

A POLYCENTRIC APPROACH TO HERITAGE SAFEGUARDING: A CASE STUDY OF COMMUNITY-LED INITIATIVES FOR BUDDHIST SITES IN SWAT AND SWABI, KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA

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ABSTRACT

This research article explores the emergent and decentralized mode of cultural heritage safeguarding in the backdrop of the existential threats to the Buddhist Heritage sites in the valley of Swat of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Apart from the government-led or international Non-governmental organizations-led preservation paradigms, this research has identified and analysed the distinct, autonomous but convergent roles played by a diverse set of local agents. A qualitative analysis of various stakeholders' individual activities was identified, such as the Museum curators, archaeologists, artists, news media personnel, architects, immediate neighbourhood members, educators, and folk singers; each has devised a distinct strategy within their own circles of influence. Although the phenomenon was not a coordinated one, top-down directive, their collective efforts posed a resilient, polycentric network for the protection of cultural heritage. This foundational level mobilization was basically reinforced by a tactical reframing of the archaeological site from being solely of religious significance to the shared and common heritage, serving as a critical motivator for local interaction. This case study is of the view that such organic, multi-stakeholder models existing in a community present a vital and often overlooked component for sustainable preservation efforts in areas with conflict or post-conflict situations.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage, Polycentric Governance, Buddhist Sites, Swat, Safeguarding, Stakeholder, Intangible Heritage

INTRODUCTION

The Buddhist archeological heritage sites in, often referred to as the Gandharan civilization, situated along the river side in the areas of particularly present day Swabi and Swat regions is a testament to the rich cultural legacy. These archaeological assets have survived various harsh weather conditions and the severity of various environmental factors. But it faced severe threats from the human-induced factors, especially during the time of militant insurgency, when the radicals had targeted these assets under the label of non-Islamic religious sites. The international level attention is often focused on the state-led protection interventions or global international

organizations such as UNESCO, the real-time phenomenon occurring on the various geographical sites involves a more complex and localized apparatus in action, which is not always taken into consideration or documented in academic literature. These include the various forms in terms of performative and narrative practices that play crucial roles in sustaining the heritage and its meaning.

This research paper investigates these very responses, positing that a sophisticated, albeit informal, system of protection was organically developed and implemented by a consortium of local stakeholders. Drawing on the concept of

polycentric governance as articulated by Elinor Ostrom (2010), this study examines how multiple independent actors at different scales self-organized to manage cultural heritage as a common resource.

The research aims to investigate the contribution made by the various members of the community in its own circle of influence, analyse it, and make a categorized documentation in conflict-prone zones.

1. Literature Review

Macro-level policies implemented on the broader level by governmental agencies and world heritage organizations are studied and focused on by various researchers and documented in detail for their impacts on heritage protection (Meskell, 2018; Cunliffe, 2020). International frameworks such as that of UNESCO for the protection of cultural heritage are being well recorded, and their impacts on the preservation of cultural identity and cultural protection (Flood, 2002). These approaches mainly stress the need for cohesive institutional initiatives rather than community-level activities. On the other hand, an increasing number of research activities and researchers advocate and support the inclusion of the local communities in the preservation processes and field efforts (Waterton & Watson, 2015; Silverman & Ruggles, 2007). An important step towards paving the way for the acknowledgement of this perspective is the Faro Convention of the council of Europe, defining the "Heritage communities" as the stakeholders, consisting of communities that value specific elements of cultural heritage of their own wish, within the context of public action, to sustain and transmit to future generations (Francioni & Vrdoljak, 2020).

This people-centered approach transforms cultural heritage as a shared resource rather than solely as possession, emphasizing rights and obligations that extend beyond ownership.

Polycentric governance studies indicate that complex systems with several decision-making centers can efficiently manage resources that are shared through flexible and collaborative processes (Ostrom, 2010). This strategy can be effectively incorporated by engaging local communities as partners in the preservation and appreciation of the cultural heritage by means of

public private partnership. The growing literature is of the opinion that such approaches can be very handy in the development of sustainability and inclusivity in local sensitive level (Francioni & Vrdoljak, 2020).

The scholarship gap still exists in the exploration of the working models of these decentralized efforts, particularly in the conflict-prone zones of South Asia. Such studies had been conducted in the context of Oman and Italy, while the specifics of the areas under study are still not explored (Herzig, 2017). This study's goal is to fill the gap by conducting field research and presenting a detailed case study that would reveal the engagement of the community, but also will show the initiatives, sometimes very bold and risky, leading to situations where the formal institutional protections seek potentially hazardous and often scary (Francioni & Vrdoljak, 2020).

These communal initiative reframes the cultural heritage as a communal resource rather than solely private property, specifying the rights and responsibilities extending beyond possession. This includes not only tangible preservation but also the protection of intangible cultural assets, which UNESCO defines as the "practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills - as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts, and cultural spaces associated therewith - that communities, groups, and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage".

However, significant gaps exist in our comprehension of how these decentralized models could work in practice, particularly in conflict-affected areas, and how they deal with the potential conflict between formal heritage legislation and live cultural traditions.

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design based on participant observation and semi-structured interviews conducted during field research activities in the Swat and Swabi regions from 2023-2025. Data was gathered through direct engagement with seven identified stakeholder groups involved in heritage protection: museum curators, archaeologists, artists, news media professionals, architects, immediate community members, and educators.

The methodology draws on approaches similar to those used in studies of community-led heritage initiatives in Oman, where researchers employed "analyses of relevant primary and secondary data, documented onsite observations, [and] interviews with local community representatives and key players" (O'Keefe, 2006). In this study, 45 semi-structured interviews were conducted with stakeholders, lasting approximately 60-90 minutes each, and were transcribed and coded for analysis.

The analysis was done by following the thematic coding for categorization of the various distinct actions and motivations of each selected group, resulting in the interpretation of the working of the polycentric governance approach (Ostrom,

2010). This approach is also being on the plate for the similar studies conducted by researchers across various geographic regions using interviews and thematic analysis for revealing communal efforts and contemporary challenges in heritage preservation (Banda et al., 2024).

In addition to the various field research, various documentary analyses of the media reports, scholarly publications, and public documents, the primary data collection was appended. This is also in standard protocols for evaluating the results by triangulation of data, and understanding of the polygovernance system emerged from the heritage protections in the specific context.

Table 1: Research Methodology Overview

Method Component	Implementation	Purpose
Semi-structured interviews	45 interviews with stakeholders from 8 groups	Understand motivations, activities, and perceptions
Participant observation	Field research during 2023-2025	Contextual understanding of preservation efforts
Thematic analysis	Coding of interview transcripts and field notes	Identify patterns and themes across stakeholder groups
Documentary analysis	Review of media reports, publications, and policies	Triangulate findings and understand broader context

3. Findings: A Stakeholder Analysis of Decentralized Safeguarding

There are eight groups of stakeholders identified, each playing a vital role in its own domain using their peculiar skill sets and resources for the protection of the heritage. Their individual efforts and actions led to a comprehensive ecosystem of safeguarding the heritage, while lacking formal coordination.

3.1. Museum Curators: Emergency Conservators

The museum in charge and gallery assistants transitioned from just custodians of the artifacts to active responders in times of insurgency, in times of acute threats. They performed the hard duties of protection, cataloguing, and relocation

of the portable antiquities during the militants' insurgency. As a result, the invaluable cultural assets were saved from physical destruction, loss, and theft by these first-line defence actors.

Such types of instances are the reflection of the saying that the built environment is the product of both historical and contemporary civilizations, representing norms, values, architecture, environments, and constructed heritage often in the building form passed on from several generations through the ages. The museum professionals performed the crucial work for the survival of these civilizational representations in spite of targeted attempts for their eradication.

3.2. Archaeologists: Scholar-Activists

The archaeologist played the role of activist for the protection of the heritage assets alongside their classical role of academic and scholarship. Organizing various pressure groups at local, provincial, and national levels for lobbying the public authorities, raising public awareness, and adding professional credibility for the advocacy campaigns, to get attention for the protection and promotion of the endangered archaeological sites.

Their approach has proposed a workable participatory governance model quoted in the literature, where they played both the roles of the experts and also that of the key stakeholder in collaboration for the protection efforts (Iaione et al., 2022). Their role showed the path to the communities and played a bridging role for the public-communal efforts, adding values of both stakeholders to the policy framework and making a strong chain of professional activities besides the community-led initiatives.

3.3. Artists: Visual Archivists

Artists engaged in an art form of preemptive documenting through their artistic endeavors. They diligently recreated the imagery, sculpture forms, and mythical tales discovered at the ruins with media such as charcoal and pencil. This piece is a significant visual archive that will preserve creative and narrative details even after it has been practically obliterated. Their contributions match that which heritage scholars have identified as a necessity for "protecting historical structures through digitization" (Shah et al., 2024), albeit through analogue means since digital media was unavailable. These artists rejuvenated visual stories, and information has also contributed to the continuation of the artistic practices and exploration of the narratives in the community.

3.4. News Media: Public Agenda-Setters

The regional reports and their teams and outlets used their media in setting up the tone and trend for the dissemination of the information. They have amplified the situation by posting the stories and organizing the various civil society interactive sessions. Additionally, they have devised a strategy to spark an agenda for the protection and preservation of the heritage sites in local and national discourse.

The press has covered both the demise and reconstruction of the Jehanabad Buddha, as it became widely covered by both the national and international media outlets. The media coverage of this event was very instrumental for the mobilization of the various resources and individuals for the preservation initiatives. It highlights that the media can be a very powerful instrument in times of any crisis.

3.5. Architects: Contextual Integrators

Heritage is always on the plate for the many architects practicing all around the globe. Here, in the case of the Swat, they have also provided evidence of this commitment. They have integrated their contemporary architectural design with the historical traditional elements from the heritage sites and monuments. In some instances, they have utilized the fragments found in the far located areas, such as the wooden or stone elements, in the new designs in suitable locations. This practice has fostered the strengthening of the lost connection between the ancient past and contemporary architecture. This process of integrating can be more sophisticatedly enhanced by the use of the heritage for the contemporary usage, termed as "Adaptive reuse". In this case of the Swat, this effort was carried out independently, wholly individual efforts rather than any organized strategy.

3.6. Immediate Community: Physical Sentinels

The residents of the local vicinity of the historic sites acted as immediate guards, constantly watching the events and sites, to ensure that the heritage sites remained safe. An exemplary exhibit of commitment to the safeguarding of the heritage sites at Saidu Sharif is that after getting the knowledge that there are bombs fixed at the sites by the insurgents, the locals used their car headlights to help out the bomb disposal squads in searching and eliminating the risks for the destruction of these sites.

The inclusion of the locals in the protection and preservation of heritage is necessary, and they need to be actively involved in the decision-making process. This personal risk undertaken to prevent the loss of the cultural heritage provides a commitment and ownership to these

sites from immediate guardians despite their disconnection from the sites and their faith.

3.7. Educators: Narrative Reframers

There are educators that promotes the narratives of common or shared heritage. These educators are also actively pursuing the agenda among their academic circle and in public by delivering formal and informal sessions, workshops, and seminars. They are active in paving the way for the students to remain on the path of harmony and untapped by the insurgents, and avoiding being used as instruments for their heinous agenda. The pursuit of these efforts are getting noticed by the younger generations and helps in endorsing the shift in their point of view about the protection of the heritage sites.

The incumbent academic activities have paved the way for the calls for the integration of the heritage in the curriculum. These kinds of activities help in the formation of a “heritage community”, as per the Faro convention, by highlighting the site's cultural significance and spiritual connections. These educators are the people who value the heritage of an area and are keen to continue passing it on to future generations.

3.8. Folk Singers: Narrative Perpetuators

The historic sites are sometimes used as a cultural center by the local musicians. They used to sing the folklore, in the sites such as in Swabi, for the interest and entertainment of the local visitors, where they sing the stories. This is encouraging and makes the local community empathetic about their heritage. In a literal approach, these folk singers are violating the Antiquities Act of the province, which calls for the physical safeguarding of the site. They do violate, but also play a vital role in preserving the history.

The performers sing songs about the history, and old locations, often stories of the Queen, translated from the elders, at the rani-gat, into their lyrics. In this way, they convey the intangible history. The physical setting of the site acts as a powerful aid to the memory, that support the oral stories. They can be described as an archivist of the narrative and cultural values of the past, although they change from time to time, but remain alive in the minds of the local people through these local performers.

Table 2: Stakeholder Roles and Contributions

Stakeholder Group	Primary Role	Key Activities	Significant Outcomes
Museum Curators	Emergency conservators	Relocating, cataloging, and protecting artifacts	Preservation of movable heritage during conflict
Archaeologists	Scholar-activists	Lobbying, awareness campaigns, and professional advocacy	Policy attention and resource mobilization
Artists	Visual archivists	Creating reproductions of art and iconography	Continuity of artistic knowledge and traditions
News Media	Public agenda-setters	Investigative reporting, seminars, public discourse	Increased awareness and support for preservation
Architects	Contextual integrators	Incorporating heritage elements into new structures	Physical integration of past and present
Immediate Community	Physical sentinels	Monitoring, protection, emergency response	Physical protection of heritage sites
Educators	Narrative reframers	Teaching, lecturing, reinterpretation of significance	Changed perceptions and increased local support
Folk Singers	Narrative perpetrators	Performing site-specific folklore and songs	Sustaining intangible heritage and community engagement

4. Discussion

The case study undertaken in the region of Swat and Swabi can be taken as best example for the polycentric approach to the protection of the heritage sites, particularly in time of conflict or crisis. These all groups worked in individual capacity and were not well coordinated one with a hierarchical approach of management, but are convergent on one main goal of protection of the cultural heritage. This was also highlighted by Ostrom's theory stating that polycentric systems can be used to manage shared resources by incorporating self-organized processes and responsive activities. The findings demonstrate and support the polycentric governance model for the safeguarding of the heritage site in conflict zones. The inclusion of the folklore singers as a stakeholder enhances one's understanding about the significance of the intangible cultural heritage also.

4.1. The Polycentric Governance Model in Practice

The ecology that worked in the context of the selected region can be called as community based strategy for the participatory governance of cultural heritage (PGCH). This approach can be replicated and developed to establish a resilient and welcoming management ecosystem and can be adopted according to the various ground realities and challenges faced by any region. This model is very effective as the various stakeholders are using distinct skillsets for the fulfillment of one basic goal of heritage protection. These individual groups complement each other, and their skill set proved more effective if brought together for one agenda. The resultant network will be very robust in working for the safeguarding of heritage and is unlikely to fail like a centralized system.

The success of this model can be attributed to two main reasons. Firstly, the various stakeholders contributed distinctly, enabling the protection of the heritage value comprising tangible, documentary, narration, and policy aspects. Secondly, the idea of shared heritage was used as a binding story, offering all of the diverse stakeholders a common reason since they were all pursuing different activities on their own. This paradigm works well because of a few key factors. First, the unique contributions of each

stakeholder group enabled the protection of heritage value in its entirety, including all physical, documentary, interpretive, policy-related, and, with the folk singers, performative aspects.

Second, there is a complex relationship between formal and informal ways of continuation of the traditions in folk singers. Although there is a complete contradiction of the antiquities rules, often stricter on the physical safety of the heritage, they are in line with the broader views of the cultural heritage encompassing the living traditions. This highlights that the antiquities rules need to adapt to various cultural activities along with the safeguarding of the simple static objects.

4.2. Digital Preservation and Traditional Methods

A recent study has concentrated on "digital restoration strategies" for cultural preservation, particularly using "virtual and augmented reality" technologies. The majority of community projects in Swat and Swabi followed traditional methods, either because of a lack of financial backing or the necessity to respond rapidly to threats. However, their research demonstrates that inexpensive options are often useful for preserving heritage. For example, creative representations created by local artists served as analog alternatives to digital documentation, preserving visual details in user-friendly versions. This means that polycentric heritage management must employ technology that is appropriate for the needs and skills of the community at large, rather than imposing high-tech solutions that may not function in areas with a shortage of resources. Future initiatives could integrate community-based surveillance and safeguarding with digital documentation methodologies to create greater protection ecosystems.

4.3. Sustaining Meaning Through Performance

According to the folk artists, traditions are temporary and are not eternal in nature. Rather, they are passing through constant change and are continuously under construction with respect to the people's behavior in society. The activities performed on the archaeological site make the aura of the heritage sites go from

stagnant to lively, contributing to the cultural and social life of the locals. This approach is successful in building resilience as the visitor's perception is governed by these stories and they view them not just as static objects but also they view it as an opportunity to express themselves, and interact with other visitors.

4.4. Challenges and Limitations

The multifaceted approach adopted in the region of the Swat and swabi for the protection of cultural heritage sites worked successfully with certain issues. Its is one of the drawbacks that if people do not follow a specific methodology, there is repetition of activities and efforts, and there remains the gaps in protection. Local stakeholders also lack sufficient resources, making it difficult for them to implement significant improvements. In comparable cases, "community-driven initiatives related to indigenous heritage restorations are being undertaken under insufficient constraints in terms of land utilization, building preservation, and adaptive reuse, making it challenging for locals to initiate their own activities. Furthermore, the security situation imposed major risks to anyone involved in heritage safeguarding, particularly residents who served as physical guardians. These issues suggest that communities require additional support to strengthen their own endeavors without disconnecting from their natural, grassroots nature. Including folk singers highlights a key issue: the potential disconnect between community-based, ephemeral traditions and institutional, state-led cultural oversight frameworks. The antiquities legislation may prioritize protecting physical integrity over limiting human interaction, yet the community's traditional practices need active participation with the site. To deal with this contradiction, we require adaptive governance that can strike a balance between these competing goals without strangling the living traditions that keep a place relevant and safe over time.

4.5. Implications for Policy and Practice

The Swat and Swabi case has significant implications for heritage policy in associated with conflict regions: First, granting official legitimacy to community-led initiatives might boost their effectiveness

while preserving their autonomy. Policies could establish "heritage communities" as formal entities under laws such as the Faro Convention (Iaione et al., 2022), granting them specific privileges and duties in culture management. Second, providing means to local initiatives may make them more effective without requiring external oversight. This could include legal support, access to documentation gadgets, limited grants, and technical training for community heritage site managers.

Third, legislation should be amended to allow communities to take the lead on preservation activities. This covers questions of ownership, management rights, and how to control actions. As observed in other circumstances, these types of initiatives require suitable regulations to assist them while also ensuring that preservation criteria are fulfilled.

Finally, international organizations may shift their focus from direct action to supporting grassroots initiatives. This is known as a "public-private-community partnership (PPCP)" model (Iaione et al., 2022) that supports local authority while providing the resources and knowledge they need.

Finally, legislation must be amended to allow for community-driven preservation by addressing issues of ownership, rights to management, and how to regulate efforts. This requires a sophisticated approach to the use of venues for intangible heritage activities, as well as ways for allowing and celebrating these traditions while mitigating the risk of physical damage.

5. Conclusion

The research highlighted how decentralized, community-led initiatives, spontaneous in nature in the wake of the existential threats to the historical sites and heritage, can effectively contribute to the safety of cultural heritage in high-risk situations. Museum curators, journalists, architects, immediate neighborhood, artists, educators, and folk singers can work and establish a robust infrastructure that protects the tangible and intangible values of Buddhist Heritage in times of crisis. Folk singers reveal that the past is more than just a collection of objects that must be preserved; it is also an ongoing process of constructing meaning. Even if their actions

violate the law, they demonstrate the importance of places to their culture. Future policy must discover methods to embrace such organic, living traditions as the most powerful guarantee of a past that is not just preserved, but also loved, relevant, and alive. This bottom-up strategy, which is founded on a sense of collective ownership and an expanded awareness of the value of heritage (which now includes both physical protection and narrative maintenance), is critical for longevity in conflict and post-conflict settings.

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