

Reconstructing of Historical Urban Civilization of Nepal Valley -

with a aim of making a worthwhile future of the magnificent past

Sudarshan Raj Tiwari

Study of urban history and historical urbanism has led me to believe that towns express their marvel more as a social artifact than a cultural and technological product. And it is in streets and pathway crossings, at *dobatos*, *chaubatos* and *chowks* that this urban and urbanism happens. It should be there and there only in the town that we should look for the story of any urban civilization, which dictionaries define as 'a situation of urban comfort achieved with a relatively high level of cultural and technological development'.

So in Kathmandu, we would find the urban and its comforts in the present day 'Kirat' reveling at the *Dyochhe* Chowk and the *Pith* clearing or a Lichchhavi rejoicing at Hadigaun *Dabali* and Narayan *Chaur* or a Malla exhilarating in the Durbar Square and Jaulakhel. And we would be charmed to find that all three historical socials are happening together - as if they did not want to discard any of those moments and saved them to keep living with – in streets and squares so densely populated with artifacts, stories and their replays arranged as overlays in communities, places and seasons.

Newars, indigenous to Nepal Valley, make the only community in Nepal that has been traditionally urban. Newar urbanism, in a large way, results from a replay of the myths, legends, stories, social memories and rituals of their calling in a urban setting and space populated by spirited spots and power places, *Dyochhe* and *Pith*, temples and trees, *Kuma* and *Kulo*, and etc., and networked through the pathways assigned for the gods, the living and the dead. Contemporary living appears purposely woven into the 'inherited life' of the gods and the ancestors. Spatially bound communities and social institutions with automated agendas managed the replay and rejoiced in making present life out of 'inherited life'. The consequent humanization and the human scale is what makes its intangible content as world class as its tangible heritage of architecture and town. It becomes clear from the urban history of the valley that this civilization owes much to the Newar sense of community, sense of assimilation (of various faiths and religions that came their way) and cultural intent of carrying on with the old and traditional along with the new.

(How did our towns got to cumulate so much of heritage attributes from each era, then?)

Public spaces and its social activation has been a long standing urban tradition in Kathmandu valley, since as far back as the Kirat period (ca. before 1st century AD). Kirat *pringgas* were small but densely built in fallow high ground and characterized by a festive street that linked the in-town sanctum (*devakula* or *dyochhe*) of the tutelary of the settlement with its out-of-town sanctuary (*pithugwora* or *pith*) located in eco-sensitive spot amid nature. Annually, all the residents came together to celebrate the ceremonial travel of the town's tutelary from the *dyochhe* to the *pith*. Eventually, the forecourt of the *dyochhe* developed into a central public space and the main street interspersed with stopover and nodal spaces populated by religious markers, public drinking water dispensers and resting pavilions. For urban water supply, they used ponds, which survive to characterize the town to this day.

When Lichchhavis arrived in the Nepal Valley in first century AD, they would have been surprised by the ecological smartness and agricultural sense of the settlements of the Kirats. Their urbanity was developed on the community of *astadasaprakritin* and an agro-forestry based economy highlighted by cotton farming and industries of spinning, weaving and cloth making, lather processing, oil pressing and pottery. It was a case of agricultural urbanization with its population socializing more in open public spaces than inside buildings, outdoor lifestyle developing a strong sense of community. Tangible archeology attests that a baked brick building culture flourished here in settlements as distinct as Andipringga, which the Lichchhavis selected to make their capital Bishalnagar out of it. Such settlements were already happening by 2nd - 3rd century BC.

And since then, this agriculture based urban system thrived on – even the religious-cosmic town space concept of the Lichchhavi continued to add to street, nodes and festive story telling character of towns while backing the basic primary agricultural economy and reinforcing the urban social practices and community formation. Along with the ushering in of mysticism, religions and classical learning, the Lichchhavi period saw such technological innovations as rice farming, irrigation canals, pit conduits water supply and dispensing utilities, copper mining, refining and smithery, and building craft. They continued to build towns on fallow raised lands despite their riverine upbringing. With geometrically laid out streets and regularly interspersed cross-roads spaces, they enlarged the towns populating street crossings there with Narayans, Siva linga, Chaityas and pit conduits. Several small *pringgas* were merged to make such towns as Bishalnagar and Daxinkoligram, to name some. This is when the pilgrimage places of Pashupati, Swoyambhu, Changuarayan, and Boudda took root. Socio-cultural reflection of their agriculture, irrigation and water management, crafts and industries, international trade further cumulated on the very streets and squares. And the urban civilization mediated by rituals, faiths and religions continued to develop and accrue. The saga of this urban civilization culminated in the building of the great monuments, squares and streets, dramatic festivals and faith based lifestyle in the peak of the Malla period – when the three Durbar Squares and the high streets were developed. No less impressive developments of this period are other market and neighborhood squares. Although the Malla discarded the idea of regular geometry in city layout in difference to the Lichchhavi and followed on the informal patterning of the Kirat, yet they continued to maintain the idea of town as a cosmic space. In effect, with the Malla developments, all three town functions - the capital, the economic, and the sacred – had merged together enriching the town life greatly in Kathmandu valley.

(How did we save so much of it till so far?)

From the days of the Kirats to those of the Mallas, the urban civilization marched on adding more of similar feathers - until we arrive at the era of Jung Bahadur Rana, when we find palaces with monumentalism sourced from French and British neoclassicism projecting newness into the valley. Although this so-called neo-classical phase of architecture and planning has been attributed often only to Jung Bahadur's visit to Europe, I should think the reconstruction demand of the buildings damaged by the earthquake of 1833 would have been as critical. As if guided by ancient agricultural ecological calling, Jung Bahadur himself built his palace at Thapathali, the nearest fallow ground next

to Kathmandu. Within decades, this new building march culminated in the making of central ceremonial civic and military spaces and avenues about Bhadrakali, Tundikhel and Ranipokhari. Still, the going rule seems to have been, preservation of the traditional town and newness limited to its periphery or outside. The traditional town layout, its monuments and markers, its streets and its squares went on living in its own social time and pursuit of culture and agriculture.

The huge earthquake of 1934 earthquake damaged the towns of Kathmandu valley massively and precipitated as massive a rebuilding. As part of moving forward with the urban heritage, Juddha Sumsher intervened with newness by constructing New Road, Bhugol Park and Juddha Sadak with wide streets and modern buildings lining up the streets. The alignment of the streets appears to have been chosen to cover green and pond areas available there. Future looking and subscribing to the new aesthetics of the time, this ceremonial drive to Gaddibaithak erased just a bit of a street and no cultural markers. When we think of the post-Gorkha-earthquake rebuilding and proposed widening of existing roads and pathways, which is bound to be more destructive of heritage on streets and squares than the earthquake itself, the ways of Juddha Sumsher and the sensibility of his engineers and builders, need to be appreciated. I find that approach progressive in style and content and without being unduly destructive or careless about what we had and where we were.

Thus, for two millennia, the urban settlements of Nepal valley have been growing continuously into a huge urban heritage – it did not wither with the heavy monsoons, many earthquakes, occasional fires or even local political upheavals. Natural disasters were always responded through *pratisamskara* or *jirnoddhara* way of rebuilding or through the system of cyclical maintenance, saving the authenticity of heritage of monuments or streets and squares time and again.

Comparative observation of the state of heritage in ancient cities in the Ganga plains of India suggests that the absence of foreign invasions could have helped us built the continuity and resilience we see in urban heritage of the valley. As for example Varanasi, whose foundation is claimed to be over two millennia ago, today, has no structure older than 300 years (Ramachandran, 1989). This outcome is in large part explained as a result of the failure of the Gupta state about fifth century, the Muslim takeover of North India in about eleventh century and the British rule over India between 1800 and 1947 - these three are blamed for destruction, desecration, and degeneration of the city's tangible built heritage. With the last event, cities in India also became “focal points of westernization” much to the detriment of traditional urban heritage of faith and religion, lifestyle, planning and management knowledge systems.

(So what's the threat?)

Although Nepal valley was untouched physically by all the three epochal events, we can see from developments after Jung Bahadur, Nepal was breathing some air of cultural change pumped by the British presence in India. But, it was neither Jung Bahadur nor Juddha Sumsher who made Kathmandu the focus of westernization – it was the changes of 1950 that in many ways ushered in westernization wholesale.

Some of the best of our urban heritage spaces have been listed in UNESCO's World Heritage as Kathmandu Valley World Heritage Site since 1979. The changes taking place and threats to his heritage were evaluated as so severe that it prompted UNESCO to put KVVHS in the List of Sites in Danger in 2003 - this state of lost heritage was indicated by the loss of authenticity and integrity precipitated not by an earthquake but by the threat of uncontrolled urban development, failure to contain the development pressures and loss of the traditional vernacular residential architecture. The causative factors of our failing urban heritage then e.g. an unmanaged migration, urban growth and indiscriminate replacement/loss of architectural heritage, loss of traditional institutions and the cultural activities they carried on, persist even more strongly today and all of them together threaten to relegate this excellent urban heritage into historical intangibles in future.

The growing scale of this is what threatens to wipe out our urban heritage than the massive destruction caused by the 2015-Gorkha Earthquake, particularly the urge of (1) globalization that devalues own ways of moving forward, (2) widening roads to facilitate cars into the heritage core streets and squares, (3) the misconceived idea of building back heritage better even with foreign hands, materials and technology, and (4) the general objectification of the historical urban social artifact. Sadly, in 2015, we seem to have become unwilling to learn from the recovery and reconstruction results following 1833 or 1934 earthquakes.

(So How do we take this into the Future?)

Global trends in urban development are governed by objectives of growth of secondary and tertiary economies and not only exclude agriculture as non-urban activity but also progress by building up over agricultural land. This cannot but go against the conservation and promotion of Nepal valley's agriculture based urbanism and urban heritage. Worse, most of the guidelines for post-earthquake reconstruction in settlement planning and redevelopment aim at urban development in the model of a post-industrial motorized transport mediated commercial town. As for monuments reconstruction, the slogan of 'building back better' with higher earthquake resistance and stronger materials like cement and steel in place of the traditional materials like clay and timber, itself can be a death warrant. 'Building as is' must be the starting point of all heritage reconstructions if authenticity, integrity and thereby heritage values, are to be saved and consciously promoted.

I fail to understand why at all any sane policy maker would think about making a development gain of widened roads out of post-earthquake reconstruction of heritage core and settlements, when the urban and urbanism heritage that has to be saved are carried in markers, monuments and socio-cultural activities line up on, frame up or happen in the streets and squares. What the planning guideline should have been sought to assure is saving the outline of the open space of street and the squares and reconstruction of all heritage markers and carriers like cultural stones, pits, recesses and alcoves, temples, pati, sattal and residential buildings with excellent heritage quality on their original footprint – such planning regulation should at the very minimum be applied to all public squares and designated high streets, festive streets or cultural walks. Clearly, proper conservation and rebuilding of public space demands that these street spaces retain their original width and outlines, remain pedestrian and keep it firmly out of regular access of motorized and wheeled traffic.

At the monuments and markers level, the motto of heritage reconstruction should not be 'building back better' but literally as the slogan of Department of Archeology says 'jastakotastai, baliyoprasastai' further qualified by a regulation that whatever additional strength needed will have to be designed and achieved with the use of traditional materials and methods as possible – any changes or materials introduced must be executed within the principle of reversibility and possibility of being regularly maintained using traditionally accepted 'cyclical renewal' principle of saving authenticity and integrity. Use of industrial materials, building principles and technology not compatible in property and structural behavior with clay, brick and wood based heritage system should be avoided. We have to protect the value of heritage in full – including its structural system, materials and their preparation, technology of use, their environmental and ecological goodness. I firmly believe that a community based approach of AVI-*navikaran* is called for (as I had proposed at the Convention of Nepal Engineers Association, Magh, 2072). Only, AVI-*navikaran* - reconstruction based on renewal with maximized saving of its' material, technological, craft and architectural Authenticity, Values and Integrity - will be able to rebuild our heritage, tangibles and intangibles together.

Also, we would do well to remember the urbanism of the capital city states were complemented by the heritage in outlying settlements, which had a given type and level of service or product specialization – like pottery of Thimi, oil of Khokana or fish of Chapagaon or Guhyeswori of Manamaiju – and which were linked to the three main towns by radial streets, which were again detailed in the same way as the city streets with rest houses, water holes and religious markers at frequent intervals. A heritage sensitive urban extension plan for the valley therefore would also need to protect the character of these outlying settlement cores as well as heritage laden segments or nodes in the traditional pathways. Similarly sensitive consideration of conservation of cultural expressions on the river banks or *ghat* would be as important to pursue.

While we think about conservation of such built urban heritage, we should not lose sight of the fact that without a fully restored river system and general urban and agricultural water management systems, and a minimum compliment of land in agricultural use, the conservation of the agriculture based urbanism will not sustain in real into the future.

(In conclusion), I would like to end this discourse with a thought that strong will and intent to conserve the heritage for the values we cherish, and for ourselves, our identity and our wished for future alone can take us through the present challenges of the conservation of our urban heritage. We need to appreciate our heritage much more strongly and sincerely and build a collective identity through its reconstruction.

..*