



Cultural Heritage and India's Civilisational Renaissance

***In many ways, contemporary India is attempting to answer a question that confronts all ancient civilisations:
Can a civilisation reclaim its past without being trapped by it, and can a modern country progress without forgetting who it is?***

The rise of modern India is often measured through economic growth, technological innovation, infrastructure development, and democratic institution-building. Alongside these achievements, however, another transformative process has unfolded during the last decade, a renewed engagement with India's civilisational heritage. Across museums, universities, archaeological sites, pilgrimage centres, manuscripts, cultural landscapes, and international forums, India has witnessed a significant effort to reconnect with its cultural roots. This process is increasingly described as a civilisational renaissance: a conscious attempt to recover historical memory, revitalise cultural institutions, preserve traditional knowledge systems, and project India's heritage confidently on the global stage.

At the heart of this transformation lies Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of *Vikas Bhi, Virasat Bhi* (Development as well as Heritage). This philosophy rejects the notion of a conflict between modernisation and cultural preservation. Instead, it seeks to integrate infrastructure development, education, tourism, technology, and economic growth with the safeguarding of India's civilisational inheritance. Heritage is no longer viewed merely as a relic of the past but as a resource for cultural confidence, nation-building, and sustainable development.

The intellectual foundation of this approach is reflected in the concept of *Panch Pran*, articulated

during the celebrations of India's seventy-fifth year of independence. Among these national resolutions, the commitment to take pride in India's heritage and to overcome colonial mindsets has emerged as a defining feature of contemporary cultural policy. This vision has encouraged renewed engagement with India's historical experiences, intellectual traditions, and cultural achievements from an indigenous perspective.

One of the most visible manifestations of this civilisational vision has been the reimagining of national institutions and public spaces. The New Parliament Building reflects India's age-old civilisational values through its architecture, artistic motifs, and cultural symbolism, seamlessly blending tradition with the aspirations of a modern democracy. It has six ceremonial entrances known as *Gaja-dwara*, *Ashva-dwara*, *Garuda-dwara*, *Hamsa-dwara*, *Makara-dwara*, and *Shardula-dwara* - each adorned with sandstone sculptures of auspicious animals drawn from Indian cultural traditions. These symbolic guardians represent virtues such as wisdom, strength, knowledge, success, and triumph, reflecting the integration of India's civilisational heritage into contemporary democratic architecture. The building's extensive collection of artworks, murals, sculptures, and indigenous crafts created by grassroots artists showcases the continuity and diversity of India's cultural traditions. The Constitutional Gallery highlights India's democratic legacy by drawing upon references from the Vedas, epics,

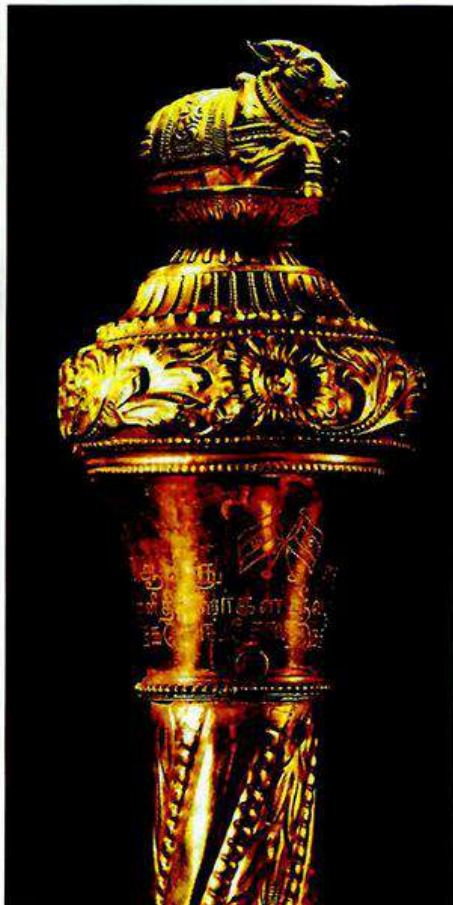
The author is currently the Member Secretary of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, Ministry of Culture, and the Vice Chancellor of the Indian Institute of Heritage. Email: ms@ignca.nic.in

ancient institutions, inscriptions, and manuscripts, reinforcing the idea of India as the “Mother of Democracy.”

The installation of the *Sengol* in the New Parliament Building revived an age-old Chola tradition that symbolised the righteous transfer and exercise of political authority. By placing the *Sengol* near the Speaker’s chair, the government sought to reconnect India’s democratic institutions with the civilisational ideal that governance must be guided by *dharma*, justice, and ethical responsibility. The installation also commemorated the historic role of the *Sengol* in India’s independence and underscored the continuity between India’s ancient political traditions and its contemporary democratic framework.

Similarly, the transformation of Rajpath into Kartavya Path symbolised a shift from the colonial ethos of power to the Indian civilisational ideal of duty (*kartavya*) and public responsibility. The conceptualisation of the Prime Minister’s Office and the Central Vista precinct as a *Seva Teertha* reflected the traditional Indian belief that governance is a sacred responsibility rooted in service (*seva*) to the nation and its people. Together, these initiatives sought to align contemporary state institutions with enduring civilisational values.

Another significant dimension of India’s civilisational renaissance is the effort to reclaim and preserve its knowledge traditions. For centuries, India produced extensive literature on philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, linguistics, governance, architecture, and spirituality. Much of this knowledge survives in millions of manuscripts scattered across libraries, monasteries, temples, and private collections. Recognising the importance of this intellectual heritage, the Government of India has launched the *Gyan Bharatam* Mission to preserve, digitise, catalogue, and disseminate India’s manuscript wealth. By employing advanced digital technologies and national repositories, the initiative seeks to transform fragile manuscripts into accessible sources of knowledge for scholars and citizens alike.



Sengol, the spirit of just rule

The revival of Nalanda University similarly symbolises India’s aspiration to reconnect with its historical role as a global centre of learning. Once one of the world’s foremost universities, Nalanda attracted scholars from across Asia and served as a hub of intellectual exchange. Its revival represents not merely the restoration of a historical institution but the reaffirmation of India’s commitment to scholarship, dialogue, and knowledge creation.

These efforts are reinforced by the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which seeks to integrate Indian Knowledge Systems, multilingual learning, and indigenous intellectual traditions into contemporary education. Complementing this vision, the One Nation One Subscription (ONOS) initiative aims to democratise access to scholarly resources, reflecting an integrated approach in which

intellectual and cultural development are treated as mutually reinforcing objectives.

The preservation of living heritage constitutes another pillar of this cultural resurgence. India’s heritage survives not only in monuments and museums but also in oral traditions, folk performances, rituals, crafts, festivals, and local knowledge systems. Through the National Mission on Cultural Mapping and its key component *Mera Gaon Meri Dharohar*, the Government has undertaken one of the world’s largest exercises in documenting cultural resources. By digitally recording the cultural profile of villages and communities, the initiative is creating an unprecedented repository of India’s living traditions while encouraging community participation in heritage preservation.

India’s civilisational renaissance is equally visible in the revitalisation of sacred and cultural landscapes. The redevelopment of the Kashi Vishwanath Dham Corridor, Mahakaal Lok in Ujjain, the Kedarnath Reconstruction Project, and the development of Ayodhya and the Ram Mandir have transformed some of India’s most important pilgrimage centres. These projects combine heritage conservation with modern infrastructure and public amenities, demonstrating

how sacred geography can be preserved while enhancing accessibility and public engagement.

Complementing these initiatives are programmes such as PRASHAD (Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Heritage Augmentation Drive) and *Swadesh Darshan*, which integrate heritage conservation with tourism development, employment generation, and local economic growth. Together, these efforts illustrate how cultural heritage can contribute directly to regional development while strengthening cultural identity.

Museums have also emerged as important instruments of cultural policy. The proposed *Yuga Yugeen Bharat* National Museum seeks to present India's civilisational journey across millennia through immersive technologies and thematic galleries. Similarly, the *Pradhan Mantri Sangrahalaya* and museum modernisation programmes reflect a broader effort to transform museums from static repositories into centres of public education, historical interpretation, and cultural dialogue. These initiatives signify a shift from preserving heritage alone to actively engaging citizens with it.

An important dimension of India's cultural renaissance has been the renewed emphasis on safeguarding and reclaiming heritage at both national and international levels. The successful repatriation of more than 600 stolen antiquities, including the revered Sripuranthan Nataraja Murti, the idol of Maa Annapurna Devi of Kashi, and the historic Chola Copper Plates, has emerged as a powerful symbol of India's civilisational resurgence. These recoveries represent more than the return of artefacts; they signify the restoration of cultural memory, spiritual traditions, and historical continuity. By bringing home objects that embody India's artistic excellence and historical legacy, these efforts have strengthened national consciousness and

reaffirmed the country's commitment to preserving its heritage.

The repatriation of the Piprahwa relics associated with the Buddha and the landmark exhibition 'The Light & The Lotus: Relics of the Awakened One' at Qila Rai Pithora symbolise India's commitment to reclaiming and preserving its civilisational heritage. By bringing sacred Buddhist relics back into the national cultural sphere and presenting them to the public through a carefully curated exhibition, India has reinforced its role as a custodian of one of the world's oldest spiritual traditions. These initiatives reflect a broader cultural renaissance that seeks to reconnect contemporary society with the country's deep historical and spiritual legacy.

Simultaneously, India has actively pursued greater international recognition of its cultural heritage through the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Several Indian traditions, heritage sites, and documentary collections have secured inscription on UNESCO's lists of Tangible Heritage, Intangible Cultural Heritage, and the Memory of the World Register. Recent achievements include the inscription of *Deepavali* on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and the inclusion of the *Bhagavadgita* and Bharatamuni's *Natyashastra* in UNESCO's Memory of the World Register. These recognitions affirm the richness and continuity of India's civilisational heritage while highlighting its contributions to philosophy, literature, performing arts, spirituality, and human knowledge.

The cultural renaissance has also contributed to strengthening national integration. Initiatives such as *Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat* and *Kashi Tamil Sangamam* highlight historical and cultural linkages between different regions of India. By promoting cultural exchanges and celebrating shared traditions, these programmes reinforce that India's diversity is sustained by deeper currents of civilisational unity.

Beyond national boundaries, India's cultural resurgence increasingly shapes its international engagement. Cultural diplomacy has become an important component of India's global presence. The worldwide observance of the International Day of Yoga has transformed an ancient Indian practice into a global cultural movement, while growing international interest in Ayurveda, Buddhism, traditional medicine, and Indian philosophy reflects the expanding influence of India's soft power.



Iconic 27 feet Nataraj Statue, Bharat Mandapam, New Delhi



Glimpses of the new Parliament Building, New Delhi

The installation of the colossal bronze image of Nataraja at *Bharat Mandapam* symbolises India's profound civilisational understanding of the cosmic order, where creation, preservation, and transformation are seen as interconnected processes. As the Lord of Dance, Nataraja represents the dynamic rhythm of the universe and the harmony between knowledge, culture, science, and spirituality that has characterised Indian thought for millennia. Its installation at the venue of the G20 Summit projected India's cultural heritage and civilisational wisdom onto the global stage, presenting an enduring symbol of balance, creativity, and universal well-being.

International platforms such as Expo 2025 Osaka and the Venice Biennale 2026 have provided opportunities for India to present a narrative that combines technological innovation with cultural continuity. Through exhibitions, artistic presentations, and traditional knowledge systems, India increasingly projects its civilisational identity while contributing to global cultural dialogue. These engagements demonstrate that Indian culture is not merely a subject of historical interest but a living and evolving force that continues to inspire contemporary creativity and intellectual exchange.

Viewed collectively, the cultural initiatives undertaken during the last decade reveal a coherent vision. Whether through manuscript preservation, educational reform, cultural mapping, heritage

conservation, museum development, pilgrimage revitalisation, cultural diplomacy, or the reimagining of public institutions and national symbols, they seek to reconnect development with historical memory and innovation with tradition. Culture is no longer treated as a peripheral concern but as an integral component of governance, education, diplomacy, tourism, and national development.

As India moves towards the goal of *Viksit Bharat@2047*, its civilisational renaissance may prove to be one of the defining features of its national transformation. The ongoing effort is not an exercise in nostalgia; rather, it represents an attempt to build the future through a deeper understanding of the past. In many ways, contemporary India is attempting to answer a question that confronts all ancient civilisations: Can a civilisation reclaim its past without being trapped by it, and can a modern country progress without forgetting who it is?

The answer may be found in one of the verses of the *Mahasubhasita Samgraha* (verse 3116), which says अलब्धं चैव लिप्सेत लब्धं रक्षेत् प्रयत्नतः, रक्षितं वर्धयेच्चैव वृद्धं पात्रेषु निक्षिपेत् – i.e., the aspiration to attain what remains unachieved, the vigilance to preserve what has been inherited, the commitment to enrich what has been safeguarded, and the responsibility to transmit it for the benefit of future generations. This verse reflects India's civilisational approach, which is rooted in continuity, stewardship, and renewal rather than rupture and reinvention. □