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Natural Disaster and Intangible Heritage: Beyond the Horizon

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Abstract

When 7.8-magnitude earthquake struck Nepal in 2015, many monuments, temples and houses turned into rubbles killing more than 8,000 people and injuring above 21,000. This unfortunate and tragic natural disaster brought international attention to Nepal. But in this time of despair and pain there was a sign of hope that should be acknowledged well, the spirit of community facing the disaster. This paper is about the indigenous community of Kathmandu on how they organized an important traditional festival just four months after the disaster when most the people were still living in the makeshifts, along with the smaller aftershock continuing almost everyday. In the country like Nepal with numerous intangible heritages, which is, still living is not taken seriously by the concerned authorities and mostly been neglected. It is the indigenous community who has been carrying out those heritages, as they are inseparable aspect of the social life. With this paper it tries look at the community involvement and intangible heritage of Kathmandu Valley, which is a part of my PhD research thesis.

Keywords: Natural Disaster, Intangible Heritage, Indigenous community and continuity.

Resumo

Quando um terremoto de 7,8 graus na escala Richter atingiu o Nepal em 2015, muitos monumentos, templos e casas foram transformados em escombros matando mais de 8.000 pessoas e ferindo acima de 21.000. Esta hecatombe natural, infeliz e trágica, fez recair a atenção internacional sobre o Nepal. Mas nesse momento de desespero e dor havia um sinal de esperança que deve ser reconhecido, o espírito de comunidade face ao infortúnio. Este artigo é sobre a comunidade indígena de Kathmandu e de como ela, apenas quatro meses após o desastre, organizou uma festa tradicional importante, quando a maioria das pessoas ainda estava vivendo em abrigos provisórios e a despeito das réplicas do sismo continuarem quase diariamente. Num país como o Nepal, com inúmero património imaterial, o que subsiste não é levado a sério pelas autoridades competentes e, principalmente, tem sido negligenciado. É a comunidade indígena que suporta essa herança e que a vê como parte inseparável da vida social. Com este artigo pretende-se observar o envolvimento da comunidade na salvaguarda do património imaterial da Kathmandu Valley.

Palavras-chave: desastre natural, Património Imaterial, comunidade indígena, continuidade.

Background:

Natural disaster has always been a major threat to the built heritage apart from the natural process of decay and human destructions, intervention of urbanization and globalization. Other threat to heritage due to human interventions could be controlled and prevented while with the natural disaster its effect could only be minimized or its risk could only be managed. The earthquake¹ with magnitude of 7.8 on 25th April 2015 was not an unexpected one but there had been much speculation about the major earthquake to occur pretty soon. Mostly because of the several earthquakes in the history of Nepal and one major every hundred year like earthquake of 1505, 1833 and 1934. The first recorded earthquake was of 1255 AD on which incident one third of population of Kathmandu Valley was killed including King Abhaya Malla (GON, 2015).



Picture 1 and 2: Monuments destroyed by the Earthquake of 2015. (Right © Impact Production/ Left © Shailesh Rajbhandari)

¹ Earthquake of 7.8 magnitude on 25th April 2015 at 11:56 am with epicenter in Lamjung district, located 81 km northwest of Kathmandu with a depth of 15m for one minute. Followed by several after shocks

Kathmandu Valley now being the densely populated especially due to migration from outside the Valley and the increasing number of high raised buildings and decreasing open spaces had been receiving warning signals by geologist and other experts. Due to the lack of urban planning and strict laws for the buildings there has been a haphazard growth of buildings all over the Valley. The sad part is despite the speculation, preparedness for earthquake either in terms of humanitarian crisis or Heritage, Nepal was not prepared to handle such a massive destruction and 2015 earthquake made Nepalese population face the bitter reality. Government was criticized heavily for its slow response during the time of crisis and inefficient way to handle the foreign rescue missions.

When we go back to the origin of Kathmandu Valley, which was a lake during prehistoric times, provided with excellent climate and soil for the settlement to start after the water drained out. Alluvial soil provided excellent base for Agricultural, never letting land to remain fallow (Hutt, 2010; Tiwari 2001). While, the geographical location made the Valley as a trading hub joining Tibet and India with trans-Himalayan trade route. In add to that Kathmandu Valley became melting pot of the Hinduism and Buddhism along with the animistic culture that was there before the arrival of Hinduism and Buddhism (Slusser, 1998). These cultures flourished with the trade, giving rise to the excellent craftsmen and the examples of those magnificent works can be still seen in the Valley.

Kathmandu Valley was listed in UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1979 for its outstanding universal value. Seven monument zones within the Valley are grouped as a single World Heritage Site. It was inscribed according under the criteria iii, iv and vi.², not only for its exceptional architectural typologies and

² According to Operational Guideline 2005 of UNESCO the criteria (iii), (iv) and (vi) is defined as (iii) bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared.

urban fabric but also for the unique Newar³ culture which is still alive, the syncretism of Buddhism and Hinduism which manifested in the unique art and architecture along with the legends, rituals and festivals (GON, 2007). The heritage of Nepal, which is also considered to be a living heritage where the monuments and temples still are connected with the daily social life of the people. Ancient squares and open spaces are still the place where the social interaction takes place. But the formal heritage conservation policies and actions are not in match with the traditional values of the society.

As Slusser mentions of the life of the people in the Valley, its monuments and practices as:

“The tangible ancestral monuments of the Valley-temples and shrines, scared sites and images- are by no means disconnected “historic” monuments. They function vigorously in contemporary Nepali Culture. Through legend and folklore the names of rulers whose dynasties have been extinct for a thousand years or more remain vividly alive. If historically garbled. Outstanding tantric practitioners and the remarkable deeds that own them fame live on in legend as if such persons had but recently crossed the stage of the Valley history. The great body of primary institutions that govern contemporary Nepalese life – religious, social and often political are the lineal descendants of those that governed Valley society of past. Indeed it is perhaps the total merging of the past and present that give to the Kathmandu Valley the charm or perhaps more properly mystique – that captivates most outsiders who make their way within.” (Slusser, 1998; p.4)

Festivals are and always have been a part of social life in Kathmandu Valley and they are linked with the built heritage. Most of them involve the gods, and local

(iv) be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history.

(vi) be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance.

³ Newar are the people who are indigenous people of Kathmandu Valley and the language they speak is called Newari.

people rejoice in participating in these romantic interactions with them. These festivals bring out the ancient Kathmandu alive in 21st Century (Tiwari, 2013). Tiwari further explains the relation of festival, people and place as *“Festival of the towns of Kathmandu Valley are fascinating deception of this romantic perspective. Resident play-act and animate gods as if their great-grandfathers has seen them walking the streets only a few decade ago.”*

Unique way of Continuation

Indigenous people of Kathmandu Valley i.e. Newars have a unique way of taking care of their tangible and intangible heritage. This is through the age-old tradition that has been in existence since 5th Century called Guthi. Guthi is derived from Sanskrit word “Gosthi” which means society or association. For the Newars “Guthi” is a fundamental unit of social organization based on caste, kinship or territory and are organic part of the society (Toffin, 2008) while, for the non-Newars the system is just a means to finance religious and charitable institutions or endowment itself (Regmi, 1968). Most of the religious and social functions are carried out within the Newar society is carried out through the Guthi System (Slusser, 1998). Every rituals, festivals, events, temples and monuments have their own Guthi based on the caste and locality. These Guthi are responsible for maintenance and upkeep of the temples and monuments as well as social functions and everyday rituals. These Guthi are passed on from the father to the sons from generation after generation and only the male member of the family actively takes part in those functions of Guthi. While the female members help the male members for preparations and rituals but mostly from behind.

These Guthi also have endowments in form of land, which helped for the steady flow of funds for the maintenance, management of the monuments, continuation of rituals and organization of the festivals. When the temples are built or festivals and rituals are initiated, endowments are made for the long-term continuation. Its

not only kings or Royals who made the endowment and built temples but also by the ordinary people (Regmi, 1968). Guthi always has religious value along with fulfilling numerous social purposes. There were different types of Guthi depending on the types of purpose they were assigned as small as for lighting oil lamp in the temples to the Guthi for the large purpose as organizing the festival of the city (known as *Dea Jatra*⁴). Guthi endowment was made because people believed they would receive good fortune until next seven generation and people received the high social status in the society. Apart from religious and social purpose during the Malla period the Guthi land were exempt from taxes and also during the time of political turmoil, Guthi endowment could not be confiscated as it was considered to be a great sin for such act (ibdi).

So due to the various reasons political, religious or social beliefs there were numerous Guthis during the course of time. Numerous of them are still functional while some became obsolete with passage of time. Some became extinct due to the loss of endowment and indifference of the ruling house. With the change in the ruling class the indigenous heritage was never given much priority especially the intangible heritage like Guthi system (Regmi, 1968). In contrary the Guthi lands were taken over by the Government to build the governments buildings and even for the private interest of the ruling during the Monarchy. Changes in the social structure have been also a major role in loss of Guthi. Nationalization of all Guthi in 1964 under Guthi Organization was a big blow to community managed Guthi which was into top-down led bureaucratic organization. Now people are more drawn to the salaried work or new profession then the traditional occupation work of agricultural, craftsmen, priests and so on given by their caste. These social changes have provided less time for the people for the community. In add to that changes in traditional urban fabric has also fueled towards the disintegration of the Guthi. People moving out of the traditional space outside the

⁴ Apart from the numerous festivals every city and villages have their own festival major festival that is the identity of the place and known as Dea Jatra or Mu jatra.

city for the houses of modern facility, more space and newer lifestyle are loosing the bond of Guthi which has also led to abandoned the Guthi (Toffin, 2008).

In spite of many changes and the difficulties there are still numerous functional Guthis. Most of the festivals within the Valley are being organized by the Guthi and also the temples are still being taken by them. Guthis are still integral part of the traditional Newar society where people work for the mutual purpose. This could be proved by the festival I took for my PhD research and which is also being discussed in this paper. Among the numerous festivals, the festival that is being considered in this paper is Yenya Punhi Festival with is the major festival of Kathmandu city.

Yenya Punhi Festival after the Earthquake

As mentioned in the previous section the year 2015 has not been a good year for Nepal and its people. The year will be remembered for the years to come with pain and sorrow. Most of the monuments were damaged some even became flattened to grounds. As every Nepalese I was quite devastated to see the giant monuments coming to grounds. But a researcher inside of me urged the need to document how the intangibility continued despite the tangibility has crumbled and handicapped by the infrastructure. So here I am trying to look at how the Yenya Punhi festival of 2015 was carried out in spite of chaos and still most of the people were still living in make shift. The Earthquake took place in 25th April 2015 and the festival was started in September 2015. Between the period of these four-month there were numerous aftershocks and again one big quake of 7.2 on May 23rd. So the resilient nature that the people of Valley had shown is worth documenting and can be a testimony for the spirit of heritage conservation. This writing is based on my PhD research and for this information I was in constantly following the news and developments in Nepal after the earthquake. Also, was in constant touch with the Guthi members, journalists, photojournalists, Guthi

members, leaders of Guthi members and also bloggers were contacted and followed for the information and the people working in the heritage in Kathmandu. For this I tried to best utilize my connection especially that I made during the field visit of 2014.

As most of the festival of Newars does not mean only the rituals and worshipping but mostly associated with the entertainment. Especially this festival have a theatrical value as well which was supposed to entertain people with dance, music and merry making. So Guthi members was not sure to organize the festival that year as most of the people were still in pain. This festival is not a one or two days festival but eight days festival which the various functions that goes throughout the city. It can also be considered as aggregated festival with many sub festivals with their independent existence (Pradhan, 1986). Until the Manandhar⁵ Guthi Mambers went to forest to fetch the tree to make pole, which marked the official start of the festival, the uncertainty loomed in people's mind. All the indoor rituals were taken place, as before because the ritual performed inside were very much important for the smooth operation of the festival. Within this festival there are processions and rituals, which are done for the spirit of dead. Also for this reason even only to carry out the ritual aspect of this festival was important to the people of Kathmandu Valley. And to pay respect and peace for the decreased soul in the Earthquake were important. The decision to carry out the festival was uplifting news for the people amidst pain and sorrow.

But the decision to carrying out the festival was a big decision in itself. Most of the buildings in the Kathmandu Hanumandhoka Durbar Square were damaged while some in the rubbles with just remaining giant plinth of the temples. This square is still the center of the festival, which used to be palace of Malla King.

⁵ Manandhar are the oil presser community who are specialized in making scaffoldings and are responsible to start festival formally by raising the wooden pole. The pole has to be always new fetched from the forest every after series of rituals. During the field research in 2014 people of those community were seen very proud of their assigned responsibility as without then the formal start of festival is not possible.

The damaged buildings were supported by the wooden logs and some buildings like Gaddi Baithak (Picture 3) was covered in the scaffoldings for the repair. Also along the road inside of the old city of Kathmandu most of the buildings were in support of the wooden log. The first day of the pole of festival went well as before with the pole raising ceremony. The dances, music and the traditional army were all present as usual tradition among the damaged monuments with support. Huge crowd of spectators were present, some climbing the damaged monuments.



Picture 3: During the Yenya Punhi festival of 2015, where most of the remaining temples were supported with the wooden poles and in scaffoldings. Seen in the picture are the Chariots during the festival in Palace area where a part of palace was covered in scaffolding for repair and the bar in red post is seen which says “Prohibited Area”. So in this fragile stage also festival was carried out.

The various mask dances took place as usual in the various places of the city including once everyday in the palace area. On the first day of the chariot

procession of the Kumari the special care was taken. On that day the along with the President various dignitaries were invited as usual. As the traditions, they used to observe the procession from the balcony of the *Gaddhi Baithak* (the white building adjacent to Kumari chhe: in Picture 3, the covered one). But this time it was not possible as that building was badly damaged by the earthquake. So the arrangement was made in the open space in front of damaged building. Tents were arranged for the VIPs, with chairs. All the VIPs watched the start of procession from that place. Also that time chariot procession was started earlier than the normal time. According to the program officer of Hamuman Dhoka Palace Conservation Project, Mr. Narendra Bilash Bajracharya, the first day of chariot procession, which was the day to have more crowd were carried out carefully amidst buildings supported by logs on the way (Nagarik, 2015). Also to avoid the accidents on the way the procession was concluded earlier before it became dark⁶. This year the safety had been the major concern for the procession. Most people have even suggested carrying the Gods and Goddess in the palanquin instead of the chariot but the normal procession were carried out without any human casualties. Local people also had the belief that if the rituals were carried out in the usual way then it will take ward off the evil from the country (Gurung, 2015).

The Dus Aavata⁷ show which was shown in the Laxmi Narayan Temple which came to the rubble except its base which consist of multiple stepped base in a pyramid style. So there was speculation on how to carry it out. But the stage was prepared in that remaining plinth of the temple and the Dus Aavata show was carried out as before. But this time they received the new clothes, jewelry and

⁶ In Kathmandu still transmission lines for the electricity is above the ground supported by the poles. While walking around the city the tangled wires with the poles are still the common practice. So during the chariot procession in order to avoid the accidents related to electricity, the areas where chariot pass by are cut off of electric supply which was normal case every year. This supply is cut off by only on those areas through with the chariot passes and again after the procession supply is continued.

⁷ The still show which exhibit the ten incarnation of God Vishnu where people dress as a various Gods and Goddess and display themselves.

light as help form the Hanumandhoka Durbar Square Conservation Program. As the chariot festival all other processions were carried out earlier and ended earlier.⁸ The procession of *Daagi* and *Bahumata*, which used to finish by 1 a.m. (last year during my field visit in the year 2014 it was 1 a.m. when procession ended) was also concluded earlier. This procession is usually carried out after the Chariot of Kumari reached its house. Since the chariot procession ended earlier so as the other procession also concluded earlier. The crowd of people was present as before. Even people were seen to observe the festival climbing on the damaged monuments and houses as in the Picture 4 below. In the images that circulated in the social media, blogs and newspaper the scenario were clearly seen.⁹ The images below were also taken form the social media after taking permission with the photographer.

⁸ This information was provided by Mr. Sailesh Rajbhandari resident of Kathmandu. He was helping me to collect the document for the Guthi Corporation as well as for some other offices and also provided me information regarding the festival of 2015.

⁹ <http://www.thelongestwayhome.com/blog/nepal/celebrating-indra-jatra-yenya-festival-in-kathmandu/>
<http://nagariknews.com/photo-feature/story/46066.html>
<http://nagariknews.com/society/nation/story/46204.html#sthash.Qm0HEG7e.dpuf>



Picture 4: People seen in the ruins of the temples to watch the chariot procession of *Kumari* during the 2015 festival. In the background can be seen the pyramid of people which is actually the surviving base of temples which was destroyed by the earthquake. (Source: Arbin Singh)

The festival for most people this time was not only limited to an entertainment and ritual but also people took it emotionally to stand tall in spite of the massive earthquake. The speculation that was among all the people and Guthi members also signifies that people were watching closely for the festival of that year. When the intangible heritage is still not taken seriously, this proves the perfect example where even though with the loss of the tangible aspect of heritage, the intangible heritage was continued. This helps to advocate us that there is still a strong link between the tangible and intangible, but perhaps more important, between intangible and space. This is a bright part of living heritage and the community involvement should not be ignored. The country and government which was struggling to provide the basic need for the people after the massive earthquake; it was a great spirit and community will power to organize the festival. This was not just a matter of chance or happened due to the initiation of the government

but it was due to the motion that was already in pace hundreds of years back as a Guthi. In add to the Involvement of the traditional institution, Kathmandu Hanumandhoka Conservation Program site office also mobilized manpower to prevent the unknown accidents during the festival.



Picture 5: The traditional musical band of Nepal army also known as *Gurju ya paltan* meaning army of priest or army lead by the Buddhist priest during the Yenya Punhi festival of 2015. This musical band is always lead any chariot procession. In that background can be seen the palace (white building) being supported by the wooden pole and scaffoldings which was damaged by Earthquake of 2015. (Source: Impact Productions)

Although the festival was concluded successfully in at that critical moment but the damaged monuments were very much vulnerable. It was seen people climbing on the ruins of monuments to observe the festival also even in the damaged buildings. There was not seen much care by the concerned authority on those demolished monuments, which had only plinth remaining. Some places in the Palace area of Kathmandu Hanumandhoka were seen with the bars for not allowing crossing it. This again proves Nepal was not prepared for such huge

disasters neither in solving humanitarian crisis nor on the heritage. But the images like Picture 3,4 and 5, people continuing their traditions despite the buildings in ruins shows the possibility and hope of continuing traditional know Also with the recent violent tremors showed the sentiments people have with the built heritage. This was because people still feel associated with those structures, which collapsed. Open squares, temples, rest houses and platforms have been a meeting place for the people. The place to gather, interact and socialize. This was not just a monument of past which did not have any connection with the present. The solidarity these heritage sites got after the earthquake from the national and international community it got was because of the human connection that this place has with it. So this earthquake should also be taken as a lesson, which has been one of the greatest enemies of the Nepalese heritage since the ancient time for the future.

Conclusion

The devastating earthquake of 2015 showed how vulnerable the human life and heritage of Nepal was. For this massive disaster Nepal was still not prepared in spite of repeated concerns and warnings. Nobody had ever thought in their strangest dream of falling into rubbles the monuments which has been a pride of city. But if we look at the positive side, this earthquake has been a test for the resilient nature of the community. How the traditional values, social association and intangible heritage matter more than the tangible heritage. When government was not able to provide basic needs to the victim of earthquakes, the indigenous community organized the biggest festival of the city. These intangible heritages prove to be a soul when the body was injured and it gave the hope for the people in despair that not everything was lost. This reminded how the forefathers of the Kathmandu Valley must have been continued rebuilding and carrying out the heritage after being cheated by nature. Now when Nepal is in the initial process of managing intangible heritage formally, this intangibility should be considered more seriously by the concerned authority. The traditional

knowledge and indigenous community should always have upper hand in the heritage conservation.

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