

THE INDIAN ADAPTIVE MIS-USE OF HERITAGE STRUCTURES?

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ALILA FORT BISHANGARH



Figure 1 Alila Fort Bishangarh photographed atop the hill with local village women below travelling to get water from a well

ABSTRACT

The adaptive re-use of heritage properties in India, particularly in Rajasthan, has gained prominence as a strategy for preserving architectural legacy while fostering tourism and economic development. This paper explores the case of Alila Fort Bishangarh, a historic fort in Rajasthan, which underwent a remarkable transformation into a luxury hotel. Through a comprehensive analysis of the project, including its historical context, socio-economic impact, and environmental implications, this study sheds light on both the positive and negative consequences of heritage regeneration. While the project has contributed to economic stimulus, heritage preservation, and tourism development, it has also exacerbated socio-economic disparities, cultural displacement, and environmental degradation. Moreover, the prevalence of luxury hotel conversions in India raises questions about inclusivity and social equity in heritage conservation efforts. The paper concludes with recommendations for diversifying adaptive reuse typologies and promoting community-centric redevelopment to ensure the holistic and sustainable development of heritage properties in India.

ADAPTIVE RE-USE OF HERITAGE PROPERTIES IN INDIA

India, with its rich cultural heritage and historical landmarks, has increasingly embraced the concept of adaptive re-use as a means of preserving its architectural legacy while promoting sustainable development. Adaptive re-use involves repurposing historic structures for contemporary use, thereby breathing new life into heritage sites and revitalizing surrounding communities. One prominent form of adaptive re-use in India, particularly in the state of Rajasthan, is the conversion of historic forts, palaces, and mansions into luxury heritage hotels. This trend reflects a desire to leverage India's heritage assets for tourism and hospitality while maintaining their historical and cultural significance but also highlights and underlying means for the rich hoteliers to get richer.

Rajasthan, renowned for its rich cultural heritage and architectural marvels, stands as a testament to India's vibrant history. The state is home to numerous historic structures, including forts, palaces, havelis (mansions), and stepwells, a product of the centuries of royal patronage, artistic excellence, and cultural exchange. In recent years, Rajasthan has witnessed a growing trend towards the adaptive re-use of these historic structures, where they are repurposed for contemporary use, an effort to breathe new life into these architectural gems while preserving their heritage value.

The most prevalent type of adaptive re-use in Rajasthan is the transformation of historic forts and palaces into luxury hotels often owned by big hotel chains. These projects involve converting erstwhile royal residences and defensive strongholds into upscale accommodations, blending modern amenities with traditional charm to offer guests a unique and immersive experience or alternatively provide an experience for the wealthy to feel wealthy.

The following are some examples of heritage buildings in Rajasthan that have been successfully converted into luxury hotels:

Neemrana Fort Palace: Originally built in the 15th century as a fort, Neemrana Fort Palace underwent adaptive re-use in the late 20th century to become one of India's first heritage hotels. Located in Alwar district, Neemrana Fort Palace offers guests a glimpse into Rajasthan's regal past while providing luxurious accommodations and panoramic views of the surrounding landscape.



Figure 2 Neemrana Fort Hotel



Figure 3 Rambagh Palace Hotel, Jaipur

Rambagh Palace, Jaipur: Once the residence of the Maharaja (king) of Jaipur, Rambagh Palace has been transformed into a luxury hotel by the Taj Group. Dating back to the 19th century, this opulent palace showcases Indo-Saracenic architecture and ornate interiors, offering guests a taste of royal living amidst sprawling gardens and grand courtyards.

Umaid Bhawan Palace, Jodhpur: Built in the 20th century, Umaid Bhawan Palace is a magnificent edifice that blends Art Deco and Rajputana styles. Part of the palace is still occupied by the royal family, while the rest has been converted into a luxury hotel managed by the Taj Group. With its lavish suites, fine dining restaurants, and world-class amenities, Umaid Bhawan Palace “offers a regal retreat for discerning travelers”.



Figure 4 Umaid Bhawan Palace Hotel



Figure 5 Samode Palace

Samode Palace: Situated near Jaipur, Samode Palace is a splendid example of Rajput architecture, dating back to the 16th century. Today, it serves as a boutique hotel, offering guests an enchanting blend of history, luxury, and hospitality. The palace's intricately decorated rooms, serene courtyards, and lush gardens evoke the grandeur of Rajasthan's royal heritage.

ALILA FORT BISHANGARH HOTEL

Nestled amidst the rugged Aravalli hills of Rajasthan, India, amidst the humble village of Bishangarh, stands the historic Bishangarh Fort, a majestic testament to the region's rich cultural heritage and architectural legacy. Perched atop a rocky outcrop, the fort's imposing silhouette commands panoramic views of the surrounding landscape, offering a glimpse into centuries of history and tradition. In recent years, the fort has undergone a remarkable transformation, evolving from a relic of the past into a luxurious retreat known as the Alila Fort Bishangarh. This ambitious regeneration project, led by the Alila Hotels and Resorts group, aimed to marry the fort's timeless charm with contemporary elegance, offering travelers an experience steeped in history and luxury.



Figure 6 Interior of the restaurant, Alila Bishangarh

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Figure 7 Interior of the Regal Suite, Alila Bishangarh

This all-suite resort has 59 stately rooms and suites that are designed with spacious interiors are furnished with large bay windows and daybeds, expansive bathrooms with footed bathtubs, luxury bedding and room amenities with each room having a 42' LCD TV, WiFi access and Minibar. It consists of Heritage Rooms (18), Royal Suites (11), Grand Suites (20), Regal Suites (8) and Presidential Suites (2). Down the hill, the 'Haveli' comprises of the

arrival courtyard luxurious banquet lawns, the pool, pool terrace with a restaurant, gym and a club for children. It is important to note that for a resident of the hotel to visit these amenities they to travel by car down the road, often making multiple trips through the day. Within the fort, are four speciality themed restaurants, locale for grand weddings and celebratory events including MICE facilities, a royal banquet hall, a banquet dining room, a conference and meeting room and an expansive lawn along with a library and a spa.

THE VILLAGE OF BISHANGARH

The village of Bishangarh, situated in the Alwar district of Rajasthan, India, is a rural settlement nestled amidst the picturesque Aravalli hills. With a rich cultural heritage and a close-knit community, Bishangarh exudes the charm and tranquility characteristic of traditional Rajasthani villages. However, like many rural areas in India, Bishangarh faces various socio-economic challenges that impact the livelihoods and well-being of its residents.



Figure 8 The Village of Bishangarh, as seen from the hotel

The village is home to a diverse population engaged in various professions and occupations that sustain the local economy. Agriculture forms the backbone of Bishangarh's economy, with a significant portion of the population engaged in farming. The fertile lands surrounding the village support the cultivation of crops such as wheat, barley, millet, and mustard, providing sustenance for both the village and neighbouring areas. Animal husbandry,

including dairy farming and animal rearing, is another vital occupation in Bishangarh. Cattle, goats, and poultry are commonly raised for milk, meat, and other agricultural products, contributing to the village's agricultural output and rural livelihoods. Bishangarh is known for its skilled artisans and craftsmen who specialize in traditional crafts such as pottery, weaving, and metalwork. These artisans play a crucial role in preserving and perpetuating Rajasthan's rich cultural heritage through their craftsmanship and artistic expression.

The village environment clearly bears a stark contrast to the exuberance and luxury of the hotel making the presence of the hotel in such a neighbourhood slightly ironical.

Additionally, the village lacks essential infrastructure, with only 30% of households having access to paved roads and approximately 40% having access to electricity. Additionally, piped water supply is available to only 25% of households, leading to reliance on groundwater sources, which are prone to depletion and contamination. The absence of basic amenities impedes transportation, communication, and access to vital services, hindering overall development and quality of life in the village. Whereas, the hotel is serviced with a steady water and electrical supply and benefits from a fully paved road that is solely purposed for bringing its residents from the high to its doorstep.

Poverty rates in the village are also significant, with approximately 60% of the population living below the poverty line. Unemployment rates are also high, particularly among marginalized communities and landless laborers, with only 35% of the working-age population engaged in formal employment. Limited job opportunities in agriculture, crafts, and small-scale enterprises contribute to income inequality and economic vulnerability, exacerbating poverty and social disparities in the village.



Figure 9 Village women travelling to get water



Figure 10 The house of the immediate neighbour of the hotel

While the hotel did to some extent contribute towards providing employment to the villagers, since a majority of the villagers remain uneducated, they are not suitable for working on the establishment. Despite the presence of educational institutions, access to quality education remains a challenge in the village. The literacy rate stands at 55%, significantly below the national average, with girls and marginalized groups disproportionately affected. Inadequate infrastructure, including classrooms and educational materials, coupled with socio-cultural barriers, hinder educational attainment and perpetuate intergenerational cycles of poverty and inequality.

Healthcare access and infrastructure in Bishangarh Village are inadequate, with only one primary healthcare center serving the entire population. There is a severe shortage of trained medical professionals, with one doctor for every 5,000 residents, far below the recommended ratio. Limited availability of essential medicines and diagnostic facilities further compounds healthcare challenges, resulting in preventable diseases, maternal mortality, and child malnutrition.

Bishangarh Village is vulnerable to environmental degradation, with soil erosion, deforestation, and water scarcity posing significant threats to agricultural productivity and rural livelihoods. Approximately 70% of agricultural land is affected by soil erosion, leading to declining crop yields and land degradation. Moreover, reliance on unsustainable agricultural practices and groundwater extraction exacerbates water scarcity, contributing to food insecurity and socio-economic vulnerability among rural households.

Addressing environmental challenges is critical to ensuring sustainable development and resilience in Bishangarh.

THE LEGACY OF THE FORT OF BISHANGARH

The history of Bishangarh Fort, now known as Alila Bishangarh Fort, is steeped in centuries-old tales of valor, strategic importance, and architectural grandeur. Located in the rural village of Bishangarh, nestled amidst the Aravalli hills in the Alwar district of Rajasthan, India, the fort has witnessed a series of transformations and periods of neglect over the centuries.

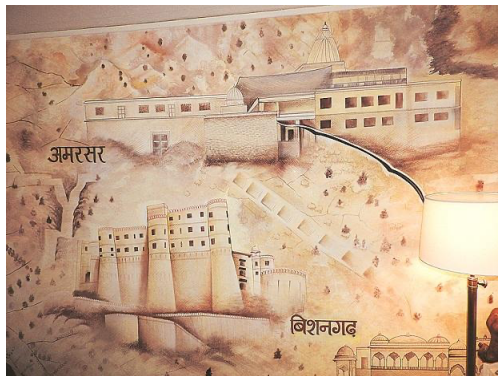


Figure 11 An old painting of the Fort

Bishangarh Fort traces its origins back to the 18th century when it was constructed by Thakur Nawal Singh, a nobleman of the Jaipur court. Built atop a hill, the fort served as a defensive stronghold and strategic outpost, guarding the trade routes that passed through the region. Its elevated position provided a commanding view of the surrounding landscape, making it an ideal location for military defense and surveillance, predominantly protecting Jaipur.

During its early years, Bishangarh Fort played a crucial role in the defense of the Jaipur kingdom against rival Rajput clans and external invaders. Its formidable walls, bastions, and watchtowers served as a deterrent to enemy forces and provided refuge to the local populace during times of conflict. The fort's strategic location also facilitated communication and trade between neighboring kingdoms, contributing to the region's socio-economic development.

Despite its historical significance, Bishangarh Fort experienced periods of neglect and decline over the centuries. Following the waning of feudal conflicts and the advent of British colonial rule in India, the fort's military significance diminished, leading to a gradual decline in its maintenance and upkeep. As the focus shifted towards modernization and urbanization, rural forts like Bishangarh were relegated to obscurity, and it faded into the backdrop of history.

By the mid-20th century, Bishangarh Fort had fallen into a state of abandonment and disrepair. With the decline of traditional feudal structures and the partition of India, many historic forts and palaces across Rajasthan were left neglected and the Bishangarh Fort too bore the scars of neglect, its crumbling walls and dilapidated structures serving as a silent reminder of Rajasthan's glorious past.

Eventually efforts were made to restore and revitalize Bishangarh Fort. Recognizing its historical and cultural significance, the fort underwent extensive restoration work to preserve its architectural integrity and heritage value. The adaptive re-use of Bishangarh Fort as the

Alila Bishangarh Fort represents a visionary endeavor to transform a neglected relic of the past into a vibrant destination for heritage tourism and hospitality.

THE REGENERATION PROJECT

The Fort Regeneration Project aimed to breathe new life into the historic Bishangarh Fort. Led by the Alila Hotels and Resorts group, the project sought to restore the fort to its former glory while transforming it into a luxury heritage hotel, now known as the Alila Fort Bishangarh. This ambitious endeavor involved meticulous planning, extensive restoration work, and a vision to blend heritage preservation with contemporary hospitality.

The current ownership of Alila Fort Bishangarh lies with the Alila Hotels and Resorts group, a luxury hospitality giant that has been known to heavily market its commitment to sustainable tourism and heritage conservation. The group acquired the fort with the vision of restoring it to its former splendor and creating a unique destination that celebrates Rajasthan's rich cultural heritage.

Many considerations were made in order to justify the regeneration of the fort.

Historical Significance: Bishangarh Fort, with its centuries-old history and architectural grandeur, held immense cultural significance for the state of Rajasthan. Recognizing its potential as a heritage destination, the Alila Hotels and Resorts group saw an opportunity to revitalize the fort and showcase its historical and architectural legacy to a global audience.

Tourism Potential: Rajasthan is renowned for its tourism attractions, including historic forts and palaces. The growing demand for experiential travel and luxury hospitality presented an opportunity to leverage the unique charm of Bishangarh Fort and tap into the luxury tourism market.

Market Demand: Extensive market research and feasibility studies were conducted to assess the demand for luxury accommodation in the region. The decision to turn Bishangarh Fort into a luxury hotel was driven by the perceived market demand for upscale experiences and unique heritage destinations.

Brand Identity: The Alila Hotels and Resorts group's brand identity, characterized by a commitment to sustainability, authenticity, and personalized service, influenced the decision to position Alila Fort Bishangarh as a luxury heritage hotel. The project aimed to promote the local population of Bishangarh by creating job opportunities for them and support their small businesses.

CONSEQUENCES OF THE REGENERATION

Constructive Consequences of the Regeneration of Bishangarh Fort:

1. Economic Stimulus:

The regeneration of Bishangarh Fort has provided some economic stimulus to the local community and region. The establishment of Alila Fort Bishangarh has created employment opportunities for local residents, ranging from construction workers to hospitality staff. Tourism revenue generated by the luxury hotel contributes to the local economy through spending on accommodations, dining, and cultural experiences.

2. Heritage Preservation:

The regeneration project has ensured the preservation and restoration of Bishangarh Fort's historical and architectural heritage. Extensive restoration work has helped revive the fort's original features, including its ramparts, courtyards, and intricate detailing. Additionally, almost the entire original structure has been retained in the adaptive re-use process.

3. Tourism Development:

The regeneration of Bishangarh Fort has contributed to the development of heritage tourism in the region. Further, the hotel organises excursions into the village that allows people to visit the local artisans and increases visibility for these small businesses.

4. Infrastructure Improvement:

The regeneration project has led to improvements in infrastructure and amenities in Bishangarh village, specifically those regions that neighbour the hotel. Upgrades to roads, utilities, and transportation facilities enhance accessibility and connectivity, benefiting both residents and visitors.

5. Community Empowerment:

The regeneration project has empowered the local community by providing opportunities for skill development, capacity building, and entrepreneurship. Initiatives such as training programs, artisan workshops, and community engagement activities enable residents to participate in and benefit from the tourism economy.

6. Environmental Conservation:

The regeneration project incorporates sustainable design and conservation practices to minimize its environmental footprint. Inside, rocks are integrated into the walls and roof to improve thermal insulation, the open design of the rooms maximises cross ventilation and daylight penetration and an advanced waste management system have helped the building itself be a sustainable building. Additionally, 90% of the materials used in the construction were locally sourced.

Detrimental Consequences of the Regeneration of Bishangarh Fort:

1. Socio-Economic Disparity:

The regeneration project has widened the socio-economic gap between affluent tourists staying at Alila Fort Bishangarh and the local villagers, many of whom struggle with poverty and limited access to resources. The luxury hotel caters primarily to high-end clientele, creating a sense of exclusion and marginalization among the majority of the village population who cannot afford to patronize the establishment.

2. Cultural Displacement:

The transformation of Bishangarh Fort into a luxury hotel may in the future lead to cultural displacement and loss of community identity as the historic landmark becomes privatized and commercialized. Traditional cultural practices and livelihoods, such as artisanal crafts and agricultural traditions, may be marginalized or commodified for tourist consumption, eroding the authenticity of local culture.

3. Environmental Degradation:

The regeneration project may contribute to environmental degradation through increased tourist footfall, resource extraction, and waste generation. Pressure on natural resources, such as water and land, may lead to overexploitation and ecological imbalance, threatening the delicate ecosystem of the surrounding area.

4. Heritage Commodification:

The commodification of Bishangarh Fort's heritage value for commercial gain has already resulted in the loss of its intrinsic cultural significance and historical integrity. The original intention of the fort was that of a watch tower and a military defence station, the transformation into a luxury hotel has led to complete loss of the identity of what used to be.

5. Social Disruption:

The influx of tourists and the presence of a luxury hotel is disruptive of the social fabric of Bishangarh village, and can often lead to tensions and conflicts between residents and visitors making some areas of the village not safe for visitors. Issues such as noise pollution, traffic congestion, and cultural insensitivity could strain community relations and diminish the quality of life for local residents.

6. Gentrification Pressures:

The regeneration of Bishangarh Fort as a luxury hotel is set to fuel gentrification pressures in the surrounding area, leading to increased property values, displacement of low-income residents, and loss of affordable housing options. Rising land speculation and commercial development could alter the character and demographics of the village, eroding its traditional charm and sense of community.

WHY IS LUXURY STAY THE ONLY OPTION FOR REGENERATION IN INDIA?

Most adaptive reuse projects involving heritage buildings in India have tended to culminate in the establishment of luxury hotels. This trend can be attributed to several factors, both economic and cultural, that are shaping the landscape of heritage conservation and tourism development in the country.

Economic Viability: Luxury hotels are often perceived as financially lucrative ventures, attracting high-spending tourists and offering substantial returns on investment. The heritage status of buildings adds an element of exclusivity and charm, further enhancing their appeal to affluent travelers seeking unique and upscale accommodations. Since this model has proven financially beneficial, it is repeated constantly while ignoring the inaccessibility of these establishments by a majority of the country's population.

Cultural Perception: In India, there is a cultural reverence for heritage structures, particularly those associated with royalty and aristocracy. Transforming these buildings into luxury hotels allows them to be preserved and celebrated while also capitalizing on their historical allure. Luxury hotels symbolize prestige and opulence, aligning with the aspirational desires of both domestic and international tourists. However, it is important to be mindful that royalty and aristocracy were abolished for a reason.

Tourism Promotion: The Indian government's focus on tourism promotion and infrastructure development has incentivized the conversion of heritage buildings into luxury hotels. By attracting high-spending tourists, these projects contribute to the growth of the hospitality sector and generate revenue for local economies.

Regulatory Environment: India's regulatory framework for heritage conservation and adaptive reuse projects may also influence the prevalence of luxury hotel developments. Government policies and incentives aimed at promoting heritage tourism and private investment in conservation efforts may prioritize projects with high-profit potential, such as luxury hotels.

The prevalent trend in India of adapting heritage structures into luxury hotels raises concerns regarding the exclusion of a significant portion of the population who cannot afford to access these facilities. Statistically, a vast majority of India's population falls within lower socio-economic brackets, with limited disposable income for luxury accommodations. Despite this reality, the adaptive reuse projects overwhelmingly favor luxury hotels, catering primarily to affluent tourists and high-end clientele. This bias towards luxury establishments perpetuates socio-economic disparities and further marginalizes the majority of the population who cannot partake in the benefits of heritage conservation and tourism development. The prioritization of profit-driven ventures over community-centric redevelopment overlooks the needs and aspirations of the broader populace.

Consequently, there is a pressing need to diversify the typologies of adaptive reuse projects to include spaces that serve the interests and well-being of all segments of society. By channeling resources towards projects that promote inclusivity, cultural enrichment, and socio-economic empowerment, India can harness the full potential of its rich heritage assets for the collective benefit of its diverse population.

While luxury hotels dominate the landscape of adaptive reuse projects in India, there are alternative building typologies that could be considered for sustainable and community-centric redevelopment.

Mixed-Use Developments: Transforming heritage buildings into mixed-use developments that incorporate residential, commercial, and cultural spaces can foster vibrant, inclusive communities. The High Line in New York City, a repurposed elevated railway line featuring parks, public art installations, and retail spaces, demonstrates the potential of mixed-use adaptive reuse projects to enhance urban livability and cultural vibrancy that is free to access.



Figure 12 The Highline, New York

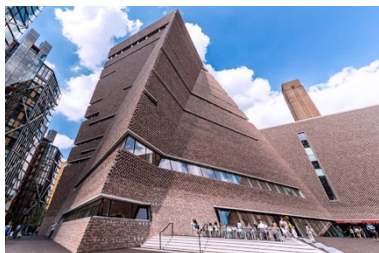


Figure 13 Tate Modern, London

Creative Hubs and Art Spaces:

Converting heritage buildings into creative hubs, art galleries, and cultural centers can nurture artistic expression, support local artists, and revitalize neighborhoods. The Tate Modern in London, housed in a former power station, exemplifies how adaptive reuse projects can serve as catalysts for cultural regeneration and urban renewal and is also free for the public.

Educational Institutions: Repurposing heritage buildings as educational institutions, libraries, and research centers can preserve architectural heritage while advancing knowledge and learning. The University of Amsterdam's Roeterseiland Campus, situated in a renovated industrial complex, showcases the potential of adaptive reuse to create inspiring environments for academic pursuit and innovation.

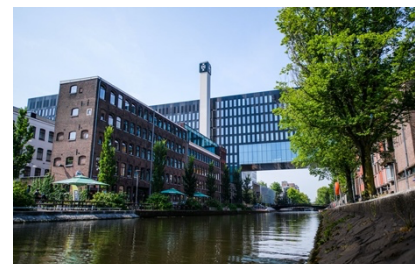


Figure 14 UoA Roeterseiland Campus, Amsterdam

By diversifying the typologies of adaptive reuse projects beyond luxury hotels, India can promote sustainable development, community engagement, and cultural preservation. By drawing inspiration from successful case studies worldwide,

policymakers, developers, and conservationists can explore innovative approaches to heritage conservation and urban regeneration that benefit society at large.

IRONICAL URBAN PLACEMENT

The misplacement of the Alila Bishangarh Fort is starkly evident when one considers the stark contrast between the average person residing in Bishangarh village, often struggling with poverty and limited opportunities, and the affluent guests staying at the luxury hotel. For the villagers, witnessing a fancy car gliding through their humble streets, disappearing behind the gates of the opulent hotel, serves as a poignant reminder of the gaping class divide that exists within their community. It's a sight that underscores the disparity in wealth, privilege, and access to resources between the local residents and the elite clientele of the hotel. The mere proximity of the luxury hotel, once a symbol of historical pride and communal heritage, now stands as a tangible representation of exclusion and unattainable luxury for the villagers. Turning the fort into a luxury hotel, while economically lucrative for some, exacerbates social tensions and deepens the sense of marginalization among the less fortunate members of the community. From a social perspective, the decision to transform the fort into a luxury establishment appears misguided, as it perpetuates inequality and widens the chasm between the haves and the have-nots in Bishangarh.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the adaptive re-use of heritage properties, exemplified by the case of Alila Fort Bishangarh, presents a complex interplay of opportunities and challenges for heritage conservation and sustainable development in India. While the regeneration of historic landmarks into luxury hotels has brought economic prosperity, cultural revival, and tourism promotion, it has also underscored socio-economic disparities, cultural commodification, and environmental concerns. The predominance of luxury hotel conversions reflects a broader trend of prioritizing profit-driven ventures over community-centric redevelopment, thereby marginalizing most of the population who cannot afford access to these exclusive amenities. To address these issues, there is a need for a more inclusive and participatory approach to heritage conservation that prioritizes community empowerment, cultural preservation, and environmental sustainability. By diversifying adaptive reuse typologies, promoting equitable access to heritage resources, and fostering dialogue between stakeholders, India can harness the full potential of its rich architectural legacy for the collective benefit of present and future generations.



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