

# NEPAL

## Overview of Heritage at Risk in Nepal: Changing Perception and Approaches

### Introduction – Nepal in transition

Nepal is in transition. After the second people's movement in 2006 the monarchy was abolished and the country was proclaimed a republic. In the 2008 elections, the Maoist Party of Nepal that had led a decade-long insurgency was elected into government. Peacebuilding began by dissolving the People's Liberation Army and reinstating the soldiers back into society. The process of writing the new constitution was a contentious process. Governments changed. It was however possible to incorporate issues of cultural rights and cultural diversity into the new draft Constitution. After the earthquake struck on 25 April 2015, the draft Constitution was proclaimed on 20 September 2015 under duress. This resulted in fierce protests by the opposing political parties. The new Constitution has however become the basis for post-disaster recovery as well as for the reorganisation of government in a decentralised system. The federal states as well as many of the newly established local governments are promoting infrastructure development with inadequate planning. Roads are being built everywhere and many protected areas are becoming vulnerable to environmental degradation, as well as to inappropriate tourism.

### The 2015 Earthquake – devastation and recovery

The 7.8 magnitude Gorkha Earthquake struck central Nepal on 25 April 2015. "As a result of the earthquake, 8,790 people died and more than 22,300 people were injured. Assessments showed that at least 498,852 private houses and 2,656 government buildings were destroyed. Another 256,697 private houses and 3,622 government buildings were partially damaged. In addition, 19,000 classrooms were destroyed and 11,000 damaged".<sup>1</sup> "According to the assessment, the earthquake affected a total of 691 buildings of historic value in 16 districts. Of these buildings, 131 were fully destroyed and 560 were damaged".<sup>2</sup> Beyond the built heritage, the earthquake affected museums and libraries as well as intangible heritage, particularly rituals linked to the monuments and urban spaces now destroyed. The initial response phase included preparations for the onslaught of the monsoon rains. Within two months a donor conference was arranged and the assessment was that the cost of recovery and reconstruction added up to be \$205,668,646.<sup>3</sup>

The resilience of the local communities could be seen by their tenacity to continue carrying out festivals and rituals, even under the pressure of trauma and devastation. Many temples that were destroyed were either reinstated with the idol of the deity under a temporary shelter or the idol was made accessible at a different location. Particularly important was the continuation



Fig. 1a: Living Goddess Kumari being carried from her house to the palanquin to be brought to a ritual site (© ICOMOS Nepal/Kai Weise)



Fig. 1b: Chariots being prepared for Indra Jatra, the main chariot festival of Kathmandu, where three chariots are pulled around the city (© ICOMOS Nepal/Kai Weise)



Fig. 2a: Carpenter working on a timber post for the reconstruction of Kathamandap, with the Kal-Bhairab statue in the background (© ICOMOS Nepal/Kai Weise)



Fig. 2b: Woman working on the wood carving of a decorative timber element, a recent development of training women for such crafts (© ICOMOS Nepal/Anie Joshi)

of festivals, such as Indra Jatra in Kathmandu (Figs. 1a and 1b). The chariot festival of Rato Machhendranath celebrates a special event that recurs every twelve years when the chariot is pulled all the way from the village of Bungamati to the city of Patan. The temple housing the deity of Rato Machhendranath in Bungamati was totally destroyed. However, after several months delay the chariot festival was carried out and rituals were fulfilled. Since the earthquake, such festivals seem to be getting a resurgence of participants and general interest.

Over the past four and a half years many monuments have been rebuilt. Rehabilitation Guidelines<sup>4</sup> were prepared and adopted by the government; however, procedures were never agreed upon. The main conflict arose in respect to the Public Procurement Act which required the government to tender out projects, which was done without controlling whether the bidding contractors had the knowledge and skills required for the restoration of historic monuments. This often led to traditional craftspeople being side-lined, while shoddy work was carried out by unskilled workers. A further issue that was raised was the fact that there was inadequate supervision of these projects.

### Adopting the 2015 Constitution – decentralisation and diversity

The positive momentum continued through the rainy season between June and September. However, the government of Nepal was in transition from a constitutional monarchy to a federal republic. For post-disaster recovery of the country, a clear gov-

ernance system was required and so the draft Constitution was promulgated on 20 September 2015. This led to protests, particularly with the communities living in the south of the country, and a blockade was set up closing the access road from India from where most relief goods would have been trucked in.

The new Constitution of Nepal does however provide a means for ensuring cultural diversity. It states clearly that Nepal is a secular state that protects and promotes “social and cultural solidarity, tolerance and harmony, and unity in diversity by recognizing the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious, multi-cultural and diverse regional characteristics”.<sup>5</sup> This can be achieved through the central government ensuring unity and the basic rights of the people and allowing diversity to be the cornerstone of the federal system. It allows for communities, through local government, to safeguard their heritage.

The Ancient Monument Preservation Act of 1956 gives the Department of Archaeology the overall authority for the protection and restoration of tangible cultural heritage. The change to the federal system as well as changes to the local government structure by creating urban and rural municipalities through clubbing together Village Development Committees was a cause for initial confusion. Furthermore, a National Reconstruction Authority was established to carry out post-disaster recovery; however overlapping responsibilities with the main government departments have caused further confusion. Within these circumstances, there have nonetheless been some good examples of community initiatives and certain specific arrangements enabling monuments to be restored in an exemplary manner.



Fig. 3: The Kali Gandaki River Valley, the site of one of the main routes that crosses the Himalayas and is earmarked as a tentative sector of the Silk Road (© ICOMOS Nepal/Kai Weise)

### Recovering from the 2015 Gorkha Earthquake – beyond reconstruction

Over the past four and a half years the reconstruction of numerous monuments has been carried out. This has been done through various processes and under various authorities, making it difficult to carry out audits on quality and authenticity. Particularly complicated has been the relationship between the National Reconstruction Authority, the Department of Archaeology and the municipal authorities. Projects have been implemented by each of these authorities and awarded to contractors. Other projects have been carried out by international agencies using different formats, each proving to lead to different outcomes. Furthermore, there are local NGOs using foreign funding. There are also local committees being set up that work on the basis of labour contracts with local artisans.

The completed projects have not been assessed and the ongoing projects lack supervision. Many of the projects have been carried out with insufficient or no research at all. There is therefore little information on why monuments that had survived the even larger 1934 earthquake were damaged or even collapsed. This has possibly been the greatest loss, since valuable knowledge could have been gained from such research and this would have also ensured the reconstruction to be carried out in the most appropriate manner. This is further linked to the lack of knowledge of the traditional structure and its performance during the earthquake. Many details that traditional artisans know have been ignored by those preparing reconstruction drawings.

In the Kathmandu Valley, an interesting comparison can be made between the three main historic cities. In Bhaktapur, the local government together with the community have carried out most of the reconstruction on their own, since they have their own traditional artisans. They even rejected a multi-million-dollar German project in order not to be forced to follow the prescribed procedures. In Patan, most of the reconstruction is being carried out by an NGO with foreign funding and with little involvement of the municipality or the community. In Kathmandu, there has been a lack of clarity and in many cases local activism has defined the procedures. This has allowed for certain monuments to be restored in an exemplary manner using traditional artisans and materials such as with Kasthamandap (Figs. 2a and 2b). Issues have however also arisen where community groups have protested against Japanese and even the direct involvement of UNESCO in the restoration of sacred temples.

### Impact of connectivity – modern Silk Roads

The Trans-Himalayan corridors have always been the drivers of economic and cultural interaction and will continue taking on this role in the future. The development of infrastructure is also inevitable as already seen with the road along the Kali Gandaki as well as in Rasuwagadhi. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) plan of building the Trans-Himalayan railway is being pursued. Such massive infrastructure projects are threats to the ancient cultures that developed along these routes.



Fig. 4a: Professor Simpson from Sterling University in Scotland taking a wood sample for testing and dating while the traditional artisan and head carpenter Laxmi Bhakta Rajchal looks on (© ICOMOS Nepal/Anie Joshi)

The initiative to inscribe the Silk Road on the World Heritage List was promoted by UNESCO through the establishment of an action plan prepared in 2006 during a meeting in Samarkand. This has required a change in approach and methodology of defining, inscribing and managing such enormous linear trans-boundary heritage chains. China soon took the lead by establishing the Secretariat of the Coordination Committee in Xian. In the meantime, the revitalisation of the Silk Road under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was presented by Xi Jinping in 2013. It might be necessary to link the two initiatives to ensure that conflicts don't arise.

In Nepal three Trans-Himalayan corridors that link the Tibetan plateau with the Gangetic plains have been identified. These would be the route along the Karnali to Mount Kailash, the Kali Gandaki route (Fig. 3) through Mustang, and the route through Kathmandu to the Kerung or Kuti passes. The heritage sites along these routes need to be inventoried and safeguarded.

### Conclusion – the lessons

Heritage conservation is greatly affected by natural disasters as well as political uncertainties. Over the past four years Nepal has had to deal with both these circumstances. There hasn't been any proper assessment of this situation other than the heated discus-

sions on Kathmandu Valley World Heritage property. Initially the argument not to put Kathmandu Valley on the danger list was that once the earthquake had caused the damage, the property was not in danger any more unless the rehabilitation process was not managed properly, and this could only be assessed after a year or two. Even after the fourth World Heritage Committee session, Kathmandu Valley has not been put on the danger list and soon it will not make any sense, unless there is definite loss of Outstanding Universal Value. This would need to be specifically assessed.

There are certain specific lessons that need to be learned from this period of devastation and uncertainty. Most of the damages caused to monuments were due to lack of maintenance as well as to inappropriate interventions in the past. Very often past interventions focused on strengthening the structure, or making certain parts more rigid, with the use of concrete or steel, which was the very cause of collapse. This again proves how little we understand of the traditional structures and the need for further research. Along with this, the total lack of respect for traditional artisans and a governance system that doesn't allow them to work unless they are registered as standard contractors makes it difficult to work on conservation.

The main lesson that has been learned from the destruction that the earthquake caused and the chaotic circumstances created by



Fig. 4b: Traditional artisan and head carpenter Laxmi Bhakta Rajchal trying out a resistograph, assisted by Project Manager and ICOMOS Nepal Secretary Manindra Shrestha (© ICOMOS Nepal/Anie Joshi)

political upheaval is that conservation is not about reconstruction. Conservation requires the continuity of traditional knowledge and skills, which allows for monuments to be maintained and when

necessary restored (Figs. 4a and 4b). Where it is possible to ensure this continuity, science must take a back seat and be there to assist and facilitate and, if necessary, bridge knowledge gaps.

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#### References

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Government of Nepal 2015c. Rehabilitation Guidelines 2072, Department of Archaeology, Government of Nepal  
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#### Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Government of Nepal 2016: 1.
- <sup>2</sup> Government of Nepal 2015b: 67.
- <sup>3</sup> Government of Nepal 2015: 72.
- <sup>4</sup> Government of Nepal 2015c.
- <sup>5</sup> Government of Nepal 2015a: 6.