

Cultural Change

It is useful next to give a general idea of the process affecting cultural change. Such a process has characterised the Nepalese culture, or cultures (in acknowledgement of the idea of a cultural plurality in Nepal), at all times. But the change process accelerated substantially from the time Nepal suddenly stepped into the modern era, breaking out of its centuries-old, self-imposed isolation in 1951. It is not possible to treat the subject at greater length here, nor do justice to it with reference to all regions or cultures. We will merely be content to look at two cultures--the cultures of the Kathmandu Valley and the Khumbu region. This attempt to understand the change process should shed some light on how far tourism can be held responsible for triggering the process of cultural change, one way or another. Kathmandu Valley and Khumbu are the two most tourist-prone regions, attracting a lot of tourists every year. We will broadly gather how well these two cultures have been able to absorb the impact of tourism.

The process of culture change affecting Kathmandu has been one of the most profound, if not cataclysmical. Kathmandu remained in relative isolation and was insulated from modernistic changes in its polity, economy, and with regard to its other broader cultural values until 1951. Nepal remained veiled in an air of mystery, because so little was known about the country to the outside world before that date. There were just a few writings by a handful of early European visitors, who were grudgingly let in to visit the Kathmandu Valley, reporting on the artistic and architectural treasures there (Levi 1925; Brown 1912). They wrote about the Valley's temples, stupas, monasteries, their tiled and gilded-metal roofs; marvelled at their wood carvings, and at their sculptures and icons.

of both the Hindu and Buddhist divinities. Much earlier, in 1793, Kirkpatrick summed up the wonders of the Kathmandu Valley to the eyes of an outsider by saying that "*in truth, there are nearly as many temples as houses and as many idols as inhabitants*" (Kirkpatrick 1811: 150). According to his estimate, the city of Kathmandu then had about five thousand houses (Ibid: 160). The European visitors to the Valley wrote about the three Newar towns; their flagged and cobbled lanes and by-lanes, houses of brick lining them, lit up with exuberantly carved windows and doorways; and the open yards and public squares where people ambled on in a leisurely way. They wrote about the people, their curious manners; their dresses, their food, fads, and customs; and their endemic festivals. They described the beautiful, vast stretches of fields that hemmed in the three towns on all sides, streams that criss-crossed the Valley, and their banks along which a lot of religious activity could be seen. Kathmandu was strewn with yesterday's historical monuments at virtually every corner; much of which still stood intact even until 1951. An air of wonder mixed with curiosity hung over this place, endowing it with a Shangrila-like image even as late as 1951. The country in the interior was known even less to most people. Thus Kathmandu in the 50s was a much more blissful place, unaffected by the later modernistic developments which were to scar it permanently with little hope of redemption. Many festivals and cultural activities kept the place pulsating and alive, and the people participated in them with total faith and immersion.

Such an idyllic picture of Kathmandu in the 50s has been rudely shattered by the feverish pitch of development and by modernisation and urbanisation programmes in the last three or four decades. One major index characterising such changes is the population increase in the Kathmandu municipal area between the 50s and the 90s. In the census of 1952/54, Kathmandu's population stood at 106,579 (Sharma 1989: 40-41), but by 1991 it had risen to 421,258 (CBS 1991). Kathmandu had also expanded considerably into sprawling suburban areas during this time. The business core which forms the city centre has been too heavily and haphazardly built up, despite the efforts of successive governments to plan and regulate its growth. This has robbed the town of the old charm and ambience of the 50s, depriving it of its cultural character. Nor has it made the new Kathmandu of the 90s into a more decent, modern, and beautiful place to live. Its natural and cultural heritage have been deeply affected in two ways. First, the green and open fields around the valley have been built up, the air is choked with all sorts of industrial pollution and noxious traffic emissions, and all its major and minor streams have been turned into open sewers and public drains. No wonder Kathmandu earned the dubious distinction of being the second most polluted city in the world after Mexico city

in 1993. Secondly, this hectic growth has completely robbed and undermined it of its cultural demography. Kathmandu Valley, which used to be a predominantly Newari area earlier, is now composed of a heterogeneous, migrant population coming in to settle from all over Nepal, as well as from Tibet and India, and the Newars are now outnumbered. The city has become a bustling hub of new business and commercial activities, domestically and internationally. It is connected by diverse air, land, and other communication links, domestically and internationally again, joining Kathmandu to its outlying districts, as well as to other world capitals. Kathmandu is exposed to an unprecedented invasion from the electronic mass media and television networks. The incumbent City Mayor of Kathmandu never tires of stating his intentions to elevate the status of Kathmandu from a metropolis, which it is now, to that of a megalopolis (Nep. *Mahanagar*).

In this pell-mell growth, Kathmandu has paid a heavy cultural price. The earlier life styles of Kathmanduites which were steeped in culture have receded in the face of the onslaughts of modern business and commerce. Specimens of art that could be found at every street corner have either been destroyed or have disappeared. To give but one example, the public, stone water-spouts called the *dhunge-dharas* have been buried under and built upon. Many festivals have already disappeared (e.g., *Maghe jatra*) since the 50s, others are beginning to bow out (e.g., *dya bwoyegu*, *gathyamuga*). There are some festivals which are still impressively celebrated, e.g., *Indrajatra*, *Machhendra jatra*, and others, but closer enquiry reveals that they too, along with many other festivals and public celebrations, are beginning to experience the strain of how to maintain them.

To what extent can or should tourism be held responsible for this cultural change now taking place in Kathmandu over the past several decades? Could this change not be attributed to Kathmandu's rapid urbanisation programme and the other processes of modernisation and development taking place at the same time? Perhaps it could. Such a broad spectrum modernisation process relating to the people of Kathmandu touches on many aspects of their lives at many levels. Kathmandu strains hard to develop as an industrial and commercial hub with ever-expanding diversification of its economy. In fact this seems, more than anything else, to have led to Kathmandu's rapid population increase, rendering its ethnic composition heterogeneous and, last but not least, causing people to abandon their earlier farm-based occupations to adopt all sorts of servicing, catering, commercial, and other new occupations that are now available. Building up Kathmandu as a business and commercial centre has triggered off a spate of heavy construction activity all around it. At another level, the changes concern change in value. Introduction of a new polity based

on popular rule, democracy, civic liberties, social justice, human rights and individual freedom, and on the propagation of western liberal education to back them up, on the one hand, and adoption of a growth-oriented economy encouraging a lifestyle of consumerism and a materialistic outlook on the other, seem to have played a greater role in eroding Kathmandu's culture and the intensity with which the people adhered to their religious faith. Many of these changes have been abrupt and sudden for Nepal and some of them, e.g., the political changes, were beyond anybody's control. The result of this abruptness has not been altogether happy and satisfactory either, which can be seen from the less than satisfactory way we have experimented with a democratic system. A culture-conducive change should never be sudden nor abrupt, especially when it can be planned and regulated, such as a change relating to tourism.

There is, however, another fact that cannot be overlooked in this context. The urban growth taking place in Kathmandu over the last thirty years or so has been concomitant with or synchronised with the tourism development taking place over the same period. Tourism has been treated as a favoured and fancied industry, more so than perhaps any other aspect of Nepal's economy. There are several indicators from which one can assess the impact of tourism on Kathmandu. For instance, the tourists in Kathmandu have a more conspicuous presence at any given time than, perhaps, in any other capital city of the region. They are a common sight everywhere and can be seen thronging the streets, sacred places, festival sites, and other areas of tourist attraction. Next, tourism has produced many new jobs and vocations specialising in the tourist-services' sector and in catering. Although figures are not available now, it would be interesting to know how many hundred square hectares of Kathmandu's urban area are used in catering to the tourist trade. Count the number of hotels, shops, boutiques, recreation areas, etc which have sprung up for tourists. One talks with greater concern when tourism declines or is affected by political protests or street violence and by the frequent calls given for all-Nepal strikes. Tourism-related issues dominate the nation's consciousness. Tourists have procured a fame for Nepal that is unique in South Asia, and which we too have partly acknowledged. The name of Kathmandu is mentioned in western literature of tourist appeal (Iyer 1988; 77-102), in addition to being popularised in pop-songs and films. This should give tourism a greater feeling of responsibility for Nepal's development and modernisation.

There seems, strangely, a paradox at work in all this process of change. On the one hand, it is culture and cultural heritage that attracts a greater number of tourists to Kathmandu every year, on the other, more tourists, or travellers,

mean a faster rate of urbanisation, which in the present condition of our bureaucratic unconcern and general public apathy, takes a heavy toll on culture. The former Acting Director-General of Archaeology HMG/N has observed that the cultural heritage of Kathmandu is being "*exposed to the twin dangers of poorly-controlled urbanisation and the tourist invasion*" (Amatya 1983b: 11). Of course, people engaged in tourism in Nepal may be totally disinclined to accept such an assessment of tourism development. If anything, they would want to put blame for any negative impacts from tourism on the many acts of omission and commission by the government. They would be extremely wary if the government were to try to place any restriction on tourism because of this or that reason. In the world we live in, no one in his right mind can make a case against tourism, least of all for the sake of culture. All that needs to be done is to bring about some order, some method, and do nothing that might injure the country's natural and cultural health irreparably.

A direct cause-effect relationship in Kathmandu's cultural deterioration may, however, be traced to pressure on land in Kathmandu, or in the Kathmandu Valley as a whole, due to the rapid urbanisation process. The *Newari* culture and cultural practices drew their sustenance earlier from the income derived from land that charitable private donors, and/or the state, had liberally endowed on them in the past. A group of people was entrusted with a specific religious, cultural, or social task which it was required to scrupulously carry out, on a specific date in the annual cultural calendar, as stipulated. The expenses incurred were to be met with the income made from the produce of the land donated. This was a unique system of cultural trust invented by the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley, and it was known as the *guthi* system. The trustees, the custodians of these specific duties, were known as *guthiyar*. A large amount of the land in the Kathmandu Valley was thus pledged to one or the other *guthi*. *Guthi* land was one of the recognised forms of traditional land tenure in Nepal (Regmi 1978). The land was held inviolate and protected from appropriation by the state, or by any other person, and was given in perpetuity. In the post-1951 Period, a separate *Guthi* Office was set up by an act of 1964, as a semi-government corporation (Amatya 1983a: 44-45), to protect and safeguard the sanctity of all *guthi* lands. But what the *Guthi* Office actually managed to do over the years, because of its incompetence, inefficiency, and rampant corruption, was to let all the *guthi* land slip into individual, private (*raikar*) ownership. This deprived the *Guthi* Office both of its permanent economic resource and income base, so that its efficiency in carrying out many of the state-protected festivals and cultural activities has been seriously jeopardised (Toffin 1992: 77).

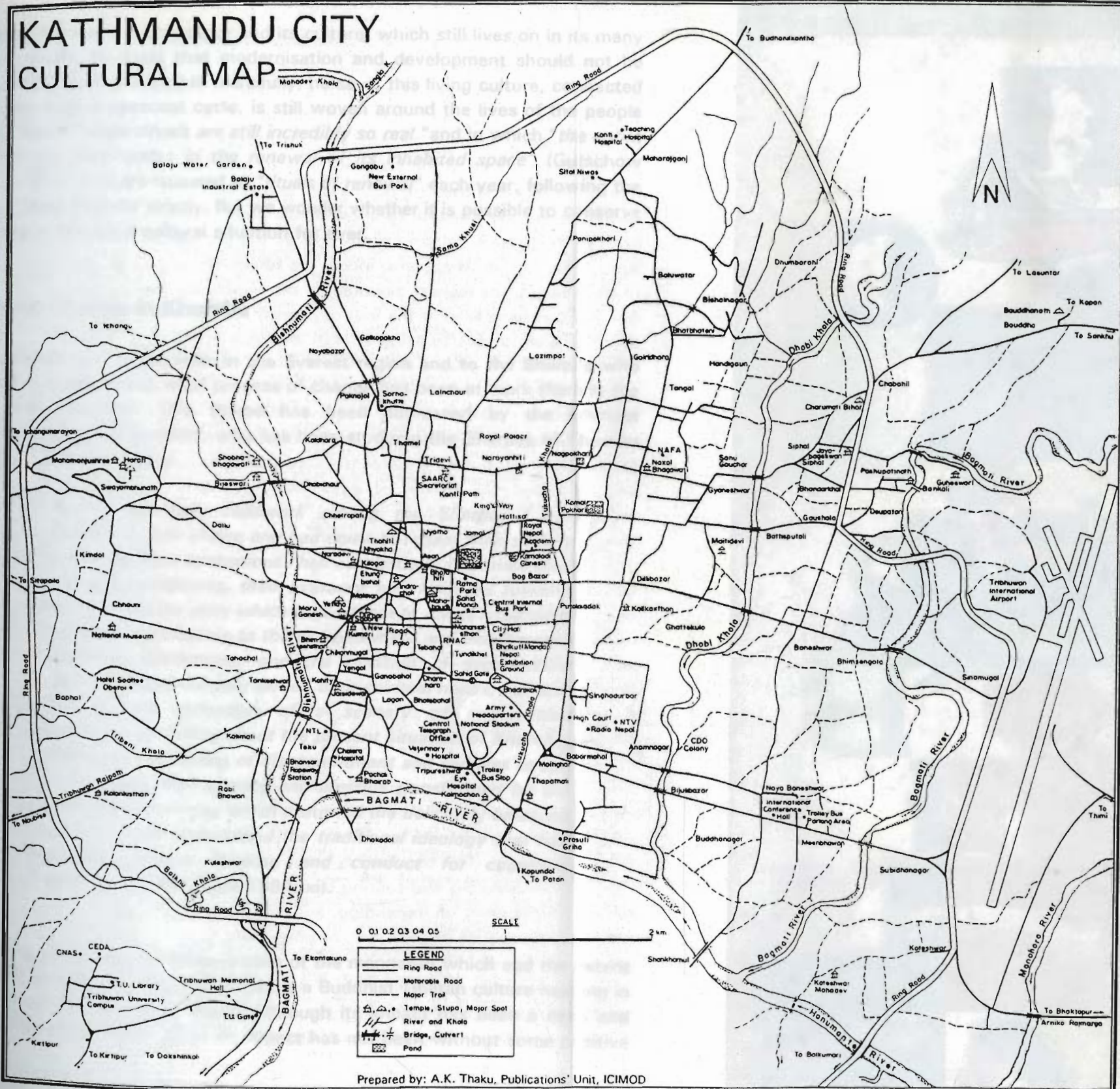
Cultural heritage constantly confronts this type of situation arising from rapid modernisation, through which it is forced to devise newer strategies for survival. Art objects are either museumised, or find their way into private collections. Their worth is now weighed in monetary terms, rather than for their religious or cultural values. Living places of worship, such as the temples or monasteries, find themselves treated as monuments and are preserved as such. Art is reproduced in bulk commercially, in the form of miniatures, curios, etc and reduced to use as room decor. Carved windows and doorways that have come apart from their original constructions are lifted and refitted in modern buildings, out of context. In short, cultural heritage lives in petrification. Such a heritage in Nepal has been able to arouse global concern for its protection and preservation, and UNESCO, in response, listed seven cultural sites in the Kathmandu Valley in the World Heritage list in 1979 (Amatya 1983b: 9). These include the Durbar Squares in Kathmandu, Lalitpur, and Bhaktapur; and the stupas and temple complexes of Swayambhu, Bauddha, Changunarayan, and Pashupati. Different loaning and aid agencies, based in Germany, France, and elsewhere, have been coming forward with many conservation schemes and projects, which are being carried out at these and other cultural heritage sites with increased frequency.

A direct and positive fallout from tourism expansion in Nepal has been the boost to handicraft production it has provided. More than 30 different skills in handicrafts are said to be associated with the Handicraft Association of Nepal (HAN), which is producing, selling, and exporting at an increasing rate. HAN claims that the earnings from the export of handicrafts in 1992-93 were approximately 560 million Nepali rupees. For the current year, i.e., 1993-94, this figure is expected to increase even further, because Nepal has already grossed 360 million rupees in the first seven months (information supplied by HAN Officials). Some of the prominent handicraft types include bronze and metal crafts; silver jewellery; *thanka* (Nep. *paubha*); woodwork; stonework; pottery; costumes; and clothing made from traditional fabric, handloom textiles, Nepalese paper made from *lokta*; and boxes, ashtrays, mementos, and animals encrusted with stones, made of metal or bone.

Sympathetic westerners with a fair knowledge of Nepal and as long-time observers deeply mourn the gradual loss of this culture to pressures from development and modernisation. For them, a thriving culture should never have been overtaken by museumisation. It should never be conserved or kept alive, as if in a zoo for example (Gutschow 1990). Gutschow is a German scholar and an expert in architectural restoration, working in Nepal since the time of the Bhaktapur Development Project, a conservation project started in 1975, and

KATHMANDU CITY

CULTURAL MAP



when he talks about Bhaktapur and its culture, which still lives on in its many urban rituals, he feels that modernisation and development should not be allowed to touch and spoil it. Mercifully, he says, this living culture, connected with the annual seasonal cycle, is still woven around the lives of the people there, where "*urban rituals are still incredibly so real*" and in which "*the entire community participates in the renewal of its inhabited space*" (Gutschow 1990). These acts are repeated as "*rituals of renewal*" each year, following the annual ritual calendar strictly. But we wonder whether it is possible to conserve Bhaktapur in such a cultural situation for ever.