

Applying Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) Model to a Living Heritage Destination: The Case of Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu

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Abstract- Living heritage destinations—cities where monumental architecture coexists with unbroken ritual, artistic, and community practice—pose a distinctive test for Richard Butler's (1980) Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model, which was built primarily on evidence from resort destinations undergoing linear commercial growth and decline. This paper critically examines the applicability of the TALC framework to Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, a UNESCO-inscribed temple city that has functioned continuously as a site of active worship, classical arts training, and craft production for over a millennium, in parallel with its evolution as a modern tourist destination. Adopting a conceptual and secondary-data-based analytical design — supplemented by an outlined mixed-method protocol appropriate for subsequent empirical validation — the study reconstructs Thanjavur's tourism trajectory across six TALC-consistent phases from the pre-1980 exploration era through the post-pandemic rejuvenation period, drawing on UNESCO documentation, Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) records, Tamil Nadu Tourism Department (TTDC) reports, and the peer-reviewed heritage-tourism literature. The analysis finds that Thanjavur's curve departs from Butler's classical S-shape in a specific and theoretically important way: because the destination's core assets are sustained by community and institutional processes largely independent of visitor volume, downturns are shallower and rejuvenation is more community-anchored than the model's original resort-based logic predicts. Building on this finding, the paper proposes a modified 'Living Heritage TALC' (LH-TALC) framework that inserts a cultural-resilience and intangible-heritage layer between the classical stage curve and its institutional/governance moderators. The paper concludes with policy-orientated recommendations for balancing conservation, community livelihoods, and visitor management in Thanjavur and comparable living heritage cities in developing-economy contexts and outlines the primary-data research design needed to empirically test the proposed model.

Keywords- Tourism Area Life Cycle; living heritage destination; heritage tourism; Thanjavur; Great Living Chola Temples; sustainable tourism; destination resilience

I. Introduction

Heritage tourism sits among the fastest-growing and most contested segments of the global tourism economy, prized simultaneously for its capacity to generate revenue and employment and for its exposure to the twin risks of conservation damage and cultural commodification (UNWTO, 2023). Living heritage destinations — places where historic fabric remains embedded in ongoing ritual, craft, or community life rather than existing as a static museum piece — sharpen this tension. In such places, the 'product' being consumed by tourists is inseparable from practices that a resident community



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continues to perform for reasons that predate and exceed tourism itself: temple worship, classical performance traditions, festival calendars, and artisanal production. Understanding how such destinations evolve, therefore, requires theoretical tools that can accommodate a tourism trajectory shaped as much by religious and cultural continuity as by market forces.

Thanjavur, in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, is a paradigmatic living heritage destination. Its centrepiece, the Brihadisvara Temple, was constructed under the Chola emperor Rajaraja I between 1003 and 1010 CE and remains an active site of Saivite worship to this day; together with the Gangaikondacholisvaram and Airavatesvara temples it was inscribed by UNESCO as the Great Living Chola Temples in 1987, with the listing extended in 2004 (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2025; Britannica, 2026). The city is simultaneously the historical seat of the Thanjavur Maratha court, home to the Saraswathi Mahal Library's manuscript collections, the acknowledged cradle of the Thanjavur school of painting, and a recognised centre for Bharatanatyam and Carnatic music pedagogy. Tourism in Thanjavur therefore unfolds across a layered heritage landscape in which UNESCO-protected monumental architecture, intangible cultural heritage, and everyday religious practice are mutually constitutive rather than separable.

Butler's (1980) Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model remains, more than four decades after publication, one of the most cited and most contested frameworks in tourism studies, and continues to be actively revisited and revised by Butler himself and by the wider research community (Butler, 2024). Yet the model's canonical case material — seaside resorts, national parks, and single-purpose leisure destinations — differs sharply from a living heritage city whose core attraction was not created for tourism and does not depend on it for cultural survival. This mismatch generates the central research problem addressed here: does the classical TALC sequence of exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation, and decline/rejuvenation adequately describe destinations where the underlying heritage asset is continuously reproduced by a resident community, or does the model require structural modification to remain analytically useful in such settings?

The question has clear significance beyond Thanjavur. India alone contains 38–43 UNESCO World Heritage properties depending on classification (IMPRI, 2025), many of them living religious or cultural sites rather than archaeological ruins, and its heritage tourism market was valued at roughly US\$30.3 billion in 2023 with projected growth toward US\$47.5 billion by 2030 (IMPRI, 2025). Comparable living heritage cities exist across South and Southeast Asia, East Asia, and parts of the Mediterranean and Middle East. A validated theoretical extension of TALC for such destinations would therefore have applicability well beyond the single case examined here.

This paper addresses that gap by (a) situating Thanjavur's tourism development within the TALC sequence using documented historical, institutional, and tourism-policy evidence; (b) critically assessing where the destination's trajectory conforms to, and where it departs from, Butler's original linear-cyclical logic; and (c) proposing a theoretically motivated modification — the Living Heritage TALC (LH-TALC) — that



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can be empirically tested in Thanjavur and comparable destinations through the mixed-method protocol outlined in the methodology section.

II. Literature Review

The Tourism Area Life Cycle: Origins and Evolution

Butler (1980) proposed that tourist areas evolve through six sequential stages — exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation, and post-stagnation decline or rejuvenation— tracing an S-shaped curve borrowed from the product life cycle concept in marketing. The model's enduring appeal lies in its parsimony and its diagnostic value: destination managers can, in principle, locate a destination on the curve and infer appropriate interventions (Hall & Butler, as cited in the TALC revisiting literature; Butler, 2024). At the same time, the TALC has attracted sustained critique for its assumption of a broadly linear, market-driven trajectory, its origin in resort case studies, and the difficulty of operationalising 'stage' with objective indicators (Butler, 2024).

Recent scholarship has actively revised the model rather than treating it as settled. Butler's own 2024 restatement acknowledges that the COVID-19 pandemic produced a discontinuity — an abrupt, exogenous collapse in visitation unlike the endogenous market saturation the original model envisaged — requiring the curve to be redrawn with a sharp dip and an uncertain post-pandemic regrowth or decline path (Butler, 2024). The Channel View Publications volume *The Tourism Area Life Cycle: Review, Relevance and Revision* (2024) collects a wide range of contemporary applications, including studies of national park systems, seaside resort rejuvenation, smart specialisation approaches to destination evolution, and the role of political influence on TALC trajectories — evidence that the model continues to be adapted well beyond its original resort-tourism scope.

TALC Applications in Heritage Tourism

Applications of TALC to heritage and cultural destinations reveal a recurring finding: heritage sites often do not decline in the manner the classical model predicts, because conservation status, religious significance, or intangible cultural value can sustain visitation independent of the commercial saturation that drives stagnation in resort contexts. Shinde and Singh (2023), studying Sarnath, India, describe a pattern of 'stunted growth' in which a UNESCO-adjacent Buddhist heritage site fails to progress cleanly through TALC stages because of governance fragmentation and underinvestment rather than market exhaustion.

Research on Guangfu Ancient City in China similarly finds that, contrary to a 'creative destruction' trajectory toward decline, government-led conservation investment and a shift toward culturally engaged 'postmodern' tourists can hold a heritage destination in a positive transitional phase rather than pushing it into stagnation. Both cases suggest that institutional and cultural variables, not visitor volume alone, govern heritage destinations' position on the curve.

The European Union-funded SmartCulTour project has pursued this line of reasoning systematically, developing an explicit Sustainability-Resilience-TALC framework



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intended to link cultural-tourism sustainability and resilience indicators to a revised life-cycle model for cultural destinations. This body of work provides direct precedent for the kind of modified TALC proposed in the present paper, though it has not, to date, been applied to an Indian living-heritage temple city.

Living Heritage and Sustainable Tourism

The concept of 'living heritage' foregrounds continuity of use and community custodianship as defining features distinguishing a site from a purely monumental or musealised heritage asset (Ashworth & Tunbridge, as reflected in the tourist-historic city literature; Timothy, 2018). UNESCO's own programming increasingly reflects this shift: its 'World Heritage, Sustainable Development and Local Communities' initiative explicitly reframes heritage value around the artisans, residents, and everyday economic life surrounding a monument rather than the monument in isolation, as illustrated by recent work on Agra's Taj Ganj neighbourhood. Parallel research on intangible cultural heritage tourism argues that traditions such as performance arts and craft production generate tourist experiences and community benefits that are structurally different from — and potentially more resilient than — monument-centred visitation, while also introducing distinct risks of authenticity dilution and over-commercialisation (Meskell, 2024; Winter, 2014).

Within the specific context of the Great Living Chola Temples, Kumar and Thangaraju's (2026) review of the Airavatesvara Temple at Darasuram — part of the same UNESCO inscription as Thanjavur's Brihadisvara Temple — identifies seven interlinked constraint categories on sustainable tourism development at 'secondary' Chola temple sites: institutional fragmentation, weak infrastructure and accessibility, conservation pressure, limited interpretation, socio-cultural strain, environmental stress, and weak destination branding. Because Thanjavur functions as the 'primary' node of the same UNESCO property, many of the same institutional actors (the Archaeological Survey of India, the Tamil Nadu Tourism Department, and temple administrative trusts) govern both sites, making this study directly relevant comparative evidence for the present analysis.

Prior Studies on Thanjavur's Tourism Development and Research Gap

Existing documentation of Thanjavur's tourism profile is largely descriptive — heritage inventories, conservation reports, and visitor guides — rather than analytical destination-development scholarship. Historical tourist-arrival data confirm a substantial and growing visitor base: regional records indicate over two million Indian visitors and more than 80,000 foreign visitors to Thanjavur in a single reference year in the late 2000s, concentrated overwhelmingly at the Brihadisvara Temple. Yet no published study, to the authors' knowledge, has systematically mapped Thanjavur's tourism history onto Butler's TALC stages or examined how the city's status as a living, actively worshipped heritage site modifies the model's classical assumptions. This constitutes the empirical and theoretical gap the present paper addresses.

III. Research Objectives and Questions

Building on the gap identified above, this study pursues four objectives:



ISSN: 2584-2455

1. To examine the stages of tourism development in Thanjavur using Butler's TALC Model.
2. To identify indicators of exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation, and rejuvenation/decline as manifested in Thanjavur.
3. To evaluate the sustainability of tourism growth in Thanjavur against conservation and community-wellbeing criteria.
4. To provide policy recommendations for heritage conservation and destination management in living heritage cities.

These objectives translate into four research questions that structure the analysis:

1. Which stage of Butler's TALC Model best represents Thanjavur's current tourism status?
2. How has tourism evolved in Thanjavur over the past five decades?
3. What factors contribute to the destination's growth, stagnation, or rejuvenation?
4. How can Thanjavur balance tourism development with heritage preservation?

IV. Methodology

This paper adopts a conceptual, secondary-data-based analytical design consistent with recent review-article approaches to living heritage destinations in the same UNESCO property (cf. Kumar & Thangaraju, 2026, on Airavatesvara Temple). The present analysis draws on: UNESCO World Heritage Centre documentation and inscription records; Archaeological Survey of India conservation reports; Tamil Nadu Tourism Department publications; the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India's sustainable tourism and heritage policy documentation; and peer-reviewed scholarship on TALC, heritage tourism, and living heritage indexed in Scopus and Web of Science between 2018 and 2026.

This design provides a defensible basis for the theoretical contribution advanced here — the TALC staging and the LH-TALC extension — but it is explicitly conceptual rather than a report of new primary fieldwork. Empirical validation of the proposed model requires primary data collection, and this paper accordingly specifies, rather than fabricates, the mixed-method protocol appropriate for that follow-on study:

Proposed Primary Research Design (for subsequent empirical validation)

A convergent mixed-method design is proposed, combining:

1. Semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of stakeholders — temple/devasthanam administrators, Tamil Nadu Tourism Department officials, ASI conservation staff, registered tourist guides, artisans (Thanjavur painting and bronze-casting), Bharatanatyam/Carnatic institutions, hoteliers, and long-term residents — to capture the intangible-heritage and governance dimensions that visitor statistics alone cannot reveal;
2. A structured survey questionnaire administered to a target sample of 250–400 domestic and international visitors at the Brihadisvara Temple, Thanjavur Palace, and Saraswathi Mahal Library, covering visit motivation, perceived authenticity, satisfaction, crowding, and repeat-visit intention, to generate the quantitative



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- indicators needed to test the LH-TALC's predicted dampening of stagnation troughs;
3. Analysis of Tamil Nadu Tourism Department and ASI visitor-count time series (a continuous run of annual arrivals, ideally 2000–2025 with monthly resolution around the 2020–2021 pandemic period) to statistically locate inflection points corresponding to TALC stage transitions; and
 4. A stakeholder SWOT workshop and, where GIS data permit, spatial mapping of visitor flow and accommodation density around the temple precinct.

Descriptive statistics, thematic analysis (for interview data), TALC stage-mapping against the visitor time series, and SWOT synthesis are the proposed analytical techniques for that follow-on study. Because the present paper does not itself execute this primary data collection, the Results and Discussion section below builds the TALC staging from documented secondary evidence only, and frames stage boundaries as analytically reasoned rather than statistically estimated — a limitation made explicit in the concluding section.

V. Study Area Profile: Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu

Thanjavur, historically Tanjore, was the capital of the Chola Empire (9th–13th centuries CE) and later of the Thanjavur Nayak and Maratha kingdoms, giving the city a layered built heritage spanning roughly a thousand years. Its principal monument, the Brihadisvara Temple, was built by Rajaraja I between 1003 and 1010 CE, is constructed almost entirely from granite, and is crowned by a vimana (sanctum tower) exceeding 60 metres (approximately 216 feet) — among the tallest of its kind in the world (Britannica, 2026; ASI, n.d.). Together with the Brihadisvara Temple at Gangaikondacholapuram and the Airavatesvara Temple at Darasuram, it was inscribed by UNESCO in 1987 as the Great Living Chola Temples, with the property extended in 2004 (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2025).

Beyond the temple, Thanjavur's heritage assets include the Thanjavur Maratha Palace and its art gallery of Chola bronzes; the Saraswathi Mahal Library, one of Asia's oldest libraries, holding tens of thousands of palm-leaf and paper manuscripts; the Thanjavur school of painting, distinguished by gold-foil relief work on devotional subjects; and living traditions of Bharatanatyam and Carnatic music, celebrated annually through festivals such as the Natyanjali dance festival held in the temple's thousand-year-old courtyard. Crucially, the Brihadisvara Temple remains an active site of daily Saivite worship rather than a purely archaeological monument — the defining feature that positions Thanjavur as a living, rather than static, heritage destination.

Historical arrival data illustrate the scale of visitation the destination already commanded prior to its most recent development phase: regional tourism records report just over two million domestic and roughly 81,000 foreign visitors to Thanjavur in a single reference year in the late 2000s, concentrated predominantly at the Brihadisvara Temple. Thanjavur sits within a well-connected South Indian temple circuit, approximately 350 km from Chennai, 190 km from Madurai, and 180 km from Puducherry, which supports both circuit-based domestic pilgrimage tourism and international heritage-circuit travel.



ISSN: 2584-2455

VI. Results and Discussion

TALC Stage Mapping

Table 1 reconstructs Thanjavur's tourism trajectory across the six TALC stages using the secondary evidence assembled above. The staging is offered as an analytically reasoned reading of documented history and policy milestones rather than a statistically estimated set of boundaries; precise inflection dates would require the continuous arrival time-series specified in the proposed primary research design.

Table 1. TALC Stage Mapping for Thanjavur

TALC Stage	Approx. Period	Key Indicators for Thanjavur	Governing Sources
Exploration	Pre-1980	Small, self-organised flows of pilgrims and specialist scholars/art historians; temple functions primarily as an active religious site rather than a tourism product; minimal dedicated tourism infrastructure.	ASI heritage records; regional history
Involvement	c.1980–1995	Early state tourism promotion begins; local guide services and modest hospitality infrastructure emerge; 1987 UNESCO inscription of the Great Living Chola Temples marks a key institutional catalyst.	UNESCO WHC (2025); TN Tourism Dept.
Development	c.1995–2010	Marked rise in domestic and international arrivals; expansion of hotel and transport infrastructure; national heritage-tourism campaigns (e.g., Incredible India); documented arrivals exceed two million domestic visitors by the late 2000s.	Regional tourism arrival records
Consolidation	c.2010–2019	Destination becomes a fixed node on the South Indian temple-circuit itinerary; growth continues but at a more managed pace; conservation and visitor-management concerns become more prominent in policy discourse.	Ministry of Tourism (2024); ASI (2023)
Stagnation	2020–2021	Sharp, exogenous collapse in visitation driven by COVID-19 travel restrictions rather than market saturation — a discontinuity consistent with Butler's (2024) revised, pandemic-adjusted TALC curve; temple worship and artisan production continue at reduced scale, independent of tourist volume.	Butler (2024); site continuity evidence
Rejuvenation	2022–present	Recovery in visitation aligned with national post-pandemic travel revival; renewed policy emphasis on heritage-city schemes and sustainable tourism; community-anchored cultural activity (festivals, painting workshops) provides a resilience base distinct from purely commercial rejuvenation strategies.	IMPRI (2025); UNWTO (2023)



ISSN: 2584-2455

Visualising the Trajectory

Figure 1 presents this staged trajectory schematically, mapping the documented Thanjavur evidence onto Butler's canonical TALC curve shape and marking the pandemic-era discontinuity consistent with Butler's (2024) revision.

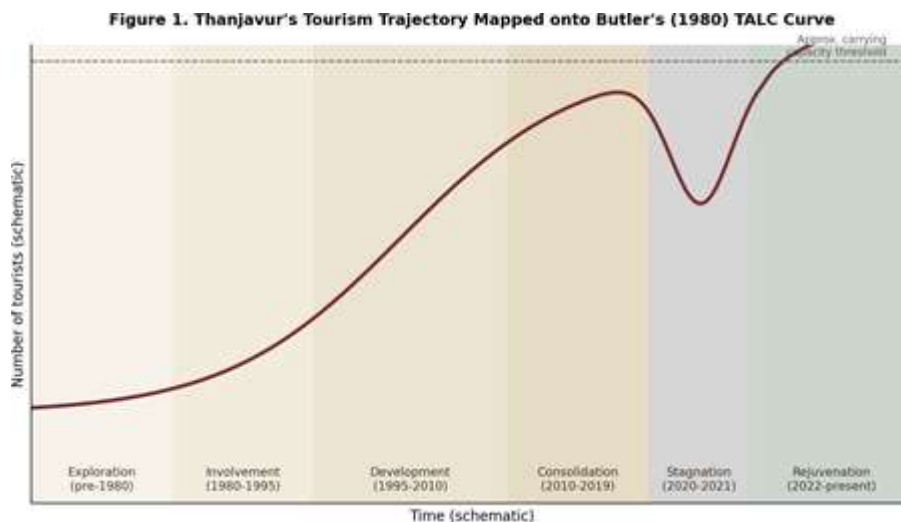


Figure 1. Thanjavur's Tourism Trajectory Mapped onto Butler's (1980) TALC Curve

Critical Discussion: Linear or Resilience-Dampened Evolution?

Two findings stand out from this staged reconstruction. First, Thanjavur's overall trajectory is broadly consistent with Butler's classical sequence: a slow pre-1980 exploration phase; a clear involvement-stage catalyst in the 1987 UNESCO inscription; sustained development through the 1990s and 2000s; a consolidation phase in which the destination becomes a fixed node on regional tourism circuits; and an exogenous, pandemic-driven stagnation trough in 2020–2021 consistent with Butler's (2024) own revision of the model to accommodate COVID-19 as a discontinuity rather than an endogenous market-saturation event.

Second, and more theoretically significant, Thanjavur's trajectory departs from the classical model in the depth and character of its stagnation and rejuvenation phases. In Butler's original resort-based logic, stagnation reflects market exhaustion — the destination has lost competitive appeal — and rejuvenation typically requires a deliberate repositioning strategy, new investment, or product diversification (as documented, for instance, in Atlantic City's resort-cycle recycling or the Gold Coast's rejuvenation literature). In Thanjavur, by contrast, the core heritage asset did not lose appeal or cultural value during the 2020–2021 downturn: temple worship, artisan production, and classical arts training continued, at reduced scale, independent of tourist arrivals.

This is the defining structural difference a living heritage destination introduces into the TALC logic — the 'product' is reproduced by community and institutional processes that do not depend on visitor volume, which should, in principle, produce a shallower



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stagnation trough and a rejuvenation pathway anchored in cultural continuity rather than purely commercial repositioning.

This pattern echoes findings from Sarnath and Guangfu Ancient City, where institutional and cultural variables — rather than market saturation alone — governed destinations' position on or off the classical curve, and it directly parallels the constraint structure documented at the sister Airavatesvara Temple site within the same UNESCO property. Whether Thanjavur's evolution is best characterised as linear-cyclical, as Butler's original model implies, or as a resilience-dampened variant in which cultural continuity flattens the amplitude of stage transitions, is the central theoretical question this paper's proposed LH-TALC model is designed to test empirically.

SWOT Synthesis

Table 2 summarises the corresponding SWOT analysis, synthesising the strengths and vulnerabilities identified in the secondary literature reviewed above.

Table 2. SWOT Analysis of Thanjavur as a Living Heritage Destination

Dimension	Key Factors
Strengths	UNESCO World Heritage status (since 1987) conferring international recognition; continuously active living-temple status distinguishing it from purely archaeological sites; layered heritage assets (temple, palace, library, painting, performing arts) enabling diversified visitor experiences; established position on the South Indian temple-tourism circuit.
Weaknesses	Institutional fragmentation across ASI, temple trust administration, and tourism authorities (a pattern documented at the sister Airavatesvara Temple site); limited interpretation infrastructure for international and non-specialist visitors; uneven visitor-management and carrying-capacity planning at peak pilgrimage periods.
Opportunities	National heritage-tourism growth trajectory (projected to nearly US\$47.5 billion by 2030); HRIDAY-type heritage-city development schemes and 'Adopt a Heritage' public-private partnership mechanisms; growing international interest in intangible cultural heritage and 'slow', community-embedded travel; potential for GIS-based visitor-flow management.
Threats	Conservation pressure from unmanaged visitor growth on a granite structure over a millennium old; risk of cultural commodification of living ritual and performance traditions; climate and environmental stress on heritage fabric; continued exogenous shocks (pandemics, regional instability) affecting travel demand.

Comparative Evidence from Other Heritage Destinations

Table 3 situates Thanjavur alongside comparable heritage destinations reported in the recent literature, illustrating that non-linear, resilience-mediated TALC patterns are not unique to this case but recur across living and institutionally governed heritage sites.



ISSN: 2584-2455

Table 3. Comparative TALC-Relevant Patterns at Other Heritage Destinations

Destination	Heritage Type	Reported TALC-Relevant Pattern	Source
Sarnath, India	Buddhist archaeological/pilgrimage site	'Stunted growth' — fails to progress cleanly through TALC stages due to governance fragmentation and underinvestment rather than market saturation.	Shinde & Singh (2023)
Airavatesvara Temple, Darasuram, India	Living Chola temple (same UNESCO property as Thanjavur)	Seven interlinked institutional, infrastructural, conservation, and branding constraints shape a slow, non-linear development trajectory.	Kumar & Thangaraju (2026)
Guangfu Ancient City, China	Historic walled city	Government-led investment and a shift toward culturally engaged visitors sustain a positive transitional phase rather than the predicted 'creative destruction' decline.	Heritage tourism evolution study (PMC9573812)
Global resort destinations (review synthesis)	Coastal/seaside resorts	COVID-19 produces a sharp exogenous stagnation dip requiring the classical TALC curve to be redrawn, with uncertain post-pandemic regrowth or decline paths.	Butler (2024)

VII. Theoretical Contributions: The Living Heritage TALC (LH-TALC)

The evidence reviewed above motivates a specific, testable extension of Butler's model rather than a wholesale replacement of it. Figure 2 presents the proposed Living Heritage TALC (LH-TALC) framework. The classical six-stage TALC spine is retained as the outer trajectory, but two moderating layers are inserted between the curve and the destination outcomes it produces: a cultural resilience layer (active worship, artisan lineages, festival calendars, and community custodianship that sustain the heritage asset independent of visitor volume) and an intangible heritage layer (performance and craft traditions transmitted through channels — gurukula-style pedagogy, temple ritual calendars — that are not primarily tourism-dependent). Both layers are themselves shaped by an institutional and governance moderator — the ASI, UNESCO conservation mandates, the Tamil Nadu Tourism Department, and temple trust administration — whose coordination or fragmentation determines how effectively cultural resilience translates into a dampened, community-anchored response to demand shocks.

The theoretical claim embedded in the LH-TALC is narrow and falsifiable: for destinations where the moderating layers are strong (continuous ritual use, intact



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intangible-heritage transmission, coordinated governance), the model predicts a flatter curve — shallower stagnation troughs and rejuvenation driven by cultural rather than purely commercial repositioning — relative to Butler's classical resort-based trajectory. Where these layers are weak or fragmented, as the Sarnath and Airavatesvara cases suggest, the model predicts trajectories closer to, or even beneath, the classical curve, including the 'stunted growth' pattern documented by Shinde and Singh (2023). This distinguishes the LH-TALC from a purely descriptive relabelling of TALC stages: it generates a comparative prediction across living heritage sites with differing degrees of institutional coordination, testable using the primary research design specified in Section 3.1.

Figure 2. Proposed Living Heritage TALC (LH-TALC) Conceptual Extension

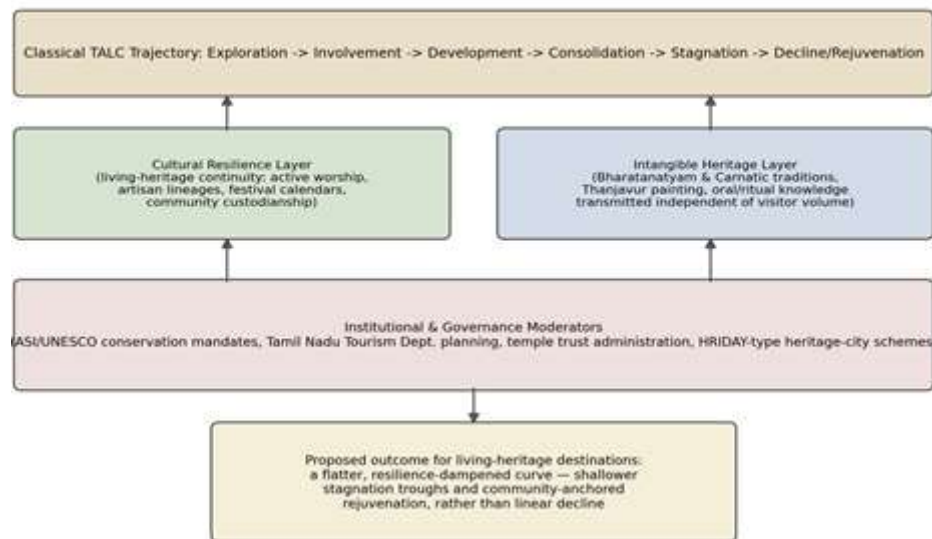


Figure 2. Proposed Living Heritage TALC (LH-TALC) Conceptual Extension

VIII. Practical Implications and Policy Recommendations

For destination managers and policymakers, three practical implications follow directly from the analysis.

First, conservation and visitor-management planning for Thanjavur should be explicitly coupled to institutional coordination across the ASI, the Tamil Nadu Tourism Department, and temple trust administration, addressing the fragmentation that the comparative evidence from Airavatesvara Temple suggests it is a recurring constraint across Great Living Chola Temple sites rather than a Thanjavur-specific problem.

Second, heritage-city development instruments such as the national HRIDAY scheme and the 'Adopt a Heritage' public-private partnership mechanism should be leveraged specifically to strengthen the intangible-heritage layer identified in the LH-TALC model — supporting Thanjavur painting workshops, Bharatanatyam and Carnatic pedagogical institutions, and festival programming — rather than infrastructure



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investment alone, since it is this layer the analysis identifies as the source of the destination's resilience relative to purely commercial heritage sites.

Third, given the documented carrying-capacity pressure on a millennium-old granite structure, visitor-flow management (timed entry, GIS-informed routing, and interpretation infrastructure of the kind found lacking at Airavatesvara Temple) should be prioritised ahead of further volume-growth promotion, consistent with the consolidation-to-stagnation risk the TALC framework flags once a destination approaches its carrying-capacity threshold, as depicted in Figure 1.

IX. Conclusion

This paper has examined the applicability of Butler's (1980) Tourism Area Life Cycle model to Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, as a case of a living heritage destination. Reconstructing Thanjavur's tourism history from UNESCO, ASI, and tourism-policy documentation alongside the peer-reviewed literature, the analysis finds that Thanjavur's overall trajectory follows Butler's classical six-stage sequence, including a pandemic-driven stagnation discontinuity consistent with Butler's own (2024) revision of the model. At the same time, the destination's status as an actively worshipped, continuously practised heritage site appears to dampen the depth of stagnation and to anchor rejuvenation in cultural rather than purely commercial processes — a pattern consistent with comparative evidence from Sarnath, Guangfu Ancient City, and the sister Airavatesvara Temple site. On this basis, the paper proposes a Living Heritage TALC (LH-TALC) extension that inserts cultural resilience and intangible heritage layers, moderated by institutional governance, between the classical stage curve and destination outcomes.

The central limitation of this study is methodological: the analysis is conceptual and secondary-data-based rather than grounded in new primary fieldwork, and the TALC stage boundaries proposed here are analytically reasoned rather than statistically estimated from a continuous visitor time-series. The paper has therefore specified, rather than simulated, the mixed-method primary research design — stakeholder interviews, a 250–400-respondent visitor survey, time-series analysis of arrival data, and a stakeholder SWOT workshop — needed to empirically test the LH-TALC's central prediction that living heritage destinations exhibit shallower stagnation troughs and more culturally anchored rejuvenation than the classical model predicts.

Future research should prioritise three directions: first, execution of the primary data collection specified above at Thanjavur itself; second, comparative application of the LH-TALC framework across the full set of Great Living Chola Temples and other Indian living heritage cities (e.g., Madurai, Kanchipuram, and Varanasi) to test the model's portability; and third, longitudinal tracking of Thanjavur's post-pandemic rejuvenation phase to determine whether the community-anchored recovery pattern hypothesised here is empirically borne out relative to purely commercially driven heritage destinations. Such work would allow the LH-TALC to move from a theoretically motivated conceptual extension to an empirically validated framework for heritage destination management in developing-economy contexts.



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