



**Public perception: Built heritage conservation in Chettinad region,
Tamil Nadu**

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Abstract

Heritage building conservation in India is still in its infancy. India has initiated the effort of conserving heritage a few decades ago. But in the last decade the efforts on conservation of the built heritage is tremendous. Over the years the ever increasing developmental pressures and neglect of the heritage areas and their environs resulted in the call for evolving harmonious strategies and conservation measures. Fortuitously, increasing awareness about heritages in the recent decades has been leading various organisations to identify heritages as well as to delineate heritage zones based on a set of defined criterion. However, whether those building are worthy of conservation is always a question asked by many. Are the people in chettinadu are aware on withstanding of those buildings at present and is it important to them? This paper aims to review the people's perception on heritage building conservation besides identifying their physical connectivity of the buildings with their past.

Key words: Chettinad, built heritage, conservation, public perception.

1. Introduction

The rich built heritage of Chettinadu region built by Nagarathar, has seen millennia of subsequent historical imprints on its urban fabric has been suffering massively from an aggressive wave of neglect, damage and demolition. The physical palimpsest which has given Chettinadu region its unique character and identity is being lost due to an absence of political will to effectively protect and conserve the regions heritage. For many years now and due to many pressure the region of Chettinadu has been constantly losing its built heritage.

Heritage building conservation in Tamilnadu, India is still at its infancy. However the effort to preserve and conserve has started a few decades ago, but only within the last decade the efforts have seen tremendous achievement.

The listing of Chettinadu Mansions as UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008 has put Chettinadu in the heritage tourism map. The UNESCO classification comprises of 3 series of villages forming clusters which contribute to the OUV (Outstanding Universal Value) as a

whole with urban character forming a unique architectural ensemble [8] . This set reflects a significant portion of the Chettinad territory.

It is believed that the government has played its vital roles to ensure the legislations, in its place and enforcement is being carried out thoroughly by its agents. But how serious are we taking this effort to a greater height, which may involve the public at large? Are they aware about the importance of conserving the Built heritage? And how does this implicate them directly or indirectly?

2.Literature Review

Many literature supports the need for public involvement in the heritage conservation processes. An effective participation will provide the possibility for achieving long-term sustainability. It also helps to build up the community's commitment and continuing involvement in the program and thus promote the concept of sharing responsibility. Public participation in the context of heritage conservation is important because it can provide valuable input and share one's knowledge, assist in coming out with a solution and decision, and broaden the understanding of the value of heritage (English Heritage, 2008 and Hoi An Protocol, 2005).

Most contemporary societies are very keen on the preservation and conservation of their heritage (Grefe, 2004), as heritage satisfies a variety of needs – artistic, earning profits through tourism, aesthetics, recreation, creating positive image of the area, and improving the living standards. Built Heritage conservation is no exception, essentially comprises the physical evidence of our environment that symbolizes the tangible cultural identity and heritage of the nation.

The public awareness of conserving the Built heritage is largely based on the changes of social and economic environment. Two main issues concerning the public in the conservation of the built heritage are the creating of new jobs and the need to maintain the character of the region for the future generations.

Godwin (2011) in his paper Building Conservation and Sustainability in the United Kingdom, is discussing even beyond the key issue of conservation. The people in the United Kingdom have already embraced the heritage building preservation and conservation efforts wholeheartedly as they are seen as the embodiment of the story of the nation and worth safeguarding for their own sake, regardless of economic value.

However in the end, Grefe (2006) also stressed that it will be what the values the community and the nation puts upon the heritage of the country that will determine the future of building conservation efforts.

In the UK, the past is still treasured, as is the story of the people who made and lived and worked in heritage buildings. This is seen as a concerted effort of the community and public as a whole, not solely shouldered by a handful of conservation personnel, Godwin, P. J. (2011)

Harun (2011) also warned in her paper 'Heritage Building Conservation in Malaysia: Experience and Challenges' that the heritage building conservation efforts require knowledge and understanding of the resources and the history they represent. For further development in this field and the benefit for the nation, she suggested more efforts should be encouraged to involve public in the scene – in terms of promotion, education, awareness and even direct participation.

Yung and Chan (2011) also stated that among major issues in public participation in built heritage conservation is due to various and clash of interest of various stakeholders, minimal understanding and different inclination or motivation towards what's valuable of conservation.

Public participation in the decision-making process of valuing heritage value or heritage significance is rather minimal, limited to the early stage of identifying the history and background of the site. A previous study [1] has revealed that almost half of the respondents gave a neutral or undecided response when asked about the current state or condition of heritage building conservation in Kuala Lumpur. The result was quite worrying as it seems that the awareness is quite minimal.

In the end, it is vital to understand that heritage building conservation is a finite resource and that in their existence there is not only embodied energy, but also the spirit of the people and identity of the country.

3.Methodology

In this paper, mixed-methods comprising of face to face & semi-structured interviews were used with an aid of photographed-supported interviews and structured questionnaire. This method is considered to be the best method of collecting the data required for this research from a random group of public around the Chettinadu region, both user and non-user of heritage buildings. This method has an advantage as it may define different opinions and responds from the public of the historic buildings at their own pace and ideas. Understanding the built heritage conservation from an elitist practice into a public matter discussing socio economic, cultural, aesthetic, architectural and functional issues is its main target.

3.1 Questionnaire Design

A semi-structured questionnaire was used in surveying the public to gather the primary data. It contains of seven sections with series of both open and closed-ended questions. This paper however will discuss only on 3 different sections of the questionnaire specifically to fulfil the objective of the paper.

The first section is to measure respondent's attitude **on the importance of valuing the Built heritage conservation** in Chettinad region. They were to rate their level of importance from a given numerical scale ranging from 'Not Important' to 'Very Important'. Five reasons were given based on 20 interviews had earlier during the pre-test.

The second section was when respondents were firstly briefed on **the current conservation of heritage buildings in Chettinad region**, and later asked on their opinion of the current

state. Answers ranging from 'Very Bad' to 'Excellent' were presented so as to know their level of awareness on the matter. As to evaluate the visits made by respondents to any heritage buildings.

The third section deals with **questions on their visits** and purpose of their visit. This section will indicate whether heritage buildings are regularly visited or not, and why they are visited by the public and also their interest in joining the conservation effort is also been discussed.

3.2 Questionnaire Distribution

The interviews were held randomly within the study area of Chettinad region in spaces like temples, heritage hotels, public market and clan temple gatherings. Questionnaires were distributed randomly by 'Convenience Survey'. Before questions were asked, the respondents were briefed on the objectives and the purpose of the survey. A questionnaire was administered in a single interview with every respondent. Due to financial, manpower and time constraints, the subjects for this study included only 250 individuals. They were selected based on non-probability convenience sampling in order to get a broad perspective of population.

The interviews began with two pre-test survey held earlier in the field. A pre-test is a small-scale survey whereby most of the steps were followed during the big survey. The pre-test is an opportunity to make sure everything works the way it is intended, get an idea about the potential response rate, and identifying any potential disasters. The pre-test was done twice, according to the survey budget and time consume.

3.3 Respondents

The research outcome describes in this paper is based on a survey data collected in-situ from two hundred and fifty randomly selected respondents from the selected villages for study namely Kadiapatti, Kanadukathan and Chokkalingapudur.

3.4 Demographic characteristics of respondents

A total of 250 respondents participated in the survey; minimum of 75 respondents at each study site. The respondents' age ranged below 25 years old (24%), 25 – 39 years old (21%), 40 – 59 years old (36%) and 60 years above (19%). In terms of gender, 54% were female; while another 46% were male. A majority of respondents were native of Chettinadu, with just 23% are non- Chettinadu residents.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Public's perception on Importance of Heritage Building Conservation in Chettinadu

The people in Chettinad were experts in banking and have been pioneers in the modern banking sector in India which gives us the broad picture of their level of understanding and sensitiveness. It is necessary to distinguish public's perception on heritage building

conservation in Chettinadu region before they were later enquired on the importance to conserve them. It is an essential pace to verify on the public's basic knowledge on conservation substance and whether they have any interest on the matter. It is a necessary measure as the public themselves will mostly be the initiator for the success of built heritage conservation efforts later. Public's opinion on how important it is to protect the heritage buildings in Chettinad is discussed in the first section of the survey.

Public's perception on the importance of heritage building conservation in Chettinadu was measured using a **five point Likert scale** in the first section of the survey. The answers are ranged from "Not Important" to 'Very Important', whereas the unsure respondents could select the option "Neutral". Table 1 shows the level of importance in the conservation of heritage building among the public.

During the pre-test survey, various reasons have been received from the public when asked on this particular question, but only five reasons are listed then for the final questionnaire as indicated in above table. It is surprisingly to know that most respondents have positive agreement on the importance of conserving heritage buildings in Chettinadu where most of them have responded 'Important' and 'Very Important'. It is a positive remark to be considered as this result may point to a high level of awareness from the public on saving the built heritage in Chettinadu. While 52% of the respondents believe that heritage buildings in Chettinadu region is important to protect the scenic beauty of the swarming city of Chettinadu region.

Table 1. Level of importance in the conservation of heritage building among the public.

Criteria	Not Important	Slightly Important	Neutral	Important	Very Important
How important it is to protect the scenic beauty of chettinadu region?	2%	6%	10%	30%	52%
Do you think it is necessary to document the architectural techniques in the built heritage of chettinadu region?	4%	8%	32%	37%	19%
To what extent chettinadu region has a tourism potential and attraction	2%	6%	10%	34%	48%
To what extent do you think the built heritage will serve as a living evidence for future generation?	4%	10%	29%	31%	26%

Source: Author

In fact, they too believed that heritage buildings are the living evidence to document all the past architectural details and techniques in the conservation of the built heritage of Chettinadu region for the benefit of the future generation. A considerable percentage of the

respondents where answered 'Neutral' to the question about documenting the heritage buildings. There are two possibilities whether the respondents are unsure about the actual need of documenting the heritage buildings, or they might just think that averagely. As to compare the 'Neutral' respondent's characteristics with the whole sample, the 'Neutral' respondents do not stand out to any significant degree, whereas a considerable number of respondents reply it as a necessary task towards the conservation program with almost 56% stating very important to important.

Chettinadu is a region with varieties of both tangible and intangible heritage. Not surprisingly, international tourists do visit Chettinadu for its priceless architectural significance especially for its mix of architectural styles: Art Deco, colonial and south Indian buildings throughout the main villages in Chettinadu region. The Indian government has expressed interest in further development of the area for tourism, but there is no overall plan in place to regulate the conservation or adaptive reuse of these unusual and important buildings. An Indian heritage passport programme on the Chettinad trail in Tamil Nadu a concept paper by UNESCO, New Delhi is done for The Government of Tamil Nadu, Department of Tourism & Culture highlighting the Opportunity for Heritage-Based Development [9]. This proposal is taken foreword by the private stakeholders approaching individual owners in developing heritage hotels, but the situation of the dilapidated houses are not conserved. Hence the strategies evolved should address the requirement of the people in the old palatial mansions of chettinadu.

First and foremost, heritage buildings are said to be important as tourism landmark and attraction in the city of Chettinadu with 48% respondents chose 'High Potential' for the tourism development in the region.

Gradually, more concrete developments are replacing the old buildings which are slowly dilapidating if no further actions are taken. According to 31% of respondents, heritage buildings are important living evidences for the future generation. It is a positive start to the research, with the knowledge that respondents are all very encouraging in conserving the built heritage of precious throughout the Chettinadu region.

4.2 Respondents attitude about the importance of evaluating the significant Values in the Built Heritage of Chettinadu

For many Chettiar families, the ancestral home remains a potent symbol of their identity and wealth. This study shows that for both heritage buildings, what the public perceived is similar to the values that the government has categorized before. As seen from the five highest ranked, public believed that it has four important values to be culturally significance, namely the aesthetic value (in terms of form, materials, details and colour), cultural value (become the focus of cultural sentiment), architectural value (planning aspects, styles, construction techniques) and also historical value (association to an important event). These heritage buildings are seen as unique and signify cultural diversity and influences.

Every heritage building has its values or cultural heritage significance, and its values are being perceived differently by various stakeholders. It is important to make sure that the public understands the significance of heritage sites and how it could affect any decision relating to the assets in the future. It is also important to have public support in heritage conservation matters. Many conservation guidelines, acts and charters have included the importance of community participation as part of the process of identifying the values and also management of heritage areas [3 Getty Conservation].

The feedback from questionnaires was based on the respondents' perception of four types of heritage values, namely aesthetic, historical, cultural and architectural. Table 2 shows their agreement with Likert Scale ranging from 1 to 5 from descending order: 5 represents - Strongly Agree; 4- Agree; 3- Neither Agree or Disagree; 2-Disagree; and 1- Strongly Disagree. The data collected then were studied and analyzed using Frequency Analysis and Average Index.

Table 2. Levels of agreement of respondents towards the values in the built heritage.

Type of Values	Frequency					Average index	Level of Agreeeness
	SA 5	A 4	NA / D 3	D 2	SD 1		
<i>Historical</i>	25	95	90	35	5	3.4	<i>Neither Agree or Disagree</i>
<i>Cultural</i>	55	150	35	5	5	3.98	<i>Agree</i>
<i>Aesthetical</i>	40	85	60	50	15	3.34	<i>Neither Agree or Disagree</i>
<i>Architectural</i>	45	150	45	10	0	3.92	<i>Agree</i>

Source: Author

SA – Strongly Agree, A- Agree, NA / D – Neither Agree or Disagree, D – Disagree, SD – Strongly Disagree

In terms of respondent's attitude about the importance of evaluating the significance Values of heritage buildings, the result comes out positively with the majority of them strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that cultural and architectural values are the

4.3. Public insight on the current threats in the Built Heritage of Chettinadu Region

In the second section of the survey, they were then questioned on their knowledge of the current condition and threats in the built heritage of Chettinadu region.

A substantial number of Chettinadu buildings have been razed since the 1940s, and many of those that remain are in a dilapidated state. Much of the destruction has been caused by commercial interest in antiques, with decorative elements from many structures being removed for sale or use in private homes. A few of the palaces have been restored as hotels and others are partially occupied by local families.

- Due to rapid urbanisation and development in the last three decades, the existing heritages are under constant threat in terms of both anthropogenic causes as well as

natural reasons, especially in the absence of any care, repair or maintenance. As a result, a good number of heritages have been fast deteriorating and their historical identity being lost

- The palaces of Chettinad are being dismantled and destroyed one after another, and the sale of the architectural elements of these houses to Western countries has fuelled a lucrative antiques business.
- Many of the historic homes in the region are no longer occupied by the families which own them and there is a huge amount to be removed from each one as it is demolished.
- Several houses each occupying one to five acres of land, are more or less empty.

The perception of the public is sought addressing these issues into consideration. The top three problem as stated by them are

1. Built Heritage that has been demolished.
2. Built Heritage that is endangered (natural and anthropogenic causes) .
3. Built Heritage that has been subjected to encroachments.

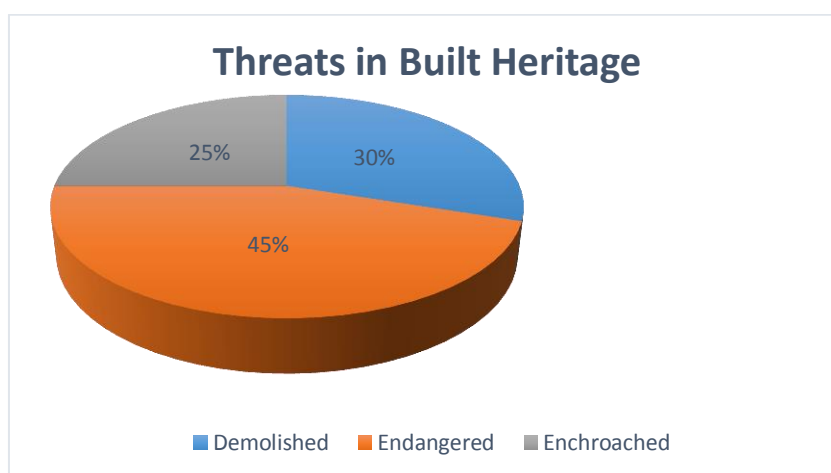


Figure 1 . Public's insight on the threats in the built heritage in Chettinadu region; Source: Author

The attitude of the people regarding the current threats in the built heritage conservation in Chettinadu illustrates in figure 1 shows that the buildings are under threat due to anthropogenic and natural causes, which is the need of the hour to be addresses. Proper conservation measures involving the public will protect the demolition of the heritage buildings to a greater extent.

4.4. Public's visits

The public were also inquired on their frequency of visits to Chettinadu region and the reason for their visit. The figure 2 shows the number of visitors and their purpose of visit, it is rather important to identify the potential reasons of the visit based on a classification on either the visit is event based, business, research, general tourism or any other.

Since the region is very famous for its athangudi tiles, cotton sarees, chettinadu utensils there are a number of crowd pulling factors in the chettinadu region. Considerable number of

foreign tourists visits the palatial mansions of Chettiandu region for its unique architectural characters and details.

Out of the 250 total respondents, 23% who are non Chettinadu residents would like to visit very often for business, tourism and unique festivals in the region.

The region has a considerably higher floating population due to trade, exclusive athangudi tiles, good craftsman, and cinema shooting in the palatial mansions Chettinadu.

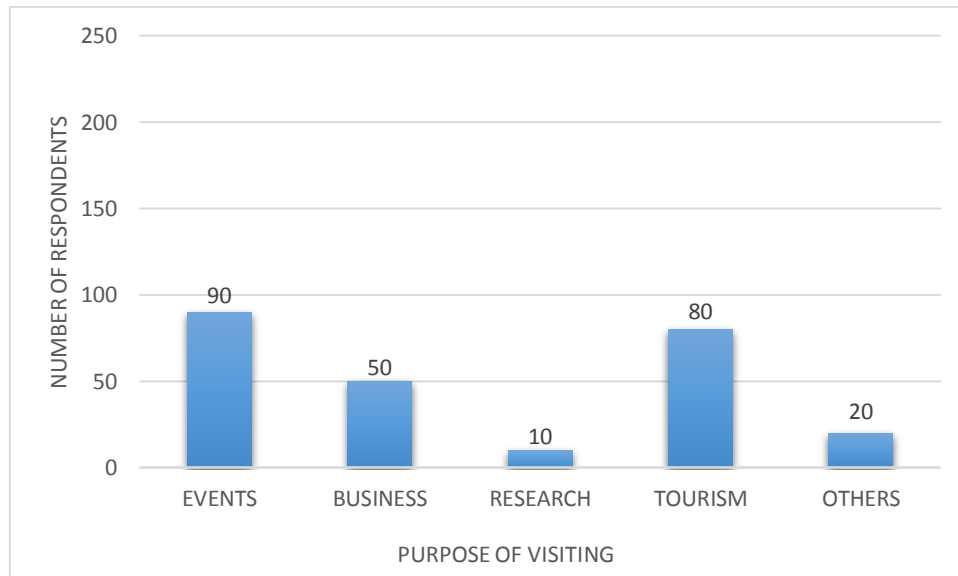


Figure 2. Public's purpose of visit to the Chettinadu region; Source: Author

4.5. Public's interest in participating in the Built Heritage conservation

The public were also asked on whether they have interest to participate in any conservation organization to protect those heritage buildings throughout Chettinadu region. About 74% of the public are interested in joining themselves in any of the conservation efforts, but are not willing to contribute towards the effort. Figure 3 illustrates the details of respondents interested in joining the Built Heritage conservation.

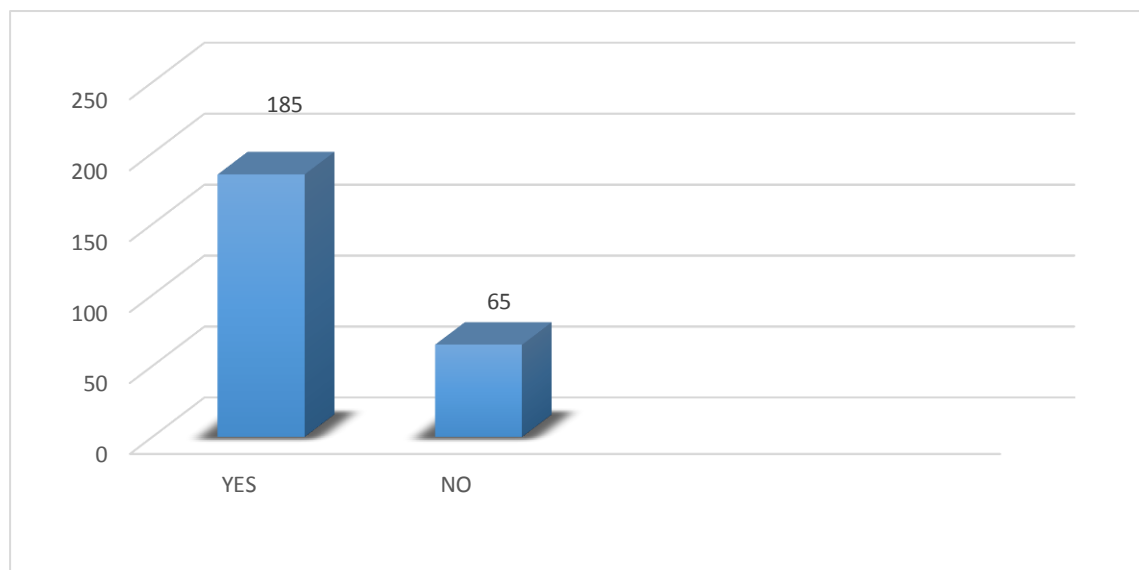


Figure 3. Public's interest in the conservation effort; Source: Author

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

As conclusion, this research paper has led to the result that, there is importance of public in conserving the Built Heritage of Chettinadu region. Besides functional as tourism landmark and attraction to the town, heritage buildings are efficient in protecting the scenic beauty of Chettinadu region. Public awareness and involvement should be seriously harnessed through promotions and educations nationwide. Continuous promotion should be held via mass media such as newspaper, television, radio, brochures as well as the internet to create more awareness among all level of society. Educational seminars and workshops on building conservation are encouraged especially among the younger generations with the participation and interest from both government and non-government organizations. The efficiency of heritage building use is nevertheless important to ensure a direct utilization by the public. It is significant point to a high level of awareness from the public on saving the built heritage of Chettinadu.

The study also aims to establish whether there is difference in value judgement the public has on the built heritage of Chettinadu region. It is concluded that people in Chettinad region are aware about the heritage values in their region and wanted to showcase their living tradition to the future generation. Their level of participation in the heritage conservation is maximum which helps in arriving strategies for built heritage conservation.

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