



Shifting Social Landscape: A Review of Socio-cultural Dynamics of Newar Community in Kathmandu, Nepal

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the social landscape of the Newar population in the Kathmandu, Nepal, as well as their cultural, economic, and social dynamics. The objective of the paper is to identify the social composition and structure of the Newar community. This paper traces different socioeconomic factors while also highlighting the changing dynamics within the historically significant Newar community and offers a more comprehensive understanding of it. It utilizes existing data to determine the profile of the Newar population and investigates the contemporary trends and accompanying factors that contribute to urban settlement in Nepal. This research employed a narrative review process, using database search techniques similar to those used in systematic reviews with some key words of social issues in the Newar community of Kathmandu in Nepal Bhasa, Nepali, and English languages, and the secondary data that is published by the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) and National Statistics Office Nepal. In the first phase, themes and subthemes for the paper were identified, while the second phase focused on pinpointing key issues related to the structure of the Newar population, as well as the factors that foster urban gentrification. The discussions in the paper are structured around insights derived from the results, with conclusions drawn to highlight the dynamics of the population, historical underpinnings, socioeconomic patterns, household arrangements, traditional dwellings, social stratification, class dynamics, and linguistic aspects within the Newar community. Through this comprehensive examination, the paper contributes to a detailed understanding of the various factors influencing and facilitating the recognition of the major circumstances of the Newar population in the Kathmandu.

Keywords: *Newar Community; Socio-Cultural Dynamics; Family Structure; Kathmandu*

Introduction

The Newar is a well-established ethnic community in Nepal with a rich cultural heritage. They have made significant contributions to the region's art, architecture, literature, trade, agriculture, and

cuisine, and are considered culturally superior. Among the ethnic communities in Nepal, the Newar is one of the largest, ranking eighth in population. The Newar community is diverse, with various clan groups and subgroups existing within the broader category (Sharma, 1990). In terms of religion, they follow both Hinduism and Buddhism (Sharma, 1990). According to the Central Bureau of Statistics (2021) conducted by the Nepal Statistics Office 2021, the total population of Nepal is 29,164,578, with the Newar community accounting for 1,341,363, approximately 4.6% of the total population. However, within the Kathmandu, they are the largest ethnic group, comprising 23.41% of the population, with a total of 708,259 out of 3,025,386.

The origin of the Newar community is complex, with people from diverse backgrounds and races migrating to the Kathmandu Valley and assimilating into Newar culture. They are commonly known as Newar and make up a quarter of the valley's population. The decline of the Newar community in the Kathmandu Valley began in 1769 A.D. after the unification of Nepal. Many Newars fled the valley and resettled in various parts of Nepal, as well as Sikkim, India. Historically, fluency in Nepal Bhasa was a requirement to be considered a Newar, as it was their common language. Nepal Bhasa was also the state language and is now recognized as a national language.

The United Nations has projected that by the year 2100, 50% of the world's languages, mainly spoken by indigenous people, will be on the verge of extinction. This means that, on average, one language becomes extinct every two weeks. The loss of languages results in the loss of cultural heritage, traditions, and indigenous knowledge. In the speech community of Nepal Bhasa, only 64.4% consider it their mother tongue nationwide, increasing to 84.4% in the Kathmandu Valley (National Statistics Office, 2021).

The Kathmandu Valley is the center of urban development in Nepal and one of the fastest-growing metropolises in South Asia. Migration, land commodification, changes in the city's socio-economic environment, urbanization, and gentrification have influenced the social dynamics of the Newar community, as well as their interaction, perception, and ownership of land and place. Urban growth in Kathmandu has also led to changes in language use and land cover, resulting in increased land surface temperature, highlighting the environmental and planning impacts (Himal et al., 2022).

The Newar population in the Kathmandu Valley represents a unique blend of cultural diversity and historical significance. The Newar community has a long historical background and is skilled in arts, crafts, agriculture, knitting, weaving, wooden work, clay pot making, metal work, and painting (Sharma, 1990). However, the community faces challenges due to urban transformations, socio-economic shifts, and cultural assimilation. Preserving Newar heritage and identity amidst these changes requires innovative strategies that balance adaptation with cultural preservation and community empowerment. Therefore, this paper aims to analyze the current socio-cultural trends among the Newar in the Kathmandu Valley.

Methodology

The review was conducted by using Newar community related literatures. We performed a rigorous and comprehensive scoping review using various databases such as the university library database, Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and Scopus. During the review process, we identified key terms associated with demography, population, and Newar through a search. We also conducted an additional search to filter the results to Kathmandu, Bhaktapur, and Lalitpur, as these are the districts under consideration. The database search results were further refined by applying filters such as the years 1959 to 2023, English, Nepali, and Nepal Bhasa languages, and specific document types. Additionally, we conducted manual searches through Google Scholar, ResearchGate, government institutions, Nepal Bhasa specific and census websites, and Nepali databases to find research published in Nepali, English,

and Nepal Bhasha languages. To review the available literature, we employed a thematic analysis. Initially various Themes and subthemes were designed, but after reviewing the literature, these themes were merged into and identify key themes that consistently emerged across the papers. These themes focused on the socio-cultural situation of the Kathmandu Valley, population census, and other related topics. Our search revealed that the existing literature on the evolving socio- cultural dynamics of the Newar population in Kathmandu.

Results

This study reviews thematic areas for analyzing the socio-cultural composition and current trends among the Newar people in the Kathmandu Valley. To achieve this, the paper thoroughly examines literature reviews, census data from Nepal spanning from 1952 to 2021, and scholarly contributions that are directly or indirectly related to the Newar community in the Kathmandu Valley.

Dynamics of Socio-economic Patterns

The word "Newar" is etymologically identical with the name of the country "Nepal." Considered the original inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley, Newars have been living in the Nepal Valley since prehistoric times, forming their own "nation" until the valley was conquered and assimilated into larger Nepal during the eighteenth century by a powerful group from outside the valley (Bista, 1976). The oldest known historical documentation of the Valley is the inscription of Lichhavi King Mandev in Changu Narayan, dating back to 464 AD (Regmi, 1965). This historical context underscores the deep-rooted presence of Newars in the Kathmandu Valley, highlighting their longstanding cultural and social contributions.

The Newar community, rich in culture, is settled in various parts of Nepal such as Kirtipur, Thimi, Sankhu, Thankot, Tokha, Pharping, and Nagarjot, and outside the territory of Nepal mainly in three centers: Darjeeling (including Sikkim), Bhutan, and Lhasa (Nepali, 1965). Migration patterns and adaptation strategies have led emigrant Newars to establish social organizations like Guthi and Samaj for unity, socio-cultural integration, and development outside the valley (Shrestha, 2020). However, these movements may not have been only about preserving culture but also could be about seeking economic opportunities and escaping political instability, reflecting broader socio-economic dynamics.

Kathmandu Valley experiences significant rural-urban migration, contributing to its high population density and diversity (Quigley, 1987). Fertile land, economic opportunities, and political and security issues attract people to the valley, while lack of economic opportunities, low living standards, and the absence of basic amenities in rural areas push people towards urban areas (MoUD, 2017). This migration has led to a diverse population with 133 caste/ethnic groups, including Newars (National Statistics Office, 2021). Despite a general population growth of 1.8 times over 30 years in the valley, the Newar population has grown more slowly, at nearly 20% (1.2 times) in the same period. This disparity raises questions about the factors influencing demographic change among Newars compared to other groups, including potential socio-economic and cultural challenges.

Table 1: Demographic Status Trend of Newar Community

	1991	2001	2021	Change in Ratio 1991-2021
Population by Caste/Ethnic Group	1,041,090	1,245,232	1,341,363	300,273
Most Numerous Caste/Ethnic groups (%)	5.60%	5.60%	4.60%	-1.00%
Large Populations in terms of Mother Tongue	3.70%	3.60%	3.00%	-0.70%
Trend in Mother Tongue Retention	66.20%	66.30%	66.50%	0.30%
Population Change by Caste/Ethnic Group	1,041,090	1,245,232	1,341,363	300,273
Population Change by Mother Tongue	690,007	825,548	863,380 (2.96%)	173,373

Source: Computed from National Statistics Office [NSO] (1991, 2001, & 2021)

The data shows that the Newar's population increased from 1991 to 2001 by 300,272 people over 30 years. However, the percentage of Newars as part of the most numerous caste/ethnic groups declined from 5.6% in 1991 to 4.6% in 2021. This suggests that while the absolute population of Newar community has grown, its relative proportion within the national population decreased. The trend in mother tongue uses shows a slight increase from 66.2% in 1991 to 66.5% in 2021. Although the retention percentage has improved slightly, the actual speaking mother tongue increased from 690,007 in 1991 to 863,380 in 2021. This shows linguistic heritage is resilient yet vulnerable. Regarding literacy and education, Newars increased significantly from 71.22% in 2000, 80.1% in 2011 to 88.4% in 2021.

Even though Newar has comprised the top 10 list of the higher proportion of the population and is shown to be increasing, the decrease in the percentage of the most numerous caste by -1% is due to a change in mother tongue speakers as the practice of education and communication in the Nepal Bhasa language has slightly dropped. Observing the changing trend related to the mother tongue, it has declined except for retention, which indicates that the decline might be due to a shift towards other local languages or global influence, and the retention might be due to the settlement of a strong Newar community.

In addition, the Newars have historically played a crucial role in the trade and commerce of the Kathmandu Valley, establishing thriving markets and artisan communities. The valley's economy depended on rice cultivation and trade between India and Tibet, reflecting its fertility and strategic position (Shrestha, 1999). Newars, primarily farmers and traders, contributed significantly to the valley's prosperity. Moreover, their expertise in craftsmanship, particularly in areas such as woodcarving, metalwork, and pottery, added to the valley's economic prosperity and cultural richness. However, it is essential to consider the impact of modern economic changes on these traditional crafts and trades. Globalization and urbanization threaten these indigenous practices, necessitating efforts to preserve and adapt them in the contemporary context.

The Guthi System

A socio-religious association, is a salient feature of the Newar community, prevalent in almost all Newar settlements in the Kathmandu Valley (Gurung, 2000). The origins of Guthi are contested among Newar ethnic groups. Pradhananga et al. (2009) suggest that Guthi is derived from the Sanskrit word "Gosthi," meaning "association" or "assembly." This interpretation highlights the system's role in generating financial and social capital through collective land ownership practiced by indigenous ethnic groups like the Newars in Nepal (Pradhananga et al., 2009). However, the collective land ownership model inherent to the Guthi system faces significant challenges. The National Land Policy and increasing

commercialization of land within Kathmandu, Bhaktapur, and Lalitpur districts threaten this traditional practice (Gurung, 2000; Pradhananga et al., 2009). This policy shift reflects broader tensions between traditional land use practices and modern economic policies aimed at urban development (Sarveshwar & Shakya, 2021).

Sarveshwar and Shakya (2021) argue that the Guthi system served as a self-governance mechanism for Newars in the pre-Shah era. They emphasize that Guthi was not strictly based on caste and social stratification but was divided into types such as Si Guthi, Sana Guthi, and Guthi for workshops, music, and craftsmanship (Sarveshwar & Shakya, 2021). Scott (2019) found that Guthi practices among Newars date back to the Lichhavi period, underscoring Guthi's resilience and its integral role in maintaining social cohesion and cultural identity among Newars.

While Pradhananga et al. (2009) emphasize the socio-economic aspects, Scott (2019)'s historical perspective underscores the system's resilience. The differing focus of these studies highlights the multifaceted nature of the Guthi system and suggests that both socioeconomic and historical factors have shaped its evolution over time. The transformation of the Guthi system under modern pressures raises questions about the sustainability of indigenous practices in the face of economic modernization. The commercialization of land and government policies threaten to erode the communal and cultural functions that Guthi has historically provided (Sarveshwar & Shakya, 2021).

The transformation of the Guthi system under modern pressures raises questions about the sustainability of indigenous practices. Land commercialization and government policies threaten to erode the communal and cultural functions historically provided by Guthi (Gurung, 2000; Pradhananga et al., 2009). Integrating the Guthi system into modern frameworks requires balancing cultural heritage with economic realities (Sarveshwar & Shakya, 2021).

Table 2: Different socio-cultural forms of Guthi

SN	Types of Guthi	Roles
1	Guthi Land Tenure 1a) Raj Guthi 1b) Duniya Guthi	1a) Raj Guthi: These are the properties of the royal families donated by them and looked by their appointed person under the organization called Guthi Sansthan until 1951. 1b) Duniya Guthi / Niji Guthi: The private families and people take care of properties donated by the people or given by the state.
2	Si Guthi	Death Guthi. It is a compulsory social organization; membership is patrilineal, passed down to sons from their fathers; membership is determined by proximity, as is necessary for the functions of each Si Guthis in the case of the death of one of the Si Guthis members.
3	Sana Guthi	Perform death rituals post the cremation for the departed souls to rest in peace.
4	Amanat Guthi	1050 Guthi which deposit their income on the Ayastha Guthi Fund as per the Article 59 on the rights given to the Guthi Sansthan of Nepal.
5	Chut Guthi	The Guthiyaar self-collects the resources use it for Jatra and festival and redeposit in this Chut Guthi which are 1032 all over Nepal.
6	Private Guthi	The Guthi that are not registered within the Raj Guthi and owned and operated by private person or a private institution. The Guthi Sansthan has no record of the number of private Guthi all over Nepal.
7	Maha Guthi	In 1993, the Jyapu community of Newar established the Great Foundation of Jyapu for the benefit and welfare of their caste groups.

Adopted from Dangol (2010); Guthi Sansthan Nepal (2019); Lawoti & Shrestha (2007); Scott (2019)

Newar Household Structures and Traditional Dwellings

The term "household" refers to family accommodations, including structural types and facilities such as electricity, drinking water, cooking fuel, and toilets (Karmacharya & Sangraula, 1998). Household information, including composition, age-sex differences, and average size, reflects the socio-cultural picture of a country. Nepal, as a multi-ethnic and culturally diverse nation, exhibits unique household characteristics among its various ethnic groups.

The Newar community in the Kathmandu Valley, comprising Kathmandu (Yen), Lalitpur (Yala), and Bhaktapur (Khwopa), is notable for its unique settlement patterns, rich architectural styles, community planning, and housing designs. Their settlements are distinguished by dense clusters that contrast with the scattered villages of non-Newar communities (Quigley, 1987). This compact nature signifies sophisticated community planning, historically facilitating efficient land use and resource management.

Traditional Newar settlements are often centered on a central courtyard, with narrow alleys linking these courtyards to interconnected streets. This layout fosters communal spaces that serve as venues for community activities, social interactions, cultural practices, and community cohesion. The central courtyards and narrow alleys are integral to the social architecture of Newar life.

House structure: Traditional Newar styled houses are historically constructed in a distinctive quadrangular style, forming courtyards or rows leaning against one another and facing the street (Korn, 1998). The foundations consist of natural stones with clay mortar, a method unchanged since the 16th century until westernization in the mid-20th century (Bekh, 2002). This consistency highlights the Newar community's deep connection to cultural heritage and environmental adaptation. Richly carved details of doors, windows, walls, pillars, floors, and specific functional areas showcase their architectural style and traditional practices (Gmińska-Nowak, 2014). A typical Newar house is a tightly integrated three-story structure used for residential purposes. According to D'Ayala and Bajracharya (2003), the layout follows a vertical arrangement with front and rear rooms separated by a spine wall running the full height of the structure. In some cases, a wood frame structure replaces the spine wall on the upper floor to create a wider continuous room. Usually, a single flight staircase is located on one side of the plan. The spatial organization includes a top-floor kitchen (Baigah), ground-floor bathroom (Chhedi), first-floor bedrooms (Maatan), and a second-floor reception area (Chwota). However, recent decades have seen a shift towards high-rise buildings and Western designs, reflecting changes due to urbanization and globalization (Bhattarai-Upadhyay & Sengupta, 2016; Weiler, 2009). This evolution raises questions about the preservation of cultural heritage amidst modernization pressures.

Family structure: Traditionally, Newar households were characterized by joint families, with multiple generations living together under one roof. This structure fostered support, encouragement, and shared responsibilities among family members (Manandhar, 2019). Each member had specific rights and roles in social, cultural, and economic activities, often tied to caste-based professions and the management of Guthis (Muller, 1981). This traditional structure facilitated a tightly-knit community where cultural practices and responsibilities were passed down through generations. However, modernization and changing economic realities have significantly impacted the Newar family structure. The rigidity of traditional structures posed challenges in adapting to dynamic socio-economic environments. The trend toward nuclear families, leading to the division of family houses into smaller units, signifies an adaptive response to these challenges (Haaland, 1982). This shift is driven by economic and social reasons, such as the need for greater autonomy and modern lifestyles.

Marriage rituals: Newar marriage customs and family formation are rich in cultural rituals and social norms. Among Vajrayana Buddhist and Dhyo Brahmin followers, Newar marriage practices are categorized into Pre-birth, Life, and Death rituals (Pandey, 1985). Key marriage rituals include Ihi,

Baraha Tayegu, and Ihipaa. This is unique to Newar rituals, where a girl can be symbolically married up to three times (Bajracharya, 1959; Subedi, 2012).

The Ihi ceremony: The Ihi ceremony, also known as "Bel Bibaha," is a pivotal ritual in Newar marriage customs, described as the most sacred and arduous of all domestic rituals (Nepali, 1965). During this ceremony, a premenstrual virgin girl is symbolically married to Lord Vishnu by holding a "Bel" (Stone apple fruit), which signifies unity with the deity (Subedi, 2012). This ritual is believed to protect Newar women from widowhood by ensuring their eternal marriage with an immortal deity, thereby shielding them from social pressures after the death of their husbands (Vergati, 1995). In the Buddhist version of the Ihi ceremony, the ritual retains its essential elements but is oriented towards the Vajrayana Buddhist tradition. Here, the girl is symbolically married to the Suvarna Kumar, a deity representing the eternal bachelor. This version emphasizes spiritual protection and continuity, aligning with Buddhist philosophies of impermanence and spiritual bonds (Gellner, 1992). This practice underscores the intersection of religious beliefs within Newar society, highlighting the syncretic nature of their cultural rituals

Baraha Tayegu: Baraha Tayegu is a significant Newar ritual marking a girl's symbolic marriage to the Sun god, performed around puberty. The ceremony ensures her protection and prosperity. The ritual involves the girl being secluded, taking a ceremonial bath, and offering prayers to the Sun, reflecting its rays with a mirror. It concludes with a family feast and celebration (Bajracharya, 1959; Pandey, 1985; Subedi, 2012). This ritual is crucial for maintaining Newar cultural and spiritual traditions.

Ihipaa: Bajracharya (1959) observes that Ihipaa is traditionally arranged by parents with the involvement of a "Lami," a matchmaker who ensures the match adheres to the caste hierarchy within the social system. This practice indicates that the caste system is deeply entrenched in Newar family structures. Unlike the Brahmin and Chhetri communities, where Kanyadaan is a key part of the marriage ritual, this practice is absent among Newars (Subedi, 2012). The absence of Kanyadaan among Newars suggests a distinct approach to marital status and widowhood, implying that Newar women may not be considered widowed upon the death of their mortal spouses. In recent times, Newar marriage practices have evolved to allow greater individual choice in marital decisions, contingent upon parental and familial approval. Despite these changes, traditional rituals such as Ihi ceremony continue to be prevalent in the Kathmandu Valley. This evolution illustrates a complex interplay between traditional customs and modern influences (Bajracharya, 1959; Subedi, 2012).

Fertility and Family Planning

Fertility, birth, and family planning practices within the Newar ethnic groups of Nepal offer a window into the interplay between traditional beliefs and modern health practices. While family planning is a crucial tool for managing population growth, its adoption and implementation can vary widely across different communities. Family planning is described as a voluntary decision made by individuals and couples to control population growth and improve family health (population Bulletin, 2000). Newar women show a higher acceptance of modern contraceptives compared to other ethnic groups.

Jennings and Pierotti (2016) note that despite the patriarchal norms often overshadowing women's autonomy, Newar women exercise significant agency in deciding to have additional children. Jennings and Pierotti's (2016) assertion that decisions about having third child are made by wives highlights women's agency but may not fully address the nuances of intra-household decision-making dynamics, particularly in varying social context. Mishra (2011) surveyed 10,763 women in Nepal and found that 52% of married Newar women used modern contraceptives, a higher rate compared to other groups such as Brahmins/Chhetris (39%), Janajati (38%), and Terai/Madhesi (24%). The higher contraceptive use among Newar women reflects wider trends in urban and education populations and

access to contraceptives rather than solely cultural preferences. This indicates that Newar married women are more inclined to utilize modern healthcare facilities available in the country.

The fertility rate in Nepal has declined from 4.6 children per woman in 1996 to 2.1 in 2022 (Ministry of Health and Population, 2022). In the Kathmandu Valley, the fertility rate is 2.0 children per woman, slightly below the national average (Ministry of Health and Population, 2022). The fertility rate for Newar women has also declined, with a TFR of 3.3 in 2001 and 2.4 in 2006 (Mishra, 2011). This overall decline in fertility rates reflects significant socio-economic changes, including urbanization and access to healthcare. However, the specific impact on Newar women should be further investigated to understand how cultural practices, economic factors, and healthcare access interplay. The lack of community-specific data in the 2022 Nepal Demographic and Health Survey limits our understanding of how Newar-specific factors influence fertility trends.

Mother Tongue and Age Structure of Newars

The age structure of inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic groups among Newars in the Kathmandu Valley is sparsely documented, primarily relying on Nepal's census data, which has been systematically available since 1961 (National Statistics Office, 2020). The Newar community, like much of Nepal, has a young population, with a significant portion under 30 years old. This youthful demographic results from historically high birth rates and improvements in healthcare. However, the absence of community-specific data hampers the understanding of intra-community variations.

The preservation of the Newar language has been a significant cultural concern, particularly with the decline in Newar mother tongue speakers in key districts. Prominent figures like Jagat Sundar Malla have historically championed education in the Newar language, opening schools and creating educational materials in the early 20th century (Shrestha, 1999). Despite such efforts, the proportion of Newar mother tongue speakers has decreased markedly in Kathmandu and Lalitpur districts while increasing in Bhaktapur (National Statistics Office, 2020).

Table 3: Population of Newar Mother Tongue Speakers

District	Population of Newar mother tongue in 1962	Population of Newar mother tongue in 2021
Kathmandu	42.88%	15.08%
Bhaktapur	24.07%	32.72%
Lalitpur	33.05%	26.95%

Source: Computed from National Statistics Office (2020)

The data highlights significant linguistic shifts within the Newar community within 59 years (1962-2021). The drastic reduction of Newar speakers in Kathmandu by 27.8% suggests cultural erosion influenced by gentrification and the influx of outsiders. Conversely, the increase in Bhaktapur indicates stronger linguistic retention. The divergence calls for an in-depth examination of local policies, socio-economic factors, and community initiatives that have either hindered or supported language preservation. The reliance on census data also underscores the need for more frequent and detailed linguistic surveys.

The demographic and linguistic shifts among Newars have broader sociocultural implications. The decline in Newar language speakers in urban areas like Kathmandu may reflect broader patterns of cultural assimilation and loss of traditional practices. The saying by Siddhidas Amatya, “Bhasa Mwasa Jati Mwai” (If the language survives, the ethnicity survives”), encapsulates the community’s concern over

cultural preservation (Shrestha, 1999). While the community remains youthful, significant challenges persist in preserving the Newar language amidst urbanization pressures. Practical measures for language preservation require sustained efforts, including educational initiatives, youth-focused programs, and community activities.

Social Stratification and Class Dynamics

This diversity reflects the rich cultural heritage of the Newar community. The Newar caste system suggests descent from various ancient groups, including Abirats, Kirats, Lichhavi, Vaishva, Thakuri, and Karnatakas, forming the foundation of present-day Hindu society (Nepali, 1965). Over time, family names such as Pradhans and Mallas evolved into Pradhananga, Shrestha, and others, demonstrating the adaptive nature of Newar identity, which warrants further socio-political study.

Gopal Singh Nepali first documented the caste system among Newars in 1965, revealing distinct stratification within the valley (Bhatta, 2017 as cited Nepali, 1965). The table below outlines the social stratification among Newars, distinguishing between Hindu and Buddhist castes:

Table 4: Hindu and Buddhist castes of Newars

SN	Caste	Hindu Newar	Buddhist Newar
1	Priestly caste	Deva/ Dyo Brahmin	Gubhaju or Bajracharya
2	High castes	Char Thare Shrestha Paanch Thare Shrestha	Vanra or Bare or Udas
3	Upper Lower	Pahari – Jyapoo Hule or Gualo	
4	Lower caste	Gathu- Nau- Khoose Chitrakar- Chipa- Manandhar Kow Mali, Pun	Ranjitkar, Salmi
5	Unclean caste	Du(n)yee(n) Balami, Songa and Bha Khasai	

Source: Adopted from Bhatta (2017)

The detailed classification provided by Bhatta (2017) offers valuable insights into the hierarchical structure of the Newar community. However, analyzing the origins and perpetuation of these social stratifications is crucial. The categorization of certain castes as “unclean” highlights deep-rooted prejudices and social stigmas, often tied to occupations deemed impure by societal standards. Understanding the historical context and evolving perceptions of these castes is essential to addressing contemporary social inequalities (Nepali, 1965).

Cultural Identity and Assimilation

The Newars, considered by some scholars to be the oldest inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley (Bista, 1967), are a fusion of Aryans, Mongols, and indigenous Australoid races. The term “Newar” reflects this diversity. After the 1950 AD revolution, the Newars regained some cultural freedom lost due

to social, historical, political, and other factors since the pre-Lichhavi and Lichhavi eras (Nepali, 1965). The continuous struggle for identity underscores the ongoing impact of historical oppression and cultural assimilation.

The cultural identity of Newars has been influenced by social, historical, and political factors. The dichotomy of Hindu religion, the oppressed position of women in marriage, and other social customs have compromised Newar identity (Gellner, 1991). Since the people's movement of 1990 AD, Newar identity has been politicized, with various castes attempting to link their lineage to deities to avoid social exclusion (Maharjan, 2012).

The debate over the classification of certain Newar castes as Dalits in 1997 exemplifies the contested nature of Newar identity. While some activists support this classification, others oppose it, leading to a split in how these castes are viewed (Maharjan, 2012). The politicization of Newar identity and the debate over caste classification underscore the fluid and contested nature of cultural identity. These dynamics reflect broader societal tensions and challenges of navigating traditional social structures in a modern context. Addressing these issues requires a nuanced understanding of the socio-political factors at play, as well as inclusive policies that recognize and respect diverse identities within the community.

The term "minority" used to describe the Newars has sparked debate. Shrestha (2020) argues that Newars are historically and currently a minority due to cultural acculturation, where dominant groups influence and alter Newar cultural characteristics. This has led to a cultural identity crisis exacerbated by national language policy, historical defeats, and urban gentrification as systemic challenges.

Literacy and Indigenous Education Practices among Newars

The development of education in Nepal, especially among the indigenous Newar ethnic groups, spans historical, prehistoric, and modern periods. The formal development of Nepal's education sector began in the mid-1950s, aligning with broader development initiatives (Shrestha, 2019). Education is crucial for cognitive and knowledge development, significantly impacting livelihoods. However, historical contexts of literacy among Newars highlight diverse educational practices. While formal education initiatives brought structured learning, they also marginalized indigenous educational practices. Understanding this historical context can provide insights into current educational disparities and help design inclusive education policies.

Dhakal (2018) defines literacy in the modern era as the ability to read and write before 1991 A.D., and as the ability to read, write, and perform basic arithmetic post-1991 A.D. However, these definitions overlook indigenous education practices. Shakya (2010) notes a significant decline in the Newar education system with the introduction of formal education in 1854. Indigenous practices, such as oral transmission of knowledge and skills, are integral to the Newar community's educational framework. Recognizing and integrating these practices into formal education could lead to more inclusive and culturally relevant education.

Official definitions of literacy often disregard indigenous knowledge transfer practices, such as the transmission of "Dapha" music, a popular Newar Bhajan (hymn) practiced since ancient times (Sthapit, 2023). This exclusion highlights gaps in recognizing diverse educational practices. Despite challenges, census data indicate that Newars are among the most literate ethnic groups in Nepal, with literacy rates of 71.22% (2001), 80.1% (2011), and 88.4% (2021) (National Statistics Office, 2014, 2020, 2023). These high literacy rates reflect successful access to formal education, yet may mask underlying

disparities within the Newar community. Differences in literacy rates among various Newar castes could indicate uneven access to educational resources and opportunities.

Language and Linguistics of Newars

The history and development of Nepal Bhasa, also known as Newari, illustrate the rich linguistic heritage of Newar community in Nepal. Nepal Bhasa, the local language of the Newar community, has a long and diverse history. The first book published in Nepal Bhasa was "Ekavimsati Prajnaparamita" by Pandit Nisthanand in 1909, a Buddhist text with Sanskrit Slokas (Shrestha, 1999). Similarly, Sukra Raj Shastri authored the first "Nepal Bhasa rammar" book titled "Nepal Bhasa Vyakarna," published in 1928. The publication of these seminal works reflects the early effort to formalize and preserve Nepal Bhasa. Tragically, Shastri was executed by the Rana Government in 1941 along with three other political activists (Shrestha, 1999). This shows the political challenges faced by language activists. The political suppression of linguistic and cultural expressions during the Rana regime had long-lasting impacts on the development and preservation of Nepal Bhasa.

Nepal Bhasa is a Himalayan language belonging to the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan group, consisting of five major dialects and several sub-dialects of Kirat and Tibetan origins (Bajracharya, 1959). This linguistic diversity of Nepal Bhasa reflects the complex cultural and historical interaction within the region. Historically, the term "Newar" referred to the inhabitants of Nepal, with the earliest references found in Kautilya's Arthashastra (283-370 B.C) (Vajracharya, 2014). Despite conflicting views on its origins, Nepal Bhasa was the official language of Nepal and is now recognized as a minority local language. The recognition of Nepal Bhasa as a minority language highlights the ongoing struggle for linguistic and cultural preservation in the face of dominant languages and cultures.

Nepal Bhasa originated from "Nepal Lipi" used to write multiple languages including Sanskrit, Pali, Maithali, Bhojpuri, and Khas/Nepali from the ancient Lichhavi period to modern times. The use of scripts for different purposes and in different languages indicates a sophisticated and adaptable written tradition. The historical usage of Nepal Lipi for various languages shows its cultural significance and the need for its preservation. Similarly, the other scripts used in Nepal Bhasa includes Ranjana scripts – mainly used for writing Holy Scripture and Golumola Script – mainly used for writing legal documents. However, the lack of a definitive statement regarding the origin of Nepal Bhasa suggests a need for further research to fully understand its development.

Urbanization and Spatial Dynamics

Urbanization is characterized by the concentration of people in small areas, forming cities. Nepal is rapidly urbanizing, with the Kathmandu valley being one of the fastest-growing metropolitan regions in South Asia. The urban development patterns in the Kathmandu Valley have been environmentally unsustainable and unplanned (Pandey, 1985). The valley, home to a significant Newar population, has experienced rapid urbanization, with urban areas expanding by 412% from 1989 to 2016, primarily at the cost of agricultural land and traditional settlements. This urbanization process has transformed the landscape and Newar settlements. While urbanization brings economic growth and improved infrastructure, it also disrupts traditional neighborhoods and agricultural land, which are crucial to the Newar way of life. The loss of these elements can lead to the erosion of cultural heritage and traditional practices.

Gentrification is a prominent consequence of urbanization. Atkinson and Bridge (2005) describe gentrification as a process that brings negative neighbourhood changes such as displacement through rent/price increases, community resentment, loss of affordable housing and speculative property development.

The valley has experienced rural-to-urban migration due to economic activities, education, healthcare service, transforming the socio-economic dynamics and traditional structure of Newar community. It exacerbates socio-economic disparities and can lead to the displacement of long-term residents. For the Newars, this means not only losing homes but also the cultural and social fabric of their communities.

Atkinson and Bridge (2005) further unveil that gentrification brings abnormal increase in property price, homelessness, commercialization, industrial development, and changes to local services. These changes create pressure on surrounding poor areas leading to a loss of social diversity and to a loss of social diversity and increased socio-economic divides. Shrestha (2022) notes that gentrification among Newars often means locals getting pushed out when new people move in, changing the use of buildings and the demographics of neighborhoods. The process can erode the unique local cultures connected to daily life, leading to a loss of cultural heritage that attracts tourists. The influx of outsiders for investment purposes can diminish the cultural uniqueness of Newar neighborhoods, even if locals do not sell their homes.

Urbanization and gentrification pose significant challenges to preserving the cultural identity of Newar community. Despite these challenges, it is essential to recognize the resilience and adaptability of the Newars. Preserving cultural identity requires a multi-faceted approach that includes community engagement, policy support and sustainable urban planning.

Discussion and Conclusions

The discussion focuses on the demographic composition, evolution, and socioeconomic dynamics of the Newar community in the valley. Urbanization, population migration, and inadequate land use planning have greatly impacted the demography and cultural dynamics of the Newar community. Agricultural land and open spaces have been replaced by concrete structures, and this trend is expected to continue (Hamal et al., 2022). The Kathmandu Valley has transformed into a metropolis due to urbanization, migration, and the commercialization of land. Approximately 80% of the land has been sold and is now used for urban housing (Maharjan, 2012). Within this urbanization, cultural and linguistic shifts have led to the diffusion of culture and language within the Newar population, indicating acculturation. The use of ethnic languages, including Nepal Bhasa, has gradually declined (National Statistics Data, 2021). However, the Kathmandu Metropolitan City has included Nepal Bhasa (Local Language) in the local curriculum to enrich the teaching of Nepal Bhasa and cultural knowledge for the younger generation, particularly regarding Newar culture. Therefore, it is crucial for parents to teach Nepal Bhasa to ensure the preservation of the language. Government offices in Bagmati Province have been officially mandated to display signboards in Nepal Bhasa, along with Tamang and Nepali languages. Additionally, a public holiday has been declared on May 6, 2024, to celebrate this decision (My Republica, 2024). This milestone is a significant step towards promoting the use of the language and advancing Nepal Bhasa.

The Newar population in the Kathmandu Valley has declined compared to the overall population, indicating a higher rural-urban migration. This has resulted in changes to the neighborhood's demographic makeup, with fewer original residents and an increase in other ethnic groups. Gentrification is taking place, as outsiders invest in the area, potentially eroding cultural traditions. However, local residents are holding onto their property. The expansion of the Kathmandu Valley has also led to the conversion of residential buildings into commercial spaces, eroding the architectural identity of Kathmandu. The Newar community can be found within and outside of Nepal, and they maintain their connection through socio-cultural organizations like Samaj and Guthi, which fulfill their social, cultural, and economic needs. Guthi plays a crucial role in adapting to new environments and embracing ethnic diversity. It is the

responsibility of senior citizens to familiarize youth with traditional Newar culture in order to keep it alive. Newar culture blends ancient traditions with contemporary influences. Rituals like Digu Puja honor lineage gods and strengthen familial bonds. The Guthi system helps preserve tangible and intangible heritage and contributes to social life. The Newar community in the valley is culturally vibrant and has a history influenced by migration, urbanization, modernization, and the commercialization of land. However, the gentrification of the valley is impacting historic settlements, architecture, and demographics. Despite being dispersed geographically, the Newar community remains connected and involved in different national and international organizations. They are also aware of demographic changes and their direct effects on the preservation of culture, festivals, rituals, and languages.

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