Darned Measures for National Treasures?

Lamentations surrounding the auctioning in New York of the Mahatma's belongings, and what it says about India's laid-back attitude towards its national treasures.

By AJAY VISHWANATHAN

I have always succumbed to nostalgia. I find it a little strange that, although it comes tinged with sadness, it has such an attraction. My fixation with nostalgia has vastly improved since the days when I used to preserve stubs of movie tickets to lock up all my memories of those glorious times spent with loved ones. Several weeks ago, my preoccupation with reminiscence was kindled again—in a different way—and I wished I had at least $42,000 to spend to buy a piece of history.

Not for myself, but for my country. I read that the Mahatma's—*our* Mahatma's—belongings were up for sale in early March this year in New York. No, I didn't go all sappy with nostalgia. I was angry, disturbed. There were so many questions that stormed my mind like jostling bees in a glass jar.

My wallet was wistful yet helpless, but what was the moneyed Indian government doing about the affair? Why would they even allow the items to be auctioned? The organizers expected at least forty grand; how about our government giving them a million? *Thanks for keeping these for so many years; we will take them from here.*

How could the classic spectacles that Gandhiji wore look more appealing in a private collector's ballroom or vault than as a national treasure in a respected Indian museum? Shouldn't India's masses be afforded the opportunity to see them and visualize them on Mahatma's face? They should be accessible to all his worldly admirers, rich and poor, not just the *ooh-aahing* affluent friends of a glorified collector.

And how about the base price for the Mahatma's possessions? Did I read $42,000? You can't put a price on such rare gems of Gandhiji, but if one had to, an unseemly number like this is almost insolent.

That was a few months ago. What happened in the past few weeks was some deplorable posturing by those involved in the lead-up to the auction: initially, the Indian authorities were strangely silent, and then, a few politicians started making exaggerated remarks and suggestions, and Gandhiji's kin entered the scene. Then came a toothless — and quite hilarious — local high court stay order on the auction, and

the global press joined in the chaos. The Atlanta-based Gandhi Foundation of USA also wrote a letter to India's Prime Minister asking for his intervention.

The owner of all the items, a filmmaker and peace activist named James Otis, unexpectedly stepped out of the woodwork and proposed an outlandish deal to the Indian government: increase the percentage of India's GDP that is going to the poor from 1 percent to 5 percent in return for the Mahatma's items; the Indian government, of course, refused. A few hours before the bidding started, there was more drama: the owner suffered a change of heart, but his agent was asked to leave the premises by the Antiquorum auction house; the bidding proceeded anyway and lasted for a frenetic four minutes. The items were sold for $1.8 million. And the person who won the bid — and I had a strong inkling about this — was the limelight-hungry "King of Good Times," Vijay Mallya.

Almost five years ago, Mallya won Tipu Sultan's sword after bidding Rs. 1.5 crore (about $290,000) for it at a London auction. He turned out to be the "mystery buyer" in what seemed like a political move, calling himself the "true *Kannadiga*" and posing in a turban while brandishing the famed sword in cheesy photo-ops.

This time round, I was struck by the somber irony of our Bapu's belongings being 'saved' by a flamboyant liquor baron. And then, the Mallya victory at New York didn't exactly halt the show. In an unrestrained show of politics, the Indian government, through Union culture minister Ambika Soni, announced to the whole world that Mallya was their man who had been sent to win back the trophies. Mallya denied it. If it is true it is disgusting. Since when has India started resorting to sending rich businessmen to close the country's international deals? If it is not true, I am equally hurt, but not entirely surprised by the Indian government's impotency.

There are other notable Indian treasures around the world that we hardly hear the government mention. Have they given up on recovering them? Or are these not worth the millions of dollars that it will cost to retrieve them? There is the Peacock Throne that is evidently lying in Iran; the Kohinoor that is now among Britain's prized jewels; the Regent that has traveled from Golconda (where it was discovered as a massive 410-carat diamond on the banks of the Krishna river) to an English prime minister to Napoleon Bonaparte, and is now on display at the Louvre, to name a few.

Look at the example of the one of the most valued treasures of the ancient world, the Elgin marbles (marble sculptures stripped from the Temple of Athena, Greece, in the early 1800s), which are lying in various parts of the world: Greece has been putting enormous pressure on countries like Britain and Italy to return them. After 13 years of negotiations, in a gesture of goodwill, a 2,500-year-old section of marble was presented last year to the Greek government by Italy's president, Giorgio Napolitano.

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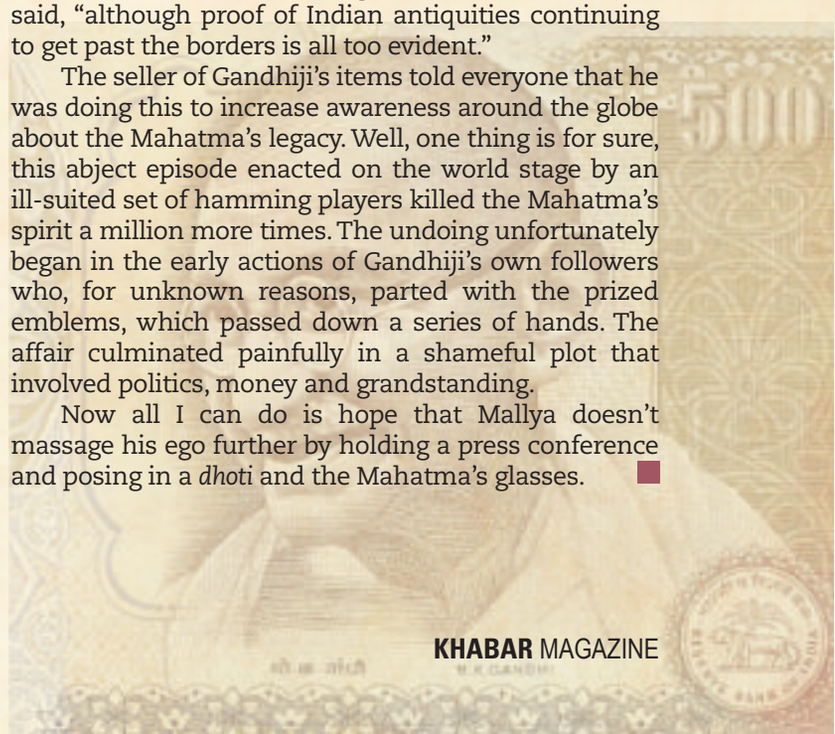
A friend remarked to me, probably to make me feel better, "It is good that these treasures are housed on foreign soil. Why would you want them back in India? So that they can be ravaged, ill-treated and mishandled?" He didn't convince me but left me pondering for a while.

To continue my rants, isn't it a little ironic that we have these Indian Premier League (IPL) cricket clubs spending millions to buy foreign players when the government doesn't even bother buying back our own heritage from strangers? It is heartbreaking to note that they have always been callous in handling our treasures. They bungled the recovery of Rabindranath Tagore's Nobel gold medal stolen from a museum in Santiniketan. Although the Nobel Foundation replaced the medal with a replica, the original—the first won by an Indian, in 1913—has been declared lost forever. The jousting spectacle that followed involving the insurance company and the museum authorities, who were claiming crores in damages, was pathetic.

We don't even have an inventory of treasures lost by the country. Our neighbor, Nepal, has published books like the *Stolen Images of Nepal* and *The Gods Are Leaving Nepal*, which document its lost heritage in an effort to discourage people from buying or seeking thieved works. The Indian newspaper *The Hindu* noted that in 1999, Interpol's first CD listing stolen heritage showed no entries from India. "Listings are still unavailable," it said, "although proof of Indian antiquities continuing to get past the borders is all too evident."

The seller of Gandhiji's items told everyone that he was doing this to increase awareness around the globe about the Mahatma's legacy. Well, one thing is for sure, this abject episode enacted on the world stage by an ill-suited set of hamming players killed the Mahatma's spirit a million more times. The undoing unfortunately began in the early actions of Gandhiji's own followers who, for unknown reasons, parted with the prized emblems, which passed down a series of hands. The affair culminated painfully in a shameful plot that involved politics, money and grandstanding.

Now all I can do is hope that Mallya doesn't massage his ego further by holding a press conference and posing in a *dhoti* and the Mahatma's glasses.