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Effects of Changing Family Structure in Traditional Newari Dwellings: A Case of Nala

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Abstract

Nala, a traditional Newari settlement located in Kavre District near Bhaktapur, historically known as “Desha” during the Malla period, is renowned for its rich cultural heritage and craftsmanship. However, the settlement is undergoing rapid transformation due to various socio-cultural changes, one of which is the shift in family structure from joint to nuclear families. This paper examines the impacts of changing family structures on the traditional architectural character of Newari dwellings, with particular focus on the front façade. The research adopts a qualitative approach, employing case studies, interviews, focus group discussions, and ethnography as the primary research methods. Qualitative data were further quantified using tools such as MS Excel, and AutoCAD was used for drawing generation and spatial analysis. The study area was concentrated along the procession route of the Mahalaxmi Jatra of Nala, considered the oldest settlement zone. The route comprises 71 houses, of which 40 have undergone vertical division. The findings indicate that the transition from joint to nuclear family structures has led to the equal division of parental property among offspring, resulting in the vertical subdivision of existing houses. Consequently, the frontage of traditional Newari houses is diminishing, and many dwellings are either being left vacant, demolished, or reconstructed using contemporary architectural approaches.

Keywords: Family Structure, Nala, Traditional Newari Dwellings, Vertical Division

1. INTRODUCTION:

Family System

Family refers to a group of individuals connected by blood, marriage, adoption, or a committed partnership. Nuclear families include the father, mother, and children (Fallah & Hojat, 2018). Joint family consists of people generally of 3 generations, Grandparents, uncles, aunties, unmarried sisters, father's sister, and children share a common kitchen (Kumar & Assistant, 2023). Joint family system was prevalent in Nepal during ancient and medieval period (Manandhar, 2020). During the Rana period (1846-1951), the practice of living in nuclear families increased. (Manandhar, 2020). With the ongoing societal change, the nuclear family is increasing and the joint family is on the verge of disappearance. Census 2021 recorded that 47 percent population are living in nuclear family and 53.4 percent in joint/extended family (NSO, 2024).

With the change from a joint family to a nuclear family, the division of ancestral properties equally among the brothers occurs. This cause the vertical division of the ancestral Newari house according to the number of sons. Later the renovation and reconstruction of the traditional newari dwellings according to preference of owners, affect the house both aesthetically and structurally.

The reasons behind the shift from joint families to nuclear families are the influence of Western lifestyle, educational activities, and the pursuit of better job opportunities, among others.

Traditional Newari Dwelling

The traditional Newari dwellings were constructed of locally available materials like brick, mud, wood, etc. The average house with its basic rectangular design is generally about 6 meters in depth, while its length is governed by the size and availability of materials (Korn, 1977). Traditional buildings are considered to be three to four storeys high with floor heights between 1.60m to 2.40m (Suwal, 2020). According to an ancient building regulation, private houses are not allowed to exceed the height of temple. (Schiebler, 1988) During the



Figure 1 Traditional Newari building facade of Malla, Shah and Rana Period (Korn, 1976)

early –Malla period (until the middle of 16th century), it can be inferred that all the buildings at that time were restricted to two storeys, for the Taleju Temple, the most important temple in Bhaktapur, is itself two storeys high (Scheibler, 1988). Later three-storeyed with pitched roof building style developed with the aim of symmetry in facade design (Figure 1). The early Shah period's (1786-1846) Dwellings were constructed in the classic Newari style of the Malla period, which enlarged in proportion. The need for more space to accommodate the ever-growing family size led to a further rise in the height of the houses. Thus, this period witnessed, fourth or fifth-storey buildings exclusive of the attic (Maharjan, 2017). The traditional architectural style was maintained during the Rana Period, with few modifications to the façade detailing and building materials. After the great earthquake of 1933-1934, are quite often five, and even in some cases, six storeys high. In some cases overextended, from an original room height of 1.60 – 1.90m to 2.50 -2.90m (Scheibler, 1988). The study aimed to explore variations in the front facade of ancestral housing due to transformation of family structure from joint to nuclear. The study has specific objective to analyze the effects of changes occurring in Newari dwellings facade.

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach to investigate the impact of changing family structures on the traditional architectural character of Newari dwellings. The research is centered in Nala, a historic Newari settlement located in the Kavre district.

A case study design was employed to facilitate an in-depth examination of the selected settlement area along the Mahalaxmi Jatra procession route, which is considered the oldest settlement zone. The study is an integration of ethnographic methods, interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and field observations that help to understand the context of architectural changes within their socio-cultural framework. The field study was conducted in July 2024.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select the case houses for in-depth study. Emphasis was placed on those houses that had undergone physical modifications due to family divisions. A total of 71 houses were studied along that historical route, among which 40 houses were divided vertically. Data collection was conducted using ethnographic field notes, semi-structured interviews, and Focus group discussions. Field notes were collected through field observation and photographic documentation of each house along the street. A semi-structured interview with open-ended questions was conducted to explore the relevant theme.

Focus group discussion organized meeting with local stakeholders, community leaders, and guthi. Discussed the changing pattern of housing and its mitigations.

Data such as the number of vertically divided houses, new constructions, and demolition of dwellings were quantified using Microsoft Excel. Graphical and comparative analysis were conducted using new and old photographs and documentation. Percentages, frequency tables, and visual charts were generated to support qualitative findings. AutoCAD was used to prepare drawings that illustrate changes in façade property division patterns and dwellings demolished after a change in family structure.

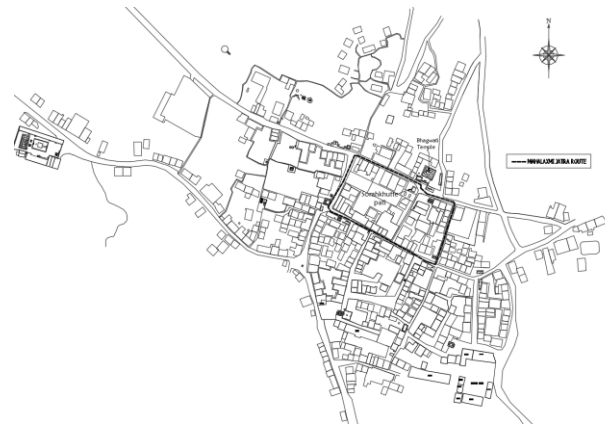


Figure 2 Research area

3. Study Area

Nala is located in the western section of Kavre district, seven kilometers east of Bhaktapur. It lies 25 kilometers east of Kathmandu, accessible by Banepa (2.5 kilometers), and 8 kilometers south of Nagarkot. The two famous rivers Punyamata and Nanyamata flow at south of Nala and meet a few hundred meters below the settlement.

Nala was previously called Nalangram, which indicates that the settlement existence was from the Kirat period. In the silapatra found in the dhungedhara near Bhagwati Temple written that "the dhara was constructed in 715 B.S. during the reign of King Shivadev II by Dhurvasheel & his brother Anagasheel. This indicates that the existence of Nala was also in the Lichhavi Period. During the Malla Period, the "saat gaun" of Kavre was arranged by King Ananda Malla of Bhaktapur which also includes (Shrestha & Shrestha, 1994). Nala is home to one of the four Bhagawati Temples ("Ugrachandi Bhagwati Temple") and one of the four Lokeshwors ("Shristikanta Lokeshwor Karumamaya"), demonstrating the connection between Hindu and Buddhist traditions. (Ulak, 2013)

Nala is a Traditional Newari Settlement with a joint family system in the past. (Tamrakar, 2018). Now it's shifting towards a nuclear family due to many reasons. It is clearly shown by the survey done in 2013 for a thesis; 47% of people live in joint families and 53% of people live in Nuclear families (Tamrakar, 2018). As in other traditional Newari towns here, changes in dwelling units can be found concerning changes in the family.

The study will focus on the core of the settlement defined by the Mahalaxmi Jatra Route (Main Jatra) of Nala as shown in Figure 1. The street consists of Traditional, Mixed, and modern types of dwellings. The social system of distributing parental assets equally to sons, as well as the change from joint to nuclear family systems, have supported the vertical division of traditional dwelling units. The study area consists of 18 houses (also including demolished) which are vertically divided and form 46 households.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

Impact of Vertical Division on Traditional Newari dwellings

As Newars are a patriarchal society, the property transfers from father to son equally. When property division occurs no one wants to leave their traditional house and this leads to the vertical division. In the study area, it was found that the maximum number of vertical divisions was up to 5 parts. It was

found that after division four things happened to the house (Figure 3) which affected the traditional architecture of the area.

- i. Division and desolation of existing dwellings
- ii. Contemporary addition with modern interventions
- iii. Complete Demolition of the house

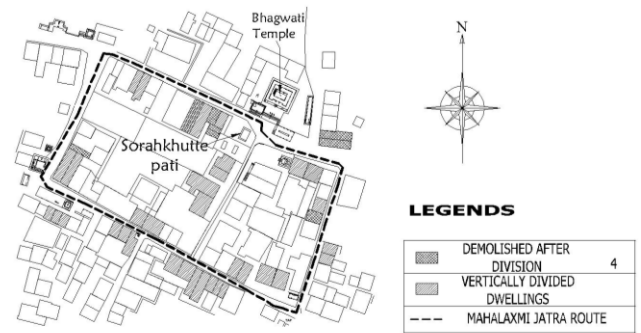
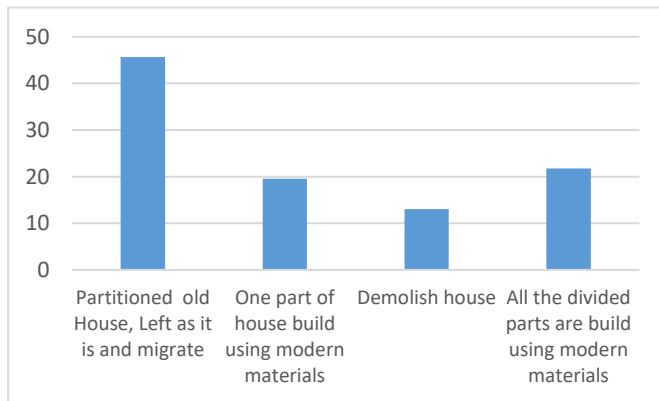


Figure 3 Changes after Vertical Division Figure 4 Map showing dwellings and vacant land after vertical division

i. Division and desolation of existing dwellings

From Figure 3 it is clear that 45% (maximum) of the houses were partitioned and left out. The owners of the house migrated either to the agricultural land or to the other city. Those dwellings that are visited by the owners are still in livable conditions (Figure 5). And which are not visited by the owners are deteriorating day by day due to lack of maintenance (Figure 6).



Figure 5: Livable condition



Figure 6: Deteriorating

ii. Contemporary addition with modern interventions:

Another 20% case found was after vertical division one owner rebuilt the house using modern materials and the other owner(s) left it as it was (Figure 8). This causes two problems, one is that traditional architecture gets disturbed. Another is houses become structurally weak. New dwellings are taller and use modern materials and their widths are smaller resulting in slender tall houses. Another left part of the house also becomes weak. Both cases are vulnerable during earthquakes.

22% of the surveyed houses are found to be reconstructed using modern materials after vertical division (Figure 10).

These cases have increased after the earthquake of 2015. This has completely disappeared the traditional dwellings.



Figure 8 Partial New Construction



Figure 7 Completely New Construction

iii. **Complete demolition of the house:**

The third case includes 12% of dwellings demolished after vertical division. The reason behind it is migration and shifting to nearer agricultural land, regular maintenance costs are higher so instead the owner demolished it (Figure 12). Another reason is traditional windows cost more and to sell those



Figure 10 Before Demolition



Figure 9 one section demolishes

they demolished the house. This has caused the disappearance of traditional Newari dwellings.

Conclusions:

This study demonstrates a direct and consequential relationship between the shift from joint to nuclear family structure and the transformation of front facades. Qualitative research methods like ethnographic methods, interviews, and focus group discussions reveals that practice of vertical division, driven by equal distribution of ancestral property among heirs, has resulted in two primary outcomes that are; a fundamental fragmentation of the urban fabric and loss of architectural heritage.

Field observation confirms that the resultant changes are not superficial but they catalyze a chain of vacancy, demolition and culturally disconnected rebuilding. The evidence is clear, the changing family structure is the primary driver behind impending loss of Nala's traditional architectural identity, placing its historical character on the verge of extinction.

The social heritage of Newari family is fundamental sustainer of its architectural heritage. Therefore, the disappearance of one accelerates the demise of other.

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