



CREATIONS
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WANTED:

A national culture policy



ment of archaeology. Unless local people — who have, after all, preserved their local heritage over centuries — are involved and take pride in local conservation efforts, we will continue to see our antiques and artefacts smuggled out of the country, and our traditional knowledge patented in the West.

There are several unexcavated archaeological sites in India. The Harappan sites now extend into UP. Where else can they be found? Nalanda was the focus of education — what treasures lie hidden beneath the ground? Where are all the stupas Ashoka built in Kanchi? A minor excavation at Mamallapuram revealed a temple, a Varaha and pushed local history back by a hundred years. Money is a problem, we are told. There are several American and European universities who would happily spend the money to give their students a hands-on experience in archaeology, and who could be invited to specific archaeological excavation sites, again under the supervision of the ASI or the state department of archaeology. Much of the ancient Egyptian and Greek civilizations were uncovered this way. India has a wealth of archaeological remains crying to be excavated.

We also need good infrastructure around monuments — clean and motorable roads, telephone lines that work, clean toilets and clean restaurants serving clean food. The most exquisite monument cannot compensate for the ugliness of public defecation, garbage mounds and rivers of sewage — common in every Indian tourist spot. There should be a policy about removing beggars who pull the arms of visiting tourists, keeping the most intrepid traveler away. Let us not pretend that they are India's face of poverty. The poor of India live in villages and tribal areas, eking out a living. These are professional beggars who hang around temples and public places. They can be employed around the monument (try it — they will refuse to work!) and if they do not work, they must be moved away to a beggars' home.

Those monuments that come under the Central and State Archaeological Acts are protected from destruction, whatever be the state of their preservation. But India has thousands of other wonderful buildings — palaces, buildings of the British Raj, old homes, ancient village shrines — and ecological heritage sites that are not covered under the act and are coming down in the name of development. A few years ago, Moore Market, that landmark of Madras Presidency and the best example of Indo-Saracenic art, had to make way for a railway station. The Police Commissioner's Office in Chennai was saved by a Public Interest Litigation

(PIL). Two years ago, as I started renovating our 400-year old family home in Kanchipuram, I discovered stucco figurines, paintings and fabulous collections of old art, brassware, textiles, and more of ancient Kanchi. The house was gifted to the C P Ramaswami Aiyar Foundation and will shortly open as a Museum of Folk Art. But I shudder to think of the number of similar houses in other old cities that have been pulled down. Most of the ancient buildings of Mylapore's *maadaa* streets, surrounding the tank, have come down and multi-storied buildings now deface the area. Once, on a visit to Trivandrum, I asked to see an old *ettukattu tharavaad* (house). My hosts were hard put to find one. We need laws by which old architectural styles are preserved and precincts maintained. A few years ago, I was part of a national committee that drafted the rules for the preservation of urban heritage — ancient monuments, precincts and environmental traditions. The draft was sent to nearly every corporation and municipality. I wonder how many of them adopted it.

Even the names of cities must be preserved, for they too have a history. Madras was the first British settlement in India and was never known as Chennai. The only alternative could have been Mylapore, an ancient port of Pallava times. But why change a name that has brought fame — Madras cotton (worn by James Bond), Madras checks, Bleeding Madras and so on. There is even an American city named after Madras.

Art can pay for its existence by generating its own revenue. Private players should be roped in to maintain archaeological sites. The adoption of the Taj Mahal by the Tatas and the creation of a National Culture Fund are welcome steps, but I am afraid they will only cover famous sites in tourist cities. We have so many more which make up local pride and culture and which need protection.

Finally, we should ensure that many more of our cities and sites are declared as World Heritage sites. Delhi, Benares and Kanchipuram deserve to be named World Heritage cities, for a start. There are many more that can make the list. For a country with so many archaeological treasures, it is shocking that few come under Unesco's World Heritage listing.

It is not enough to be proud of our heritage. We must protect it systematically. Conservation should not require public agitations and litigation. We need a national culture policy, one that will outlive political parties and their whims, and local governments, must be compelled to adopt them. Is anyone listening out there?

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ISTART the New Year with a fervent prayer for a policy and direction for Indian culture. There is no dearth of talent or creativity; we have as many beautiful sites of architecture, sculpture and painting as Egypt, more cultural traditions than the rest of the Asian continent. India's greatest asset is its cultural heritage. Yet we do not even maintain most of them well. And we are unable to use them to attract the rest of the world to our shores. Why?

We have a new Minister for Culture — the fourth in three years. Is the subject so unimportant? Dr Murli Manohar Joshi was interested in culture, but he made the mistake of opening up the books of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) and was promptly shunted out. Mr Ananth Kumar had little time for or interest in art and culture. At the 38th Annual Triennale of the Lalit Kala Akademi held in New Delhi, he inaugurated the exhibition and went away without even seeing the exhibits. Maneka Gandhi made the same mistake as Dr Joshi and paid the price. Mr Jagmohan, with a good track record and administrative background, has taken over as minister. One hopes he stays to do something for culture. Fortunately, the department has had good Secretaries in recent years. They held fort even as ministers came and went. And we all know that the bureaucracy runs India.

Independent India has had few or no ministers of culture who were interested in their portfolio or took their jobs seriously. Only artists who lived in Delhi could 'reach' anywhere, or be patronized by the czars and czarinas of culture who have dominated the national scene from time to time. For several years, these 'czars', such as Pupal Jayakar, Kapila Vatsyayan and Martand Singh, made the decisions in the world of culture. They lived in Delhi and occupied positions of

patronage. Lack of support for the 'outsider' — those artists who did not live in Delhi — forced many artists, such as Sonal Mansingh of Bombay, Alarmel Valli of Madras, Jatin Das of Orissa and others, to shift base to Delhi. Most of the others did not care: unfortunately, they were unheard and unsung. Over the years, the various Union Governments have used the Culture Ministry as a source of patronage. The Festivals of India were presided over by prime ministerial favourites who supported their favourites and so on. It was a self-serving and self-perpetuating exercise. Of the czarinas, only one made a major contribution to preserving culture — Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay who established the All India Handicrafts Board and saved many of our craft and textile traditions from oblivion. Culture does need patronage — it has always survived on royal or government patronage, all over the world and from time immemorial. But the patronage must be fair, financially accountable and transparent. There are so many artists and art forms that languish in poverty, so many buildings crying for conservation. Why start new ventures when the old need the money?

We Indians are proud of our ancient and unique culture. But what has the government done for culture? Private galleries, institutions, individuals and impresarios promote culture; they organize seminars and exhibitions, concerts and performances. E Krishna Iyer, Rukmini Devi and Balasaraswathi revived Bharatanatyam, Kalamandalam and Guru Vallathol did the same for Kathakali and Mohini Attam, Guru Vempatti Chinna Satyam for Kuchipudi and Guru Kelucharan Mahapatra for Odissi, while the Sabhas of Madras preserved and promoted the ancient Carnatic music tradition. The art revolution took place in the galleries of Bombay and Calcutta. The

state governments were slightly better. Realizing the importance of culture in emphasizing regional pride, they set about preserving several cultural traditions, never mind the fact that they used culture as a stepping-stone for gaining votes. Unfortunately, corruption and favouritism is more rampant in the state governments, where every signature costs money or an inordinate delay.

India has tremendous scope for cultural tourism, which can generate revenue, but our policies are short-sighted and self-defeating. For example, the exorbitantly unfair pricing for foreigners by the Archaeological Survey of India at heritage sites lost us visitors and 30 per cent in tourism revenues last year. The ticket price has now been reduced, is payable in rupees and purchasable at hotels and airports. Further, all monuments are to be closed on Mondays, as they are all over the world, instead of staggering the weekly holiday and changing it at short notice (as was done earlier), thereby creating confusion for the tourist. This should have been done long ago.

If we need government patronage, particularly largesse, the government must also recognize the fact that it needs people to give credibility to its efforts to promote culture. It is inconceivable that the Government Babu can promote culture. Today there is a government-people divide in the field of culture. I have visited several villages, which house exquisite and ancient monuments, which leave the local people cold. They belong to the government, I am told; what role do we have there? This brings us to the problem: how can we create a government-people partnership to promote culture?

Firstly, every city, town or village must have a 'Culture' or 'Heritage' committee, as is done in several parts of the UK. These committees, as a beginning, must list every local heritage site, old building,