Towards Sustainable Buddhist Heritage in Kathmandu

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The Kathmandu Valley in Nepal is home to seven UNESCO World Heritage Sites. One of them is Swayambhu, the oldest Buddhist temple area in the Valley and a monument favoured by pilgrims and tourists alike. The imposing white-washed stupa with its Buddha eyes welcomes masses of spiritual seekers and casual visitors, families and individuals, scholars and backpackers. The Swayambhu area in its present form is a rich manifestation of Buddhist and Hindu mythology, rituals, architecture and national pride. It also represents a delicate and unique natural environment in congested urban space where littering, pollution, deforestation and breakdown of buildings are among the many challenges for sustainability.

Preserving the heritage of Swayambhu falls to various stakeholders: government officials, international bodies and religious specialists. This paper will discuss the role of the Buddhacaryas, a lineage of indigenous Newar Buddhist priests responsible for ritual life in the area, and their relationship with heritage strategies and policies. Approaching religion with a wide hermeneutical lense, this study will explore the ethnic and social situation of the Buddhacaryas as the traditional custodians of Buddhist cultural values, and challenges brought to them by modernization and urbanization in one of South Asia’s fastest growing cities. Analyzing current tensions and conflicts of interests we can suggest feasible ways to enhance cultural sustainability at Swayambhu.

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