

**Statement by H.E. Mr. Vinod Khanna, Minister of State for External Affairs
on Agenda Item 42: Follow-up to the United Nations Year of Cultural
Heritage at the 58th Session of the UN General Assembly on
October 31, 2003**

Mr. President,

We thank the Director General of the United Nations Economic, Social and Cultural Organization for the overview he has provided on activities undertaken during the past two years to protect cultural heritage. The declaration of 2002 as the UN Year for Cultural Heritage attests to the importance which the international community has attached to this matter. There is, in our view, a continuing need to give priority to programmes, activities and projects for the protection of cultural heritage.

Mr. President,

It has been said that cultural heritage represents the historical record and understanding of the entire spirit of a people in terms of its values, actions, works, institutions, monuments and sites. The record of our history shows that India has always been a meeting place of different cultures. The Indic civilization is a result of several cultural fusions. It encompasses the philosophic tenets of both idealism and materialism, of religion and secularism, of quest for its own identity and a search for integrative globalisation. Pluralism, tolerance and respect for all religious, linguistic and cultural manifestations define our values. The spirit of our people and their faith in the fundamental unity of all mankind is encapsulated in the Sanskrit phrase "Vasudhaiva Kutumbkam" which means the world is one family.

We share much of this cultural heritage with rest of the world. The values of liberal and participative democracy and of rule of law belong to all of us. The commonality in our values has allowed for the codification of international instruments on human rights. To protect our cultural heritage is to also protect our common values. We need to do so particularly from the threat posed by those who seek to impose political ideology by murdering and terrorising innocent civilians. The forces of terrorism deny the existence of a common thread of humanity and seek to destroy the cultural heritage of peaceful co-existence.

The preservation of our values also requires the preservation of the tangible forms of our cultural heritage. We are proud in India to be the inheritors of monuments and sites which attest to the achievements of our forefathers since the early dawn of civilisation. There were, till last year, 23 Indian sites on the World Heritage List. We are happy that four months ago, another Indian site, the rock shelters of Bhimbetka, was added to this list. These five clusters of natural rock shelters display paintings which date from the Mesolithic period right through to the Historical period. We are committed to the preservation of these expressions of our cultural heritage and continue to take new initiatives. In February this year, Prime Minister Vajpayee launched the National Mission for Manuscripts. It is estimated that there are over 50 million manuscripts in India. The objective of the Mission is to document and catalog Indian manuscripts, to facilitate their conservation and preservation and to also promote ready access to them through publication, both in book and electronic form. We also plan to build a National Manuscripts Library.

Mr. President,

A key reason for discussing tangible cultural heritage in a multilateral setting is the need for international cooperation to assist in efforts for its preservation. To value our common humanity is to value also the various tangible expressions of cultural achievement which exist in different parts of the world. This value is expressed through a willingness to assist developing countries to build their own capacities for safeguarding their cultural heritage.

Mr. President,

We are happy to have been able to share our know-how on conservation and preservation with others. We are proud of India's role in the restoration of the Angkor Wat. During the visit of Prime Minister Vajpayee to Cambodia last April, we also agreed to participate in the restoration of Ta Prom, another magnificent temple complex in the Angkor Park area. Through this participation, we recognise our common South Asian and South-East Asian cultural heritage.

Mr. President,

We also believe that multilateral cooperation is necessary to preserve the expression of cultural heritage which is found in traditional knowledge. A seminar on the protection of traditional knowledge was held in New Delhi last year. The conclusions of this seminar underline the need to develop an internationally agreed instrument which recognises protection of traditional knowledge at the national level to prevent misappropriation and to ensure that national-level benefit sharing mechanisms and laws are respected world wide. The conventional forms of Intellectual Property Rights are, in our view, inadequate and need to be developed further if we are to provide protection to these manifestations of cultural heritage. We have, along with some other developing countries, made a submission in this regard to the TRIPS Council.

Mr. President,

The consideration by the UN General Assembly of issues which come within the mandate of specialised agencies and other multilateral organisations is useful. It allows us, without getting into details, to come to a common and holistic understanding of the various aspects of such issues. This debate has also allowed us to recognise the important role which UNESCO plays in the preservation of cultural heritage and we would like to use this opportunity to further encourage them in their efforts.

Thank you, Mr. President.

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