

# **3. Empowering the Custodians of Heritage Sites and Redefining the Roles of Community in Heritage Management: A Case Study of DHAN Foundation**

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## **Abstract**

The heritage resources of India, both tangible and intangible, are fast disappearing because of the changing socio-economic profile of the country. Much of the local community is not aware of the importance of protecting the wealth of its heritage. The local people are also unaware of the historical and archaeological importance of their villages, and that the heritage resources may contribute to sustainable growth through tourism. From 2008, the DHAN (Development of Humane Action) Foundation has been organising heritage walk programmes through its Tourism for Development unit to promote heritage literacy among the public in various parts of Tamil Nadu. The DHAN Foundation named 2008–09 as the 'Year of Heritage'. The ongoing heritage walk programmes for the sustainable development of heritage resources in various districts of Tamil Nadu and the World Heritage and Culture Lecture Series are some of the important initiatives of the DHAN Foundation. Memoranda of understanding (MOUs) and collaboration with various educational institutions such as Tamil University, Pondicherry University, INTACH and individual scholars and experts for heritage development are some of the other initiatives of the DHAN Foundation. This paper highlights the initiatives of DHAN Foundation in promoting an awareness about heritage through various measures among the communities in various parts of Tamil Nadu.

**Keywords:** Heritage Walk, Heritage Education, Heritage Management; Heritage Awareness Programmes; Heritage and Development

## 1. The Context

Many of the Indian heritage resources (both tangible and intangible) are fast disappearing because of changing socio-economic profile of the country and poor heritage literacy among the host communities. Lack of livelihood opportunities in many of the villages that possess heritage resources often leads to migration of people to the nearby urban centres. Most of the local community is neither aware of the importance of protecting its heritage wealth nor has the resources necessary for preserving these valuable resources. The local people are also unaware of the historical and archaeological importance of their villages and that the heritage resources may contribute to sustainable growth through tourism. While in the World Economic Forum's world competitiveness index for cultural resources India enjoys a very high 9th rank in 2017, in the Human Resources and Labour Mark Index, it is placed at the 87th position in 2017;<sup>1</sup> this vast gap shows the enormous opportunity for the development and utilisation of the cultural resources. India has 37 UNESCO endorsed world heritage sites, 3650+ national heritage sites protected by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), while the state-level protected archaeology sites by the Tamil Nadu State Archaeology Department are 96 in number. However, an estimate reveals that more than 5 million religious and heritage sites require care and protection from the central and state agencies. The DHAN (Development of Humane Action) Foundation as a voluntary organisation has worked at various levels with communities to create awareness about heritage preservation. Several voluntary sector organisations are working in India for creating awareness among people on heritage and it is not the intention here to present a survey of these institutions and their contribution. This paper takes up DHAN Foundation as a case study and presents the initiatives undertaken by this institution and the experience it has gathered from its involvement in the grassroots.

DHAN Foundation ([www.dhan.org](http://www.dhan.org) and [www.developmenttourism.in](http://www.developmenttourism.in)) named 2008–09 as the 'Year of Heritage'. The year-long celebrations of heritage and action programmes related to heritage have resulted in creating an understanding about the importance

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1. Source: [reports.weforum.org/travel-and-tourism-competitiveness-report-2017](http://reports.weforum.org/travel-and-tourism-competitiveness-report-2017), accessed May 2019.

of cultural heritage among various communities in different parts of India. These programmes have also focused on the documentation of local heritage and integrating them into the development programmes. DHAN Foundation views heritage as very much a living idea – it is about the present and the future as much as the past. DHAN believes that the past would give, in some way, a lesson for the present and future. Our experience at the community level has enabled us to develop the following ideas:

- It has emerged from our experience that intangible heritage (software) is very important for sustainable development with tangible heritage (hardware), and for the use of intangible heritage for development, the community and various stakeholders have to collaborate.
- Since the role of school children, college students and village youth are very important for the sustainable development of the local heritage, a strong orientation with heritage education as a part of the school/college curriculum is important to divert their focus from spending more time on the e-gadgets.
- For sustainability, the organised people-centred institutions have to take charge of this responsibility with networking of various stakeholders. The *panchayats* have to take up the role of local policymakers for the sustainable development of their own heritage resources.
- Advancement with the promotion of local tourism circuit is vital to support the livelihoods for the sustainable development of heritage.
- However, all the stakeholders and communities have to realise that social well-being oriented development is more important than their intellectual and material development for sustainability.

DHAN Foundation's 'Tourism for Development' theme is an outcome of the four-year pilot project 'Endogenous Tourism for Rural Livelihoods' implemented by it in Karaikudi and Kazhugumalai in Tamil

Nadu with the support of United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Government of India. One of the key learnings in the project was that the diversified livelihood opportunities that exist in the tourism sector can contribute to poverty reduction.

## **2. Conserving Heritage through Heritage Literacy: DHAN Foundation's Initiatives**

The ongoing heritage walk programmes for the sustainable development of heritage resources in various districts of Tamil Nadu and the World Heritage and Culture Lecture Series are two of the important activities of the DHAN Foundation. Memoranda of understanding (MOUs) and collaboration with various educational institutions such as Tamil University, Pondicherry University, Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) and individual scholars and experts for heritage development have been implemented. The programmes of DHAN foundations include the following:

- Heritage village network for heritage development
- Collaborative action and contribution of heritage development in little known historically important locations of Thanjavur district
- Heritage resilience among students through innovative Life Frontier Education
- Building heritage awareness among host communities and students of Madurai
- Learning heritage and promoting local tourism as inclusive development through internship activities with the Pondicherry University
- Village development through heritage.

## **3. Heritage Walk for the Sustainable Development of Heritage Resources in Tamil Nadu**

From 2008, DHAN Foundation has been organising heritage walk programmes through its Tourism for Development unit to promote heritage literacy among the public in various parts of Tamil Nadu.



*Fig. 1. Madurai Heritage Walk Brochure, Source : Author*

The heritage walk programmes create awareness among the host communities and help them to understand the historical and archaeological importance of their villages. During the heritage walk programmes, which are arranged at different historical sites, the historical importance and archaeological significance are presented to the public by eminent historians and archaeologists by offering simple lectures, explanations, demonstration, stories, answering queries and documentation including brochures on heritage and history (Figs. 1-2).

The response of the local community has been very encouraging due to the simplified presentation of historical information from the inscriptions, social context and stories associated with temples and sculptures. The local people finally have begun to understand the heritage value of their

neighbourhood. They have become aware that they have to preserve their heritage and contribute to the maintenance of the temples and environment of the villages. Collaborative action and contribution of heritage development in little known historically important locations of Thanjavur district has been undertaken in collaboration with Dr. S. Rajavelu and Dr. N. Athiyaman from the Department of Maritime History and Marine Archaeology, Tamil University, Thanjavur. So,



*Fig. 2. Heritage Walk at Kailasanatha temple, Saylkudi, Ramanathapuram District, Source : Author*

for DHAN Foundation has organised more than 300 heritage walks in 210 little known heritage sites in Madurai, Thanjavur, Tirunelveli, Sivagangai, Kanchipuram and Ramanathapuram districts of Tamil Nadu (Figs. 3-5).

#### **4, Lecture Series on World Heritage and Culture**

Now DHAN Foundation is organising a monthly lecture series on World Heritage and Culture for the benefit of Madurai citizens, especially students, younger generation and interested individuals who wish to promote our traditional culture and heritage with the purpose of inculcating moral development, which is superior to intellectual and material development. This event is organized from 5 to 7 p.m. on every second Sunday of each month at the conference hall of DHAN Foundation. So far, 67 such events have been organised from 14 April 2013 to January 2019.



*Fig. 3. Heritage Walk at Koil Devarayanpettai, Thanjavur District, ,  
Source : Author*

## **5. Educational Social Responsibility and Heritage Development**

With a view to promote educational social responsibility and heritage development, the DHAN Academy, which is a development management institution of DHAN Foundation, Madurai, initiated heritage events from 2012. The past seven editions of heritage events were organised at Keezhamattaiyan, Thenkarai, Thiruvudagam, Thenur, Kodimangalam, Thuvariman and Vikramangalam in Madurai district with creative and innovative ideas, which would be recognised to identify the village culture and traditional knowledge, and people from the local community would also share their wisdom with younger generations from the Madurai region. A heritage council consisting of members from the colleges and experts in the field of heritage to draft policies at panchayat level will be formed, resulting in valuing the heritage aspects at the grassroots.

## **6. Promoting Local Tourism Circuit as Inclusive Development**

Our heritage villages in India are unique in their history,



*Fig. 4. Heritage Walk at Marudur, Madurai District, Source : Author*

archaeology and culture. The Local Tourism Circuit (LTC) is formed for the promotion of the lesser known sites among tourists. These heritage and cultural sites have a universal value – they belong to all and must be protected by all. The objective is to promote public-private-community partnership in heritage conservation, to share the expertise, to train and capacity building and to create awareness all under the theme of dissemination and heritage literacy (Fig. 5). LTC is for sustainable development involving local community so that tourism can prevail in a longer run.

The measures will also be a tool to spread the tourism benefits to various districts of Tamil Nadu, which would also lead to protection of the culture and tradition of the villages. The diversity and uniqueness of villages of India can be experienced through this initiative. Heritage preservation will also give livelihood opportunity for the poor community, which in turn promotes the sustainable development of heritage sites. So far, the students of Pondicherry University through their summer internship activities explored this initiative in Madurai, Theni, Nagapattinam and Thanjavur districts. In these initiatives, SHG federations, local panchayat, district administration, Defence Research



**THENKARAI**



**ANAIMALAI**



Madurai local Tourism activity group welcomes to domestic and international tourist to explore Madurai Heritage at Madurai Local Tourism Circuit

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**ARITTAPATTI**



**MADURAI LOCAL TOURISM CIRCUIT - 1**

**KEELAKUILKUDI**



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*Fig. 5. Madurai Local Tourism Circuit Brochure, Source : Author*

and Development Agency (DRDA), DHAN Foundation, INTACH, ASI, Tamil Nadu State Archaeology, host community organisations, tourism Department, National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) and other corporate social responsibility (CSR) institutions are also involved. The major focus of this network is to help identify measures through which the local community would benefit from initiatives concentrated on heritage conservation, integrated with inclusive economic development programmes. Direct and indirect impact from conservation activities increase the economic value of heritage and help create employment opportunities. The development of public infrastructure of the villages and increased demand for production and consumption of cultural goods, craft products and services could be realised as well.

## 7. Heritage Resilience among Students by the Innovative Life Frontier Education

Under this programme, the college students are given training and orientation on heritage as an extra-curricular activity. Many positive changes have happened among the participating final year history students of Lady Doak College, who took an active part in this

programme for the last four years. The combination of the experience of village community and the academic knowledge of students brings positive attitude towards learning and understanding heritage and work for its development. This understanding made them to practice the value of culture and tradition at the levels of self and family. Their understanding on the team effort and collaboration with the community is the way forward for the sustainable development of heritage and culture.

### **8. Heritage Conservation and Development**

India has more than 6,00,000 villages. Each village is unique in its culture and diversity of heritage. Village development can be connected with heritage and tourism development by way of village cultural immersion activities for the domestic and international tourists. The various types of village cultural immersions like development tourism, village tourism, rural traditional cooking immersion, coastal cultural immersion and tribal cultural immersion organised in various part of Tamil Nadu would facilitate overnight accommodation, which would be available within the villages and would support local tourist guides. Traditional cuisines would be provided on the site and local crafts (including souvenirs) would be available at the site. Developing a people's charter for sustainable tourism, forming institutions for governing tourism, setting up interpretation centres and developing promotional material would also form part of this activity. Further, they would help bring about behavioural change in the minds of people such as heritage is a shared resource, everyone should participate in heritage conservation, understanding the significance of heritage is vital and heritage should be managed to sustain their values.

### **9. Redefining the Role of Community: Way Forward**

Based on the experience of DHAN Foundation and interactions with various institutions, experts, stakeholders and communities, the following measures are suggested for improving the role and contribution of community in heritage management (Elia and Ostovich 2011) and cultural tourism (Allchin 1969; Raj *et al.* 2013).

- Heritage Literacy: Each district has its own heritage assets. Archaeologists and historians in the vicinity of the heritage

sites can come forward for collaboration on heritage literacy, which will result in sustainable protection of heritage sites and sacred places.

- Development of heritage policies at the village level.
- Community groups for heritage and temple protection.
- Annual audit of heritage structures by the local community.
- Networking with stakeholders.
- Institutional social responsibility similar to CSR.
- PPCP (Public-private-community partnership/non-political PPCP model).
- Sacred places are not for commercial activities.
- Annual risk management of sacred places.
- Consulting the experts and transparency with community before making any modification of the heritage structure or allowing it to be used for purposes other than its intended use.
- Promoting and developing local heritage and cultural route (LHCR), which facilitates the visibility of minor sites in the village to design products and interventions.

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