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Taj Mahal: History or heritage?

To make the past reveal its humanity, our attention must shift from documents to monuments

Dipankar Gupta



Is the Taj Mahal history or heritage? The answer depends on which of the two doors we take when we step into the past. One could well be marked “His” and the other “Her”; because through one you see “History” and through the other, “Heritage”. In many ways, history is the way a patriarchal narrative presents itself. There are goals to be accomplished and there are grand personages forcing them. Peasants and workers, artisans and traders are drawn in, but they did not start the plot. Whether it be war or peace, or licence to make and sell, those below either submit or

rebel on a stage set by others. Heritage is very different. It is about ordinary people who are skilled, resourceful, adventurous and risk taking; but not war like, nor policy driven. Heritage proceeds in peace and there are no great movers and shakers, no princes and potentates when its story is being told. This story instead is about farmers and herders who tamed the wild to breed edible seeds and food; about merchants and craftspeople who braved mountains and deep waters to exchange knowledge; about rustic engineers and metallurgists who first hammered copper. Their combined contribution to our normal, routine lives is much greater than what warriors have accomplished, or emperors have bequeathed.

Is Taj Mahal then history or heritage? Is it beautiful because a powerful ruler ordered it be made or because of the magic that craftspeople created? These workers had gathered from different parts of India, as well as from Central Asia and Turkey and it is here that Islamic and Hindu motifs merged. In none of this was the throne involved. Makrana marble came from Rajasthan, jade and crystal from China, jasper from Punjab, and sapphire from Sri Lanka. Notice the mix of Hindu and Islamic traditions in the red sandstone carvings of Jehangiri Mahal of Agra Fort, or in the colonnades of Mughal courtyards whose balconies are supported by brackets. Or take the Deccan Sultanate period (1500-1700), when Asia and Europe met in the plateau and promiscuously reproduced. This fusion was not ordained from above, but crafted from below where skills and talents met in camaraderie and not in a cage fight. The kalamkari of

that period carried Hindu, Islamic and European motifs and the Deccan standard (or alam) displayed the Chinese dragon. If 17th century Jaipur carpets showed European designs up front, Venetian paintings reciprocated by depicting Turkish “Ushak” carpets with intricate borders and geometric cartouche patterns. Heritages, everywhere, unite vast territories that histories and kingdoms divide. We all know of the enmity between Aurangzeb and Dara Shikoh, but that is history telling at its best. Behind its back, heritage was at work in the Mughal court itself. Dara Shikoh’s wife, Nadira, painted Mary Magdalene in a style that deliberately imitated Tintoretto, the great 16th century Italian artist. That is how deeply European art was appreciated in medieval India.

Apparently, European motifs and paintings from the New and Old Testament were also doing the rounds in Akbar’s court. None of this was of any consequence, however, when Akbar made history and captured Chittor. Nor did this grand historical event change the course of heritage. That proceeded with combinations and re-combinations, linking past and present, near and far, in perpetual sympathy. Europe too was inspired by the Orient. Renaissance Italian drapery openly copied Chinese patterns, just as Gothic builders transformed Saracenic and Islamic architecture. The dazzling silk drapery in St Mary’s Church in Danzig, a revered Christian place of worship, is clearly Arabic in style. Tin-glazing earthenware, in particular Venetian Majolica, drew heavily from the Orient, especially its blue enamel and flower tendril designs. 17th century Chinese weavers learnt about the Sehna knot from Persia and used it extensively to make their very distinctive carpets. Even Buddhism did not travel alone from India. It impacted textiles in China with a proliferation of patterns featuring bulls, elephants and tropical trees.

The patriarchal aspect of history and the feminine tone of heritage can also be gauged from another perspective. Deborah Tannen, best selling author and sociolinguist, pointed out that while men engage in “report talk”, women are better at “rapport talk”. For example, observe a party scene. Men tend to crack the loudest jokes, provide the definitive answers and generally strive to be the life and soul of the evening. Women, on the other hand, make connections through everyday issues, quotidian dilemmas, information about illness and health, securities and insecurities of jobs and marriages. In none of this conversation are voices raised or attention demanded, as in the case of masculine “report talk”. History and heritage are analogous to masculine report talk and feminine rapport talk, respectively. While the former studies successes and failures of singular projects, the latter unites little deeds of some of the smartest people who have gifted us the wisdom of the ages. They have done this in unobtrusive, peaceful exchange, without bells and whistles. How else did we get high art, delicate crafts and majestic constructions, such as the Taj Mahal? Even the heaviest lifter is powered by gentle heartbeats. To make our past reveal its humanity our attention must shift from history to heritage, and from documents to monuments.

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Happy khichdi day

Harsimrat Kaur cooks up a storm

TOI Editorials



It seems the pride of the ongoing World Food India fair will be a Brobdingnagian dish of khichdi, some 800 kg of it to be cooked at the capital's India Gate lawns today. If the rumour had persisted that this khichdi was being elevated as the national dish, the festival would have been in danger of fisticuffs. Rival parties like masala dosa, biryani and samosa-jalebi had really started gathering their forces across the country's far corners. Even non-partisan folk had started worrying whether it would be compulsory to stand every time they saw khichdi being

eaten. Or to eat it before watching every movie.

Thankfully calm returned when Union food processing minister Harsimrat Kaur Badal squelched the rumour determinedly. All of the above is not to say that khichdi does not have a gazillion fans. Moms from Manipur to Gujarat, Kashmir to Karnataka think the dish is heaven-sent because it's such a timesaver. It's handy feed for children young to old, whether they are teething or nursing hangovers. When these children sail to lands far from their mom's kitchen and pampering ways, her easy-to-follow khichdi recipe often travels along for comfort and sustenance. As an admiring wit has put it, khichdi is like Rahul Dravid, never flashy or flamboyant, but the only thing that will rescue you when you are ill and a few wickets down. Meanwhile the opposing camp finds that khichdi turns the stomach.

Feeding India

Discussions on IFPRI's Hunger Index illustrate the complexity of India's malnutrition problem. Solutions must focus on evidence, accountability.

Uma Lele

India's ranking in the International Food Policy Research Institute's (IFPRI's) 2017 Global Hunger Index has invited much comment and criticism among India's intellectual elite. India has slipped to 100 among 119 countries in the 2017 Global Hunger Index, down from 97 among the 118 countries in 2016. Fortunately, the Government of India's National Nutrition Strategy announced in September 2017 provides the much needed comprehensive approach with a National Nutrition Mission combined with strengthening decentralised delivery. The challenge will be implementation with a focus on results, credibly monitored. Surjit Bhalla ('Hungry for publicity', IE, October 21) accuses the IFPRI of being hungry

for publicity and of misinformed and faulty analysis, in the name of the poor. He argues that “hunger” in the title of the index is inappropriate, and the IFPRI index should be called a Malnutrition Index.

Notwithstanding these initial comments, Bhalla acknowledges a “genuine” nutrition “absorption problem” in India and rightly applauds the priority to sanitation given by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. On the same subject, Swaminathan Aiyar (The Times of India, October 22) addressing the PM directly, also questions the title, suggesting “a more accurate title might be World Child Nutrition Report”, but, like Bhalla, argues the IFPRI prefers “hunger” as a sexier sales pitch. He cites NSSO surveys to argue that hunger declined from 16 per cent of the population in 1983 to an incredible 1.9 per cent in 2004-05 without mentioning the measurement issue. Instead of trumpeting this as a success, he argues, “you, (the prime minister), have stopped asking questions about hunger altogether in your surveys!”

He urges the need to show that India is far less hungry than critics allege and that the PM is remedying problems that are real. He also gives PM Modi more practical advice to keep critics at bay, asking to take five steps: One, restart measuring hunger in National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) surveys: International organisations will find that difficult to ignore. As an aside, Nobel laureate Angus Deaton has lamented the declining quality of national household surveys in India observed by well-known Indian scholars such as Minhas. Two, revise Indian calorie norms (downwards?) in view of widespread mechanisation and urge world bodies to follow suit. FAO’s norms are already substantially lower than Indian Council of Medical Research-National Institute of Nutrition (ICMRNIN) norms. Indian norms of 2,400 kcal per-person per-day for rural and 2,100 kcal per-person per-day for urban areas imply a much higher incidence of undernourishment (Chand and Jumrani 2013). His third, more cynical, advice is “combat critics spinning data with counter-spin. Spin your own emphasis on gender equality to say it also attacks maternal mortality and child stunting.” Four, spin the Swachh Bharat scheme to boast that, as the first politician to aim for an open-defecation-free India, the PM targets not just cleanliness but malnutrition. And finally, implement the Food Security Act’s promised cash benefit to pregnant and lactating women.

Here are some “facts” to consider generating an informed debate. The World Bank says the poverty rate in India is 21.2 per cent. That rate is similar to the Gallup hunger estimates, which Bhalla likes, of 22.4 per cent. The malnutrition rate (stunting among children below five years) is 38.4 per cent according to the latest National Family Health Survey (NFHS 4) — there are 47.5 million stunted children in India out of 154.8 million globally. This is because of poor diet, poor healthcare and poor sanitation. Sanitation improvement is key, but so too are improving diets, and we know that especially for very young children (6-23 months), diets (meaning actual food intake) are terrible, but only about one in 10 meet diet adequacy (NFHS 4).

A recent paper by Srivastava and Chand (2017) based on household level Consumer Survey Data of NSSO covering several years (1993-94, 2004-05, 2009-10 and 2011-12), suggests that the decline in calorie consumption noted in several earlier studies was reversed in 2011-12. More importantly, the paper found the disparity in calorie consumption among income classes in rural and urban areas declined and that access to PDS had a greater impact in explaining the increase in calorie consumption per rupee compared to cash transfers, a smaller portion of which was spent on calories. They suggest a need for more such research on increasing the efficiency of public distribution, or to consider conditional cash transfers than to discard them as tools if the objective is to increase food consumption rather than simply cash transfers as a means of income transfer. The Srivastava-Chand study’s (2017) results are at odds with the IFPRI study on pulses which suggests increased access to pulses through public distribution had only a marginal impact on households’ pulse consumption.

To summarise, nutrition is a challenge full of complexity. There is plenty of evidence globally and in India suggesting that poor nutrition affects early childhood development, learning and earning potential with life-cycle effects on national health and economic growth. For an emerging country with one of the fastest economic growth rates, India needs to implement its announced strategy with a focus on evidence, results and learning, not just spin. That calls for a true commitment at the level of the states and communities with a focus on improved outcomes for the poor and accountability for those in governance, and the solutions need to go far beyond the expansion of sanitation, important as that is.

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Khichdi unleashed

The government puts its muscle behind the recommended food for convalescents

Editorials

An exaggeration in the press has lit a fire under khichdi, which is being promoted by the government as a “Brand India food” (whatever that means) that is valued all over the country. This weekend, a celebrity chef will promote the brand by cooking up 800 kg of khichdi in a single pan at India Gate, in an attempt for a Guinness Book record. His weighty creation will be distributed to diplomats, to sit uneasily on their kitchen counters alongside the tagliatelle and the sashimi or whatever, according to nationality. In British diplomatic kitchens, it could also go eye to eye with its estranged relation, kedgeree, a colonial breakfast dish chiefly featuring smoked haddock, often eaten cold, thereby transgressing three khichdi taboos.

But when was the last time you went in search of a nice khichdi? It is the Brand India food only by government diktat. Had the choice been left to the masses, biryani (mutton, chicken or veg with lurid pink sauce, according to taste) would have won hands down. Like khichdi, biryani has a nationwide footprint. The clincher is that one clearly recalls when one last went looking for a biryani, and firmly resolves to do it again. As soon as possible. But then, even commentators with deep experience of biryani have spoken up for khichdi. In the 14th century, Ibn Batuta wrote of a “kishri” made of rice and moong dal. The Mughals were not averse to it, either, and Abul Fazl recorded seven variations on the theme. The dish is politically salad bowl-like, in the sense that every region has its own variant, from the khichuri of West Bengal to the pongal of Tamil Nadu. But the question that is engaging the nation is, now that the government has backed khichdi, will it be mandatory to eat it standing up?

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A quicker justice

Settling criminal cases involving politicians requires urgency. But the experience so far with fast track courts raises questions

Editorials

On Wednesday, the Supreme Court asked the Centre to set up special courts to try criminal cases against MPs and MLAs. Though the apex court has suggested special courts to try lawmakers several times in the past two years, including in September, this is the first time it has given explicit directions to constitute such courts. A two-judge bench gave the Centre six weeks to put in place a scheme to “set up courts on the lines of fast track courts”. The bench reasoned that the backlog of cases before the judiciary made it difficult for courts to give speedy verdicts in cases involving politicians.

There is scarcely any doubt that the country’s political system requires an urgent clean-up. The Second Administrative Reforms Commission (2005) had noted that the “opportunity to influence crime investigations and to convert policemen from being potential adversaries to allies is the irresistible magnet drawing criminals to politics.” The situation seems to have worsened more than a decade later. According to the Association for Democratic Reforms, more than a third of the members of the current Lok Sabha have criminal cases against them. Another report by this organisation notes that more than 50 lawmakers in the country face charges of crimes against women. Candidates’ criminal reputation is often perceived as an asset in an election. On Wednesday, the SC said “it take years, probably decades, to complete a trial against a politician. By which time, he would have served as a minister or legislator several times over”. There is, then, a case for expediting proceedings in criminal cases against lawmakers. But are fast track courts the right instruments for this purpose? The country’s experience with such courts indicates otherwise. According to the response to an RTI petition filed two years ago, more than 50 per cent of the fast track courts were not functioning. According to the Department of Justice, more than 6.5 lakh cases are pending in fast track courts in the country, about 1,500 of them in Delhi. Without adequate infrastructure and qualified judges, many of the fast track courts are ill-equipped to deal with such a huge volume of cases.

Given the shortage of judges in the country, fast-tracking criminal cases against lawmakers will inevitably mean slowing down the pace of other litigation. At the same time, with deadlines hanging over their heads, the judges will be under pressure to process evidence without due consideration. Rulings will inevitably be challenged, defeating the purpose of setting up these courts. The SC should re-think its directive to the Centre — and both should find other ways to speed up proceedings in criminal cases against politicians.

राष्ट्रीय सहारा

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मजबूत बनना होगा

हिन्द महासागर में कुछ देशों की मौजूदगी को लेकर रक्षा मंत्री निर्मला सीतारमण का चिंता जाहिर करना निश्चित तौर पर देखने-समझने वाली बात है। खासकर हिन्द महासागर में चीन की ज्यादा उछल-कूद को लेकर भारत की बेचैनी स्वाभाविक भी है। दरअसल, चीन की महत्वाकांक्षा से हर कोई वाकिफ है। वह किस कदर लालची और हठी है, यह उसके पूर्व में किए गए कामों से भी जाहिर होता है। चूंकि विश्व के 40 देश हिन्द महासागर को स्पर्श करते हैं और इसके तटों पर विश्व की चालीस फीसद जनसंख्या बसती है। सो चीन इस क्षेत्र के रणनीतिक महत्त्व को भली-भांति जानता है। यही वजह है कि उसने भारत के मुकाबले इस अहम समुद्री इलाके में ज्यादा ठोस, व्यापक और योजनाबद्ध तरीके से अपनी मौजूदगी दर्ज कराई है। यानी कि उसने न केवल हिन्द महासागर के छोटे से लेकर बड़े देशों के साथ अपने रिश्तों में मिठास घोली बल्कि उनसे व्यापारिक और राजनयिक संबंध भी प्रगाढ़ किए। हालांकि पिछले कुछ सालों से हिन्द महासागर में शांति बनी हुई थी, मगर चीन के ज्यादा आक्रामक तौर-तरीकों ने भारत को भी यहां मुखर और जिम्मेदार बनने के लिए मजबूर कर दिया है। हालांकि नरेन्द्र मोदी ने सेशेल्स, मॉरीशस और श्रीलंका का दौरा कर कूटनीतिक धार को मजबूती देने की भरसक कोशिश की, लेकिन अभी भी बहुत कुछ किया जाना शेष है। भारत को सबसे पहले यह समझना होगा कि हिन्द महासागर उसका समुद्री क्षेत्र है और इस पर भारत का नेतृत्व बने, बढ़े और स्वीकार्य हो; इसके लिए क्षमता और मजबूत इच्छाशक्ति दिखानी होगी। और यह तभी होगा जब यहां भारत की पूर्णकालिक उपस्थिति रहेगी। यह क्षेत्र अमेरिका या चीन के हवाले नहीं किया जा सकता। भारत के लिए ज्यादा गंभीर मसला यह है कि चीन हिन्द महासागर में स्थायी तौर पर नौसैनिक अड्डे बनाने और इसी बहाने सैन्य उपस्थिति दर्ज कराने की दिशा में ज्यादा सक्रिय है। प्राकृतिक संसाधनों मसलन तेल और गैस पर वर्चस्व जमाने की उसकी अतिसक्रियता भी इलाके के बाकी देशों के साथ उसके रिश्तों को जटिल बना रहे हैं। दक्षिण चीन सागर में भी उसके इसी लालच-दबंगई ने माहौल को खराब किया हुआ है। लिहाजा, चीन के अतीत से सतर्क रहते हुए खुद को बुलंद करना होगा। समुद्री इतिहासकार अल्फ्रेड माहन का यह कथन ध्यान देने योग्य है कि हिन्द महासागर पर जिस भी देश का प्रभुत्व रहेगा, वह पूरी दुनिया पर अपना प्रभुत्व स्थापित करेगा।