

THE MOSQUE CONSERVATION PROJECT IN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The Spal Bandai Village Community Mosque in Swat, Pakistan, a fine example of traditional architecture, was under threat of demolition. It is the only community owned property in the village. With the support of Prince Claus Fund (PCF) this mosque was recently restored by professional architects and the building was returned to its original splendour. This paper documents the conservation process highlighting the special physical features of the mosque and the role of the community in the process.

Keywords: Community, Mosque, *Jumaat* (assembly), Conservation

INTRODUCTION

The Spal Bandai Village Community Mosque in Swat,

northern Pakistan, is a classic example of traditional Swati Mosque architecture, with exquisitely carved wooden columns, wood structural frame, stone masonry and winter and summer prayer areas (Figures 1, 2). The mosque as a building type and institution has historically served social functions in Muslim societies, besides that of being a place of worship. There are also regional variations or interpretations to its use or built expressions. The word used for mosque in the local Pushto language is *jumaat*, which implies a gathering place. The Spal Bandai mosque truly is a community mosque serving the village for larger Friday and Eid prayer congregations and some social gatherings, besides everyday five-time prayers. It also has the distinction of being the only community owned property in the village.

The trustees were recently struggling to meet the spatial needs of a fast growing 'catchment' community, which spans



Figure 1: Location of Spal Bandai village community mosqu in Swat

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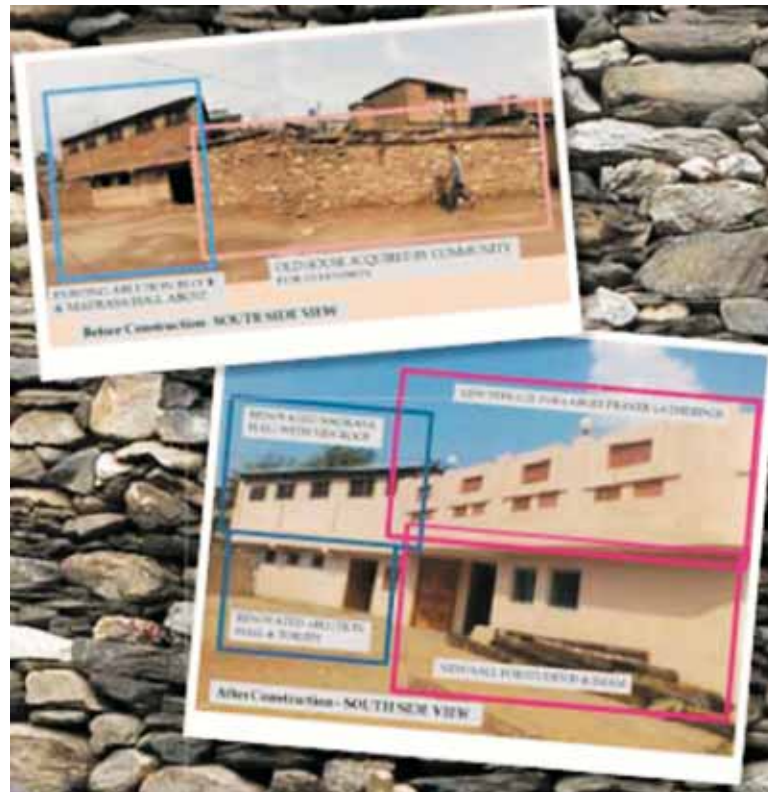


Figure 2: Images taken before and after the renovation of the mosque.

the extensions of the village into the countryside. Some of its portions had also become damaged and so the structure was being considered too dangerous for further use. Having recently gone through the trauma of conflict, the villagers were running scarce on the traditionally gathered resources for maintenance. Thus the mosque, now one of the few traditional Swati mosques still standing, could have been doomed to demolition.

With the support of the Prince Claus Fund (PCF), Swat Participatory Council (SPC) professionally engaged architects as Project Managers and Project Coordinators an attempt was made to save this building from demolition. It was successfully restored to its original glory through a formal Conservation and Extension project carried out in 2013. There was an effort to follow, as much as possible, the international principles for conservation work, including the preservation of authenticity, documentation and reversibility of additions (Chitty, 2016; Albert, et.al, 2015).

An extension component as well as some upgradation of the mosque and its surrounds was planned. An attempt was made in this effort to preserve the original overall character

of the heritage structure. Positive new interventions were carried out only where deemed necessary. Community participation was made an essential component of the project by both PCF and SPC and was very much appreciated by the villagers.

There was also much community support in the endeavour. Financially, villagers raised funds to acquire additional land for the extension and provided hospitality to all the workers throughout the project cycle. Managerially, the mosque committee worked with the SPC team and, socially, they instilled a new sense of pride in the village regarding their rich local heritage.

This paper documents the process of restoration and conservation of the mosque, the impact on the community and their engagement in the process.

DOCUMENTATION

The documentation phase was carried out in the beginning with the SPC technical team preparing the measured CAD drawings of the mosque and related documents for the

Conservation Plan. These were further reviewed and updated as work continued. Special patterns and details were recorded (Figures 3 - 5). Through this project it became possible to record a rich body of cultural knowledge about the history of the related crafts and craftspersons. The Prince Claus Fund supported the gathering of all this precious information in the form of a book as a separate venture (Ahmed, 2015).

CRAFTSMANSHIP AND CONSERVATION

Recently the typical Swati crafts had become endangered, with a negligible number of craftsmen of the traditional wood crafts and traditional artefacts, such as carpenters, carvers and masons, who were masters in the traditional techniques, being visible in the market. Many had switched

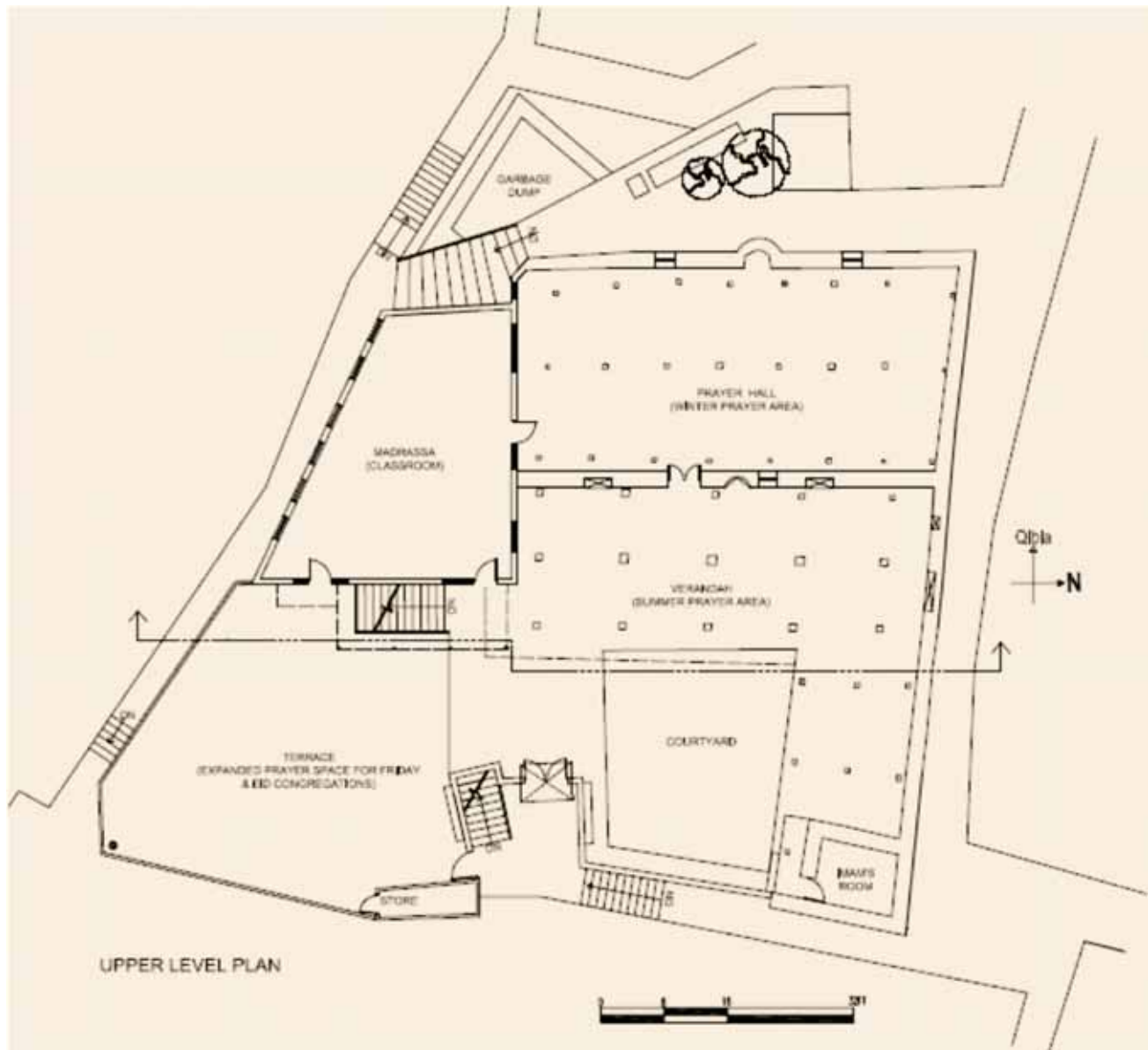


Figure 3: AutoCad plan of the mosque.

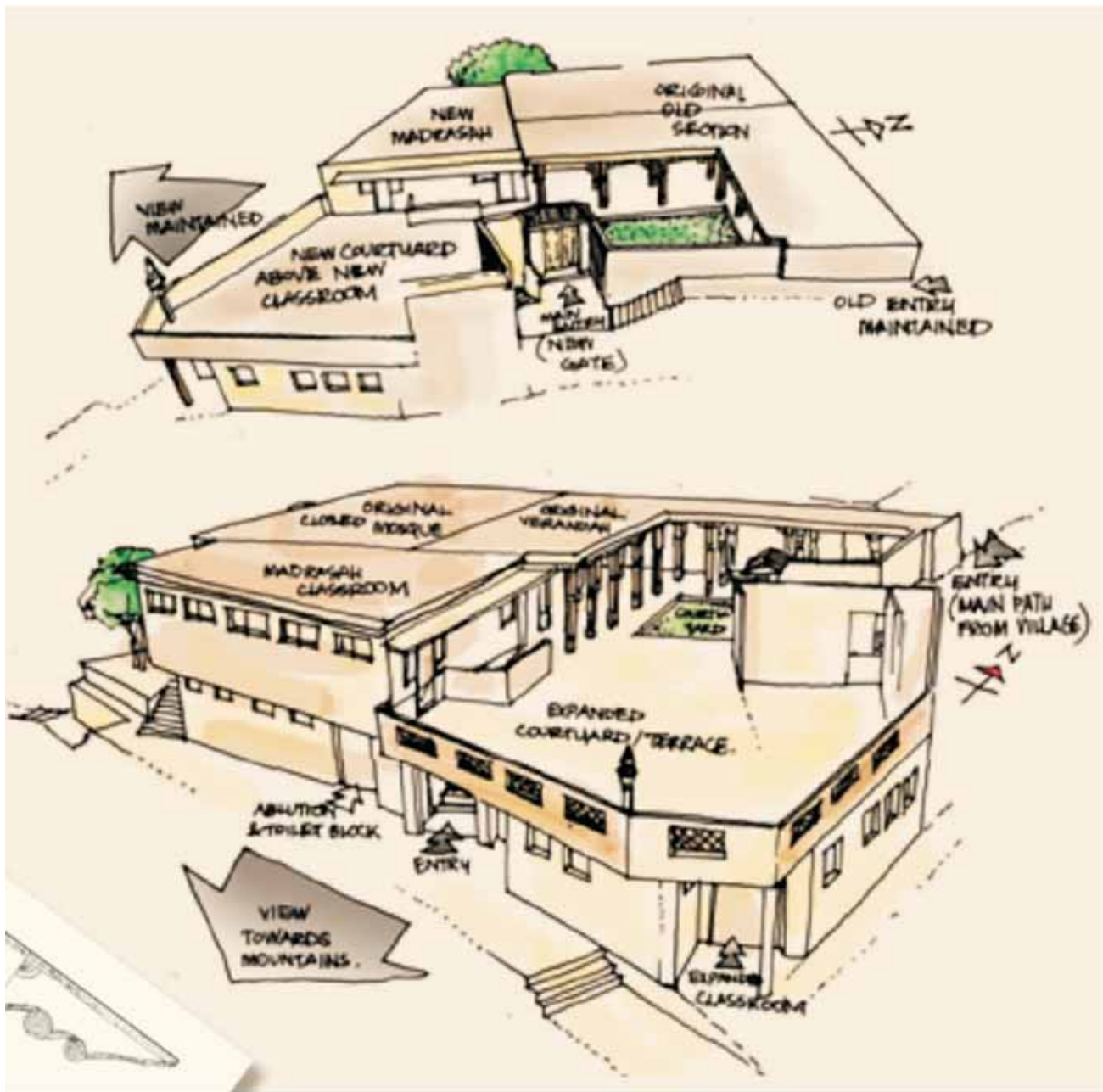


Figure 4: Three dimensional sketches of the mosque.



Figure 5: Documentation of built elements of the mosque.

over to either modern or other regional styles to follow market trends. The demand for wood utensils and household products had diminished considerably as new, cheaper materials became common. The past few conflict-ridden years had exacerbated this predicament further. In this context, the search for relevant craftspersons, materials and techniques for this conservation project has been a challenging but rewarding process. Especially needed were professionals who were familiar with the art of carving patterns in the Swati style repertoire (Figure 6).

A very valuable spin-off occurred in this search for skilled, traditional wood carvers – one with an excellent knowledge of regional pattern-making was found in a neighbouring sub-valley of Swat. He was hired throughout the length of the project and also paired with carpenters from the village,



Figure 6: Interior courtyard of the mosque.

who learned and worked with him. This master carver, embellished the structure greatly and was even able to create a new, designed and carved gate, as well as carved doors and windows for the mosque and its extension, in the traditional style (Figure 7). These replaced later adhoc interventions including a makeshift metal gate as well as carving in non-regional styles.

The master carver was asked to generate more samples of typical Swati regional patterns and motifs on sample panels, to be preserved as a record. It seemed as if this mosque project, which preserved the old carved columns and created new interventions in the same style, had served to revive the almost-dead art of Swati wood carving and its rich and ancient range of motifs and patterns in a classic, historic setting. The team was also able to provide professional engagement to local stone masons and carpenters, who were familiar with traditional work and showed their mettle in the project.



Figure 7: Exhibiting a range of sample carving patterns in typical Swati style.



Figure 8: Prayer hall of the mosque.

Structural repairs were carried out selectively to consolidate masonry and the wooden column framework. A damaged column was replaced with a brand new one using traditional methods. It was carved in the original styles, but not competing with the old. The surface carving of a few columns, which was missing, was restored. The process also revealed the immense diversity of traditional detail in ornamentation (Figure 8).

Later interventions of modern paint with non-authentic colour schemes were successfully removed from the original wood elements in the mosque, and the old woodwork was restored and repaired as and where needed, while giving them protective polish.



Figure 9: Safer pathways and steps designed as an extension of the project.

SITE UPGRADATION

Safety factors, or a Disaster Risk Reduction approach, were further addressed as much as possible in the project in proposing safer pathways and steps, emergency exits, and space for the smooth flow of users between blocks in and around the mosque compound (Figure 9). The traditional seating where elders gather along the mosque wall exterior was also preserved (Figure 10). In view of the immediate needs of the community, the extension and site upgradation phase was carried out first.

The systematic re-organization of the ablution and toilet block according to architectural standards was greatly

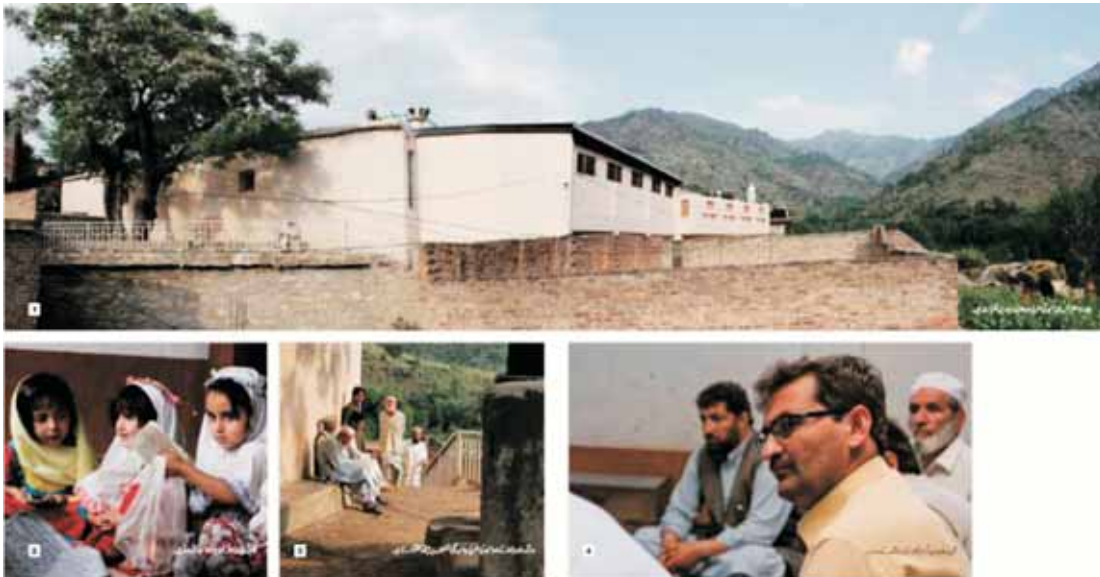


Figure 10: Elders socialising on steps and benches outside the mosque.

appreciated by the local community. Through this block, a great side benefit has been the ease of accessing piped water for some neighbouring villagers who might not have had the facility at their doorstep. Young females in the vicinity who usually collect water for their homes from other sources were benefitted directly. A proper garbage dump was built near the mosque complex to replace the older one, which had become an eyesore. Some male and female sitting spaces were also constructed in the waiting areas of the local village bus stops, as part of the project.

COMMUNITY CONSULTATIONS

SPC successfully carried out various workshops for consultation, awareness-raising and capacity-building. The project started with a community orientation workshop followed by regular community consultations (Figure 11). This project has greatly benefitted from the good footing that SPC and the project management had with the village community. The project planning has directly involved community members through official committees in project development, decision-making and implementation.

Introducing a cultural heritage conservation project in the village was an interesting new experience for all, especially coming soon after the conflict when most support was being offered only at the subsistence level. As the project progressed, the media played its role in highlighting the conservation, and local youth became more aware of the value of their heritage. The mosque even started attracting tourists from other cities of Swat.

The SPC team's general pro-people and community development approach led them to build into the project a 'Village Planning Workshop'. The Project Architect, who was both Project Manager and a member of the village, along with Mohammad Roshan, Executive Director of SPC, co-conducted the workshop and shared an initial mapping of the village and its resources with participants. The aim of this workshop was to find out the problems of the community, to highlight other issues and point towards more environment and culture conservation efforts needed through open discussion.

CRAFTSPERSONS WORKSHOPS

Introductory Capacity Building Workshops for masons, carpenters and wood carvers were designed to familiarize the skilled labour with the approach to traditional materials and methods to be used in the mosque conservation from the start (Figure 12). They were welcomed by the community,



Figure 11: Community consultation workshop with locals.

and there was a mutual and rich exchange of information about the building's history and the methods employed in it. This contributed to the enhancement of knowledge and the fine-tuning of conservation techniques which were applied by the technical team. An elderly carpenter from the village, who participated in the workshop, informed the team about how in his childhood his father had carved one of the standing columns of this mosque when it was replaced at that time. He also recollected how certain wood members were replaced in 1970, after the princely Swat State was disbanded and the embargo on cutting trees from nearby forests was annulled.

INVOLVEMENT AND IMPACT

Many responsible villagers and youth led by the mosque committee played an active role in the conservation project



Figure 12: Capacity building workshop with craftspeople.

(Figure 13, 14). While the village planning workshop was a first in making the mosque space a forum for development planning, another first was that a woman Project Coordinator, was a leading member of the mosque conservation team and her presence was welcomed in what is a traditional men's space in Pukhtun culture.

Introducing cultural heritage conservation as a theme has been interesting for all concerned. Watching a dying structure being resuscitated back to life, in all its glory, especially after the traumatic social experiences of war and flood devastation, has generated new energy and spirit in the village and its environs, and seems to have created hope and shown a way for the future.

CONCLUSION

In essence the project was a conservation project of a physical building but the impacts of the project were many folds. Firstly the process of the project bought the entire community on one platform and instigated a sense of pride and positive spirit in the community. Other positive outfalls of the project



Figure 13: Interaction of architects with local community elders.

were attraction of tourists, ease of accessing piped water for the neighbouring village and recognition by the youth of the heritage value of the local buildings. The project not only succeeded in reviving the age old art of wood carving, it also created many public places for social interaction amongst the community, in the process thus enhancing a sense of ownership, pride and community.

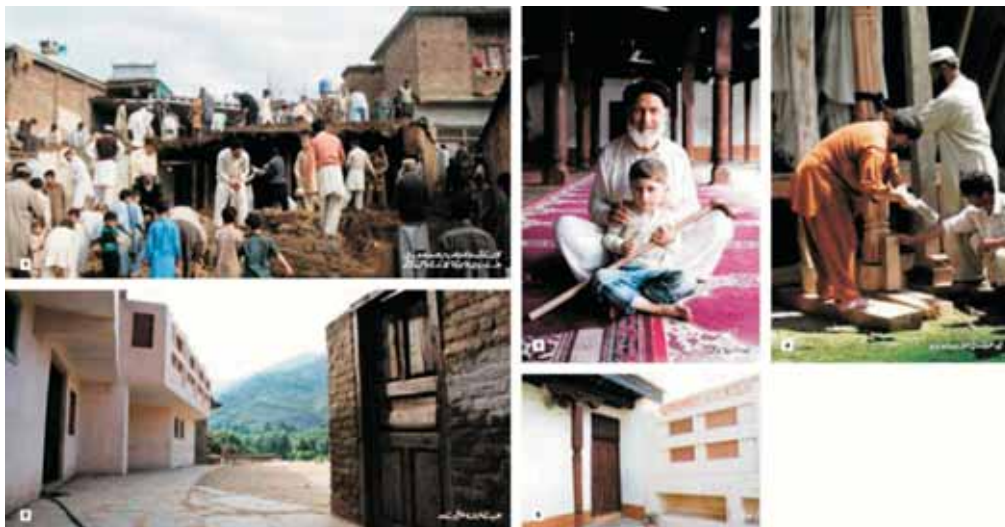


Figure 14: Involvement of local community at various stages of the conservation project.

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