

# Exploring the Culture–Nature Interface for Landscape Heritage Conservation in India

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**Abstract:** ‘Culture’ and ‘Nature’ have always been seen as thriving in a symbiotic relationship through ages in the human history. However, in the last two centuries, this dynamic relationship between the two has gone under scrutiny due to ever-increasing human activities. With a rich legacy of its cultural and natural heritage, the changing Indian environmental and socio-political conditions have always been creating challenges for governance and community-based conservation for protection of natural and built heritage. Many textual references from Indian literature explain how communities through various Indian civilizations were striving for creating a balance between conservation and development in the past. Today, when the humanity is facing climatic catastrophic events in each and every corner of the globe, it becomes imperative to understand and reflect upon the current practices in heritage conservation so that further damage can be avoided. This analytical study explores the relationship of cultural and natural heritage sites in India identified in the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites. It also advocates for referring to various ICOMOS Charters and Doctrinal texts which are strictly framed to provide protection to such important resources of the country. The study calls for attention for a governance model for other cultural and natural sites having heritage value using an integrated approach towards landscape conservation and management through involvement of all stakeholders.

**Keywords:** cultural heritage, conservation, communities, landscape, natural heritage

## I. INTRODUCTION

The modern notion of heritage expresses a wide variety of relations – physical and associative – of populations with the tangible and intangible aspects of their cultural territories in the natural settings. Furthermore, environment is considered to be an intrinsic factor in shaping human cultures and any shift in it impacts the culture too (Dhavalikar, 2002) [1]. In other words, difference in environment of various regions of the world, broadly due to varying climatic and geographic factors, is the root of cultural diversity. Recalling one such example of The Maya, a truly advanced, most sophisticated and highly developed pre-Columbian native American civilization, whose cities impress us not only for their mystery and beauty but more for their “pure archaeological” expression because once the city was depopulated, it was never occupied by later buildings. However, climatologists and paleo-ecologists have recently recognised several signals of ancient climate and environmental changes in Maya civilization that occurred thousand years ago and contributed to its collapse (Diamond, 2005) [2]. These evidences suggest that if a society is not aware of the environmental consequences of its actions, it won’t be able to survive for long. Today, when the whole humanity is facing major threats to its existence due to change in global climatic patterns, it has become doubly important to hold on to what we have inherited from the past. This will not only build a value system to enjoy the present, but will help the communities to preserve and pass the legacy on to future generations.

## II. NATURE-CULTURE RELATIONSHIP AND LANDSCAPE HERITAGE

Cultural heritage in simple terms is considered as an asset that exists tangibly in the form of objects, buildings, monuments, landscapes, archival material and works of art; and intangibly as folklore, traditions, language and knowledge rooted deeply in memories, attitudes and imaginations of a cultural group or society. Our world is full of wonders that generate curiosity in the human mind and a quest to know more about his past. This is enabled when a connection is established with cultural sites from pre-historic caves, historic cities, forts, castles, temples, cathedrals, mosques to naturally occurring mighty mountains, roaring waterfalls, mystical forest groves, sacred rivers and life-giving oceans. Heritage Landscapes, also commonly referred to as Cultural Landscapes, tend to represent some of the most remarkable landmarks on Earth (Kryder-Reid, 2014) [3]. Barnes (2022) puts together the words of famous geographer Lowenthal, “*the word landscape comprises of three vital concepts: nature as fundamental heritage in its own right; environment as the setting of human action and sense of place as awareness of local difference and appreciation of ancestral roots*” [4]. Cultural heritage landscapes are typically the defined geographical area of heritage values that are predominantly shaped by humans and their related activities.

However, many pristine landscapes of the world with their unique cultural footprint have survived over the years until they had fallen prey to exponentially rising population and industrial growth 200 years ago. Knowing the fact, that our built and natural heritage is constantly under threat from various anthropogenic activities, natural disasters, wars between the countries, rising environmental pollution and tourism beyond their carrying capacity, the lack of awareness makes it more vulnerable to such hazards. This is the time to reflect on the learning from our past by turning them into protection and conservation strategies for most valuable assets on earth that are the basis of human existence. A proper and effective framework that encourages cooperation among communities can help achieve the aim of equitable distribution of resources through conservation and management (Narain, 2009) [5].

## III. INTERNATIONAL CONVENTIONS AND CHARTERS ON HERITAGE PROTECTION

The health and future of the planet and the cultures thriving on it, especially as affected by global environmental change, should be of great concern to all countries, the diverse communities living in them and of course each one of us as individuals. One cannot think of giving due consideration to future protection of cultural resources, without recognising and responding to the clear trajectory of climate change (Wood & Landry, 2008) [6]. The aim of conservation is to protect and maintain the sanctity of the places for present as well as future use, for they have an intrinsic and instrumental value for local and global population. In one of its endeavours to identify and safeguard world’s most significant natural and cultural heritage having ‘**outstanding universal value**’, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) initiated a mission commonly known as World Heritage Convention 1972 [7]. The convention strongly emphasized on the role of local communities for nature conservation and preservation of cultural sites. Conservation is thus an activity that requires responsible action and due deliberation before making any interventions that may alter or damage the existing inherent values in heritage (Singh, 2021) [8]. There are many Charters formulated by ICOMOS (The international Council on Monuments and Sites) that suggest and guide actions on heritage sites [9].

The international movement created by **The Athens Charter of 1931**, led to the formulation of **The Venice Charter 1964**, on *Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites*. With sixteen articles, its objective was to establish a framework for preservation and restoration of ancient buildings which can then be applied in concordance with each country’s own tradition and culture. **The Florence Charter 1981**, on *Historic Gardens* recommends that these gardens have architectural and horticultural value from a historical point of view, therefore these should be considered equivalent to monuments. The underlying aim behind framing of

twenty-five articles in this charter was to prepare guiding principles for interventions in historic gardens regarding maintenance, conservation, restoration and reconstruction for owners and decision-makers. **The Washington Charter 1987**, on *Conservation of Historic Towns and Urban Areas* was conceptualised for a growing concern towards historic areas of small and large scale with their natural and man-made environments embodying the values of traditional urban cultures. Adopted during 12<sup>th</sup> General Assembly in Mexico, **International Cultural Tourism Charter 1999**, focuses on *Managing Tourism at Places of Heritage Significance*. The charter laid down six governing principles to ensure responsible cultural tourism that provides enriching experience to visitors and benefits to host communities. In order to deal with the rising complexities of dramatic expansion of interpretive activities at many cultural heritage sites, nine years later, during the 16<sup>th</sup> ICOMOS General Assembly meeting at Quebec, **The Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites 2008**, was established. The main objective of this charter was to define the basic principles of Interpretation and Presentation as essential components of heritage conservation efforts and as a means of enhancing public appreciation and understanding of cultural heritage sites. The second decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century was the decade of technological advancements that boosted globalization of markets. The economic opportunities offered by developed nations called for a shift in population between regions causing large-scale migrations that posed new threats to the identities of old towns and urban areas. The next General Assembly of ICOMOS provided a framework for urban conservation called, **The Valletta Principles for the Safeguarding and Management of Historic Cities, Towns and Urban Areas 2011**. Held in 2017 at New Delhi, the 19<sup>th</sup> ICOMOS General Assembly paved way for the preservation of **Historic Urban Public Parks** as historic sites for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations. The doctrinal text in this regard provided guidance on explaining, celebrating and safeguarding a range of social and intangible values that are associated with these public parks. The most recent addition to the list is the **International Charter for Cultural Heritage Tourism 2022**, which suggests reinforcing cultural heritage protection and community resilience through responsible and sustainable tourism management [10].

#### IV. THE UNIQUE CULTURAL-NATURAL LANDSCAPE HERITAGE OF INDIA

All great discoveries in this world have their origin in the process of self-discovery of human nature. This journey starts when one tries to begin his search to find one's own identity, first within the self and later with the immediate environment to which he is related by birth. India's dynamic history and adaptation to its ever-changing political and social scenarios by the society, has successfully enriched the experiences and shaped cultural identities of its people. Indian heritage, in its true sense, is a reflection of who we are as a society. Being one of the oldest civilizations on earth, India's unique physiographic regions and a long history of rise and decline of various empires, make it a destination to wander and explore natural and architectural marvels for visitors across the world. Layer upon layer, its cultural geographical setting is a reflection of the ancient and modern civilizational traces thorough the entire land of India. With its great network of pilgrimage places having an inherent connection with its geomorphological features, it has been regarded as 'sacred geography' by eminent scholars and authors. On the whole, what makes India stand out in UNESCO's list of cultural and natural heritage with 'outstanding universal value' is its archetypal references of built forms interspersed into nature's remarkable manifestations [11]. Each land parcel on this subcontinent tells a story of sacrifices made by Indians to protect its sanctity. This is exactly why the Indian historic transport networks and routes, places, landforms and ecologies seem so intricately connected with one another to form a living landscape. UNESCO itself maintains that "Cultural heritage means monuments, groups of buildings and sites that have historical, aesthetic, archaeological, scientific, ethnological or anthropological value". While "Natural heritage means exceptional physical, biological and geological formations, habitats of threatened animal and plant species, and areas that have scientific, conservation or aesthetic value" (Amoruso & Salerno, 2019) [12]. Globally, India ranks sixth for having the most UNESCO World Heritage Sites, with total 40 recognized sites in the categories – Heritage sites, Natural sites and Mixed sites.

**Cultural Heritage** comprises primarily of tangible attributes like buildings, landscapes, artworks and relics of historic importance. There are all together thirty-two cultural heritage sites in India as per UNESCO listing. Indian history can be broadly classified into three periods, pre-historic, medieval and modern. The cultural sites of India narrate the history of Indian civilization through their long existence. Covering the entire land of Indian subcontinent, these cultural sites such as Rock shelters of *Bhimbetka*, Archaeological Site of *Nalanda Mahavira*, Buddhist Monuments at *Sanchi*, *Dholavira*: a Harappan City, Sculptures of *Kahjura*, Temples of *Mahabalipuram*, Hill Forts of *Rajasthan*, *Humayun's Tomb* at Delhi, Historic Cities of *Ahmedabad* and *Jaipur*, Churches and Convents of Goa, The architectural works of Le Corbusier etc. display a wide range of periods of India's glorious past. The minute architectural details, carvings on walls and ceilings, structural efficiency and construction techniques adopted by ancient Indians is still a matter of surprise for archaeologists and architects. Associated with the history of *Buddhism*, the caves at *Ajanata* are excavated out of a vertical cliff and are known for their unique artistic achievement bearing exceptional testimony to Indian art from 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C. in western India. On the shores of Bay of Bengal in eastern India, The Sun Temple at *Konarak* showcases the traditional *Kalingan* temple architecture and art in terms of conception, scale and proportion along with its association of social, religious and cultural values of the people in 13<sup>th</sup> century. Built on the sloping levels of the outcrops of *Vindhyan* hill ranges in northern India during the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the city of *Fatehpur Sikri* was first planned city of *Mughal Empire* and continued to be their capital for 10 years. Commonly known as the "city of victory" it comprises of palaces, public buildings, mosques, open spaces and landscape courtyards showcasing the style and influence of Indo-Islamic architecture during the *Mughal Empire* in these spaces (Fig.1).

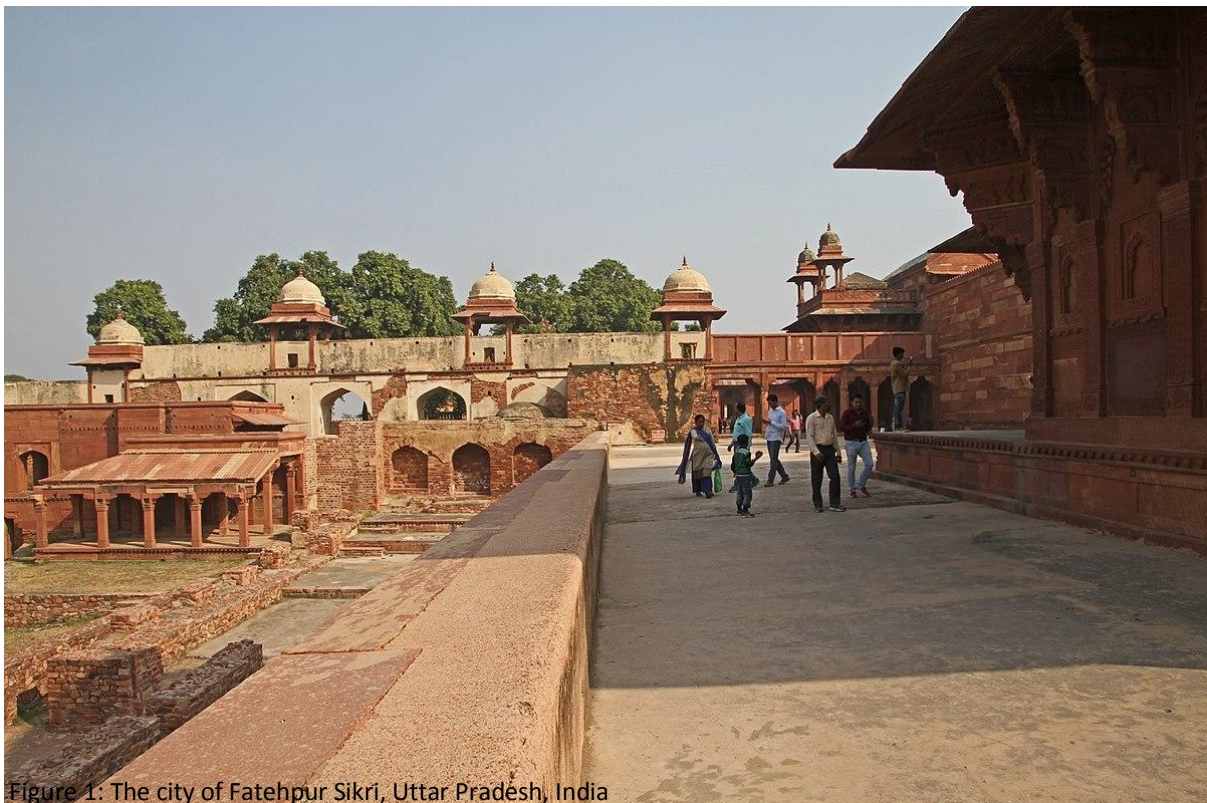


Figure 1: The city of Fatehpur Sikri, Uttar Pradesh, India

**Natural Heritage** comprises predominantly of elements of biodiversity, ecosystems and geological structures all together forming the natural resources and includes privately and publicly protected natural areas. There are a total seven natural heritage sites in India as classified by UNESCO. Over 100 million years ago, during the continental drift and action of tectonic plates, Indian subcontinent broke off from large southern

landmass (Gondwanaland) and hit the northern landmass (Laurasia), leading to the formation of folded mountains of the *Great Himalayas*. This shift led to the formation of distinctive biogeographical features in the region along with exchange of flora and fauna. In 2014, the Great Himalayan National Park (GNHP), located in *Kullu* region of *Himachal Pradesh* was added to the list of UNESCO world heritage site under the criterion of "outstanding significance for biodiversity conservation." This pristine landscape of temperate forests with glacial rivers flowing through the valleys of alpine meadows is home to many endangered species (Fig.2). We are living in an era, where world's natural heritage is under severe threat due to long-term changes in earth's climate. Collective efforts of authorities and cultural practices by local people have been instrumental in establishing an Ecozone around GNHP to promote ecologically sustainable development. With its indescribable charm and splendid glory, this mighty mountainous region reflects purity of nature and has spiritual significance for millions. *Keoladeo* National Park, located in *Rajasthan*, consists of mosaics of grasslands, woodlands, woodland swamps and wetlands along with human-dominated landscapes. *Kaziranga* National Park, located in the *Brahmaputra* valley floodplain of *Assam*, showcases areas that are undisturbed by human presence and is shelter to many mammals, including tigers, elephants, panthers and bears, and thousands of birds along with the world's largest population of one-horned rhinoceroses. The *Sunderbans* in West Bengal are home to a number of rare or endangered species including tigers, aquatic mammals, birds and reptiles. Being one of the most biologically productive natural ecosystems, *Sunderbans* contain the world's largest mangrove forests (Fig.3).

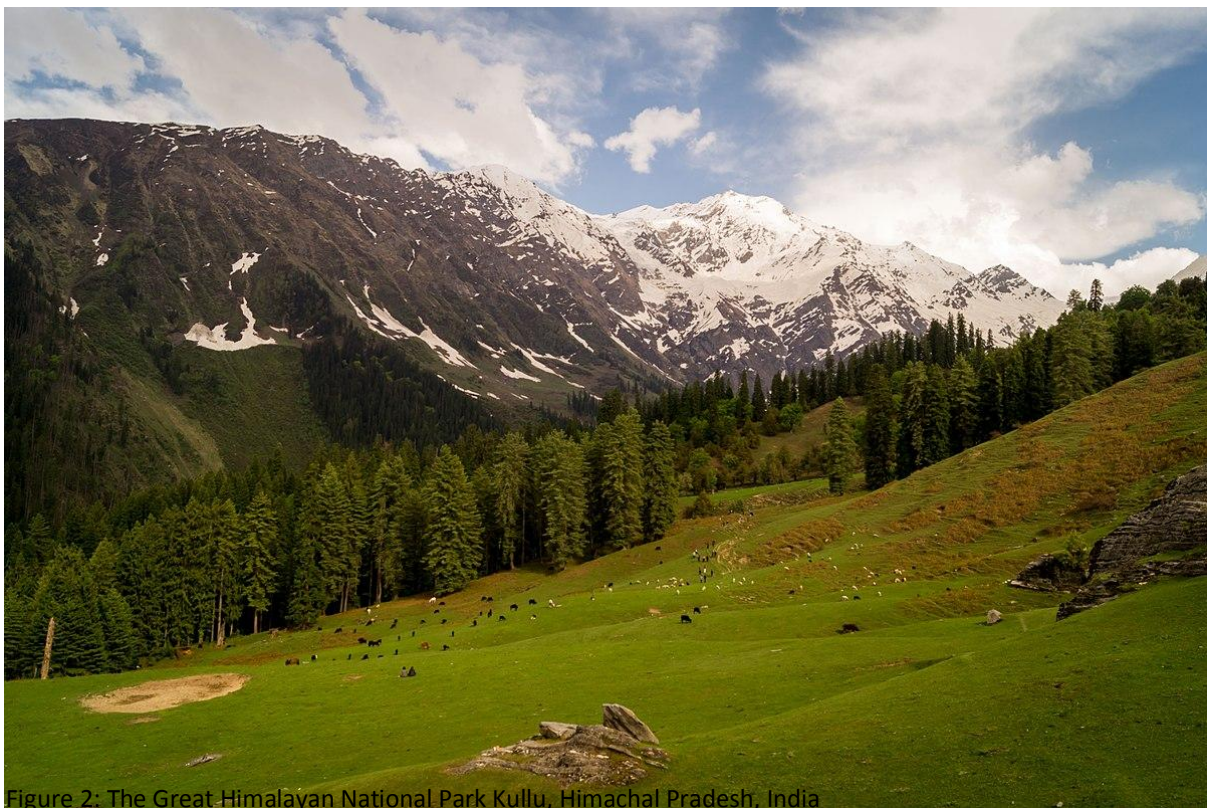


Figure 2: The Great Himalayan National Park Kullu, Himachal Pradesh, India



Figure 3: Mangrove forests of Sundarbans, West Bengal, India

**Mixed Heritage** comprises of sites or places having both elements of natural and cultural significance. Located in *Sikkim, Khangchendzonga* National Park is the only Indian site which falls under mixed heritage. *Khangchendzonga* National Park is the combination of ideologies related to multi-ethnic culture and religious traditions along with the surrounding natural environment that includes plains, valleys, lakes, glaciers and snow-capped mountains covered with ancient forests that constitute the base for Sikkimese identity and unity within the region.

## V. NEED FOR LANDSCAPE CONSERVATION OF HERITAGE SITES

Heritage in India is often regarded as an integral part of the living fabric of society that is ever-changing and has transformed through time. The sub-continent of India is graced with diverse cultural and architectural heritage assets, most of which are constituted with living structures. The cultural heritage landscapes of India are the combined works of nature and mankind where the natural elements play a vital role in shaping the socio-economic structure of the cultural landscape and contain the natural and built heritage along with the intangible heritage that governs these landscapes. They are typically characterised by a concentration of cultural heritage resources, such as buildings, structures and landforms; a concentration of supporting structural elements such as vegetation, fences or roads; a sense of visual coherence; and a distinctiveness which enables the area to be recognized from neighbouring areas. The tangible cultural heritage resources of any region in India, combined with stories of the past, provide a physical and psychological foundation for their regional identity. These landscapes often support ongoing traditions and reflect particular ways of life and provide economic, environmental, social and cultural benefits through aesthetic, ecological, recreational and educational opportunities to the communities. Tangible and intangible urban heritage are sources of social cohesion, factors of diversity and drivers of creativity, innovation and urban regeneration. With the influence of globalization and the notion of sustainable development, cultural and natural heritage has received and gathered attention globally. Where UNESCO seeks to protect and preserve the cultural heritage of outstanding value to humanity, these landscapes, apart from those listed in World Heritage Sites, should not only be preserved but also to be

recognised as a component of patrimony that needs to attract attention of diverse Indian communities. As a part of the heritage, these cultural landscapes adapt to various needs and purposes: such as research, assessment and recording and awakening of traditions; can help individuals, groups, nations, and transnational communities develop and strengthen social identity; and raise awareness and enrich tourism content. The current researches have suggested that 'Cultural Ecosystem Services', the intangible benefits received from human-nature interactions in these sites, cannot be retrieved once lost. Therefore, the conservation and preservation of these important resources in the country is essential for the survival of current and future generations.

## VI. CONCLUSION AND WAY-FORWARD

Both cultural and natural heritage have immeasurable value as they are the catalysts of motivation to derive meaning in the lives of human societies through civilizations in Indian history. These dynamic cultural and natural landscapes can coexist with communities through their associative values such as: i) sustainability of production by working with the community, ii) by maintaining the traditional activities of an area and giving them outstanding universal value and iii) involving local inhabitants to safeguard the resources who are generally considered as the guardians of the local cultural values. Hence, the concept of equity and involvement of communities in conserving and preserving the rich heritage of our glorious past lies with research-based innovative governance models and multiple stakeholder involvement.

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### List of Figures

**Figure 1:** The city of Fatehpur Sikri, Uttar Pradesh, India

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fatehpur\\_Sikri-38-2018-gje.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fatehpur_Sikri-38-2018-gje.jpg)

**Figure 2:** The Great Himalayan National Park Kullu, Himachal Pradesh, India

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Himalayn\\_National\\_Park.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Himalayn_National_Park.jpg)

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