

## NEPAL

### Situation

2001 has not been an easy year for Nepal. The country has witnessed much turmoil, suffering from a royal tragedy and also from enormous political problems. It seems not only the Nepalese people but also the country's cultural heritage is suffering in these times. The monuments and the ancient sites naturally remain silent – but if they could speak the valleys and hillsides would be full of their lamentations. Every year Nepal is losing a significant portion of its incredibly rich and diverse cultural heritage. The alarming condition of the most important sites – and countless equally precious sites that are afforded far less protection – give cause for serious concern. The dismantling and scarring of historic buildings is regrettably common. Several important buildings and monuments that were not under the protection of the UNESCO World Heritage list have been dismantled, or collapsed through lack of maintenance. In their place the desire to build quickly and above all cheaply is producing a modern architecture that is ad hoc and chaotic, characterised by the poorly constructed concrete pillar buildings that are so detrimental to the fabric of the historic areas – and an increasing blot upon the beautiful Nepalese landscape.

Although these threats to the country's cultural heritage are largely confined to private property, many of the more prestigious national sites and monuments are also in danger. Uncontrolled new buildings and roads at many historic sites – even in the midst of some of the most important ancient sites – are springing up quickly. Nor are some UNESCO listed sites left untouched by such developments.

### Community and Management Approaches

Of course, there are a few notable examples of communities beginning to take an active part in the conservation of their heritage. This cultural awareness is most obvious where particular sites are used directly to generate income. But even the financial incentives of tourism cannot totally relieve the pressures on a great many monuments. Ironically these are sometimes threatened by the very attempts to save them. Many of the so-called conservation and restoration projects in Nepal are, in reality, often large-scale renovations, or complete reconstructions. These can damage or obliterate the original fabric that they set out to preserve. Perhaps this is due in part to wider international uncertainties over definitions of conservation. But greater sensitivity is undoubtedly called for. Even if the most sophisticated and cutting edge conservation techniques, pioneered in Europe and elsewhere, might not always be transferable to Nepal, a minimum care of authenticity should be expected after all the national and international efforts in the country.

While we should acknowledge that there will always be conflicting pressures between preserving the ancient and yet creating an environment suitable for modern life, greater efforts need to be made to avoid the many wrong turnings. In Kathmandu, for instance, the proliferation of slavish modern copies of ancient design in new buildings, such as hotels and shopping malls – yet in a totally different context, use and scale – is not conducive to a living, vibrant architecture. There are young architects of vision and talent in Nepal, but they are not being given the opportunity to express themselves. Instead, there is a very real danger that new urban development will come to resemble an idealised, sterile Dis-

neyland that fails to reflect the society that surrounds it. This is scarcely in harmony with the officially adopted slogan: 'Nepal, a land with living cultural heritage'. It is a tragic irony that this should be happening just as many 'genuine' examples of remaining architectural heritage are collapsing into rubble.

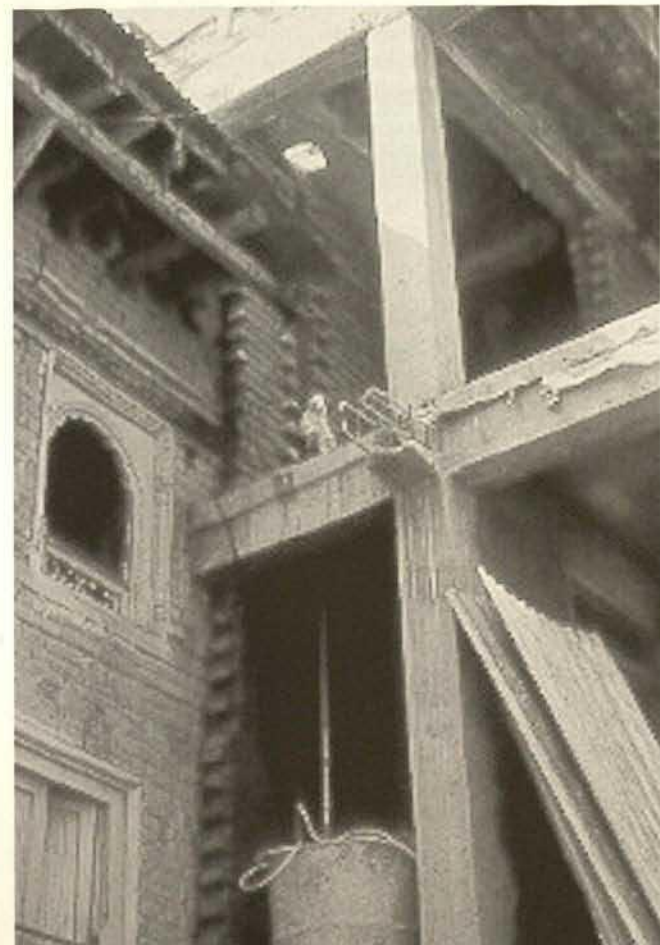
Why is it that the responsible departments and organisations are not able to change this depressing situation? A lack of financial resources and investments? This can hardly be deemed the case, given the huge amount of aid pumped into Nepal on a yearly basis. The necessary skills can still be found, labour costs remain (by Western standards) low and materials are available at a reasonable price. Under these conditions, conservation and preservation work should not be difficult to undertake. So why is this not happening on a more significant scale, and in a more sympathetic way? Consider the various strategies that have thus far sought to defend a fragile and fast-shrinking heritage. Workshops, symposiums, training initiatives, awareness campaigns – Nepal has seen many of these. But an honest evaluation of their results would have to conclude that talking has not always led to action. Rules and regulations, government legislation – there is no shortage of these. It is the implementation that is lacking. The enforcement of necessary conservation measures, often unpopular with owners, seldom takes place. At present it seems there are many higher priorities than heritage conservation.

Among the wider population, the prevailing indifference and disregard for the country's physical heritage suggests that only a minority is interested in its preservation. This can be attributed, in part, to a lack of popular awareness concerning the importance of many aspects of the country's heritage. This, in turn, stems from a failure to provide education on this subject for school children and students. Although there are some welcome education initiatives now taking place, the official support for them remains fragmented and weak. At present there is a clear shortage of 'home-grown' skills in the field of cultural heritage in Nepal – whether in teachers, lecturers or technical experts. At an academic level, there is an obvious dearth of scientific studies, inventories and documentation. Where these have been carried out, it has often been at the instigation of foreign organisations. The responsible government departments have not created a public documentation centre, or developed user-friendly systems that might enable municipalities to support the urgent tasks of surveying and documentation at a non-academic level. Rectifying this will need to be a dedicated and long-term strategy. But the time for commencing these actions must be now. Traditional buildings, temples and monuments are disappearing daily. The living witnesses of the country's past heritage are also dying out. And the absence of documentation makes it almost impossible to help preserve the immeasurable value of both – for the next generation of Nepalese, as well as the world at large.

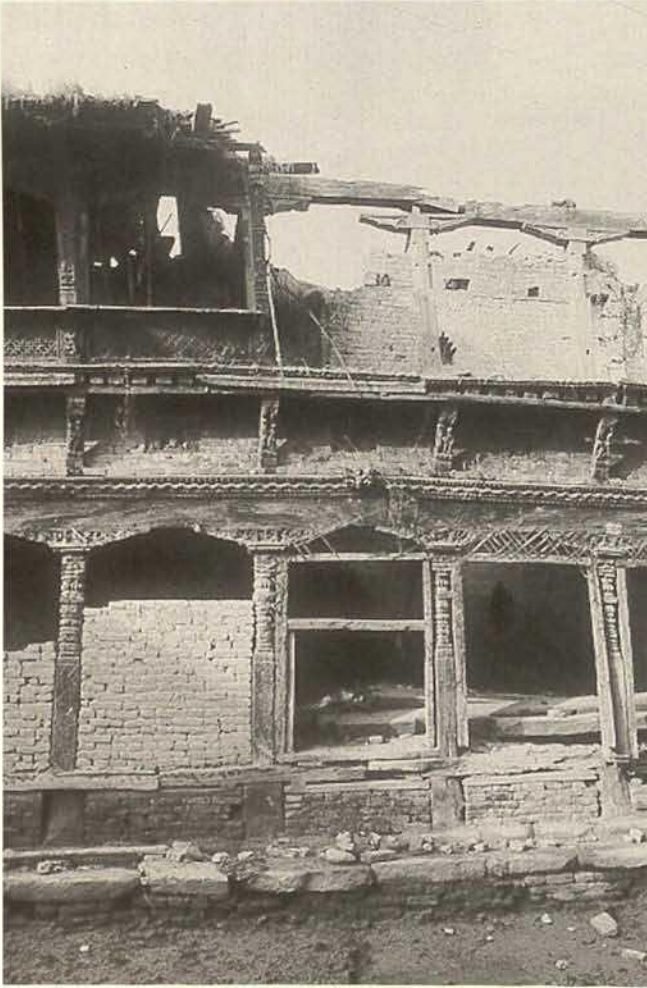
### Foreign Aid Organisations

Any examination of the mixed success of heritage conservation initiatives in Nepal should also consider the role of foreign organisations. Without their huge injection of development aid – financial and technical – there would be even less of the country's heritage to enjoy in 2001. Whether their involvement will lead to a sustainable impetus for heritage conservation within the country itself is less certain. There is still a clear lack of co-operation and









co-ordination between the Nepalese area of responsibilities and foreign aid organisations. For example, the majority of project documents and studies are written in the English language, yet little if any provision has been made for their translation into Nepalese. In many instances foreign organisations have also been culpable of 're-inventing the wheel', ignoring the lessons learned by other projects, and replicating one another's initiatives. Too often the response to a problem in the field is to throw more money at it. Too seldom do the interested parties sit down together to consider alternative approaches. Community involvement is usually token. Is it any wonder that some Nepalis now consider foreign aid a bountiful cash cow, to be milked as heavily as possible before the udders run dry?

### Towards a Positive Future

In spite of everything, Nepal shows a few encouraging signs of a more positive approach to dealing with its heritage. There are some notable examples of valuable and effective co-operation between the Nepalese government, a donor country and the local community. Hopefully these success stories will prove sustainable, marking the way for other large-scale projects. Some municipalities are increasingly active in implementing building codes for their historic centres. There are heartening cases where illegal buildings have been dismantled, proving that the local government is beginning to view transgressions in a more serious light. It is even more pleasant to see that not only in famous tourist places are the locals starting to preserve their ancient sites. But these rare advances need to become the norm.

In conclusion, it is clear that it is high time to act. If the Nepalese really want to keep their rich cultural heritage they have to work hard for that objective, and also to fight against fatalism. Aid organisations can provide many valuable tools and resources, but it cannot be their responsibility to create an impetus for heritage conservation among the Nepalis themselves. Hopefully for the remaining heritage of Nepal, there will be a positive ending – just as there is in a fine story about a difficult and much-discussed restoration of a holy idol, which concludes with the happy sentiments of an old man from the mountains: 'Now, the gods can smile again'.

Nepalese architectural heritage in various states of decay and threatened by modern constructions