The Indian cultural heritage is on the threshold of many risks, threats and perils that the cultural annals of the country and mankind ever seen. The protection, preservation and promotion of it has become one of the regular topics of the discussion among the academicians, art connoisseurs and the people alike. The Government and its agencies are assiduously endeavouring to conserve the heritage of the country and are enacting the antiquarian legislations as and when the need arises to ensure its safety and security. Even, the international communities like UNESCO, ICOM and ICOMOS are evincing deep concern to protect the monuments and natural sites of universal and exceptional value and are bringing out the documents of Conventions and Recommendations containing useful guidelines for preservation of them from time to time.

Roots and Causes

Unfortunately, the cultural heritage of India is constantly exposed every day to one or the other kind of risk since early days. The conquerors, explorers and alien colonists have depleted the heritage the way they liked. Further, wanton destruction of heritage for obvious reasons has also been perpetuated. It is well known that the bricks of Harappa, now in Pakistan and Kalibangan, Rajasthan were rifled for laying the railway tracks. Under Erol of Moria, the marble bath in Shah Jahan’s Palace was once thought as a present to King George IV which was later sold by public auction under the orders of Lord Bentinck. The idea to dismantle the Taj Mahal for its marble value was also planned which fortunately did not materialize. Even a genuine antiquarian like Mackenzie did not find anything wrong in rifling away the magnificent stupa at Amaravati, Andhra Pradesh of some of its finest sculptural relics or in shipping them away to England. Surprisingly, Alexander Cunningham was allowed to have his share in the antiquities he discovered in the Archaeological explorations of the country. Added to this, the global interest in the Indian objects of artistic, traditional and antiquarian interest to possess them initially as curios and later the unflinching desire to procure them by any means paved the way for their clandestine trade also. Since the second half of the last century, this has taken a deep root on the Indian soil.

Today, vandalism, theft and illicit trafficking – each one being interrelated with one another, are the main risks among several others that are threatening the very existence of the heritage of the country. The illicit trade is often preceded either by blatant robbery or vandalism of the cultural heritage. The cultural property once stolen, sooner or later appears in the international art markets as they fetch fabulous prices. The whole process involves different stages like the source, thief, receiver, middleman and the final destiny and purchaser. The unprotected monuments and sites located throughout the length and breadth of the country particularly in the remote places are more prone to such thefts and vandalism as compared to the centrally protected monuments and those under the State Governments. The items of theft and illicit export broadly comprise the sculptures in all media and other objects of plastic art such as miniature paintings, illustrated or painted manuscripts, tankas, coins, medals, arms and armoury and jewellery etc.

The production of replicas or fakes in the same size and fabric is yet another threat to the cultural heritage of the country. The original art objects like sculptures are replaced with these copies in their place which of course are detected at a later stage. The classic examples of this kind are the bronze image of Shivapuram Nataraja of Chola period and Amin pillars datable to second century BC. Both of these invaluable antiquities were replaced by the replicas and the originals smuggled out of the country only to surface in London. Fortunately, they have been successfully retrieved.

The museums and art galleries that house and exhibit a variety of antiquities and art objects ranging from prehistoric times to the modern age do not escape one or the other kind of menace. The theft and vandalism are again the main threats to these institutions. The visitors have a tendency to touch the exhibits particularly the images of Gods and Goddesses either out of curiosity or reverence. In due course, this leads to the disfigurement of the sculptures and other antiques. The thefts and burglary from the museums have also been reported in the last century from the important museums in India like National Museum, New Delhi Indian Museum, Calcutta, Government Museum, Chandigarh only to name a few. The percentage of the thefts as compared to other areas is minimum and under control.

The treasure hunting and chance discovery of treasures, the two different groups are contributing the destruction of cultural heritage in their own way. In the first category, a cross section of the people have a belief that the ancient mounds, megalithic burials and spot just below the consecrated presiding deity in the garbhagriha (sanctum) of the temple contain the treasures i.e., gold and silver coins and other valuables. In view of this, the archaeological sites...