

## **AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY ON THE OPPORTUNITY AND CHALLENGES FACED BY THE SIKAMĪ (WOODCARVERS) OF BHAKTAPUR MUNICIPALITY IN WOODCARVING**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study explores the opportunities and challenges faced by *Sikamī* (Shilpakars) of Bhaktapur Municipality, the woodcarving artisans and entrepreneurs, with a focus on preserving and promoting this heritage craft over the past four decades. It is qualitative research with ethnographic method applying interpretive paradigm. Field observations, document analysis and interviews were employed in the research. The findings of the research reinforce that the revival of traditional architectural designs and the restoration of ancient monuments have significantly boosted the demand for traditional woodcarvings. Initiatives of the local government, including training programs for individuals from diverse caste groups, have broadened participation in this craft, fostering its independent practice. The expansion of the tourism industry has further widened the market, enhancing production to meet growing demand. Notably, the inclusion of women in woodcarving indicates a progressive shift, contributing to the industry's sustainability. However, challenges such as the disinterest of younger generations, particularly among traditional *Sikamī* families, and the impact of modern technology on traditional skills threaten the craft's continuity. The study emphasizes the need to honor and support traditional artisans as custodians of

cultural heritage, ensuring the preservation and evolution of this vital art form. The study provides insights into how globalization and technological changes impact local crafts. It can help *Sikamī* adapt to changing market demands along with preservation of traditional skills, heritage conservation, develop tourism industry.

**Keywords:** Woodcarvings, Newar, Bhaktapur, *Sikamī*, Shilpakar, Carpenter

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Bhaktapur is a city of immense cultural heritage and UNESCO has included Durbar Square of Bhaktapur in their list of World Heritage Sites. Seven historical and cultural sites of universal importance in Nepal were enlisted as World Heritage Sites in 1979, and Bhaktapur Durbar Square is one of them. (Amatya, 1999). Bhaktapur is taken as the abode of ancient Nepali culture, custom, and art of excellent craftsmanship. Bhaktapur, largely dominated by the Newars, is a hub of traditional knowledge and skills. The age-old cultural heritages, both tangible and intangible, are painstakingly preserved by the working-class people of Bhaktapur.

Newars are language groups with mixed blood; an ethnic group that shares the Mongolian blood; and different occupational group within the Newar socio-cultural structure (Gosai, 2022). The Shilpakār is one of the caste group of the Newars of Kathmandu valley. Deo (1969) refers to Regmi (n.d.) that they are not a single ethnic group but a mixture of different ethnic elements. But the caste analysis of the Newar community shows that they belong to the Newars who have special *Silpa* (skill) and hence are called Shilpakār. The Shilpakār Newars are the carpenters or the woodcarvers. These Shilpakārs have sculpted the idols, houses, temples, and palaces for centuries. Almost all the historical woodcarvings, the beautifully shaped, formed, and carved in an intricate pattern and design extensively used in door frames, window cornices, brackets, lintel, struts, posts, etc. are made by the Shilpakārs.

In Nepal Bhasa (Newari) *sī* means wood and *kamī* means worker or woodcrafter. The artists (*Kaligadh*) who work related to wood are called *Karmī* or *Sikamī* (Baidya, 2004, p. 33). Shilpakār means the person who can make a design with craftsmanship. The earliest stone tablet that mentions the name of a Shilpakār dates back to 793 N.S.(1673AD) and it records the creation of four stone idols at Jagatpal Mahabihar in Kirtipur (Sandhya Times, 2068, Asoj 4 (2011 Sept. 21), as cited in Shilpakār, 2012). Levy (1992) stated that *Kamī* is one of the occupational groups and were traditionally wood carvers, one of the Newar high arts and now make furniture and do woodwork in the construction and repair of houses. All the

wooden structures used in *Mathas*, temples, Buddhist monasteries, and taverns are dedicated to Gods and Goddesses as sacred offerings (Sharma, 2012).

There are about 350 households and a population of 5,000 belonging to the Shilpakār community in Bhaktapur Municipality. Shilpakārs are centered at *Tekhāpukhu*, *Ghugacho*, *Ichādo*, *Mulākhu*, *Itāchhen*, *Khaumā*, *Gomārhi*, *Yāchhen*, *Bholāchhen*, *Jenlā*, *Tahamalā (Thane)*, etc. (ibid). The original place of this caste group stays nearby the monasteries and palace area. Sharma adds that the windows, doors and the frames, posts, stairs, etc. of the palace and the monuments of those days were made by them and they are assigned to repair the wooden parts. According to Sharma, they were learned people of Tantrism. The mother tongue of Shilpakār is *Nepal Bhasa*. They follow the Hindu religion and *Viswokarma*, the legendary architect mentioned in Vedas is their *Kulguru* (Family Teacher).

## 2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Woodcarving is a significant source of livelihood of *Sikamī* of Bhaktapur Municipality, a hub of woodcarving traditions. The increasing interest of heritage conservation, cultural tourism, and international markets provides avenues for sustaining and revitalizing the art form. But, it has faced numerous challenges that threaten its sustainability. The rising cost of materials, declining interest among younger generations, urbanization and competition from mass-produced alternatives have put the traditional profession under pressure.

The primary purpose of this study is to examine the current state of woodcarving profession of *Sikamī* of Bhaktapur Municipality, focusing on opportunities available and challenges faced by them.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed an ethnographic approach to explore the transformation of the woodcarving industry in Bhaktapur Municipality over the past four decades. Ethnography was chosen as it allowed for an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences, cultural significance, and evolving practices of *Sikamī* artisans. Through field observations, interviews, and document analysis, the study examined the opportunities and challenges faced by traditional woodcarvers in a rapidly changing economic and social landscape.

The research was conducted in Bhaktapur Municipality, Nepal, a historic city renowned for its woodcarving heritage. Key locations included traditional woodcarving workshops, restoration sites, and artisan communities, where participants were actively engaged in various stages of woodcarving, from design to production.

### **Data Collection Methods**

The researcher conducted extensive field observations in woodcarving workshops, restoration projects, and training programs. By spending time with artisans in their natural work environments, the study documented daily routines, work techniques, and use of traditional tools. Interactions between master artisans and apprentices on adaptation of traditional skills in response to modern influences, the inclusion of women and younger generations in the craft was done. Informal conversations during the observations provided additional context for understanding the perspectives of artisans.

A total of 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted with a diverse group of participants, among them were Senior *Sikamī* artisans - Krishna Gopal Shilpakar (90), young entrepreneur - Ram Sundar Bhele (50), Historian and Writer - Purusottam Lochan Shrestha (70), woodcarver and designer – Bishnu Gopal Shilpakar (60), tourism industry stakeholders - Jeevan Shilpakar (60) and Ramsundar Bhele (48).

Each interview lasted between hours and was conducted in Nepali/Nepal Bhasa as per the participant's preference. Interviews were recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

The study also analyzed historical records, government policies, training program reports, and previous research on Bhaktapur's woodcarving industry. These documents helped contextualize the transformation of the craft over time and the impact of economic and cultural policies.

The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis, identifying recurring patterns related to economic opportunities and market expansion, cultural sustainability and traditional knowledge transmission, the impact of modern technology on traditional craftsmanship, gender participation in woodcarving, generational interest and skill continuity.

Themes were derived through a systematic coding process, ensuring that findings were rooted in participant experiences.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Informed consent was obtained from all participants before conducting interviews and observations. Participants were given the option to remain anonymous. Ethical approval was sought from relevant local authorities before initiating the study. The researcher remained sensitive to cultural and social norms during fieldwork.

### **Research Limitations**

Despite efforts to ensure a comprehensive study, certain limitations were encountered. Limited Access to Some Participants: Some older artisans were hesitant to share details, fearing misrepresentation. Observer Effect: The presence of the researcher might have influenced participants' behavior. Time Constraints: Ethnographic research ideally requires prolonged engagement, but the study was conducted within a fixed timeframe, which limited deeper immersion. Generational Differences: Older and younger artisans held different perspectives on the sustainability of the craft, making interpretation of results complex.

### **Reflexivity**

As a researcher, my position, background, and biases influenced the study process. To address this, I maintained a field journal to reflect on observations and potential biases. I ensured multiple perspectives were included to present a balanced narrative. Continuous self-evaluation helped reduce subjectivity in data interpretation.

## **4. DATA ANALYSIS**

### **Renovation and Conservation Work as an Opportunity**

In the past, efforts to build such artworks used to be initiated by the state itself as during the Malla period but the indifference of the state affected the scene in the ensuing period. Common people were poor in the Shaha Regime and people could not make artistic buildings with fine carvings. So, it would be hard to continue the woodcarving as in the past. It was due to poverty that the artwork could not be preserved. By the year 2032 BS (1975 AD), the profession of skilled wood artists must have significantly declined. German government-supported Bhaktapur

Development Project to restore the old town and its glorious architectural heritage in 1974. Many historic temples were renovated.

Woodcarving and woodcraft making has increased since the last four decades in Bhaktapur with the start of renovations of the ancient monuments and buildings in Bhaktapur in the 1970s and the number of tourists coming in the city is increasing year by year. Guru Lal adds:

"In the context before 2032 BS (1975 AD), it was collapsing due to a lack of opportunity to carry out the woodcraft. However, in the early 30s of the Bikram Era, the German Project created an opportunity to work".

The Bhaktapur Development Project was the milestone in the development of woodcarving as it started, conservation and renovation sped up. People started sharpening their chisel, saw, *Basilā* and so on that was rusted for decades. There were very few *Sikamī* left who had the knowledge and skill of their tradition. Many *Sikamī* people joined the project making much woodwork to renovate the temples and monuments in hundreds of years. It was a good opportunity for the people to get work and earn money. It was similar to working from home because the *Sikamī* either had to travel far in search of work or stay away from home for months to complete houses. Some *Sikamīs* had reached to Dhulekhel, Panauti, Kathmandu to make public houses and temples.

Guru Lal further reflects:

"I do not think there were more than 10-12 people who had expertise in woodcarvings in Bhaktapur in those days. Those people led about 50 to 60 artisans who worked here at Dattātraya while the German Project was going on. It was going to work rather than a matter of learning. You get money. The workers were mostly Shilpakārs. Some others joined only after the German Project was launched."

The *Sikamī* got employment in the Bhaktapur Development Project (BDP) and the community people were encouraged to continue their family tradition of woodcarvings. The workplace made by the German Project was like the vocational training institute where the newcomers learn from the elders. However, teaching and learning practices were limited to their own lineage. Others did not intervene, as everyone had their own tasks to fulfill according to family tradition.

Jouvan adds:

“There was a lack of woodworks. The workers were not good enough either. Some were very bad. After the German project came, it gave high importance to it. Many people learned the skill in the period. The enthusiastic youth learned it and the German project encouraged them.”

The challenge faced by the ancestors of the *Sikamī* was converted into an opportunity because the harsh condition makes the people labor harder. It was like the survival of the fittest and the survived people gave birth to the new artists in a favorable time.

Knowledge of *Sikamī* is related to earnings too. Learned people got job or employment in woodcarving workshops and that encouraged to learn more. The German project used to pay more money than the local people while making a home. The payment was on the basis of the level of the skill of the people too. It motivated the artisans to learn harder. It paved the path of opportunity further.

The preservation of the ancient monuments and buildings with elaborate wood carvings is labor intensive and expensive. Bhaktapur Municipality has renovated almost all the monuments and buildings in the past three decades. In the meantime, Ngyātāpola Temple and Bhairav Temple at Taumadhi square have been renovated two times. Following the 1988 earthquake, the conservation of the 55-Window Palace became a significant concern, sparking extensive debates over the use of traditional techniques and materials versus modern industrial construction methods. Numerous experts were involved in the restoration process, each presenting their own proposals and innovative approaches to conservation. Khan (2016) says that the palace was preserved using traditional methods and structural systems, ensuring both load-bearing capacity and earthquake resistance were maintained.

Bhaktapur Municipality has encouraged to local people to learn and earn the skill too. Kanhaiya has an almost the same line to say:

“There was no practice of teaching wood carving like today. Only the people who knew woodcarving would be involved in it and they were very few. Whenever I see broken windows while going out, I used to worry about who would renovate them. My core concern was always this. There have been so many windows with a lot of wood carvings and I was not sure who would repair them if gets broken. And all the works are done were only Kora.”

The recent trend of making houses and buildings of the traditional style of architectural design has boosted the woodcarving industry as well. Traditional woodcarvings are being incorporated in the buildings made these days. Bhaktapur municipality provides 35 percent of wood required to make the front part and the roof of a house in the core area of the city. This has encouraged the local people to make houses in the traditional Newar style. Such a provision can create opportunities for those engaged in the woodcarving profession.

Bhaktapur Municipality has prepared detailed guidelines for the preservation of existing buildings and for new development in the core zone of the World Heritage Site, based on UNESCO guidelines (UNESCO Kathmandu Office, 2007). Within the core zone, buildings must be constructed out of traditional materials and details, such as decorative wooden frames for fenestration, and traditional veneer bricks for walls. The Municipality reimburses 70 percent of the cost of wood used and 100 percent of the cost of bricks used, to encourage the public to follow these architectural regulations (Silva, 2017).

COVID-19 has some slackness on the woodcarving industry. But most of the workshops were run during the pandemic because one can work in his own home or workshop in his own locality maintaining social distance and using some other safety measures. I went to one of the workshops in Bhaktapur where a dozen of carvers was working during the pandemic. Bishnu, the proprietor of the workshop said that we had already enough orders to make the wood carvings on the struts, doors, windows, etc. He said that the transaction of wood carvings reduced by a quarter in comparison to the normal period.

## 5. OPPORTUNITY TO OTHER CASTE GROUPS

In 2052 BS (1995 AD), the Bhaktapur Municipality authority took an initiative to rebuild and renovate the age-old temples like Ngyātāpola temple, Bhairabnath temple, etc, and there was a demand of the carvers a lot. The local government organized some training of woodcarvings to the other caste group people to fulfill the demand of the workers. Thus, the other caste group people too started the profession independently. The *Sikamī* helped to train the other caste group. Kanhaiya, one of the tutors who trained the other caste group people of Bhaktapur Municipality remembers:



Luckily, I heard that the municipality is planning to teach wood carving. I was also informed by a person working in the municipality. He even asked me if I was interested in teaching. I was to be accompanied by Tulshikumar of Golmadhi. So we both started teaching everything we knew. It is very difficult to start wood carving to the other caste groups. So, I had to teach step by step.

Some of the people of the *Sikamī* caste group were not happy in teaching wood carving to the other caste group because they had the tradition of transferring the skill to their clan only. Their culture and belief system had forbidden them to teach the skill to another caste group. However, it was the demand of time and space. Krisna Gopal remembers those hustle-bustle days:

Many told me not to go. They even called me in clan meetings but I did not go. If I had gone, I would have to leave teaching wood carving. I was even threatened to be outcasted by my own people. Since I was backed by the municipality, I had the courage to take the challenge. Also, we did not go in haste; we were called for it. They might be afraid that more people will learn the art. But they do not realize that if people do not learn then there would not be any to continue the work. After we started teaching there has been immense growth in the work. People who used to stay idle before are also getting jobs today. They used to sit idly and gamble around the whole day. Now they are all busy in the work.

Some of the *Sikamī* people doubted that they would be out of work if others learned their craft. However, due to continuous renovations, ongoing projects, and the growing demand for wood crafts in both the tourism and international markets, they became even busier than before.

The furniture industry is flourishing in Bhaktapur Municipality. There is high demand for different furniture. But most of the workshops are run by people other than the Shilpakār caste group. Ram Sundar Bhele says:

There are about 7-8 thousand workers in 25 hundred workshops working as a carpenter making different furniture like kitchen racks, bed, table, chair, etc. in Bhaktapur Municipality and most of them are other than the Shilpakār community. It is because of the high demand in the valley and other cities of the country.

The population of Kathmandu valley is increasing day by day because of the increase of migratory people and there is a high demand for furniture for the people. A good number of youths is involved in fulfilling the demand of the market. These youths have noted the fact that most of the furniture found in the market is not so much durable and are very cheap. They say them '*bajāriya sāmān*' that means use and throw type of furniture. This gave them the new opportunity to work for durable traditional artwork.

### **Opportunity Created by Tourism**

Nepal was open for foreign tourists after the end of the Rana autocratic regime and the tourism industry started to flourish. Designing and producing woodcrafts in Bhaktapur Municipality started to cater to the needs of tourists and export overseas in the past some decades ago. There has been the relation between the tourism industry and the woodcraft industry too. The market of Nepali woodcraft is widening in the past decades because of the development of the tourism industry in the past decades and it is encouraging to produce the woodcraft to meet the demand.

Tourism has suffered an unprecedented setback and its effect can be seen on the global economy due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It has rendered thousands of people unemployed so the woodcraft industry has also been affected seriously. All the handicraft shops were closed for months because of the lockdown ordered by the government to control the pandemic. However, people continue to make woodcrafts in their workshops, though in smaller quantities, hoping the situation will return to normal. They were puzzled when the lockdown was announced by the government to control the COVID-19 pandemic and could not decide what to do in the initial days. Indrakaji says that they accepted the situation and started making sculptures.

In recent years Chinese tourists are added to the Nepali tourism industry and they prefer to buy Nepali woodcraft. Unskilled and semi-skilled people got scope to widen their works because of the growing demand for a variety of woodcrafts in the past. If we evaluate the time before the COVID-19 pandemic, the scene was different. Jouvan explains:

The wood carving business is getting better as the Chinese are coming. So, it's a good opportunity to produce real workers/artisans. Yes, if the condition goes on getting better, the living standard of the workers will develop to a great extent, they have gained financial development to some

extent in the last 4 -5 years. Those who work and produce themselves paying attention can earn about 50,000 rupees easily. And if they can carve images of gods and goddesses, they can earn up to 100,000 and 150,000 rupees.

About 15 years ago the workers Shilpakar got that money only after delivery of their products, now they get money in advance. This scene changed only after the Chinese came.

Some tourists looked for very good crafts, that encouraged people to make good products that gave them good earning. Today's crafts are no less in value than those which are exposed in the temples. Ram Sundar informs:

There are 30 workshops of woodcarvings registered in the government office and 5 of them have a license of exporting woodcrafts. Each gets enough income. I think more than 2 crores of net profit. One had the sale about 15-16 crore in the expo held in China some years ago. They sale statue of Budha, Tara, windows, etc. mostly. Sometimes they get 1000 percent of profit.

Most of the workers in the woodcarving workshops face language problems while selling the crafts to tourists from different countries and they are dependent on the tourist guides for it. The workers cannot explain the quality of the wood, history, and cultural value of the image or the craft they make. The workers have to give commission to the tourist guide for it.

### **Opportunity to the Female Workers**

Once there was a taboo that other caste groups of people did not bother to do the woodwork. Time has come that women are attracted to this profession. There are many females at present doing this occupation. The then women of the Shilpakār did not show interest in such works. That might be because that there were no enough works either. But now things are changed: women are there in this occupation.

Srasta Gopal says:

It might be a kind of awkwardness working together with males and females in this sector. Women needed to stay separate. Some of the males did not like allowing females in this occupation. They get angry. We

needed to leave the family for days. Leaving the family in this way was unusual for the women.

Family size is smaller today and one gives birth to not more than two children. The women are free. There is less land to do farming too. The income of only one (male) is not enough to feed the family nowadays. So, women have come out of the house to support the family.

In the past one had a number of children and the women had to take care of the children. Srasta Gopal adds:

If children come there, they may get injured. Again, if the children are kept in the upper floor without being watched, they may fall down. This is also another reason why females are not encouraged. It is not that they are not allowed to touch this or that but necessity of looking after the children is the main cause.

The future of the woodcarving looks bright as the women are introduced in the artworks. Women's economic empowerment helps in closing gender gaps. Economies grow when more women work. It boosts the productivity of the society too. The occupation of wood carving can be a base of social transformation.

Hence, I have concluded the opportunities of woodcarvings. I have discussed on the challenges of woodcarvings in the following paragraphs.

### **Introduction of Western-Style Architecture: Fall of Traditional Knowledge**

Woodcarving and wooden architecture grew in prominence during the Licchavi period (from 400 to 750 CE) and the Malla period (10th–18th centuries). Unfortunately, during the period of the Shaha dynasty (1768 – 2008) and Rana Administration (1846–1951), this tradition was greatly discouraged (Uttam Lochan, conversation).

In the 1850s, British historian Ambrose Oldfield visited Nepal. A description of Oldfield of Kathmandu streets in the 1800s reads (cited in Poudel, 2010):

The houses are of brick and tile, wit-pitched or pen-roof; towards the street, they have frequently enclosed wooden balconies of open carved work, and of a singular fashion, the front piece instead of rising perpendicularly, projecting in a sloping direction towards the eaves of the roof. They are of two, three, and four stories, and almost without a single

exception, of a mean appearance; even the Raja's house is but a story building and claiming no particular notice. The streets are excessively narrow and nearly as filthy as those of Benaras.

In Newar architecture, the buildings are not more than four stories, the face of the buildings clearly shows the bricks, the windows often have carvings, and the roofs are supported by the struts. Jung Bahādur Rana, the first Prime minister of Rana regime, established the Rana oligarchy in Nepal. During his regime, he discouraged traditional architecture by introducing and promoting western-style architecture after his return from Europe visit in 1850 AD. His successors also continued the same policy, as they imported the European design and/or appreciated British India's nobility design (Bernier, 1979).

In this connection, Uttam Lochan says:

The Ranas were inspired by the British culture and the new palaces and buildings made by them were more inclined towards European designs and elements. Perish of the Nepali art started. The artists were diverted and discouraged. They changed their occupations. The traditional art and techniques were just simply forgotten.

Uttam's arguments can be taken as a proof in Rana palaces like Simha Darwar, Thapathali Darbar, Babar Mahal, and Keshar Mahal. All of these palaces were made in neoclassical architectural style. The Ranas also changed the conventional Newari pattern of building palaces inside the city. Erection of white plastered palaces and absence of traditional style artistic wooden window, struts, and roofs are some of the examples.

One can see such example in Bhaktapur Darbar Square as well, there is an 'odd one out' building called Lal Baithak. This Baithak was built by the Rana regime after the massive earthquake in 1890 BS (1833 AD). Before its demolition in the earthquake, there stood the Simha Dwaka Darbar (Lion Gate Darbar), also known as Nhekan Jhyā Darbar (Mirror Window Darbar), with the mirror addition dating back to the Malla Period. The Rana rule lasted for 104 years and during that time a number of grand royal residences were built in Kathmandu but only a few are in Bhaktapur. Among them is the building of Shree Padma Secondary School, established in 1980 B.S. (1923 AD) in the Darbar Area of Bhaktapur. This building was also built in a western model. Even the residential building at Thalechhe in made in western style. This building was also collapsed in the 2015 earthquake.

Modern technology of reinforce cement concrete (RCC) was adopted during reconstruction of residential building after Nepal earthquake 2015 instead of adopting traditional materials and technology of brick mortar load bearing wall system (Pahiju & Bajracharya, 2021).

### **Attraction towards White-Color Job as a Challenge**

White color is meant to go to the office wearing a neat and clean dress and respected everywhere whereas the working people are not respected. People give respect to those who tend to work in an office, but ignore those who work physically hard, dirty and heavy. The children of Shilpakārs do not seem to be interested in this occupation nowadays. The first thing is that they've developed their economic status higher in the last few decades. In the past, Shilpakārs focused on their children's (sons) education rather than on woodcarving. Now they are training their women and daughters to carve wood. But the women and daughters are not being able to give enough time for the work because they have their own family responsibilities. Jouvan tries to supplement:

In the past, they (Sikamī) did not value school education. The reason was that Shilpakārs did not have enough land for farming. They had to survive on their labor. So, they focused on work than study and they trained their children from the age of 8-11 years, the school age.

Now the situation has been changed. The children do not pay attention as it is physical work. Besides, it's believed that they should be educated first, some of the children study in boarding school, that makes them too busy after passing SEE (grade ten), they need to go to college, after that they make their own destinations as they are learned.

In terms of earning, a wood carving artist can earn a good sum of money. But, the children prefer to have a white-color job. Jouvan's statement clarifies it this way:

I've told you. Today an engineer or a doctor hardly earns 20-25 thousand rupees being employed as government works (officials). Maximum they earn up to 40,000 rupees. No more than that. On the other hand, the good wood carving man earns 40-50 thousand rupees easily in a month. You do not need a big investment whereas you need 30/40 lakhs to pass MBBS and some 15 lakhs to pass engineering.

While visiting the people for data generation, I have heard about an incident regarding the interest of people in this work. There was a father who earned about 50/60 thousand rupees a month doing this carving job. He did not let his son do this job. He made the son an engineer. Now the son's income is only 20/30 thousand rupees whereas his own income is 50 thousand rupees a month. However, the father encouraged the son to be in the academic field itself. Jouvan adds:

People do not see/ think that this is a well-paid job. They think there's no future scope of this job. It is believed that there is no future in this kind of job, as people think you can only earn as long as you are physically able to work. They work for jobs that pay them life long, who knows what will happen tomorrow?

Shilpakārs' common understanding is that there's no security in this occupation from the side of the nation. They claim that the nation is not responsible for its citizens, the industry owners themselves should manage for the security of the workers. The workers feel they are not secured. They do feel a lack of respect and honor by the authorities and the officers of the in comparison to an engineer, doctor, and lawyer or like that. Kali Bahādūr opines: "This is not a reliable job. When people get older, they cannot earn well so there is a tendency that they let their children see other jobs and study well."

Some people are forcefully engaged in this job. Normally we do say that different people have different skills, interests, and abilities. But, when a father asks all four of his sons to engage in the same work, that does not bring a good result. There is a great difference between working with interest and working under someone's pressure. When a father sees some potential in his son, he forcefully tries to make his son work for him. He thinks he gets some support in his work but the result becomes negative in many of the cases. Jouvan adds:

In our society, working-class people are a bit neglected. People think that they cannot even survive as they do not work. On the other hand, a shopkeeper thinks he's an investor and that he's superior to the worker. He thinks that the worker cannot get anything to eat if he's not there. In this way, the worker is oppressed and that's why they get depressed.

As a researcher, my argument is that we can respect them as an artist with educational degrees like a bachelor, master, and Ph.D. They deserve it. They are greater architects than engineers; researchers have also shown that they (Shilpakārs) are real architects.

Kali Bahādur has a different observation in this issue. He says that the changing family structure and the job relations have caused the gap between the parents and the children. He says:

I have got a son, but he does not show interest in carpentry. It might be so because the workplace and he stay apart. I go to work outside. It's not like the furniture in one's own home. It would be good if there is a small workplace within one's home. But people have to shift to another place for work now as big places is necessary. Nowadays people get irritated because of sound pollution!

In those days, people did not have many options in an occupation like today. Today, people can select their own occupations according to their interests and scope. The parent cannot compel their children to do the family works too. They like to enjoy their personal or private life. They have become more individualistic. It is because individualism has become predominant. There is a lack of collective feelings.

Guru Lal says, "In the past, most of the people were very poor and were compelled to do the physical works. In the past, we had to look forward to Dashain or Bisket to enjoy the taste of some beaten rice."

It seems that the tradition of transferring the knowledge that one has inherited from his ancestors to the younger generation, from one generation to the next, might be broken or discontinued.

### **Escalating Cost: Another Challenge**

The main hindrance to the use of wood on the wide-ranging scale for the building is its escalating cost. In earlier days, there was enough timber from the Kathmandu valley itself or in the surrounding hills. The growth of population and the following demand for timber resulted in the shortage of timber. Now Kathmandu valley is mostly dependent on Terai Jungle or the woods from abroad.

People have begun to put doors and windows on aluminum just because of their cost-effectiveness. Many Shilpakārs are also invested in aluminum works. Some of them have left the woodworks on changing course of time and demand. They say that in terms of building the demand for aluminum or steel structures is greater so they cannot be confined to the wooden window and door.



Many private owners interviewed reported preserving the ancient buildings was very costly and they could not afford to reconstruct or build the house in traditional styles. Price of bricks and wood had increased, and also skilled human resources for maintenance were scarce and costly. Traditional knowledge on such craftsmanship had also declined over the past decade. In many cases these have actually led to demolition, and reconstruction of heritage buildings with design adapted to the by-laws that are officially valid for newly constructed buildings (Maharjan, 2012).

Almost all buildings are concrete nowadays because wood is costlier. Even quality wood is not easily available in Nepal. Those who make the traditional style of houses in the core area make all the structures concrete except the doors and windows. Some make roofs with struts and tiles. Woodworks are slower because wooden structures are made manually. Kali Bahādur elaborates:

In the past, Shilpakārs are kept for three-four months to build a home. Nowadays, Shilpakārs are called just to make windows and doors and some furniture pieces. If the house is constructed traditionally, carpenters come first. They get paid from the very beginning. If a policy to make a traditional style of load-bearing masonry houses is made compulsory at least in the core area of the city, woodcarving occupation would be better.

Newar style of architecture is unique and can be developed supporting the people in making traditional style of houses. The knowledge may be lost when such structures are destroyed completely.

In the past, the carpenter was considered to be a higher-level engineer because he is given an important place before the start of construction and the end of it. Now everyone looks for the money. The carpenters have become a contractor. With the introduction of modern technology, people with traditional skills have to live in crisis.

Wooden structure buildings are nature friendly and are reusable. Nepali geography is suitable to produce enough wood for Nepali people. The cost of timber can be reduced by planting extensive trees in the barren land of the country. This is how the challenge of *the Sikamī* converts into opportunity.

### Value Becomes a Challenge

Without hard work and time, no woodcraft can be made. Some customers do not understand the labor of the workers and might underestimate the time and again that makes the artists disheartened. Raj Kaji says that some people understand the time-consuming hard work to make artistic crafts but most think that they are overcharging them. It is good that people have started showing more interest in wood carving these days. There is the demand for new designs or replicas of temples and palaces to decorate their living rooms, balconies, courtyards, and walls.

### 6. CONCLUSION

The German-supported Bhaktapur Development Project revitalized Bhaktapur's woodcarving tradition, providing employment and training opportunities. The municipality's preservation efforts and incentives have further boosted the industry. Despite COVID-19 challenges, woodcarving workshops continued operating. Traditional architectural styles are being revived, ensuring economic opportunities and the survival of this historic craft. Bhaktapur Municipality initiated woodcarving training for other caste groups in 2052 BS (?) to meet labor demands. Despite resistance from traditional *Sikamī* artisans, teaching expanded opportunities. Continuous renovations and tourism boosted the industry, with many non-Sikamī workers excelling. Today, Bhaktapur's furniture industry thrives, meeting rising market demands with durable traditional craftsmanship. The tourism industry has boosted Bhaktapur's woodcraft sector, with demand rising, especially from Chinese tourists. COVID-19 caused setbacks, but artisans adapted. Earnings have improved, with some making up to 150,000 rupees monthly. Export profits have soared, though language barriers challenge sales. Despite difficulties, woodcraft remains a thriving business. Women are now increasingly joining the woodcarving profession, overcoming past taboos and societal restrictions. Economic necessity, smaller families, and changing social norms have enabled their participation. Their involvement boosts economic growth and gender equality. With women entering the sector, woodcarving holds potential for social transformation and sustainable economic development. The Lal Baithak in Bhaktapur reflects historical transitions, including the shift from traditional to western-style architecture. Despite good earnings in wood carving, younger generations prefer white-collar jobs for security and social respect. Lack of government support and societal perceptions discourage continuity in the craft, posing challenges to its future. The rising cost of timber has shifted construction

trends toward aluminum and concrete, reducing demand for traditional woodwork. Preservation of heritage buildings is costly, and skilled artisans are scarce. Policy support for traditional architecture and reforestation efforts could revive wood-based construction, turning this challenge into an opportunity for sustainability.

## 7. IMPLICATIONS

The research contributes to the study of role of indigenous knowledge system in economic development. It helps understand Newar arts and crafts in a rapidly changing society and how globalization impacts local knowledge and skills. It highlights the importance of preserving traditional skills and ways to enhance market access. Bhaktapur Municipality, organizations that promote local knowledge and skills, Government bodies can make policy accordingly. The research can be a model for studying other socio-cultural and economic dynamics of Nepal.

The study opens doors for further research on how can the country promote traditional knowledge and skills with the help of modern technology and develop the economy of the country. It suggests comparative studies on woodcarving industries in other heritage cities like Patan and Kathmandu. It calls for further investigation into the role of local government, central government and other institutions in preservation of the glorified heritage of knowledge and skills of *Sikamī* of Bhaktapur Municipality.

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