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What will be our legacy a millennium ahead?

By Ananda Shankar Jayant | Published: 12th August 2017 10:00 PM |
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Brihadeeswara Temple in Thanjavur

Last weekend, a family trip took us to Thanjavur. We craned our necks, squinting against the sun, hoping to capture the sheer magnitude of the Vimana in our mind, and clambered up the rickety steps to view the karanas sculpted inside the gopuram of the Brihadeeswara. It is the big temple of the Cholas, marvelling at the colossal Shivalinga there. We were overwhelmed by the sheer size of the Srirangam Temple, and gaped in awe at the intricate uniqueness and playfulness of the sculptures at Darasuram. What a legacy, our history and culture has bequeathed to mankind.

Legacy—one of life’s greatest yearnings, an inherent human desire to be remembered, hopefully for something that will leave the universe unalterably changed; though most of us will be happy to just be remembered!



Awestruck by the grandeur and scale of the big temple—constructed more than a millennium ago, in just a decade—we wondered, leave alone construct such a monument, could we even imagine creating such a thing in this time frame in the 21st century? And you acquiesced in despair, that even a city’s metro has taken longer.

As we did the Parikrama, I wondered aloud: will humans in 3017 have something this awe-inspiring, that we in the 21st century will bequeath as our legacy, or will they remain awestruck only by the heritage of ancient India? Treading the superfast highways governing a nation on the cusp of growth, caught in the daily clamour of deadlines, actualising the dreams of a billion-plus people, have we sidestepped the civilisational need of leaving a legacy?

Yes, we could flag all our achievements in technology, space, polity and science etc. And we know that there were many such achievements in the Chola period, even as they fought wars across continents, yet they imagined and created such colossal splendours. This is something one sees across the spectrum of India’s ancient and medieval past; a deep commitment to the arts in its widest understanding being central to almost all eras, as something that was to be nurtured.

And I worry, that somewhere in post-Independent India, we have trivialised and isolated our arts as mere performance and entertainment, forgetting the role of arts as legacy carriers. By not mainstreaming arts and integrating it with education, society and growth of the nation, we have quarantined our civilisational inheritance. In this, I see the rather, uninspiring and ugly things we build, and create, that most definitely is not going to excite tourists in 3017, leave alone 3017.

So what can we do? Recognise that arts are integral to a nation’s legacy. That arts need to be nurtured, invested in and sustained in a wholesome way beyond the tokenism of grants, performances and exhibitions.

Therefore, at India@70, I wish for freedom and empowerment for arts and artists to pursue their dreams, to take forward the inheritance of centuries even as they embark to leave imprints of their own cultural legacy for future.

Jayant is a bureaucrat, classical dancer, choreographer and dance scholar ananda.jayant@gmail.com

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