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Conference abstract

Title
Learning from the guthis: An Indigenous community-based conservation system

Theme
Non-Western challenges to dominant Western heritage concepts and characterisations

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Nepal’s Kathmandu Valley was one of the first designated sites in Asia and one of the first living historic cities in the world to be inscribed on the World Heritage List when inscribed in 1979. As a site comprised of seven monument zones, the Kathmandu Valley was also one of the first multiple area or serial sites on the World Heritage List. The site was listed as endangered between 2003 and 2007 due to the partial or substantial loss of traditional elements in six of the seven monument zones and resulting loss of authenticity and integrity. One of the five benchmarks for the removal of the Kathmandu Valley from the World Heritage in Danger List in 2007 was the development of a long-term management plan. This led to the development of an Integrated Management Plan (IMP) which makes reference to a 'bottom-up approach' and 'promoting local empowerment' primarily through the auspices of designated site managers for each monument zone. Reference is also made to the need for community support to ensure the social and economic sustainability of conservation activities.

While the IMP has been successful in stabilising the World Heritage values of the Kathmandu Valley, it sits at times uncomfortably alongside an indigenous conservation system that has existed in the Kathmandu Valley and Nepal more generally for centuries. The system is comprised of informal associations called guthis whose membership is based on caste, geographical or patriarchal connections. Guti were endowed with land donations from members and sponsors. The land was collectively farmed or otherwise utilised by the local community providing employment and generating an income for festivals, rituals and the maintenance of cultural heritage items.

This paper, initially, examines the gradual decline in the guthi system following a nationalisation process in the 1960’s and the more recent designation of the Kathmandu Valley World Heritage Site. With reference to archival research and original interviews, the paper then provides a critical analysis of the key characteristics of the guthi system, particularly in relation to the definition and participation of a community in the conservation of cultural heritage. Following a comparative evaluation of community participation as proposed in the IMP, the paper proposes a framework for the integration of indigenous and non-indigenous heritage conservation systems. Such a framework is relevant to the Kathmandu Valley, as well as to other heritage sites with similar systems of indigenous heritage practice.