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## **PROCESS OF COMMUNITY BUILDING THROUGH BAJA KHALAS AMONG THE NEWARS OF NEPAL**

### ***Abstract***

*After the family and kin group, the responsibility of socializing the younger generations to be the citizens of any community rests on the society. Different societies engage different means to socialize its members. In the same fashion, this paper analyses how Baja Khalas contribute their part in the process of community building among the Newars of Thecho village. Khala is a voluntary group formation observed among Newars of Thecho Village in Nepal.*

**Keywords:** *Community Building, Newars, Musical Associations, Khalas*

**Received:** 27<sup>th</sup> May 2019

**Revised:** 29<sup>th</sup> June 2020

**Accepted:** 20<sup>th</sup> Aug 2020

### **Introduction**

The fight with nature for survival might have led to human interdependence. As many scholars observed the formation of groups, which in turn led to the formation of a society itself. Robin Fox states, “all primates developed society as a weapon in the struggle for survival...in the larger groups, everyone is to some extent everyone else’s responsibility” (Fox 1967: 29). Traditional institutions, such as family, marriage, kinship and caste, are prominent examples for this. Once the groups are formed, the members interact and the interactions give rise to repeated observed patterns, and these patterns emerge as a social norm leading, these groups to institutionalize themselves. Though these institutions are subjected to change from time to time, one or the other form of structure continues to exist against the odds posed by modernization. The continuity is the result of such groups having high values and the necessity to sustain them, no matter how they change their structure and function on a day-to-day basis.

Different societies form different groups, which are unique given their culture. The group formations among the Newar is not the first of its kind. Lowie (1966) explains different kinds of ‘sodalities’, such as feasting societies

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of Omaha Indians, the Chinese have cooperative loan societies, merchant and craft guilds, associations for visiting the sick, watching the crops, praying for the dead, making pilgrimages to their sacred mountains, maintaining the village temple etc., He further gives us examples of different sodalities, such as men's societies, secret societies barring the other gender or non members from participating in it, exclusive clubs (Ibo men's club excludes slaves as well as women), age classes for bachelors and spinsters, economic sodalities to help each other in the trade and merchandis, etc., One can boil down to the argument by saying each and every human being who lives in a society is a member of one or more groups. The sodalities help to address the issues which other traditional, institutionalized groups, such as family, kinship and caste, failed to address. It is more like what Malinowski (1960) explains, 'The need determines the function'. Culture paves way to decide the kind of social institutions that are feasible in a society (or vice-versa). It further depends on historical, social and geographical factors that a society experiences.

Anthropologists and sociologists who are interested in understanding social organization of any community find it hard to abstain from studying, evident and explicit social groupings. The studies undertaken by Evans-Pitchard (1956) on the Nuers and Malinowski (1922) on the Trobriand Islanders, it was evident that the anthropologist had no choice but to focus on traditional social institutions formed based on kinship ties that were prevalent in the society. However, in the changing context, anthropology does not provide enough apparatus to understand other group formations that are not based on kinship ties. In this context, understanding *guthi* amongst the Newars poses a challenge. Robin Fox quotes 'blood, as the adage has it, is thicker than water' (1967: 15). So far, anthropologists perceived blood as an important factor to study, but to an extent they failed to recognize the importance of water along with it. Water may not be as important as blood. Nonetheless, water is essential to understand a society as a whole. It should be noted that it is never only the kinship that helped societies to survive. Along with kinship ties, a strong presence of non-kinship ties is also instrumental in societies' survival. Robert Parkin says, 'The development of phenomena such as the fragmentation of parental roles through new reproductive technologies and same-sex succession through adoption raises the possibility of a society in which relationships need no longer be defined at all in ways that make explicit reference to kinship. Of a society which, therefore, does not need to rely on conventional procreative methods for its continuity. Although an organization forward exclusively in this way would be an innovation, however, human society has a long history of relationship formed in other ways than kinship, names through informal associations or networks and formal contractual obligations these, of course, are alternatives' (1997: 128-129). It is not just alternatives to kinship or family institutions, but some communities tend to form certain social institutions that will serve as additional institutions to the existing ones. As per people's need, new social institutions emerge and continue to survive over a period of time when the groups formed are institutionalized and become part of a culture.

**Guthis among the Newars:**

Newars of Nepal are considered *janjati* (Shrestha 1998-99; Sunder 2000-01), which means natives or original inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley. *Guthi* (a group formation) is a unique social and cultural factor that can also be considered as an additional social institution of the Newars in Kathmandu valley (see also Quigley 1985). Nepali (1965) opines that the term '*guthi*', might have originated from the Sanskrit term '*gosthi*'. Levy & Rajopadhyaya write that, Newar society has miscellaneous associations of people formed for various special reasons called *guthi*. The word is derived from Sanskrit term *gosthi*, meaning 'assembly, company, fellowship'. Levy also cites about D.R. Regmi's work stating inscriptions from 'licchavi' period suggesting some of the early functions of these *gosthi*. Some groups were formed for the purpose of providing drinking water to travelers, some for the maintenance of water conduits, and others were given the responsibility of maintenance of temples and palaces. The early inscriptions also refer to state donating agricultural land to support the *guthi* materially. Such land is called "*guthi* land" and is one of the fundamental kinds of land tenure in Nepal (1992: 140).

There are various *guthis* such as Raj *guthis* (enjoyed the patronage of the king), Main *guthis* (responsible to organize the village carnival and cremate the dead of its members), Sa *guthis* (formed to establish oil extracting mills), Chibha *guthi* (to take care of the chibhas), Falcha *guthi* (to take care of the falchas), Salu *guthi* (to offer prayers on the first day of every month to the matseyandranath) and so on in the Thecho village. The groups are formed for different purposes. The number of members varies from one *guthi* to another, but the function and the structure of the *guthi* remain the same. The larger the group, the bigger the responsibilities a *guthi* will have and more number of people sharing the work burden through division of labour. Here in the Thecho village, the *guthi* affiliates geographically to either the lower part (*koye*) or upper part (*choye*). The *guthi* will have names based on the roles they play. Naming is derived from historical significance or can be named after the gods/goddess, for which the *guthi* has an essential role to play in worshipping.

The membership into *guthi* is only through inheritance. 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 role-players can change, but the roles continue.

**Other Group Formations among Newars:**

*Guthis* are not the only group formations among the Newars of Nepal. There are various group formations such as *Khalas* (Voluntary group formation), *Bhajan Mandals*, *Kosh* (traditional financial cooperatives), *Jhar*

*Goo* (working groups formed to help each other in the agricultural fields), *Pucha* (Voluntary group which is not institutionalized and majorly governed by the modern rules). Apart from the traditional group formations, Newars of Thecho village are also famous for forming different groups which are modern in nature and also purpose based groups such as Two Star Club (which politically motivates and organizes football matches to attract youth of the village), *Jetha Nagarik Samman* (A group formed by few individuals to organize the elders who have celebrated their *janku* as a mark of respect for their age) and many more modern groups.

Many Newari scholars wrote extensively on the *guthis*. However, few focused on understanding the other group formations such as *Khalas*, *kosh*, *Jhar Goo*, *Pucha* and other associations. This paper tries to understand the community building process through the *Baja Khalas* (Musical associations) prevalent among the Newars of Thecho village. *Khala*<sup>1</sup> is a group whose membership is based on voluntary participation. *Khala* is also loosely used term among the Newars to refer simply to group of people. Its membership is not necessarily through inheritance. Nonetheless, some members can join after their father's demise to continue the family tradition. Apart from the difference in membership pattern, *Khala* is also a group that fulfils almost all the responsibilities as that of the *guthi*. Situated in a particular area, they teach how to play musical instruments for the members who associate themselves with the musical association and to other villagers who show interest in learning how to play the particular instrument which the *Baja Khala* is dealing with.

Music for Newars is not only amusement but also a mark of celebration and cultural identity (see also Rana 1990; Sharma & Wegner 1995; Tingey 1995). It is popularly believed that, the Newars who are original inhabitants of the Kathmandu valley was conquered by Prithvi Narayan Shah in 1766 and the subsequent rulers of shah dynasty started to suppress the Newari culture. Music being one of the important trait of the Newari culture it can be understood that the rigorous practice of music and the interest to join the musical associations as a means of resistance towards the cultural suppression that continues till date in one form or the other. Music is also another means that the Newars employ to ascertain their Newari Identity.

Newari children are encouraged to learn any of the musical instruments by joining the *Khalas*. There are twelve registered musical associations (see table 1), under the supervision of the Thecho *Baja Khala samrakshana samithi* in Thecho village. Apart from these twelve, there is one more un-registered female<sup>2</sup> musical organization. Both the new and old people who associate themselves with the *Khalas* participate in the procession for almost all the village festivals. It was observed during the study that people who affiliate themselves with the *Baja Khala* show interest in participating in the procession with that particular *Baja Khala* which are mostly based on a particular geographic location.

Each association focuses on specific instruments to teach and to play in the village procession. The *Baja Khalas* were believed to be started by economically well-off families in the olden days. Some of the families who are not economically sound are still trying to maintain this *Baja Khalas*. The families who were traditionally responsible for managing the *Baja Khalas* are highly respected in the society for the service they render to the community. The head of the musical association, who manages the affairs of the *Khala*, is referred to as *khaji*. The house which hosts the *Baja Khalas* are called *Khala chhen*. When the *Baja Khalas* feel that they need to recruit more people in the *Khala*, they call for a teaching session where those who want to learn playing the instrument which that *Khala* is specialized in can enroll themselves in the class. The class lasts for five months or more, based on the instrument that the students learn. The elders who are good at playing the instrument will act as *gurus*, and those who play well but are not good enough to become *gurus* will assist the *gurus* in teaching the children.

Generally, children within the locality join, because it is in the same *tole* or their father or kindred is associated with it. Sometimes, it maybe because of the pride those members feel being associated with the *Khala* situated in their place of residence. However, there are instances where difference of opinion crops up. In one such incident, a particular *Baja Khala* emphasized on learning *dhimme* (a big drum), but one student wanted to learn *basuri* (flute). Therefore, he went ahead and enrolled himself in another *Baja Khala* situated in some other locality.

Once the *Baja Khala* gives a call for class, people who are interested will approach the *khaji* and express interest in learning to play the instrument. The classes were organized either on mornings or in the evenings, which allow the students to carry out their daily routine. Those students who are interested to learn music are expected to come with a *kisili* (meaning small mud lid used to light an oil lamp for ritual purpose) that comprises *kishaliñ* (items such as a coin, rice and betel nut to be kept in the *kisili* for worshipping the god before learning music). The *kisili* is kept at the *Khala chhen* every day till the classes are over. The students learn the musical instruments only after worshipping the *kisili*. The *gurus* will be offered *guru pa* during classes. The *guru pa* is organized either by a group of students or by a single student, who will call the guru to their house to treat him with food and show respect for the musical knowledge they receive from the *gurus*. On completion of the class, the students provide *bettle* (a white cloth which is a mark of respect gifted to anyone) to show respect and thank the guru. These students continue to respect the *gurus*, even during routine encounters<sup>3</sup>in the streets. This method of socialization for children is effective as they learn by seeing their elders how to respect their master. In the case of death of a guru, the musical association and the students who learnt to play music will render their musical services during the death procession of the guru as a mark of respect.

Every student should offer four kinds of prayers to *nasadyo*<sup>4</sup> (the god of music, dance, and drama) while they learn music in the *Baja Khala*. The prayers offered to the *nasadyo* are *kshama pooja*, *bapooja*, *khupooja* and *pirnew pooja*. *Kshama pooja* is considered the first one done by the students before learning any musical instrument. The *ba* (indicates half) *pooja* is done after completing first half of the classes. The *khupooja* is believed to be done when students finish or attend  $\frac{3}{4}$ th of the classes while *khupooja*<sup>5</sup> has to be done by stealing a rooster from the neighbor's house. If they are unable to do it, they should at least steal a rooster from their own house and conduct the *pooja*. It is believed that if one steals from his neighbor's house, he will learn the instrument much better. *Pirnew pooja* is done at end of the classes. Unless this *pooja* is done, students who are learning instruments are not supposed to play music outside the classroom. After the *pirnew pooja*, they are free to play music anywhere. If the master feels that students have done well in learning a musical instrument, he will take them in a procession to show their talent to the villagers. If not, with the end of the *pirnew pooja*, they can simply conclude the class. Most of the people believe that unless one is committed to finishing the musical classes, he should not enroll himself for the same. Otherwise, those who discontinue the class tend to get mentally disturbed. This might be a belief developed in order to inculcate fear among people so that they stay committed.

People who learn musical instruments at a *Baja Khala* will naturally become the members of the group and continue to be its members their entire lifetime. Often these are the groups that even the students' fathers and uncles associate themselves with and learned playing instruments from. The members have to take part in the procession taken out as part of village festival when called by the group. The *Baja Khalas* take part in the procession by playing musical instruments. Each year, one *Baja Khala* will take the responsibility of organizing the *mataya* (a village carnival held on the next day of *saparu*). The other *Baja Khalas* compete to win a trophy in a competition that expects the *Baja Khalas* to be innovative. The subjects generally are preserving culture, political satire on current Nepal politics, people claiming to re-establish the Newar rule for Newar people, awareness on social issues and others. Whenever the members are summoned to participate in the procession, it is expected that the *khajji* provide *samaybaji* for the members, but it is not mandatory. The members sit and socialize after the musical procession while having refreshments provided by the *khajji*. The children and the young learners are given primordial position in the procession. The *Baja Khalas* take pride in the number of young learners participating in musical services they render during the village festivals. Each *Khala* has a certain dress code to be followed to stand out from the other *Baja Khalas*. The repeated meetings of the members of the *Baja Khala* ensure the frequent social interaction among the members. The informants told that on an average at least 50% of the members attend to the call given by the *Baja Khalas*.

Once a year, on *godda jatara* day, all the *Baja Khalas* go for *sas pooja* to any nearest religious place (a religious picnic). The members are expected to contribute for the feast in the form of *lasa*, which includes one egg, two *mana* of *baji*, and *pooja* plate for worshipping the god/goddess. The meat expenses for the feast should be borne by all the members of the group. The *khajji* will take the responsibility of organizing the feast for which every member works, either cooking or serving, and they spend the whole day enjoying the picnic. The members contribute if the musical instruments to be mended. If it involves more money, then they seek the help of Village Developmental Committee or the Thecho *Baja Khala samrakshana samithi*.

While explaining the importance of music, one of the informants said, 'what is life and celebration without music' and the villagers consider learning one or the other musical instrument as a symbol of respect. Children who are good at playing instruments are appreciated and praised. It is also observed that almost all the households have one or the other musical instruments. It is a matter of pride for the Newars to play musical instruments in the social sphere.

The *Baja Khalas* though vary from *guthi* in its membership pattern reflects the social organization of the society. At least once in a year the *Baja Khala* organizes classes. The membership of the *Khala* is kept constant by recruiting students time and again. The members were not only taught the music but also these interactions act as a socializing process. The *Baja Khalas* act as an additional socializing agent along with Family, kin members and the modern classrooms in the schools. Introducing children to the *Baja Khalas* benefit them to learn one of the important traits of the Newari culture along with preparing them to accept their future roles in the society as potential *guthi* members. Abiding and respecting the elders is one of the key component of functioning of *guthis* in particular and society in general among the Newars. The *Baja Khalas* ensure that the youngest members of the community get acclimatized with this and train them slowly to be the citizens of the society. The members are expected to answer the *Baja Khalas* during the musical procession organized either for the village festival or for any of the member's family's life cycle ritual.

**Table 1: Details of *Khalas* or Musical Associations in Thecho**

No.	Name of the Musical association	Locality or ward	Members in the past	Members during the study	Caste groups allowed	Main instrument thought	No. of gurus in the association	No. of musical instruments	Classes organized so far
<b><i>Choyelachi</i>(Upper part of the village)</b>									
1.	Malligaon Dapa <i>Khala</i> :	Ward I <i>Choyel achi</i>	Less than the present	100	Though there is no prohibition for others, so far only malligaon people showed interest	Khin	6 gurus	2 khin, 2 dhas, 2 bushya, 1 tha and 2 kalmulcha	Three classes
2.	Malligaon Dhime <i>Khala</i> :	Ward I <i>Choyel achi</i>	Less than the present	107	Only people from jayapu community	Dhimme	2 gurus and three assistant gurus	7 dhimme and 4 bhushya	Three classes
3.	Ta: Nani Basuri <i>Khala</i> :	Ward II <i>Choyel achi</i>	45	90	All caste groups but during study only maharjan caste group students were seen	Basuri and Khin	Guru has been hired from the Kathmandu	2 khin, 1 madal, 45 basuri, 1 harmonimum, 1 babucha and one taa	4 classes for basuri and 2 classes for Khin
4.	Nuche Dapa <i>Khala</i> :	Ward II <i>Choyel achi</i>	More than 100	71	All caste groups are allowed	Khin	Three gurus	Khin, dah, dhan, dholak Babhucha, ta and Basuri	Not mentioned
5.	Kutujol Basuri <i>Khala</i> :	Ward III <i>Choyel achi</i>	30-32	50	All caste groups are allowed	Basuri	Two gurus	10 basuri, 2 khen, 1 dholak, 1 ta and 1 bhabucha	Five classes
6.	Khaacha Dhime <i>Khala</i> :	Ward III <i>Choyel achi</i>	15-20	80	All caste groups are allowed	Dhimme	Two gurus	4 dhimme and 2 bhushya	Three classes
7.	Sikhache Dapa <i>Khala</i> :	Ward IV <i>choyela chi</i>	More than the present	30-40	All the caste groups are allowed	Basuri and khin	4-5 gurus	10-12 Basuri, 3 khin, 4 dha, 1 bhushya and 1 ta.	Three classes
<b><i>Koyelachi</i>(Lower part of the village)</b>									
8.	Brahmayini Basuri <i>Khala</i> :/ Mankha <i>Khala</i> :	Ward V <i>koyelachi</i>	Not sure	More than 100	All caste groups are allowed. <i>Mali</i> caste group active participation is observed	Basuri	Four gurus	Unable to tell	Five classes

***Contd...***



9.	Saraswathi Dhime <i>Khala</i> :	Ward IV <i>koyelac hi</i>	27 mem bers	50-60 memb ers	All the caste groups	Dhimme	2 gurus from maali caste	4 dhimme and 2 bhushya	Three classes
10.	Kushiko Basuri <i>Khala</i> :	Ward IV <i>koyelac hi</i>	More than the prese nt	30-35	All the caste groups	Basuri	5 gurus for basuri one for khin and one for harmon ium and one for Tabala	40 basuri, 3 khin, 3 harmonium, 5 pairs of tabala, 1 dholak, 3 mada1, 2 ta, 2 jaali, 1 dhaa and bhushya	Unable to recall
11.	Navadurga Dhime <i>Khala</i> : <sup>vi</sup>	Ward VI <i>koyelac hi</i>	4-5	22	Only <i>Mali</i> caste groups are allowed	Dhimme	One guru	2 dhimmes and 2 bhushya	Two classes
12.	Neché Twa: Dapa <i>Khala</i> :	Ward VII <i>koyelac hi</i>	42	45	All the caste groups are allowed	Khin	Two gurus	3 khin, and four Ta	Five classes
13.	Thecho Messa Dhimme <i>Khala</i> (not registered and denied to be part of organizing the Mathaya because of lack of human resources)	Ward VI <i>koyelac hi</i>	10	10	All the members are from <i>Mali</i> caste group	Dhimme	Two gurus	2 dhimmes and 1 Bhusha	One class

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Plate 1: TL: *Baja Khalas* who are about to conduct *mathaya jatara*;  
 TR: *Mankha Khala* offering their musical service during the Village carnival;  
 BL: *Navadurga Dhime Khala* and *Thecho Messa Dhimme Khala* rendering their services during the Buddha Prunima procession  
 BR: *Baja Khalas* rendering their services for the *Janku* (Lifecycle ritual) celebrations



### Notes

1. The group which has the obligation to worship a clan goddess and also the members are linked by common ancestry are sometimes called as depcha guthi or depcha khala. This is called so because, the depcha guthi tend to break when they grow bigger in size or when they have conflicts between their members. Or any particular family might decide that they do not want to go along with the other families to worship their clan goddess. They have the freedom to offer prayers individually, which makes the participation of the family a voluntary so some people refer this group as depchakhala and as all the members by birth becomes the members of this group (by inheritance) this group is called as depcha guthi.
2. It should be noted here that, learning music by the women is strictly prohibited. In the recent days, as a part of social movements women started to question this and women from Mali Caste group in Thecho formed this “Thecho Messa Dhimme khala”. Performance by the women members are considered to be attractive for the political rallies. The members of this group get invitation to play the Dhimme in other villages as well.
3. It is observed during the fieldwork that the old teachers were greeted and shown respect in the form of offering tea and other items the guru might want. Once a guru always stays a guru and commands respect from the students and other villagers as well.
4. Who is equivalent to Nataraj (the god of music and dance in south India)

- 5 . Thieving generally is considered as most unacceptable behaviour in Newar community. A person who is seeking his livelihood by thieving is often looked down and he is not respected socially.

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