

Governance and Community Participation in Heritage Conservation

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Abstract: *Devaliya, is an arid village in the district of Kutch in Gujarat, that embodies a rich tapestry of tangible and intangible heritage. This paper investigates how community based Traditional Knowledge Systems contribute to the conservation of the built, ecological and cultural heritage. Using a mix method of qualitative, and participatory methodology which included a 20 days field immersive study, mapping of cultural markers, visual documentation and conducting in depth interviews, a comprehensive biocultural inventory was compiled. The inferences revealed that Traditional Knowledge Systems encompass agricultural practices such as dry farming and rain water harvesting, climate resilient building techniques, using locally available materials, and cultural rituals that reinforce social cohesions and ecological awareness. These knowledge systems have enabled the communities in Devaliya to adapt to extreme climatic conditions while maintaining a distinct cultural identity. The study highlights the importance of documenting traditional knowledge systems, integrating these knowledge systems into the local governance and promoting community led initiatives towards conserving the traditional knowledge and promoting onto the future generations. The paper asserts that conservation requires recognition of community knowledge and active participation of the local governing bodies. By recommending policies that bridge traditional and contemporary approaches, this paper positions Devaliya village in Kutch as a model for sustainable heritage management model for rural areas. The paper also highlights the importance of community engagement in the field of conservation by enhancing resilience against socio economic and climate challenges.*

Keywords: Traditional knowledge systems, cultural heritage, community engagement, heritage management

1. Introduction

Most rural communities in India have developed different adaptive strategies to sustain their built and natural heritage, specially under challenging climatic conditions. Devaliya is one such village situated in the Anjar taluka of the Kutch district in the state of Gujarat, that exemplifies this resilience. Inhabited by the Kutch Gujar Kshatriya (Mistri) community, the village bears the legacy of the two historic earthquakes of the region – 1956 and 2001 that damaged most of the built heritage and disrupted intangible traditions. (1)

The cultural heritage of Devaliya is intertwined with the natural landscape of the place – the white sea salt flats of the Rann of Kutch, the sparse grasslands and the thriving ecological practices and traditions. Communities have come to evolve a symbiotic relationship with the nature, which resulted in practices that harmonize architecture, agriculture and, social rituals. There is an urgency to document and preserve these knowledge systems because development pressures and climate change threaten to erode this traditional knowledge systems away.

2. Methodology

The research adopted a mix of qualitative and participatory approach to document both the tangible and intangible aspects of Devaliya's heritage. The method consisted of several components:

- Literature study: secondary sources and archives on Kutch's history, the disasters, ecology and, culture were studied for a broader contextual understanding.
- Immersive Field Study: recorded the daily life, heritage practices and, traditional knowledge systems of the village by closely interacting with the community and residents.

- Community mapping: all the cultural markers– traditional houses, public spaces, festivals and, rituals – were identified and mapped to understand the cultural landscape.
- Visual documentation: photographs and sketches were recorded to document the architecture, landscape and, the traditional rituals.
- Ethnographic research: interviews and structured interactions with the community elders and traditional knowledge bearers were conducted to get insights into the historical events, constructions techniques and, to understand the intergenerational transfer of knowledge.

3. Results

The extensive field documentation and mapping generated a biocultural register that recorded Devaliya's heritage and the interconnection and dependency between the built, ecological systems and, the cultural rituals.

- Built Heritage: the traditional houses constructed by the Mistri community uses stone masonry with lime mortar and carved wooden beams. These locally available materials incorporate climate resilient features such as thick walls, sloping roofs and earthen flooring in construction that improves thermal comfort and also provide resistance against seismic waves (4). The public spaces like the temple plazas and community chabutras function as social hubs and reflect Devaliya's traditional knowledge in artistic craftsmanship.
- Intangible Heritage: community festivals and rituals such as Navratri, Janmashtami, and others reinforce community bonding through dance, music and, cultural practices (1). Oral traditions and story- telling help in preserving these historical narratives and sustain cultural identities. Some of the art craft traditions, particularly embroidery by the

Meghwal women, reuse fabrics and show ecological sensitivity (3).

- c) Ecological Adaptations: the community practices dry farming techniques (sukhi kheti) which uses minimal water and organic manure to cultivate crops like bajra, jeera and, til (6). Structures supporting rain water harvesting – including step wells and reservoirs – address water scarcity and support water resource management in the most efficient ways. Neem and lemon trees planted in the courtyards provided not only shade, but medicinal and spiritual benefits too.

The biocultural inventory helped in identifying endangered practices that requires immediate preservation and proposes policy changes that integrate traditional knowledge systems into the local governance.

4. Discussions

The documentation of these traditional knowledge systems highlights the pivotal role they play in sustaining Devaliya's nature and culture balance. The ecological practices of dry farming, rainwater harvesting and the climate resilient architecture have enabled the community to thrive in such arid environments. These systems offer lessons to the challenges of climate change and socio-economic transitions.

By the integrating the traditional knowledge systems into the local governance can enhance community resilience. Local bodies like the gram panchayat should involve heritage management through capacity building strategies that bridge traditional practices and modern policies. Community engagement and initiatives supported by the government bodies can develop eco-tourism and craft-based services that help in generated livelihood while promoting heritage.

The study also helps in highlighting the importance of involving younger generations in the conservation and promotion of heritage. Education and digital documentation can foster pride in cultural heritage and ensure continuity of traditional knowledge systems.

5. Conclusion

Devaliya's heritage offers valuable highlights into sustainability and resilience derived from the community based traditional knowledge systems. Documentation and promotion of these practices is crucial in maintaining the village's identity and fostering sustainable development.

Future initiatives in Devaliya and such rural villages should focus on engaging the youth, spreading awareness on conservation, strengthening community institutions and, integrating traditional knowledge systems into a broader conservation framework. Through the recognition and empowerment of these stakeholders, Devaliya and this study can serve as a model for rural communities facing similar socio- economic development and climate change challenges.

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Author Contributions

Ar. Jahanvi A Sinha conceptualised the study, conducted fieldwork, analysed the data and wrote the manuscript.

Ethics Approval

The study involved interviews and observations with community members. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and consented to share their knowledge. The research adhered to ethical standards for social science research.

Data Availability

The data supporting this study, including field notes and photographs, are available from the author upon reasonable request.

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