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Portada interior: **TEMPLO DE KRISHNA EN HANDIGAUN, KATMANDÚ, NEPAL.**
Imagen: Neel Kamal Chapagain.

South Asian approaches to heritage and conservation

NEEL KAMAL CHAPAGAIN

Abstract
Diversity in culture and heritage perceptions, values assessment and conservation approaches are increasingly being recognized today. While highlighting diversity, we are also finding that heritage and conservation issues within each diverse context may still be somehow similar to each other. In that case, I wonder whether we can discuss about a 'South Asian approach' or any regional approach to heritage and conservation. Yet, we can see some trends that are perhaps unique or more pronounced than other contexts. It is in this assumption that this paper explores some un-conforming notions of heritage and conservation in the South Asian context. The experiences from South Asia suggest that the very idea of heritage is a plural one except a fundamental basis that heritage has to be valued by communities and it must make sense to the contemporary time. The approach of conservation, therefore, cannot simply be reduced to a process of 'arresting decay' or a 'freezing the time' or 'restoring most of heritage back to a glorious past' but it should mean to restore values and increase significance at present and future. Therefore, it calls for a contextual rethinking of the heritage idea and conservation strategies. In addition, it also calls for enabling such processes by a sensitive management approach which draws from inclusive approach with economic as well as environmental sustainability.

Keywords: *Heritage, conservation, heritage management, South Asia.*

Background

When Kapila and I finished the manuscript for *Asian heritage management: contexts, concerns and prospects* (2013) in 2011, I began to wonder on two contradictory thoughts:

(i) whether we did justice to the 'Asian' context, i.e. did we have enough representations of diverse ways of looking at heritage and conservation within the geographical limits of the largest continent on the planet? and
(ii) whether the issues that emerged out of the book (thanks to the contributing authors) pertained only to Asia or would it be shared by other continents as well (I felt yes, most of it could be shared across other continents too).

I think the two questions answer each other because there may always be some uniqueness and some shared characteristics among any level of classification of heritage. Hence, rather than trying to resolve the above dichotomy, I believe we should attempt to enhance our understanding of diversity within the umbrella term of heritage and conservation as well as heritage management.

With this over-arching theme, I would now like to delve into the following two points within the contexts of South Asia in general:

(i) Understanding heritage in its plurality and diversity; and
(ii) what conservation and heritage management would mean for such diverse ideas and cases of heritage.

A TRADITION-INSPIRED ROUND MUD HOUSE (BHUNGA) IN KUTCH, INDIA. *Image: Neel Kamal Chapagain.*

The paper will follow the keywords in the topic: Heritage, Conservation, and Heritage Management – particularly in the context of South Asia.

Idea of heritage

As I do every year in my inaugural course 'Heritage and Conservation Discourses' in the Masters in Heritage Management at Ahmedabad University's Centre for Heritage Management, I suggest that the fundamental inquiry into the idea of heritage can begin by looking at the equivalent words for heritage and conservation in vernacular languages in which we would like to understand the concepts and approaches. For example – in Nepal, the Nepali word '*Sampada*' has become an official translation to the word 'heritage'. However, the word '*Sampada'* means 'treasure' or 'property'. In that sense, what you own and value could be the interpretation that makes '*Sampada'* as the equivalent word to 'heritage'. However, I must highlight that it is not a colloquial meaning but an 'educated' meaning. When one converses to general public, one has to add some qualifier before the word 'sampada', such word to heritage in Nepali alone may not imply heritage, but it does push us to realize that there already is a multi-faceted understanding of the concept. Another observation I make in communications among the Nepali speakers (or readers) – through general conversation or media or written texts, is that the general trend is always to use a few words together to discuss the umbrella idea of 'heritage'. For example – *Nepali kala sanskriti* (Nepali Art and Culture), *haamra aitihasik*, *dharmik ra sanskritik sampada* (our historical, religious and cultural heritage), and so on.

KAILASHNATH TEMPLE COURTYARD IN ELLORA CAVES, INDIA. *Image: Neel Kamal Chapagain.*

The above exploration can be extended to any language just like how I do in my class, drawing upon the diversity of students; for example – *Dharohar* (used in Hindi as well as in Nepali), *Virasat* (mostly used in Hindi), and so on. Some languages in South Asia may have a specific word that comes closer to heritage, but it has a specific genealogy. For example – In Bangla, the word is '*Eitijyo*' which is a very encompassing word that does not just limit itself to historic or monument or tradition but it is a colloquial word that can be used for all forms of heritage as we understand, but it is primarily so personal or family-affiliated. The availability of the word *'Eitijyo'* in Bengali community tells us that the over-arching idea exists in this particularly community, and the particular colloquial word does not need any qualifier like the case in Nepali language. Similar is the word '*Paitrikam*' in Malayali, which originates from its root which implies paternal inheritance. Hence, as much as Bangla word is gender neutral and referring to family inheritance, the Malayali seems to be gender-biased. However, in colloquial terms, the gender issue is not so pronounced, hence they both equally represent the same meaning 'heritage'. Gujarati also has a distinct word '*varso*' which to any Gujarati speakers remind of the idea of heritage, but without any need of qualifiers – it is an encompassing word equivalent to heritage.

This implies that the crisp translation of the idea of 'heritage' is difficult in many languages in South Asia, yet there are a few languages which captures the idea aptly in a single and commonly used word. Where it is crisply captured by a single word, the word actually is inclusive of diversity of expressions under the idea of heritage. Where the vernacular word needs a qualifier to explain what actually is meant in the conversation, the qualifiers reminds us that the translated word could mean natural or cultural or traditional or historical, and so on. This suggests that in these linguistic contexts, the idea of heritage is mostly inclusive of

all possible dichotomies that we may want to classify heritage into. The fact that the idea of heritage does not resonate immediately to a vernacular speaker probably hints to another scenario where heritage may not stand out as prominently as we may like to romanticise. I think this is an important point we (experts) need to understand that the idea may be entrenched deep into everyday life but not so promptly articulated in everyday language. Such a scenario in South Asia actually calls us for a richer and immersed engagement with the idea of heritage than a simply expert-driven (at times pre-conceived) identification of heritage. I elaborate this with two examples.

Leora Pezarkar, a student (already graduated in 2017) from the Masters in Heritage Management programme at Ahmedabad University, spent her two months practicum in 2016 in a village in Kutch – a region in Western India. Assigned with a task of listing heritage resources in the given context, Leora – at first, was guided by the villagers to an old fort and a temple for obvious reasons that the community could also associate, seeing an outsider like Leora being interested in 'heritage'. However, as she continued her discussions with them, and worked collaboratively in exploring the discourse of heritage in that local context, she was able to come up with a range of other 'heritage' elements in the village. That exercise got the villagers excited about the idea of heritage, and Leora prepared a newsletter for them. In a year or so, this exercise triggered a kind of 'heritage movement' in the community, which is now taking shape in an initiative that aims to integrate heritage ideas in their local development plan.

PATAN DURBAR SQUARE, NEPAL. *Image: Neel Kamal Chapagain.*

It is also important to note how the reference to heritage may differ among the professionals, but also between the professionals and other communities. I have referred one such example I came across while I was curiously exploring about a temple that had an overgrowing tree in and around it. At once, it looked like the temple was destroyed by the temple but the closer look revealed that the roots of the temple were holding bricks and other elements of the temple despite seemingly damage done by the tree already. Trying to understand the values and conservation issues, I approached some local community members

who were busy socializing at that very space as part of their daily routine pastime. On my question about what was important to them, they told me that for them both the trees and the temple were equally important, and that they found my question out of context. My question was also extended to the idea about the authenticity and historicity as well as what was the threat there (Chapagain, 2016).

The idea of heritage then gets nuanced in practice when we are not sure whether heritage always deserves to be 'preserved'. In other words, situations will arise where heritage will be alive by destroying its material manifestations, or an attempt to preserve and manage a heritage may actually convert a living heritage into a dead fossil or mere a piece of document. For example – in the Tibetan Buddhist practice of creating sand mandala, the heritage is kept alive by following the ritual of dismantling the sand mandala at the end of the ritual and not by preserving the art form (which unfortunately was a recommendation in one consultant's recommendation to one of the UNESCO offices in South Asia).

Yet, there could be a need of managing such heritage, in absence of which the fear would be that we may lose it anyway. In other circumstances, there are cultural appropriations of our heritage (mostly sites) that need to be understood at multiple levels before we clear those cultural layers in order to retain certain material and historic values of the particular heritage. Yet, while allowing cultural appropriations, there is also a challenge of preventing other tendencies of encroachment and so on. This complications of heritage is what I intend to discuss here – mostly drawing from the South Asian experiences. I will continue further discussion in two parts: What is conservation, and how do we engage with it?

The approach of conservation

Similar to the previous discussion on the translation of the word 'heritage' in Nepali language, the word 'conservation' gets equated in Nepali language with words which would actually mean 'repairs', 'maintenance', and sometimes 'uplifting'. However, these words and concepts are not necessarily separated from the mainstream construction practices. In other words, the idea of conservation is already inbuilt within the framework of constructing anything. In the Indian literature of temple building, there exists a term that probably is the closest term resonating with 'conservation'. The term is '*jirnoddhara'*, meaning uplifting the old or weak one (improving the dilapidated one). This term and process is elaborated on some traditional texts including the Mayamata. This is seen in wider practice in many temples in South India. Binumol Tom discusses this concept of *jiirnoddharana*[1] in detail (see Tom, 2013 for a rich discussion).

There is a slight difference here between the term conservation and *jirnoddhar*. In *jirnoddhar*, the emphasis on the historic material is not explicit in the sense that the material permanency is not envisioned. Instead, the design intent and the ritual processes are strongly emphasized. One common view the approach of *jirnoddhar* shares with other approaches pertaining to Buddhist and other religious heritage contexts in South Asia is that there is no explicit need of permanent existence of any material manifestation, implying that they may always be subjected to modification and uplifting. In this aspect, many of the traditional practices contradict the core essence of the material conservation that dominated the international conservation ideology until recently. Yet, the South Asian view is not so simply deductible to only the idea of impermanence, rather I would argue that it is related to continuous existence of the idea (both tangible and intangible), not necessarily the material form from the historic point of view. I will elaborate this with an experience I had gone through.

[1] There may be slight variations of spellings on this term. Tom uses this spelling, and I have used slightly different version of the spelling due to my familiarity of the same term in Nepali language. The meaning is same, however.

TAJ MAHAL WITH ONE OF ITS MINARETS UNDER MAINTENANCE WORK AMIDST HEAVY TOURIST VISITATION. *Image: Neel Kamal Chapagain.*

Elsewhere (Chapagain, 2013) I have discussed a problem of conservation with reference to a 15th century wall paintings at a site where I was coordinating the project activities on site. When it came to the public's notice that our team of wall paintings restorers were going to leave the lost part of a historic image of Bodhisatva as 'missing', the elderly members of the community began to raise their voice asking for completion of the painting. For them, the Bodhisatva image was like a living deity. Hence, they would not worship it in its amputated form (Chapagain, 2013). However, they had not done anything to the partially existing painting on their own, rather they had resorted most of their religious activities in a new *gompa*, instead of restoring it. Hence, the discourse is not a straightforward one, and it seems to take shape when the discussion begins. This is well argued by Laurajane Smith in her 2006 book where she aptly discusses that 'there is no such thing as heritage' in its absolute sense but there is a cultural process which determines something as heritage (Smith, 2006). Therefore, when the process of ascribing values begins, there may likely be different view points in most of the contexts – that the professionals need to appreciate or negotiate.

Gamini Wijesuriya discusses the dilemma of conservation practice in Sri Lanka, where the activities by monks in their living heritage site have been termed by conservators as ' pious vandalism' (Wijesuriya, 2001). The issue here is between the act of restoration (following the Buddhist spirit of merit making and the desire to enhance the spirit of the religious monument) and the romantic idea of preservation or conservation. Gamini also points out that the cases of pious vandalism has taken place in many other contexts too, including Europe. There was an incident from Bhutan that I experienced which may also be called as 'pious vandalism'. In Bhutan, one of the high monks in a Buddhist monastery in Central Bhutan told that his wish of the lifetime was to get a new roof over his monastery. When asked about values, he clarified that for a Buddhist to earn merit, you needed to add onto the offerings and not to limit one's contribution any short of the maximum extent. Hence, being the head monk, he believed his duty was to uplift his 'heritage' beyond what it was then. By doing that, he would actually ensure that the life of the monastery is prolonged, and the service of the monks are enhanced, hence all justified for their duty.

All these anecdotal but often commonly found instances in South Asia suggest that a straight forward idea of conservation out of *Venice Charter* may not be the right approach in South Asia. In fact, we may not even aim for practicing 'conservation' for what it means. Therefore, I feel comfortable in calling it a heritage management practice, where there are some negotiations, some debates, and some strategic decisions to achieve the core heritage values with utmost attention given to the values and aspirations of maximum stakeholders as possible. Hence, I think the paradigm in South Asia is that of Heritage Management, and not necessarily of conservation.

Towards heritage management: How do we engage with heritage

The above discussion on the idea of heritage and approach of conservation in the South Asian contexts indicate that heritage needs to be understood in its plurality and the conservation approach needs to be re-thought in order to accommodate the evolution or change of multiple engagements with heritage. To me, this calls for a management approach which is slightly more than the conservation approach with respect to the emphasis on community or culture specific identification of heritage, and intervention strategies derived through a negotiation or mutual dialogue. In addition to these, the heritage management today also calls for addressing the contemporary global economic system where the conservation also needs to be economically justified and sustained. Some established discourses on management may offer perspectives to connect the heritage resources to the market force but with adequate care about the heritage values. In South Asian context, it appears that the conservation alone is not a sufficient approach, it must be seen through the lens of managing values and aspirations. This is generally a recognized theme, however how one practices heritage management is yet to be widely discussed and established in the South Asian context. Currently running a programme on Heritage Management within the South Asian's largest economy and culturally diverse country, I have realized that despite the immense need to manage the heritage in South Asia, the society is yet to be awakened to the positive contribution that the heritage practices can make. The common perception about heritage is still somehow ill-informed with the misperception that the heritage is only about past, hence may not be complementing a future looking society. Since the discourse of development seems so powerful in contemporary socio-economic context, it is very important to establish that a genuine and critical heritage discourse can complement a just development discourse. This shall be the drive of heritage management paradigm that we have begun to see in South Asia. Recently concluded ICOMOS General Assembly in New Delhi, India with its *Delhi Declaration* also calls for it.

WALLED SETTLEMENT OF LOMANTHANG IN THE TRANS-HIMALAYA OF NEPAL.
Image: Neel Kamal Chapagain.

Conclusion

The above discussion implies that there may not be a universal concurrence on what is heritage and how it should be conserved. The experiences from South Asia suggest that the very idea of heritage is a plural one except a fundamental basis that heritage has to be valued by communities and it must make sense to the contemporary time. The approach of conservation, therefore, cannot simply be reduced to a process of 'arresting decay' or a 'freezing the time' or 'restoring most of heritage back to a glorious past' but it should mean to restore values and increase significance at present and future. Therefore, it calls for a contextual rethinking of the heritage idea and conservation strategies. In addition, it also calls for enabling such processes by a sensitive management approach which draws from inclusive approach with economic as well as environmental sustainability.

In fact, at times, the action of destruction may entail the essence of conservation. The case of sand mandala dissolution is a classic example to keep in mind, where the continuation of heritage happens through the destruction of material evidence of the particular heritage practice. Where conservation seems to be the right intervention, even then the approach of conservation may have a range of varying intervention strategies and much of such decision need to be taken through a consultation process and may not always be associated with materiality. Conservation often may imply continuation of the practices and engagement with the 'heritage'. It also seems logical to think that such plurality and diversity occurs at all other contexts too and not just South Asia. As much as I find the diversity of concept and practices on heritage and conservation in South Asia, I also equally feel that such diversity exists in other parts of the world too. There is the universality in the diversity.

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