

## The Reconstruction of the Bhagavati Temple at Naxal

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**Introduction:** In 2010, conservation of the temple of Naxal Bhagavati was initiated by the Naxal Bhagavati Jirnodhar(User) Main Committee, organized under the Naxal Bhagavati Samudayik Sadan, a community group set up in 1976 in Naxal Kathmandu to manage the affairs of the temple and associated spaces and activities. As the *Gajur* (finial) of the temple was taken down on 2 December 2009 and the



dismantling of the temple began, a public outcry that questioned the 'technology of dismantling' as well as the proposed approach of reconstruction ground up led to the formation of a technical committee under my chairmanship to oversee and assure that the civic committee followed 'accepted norms and standards of conservation' in its works. This article presents my experiences in the reconstruction project, which ended on 6 June 2011, when a new *Gajur* was installed.

**Fig 1: Work in Progress, Feb 26 2011**

As the process of conservation of Bhagavati Bahal is completed and its premises formally and ritually dedicated back to the Goddess and the devout public, we are happy to note that Naxal Bhagavati Jirnodhar(User) Main Committee was successful in doing so with the support and participation of a large number of individuals and institutions. It has given us not only an opportunity to be thankful to all of them, but also a pause to make an appraisal of the results against the plans and possibilities & constraints and difficulties. This article aims to assess the involvement and performance of the community in heritage conservation, particularly in assuring the professionally set standards of identity, integrity and authenticity. It is hoped that the experience of the Bhagavati temple will help in increasing the prospects, improving the process and augmenting the success of joint action of the socio-cultural community and the professionals and institutions which administer standards of heritage conservation. Except at the monument zones of the Kathmandu Valley World Heritage Site, we find an increasing number of '*jirnodhar*' activities on heritage buildings in Nepal being initiated at the community level and quite a few of them also funded likewise. In recent decades it has been usual for heritage buildings within the municipality to be conserved and funded jointly by the community and the municipality. 'Technical' supervision is also led and overseen by relevant technical section of the municipality as conservation has acquired the status of a public work. Although such an arrangement professes to infuse international standards and approaches in heritage conservation into the community practice, the results have not usually been appreciable. In the building culture of Kathmandu valley, '*jirnodhar*' is

a term that is broadly translated as conservation but is applied to mean anything from renovation, reconstruction to renewal allowing, and even seeking, innovative and creative design inputs in the process. Such a traditional understanding and overt reliance on the craftsmen unaware of international practice have resulted in several cases of serious disagreements and mistrust between the profession and the community.

**Initiation of conservation action:** The beginnings of the present conservation action in the temple of Bhagavati Bahal goes back to five years ago when the workmen who climbed up to the third roof to replace some ritual artifacts in the top roof reported that the timber under structure of the roof had deteriorated so badly that they would not feel safe to go back again. In their assessment, not only the deterioration of the rafters was physically visible, but also that it was so near a state of collapse that it was not advisable to add any additional stress. They claimed that even the small stress induced by the



movement of a single individual workman could spell disaster. Due to increased level of street and incompatible drainage system, water had also been entering the sanctum room and flooding the floor during the rainy seasons and since a couple of years, the image of the goddess had often been half under water during heavy rains. A joint team of the Department of Archaeology and Kathmandu Metropolitan Corporation called in later to inspect the structural and architectural state of the temple recommended that it needed to be reconstructed from the foundations up. Its findings were that the understructure of the roofs and the floors, the timber rafters as well as joists, had deteriorated significantly due to egress of moisture and roof leakage, the metal sheet roof was ridden with holes caused by acidic action of chemicals and bird droppings, brick wall showed cracks in several critical places and the temple itself had slightly tilted to the west, possibly due to egress of water unto the foundations.

**Fig 2: The monolithic dowel of the image of Bhagavati**

About thirty five years ago in 1978, the problem of the weakening wall had been noticed and Naxal Bhagavati Samudayik Sadan, a community action group, was organized with an objective to manage operation and maintenance of the temple complex. The Sadan was then conceived as a two tier body with an Executive Committee and an Advisory Council consisting of such influential members of the society as Kumar Khadga B Shah, Narayan P Shrestha and Garib N Sarraf. Bhola Thapa worked as secretary to both the council and the committee. It quickly swung into action and temporary timber shores were put up and RSJ I-sections encased in brick used as internal buttresses in 1979 to prop the west wall on advice of Lekhnath Regmi, a well known overseer and local resident. The works were

executed by Jujubhai Maharjan, a local master mason. The RSJ I-sections had been granted by the government then from the store of materials salvaged from Simha Durbar fire of 1973. Apparently, this buttressing did help to keep the temple safe for some decades only. It is notable that Garib N Sarraf and Bhola Thapa are members in the present Naxal Bhagavati Jirnodhar(User) Main Committee. Deb S Shakya chairs the committee.

**History and archaeology of the Temple:** No deterministic historical material like inscription is so far known about the temple of Bhagavatibahal. The place name Naxal is believed to be a derivative of Nilisala or Nandisala, a well known Lichchhavi site that developed further in the Transitional period. One



entry in Gopalarajavamsabali, a famed chronicle of Nepali history, speaks of King Sivadeva consecrating Nandisalavihara and a later King Shankerdev consecrating the 'Bhagavati Manahara Bhatarika' in Nandisala possibly towards 1050 AD. An in-situ Lichchhavi inscription dated to 654 AD and Narendradev on the heritage pit conduit next to the temple attests the currency of the site to as early as seventh century AD. On the basis of style of the stone image and the *tamralep* technology used in its polish, historians have dated the image to mid-Lichchhavi period. Popular memory has it that the annual festival of Naxal Bhagavati was initiated and popularized by King Shankerdev also. According to some legends popular with the family of the custodians of the temple, the goddess is named 'Navasagar Bhagavati'. The image of the Bhagavati is housed in a small freestanding brick pier shrine with stone post and lintel framing. It would appear that the early references are to the consecration of the small inner shrine.

**Fig 3: The upright post of the original 'Avarana' temple**

The small shrine is enveloped to form a sanctum room of the outer temple, which follows the traditional tiered temple design with three brass plate roofs. Inscriptions from later periods in the site show that this outer temple went through a '*jirnodhar*' in the year 1882 as a pious act of Bhim Taksari. The plinth of the temple was repaved in stone in 1929 by Bimalraj Haluwai, a local resident. The temple was damaged by the earthquake of 1934 when the finial and top tier fell over bringing down the west side of the second roof along with it. Both the roof tiers were reconstructed in 1940 by the then Rana Prime minister Juddha Sumsher. In 1954, the lowest roof in *Jhingati* was replaced with sheet roofing in preparation for the coronation of the then King Mahendra. It is obvious that the temple was built three tiered with jhingati roofs in 1882.

As the committee decided to follow the recommendations of the inspection team, the first action of present reconstructive conservation was to dismantle the building down to the foundations. This



process provided an archeological opportunity to explore the evolution of the temple through close observation of artifacts, reused building materials and the layers in and under the old substructure and underneath the sanctum floor. The bottom of the foundation trench of the dismantled temple was sandy and showed no indicator of earlier interventions. No salvage materials were observed in foundation brickworks and in backfill thus confirming that the '*jirnoddhar*' of 1882 was actually a new construction of the outer temple enveloping the more ancient structure, the small temple pier in which the image of Bhagavati is housed, within it. The present reconstruction also opened up the floor to explore the nature of archeological evidences below and around the image. The brick pier backing of the stone image was loose with the rat holes behind the plastered surface and the wall was raised directly from the level sandy ground. A piece of stone 20 cm square and about three meters in length, similar in design to the upright stone post framing the image, was found under the floor laid parallel to the pier wall and covered with sand infill. It would appear that the original shrine was framed with the four posts, possibly of *Avarana* type, and only two were reused during the 1882 reconstruction and others left in the floor infill. The picture in Fig 2 above shows the retained post framing the image. Also the rough hewn back of the image, left unfinished, supports the conclusion that the shrine's brick pier backing is of original design. The support structure of the image, when examined from the front side by



excavating about half a meter below the carved portion of the image, showed a monolithic taper dowel standing on a piece of stone, which appears to have settled. The lower stone could well be part of the original '*jalahari*' type of support stone used to house the dowel.

**Fig 4 & 5: The extent of damage of the base structure of the Gajur and the Gajur (right).**

**Conservation process:** The conservation project was proposed and developed in response to the inspection report of the joint technical team, the drawings and estimate being prepared by the relevant professionals from the heritage section of Kathmandu Metropolitan Corporation. The proposal was approved by the KMC authority on 30 April 2008. It was subsequently approved by the Department of Archaeology of Government of Nepal on 2 November 2008. The ritual worship of *Kshyama Puja*, seeking blessings, peace and forgiveness from the goddess of the temple was performed on 25/26 November 2009. On the full moon day of 2 December 2009, *Dhanya purnima*, the reconstruction work actually and symbolically started when the *Gajur* (finial) was dismantled and lowered down. On completion of dismantling to the foundations, on the morning of 15 February 2010, new bricks were laid for the foundations by five senior citizen of the neighborhood. The reconstruction process of the main temple

building took one and a half year symbolically ended with the installation of the new Gajur on 6 June 2011.

Experts and press reacted vehemently to the project as the work of dismantling the temple started. Critical articles were published and discussion programs aired on radio; the main criticism was on the 'destructive tearing down' of the metal sheet roofs and others questioning whether a foundation up reconstruction in the manner will sensitively aim to conserve the heritage and historical-cultural value of the 'ancient' temple. The large gathering of the local community, heritage conservation and construction specialists and media personnel present to witness the laying of foundations made the Naxal Bhagavati Reconstruction (User) Main Committee form a Technical Committee then and there 'to assist in conservation and assure that the heritage conservation sensitivities are respected and standards followed'. On close observation, it appeared to me that reconstruction was justified due to the extreme state of deterioration of the structural timber beams, rafters, core wall around sanctum and the 'porous' state of its metal sheet roof. Since the cracks of the core walls were a result of the settlement of the foundations in the north-west corner and the tilting of the wall.

**Influencing conservation outcomes:** Through its discussion with the civic committee, the technical committee sought to save authenticity in reconstruction by calling off design interventions and making greater reuse of salvageable and un-weathered carved elements such as windows, struts and cornice string bands as well as special shaped bricks. It also got the community to agree to keep the historic ancient image of Bhagavati, unmoved and on in its venerated spot. Moving it would have greatly impaired the authenticity of the place, the deified power pit (Sans.: *shakti pith*). Civic committee agreed to drop several actions it had planned as 'improvement on the temple' e.g. raising the plinth of the temple, adding a side door in the sanctum room and introduction of a stone string course (New.: *nago*) as they actually compromised the integrity of temple design itself. The craftsmen were most reluctant to the reuse of old wooden cornice bands as they thought that the 'quality and style' of the extant carvings was poor, the wood itself did not come from the 'right genus of tree' (like '*salla*' instead of '*sal*') and was also too deteriorated to reuse. This brought into light another sense of enhancement, that of the object itself not just of the context intended by Nara Document. Only one quarter of the old band was reused



in the back side of the sanctum walls just as a token honour to the position of the technical committee! However, all woodworks of the Ga-jhya and struts in all the three floors were cleaned and reinstalled back in the reconstructed temple as per original state. Only the undamaged patterned bricks (*baa-appa*) of the cornice were reused. The committee also agreed to house within the body of the wall a new timber frame, uprights and ties, to strengthen it against the action of earthquakes.

**Fig 6: The numbered Baa-appa cornice bricks**

**International norms and local objectives:** The international doctrinal position on conservation has been largely developed on the three defining criteria of *understanding*, *knowing* and *safeguarding* heritage, mainly in regard to three aspects – *history*, *meaning* and *material* – and the three objective stances of *presentation*, *restoration* and *enhancement*. In this context, “authenticity” is spelled out with special focus on the history and material of a building and is applied for the purpose of restoration only. In practice, the notion of material authenticity is often limited to its initial construction, the first phase of the historical time line of the resource. A building’s identity – the stages of reconstruction or renovation of an object that add significantly to its meaning in the context of living cultures – is thus oversimplified and presented as one hazy aggregate. The manner of breaking down the history of a heritage building into three phases, “the creation of the object, the past and the perceptual present” (Feilden & Jokilehto, 1993) condenses the very longest period of its existence with greater accretion of evolutionary cultural meaning i.e. longevity of the past into a perfunctory consideration. The detailed sequential imprint of an object’s evolutionary history is reduced into something of a challenge to authenticity! If a heritage building that is substantially reconstructed in the present is considered a new building or a product of the present and thus denied any historical value, in such a line of thinking, the site’s past reconstructions would also amount to a progressive loss of its authenticity rather than to its enrichment. The fallacy of such a position is apparent. Also this manner of educing historicity of any heritage site from a linear reckoning of time and defining its authenticity with respect to historic time stands challenged also by living cultures raised with cyclical time. In such a context, we would have to see historicity as fixed in space but with time of re-creative auspiciousness renewing in seasonal cycles. In the context of the history of Nepalese architecture and conservation, any notion of authenticity that only considers the value for the original construction fails. As we have seen from the Naxal Bhagavati case, the re-creative cultural genius only recognizes fixity in space taking both the time and people in evolutionary context. While assuring identity, authenticity and integrity is possibly the most important requirement of any conservation action, for Nepal there is an immediate need to develop a redefinition of “authenticity” based on the conservation actions as practiced by traditional craftsmen under the sponsorship of the *Guthi*, an institutionalized community based trust organization of long historic standing. The purpose of the interventions made by our ancestors at many points of time in the past was to allow for the integrity of a site with the seasonally renewing time of re-creative auspiciousness. As much value must thus be assigned to the authenticity of evolutionary integrity as carried in traces and layers of past conservation actions as points of (re-)creation and also give due space to creativity in the present conservation action. As the intent, process and institution of ‘*jirnoddhar*’ were all community based and led, conservation in Nepalese tradition has treaded a fine path between conserving history and culture and community’s collective memory, which often demand contradicting actions. It must have happened that way at all past points of ‘*jirnoddhar*’ at Bhagavati temple and the present reconstruction has not been different. International norms of conservation go against acts that prioritize local community memories and creativities.

Nepalese history presents an enlightening case of cultural conservation practiced in a context overwhelmed by natural change agents. Many structures are characteristic of constant decay and recovery due to the construction with semi-perishable materials such as wood and brick and the buildings’ subjugation to a harsh monsoon environment. Furthermore, Kathmandu Valley is located in

an active fault, thereby making its architecture occasionally subject to large earthquakes. Such factors have necessitated a periodic reconstruction or replacement of buildings or its afflicted components and elements and the Newar builders appear to have worked on the development of materials and methods of construction adapting their construction techniques and conservation practice to these circumstances. For example, the Newar builder provided the window with a double frame so that the outer and decorative window elements, when decayed, could be replaced without opening the brick wall.

**Conclusion:** Nepalese practice of replacing old with new part or whole, be it a carved window or a brick veneer, runs counter to current international conservation principles which emphasize the original material and its scientific dating as the key criteria of authenticity. Such western principles and interest in the remote, the past and the dated that take time as a linear entity would simply run counter to the traditions of Kathmandu valley that bases on the concept of time as cyclical and seasonally renewing and takes lot of care for collective memories and their dramatic replays. The restoration of the Bhagavati temple and the points of disagreements and mistrusts between the local and the international, between local and the national and between the community and the professionals has only highlighted these very contradictory positions and traditions. Still the reconstruction of the Bhagavati temple has been more sensitive to standard norms than the other 'improvement works' about it such as the paving works, pit conduit, the *dachi-appa* cladding of community building, the removal of Pipal tree, etc. which have thrown integrity and authenticity to the wind.

The cycle of recovery, restoration, and reconstruction in Newar architecture has not only led to the overlap of multiple layers of history, meaning and materials in a heritage building but it has also established its own values and standards of understanding, knowing and safeguarding a structure regarding its presentation, preservation and enhancement that contradicts the western position that has largely sought permanency and historicity. Indeed the disagreement between the two arises as the international standards of conservation seek to assure preservation anchored on history and authenticity so defined while the local objectives of 'pratisamskar' and 'jirnoddhar' based reconstruction seek continuity anchored on memory and identity.

Integrating the professionals in community led conservation projects has been seen as a requirement of conservation design and implementation both by the 'user committee' and the professionals. Whereas professionals seem to think that community conservation action is often substandard, the community committees voice their concern that professional conservationists apply more of theoretical standards. In the case of the reconstruction of Bhagavatibahal Temple in Naxal, the members of the user community felt more inspired by the local craftsmen than architects and engineers in conservation practice. As a matter of fact, it was the master craftsman, Naik, who made the detailed design of the components of conservation rather than the user committee, which was almost totally centered on policy and funding issues. The user committee which sought to behave more in the pattern of the traditional Guthi institution was more accommodative of creative inputs in conservation, even deliberately seeking innovation and change as a way of improving the relevance of the heritage to the present time and society – a clear statement that conservation is about continuity of culture allowing

space for creativity and the present and aiming at remembering memories and creating new points and moments of memory.