

# Knowledge and Practice of Traditional Skill Technology among Hill *Dalit* of Kaski (A study based on *Pariyars*, *Nepali* and *Bishowkarma* of Kaski District)

✉ *Biswo Kallyan Parajuli, Ph.D.*

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## Abstract

There is a rapid change in traditional occupation and traditional skill technology of *Dalit*. The study shows that knowledge of the Traditional Skill Technology among Hill *Dalit* of Kaski district is declining.

**Keywords:** *Traditional Skill Technology, Knowledge, Occupation, Hill Dalit*

## Background of the Study

Nepal is a country, which exhibits ethnic and cultural diversity. It is a cultural mosaic inhabited by an amazingly diverse array of castes, religions, languages, and ethnicity and so on. Undoubtedly, Nepal is a pluralistic and multicultural society. Census 2001 identified 103 caste/ethnic groups in Nepal (CBS 2002), out of which Hill *Dalits* of Nepal form one of the distinct groups of people. They are largely known as *Bishowkarma*, *Pariyars* and *Nepali*. At community and village level, these people are recognized as *Bishowkarma*, *Kami*, *Sunar*, *Lohar*, *Tamata*, *Chunara*, *Aodh*, *Darjii*, *Damai*, *Pariyars*, *Hudke*, *Dholi*, *Sarki*, *Mijar*, *Charmakar*, *Nepali* and so on. These Hill *Dalits* are scattered throughout high and mid-hill region. However, the numbers of hill *Dalits* are concentrated in the Far West, Mid West and Western regions of Nepal. According to the census of 2001 *Kami*, *Damai* and *Sarki* constitute 895954, 390305 and 318989 respectively out of the total population of Nepal. It reveals that out of 75 districts of Nepal, 28 districts from Western Nepal represent *Dalit* population as 3rd or 4th larger group (CBS 2002). Total population of Hill *Dalit* in Kaski is 50,518, out of which *Kami*, *Damai* and *Sarki* constitute 26278, 15116 and 9124 respectively. Evidences show that *Kami* is the 4th largest group in terms of population density of Kaski District where as the largest cluster of *Damai* population was also recorded in Kaski during the census of 2001 (CBS 2002).

Technology is the use or application of organized knowledge to achieve practical solutions to problems such as turning resources into the material goods and services that a society needs. Technology, a part of material culture, is an important component of culture. Thus, the technology in its broad meaning connotes the practical arts. These arts range from hunting, fishing, gathering to agriculture, animal husbandry, and mining through manufacturing, construction, transportation, provision of food, power, heat, light, etc. to means of communication, medicine and military technology. Technologies are bodies of skills, knowledge, and procedure for making, using, and doing useful things (Merril, 1964). Technologies are important for not only they affect social life but also because they constitute a major body of cultural phenomenon in their own right. These phenomena pose numerous problems whose study may shed light on a wide range of issues in the social sciences. In Nepal, the tradition and technologies of *Dalits* are also going through transformation in the same manner.

It is widely recognized that economic change, new education system, modernization, urbanization and globalization can play a decisive role in changing the structure of a society, a community or a group. Caste system and *Dalit* are no exception in this connection. In this process, traditional occupations, skills and technology are changing rapidly. Some empirical evidences approve this fact (Parajuli 1999 and 2005) vividly. Nepalese constitution (1990, 2007) has given equal right and status to all of its citizens and the practice based on caste is legally prohibited in Nepal. Nevertheless, one can observe the ruin of caste system even in the urban areas. Traditional social system is reflected in occupational choice and knowledge of the traditional skill of individual. *Dalits* of Nepal are one of the oppressed, excluded and marginalized strata of society, Majority of them are practicing their traditional occupation and skill for livelihood (Parajuli 2010). Knowledge and practice on traditional skill technology play an important role in the livelihood of such people. Current study tries to explore the existing knowledge and practice of traditional skills and technology among the Hill *Dalits* (*Bishowkarma, Pariyars* and *Nepali*) of Kaski.

### **Objective**

This article is an outcome of previous research on ‘continuity and change in traditional skills and technology among hill *Dalits* of Nepal. The gen-

eral objective was to explore the level of knowledge and practice of traditional skill technology among Hill *Dalits* of Kaski. The specific goal of current paper is to reveal the knowledge of *Dalits* on traditional skills and technology.

### **Methods**

The study was carried out in Kaski district of Gandaki Zone. Out of 43 VDCs and 2 Municipalities (33 wards), 540 households were selected randomly from 14 VDCs and 9 Wards of 2 municipalities as sample households. Stratified sampling was used to select 180 households from each sub-caste group (*Bishowkarma*, *Pariyars* and *Nepali*). Household heads were interviewed for information. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected through interview, focused group discussion and key informant interview. The quantitative data generated from interview were processed and analyzed through SPSS. Qualitative data were analysed descriptively.

### **Presentation of Findings**

In the context of patron-client relationship, *Dalits* provided various services to their clients. Situational Analysis of *Dalits* in Nepal (2002) states that, 'the caste base occupation was the major means of livelihood for the *Dalits* population until a couple of years ago but it has been gradually disappearing over the years primarily due to three reasons: i) they themselves think that their occupation has lower social prestige and demeaning socially; ii) many young educated *Dalits* boys and girls do not like to follow their father's footsteps, and iii) they are finding difficulty in competing with the open market which supplies various types of similar goods, depending upon the needs of the customers. In this connection, this study tried to find out the knowledge of traditional skills among the selected groups of *Dalits*.

### **Inventory Occupation of the Family Members**

The study found that there is multiplicity of occupation in the study area. A family and a sub-caste group are engaged in multiple occupations at a time. Table 1 summarizes occupations found among the *Bishowkarma*, *Pariyars* and *Nepali*.

Table 1: Traditional Occupational Skills among the Study Population

Varieties of TOS	Sub-Caste Group		
	<i>Bishowkarma</i>	<i>Pariyars</i>	<i>Nepali</i>
<i>Aaranko kaam</i> (iron work at hearth)	√		
Agriculture Tools ( <i>Nara</i> ) manufacturing			√
Bamboo Work	√	√	√
Both Skill of <i>Sikarmi</i> and <i>Dakarmi</i>	√	√	√
Coloring and Mending Skin Ware			√
Dakarmai (mason)	√	√	√
<i>Doko</i> (basket) Weaving	√	√	√
Goldsmith (ornament manufacturing)	√		
Katuwali (Messenger work)		√	
<i>Korko</i> Weaving	√	√	√
Leather collection and Processing			√
<i>Madal</i> (tom-tom) Making			√
Manufacturing and mending Shoe			√
Manufacturing Bags			√
Manufacturing <i>Dhiki and Jato</i>	√	√	√
Manufacturing Plough and Yoke	√	√	√
Mending Bages and Skin Items			√
Mending Musical Instruments	√	√	√
Mending Sewing Machine		√	
Piercing Nose and Ears	√		
Playing Musical Instrument		√	
Preparing coal for hearth	√		
Presence in rituals/fair & festivals		√	
Producing <i>Damlo</i> , <i>Namlo</i> and <i>Dorei</i>	√	√	√
Production of Agriculture Tools	√	√	√
Production of Household Utensils	√		
Production of Musical Instruments	√	√	√
Sewing Gents ware		√	
Sewing Kids ware		√	
Sewing Ladies ware		√	
Sewing Traditional Dress materials		√	
<i>Sikarmi</i> (wood carpenter)	√	√	√
Skilled Agriculture work (ploughman)	√	√	√
Skilled Labour ( <i>karmi</i> ) in Barter	√	√	√
Tailoring & Sewing		√	
<i>Theki</i> Carving	√		
<i>Thunse</i> , <i>Dalo</i> and <i>Soli</i> Weaving	√	√	√

Source: Field Survey, 2007

The table above illustrates clearly that *Dalit* have a number of traditional skills. Out of 37 traditional occupational skills listed, 15 are common in all these groups of *Dalits* in Kaski. Remaining 22 skills are specific to a single sub-caste group (*Pariyars*-9, *Nepali*-7 and *Bishowkarma*-6).

### Household Members' Knowledge on TST

Out of the 540 households, 54.4 percent of them had no member who knows the ancestral traditional occupation. It shows most of the *Dalit* households have no one who have acquired their traditional occupational skills. In *Nepali* group, vast majority of the members does not know the skill which is opposite in the case of *Pariyars* group in which only few (15.6%) households do not have members without knowledge of traditional occupation. The data indicates that transfer of traditional occupational skill is very limited among the *Nepali* and high among the *Pariyars*.

**Table 2: Knowledge of Family Members in Traditional Skill and Technology**

Category	<i>Bishowkarma</i>		<i>Pariyars</i>		<i>Nepali</i>		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
N o b o d y Knows	101	56.1	28	15.6	165	91.7	294	54.4
At least one knows	79	43.9	152	84.6	15	8.4	246	45.7
Total	180	100	180	100.2	180	100.1	540	100.1

Source: Field Survey, 2007

### Traditional Occupation followed by the Respondents

It has been already explained that the respondents follow different occupation related to caste base. The major traditional occupations adopted in the study area are listed in the table below.

**Table 3: Traditional Occupations Performed by the Respondents  
Listed Traditional Occupations**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Katuwali</li> <li>• Katuwal Pathi Uthani</li> <li>• Mela–Parma</li> <li>• Preparing and mending musical instruments</li> <li>• Playing musical instruments</li> <li>• Playing Panchai Baja</li> <li>• Tailoring and dressmaking             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(i) Sewing by machine</li> <li>(ii) Tailoring of Modern dress materials</li> <li>(iii) Tailoring of Traditional dress materials</li> <li>(iv) Sewing by hand</li> <li>(v) Mending clothes</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Preparing leather sack (thaili) for treasury (traditional)</li> <li>• Preparing Bassa for smoking (traditional)</li> <li>• Plough up in cultivable land</li> <li>• Agriculture related works</li> <li>• Fishing in rivers</li> <li>• Singing and dancing in weddings</li> <li>• Preparing copper utensils &amp; pots</li> <li>• Preparing silver utensils and ornaments</li> <li>• Manufacturing Madal, Temko and Damaha (with wood &amp; skin)</li> <li>• Manufacturing of Musical Instruments (with wood and metal)</li> </ul>
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*Source: Field Survey, 2007*

The table above is the list of the traditional occupation followed by the respondents in the study area. The respondents had adopted more than one occupation for their living. The list also shows that *Dalits* have performed a wide range of traditional occupational activities.

**Respondents’ Knowledge on TST**

It has been recognized that traditional skills of the *Dalits* are disappearing. The study tries to explore the fact whether this statement is correct. The following figure illustrates it.

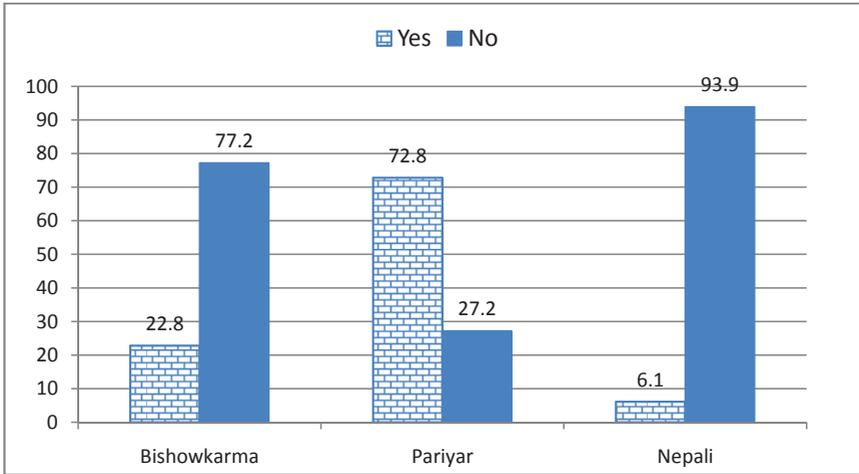


Fig 1: Respondents' Knowledge on TST

Source: Field Survey, 2007

Out of the total 540 respondents, only one third (33.9%) reported that they know the traditional skill/technologies while majority (66.1%) of the others didn't know the skill and technologies related to the traditional occupations. This clearly indicates that most of the *Dalits* are leaving their traditional occupation. This has been supported by the data on household members' knowledge on TST mentioned above. Consistent to this finding, very few (6.1%) respondents from *Nepali* group reported that they have the knowledge on TST while large majority (77.2%) respondents from *Pariyars* group reported that they have knowledge on TST. It substantiates the findings that transfer of TST is very limited among the *Nepali* and high among the *Pariyars*. This is also because *Pariyars* still have market for their TST while *Nepali* has already lost their market due to easy availability of factory made leather goods.

### Known Traditional Skill and Technology

As depicted in the table above very few respondents reported that they have knowledge on TST. This indicates that most of the known occupations belong to *Pariyars* group. In this context, most of the *Pariyars* group had reported that they know the TST. The table 4 illustrates what types of TSTs are possessed by the informants.

**Table 4: Known Traditional Occupation**

Known Skills	Number	Percentage
Sewing	122	66.7*
Playing Musical Instrument	51	27.9
<i>Aranko kaam</i> (iron works)	29	15.8
Leathor Works	12	6.6
<i>Karmi</i>	1	.5
Goldsmith	7	3.8
<i>Dakarmi</i>	2	1.1
<i>Sikarmi</i>	5	2.7
<i>Theki making</i>	4	2.2

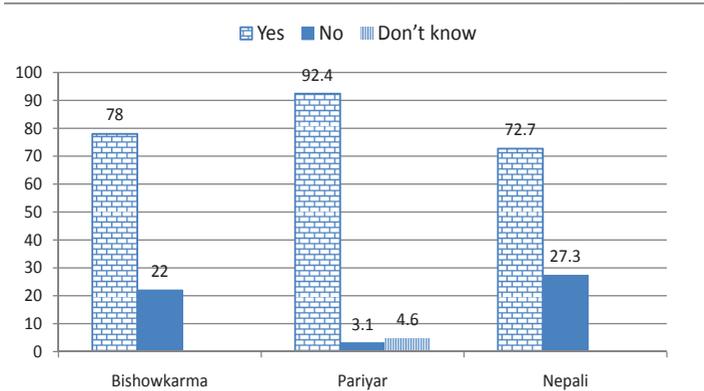
Percentages are based on multiple responses of 183 cases

Source: Field Survey, 2007

The table depicts that the most known *Dalit* TST is sewing. Of the total respondents who reported that they know about TSTs, two third (66.7%) of them reported sewing as known TST followed by playing musical instruments which was reported by one fourth (27.9%) of them. It is quite obvious that both of these TST belong to *Pariyars* group. A few (15.8%) reported iron work. These informants are from *Bishowokarma* group. TST like leather works is traditionally tied to *Nepali* and it was reported by very few. In sum, it can be said that TSTs of *Pariyars* group is still prevalent but others are getting eroded or not being transferred. The similar facts have been demonstrated in the figure below.

**Attitude towards Learning Traditional Skill**

Attitude towards traditional skills are affected by several factors such as financial rewards and cultural significance associated with it. The figure below shows happiness of the respondents on learning the traditional skill.



**Fig.2: Happiness on Learning TST**  
Source: Field Survey, 2007

Most (88%) of those who have learnt traditional occupational skills reported that they were happy being equipped with these skills. Only few (8.7%) were found not happy with the traditional skills they have learnt. There is some level of inter-group variations. Virtually all (92.4%) respondents from *Pariyars* group showed happiness on learning the TST while remarkable percentages (22.0 and 27.3) of respondents from *Bish-owkarma* and *Nepali* were not happy. This is indicative of the fact that they might not continue themselves and or transfer the TST to their offspring. Low prestige and economic returns and unavailability of works were attributed to the unhappiness. The reasons for happiness have been explained in the following table.

### Reasons for Happiness

The table below depicts the reasons explained by the informants for their happiness on having knowledge on TST.

**Table 5: Reasons for being Happy of Learning the Traditional Skills**

Category	Number	Percentage
Source of livelihood/Income	142	88.2
Easiness	40	24.8
Self-independence	10	6.2
Own Occupation	9	5.6
Others (low investment)	8	4.9

Percentages are based on multiple responses of 161 cases

*Source: Field Survey, 2007*

Most (88.2%) of the informants reported that they were happy to have knowledge on TST because these r skills were their source of livelihood. Almost one quarter (24.8%) of the respondents reported the easiness in the applications of the TST as another important reason for their happiness. e. They felt their skills easier than others. Some took them as pride and said they are happy because these are their own traditional skills.

### Expertness in the Traditional Occupation

The survey had explored the state of expertise of the respondents in their traditional occupation. Even when it had been stated that the person had

knowledge of the skills, he/she might not be well skilled to utilize it for livelihood and most importantly to transfer it to new generation.

**Table 6: Occupational Expertise on the Caste Base Occupation**

TSTs	Skill level						Total	
	Basic		Moderate		High			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Karmi	0	0.0	1	100.0	0.0	1	100.0	
Dakarmi	1	50.0	1	50.0	0.0	2	100.0	
Sikarmi	2	40.0	3	60.0	0.0	5	100.0	
Theki Making			4	100.0	0.0	4	100.0	
Sewing	33	27.0	57	46.7	32	26.2	122	100.0
Playing Musical Instrument	13	37.1	18	51.4	4	11.4	35	100.0
Aaran Ko Kaam (iron work)	7	46.7	8	53.3	0.0	15	100.0	
Leather Work	4	33.3	8	66.7	0.0	12	100.0	
Goldsmith			4	57.1	3	42.9	7	100.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>29.6</b>	<b>104</b>	<b>51.2</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>19.2</b>	<b>203</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Percentages are based on TST

Source: Field Survey, 2007

It has been found that an individual has expertise in more than one skill. Most (51.2%) of the respondents reported they had basic level of skills in their known TST. Some (19.2%) had high level of skills. There were very few skills in which the *Dalits* have retained high level of expertise. Except sewing, playing musical instrument and gold works, there were very few who reported they have high level of expertise in their traditional skills. Sewing is the only traditional skills in which many *Dalits* have maintained good level of skills. Besides sewing, respondents have good level of skills on playing musical instrument. It is remarkable that both of these skills belong to only one group-*Pariyars*. Remarkably there are a very few respondents who have maintained major *Dalits* skills such as iron work and leather works. Interest towards the traditional occupation is getting low. Most of the people had lost the knowledge about the *Karmi*, *Dakarmi*, *Sikarmi*, *Theki* making and leather related works. The main factors reported were the low economic and social value of the work. The

modern commodities produced by the industries have been replacing the handmade traditional goods with high price.

### Source of Knowledge of Occupational Skill

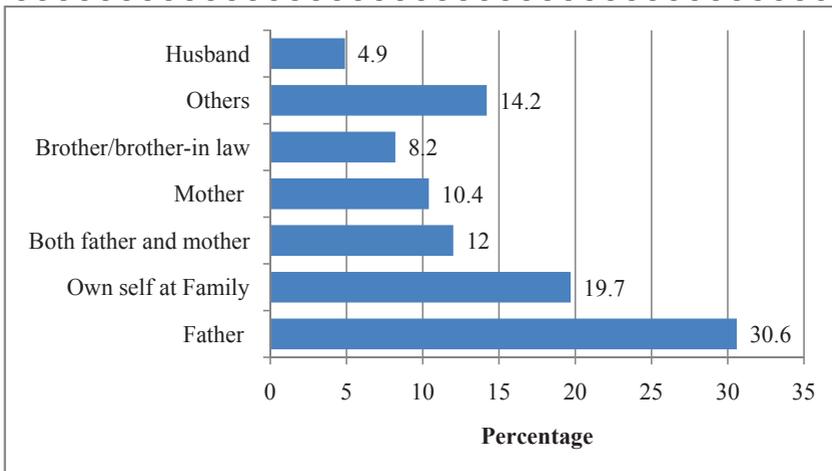
Being a patriarchal society, occupational skills are generally transferred by fathers to sons. In some cases, mothers transfer to their daughters. The Table 7 shows the inheritance pattern of knowledge traditional skills.

**Table 7: Source of Knowledge on Occupational Skills**

Member/Institution	Frequency	Percent
Father	56	30.6
Own self at Family	36	19.7
Both Father and Mother	22	12.0
Mother	19	10.4
Brother/brother-in law	15	8.2
Other	15	8.2
Husband	9	4.9
Training Institute	5	2.7
Mother-in-Law	4	2.2
Father-in-Law	2	1.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>183</b>	<b>100.0</b>

*Source: Field Survey, 2007*

From Table 7, it is clear that the majority of the respondents (30.6%) who knew the skills and arts of traditional occupation had learnt them from their parents. But 19.7 percent of the respondents did not mention where they had learned the skill, rather they reported that they learnt them on their own. Other 12 percent of the respondents reported that they had learned from both father and mother in the family. More than 10 percent of the respondents had stated that they learnt the traditional skill from their mother. In the context of modernizing the traditional skill, some of the institutions have transferred the traditional skills. A few (2.7%) reported that they learnt TSTs from training institutes. It can be seen that there are many sources in the society from where the person learns the skill related to the traditional occupation. But family (particularly father) is mainly responsible to transfer the skills.



**Fig. 3: Acquired the Traditional Skills From**

Source: Field Survey, 2007

### Age at Learning Traditional Skills

Since traditional skills are largely acquired at household level, it can be expected that the skills are learnt in early ages (i.e. young age) and is the part of family socialization. The table below explains it more.

**Table 8: Age at Learning Traditional Skills**

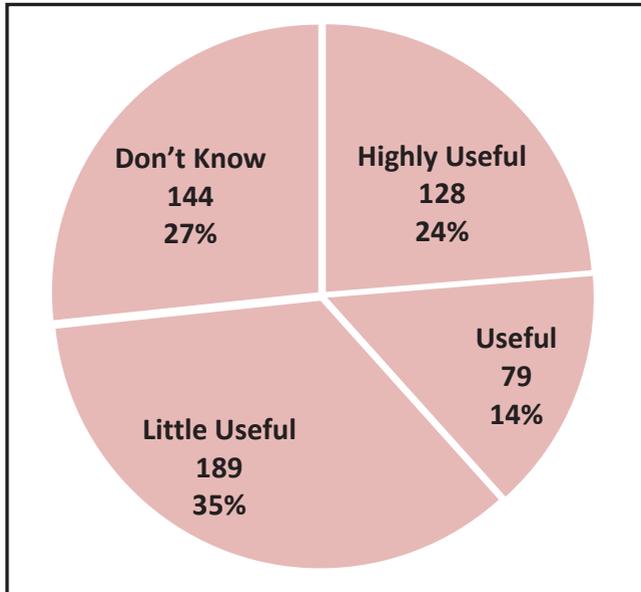
Age (year)	<i>Bishawkarm</i>		<i>Pariyars</i>		<i>Nepali</i>		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Up to 9	2	4.9	3	2.3	0	0.0	5	2.7
10-19	33	80.5	99	75.6	10	90.9	142	77.6
20-29	4	9.8	28	21.4	1	9.1	33	18.0
30-39	1	2.4	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	0.5
40-49	1	2.4	1	0.8	0	0.0	2	1.1
Total	41	100.0	131	100.0	11	100.0	183	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2007

Most of the informants reported to have learnt their skills in 10-19 years. It shows that skills are transferred at young age. Compared to other two groups, the proportion of informants who learnt traditional skill in between 10-20 year age is high among the *Nepalis*. However, the number is too small to make strong conclusion. In sum, virtually all *Dalits* learn the skills between 10 to 29 years.

### Utility of Occupation Skills in Daily Life

To an extent, continuity and change in the traditional occupational skills also depend on the attitude of the respective occupational groups toward these occupational skills. If the occupational skills are not useful, it can get eroded over the time. In this connection, following table illustrates how *Dalits* perceive their traditional occupational skills in relation to its usefulness.



**Figure 4: Utility of Traditional Skill in Day to Day Work**

*Source: Field Survey, 2007*

Figure 4 depicts that attitude of *Dalits* toward their occupational skills are somehow of mixed type. Almost one fourth (23.7%) rated it as highly useful. But more than one third (35%) of them believed that it is little useful for their subsistence. Other remarkable proportion (26.7%) had no idea about it. If we merge the respondent who reported the skills as highly useful, it accounts for 38.3 percent of the total. These respondents can be taken as the people having positive attitude toward their traditional skills. Therefore, it can be said that most of the *Dalits* no longer believe that their traditional skills are useful in their day to day works and thereby survival.

## Conclusion

Traditional Skill Technology of the *Dalits* was found at the verge of extinction barring some skills. In majority households, there is not a single member who knows about TST, which shows decline of TST among the *Dalits* in the study area. But there is a remarkable intergroup variation. The Knowledge of TST is very poor among the *Nepali* group but it is far better among the *Pariyars*. It also shows that transfer of traditional occupational skill is very limited among the *Nepali* and high among the *Pariyars*. Two major TSTs of *Dalits*, such as iron work and leather work, which are traditionally tied to *Bishwakarma* and *Nepali* groups respectively, are rapidly vanishing. In these two groups, a few have knowledge about TST but the level of knowledge is too low to put into practice. Encroachment of market and changing value about traditional occupations are responsible for the reluctance in transferring and learning the TST related knowledge. There is low economic and social value of the work. The factory produced commodities have been replacing the handmade traditional goods with high price. Interestingly sewing is the widely known TST. This TST is related with *Pariyars* group. Therefore, *Pariyars* are the only group which has maintained the knowledge of traditional occupation. This is also because the sewing skill is still in demand in the market. The study clearly indicates that younger generations from *Dalits* groups are no longer interested in learning these TSTs. It can be said that knowledge about *Dalit* TSTs is eroding and the TST skills are disappearing.

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