

HERITAGE MATTERS

'A NATION STAYS ALIVE WHEN ITS CULTURE STAYS ALIVE'



Aga Khan Trust for Culture and UNESCO Kabul under the leadership of the Ministry of Culture have drafted the national Intangible Heritage Policy. I facilitated the development of this policy framework. The good news back home in Andhra is that we will soon have a substantive AP Framework for safeguarding intangible heritage. It is much needed with the rapid erosion of our living heritage in all its manifestations. AP Creativity and Cultural Commission and Lepakshi are on to the task with the facilitation by the Amaravathi Heritage Centre and Museum and the International Institute for the Inclusive Museum



Kabul often evokes visions of bomb blasts, suicide attacks, barriers and massive security arrangements. They are often guarded by Gurkhas. Most of my visitation and work was outside such confined areas. I enjoyed eating and talking to people on the roadside. Afghans of all ethnicities - Pashtun, Hazara, Uzbek, Tajik - and so on are very fond of Indians. They understand Indian cultural heritage that most of the younger generation in India have not shown interest in. There are ponds whitening cream ads sporting Shah Rukh Khan in Kabul. He is much loved and seen as a champion of Afghan cultural rights



Kabul has many rich cultural places with deep historical connections. Revitalisation of intangible heritage - performance, music, dance and crafts - are taking place. Most of the locations are protected and both the visitors and the locals come together, like here at the Babur Gardens, to enjoy and celebrate the rich cultural traditions of Afghanistan



Energy efficient and locally appropriate architecture is promoted as far as possible in the Murad Khani area by Turquoise Mountain Foundation. In the rehabilitation of the buildings, jobs are created and livable spaces established through local expertise. Back home, in Amaravati 129 traditional and environmentally sound houses have been destroyed in the past three years. In addition to aspiring to modern day facilities and comforts, people also feel an inferiority complex and do not want to live in pan tiled houses. They give way for apartments that need air-conditioning and several people struggle with both lack of hygiene in the surroundings and respiratory problems from air conditioning. Adaptive reuse of the traditional Manduwa houses is advocated, but not taken up. Hopefully this will eventuate in the villages of new Capital Region of Amaravati

I have deliberately chosen the manifesto of the National Museum of Afghanistan as the title. Here it refers to a country that is battling cultural survival on two fronts: War and ongoing terrorism. The impact of outsider ideas of what Afghanistan is all about. From the hippie trail to Taliban and contemporary imagining of gender relations. Most Telugu people are puzzled that I risked my life on several occasions working there. I never saw it as a risk, but an honour to serve in a country that gave India so many of its cultural characteristics. The foundation of the Mughal Empire is from this beautiful mountainous country with its longitudinal valleys. But the manifesto is relevant to all peoples, especially Andhras as we build a new state despite several challenges, including political, and the impacts of rapid transformations and globalisation.

Kabul evokes to many people the story of Kabuliwalah by Rabindranath Tagore. There are many people of Afghan descent in present day India as until about seven decades ago political borders were porous and witnessed seamless cultural exchanges and movements. Tagore's short story is a moving portrayal of emotional engagement between fathers and daughters, from the upper middle-class Bengali to an itinerant merchant of dried fruits and nuts. The longing of Kabuliwalah in Kolkata for his daughter back in Kabul is shared by thousands of present day migrant workers and refugees who are separated from their families and children.

Kabuliwalah has been translated into films in Bengali, Hindi and Malayalam. Surprisingly not into Telugu. Tollywood is saturated with stories of love between fathers and daughters. But few deal with the longing and pain of separation from daughters who grow up longing for their parents who are often working in urban conglomerations as cheap labour serving a rapidly burgeoning middle class of Telugu elites, rich from recent land speculation and entrepreneurial activities.

While working for UNESCO missions, the Afghan government and Aga Khan Trust for Culture, I often met and shared bread and tea with separated families. It is one of the most heart-breaking legacies of war. Afghan fragmented families, diaspora and displaced people, are all over the world. Afghan music and culture have begun to influence many countries far from Kabul. Movies about Afghan cricket teams are being made by a young woman from British Columbia in Canada. Such is the admiration and fascination for these amazing people who have never allowed anyone to dominate them throughout history.

One of my very early responsibilities was the return of 2017 stolen artefacts from the National Museum referred to as the Kabul Museum. They were recovered from the Heathrow airport in London confiscated by customs authorities. There have been several subsequent returns of treasures. Many young people led by cultural warrior and director Massoudi of National Museum of Afghanistan in Kabul have proudly joined a burgeoning professional group of young people protecting their countries' heritage.

One of the most astounding achievements of the director is the safety of Bactrian treasures that are now travelling around the world. Fees from the exhibition are used in rebuilding galleries in the museum. Director Massoudi was honoured with the prestigious Prince Claus Award from the Netherlands. His leadership in the rehabilitation of the museum and safeguarding of significant heritage sites such as Mes Aynak, across the country has been recognised. Mes Aynak near Kabul is one of the largest Bronze Age site that is layered with a massive Buddhist landscape of 400 acres of monasteries, stupas and Buddhist sculptures.

Apart from conserving the tangible heritage, the country is also strongly focussed on



Lapidary is an endangered craft skill across South Asia. Here in Kabul women play an important role in safeguarding the knowledge associated with the making of beads. Weekly markets in Kabul play a critical role in providing for the livelihood of craftspeople. Readers will recall Heritage Matters Column on Papinaidupeta. Rehabilitation and revitalization of the place through appropriate capacity building by Lepakshi will set the bench mark as to the extent to which Andhra people will set forth on war footing safeguarding the highly endangered living heritage of the state



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its living heritage. In developing the national intangible heritage policy of Afghanistan, one of the key issues was the intergenerational transmission of knowledge and skills often within the workshop or karkhane. Many of these were destroyed due to violence and slowly they have to be rehabilitated. The transmission of intangible heritage elements is from the master or ustad to the apprentice or shargird. It was often a collaborative teaching and learning process.

Traditionally shargirds were within family networks. Craft and intangible heritage traditions were passed on through the very special space between master and apprentice. Broader guild structures provided the overarching frame. Different crafts had different guilds. In the present day context, technical colleges and institutes are beginning to play an important role. They provide for interested apprentices who may not necessarily be from the same family network.

It is a similar situation in Andhra Pradesh. Official subsidies to save craft traditions that are struggling made it challenging to reconcile the traditional governance of guilds with modern managerialism. Imbalances occur in

power structures and family alignments. The threats of decline in the market demand and increasing poverty of crafts people are compounded by access to subsidies and support. Micro finance could help but it needs to be farmed out wider to assist struggling crafts-people.

The good news is that AP Creativity and Culture Commission is translating all the documents of the UNESCO 2003 Convention on Safeguarding Intangible Heritage into Telugu. This will be simultaneous with a rigorous process of memory mapping. As mentioned in the Convention - "intangible cultural heritage" means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills - as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith - that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.

In localising the above understanding of intangible heritage, we may further elaborate on it. We may also further expand on the five domains in the Convention: (a) oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage; (b) performing arts; (c) social practices, rituals and festive events; (d) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; (e) traditional craftsmanship. Revitalisation of traditions and intergenerational transmission can be promoted. Creating a deep understanding of the new concept of safeguarding will take some time and effort.

In short, what I found similar in Afghanistan and Andhra is the sense of urgency for safeguarding rich and diverse intangible heritage elements. War and destruction in Afghanistan is one thing. Rapid growth and dramatic changes in the landscapes, families and industries in Andhra is another thing. Both need an effort on war footing to ensure a sense of place and self-esteem of posterity, Afghan or Andhra.



Sharing a moment of brotherhood and camaraderie with Dr. Omara Khan Massoudi at his house after a hearty homemade Afghan family meal. He risked his life in safeguarding as many artefacts as possible during the Taliban regime by transferring them to safe locations with the support of the then President Mohammad Najibullah. By 1996 the museum was almost destroyed with most of the historic photographic collections, documentation burnt, and objects shattered ruthlessly from both personal attacks and heavy shelling

NEXT WEEK

Heritage Matters will take you to the beautiful ancient capital of South Korea, Gyeongju. What can we learn from the Koreans?