

HISTORY & CULTURE

The call of culture



Anusha Parthasarathy

CHENNAI, MAY 14, 2012 17:47 IST

UPDATED: JULY 11, 2016 17:14 IST

When you visit ancient temples don't stop with clicking photos, suggests S. Jayakumar, who along with a group of volunteers runs Prastara to help young people connect to heritage.

A conversation with S. Jayakumar takes one through the endless, pillared corridors of many of Tamil Nadu's lesser-known temples, stories that take form through their inscriptions and the symbols their idols represent. He is part of Prastara, an initiative that strives to spread awareness about temples.

What began as a field trip to the historic places that formed “Ponniyin Selvan” became a passionate urge to conserve heritage. “A bunch of us met on an Orkut group for ‘Ponniyin Selvan,’ and one day a few of us decided to visit the places mentioned in the book. As we

travelled, we discovered there were so many monuments vandalised and in ruins; so many temples were thousands of years old and not cared for. We wondered what was going to happen to them, say 10 or 20 years from now; do we just visit these places and take pictures or do something more?" says Jayakumar.

The big start

That's when the group decided it wanted to protect, restore and conserve such temples, especially in the Kumbakonam-Thanjavur belt. With a team of eight, Prastara began a couple of years ago to help locals connect with their heritage. "We want the locals to be aware of their heritage and its importance so they can stand up for it."

Jayakumar, who teaches music at Kalakshetra Foundation, has majored in History, studied Epigraphy, been trained by an archaeologist and epigraphist, and attended lectures on heritage issues. "We use this knowledge to study each temple we visit," he says.

Prastara's first project was at the Thiruvengad Girls High School. "We spoke about the local heritage, the importance of preserving monuments and told them to find out about the history of their area. We took 32 children on a field trip to the Thanjavur Big Temple to teach them how to find a monument, look at it and study it. A lot of them seemed very interested in local culture; they hadn't had such an opportunity or the right people to explain it to them."

The initiative focusses on rural pockets since most old temples are concentrated in such areas. "The movement must start where most temples are. What is more important is that the awareness reach the children of that area because they're the ones that will be around for long. We also want to look into proper methods of renovation. In a lot of temples, they use mosaic tiles and sandblast the area for renovation, which damages inscriptions and carvings beyond repair. We are working with art conservationists, sthapatthis, historians and other stalwarts to stop this. We're in the process of creating a database of experts and structures, and will soon begin work."

Right now, the group is focussed on the temples themselves. "Our resource people are the ones who provide us with maximum information about a place before we visit it. We take books along and try to decipher the inscriptions, and when you do that, you discover so much. Paintings on temple walls are important because they tell us how people lived 1,000 years ago, their culture, dressing style, the ornaments they wore and the ambience. Since the temple was the centre of administration those days, the inscriptions tell you the number of people who lived in the area, the hospitals, schools, land disputes and funds collected then. Even the temple tanks are important and most inscriptions have details about them. But you often find people bathing in it, and leaving plastic sachets and bottles around. We are looking to educate people and catch them young."

Prastara hopes to spread across the State. “We're planning on taking two other schools on field trips and conducting workshops. We will sponsor the trips for children from rural areas, if they can't afford our fee. We're also planning a documentary on the Thanjavur Brihadeeswarar Temple in consultation with experts. Our monthly online magazine Prastara has just been launched too,” he says.

Prastara refers to the roof that completes a temple structure. It also means a flat bed of stone. “A stone that needs sculpting to take shape,” says Jayakumar. Just like their own organisation. And taking shape is vital simply because as Jayakumar puts it “learning about a temple is like discovering a whole new world. Or, sometimes a travel back in time”.

(For more details, visit www.prastara.in)

Letter from Editor

Dear reader,

We have been trying to keep you up-to-date with news that matters to our lives and livelihoods, during these difficult times. To enable wide dissemination of news that is in public interest, we have increased the number of articles that can be read free, and extended free trial periods. However, we have a request for those who can afford to subscribe: please do. As we fight disinformation and misinformation, and keep apace with the happenings, we need to commit greater resources to news gathering operations. We promise to deliver quality journalism that stays away from vested interest and political propaganda.

SUPPORT QUALITY JOURNALISM

Printable version | May 9, 2020 11:38:18 AM | <https://www.thehindu.com/features/friday-review/history-and-culture/the-call-of-culture/article3418552.ece>

© THG PUBLISHING PVT LTD.
