

India is different. Don't rush for conservation.

INTERVIEW M.
VELAYUDHAN
NAIR

BY ROMAN
TRONNER



Fig. 1: Prof. M.V. Nair and Prof. Gabriela Krist in New Delhi 2013

India owns a rich and manifold cultural heritage. Preservation strategies differ from the West. Not only because of difficult climate conditions, explains Prof. M.V. Nair, conservation specialist and former vice-president of ICOM-CC.

Velayudhan Nair is professor emeritus at the National Museum Institute (NMI), Conservation Department, in New Delhi, India. In 2003 he was elected vice-president of ICOM-CC (UNESCO) – the International Council of Museums, Conservation Committee. From 1991 to 1995 and 2005 to 2010 he was director of the National Research Laboratory for Conservation of Cultural Property (NRLC). He studied chemistry at the Indian Institute of Technology in Madras. Today he is chief adviser and responsible for the museums in his home country, Kerala.

What does cultural heritage in general mean to people in India?

Basically, cultural heritage in India is something which is our ancestor's property. For Indians it is the way of life: my father's, my forefather's property, even if it is a pen, even if it is a cloth.

Are there any differences to western countries?

In India, even if you notice a monument, say 150 years old, it may not become so important because there is such a large quantity of cultural property in this huge country. But if you go to the US or another country you see it is very valuable and much care is given to it. Of course, preservation is also a matter of how much money and manpower you can spend and whether there is trained manpower for such an intervention. In India, the standards are very different because you have such an abundance of cultural property. This is the only difference I see among the approaches to cultural property. It is the question of how relevant it is, because even if you want to make it important, sometimes you may not be able to achieve this in India because you don't have resources to take care of everything even if it becomes relatively important. In Austria, for example, or in Europe, it is totally different. You will get the attention. In India it is a matter of recognition, how much importance you are giving to an object and how much money you spend for its preservation. For example, in India, if you live in a house that is five hundred years old, sometimes people think it is cursed, I cannot renovate it. When you come to Europe it is a matter of pride that "I am living in a house that is a few hundred years old." That is the difference in approach. Of course renovation of such a house can be very expensive, and in India you may not be able to afford it. In other countries like in the UK there are tax exemptions for reno-

vating old buildings; you have trained conservators, qualified professionals. So there should be more incentives given by the state to protect cultural properties.

How does India as a state protect its cultural heritage?

India has a national legislation with regards to cultural property. Ancient monuments are subject to the Monument Sites Act of 1952, of the government of India. In addition, there is further legislation at the level of the federal states. For example in Kerala, where I work and live, ancient monuments remain subject to the Monument Sites Act, which was enacted two years after the national act. All these acts basically work the same. Before federal state legislation was enacted, most of the cultural property was government controlled. Today, protected monuments are governed by India if they are of national importance. If it is of regional importance, it becomes protected by the federal state and once it is protected, the upkeep becomes a duty of the Indian government. Often there won't be any conservation or refurbishment because if it is a living monument, it will continue to live and if it is a temple, it will continue to function as a temple. But there will be restrictions on its preservation because you won't be able to alter the temple in any way. Preservation becomes the responsibility of the owner and also of public authorities. Sometimes an agreement is signed between the owner and the government.

What policies in conservation does India follow?

India follows the ICOM and the UNESCO conventions. UNESCO defines cultural property and what a museum object is. But the policies of conservation in India may be different to Europe. For example, we don't want to imitate the original artist because we hold him in high esteem. We believe that no other paintings made by different peo-

ple can reach the quality of the original. Take the Ajanta paintings. There are so many patches in there, but that doesn't mean that India has no conservators. This is a tick of conservation we follow, the fact that we cannot do anything with the creations of the original artist. We preserve, but we cannot restore to the extent that it looks original. This is the difference to Europe.

The approach in Europe is indeed somewhat different.

Yes, you can see that, even if you go to the Vatican Museum, all the paintings look brand new, the mural paintings also look brand new, which means they have attained an emulation of the original, but in India we don't do this. And we have restrictions, we all follow different aesthetics and it will probably remain so. But preventive conservation should be carried out. Because if for example one leg of a sculpture is missing, I fix the equilibrium and the strength of the object. The conservator should not misunderstand it as original so we resort to recursion, even if you have to conserve it to some extent. We have to ensure that all applied measures remain reversible. Reversibility in that sense is a principle everywhere: if a better technique emerges, the worse one won't stand in the way of improving the object. Everything should be reversible; we follow this principle, we cannot add something which is permanent to the object.

What is the role of museums and collections in preserving cultural heritage?

Of course, there is a collection policy for all the museums. They should collect objects and care for them; in India, faking is one of the problems. We had the case of 24 Mughal paintings in a museum in Calcutta. The museums found out that the paintings were faked. The High Court of Calcutta intervened to discover whether they were genuine or fake. We could easily identify the fake because the

technique of faking was not intended for faking, but for making a duplicate of these paintings about fifty years ago.

To give a proper identification of authenticity is the duty of a qualified conservator and a laboratory that can identify it correctly. If it is a painting, they may use old canvas; fakers really do use these things as well. But who is going to carry out the search for fakes in the collections? Only conservators can do that. Therefore, collection care becomes very important. And objects have to be authentic, particularly before they go for exhibitions.

You are pointing to the prevalent need in India to bridge the gap between knowing preventive conservation measures and applying them to the collections. What is so challenging in this respect?

Preventive conservation is very important in India because of the tropical climate. In the Indian climate, conditions vary a lot, from the Himalayan region and Kashmir to the tropical south. In the northwestern areas humidity levels are very low, that means everything can be more easily preserved. If you come to Central India, like Delhi, there will be many variations in the climate, temperature and humidity. There you have hot summers and hard winters. In the south of India, like Kerala, temperature variations might not be high but the humidity variations will be very prominent, whereas in the desert in Rajasthan, humidity will be very low and the temperature variations are very high.

Conditions such as in Kerala are ideal for the growth of fungus, insects, and bio-deterioration is high. Another problem is precipitation. A few years back, there used to be no rain in Leh, a city in Ladakh; there was only ice, but that caused a lot of problems to the monasteries there because they were not equipped for such climate conditions, which are quite barren.

Therefore, preventive conservation and risk assessment should now deal with everything. We cannot allow disasters to happen only because we did not take precautions. So, we have to be aware of those challenges for preventive conservation, which has become very relevant in a country like India.

You've been collaborating with the Institute of Conservation in Vienna for many years. How did this cooperation evolve?

The starting point dates back to 2004 in Nako. In that year I was the director of the National Research Laboratory of Conservation of Cultural Property in Lucknow under the Ministry of Culture. This is a national laboratory of India. Therefore, we collaborated with Gabriela Krist's team from Vienna in conserving and working on many of our problems concerning the Buddhist temples in the Nako village. We enjoyed working with the Austrian team.

But today the main subject of your cooperation is the exchange of students and expertise?

Yes, we had students from the University of Applied Arts and staff members, they worked in the laboratory in Lucknow and started with analyses. Our first thing in analysis was how to investigate cultural property, like a doctor intervening a patient. First you should know what the disease is, how the patient reacts to the chemicals.

How can the Institute of Conservation in Vienna support preventive conservation in India?

When we started the collaboration in Kerala for Napier Museum, the first thing we had to do was to deal with the climatic variations in different seasons. First we had to collect data about the climate variations and data of organic objects, various types of wood, paintings, leather, and textiles and how these materials are affected by the climatic

variations. What we need here is collection care, which is what the Institute of Conservation in Vienna is concentrating on. In 2016, we had a workshop on how to establish a roadmap to be prepared for conservation strategies in Napier Museum. The first thing Gabriela Krist and we discussed was the study of the effects of climate and how preventive conservation can be achieved. This is a prerequisite for adopting any type of conservation.

Students from India come to Vienna to be trained particularly in this practical hands-on type of work. Was that the main experience that your students gained?

Of course, but it is a mutual exchange, because the techniques followed in Vienna were not working in Delhi and in Trivandrum. For example, when you take a mud painting, the painting has been done on a mud plaster. Therefore, you have to use the traditional techniques to conserve this. You have to take a decision to what extent non-conventional chemicals can be used. You have to examine how conservation methods behave in the specific climate in India, whether pigments are affected and so on. If these things aren't carried out successfully, conservation has no meaning.

The experience from such analyses was mutually profitable because our chemists and scientists do not know the latest chemicals that are used in Vienna, for example ethyl silicate they use in Vienna – it was very new to our scientists and conservators.

What in your opinion was the most important contribution of Gabriela Krist's crew during their work in India?

Gabriela's colleagues have become very important because they are very well organized. Sometimes in India the laboratories are not that organized. Sometimes the museum people in India are not fully aware of the conservation problems and conservation standards and also the needs of a mu-

seum. India is a very large country, it has so much cultural property and so many museums, so sometimes there are no fixed standards. So, it is essential that custodians of the cultural property follow the standards. This is why we organized joint workshops on the right practices with a large group of museum professionals. Therefore, this collaboration with Vienna is very useful for India, and in Kerala we feel that this cooperation is very important.

You talked about standards. Do you believe there should be one world-wide standard of conservation training and if so what has to be done to achieve such standards?

I think the standards should be different, particularly because of the problems you face. The training should not be universal, it should be for the particular case, the particular collection. For example, if somebody is trained in Vienna for the preservation of paintings – curatorial and preventional – it may not work under other climatic conditions. When I was council member of ICCROM, I was responsible for a wall painting training course; we took equal number of South-east Asian people and Indians. First of all, we asked them to bring materials from their own places and we made some analyses. You have to know which technique was originally used. Of course, the standards and syllabus can be internationally fixed. But how can that be achieved? You always have to take into account the specific situations and challenges, for example climate conditions.

We have to decide about the practical standards in the training. The training should be to know the object, to know the climate, to know your problems, and the first thing in the training is that you should use common sense in understanding the object, and you should see the object in its particular state. If there is any intervention, you should plan where you are doing

it, whether the intervention is essential, whether you can avoid it as far as possible – the conservation ethics say: minimum intervention for an object; whether you fulfil these criteria, the minimum intervention and reversibility, whether you are able to achieve this. You should repair and conserve that object. To go for conservation for conservation sake – that should not be the criteria. It is saving the object. This is the training one should give to students to make them qualified conservators.

What would you recommend to a conservator from Europe to take into account before starting a conservation campaign in India?

I would recommend: don't immediately start in India. First you should understand the problems. Because if you apply chemicals to objects that are prevalent in Europe and use them for preservation or consolidation, it may be a disaster for the cultural property in India. An historical example: the paintings of the Ajanta caves are world heritage. In 1940, Italian qualified conservators did the conservation of the paintings. They came and put shellac on it, which made the paintings shiny. This was the work style of the Italians that time. But the paintings which were preserved from the second century B.C. until 1940 didn't have many problems in the beginning. The problem was, however, that the expansion properties of shellac are totally different from the paintings. The paintings, which were safe until 1940, started to crumble and to fall down from the wall. The intention was good but they didn't consider the variations in climate. Therefore, it should be a lesson for all the other conservators coming from Europe – they should learn this lesson and before attempting anything in India – India is different. You should not rush for conservation in India, one should have proper understanding before attempting anything.



Fig. 2: Nako, where it all started 115