

IT'S TIME TO RECLAIM OUR HERITAGE

Jawhar Sircar

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(English Version)

As the World Heritage Week draws to a close, one looks back at India's track record with a certain degree of frustration. Every educated Indian who has been overseas has seen for himself how well heritage is preserved abroad and also marketed with passion, even by nations that hardly have a fraction of what India can boast of. So, where did we go wrong, and why?

To begin with, one has to admit that the Indian cultural gene has never been embedded with a historical chromosome. The history that we read nowadays is, by and large, a post-Independence product where a certain degree of linearity and continuity could be established between the present and the Indus Valley, after Mortimer Wheeler discovered Harappa in 1946. The momentous finds made by the imperial Archaeological Survey throughout 19th and 20th centuries unearthed what we had obliterated and these were factored in, at episodic intervals, to fill up embarrassing gaps in our timeline. We had, for instance, completely forgotten the glorious art of Ajanta, until a British Army Captain stumbled upon it quite accidentally in 1819, but it actually took another century to figure out its critical significance. The grandeur of Amaravati, that has been in the news recently, and other classic Buddhist edifices at Takshashila, Sanchi and Bodh Gaya were "rediscovered" mainly in the 19th century, but they were restored to their present form only in the middle of the last century. Just about an hour's drive from Kolkata we have the ancient town of Chandraketu Garh that was mentioned in Greek and Roman records. But how many of us even know of the existence of this fortified settlement that dates back to at least two centuries before Christ?

Let us also not forget that the Indian mind believes in the life of every object, whether animate or inanimate, and considers it to be “impure” after its “death”. This means that even the clothes of a dead person are technically impure. Such a civilisation was genetically programmed to burn or consign to the waters any living being or item that had outlived its period. No museums existed, because we were uncomfortable with retaining such “polluted” items. But then, we have been exposed to western education and culture long enough to accept that a nation's pride lies in flaunting its rich antiquity. Then why can't the Indian Museum, which is still called the Jadu-ghar or the palace of mysteries, be as attractive as the British Museum?

That the Central Museums have to seek permissions for every major modification, wait upon an unimaginative bureaucracy is bad enough, but then museums could also not work out their vision and roadmap. Where we failed the most was in creating a professional museum cadre as the better students all gravitated to academics. A start has been made recently by sending three batches of bright youngsters for intensive training to world class foreign museums. Let us hope this succeeds eventually, once many of the present negative museocrats retire and service rules are improved.

As one enters the British museum or even the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin, one looks up in wonder at the beautiful transparent Atrium dome that covers the whole area and connects the old buildings with the new. The dome adds value, glamour and utility and such a dome could transform the very character of the Indian Museum. When this was proposed during the bi-centenary renovations, it was greeted with shrieks of alarm in Kolkata till it was shot down. Those who understood international museums better kept quiet as sarkar never sought their support. All attempts to modernise the galleries, display templates,

lighting and signage are met with bureaucratic resistance, red tape and internal politicking. This can only be tackled through persistent haranguing in public, through an interested and informed press. Delhi's National Museum was transformed dramatically by a dynamic Director, but he was shunted out overnight to the deep disappointment of museum lovers, who had just started revisiting it after decades.

Where India's built heritage is concerned, the Archaeological Survey has done its bit but it is impossible to expect this terribly understaffed organisation to protect all the 3650 notified monuments. More than half of these could either be de-notified with no great harm to heritage or handed over to the local community to involve them, instil pride and ensure protection. This would permit the ASI to concentrate its attention on a limited number that would hopefully be better maintained, even within its meagre budget. A few years ago, we had pleaded before Planning Commission for a raise in public funding, arguing that the Central Government spends just 13 paise per one hundred rupees of its budget on the culture sector, which is indeed very low. We have to start the process of gradually entrusting responsibility to the community, reliable NGOs, willing corporates or select PSUs, as government has reached its point of exhaustion. But without CSR set-offs or some tax breaks, corporates cannot really be roped in. Having handled culture at the national level, I would plead that neither the State nor the Central Government should set up any new museum, whatever be the local pressure. The ones that they already have are usually in a dismal condition because of staff problems and archaic attitude, as well as restrictive rules and fund shortage. Almost all the major museums in America and in other parts of the developed world are run by private Trusts and corporations and there is no reason why a vibrant India cannot adopt this route. It is also time for the educated and more

affluent Indian elite to walk the talk and show the government sector how museums can be run better.

The main villain of this story, however, is the outdated and stifling Antiquities Act that converts every serious collector of art and heritage into a serial offender. Neither has the ASI the capability to knock at every door to find out who has collected what antiquity, nor could the Act prevent the rampant smuggling of historical objects. Numerous committees and experts have pondered over every word, phrase and comma of the Act and it is now time to act. The well meaning intent of the government can be better realised through a non-intrusive sharp legislation, that would better ensure that antiquities do not leave our shores without proper procedures. But there is absolutely no reason to stop the free flow of antiquities and art objects within the country, as we seriously need to encourage former royals or zamindars to bring their treasures out of dark lockers. The present government has taken the initiative to repeal a whole lot of useless or retrograde Acts and I submit that this Antiquities Act should be deleted or radically modified to permit harassed collectors assume their rightful role in upholding the nation's treasures.

The last question I pose is: why is it that we hear of heritage hotels mainly in Rajasthan or M.P. or Hyderabad? Simple: Curzon's Ancient Monuments Act did not apply to Princely States. In the rest of India, the ASI cannot or does not permit the re-use of its sombre buildings. One way to make heritage more exciting is to open up selected "protected" structures, not the Taj Mahal of course, to tourism with strict safeguards. Though they appear to be at loggerheads, commerce and culture are historically connected, as the generous contribution of trader's guilds to Ajanta and countless other cultural enterprises will reveal. It is time once again for them to join hands in rescuing and preserving our patrimony.