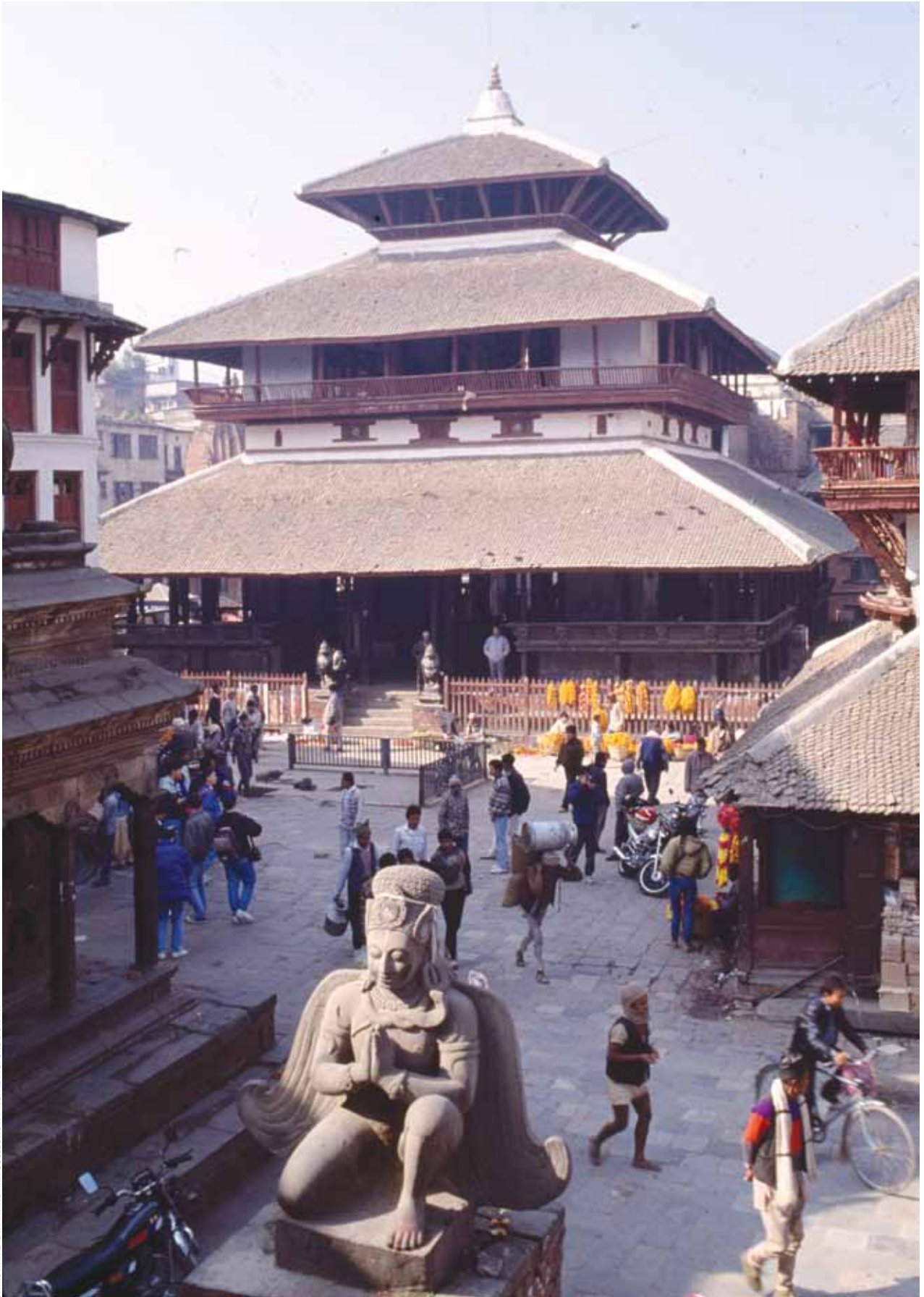


2nd REPORTAGE
STOREYED PAST
ATUL BHATTARAI



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Storeyed Past

The movement to rebuild earthquake-hit Nepal's most iconic heritage structure.

/ ARCHITECTURE



ATUL BHATTARAI

ON A SUNDAY MORNING LAST OCTOBER, in a cramped office overlooking Kathmandu Durbar Square—an iconic plaza surrounding Nepal's old royal palace—a small group of volunteers was frantically preparing for a public exhibition to be held that afternoon. The subject of the event was the reconstruction of Kasthamandap, a giant pagoda-like building that gave Kathmandu its name, and which, for more than a thousand years—until it collapsed in an earthquake in 2015—had been a public fixture, sheltering ascetics, weary traders, and on occasion, men exiled from their homes for the night by their irate wives. The office had the chaotic air of a crafts fair. People rushed around wielding scissors, stepping over paper scraps, glue-bottle caps and chunks of styrofoam. At one end, nine volunteers pieced together a 3D paper-model of the plaza outside.

The exhibition was organised by the Campaign to Rebuild Kasthamandap, or RK, a non-profit that has tried to ensure the building is reconstructed as closely to the original as possible and that its associated cultural practices remain intact. RK had held two workshops in the previous days. One was led by volunteer architects, who presented the logistics of construction to a panel of experts. The other workshop had guided groups of locals to document and map out, on floor plans, the rituals that had been performed inside the building and its vicinity.

As the exhibition's opening time approached, the room swelled with volunteers. Several wore the Rebuild Kasthamandap T-shirt, with a slogan printed on the back: "Let us rebuild our heritage ourselves." A short while later, the group had shifted downstairs to an open space at the centre of Maru, the Newari name for the neighbourhood. (Newaris are indigenous inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley.) Posters, including proposed architectural drawings, had been taped against the side of a building for public scrutiny. A few steps away was the site of Kasthamandap: about the size of two adjacent tennis courts, now a fenced-in mound of bricks and wooden beams. A poster showed the building as it had stood, "austere and ponderous," as described by the cultural historian Mary Slusser, although others have been less generous with their descriptions: Alok Tuladhar, RK's spokesperson, told me it was, admittedly, "a little ugly."

The exhibition soon caught the attention of locals. A group of older men circled RK's paper model of the plaza and critiqued its accuracy. Passers-by picked up markers left on the table and corrected spellings and names of rituals on the posters. A crowd formed around the architectural drawings, which RK had ensured were faithful to the original structure—an approach derided by those who believe Kasthamandap collapsed because of its flawed engineer-

ing. A middle-aged man, dressed as if he had made a sharp detour from a hike, began lecturing the architects on the team. "Don't let people with limited knowledge of structural engineering dictate your design," he announced. On the margin of a drawing, he wrote: "1st principle + responsibility as professionals: life safety." Below, "2. aesthetics."

The man, who later introduced himself to me as Ananta Raj Baidya, a structural engineer based in California, summed up his position as: "Once it goes up, it shouldn't go down." I asked Badan Lal Nyachhyon, an architect accompanying him, about his view on RK's work. "Our heritage comes out of this structure," he told me. Baidya interjected: "They are all young, they have energy, but if they don't channel the energy properly, they will destroy everything!"

"Everything," Nyachhyon intoned, looking grave.

Baidya grabbed a red marker and began scrawling comments on one of the drawings. The poster, secured to the wall with masking tape, suddenly came undone on one corner, folding in on itself. Nyachhyon laughed. "It's collapsing?" he said. "Already?"

AS THE NAMESAKE OF KATHMANDU, Kasthamandap—literally "wooden pavilion"—has a special grip on the Nepali public imagination. Every schoolchild knows its origin story. Its likeness is on

PREVIOUS PAGE: Kasthamandap, a giant pagoda-like building that gave Kathmandu its name, was considered one of the most iconic monuments of Nepal.

RIGHT: After it was razed in the 2015 earthquake, a movement to rebuild Kasthamandap has engendered an intense debate over Nepalis' attitudes towards their past.



NARENDRA SHRESTHA / EPA

the newest five-rupee note, on the National Tourism Board logo, and on the logo of *Kantipur*, the most widely-read Nepali-language newspaper. Its name is used by legions of businesses in the city, from banks and schools to an airline.

Likely conceived as a non-religious site, Kasthamandap became a *sattal*, a subtype *Slusser* described as “half shelter, half temple,” after a *Gorakhnath* statue was installed inside around 600 years ago. Over the centuries, it was used as a royal council hall, a rest house and a marketplace. Generations of visitors commented on its size—it is the largest building in Newar architecture—its antiquity and the austerity of its design. One nineteenth-century Scottish visitor remarked that it was “of so singular a form, that our terms of art could not be applied to describe its architecture.” In the 1960s and 1970s, it became a habitat for

doped-up hippies: the popular Bollywood song “*Dum Maro Dum*” was shot there. More recently, porters loitered in its ambulatory during the day, awaiting work. A 1997 *Let's Go* guidebook describes it as possessing “a feeling of transience, kind of like a train platform.”

Since it collapsed in the 2015 earthquake, there has been a growing demand to rebuild Kasthamandap. The government has been criticised for being callous toward heritage, but even its critics are divided on how reconstruction should proceed. Some, such as RK, argue for a traditional approach, replicating the original structure and resuming practices such as *pujas* and festivals. Others have made a case for integrating Western engineering concepts, citing safety concerns. For many, the debate over reconstruction is changing their relationship with the past, and has become a way to



get in touch with an attenuated cultural identity.

WHEN THE FRENCH TRAVELLER Gustave Le Bon visited the Kathmandu Valley in 1885, he was struck by the profusion of temples he encountered. If the “moral level” of a people were reflected in the number of their religious buildings, he wrote in his book, *Voyage to Nepal*, then “one could assume that the Nepalese are the most virtuous people of the universe.” Le Bon was evidently not a fan of this logic—elsewhere he wrote that “it is rare that a Hindu speaks the truth ... but a Nepalese never does”—but it is not difficult to imagine why he was impressed with the hundreds of tiered temples

crammed into the Valley. And Kasthamandap, as one local elder described it to me, is “the grandfather of them all.”

For a structure that had amassed enough importance by the twelfth century to have become a synecdoche for the surrounding city, Kasthamandap has a thin historical record. In some ways, this is not surprising, since its early life was a time of political turbulence. When the Licchavi kingdom dissolved in the ninth century, it was replaced by warring fiefdoms of the Transitional Period—something like the European Dark Ages—during which the historical record amounted to little more than a sketchy timeline of kings. In place of facts about Kasthamandap are creation myths, the most popular of which is recorded in a nineteenth-century chronicle, *History of the Kings of Nepal*. During the Machhendranath festival, the legend goes, a resident of the city trapped the Kalpavriksha—a wish-fulfilling tree in Sanskrit mythology—that was lurking in the crowd in the guise of a human, and freed it only after extracting a promise that it would provide him with a single massive tree, with enough wood to build a sattal. The Kalpavriksha agreed for its spirit to remain in the sattal until it was consecrated. To trap it indefinitely, the resident decided Kasthamandap would be consecrated only when the price of salt and oil in the market became equal.

Kasthamandap is sometimes referred to as a temple, a misconception regarding its function more than its form. Although twice as big as the largest temple, Kasthamandap, with its tiers and sloped, recessed roofs, was easy to confuse with the religious buildings around it. But its religious function was incidental to its main purpose as an “international guest house,” as the historian Kashinath Tamot put it to me. Soon after the 2015 earthquake, Slusser, encouraging Kasthamandap’s reconstruction, wrote that it was “Nepal’s

heritage defined, a witness to its history and evolution as a nation.” That history is Kathmandu’s role as an ancient lay-over for travellers, and Kasthamandap’s as the kind of place they would stay in. Until the eighteenth century, when new routes became more expedient, the preferred path between India and Tibet was through the Valley, through Yangala—an ancient village that made up the southern part of what is now Kathmandu—and which, by the twelfth century, was occasionally called Kasthamandap. From here, one would have headed to the mountain passes to the north, toward Lhasa, or to the flat plains of the Terai, which connected to India through the Uttarapatha. But seasonal trends gave Kathmandu an outsized importance: the passes into Tibet clogged up with snow in the winter, and the jungles of the Terai, called the “unhealthiest region in all of Asia” by one foreign visitor, flared up with malaria in the summer. Travellers were left stranded in the Valley for months as they awaited milder weather.

The first mention of traders crossing Kathmandu on the trans-Himalayan route appeared in the fifth century. Inscriptions from 300 AD onwards indicate that Nepal exported musk, wool, iron and copper to India. After the Tibetan Empire coalesced in the seventh century under King Songtsen Gampo, the trade route was formalised, and a “constant stream” of Chinese pilgrims and diplomats, Slusser wrote, began passing through Kathmandu. By the fourteenth century, the Valley had been united by King Jayasthiti Malla. A century later it crystallised into the three kingdoms of Bhaktapur (alternatively Bhadgaon), Patan and Kasthamandap, which had by now come to signify the entire city. So many Tibetan traders journeyed between Lhasa and the Valley that they were assessed a special visitors’ tax. Trade exploded, and for the next 300 years, Nepal accrued a

If the “moral level” of a people were reflected in the number of their religious buildings, Gustave Le Bon wrote in his book, *Voyage to Nepal*, then “one could assume that the Nepalese are the most virtuous people of the universe.”



ALINA TAMBAKAR

TOP: Rebuild Kasthamandap, a non-profit organisation, has proposed architectural plans for Kasthamandap that it claims to have put together through public consultation.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Rebuild Kasthamandap's supporters pledged in front of the house of Kumari, a living goddess of Kathmandu, to rebuild Kasthamandap through a "community-led" process.

wealth disproportionate to its size.

Meanwhile, the three thrones were occupied by a string of bickering cousin-kings, whose record of rifts and alliances read like something out of an adolescent's diary. Between 1698 and 1699: "This day Patan was isolated as Kathmandu and Bhadgaon signed an agreement of mutual friendship"; "This day the three cities again became friends"; "This day the three cities had united, but the Rajas of Kathmandu and Bhadgaon were not on speaking terms." Rivalries were expressed occasionally in petty raids and skit-like battles—often shouting matches between standing armies—but mostly in each king trying to upstage the other two with the opulence of his palace and temples, raising what the writer Thomas Bell called a "forest of pagoda roofs" in the core of his city. Once built, a temple was cared for by a dedicated *guthi*, a hereditary trust managed by locals. The *guthi* was endowed by the patron, often a king, with land, the returns from which were used for rituals, maintenance and periodic renovations.

In 1744, Prithvi Narayan Shah, the king of a northern hill territory called Gorkha, began capturing kingdoms that girded the Valley, slowly snuffing out its trade. Twenty-four years after he launched this campaign, Shah invaded Kasthamandap, which the Gorkhals had adapted into the name "Kathmandu." In a year's time he had conquered Patan and Bhaktapur. Over the rest of his life, Shah would expand his empire and call it Nepal, a name originally used for the Valley.

The bellicose Gorkhals, Le Bon wrote when he visited nearly a century and a half later, "form a much superior race by their martial qualities, compared to other inhabitants," but "certainly do not

have the artistic dispositions of the race they conquered." At first, the new kings built in the Newar style, but within a few generations temple-building had largely ceased. Of the "remarkable" monuments in the city, "almost all ... have been built before the Gorkha domination," Le Bon wrote. Since the Gorkha conquest, he continued, "the major parts of the country's monuments are not maintained, any more, and are falling into ruin."

ON THE MORNING OF 25 APRIL 2015, Nimbus Savings and Credit Cooperative was holding a blood donation drive at Kasthamandap, where 54 of its employees and shareholders had reportedly come to volunteer. At four minutes to noon, the ground began to shake. Loose bricks and pieces of timber rained down on the participants. Moments later, the sattu collapsed, killing ten people, some with needles still in their arms.

Later that day, the army pulled out bodies from the rubble. As aftershocks rattled weakened homes, some locals set up camp on top of the site. At a tourism programme three weeks later, Prime Minister KP Oli talked of rebuilding the Dharahara, a lighthouse-like tower some way south of Maru that the earthquake had reduced to a jagged stump. The tower, built in 1832, was quickly fashioned by the media into a symbol of heritage reconstruction. A small group of older locals in Maru, led by Birendra Bhakta Shrestha, a former mayoral candidate, "got pissed by the talk of Dharahara this and Dharahara that," Tuladhar told me, and began speaking to the media about the historical value of Kasthamandap. In July, the government announced that the Durbar Square restoration would be handled by the Kathmandu Metropolitan City, or KMC, and that of the royal palace by the Department of Archaeology, or DoA, for a total of 7 to 10 billion Nepali rupees.

By April 2016, the KMC had decided that Kasthamandap would be built through the tender process, in which construction firms place bids and the lowest bidder is given the contract. It estimated that construction would take three years and cost 192 million Nepali rupees. But when the DoA posted its proposed design in the Durbar Square courtyard, they were excoriated by Birendra Bhakta and others, who argued that the plans—which included modern materials, such as steel, structural glue and concrete—did not meet even the DoA's own conservation guidelines. In an article in the *Kathmandu Post*, Baidya, the structural engineer, wrote that the plans were "haphazardly conceived" and made unnecessary compromises to "traditional and heritage architecture and ambiance," without adding earthquake resistance. The work was subsequently halted by the government.

Some months later, Birendra Bhakta met Sumana

Shrestha, a former management consultant, and Tuladhar, an IT professional and documentarian. They began holding public debates on the “downfalls of the tender system”—which is widely thought to enable politicians to absolve themselves of responsibility over a structure and extract a cut from contractors. They decided the group should take a lead on raising money from the public, to create a sense of ownership over reconstruction; they would then use the money to contract work out to architectural firms and craftsmen. Tuladhar realised, however, that his sense of urgency was not shared by his older colleagues, who “have very high attachments to our culture, heritage, community involvement,” he told me, and were also politically connected, but “were not energetic anymore.” Earlier, Tuladhar had set up a Facebook page—“The Campaign to Rebuild Kasthamandap”; he soon began receiving messages from students and young professionals, whom he took in as volunteers.

In December, a UNESCO-funded archaeological team from Durham University wrapped up a six-week excavation of the Kasthamandap site. It

announced that the foundation dated from two periods, hundreds of years before the earliest recorded mention of the sattu. An inner wall was found to be from the seventh century, and an outer wall—indicating an expansion of the original site—from the ninth century. The walls formed a nine-cell matrix, which was touted as having religious value. To mark the end of excavations, Tuladhar told me, RK held a Satwa puja with 185 monks, intended as a call to the surrounding community to “build Kasthamandap themselves.” Four months later, in what the Facebook page called a “mega event,” supporters pledged in front of the house of the Kumari—a living goddess of Kathmandu—to rebuild Kasthamandap through a “community-led” process.

The publicity this drew seemed to make the government receptive to collaboration. In April 2017, the National Reconstruction Authority, or NRA, a government agency formed after the earthquake, met with Birendra Bhakta and others in what a post called a “fiery but productive” meeting. On 12 May, RK posted to its page: “Today is a great day, and now is a much awaited moment.”

Two days before local elections, the NRA had coordinated a blanket four-way agreement, designating RK responsible for reconstruction and the DoA and the KMC as supervisory bodies.

A month later, on 18 June, volunteers erected a bamboo scaffolding to cover Kasthamandap’s exposed foundation before the monsoon rains began. But eight days later, another group of locals padlocked the site, arguing that RK lacked legitimacy. Two days after that, workers from the KMC dismantled the structure. “The room, which is usually abuzz with activity, is starkly muted today,” wrote Sanjit Pradhananga in the *Kathmandu Post* about the RK office. “A heavy cloud of frustration looms large. Every few minutes, a volunteer rises, peeks out the window, sighs, and sits back down.” In a subsequent press release, RK called it vandalism. Bidhya Sundar Shakya, the newly elected mayor of Kathmandu, said the four-way agreement was invalid, having been signed before the election, and announced that the KMC would take charge of reconstruction.

FEW TERMS ARE HEARD MORE frequently



OPPOSITE PAGE: The architecture from the time of the Ranas mostly comprises neoclassical-style palaces, one of which the French traveller Gustave Le Bon called a “horrid semi-European building, totally lacking in any interest.”

at RK events than “intangible heritage”: the legends and practices associated with a tangible structure, upheld by the people who use it. Although Kasthamandap was never associated with a dedicated guthi, it was linked to the rites of several clan guthis. Tuladhar told me that from the outset, RK had interviewed dozens of locals, to uncover and publicise the sattal’s intangible heritage.

In 1905, the French traveller Sylvain Lévi wrote in his book *Le Népal* that the “outstanding trait” of a Newar is “his liking for society”: Newars live in compact, multistory houses, even if this means their living space is cramped, “somewhat in the manner of the Parisian,” he wrote. This attention to society is reflected in communal gatherings. In a 2005 lecture, the social anthropologist Gérard Toffin said about the Newars: “There are no ethnic groups in Nepal that devote more time and money to rituals, festivals and offerings to the gods.” It also comes through in the wealth of Newar architecture that falls between the privacy of a house and the publicness of a road, such as the gazebo-like *patis*, used for shelter, meetings, public events and *bhajans*—which were a nightly occurrence at Kasthamandap.

Guthis oversee both festivals and the management of these buildings. Derived from the Sanskrit word “*gosthi*,” meaning assembly, Newar guthis are hereditary trusts. Most have members of the same caste, but another type, which periodically shores up public infrastructure such as roads or temples, may span castes. Newar families tend to belong to many guthis, all of which fund their activities with returns from land holdings. They meet shortfalls by collecting dues. Toffin has called guthis a form of “social control” for levying fines on those who shirk obligations like attending festivals, to ensure practices persisted across generations. In the past, to leave one’s guthi amounted to self-ostracisation. But as families have relocated from their ancestral homes in the past few decades, local bonds have weakened, and many traditions have been abandoned.

After the Valley fell to Prithvi Narayan Shah in 1769, guthi land was sequestered first by the new kings, and later, more gleefully, by the Ranas, who seized control of the kingdom with a coup d’état in 1846. The Ranas used the funds to build neoclassical-style palaces, one of which Le Bon calls a “horrid semi-European building, totally lacking in any interest.” In past decades, further guthi land was embezzled by guthiyars or lost to tenants because of property laws, which has caused festivals to become less frequent and opulent, and the regular maintenance of many temples to be overlooked.

While interviewing residents about their ties to the sattal, RK launched a series called *Bakhan Nyani Wa*—“come tell your story” in Newari—to

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document these accounts. The two instalments so far have featured active guthis, which have existed for centuries to carry out their yearly ritual, although these have been pared down in recent decades for lack of funds. The Sa guthi raises 1 lakh rupees annually from its members to hold a two-day feast every January, which ends with a flag being hoisted on the roof of the sattal to mark that it is still incomplete, and a ritual announcement that the price of salt and oil are still not at par. This tradition was continued after the earthquake, with the flag being hoisted from the middle of the ruins. During *Panchadaan*, the members of the Ta Chatan guthi hold a three-day feast for the priestly caste outside the sattal, serving food from a gigantic pot, which is arranged in the middle of a mandala made of four planks of wood, which guthiyars claim is the original Kasthamandap.

As RK hunted for stories, it found six more guthis, most of which had folded long ago. One belonged to the Nath sect, whose members had lived inside Kasthamandap for generations until 45 families were evicted in 1966. Members of the sect I spoke to claimed the sattal had been built for their use. Another was a guthi of Bajracharyas. Drawing from traditional songs called *charyas*, Yagyaman Pati Bajracharya, whose family was part of the guthi, wrote a book in 2010 about Leela Bajra, an eighth century scholar whom he billed as his forty-third ancestor, and the one who trapped the Kalpabriksha to build Kasthamandap. Tamot, the historian, argued that his book is part of a wider trend of people trying to “claim Kasthamandap for themselves” by “weaving” emendations into popular legend.

The architect Kai Weise told me that the number of groups with claims on Kasthamandap can make it seem like “a little Jerusalem.” For most monuments, it is not so contested which community is responsible for rituals, nor are there so many differing opinions on reconstruction. The Sanskrit scholar Mahesh Raj Panta, for example, told me that before embarking on reconstruction a committee should be formed to study the formulas of *vastushastra*—Hindu architecture—that were used to plan the temples. Bajracharya told me the sattal



should be rebuilt only after he had performed certain pujas. When asked about his views on using modern materials, he flared up. “Sometimes I get so angry,” he said. “If they want to show tourists what Kasthamandap was like, let them build it with their steel and concrete somewhere else. Leave this site as it is!”

FOR THE PURISTS among the heritage conservationists in Nepal, Sudarshan Raj Tiwari, a retired professor of architecture at Tribhuvan University, is something of a hero. At a recent event, one booming activist announced, without irony, that he regarded Tiwari himself an example of “living heritage.” For others, even some who largely agree with his principles, Tiwari is seen as a perpetual thorn in the side of progress,

with an endless list of grievances, and a tiresome capacity to air them. One engineer I spoke to said his proposal for reinforcements to a temple in Patan, approved by the DoA, had been put in limbo because of the strident objections of a certain critic. “I think you know who,” he told me, darkly.

The debate in Nepal on heritage restoration spans limited ground: most architects agree that restored structures ought to hew as closely as possible to the original, with little deviation. But many also argue that Newar architecture is “unscientific,” and in the interest of public safety ought to be reinforced with stronger, modern materials. This debate took on a renewed urgency after the 2015 earthquake brought down a number of traditional buildings, which

many professionals took as proof of defects in their engineering. Tiwari’s position is that these buildings collapsed because of a lack of maintenance, and that modifications of this sort are not only unforgivable—they are an assault on their “values”—but unnecessary. He thinks the properties of Newar architecture have eluded engineers, who, steeped in the “jargon and cacophony of alien knowledge systems,” are unable to evaluate the traditional system on its own merits. “A lot of engineering has been forced into buildings saying that you need to build them to withstand earthquakes,” Tiwari told me. “We have been living here for thousands of years, so our technology must have accommodated them. Just because you don’t do any research does not mean the build-



SHRIDHAR LAL MANANDHAR COLLECTION / NEPAL PICTURE LIBRARY

ings don't withstand earthquakes."

In the course of studying Newar architecture, Gustave Le Bon observed that "the temples in brick and wood ... are very recent. The non-durable material of which they are made prevents them from lasting long." For Tiwari, the use of perishable natural materials is what sets Newar architecture apart. And buildings are resilient, instead of resistant, to natural phenomena. For instance, joints are not rigid—necessary for seismic resistance in Western engineering—but flexible, built to absorb

earthquake shocks. Similarly, because wood rots or wears away, buildings were designed as modular systems—made of toothpicks rather than Legos, say—so that workers could isolate and replace damaged components without dismantling the structure, in a process of "cyclical renewal" that was carried out every few decades.

Tiwari feels conservationists have snubbed these basic principles of traditional architecture. The German-funded Bhaktapur Development Project, one of the first international restoration initia-

tives, used concrete and concealed steel in its work. "It pleased the Germans very well," Tiwari told me, "but it destroyed our culture totally." Several other conservationists are wary of what is justified in the pursuit of safety. "If you can use concrete, why not use styrofoam?" Weise told me, laughing. "When you rebuild the structure, it will look exactly the same. It's so light, even if it falls over you can push it back up."

In 1991, the American architect Eric Theophile co-founded the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust, which has

restored more than 50 monuments, especially in Patan. KVPT, funded mostly by foreign donors, is widely feted for its work, and its projects are among the few that have made significant headway after the earthquake. But its interventions, though more studied than those in most projects, are criticised by the likes of Tiwari. For instance, KVPT uses old parts that would be discarded by most architects, to keep as much of the original building as possible; but because this introduces structural weaknesses, steel pins are inserted to tie the structure together. Tuladhar calls KVPT's restored monuments "a sticker of the original," and accuses it of turning temples into "museum pieces." The original architects and craftsmen of a building "live in that building through their materials, through their technologies, through the carvings they have done," Tiwari said. A conservationist's policy towards them should be: "Look, you have made it so well that we want to keep it. There might be some problems, and we'll resolve them—but resolve them to your satisfaction."

This criticism finds a place in a broader international debate about what it means to safeguard the authenticity of a restored building. Following the 1964 Venice Charter, authenticity was judged only along physical criteria. In 1992, while inspecting a Japanese restoration of the fourteenth century I Baha Bahi monastery in Patan, an official at the International Council on Monuments and Sites,

which advises UNESCO on its World Heritage Sites, found decayed brick walls being torn down and rebuilt instead of preserved as ruins. The architect responsible was fired, and in the ensuing kerfuffle the Japanese government invited the official to inspect its approach to heritage, in which some monuments are regularly dismantled. For example, the Shinto Ise Shrine has been rebuilt from scratch every 20 years, for the last 1,300 years, using the same blueprint and technique; others are regularly repaired, as in Newar architecture. In 1994, Japan hosted a conference that culminated in the Nara Document, which loosened the definition of authenticity to make room for the restoration of "living" structures, emphasising the continuity of a building's function, its associated rituals and its craftsmanship, over conservation.

In Nepal, this debate is undergirded by a practical question: Do modern materials actually make traditional buildings safer? A straightforward approach would be to assess the performance of buildings that were strengthened with modern materials against the 2015 earthquake. But "no one is interested in doing that here. Everyone is interested only in hiding what went wrong," Weise told me. "The bad interventions—and who did those interventions—nobody wants to talk about that." Several professionals I spoke to said that the DoA, and even KVPT, were brushing off past interventions that had clearly backfired during the earth-

OPPOSITE PAGE:
According to many academics who have studied Newar culture, the ethnic group is known to spend time and money on rituals, festivals and offerings to the gods.

BELOW:
In 1991, the American architect Eric Theophile co-founded the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust, which has restored more than 50 monuments and is widely feted for its work.



COURTESY ROHIT RANJITKAR / KATHMANDU VALLEY PRESERVATION TRUST



ROBIC UPADHAYAN

ABOVE: After the earthquake, some families began living in tents set up over the rubble of Kasthamandap.

quake. “The greatest disservice Nepali engineers have done for our heritage is self-deprecation,” Tiwari told me. When I talked to Santosh Shrestha, an engineer who studied structural cracks for his doctorate, he said there was overwhelming evidence that steel reinforcements break through wooden beams during an earthquake because of the disparity in strength between the two materials, much like how strong thread will cut through threadbare fabric. In other cases, buildings seemed to have been undermined by concrete additions. “There is no proper study done on the impact. I think that’s the worst part,” Weise told me. “In an earthquake things get damaged, there’s loss, but as long as we learn from this, then we can say at least we got something out of it.”

If there is consensus among conservationists, it is that heritage work and the tender system are incompatible. Enacted to combat corruption and reduce costs, the tender system has been lambasted for handing out contracts indiscriminately. Legally, a prequalification requirement should exclude firms lacking relevant experience from consideration, although this is seldom enforced. Every conservationist I talked to related cases of restora-

tion contracts going to firms that specialised in furniture, industry or even sewage systems. Flouting conservation practices, these firms skimmed on materials or inserted concrete and rebar in buildings out of convenience rather than necessity.

When I asked Baidya what he thought of Tiwari’s purism, he told me it confused aesthetics for engineering. Life safety, he said, was paramount: “Do they want the blood of people on their hands?” Weise told me he thinks such an outlook would be displaced only if the government changed its building codes, which recognise only rigid structures, and set out to study how traditional systems functioned. Until then, he said, the fact that traditional structures have withstood earthquakes for hundreds of years would be dismissed, and their technologies maligned. If the DoA’s plan had been followed, Kasthamandap’s foundation, which has remained intact through more than a thousand years’ worth of earthquakes, would have been excavated and inlaid with steel and concrete. “Which is a joke,” he said. “A concrete pile, if it’s reinforced, wouldn’t last for more than 50 or 60 years. And you’re comparing that with something that’s existed for 1300 years.”

LAST DECEMBER, a few weeks after a third round of legislative elections were held, controversy over the restoration of Rani Pokhari—a seventeenth-century pond—erupted after passers-by spotted concrete mix on its premises. An event was hastily planned for Christmas Eve, featuring a panel of experts, including Tiwari. The objective was to halt the work that had been restarted by the KMC in the lull of election season. Several of the organisers were part of RK. As he frequently does during such events, Tuladhar drifted around the room with his phone and power bank in hand, livestreaming the proceedings. I sat next to Binita Magaiya, a conservation architect working for RK, and asked her which groups had planned the event. “It’s all us. We’re fighting for so many things on different fronts,” she told me. The experts gave their presentations. Afterward, during the question and answer session, a member of the Society of Nepalese Architects stood up. The tussle with the KMC, he said to laughter from the audience, had become like “battling Ravana.” “Every time we chop one head off, another one grows back.”

A few days earlier, a group of activists had met with Shakya, the mayor, to discuss Rani Pokhari. After several pleas to refrain from using concrete in the pond, the mayor said that as a Newar, he knew the value of heritage, but rejected the idea that it should not be modified: “I think it’s not about keeping it the same but making progress,” he said. After leaving the mayor’s office, an indignant Tuladhar said, “When he talked about being Newar, I felt so much shame.”

This flurry of events had followed a long silence from the KMC on Kasthamandap. In the months after the site was padlocked—the “key incident,” as some referred to it—a schism crept in between its founding members, who clung to their original ideas about the role RK should have in reconstruction, and some of its younger members, who favoured compromise with the KMC. Negotiations suggested the mayor’s office was amenable to RK directing reconstruction work as long as it took municipal money and made clear that it was working under the KMC’s supervision. “We shouldn’t demonise the government,” Sumana told me. “It is an elected body, we live in a democracy, they represent the people. If they just gave space for us to get involved, I would be okay.” Government money, she said, was ultimately the people’s money. But Birendra Bhakta was insistent that reconstruction should be crowdfunded. The deal, which had seemed tantalisingly close to completion, soon fell through.

Several people I spoke to characterised the negotiations as a “battle of egos” between Shakya and Birendra Bhakta, who belong to different political parties and wanted sole credit for rebuilding

Kasthamandap. When I met Shriju Pradhan, an official at the KMC’s Heritage Division, she made it clear that her sympathies lay with RK. But locals were sometimes the most exasperating, she said, because they acted like heritage sites belonged only to them. When I asked her if restoration should be left to the guthis, as per tradition, she replied, “You can’t say ‘traditional way’ and write accounts on the back of a matchbox.” In the past, guthis had “faith to god. Now guthis are governed by new people. There is no trust and honesty. There should be a mechanism that controls the guthis as well.” “When money is involved,” she added, “you can’t trust even Mahadev.”

When I spoke to Tuladhar recently, he told me RK had managed to reengage the KMC in talks and was working out a possible compromise, on terms similar to before. In the meantime, he had been honing RK’s media strategy, to impress the importance of heritage on a wider audience, and perhaps, in the process, recruit more volunteers. And Tuladhar felt his social media presence—he posted at least once a day—heaped pressure on the KMC. He reeled off statistics: “8 pm is our prime time, Sunday to Thursday; we mostly attract Nepalis between 18 and 34; our response time for messages is two hours.”

As far as RK goes, he said, “the physical building is just an excuse”—the movement is more about “the revival of cultural values.”

In an early conversation, Sumana told me that RK was trying to spark a “spiritual awakening.” When I first met Tuladhar this past October, he talked about his disappointment that his parents had not taught him about his heritage as a child. “The last two or three generations who did not pass it down made a mistake,” he said. After the fall of the Ranas, in 1951, “people were in a mindset: discard the old, grab whatever we can from the so-called developed Western world.” This is a common feeling among RK volunteers—that a lack of knowledge created a distance between them and their heritage, bridged only after the earthquake, when many monuments were already destroyed. Tuladhar said he began to appreciate old knowledge only recently, going out of his way to teach his children. “I realised that it’s something I need to be proud of, and that I need to preserve and promote. I need to help it remain for more generations.” As far as RK goes, he said, “the physical building is just an excuse”—the movement is more about “the revival of cultural values.” ■