

WOMEN IN NEWAR CULTURAL PRACTICES OF BHAKTAPUR MUNICIPALITY: REPRESENTATION, EMPOWERMENT AND CHANGE

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the representation of women in the Newar cultural practices for their socio-economic change in Bhaktapur Municipality. Gender ideology is created in a society and manifested in various ways. Among several approaches, cultural practices are crucial in establishing and expressing gendered culture in the society at large. This paper examines women's position in traditional Newar cultural practices through the perspective of gender performativity, challenging the notion that there is a single, universal experience of womanhood that applies to all women regardless of their culture, class, and race. Gender performativity refers to the concept that gender is socially constructed and continuously performed through repeated actions, behaviors, and expressions, rather than anything innate or biologically determined. Bhaktapur Municipality is widely recognized for its festivals, traditional dances, art, culture, and Newari way of life. The major deities of the two major religions, Buddhism and Hinduism, are thought to have contributed to the evolution of the enigmatic, vibrant, and thrilling ancient festivals that are still observed today. Throughout the year, numerous festivals are observed to commemorate historical and legendary events, to honor the gods, and to mark the shift of the seasons. This qualitative study analyzes how women are portrayed in cultural traditions of Bhaktapur Municipality by

applying narrative research design. Primary data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and field-based observation whereas secondary data were gathered from books, journals and online databases. The finding of the article suggests that despite all the barriers of patriarchal power, Newar women have an influential position in indigenous cultural practices. Along with the significant participation in the cultural practices, the Newar women have learnt the indigenous skills and knowledge which are applied to produce the local products. Many Newar women have turned into entrepreneurs by following the local skills in the production of the goods. The growing number of female entrepreneurs is a highly effective way of promoting women's socioeconomic development, gender equality, and women's empowerment.

Keywords: Cultural Practices, Gender Performativity, Newar Women, Socio-economic Development, Women Representation

1. INTRODUCTION

Bhaktapur, a city noted for its rich cultural legacy, celebrates a variety of festivals, rituals, and traditional arts that reflect its people's history and values. These cultural traditions are essential not only to the city's identity, but also to the lives of those who participate in them. Within this cultural milieu, women's depiction and role provide valuable insights into gender dynamics, societal conventions, and religious beliefs.

Discussions on women's status have been going on for several years in Nepal, and they will probably continue to be a dominant topic for many more decades to come. An important consideration when evaluating the success of any civilization is the status of women in society. However, a society is heavily influenced by its cultural heritage, and gender equations are frequently culturally defined. Generally speaking, Hindu thought dominates Nepalese society, and Hindu cultural traditions and equations have an equal impact on gender roles. "Women enjoyed more or less the same status as men during the early Vedic Period" (Pathak, 2019, p. 228). A man cannot perform any religious rite in Hinduism flawlessly without his wife's assistance. Pathak (2019) further writes, "In early Vedic period, the *Rig Veda*, child marriage is not mentioned. The girl was free to choose her match, and dowry was unknown...Even widow remarriage was permissible in Vedic period" (p. 229). It is undeniable that women and men have equal status according to the Vedic line. Women, however, have long been discriminated and subjugated. During the early Vedic Period, when wars and disputes were common, soldiers were essential.

Women addressed such societal demand, therefore women were respected and allowed widow remarriage. All of this altered dramatically in the later Vedic Period. “In the later Vedic Period, women had begun to lose the position acquired during early Vedic Period” (Pathak, 2019, p. 229).

Despite significant legislative and policy changes in support of women’s rights, gender-based discrimination still occurs in real-world settings. Women continue to be financially dependent on men. Work in the home is not considered valuable. Due to anti-social attitudes and actual discrimination, oppression, exploitation, injustice, and exclusion, women’s standing has not substantially improved in comparison to men’s in all spheres, including the political, economic, social, cultural, and educational ones. *Jhuma*, *Deuki*, *Chhaupadi*, and dowry are examples of socially detrimental customs that have not yet been fully eradicated. As time and development progress, so do the types and manifestations of violence against women. Misuse of contemporary technologies has also resulted in violence against women. One of its manifestations is the procedure of performing an abortion following the identification of the fetus via video X-ray. Anita Gurumurthy (2004) states that existing power relations in society determine the enjoyment of benefits from Information and Communications Technology (ICT); hence these technologies are not gender neutral. The digital revolution is altering how people live, work, and communicate with one other. ICT growth and adoption may expand access to services and information and pave the way for collective action for social justice. But there's also a chance that this change may lead to inequalities in terms of who benefits and whose opinions are heard.

While much has been published about women's roles in religious rituals and cultural customs in South Asia, there has been little research on Bhaktapur particularly. Previous research on gender and cultural practices has frequently highlighted women's underrepresentation or marginalization in public cultural settings. However, there is also evidence of women actively shaping and preserving these behaviors, indicating a greater and multifaceted role. It specifically investigates whether traditional cultural practices reinforce gender stereotypes or if women have found ways to assert agency and influence within them. This article aims to examine women's representation and participation in the cultural activities of Bhaktapur Municipality, focusing on their role in important cultural ceremonies and socio-economic change. This study contributes to greater insight of gender roles in Newar cultural traditions and sheds light on the changing position of women in traditional settings. This research shows the women's agency

within a patriarchal society by investigating opportunities provided by cultural traditions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

By upholding particular values and standards, cultural practices are crucial in forming and preserving a society. Since the beginning of time, people of Bhaktapur have been guided by Newar cultural norms to live in a specific manner. “Ancient Hindu scriptures like the *Vedas* and *Upanishads* show profound respect for the feminine principle” (Pathak, 2019, p. 228). A woman is a Goddess to be worshipped from who all emanate. Women in ancient times enjoyed freedom, equality, and liberty in all areas of life, and their circumstances were in accordance with religion. However, the rise of oral traditions and vernacular writings reinterpreted the ideal woman and gave rise to customs in which women were obedient to males.

The equation shifted over time as cultures became increasingly power-hungry and militaristic, and battles began to play a significant role in gaining territory. Because wars were martial in nature, they gave preference to courageous men, and women were kept in the house. Managing families and raising children became their innate responsibility. Due to the afore stated circumstances, this is an outcome of male child’s preference in the society (Acharya, 2020). Subsequently, this resulted in gendered divisions, and women ceased to have the same privileges as males. When taking account of contemporary Nepalese society, one can see the division in many areas, such as politics, economic autonomy, property rights, and health concerns. Women have not been able to enjoy even the most fundamental of rights since the establishment of such a gendered value system. They were entitled to their own protection as well. They had to be content inside the safe bounds that their man had promised. Because they believed that women were men's property, they were unable to speak up against their own men. While males were expected to obtain formal education and work in official employment to provide for their families, women were expected to do household responsibilities. Women struggled in patriarchal, oppressive societies that were afflicted with caste issues and other ills in many parts of the world. Asian Development Bank (2016), in its Gender Equality Result Case Study, makes the following claim:

Women in Nepal have long experienced high levels of poverty, social exclusion, and marginalization because of their gender. For women from ethnic minorities and groups considered low caste, these disadvantages are

greatly compounded. The 2013 Gender Inequality Index, reflecting gender-based inequalities in three dimensions—reproductive health, political empowerment, and economic activity—ranked Nepal 102 out of 182 countries. (p. 2)

Various beliefs are associated with women's status. While it is generally accepted that no one's leftover food is fit for consumption by others, it is frequently the case that food left on men's plates is acceptable for their wives. Women are viewed as men's sexual object of desire and reproductive function.

In the male dominated society, women receive their identity with men's reference. In such a patriarchal society, women remain second and other. "For him she is sex-absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute- she is the Other" (Beauvoir, 1953/1956, p. 16). Women were expected to give up their world and happiness in order to ensure the well-being of their families. They were prohibited from engaging in appropriate conversation with men other than her partner. It was considered a sin if a lady was discovered conversing with another guy. Men and women have been categorized as masculine and feminine by society's culture, which has led to gender inequality. "Gender refers to the socio-cultural definition of man and woman, the way societies distinguish between men and women and assign them social roles" (Bhasin, 2000, p. 1). In contrast, women are today more educated and skilled than in the past, enabling them to lead families and businesses of all sizes. Many of them have begun to defy the rigid, conventional roles that were assigned to them, although they were frequently compelled to follow them. Since their priorities and value systems have changed over time, the fight for women's empowerment and gender equality is the primary priority. Butler (1990) challenges the division between gender and sex made by earlier feminists and claims that a person acquires her gender by continually performing it rather than having it engraved in her body. She argues that gender is constructed through performance and an individual's gender identification is contingent on the situation and is not static (Butler, 1990).

In Nepalese society, gender discrimination has taken the place of patriarchal societal standards. Because men are viewed as superior and women as inferior, the social norm that the man is the head of the household has established a definite hierarchy. Stereotypes with sociocultural roots and male hegemony have prevented women from participating in a variety of social activities, and discriminatory gender-role norms have prevented them from performing household tasks. In

addition, women are viewed as less qualified for leadership positions because of the idea of masculine leadership qualities. Their professional development and career objectives have been further hampered by the societal perception that women are exclusively in charge of taking care of the home and the family. Different socio-cultural factors, such as religion, conventions, tradition, caste, gender, and so forth, have shaped the menstrual habits and beliefs that differ throughout the world in terms of time and location. Despite the fact that menstruation is a normal biological process that signifies the start of womanhood, the sociocultural norms and values surrounding its practice put women's and girls' lives in danger and cause a gap in human development. Due to numerous restrictions and inadequate menstrual hygiene practices, women and girls who are menstruating suffer in silence during their periods since they are viewed as impure and untouchable, particularly in Hindu communities. The women and girls are prohibited to touch some sacred things such as temple, water tap, and kitchen utensils including the male member of the families who have undergone the sacred ritual like *Bratabandha* (Amatya et al., 2018).

When women are menstruating, many traditional Nepali Hindu families place restrictions on them. One example of such limitations, albeit in a more extreme form, is *Chhaupadi*. The mid- and far-western parts of Nepal are home to the *Chhaupadi* ritual, which involves banishing women from their normal homes during their periods on the grounds that they are supposedly impure. In remote areas of far-western and Karnali Province of rural Nepal, the menstruating girls and women should make a distance from both community people and their daily normal activities (Amatya et al., 2018). It has drawn criticism for violating women's fundamental human rights as well as for the negative effects it has on their physical and mental health. It persists despite being illegal because of gender inequality, superstitious beliefs, and illiteracy. The historical patriarchal socio-cultural structure exacerbates the predicament of women in areas already beset by conflicts over caste, religion, and ethnicity. Even though the severity of the issue differs from community to community, the situation of women in these two areas reflects that of Nepali women generally, who are viewed as inferior to males and have less freedom, authority, and autonomy. It is mainly motivated by the superstitious idea that women who stay at home during their periods—which are seen as a time of impurity—would anger the gods, and as a result, the entire family will suffer. Additionally, some people believe that if a menstruation woman touches a cow, it will die; if she touches a fruit, it will fall off before it ripens; if she touches a water source, it will dry up; and so on. “Girls in Bajura and Achham were particularly afraid of taking roads where there may be a temple, or a water

source, or touching someone who they weren't meant to touch and therefore angering the gods, being cursed or causing ill health to themselves or their family" (Morrison et al., 2018, p. 18). In addition to being forced to live in small huts after being exiled from their residential dwellings, women are also prohibited from touching their brothers, spouses, cattle, crops, and fruit-bearing trees. If they unintentionally touch someone, they have to purify them, for instance, by using cow urine, which is revered. The only nourishing foods available to women are rice, salt, and certain cereals; they are not permitted to eat milk, meat, fruits, or green vegetables. The constant worry is that they might get hurt if they unintentionally touch something.

3. RESEARCH GAP

Numerous researches have been conducted on cultural practices of Bhaktapur. The previous studies have not explored the representation of Newar women in cultural practices of Bhaktapur Municipality. In spite of all the obstacles posed by patriarchal authority, the paper asserts that Newar women play a significant role in indigenous cultural practices of Bhaktapur Municipality. This study explores how Newar women perform crucial roles and are presented in the cultural practices of Bhaktapur Municipality.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study investigates the roles and representation of women in Bhaktapur's cultural practices employing a narrative research design. A deeper comprehension of how gender roles and cultural norms are portrayed is made possible by narrative research, which is especially well-suited for capturing people's lived experiences and intimate stories. The study's objective is to collect rich, in-depth accounts that shed light on the changing roles that Newar women play in these customs. Narrative research was used because it allows for a thorough analysis of individual experiences and highlights both individual and group voices within the Newar community. Researchers can gain insight into the individual's meanings attached to their experiences and how storytelling shapes these meanings by using this method (Riessman, 2008). The study followed semi-structured interviews and field-based observational methods to collect primary data, and it also used books, scholarly journals, and electronic resources to collect secondary data. Through visits to places of worship and cultural celebrations, primary data was gathered. The researcher actively engaged in some rituals in order to gain deeper insight into the community members' daily experiences.

Four Newar women particularly from *Jyapu* (peasant) community, ages 30 to 40, were chosen as a purposive sample for the study. In order to ensure inclusion of voices from experienced women, the age range was selected to encompass women who actively participate in cultural practices. The participants were chosen on the basis of their direct participation in cultural activities and ability to provide insightful remarks on the representation and role of Newar women in cultural practices of Bhaktapur Municipality. A very small sample size was selected to enable a detailed, in-depth exploration of each woman's individual experience and her interaction with cultural traditions of Bhaktapur Municipality. Community people were interviewed in a semi-structured manner. The purpose of these interviews was to record individual accounts and subjective interpretations of religious festivals, customs, and beliefs. The results were contextualized using secondary sources, which were gathered from a range of books, scholarly publications, and online databases. Judith Butler's theoretical concept of gender performativity serves as the foundation for this study. The study investigates how religious and cultural rituals construct, represent, and depict gender roles and identities. How religious rituals and celebrations might support or contradict prevailing gender norms in the community will be examined using gender performativity.

5. REPRESENTATION OF NEWAR WOMEN IN SOCIO-CULTURAL PRACTICES OF BHAKTAPUR MUNICIPALITY

Despite global advancements in gender equality and women's empowerment, many Nepali women continue to experience discrimination and discouragement for playing musical instruments. Interviews with a number of community members and cultural leaders of Bhaktapur Municipality revealed that musical instruments were often considered as divine manifestations, and historically, it was thought that women should not touch or play them because of the cultural connotations of menstruation and impurity. But new generation women are challenging these ideas more and more, especially in Bhaktapur Municipality, where shifts in these long-standing conventions are slowly becoming more apparent. I saw women and girls actively playing traditional instruments during my fieldwork, which was traditionally thought to be improper. These performances were remarkable because they were in the traditional Newari attire, *Haku Patasi*, which gave the scene an aura of cultural beauty. Among the many traditional and well-known garments worn by Newar women is the *Haku Patasi*, or black saree. The Newar people are native to the Kathmandu Valley and have lived here from the days when weaving was a significant industry there. It is composed of domestic cotton that is grown in

various locations within the city. Handlooms and locally made clothing for both personal use and retail sales are owned by Newars of Bhaktapur Municipality. *Haku Patasi* is the typical local clothing worn by ladies, particularly those from the *Jyapu* community. The clothing nevertheless draws notice right away. The Newar women's *Haku Patasi* serves a unique function. *Haku Patasi*'s hue itself has a historical and cultural connection to Newar customs. According to Newar legend, the sari's bottom red lines represent the source of power, which is thought to resemble the powerful goddess *Mahakali*. "Eight different corners which are tied in the *Putu Laun* symbolize the *Astamatrika*, the goddesses of protection" (Shrestha, 2003, p. 101). The black color of the saree was chosen so it would keep its warmth. *Haku Patasi* is also thought to have the ability to ward against bad luck. Above the *Patasi*, a full-sleeved shirt, known as *Putu Laun* in Nepali, is worn. It is constructed of hand-woven threads and is tied at eight separate corners. Therefore, *Haku Patasi* represents the strength of women in society in addition to being a clothing.

In Taumadhi, Bhaktapur Municipality, I once sat in the temple courtyard and watched a group of women playing musical instruments. The lively sound appeared to enliven the atmosphere and uplift everyone in the vicinity, even those who were in deep sadness. The increasing acceptance of women's involvement in these performances was demonstrated by this scene. Furthermore, I found through casual conversations with members of different *Bhajan Samuha* (hymn groups) that Newar women have taken on a pivotal role in maintaining Bhaktapur's hymn-singing tradition. Particularly during festivals, when they perform in temple courtyards and offer prayers and songs day and night, these hymn groups play a crucial role in the social fabric of Bhaktapur. I had the chance to go to a hymn performance at a festival visit where women were active in organizing the music and leading the group. Many of the women I interviewed talked about how these organizations have given them a voice and a place to not only maintain their culture but also make their presence known in areas that have historically been dominated by men.

Newar women in Bhaktapur Municipality do not face the same restrictions as women in other regions of Nepal, and they are central to the sociocultural practices of the city. "Differences in comparative disabilities during their monthly menstruation is another way in which the Newar women feel themselves to have a better situation than Indo-Nepalese Chetri and Brahman women" (Levy, 1990, p. 122). In Bhaktapur Municipality, Newar women face far fewer restrictions than Chhetri and Brahman women. Menstruating Newar women are permitted to cook

in the kitchen and continue to sleep in their customary locations in the majority of middle-class and lower-class *Jyapu* households in Bhaktapur Municipality. The 34-year-old woman from Bhaktapur Municipality talked about how women in her community who are menstruating are not isolated during their period and are still incorporated into family and social life. She noted, “Women who are menstruating are still viewed as integral part of family. We remain in our regular locations, carry on with our daily tasks, and are not viewed as dirty or taboo. Many women from different groups do not enjoy this independence” (R. Suwal, personal communication, December 18, 2024). Her account suggests that women in Newar households do not experience the social exclusion that is frequently observed in other caste or cultural groups, and menstruation is not seen as a source of impurity. It seems that maintaining daily routines and removing barriers to social interaction provide a feeling of normality and individual freedom. All the aforementioned issues are echoed in Nepali's earlier report on Newar communities:

Menstrual impurity other than the first one [i.e., menarche rites] is not observed by the Newars as strictly as by the Gorkhas [the Indo-Nepalese]. During menses, a Gorkha woman lives practically in isolation. On the fourth day after her bath she is considered clean. But still she is not allowed to touch water and attend to religious duties until the fifth day. Among the Newars, on the other hand, a woman during her menses can even attend to the domestic duties including kitchen. (Nepali, 2003, p. 115)

In contrast to the non Newar community, Newar women especially from farmer community in Bhaktapur Municipality feel free in different socio-cultural activities and family functions as well.

The folktales, history, customs, way of life, religious beliefs, social harmony, craftsmanship, joys and fears, dreams and sorrows, and unity in the diversity of the people and the entire nation are all reflected in festivals and ceremonies. In particular, they have religious and cultural importance, and on certain auspicious days and times, they are celebrated with a large number of people in order to fulfill certain wishes of both individuals and communities. To make the gods and goddesses happy, they are connected to the recollections of noteworthy occasions. “Festivals were inaugurated to celebrate annually in some event in the scriptures to pacify the gods, to thank them for the harvest, to honor their birth dates or to celebrate some miraculous performance attribute to them” (Anderson, 1977, p. 27). The Newars of Bhaktapur Municipality celebrate feasts and festivals, and they enjoy and deepen their bonds by participating in at least one festivity each month.

In order to commemorate the start of the monsoon season, the Newar community cleans water sources such ponds, wells, and stone spouts during the *Sithi Nakha* celebration. Special Newari dishes like *Wo* (a lentil-based chapatti) and *Chatamari* (a rice flour-based chapatti) are prepared by the Newar women on that day. During the celebrations, six types of *Wo* and various vegetables are prepared. They honor their ancestral god by making traditional pancakes like *Wo* and *Chatamari*. “*Chatamari* and six different kinds of *Wo* are the symbols of the earth and the families inside it respectively” (Bajracharya, 2000, p. 18). Not only are the foods tasty, but they are also high in vitamins. The body needs a variety of vitamin-rich foods as the monsoon draws near in order to boost immunity. This source demonstrates how aware Newar women are aware of the importance of consuming nutritious foods for their health. Additionally, they develop their ability to cook a variety of common foods, which can aid them in becoming entrepreneurs. Thus, *Sithi Nakha* is very special to the Newar women and it is known as “daughters’ day” (Pandey, 2018, p. 13). This might be explained by the fact that daughters are the primary householders who fetch water for residential consumption. Therefore, one way to help daughters fetch water is to clean water sources.

In Nepal and around the world, marriage is a revered custom. In contrast to other communities, the Newar community has a very distinct marriage arrangement, with a Newari girl getting married twice before she really marries a man and starts menstruating. In the Newar society, daughters are thus given preference over sons. But an amazing fact is that a girl is not married to an ordinary man but “Narayan” (Mangar, 2020, p. 926). *Ihi* (*Bel vivaha*), the sacred process of marriage at a very young age, is experienced by a Newari girl. In the traditional Hindu marriage rite known as the *Ihi* ceremony, a girl is wedded to Narayana prior to the start of her menstrual cycle. Using customary Hindu marriage rites and a procession of *Kanyadan* (the father offering a virgin daughter to the divine husband), a premenstrual virgin girl is married to Narayana during the *Ihi* ceremony. The ability of the Newar people to arrange their children’s marriages to *Bel*—a fruit from the bel plant, commonly known as the wood apple—is one of their most distinctive cultural practices. The *Bel* or the wooden apple, which is also assumed as a figure of the Lord Narayan had a peculiar quality of not getting rotten and remaining fresh forever. “Since, the ‘*bel*’ to whom she was first wedded is said to exist perpetually, a Newar lady is never a widow” (Mangar, 2020, p. 927). The girl is therefore not regarded as a widow even if her husband passes away in the future because she is also married to Narayan, who will always and forever live on. According to Hindu tradition, the *Ihi* ceremony is a pre-menarche marriage, meaning that a second marriage, the *Gufa* rite (*Surya darshan*), can come before a

real marriage to a human. A female must spend twelve days in a dark room. Different families carry out this rite in different ways, and it has its own importance. In fact, this ritual is also known as *Barhang Taygu*, where it is a marriage but with the Sun, *Surya Narayan* (Mangar, 2020, p. 928). It is performed on the 12th day. Since the Sun is the source of strength and energy, it is regarded as God. Accordingly, it is said that the girl will be shielded from evil and terrible things by her marriage to the Sun. By keeping the girl in *Gumba*, a Buddhist place of prayer, for a few days but not more than twelve, the Newar community has also revived the *Gufa* tradition. This demonstrates how Buddhism and Hinduism are intertwined. Once I visited Suryamadhi, eastern part of Bhaktapur, while the ritual of *Ihi* ceremony was being held and I talked to 35-year-old college lecturer, one of the participants in the ceremony. She argued, “*Ihi* and *Gufa* customs are powerful symbols of Bhaktapur's cultural heritage, and they have empowered Newar women while imparting useful lessons. As a woman from Bhaktapur, I feel pride in these traditions because they shape who I am and provide me with a sense of continuity, community, and connection to something more than myself” (G. Duwal, personal communication, January 30, 2025).

Worshipping *Kumari*, the living goddess, is another instance of the Newar community's tolerance for various religions. In Nepali, the word *Kumari* literally means virgin girl. For generations, people have worshipped the *Kumari*-living goddess, who is thought to be the spirit of the *Taleju* goddess and is represented by a line of Nepali females. In order to fulfill their wishes, believers of Buddhism and Hinduism bow their foreheads on the toes of the living goddesses, the *Kumari*, with utmost respect. “The *Kumari* is a prepubescent girl who is hailed as manifestations of divine and spiritual energy, the living incarnation of the Hindu goddess of power Durga who is also named as *Talejū (Tulaja) Bhawani, Bhagawati, Kālī, Pārvatī, Tripurasundarī, Ambikā* etc” (Ghimire, 2018, p. 24). It is interesting to note that the Newar Shakya clan is always the source of the Royal *Kumari*. The *Taleju* is an important Hindu goddess, yet the *Kumari* is a Buddhist by birth. This distinctive custom exemplifies the harmonious coexistence and blending of religions that Nepal has long been recognized for. *Kumari* culture belongs to a unique holy ritual in which young girls are worshipped as living goddess with profound faith. “People worship and present her offerings to wish for jobs, visa, prosperity and success” (Maharjan, 2024, p. 74). In *Kumari* cult as well, *Ekanta kumari* of Bhaktapur enjoys freedom than other *Kumaris* found in other cities in Kathmandu Valley. As 40-year-old caretaker of *Kumari* stated, “*Ekanta Kumari* of Bhaktapur always exercises more freedom and choices while most *Kumaris* are completely dedicated to the temple and its ceremonies. Most *Kumaris* carefully follow the regulations

established by their family and the temple, but *Ekanta Kumari* has been free to pursue education, play with friends, and live with parents which is unusual” (R. Shakya, personal communication, November 20, 2024).

Indigenous knowledge and women's empowerment are interconnected and both should be fostered simultaneously for a better future. “Indigenous knowledge reflects the dynamics way in which the residents of an area have come to understand themselves in relationship to their natural environment and how they organize that folk knowledge of flora and fauna, cultural beliefs, and history to enhance their lives” (Semali & Kincheloe, 1999, p.3). Through the year-round cultural rituals, the Newar women have acquired numerous indigenous skills. They have started small to large-scale businesses in Bhaktapur with the aid of these local talents and knowledge. Entrepreneurship focused on tourism in particular is being encouraged, which helps the nation become more well-known worldwide. Women contribute significantly to the growth of the tourism industry and the country, and in turn, tourism enables women to improve their socioeconomic standing. The general concept of women as housewives is gradually changing in Bhaktapur Municipality to artists, craftsmen, and entrepreneurs and at present, women serve as decision-makers in farm management, domestic expenditure (food items, clothes and other expenses), the children’s education, religious and social travel, household maintenance and also capital transactions (Shivakoti, 2022). “In spite of being in a large joint family, Newari women enjoy higher social status than non-Newari women...Newari system allows equal and active participation from both sexes which shows liberal outlook of the Newars regarding women” (Shivakoti, 2022, p. 82). According to the comparative study of the socioeconomic status of women in the *Jyapu* community of the Lalitpur and Bhaktapur districts, more *Jyapu* women in Bhaktapur are involved in income generating activities and entrepreneurship than women in Lalitpur (Shrestha et al., 2015). The study further depicts:

More women from Bhaktapur district are involved in cultural activities than women in Lalitpur. The same is true for involvement in saving schemes and cooperatives, and community based social service. Women in Bhaktapur are not only economically active, but they are also more active in work related to their local communities. (Shrestha et al., 2015, p. 58).

It is important to think about empowerment holistically, not just in terms of goods and financial decisions. The first step in improving the outcomes of empowerment initiatives worldwide is self-examination. Empowerment includes the ability to choose and address something that deviates from norms and values, in addition to the right to choose or possess something of need or preference.

Indigenous knowledge remains essential to women's empowerment in Bhaktapur Municipality, particularly in the fields of community leadership, agriculture, crafts, and health. Women improve their social and financial status by embracing and valuing this knowledge. Numerous women in Bhaktapur Municipality are knowledgeable about traditional treatment methods that employ local herbs and natural cures. In addition to improving the health of the society, this information enhances the social status of women who preserve this priceless indigenous knowledge. Traditional healers, often women, play a significant role in community health and are valued for their knowledge. Women in Bhaktapur Municipality actively engage in, and occasionally lead, traditional festivals, rituals, and celebrations. This commitment elevates their position and influence in their communities. A woman of 30-year-old from Pottery Square in Bhaktapur Municipality has embraced the traditional skill of clay pot making and converted it into a successful entrepreneurial venture. She responded:

I realized that the distinctive craftsmanship of our clay pots may be more than just a tradition; it could serve as a bridge for us to convey our culture with the world. With the growth of tourism in Bhaktapur, I saw a chance to not only preserve the art alive, but also to make it into an economically sustainable business. I began conducting classes for tourists, teaching them how to make clay pots and discussing the story behind each one. Tourists are fascinated by the hands-on experience and it's been very satisfying to see them carry home a piece of Bhaktapur's heritage. By combining my passion for pottery with our city's expanding tourism, I've been able to establish a business that supports my family while also employing others in our community. (L. Prajapati, personal communication, December 10, 2024)

This response demonstrates how the woman has applied her traditional clay pot manufacturing skills to start an entrepreneurial journey that benefits both her personal progress and the local economy, while also promoting and protecting Bhaktapur's heritage.

With the aforementioned evidences of cultural practices, Newar community of Bhaktapur Municipality confirms that it has provided influential space for the Newar women. In addition, Newar women have been engaged in different income generating occupation utilizing their indigenous knowledge as the men. The idea of gender performativity, which holds that gender is not only a biological truth or a fixed identity but rather a performance or a set of activities that people perform

through. "Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 1990, p.140). This notion challenges the conventional classification of gender as a stable identity revolutionizing the discourse on feminism and gender identity. Gender is a performative constructed identity, a rehearsed act, akin to a character in a play, supported by social scripts that have been passed down and modified over time. The recurrence of these performances gives an illusion of a fixed gender identity.

One of the best examples of gender performativity in action is the participation of Newar women in traditional cultural activities of Bhaktapur Municipality, such as leading hymn groups and playing musical instruments during festivals. Women are now questioning and redefining these performances, which were once thought of male domains as they not only participate in but often lead these rituals. By doing this, they are changing how society views gender and proving that femininity may encompass creativity, and power in both public and sacred spaces. Historically, societal taboos surrounding menstruation and perceived impurity made it inappropriate for women in Bhaktapur Municipality to play musical instruments and join in cultural and religious rituals. It was socially discouraged for women to use these places and instruments of worship. These notions are being challenged by the women at present. By actively participating in festivals, playing musical instruments and wearing *Haku Patasi*, they are redefining femininity. The portrayal of women playing musical instruments fights back against the traditional stereotype of women as being quiet, subservient, and constrained in their positions. Applying Butler's idea of performativity in this context, Newar women embody a new form of femininity that is active, strong, and defiant at places of cultural and religious significance through embracing these stereotypically male responsibilities. The act of leading hymn groups and playing musical instruments might be interpreted as a performative revolt against the gender conventions that have historically repressed women's voices.

The idea that gender is a fixed identity is being challenged by the growing involvement of Newar women in both public and private domains, such as social ceremonies, economic activity, and cultural practices. For example, women from other Nepali communities (such Brahman and Chhetri women) have historically experienced more restrictions than Newar women. At *Sithi Nakha*, their participation and acknowledgment in defending domestic and communal traditions demonstrates how Newar women constantly re-perform and re-negotiate their

gender identity within the family and community. Gender and spirituality are uniquely intersected in the *Ihi* ceremony, where young girls are married to the god Narayan before they start menstruation. These customs provide women a great deal of social and cultural authority and are often connected to religious devotion and feminine purity. Newar women are exercising cultural and gender authority in ways that go beyond traditional gender roles through these ceremonies. Furthermore, a young prepubescent girl known as *Kumari* is worshipped as a living goddess, representing the confluence of social identity, gender, and spirituality. This devotion, which combines Buddhist and Hindu aspects, emphasizes the importance of Newar women in maintaining a spiritual tradition that transcends gender and divine identity.

The findings of this study reveal that Newar women in Bhaktapur Municipality are defying traditional gender stereotypes and claiming their places in social, religious, and cultural traditions. The concept of gender performativity, which challenges the notion of gender as a fixed identity by interpreting it as something constituted via repeated actions, behaviors, and rituals, can be used to clarify this shift in active participation.

6. CONCLUSION

To sum up, human beings are intimately linked to events. Every event has an immediate impact on society. These do not happen in a vacuum. Consequently, they have an impact on nearly every element of daily existence, including the religious, sociocultural, political, economic, and ecological. Women are the focus of almost all socio-religious ceremonies and traditions. The Newar community in Bhaktapur Municipality values and prioritizes women, as seen by these women-centric traditional rituals. Some of the distinctive customs and celebrations, such as *Ihi*, *Gufa*, *Sithi Nakha*, *Haku Patasi*, and *Kumari* are focused on women and require their effort in order to improve their socioeconomic status. Indigenous knowledge is used to produce local, typical Newari goods and to boost the travel and tourism sector. In actuality, these rituals and traditions show how Newar women are valued in Newar community in Bhaktapur Municipality. Compared to previous decades, a healthy balance between religious and economic responsibilities has become increasingly apparent. This might be because of the shifting social perception of women's roles, abilities, and significance in the Newar community of Bhaktapur Municipality.

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