

## Role of Guthis in Self-Governance among the Newars of Nepal

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**Abstract:** Nepal Mandala which was a conglomeration of city-states centered on the Kathmandu valley in the pre-Shah era and its populace were called *Newa* or *Newar*. Historians have written of the era being a golden era of the region that saw prosperity and development in trade, art, architecture, infrastructure and culture. With the invasion, the Himalayan state witnessed its downfall especially how it is governed by the new rulers. Additionally, research shows that some of these customs and practices of social organization might have been effective as systems of self-governance that actually helped the society to continue with its values, beliefs and traditions intact as well as keep relative economic prosperity among the members of the *Newar* society. This paper argues how the guthis act as a self-governing mechanisms through an ethnographic case study done in *Thecho* and also review of available literature.

**Keyword:** Self-governance, Guthis, Newars, Nepal.

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## Background

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The most prominent landmarks in Kathmandu valley are the three Durbar squares that were constructed mostly during the early Malla era from around 1200 to 1600 (Pradhan, 1996; Shaha, 1990; D. B. Shrestha & Singh, 1972; Slusser & Vajrācārya, 1974). While the date of construction of most of the structures existing in the three Durbar squares are from the Malla era, structures like the Kasthamandap, Saugal-Tole temple and others predate the Malla era. (Slusser, n.d.; Slusser & Vajrācārya, 1974). The distinct architectural style of Nepal and especially the Kathmandu Valley and surrounding areas which is also termed as Nepal Mandala seems to have been an accumulation of knowledge and skill among the population that started even before the Malla era. The conglomeration of city states that had rich trade with

India and Tibet has been thought to be vastly rich in both wealth and culture (D. B. Shrestha & Singh, 1972; Worden, 1993). The infrastructural and cultural heritages that exist even today as testimony to the richness of the Kathmandu valley are accumulation of progresses made during the early Malla era and several centuries predating it.

The later rulers of the Malla era are said to be not as successful as their predecessors with the city states and their rulers quarrelling among themselves (Shaha, 1990; Worden, 1993). This provided the opportunity for Prithvi Narayan Shah who annexed the Nepal Mandala and several other petty states to form a nation state of Nepal that we know of today. This saw the beginning of the Shah era which unfortunately in later generations comprised of generations of weak leadership due to early deaths of monarchs, rivalry between regents and violent struggle for power which saw rise of the Ranas (Worden, 1993). Scholars have written about lands belonging to local *guthis* being confiscated during the reign of Ranabhadur Shah (Vajracharya, 1998). As soon as the annexation of the nation, as a consequence of Gorkha's economic blockades and military actions for annexation of Nepal, trade relationship with Tibet deteriorated which eventually led to the Sino-Nepal war (Killigrew, 1979). Problems with leadership and ability to govern continued with the emergence of feudalistic Rana regime that was mired by violent struggle for power (Lohani, 1989). This clearly shows that, while the military exploits of the Shah era are famous, economically, the state was since then in a downhill path. Multiple wars and focus on territorial gain more than development and prosperity saw chaotic situation as far as governance of the country was concerned.

The depleted situation of the state and governance mechanism meant that there was an overall depletion of the skills and technologies that Nepal Mandala had in fields of art, architecture, trade and manufacturing. Settlements like Sinja valley of Karnali zone, which once were known to be prosperous reached situation of poverty and desperation (Evans, Gibson, Acharya, Harward, & Kunwar, 2002; IRIN, 2013; WUNRN, 2011) while architectural wonders previously build by the *Mallas* stopped receiving proper maintenance. However, more than 200 years on with very little interest from the state in preservation of these heritages for a long time, most of these heritages have survived. Not just tangible but intangible heritages too have since survived. The *Newars* or the population of the former Nepal Mandala (also *Nerwa*) seemed to have continued with their systems of organizing and governance (Quigley, 1985; B. G. Shrestha, 2012; Gérard Toffin, 2005; Vajracharya, 1998). Multitude of monuments that have survived and the festivals or rituals that continued have been continued to be organized through traditional

associations known as *guthi*. With *guthis* more than 1100 years old still functioning till date (KC, 2016) along with other systems of governance such as *Kosh*, and *Khalas* seem to have been the core of the Newar societies' social organization. These systems which predates the *Malla* era have survived centuries of dysfunctional state government that at times have not favored the local populace of the cities rather be it on basis of religion or caste and ethnic routes (D. N. Gellner, 2005; Vajracharya, 1998). With the changed era of globalization, it is necessary to question whether continuation of these systems is relevant or not. While it can be argued that these practices need to be protected as being part of the intangible heritage of the country, can these systems still be a functional form of governance that may be effective? This paper begins with discussion of some theories related to organization and governance. In the later sections, we discuss *guthi* system and literature available regarding it to clearly understand the aspects of the system. Further on we present study of *Thecho*, a village in Southern part of the Kathmandu valley and the different *guthis* among the village population. Then we discuss results in light to how *guthi* system may still be relevant as a form of governance in present context and even for future.

## **Theoretical Background**

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Governance is relatively a very commonly used term that has been used across multiple discipline. In contemporary literature, the shift from 'government' to 'governance' into mainstream field of researches shows the general acknowledgement of importance of the non-state actors in process of societal development. While new liberal approach towards this importance of non-state actors concerns more towards marketization, contracting out, staff cuts, and stricter budgeting (Bevir, 2009), it vastly differs from other perspective which equally emphasize on role of non-state actors. A good example for this would be the concept of commons and self-governance of Common-Pool Resources (CPRs) as explained by Elinor Ostrom (1990). Governance based on the commons is something that has been found to be used across all geographic locations and cultures. While there have been criticisms of governance and economy based on the concept of the commons (Hardin, 1968), Ostrom and several other writers have written in favor of the same (Bauwens & Kostakis, 2014; Bollier, 2002; Kostakis & Stavroulakis, 2013; Yavor Tarinski, 2016).

The concept of governing of commons has become relevant in an entirely new dimension of implication with the emergence of Internet Technology (IT). With the new capabilities enabled by IT, loosely structured large groups are creating

artifacts online through Commons Based Peer Production (CBPP) for which a great example can be Wikipedia (Black, Welser, Cosley, & DeGroot, 2011; Kostakis & Stavroulakis, 2013). Self-governance concepts is also prevalent in simpler cases such as self-government of a neighborhood or apartment buildings (Power, 2015). Self-governance systems are prevalent in several cultures and especially in rural settings (Pur & Moore, 2010). Especially the aspect of self-governance reimposes its significance when the government (Shah and Rana era or colonial forces elsewhere) fail to provide for the need of governance to the people who they have conquered (Nepal Mandala/Newars). Traditional institutions are also important to be looked at from the perspective of organizational theories as well. Organizations/associations are important aspects of human civilization and its progress. It must be agreed upon that organizations and the ability to organize is among the keystone of any society. Aldrich provides a simple definition of organizations as “goal-directed, boundary-maintaining, and socially constructed systems of human activity” (as cited in Aldrich & Ruef, 2006). Organizations are different from other types of social units like families, clans and friend circles. Aldrich mentions that three key nature of organizations that make them differ from other social units are goal direction, boundary maintenance and activity systems (Aldrich & Ruef, 2006). Organizations seem to have a clearly defined purpose and the boundary as to who is and is not the part of the organization. Organization also have clear activity system that allow them to accomplish their goals and allow them to change swiftly as per the need of that particular time and space.

There are several perspectives to look at organizations and the theories behind them. As per Astley (2017), authors have often distinguished organization theories by using the classical duality between social determinism and free will (Astley, 2017: 246). Organizational theories often is highly inclined towards “economistic” perspective and focused more on for-profit organizations rather than governmental and cultural organizations (Senge, 2013). As per Senge many theories such as Contingency theory, Resource Dependence Theory, Population Ecology and Transaction Cost Theory all ignore the societal perspective. However, new institutionalism school argues that organization cannot be adequately explained through economic and technological variables. It goes beyond the borders of for-profit organizations towards non-profit organizations and also views them as embedded in a variety of social institutional influences stemming from spheres such as political influences, cultural influences, economic influences etc. New institutionalists put forward a view that institutions are equated with culture and society. It has been argued that organizations are developed by the state or by local

communities, where they are embedded in their culture (Haller, 2002) however if the people does not feel the essence of it and does not value the organizations they are bound to dissolve and fade. They also share the conviction that society and the actors within it make decision and behave based on the institutions constituting the conditions under which the actors act (Alasuutari, 2015). For all these reasons it can be claimed that study of culture and society can be done through the perspective of new institutionalism. Ensminger (1998) argued that, new institutionalism is relevant for research in anthropology and that anthropological studies can provide a lot of empirical contribution to new institutionalism (Ensminger, 1998).

### ***Guthi Organizations among the Newars***

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There is a relative lack of clarity in defining when exactly the term *Newars*. However, there is a common consensus among the scholarship that *Newars* were the collective inhabitants of the Kathmandu valley and its peripheral areas where the cities of Kathmandu valley had the administrative control before the overtaking of Kathmandu valley in 1768-9 by Prithvi Narayan Shah from Gorkha. Thus, *Newars* are a geo-political and linguistic group rather than simply an ethnic group (D. Gellner, 1986; Levy & Rajopadhyaya, 1992). Likewise, *Newars* are also religiously divided primarily into two groups. Levy (1992) opines that the Hinduism propagated by the Brahmins found its way into the Buddhist *Newars* and paved the way for new kind of amalgamated religion which *Newars* follow today. Yet the two religious divisions are clearly distinguishable. Things that seems to be common amongst the *Newars* is the common language they speak (Diwasa, Bandu, & Nepal, 2007: 7) and the means of self-governance among the communities through traditional institutions of governance that have continued to exist as a non-formal or semi-formal system in the community (Dangol, 2010; Quigley, 1985; G Toffin & Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2014). *Guthis* not only act as a mechanism to self-governance but *Newars* quite often affiliate their identity and pride in being able to manage the *guthi* associations.

### ***Origin of Guthis***

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The governance system in Nepal starting from the Lichhavi era is said to be participatory in nature with decisions being made through discussion groups called *Gosthi* (Shaha, 1990; Nepali, 1965). As per Shah (1990), *Gosthis* were autonomous bodies that functioned like a private or public trust and the members of the *Gosthi* were called *Gaustika*. In Sanskrit, the word *Gosthi* means 'assembly' or 'association'

and in present-day Nepali and Hindi languages as well, the word *Gosthi* is used for describing work groups or discussions groups (Dangol, 2010; Pradhananga, Shrestha, & Dee, 2010; Gérard Toffin, 2005). *Guthi* has been described by Gérard Toffin as a fundamental element of social structure, of the same order as lineage or caste for the *Newars* (as cited in Quigley, 1985). Several writers have written explaining how deeply the *Guthi* system has been embedded into the socio-cultural making of the *Newars* (Pradhananga *et al.*, 2010; B. G. Shrestha, 2012; Gérard Toffin, 2005; Vajracharya, 1998). However, regarding how or when the practice might have started, there is a general similarity among what writers have written that the practice or a similar practice has been found since the Licchavi era which started in 464 C.E<sup>1</sup> (Shaha, 1990; D. B. Shrestha & Singh, 1972; Vajracharya, 1998; Worden, 1993).

### Characteristics and functions of *Guthi* organizations

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There is relative clarity that *Guthi* among *Newars* is something which later inspired the word to be used as a land tenure system in other parts of current day Nepal in addition to Nepal Mandala while the *Guthi* system itself not being a land tenure system in essence (Quigley, 1985; Toffin, 2005). There are writers who have focused on *Guthis* being essentially a land tenure system like Regmi (1965, 1977) and Diwasa *et al* (2007). As per Quigley, early writers like Regmi tend to have legalistic and state-centric perspective and do not examine the *Newar* institution as much. Quigley further argues that *Guthis* being seen more as land tenure system is Gorkhali invention that started only after the Gorkhali conquest of Nepal Mandala (see Quigley, 1985: 8). This argument is supported by Toffin that, the oldest *Guthis* are from the *Nepal Mandala* and elsewhere they have not been recorded before the nineteenth century (see Toffin, 2005). Regmi (1977), despite writing on *guthis* mostly from the perspective of the them being a system of land ownership as prescribed by the state, acknowledges the Newar origin of *guthis* and the continuation of a distinct form of the institution among the *Newars*. While land being owned by a specific *guthi* is not uncommon, as would it be for any other form of private or public organization, this is not something that is of defining nature when it comes to *guthis* in their actual form. Rather owning the land by *guthis* can be understood as a financial supportive mechanism which allows the members to fulfill the obligation vested on them.

As the idea of *guthis* being primarily a land tenure system can be excluded, the other characteristics as per most literature, seem to point towards *guthis* being socio-religious organizations. There is a common theme in most literature that the

focus in defining the characteristics of *Guthis* in being goal oriented. In general, based on the goals or objectives of *Guthis* they seem to be of three types: first, with religious function like organizing a ritual or a religious festival and/or caste related group; second, group concerned with carrying out of funerals; and third, concerning workshops, craftsmanship, music, maintaining water conduits and other activities (Gérard Toffin, 2005) however, one should not be surprised to see the *guthis* interchangeably fulfilling these three types of objectives as they are inseparable in the context of social organization. While some writers have written about some *Guthis* being caste specific and some not, as per Toffin's categorization of the *Guthis* into three groups, he exclaims that the first or the third group can be multi-caste as well while the second is always a mono-caste *guthi*. In that sense, a *guthi* is not entirely based on caste and lineage and even lineage among groups may be defined through the ritual attachment to a locality and not entirely based on the Hindu caste system (Quigley, 1985; B. G. Shrestha, 2007) nonetheless caste plays a vital role in understanding the *guthis* in totality.

Even though religion plays a very large part defining the characteristics of *guthis*, they might not be entirely religious. As per Dangol's categorization of *guthis*, he claims some fall on the group which is service-oriented (Dangol, 2010; Vajracharya, 1998). However, with religion and rituals being such an integral part of the normal life among the *Newars* (Pradhananga *et al.*, 2010; Worden, 1993), it would be very common for virtually all *guthis* to have some religious function ascribed to it. It will also give the religious color to obligations to be fulfilled and also act as a means of establishing discipline for the fear of god/goddess. For instance, both Dangol and Vajracharya mention *Latwankegu guthis* which translates to providing drinking water. Here the provision of drinking water is specifically during religious procession or ritualistic activities and thus again becomes connected to religion. That being said, it would be incorrect to assume that *guthis* are religious organizations or that religious activities are particularly the chief characteristics of *guthis* as an institution. However, it will be impossible to discuss *guthis* without a major part of the discourse involving religion or religious activities.

### **Ethnographic Case Study: *Guthis* in Thecho**

Thecho is a historical village and presently a village council in Lalitpur district of Nepal. It lies towards the southern edge of the Kathmandu valley. The village celebrates five days village carnival every year for the two goddesses *Balkumari* and *Brahmayini* who are believed to be the goddesses protecting the *choye* (Upper part

of the village) *lachi* (Temple complex) and *koye* (Lower part of the village) *lachi* respectively. *Brahmayini* is believed to be the elder sister of *Balkumari*. *Brahmayini* is attributed with benevolent nature and *Balkumari*, being young, is considered to be ferocious and malevolent in nature. During the village carnival, once in a year, the goddesses were brought down from the *deyo chey* (house of the god) and taken to the *pingal* (considered to be the maternal house of both the goddesses) for overnight stay and it is believed that the goddesses are in festive mood. Once the goddesses were brought down from their *deyo chey* and the elder sister (*Brahmayini*) is taken first to *pingal* followed by younger sister *Balkumari*. However, the younger sister (*Balkumari*) is placed right behind the *pingal* gods facing west which is considered to be prominent place for the goddess to sit and the *Brahmayini* is placed facing north. The seven mandatory sacrifices of the goats offered by various *guthis* as per their religious obligation is also done to the *Balkumari* and just blood is shown as mark of respect to the *Brahmayini*. When asked why this is so. The villagers narrated a story,

‘A very long time ago, when people from both the parts of the village indulge in repeated fights for various reasons, jatra gives them yet another chance to fight among each other. Every time during jatra they fight which goddess must be kept right behind the *pingal* gods and which goddess to be offered the sacrifice first. However, they decided to resolve this issue once and for all by taking up with the king. The people from the lower part of the village as a group went to Hanuman Dhoka (palace of king of Kathmandu or Yen), however, the people from the upper part though started as a group but many of them stayed back in various parts on their way as they were not united and resolved to go to the king. The villagers from lower part thought that the large group of people against the small group might be able to convince the king to give the judgment on their favour. Upon hearing both sides of the argument, king handed them piece of sugar-cane each and announced that, whoever reaches *pingal* first and ties the sugarcane to the *pingal* their goddess should be accorded the right to sit behind the *pingal* deities and other ritual procedures. Both the groups started the race. However, the people from upper part started handing over the sugarcane for the people who have rested in the multiple places throughout the way and could reach faster than the lower part of the villagers and managed to tie the sugarcane first to the *pingal*. It is the first time the unity among the lower part is considered to be deceived and defeated by this little game of the king.’

The informants also opined that, king would have resolved in many ways such as, as the (1) *Brahmayini* being the elder sister she may be seated behind the *pingal* and the sacrifice may be offered to the *Balkumari*. Allowing people from both the parts feel



important. (2). From that year onwards, *turn wise* both the goddesses get the seat and first prayer, year after year making people from both the parts happy about it and so on. But king choose to race the villagers and leave a matter of that important on the game of running. The informants also added that, we would have sought for a better solution if not for the king's judgment. Taking cue from the above story this paper resolves to analyze the situation of governance among the *Newarsin Thechois* best managed by the locally established *guthis* who realizes the importance of that particular monument, common resting places, temple, roads, water canal or social governance than the mighty State.

### Study Area

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This case is based on the ethnographic fieldwork carried out during 2013-14 AD in *Thecho* village of Lalitpur District. The village is divided into lower (*Koyelachi*) part and Upper (*Choyelachi*) part like any other *Newar* Village (Fürer-Haimendorf, 1956). Apart from the traditional segregation of the village into upper and lower, the *Thecho* village can also be divided into old and new. The old part comprises brick lied roads, ponds, temple and religious places in other words, the old part of the village is the crux of social organization of the *Thecho* villagers. The new part should be considered as an extension of the old part because of the population pressure, the villagers have simply settled in the other parts which were not inhabited earlier, however their religious and social life revolves around the old part. The people in new part make sure to express their affiliation to the upper or lower part of the village.

### Guthis in Thecho

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Before discussing the *guthis* in *Thecho*, it is important to understand group formations in *Thecho*. The groups are formed for different purposes. Each member of this group will have certain responsibilities and obligations to fulfil while abiding by the rules put in place by a majority of the members of the group. Each group will have a purpose and a particular role to play in the larger social organization. In addition to this, each group will act as a socializing agent for its new members. The number of members varies from one *guthi* to another, but the function and the structure of the *guthi* remain the same.

### Raj guthi

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There are three *rajguthis* in *Thecho* village. Brahmayini *raj guthi* (*Koyelachi* where the Temple or *dyochhen* is situated), Balkumari *raj guthi* (*Choyelachi*) and Navadurga

*raj guthi (Koyelachi)* (figure 1). The primary *guthis* under Brahmayini *raj guthi* are responsible for organizing village *jatara* (carnival) for Brahmayini. Similarly, *guthis* under Balkumari *rajguthi* are (*pune guthi, charbe guthi, paru guthi* and *ta guthi*) has the responsibility of organizing the village *jatara* for this goddess. The Navadurga *rajguthi* has the task of worshipping Navadurga and performing mask dance on stipulated days of a year. The *guthis* under this *rajguthis* are the main ones in Thecho. There are seven main *guthis* in Thecho (three in *koyelachi* and four in *choyelachi*) that can be considered as main *guthis*. These *guthis* have significant responsibilities in religious, social, and political spheres. Each *guthi* take turn in organizing the *jatara* and maintaining the *dyo chhen* (temple of the goddess) for a period of one year (from *jatara* to *jatara*). Along with the religious function, another important responsibility is these *guthis* have is to cremate the dead in families that come under their jurisdiction. All the families of Newars will be affiliated to one or the other *guthi* unless the respective *guthi* has excommunicated a particular family. Once excommunicated, that family will not be accepted by any other *guthi* and in this way, a *guthi* also exercises social control over individuals. These *guthis* also have the obligation of organizing a feast for its members during the *jatara*. The number of feasts held depends on the resources that each *guthi* has and is also based on the decision taken by the *guthiyars* of the *guthi*.

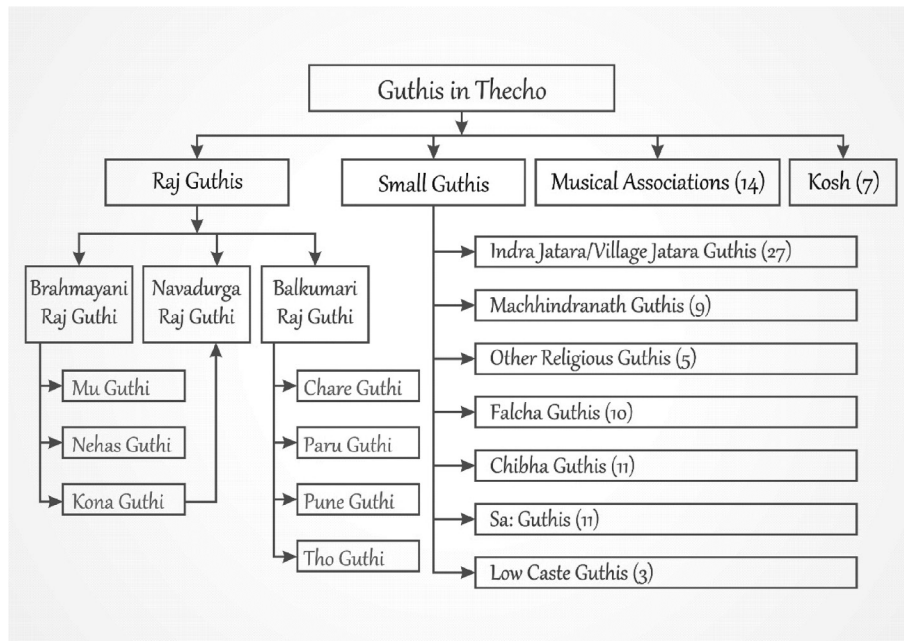


Figure 1: List of Guthis and Groups in Thecho

## Functions of the main *guthis* in Thecho

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### *Social Control*

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The *guthis* hold social control over members, to maintain order in the society. Individuals who do not abide by the norms of the *guthi* or its culture will receive warnings from the *guthi*. The ultimate warning is of being expelled from the *guthi*. The expulsion means his family including all his patrilineal descent will not have any *guthiyars*<sup>2</sup> to cremate their dead in that family. As *guthis* are closed groups, no other *guthi* will accept him as a *guthiyar*. The traditional way of social control has been threatened by the modern practice of taking the dead body for cremation to Pasupathinath temple at Kathmandu. It is considered that taking the dead to incinerate at Pasupathinath temple will give credit in the afterlife of the dead person. In the recent past, due to lack of financial support, most people depended on the *guthis* to cremate their dead. However, opening up of economic opportunities for many and with vehicles available to carry the body, traditional practices are in jeopardy. The *guthi* also functions in the manner that is agreeable to all of its members. It take decision based on the majority votes within the *guthi*. All the members are treated equally either in sharing the food during the feast or contributing for the feast and other expenses.

### *Religious function of the main guthis*

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One of the primary responsibilities of the *guthis* is to organize the village *jatara* for Brahmayini and Balkumari goddesses in *koyelachi* and *choyelachi*, respectively. This takes place every year. The three *guthis* in *koyelachi* get their turn to organize the *jatara* for Brahmayini and the four *guthis* in *choyelachi* to organize the *jatara* for Balkumari.

### *Mask Dance by the Navadurga Guthi*

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One of the important religious functions of the *Navadurgaguthi* is to perform mask dance. The *guthi* has the members from the *Mali* caste group. The *guthi* with the membership of 35 people is unique that, these members are allowed to retire, and the members can be selected by the other *guthiyars*. This is the privilege given for the *guthiyars* as they grow old they may not perform the mask dance. The *guthi* performs mask dance in front of the Navadurga twice in a year. This *guthi* is also responsible for conducting *barah barsa mela* which happens once in twelve years.

These *guthi* members are automatically the members of *kuna guthi*, which is also *guthi* of *Mali* caste group. However, the *kuna guthi* members are not allowed to sit for the feast organized by the *Navadurgaguthiyars*. The mask dance is performed during the village *jatara* also.

### ***Charhe Pooja***

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*Charhe* is the day that comes before *ammai* or no moon day. Keeping track of no moon day and full moon day is important to Newars, as they follow the lunar calendar. It is believed that, on the day of *ammai*, one should not take a head bath unless any one of his/her parents is dead. One of the main *guthis* in *choyelachi* is specially ordained to perform this *charhepooja*. Unlike *koyelachi*, where the three main *guthis* take turn to perform the *pooja* every month on the day of *charhe*, in *choyelachi*, the responsibility lies with *charheguthi* alone. They will go around the village in a stipulated *charhe* track.

### ***Infrastructural Maintenance Responsibility of the Main Guthis***

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The *guthis*, as mentioned above, not only have religious and social/cultural obligations (including organizing feast for its members), but also has the responsibility to maintain the roads, canals, ponds, common resting places, Chibhas and temples.

### ***Maintaining the Roads***

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The main *guthis* who have enough financial resource and work force are assigned jobs such as maintaining the traditional roads (that differentiates the old part of the village from the new). *Mu:guthi* is responsible for maintaining roads from *lachi* to *nakhu khula*, and *konaguthi* from *nehas falcha* to health post and *nehasguthi* from *nehas falcha* to Dhoorikhel road. The *paruguthi* in *choyelachi* is vested with the responsibility of maintaining roads that are used for carrying dead bodies. This *guthi* is also vested with the task of taking care of the road from *papas* to *tanne*.

### ***Maintenance of canal***

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Cleaning the canal from Tikka Bhairav to Thecho village, as it brings water to ponds in the village, is another major maintenance work carried out by the *guthis* in the Thecho. For this, all the *guthis* from *koyelachi* and *choyelachi* will decide a date and communicate it to all the other *guthiyars*. Nearly 593 persons and their family members will gather at one place and divide the distance of the canal according to

the number of *guthiyars* the *guthi* has. All the *guthiyars* are supposed to get their own *tarkari* (which can be munched with *baji* during lunch) and *guthipala* has to arrange for the *baji*. Moreover, the canal can be cleaned in a day with huge work force<sup>3</sup>.

### *Replacing the Log to cross the stream*

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*Muguthi* and *ta: guthi* are assigned the task of replacing the log to help villagers and others cross the stream. These two *guthis* also place the log at two different places of the stream. As in the olden days, the log had to be replaced every year when the stream used to be full. *Ta: guthi* takes care of the log near *deepa* (Crematory ground) and this work will be carried out on the day of Lakshmi *pooja*. On *sithinakha* day, they are supposed to remove the wooden plank from the river and bring it to *nasa falcha* in the *lachi*. Later, when the *falcha* near *deepa* was constructed, they started keeping the log in the *deepafalcha* itself until Lakshmi *pooja* where the old one has to be replaced. The *falcha* near *deepa* was constructed by all the *guthiyars* in Thecho, as cremating the dead was becoming a problem if someone dies during monsoon.

### *Cleaning Ponds and Maintaining the Common Resting Places*

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Apart from the infrastructural responsibilities, the *guthis* also clean ponds in the village and maintain the *falchas*. The *falcha* is a public place either maintained by the main *guthi* or by the small *guthi* functioning exclusively for this purpose. The *falcha* is used by the elders to sit and take rest and it is often used for storing straw and grains. This *falchas* also often house the Bhairav or *hata dyo* during the *jatara* and Indra *jatara*. It is also believed that each *falcha* has its own god who has to be worshipped and maintained regularly.

### *Small Guthis in Thecho*

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Apart from the seven main *guthis* in Thecho, there are small *guthis* functioning exclusively for worshipping the god/goddess during Indra *jatara* and village *jatara*. Another set of small *guthis* are dedicated to worship Machhindranath or Bunga *dyo* and fulfilling certain obligations. Another set of small *guthis* is exclusively for worshipping and maintaining the Buddhist stupas that are locally known as *chibha*. These *guthis* are known as *chibha guthis*. Other small *guthis* are formed for maintaining the common property *falcha*. There are other small *guthis* called *sa: guthis*, formed to generate livelihood opportunity or to meet the day-to-day oil consumption requirement.

**Table 1: Showing the overall governing activities of the guthis in Thecho**

<i>Type of guthi/ group</i>	<i>Function</i>	<i>Koye lachi</i>	<i>Choye lachi</i>	<i>Total</i>
Main <i>guthis</i>	Religious Social control Infrastructural maintenance Cremating the dead Organizing feast	4	4	8
Indra and village <i>jatara</i> Related small <i>guthis</i>	Religious Organizing feast	13	14	27
Other religious small <i>guthis</i>	Religious Organizing feast	2	3	5
<i>Chibha guthis</i> (No. of <i>Chibhas</i> 13)	Taking care of the <i>chibha</i> Organizing feast Religious	7	4	11
<i>Falcha guthis</i> (No. of <i>falchas</i> 22)	Taking care of the <i>falcha</i> Religious Organizing feast	1	9	10
<i>Sa guthis</i>	Creating a livelihood opportunity or oil for the household consumption Religious Organizing feast	3	8	11
Musical Associations	Training youngsters in music Rendering musical services for the villagers Organizing feast Religious and community building process	7	7	14
<i>Saalu guthis/ Deyo lawswa guthis</i>	Religious Organizing feast	9		9
<i>Kosh</i>	Financial cooperation Religious Organizing feast	7		7
'Low' caste <i>guthis</i>	Mainly comprises of 'lower' caste population in the village	3		3

### ***State's Intervention and the dissolution of self-governing system among the Newars***

The Newars are the original inhabitants of the valley, and Prithvi Narayan Shah, from Gorkha, had conquered the valley with ambitions to establish himself as the King

of the then *Nepal Mandala* and other smaller city states spread across what is now the modern state of Nepal. The Gorkha conquest meant that Newars were sidelined politically, militarily<sup>4</sup>, bureaucratically and were confined to crafts, business and agriculture. The failure of the Shah Kings to provide proper administration for the people might have caused the locals to provide more emphasis on self-governance through *guthis*. With external influences brought in by the Shah administration (and in later period by the Rana administration) towards the public administration and governance system in the state, *guthis* became sidelined as informal means of governance. Every *guthi* functions like a small autonomous group with their own rules, ensuring that they cope with the modern times and at the same time, maintaining the traditional aspect of the *guthi* and its culture. The *guthis* are probably the best example of how a society can be run with minimal state involvement and through the mechanism of the cooperative system adopted by people in a society. Apart from political reasons, a few of the informants said that the Newars also experienced shortage of food twenty years ago and women had to wait for festivals to eat meat that used to be provided by their natal house by inviting them to the feast. With the farm production being less, and the import of food products almost impossible, through these *guthis* the Newars would have adopted the practice of sharing food in the form of feast. Without a source of income and any form of incentives for the members, it would have been impossible to facilitate smooth running of a *guthi*. Hence, pieces of land used to be allocated for the *guthi*. Every *guthi* or a group will have a feast at least once a year and the food is allowed to be taken home. In this way, the *guthi* ensured that at least small amount of food is re-distributed among its members.

Another interesting factor is treating everyone as equal. Everyone has the right to vote and raise his or her voice, if he/she disapproves of something. They also try to maintain transparency in its economical transactions. When it comes to responsibilities assigned to the *guthiyars*, they follow it without any bias. The absentees in the meetings or for works called by the *guthi* will be levied a fine amount based on the daily wage labour charges. The religious sanctification associated with the *guthi* adds a religious colour and gives more value to the importance of the *guthi* among the Newars. Apart from this, being *guthiyar* is a matter of social respect and vice-versa. However, the *guthi* is also subjected to changes owing to the changing times. Levy & Rajopadhyaya (1992) says that, a large variety of *guthi* groups existed in the recent past. Older informants could name twenty to thirty *guthis* in case of Thecho. But the list seems to be quickly diminishing as the government took over some of their functions or the government Acts has led to *guthis* losing their lands,

and others disappeared with modernization (Levy & Rajopadhyaya, 1992 pp. 141). The main challenges faced by the *guthi* are modernity, and the rise of individuality. In addition, changing perception about dignity, morality and social honor among youngsters have threatened their culture. Several economic opportunities opening up for younger generations now has minimized the necessity of depending on a group to meet the socio-economic needs.

The state with its two laws<sup>5</sup> has caused damage to the *guthis* more than modernity. Land (Survey and Measurement) Act, 2019 (1963 AD), was enacted to survey lands and provide documents for the same. Prior to this Act, the villagers did not have any documents for their land. When this Act was enacted, the *Naapi* or surveyor started measuring lands in Thecho too. The tenants (a *guthiyar* or a non-*guthiyar*) cultivating in the *guthi* land had created documents in their name. This discrepancy had taken place with or without the knowledge of the tenant. The tenants cultivating the *guthi* land used to give agreed tenancy to the *guthi* and it used to get income prior to the land (Survey and Measurement) Act, 2019 (1963 AD). This law, in fact, had created chaos in the community, made people greedy, as Kathmandu was a capital valley, and everyone was aware of the land value. When the government decided to distribute land documents, everyone seized the opportunity to get *guthi* land for themselves. The law also specifies that if a landowner who is unable to provide any evidence that he/she owns the land, in the form of registration and payment of land revenue, he/she may approach the survey team and it shall paste a notice at main places in the village. Any villager who has objection to issuing the land title to that particular person who claims the land as his/her's can approach the officials. Not being aware of the Act and its provisions might have been the reasons for the *guthis* and villagers to lose the land. The *guthiyars*, who were unable to predict the consequences of this Act, showed negligence in getting or claiming the land titles for the *guthi*. As a result, the *guthis* had to lose their land. The *guthiyars* who had made the land documents on their name claimed that their ancestors had donated the land in order to help the *guthi* function. Another Act called Lands Act, 2021 (1964 AD), was another deathblow to *guthi's* economic source. The Land Act had a ceiling on the land and through fourth amendment to the Act in 1996<sup>6</sup>, it gave tenancy rights, which says the tenants who are cultivating the land will get half the share in the land. That resulted in *guthis* losing half of the land in their possession. The government clearly mentions in the Act that the tenancy rights will not be applicable to tenants cultivating government land. They should have added the *guthi* land under this category to save *guthis*, because *guthi* as a 'group' owns the land (not any individual). The Act should have exempted the *guthi*-owned land from tenancy



rights as it fulfils the purpose of the land reforms Act. Because of the two Acts and the challenges posed by modernity, the *guthi* as a system is on the downward spiral. However, the *guthiyars* were and are trying their best to keep their tradition alive in spite of not having any economic backup. Participating in social activities and maintaining their own family has become a burden for any individual. Elders in the *guthi* also started accepting the changing perceptions.

## Conclusion

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The *guthi* associations and other group formations among the Newars of Kathmandu Valley and its surroundings resemble the formal way of organizing the groups within the norms prescribed by the culture. The norms dictate the obligations, and the people who are being part of these formal voluntary groups respected by the society and value is placed on such perceptions. The *guthi* by its nature tries to minimize the impact of power exercised on each other and maintains equality among its members. The exchange of respect and resources allows its members to form a network, which goes even beyond their kinship networks. The phenomena of group formations among the Newars can be considered as a unique phenomenon, as they managed to institutionalize the groups. Groups are vested with different responsibilities, which the members try to fulfil. The value placed upon the *guthis* and other group formations acts as an inspirational source for the members to continue these groups in the midst of challenges they are facing. Different groups with their own autonomy to function acts as self-governing bodies of the different areas almost neglecting the state's intervention in the day to day activities of the Newar lives. While the changing scenario amongst the Newar society and also within Nepal in terms of governance of the state does tend to go against *Guthis*, the nature of the once mainstream system of governance within *Nepal Mandalash* should be studied as possible reference model for contemporary studies. *Guthis* that still do exist will certainly continue to be an important part of the lives of *Newars*. Transformation of these institutions into systems of contemporary relevance in the larger scale within Nepal will however require immense support from the state.

## Notes

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1. This leads to an intriguing observation, if the *guthis* originated during the lichhavi period, they got manifested by reinforcing themselves by adding the value of identity and pride to be associated with *guthi* among the Newars which also would have escalated by the necessity of governing themselves as the people are not getting enough support to manage the day to day activities.

2. A rich family can be able to manage to cremate the dead, either by managing the resources in the village or by the taking the dead body to the Pasupathinath. However, the social embarrassment of cremating your dead without the support of *guthi* is high. The poor family finds it hard to manage the resources for cremating the dead.
3. The *guthiyars* will be joined by the respective family members, women serving beverages and men participating in the assigned work of cleaning the canal.
4. During the fieldwork the informants expressed that it is considered as great achievement to be a bureaucrat or joining military as the Newars were excluded historically from these jobs.
5. See also Land (Survey and Measurement) Act, 2019 (1963 AD), The Lands Act, 2021 (1964 AD) and the *guthi* Corporation Act, 2033 (1976 AD).
6. In the Kathmandu post, Jagat Basne while writing the article called 'Feudalism is alive and well' states that, "The People's Movement of 1990 reintroduced multi-party democracy to the Kingdom of Nepal, bringing new hope. In 1996, amendments to the original land Act stipulated that any tenant farmer who had cultivated a piece of land continuously and was registered as a tenant in the landlord's land certificate, would be given the right of tenancy and the right to receive half the land they farmed. As a majority of the tenants were unregistered, landlords reacted predictably by evicting them from their land and refusing to grant secure tenancy contracts".

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