

Politics of Heritage Sites and UNESCO Recognition (Case Study: Ajanta Caves)

Mr. Nishikant Savanta Waghmare, Department of Political Science, Padmabhushan
Vasandraodada Patil Mahavidyalaya, Kavathe Mahankal. Email- nishi.6147@gmail.com

Abstract:

This research investigates the intersection of global governance and national identity through the ‘politics of heritage,’ utilizing the UNESCO-recognized Ajanta Caves as a primary case study. It examines how international recognition serves as an instrument of soft power and cultural diplomacy for the Indian state. Through historical and policy analysis, the study explores the tensions between state-led tourism development, conservation mandates, and the socio-economic rights of local communities. The paper concludes that the designation of World Heritage sites is a deeply political process that reshapes historical narratives to support nation-building, necessitating a more inclusive and sustainable approach to heritage governance.

Introduction :

Cultural heritage is increasingly recognized not merely as a relic of the past, but as a dynamic instrument of contemporary political power and global governance. Under the aegis of UNESCO, the designation of World Heritage sites transcends cultural preservation, functioning as a vital marker of international prestige and ‘soft power.’ This research investigates the multi-layered politics of heritage recognition, focusing on the Ajanta Caves in India as a critical case study. For the Indian state, the UNESCO tag serves dual purposes: it projects a narrative of a pluralistic, ancient civilization for cultural diplomacy while simultaneously driving the political economy of tourism and national image-building.

However, the governance of such sites by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) reveals inherent tensions between top-down international mandates and grassroots socio-economic realities. This paper examines the ‘politics of heritage’ by analyzing how the Ajanta Caves navigate the dialectic between conservation and commercialization, and the ways in which historical narratives are curated to serve national identity. By scrutinizing the intersection of global frameworks, state-led development, and local community impacts, this study argues that UNESCO recognition is a deeply political act that reshapes the socio-political landscape of the host nation, transforming a site of ancient worship into a contested space of modern diplomacy.

Objectives :

1. To analyze how UNESCO World Heritage recognition functions as a strategic instrument of global soft power and cultural diplomacy.
2. To examine the role of the state in utilizing heritage sites for the construction of national identity and civilizational narratives.
3. To investigate the political economy of heritage management and the tensions between tourism-driven commercialization, conservation, and local community interests.

1. The UNESCO World Heritage Framework: Global Governance and Diplomatic Maneuvering

The UNESCO World Heritage framework, established by the 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, represents one of the most

significant examples of international intergovernmental cooperation. While its stated goal is the preservation of sites for ‘all humanity’, the framework functions as a sophisticated political apparatus where global governance intersects with national interests. The inscription of a site, such as the Ajanta Caves, is not merely a technical acknowledgment of historical value but a complex process of international validation and diplomatic negotiation.

Criteria for World Heritage Inscription and the OUV

The cornerstone of the UNESCO framework is the concept of Outstanding Universal Value (OUV). For a site to be inscribed, it must meet at least one of ten specific criteria. The Ajanta Caves were inscribed under several criteria, most notably as a masterpiece of human creative genius (Criterion i) and for having exerted great influence on the development of art (Criterion ii). However, the definition of universal value is inherently subjective and often Eurocentric. The politics of inscription lies in how a State Party (in this case, India) frames its local history to align with these globalized criteria. By articulating Ajanta’s Buddhist murals and rock-cut architecture as globally significant, the Indian state successfully converted a regional cultural asset into a universal treasure, thereby elevating its own cultural status on the world stage.

The Role of the World Heritage Committee

The World Heritage Committee, consisting of representatives from 21 State Parties, acts as the executive body of the Convention. It is here that the politics of recognition is most visible. Decisions regarding inscriptions, deletions, or placing sites on the List of World Heritage in Danger are often influenced by geopolitical alliances and logrolling (the exchange of political favors). Membership in the Committee provides states with significant leverage to promote their national heritage and influence global preservation standards. For India, engaging with this committee is a strategic act of cultural diplomacy, ensuring that its civilizational narrative is recognized and protected by the international community.

State Party Obligations and International Monitoring

UNESCO recognition is not a one-time award but a permanent contractual relationship between the state and the international community. Once a site is listed, the State Party (India) assumes rigorous obligations to protect, conserve, and present the site. This introduces international monitoring into domestic affairs. UNESCO’s Reactive Monitoring missions and Periodic Reporting requirements mean that the management of the Ajanta Caves by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) is subject to global scrutiny. This can lead to political friction, particularly when international conservation standards clash with national development goals, such as infrastructure projects or mass tourism initiatives in the Aurangabad region.

Soft Power and International Prestige

Finally, the UNESCO framework is a primary vehicle for Soft Power. In the 21st century, a nation’s power is measured not just by military or economic might, but by its attractiveness and cultural influence. The ‘UNESCO World Heritage’ label is a global brand of excellence. For India, the Ajanta Caves serve as a diplomatic asset, particularly in fostering Buddhist Diplomacy with East and Southeast Asian nations. Recognition brings international prestige, high-value tourism, and a sense of moral authority. In this sense, the UNESCO framework is less about the past and

more about the present using ancient heritage to secure a prominent position in the contemporary global hierarchy.

2. The Indian State and Heritage Politics: Governance, Federalism, and Identity

In the Indian context, heritage is not merely a collection of ancient monuments but a cornerstone of the post-colonial state's identity and a vital instrument of modern governance. The management and projection of sites like the Ajanta Caves involve a complex interplay between bureaucratic institutions, federal power structures, and the overarching project of nation-building. The politics of heritage in India is characterized by the state's efforts to balance scientific preservation with the demands of cultural nationalism and economic development.

The Role of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI)

The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), an attached office of the Ministry of Culture, serves as the primary custodian of India's monumental heritage. Operating under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains (AMASR) Act, the ASI functions as a technocratic and regulatory body. However, its role is inherently political. The ASI decides which sites are protected and which narratives are highlighted through signage, guidebooks, and museum curation. At Ajanta, the ASI's management reflects a colonial-legacy conservation philosophy that prioritizes physical fabric over living traditions. The tension often arises when the ASI's strict conservation mandates necessary for maintaining UNESCO status clash with political pressures to modernize facilities or increase visitor capacity for populist or economic reasons.

Central vs. State Government Power in Heritage Governance

Heritage governance in India is a site of federal friction. While the Ajanta Caves are designated as a Monument of National Importance under the exclusive jurisdiction of the Central Government (ASI), the surrounding infrastructure, land use, and tourism services fall under the jurisdiction of the State Government of Maharashtra (through agencies like the MTDC). This dual-layered governance often leads to coordination challenges. For instance, the Ajanta-Ellora Development Plan, largely funded by international agencies like the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC), required seamless cooperation between central conservationists and state-level developers. The politics here involves a struggle over revenue sharing, administrative credit, and the control of the heritage zone, where central environmental regulations often limit the state government's developmental ambitions.

Tourism Policy and National Image-Building

The Indian state views heritage as a strategic economic asset. Through global campaigns like Incredible India, heritage sites are packaged as products to attract foreign exchange and investment. The recognition of Ajanta by UNESCO is a critical component of this branding. Tourism policy is thus a form of national image-building, where the state selects iconic sites to project a vision of India as a stable, culturally rich, and civilizational power. This commodification of heritage, however, risks prioritizing the tourist gaze over historical accuracy or local community needs, turning sacred spaces into commercial spectacles.

Heritage for Nation-Building and Cultural Nationalism

Perhaps most significantly, heritage is a tool for cultural nationalism. The state utilizes sites like Ajanta to construct a cohesive national narrative. By highlighting the Buddhist murals of

Ajanta, the state projects an image of an ancient, pluralistic, and aesthetically sophisticated Golden Age. This serves both internal and external political goals: internally, it fosters a sense of shared national pride; externally, it supports Buddhist Diplomacy, positioning India as the spiritual heart of Asia. Consequently, the politics of heritage in India is a process of curation where the state selects parts of the past to legitimize its present identity and future aspirations as a civilizational state.

3. Political Economy of Heritage Recognition: Capital, Infrastructure, and the UNESCO Brand

The recognition of a site by UNESCO is often framed as a triumph of cultural preservation, but in the realm of *realpolitik*, it serves as a powerful economic catalyst. The political economy of heritage refers to the processes by which cultural assets are converted into economic capital, driving tourism, regional development, and global investment. For the Ajanta Caves, the UNESCO World Heritage tag is not merely a badge of honor; it is a branding tool that integrates the site into the global neoliberal economy, creating a complex web of financial interests and developmental pressures.

The UNESCO Effect: Tourism Development and Revenue

The inscription on the World Heritage List triggers what economists call the UNESCO Effect: an immediate spike in visibility that places a site on the global tourism map. For Ajanta, this tag acts as a quality assurance marker for high-value international tourists. This leads to a significant increase in foreign exchange earnings and gate revenue for the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). However, this creates a political tension: the state becomes reliant on these revenues to justify the high costs of conservation. Consequently, management policies often shift toward maximizing visitor throughput, which can threaten the fragile microclimate of the caves and their ancient murals. The politics here lies in the prioritization of the heritage industry over the intrinsic value of the site.

Infrastructure Development and Global Investment

Heritage recognition facilitates large-scale infrastructure projects that would otherwise be difficult to fund. The Ajanta-Ellora Conservation and Tourism Development Project is a landmark case, largely funded by the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC). This international investment led to the modernization of the Aurangabad airport, the construction of world-class highways, and the development of the Ajanta Visitor Centre. These projects demonstrate how heritage recognition allows the state to attract Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and integrate remote regions into the national and global economy. However, this development is often enclave-based, focusing on the tourist's experience while potentially bypassing the broader developmental needs of the local population.

Public–Private Partnerships (PPP) in Heritage Management

In recent years, the Indian state has increasingly moved toward Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) to manage heritage sites, such as the Adopt a Heritage scheme. While Ajanta remains primarily under the ASI, the management of peripheral services transportation, hospitality, and interpretation is often outsourced. This shift represents a neoliberal turn in heritage politics, where private corporations gain influence over public assets. Proponents argue that PPPs bring efficiency

and better funding, while critics fear the Disneyfication of heritage, where the commercial logic of profit-making overrides the historical and spiritual integrity of the caves.

Local Economy, Employment, and the Paradox of Commercialization

On a micro-level, the UNESCO tag fuels a vast informal and formal economy. From licensed guides and hotel staff to local artisans selling traditional crafts, thousands of livelihoods depend on the brand of Ajanta. However, the commercialization of heritage is a double-edged sword. While it creates employment, it often leads to the commodification of culture, where local traditions are packaged for tourist consumption. Furthermore, there is often a leakage of revenue, where the majority of profits flow to large travel agencies and luxury hotel chains located in urban centers, leaving the local rural communities near the caves with minimal long-term socio-economic gains. In this political-economic framework, the Ajanta Caves become a contested site where global capital, state interests, and local survival strategies collide.

4. Power, Identity, and Cultural Representation: The Contested Narrative of Heritage

Heritage is never a neutral reflection of the past; it is a selective process of remembering that is inherently tied to modern power dynamics. The politics of representation at heritage sites involves a struggle over whose history is told, which values are celebrated, and which voices are marginalized. In the case of the Ajanta Caves, the site is not just an archaeological wonder but a canvas upon which the Indian state, religious groups, and regional movements project competing visions of identity and belonging.

Whose History is Represented? The Authorized Heritage Discourse

The selection of the Ajanta Caves for UNESCO recognition was driven by what scholar Laurajane Smith calls the Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD). This discourse prioritizes the grand, the aesthetic, and the monumental values often defined by state elites and international experts. In this framework, Ajanta is represented primarily as a masterpiece of Classical Indian Art from the Vakataka and Gupta periods. This narrative focuses on a Golden Age of Indian history, emphasizing high culture and imperial patronage. While historically accurate, this focus often overshadows the daily lives of the monks, the local labor that carved the caves, and the centuries of neglect or local preservation that occurred before discovery by the British. The state chooses to represent a version of history that bolishes its image as a sophisticated civilizational power.

Dominant vs. Marginalized Narratives in Heritage Politics

A critical tension in the politics of representation at Ajanta is the gap between museumized heritage and living heritage. The official UNESCO/ASI narrative treats Ajanta as a static monument of the past a relic of a vanished Buddhist era. However, for many contemporary Indians, particularly the Navayana (Neo-Buddhist) community in Maharashtra, these sites are living symbols of identity and resistance. Following Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism in 1956, ancient Buddhist sites have become focal points for Dalit identity and empowerment. Yet, this contemporary socio-political significance is often excluded from official heritage management and tourist brochures, which prefer to keep the site secular and aestheticized. The marginalization of these modern religious and political meanings reveals how heritage curation can be used to sanitize history and suppress contemporary political claims.

Heritage as a Tool of Cultural Identity Construction

The Indian state utilizes Ajanta to construct a pluralistic national identity. By promoting a Buddhist site as a primary national symbol, the state projects an image of Unity in Diversity and religious tolerance. This is particularly important in international diplomacy, where Ajanta serves as a counter-narrative to modern sectarian conflicts. However, this construction is also a form of cultural appropriation where a specific religious history is absorbed into a broader nationalistic framework, sometimes stripping the site of its specific theological or sectarian nuances to serve the needs of the nation-state.

The Role of Religion, Caste, and Regional Politics

Finally, heritage politics at Ajanta is deeply influenced by the regional politics of Maharashtra. The site is a source of regional pride for the Marathwada region, and local political actors often use the site to demand more infrastructure and autonomy from the central government. Furthermore, because Buddhism in modern India is inextricably linked to caste politics (via the Ambedkarite movement), the management of the site becomes a sensitive political issue. Any changes in how the history of Ajanta is told or who is allowed to worship or congregate there can trigger debates over caste representation and historical ownership. In this sense, the Ajanta Caves are a microcosm of the broader struggle in India to define the relationship between ancient heritage, religious identity, and modern social justice.

Conclusion :

The study of the Ajanta Caves demonstrates that UNESCO World Heritage recognition is a complex political phenomenon rather than a mere act of cultural preservation. This research has illustrated that the designation of Outstanding Universal Value serves as a strategic instrument for the Indian state to project soft power and bolster its civilizational narrative within the global order. However, this international validation introduces a paradox of governance, where the state must constantly negotiate the friction between rigid conservation mandates and the neoliberal imperatives of tourism-driven economic development.

The case of Ajanta further reveals the inherent tensions between top-down, technocratic management and the socio-political realities of marginalized communities. By prioritizing a museumized version of history to suit the international tourist gaze, current heritage policies often sideline grassroots interests and the living religious significance of the site for the local population. Ultimately, the politics of heritage at Ajanta underscores that sites of the past are active battlefields of the present. Moving forward, a more equitable heritage policy is required one that moves beyond aesthetic preservation toward an inclusive model that integrates community agency, socio-economic justice, and sustainable development into the core of global heritage governance.

Bibliography:

1. Guha-Thakurta, T. (2004), 'Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India', Oxford University Press (India)
2. Ray, H. P., (2014), 'The Return of the Buddha: Ancient Symbols for a New Nation', Routledge India.
3. Lahiri, N., (2012), 'Marshalling the Past: Ancient India and its Modern Histories', Permanent Black.
4. Dehejia, V., (1997), 'Discourse in Early Buddhist Art: Visual Narratives of India', Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers.
5. Sengupta, G., & Panja, S. (Eds.), (2012), 'Archaeology and Community: A Dynamic Relationship', Kaveri Books.