

Strategies for Sustaining Thousand-Year-Old Monuments in India – the Great Living Chola Temples

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ABSTRACT

In India, a large number of 'living heritage' monuments, such as temples that are in active use by devotees, are under the direct care of the government. Despite the fact that such monuments are of increasing interest to audiences other than devotees, from the art connoisseur to the casual tourist, they continue to be managed in traditional ways that essentially cater to the needs of the devotees. In an attempt to ensure that all types of visitors to living heritage monuments can have their desired experience, new strategies are being adopted. This paper explores the actions undertaken by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) in implementing a conservation management plan and specific conservation interventions on a group of three World Heritage Hindu temples known as the Great Living Chola Temples. As these temples are a living heritage, it was necessary to take into account the needs of all stakeholders during the execution of conservation interventions.

Introduction

Throughout its lengthy history spanning nearly 5 000 years, India has shown itself to be a nation that has sustained itself during periods of turmoil and invasions by adopting the best practices of other peoples and religions. It is this rich and diversified background that has also resulted in the construction of countless secular and religious structures that can be found scattered across all regions of the country. Historically, in the Indian way of life, religion and kingdom were intertwined and the temple building was considered to be one of the most pious deeds; hence, many temples were constructed and dedicated to different cults.

In India one can see many temples, from big to small, which are still being used for worship, as indeed they have been since the time of their consecration. The continued upkeep of these temples is made possible because of factors such as their manner of construction, continuous usage, the dynamic roles they play in the sociocultural activities of the communities, and monetary donations.

Today, India's general situation is similar to that of other developing populations across the globe: on the one hand the growing population places intense pressure on land use and basic sustenance, and on the other hand there is the opening up of the country to globalization and the influence of Western culture and values. Together, these variables make it extremely difficult to maintain the delicate balance between traditional cultural values and their associated heritage, and new trends. As a result, India's rich and varied heritage, including its temples, is facing serious threats.

The Cholas

The Cholas were an Imperial dynasty that ruled over most parts of southern India between the ninth and thirteenth centuries CE. The greatest Chola Emperor, Rajaraja I's (985–1012 CE) indelible contribution to India is undoubtedly the *Brihadisvara* Temple at Thanjavur - conceived, planned and executed with great attention to detail. His son and successor Rajendra I (1012–1044 CE) is credited with the construction of a second *Brihadisvara* Temple at Gangaikondacholapuram, which became the new capital during his reign. Another ruler, Rajaraja II