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Public Archaeology: A Case Study of Bhajya Pukhu

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Abstract

This paper explores the concept of public archaeology, using an example of a case study of Bhajya Pukhu, a historic pond in Bhaktapur, Nepal. Public archaeology involves the community, educates people, and makes archaeological knowledge open to everyone. It helps bridge the gap between academic research and public understanding. The study shows how public archaeology helps preserve and revive its cultural identity, focusing on the restoration of Bhajya Pukhu. The project used community involvement, traditional restoration methods using local resources, and discovered important artifacts during excavation. It highlights sustainability, inclusivity, and ethical practices in public archaeology. By looking at trends like public engagement, new technologies, and managing cultural heritage, the study emphasizes the importance of community participation in preserving historical sites. The case of Bhajya Pukhu shows that public archaeology not only brings cultural heritage back to life but also strengthens community identity and connects people to their past. This research highlights how public archaeology can protect cultural heritage for future generations.

Key words: Public archaeology, Bhajya-pukhu, Community, Heritage.

Introduction

This paper explores the concept of public archaeology with references to a case study of historical site *Bhajya Pukhu* in Bhaktapur. Public archaeology is an important part of archaeology that focuses on involving communities and educating people. It helps to share archaeological discoveries and methods, creating a conversation between archaeologists and the public. *Bhajya Pukhu* is recorded as a 17th century pond and was damaged in 1681 A.D. earthquake (Sarita Dhukhwa, 2080 B.S.) situated at western side of Bhaktapur Municipality. This study uses the

archaeological perspectives. The researcher argues that the public archaeology helps to revive the heritage, history and its identity.

Public archaeology is a branch of archaeology dedicated to engaging the public and making archaeological practices and findings accessible to non-professionals. It serves as both a practical approach and a theoretical framework aimed at democratizing archaeological communication and management. This sub-discipline allows for public involvement in preserving archaeological resources, functioning across various social and academic contexts (Richardson & Almansa-Sánchez, 2015). The term "public archaeology" was first coined in the U.S. in 1972 by McGimsey, who stressed the importance of preserving archaeological heritage for public understanding. Unlike traditional archaeology, which primarily focuses on past events, public archaeology examines the interactions between archaeology and contemporary society, taking into account cultural, economic, and political influences. This encourages archaeologists to engage with both their peers and the broader public (Matsuda, 2004). In discussions about public archaeology, defining the "public" and "community" can be complex. It raises questions about who is included—local communities, tourists, religious groups, developers, media, and others. The meanings of "public" and "archaeology" can vary based on social, cultural, and geographical contexts, making hands-on practice essential for effective public archaeology (Lorna Jane Richardson, 2015).

Bhajya Pukhu, also known as Bhaju Pokhari, is a historic pond located in ward number 1 of Bhaktapur municipality, Nepal. The total area of pond including plinth is 1.6646 sq/km (32 ropani, 11 anna, 2 paisa). The pond is structured in three layers with the dimension of the east-west length: 104 m, the north-south length: 80 m, width of top plinth: 6.5 m, width of lower plinth: 6 m. It is believed that the Bhajya pukhu was damaged in 1681 A.D. earthquake.

Research Problem

The reconstruction of Bhajya-Pukhu gives a new shape and structure of the pond that significantly different than others pond. The historical and cultural study of the pond has been found rare. While some studies mention community efforts to restore the pond, they don't fully explore how recent excavation findings affect the history of the pond and the community's identity. The role of public archaeology in getting the community involved and raising awareness about cultural heritage is also not introduced in existing published articles. Addressing these gaps could give us valuable insights into the importance of Bhajya Pukhu and the connections between history and community involvement in preserving cultural heritage. So, the researchers have raised the questions like: What is the historical background of the Bhajya-pukhu? And why is public archaeology important in restoration of Bhajya Pukhu?

Objectives

This paper has specific objectives to fulfill the gaps i.e. to explore the historical background of the pond and to investigate the role and importance of public archaeology in the restoration of Bhajya Pukhu, focusing on community involvement.

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative approach, utilizing both primary and secondary data sources to explore the role of community involvement in the restoration of the historic pond Bhajya Pukhu.

Data Collection Techniques

For primary data, the participant observation method is used to collect relevant information directly from involved community interactions. Secondary data is gathered through a thorough review of the existing literature associated with the topic and study area, including books, scholarly journals, articles, and publications accessed from online libraries and various printed materials, focusing on the significance of community participation in restoration efforts.

Data Analysis

The synthesis of data from both sources aims to provide insights into the importance of public archaeology in the context of Bhajya Pukhu's restoration.

Empirical Review

This literature review aims to explore the origin of the pond, historical background and the involvement of community in the restoration of the pond. The review of the study has been conducted thoroughly.

Significance of Pond

Ponds in traditional settlements serve various functions, playing a vital role in cultural, environmental, and economic aspects of community life. They are often constructed for various rituals and festivals, highlighting their cultural significance (Joshi, 2080 B.S., p. 7). Environmentally, ponds hold important ecological value, as they can capture dust particles, contributing to a cleaner environment. Additionally, they play a critical role in disaster management, particularly in fire control. Beyond their functional uses, ponds enhance the beauty of cities, making them more beautifully pleasing. They also provide livelihoods through activities such as fish and duck farming, supporting local economies and sustenance (Joshi, 2080 B.S., p. 8).

There are various legends about the founding of Bhajya Pukhu. One famous myth, according to Munankarmi (2041 B.S.), is that the pond was built by a prominent man from the Malla period named Bhaju Kasa, to the south of Siddha Pokhari (the famous and largest pond in Bhaktapur) for the desire and dalliance of his queen (p. 172). However, he could not finish it in one night, and the remains of the mound still exist in the middle of the pond.

Similarly, another account by historian Purushottam Lochan Shrestha (2080 B.S.) in his article "Bhajya Pukhu ko Itihas" states that two sisters tried to build Siddha Pokhari and Bhajya Pukhu at the same time, but the younger sister could not complete her task in time (p. 25).

Public Participation During Restoration :

Phuyal (2025), explores in his article “The women of Bhajya Pukhu” that Bhajya Pukhu, once just a field, is now a historic site being restored with the help of hardworking local community especially women. He also claims that the authority prioritise on using traditional building methods and natural materials like black mud, which are better for the environment than concrete. This approach not only helps keep the pond's ecosystem healthy but also supports local jobs. The community is now more proud and involved, realizing the importance of their heritage. Bhajya Pukhu shows how local efforts can empower people and preserve cultural sites. The area is already looking better, with cleaner surroundings and more wildlife returning, creating a brighter future for both the pond and the community.

Likewise, Joshi, A. R. (2018). States in his article that the local community are working hard to bring the Bhajya Pukhu pond back to life. Since October 2017, they have been cleaning the pond, which had dried up because of nearby construction. The pond is part of an old water management system that has been neglected over the years, especially after the 1934 earthquake and modernization efforts. This system, called the *Hiti* system, was designed to manage water sustainably and protect against floods. However, unplanned building has disrupted this system, causing water problems. The author also claims that restoring ponds like Bhajya Pukhu and old canals could help solve these issues. The community's efforts, along with support from researchers, show how important it is to use traditional knowledge for modern water management.

Process of Restoration/Reconstruction :

The book *BhajuPukhu ra Jaleshor Mandir Punanirman* (2080 B.S.) by Bhaktapur Municipality states that in 2048, the Bhaktapur Municipality initiated a project of reconstruction of Bhajya pukhu involving local people, marking the beginning of significant efforts. During that time when trying to build the pond, it looked like bridge in the middle of the pond. The archaeology department stopped the work and suggested for excavation. In 2054, with the expiration of the tenure of the elected representatives, the restoration work was stopped.

Then-after, by 2058-59, the first excavation took place under supervision of a six-member consumer committee (p, 14), uncovering various artifacts dating back to the 12th and 13th centuries, alongside the construction of the plinth and steps around the pond (p. 60). Progress continued in 2069-70 with the management of sewer pipelines on the northern side. Under the supervision of Bhaktapur municipality, the pond, which has historical significance began reconstruction with the help of different community groups like sports committees, local clubs, schools, women's associations, farmer's union, police, the army, people's representatives.

Similarly, in 2074-75, further excavation and restoration work were carried out under the committee of six experts led by Dr. Purushotaam lochan Shrestha. The working group studied for seven months and presented a detailed study report to the municipality. Based on the historical evidence obtained from Bhajya pukhu, it was revealed that there was a Jaleshwar temple in the middle of the pond (Setopati, 2019). After that the reconstruction work was done through a consumer committee formed by local people. During construction, one of the problem was leaking

water from the pond, which needed to be addressed by filling black cotton soil in the southern and western areas. Finally, on Chaitra 27, 2079, the completion of the Bhajya Pukhu project was achieved.

Artifacts Found During Excavation:

Various artifacts found during the excavation of the pond that are Mritika Toran, Statue of sheep, Broken statue of Indra, Mritika Makar, Griffin, Flying lion, Broken stone statue of flying lion, Ammlock (Lotus pedestal), Singhasan (Lion throne), 12th century brick (Baatu appa), 16th-17th century Kung: apaa (Triangular brick), Digit carved brick, 17th-18th century (Libi swongto appa), Triangular semi-circular brick, Mesh-asan (Agni dev ko asan), Statue of Makara, Remains of bridge, Steps to temple, Sanctum sanctorum (Garvagriha), Wooden pillar, etc. (Shrestha, 1139 N.S.)

Result and Discussion

Findings from Excavation

Bhajya Pukhu was damaged in the earthquake of 1738 B.S. The *damphu* of Bhajya Pukhu is a mound of remains that appeared after the burial of Shikhamandir. With the help of artifacts found during excavation, the structure of Shikhar Mandir has been discovered as a west-facing Shiva temple with a single bastion. Three sides of the Garbhasthan are covered with silt (garo), while the front (west) or main entrance is open. There are also two holes to hold the beak instead of mud, which are likely the remains of the temple's main door. It is also revealed that the temple underwent restoration or preservation during various periods of the medieval ages, as indicated by artifacts found. For example, as per historian Purushottam Shrestha the pattern of numbers engraved on the bricks is similar to the pattern of metha(मेठ) of Kasthamandap from the 12th century.

The case study of Bhajya Pukhu highlights that the public archaeology plays significant role in preserving and revitalizing cultural heritage sites in Bhaktapur. The project was successfully completed with the help of public contribution i.e. labour contribution by the local women political committee of Bhaktapur, schools, private Guthis and local habitants as well. Some construction materials are also donated by the public as per the president of user committee Laxmi Narayan Rajlawat. The wooden artist Shyam Kumar Twayana also claimed that the artists were also contributed from the local habitants and constructed the pond and the temple with laborious ownership of the public heritages. It demonstrated the importance of community involvement, with local people and various organizations actively participating in the excavation and restoration efforts. The uncovering of historical artifacts from the 12th and 13th centuries provided valuable insights into the site's cultural and historical context. Restoration efforts included constructing plinths and steps, managing sewer pipelines, and addressing water leakage issues (Dumaru, personal communication, Falgun 4, 2081 B.S.). The project underscored the cultural significance of Bhajya Pukhu, which has served various community needs over the centuries. It also illustrated trends in public archaeology, such as sustainability, inclusivity, ethics, public engagement, and the use of technology. Despite challenges like water leakage, the collaborative efforts and application

of archaeological techniques ensured the successful completion of the project, demonstrating the value of public archaeology in preserving heritage and engaging communities.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the local bodies, communities and stakeholders engaging in heritage conservation, heritage excavation, and archaeological activities under their own ownership is an example of public archaeology. Despite that, it shows that public archaeology is important for preserving cultural heritage by involving local communities. With the help of local people and organizations, the restoration project uncovered valuable historical artifacts which proved the existing legends are not true. From the artifacts found during excavation, the history of Bhajya-pukhu goes back to 12th century. The entire legends and myths behind any historical sites cannot be regarded as the real history.

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