

LEFT, RIGHT, CENTRE

Should urbanisation score over conservation?



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The Culture Ministry talks not of cultural heritage but of roadways, railway tracks, and private landed interests

← It is remarkable how those today in power, who shout daily from the houseposts that they love Bharat Mata and serve her in a manner never imagined by their predecessors, by their actions daily undermine the country's multicultural heritage.

For instance, sample the latest amendments to the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains (AMASR) Act, 1958, that have been placed before Parliament, to do away with the prohibited zones around protected national monuments whenever it

chooses to do so for some supposed "public" purpose.

Whose Culture Ministry?

To justify this, we are offered a note for the Cabinet prepared by the Ministry of Culture. Significantly, the ministry here speaks not on behalf of our cultural heritage, as it should, but pleads the cause of roadways, railway tracks, and unknown private landed interests.

The note claims that lives would be endangered if an elevated highway is not allowed to pass within 100 metres of Akbar's tomb in Agra. In the second case, it speaks of a

proposed railway track that had to be shifted away from Rani ki vav in Patan, Gujarat. The third and final instance is that of an unnamed hospital (private?) which cannot supposedly expand except by intruding within 100 metres of Tipu Sultan's palace in Bengaluru.

These three instances are considered enough by the Ministry of Culture to demand the withdrawal of the constraint imposed by the AMASR Act on any new construction within 100 metres of a protected monument (with a further limit of 200 metres set for "regulated area"). In effect, the cases it cites are two only, since in Patan the



matter has ended with the railway track already steering clear of the 11th century stepwell. The remaining two are interesting instances since they do not only concern "Muslim" monuments, but are associated with

two men in the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's cross hairs, namely, Akbar and Tipu Sultan. Are these two dubious cases enough to justify endangering the security and spoiling the surroundings of over 3,500 nationally protected monuments in the country?

Incidentally, the statement in the note that some hypothetical projects cannot be shifted away from the monuments because of con-

straints of "land-ownership" in the alternative area is really strange since this nation has on its statute book a law for compulsory acquisition for public purposes. It is clear that the Ministry of Culture's note is a piece produced at somebody's command.

Nowhere is it stated in it that the Archaeological Survey of India (under the Ministry of Culture) has cleared the proposal or that the Central Advisory Board of Archaeology has been consulted about it. Nor does even the ministry's note itself care to consider the probable effects of the intruding structures on the security and appearance of the protected monuments concerned, or the effect of heavy traffic on the structures of the monu-

ments (as in Sikandra, Agra).

All those interested in the defence of our heritage must do their best to oppose this proposal. Our members of Parliament, before whom the proposed amendments to the AMASR Act are being put, should be reminded of how in 1876 James Fergusson, a great Anglo-Indian student of Indian architecture, had the courage to describe such ill-treatment of Mughal monuments by the British government as "vandalism". Behind British prejudice there was at least no avarice. Now the protected zones around our 3,500-odd monuments are to be put up for grabs by corporates and land sharks hiding behind nominal "public authorities". This should not be allowed to happen.



RAJEEV SETHI
is the curator and founder of the Asian Heritage Foundation

We are not facilitating the exchange of ideas. Regions have to evolve their own charter and engineering codes

→ A barbed-wire approach towards conservation can be faulted just as cookie-cutter standards on rules can become tyrannical. Yardsticks framing ground regulations must be preceded by informed discussions with experienced historians, artists, planners, conservationists, etc. A view on every single proposal that relates to the built environment requires trans-disciplinary intervention.

I.M. Pei's glass pyramid in the courtyard of the Louvre in Paris could not have been built if a view

had not been taken right at the top by the President of France to see the project through. Intense public participation followed. There were heated debates. Today the luminescent hi-tech structure enhances the experience of the stone facade museum and has become iconic to Paris's heritage value.

People protested even then. But look at the Grands Projets – or officially, the Grandes Opérations d'Architecture et d'Urbanisme, an architectural programme initiated by President François Mitterrand to create modern iconic monuments in the inner city of Paris – now.

However provocative, it is an elegant, complementary foil to the past. The civic building projects symbolised both the revitalisation of the city and an adherence to its history



even at the cost of old ones if absolutely needed and designed accordingly. I don't think this can come from a one-dimensional rule.

One would need to evolve a holistic strategy that can cohere and be transmitted enhancing the spirit of the city. I hope the new rules, that I am yet to examine, will not mean that one can build anything anywhere.

Rules without a system in place can become abusive. Knee-jerk reactions cannot be an answer to de-velopment and this is not just about a city. This is not about a monument or a builders' lobby.

The irony is, in a so-called federal polity, we are not facilitating

the exchange of ideas. Everybody seems to be doing his or her own thing or too fearful of doing anything.

There is no reason why a Meerut or Jaipur cannot exchange ideas with Delhi or Nashik and Pune refer to Mumbai. Regions have to evolve their own local charter and engineering codes.

Bodies buckling under

The Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) was supposed to be the civil society's initiative answering questions on the nature of appropriate materials, local skills and contexts, serving as a bridge between conservation and urbanisation. While it did a number of good things, it did not develop

teeth to challenge the government or initiate state-of-the-art research or conduct a seminal taking of stock.

A few years ago, some of us had taken the Archaeological Survey of India to the Supreme Court for undertaking major renovation work in the name of conservation at the Red Fort in the Capital, making a mockery of its heritage status. The court had intervened very positively, but as I am told, damages continue with utter disregard to the ruling. There is ample evidence to show what is being done in the name of renovation.

There has to be a politics of culture represented by people who have a feel for the city, its history and cultural heritage.



JAWHAR SIRCAR
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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 real-



ised 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?

SINGLE FILE

Mystic healing

Lalan Shah Fakir's poems act as a syncretic bridge in the two Bengals

KALLOL BHATTACHARJEE



The recent criticism of West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for their handling of communal flare-ups has overlooked the fact that Islam in Bengal has a glorious syncretic tradition. This was best exemplified by the 19th-century mystic, Lalan Shah Fakir, who hailed from

the Kushtia district (in Bangladesh now), an area where the Tagores had their landholdings.

Memories of Lalan Shah Fakir, or Lalon Fakir, have been revived in recent weeks by the splendid translation of the mystic's Bengali poems into Hindi by former Foreign Secretary Muchkund Dubey. In his *Lalan Shah Fakir Ke Geet*, Mr. Dubey has collected and presented 105 of his poems, making the mystic's work more accessible to the rest of South Asia.

Lalan's date of birth is covered in the mist of time but it is chronicled that he passed away on October 17, 1890. In his lifetime, Lalan, who ran his famous institution, Lalon Akhrah, had at least 10,000 followers cutting across religious lines. His biggest strength was that he blended Islamic and Hindu religious tenets and epics freely in his search for the divine.

A contemporary of Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Swami Vivekananda, Lalan mixed the teachings Bengal's Vaishnav hero Sri Chaitanya and Lord Krishna with the Islamic quest for Allah. Even after more than a century of Lalan's demise, his songs continue to resonate on both sides of Bengal. Such is his influence that folk songs of the Bauls in Bangladesh continue to be called 'Lalan Geeti', in the same way as Rabindranath Tagore's songs are categorised as 'Rabindra Sangeet'.

Influence on Tagore, Nazrul

Mr. Dubey deserves appreciation for deftly handling nuanced songs like *Khachar bhitro achin pakhi kemne ashe jae* and *Shobe bole Lalan fakir Hindu ki joban*, among many others. Lalan's influence on the likes of Tagore and Nazrul Islam – two of the common icons of both sides of Bengal – remains relatively unexplored. Mr. Dubey mentions that there has been enduring speculation about meetings between Tagore and Lalan in Kushtia.

There have been debates among experts on whether Lalan's songs could be considered a work of art or an offer of prayer. However, there can be no debate over the fact that his poetry can be recited and sung both to evoke the divinity and to appeal to the humanity. Lalan's memories serve as a reminder that communal disturbances in Bengal – right from the Partition violence to the recent Basirhat riot – cannot erase the harmonious history and syncretic heritage that signify peaceful coexistence between Hindus and Muslims.

(Picture shows the only portrait of Lalan sketched during his lifetime by Jyotirindranath Tagore, Rabindranath's elder brother)



CONCEPTUAL YERKES-DODSON LAW

PSYCHOLOGY

A psychological phenomenon where the performance of an individual at a particular task increases with physiological arousal, but only up to a point. After a while, the positive relationship between the two variables reaches a point of saturation, and excessive arousal, in fact, leads to a deterioration in task performance. The law is named after psychologists Robert Yerkes and Dillingham Dodson, who first proposed it in 1908. They observed that mild electric shocks on rats motivated them to complete tasks more efficiently, but as the shocks became too strong, their efficiency dropped dramatically.

MORE ON THE WEB

Swapan Dasgupta's spirited appeal on cow slaughter
<http://bit.ly/ChauriChaura>

ACT ONE Retrospective comfort

Was demonetisation in 2016 a cinch compared to 1978?

KRISHNADAS RAJAGOPAL

A rejoinder filed by the Centre engages the Supreme Court in a comparative study between the demonetisation exercise of January 16, 1978 under The High Denomination Bank Notes (Demonetisation) Ordinance, 1978 (1 of 1978) and the recent one of 2016 which was later given statutory recognition under The Specified Bank Notes (Cessation of Liabilities) Act.

The 1978 ordinance was promulgated, providing that all high-denomination banknotes shall, notwithstanding anything contained in Section 26 of the Reserve Bank of India Act, 1934, cease to be legal tender. The ordinance was replaced by The High Denomination Bank Notes (Demonetisation) Act, 1978 on March 30, 1978.

Doing it differently

The Centre reasoned that compared to the 1978 exercise, the 2016 made only "extremely reasonable"

demands from the public.

In the 1978 one, people were allowed over-the-counter exchange of their demonetised notes only if they did not have a bank account. But in the 2016 exercise, the public was allowed to do such exchanges up to a limit. This limit was monitored closely and was modified according to the prevailing situation.

Compared to the provisions allowed in 1978, in 2016 more types of banking establishments were allowed to exchange demonetised banknotes. In 1978, only the RBI offices and few branches of State Bank of India/designated nationalised banks were allowed. In the present instance, the notes could be exchanged at any office of the RBI or any branch of public sector banks, private sector banks, foreign banks, regional rural banks, urban cooperative banks, State cooperative banks and banking companies as

defined in the Banking Regulation Act, 1949.

Purchase of essentials

In the previous instance, no transactions with demonetised banknotes were allowed immediately on declaration of demonetisation, whereas this time, to mitigate difficulties faced by people, various essential goods and services were allowed to be available on tendering of the specified banknotes for a limited period. Control rooms were set up both in the Finance Ministry and RBI, which were in operation till December 30, 2016, the last date of stipulated period of deposit.

Compared to the 1970s, electronic media and social media played a major part in disseminating information to the masses in the 2016 exercise. Finally, people were given just six days to exchange their demonetised notes in 1978, whereas they had 51 days' time in 2016.

FROM THE HINDU ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO JULY 21, 1967

Police arrest 63 persons in Naxalbari area

Fifty-six wanted persons were taken into custody when a 300-strong police force carried out a "major raid" on a twelve square mile rebel hide-out on the Nepal border, less than half mile west of Naxalbari township this afternoon [July 20]. In a simultaneously smaller raid, the police arrested seven persons in the Burriganj pocket in the Kharibari area. Six of the arrested men were left off later on personal bond. Some quantity of bows and arrows was seized. Among the arrested men are two second rank rebel leaders, Kamal Singh and Osman Mohammad. The hide-out raided on the Nepal border comprised ten villages in the dense forest between the river Baralia on the east and the river Mechi on the west. The raid, the third big in the series, lasted nearly four hours. Rebels offered no resistance. Elements of eastern frontier rifles and border security force participated in the operation.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JULY 21, 1917

Alleged lawlessness in Dadar.

A Press note [Bombay, June 21] says: It has come to the notice of the Government that during the past six weeks there had been some unrest amongst the working populations in the north of the Island of Bombay due to rumours in circulation concerning lawless behaviour on the part of inmates of the military labour camp at Dadar, recruiting agents and other persons apparently inmates of the military hospital at Parel. The City Police have been active in investigating into the sources of all such rumours as have come under their notice. The publication in the Press of rumours and allegations of lawlessness on the part of persons mentioned is considered by the Government to be prejudicial to public safety as being likely to promote feelings of enmity and hatred between different classes of His Majesty's subjects, which feelings in turn give rise to strikes hampering production of the materials required for the prosecution of the war and prejudice recruiting operations upon which depends the adequate supply of the combatants and followers for the Indian army. The Government are most anxious that all such rumours and allegations shall be investigated at an earliest opportunity by the police, so that they may be brought to light and any offender promptly punished.

DATA POINT

Speed breakers or back breakers?

A look at latest data available on accidents and casualties due to speed breakers in the country

