



# Volunteering Practices in Traditional Institutions for Deliberative Governance

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# **Volunteering Practices in Traditional Institutions for Deliberative Governance**

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-Mahesh Nath Parajuli, Suresh Gautam, Lasata Joshi, Urmila Chaudhary

## Table of Contents

Background Chapter .....	4
Guthi in the Newar Community .....	6
Barghar in the Tharu Community .....	8
<i>Guthi</i> and <i>Barghar</i> : Exploring their roles in Governance .....	9
Understanding the Community Context .....	11
Research Approach .....	13
Key Volunteering Activities.....	14
Barghar as a Community Leader .....	15
Community Development Initiatives of Barghar .....	16
Co-Financing Volunteering Activities .....	19
Guthi- Traditional Governance Mechanism .....	21
Social Contract with Local Government.....	25
Resistance from Federal Government.....	29
Volunteerism during Covid 19 .....	30
Conclusion and Recommendation.....	31
Recommendations.....	32

## Background Chapter

Volunteerism in Nepal has evolved and expanded from the traditional practices and cultural heritages of ethnically homogenous communities living in a certain territory. These activities are embedded in the everyday life of people and in strategies that they have developed to address social and cultural problems. Traditional forms of volunteerism in Nepal have been practised as a form of social contract within the community and beyond. Such social contracts have been developed and shaped through the relationship between state and non-state actors, especially with volunteers from different communities of Nepal.

The draft version of the National Volunteering Policy 2021 (Youth and Sport Ministry, 2021) emphasizes the present context of volunteering in the Federal Republic of Nepal<sup>1</sup>. Nepal's new national volunteering policy envisions volunteerism as contributing to the functions of deliberative governance, such as formation of community planning, increasing people's participation and leading socially just activities (p.2).

The governance system in Nepal has been in transition from a central-unified system to a federal local level of governance. The constitution of Nepal 2015 has a provision to have three tiers of government: federal, provincial (7) and local (753). Within the context of federal republic government, there is also an aim to preserve and continue traditional forms of volunteerism alongside the more 'formal' activities within local government for deliberative governance (p.1).

Among many traditional and cultural volunteering practices in Nepal, *Guthi*<sup>2</sup> and *Barghar* are still being practised in the Newar and Tharu communities, respectively. *Guthi* and

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<sup>1</sup> According to the 2015 constitution of Nepal, the country is constituted as a federal democratic republic governance system with a three-tiered governance structure: federal, provincial, and local. Local governance units include municipalities, rural municipalities, and districts councils. The election of all these three tiers of government was held? and decision making, and resource allocation is decentralised.

<sup>2</sup>Guthi is derived from the Sanskrit word "Gosthi" which originally referred to "an association of persons responsible for the management of religious and philanthropic land endowments." Guthi land endowments are/ were made with the objective of acquiring religious merits (Hindu belief: a

*Barghar* have strong social recognition, developed through the practices and experiences of many generations and transmitted informally to the new generation. Volunteerism under *Guthi* and *Barghar* is a social and cultural activity intended to enhance the community and society. Within this system, individual choice is considered less important than the broader social and cultural goals. *Guthi* and *Barghar* tend to be characterised as mutual aid and self-help systems in which individuals and communities work together for the common good, addressing shared individual and community problems with cooperation.

In the context of federal governance, *Guthi* and *Barghar* activities directly support the functions of the local government in the planning and implementation of development projects. Roles and responsibilities are shared with local government in this respect. The Constitution of Nepal 2015 has allocated power to local governance units to ensure good and deliberative governance. The aim is to encourage people's equal and easy access to services through enhancing local participation (Government of Nepal, 2015). Increased participation in turn enhances the decision making of those people responsible for setting their priorities for community development. Local governance also provides opportunities for community involvement in the planning and implementation of development projects. In this regard, *Guthi* and *Barghar's* role are aligned with activities led by local government. These local volunteering practices have been resurrected with the decentralization of governance into the three tiers of government. In this regard, roles of *Guthi* and *Barghar* are being viewed in relation to their role in facilitating deliberative governances.

Traditionally, *Guthi* and *Barghar* tended to focus on cultural and religious volunteering

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person gains religious merits if they donate land). Similarly, in the Newar community, people would donate land for specific purposes such as maintenance of a temple, the construction of a rest house or facilitating religious rituals or festivals. Throughout history, especially many rulers and commoners have made *Guthi* land endowments in various parts of the country. However, the majority of *Guthi* endowments is concentrated in the Kathmandu valley and in eastern and central Terai. Over time, *Guthi* has become mainly associated with the land tenure system is now limited to a type of land tenure system. Among the Newars, *Guthi* still predominantly denotes a social institution that determines the rights and obligations of Newar towards their community. In this research, the term *Guthi* describes this institution as practised in the Newar community.

activities. In federal Nepal, their roles have been widening to encompass a variety of community development activities.

This chapter aims to explore the social contract of *Guthi* and *Barghar* as traditional social institutions that are engaged in facilitating/organising volunteering in their communities and interacting with local governments as members of self-help and mutual aid groups. In this new policy context, members of *Guthi* and *Barghar* are in essence both volunteers and members of self-help and mutual aid groups. The chapter focuses on this new form of social contract in terms of a) the initiatives of the local government to bring *Guthi* and *Barghar* as key volunteering practices/local institutions for shared decision making and b) the interests and aspirations of the *Guthi* and *Barghar* members towards deliberative decision making in the context of community development, especially natural resource management. It should be noted that traditionally and in the present day, the contribution of the *Guthi* and *Barghar* has tended to be cultural rather than economic (for example, livelihood related activities).

### ***Guthi in the Newar Community***

Historical accounts suggest that *Guthi*, as an institution dates to the 5<sup>th</sup> Century. It has been an integral part of social, economic, cultural, and religious aspects of life for the Newar community in Kathmandu Valley (Pradhananga, Shrestha, & Dee, 2010). The *Guthi* system also plays a part in other ethnic and religious contexts, particularly with regards to the preservation of cultural heritage such as temples<sup>3</sup>. The *Guthi* Act 1976<sup>4</sup> refers to *Guthi* as an offering or contribution made by an individual, rather than a system or institution:

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3. The *Guthi* system exists in various parts of Nepal but is now limited to a type of land tenure. Only among the Newars does *Guthi* play the role of a social institution, determining the rights and obligations of Newars towards their community.

4. The Guthi Corporation Act, 2033 (1976) mostly manages state owned *Guthi* and describes various types of *Guthi* management by cooperation.

"a *Guthi* endowed by any philanthropist with religious or philanthropic motives through relinquishment of title to movable or immovable property or any other income-yielding property or funds for the performance of religious functions, construction and maintenance of temples, wells, ponds, libraries, hospitals" (p.2-3).

In this report, *Guthi* refers to a community-based mutual aid group and an informal local governance group. Significantly, it is based around a specific caste/ethnic group, rather than being open to all<sup>5</sup>. The Newars are indigenous to the Kathmandu Valley, having their own language (Nepal Bhasa) and customary socio-economic hierarchy (within the Hindu and Buddhist religious system), rules and institutions. Historically, they have lived in compact settlements with multi-storey architecture, mostly involved in agriculture, trade, arts and crafts. *Guthi* is considered to be an integral part of preserving and developing their social and cultural practices.

Since ancient times, the Newars established *Guthi* to manage different aspects of life, including culture, tradition, rites and rituals and economic development. Many *Guthi* practices have continued to this day. However, the forms and functions of *Guthi* have changed as a result of urbanization. As *Guthiyar* (members of *Guthi*) spend more time working away from the community, they have less time to engage in religious rites and practices. In addition, the transmission of *Guthi* knowledge has been affected by the increased use of Nepali and English, particularly by the younger generation. Although there

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<https://www.lawcommission.gov.np/en/archives/category/documents/prevaling-law/statutes-acts/the-guthi-corporation-act-2033-1976>

<sup>5</sup> *Guthi* started with occupations of the people in the prehistoric time which evolved in/around the caste-based organisation with hierarchies and shaped by the practices of that group. There are hierarchies of caste system within Newar community and *Guthis* are situated in the caste-based system under patriarchal structure, vis the *Guthiyar* (member of the *Guthi*) is all male (inherited from father to the eldest son). Traditionally Newar settlements in Kathmandu valley were set on the caste system and thus *Guthi* functioned in a close group of people but gradually increased in migration, influence of media, changing nature of work have changed the functions of *Guthi*.



has been a decrease in religious and cultural functions, *Guthi's* relevance to broader public and civic activities has continued.

There are still around 1000 *Guthi* groups in the Kathmandu valley, and they have come to be seen as an inseparable part of the valley's natural, cultural, and intangible heritage. Almost all the monuments, temples, Bihars and Chaityas (Buddhist Monasteries) in the Kathmandu Valley have been maintained by generations of *Guthiyars*. *Guthi* functions encompass family and community life. At the family level, *Guthi* is applied to practices around birth and death and the worship of family deities. At the community level, *Guthi* functions include maintenance of the infrastructure of the temple and its surroundings; performance of rituals; construction and preservation of ponds and water resources.

### ***Barghar in the Tharu Community***

Tharu are indigenous people settled in the southern plains of Nepal with their own language, customs and traditions. They are mostly involved in agriculture and livestock farming and live in clustered settlements. Traditionally, a Tharu community is led by a *Barghar*. Each year, the community people select or elect a community leader, known as a *Barghar*. This person is not only an individual but represents an institution that unites all the people in the community in working together to address their social, environmental and economic concerns. The functions of the *Barghar* are critical to managing and governing the community and its affairs (Khadka, 2016).

The *Barghar* serves as a head or executive, ensuring the implementation of rules and decisions in the community, assisted by the *Chaukidar* (watchman), *Guruwa* (religious healer) and *Kulapani Chaukidar* (Canal watchman). These members are also selected or elected by local community people to facilitate the governance activities of the community by coordinating with local government authorities. Within the context of the village, *Barghar* creates a sense of belonging. A *Barghar* demonstrates their leadership in the governance of the community by preserving their cultural heritage and natural resources. *Barghar* are well respected and recognized by the Tharu community.

The *Barghar* system is based on kinship: all the members of a household in the community automatically become members but males take on the leadership roles. *Barghar* is one of the most popular traditions in Southern Western Nepal in Tharu communities. However, its influence is being undermined by other institutions such as schools, services such as the police and health centres. For example, the police are replacing the role of *Barghar* in managing conflicts and disputes at community level. Other changes that are impacting *Barghar* functions include changing livelihood patterns, the decreasing value of agriculture, and out-migration of Tharu people who prefer to earn a wage in nearby cities.

Like *Guthi*, *Barghar* is patriarchal in its selection and election process. However, females can participate in volunteering work from within their households. Unlike the *Guthi* system, *Barghar* is not confined to the Tharu communities; people from other castes and cultures can belong to the *Barghar* system if they live within the same geographical boundaries. It is therefore more inclusive compared to the *Guthi* system.

*Barghar* as an organizational entity is informally recognized by the local government and by other development-related organizations such as NGOs and CBOs at the local level. These NGOs and CBOs do not begin their activities/projects in the community without the prior approval of the *Barghar*. In the changing context of federalism, although it has not gained formal recognition from the state, at the local level, *Barghar* is valued for its role in deliberative governance, participating in planning and implementation. In decentralised Nepal, *Barghar* is increasingly bridging the divide between the community and local government. The *Barghars* communicate public concerns to the local government and conversely, pass on messages from the local government to the community. Overall activities that are led by *Barghar* are voluntary to maintain the order and stability of the community.

### *Guthi and Barghar: Exploring their roles in Governance*

Historically, both *Guthi* and *Barghar* have played a part in informal governance whilst also being valued in the formal governance system for their role in the social and cultural development of the community. In shifting from a centrally controlled unitary system to a

federal system, the local government has been to encourage proactive and deliberative governance. This includes community meetings, committees and the planning and implementation of local development activities such as natural resource management (e.g., forest usage, land management, water resource management and preservation) and cultural and social activities, such as regular music, dance and drama events.

*Guthi* and *Barghar* members also work closely with the local government as volunteers either to solve local problems or to develop procedural models of deliberative governance. The relationship between local government and these traditional institutions is therefore a collaborative one. Spaces for deliberative governance are created in the community that maximize participation. The combination of political legitimacy and deliberative decision-making means that *Guthi* and *Barghar* members have a sense of ownership. This helps to ensure that development activities and projects are sustained and sustainable. The strong sense of belonging increases this sense of ownership. In this model, the deliberative capacities of local informal institutions like *Guthi* and *Badghar* are strengthened and can influence the micro system of the state when it comes to planning and implementing development activities such as natural resource management.

The involvement of *Guthi* and *Barghar* also legitimatizes state activities and therefore increases community support. These institutions with their elaborated system and practices show that local people have the capacity to create and participate in deliberative governance mechanisms. They are examples of self-organization and self-governance. The financial resources that the state allocates to the communities are managed by the *Guthi* and *Barghar*. In some cases, the local government provides resources to protect specific activities or sites of cultural importance. For example, Lalitpur metropolitan city has allocated a budget for the *Guthi* to preserve their musical traditions and their temples. This arrangement can be seen as mutual financing and resource sharing between *Guthi* and local government.

This informal decentralized system of local governance existed under the unitary system of state governance. However, in the new federal Nepal, there have been attempts to give more formal recognition to traditional governance models by increasing the participation of *Barghar* and *Guthi* in the planning and implementation of their projects. This new form of

social contract has led to the emergence of an innovative form of partnership between state and community to solve local problems. It has also resulted in the formal inclusion of volunteering activities within the state's plans. Sometimes, the community identifies problems and addresses them without state support. Examples are dam construction, pond dredging, temple maintenance, repair of musical instruments and tree planting. Such tasks are done because the community sees them as in their own interest, in the sense that they directly improve their community.

### Understanding the Community Context

For the purposes of this case study, the *Barghar* from Rajapur Municipality in Bardiya District in the Lumbini Province of Nepal was selected. The municipality is divided into 10 wards covering an area of 127 square kilometres with a population of 60,000. About 80% of the population are Tharu. The remaining percentage comprises Brahmin, Chhetris, Magar and Dalits from Hindu and Christian religious groups. Some people in and around the municipality follow the Muslim religion. The area is known for its fertile land and about 80% of the population engage in farming.

The research took place in ward 9, consisting of 215 households. Ishwarijung is near the Indian border where the majority of the population are Tharu. Although *Barghar* originates from within the Tharu community and traditionally only men could be members, today anyone, irrespective of ethnicity and gender, can apply to be *Barghar* in the research area. The previously homogeneous Tharu settlement is becoming increasingly heterogeneous, with the in-migration of other ethnicities. However, the tradition of *Barghar* is still followed and accepted by everyone, regardless of ethnicity. Non-Tharu ethnic communities also participate in the rites and rituals of the Tharu community. Every community member automatically comes under the customary jurisdiction of the *Barghar*. The *Barghar* system is particularly high profile in the planning process of development activities and their implementation.

Three *Guthis* associated with the Newar community located in Lalitpur Metropolitan City in Bagmati Province of Nepal were selected because of their different volunteering activities. *Guthi* traditions are focused on (a) Sana *Guthi* (funeral related *Guthi*) of Khokana Ward no 21 of Lalitpur Metropolitan which is a public community owned *Guthi* , (b) Da: *Guthi* of Barahi, a part of Raj *Guthi* (state owned) and (c) a *Dewali* (deity linked) *Guthi* (privately owned) from Pimabahal, Ward no 20 of Lalitpur Metropolitan.

There are numerous types of *Guthi* in the Newar community, differentiated by their purpose (social, religious, economic), clan lineage and ownership (state/public, community/semiprivate or close kinship/private). *Guthi* is rooted in patriarchy, so membership is inherited by the eldest son. *Guthi* membership is also clan specific and hierarchical. Almost all *Guthi* have a *Thakali*, the eldest and the most respected member. Other positions and roles vary depending on the *Guthi*. For example, three *Guthis* in Khokana have an *Innava*: the youngest member in the *Guthi*. They will enter the *Guthi* after the demise of the head member of their household. Within these restrictions, everyone regardless of their financial status is treated equally. In the Da: *Guthi*, the Barahi clan provide the carpentry work in preparing for *Rato Machindranath*, a month- long festival celebrated by the Newar in the Patan area of Lalitpur. This role is hereditary, passed to the eldest son of a specific family within the clan.

As *Guthis* are patrilineal, women tend to have supporting roles such as the preparation of puja or feasts, which are often laborious and time consuming. Nonetheless, there is some evidence of the participation of women increasing in *Guthi* activities. Young Newar girls, for example, can be seen learning and playing traditional musical instruments in festivals, chariot processions and cultural rallies. Some *Guthiyars* and community members recognize women's roles and arrange special feasts for the wives of the leaders. In Khokana, a special dance is performed especially for the women and the elderly who would be busy during the actual festival. On a specific day and area in the *Rato Machindranath* chariot procession, the 60 feet tall chariot is pulled only by the females, called *Yakah Misaya Bhujya*.

## Research Approach

To understand the volunteering practices of local people, an interpretive methodological approach was chosen. The focus of the research was the relationship between the people and the state as enacted through new forms of the social contract. The volunteering practices of two communities, the Newar and the Tharu, were chosen as case studies. The aim was to investigate how these communities interact with the formal and modern state mechanisms for the betterment of society. The intention was to limit the research to understanding volunteerism under the identified *Guthis* and *Barghar* in the selected study area only. However, at times and as needed, this report refers to the macro context and brings examples from other places and institutions to illuminate volunteerism as a deliberate governance system within Nepal.

Fieldwork began by interviewing individuals in the *Barghar* and *Guthiyar* catchment areas who are the leaders of these traditional institutions. In their positions, they directly engage people for volunteering activities. Following conversations with these individuals, in-depth interviews were conducted with 4-5 members who were directly engaged in volunteering and with two local government officials (Deputy Mayor and Ward Chairperson) in each community. The nature of interpretive research is that it can generate key insights based on the research participants' perspectives. In applying an interpretive approach this report does not claim to make generalizations about volunteering practices in the wider Newar and Tharu community. Rather, it illuminates volunteering practices within this new social contract.

Interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in the two study villages for four weeks from June 1 to July 1, 2021. Open-ended interview questions were used. This method allowed for follow-up or probing questions, depending upon what respondents said. The interviews and focus group discussions were carried out by two women researchers from the same community to minimize language barriers. The following table summarizes the field work activities.

<i>Guthi</i>	
In depth interviews (9)	1. Da: <i>Guthi</i> leader ( 1)
	2. Innava (Youngest member of Khokana) (1) 3. Deity linked <i>Guthiyar</i> (2)
	4. Municipality member responsible for heritage preservation section (1)
	5. Ward (Smallest unit of the municipality) level chairpersons (2)
	6. Community People (2)
<i>Barghar</i>	
In depth interviews (6)	1. <i>Barghar</i> (1)
	2. Associate <i>Barghar</i> (1)
	3. Community People (3)
	4. Municipality ward chairperson (1)

### Key Volunteering Activities

*Guthi's* functions were traditionally predominantly religious. Community activities included celebrating festivals, worshiping gods and construction of shrines and temples. However, because everyday life is entwined with spiritual life, *Guthi* also embraces social and environmental activities. Examples include the building of shelters, constructing a water tank, installing water taps, constructing bridges, clearing land for pasture, tending school

gardens, building libraries, preservation of forest and rivers. Volunteering is deeply embedded in all these activities.

### *Barghar as a Community Leader*

In the Tharu community, a popular volunteering practice led by *Barghar* is Begari, which is a volunteering engagement in the community development activities. For example, a person from each household joins the volunteering work to solve their individual and community problems. A *Barghar* narrated his experience of performing this role:

“I have been selected as a *Barghar* for a year in the village. I participate in all social and cultural and economic activities of the village. Though I belong to a farming family, I volunteer in the social and cultural development of the community”.

One community person explained that *Barghar* guides and regulates communal projects like the building of a road, temple, canal or community building. The *Barghar* also takes on the role of overseeing other community development projects:

“I move around the village, educating people to prevent them from defecating in public areas for the health and hygiene of the whole community. I tell them about vaccination for infants and children and encourage them to send children to school. I also get involved in establishing and running schools.”

Sometimes other development actors request the help of *Barghar* to mobilize community people in monitoring schools and libraries, getting involved in drinking water management or in the implementation of sanitation. One community member explained:

“The *Barghar* is involved in everything, from minor individual or family problems to community level problems such as appointing volunteers, attending funerals, participating in feasts and festivals, constructing roads and temples, managing community forests, maintaining irrigation systems...”



The *Barghar* is supposed to address all these problems with the consensus of community members. These communal activities are accomplished with the participation of community members, who contribute their labor for free, generating resources and managing public events. Another community member reported, “We also propose solutions to the problems and volunteer to carry out the tasks assigned by the *Barghar*.”

The role of the *Barghar* is to assign volunteers to different community development related activities such as road construction, forest management, canal construction and public meeting houses. In this context, the *Barghar* explained,

“We have several problems in our village such as irrigation, road, electricity, agriculture, education, and diseases... An individual from each household joins the meeting to discuss the problem... Mostly, I call a meeting to address a specific problem... Sometimes, we can address our problem with the volunteering services of the people in the community...Some problems we cannot address, and then we get support from the Municipality office”.

He gave an example of a road construction project that was carried out in collaboration with the help of local government:

“The road from the custom office, *Ishworijung to Sadakpur*, was being constructed by the help of local government because it was muddy, and it was really difficult to drive vehicles during the rainy season. Thus, we needed a gravelled road of about one kilometre but there were ditches to make culverts which were almost completed. I monitored and inspected these activities and instructed labourers and contractors also”.

### ***Community Development Initiatives of Barghar***

The *Barghar* performs an active role in calling community meetings, participating in the Municipal meetings, lobbying for the community’s needs. The *Barghar* described the management of flood during the rainy season:

“Rajapur is severely affected by floods during the monsoon season. Floods usually damage the fertile land and there is risk of inundation. To solve this sort of problem, I initiated a meeting and set activities to solve such problems. In this regard, one from each household offered to volunteer”.

He went on to describe what was involved:

“As per their availability, men, women, young and old participate as volunteers. They set out to the dam early in the morning with their lunch and snack. They fill the ditch with stones to irrigate water in the canal. It takes 3-4 days to build a dam.... Traditionally, *Barghars* only used their own solutions but nowadays, they have become more participatory and welcome new ideas and solutions during public gatherings. Decisions are not individual but communal and aligned with the local government’s aspirations”.

Such community practices represent innovative solutions to preventing such natural disasters. These practices draw on local knowledge and lived experience. Traditional skills and knowledge are used to make the dam stronger, including a ritual to ask for blessings and protection for the dam. Every year before the monsoon, Tharu people in the community volunteer to protect the community from flooding. As a result, they have built up considerable experience of flood control and irrigation regulation. The Ward chair of the village explained how the collaboration with local government combines traditional local knowledge with modern engineering techniques:

“Such volunteering practices are carried out in collaboration with the local government in Rajapur Municipality. As a result, they get support from local government which provides modern gabion wire and technical support to make walls to protect from landslides and floods. The volunteering practices range from making gabion wire to collecting stones. In doing so, local volunteers use their local knowledge to identify the direction of the water flow. They use water speed reduction techniques and flood prevention. They use traditional skills when filling in the gabion wall with stones. Some people make the wire while others make the gabion wire. The

*Barghar* also mobilises volunteers to plant trees like bamboo on the riverbanks which absorb water and protect the land from being flooded”.

Flood protection in this community is a good example of a collaborative form of governance in which local people volunteer as part of *Barghar* customs. This collaboration with local government has also created a more sustainable structure to prevent flooding in their community and regulate the irrigation system for rice cultivation during the monsoon. Such activities take place under the leadership of the *Barghar* and volunteers from each household, who can be both male and female.

Speaking about the state-community collaboration over flooding, the Deputy Mayor stated: “We also propose activities to the *Barghar* to solve the problem of the flooding”. The Ward Chair explained that the planning process of controlling problems like flooding begin with collecting views of community members. The budget is allocated, and the plan is implemented with the support of volunteers. This degree of collaboration is relatively recent, as the Deputy Mayor explained:

“Traditionally, the *Barghar* imposed their solutions but now they welcome new ideas and solutions from the public gathering. Decision-making has become more participatory. Therefore, it is not just the *Barghar* as an individual aligning with local government’s aspirations but the community as a whole”.

In this context, volunteers do not only provide human resources in the form of free labour but also participate in designing and implementing the projects.

Forms of volunteering in the community are changing, as the *Barghar* reflects:

“In our day, there were no roads, no machines. We depended on our own muscle and labour to do public works. But the new government in our village which has recently been elected is attempting to make several things easier and comfortable for us by listening to our voices and allocating budgets for

what we want, such as roads, dams, electricity and schools, and training for youth”.

Another community member shared how modernisation of machinery has also reduced the amount of labor needed in these activities:

“Every task from ploughing the field, cutting the harvest, to construct water canals were all manual. Now since machineries such as tractors to plough the field, grain thrashers and excavators to dig the canal have been introduced, the work has been easier and reduced our labor force”.

Reminiscing about his days in the past he shared that canal digging would begin in Chitra (March/April) and end in Jestha (May/June). A representative from each farming household from the 19 Mauja (villages) would come to participate.

#### ***Co-Financing Volunteering Activities***

While the local government now allocates budgets for public works, fundraising still happens regularly within the festival calendar. *Fagawai* (Festival of Colours) seems to be a particularly important occasion for collecting money from each household. Tharu women visit households and put colours (water-based pigment) on the faces of household members and family head and are then offered food, drink and money. The money raised is used for community development activities and social events such as picnics. During the festival of *Maghi*, (the Tharu people usually celebrate this in January as a new year festival) women will go to individual houses and perform traditional dances. The money they collect is used for community development activities.

***Deliberative Governance Practices*** *Barghar* is recognised by the local authorities as a powerful informal institution that is embedded in the community. The Deputy Mayor said,

“There is a need to recognize and formalize the *Barghar* system in local level planning and development. Rajapur Municipality is going to approve the

working guidelines of the *Barghar* system in Rajapur Municipality to have commonalities among *Barghars*".

The Ward Chair stated concurred that the *Barghar* system is in complete alignment with the local level planning of the community. Each household sends someone to the planning meetings, and this means that the discussion is wide-ranging and considers many priority areas. One community member explains the important relationship between participation in planning and having enough volunteers to complete a project:

"The role of the *Barghar* is crucial to increase people's participation in the planning phase of the project and its implementation because with the request of the *Barghar*, community people are ready to volunteer on these projects".

As a community member shared, one call from the *Barghar* and volunteers will step forward without question.

The Ward Chair explained how *Barghar* is a bottom-up system:

"Community people gather together and discuss even a small problem at their own level under the leadership of *Barghar*. The *Barghar* takes this problem to the Municipality office if it was not solved from the community level. The *Barghar* system helps to follow the bottom-up approach for the Municipality".

In these discussions, it is not only immediate social and community problems that are addressed. The development of more long-term regulations and strategies are also discussed. The new *Barghar* described his role:

"I called a first meeting with people a week after I was elected, to make policies and plans for the village. We looked at revising the previous provision of fines for those who do not attend meetings or volunteer. The *Chaukidar* (Watchmen) were asked to fix some village facilities and we discussed changing the procedure to resolve conflict in the community. After that first meeting, I will call a meeting at any time I think it is needed."

This modality is accepted by the local government. Indeed, local government encourages collaboration with the *Barghar*. The Deputy Mayor of Rajapur Municipality said, “Such functions of the *Barghar* are recognized by the local government. Thus, we are developing working guidelines for *Barghar*”.

In terms of collecting and sharing resources, there is a collaboration between local government and the community, under the leadership of *Barghar*. Most of the work is sponsored by the state but it is not enough to cover the costs. *Barghar* leads the community in terms of volunteering in the form of labor and resources. The evidence suggests that local government gives space to *Barghar* as a traditional institution and collaborates with it on taking forward the social and cultural aspects of the community. The government collaborates with *Barghar* as an institution to champion the social and cultural life of the community through interactive and collaborative dialogues, led by *Barghar*. Such dialogues are created by both local government and *Barghar*. The community has a stronger voice when negotiating policies with local government .

The participatory process is a well- developed aspect of the *Barghar* tradition. Under the *Barghar*, people participate as volunteers in the local planning development led by local government official. When a planning application needs to be discussed, the Ward chair of the local government notifies the *Barghar* three days before the planning meeting. The Ward chair ensures the participation of the community level volunteer group. These people discuss the problems at the local level. They are then invited to participate in the implementation of the development projects related to their community and local government allocates a certain budget to address their problems. Sometimes, it is the community, through the *Barghar*, that calls a meeting to discuss a community issue and the Ward chair and the Mayor are invited to join their discussion. In other words, it is a reciprocal relationship, in which either side can organize and participate in meetings, gathering and dialogues.

### ***Guthi- Traditional Governance Mechanism***

*Guthi* is a complex combination of self-help group, governance and volunteerism. It is not always clear what can and cannot be considered as *Guthi*. As one community member said,

“It is indisputably considered as a form of cooperative where community members of the same or close clan of mostly Newars cooperate and collaborate together towards the continuation of social, cultural, religious activities, whilst providing economic security”.

It is broadly understood as a group of people working together towards a common social purpose. It is not obligatory to be a member of *Guthi*, it is a personal choice, but revoking *Guthi* membership is not common. At the same time, it is a social obligation for *Guthi* members to contribute their skills and financial support for the continuation of *Guthi* practices. Naike (leader) of the Da Guthi said,

“Guthi plays an important role in the continuation of cultural practices among the Newars due to which the culture, festivals, the monuments have withstood the changing of time. It has played several roles in community development, system formation, ritual celebrations and cooperation within and among clans”.

One community member explained how religion and care for the environment are interconnected in local practices:

“Our festivals and rituals are not only based on religion. They also relate to resource management, environmental conservation, and governance. Before the notion of World Environment came to be used in the Newar Community, our ancestors were well aware of the need to clean water sources such as waterspouts, wells and canals. The need to unclog water sources, renovate and maintain religious sites before the monsoon. It is referred to as a type of cleaning campaign based on our tradition.”

Away from the crowded urban areas, Khokana lies on the southern outskirts of Lalitpur Metropolitan. It is an exemplary community, independent, self-reliant, and self-supporting since ancient times (Lichhavi era, 5th -9th century). The Ward Chair of Khokana said,

“It is still predominantly an agrarian community and is popular for mustard oil within Kathmandu valley even today. The production of oil has always been a communal activity and has been practiced as a form of cooperative.”

Some residents refer to this form of cooperation as *Guthi*, while some prefer it to refer to it by its specific name, Chika Sa: (Chika means oil in Nepal Bhasa and Sa: means workplace; colloquially it can be understood as area or association for the production of oil). This traditional cooperative is struggling to maintain its ingenuity in the modern industrial era. Local community members have been working together for the preservation and continuation of Chika Sa. Ward Chair of Khokana described:

“There are four Chika Sa: that are still operational. The oil is produced manually through cold press techniques. One Chika Sa: might have around 80-100 members. It might be one of the oldest forms of cooperative. The member can press their mustard seeds in the mill; they take turns on production and follow the schedule that has been agreed by the members. Once a year, the members conduct *puja* (religious rites and rituals) and then discuss the schedule for the coming year, usually once a year, which is usually followed by a feast.”

Despite its long tradition, *Guthi* is not as strong and influential as it once was. One result of this is that the preservation of monuments is no longer guaranteed. The Ward Chair said,

“The 2015 Gorkha Earthquake reiterated this notion, as the large number of cultural heritage sites were heavily damaged or destroyed, due to lack of maintenance and renovation of the structures. One of the reasons for the negligence for maintenance of many of these cultural heritages was the dissolution of the *Guthis*”.



It is the institution of *Guthi* that binds the faith and sense of ownership of commonly owned monuments such as temples, rest houses, waterspouts, and contributes to the preservation of these structures.

*Guthi* plays an important role in all aspects of life for Newar. *Guthi* represents a strong social asset in the Newar community. The community or *Guthiyars* (members of *Guthi*) are not only there for celebrations and festivals but also in sadness and difficult times such as death. The *Rato Machindranath Guthi* is composed of various *Guthis* belonging to a multifaceted ethnic group within Newar. Each ethnic clan has a specific task in the chariot procession of *Rato Machindranath*. Specific clans are required to construct the chariot, and some must work on the ropes used to pull the chariot. Some work on the wooden block to be used as a brake for the chariot. Each clan contributes their knowledge, skills and time to construct the 60-foot chariot binding together the religious faith of thousands of Patan residents (area in Lalitpur Metropolitan). *Rato Machindranath* (also known as *Karunamaya* by the local farming community) is believed to bring rain and good harvest, The *Guthis* work together for the successful procession of the chariot.

Similarly, One of the *Dewali Guthiyar* shared that each Newar family is supposed to be linked to *Si Guthi* (also known as *Sana Guthi*, *Guthi* related to funeral rites and rituals). This *Guthi* morally and financially supports the family of the deceased *Guthiyar*. The *Guthiyar* collects money annually and uses the money at the time of cremations, like a self-help group. This ensures that the deceased *Guthiyar* have a respectful and ceremonial cremation.

The functions of *Guthi* have expanded in response to the needs of community and culture. One of the community members shared that people under *Guthi* have volunteered to save ponds in public spaces as well. The Ward Chair said:

“People have established different associations in *Khokana*. One of them is La: Manka which involves distributing potable water during festivals and religious rallies to the devotees, participants and audience so that no one is thirsty. In past years when bottled water was not available, the members of La: Manka would carry two *Gagri* (traditional utensil to store water) on

*Kharpan* [two baskets suspended by a long bamboo stick which was used by people to carry load on the shoulder]. They would travel with the crowd to provide their service free of charge.”

Such practices are not only carried out during festivals. La:Manka serves volunteers who go to the forest to collect wood and fodder for making temples. La: Manka was also active during the protest about the *Guthi* Bill which was controversial in that it was an attempt to control the public and private *Guthis*. In this regard, the Community Member added that:

“This practice is now being replaced by the availability of water bottles. There are separate Manka (groups) responsible for seating arrangements during festivals, for organising the *sukul* (woven straw mat). The *Guthi* as an institution belongs to different clans but provides collective benefits for the community, as each *Guthi* provides their own service whilst also providing benefit to their own members”.

### ***Social Contract with Local Government***

With the new federalization of the state, *Barghar* and *Guthi* have developed a stronger connection with local governments. The local government officials and mechanisms of governance start at the local level and for this to work, they need the participation and cooperation of the *Guthiyar* and *Barghar*. One *Guthiyar* said,

“*Guthiyar* in the planning phase of the local government participates in the planning process to have a stronger lobby to preserve their cultural heritage. The increase in participation of the people will strengthen the governance mechanism”.

Likewise, the officer of the cultural heritage department shared that in the case of Lalitpur Metropolitan City, where most of the population is indigenous Newar, the budget allocated by local government set the activities to promote the culture of the Newar.

The local government in Rajapur Municipality has drawn up guidelines to create some consistency in working patterns among *Barghars* so as to develop a consensus about functions but this has not been approved or formalized yet. However, *Guthi* is regulated by the federal government so that it is more in conflict with its management system. The *Guthi* system has been more functional in its informal ways of working with local government while the *Barghar* system seems more aligned with the interests of local government.

The Ward Chair said that:

“The local government has been in place since November 2017 after the election. Therefore, we are still learning to engage community people in the planning and decision-making processes of the *Guthiyar*. The scope of *Guthiyar* has been expanding to community development. The position of local government (Ward) has been vacant for almost 20 years, there have been no action plans. The local government is currently working to fill the gaps, trying to understand the needs and requirement of local communities.”

The actors from local government invite people to the planning process and offer space to design their projects based on their needs. Another *Guthiyar* shared that,

“The voices of the locals are being heard, but since the community is now heterogeneous with migration to various places, also since the needs and requirement of the Newar are evolving to meet modernization, the issues of *Guthi* are not a priority. *Guthi* is important. No one argues with that. But it is more important to have the focus on infrastructure development, development of opportunities for employment and so on.”

In the case of *Barghar*, it is the role of the *Barghar* to bridge the communication between community people and local government. A call from the *Barghar* is enough to bring the whole community together to discuss community development related activities and to participate in dialogues. Such participation is not so much intended to bring the issues of the

*Guthi* to the attention of the local government but more broadly, issues related to community development. The Ward Chair said,

“Informally, *Guthiyars* also participate in the meetings arranged by the ward office as required and put their voice in as project development volunteers”.

*Guthis* show their interest in strengthening the *Guthi* system, which ties their socio-economic development with the cultural setting. *Barghar* mostly represent the community in the planning process in the municipality, monitoring development activities in the village and regulating community people in volunteering activities. One of the community members shared:

"Increased participation of *Guthi* people in the local government offers opportunities to listen to the voice of the traditional institutions in the governance mechanism and sets the example of open governance. Local volunteers also participate in the planning process of governance. Such kinds of practices have been gradually strengthening in the federal context".

He gave examples of how local government is working with the *Guthi* to preserve and improve local culture and environment:

“There are a few examples where local government has initiated work supporting and promoting people’s participation. These range from protecting the environment to making traditional music instruments, to performing death rituals. Local government has also offered cash initiatives to the *Guthi* to perform volunteering practices and to practice the traditional music of worship”.

The literal meaning of Lalitpur translates to beautiful city. Historically, the city was renowned for its craftsmanship, woodcarving, and artistically beautiful monuments such as temples, rest houses and waterspouts. Lalitpur metropolitan city has numerous cultural monuments some of which date to the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Patan Durbar Square located in the heart of Lalitpur Metropolitan City is also enlisted as a UNESCO world heritage site. With regards

to the role that *Guthi* plays in the preservation of such cultural heritage, a municipal official responsible for heritage said,

“The metropolitan focuses more on heritage conservation through establishing a unit for the maintenance and preservation of tangible and intangible heritage. *Guthi* plays an important role in the conservation of such heritage. So the municipality has been working to revive some *Guthi* that had been inactive for a couple of years. For example, *Guthi's* involvement in KhadgaJatra, a funeral ritual<sup>6</sup>, had been inactive for the past 25 years and the number of *Guthiyar* almost reduced to one.”

The official further stated that they work to motivate members and spread awareness about the importance of *Guthi* in the preservation of culture. *Guthiyar* are encouraged to write applications to the Heritage Conservation Section who evaluate the application and provide the necessary support for the proposed renovation. It then evaluates whether the historical structure and materials are well maintained.

The Municipality has financial responsibility for the restoration and maintenance of temples, waterspouts, and other monuments. In co-funded government-initiated projects, *Guthiyar* contribute 10-20% while the municipality bears 80-90% of the cost. This is an example of resource sharing in volunteerism. Most activities involving *Guthi* are managed by the *Guthi Sansthan* (Central body of *Guthi* Management), especially in financial terms, as the revenue collected from *Guthi* lands are collected by the *Sansthan*. There has never been a clear means of communication between *Guthi Sansthan* and local government (in the case of Lalitpur, the metropolitan office and the Ward Office). A clear line of communication and coordination between the three parties (*Guthi* Sansthan, Metropolitan and Ward) would make the efforts to preserve and continue *Guthi's* activities and practices more efficient.

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<sup>6</sup> The body of the person carrying the Khadga, a wide blade heavy sword, shakes as they walk onto the streets, fuelling the common belief that deities themselves enter the persons carrying the swords. They are followed by huge crowds with their worshipped khadga in their hands and form their respective processions.

### *Resistance from Federal Government*

As suggested in previous sections, *Guthi* and *Barghar* as institutions embedded in communities, act as a people's forum which helps them to increase their bargaining power and resist state intervention on their values and practices. On April 29, 2019, a bill was tabled in the Upper House by the Minister of Land Management, Cooperatives and Poverty Alleviation in the federal government which would consolidate all acts and amendments related to *Guthis*. The bill also proposed a powerful commission to replace the *Guthi Sansthan*<sup>7</sup> and to nationalise all *Guthis*, both public and private, and regulate all religious and cultural activities without consultation with the *Guthi* (Shrestha, 2019). This Bill was heavily criticized, especially by the Newars of Kathmandu Valley, as it threatens the continuation of *Guthi* practices within the Newar community<sup>8</sup>.

On June 19, 2019, thousands of people gathered in Maitighar Mandala (public space for protest), an important roundabout close to Singhadurbar (the central administrative centre of Nepal). Protestors carried placards, banners, national flags to protest about the controversial Bill. The Bill was then withdrawn on June 26, 2019.

In this regard, the *Naike* (Leader) of *Guthi* shared:

“The Federal state planned to abduct our rights to preserve cultural heritages which we have been performing from historical time. Though there are certain pitfalls of managing *Guthi* and its land, taking away the rights of the *Guthi* is

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<sup>7</sup> The bill violated the constitutional rights of citizens as Article 26 (2) of the constitution includes that every religious denomination shall have the right to operate and protect its religious sites and religious *Guthi*.

<sup>8</sup> The bill violated the constitutional rights of citizens as Article 26 (2) of the constitution includes that every religious denomination shall have the right to operate and protect its religious sites and religious *Guthi*.

intolerable. Even the local government leader resists the proposed Bill of *Guthi*".

This shows the gap that exists between local government – that recognizes the contribution *Guthi* makes to its agenda - and federal government that is more interested in controlling its assets.

All the participants mentioned how supportive local governments are of *Guthi*, especially the Ward officials. These elected local people are usually very familiar with *Guthi* and its activities and may themselves be *Guthiyars*. They understand the importance of *Guthi* and consider it as an intangible heritage. They therefore consider that part of their public duty is to help community members to exercise their right and provide access to the required services. The Ward coordinates *Guthi* activities to help in developing infrastructure such as toilets, laying drinking water pipes in *Guthi Ghar (Meeting place)*, renovation and maintenance of *Guthi Ghar*, allocating area and construction of crematorium, maintenance of temples.

### ***Volunteerism during Covid 19***

The activities and functions of both *Barghar* and *Guthi* demonstrate that volunteerism can be crucial in emergency situations. During the COVID 19 pandemic, *Barghar's* role expanded to educating local people to use preventive measures such as organizing isolation centers, distributing masks and sanitizer. *Guthi* coordinated with the Ward to conduct festivals and their social activities safely. In both cases they developed cooperative and collaborative relationships with local government. The role of the Ward was to simply support such activities, thereby strengthening their effectiveness. These kinds of practices spread beyond the community of the *Guthi* members, serving the needs of local people whether from *Guthi* or *Barghar* areas. For example, one *Guthi* located in Lalitpur Chysal, constructed a temporary isolation center when the hospitals were overcrowded, and people were not able to get a bed in hospital.

During this pandemic, local government has worked closely and collaboratively with the *Guthi* in organizing and conducting festivals while at the same time controlling the spread of the disease by following the health protocols set by the Health Ministry as well as the World Health Organisation. The main protocols followed were limiting the number of attendees, social distancing, use of mask, face shield and sanitizer. There was one altercation between the Newar community/ *Guthiyar* and the State during the Rato Machindranath Jatra festival. The State initially gave permission for the procession of the chariot but later revoked the decision after the chariot had been constructed and ordered for the festival to be cancelled that year. The community felt their belief and devotion to the deity was not respected, which sparked a protest. Eventually, the festival proceeded but with health safety measures implemented and a shorter procession. Similarly, in *Khokana*, the Ward Office imposed safety measures and distributed sanitizer, masks, face shield and restricted visitors from outside when conducting the annual festival (2020).

### Conclusion and Recommendation

Alongside the organic development of social contracts between local government and social institutions like *Guthi* and *Barghar*, there have also been attempts to institutionalise the volunteerism embedded in these practices. The centralized modern state ideology has attempted to narrow the roles and responsibilities of these informal governance systems. The case studies suggest that federalism offers space to local government to strengthen the forms of volunteering that are embedded in *Guthi* and *Barghar* practices. However, local government has only been in existence since 2017 and has yet to understand these systems. At the same time, local government cannot entirely bypass them because of their long lineage and legacy in the community. While the functions of *Guthi* and *Barghar* have become limited to their cultural and religious functions, this is likely to change. Since 2017, the newly elected local bodies are attempting to give more space to existing social and cultural institutions that have strong volunteering dimensions. They recognize not only their contribution to maintaining traditional and local cultural practices, but also to increasing people's participation in deliberative governance. *Guthi/Barghar* have been co-opted to fulfilling local



government's needs for participatory consultation and planning, paying less attention to their traditional cultural and religious functions.

Drawing on the cases of *Guthi* and *Barghar*, there are clearly opportunities for strengthening the people-state relationship through valuing and promoting traditional knowledge and wisdom. This can occur through the planning and implementation of governance activities such as designing public hearings, community dialogues and increasing participation in policy formation at the local level under different themes such as education, health, transportation and irrigation. The dialectic relationship between traditional institutions could continue to support the role of the government. Such social contracts can create bonds and a feeling of belonging between people and government in the federal context to promote open governance, with roles and responsibilities of public goods and services shared for a sustainable future.

## Recommendations

Local government should take initiatives for promoting existing volunteering practices to increase the accountability of state actors.

Local institutions who have been volunteering should further practice their autonomy and agency to take part in governance at community level.

Volunteering practices in traditional and indigenous communities like Tharu and Newar should be supported through their informal institutions to increase the participation of people in policy making processes and their implementation.

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