities of religion but also the beliefs of people in the entrance of the temple. Therefore, visiting the temple would be both a visual and religious experience.

The reason for studying iconography is because each and every image, symbol, expression, posture, and decoration carries some sort of religious or cultural meaning. Hence, it cannot be considered as "sculptural ornamentation" of the ***Mahasu*** Temple.

The religious importance of the deity ***Mahasu*** is also linked with justice. It is evident from the tourist places of the state of Uttarakhand that the deity is described as the god of justice and also the method of resolving disputes. This makes it clear that the religious importance of the temple has much more to do than just worshipping and sightseeing.

Hidimba Devi Temple: Myth, Female Power, and Architecture



Figure:3, Source: Author

Hidimba Devi Temple case study is a fascinating phenomenon, which is not any less interesting and important than that of ***Mahasu Devta*** Temple. As noted by Bansal, Thakur and Sharma (2024), Hidimba Devi Temple is one of the most religious destinations and located at ***Dhungri***, Manali. In this research paper, religious significance of Hidimba Devi Temple in regard to religious tourism in the ***Kullu*** Valley is analyzed. ***Hidimba Devi*** Temple is depicted as one of the most important gods during local religious rituals, while the connection between ***Hidimba Devi*** Temple and ***Dhungri*** forest is revealed (Bansal, Thakur & Sharma, 2024: 668-670).

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According to my personal visit to the temple, it is possible to claim that both temple and its environment are extremely important.



Figure: 4, Source: Author

Figure: 4 reveals that the temple does not exist alone within the thick forest of Deodar/Pine trees. It does not stand alone as a building as nature, religion, and architecture altogether form the concept of a temple. It can thus be stated from the visit to the surrounding of the temple that nature has an important role to play in the architectural design of the temple.

The story of ***Hidimba Devi*** comes from the Indian epic ***Mahabharata.*** According to traditions and as stated by Bansal et al., (2024), ***Hidimba Devi*** was the sister of **Hidimba** who came to ***Pandavas*** when ***Pandavas*** were camping at ***Kamyaka*** forest. ***Hidimba Devi*** loved ***Bhima***, fought against his brother for the benefit of Pandavas and got married to Bhima. It is considered that ***Ghatotkacha***, the son of ***Hidimba Devi***, took part in the war of ***Mahabharata.***

It has been observed that the most significant aspect of this legend is the character of ***Hidimba***. In the traditional narrative, she cannot be viewed merely as a ***Rakshasi*** (demoness). Within the story, she emerges as a woman who makes decisions based on her own judgment, prioritizes love and compassion, assists the Pandavas by going against her own family, and later raises her son independently. For this reason, the story of ***Hidimba*** can also be interpreted through the lenses of female power, independent decision-making, sacrifice, and motherhood.

The research paper notes a local belief that, following intense penance, ***Hidimba*** transformed into a divine figure ***Hidimba Devi*** and became the guardian deity of the region. It was based on this religious conviction that a temple dedicated to her was established in the ***Dhungri*** forest (Bansal, Thakur & Sharma, 2024: 669). Thus, Hidimba Devi's identity evolves beyond that of a mere mythological character into that of a living deity.

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Architecture and Iconography of the Hidimba Temple



Figure: 5

Source: https://airial.travel/attractions/india/manali/hidimba-devi-temple-3ttfGtCs

Another aspect of the temple architecture has become the subject of my analysis. Figure: 5 The temple architecture that includes wooden construction, carvings and the nature around the temple makes this temple unique among other temples of the Himalayas. In accordance with literature on this topic, this temple was built in 1553 CE by Raja Bahadur Singh (Bansal, Thakur & Sharma, 2024: 669). This temple is located on the sacred rock and its architecture consists of wooden constructions. Multi-layered roof with wooden constructions and projections is the characteristic feature of the architecture of the temple.

While visiting the temple, I have paid a special attention to wooden carvings as they are important not only from the point of view of decoration but also because they embody the culture and religion of the place.

In order to understand the iconography of the ***Hidimba*** temple, it is necessary to study the elements of its architecture.

They include wooden construction, tiered spire/roof, carvings, sacred rock, and the nature around the temple.

It is also important to note the significant role that natural elements play in the temple traditions and the culture of local deities in the ***Kullu*** Valley. According to Bansal et al. (2024), the tradition of deities in the ***Kullu*** Valley is deeply intertwined with villages, forests, rivers, and the mountainous landscape (Bansal, Thakur & Sharma, 2024: 666–667). The Hidimba Temple appears to be a prime example of this, where it is difficult to perceive the temple and the forest as separate entities.

Oral History and the Role of the Local Community

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The first thing that I would like to highlight from the field visit is the fact that the information about the temple has been obtained not only from the written sources but also from the local residents. The legends of local residents helped me to learn some information regarding the history of the temple, relations between the temple and gods and religions that cannot be found in the literature.

This aspect is also confirmed by the methodology that was applied by Bansal et al. (2024). The authors have interviewed 20 people including the local residents of ***Dhungri*** and Old Manali and also the temple personnel such as ***Pujari, Kardar***, and ***Deulu***. Some such issues as ***Mahabharata***, legend about ***Bhima*** and ***Hidimba*** and ***Tharah Kardu*** tradition (Bansal, Thakur & Sharma, 2024: 670-671) were revealed during the interviews.

Therefore, it should be stated that the heritage of the Himalayan temples involves not only the tangible heritage of the temples. The heritage includes at least three layers:

- tangible heritage – temple, wood, stone, metal, carvings, architecture.
- Intangible Heritage- Folklore, religion beliefs, practices, myth about the deities and oral tradition.

Religious activities such as worship, celebration, pilgrimage and social functions that take place in modern times among the indigenous people.

In simpler words, while recording a temple, one must not restrict ourselves to the physical aspects of it alone.

The Challenge of Religious Tourism and Conservation

Based on the study undertaken by Bansal et al. (2024), the following are some of the major issues faced by the religious tourism of Hidimba Devi Temple, which includes overcrowding, waste disposal, water supply, hygienic sanitation facilities, parking issue, overpricing, and lack of information center (Bansal, Thakur & Sharma, 2024: 670-672).

From my own observation, increase in number of tourists in the religious place can be attributed to the economic activities and generation of employment opportunities, despite the strain caused on the heritage site. Increase in number of tourists in the religious place means that there will be not only increase in economic activity but also strain in terms of the physical aspect, environment, natural resources and culture of the area.

With this view in mind, therefore, the strategy to develop heritage tourism in the future should be different from the strategy, which involved attraction of tourists. The strategy should now involve making tourists aware of the heritage.

Potential for Digital Conservation of Himalayan Temples via AR/VR

One of the solutions that I have provided through my research work is the use of AR and VR technologies for preserving and interpreting the heritage of the Himalayan temples. It is not possible to preserve the complete culture of temple through photographs and documentation. This is because there are various elements of the culture like wooden carving, metal inscription, architecture, religious significance, space arrangement, and even the local oral tradition, which may get damaged.

अभिनवधारा
ABHINAVDHARA
International Journal of Innovation in Indic Studies
ISSN: 2583-5149
SPECIAL EDITION -2, VOL- 3
SEPTEMBER 2026
www.ijiis-org.com
SHRIJANSHODH 2026: International Conference on Indian Knowledge Systems, Art, Design, Wellness, and Cultural Heritage Date: 29-30 August 2026

For this, I would like to propose the concept of "Virtual Himalayan Heritage Ecosystem". Through the three-dimensional digital technology, it can be used to document the temples of ***Hidimba Devi*** Temple and ***Mahasu Devta*** Temple as well as other temples of Himalayan Temples in the future.

Through this virtual ecosystem, the complete virtual tour experience as well as the complete digital heritage archive of the temple would be made available. For example,

- Complete 3D architectural scanning of the temple
- Virtual reconstruction of the exterior and interior
- High-resolution documentation of every major wood carving
- Digital archive of metal plates and engraved religious figures
- Documentation of the temple entrance, roof, pillars, walls, and sacred spaces
- Clickable information on every icon/symbol
- Audio narration of folklore associated with the temple
- Video/audio interviews capturing the oral histories of local people
- Timeline of the temple's construction and architectural evolution
- Storytelling based on the Mahabharata and local folklore
- Immersive documentation of festivals and religious processions
- Comparative visualization of the old and current temple structures
- Interpretation provided in Hindi, English, and the local language
- Viewing additional information via mobile at the physical site using AR mode
- Virtual visits in VR mode for users unable to physically reach the temple.

Thus, the virtual environment will not merely serve as a medium for tourism but can become a platform for digital documentation, education, research, and heritage preservation.

The need for detailed documentation prior to digital preservation

However, despite that, the very first thing to consider in the development of the AR/VR ecosystem for the temple is its proper documentation. Not having enough information regarding the architecture, iconography, and culture of the temple would mean that the 3D rendering of the temple would be merely the virtual representation of it and not its heritage documentation.

Thus, it is important to document all the temples in their proper way. The documentation should cover –

Measurements → material→ construction technique → space organization → iconography → inscriptions/engravings → religious importance → oral traditions → rituals →practices → surroundings → history references.

Figure:6

Source: Author

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For example, in Figure: 6 the process of documenting the ***Mahasu*** Temple, simply taking the scan of the outer structure of the temple would not be sufficient. The documentation should include metal plaques on the door of the temple, the images carved on those plaques, the religious importance of the interior of the temple, iconography linked to four ***Mahasu*** brothers and the local significance of the temple. Furthermore, while documenting the ***Hidimba*** Temple, one should not restrict himself/herself only to the ***pagoda*** style roof of the temple Figure 3.

From this perspective, AR/VR technology will not replace heritage; instead, it will serve as a medium to preserve information about that heritage and make it accessible.

Conclusion

Nevertheless, the field research conducted in these two temples proves that the information about religious heritage of the Himalayas provided by temple architecture and tourism is inadequate. One can find architecture, iconography, mythology, nature, folklore, and local culture in these two temples.

The worship of the four brothers ***Mahasu Devta*** and ***Chalda Mahasu*** is yet another case of living religious tradition, which provides the feeling of community unity beyond geography. Furthermore, the worship of ***Hidimba Devi*** transforms a character from mythology into the patron goddess of the area. The styles of the architecture of these two temples are consistent with the cultural context of Kath-Kuni in case of ***Mahasu Devta*** Temple and Wooden ***Pagoda*** in case of ***Hidimba Devi*** Temple.

From my field work and interviews with local population I understood that the distinguishing characteristic of the two temples is their life. Thus, the history of these two temples does not belong to stone, wood and metals, but to the collective memory of the people.

Thus, any future attempts at preserving these temples should consider both physical and virtual methods of protecting these temples. The virtual project could be called "Virtual Himalayan Heritage Ecosystem" which could be developed through the use of augmented and virtual reality. This will give future generations not only the chance to view the pictures of the temples, but to learn more about architectural peculiarities of the temples as well as listen to the stories about the temples from the local population.

The main goal of the proposed project is not just to develop virtual touristic destinations, but to digitize the memories, legends, arts, and architecture of these temples. Thus, augmented and virtual realities cannot be viewed just as technological advancements, but also as scientific research and preservation method.

Results and Findings

Mahashu Devta Temple and ***Hidimba Devi*** Temple are the two temples that have been analyzed through visiting these temples and collecting data about their history, religion, architecture, and significance in local culture through the locals, the people connected with these temples, and the people who live in the area. It can be seen that the temples of the Himalayas are not just religious places but also a part of local history and mythology.

Two things that could be noted during the process of analyzing the ***Mahashu Devta*** temple are the architecture and decoration of its entrance. The entrance of the temple is decorated by metal plates bearing inscriptions of various gods and religious symbols. It is important to point out that, in addition

to decorating the entrance of the temple, the mentioned above inscriptions reflect beliefs and traditions of art of this temple. What concerns the information gathered from the locals, ***Mahashu Devta*** is considered to be four brothers. It is necessary to note that the fourth brother does not have his own temple because he is said to wander around the world and never rest in one place.

Observations and research work about the ***Hidimba Devi*** temple have shown how unique this building is from an architectural point of view. Such architectural features include multi-layered wooden roofs, wood carvings, overhanging roofs, and environment. As noted by Bansal et al. (2024), the existing ***Hidimba Devi*** temple was built at the initiative of Maharaja Bahadur Singh in 1553 CE and serves as a religious tourism destination within the deodar forest of **Dhungri**. The religious importance of this temple is associated with the ***Mahabharata*** story of ***Hidimba*** and includes ***Bhima, Hidimba***, and ***Ghatotkacha*** (Bansal et al., 2024). Personal visit to the temple proved its connection with the surrounding forest environment.

One of the most significant findings of the research is that even when heritage remains physically preserved, the preservation of the heritage of these temples cannot be guaranteed. The concerns such as increasing tourism, overcrowding, waste generation, problems with respect to parking, water, and sanitation are some of the biggest concerns of these religious heritage sites (Bansal et al., 2024). It is in this perspective that the development of the concept of virtual heritage using AR/VR technology will be useful as it will help capture different aspects of the temples.

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