Beyond Namaste: *A Cultural Exploration of Nepalese Hospitality Traditions*

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Abstract

Nepalese hospitality is a unique and socio-cultural institution deeply rooted in religious values, communal ethics, and social honour. Guided by the principle of Atithi Devo Bhava, "The guest is equivalent to God", hospitality in Nepal extends beyond simple courtesy to a moral and spiritual duty. This paper intends to explore the historical, religious, and socio-cultural foundations/ dimensions of hospitality in Nepal through examining its manifestations across ethnic, regional, and caste lines. It further aims to analyse how modernisation, urbanisation, and tourism are reshaping traditional hospitality practices. Drawing on academic literature and tourism case studies, the findings reveal a culture of hospitality that is resilient yet adaptable, facing both opportunities and tensions in a globalised era. The study concludes by offering recommendations for tourism planning, promoting gender equity, and preserving cultural heritage.

Keywords: Atithi Devo Bhava, caste, cultural preservation, gender, Nepalese hospitality, tourism

INTRODUCTION

In Nepal, hospitality is more than just a polite gesture; it is a firmly held cultural belief and a spiritual duty that has been passed down through generations. The Sanskrit axiom "Atithi Devo Bhava," translating to "The guest is equivalent to God," captures the moral foundation of Nepalese hospitality (Sharma, 1990). Rooted in Hindu and Buddhist ethical frameworks, this belief system elevates the practice of hosting to a sacred duty-one that merges religious devotion, family honour, and communal identity (Gellner, 1992; Michaels, 2004). In this philosophical framework, hospitality transcends mere functionality or transactional aspects, evolving into a representation of moral integrity and cultural continuity.

Nepalese hospitality stems from community bonds and spiritual beliefs rather than professional service standards and personal etiquette that which makes it different from Western hospitality practices because it stems from spiritual values together with community relationships. Hosts provide hospitality to guests

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through religious sites and communal areas as well as residential properties and commercial establishments, including homestays and eco-tourism lodges (Nepal Tourism Board, 2023). The responsibility of providing comfort and sustenance falls solely on the hosts who welcome guests regardless of their economic standing and past interactions with them (Cameron, 1998).

Nepal's diverse population preserves its cultural heritage through different expressions across ethnic and religious communities as well as geographical regions. From the elaborate feast customs of the Newar community in Kathmandu Valley to the informal and open-door welcome practices of the Tamang, Gurung, and Tharu peoples in rural villages, hospitality assumes multiple forms while adhering to a shared spiritual ethos (Pfaff-Czarnecka & Gellner, 1997). Additionally, caste identity, gender roles, and local resources dictate the ways hospitality is practiced and by whom (Bennett, 2005).

Modernity complicates hospitality even further. Nepal's mountains, ancient sites, and spiritual tourism are leading a rapidly growing tourism industry. This development has resulted in increasing commercialisation of hospitality (Nepal, 2007), as hospitality ceases to be organic, culturally intrinsic practices and begins to embody structured, prescribed expectations for the purposes of monetisation for global consumers (Bhattarai et al., 2005). As noted above, urbanisation and digital globalisation similarly alter the material and symbolic forms of hospitality by substituting traditional rituals with fast, practical gestures such as restaurant invitations or online greetings.

The purpose of this study is to analyse hospitality in Nepal from a qualitative approach with thematic analysis of secondary sources. This paper is intended to focus on three interrelated issues. First, it considers traditional building blocks of hospitality and cultural preferences for hospitality across Nepal's ethnic and regional communities. Second, it examines the extent to which caste, class, and gender shape the expectations and practices of hospitality. Third, it analyses how modern forces- especially tourism and urbanisation- are reshaping these traditions, creating both tensions and opportunities in the process.

This study aims to analyse hospitality as a dynamic social institution through a multidisciplinary perspective, highlighting its reflection of broader cultural dynamics, economic adaptation, and moral resilience. It argues that while Nepalese hospitality remains deeply rooted in its religious and ethical heritage, it is increasingly subject to reinterpretation and negotiation in a rapidly changing world (Tamang, 2009). This study has the specific objectives as follows:

- To explore the historical, religious, and socio-cultural foundation of Nepalese traditional hospitality practices across diverse ethnic and regional castes,

- To analyse the influence of caste, class, and gender dynamics on the expectations and experience of hospitality,

- To examine the influence of modernisation on tourism commercialisation, focusing on the transformation, adaptation, and potential erosion of traditional hospitality values.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This section presents both theoretical and empirical reviews of literature.

Theoretical Review

This part of the paper covers the theoretical review.

Religious and Philosophical Foundations of Hospitality

Nepalese hospitality is profoundly rooted in beliefs and spiritual norms, especially those derived from Hinduism and Buddhism. The Hindu dictum "Atithi Devo Bhava" emerges from the Taittiriya Upanishad, forming the moral foundation of Nepalese hospitality practices (Sharma, 1990). This principle asserts that hosting guests is not merely a social act, but a sacred duty imbued with karmic value. Hosts accumulate spiritual merit (punya) by attending to the needs of visitors with humility and sincerity (Michaels, 2004).

In Buddhist-influenced regions such as Mustang and Solukhumbu, the principles of Karuna (compassion) and Dana (generosity) guide the treatment of guests. Hospitality is perceived as a path to spiritual fulfilment, emphasising interdependence and karmic reciprocity (Gellner, 1992).

In areas influenced by Buddhism, notably Mustang and Solukhumbu, the principles of Karuna (compassion) and Dana (generosity) fundamentally inform the nature of hospitality. Here, the act of receiving and welcoming visitors is more than a social courtesy; it is an act of merit (punya) as part of an overall spiritual journey. Whether providing a cup of salty butter tea (su cha) in a Solukhumbu Sherpa household or providing shelter to a visitor in Upper Mustang, the act of providing nourishment is a strong norm intended to promote compassion and earn positive karma (sonam), reinforcing the Bodhisattva idea of alleviating suffering (Gellner 1992). Hospitality is therefore seen as an important spiritual practice; it is framed explicitly in terms of pratītyasamutpāda (dependent origination) in the Buddhist tradition.

The ethical nature of hospitality as a practice entails that the host and guest have universal interdependence, collectively enhancing community ties and the generation of karmic reciprocity (le yin)-the worldview that virtuous acts produce conditions that will contribute to well-being in the future (Craig, 2012). Ethnographic accounts capture the ritualised contemporary examples like a ceremonial presentation of a khata (white silk scarf) provided at the same time as refreshments, which reinforces the purity of their intention and auspiciousness while further ritualising the visitor's arrival into an opportunity for their interdependent

spiritual benefit (Fisher, 2001; von der Heide, 2016). This form of hospitality is subtly distinct in formality from the less formal, more duty-centred seva aspect of hospitality in Hindu traditions, focused on cultivating the inner world.

Hospitality and Caste Dynamics

Caste is still a powerful, yet disputed, element in how hospitality is given and received. While Nepal's 2015 constitution outlaws' caste-based discrimination, social practices often lag legal reforms (Cameron, 1998). In Brahmin and Chhetri households, hospitality customs often reflect notions of ritual purity. These customs, rooted in religious symbolism, define who may enter kitchens, what kind of plates are used, and which rituals apply to guests (Bennett, 2005). The evolution of these practices over time reflects a theoretical tension between constitutional ideals and entrenched socio-religious norms (Gellner, 2007).

In the Newars hospitality, weaves in a complex way with caste hierarchies within the feasts such as Bhoye (dictating participation, roles (Toffin, 2007). Likewise, Tamang communities have specific hospitality customs during rituals and the guests' visits reflect family ties and social status, though in daily life is often seen as more equal (Holmberg, 1996; Tamang, 2009). These diverse ways of showing hospitality are the influence of social hierarchy across ethnic lines, challenging basic narratives of uniformity.

Gendered Dimensions of Hospitality

In Nepal, hospitality is also a social construct that originates from gender. Culturally defined roles of men as providers and women as caregivers link hospitality to gender (Deagon et al.,2021). Cultural norms have relegated women to the subordinate role of caregiver or primary caretaker, with behind-the-scenes responsibility for domestic spheres of work such as cooking and cleaning (Acharya & Bennett, 1981). This division of work as gendered and gender-related is substantiated by the notion of honourability and obligation reinforced by social conditions, social conventions, and customary laws. From a feminist theoretical perspective, this division of work begs further examination of the hospitality labour performed by women, including cultural practices, and the potential to recognise it as [unpaid] and unrewarded labour (UN Women Nepal, 2022). Feminist scholars critique this gendered division as imposed patriarchal structures, where women's hospitality labour becomes a naturalised extension of domestic duty, contributing to th4e symbolic capital of the household and community while remaining largely invisible and economically undervalued (Tamang, 2009). While considering this view, it demands examining hospitality not just as a cultural practice, but as a site of gendered power relations and potential economic exclusion.

The Commercialisation of Hospitality by way of Tourism

The emergence of tourism fundamentally redefined the way hospitality is viewed and discussed as a business rather than a cultural obligation. The emergence of cultural tourism and homestays continues to be articulated as a type of sustainable

development strategy to raise income for host communities but is also leading to debates about the commodification of culture and questions of authenticity (Bhattarai et al., 2005; Nepal, 2007). Critics of hospitality as business warn that hospitality is being reduced to a mere transactional relationship rooted in economic efficiency and profitability, rather than relationality and spirituality (Stevens, 1993). Recent studies explore this tension, referencing how community-based tourism initiatives economics benefits against the potential dilution of genuine cultural exchange and the performative demand placed on host (Baral, 2024).

Empirical Review

Ethnic, Regional, and Cultural Variations: Empirical research demonstrates that Nepal's ethnic and geographical variety leads to diverse forms of hospitality. Field research among the Newars of Kathmandu reveals ritualised feast-hosting traditions called *bhoye*, involving symbolic toasts and hierarchical seating arrangements (Levy, 1990; Toffin, 2007). Observations among the Tharu community show a contrasting model: spontaneous, informal hospitality rooted in agrarian values (Bennett, 2005). Geographical studies conducted in mountainous areas such as Annapurna and Langtang document the practice of open-door hospitality for trekkers, where locals routinely offer butter tea or millet beer as acts of inclusion and goodwill (Fisher, 2001; Stevens, 1993).

Caste Dynamics in Practice: Ethnographic evidence from rural households documents discriminatory hospitality practices toward Dalits, such as serving them on disposable plates and restricting access to kitchens (Bennett, 2005). However, surveys in urban areas indicate a shift toward more inclusive behaviours, particularly among younger populations and in commercial settings like restaurants and homestays (Tamang, 2009).

Gendered Labour in Hospitality Settings: Empirical data indicate that while women continue to be the predominant contributors of domestic hospitality, tourism has allowed some to become cultural ambassadors through homestay programmes. Field observations indicate an increased participation of females in visitor engagement, ceremonial performance, and culinary representation. Yet economic data and feminist evaluations show that this labour often remains undervalued and unpaid (Nepal, 2007; Tamang, 2009).

Tourism and Hospitality Commodification: Research on homestay programmes in Sirubari, Bandipur, and Ghalegaun indicates both advantages and disadvantages. Community-level data highlight increased income, infrastructure development, and intercultural dialogue (Nepal Tourism Board, 2023). However, qualitative interviews with hosts reveal tensions between authentic cultural performance and economic motivation (Bhattarai et al., 2005). The pressure to deliver "authentic experiences" for tourists often results in a performative version of tradition, raising concerns about sustainability and cultural dilution (Stevens, 1993).

RESEARCH METHODS

The research has used a qualitative research design founded on thematic analysis and literature synthesis. In the lack of primary research due to practical restrictions, the methodology allows for an interpretive knowledge of cultural patterns and social transitions by utilising existing academic and anthropological materials (Creswell, 2014).

The qualitative approach is particularly suited for exploring cultural behaviours rooted in spiritual and communal traditions. Rather than quantifying occurrences, the study interprets hospitality practices and meanings from diverse social contexts, drawing from grounded textual evidence (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Silverman, 2015).

The analysis is also based on a related set of peer-reviewed journal articles, ethnographic case studies, tourism studies, and cultural texts. These sources were accessed through databases such as JSTOR, ScienceDirect, and institutional repositories. Thematic analysis was as it suited to identify and interpret patterns of themes across diverse secondary sources, aligning to explore cultural practices. Its flexibility with textual data, focusing on values and beliefs, and structured yet inductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) made it apt for synthesising insights on hospitality traditions, each grounded in empirical observation and ethnographic evidence:

- Traditional Hospitality Rituals
- Caste and Class Stratification
- Gendered Labour and Social Recognition
- Commercialisation and Authenticity in Tourism
- Urban Transformation and Digital Adaptation

The themes were identified inductively using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process: familiarisation, open coding, theme construction, iterative review, theme definition, and narrative reporting, using NVivo for systematic analysis of textual patterns. Analysis mainly covered hospitality practices across Nepal's major ethnic groups, such as Brahmin/Chhetri, Newar, Tamang, Gurung, Tharu, Magar, Sherpa), regions covering Himal, terai and hilly regions.

As this study used only secondary data, it limits the capacity of the research to identify real or post-COVID-19 cultural changes, and to identify missing perspectives due to complaints of partially documented caste, gender, or regional experiences. There is an opportunity for future research to do fieldwork, focus groups, or other participatory action to capture missing reports and further corroborate the study's results.

Findings And Discussion

Hospitality in Nepal is a complex cultural practice that, beyond simple expressions of kindness, includes deeper religious obligations, hierarchies in society, and changing community lifestyles.

Traditional Hospitality Rituals

Nepalese homes project a hospitality stronghold that is based on spiritual and symbolic tenets. Offering a seat, providing water and dudh-chiya (milk tea), and making a home-cooked meal, no matter what time it is, are more than just polite things to do. They are also religious duties based on Hindu beliefs, especially the idea of seva, or sacred service. The concept that guests are divine (Atithi Devo Bhava) underscores the religious imperative to host with sincerity and reverence (Michaels, 2004; Sharma, 1990).

Studies from empirical research and ethnographic reports confirm that these activities refer to formal rituals, including tika application, flower garlanding, and the prioritisation of recognised sitting arrangements. In communities in the mountains and hills, particularly among the Gurung and Tamang groups, hospitality is a collective community activity. Field research documents how visitors and even trekkers are received with raksi (local alcohol), sel roti, and lodging, gestures that embody karmic reciprocity and Buddhist values of compassion and generosity (Fisher, 2001; Gellner, 1992; Stevens, 1993).

During major festivals like Dashain and Tihar, hospitality becomes a group activity that is done in a certain way. This shows that family ties and social peace are important. These spiritually inspired customs not only greet the guest, but they also help the host find their position in the moral and social order again.

Caste and Class Stratification in Hospitality

Even though Nepal's 2015 Constitution eliminated the practice of caste-based discrimination, empirical evidence shows that caste hierarchies still affect hospitality practices, especially in rural areas. Field studies have found that Brahmin and Chhetri houses that belong to the upper caste have discriminatory practices, such as serving Dalit guests in separate utensils or not letting them into the kitchen. These acts reflect long-standing beliefs in ritual purity and untouchability (Bennett, 2005; Cameron, 1998).

Urban environments show a degree of departure from such practices. Surveys in Kathmandu and Pokhara suggest a generational shift, where younger individuals, particularly those in education or tourism sectors, engage in more inclusive hospitality (Tamang, 2009). Nonetheless, implicit biases remain evident in seating arrangements, food offerings, and levels of access granted to guests in private spaces.

Class is also very important in setting the hospitality rules. For families with more money, hosting becomes a sign of social status, as shown by the variety of cuisine and fancy service. On the other hand, families with low incomes may feel pressure to satisfy these cultural expectations, even if it means putting their money at risk. Empirical observations thus underscore hospitality as both a social performance and a site where caste and class boundaries are negotiated and either reinforced or subverted (Gellner, 2007).

Gendered Labour and Social Recognition

In Nepal, hospitality is very gendered, and women are the main workers, even though they are often not seen. They have always overseen cleaning the house, cooking meals, and taking care of guests. This division of labour is reinforced through early socialisation, where girls are trained in hospitality duties as part of a broader moral economy that associates female virtue with domestic service (Acharya & Bennett, 1981).

This work is important for the household's social and spiritual well-being, yet it is rarely recognised or paid for. Feminist literature critiques this lack of recognition and highlight how unpaid domestic labour sustains not just families but broader cultural practices (UN Women Nepal, 2022).

With the rise of homestay-based tourism, women's roles have expanded into cultural representation. In these programmes, women introduce guests to local foods, rituals, and daily life. However, ethnographic and tourism studies show that economic control over such engagements often remains in male hands, with women's participation rarely translating into financial empowerment or decision-making authority (Nepal, 2007; Tamang, 2009). In response, NGOs and policy advocates have begun promoting training, property rights, and leadership programmes aimed at correcting these imbalances and positioning women as key stakeholders in tourism-driven hospitality ventures.

Commercialisation and Authenticity in Tourism

Tourism has changed the nature and meaning of hospitality in Nepal, transitioning it from a religious and social activity into a commercialised opportunity. Village packages, such as Sirubari, Ghandruk, and Ghalegaun, are intentionally marketed to capitalise on "authentic" hospitality, which includes showcasing ethnic cultures, meals, and accompanying rituals (Bhattarai et al., 2005; Nepal Tourism Board, 2023).

These packages do have measurable material benefits, including higher household income and improved community facilities, but they also have the potential to generate issues with cultural authenticity. Ethnographic interviews with homestay managers illustrate increasing pressures to preserve traditions for visitors that often result in exaggerated or stylised behaviour based more on the expectations of outsiders than on their internal veracity. This is quite in line with MacCannell's (1973)

theory of "staged authenticity," where the local culture is staged for consumption rather than practiced for its original function (Stevens, 1993).

However, community-based efforts have been somewhat feasible for sustainable development. For example, Ghalegaun managed to invest money from tourism to upgrade schools and healthcare. This demonstrates that if tourism is managed locally, it can benefit both the economy and culture.

Urban transformation and digital change

Nepal's urban areas themselves are also changing the way they extend hospitality through demographic transitions, globalisation, and new technology. In places like Kathmandu, the custom of greeting visitors with extended family is giving way to more symbolic and virtual forms of hospitality. Urban dwellers are more likely to meet at restaurants or send Christmas wishes and gifts via digital media rather than having friends drop by casually.

Empirical observations indicate that this evolution reflects both practical constraints, such as time, space, and labour shortages, and changing value systems among urban youth. Those who have studied or worked abroad are particularly inclined toward hospitality expressions shaped by global ideals of consent, efficiency, and privacy (Silverman, 2015).

However, this change does not imply that cultural values are being eliminated. Instead, it illustrates the way in which core hospitality values, such as respect and care, can be understood in a new social and economic context. Hybrid models that combine elements of old traditions with new technologies are emerging, particularly with the urban middle class, as signs of an adaptive ethic that maintains cultural continuity while adapting to new models.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In Nepal, hospitality is not merely a social practice; it is an ontological practice combining spirituality, ethics, identity, and survival. Nepalese hospitality, based on the traditional saying of Atithi Devo Bhava, does not stop at transactions of commodities and services; it is a social obligation of morals and cultural pride. From the initial hospitality of greeting the guest with water and a tika to the set rule of no guest leaving without food, hospitality has operated as a cultural institution, integrating familial honour, religious virtue, and community.

The research has demonstrated that hospitality is present globally in human societies, but in Nepal, the practice is different and is influenced by religion, ethnicity, caste, and gendered hospitality in its practices. In rural villages, hospitality is a religious obligation and duty closely related to festivals, rituals, and oral traditions. In cities, hospitality practices are changing with increasing economic

challenges, digital entertainment, and younger generations negotiating tradition and modernity.

The tourism sector increased as an economy, in addition to all the changes, in Nepal, complicated matters. When communities have opportunities to monetise their cultural values, to share those values globally, and to pursue better infrastructure and global attention, it reflects a level of cultural pride. However, distinguishing between monetisation and commodification is difficult under the pressure of authenticity and performance culture, and it seems to diminish our hospitality of the true meaning. Homestay models and performing ethnic practices, as positive economic ventures, can quickly turn our layered cultural practices into products for tourists.

Along with the general trend of hospitality earning a living, the division of labour by gender also raises a concern. Women are largely doing the cooking, cleaning, and leading the rituals, but women are rarely included in policies or sharing any profits. As the hospitality industry expands in Nepal, identifying these roles and recognising that they deserve a wage for their contribution is crucial.

The study's implications include:

- Tourism initiatives should be community-driven to protect authentic hospitality traditions.

- Women's roles in hospitality need more recognition, leadership opportunities, and equal pay.

- Addressing exclusion based on caste and class in hospitality practices requires awareness programmes and inclusive policies.

- The changes in hospitality practices by urban and diaspora communities highlight the need to support hybrid cultural models.

- More research is needed to understand hospitality experiences among marginalised groups like Dalits, migrants, and the Nepalese diaspora.

In summary, Nepalese hospitality is a vital cultural asset. Maintaining its authenticity, inclusivity, and ethical foundation is essential for national unity and cultural continuity.

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