REVISITING CONSERVATION CHARTERS IN CONTEXT OF LOMANTHANG, NEPAL: NEED TO ACKNOWLEDGE LOCAL INHABITANTS AND CHANGING CONTEXTS

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Abstract

Many historic and traditional settlements are characterized by their continuous habitation and associated cultural practices. The identity of these settlements are shaped by their legacies of past, and their vitality is ensured by the continued inhabitation. While conservation of historic identity is the prime concern for many conservation charters, continuing the traditional inhabitation is also equally important in cases of living historic settlements. This paper is concerned about the latter aspect of conservation of historic settlements i.e. ensuring continued inhabitation of traditional settlements by addressing changing contexts and inhabitants’ aspirations. With reference to a historic but living earthen walled settlement of Lomanthang in the Nepalese trans-Himalayan region, this paper reviews some conservation charters dealing with historic settlements. Many conservation charters have acknowledged the variation in cultural values and practices in different regions, and accordingly have emphasized on the strategies suitable for specific cultural contexts. However, such strategies have not adequately considered the local aspirations and changing needs. Unless the local inhabitants feel comfortable living in these settlements, the true identity of the settlement can not be maintained. Following the footsteps of some regional charters that recognize the rights of indigenous people and specific cultural values, this paper argues for need of charters that recognize the active role of the local inhabitants in value assessment, decision making, and strategic planning of conservation in such settlements.

Key words: Change, Continuity, Conservation, Culture, Community, Participation

1. Introduction

The concern for heritage conservation has increased significantly since the early twentieth century, and many charters have been adopted as consensus building as well as guiding documents for general conservation practices. Since modern conservation movement started from Europe and spread over the rest of the world, many of the issues addressed in these charters are specific to European and Industrialized context rather than many other cultural contexts. Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter, the Nara document on Authenticity, and the Bangkok Charter are some of the documents that emerged as responses to other cultural contexts. The questions or concerns dealt by these charters
have also been widened to encompass various aspects of heritage conservation. As Luxen puts it “the questions asked have graduated from “how to conserve?” to “why conserve” - and then to “for whom to conserve?”” (Luxen 2004, p. 5). This paper extends these questions further to incorporate “by whom” in order to emphasize the need of recognition of the inherited association of inhabitant communities with their heritage in living settlements. There is a need to recognize the local inhabitants’ continued living as an integral part of the heritage spirit and significance. It is only through a continuity of life within these settlements that the heritage lives longer, implying conservation in professional terms. As this is solely possible by continuing the life in the settlements, there is no doubt that the main concern is to conserve the dynamic and intimate relationship between the people and the built environment. The dynamic relationship between the inhabitants and their built environment can be accounted only if we acknowledge the changing contexts.

Various conservation charters have emphasized the issues of value, authenticity and process of conservation work. However, these charters have a basic assumption that the prime agents for conservation are either the state party, or the conservation professionals. While the roles of state party and professionals must be appreciated, living heritage settlements rely on self-motivation and active engagement of the inhabitant community. The conservation professionals or state parties or allied agencies can act as facilitator in these processes, but these communities themselves are the main keeper and manager of their cultural heritage, and so their role and authority must be acknowledged above all other parties.

With reference to Lomanthang, a 15th century walled settlement in the trans-Himalayan region in Nepal, this paper argues that facilitation of continuity of life as an integral part of living heritage sites shall be the guiding conservation strategy for those heritage sites, and the community themselves shall be recognized as the key agent for conservation and continuation.

2. Lomanthang: Context

Lomanthang is a small historic walled settlement in the Upper Mustang region of Western Himalayas in Nepal. It is located at an altitude of 3750 meters in a small valley near Nepal-Tibet border. Historically, this region was a province of Tibet, and later became an independent kingdom by the name Lo. The walled settlement of Lomanthang was the capital of the Kingdom of Lo. In mid 18th century, this kingdom eventually came under jurisdiction of present day Nepal. Upper Mustang was a restricted area prior to restoration of multiparty democracy in Nepal in 1990. In 1992, the government of Nepal opened the area for controlled tourism. Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) is the agency designated to manage the tourism in Upper Mustang. ACAP was launched in 1986 to incorporate natural resource conservation and development in the Annapurna area including Upper Mustang.
Lomanthang is probably the only existing walled settlement in the Himalayas. The settlement wall, the palace, and two Buddhist temples were all built in between 1440 to 1470s. All these historic buildings are built of rammed earth construction where as contemporary buildings are built with earth bricks. Many scholars interested in Tibetan Culture regard Lomanthang as an important place outside Tibet, where Tibetan Buddhism is practiced in its authentic sense. Until late 1980s, the settlement was contained within the original fortified setting, and the main entrance gate used to be closed at night. In recent years, building activities in Lomanthang have significantly increased, bringing in changes to the existing built environment and indicating the gradual settlement expansion.

Earlier, settlement was confined within the wall, and the wall was symbolically a protector God. A small strip of land outside the settlement wall used to be bounded by another small sacred wall. Though the sacred mani wall has almost disappeared except a few segments, there still is a circumambulatory way around the settlement. The space in between the sacred wall and the settlement wall can be considered as a ‘buffer zone’ in modern planning concept. However, a few decades ago, people in need of more space negotiated with the local king to gain private lots within this buffer zone. This was probably the first significant change in land use in Lomanthang. The private use of the buffer zone included keeping cattle, storing fodder, and also some building activities. In recent years, the building activity in this buffer zone has grown so much that at some places, the settlement wall can not be seen from the pedestrian circumambulatory path. Moreover, some people have also made punctures on the wall to provide easy access to their private lots from the house inside the wall. In recent years, there has been some vandalism on the settlement wall itself.

Since 1990s, the National Trust for Nature Conservation (previously King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation) – with financial support from the American Himalayan Foundation – has been funding cultural heritage conservation projects to restore various cultural heritages of Upper Mustang. A significant proportion of the population is directly employed in these projects. However, despite the significant public involvement in
heritage preservation, often the community’s response towards heritage issues does not concur with that of the conservation agencies.

3. Conservation Charters and Lomanthang

Nature conservation and lately cultural conservation as well as tourism have been the main aspects of area management in Upper Mustang which contains Lomanthang. Lomanthang is the largest settlement and the ultimate destination of the fee paying trekking tourism in this region.

Conservation and Tourism

Even though the people of Upper Mustang used to travel to other parts of Nepal in winter for seasonal trades and labor works, they did not bring back any significant means to have any major changes on their cultural landscape. The introduction of controlled tourism in 1992 has been one of the first major impetuses of changes in Lomanthang. The incorporation of tourism in the conservation area was aimed at supporting local development and conservation of natural and cultural heritage. Theoretically, this idea is similar to some cultural tourism charters, such as the one adopted in 1999, the International Cultural Tourism Charter.

While most of the tourism principles in the Cultural Tourism Charter are concerned with mutual responsibilities among the hosts and guests, two principles do really matter in case of Lomanthang. Principle 4 underlines that the host communities and indigenous peoples should be involved in planning for conservation and tourism, and principle 5 points that tourism and conservation activities should benefit the host community. In the early 90s, when Upper Mustang region (including Lomanthang) was opened for limited tourism with a provision of significant entrance fee to the region, the Government envisioned this as an opportunity to contribute for local development by channeling the tourism revenue to the local communities. This promise has not been realized and there is not much involvement of local people in tourism activities. This paper explores later that the lack of local involvement has been a prime reason for local people’s passivity towards heritage issues.

The series of International Conservation Charters began with the principles outlined in the Athens charter of 1931, which was then further reified by the International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites (Venice Charter) of 1964. The Venice charter recognizes the importance and authenticity of historic monuments and sites. Lomanthang has distinctly four major monuments: Settlement wall, Thubchen Gompa, Champa Gompa, and the Palace. The palace is still a private property of the local king where as the Gompas and the Wall are communal properties. The Gompa conservation projects in Lomanthang faced a unique challenge of defining authenticity. During the wall paintings conservation works in Thubchen Gompa in Lomanthang, the community had a different thought on the extent the historic wall paintings should be restored. As the restorers aimed in cleaning and consolidating the remaining fragments of larger than life sized wall paintings without any redrawing and repainting of the missing sections, the local community suggested completing the Buddha figure by painting the missing sections. While a restorer would not attempt restoration to that extent, the community’s religious belief would not accept an incomplete Buddha figure in a temple. In fact, the Buddhist cultural belief would seek complete repainting of the wall paintings. This belief is based on the Buddhist assumption of immortality of everything in this world. However, this was not the first time such issue was raised. Byrne mentions the emergence of Bangkok charter of 1985, as a response of Thai Government as it was “bridled at the
restrictions imposed by the Venice charter on its desire to reconstruct some of the Buddhist monuments and sculptures” (Byrne 2004, p.18). Similar issues of authenticity and acceptability of conservation measures in different cultural contexts was the motive behind the formulation of the NARA document on authenticity.

Nara Document on Authenticity (1994) emphasizes the need to consider specific local cultural contexts and even micro-contexts within individual cultures to base the value-judgment of its heritage. Thus, it allows us to consider the socio-economic and cultural contexts of Lomanthang, and their reflections at present consequences; to determine the authenticity and values of the heritages that belong to Lomanthang and its people.

As the article 1 of the Venice charter suggests, we would have to consider the whole walled settlement of Lomanthang as a historic setting (article 1). Being a walled settlement, the historic setting is more prominent in Lomanthang. Even though monuments are important here, strictly following Venice charter may not be feasible to the context of the setting in Lomanthang, where the vernacular houses are continuously being adapted, modified, and reconstructed to suit the changing needs. The Department of Archaeology restored a few parts of the settlement wall in late 1980s. In the early 1990s, a major conservation project began in one of the two old temples of Lomanthang. Conservation of other old temple and the historic settlement wall were also included in the ongoing program. Though community involvement through community meetings and employment has been a key aspect of these projects, the community in general has become passive towards heritage conservation issues. This passivity and disinterest in
matters of safeguarding the heritage was in its climax when a road was being developed in the region.

The effort to build a dirt road was a major development project launched through the collective effort of the people from six village development committees (VDCs) of Upper Mustang. The fund for this work was jointly contributed by the District Development Committee of Mustang, and the six VDCs of Upper Mustang. This road, still in progress, links Lomanthang and other villages to the Nepal-Tibet border. As the only feasible option amidst their limited resources, people of Upper Mustang simply widened the existing trail route to convert it into a vehicular dirt road. No concerns on safeguarding heritage sites were reported by any parties until the road was developed and cargo trucks arrived within 3 meters of settlement wall of Lomanthang, touching some of the old chhortens. Though late, some conservation professionals and the Department of Archeology raised the concern of safeguarding the historic settlement, and drew attention of all parties for better management of the motor traffic. After some discussions, local people agreed to divert the road to presumably a safer distance from the historic site. United Nations Development Program (UNDP) provided the funding for both the diversion study as well as the construction of the diversion road.

Following the diversion of the road, the American Himalayan Foundation, through the National Trust for Nature Conservation funded a project to repair the historic settlement wall. This work is still in progress. Along with the wall restoration project, a drainage improvement project is also in progress.

What these incidents suggest is that the heritage conservation efforts in Lomanthang have been motivated by kind interests of national and international agencies (other than the local residents), and accordingly the entire funding and activities plan have been externally devised. The generous grants definitely helped in restoring the threatened monuments and offered employment opportunities in a place where virtually there were no other economic activities; but they could not enhance the community’s association with their age-old heritages. Further, it financially scared the local people making them think that the heritage conservation is beyond their affordability both financially and technically. This prevalent feeling combined with the frustration of unequal economic opportunities in tourism industry not only detached the people from their heritage, but also gradually affirmed in them a parasitic nature.

The story of Lomanthang raises a crucial issue of integration of monument conservation with the livelihoods of the inhabitants of the place. This includes the concern for improvement of living standards in the historic settlement, provision of economic opportunities, sense of ownership through their rights in decision making and planning to implementation works etc. It is appropriate here to recapture some conservation charters that have dealt with historic settlements:


Article 7 of this charter recognizes the rights of the inhabitants of historic towns, and stresses on the rights of disadvantaged inhabitants to continue living in their old buildings, and the need to assist them financially. Article 9 further acknowledges the necessity of the adaptation of the historic town to the requirements of contemporary life. However, the debate may arise to the extent the historic town is preserved and to the extent it is changed. While the charter endorses the Venice charter in preserving the authenticity of monuments, and buildings, and argues that “respect for authenticity
implies the integration of modern architecture in old town”, the implication of Venice charter for the setting which must be adapted for daily living, may need some extended discussions and thoughts on the way authenticity may be defined in a living context.

**ICOMOS Resolution of the International Symposium on the Conservation of Smaller Historic Towns, Rothenberg Tanber, 29-30 May 1975**

Adding on to the Bruges Resolution, Rothenberg resolutions further account more practical concerns for smaller historic towns and reflect many concerns similar to that encountered in case of Lomanthang. It correctly recognizes the danger of population migration from a historic area in search of other places which have better transportation facilities and other contemporary amenities. It also recognizes the potential drawbacks of relying too much on economic incentives like tourism that might keep the inhabitants in old town, but completely transform the essence of historic town into a commercial place with historic flavor. Most importantly, this resolution recognizes the need of acknowledging local initiatives for preserving their own heritage. This is a key concept applicable in case of Lomanthang where local traditional systems are still functioning better than a government devised administrative systems. In the same line, the standard processes and norms outlined in majority of conservation charters would have to be transformed in accordance with the local traditions and maintenance systems. Integrating conservation ideas within the existing cultural systems, the local initiative for heritage preservation can be promoted.

**UNESCO “Recommendation Concerning the Safeguarding and Contemporary Role of Historic Areas” (Warsaw - Nairobi, 1976)**

Article 6 of The Nairobi recommendations highlights the significance of preserving the identity of historic town amidst the prevalent universal building culture. However, it must be acknowledged that the inhabitants do not always think the same way as the conservation professionals do and the inhabitants may have some desire to follow the universal trend of building. While negligence towards historic values at the cost of fulfilling a desire to imitate universal lifestyle should not let happen, turning a vibrant settlement into a museum shall also not be the first option. Article 7 does include a visionary statement which recommends enabling appropriate authorities with legal frameworks to not only safeguard the historic areas, but also to adapt them to the requirements of modern life. In my opinion, this is a very important policy approach and needs to be elaborated. Remaining articles in this document attempt to elaborate the legal, administrative, technical, economic and social measures. This document has further more visionary statements, and must be remembered:

“Member states should encourage and assist local authorities to seek solutions to the conflict existing in most historic groupings between motor traffic on the one hand and the scale of the buildings and their architectural qualities on the other”.

Article 32 suggests a very crucial step for the governments in empowering local authorities in resolving the conflicts between conservation approach and development efforts including transportation facilities, traffic issues, and other infrastructures. Article 33 recognizes the use value along with the preservation value in any cultural revitalization effort. Articles 34, 35 and 36 highlight the need of community participation through various avenues and articles 37 - 46 raise the financial issues along with some recommendations. This charter also discusses extensively on the need of research and
international collaboration. In my opinion, this charter is so far the most relevant charter to encompass the broader issues that a historic settlement like Lomanthang faces.

Charter for the Conservation of Historic Towns and Urban Areas
(Washington Charter 1987)

This charter outlines comprehensive principles and objectives “for the protection, conservation and restoration of such towns and areas as well as their development and harmonious adaptation to contemporary life”. However in case of Lomanthang where there was no official development plan from the government, the local people of the region (through their respective village development committees) put together their efforts to make a dirt road to introduce vehicular transportation. In absence of any forthcoming plan that they were aware of, they simply brought the road straight to the main entry way to the settlement. This approach was then seriously criticized and amidst huge debates, UNDP paid for a realignment of the road to bypass the historic settlement. In connection to article 13 of the charter which suggests “When urban or regional planning provides for the construction of major motorways, they must not penetrate a historic town or urban area, but they should improve access to them”, I would like to emphasize here on the nature of the problem. As earlier mentioned, the road link to the settlement entrance was done without any sort of urban plan, it was rather a development aspirations of local people which was then done entirely by local initiatives. In fact, when later the road was realigned, many local people were not (probably still they are not) happy with the criticism. The question here arises: would we be acknowledging this historic development carried out by the inhabitants (all of whom are native) as one step in the ongoing activities within a continuing history of this settlement? There is a difference in the intention of the act here. The intention behind this act was to facilitate the life in this historic settlement, and thus to contribute for continuity of this living settlement. If the conscious agencies did fail to plan it before hand, why the contemporary life in the historic settlement would have to suffer? If we were to continue arguing for preservation
of the settlement without a plan to facilitate the life there in present context, we would probably see a deserted settlement in a trans-Himalayan valley.

Article 8 suggests: “New functions and activities should be compatible with the character of the historic town or urban area. Adaptation of these areas to contemporary life requires the careful installation or improvement of public service facilities.” We have to remember here that the case of Lomanthang is not that of adaptation of the area to contemporary life, but rather it is facilitation of a continued life in the historic settlement. Such an issue is addressed by yet another charter.

**Charter on the Built Vernacular Heritage (1999)**

This is a comprehensive charter which recognizes the “continuing process including necessary changes and continuous adaptation as a response to social and environmental constraints.” Places like Lomanthang, which is still managing its built environment on its own, without any guidance from the government, truly depends on the motives of the community themselves. In that sense, the charter on the built vernacular heritage seems to override all other charters which tend to put the professional process before the vernacular process.

Thus, we come to a point where the need to understand the indigenous people’s process of vernacular building and traditions is important. If we were to preserve the heritages that were primarily created through an indigenous process, we need to recognize the value and authority lying within those indigenous communities. The right of indigenous people is what a regional or national charter like the one from New Zealand advocates for.

**Charter for the Conservation of Places of Cultural Heritage Value, ICOMOS New Zealand, 1992**

Article 2 of this charter, referring to a treaty of Waitangi, mentions about the indigenous cultural heritage, in which it emphasizes on indigenous guardianship of heritage, whereby “the conservation of places of indigenous cultural heritage value therefore is conditional on decisions made in the indigenous community, and should proceed only in this context. Indigenous conservation precepts are fluid and take account of the continuity of life and the needs of the present as well as the responsibilities of guardianship and association with those who have gone before. In particular, protocols of access, authority and ritual are handled at a local level. General principles of ethics and social respect affirm that such protocols should be observed.”

Further, it becomes desirable to be inclusive of local contexts while determining heritage values and necessary safeguarding measures. Extending the concepts of heritage conservation as a universal concern as outlined in the Venice charter to address specific regional and local contexts in Australia, the Australia ICOMOS Burra charter – in its revised form, is an exemplary charter that encompasses the need of community involvement and changing contexts. However, all of the charters have a preset notion that conservation professionals recognize the value, and let the community to participate in the conservation process. Can we recognize a role for the community when we define the values for their heritage? Can we acknowledge the community as knowledgeable about their heritage ‘value’ and then professionally articulate the articles (in our charters) on ‘value’, ‘authenticity’ based on the community’s vision? (the concern here is for heritage sites that are living settlements). Many of the charters have acknowledged that the different cultural contexts may have different way of recognizing values in its heritage. The crucial issue then becomes the agents and processes that are involved in deciding the
value at first place. Is retaining or preserving a surface or artifact important, or is it the cyclic process of creation, destruction, and recreation, as the Buddhist philosophy would consider all forms of lives including the physical manifestations of spiritual ideas including art works and built forms? A strong example is the tradition of creation of sand mandala in Tibetan Buddhist communities, the authenticity of which lies in creating, consecrating and subsequently destroying it.

4. Conclusion

In the footsteps set by regional charters like Australia ICOMOS Burra charter, and many locally adopted charters like Appleton charter; we may also adopt charters that suits the specific contexts of Himalayan and Buddhist cultural regions to account for those underlying spiritual and cultural values. In settlements like Lomanthang, where continued living through many centuries in past have contributed for preservation and continuity of cultural practices, it is important to consider the continuous facilitation of life as the key aspect of conservation. If we expect the community to continue living in these settlements tomorrow, we will have to facilitate the life at present in acceptable standards, and not by forcing them to freeze the life style such a way that they feel uncomfortable for living, resulting in a gradual decline of cultural practices. This key aspect can not be achieved by adopting a specific conservation measure, but is possible through facilitating life in contemporary needs. If the visible features get changed while facilitating contemporary life, we should be willing to accept that as an integral part of living culture. This would be possible only when our charters accept the issue of ‘change’ as an integral component in the process, and not as something that should always be resisted. By adopting such a measure, we will not be departing from ‘authenticity’ and cultural conservation, but we will be more strongly paving ways for continuity of culture and strengthening the foundations for our heritages in those living settlements.

However, facilitating the life and accommodating changes should not mean discarding the ‘old’ and introducing ‘new’ features; the approach argued here is to create an environment where the inhabitants feel comfortable to live in such settlements with pride and affinity towards their cultural practices. We, the professionals, have to understand that the creation and sustenance of such practices have primarily been done by the inhabitants, and they are the ones who have been keeping the heritage alive through accommodating the changing contexts. Therefore, the conservation profession should accept the primary right of the inhabitants of heritage settlements on deciding the means and ends of their heritage, and the charters should reflect those local voices and their specific contexts.

References


