



## RETHINKING LIVING BUDDHIST HERITAGE: MONASTIC NETWORKS AND TRANSREGIONAL AUTHORITY IN SRI LANKA AND SOUTH ASIA

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### Abstract

**Background:** This study examines how core Buddhist teachings are constituted and perpetuated through lived religious practices and institutional forms. Buddhadhamma refers to the teachings generated during the enlightenment of the Buddha, which have been transmitted over the past 2,560 years through doctrinal teaching, moral practice, and the Buddhist monastic institutions. However, it has been preserved within the Pāli canon and understood for centuries of Buddhist learning. Their persistence depends not only on textual but also on the social and institutional processes of reproduction. Since the Mauryan period (321-185 BCE), Buddhism has shaped both the material and immaterial landscapes of South Asia. While scholarship has frequently approached Buddhist heritage through architecture, archaeological documentation, or textual transmission, this study argues that Buddhist heritage in Sri Lanka is better understood as a dynamic socio-religious process that is sustained through interconnected monastic networks. From its early expansion, Buddhism moved across political and cultural boundaries through the circulation of monks, relics, texts, and ritual practices, embedding doctrinal authority within institutional and ritual forms. Sri Lanka, one of the most enduring centers of Theravāda continuity, provides a compelling case. Sacred sites such as Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, and the Temple of the Tooth Relic in Kandy function not merely as historical monuments but as active religious environments sustained through monastic lineages, ritual traditions, and devotional communities.

**Involvement to Buddhadhamma:** Living heritage traditions associated with these sacred landscapes embody core principles of Buddhadhamma. Monastic discipline enacts *sīla* (Ethical Conduct) as a foundational structure for both monastic and lay communities, while the preservation of the monastic regulations reflects the persistence of the tradition of the Vinaya in the Theravāda practice. Pilgrimage promotes acts of piety and charity that bring about *puñña* (Merit), which underlies mutualism between the monastic Saṅgha and lay followers. In this exchange, the Buddhist ethical values are replicated in everyday social life. Ritual cycles materialize teachings on *anicca* (Impermanence) through repetition, renewal, and commemorative performance. At the same time, *Paññā* (Wisdom) and compassion are cultivated not solely through scriptural study but through embodied participation in ritual practices, religious education, and communal activities



which are organized by monastic institutions. Monastic networks thus operate as the structural nexus through which ethical practice, sacred sites, doctrinal continuity, and social organization are continuously reproduced. In this way, Buddhadhamma is sustained not merely as textual doctrine but as lived, relational practice embedded within heritage sites and institutional structures. This framework highlights how religious institutions transform doctrinal teachings into lived practices that sustain the Theravāda tradition.

**Conclusions:** By situating sacred centers within networks of monastic lineage, governance, and transregional affiliation, the article challenges static models of heritage that isolate monuments from lived religious practice. Instead, it advances a processual understanding of Theravāda continuity in which authority and identity are actively negotiated through ethical discipline, ritual performance, institutional organization, and devotional participation. From this perspective, Sri Lanka emerges as a pivotal doctrinal and institutional node within both South Asian and global Buddhist networks. The endurance of Buddhadhamma in this context does not rely only on the preservation of texts or monuments but on the ongoing interaction between monastic communities, sacred landscapes, and lay practitioners. Living Buddhist heritage, therefore, represents an active religious framework in which the teachings of the Buddha are sustained through embodied practice, interdependence, and institutional resilience rather than preservation alone.

**Keywords:** Living Buddhist Heritage, Monastic Networks, Theravāda Continuity, Cultural Diplomacy, South Asian Buddhism

## Introduction

Architectural preservation, archaeological documentation, and textual transmission have long structured the study of Buddhist heritage in South Asia. However, such approaches often isolate monuments, ritual practice, and monastic institutions into analytically separate domains. As critical heritage scholarship has argued, heritage is not merely the safeguarding of objects but a cultural process through which meanings, identities, and authority are actively produced (Harrison, 2013); (Smith, 2006). Laurajane Smith's formulation of the "Authorized Heritage Discourse" further demonstrates how heritage regimes privilege particular narratives of preservation while marginalizing lived religious practice. What remains insufficiently examined is how these elements function together as an integrated socio-religious system that sustains doctrinal authority across time and changing political contexts. This article addresses that gap by reconceptualizing "Living Buddhist Heritage" not as a category of preservation but as a relational process through which monastic institutions reproduce ethical practice, ritual continuity, and religious legitimacy.

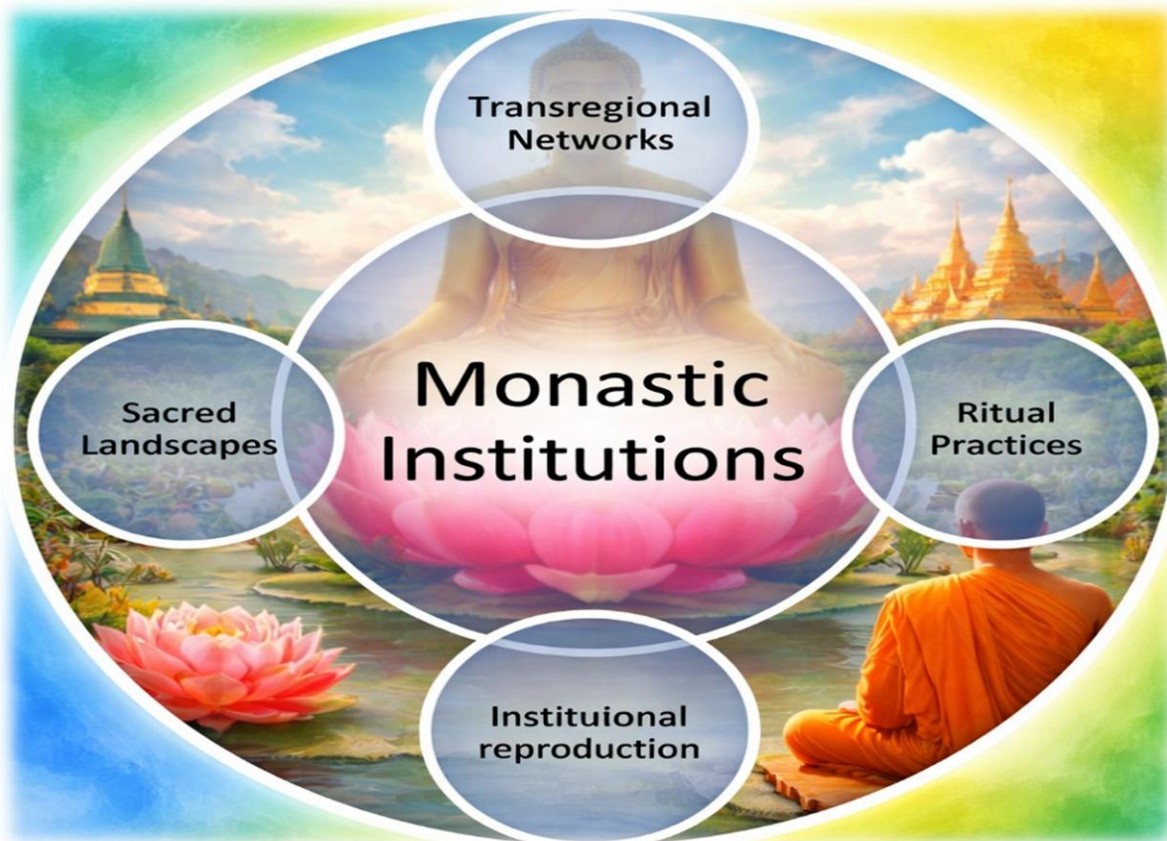
From its early formation, Buddhist doctrine, monastic organization, and pilgrimage networks extended beyond political boundaries, generating shared yet locally inflected traditions of art, architecture, and ritual (Sen, 2003). Rather than separating material and intangible domains, this study defines living heritage as the dynamic integration of sacred landscapes, institutional lineages, and ritual performance through which authority and identity are continually negotiated.



In this framework, monastic networks constitute the structural nexus linking stūpas, vihāras, pilgrimage circuits, and educational institutions into a coherent system of religious reproduction.

Sri Lanka provides a particularly compelling case. As one of the most enduring centres of Theravāda continuity (Malalgoda, 1976), the island has sustained monastic lineages that mediate doctrinal legitimacy and transregional affiliation. Sacred sites such as the Temple of the Tooth Relic in Kandy and the monastic complexes of Anuradhapura function not merely as monuments but as active religious fields embedded in networks of governance, patronage, and regional exchange (Behrendt, 2007). Through these networks, Sri Lanka has operated both as a site of preservation and as a node of doctrinal transmission and regional religious diplomacy.

Drawing on historical and anthropological analysis, this article examines pilgrimage, monastic education, ritual performance, and transnational affiliation as arenas in which religious authority is negotiated and institutional continuity sustained. By advancing a processual account of Theravāda continuity, the study contributes to Buddhist anthropology by demonstrating how relational networks integrate material heritage, lived religious practice, and regional exchange into a unified analytical framework. The relational interaction is illustrated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1** Conceptual framework of living Buddhist heritage showing the relational interaction between sacred landscapes, monastic institutions, ritual practices, and transregional networks.



## Buddhism Across South Asia: Monastic Networks and the Reproduction of Religious Authority

The study argues that Buddhist heritage in South Asia should be understood as a dispersed collection of sacred monuments. Rather, it functions as a system of institutional reproduction sustained through monastic mobility, ritual circulation, and regimes of patronage. From its early doctrinal formulation in the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path (Walpola, 1974); (Gethin, 1998), Buddhism developed mechanisms for transmitting authority beyond localized communities. Under Mauryan imperial patronage, particularly during the reign of Ashoka, Buddhist moral sovereignty became territorially articulated while remaining dependent upon itinerant monastic networks (Thapar, 2012). Expansion proceeded along commercial corridors and pilgrimage routes linking urban centers and maritime circuits (Neelis, 2011). Sites such as Bodhgayā, Sārnāth, and Anurādhapura thus functioned not as isolated devotional spaces but as nodes within a relational sacred geography shaped by these movements.

Material institutions anchored this networked system. Stūpas, monasteries, and scholastic complexes were not merely symbolic expressions of faith; They functioned as institutional infrastructural sites through which authority was stabilized and reproduced. Monastic establishments operated within legal and economic frameworks that secured patronage, land grants, and ritual legitimacy (Schopen, 1997).

Intellectual centers in eastern India facilitated transregional scholastic exchange while artistic production in Gandhāra and later Pāla domains demonstrates adaptive engagement with wider cultural forms (Behrendt, 2007); (Sen, 2003). In this sense, material heritage functions as institutional architecture. It operates as an apparatus of continuity rather than a passive remnant of devotion.

Sectarian differentiation reconfigures but does not dissolve these networks. The Buddhist Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna traditions generated distinct textual canons and ritual regimes while remaining interconnected through ordination lineages and scholarly mobility. In the Kathmandu Valley, Buddhist authority evolved through sustained interaction with Hindu ritual systems, producing locally embedded yet networked forms of legitimacy (Lewis, 2000). In Bhutan, Vajrayāna institutions became integrated with governance structures, illustrating the political elasticity of monastic authority (Ura, 2015). Such developments demonstrate that Buddhist heritage operated through adaptive coherence rather than doctrinal uniformity.

Political disruptions fragmented certain circuits of exchange, yet institutional transmission persisted through reconstituted networks. Modern heritage regimes have recast Buddhist sites as objects of national and global patrimony, often privileging conservation frameworks over monastic custodianship (Smith, 2006). Nevertheless, pilgrimage movements, ordination exchanges, and scholastic collaborations continue to sustain regional connectivity. Buddhist heritage, therefore, remains a dynamic system sustained through pilgrimage, ordination exchange, and scholastic mobility rather than a static archive of sacred antiquity.

Within this broader South Asian configuration, Sri Lanka occupies a structurally stabilizing position. From the third century BCE onward, the island consolidated Theravāda institutional frameworks grounded in the Pāli Canon and sustained through royal-monastic alliances articulated in



the Mahāvamsa (Geiger, 1912). Rather than functioning merely as a peripheral repository of orthodoxy, Sri Lanka operated as a nodal center for the preservation and retransmission of ordination lineages during periods of institutional decline elsewhere in the subcontinent (Gombrich, 2006). Ritual institutions such as the Temple of the Tooth further linked sovereignty and monastic authority, embedding Buddhist custodianship within processes of state formation (Holt, 1991).

Sri Lanka's historical role, therefore, lies not in isolationist preservation but in its capacity to stabilize and regenerate transregional Theravāda networks. By situating the island within broader systems of circulation and institutional reproduction, this study reframes Buddhist heritage as a dynamic structure of authority maintenance, one sustained through mobility, adaptation, and continuity across political and regional transformations.

### Intersecting Cultural Heritage across South Asia

The historical expansion of Buddhism across South Asia facilitated the circulation of religious doctrines, artistic forms, architectural models, and philosophical traditions. These processes created a shared yet regionally diverse cultural landscape. It is through networks of monastic mobility, pilgrimage, and trade. Buddhist communities transmitted texts, relics, ritual specialists, and aesthetic practices across political and geographical boundaries.

Material heritage, especially stūpas, monasteries, and sculptural traditions, reflects this long process of transregional exchange. Indic stūpa architecture, visible in India, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, alongside the sculptural innovations of Gandhāra and Mathurā, exemplifies the emergence of shared visual languages through sustained monastic and pilgrimage networks. These networks enabled the movement of texts, relics, ritual specialists, and artistic conventions across political boundaries, underscoring Buddhism's role as a medium of cultural interaction. Recognition of Buddhist sites across SAARC countries as UNESCO World Heritage Sites emphasizes their transnational significance and potential as platforms for regional cooperation (UNESCO, 2019). Pilgrimage centers such as Bodhgayā, Lumbinī, and Anurādhapura therefore form a part of a broader sacred geography that transcends contemporary political divisions.

In Nepal, monumental stūpas such as Boudhanath and Swayambhunath combine hemispherical domes with the iconic painted Buddha eyes, structuring ritual and social life (Slusser, 1982). Newar artisans developed refined sculptural and pictorial traditions, including intricate paubha paintings that influenced Tibetan thangka art and facilitated the trans-Himalayan circulation of aesthetic forms (Levy, 1991). Nepalese Buddhist art also exhibits a significant interaction with Hindu traditions in sacred spaces, iconography, and ritual practices.

Bhutan presents another example of the regional adaptations of Buddhist heritage. Vajrayāna influenced Dzongs fortress-monasteries, integrating religious, administrative, and defensive functions (Aris, 1979), while Thangka paintings and Tsechu masked dances serve devotional, pedagogical, and performative roles (Rhie & Thurman, 2000). In Gandhāra (Modern Pakistan and Afghanistan), naturalistic schist and stucco sculptures were produced, merging Hellenistic, Persian, and Indic artistic traditions (Rosenfield, 1967). Monastic complexes in this region, including the Bamiyan Buddhas, highlight



Gandhāra's historical importance within trans-Asian trade and pilgrimage networks (Flood, 2009). In Bangladesh, Pāla-era monastic institutions such as Somapura Mahāvihāra demonstrate large-scale monastic planning and refined iconography, influencing Buddhist practices in Tibet, Myanmar, and Java (Chakrabarti, 1992); (Huntington, 1985). The Maldives preserve fragmentary pre-Islamic stūpas and monasteries, indicating the maritime reach of Buddhist cultural networks (Forbes, 1987).

Alongside these material forms, intangible heritage rituals, festivals, monastic practices, and performance traditions continue to sustain Buddhist cultural life across the region. Practices such as circumambulation at Nepalese stūpas, Tsechu dances in Bhutan, and regional pilgrimage rituals articulate shared cosmological frameworks while reinforcing communal identity. These traditions exhibit the enduring continuity of Buddhism across political and geographic boundaries.

Within this regional context, Sri Lanka particularly occupies a strategic position. Its uninterrupted custodianship of major heritage sites, preservation of Theravāda textual traditions, and continuous monastic practices establish the island as both a repository and conduit of Buddhist culture in South Asia. Sites such as Anurādhapura, Polonnaruwa, Dambulla, and Kandy serve as platforms for ritual practice, education, and international pilgrimage. They also reflect the historical development of monastic architecture and institutional Buddhist landscapes in Sri Lanka (Bandaranayake, 2023). These historical and institutional foundations provide Sri Lanka with considerable cultural authority and symbolic power to influence the Buddhist heritage as a form of soft power within and beyond the framework of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (Nye, 2004).

Although SAARC has struggled to fulfill its political and economic mandates due to regional rivalries, its cultural pillar offers a practical avenue for cooperation (Jha, 2004). Sri Lanka leverages Buddhist heritage to advance SAARC's three pillars: Culturally, by preserving and promoting shared traditions; Socially, by enabling scholarly, monastic, and community exchanges; and economically, by fostering heritage tourism and regional development. Initiatives such as regional Buddhist forums, relic exhibitions, promoting cross-border monastic exchanges, and developing transnational pilgrimage circuits help to strengthen these networks. Institutional mechanisms, such as the SAARC Cultural Centre and interconnected cultural trails, further support regional engagement. Collectively, these initiatives demonstrate that Buddhist art, architecture, and living traditions function not only as markers of historical identity but also as dynamic instruments of regional integration and cultural diplomacy.

Sustaining these initiatives requires careful attention to preservation, inclusivity, and sustainability. Authenticity in architecture, murals, and craftsmanship must be maintained, and local communities should be engaged as custodians of heritage sites. Moreover, intangible traditions, including monastic education, ritual performance, and artisanal knowledge, must be nurtured. By integrating material and intangible heritage with cultural diplomacy, Sri Lanka exemplifies how Buddhist traditions can serve as living, participatory mechanisms for regional cohesion and cultural engagement, even amidst the political and economic challenges faced by SAARC.

The South Asian country Sri Lanka also offers a compelling example of how Buddhist heritage can be mobilized within national cultural diplomacy. Major pilgrimage sites such as Anurādhapura,



Polonnaruwa, Dambulla, and Kandy attract international visitors drawn by their religious, historical, and artistic significance. Within the framework of national identity, Buddhism occupies a central place in Sri Lanka's cultural consciousness.

Heritage sites, therefore, function as symbols of historical continuity, moral authority, and civilizational legitimacy.

Through initiatives such as relic exhibitions, international pilgrimages, and heritage tourism, Sri Lanka projects its image as a custodian of Buddhist tradition not only for its own society, but also for the wider Buddhist and SAARC worlds. These practices reinforce Buddhism's role as a unifying cultural resource while contributing to economic development through tourism. In this sense, Buddhist heritage operates at the intersection of religious devotion, national identity formation, and international cultural engagement.

At the same time, the use of Buddhist heritage as an instrument of cultural diplomacy also presents significant challenges, particularly in the areas of preservation, inclusivity, and sustainability. Many heritage sites face threats from environmental degradation, urban encroachment, inadequate conservation, and insufficient maintenance. Preserving authenticity, whether in architectural structures, mural paintings, or traditional craftsmanship, requires continuous investment, technical expertise, and institutional commitment. Equally important is the challenge of balancing heritage diplomacy with religious and ethnic pluralism. As a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society, Sri Lanka must ensure that Buddhist-based cultural diplomacy remains inclusive and does not marginalize other religious or cultural traditions (Spencer, 2007); (Tambiah, 1992). It is an overly exclusive approach that risks reinforcing perceptions of cultural bias and social exclusion, thereby undermining the unifying potential of heritage.

Strategically, effective deployment of heritage diplomacy and tourism requires enhanced infrastructure development, including transportation networks, visitor facilities, conservation laboratories, and interpretive resources such as trained guides and multilingual signage. Regional cooperation is also essential for developing transnational heritage trails, particularly in areas where Buddhist communities are minorities or where heritage sites are affected by political sensitivities. Crucially, heritage initiatives must be implemented in close collaboration with local communities, respecting their custodianship and ensuring equitable participation. Sustaining intangible dimensions such as monastic education, ritual performance, festival arts, and traditional crafts is essential to prevent heritage from being reduced to static monuments. Continued support for Pāli learning, monastic training, and the transmission of artisanal knowledge ensures that Buddhist heritage remains a living tradition rather than a purely touristic or symbolic resource.

Across South Asia, Buddhist art and architecture reveal a pattern of shared symbolic vocabularies combined with localized adaptations. Cave temples in Gandhāra, monumental stūpas in Sri Lanka and Nepal, monastic universities in Bengal, and maritime relics in the Maldives collectively reflect a connected historical landscape shaped by pilgrimage, patronage, and monastic mobility. These sites embody a shared cultural past that transcends contemporary political boundaries while remaining rooted in local social contexts.



Such transregional continuities provide a foundation for understanding Buddhist heritage as a potential medium of regional cultural engagement. Within the SAARC context, shared Buddhist traditions offer opportunities for collaborative heritage preservation, pilgrimage tourism, and intercultural dialogue. As a long-standing center of Theravāda continuity, Sri Lanka occupies a particularly strategic position in mobilizing Buddhist art and architecture as instruments of cultural diplomacy, facilitating renewed connections across South Asia through a historically grounded framework of shared religious heritage.

### Literary Traditions, Ritual Practices, and Festive Traditions

While Buddhist art and architecture constitute visible and enduring markers of religious heritage across South Asia, the cultural dimensions of Buddhism extend equally into literary traditions, ritual practices, and lived customs. Intangible forms of heritage, including canonical texts, oral transmission, festivals, and performative traditions, have played a crucial role in preserving Buddhist teachings while simultaneously adapting them to diverse social and cultural environments. Together, these practices provide a shared cultural framework across the SAARC region, enabling both regional continuity and local differentiation in Buddhist life.

Among the earliest and most influential textual traditions is the Pāli Canon (Tipiṭaka). It was transmitted orally for several centuries before being committed to writing in Sri Lanka during the first century BCE, traditionally associated with the reign of Vaṭṭagaṃaṇī Abhaya. This act of textual preservation established Sri Lanka as a major center of Theravāda literary authority and contributed decisively to the dissemination of canonical traditions throughout South and Southeast Asia.

The Pāli Canon represents the earliest complete corpus of Buddhist scripture and forms the doctrinal foundation of Theravāda Buddhism. Its transcription in Sri Lanka ensured the continuity of textual transmission at a time when Buddhist institutions elsewhere in the subcontinent were facing political and social upheaval (Gombrich, 2006). This preservation enables Sri Lanka to function as a principal center for the transmission of Theravāda literature, influencing monastic education and ritual practice across regions such as Myanmar, Thailand, and Cambodia.

The codification of Theravāda doctrine and meditative discipline reached a critical moment in the fifth century CE with the work of Buddhaghosa, particularly his composition of the Visuddhimagga. Drawing upon earlier Sinhala commentarial traditions, this text systematized ethical conduct, meditation, and wisdom into a coherent framework that standardized Theravāda orthodoxy across South Asia (Malalasekera, 1928). The material culture of manuscript production, including palm-leaf texts, decorated covers, and monastic libraries, further reinforced the authority of these traditions and facilitated their circulation through transregional monastic networks.

Parallel to the Theravāda corpus, Mahāyāna Buddhism generated an extensive body of Sanskrit literature. The corpus includes influential sūtras such as the Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra and the philosophical works of figures such as Nāgārjuna and Asaṅga. These texts articulated sophisticated doctrines of emptiness, compassion, and bodhisattva practice that profoundly shaped Buddhist intellectual life across Asia.



Major monastic universities, including Nālandā, Vikramaśīla, and Odantapurī, served as important centers of literary production and scholarly exchange, attracting students from across the Asian continent (Huntington, 1985). Following the decline of Buddhism in much of the Indian subcontinent, Nepal assumed a significant custodial role in preserving Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna manuscripts. Many of these texts survive today only in Nepalese or Tibetan recensions (Slusser, 1982). In this capacity, Nepal emerged as a key mediator in the transmission of Buddhist literary heritage.

Beyond canonical scriptures, Buddhist narrative literature played a formative role in shaping the vernacular literary traditions across South Asia. Stories from the Jātaka tales, which recount the previous lives of the Buddha, were translated into several languages, including Sinhala, Bengali, and Nepali. Through these translations, Buddhist ethical ideals became embedded within local folklore and oral storytelling traditions. Literary works such as Pūjāvaliya in Sinhala and Caryāpada corpus in Bengali further illustrate how Buddhist thought influenced both narrative prose and mystical poetry. These compositions blended religious instruction with vernacular expression, allowing Buddhist teachings to circulate beyond monastic and scholastic contexts (Chakrabarti, 1992).

Ritual practices and liturgical celebrations constitute another important dimension of Buddhist cultural life in South Asia. These practices function as embodied forms through which ethical values, communal identity, and spiritual discipline are maintained. Observances such as uposatha days emphasize restraint, mindfulness, and moral reflection within monastic and lay communities. In contrast, large-scale public festivals integrate performance, visual symbolism, and collective participation. For example, the masked dance festivals known as Tsechu in the Himalayan regions integrate ritual practice, demonstrating how Buddhist traditions have historically shaped both literary culture and communal religious life in the region.

Anthropologically, these ritual forms operate as mechanisms of social cohesion and religious continuity. They link individual practitioners to wider networks of meaning, authority, and communal belonging. Despite regional variations in form and expression, Buddhist ritual traditions across South Asia share common orientations toward devotion, ethical cultivation, and collective memory. As living practices rather than static inheritances, they demonstrate how Buddhism continues to adapt to changing social contexts while sustaining a transregional cultural heritage rooted in shared historical experience.

Among these ritual observances, Vesak is also known as Vesak, Buddha Jayānti, or Buddha Pūrṇimā. This is the most widely celebrated Buddhist festival across South Asia. The festival commemorates three pivotal events in the life of Gautama Buddha: His birth, enlightenment, and parinirvāṇa. It is celebrated on the full moon day in May and functions as a shared religious and cultural observance across countries of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), particularly in Sri Lanka, Nepal, India, and Bangladesh. The festival has also received international recognition through the designation of the Day of Vesak by the United Nations in 1999 (United Nations General Assembly, 1999). Although Vesak reflects a shared devotional focus on the Buddha, its modes of celebration vary considerably across regions, shaped by local historical experiences and cultural



traditions. As Table 1 illustrates, the shared ritual framework of Vesak is alongside its diverse regional expressions across South Asia.

**Table 1** Framework for the Development of South Asian Buddhism

Dimension	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Outcome	Social Outcome	Cultural Function
<b>Canonical Texts</b>	Core Buddhist Doctrines	Scriptural Transmission	Philosophical Interpretation	Consolidation of Core Buddhist Doctrines	Intellectual and philosophical traditions	Preservation and interpretation of doctrine
<b>Narrative Literature</b>	Local Folklore	Adaptation into Narrative Traditions	Vernacular Prose and Poetry	Ethical and Liturgical Traditions	Cultural and literary development	Transmission through folklore and vernacular expression
<b>Ritual Practices</b>	Ethical and Liturgical Traditions	Ritual Observances	Ritual Observances and Festivals	Communal Religious Practices	Festivals, rituals, and collective identity	Embodied religious practice and communal participation

In Sri Lanka, Vesak is marked by the public display of illuminated lanterns (*Vesak kūḍu*), elaborate pandals depicting episodes from the life of the Buddha, religious processions, and extensive practices of *dāna* (Almsgiving). In Nepal, the festival is observed through large-scale pilgrimages to Lumbinī, the birthplace of the Buddha, where rituals, chanting, and communal offerings take place. In India, Bodhgayā, the site of the Buddha's enlightenment, becomes the focal point for international gatherings of monastics and lay devotees (Goonatilake, 1998). These parallel yet distinct practices underscore Vesak's role as a unifying Buddhist observance while accommodating diverse regional ritual expressions. In recent decades, Vesak has also gained significance within the framework of cultural diplomacy. International Vesak conferences, particularly those organized in Sri Lanka, bring Buddhist leaders, scholars, and diplomatic representatives from across Asia. Through such gatherings, the festival serves not only as a religious commemoration but also as a platform for transnational dialogue and cultural exchange within the global Buddhist community.

Beyond Vesak, South Asia hosts a range of Buddhist festivals rooted in specific ethnic and historical traditions. In Sri Lanka, the Esala Perahera of Kandy, centred on the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic, represents one of the most elaborate ritual spectacles in the region. The procession featured caparisoned elephants, drummers, dancers, and monastic participants. Through these elements, the festival symbolically integrates Buddhist religious authority with historical notions of kingship and state patronage (Holt, 1991). Such celebrations function not only as acts of devotion but also as instruments of cultural continuity, social cohesion, and heritage tourism.



In Bhutan, annual Tsechus are characterized by masked ritual dances known as cham. These performances re-enact episodes from the lives of Buddhist saints and tantric masters. They represent a synthesis of Vajrayāna ritual, theatrical expression, and communal participation, while reinforcing collective identity and moral instruction (Aris, 1979).

In Nepal, the Newar Buddhist community observes Samyak Mahādāna, a grand public ceremony of almsgiving that embodies ideals of generosity, merit-making, and social solidarity. Similarly, in Bangladesh, Madhu Pūrṇimā is observed primarily among Buddhist communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. This commemorates narratives of reconciliation associated with Gautama Buddha. The festival highlights the continuity of Buddhist traditions within a predominantly non-Buddhist cultural environment.

Buddhism has exerted a profound influence on the performing arts of South Asia, particularly through narrative adaptations of the Jātaka Tales. These accounts of the previous lives of Gautama Buddha have inspired a range of dramatic and dance traditions across the region. Examples include Sinhalese theatre in Sri Lanka, Tibetan opera known as Lhamo, and masked ritual dances in Bhutan. Through these performances, ethical teachings are communicated in embodied and accessible forms. As a result, performing arts function simultaneously as educational, devotional, and aesthetic expressions within Buddhist cultural life.

Musical and chant traditions further constitute an important dimension of Buddhist intangible heritage. In Sri Lanka, Pāli chanting forms a central component of ritual and devotional practice. In India, diverse liturgical innovations and musical traditions accompany temple rituals and public ceremonies. In Vajrayāna contexts in Bhutan and Nepal, ritual music performed with instruments and chants creates sonic environments that support meditation and ceremonial efficacy. These vocal and musical forms function both as religious practices and as cultural expressions, preserving sacred soundscapes across generations (Gombrich & Obeyesekere, 1989).

An oral narrative tradition, particularly folktales derived from Jātaka Tales, continues to circulate widely in rural regions of South Asia. These narratives shape popular moral consciousness and facilitate the intergenerational transmission of Buddhist values. Through festivals, performances, and oral storytelling traditions, Buddhism remains embedded in everyday cultural life. In this way, Buddhist teachings extend beyond monastic institutions to the broader social and cultural fabric of South Asian societies.

### **Culinary Heritage, Pilgrimage Rituals, and Vernacular Cultural Expressions**

Buddhism exerts a sustained influence on everyday cultural practices across South Asia, and culinary traditions provide a significant expression of Buddhist ethical values. Vegetarianism, grounded in the principle of ahimsā (Non-violence), represents one of the most visible manifestations of Buddhist moral philosophy in daily life. In regions such as Sri Lanka and Nepal, vegetarian food practices are commonly observed, particularly during religious occasions and observance days. Closely associated with this culinary ethic is the practice of Dāna (Generosity), especially the offering of food to monastic communities.



The ritualized distribution of food has historically structured relationships between monastics and lay communities. It fosters patterns of reciprocity, compassion, and communal responsibility. Through these practices, Buddhist ethical principles become embedded in everyday social life and continue to shape the cultural fabric of South Asian societies.

Pilgrimage constitutes another central dimension of Buddhist cultural practice and serves as a unifying force among the countries of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Within a broader spiritual and ethical framework, pilgrimage facilitates both the accumulation of personal religious merit and forms of collective cultural exchange. Major pilgrimage sites such as Lumbinī in Nepal, Bodhgayā in India, Anurādhapura in Sri Lanka, Boudhanāth in Nepal, and Somapura Mahavihara in Bangladesh attract devotees from across South Asia and beyond.

These sacred sites form a network of transregional devotion. They encourage intercultural interaction among pilgrims and religious communities. In this way, Buddhist pilgrimage landscapes reinforce the role of Buddhism as a cross-border integrative tradition within South Asia.

Although the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have witnessed a notable resurgence of Buddhism in several South Asian countries, earlier historical periods saw a decline in Buddhist institutional presence in parts of the region. In countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and the Maldives, this revival has taken different social and cultural forms. In India, the emergence of the Navayāna movement under the leadership of B. R. Ambedkar marked a significant re-articulation of Buddhism as a framework for social justice, equality, and emancipation for historically marginalized communities (Zelliot, 2013). This reinterpretation underscores Buddhism's capacity for adaptation while retaining its core ethical foundations.

In Bangladesh, Buddhist communities, particularly in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, continue to preserve Theravāda Buddhism through practices such as Pāli chanting, monastic discipline, and ritual observance. These practices demonstrate the resilience of Buddhist ritual culture despite demographic marginalization of Buddhist communities in the region. At the same time, processes of globalization have expanded the scope of Buddhist intangible heritage beyond regional boundaries. Practices such as meditation and mindfulness, although not exclusively Buddhist, are strongly influenced by Buddhist contemplative traditions and have gained international recognition as approaches to mental well-being and ethical living. Through this global circulation, elements of Buddhist cultural practice continue to shape contemporary discussions on spirituality, health, and ethical self-cultivation.

Within the context of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), these practices are increasingly promoted as elements of cultural diplomacy. In this sense, Buddhism is positioned not only as a historical legacy but also as a contemporary resource within global wellness culture. Through the continued vitality of culinary customs, pilgrimage networks, ritual traditions, and revitalised movements, Buddhism remains deeply embedded in vernacular cultural expressions. These practices sustain their relevance in both local communities and transnational cultural contexts.



Although the historical prominence of Buddhism in South Asia is often demonstrated through its material culture, particularly artistic and architectural achievements, the domain of intangible cultural heritage most vividly illustrates the continued vitality of Buddhism in the region. Festivals such as Vesāk and the Esala Perahera, together with Pāli and Sanskrit literary traditions, oral narratives, masked ritual performances, and pilgrimage practices collectively attest to Buddhism's enduring role in shaping cultural identities within the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC, 1985).

The persistence of these intangible forms, despite significant political transformation and shifts in religious dominance, underscores their remarkable resilience and adaptive capacity.

Even in contexts where institutional Buddhism experienced periods of decline, Buddhist narratives, ethical values, and ritual practices were absorbed into local folk traditions and communal life. This diffusion enabled Buddhist ideas to survive beyond formal religious institutions and become embedded within vernacular cultural expressions. As a result, intangible heritage provides an important foundation for regional cultural integration within the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Shared festivals, narratives, and ritual practices transcend political boundaries and foster a sense of collective cultural affinity rooted in a common Buddhist legacy.

## Conclusions

This article argues that Buddhist tradition in South Asia, and particularly in Sri Lanka, should not be understood as a static reservoir of monuments but rather as a relational system through which doctrinal authority, ethical practice, and institutional continuity are continually reproduced. It therefore proposes a theoretical shift in understanding of "Living Buddhist Heritage," conceptualizing it as a networked process that links sacred sites, monastic lineages, ritual performance, and transregional affiliations. Where heritage is not simply preserved but actively produced through ongoing negotiations of authority, identity, and legitimacy. By approaching heritage as a relational and diplomatic resource, the study advances how monastic networks and sacred sites can function as instruments of cultural diplomacy and regional connectivity. At the same time, these networks may also become embedded in nationalist narratives, soft-power politics, and heritage economies. The politicization of Buddhist symbols in statecraft and tourism, therefore, reveals the tension between devotional continuity and political instrumentalization, highlighting the need for a processual perspective that attends not only to institutional continuity but also to the ethical and political stakes of heritage deployment within plural and globalized contexts. Sri Lanka's long-standing Theravāda tradition provides a particularly compelling case for examining these dynamics as the island's dense institutional history and resilient monastic lineages demonstrate how doctrinal transmission is sustained through networked structures across time. Although historically specific, this case provides a comparative framework for analyzing Buddhist heritage formations elsewhere in South Asia and Southeast Asia. By foregrounding adaptation, relational interdependence, and contested renewal, the study contributes to the fields of Buddhist Anthropology and Heritage Studies. It



exhibits that religious traditions endure not through preservation alone, but through dynamic processes of negotiation and transformation.

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