



**SLOW HERITAGE THROUGH FAST MEDIA: ENSURING
CIVIC PARTICIPATION THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA**

Sargam Mehra

sargam_mehra@yahoo.com

Doon University, India

School of Media and Communication Studies

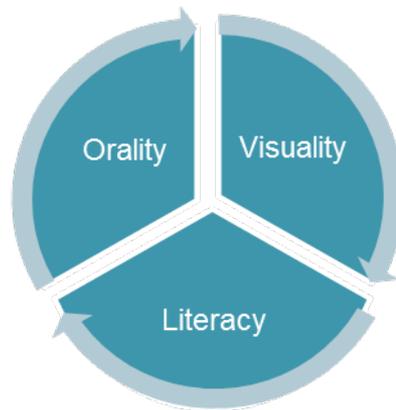


QUESTION THREAD

- Does social media and the urge and availability of platforms to post one's experiences encourage fast food like consumption of heritage and heritage sites? Can it be used to reverse dominant tourism trends and encourage slow and sustainable tourism initiatives involving civic participation?
- Social Media is seen as a powerful medium shaping our opinions even when we travel, often pushing us to 'consume' a site rather than feel it. Our first instinct, when travelling, is not only to capture photographs but also post them and cover as many areas as possible in a short span of time to lend a variety to our post. Travel accounts, posts and blogs are a popular format now.

HERITAGE AND SOCIAL MEDIA

- The Committee of Experts on the Safeguarding of Folklore having a special Section for Non-Tangible Heritage, UNESCO, 1982, expanded the ambit of the term heritage from tangible to intangible (Ballen, Vandesande, 1973)*. Social Media has accommodated this widening by the principle of convergence.



- Convergence of Medium- Social Media brings together **Oral, Literary and Visual** senses involving greater sensory involvement and there is no sharp division between the sender and the receiver. One comes across User-Generated Content. This is a potent tool to encourage civic participation in any field.

*Ballen K.V.& Vandesande, A. Eds. (2015). *Community Involvement in Heritage*, Garant Publishers



SOCIAL MEDIA, HERITAGE AND PARTICIPATION

- In the Himalayan state of Uttarakhand in India, tourism is the mainstay of the economy but has also brought unwanted commercialization and destruction of natural spaces. Tourism from below, run by and in accordance with the resources of the local people, is the need of the hour.
- In this region, social media can be a potent tool to move towards sustainable tourism and heritage preservation. It allows live streaming, accommodates groups based on mutual interests, brings together sounds and visuals (photographs, folk songs, sharing of bird calls) and is proving to be a better medium of heritage preservation than anything else. It is in this digital landscape that people are sharing personalized experiences, recommendations and things that they got back from their travels.

CIVIC PARTICIPATION: HERITAGE FROM BELOW

- Using social media for heritage makes sense because both are essentially participatory. India is currently applying a top down archaeological approach to heritage where tangible or built heritage takes precedence over everything else. In their study of community archaeology in South Africa, Shedreck Chirikure and Gilbert Pwiti point out that initially archaeologists and heritage managers viewed local communities as reservoirs of cheap labour and fieldwork rather than consumers of knowledge from the past. Archaeologists sometimes kept interesting sites out of the public eye to protect them from destruction' (Chirikure, Pwiti, 2008)*. They soon realized that the alienation of local interests and indigenous groups was also depriving them of valuable allies in the protection of sites.

*Chirikure, S. & Pwiti, G. (2008). Community Involvement in Archaeology and Cultural Heritage Management: An Assessment from Case Studies In Southern Africa and Elsewhere, *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 49 (3), pp 467-485



Been There, Doon That?

- Been There, Doon That? (<https://www.facebook.com/walks.btdt/?ref=bookmarks>) is a citizen initiative based in the Doon Valley (Dehradun region) of Uttarakhand state. A group drafting heritage walks and leisurely trips to several Himalayan sites, it is using social media to challenge the trend of fast tourism.
- Several citizens and native residents wish to contribute to heritage awareness and preservation. An increasing number of people undergoing social fatigue and are seeking isolated and slower life experiences. Those who are nostalgic use old pictures on social media to revive pristine images and encourage people in participating in preserving these places. Been There, Doon That? is a community of all such participants who have come together to walk and access these spaces physically.



DEVALSARI

- Devalsari is a pristine Deodar forest situated at an altitude of 6,000 feet. It is extremely unusual to find the Himalayan tree of Deodar at such a low altitude. This tree is not only a natural resource but also the species around which the local rituals and festivals are centered. Supported by NGOs and the government's Eco-Tourism Wing, Devalsari began tourism with a committee led by the local youth (<http://www.devalsari.org/>). Been There, Doon That? has encouraged walkers to visit the place and walk the forest to observe butterflies, birds and trees. These trails are also led by the local villagers who share interesting tales about their natural heritage. Buoyed by the response of the visitors, the community has come together to preserve the forest and the number of tourists that have now begun to come (primarily due to social media) have also led the local government authorities to fund preservation initiatives here.



THE NOMADIC VAN GUJARS

- The Van Gujars are a nomadic community travelling to the upper reaches of the Himalayas with their cattle during the summer months. They descend to the plains during the winter. The ‘deras’ or the camps of the Van Gujars are frequently visited by this citizen initiative and has encouraged the Van Gujars to learn the use of social media. They are now using various platforms like WhatsApp to sell their milk, buy buffalos and even record and exchange local bird calls which are shared with visitors! Many of them have now volunteered to be local guides to not only share their heritage with visitors but also participate in preserving their forests which are their home.



BHANGELI- THE MIGRATION STORY

- A detour near the sacred source of the River Ganges, Bhangeli is a picturesque village fighting the perils of migration, much like other Himalayan villages. Urged by the local women, Been There, Doon That? has initiated WhatsApp groups and Facebook communities to promote home stays in Bhangeli and stop migration of local youth. While the men lead treks to Asia's highest meadow (the Gidara Bugyal) from this village, the women have begun to circulate videos of them working on the crops and inviting tourists to live the same experience. The residents here have urged the local authorities to keep their homes away from commercialization. Instead of building hotels and restaurants with fancy tourist amenities, they are using social media to challenge the comfort of tourists and invite them to stay just like the villagers. Regular tours to the village have now begun without harming the local ecology or architecture.



PAWALGARH- THE HOME OF TIGERS

- Pawalgarh, another heritage trail developed by this citizen's initiative and promoted through social media, is a lush forest near the famous Jim Corbett Tiger Reserve in the Kumaon Himalayas. Supported by the Eco-Tourism Wing of the government, the Pawalgarh youth have come forward to form a committee initiating tourism and encouraging home stays among the visitors. (<http://pawalgarh.org/>). The local youth here are a key example of civic participation where they are taking people on leisurely trails and asking them to participate in village activities. They have avoided providing luxury hotel-like stays to tourists, keeping their local traditions and lifestyle intact.



ALMORA

- Almora, a hill town, is often eclipsed by the nearby hill station of Nainital that is more popular among tourists and is now fighting for preserving its showpiece, a lake. The local residents have protested that rampant construction and unregulated tourism have affected the lake dwindling its waters. The nearby town of Almora has, in contrast, maintained its local heritage (architecture, rivers, food). However, the local residents urged this walking community to help them use their social media pages and promote heritage trails in Almora. The Almora Heritage Walks (<https://www.facebook.com/Almora-Heritage-Walks-138409806858233/>) is now a popular group undertaking heritage awareness initiatives on a regular basis and hosting tourists every now and then.

HERITAGE AND PARTICIPATION

- For many of us, travelling is a quick consumption of sounds and sights. But a slower experiencing of these things will contribute more strongly towards achieving a balance between tourism and heritage preservation. Shared and popularized on social media, such initiatives can be significant in attracting tourists in a responsible way without damaging the local ecology and encouraging the awareness of local traditions.

REFERENCES

- Ballen K.V.& Vandesande, A. Eds. (2015). *Community Involvement in Heritage*, Garant Publishers
- Chirikure, S. & Pwiti, G. (2008). Community Involvement in Archaeology and Cultural Heritage Management: An Assessment from Case Studies In Southern Africa and Elsewhere, *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 49 (3), pp 467-485