

Conservation- The issue of Civic acknowledgment

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To this informed gathering, the important place occupied by conservation and restoration of archaeological and architectural monuments in conservation and restoration of cultural heritage, needs no reiteration. Despite two decades of having got the seven sites of the valley listed as World Heritage by UNESCO and several large monument conservation inputs, the downward slide of the traditional cultural / visual environment continues unabated. Conservation exercises have largely failed to arouse public curiosity and the arousal of civic participation and initiatives towards cultural conservation has been a far cry. This paper presents some issues and possible means of raising civic awareness and larger civil participation in cultural conservation.

Noble objective of passing on to posterity what has been handed down to us by our ancestors aside, we should also take time to ponder other questions like how does it appeal to the local lay person on the street, why it fails to inspire him to save his own culture, or why even the harmony of the immediate built environment is lost amid such exercises. Although workshops like this, with participation of like minded professionals, are important to communicate to each other the experiences of technical nature, how much of such information is communicated to the citizen at large and in what kind of wrapping is paramount if 'changing mentality and values' leading to 'decreased civic pride in cultural heritage' is to be arrested and civic awareness and acknowledgment of conservation action is to be achieved.

Larger conservation of cultural heritage need civic support and participation for scale and effectiveness as elemental conservation alone can hardly be effective in causing a holistic movement. Civic acknowledgment of conservation efforts is highly desirable if their support is to be marshaled.

We have already seen that civic support has not been forthcoming in most of the conservation actions and few have been able to increase civic awareness

and appreciation of cultural heritage. Looking for reasons one could analyze the past actions and try to establish the reasons for this state of affairs. One could identify several issues hampering civic appreciation of cultural heritage from the way conservation of cultural heritage is practiced in Nepal and most other countries of the world. Particularly when we work on conservation of living cultures such as that of Kathmandu valley, these issues assume added significance.

- (a) The practice of conservation of culture is almost solely centered on the conservation of its tangible expressions and the intangibles, which infuse meaning and life into it, are almost entirely neglected.

...Cultural intangibles are dormant in the present day lay person on the street and its consideration in conservation would have aroused his mind towards it.

- (b) Conservation of culture, particularly the built cultural heritage, concentrates mostly on conservation and preservation of 'peak cultural edifices' and the 'lesser' cultures are totally neglected.

... The lay person on the street is an average cultural being and lower rungs of the present society retain cultural values and practices to the highest degree.

- (c) Urban Heritage Conservation has largely remained aloof of development and associated needs and problems.

... Elemental conservation of Peaks negates the process of reducing conflict between conservation interest and economic development.

- (d) Communication about cultural heritage conservation are limited to scholastic journals or commercial publicity.

... Every moment one cell of the Nepalese cultural being dies at the incessant hammering of alien communication.

Civic acknowledgment of and participation in conservation of culture could be affected if the above concerns are addressed effectively.

Conservation of Intangibles:

Cultural conservation approached through monuments / physical heritage conservation does not suffice to arouse civic curiosity. This is so because the process of cultural deterioration per se starts with loss of affinity to physical heritage as this is caused by material nature of dominating western / or other cultures. Vestiges of intangible culture are however the last to go and these remain precisely because they touch the cords of heart of the practitioner of residual culture. Elements such as language, dialects, music, legends and rituals are some such areas which could be linked with monument conservation so that civic relation is established. This will be able to infuse civil acceptance and emulation of conservation in their daily actions.

Going down the 'Peaks of conservation' or conservation from root up:

Heritage of the ruling hierarchy and that of the common lay persons, although related in a wider sense, are not the same. As the relationship of the ruler and the ruled in the past was almost always involved a cautious distance, so also the conservation exercises focused on heritage of the rulers causes a distancing of the lay person. This has to be avoided for the sake of developing civic emulation. For this objective, conservation of 'lesser heritage monuments' must be mixed with 'peak heritage' so that a package of relevance and acceptance to the public is delivered. Some such heritage should be living ones as this would bring exposure to conservation directly. In choosing the non-peak heritage, distribution of some activities to the lower rungs of the society needs to be affected. Lower rungs of a material society being more oriented to traditions success of such activities will be more rewarding from the spontaneous emulation that it will trigger. Conservation from the grass-roots would thus be a reality and conservation would get civic acknowledgment.

Conservation and Development: Infusing money meaning in heritage

Conflict between conservation interests and economic development interests is rooted in the myth that heritage environment is less paying than modern mercantile environment. As domestic and international tourism and other leisure industries grow, a high value is added to things 'pleasing to the senses and beautiful'. It can be observed even casually that traditional shop front attracts international tourists better than another with modern shop front. Experience from Western countries show that this phenomenon is also observed in the case of domestic shoppers. One could well see that in a recent food festival, the *Newars* crowded more towards *Newari food stalls* than others. We can see that money is there in maintaining the heritage quality of visual environment. Current distribution of money earned due to heritage environment is lopsided and tends to go outside the site and measures to correct this aberration can bring in a new motive force into play. Although this is not traditionally a conservationist's field, this call is evident and should not be neglected.

Communication and Public Education:

The importance of communication of values, needs, advantages and ways of cultural conservation to the lay persons is probably more important than to reach other conservationists. The professionals will anyway reach out for information and added mileage through such workshops as these may be very limited. This is for us to realize than for any one else ! If conservation actions were designed with a publicity and educational component, the lay persons would be able to judge for themselves and make a choice on what is good for them. Today, we hardly interact with or inform the commoner about these things and as they get a massive doze of alien information only, little wonder that they are allowing their heritage cultural cells to die and absorbing other 'better cultures' as trumpeted by the media. Thus a need of massive public campaign of informing the public is a call of the day.

Conclusion or why Bhaktapur is a success today:

In Nepal, several projects and exercises related to building conservation have been undertaken. One of the firsts to be conserved was Basantapur Durbar

and it was followed closely by Bhaktapur Development Project. Other notable buildings conserved are I-Baha of Lalitpur, Radhakrisna Temple of Swotha at Lalitpur, Akash Bhairab of Bhaktapur. Although a romantisization in steel and concrete and would hardly qualify as conservation, works at Keshav Mohan Chowk of Patan Durbar, are nearing completion. Except for later phases of Bhaktapur Development Project, all the conservation activities listed here suffer from the above problems.

Although Bhaktapur conservation action also suffered the monuments approach in its early years and actually started as a action to conserve the Pujarimath, it soon started taking up conservation 'lower down'. It may appear strange that, albeit not by intent but by courses of events, the highest cultural 'peak edifices' such as the Bhaktapur Palace, Nyatapola Temple or the Vairabnath Temple stayed without conservation inputs from the BDP but industrial district was developed as a prop to conservation efforts. Conservation of streets and other city services brought in more community approval than the grand professional success of Pujarimath restoration. Lack of educational and communication components of a satisfactory scale has also cost in delayed acceptance in political circles as only in the past few years, the leaders of people and planners of economies are emulating conservation.