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‘Adopt a Heritage’ scheme

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Why is in news? As the ‘monument Mitra’ (Adopt a Heritage) scheme of the tourism ministry could not yield desired results, the ministry of culture is ready with its own version the initiative for better maintenance of centrally protected heritage properties in India

About Adopt a Heritage Scheme

“Adopt a Heritage: Apni Dharohar, Apni Pehchaan”, is a collaborative effort between the Ministry of Tourism, Ministry of Culture and Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), and State/UTs Governments.

The Project aims to develop synergy among all partners to effectively promote “responsible tourism”.

It aims to involve public sector companies, private sector companies and corporate citizens/individuals to take up the responsibility for making our heritage and tourism more sustainable through development, operation and maintenance of world-class tourist infrastructure and amenities at ASI/ State heritage sites and other important tourist sites in India.

They would become ‘Monument Mitras’ through the innovative concept of “Vision Bidding”, where the agency with best vision for the heritage site will be given an opportunity to associate pride with their CSR activities.

They would also get limited visibility in the premises and the Incredible India website. The aim is enhancement of tourist experience and promotion of the incredible heritage sites to bring them on tourism map.

‘The Adopt a Heritage’ is essentially a non-revenue generating project. It is part of responsible tourism where the ‘Monument Mitra’ essentially spends his CSR funds for upkeep and maintenance etc., and gets limited visibility. The agency was selected on the basis of unique concept of vision bid and no financial bid is involved.

Focus of the project

The project primarily focusses on providing basic amenities that includes cleanliness, public conveniences, drinking water, ease of access for differently abled and senior citizens, standardized signage, illumination and advanced amenities such as surveillance system, night viewing facilities, tourism facilitation centre and an enhanced tourism experience that will result in more tourist footfalls, both domestic and foreign

The priority areas of Programme are listed as under:

Developing basic tourism infrastructure;

Promoting cultural and heritage value of the country to generate livelihoods in the identified regions;

Enhancing the tourist attractiveness in a sustainable manner by developing world-class infrastructure at the heritage monument sites;

Creating employment through active involvement of local communities;

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Harnessing tourism potential for its effects in employment generation and economic development;

Developing sustainable tourism infrastructure and ensuring proper Operations and Maintenance therein.

Concerns with the Scheme

Some of the activities under the scheme appear to be progressive measures aimed at improving visitor services and amenities. However, scrutiny establishes perils.

Giving chances to businesses, rather than trained professionals to build museums and interpretation centres and develop their content threatens India's understanding of its own past.

The current plan also sidelines the mandate of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and abandons The Sarnath Initiative, guidelines devised by the ASI, the Getty Trust, U.S., the British Museum, and National Culture Fund to safe keep excavated objects and present them to visitors in an engaging manner.

Many monuments selected for the scheme including the stupas at Sanchi, the Brihadeshwar temple in Thanjavur, and Akbar's palace city at Fatehpur Sikri already have tourist infrastructure.

If excavations are carried out in them, then they may lead to the discovery of antiquities that can offer clues into the historical context of monuments. Primarily for this reason, new construction in these areas has hitherto been prohibited. When the scheme let businesses occupy prime public land and build their own brands in the valuable spaces, it further diminishes grounds around iconic monuments

Another danger of implementing the 'Adopt a Heritage' scheme is that it will undermine local communities and their relationships with historical sites. Guided tours led by employees of large businesses who have received permission to adopt a monument may endanger livelihoods of those who have lived near the site and made a living by regaling visitors with stories of its colourful past.

There are some monuments selected for the scheme that are not protected by the ASI and are in States without Archaeology Directorates. One fears that businesses that sign agreements with the Union Ministry of Culture to adopt these monuments will be able to alter their historical character without much opposition.

The Way Ahead

First, businesses can help citizens understand why monuments matter. This can be done by earmarking CSR funds for grants for researching, writing, and publishing high quality textbooks, and developing imaginative and effective ways of teaching history. Traders and shopkeepers can give funds to school libraries for collecting archival materials including books, maps, and old photographs relevant to monuments in their vicinity that will lead students to establish the value of monuments.

Second, industrial houses can support the meaningful conservation of heritage buildings by looking within. Their CSR funds can be used to purchase new equipment that release fewer noxious gases that darken and corrode marble buildings and discharge fewer effluents into rivers, thus making these water bodies less likely to serve as breeding grounds of microbes that gather on the walls of ancient buildings erected on riverbanks and cause their decay.

Conclusion

Currently, India's progress in diverse fields is being projected at G-20 events across the nation. By embracing forward-thinking principles of historical preservation, businesses, government agencies, and civil society groups can showcase India's genuine progress in this arena. Maybe their efforts will inspire more citizens to participate in the pressing task of safeguarding India's pluralistic heritage.