

Dapha Bhajan: Negotiation of Hierarchy and Participation of Women on Devotional Music among the Newars of Kirtipur

doi: <https://doi.org/10.3126/skmj.v4i1.90299>

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Abstract

Women's participation in Dapha musical schooling and gathering is a recent phenomenon. Most of the Dapha Khal at Kirtipur observed exclusively male participant. Very few Dapha Khal trained and included women as hymn singers and musicians. We observed that seniors and young, males and few young females participated in a few Daphas at temples and Falchas regularly. In comparison to caste women, Newar women were considered active and dominant participants of decision-making in the family and community. The article tries to address: Why were Dapha Khal exclusively male musical institutions? How and why are females included in training and Dapha hymn singing within the limited Dapha? What are the experiences of female negotiation in Dapha Khal? Being members and residents of the Newar community, we tried to explore gender and musical relations through the integration of religions, livelihood, and historical trajectories of the musical institution. The qualitative study was carried out by employing key informant interviews, observations and archival research methods. We talked to both male and female participants when they were engaged at Dapha Khal music. We tried to explore how gender, sacred and social orders interact and negotiate in various contexts at the Newar community of Kirtipur. Through Dapha musical culture, their gendered negotiation and rupture are explained and interpreted. The historical trajectories of livelihood, gender roles, political-economic changes, education, religious and musical transformations empowered women to negate gendered narratives of Dapha music. They encouraged young girls, seniors and the Dapha community to train and involve females in Dapha musical activities. The resistance and inclusion of females in Dapha contribute not only significant changes on religious narratives but also strengthen gender and social harmony in society.

Keywords: *Dapha Khal, gender, religion, inclusion, negotiation, hierarchy*

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Introduction

Dapha Khala is one of the oldest *Newari* devotional musical institutions. It integrates systems of traditional agrarian culture, religious unity, musical culture, and a system of knowledge transformation among the *Newar* community (Wegner, 2023). *Khin, Ponga, moo Dhime, Babuu, Nagara, Damaru, Paschima, Taa, Bhusya*, flutes and cymbals are musical instruments of *Dapha Bhajan*. Group singing with *Rag and Taal* is its fundamental characteristic. Most of the rituals, festivals (jatras) and processions of the community include traditional music, including *Dapha*. *Dhimay* and *Dapha* are the most popular traditional musical bands culturally integrated in the *Newar* community (Widess, 2013; Wegner, 2023). There are many hundreds of *Dhimay* and *Dapha Khals* and apprenticeship centers in the Kathmandu valley³. *Dapha Gurus* informed that there were more than 25 *Dapha Khals* in the old settlements of Kirtipur. Some of them included women participants in their schooling and practice, whereas many of the *Dapha Khals* observed exclusively male participants. For the native, the exclusion of women was normal because their cultural orientation discouraged females from engaging in devotional musical institutions. The story of the presence and absence of females in *Dapha* music was not simple and taken for granted because sexuality has attracted the attention of people in social organizations and gender relations. This research tries to explore the gender hierarchy of sexuality construction and gendered socialization, division of labour, cultural beliefs, and institutional arrangements of the *Newar* agrarian community. After the implementation of the social inclusion policy in all governance and social development practices creates moral and political pressure to include females in all traditional cultural institutions (GESI, 2021). The significant number of females trained traditional *Newari* musical performance both *Dhyme* and *Dapha*. Young women and girls started questioning on exclusive male space and gender hierarchy in *Dapha* (Ray, 2024).

Women participation in both musical culture and other social structure found increasing in number. Girl musicians and dancers are widely observed and documented in *Dhimay* (Ray, 2024; Tuladhar, 2018). Recently, women's participation and engagement in *Dapha Khals* gradually increasing around Kirtipur. We came to know that women were not preferred and excluded in the *Dapha* music school in the past. There were gendered religious myths, cultural

³ Gert-Matthias Wegner (2023) noted 113 daily basis group performance of *Dapha* around Bhaktapur in 1983. The author had not counted around Thimi, and outer settlement of Bhaktapur Darbar.

taboo and reversed gender-friendly practices that hindered the participation of girls in *Dapha* music.

This study tries to explore gender hierarchy, discontent and unity of diversity of religion, language, music, ritual through *Dapha* culture among the *Newars*. Community participation and engagement of the *Dapha* music schools are observed increasing at Kirtipur. The discontents of gender hierarchy expressed through the significant numbers of girls and women were observed *Dapha* and Dhime schooling and performance. They not only learned musical instruments and contextual hymns but also ruptured the gendered concepts of *Dapha* music, myths, stories and gender equality in traditional musical (socio-cultural) institutions.

For this study, music includes singing, playing musical instruments and performance. Most of caste/ethnic communities in Nepal, irrespective of culture and nationalism, have produced and continued their own language, culture and musical culture. Specific caste/ethnic or cultural groups' music is called ethno-music (Lok sangit in Nepali language) (Tingey, 1994). Similarly, music is the expression of nature, cosmology, sorrow, happiness, and veneration of unseen power in a rhythmic pattern. Ethno-music is connected with tradition, art, rituals, culture, religion, belief, socio-economic systems, and identity (Thapa, 2072 BS). The *Newars* of Kirtipur have a long history of traditional *Dapha* (musical band), Dhime and modern music. The traditional *Dapha* integrated various religion, rituals, language and social differences, but segregated gender participation on musical performance. Political freedom after 1990 provided space for the cultural rights and questioning the hierarchy on traditional institutions. Despite challenges and discourage, individual-level resistance and efforts of joining *Dapha* apprenticeship were found in the community. Recently, organized and collective participation of girls and women in the cultural space of *Dapha* and Dhime are reported and observed. The researchers are interested to explore narratives of hierarchy and harmony, as well as cultural hegemony and collective initiations of women in *Dapha* music of the *Newar* community. The fundamental questions are why women were segregated and why included.

The strength of music is binding diversity of people and place together with the livelihood and the surrounding environment. How does *Dapha* integrate and differentiate multi-cultural practices and gender relations? There is a deep relationship of music with rituals, culture, occupation, traditional skills, and collective socialization. *Newari Dapha* culture and performance are unique, and highly regular but it's cultural implications and naturalization of gender have not been adequately documented. It is argued that *Newari Dapha* is a genre of devotional singing and performed by male, non-professional musicians (Widdess, 2013).

Several studies have been conducted in this field of *Newar* society and culture by different research institutions and scholars, but most of them have been concerned with general aspects of musical activities (Widdess, 2013; Tuladhar, 2018; Wegner, 2023). They were not

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concerned with cultural, religious integration and gender hierarchy, status and change gender mobility. *Newar* scholarship highlited *Newar* women's status of empowerment, relatively strong decision making and good status in family and community (Nepali, 1965; Bista, 1967; Widdess, 1988). Widow, remarriage, late marriage and unmarried women have a respectable and acceptable social status (Nepali, 1965; Bista, 1967). Actually, these studies did not portray the gender hierarchy and harmony in traditional musical institutions. The previous studies could not address the gender issues of musical cultural activities in order to address change, identity, cultural tradition and collective participation.

We observed a sufficient number of women's participation and engagement in *Dapha* as well as collective musical schools of the *Newari* settlement in Kirtipur. Scholars noted that *Newari Dapha* music combines religious rituals, social interaction and musical performance (Widdess, 2013; Wegner, 2023). They did not pay attention to gender hierarchy, harmony, hegemony and community initiatives in *Dapha* Music. This research aims to explain gender hierarchy, harmony, cultural integration, and transformation processes on *Dapha Khal* in Kirtipur.

Research Methodology

We employed qualitative research design to explore and describe gender-based hierarchy and harmony on *Dapha* culture of the *Newar* community of Kirtipur. *Dapha* musical culture is typical and most frequently repeating musical culture of the *Newar*. Despite its everyday operating phenomena, very few people have adequate knowledge on the historical trajectories of the *Dapha*. Therefore, we employed key informant interview, observation and archival study methods to generate data. We consulted lay people to get general knowledge and information of the *Dapha*. We interviewed four *Dapha* Gurus, six women participants, 10 key informants and ex-mayor whose grandparents have been running *Dapha* apprenticeship for centuries. The *Dapha* Gurus can explain historical, religious, Musical, linguistic and social phenomena of the *Dapha* culture. Both male and female knowledgeable people with references of the local people were selected. Both of the researchers resided in *Newar* community of Kirtipur for long time and one of us belongs to the local *Newar* community. We selected cultural historians, *Dapha* music school organizers and local politicians who contributed *Dapha* music culture. Long familiarity and linguistic competency helped our discussion and specific data for the specific research questions. We have observed the *Dapha* culture almost regular, but we observed, for the purpose of this research, at Layaku Darbar *Dapha*, Samaldhoka *Dapha*, Baghbhairab *Dapha* and Chilancho Falcha *Dapha* in August-December in 2025. Collected data were translated, coded, and organized in different categories based on the nature of themes and descriptions.

History of *Dapha* Music

It is believed that *Dapha* music is originated at 8th century and flourished during mall period (1209-1769) (Widdess, 2013). Its blended Hindu-Buddhist devotional hymns and social gatherings. Like other South Asian musical schools, its integrated Rag (melodic framework) and Tal (rhythmic structure). It followed the framework of classical Rag but a different Tal. Ramkrishna Duwal argued that *Dapha* was/is social and group-based music. It has been taught in groups and performed in groups. It is not solo musical tradition. *Dapha Khal* was its institutional structure that managed and organized the Musical practices and governance.

Tirtha Mali (*Dapha Guru*) sad that the Rag of certain songs are divided according to the seasons and ritual contexts. Rag and contents of the songs indicates moods of the season and time. Time indicators of the Tal are: Astara Tal and Pratal Tal. Similarly, Rag indicators are: Bahramas, Basanta, Aashabari and Malashree. Both the contents and Rag and Tal articulate similar meaning. It is practiced in group. Gurus taught the *Dapha* on the response interest of young and initiation of Guthi or other cultural institutions.

Mali added that there is no fixed written notation to train because it passed down orally. In the content of the Bhajan are slightly different from *Dapha Khal* to another *Dapha Khala* with the same community. *Dapha Gurus* argued that particular Guru of the *Khal* added own content and made slightly different from other *Dapha Bhajan*. This argument is supported by the writing of Widdess's research on *Dapha* music of Bhaktapur (Widdess, 2013). He found different Rag and Tal within the same settlement. He notes that "the *Newar* interpretation of Ragas simplifies or modifies their scale, making them fit within the model and melody preferences of the *Dapha* tradition" (Widdess, 2013, p 141). He listed some Rags: Malashree (associated with autumn and Dashain festival), Bhupali (a pentatonic raga in Indian music), Pilu (a Rag with folk like characteristics), Asavari (morning mood compositions), and Bharavi (hymn at conclusion session). The Gurus at Kirtipur also argued that they have varieties of Rag, Tal and content of the *Dapha*. Kirtipur Municipality formulated a committee to compiled varieties of *Dapha Bhajan* into standard version, but the committee failed. All of the *Dapha Khal* claimed their own authenticity. The task committee tried to include the content of *Dapha Bhajan* in the textbook of local curricula in schools at Kirtipur.

Gender Hierarchy in *Newari* Music

Newars are a patrilineal and patriarchal value-based people. Both the Hindu and Buddhist communities of *Newars* preferred sons in comparison to daughters (Nepali, 1965). Both lineage and family god transferred toward son's family line. Even, parental property was also

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transferred to the line of male children. Though, they allocated land and material property to the daughters, the volume and amount were lesser in comparison to the sons (Gellner & Quigley, 1995). Though daughters are highly valued in their natal family and their rituals, they preferred son for social prestige and status. The values and honors can be observed when *Newar* girls get married to the sun god and are granted membership of father's caste deity (Nepali, 1965). Their father granted own caste and lineage during symbolic marriage rituals. When they get married to a human husband, they transfer allegiance to their husband's lineage, but they retain important ties with their father's agnates (Grandin, 2010). The married women share that agnatic relatives were required to fulfil various ritual functions of the lineage (Nepali, 1965). Therefore, *Newars* preferred to arrange the marriage of their daughters within walking distance. Now, many informants said that they did not practice gender difference and priority in their families. But in practice, gender hierarchy and priority are found.

Hira Kumari Maharjan (68-year-old widow) said that her husband's relatives dishonored her because she did not have a son. She has only one daughter. She said, "My father-in-law's family members frequently said me, 'you do not have a son and why do you need land and property'". By using the sonless rhetoric linguistic terms, they manipulate to expense monthly income. When she tried to convince her husband to save money, her husband disclosed father's relatives' devaluation of her family because of not having a son. She argued that though the *Newars* said that they equally value both sons and daughters, they preferred sons. She added that her friends and neighbors also tried to dominate her in the community. She felt that her neighbor frequently made loud sounds on trivial issues because she had no son to support her. When her daughter got married and her father-in-law died, her husband's father's brother and his family allocated marginal land and a smaller area of land at Kirtipur. More than this, she was excluded from the kinship network of her husband's relatives. She was not informed of important ritual functions. She felt a kind of outcast from the husband's collateral kinships. Similar types of gender preferences prevailed in social and cultural institutions in *Newar* society.

Tirtha Mali (56 years *Dapha Guru*), said that women were discouraged from training in *Dapha* music. Many of them did not express their interest in participation and learning. The unmarried daughter may have an interest in *Dapha*. The Guru was discouraged because they would not continue the *Dapha* after their marriage. There were a few cases of discontinuation of *Dapha* after the girl's marriage. Another Guru said that women were busy with their domestic and agricultural work. They did not have time to participate *Dapha* music learning commitment. Therefore, they were not encouraged. Basna Maharjan (40 years) said that her father

encouraged her to learn *Dapha* music when she was a teenager. She remembered her heydays of the training and participation in *Dapha* music. After marriage, the family environment did not favor her continuation. She left the practice for many years. She expressed humiliation and forgiveness from the god of music and dance (*Nasadyah*). When we visited different *Dapha Khals* around the Kirtipur, we did not observe elderly women participating in *Dapha* musical practices. In various public ritual occasions, young women presented their art and performance of flute playing, but none of them observed Khi playing instrument at *Dapha*. There were women participants who engaged in singing and playing of the flute, chymbal, and other activities.

Within the *Newars*, professional musicians and drum makers were from the so-called low-caste peoples. They were called Jugi, kapali and Naye. More specifically, Jugi caste played Muhali, Naye played Naykhin drum, and Kulu made drums. All of them were in the lower hierarchy of caste system (Nepali, 1965). The gender and caste-based hierarchy and division of labour were created at least Jayasthiti Mall in the 14th century.

Gender Narratives of *Dapha* Music

There are various gender narratives related to women and *Dapha* music. *Gambhirman* Maharjan (35 years old *Dapha Guru*) said that *Nasadyah* was narrated as a face of shiva Mahadev, (Natyasvara or Nrtyanatha in Sanskrit) or in the guise of *Bodhisattva* Padmantmesara. He added that the masculine characteristics associated with the god of skill, talent, perfection, eloquence, and powers (*Siddhi*) which are essential for the creative act. Furthermore, the *Nasadya* represents masculine power, feminine compassion, and possibly androgynous symbols depicted in the form of cavities in the temple, Falcha and house walls. He showed a photo of temple where the cavities were covered by a piece of cloth. It was told that women should not look the face of *Nasadyah* god. Without blessing of the *Nasadyah*, *Newari* classical musical learning and knowledge could not be accomplished. If the training of *Dapha* or any musical apprenticeship left without completion, *Nasadyah* god will be angry. The participant and his/her family members will be badly affected. Tirthaman Mali (one of the *Dapha Gurus*) said that there were many cases of suffering, mental disturbance and deaths in the communities because of not following the disciplines of training and disrespect of *Nasadyah* god. Women were frightened with the hardship of discipline and commitment of accomplishment and continuation of the *Dapha* in any conditions. Dilkumari Maharjan said that when the *Nasadyah* pulled into the Aakhache (*Dapha* training house) from nearest temple, the member and trainee should follow the disciplines of sacred and profane behaviors. The Aakhache center is forbidden for the outsiders. Gyan Maharjan and a *Dapha* Guru shared a mythical narrative of Mahadev (*Nasadyah*). The story was:

Mahadev was incredulous with the beauty of Parbati (the most beautiful lady among the goddess), Parbati informed him that there was another beautiful lady in the *Newar* community in Kathmandu. Then, Mahadev searched and found that the beautiful lady from the *Newar* community was planting rice at the field in the Valley. The god visited in the plantation field and talked to the lady. Mahadev and the lady indulged in love. The lady conceived a baby. She informed him that she was pregnant. When *Mahaved* knew scared because the baby will have face of Mahadev. He cursed the baby with a blurred face in the belly of the girl. Then, he ran away by leaving the girl because of the fear of people. When her pregnancy was matured, the girl also ran away from the society. The blurred face boy was born from the girl. It was believed that the blurred face was caused by the curse of Mahadev. The baby was grown up, he started playing musical instruments. He has an extra talent of playing and dancing. It is believed that God Indra sent own musical caste people (Gandrabha, Kapali of *Newar*) and Apsara (a beautiful girl in heaven) to get better training from the faceless son of the Mahadev. The same boy trained music and dance among the *Newar* community. The folk version of Mahadev is also called Natraj and *Nasadyah*. (G. Maharjan, personal communication, 25 September, 2024).

The narrative indicates the precarious situation of the girl when she was pregnant. Mahadev left her alone, and the society ostracized her. Therefore, engaging on *Dapha* music is considered as entering the cosmic world of religion and interacting with a variety of gods. Human and god interaction, compassion, music, dance, love, and sex are expressed in the process and practice of *Dapha* schooling.

Similarly, Radha Mali shared that *Dapha* music trainings were organized at late evening. Most of the males stayed the whole night at the training center. In the case of a girl, it was not allowed. Because of the inconvenience of time and the gendered training center, women were not interested in *Dapha*. All female informants said that the exclusion of women was because of female's menstrual practices. In those days, it was believed that menstrual pollution was forbidden because all trainee has to put on the Tika of *Nasadyah*. Menstrual women were forbidden to entered into the Aakhache. They shared that menstrual seclusion was limited to the seating arrangement and getting Tika from the Gurus. Menstrual women can join the training but they have to sit by folding mats these days.

Hira Kumari shared that there was orthodox beliefs of gender and caste barriers. Those girls who were participated in the music and dance were negatively portrayed. The society was

closed and marital relations were also restricted. The fear of remaining unmarried was the force controlling women in the *Dapha* music. If the elderly women were engaged, their family members were loosely characterized. There was a religious belief of restriction of looking *Nasadyah* and orthodox practices of caste and gender. Women were busy either in household activities or in the agricultural field during the agricultural season. The agricultural caste among the *Newars* were not economically rich. So, women were tired of taking extra work on music and dance. If they engaged late night and early morning trainings, their family members remained starved. Cooking, feeding, cleaning, and care of vulnerable family members were considered as female jobs. " How could they learn *Dapha* music under such family load" said by Hirakumari. It indicates that traditional music institutions were domain of male because they could adjust time in the family. The gender division of labour in the family and relatives were challenges of engaging in *Dapha* performance. These days, both women and men have leisure time because they left agrarian cultural practice. Very few families continued agriculture in small piece of land. Most of the land volumes were reduced by selling, dividing and making new houses. Now, many of them engaged on salary-based job, own business and education. They have leisure time. They learned values of culture and identity from schools and political activism. The issues of gender inclusion also talked in different development programs. So, many young girls were interested to join *Dapha* music to preserve own past music culture. Angila Maharjan (20-year girl) said that she joined the *Dapha* when she was 12/13 years old. She was interested because she read course books on importance of the past culture and identity in school. She continued participating flute playing. She planned to join Khi instrument plying which was considered as difficult training of *Dapha* .

When women missed some day training because of their natal home ritual obligations, they felt that they had fallen behind. They gradually felt humiliation and left the training. The *Dapha* flute playing training was running at different Aakhache of Kirtipur. Many of them were interested to playing flute. It needed less training and skill in comparison to Khi Tal.

Male and female articulate quite similar logics of exclusion of female in *Dapha* Music. Pragman Pradhan opined that women were excluded not only religious interpretation of inferiority and partial pullated status but also their work burden in agrarian family and community. The women from peasant community (*Jyapu*) worked from early morning to late evening at the family, and field. They have subordinate political economic status in the family. Ramesh Maharjan (ex-mayor of Kritipur Municipality) provided logical evidences of seclusion of women in Dhapa music. He told:

Senior women have not observed female participation in Dhime and *Dapha* music when they were grown up. They did not have idea and courage to venture in male domain and cultural space. Moreover, they did not have leisure time to initiate collective activities. Political and social systems were not gender friendly before

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1990s. If they resisted gender and cultural norms and values, they would be ready to bear social dishonor (R. Maharjan, personal communication, August 19-23, 2024) .



Exclusive male *Dapha* at Samaldhoka



Mixed of male and female at Layaku *Dapha*

Pragman Pradhan said that patriarchal values influenced *Newar* women and culture. They were restricted to enter into Aakahche, temple and kitchen during menstrual period. Mensural and cultural pollution followed in among the peasant community of the *Newar*. Women were forbidden to look the face of *Nasadyah* Pregnancy and postnatal periods were not considered feasible for public participation and *Dapha* participation. Pradhan says:

these days women were busy because they gave birth many children. There was practices of early marriage and many children. Because of pandemic the possibility of death of children was high. So, people did not control child birth. There was no concept of family planning too. Naturally, sexually active women kept on pregnant and child birth. They did not have time to participate on traditional music. (P. Pradhan, personal communication, August 19, 2025).

The statement indicates gender hegemony and naturalization of gender division of labour in the community. There was no socio-political and educational freedom for the women. gender preference was structured and naturalized in the society. They were not educated and exposed another world. They have double work burden. Though, ethnic including women were

relatively strong on decision making and freedom of mobility, patriarchy was strong influencing principles in the society.

Gender Harmony on Dapha

Male and female integration is essential for the continuation of life and society. G.S. Nepali (Nepali, 1965) claimed that the *Newar* society is the best example of a harmonious society, notwithstanding social hierarchy and differences within the *Newars*. He analyzed how male and females were integral part in various rituals of the *Newars* (Nepali, 1965). He has not explained gender roles and harmony at apparently gender exclusive *Dapha* music. It can be argued that gender harmony of musical community reflects on larger gender roles and division of labour in the *Newar* society. The harmony is observed and analyzed larger framework of division of labour and responsibilities within the household and community. Though there was unequal power and access to resources, cultural provided meaning of division of responsibilities and social status. P. Pradhan argued that without social and gender harmony, such a thick traditional culture like *Dapha* music could not be continued in the *Newar* society. Shyambabu Maharjan (60 years) said that social harmony is the fundamental characteristics of the *Dapha* music. All people around the settlement gathered together at least once a day. They participate worshipping, devotional hymns, have a cup of tea and sharing socio-political issues in the community. He argued that the peasant community (Jyapu) followed both Hindu and Buddhist cultural practices. He added that the image of Nasadhyah, the god of the music, looked mixture of male and female. The image and sculpture are an integration of gender and religion. In practice, women were not directly participated on instrument playing and singing space but they arranged preparation of seating and food distribution. When they visited many religious deities around the Valley, women engaged in the preparation of worship materials, food, and travel arrangements. Radha Mali (55 years old female) added that females covered all agricultural and household responsibilities and then males got the opportunity at the *Dapha* music and visiting around the deities. Women believed that when males engaged on *Dapha* music and worshiping of deities related to devotional music and dance, the blessing of gods will not be limited to the specific person. The reward and blessing of the god will be received at family and household level. Therefore, male engagement of *Dapha* music is a type of division of labour like male seldom engaged on cooking and cleaning in the family. Whoever engaged in the musico-religious activities, other members of the family and relatives were interested in supporting the participants. None of the females said that they felt the burden of family labour, while males engaged in *Dapha* music and musico-religious travelling. They believed that male earned merit to the family which were essential for the well-being of the family members.

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Gender Participation Initiatives

Ramesh Maharjan (ex-Mayor of Kirtipur and owner of Aakhache in Kirtipur) said that women participation started after democratic movement in Nepal. He said, "Before 1990, women's participation in *Newari* classical music was rare and not easily acceptable. In Gyanamala Bhajan of high caste Buddhist community, women were observed, But in *Dhime* and *Dapha*, women were limited managerial and logistic managers". He added that they did not visit the *Dapha Khal* to observe and participate in music. After the revival of democracy in 1990, various ethnic organizations raised issues of marginalization, social inclusion and cultural identity (Gellner, 2016; Wegner, 2023). Various social issues were evaluated through the lens of inclusion and gender participation (Giri, 2018).

During the Maoist insurgency, female engagement in insurgency validates gender inclusion in the army, policy, and bureaucracy. The Government of Nepal also implemented the social and gender inclusion policy in all development activities (GESI, 2021). *Newar* women were not an exception from the wave of social and gender inclusion. They started to engage in classical musical institutions in *Dhime*. They started flute playing in the 1990s (Widdess, 2013). Gradually, they started joining on *Khi* instrument apprenticeship. Basna Maharjan (trained female) said that she was the first lady who learned *Dapha* music in Kirtipur area. Her photo with her name was published by a newspaper as a bold lady because it was considered a unique engagement of women in the 1990s. She was encouraged by her own father, who was the main Guru of the *Dapha* music. She was the only one girl, but she did not feel humiliation. She said that she did not know much about the gender narratives of *Nasadyah*. She regularly joined the *Dapha* before her marriage in 2000s. After marriage, she could not continue. The discontinuation was considered as opposition of the commitment expressed during the training period. It is associated with the blessing and curse of the god. Those who were blessed were supposed to have good life. Her dissatisfaction of discontinuation of *Dapha* was expressed through her face and style of expression. She wishes she could join again, but her family circumstances do not favor her interest. Sometimes, she relates her health issues to the discontinuation of *Dapha* because she heard stories of the consequences of the unfulfilled commitments of the *Dapha* apprenticeship. She suggested that if any of the females enrolled in the *Dapha*

music, they should continue the practices throughout their lives. It is interesting not just for psychological and entertainment aspects but also for strengthening social and cultural bonding. She argued that *Dapha* music is not mere music rather it is socially and culturally embedded

musical function. The participants have at least a social group that meets regularly. There was regular movement of the *Dapha Khal* to worship deities at different pilgrimages.

Ramesh Maharjan told that women who were interested in participating in *Dapha* were commented negatively until 1990. He added that when he joins *Dapha* school, there were no women apprentices. Interested apprentices enrolled in the *Dapha* training home named Aakhachhe where all trainees stayed at night and trained on musical instruments with a variety of hymns. They have to go out of their hometown frequently. Women were considered not safe night stay out at night. Informants argued that hidden forms of male supremacy and controlling behaviors were reflected among the *Newars* as well. They reported mischievous activities like stealing and competition of winning body part of chicken were also practiced. Gopal Singh Nepali argued that *Newar* women were relatively empowered but they had subordinate status in the family (Nepali, 1965). Participation at such public programs against the restriction of women by *Nasadyah* myth was powerful logic of women's exclusion. Because of these religious, practical and gender specific logic, women were not interested in *Dapha*.

There should be commitment to continue and lifelong engagement with *Dapha* team before participating *Dapha* apprenticeship. Prayagman and Gambhir said that Data guru hesitated to enroll girl because they will not continue *Dapha* after marriage. The Gurus doubted family environment and interest of future husband about *Dapha* music. Before marriage, the guru thought that if the girls were trained, they would go by marriage. If husband and in-law's family restricted the *Dapha*, trained artist left the *Dapha* engagement. The second reason of not training for the women was the *Dapha* team has to go out of hometown and stay out in the night. The family did not allow for girls to stay out of family and hometown. Ramesh Maharjan and Prayagman Pradhan argued that the situation and concept of docile girls has been changed. The girl's education, livelihood changes and political provision of gender inclusion empowered women not only engage *Dapha* but also ready to stay out and move out of hometown.

When we walked around Kirtipur three pattern of *Dapha* Music observed. The dominant pattern at baghbharab, SamalDhoka and Dalph *Dapha Khals* were exclusively male participants. Two or three males played Khin and other instruments. The second pattern observed mixture of male and female participants at Layaku Durbar *Dapha Khal*. Both male and female played musical instruments. All of they participated on Rag and contents of the Bhajan. The layaku *Dapha* is the largest number of participants so far observed. At Chitu Bihar *Dapha Khal* and Bahirigau *Dapha Khal* male and female seated different space of the Falcha, they followed content and Rag simultaneously but female did not play any musical instruments. This pattern was observed almost regularly in morning session since August 2024 to 20th January 2026. They gathered early morning or evening and departed by taking tea and biscuit. played the

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Chitup Bihar early morning in Mid-July in 2025, I observed a group of women sang *Dapha* Bhajan at the left-hand side Falcha of the Bihar entrance. Male group sang a similar Bhajan at right side Falcha of the entrance gate of the Falcha. I did not understand the meaning of the Bhajan but curious to explore women's engagement in the *Dapha* Bhajan. During *Saparu* (Gai Jatra), *New Dhaya Vintuna* (New Year rally), and other *Jatra* and other festivals, women played *Basuri*, *Khin*, *Dhime* and other instruments. Very young girls also played *Dhime* and *Basuri* (flute) very well. In *Dhime* and *Basuri* musics, girls' participation and apprenticeship are higher than those of boys at Kiritpur.



Girls' *Dhime* drum apprenticeship at *Baghabhairab*, Separated space in *Dapha* at *Chithubihar*

Prayagman Pradhan argued that the number of girl apprenticeship was increasing in many *Dapha Khal* in Kirtipur. He said that about 20 girls' apprentices successfully completed their training period at Lahana *Dapha Khal* recently. Because of male educational migration and engagement on job market, females were preferred in apprenticeship. Pradhan argued that the stability of females was higher than male now. So, many *Dapha Khal* started enrolling girls in their Aakhache. Large number of girls started playing flute, Dhimay and Khi instruments. Widdess argued that *Newari Dapha* was a genre of devotional singing and performed initially by male, non-professional musicians (Widdess, 2013). Recently, a sufficient number of

females' participation has been observed in *Dapha* as well as collective musical schools of the *Newari* settlement in Kirtipur.

Discussion

The history of traditional music of the *Newar* community is interconnected with the political-economic, and gendered trajectories of the society. The *Newari* cultural of the Kathmandu valley was influenced by the cultures of North Indians, Tibetan, Kirat and Khas-Nepali in different historical phases (Toffin, 2005; Nepali, 1965). Similar admixture overtone found in the contents, Rag and Tal of the *Dapha* music (Widdess, 2013). Studies indicate that *Dapha* culture was systematically started during the Malla period. It was started as courters devotional music. The vernacular version of *Dapha* practiced by adjusting influencing Hindu-Buddhist and folk cultures around the *Newar* settlements because they followed multi-religious culture and rituals (Gellner, 2005; Toffin, 2005). There is no unanimity of contents, Rag-Tal among closely located *Dapha* Khal. Polyreligious contents and Rag-Tal differently maintained by the specific *Dapha* tradition as trained by specific Guru. The Guru-Chela tradition was strongly rooted because they did not compromise to modify the contents and Rag-Tal with other *Dapha*. The Kirtipur Municipality tries to make singular version of *Dapha* content, Rag and Tal, but it failed. The diversity of the contents, Rag, and Tal maintained the uniqueness of each *Dapha* Khal of the *Newari* community.

The agricultural caste of the *Newar* was not free from gender preference, hierarchy, and unequal access to power and resources. Women were subordinate in the family despite they were being relatively strong in decision-making within the family (Nepali, 1965). Women carried multiple roles and the burden of work. The agrarian community believed varieties gods and cultural practices. The exclusion of women in *Dapha* music could be analyzed on the basis of the integration of these cultural practices. If the rain gods were not satisfied, there was starvation. Violation of norms were interpreted the rupture of human-nature-cosmology relationships. The Guru were powerful because they could interpret the cultural practices by linking the everyday world, cosmology, and spirits. There are many hymns related to nature, god and human relationships. Similar expressions and contents are found in spring season and Machhandranath deities were worshipped. Cultural interpretation and embeddedness of nature (Rappaport, 1968 & 1999) support analytical ramifications of *Dapha* musical practices.

The devotional hymns of Krishna, Buddha, kings, and local deities were androcentric because all these agencies were established in the contexts of masculine power and devotion. The presence of female values and characters was subordinate in the content. Similarly, they sang devotional hymns of rain gods, Krishna, Buddha, kings, and other gods, and nature. Despite its lacuna, *Dapha* music continued classical cultural identity.

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Participation of women in the *Dapha* music is one of the ruptures in terms of gender inclusion. Anthropologists believed that change is an inevitable characteristic of culture and society (Tylor, 1871; Boas, 1940). Social scientists believed that culture changed over time because people learned and imitate best practices of other societies. In the same vein, females' engagement in the *Dapha* music is a new learning and implementation of practices of other societies. The democratic society provides freedom to choose the best practices. Social inclusion policy motivated the women to enroll in the *Dapha* apprenticeship. Tingey (1994) argued that traditional Nepali music culture has been rapidly changing among different communities of Nepal. In this context, participation of female in *Dapha* music is considered a cultural change over time. The inclusion of women and different castes, age group strengthen social harmony, gender inclusion, and girl's education became prominent development issues in Nepal after 1990. The Nepalese Constitution 2015 and social inclusion policies ensured the participation of women in formal socio-political institutions. Similarly, the right to the development of arts, literature, music, and cultural heritages are listed under the fundamental rights of the citizens (Constitution, 2015). All communities have rights to the institutional development of their musical property and skills. The *Newar* women are very rich in their culture, relatively educated, and politically empowered and joined musical institutions of their community. Their musical institutions are interwoven with *Guthi*, *Dapha*, and *Falchha* where many of the *Newar* collectively grow.

Women's involvement in *Dapha* musical culture is considered a powerful rupture to the mythic narrative of *Nasadyah* and the cultural practices of the musical community. The gender hierarchy and prohibitions in core cultural practices are global phenomena in traditional societies, and most of them have been trying to reorganize in a new order. The gender hierarchy and harmony of *Dapha* musical performance are understood through the broader lens of the remaking of the traditional ethnic institution in the fashion of democratic values. *Newari Dapha Khala* systematized during the Mall period, developed as the devotional music to the elites, and kings who equated the rank of god. Initially, male musicians and singers got access to the courts of elites. The androcentric political economic systems and culture continued, so did the *Dapha* musical performance, converted into vernacular versions for a long time.

Women were excited while they were encouraged in *Dapha* musical apprenticeship. The livelihood practices are changed and they have leisure time for musical and cultural activities. The political and educational access sensitized them to involve the music-religious activities. The *Dapha* music is associated with cultural identity and space for social interaction. They

started questioning on mythic narratives and propositional representation in other social institutions. By enrolling in the *Dapha* schooling, they felt proud of doing core cultural preservation rather than violating traditional gender values. School textbooks, civil society and local government also prioritized traditional culture and gender participation which are supporting ingredients to overcome gendered myths and social practices. After the revival of democracy in 1990 and a series of political movements between 1996-2015, female participation in *Dapha* musical culture dramatically increased among the *Newar*. The community and *Dapha Gurus* also found accommodative to include women in the age of domination of commercial and foreign music. It can be analyzed as the cultural politics of identity of the community because an inclusive cultural tradition attracts tourist and the values of the musical performance. Local government and community leaderships also interested for the promotion of gender inclusive culture of the *Newar*. It cultivated gender solidarity, intergenerational integrity and knowledge transformation from seniors to juniors.

Acknowledgment

The research article is developed on the research carried out under the financial support provided by the Research Management Cell of Shahid Smarak College, Kirtipur, Kathmandu. We are thankful for the financial support of the RMC and the college administration. We are also thankful to the local people who have provided valuable information.

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