

# Not just bricks and mortar

The restoration of the heritage sites which have been destroyed in Nepal will help the healing process

**T**he recent earthquake in Nepal has left behind a trail of devastation. The temblor has not only destroyed the country's present but also its rich past. Along with destroying homes, schools and offices, it also damaged at least 68 priceless heritage sites in the country, said Unesco recently, citing preliminary figures from the department of archaeology. That's nearly 80% of historical landmarks in seven monument zones that have been declared World Heritage Sites in the Kathmandu Valley alone. "It's hard to describe how painful this is," Nipuna Shrestha of Unesco told agencies recently. "These are not just monuments, they are part of our daily life. It feels like losing part of your family." After the quake, Prime Minister Sushil Koirala said the government's priority was relief and rescue for all those affected but he also vowed to rebuild "all structures of historical, religious and archaeological significance".

Destruction of heritage is not just physical devastation of priceless and beautiful properties; their ruin obliterates centuries of the history of humankind and belief systems. In fact, in the last few months, the world has become poorer hundred times over thanks to the destruction of beautiful structures, statues and books either by calamities or marauding terror groups. In March, Isis posted a video on the internet of its men destroying ancient Mesopotamian sculptures in the Mosul Museum, Iraq's second-largest museum, with sledgehammers and power tools. The reason: These works of art promoted idolatry. A few years ago jihadists destroyed mud tombs and some of the ancient Islamic manuscripts in Timbuktu, and in 2001 the Taliban in Afghanistan blew up the two statues of the Buddha in Bamiyan. These attacks by terror groups have led to the demand that the destruction of cultural heritage should be made into a war crime.

As Nepal picks up the pieces, it must ensure that its heritage — in whichever form it exists now — is not lost forever. While many countries have sent relief personnel, money and other emergency material to Nepal, it should now help the country to reconstruct some of those heritage structures. It will be a painstaking process but their proper restoration would help the Nepalese people to heal their hearts and minds, regain a sense of their traditions and put the disaster behind them.