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Unmasking the Symbolic Meaning of Mask in the Newari Festivals

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Abstract. Unmasking the masks is a way of delivering the message enveloped in the symbols of culture, religions and socialization processes. This phenomenon is very meaningful from the anthropological perspective. For this article, field research was conducted in the Kathmandu Valley purposefully in Kathmandu, Patan, Bhaktapur and Kirtipur Durbar Square on the festivals celebrated and the various cultural and religious performances in the year 2023 and 2024. The theories of Clifford Geertz, Erving Goffman and Herbert Mead are applied in the context of Newari mask dance festivals. The masks used in Newari festivals represent the various cultural and religious features, and these masks are the windows through which we have tried to explore the Newari world. In Newar mask performance, the role of dress and music also play vital role for the performance in totality. The research explores that the masks signify various meanings, and the meanings depend on the colors, shape and size. Specific masks are used for specific gods, goddesses and even for *panca tatwa – prithvi tatwa, bayu tatwa, jala tatwa, akash tatwa,* and *agni tatwa*. Field-based data and information are interpreted by using anthropological methods where ontology, epistemology and methodology are defined shortly using participants' observation, in-depth interviews and various other methods. The study also incorporates the axiological dimension of Newari culture.

Keywords. Newar, festival, mask, performance, *Panca tatwa*.

1. *Introduction*

Society teaches us that our identity is everything and significant every time that we must carefully construct and present it to be valued and grasped. Nonetheless, identity might be hidden or masked, therefore, it is necessary to unmask the mask of the identity that they publicly present. To understand the reality of these social phenomena or social interactions, the concepts of front space and backspace of Erving Goffman are quite relevant. Equally relevant is the theoretical notion of thick description to gauge the depth of reality in the performances of mask culture in Newari festivals. This paper attempts to draw the concept that self-presentation is necessary, arguing that identity is not a means of connection but a form of social control. Drawing on Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* and Mead's theory of Self, it examines how impression management enforces comparison, competition, and existential distress. Rather than fostering genuine social cohesion, the constructed self becomes a commodity shaped by Newari culture, reinforcing socialization, social control rather than deviance.

The unmasking process of ritual exposes the hidden objects and symbols intrinsically embedded. Masks turn out to be special interpretative objects, not just decorative objects but powerful symbols that represent a wide range of spiritual and cultural concepts including the connection between life and death, the divine and the human, and the sacred and the secular (Dahal [2020a]). Wearing a mask is seen as a way to connect with unseen realms and give voice to the unspoken, placing the wearer at the intersection of the present and the past, the living and the dead. Masks play a crucial role in Newari rituals and ceremonies, particularly masked dances, where they are worn to invoke deities and connect with the spiritual realm. In Newari, the word for mask (*khvāhpāh*) does not carry the meaning of hiding or distorting reality, but rather emphasizes the mask's role in revealing the essence of the character being embodied. Newari masks are predominantly used to represent deities, both male and female, including those in the form of animals (like Ganesh or Arāha) (Toffin [2014]). They also represent attendants and vehicles of deities, such as peacocks or lions. In Newari culture, masks hold immense religious and cultural significance, playing a vital role in festivals, rituals, and artistic expression. They serve as symbols of deities, spirits, and mythological figures, connecting the community to their heritage and spiritual beliefs. Masks are not merely decorative items; they are believed to be imbued with power and are essential for performances, processions, and rituals.

The art of costume performance has actively responded to the themes of today's social development. As an independent art form, only by strengthening the connection with the body or performer, costume performance can be. In Newar mask performance, the role of dress and music also play vital role for the performance in totality.

In Newari culture, masks are deeply symbolic, embodying deities, attendants, and vehicles like peacocks or lions, often representing deities or mythical figures. They serve as a conduit to the spiritual realm, transporting wearers between the present and the past, the living and the dead (Roy [2015]). Masks are not seen as a disguise, but as a manifestation of the character being embodied, revealing their essence. Masks often represent deities, spirits, and mythological figures from Newari folklore and Hindu-Buddhist traditions. For example, the *lākhe* mask, a prominent feature in Newari festivals, represents both fearsome and protective aspects of traditional Nepali folklore.

Masks are believed to be imbued with supernatural power and are used to invoke the presence and blessings of the deities they represent. In the *Nava Durga* festival, for instance, masks are regarded as alive and empowered, playing a crucial role in the ritual. Nepali masks are more than just decorative things; they are an important element of Nepal's cultural history and artistic expression (Paulo [2005]). They serve as a conduit between the spiritual and the mundane world, encouraging the passing down of traditions and tales from one generation to the next, inspiring the new generation to preserve the history passed down to them, and making sure they would not be misled in the upcoming time (Dahal [2024a]). These masks are renowned throughout the world, drawing the attention of art collectors and cultural enthusiasts everywhere.

The vibrant mask culture of Nepal is a replication of the nation's artistic creativity, cultural symbols and diverse cultural heritage. The elaborate patterns and deep symbolic meanings of these masks provide insight into Nepal's spiritual past and the artistry of its artisans (Alsop [1976]). Nepali masks are fascinating and inspiring, whether displayed in museums or worn at colorful festivals, keeping Nepal's cultural identity alive.

This study aims to identify the specific colors that are used in the mask for a particular god and goddess, and specifically to represent the particular meanings.

2. *Theory*

When the phrase "thick description" is used in literary and anthropological analysis, it refers to the ethnographic method that employs serious and engaged fieldwork. Moreover, it grasps the social process of the world under study; and the study prepares a detailed and observant ethnography that is utterly persuasive. This central metaphor, of culture as a text, gives the ethnographer something specific to do: to identify symbols that somehow represent the particular social process of that group, and then explain their meaning.

Geertz (1973) transplants the phrase "thick description" that describes the different behaviors and their contrast coined by Ryle (1949). The rapid contracting

right eyelids description Ryle calls 'thin.' He uses the term "thick description" to characterize the behavior in detail. The thick description model is interpretative and communicative incorporating questions such as how it was done, why it happened and which social codes. Geertz argues that the kinds of things that anthropologists interpret – rituals, myths, cockfights – are themselves interpretations of the society in which they are found, and so the anthropologist is producing second- and third-order interpretations for a different purpose (Geertz [1973]).

As researcher, I enquired the performers about both physical as well as spiritual significance of masks in Newari culture and festivals. Culture is a semiotic system, so that all representation is, in fact, interdependent. Anthropologists tend to think social behaviors as cultural properties – rituals, festivals, performances; the non-instrumental side of life – are also understood as interpretations of their society, the anthropologist could focus on some practice that on the surface seem trivial or irrational, and use that practice to understand and reflect upon the nature of the social whole (Goffman [1959]). Geertz applies this most famously in his essay on the Balinese cockfight. The cockfight is a seemingly unimportant and irrational piece of Balinese culture in which grown-up men bet money they cannot afford to watch birds kick each other to death in illegal matches (Geertz [1973]). Geertz suggests that Balinese men are gripped by their cockfights because the matches flung away the restrained and polished social hierarchy that otherwise defines Balinese daily life. Through this discussion, this small social practice turns out to be the prism to observe the fundamental features of Balinese society.

Here, I juxtapose the concept of thick description put forward by Geertz (1973) with the performance connoted with mask wearing in the festivals of Newari culture into three different layers. It is logical to ask why these mask performance festivals are celebrated, though participants were not able to understand the significance of the performances. We feel that there are different levels of attainment of meaning among the mask performer (signifier) and participant (signified): pre-preparation – the best and most intelligent with an academic and philosophical bent of mind (backspace as termed by Erving Goffman) and practice in term of Pierre Bourdieu – who instinctively know the symbolic meaning of masks and its impacts in Newari culture. During the performance – the performers who perform the performances (front space as termed by Erving Goffman) are bright, clever, intelligent, educated but not much inclined to abstract thought who transfer the meaning from the signifier to the signified.

In Richard Bauman's (1975) terms, most practice has a decidedly performative aspect, and almost all performances can be interpreted as a form of practice in the sense of Pierre Bourdieu (1990). However, the distinction between practice and performance is analytically helpful in understanding the dynamics of consciousness and objectivity underlying the process of producing identity, piety, harmony, and social order.

Practice refers to the embodied, ritualized actions Newari individuals perform within a collective-internal epistemological framework that mediates between the human and divine worlds through the performance of culture. Performances are ritualized acts performed within a broader discursive context created by socio-religious and psycho-cultural agendas that must materialize in the Newari interpretive world. Newari audiences witness performances to express their solidarity with the community culture. Demonstrations are held in public places to perform for both Newari and other audiences.

Both practices and performances are fundamentally acts of objectification– worldviews and beliefs deeply held in social space and the simultaneous process of producing those worldviews through ritualized action. As sets of rules enacted in a communal space, rituals are, by nature, objectified forms of social action that express human relationships with the sacred. Instead, to use Goffman's (1974) terms, primary frameworks are still frameworks. The practice still requires objectification as does all ritualized action. Festivals and *jatras* alternately and effectively culminate the purpose of Newari cultural performance and practices of everyday life.

The permanent presence of the "sacred object" is the constant binding principle that brings these different types of actions together and requires certain rules of conduct to be ritually set. Richard Handler (2011) closely follows "Emile Durkheim" in suggesting that the sacred object of heritage performance may be the "social self". By applying Erving Goffman's dramaturgical approach to the mask culture of the Newari community, we can view Newari social interaction as a performance, similar to a theatrical play, where Newar individuals are like actors playing different roles in their cultural, religious and social settings. This theory focuses on how individuals present themselves and manage the impressions they make on others in their everyday lives (Goffman [1959]).

As front stage, cultural performances and festival celebrations are the public sphere of Newars where each people present themselves to others, often with specific behaviors and appearances designed to convey a certain impression. As backstage, the more private space of Newars where individuals can relax and be their authentic selves, free from the scrutiny of others.

Likewise, post performance – the "small" folk – those who are simple and non-academic, with basic education, who belong to the masses and are not naturally inclined to ignore and disobey and often mistake against the performances, are generally following their instincts without discrimination as in Mead's theory of self. They are prone to superstition and need encouragement and support for their participation as divine work, a sacred role that fosters harmony, cohesion rather than conflict and clash (Mead [1934]).

Erving Goffman's dramaturgical model, outlined in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, and George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism both sug-

gest that people exist in a world where they must consciously craft and manage their public persona. This idea implies that individuals are constantly engaged in impression management, carefully curating their behaviour, speech, and even emotions to align with the social scripts imposed upon them.

Society applauds this process, viewing it as necessary for maintaining order, communication, and cooperation. Goffman views impression management not simply as a way of deceiving others, but as an essential method for keeping social life smooth and predictable (Goffman [1959]). It allows people from different backgrounds to coordinate their actions and understand each other. Similarly, Mead believes that identity making through social interaction gives individuals a way to find meaning, build relationships, and create a shared sense of belonging in a complex world.

3. *Methodology*

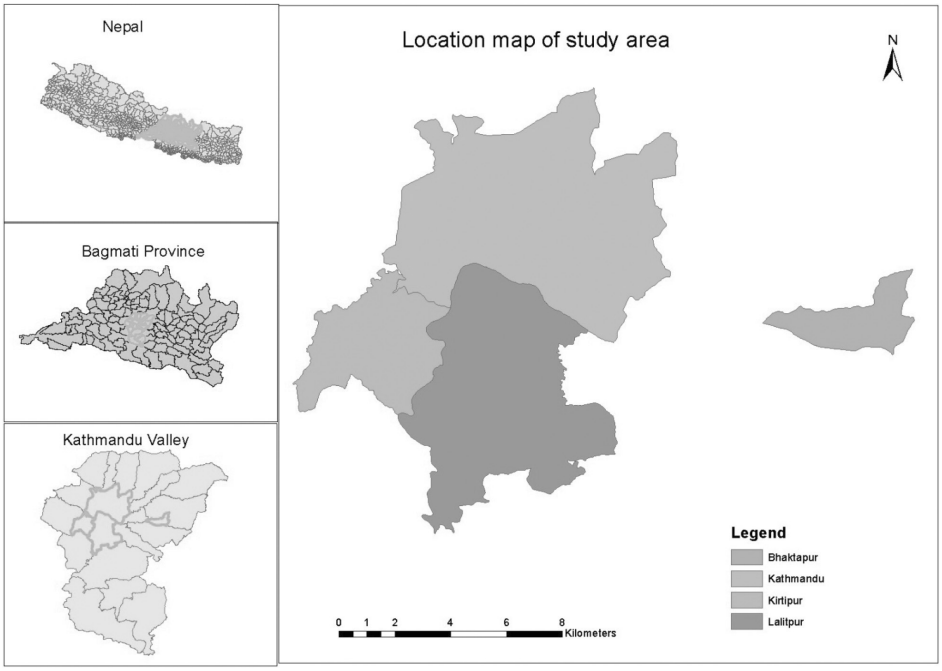
This research is guided by an interpretive paradigm. For accumulating symbolic meaning of the mask culture of Newari festivals, we have interviewed the selected locals with deep and prolonged engagement in the field for the fulfilment of our study objectives. For this, we have spent a considerable amount of time at the research site.

Here, back spaces of mask culture including mask preparations, interrelationship between mask and divine power specific to color, etc. whereas, front spaces – performances, dances, dresses, etc. the concept of Erving Goffman we have tried to define ontologically. The mask-related contents, their interrelationship with *panca tatwa*, gods and goddesses and color specifications are the defined ontology of this study. Therefore, masks, symbols and contents of masks- shape, size, color and mask specific to gods and goddesses are interpreted in the study.

The primary task is to explore symbolic meanings of masks, their connection with festivals and Newari culture in general and to find out the interrelationship with *panca tatwa*, color, specific deities and demons. We have tried to find out the process of worship of specific gods and goddesses in terms of mask, their relations with physical elements (*tatwa*), their specific use and symbolic reflection in the masks and everyday life. The Kathmandu Valley is the study area of this research. We have conducted the fieldwork in Kirtipur, Patan Durbar Square, Bhaktapur Durbar Square and Kathmandu Durbar Square only in specific festivals – *Indra Jatra*, *Gãi Jatra*, *Dashain*, *Gathe Mugha* and so on in the year 2023 and 2024. Our research respondents were mask dancers, mask makers and participants, and we have taken one dancer, one mask maker and one participant of the festival from each cluster of our research areas. Each city consists of different hierarchical respondents purposively selected. Altogether twelve re-

spondents were our primary informants. As per the need to clarify the title and situations, to eliminate the confusion and to verify the data collected from the primary respondents in the study, we consulted the key informants – priests, *guthi* members and seniors.

Since this research is qualitative and has an ethnographic design, observation and in-depth interviews are effective tools and techniques for data collection to carry out my research more effectively. Content analysis, thematic analysis, narrative analysis and discourse analysis methods were used and grounded theories of Ervring Goffman, Clifford Geertz and Mead's theory were selected to visualize the data in practice and performance of mask culture of Newars.



4. *Findings and discussion*

In Newari society, masks serve as a significant symbol that provides embodiment for invisible spirits and deities, often depicted as fantastic composites of humans, animals, or male and female. Some of the masks are found to be of deities, others of demons with symbolic meanings significantly reflecting Newari society and its cultural nuances. Mostly, the masks are of Ganesha, Varaha and

their vehicles. Performance-based two categories are found, namely full-dress performances and half-dress performances – *pyãkha* and *ba khawapah* (Toffin [2012]). The former is associated with human, male or female, merchant, priest, animal characters, demons, and spirit characters, in which full masks are used to perform various performances, mimes, dances, and processions, and the stories are often based on mythology and folklore (Lachhi, Prajapati [2006]). Some *pyakha* performances can be humorous. Fools, jesters, or clowns have their masks, which are worn during comic performances. The half masks worn by these comedians are called *ba khawapah* in which the mouth is not covered, so that the dialogue or monologue between the characters in the performance can be spoken.

Nati Babu Maharjan (pseudonym) replied on why Newars celebrate these expensive festivals every year, as "a town called Majippa was troubled by a *lãkhe*. The word l*ãkhe* in Newari refers to a human-flesh-eating demon. In the city, hundreds of young men fell in love with a young woman; and she started dating, in human disguise, with them. The young woman in human disguise was none other than the human-flesh-eating demon. Ultimately, he was caught by the authorities. Instead of punishing him, the king of Majippa offered him impunity and life with his lover if he promised to give up his carnivorous attitude and protect Majippa's children. With the conversation, we found that the *lãkhe* dance performance was the recreational punishment from the king when *jhyãlincã,* a teasing demon, excited *lãkhe* and chased him continuously. This was probably a recreation for one of the many duels that *lãkhe* undertook as part of his treaty with the king. A different version of the myth claims that the lacquered dance was a punishment from the gods for an illicit relationship with a young woman.

Although the dance is unique and traditional, there is no shortage of grandeur in the annual *Indra Jatra*. Regardless of the location and the occasion, *lãkhe* dances are worth watching. The red mask, a work of traditional, meticulous Newari-Tibetan art, is accompanied by a matching red and gold *bhoto* (blouse) and full-length skirt. Dancers also tie red silk handkerchiefs around their fingers to add color and excitement to the dance. With a quick hand movement, these silk handkerchiefs appear as a blur and a red glow.

Lãkhe dance is always accompanied by traditional Newari music. *Lãkhe*'s beautiful and violent gyrations are inspired by the music composed by *dhime* and *bhushya*. *Dhime* is the most common and important Newari musical instrument (Alsop [1976]). It is a double-sided drum with one side wider than the other; the broad end is struck with a stick to make a sound. *Bhushya* is a complementary device, a pair of sashes with a strap to tie around the wrist.

Most of the masks in the Newari tradition are found to be complex in structure, with vibrant, warm, multi-colored designs that often appear decorative.

They are shaped according to the different characters and the masks that depict their nature. The masks are then varnished and painted with great precision and care. Most masks are made of clay mixed with paper and jute (Paulo [2005]). As a rule, they are a mixture of Nepalese paper (made from the inner bark of some plant), clay, jute (sack) and cotton. Even now, there is a tradition of making metal masks in Patan, which is famous for metalwork. Such Himalayan cultural masks are simply constructed, and their design, detail and expression of these elements only reflect or conform to the straightforward and fundamental religious concept of animism.

Mask dance in Newari culture originated to preach religious sermons, but this is not the only thing that happens during these performances. Masked dances describe dramas, which are taken from traditional Hindu literature, with stories and characters that are familiar to people. Newari mask dances are based on local folklore and traditions that are traditionally local. Amidst heavy action and dance, there is plenty of comedy to give some relief to the audience.

Newari masks differ in size, shape, materials used and depictions with colors from Tibetan or Indian. The colors used in the symbols indicate *panca tatwa* (five elements) – *prithvi tatwa*, *jala tatwa*, *bãyu tatwa*, *ãkãsha tatwa* and *agni tatwa*. Both *pyakha* and *khwapa* are great living traditions handed down verbally from one generation to another, with their cultural features.

4.1. *Types and varieties of masks*

Masks, costumes and plays are distinctive and essential features of Newari dramas, performances, plays and dances. Both types of performances are called *pyãkha* in Newari (Alsop [1976]). Usually, they are made by members of the local Chitrakar community (painter caste), which is regarded as of relatively low status (but pure). However, in Patan, the Shakyas (for their annual *ga* or *gana pyãkha*) make and paint their masks, and in Bhaktapur, potters and members of the farming caste have long been making masks.

Masks of Newars mainly represent gods and goddesses including animal-shaped deities (*Ganesha*, *Baraha*), their attendants and their vehicles (peacock, lion and so on.). Certainly, the masks also represent negative power roles – evil, demons, various animals such as monkey, dog, deer, buffalo, pig and elephant (Roy [2015]), and reflect human characters such as priests, merchants, clowns, hunters and women of the *Jyãpu* farming caste. Masks were not the symbols and images of their ancestors, so they do not relate to death rites and funeral ceremonies (Dahal [2024a]). Masks are used in festivals, *jatras* and religious performances.

Buffoons, jesters and tricksters have their masks, which are worn during comic/clown theatre performances. The mask usually covers the whole face, but the

half mask, *ba khawapah*, does not touch the mouth, and is familiar and used in comic plays with dialogue (Toffin [2012]). The color of the mask varies according to the figures/deities it embodies.

The color used everywhere in the religious sector is specific and associated with the nature of god, Goddess and their context or role that Hindu mythology has prescribed. Specific colors are assigned for specific gods and goddesses depending upon their nature and the things associated with them. We found yellow color is assigned to Lord Vishnu, god of *prithvi tatwa*, and the green color is assigned to Vishnu for his presence in land, air and sky. Earth sign is represented by the yellow color and sky by blue. Therefore, the presence of Vishnu on the earth and sky means yellow and blue combined to make green and is synonymous with noble and highborn characters. *Bãyu tatwa* (air) is represented by white because air is colorless, and white is linked with the purest and pleasing images of gods and goddesses. Red color signifies *agni tatwa* and represents the temper, and is associated with violent nature, power and strength. Black is the symbol of demons. So, the masks used in Newari culture are found heavily dominated by these philosophies in their iconographical design as *Brahmayani* – yellow, *Vaishnavi* – green, *Ganesha* – white, *Bhairawa* – dark blue, *Kumari* – red and so on. Some variations might take place between cities (Toffin [2014]).

Color is therefore an essential element of visual vocabulary and indicative of the poetry encoded in these mythic motifs. In the Newari traditional masked dance and the use of color in masks, the specific deities are referred to by the color of their masks (Alsop [1976]). It is part of an all-embracing theatrical language, a system of visual cues that includes other areas of performance, such as music, costume and choreography.

The masks of *Ugra* (fearsome gods) are depicted with frightening canines emerging from their mouths. The trunk of the elephant-headed god Ganesha is coiled to the left. With some exceptions, god masks are decorated with a third eye (sight) painted vertically on the forehead (Lachhi, Prajapati [2006]). Indrayani's third eye, however, is drawn horizontally. Most male deities have stylized moustaches and small beards.

Masked dances describe dramas, often derived from mythological Hindu literature, divided into stories, plots, and several episodes. Masks do not speak, except in some comic plays (Toffin [2012]). As a result, there is no negotiation. In some cases, the singers who play the role of narrating the story of the play sit at the edge of the stage. Occasionally, a couple lifts the dancer into the air to illustrate his ability to fly (*khokana sikali pyãkha*).

Newari masked dances are also filled with folklore and more secular (sometimes even comic) elements that fascinate audiences. Since there is a constant transition between cosmic and domestic scales. The fusion of comedy and cos-

mic features in mask dances is often played out between the scenes. When symbols of Newari masked dances are interpreted, new generations feel happy and accountable to sustain the cultural performances. These performances are a living tradition that has been transmitted from generation to generation.

The mask dancers are mostly Shrestha, Shakya, Bajracharya, Jyapu, Maharjan, Prajapati, Malakar and so on from Newari community and generally following the professions of agriculturists, farmers, potters and painters. All dancers are male, and Chitrakar is responsible to lead the troupe and manage the processions. The masks are regularly repainted or refreshed each year just before the first performance of the dance, and the date is calculated according to the lunar calendar. Masks directly involved in ritual activities are cremated or immersed in a nearby river.

The aesthetic style and value of Newari masks are completely different from northern Tibetan and southern Indian masks of their respective cultures. This style is an outcome of a special combination of natural pigments, masking materials (metal, clay, and *papier mache*), shapes, icon details, metal decorations and perhaps more. We can find the transmission of specific canons between Newari artisans over the centuries.

4.2. *Masks and Divinity*

The masks in Newari culture represent the divine, deities and demons and are mostly used in processions and rituals rather than theatrical performances. The available masks are classified into three categories according to the performers. The first category of masks symbolize the faces of gods and goddesses in ritual dances. The second category of masks is used to decorate the temples or chariots during procession as ritual objects. The third category includes metal masks that reflect the faces of deities as statue-masks.

Nepal boasts a rich tradition of mask-making and usage in religious rituals, folk dances, and cultural performances. These masks, often crafted from wood, felt, or goat skin, represent deities, demons, ancestors, and various characters from Nepalese mythology (Alsop [1976]). While traditional mask making remains a vital part of Nepali culture, modern robotics is emerging as a field with potential for both cultural preservation and innovation in Nepal (Toffin [2014]). All the masks have a ‘third eye’, a mark on the forehead, and headgear. It can be large earrings, a crown, hair nets or a headband. Masks are considered lifeless until ceremonies of consecration and installation are performed.

The symbols of masks related to both divine beings and demons in the context of *panca tatwa* (the five elements) often involve a blend of sacred and profane imagery. Divine figures may be represented with elements like fire (representing passion and purity), water (representing emotions and cleansing), earth (repre-

senting stability and grounding), air (representing communication and intellect), and ether (representing space and consciousness) (Toffin [2014]). In contrast, demon symbols often incorporate distorted or inverted forms of these elements, such as fire as destruction, water as a destructive flood, earth as chaos, air as a chaotic storm, and ether as a void or emptiness.

In divine symbolic iconography, fire represents passion, purity, and divine energy and is depicted as a bright, radiant flame or a powerful, purifying force (Doniger O'Flaherty [1988]). Water symbolizes emotions, cleansing, and the life-giving force of nature and is depicted as a calm, flowing river or a powerful, purifying wave (Venkatesan [2021]). Earth represents stability, grounding, and the physical world and is depicted as fertile land or a solid foundation. Air symbolizes communication, intellect, and the ability to move freely and is depicted as gentle breezes or powerful winds. Ether represents space, consciousness, and the divine void, and is depicted as a vast, empty sky or a mystical, limitless space.

In demonic symbols iconography, fire represents destruction, hellfire, and the destructive power of passion and is depicted as a chaotic, raging inferno or a demonic flame. Water symbolizes a destructive flood, chaos, and the loss of emotional control and is depicted as a dark, raging torrent or a powerful, destructive wave (Campbell [2018]). Earth represents chaos, instability, and the decay of the physical world and is depicted as barren land or a crumbling foundation. Air symbolizes a chaotic storm, misinformation, and the disruption of communication and is depicted as a raging wind or a swirling vortex (Campbell [2018]). Ether represents a void, emptiness, and the absence of divine consciousness and is depicted as a dark, infinite void or a chaotic, endless space.

Here, both divine and demonic combined symbols were also found as inverted pentagram, which was a common symbol of the demonic, often depicting a distorted or upside-down pentagram, which was a symbol of protection and harmony in some spiritual traditions (Alsop [1976]). Similarly, demons with horns and wings were the common depiction of demons, incorporating horns (representing aggression and pride) and wings (representing the ability to travel between worlds). The specific symbols and their meanings can vary depending on the culture, tradition, and specific interpretation of the divine and demonic realms. The *panca tatwa* framework provides a foundation for understanding these symbolic representations but the actual imagery and its interpretations can be diverse.

Here, the meticulous, private process of repainting the masks constitutes the "back stage" (Goffman [1959]), where the object is prepared for its sacred role. Once the dancer dons the mask and the spirit "takes over", they enter the "front stage" of the festival, performing a collectively understood version of the divine."

4.3. *Symbolic interpretation of Panca Tatwa and color specification*

Human beings are God's wonderful creation. To provide peace and prosperity God has created nature. The human body is made up of (Panca Tatwa) five elements like – Water, Air, Fire, Earth and Space (Chapple [1998]). In Hindu diction, happiness, success, prosperity and peace will prevail if there is balance in *Panca Tatwa*. The chakra of the universe revolves in *Panca Tatwa*. Brahma, Vishnu, and Mahesh Tridev work together on this.

Essentially, *Panca Tatwa* is a beautiful Sanskrit word that means five elements (Panca = Five + Tatwa = elements). It is often referred to Akash (Sky or Space), Vayu (Air), Jal (Water), Agni (Fire) and Prithvi (Earth) in ancient texts.

Hindu religious philosophy is based on the energy transfer concepts of *dharma, karma, bhakti*, incarnation, salvation and rebirth, and there are two sects, divine and demon, as *panca tatwa – panca deva* and *panca bhuta*. Here, we have tried to transplant these concepts to the uses of masks and their specific colors with significances.

4.3.1. *Vãyu Tatwa*

In Hindu tradition, *bãyu tatwa*, which signifies air or wind, is associated with the god *Vãyu*. *Vãyu* is also known as *Pavana*, and he is considered the god of the winds, as well as the divine messenger of the gods (Venkatesan [2021]). He is closely associated with Indra (the king of the gods, associated with rain and storms (Chakravarti [1991]), as well as with the color blue. It is also linked to the color black, sometimes representing the dark, dynamic nature of the wind and is also praised as *prãna* or the "life breath of the world" in the *Upanishads*.

Vãyu, the god of the wind, is directly associated with *vãyu tatwa*. He is often depicted with a white or blue complexion, representing the sky and wind (Kinsley [1993]). Indra, the king of the gods, is another figure closely linked to the wind element, especially in its stormy and powerful manifestations. His association with rain and storms connects him to the wind's role in weather patterns (Dahal [2024a]). The great masks and the *lãkhe* on *Indra Jatra* are performed to worship the *vãyu tatwa* or god Indra for rain, prosperity and progress because of an agro-based economy and fertility in the Kathmandu Valley.

Significantly, *vãyu tatwa* (air as awareness), which can also be linked to space and atmosphere is a powerful life source that is important to sustain life. Only when we are alive can we feel our Body, Mind and Intelligence (Sherman [2000]). That Aliveness is known as Awareness. Without Awareness, we are dead. It is the Awareness that enlivens all three, the Body, Mind and Intelligence. Like the air is needed for the fire to burn, Awareness is needed for the fire of intelligence to propel the functioning of the Mind and the Body.

According to ancient Vedic science, the awareness we perceive as vitality is the subtlest energy form. As water vapour condenses to form liquid water and finally solidifies as ice, awareness-energy condenses to form the liquid mind and solid body (Sherman [2000]). The total sum of consciousness, intelligence, mind and body is called energy. Modern quantum physics concludes that the physical world (matter) is just condensed energy.

Depending on the context, other colors like white, gold, and red may also be associated with *vãyu*, especially when his anger or energy is emphasized.

4.3.2. *Jala Tatwa*

Water is the source of life – and it flows within all of us. 70% of the Earth is water and so is the human body. Do our senses perceive the physical world? No, there is something subtler than the body that is involved in perception. The physical eye may be looking at an object, but if we are not mentally attached to the physical body, there is no perception of that object. So it is the mind that brings reality to the body or material world (Chapple [1998]). There is no body without a mind. This is what we experience when we are asleep or unconscious due to brain injury or anaesthesia. So it is the mind that gives reality to the body.

However, this mind is not solid like the Body. The mind can change rapidly and flow or alternate between various sense perceptions. The mind can also flow backwards in time and leap forward in time. Because of this fluid nature, the ancients attributed the Mind to the water element (Chakravarti [1991]). The Vedic Scholars say that like the fluid water solidifies into a solid block of ice, the Body is nothing but the solidified energy of the mind. The mind is represented by the ring finger. A wedding is the symbol of the joining of two minds and hence a wedding ring is worn on the "Mind" finger!

In Hinduism, the water element (*jala tatwa*) is strongly associated with several deities, particularly Vishnu and his *avatars* (Venkatesan [2021]), and the color blue. These deities are often depicted with a blue complexion, symbolizing the vastness and coolness of the sea and the sky, as well as their tranquil and protective nature (Doniger O'Flaherty [1975]). Other deities and colors associated with *jala tatwa* include *Lakshmi* (pink), *Saraswati* (yellow), and *Matangi* (emerald green).

Mostly blue color represents *jala tatwa*, reflecting their association with water and a cool, tranquil nature (Kak [2000]) and these colors are used in the everyday life of Newars. Blue color is found original or main color received from nature, represents *Shiva, Vishnu, Saraswati,* associated with the *jala tatwa*.

4.3.3. *Ãkãsh Tatwa*

In Hinduism, *ãkãsh* (ether or space) is one of the five fundamental elements (*panca mahã bhutas*). It does not directly correspond to a specific deity in the

same way that other elements do (like *agni*/fire with *Agni*, *vãyu*/air with *Vãyu*, and so on) (Venkatesan [2021]). However, *ãkãsh* is often associated with the god of the sky, *Ãkãsh Bhairawa*, and the color blue.

The sky as consciousness is the vast open space that accommodates everything. The clear blue sky above us acts as a shelter to the earth in the day, while at night it serves as a gateway to the starry galaxies that exist light years ahead of us (Chapple [2001]).

Consciousness is being aware without being aware of the intellect, mind and body. In other words, consciousness is unconditioned awareness (without form). Nothing can happen without consciousness. In consciousness, living, dead, moving, immovable, tiny, everything exists. As all things in space, all existence comes to be due to "consciousness" (Sherman [2000]). Hence the ancients associated consciousness with the space element. Just like the thumb is necessary for all other fingers to function, nothing can exist and function without consciousness. Hence consciousness is marked as the thumb.

In Hindu philosophy, *Ãkãsh* represents the subtle, primordial state where all things have their origin. It is the space without which matter cannot exist, the potential for all things (Dimmitt, van. Buitenen [2012]). *Ãkãsh Bhairawa* is a deity associated with the sky and is considered a protector of the universe and a progenitor of the Maharjan caste among Newars in Nepal.

The color blue is frequently associated with *Ãkãsh Bhairawa*, possibly because of the sky's color. Additionally, *Ãkãsh Bhairawa* is often depicted with a large blue head (Toffin [2014]). While *Ãkãsh Bhairawa* is a prominent figure, *ãkãsh* is not directly attached to a specific goddess. The other four elements (*agni*/fire, *vãyu*/air, *jala*/water, and *prithvi*/earth), each have deities associated with them, but *ãkãsh* is more of a foundational principle.

4.3.4. *Prithvi Tatwa*

Body as Earth is solid – has soil, landscapes, flora and fauna. With its tremendous magnetic field and gravitational force, it holds every living and non-living thing on Earth. From birth, we try to perceive everything in this world in a physical "form" or body (Chapple [1998]). By using the word "I" we also refer to our physical body. The same happens when we look at the outer world, recognizing all forms of physical entities. We cannot relate to anything without a physical "body" or structure. Even those things that we cannot see with our senses, we try to objectify as images through our imagination. So our world is only filled with objects, bodies, entities and images. We connect with the outside world through the senses of our body. The five sense organs are the ears, skin, eyes, tongue and nose which help to perceive the five physical qualities of this universe, sound, touch, sight, taste and smell. In essence, we owe our existence to our physical bodies. This is why the ancients referred to the body as the earth element, be-

cause our life is on the earth. Anything gross, solid, and inert, is anciently called body or earth. This earth is depicted as the little finger of the hand.

In Hinduism, *prithvi tatwa* (earth element) is associated with the goddess *Prithvi* (also known as *Bhumi* or *Dharani*). *Prithvi* is the Mother Goddess representing the Earth and its nurturing nature (Venkatesan [2021]). She is also associated with the color yellow or gold.

Goddess *Prithvi* is a prominent goddess in Hinduism, embodying the earth as a nurturing and fertile entity (Venkatesan [2021]). Certain deities, like the planetary god for Saturn (*Shani*), are also connected to *Prithvi*, being viewed as her child. *Prithvi* is associated with stability, strength, and grounding energy, which are important aspects of the Earth's role in *vãstu shãstra* (Collins [1988]). The *bija mantra* related to *prithvi tatwa* is *Kshamã* (Venkatesan [2021]). The color yellow or golden is often associated with *prithvi*, symbolizing her nurturing and fertile nature. The yellow color is associated with the god *Vishnu*.

4.3.5. *Agni Tatwa*

Agni, the Hindu god of fire, is associated with the *agni tatwa*, signifying the element of fire. The color specifically associated with *agni* is saffron or a mix of red and yellow, symbolizing the radiant flames of fire (Chaturvedi [2002]). *Agni* is also known as *Agni Deva* and is depicted with two faces, representing fire as a life-giver and a life-taker. The *agni tatwa*, or fire element, is one of the five basic elements in Hindu philosophy.

Agni, the god of fire, is a central deity in Vedic and Hindu mythology, associated with purification, sacrifice, and the sun. The color saffron, a mix of red and yellow, is a key symbol of *agni*, representing the fiery essence of fire. *Agni* is also associated with light, energy, enthusiasm, order, and passion. In Hindu traditions, *agni* is believed to reside in the household fireplace, the heart, and the universe, taking on different forms (Venkatesan [2021]).

Agni is often depicted with three or seven tongues; two faces, and is associated with a ram, reflecting his role as a life-giver and life-taker. He is also known as a messenger between the gods and mortals, carrying sacrificial offerings and messages to the gods.

Fire as intelligence is the source of energy and light. Light is important for making the beauty of the world visible to all of us – in all its radiant colors. The sensory signals received by the body-sense-organs are perceived or translated as thoughts. Each thought refers to an object or image and we generate an infinite number of such thoughts (Singh [2010]). The constant flux of thoughts is called the mind. Interestingly, the thoughts are streamlined into a logical information pattern by a subtler aspect called Intelligence or Buddhi.

Newari culture features a rich tradition of mask making and use, with historical evidence showing their significance in religious rituals, dramatic perfor-

mances, and social gatherings (Toffin [2012]). Newars artistically connote the religious performances, their knowledge about environments (*panca tatwa*), divine deities, demons and direct and indirect associations with the everyday life of Newars that bridge the spiritual world with the physical world to maintain the social order and mechanism of controls. Masks are often used to represent deities, demons, and other mythical figures, playing a crucial role in expressing and preserving Newari beliefs and customs (Toffin [2014]).

Masks are used to represent deities, both male and female, including gods in the form of animals like *Ganesha*. Masks are integral to religious rituals, especially those performed during festivals like *Indra Jatra*, where *lãkhes* (demons) dance among the gods, and *Bhairab Jatra*, where the *Bhairab nãch* is performed (Toffin [2014]). *Lakhes*, who are depicted as demons in Newari tradition, are believed to have been forest-dwellers who later became protectors of the townspeople.

Lakhes are a prominent figure in Newari culture, often appearing in the *lãkhe* dance, a theatrical performance that combines drama, music, and dance (Alsop [1976]). Besides *lãkhes*, other mythological figures like the *khyāh* (a fat, hairy ape-like creature) are also represented in Newari mask performances.

Masks are a part of elaborate costumes worn by performers, often accompanied by ornate jewellery, bells, and other accessories. The masks themselves carry symbolic meaning, often representing the essence of the character being embodied (Tateyama [2016]). Masked performances are a way for the Newari community to express their identity and culture, displaying their rich traditions and beliefs. Masks are made from various materials, including wood, clay, cloth, and metal (Toffin [2014]). The process of making masks involves traditional knowledge passed down through generations. The making of masks often involves rituals and ceremonies, emphasizes their sacred nature. In essence, the mask culture in Newari society is a vibrant and complex tradition that reflects the community's deep-rooted beliefs, customs, and artistic expression.

4.4. *Mask and thick descriptions of the Newar world*

Mask culture in Newar festival is an events, context, performances within which social phenomena (whether these belong to the micro-, meso-, or macrospheres of Newar cultural existence) can "be intelligibly–that is, thickly–described" (Geertz [1973]). The question of whether such a (cultural) context is familiar or unfamiliar to those experiencing and/or studying it is crucial. The old cliché that anthropology is all about making the familiar strange and the strange familiar persists to this day. This laudable mission, however, is transferable to other academic disciplines.

From a semiotic point of view, the backspace of making mask, illusion, embodies that Newari culture functions properly as an anonymous force or power, working – paradoxically, "through social elements or bodies" and "behind itself" – in a causal fashion and determining every moment of being Newar. Not only by describe the mask of Newari culture as omnipresent and omnipotent, but it is also able to explain the material, social and personal dimensions of Newari cultural existence of mask culture, color uses, relationship with *panca tatwa* and their significance. Human actions and interactions are inevitably power-laden, they are not always power-driven (Geertz [1973]). All social practices are power- and culture-transmitted, but not all are power- and culture-induced (Susan [2018]) and the culture of the mask symbolizes in the Newar world is symbolically powerful, but not found powerful symbol. Interpretation of mask culture in the Newar world is not merely a cognitive mechanism (subject to the laws of logic, validity, or rationality) but also an experiential and existential journey (contingent on different degrees of recognition, relevance, and resonance).

From Geertz's perspective, the significance of mask culture in the Newar world tried to explore the interrelations between – counterproductive divisions-bottom-up vs top-down, hermeneutic vs systemic, concrete vs abstract, micro vs macro and so forth. The individual vs social (communal), material vs moral, thin (microscopic) description vs thick description owing to its embeddedness in everyday Newar life, has the potential significance in ordering, integrating and uniting Newar society despite various conflicts and cleavages.

From the perspective or the lenses of costume and performance, mask culture of Newar signify how colors, materials, and movements of dancers symbolize the specific deities, demons or abstract concepts within their belief system. Both performers and audiences understood that the masks and costumes are not just decorative but are ritually charged and are often consecrated before use. Similarly, it is found that how these visual elements-music, dances, dress-are passed down through generations during festivals, preserving the Newari cultural heritage.

4.5. *Mask tradition as practice and mask performance*

Bourdieu illustrates this by referring to the way Newar mask audience and participants in all Newar festival, rally, mass procession and festivals including mask performance that Newar society imitate gestures and mimicry, music, performances and dances, and how perception schemes and social structures are thereby passed "from Newar practice to practice of Newar".

The condition to understand the communicative intentions of Newar society through such performances in integrity is becoming similar to performer by par-

ticipants or children (Wulf [2017]). By imitating parents' gestures and symbols, the children "familiarize" with their parents in a process of "similarisation" or "approximation" (Wulf [2017]).

Mask traditions, deeply rooted in cultures worldwide, serve diverse purposes as both practices and performances. In this regard, I like to note the practice theory of Bourdieu that provides a framework for understanding the interplay between Newar social structures and Newar individual actions through the festivals, performances, dress and dancers with masks. The images that emphasise the Newar individuals and their roles, characters and status are both shaped by and help to shape the Newar social world through their practices, which are influenced by their "habitus" and operate within specific "fields". In mask performance and practice key concepts various embodied dispositions of Newar practices, values, traditions and norms (habitus), and performance or field (social space with its own rules and socio-cultural significance), and social harmony, integration, cooperation etc. (events, process and phenomena that can be converted into social capital identity, unity as power).

With the help of Bourdieu's theory, Newar social structures are both the product of past practices and the conditions for future practices. Individuals, with their habitus, navigate the social world and engage in practices that both reproduce and potentially transform existing social structures. This dynamic interplay between structure and agency is central to Bourdieu's practice theory which Newars are continuing I found the course of study on the significance of mask culture among Newars. So, Newars are not only obligated to follow the social life as prescribed by their rules, traditions and norms but it is not simply a matter of individuals following predetermined rules, but rather a dynamic process where individuals actively engage with and shape their Newar social world through their Newar practices, guided by their habitus and operating within specific fields.

They can conceal identity, reveal the supernatural, facilitate ritual, and enhance storytelling through theatrical performance. Masks act as a bridge between the human and spirit realms, allowing for the representation of deities, ancestors, and mythical beings. In theatrical contexts, masks transform actors, enabling them to embody different characters and explore a wider range of emotions. From the perspective of Bauman, mask culture and dance performance act as the events through which many aesthetic, linguistic values, norms and beliefs that transferred from the old generation to the new as a mechanism of linguistic socialization.

Mask traditions are cultural practices where masks hold deep symbolic meaning and are used in rituals, ceremonies, and social events, often connecting the wearer to the spiritual realm (Sing, 2025). Mask performance, on the other hand, refers to the use of masks in dramatic or artistic presentations, where the mask

enhances character portrayal and storytelling. Essentially, mask traditions are about cultural significance and spiritual connection, while mask performance is about theatrical expression. So, both Bourdieu and Bauman's common place of argument is that masks tradition or practice and mask performance ultimately unite Newar people, continue or follow their practice to perform social functions.

Here, one of the specific characteristics of communicative interaction through the size, color of the masks which include a range of explicit or implicit messages which carry instructions on how to interpret the other message(s) being communicated (Bauman [1977]). The theoretical underpinnings of this article can be found in the work of Erving Goffman such as *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (Goffman [1959]) and its application to professions; Bourdieu's (Bourdieu [1984]) concepts of practice, habitus and field in reproductive norms in social organizations including occupations; and concepts of performance, and embodiment from Richard Bauman. Except these, new technology, innovation, market are also major determining factors for changing and developing new pattern of costume and performances (Osmond *et al*. [2025]) and it is evident from the field study that their studies visualize the changing patterns of dress uses in the Newar festivals including Newar performances. These scholars help explain the changing social conditions of the Newar festival through mask performance, the formation and maintenance of identity in their lives, and their social organisation. They theorise the external manifestations of the mask, preparatory mask, (backspace Goffman), performance frontspace (Goffman and Bauman) and the notion of unity, harmony, socialization, and entertainment as a performance were found great significance which is without Geertz's thick description cannot possible to understood.

Goffman wrote, «The actor may take rest or relaxation from work and activities may leave ahead and become speechless and disengaged from role or out of character». In Goffman's terms, face represents the "mask" in a figurative sense in layman's terms in common expression as the "mask" or "the face of someone". But as we consider the compulsion of the literal mask, one assumes the value of the literal face. It can be amazing at the way subtle differences in the angle of the mask shape, size, color, or say structures like eyebrows–or the curve of the lips, the nostrils, the set of the jaw–can convey completely different emotions.

4.6. *Festivals, masks and dress*

4.6.1. *Mask of Bhairawa*

In Nepal, Newars wear *Bhairawa* masks during festivals to honor the terrifying yet protective deity, who is considered the wrathful aspect of *Shiva*. The masks often depicted with fierce facial expressions, three bulging eyes, and

jewel-studded diadems represent the deity's power and presence (Roy [2015]). Devotees may seek blessings, receive consecrated drinks, and participate in ceremonies where the mask is central to the ritual.

Bhairawa is a significant figure in Newari culture, often viewed as a protector against negative energies and evil spirits (in fig. 1). The masks play a key role in various Newari festivals like *Indra Jatra* and *Gãi Jãtrã*, where they are displayed, worshipped, and used in dances and processions.

«What about the wooden mask market?», researcher asked to the shopkeeper, who has been in the business for about ten years, sitting in his shop, surrounded by masks of all kinds, responded, «Our speciality is skin masks – they are made up of buffalo skin». His handicrafts shop located at the heart of Thamel retails different types of masks such as wooden, skin and metal. The mask makers are not only the artists, but they are locals and encompass deep knowledge of Newari arts and cultures along with the power of masks and their religious and cultural significance.

Masks used in ritual dances are made of materials such as *papier mache* or wood plastered with clay and linen and painted in vibrant colors. So, such masks never get old as they cannot survive for long in such weather. Some of the masks are destroyed after use and remade the following year. The oldest Nepali mask dates back to the Seventeenth century (Toffin [2012]). The divine power and deities represented by the mask are numerous: *Shiva, Bhairawa, Ganesha, Kumari, Varahi*, *Durga*, *Lakshmi*, *Sima* and *Duma*, these last two being the popular names of lion and tiger (Kropf [2003]). Some people interpret these two masks as a pair, the white-faced *Sima* being male; others consider them two goddesses.

4.6.2. *Masks of Devis (Goddesses)*

Masks of *deities*, or goddesses, in Hinduism and related traditions, are symbolic representations of divine feminine energy and are often associated with specific deities (Alsop [1976]). They are worn during religious rituals, ceremonies, and festivals, or displayed, as sacred objects in temples and homes (Dahal [2020a]). The masks are intricately designed and often incorporate elements of the deity's attributes and symbolism.

The living goddess *Kumari*, believed to be an incarnation of the Hindu goddess *Taleju Bhawani*, is represented in masks. These masks are often made from materials like wood, and they are painted with vibrant colors, and are displayed in temples and homes (Dahal [2024a]). *Durga*, the powerful goddess known for her strength and protection, is also depicted in masks. These masks often showcase her ferocious aspects, with features like a third eye and multiple arms. Tara, the divine queen mother, is represented in masks that depict her in a meditative state, symbolizing her spiritual prowess (Dahal *et al*. [2025]). Masks of various other *deities*, such as *Lakshm*i, are also found in different parts of both India and Nepal.

4.6.3. *Mask of Nava Durga*

The *Nava Durga* mask (in fig. 2) dances include mostly *asta mãtrikã* (eight divine mothers – *Brahmani, Maheshwari, Kaumari, Vaishnavi, Varahi, Indrani, Chamunda*, and *Mahalakshmi*) plus four male deities (*Shiva*, *Kãla Bhairaw*a, *Sweta Bhairawa*, *Ganesha*) with *Tripura Sundari*. The goddess *Mahalakshmi* is not found incarnated in terms of masks dances and her incarnation in *kalasha* (silver vessel) in a small wooden chariot is performed due to the most powerful goddess.

Mahalakshmi, in Newari, is known as *Sifa Dyah* (no doubt the oleander goddess after the name of the red flowers adorning her image), is worshipped by onlookers and mask bearers. *Mahakali* is represented as a corpse with emaciated flesh, deep-set eyes and facial bones protruding through the skin. The dancer group or troupe also include a pair of female patron deities, called *Sinhini* or *Sima* (lion-faced) and *Baghini* or *Baghrini* or *Duma* (tiger-faced). It is inextricably associated with a number of lion and tiger Newari masked dances. They come in a street procession made up of the first and last mask bearers respectively before dancing. *Singhini* is usually yellow and *Baghini* white, but the latter is red or orange in color. In the study area, the white-faced *Sima* is often thought to be male.

4.6.4. *Masks of Demons in Newari Culture*

In Newari culture, masks are a significant part of religious and dramatic performances, often depicting both deities and demonic figures. The *lãkhe* or demon is a prominent figure, with his mask being a distinctive element of the *lãkhe* tradition. These masks, known as *khawpa* in the Newari community, are believed to embody the spirit of the *lãkhe*.

Lãkhe masks are typically large and red, with prominent, sometimes bawdy eyes. They are often made of papier-mâché, with yak tails used for hair. The *lãkhe* is a figure of both fear and reverence, considered a protector of the townspeople. Every Newari community has its own unique *lãkhe* tradition. The *lãkhe* is often featured in the *Indra Jatra* festival.

4.6.5. *Other Newari masks*

Newari masks also represent various deities, both masculine and feminine, including those in animal form like *Ganesh*. Simple cloth masks with eye holes are also common, as seen in Bhaktapur. Some masks as the ones applied in the *Nava Durga* ceremony, are believed to be alive and empowered with supernatural forces. Golden-colored masks, like those used in the *lãkhe* dance, can be an example.

4.6.6. *Mask of Khyãh*

In Newari mythology, *khyãhs* are humanoid, ape-like creatures with a strong presence in children's stories and sacred dance dramas. They are believed to

be guardians of the home, particularly in attics and dark stores, and are often depicted attending to *Lakshmi,* the goddess of wealth. *Khyãhs* can be of both benevolent and malevolent types: white *khyãhs* symbolizing good fortune and black *khyãhs* representing bad luck.

Khyãhs are typically depicted as fat, hairy, and short, with ape-like features. White *khyãhs* are believed to bring good luck and prosperity, while black *khyãhs* are associated with bad luck and problems. They are said to dwell in attics and dark stores, and to be afraid of electric lighting. *Khyãhs* are supposed to be protectors of the house, family, and harbingers of good fortune. Images of *khyãhs* are also placed at temples as the guardians of the shrine. They appear as supporting characters in sacred dance dramas, like the *khyãh pyākhan*. They are depicted as attending to *Lakshmi*, the goddess of wealth, and are often shown guarding bags of coins. In some versions, *khyãhs* are depicted as tricksters who play pranks on humans, though usually harmless.

Khyãhs are popular figures in children's stories within Newari society. They are a part of Newari animism traditions, where they are revered and treated as deities. The *khyãka pyãkha* dance, which depicts the *khyãhs*' powers and struggles, is performed during Newari festivals.

4.6.7. *Dresses in Newari performances*

Dresses in Newari performances primarily feature the Haku Patasi, a traditional black cotton sari with a red border, worn by women. For men, the term Kalli refers to a traditional outfit. These garments are donned for various festive and religious occasions, symbolizing Newar unique identity and cultural heritage. Newari masks and costumes are central to their traditional festivals (Jatras), transforming dancers into deities, demons, and spirits through vibrant performances.

The body or performer is not only of specific physiological significance, but also of cultural and social significance. The behaviors and skills of the body are learned and shaped in society, and should become the expression of social interaction and social identity (Mauss [1973]). Physical skills are not only the product of individual behavior, but also the expression of social power and symbology (Mauss [1934]).

The process of dress performance is also a process of creating beauty, which has certain requirements for everyone's aesthetic foundation and abilities. In a costume performance, the beauty seen by the audience not only improves their artistic beauty, but also enhances their ability to understand clothing, art, culture and performances (Xie, Ge [2024]).

Body social constructivism believes that the body or the performer is a product of social and cultural forces. It emphasizes that the body is shaped and defined through social and cultural norms and expectations, and that bodily experi-

ences and identities are constructed within a social and cultural context (Zhang [2018]). In general, the body is based on the unity of mind and body, with characteristics such as integrity, perception, and subjectivity (Behuniak [2019]).

Regarding the presentation forms of textile performance, they mainly include conceptual elements such as lines, colors, shapes, sounds, and rhymes (Shi [2019]). Its importance lies in its own conceptual structures. An aesthetic object is a unity of sensibility and meaning (Xie, Ge [2024]).

Therefore, when designing clothing, one can put forward creativity and aesthetic value to respect the dignity of the person and create a good environment for clothing design (Xie, Ge [2024]). In the concept of physical existentialism, the body is the basis of emotions, and people feel and express emotions through the body (Ma [2019]). In Newar mask performance there was perfect dress code for performers and audience were previously ruled to wear cultural dress code but now a day it is going to weaken.

4.7. *Significance of mask culture in Newari festivals*

Masks hold significant cultural and religious importance within Newari society in Kathmandu, serving as vital components of festivals, rituals, and performances. They represent deities, demons, and other characters, reflecting both the Hindu and Buddhist spiritual beliefs of the community. Beyond their practical use, masks also have an aesthetic dimension, adding to the visual and sensory experience of events.

Rituals, encompassing social practices and festive events, play a crucial role in maintaining and organizing social order. They serve to reinforce social norms, build shared meanings, and provide a sense of collective identity, particularly in the face of uncertainty or social change.

Masks in Newari culture are not just decorative; they are deeply rooted in religious and spiritual significance, representing deities, spirits, and even profane characters during festivals and ceremonies. They serve as a conduit between the human and divine worlds, acting as a focal point for devotion, ritual, and entertainment.

Newari masks often depict deities, both male and female, including animals like *Ganesha*, and demons like *lãkhe.* They embody the power and presence of the divine in the form of the masks. Masks are integral to masked dances and other rituals performed during festivals. These dances are believed to invoke the deities' presence and bring blessings to the community. Festivals and masked dances serve as a space for communal bonding and celebration. They bring people together to participate in shared rituals and expressions of faith and culture.

Masks are not merely visual representations; they carry symbolic meaning as well. The colors, patterns, and features of the masks can convey specific at-

tributes of the deities or characters they represent. When a dancer wears a mask, they transform into the deity or character they represent. This act of role-playing allows for a deeper connection to the spiritual realm and a means of storytelling through dance. The specific masks and dances associated with different festivals vary across the Kathmandu Valley and other Newari settlements, reflecting regional variations in religious traditions and cultural practices.

Rituals often embody and reinforce established social values, beliefs, and behaviors. For instance, marriage ceremonies, funeral rites, or seasonal festivals can demonstrate and reinforce the accepted norms surrounding family structures, death rituals, or community relationships. Rituals can provide a shared experience that unites participants, fostering a sense of belonging and common purpose. Recurrent rituals help build shared meanings, generate solidarity, and reinforce them through social engagement.

In times of social disruption or uncertainty, rituals can offer a sense of stability and provide a framework for navigating new situations. They can act as a buffer against anxiety and help individuals adapt to changing social landscapes. This symbolic representation can contribute to the maintenance of the existing social order or, conversely, be used to challenge or transform it. In an increasingly complex world, rituals can offer individuals a sense of meaning, purpose, and connection to something larger than themselves. This can contribute to the stability and well-being of individuals and the social fabric as a whole.

4.8. *Religious significance of color in Newari culture*

In Newari culture, colors hold significant religious and symbolic meaning. Red, particularly the *alla*, is associated with purity, auspiciousness, and feminine beauty, used in rituals and adornment. Five colors are perceived as natural colors and the rest as mixed colors. So natural color signifies the various meanings in Newari cultural usage, but specific colors in masks, among the five colours, represent the masks that belong to deities or divine and demons.

In various cultures, colors and symbols play a significant role in masks, communicating character traits, social status, and even supernatural significance. For example, red in Chinese opera masks often symbolizes loyalty and bravery, while white may indicate treachery or duplicity. Similarly, blue, green, and yellow can represent different aspects of a character's personality or role in a story.

4.9. *Masks as transformative objects*

Masks are believed to possess protective powers, warding off evil spirits and bringing good luck. They are often worn in processions and rituals to bless the community and ensure well-being. Masks, in various cultures and contexts, serve

as powerful transformative objects, enabling individuals to transcend their everyday identities and embody different roles, spirits, or even supernatural beings. These objects can facilitate transitions into new realms, reveal hidden aspects of the self, and connect individuals to deeper cultural or spiritual narratives.

Masks are essential tools in theatrical productions, allowing actors to embody diverse characters and convey complex emotions. Artists across various movements and expressions have explored the transformative power of masks, using them to question identity, reality, and social norms. Contemporary artists continue to engage with masks, using them to explore themes of identity, self-optimisation, and the blurring lines between the real and virtual realms. Newar masks are not merely decorative items; they are powerful objects that facilitate transformation, connecting individuals to different aspects of themselves, their culture, and the Newar social world around them.

5. *Conclusion*

In Newari culture, masks in festivals symbolize the embodiment of deities, both divine and demonic, and are integral to ritual practices and performances. They represent a connection between the human and supernatural realms, acting as a bridge for performers to embody specific deities or characters. The mask is not merely a costume; it is a sacred object, which grants the wearer access to a different realm. Methodologically, we have discussed briefly the major methods that guided us to conduct the research in an organized way. We have presented the strategy for how we chose the research topic, research site, and participants who supported us by providing valuable data and information that helped in answering our research questions. We have briefly described the tools and technology used for data collection and the data analysis and interpretation process.

From the research, we conclude that the masks signify various meanings and the meanings depend on the colors, shape and size. Similarly, specific masks are used for specific gods and goddess. Moreover, colors used in the masks represent the *panca tatwa – prithvi tatwa, bayu tatwa, jala tatwa, ākāsh tatwa* and *agni tatwa* described in the Hindu mythology. In course of the study, we gathered literature related to the masks in Newari culture by using anthropological methods in which we have briefly defined ontology, epistemology and methodology using participants' observation, in-depth interviews and various other methods.

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Fig. 1. Bhairawa Mask

Fig. 2. Nava Durga Mask