[**A culture of neglect**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1737431/a-culture-of-neglect)

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THE Sindh government’s culture department recently invited bids to engage ‘experienced’ event managers to help it organise a weeklong centenary celebration of Mohenjo-Daro next month in London and Paris. One worries about the financial implications of such an extravaganza in these difficult times. If the intended events are meant to ‘project’ this Unesco-listed world heritage site and to attract international cooperation and financial assistance for its preservation, then it is imperative that the provincial and federal governments also convince the international community of their resolve to protect Mohenjo-Daro; not just with hollow words, but with concrete and concerted efforts.

Unfortunately, save Unesco’s frantic efforts to salvage the rain-wrecked site, there is little on the ground to reflect governmental resolve or corresponding urgency. Indeed, it is painful to see Mohenjo-Daro — a metropolis of the 5,000-year-old Indus Valley Civilisation — in a pitiable state, beset with a host of threats, both natural and anthropocentric. It is grappling with two mortal dangers: waterlogging and salinity. A fast-changing climate is a new entrant to this list of menaces, particularly in the wake of last year’s monsoons, which lashed it with a record-breaking 1,400 millimetres of rain. Luckily, the devastating rains affected its outer protective layers, leaving the main structure intact, though much sapped.

Behind the site’s miraculous survival lies its own ancient drainage and water management system, which saved its precincts from complete inundation even as the adjacent city of Larkana was drowning in four feet of water. Considering the official neglect and the perennial dearth of financial, human, and technical resources, it is a miracle that Mohenjo-Daro has outlived a 1964 forecast made by the conservationist H.J. Plenderleith: “If nothing is done to preserve them, all the excavations will crumble in the next 20 to 30 years.”

But how long will Mohenjo-Daro continue to hold on, given the worsening climatic conditions and the missing measures required to save it? Thankfully, Unesco experts, along with local academia and volunteers, have recently come up with a two-pronged strategy comprising a three-year ‘rehabilitation plan’ and an urgent four-month ‘stabilisation work’ project. Let’s see if the culture department doubles down on its efforts to finish the stabilisation work well before the onset of the 2023 monsoon, which may bring more floo­ding, or again fall into characteristic complace­n­­cy, leaving the city to fend for itself until the next disaster. The fear of official complacency arises in the mind when one looks at the rueful annals of the efforts made to preserve Mohenjo-Daro.

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Mohenjo-Daro faced a lower threat to its existence at the time of its excavation in 1922, as the water table was at the time around five metres below the ground level. This water table began to rise after the construction of the Sukkur Barrage and its tributaries in the 1930s. Instead of finding a lasting solution to waterlogging, the federal government conveniently decided to ban further excavation on the site. Finally, in 1973, a ‘master plan’ was devised with the help of Unesco to combat waterlogging and salinity. Yet, little progress was made on the ground.

The government showed some action after Mohenjo-Daro was declared a Unesco World Heritage Site in 1980, and under a multistage rehabilitation plan, several tube wells and piezometers were installed in the periphery of Mohenjo-Daro to reduce and measure the groundwater. However, this project also failed to produce the desired results. Consequently, the 1973 Unesco master plan was again revised in 2006, but the exercise, too, proved a damp squib. Mohenjo-Daro is today literally ‘sinking’ as the groundwater swells up, reaching just 1.5m below the surface in summer. The department does not seem too perturbed: on a recent visit, a Unesco team found that only one out of 39 piezometers was functional.

To be fair, preserving Mohenjo-Daro and other antiquities was the responsibility of the federal government until 2010 when the antiquities were devolved to the provinces as a result of the 18th Amendment. The government failed to protect the ancient heritage, probably because it was pursuing a state policy that aimed at promoting an ‘Islamic identity’ rather than recognising the multi-ethno-cultural composition of the state.

This misguided policy had carried on even after it led in some ways to the dismemberment of the country in 1971, albeit in a more nuanced manner. Thus, Article 28 of the 1973 Constitution merely concedes the fundamental right of a section of citizens having a distinct language, script or culture “to preserve and promote the same”, but it does not saddle the state with a ‘duty’ to protect the culture and its constituents. On the contrary, Article 49 of the Indian constitution categorically places the state under a compelling “duty” to “protect every monument, or place, or object of artistic or historical interest”.

However, statutory protection has been accorded to culture and antiquities, but like the federal government, the provincial government, too, has paid little heed to its statutory responsibilities. A case in point is Shikarpur — a 500-year-old city. It once boasted 1,163 heritage sites ‘protected’ under the law. Among them were the exotic havelis (mansions), which proudly displayed their sublime architecture and unique decorations — “the carved doors, colonnaded porticos, timber-carved screens, figurative, floral and geometric motifs, iconographic representations”, and so on. Much of that heritage has been demolished, thanks to the timber/ furniture mafia, local influentials, and a collusive bureaucracy.

Shikarpur can be used as an apt metaphor for much of the decaying heritage in Sindh, if not the country. In fact, most of the 4,000-odd archaeological sites lie in dire straits while the culture department remains happily engaged in holding expensive festivities and melas in the name of cultural promotion. Disappointed, I have filed constitutional petitions to save some of these precious relics.

It’s time we — civil society, academia, media, and lovers of art and culture — came out in full force to save Mohenjo-Daro and the hundreds of other cultural monuments that preserve our social, cultural and political history, besides allowing us to benefit from an untapped multibillion-dollar global tourist industry.

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