

Tourism & Heritage. Who benefits?

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Heritage Tourism Today

There is a common belief that promoting heritage spaces among tourists benefits the country and the tourists. However a close investigation of the visitors to the heritage sites, the interest shown by them about the sites, the information available to the visitors, and the benefits to the country and the people around the site, raises doubts on all counts.

Heritage sites are a major attraction for the tourist industry in almost every country around the world. This paper explores who really benefits, from Heritage Tourism, and questions the purpose of displaying heritage sites to tourists.

Heritage Business and Politics

Though Heritage is what we value as a people and choose to pass on to future generations, there have been many instances where this heritage and the heritage spaces have been used to rouse communal, racial and religious conflict and hatred. There have been conflicts on the claims for these sites, and restrictions on visits.

Today Heritage is a potentially profitable, audience attracting business. certain sites around the world have become great money spinners, not only for the administrators of the site, but for those who offer infrastructure facilities and to the traders. Unfortunately, by trying to make heritage an economic asset, and

trying to conserve and maintain the heritage site as a self-supporting venture, it could cause more harm. Commodification demeans the heritage, and in the end would mean its destruction. Commodification also affects the environment, the ecological balance and causes the displacement of people and animals from around the heritage sites. Where heritage and culture are intertwined, promoting heritage tourism affect the culture very badly.

A problem we face today is the overlapping of heritage and culture tourism. One reason is because it is often the same visitors who are targeted. But Heritage Tourism is fixed to specific spaces in a land, and they are mostly of historical value and their physical form has to be preserved. People have to visit such places personally, people have to climb a mountain, walk several miles and follow certain restrictions. The Culture is movable, it is displayed by people, who can move, who can shift their stage sets and their equipment and instruments, they can go to the people, or gather them in one place. Culture is not a static object or system, it keeps on evolving and changing and it is impossible to preserve it as it had been even a few years ago. This means even if the cultural and heritage tourisms overlap, the issues, the problems, the effects, are very different.

A heritage site could be a sacred space

for one community, and there would be a strict code about visiting such sites. But for many visitors it would be just a tourist attraction, a historical building or a work of art. They would not understand, or realize any religious significance. This leads to conflict when tourists do not understand the local culture and religious practices, and they are not informed by the tour guides or the administrators of the sites.

Heritage is of immense value to the people of the region. It is our legacy from the past, what has been left for us by our ancestors, what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations. Our cultural and natural heritage are both irreplaceable sources of life and inspiration. Most such spaces are sacred to us, or to some section of our people. It is our responsibility to preserve them, and ensure that they are not defiled, damaged, or destroyed, by people who visit them with no knowledge of what they would see.

Most tourists travel to our country to lie on the beach, relax, do shopping, and have fun. Out of the one million tourists last year there would have been a small minority who were definitely interested in our heritage sites. They would have visited them, because it is part of their arranged tour, or out of curiosity, or for them to go back home and talk about them.

It is very clearly observed in the faces of most tourists we meet around our sacred sites.

One of the most flouted heritage space in our country is Sigiriya. For our own people it is just one hard climb, puffing and panting, for some of them it is a torture. They do not have the time and they are not in a mood to appreciate what is around them, even the frescoes. For those who are strong enough to reach the summit, at least they have a view of the surrounding country side. The foreign tourists are taken straight up to see the frescoes, and then to the summit. I have never seen

even one percent of these visitors, both local and foreign, who even glance at the mirror-like wall. Even if they do, it is just another wall. We hardly see any tour guide explaining the significance of the wall. If they explain, perhaps the tourists would realize that it is the oldest social media site on earth, 1500 years before facebook was built. The Western precinct is only a path leading to the rock, with a few half broken walls and foundations. They do not pause at the miniature water garden, to try to imagine what it would have been to be seated here, listening to the water flowing slowly over the pebbles, watching a frescos on the rock face, and the garden leading up to the rock. Would they stop to imagine what it would have been like, as they walked along the water garden, the boulder garden and then how many would see the Cobra Hood Cave?

To see the entire Sigiri complex a visitor should have at least two full days, if it is to be appreciated as a heritage space. We need more time at Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa. to visit the museums and get an understanding of what it would have been in the past, the art and technology of the era. How many tourists would have seen the stone bridges or how they would have been built?

This is not unique to Sri Lanka. At Ajanta and Ellora, foreign tourists and Indian diaspora, native tourists from all over India, rush through them like it is a task they have to get over with. Most of them cover all 29 caves, within about an hour, pausing only to take photographs of the paintings and the sculptures, and more of themselves. To study each cave in detail, would need a minimum of one week. It is the same at Ellora, with its 34 rock-cut temples stretching over 2 km. People spend more time traveling to these sites from Aurangabad, than they spend at the caves.

At Khajuraho, most people are simply attracted by the carvings, which they see as simply erotic art, without any

consideration of the religious significance, and Mahtma Gandhi had wanted to destroy them, feeling ashamed that the Western tourists would see them as obscene, but it was Gurudev Tagore who managed to prevent the destruction.

That is heritage tourism today.

A foreign visitor to Kandy, unless he is made aware of the significance and the history of the Tooth Relic, for him it is only a religious building. The same at Galle, how many of even our local tourists would be aware that the Galle Fort is probably the largest Dutch Fort in South Asia (even though it is nothing for us to boast of), and that inside the fort is preserved four different cultures, the Portuguese, the Dutch, The British and later the Muslim. Perhaps this is the only such preserved historical space in the world.

We can go on about all our heritage sites in this manner. Even closer to Colombo, Kelaniya is as much a heritage space as it is a religious space. From the legendary visit of the Buddha, how it had continued to be a Buddhist place of worship, the destruction caused by the Portuguese, and the reconstruction, the paintings and the sculptures, If we are to promote it as a heritage site these are things that have to be highlighted, or just show them as a mere cultural site. That is where we have to have some distinction between a heritage site and a cultural site.

The heritage explosion today with tv programs, interactive heritage museums and light and sound shows are all misleading. No one today can rightly imagine how an ancient building and the surroundings would have looked, how the people were dressed. By trying to thrust our imagination on the curious visitor we are insulting the visitor and our ancient people too. An example is the diorama created in the American Museum of Natural History, New York, based on the 3.6 million year old footprints found in

Tanzania.

Out of 855,975 tourists who arrived in the country, only 210,710 had visited the Cultural Triangle, which is about 25% and this seems to be the annual average. The revenue had been Rs. one billion. (Ministry of Culture & the Arts. Progress Report, 2012)

For the tourist industry heritage is a marketable commodity, to lure consumers. for the locals it is gaining a sense of one's past, claiming an identity

Future

The future of heritage tourism, using digital and audio visual technology, could be a solution, providing an opportunity to see all heritage spaces around the world, at virtually no cost, while also preserving the spaces and the environment. They could be Virtual Destinations. Digital simulation and non-corporeal travel. Virtual destinations would be like reading an e-book. Virtual travel also is a solution to avoid any cultural or religious misunderstandings or conflicts, specially when a cultural or sacred space is claimed by different communities.

We could see all the heritage sites in the world, on our own time, in our own private space, at leisure, enjoying and learning at our own pace, not rushing through a site in the hot sun, heavy rain or biting cold, spending many hours in travel just to visit a place for a few minutes, and seeing it as if in a dream.

Let us plan for armchair tourism when it comes to our heritage. It may not bring us revenue, but it would preserve our heritage and it will also provide an opportunity to everyone around the world to see and appreciate them.