

Deconstituted Heritage: The (Un)making of a ‘Buddhist’ Heritage Site in Central India

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ABSTRACT

The ultimate aim of heritage conservation one could assert is not to conserve cultural materials for its own sake but, rather, to maintain (and shape) the values embodied by them — with physical intervention or treatment being one of many means toward that end. To achieve that end, so that the heritage is meaningful to those whom it intends to benefit, it is necessary to examine why and how heritage is valued, and by whom. The creation of cultural heritage is consequently largely derived from the way people remember, organize, think about, and wish to use the past, with a wide acknowledgment that culture is not a static but fluid, changeable, and evolving set of processes and values. The values of individuals and communities shape all conservation. Thus, these values, as represented in the object or place, are not simply ‘preserved’ but are rather, deconstituted through the conservation effort; thereby reconstituting the meaning of the object or place.

This paper, while acknowledging the importance of studying the relationship between movement, memory and meaning in archaeological context to the understanding of cultural antecedents and values, works on the premise that the trails, paths and roads are physical manifestation of the movement of people through the landscape. This is instrumental/central to an understanding of sites – and consequently cultural heritage. Looking at the spatial organization of monuments at the site of Saru Maru Buddhist Stupa and Monastic Complex, this paper makes the case for a conservation practice that embraces the centrality of paths, trails, and roads as an organizing element of human lives throughout history, which, while accounting for the inherent fluidity of these features, should not lose sight of the immutable cross-generational responsibility of memory and remembrance that it entails.

Keywords: Heritage, Conservation, Saru maru, Early Buddhism, Stupa, memory