

# CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL SCIENCES

PEER REVIEWED, INDEXED & REFEREED QUARTERLY INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

ISSN 0302-9298

<https://www.jndmeerut.org>

[Vol. 33, No. 3 (July-September), 2024]

<https://doi.org/10.62047/CSS.2024.09.30.84>

## Changing Practices among the Newars : A Study from Kirtipur

*Sudeep Singh Nakarmi*

Faculty of Sociology in the Central Department of Sociology, Tribhuvan  
University, Kathmandu (Nepal) E-mail:<[sudipnakarmi@gmail.com](mailto:sudipnakarmi@gmail.com)>

### Abstract

*Nepal has undergone a significant transformation from a traditionally stratified conservative society to one more open society for several reasons. We have witnessed changes in different practices for a few years. The Newars, an indigenous inhabitants of Kathmandu Valley, are not exempt from such changes. The Newars are one of the ancient groups residing in Nepal. The country's name is believed to be derived from the Newar as the 'Newar' is considered identical to Nepal. The study reveals that everyday life, traditional occupation, mother tongue practices and ways of celebrating festivals and rituals within the Newars have experienced changes. The rise of capitalism is mostly responsible for such changing practices. This study is conducted amongst the Newars of Kirtipur.*

### Keywords

The Newars, Changing practices, Socialization, Traditional occupation, Mother tongue and Festival.

**Research Foundation International, New Delhi**  
(Affiliated to UNO)

Editorial Office : D-59, Shastri Nagar, Meerut - 250 004 (INDIA)

Ph. : 0121-2763765, +91-9997771669, +91-9219658788

## **Changing Practices among the Newars : A Study from Kirtipur**

### **1. Introduction**

Nepal is one of the most diverse countries in terms of population, ecology, culture, caste and ethnicity, religion, etc. People living in different parts of Nepal have their cultural practices, traditional systems, norms, values, beliefs, etc. However, we have witnessed changes in these practices since a few years back. The Newars, an indigenous inhabitants of Kathmandu Valley, are not exempt from such changes. Amongst the indigenous groups in Nepal, the Newars are one of the ancient groups residing in Nepal, and they are one of the strongest groups in terms of their culture and traditions. The country's name is believed to be derived from the Newar as the 'Newar' is considered identical to Nepal (Acharya, 2009). The majority of the Newars were Buddhist in the past (Bista, 1982). However, due to religious syncretism, in the present day, most of them practice both Buddhism and Hinduism. Until the Middle Ages, the Kathmandu valley was the main place of dwelling of the Newars. Presently, they are found in nearly every part of Nepal, from the Terai to the Himalayan highlands and from east to west.

Various accounts exist regarding the Newars' origin and ancestry. Some attempted to link their ancestry to the Nayar community of the Malabar Coast in southern India. Similarly, Bhasa Bansawali also exposes traditions indicating that the Newars migrated from India to the Kathmandu Valley in the days of Naanyadev, the first Karnataka king. Some, however, attempted to establish their genealogical connection to both Kirant and Lichhavi. Similarly, some Newar sub-group claim their ancestry with Lichhavi, who migrated to the Kathmandu Valley from India to protect themselves from Muslim invasion (Bista, 1996). Most native and foreign experts today agree that the various tribes, castes, and ethnic groups that arrived in the Kathmandu Valley over time combined in the form of *quanti* (*Quanti* is a popular food amongst the Newars, which is prepared by blending 9 varieties of pulse grains. It is prepared to mark the special occasion during the winter season.), which is the modern form of the Newar people.

## **2. Objective of the Study**

This paper examines changing practices among the Newars, particularly in the areas of everyday socialization, occupations, use of the mother tongue, and the observance of festivals and rituals. The world is dynamic and ever-changing, and so are the communities, societies, and cultures. Such changes in today's world are caused by a variety of elements such as westernization, globalization, modernization, law, physical environment, overpopulation, migration, and so on (Piotr, 1993). The reciprocal interdependence of diverse parts of a social system drives society. No single element can influence the process of social transformation in the same way all the time (Escobar, 1997). Due to increased exposure to the outside world and the restoration of democracy, Nepal has seen a dramatic and impressive transformation from a severely stratified culture with deeply embedded conservative traditions and rituals to a manner of social contact and rejuvenation tools. Improved access to education and health services, substantial expansion of the road network and increased access to media and communication technologies have raised the aspirations of Nepalese, leading to social changes in Nepali society.

## **3. Methodology**

Kirtipur was chosen as the study area for this research. While Newar settlements exist in various parts of the Kathmandu Valley, many areas now have a Newar in the minority due to increased migration. Kirtipur is one of the few remaining areas where the Newars are still in the majority despite rampant migration. It is situated five kilometers south of central Kathmandu. Informal interviews were conducted with 50 local respondents of different age groups for the study. The respondents belong to different sub-castes within the Newars and were selected purposively.

## **4. Everyday Socialization**

The process of socialization and training young children is an everyday family activity. It is a fundamental aspect of their development. It encompasses the transmission of cultural norms, values, and behaviours from parents or guardians to children as they grow and interact within the family unit. Through everyday interactions, rituals, and routines that they live within, youngsters

learn how to handle social situations, develop interpersonal skills, and understand societal expectations (Schaffer and Schaffer, 1969; Schaffer, 1984). It was found during the study that everyday life has been changed especially for daughters from the past to the present. In the past, girls were taught to do all the household chores, rather than asking their mothers or other members for help. This was considered as a sign of being a good daughter. But things have changed over time.

The rise of capitalism is mostly responsible for such changing role of daughters in day-to-day activities. As capitalism systems expanded and the value of capital increased, significant changes were observed in many facets of daily life. This change affected social norms and expectations in addition to economic institutions (Thomas, 2000), which in turn affected how daughters interacted with and managed their daily schedules. In the changing dynamics of Newar society, moving from large joint families to smaller nuclear ones, an important trend has emerged. Research conducted in the area shows that Newar families are increasingly realizing the connection between educating their daughters and achieving stability in their social and economic lives. This shift in mindset represents a departure from traditional norms, as investing in girls' education is now seen as a key way to empower them, earn wealth, and ensure a better future for the family.

During the study, only 10 percent of the respondents answered that they would involve their daughter more in household chores. They view it as a characteristic of the ideal daughter. They must therefore participate in domestic tasks. Respondents who thought this way were all around 70 years old. Other respondents expressed a desire for their daughters to prioritize their academic pursuits. They do not want to involve their daughter more in household chores rather they believe that education is more important to ensure their daughter's future. They believe that the current situation is different from the earlier one. So, rather than having their daughters focus more on housework, they want them to be more active in education. Those who held this perspective were all below 55 years old. The majority of them are exposed to the outside world. Exposure to diverse ideas and viewpoints undoubtedly helps develop intellectual growth, encouraging critical thinking and broadening understanding of the world. In every circumstance, there are both positives and negatives. As exposure to the external world grows, the

everyday household chores that previously promoted deep connections among family members might disappear. This might cause future generations to place less value on family and the ties that bind them. And, the idea of home and family may remain more focused on formal relationships, losing the deep emotional and psychological bonds they once had.

## **5. Changing Traditional Occupation**

The Newars are often seen as a single caste group, however, they comprise various sub-castes within them. Each of these sub-castes is unique and traditionally associated with specific occupations. This system has not only determined the social hierarchy but has also prescribed the economic roles within the community. The Jyapu sub-caste, for example, with a distinct identity within the Newars is predominantly involved in agriculture, sustaining the food supply of the valley. Similarly, the Shakya, Tamrakar, Kansakar, and Nakarmi sub-castes are associated with metalworks related to gold and silver, copper, bronze and brass, and Iron respectively. These sub-castes have been associated with specific crafts and trades, reflecting their contributions to the socio-economic fabric of the society. Bajracharya are traditionally involved in religious functions. Mali, Napit, and Ranjitkar are traditionally involved in gardening, haircutting and dyer work respectively. Other sub-castes like the Chitrakar are known for their artistic skills, creating paintings and religious icons. Similarly, traditionally Manandhar sub-caste within the Newars is involved in oil production (Nepali, 1965).

The Khadgi sub-castes, have a distinct identity within Newar and are mainly involved in the meat trade. The Kapali, also known as the Kusle, has traditionally been associated with the profession of musicians and drummers. They play important roles in religious ceremonies, festivals, and cultural events, providing music that is integral to the Newar cultural expressions. Pore and Chamkhala castes within Newar are traditionally involved in guarding and protecting deities and sanitation respectively around the valley (Nepali, 1965). The origins of Newar people are also varied, with lineages traced back to different sources including Sino-Tibet, Kirant, Shakya, Koliya, and Licchavi (Bista, 1996). However, in the face of modernization, urbanization, and economic globalization, the Newar occupational sub-castes have witnessed a significant shift in

their traditional occupations. The transformation of occupational roles among Newar sub-castes can be attributed to several factors. After the introduction of democracy in Nepal in 1950 AD, Kathmandu Valley opened up new opportunities. With the advent of formal education and new employment opportunities in the valley, many Newars, especially the younger generation, have sought occupations outside their traditional roles. This process speeds up even more after the restoration of democracy in 1990 AD.

The liberal economic policy adopted due to the influence of globalization and modernization has led to a decline in demand for certain traditional crafts and services (Liechty, 2003). For instance, the rise of mass-produced goods has significantly impacted the livelihoods of artisan sub-castes, prompting them to diversify their skills or seek alternative employment and the growing emphasis on individual rights and equality has also facilitated social mobility. This has enabled individuals from various sub-castes to pursue careers based on personal interest and aptitude rather than caste-based prescriptions. Agriculture remains a significant occupation of the Jyapu sub-caste within Newar, however, many Jyapus have diversified into business, teaching jobs, real estate, foreign employment and others. In the study areas, most of the respondents were from the Jyapu castes, and all of them had more than one source of income. They are engaged in both agricultural work and other income-generating activities simultaneously. They lack sufficient land to cultivate and sustain themselves throughout the year. They have sold some of their land to finance their children's education and invest in potential alternative income sources. Likewise, members of the Shakya families in the study areas, who have historically been involved in gold work are found to be involved in the education sector, cooperative jobs and tourism sector. Nakarmi families in the study area have moved away from their traditional occupation. Instead, they are now working in fields like cooperatives, teaching, and foreign employment. One respondent from this sub-caste proudly shared that her son, after completing his engineering degree from Tribhuvan University, finished his PhD in the United States and has recently joined a university in the United States as a teaching faculty member. Some Nakarmi have incorporated modern techniques into their traditional work and have transitioned to heavy machinery and vehicle maintenance jobs. In the study area, the Napit, traditionally known for hairdressing, have

shifted to other income-generating activities like transportation services and foreign employment. This shift is also applicable to other Newar sub-castes in the study area. The shift from traditional to modern jobs has offered the Newar community both benefits and difficulties. It has facilitated economic growth, social advancement, and better integration of Newars into national and global spheres. However, it also threatens the continuation of their traditional skills, crafts, and cultural practices. The changing occupations among Newar occupational sub-castes reflect the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity.

## **6. Mother Tongue Practices**

Defining one's mother tongue is a complex task. Typically, a mother tongue is considered to be the initial language a person acquires from birth, which implies that individuals might have more than one mother tongue (Gupta, 1997). The mother tongue holds significant sentimental value for individuals, as it is the language learned during early childhood within the family setting. It is the primary language of the community, acting as the natural mode of communication, thus establishing a profound connection between the language and a sense of communal identity (Kainla, 2062). Nepal is a multi-ethnic nation composed of various castes and religious groups, which contributes to its rich linguistic diversity. As reported in the 2078 census, Nepal is home to 142 castes and 124 distinct languages (NSO, 2021). These languages are related to different specific communities. Within these communities, in the majority of cases principle of one group and one mother tongue is prevalent, whereas in some cases a singular mother tongue often serves as a common language for different communities across the regions and locations. For instance, the Tharu, Rajvanshi, Newar, Gurung, Dhimal, and Darai communities predominantly speak their distinct mother language. In contrast, languages such as Maithili and Bhojpuri are the mother tongues for various communities in different regions (Yadav, 2006).

The majority of languages in Nepal are primarily documented but not actively spoken, and some face the risk of extinction. Languages without a written tradition are particularly vulnerable if their speakers do not continue to use them amidst the presence of numerous other languages. Nepal has a limited number of mother tongues with a long-standing written tradition. Key languages with

written records include Nepali, Maithali, Newari, Tibetan, Limbu, Bhojpuri, Awadhi, and Lepcha (Yadav, 2006)). These languages utilize various scripts, with Newari having several unique ones such as Bhujimo, Pachumol, Golmol, Rajjana, and Prachlit. However, respondents from the study area reported that they did not understand the scripts associated with their mother tongues. Currently, the Devanagari script is widely used for writing the Newari language. Commonly referred to as Nepal Bhasa, the Newari language originates from the Sino-Tibeto-Burman family. It has played a crucial role in forming Newar ethnic identity. Everyone who belongs to this community has emotional connections to the language, which serves as the primary foundation of their unity and identity. Therefore, if the language is overlooked, there is a significant risk that the affected community will become detached from the state's mainstream.

With the expansion of the Gorkha state, priority and protection were given exclusively to the Khas language which later became Nepali language. During the Panchayat era, the government promoted a "one nation, one language" policy. This action negatively affected the participation of communities speaking different languages than Nepali in multiple areas. Most Newar respondents, in the study area felt dominated by non-Newar individuals, particularly those from the Nepali-speaking community, because of their accent. To prevent their children from facing the same issues they experienced, they began speaking Nepali at home to help their children develop a better Nepali accent (Nakarmi, 2010). According to the majority of the respondents in the study area, most of the Newar family wanted their children to speak the Nepali language instead of their mother tongue. The Newars, who wanted to connect themselves with modernity, started using Nepali language in their daily life. To project a modern image and express pride in being Nepali speakers, many began speaking Nepali with their children at home. They hoped their children would speak Nepali fluently, like native speakers.

Although advocacy for the use of mother tongues in education and other areas was initiated during the Panchayat era, it was not fully acknowledged until the restoration of democracy. Subsequently, various political parties, non-governmental organizations and international organizations emphasized human rights and participatory democracy, leading to the recognition of



Nepal as a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and multi-lingual nation in the Interim Constitution of 2047. Similarly, the second popular movement of 2062/63 guaranteed the right to education in one's mother tongue at the basic level through the Interim Constitution 2063. The Constitution of Nepal 2072 continued this recognition, upholding the status of mother tongues as provided in the Interim Constitution. The movement of 2062/63 not only promoted the use of mother tongues but also encouraged individuals from various ethnic groups to get back to their own ethnic culture. Consequently, many ethnic communities have begun incorporating their mother tongues to varying extents in different contexts. This trend is also evident within the Newar community. One respondent in the study indicated that they have two children—a son and a daughter—whom they enrolled in Jagatsunder Bwonekuthi, a school offering instruction in Nepal Bhasa (Newari Language). This institution is recognized as the first school providing education in Nepal Bhasa (Newari Language). Similarly, 30 per cent of respondents in the study areas reported that they now use Newari as the main language for daily communication with their children at home. However, almost all respondents want their children to learn English because it is crucial for international communication and can improve their social and professional status, aligning with modernity. In total, 20 per cent of respondents reported that they frequently use English words and sentences with their children to help them learn the language.

## **7. Festivals and Rituals**

Festivals bring the entire community together, providing a joyful break from their busy schedules. Various festivals are celebrated amongst the Newars, each with its unique significance. Some festivals carry deep religious sentiments and messages, others hold social and cultural importance, while some highlight the significance of the changing seasons. Regardless of their religious, socio-cultural, or natural significance, all festivals have become an integral part of the Newar community (Nakarmi, 2010). These festivals, along with the fairs and feasts associated with them, serve as a means to relieve fatigue, provide entertainment, and refresh the Newar people. Newar society and culture can not be understood by separating these festivals. Before modern entertainment options were available, festivals celebrated served as a primary source of refreshment for the Newars. Despite their differences, all these festivals rejuvenate

people, leaving them physically and mentally refreshed, and ready to face the days ahead. Different festivals celebrated within the Newars also help to maintain kinship bonds. For the Newars belonging to occupational castes, who are engaged in physical work throughout the year, the monthly festivals and fairs hold special significance. Apart from festivals, rituals connected to birth to death also entangle the Newars. Most of the festivals of the Newars are celebrated according to the lunar calendar.

The Newars customarily invite close family and friends to a feast during major religious and social festivals. This practice is known as *Nakhtya Bonegu* in the Newari language. Guests are first served a welcome dish, known as *Kaula*, followed by the main meal associated with the festival. These invitations are considered a matter of social prestige among the Newars. Traditionally, one or two days before the feast, all the household members are busy with preparations. They do not have time for other tasks. In the study area, majority of the respondents mentioned that they often have to take leave from the work for these preparations, which is not always practical. Consequently, they have started inviting fewer people to these events. In today's capitalist economy, it's important to learn how to manage these tasks according to one's time and the nature of the work (Nakarmi, 2010).

*Bagh Bhairab Jatra* (*Bagh Bhairab* Worship celebration) and *Nhaygaa Jatra* (*Seven Village* celebration) are the main religious village festivals of the study area. *Bagh Bhairab Jatra* is celebrated in the Kirtipur area only whereas *Nhaygaa Jatra* is celebrated in the seven villages of the south-western part of Kathmandu where the Newars are densely inhabiting. These villages include Nagaon, Panga, Satungal, Macchegaon, Boshigaon, Lhokot and Kirtipur (Maharjan, 1137 ns). The main Jatra celebration in Kirtipur under *Nhaygaa Jatra* (*Seven Village Celebration*) is the *Jatra of Indrayan*.i During these festivals, traditionally all the Newars of the Kirtipur area invite their relatives and friends to enjoy the celebration. One respondent shared that they used to invite all their close relatives and friends for the celebration. The married daughters and their families are mandatory guests in such celebration. This would result in hosting over 50 guests. However, they have now begun limiting the invitations to married daughters, their families, and a few close relatives. Newars now invite fewer guests to their Jatra festivals mainly for practical reasons. With modern work commitments,

many people find it challenging to take time off for the extensive preparations needed to host large gatherings. Consequently, they have started limiting the guest list to close family members and a few relatives, making the celebrations more manageable. Moreover, the demands of a busy lifestyle in a capitalist economy have made it necessary to balance cultural traditions with the realities of modern life.

Traditionally before social marriage, the Newar girls undergo two special rituals. The first, called Ehi or Bel fruit marriage, takes place when Newar girls are 7, 9, or 11 years old. The second, known as Barah or Gupha, is celebrated between the ages of 11 and 15, before the start of menstruation. These are the customs related to socializing a girl in the community and training them for life ahead. During Barah a girl is kept in a dark room for 11 days out of sunlight and male contact. She is served food and drink in the same room for 11 days. Many relatives, neighbours, and friends visit and feed corn flakes, beans, beaten rice, fruits, nuts etc. during the Barah period. The twelve-day Barah ritual concludes with a ceremony that signifies the girl's entry into adulthood. The majority of respondents shared that the traditional twelve-day Barah ritual is too demanding and they are looking for less complicated options. So as an alternative, these families prefer to send their daughters to Viharas (Buddhist Monastery) for a shorter, less restrictive period, often just three days. They are allowed to play in sunlight and meet everyone who comes to visit them, either boys or girls in Viharas. Girls staying at Viharas receive teachings on various aspects of life from their guru during their stay. After completing specific rituals within certain days, girls are sent back home with their parents and start a normal life. This is the Buddhist practice but these days it is becoming increasingly popular among Hindus as well in the study area due to the easy completion of cultural regulation in terms of time and money.

## **8. Conclusion**

The world is constantly changing, and so are communities, societies, and cultures. Nepal has undergone a significant transformation from a highly traditional conservative society to more open and socially connected. Better access to education and healthcare, a growing road network, and more media and communication technologies have increased the aspirations of Nepalese people, driving social changes in the country. Nepal is one

of the most diverse countries in terms of population, ecology, culture, caste and ethnicity, religion, etc. People living in different parts of Nepal have their cultural practices, traditional systems, norms, values, beliefs, etc. However, we have witnessed changes in these practices since a few years back. The Newars, an indigenous inhabitants of Kathmandu Valley, are not exempt from such changes. It was found during the study that the everyday life socialization process has been changed especially for daughters from the past to the present. With the rise of capitalism, social norms and expectations have changed. As a result, the Newars are increasingly realizing the connection between educating their daughters and their future socio-economic lives. Similarly, the liberal economic policy adopted due to the influence of globalization and modernization has led to a decline in demand for certain traditional crafts and services. This has resulted in a shift from traditional occupations to career-based work, and similarly from using mother tongues to speaking modern Nepali and English, based on personal interests and skills amongst the Newars. The rise of the capitalist economy has also led to changes in celebrating festivals and rituals amongst the Newars in the study area.

## References

- Acharya, Babu Ram, "Nepal, Newar ra Newari Bhasa", *Nepal Sanskritik Parishad Patrika*, 1(2), 2009, 2-3.
- Bista, D. B., "The Process of Nepalization", Dor Bahadur Bista, Shuigeru Iijima, Hiroshi Iishi, Yashuhiko Nagano and Yoshio Nishi (eds.), *Anthropological and Linguistic Studies of the Gandaki Area in Nepal*, Tokyo : Tolyo University of Foreign Studies, 1982, 1-12.
- Bista, Dor Bahadur, *People of Nepal*, Kathmandu : Ratna Pustak Bhandar, 1996.
- Escobar, Arturo, "The making and unmaking of the Third World through development", Rahnema, M. and Bawtree, V. (eds.), *The Post-Development Reader*, London : Zed Books, 1997, 85-93.
- Gupta, Anthea Fraser, "When Mother-tongue is not Preferred", *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 18(6), 1997, 496-506.
- Kainla, Bairagi, "Aadiwasi Janajatiko Paripreshyama Pahichanko ko Rajniti re Bhasa", *Baha Journal*, 2(2), 2003, 1-28.
- Liechty, Mark, *Suitably Modern : Making Middle Class Culture in Kathmandu*, Princeton, New Jersey, USA : Princeton University Press, 2003.
- Schaffer, H. R. and E. B. Schaffer, *Child Care and the Family*, London : Bell, 1969.

- Schaffer, H. R., *The Child's Entry into a Social World*, London: Academic Press, 1984.
- Sztompka, Piotr, *The Sociology of Social Change*, Chapter 2, Oxford and Cambridge : Blackwell, 1993, 24-40.
- Maharjan, Dipa, *Pangaya Bishnudevi Balkumari Jatra*, Kirtipur : Jyapu Mahaguthi, 1137 ns Nepal Sambat.
- Nakarmi, Sudeep Singh, "Newarbhitra Shikshama Asamanata ra Samabesikaranko Bahas", *Studies in Nepali History and Society*, 15(1), 2010, 135-151
- NSO (National Statistics Office), *National Population and Housing Census 021 National Report on Caste/Ethnicity, Language and Religion*, Kathmandu : Government of Nepal, 2021.
- Nepali, Gopal Singh, *The Newars : An Ethno-sociological Study of a Himalayan Community*, Bombay : United Asia Publications, 1965.
- Thomas, Alan, "Development as Practice in a Liberal Capitalist World", *Journal of International Development*, 12, 2000, 773-787.
- Yadav, Yogendra Prasad, "Taraika Bhasaharu : Sandarva re Sambhawana", Basanta Thapa and Mohan Mainali (eds.), *Madhes Samsya re Sambhawan*, Kathmandu : Social Science Baha, 2006, 84-98. ★