

INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE AND DISASTER IN NEPAL

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Nepal is a small country having an area of 147,181 sq. km. The country is sandwiched between two big Asian countries: China in the north and India in three sides. It is almost rectangular in shape stretching 800 km in east-west direction and from 140 to 210 km north-south. Nature has divided the country geographically into three parts: alpine region of Himalayan Mountains in the north, hilly region in the middle, followed by the flat lands in the south. The highest point of the country is Mt Everest, also the highest on Earth (8,848 m – Everest) and lowest point reaches merely 58 m above sea level. The country has no sea-shore at all and is thus a landlocked country.

Nearly 29 million people live in the country that is divided into diverse ethnic groups of more than 100. The people speak 123 local languages and dialects. Nepali is the *lingua franca* within the country and English is spoken by educated people.

Every country has its own history and culture. Cultural heritage is divided into two parts: tangible and intangible. Nepal is best known by both. Despite the damages made by deadly Nepal earthquake of 2015 on tangible heritages, intangible heritages are still intact and thriving.

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) is a relatively new term and concept in Nepalese academic field. Previously the domains of ICH were discussed under the general term 'folklore'. In 2003, UNESCO adopted the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage to be ratified by UNESCO member states, which focused on the significant role of ICH, and highlighted the need to safeguard ICH. Nepal became a State Party to this Convention by ratifying it in the year 2010. The Convention defines ICH as 'practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills ... that communities ... recognize as part of their cultural heritage'. UNESCO specifies that there are five domains of ICH: oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, and traditional craftsmanship.

Nepal is prone to different natural hazards, especially earthquakes, landslides, annual flooding, and avalanche, and is highly susceptible to climate change that is likely to exacerbate in particular the risks of annual droughts and floods. Furthermore, being located in the most at-risk seismic zone, Nepal is the 11th most earthquake prone country in the world.

On 25 April and 12 May 2015, Nepal was hit by two devastating earthquakes (Gorkha

earthquake) with magnitudes of 7.8 and 7.3 Richter scale, respectively. These earthquakes and their aftershocks have killed nearly 9,000 people and injured nearly 22,000. It led the immense damages of cultural heritages, buildings and infrastructures all around the country. Much of the historic fabrics in the city center is lost. The epicenter of the earthquake was at Barpak, Gorkha district. The hypocenter was at the depth of approximately 8.2 km. The earthquake damaged a large number of heritage properties like temples, stupas, monasteries, palaces, museums historical houses, rest houses and so on. Small shrines, statues and community temples were buried under the debris of collapsed buildings. Barpak is a tiny, vibrant settlement of about 1,200 homes of Gorkha district. The place is mostly home of the Ghale people, an ethnic group known for their martial prowess; many of its members join the British Gurkha regiment. Today, Barpak is almost entirely destroyed; 90 percent of 1,000 homes and huts reduced to rubble.

After the 2015 Earthquake, one can see the drastic changes in Barpak, changes in tangible and intangible cultures, no more traditional architecture and building materials are use (Figures 1 and 2). The fear of shakes results in this. The forces of



Figure 1
Barpak before 2015 Earthquake (top); and drastic change after the earthquake (bottom). No more traditional architecture and building materials. (Source: Udesh Lal Shrestha)

globalization are uprooting local cultures. The cultural consciousness of Nepal has always been evolving and will continue to do so. Their priorities have been shifting, and their preferences for lifestyles, value systems, educational systems, work environments and working styles have been changing. Of course, cultural erosion is a very slow process.

Although the 2015 earthquake might have caused widespread damage to the tangible heritage of Nepal, the intangible heritage elements are still intact and thriving. For instance, people still observe and celebrate religious and cultural festivals as they used to. When intangible culture is endangered or totally lost, it is preserved in the museums. The museum is a non-profit, informal education center. The museum is the mirror of one's country, so it collects, preserves, conserves, and exhibits the whole nation's art, culture, and history.

The government of Nepal has taken an active role in initiating several activities to safeguard and promote ICH. Many surveys and research have been carried out by the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation, all over Nepal. The ministry and institutions such as the Nepal Academy have launched documentation programmes to motivate the new generation, academic and the general people, in understanding the country's history including tangible as well as intangible culture, and there is a need to facilitate their study and involvement in the practice, preservation and promotion of culture.



Figure 2 Barpak kitchen before (left) and after (right) 2015 Earthquake. (Source: Udesh Lal Shrestha)