

# Samrajyeswar Mahadeva Temple A Case of Archaeological Renovation Outside Nepal

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## Introduction

Archaeological conservation or renovation of many of our cultural heritage has become one of the important problems inside country. The temple like Samrajyeswar Mahadeva, in Lalitaghat of Varanasi, U. P. India, outside Nepal, is the most valuable representative of Nepalese temple architecture and woodcarvings, which was renovated with appropriate indigenous techniques.

Samrajyeswar Mahadeva Temple was built in 1898-1900 Bikram Sambat by Late King Surendra Bir Bikram Shah in memory of his beloved mother Late Queen Samrajye Laxmi Devi Shah. It was a great challenging project carried out by the Department of Archaeology, Kathmandu, Nepal since 2036/037 B. S., outside the kingdom.

This temple depicts a typical profile of individual and national identity and continuity in the field of Nepalese art, architecture and religion. This was the first temple constructed outside Nepal with indigenous cultural artifacts and mentifacts.

## Historical Background

In 1898 Bikram Sambat, Queen Samrajye Laxmi Devi Shah during her last breath of life had wished to built a Siva temple and choudhara (Dharmasala) in her commemoration. Then, King Rajendra Bir Bikram Shah and her son Surendra Bir Bikram Shah constructed the temple and Dharmasala in Lalitaghat in the 1900 B. S. It appears that it took two years to complete these historical and religious monuments. Its construction began in the year 1898 and was completed in 1900 B. S. The temple and Dharmasala were constructed by Nepalese artists and workers specially brought from Nepal. The sacred myth that Kashi is mokshadayani and all the pilgrimages are enshrined in Kashi had brought the queen to Kashi for her last breath. The materials that were needed for the construction of the temple and Dharmasala were mostly brought from Nepal. Special kinds of bricks called 'Telia eet' (which are very smooth and thick) were also made for this purpose. These bricks are specially made by adding quantified amount

of mustard oil in the soils thereby making very smooth, bright and beautiful. Beautifully carved wooden doors, windows, tunals (struts), toranas, brick tiles, for roof were also brought from Nepal in fully prepared condition.

It is said by the old priest of the temple that these required number of bricks were locally made in Varanasi. But it is not known as to how the special type of soil needed for such bricks could have been locally available. Perhaps the bricks might have been brought to Varanasi from Kathmandu although there was no easy transportation facilities like that of to-day. The architectural style represents an unique feature in the whole of Varanasi. The majestic view of Lalitghat, its Nepalese architectural and artistic significance, along with its prevailing tranquility of the environment on the bank of River Bhagirathi gives a vivid picture of the aspect of Nepalese cultural heritage outside Nepal.

### **Artistic aspect of the Temple**

This pagoda style about 45 ft. height having 27X27 ft length and breadth temple is magnificent example of art and architecture of Nepalese originality. In Nepali religion, Brahmanism and Buddhism is not easy to separate because Vajrayan Buddhism began to evolve icons and architecture showing marked Brahmanical features. From about 8th century to about the end of 12th and 13th century the high tide of cultural contacts between Nepal and India reached its peak. This temple is one of such examples. Nepalese secular architecture depicting Hinduism and Buddhism in its all round structure, icons and wood carvings show the adoption of assimilation of all aspects of culture.

The most characteristic form of Nepalese architecture is found in wood. This brick

temple is provided with slanted roofs rising upwards like a tower in eaves receding tier. This temple consists of square cell set within a bigger square which is roofed by a tower rising upwards in two diminishing tiers. The ground floor is the most important one since the upper storey is blind being non-functional and is built in the form of a casement of intricately but delicately carved wooden architectural features and decorations. The shadows cast by long over-hanging eaves that are supposed to support the roofs, produce a most pleasing aesthetic effect.

The most important features of this temple are the carved wooden panels, doors, windows, eaves and the struts. The entire weight of the wooden super-structure consisting of the slanting roofs and the tower itself seems to be carried by the pillars, bracket capitals and radiating rafters which are all very richly carved. The profusely ornamented brackets with conventional designs and graceful figures in relief lend a peculiar charm to these edifices. The projecting lower end of the radiating rafter beams is joined with a horizontal beam which transfers the load to the 14 struts resting on the projecting bracket. The decoration on the struts consists mostly of symbolic icons of various divinities like Ram, Sita, Janak, Narashimha. The Temple has the characteristic features of late Malla period. There are fourteen struts which are painted with black and brown colours. The style of the art is similar to the contemporary stone or metal art found in the various temples of Kathmandu valley. They are precisely modelled and skillfully carved. Tantric cult is seen in these struts and wood carvings are found in the doors. The bottoms of the struts are generally carved with the erotic figures of mundane characters. These erotic figures are believed to ward off the evils and lightning that might harm the temple.

This typical temple of Nepal seems to have preserving a method of construction that is not to be seen in the construction of temples in India. The method of construction consists in the foundation and the lower part of the walls being led and built in stone and brick and the entire structural frame in wood filling is being done by piece of stones and bricks are kept together by mud-mortar.

The square cella shelters the sanctum and sanctorum, is surrounded by a pradakshina or circumambulatory path running between the walls of the inner square. These two squares are covered with roofs which rises in the manners of low pyramid composed of horizontal courses diminishing in size and in finical way. The art of wood-carving is indeed the pride of this temple. Both in temple and Dharmasala, wood is beautifully shaped, formed and carved in intricate patterns and designs. It is extensively used in door-frames, door-leaves, windows, cornices, brackets, lintels, struts and pillars. Apart from vegetal and geometrical forms of all conceivable varieties, human and animal forms of life and myth to enrich the repertory of these wood carvings is a live art in this temple. Sankhu variety of timber is the best one, which is invariably used in temple.

Figure-carvings on the struts are remarkable for their exquisite craftsmanship and compositional skill. The ascending lines of sinuous volume are gracefully balanced and responded by descending lines, and they create a fine rythmic movement in most of them. These figures are in most cases iconic, representing and gods and goddesses like Lokeswar, Siva, Bishnu, Laxmi, Indra and Indrani and others are belonging to tantric pantheon. Some of the figures are mythical and semi-religious like those of epic hero

Bhimsen. Secular themes like those of dancing men and women, mother and children, amorous couples, frankly erotic scenes show the remarkable poise and balance, sensuous charm and disciplined grace in the whole of temple and Dharmasala.

### Present Condition

Samrajyeshwar Mahadeva temple was latest name coined to it during the beginning of the project, in the memory of the Late Queen Samrajye Laxmi Devi Shah. In Varanasi, this temple is believed as the replica of Lord Pashupatinatha temple of Kathmandu. Those devotees who cannot visit Kathmandu visit it for their offerings. This temple is known as "Kathawala Mandir" (wooden temple) in Varanasi by local people. Many tourists who visit Varanasi interestingly come to see this temple. The image of the Pashupati is single phalic (lingum). The work of this temple is compared to the similar type of works of China, Japan, Burma and Tibet.

According to the religious tradition, Dharmasala was also constructed at the side of the temple. It has inside courtyard, which is unique in itself. The courtyard is covered with big flat stones. The height, length and breadth of Dharmasala is 35 ft, 47 ft, 48 ft, respectively.

There are four stone images inside the four corners of the temple. They are Bhagavati, Ganesh, Buddha and Laxmi. It is believed that lots of movable and immovable properties were donated so that the daily worships of the temple would be managed smoothly. But to-day, due to the lack of proper fund management and security the situation is abnormal. The four beautifully carved big doors, struts are in a deteriorating conditions.

The religious temperaments of the people of Nepal can be seen in the various carved images of gods and goddesses. Here we can see as of Hindu pantheon Vajra, lotus, bell and find the depiction of Vajrayan as well chakra, all are found along with the images incarnations of the Hindu gods and goddesses. The syncretism of blending cultural profiles of Buddhism and Hinduism so inherent in Nepal is a living culture of Nepal still to-day. Most interesting are the tunals of this temple which are fourteen in numbers and have eighty four erotic ashanas, thereby implying the introduction of tantric cult in Nepalese religious practices. In this way, in a nut shell we can see the culture of Shakt, Saiva, Boudha and Nath cult in the various wood carvings of the Temple and Dharmasala.

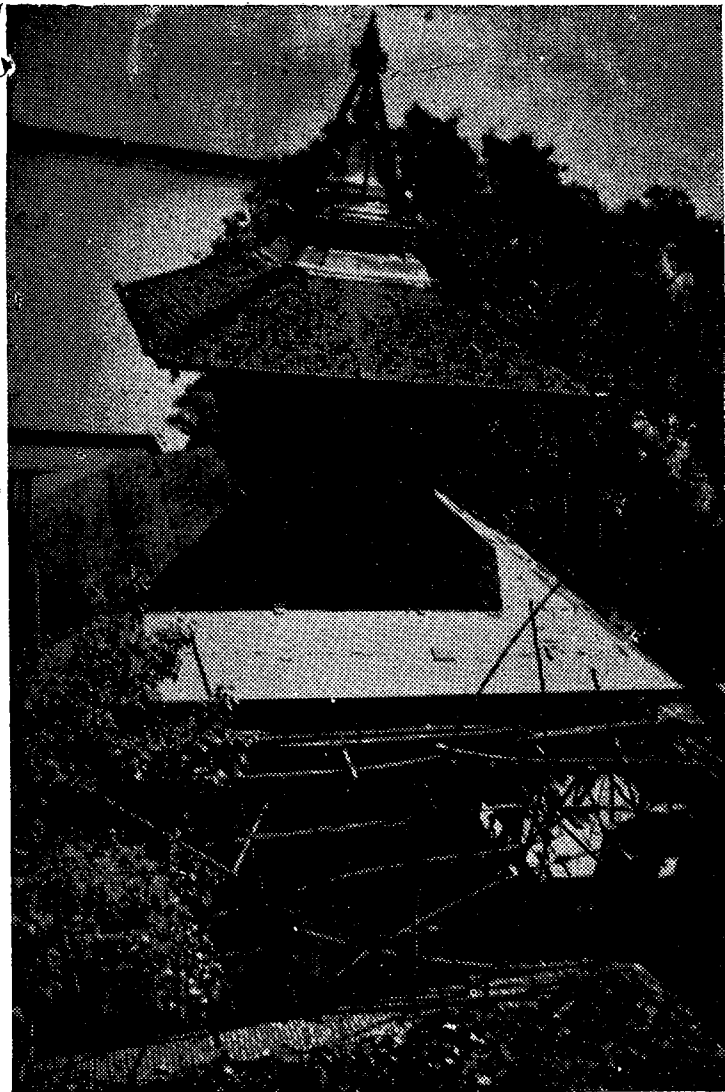
### **Previous attempts of renovation**

Motive behind the conservation and renovation of this important monument is to enhance and enrich its art and architectural existence. It provides a sense of individuality, national identity, continuity and finally it preserves unified rich aspects of Nepalese cultural heritage through ages. The first partial renovation of the temple and Dharmasala seemed to have been done in the 2020 B. S. During this time, Guthi Sansthan had provided some timbers and renovation was carried by non-archaeological group of people from Vidya Dharma Pracharini Committee which is still exist in Varanasi. Its members are all Nepalese people, residing in Varanasi. Then Bada Guraju Janak Raj Pandey was the chairman of the Guthi Sansthan as well as the above mentioned committee. In 2020 B. S. upper portion of the roof of temple was partially renovated by replacing a few old and fragile timbers. The main aim was to stop the leakage of water from the top roof just

below the gajur. The carpenters and other workers were not brought from Nepal who could know the indigenous techniques of preserving such architecture. They had no knowledge of the work of such conservation nor there was any archaeologist or other technical expert who could guide in a scientific manner. The work was not to the point of the satisfaction. Regarding the renovation of Dharmasala, patch work done can be seen in the eastern wing which too was not of lasting quality. Though such unscientific renovation work was carried to save this precious religious monument of historical importance, it went on deteriorating after sometime. During rainy season leakage of the water could not be stopped by the unbalanced roof and broken bricks tiles as a result of which water started entering even inside the brick walls. Water, thus unchecked for several rainy years damaged most of the timbers that were used in roofings.

### **Visit of Their Majesties King and Queen**

His Majesty King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev and Her Majesty Queen Aishwarya Rajya Laxmi Devi Shah, in the course of the state visit to India in 2035 B. S., also visited this temple in Varanasi. On that occasion, Their Majesties worshipped the deity in the traditional style. Then at this juncture, looking at the poor conditions of their ancestor's monumental work of cultural heritage, His Majesty took keen interest and ordered to renovate the temple complex keeping in view the Nepalese architectural and cultural traditions. Then a committee of chief engineers, architects, archaeologists and chairman of Guthi Sansthan presented a report and future plan to His Majesty's Government of Nepal and the decision to that effect was carried out on 2035/2/6. H.M.G. then ordered the



*Samrajyeshwar Mahadeva Temple in Varanasi, India*

Department of Archaeology to launch the renovation project desired by His Majesty the King. The Department of Archaeology with the sanctioned amount of Rs 500,000/- (Five hundred thousand) started the work at this monument. First of all, a team of technical personnel and some carpenters actually visited the site, estimated the plan and cost and then the work was continued. Later on, a further amount of Rs. 500,000/- was sanctioned for the project.

### **Renovation Project 2036/2037 B. S. to 2040/41 B. S.**

Because of the climatic variations in Varanasi, project was planned to begin during winter only. The temple and Dharmasala had to be well-renovated according to archaeological plan, techniques and principles as early as possible. The materials like brick tiles could not be found in time easily in Varanasi so it was decided by the Department of Archaeology that old brick tiles will be totally dismantled, new roofing of timbers would be done and the timber roofing will be covered by brass sheets. During this operation, ninety percent of old timbers were disregarded because of its decomposition and new timbers were replaced with great care.

### **Collection of Materials**

Because of the location of project site in the ghat, substantial difficulties in transportation of materials was there. Everything could not be brought through the narrow lanes. The materials like bamboo, timbers were first brought upto the ghat from nearest ghat by hired boat to the site and by labourers. The cost of the materials as well as of labourers was potentially very high. The most great problems of that project had to encounter was the purchase of timber of Sankhu variety. The timbers that were also available in Varanasi with great difficulty.

That project insisted and searched for such kind of timbers in the whole of Varanasi. The timbers sought in sizes and shape were available with our endless effort. The timbers were purchased with high cost from time to time. This was a great problem since we had to work according to the fiscal rules and regulation of H. M. G. in a foreign soil. In spite of the several physical and material problems the project continued due to great effort. Another problem that project encountered was that of brass sheets. Prior to the departure from Kathmandu it was decided that all the brass sheets and its related materials would be brought to site from Kathmandu itself. But due to many problems brass sheets were not available in time. The heat wave in Varanasi was increasing, workers brought in contact to Varanasi from Kathmandu would not like to stay, brick tiles were already dismantled, timbers already fitted, brass sheets were ought to be fitted in the roofs, otherwise forthcoming rainy season would destroy all the effort. All these problems brought to us a tremendous challenge in obtaining the brass sheets of required quality.

Muthal, Kunpa were the very important ingredients which ought to be made before we start the brass sheets in the roofs. Long dome (gajur) which was taken out previously was first fitted on the top of the temple. Serious observations and attempts were made to fix the gajur carefully because a little negligence could create a leakage inside the temple. Lastly, locally available brass sheets of twenty six gauge was fitted all over the roof. It took three weeks time. The sheets needed were fitted by ten brass fitters and wood works were simultaneously carried out by six carpenters, brought specially for these works from Kathmandu. It was in the last week of April 1984. The trouble was with the great prevailing heat that would

bother workers stepping in the brass sheets. In order to avoid the adverse climatic conditions, it was decided that the brass sheets fitting should be started from early 4.30 a. m. to 9 a. m. in the morning and from 4 p. m. to 6.45 p. m. in the evening. All the fittings with appropriate techniques were done to avoid any subsequent deterioration with utmost care.

### **Chemical Conservation and Treatment on Wood Carvings**

In the whole structure of both the temples and Dharmasala, various wood carvings of doors, windows, pillars & struts were in a pitiable condition. Some of the patches were turned out. White ants and termites had attacked on some of its part. There was a fear of continuous flow of insects to new placed struts. For this reason a chemist was brought to that site for short term chemical treatment because of lack of fund and time. Though the method of chemical treatment was quick and short, it was planned that serious chemical treat will be carried out in the next season of the project. This chemical treatment must be done further in time.

### **Conclusion**

In order to protect and to preserve the temple from further deterioration, though

fullfledged archaeological methods and techniques have been used, it is expected that time to time inspection and chemical treatment must be regularly carried out.

The condition of Dharmasala is further worsened. Its roofs, walls and interior portions, windows, doors & pillars are at pitiable condition. The most elegant and beautiful wood carvings, its artistic charm of various doors and windows and pillars are in a state of decomposition. Much of the future work has to be employed in Dharmasala in future. It is hoped that this temple and Dharmasala will continue to display valuable and significant Nepalese cultural heritage outside Nepal in long days to come. The religious sentiments of Nepalese people to visit Varanasi cannot die with the passage of time. This Dharmasala should be used to give well managed shelter for visiting pilgrimages from Nepal with appropriate cost. It can be hoped that in future no single Nepali will feel shelterless in Varanasi during his tirtha.

This renovation work should be an example of the archaeological conservation performed by Nepal in a foreign soil.

