

CHAPTER

6



RESEARCH
REPORT

Heritage values through gender

Case studies from South Asia

By

Sonali Ghosh
Deputy Inspector
General of Forests

*Central Zoo Authority
New Delhi, India*

Vinod B. Mathur
Chairperson

*National Biodiversity
Authority
Chennai, India*

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About the authors

Dr Sonali Ghosh

is an Indian Forest Service Officer with more than 20 years of professional experience in the fields of forest, natural heritage and wildlife in India. She has a dual master's degree in Wildlife Science and Forestry and a PhD in Geography from Aberystwyth University, United Kingdom. She has co-edited two books: *Cultural Landscapes of Asia* and *Wild Treasures: Reflections on Natural Heritage in Asia*, and was a founding faculty member at the UNESCO Category 2 Centre on World Natural Heritage Management and Training for the Asia-Pacific Region at the Wildlife Institute of India. She is currently serving as Deputy Inspector General of Forest (DIGF) with the Central Zoo Authority, Government of India.

Email: ghoshsonali@gmail.com

Dr Vinod B. Mathur

is a former Indian Forest Service Officer. He also served as Director of the Wildlife Institute of India and the UNESCO Category 2 Centre on World Natural Heritage Management and Training for Asia and the Pacific Region. He obtained his DPhil in Wildlife Ecology from the University of Oxford, United Kingdom, and pioneered the formulation of policies related to world heritage conservation, biosphere reserves, management effectiveness evaluation and environment appraisal standards in developmental projects in India. He is currently serving as Chairperson of the National Biodiversity Authority.

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Abstract

Gender and culture play an important role in sustainable natural resource use, especially in the Himalayan landscapes of the Indian subcontinent. Culture shapes people's identities and determines the ways they relate to their surrounding environment. UNESCO-designated World Heritage Sites are good examples of setting standards and sharing best practices from around the world. The management of World Heritage Sites aligns with the cultural beliefs underpinning the functions of a place and the roles of women and men, including access to the site. In this paper, a gender lens is applied to the

definition of heritage to further analyse the role of heritage sites, especially for inter-generational transmission of values associated with the site. Case studies from mountain ecosystems in South Asia have been reviewed to illustrate the diversity of cultures, beliefs and practices exercised around natural world heritage sites including cultural landscapes and the role of gender. Examples are drawn from UNESCO-designated World Heritage Sites such as the Manas Wildlife Sanctuary, Khangchendzonga National Park, Nanda Devi National Park in India and Chitwan National Park in Nepal.

Ecosystem-based livelihood practices that create sustainable interactions between people and nature have been the hallmark of such sites, and therefore occupy a prominent position in the discourse on heritage sites. It is argued that these sites have retained their Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) *inter alia* through oral traditions that are passed from one generation to another primarily through women. Gender equality is instrumental in broadening the definition of natural heritage, as gender enriches the scope and meaning of heritage for the benefit of society at large.

Keywords:

world heritage

Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK)

nature-culture linkage

gender

heritage conservation Manas Wildlife Sanctuary

Khangchendzonga National Park

Nanda Devi National Park

Chitwan National Park

Background

Gender is invariably shaped by the power relations between men and women, and the norms and values regarding ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ behaviours (Bokova et al., 2014). Gender relations are influenced by a variety of intersecting factors, such as class, race, poverty, ethnicity, religion, age, disability and marital status (Ibid). The socio-cultural values that help in the negotiation of gender are crucial to the identity of women in their communities. Gender relations determine how individuals and communities understand today’s world, and how they envisage and shape their future. Gender equality is critical to attaining the goal of inclusive and sustainable development (Bokova et al., 2014).

At a time when countries, especially those in the Global South, are defining the contours of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, there is an increasing recognition of the role of culture and gender in promoting inclusive social development, eradicating poverty and advancing environmental sustainability.

Heritage is commonly understood as a legacy from past generations, cherished in the present for its recognised aesthetic, spiritual and social values within society. It comprises historical monuments, cultural properties and artefacts, landscapes and natural environments, as well as intangible, or living, heritage (UNESCO, 2019). Heritage can be passed down from one generation to another in multiple ways, and gender plays a vital role in its interpretation, transmission and sustenance. Heritage practises have gender implications, as arts and crafts are largely considered the domain of women while agricultural practises are the domain of men. In all cases, gender roles are defined within the heritage concerned and are transmitted as such, strengthening social assimilation, gender relations and stereotypes. Traditional ecological knowledge of natural heritage environments can be vital to ensuring a balanced ecosystem, food and livelihood security, biodiversity conservation and climate change adaptation (Berkes, 2012). In particular, recognising women’s roles as primary land and resource managers is central to the success of biodiversity policy and heritage conservation and management efforts.

The Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage defines the kind of natural or cultural heritage sites that can be considered for inscription on the World Heritage List through a system of international cooperation. The most significant feature of the Convention is that it links together in a single instrument the concepts of nature conservation and the preservation of cultural properties. The Convention recognises how

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people interact with nature, and the fundamental need to preserve the balance between the two. The Convention sets out the duties of States Parties in identifying potential sites and their role in protecting and maintaining them. By signing the Convention, a State Party pledges to conserve not only the World Heritage Sites situated on its territory, but also to protect its national heritage. As of July 2020, there are 1,121 sites inscribed by 167 States Parties (UNESCO, 2019).

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Methodology

This chapter analyses four case studies to highlight the role of gender vis-à-vis the protection and management of World Heritage Sites in the Himalayan landscape of South Asia. We reviewed relevant literature cited and available on the UNESCO World Heritage List for the inscribed sites to understand aspects of gender vis-à-vis the protection of the sites. We reviewed and integrated the available literature, though scarce and uneven in geographical scope, supplemented by the first author's experiences as a site manager. Together, our findings help to reveal the complex relationships between gender and nature.

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Manas World Heritage Site: safeguarding traditional ecological knowledge and the role of women in reconstructing an endangered site

In many ways, the dynamic political journey of human rights and the rights of nature has been intertwined with the fate of the Manas World Heritage Site (Manas WHS). This UNESCO-designated World Heritage Site has stood the ravages of time. Manas WHS is part of the core zone of the 2,400 sq km Manas Tiger Reserve that forms a transboundary landscape along the Terai belt in Lower Assam, India. It is bound in the north by the forests of Bhutan, River Sankosh and West Bengal in the west, and the administrative boundaries of the Bodoland Territorial Areas District (BTAD) Assam in the east and south respectively. The recorded history of Manas dates back to late 15th century when the renowned Vaishnavite saint Shri Madhabdeb established the Barpeta *Satra* (an institutional centre associated with the Vaishnavite spiritual movement in India), wherein the preserved sacred texts mention a “dense forest” beyond the boundaries of the Barpeta human settlement (Choudhury, 2007). Since then, land ownership has changed hands from Indian royalty to British foresters, later becoming a prized possession of the Assam Forest Department in the post-independence era.

The historical evolution of Manas suggests a linkage between forest resource alienation and the mobilisation of local tribes. The colonial British government affected the territory dominated by the Bodo (tribe indigenous to the area) in at least two ways: by using the forest as a revenue source and by settling outside workers in the region, thereby outnumbering the Bodo people. This had the unintended consequence of the political mobilisation of the Bodo people. In all this, Manas became a contested space for the possession and dispossession of the Bodo people. Within a few years of its inclusion as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Manas ended up on the “danger list” owing to the ongoing unrest (Goswami & Ganesh, 2014).

The site’s scenic beauty includes a range of forested hills, alluvial grasslands and tropical evergreen forests that provide a contiguous transnational landscape with critical and viable habitats for rare and endangered species, including tigers, greater one-horned rhinos, swamp deer, pygmy hogs and Bengal florican. The peace and stability in the region and the revival of Manas also helped in supporting the revival of local economy through tourism, which is intrinsically linked to nature-based skills such as silkworm rearing, bamboo crafts, nature-inspired music and performing arts that is transferred inter-generationally through women in the local community (Saikia, 2011; Das et al., 2013).

In 1985, the Manas Wildlife Sanctuary (391 sq km) was inscribed in the list of World Heritage Sites (UNESCO) as a site of outstanding universal value under criteria numbers (ii), (iii) and (iv). However, in 1992 UNESCO-IUCN reviewed the status of the site and decided to tag it as a “World Heritage Site in Danger” due to damages that had occurred to park infrastructure and other properties as a result of Bodo agitation since 1988 (Vigne & Martin, 1991; Goswami & Ganesh, 2011). In June 2011, Manas regained its original status of World Heritage Site (Ghosh & Kumar, 2012). The 20-year armed conflict coincided with a period of civic unrest in which the Bodo people fought for their community identity. Studies indicate that several biodiversity hotspots in the world are currently in areas of significant political volatility and armed conflict (Hanson et al., 2009). Such conflicts often result from the intentional and unintentional exploitation of wildlife and other natural resources, such as forest timber, by conflicting parties (Goswami & Ganesh, 2011). With human security concerns taking priority, financial resources and international aid is often diverted to peacekeeping, rehabilitation and humanitarian efforts, thereby marginalising conservation activities and priorities. Manas met the same fate during the insurgency period that lasted for almost a decade and a half from 1989 until 2003. In 2005, when the first elected local government was formed, park infrastructure was in shambles, and there was virtually no protection.

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The 100-odd rhino population had been completely decimated, and more than 90% of the park infrastructure had been destroyed (Debonnet et al., 2008; TCP, 2013).

What emerged as a ray of hope was the evidence of persistent wildlife (camera trap studies yielded signs of tigers in the area) (Goswami & Ganesh, 2014). International concern and support (the UNESCO World Heritage Committee sent monitoring missions and called for annual status reports from the Government of India) and local political will to take up the challenges enabled a turnaround. First and foremost, protection of the site was of major concern. As the Forest Department was extremely understaffed, a unique conservation model was adopted wherein local youth from fringe villages were deployed to take up surveillance and anti-poaching activities inside the park. Such youth (mostly men) had experienced armed conflict in their lifetime, and several were motivated to surrender their firearms and take up conservation instead. In a way, the alternative livelihood support provided immediately in the aftermath of a war was a major boost towards lasting peace in the area. At the same time, sustained nudging from UNESCO, international conservation agencies and local non-governmental organisations helped in formulating a scientifically backed wildlife restoration plan including the highly ambitious 'wild-to-wild' rhino and swamp deer translocation and population augmentation programmes at Manas. Funding from the central and state government was channelled to rebuild park infrastructure and adequate human resources were recruited and posted in the area.

A key method utilised was to catalyse empowered community institutions to protect forests and wildlife (Feeney et al., 1990; Horwich & Lyon, 2007). Several governance models facilitated success, changing the situation from open access to an informal community co-managed system and, subsequently, into organised zones of wilderness and multiple-use zones in Manas WHS and forest fringe areas. It was a multi-pronged strategy that included a focus on women in the forest fringe villages of Manas. Women were offered opportunities for skills upgrading and alternative livelihood options. The Bodo women enjoy equal status in their community and have also been influential in the economic upliftment and political discourse in the region (Talukdar, 2012). The fact that they were integrated in the conservation narrative helped the park to recover in a much shorter time than expected.

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Khangchendzonga National Park: when mountains are sacred and nature is culture

It is well established that culture and religion play a determining role in shaping one's relationship with the environment (Verschuuren et al., 2010). In this regard, it was a proud moment for India when in 2016 the Khangchendzonga National Park was inscribed as the country's first mixed World Heritage Site in recognition of its unique nature-culture linkages. Located at the heart of the Sikkim Himalayas, the park has a unique high-altitude biodiversity and landscape. Mythological stories are associated with these mountainscapes and a great number of natural elements (such as caves, rivers and lakes) are considered to be objects of worship by the indigenous people of Sikkim (Arora, 2006; Little, 2008). The sacred meanings of these stories and practices have been integrated with Buddhist beliefs and constitute the basis for Sikkimese identity.¹

Sacred beliefs have therefore helped to preserve some of the region's unique biodiversity, protecting it from hunting or over-harvesting. It has also resulted in an extensive gain in traditional ecological knowledge, especially regarding ethnomedicinal plants in the local indigenous tribal communities such as the Lepchas people (Gorer, 2000; Pradhan & Badola, 2008). The Lepchas people are nature or animist worshippers who prefer to live in tranquil surroundings largely in harmony with nature (Tambe & Rawat, 2008; Laskar, 2015). The women are especially adept in making handicrafts from cane and bamboo and weaving textiles from locally available materials. While no direct study on the region was found that depicts the linkages between women and their role in nature conservation, it is evident that, similar to other mountain ecosystems, natural resource preservation is gendered, and the responsibility for the intergenerational transfer of ecological knowledge rests with the women.

Recent eco-tourism initiatives in and around the Khangchendzonga National Park have made a good start in being cautious towards waste management, and in all this, women from the local communities certainly have a lot to offer (Dam, 2013).

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¹ Available at: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1513>

Nanda Devi and the Valley of Flowers: women's empowerment for sustainable tourism in the high mountains

Nanda Devi National Park in the Northern Himalayas became India's fourth World Heritage Site in 1988. The site was later expanded in 2005 to include the Valley of Flowers National Park. Both parks are rich in biological and cultural diversity. Until the early 1960s, cross-border socio-cultural exchange including marriages and trade helped local communities to flourish in an otherwise remote inaccessible mountainous landscape. The scenario changed somewhat after the Indo-China War in 1962 as borders were sealed and informal exchange was discouraged between the two countries. It is, therefore, more than a coincidence when a women's group from the Nanda Devi region launched the *Chipko Andolan* ("hug the trees") movement to oppose the felling of green trees for developmental projects (Jain, 1984). This small women-led movement went on to become a flag-bearer for many future non-violent forms of environmental protests all over the world.

The hill people, including women, protested the new forms of mountaineering and adventure tourism activities that emerged along the Nanda Devi peak and adjoining ranges and valleys. While these activities emerged as an alternative source of income to the local residents, in the long run the unorganised mountaineering activities seriously threatened the biological as well as cultural integrity of the region. In a bid to reverse the loss of biological wealth, the mountaineering activities were banned, and the entire Rishi Ganga River basin was declared the Nanda Devi National Park (NDNP) in 1982 and subsequently also a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The ban improved the biodiversity of the area, as evident from the expeditions that have taken place since then (Negi et al., 2018).

Meanwhile, tourism opportunities shifted to the surrounding buffer areas where better road connectivity led to a rise in religious tourism. The Valley of Flowers National Park hosts a buffer zone with a 19-km trail that leads to Hemkund Sahib, the highest *Gurdwara* (a place of worship for the Sikh community) in the world. The sudden increase in the tourists visiting the *Gurudwara* also meant an increase in garbage and pollutants. To make matters worse, the Forest Department was at odds with local communities, especially because of the strict preservationist and no-resource use approach by the former (Silori, 2007).

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Circumstances improved after a female forest officer involved local community members through a series of vigorous campaigns². As a result, Eco-Development Committees (EDC) were initiated with local women and villagers to make them equal stakeholders in decision-making. While it has been reported that gender-based divisions within EDCs yielded mixed results (Badola, 2014), the formation of localised institutions of 40 *Van Panchayats* (local forms of forest self-governance) and more than 60 *Mahila Mandal Dals* (women's groups) to make conservation a socially and economically self-alleviating experience was a step in the right direction. The idea was to integrate livelihood and equity concerns in conservation practices for long-term durability. Training was imparted to the community to harness local resources and generate eco-tourism activities. Growing and preserving medicinal plants, exotic condiments and traditional crops were listed as priorities. This stimulated the hill economy, which helped to prevent the poaching and illegal uprooting of herbs from nearby forests.

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Communities were also encouraged to document and preserve their culture and folklore. Young people (both boys and girls) were placed at the centre of local biodiversity, folklore and culture promotion. Eco fees were introduced for cleaning operations and for building green value chain systems to serve the pilgrims without depending on government funds. Many small businesses dedicated to service the pilgrims, such as renting plastic coats, were introduced. In this way, additional income-generating opportunities were created, especially for women, thus linking the livelihood concerns of locals with the conservation realities of the area (Silori, 2007).

Chitwan National Park: a case for co-management

Chitwan National Park is situated in the inner Terai lowland of Nepal, and it is globally renowned for its unique floodplain grassland biodiversity, as it is home to the second largest population of the great one-horned rhinoceros in the world (Lehmkuhl et al., 1988).

The indigenous tribe of Tharus and other hill tribe immigrants numbering over 200,000 reside in the park's buffer zone (Straede & Helles, 2000). Local communities are organised into formalised Village Development Committees (VDCs), the smallest administrative unit in Nepal.

² Available at: <https://www.thebetterindia.com/5904/tbi-heroes-jyotsna-sitling-a-green-warrior/>

Community-based conservation has been practised in the region not just as a tool to improve forest management but also as a means to alleviate poverty and promote equity among the local communities (Parasai, 2006). Nepal is largely an agriculture-based economy and forests provide opportunities for livelihoods and other resources such as firewood for cooking.

In Chitwan, a grass-cutting programme has been running since 1976. The Terai grasslands are a successional stage in the floodplain ecosystem and therefore must be maintained by using methods such as controlled fires and cutting. The park devised a unique strategy in which locals (including women) cut the grass, reeds and rope bark and use them for thatching, fuelwood and fodder purposes. In this manner, the dual purpose of meeting local demands for these materials are balanced with managing the ecosystem.

This also serves as a way to resolve the park-people conflict as it provides resource-usage opportunities for the local people who were deprived of their customary rights to collect traditional house-building and binding materials after the park was established. The grass-cutting programme has been under scrutiny for a while, and the feasibility of opening up the park to a burgeoning population in the buffer zone has been revisited (Straede & Helles, 2000). At the same time, it has also been acknowledged that a positive perception towards park and wildlife has been generated, besides providing customary resource use to local communities including women whose lives have been improved by the programme.

Reflections

Forest governance is complex and driven by elements of the local politics of place, history, ecology and socio-cultural relations (Gurunani, 2002). Forests can be more than a source of fuelwood and timber resources; they have shaped the social relations that are locally specific and respond to the ecological and geographical contexts of a place.

The above case studies clearly demonstrate that heritage can no longer be regarded in isolation but as part of biocultural conservation, thereby strengthening the meaning and cultural identity to the people concerned (Bokova et al., 2014). It also underlines that heritage is increasingly gaining importance as part of the discourse on human wellbeing. Case studies and examples as stated above help in garnering support from

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the local communities towards forest governance and also for ensuring long-term gender equality and sustainability in economic development.

Heritage has therefore proved its close connection to people's identity, thereby making it a potential instrument of voice and representation for women and other marginalised people of civil society (e.g. forest fringe communities), among others. Recognising and enabling an inclusive, integrated and multi-stakeholder approach to heritage will therefore have a significant bearing on the future sustainability of heritage. While heritage, by designation, encompasses a vast array of monuments, cultural landscapes, protected areas and the environment, it is the people who identify, choose and carry out the actions for its protection, conservation and safeguarding that make these constellations a living heritage.

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