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TUNNEL VISION THAT IS ENDANGERING INDIA'S HISTORY

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'Now is the time to learn from painstaking efforts to preserve our composite tangible heritage and the ecosystems that they are ensconced in' | Photo Credit: Shiv Kumar Pushpakar

Close on the heels of the unveiling of a bronze statue of the national emblem atop the new Parliament house building, the Government has tersely announced that a Bill will be introduced in the monsoon session to modify a law dealing with ancient monuments. According to media reports, the Bill will "provide more teeth to the Archaeological Survey of India". This move will align the Bill with the new bronze statue, which has a more aggressive expression than an ancient Ashokan sculpture from Sarnath (Uttar Pradesh) from which its form is derived. Progressive militarisation of tangible heritage and state agencies are endangering India's history and dismantling public institutions.

Consider a current law. Section 20 of the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains (AMASR) Act of 1958, last amended in 2010, prohibits construction within a 100 metre radius of all Archaeological Survey of India (ASI)-protected monuments and regulates activities within another 300 metre radius. The new Bill proposes to revise this section. Henceforth, expert committees will decide on the extent of the prohibited and regulated areas around each monument and activities permitted herein.

The ASI protects around 3,700 archaeological sites and ancient monuments. Taken together, they mark milestones in India's history: the emergence of well-planned cities, the rise of empires inspired by egalitarian ideals, the development and dispersion of Buddhism along trade routes, the flourishing of temple cultures, the establishment of Sultanate polities, creative and competitive encounters among and between the Mughals and the Rajputs, the ascendancy of the British Raj, and a largely non-violent movement that overthrew colonial rule.

Historically, each monument was integrally connected to the landscape around it. Here are a few examples. Rock-cut sanctuaries from Barabar (Bihar) to Ajanta (Maharashtra) and from Masrur (Himachal Pradesh) to Guntupalli (Andhra Pradesh) were physically connected to outcrops and canyons. Pattadakal's temples (Karnataka) were symbolically linked to the Malaprabha river that flowed past them. Viramgam's Munsar Talav (Gujarat) was the centrepiece of a landscape consisting of interlocking ponds, sluice gates, decanting wells, irrigation canals, and farmlands. Lucknow's *imambaras* were tied to markets, palaces, processional roads, and gardens.

In time, some of these connections weakened. After 1857, colonial authorities reorganised cities by widening streets and demolishing dwellings around certain majestic older buildings so that they could properly survey the populace. In their effort to reposition architectural fragments of India's past as Britain's patrimony, colonial administrators placed select buildings on cushions of emerald grass. On occasion, they also dismantled and removed edifices and sculptural ensembles that they felt were inconsistent with the forms and functions of buildings that most interested them.

Over the past 75 years, grounds around ASI-protected sites have served diverse needs. In Delhi, the grounds of the Purana Quila and other iconic buildings quickly transformed into campsites for tens of thousands of individuals arriving from newly-formed Pakistan. As these refugees resettled in various neighbourhoods and cities, these grounds emerged as public

spaces for exercise, prayer meetings, protests, and more. With the progressive transformation of the capital into a concrete jungle, the green edges around Delhi's protected monuments became havens for migratory birds, small mammals, and host of reptiles and amphibians.

Rezoning land around ASI-protected monuments into industrial, commercial, or even residential plots will thus deprive human and animal communities of much-needed commons. Moreover, permitting construction work risks weakening the foundations of centuries-old edifices. The chances of inadvertent damage are also higher. A hastily grounded electric pole might hit a monument's finial, leading it to fall to the ground. Sacks of cement stacked against a frescoed wall can irreversibly abrade its surface. As is well known, many monuments in India are already threatened by anthropogenic forces. Domestic waste and greywater regularly seep into the subterrain sixth-century sanctuary at Jogeshwari in Mumbai. Air and water pollution continue to turn the white marble of the Taj Mahal yellow and green, and so on.

For a well-trained historian, the earth around an archaeological site or ancient monument is like a text. If construction machines disturb it, then artefacts long buried in layers of soil risk being broken and their contexts destroyed. This makes the task of undertaking new research more difficult — like reading a book whose pages have been chaotically torn out. In recent years, the Government has built new highways, metro-rail systems, and industrial parks without methodical archaeological impact assessments. These projects have led to the shattering of an untold number of historical artefacts and the casual collection of many others. We cannot afford to lose more of our tangible heritage.

Now is the time to learn from painstaking efforts to preserve our composite tangible heritage and the ecosystems that they are ensconced in. Conservation architect Ritish Nanda's team at Humayun's Tomb in Delhi has conserved a dazzling edifice and provided meaningful employment to an entire *basti*.

In Bhubaneshwar, the Odisha government has formulated a scheme to protect a cluster of ancient temples, tanks, and ponds to nurture a sense of regional identity, restore habitats, and bring in visitors in a methodical way. At the ancient city of Nagaur, Rajasthan, local artisans and multidisciplinary teams led by conservation architect Minakshi Jain have worked together to conserve a citadel, reopen ancient gates, plant trees, and promote a lively bazaar outside its main entrance, ultimately giving a new lease of life to a medieval complex and strengthening social fabrics.

Thus, with the monsoon session having begun, our parliamentarians must ask basic questions: Who will determine the make-up of committees empowered to decide land use around each protected monument? What criteria will these committees use? How will different points of view be accommodated and what mechanisms will be present for redress? It is also unclear whether the new Bill will empower the ASI. Various laws and statutory bodies, such as the National Monuments Authority (under the Ministry of Culture), are already in place to help the ASI to fulfil its mandate. Is it possible that the proposed amendment to the AMASR will hasten the ASI's transformation into a constabulary of a past that exists only in name?

Now is also the time to ask for new, well-planned archaeological excavations to be undertaken at Sarnath and beyond, new partnerships to be formed with academic institutions committed to the rigorous study of India's past, and new accessible articulations of why studying history is important today. Such efforts — and not new laws with more teeth nor giant bronzes of menacing lions placed atop buildings — will safeguard and promote our heritage in the years to come.

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