



Vitascope

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The Phuktal Monastery

The name Phuktal translates as *"Cave of Silence"*, *"Cave of Liberation"*, or *"Place of Retreat"*.

The monastery houses numerous sacred sites and valuable wall paintings dating back to the 16th century. It is an important spiritual and cultural centre for the people of the Zaskar Valley and also attracts visitors from around the world.

Today, between 30 and 80 monks (aged 7 to 80 years) live in the monastery. One of their main tasks is to perform rituals and prayers in the temple – for the people, the animals, the environment, and the entire world. They also visit the surrounding villages regularly to carry out prayers and protective rituals, often undertaking long and, especially in winter, dangerous journeys.

The Impact of Permafrost

Until just a few years ago, the great Tsarap River froze completely in winter near Phuktal Monastery. This frozen river was once essential for transporting heavy goods to the foot of the monastery. Snowfall used to be much heavier and more frequent, covering the area with a thick blanket of snow.

The main reason for the thawing of the permafrost is the rising temperatures caused by climate change. Permafrost is permanently frozen soil or rock. When it thaws, the earth and rock layers become unstable. This instability causes stones and boulders to break loose, creating a serious danger for people and buildings.

In addition, the thawing process affects the region's hydrology: underground water flows change, and the availability of water resources may diminish or even disappear altogether. It is likely for this reason that the spring inside the monastery's cave suddenly dried up a few years ago. Although permafrost

itself remains invisible, the catastrophic consequences of its thawing are, unfortunately, clearly felt today.

Planned Measures

The existing protective measures must be strengthened by the construction of additional gabions (reinforcement structures of rock-filled wire mesh).

Surface water should be diverted away from the critical gullies (deep erosion channels) to prevent further erosion.

A maintenance plan is required for the regular upkeep of the gabions, as well as ensuring safe access to them.

In addition, planting shrubs and trees – such as sea buckthorn, wild roses, barberry, or even larger trees – is proposed as an additional measure.

Finally, a ban on entering the area above the monastery is absolutely necessary to avoid triggering rockfalls unnecessarily through human activity.