The fabric of Indian culture is woven from the tangible and intangible cultural and built heritage of the country. Over the centuries the sharing of common history, customs, beliefs, etc., has been giving the people of India a feeling of kinship and a sense of common identity. Therefore, the heritage sites which dot the country are of immense importance to the people of India. In spite of this it is often seen that the cultural heritage sites are ignored and neglected. The general lack of interest in the maintenance of the cultural heritage sites of India makes them vulnerable to threats from factors like population pressures, ill managed tourism, environmental degradation, vandalism, theft, religious terrorism, etc.

In this paper I propose to highlight the threat which is posed to the sites in Jammu region of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir by the recent phenomenon of terrorism fuelled by religious fundamentalism. I will also suggest measures which need to be taken or already have been taken to protect the sites from the depredations of such terrorists.

The state of Jammu and Kashmir, also known as ‘Paradise on Earth’, is situated on the northern part of India covering an area of about 22,22,236 sq km. It is bounded by Tibet in the East, Pakistan in the West and Turkmenistan in the North, and the Indian states of Himachal Pradesh and Punjab in the South. It comprises three distinct geographical regions, differing in topography and culture - the foothills of Jammu; the valley of Kashmir and the starkly beautiful cold desert of Ladakh. Amongst the three regions Jammu, perhaps, offer the widest diversity of terrain, beauty and heritage sites.

The Jammu region which derives its name from the city of Jammu, which is the winter capital of the state, is dotted with numerous heritage sites like temples, shrines, forts, palaces, etc. In fact, the temples and the shrines which dot the region are of two kinds – those that have fallen into disuse and are now merely historical monuments and those which have a hoary past but are still revered and worshipped by the people.

In the following Paragraphs, I will be discussing 4 sites which are frequented by thousands of people from every nook and corner of India. These living heritage sites of Jammu region have been constantly under threat of attack by religious terrorists since the last one decade. In well thought out and orchestrated actions, forces inimical to India have tried to engineer a serious communal divide in the country by trying to destroy the shrines and holy places of the majority community in India. They hope that this will lead to the dismemberment of India. Many such instances have already occurred in the last few years and some of them have been highlighted in the succeeding pages.

VAISHNO DEVI (The Holy Cave): The holy cave shrine of Vaishno Devi ji is situated on the Trikuta Mountain in the Shivalik Himalayas at an altitude of over 5000 feet. The origin of the shrine is shrouded in mystery. It is believed that the Devi (Mother Goddess) petrified Herself into stone inside the cave so that she could worship the Supreme God and become one with Him. The rock formation which symbolizes the Goddess is about 5′ 6″ high located at the end of a 90′ long cave. Water gushes out of the base of the rock formation. It is a SWAYAM BHU (self revealed) shrine and is one of the most revered places in India. The shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi ji was first discovered by Pandit Shridhar about thousand years ago. It attracts almost 6 million pilgrims annually in spite of the fact that they have to trek 24 kilometers on foot up and down a steep mountain.

Washington on 11th September 2001. Prior to that, the threat that emanated from religious terrorism had been demonstrated by the notorious Taliban of Afghanistan who felt no compunction in systematically destroying the world heritage site of Bamiyan Buddhas. However, the world preferred to ignore this threat in the fond hope that this was an isolated incident and there would be no repetition. The events of 11th September 2001 however, jolted the world which then realized that any place, organization or country which does not conform to the way of thinking of the religious terrorists is considered a fair target for destruction by them.

The Vibrant and Living Heritage of Jammu

The shrines and temples which represent the living heritage of the Jammu region are Shri Mata Vaishno Devi ji, Raghunath Temple Complex, Bahu fort cum temple complex, Sudh Mahadev temple, etc. These temples/shrines are dedicated to various Gods and Goddesses of the Hindu pantheon and are frequented by thousands of people from every nook and corner of India. These living heritage sites of Jammu region have been constantly under threat of attack by religious terrorists since the last one decade. In well thought out and orchestrated actions, forces inimical to India have tried to engineer a serious communal divide in the country by trying to destroy the shrines and holy places of the majority community in India. They hope that this will lead to the dismemberment of India. Many such instances have already occurred in the last few years and some of them have been highlighted in the succeeding pages.

RELIGIOUS TERRORISM -THE LATEST THREAT
(JUXTAPOSITION OF JAMMU’S HERITAGE - LIVING AND VIBRANT VERSUS DEAD AND DECAYING)

Poonam Chaudhary *