
Beyond Bricks and Mortar: Voices of Locals on Thane City's Heritage

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Received: 15 July 2023; Revised: 02 October 2023; Accepted: 31 October 2023

Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology 11.2 (2023-24): 1074-1090

Abstract: Thane, a city in Maharashtra, India, is well-known for its ample historical sites, ecology and culture. However, the material culture in the city reflecting the historical events has had been largely ignored. The presented study investigates the intricate relationship between individuals and the historical monuments in Thane, Maharashtra, India, focusing on the cultural, social and economic impact. This research employs key informants and is based on a quantitative survey method conducted among a diverse group of Thane residents. The data collected sheds light on people's perceptions, attitudes and experiences toward historical monuments in their city. The findings highlight the significance of historical monuments in fostering community ties, preserving regional history, boosting the local economy through cultural tourism and inculcating a sense of pride about the city's heritage. However, challenges such as maintenance issues and urban expansion threaten the very existence of these historical monuments. The study concludes by proposing measures to protect, conserve and preserve, as well as promote Thane's historical monuments. These measures include conservation efforts, public engagement/awareness campaigns and the need for coordination for urban development strategies that prioritize the conservation and preservation of cultural heritage. This research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on the importance of historical monuments in shaping urban identities and promoting sustainable development.

Keywords: Thane, Heritage, Urban, People, Monument, Culture, Sustainable Development

Introduction

Thane has throughout its existence experienced many important events, making it a storehouse of historical, cultural, religious, and political heritage. The area is rich in historical monuments and archaeological artifacts, with the rulers of the Shilahara Dynasty, Portuguese, Maratha, and British among others playing a crucial part in shaping Thane's historical identity. Through my years of travel throughout India or abroad, I have always deeply appreciated cities that strongly emphasize conserving, showcasing and advocating their historical landmarks. Contemplating this, I found myself wondering why Thane; a vibrant urban centre, has no comparable steps that have been taken to protect its heritage. Thus motivated, the fast-paced urbanization

and growth within the city have had also sparked worries about preserving and conserving the heritage. I decided to initiate a study to explore the deficiencies and obstacles as well as to utilize current insights to improve heritage awareness efforts within the city inclusive of aims to explore the local perceptions towards the heritage.

Previous Studies

Thane's antiquity dates long back as a historical place of importance is observed through various written accounts as well as extant remains. We find Ptolemy mentioning Thane in his 2nd century AD text also Alberuni (970 AD-1039 AD) who speaks of Thane as being the capital of Konkan (Raghavan, 2020; 200-258). Other accounts like that of Marco Polo in the year 1290 AD and Ibn Batuta in the mid-14th century AD (Roy 2019; 669). In addition to these sources, few other historical records shed light on Thane's past. For instance, Arikesa's Copper Plates of 1078 AD were found at Thana Fort. ((Raghavan, 2020; 200-258).

Compiled during the British era, 'The Gazetteer of Bombay Presidency, Volume XIII' proves to be a significant record of Thane. Published in the year 1882 by James M. Campbell, this publication provides detailed information about Thane's geography, society, and polity. In more recent times, various scholars have had made valuable contributions towards understanding Thane's historicity. In addition to academic research, Thane's history has been explored through various popular media outlets such as newspapers, social media platforms, and YouTube series. These diverse forms of media have shed light on different aspects of Thane's past by presenting engaging narratives to a much broader audience. Through articles, posts, videos, and series; they have highlighted key events, landmarks, and cultural heritage; thus, enhancing public understanding and appreciation of Thane's history.

Late Dr. Daud Dalvi, for example, has written several books on the history of Thane district. He has discussed the city's comprehensive history in the documentary series '*Ase Ghadle Thane*' (YouTube channel - thane homes), in Marathi consisting of four episodes. The historical and archaeological relevance of Thane is glorified through the discovery of extant artefacts found at various places; one such place is Siddheshwar Lake from Thane which is one of the biggest lakes in the city. It gained importance after the discovery of Brahma's sculpture and Dr. Kumud Kanitkar in her article 'Brahma' has provided valuable insights related to sculpture.

Additionally, Mr. Sadashiv Tetvilkar has attempted to compile the history of Thane in a book format, with one popular book being '*Tumche Amche Thane*' (in Marathi, 2016). Rupali Mokashi has also made contributions to the decipherment of the city's history through her book titled '*Shilaharas of Thane*' (2023), which delves into discussions on the Shilaharas and their connection with Thane. Furthermore, important literary compositions such as V. K. Rajwade's *Mahikavatichi Bakhar* (In Marathi, 2022) and Dilip Telang's '*Great Historical Background of Thane District during the Portuguese Regime*' are all considered as important sources to gain insights into the history.

Dr. Indrayani Roy's 2019 publication, 'Exploring Thane: A Heritage Tourist Destination', examines the potential of Thane's heritage sites to attract tourists. The author emphasizes the importance of raising awareness about these sites, though research reveals a lack of public knowledge. While Dr. Roy discusses various efforts to preserve and promote these historical landmarks for tourism, she offers generic recommendations. Nevertheless, her paper lays the groundwork for future heritage tourism development in Thane. However, the author concentrated only on certain major aspects and hence has a limited scope if we consider a holistic approach.

The publication of the book '*Talav Te Tower*' (in Marathi) in 2022 provides a comprehensive overview of Thane City's evolution from ancient times to its contemporary state.

Thane's history is being highlighted through editorial pieces in local newspapers by Mr. Makrand Josh. It covers a wide range of topics, including prominent figures in Thane, the city's theatre and art scene, street names, historical buildings, and their cultural significance. The existing research on Thane's heritage; therefore, accentuates the need for a deeper understanding of the relationship between its residents and material culture. This study seeks to examine how individuals in Thane perceive their historical heritage, emphasizing on the significance of heritage in shaping local identity as well as fostering a sense of belonging and promoting appreciation for the city's rich history.

Aims and Objectives

The study aimed to examine citizens' sense of belonging and their connection to, understanding of, and appreciation for the city's heritage. It sought to identify the factors influencing local perceptions of heritage and to understand the community's role in heritage preservation. Additionally, the research aimed to propose methods to enhance heritage management and foster greater community engagement in preserving and valuing cultural heritage.

Research Problem

In Thane; a rapidly developing urban centre in Maharashtra, the relationship between individuals and historical landmarks has emerged as a noteworthy research concern. This matter encompasses a range of aspects, including the consequences of urbanization on historical sites, the influence of these monuments on shaping the city's cultural identity and the methods through which the local community engages with and safeguards their historical heritage. To gain a deeper understanding of the problem, it is beneficial to break it down into several sub-topics:

The impact of urbanization on historical monuments: As Thane experiences rapid urbanization and infrastructure development, historical monuments may face various threats such as demolition, encroachment, and or damage due to construction activities. Research in this area re-examined the policies and measures that are already in place to protect these sites and evaluate their effectiveness.

The role of historical monuments in shaping the city's cultural identity: It is crucial to comprehend the significance of historical monuments in defining Thane's cultural heritage. This research explores the historical, architectural and cultural importance and the contribution of these monuments in creating the city's distinct identity.

Public engagement and awareness: Investigating the level of public awareness and engagement with historical monuments in Thane provides valuable insights into the community's interest in preserving their heritage. This study involves conducting surveys and or interviews to understand the public perception of these sites and their role in the city's development.

Preservation and restoration efforts: Re-evaluating the current initiatives for preserving and restoring historical monuments in Thane would help identify areas for improvement and promote better conservation practices. This research involves comparing different restoration techniques, analysing the effectiveness of various preservation strategies, and recommending best practices.

Community engagement in heritage preservation: It was observed that promoting community participation in preserving and conserving historical landmarks can foster a stronger sense of ownership and accountability towards these significant sites. Studies in this field aim to pinpoint effective strategies for community involvement in heritage protection and propose methods for their application in Thane.

In summary, the relationship between the people and historical monuments in Thane presents a complex research challenge that necessitates a holistic examination. A more thorough understanding of this issue can be achieved by exploring different elements like urban development, cultural heritage, and community engagement.

Research Methodology

The methodology outlined for this study is both well-structured and comprehensive. The study aims to capture diverse perspectives by strategically categorizing participants based on age, social status, occupation and city affiliations. Employing quantitative methods; particularly a structured survey via a questionnaire, ensured a systematic and methodical approach to both data collection and analysis. The methodology delves into participants' perceptions, understanding and appreciation of their city's heritage and sense of belonging, while also considering the various factors shaping these perspectives. The study intends to offer valuable insights into the intricate elements contributing to a city's identity and the extent to which its residents feel connected. By maintaining simplicity in its approach, the methodology balances feasibility and thoroughness, ensuring that the study remains manageable without sacrificing depth in examining the research topic.

Limitations

This study offers a valuable opportunity to understand how a Thanekar (a local Marathi term used for denoting the citizens of Thane) perceives and values their

heritage. However, it is crucial to recognize the study's limitations. Firstly, the sample size and participant scope may not capture the full range of perspectives present in the community. Furthermore, the reliance on quantitative methods, such as structured surveys, may fail to capture the nuanced qualitative insights that could provide a richer understanding of the subject. Additionally, the study's exclusive focus on perceptions and appreciation may overlook the broader socio-political and economic factors that influence heritage preservation and conservation of Thane. Lastly; as a study, the findings might not be broadly applicable beyond the specific context of Thane.

The survey consisted of 20 questions and employed a snowball sampling method. A total of 100 people took part in the survey. The citizens in this survey are divided into the following groups: Residents, Immigrants, Field Experts, Students – school and college, and Others. The study covered an age range from 11 to 81.

Data was procured from various locations such as Naupada, Upvan, Meadows, Vishnunagar, Pachpakhadi, Ghodbunder, Waghbil, Charai, Kolshet, Khopat, Dongiripada, Kolbad, Pune, Kalwa, Ratnagiri, USA, etc.

Participants Occupation Range

Student, assistant professor, actor, advocate, film designer, social worker, teacher, healer, writer, photographer, doctor, director, heritage professional, archivist, archaeologist, etc.

Questionnaire Details

1. How often do you visit historical monuments in Thane?
- 2a. How familiar are you with the historical monuments in Thane?
- 2b. Which historical monuments in Thane have you visited?
- 2c. In your opinion, how significant are historical monuments to the cultural identity of the city of Thane?
3. Have you ever participated in any events or activities organized around historical monuments in Thane?
- 4a. What, in your opinion, are the main barriers or challenges that prevent people from engaging with historical monuments in Thane?
- 4b. Do you think the city of Thane provides enough information about its historical monuments?
5. Do you believe that historical monuments in Thane contribute to the city's tourism?
6. To what extent are historical monuments in the city of Thane accessible to individuals with diverse abilities?

- 7a. To improve the visiting experience of historical monuments in Thane and ensure their accessibility and appeal to the public, what measures can be taken?
- 7b. Are there any specific historical monuments in Thane that you want to see improved or restored?
8. Have you learned anything new or interesting about the city's history through your visits to historical monuments?
9. How important is it for schools and educational institutions to create awareness about the historical monuments as part of their curriculum?
10. How can the city of Thane involve its residents in preserving and promoting historical monuments?
11. Do you think the current presentation and interpretation of historical monuments in Thane adequately explain their significance and history?
12. Have your perceptions or opinions about historical monuments changed after visiting them in the city of Thane?
13. Do you think the presence of historical monuments impacts the overall atmosphere and ambiance of the city of Thane?
14. Do you believe that the city of Thane should invest more resources in conserving and promoting its historical monuments?
15. Are you aware of any ongoing initiatives or projects related to preserving and promoting historical monuments in Thane? If yes, please specify.
16. Name
17. Age
18. Occupation
19. Address
20. I confirm the information provided is authentic.

Data Analysis

Upon data analysis, it is evident that 58% of individuals have rarely visited the historical monuments in the city (Figure 1), with 28% being frequent visitors and 14% having never visited. Additionally, 63% are aware of the presence of these historical landmarks. According to the survey results, 86% have paid a visit to the renowned Maratha period temple, Kopineshwar Mandir, situated in the bustling market of Thane. Following closely behind is St. John the Baptist Church, which gathered 77% of

the votes. This church, dating back 475 years, signifies the arrival of the Portuguese in Thane. Ghodbunder Fort, located on the outskirts of the city, received 41% of the votes, while Cowasji Patel Ajiary, situated on one of the main streets, was visited by 39% of the respondents. Naglabunder Fort was visited by 22%, St. James Fort by 30%, and the Synagogue by 21%. Merely 18% have explored the remains of a church near Little Flower School. Surprisingly; despite its rich historical background, only 1% have visited Thana Fort. Which currently serves as the well-known Thane Central Jail. Other sites that were visited by the participants (Figure 2) include Siddheshwar Lake, the Brahma sculpture, the Ram Mandir at Kasarvadavli and other such places.

Despite the varying opinions of individuals who have had visited or not visited these monuments, 48% believe that these landmarks hold great significance and can enhance the cultural identity of the city. Conversely, 60% of respondents are unaware of any events or activities organized around these historical sites, while 40% have some level of awareness (Figure 3). The barriers and challenges preventing people from engaging with these monuments include the lack of proper mapping, public awareness, preservation and conservation efforts, signage, media coverage, faith and affiliation related restrictions to enter and access these monuments and a general attitude of taking these monuments for granted. Additionally, 67% of individuals feel that Thane City does not provide sufficient information about the history of these historical sites, yet 37% believe that these monuments have the potential to boost the city's tourism (Figure 4). Furthermore, 51% of respondents find these monuments somewhat accessible, while 19% consider them easily accessible (Figure 5).

A diverse range of perspectives is expressed to emphasize the importance of enhancing the visitor experience at these historical monuments. 91% felt that there should be school and college visits. Other varieties of opinions expressed were, that there should be incorporation of guided tours, workshops, interactive lectures, informative websites, improved transportation, signage, Thane darshan tours, and involvement of the Thane Municipal Corporation (TMC) in preservation and conservation efforts (Figure 6). It was also recommended that city historians should collaborate to offer guidance, introduce augmented reality experiences and ensure accessible pathways. Respondents identified Thana Fort, Naglabunder Fort, St. James Church, Kopineshwar Temple and Kalwa Bridge as monuments in need of enhancement or restoration. Additionally, 48% of participants noted a change in their perception of the monuments after visiting them. While some found value in their experiences, 76% expressed dissatisfaction with the current presentation and interpretation of historical monuments, believing it does not adequately showcase their significance. Furthermore, 78% agreed that historical monuments contribute to the city's overall atmosphere (Figure 7) and 93% strongly supported the thought that there should be increased investment in resources for the conservation and promotion of these historical monuments of Thane city (Figure 8). The following are a few of the infographics from the surveyed data representing the designed questionnaire utilised specifically for this research.

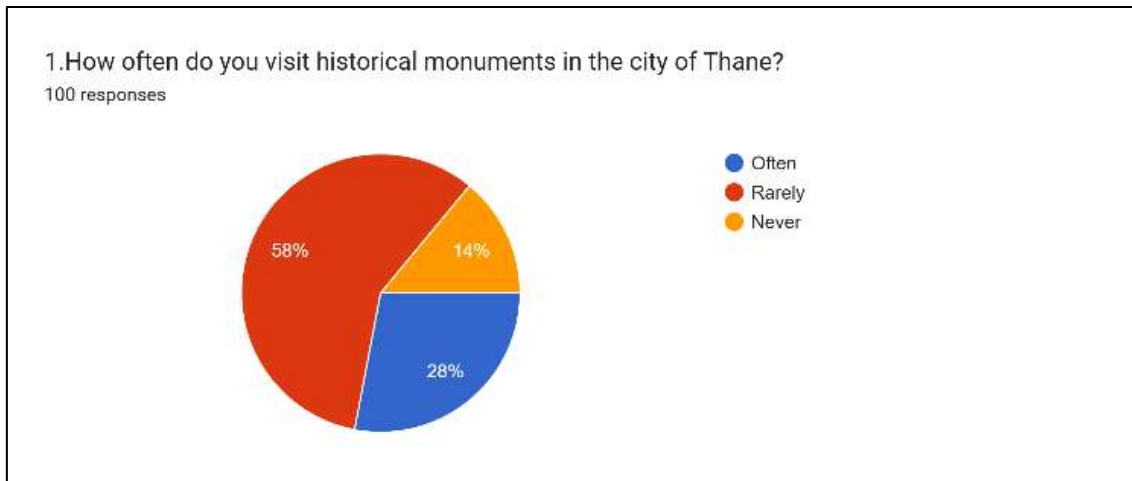


Figure 1: Infographic indicating responses received from the conducted survey
(© Oke 2024)

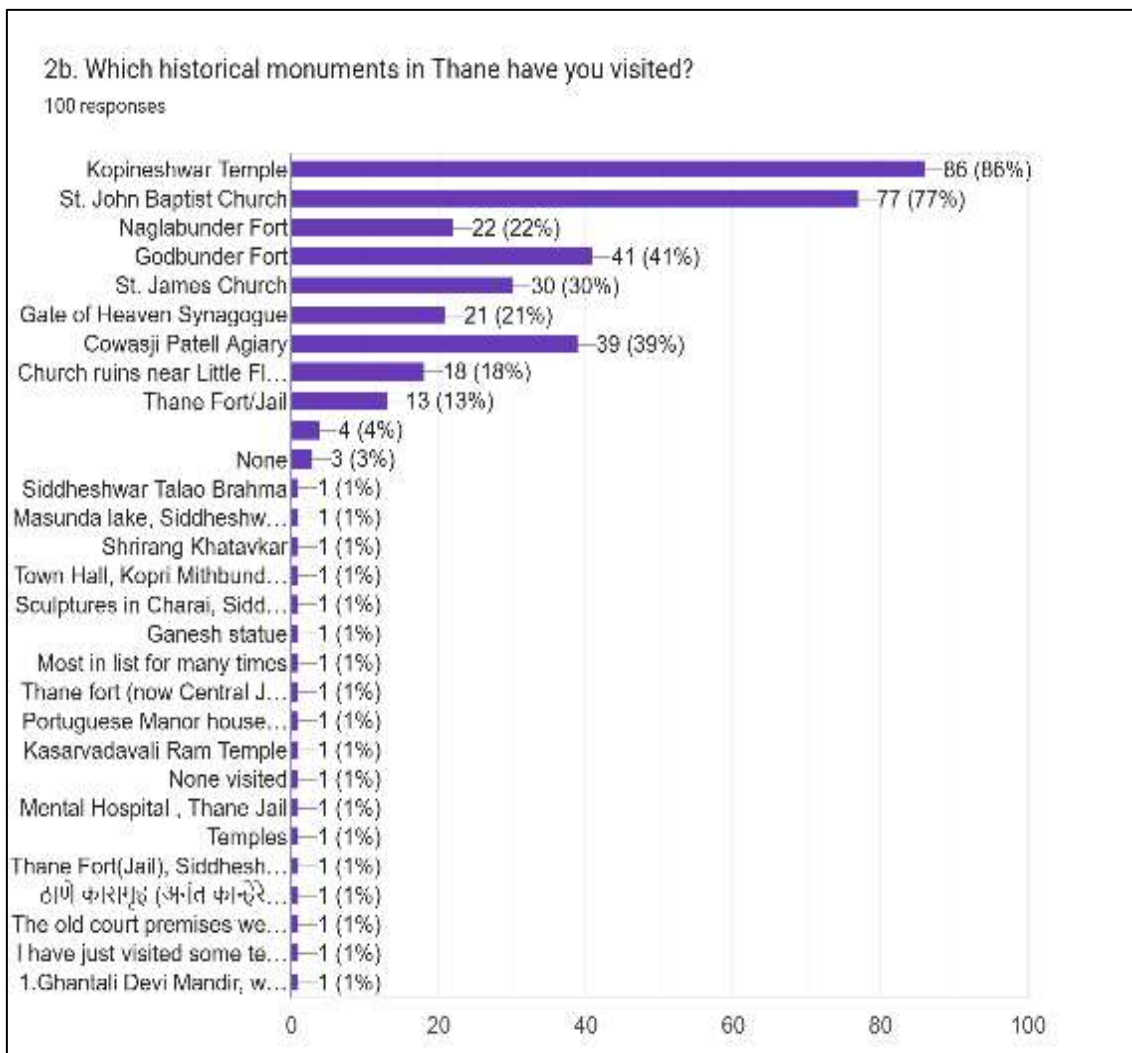


Figure 2: Infographic indicating results of question visits to the historical monuments within the city (© Oke 2024)

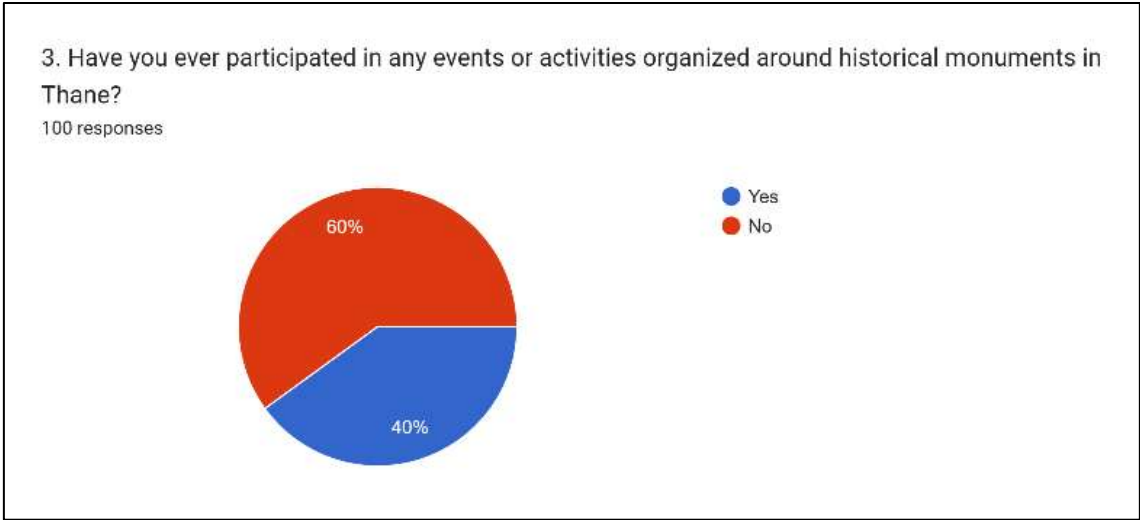


Figure 3: Infographic representing participation of citizens in the activities related to the historical monuments (© Oke 2024)

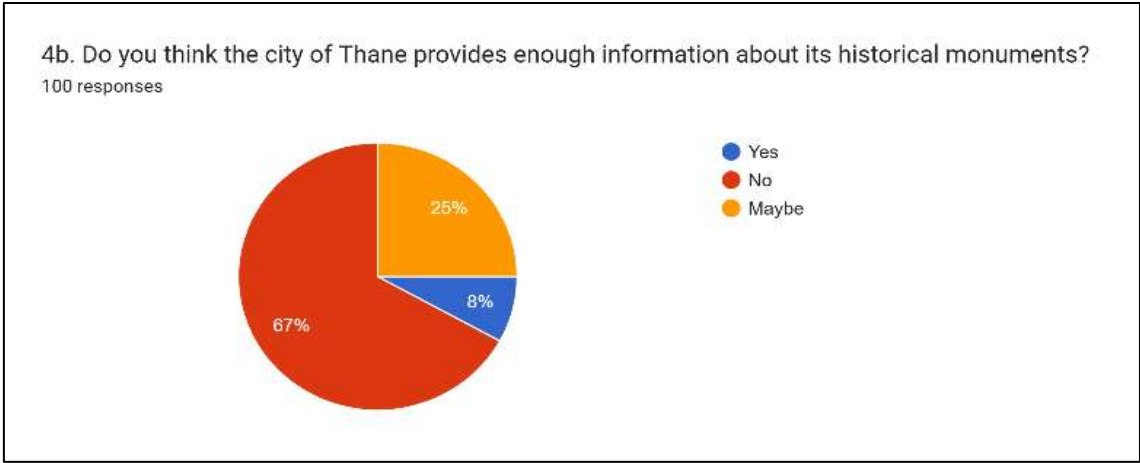


Figure 4: Infographic with information related to historical monuments (© Oke 2024)

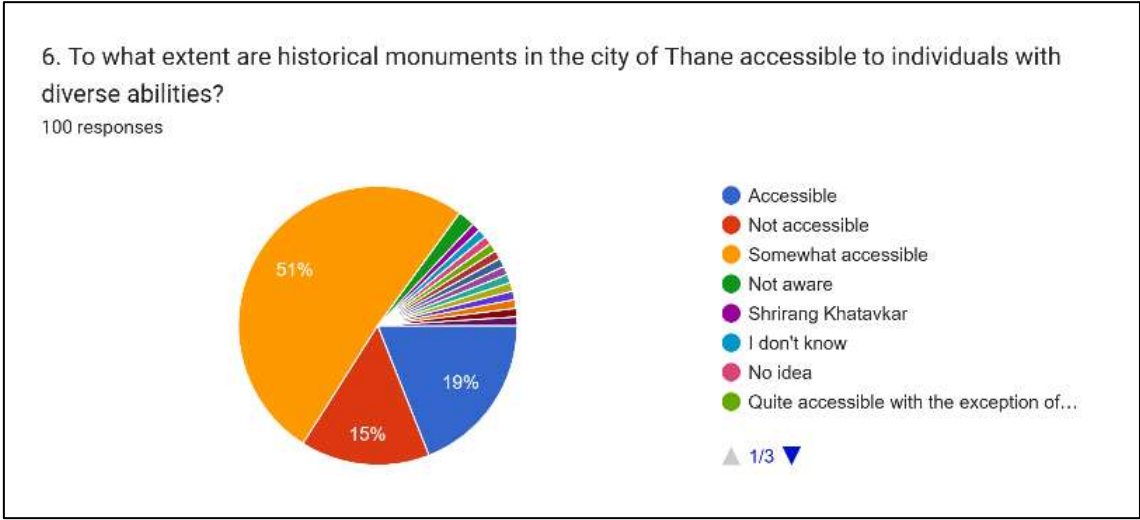


Figure 5: Infographic data related to accessibility and monuments (© Oke 2024)

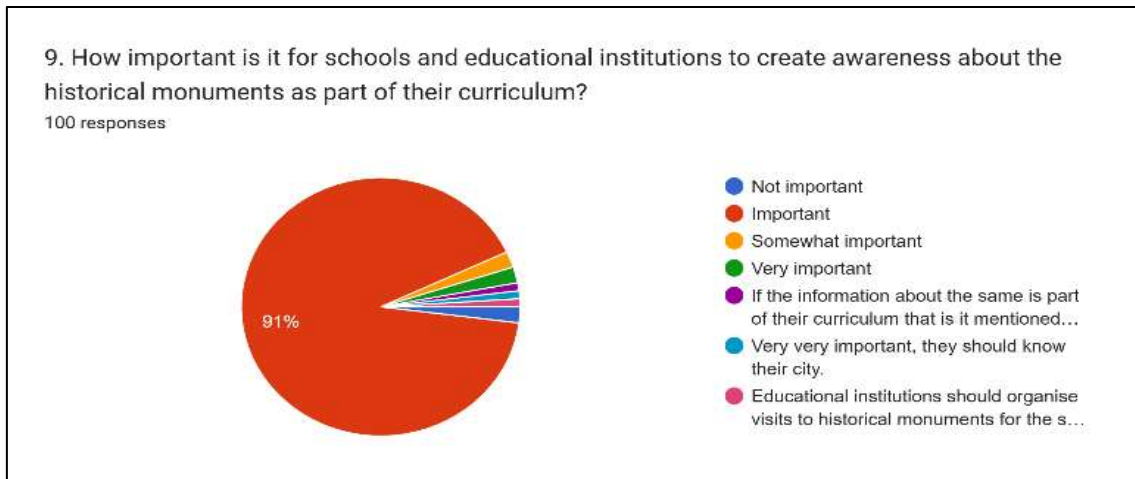


Figure 6: Infographic data received related to awareness within the educational institutes (© Oke 2024)

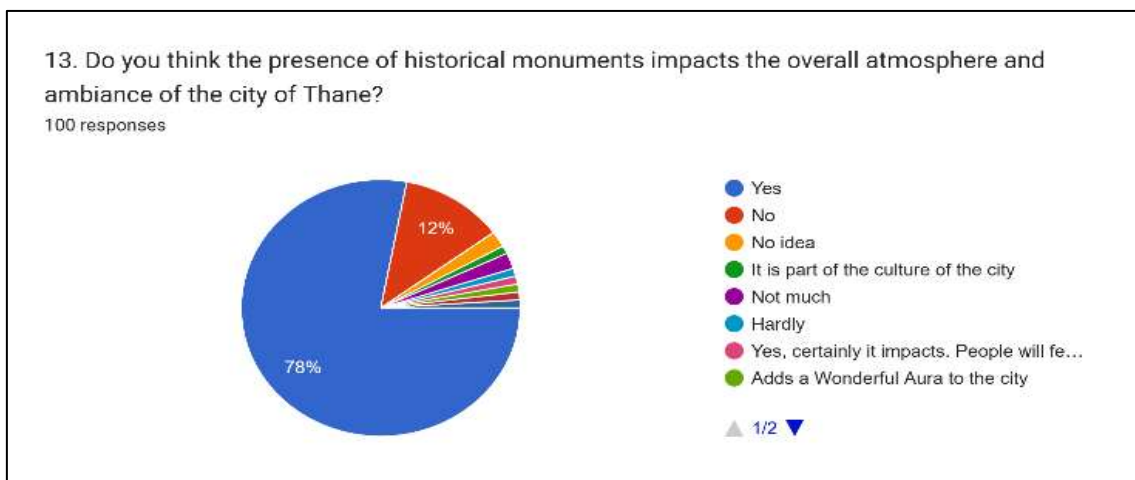


Figure 7: Infographic data related to the overall city's atmosphere affected by historical monuments (© Oke 2024)

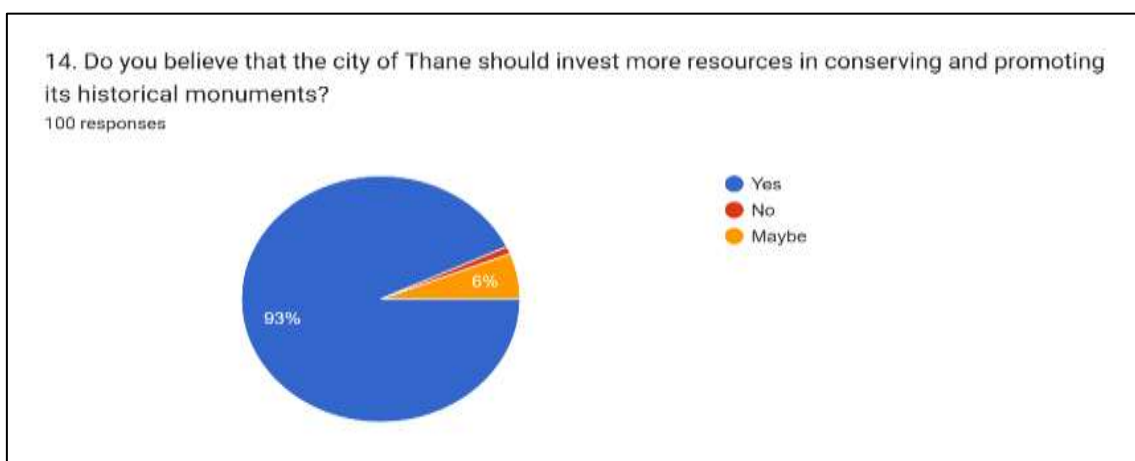


Figure 8: Infographic data highlighting the status of the resource utilised for conservation and promotional activities (© Oke 2024)



Figure 9a-b: 9a Before and 9b after restoration works at the Ghodbunder fort
(© Oke 2024)

Amelioration Work

According to the survey, it has been observed that there is a lack of awareness among people regarding the ongoing activities surrounding historical monuments. In 2014, the restoration project for St. John the Baptist Church was initiated by the architectural firm Vikas Dilawari Architects and it has recently been concluded. Similarly; in the year 2020, the Mira-Bhayander Municipal Corporation allocated a budget for the conservation, beautification and establishment of a green zone in a 7-hectare area of Ghodbunder Fort (Figure 9a-b,10a-b). The NOC (No Objection Certificate) was issued by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and the State Department of Archaeology & Museum, Maharashtra. However, the restoration work is still in progress. Dr. Sachin Joshi from Deccan College Post-Graduate and Research Institute Pune, together with his team, successfully carried out another significant restoration project. They were responsible for the conservation of the canons discovered at Meeth Bunder (Kopari jetty) (Figure 11a-b). Following the restoration process, these canons were transformed from functioning as bollards and are now showcased to the public.

Furthermore, there are a variety of other activities, including popular heritage walks, that are organized periodically in the city. Mr. Makarand Joshi; a senior writer and travel enthusiast, regularly conducts a series of heritage walks through his company Vihang Travels that quite popular and hence attracts a large number of attendees. Similarly, Mr. Atharva Bedekar, archaeologist and fort enthusiast organizes regular heritage walks in the city under the Durgavata banner. These walks gathered positive participation from the residents captivated by the city's history. Additionally, Mr. Raamesh Gowri Raghavan, the Director of the INSTUCEN School of Languages and

Literature also collaborates with various ventures to organize heritage walks in and around the city, focusing on Ghodbunder Fort.



Figure 10a-b: 10a Before and 10b after restoration works at the Ghodbunder fort
(© Oke 2024)



Figure 11a-b: 11a Before and 11b after display of the restored canons at Meeth Bunder
(© Oke 2024)

The Institute of Oriental Study in Thane- houses a wide array of artefacts. These items are displayed in a dedicated area on the premises, alongside a library and an activity room. The institute also hosts temporary exhibitions showcasing pieces from their collection. Additionally, the Tandel Fund for Archives, founded by artist Parag Tandel,

aims to educate the public about the Koli community through pop-up exhibitions and events in Chendani Koliwada and Kopari.

An additional significant detail to note is the creation of the Thane Heritage Cell within the Thane Municipal Corporation. This department has initiated various measures aimed at preserving the city's heritage. The establishment of the Thane chapter of INTACH (The Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage) signifies a promising future for its activities. Despite encountering certain constraints at present, the chapter remains steadfast in its determination to surmount these obstacles. Through unwavering dedication and the backing of the community, the Thane chapter seems to be well-positioned to play a pivotal role in safeguarding and advancing art and cultural heritage within the locality.

Additional Steps

Despite the occurrence of these activities in the urban area, the survey reveals a lack of awareness and active participation among the people. A series of valuable recommendations have emerged through meticulous analysis of survey participant responses. This aims to bridge the gap between individuals and their monumental heritage, fostering a deeper connection and appreciation for these invaluable cultural treasures. By showcasing key findings and insights from the research, these recommendations offer practical strategies to engage, educate and empower people in spreading awareness, conserving, preserving, and celebrating their rich heritage. Thus, one can offer several measures and recommendations under broad categories; which are as follows:

Community Surveys and Interviews: To pursue comprehensive surveys and interviews within the community time and again to gain insights into their perceptions, values, and concerns regarding their monumental heritage. This will help identify key themes and sentiments inclusive of reiterant issues.

Architectural and Historical Documentation: Thorough architectural and historical documentation of the monuments in Thane through a holistic approach can served as a valuable educational resource and help raise awareness about the importance of heritage preservation.

Heritage Impact Assessments: To conduct heritage impact assessments before implementing any development projects near the monuments. This will help evaluate potential threats to the heritage sites and enable the development of appropriate mitigation strategies.

Capacity Building Workshops: To organize workshops and training sessions for the local community on heritage conservation techniques and practices. Empowering the community with knowledge and skills will foster a sense of ownership and responsibility toward safeguarding their heritage.



Figures 12a-c: Our Mercy Lady Church (© Oke 2024)

Stakeholder Collaboration: To foster collaborations among various stakeholders, including local authorities, heritage conservation organizations, academic institutions, and community groups as collective efforts are crucial for effective heritage preservation and management.

Public Awareness Campaigns: To launch public awareness campaigns through diverse mediums such as social media, community events, and educational programs. These campaigns can highlight the cultural significance of the monuments and encourage active community participation in their preservation.

Sustainable Heritage Tourism Development: To explore opportunities to develop sustainable heritage tourism that both preserves the integrity of monuments and provides economic benefits to the local community. This can involve responsibly organizing guided tours, cultural events, and artisanal markets in a responsible way.

Advocacy for Heritage Protection: To advocate for the implementation of laws and policies that protect heritage sites at both, the local and national levels. Legal frameworks are essential in preventing encroachment and unauthorized development that could harm these sites.

Regular Monitoring and Evaluation: To establish a system for regularly monitoring and evaluating efforts to preserve and conserve heritage. This will help identify challenges and refine strategies for continuous improvement.

Inclusive Decision-Making: To ensure that decision-making processes regarding heritage conservation are inclusive and participatory, taking into account the perspectives and aspirations of all stakeholders, including marginalized communities. The enforcement of these measures and strict adherence to these suggestions is and should be firmly endorsed. By regularly conducting such studies and inculcating the measures and opinions of the local populace, it is possible to make a valuable contribution to the sustainable conservation of the city's monumental heritage while fostering a sense of belonging and significance. One of the Monuments that require immediate attention.

Conclusion

In the dynamic city of Thane, the inhabitants; popularly known as Thanekars, through this survey have vocalized their viewpoints on the historical monuments that embellish their city. There exists a substantial disparity between these perspectives and the factual conditions of these heritage sites. This disparity acts as a metaphorical bridge that must be crossed to mend the gap between the people and their culturally significant heritage.

Thanekars have expressed their thoughts, and concerns, emphasizing the necessity for improved maintenance, awareness, and engagement from the government, stakeholders, and the community. By addressing these issues, Thane can strive towards establishing a strong connection between its people and the monumental heritage that shapes the city's identity and creates a better understanding of the sense of belonging.

As Thanekars voice their opinions, the city must take decisive action and narrow the divide between perception and reality. By doing so, Thane can metamorphose into a city where its inhabitants take pride in their heritage and actively participate in its preservation, conservation and promotion. This will not only enhance tourism leading to greater economic outputs but also foster a sense of belonging and cultural pride among the residents.

In conclusion, the endeavor to bridge the gap between local perceptions and the actual state of their city's heritage monuments is a crucial stride towards a brighter future for Thane. By united efforts of its inhabitants, government officials, and heritage professionals the city can collaborate to safeguard, cherish and celebrate its rich cultural heritage, beyond being considered just buildings of bricks and mortar.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Mr. Raamesh Gowri Raghavan for helping me reach wider groups by sharing the questionnaire. I am thankful to Ms. Harshada Wirkud for supporting me throughout the writing process of this article. Lastly, I am thankful to my parents Mrs. Varsha Oke, Mr. Hemantkumar Oke and my cousin Mrs Kimaya Oak Deshpande for sharing my questionnaire with a larger group which helped me procure the needful data.

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