



Jawhar Sircar

No one has empowered the present generation to endanger our heritage pooled in over centuries

The problem with parliamentary democracy often lies in its inscrutable legal jargon. By the time one gets to know the real purport of a Bill, it is all over and done with.

We need, therefore, to act real fast to convince our lawmakers not to rush through with further amendments to the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains (Amendments and Validation) Act, 2010.

If passed, it will shatter the much-laboured protective circle that was installed around our monuments only seven years ago, after centuries of indifference. The nation realised that it had to act tough if it was to save the part of India's priceless built heritage that had not yet been mauled by urbanisation, greed or insensitive development projects.

The law was, therefore, amended in 2010 to declare the immediate circle of 100 metres around these monuments as strict 'prohibited zones'. For the first time, no one was permitted to build or rebuild: not even ubiquitous and omnipotent government authorities.

The present Bill before Parliament seeks to restore the 'majesty' of government.

I happened to be around as Secretary of the Culture Ministry seven years ago when this protective law was put in place and I faced the same criticism: why can't government projects be on a different footing?

Lessons and experiences

We went through the lessons and experiences of advanced countries and found that more history-conscious nations too had to use very strict laws to protect their heritage that they could never rebuild without some critical loss. We realised that in India, this law has to be even more stringent or else it would be treated as just one more 'negotiable instrument'.

Our collective heritage has been pooled in by several generations over many centuries and millennia. No one has empowered the present generation to destroy or endanger this bequest. From my four decades in government, it is clear that its rusty cutting edge, the tribe of inspectors, tehsildars, thanedars and crafty clerks can pervert every well-meaning decision to make quick bucks or to misuse some megawatts of power that a new notification bestows on them.

The upper echelons need to be extra sensitive and realise that every exception that they make further empowers these dreadful hyenas who are so thick with local leaders and business sharks.

A recent parliamentary committee report pointed out that even with so much legal protection, 93 encroachments have actually come up in the Qutub Minar zone in the Capital. This could never have happened without the collusion of local leaders and officials. And a large number of our monuments are simply 'missing'.

It is difficult to believe that the world's fastest-growing economy cannot spend a little more to skirt a road project around the tomb of the father of Indian secularism, Akbar, in Agra so that it passes beyond the prohibited 100-metre zone. Or is Akbar being given a message?

Will we be so tolerant if a busy flyover or a ground-shaking train line rubbed past Kashi Vishwanath or the Sri Ranganathaswamy temple and disturbed their gravitas?

Rani ki vav is an outstanding architectural masterpiece of Chalukyan Gujarat. It is not only 'Hindu': it also nurtures the revered waters of River Saraswati.

Can the proposed railway line in Patan that one hears of take a little detour so that India does not lose the World Heritage status that it

earned with so much toil for Rani ki vav? Are a hundred metres too much to plead for?

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