

Terracotta on terra firma

- Conservationist calls on chief secy with Mission Maluti

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Telegraph 13th April, 2015



SK Mishra

Ranchi, April 12: Restoring Maluti's terracotta temples in Dumka has been a priority for renowned bureaucrat-turned-conservationist S.K. Mishra much before the tableau inspired by them earned Jharkhand its Republic Day glory this year.

Now 83, the 1956-batch IAS officer had been close to Prime Ministers Rajiv Gandhi and Chandrashekhar and principal secretary to three Haryana chief ministers, among other plum postings. But, the top bureaucrat's passion is conservation, undimmed despite his advancing years. One of Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (Intach) founding members, he set up Indian Trust for Rural Heritage Development (ITRHD) in 2011, which he currently chairs.

Fascinated by Maluti's terracotta temples, which Mishra calls "exquisite", he met chief secretary Rajiv Gauba on April 10 to work on a plan for their conservation and restoration.

"The temples are exquisite works of art and need conservation and restoration," he told **The Telegraph** in an exclusive interview on April 11 at the Khukri guesthouse in Doranda.

"Much before Maluti got feted (read: terracotta tableau earned the state second prize at Republic Day parade), we at ITRHD have been trying to work out a plan for its conservation. In 2012, during chief secretary R.S. Sharma's tenure, we had worked out exhaustive plans and got US-based Global Heritage Fund, Tatas and CCL to agree to part with funds for the project. But, nothing moved at the state government level here. I kept on writing several letters but got no reply. At this moment, we are working in six states, but Jharkhand is the only one where we have not made any

headway," Mishra said.

So how was the meeting with chief secretary Gauba on Friday?

"He assured us of support this time. A committee with (state) officials of art and culture and tourism secretaries along with one of our representative has been formed to work out further action plans. We have demanded an initial state share of Rs 6 crore for work to begin in phases," Mishra said.

He stressed that there was no time to lose. "Terracotta temples are unique. Of the over 100-plus structures, around 60 exist today that can still be restored. So, there has to be some urgency," he said.

He also urged the government to think of the big picture. "Restoration only can't help. The whole area has to be developed as a tourist and cultural zone. Famous pilgrim site Tarapith (in Bengal's Birbhum district) is close by, but there is no proper road connectivity from Maluti. Along with restoration, creating tourism infrastructure will be the key to giving Maluti temples their rightful place," he said.

So if all goes well, how long will Maluti take time to become international tourist hub?

"A minimum of five to seven years is required provided there are no bottlenecks," he said.

How did he get interested in art, culture and conservation?

"I was posted at the Centre as the secretary of art and culture in the 80s. Then, we introduced a concept called Festivals of India where we promoted our culture in US, France, Japan and many more. I was the director general of these programmes. Intach too was formed during this time and I was a founding member."

Though Intach became a global brand over the years, Mishra said he realised it got restricted to urban areas.

"There is a need to address rural pockets, not just for conservation but for overall development and preservation of culture, related cuisine, practices, buildings. That's how we began ITRHD in 2011 with top brains of the world working in tandem," said the man who has been instrumental behind setting up the National Institute of Fashion Technology and the renowned Surajkund fair.

Ever affable, he promises his memoirs "soon" and relates a humorous anecdote.

"When Bhajan Lal became Haryana's chief minister, he appointed me as his principal secretary, but Morarji Desai wanted him to remove me. Bhajan Lal asked me what should I do, I said please remove me, so he told me to take a department of my choice. I said give me Scheduled Caste, tourism and art and culture. But, Lal Singh, who the SC minister then, had been my peon once. So, when I went to office, he sat on the floor with folded hands. It was embarrassing, but every time he saw me, he would fold his hands and sit on the floor. I had to ask the CM to remove me from the department."

What was it like being the bureaucrat for top names of the nation? "Let me put it this way. I worked with many politicians, many of whom were each other's foes but loved me," Mishra smiled.