

# **The Role of Community Participation in Heritage Conservation: Lessons from Sri Lankan Buddhist Monasteries**

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## **1. Introduction**

In heritage conservation, there is indeed a greater realization for involvement to be shifted to the level of the local community through an inclusive model, from an entirely technical and top-down one where the voices and experiences of the most connected with the cultural site are given due importance. The Buddhist monasteries in Sri Lanka are more than a place of worship but bearers of rich culture, spirituality, and history. The sites, examples of which include Dambulla, Aluvihara, and Ridi Viharaya, have played an indispensable role in the construction of the religious and social portrait of Sri Lankan society (De Silva, 2016). They form part of the identity of the local communities and provide a focus for religious practice, communal gatherings, and cultural learning.

The special relationship between such monasteries and the host communities sets an example to be followed in possible sharing in heritage management. Often, communities within which these monasteries exist are responsible for their maintenance and preservation, while people benefit spiritually, socially, and economically from proximity to holy sites (Abeysekera, 2018). This, in turn, calls for a very strong case of participation, which shall recognize local knowledge, traditions, and practices as an integral part of the conservation process.

It instills in the people within the community a sense of ownership and responsibility, which is important to ensure that the management of cultural resources is carried out in a sustainable manner. A community involved in the conservation of its heritage is in a better position to champion its protection from such external stresses as urbanization, tourism, and neglect (Perera, 2012). Moreover, the involvement of the local people furthers conservation practice by adding the essential elements of tradition and culture that may have been left out in the treatment in a formally identified conservation framework (Fernando, 2015).

The extended abstract is set out to investigate the role of community participation in the conservation of Sri Lankan Buddhist monasteries through lessons learned from specific case studies. The following research focuses on trying to extract effective practices applicable to broader heritage conservation efforts in Sri Lanka and, to a greater extent, globally from the experiences gained (Jayasuriya, 2010). This will help add to the body of knowledge on how community involvement can make sure that heritage management is considerate of principles of sustainability for resilient cultural landscapes that continue to pay their respects to tradition, yet remain mindful of contemporary needs.

The time has come to link the technical expertise with local knowledge as heritage conservation proceeds. This research will shed light on including community participation in the modus operandi of conservation practices so that the narrative about the cultural heritage can be enriched and protection ensured for generations to come.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

This study is based on a mixed-method approach to investigate community involvement in the conservation of Buddhist monasteries in Sri Lanka. In this research, three major sites-Dambulla, Aluvihara, and Ridi Viharaya-are considered, each representing unique variations from different aspects of community participation in heritage conservation. The key ethnographic methods employed in collecting data during this fieldwork with key stakeholders-like monks, temple custodians, local residents, and community leaders-included participatory

observation, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions (Perera, 2012).

In-depth interviews were designed to capture information on the level of community engagement in conservation activities, including financing, volunteering, and religious and cultural ceremonies. The motivations behind such engagement and perceived benefits from this involvement were also intended to be captured (Abeysekera, 2018). Furthermore, focus group discussions have been important in increasing an understanding of the dynamics at community level with regard to collective action and shared responsibilities in heritage management (Jayasuriya, 2010).

The religious festivals and events on conservation provided an opportunity to observe the interaction of the local communities with these heritage sites. Such events documented their communal bonding with their cultural heritage, therefore further strengthening the resolve for conservation (De Silva, 2016). Archival research was also done, reaching out to historical documents, policies on conservation, and earlier studies done on the subject of community involvement in heritage management (Gunawardana, 2004).

These therefore provided a very in-depth approach to analyzing how community participation shapes the conservation landscape of Buddhist monasteries in Sri Lanka. Synthesizing qualitative data from interviews and observations along with a historical context, the research tried to deduce successful models of community engagement that could inform future initiatives of conservation. This kind of approach underlines not only the importance of traditional knowledge but also the relevance of establishing collaborative relations between the communities and formal entities of conservation (Fernando, 2015).

### **3. Results and Discussion**

These research findings therefore suggest that community ownership and participation go a long way in successfully conserving these Buddhist monasteries of Sri Lanka. In Dambulla, for instance, the locals have made them feel that this is their property by being very active in raising funds and organizing volunteer cleanup campaigns. It aids in keeping the site physically but helps the community to reaffirm their ties and cultural identity (Abeysekera, 2018). Community members indicated that through the conservation activity, they were being brought much closer to their heritage and had increased commitment to preserve the sites for the future generation.

Similarly, Aluvihara is an example of what happens when the local artisans and devotees are working with a site to safeguard the ancient manuscripts. The community-led workshops on traditional preservative techniques have provided the passing on of the basic skills to the younger generations while reinforcing the essence of cultural heritage (Fernando, 2015). Participants thus felt proud about the contribution they were in a position to make towards the conservation of their history and also proved a point about how local knowledge could act in complementing formal conservation practices (Perera, 2012).

Ridi Viharaya thus helps in showing how a communitarian approach to heritage management might be linked with governmental policies. Challenges here include insufficient resources within frameworks and pressures from tourism, though the people of the locality are genuinely involved in site conservation (Jayasuriya, 2010). This study characterizes the fact that while tourism can provide a critical source of funding for conservation, at the same time it carries a certain risk of being destructive to the authenticity and integrity of heritage sites (Gunawardana, 2004).

Community-based initiatives are more resilient, and from this premise, the need to empower local stakeholders forms a very integral part of sustainable heritage conservation. Community involvement within formal conservation frameworks offers a clear manner in which respect

and honor for traditional practices can be guaranteed, in turn nurturing relevance and therefore promoting better preservation of Sri Lanka's rich cultural heritage (De Silva, 2016).

#### **4. Conclusion**

The paper, therefore, underlines the pivotal importance of community participation in the conservation of Buddhist monasteries in Sri Lanka, reflecting how active involvement at the local level inspires a sense of ownership and responsibility that bears directly on the sustainability of heritage management. Drawn from case studies across Dambulla, Aluvihara, and Ridi Viharaya, one finds that community involvement has helped not only in the physical preservation of such sites but also in enhancing social bonding and cultural identity (Abeysekera, 2018; Perera, 2012). We will be able to develop better strategies by incorporating traditional knowledge with formal conservation, which would acknowledge traditional values but would also provide the urge for new challenges (Fernando, 2015). Empowering the communities with respect to conservation will make it worthwhile and sustainable for preserving the rich cultural heritage of Sri Lanka and ultimately make it relevant for future generations as well (Jayasuriya, 2010).

#### **5. Acknowledgment**

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#### **6. Keywords**

Community Participation, Heritage Conservation, Buddhist Monasteries, Sri Lanka

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