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## Recovery of cultural tourism in Kathmandu after the 2015 earthquake



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## **Abstract**

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The 2015 Nepal earthquake with its epicentre in Gorkha, central Nepal, caused devastating damage to Kathmandu's cultural heritage sites, severely affecting the city's tourism sector and local economy. The thesis focuses on the recovery of cultural tourism in Kathmandu, the restoration of tangible heritage, the preservation of intangible cultural practices, changes in restoration projects inclusive of community participation, and the demise of the local economy mainly dependent on tourism revenues. A qualitative case study approach was used, in which semi-structured interviews were implemented with key stakeholders—including government officials, UNESCO representatives, local artisans, tourism operators, and community members—alongside an analysis of relevant secondary data from official sources.

Findings indicate that recovery efforts were to some extent hindered by bureaucratic delays, limitations of funds, and coordination challenges. Regardless, the strong participation of local communities and utilization of traditional skills, tools, and resources have been instrumental in preserving cultural authenticity and boosting resilience. The economic impact of the earthquake on tourism-dependent communities was consequential. Large communities reliant on tourism revenues almost collapsed. However, initiatives from government, international organizations, Nepalese diaspora along with affected local communities have emerged with effective strategies for promoting inclusive recovery and long-term development of heritage sites and tourism in Kathmandu.

The need for nationwide integrated disaster management, strategic communication between parties, and inclusive planning is highlighted for a more resilient and sustainable cultural tourism sector after natural disaster. As a result of this research, policy recommendations were proposed including establishing a centralized recovery framework—for example, an active national disaster management institute—integrating disaster risk management into tourism planning, and utilizing modern technology and tools to support rebuilding and restoration projects affected by natural disasters. The study contributes to broader discussions on post-disaster recovery in heritage-rich developing countries and offers practical guidelines for crisis preparedness, management, and sustainable tourism development.

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## 1 Introduction

Nepal's tourism industry relies heavily, especially in Kathmandu valley, on the sector of cultural tourism, which particularly encompasses Durbar square, the Swayambhunath stupa, Pashupatinath temple, and Boudhanath stupa (Beirman et al., 2018). They are not only important in a religious and architectural sense but also act as important economic assets of the country (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2015). However, on April 25, 2015, a 7.8 magnitude quake hit central Nepal and left the cultural heritage sites in Kathmandu ravaged. This natural disaster had a big impact on the cultural tourism sector, especially since it disrupted the inflow of international tourists and the lives of thousands who receive income because of tourism-related activities (Rijal, 2016).

After the earthquake, Kathmandu valley saw drastical decline in visitors number. The Nepal Tourism Board (2016, p. 8) states that the earthquake resulted in a 50 percent decline in tourism arrivals in the immediate following year. Fear of safety and infrastructure caused tourists to shun cultural monuments. As a result, besides the architectural damage caused, the disaster greatly affected the local economy, which, to a great extent, is based on the tourist industry (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2016).

Since earthquake to the period of this study, national authorities, international heritage organizations such as UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization), and grassroot community groups have begun various restoration attempts. One of these initiatives has been on temples, palaces, and stupas reconstruction and the rebuilding of trust between potential tourists based on improved infrastructure and promotional campaigns (Beirman et al., 2018). Nevertheless, questions related to the effectiveness of recovery strategies, the sustainability of tourism development after the disaster, and the resilience of the tourism sector in the presence of future shocks remain (Min et al., 2020; Sharma & Tham, 2021).

### 1.1 Aim of Research

This research aims to generate outcomes that are both produced in an academic as well as in a practical term. The report will be a comprehensive account of the present condition of cultural tourism recovery in Kathmandu. By documenting best practices and lessons learned in the

restoration process, it will also provide evidence-based policy recommendations regarding procedures that tourist authorities and planners should follow when needed. Additionally, the study will contribute to the debate surrounding tourism resilience and the aftermath of severe damage to developing countries. This study will determine the impact of the 2015 earthquake on Kathmandu's cultural tourism and assess the outcome of the measures taken to revive and restore the sector. This involves studying how the physical rebuilding of Nepalese heritage monuments has incorporated such principles, how tourists visiting these attractions have changed their behaviors, and what role the Nepal Tourism Board, UNESCO, NGOs, and the community at large played. The paper uses these dimensions to present a clearer understanding of recovery and, from this, develop a set of policy recommendations to strengthen the resilience and sustainability of cultural tourism in Kathmandu.

## 1.2 Problem Statement

Kathmandu's cultural tourism infrastructure was revealed to have weaknesses as a result of the 2015 earthquake. The Dharahara tower and Kasthamandap temple were among the buildings destroyed, as were most temples in Patan and Bhaktapur Durbar squares. They were an essential part of Kathmandu's cultural identity and a major tourist attraction. Their destruction also created an impression of a lack of disaster preparedness in the country and unsustainable heritage management in Nepal. (UNDP, 2016)

Reconstruction and promotional efforts to revive tourism have been made, but there is no critical academic research on the recovery process. The problem lies in understanding how both the physical (tangible) heritage and the local culture, traditional practices, and community participation (intangible) were affected by the earthquake. Additionally, tourist perception and behavior changed in response to safety concerns and shifting travel preferences and need to be studied to inform future tourism strategies (Lekakis et al., 2018). For this reason, the gap in understanding the magnitude, challenges, and effectiveness of cultural tourism rehabilitation in post-earthquake Kathmandu is the core issue addressed in this study.

Nepal's tourism industry relies heavily, especially in the Kathmandu Valley, on the sector of cultural tourism, which particularly encompasses Durbar square, the Swayambhunath stupa, Pashupatinath temple, and Boudhanath (Beirman et.al., 2018). They are not only important in a religious and architectural sense but also act as economic assets of the country (UNESCO World

Heritage Centre, 2015, p. 12). However, on April 25, 2015, a 7.8-magnitude earthquake hit central Nepal and left the cultural heritage sites in Kathmandu ravaged. This natural disaster had a major impact on the cultural tourism sector, especially since it disrupted the inflow of international tourists and the lives of thousands who received income from tourism-related activities (UNESCO, 2016).

After the earthquake, Kathmandu valley saw a drastically decline in visitor number. The Nepal Tourism Board (2016, p. 8) states that the earthquake resulted in a 50 percent decline in tourism arrivals in the following year. Fear of safety and infrastructure caused tourists to avoid cultural monuments. As a result, beyond the architectural damage, the disaster greatly affected the local economy, which depends significantly on the tourism industry (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2016).

Since the earthquake and prior to the present, national authorities, international heritage agencies such as UNESCO, and local-level community initiatives have engaged in dozens of restoration initiatives. One such strategy has been to restore temples, palaces, and stupas and to restore confidence in potential tourists via the enhancement of infrastructure and promotional activities (Beirman et al., 2018). However, doubts still exist about the efficiency of the recovery initiatives, about the long-term viability of the development of tourism in post-disaster conditions, and about the resilience of the tourism industry against any other shocks to come in the future. The 2015 earthquake showed big problems in Kathmandu's tourism sites. It destroyed places like Dharahara tower, Kasthamandap temple, and parts of Patan and Bhaktapur durbar square. These places are key to the city's history and are busy with visitors. Their loss pointed to weak disaster plans and poor care for old sites (UNDP, 2016).

### 1.3 Research Questions

This thesis is guided by the following research questions:

- a) What were the immediate and long-term impacts of the 2015 earthquake on Kathmandu's cultural tourism sector, particularly regarding physical restoration, economic effects, and changes in tourist perceptions?
- b) What strategies and initiatives have stakeholders implemented to restore heritage sites and support the sustainable recovery of cultural tourism in Kathmandu?

- c) What key challenges and opportunities have emerged during the post-earthquake restoration and revitalization of cultural tourism in Kathmandu?

#### 1.4 Commissioning Party

The study and research of the thesis is commissioned by the Nepal Tourism Board, this government body has been actively promoting and encouraging research-based, reflective approaches to sustainable tourism development in Kathmandu valley as well as in the whole of Nepal. As the lead organization responsible for promoting and managing the country's tourism sector, NTB recognizes the importance of academic input in shaping post-disaster relief efforts, particularly in a culturally and historically significant tourist destination like Kathmandu. By authorizing this research, NTB aims to complete the loop among practice, policy, and community-led recovery so that tourism not only recovers from crises but also recovers in a way that respects heritage and empowers local stakeholders. (Nepal Tourism Board, n.d.)

The fact that NTB authorized such a project also reflects its ongoing commitment to learning from the best in the world and applying these learnings to Nepal's unique cultural environment. The Board serves a coordinating function among government authorities, the private sector, and the local community and values solutions to problems through joint effort and evidence-based research. This thesis substantiates NTB's general goal of promoting Nepal as a disaster-resilient, inclusive, and heritage-conscious destination and concurrently addressing the business concerns of destination management, conservation of culture, and sustainable recovery after natural disasters.

## 2 Cultural Heritage and the Disaster Recovery Process

This chapter presents a structured analysis of Nepal's cultural heritage in relation to tourism and the dynamics of post-disaster recovery. It begins by detailing the significance of cultural and heritage tourism in the Kathmandu Valley, emphasizing its economic and cultural importance. The discussion then addresses the principles of disaster recovery and resilience, particularly as they pertain to tourism systems impacted by large-scale disruptions. The roles of key stakeholders—including governmental agencies, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, and local communities—are outlined, highlighting their respective contributions and challenges. The subsequent sections examine the preservation and revitalization of intangible cultural heritage, encompassing traditional rituals, performances, and craftsmanship. Comparative insights drawn from both local and international case studies are included to contextualize Kathmandu's experiences within a broader recovery framework. The chapter concludes by visualizing the effects of the 2015 earthquake on cultural tourism infrastructure and practices throughout the region.

### 2.1 Cultural and heritage tourism in Nepal

Cultural tourism is one kind of travel for those who wish to experience, discover, or engage with a destination's cultural features. Historical monuments, artwork, architecture, customs, religious sites, festivals, and regional ways of life are a few examples of such assets. Cultural tourism is described as "a type of tourism activity where visitors' decisive motive is to acquire, explore, listen, experience, and purchase cultural products in the destination's area of tourism" by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (2018, p. 6).

Ancient temples, palaces, and religious festivals and rituals that represent Nepal as a Hindu and Buddhist nation are the main attractions of Kathmandu's cultural tourism industry. Swayambhunath (Monkey temple), Kathmandu durbar square, and Boudhanath stupa are a few of the main destinations for cultural tourists UNESCO (2021). Cultural tourism contributes significantly to the local economy by creating jobs and bolstering other associated sectors like handicrafts, hospitality, and transportation, in addition to protecting the nation's identity and legacy. (Shrestha, R.K., 2023)

Sites that hold historical, artistic, scientific, cultural, or other significance and are preserved in a way that maintains their worth to humanity are known as cultural heritage sites. Monuments, collections of structures, and locations with historical, aesthetic, archaeological, scientific, ethnological, or anthropological significance are considered cultural heritage, according to the UNESCO World Heritage Centre (2016, p. 44).

The Kathmandu valley is home to seven UNESCO World Heritage Sites, and its complex of Buddhist and Hindu buildings makes it one of South Asia's most densely populated cities. However, during the 2015 earthquake, these locations—most notably the famous Dharahara tower and portions of the Patan and Bhaktapur durbar squares—were either completely destroyed or seriously damaged. A heritage site is a representation of collective memory in addition to its physical structure. Nepal's national tourism industry has long relied on cultural tourism. Temples, palaces, and stupas that are emblematic of the rich cultural heritage of both Buddhism and Hinduism are among the historical, architectural, and spiritual attractions that draw the majority of tourists to the Kathmandu valley. Together, these seven UNESCO World Heritage Sites—including Kathmandu durbar square and Boudhanath stupa—reflect Nepal's heritage sites. (Nepal, W., 2025)

Many people find these locations appealing not only for their aesthetic qualities but also because of the ongoing cultural activities that are connected to them, such as customary festivals, rituals, and food preparation and crafts. In Nepal, cultural tourism serves as both a means of preserving intangible cultural expressions and a source of income for the local population, particularly for craftspeople, tour guides, and business owners (Zubiaga et al., 2024, p. 13). Prior to 2015, this sector played a significant role in the national economy's expansion as well as in the preservation of Nepal's cultural identity, spiritual significance, and heritage (Dhakal, C. P., 2024).

## 2.2 Disaster recovery (post-earthquake) and cultural resilience

The word disaster recovery involves processes or activities that communities, systems, and infrastructures undergo to bounce back from a devastating event like a natural disaster. Also included in the recovery process is rebuilding physical infrastructure, restoring essential services, reviving economic activity, and attending to the psychological and social well-being of affected populations (Sharma et al., 2023). Recovery, according to the national strategy for disaster risk management in Nepal (Disaster Risk Management, 2007), should afford the opportunity to 'build back better' and improve resilience as well as reduce future risks.

Cultural tourism in Kathmandu particularly suffered a great loss because of the Gorkha earthquake of April 25, 2015, which has disrupted Nepal's tourism sector significantly. The earthquake was 7.8 on the richter scale and was responsible for a lot of damage to over 750 cultural monuments in the country (UNESCO, 2016), including total or substantial destruction of sites in the Kathmandu valley like Dharahara tower, Kasthamandap temple, and parts of durbar squares.

According to the Ministry of Culture, Tourism, and Civil Aviation, the earthquake caused tourist arrivals to decline by almost half, a result of both the blight of key area attractions and a worldwide perception of Nepal as a hazardous travel destination (Ministry of Culture, Tourism, and Civil Aviation, 2016). According to UNESCO (2015), in addition to the visible damage, the disaster disrupted cultural festivals, community rituals, and day-to-day people practices, contributing to a gesture of cultural tourism. Therefore, the earthquake combined its effects by destroying the structures and cultural rhythms that draw tourists to Kathmandu.

Post-disaster recovery studies have paid much attention to the idea of tourism resilience. According to Daly et al. (2023), tourism resilience is the ability of destinations to survive and recover from crises while continuing core operations. According to Harper (2023), in Kathmandu's case, the cultural tourism sector has been a resilient sector that can begin to do physically, economically, and socially what is needed to rebuild after an earthquake. Sharma and Paudel (2024) argue that playfulness, involvement of the community, and flexibility of the system are necessary to build resilience.

Following the earthquake, Nepal set up, with UNESCO support, various recovery programs, including rebuilding for the earthquake and commercial marketing campaigns like 'Nepal Now' that sought to repair Nepal's reputation as a travel destination (World Bank Group, 2020). Despite the resilience strategies adopted, however, bureaucratic inefficiencies and a lack of coordinated actions among stakeholders undermined the process to a large extent, exposing the importance of strengthening institutional capacity and disaster preparedness in planning for tourism governance (Acharya et al., 2025).

### 2.3 Stakeholders

According to the Community Toolbox (n.d.), stakeholders are those who have an interest in the outcomes of a particular project or system. Cultural tourism recovery involves various government institutions (such as the Nepal Tourism Board and the Department of Archaeology),

international support (such as UNESCO and UNDP), NGOs, community people, tourism operators, artisans, religious leaders, and tourists. The recovery process involves each stakeholder with a unique role. For instance, government bodies such as police, personnel, etc., are responsible for policy and coordination, while international organizations come in with the funding, expertise, and advocacy (Shrestha et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2020a). On the other hand, local communities imbued with cultural heritage are the custodians of culture and also the ones worst hit by tourist disruption in economic terms. To understand the successes and limitations of post-disaster cultural tourism recovery efforts, stakeholder interests, power dynamics, and participation levels should be recognized as diverse. (Lin et al., 2024)

In the Kathmandu valley, only cultural tourism recovery has involved various stakeholders, such as government departments, international organizations, NGOs, and local communities. Planning and implementing restoration projects, the Nepal Tourism Board and UNESCO, along with the Department of Archaeology, were joined by primary institutions. The international donors and technical experts provided financial support, conservation knowledge, and planning frameworks. (UNESCO, 2016)

According to Baniya et al. (2019), local communities hold a key role in the cultural tourism recovery following a disaster, and most importantly, they are maintaining their traditions and rebuilding with culturally sensitive means. According to Chan (2017), traditional artisans and masons in Kathmandu used indigenous techniques to restore temples, increasing authenticity and community engagement. However, Chapagain (2008) finds that the recovery process does not sufficiently involve local voices during the decision-making phase. In many communities, there was frustration with the delays, which they felt excluded them from being officially consulted in as they were the custodians of their cultural heritage. As a result of this disconnect, the mistrust and inefficiencies of implementing recovery strategies were the norm.

#### 2.4 Intangible cultural heritage

Much of the attention afforded to physical heritage sites also applies to intangible cultural heritage. It includes oral traditions, performing arts, rituals, festivals, and traditional forms of craftsmanship. In addition to affecting buildings, the 2015 earthquake also interrupted festivals, community gatherings, and religious ceremonies that are an important component of the cultural experience afforded to tourists. (Chandani et al., 2019)

Second, intangible heritage is more difficult to restore as it is absorbed by the everyday practices and values of the community. It must continue to have community engagement, documentation, and intergenerational transmission. As with the reconstruction of the physical spaces, support for the cultural events, the rituals, and the reinvigoration of traditional practices are all important elements in the recovery. (Wang et al., 2025)

## 2.5 Empirical insights from Nepal and international case studies

Valuable insights from global examples of cultural tourism recovery post-disaster are available to the Kathmandu context. After the 2004 tsunami in Thailand, tourism infrastructure was restored, and the destination was promoted internationally through transparent communication and marketing by the government, private sector, and NGOs in a coordinated response (Sopha, 2024). The paper illustrates how Christchurch in New Zealand recovered from the 2011 earthquake through the integrated urban renewal encompassing culture, arts, and public spaces to bring back tourists (Wilson, 2014). In Japan's response to the 2011 Tokyo earthquake and tsunami, memorial tourism was designed in the form of storytelling and cultural remembrance to promote interest in affected regions (Cadman et al., 2023).

According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, n.d.), interventions and efforts launched by organizations such as the Sustainable Tourism for Livelihood Recovery Project (STLRP) between UNDP and the Nepal Tourism Board have been focused on stakeholders' capacity building and inclusive approaches to restore the infrastructure and tourism sector. Interventions involved the use of traditional building techniques and community-based tourism. However, there are also institutional leadership, funds, and managerial capacity issues that can limit the scalability and sustainability of ongoing recovery (Thakur, 2024). These case studies and these national interventions consider probable avenues for post-earthquake tourism recovery in Nepal without declaring absolute outcomes.

## 2.6 Impacts of the earthquake on cultural heritage tourism

It was one of the most devastating natural disasters to hit Nepal in the history—the April 2015 earthquake. It was 7.8 in magnitude on the Richter scale and caused destruction to Kathmandu's cultural heritage and tourist infrastructure, which is of paramount importance to the Nepalese

economy. Along with all the physical damage made to the monuments, there were negative cultural and economic outcomes from the disaster. The disaster had significantly affected the tourism sector, which is a major income-generating activity for Nepal. It claimed thousands of lives, and many of Kathmandu's ancient temples, monuments, and palaces were either destroyed or badly damaged. This was a huge blow to the heritage sites that supported the tourism industry. (Rijal, S.P. 2016)

In the post-disaster period, the Department of Archaeology and UNESCO began working together with local and international agencies to reconstruct the affected cultural sites and revive the tourism sector. Progress has been made over the years, but recovery has taken longer than expected. The sheer scale of the destruction, along with a lack of skilled workers and limited funding, made rebuilding a long and difficult process that remains ongoing more than a decade later (UNESCO, 2020c).

Kathmandu is also considered to be the cultural center of Nepal, with Hindu, Buddhist, and Newar roots. Landmarks like Kathmandu durbar square, Swayambhunath stupa, Boudhanath stupa, and Patan durbar square have long drawn tourists from all over the world. Tourism had been a major contributor to the country's GDP before the earthquake in terms of the generation of job opportunities and stimulation of local economies and national development. (Rijal, S.P. 2016)

Much of Kathmandu's tourism is based on these heritage sites for religious or cultural reasons. When they were destroyed, it was not just the structures that were lost—it also meant an immediate loss of tourist flow and revenue. On top of that, international perceptions of Nepal being unsafe after the earthquake only helped to further worsen the situation. Restoration and reconstruction of the city's cultural and tourism infrastructure have been at the forefront of the recovery process ever since. The reconstruction of these historic sites plays a key role in allowing Kathmandu to once again thrive as a sustainable and world-class tourism destination (UNESCO, 2020b). Figures 1 and 2 show the destruction of key monuments of Kathmandu, and Figure 3 shows the recovered monument.

The first set of photographs (figure 1), adapted from Thapa (2016), portrays Kathmandu Durbar Square before and after the earthquake. The image on the left side, dated June 2012, captures the busy Durbar Square area, which is surrounded by well-preserved temples and historic structures that symbolize Kathmandu's rich cultural heritage. Completely different from the picture on the left, the image on the right, taken on April 25, 2015—on the day of the earthquake—reveals widespread destruction: The image depicts temple ruins reduced to structural debris, with large

crowds assembled at the site, reflecting both the magnitude of the tragedy and the collective resilience of the community.



Figure 1. Before and after situation of Kathmandu Durbar Square (Thapa, S., 2016)

The second pair of images (figure 2), adapted from Thapa (2016), replicates the Dharahara Tower, a historic monument and UNESCO World Heritage structure, which was first built in 1832 A.D. (National Reconstruction Authority, n.d.). The “Before” image shows the original nine-story white tower standing prominently in the heart of Kathmandu valley, surrounded by traditional fencing and urban buildings. The “After” image shows the same iconic Dharahara tower, which was completely collapsed after the 7.8 magnitude earthquake, leaving only its circular base remaining amidst scattered rubble, representing both the architectural destruction and the cultural significance lost to the city.



Figure 2. Before and after situation of Dharahara (Thapa, S., 2016)

Figure 3 The Himalayan Times (2019), illustrates the reconstructed Dharahara completed on 25th April 2021 (National Reconstruction Authority, n.d.). The image on the left displays the newly built tower, faithfully modeled after the original and brought back into the center of modern urban surroundings. The rightmost image offers a closer view of the tower's upper section against a backdrop of Himalayan peaks, symbolizing national recovery and architectural resilience. Collectively, these pictures not only document the physical transformation of Nepal's iconic landmarks and cultural historic sites but also narrate the deeper story of cultural endurance, urban renewal, and the complex interplay between memory, identity, and reconstruction in a post-disaster context.



Figure 3. Reconstructed Dharahara after the 2015 earthquake (The Himalayan Times, 2019, November 24)

The listed images offer a compelling visual chronology of the 2015 Nepal earthquake's devastation and subsequent reconstruction efforts on the most visited cultural sites of the Kathmandu Valley.

### 3. Integrated Theoretical Framework

The use of theory in scholarly research is the application of existing frameworks and models that guide the analysis and interpretation of empirical facts. Theories interpret relationships, patterns, and mechanisms underlying the studied phenomenon (Silverman, 2021). The inclusion of theoretical frameworks provides credibility, organization, and depth of analysis to a study, especially complex and multidisciplinary phenomena such as post-disaster tourism recovery. In this research, a synthesis of four major theories has been utilized to form a multidimensional explanation of the cultural tourism recovery process in Kathmandu following the 2015 earthquake.

#### 3.1 Resilience Theory

Kathmandu's tourism sector's response to the 2015 earthquake can be interpreted using resilience theory as an essential lens. By focusing on the capacity of systems—communities, institutions, and destinations—to absorb external shocks, reorganize, and adapt to new conditions while maintaining core functions and identity, it endorses a theory adopted by Shrestha and Pathranarakul (2018). According to Wut et al. (2023), the ability of a destination to recover from crises such as natural disasters and continue providing tourism services and experiences is called resilience in the context of tourism.

According to Baniya et al. (2019), resilience theory says that tourism sectors can be seriously disrupted and yet remain resilient. Active restoration effort is often the result of coordination between governmental bodies, international agencies, tourism business operators, and local communities, targeting not just the restoration of heritage structures but also improvements in tourism planning and safety standards, along with considering all the festivals. Resilient destinations integrate adaptive learning, flexible planning, and community involvement in recovery processes, as suggested by Baniya et al. (2019). These principles of resilience are evident in traditional construction methods and community involvement in rebuilding processes.

According to the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (n.d.), the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction asserts that a system should recover better than it was before a disaster—in other words, increasing the capacity of the system to respond to future disasters. Alongside it, it also involves the recovery and reconstruction of physical and policy frameworks, risk awareness, and infrastructure development.

Visual representation of this resilience theory in Kathmandu's tourism post-2015 earthquake application (figure 4) explains that there are three interconnected phases: adaptation, recovery, and transformation. The arrows suggest the cyclic nature of rebuilding and evolution of the tourist sector, relating to continuous growth and recovery after the disaster.

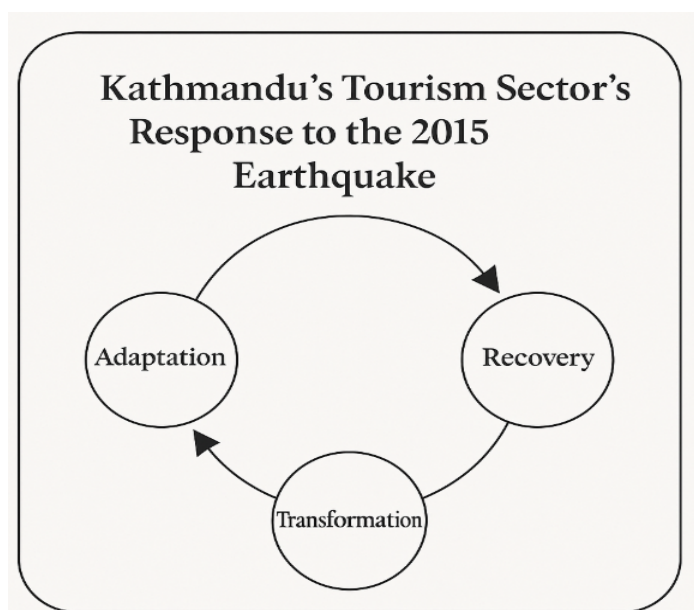


Figure 4. Tourism Resilience Cycle (Cochrane, 2010).

### 3.2 Cultural Economics Framework

The cultural economics framework contributes to this study by helping explain how cultural heritage holds two types of value—it is both a cultural asset and an economic resource. As Chapa-gain, N.K. (2008) explains, cultural elements like temples, traditional buildings, and festivals carry not only symbolic and aesthetic significance but also have a clear market value. In Kathmandu, the heritage sites are the central point of attraction and an economic boost to the local economy because they draw cultural tourists.

After the 2015 earthquake, the economic impact of heritage loss was severe. Local businesses, tour guides, artisans, and hospitality workers all faced declines as tourists stayed away from damaged areas (Rijal, S. P., 2016). Through the lens of cultural economics, these losses are understood not just in financial terms but also as harm to cultural identity and reduced community morale (Saxer, M., 2012). According to the Nara Document on Authenticity (1994), restoration efforts are considered, for example, whether rebuilding should happen quickly with new materials or take more time to protect authenticity.

Furthermore, the framework considers investments by the public sector and policy to preserve cultural heritage economically. More specifically, the Nepal Tourism Board (with international donors' support) realized that cultural heritage in general, and restoration of cultural heritage in particular, is a public good and ought to be preserved and invested in (World Bank, 2022).

Within the cultural economics framework (figure 5), the dual value of cultural heritage (Stephenson, 2023) represents a cultural asset and an economic resource simultaneously. It brings out the fact that these dual roles are, in fact, linked, and the occasion for the intersection of heritage both culturally and economically (Stephenson, J., 2023).

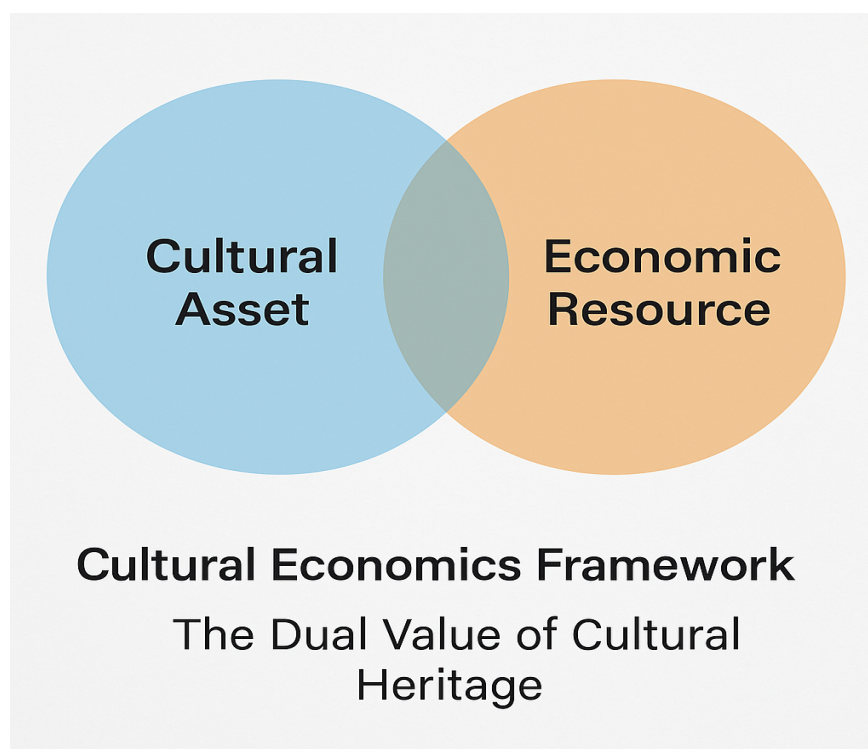


Figure 5. The Dual Value of Cultural Heritage (Stephenson, J., 2023).

### 3.3 Destination Management Theory

Destination management theory provides us with a comprehensive way of thinking about how a tourism destination is organized, promoted, and governed after a crisis (Casal-Ribeiro et al., 2023). Sotiriadis (2020) defines successful destination management as involving a coordinated effort of stakeholders—that is, government, tourism boards, private enterprises, and communities—to keep a destination competitive, sustainable, and appealing.

This theory is useful to assess how the Nepal Tourism Board (NTB), UNESCO, and local municipal stakeholders collaborated to reconstruct cultural sites and promote Kathmandu as a safe and attractive destination in the post-earthquake recovery phase. To improve public perception and regain tourist confidence, campaigns were launched, such as ‘Nepal Now’ (CBI, 2017). Destination image is also essential to Destination Management Theory. As Daly et al. (2021) argue, the tourists are largely influenced by how the destination is perceived in terms of safety-security, culture, lifestyle, and infrastructure.

Butler's lifecycle model (Figure 6) illustrates the relationship between tourism image branding (rejuvenation) and its components. Key domains—such as perception of beauty (tourism exploration), personal satisfaction (tourism involvement), infrastructure (tourism development), quality of accommodation (tourism stagnation), and destination management (tourism decline)—contribute to shaping the overall tourism experience and image (Alam et al., 2023).



Figure 6. Butler lifecycle model (Alam et al., 2023).

### 3.4 Heritage Conservation Principles

The final theoretical pillar of this research is based on the heritage conservation principles. This principle provides a guideline for this study to understand the practical approaches on how cultural monuments should be preserved and restored, particularly after disasters. It also outlines essential principles such as authenticity, minimal intervention, and reversibility. Decision-making on how to repair damaged structures to preserve historical and cultural integrity is based on these principles (Liang et al., 2023).

Post-earthquake recovery in Kathmandu was largely about heritage conservation, with a strong sense of authenticity where many temples and monuments were rebuilt using traditional Newari techniques and materials (Lekakis et al., 2018). Conservation agencies supported this approach as it was in line with UNESCO and ICOMOS guidelines (UNESCO, 2016), promoting a culturally appropriate and community-inclusive process of restoration.

However, some sparked debates—such as the use of modern techniques or foreign-led interventions—which may have compromised historical accuracy or excluded local stakeholders. It encourages and highlights the tension between time urgency and authenticity of the monuments in post-disaster recovery and the need to balance both sides (Weise, 2021).

Besides, heritage conservation principles are not limited to physical structures; they also stress the protection of intangible heritage like rituals, craftsmanship, festivals, and community practices. The cultural recovery involving the revival of festivals and traditional arts in Kathmandu is part of the allure of the city as a destination of living heritage. (KC et al., 2019)

Figure 7 shows the basic principles of heritage conservation: authenticity, minimal intervention, and reversibility. The preservation and restoration of cultural monuments is based on these principles to maintain historical integrity, while restoration strives for minimal invasiveness and reversibility. These are important for post-disaster conservation decisions.

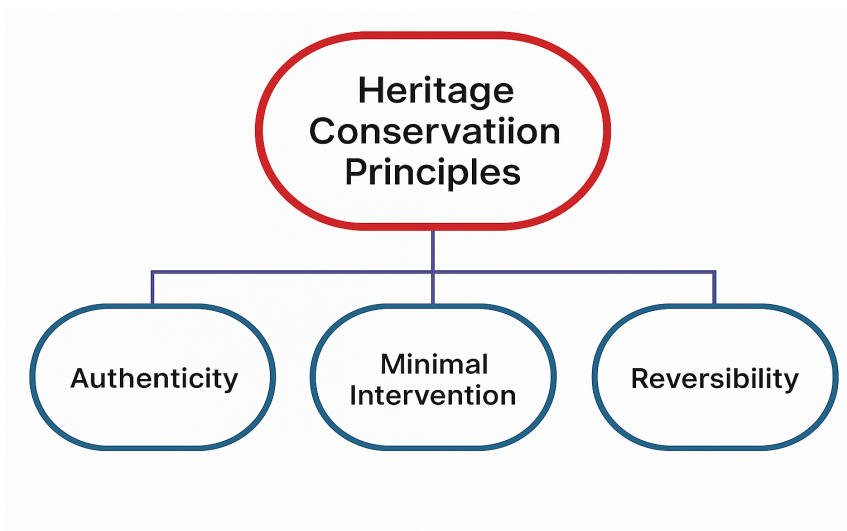


Figure 7. Author's adaptation of heritage conservation principles (British Columbia Heritage Trust, 1989)

## 4 Qualitative Research

Qualitative research methodology is an approach of research relying on non-numerical data to understand complex human experiences, social phenomena, and cultural contexts. Therefore, it focuses on the people's perspectives and behaviors, and the meanings of the experiences. Methods that will typically give rich, descriptive data are through methods such as interviews, focus groups, observations, and content analysis, are usually used in this methodology. Unlike quantitative research that involves the instantiation of statistical analysis, qualitative research embodies the subject of inquiry in contortions to discover the why, the key, and general social dynamics behind it. In the case of cultural tourism recovery, qualitative methods allow one to explore the lived experience of stakeholders, and as these were applied for Kathmandu's post-earthquake restoration, they contributed to a more holistic understanding of the recovery process, potential challenges, and successes. (Al-Busaidi, 2008)

Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes in qualitative data. It provides openness and can be applied with diverse theoretical and epistemological standpoints. According to Caulfield (2019), thematic analysis has six key steps: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and final report production. This is a technique that allows researchers to transcend description of the data and interpret the underlying meaning in participant responses.

All the interviews were audio recorded on the voice recording device, and a written record was made as per the requirement. The thematic analysis of this study has followed the process and cycle according to Kiger & Varpio (2020), where the focus is on sensitizing patterns in the collected data and developing themes according to these patterns. In their method, identifying patterns in the data through in-depth reading is the first step of the process.

### 4.1 Research design and sampling

A research design is a method chosen for the whole study, which integrates the different components of a study in a consistent and logical way, thus ensuring that the research problem is well taken care of (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Moreover, it provides the model for the collection, measurement, and analysis of data. Sampling is a way of choosing individuals, groups, or elements

from a larger population to participate in a research study and of learning from these groups, individuals, or elements something that can be generalized or deeply understood in the context of the study (Etikan et al., 2016). According to Palinkas et al. (2015), in qualitative research, purposive sampling is a usual way to identify and select the persons particularly knowledgeable about or expert in the phenomenon of interest.

The research was conducted through a qualitative case study (interviews) on the Kathmandu valley only. The case study design was considered apt because an in-depth understanding of the real problem in a realistic context was obtained (Yin, 2018). By designing this study, the post-disaster tourism recovery process was able to be examined holistically with all its cultural, economic, and administrative aspects. The key challenges faced by stakeholders in the process of rebuilding cultural tourism after a large natural disaster were also able to be investigated. All the interviewees who were selected had a direct relation to tourism conservation or tourism-related business.

Participants for interviews were selected by using a purposive sampling method. The study on those who had particular knowledge and involvement in the recovery of cultural tourism, which made this technique appropriate (Palinkas et al., 2015). The participants involved in the research were government officials, representatives from NGOs, tourism business operators, residents, and tourists. Expertise, roles, and experience in post-disaster restoration efforts were the basis of the selection of the participants. The data saturation method was also used as the principle of determining the sample size, and interviews were conducted till new data did not bring new insights (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

## 4.2 Data collection and analysis

Primary data is the set of data that is collected first-hand by a researcher to meet a specific research objective. Primary data is fresh data that hasn't been published before. Survey, interview, observation, and experiment are some of the techniques of collecting primary data. Primary data is collected firsthand from the participants according to Creswell and Creswell (2018), and it is molded to respond to the specific research questions required by the study.

Secondary data is the collection of data that has already been verified, analyzed, and published by someone else. Sources include books, journal articles, government reports, and datasets.

Researchers make use of secondary data to substantiate their analysis, contextualize, or verify against findings (Johnston, 2017). As stated by Saunders et al. (2019), secondary data are typically utilized at the start of a study in an attempt to structure the study and to inform methodological decisions.

A semi-structured interview is a qualitative data collection method that is a mix between structured and unstructured types. The interviewer follows a list of open-ended questions, but with the ability to follow up on new issues emerging from the respondent's answer. Semi-structured interviews are a flexible way of getting deeper into participants' perspectives and views with consistency across interviews. Kallio et al. (2016)

Primary data for this research was collected through semi-structured interviews with the key stakeholders. It involved the government tourism officials from the Nepal Tourism Board, UNESCO representatives, cultural heritage experts, local artisans, tourism operators, and community leaders. The semi-structured format helps with in-depth research and covers the necessary themes on the research objectives. The flexibility to do this allows researchers to participate in these conversations with people and to explore how they have perceived cultural tourism recovery after an earthquake.

The thematic analysis process was used to analyze the data collected from interviews. The interview transcripts were reviewed, coded, and common patterns and recurring themes were extracted. They were then interpreted with regard to the research questions and theoretical framework. In order to increase validity, the primary data were triangulated with secondary sources, which were policy documents and relevant literature from relevant academic journals.

### 4.3 Reliability and validity

Reliability is the extent to which the process of a study and its findings can be replicated; validity is the extent to which the interpretations based on the data are credible and accurate (Golafshani, 2003).

During every phase of this study, ethical integrity and cultural values were well maintained. Before the interview, all respondents were asked for their consent to record their voices for research purposes throughout the interview process, and after the consent was granted, they were also provided with clear instructions and an explanation about the purpose and objectives of the research. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage, and the confidentiality procedures were communicated. Only after these steps was primary data collected. As per social science research ethical guidelines, every personal identification was eliminated from the transcripts and final report to ensure participants' privacy (Israel & Hay, 2006). The moral process followed was consistent with the research ethics policy of Kajaani University of Applied Sciences and aligned with broader ethical guidelines set in the research guidelines for human subjects, among which are those currently utilized under legal as well as cultural regulations of Nepal (Bryman, 2016). This approach offered transparency, respect, and protection of participants, which are fundamental ethical building blocks in qualitative research with human participants (Orb et al., 2001).

## 5 Results

The use of qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews is widely acclaimed as a very effective way to explore complex human and social phenomena, especially in post-disaster contexts. Semi-structured interviews allow a flexible approach while maintaining a consistent thematic structure and enable researchers to access in-depth insights into the participants' experiences and perceptions (Kallio et al., 2016). In the context of tourism and disaster recovery, this method is particularly valuable to discover refined understandings that structured surveys may overlook (Gill et al., 2008). Besides that, the combination of multiple data sources, such as interviews and document analysis, is a well-known process to strengthen the validity of findings through data triangulation; it also enhances the credibility and depth of case study research (Bowen, 2009).

The earthquake made a profound impact on Kathmandu's cultural tourism sector; it damaged the major heritage monuments such as the Dharahara, Kasthamandap temple, and significant parts of Patan and Bhaktapur Durbar Squares. These eye-catching monuments, which were vital to both the cultural identity and the economic value of the city, suffered massive structural damage, leading to a significant drop in the arrival of tourists immediately after the disaster. This disaster caused a huge loss of income in tourism-dependent sectors, including local artisans, guides, hospitality providers, and small business owners. Interviews with the stakeholders revealed that the initial recovery efforts were affected by poor coordination, bureaucratic delays, and limited clarity in stakeholder responsibilities (UNESCO, 2015). Steady progress was observed in later stages through the initiatives made by NTB, UNESCO, and other stakeholders. Campaigns such as "Nepal Now" aimed to restore Kathmandu's image on a global level, attracting more international tourists and rebuilding the trust of the city's safety and cultural activity. These outcomes work together with destination management theory, which underlines the importance of integrated governance, strategic communication, and collaborative planning in securing a tourism destination recovery process and effectiveness after a crisis (UNESCO, 2020b).

To answer the research questions and to look deeply into the findings of this study, a dozen semi-structured interviews were carried out with selected participants from the local communities to the concerned agencies, who are the primary stakeholders in the tourism sector of Kathmandu and who provided comprehensive insights into the recovery of this region after the earthquake of 2015. The participants involved in the research were government officials, representatives

from NGOs, tourism business operators, residents, and tourists. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their flexibility and depth, which are especially useful in exploring experiences and perspectives in post-disaster contexts (Kallio et al., 2016). Apart from the interviews, government reports were screened as well for the collection of secondary data that would be the backbone of the research, which aligns with the practice of triangulating data sources in case study research (Bowen, 2009).

Every single interview has a time constraint of 30 minutes, since this time was convenient and was agreed upon by respondents, so it was easy to manage, and at the same time, there is no loss of particular information. Interviews were conducted by face-to-face conversation, recording was done with the participants' agreement, and the audiotape was later transcribed; thus, the key notes collected were very useful for the sessions. The semi-structured character of the interviews was a strong point of this research because it allowed deeper insights into it using open-ended questions and discussion, which in turn led to the identification of the main themes related to the recovery process.

The questions that had been formed according to the research questions and the theoretical framework that was previously stated in the paper were the basis of the interviews. These questions were given to all of the participants except local residents and tourists. The main topics of the discussions were problems and solutions in the field of sustainable tourism, the role of local communities, and the impact of the reconstruction of cultural heritage sites and tourism infrastructure on the local economy, the number of tourists, and the identity of the local community.

Through these interviews, five themes have been identified that indicate the recovery efforts and the mindsets of different stakeholders regarding cultural tourism in Kathmandu. The identified themes are described further with examples and quotes.

### 5.1 Thematic analysis of results

The first stage was to get familiar with the data, which required the translation and transcription of the interviews, and then the data was labeled as the coding phase, where brief, relevant observations or points are marked and identified for easy retrieval. As soon as the codes have been tagged, the third step entails assembling the similar ones to point out the complete theme and its different aspects. Then, after the pattern of creating themes was done, examination of other theses and the process of analyzing data helped to extract the headings of themes. These themes

can be considered a personal matter, which makes the procedure susceptible to being affected by the degree of bias.

The last action in the analytical methodology is the validation method. In this particular phase, first, the themes were cross-verified to determine whether the themes are supported by the data and conceptually distinct from each other. Although there was very little use of data as a secondary source, it had to support the theme anyway. After that, the interview was reviewed once again to make sure the themes were accurate and reliable as answered by respondents, with the theme largely the concept of inductive theory, and then the findings were validated completely.

Once the themes had been screened, they were arranged respectively, matching their content with the major research question that they portrayed and tracing back to the introduction section. This also expanded the understanding of the connection between each example and the whole study.

Finally, the themes together with the analysis formed the grounds on which the report was built. Description, explanation, and direct quotes from the interviews and secondary data as evidence have been used for the chapter on conclusions (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

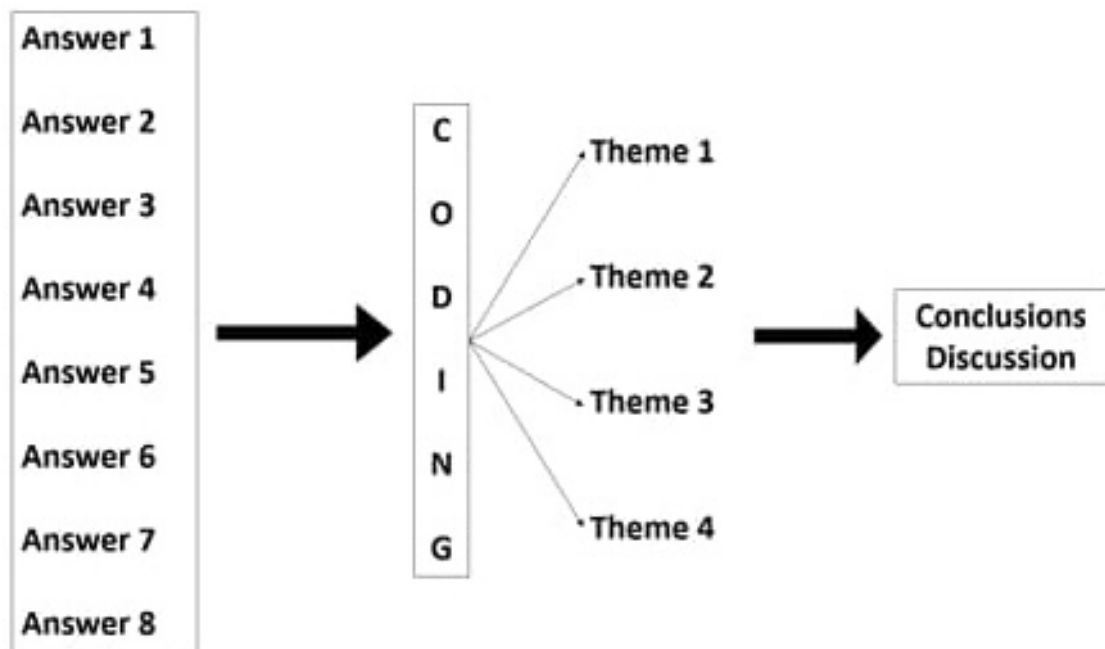


Figure 8. The Process of Data Analysis (Caulfield, 2019)

## 5.2 Theme 1: Delays in restoration and infrastructure repair

The most striking theme that came from the interviews is how long it will take for cultural heritage sites and tourism infrastructure to be restored. At the level, government officials, business operators, and residents all shared complaints regarding the rate of recovery, largely because of the inefficiency of bureaucracy, financial limitations, and the scale of the restoration work involved.

*"The greatest challenge has been a combination of the restoration of cultural heritage sites and modern earthquake-resistant structures. We also experienced a slack in the issuance of funds, which affected the process. Skilled labor was scarce, and the mechanics of dealing with several stakeholders were a major impediment." (Government Officer 1)*

The delays were caused by a variety of logistical problems, including reconciling traditional restoration work with contemporary construction seismic resistance regulations. Lack of skilled labor, as well as a slow government fund dispensation, further delayed the recovery process. These delays have had a direct impact on the physical and tourism sector restoration of heritage sites.

Good collaboration and cooperation between different stakeholders were critical to recovery, but on the other hand, they were the major issues. Government bodies, international organizations, NGOs, and local communities have all been contributors, but there have at times been delays due to differences in priorities and bureaucratic obstacles.

*"Working with governmental agencies may sometimes be slow or too bureaucratic. We have been trying to assist the community and make sure it directly gains from tourism-based developments, but it is hard without the proper, timely decision-making." (NGO Officer)*

Although the involvement of many stakeholders was essential to the process of recovery, the interviews showed that delays and problems of coordination usually interfered with recovery processes. For example, NGOs pointed out the problem of collaborating with government agencies that did not always have sufficient efficiency for rapid decisions on the recovery process. This disparity in the rate of recovery among various actors was a frustration common to all the interviews.

### 5.3 Theme 2: Economic impact on local communities

The economic effect of the earthquake on local communities, especially communities that rely on tourism to earn a living, was tremendous. The local artisans, hospitality workers, and small business people took the brunt of the decline in tourism. But there were also signs of resilience because local communities were actively engaged in the recovery so as to make the benefits of tourism more equitably distributed.

*"The recovery process has caused its own set of challenges and improvements. Roads have been fixed, and a lot of attention has been paid to the maintenance of public safety, especially in the heritage areas. However, the restoration project usually disrupted the way of life and street business. Although this is the case, there is pride in the fact that our heritage is being restored." (Local resident)*

The local community bore the economic brunt of the decline in tourist arrivals, which badly hit businesses that thrived from it. There was also the pride experienced in seeing heritage sites restored. Active participation of local craftsmen in restoration activities ensured an economic stimulus; restoration of public utilities enabled tourists to reach important tourist attractions with relative ease.

### 5.4 Theme 3: Safety concerns and destination perceptions

Safety concerns were indicated by both tourists and tourism operators rather often. The earthquake left a long scar on the global image of Kathmandu as a tourist destination, as many potential tourists were initially put off by the fear of safety.

*"I chose to visit Kathmandu because I wanted to contribute to the recovery, but I was at first in doubt as to safety. As time went by, I could see that the city was at pains to put itself back together, and that made me more at ease visiting here." (Tourist)*

Although recovery efforts continued, the sense that Kathmandu was a dangerous place for foreigners endured for many tourists from other nations. It emerged in the interviews that fears about safety, physical infrastructure, and political stability were a huge repellent to some

participants. Rebuilding trust was a major priority for tourism operators, who identified effective communication campaigns to calm potential visitors' fears that the city is safe as a crucial necessity.

#### 5.5 Theme 4: Role of local communities in heritage preservation

The theme of local communities' involvement in the restoration and preservation of the cultural heritage sites was a major part of the discourse. Local residents, artisans, and small businesses were seen as being key to both the cultural integrity of the restoration initiatives and the economic viability of the tourism sector.

*"We have been part of the restoration as we have provided highly skilled labor and have kept traditional practices. We know these monuments as a part of our identity, and we are proud to contribute to their restoration." (Local Artisan)*

Local communities in general, especially artisans, were central in the preservation of traditional craftsmanship that is part of the cultural heritage of Kathmandu. Their participation meant that restoration activity did not deviate from the city's cultural origins and offered an income to families living in the area. The relationship between cultural preservation and community economic development received an emphatic nod from the interviews.

#### 5.6 Theme 5: Community-based and sustainable tourism approaches

Governmental activities aimed at promoting tourism at a community level were also understood as an element of the recovery process. Such measures enabled benefits to accrue directly to the local communities, resulting in benefits to diversify income streams and conserve cultural heritage.

*"We've prioritized empowering local communities through community-based tourism. Measures like homestays, local craft markets, and guided tours of heritage sites create economic spaces for inhabitants and are very much credited in the recovery." (Government Officer)*

Community-based tourism efforts developed as a fundamental strategy not just to sustain local economies but also to augment an authentic, sustainable tourism experience. By encouraging tourists to stay in the local homestays and to buy products from local artisans, the government and NGOs were making the economic advantage of tourism go more to the community, creating a more resilient and inclusive tourism model.

Sustainable tourism practices were a major area of discussion in the post-earthquake recovery meetings. Stakeholders called for the integration of the conservation of the environment and responsible travel as well as the benefits to the local economy so that the tourism industry of Kathmandu would not be sustainable in the long run.

*"Sustainable tourism can be reached if one focuses on environmental conservation and the development of the local people. We need policies that control the number of tourists in vulnerable places to prevent overtourism and damage to the heritage sites we have struggled to restore."  
(NGO Officer)*

The focus on sustainable tourism was considered essential to help avoid the process of recovery, causing the overexploitation of Kathmandu's cultural heritage. If the number of tourists were controlled, the choice of eco-friendly accommodations would be encouraged, and as a result, local populations would directly gain from tourism. Stakeholders believed that the city could reconstruct its tourism sector not only in a sustainable way but also in an economically viable way.

## 6 Conclusion and Recommendation

The conclusions drawn from the five themes identify how recovery following earthquakes in Kathmandu has been shaped by complex interplays between institutionally delayed processes and local resilience. The lengthy restoration timetables—attributable to bureaucracy, lack of funds, and inaccessibility of skilled labor—were exacerbated by coordination challenges among various stakeholders, affecting infrastructure and conservation of heritage. At the same time, the active role of the local communities in cultural conservation activities, such as utilizing traditional craftsmanship, not only helps to build authenticity but also supports livelihoods at the local level. Economic impacts were profoundly felt, especially in tourist-dependent communities, but community-based tourism and sustainable strategies proved to be the key to redistributing benefits as well as protecting heritage. Safety and destination image concerns remained, which shows that there must be continued efforts at communication to restore international confidence. Together, these themes highlight the complex and ongoing nature of Kathmandu's reconstruction and require integrated, inclusive, and responsive strategies in the future.

This thesis has offered a deep analysis of the recovery of cultural tourism in Kathmandu after the devastating earthquake of 2015. The earthquake left a devastating and multi-faceted impact on the tourism industry in Kathmandu, destroying heritage sites as well as crippling local economies and destroying people's global impressions of the city as a safe travel location. The research identified the challenges faced by different stakeholders, such as the government, international bodies such as UNESCO, local communities, and tourism providers, in attempting to restore the cultural heritage and tourism sector.

The interviews and data analysis that have been made throughout the study which highlights that considerable efforts have been put into the restoration of cultural monuments, such as temples, stupas, and ancient palaces, as well as stalling, which have largely been attributable to bureaucratic inefficiencies, budget deficits, and the shortage of skilled workers. These delays have also negatively impacted the tourism infrastructure, which is very important in drawing tourists. Moreover, the research found that restoration of the cultural heritage not only has physical aspects but also plays on the preservation of Nepal's cultural identity and the creation of community pride.

Through all the struggle, there has been plenty of improvement in re-launching local economies in tourism, and also the opening up of new opportunities for the locals. The involvement of local people, including local artisans and traditional workmanship, has been key to authenticating restoration activity and supporting sustainable tourism. Seeing the Kathmandu valley bounce back after such adversity is clear in the slow return of tourists, even after initial fears for security.

The research also highlighted the need to improve stakeholders' coordination and the recovery process. Though both international aid as well as government initiatives have played a dramatic role, further communication and closer collaborative work are important in the present situation and for long-term sustainability. The recovery process has uncovered important lessons that could inform disaster recovery initiatives in similar settings in the future.

In conclusion, although Kathmandu's cultural tourism sector has come a long way in overcoming the earthquake, work remains to be done in returning the city's cultural heritage and tourism infrastructure to its best. The readiness of local communities, continued government, and international support provides a glimmer of hope for the future cultural tourism of Kathmandu. Yet, efforts and strategic planning would need to be maintained to strengthen the city's more sustainable, connected, and resilient tourism sector, to protect its unique cultural assets, so that they can continue to serve both local communities and global tourists.

The findings of this study suggest that in order to consolidate the recovery process, a centralized recovery framework should be established by engaging governments, international organizations (e.g., UNESCO), NGOs, and local stakeholders. A unified approach with a clear roadmap should be used to coordinate with each other, minimize repetition, and support the timing of the recovery actions. Integrating disaster risk management into the policy of the tourism sector is also very important. The location-specific risk assessments, emergency response programs, and instruction of other sectors will be useful to the tourism sector to be well-prepared for similar disasters in the future. These strategies, which have been mentioned, are not only addressing the challenges of the 2015 earthquake disaster but also filling the gaps of the reconstruction and preparedness phases.

The better future of community-based tourism comes when it is given more power by receiving targeted aid such as microfinancing, training, and marketing assistance. The conservation measures can promote local individuals' sense of responsibility and ensure a sustainable recovery. Kathmandu's cultural heritage can be best maintained by the use of traditional restoration methods and local materials. At the same time, it is key to continue following the guidelines set

by UNESCO in line with the principles of cultural continuity. These proposals are in line with stakeholders' actions and reveal an intensive level of mutual engagement and cultural identity empowerment in the recovery process.

Strategic communication is important to win the confidence of tourists for Kathmandu, as the tourists should be informed of the recovery taking place there. Clear and candid promotional campaigns, which emphasize the city's ability to cope with the crisis and the wealth of its cultural heritage, are likely to change perceptions and increase the influx of tourists. The unfolding of digital heritage tools such as virtual tourism, 3D reconstructions, and online exhibitions can also offer new channels of participation, especially in the period after the pandemic. There can now be new ways of communicating and relating to tourists' behavior and perception changes, which are the two aspects that were mostly noted in this study as the core problems in the area of tourism.

To recover tourism using modern technologies on a sustainable basis for the long run, a heritage recovery fund, backed by tourism yield, is recommended. This kind of fund would support the prompt recovery and preservation of cultural treasures in future emergencies and heritage disasters. In addition, collaboration with local towns such as Bhaktapur, Patan, and abroad analogues like Christchurch could promote knowledge transfer and recovery plans. There is also a need to ensure a more inclusive recovery in tourism, for example, including women, youth, and marginalized people. This inclusive approach will help to ensure that economic recovery is equitable and that the goals of sustainability are met, and that the social issues discussed in this thesis are tackled.

## 7 Discussion

This study has been an extremely rewarding journey, and it has provided a valuable insight into the nuances of cultural tourism recovery in Kathmandu post-2015 earthquake. Engaging in the diverse stakeholder meetings, where both representatives of the government and NGOs, as well as local craftsmen and tourists, contributed, offered rich qualitative data on the problems and achievements of heritage restoration. The experience of critically thinking through the research design, conducting interview data collection, and applying thematic analysis collectively facilitated a deep insight into the interrelationship of culture, governance, community participation, and infrastructure in disaster recovery. Although throughout this study there were difficulties in accessing respondents and coordinating interview times, the research process was, overall, fruitful and intellectually gratifying.

Future studies can contrast and compare the recovery of Kathmandu with other heritage cities with similar issues, i.e., cities devastated by tsunamis or earthquakes. Comparative research of this kind, would offer illuminating information regarding different models of recovery and culturally specific models of post-disaster reconstruction. Furthermore, future research may explore intensified use of digital technology to promote cultural tourism in the Kathmandu valley, particularly enhancing accessibility and visibility of distant heritage sites or economically unviable ones. Another research domain of interest is the long-term economic recovery of communities that are dependent on tourism. A thorough investigation into the employment trends, along with income distribution and the quality of life, can provide the necessary information regarding the sustainability of tourism-based recovery models. The occurrence of such an extensive disorder and the ensuing recovery period have made the economic impact on local communities a point that has never been discussed, as it has much potential for carrying out further academic research. These latter researches, if related to the comparison of recovery models and the digital changes area augmentation to the sustainable cultural tourism and the societal discussion, might produce valuable data that society wants.

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## Research data management plan for the thesis

### 1. General description of the data

The qualitative method of research was applied, where the primary data was collected by interviews and secondary data from governmental reports. Interviews were recorded, translated, and transcribed for thematic analysis.

### 2. Documentation and quality of the data

The data that were collected for the purpose of this study are stored in separate files that are coded with special characters that only the researcher can identify. Since questions were provided beforehand to the respondents and the interviews are all recorded, hence it is believed that legitimate and accurate data has been documented.

### 3. Storage and backup

The data has been uploaded to a separate file and locked with password security; only the researcher has access to open and make changes to the files if required. The file is uploaded to OneDrive and also stored on an external hard disk in case of backup if one of them doesn't work.

### 4. Ethical and legal issues related to storage

Consents were taken from respondents to make sure there are no legal issues in the future, and following the laws, it was also necessary to ask about storing the information they have provided for future use. Although no individual will be published, all the respondents are kept anonymous for the safety and reliability of the data.

### 5. Opening of the data and long-term storage

The data that are applicable and necessary for this study are mentioned in this thesis, and all the rest of the sensitive information and data will be provided to the commissioning party on a secure file. After that, the commissioning party will be responsible for it.

## Interview Questions

### 1. Government Officials

- a) What are the primary challenges that the government has encountered in the recovery of Kathmandu's cultural heritage sites following the earthquake?
- b) How does the government evaluate the success of recovery programs, particularly concerning the tourism sector?
- c) What measures have been implemented to engage local communities in the recovery process, and how has their involvement influenced the overall outcomes?

### 2. Tourism Business Operators

- a) In what ways has the recovery process affected your business, and what has been the most significant alteration since the earthquake?
- b) What challenges have you experienced related to infrastructure or tourist demand since the earthquake, and how are you addressing these issues?
- c) How do you envision the future of tourism in Kathmandu once all recovery programs are finalized? What role do you anticipate local businesses will play in the future?

### 3. Local Residents (Kathmandu Valley)

- a) How has the recovery process influenced your community, and what improvements have you observed thus far?
- b) What role do you believe local communities should assume in the tourism recovery process?
- c) In what ways has the restoration of cultural heritage sites affected your daily life and the community's sense of identity?

#### 4. NGO Representatives

- a) How has your organization contributed to the recovery efforts in Kathmandu, especially in terms of cultural heritage and community engagement?
- b) What are some of the principal challenges NGOs encounter when collaborating with the government and local communities in recovery initiatives?
- c) In your opinion, what strategies are essential to ensure the sustainable development of tourism in Kathmandu once the recovery is accomplished?

#### 5. Tourists

- a) What factors influenced your decision to visit Kathmandu, especially in light of the earthquake and the ongoing recovery efforts?
- b) What are your feelings regarding the recovery of cultural heritage sites in Kathmandu? Do you believe that the restoration efforts have preserved the authenticity of these sites?
- c) What enhancements, if any, would contribute to a more enjoyable and sustainable experience for you as a tourist in Kathmandu?

## Key Heritage Sites Restored

Post-earthquake recovery efforts focused on the restoration of major cultural landmarks in the Kathmandu Valley. Significant progress was made in restoring the following sites:

- Kathmandu Durbar Square: Restoration of temples, palaces, and monuments is ongoing, with a completion target set for 2022.
- Swayambhunath Stupa: Restoration work has been focused on stabilizing the stupa's structure and preserving sacred areas.
- Patan Durbar Square: Patan Durbar Square's restoration includes both structural and cultural conservation efforts to preserve the site's history.

## Restoration Activities: Structural and Cultural Aspects

**Structural Restoration:** The primary focus has been on rebuilding heritage structures using earthquake-resistant techniques, following guidelines set by UNESCO.

**Cultural Conservation:** Efforts have also been made to preserve the cultural practices associated with these sites, including traditional festivals and rituals, which are crucial to maintaining the identity of Kathmandu's tourism.

## Key Barriers to Full Recovery

Despite significant progress, challenges remain in the recovery of Kathmandu's tourism sector:

- **Slow Restoration:** Delays in the completion of heritage site restoration have hindered the full recovery of tourism.
- **Financial Constraints:** Limited funding for infrastructure repair and site restoration has slowed recovery.
- **Safety Concerns:** Global perceptions of Kathmandu as an unsafe destination have deterred some potential tourists.

## Opportunities for Sustainable Tourism Development

- **Eco-Tourism:** Focusing on sustainable tourism practices could provide a long-term solution to the city's recovery.
- **Community-Based Tourism:** Engaging local communities in tourism activities can promote cultural tourism and improve local economies.