



Rediscovering The Past: A Journey Along The Chatrams of a Forgotten Pilgrimage Route

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Abstract

Cultural routes have emerged as a vital means of uncovering and preserving hidden cultural gems in remote rural areas. Pilgrimage routes involving journeys to sacred or religious sites fall under the umbrella of cultural routes. This paper examines the cultural significance of the Kashi-Rameshwaram Pilgrimage Route in India, with a specific focus on historical resting places called Chatrams built along the Route during the 17th-century Marthava rule in Thanjavur, a city located in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, India. The study examines the Chatrams' contemporary condition, influence on the surrounding neighbourhood, and the challenges they face amidst the landscape that once played an essential role in shaping the region's cultural landscape along the Pilgrimage Route. It employs qualitative data from interviews with Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) with Historians and the local community, a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach, as well as on-site observations. The findings scrutinize the contemporary condition of these Chatrams, their profound influence on the neighbourhood, and the challenges they confront amidst the surrounding landscape, along with the current policies of stakeholders, which often prove ineffective in preserving and revitalizing these Chatrams. Community participation emerges as a crucial factor in revitalizing these sites. The research concludes that restoring Chatrams can preserve cultural heritage, enhance cultural tourism, and improve the overall aesthetics of the landscape.

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Keywords

Cultural Route; Pilgrimage Route; Chatrams; Community participation; Revitalization

1. Introduction

Cultural routes are more than mere pathways; they are living corridors of heritage that weave together the stories, traditions, and legacies of civilizations across time and space. A cultural route is a historic route of communication usually defined by its constituent elements related to the road, encompassing inns, storage sites, ports, defensive constructions, urban centers, cultural landscapes, etc. (Carreño, 2003). One such significant cultural artery in India is the Kashi-Rameshwaram Pilgrimage Route, a journey steeped in spiritual significance and historical resonance, usually undertaken to appease their forefathers, perform last rites and purify themselves from sins.

This study focuses on two main topics: the Kashi-Rameshwaram Pilgrimage and the exploration of Chatram heritage (south Indian rest houses) serving as royal venues for religiously inspired hospitality to pilgrims and travellers, which were built along the Pilgrimage Route, within the Thanjavur District, in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, India. The research delves into the palimpsest nature and the process of reintegrating cultural routes within this landscape, with a specific focus on Chatrams as pivotal elements. These Chatrams played a significant role as sites for progressively diversified social outreach in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century South India (Linderman, 2013).

Today, the pilgrimage remains active, but the historical Route once taken is no longer used by pilgrims, resulting in the abandonment of these Chatrams. Regrettably, most of these structures are no longer used for their original purpose, while some are in ruins. The landscape around remains agricultural lands without losing its rural charm. The quietude of the abandoned Chatrams stands in stark contrast to the bustling activity of the modern pilgrimage route, creating a sense of forgotten history. Yet, the potential for these structures to be revitalized is undeniable.

While this heritage is an integral part of the region's identity, the remnants of its past are sporadically protected, with some left in ruins. Diverse ownership and political conflicts, unfortunately, obstruct efforts to establish a unified protection strategy. Although individual initiatives have been taken to preserve some of this heritage, the effects are minimal. This study aims to bring cohesiveness and awareness to the heritage by analysing the historical fabric and palimpsest layers, addressing possibilities for improved conservation and reintegration of the built heritage.

1.1. Scale of the study/ Limitations

1.1.1. Physical scope

The physical scope of the study is the region within the District of Thanjavur, located in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Specifically, it examines a small section of the Rameshwaram Highroad Route (Figure 1), which is confined to three towns within the District: Thiruvaiyaru, Thanjavur, and Orathanadu, covering a distance of 37km.

The abundance of temples in Thanjavur's vicinity has played a crucial role in shaping its identity as a vibrant spiritual center and a prominent stop for pilgrims throughout history. This influx of devotees didn't just leave behind footprints, it led to the creation of an entire ecosystem catering to their needs. Resthouses emerged as vital elements along the Pilgrimage Route for the pilgrims to rest or navigate further. This selected section has more remnants of historical resthouses compared to other places because the last rulers, the Thanjavur Marathas, undertook noteworthy charitable works during their reign and endeavoured to continue them even during British rule.



Figure 1: Enlarged map of Thanjavur District, India, highlighting the towns of Thiruvaiyaru, Thanjavur and Orathanadu and a smaller map of the entire state of Tamil Nadu (bottom left) highlighting the Thanjavur District. (made by the author, modified from Wikipedia)

1.1.2. Temporal scope

The temporal scope of this study focuses on the period when Thanjavur was under Maratha rule, before British colonization in the 19th century. The Marathas were renowned for their philanthropic endeavours. Therefore, the decision was made to conduct an in-depth analysis of the history of Chatrams along the Kashi - Rameshwaram Route constructed during the Thanjavur Maratha rule from 1799 to 1855 CE.

Over the past two centuries, there has been a significant rise and subsequent decline in the prominence of Chatrams and pilgrimages travelling on foot. During the Maratha rule, a total of 96 Chatrams were constructed along the Rameshwaram highroad, marking a period when these charitable accommodations were considered not only luxurious for pilgrims but also for international traders. This era is pivotal in understanding the evolution of today's landscape.

1.2. Objective, Significance and Research Questions

This study explores a section of the forgotten Kashi-Rameshwaram pilgrimage Route in India that significantly influenced the development and prominence of the Thanjavur region. The city of Thanjavur and its neighbouring towns exemplify a continuous cultural tradition that has developed over time and is an integral part of their heritage. Preserving these lesser-known, historically valuable sites for future generations is crucial. The scope of this study centres on the conservation of built heritage, specifically addressing the current conditions surrounding the Chatrams and proposing a sustainable future for these structures through community involvement. These include engaging decision-makers, the local community, and other stakeholders in the conservation process. This research fills a gap in existing scholarly literature, which lacks studies on the combined subject of the Pilgrimage Route and Chatrams in this specific area.

Chatrams, the most prevalent architectural category, have suffered intentional and unintentional destruction over time. Factors like negligence by the stakeholders, inadequate heritage protection laws, commercial development, and natural degradation all contribute to this decline. The haphazard development surrounding these Chatrams further exacerbates the issue, along with the lack of comprehensive protection laws or policies – due to the diverse ownership structure, ranging from private individuals to various government bodies – hindering effective conservation efforts.

The research objective emerged from a combined analysis of literature and on-site observations. The built heritage and its connection to the Pilgrimage Route exhibit a fragmented nature, which calls for better legibility of the site. Conservation efforts for these sites not only call for their protection but also an opportunity to engage local communities. Currently, these communities are disconnected from the historical sites and do not benefit from them. This lack of connection fosters a sense of indifference and neglect, particularly among older residents who have witnessed the decline of these Chatrams (a top-down movement) over the years.

A study of the state of the art of the Maratha Chatrams underscores the urgent need for immediate attention to these landmarks through improved maintenance, management strategies, and regulations. The state of conservation of the Chatrams remains highly neglected and vulnerable, under constant threat from lack of maintenance and natural deterioration. With many Maratha Chatrams outside the Thanjavur district facing demolition, integrating the remaining ones into the existing heritage framework becomes crucial for their sustainable conservation. These Chatrams no longer serve their original purpose, leading to a cultural disconnect within the community. The current management's ambiguity and fragmented approach threaten the Chatrams' future. Today, the communities desire a "bottom-up" movement for heritage-based regeneration.

Based on the fieldwork and observations, the following research questions guide this investigation, starting with a broad perspective and progressing to a detailed analysis.

Enhanced Legibility and Heritage Inclusion: Can improving the integration of the Built Heritage within the local landscape improve the legibility of the Pilgrimage Route?

Further, the research questions are divided into sub-questions to analyze the potential of these Chatrams.

1. How could the connection between the local community and the built heritage be bridged and foster a sense of ownership and appreciation?
2. How could the communities act as catalysts for regional regeneration?

1.3. Methodology

The general methodology of this study aims at enhancing the legibility of the Pilgrimage Route and interpreting it, along with its associated built heritage, as a unified heritage landscape. The objective is to increase value and protection by establishing spatial and temporal connections through narratives or highlighting connections along the

Route. This can resonate with and raise awareness within the local communities, which have currently lost their connection to the Chatrams. As stated earlier, mere material conservation of the Chatrams is insufficient to ensure its future survival. Without understanding their 'values' and 'significance' within the communities, the conservation efforts lack justification.

Many different methods of investigation have been applied in this research to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the Chatrams. The aim is to gather all available information on the Pilgrimage Route and the Chatrams, creating a comprehensive picture. A critical aspect involves evaluating the various types of information gleaned from these different methods. Given the case study nature of this research, data collection primarily relies on fieldwork, non-participant observation, and interviews.

For the literature review, previous records of the Chatrams were examined, along with available data from publications. These sources offered historical context regarding the region, the charitable endeavours of the Marathas and the evolution of their services over time.

Alongside the historical research, various in-person and virtual meetings with the stakeholders, employees at the Chatram Administration and experts working on the conservation of these Chatrams, as well as online survey forms to collect impressions of public opinions on these Chatrams and the concept of Cultural routes, were collected, in preparation for the fieldwork. Photographs and detailed observations were employed to visually support the collected data. Drone footage proved particularly valuable for capturing a holistic view of these sites, especially since some Chatrams were inaccessible or overgrown with vegetation.

This study synthesized data from both background research and fieldwork. Community perspectives on the Chatram's current value were gathered through interviews. Subsequent empirical analysis led to the identification of opportunities and threats, culminating in the development of recommendations.

2. Kashi-Rameshwaram Pilgrimage Route: A Journey of Faith and Spirituality

The Kashi-Rameshwaram pilgrimage, spanning an extensive 3,000 kilometres, is one of India's most esteemed and demanding spiritual odysseys. The pilgrimage route extends across diverse landscapes, beginning from the vibrant streets of Kashi (Varanasi) in the north, located in the state of Uttar Pradesh, and concluding in the coastal town of Rameshwaram in the south, situated in the state of Tamil Nadu. Beyond its geographical significance, this journey holds profound spiritual importance.

The pilgrimage is typically undertaken over a period of 40 days and involves visiting a number of sacred sites along the way. It is divided into two parts: the northern part, which takes pilgrims from Varanasi to Rameshwaram, and the southern part, which takes pilgrims from Rameshwaram back to Varanasi. The northern part of the pilgrimage is considered to be more arduous as it involves crossing the Vindhya Mountains and the Narmada River. The southern part of the pilgrimage is considered to be more relaxing as it involves traveling along the coast of India.

2.1. Present Day

This sacred pilgrimage for Hindus holds immense historical and cultural significance. While the journey is still undertaken by devotees, the mode of travel has evolved considerably. The construction of the railway station in Rameshwaram in 1906 marked a significant shift in the pilgrimage's dynamics. Additionally, the dismantling of the Chatrams (rest houses) along the Route during colonial rule further diminished the allure of the traditional pilgrimage, which is also due to the fact that these Chatrams were getting emptier day by day. These resting places not only offered accommodation and sustenance but also served as hubs for spiritual discourse and communal bonding. These Chatrams, though no longer physically present, embody the spirit of hospitality and care that has always been integral to the pilgrimage experience.

2.2. South Indian Resthouses: Chatrams

Along Tamil Nadu's sun-baked historic highways, where time stands still, stand silent sentinels – crumbling testaments to a bygone era of hospitality, whispering untold stories within their faded walls. Built as rest houses

strategically positioned for a day's travel by foot or cart, these structures served as much more than mere shelters, which have rendered countless services and made significant contributions. Many of these establishments were architectural marvels created by the Tamil people.

With a rich legacy of providing hospitality, the Maratha rulers devoted considerable effort to expanding this charitable tradition and enhancing facilities according to the needs of the people. In the Thanjavur district, there are twenty Maratha Chatrams, making it a unique concentration of such rest houses. This region stands out as one of the most well-established areas in India, especially in South India, for the presence of these Chatrams.

2.3. Chatram – General features

2.3.1. Architecture

Chatrams, a unique building typology, often invite comparisons to Chettinadu house architecture. These structures, categorized as large and small based on their number of entrances and courtyards, offered essential accommodations for travellers. The Classic Chatram has a linear plan, having the front and the back entrance on the same axis (Figure 2). Large Chatrams typically consist of two entrances and courtyards, while smaller ones feature just one. A defining characteristic of Chatrams is the spacious "Thinnai," a raised platform flanking either side of the entrance at the plinth level.

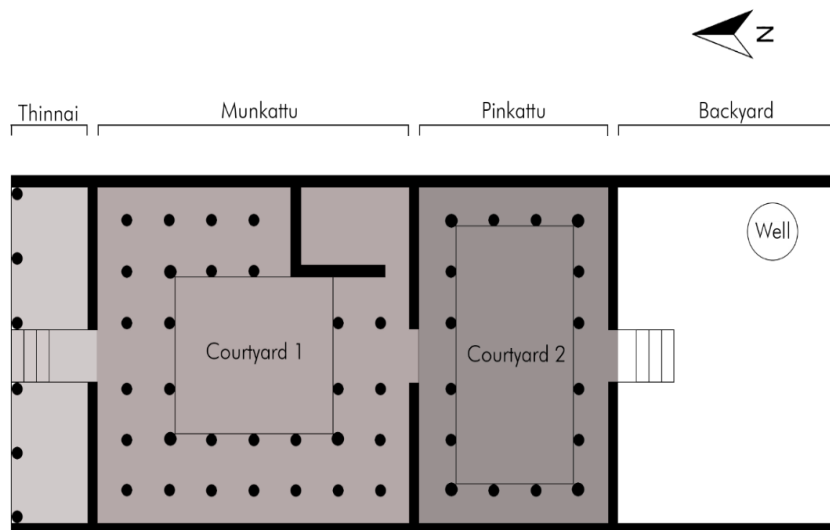


Figure 2: Schematic representation of the typical Chatram plan. (made by the author)

The interior of the Chatram is divided into two sections: the "Munkattu" (front portion) and the "Pinkattu" (back portion). The Munkattu area comprises a spacious hall supported by pillars on all four sides, along with a courtyard intended for use as a dining space. Following the principles of Vastu Shastra, the south-eastern corner of the Munkattu, known as the "sani moolai," is traditionally designated as the location for the kitchen. In contrast, the "Pinkattu" section, while similar in its basic layout to the front portion, serves distinct functional purposes. It typically features an entrance leading to the backside of the site, often housing a water well.

2.3.2. Materials

The materials used in Chatram construction consist of Granite and Laterite for the base, with lime mortar utilized for binding. Baked Brick (manufactured on-site) and lime mortar are commonly used for the walls, while lime plaster, incorporating ingredients such as jaggery, egg white, and inknut, is applied as a finishing layer. Interior decorations in Mukthambal and Yammunambal Chatram include Teak wood specifically for the roofing structure, columns, door and door frames. Skilled workers who specialize in Chettinadu construction techniques typically carry out these construction works (Dhamodharan, 1988).



Figure 3: Section of a three-leaf masonry wall at Vennar Chatram showing the two layers of laterite and a center brick layer with lime mortar (left); the steps leading to the Vennar river at Vennar Chatram made up of sand stone (center); interior of Kalyana Mahal finished with lime plaster (right). (made by the author)

2.4. Public Services

Typically, these Chatrams had a temple annexed to them, and a notable innovation was the establishment of schools at several of the larger Maratha Chatrams. The Chatram schools were considered progressive as they had a multi-language curriculum. This diversity in the linguistic and cultural composition of the Tamil and English classes reflected a broader spectrum of backgrounds and identities within the student community.

In addition to providing traditional meals for pilgrims, these Chatrams extended their services to assist the public by offering food, money, or small grants for funerals and other Hindu ceremonies, and hospitality to European travellers. Each Chatram had a skilful doctor. Travellers who fall ill at the Chatram or before their arrival are provided with medicine and a suitable diet. These charitable institutions received considerable endowments, encompassing approximately 40,000 acres of both wet and dry lands.

3. Selected Section of the Route – Thanjavur

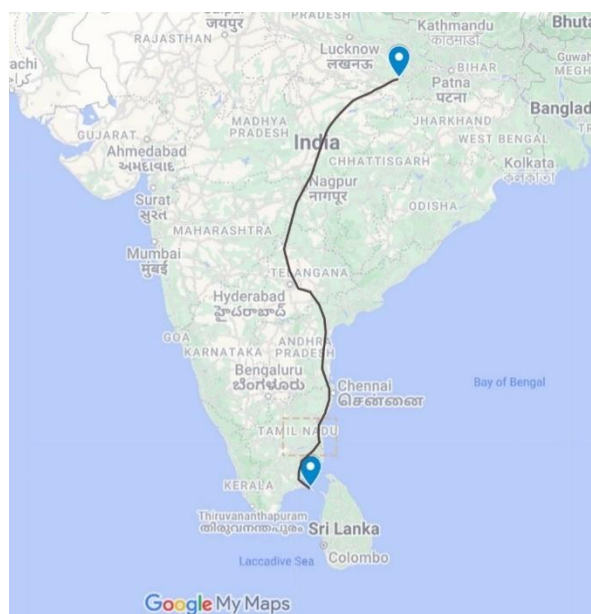


Figure 4: Present-day Kashi-Rameshwaram Pilgrimage Route. (made by the author, modified from Google Maps)

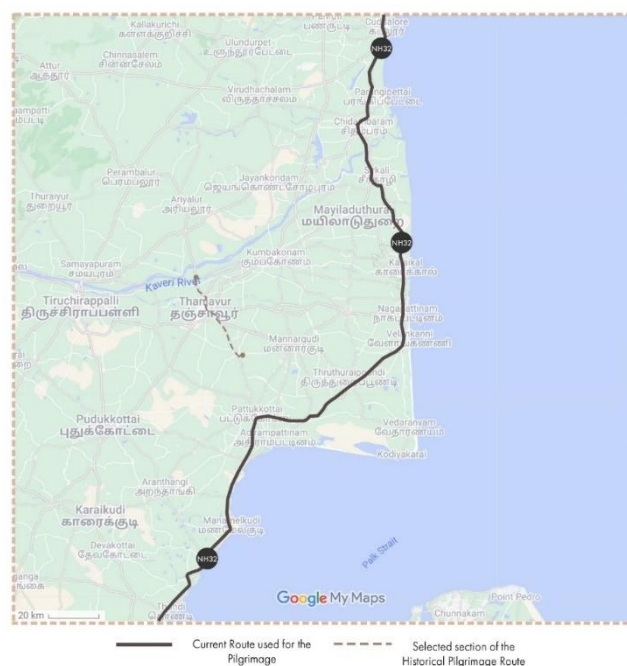


Figure 5: Detailed view of a portion of the Pilgrimage Route within Tamil Nadu, highlighting the current route along NH32 (ECR) and the selected section of the historical Pilgrimage Route within the District of Thanjavur. (made by the author, modified from Google Maps)

3.1. Tangible Heritage Along the Route

Located within the Thanjavur District, this 37-kilometre Route begins in Thiruvaiyaru, a panchayat town in the district, and concludes in Orathanadu (or Mukthambalpuram), another panchayat town within the same district. This section represents a small portion of the historical Kashi-Rameshwaram Pilgrimage Route, which was traditionally traversed on foot in the past. The Route encompasses a total of nine structures, among which 5 are Chatrams that come under the Chatram Administration, two private Chatrams, a cemetery and a bridge constructed during the Maratha rule.

Beyond serving pilgrims, this Route historically attracted traders from different parts of the country and even foreign traders. Thanjavur, being the capital of several dynasties, remains a tourism hub in the south, and this Route has played a pivotal role in facilitating trade and cultural exchange. Its significance in the past centuries persists, with numerous sites along the Route linked to pilgrimages and tourism, drawing visitors from far and wide.

Many of these structures are degrading, hidden by dense vegetation. Some, unfortunately, have been destroyed without any documented record. In recent years, heritage experts and the public have shown increased interest in these structures. Despite limited resources, they are striving to revive them by marking their GPS coordinates, which helps in locating them and analysing their conditions. While records of these Chatrams exist in archives, their unknown locations make it impossible to assess their present state.

Apart from the non-private and private Chatrams, the Maratha cemetery and bridge, while not Chatrams themselves, are included as they are part of the Maratha's built heritage and lie directly on the Route. The map denotes the location of all structures.



Figure 6: The five non-private Chatrams (from top-left) Kalyana Mahal, Vennar Chatram, Shreyas Chatram, Saithambal Chatram and Mukthambal Chatram. (made by the author)

3.1.1. Non-private Chatram

The Kalyana Mahal, originally a royal seraglio, was repurposed as a Chatram for travellers and later housed students from the nearby Government College of Music, even though its first floor is currently unsafe due to deteriorating plaster. Vennar Chatram, the oldest Maratha-built Chatram, was strategically located near the river and temples for pilgrims' rituals, though much of its area has been occupied by unauthorized settlements. Shreyas Chatram, built in 1837, now functions as a psychiatric hospital, with only a small part of the original structure intact. Saithambal Chatram, located in Soorakottai, is largely overgrown and difficult to locate despite nearby signage. Lastly, the Mukthambal Chatram in Orathanadu, built in 1802, is a highly ornate structure now under the care of the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology and remains one of the few Chatrams used for an extended period.

3.1.2. Other structures

In addition to the five Chatrams managed by the Chatram Administration, two privately owned Chatrams, including the Anna Chatram, exist along the Kashi-Rameshwaram Route as tangible heritage sites. The Maratha rulers also contributed to infrastructure by constructing five bridges along this pilgrimage route; only one original bridge over the Vettar River remains, while the others have been renovated. Another significant Maratha structure is the "Raja Gori" at Kailash Mahal, a burial ground featuring mausoleums of Maratha kings, blending Maratha, Mughal, and Dravidian architectural styles.

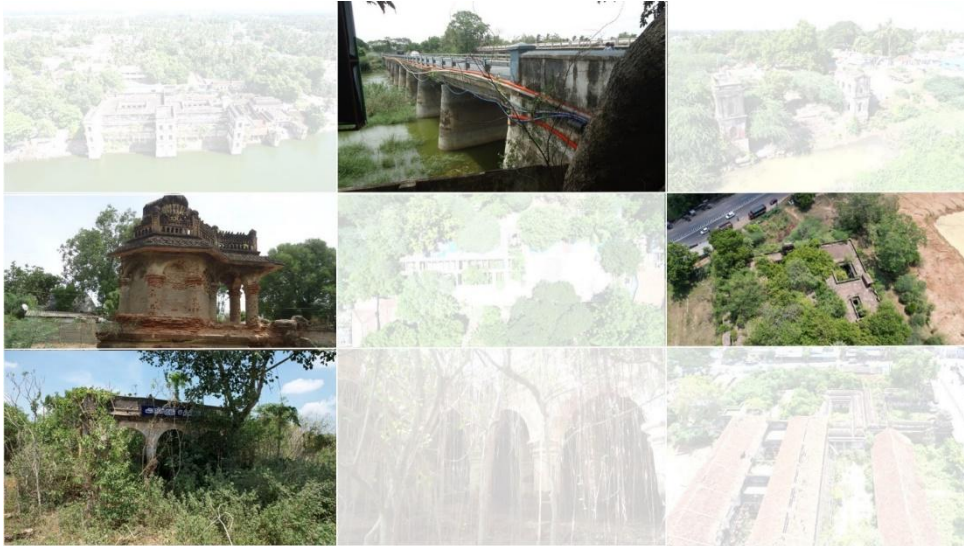


Figure 7: Other structures along the Route (from top-center) Vettar Bridge, Raja Gori, Private Chatram 1, Anna Chatram. (made by the author)

4. Stakeholders

4.1. Direct stakeholder

4.1.1. Chatram Administration

The Chatram Administration falls under the jurisdiction of the Thanjavur District Collector, with a Tahsildar as the head of the Administration and Chatram staff employed on a rotational basis to manage daily operations. Their responsibilities include collecting revenue from the lands allocated to the Chatrams, surveying these lands for illegal trespassing at regular intervals, and maintaining the Chatram. However, the Tahsildar frequently undergoes transfers to different departments or even to other districts, which complicates the preservation of the Chatram, and the small Administration often faces neglect from superiors.

4.1.2. Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology - TNSDA

The Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology (TNSDA) is responsible for archaeological affairs in Tamil Nadu. Among the Chatrams, only Mukthambal Chatram has been under the control of the TNSDA since 2022, following a pivotal article in The Hindu Tamil newspaper that attracted attention from state ministers and led to the transfer of control. However, the TNSDA has not yet designated the Chatram as a protected monument, which contributes to its unrecognized status. Currently, there are discussions regarding a maintenance plan and budget allocation for the Chatram.

4.2. Indirect stakeholder

4.2.1. Thanjavur Palace Devasthanam

The Thanjavur Palace Devasthanam, the lineage of the Thanjavur Marathas, manages various temples and religious properties linked to the Thanjavur Maratha dynasty but does not directly associate with Chatrams. Nevertheless, these Chatrams hold significance due to their historical context.

4.2.2. NGO's and Local Community

The Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), a non-governmental organization, maintains a positive relationship with the Prince of Thanjavur, collaborating on preserving Maratha heritage. Notably, INTACH lists Mukthambal Chatram among the monuments at risk on its official website, citing a lack of user-friendly guidelines as a challenge.

The involvement of the local community is crucial for the success of any proposed changes to the Chatrams. Longstanding residents have deep-rooted connections to these historic structures, recalling their prime when Chatrams served as community hubs. The desire to revive these sites is strong, as residents see restoration as a means to reconnect with their past and enhance their community's cultural and economic vitality. Conservation efforts in historic landscapes where older communities reside can foster cultural identity, promote sustainable tourism, and enhance socio-economic well-being. Success largely depends on the acceptance and support of the local community, necessitating the inclusion of diverse stakeholders such as local residents, institutions, government bodies, and public and private organizations.

5. Empirical Observations and Recommendations

5.1. Current activities and Social perspectives around the Chatrams

These analyses provide a clear understanding of the state of conservation of these structures and their connectivity with the neighbourhood. Many community members expressed a sense of loss and nostalgia for the historical significance of these structures yet acknowledged the challenges posed by their current state of disrepair and abandonment. Key themes that emerged from the interviews included concerns about safety, cleanliness, and accessibility, as well as ideas for potential reuse and revitalization. One major issue highlighted during the interviews with the stakeholders and historians was the encroachment and informal settlements around some of the Chatrams, which have led to restricted access and further degradation of these heritage sites.

Despite these challenges, there was a strong sense of community interest in preserving and revitalizing the Chatrams. A questionnaire (Figure 8) was developed and shared online, featuring images of the Chatrams. In addition to conducting in-person interviews with stakeholders and locals, the link for the questionnaire was shared on WhatsApp groups, which helped in understanding the perception of a broader circle. A total of 70 responses were received, with respondents representing diverse demographics, including local residents, historians, and conservation professionals.

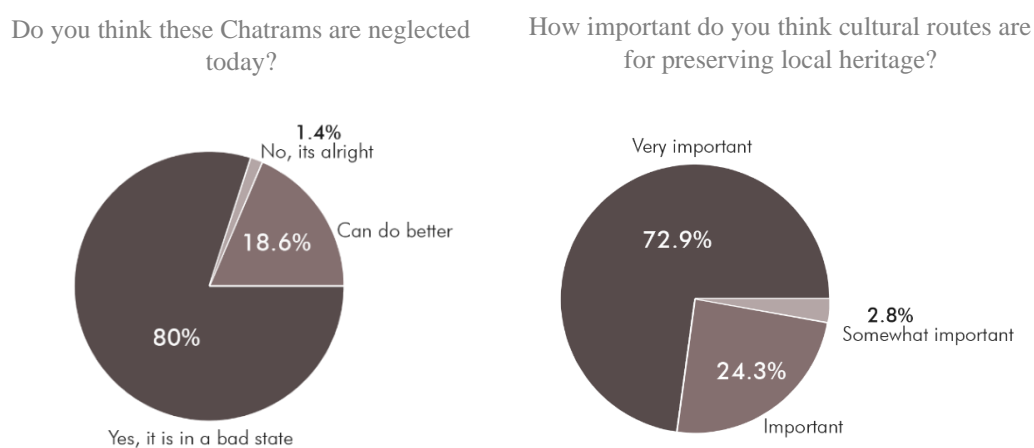


Figure 8: Survey results highlighting public perceptions on the condition of the Chatrams and the importance of Cultural routes in preserving local heritage. (made by the author)

The survey results provide a compelling reflection of the public attitudes towards the preservation and significance of the historical Chatrams and cultural heritage in Thanjavur. The willingness to engage in preservation activities is also notably high, indicating strong motivation among residents to participate in conservation efforts. Despite this strong sentiment, there is a clear perception that the current state of these historical sites is poor, with many believing

they need urgent attention and improvement. These diverse ideas highlight the community's desire to integrate the Chatrams into the social and the city's cultural fabric, enhancing their utility and social value.

5.2. Heritage Values

In 1975, the Declaration of Amsterdam introduced the idea of Integrated Conservation Planning, which states that architectural heritage consists not only of individual buildings of heritage value but also of their surroundings (Council of Europe, 1975). This approach emphasizes the importance of considering the broader urban and rural contexts in which the structures are situated. Integrated Conservation Planning seeks to harmonize the preservation of historical structures with contemporary urban development, ensuring that heritage sites remain vibrant parts of the community.

5.2.1. Historical Value:

- Reflects historical pilgrimage practices and routes, with a connection to Kashi and Rameshwaram; historic infrastructure, wayfinding elements, and built environment relevant to the Pilgrimage Route.
- Only remaining example of the Maratha Architecture and community services, valued for their role in the history of the Thanjavur Maratha kingdom
- The use of traditional materials that were locally manufactured, showcasing historical building techniques and regional craftsmanship.
- These structures have stood through various historical epochs, changes in function and different owners, explaining its administrative evolution.

5.2.2. Religious Value:

- Importance of the Kashi-Rameshwaram Pilgrimage Route in Hindu traditions, symbolizing spiritual journeys and religious practices.
- Presence of temples, shrines, and Chatrams serving pilgrims, emphasizing the religious atmosphere.

5.2.3. Architectural and Artistic Value:

- Traditional construction and decoration techniques exemplify the integration of art and architecture through traditional building methods.
- The Chatrams feature decorative elements, often depicting religious and mythological themes that reflect the cultural and spiritual heritage of the region.

5.2.4. Urban Value:

- Cultural heritage as part of tourism infrastructure: The Chatrams contribute to the local economy through their potential as tourist attractions.
- The presence of the Chatram reinforces a sense of community identity and pride, serving as a reminder of the area's rich historical and cultural heritage.
- The Chatrams offer opportunities for adaptive reuse, which can bring new life to these historic structures while preserving their heritage value.

5.2.5. Ensemble Value:

- Interlinked built and open spaces: The relationship between the Chatrams, their surrounding spaces, and the Pilgrimage Route enhances their cultural and functional integration.
- The natural landscape surrounding the Pilgrimage Route and Chatrams includes rivers, which served as water sources for the Chatrams, and agricultural fields, some of which were endowed to the Chatrams, creating a cohesive cultural landscape.

5.3. SWOT analysis

The SWOT analysis reveals key aspects of the Chatrams' preservation and potential.

Strengths: The Chatrams exhibit traditional South Indian architecture and craftsmanship, contributing to the cultural heritage and identity of Thanjavur. They hold significant tourism potential, which could boost the local economy.

Weaknesses: Many Chatrams are in poor condition, with limited historical information and awareness. Financial constraints and lack of collaboration between stakeholders hinder their restoration.

Opportunities: Heritage tourism and collaboration between stakeholders can drive preservation efforts. Engaging local communities in conservation projects can foster ownership and support.

Threats: Urban development, neglect, and vandalism threaten the Chatrams' preservation. Cultural erosion and regulatory challenges further complicate restoration efforts.

5.4. Recommendations

The Maratha Chatrams in the Thanjavur District represent a rich tapestry of transcultural tangible and intangible heritage, intricately interwoven and inseparable. The extensive history of transformation within these built heritage sites suggests that they will never fully revert to their original state before human intervention.

Key areas that require attention are:

- Fostering collaboration among stakeholders
- Encouraging community involvement
- Documenting the Route and the built heritage
- Proposing tourism-benefiting ideas

The initial phase of this process involves establishing buffer zones around each heritage site. Addressing and removing illegal encroachments within these areas is crucial, followed by necessary rehabilitation efforts.

Conflicting interests among stakeholders and negative views from some local residents can adversely impact the conservation of existing built heritage. Such disagreements can create barriers due to differing interpretations and may lead to reduced motivation and engagement from the community. This section seeks to initiate the reintegration process by proposing theoretical solutions while acknowledging the complexities of practical politics.

The main objective of the Chatram rehabilitation project is to re-establish connections between the site and the neighbouring residential area, ensuring full community involvement in the rehabilitation efforts. Given the lack of current activities around the sites related to the Pilgrimage, it is important to develop initiatives that engage with the Chatram heritage and reconnect with the forgotten Pilgrimage Route. Identifying gaps and opportunities for better integration of this heritage is crucial.

5.4.1. Encouraging Partnership and Communication

- The Chatram Administration, as a dedicated body, should take proactive steps to initiate dialogues and foster collaboration among all stakeholders. Establishing regular meetings with the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology (TNSDA), the Thanjavur Palace Devasthanam, and also the Department of Tourism, given the tourism-related aspects of the project.
- An open discussion among stakeholders, chaired by the District Collector of Thanjavur, should address the revenues generated from endowed lands. This discussion will help to understand the financial dynamics and challenges associated with the Chatrams. Including the owners of the two private Chatrams in these discussions will also help in integrating efforts and providing a comprehensive understanding.
- The Chatram Administration should explore opportunities for joint funding initiatives and grants from private and public sectors. Collaborating with organizations such as INTACH can provide the necessary financial support for restoration and conservation projects.

- The Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology (TNSDA), as the regional authority on heritage, should initiate dialogue to consider heritage protection laws. These include defining and protecting these lesser-known heritage sites and creating buffer zones to preserve the entire site.

5.4.2. Community involvement

- Based on surveys and on-site interviews, it is evident that the community is interested in reviving the structures and participating in the restoration plan, primarily due to the potential revenue generated. To effectively involve the community in the restoration plan, it is essential to educate and raise awareness about the historical significance of the Chatrams and their connection to the Pilgrimage Route, especially since many current residents are immigrants.
- Gathering oral histories and historical documents from local inhabitants, along with surveying the entire structure with the engagement of locals, can lead to a better understanding of the built heritage and the physical and social dynamics governing the area. This process can also act as a catalyst to revive memories and restore the community's attachment to the town.
- Direct community involvement in the restoration process is essential, which can be achieved by hiring local artisans and craftsmen who have traditional skills pertinent to the restoration work.
- To sustain community involvement, it is important to highlight the economic benefits of the restoration project.
- Collaborating with local schools and universities can significantly enhance community involvement.

5.4.3. Documentation

- Currently, there are no original or comprehensive architectural drawings or photographic documentation available for any of these Chatrams. To safeguard the remains and to understand the architectural planning of these Chatrams, it is imperative to conduct thorough documentation of the existing structures.
- In addition to the buildings themselves, it is also important to document the surrounding spaces that were integral to the Chatrams, which are the water bodies, as many Chatrams historically featured artificial water bodies for functional purposes.
- Establishing a digital archive exclusively for Chatram documentation can ensure the longevity and accessibility of the records.

5.4.4. Tourism and Economy

To effectively revitalize the Maratha Chatrams and the Pilgrimage Route and ensure their sustainable future, it is crucial to develop tourism initiatives that balance heritage preservation with economic benefits.

- The initial step involves updating the 'Thanjavur District' website by including the Maratha Chatrams along the Pilgrimage Route. Enhancing the website with high-quality images, interactive maps, and virtual tours will boost visibility and engagement.
- Collaborate with travel agencies and tour operators to promote the Trail as a distinct heritage destination. Engaging with international tourism boards and cultural institutions will also help attract potential tourists from abroad.
- Enhancing infrastructure around the Chatrams and along the Pilgrimage Route is essential for ensuring a positive visitor experience. These include developing well-maintained pathways, adequate signage, rest areas, and facilities such as toilets and food outlets.

6. Conclusion

This study has focused on conserving the heritage elements of the Maratha Chatrams in the Thanjavur District, which represent a significant historical identity of the region. By exploring the rich tapestry of heritage embodied by the Maratha Chatrams, examining their historical significance, and proposing strategies for their integration into a

cohesive cultural narrative, this study underscores their unique role in the Kashi-Rameshwaram Pilgrimage Route and the broader historical landscape of Thanjavur. The Chatrams, representing a blend of transcultural tangible and intangible heritage, offer a compelling opportunity to reconnect with and celebrate the region's historical legacy.

Through comprehensive analysis, the study has identified critical areas for intervention, ranging from immediate conservation needs to long-term integration strategies. However, with the community that once lived around the Chatrams having moved away, merely reviving historical values is insufficient. The current lacunae in heritage legislation and the disconnect between urban development and heritage protection pose challenges to prioritizing sites like the Chatrams.

In contemporary India, heritage sites are often viewed as inconsequential to development rather than being integrated into development plans as functional spaces. There is a need to repurpose heritage sites like the Chatrams beyond mere preservation and museum-like settings, transforming them into vibrant, usable spaces that contribute to community life and tourism like they once did. Integrating the Chatrams into the Smart City plan and aligning them with existing heritage initiatives is crucial. Adding functional value to the Chatrams and making them integral elements of the neighbourhood will help create a more cohesive and engaging heritage experience for the residents and visitors. Key recommendations for achieving this include strengthening stakeholder collaboration, enhancing community involvement, and improving infrastructure to support the successful implementation of these strategies.

The present study has attempted to learn about the historical background from a distant perspective, including ethnographic analysis, detailed interviews with stakeholders and historians, and identification of the factors and issues beyond heritage. Through these efforts, the study has made progress in bridging the gap between the community and the Chatrams, the Pilgrimage Route, various stakeholders, and the historical and future dimensions of the Chatrams.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no competing interest.

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