

Heritage and Sustainability: Reflections of a Visiting Scholar at RIWATCH

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Abstract

From May 20th to 23rd, I visited the Research Institute of World's Ancient Traditions, Cultures, and Heritage (RIWATCH) in Arunachal Pradesh to explore heritage and sustainability, focusing on traditional weaving in Northeast India. RIWATCH, a community-based organisation, embodies what could be seen as "*7 Pillars of Sustainability and Heritage*" with its museum, herbal gardens, documentation centre, centre for mother languages, Arogya center and facilities for scholars and researchers. My dual perspective as a researcher and someone exploring my heritage enriched my understanding of RIWATCH's multifaceted approach. The visit underscored the importance of community engagement in heritage preservation and sustainability, positioning RIWATCH as a model for integrating traditional knowledge with contemporary sustainability efforts.

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Introduction

Between May 20th and 23rd, I had the privilege of visiting Arunachal Pradesh and spending three nights at the Research Institute of World's Ancient Traditions, Cultures, and Heritage (RIWATCH). RIWATCH is a non-profit, community-based research organisation dedicated to the cultural empowerment of ethnic communities and sustainable development. Located about 10 kilometres from Roing town, the 5-hectare campus includes a museum, herbal and medicinal gardens, a documentation centre, a centre for "mother languages," and Arogya, a well-being centre with Ayurvedic *Panchakarma* therapy facilities. RIWATCH also accommodates visiting scholars and researchers, with a community kitchen often featuring produce from its own garden. Recently, the community acquired a bus to facilitate trips to other places in Arunachal Pradesh. This visit was an integral part of my ongoing research on heritage and sustainability, specifically focusing on traditional weaving practices of Northeast India. At this stage, my research was exploratory. I aimed to gain a holistic understanding of both institutional and community efforts surrounding the intersection of heritage and sustainability.

My research, however, is inseparable from my own curiosity and questions regarding heritage and identity. As someone with an Assamese and German background who did not grow up in India, I navigated RIWATCH both as a researcher and as an individual eager to gain knowledge about India, the Northeast, and Assam. This dual perspective has shaped my experience with the RIWATCH space, allowing me to appreciate it from both professional and personal lenses.

Image 1. *The 7 Pillars of RIWATCH*

("7 pillars of Heritage and Sustainability"....)



Day 1: Arrival and Initial Impressions

On my first evening at RIWATCH, I was given a tour of the gardens, which soon became a central part of my experience. These gardens exemplify the interplay between heritage and sustainability, providing an excellent backdrop for exchanging stories and ideas on the subject. The commitment to plant diversity at RIWATCH is evident to anyone walking through the gardens. Here, the preservation of natural heritage is achieved through meticulous documentation and innovative growing practices, reviving traditional knowledge while incorporating modern methods. I happily discovered a comprehensive guide on various plant species and their properties, compiled by a RIWATCH scholar, towards the end of my stay.

The gardens, along with the Ayurvedic centre, demonstrate the practical application of heritage and sustainability. They highlight the importance of preserving knowledge, understanding nature's benefits, and learning about food, nutrition, and sustainable farming practices. This approach shows how heritage and sustainability studies can be both forward-looking and innovative.



Image 2. An abundance of Zucchini (and what to do with so much Zucchini) is something we must also contend with at my grandparents garden in Germany



Image 3. I have never seen so many varieties of Banana. Wild Banana, Banana's from Manipur, Banana's planted strategically to help with irrigation, Really tall variety, very short Varieties. If Memory serves, this is a Banana Plant from Manipur.

Day 2: Exploring the Museum and Surroundings

On the second morning, I began with a self-guided walk through the museum. I appreciated how the museum featured three different exhibits, although the international exhibit was not yet open to the public. The exhibits on Northeast India and Arunachal Pradesh provided insights into agricultural ways of life, traditional textiles, clothing, rituals, and traditions. The exhibit on funeral rites and rituals was particularly striking, with detailed explanations later provided by a local community leader closely associated with RIWATCH.

One of my favourite moments was encountering a realistic model of a “rice pounder” used to de-husk rice. The community leader humorously remarked, “this is what your ancestors used,” and invited me to try it. I was surprised by the weight and the effort required to operate it, which made me wonder about the leg strength of my ancestors and appreciate the amount of effort going into a bowl of rice. These interactive experiences, though seemingly small, create a deeper connection to the exhibits. Without this invitation, I would not have known that



Image 4. Intricate components of a Shaman's attire

touching the tool was allowed, museums are after all spaces where touching is usually not allowed.

The exhibits did not focus on providing detailed information for every object; many clothing items, for instance, lacked labels or information about the textiles. While this might be frustrating for a researcher, it offers the general public a sense of shared heritage. The juxtaposition of distinct objects without “essentialising” their differences created a unique experience. I also appreciated the inclusion of geological information about the region, which sparked questions about “natural heritage”. The community aspect of RIWATCH was highlighted by its sourcing practices, the collections include contributions from elders around the world, during a conference hosted by RIWATCH last year. This practice serves as a model on how museums can source their objects creatively and ethically.

After my museum visit, I toured the village and the surrounding areas with the same community leader. I saw rubber plantations and learned that there are indeed endemic rubber species; however, the rubber plants used now are more profitable because of the ease of harvesting. I saw how plantation land bordered rich

forests and marvelled at the clear streams surrounding fields. To the naked eye, all seems well. I wouldn't have known that the rows and rows of saplings I saw in another field were new up-and-coming palm plantations. We exchanged information about what we knew about palm oil, its effects on ecosystems and what damage the industry has caused in other parts of the world.

In lieu of my research, I was also brought to households where the women were connected to weaving in some way, and I was warmly welcomed into their homes. This experience allowed me to see village life from the inside, observing and hearing more about weaving. The environmental history, coupled with the museum context, and village visits painted a comprehensive narrative on the changing landscapes of Arunachal Pradesh



Image 5-8. Visiting Homes in Roing

These experiences made me think about the role of museums in sustainability education, how exhibits could include more on environmental and agricultural history. Multimedia approaches, with story telling could enrich this aspect, as there are many environmental documentaries and documentation projects that could be showcased, some of them recommended by this community leader himself.

On this fully packed day, I also had a scheduled meeting with my supervisor in Germany. There were issues with the electricity and network, but everyone rallied around me to get the generators running in time. .

Day 3: Bamboosa Library and Language Preservation

On the third day, I visited the Bamboosa Library in Tezu, which is closely associated with RIWATCH and Sathyanarayan Mundayoor, an educationalist and social activist lovingly known as Uncle Moosa. This was a particularly enriching experience, providing insights into efforts of language preservation and the role of storytelling in heritage. The library plays a crucial role in bringing books to remote villages, offering children a space to engage with reading after school, and resurrecting mother tongues. I exchanged experiences with young women my age from the surrounding communities, discussing our struggles with mother tongues, language preservation efforts, as well as the idiosyncrasies of our cultural backgrounds. We had lively conversations touching on a range of topics, including weaving. These conversations, like the museum exhibit, illuminated much common ground in our experiences. There was a feeling of mutual curiosity. We talked about issues ranging from COVID-19 (one young woman wrote her dissertation about online learning during COVID-19), while another shared her ideas about keeping handloom traditions alive from a policy perspective.



Image 9 : Interacting with Reader's at Bamboosa Library

Serving as a popular meeting space for children, the library provided an opportunity to connect with young minds who eagerly shared their interests, ideas for the future, passion for books, and stories of their hometowns. Through these interactions, I discovered books filled with local stories and folklore, including a captivating collection of horror stories that I later sought out for myself. I also met a young poet and activist from Guwahati dedicated to promoting poetry in local mother tongues as a language preservation effort. We exchanged ideas about Europe and writing, and the poet expressed interest in creating online poetry exchanges, particularly for queer youth. Though these were just preliminary ideas, such encounters demonstrate the potential for networking and collaboration, highlighting the scope for intercultural dialogue and the crucial role of community spaces. Additionally, we attended the opening of a Buddhist temple in Namsai and enjoyed the mela organised by the local community. For anyone studying textiles, the mela not

just a feast for the belly, but also the eyes, showcasing a diverse array of traditional clothing worn by the attendees.



Image 10: At the Mela in Namsai

Positionally: Feeling at Home at RIWATCH

I am an independent researcher and emerging practitioner specialising in heritage and sustainability, currently in a BSc program in Global Environmental Sustainability Studies with a minor in Psychology and Society at *Leuphana University, Lüneburg, Germany*. The Leuphana degree program has offered opportunities to collaborate with multidisciplinary teams from diverse academic backgrounds. Such interdisciplinary studies often require students to forge independent pathways forward, straddling between departments and subjects, thus fostering a self-reliance that sharpened my skills in finding unique intersections to study. I identify as a practitioner because my approach is practice-based and fieldwork-oriented, emphasising creativity, community building, and storytelling. I believe in participatory research approaches that aim for and lead to greater community engagement, generating outputs beyond academic reports. These academic and personal orientations helped me to feel at home at RIWATCH. With its community of experts, facilitation of interactions, communal spaces, and resources not accessible from European libraries, I no longer felt like the “sole advocate” for heritage and sustainability within my faculty. RIWATCH resonated deeply with my philosophies on fostering a community-oriented approach in academia. The multidisciplinary and collaborative environment at RIWATCH created a sense of camaraderie and intellectual exchange that is rare in academic settings. Doing fieldwork, sharing meals, and exchanging reflections with other researchers was a unique and enriching experience.

Perspectives from a European Institution

I also want to provide insight into the perspectives that someone from a European institution may bring with them. Such perspectives may help facilitate intercultural dialogue, an area in which RIWATCH already excels.

1. Before arriving in India, an advisor at my university had cautioned me about the sensitivity of identity-related topics in India. Having been away from India for six years, I was uncertain about the current academic climate and what might be contentious. Topics like dam-building projects and heritage discourses are often critical of top-down approaches and wary of nationalism. Discussing research with someone familiar with politically sensitive topics could have helped me understand how to navigate the current political climate in India.
2. The European academic environment often encourages critical thinking and questioning of established narratives. Young scholars like myself approach spaces like RIWATCH from a reflexive standpoint, influenced by strong discourses on decolonisation and the examination of power relations and privilege. During my stay at RIWATCH, a challenging conversation with my research supervisor reminded me of the "extractivist quality" of academic research and the importance of capturing the agency and maintaining the personhood of those I interact with. My supervisor emphasised "compensation," suggesting workshops where monetary compensation was not possible.

These were valid reminders, and my RIWATCH experiences were invaluable in demonstrating the notion of compensation. However, I realised through conversations that workshops were often neither viable nor desired. Feeling deflated after my meeting, a perceptive RIWATCH staff member encouraged me to share my thoughts. When I expressed my concerns about compensation, limited time, and resources, it led to a fruitful exchange on how to reciprocate and compensate even during brief visits. The staff member highlighted the value of sharing knowledge through interpersonal conversations, citing our visit to RIWATCH's gardens where I exchanged recipes and plant uses from other parts of the world. This kind and compassionate response helped me navigate fieldwork fearlessly, demonstrating that critical theory should not inhibit students from attempting intercultural dialogue. My experiences at RIWATCH were constructive and nurturing in this regard, and I believe more students should come away from fieldwork feeling supported and empowered as I did.

Conclusions

The holistic nature of RIWATCH aligns well with my interdisciplinary background, seamlessly connecting sustainability and heritage. My dual role at RIWATCH, as both a researcher and someone exploring their own heritage, has provided me with a unique perspective that is valuable to the institution. This experience allowed me to appreciate RIWATCH's multifaceted approach to heritage and sustainability, fostering a sense of belonging and intellectual growth. This perspective equips me to offer constructive feedback that can enhance RIWATCH's efforts in promoting cultural empowerment and sustainable development. RIWATCH has great potential as a case study to explore, "How can Heritage be curated with Sustainability in mind?"—a guiding question of my research interests.

The multidisciplinary and community-oriented approach of RIWATCH offers a model for integrating traditional knowledge with contemporary sustainability efforts, preserving cultural heritage while ensuring its modern relevance. A key takeaway is the importance of community engagement in heritage preservation and sustainability. The various initiatives at RIWATCH, such as the gardens, museum, and library, highlight the potential of community-based approaches in fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility. I see significant potential to contribute to ongoing and future projects. While my current focus is on the intersection of heritage and sustainability, my experiences in Europe provide a foundation to consider global perspectives of heritage, aligning well with my ongoing research. I am excited about the possibility of contributing to RIWATCH's mission and look forward to exploring collaborative opportunities in the future. I would like to express my gratitude to Mr. Vijay Swami, the museum director, for his commitment to continuous and active collaboration. Although we could not meet in person, I appreciate his efforts in maintaining open communication. This reflection is a gesture of my gratitude and

acknowledgment of the potential for future collaboration. Additionally, I extend heartfelt thanks to the RIWATCH staff, who made me feel very much at home.

