

Preservation Challenges for Ancient Temples: Conservation Ethics in India and Mongolia

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Abstract

Ancient temples in India and Mongolia represent vital repositories of cultural identity, religious practice, and historical memory. Yet their conservation is shaped by complex ethical dilemmas concerning authenticity, ritual continuity, reconstruction, and stakeholder participation. This paper undertakes a comparative analysis of preservation challenges affecting major temple and monastic sites in both countries, specifically Ajanta–Ellora in India and the Erdene Zuu Monastery within the Orkhon Valley Cultural Landscape in Mongolia. Drawing on international conservation frameworks such as the Venice Charter (1964) and the Nara Document on Authenticity (1994), as well as UNESCO dossiers, Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) reports, World Monuments Fund (WMF) publications, and peer-reviewed scholarship, the study examines how physical deterioration, tourism pressures, climatic stress, historical violence, and competing value systems shape decisions about what and how to preserve. The comparative lens reveals that while India grapples with managing living, ritual-intensive sites, Mongolia faces the ethical tension between reconstructing sites destroyed during the socialist purges and preserving surviving fragments with material authenticity. The paper argues that conservation ethics must integrate community values, contextualised understandings of authenticity, and sustainable site management strategies. It concludes with recommendations for culturally sensitive, stakeholder-driven, and ethically grounded conservation frameworks relevant to sacred heritage worldwide.

Keywords: Authenticity, living heritage, reconstruction ethics, stakeholder participation, World Heritage, Ajanta, Ellora, Erdene Zuu, Orkhon Valley

1. Introduction

Sacred heritage conservation rarely presents purely technical problems. Temples and monasteries are repositories of art and architecture, but they are also active sites of religious meaning, collective identity, and social memory. Conservation decisions, therefore, carry ethical weight: they determine whether "authenticity" is pursued primarily through the protection of historic fabric, through continuity of ritual use, through the recovery of cultural

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life after destruction, or through negotiated balances among these aims. Internationally, the World Heritage system amplifies this ethical dimension by tying stewardship to obligations surrounding Outstanding Universal Value (OUV), including the maintenance of attributes linked to authenticity and integrity (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.-a; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.-b; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.-c).

This paper explores how conservation ethics are negotiated in two contrasting World Heritage contexts. In India, Ajanta and Ellora are globally significant rock-cut sacred ensembles. Ajanta consists of thirty rock-cut caves, including sanctuaries and monastic spaces, renowned for their artistic and historical significance (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.-a). Ellora comprises thirty-four rock-cut monasteries and temples associated with Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism, representing a complex, long-duration sacred landscape in stone (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.-b). In Mongolia, the Orkhon Valley Cultural Landscape is an extensive pastoral cultural landscape recognised for its archaeological remains and monuments connected to successive nomadic empires, and for its continuing association with pastoral lifeways (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.-c). Within this landscape, Erdene Zuu is characterised in UNESCO/ICOMOS evaluation material as the earliest surviving Mongol Buddhist monastery, historically central to Mongolian Buddhism yet severely damaged by late-1930s destruction, leaving a limited number of standing structures that have since been partially restored and used in mixed museum and worship functions (UNESCO World Heritage Centre/ICOMOS, 2004).

The central argument advanced here is that conservation ethics becomes most robust when authenticity is treated as multi-dimensional and when decision-making is procedurally accountable. This requires explicit articulation of what is being preserved and why, disciplined transparency about trade-offs, and stakeholder participation designed as governance rather than symbolic consultation. The comparative lens shows that ethical dilemmas differ structurally across the two contexts: Ajanta–Ellora is dominated by cumulative risks generated by visitor pressure and environmental instability affecting fragile surfaces, while Erdene Zuu is dominated by post-destruction recovery and reconstruction ethics within a wider cultural landscape and climate-risk context.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

2.1 Conservation Ethics and the Legacy of the Venice Charter

Modern conservation ethics is substantially shaped by the Venice Charter (International Council on Monuments and Sites [ICOMOS], 1964), which frames conservation as a duty to transmit monuments to the future while respecting the evidentiary value of historic fabric. The Charter's influence lies not only in its technical guidance but in its moral posture. It privileges restraint, discourages conjectural restoration, and implies that the past should remain legible rather than rewritten through speculative completion. For sacred heritage, however, the Venice posture can become ethically strained when "minimum intervention" conflicts with ongoing ritual requirements or with recovery needs after deliberate destruction.

2.2 Authenticity after Nara: Plural Sources of Information

The Nara Document on Authenticity (ICOMOS, 1994) represents a decisive shift from a narrow, fabric-centred interpretation of authenticity toward a culturally contextualised evaluation. Nara emphasises that authenticity judgments may draw on multiple sources of information, including use, function, tradition, techniques, setting, and spirit, alongside material attributes. This is crucial for sacred heritage because ritual continuity, custodianship, and lived meaning often serve as primary carriers of significance. Nara does not abandon material authenticity; rather, it argues that material authenticity must be assessed within a cultural context and alongside other authenticity attributes.

2.3 Values-Based Conservation and Participation as Legitimacy

The evolution toward plural authenticity aligns with values-based conservation scholarship. The Getty Conservation Institute's research on values and conservation emphasises that heritage decisions are shaped by multiple stakeholder values (historical, aesthetic, social, spiritual, and economic), and that conflicts among values are normal rather than exceptional (Avrami, Mason, & de la Torre, 2000). In sacred heritage contexts, such conflicts often become acute: the priorities of conservators, religious custodians, tourism agencies, and local communities may diverge sharply, yet each group may hold legitimate claims to what the site "is" and what it should remain.

ICCROM's work on sharing conservation decisions further frames participation as ethically and practically necessary. It suggests that durable conservation outcomes depend on decision processes that integrate stakeholder perspectives and create legitimacy, improving compliance and reducing conflict (ICCROM, 2018). This literature supports a methodological shift in conservation ethics: the "right" decision is not only a matter of doctrinal correctness but also of social implementability.

2.4 Reconstruction Ethics and Cultural Recovery

Reconstruction is among the most ethically contested forms of intervention because it reshapes the boundary between surviving evidence and revived cultural form. The Warsaw Recommendation on Recovery and Reconstruction of Cultural Heritage (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2018) frames reconstruction within broader recovery processes and emphasises that decisions should be grounded in understanding the values and attributes that justify heritage significance, including community values and intangible practices, particularly in contexts of trauma. The Riga Charter on authenticity and historical reconstruction similarly speaks to the relationship between reconstruction and authenticity, encouraging careful justification and transparency when reconstruction is pursued. Together, these documents offer a doctrinal and ethical basis for analysing Mongolia's case, where reconstruction pressures are inseparable from the history of destruction and the revival of religious life.

2.5 Conceptual Framework

Drawing on the above literature, this paper operationalises conservation ethics through four interconnected domains. First, authenticity is treated as multi-attribute, combining material and non-material sources of information consistent with Nara. Second, reconstruction ethics is

evaluated through evidence thresholds, legibility, and transparency, informed by Venice's caution and Warsaw's recovery-oriented guidance. Third, living heritage is treated as an ethical dimension of conservation where ritual continuity and use-function authenticity are legitimate attributes but must be governed to prevent irreversible material harm. Fourth, stakeholder participation is treated as an ethical and practical requirement: it shapes legitimacy, compliance, and long-term sustainability of conservation measures (Avrami et al., 2000; ICCROM, 2018).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative comparative case-study design. It compares Ajanta–Ellora (India) and Erdene Zuu within the Orkhon Valley (Mongolia) as World Heritage contexts facing distinct ethical problem-structures. The purpose is analytical rather than statistical generalisation: the goal is to identify how conservation ethics is negotiated under different historical and environmental pressures, and to develop transferable ethical principles for sacred heritage management.

3.2 Data Sources

The analysis is based on documentary and published sources, organised into four categories. First, it uses international conservation doctrine and guidance, including the Venice Charter (ICOMOS, 1964) and Nara Document (ICOMOS, 1994), as well as recovery-oriented guidance such as the Warsaw Recommendation (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2018) and the Riga Charter (2000). Second, it uses UNESCO World Heritage property descriptions for Ajanta, Ellora, and Orkhon Valley to anchor site significance and governance context (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.-a; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.-b; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.-c). Third, it uses UNESCO/ICOMOS evaluation material for the Orkhon Valley to ground claims about Erdene Zuu's destruction history, surviving structures, and mixed religious/museum functions (UNESCO World Heritage Centre/ICOMOS, 2004). Fourth, it incorporates institutional and peer-reviewed sources that address risk and conservation pressures, including JICA's evaluation of the Ajanta–Ellora conservation and tourism development project (JICA, 2007), World Monuments Fund materials on Erdene Zuu, and peer-reviewed heritage science on Ajanta deterioration (Singh et al., 2019; Singh & Arbad, 2013).

3.3 Analytic Procedure

Documents were analysed using an ethics-oriented coding approach aligned with the conceptual framework. Texts were coded for deterioration drivers, tourism pressures, climate and environmental risks, governance constraints, and intervention strategies. They were also coded for explicit or implicit authenticity claims (material, functional, contextual), reconstruction narratives, and stakeholder references. Cross-case synthesis then identified convergences and divergences in ethical dilemmas, intervention rationales, and governance challenges.

3.4 Limitations

Because the study relies on secondary sources, it does not add new on-site measurements, interviews, or engineering assessments. The analysis emphasises doctrinal reasoning, documentary evidence, and published conservation research. Additionally, management conditions can change, particularly in tourism dynamics and climate-related impacts; the findings should be read as a doctrine-grounded, evidence-based interpretation rather than a definitive technical audit.

4. Case Study I: Ajanta–Ellora (India)

4.1 Heritage Character and Vulnerability

Ajanta and Ellora are distinct in religious scope and material expression, yet both share a defining conservation challenge: fragile heritage attributes are embedded in rock-cut environments not designed for modern visitor volumes. Ajanta's thirty caves include sanctuaries and monastic spaces, and its significance is strongly tied to the survival of mural painting traditions alongside architectural forms (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.-a). Ellora's thirty-four caves span three major religious traditions, creating a vast ensemble in which carved surfaces and spatial experiences are central to meaning (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.-b).

4.2 Deterioration Pressures: Environmental and Biological Interactions

Peer-reviewed conservation research emphasises that Ajanta's deterioration is shaped by interacting environmental and biological pressures. Singh et al. (2019) examine deterioration pathways at Ajanta and highlight biological agents and environment-friendly strategies for protection, situating conservation within a system of environmental conditions and human pressures. Complementary technical discussion on Ajanta's murals underscores the complex chemistry and material vulnerabilities involved in preserving painted surfaces and their supports (Singh & Arbad, 2013). These studies support a key ethical inference: when risks are cumulative and interactional, the ethically preferable approach is often preventive and governance-led (stabilising conditions, reducing stress) rather than interventionist "repair" cycles that may introduce new uncertainties.

4.3 Tourism Development and Conservation: An Institutionalised Tension

Ajanta–Ellora also illustrates the ethical complexity of conservation-tourism coupling. JICA's ex-post evaluation describes an approach explicitly oriented toward tourism promotion through monument conservation and surrounding improvements (JICA, 2007). This coupling can strengthen conservation by funding infrastructure, visitor routing, and site services; however, it can also increase the risk load by intensifying visitation. In ethical terms, this creates a governance dilemma: conservation can become instrumentally valued for tourism outcomes rather than for safeguarding authenticity attributes, unless conservation indicators (damage rates, micro-environment stability, crowding frequency) are treated as binding constraints.

4.4 Ethical Dilemma Profile

In Ajanta–Ellora, the primary ethical conflict is best characterised as "access under

fragility."The Venice Charter's emphasis on safeguarding historic evidence supports restraint in intrusive interventions (ICOMOS, 1964). Yet the pressure to enable access—educational, cultural, and economic—pushes toward increased visitation. The ethically defensible pathway, supported by the deterioration literature, is to treat visitor management, monitoring, and preventive conservation as core authenticity-preserving strategies rather than as peripheral "management" concerns (Singh et al., 2019; Singh & Arbad, 2013).

5. Case Study II: Erdene Zuu and the Orkhon Valley Cultural Landscape (Mongolia)

5.1 Landscape Heritage and Continuing Pastoral Context

Orkhon Valley is inscribed as a cultural landscape in which archaeological remains and monuments are embedded within an actively used pastoral environment (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.-c). UNESCO/ICOMOS evaluation materials emphasise that the landscape remains grazed and that its significance includes long-term relationships between nomadic pastoral societies and their administrative and religious centres (UNESCO World Heritage Centre/ICOMOS, 2004). In this setting, conservation ethics extends beyond built fabric to governance of landscape integrity, setting, and land-use relations.

5.2 Historical Rupture and Post-Destruction Revival

Erdene Zuu's conservation ethics are shaped by historical trauma. UNESCO/ICOMOS evaluation material notes that forty-four structures were destroyed between 1937 and 1940 and describes the current condition as a limited number of surviving buildings, gradually restored, with some functions oriented to worship and others to museum use (UNESCO World Heritage Centre/ICOMOS, 2004). This creates a distinctive ethical environment: reconstruction and restoration are entangled with cultural recovery, religious revival, and national memory. Independent heritage interpretation likewise underscores the scale of monastic destruction during the late-1930s purges, reinforcing the ethical context in which rebuilding can be viewed as repair of historical violence (Rubin Museum of Art, n.d.).

5.3 Conservation Capacity, Preventive Needs, and Risk Framing

UNESCO/ICOMOS evaluation identifies practical stewardship constraints, noting that many buildings need conservation and that preventive conservation is challenged by limited personnel resources (UNESCO World Heritage Centre/ICOMOS, 2004). World Monuments Fund materials on Erdene Zuu further frame the site within broader risk contexts and the need for safeguarding efforts (World Monuments Fund, 2025). These sources collectively support an ethical claim that differs from Ajanta–Ellora: in a post-destruction setting, the ethical stakes are not only cumulative damage but also the direction of recovery. Over-reconstruction risks weakening evidentiary authenticity, while under-investment in preventive maintenance risks continued loss of surviving material and meaning-bearing structures.

5.4 Ethical Dilemma Profile

The Mongolian case is dominated by "recovery under authenticity constraints." Venice cautions against conjectural completion and emphasises preservation of evidence (ICOMOS, 1964). Nara, however, legitimises authenticity judgments that incorporate function, tradition, and

spirit (ICOMOS, 1994), which becomes especially important where religious revival and renewed monastic life are central to local meaning. Warsaw provides an additional ethical frame by treating reconstruction as part of recovery while insisting on careful value assessment and stakeholder engagement (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2018). The ethical challenge is therefore to reconcile recovery goals with evidentiary transparency and disciplined documentation.

6. Comparative Discussion

6.1 Shared Conditions and Ethical Common Ground

Despite distinct histories, both cases demonstrate that conservation ethics is inseparable from governance. Both operate under World Heritage expectations that connect conservation practice to authenticity/integrity obligations (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.-a; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.-b; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.-c). Both are shaped by tourism dynamics in which visitor economies can support conservation but also intensify risk. India's coupling of conservation and tourism development is explicit in JICA's evaluation framing (JICA, 2007), while Mongolia's risk and safeguarding framing is visible through WMF's attention to Erdene Zuu and the wider need for heritage protection capacities (World Monuments Fund, 2025).

Both cases also show that the ethical durability of interventions depends on legitimacy and implementability. Values-based conservation emphasises that multiple values shape what should be protected and how (Avrami et al., 2000), and ICCROM underscores that shared decisions improve sustainability of outcomes (ICCROM, 2018). These insights are equally applicable to visitor governance at Ajanta–Ellora and to reconstruction debates at Erdene Zuu.

6.2 Divergent Ethical Problem-Structures

The critical divergence lies in the type of ethical dilemma. Ajanta–Ellora is dominated by fragility under high visitation and environmental interaction, where cumulative stress can irreversibly degrade rock and painted surfaces, and where ethics therefore trend toward preventive conservation and access governance supported by conservation science (Singh et al., 2019; Singh & Arbad, 2013). Erdene Zuu, by contrast, is dominated by recovery after destruction, where reconstruction may be value-necessary for religious continuity but threatens evidentiary authenticity unless managed through evidence-led protocols and transparency. The UNESCO/ICOMOS evaluation's explicit record of destruction and mixed museum/worship use makes this tension structurally visible (UNESCO World Heritage Centre/ICOMOS, 2004). Warsaw further legitimises reconstruction within recovery while insisting on values assessment and stakeholder engagement, especially where intangible practices and community meanings are central (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2018).

In conceptual terms, the Indian case foregrounds conservation ethics as "limits" (how much access, what controls, how to prevent loss), while the Mongolian case foregrounds ethics as "direction" (how to recover, what to rebuild, how to keep authenticity legible while restoring cultural life).

7. Implications and Recommendations

The comparative findings imply that sacred heritage requires ethically grounded frameworks that are simultaneously doctrinally disciplined and culturally responsive.

First, authenticity should be operationalised as a multi-attribute judgment rather than treated as a single material metric. Nara makes clear that authenticity can be conveyed through use, tradition, and spirit, as well as through fabric (ICOMOS, 1994). However, the Venice Charter's caution against conjecture and its emphasis on safeguarding evidence remain essential safeguards against authenticity erosion through uncontrolled replacement (ICOMOS, 1964). Conservation practice should therefore document which authenticity attributes are being prioritised in each intervention and why, and should ensure that changes remain legible to future users and researchers.

Second, participation must be built as governance. Values-based research shows that multiple values are always in play (Avrami et al., 2000), and ICCROM frames shared decision-making as a condition of legitimacy and sustainability (ICCROM, 2018). For Ajanta–Ellora, this means that visitor restrictions and micro-environment controls should be communicated and implemented through legitimate procedures that include site authorities, local tourism economies, and public interpretation systems, so that regulation is understood as ethical care rather than arbitrary exclusion. For Erdene Zuu, participation must include religious custodians and community voices in defining what recovery requires, while maintaining evidence-led discipline in how reconstruction is justified and presented.

Third, preventive conservation should be treated as an ethical priority, particularly where deterioration is cumulative and interactional. Conservation science on Ajanta indicates the relevance of biological agents and environmentally sensitive mitigation (Singh et al., 2019) and points to the complexity of preserving mural materials under changing conditions (Singh & Arbad, 2013). Preventive strategies that reduce stressors, stabilise conditions, and manage visitor impact align strongly with Venice's "least harm" posture while remaining compatible with Nara's broader authenticity concerns.

Finally, for post-destruction sacred sites such as Erdene Zuu, reconstruction ethics must be governed by transparency, documentation, and clear evidentiary thresholds. Warsaw's recovery framework emphasises values-based planning, community engagement, and attention to intangible practices, including those affected by trauma (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2018). Riga's focus on authenticity and reconstruction provides additional support for disciplined, non-deceptive reconstruction (Riga Charter, 2000). In practical terms, this requires explicit interpretation that distinguishes reconstructed elements from surviving historic fabric, ensuring that cultural recovery does not produce unintended authenticity confusion.

8. Conclusion

By comparing Ajanta–Ellora and Erdene Zuu within the Orkhon Valley Cultural Landscape, this paper demonstrates that conservation ethics in sacred heritage is not reducible to technical best practice. It is a structured negotiation among values, risks, historical experience, and institutional capacity. In India, ethics is dominated by managing access and environmental

interaction to protect fragile rock-cut and painted attributes, especially in contexts where tourism development is explicitly linked to conservation programming (JICA, 2007). In Mongolia, ethics is dominated by recovery after destruction, where reconstruction can support revived religious life but must remain transparent and evidence-led to preserve authenticity as legible heritage knowledge (UNESCO World Heritage Centre/ICOMOS, 2004; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2018).

The broader contribution is a transferable ethical stance: authenticity should be treated as a multi-attribute judgment anchored in doctrine, evidence, and community meaning; conservation should prioritise preventive risk governance where cumulative deterioration threatens irreplaceable attributes; and stakeholder participation should be designed as an accountable governance mechanism that makes decisions legitimate and enforceable (Avrami et al., 2000; ICCROM, 2018). In this form, conservation ethics becomes not an abstract ideal but a practical framework for sustaining sacred heritage under contemporary pressures.

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