India was incredible in all respects at the 38th session of the World Heritage Committee meeting in Doha recently. First, it achieved the inscription of The Great Himalayan National Park and the Rani-ki-Vav (the Queen's Stepwell) in Patan, Gujarat, on the prestigious World Heritage List. Second, it was one of the best prepared and most articulate delegations present; and finally, it had a fantastic new transnational project, highly praised and endorsed by none other than Irina Bokova, UNESCO Director-General, up its sleeve.

Seated beside the Indian delegation in the enormous and spectacular Qatar National Convention Centre, I held my breath as the advisory body ICOMOS read its evaluation report on the Rani-ki-Vav. Just a few months ago, I had visited the richly sculptured subterranean water monument built circa AD 1050. Commissioned by Queen Udayamati in memory of her husband Bhimdev I, founder of the Solanki dynasty, the well in the town of Patan, northern Gujarat,
was excavated in the late 1980s by the Archaeological Survey of India.

Nothing prepares you for the first sight of the magnificent monument with its intricate sculptures and the engineering ingenuity that must have gone into its planning and construction.

Support for the inscription of the Rani-ki-Vav on the World Heritage List was unsurprisingly unanimous. When the chairperson of the 21-member Committee struck the gavel to pass the decision, I wanted to jump up in the air but I rose as dignified as possible to congratulate the Indian delegation, its members flushed with pride and surrounded by a mob of international delegates.

After The Great Himalayan National Park went up on the World Heritage List with a clean chit by the advisory body IUCN, Ruchira Kambhoj, the Ambassador and Permanent Representative of India to UNESCO-Paris, told me, “India now has seven natural properties and 25 cultural sites, taking the total up to 32, on the UNESCO World Heritage List. It is a matter of great pride for us. After 10 years, India has achieved a double inscription: one in the cultural category and one in the natural.”

Yet, India has far fewer sites of the latter category on the list. Apparently that lack is being addressed. Dr. Vinod B. Mathur, the director of the Wildlife Institute of India, said that in the last 10 years the Indian government, the Ministry of Environment in particular, has been working strongly on the natural heritage conservation front. Nominations for natural sites are in place for the next four years and these include the Rann of Kutch in Gujarat and Khangchendzonga National Park in Sikkim. “UNESCO is setting up the first centre in the world dealing with natural heritage for management and training at the Wildlife Institute of India. This is for the Asia-Pacific region and the Wildlife Institute is at the forefront of it. In a few weeks time we will have the centre up and running,” he said.

India’s ambitions extend further. To a packed hall comprising a rapt audience, Prof. Himanshu Prabha Ray, chairperson of the National Monuments Authority, talked about its latest project that goes far beyond the borders of India — as far as the shores of Africa. Mausam/Mawsm: Maritime Routes and Cultural Landscapes will be a transnational nomination under World Heritage. Dr. Shikha Jain, the director of Development and Research Organisation for Nature, Arts and Heritage (DRONAH) and consultant to UNESCO, New Delhi, said, “The project aims to explore the multi-faceted Indian Ocean ‘world’-collating archaeological and historical research in order to document the diversity of cultural, commercial and religious interactions in the Indian Ocean — extending from east Africa, the Arabian peninsula, the Indian subcontinent and Sri Lanka to the Southeast Asian archipelago. The project will open up strong possibilities for all these regions to work together to prepare the nomination dossier.”

The fact that Irina Bokova made a surprise appearance at the presentation and endorsed the project in glowing terms was a shot in the arm for the ebullient team.

It is 42 years since the birth of the World Heritage Convention in 1972. Today, it is possibly the only international legal instrument that unites such a staggering number of countries — 161 have ratified it — towards a common purpose: protection not only of their own heritage but also of one another’s. At its core lies a profound philosophy: the inter-connectedness of nature, culture and the entire world.

However, Dr. Kishore Rao, the director of the World Heritage Centre, faces with several challenges: the politicking that goes into inscriptions, the loss of personnel and expertise in the natural heritage sector, and the difficult financial situation with the US not paying its dues over the Palestinian issue. The host of this year’s meeting, Qatar, came to the rescue by donating $10 million to an emergency fund set up to protect World Heritage Sites. “Protecting World Heritage is our answer to extremism,” said Irina Bokova.

And that’s not all. World Heritage and an understanding of it can be the answer to several issues confronting us today. If the Rani-ki-Vav in Patan, Gujarat, can be tapped to integrate well-being and development, and if the Great Himalayan National Park serves as a model for nature management, India will have further endorsed Bokova’s words that World Heritage is “our ally against poverty and climate change”. And India will have proved to be incredible yet again.

Keywords: The Great Himalayan National Park, Rani-ki-Vav, UNESCO World Heritage List, UNESCO, World Heritage

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