

# CULTURAL HERITAGE NEEDS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND A CASE STUDY OF STOLEN IMAGES OF NEPAL

- Prem Singh Basnyat, PhD<sup>1</sup>

## Part I : Cultural Heritage Needs sustainable Development

First, cultural heritage- It serves as a mirror for a country because it reflects the national scenario of political, economic, cultural and historical past. It is in true sense of the term a comprehensible book written down for the sake of the common people: laborers, peasants, children and foreigners. In the scary context of one country split into many by conflict, war and colony, and embittered by feud and contempt cultural heritages raise the possibility of rebuilding/rejoining with a glue of identical culture and civilization. It is true to note that any heritage is global asset and needs to be saved from any disaster, which is a serious disruption, occurring over a relatively short time, of the functioning of a community or a society, is unavoidable and beyond human capability to stop. In this regard, preparedness for disaster is the organization and management of the resources and responsibilities for dealing with all cultural heritage aspects of emergencies in order to reduce the harmful effects of all hazards, such as natural disasters. On the other hand, manmade disaster is more vulnerable than natural. If the 21st century military warfare doesn't refrain to plunder and rub the epitome of age old cultural heritage, how else is to describe them? They are not any less than the gang of robbers of the Stone Age! Stealing and smuggling pose similar challenges. This is really a sensitive issue. It is therefore a matter of grave concern of all the connoisseurs of art, culture and history. If we still fear to raise the voices against the super powers' guns, bombs and missiles and again resort to keep mum even as they destroy the embodiment of our cultural heritages, there is none but ourselves to be blamed. Therefore, from now on, let us speak loud and clear to the world "No plundering others" culture in the guise of war'.<sup>2</sup>

It is high time we preserved the existing cultural heritages and found more museums to preserve the art, culture and history. It is advisable that United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the power centers take a policy to found and provide assistance for the sustainable developments of cultural heritages. There are many ways out too for preparedness planning, communication plan, collection and storing the artifacts, security and restoration policy, special needs, disaster recovery, insurance preparedness, etc for preservation and of our cultural heritage. And there are many ways through which to meet sustainable development goals.

Second, the sustainable development- A certain culture is the combination of whole system of past, and presents today as a customary value. It is a common and open book for present generation for the reason that it keeps flowing as guidelines for today and remains as history and archives for tomorrow. Culture does not celebrate any type of wrongdoing because it stands with the best and the most favorite practices adopted by the people.<sup>3</sup> Culture therefore is a global property. To

---

<sup>1</sup> Dr Basnyat is Chairman: Nepal Museum Association (<http://www.museumassociation.org.np/>), Board Member: ICOM-ASPAC, Board Member-ICOM-Nepal, Adviser: Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Nepal, Board Member: National Ethnographic Museum, Kathmandu, Life Board Member: Military Museum, Nepal, Advisor: Aviation Museum, Nepal and working as visiting professor and Brigadier General (Retd) –Nepalese army ([www.premsinghasnyat.com.np](http://www.premsinghasnyat.com.np)).

<sup>2</sup> Prem Singh Basnyat, *Innovation and Sustainability of Small Museums*, <https://www.museumassociation.org.np/>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

safeguard our culture, a community, nation, region and world should support for its future sustainability. And sustainable development is very important for the enhancement and protection of cultural heritages, which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Also mind that making sustainable culture is not comfortable going in present context. Nonetheless, it is possible if we could mitigate environmental threats and adopt inclusive social development, and inclusive economic development, while still fostering peace and security as well. This is the age when we talk about human rights, equality, and sustainability through long term perspective, recognition and respect. Cultural values add to this cause. Therefore, cultural issue should include sustainable development plan of cultural heritage for sustainable future.

Sustainable development is possible through education on cultural heritage too which is a specialized field devoted to developing and strengthening the education role of non-formal education spaces and institutions such as museums, the public dimensions of museum lead them to perform public service of education. In addition to the said functions as referred to above, it includes exploration, study, observation, critical thinking, contemplation and dialogue. In this regard, any museum from Asia Pacific and of the world would be a school of informal set up but very effective education may consist of cultural heritage. It also sounds true to recall that museums are very useful institutions to generate public awareness in this purpose.

Finally, it would be very important to note that yet another aspect that needs attention is that cultural heritages and museums are the entities of pride and glory of any country. Rich countries have founded bases to preserve cultural heritages and museums to represent their progress and achievement. But in the poor countries where food, shelter and clothing are the immediate need are unable to do so for advanced quality. The UNESCO and the developed countries need to turn their eye and mind to support the developing nations for their sustainable development of the cultural heritages.

## **Part II: A Case Study of Stolen Images of Nepal<sup>4</sup>: Manmade Disaster**

Firstly, many are there but Hinduism and Buddhism are the two main religions in Nepal. One of the most interesting features in Nepal is the coexistence of the two great religions, indeed, a rare example in world history. Both religions have flourished side by side in a harmonious atmosphere, even to this day. Hindu religion was first evolved and developed in South Asia about three and half thousand years ago.<sup>5</sup> The earliest Indian literature, the Veda, refers to gods such as Indra (God of Sky and Stom), Agni (God of Fire), Surya (The Solar Deity), Varuna (God of Rain), Yama (God of Death), Vayu (God of Winds) and Rudra (God of Lightning). In course of time, however, many of the Vedic gods gradually lost their importance and were reduced to minor deities. The later development was the Hindu trinity: Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. Brahma, the creator; Vishnu, the preserver; and Shiva, the destroyer, of the trinity, Vishnu and Shiva receive the most devotion.<sup>6</sup>

Secondly, Siddhartha Gautama, son of Sakya King, Suddhodana, was born in Lumbini, in the southern region of Nepal in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C., while his mother, Mayadevi, was on her way to her maternal home. Seven days after his birth, Mayadevi died and Prince Siddhartha Gautama was

---

<sup>4</sup> Most of the images have been copied from the book *Stolen Images of Nepal*, authored by Lain S Bangdel.

<sup>5</sup> Lain S Bangdel, *Stolen Images of Nepal*, (Kathmandu: The Royal Nepal academy, 1989), p.23.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

brought up at his father's palace in Kapilavastu, the capital city of the Sakyas.<sup>7</sup> He spent a carefree youth until he became conscious of the fate of man by seeing human misery, old age and death. He then renounced all worldly possessions and left his father's palace to become a wandering mendicant. After years of meditation he attained Enlightenment; thus, he, became the Buddha or the enlightened One. Having been born in the Sakya clan, he is called Sakyamuni Buddha or Gautama Buddha.<sup>8</sup> His teachings were simple. He preached the doctrine of Eightfold path. The ultimate goal was to achieve Nirvana, a release from suffering and rebirth. In this realities, most of the Nepalese heritages have been based on the Hindu and Buddhist religions and the stolen images of statues also belong on same aspect as given bellow.

It is true to note that the art of Nepal, which has expanded over 25,00 years, is mostly concentrated in then kingdoms of Kathmandu valley and *Sinja* kingdom of western Nepal since Nepal was fragmented into more than 54 principalities (small kingdoms) before its unifications. In fact, Nepal was isolated from the rest of the world for many centuries: firstly, due to geographical isolation i.e. Northern borders are fully covered by the Himalaya, which hindered road communication, the Southern border was full of thick *Saal* forests with malaria, which hindered on foot road communication except winter season and the East-West road communications were blocked by several big steep rivers, lacking of bridges at that time. Secondly, very few outsiders were allowed to visit the country and had strict visa provision.<sup>9</sup> This enhanced the heritages of Nepal, whether stone sculptures, bronzes, or wooden works or paintings, were all safe and intact in the country. Those foreigners who were allowed to visit the Valley of Kathmandu i.e. Bhaktapur, Patan and Kathmandu cities with special permission were spellbound to see the art and architecture of the valley but the *Sinja* civilization was very far from capital city since lacked road communications at that time. They wrote on and praised lavishly what they saw. Among them were Percival Landon, Daniel Wright, Oldfield, Sylvan Levi, Kirkpatrick and Percy Brown.<sup>10</sup>

In the early fifties, Nepal was opened to the world and for the first time foreigners could see the ancient city of Kathmandu. They found the Valley of Kathmandu like an enormous open museum where thousands of icons of gods and goddesses in stone, metal, wood or terra-cotta could be seen scattered around. Such art objects were found literally almost everywhere - in temples, shrines, monasteries, Buddhist *chaityas*, *stupas*, old palaces, private courtyards, streets, narrow lanes, by-lanes, water spouts, open fields, neglected places and many more. Until then the art of Nepal was virtually unknown to the world.

In 1964, Dr. Stella Kramrisch organized an exhibition of Nepalese art in Asia House, New York and published a magnificent catalogue. Actually, she was the first scholar to introduce the art of Nepal to the western world.<sup>11</sup> In 1966, the Department of Archaeology of then His Majesty's Government of Nepal arranged an exhibition of Nepalese art in Western Europe which further generated interest in the art of Nepal among the western public.<sup>12</sup> Then, a number of articles and books on various aspects of Nepalese art began to appear. Perhaps it would not be out various aspects of Nepalese art begun to appear and not be out of place to mention here a few noted publications which further helped to introduce the art of Nepal to the world.

As interest was growing in the art of Nepal, art objects of Kathmandu Valley began to disappear fast. From the late sixties, stone sculptures of great archaeological value were missing. At night, valuable images were stolen from temples, shrines, *chaityas*, *stupas* or niches where the

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, pp. 23-24.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> <https://mofa.gov.np/the-ministry/history-of-the-ministry-of-foreign-affairs/>

<sup>10</sup> Fn. 5, p.13

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p.p. 13-14.

images had been kept for centuries. In some cases, priceless images were mutilated or disfigured in attempts to remove them.

This research work provides strong and authentic photographic evidence of those sculptures which were stolen from the Valley of Kathmandu and the surrounding areas during the past 65 years. Other Nepalese art objects, such as bronzes, wooden sculptures and terra-cottas which were stolen earlier, are not covered here. It is hoped that they will also be prevailed soon on the days to come. On the other hand, Nepalese cultural heritages have not been well protected and preserved due to natural disasters, manmade disasters and government's negligence too. In this regard, Nepal is more concerned now about the safety of the remaining images in Nepal, in view of the increasing art theft of stone sculptures. Scholars have been discovered that a great number of stone sculptures were already stolen. Since photographic evidence had been made, these images might be lost forever. Between 1960 and the early 1990s, numerous statues were stolen and then sold to private foreign collectors. Others ended up in museums in the United States of America or Europe. The project "Remembering the Lost" has tracked down about 160 statues that were stolen from Nepal, which prevailed the total number of missing relics – including statues and other religious items – is probably close to 1,000.<sup>13</sup>

UNESCO reported that the earthquake had taken a "catastrophic" toll on cultural heritage sites in Nepal: 90% of seven World Heritage sites in Kathmandu Valley were destroyed, including most of their statues. However, some of these temples' original statues were not damaged, because they are no longer in Nepal. More than 200 Hindu and Buddhist statues have disappeared from Nepali temples, fountains and sanctuaries since the country first opened its borders to tourists in 1951.<sup>14</sup> The art trade got started after the road to India opened. "I heard about a Swiss woman and (separately) an American aid official who simply drove truck loads of art-works to the border during the fifties, before anyone in Nepal understood the cash value."<sup>15</sup> Nepali art was rare in the West until the 1950s. According to Dr. Pratapaditya Pal, whom Bell quotes, "Soon thereafter, America rushed in with aid, and Nepali art began to flow out of the country."<sup>16</sup> This also mentions the fifties as that unfortunate decade when all this started, points fingers at "local thugs and the mafia and elites, development workers and even some unscrupulous diplomats."<sup>17</sup>

## Hope To Get Those Back

At the end, Nepal is aware of the UNESCO Convention, we hope this presentation will attract the attention of the global art world, where antiques are bought and sold in the art markets, through art dealers or in public auctions. Many would buy such art objects not knowing whether they had been stolen or illegally smuggled out of the country. In fact, many of the stolen sculptures mentioned in this presentation may someday appear in the art market, or museums, but once it is proved they are stolen art objects, no one has the right to possess them. Nepal, a small Himalayan country will be completely deprived of its rich cultural heritage by the end of this century if such illegal art trafficking is not checked and stopped in time.

---

<sup>13</sup> <http://observers.france24.com/en/20150519-earthquakes-stolen-statues-solidarity-nepal>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/niranjan-kunwar/the-lost-sculptures-of-kathmandu\\_b\\_7059524.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/niranjan-kunwar/the-lost-sculptures-of-kathmandu_b_7059524.html)

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

Finally, Nepal is optimistic to get it back .The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA has decided to repatriate 11th and 12th century images of Lord Budhha and Uma Maheshwor, which were stolen from Nepal during the 1980s.<sup>18</sup> Also the Berlin Museum of Indian Art has returned an 800-year-old carving to Nepal after concluding that it had been stolen from the Katmandu valley.<sup>19</sup> It is the latest of a handful of works returned to Nepal in the past year by conscience-stricken holders.<sup>20</sup> The director of Patan Museum, Mr. Suresh Lakhe , says the museum has about 300 pieces - 20% of its collection - which were stolen but recovered by the police or customs officers before they left the country.<sup>21</sup> It is good to know that 36 statues have been recovered from abroad, so far.<sup>22</sup>

At The End, cultural heritage, disaster management and sustainable development are equaled important for heritage lovers. Poverty, illiteracy, natural and manmade disaster are bigger challenges against heritage enhancement. However, it is possible to prevent it, national efforts, needs many minds, hands and global efforts as well.

---

<sup>18</sup> <https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/stolen-11th-century-statues-of-nepal-to-return-home/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2000/sep/06/nepal>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> <https://vimeo.com/113146926>