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ULAVI KSHETRA: SACRED SPACE, HERITAGE TRADITIONS, AND COMMUNITY IN KARNATAKA

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ABSTRACT
Ulavi Kshetra, situated in the ecologically rich Western Ghats of Karnataka, is one of the most prominent sacred centers of the Lingayat/Sharana tradition. It is revered as the samādhi of Chennabasavanna, a 12th-century reformer and disciple of Basavanna, who safeguarded vachana literature and expanded the Sharana movement's egalitarian ethos. Despite its religious and cultural significance, Ulavi has received limited academic attention. This study explores Ulavi as a sacred space, its intangible heritage traditions, its role in shaping community life, and the challenges it faces in heritage management. Using a qualitative, ethnographic approach, the study integrates archival research, field observation during the annual Jatre, interviews with trustees, devotees, and local residents, and documentation of architectural and ecological conditions. The findings show that Ulavi embodies both continuity and transformation: while ritual and oral traditions remain vibrant, tangible heritage faces threats from modernization, tourism pressures, and ecological degradation. The annual Jatre sustains local livelihoods but simultaneously strains infrastructure and fragile ecosystems. The study concludes that Ulavi Kshetra is not only a site of pilgrimage but also a living cultural archive of Karnataka's Lingayat identity. It calls for a community-driven heritage management model that integrates conservation ethics, ecological sustainability, and inclusive governance. Such an approach ensures that devotion and cultural memory can coexist with biodiversity and heritage preservation.

KEYWORDS: *Ulavi Kshetra, Sacred Space, Lingayat Tradition, Heritage Traditions, Intangible Heritage, Community, Western Ghats*

INTRODUCTION
Pilgrimage sites in India represent more than spaces of devotion; they are cultural landscapes where religion, history, and community converge. These sites embody collective memory, shaping identity through rituals, oral traditions, and material culture. Among them, **Ulavi Kshetra**, situated in the ecologically rich Western Ghats of Karnataka, holds a distinctive place in the Lingayat or Sharana tradition. It is revered as the *samādhi* of **Chennabasavanna**, a 12th-century reformer and disciple of Basavanna, who safeguarded vachana literature and advanced the egalitarian ideals of the Lingayat movement.While pilgrimage centers such as Varanasi, Sringeri, and Shravanabelagola have been widely studied, Ulavi has remained comparatively underexplored despite its enduring religious, cultural, and social significance. Its heritage lies not only in tangible structures such as temples and caves but also in intangible traditions including **vachana recitation, devotional singing, and folk performances**. The annual *Ulavi Jatre* reinforces this identity, generating both spiritual renewal and socio-economic activity for the local community.

Yet, Ulavi faces complex challenges. Rapid modernization and unregulated renovations have altered architectural authenticity, while tourism pressures and ecological stress threaten the sacred environment of the Western Ghats. These dynamics raise important questions about how sacred sites adapt to contemporary demands while preserving cultural memory and ecological balance.This study, therefore, examines Ulavi Kshetra at the intersection of sacred space, heritage traditions, and community participation. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How has Ulavi Kshetra evolved historically within the Lingayat/Sharana tradition, and what role does Chennabasavanna's legacy play in this continuity?
2. In what ways do intangible heritage practices—rituals, oral traditions, and festivalssustain cultural identity at Ulavi?
3. What socio-economic and ecological impacts does pilgrimage generate, and how can community-driven heritage management ensure sustainability?

By addressing these questions, the paper contributes to broader debates on **religion, heritage, and sustainability** in South Asian contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Pilgrimage and the Sacred Space Scholarly engagement with pilgrimage has moved beyond viewing it merely as religious travel to considering it as a ritualized social practice. Turner and Turner (1978) argue that pilgrimage produces communitas a temporary suspension of social hierarchies that allows participants to experience equality and shared devotion. This framework explains how ritual spaces foster solidarity, though it has been critiqued for romanticizing cohesion while underestimating conflict. Later, Eade and Sallnow (1991) conceptualized pilgrimage as a contested space where meanings are constantly negotiated among pilgrims, custodians, and institutions. Applying these frameworks to

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Ulavi reveals how its sacred status is continuously redefined through ritual practice, festival performance, and competing claims over heritage management.

Lingayat/Sharana Tradition and Chennabasavanna's Role

The Lingayat tradition, established by Basavanna in the 12th century, was not merely a devotional movement but also a **radical social reform** challenging Brahmanical orthodoxy, caste distinctions, and ritual excess (Schouten, 1995). Chennabasavanna, Basavanna's nephew and disciple, emerged as a central figure in this reformist ethos. He is credited with compiling and safeguarding vachana literature, a body of devotional poetry emphasizing equality, devotion, and direct communion with *Ishtalinga* (Hiremath, 2008). His work, especially *Karana Hasuge*, remains foundational in understanding the metaphysical and ethical framework of the Lingayat movement. Ulavi, as his final resting place, is thus both a physical and symbolic repository of this legacy. Yet, despite its centrality to Lingayat identity, Ulavi has not received the same academic attention as other Lingayat centers like Kudalasangama or Kalyana.

Intangible Heritage and Oral Traditions

The notion of **intangible cultural heritage** was formalized by UNESCO (2003), which defined it as practices, representations, and expressions that communities recognize as part of their heritage. South Asian devotional traditions exemplify this category, where oral narratives, folk performances, and ritual songs preserve religious identity (Narayan, 1997). In Ulavi, vachana recitations, folk theatre, and devotional singing performed during the *Rathotsava* festival embody this living continuity. However, as Narayan (1997) observed, modernization and mass media have led to the decline of folk narrative traditions, which raises concerns about intergenerational transmission. Scholarship on South Indian oral heritage acknowledges the resilience of devotional practices but also highlights the need for systematic documentation and preservation (Joshi & Bhat, 2019). Ulavi offers an important case study where intangible heritage remains vibrant but increasingly mediated by new technologies, such as the digital circulation of vachanas.

Pilgrimage Economies and Community Participation

The economic dimension of pilgrimage has received increasing attention in recent decades. Singh (2013) highlights how pilgrimage tourism generates income opportunities, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas. Gupta and Krishna (2020) further argue that pilgrimage economies function as informal redistributive systems, enabling marginalized communities to participate in religious economies. At Ulavi, the annual *Jatre* transforms the town into a temporary economic hub, with markets, food stalls, and lodging facilities catering to pilgrims. Women play key roles in annadana (free meal distribution), artisanal production, and small-scale vending, reinforcing the Lingayat ethos of equality. Yet, these benefits are accompanied by infrastructural strain, as roads, sanitation, and waste management systems struggle to cope with the influx of pilgrims. The dual nature of pilgrimage economies empowering yet environmentally taxing emerges as a central theme in contemporary studies (Gupta & Krishna, 2020; Singh, 2013).

Architectural Heritage and Modernization

The architecture of sacred spaces in South India reflects centuries of adaptation and synthesis, drawing upon local ecological materials, aesthetics, and spiritual symbolism (Michell, 2013). However, scholars caution that modernization has resulted in the erosion of traditional craftsmanship. Menon (2018) introduces the concept of "aesthetic displacement," whereby religious devotion drives architectural changes that inadvertently compromise heritage authenticity. Ulavi's temple complex, originally constructed using stone and local techniques, has undergone repeated renovations, with concrete and modern materials replacing traditional forms. While these renovations reflect devotion and evolving community aspirations, they also raise questions about authenticity and conservation. The broader scholarly consensus emphasizes that **heritage preservation must balance ritual functionality with historical integrity**. Ulavi epitomizes this tension, as modernization sustains ritual practice but simultaneously risks erasing tangible history.

Environmental Dimensions of Pilgrimage

Environmental studies underline the vulnerability of pilgrimage sites located within ecologically sensitive zones. Gadgil and Guha (1995) warned of the ecological pressures created by deforestation, littering, and resource extraction in the Western Ghats. Similarly, Rangarajan and Sivaramakrishnan (2014) demonstrated how environmental degradation often accompanies religious expansion in India. The Western Ghats, recognized as a global biodiversity hotspot, face increasing stress due to pilgrimage-related activities, including unregulated tourism, plastic waste, and habitat disruption. The United Nations Environment Programme (2019) has called for "faith-based ecological stewardship," emphasizing the need to align religious practices with conservation ethics. At Ulavi, this debate is highly relevant as annual festivals draw large numbers of devotees into fragile forest zones. Existing scholarship provides insights into eco-spiritual ethics, yet case-specific studies like Ulavi are essential for operationalizing these ideas in practice.

Heritage Management and Community Involvement

Heritage studies emphasize that conservation is not merely about preserving monuments but also about managing cultural processes. Smith (2006) critiques the "authorized heritage discourse" that privileges expert perspectives over community voices. Instead, she advocates participatory models where local communities actively define and safeguard their heritage. In Karnataka, community-driven heritage management has been documented in temple towns where local custodians, NGOs, and government agencies collaborate (Joshi & Bhat, 2019). However, these models are unevenly implemented, often constrained by institutional gaps and resource limitations. At Ulavi, the Channabasava Trust plays a central custodial role but lacks formal coordination with the Archaeological Survey of India or environmental authorities. The absence of a structured conservation policy illustrates the challenges of bridging local devotion with institutional frameworks. Scholarship suggests that empowering communities through training, awareness

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programs, and participatory governance can provide more sustainable outcomes (Joshi & Bhat, 2019).

Regional Religious and Cultural Context

The Karnataka State Gazetteer (2012) situates Ulavi within the broader religious geography of the state, noting its significance alongside Lingayat monasteries and reform movements. Hiremath (2008) provides ethnographic documentation of Ulavi's sacred caves, temple rituals, and annual *Rathotsava*. These works underscore the cultural embeddedness of Ulavi in Karnataka's religious history, while also highlighting the need for updated research on contemporary transformations.

Positioning of This Study

- Documenting Ulavi's **historical evolution and Chennabasavanna's legacy** within the Lingayat tradition.
- Analyzing its **intangible heritage** oral narratives, ritual performances, and devotional singing highlighting both continuity and adaptation.
- Assessing the **socio-economic benefits and ecological costs** of pilgrimage, especially during the *Ulavi Jatre*.
- Evaluating **tangible heritage challenges**, including modernization and conservation deficits.
- Proposing a **community-driven, sustainable heritage management model** that integrates cultural preservation with ecological stewardship.

OBJECTIVES

1. To trace the historical evolution of Ulavi Kshetra and assess the legacy of Chennabasavanna in the Lingayat/Sharana tradition.
2. To document and analyze intangible heritage practices vachanas, oral narratives, rituals, and festivals that sustain cultural identity.
3. To evaluate the socio-economic contributions and ecological challenges of pilgrimage, particularly during the annual *Ulavi Jatre*.
4. To examine the state of tangible heritage, including temples, caves, and inscriptions, and identify preservation challenges.
5. To propose a sustainable, community-driven heritage management framework that integrates cultural preservation with ecological responsibility.

METHODOLOGY

The study employs a **qualitative, ethnographic research design**. Given the cultural and spiritual nature of the research problem, this approach is well-suited to capture the richness of lived experiences, oral traditions, and community perspectives. The design is exploratory and descriptive rather than hypothesis-testing, with emphasis on meaning-making, cultural continuity, and heritage interpretation.

DATA SOURCES AND COLLECTION METHODS

1. **Archival and Documentary Analysis**
   - Review of temple records, inscriptions, trust documents, and gazetteers.
   - Analysis of Ulavi*: The Abode of Salvation* by Panchakshari Hiremath (2008).
   - Reference to vachana manuscripts and digital repositories (e.g., LingayatReligion, Channabasava.com).
2. **Oral Histories and Interviews**
   - Semi-structured interviews conducted with temple priests, trustees, folk artists, devotees, women ritual participants, vendors, and elderly community members.
   - These interviews capture memory, ritual knowledge, and lived perspectives on the evolution of Ulavi.
3. **Participant Observation**
   - Direct observation during the annual Ulavi Jatre and routine temple practices.
   - Engagement in rituals, processions, and annadana activities to understand religious participation and community organization.
4. **Heritage and Ecological Documentation**
   - Photographic and video documentation of temple architecture, sacred caves, inscriptions, and ecological stress points (waste zones, forest trails).
   - Mapping of pilgrimage routes and identifying zones of environmental vulnerability.

Sampling Strategy

- **Purposive Sampling:** Key informants were selected for their knowledge, role, or long-standing association with Ulavi (e.g., priests, trustees, elders).
- **Diversity Consideration:** Efforts were made to include participants across gender, caste, and age groups to reflect the community's plural voices.
- **Observational Sampling:** Conducted both during peak pilgrimage (festival season) and off-season periods to capture temporal variations.

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DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

1. Historical Continuity and the Foundational Role of Chennabasavanna



Source: Compute by Author

Ulavi Kshetra's spiritual significance is deeply intertwined with the life and legacy of **Chennabasavanna**, one of the foremost disciples of Basavanna. Historical accounts, temple inscriptions, and oral traditions converge on the belief that Chennabasavanna migrated to Ulavi during the upheavals at Kalyana in the mid-12th century. This migration was not merely geographical but ideological, representing the transplantation of the **Sharana movement's reformist ethos** into a new sacred landscape.

Field interviews with temple priests and local historians indicate that Ulavi was chosen both for its geographic isolation and its spiritual resonance. Oral narratives describe it as a safe haven for preserving the **vachanas**—poetic expressions that challenged orthodoxy and championed direct communion with the divine. Archival sources such as Panchakshari Hiremath's Ulavi: The Abode of Salvation (2008) corroborate these accounts, documenting how Chennabasavanna became custodian of vachana manuscripts, ensuring their transmission across generations.

The temple complex itself reflects this historical continuity. Initially constructed in local stone, it has undergone multiple phases of renovation, reflecting changing social and devotional aspirations. Inscriptions suggest expansions under Lingayat monasteries, while recent decades have seen the incorporation of concrete structures, a trend Michell (2013) identifies as common in South Indian sacred architecture. Such transformations highlight the **dual nature of heritage** continuity of faith alongside adaptation to modern forms.

Smith's (2006) notion of the "performative use of heritage" aptly describes Ulavi's evolution. Rather than viewing renovations as mere loss of antiquity, they can be understood as **cultural performances** where communities continually reinterpret sacred space. Thus, Ulavi embodies both **anchored tradition** in Chennabasavanna's legacy and **dynamic transformation** in response to contemporary devotion.

2. Intangible Heritage: Vachanas, Rituals, and Oral Traditions

Intangible heritage forms the living essence of Ulavi's identity. The recitation of vachanas, ritual singing, storytelling, and folk performances constitute what UNESCO (2003) terms "living heritage."

Vachana Literature and Devotional Singing

Vachanas, composed by Basavanna, Allama Prabhu, Akka Mahadevi, Chennabasavanna, and others, remain central to religious life in Ulavi. Field observations during the Rathotsava revealed groups of devotees chanting vachanas in unison, sometimes interspersed with **bhakti sangeeta** (devotional songs) accompanied by traditional instruments. Chennabasavanna's pen name, **Kudala Chennasangayya**, continues to resonate in recitations, emphasizing the personal and intimate nature of devotion.

Younger devotees increasingly share vachanas through social media platforms, suggesting that while oral performances in dialects are declining, digital circulation offers new pathways for intergenerational transmission. This aligns with Narayan's (1997) argument that oral traditions adapt rather than vanish under modernization.

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Ritual Storytelling and Folk Performance



Source: Compute by Author

Elders interviewed recalled the once-flourishing folk theatre traditions during the *Jatre*, which dramatized Sharana narratives in Kannada dialects. These performances embodied collective memory and social critique, reinforcing egalitarian ideals. However, their decline mirrors broader national trends where folk forms struggle to compete with electronic media. Yet, ritual storytelling continues in adapted formats, often condensed into recitations or informal gatherings.

Ritual Practices in Sacred Caves



Source: Compute by Author

Ulavi's sacred caves represent both physical and metaphysical spaces of worship. Rituals such as lamp lighting and **Lingadharana** ceremonies are performed in these caves, materializing spiritual memory (Eade & Sallnow, 1991). Observations revealed that devotees treat these spaces with deep reverence, perceiving them as repositories of ancestral presence and divine energy.

Together, these practices show that Ulavi's **intangible heritage is resilient**, though evolving. While traditional performances may wane, new forms of devotional expression digital, musical, and ritual continue to sustain collective identity.

3. Socio-Economic and Ecological Impacts of Pilgrimage

Socio-Economic Dimensions

The annual Ulavi Jatre remains the lifeline of the local economy. Interviews with vendors and service providers revealed that income during festival periods increases by up to **four to five times** compared to ordinary months. Temporary markets spring up, offering handicrafts, religious paraphernalia, and food items. Lodging facilities expand informally, often

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within local households, indicating a community-based hospitality model.

Women play a particularly active role, whether through preparing meals for annadana, selling offerings, or managing stalls. This reinforces the Lingayat ethos of gender equality while also empowering women economically. In line with Singh (2013) and Gupta & Krishna (2020), Ulavi exemplifies how pilgrimage acts as an **informal redistributive system**, benefiting lower-income groups through religious tourism.Beyond direct income, the Jatre fosters social solidarity. Collective service in annadana, voluntary work in temple organization, and shared ritual participation strengthen community ties. Thus, the pilgrimage sustains both livelihoods and social capital.

Ecological Dimensions
However, economic gains come at an ecological cost. Field documentation and discussions with forest officials identified major challenges:

- **Plastic Waste Accumulation:** Non-biodegradable offerings and disposable items litter sacred caves and trails.
- **Deforestation and Firewood Use:** Increased cooking during the *Jatre* leads to localized deforestation.
- **Wildlife Disturbance:** Pilgrim influx disrupts animal corridors, reducing sightings of native species.
- **Water Stress:** Pilgrim demand strains local water sources, especially during peak season.

These findings echo Gadgil and Guha's (1995) warnings about pilgrimage-induced ecological stress in fragile ecosystems like the Western Ghats. They also support UNEP's (2019) call for integrating **eco-spiritual ethics** into religious practice.

Community members expressed awareness of these issues, with some suggesting biodegradable offerings and waste segregation. However, institutional support remains limited. Without coordinated efforts, ecological stress threatens to erode both biodiversity and the sanctity of Ulavi's environment.

4. Tangible Heritage and Conservation Challenges
Ulavi's tangible heritage—its temples, sacred caves, and inscriptions—reflects a complex relationship between devotion, modernization, and conservation.

Architectural Transformations
The temple complex originally reflected **local stone-based architecture**, blending functionality with aesthetics. Successive renovations, however, have introduced concrete structures and modern plaques, often without expert consultation. This aligns with Menon's (2018) notion of "aesthetic displacement," where devotional intent overrides heritage authenticity.

Preservation Challenges
Physical observation revealed that inscriptions are weathered, moss-covered, or replaced with modern replicas. Stone carvings show signs of erosion due to humidity and unregulated human contact. Photographic documentation highlighted unsystematic repainting of temple structures, which, while devotional in intent, compromises historical value.

Institutional Gaps
The Channabasava Trust serves as the primary custodian but lacks formal collaboration with heritage authorities such as the Archaeological Survey of India. Interviews with trustees revealed both resource constraints and the absence of clear conservation policies. This reflects Joshi & Bhat's (2019) observation that while community participation is vital, **structured institutional support** is equally necessary.

Emerging Awareness
Despite challenges, there is growing awareness among devotees of the need for heritage-sensitive practices. Suggestions included interpretive signage, waste segregation, and regulated access to fragile caves. Such participatory awareness aligns with UNESCO's (2003) framework on safeguarding intangible heritage while empowering communities as custodians.
Ulavi thus reflects a paradox: while devotion sustains the site's vitality, modernization and ecological strain endanger its physical heritage. Sustainable conservation must reconcile ritual needs with professional heritage management.

CONCLUSION
Ulavi Kshetra represents a sacred landscape where **faith, heritage, and community life converge**. As the *samādhi* of Chennabasavanna, it anchors the Lingayat tradition while preserving vachanas and ritual practices that continue to shape cultural memory. The site's **intangible heritage**—devotional singing, storytelling, and festival traditions—remains vibrant, though increasingly adapted to modern platforms.

The annual *Jatre* highlights Ulavi's socio-economic role, generating livelihoods and reinforcing community solidarity, especially through women's participation. Yet, alongside these strengths lie challenges: **tangible heritage structures** face deterioration from modernization and neglect, while the fragile ecology of the Western Ghats suffers from pilgrimage-induced pressures such as waste, deforestation, and wildlife disruption.

Ulavi thus embodies both resilience and vulnerability. Safeguarding its legacy requires balancing spiritual devotion with conservation and ecological responsibility, ensuring that it continues to thrive as a living center of Karnataka's cultural and religious identity.

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