

Nepal Heritage Recovery Campaign

(सम्पदा पुनर्स्थापन अभियान)

Introductory Note

International Conference on Recovery of Cultural Heritage

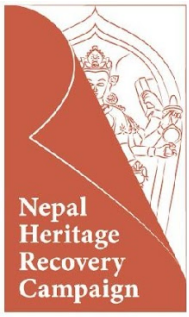
Lalitpur, Nepal, 16-18 June 2025

Background: The removal of cultural heritage from original, consecrated sites, often through theft or deception, has long been a global concern. While some transfers over the centuries may have been legitimate, most occurred outside legal and ethical parameters. As heritage items are removed from their places of origin, transported across borders, and commodified as ‘art’, societies suffer immense cultural loss that is rarely recognised. The local populace is often powerless even as market forces strip heritage items of their sacred and historical significance.

In the post-decolonisation era, societies of the Global South have increasingly adopted rights-based approaches to demand the repatriation of stolen cultural heritage properties. While some collectors and museums defend continued possession by indicating adequate provenance or pointing to the value of ‘encyclopaedic museums’, the demand for restitution has gained momentum, supported by the understanding that loss of heritage harms both the understanding of history and experience of living culture. Although the theft of heritage affects every continent, the Global South’s calls for restitution have been insufficiently acknowledged in ‘holding’ societies and entities. Hearteningly, there is now a growing movement to research, document and campaign to reclaim heritage.

In Nepal, particularly within Kathmandu Valley (Nepal Mandal/*Swoniga*), a culture spanning two millennia gave rise to a wealth of tangible and intangible heritage that remains vibrant and alive, although buffeted by demographic and economic change. The theft of the Valley’s heritage patrimony began in the late 1950s, following with the country’s opening to the West and the publicity given to its treasures by ‘art connoisseurs’. During years of autocracy and political upheaval, the public suffered in silence as loot of religious statues and other sacred properties escalated. Despite this, there were individuals working against great odds to document and prevent the loss, alerting citizens and communities to the escalating cultural crisis.

Recently, coordinated efforts by government agencies and citizen activists, supported by national and international partners, have focused on the repatriation



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of stolen statues, scrolls, struts, paintings and other items. These efforts have yielded notable successes.

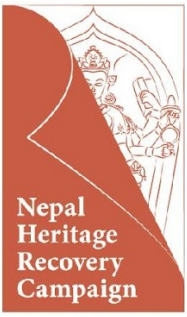
The Nepal Heritage Recovery Campaign (NHRC) was established in 2020 when individual activists united to build on the work of predecessors and develop a coordinated movement to reclaim Nepal's stolen gods, goddesses, buddhas, bodhisattvas, and other representations of living cultural heritage. The Campaign's goal is to ensure that, as much as possible, recovered items be returned to their original pedestal, niche or sanctum.

In May 2024, in collaboration with the Department of Archaeology (Government of Nepal), NHRC organised the National Conference on Heritage Recovery. The event addressed various aspects of cultural property theft, including the history of *Devi-Devta*, *Buddha-Bodhisattva* theft in Nepal, international treaties, perspectives of receiving museums and collections, role of investigative agencies, and the challenge faced in returning items to original sites. The Conference concluded with the adoption of the **Lalitpur Declaration on the Recovery of Heritage** on 27 May 2024. (www.nepalheritagerecoverycampaign.org)

2025 International Conference

Building on the experience of the 2024 National Conference and recognising the importance of promoting heritage recovery globally, in collaboration with the Government of Nepal's Department of Archaeology, NHRC is organising the '*International Conference on Recovery of Cultural Heritage*' in **16-18 June 2025**. The Conference will bring together heritage activists, scholars, government officials, international agency experts, and museum administrators, curators and collectors keen to join the discussion.

We invite the participation of individuals and institutions from both 'sending' and 'receiving' societies to engage in discussions on a wide range of topics related to the return of heritage, spiritual and religious patrimonies, covering both philosophical and practical aspects. We welcome participation and presentations from diverse fields, including activism, scholarship, journalism, archiving, government administration, museum administration, policing, international agencies, community groups, media and curators.



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The Conference seeks participation from both Global South and North, including from countries that have suffered greatly such as Cambodia, Egypt, Ethiopia, Greece, India, Iraq, Mexico, Nigeria, Peru, Thailand and Zimbabwe. We also seek representation from nations with less prominent repatriation campaigns, such as Pakistan, as well as from activists focused on the return of indigenous heritage, including native communities across the continent, from Siberia to the Sahel, Myanmar and Mongolia to the Tibetan Autonomous Region. Additionally, we invite museum and auction houses administrators, investigative journalists, social scientists, curators and art scholars to participate in constructive dialogue for heritage repatriation.

Themes

The following is a preliminary outline of themes to be taken up at the Conference. The final list will see some consolidation and adjustments as per suggestions and participant confirmations.

1. *History and Global Experience of Heritage Repatriation*
2. *Repatriation to Home Communities: Challenges and Successes*
3. *Proving Provenance: Legal, Ethical and Practical Challenges*
4. *International and National Laws, Legal Frameworks and Investigation Agencies*
5. *Art and Idol: Cultural Expression, Spiritual Significance and Ethical Considerations*
6. *Illicit Trafficking of Heritage Items in the Digital Era*
7. *Documentation, Research and Collaboration in Heritage Recovery*
8. *Media and Social Media's Role in Recovery and Advocacy*
9. *New Dimensions of Heritage Loot: Emerging Destinations and Methods*
10. *Role of Museums: Ethical Acquisition, Display and Response to Advocacy*
11. *Public Awareness, Education and Advocacy*
12. *Heritage Diplomacy and Governments' Role in Repatriation*
13. *Indigenous Rights, Community Engagement and Restitution*
14. *Digital Technologies and Innovations in Heritage Recovery*
15. *Private Collectors and the Ethics of Acquisition*
16. *Restitution and Cultural Reconciliation: Addressing Historical Injustices*
17. *Cultural Heritage Loss in Conflict and Post-Conflict Societies*



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Two site visits are proposed, one to Patan City (Yala/Lalitpur) to observe in-situ restoration and the other to the National Museum and its chamber dedicated to returned icons and items.

Logistics and Support

NHRC will be hosting the Conference on 16-18 June 2025 (Monday to Wednesday), bringing together approximately a hundred participants for two-and-half days of deliberations. While we are unable to provide support for international travel, we offer local hospitality for three nights during the Conference. To cover expenses including venue costs and participant hosting, we are seeking financial support from the Nepal Government, municipal authorities and national and international organisations.

Those interested in attending or needing more information kindly write to the Conference Organising Team at nhrcampaign@gmail.com.