Of old and magnificent: Youth’s involvement essential in heritage preservation, says Bokova

Realising the need for passing on the rich knowledge of cultural heritage to the youth, UNESCO is currently working on integrating intangible cultural heritage into the curricula, said a press release.

The project helps link the cultural practices of the tradition bearers and practitioners with the formal school system, besides supporting the education ministry establish a database of cultural assets.

In this connection, UNESCO Director General Irina Bokova during her two-day stay in Pakistan visited Taxila and Lok Virsa in Islamabad on Friday.

“Cultural diversity of Pakistan is the foundation of inclusive citizenship showing that there is no such thing as “pure” culture in the world”

Unesco Director General Irina Bokova

During the guided tour of the museum, she inquired about the sculptures and other objects dating back to the Gandhara period.

“People of Pakistan must be proud of its heritage,” Bokova said. “Taxila is a unique site showing so many layers of civilizations, from prehistoric heritage to Greeks to Buddhist and Islamic culture. This is a wellspring of creativity, an open book for tolerance, mutual understanding and dialogue, both within the country and abroad.”

Later she also visited the Sirkap site.
Talking about the tourism potential of the site, she said that it can attract national and international visitors.

Appreciating the efforts of the governments in the restoration and preservation of historical artefacts, she emphasised the involvement of youth in this important work.

To address the issue of bio-deterioration at the sites of Sirkap and Sirsukh, Bhirmound, Dharmarajika and Giri, UNESCO is helping the Punjab Department of Archaeology by training its staff on modern conservation techniques.

“The cultural richness and diversity of Pakistan is the foundation of inclusive citizenship. It shows that there is no such thing as “pure” culture in the world. Cultures interact, cultures influence and talk to each other, like the Buddha with the Greek hairdo I saw in the museum. Preserving and promoting this heritage will give people the strength and confidence to promote peace and dialogue,” said Bokova.

Taxila is one of the six world heritage sites of Pakistan. The museum has a covered area of 60,000 square feet exhibiting nine halls or galleries.

During her visit to the National Institute of Folk and Traditional Heritage or Lok Virsa at Shakarparian, a cultural show was presented. Artists from the Pakistan National Council of the Arts presented folk and traditional dances and songs.

Bokova also took a round of National Museum of Ethnology. She was very impressed with the cultural dioramas in the museum, depicting the diversity of Pakistani culture and lifestyles.

She took keen interest in the display of “Truck Art” “hall of ballads and romances” presenting four epic love stories — ‘Heer Ranjha’ from Punjab, ‘Adam Khan Durkhane’ from Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, ‘Dhola Maro’ from Sindh and ‘Hani Shah Mureed’ from Balochistan.

The UNESCO head lauded the efforts of Lok Virsa management in documenting and preserving the rich cultural heritage of Pakistan.

Preserving Culture

The director general of UNESCO, Irina Bokova, has been visiting Pakistan and during her two-day visit, she had much to say, all of it worth listening to. Pakistan is a vast storehouse of cultural artefacts and buildings stretching back millennia. We are custodians of a historical legacy that belongs to the rest of the world and not only to Pakistan. Preserving the many threads that make up our diverse culture is a challenge, in part because it can be expensive and money is short, but there is also a need to instill a sense of awareness and ownership in the minds of the young — which is where UNESCO comes in. It is working to integrate the ‘intangibles’ of cultural heritage into the curriculum and is supporting the education ministry in the establishment of a database of cultural assets.

The Lok Virsa complex in Islamabad is the national hub of cultural preservation and the continuity of customs, but there are other places in cities around the country that serve as regional centres for preservation and conservation. Almost every medium or large-sized city has a museum, many of them in a state of dilapidation. All of them have potential as tourist destinations, both foreign and international, and as countries such as Egypt, Greece and Turkey have all found, there is revenue to be earned by the marketing of culture and heritage. Sites such as Moenjo Daro and Derawar Fort could see real benefit from marketing their attractions. Hunza in Gilgit-Baltistan has for many years traded on its attraction as a cultural tourism hotspot.

The preservation of culture as an intangible value may seem a little abstract, far removed from the bricks-and-mortar, but through creating such awareness comes an appreciation of diversity and the value of knowledge and tolerance — all of which have a place in the minds of the young. Dance, music, calligraphy, pottery and even truck art, all have a niche, and oral traditions are a vital part of the cultural landscape. The UNESCO project will hopefully plant seeds in young minds that will grow into a desire to protect and preserve our cultural diversity.

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