

**Third Party Evaluator's Opinion on
Ajanta–Ellora Conservation and Tourism Development Project**

Kuldip Nayar
Journalist
India

I find from the evaluation report that what has been done need not have been done and what needed to be done has not been done. I am basing my judgement on what the report says. Let me elucidate.

No doubt the project, carried out with funding from the **JBIC** has led to the illumination of the cave paintings at Ajanta using optical fibre lighting. As far as the illumination is concerned it is all right but the works carried out at the Ajanta site have disfigured the character of the World Heritage site and compromised the authenticity.

On study of the Thematic Evaluation Report and photographs presented to me, and study of the ICOMOS Venice Charter, 1964, I find that the restoration works have been carried out in an incompetent manner using inappropriate materials that are not acceptable. The ad-hoc widening of pathways, creation of 'stone like walls' in concrete', replicating cave columns in concrete, installation of a concrete bridge through the centre of the valley, building high retaining walls have had a major negative **impact** on the site which, no longer retains its authenticity. The cultural significance of the site has obviously not been understood by the Project team and hence excessive quantum of work.

Similarly the afforestation carried out as part of this project has surprisingly been carried out at a large distance from the monuments. Maybe in the long run the whole area will benefit but in the short run the impact will be very little.

Another misuse of funds which will not have the desired impact has been the purchase of 'air conditioned diesel buses' rather than electric buses, as originally envisaged, to transport tourists to the site from the visitor centre. However, since these buses replace private vehicles, they will ensure reduction in pollution levels. The fencing and signage installed, again seems to have had a severe negative impact owing to its in-sensitive design, material, colour and placement.

Lack of **efficiency** is demonstrated by the fact that such a large project with international involvement has been carried out without a statement of Cultural Significance and without the preparation of a sensitive Management Plan - as is the norm for World Heritage Sites as per the convention. Had these been carried out, it would have been clear to the project team about the natural rock setting for the Ajanta. Lack of **efficiency** is also demonstrated by the inability to co-ordinate amongst the ASI and the Forest department to repair an existing bridge rather than adding a new bridge within the WHS at a significant cost.

Though the project may make it convenient for visitors by various means; this is being done in a un-sustainable manner and would lead to a considerable loss of historic character. The single most benefit to the site has been the sensitively carried out optical fibre lighting though even here the gains seem to have been partially off-set by the 'restoration' of the significant sculptures.

**External Evaluators' Opinion Regarding
"The Third Party Evaluator's Opinion on
Ajanta–Ellora Conservation and Tourism Development Project"**

External Evaluator:
Kenichiro Hidaka and Hidetoshi Saito
Professor, University of Tsukuba
World Heritage Studies

Overall

The third party evaluator's opinion is heavily focused on monuments conservation and does not address any opinion on the development of tourism infrastructure. On the opinions on monuments conservation, some of the points are judged to be misunderstandings as the evidence of those points contradicts the findings shown in our Thematic Evaluation Report. It may also be because he has not seen the actual project site.

Effectiveness and Impacts

Based on the study of our Thematic Evaluation Report and photographs, and study of the ICOMOS Venice Charter, 1964, the third party evaluator states that "the works carried out at the Ajanta site have disfigured the character of the World Heritage site and compromised the authenticity." As he points out, there are certainly some problems regarding conservation work from the global standard point of view. However, the result of the ex-post evaluation is based on the thorough investigation of the actual project site and "Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention" (UNESCO: 2005 revised) and "International Charter for Conservation and Restoration of Sites and Monuments" (The Venice Charter) (ICOMOS:1964) , and the overall result shows measures taken have not necessarily disfigured the character of the World Heritage, but rather, served the preserving purposes.

The third party evaluator also states that "the restoration works have been carried out in an incompetent manner using inappropriate materials that are not acceptable" by bringing examples such as "stone like walls in concrete," and "replicating cave columns in concrete." However, the use of concrete has been discussed by the Panel of Experts (POE) such as UNESCO and National Research Institute for Cultural Properties, Tokyo in the Phase II project and it is not necessarily objected as one of the selectable ingredients. It is important to note that, on the basis of the documentation, it is comparatively easy to discern the concrete-made additions which have been carried out during the Phase I. Though, in some cases, the reinforcement by the concrete does not seem to conform perfectly with the so-called "minimum intervention", the external evaluators appreciate the structural efficiency, and hence the structural necessity of the reinforcement by concrete, the only possible material selected by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI).

As to the afforestation, according to the third party evaluator, "the afforestation carried out as part of this project has surprisingly been carried out at a large distance from the monuments. Maybe in the long run the whole area will benefit but in the short run the impact will be very little." However, this project is not only meant for monuments

conservation but also for the improvement of surrounding natural environment. It may appear to have not direct impact on the World Heritage site; however, it is important to maintain the ecological system at the sites as well as its surroundings.

The third party evaluator asserts that “Though the project may make it convenient for visitors by various means; this is being done in an un-sustainable manner and would lead to a considerable loss of historic character.” However, despite the several issues involved in the project planning and implementation, the implemented restoration and other forms of works were necessary for the appropriate conservation, management, opening and use of the historic sites, and are useful for the conservation of the world heritage sites. Eco-bus and optical fiber lighting are well-thought examples to promote tourism without compromising the protection of the historic site.