

Reclaiming India's past

Greater focus and investment are required to understand the evolution of India's diverse and inclusive cultural heritage

ILLUSTRATION: AJAY MOHANTY



It is said that a country that forgets its past does not have a future. India has a continuous civilizational stream stretching back to the very edges of human history. It is a stream that has been nourished and enriched by encounters with different peoples and cultures. It is today a colourful tapestry woven with multiple strands, each adding its own colour and texture. While there have been, and always will be, attempts to pick out one strand or another as pre-eminent, the reality is that each strand draws its strength, even its identity, as part of the whole. Pull out one strand, and the whole weave starts unravelling.

This is the danger we confront today when there are attempts to celebrate one single component of our composite culture as the mainstream, relegating others to the periphery. This so-called mainstream is a contrived one, because many of its features belong to the imaginary. And even if there was a singular beginning, it no longer exists and cannot be resurrected.

India has always been a crossroads of culture. For much of its history, it lay at the intersection of the caravan routes connected to Central Asia and Iran. Being a peninsula, it straddled the ancient sea routes to its west, across the Arabian Sea and to its east, across the Bay of Bengal and the South China Seas. These maritime connections followed the direction of the monsoon winds, which made sailing over long distances possible. There was a constant traffic of traders, pilgrims, invaders and adventurers, enabling a dense engagement and rich interaction with countries east and west. India was privileged precisely because it could draw upon

the diverse cultures of its extended neighbourhood and create an unusually cosmopolitan and plural culture with a distinct personality and identity. It is this cosmopolitan temperament that makes Indians one of the most adaptable people in the world.

Several things considered quintessentially Indian are in fact imports. This is most apparent in our cuisine, where chillies, tomatoes, potatoes, and tea are all imports and not endemic to India. While India was always famous across the world for its fine cotton fabrics, it imported silks and silk weaving techniques from China. Hindi has many loan words from other languages. For instance, *akhbaar* or newspaper is derived from Arabic, while *khbar* or news is a Turkish word. Our everyday language in north India is Hindustani rather than Hindi and is a sister language of Urdu. It has a larger Hindi content, while Urdu has a larger Persian content. All efforts to consign Urdu to the dustbin have not succeeded, and Indians, of whatever religious persuasion, continue to take immense delight in the lyricism and subtlety

of Urdu poetry.

There is no doubt that religion plays an important, even defining role in the lives of Indians. But in this respect, too, there has always been an awareness and acceptance of common humanity, where all paths lead to the same truth. This is why Sufism found fertile soil in India with its message of love of the divine, which transcends all religious or sectarian differences. Sant Kabir's poetry, earthy and yet profoundly wise, mocks narrow bigotry of both the Hindus and the Muslims.

What is the past that we are in danger of forget-

ting? It is this complex evolution of our culture drawing from multiple influences even while the original impulse from the Vedas and our ancient epics must be acknowledged.

The other side to this story is the spread of Indian culture, religious and philosophical ideas, and material influences to India's extended neighbourhood and beyond. Just as India borrowed heavily from countries and people beyond its shores, so did it, in turn, influence them. One may say that influences that came to India through history were transformed and assimilated through the genius of its own people. Similarly, Indian influences were transformed by countries and people who received them. Though Indian in origin, they became the inspiration for a remarkable efflorescence of local cultures. I had the privilege of serving in Indonesia as India's envoy. What struck me was how the colours and sounds of India echoed in the remotest corners of this country. And yet they were Indonesian expressions not imports from India. One sees this in China as well where Buddhism travelled from India but, over a period of time, became assimilated into the fabric of Chinese culture and developed its own dynamic. Indian scripts travelled to Tibet, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia, but developed and evolved in their own unique ways. It is as important to understand this history of interchange between India and its extended neighbourhood as it is to understand how India's plural culture has come to be what it is today, a fusion of the multiple influences that it has been exposed to through its long history.

This study of India outside its shores is indispensable to understanding the evolution of our own culture. We have borrowed heavily from others but also take pride in being the inspiration that led to an extraordinary burst of creativity in countries that we engaged with in history. Some foreign academics have dwelt more deeply into this history of cultural engagement but should this not be a national project? Should we not nurture scholars who may be able to delve deep into this subject, thereby advancing knowledge about our own culture?

Even with respect to our classical Sanskritic culture, so many ancient Indian treatises and religious texts were lost during invasions, natural calamities and internecine warfare. They are preserved either in their original form or in translations in monasteries in Tibet, China, Nepal and in countries of Southeast Asia. Should they not be retrieved and become the subject of careful study?

The India International Centre has launched a *Samhita* project, with the support of the Ministry of External Affairs, to undertake a modest effort to inventorise ancient Indian documents and texts in foreign libraries and collections to create a digital record of these resources. But a much greater focus and investment are required to resurrect some of India's forgotten history.

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