

Hampi forever

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Timely action has helped the World Heritage Site of Hampi shake off the 'endangered' tag... but several concerns remain.



PRECIOUS AND VULNERABLE: Can Hampi balance the demands of conservation and tourism? - Bijoy Ghosh

With the Karnataka government actively promoting Hampi as a destination for domestic and international tourism, the proposed tourism plan and infrastructure must take into account the concerns of the ASI.

The decision to remove Hampi from the Endangered List by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee, which is responsible for implementing UNESCO's 1972 World Heritage Convention, is a welcome one.

While this is no doubt a shot in the arm for the Government of India, State Government of Karnataka and the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), as well as a welcome relief for the local NGOs and inhabitants, it also brings with it responsibilities for all involved to ensure a sustained and caring future for this archaeological treasure.

After being termed a World Heritage Site in danger in 1999, it took seven years and immense efforts by the Indian government and the ASI to rid this eminent site of the unfortunate designation.

The intrusive structure and location of the bridge, along with the construction of a visitors' complex were unfortunate decisions that undermined the historicity of the site and thereby justified to some extent its endangered status. We now have to tread carefully while devising policies and decisions, and ensure that they focus on retaining the historic significance of the site.

The first step in this direction has been the setting up of the Hampi World Heritage Site Management Authority (HWSMA), the first of its kind in India which will in many ways influence the future course of heritage conservation in our country.

One of the main challenges faced by HWSMA and ASI would be the unambiguous delineation of the site. The present expanse (measuring over 125 sq m); division into core, buffer and

peripheral zones; and the scattered ensembles of significant structures make this an especially challenging exercise.

Further, the importance of the historic town plan and its constituents, many of which continue to function to this day and the unique landscape setting make this a truly spectacular site on the one hand and an extremely vulnerable one on the other. These issues will hopefully be adequately addressed in the management plan for the site.

It is equally important to ensure that local inhabitants are not inconvenienced. The necessity to travel nearly 52 km from Anegundi to Hospet across the Tungabhadra river, instead of the 15 km that a bridge would facilitate, is a real concern.

The Talavaraghatta Bridge was a few metres short of completion when its construction was abandoned on the insistence of UNESCO, which has in turn earned it and the ASI some amount of negative feelings among the locals. The bridge on completion would have brought vehicular traffic right into the heart of the site, endangering it tremendously.

With the Karnataka government actively promoting Hampi as a destination for domestic and international tourism, the proposed tourism plan and infrastructure must take into account the concerns of the ASI. Plans for luxury and low-budget hotels, as well as tourist facilities in the core and buffer zones must be finalised carefully in conjunction with all concerned.

Hampi has been the starting point of many an archaeologist's career and will continue to attract many more, thanks to its expanse and the historic town planning with the building ensembles, drainage and road systems, and exquisite architecture all reminiscent of the 'golden era' of Vijayanagara rule (14-16th centuries).

Any conservation effort must take care of the structures as well as the unique landscape housing them.

Mythological associations of the landscape with Pampa Devi and Kishkinda Kshetra lend an additional flavour to the place.

Hampi can effectively become a paradigm for sustainable coexistence between conservation and tourism.

Though ASI made a beginning by organising a series of stakeholder workshops in 2004, we must keep up a continued dialogue between the HWH SMA, ASI, Department of Tourism, local planning departments and various government departments on the one hand, and conservation professionals, historians, archaeologists on the other, besides of course the local inhabitants, entrepreneurs, tour operators, guides and so on.

The future of Hampi lies in understanding and interpreting its past with sensitivity.

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