



Government of Nepal
Department of Archaeology



Nepal Heritage
Recovery Campaign

नेपाल सम्पदा
पुनर्स्थापन अभियान

Lalitpur Declaration on the Recovery of Heritage, 27 May 2024

After two days of deliberations in Lalitpur, Nepal, on numerous aspects of heritage theft and restitution (26-27 May 2024), the National Conference on Heritage Recovery makes the following declaration:

The National Conference on Heritage Recovery demands museums, curators and private collectors around the world to review their inventories, identify looted cultural objects from Nepal, and urgently work to return them. The living culture of Nepal has been damaged by the theft of thousands of deities and heritage objects over the decades by what can only be described as organised crime. It is the legal and ethical duty of institutions and individuals in possession to start programmes of restitution. Until such time that the objects are returned to their rightful home, the Conference demands that those in possession publicly acknowledge that they are not the owners, but instead are holding the objects in trust until the time of restitution.

The Conference asks the Government of Nepal to further empower the Department of Archaeology, as the nodal agency on heritage protection and restitution, by significantly increasing its budget and human resource in order to carry out its assigned tasks of documentation, investigation, follow-up and transport of cultural items back to Nepal. At the same time, the Conference suggests further coordination between Government offices, with the Department convening meetings on restitution between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Finance Ministry, Nepal Police, Armed Police, Guthi Sansthan, local and provincial governments, and others.

The Government of Nepal must develop 'heritage diplomacy' as a key component of its international engagement, and take a leadership role in the accelerating worldwide campaign for return of heritage. To this end, the Conference asks Nepal's Government to urgently engage foreign governments and institutions for the identification and restitution of tangible heritage.

The Conference recommends that the Government establish a 'heritage police' unit with special responsibilities to protect cultural property. It also recommends the enactment of new laws and regulations to better reflect new challenges, given that the main heritage law of Nepal dates back to 1956. It further recommends that the Department of Archaeology proceed with consolidating and updating inventories of heritage.

We call on the citizens of Nepal to collect evidence on missing heritage including historical photographs and testimonies from community members who remember

the objects in place before their theft, so we can understand the scope of the loss and reclaim our heritage.

The historical tangible heritage of Nepal supports intangible heritage, including festivals, *jatras*, rituals, performances and meditative and spiritual pursuits. For this reason, as well, at a time when Nepal's age-old culture is being buffeted by numerous social and economic forces, it is important to get back stolen objects that reside in foreign collections.

As much as possible, the returned cultural objects including statuary, tympanums, struts, ornaments, scroll paintings, inscriptions and ritual items must be restored to their places of origin in temples and monasteries, in sanctums and pedestals. Such restitution requires local communities to be provided with information and to be supported so that returned cultural objects are secured from future theft.

The Conference recognises with gratitude the contribution of individuals who have contributed their scholarship and activism in the fight against the loot of heritage, including the late Lain Singh Bangdel, Satya Mohan Joshi, Sukrasagar Shrestha and Dina Bangdel. We also recognise scholars and documentarians such as Jurgen Schick, Ulrich von Shroeder and Ramesh Dhungel.

While the focus of media, scholarship and activists has been on the theft of cultural heritage of Nepal Mandal (Kathmandu Valley), the Conference recognises the need to focus on cultural loot from all parts of Nepal's mountains, hills and plains. These include theft from monasteries in Dolpo and Mustang, from sites in the Tarai-Madhes such as Simraungadh, as well as cultural sites across the mid-hills beyond the Valley.

The Conference appreciates the positive response of the governments of the United States and Australia (and their respective embassies in Kathmandu) to request for the return of stolen cultural objects. We seek a similar willingness to engage from other countries where large numbers of looted items are held, including France and United Kingdom. The Conference also notes that China is emerging as a destination for stolen statues, and seeks the positive engagement of the Chinese Government.

The Conference believes that the expansion of the Nepali diaspora across all continents helps in the campaign for restitution. We call upon Nepali residents in the 'receiving countries' to be part of the campaign, through visits to museums, studying catalogues, and using media and social media to inform each other and the larger public.

The Conference announces the holding of an International Conference on Heritage Recovery in January-February 2025, bringing together international stakeholders from around the globe to Kathmandu to further energise the worldwide campaign for the restitution of cultural property.