

## WHOSE HERITAGE IS IT ?

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(English Version)

The World Heritage Week provides an excellent occasion to introspect and re-think our approach to the preservation of a rich heritage that our forefathers and nature have bequeathed. For well over one and a half centuries, government has undertaken this task, with varying degrees of success and failures, but it is now time for a mature nation to consider a broader framework of citizen-government partnership: as this heritage belongs to the entire nation and not only to the present custodians.

Let us look at our record so far. We have 32 sites, 25 of which are historic or 'cultural', on Unesco's World Heritage list and only five countries are ahead of us, Italy, China, Spain, Germany and France. This is mainly because they were busy filing nominations in the 1970s, when the argumentative Indian and the ASI were looking elsewhere. By the time we realized the importance, the 'drop-gate' had come down and Unesco restricted nominations from each country to only two per year, irrespective of its size, history or geography. But, we do not seem to have succeeded even in this limited task, as the ASI could not submit even a single nomination to the Unesco for several years. This 'scandal' was hardly noticed by either the nation or by successive DGs of the ASI, or even by Culture secretaries and ministers.

When we got our act together, India could place 12 fresh sites in the Tentative List, that precedes the final scrutiny and listing, in just four years

between 2009 and 2012, against just 12 claims listed in the preceding four decades. A part of this sudden burst of energy came after an Advisory Committee that was set up in the Culture ministry with the private experts, though ASI did not appear pleased to give up its monopoly. Within the next two years, India could file 22 more and now we have a wider choice of 50 'properties' in the Tentative List to select our final nominations for World Heritage status. It saves us from the last minute tension of filing dossiers on the closing day, and substantiates the view that wider participation can help improve performance.

We also have an inherent responsibility to protect and preserve what God has endowed, in the form of unique natural landscapes, seven of which find mention as 'natural sites'. If one goes over the dates, one can clearly see how there were occasional bursts of energy in the Ministry of Environment in the 1985-88 period and then all of a sudden, again in the second decade of 21st century. There are mysterious black patches where no effort was taken to file for Unesco's heritage status, which also proves that a nation's heritage is too serious a matter to be left only to officialdom.

INTACH and other societies have made valiant strides to reach the message down the line, though frankly, 'heritage' still remains an obsession of very small groups of concerned citizens. Any attempt to involve citizens ultimately hits the wall of the law: the Act of 1958, which took over Curzon's Act of 1904 and entrusts the entire task of preservation of 'monuments of national importance' to the ASI. As one who has worked with it, I feel that other than its perennial shortage of men and money, it is too hamstrung by government procedures to incubate and carry out great projects. So sad is ASI's condition that half its 3680 protected sites do not have a single guard, but horror overtakes us when we read that 45 or 92 such sites are "actually missing". Entrusting the community to look after the

'unimportant' monuments, with some local pride and involvement is viewed suspiciously as "fraught with dangerous consequences". In most advanced countries, local heritage groups play a key role in the upkeep of many monuments and often do a great job, and it is my submission that India needs to consider this alternative very seriously. ASI's list could also be slashed boldly, by deleting ones like Nicholson's grave, which apart from other factors, commemorates Delhi's devastating defeat in the War of 1857.

But 'heritage' does not cover only built or natural wonders, it also refers to 'living heritage' like customs, rituals, literature and the performing arts. Traditional societies like India are especially rich in this domain of 'intangible cultural heritage' as all relations are not crisply monetised. Here again, the Unesco stepped in with consultations among its State Parties and came up with the Convention of 2003. India could register three living traditions in the first round, i.e., Vedic chants, the Ramayana and the Kutiyattam dance of Kerala, but when the real 'fight' started in 2008, it was caught napping, as China 'inscribed' 26 traditions in one shot, while Japan and Korea got away with dozens. Every attempt to galvanise or even shame cultural organisations were met with yawns or "what's in it for me?", until one literally pleaded with them to think of the nation's prestige and wasted potential. As a result, India could present 20 nominations by 2010, but Unesco then cut quite irrationally, the national quotas to 3 per year: so we now have only 13 up on the world list.

These are only pointers, so we may move away from the Unesco to where we started: public participation. This is emerging slowly but it is unable to keep up with the forces of destruction of heritage, be they in structures, in nature or in living culture. Respect or pride in one's history is simply not enough to sustain us in this difficult task and we will keep bemoaning like this, until we open up

frankly the issues concerning the family's treasures to its members, more so, to its young ones.