

Policy Gaps, Community Roles and Sustainability Challenges: A Systematic Literature Review of Cultural Heritage Conservation in Nepal

Madhav Bhattarai^{1,a}, Werapong Koedsin^{1,*}, Saroj Gyawali^{1,c}, Hari Prasad Ghimire^{2,d}, Bishal Khatiwada^{2,e}

¹ Faculty of Environmental Technology and Environment, Prince of Songkla University, Phuket, Thailand

² Faculty of Environmental Management, Prince of Songkla University, Hat Yai, Thailand²

*Corresponding author: werapong.g@phuket.psu.ac.th

amdbhattarai@gmail.com^a, bsgyawali@gmail.com^c, harighimire2@gmail.com^d, khatiwada.bishal@gmail.com^e

Abstract:

Cultural heritage conservation in Nepal is a critical concern due to the country's rich repository of historical, architectural, and intangible cultural assets. This systematic literature review (SLR) synthesizes scholarly and grey literature from 2000 to 2023 to explore the policies, practices, and evolving dynamics of heritage conservation in Nepal. The review evaluates key legislative frameworks—including the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act of 1956 and the National Heritage Conservation Policy of 2009—and examines the operational challenges posed by natural disasters (notably the 2015 earthquake), rapid urbanization, institutional fragmentation, limited funding, and technical skill gaps. Emphasis is placed on the significance of community engagement, illustrated by case studies such as the Bhaktapur Development Project and the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP), which demonstrate the benefits of inclusive and participatory conservation. The analysis also highlights the role of sustainable tourism in harmonizing economic development with heritage preservation. Drawing on international guidelines and examples, this review advocates for stronger policy coherence, enhanced capacity building, integration of modern conservation technologies—including geospatial tools for mapping and monitoring—and expanded global cooperation. Ultimately, the study offers a comprehensive framework for rethinking heritage conservation in Nepal through a more resilient, participatory, and adaptive approach.

Keywords: Cultural heritage conservation, Heritage policies Nepal, Sustainable tourism, Cultural resource management, Nepalese heritage preservation

INTRODUCTION

Cultural heritage encompasses the tangible and intangible cultural assets inherited from the past, preserved in the present, and passed on to future generations. These assets include monuments, historic buildings, artworks, cultural landscapes, traditions, languages, and indigenous knowledge—elements that are integral to the identity and historical narrative of societies (UNESCO, 2013). Cultural heritage is not confined to physical objects and locations; it also includes the associated knowledge systems, practices, and values that imbue these objects with meaning, as acknowledged in Nepal's Ancient Monument Preservation Act, 2013 (1956)(Government of Nepal, 2013). In this regard, cultural heritage plays a vital role in defining cultural identity and ensuring societal continuity. It significantly contributes to social sustainability through its roles in education, community cohesion, and as an economic resource—particularly through cultural tourism and related sectors (UNESCO, 2011).

Nepal is endowed with a wealth of cultural heritage sites. The Kathmandu Valley alone hosts seven UNESCO World Heritage Sites, including Swayambhunath, Boudhanath, Pashupatinath, and the Durbar Squares of Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur. These monuments reflect the architectural ingenuity, religious significance, and multi-ethnic heritage of the nation (Gutschow, 2017). The preservation of such sites is essential not only for safeguarding national cultural values but also for sustaining the tourism industry, which remains one of Nepal's major economic pillars (S. K. Nepal, 2007).

Despite their importance, Nepal's cultural heritage assets face numerous challenges, including natural disasters, rapid urbanization, environmental pollution, inadequate financial investment, and a shortage of trained conservation professionals (Croes, 2007). The devastating earthquake of April 2015, which led to the destruction or damage of many iconic heritage sites, underscored the urgency of integrating robust preservation and risk preparedness strategies into heritage management frameworks (Wu et al., 2019).

Overview of Cultural Heritage Policies in Nepal

Nepal has established several policies and legislative instruments to safeguard its rich cultural resources, reflecting a longstanding national commitment to the preservation of cultural heritage. The Ancient Monuments Preservation Act (1956) was the first comprehensive legal framework enacted to protect the nation's cultural assets (Government of Nepal, 2013). This Act provides statutory guidelines for the identification, preservation, and management of ancient monuments, archaeological sites, and artifacts, and remains foundational to Nepal's heritage governance (Croes, 2007).

Over the decades, the Government of Nepal has introduced additional policies and programs aimed at enhancing heritage conservation. Among these is the National Heritage Conservation Policy (2009), formulated by the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation. This policy emphasizes the integration of heritage preservation with broader national development strategies and promotes a multi-dimensional approach to conservation involving institutional frameworks, community engagement, sustainable tourism, and capacity building (Lama, 2016).

Furthermore, the strategic framework known as Tourism Vision 2020 underscores the critical role of cultural heritage in fostering tourism and contributing to national economic growth. This vision document outlines guidelines for developing a sustainable tourism sector with a strong emphasis on the promotion, marketing, and protection of Nepal's cultural heritage assets.

Challenges in Cultural Heritage Conservation in Nepal

The conservation of cultural heritage in Nepal faces multifaceted challenges that can be broadly categorized into natural, socio-economic, and institutional domains.

Natural hazards—particularly earthquakes, landslides, and floods—present acute threats to the structural integrity of heritage sites (Wu et al., 2019). Many historical buildings, due to their age and traditional construction materials, are highly vulnerable to seismic activity. The 2015 Gorkha earthquake, for instance, caused severe destruction to numerous iconic heritage structures, highlighting the precarious condition of Nepal's cultural assets in the face of natural disasters (Yamada, 2022). Post-disaster reconstruction and restoration efforts have been sluggish and

constrained by limited funding, a shortage of trained conservation professionals, and insufficient disaster preparedness mechanisms.

Climate change is emerging as an increasingly serious threat to cultural heritage conservation in Nepal. Shifts in temperature, erratic precipitation patterns, and the heightened frequency of extreme weather events are accelerating the physical deterioration of historic structures. Increased rainfall and humidity contribute to material decay, while rising temperatures can compromise the stability of conservation materials and techniques (Colette, 2007). These impacts are particularly concerning for Nepal's traditional architecture, which relies heavily on locally sourced, organic materials that are highly sensitive to environmental change.

Despite the foundational legal framework such as the *Ancient Monument Preservation Act* (2013 [1956]), there remain critical gaps in integrating climate resilience and disaster risk reduction into heritage conservation strategies. As environmental stressors intensify, there is an urgent need to adopt proactive, risk-informed approaches to ensure the long-term protection of Nepal's cultural legacy.

Socio-Economic Factors

Socio-economic dynamics, particularly rapid population growth and urbanization, have placed increasing pressure on Nepal's cultural heritage sites. The sharp rise in population density within urban centers—most notably the Kathmandu Valley—has led to the encroachment upon, and in many cases, the demolition of historical buildings and monuments (Thapa & Murayama, 2009). The expansion of infrastructure and residential development often takes precedence over heritage preservation, contributing to the gradual disappearance of culturally significant structures (Government of Nepal., 2020).

These challenges are compounded by inadequate urban land-use planning and the weak enforcement of zoning regulations, which have allowed for unregulated development on or near heritage sites. This not only endangers the physical integrity of such sites but also erodes their cultural and aesthetic value.

In addition to spatial pressures, economic constraints pose significant barriers to heritage conservation. The preservation of cultural heritage is inherently resource-intensive, requiring substantial investment in maintenance, restoration, documentation, and skilled labor. However, in a resource-constrained developing country like Nepal, government allocations for cultural heritage remain insufficient to address the breadth and diversity of conservation needs across the country (UNESCO, 2011; Ancient Monument Preservation Act, 2013 [1956]).

Although international donors and organizations provide valuable support, this funding is often project-based, short-term, and inconsistent. Such limitations hinder long-term planning and the implementation of sustainable conservation strategies (Croes, 2007). As a result, many heritage sites continue to deteriorate or face threats of irreversible loss.

Institutional and Capacity Challenges in Heritage Conservation

The institutional landscape for cultural heritage conservation in Nepal remains fragmented and poorly coordinated. The governance structure involves multiple actors—including the Department of Archaeology, the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation, and various local municipalities—all of which share overlapping responsibilities for heritage management (Kissling, 1989). This multi-

agency framework often lacks clarity in terms of jurisdiction and accountability, resulting in duplication of efforts, administrative delays, and gaps in policy implementation (Flintan et al., 2013).

One of the key institutional limitations is the absence of effective inter-agency coordination mechanisms. Conservation initiatives are frequently hindered by bureaucratic inefficiencies, limited communication among stakeholders, and the absence of a unified strategic vision for long-term preservation.

Compounding these structural challenges is a pronounced shortage of trained professionals and technical personnel in the heritage sector. There is a dearth of conservation architects, archaeologists, engineers, and restoration specialists with the expertise necessary to plan and execute complex restoration and maintenance tasks (National Planning Commission, 2013). Most of the existing training programs in Nepal are insufficiently equipped to produce the scale and quality of human resources needed for modern conservation demands.

Furthermore, the country lacks access to state-of-the-art conservation technologies, equipment, and materials. Advanced tools and scientific techniques used in modern heritage preservation are either unavailable or prohibitively expensive. This technological gap severely limits the capacity of conservation agencies to respond effectively to both routine maintenance and post-disaster restoration needs (National Planning Commission, 2013).

Addressing these institutional and capacity-related issues is critical to the development of a resilient and professional heritage management system in Nepal—one that is capable of responding to present-day risks and preserving cultural assets for future generations.

The Role of Community Involvement in Heritage Conservation

Community participation is widely recognized as a cornerstone of effective and sustainable cultural heritage conservation. As cultural heritage inherently belongs to the people who live in and around heritage sites, its protection and preservation cannot be fully achieved without the active involvement of local communities (UNESCO, 2011). When communities are meaningfully engaged in decision-making processes related to heritage, they develop a deeper sense of ownership and responsibility—factors that are critical to the long-term preservation and transmission of traditional knowledge, practices, and values.

In the context of Nepal, several successful initiatives have demonstrated the transformative impact of community-based heritage management. One prominent example is the Bhaktapur Development Project, launched in the 1970s and 1980s, which actively mobilized local participation in the restoration and revitalization of Bhaktapur's historic urban core. The project not only rehabilitated numerous heritage structures but also improved local housing and infrastructure, enhanced community pride, and promoted eco-cultural tourism as a sustainable development strategy (Baral et al., 2007).

Another notable initiative is the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP), which integrates both environmental and cultural conservation objectives through a community-based management approach. ACAP has empowered local residents to take an active role in managing natural and cultural resources, thereby fostering a stronger connection between conservation practices and community well-being (Baral et al., 2007). These participatory models have proven effective in building trust, leveraging indigenous knowledge systems, and ensuring that conservation efforts align with the needs and aspirations of local stakeholders.

Despite these successes, community participation in heritage conservation in Nepal remains sporadic and largely project-based. Institutionalizing community engagement within national policies and legal frameworks is essential to scaling these efforts and ensuring that conservation is both locally grounded and nationally supported.

Leveraging Sustainable Tourism for Cultural Heritage Conservation

Cultural tourism constitutes a vital pillar of Nepal's economy and serves as one of the country's primary attractions for both domestic and international visitors. However, the growing influx of tourists presents both opportunities and challenges for the conservation of cultural heritage sites. Sustainable tourism emerges as a key strategy to ensure that tourism contributes to, rather than undermines, the long-term protection of cultural assets (Citaristi, 2022).

Sustainable tourism is broadly defined as tourism that promotes economic development through the responsible use of cultural and natural resources, while simultaneously safeguarding these resources and ensuring that local communities derive tangible benefits (National Planning Commission, 2013). In this context, sustainability encompasses not only environmental stewardship but also social equity, cultural integrity, and long-term economic viability.

Nepal has initiated several programs that reflect the intersection between cultural heritage preservation and sustainable tourism. A notable example is the Tourism for Rural Poverty Alleviation Programme (TRPAP), launched in 2001. This initiative aimed to develop rural tourism models that capitalize on local cultural capital, foster community participation, and reduce poverty through inclusive tourism development (UNDP, 2006). TRPAP played a critical role in increasing awareness about heritage tourism across rural regions, supporting the restoration of cultural sites, and strengthening the socio-economic resilience of host communities (UNESCO, 2011).

Another key policy initiative is the Tourism Vision 2020, which underscores the strategic importance of sustainable tourism in cultural resource management. The vision document lays out comprehensive goals for infrastructure development, destination promotion, and the integration of conservation principles into tourism planning. By promoting environmentally and culturally responsible tourism practices, *Tourism Vision 2020* seeks to balance economic growth with the preservation of Nepal's rich heritage (S. K. Nepal, 2007).

Despite these efforts, the practical implementation of sustainable tourism principles remains uneven. Over-commercialization, unregulated tourism growth, and lack of site-specific management plans continue to pose risks to heritage sustainability. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated action among stakeholders, integration of sustainability standards into tourism policies, and long-term investments in capacity building and community-based heritage tourism.

Strengthening Capacity and Technical Expertise in Heritage Conservation

The effectiveness of cultural heritage conservation efforts is intrinsically linked to the availability of skilled human resources and the accessibility of appropriate technical knowledge. Capacity building—through structured training and institutional development—remains a cornerstone of successful and sustainable heritage preservation (Yamada, 2022). In this regard, investment in education, professional development, and knowledge transfer is essential to empower individuals and institutions involved in cultural heritage management.

In Nepal, various organizations and institutions have taken significant steps to enhance capacity within the heritage sector. For example, the Lumbini International Research Institute offers specialized training programs in the conservation and management of cultural heritage sites, integrating theoretical instruction with practical, field-based learning experiences (Ancient Monument Preservation Act, 2013 [1956]). These programs aim to equip participants with both foundational knowledge and hands-on skills required for effective conservation practice.

Similarly, the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust (KVPT) has been instrumental in providing training workshops for local communities, artisans, and young professionals. These workshops focus on reviving traditional construction techniques while incorporating modern conservation methodologies. KVPT's approach enhances the skill base of local actors, encourages the retention of indigenous knowledge systems, and fosters community ownership in preservation efforts (Yamada, 2022).

Capacity building in Nepal is also significantly supported by international cooperation. Organizations such as UNESCO, ICOMOS, and ICCROM have played pivotal roles by offering technical assistance, funding, and policy guidance. Through their training programs, consultative services, and dissemination of best practices, these agencies help bridge the knowledge and resource gap that often impedes national conservation initiatives (UNESCO, 2011).

Despite these advancements, the demand for well-trained conservation professionals still exceeds supply. There is a pressing need for scaling up training programs, modernizing curricula, and institutionalizing conservation education within national academic and vocational frameworks. A strategic and sustained investment in human capital is fundamental to ensuring that Nepal's cultural heritage is preserved with scientific rigor and cultural sensitivity for future generations.

Policy Innovation and Adaptive Governance for Cultural Heritage Conservation

An effective and forward-looking policy framework is fundamental to the successful protection, management, and sustainable use of cultural heritage resources. Public policy, legislation, and institutional governance shape the legal and administrative environment in which heritage conservation is practiced (Government of Nepal., 2020). In light of Nepal's complex heritage landscape and the growing threats from natural disasters, urbanization, and climate change, there is an urgent need for dynamic and flexible policy mechanisms that are capable of responding to both long-standing and emerging challenges (Ancient Monument Preservation Act, 2013 [1956]).

The Nepal National Heritage Conservation Policy of 2009 stands as a cornerstone policy document, outlining key principles and strategic directions for integrating heritage conservation into the broader development planning of the country. The policy emphasizes community participation, institutional capacity building, and the mainstreaming of heritage management across government sectors and levels (UNESCO, 2011). It also aims to foster local ownership, technical competency, and sustainable tourism models that are compatible with cultural preservation goals.

However, effective heritage policy requires not only formulation but also meaningful implementation, which depends on the involvement of a broad coalition of stakeholders—including governmental bodies, community organizations, NGOs, and international agencies. Inclusive policy processes that recognize diverse knowledge systems and local agency are essential to creating frameworks that are both socially legitimate and operationally effective.

Recent studies emphasize the importance of public participation in heritage policymaking. For example, (Han et al., 2024) argue that participatory approaches in architectural heritage conservation enhance transparency, cultural sensitivity, and long-term sustainability. Complementary to this, the concept of adaptive reuse has gained prominence as a means to reconcile conservation goals with modern urban development needs. A study by *Buildings* (2021) introduced a hybrid evaluation framework for prioritizing adaptive reuse projects, highlighting their value in preserving cultural identity while promoting innovation, sustainability, and economic revitalization.

Such frameworks and participatory models underscore the importance of adaptive, inclusive, and learning-based approaches to policy design and execution. To ensure the long-term safeguarding of Nepal's rich cultural heritage, conservation policies must be resilient to change, grounded in community realities, and informed by both tradition and innovation.

Exemplary Case Studies and Strategic Directions for Cultural Heritage Conservation in Nepal

Case Studies of Successful Heritage Conservation Interventions

Analyzing successful heritage conservation initiatives provides valuable insights into the institutional, social, and technical conditions that facilitate effective and sustainable preservation. The following case studies illustrate best practices in Nepal's heritage conservation landscape.

Case Study 1: Bhaktapur Development Project (BDP)

The Bhaktapur Development Project, implemented with support from the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ), is widely regarded as a model of integrated urban heritage conservation. The project aimed to restore the ancient city's rich architectural heritage while simultaneously upgrading local infrastructure and improving the standard of living. Importantly, the initiative emphasized community engagement, where local artisans and residents actively participated in restoration efforts. Conservation professionals combined traditional building techniques with modern methods, ensuring both authenticity and structural resilience. As a result, Bhaktapur has emerged as a symbol of sustainable urban revitalization and heritage-centered development (Sengupta & Sharma, 2016).

Case Study 2: Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP)

The Annapurna Conservation Area Project exemplifies an integrated approach to conserving both natural ecosystems and cultural landscapes. Operated under the National Trust for Nature Conservation, ACAP employs participatory management practices, empowering local communities to protect sacred sites, traditional villages, and religious monuments. The project links heritage conservation to ecotourism and livelihood enhancement, reinforcing the interdependence between cultural identity, environmental stewardship, and socio-economic development.

Case Study 3: Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust (KVPT)

The Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust (KVPT) has played a pivotal role in restoring endangered architectural sites across the valley. Through careful documentation, structural assessments, and the use of locally sourced materials, KVPT has preserved numerous temples, courtyards, and residential buildings. The organization's work is characterized by a balanced integration of heritage conservation principles with modern engineering standards and climate-sensitive design. Despite rapid urbanization, KVPT's interventions have contributed significantly to the continuity and visibility of the Kathmandu Valley's built heritage (Yamada, 2022).

The Way Forward: Strategic Priorities for Enhancing Heritage Conservation in Nepal

To safeguard its cultural assets against ongoing and future threats, Nepal must adopt a proactive, inclusive, and forward-looking conservation agenda. The following strategic directions are proposed:

1. **Strengthen Policy and Legal Frameworks**
Establish comprehensive and adaptable policy instruments that clearly define stakeholder roles, align with disaster risk reduction (DRR), and incorporate international heritage conservation standards.
2. **Increase Financial and Technical Resources**
Secure diversified funding sources including government allocations, international donor assistance, and private sector partnerships. Ensure that funding mechanisms are sustainable and project-specific.
3. **Promote Community-Centered Conservation**
Institutionalize participatory planning processes to empower local communities, respect indigenous knowledge systems, and reinforce the cultural value of heritage sites.
4. **Invest in Capacity Building and Research**
Develop structured training programs for professionals and artisans. Promote interdisciplinary research to bridge the gap between traditional techniques and modern conservation science.
5. **Integrate Sustainable Tourism Models**
Leverage cultural heritage as a foundation for eco- and community-based tourism. Establish visitor management strategies that minimize degradation and maximize local benefit.
6. **Enhance International Collaboration**
Deepen partnerships with organizations such as UNESCO, ICOMOS, and ICCROM for technical advice, training, and access to global networks of best practice.
7. **Adopt Innovative and Climate-Resilient Technologies**
Utilize digital documentation (e.g., 3D scanning, GIS), early warning systems for hazards, and climate-resilient restoration materials to future-proof heritage conservation efforts.

By embracing these strategic priorities, Nepal can position itself as a leader in heritage conservation within disaster-prone contexts, contributing to cultural resilience, national identity, and inclusive development.

Table 1. Representative Literature on Cultural Heritage Policies and Conservation Practices in Nepal

No.	Author(s) and Year	Title	Key Focus Area	Key Contribution
1	(G. of Nepal, 1956)	<i>Ancient Monument Preservation Act, 2013 (1956)</i>	Legal framework for heritage protection	Foundation of Nepal's heritage legislation; outlines monument protection and institutional mandates
2	(Government of Nepal., 2020)	<i>National Heritage Conservation Policy</i>	Policy development and strategy	Provides guidelines for integrating heritage conservation with national development plans
3	(UNESCO, 2011)	<i>Enhancing Cultural Heritage through Community Participation</i>	Community-based conservation	Emphasizes participatory approaches and local ownership in preservation processes
4	(Sengupta & Sharma, 2016)	<i>Bhaktapur Development Project Review</i>	Urban heritage restoration	Case study on post-earthquake restoration and sustainable urban regeneration
5	(Baral et al., 2007)	<i>Community Participation in Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP)</i>	Community-driven conservation	Examines integration of natural and cultural conservation through local involvement
6	(Gutschow, 2017)	<i>Architectural Conservation in the Kathmandu Valley</i>	Technical conservation practices	Highlights use of traditional construction techniques and architectural integrity
7	(Yamada, 2022)	<i>Preservation Challenges in Post-2015 Earthquake Kathmandu</i>	Disaster resilience and recovery	Evaluates recovery gaps and resilience issues in post-disaster heritage management
8	(De Silva & Buildings, 2021)	<i>Framework for Adaptive Reuse in Heritage Conservation</i>	Adaptive reuse and policy innovation	Introduces hybrid model for ranking conservation projects based on reuse and sustainability criteria
9	(Han et al., 2024)	<i>Public Engagement in Architectural Heritage Conservation</i>	Participatory policy design	Demonstrates how public involvement strengthens heritage policy legitimacy and implementation

No.	Author(s) and Year	Title	Key Focus Area	Key Contribution
10	(Michell, 2014)	<i>Heritage Training and Capacity Building in South Asia</i>	Capacity development and knowledge transfer	Discusses regional training models, with a focus on Nepal’s need for skilled conservation professionals

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) to synthesize research on *Cultural Heritage Policies and Conservation Practices in Nepal*. The review was designed to examine the evolution of policy frameworks, identify conservation challenges, and explore strategies and best practices through a structured and transparent approach grounded in established guidelines.

Search Strategy

A comprehensive search was conducted using major academic databases—Google Scholar, JSTOR, Scopus, and Web of Science—to retrieve peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and conference proceedings. To broaden the scope and include practice-based insights, relevant grey literature such as government reports, policy documents, project evaluations, and NGO publications was also incorporated.

Key search terms included

- “Cultural heritage conservation in Nepal”
- “Heritage policies Nepal”
- “Cultural resource management Nepal”
- “Sustainable tourism Nepal”

Boolean operators were applied to refine searches, and reference chaining was used to identify additional sources from bibliographies of selected works.

Table 2. Enhanced Summary of Search Strategy

Component	Details
Databases and Sources	- Academic Databases: Google Scholar, JSTOR, Scopus, Web of Science - Grey Literature: Government policy documents, project reports, NGO publications - Supplementary Sources: Conference proceedings, academic books, and doctoral theses
Search Terms and Keywords	- “Cultural heritage conservation in Nepal” - “Heritage policies Nepal” - “Cultural resource management” - “Sustainable tourism Nepal” - “Heritage preservation strategies”

Component	Details
Inclusion Criteria	- Peer-reviewed journal articles, books, conference proceedings, and institutional reports - Published between 2000 and 2024 - Literature directly addressing cultural heritage policies, conservation practices, and DRM in Nepal - Studies available in English or Nepali - Empirical studies, case studies, policy reviews, and systematic reviews related to heritage management
Exclusion Criteria	- Studies focusing solely on economic impacts without reference to cultural dimensions - Publications unrelated to the Nepalese context - Informal literature (e.g., opinion blogs, non-reviewed articles) - Documents in languages other than English or Nepali - Studies published before 2000

Review Framework

The review followed methodological guidelines from multiple authoritative sources:

- (Gough et al., 2017) provided a structured protocol for conducting and synthesizing systematic reviews, especially in education and policy research.
- (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006) offered a robust framework for integrating qualitative and quantitative findings, particularly in the social sciences.
- The PRISMA Statement (Liberati et al., 2009) was applied to enhance transparency and rigor in documenting the review process.
- (Tranfield et al., 2003) proposed best practices in conducting systematic reviews in management, especially useful for policy and institutional studies.
- (Okoli, 2015) contributed guidance for incorporating both academic and grey literature in reviews with a strong policy orientation.

This multi-source methodological framework ensured a transparent, replicable, and evidence-based approach to synthesizing relevant literature.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The selection criteria were designed to ensure both relevance and quality (see Table 3):

- Inclusion: Studies published between 2000 and 2023, in English or Nepali, explicitly focusing on cultural heritage policies, conservation practices, institutional mechanisms, or community-based initiatives in Nepal.
- Exclusion: Studies that did not relate directly to Nepal, focused solely on economic or tourism impacts without cultural relevance, or lacked sufficient methodological detail were excluded.

Table 3. Quality Assessment Checklist for Reviewed Studies

Criteria	Assessment Focus
1. Relevance to Research Topic	Does the study directly address cultural heritage policies, conservation practices, or disaster-related heritage governance in the context of Nepal?
2. Clarity of Research Objectives	Are the aims, objectives, or research questions clearly stated and aligned with the study's scope?
3. Study Design Appropriateness	Is the methodological design appropriate for addressing the stated objectives (e.g., case study, policy review, empirical research)?
4. Methodological Rigor	Is the methodology detailed, replicable, and suited to the study design (e.g., sampling, data collection, analytical methods)?
5. Data Quality and Transparency	Are data sources credible and well-documented? Is the process of data collection and analysis clearly described and justified?
6. Depth of Literature Engagement	Does the study provide a well-structured and critical review of relevant literature, identifying key debates and gaps?
7. Presentation of Findings	Are the results or arguments presented clearly, logically organized, and supported by evidence?
8. Acknowledgment of Limitations	Does the study reflect critically on its limitations (e.g., methodological, contextual, or data-related)?
9. Alignment with Review Standards	If applicable, does the study follow recognized guidelines (e.g., PRISMA for systematic reviews, or standards for case study analysis)?
10. Contribution to the Field	Does the study offer new insights, practical implications, or theoretical contributions relevant to cultural heritage conservation and policy in Nepal?

Table 4. Summary of Literature Search Strategy

Search Strategy Element	Description
Databases and Sources	- Academic Databases: Google Scholar, JSTOR, Scopus, Web of Science- Additional Sources: Conference proceedings, relevant books, doctoral and master's theses, institutional repositories, and NGO/governmental reports
Search Terms and Keywords	Combinations of the following were used: • “Cultural heritage conservation in Nepal” • “Heritage policies Nepal” • “Cultural resource management” • “Sustainable tourism Nepal” • “Heritage preservation strategies”
Inclusion Criteria	- Peer-reviewed journal articles, books, policy reports, and conference proceedings- Publications dated from 2000 to 2024- Literature specifically addressing cultural heritage policy and conservation practices in Nepal- Materials available in English or Nepali- Studies including case analyses, implementation assessments, or community-based heritage initiatives

Search Strategy Element	Description
Exclusion Criteria	- Publications focused exclusively on economic or non-cultural tourism impacts- Studies not centered on the Nepalese context- Non-academic blog posts, media articles, or commercial content- Articles unavailable in English or Nepali- Publications prior to 2000, unless cited as foundational historical references

Data Extraction and Thematic Analysis

All selected studies were thematically coded based on four core domains:

1. Policy and legal frameworks
2. Institutional coordination and governance
3. Community participation and capacity building
4. Integration of disaster resilience and sustainable tourism

Both qualitative and quantitative findings were synthesized to reveal thematic patterns, trends, and research gaps. This analysis allowed for a critical examination of how challenges have evolved over time and how they have been addressed through policy and practice.

Where applicable, numerical data from case studies and reports were extracted to identify trends, while qualitative evidence was analyzed to deepen contextual understanding.

Reporting and Ethical Considerations

The review process and findings were reported in alignment with the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1), detailing the number of records identified, screened, included, and excluded. Conclusions were drawn based on recurring themes and best practices identified in the literature, and recommendations were developed to inform future policy and conservation strategies in Nepal.

All sources were appropriately cited to ensure academic integrity and to credit original authorship. Ethical standards regarding citation, acknowledgment, and use of secondary data were strictly observed.

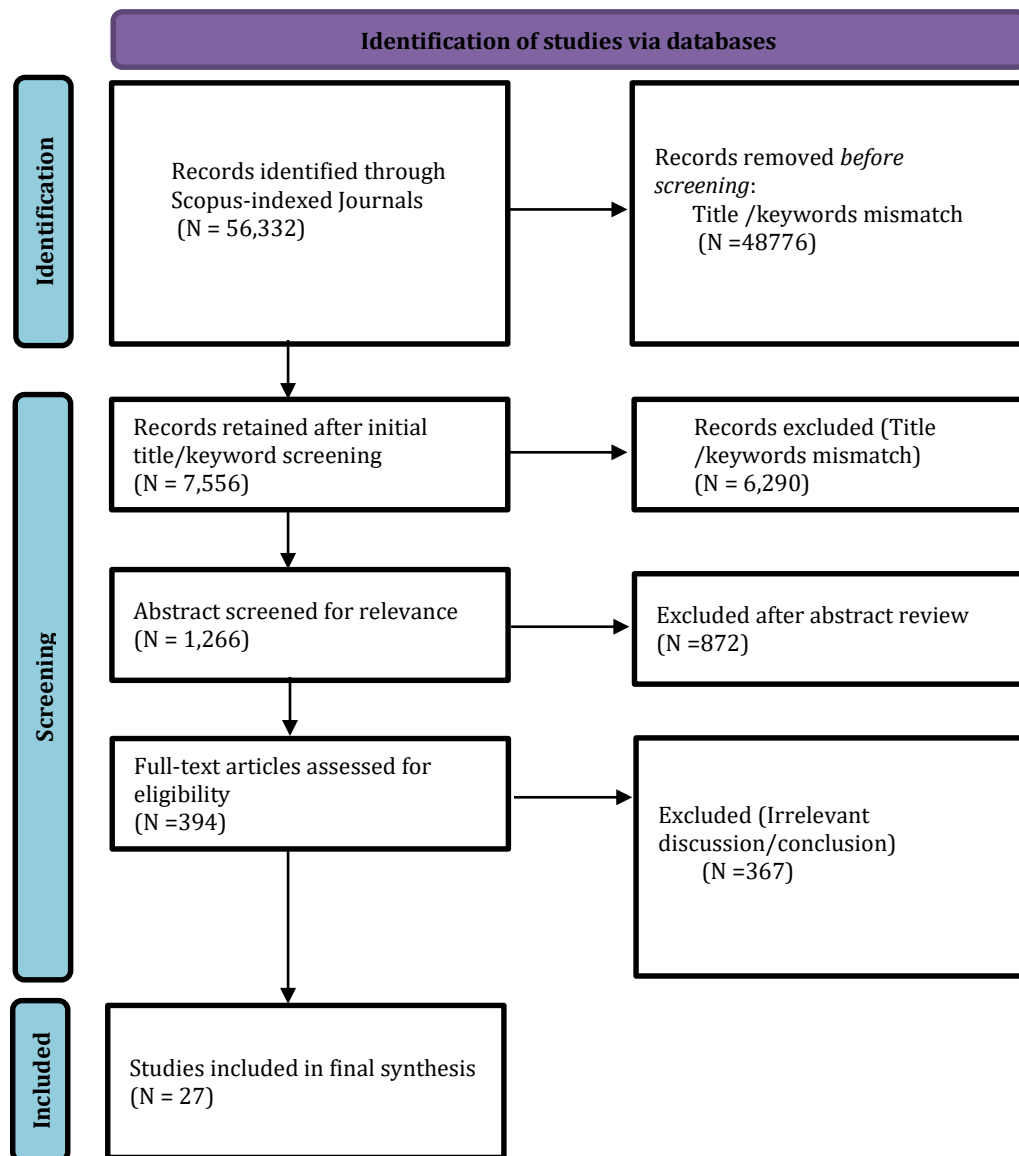


Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram

RESULTS

The systematic review conducted in response to the research question—“*Understanding Cultural Heritage Policies and Conservation Practices in Nepal*”—revealed a diverse body of literature that addresses the multifaceted challenges, frameworks, and strategies involved in heritage conservation in Nepal. The analysis of selected studies identified five major thematic areas: conservation challenges, policy frameworks, community involvement, sustainable tourism, and capacity building. Each is summarized below.

1. Challenges in Heritage Conservation

The conservation of cultural heritage in Nepal is constrained by a triad of interrelated challenges: natural, socio-economic, and institutional factors.

- **Natural hazards**, particularly the 2015 Gorkha earthquake, inflicted substantial damage on historically significant structures, exposing the vulnerability of heritage assets to seismic activity (Wu et al., 2019).
- **Urban expansion**, especially in areas like the Kathmandu Valley, has resulted in unregulated construction, encroachment, and poor urban planning, leading to the degradation and destruction of heritage sites (Thapa & Murayama, 2009).
- **Institutional limitations**, such as inadequate technical expertise, lack of coordination among agencies, and constrained budgets, have significantly impaired the implementation of conservation initiatives (Flintan et al., 2013).

2. Policy and Legal Frameworks

Nepal has enacted several policy instruments to guide heritage preservation, notably the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act of 1956 and the National Heritage Conservation Policy of 2009. These frameworks outline the responsibilities of institutions, promote cultural sustainability, and aim to link heritage protection with national development goals.

However, the review revealed significant implementation challenges, including policy fragmentation, overlapping institutional mandates, and lack of enforcement mechanisms. These issues have led to operational inefficiencies and unclear accountability in heritage governance (Kissling, 1989).

3. Community Involvement

Local communities have emerged as essential actors in the preservation of cultural heritage. Initiatives such as the Bhaktapur Development Project and the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) demonstrated the potential of community-driven conservation. These programs not only restored heritage structures but also enhanced local livelihoods and fostered a sense of ownership among residents (Baral et al., 2007).

The findings suggest that community participation enhances sustainability by integrating traditional knowledge, fostering local stewardship, and bridging gaps between policy and practice.

4. Sustainable Tourism

Sustainable tourism was identified as a critical mechanism for both promoting economic development and conserving cultural resources. Programs such as the Tourism for Rural Poverty Alleviation Programme (TRPAP) and Tourism Vision 2020 advocate for tourism models that are environmentally sound, socially equitable, and culturally respectful (Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation; Nepal Tourism Board). These initiatives emphasize the synergy between tourism and heritage, supporting conservation efforts while enabling local communities to benefit economically through heritage-linked livelihoods.

5. Capacity Building and Training

Effective heritage conservation requires ongoing capacity development, including investment in education, training, and knowledge transfer. Institutions such as the Lumbini International Research Institute and the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust (KVPT) have played pivotal roles in building technical expertise and promoting conservation skills at the local level. Despite these efforts, the literature highlights persistent gaps in professional capacity, with calls for broader training programs, enhanced resource mobilization, and the adoption of modern conservation technologies to complement traditional practices.

DISCUSSION

The review of literature reveals the multifaceted nature of cultural heritage conservation in Nepal, influenced by environmental, socio-economic, institutional, and technological factors. The devastating 2015 earthquake exposed the physical vulnerability of Nepal's heritage structures and highlighted significant gaps in disaster preparedness and response frameworks. As observed in (Wu et al., 2019), many historically significant sites suffered extensive damage, which not only demonstrated the sensitivity of such assets to natural disasters but also illuminated the systemic inadequacies in conservation planning and emergency recovery.

Beyond natural hazards, socio-economic transformations—such as rapid urbanization, population growth, and limited financial capacity—pose persistent threats to cultural heritage. Urban sprawl in the Kathmandu Valley, coupled with weak land-use regulations, has led to the encroachment and even demolition of historically significant sites (Thapa & Murayama, 2009). These dynamics underscore the pressing need for integrated urban and heritage planning, supported by stronger legal enforcement and institutional coordination.

From a policy perspective, the review identifies a proliferation of heritage-related policies and frameworks—most notably the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act (1956) and the National Heritage Conservation Policy (2009). While these instruments establish a foundation for heritage protection, their practical implementation remains hampered by overlapping institutional mandates, limited capacity, and bureaucratic fragmentation (Kissling, 1989). The lack of policy coherence diminishes the effectiveness of heritage interventions and contributes to resource inefficiencies.

One of the most consistent themes across successful case studies is the role of community involvement in heritage conservation. Initiatives such as the Bhaktapur Development Project and the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) demonstrate that local engagement fosters greater ownership, enhances sustainability, and facilitates knowledge transfer. These projects provide evidence that heritage conservation, when driven by local stakeholders, can simultaneously promote cultural preservation and community well-being (Baral et al., 2007).

The intersection of sustainable tourism and cultural heritage also emerged as a strategic opportunity. Properly managed tourism not only serves as a critical economic driver but also incentivizes the protection of heritage resources. Programs like Tourism Vision 2020 and Tourism for Rural Poverty Alleviation have successfully demonstrated how tourism development can align with conservation goals, provided that clear regulatory safeguards and community participation mechanisms are in place (Citaristi, 2022).

A persistent challenge, however, is the lack of capacity building and specialized training in heritage conservation. Although institutions such as the Lumbini International Research Institute and

the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust (KVPT) have initiated valuable training programs, a significant skills gap remains, particularly in advanced documentation, structural engineering, and conservation science (Yamada, 2022). Addressing these gaps is critical to improving the quality and consistency of heritage restoration efforts.

Furthermore, the integration of geospatial technologies—including GIS, remote sensing, and spatial databases—holds untapped potential in enhancing the effectiveness and efficiency of heritage conservation in Nepal. These tools can assist in risk mapping, monitoring of heritage sites, and planning of development interventions, especially in disaster-prone areas. Their application in post-earthquake assessments, cultural site inventories, and urban planning can provide critical data for policymakers and conservationists alike.

In summary, the literature affirms that cultural heritage conservation in Nepal is a multidimensional challenge that requires a coordinated, participatory, and technologically-informed approach. Strengthening institutional alignment, enhancing local capacity, leveraging community knowledge, and embedding digital technologies are essential to safeguarding Nepal's rich cultural legacy for future generations.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Nepal's rich and diverse cultural heritage remains one of its most vital national assets, yet it faces multifaceted challenges requiring urgent and strategic responses. The findings of this review underscore the need for comprehensive and integrated approaches to cultural heritage conservation in the country. Natural disasters such as the 2015 earthquake have exposed the vulnerability of heritage sites, while socio-economic pressures like rapid urbanization, limited financial resources, and institutional inefficiencies continue to undermine effective conservation efforts. Despite the presence of key legal frameworks, including the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act and the National Heritage Conservation Policy, the implementation of these policies is often hindered by overlapping mandates, weak coordination, and inadequate resource allocation.

Community engagement emerges as a central pillar in successful heritage conservation. Initiatives like the Bhaktapur Development Project and the Annapurna Conservation Area Project highlight the significant contributions of local communities in safeguarding and revitalizing heritage resources. Sustainable tourism, if carefully planned and managed, offers a promising avenue for balancing economic development with cultural preservation. However, such tourism must be guided by strict regulatory measures to avoid overexploitation and degradation of heritage sites.

Equally important is the need for capacity building. While institutions such as the Lumbini International Research Institute and the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust are already providing training and support, more diversified and advanced educational programs are essential. Moreover, geospatial technologies—including GIS, remote sensing, and spatial data analytics—can enhance the monitoring, documentation, and protection of heritage sites, particularly in remote or disaster-prone areas. Leveraging these tools, in conjunction with increased collaboration with international partners such as UNESCO, ICOMOS, and ICCROM, can significantly strengthen Nepal's ability to manage its cultural resources effectively.

To ensure a sustainable future for Nepal's cultural heritage, it is imperative to adopt a holistic approach that integrates disaster risk reduction, improved policy coherence, community participation, sustainable tourism, and technological innovation. By implementing these strategies,

Nepal will be better positioned to safeguard its heritage while promoting socio-cultural resilience and inclusive development for future generations.

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