

Studying, Documenting, and Teaching Nepal's Cultural Heritage

Christiane Brosius, Axel Michaels, Rajan Khatiwoda, Astrid Zotter, Manik Bajracharya, Simon Cubelic and Arunava Dasgupta

Several initiatives at the Centre for Asian and Transcultural Studies (CATS)¹ – based at Heidelberg University and with the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences – bring together a particular research focus and expertise on Nepal from a transcultural, interdisciplinary, and internationally networked perspective. The projects mirror the broad and yet carefully entangled focus on digital humanities, on heritage documentation and critical heritage studies, as well as on urban transformation and state-formation in South Asia. They bring to the fore the productive cooperation across national boundaries. Nepal is a particular case because it has a long history of religious monuments and documentary texts that reflect and shape social practices up to the present day. Evidence extant in architectural structures, inscriptions, and documents is especially dense from the medieval period onwards and continuing into the present.

Due to having remained largely untouched by both Muslim conquest and British colonial rule, in Nepal Hindu kingship and its related forms of rule and social organization continued thriving long after they ceased elsewhere on the South Asian subcontinent. Its geopolitical location as a high-altitude and hard-to-access country between the Indian and Tibetan/Chinese cultural spheres favored Nepal as a repository and archive on the one hand, but also as a contact zone where external influences and local developments were negotiated in unique ways. Here, we present glimpses on four interdisciplinary initiatives that engage Nepal in larger fields of current research – ranging from the digital documentation of built and performed cultural heritage in the Kathmandu Valley to the exploration of urbanization in South Asia: (1) the Nepal Heritage Documentation Project (NHDP); (2) the Documents on the History of Religion and Law of Pre-modern Nepal (Documenta Nepalica) project; (3) the Anthropology of Inscriptions project; and (4) a multilateral partnership that combines research and teaching about urban transformation in Kathmandu, Delhi, and Heidelberg.

Preserving heritage digitally: The Nepal Heritage Documentation Project (NHDP)

NHDP, substantially supported by the Arcadia Fund of Lisbet Rausing and Peter Baldwin, was started in 2018. It provides an open access approach to extensive heritage documentation in Nepal, with a particular focus on the Kathmandu Valley and West Nepal. In Germany, the NHDP is run collaboratively by the Heidelberg Centre for Transcultural Studies (HCTS) and the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities (HAdW). Key partners and representatives in Nepal include the Saraf Foundation of Himalayan Traditions and Culture and the Department of Archaeology of the Government of Nepal. NHDP's first commitment is to historical monuments that are spread across the Kathmandu Valley. These monuments still play important roles in active social and religious habitats, be it in the old towns of Patan, Kirtipur, Kathmandu, or Bhaktapur, or in more remote places (beyond the Kathmandu Valley) like Nuwakot, Jumla, or Solokhumbu. Most of the heritage sites documented are impacted by massive transformations in the city fabric, be this related to the aftermath of the 2015 earthquakes, to gentrification or informal densification, through encroachment or erasure. Others are affected by changing infrastructures (e.g., roads, airports) and changing trade patterns. Thus they reflect heritagisation and urbanisation processes that can be witnessed across Asia and beyond. NHDP aims at documenting the historical and anthropological 'biographies' of such monuments as well as their current states and uses.

NHDP is even further enriched by the spirit with which many researchers and institutions have shared their (mostly unpublished) material related to tangible and intangible heritage. This includes close interaction with the impressive data collection of the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust (KVPT)

as well as ties with the digital and open access John C. and Susan L. Huntington Photographic Archive of Buddhist and Asian Art. Moreover, the legacies and support of architects, architectural historians, and researchers (e.g., Niels Gutschow, Wolfgang Korn, Ulrich von Schröder, Bruce Owens and Carl Pruscha) further thicken the fabric of NHDP's database, the Digital Archive of Nepalese Arts and Monuments (DANAM).² All of DANAM's content is available to the public for free and can be accessed online. Its visual and textual materials are transferred to Heidelberg University Library for sustainable storage in its repositories of research data, heidCON³ and heiDATA.⁴

Datasets include structured information about the monuments' histories. This is comprised of architectural, art historical, anthropological, and historical data; descriptions of monuments in English and Nepali; photographic documentation of monuments, objects (e.g., sculptures), and inscriptions; architectural details and measurements together with site plans, elevation drawings, and location maps; and maps of ritual processions and other thematic entries for heritage walks. These digital heritage walks, sometimes visualized in short videos, connect a set of particular architecture types, such as monasteries, arcaded rest-houses, or water architecture across the urban or rural space. They present selected thematic narratives that evolve around a particular procession through a neighbourhood, also bringing in a timeline of change, detailed documentation of rituals and routes. Moreover, NHDP aims at transferring the findings to wider publics, for instance, by explaining how tangible and intangible heritage are condensed in 'heritage focus areas' – e.g., palace squares or special city quarters – to highlight the social, religious, and historical connectivity of sites across a particular locale instead of promoting individual sites as if they were contained and isolated places.

Over its running time of eight years, NHDP aims to document and inventory more than 1500 monuments, 2200 inscriptions, and 7000 objects, producing around 23,000 photographs and 1900 architectural drawings. Beyond this, it also highlights the unique intangible cultural heritage associated with the structures: rituals, festivals, and other historical, social, and religious events and practices. Thus, DANAM comprises four databases: an architectural monument database, an art objects database, a historical database with inscriptions, and an anthropological database. The last of

these is crucial for the understanding and documentation of intangible heritage and how it is intrinsically connected to built structures in Nepal.

NHDP's team consists of architects trained in heritage documentation (Bijay Basukala, Bibek Basukala, Anil Basukala, Thomas Schrom), archaeologists (David Andolfatto), Indologists and historians who sometimes also work as anthropologists (Bharat Maharjan, Pankaj Nakarmi, Rajendra Shakya, Ravi Shakya), photographers (Yogesh Budhatoki), IT experts (Ashish Gautam, Bishwo Shah), geographers (Elias Michaels), an administrator in Nepal (Roshan Mishra), and a chief administrator in Heidelberg (Radha Malkar). The team is led by Christiane Brosius, an anthropologist specialising in visual and media ethnology in urban India and Nepal, and Axel Michaels, an ethno-Indologist specialising in South Asian rituals and religions, as well as Rajan Khatiwoda, an Indologist who coordinates the documentation work.

One example shall be sketched to highlight NHDP's work: the Bhimasena Mandira,⁵ located at the northern end of Patan Durbar Square in Lalitpur's historic city. It serves as an exemplary case because its documentation not only created awareness and motivation to initiate the post-earthquake renovation process in 2018 but is also assisting its actual restoration work through the systematically recorded information in the DANAM. For example, the elaborated maps and plans drawn and published under the NHDP have been used by the local government and other institutions during the rebuilding process. The temple, dedicated to the deity Bhimasena, was not destroyed in the 1934 earthquake but sustained heavy damaged during the 2015 earthquakes. Its carvings are remarkable, such as in the principal façade of the first floor or the struts supporting the broad overhanging roofs, displaying images of different deities. Bhimasena is a mythological character of Hindu mythology, worshipped as the god of trade in Newar society. The temple is lively, much frequented, and considered one of the 'eight jewels' on Patan Durbar Square. Constructed during the early Malla era (ca. 1200 CE), it was reconstructed in 1627 and 1681 CE by King Siddhinarasimha and King Śrinivāsa Malla, respectively. Smaller and larger rituals are still taking place here, underlining the the complementary relation of built and ephemeral heritage, its relevance for local residents rather than for tourists.

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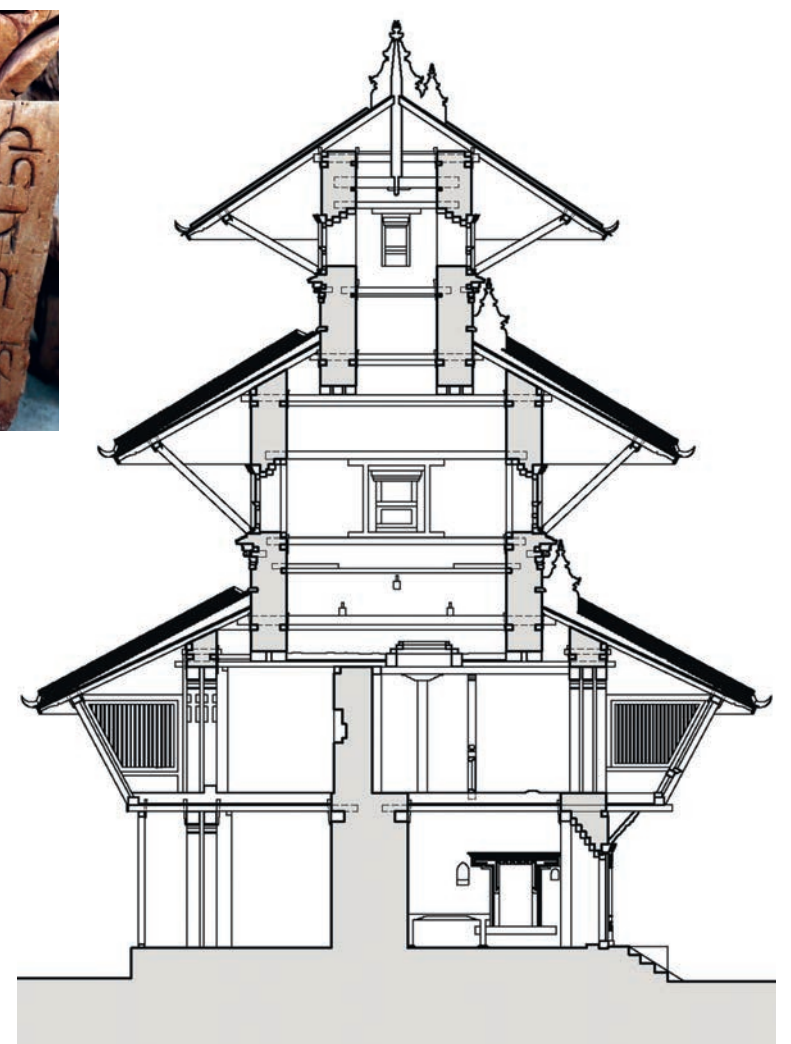
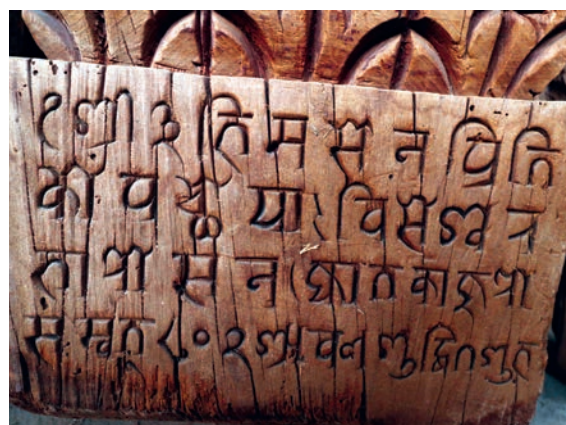


Fig 1 (above): Bhimasena temple, current view, scaffolded for renovation (Photo by Yogesh Budathoki, 2019).

Fig. 2 (right): Historic photograph of Bhimasena temple by Bourne and Shepherd, ca. 1970.

Fig. 3 (above right): Strut inscription from 1682 CE (NS 802) (Photo by Yogesh Budathoki, 2019).

Fig. 4 (far right): Section drawing of Bhimasena temple by Anil Basukala (September 2020).





Fig. 5 & 6 (top left): Book covers: *The Muluki Ain of 1854* and *Studies in Historical Documents from Nepal and India*

Fig 7 (top centre): A ritual vessel (*kalaśa*) with an inscription. The vessel is said to contain the Newar deity Buṅgadyah (Photo by Monalisa Maharjan, 2021).

Fig 8 (top right). Micchu Bāhā, statues of Lokeśvara and other deities, with stone inscription (Photo by Yogesh Budathoki, 2019).

Fig 9 (right): Roofscapes of Lalitpur's heritage city center (Photo by Christiane Brosius, 2019).



Cataloguing and editing documents of pre-modern Nepal (Documenta Nepalica)

From the late 18th century on, Nepal experienced a rapid and extensive increase in the production of paper documents serving the needs of the growing administrative and legal apparatus of the emerging nation-state formed in the wake of the conquests of the Shah kings of Gorkha. The huge corpus – unique for South Asia and still extant in public and private archives throughout the country and abroad – includes hundreds of thousands of documents and offers a true kaleidoscope of officially administrated life. It seems as if each human activity and every settlement, however remote it may have been, was captured by paper. The material spans from royal edicts (land grants, regalia, caste regulations, tax rules), court decisions, and documents for the organisation of religious institutions and festivals to trivial blurbs, such as orders to feed buff instead of dog meat to tigers in the royal zoo; from reports of Nepalese envoys about military facilities in British India to complaints about irregularities in issuing gambling licenses.

The development of digital methods and tools to make this wealth available in the form of a catalogue, and in scholarly editions and translation is a pioneering work. The philologically treated texts form the basis for tackling larger research questions including the legitimation and affirmation of rule, political unification and nation building, Hinduization, the textualization and codification of law, or the development of elite cultures.

The centre-piece of the academic endeavour is an open access and freely accessible database, called Documenta Nepalica.⁶ It features a catalogue with metadata for documents held by public institutions and private holders. The lion's share within these data sets, whose number is growing steadily (currently over 60,000), are those that have been documented under the earlier Nepal German Manuscript Preservation Project (NGMPP) and which have been worked on in cooperation with the National Archives in Kathmandu, the German Oriental Society, and the State Library of Berlin. Documents selected on the basis of the researchers' thematic foci are hosted as xml-coded digital editions compliant with the standards of the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI). The digital infrastructure, which has been designed within the project using open source programs and data formats and is programmed by Oliver Hellwig, features further components, providing tools for textual processing and analysis. The editions can be linked to a bibliographic database and a glossary of technical terms, both of which are collaboratively fed. Names of persons and places tagged in the digital editions feed into the ontological database with the aim to make the information retrieved from the documents reusable in broader ontologies, controlled vocabularies, and the semantic web.

The latest addition to the digital architecture is the development of a lemmatizer that is trained to analyse the texts morpho-syntactically and thus contributes to the study of the lexicography and grammar of the still under-researched Nepali language. In a substantial number of cases, the data of Documenta Nepalica and NHDP are cross-referenced.

The project started under the lead of Axel Michaels in 2014, as a research unit of the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities. With teams in Heidelberg and Patan, it consists of the researchers Manik Bajracharya, Simon Cubelic, and Ramhari Timalisina; the deputy project leader Astrid Zotter; the head of the editorial program Christof Zotter; and the cataloguers and editors Rabi Acharya, Pabitra Bajracharya, and Yogesh Budathoki.

The Research Unit publishes the print-on-demand series "Documenta Nepalica – Book Series" by Heidelberg University Publishing. The first volume – *Studies in Historical Documents from Nepal and India* – is edited by Simon Cubelic, Axel Michaels, and Astrid Zotter (2018) and contains contributions by Diwarkar Acharya, Manik Bajracharya, Rajan Khatiwoda, Gisele Krauskopf, Timothy Lubin, Charles Ramble, Alexander von Rospatt, and others. It aims at exploring and rethinking issues of diplomatics and typology, the place of documents in relation to other texts and literary genres, methods of archiving and editing documents, as well as the role they play in social, religious, and political constellations. The second volume – *The Muluki Ain of 1854: Nepal's First Legal Code* (2021) – is the first comprehensive translation of a foundational legal text for modern Nepal. It covers almost every aspect of public, criminal, private, and religious law, ranging from the organisation of the state and courts to murder and other delicts, the workings of the caste system and the joint family, matters of purity and penance, customary law, widow-burning, and witchcraft. As such, the Muluki Ain is a unique source for the place of traditional Hindu jurisprudence in South Asian legal cultures.

Connecting written artefacts to social practices: the anthropology of inscriptions

This project aims at investigating the crucial role that inscriptions – mobile and place-bound, graffiti or other publicly displayed media of written communication – have played (and still play) for the construction of spaces, belonging, collective memory, and varieties of value in the Kathmandu Valley. A selected corpus of inscriptions has been documented, catalogued, edited, geo-referenced, and published at the digital platforms of the NHDP and the Research Unit "Documents on the History of Religion and Law of Premodern Nepal." Besides a description of the inscriptions as

text- and image-bearing objects, socio-religious practices connected to the inscriptions are also documented. A special focus is on inscriptions related to religious sites and the processional chariot of the Newar deity of Buṅgadyah, also referred to as Karuṅāmaya or, for Hindus, the Rāto (Red) Matsyendranātha. By drawing on methods from visual anthropology and philology, the inscriptions are studied from an interdisciplinary and transtemporal perspective: as images and texts, as sediments of past meaning and sites of contemporary struggles, as historical objects embedded in monument sites, but also as literate practices through which ritual and festive activities are connected to heritage scapes. Thereby, the project wants not only to contribute to a better understanding of the linkage between tangible and intangible heritage, but also to interrogate the concept of cultural heritage by opening it up for local notions from the past and present. The project team, headed by Christiane Brosius and Astrid Zotter, includes Simon Cubelic, Rajan Khatiwoda, Monalisa Maharjan, and Nutandhar Sharma.

Studying the city: entangling cities across South Asia and Germany

How can knowledge about urban transformation in globalizing cities be shared and invested in critical and self-reflexive teaching tools across disciplines and institutions of higher education in the so-called Global South and Global North? The themed partnership "Urban Transformation Urban Placemaking: Learning from South Asia and Germany," funded by the German Academic Exchange service (DAAD), explores the ways in which cities reflect and stimulate cultural, social, economic, and political lifeworlds across time and space. It also aims to develop curricula about these dynamics. The research considers the transforming nature of public urban spaces and practices related to cultural heritage, neighbourhoods, and everyday life as a resource of knowledge co-production and collaborative socio-cultural practices. The project members pay attention to this demographic condition, but go deeper and beyond quantitative dimensions to jointly investigate and develop research-based teaching toolkits. The aim is to enable institutions of higher education to respond to the ways in which cities in South Asia and Germany transform and what can be learnt from their often substantial changes. With this, young generations of students will be trained in the humanities and social sciences as well as art and design, to shape socially responsible and sustainable career paths by means of handling future-oriented questions and methodological challenges related to the 'Urban Age.'

The network pays particular attention to the study of urban responses to the interconnectivity of natural and man-made

crises in cities (e.g., earthquakes, climate change, migration, endangered heritage, and cultural diversity). A focus on placemaking – that is, how people shape their urban habitats and everyday worlds in cities – is especially promising for such an approach. Thematically seen, the comparative lens on Delhi and Kathmandu contributes to a conjunctive understanding of intra-Asian urban transformation without reducing the cities to the often attributed stereotypical 'chaos.' Across the wide spread of Kathmandu and Delhi, the multi-layered physical and social fabric of the city is characterized by distinctive sites of urban life and heritage, such as the mansions (*havelis*) in the historic town of Shahjahanabad in Delhi or the Buddhist compounds (*bāhāh*, *bāhi*) and arcaded rest houses (*phālca*; *pāti*) in the old cities in Lalitpur and Kathmandu. In Delhi and the Kathmandu Valley, many of the erstwhile traditional neighbourhoods have been steadily giving way to new public spaces, gentrification and 'modernisation,' the idea of neighbourhood, the design of heritage areas, suburban areas, and even slums. The old transforms in terms of its apparent relevance and usefulness while new populations bring in new aspirations, sensibilities, living narratives, and practices of placemaking. In comparison, Heidelberg's emphasis on becoming a "knowledge city," including the university, a range of museums, a professional landscape of software technology, small and middle-size businesses, but also experiences of cultural and ethnic diversity, helps considering how cities are managed and shaped by diverse agents and objectives.

Structurally and methodologically, the three partners each bring a particular regional and disciplinary expertise: Delhi's School of Planning and Architecture (SPA) contributes with urban design and mapping methods for people-oriented 'open cities,' questions of ownership of and belonging to the city; Kathmandu University provides knowledge on community and memory, the training of art practice and curation as a socially responsible and responsive practice; and the Heidelberg Centre for Transcultural Studies (HCTS) invests digital and ethnographic methods and an emphasis on critical heritage studies.

Project members include Sujana Chitrakar from Kathmandu University's Department of Art and Design, Arunava Dasgupta from Delhi's School of Planning and Architecture's department of Urban Design, and Christiane Brosius from the Heidelberg Centre for Transcultural Studies at Heidelberg University.

For more information, please see <https://spacetoplace.org>.

Christiane Brosius, Heidelberg Center for Transcultural Studies, Heidelberg University.
Email: brosius@hcts.uni-heidelberg.de

Axel Michaels, Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Germany.
Email: michaels@hcts.uni-heidelberg.de

Manik Bajracharya, Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities.
Email: Manik.Bajracharya@hadw-bw.de

Simon Cubelic, Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities, University Library.
Email: Simon.Cubelic@hadw-bw.de

Arunava Dasgupta, School of Planning and Architecture, Delhi.
Email: arunavdg98@yahoo.co.in

Rajan Khatiwoda, Heidelberg Centre for Transcultural Studies. Email: rajan.khatiwoda@hcts.uni-heidelberg.de

Astrid Zotter, Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities.
Email: Astrid.Zotter@hadw-bw.de

Notes

- 1 See the Spring 2019 issue of *The Newsletter*: <https://www.iias.asia/the-newsletter/article/asia-europe-transcultural-perspective-new-heidelberg-centre-asian>
- 2 <https://danam.cats.uni-heidelberg.de/danam>
- 3 <https://heidicon.ub.uni-heidelberg.de>
- 4 <https://heidata.uni-heidelberg.de>
- 5 <https://danam.cats.uni-heidelberg.de/resource/3b68c5ca-e64a-11e9-b125-0242ac130002>
- 6 <https://nepalica.hadw-bw.de/nepal>