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Heritage Tourism for Nation Building: Community Engagement and Economic Empowerment through Heritage Tourism of Chola Temples

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Abstract

Heritage tourism serves as a vital instrument for linking cultural preservation with community development, particularly within the context of temple heritage in South India. This study investigates how heritage tourism centered on the Chola temples in Tamil Nadu contributes to community engagement and economic empowerment. Through a qualitative review of secondary sources, the research examines the role of local communities in promoting, maintaining, and managing Chola temple tourism, with emphasis on inclusive development strategies. It further analyzes the economic dimensions of heritage tourism by assessing its influence on local livelihoods, encompassing employment creation, entrepreneurship, and skill enhancement. Additionally, the study explores challenges affecting equitable benefit distribution and sustainable participation among stakeholders. To complement secondary analysis, stakeholder perspectives are examined to provide a grounded understanding of community involvement and perceived empowerment outcomes. The findings are expected to highlight how heritage tourism around Chola temples can serve as a catalyst for both cultural sustainability and socio-economic progress in Tamil Nadu.

Keywords: *Tourism, Heritage Tourism, Community Engagement, Economic Empowerment, Chola Temples and Nation-building.*

Introduction:

Heritage tourism refers to a form of tourism that emphasizes experiencing a destination's cultural legacy through visits to historical sites, artifacts, and performances that embody its unique culture and history (Roque, 2022). According to the Oxford English Dictionary, heritage constitutes elements that are transmitted from one generation to another, preserved or inherited, and possess significant historic or cultural value. It represents the legacy of the past that contemporary society endeavors to maintain, both for present benefits and to pass on to future generations (Muzaini, 2012). Heritage holds an integral role in shaping individuals' lives and histories, influencing values, beliefs, and a collective sense of belonging. It also serves as a wellspring of inspiration and creativity, offering platforms for artistic expression and cultural dialogue (Stephenson, 2023).

The concept of "heritage" encompasses a diverse spectrum of environments, ranging from natural landscapes to urban settings, and from architectural structures to artificially created spaces (Poria et al., 2003). As one of the oldest and most prominent types of tourism, heritage tourism attracts significant visitor numbers and generates substantial revenue (Timothy & Boyd, 2006; Towner, 1996; Chong & Balasingam, 2018). In India, heritage tourism enjoys considerable popularity; as of July 2025, the country boasts 44 UNESCO World Heritage sites—including 36 cultural, 7 natural, and 1 mixed site—and the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) protects 3,687 monuments. Ticket revenue from ASI-managed monuments has witnessed a remarkable increase, rising from INR 101.5 crore in 2021-2022 to INR 252.85 crore in 2022-2023, and amounting to INR 198 crore (Pti, 2025; Online Bureau et al., 2024).

Heritage tourism acts as a catalyst for economic growth, delivering numerous positive outcomes such as enhanced revenue, employment generation, improved quality of life, and greater investments in infrastructure and public utilities including transportation (Johnson et al., 1994; Chen & Chen, 2010; Liu & Var, 1986; McCool & Martin, 1994).

The heritage of a place plays a foundational role in shaping its identity and serves as a potent symbol that contributes to nation-building (Light & Dumbraveanu-Andone, 1997). Moreover, heritage and sustainability are closely intertwined, both revolving around the principle of inheritance. In alignment with the United Nations General Assembly's 2030 agenda, culture and heritage should be embedded within governmental development strategies to address challenges posed by globalization (Wei et al., 2022).

Tourism, and especially heritage tourism, plays a central role in nurturing, promoting, and reinforcing national identities among both domestic and international visitors (Rose, 2003). Every mature nation possesses symbolic landscapes that evoke powerful emotions due to their ties to national history and collective memory (Rowntree & Conkey, 1980; Palmer, 2002). Such landscapes serve as essential mediums for nation-building, as they embody the historical roots of a nation and enable people to connect with their past, thereby fostering an understanding of the present.

Among these emblematic monuments are the Chola Temples in India, some of which have garnered recognition as UNESCO World Heritage sites under the designation "The Great Living Chola Temples."

Chola Temples:

The Chola Empire, an influential dynasty in South India, traces its beginnings to around 350 AD (Ramesh, 2018). The Chola rulers are conventionally classified into three categories based on their periods of reign: the Early Cholas, the Medieval Cholas, and the Later Cholas. The Medieval Chola period, renowned for its flourishing art and architecture, commenced around 850 AD when the chieftain Vijayalaya captured Thanjavur and established it as the imperial capital (Ramesh, 2024).

During this era, the Chola kings founded the "Chola Mandalam" and embarked on extensive developments in art and architecture. Utilizing the wealth accumulated through widespread military conquests, they constructed enduring stone temples and exquisite bronze sculptures predominantly within a Hindu cultural context (Chandramohan & Vivekanandam, 2024).

Among their remarkable architectural achievements are three temples that remain well-preserved and have been recognized by UNESCO as World Heritage Sites: the Brihadisvara Temple at Thanjavur, the Brihadisvara Temple at Gangaikondacholisvaram, and the Airavatesvara Temple at Darasuram (UNESCO, 2004). These temples stand as prime examples of heritage tourism, representing outstanding accomplishments in architecture, culture, and history from the Chola Empire period in Southern India. Their UNESCO

recognition underscores their exceptional artistic brilliance and their ongoing cultural and religious importance.

Constructed primarily during the 11th and 12th centuries AD, these temples were commissioned by prominent Chola rulers Raja Raja Chola I, Rajendra Chola I, and Rajendra Chola II (Vijaya, 2024; Baby, 2024). Notably, the Brihadisvara Temple is distinguished by having one of the tallest vimanas in the world (Baby, 2024). As UNESCO World Heritage Sites, these monuments attract significant tourist influxes and benefit from concerted efforts for protection and conservation (Vecco & Caust, 2019).

Community Engagement:

Community engagement refers to the process of involving and empowering individuals or groups in decision-making processes that impact their lives and communities (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). Within the tourism context, community engagement ensures that tourism initiatives align with the needs, values, and aspirations of local populations (Hall, 1999). The term "community" itself denotes a network of individuals connected through shared locality, interests, or governance (McCabe et al., 2006). Community engagement is widely studied because tourism development invariably affects local residents and their social fabric (Hanrahan et al., 2016). In Southeast Asia, community engagement in tourism is often driven by the recognition of the importance of cultural heritage preservation, environmental protection, and sustainable development (Rahman & Baddam, 2021). By fostering community involvement and implementing localized tourism initiatives, it becomes possible to empower local economies to thrive sustainably alongside tourism sector growth (Darmi, 2017).

Economic Empowerment Through Tourism:

Economic empowerment refers to strengthening individuals or communities to access the factors of production. It cannot exist in isolation and must be supported by social, political, and psychological empowerment (Pradono et al., 2016). In the tourism context, economic empowerment is indicated when tourism delivers lasting economic benefits to households and provides equitable access to employment opportunities (Scheyvens & Van Der Watt, 2021). Marginalized groups gain opportunities for senior positions within the tourism sector or operate their own tourism-related businesses, such as restaurants or craft stalls. They also participate in local trade and commerce associations and have access to production means such as land and capital. Tourism promotes economic empowerment by offering diverse employment and entrepreneurial opportunities, especially to disadvantaged groups like women,

youth, and ethnic minorities, fostering financial independence (Aghazamani & Hunt, 2016). Scheyvens (2002) proposed several indicators to evaluate economic empowerment through tourism: (1) tourism provides sustained economic benefits to the community; (2) financial benefits are distributed among many families; and (3) visible improvements arise from generated income, such as better housing and education. Conversely, signs of disempowerment include sporadic, minimal income generation; profits preferentially accruing to government agencies, local elites, or external operators; only a few individuals benefiting financially; and others being excluded due to lack of capital, experience, or skills.

Nation- Building:

The term Nation – building was rooted in Cold – War ideology. The term was meant to suggest that the newly independent countries of the Global South could modernize to become as democratic, capitalist, and individualist as Western societies, rather than turn to the communist nemesis. Nation – Building seeks to build peace and foster economic growth (Wimmer, 2018). Indicators of nation-building reflect the multifaceted progress of a country toward political stability, social unity, economic development, and cultural identity. Key indicators identified are :

1. Political Stability and Governance: A stable political environment with effective governance, rule of law, and accountable institutions creates the foundation necessary for nation-building by ensuring security and public trust.
2. Social Cohesion and National Identity: The extent to which diverse social groups share a sense of belonging, trust, and common values is essential to strengthen national unity and peace.
3. Economic Development and Equitable Growth: Sustainable economic growth, measured by GDP growth, poverty reduction, and employment generation, is a critical indicator, as economic well-being underpins social stability.
4. Cultural Preservation and Promotion: Maintaining cultural heritage and fostering collective national identity supports social integration and pride, contributing to nation-building at the community level.
5. Education and Civic Engagement: Access to quality education and active citizen participation in democratic processes empower individuals and foster inclusive nation-building.

Community Engagement, Economic Empowerment and Nation – Building:

Community engagement plays a foundational role in nation building, especially

through the medium of heritage tourism. By actively involving local communities in the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage sites such as the Chola temples, heritage tourism fosters a sense of collective identity, pride, and belonging among residents. This engagement not only strengthens social cohesion but also empowers communities to become stewards of their own cultural narratives and traditions. Moreover, community participation facilitates sustainable tourism development by balancing conservation with economic growth, ensuring that the benefits of tourism contribute directly to local livelihoods. As a result, heritage tourism acts as a catalyst for socio-economic upliftment, cultural continuity, and national unity. Through awareness, education, and economic opportunities generated from heritage tourism, communities are better positioned to contribute to broader goals of sustainable development and inclusive nation building, reinforcing the interconnectedness of cultural preservation and societal progress (Rahman & Baddam, 2021b).

As mentioned earlier economic development is directly an indicator of nation-building. Nation building in other terms is defined as the economic aid (Creasey et al., 2012). The relationship between nation building and economic empowerment is interdependent. Economic empowerment supports nation building by promoting inclusive economic growth, reducing poverty, and strengthening social stability. Conversely, effective nation-building policies create a stable framework in which economic empowerment can flourish by ensuring equitable access to resources and opportunities for all citizens (Creasey et al., 2012). Economic empowerment enhances community participation and social cohesion, thereby contributing to the long-term success of nation-building efforts (*Nation Building | Beyond Intractability*, 2024).

Statement of the Problem:

Great Living Chola Temples are an epitome of Tamil Culture. Despite the global recognition of the Great Living Chola Temples as UNESCO World Heritage Sites, the potential of heritage tourism in promoting community engagement and economic empowerment around these sites remains underutilized. Although Tamil Nadu possesses a rich cultural and architectural legacy, studies indicate persistent challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, limited marketing, insufficient community participation, and weak linkages between heritage preservation and local economic development. Though there has been a lot of studies on community engagement in heritage tourism, there are only limited number of studies on economic empowerment through heritage tourism. Also, when it comes to

community engagement in India, there has been very limited research done on this theme in built heritage sites. This paves the way for the papers research based on the community engagement and economic empowerment through heritage tourism of The Great Living Chola Temples.

Research Objectives:

The following are the research objectives of the study:

- 1) To examine how heritage tourism centered on the Chola temples contributes to community engagement and economic empowerment in Tamil Nadu using secondary sources.
- a. To review the role of community participation in promoting, maintaining, and managing Chola temple tourism through inclusive development approaches.
- b. To analyze the economic impact of Chola temple tourism on local livelihoods, including employment generation, small business growth, and skill enhancement opportunities.
- c. To explore challenges and limitations affecting effective community engagement and equitable benefit distribution within the Chola temple tourism economy.
- 2) To explore stakeholder perspectives on community engagement and economic empowerment through heritage tourism at Chola temples in Tamil Nadu.

Literature Review:

The Great Living Chola Temples comprise three monumental stone-built temples situated in and around the Thanjavur District of Tamil Nadu. These temples are administered by governmental and semi-governmental authorities; while the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) oversees structural maintenance and security (Archaeological Survey of India, 2004), the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department (HRCE) manages them through the “Thanjavur Palace Devasthanam” trust (Tm, 2025). The trustee of the Devasthanam is Hon. Babaji Raja Bhonsle, a descendant of the Maratha Kings of Thanjavur.

These temples attract a substantial number of visitors annually, with the Brihadisvara Temple at Thanjavur being the oldest and most frequented. According to Tamil Nadu's Tourism Statistics (2024), this temple receives approximately twelve times the visitors compared to the other two temples. Despite their popularity, the Great Living Chola Temples face challenges such as insufficient planning, unauthorized local interference, unclear boundaries, inadequate tourist information and signage, poor hygiene facilities, lack of data on visitors, unclear administrative offices, ineffective promotional strategies, environmental pollution, and weak public-private partnerships.

McKenna and Hanrahan (2024) emphasize that effective community engagement necessitates fostering partnerships among local residents, tourism stakeholders, and governing authorities, embodying a collaborative governance approach to heritage tourism. Community perceptions of tourism's effects on quality of life and cultural identity, alongside their awareness and support of sustainable tourism practices, constitute key indicators of engagement. It is important to distinguish between community engagement and the sense of community, which are often conflated (Di Napoli et al., 2019).

Economic empowerment in this context pertains to equitable community access to economic opportunities and benefits arising from tourism development (Scheyvens & Van Der Watt, 2021). It transcends mere economic growth by encompassing dimensions such as health, education, poverty reduction, and inequality alleviation, all of which contribute to overall well-being (Alcalá-Ordóñez & Segarra, 2023). Sen (1999) conceptualizes economic empowerment as comprising opportunities (capabilities), achievements (functionings), and freedom of choice. Tourism has the potential to promote such economic empowerment through sustainable development.

Research Methodology:

This study adopts a triangulation approach, combining secondary research with qualitative primary research to comprehensively address the research objectives concerning heritage tourism, community engagement, and economic empowerment at Chola temples in Tamil Nadu.

Research Approach

A phenomenological approach underpins this study to capture the lived experiences and perceptions of key stakeholders. This approach facilitates a comprehensive understanding of socio-economic impacts and engagement processes from the viewpoints of those directly involved.

Study Area

The research has been conducted in the UNESCO World heritage Site of the Great Living Chola Temples, which includes the Brihadisvara Temple at Thanjavur, the Brihadisvara Temple at Gangaikondacholisvaram and the Airavatesvara Temple at Darasuram.

Data Collection Methods

An extensive review of secondary sources including scholarly articles, government reports, UNESCO publications, and prior research has been conducted to examine existing knowledge on community participation, economic impacts, and the challenges related to heritage tourism at Chola temple sites. Concurrently, the study uses qualitative research methods to capture in-depth

insights from key stakeholders involved in Chola temple tourism. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with temple authorities, local community members, tourism entrepreneurs, government officials, and heritage experts. Purposive sampling will ensure representation of diverse perspectives relevant to understanding community engagement and economic empowerment. The qualitative data was analyzed to identify themes, ideas, or patterns, based on the existing theories and new issues from the field supported by the observation. The data was coded manually using open coding to identify the ideas and themes. Open coding involves breaking down the data into parts and searching for similarities and differences within and across interviews. Apart from that, ethnographic data from the perspective of the author has also been used in the study.

Population and Sampling

The study population includes key stakeholders involved in or affected by heritage tourism at the Chola temple sites. This includes temple authorities, local community members, tourism business owners, government officials, cultural conservationists, and NGOs.

A purposive sampling technique has been employed to select participants who have substantial knowledge or roles related to the management, promotion, and experience of heritage tourism in the area. The total number of samples obtained is 12 based on data saturation.

Result and Analysis:

Community Engagement in Great Living Chola Temples:

The Great Living Chola temples foster community engagement through various means such as participation in temple rituals, management of tourism activities, and facilitating local festivals, arrangement of accommodation, amenities and accessibility, etc.,. The community engagement also happens through special development board for specific temples, where the locals can be a part of the board to give ideas and work for the development of the site. According to the Chairman of Gangaikondacholapuram Development Council,

.... we with the help of the local government authorities and local people, trying to develop this temple so as to increase the visitor numbers which in turn will help in job creation and infrastructure development for the locals. Apart from this council, we also actively engage with the training the locals for becoming Tourist Guides for the Temples. Recently to increase the visitor count and revisit intention of the tourists we have started to celebrate some festivals ...

Apart from these several NGOs and clubs such as INTACH (Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage) play a vital role in the decision

making, promotion and management of the site. According to Mr. Babaji Rajah Bhonsle, the Convenor of Thanjavur Chapter of INTACH,

...there are lot of community engagement programs happening in the temples from involving school kids in promoting these sites through heritage walks and promotional march to various competitions held for kids to promote these sites...

Empowering local entrepreneurs is part of Community Engagement for a place as the tourism will be of benefit to the community (Friedel & Chewings, 2011). According to a handicraft shop owner inside the compound of the Airavateshwara Temple,

....this temple is a source of income for us. Before it was very difficult as the temple had only countable visitors, but now it has been increasing. This boosts our business. Currently there are also a lot of foreigners who are purchasing indigenous products from us...

From this it can be understood that the community is engaged in the local entrepreneurship. The temple is also a source of identity fostering and promoting a sense of belongingness to the people. According to a resident in the vicinity of the Thanjavur Brihadheeswara Temple,

...it is our temple. It shows that the Tamils have stood tall even before 1000 years creating this marvel. I have bought all my relatives to visit this temple. It is our pride....

This shows that people are engaged and feel a sense of pride and belongingness to this temple.

Economic Empowerment through Great Living Chola Temples:

Cultural Heritage is closely related to the economy. According to (Zeng & Wang, 2023), cultural heritage has a causal effect on overall economic growth. There exists an extensive sociological work exploring the association between World Cultural Heritage sites and tourism economy—other than the overall economic status. The status of World Heritage Site also boosts the tourist economy of the region (Su & Lin, 2013).

The Great Living Chola Temples, have increased the quality of life for the local people through better infrastructure like road facilities, transport facilities, etc., Ariyalur is one of the least performing districts in terms of GDP in Tamil Nadu. But the presence of the temple has increased the revenue of the district, as well as improved the public infrastructure in terms of proper road facilities, transport facilities and availability shops, though there is a scope for improvement there.

...before there were no proper road facilities in this place. To come here people have to have some vehicle, but now there is bus available. There is also a new hotel which have opened near the temple. The visit of the Prime Minister have also increased the number of visitors to this temple.

Now the lake area where the Prime Minister has visited have also cleared up and maintained well....
-noted the priest of the temple. Tourism has also created employment for the local in the sites of The Great living Chola Temples. According to the Tourist Officer of Tanjore,

...Tourism has created lot of job opportunities for the people. There are many travel agencies and hotels which have been opened. There are also a lot of tourist guides now available. Now instead of lack of job, we are facing the issue of manpower shortage. This is even an issue in the hotel Tamil Nadu....

The temples have also inspired many to create their own small enterprises. There is a huge increase in the number of small shops, hotels, hostels, travel agencies, tour operators in recent time. There is also a skilled manpower now available for the workforce.

...previously there were guides who didn't have certified training or any form of formal education. There was also a huge vacancy for guides who can speak foreign languages. Now there are guides who were trained with Incredible India program....
-mentioned the tourist guide in Airavateshwara Temple.

Challenges and Limitations affecting Community Engagement and Equitable Benefit Distribution

There are lot of challenges for Community Engagement. They are lack of coordination among stakeholders, weak policies and regulations, lack of community participation, lack of human capacity, limited access to resources, and lack of knowledge (Cole, 2006). There are a lot of challenges for community engagement in the temples. According to the trustee of the Tanjore Devasthanam,

...people do not have discipline. The sellers of small food item haven't looked out to keep a dustbin near by nor have instructed his buyers to not litter the place. The local people are also not very interested in maintaining the place. They just spit saliva on the compound walls of the temple. The government have not given preference for the locals in terms of MSME near the site. Most of the place has been bought by people of other districts and states....

The major issue for the community engagement in the Great Living Chola Temples is that, locals are not ready to participate, there has been very minimal inclusion of local from the government's side, the temple is commodified, and as the temple is managed by ASI, there is limited access to the locals. Other significant challenge is the inadequate infrastructure and basic facilities around these temple sites, such as poor connectivity, limited accommodation options, erratic water supply, and insufficient sanitation

services, which hinder tourist satisfaction and community benefits.

Another limitation is the dominance of state control and complex temple management structures that sometimes restrict active community participation in decision-making and benefit-sharing processes, reducing transparency and inclusivity. The persistence of traditional governance systems and bureaucratic challenges can marginalize local voices, leading to inequitable distribution of economic gains derived from tourism.

Economic disparities within communities around the temples also pose barriers to equitable benefit distribution. Not all community members have equal access to tourism-related employment or entrepreneurial opportunities, often due to differences in skills, resources, and social capital. Finally, insufficient capacity-building programs and awareness about sustainable tourism among local residents limit effective engagement and long-term empowerment.

Addressing these challenges requires integrated efforts focused on improving infrastructure, promoting inclusive governance, enhancing skills development, and implementing sustainable tourism practices that balance conservation with community welfare around the Great Living Chola Temples.

Discussion:

There is a complex interplay between heritage conservation, community participation, and socio-economic development. The findings underscore that community engagement is essential for sustaining the cultural integrity and tourism potential of the Chola temples. Active local participation fosters a sense of ownership, strengthens cultural identity, and enables the preservation of traditional knowledge and practices, which are crucial for authentic heritage tourism experiences. However, the existing challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, limited local capacity, and centralized governance reduce the effectiveness of community involvement. State control over temple management, while ensuring preservation, often limits grassroots decision-making and marginalizes local stakeholders, hindering inclusive development. The influx of tourism without adequate sustainable planning raises concerns about environmental degradation and cultural commodification. This signifies the urgency for integrated strategies combining capacity building, infrastructure improvement, and inclusive governance to address these issues effectively. Enhancing skills training and spreading awareness about sustainable tourism would empower communities to leverage cultural resources for improved livelihoods while safeguarding the heritage sites.

In essence, promoting balanced community engagement and fair benefit-sharing mechanisms is critical to maintaining the Great Living Chola Temples as living heritage sites that continue to inspire social cohesion and economic vitality in Tamil Nadu. Future policies must emphasize participatory planning, transparent governance, and long-term sustainability to transform heritage tourism into a viable vehicle for community empowerment and inclusive growth.

Managerial insights:

The following are the insights for the managerial decisions based on the research

- Engage local communities actively in decision-making to ensure their voices shape temple tourism management and benefit-sharing.
- Build local capacity through skill development in heritage conservation, hospitality, and entrepreneurship to maximize community empowerment.
- Prioritize essential facilities such as transport, sanitation, and visitor amenities to enhance tourist experience and local participation.
- Develop mechanisms that support local businesses and equitable sharing of tourism revenues to reduce social disparities.
- Implement practices that protect cultural integrity and minimize environmental impact while raising community awareness.
- Collaborate with government agencies, NGOs, and private sectors for coordinated, resource-efficient heritage tourism development.

Conclusion and future Scope:

The Great Living Chola Temples stand as magnificent legacies of the Chola dynasty, embodying extraordinary architectural, cultural, and religious significance. Community engagement plays a pivotal role in sustaining these heritage sites, promoting preservation, and ensuring that the economic benefits of tourism are equitably shared. However, challenges such as infrastructural deficiencies, limited local participation in governance, and uneven benefit distribution need systematic addressal. By embracing inclusive development approaches and sustainable tourism practices, these temples can continue to thrive as living cultural centers while empowering local communities.

This research exclusively examined the Great Living Chola Temples. Future studies could expand the scope to include additional Chola temples to achieve a more comprehensive understanding. The present study employed qualitative and ethnographic methodologies; however, subsequent research could benefit from incorporating quantitative data to enhance empirical rigor. Due to constraints related to time

and participant availability, the sample size was limited to 12. Future investigations should consider larger sample sizes to minimize potential biases and improve the generalizability of findings.

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