

Deconstructing Heritage: Colonial Contexts, Identity, and Contested Symbols

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Abstract: This article explores the evolving conceptual paradigms of "heritage" from a static legal definition of inherited property to a dynamic, actively constructed cultural discourse. It traces how heritage transitioned from medieval notions of landed estate ownership into a modern tool of nationalism and Western modernity, utilizing state-controlled institutions like museums and archives to establish a distinct linear division between the past and present. Focusing significantly on the South Asian context, the authors analyze how British colonial orientalist systematically categorized Indian literature and monumental architecture to facilitate socio-political control, while indigenous scholars simultaneously appropriated those same discoveries to cultivate national pride and build an anti-colonial national identity. Finally, the paper investigates contemporary post-World War II global frameworks, evaluating the role of UNESCO conventions, the rise of the post-custodial "heritage industry" driven by cultural tourism, and how heritage functions today as a highly contested political symbol frequently vulnerable to deliberate destruction or ideological manipulation..

Keywords: Heritage, Modernity, Nationalism, Colonialism, Contestation

Introduction

Defining Heritage

Heritage, broadly conceived as the link between past and present, is a locus of knowledge, power and identity. It is not a physical thing left over by history but an actively constructed discourse.ⁱ From antiquity to UNESCOⁱⁱ led World Heritage Convention in 1972, the interpretation and classification of heritage has changed to the ways in which they are consumed and expressed as notions of culture and politics. Viewed in this context, the present article tries to contextualize the changing paradigms of understanding and analysis of heritage.

The word 'heritage', derived from Latin *hereditare*, and French *iritage* means the property inherited by a person's 'heirs'.ⁱⁱⁱ Conventionally, heritage has been thought as a static body handed down by ancestors and passed on to the descendants. There is no standard criterion of categorizing what constitutes heritage. Generally it is understood in terms of 'natural heritage', consisting of physical landscape and environment, and the 'cultural heritage' created by human effort.^{iv} This categorization has further been analyzed in context of tangible and intangible heritage. The tangible heritage refers to all the material traces such as archaeological sites, historical monuments, artefacts, and objects, significant to a community, nation and humanity in general whereas the intangible consists of nonphysical intellectual wealth, such as folklore, customs, belief, traditions, and language.^v Overall, heritage represents outstanding value to humanity, and refers to a set of attitude and relationship with the past.^{vi} The concept of heritage in present sense has been the product of idea of modernity.

Till the medieval times, the term heritage was used for denoting the great estates and properties belonging to landed class. After the emergence of enlightenment, scientific progress and nationalism, which collectively marked the beginning of modernity, heritage came to refer to cultural and intellectual legacy of the nation-state.

Heritage as a Project of Modernity and Nationalism

Modernity believes in linear progression and contrasts itself with past. In this context, heritage became an important factor in determining the 'difference between past and present'.^{vii} Institutes like museums were created as a custodian for showcasing this difference by 'putting the past into its place'.^{viii} Providing an example of the old gramophone, Rodney Harrison emphasized that by exhibiting an old gramophone in museum, its relationship with humans got fundamentally changed. Gramophone became an object of display from a functional 'tool', though the fabric of the object remained intact.^{ix} Heritage is thus both a product and producer of Western modernity.

Subsequently, the emergence of nationalism led to an interest in studying and preserving the past, physical monuments, places and cultural practices to connect the present generation with 'glorious' past of the country. In this context, heritage became an integral part of the search of 'invented tradition' and 'imagined community', required for the emerging nation-states.^x With the rise of extreme nationalism and Nazism in Germany, archaeologists were forced to dig the past. Whereas in Egypt, it was popularized that Egyptians are the 'sons of the Pharaohs' and their 'ancestors had built the pyramids'. In this regard Hall called heritage as a 'discursive practice' which creates a sense of belonging to the nation.^{xi} The appropriation of past along with the process of identifying, categorizing and classifying the heritage directly brought control, surveillance, interference of ideology of state in managing heritage sites.^{xii} .

The 'search for heritage' also brought professionalization in studying the past which resulted in the establishment of archives, archaeological centers and national trusts. Setting up of these institutions was also required as the developing idea of scientism, positivism and empiricism in late eighteenth century focused on collecting primary sources.^{xiii}

The earliest inventories and the professionalization of practice began in France with establishment of Archives Nationales on 12 September 1790 for preserving the public records.^{xiv} Subsequently, Commission des Monuments Historique was set up in 1837 for taking care of historic buildings.^{xv} With these developments, heritage became a part of 'public sphere'. Romantic artists and writers promoted the idea of conserving the 'wild' spaces through setting up of national parks. The voice to look after the ancient building also began in Britain. John Ruskin, an art critic of the Victorian era, in his *Seven Lamps of Architecture* which was published in 1849 noted that:

Take proper care of your monuments, and you will not need to restore them... it is again no question of expediency or feeling whether we shall preserve the buildings of past times or not. We have no right whatever to touch them. They are not ours. They belong partly to those who built them, and partly to all the generations of mankind who are to follow us. The dead have still their right in them: that which they laboured for, the praise of achievement or the expression of religious feeling, or whatsoever else it might be which in those buildings they intended to be permanent, we have no right to obliterate.^{xvi}

Amidst this William Morris's Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings was set up in 1870 and Ancient Monument Protection Act was passed in 1882 in Britain. Similar piece of legislations were adopted in Germany and the United States, and later exported to Western European colonial interests in Asia and Africa.^{xvii} These legislations helped in identifying and protecting the heritage sites and subsequently changed the relationship with past.

Colonialism, Heritage and India

In India, the concept of heritage developed in a colonial context when orientalist^{xviii} were trying to search country's past for political purposes. In this context, institutions like Calcutta Madrasa (1781), Asiatic Society of Bengal (1784) and Banaras Sanskrit College (1792) were established to understand the Indian society, classic language, culture and the 'glorious past'. Some notable British scholars devoted their time to study Sanskrit, Philosophy, Indian culture and History. Sir Charles Wilkins, an English typographer and founding member of the Asiatic Society, translated *Bhagavad Gita* into English which was the first direct translation of a Sanskrit work. Subsequently, Sir William Jones translated Kalidasa's *Abhigyan Shakuntalam* and identified Chandragupta Maurya with Sandrokottus, the name mentioned by Greek historians.^{xix} This verified a milestone in Indian chronology and history. Subsequently in the year 1837, James Prinsep deciphered *Brahmi* script which highlighted the achievements and contribution of forgotten emperor Ashoka. Subsequently, Max Muller, a German orientalist settled at oxford, acquired a mastery over Sanskrit and translated the Vedic literature in several volumes titled *The Sacred Books of the East* which was published during the year between 1879 and 1904. These orientalist scholars believed that a better understanding of Indian heritage through literature, languages, and culture would make easier for them to control India.^{xx} However, their works also highlighted the rich cultural heritage of India.

Alexander Cunningham, the creator of the Indian Archaeological Survey, excavated historic sites of Sarnath where Buddha had delivered the first sermon. Further in the second half of nineteenth century, Cunningham excavated the ruins of Taxila, an important centre of learning, and Great *Stupa* at Sanchi which was one of the oldest stone structure and an important monument of Indian architecture commissioned by the emperor Ashoka.^{xxi} James Fergusson also studied architectural heritage and published *Picturesque Illustrations of Ancient Architecture in Hindostan*. As discussed, Indian cultural items were not a source of heritage for British. They were a source of information on the colony and fed their curiosity about its culture. Amidst this contesting view, heritage preservation received a real boost during the Governor Generalship of Lord Curzon. Curzon passed the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act in 1904 which provisioned the grant for restoration of historic buildings and a fine for attempting to take protected antiquities.^{xxii} The legislation created the control and interference of state over the heritage protection. However, the discoveries by colonial administrators further strengthened K.P. Jaiswal, R.K. Mukherjee, R.C. Dutt and other nationalists' argument about the achievement, advancement and glorious past of India. The appropriation of monumental architecture and antiquity was highlighted during colonialism which helped in creating a sense of pride among Indians and developing the idea of Indian nationalism.

Heritage as a Contested Symbol

After the Second World War, the setting up of UNESCO and its aim of protecting the sites having cultural, historical, scientific or other form of significance made the heritage protection an international issue. The UNSECO World Heritage Convention of 1972 linked together the concepts of nature conservation and the preservation of cultural properties.^{xxiii} It was a major step to safeguard the heritage sites amidst the growing industrialisation and environmental decay. The States Parties adhered to follow the provisions of convention and were encouraged to integrate the protection of the cultural and natural heritage into regional planning programmes, set up staff and services at sites, undertake scientific and technical conservation research and adopt measures which give this heritage a function in the day-to-day life of the community.^{xxiv} Along with the UNESCO effort, the postmodern idea which focused on highlighting the micro-narratives, folklore and contribution of marginalized class extended the protection to traditional social practices and popular culture against the dominant notion of preserving the remarkable, greatest, oldest, biggest and best sites.^{xxv} These developments

helped in creating 'post-custodialism',^{xxvi} and consciousness for heritage protection among masses against the centrally control system of state.

By the end of twentieth century, the increasing focus on globalization, commercialization and tourism, heritage became an integral part of cultural tourism and was seen as a potential 'industry'. In this context, Robert Hewison wrote a book titled *The Heritage Industry* in the year 1987.^{xxvii} The teaching of heritage management began in academic institution. These developments signified the importance of heritage and led to contestation and competition for [ex] inclusion as national heritage.

The national heritage started to be invariably contested since competition for inclusion began, especially in societies that hosted multiple cultures. Sometimes the contestation also led to the deliberate destruction of heritage, often for political reasons, as for instance the destruction of the Mughal period Babri Masjid in India and the destruction of monumental statues of Gautam Buddha at Bamyán in Afghanistan.^{xxviii} The act of destroying the Buddhas statues by Taliban came to be viewed as an explicit defiance of international conventions and a form of symbolic violence directed at the world's heritage, and hence at the whole world. It marked a turning point in deciding to overthrow Taliban regime by United States led coalition.

Subsequently, contestations were often been but not invariably linked to competition among dominant groups. The Smithsonian Institute had to cancel an exhibition in the year 1995, organized on occasion of the fifty years of atomic attack by plane Enola Gay on Hiroshima. The exhibition was opposed by the dominant groups from military and political circles as it displayed Enola Gay as a contested symbol that brought 'peace and victory' along with 'destruction and fear to the world'.^{xxix} In this context, another debate arose that whose history is told through dissonance of heritage. The same question was again raised when Britain was celebrating the bicentenary of the Abolition of the British Slave Trade Act in 2007.^{xxx} Amidst these diverse aspects, heritage has helped in shaping the changing identity of human civilization.

Conclusion

Heritage is not a passive process of simply preserving things from the past but an active process of assembling a series of objects, places and practices that human civilization wish to take into future. In fact, heritage is not a 'thing' but refers to a set of attitudes and relationships with the past. It has been playing an important role in creation of identity in a variety of forms. Till the middle ages, heritage was understood as great estates and properties of the landed class. After the development of modernism as an idea, the word came to seen as a cultural and intellectual legacy of the nation-states. Thereafter heritage was used as a tool of ordering modernity by re-enforcing the dualism between past and present. In the days of nationalism, heritage was used to create the feeling of nationalism by highlighting the 'glorious past' of a country. A series of economic and political transformations across the globe in late twentieth century established heritage as a part of cultural tourism which led to the concept of 'heritage industry'. Amidst the growing industrial capitalism it has become a commodity to 'tour' and seen as the 'wonders' of the world.

Based on the above discussion it can be concluded that the concept of heritage has broadened its own scope in the changing, time, space and context. The classification, conservation and interpretation of heritage have been widely affected by the notions of culture, identity, economy and politics

References

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- ⁱⁱ The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), established in the year 1945, aims at promoting world peace and security through international cooperation in education, sciences and culture.
- ⁱⁱⁱ "Heritage", *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/heritage> accessed on 17 December 2020.
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- ^v F. Hassan, Tangible Heritage in Archaeology, in C. Smith, eds., *Encyclopedia of Global Archaeology*, New York, NY: Springer, 2014. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-0465-2_1141 accessed on 12 January 2021. Also see D. Munjeri, 'Tangible and Intangible Heritage – From Difference to Convergence', *Museum*, 56(1–2), 2004: 12-20.
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- ^{vii} For details see F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1991.
- ^{viii} Custodialism argues for caring, supervision and control of institutions, such as schools, hospitals, archives, museums and others. Howard W. Polsky and Roni Berger, *From Custodialism to Community: A Theory Based Manual for Transforming Institutions*, Lanham: University Press of America, 2003.
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- ^x For details see E. Hobsbawm, and T. Ranger, ed., *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983; E. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992; B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London and New York: Verso, 2006.
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- ^{xii} To indicate the surveillance and control of state Michel Foucault applies the term panopticism, firstly used by utilitarian thinker Jeremy Bentham. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, New York: Random House, 1979.
- ^{xiii} After the development of the principle of enlightenment in seventeenth and eighteenth century western world, the disciplines such as history were questioned on account of the lack of objectiveness and quantification like of science. Rene Descartes, a French-born philosopher, mathematician and scientist, criticized history by calling historians 'escapist' who by living away from home becomes a stranger to his own age. Further, he termed history as fantasy building and questioned the trustworthiness and utility of the subject. As a response to it, the philosophers like August Comte, Leopold von Ranke and others supported positivism in order to bring fact based objectivity in history writing which could have been possible by way of applying the primary sources. And to identify and preserve the primary sources, heritage became an important source. R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 60.
- ^{xiv} Jennifer S. Milligan, "'What is an Archive?' in the History of Modern France", in Antoinette Burton, ed., *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2005, pp. 159-183.
- ^{xv} S. West and J. Ansell, 'A History of Heritage', in S. West, ed., *Understanding Heritage in Practice*, Manchester/Milton Keynes: Manchester University Press, 2010, pp. 33-34.
- ^{xvi} John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1849, 181.
- ^{xvii} Rodney Harrison, *Heritage: Critical Approaches*, London and New York: Routledge, 2013, p. 45
- ^{xviii} Orientalists encompassed the study of the languages, literatures, religions, philosophies, histories, art and laws of Asian societies, especially ancient ones. For details see Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.
- ^{xix} For details see R.C. Majumdar, *Historiography in Modern India*, Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1967.

^{xx} Along with the orientalist, imperialists' historians led by James Mill provided the evocations of a cultural past characterized by decay and degeneration. Statues of temples were called as 'rude', 'badly designed and worse executed' in the writings. James Mill, *The History of British India*, Volume 1, London: Baldwin, Cradock and Joy, 1817, p. 355.

^{xxi} See Tapita Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

^{xxii} 'The Ancient Monuments Preservation Act 1904, VII of 1904' <https://www.indiaculture.nic.in/sites/default/files/Legislations/5.pdf> accessed on 12 February 2020.

^{xxiii} 'The World Heritage Convention', <https://whc.unesco.org/en/convention/> accessed on 15 February 2021.

^{xxiv} Ibid.

^{xxv} Postmodernism, a philosophical movement developed in the mid- to late twentieth century, rejected the meta-narratives and enlightenment rationality associated with modernism. It emphasised that 'knowledge is power' and the focus should be on deconstructing the knowledge. Postmodernism as an ideology supported to give importance to folklore, popular culture and contribution of subaltern people. J. F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (trans.), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

^{xxvi} Post-custodialism promotes the control of records by the creators. Non-custody is one of the potential component of this approach. Jeannette A. Bastian, "Taking Custody, Giving Access: A Postcustodial Role for a New Century." *Archivaria* 53, Spring 2002: 76–93; Cyndi hein and Emily Lapworth, 'Say Yes to Digital Surrogates: Strengthening the Archival Record in the Postcustodial Era,' *Journal of Western Archives* 7 no. 1 (2016): Article 9.

^{xxvii} Also see P. Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain*, London and New York: Verso, 1985; D. Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

^{xxviii} Babri Masjid was a mosque in Ayodhya which was believed to be the birthplace of Hindu deity Rama by many Hindus. it was built in the year 1528–29 by General Mir Baqi, on the orders of Mughal Emperor Babur. The mosque was attacked and demolished by a Hindu nationalist mob on 6 December 1992. For details see R. S. Sharma, *Communal History and Rama's Ayodhya*, New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1999. The Buddhas of Bamiyan were two sixth century statues of Gautama Buddha carved into the side of a cliff in the Bamiyan valley of Afghanistan. These statues which represented the classic blend of Gandhara art were destroyed by Taliban's regime in 2001. See B. B. Lal and R. Sengupta, *A Report on the Preservation of Buddhist Monuments at Bamiyan in Afghanistan*. Islamic Wonders Bureau, 2008.

^{xxix} Jessica Moody, 'Heritage and History', in Emma Waterton and Steve Watson, ed., *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p.120-121.

^{xxx} Ibid., pp. 121-123.