

Why Your Car Hates Your Magnificent Heritage

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28 November 2013

For about 20 years, those attempting the conservation of monuments in India have struggled with one big problem: traffic. From Madurai to Pune, from Ahmedabad to Srinagar, the solutions are being fought over with varying results.

Mamallapuram, Tamil Nadu:

Postcards from Mamallapuram offer a serene view of the Five Rathas, a cluster of exquisite stone chariots carved in the 8th century. But a late afternoon visit to this UNESCO World Heritage site in Tamil Nadu (also known as Mahabalipuram) shows the disruptive power of man's modern-day chariots – a barrage of diesel-fuelled vehicles.

Just a skeletal gate separates this 'protected' monument from the road. At 5pm, a white tour bus revs its engines repeatedly, as a guide shouts "Andiamo!" to his Italian flock. A school bus lumbers past and a packed auto rickshaw roars by, followed by two joy riders honking a yellow motorcycle. And so on. The commotion leaves a residue of irritation more visible than the pollutants in the air.

A better model lies just down the road. A buffer zone holds traffic well away from the lovely Shore Temple, where the gentle sounds of the sea enhance a calm stroll. Now local planners are contemplating a proposal for a two-kilometer pedestrian zone that would stretch from the Shore Temple to the intricate bas-relief of Arjuna's Penance and on to the Five Rathas. "It is very essential," says RS Vattaldoss, a civil engineer who works with the New Town Development Authority. But re-routing traffic is a contentious topic in this town, as panchayat chairman M. Kothandapani insists all that walking would create too much hardship.

Of course, the problem of traffic engulfing ancient monuments is not limited to India. Different countries have dealt with it with varying success. In Italy, the mayor of Rome seeks to establish a pedestrian zone flanking the Colosseum. In Germany, the city of Dresden built a four-lane bridge and promptly lost its UNESCO World Heritage status. In Britain, fans of Stonehenge rejoiced when the government closed an adjacent road, but nearby villagers were left fuming. In Belize, construction crews blithely wrecked a Mayan pyramid to extract material for roadside gravel. And that's just this year.

"Road traffic constitutes a significant threat to heritage sites all over the world, from India to Rome," says Elizabeth Lee, vice president of CyArk, an international non-profit group devoted to heritage education and digital preservation. "Traffic is a symptom of a larger threat to heritage, which is urban encroachment and unplanned development."

Site managers in India and overseas must grapple with ways to welcome an increasing number of visitors while protecting the sites from fumes, noise and vibrations. But India seems to be lagging behind other nations because its archaic systems discourage coordination between municipal planning bodies and the Archeological Survey of India (ASI), according to Rohit Jigyasu, head of the India national committee for the International Council on Monuments and Sites.

India initially seemed like it had gotten a jump on the problem, pushing traffic back 500 meters from the Taj Mahal in 1996, following a Supreme Court mandate for a green belt, and offering eco-friendly battery-operated vehicles – quaintly termed "buggies" in manufacturing circles – to transport people from the parking lot. And in 2002, fearful that carbon dioxide and soot particles were accelerating deterioration of the Ajanta murals, Maharashtra authorities relocated the parking lot a full four kilometers away from the caves.

But are more buggies really the answer? Dirt roads lead to punctures, meaning that some sites could lose their rugged look and surrender to paving if more electric vehicles are to be deployed. That will soon be put to the test in Hampi, the sprawling UNESCO World Heritage site in Karnataka, where authorities purchased an initial batch of 25 buggies in 2010 and now plan to order more. By January 2014, buses and cars will no longer be permitted to rumble

through this site. (It has been discovered that young women make better buggy drivers than men, who were a bit careless and bashed them about.)

According to the ASI, a limited fleet of buggies is now traversing 45 monuments, including the Golkonda Fort and Fatehpur Sikri. To win tenders, dozens of Chinese buggy makers are competing fiercely with the Maini Group, a Bangalore-based manufacturer proud of its capacity to produce them in 2,000 colors.

Sathya Prakash Varanashi, convener of the Bangalore chapter of the conservation group Indian National Trust For Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), describes the disappointment of a recent family trip to Shalimar Bagh in Srinagar – an exquisite layout of Mughal garden and waterways linked to the Dal lake. It turned out to be marred by the sight of a field of cars. Given the plethora of heritage sites and the crush of visitors, concerns over vehicular pollution are mounting. But even for the tourist, a traffic jam in unlikely locations can destroy much of that old-fashioned, pre-Instagram pleasure – the view.

Different Strokes

“We need to be much more proactive,” says Amita Baig, member of the advisory committee on World Heritage Matters. Action will require a quantum leap in coordination, however. “There’s no serious partnership between the Center and the state. That’s going to take a restructuring of the mind,” Baig notes.

Consider the challenge in Bodh Gaya, where Siddhartha Gautama once spent three days and three nights in peaceful meditation. Even after a dip in tourism following the blasts earlier this year, Bodh Gaya sees anywhere between 300 to 4,000 visitors everyday. Buses, auto rickshaws and taxis vie for space. Today, Mumbai-based conservation architect Abha Narain Lambah is engrossed in crafting a master plan that will restore calm to this pilgrimage site. “It’s chaotic,” says Lambah. “But with the kind of weather conditions that we have, we must look at providing a shaded pathway or tree cover before we jump into pedestrianization and implement it in one sweep.” Lambah and other planners acknowledge that community consultation is vital to garner support for any reconfiguration of traffic. On November 26, for example, Lambah’s firm convened a stakeholders’ meeting.

Such questions are particularly tricky in areas where heritage sites are surrounded by people who need modern vehicles to conduct their daily lives. “In tourism, there is a notion of a ‘sterilized’ landscape, where Time has to stand still. For us, there is a living culture that continues to grow with it. Striking a balance is important,” observes Aditi Chanchani, director of Equations, a Bangalore-based advocacy group that works on tourism issues.

One controversial case involved the restoration of the 19th century Baradari palace in Patiala, Punjab, by Neemrana Hotels. According to Neemrana co-chairman Aman Nath, the group struck a deal with local officials to block a road where traffic threatened to disturb guests at the property. Then came a public battle, complete with public interest litigation. Neemrana countered that it would close the hotel if the road were reopened. The hoteliers prevailed. “Nobody will come here to sleep if a truck is passing under their window,” Nath says. “You have to give them a certain amount of peace.”

Veteran architect Ajit Koujalgi disapproves entirely of this sort of approach that pits locals against tourists. “We should not do anything, per se, for tourists. That’s what has taken us down the wrong path,” he says. “The people who live there should really enjoy it, and that would automatically bring the tourists.” An evening stroll along the beach promenade at Pondicherry (created by Koujalgi and his INTACH colleagues) might convert anyone to the pleasures of a pedestrian zone. Re-landscaping and improved lighting have won over both residents and visitors. Impressed by pedestrian zones in Germany and Nordic countries, Koujalgi is now lobbying to create walkers-only shopping streets in this former French colonial town. But citing India’s “infatuation with the car,” he knows it will be a slog.

The modern love for cars is at the heart of this mess. In Pune, activist Sujit Patwardhan argues that this infatuation is deadly for heritage, particularly for the narrow streets of old cities at the core of fast-expanding municipalities. Parisar, a sustainable development NGO that Patwardhan founded, recently failed in its bid to stop an underpass being dug near the 8th century Pataleshwar Cave Temple, even though this violates a law prohibiting any development within 100 meters of a protected monument. “No amount of road is enough, no amount of parking is enough. The appetite is insatiable,” says Patwardhan. Pune is said to add 768 vehicles to its roads everyday and is now a crowded home to 431,831 four-wheelers and 1,883,965 two-wheelers.

At heritage sites, family groups must also contend with the varied energy levels of its members, from small children to the elderly. But what makes the issue of pedestrianization truly complex is a growing sense of entitlement: i.e., I am entitled to drive my car (ditto motorbike, auto rickshaw, bus) right up to the exact entry point of any site and I am not going to take one footstep further than necessary. It is like the person who madly searches for parking right in front of a restaurant, rather than settle for a spot four blocks away and then simply stroll in the direction of dinner. It amounts to an exaggerated sense of hardship and effort. And it is often this distorted sense of inconvenience that bedevils efforts to introduce buffer zones and pedestrian areas.

Planners can arrange to plant extra trees or shaded pathways. They can introduce buggies for the truly tiny or infirm. They cannot, however, alter this sense of entitlement without a sustained campaign of social awareness of the negative impact of fumes, noise and vibrations.

Though these troubles are mirrored across the country, both the failures and successes in managing traffic around heritage sites remain local and isolated. While Parisar struggles in Pune, urban planners teaching at the Center for Environmental Planning and Technology (CEPT) University in Ahmedabad sound jubilant over the ongoing 100-crore development project to create a pedestrian plaza in front of the 15th century Bhadra fort, eventually extending up to the landmark Jami mosque. Even the notoriously bureaucratic ASI is pitching in by restoring the fort and coordinating with local authorities and architects. "We are working together. It's a breakthrough," says CEPT professor Utpal Sharma.

Like Koujalgi in Pondicherry, Sharma too believes that locals, including shopkeepers and hawkers, will benefit from more pedestrian movement. The argument goes that if walkers linger in one area, enticing items are more likely to catch their eye. Yet that remains a contested notion in Madurai, where traffic has been barred from four streets surrounding the Meenakshi temple since 2008. Several buggies ply the venue for Rs 10 a pop, but otherwise visitors must walk about 10 minutes to get access to the sanctuary.

In Madurai the pioneer was not a conservation NGO or the ASI – it was Karumuttu Kannan, an influential businessman who serves as the Thakkar (administrator) for the Meenakshi temple that draws as many as 15,000 visitors per day. Worried by cracks in the temple façade, Kannan says he also wanted to enhance security and overcome helter-skelter traffic. "When I ran this idea past the Collector, he was very skeptical and just laughed," recalls Kannan. He also faced opposition from tour operators, taxi operators, and most of all, shopkeepers who feared a plunge in business. After the plan was implemented, Kannan says it was an "instant hit," and maintains that many stores benefited.

That's not the way electronics entrepreneur Mukesh Babu tells the story. As secretary of the Chitrai Street Association in Madurai, Babu says business has dropped, on average, 25 percent for the 275 shops in the area and caused serious inconvenience for the 569 residents. He claims that local authorities won't allow non-tourists to use the buggies, not even to help people like his own elderly mother, who can't walk. Deliveries of heavy items such as refrigerators are now impossible. "Innocent people have been punished by this," he says.

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Back in Mamallapuram, walkers are holding their breath. "The pedestrian proposal was presented earlier this year by Vidhya Mohankumar, an architect and urban designer based in Chennai, on behalf of the Tamil Nadu chapter of INTACH. The scorecard so far: tourism officials in favor, some municipal planners in favor, the panchayat chairman against, autorickshaw drivers against, ASI silent, UNESCO silent, and hotel operators divided."

One man who supports the idea is J Sethuraman, director of Mamalla Hotels. He has seen this town grow from a dozy outpost of 700 people in 1987 to its current hodgepodge hub of 20,000 residents and large waves of tourists. Sethuraman thinks the walker-friendly plan should be introduced gradually, and that it should sell itself.

"If it makes economic sense to do this, they will all fall in line," he argues. After all, a visitor who can stroll around town safely and peacefully might actually want to spend three days here – instead of three hours.