

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Heritagization of Religious Festivals and (Re) Invention of Jainist Cultural Heritage in Contemporary India

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## Abstract

This paper examines the heritagization of religious festivals and the (re)invention of Jainist heritage in contemporary India. The paper provides insight into how Jainist religious practices are being adapted to fit modern contexts while retaining their traditional essence through an analysis of the dynamics of cultural preservation, transformation, and commercialization. These case studies are complemented with extensive ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with community leaders and practitioners. The investigation shows the complexities and contradictions involved in the process of heritagization, with the phenomenon reflecting the interplay between local traditions, national identity, and global influence.

**Keywords:** Heritagization, Jainism, Religious Festivals, Cultural Preservation, Modern India, Tradition, Globalization.

## 1. Introduction

Tangible and intangible heritage contributes significantly to the formation of collective identities and to the cohesion of societies. The festive medium is a very important arena in which cultural values are expressed and transmitted through religious traditions. The object of heritagization is the perception and preservation of certain cultural practices, and, in some cases, their restaging as heritage. The process of heritagization has very important consequences for religious festivals as aspects of contemporary social life. This paper discusses the heritagization of Jainist religious festivals in modern India by looking closer at how these celebrations are being modified and redefined in response to changing social, economic, and political contexts.

## 2. Heritagization

Heritagization is the making and transformation of cultural practice, including festivals, into recognized “Heritage” with a socially situated value within both the community and the general public. For Jainism

in contemporary India, this can be understood as the reinvention and preservation of Jain religious festivals and sites, quite often for the purpose of preserving cultural identity while also meeting modern sensibilities.

## 3. Methodology

This research study is mixed-methods in its approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis. The major methods employed are ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews with people from Jain communities, religious leaders, and heritage professionals involved in the industry. Archival research and content analysis of media discourses on Jain festivals provide historical and contemporary insights into the process of heritagization.

## 4. Background and Literature Review

Heritagization—the process through which cultural practices, sites, or artifacts are turned into heritage by acquiring historical importance and value—is concerned with the process of how cultural practices,

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artifacts, and sites are identified, valorized, and preserved as heritage. This usually happens through the negotiation of meaning and value of the most involved parties: community members, heritage professionals, and policymakers. In fact, scholars have argued that heritagization is dynamic and contested, power for one but powerlessness for another.

**Jainism and Its Heritage** -Jainism is one of the oldest religions in India. This treasure is comprised of mass scriptural texts, philosophical and spiritual thought through art and architecture. Among these Jain festivals, *Paryushana Mahaparva* and *Mahavir Jayanti* are important for religious deliberation and communal celebrations. Not only are these festivals a way of strengthening this religiously acknowledged identity but also carry scope for artistic and social expression.

Heritagization is indeed the process through which cultural practices and religious festivals and monuments acquire a symbolic sense in heritage and are related to national identity as well as tourism (Smith, 2006). In the case of modern India and Jainism, heritagization has, thus, formed an important plank in saving religious practices but making them subservient to larger cultural and economic discourses. This process, which integrates religious festivals and sacred sites, often becomes a tool for (re)inventing heritage for contexts of modern times (Mishra, 2019).

#### 4.1 Heritagization of Jain Cultural Festivals

Religious festivals in Jainism, such as *Mahavir Jayanti* aka *Janm Kalyanak*, *Paryushana Mahaparva*, *Raksha Bandhan*, and *Diwali*, have long been part of Jain religious practices. However, with the passage of time in modern India, the participation of these religious festivals is increasingly viewed in a different light. *Mahavir Jayanti* has spread beyond its importance in the religious domain, which has now included public celebrations, cultural performances, and charity acts involving the larger Indian populace (Babb, 2017). This trend in general speaks to a larger phenomenon wherein religious festivals are commodified and commercialized, the spiritual blended with the public domain, turning them into cultural heritage that non-Jains can equally enjoy (Sharma, 2020).

For instance, *Paryushana Mahaparva*, a key period of fasting and self-reflection, has gained attention for its ethical and spiritual messages, particularly its emphasis on Ahimsa (non-violence) and environmental consciousness, which resonate with global movements towards sustainability (Jain, 2018). The festival's heritagization has also influenced the

tourism sector, drawing both religious pilgrims and cultural enthusiasts, thus further embedding it in the national consciousness (Mehta, 2018).

#### 4.2 (Re) Invention Jain Cultural Heritage

This reinvention of Jain heritage can be traced in the restoration and conservation work concerning ancient Jain temples and pilgrimage sites. Historic temples such as the *Dilwara* Temples in Rajasthan and the *Palitana* Temples in Gujarat have been under massive restoration work that comes with private and government finances, thereby framing these religious structures as a suitable part of India's architectural and cultural heritage (Desai, 2016). The recognition of such temples by bodies like UNESCO has contributed to a change in their make-up from purely religious sites to global heritage icons (Kumar, 2019).

Another significant development is the reinvention of Jain pilgrimage traditions. The *Sammed Shikharji* pilgrimage in Jharkhand, which has long been a central site for Jain religious practices, is now being promoted as a cultural and spiritual heritage destination (Shah, 2020). This has led to the modernization of facilities and infrastructure surrounding the site, attracting not only religious devotees but also tourists and history enthusiasts. As such, the sacred line of pilgrimage and heritage tourism blends at this point (Babb, 2017).

#### 4.3 Religious Tourism and the Economy

The heritagization of Jain religious festivals and sites has also promoted the growth of religious tourism in India, converting sites of spiritual significance into local economies for the community. Jain heritage destinations like *Shravanabelagola*, famous for its colossal statue of Lord *Bahubali*, have become focal points for domestic and international tourism, significantly contributing to local economies (Mehta, 2018). Such sites are being commercially promoted not only because of their religious importance but also because of the historical, architectural, and cultural values, merging pilgrimage for spiritual reasons with economic development (Sharma, 2020).

#### 4.4 Globalization and Digitalization of Jain Cultural Heritage

Globalization also brought with it modern means of preserving and transmitting Jain heritage. Ancient Jain manuscripts have been digitized, accompanied by the development of digital online archives, which have enabled Jain teachings and heritage to be disseminated across the globe (Shah, 2020). Initiatives like the Jain e-Library provide access to rare manuscripts, texts, and academic resources, allowing the community

to preserve and promote its religious heritage in the digital age (Jain, 2018). This reflects a broader trend of using technology for heritage conservation, aligning with global efforts to modernize heritage practices while ensuring accessibility (Desai, 2016).

#### 4.5 The Relevance of the (Re)Invention of Jainist Cultural Heritage

The perusal of modern India lies in its role as a medium for reinforcing identity, preserving religious traditions, and contributing to socio-economic development through tourism. Jainist heritage sites, temples, and festivals have been instrumental in maintaining the religious and cultural practices of the Jain community while also offering educational and tourism opportunities. As a small religious group, the Jain community has effectively used the process of “heritagization” to protect their cultural expressions in an ever-increasingly modern society. At the same time, the process not only protects the architectural and spiritual significance of Jainist sites but also folds them into the broader history of India’s varied cultural heritage. This reformation helps the local economies through religious tourism; it also means that the historical places will be preserved and services linked with them developed.

As observed by researchers, heritagization of religious events and holy places turns into a means of preservation of culture, which fosters a sense of belonging and historical continuity (Verma, 2023). This corresponds to the global general patterns in terms of cultural heritage being used for socio-economic development, which is centred on adaptive reuse and smart management of religious and cultural space.

### 5. Case Studies

#### 5.1 Paryushana Mahaparva

Fasting and Forgiveness in a Modern Context - *Paryushana*, celebrated as an eight-day festival by the *Shvetambara* sect and ten-day festival by the *Digambara* sect of Jainism, implies fasting, meditation, and self-control practices and represents one of the most important events in the Jain calendar. Within the *Digambara* tradition, the ten *dharma*s or virtues of the soul—*Uttam Kshama* (forgiveness), *Uttam Mardav* (compassion), *Uttam Arjav* (simplicity), *Uttam Sauch* (purity), *Uttam Satya* (truth), *Uttam Sanyam* (renunciation), *Uttam Tapa* (austerity), *Uttam Tyag* (abstention), *Uttam Akinchanya* (non-attachment), culminating with *Uttam Brahmacharya* (supreme celibacy)—are scrupulously followed.

Traditionally, this festival celebrates austerity and spiritual purification. Nevertheless, in contemporary contexts, *Paryushana Mahaparva* has increasingly been reframed as a cultural heritage event, drawing not only devout practitioners but also considerable tourist and media interest. This section critically analyzes how *Paryushana Mahaparva* is being reinterpreted and commodified, thereby emphasizing the inherent tensions between religious authenticity and cultural tourism.

#### 5.2 Mahavir Jayanti

Celebration of the Birth of a *Tirthankara-Mahavir Jayanti* is also known as *Janm Kalyanak* in Jainism. This day is considered to be the day of the birthday of Lord Mahavira who was the 24th *Tirthankara* in Jainism. The function is traditionally associated with processions, religious discourses, and community service activities. As time passed on, public displays became more elaborate and involvement of people other than Jain community is increased. This case study explores the role of media and technology in changing modern celebrations and the further implications for Jain identity and the preservation of heritage.

#### 5.3 Diwali

*Diwali*, also known as *Deepawali*, is the celebration of *Tirthankar Mahavira’s* attainment of *moksha* or liberation in *Pavapuri* according to Jain Dharma. Throughout the three-day celebration—on the fourteenth day (*Choti Diwali*), the *Amavasya* day (*Diwali*), and the subsequent day—devotees immerse themselves in a variety of spiritual activities. These beliefs are practiced through meditation, fasting, and the recitation of some hymns. Fasting and meditation are both observed on all three days; however, on the main *Diwali* day, it is common for devotees to hear the *Uttaradhyana Sutra*, which is the collection of Lord *Mahavir’s* final *preachings*.

Note that though *Diwali* forms one of the significant festivals within Hinduism, thus combining Jain roots with Hindu customs, the Hindu celebration focuses on material prosperity, whereas in Jainism the essence of *Diwali* is exclusively spiritual.

### 6. Challenges and Tensions

There seems to be no downside to heritage-processes, despite the danger that these ones concern a commoditization of religious life. According to some Jain scholars, the commercialization of religious festivals and converting religious sites into heritage tourism products debases them by stripping away



their spiritual aspect (Mishra 2019). After all, the separation of secular heritage from sacred tradition is often blurred. This holds the potential of creating tensions between maintaining unadulterated religious practices and tapping into a more mainstream, often commercial audience, such as when Jain sites, festivals etc. are marketed for tourism by state and private agents (Kumar 2019).

## 7. Future Recommendations

Based on research findings of this research we recommend that individuals such as researchers and preservationists make several recommendations to further enhance the understanding and preservation of Jainist heritage in contemporary India. In the first place, it is important to win the backing of policymakers and heritage agencies for mutually allied community-driven initiatives where they make religious festivals as part of their heritagization efforts. Local contributor guide can help preserve this tradition in heritage conservation efforts to keep it alive and well. Furthermore, modern technological tools such as those of digital archives and virtual reality experiences could also offer new avenues through which Jainist heritage can be customs designed and presented to a global audience thus maintaining its originality.

The other pathway is to foster more interdisciplinary research on where Jainist heritage rests within larger constructs of cultural identity and socio-economic development. This might include interdisciplinary studies of historians, cultural anthropologists and sociologists to understand how our religious heritage affects and is affected by current social processes.

This way we can create a space that would be able to put traditional heritage practitioners and modern cultural theorists together in discussion, thus informing each other of the road they have left behind only to reach this very point. Through workshops, conferences, and public discussions these forums can bring to the fore a more nuanced understanding of how traditional practices are being adapted in response to contemporary challenges. This may also help in scaling such initiatives

## 8. Conclusion

The heritagization of Jainist religious festivals in modern India exemplifies the broader trends of cultural preservation and transformation. While it revitalizes and promotes Jain heritage, it also raises challenges related to authenticity, commoditization, and community involvement. By navigating

these dynamics, Jain festivals and heritage sites demonstrate the adaptive nature of religious traditions in contemporary contexts, ensuring their relevance in a changing world. This process, marked by a dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity, highlights the balance between preserving spiritual significance and engaging with global forces like tourism and conservation.

## Conflict of Interest Statement

We, the authors, confirm that there is no conflict of interest in relation to the publication of this research paper. Our work has been carried out with complete honesty and integrity, without any external influences be they financial, personal, or professional affecting the research or its conclusions.

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