

Heritage at stake

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The government's decision to involve the Dalmia Bharat Group in the maintenance of the Red Fort has spawned a much-needed debate on the conservation of historical sites. The move to involve the corporate group in the maintenance of one of the country's most iconic monuments is, in itself, a rather limited one, given the scale of the problem heritage conservation presents. The business house will spend Rs 25 crore over the next five years on the fort's upkeep. The money will be used to fund a light and sound show at the fort, and for providing amenities like clean toilets and street furniture.

More significant are the questions that the move has raised. Should private enterprise be involved in preserving heritage? Should the fate of centuries-old relics be left to the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI)? Does the Survey have the expertise, funds, and most importantly, the will for the purpose?

The ASI, a more than 150-year old agency, is officially-responsible for the upkeep of India's 3,600-odd protected monuments. But only in the rare instance does the agency shed its colonial mooring. The deficiency of the ASI's scientific branch has been laid bare in the agency's floundering attempts to stave off the imprints of pollution from the Taj Mahal.

Since 1994, workers have been assiduously applying Fuller's Earth to the tombs and minarets of the mausoleum of Shahjahan's favourite queen in an attempt to provide what can — most charitably — be called cosmetic relief against the grime gnawing away the world's grandest monument to love. The trouble is that, for the most part, the ASI sees its role as policing entry to monuments and warding off encroachers. It has failed miserably, even at that. In 2013, the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India reported that more than 90 monuments under the ASI's charge were "missing". Last year, the minister of state for culture and tourism told the Lok Sabha that another 24 monuments "had ceased to exist".

The involvement of corporate groups in conserving heritage monuments should be seen in light of this failure of the ASI. Business houses have been involved in the preservation of historical monuments in other parts of the world. The Agha Khan and the Dorabji Tata Trusts were recently involved in the restoration of the Humayun's Tomb. Such outsourcing should, however, be done with proper monitoring. The ASI took on the overseer's role in the Humayun's Tomb project and according to a 2013 CAG report its handling of the task left much to be desired. The questions then are: Has the agency learnt lessons? Or does heritage conservation require an even more radical paradigm shift?

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