

Reflecting the Scenario of Earthquake (2015) Affected Communities in Historic Cities of Kathmandu Valley; Hassles or Delays?

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Abstract

Along with the establishment of Nepal Reconstruction Authority (NRA) vigorous discussions in bringing attention of communities as major responsibility in heritage conservation had been done in relation to earthquake affected cultural heritage areas in 2015. Likewise, numbers of reconstruction projects had also been forwarded and are been undertaken at different levels of implementation by respective authorities. In a figurative interpretation, NRA is at the verge of completion of reconstruction works in substantial numbers. However, the process of reconstruction still remained ambiguous to the communities of major cultural heritage sites plundering to dilemmas in implementation, of which many are still in disputes. Apart from the monument reconstruction in these areas, reconstruction works of private heritages have plunged into a prime concern on economic development through tourism promos unlikely to keeping cultural heritage essence, while the latter seems awful in fulfilling their basic demands of livelihood. This paper assumes either of these deeds is rampant on the long run of heritage conservation major goals.

Thus, it considers major 3 areas concentric to Kathmandu valley heritage sites i.e. Bungamati, Sankhu and Panga that are in the process of reconstruction and identify probable consequences brought over by ongoing enigmas among the communities and authorities in due course of reconstruction. It also seeks to assess them through the prism of authenticity criteria and sustainability measures of heritage assets based on community participation in reconstruction process. Ultimately, it highlights the necessity of instant and rapid reconstruction as well as conservation measures in Kathmandu valley by identifying the real owners, authorities and beneficiaries responsible for keeping intact the heritage resources.

Keywords : Reconstruction; Cultural heritage; Local Community; Authenticity and sustainability

I. Introduction

All 52 traditional settlements of Kathmandu valley are culturally rich and interwoven with Newar lifestyle, of which most of the peripheral historic settlements are overshadowed from policies of prime heritage discourse and development. Smaller in sizes, these settlements are equivalent to other principal Newar towns of the valley in terms of culture and heritage resources. A blindfold towards heritage sensitivity is seen not only into peripheral historic settlements but entirely over Nepal and predominantly in Kathmandu valley. It is evident in case of Sorhakhutte Pati relocation (Joshi, 2017) and in road widening amidst Sunakothi historic settlement (Waise, 2017).

Sympathetically, the 2015 earthquake greatly ravaged the cultural heritage sector along the country including main historic areas in Kathmandu valley. The impact seems severe into not only the monuments, but also into private buildings and other amenities. In the broader context of Nepal Earthquake, 498,852 houses have been collapsed and 256,697 houses were estimated to be partly damaged in the extent of 31 affected districts claiming approximately 9000 lives and 22000 injuries (GoN, 2015). According to the Department of Archaeology, of 691 historic buildings, 131 were completely destroyed and the remaining 561 were damaged from the 16 affected districts of the country (Taylor, 2015). The government report states the total of 1733 casualties and 13,303 injured people in Kathmandu valley alone. Only in the valley, around 73000 buildings collapsed and 67000 buildings were partially damaged. Looking at these figures of rampancy, it can easily be assumed that, to reconstruct and rebuild the losses is not just complex but also urges for instant and meticulous planning mechanism in the post-disaster programs of national policies.

A. Study Methodology

This study is based on critical literature review, interviews and physical reconnaissance survey on major 3 settlements lying in the periphery of Kathmandu valley namely; Bungamati, Sankhu and Panga supported with opinions from key informants. The key informants for this study comprise the general community members, professionals involved in reconstruction, volunteers, expertise and representatives from local authorities within these settlements. The collected information is revisited with the prism of authenticity criteria

and sustainability measures to signify community involvement in the reconstruction process of heritage settlements.

B. Review of Literature

What is a heritage?

Heritage at the very first is just the physical entity and now it has become the entangled relationships of social, cultural, economic activities reflected into the built environment and landscapes in its broader context. It can be understood in two dimensions; intrinsic values like sentiments, collective memory, etc. and instrumental values like socio-economic importance (Dumcke et.al. 2013). It is where people anchor to their roots, build self-esteem and restore dignity. Therefore, identity matters to all vibrant cities and its people. However, in “the past is a foreign country”, Lowenthal (1985) discusses the nostalgia for lost unity, harmony and authenticity as a part of historic cities. He further argues that the pace of change and development tends to attenuate the legacy that is integral to identity and well-being. In addition, Kawan (2013) argues for the concept of authenticity, which emerged at the time when conservation was thought no greater than to an extent of a monument or heritage area. Along with the broadening of heritage notion, the assessment of authenticity also grew complicated; from physical parameters to the spirit of place and relation to the values that community epoch to their place (UNESCO, 1978: 2005).

The cross-cutting nature of heritage not only affects the cultural policy but also various sectors like planning, agriculture, sustainability, etc. creating a difficult situation for any government to deal with (Dumcke et.al., 2013). Moreover, the experts from EUROMED (2011) argue that cultural heritage is most often overlooked into the national policy unless its influence in social, economic, local and international domain is made clear unlikely to its essence as engine for economic growth. So, the community involvement significantly plays role for over-lasting results in the long run as the conservation and reconstruction works in historic areas have high job potential and requires highly skilled and potentially rare skills.

“A million dollars spent on new construction generates jobs but 1 million dollars spent on rehabilitating a historic building generates 40 jobs.” (quoted from EUROMED, 2011)

C. Impact of 2015 Earthquake in Study areas

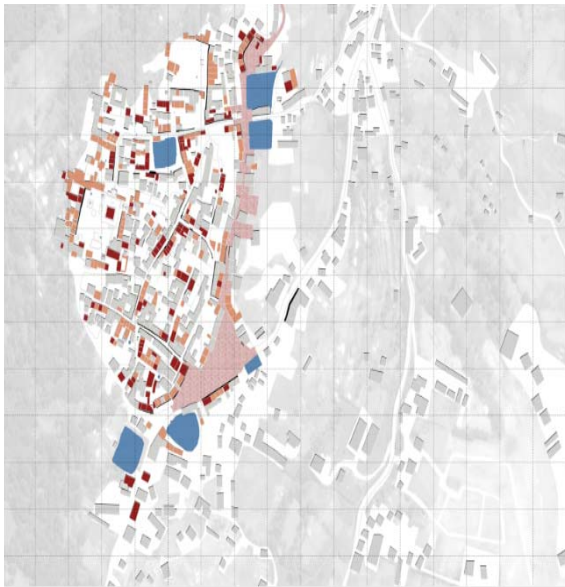


Figure 1: Damage Assessment Map of Bungamati (Source: KU Leuven, 2015)

The first settlement, Bungamati lies in Lalitpur metropolitan city around 10 km on the southern side of the Kathmandu valley. It is culturally very rich and probably one of the potential world heritage site regardless of the mega-earthquake 2015. Out of 1351 houses documented, 851 houses were completely

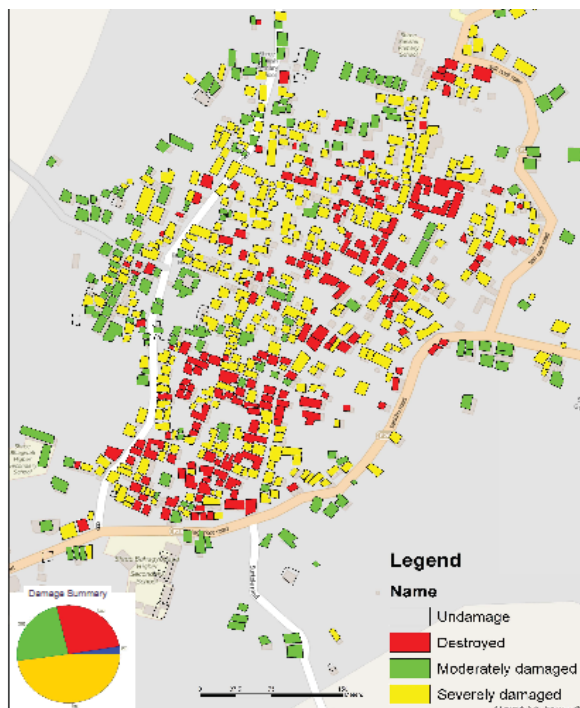


Figure 2: Damage Assessment Map, Sankhu (ICIMOD, 2015)



Figure 3: Damage assessment map, Panga (Source Author, 2015)

destroyed, including the Rato-Machchhendra Nath temple in Bungamati (Shrestha, 2016). The second settlement, Sankhu lies in Sankharapur municipality on the North-east side of the Kathmandu valley and probably the most attention drawn settlement after the earthquake. The municipality states that; out of 1416 houses, 1051 houses were completely damaged and 365 were partially damaged. Similarly, Panga lies 7 km far from Kathmandu to the south-west direction of Kathmandu valley in Kirtipur Municipality. This should be the least exposed settlement from the beginning of recovery phase after the earthquake 2015. Out of 788 houses surveyed, 342 houses were destroyed, 220 were damaged and remaining 226 had no significant damages (Kawan, 2015). The figure urges instant rehabilitation and reconstruction of damaged built environment in all the study areas. But the condition is contradictory for the community with compulsive displacement from their inhabitation. At the initial years after earthquake, most of the affected families sheltered in temporary structures which have shortly overturned into the remnants and their own buildings have now been converted into RCC buildings. Despite of the casualties and property loss recorded in these settlements, infrastructure development and cultural revival are yet other issues that remained undetermined.

II. RECONSTRUCTION ATTITUDES AND APPROACHES

NRA is established with extraordinary jurisdiction to consider various development sectors in earthquake affected areas under the *Reconstruction of earthquake affected infrastructures act, 2015* (NRA, 2016).

Initially this national body at its establishment had to suffer because of political conspiracies and squabble among the leading parties of Nepal (ibid). It has now been able to configure a significant progress on reconstruction and rebuilding stature with more than 80% beneficiaries registered for agreement (NRA, 2019). Following attitudes among the community and authorities including expressions from various key informants are noticed during the visit.

A. 2.5 Million Mindset and financial support

Along with the establishment of NRA, with denunciation, a public affirmation of 2.5 million rupees and 1.5 million rupees as a soft-loan was assured to the earthquake affected families in Kathmandu valley and remote areas respectively (Bhattarai, 2018). The decision proved to be blunt since it came with no consultation with concerned authorities like NRB and Ministry of Finance regarding the economic crisis caused during the time of national trauma. Around 1300 people somehow managed to get this soft loan for reconstructing their houses that ended soon blaming the inefficiency of the incentives and leaving anonymity in the selection procedures (Giri, 2018). Another denunciation was also made for providing financial incentives of Rs. 200,000 later increased to Rs. 300,000 for reconstruction works to the affected families in condition to adhere with standards proposed by DUDBC for earthquake safety.

People have started rebuilding their homes in these settlements in whatever capacity they have. The reason behind this hassle is not to risk their lives but to secure the family from additional natural adversities like rain and wind in the years to come. The key-informants from these settlements mentioned that the rebuilding initiatives would have already been started from the community level as such, if 2.5 million loan schemes had not flourished. The financial support dissipated in three phases to the beneficiaries is yet in its initial levels to more than half of the community nevertheless NRA has argued for significant progress of this support initiative.

B. Inundating Approaches of Reconstruction

Along with International Donors' Conference, the government of Nepal had pleaded for support in

various ways to the international community. As a result, different NGOs and INGOs got involved into these areas for recovery, rehabilitation and rebuilding of heritage structures. Despite controversies of indulging their vested interest by the support organizations in the beginning, some few like UN-Habitat, UNESCO, NSET, OXFAM, Lumanti, USAID, Action-Aid, etc. are still into action in uplifting various sectors of the study areas. UN-habitat along with Lumanti, CIUD and Sabah Nepal are involved in Bungamati for institutional capacity building and inclusive neighbourhood approach. While in Sankhu, a collaborative community-based approach was adopted. The first two have formulated their respective Reconstruction Committee with the inclusion of local political leaders, community representatives into the work force namely BARDeC and Sankhu Reconstruction Committee (SRC). In the latter, the community revived the already existing community disaster management committees (CDMC) to deal with post-earthquake reconstruction.

Coordination other than competition is vital, in reconstruction and disaster mitigation activities, to build back better. The lack of coordination among various agencies and institutions ultimately defies their role of being responsible for developing and decision making in their respective precincts. All of these settlements have a complaint of duplication and overlapping projects to imply by organizations in the field regarding post earthquake activities. Most importantly, during the time of involvement, these projects basically concerned in revitalization of open spaces, infrastructure development and capacity building passes overhead of the community.

C. Heritage: a commodity?

Public monuments are the core heritage resources in all of the settlements in Kathmandu valley but the present state is about reconstruction of private residential buildings, which are yet not considered into heritage discourse. Nevertheless, majority of the community members were in favour of the RCC buildings, while very few sought for traditional building technology in all three study areas. In another perspective, their urge to this intervention is safety, which they interpreted from the neighbouring standing concrete buildings. According to the key informants, only few if not negligible community members showed

interest in rebuilding their houses in traditional way provided, they will have incentives while rest witnessed the demise of old buildings.

The present ongoing reconstruction projects in the study areas demonstrate many opportunities to invest, innovate and explore in the field of heritage conservation and tourism sectors. The trend is to seek instrumental values and enhance the quality of built environment. Unfortunately, the post-disaster context is deterrent with every single individual, organization and institution turning into an opportunist.

D. Volunteerism and Reconstruction

It has been clear that instantly after the earthquake, volunteerism was highly appreciated for their unconditional effort in rescues, recoveries, and support campaigns in almost of the affected areas. These three settlements had numbers of organizations helping in the early recovery phase but only few remain active in taking their campaigns for making longer impact in the reconstruction. Volunteerism, which was flourished rapidly, is now a matter to sustain for many of the volunteers who have worked for the rebuilding projects. The rebuilding in Sankhu and Panga has almost come to a halt because of the cease of volunteering activities. While in Bungamati, the rebuilding process is still under consideration, however, volunteers there too are feeling tired of volunteerism. Volunteers generally are among the local community members and many of them are interested because of complying field of interests and self-esteem. They should be mobilized properly through effective communication and guidance. Some of the volunteers in Bungamati and Sankhu argue that; they are capable of handling things in their local community as they know much about their place, culture and identity.

III. Reconstruction: Authenticity and Cultural Identity

The study areas are definite Newar settlements based on the agrarian lifestyles and culture. Their identity lies among the cultural heritage attributes associated into their urban morphological characteristics. Though these settlements have a common base of cultural activities, their identity is distinct in terms of their urban patterns, city image and respective symbolic meaning along with socio-cultural activities of the people residing there.

Bungamati is an ancient 7th century 'Newari' settlement enriched by the natural resources, compact built form and with Hindu and Buddhist socio-cultural values. It is believed that 100 people from each principal cities of the Kathmandu Valley - Kathmandu, Lalitpur and Bhaktapur - were brought into this area at the time of King Narendradeva and housed them around 'Machendranath' [Bunga-dyo] in three different directions with construction of three artificial ponds corresponding to each community (Shrestha et.al., 2008).

Sankhu is believed to be established by the Lichhchhavis in the 4th century A.D. and was historically important trade port on the way to Tibet. Sankhu is termed as Sankharapur because of its conch shaped urban layout of the settlement. The Vajrayogini temple to the north of Sankhu has its prominent influence on the land surrounding the settlement since the land is devoted to the maintenance of the temple (SRC, 2015).

Panga is believed to be established by Ratna Malla in 621 N.S. in order to secure from the frequent looting by the northerners in Chobhar Adinath temple. The literal meaning of Pa: (Guarding) and Gan: (village) comes from the reason for establishing this town. According to the inscription mentioned in Gopal Vanshawali (CDMC-9, 2015), this settlement was initiated by residing 300 houses in the year 629 N.S. households.

A. Lacking entitlement and ownership

Many of the community members in these settlements lack the entitlement, i.e Lalpurja of their respective land and houses. So, getting reconstruction facilities to the community members is a long way unless they get the entitlement. In Panga and Bungamati, the local agencies and reconstruction committees have initiated and applied for the formal procedures. Even though the government has argued to simplify the process of issuing entitlement for community members from earthquake-affected settlements, the people have not felt satisfactory outcomes due to series of hectic formalities that they faced in government offices. Thus, they are yet forbidden from the reconstruction felicitations. Besides, the multiple ownership of an ancestral property is making the process further complicated and caused delay in reconstruction.

According to the municipality authorities, one of the major problems at the moment in reconstruction is entitlement and ownership issues.

B. A state of planning crisis

The communities in these settlements have experienced the difficulties in adopting the bylaws and guidelines set for heritage settlements after the earthquake. In case of building heights and traditional construction technology, they felt unapplicable and non-contextual to community's modern space aspiration. Therefore, the communities have disregarded the implication of heritage settlement plans and policies compromising the antiquity of historic towns at the cost of their present lifestyle demands.

As the implication of the planning guidelines and building bylaws got harsh into these settlements, the built environment is eroding continuously. The traditional urban spaces and surroundings are affected with stinging skylines, non-linear building edges, non-contextual building materials and technology. More importantly, negligible records of issuing the building completion certificates can be seen in all of the respective municipalities. Also, a significant number of buildings are seen constructed without following the regulations to get rid of complexities regarding entitlement, ownership and persuasive need of housing.

C. Parasitic attitude towards rebuilding

Just like the monuments reconstruction, majority of the responses from communities, unable to rebuild their houses in the study areas, are economically deprived and do expect some external support to construct their houses. When asked about reconstruction, they urged for a complete concrete house rather than a shelter built in their own capacity. The local resources like the masons and carpenters in Panga and the technical man-power in Sankhu and Bungamati explained not being consulted in the reconstruction activities. Some of them even recall the earlier reconstruction works in 1934 and the self-recovery mechanism then.

IV. Reconstruction and sustainability

A. Tourism: a turmoil solution

Tourism is considered as an only economic source in these settlements except for CDMC in Panga. Newar settlements are meant for expressing cultural edifices and tourism is unavoidable into them. The community representatives in Panga argued cultural entity as their poise and then tourism as their economic activity. While the other two settlements are enriching their building stock with apparent tourism curios into their brick faces. Along with space congestion, additional tourism space is felt a burden by the community members in the settlements where tourism development plan is proposed. The community members also did state that outer beautification will not be significant to drive tourism into their respective settlement but it is the intangible part, that can at least drive the domestic tourism.

B. “Bun: Chalan:, Chhen: Dhalan” paradox

In Newari language - “Bun: Chalan:” literally means “*agricultural land gone*” and “*Chhen: Dhalan*” means “*house concretised*”. Most profoundly, ongoing constructions into these settlements after the earthquake are with remittances and else selling the ancestral agricultural land from the vicinity. Agriculture being the prime measure of sustainability for these settlements according to NUDS 2015, agricultural land is under a threat of rapid conversion. This paradox is seen desperate among the communities in Panga where the urbanization rate had exceeded even before the earthquake, while other two abide the need for agriculture with gradual conversion.

C. Inadequacy of local resources

Experts and representatives of the local authorities and agencies argued for the reason of RCC construction of entire heritage settlement is the inadequacy of local resources like traditional construction materials, technology and craftsmen. Whatever is there is being used up in the reconstruction of monuments only. It is mentioned that it has become very hard to identify the sources of construction materials to be used in traditional construction techniques and so the price for materials have already gone high esp. timber, mud and bricks. It is not only the scarcity of traditional construction materials but the workers too, who state their familiarity into concrete technology as it is a source of easy earning.

V. Conclusion

Very clearly a generalized approach towards reconstruction is predominant in the bureaucracy at present. In one way, the general community members in these study areas are unaware about the cultural values and local identity of their settlement and in the other the authorities from national to local levels have given less intension in conserving the local heritage while restoration. The present scenario of less priority to the private heritage buildings still prevails since these are the buildings, where the living traditions evoke. Intentions of heritage professionals and perceptions of public are different in cities. What public perceives heritage is different from what the heritage professionals do. Conservation works seem to be just limited in academia whereas in the present scenario it seems to be difficult in practice. Motivation is felt less in the reconstruction works, especially the volunteers and local resources that had been significant role-players from the initial phases of recovery till now. Incentives for heritage building owners, heritage conservation works should highly be prioritized. The present state is the cumulative effect of being indifferent towards the heritage resources in Kathmandu valley. Had there been clear policies and guidelines for heritage conservation, we would have different strategies to deal with. First, we ignored heritage buildings, second, we started forgetting our identities, third we don't know how to rebuild our heritages and now we lack resources during the time of reconstruction.

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