

Heritage in Danger:

From Chysilin Mandap to Mani Mandap, Experts wrench the Guts out of Newar Architecture¹

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In Patan Durbar, perimeter fence has gone up around Mani Mandap for its reconstruction. Soon the *navakunda* traditional foundation of this important representative of the sixteen pillared *mandap* buildings, will be expunged and replaced by a steel-grillage footing. Its timber posts will be fixed to the base stones directly using steel bolts discarding the *lakasi* grid interface traditionally used to connect the pillars in such open pillared buildings thereby demeaning and killing the structural sense of the traditional construction system. The timber joinery developed by the Newar craftsman with over thousands of years of experience in detailing to absorb earthquake forces such as wedged mortice and tenon, *chukul*, dowels, so excellently brought together used in the construction of its *lakasi-tham-meth-nina* system frame built to take the roof in the *mandap*, will be rendered toothless and rigidified with a set of bolted-through steel cleat plates! This three pronged stake is ready to be driven cruelly into the very heart of Newar traditions of materials, technology and architecture, the illustrious *mandap* style heralded by the seventh century Kashthamandap, which gave name to Nepal valley itself!

Is this a new thing, this attack on our heritage by the saviors of the modern era? No, experts have always had their say and handed in such 'conservation' of Nepalese heritage. Possibly, poor as we are and have no alternative to foreign grants and donations for the reconstruction after the disaster in heritage triggered by the 2015 Gorkha Earthquake and as donors continue to slap such foreign expertise on us, this will go on. This started even before our heritage was inscribed by UNESCO as Kathmandu Valley World Heritage: UNESCO gave a grant gift to Nepal on the coronation of King Birendra for the restoration of Lohn Chowk of Hanumandhoka Durbar and its tower. It came with the expertise also. The experts decided that the Lohn Chowk needed Reinforced Concrete Ring beams all round its terrace floor and a set of RCC beams to strengthen the corner supports of Basantapur tower at its south-west. These modern material and technology intrusions were argued as the way to improve the performance of defective material and technology system components in our architecture despite calls, albeit from other foreigners too, to stop the use of cement. How much this intrusion expunging the timber sense of traditional Newar construction practice cost Basantpur tower and the terraces of Lohn Chowk in the Gorkha Earthquake is there for us all to see. The force of earthquake collected by the rigidity and asymmetry introduced through the use of incompatible and 'strong' modern material and technology hammered even harder at Basantpur tower inflicting damage greater than what the earthquake would have otherwise done.

And, when a reconstruction gift made by Germany was implemented, the river-boulder-mat foundation of Chysilin Mandap (1988) was taken out and replaced with a concrete grid mat, four of its sixteen timber pillars making the core of the *sohrakutte mandap* was replaced with steel encased in concrete and lime plaster, and used steel frames and trusses to throw away our very own flexible structural system and timber joinery in the floor and roofs, there were no ears to heed the calls for use of local

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materials and methods. The reconstruction's audacious design aiming to 'pay tribute to the modern era' had turned, the prayer pavilion of Queen Lalmati, celebrated by King Jitmitra Malla with a poem inscribed in stone therein, into a Kohl monument, to borrow the term Bhaktapur heritage community loved to use in private. It had hurt the cultural sentiments of Bhaktapur so badly that the municipality vowed to reconstruct 55 Windows palace differently. Of course, this is now history made in fifteen years of continuously struggling to put traditional materials and methods in priority for the reconstruction of the palace and shed off the international expertise that sought to put steel frames and concrete diaphragms into the palace as another tribute to modern engineering. The restoration of 55 Windowed Palace was completed in 2008 by Nepalese professionals staying within the Newar architectural, structural and crafts vocabulary and with Nepali money. The response of this building to the 2015 Gorkha earthquake proves beyond doubt that our ancestors were not so dumb and the conservation work is a tribute to the Newar prowess in building earthquake absorbent structures.

But the power of money and expertise of this kind were exercised more forcefully elsewhere and we 'reconstructed' the east wing of Keshav Narayan Chowk of the Patan Durbar as if the grand architecture of Yognarendra Malla was more worthy of contempt and reprimand and a flaunting of post-Victorian Neo-classicism was the order of the modern day there. Steel columns replaced timber posts and steel trusses replaced our roof structure. When the issues were raised in an international meeting called by UNESCO to review the same, our very own archeology department, charged with the authority of the state party for heritage conservation, expunged even the mention of it from its declaration. Overnight the powers that were had rewritten the declaration of the conference into a floral tribute to the expertise! A visit to the closed off second floor of Patan Museum, which is what Keshav Narayan Chowk is after fully erasing Yog Narendra Malla's memory, will show to anyone what happened with 2015 earthquake at the joint between the rigidity of the industrial knowledge and standard grips the flexible natural materials and structural system of the Newar. And to think this erasure is driven down the throat of Newar culture, which was even setting up a *hookka* for their dead Malla royal residents until the day before?

When the tarpaulin cover went up on the perimeter fence of Rani Pokhari, little did the people know that the scheme was to use reinforced concrete ties, columns and slabs to make the heritage temple in the middle of the sixteenth century pond to imbibe a structural sense of modern engineering. But as the reinforcing rods started peeping out of its terraces and the pedestrian bridges offered a view deck for the ordinary citizen, the concerned raised their voice for use of traditional materials and methods as a priority principle for heritage conservation. Forty young boys and girls marching around the pond to the rhythm of a *Dhimay* with message posters had prompted the Department of Archeology of Government of Nepal to order a halt to the reconstruction. We can now expect that DOA will do it in a way that best respects our tradition, philosophically as well as materially.

Between Chyasilin Mandap and Mani Mandap, there is Kashthamandap. This reconstruction promised to be different in that its announcement as a national prestige project brought an outpouring of community interest: as many as one hundred and thirty one representatives thronged into an early meeting called to develop a coordinated approach. The restoration design, which initially used laminated timber with steel ties and cement mortar in superstructure and sought to introduce timber piles to strengthen its *navakunda* foundations, met with strong objections primarily from the affected ethnic community. Several crowded uproarious meetings later, a revised reconstruction plan conforming to the DOA guidelines and the principle of priority use of traditional materials and methods of construction was agreed to and has since been entrusted to Kathmandu Metropolitan City government for execution. Although KMC is still grappling to realize the reconstruction, at least, when it will finally come up, it will use a traditional timber plinth and floor system of *lakasi-tham-meth-nina*, sufficiently absorbent of energy released in earthquakes with *chukuls* and flexible joinery without steel cleats, and the central core of four timber posts of the *mandap* will continue to be cushioned in gold plated foils lining the *llohn* recess.

In 1984, Prof. Sekler, the founding chairman of Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust, had stood alone at Mangalbazar of Patan protesting the demolition of Mangal Pati to demand respect for traditional materials, methods and surviving sections: he could not save it from destruction then. It had taken a dogged struggle of fifteen long years to bring the restoration of 55 Windowed Palace in line with traditional materials and methods. That was already 2003. In 2016, citizen of Kathmandu picketed at Ranipokhari against the use of concrete in the reconstruction and they forced a halt to it. Today, community pressure is on to ensure that the reconstruction of Kashthamandap prioritizes use of traditional materials and technology.

But the sacrilege continues at the throne pavilion of the Mallas of Patan. Worse, the wrenching of the guts of Manimandap is proposed by KVPT, the organization Prof. Sekler created, while Department of Archeology prefers to look the other way. Now, it is for the rest of the community to quickly get out of this cultural amnesia to demand that all reconstructions respect the values of Newar culture including those embedded in conservation traditions, technologies and natural materials. After all, we are children of the civilization that noted, agreed and set up its' own guiding principles of heritage conservation:

Having observed the time torn state of the coat of arms of Lord Vishnu, I restored as truthfully to its original as guided by its remaining traces, for the benefit the world. (*Mahasamanta* Amshuverma at Changu, 607 AD)

And rise we must and in time, before Newar architecture is reduced to a cut and paste wood carvings job on a steel and concrete carcass!
