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## Miracle in Patan

By Gurcharan Das

I was in Kathmandu recently, where I had gone for my nephew's wedding. It turned out to be a warm family affair with plenty of good food good felling and This was before the Hrithik Roshan episode and there was lots of sunshine, attractive women, and beautiful clothes but what took my breath away was the Patan Museum, which is arguably the best museum on the subcontinent with plenty of lessons for us in India.

The museum displays the traditional sacred art of Nepal in a wonderful setting. Its home is an 18<sup>th</sup> century royal palace of Kathmandu's Malla kings, restored lovingly by Gotz Hagmuller and others with funding from Austrian and Nepali sources. Its gilded door, guarded by two ferocious bronze lions, faces one of the beautiful squares in the world. Inside is an exciting collection of 200 sculptures and objects that transport one into the rich living traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism.

This in itself is not exceptional Many Indian museums are housed in grand buildings and contain

equally rare treasures. What is exceptional is the world class presentation the quality of the display accompanied by educative commentary impermeable maintenance and expert management. There is no dust, filth or anything shoddy which, alas are the defining qualities of our museums. Museums in India are usually run by bored bureaucrats, who don't even have the authority to replace a light bulb, The treasures are poorly displayed, poorly guarded and poorly maintained, They depend on annual government grants, which ate eaten up in staff salaries. The end result is that our museums appeal neither to local people not to foreign visitors. They don't achieve their educational aim or their tourist potential.

The creators of the Patan Museum were aware of these pitfalls, and their biggest victory was to convince the government to let it be a semi-autonomous body, with an ability to raise revenues, employ its own staff (not bureaucrats), and manage its pricing policy and budget, Its entrance fees are Rs. 10 for

Nepalis, Rs.30 for SAARC tourists and Rs. 120 for foreigners.<sup>i</sup> It supplements the fees through revenues from an outstanding Museum Cafe in the landscape palace gardens; gift shop that sells lovely posters, art books and post cards. The end result is a self-sustaining, world-class museum that attracts 40000 annual visitors<sup>ii</sup> or 5 per cent of all tourist arrivals in Nepal. It has been acclaimed around the world and its growing popularity guarantees it a sustainable, self-reliant future. A decaying old building has won a new lease of life as a cultural preserve that will be Nepal's pride for generations.

Here's an idea for India's Languishing museums. How can we allow our national treasures to be managed by non-government institutions? Others will protest why do we need foreigners to restore our palaces and design our museums? The simple answer is that museums need people with special skills, a unique knowledge base, and a passion for art history and aesthetics. Museums are public spaces, but they

don't have to be run by governments. The best museums in the world, especially in America, are managed as autonomous citizens' trusts. Expertise has no colour, and the issue is not swadeshi versus videshi. The challenge is to get passionate experts to run our institutions rather than bored bureaucrats. To be afraid of foreigners is the sign of an inferiority complex and Tagore reminds us that "Whatever we understand and enjoy in human products instantly becomes ours, wherever they might have their origin."

So, are there high-minded Indians who care enough about their heritage to come together, raise funds in India and abroad in order to upgrade our museums and be willing to convince our government that our museums should become semi-autonomous, self-sustaining institutions? To be sure the cultural bureaucracy will resist, but the truth is that our government doesn't have money. It might welcome a Patan type initiative, which will make our museums self-reliant. Once that happens we can dream of a Gotz Hagmuller to create magic one day in the Chola bronze gallery in Chennai.

In these troubled times between Nepal and India. this will be our best compliment to our neighbour. While on the subject I, for one do not

think that Ayodhya needs a new building. But if there is "national sentiment" in its favour, as Mr Vajpayee believes, I hope it will be a world –class monument to India's multifaith diversity. I would invite one of the world's top architects – a Frank Gehry. Richard Meir. I.M. pei, or Charles Correa to Design it . That will do more for Ayodhya's pride and tourism Recall, Nehru had the courage to invite Chandigarh. Now, here is another idea, Mr Vajpayee.

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*<sup>i</sup> Now Its entrance fees are Rs. 20.00 for Nepalis, Rs.150.00 for SAARC tourists and Rs. 250.00 for foreigners.*

*<sup>ii</sup> Now museum that attracts more than 65000 annual visitors*