

# Preservation of Traditional Indigenous Skills

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## Abstract

*This article is about the preservation of traditional indigenous skills of woodcarving at Bungamati in Nepal in the context of the socio-economic environment for preservation of such skills. The ethnographic study also attempted to examine the awareness of the practitioners of woodcarving about the threats to their traditional occupation and how they tried to cope with these. The conceptual framework of the study was derived from the theme of different forms of capital assets for people - cultural capital related to identity, pride and aesthetic values of possessing a traditional skill; economic capital reflected in the skill as the source of livelihood and an occupation; human capital embodied in acquiring and possessing an occupational skill; and social capital related to community solidarity, identity and sustainability of livelihood and well-being of the community.*

*Woodcarving is a traditional family occupation and a means of livelihood for the Newari people of the village of Bungamati. They regarded woodcarving as a valued traditional occupation and it was customary for younger members of the family to learn the skills from the elders. However, changes in economy, technologies and people's attitudes regarding traditions made it difficult to rely on the traditional skills of woodcarving as the main source of livelihood for a family and meeting all household expenses. Waning interest of the new generation in continuing with the traditional family occupation raised questions about sustainability of the skill and the occupation.*

*The people of Bungamati still looked for ways to preserve the traditional skills. The Community Learning Centre (CLC), established as a part of non-formal adult education programme of the government, could help achieve this aim by combining basic literacy and skill training. Family members, especially women from poorer households, with few economic opportunities, could benefit from this and help supplement family earnings. For such an effort to succeed and to preserve the traditional skills that also represented cultural and aesthetic identity of the community, government encouragement and support was needed. It was also necessary for the people of the community to be united in supporting and participating in this effort.*

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## I. Introduction

In all regions of the world, local communities with a long history developed and possessed a cumulative body of knowledge, know-how, practices and artistic representations (UNESCO, 2002). Traditional indigenous skills and knowledge are the distinctive characteristics of culture of a community. Traditional knowledge is manifested in the beliefs, practices, innovations, arts, spirituality, and other forms of cultural experiences and expressions that belong to indigenous communities globally (Simeone, 2004).

The local and indigenous knowledge, skills and forms of cultural expression constitute a resource for empowering communities, establishing identities and preventing marginalization of people. However, the sustainability of traditional skills, even those practiced for centuries, has become a concern. The traditional skills in many instances are losing out to the pace of modernity. This appears to be the fate of traditional woodcarving in Nepal as well. Wood carving is an admired craft commonly in display in religious and historical places in Nepal as well as in artifacts and decorations. Certain communities have been customarily engaged in learning and practicing this indigenous skill since the ancient times. This artistic work reflected cultural values and provided a livelihood to the craftsmen.

## II. International and National Policy Initiatives

Development and preservation of traditional skills are underpinned by policies regarding national development and development of skills and education. In Nepal, the Tenth National Development Plan has emphasized technical education and vocational training to fulfill the requirements of national and foreign labor markets; it also stressed life-skills education in an integrated manner, especially for women and disadvantaged groups (National Planning Commission Secretariat, 2008).

The Council for Technical Education and Vocational Training (CTEVT) of Nepal was constituted in 1989 as the apex body of technical and vocational education and training. TEVT Skill Development Policy, 2064 (2008) of Nepal provides for expansion of training ensuring access and inclusion of women, Dalits (oppressed), ethnic groups, and deprived communities. The aim of this policy is to promote market oriented employment for youth and adults and assisting people without basic education to engage in income generating activities for their livelihood (MOE, 2010).

The ILO Convention of 1996 urged the recognition of workers with traditional home-grown skills and taking steps to bring them into the national economic mainstream. These workers often have traditional skills; however they lacked access to further skill-based training and development. They also lacked direct access to markets due to long value chains in production and marketing. Even though they contributed significantly to the national economic development, they remained invisible and voiceless. (HomeNet Nepal, 2007).

The concept of indigenous and traditional knowledge gained recognition through the World Conservation Strategy of International Union for Conservation of Natural Resources (1980),

Brundtland Commission (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987) and the United Nations Conference on Environment and Education (1992). These events recognized the existence of indigenous knowledge in every country, society, and culture. Furthermore, a worldwide network of indigenous knowledge resource centers has emerged over the last decades. Its members include academic institutions, NGOs, CBOs, and individuals engaged in the study, documentation, dissemination, and advocacy of indigenous knowledge (Gorjestani, 2000). At the local level, Community Learning Centre is the venue for resource, training and dissemination in the community and can take the role of linking community to the networks of knowledge and skills nationally and globally.

### **III. Practice of Woodcarving in Bungamati**

Bungamati is a small Newari village where people still continue to be engaged in their traditional occupational and livelihood activities, one of which is woodcarving. Bungamati is a classic Newari village dating from the 16th century. It is perched on a spur of land overlooking the Bagmati River, 10km from Kathmandu, and is shaded by large trees and stands of bamboo. There are quite a few woodcarving shops in the village and a couple of carpet looms, but visitors have yet to arrive en masse, because the village streets are too narrow and not friendly to cars.

Not being far from Kathmandu, people of Bungamati are also influenced by the ways and economic opportunities of the city. Most of the Newari people in the village acquired in the family the skills of carving intricate designs in wood and stone resulting in the creation of decorative pieces used in private and communal buildings and temples. Most of the people of the village earned supplementary income from carving these designs. The village has by tradition the responsibility of maintaining the chariot of the Hindu god Machindranath, well-adorned with carvings, and paraded annually in one of the most important religious festivals of the Newari community called the Rath (Sharma, 2007).

The art of woodcarving has been in existences since the Middle Ages as evident from artistic wood works found in various old temples, palaces and houses in and around Kathmandu valley. They are also visible on windows, doors, mythological figures, chests, boxes, and figures of gods, animals and birds. Gradually, the art started disappearing until a revival since the 1960s with the growth of tourism and tourist interest in the artifacts created by wood carving. The opening of new hotels and construction of new houses also created demand for decorative woodcarvings. Bungamati is one of three villages of Kathmandu valley (Sana Hastakala [n.d.]).

In spite of revival of interest in traditional crafts, there is fear today of the loss of the entire occupation of traditional woodcarving of Nepal due to modernization and globalization. The children of the craftsmen in the new generation are inclined to give up the family occupation. Another problem is that the extensive use of teak in traditional house construction is also in rapid decline, because of the lower cost and widespread use of steel, glass and synthetic materials like plastic.

People who are involved in the woodcarving occupation are used to the idea of transmission of skills from elders to youth within the family. The importance of appropriate institutional education and training in transferring knowledge to the new generation has been neglected. The role of education and training for preservation and maintenance of indigenous occupation and knowhow needs due attention (Langton & Ma Rhea, 2003).

A UNESCO study (2004) explained that the woodcarvers of Bungamati did not have any idea about the marketing of their products. It also stated that the products of Bungamati were sold either to the wholesaler or to the middleman. The woodcarvers themselves were hired as skilled laborers. Some of the woodcarvers worked at very low wages in the rehabilitation projects of Pashupati Development Trust and Lumbini Development Fund, projects intended to restore and develop traditional trades and crafts.

Those who engage in woodcarving as a side-business cannot sell their products at reasonable prices for lack of marketing skills. They lack the knowledge and skills necessary for running a business. Most of them run the business in their homes. They cannot differentiate business from household activities. In short, they lack the entrepreneurship skills (CERID, 2004).

Woodcarving is a hard, lengthy and labour-intensive work, which make the products expensive. The techniques used by the Newari craftsmen follow the method for woodcarving contained in medieval texts, which give exact and specialized instructions for every aspect of the craft. The execution of the decorative work has to be very precise so that the countless tiny component parts of a pattern fit perfectly, because no nails or glue are used (UNESCO, 2002).

Wood-carving can provide monetary income in a country with relatively few economic opportunities under certain conditions (Hamilton, 1996). The sustainability of the traditional skills can be promoted, if the various dimensions of their value and importance to the people are recognized and given due importance in socio-economic and human development efforts, as discussed below.

#### **IV. Traditional indigenous skill: Forms of Capital Assets**

The traditional indigenous skills of woodcarving can be looked upon as cultural, economic, human and social capital for the people of Bungamati. Use of the skills for the benefit of people and their development and sustainability depend on recognizing the value of the skills as different forms of assets for the people and realizing the potential of the multiple forms of capital assets.

*Indigenous skills as cultural capital.* Cultural capital gives each community its own distinctive character. Many communities have festivals celebrating their heritage and religious and social occasions for applying and demonstrating traditional crafts and artistic skills. For example, different types of woodcarving artifacts and designs are used in

Machhendranath temple and in decorations of the chariot for the annual parade of Machhendranath called the Rath.

Lin (1999) explained that cultural capital represents investments on the part of a community group in reproducing a set of symbols which reflects its distinctive identity in society. The symbols are often expressed in shapes, designs, and objects such as flowers and animals represented in architecture and artifacts. Cultural capital is also related to common attitudes and beliefs. For instance, woodcarvers of Bungamati made statues of Ganesh and Buddha, and designs for Machhendranath Rath that represented their beliefs and practices that defined and shaped their lives, their families, their spirituality, their history, and their ethnicity—and thus formed their cultural capital. The distinctive features of woodcarving products created by the Newari have gained popularity both inside and outside the country. People build houses with beautifully decorated windows and doors of woodcarvings to express happiness and sorrow—such as scenes of people dancing and eating together, as well as battle scenes, training of the warriors, and outcomes of war.

*Economic Capital.* Economic capital relates to the idea of an investment for returns in a business context. The woodcarvers themselves may not be fully aware of the concept of investment, returns and risks and skills in making decisions from a business perspective. They may not have a full understanding of intricacies of credit, market and operational costs of woodcarving as a business. In fact, low returns from woodcarving as an occupation have become a threat to its sustainability. One consequence of this situation is that the skill and occupation, traditionally seen as a male domain, has opened up for women whose time and labour often have a low opportunity cost in a patriarchal culture.

As noted above, the makers of the beautiful pieces out of wood did not indeed have the skills and knowledge of marketing to ensure a good return for their labour. The level of monthly earning from woodcarving for an artisan was around Rs. 5,000-7,000, whereas an income of at least Rs. 10,000-12,000 was considered necessary for an average family to meet monthly household expenses.

Another issue is that the artisan's distinctive skills and designs lacked recognition as intellectual property and the woodcarvers have not been able to establish and exercise this right. Establishment of the intellectual property rights through trademarks and copyright could enhance the value of the economic assets embodied in skills and designs and improve return from and sustainability of the artisan's occupation.

*Human Capital.* It is well-recognised that human capital plays an important role in economic growth (Krueger, 1995; Pritchett, 2001; Temple, 2001; Islam, 1995; as cited in Fleisher, Li, & Zhao, 2007). Woodcarving is a human capital which contributes to national GDP (Gross Domestic Product) of Nepal. The human capital of the artisan is represented by the skills s/he has acquired in the family or through formal or non-formal training and can use the skills to produce economic value. The conditions for applying human capital to producing

economic value are created by a favourable combination of human capital with other forms of capital, such as cultural, economic, and social as noted above and below.

*Social Capital: Building on Community Strength.* Social capital refers to features of social organizations such as networks, norms, and mutual trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit in economic production (Putnam 2000; as cited in Malloch, 2003). The woodcarvers have realized that the community people need to be united to build the social capital in order to enhance sustainability of their traditional skills in the face of market, technology and attitudinal challenges. As Lin (1999) argues, social resources or social capital enhance an individual's attained status in respect of occupation, employment and authority in society and improves economic earnings as well.

According to the action plan under the Non-formal Education Policy of Nepal, Community Learning Centres (CLCs) will be mobilized for community development, increased production, cultural preservation and continuing education. The strategy also says that as per the need of the community, the CLC should conduct various types of activities for community welfare. However in reality these services are not often provided. Consequently due to the lack of support from the CLC, the woodcarvers often face problems

## **V. Women and Woodcarving**

Women in most developing countries lag behind men in terms of educational attainment at all levels and Nepal is no exception. In spite of some recent progress, the status of women is far from satisfactory (UNESCO, 2006). Women have been discouraged in gaining access to skill training and many occupations.

There is a huge difference between the male and female roles in decision making. For instance, the female woodcarvers are not confident about making decisions by themselves. They have to listen to and depend on the male for choosing their jobs. The female woodcarvers learn this trade only from their family members as they are primarily restricted to the domestic sphere. At Bungamati village, girls are not typically permitted to give their opinions nor are they granted as many opportunities as men. The women woodcarvers realize that learning woodcarving is not enough. Designs and methods have been changed and new learning opportunities also have arisen.

The male woodcarvers believed that it is their responsibility to earn income to support the family. However, to what extent are they helping other family members to be independent and contribute to improving the family's situation? In some cases, women are not permitted to design the more intricate parts of sculptures. For example, they may be allowed to design the edge of a Ganesh sculpture but not the body parts. In this context, how much can a female woodcarver value her ability? The real empowerment for the women woodcarver requires giving attention to enhancing self-esteem of women. Furthermore, the women need to have access to training or other skill-based programs that could develop their competence and confidence.

UNESCO (2002) described a skill-based training to promote female employment in Nepal. The main objective of the training was to impart 'hands-on' traditional woodcarving skills to fourteen young female participants to improve their employment potential as woodcarver. The objectives of the training also were to enable learners explain the value of the woodcarving tradition, to safeguard the heritage of woodcarving, to identify appropriate carving tools for specific patterns, to identify appropriate timber for carving and to allow hands-on practice by carving seven different patterns on decorative pieces or doors or window frames. It was reported that employment opportunities increased for those who were trained in woodcarving.

### **VI. Community Learning Centre and the Woodcarving Skills**

The Community Learning Centres (CLCs) were established in the 1990s in Nepal to impart non-formal education (NFE) and income generating skills. The CLCs were also regarded as the vehicle of lifelong learning for individuals and communities, creation of various learning opportunities, and offering education and training services in response to demands. They also offer self-development alternatives for the learners, resulting in greater self-reliance. (Office for Non-Formal Education Commission [ONFEC], 2006).

CLC is seen as the venue for providing woodcarvers literacy, basic education, training, and technical knowledge. CLC promotes cooperation and participation in community activities in relation to religion, local traditions, society and culture, and health and sanitation. CLC can be the place where the woodcarvers can meet for sharing relevant information and knowledge, developing marketing strategies as well as enhancing job satisfaction and appreciation of the traditional skills.

*Expectation of the Woodcarvers from CLC.* The expectation of woodcarvers from CLC and government creates possibilities of further development of the occupation.

The woodcarvers of Bungamati expected that CLC could help the woodcarvers and their families to give basic literacy, the skill based training, and raise awareness about potentials and opportunities. They also believed that marginalized female woodcarvers should get more benefit from income generating activities promoted by the government. Actually the Bungamati CLC promotes human development by providing opportunities for lifelong learning to the local community. As UNESCO (2008) stated Community Learning Centre (CLC) is a local educational institution outside the formal education system and managed by local people to provide various learning opportunities. CLCs support empowerment, social transformation and improvement of the quality of life of the people.

The main functions of CLCs are to provide education and training, offer community information and resource services, support community development activities, and facilitate coordination and networking. UNESCO (2006) reports about a number of skill development training conducted in the CLCs to promote income generation and poverty alleviation. The

linkage of literacy with income generating activities has been considered extremely helpful. According to the World Bank (WB, 2002), people are encouraged and better prepared to start training in a livelihood, when they acquire reading, writing, and mathematics skills. The woodcarvers of Bungamati expected the CLC would offer adequate access to basic literacy and numeracy courses and relevant skill training for the community people. CLC is thus regarded as an intervention to enhance basic education, offer training, generate income, and improve livelihood of the people in the community.

The theoretical rationale for designing and implementing the education and training programme at CLC calls for attention to technical, practical and “emancipatory” aspects of learning and the curriculum as identified by Habermas (Grundy, 1987)

Technical aspects, according to Habermas, refer to the essential elements of the skills and their effective transfer to learners. For example, most of the woodcarvers follow the same design as their kinsmen and previous generations practiced, which constrained innovation. This resulted in the reproduction of the same kinds of arts and designs. This may be temporarily adequate but unsustainable in the longer term, as market, technology and socio-economic factors change. It is also likely that the social structure encourages the status-quo in favour of traditional practices and risk-averse attitudes.

The practical aspects, as conceptualised by Habermas, refer to the understanding of the environment, culture and socio-economic conditions of the people who are involved in this occupation. The practical interest is to make a difference in the lives of the people in terms of improving human assets, social assets, and financial assets. The woodcarvers may not be able to assess correctly the value and market potential of their skills or the need for education and training to make the skills sustainable and a source of improved livelihood.

According to Grundy (1987), Habermas’s emancipatory dimension relates to the capacity to take autonomous and responsible actions based upon practical and sensible decisions. Knowledge and enhancement of skills should strengthen the capability of individuals and groups to take control of their lives independently and with responsibility. The education and training activities should be aimed at promoting the emancipatory dimension of productive skills.

## **VII. Conclusions**

Nepal is rich in traditional indigenous skills of woodcarving, but there are several factors threatening the sustainability of this occupation. Economically, the woodcarvers are not on a sound footing as they get low returns from their artistic work. Community solidarity is a further issue. The artisans need to communicate with each other and create capacity to network among community members to promote and protect their common interests. Another concern is gender. Traditionally a male domain, but no longer a sufficient source for family livelihood, the craft has become attractive for women as a means of supplementing family earnings.



Furthermore, the community needs to be motivated to participate in the overall planning, implementation, leadership and management regarding their common development. Equally, it is important to influence the community and private entrepreneurs to work together to invest in the development of woodcarving as a business.

For example, Bhaktapur is one of the villages in the Kathmandu Valley where, as in Bungamati, the heritage of woodcarving has continued. Bhaktapur Municipality has a programme of providing subsidy to people who build houses with traditional carvings. This provision has not only motivated people to build houses with woodcarving, but has also created a demand for more woodcarving products. In addition, employment opportunity has increased for those who are trained in this occupation.

The Community Learning Center offers an approach to address the training needs of woodcarvers. Instituting practical training for woodcarvers would not only result in a deeper understanding of the occupation, but also would make the process and outputs of woodcarving more competitive and sustainable.

It is necessary to ensure that the work of CLC incorporate and combine literacy programmes, skill-based training, awareness programmes and income-generating activities leading to the woodcarvers' occupational development and improvement of their livelihood. The present situation demands collective efforts from all relevant agencies of government as well as the community to enhance sustainability of woodcarving as an occupational skill in Nepal.

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