

YACHAY WASI Sacred Sites Event - Submission 22 – NEPAL - Received April 28, 2006

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Kankrebihar Biodiversity and Culture Conservation Project, Nepal

Site Description

Kankrebihar, the unique niche of archeology, culture and ecosystem, derives its name from Kankre (meaning seed of cucumber) due to its shape. This sacred site worshipped both by Hindu and Buddhist, stands tall amidst the flat-rounded Surkhet valley in Mid West Nepal. The elevation ranges from 624 to 724 meters above the seal level. The landscape is surrounded by Sal (*Shorea robusta*) and Pine (*Pinus roxburghii*) tree and the cultural artifacts have been buried in the pinnacles of this tiny hill. It is located at Latikoili VDC in Surkhet district, 4 Km southeast from Birendranagar Municipality and covers 167.16 hectares of land.

The historic saga of the Kankrebihar is still a mystery. The major breakthrough was achieved in 2001 when Department of Archeology started to excavate the site with the active support from local people. The excavation team was able to dig to the basement of the ancient structure revealing a 13 meter long *Shikhar* styled temple which resembles the stone temples of Kumau Gadhawal of India. The team also unearthed 2026 exquisite pieces of beautifully carved stone images of Hindu and Buddhist Gods and animals. But the prominent parts of these icons are broken and the answer to these destructions is yet to be explored.

According to Ghimire, Kankrebihar was built in between 1207 and 1313 AD probably by one of the descendant of renown Khas King of 13th century namely King Ripu Mall, Ashok Challa and Krachalla, who were associated with both Buddhist and Hindu religions. The destruction of these artifacts was even more mysterious than their construction. Most historians blame Gayasuddin Tugalak, the Bengali invader, for demolishing the monuments and images of the artifacts. Others blame fundamental followers of Shaiva while others also consider earthquake for the destruction of the temple.

Flora and Fauna

Kankrebihar forest is dominated by regenerated Sal (*Shorea robusta*) intermixed with pine (*Pinus roxburghii*). *Syzygium cumini*, *Terminalia chebula* and *Clerodendron viscosum* are other associated species. Likewise *Asparagus racemosus*, *Cinnamomum camphora*, *Piper cubeba*, *Justicia adhatoda* have the medicinal value. The forest is also home for various faunal diversity which includes Sambar deer, leopard, jackal, rabbit and 70-80 bird species.

The Project

The project titled “Kankrebihar biodiversity and culture Conservation Project” was initiated in 2000 with the financial support from GEF Small Grants Programme. The main aim of the project was to empower community for the conservation of unique niche of the culture and biodiversity and uplift the socio-economic status of local people especially the indigenous Tharu communities. The project also initiated the ambitious task of unearthing the cultural artifacts buried at the pinnacle of the Kankrebihar forest.

Achievements

The project started the work with the slow but planned manner mobilizing the community first. The project formulated 23 settlement-based groups comprising 391 men and 398 women from the community who are also the primary users of the forest. The project also activated the Kankrebihar Conservation Committee with the representation from the settlement-based groups. The next step was to coordinate with different line agencies to carry out the sectoral work. With the enthusiastic participation from the local people, the Department of Archeology has started to excavate the ancient site unearthing the temple basement and 2026 beautifully carved stone images and icons. The Ministry of Population and Environment supported to gravel the road and fencing the Kankrebihar area. Likewise, the District Forest Office and District Soil Conservation Office had also supported in plantation and conservation initiatives.

The main outcome of the community initiated conservation lead to complete ban on grazing, drastic (90%) reduction in poaching and illicit felling. Due to this achievement, the department of forest has declared the site as “Conserved Forest”. The project also supported in construction of over 300 improved cook stoves and also helped in establishing the Tharu Cultural Museum at the community level.

Access to loan for small scale green enterprise, innovative goat and pig for all campaign, Indigenous Tharu museum and Tharu children scholarship fund, rope making enterprise, plate making from Sal tree leaf, improved cook-stove making and benefits (firewood and fodder) are the major incentives provided for the community members to participate in the project.

So far USD 24,819 has been mobilized as loan in different enterprise activities (animal husbandry, trade, poultry and vegetable farming) benefiting 151 community members. USD 17,104 (69%) has been provided to 98 women members. This included 21 women members who are indigenous Tharus and lower caste people. Similarly, out of the 53 men members who received the credit facility, 43 were Tharus and lower caste members of the community.

Goat and Pig for all campaign:

Initially, 39 goat and 23 pigs were distributed to the poorest of the poor members. The tally has already reached to 134 goat and 61 pigs in the community and they have also earned USD1,384 by selling goats and pigs. Of the beneficiaries, 58 members belonging to Tharus and lower caste (Men 30, women 28) received the goat. Likewise, 28 members from Tharus and lower caste (men 12 and women 16) received the pig.

The road ahead

The re- construction of ancient temple would not only help in conservation of cultural heritage but also help in promote ecotourism in the area. Likewise, the expansion of indigenous Tharu museum would also help conserve Kakrebihar site and to better understand Tharu ethnic culture and heritage.