

Culture, Covid and the State

While the world struggles to achieve normalcy, how much cold, hard cash countries are willing to spend on supporting the arts and its artistes is more revealing than all manner of spin relied on by any form of public relations.

By Jawhar Sircar

India has always been proud of its culture, some elements of which can be traced back to five millennia. Such cultural continuity is, indeed, quite rare to find. Besides, culture has played a unique role in getting together and coalescing widely different ethnic and linguistic groups—including those influenced by foreign cultures—across the vast subcontinent into one identifiable civilisation. In terms of 'Tangible Heritage', for instance, we have 3691 protected monuments looked after by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), a wing of the Ministry of

Culture. Thirty of these are recognised by UNESCO as World Heritage cultural sites. But for all its labours, the ASI receives just about ₹1,000 crore annually—which is barely 0.03 per cent of the annual central budget. The whole Ministry of Culture is due to receive ₹2,688 crore in 2021-22, which works out to less than 0.08 per cent of the Government of India's annual budget. This percentage was hovering around 0.11 a decade ago and it may not be proper to blame any particular government for this state of affairs. The point is that Indians as a nation do not appear to be greatly worried and our



regard for culture is more abstract and emotional than material.

China spends roughly 18 per cent of its budget on culture, education and science, and culture alone receives 300 times more funding than we do. India's overall culture budget looks really insignificant compared to France's allocation towards culture, which is over three billion USD, i.e. ₹22,000 crore. Of course, France recoups more than this outlay through tourism, which also provides jobs for several lakhs of people. The budget for culture in Britain lags behind and is less than half of France's, but then, the government opens up other avenues of funding. Even Brazil allocates three times more towards culture than India. Most Western countries help the culture sector with 1 to 1.5 per cent of their overall budget, as they showcase culture rather energetically.

Budgets and bureaucracy

Even so, we need to be cautious in India to ensure that additional government funding in culture does not lead to a further expansion of the bureaucracy and to leakages. We need, therefore, to first build a consultative framework with stakeholders and external experts for government agencies to learn to spend more meaningfully and with constant public audit. The vast decentralised world of the performing arts, of course, needs a different approach that does not rest primarily on suspicion and rule-bound condescension. After India's independence, the government was expected to fill in the role of

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the former maharajas and nawabs by patronising culture, especially the performing arts. Consequently, a very large empire, consisting mainly of top-down government or government-dependent organisations, was built to cater to different sectors of culture. The radio was a state monopoly and it did play a sterling role in popularising and democratising culture, as did state television till

the end of the last century. Then, as part of the Tagore birth centenary celebrations in 1961, the government launched a massive programme to build auditoria in his name across cities and towns. This went on for almost three decades and these affordable spaces that came up surely gave a fillip to the performing arts. It was only when bigger corporates like the Shri Rams, the Tatas and the Godrejs stepped in that more options opened up and different ways of doing things emerged. Culture started losing its priority in government once succeeding generations of Indians born after Independence took over, as they did not require the same emphasis on a 'cohesive and common idea' because the country had successfully emerged as a more unified nation. Sadly however, culture, history and archaeology soon became bitter areas of contestation between opposing ideologies and scoring points appeared more important than upholding a common patrimony.

Another hard fact is that culture in India has always been intrinsically intertwined with religion, as popular public celebrations more than as acts



of piety. This domain could hardly be entered into by a secular state, even though the masses were totally absorbed in such popular festivities. Then, when films representing mass culture emerged as a hugely popular medium, much of it was considered to be crass. In the process, culture in India disengaged itself from the most powerful link with the common people and was soon identified with certain classes of enthusiasts. On the other hand, iconic institutions like national museums and great art exhibitions hardly seem to evoke the same level of national pride and involvement that they do in many other countries. Soirées of Hindi film songs, on the other hand, enthrall the masses but are hardly considered as 'culture'. Despite these differences of perception, a shehnai played by Bismillah Khan or a sitar recital by Ravi Shankar can bridge the gap and cultural management does call for some imagination. Art is also not really out of reach and can captivate the masses when presented with flair, like Debiprasad Roy Chowdhury's massive sculpture of the Dandi March in Delhi's Willingdon Crescent. Even corporates do not find culture exciting enough to spend their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) funds on, and barring just a few, corporate giants in India hardly realise that a Rockefeller Center can immortalise and almost beatify even the most controversial magnate.

A culture of support

Moving now to the pandemic, we find that while we were locking ourselves in with a vengeance, European nations were busy rescuing culture from the devastation afflicting the livelihood of lakhs engaged in it. French President Emmanuel Macron declared as early as in May 2020 that he would extend special unemployment benefits to actors, performers, musicians and technicians. After all, the cultural industry employs some 13 lakh people in France. Macron also pledged €50 million investment in the 'particularly hard-hit' National Music Centre (CNM). While extending another €200 million to the music sector across France, he requested cultural practitioners "to use this period to revolutionise the way culture and art is accessed." The German government promptly responded to the Covid challenge, and in June last year, it earmarked €1 billion (approximately ₹8,690 crore) under its New Start for Culture programme, to revive the culture industry. Funds were widely distributed across

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cinemas, music clubs, memorials, museums, theatres and festivals, and a quarter of it went to help cultural institutions reopen with new hygiene protocols. Substantial amounts were given to art galleries, cultural centres and even publishing houses. The whole idea was to provide gainful employment to creative people and boost public morale when it was really down, through culture. Other countries like Italy and Belgium also announced their schemes to assist the beleaguered culture sector and

many countries reduced taxes on tickets.

Europe has a long tradition of the state subsidising heritage and the arts not only because they attract tourists but also because these nations consider culture to be integral to their lives. Museums, theatres and opera halls reopened quite early and audiences, tired of Covid, thronged them but maintained reasonable social distancing. Britain, of course, is always different and government funding is traditionally much lower, which compels organisations to rely more on commercial income. The British government came in for serious criticism from senior cultural personalities for its rather delayed and ad hoc response to the pandemic. The Arts Council England, a major funding body, however, reacted faster and awarded £160 million (approximately ₹1,600 crore) in emergency grants to help venues survive, while the National Lottery Heritage Fund committed £50 million (₹500 crore) to assist museums and other similar institutions.

Coming to India, where the culture of giving top priority to culture does not appear to be so embedded, all energies were concentrated on locking ourselves down more vigorously than most countries. Public gatherings were banned while auditoria, museums and galleries were shut. Cultural workers thus had to fend for themselves. Doordarshan took advantage of the captive audiences trapped at home to telecast religious epics. In September 2020, the Ministry of Culture declared that it was planning a massive digital operation with a web series on India's struggle for independence and virtual tours of museums, but nothing more is known. Its budget was soon cut by 15 per cent. In October, the ministry announced that grantees under its umbrella scheme of assistance, known as the Kala Sanskriti Vikas Yojana, could conduct virtual performances and submit documents in digital format. Some must have benefited but there is little point in drawing comparisons. Nations, obviously, have their own priorities. ■