

# LIVING HERITAGE AND WORLD HERITAGE SITES

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## INTRODUCTION

Cultural and natural heritage shape human identity and global cultural landscapes. As the world grapples with challenges like climate change, social inequality, and loss of cultural elements with rapid urbanization, the integration of cultural heritage into sustainable development strategies has become increasingly urgent. This paper explores the frameworks guiding heritage conservation, and examples of transformative shifts towards community-led and holistic approaches to safeguarding cultural resources. It also examines the challenges of tracking and reporting on SDG 11.4 and emphasizes the need for integrating tangible and intangible heritage within broader sustainability agendas. The case study example is about Santiniketan in India, designated as a World Heritage Site in 2023. Santiniketan is not only a centre for education but is also a living embodiment of celebration of nature and culture. At the heart of Santiniketan's ethos is universalism and the seamless blend of tangible and intangible heritage, where art, music, crafts, and education are deeply intertwined with nature. By connecting global cultural exchanges with local traditions, Tagore and his successors at Santiniketan highlighted the potential of culture to bridge diverse geographical regions and inspire innovations in the early decades of the twentieth century. This paper briefly shares the rich legacy of Santiniketan and the dynamic interventions that sustain its cultural vibrancy today.

Art for Life methodology was conceptualized by Contact Base, a social enterprise working across India for safeguarding living heritage as sustainable livelihood. The focus has been on creating an ecosystem that supports skill transmission, innovation, market access, and the development of artists' habitats as cultural destinations (Bhattacharya & Dutta, 2022). The organization has been working with rural communities around Santiniketan for a decade. Efforts for safeguarding local storytelling, music, embroidery and other craft traditions have empowered

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women, engaged youth, and fostered grassroots entrepreneurship and cultural tourism, bridging the rural-urban divide and advancing several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

## **CULTURE IN GLOBAL SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AGENDA**

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development emphasizes the role of culture in fostering inclusive, innovative, and sustainable growth. It envisions a world that respects human rights, dignity, and cultural diversity, recognizing that both natural and cultural diversity are essential to sustainable progress. Culture is recognized across multiple SDGs as an essential enabler and driver of sustainable development, directly and indirectly influencing economic growth, social cohesion, and environmental sustainability. Its integration reflects the understanding that cultural heritage, diversity, and creative industries are vital for achieving the 2030 Agenda. SDG 11 is about Sustainable Cities and Communities. SDG 11.4 is dedicated to strengthening efforts to protect the world's cultural and natural heritage. In SDG 4 (Quality Education) target SDG 4.7 encourages appreciation of cultural diversity and its role in sustainable development. The 2030 Agenda recognizes that cultural industries and tourism are powerful tools for economic diversification, supporting livelihoods and preserving heritage. In SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 8.3 promotes creativity, innovation, and job creation, while SDG 8.9 focuses on sustainable tourism that highlights and promotes local culture and products, benefiting communities economically. In SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), the target 12.b focusses on sustainable tourism that supports local culture and products. Although traditional knowledge isn't directly mentioned in the SDGs Life Below Water (SDG 14) and Life on Land (SDG 15) cultural practices often align with biodiversity conservation and sustainable resource management, SDGs 14.7 and 15.5 address conserving natural resources and biodiversity through sustainable practices.

The Mondiacult 2022 Conference, convened by UNESCO in Mexico City marked a pivotal moment in reaffirming the critical role of culture in global development. It set the stage for actionable commitments and policy frameworks that aim to ensure culture's integration into all aspects of sustainable progress. A key recommendation was integration of tangible and intangible cultural heritage into national development strategies and policies, linking cultural preservation with economic and social development. The conference strengthened advocacy for explicit recognition of culture as a key component in achieving the UN SDG Goals.

The Pact for the Future Summit in September 2024 brought together world leaders, policymakers, and cultural stakeholders to formalize commitments and concrete actions to embed culture in the sustainable development agenda. The

summit emphasized culture's role in fostering social cohesion, driving innovation, and addressing global challenges such as climate change and inequality. The following two key actions proposed are around culture and heritage:

- **Action 11:** Protect and promote culture as a key part of sustainable development, integrating it into policies and ensuring public investment.
- **Action 32:** Support indigenous, traditional, and local knowledge by fostering synergies with science and technology.

There is now global recognition that integrating cultural heritage into sustainable development is essential.

## MEASURING PROGRESS IN SDG 11.4

Measuring the impact of culture is important for effective integration of culture in post 2030 development goals. Member States report on their integration of culture through Voluntary National Reviews, helping to position culture within the development agenda. A major challenge in tracking 11.4 is data availability. Under indicator 11.4.1, countries have to report on 'Expenditure on Cultural and Natural Heritage.' This indicator captures the financial commitment of countries to safeguarding their cultural and natural heritage. These investments directly impact the sustainability of cities and human settlements by preserving cultural and natural resources to enhance their attractiveness to residents, tourists, and investors and ensuring long-term sustainability of heritage sites through adequate funding and policy support. The indicator measures the 'Total per capita expenditure on the preservation, protection, and conservation of all cultural and natural heritage, by source of funding (public, private), type of heritage (cultural, natural), and level of government (national, regional, and local/municipal).' This includes financial investments made by public authorities and private entities, both at local and national levels, and international partnerships. By examining per capita expenditure, this indicator serves as a proxy measure to assess the financial strength of efforts to conserve heritage assets. The expression of data in purchasing power parity (PPP) allows for cross-country comparisons, and the use of constant values ensures the impact of inflation is eliminated for time-series analysis (UIS, 2023).

In 2022, only 60 countries reported on Indicator 11.4.1, revealing significant gaps in data collection and analysis. This fragmented data often marginalizes culture in global development strategies and funding frameworks like the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF). To address this issue, there is an urgent need for improving reporting mechanisms and identifying more effective indicators (UIS, 2023).

Wang et al. (2018) in their insightful work details at length the decomposition

system of target 11.4 into three levels from goals, to targets to indicators. The Inter-agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators (IAEG-SDGs) upgraded indicator 11.4.1 to Tier 2 status and also added 11.4.2 and 11.4.3 as potential indicators to make the measuring paradigm conceptually sound and internationally viable. 11.4.2 focuses on increasing investment in science and technology to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage. By investing in science and technology. Target 11.4.2 strengthens efforts to ensure that heritage sites and practices can be preserved for future generations, adapting to contemporary challenges while fostering innovation. 11.4.3 aims to increase education and publicity to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage. It emphasizes the importance of raising awareness, fostering appreciation, and building knowledge about cultural and natural heritage as integral components of sustainable development. It recognizes that safeguarding heritage is not just about conservation but also about engaging and educating communities, policy-makers, and future generations.

Public expenditure on cultural and natural heritage lacks standardized reporting mechanisms across many countries, while private expenditure data collection is even more limited. This requires substantial capacity-building efforts and financial investments to enhance data reporting over time. Many countries face resource constraints, both technical and financial, in building the necessary infrastructure to collect and report comprehensive data on heritage expenditure. The scope of measurement also presents a limitation. The indicator primarily focuses on monetary investments in heritage, overlooking non-monetary factors such as national or local policies, fiscal incentives like tax benefits for sponsorships, and legal frameworks supporting heritage conservation. While financial data provides insights into protection efforts, it does not fully capture the extent of these efforts or the benefits they generate. International harmonization further complicates the process. The lack of globally accepted definitions and methodologies for cultural and natural heritage expenditure poses further challenges for consistent data collection. Data collection also needs to encompass tangible and intangible, cultural and natural heritage. Existing frameworks, such as the 2009 UNESCO Framework for Cultural Statistics and the Classification of the Function of Government (COFOG), need better integration to standardize reporting practices worldwide (UIS, 2023).

For achieving the goals of SDG 11.4, policies and programmes need to underscore the interdependence of tangible and intangible heritage in preserving the cultural and social significance of sites and balance universal standards with localized, community-led approaches to heritage conservation. Fostering inclusive, adaptive, and culturally sensitive practices will pave the way for sustainable and meaningful preservation of humanity's shared heritage.

## GLOBAL FRAMEWORKS ON HERITAGE CONSERVATION

The UNESCO Cultural Conventions delineate the scope and definition of heritage and provide a framework for heritage management and conservation. The 1972 World Heritage Convention and the 2003 Convention on Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage define heritage and conservation through different lenses. The World Heritage Convention revolves around Outstanding Universal Value (OUV), recognizing cultural monuments, buildings, and natural sites with exceptional historical, artistic, or scientific significance. It emphasizes tangible heritage like monuments as well as natural formations. While community participation is acknowledged, the convention primarily centres on the physical conservation of heritage sites through a top-down approach involving national governments and international cooperation. Criterion (vi) of the World Heritage Site inscription recognizes sites tied to living traditions, beliefs, or artistic works of Outstanding Universal Value. This has broadened the understanding of cultural heritage, linking tangible and intangible elements. The significance of places often lies in their social meanings, tied to intangible heritage such as rituals, farming, and crafts, which are connected to the natural environment and cultural landscape. While Criterion (vi) acknowledges intangible heritage, its interpretation often leans more toward intangible values than fully embracing the broader definition of intangible heritage. Many sites have intangible connections that are not fully recognized under this criterion (Skounti, 2011).

The UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage emphasizes the pivotal role of communities, groups, and individuals in identifying, safeguarding, and transmitting their intangible cultural heritage (ICH). Article 15 of the convention states: 'Each State Party shall endeavour to ensure the widest possible participation of communities, groups, and, where appropriate, individuals who create, maintain, and transmit such heritage, and to involve them actively in its management.' While the 1972 convention lays emphasis on authenticity, the 2003 convention recognizes that ICH is inherently dynamic and continually recreated by communities in response to their environment, history, and interactions, making community involvement essential to the sustainability of heritage (Stovel, 2008). The communities decide what constitutes the 'true' or meaningful form of their heritage, which may differ over time and across contexts. The convention warns against safeguarding measures that may 'freeze' cultural practices in an artificial or static form. Instead, it promotes approaches that allow heritage to adapt and thrive in contemporary settings.

Over time, the role of communities in conserving World Heritage Sites has expanded significantly (Rössler, 2012). A major turning point in this process was the adoption of the Nara Document on Authenticity in 1994. This document marked a transformative moment in the history of heritage conservation, empha-

sizing the evaluation of heritage attributes within their cultural contexts. It represented a critical departure from earlier frameworks like the Venice Charter of 1964, which advocated for preserving authenticity but lacked detailed guidelines or methodologies for its assessment. The Nara Document stressed the need to respect cultural diversity when evaluating heritage. It rejected universal criteria for authenticity, asserting that cultural values and credible information sources vary widely across and within cultures. This contextual approach laid the groundwork for more inclusive and culturally sensitive conservation practices. A notable contribution of the Nara Document was its emphasis on integrating tangible and intangible dimensions of heritage. Natalia Dushkina of ICOMOS Russia underscored that authenticity encompasses both physical elements, such as form and setting, and non-material aspects, like tradition and spirit. This holistic understanding broadened the scope of heritage conservation to reflect the full cultural significance of sites (Dushkina, 1995). The document also addressed threats posed by globalization and cultural homogenization. Article 4 highlighted the role of authenticity in preserving humanity's collective cultural memory and protecting minority cultures from being overshadowed. Additionally, Article 9 linked conservation efforts to the values attributed to heritage, ensuring that decisions were informed by credible sources of information. Authenticity was further established as a central criterion in Article 10, which guided conservation, restoration, and heritage listing processes. By addressing the Venice Charter's shortcomings, the Nara Document provided a robust framework for evaluating authenticity and underscoring its relevance in global heritage practices. Overall, the Nara Document reshaped conservation by prioritizing cultural diversity, holistic evaluation, and the central role of authenticity.

The World Heritage Convention's five strategic objectives—Credibility, Conservation, Capacity-building, Communication, and Communities—are vital for effective heritage management. While state parties are primarily responsible for managing these sites, local communities have increasingly been involved (Strasser, 2020). Initially, four C's were established in 2002 to enhance the credibility of the World Heritage List, ensure effective conservation, promote capacity-building, and foster communication. In 2007, the fifth C, 'community,' was added to emphasize the role of local communities in heritage management. These objectives aim to address global heritage conservation challenges, ensuring a balanced representation of cultural and natural heritage. They focus on strengthening the World Heritage List's credibility, protecting heritage through effective conservation strategies, building capacity for stakeholders, raising awareness, and promoting community involvement in heritage management. Community participation is critical, as local communities play a vital role in identifying, managing, and sustaining World Heritage sites (Albert, 2012; Luo et al., 2022).

## COMMUNITIES AND HERITAGE GOVERNANCE

Engaging communities in heritage management presents challenges. These include bureaucratic hurdles, lack of awareness, limited access to information, and insufficient resources or skills. Communities often consist of diverse groups with varying priorities, making consensus difficult. Experts and community members with cultural connections to heritage sites may interpret them differently, leading to differing perspectives on ownership and control. Furthermore, balancing tourism growth with conservation efforts, and development goals with heritage preservation, is complex. Addressing these challenges requires collaborative approaches, capacity building, and continuous dialogue to ensure that community voices are heard and valued in heritage management.

Elinor Ostrom's concept of polycentric governance offers a transformative approach to heritage management by balancing autonomy and collaboration across multiple decision-making centers. By fostering self-organization, incentivizing cooperation, and facilitating dynamic interactions across scales, polycentric systems address the complexity and diversity of heritage conservation needs. This governance model ensures that the collective memory of humanity is safeguarded in ways that are inclusive, adaptive, and sustainable (Ostrom, 1990). Ostrom posited that any group facing a collective problem should address it in ways best suited to their context, whether by adapting existing governance structures or crafting new regimes. This principle is particularly relevant for heritage management, as it allows localized entities to tailor conservation strategies to their unique cultural, social, and environmental contexts. Her research demonstrated that individuals are capable of self-organizing and cooperating effectively, particularly in the context of shared resources. For heritage, this implies that communities, heritage organizations, and governments can work collaboratively to conserve shared cultural assets. Applying the concept of polycentric governance in heritage management empowers communities, regional and national governments, and global institutions to work collaboratively while retaining autonomy. At the local level, communities, as primary custodians of heritage, play a critical role in preserving both tangible and intangible cultural assets. Polycentric governance acknowledges their agency, enabling localized conservation strategies tailored to specific cultural contexts and fostering community ownership of heritage initiatives. By centering community-driven actions, this approach not only ensures authenticity but also strengthens the cultural identity of the custodians themselves. At the regional, national, and global levels, polycentric governance provides a framework for cooperation and resource-sharing without undermining local autonomy.



## VISION OF TAGORE

Visva-Bharati University was founded by Rabindranath Tagore in 1921 at Santiniketan in West Bengal in eastern India. It was established with the aim of promoting a holistic form of education that integrated nature and culture, and the best of both Eastern and Western cultures. Tagore envisioned Visva-Bharati as a place where the world could come together to study and appreciate cultural diversity, fostering international understanding and unity. Santiniketan was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2023 based on Criteria iv and Criteria vi. It is a symbol of internationalism, humanism, and environmental harmony. Santiniketan is an exceptional example of a landscape, architectural ensemble, and technological design that highlights significant stages of human history (Chakrabarty et al., 2024). The buildings showcase innovative material, design, and construction techniques. Classes are held in open-air. This unique combination of built and open spaces makes Santiniketan a remarkable global model of environmental art and educational reform, where progressive education and visual arts are intricately woven together with architecture and the surrounding landscape. Santiniketan stands as a remarkable enclave of intellectuals, educators, artists, craftsmen, and workers who collaborated and experimented with an Asian modernity rooted in an internationalism that draws upon the ancient, medieval, and folk traditions of India, as well as influences from Japanese, Chinese, Persian, Balinese, Burmese, and Art Deco styles.

Tagore's concept of 'indivisibility of life' manifested in the seamless integration of education with work, joy, and play. Traditional crafts are integrated into its education system, fostering creativity, craftsmanship, and community building. The Sangeet (music) and Kala (art) Bhavan were established as separate schools, embodying Tagore's legacy of art and education as monumental examples for future generations. Santiniketan has played a pivotal role in cultural exchange between India and the world. Tagore drew inspiration from the indigenous cultural expressions of Bengal, particularly influenced by Baul philosophy in his songwriting. He incorporated Santhal dance into his choreography, bridging the divide between elite and folk culture. Tagore also promoted the study and practice of Southeast Asian dance forms, encouraging their integration into Indian performance arts. He envisioned Visva-Bharati as a hub where scholars, artists, and thinkers from around the globe could come together for meaningful exchanges. By introducing the aesthetics and techniques of Southeast Asian dance, he innovated a new tradition of dance dramas. Tagore had a deep appreciation for music from around the world and incorporated elements of Scottish and Irish tunes into his own creations. He introduced Batik in Santiniketan after visiting Indonesia.

Central to Rabindranath Tagore's philosophy was the belief in empowering rural



communities through education, healthcare, sanitation, scientific agriculture, and the revival of traditional arts and crafts. His holistic model sought not only to uplift the physical and economic conditions of the village but also to restore dignity, foster creativity, and instill a sense of cooperative living among villagers (Chattopadhyay, 2018). In his vision, Tagore emphasized that culture and heritage have the power to transform birth (often without purpose) to life (necessarily with aspirations). This belief encapsulates how culture, when integrated with daily life, could elevate individuals and communities, turning simple existence into a purposeful and aspirational life. Cultural practices, music, games, and socio-religious festivals played a central role in his rural reconstruction programme. For Tagore, festivals were opportunities for artistic expression, infused with new meanings.

Santiniketan's festivals celebrate the beauty of nature, with signature events. PousUtsav celebrates the harvesting season and encourages the participation of folk artists and craftspeople. While Holi is widely celebrated across India, Tagore created BasantUtsav to emphasize the themes of spring and cultural performances rather than the traditional celebrations. Initiatives such as '*HalaKarshan*' (agriculture), '*Vrikha-Ropan*' (tree planting), and communal celebrations like '*Barshamangal*' and '*Nabo-Barsho*' were designed to foster a sense of community, build self-reliance, and preserve local traditions while introducing modern agricultural methods (Dasgupta, 1993). Tagore's approach recognized the importance of integrating built and living heritage into creating a village that was both forward-thinking and rooted in its traditions. His model embraced an environment where culture, arts, and physical landscape were inseparable from everyday life. Through this praxis-based approach, he envisioned a liberated village, free from ignorance and poverty, one that embodied joy, creativity, and self-sufficiency, and where culture was the transformative force. However, he encountered challenges in implementing his vision for rural reconstruction at Sriniketan, as local communities were often resistant to new ideas. Additional obstacles included a lack of funding and human resources to support this unique initiative.

## **LIVING HERITAGE AND CREATIVE ECONOMY**

Santiniketan is a popular tourist destination, attracting over a million visitors each year who come to enjoy a blend of nature, culture, tangible and intangible heritage. Tourists explore Visva-Bharati University, vibrant local *haats*, and immerse themselves in the region's rich artistic and cultural traditions amid serene landscapes. The Government of India and the West Bengal State Government, has undertaken significant initiatives to develop cultural spaces in and around Santiniketan (EZCC, 2024), build creative enterprise and promote cultural tourism

(MSME & T, 2023). The Rural Craft and Cultural Hub<sup>2</sup> initiative by the Government of West Bengal in collaboration with UNESCO New Delhi Office (2011–2023) aimed to develop grassroots creative economy safeguarding traditional skills in art and craft as sustainable livelihood. The project used the Art for Life model of Contact Base and supported revitalization of traditional skills and promotion and market linkage of art and craft of the region. The performing art traditions covered under the project are Baul music, storytelling traditional called Patachitra, and folk songs and dance of indigenous communities. Baul music is inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage. The Bauls, often regarded as the Sufis of Bengal, sing of self-discovery, transcending religious divides, and spreading love. Joydevkenduli, near Santiniketan, is a historic heritage site that has attracted devotees for centuries. Rina Das Baul from this region has carved a space as a Mahajan (lyricist) and is the first Indian woman folk singer to perform at the prestigious World Music Expo. Patachitra is a visual storytelling tradition where skilled painters, known as Patuas, create intricate works depicting mythological and social themes using natural colours. In this region the stories sung as songs or Pater Gaan, are often centered around the legacy of Chaitanya and agriculture. Very few practitioners remain in this region though the art form thrives in Medinipur region in the southern part of the state of West Bengal.

The popular craft traditions include Kantha embroidery, basketry, pottery and Shola craft. The intervention in Birbhum focused on women practising Kantha embroidery, an age-old tradition of repurposing old fabrics with simple running stitches to create something new. A decade ago, these women worked for low wages while their beautifully embroidered products were sold at high prices in boutiques. Today, women-led collectives have overcome barriers like limited mobility and are now accessing markets directly, even selling online (Bardhan & Bhattacharya, 2022). Surul near Santiniketan is a hub of Shola craft. The supple, porous core of the Shola stem also known as Indian cork is transformed into delicate, intricate wonders. The artists primarily earned from making products for rituals and the young were losing interest. Shola is now used to make a wide range of decorative products. The plant is being cultivated in the marshy wilds and the Shola craft is now a sustainable livelihood.

Santiniketan has long been a popular tourist destination due to its unique blend of culture, nature, and heritage. Even during the pandemic, when long-distance travel was restricted, hotels and resorts maintained high occupancy rate. Seeing this as an opportunity, Contact Base partnered with India Tourism and the British Council to launch campaigns promoting nearby villages where visitors could experience local folk art and crafts. This initiative provided vital support to tradition

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.rccgbengal.com>

bearers by opening new market channels during a time when conventional ones were disrupted (Contact Base, 2024; Festivals from India, 2024).

Following the pandemic, the West Bengal State Government expanded the Rural Craft and Cultural Hub initiative to include 50,000 folk artists and craftspeople across the state, many from this region. Patachitra painters, basket makers, terracotta potters, and Shola craft artisans received training to diversify and improve the quality of their products. As part of the project, in 2023, Santiniketan hosted a district ICH festival, raising awareness of the living heritage of rural and tribal communities in the area.

Thus we see how at Santiniketan—the confluence of world cultures and ideas, rural and indigenous tradition has created a unique cultural landscape contributing to several SDGs like alleviation of poverty SDG 1, women empowerment SDG 5, social inclusion SDG 10, global partnerships SDG 16 apart from SDG 4, 8, and 11. To achieve sustainable development, an integrated approach incorporating community involvement, skills transmission, and market access for artisans, fosters economic growth and cultural preservation simultaneously. Integration of tangible and intangible heritage has led to resilience and social cohesion, contributing to multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) beyond just the target 11.4.

## CONCLUSION

In the afore-mentioned case study, cultural heritage serves as a driver of community-based tourism and creative economy offering avenues for the protection and celebration of both tangible and intangible assets. Promoting cultural industries, such as crafts, performing arts, and creative sectors creates sustainable economic opportunities, supports cultural entrepreneurship, and ensures fair compensation for heritage-related work. Responsible tourism models can safeguard cultural resources while fostering economic growth and cultural appreciation. The integration of tangible and intangible cultural heritage within sustainable development frameworks underscores the transformative potential of culture in fostering economic resilience, community identity, and environmental harmony. Supporting local communities, particularly rural and indigenous peoples who are the traditional knowledge holders, through capacity-building and inclusive policymaking, places them at the heart of heritage management. This empowerment ensures that their knowledge, practices, and voices are respected and preserved as integral elements of cultural governance. Santiniketan's model exemplifies heritage as a shared resource and responsibility, where polycentric governance fosters collaboration across stakeholders and scales, ensuring adaptive and inclusive management. This approach underscores that heritage conservation extends beyond preservation, embracing innovation and community-driven initiatives to catalyse

sustainable and inclusive development. By leveraging its cultural legacy, Santiniketan sets a benchmark for heritage as a transformative tool for holistic progress, with lessons resonating globally.

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