

KARNATAKA'S MONUMENTAL CHALLENGE

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The Chennakeshava temple at Belur in Karnataka is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. | Photo Credit: SRIRAM MA

The Hoysala temples at Belur, Halebid, and Somanathapur in Karnataka were recently declared as UNESCO World Heritage Sites. This has brought to the fore the rich repository of architectural and cultural properties in the State as well as the challenges involved in their conservation.

In Karnataka, 609 monuments are protected by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and 848 monuments, including temples, mosques, churches, tombs, forts, citadels and stepwells, are protected by the Department of Archaeology Museums and Heritage (DAMH) of the State government. In addition, there are about 20,000 historically important temples and sites under the Muzurai or Endowment Department; these have a semblance of protection. But there are also as many monuments that are outside the ambit of any legal protection. While Karnataka boasts of harbouring the second highest number of centrally protected monuments in the country after Uttar Pradesh, and the highest number of State-protected monuments, it also faces the challenge of ensuring protection to lesser-known cultural properties. Without such protection, these properties could be encroached on or lost.

However, identifying heritage sites and monuments for protection calls first for their documentation. To its credit, the DAMH has already launched such an exercise. The process of mapping monuments across all taluks to update the inventory list began three years ago. But considering the funding pattern for the project, no more than 15 to 20 taluks are taken up every year. Given that Karnataka has 227 taluks, the exercise is bound to take not less than a decade, and that too only if funding is consistent.

By the time documentation across all the taluks is completed, and monuments are notified as protected, many may disappear due to developmental pressures and the forces of modernisation. The challenge in their conservation also stems from the fact that a majority of them are not standalone monuments. Local communities have lived alongside them for decades. The conventional approach of barricading the monuments as a protection measure will not work and calls for a via-media approach. The monuments at Srirangapatana, Vijayapura, and Kalburagi are examples of such continuity.

Given the fact that a sizeable number of historically important monuments are religious in nature, the DAMH floated the PPP model of conservation. This entails funding by the private

sector, the release of matching grants by the government, and a nominal contribution from the local community to give them a sense of ownership and make them partners in conservation. In a little more than a decade since the project was launched, more than 150 monuments have been conserved under the PPP model but almost all of them were taken up by one group. The challenge before the DAMH is to get more such interested groups on board.

The PPP model and the involvement of the public is also imperative given that the DAMH has only 12 engineers to look after the 848 monuments under its ambit. Besides, the annual budget for the department is approximately 28 crore of which about 50% goes towards salaries for the staff. This leaves very little for actual conservation. The fund crunch is such that the DAMH has also taken the MGNREGA route to get the precincts of monuments overrun by vegetation cleaned up through Zilla Panchayats.

In another bid to overcome the paucity of funds, the government has launched the 'Adopt a Monument' scheme under the tag line 'Namma Smaraka (Our Monument)'. About 280 monuments have been listed as eligible for adoption, which entails maintenance and creating facilities for tourists. While conservation work, if any, will be under the supervision of the DAMH and as per ASI guidelines.

This is expected to broaden the scope for public and institutional involvement, make them stakeholders in the conservation of monuments, and strengthen heritage consciousness. But experiences from elsewhere in the country in seeking corporate involvement or promoting adoption of monuments indicate that only the more popular sites or Grade A monuments, which attract tourists, receive importance under the scheme. The greater challenge is to secure funding for lesser-known monuments and turn the conservation exercise into a tool for socioeconomic development of the local community.

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