

# Living with Heritage: Including tangible and intangible heritage in the changing time and space

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**Abstract:** Kathmandu Valley, which now the compose of many cities and towns, is the result of centuries of evolution from small villages, hamlets and small towns. These cities evolved with the need and the lifestyle of people, a result of which gave birth to the magnificent art and architecture. The centuries old temples, squares, monuments, rest houses and water fountains are still present despite the frequent natural calamities like earthquake. The city which was once seemed to be designed for people and God now has to incorporate many things like population growth due to migration, urbanization, globalization and so on. The sudden influx of so-called “development” is putting the heritage and traditional values at risk. The integrated form of intangible heritage like rituals, festivals, mask dances and many more are the vehicle for the continuity of tangible heritage. But still in the heritage conservation practice, the focus has been on the tangible heritage. One of the major driving forces of heritage has been the indigenous people of Kathmandu Valley and the interconnectedness of their social life with the heritage. This paper is about the interrelationship with the tangible and intangible heritage in the changing dynamic of city, and how indigenous people are incorporating it concentrating only on Kathmandu city. This paper is based mostly on the field visit for the PhD of the author in 2014 and was initially presented in the conference Cultural Landscape and Heritage Values at University of Massachusetts, Amherst in 2015.

**Keywords:** Intangible heritage, tangible heritage, urbanization, historic city

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## 1. Background

Daniel Wright one of the British residents to Nepal during his stay in Kathmandu Valley from 1866 to 1876 wrote about Kathmandu Valley that “*In fact, at a first glance, the town seems to consist of almost nothing but temple*” [20] and he further wrote about the lifestyle of people as “... *it may be supposed that the religious festivals are somewhat numerous. To a stranger indeed they seem never ending and the marvel is when the people find time to earn their livelihood.*” [20]. After almost one and half century later these statements are still hold true to the certain extent. Still there were numerous monuments, temples, stupas, chaitya, water sprouts and as such scattered all over the Valley, apart form designated UNESCO Kathmandu Valley World Heritage Site. While the population growth and rapid urbanization had outnumbered, the ratio of the monuments and

temples was decreased. In addition to that the earthquake of 25<sup>th</sup> April 2015 did a massive damage to the monuments of Kathmandu Valley.

The earthquake of 7.9 magnitudes on 25<sup>th</sup> April and 7.2 magnitudes in 12<sup>th</sup> May 2015 made a major impact in the Historic Urban fabric of Kathmandu Valley. Before 25<sup>th</sup> April the ancient monuments were still intact along with the mushrooming high raise buildings, which were surrounding the old cities and started to cover the whole Valley. This earthquake was not a surprise for most of the Nepalese due to the frequent earthquakes and history of major earthquake almost every hundred years [3]. Even between the time of Wright and 25<sup>th</sup> April there was another big earthquake that is even referred in Nepalese history as a Great Bihar-Nepal Earthquake of 1934 which changed to a greater degree in the architectural landscape of the Valley [11]. During that earthquake of 1934 numerous monuments and temples were destroyed. In spite of the history of devastating Earthquake every hundred years, the monuments and temples of Kathmandu Valley were again reconstructed, repaired back. Some restored back to the original, some changed their style and shape while other were lost during the process [16].

Its not only the tangible aspects which makes Kathmandu Valley of outstanding universal value but also the intangible heritage in form of mask dances, chariot festivals, rituals and numerous festivals which are never ending process and integral part of vibrant heritage. Syncretism of Buddhism and Hinduism in a perfect harmony can be seen in the monuments, building and urban setting. The centuries old Newar Culture and the urban setting with excellent art and architecture are the reasons behind seven monument zone of the Kathmandu Valley to be listed in UNESCO World Heritage Site [2]. These intangible forms of heritage with the tangible as backdrops make this place one of the unique living heritage site in the world.

If we look at the heritage of Kathmandu Valley, the tangible and intangible form of heritage are interlinked form the very existence. While the conservation practice in heritage in terms of Nepal still follow the old school of heritage conservation with focus on the tangibility like specific monuments, temples, and collections. Consequently in the international context the heritage conservation widened to a great extent and is turning towards the holistic approach. Now heritage is not limited to what it used to be hundred years ago limiting to the collections, group of buildings and monuments. As it's broadened it's horizon to landscape, diversity, intangible and so on giving the various streams to be included. The patron organization of heritage – UNESCO, with the various convention under its flagship such as Conventions for Historic Urban Landscape, Conventions for Safeguarding Intangible cultural Heritage, Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions 2005, Convention on the Protection of the underwater cultural heritage and more is making an attempt to address the issues.

## **2. Changing Dynamics of Cities and Kathmandu Valley**

It's not only the cities of Kathmandu Valley but also the cities around the world are changing too. According to United Nation's data, more than World's half of the populations now live in the urban areas and by the 2050 this is expected to increase to 66 percent of world's total population [17]. This is changing the traditional fabrics of the cities along with the needs and priorities of the city dwellers. According to the UNESCO recommendations on Historic Urban Landscape, all the historic cities faces the pressure of Urbanization and Globalization, Development and Environmental change [15]. They are losing their functionality, traditional role and populations. The problems of the historic cities all over the world are similar following the similar pattern of growth.

Likewise the cities of Kathmandu Valley have also seen a huge change of urbanization, modernization, economic growth and globalizations and is also one of the rapidly growing urban agglomerations in South East Asia with the population growth of 3.9 percent yearly [5]. The change that Kathmandu Valley has seen is drastic and within just last few decades. Kathmandu Valley was kept isolated from the rest of the world [4]. Only after the overthrow of autocratic rule of Rana in 1951, Nepal became known to the world and followed modernization. This process was accelerated after the establishment of multi party democratic system, which opened way for many things in Nepal. And finally also due to the Maoist led so called “people’s movement” made many people to migrate to Kathmandu Valley from the other part of Nepal which resulted the massive urbanization [14]. With this modernization, the traditional infrastructures are being the mere aesthetic objects. Like once functional common water systems, rest houses are losing its significance in today’s modern society. The need of new buildings, broader roads, high market value of land and the urge to be like other developed modern cities are threatening the traditional structures even more. As the priority of people are changing so as of government. This can be seen in the recent road extension drive of the government, which even risked the ancient settlements of Kathmandu Valley. In add to that negligence of traditional system and indigenous values over the formal new system is speeding the loss of heritage. Even though the problems of Kathmandu are similar to the rest of the world’s cities, Kathmandu has one special character of being living historic city with its intangible heritage and tangible heritage inseparable.

Urbanization and migration in Kathmandu Valley is growing in the exponential rate. The three ancient cities, small villages and towns scattered over Kathmandu Valley now seemed to be joined together to form a single city [17]. The old cities have grown to the outer boundaries that used to be the cultivation fields. Indigenous people who used to live within the old cities now are migrating outside the older boundaries for the bigger and modern house. This also leads to weaken the ties with the place that their ancestors have been living for centuries. The culture of Newars, which are associated with the place and kinship gets weaken once they move out. The younger generations could not feel the traditional ties that their ancestors have. [13]

The issues like rural migration to city, real estate boom, economic progress in the Valley, and weak governance are making the pressure in traditional urban setting of the Kathmandu Valley. Centralized policy of government with the availability all the basic services like health, water, education, government offices, jobs and many more only in Kathmandu Valley is attracting people from all over Nepal. This in turn is affecting the traditional occupations like farming, pottery making, and so on. The land owners are selling their land at the high prices and opting for the other profession and many to the foreign jobs leaving their family behind [9]. Urbanization is making ripple effect in many sectors. The high rise buildings over the traditional buildings, encroachments, illegal construction is turning into urban slums [7]. The pleasant surrounds, the traditional urban landscape and traditional functional monuments are being demolished for the want of new things. Even though there are bylaws for the traditional houses people don’t comply with it now a days. In past people never build houses taller than the nearby temples.

### **3. Cultural Heritage of Kathmandu Valley**

Heritage is an inseparable part in the social life of the people as mentioned earlier in form of the festivals, rituals, everyday practices and cycles of life. These festivals and rituals take place in the temples, God houses, squares and the traditional spaces as they did hundred years before. Temples, monuments, *stupas*, *chaitys*, courtyards, performing stages and as such are the meeting place of

human interaction and magnificent art. Mary Slusser perfectly sum up with the phrase “*designed for Gods and men*” [10] and the examples are still living in the old streets of the Valley. The interwoven fabric of social lifestyle, art and generations old culture are responsible for the heritage of Kathmandu Valley. Among them, one of the unique and most important factors of the living heritage in Kathmandu Valley is the system called “Guthi” which is responsible for the tangible and intangible heritage. Guthi is a Newari word derived from Sanskrit word “Gosthi” meaning society or association and with the course of time the word became corrupted to Guthi [8]. Guthi in Newar society is made up of extensive network of various Guthi based on caste, place of residence, functions and as such. Most of the Guthi are mono-caste while some of the Guthi which has the bigger function is made up of multi caste like the Guthi of *Machhindranth* or *Karunamaya* Chariot festival in Patan [13]. Guthi can be compulsory or voluntary depending on the nature of Guthi like Si Guthi or Sana Guthi meaning death Guthi to take care of cremation ceremony of dead people are compulsory Guthi for all Newars and Tva: Guthi meaning locality Guthi are compulsory for the Jyapu caste of Kathmandu while other Guthi like related to temples and festivals depend on the wish of the family. There are numerous Guthis within the Newar society but it can be categorized into four groups as Sana Guthi, Twa: Guthi (Locality Guthi), Guthi for temples and festivals [12] and Digu Dyo: Guthi which is the for worshipping lineage deity and only family members are concerned [19].

Most of the religious and social functions within the Newar society are carried out through the Guthi system [10]. Guthi being an integral part of social life to Newars, they should be members of at least one Guthi. But a single person can be a member of numerous Guthi with different functions. The main idea behind the Guthi was to involve people within community, socialize them and help each other to accomplish certain task. And some of the compulsory Guthi where the family are not member then they are treated as outcaste which meant a great deal in the traditional Newar society. Prayag Raj Sharma has mentioned in his book about the Guthi record in the inscriptions found in the Kathmandu and the Guthi has been continuing since 5<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> Century CE till date (Sharma, as cited in Toffin, [12]). This system was confined within Kathmandu Valley until 1768 but only after the Shah rule this system was seemed to spread all over Kathmandu Valley [8]. Toffin argue that as the Guthi records were not found outside the Valley before that does not mean that it was not present [12]. But Guthi has inter-woven linkages with social life of Newars from birth to death other than just endowments, temples and festivals. Even though Guthi found outside Kathmandu Valley were to fund the social and religious institution but not associated with the daily life of people as in case of Newars.

The heritage of Kathmandu valley has been continuing for centuries not just because of design and rebuilding but also due to the traditions, which people take care of through indigenous system called *Guthi* [11]. Most of the temples and festivals were self-sustainable as they have funds in form of land and property to sustain financially. Royals, influential people and also general people made the endowments while constructing the temples, monuments or rest houses. Due to the change in political power and its will, there has been a significant change in the endowments rights. Nationalization of the Guthi lands and establishment of the formal Guthi Organization by the government to take care of all the endowment lands made local people separate from the endowments. They have to go to Guthi organization for funds and that too was delayed and not enough. As the prices of everything have increased in an incredible way compared to thirty years back. Still most of the Guthi which are in charge of the monuments and festivals are getting what they used to get back then [1]. Due to the lack of funds and more responsibility people are reluctant to the traditional jobs. There has also been a considerable misuse of the Guthi lands and most of

the properties have been lost. The misuse of the Guthi Lands have been even accepted by the Guthi Corporation also [18]. The dramatic increase in the land prices of Kathmandu Valley is also behind the misuse and loss of Guthi lands.

Still with many problems and challenges the traditional festivals, rituals and taking care of temples have been continuing. As the heritage is so much linked with the religion and social structure. People of various castes are involved in organizing festivals as if this happens in a pattern. Everyone knows their role in the society and functions to be carried out. There has not to be any direction from the government or any organization to carry out the festival. It's like it set in the automatic time and settings, the rituals, functions and festivals carry out in their respective time by the concerned Guthi members. Lets see as an example from the *Yenya Punhi* festival. In picture below is Manandhar community (community of oil pressers form Kathmandu) is making stand for lightening butter lamps in the evening during Indra Jatra festival in 2014. They are the people specialize in making scaffolding and pressing oil out of mustard seeds traditionally. In spite of involvement in the different occupation, still these jobs are carried out by the Manandhar community Guthis.



**Fig. 1: Manandhar community making wooden frame for festival to light oil lamps during night.**

Next picture below is from the same festival but in the different locality. The stage being made to celebrate the festival *Yenya Punhi* in Kathmandu. The Temple at the back is of Aakash bhairab where the deity is kept for the whole year and during the week long festival the deity is kept in front of the temple in the high raised stage which is decorated beautifully. The community of farmers of that locality takes care of the festival as well as deity and temple all around the year turn wise.



**Fig. 2: Farmer community of Wongha locality preparing for the festival on the first day.**

These are just a few examples of the traditional association; there are hundreds and thousands of these associations taking care of each and every social, religious and cultural activities in Kathmandu Valley. With the history of hundreds of years these festivals are still celebrated in the traditional ways as it used to be celebrated. Though there has been some modern touch in celebrations but the core value being unchanged. Due to the change in the professions people are taking up than the traditional, it's making difficult to carry out the traditional functions. Salaried work, younger generations reluctant to join the old traditions, lack of fund for Guthi operations, government not giving attention to the traditional organizations and as such is making loss of traditional heritage [13]. Still with so many hurdles form of living heritages seen in the Kathmandu Valley is quite a commendable.

#### **4. Interconnectedness of Heritage**

As mentioned earlier the traditional landscape of the Kathmandu Valley had gone through a great deal of change. But still in the changing landscape the traditional rituals and functions are getting the continuity. The interesting examples of this continuity is seen in the festival of Yenya Punhi (Indra Jatra) festival. Most of the information about this festival was collected during the festival of 2014 duing the process of data collection for the PhD research. The memory of the past clearly reflected in the present practices - with connection of memory and place. As for the festival Yenya Puni is the multi-layered festival of Kathmandu, where different sub-festivals are present in this grand celebration of Kathmandu for seven to eight days (depending on the lunar calendar) celebrated by the indigenous inhabitants of Kathmandu Valley. This paper will discuss only about the rituals and activities during the Yenya Punhi festival where the place has gone complete change. And the place having different functions in the everyday use but during the specific time of the year the place comes to alive as in past with the memories of people.

During the festival there is one day the ritual called *Apa kobue* or *palcha biyou*, where the family of the deceased person of that year goes around city with the burning incense stick and lightening butter lamps along the path. The traditional musical groups of various traditional quarters also accompany them along the route. All the deities along the routes are worshipped while the people residing the route and the caretakers of the deities seen cleaning the place and decorating the place for that circumambulation. According to Slusser, Kathmandu was the walled city and after the Shah King took the valley in 1769, he considered the surrounding mountain as a natural defensive wall than the actual wall of the city. So the walls were not taken care and were turned to ruins. Now there are no any traces of walls remaining. But people go around the city along the path of the walls. The wall was the boundary of the city and to go with light is to show the light to the dead spirits to the heaven [10]. Some knowingly or some just following the rituals, people are still continuing the traditions of going around the old city boundary.

The next example is the mask dance called “Devi Pyakha” from the place called Kilagal of Kathmandu from the same festival. This dance is very much ritualistic and has to go training and many rituals behind the closed doors before they perform in audience. They perform their dance in five places of old city of Kathmandu, that too in specific time and specific date during the seven days long festival. As most of the ritualistic dances they perform their dance in the raised platform called “*Dabu*”. In all the places where the play is performed have that raised platform except the one place called Indra chwok, which is performed at a cross road without any raised platform. During the interview with the older members of the dance it was found that the place used to have a raised platform before the great earthquake of 1934. After that earthquake the place which had the raised platform and the surrounding area were rebuilt in the new style, with the broader roads and also the neo-classical style were added in the Nepalese architecture. The surrounding houses with the raised platform were demolished to make a road which was named “New Road”. So people still continue with the memory of space, which is connecting past with the present. The road which is so busy with traffic is blocked and the traditional dance of the deities are performed exactly in the place which is marked by the piece of colorful cloth as seen in the fig. 3.

Even though, there is no any trace of the past in the physical structure but when it comes to the intangible heritage it seems people are remaking the tangibility out of memories. While city planners seem to ignore the traditional practices and changing the whole dynamics of the place. Here in this paper are mentioned only two examples but there are many more examples where intangibility is making tangible alive in Kathmandu Valley. Since the focus of the government for the heritage being mostly monuments and sites, there is a threat to the heritage like in Kathmandu Valley where tangible and intangible are interconnected making it a living heritage. These memories of the place if not passed to the younger generations or if there is not means for its continuity then its very easy to get lost for ever.



**Fig. 3: Below the red piece of cloth the Dance is performed which used to be a raised platform before the Earthquake of 1934.**

### **5. Keeping Traditions Alive in Modern Society**

Nothing remains constant especially when it's living or organic. Similarly the living heritage of Kathmandu – Yenya Punhi festival has undergone many changes and evolved with the time. Here I won't be discussing the change in terms of rituals and minor detail but the change brought by the modernization, globalization and how indigenous community are adapting to change in order to give continuity to their past. The Nepalese society saw the sudden change after 1950's when the Nepal opened to the outside world. Many institutions started to form like the department of archeology for the overall caretaker of heritage. The traditional social association "Guthi" was also nationalized in 1964 and form "Guthi Sansthan" which it brought the sharp change in the heritage management and continuity of the traditional practice and heritage conservation. The tops down approach of heritage conservation prove to be a failure with the establishment of government institution over the community oriented management of funds and land. With this government corporation many of the land and properties were embezzled. Now the traditional social structure "Guthi" face the fund crunch for the continuity of the festivals. Some lost due to the fund crunch, loss of manpower and while some due to the change in the lifestyle.

Most of the festivals that were celebrated centuries ago are getting continuity in Kathmandu Valley and mainly through the traditional association. In due course of time there has been certain changes in the festivals as the intangible heritage is always evolving and adding new elements to make it dynamic. As in this paper we are discussing Yenya Punhi festival, this will be related to the changes brought by the modern society in the festival. Some were the revival of the lost elements of festival in the modern way. The examples presented here are from the field observation at Yenya Punhi Festival of 2014 during the month of September.

Dabu Pyakha meaning stage play used to be one of the elements of this festival where the group of local youth used to perform plays in the social and political issues in the neighborhood. This play was shown in most of the neighborhood for seven days during the *Yehya Punhi* festival and even for the longer days and even they made the tour to other neighborhood apart from their own if the plays are liked by people. The actors, writers and directors all used to be the local youth. The plays mostly used to be on the social issues [6]. In almost every locality there were permanent performing place for dance, music and ritual activities, which was a raised platform in rectangular or square shape called in Newari language *dabu*. But it's now no more shown during the festival as these stage plays are shadowed by the modern days cinemas and TV channels.

In order to revive the lost heritage, a group of like-minded people started an initiative in the digital form with the name called Newa Film Festival in the Newari language. The short film festival was shown every night in the place called Janabahal in Kathmandu. The chosen place was a traditional raised platform “*Dabu*” but the technology were new. At the back of this platform a big screen were kept and there were chairs in front for the audience. There were a good number of filmmaker participants as well as audience. In the end there was a prize for the best films to encourage the filmmakers. For this the local youth club also joined the hands along with many organizations. In this course, the raised platform, which was in bad condition, was also renovated with the help of local club. So the revival and continuity of the heritages has been done in the new ways keeping its core value. In the process some new elements are added while some traditional touch is lost but it's a process of change as nothing lasts forever as it is.



**Fig. 4: Audience in the film festival. (a modern version of *dabu pyakha*)**



**Fig. 5: By passers reading the schedule of the movies that was to be screened.**

The next example of modernization is the influence of social media and technology. Social media and technology seem to be impacted in the sense of information dissemination and also to some extent helping in the documentation. This was seen during the festival of *Yehya Punhi* festival with many Facebook pages, Instagram pictures, tweets, and pictures in social media. Also this helped in providing information on the series of events that takes place during the festival in different part of Kathmandu. As Pradhan had questioned in his doctoral thesis as is *Yehya Punhi* is one festival or conglomeration of festivals [6]. There are series of events taking place during this festival and it's almost impossible to see all the aspects of this festivals due to the simultaneous events in different parts. So people were posting the information about the events in their locality or the places they

visited during festival. It's not only in the street of Kathmandu but also in the virtual world the colors of festival could be seen.

It was interesting to see many participants from younger generations. There are now also many blogs, Facebook pages and so on aiming to give information about certain festivals, historic places, events and as such. In addition to that the festival of Yenha punhi in 2014 also saw the photography competition in Facebook with the pictures of the festival. Though this seem to be not in a big scale but enough to show those younger generations to take pride in their culture. Also we cannot neglect the narcissist part of social media and intentions of people using behind it.

The last example here being discussed is the formalization of the traditional associations. These association called Guthi which has been discussed earlier are now emerging as a formal group involving in the various activities other than the religious and social activities. Most group seem to be working on establishing the identity of the different groups then the culture and heritage, though identity is also a part of culture. These groups are also helping on getting people together and raising their voice in different issues, which also includes pressuring government to help in continuing the traditional cultures and heritage. These groups are now working as an institutions registered in the government, with the formal office, websites and so on. These organizations also help in promoting the cultural heritage like giving training to youth in indigenous musical instruments, organizing various competitions, organizing rally in the indigenous festivals and many more.



**Fig. 6: Formal website of Jyapu Mahaguthi which represent the farmer community of Kathmandu Valley**



**Fig. 7: Manandhar community of Dhalashikwa locality of Kathmandu representing themselves with banner during pole erecting ceremony of Yenya Punhi Festival.**

Now with the influence of modernization, globalization and urbanizations in every sector including cultural heritage, these rituals and traditions cannot be isolated and performed as an isolated time capsule event. Here this paper is pointing out the three examples as an adaptation of the change form the festival.

## 6. Impact of 2015 Earthquake on Tangible and Intangible

The earthquake of 2015 did the immense loss to the built heritage of Kathmandu Valley apart from the human and financial loss. The skyline of the Kathmandu Durbar Square was changed to unrecognizable which used to be topped with the temples and monuments. 7.8 magnitude on 25<sup>th</sup> April and 7.1 on May 13 brought the life of people to stand still including the frequent aftershocks that continued until one year. This section does not want to deal with the impact of earthquake as

it will need a separate discussion paper for that. Here the point on mentioning the earthquake of 2015 was to highlight the festival of Yenya Punhi of 2015 that took place just four months after the earthquake. Still when the monuments were fragile, with most of them in ruins and people still vulnerable to aftershocks, the indigenous people of Kathmandu carried out the centuries old festival of Yenya Punhi. The belief of people not to stop the procession and the rituals which they believed would bring more bad luck to the country if they did so helped to continue it.

The spirit of people and the management system “Guthi” which was started hundreds of years ago helped to continue even in the time of crisis effectively. The traditional space was still the backdrop where the functions and rituals took place. Even the festival of 2015 was not that joyous as in the other years but the continuity of it was vital. And also because this festival was integrated with the social life and identity of the people. In other words it was a symbolic for the people of Kathmandu Valley who are in habit of rebuilding after every earthquake.

## 7. Conclusion

There are no cities in the world, which could resist change, as change is inevitable. So do Kathmandu Valley. As the other Historic cities, it also faces the pressure of urbanization and globalizations, development and environment. In the mean time this city is also unique as it's a city where people still live the heritage and has an immense integration of heritage in the social life. So for the city like this traditional measure of conservation heritage or city planning approach cannot be used. The integral component of the heritage which makes its outstanding like rituals, traditions, festivals, connection of people with the place and with the heritage should be well recognized. It's not the tangible component of the city but the intangible component, which makes the city living and unique. Change cannot be stopped but should be given space for it so that it does not lose its significance and core value. The dynamic nature of historic should be well recognized.

The indigenous people who are putting the effort out of their social customs and traditions will not be able to survive for so long if government does not intervene to support, letting the community to take the lead. The most important consideration to be taken in the heritage management of place like Kathmandu is that heritage is interlinked. The tangible and intangible could not exist solely as they are interdependent on each other. Even if they do, the essence of the heritage will be lost.

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