

“HERITAGE @ RISK” UNDER DIFFERENT HUMAN SITUATIONS, WITH EXAMPLES MAINLY FROM SRI LANKA

The term “Heritage @ Risk” in the context of this paper, applies mainly to the Immovable Architectural Heritage of Human-kind. This is not a phenomenon of just today, but a poor custom or a bad practice, that has existed since humans began to live in shelters, created for their settled existence. This concept can best be illustrated by an event that took place about 150 years back when the well known campaigner for Monuments, John Ruskin refused to accept the Gold Medal of the Royal Institute of British Architects, by saying: “I do not wish to be decorated by a bunch of Demolishing Experts.”

With this example in focus, I wish to address the readers with a series of “Human Situations” that can be identified as those elements of “Human Nature” that can be classified as the “Intellectual” or “Non-Intellectual” causes that have sparked off these sad sequences of “Human Bad Behaviour” in the permanent loss of “Cultural Property”, which otherwise would have been an item of “Cultural Heritage”, meant for the joy and pleasure of those that lived after, without such “deadly disasters”. If we are to re-count these “Human Situations” at random, these may include: Entrepreneurship, Ethnicity, Terrorism, Simplistic Joy, Lack of Professionalism, Tourism, Anti-Colonialism, Politics, Capitalism, Nationalism, Religious Fanaticism, Academism, War, Human Growth, and many other such circumstances. We believe, that each “Human Situation” will best be understood if each is linked to a real example, and the fact that our areas of activity have been mainly Asian, and especially Sri Lanka, the internationally applicable line-up of “Human Situations” will accordingly be illustrated with localized events.

1. Entrepreneurship

In the late 1970’s a well known bank in the Colombo Fort caught fire over the week-end. The Flat of the Managing Director of the Institution was in the upper most floor of this exceptionally beautiful British Colonial edifice, but it so happened that he was on a bridge-drive that lasted the week-end, in a suburb home in Colombo. The customers of the Bank, for some unknown reason, were all informed of the balances in their accounts the week before. The fire brigade that called on this occasion too, took its own time to subdue the flames. The building, as a result, was condemned for living and was compelled to be demolished. Thus the objective of the “misguided entrepreneur” and those of the “Demolishing Experts” were fulfilled. But the last laugh was when the “Shrewd Insurance Agents” refused to pay compensation, as suspicions were sufficiently roused, and the “cat was out of the bag”.

2. Ethnicity

Since its independence fifty years back Sri Lanka has re-surfaced a 2000 year old ethnic question between the Sinhalese of an attributed Aryan origin, and the Tamils of an assigned Dra-

vidian stock. Religions are also associated with these popularly known ethnic groups, where the Sinhalese are mainly Buddhists and the Tamils are mainly Hindus. A type of “Enoch-Powell of England” also surfaced in Sri Lanka in the 1970’s, who was trying to consolidate national traits through the monuments in the predominantly Tamil occupied North and East of Sri Lanka, by excavating and restoring the ancient structures to their pristine glory and thereby displaying the ancient dominance of the Sinhalese-Buddhists in this region. When the fanatical campaigner approached us as a senior member of the Department of Archaeology, we had to tell him that his fanaticism was counter productive as he was removing even the faint traces of Sinhalese-Buddhist ancient monuments, laying underneath, and was replacing them with new concrete foundations and re-building new structures in the identical positions of the old, and thus losing all the vestiges of the Sinhalese-Buddhists culture in their authentic and original bedding.

3. Terrorism

Sri Lanka was about to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of Independence on the 4th February 1998 in the World Heritage City of Kandy, in front of the most Sacred Shrine of the Buddhists, the “Temple of the Sacred Tooth”. Prince Charles of England was to represent the Commonwealth of Great Britain at this formal function at the Sacred Temple and in the grounds outside. A few weeks before the event, the Tamil Tiger Terrorists of the North and East, attacked this 16th century shrine at Kandy and blasted a massive bomb at the main entrance, blowing off the roofs of the entire set of buildings in front, including the famous Octagonal Pavilion where the formal addresses to the Nation were to be made by the selected dignitaries.

4. Simplistic Joy

In 1960, we were acting for the Assistant Commissioner in charge of Mural Conservation in the Department of Archaeology, Sri Lanka. The High Priest of one of the finest temples with paintings of the 18th century in the South-West, Sri Lanka requested for the roof to be prepared where the tiles had to be re-laid. We advised him to select the dry month of August, and inform us a week before so that a suitable officer could be sent when the work was on. However, I was passing by the temple about 10 days before the appointed date of the repair, and I thought it would be well to look at the monument. To our surprise we found the priest and the local helpers all at the site, with the roof of the temple removed. The irony of the situation was that it was raining cats and dogs, and water was dripping down the water soluble pigments of the 18th century edifice. Quickly, we managed to get every bit of covering material and protected the walls, and then taking a quick breath, asked the venerable priest the reason why he had removed the roof much sooner than the appointed date, and without the officer of the Department

present? The reply of the aged priest was a simple peasant response. We wanted to give the officer of the Department of Archaeology a surprise when he came, by saying that the work was done, and that all was well.

5. Lack of Professionalism

In the 1980's when we were heading the Department of Monuments and Sites in Sri Lanka, we re-employed retired experts in the conservation of mural paintings as there was a shortage of such experts. There was one who worked at a fine temple in South-West Sri Lanka. He attended to the consolidation of loose plaster, the cleaning of soot from the painted surface, and even pasted back the tiny freckles of flaking pigments. However, on the request of the Venerable High Priest, he went beyond his professional skill, in attempting to re-touch some of the neutral backgrounds of the horizontally laid-out narrative stories. The risk element reached levels of fever-pitch, when he assigned this task to the driver of his vehicle. The alarm was soon raised by one of the finest documentalist of paintings in Sri Lanka, who visited the temple not long after.

6. Tourism

With the declaration of the 5th century Sigiriya Water Garden, Palace and Paintings as a World Heritage Site in 1983, the visitors increased by leaps and bounds. The site that had about 2,000 to 3,000 visitors a day, increased to over 10,000 a day especially over the week-ends. The increase peaked to a record height of 52,000 visitors in one day when the planetary conjunction for such visitation coincided with the fullmoon of June (pilgrims season), a village re-awakening programme (an annual event held during this time near Sigiriya), school holidays, and also a week-end. The wear and tear on the marble steps of the palace 200 metres above, and the pathways of the water garden, apart from the scatter of visitor rubbish all over the site, was unimaginable. The same visitors on this occasion, also visited the World Heritage Site of Dambulla with the painted caves, and the humidity of the exhumed air softened the ancient plaster, and as soon as the first few square inches of plaster began to fall, the visitors were forced to be stopped.

7. Anti-Colonialism

The Department of Archaeology extended its strictest laws on the 17th century Dutch Fort of Galle in 1971, when the army moved into the Fort, to make it its Headquarters against an uprising of the youth, mainly in the South of Sri Lanka. In order to explain the new legislation to the people within and outside the Fort of Galle, the Department arranged a meeting of various dignitaries and the people of the city at the Town Hall of Galle. The Ministers, Politicians, Government Heads and Well-wishers of Culture were all invited to speak, and they captured the goodwill of the citizens until one but the last speaker. I had kept the last speech to myself to explain any questions or queries, if there were any, as raised by the speakers previously. The speech before mine was assigned to a Senior Assistant Secretary of the

Cultural Ministry, who was meant to help me with the task of explaining any awkward questions that could have been raised previously. With such a strategy in place, it was time for my colleague of the Ministry to speak. He also had an easy task, as there were no awkward questions raised. But, low and behold, the bombshell was ready to burst. This eccentric Senior Assistant Secretary got up and said that the walls of the potential World Heritage Site of the Dutch Fort should be pulled down, because it was a colonial fort, and that its stones be used to build houses for the poor peasants of Galle. This mad and unwanted speech was given the right response by the 700 members of the public present on that occasion, where not a single comment or question was asked from him by any member of the audience. My last speech of the day was a peaceful one, with no reference being made to the mad speech of this eccentric man. Silence was the perfect response to this loony idea.

8. Politics

The post 15th century Portuguese, Dutch, French and British Fort of Trincomalee was the subject of debate between the Hotels' Corporation and the Department of Archaeology. The Commissioner of Archaeology had refused to allow the Hotels' Corporation to build a Guest House at the highest point of the fortified Rock. The Secretary of the Ministry who was about to change places with a political position, wished us to agree to his political proposal. The Commissioner refused to accept the invitation of the Secretary to an inspection of the site and instead, sent me. During the site inspection, I showed that the trenches cut for the Guest House had exposed an 8th century Forest Monastery and therefore, my suggestion was that the Hotels' Corporation takes over the whole Fort as a monument, and convert it to a Residential Tourist Fort. The money set apart for the Guest House be given to the Government Agent, to move his office from the Fort to a new Secretariat Building which can be erected well outside the fort, amidst the new township. Everyone agreed to this, and we saved the Fort that was visited and lived-in by the Duke of Wellington and Lord Nelson in the grand old Empire days.

9. Capitalism

Colombo was occupied by the Portuguese in 1505, and ever since it had one of the finest fortified cities of European outlook in Asia and was only second to Goa. The Dutch occupied it in the 1650's and improved it, while the British continued to use the fortification of the Dutch, but dismantled the walls 70 years later. However, it was the pretentious capitalism of the largest Bank in Sri Lanka, that persuaded the Head of State in 1977, to build the first skyscraper of Colombo, 400 feet high, on the remains of the Southern City Wall. It is now challenged further for its ugliness, by the adjacent twin towers of the Trade Centre at 500 feet, which is also sitting on the ancient city walls of the Dutch and Portuguese. The protests of the entire enlightened community of Sri Lanka went unheeded, due to the pretentious concept of an era of new capitalism, and tearing away from the manacles of socialism, along with a free economic and world trade policy.

10. Nationalism

Galle Face Hotel in Colombo was one of the outstanding landmarks of this important Harbour City of the Orient. From Roman times, no ship went east without calling at the Great Emporium (Sri Lanka), according to the words of the 6th century Greek writer Cosmos Indecopleustes. No ship went East without calling on Colombo, since Prime Minister Pitt of England took over Sri Lanka in exchange for South Africa at the Treaty of Amiens. This Landmark Galle Face Hotel, pretentiously changed its façade in a nationalization of architecture attempt after Independence in 1948, where a type of Kandyan roof was introduced, and the doors and the porch were changed in an unhappy compromise to a pseudo-orientalised architecture, in contrast to a splendid colonial style that it once had.

11. Religious Fanaticism

The holy city of Ayodhya in India, according to the Epic Poems Ramayana of the 2nd millennium BC, was the abode of Rama. However, in and around the 14th century of the current era, a mosque was built over a mound at this ancient site and it became a place of pilgrimage to the Muslims ever since. In the past fifty years of India's Independence, even the Department of Archaeology attempted to trace the facts of history pertaining to the Ramayana story. I was fortunate to meet the archaeologist who investigated the site, but he had not published a detailed report as the area of his investigations did not reveal the expected evidence. However, the passions of the Hindu public were sufficiently roused in the past decade or more, and the site was turned into a battle ground between these religious groups, where the dominant Hindus marched to the site on a given date, and began to remove the 14th century Mosque brick by brick, until every bit of the 14th century structure was evicted. Hence, this historic site is now an open sore, and the monument of the 14th century is also lost, without any trace of the 2nd millennium BC shrine either.

12. Academism

As a student at Rome University we visited Lucca to study the eccentricity of an Academic Superintendenza of Italy who's fad was Romanesque Architecture. Hence, the Gothic additions or changes were unceremonially pulled down by him to exhibit, or replace the altered Romanesque work during the Gothic phase.

This is where academism has gone to the head to the point of eccentricity, and to the detriment of heritage.

13. War

Since World War II, we have seen a type of stepping stone to the "Star Wars" programme in two efforts in Bagdad and in Belgrade. The definitive accuracies, and definitive inaccuracies of targets of attack have been proven. As such, with a risk element of even 10% or 20%, the monumental heritage of Humankind is at Risk. Therefore, the safest course of action is "no war".

14. Human Growth

We were in the Dieng Plateau in Central Java in August 2000. We were also at the same site in 1981 or 20 years back. The unique and the earliest Hindu Shrines of Indonesia are there. On the previous visit, we marched to the site through a jungle trail avoiding puddles of hot volcanic slug and smelling concentrations of sodium. We were still smelling the sodium in minute doses even now, but it was all built up with houses and agricultural field, leading up to within meters of the monuments. Thus human growth is a living risk element to monuments, if we do not plan our march of progress in a systematic and at a heritage conscious level.

These fourteen "Human Situations" of "Heritage @ Risk" are only a random collection of possible circumstances with real examples that are either big or small, but specific and varied, and could take place in any part of the world. "Monuments and Sites" being a subject that is universal, "Heritage @ Risk" is also an effect that is equally global, although the examples quoted here are specifically from the areas of our experience in Sri Lanka and partly in Asia.

Considering the examples quoted, it is well to note that there are items of "Heritage @ Risk", that are perpetually on the boil, and taking place at every moment of time. All we mortals can do is to carry the "message of tranquility" to these burial mounds of "debris dust", and spray a scent of perpetual charm that will make right those deeds of evil. Yes, it is this vision of "Amnesty International" for justice, or "Greenpeace" for environment, that we wish to emulate, through "Heritage @ Risk" in terms of the "Heritage of Humankind", or in an oriental way, offer our simple *pūja* to our dumb and "Immobile Friends" that have stood by us in our loneliness, through "War and Peace".

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