

Youth and heritage

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Today is International Day of Monuments and Sites, and the theme chosen for 2021 is 'Complex Pasts, Diverse Futures'. The Indian Trust for Rural Heritage and Development, by its very mandate, is committed to the diversification of Indian heritage protection initiatives. It does this by taking up the cause of the often neglected rural heritage, and in including in it not only the built heritage, but also the intangible, for instance the craft and performance traditions that are associated with rural, non-metropolitan, centres.

I take this opportunity to talk about a subject which I think is very relevant to the heritage movement and its diversification – the involvement of youth. The fact that we need to sensitize young people to heritage is a widely accepted truth, and great strides in this direction have been made in the last couple of decades. Visits to historic sites of course were a long tradition in many schools, but there is greater emphasis now on making such visits more meaningful, for instance by inviting an expert to lead a guided walk through the site. Institutions like INTACH (the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage) have been able to reach a large number of educational institutions and helped them in setting up of heritage clubs. Assignments and projects related to heritage are now part of the curriculum in many schools. College students too are going out on heritage walks, doing heritage related projects, and even history students are doing PhD theses on the subject of heritage management.

The argument advanced is that by sensitizing youth, we are sensitizing decision makers of the future. These young people, we hope, will prioritize heritage when it comes to taking decisions for a society when they are in positions of power, or in small ways in their own day to day lives. This is very true, and moreover the young are usually very receptive to the message if it is conveyed in a meaningful manner.

For one, they tend to be naturally curious and ready to explore the unfamiliar. I am personally familiar with some young working people and college students who have embarked on informal projects to document neglected monuments, all out of personal passion. They are simply going out, finding and photographing monuments, highlighting their condition, and trying to study their history. How important this documentation is, cannot be overemphasized. Experience has shown that taking stock of our built heritage through enumeration and basic documentation is the first step towards its protection. With some amount of guidance many school and college students as well as young working people could be encouraged to feel a sense of ownership of heritage simply through documentation. Needless to say, spreading this message widely through rural India would be a very rewarding exercise.

Nor should we think of young people simply as foot soldiers in documentation projects. They can be pathbreakers in preservation and conservation too. Young people today are already more sensitized to issues like climate change and sustainability. In fact, they are playing a large role globally in the environment protection movement. The cause of rural

heritage conservation is intimately tied to these concerns. The preservation and conservation of old built structures as an alternative to new construction is an obviously sustainable practice. At the same time, the value of the use of traditional materials and techniques for the construction of new structures is once again being appreciated. The reasons are several. The older construction techniques and materials gave us structures that were long lasting and suited to the climate. In addition, their revival can help in the revival of building crafts that are rooted in the soil, and perhaps are still more alive in rural India than in the cities. The preservation of traditional farming methods is also being increasingly recognized as an important aspect of sustainability, and as a means for the preservation of rural economies and ways of life. The only hope for revival, and the arrest of further decline in this area can come from youth finding these traditions worth continuing. Our young people, who are more sensitive to issues of climate change and sustainability than we probably ever were, are ideally placed to take these initiatives forward.

The preservation of crafts and performance traditions centred in rural areas is also an urgent concern. Declining interest in these traditions, the moving away of the younger generation from these hereditary professions, leading to further decline in numbers practicing the art, is a vicious cycle. Revival of interest in these on the part of youth can serve to infuse new blood into these old traditions, establish new connections for the passing on of the tradition, and thus keep them alive. It goes without saying that the revival of rural centres of craft, and visual and performing arts traditions, would serve to attract and keep a younger population in these centres.

Once sensitized, young people are in some ways specially well equipped to take up this challenge. They have not yet settled into predictable ways of thinking, neither are they cynical about the ability to bring about change. In a fast changing world, they are often the most able and ready to adopt new ideas and technologies, and it is out of the box thinking that is needed to bring more strength into the conservation movement. We have many examples of how this is beginning to happen. Here I can give some examples from Delhi, which is the place I am familiar with, though there may be many elsewhere too. Regular heritage walks for the public began more than two decades ago under the aegis of groups such as the Conservation Society of Delhi, KlodB (Knowing and Loving our Delhi Better), with institutions such as the India Habitat Centre and INTACH following soon after. Very soon however, it was the somewhat younger age group who took this further. Not only were they eager participants at these walks to monuments led by experts, they were quick to learn, and to take initiative. Now there are many groups in Delhi who lead heritage walks. Several years ago a group of students of Delhi University even worked with some rickshaw drivers to develop a heritage trail around the North Campus of Delhi University, and to learn some basic facts about the history of the area and of its attractions. These rickshaw drivers could, by adding this skill to their repertoire, earn extra money by taking visitors around the many historic structures that dot the Northern Ridge, which range from the ancient Ashokan Pillar to the so called Mutiny Memorial.

Which brings me to another very important aspect. These young people are trying to make careers out of heritage-related activities such as leading heritage walks. This is a very good sign indeed. Heritage cannot be a luxury, something to be done only out of a sentimental regard for the traditions inherited from our past generations, or our aesthetic appreciation

for the beauty of performance traditions and handicrafts – though no doubt all these things are important. Heritage must have very immediate value if it is to be sustainable, and no one can appreciate this better than the young, who are at a stage in their lives when they are looking for careers that will sustain them as well as bring them satisfaction.

How well the young can do this can again be demonstrated through a few examples that I have come across in Delhi. A group in the historic locality of Shahjahanabad are working to revive the performance tradition of Qissagoi. This is a storytelling tradition, which, unlike the better known Dastangoi, is based not on refined Urdu, but on the more colloquial 'karkhandari zubaan' the language of the common people. Those who are reviving this are young people who live in Shahjahanabad, mostly of underprivileged backgrounds, and they have been trying to make it a source of income through performances. Another youth group based in Shahjahanabad highlights built and living culture, and organizes events that are intimately connected with local heritage institutions and people, and thus serve to popularize them and their work.

Other groups are organizing cultural events in small ways in monuments, distinct from the large corporate sponsored or state sponsored events that we are used to seeing. Some are organizing out of town trips for heritage enthusiasts, exploring not only monuments, but also crafts and food, mainly of areas off the beaten trail. In this way they are bringing tourism to relatively new areas. Young tech-savvy entrepreneurs are creating mobile applications to put audio guides to historic monuments and precincts on every mobile phone.

These are just a few indicators of the kinds of possibilities that exist in the field of heritage preservation, and the role youth can play. The way forward lies in supporting efforts like these and allying them to the work being done by the state and by non-governmental institutions. Youth will find answers for us if we give them a chance, answers that will save heritage as well make it a means for a better, more sustainable, and enriching life for all of us.