Managing Cultural Practices

The case of Venkatappa Art Gallery

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1. Karnataka State
   Lawn Tennis Association
2. Vidhana Soudha
3. Karnataka High Court
4. Cubbon Park
5. Venkatappa Art Gallery
6. Government Museum
7. Vishweshwaraiah Museum
8. M. Chinnaswamy Cricket Stadium
9. Kanteerava Stadium
10. UB City Mall
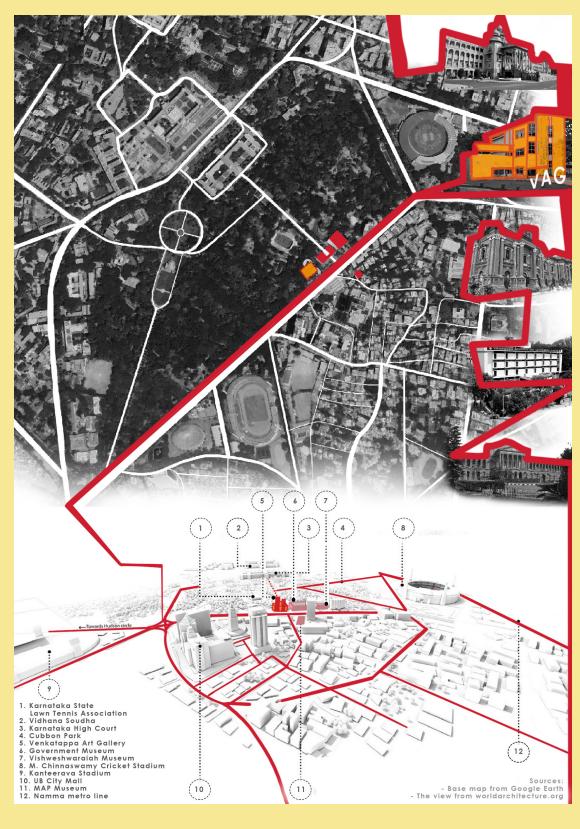11. MAP Museum
12. Namma metro line

Figure 1. Locating Venkatappa Art Gallery in Bengaluru's cultural district. (Illustrators: Shakshi Sharda & Shivani Goud)

In May 2016, I wrote an article titled 'Managing Cultural Practices' in Economic and Political Weekly, documenting issues related to the state government proposed redevelopment of Venkatappa Art Gallery (Figures 1-4), a small but culturally significant government museum located near Cubbon Park in the heart of Bangalore (Pillai, 2016). This article is a follow-up piece. The potential redevelopment had caused significant anger in the local artist community. Activists and community fora took shape across the state to oppose the project and eventually succeeded in stopping it.

Under the Karnataka Department of Tourism, a private art gallery/foundation, the Tasveer Foundation was selected to renovate the existing building and 'adopt' the Gallery. The agreement allowed all curatorial, exhibition and programming decisions to be taken by the Foundation. The artist community of Bangalore felt that this initiative to promote tourism, in the garb of adoption, was a move to grab the property located at a prime location in the city. Others felt that the Gallery, a long-time supporter of Karnataka's struggling and poorer artists would be commercialised and no longer act as a democratic and affordable platform for the local art community (Pushpamala, 2016).

Figure 2. Walkway to entrance of Venkatappa Art Gallery

Figure 3. View of Venkatappa Art Gallery from Museum Road

Figure 4. Venkatappa Art Gallery with UB City in the backdrop across Museum Road

The article raised bigger questions about Karnataka State Government's decision. Was allowing a private foundation to adopt Venkatappa Art Gallery (VAG) a workable model in India? Was there a workable model for participation from corporates in museums and art galleries that could ensure research and conservation of cultural assets and foster art for all strata of society?

The Gallery was not witnessing something new, since before the 1990s, the government had, in conjunction with large business houses, engaged in the restoration and renovation of the arts and culture of the country. Internationally, the steady devolution of funding to the arts has necessitated a greater engagement with industry. All of this has come at a price. Financial restructuring has led to abandoning cultural support and funding for nonprofit-making activities like research and the conservation of cultural assets, and fostering art for all strata of society is becoming rarer across the world. The situation at VAG was only a precursor to what could happen in the rest of India; that while the issue meant very little to everyday people caught up in their daily struggles in the city, it was a harbinger of things to come, of how we, as a society, view, curate, engage and manage art and culture. This essay revisits the VAG issue to investigate what has happened since the 2016 contestations for the museum and to discuss the implications of the fracas on the art and culture scene in India.

So, what happened at VAG and what has been happening since then? In 2016, the proposed adoption of Bangalore's VAG by the Tasveer Foundation (a local foundation established by businessman Abhishek Poddar that showcases art collections from across the world) had the city's art community on opposing sides. On one side was a group of nearly 300 artists, writers and theatre persons (Murali, 2016) protesting the adoption and on

the other side another group, also comprising artists, writers and theatre persons supporting the plans. Marches and protests were held on the streets of central Bangalore in 2016.

The 40-year-old VAG is part of a central Bangalore complex comprising the Visvesvaraya Industrial and Technological Museum (VITM) and the Government Museum, and is managed by the State Government. The VAG was established as an exhibition space for local artists in 1971. It houses the works of artists like KK Hebbar and sculptor Rajaram, and started the careers of contemporary artists like Pushpmala N and Sheela Gowda. It also hosts student and artist shows for nominal rates.

In 2013, the Karnataka Tourism Vision Group (KTVG), a multi-agency body that included prominent citizens of Bangalore (including Poddar) was set up by the State Government to provide recommendations regarding tourism for the state. The group suggested a museum district around the centrally located Cubbon Park be managed by an autonomous body with representation from various Cubbon Park stakeholders. This autonomous body would be built along the lines of English Heritage/National Trust in the United Kingdom (UK) and work on a self-sustainable model (with initial /annual grants from the state government).

In 2014, the State Department of Tourism promulgated the '*Adopt a tourist destination*' policy and forty-six tourism sites in Karnataka were nominated for adoption. Of these, six, including VAG, were 'adopted' by private organisations. By March 2016, the State Government signed memorandums of understanding (MoU) with the Tasveer Foundation for VAG, with the food franchise Cafe Coffee Day for the iconic Belur and Halebid temple complexes and with the corporate charity Jindal Foundation for the Government Museum.

Within days of the public notification of the MoUs, artists in the city were up in arms. The VAG Forum (vagforum on Facebook, 2016) was established by artists to protest the move and it claimed that the initiative to promote tourism was an attempt to grab prime property. Assertions were made that Tasveer and Poddar were elitists and art dealers (Pushpmala, 2016) and would profit off the gallery, and that local Karnataka artists would not have access to the gallery to exhibit their art and that the gallery would be aimed at only corporates (vagforum on Facebook, 2016). Proponents argued that the VAG building was in poor shape and needed to be managed and that Tasveer would provide a world class art gallery for the city (Jaishankar, 2016). Others asserted that the protest was an artificial one, motivated by resentment and that the gallery was needed to promote art in Karnataka (ibid).

On 14 March 2016, Poddar responded to the protests with a Facebook post '*Why plans for a new museum in Bangalore puts the public first*' saying, '*The proposed redevelopment of VAG is a significant step forward for Bangalore to have a modern museum facility. At the center of our plans is the belief that art should be for everyone, and to create an inclusive, accessible space to rejuvenate interest in art and culture … we are bringing in expertise, thought and funding to improve the approach to museums, exhibition programming and education in the visual arts in Karnataka, and are dedicated to building a new, broader, more democratic and inclusive audience for art*' (Poddar, 2016). Poddar followed the post, detailing the plans for the new public museum.

The protests intensified. Five months after the protests, Poddar and Tasveer Foundation withdrew from the project. The VAG Forum continues today as an informal artists' collective. It has gone on to curate collectives and events in the last few years. The Forum hosts 'celebratory' shows to include artists from diverse backgrounds attracting diverse audiences such as housewives, young students and NGOs (Madhukar, 2018). Some say that the protests have rejuvenated the art community in Bangalore in a small way, especially given the rapid urbanisation and loss of accessible venues for the arts in the city. Others bemoan the fact that the protests have stopped private companies from investing in and improving the quality of infrastructure for the arts.

Interestingly though, many private companies are investing in public art across the city, such as G Ravinder Reddy's large-scale sculptures, Subodh Gupta's 'Dreams Overflowing', Jayashri Burman's 'Dharitri' and Paresh Maity's 'The Force' at RMZ Ecopark, Bellandur. The Tasveer Foundation has since established the Museum of Art and Photography (MAP), a private art collection in 2022 across the road from VAG. Propelled by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, this primarily digital collection, hosts over 18,000 artworks, predominantly from the Indian subcontinent 10th century onwards, and has networks with museums around the world. The privately funded Indian Music Experience Museum also opened just before COVID-19.

What has happened since 2016 to other projects in Karnataka under the Adopt a Tourist Destination Policy? In 2016, in addition to the MoU for VAG with Tasveer Foundation, MoUs were signed for the Ranganathittu Bird Sanctuary with Sandur Manganese

and Iron Ores Ltd., Belur Halebid with Coffee Day Resorts and Hotel, Kavala caves near Dandeli with The West Coast Paper Mills, Bengaluru Government Museum with Jindal Foundation, and Lalbagh with Bangalore Chamber of Industry and Commerce (BCIC). With exception of the Ranganathittu Bird Sanctuary, none of the adopted destinations has seen any redevelopment since 2016 (Niranjan, 2018). The adopters assert that permission from central government agencies (environmental, etc.) are pending and that local protests are preventing work on the projects. The State Government has agreed with the assertion (ibid).

The BCIC requested the annulment of the MoU with the Government (ibid). In October 2019, under the National Strategy of *Adopt a Heritage Scheme*, it was announced that three firms from Hampi (Orange County and Resorts, Hotel Malligi and Heritage Hotel) would manage six monuments (Lotus Mahal, Kodandarama Temple, Krishna Temple, Elephant Stable, Badavilinga Temple and Ugra Narasimha Temple) in Hampi (Upadhye, 2019). The firms would ensure basic amenities like toilets, drinking water, signage, illuminations and internet. While there are no real signs of redevelopment in Hampi, it is still under the *Monument Mitra* scheme (Singh, 2021).

What has been happening at the National Level?
Historically, the Government of India (GoI) has been involved in redeveloping heritage for almost a decade. In 2001, the UPA government facilitated the National Culture Fund (NCF) program which revitalised Humayun's Tomb with private sector funding, among other projects (Agha and Kumar, 2018).

In September 2017, the GoI issued a policy, the *Adopt a Heritage Scheme* (*Apni Dharohar Apni Pehchan* Project) to allow private and public sector corporations to adopt some of India's heritage sites. Private and public sector companies and corporate individuals were *'invited to adopt heritage sites and to take up responsibility for making them and promote sustainable tourism through conservation and development under their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities. The companies will be responsible for building, operating and maintaining tourism infrastructure in exchange for brand visibility at the monuments'* (Ministry of Tourism, 2018).

Under the scheme, the company becomes a *Monument Mitra*. So far, the Ministry has drafted thirty-one agencies as *Monument Mitras* for ninety-five monuments across India. Some of the monuments 'adopted' include Mt. Stok Kangri in Ladakh, the Gaumukh trail in Uttarakhand, Red Fort in Delhi, and Gandikota Fort in Andhra Pradesh.

On April 24, 2018, the Dalmia Group, a large Indian corporation, announced that it had signed an MoU committing Rs.25 crores over a five-year period for the upkeep of the iconic Red Fort/ *Laal Quila*. It is believed that corporate giants GMR and ITC have submitted a letter of intent to adopt the Taj Mahal in Agra. In 2019, the GoI announced that an MoU had been signed with 11 private parties (Ministry of Tourism, 2019). This includes an agreement with Yatra Online for Hampi in Karnataka.

This caused anger and protests from experts and political parties across the country. The *Adopt a Heritage* scheme was rolled out across the country but has faced opposition in other states too. In Goa, the government had shortlisted companies to adopt the old Goa Church complex, Aguada Cabo de Rama, Chapora fort, a lighthouse, Morjim beach and the Basilica of Bom Jesus Church (Ajmal and Saxena, 2018). In Assam, the Tourism Ministry had identified three Ahom-era monuments in Sivsagar district - the Rang Ghar, Kareng-Ghar, Shiva Doul, and the Kaziranga National Park for adoption. In both Goa and Assam, the Tourism Ministry has had to backtrack on the '*Adopt a Heritage*' scheme because of violent protests (Ajmal and Saxena, 2018).

Interestingly, the last few years have seen a sharp increase in the establishment of private museums across the country (Lall, 2016). These include the MAP museum and the interactive Indian Music Experience Museum in Bangalore, Piramal Museum of Art in Mumbai, and Kiran Nadar Museum of Art in Delhi. These museums are typically managed by individuals or trusts, built faster and have more control on the quality, cataloguing, conservation, restoration and archiving of exhibits. They are mostly funded by corporate houses and philanthropies. These new museums are designed as experiences rather than as a collection of objects reflecting the current technology-driven, social media age. Criticisms include the fact that private museums are usually a reflection of the promoter's taste and are often inaccessible to the average Indian because of entrance fees (although many are free) and intimidating architecture.

What does the current situation say about the management of art and culture in India? The machinery of the welfare state in Europe promotes culture as a fundamental right and an essential part of personal and collective growth along with other rights such as education, health and social security (Menger, 2010). UNESCO (2001) describes culture as concerning '*all the specific features, spiritual, material, intellectual or affective, that characterise a society or human group. Culture includes, besides art*

and literature, way of life, basic human rights, system of value, tradition and religions'. In its 10th Five Year Plan, the Indian Planning Commission (now Niti Aayog) recognizes culture as one of the basic concepts to be integrated with all development activities and as a sector, necessary to spur economic growth, and strengthen the expression of the creative urges of Indians.

In India today, most cities are in a state of rapid transition - with much of the private heritage (i.e. monkey top houses in Bangalore being replaced by apartment blocks) vanishing swiftly. Unlike in the West, where they are rediscovering and retrofitting their cities in terms of art and culture, the Indian State and Indian cities are still primarily dealing with providing basic needs such as food, housing, transport, health (also of interest to culture and community). The issues of conservation, art and culture at the level of the city take a back seat to everyday living and commuting. There is little time to debate the state of art and culture, spatial mobility, personal care, and domestic services in the city. And yet, whether we like it or not, it is critical to the discourse on Indian cities. And maybe this discussion should include more sections of society than just academics and the government.

Currently, under government schemes such as the Smart City Mission, too many Indian cities are being developed within a technology-focused urban engineering paradigm as distinct from creative, cultural and inclusive cities. India has a long and distinct history that is marked by historical monuments and cultural spaces, many of which are located in cities. These monuments and spaces provide cities with strong cultural markers and public space for people, especially the poor, to interact with the cities on terms beyond just being workers, guards or cleaners for the wealthier populations. Additionally, our cities have a strong local culture that can be harnessed to provide distinctiveness of place and involve citizens (including migrants) in an act of co-creation in making and shaping the urban milieu.

Perhaps this is where the lessons from the VAG and its broader context come into play. To maintain the city's attractiveness, vibrancy and opportunities, the state has to renew and revitalise its socio-cultural economic base incorporating citizens' wishes. In the case of VAG, the state government and specifically the Department of Tourism took on this mandate. While discussions with the city were held through the KTVG, this endeavour was too elitist and top-down. Policy was driven by powerful business and government voices in the state and city and did not involve public participation in the real sense. In the light of the

74th CAA, meaningful public participation is critical, especially for urban governance. The absence of diverse voices in this discourse brings up questions of whether art and culture in the city are only the domain of the rich, elite and leisured classes?

The issue of access arises in multiple forms - the assertion that Tasveer's curation was aimed at the Western collector and tourist potentially disregarding local and poorer artists; the potential loss of access to exhibition space for the local struggling artist and the potential increase in entrance fees reducing access to art for the poor. Despite Poddar's assertion to the contrary, the current subscription model does exclude large masses of our society. Again, with the *Adopt a Heritage Scheme* in Hampi, it shows that the government is slow to learn any lessons. The decisions are still being made in a top-down elitist fashion and ad hoc manner by politicians and bureaucrats.

The right to the city is being abrogated at every stage in both the Bangalore and national discourse. Significant in this fracas is the distinction between what political scientist Partha Chatterjee calls the voting poor versus tax paying rich. While the struggling Kannada artist is active in the VAG forum, little is heard from the 'voting poor' of Bangalore. Perhaps, they are so busy struggling to survive that they do not have the time to be involved. But then a platform for their involvement needs to be created. The only place that the voting poor appear to have acquired a voice is in the violent protests over the *Adopt a Heritage* scheme in Assam.

While it is generally accepted that the conservation of cultural heritage requires the involvement of multiple players across the public, private and non-governmental sectors, it is important to understand what constitutes successful partnerships and that other factors such as equity, inclusivity and access need to be in place to facilitate success. It is critical to understand that in India, the current urban renewal agenda is to improve water, sanitation, transport, health and housing infrastructure. It is incumbent on us to realise that we are lucky to be able to learn from the missteps of the techno-engineering approach of Western cities. We have the opportunity to adopt a more humanistic and inclusive approach to urban development before too late. The wealth of our history, represented in the monuments, museums and art galleries in our cities need to be identified, protected and made accessible to all.

The Indian City is no longer just an economic hub. With a burgeoning middle-class and increasing incomes, it is very much a place for art and culture

and the language of government policy. The actions of the state need to reflect that. While the new private museums provide a platform for a section of society and are, to some extent, better and more equipped at exhibiting art and culture, the state is probably the only agency that can facilitate equity and equal access. The Government and cultural administration need to engage with the private sector, communities and other stakeholders in participatory ways to define changing needs; to engage with the existing culture of knowledge-creation and transmitting-traditions; and and to facilitate and assist local authorities in creating libraries, museums, performing arts venues, art and music schools, and theatre companies. Simultaneously, local authorities need to broaden the definition of culture that they are willing to support, moving it towards a more anthropological definition of cultural identity and diversity, and by linking cultural policy to education, urban and social policy.

Note: All pictures in this article are by Salila Vanka.

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