

India: Protecting Heritage through New Commission

It has not been difficult to persuade the Indian government to accept monuments such as **Sanchi Stupa** and **Humayun's tomb** as valuable heritage and invest in their protection. However, the same cannot be said of heritage structures such as the crumbling **wadas of Pune** and the **colonial buildings in Chennai**, which are not classified as monuments but possess distinctive architectural and historical merit.



Though these structures contribute much to the nation's cultural wealth, they have not received adequate support for their conservation. Much of what remains conserved owes it to the efforts of individuals and voluntary organisations.

To redress this deficit, the Government of India has decided to set up a **National Commission for Heritage Sites** with statutory powers. The mandate of the proposed commission will include policy formulation, evolving guidelines, and maintaining a national registry of heritage sites. It will be empowered to issue directions to the owners of heritage sites for their conservation and maintenance.

The rather belated initiative comes after a substantial number of heritage structures have been lost. Yet it is welcome for the reason that it will give a boost to the struggling heritage conservation movement.



The commission faces the challenge of managing a staggering number of heritage buildings. Every historic city in India boasts hundreds of buildings that need to be conserved. Unlike monuments, these structures are in use and cannot be taken up in isolation or managed entirely by one centralized agency.

The success of the panel's efforts will depend on whether conservation measures are placed at "the heart of local city planning processes." Unless this is done and changes are allowed to be made in the buildings without, of course, diminishing their heritage value, there is the real danger of conservation being perceived as catering only to antiquarian interests and the idea not getting the wider community

support it needs.



Moreover, an active involvement and participation of local administrative units in this endeavor makes Constitutional sense because land and development are State subjects. In fact, in the British model, on which the proposed legislation is based, 90 per cent of the heritage buildings are under the local administration's responsibility. The commission must aim to strengthen the local bodies, administratively and financially, so that they implement efficient conservation measures.

Thousands Sites Unprotected

The current body maintaining the Indian heritage site is the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) which takes care of 37,000 heritage sites across the country. However, experts say over 50,000 heritage sites are unprotected and lying neglected.

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