

# ICT and Institutional Transformations in the Global South: A Study of the Rejuvenation of the Guthi Institution in Nepal

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## Abstract

*At a juncture where various streams questioning the role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in democratic governance have joined, this paper explores how a traditional South Asian institution – the Guthi – is rejuvenated, if not resuscitated, by ICT. Furthermore, this study examines how the Guthi was transformed, especially – but not only – by the communication aspect, prompted by a cataclysmic event, and also propelled towards global normative priorities. The case came to attention after the major earthquake of 2015 in Nepal. The Guthi, the traditional institution of cooperative self-governance prevalent primarily amongst the Newars of Kathmandu Valley, was in serious decline and the earthquake laid bare the void it had left behind. Leveraging on ICT and following their traditions, the communities put forward the case for their participation in rebuilding efforts. Especially the case for community participation, but also possibilities through ICT in general, “spun off” new iterations of the Guthi: neo-Guthis, sub-Guthis, and quasi-Guthis. We argue that much of the criticism that is levelled against the Guthi today ignores these newer iterations of the institution and solely focuses on the ancient guthis. As we put forth, it was the reaction to the demand of the time as well as utilizing the digital tools available, and even adapting the organization(s) to do so, that enabled the rejuvenation of an indigenous institution for the common good.*

*Keywords: Guthi, Nepal, ICT, Cooperatives, E-participation, Deliberation, Social Media*

## Introduction

With the rise of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)<sup>1</sup>, especially since the 2000s but also even before (Olphert & Damodaran, 2007), barriers to decentralization and citizen involvement were supposed to be resultantly ameliorated. The more specific genre of scholarship known as Information and Communication Technology for Development (ICT4D) has extensively dealt with research in its eponymous area (Walsham, 2017). Yet, increasing evidence suggests that e-participation projects do not easily achieve success in transforming governance as

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<sup>1</sup> By now, ICT has become a self-explanatory term that is generally understood as a collection of technologies and components which deals with individual and societal units to interact through transfer and storage of information in digital format.

anticipated (Bright & Margetts, 2016; Falco & Kleinhans, 2018). Despite the large volume of literature in favor of the implementation of participatory democratic governance, how it actually can be achieved through ICT is still a learning process; *a fortiori* when it comes to diversified contexts (Kostakis, 2011; Thomas et al., 2017; Walsham, 2001).

Our paper starts with the assumption that resilient, context-suited institutions enable socio-economic development in the broadest sense of improving the human condition, both materially and regarding equity, in time and space (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1985, 2000). Our interest in the research is to explore whether ICT has a role to play in furthering the resilience and sustainability of indigenous “democratic” institutions, and if so, how.

We are offering a study in which a traditional South Asian institution is rejuvenated, if not resuscitated, by ICT. Furthermore, the research examines how the Guthi were transformed, especially – but not only – by the Communication aspect, prompted by a cataclysmic event, and also propelled towards global normative priorities. The case in question is that of the Nepalese Guthi<sup>2</sup>, an institution characterized by community-based cooperatives with a centuries-old tradition. This institution often includes heavy endowments, part of Buddhist Economics (Drechsler, 2019, 2020) and a typical institution of the Newars<sup>3</sup>, the inhabitants of the urban core of Nepal in the Kathmandu Valley. The victim of government discrimination and “modernization”<sup>4</sup>, the Guthi resurfaced in the wake of a devastating earthquake and re-established itself, in various permutations, through facilitation by ICT.

## Research approach and methodology

### Research motivation

For our research approach, we consider the common occurrence of traditional institutions often getting side-lined from mainstream practices, with such institutions often being under-researched. Yet, many studies have shown that in a situation with void of a government’s institutional framework, with regard to the fulfilment of a specific necessity, traditional practices and institutions can come back and re-establish themselves (e. g., Boonjubun et al., 2021; Pur & Moore, 2010; Urinboyev, 2011).

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<sup>2</sup> We do not italicize Guthi, and use the capitalized singular, with definite article, to refer to the institution as such, whereas individual guthis are not capitalized and can be singular (guthi) or plural (guthis).

<sup>3</sup> Newars are the indigenous inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley, historically also referred to as Nepalmandala (also written Nepal Mandala; see Slusser, 1982). The Newar culture arguably climaxed during the reign of the Malla Kings in the 18th century, until the region governed as a system of three cities was conquered by the Gorkhali Shah dynasty (Levy, 1992, p. 35; Sharma, 2015; Toffin, 2008, p. 8; Whelpton, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> In today’s general academic parlance, “modernization” is a theoretical concept associated with a linearity of socio-economic development, which is premised on the assumption that societies progress with technological and scientific advancement, and that there are leaders and laggards in this process, with the latter catching up to the former on an identical trajectory (see Kreuzmann, 1998).

## Theoretical perspectives

From a historical institutional perspective, pre-existing institutions and the path dependency they create are essential in considering policy implementation (Steinmo, 2008). The framework of Non-Western Public Administration and Governance (NWPA) asserts that in contrast to the global-Western paradigm in Public Administration (PA), alternative paradigms do exist (Drechsler, 2013). These institutions and elements, if relevant to the specific context, are worth studying even without the need for an elaborate theoretical scaffolding. But from the perspective of resilient institutions, traditional institutions are embedded into the societal fabric and thus either create challenges to change or provide advantages in some respects (Peters, 1999). Resilient institutions also characteristically tend to utilize collective action and are contextually grounded with the ability to absorb disturbances and keep the ability to perform (Ostrom, 2005, 2008; Ratner et al., 2017). Through the right institutional arrangements, the social capital within a population can be utilized to achieve set goals collectively (Ostrom & Ahn, 2009).

Through a historical institutionalist perspective, we follow the trajectory of the transformative process of the Guthi and consider its interaction with ICT against the backdrop of the devastating earthquake of 2015. Research for the paper started in 2017, when early signs showed that community-led collective action following the blueprint of the Guthi could have an important role to play in the process of reconstruction, especially concerning built heritage (Lekakis et al., 2018). Given the reach of ICT within the urban population of the Kathmandu Valley, it was likely from the outset that this would be a factor too, but its key role became eventually visible. It therefore became relevant to pursue our topic from the angle of ICT-enabled institutional transformation.

## Methodology

As suggested by the subject matter itself, our inquiry takes an interpretivist qualitative approach which can be categorized as an ethnographic case study methodology. The research formed a continued long-term endeavor of over 5 years which has produced other published material as well (see Lekakis et al., 2018; S. Shakya & Drechsler, 2019; S. Shakya, 2021). A mix of qualitative data approaches was used: informants were selected based on responsiveness and knowledgeability; key individuals (activists, scholars and politicians) who were influential within the Newar community were shadowed through social media; 21 interviews were conducted of which 12 are directly relevant for this paper and 6 interviews have been quoted in the paper<sup>5</sup>; key scholars with knowledge in the field (studies concerning the Newar community from an anthropological and/or historical perspective) were consulted; and active participation in online forums and discussion groups were established. All these were activities were done in addition to field work, conducted in March 2017, July 2018, and July 2019 in Kathmandu and in January 2019 and February 2020 in London.

For our inquiry, because of the phenomenon being activities influenced by and reflected in digital media, it was necessary to go in parts towards digital methods employing digital

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<sup>5</sup> Interviews were not conducted particularly with this paper and ICT transformation in mind and as a result, not all interviews were considered here. See *infra* exclusion criteria.

ethnography (Pink et al., 2016). Data were sought from evidence available online through social media and other digital materials posted by relevant community members. While digital technology has been a medium to study the phenomena, in parts, from afar, it was ascertained that some of the phenomena under review were or had become completely digital or digital-dependent. The cyberspace which contains “archived moments” of the interactions of people online is relevant for study and often also produces additional insights which otherwise are not possible to access (Postill, 2017, p. 66). Active engagement with the community through an online medium such as chat groups and social media platforms, continually following up and communicating was therefore highly relevant. The first author is a member of a guthi associated with Rudravarna Mahavihara (a Vajrayana Buddhist temple and monastery) in Patan, and a member of the World Newah Organization, and took an active approach to the research that reflected a participatory action research process. A similar approach termed Ethnographic Action Research (EAR) has been utilized in ICT4D research (Tacchi, 2017) as well.

The availability of a rich repository of literature from historical and anthropological perspectives concerning the guthis (and Newars generally) meant that a significant study could be achieved through their work. Gellner (1986, 1992), Regmi (1977), Sharma (2015), Shrestha (2012; 2015), Toffin (2008; 2016), Vergati (1995) and several others provided key material, while direct correspondence with some of these authors also helped provide direction to the research.

As in most ethnographic studies, the analysis was done through the employment of heuristic means of utilizing an “iterative-inductive, reflexive” process of data collection and conceptualizing of the phenomenon (O’Reilly, 2009). Ethnographic data analysis goes along a “grounded theory” approach where making sense of the data produced through a variety of methods would be iteratively used to produce a theory rather than to approach logical deduction from a priori assumptions. Selection and exclusion of data was done reflexively through constantly considering the theoretical framing and using the knowledge gained through the prolonged immersion into the context (the Newar community and Guthi institution in this case). In doing so, we have followed the classical hermeneutical approach of cultural and textual analysis for which Gadamer’s work forms the foundation (1960/1990), particularly as its utilization in the social sciences is concerned (Drechsler & Fuchs, 2023). This implies that the tension between data gathering and how that information must re-inform the questions cannot be resolved and must therefore be borne (Drechsler 2016).

## **The case of the Guthi in Nepal**

In this section, we provide the background to the Guthi institution in Nepal, largely based on literature review, in order to build a cohesive narrative that links the historical perspective to the present context and to the findings of the research. The Guthi, or गोष्ठी (goṣṭhī) as per the Sanskrit terms historically used, is an institution of community governance prevalent amongst the Newars since the rule of the Licchavi clan more than 1600 years ago (Vajracharya, 1973). Guthis, in essence, are community organizations tasked with private matters associated with members of the organizations themselves or with public utility. Their functions are diverse; they can range from social and cultural functions, like arranging funerals and organizing rituals in temples, to

alternative public-service provisions like the maintenance of water sources (see Toffin, 2005). Although cooperatives abound in human time and space, the Guthi is so distinct, resilient, and important that there are calls to even declare it a UNESCO intangible cultural heritage (Gellner, 2019; M. Maharjan & Barata, 2020).

But well beyond this aspect of cultural importance, the Guthi was and can be an effective (alternative) public-sector institution (S. Shakya, 2020; Gellner, 1992; Toffin, 2005). In fact, this was so already during the Licchavi times, gleaned from inscriptions that mention guthis established for public utility tasks, such as cleaning and maintaining the roads (Vajracharya, 1973).

An example of the public utility function of guthis is the maintenance of water sources. In the Kathmandu Valley, these generally took the form of ponds or *hiti* (*hitis* for plural), which is a specific structure that taps into underground water channels with sunken courtyards, providing running water for public usage – and in parallel with modern water supply, they are still in crucial and everyday use (Molden, 2019; UN-HABITAT, 2008; Shrestha, 2012). *Hitis* along with other water resources, such as ponds and dug wells, were maintained by guthis and were available for general public use (Molden, 2019; UN-HABITAT, 2008).

Even though most of these structures were constructed by ruling monarchs (Whelpton, 2005), *hitis* came from philanthropists as well with the kin of the donor often establishing a guthi for continued maintenance of the common resource in future. For example, Alkwo Hiti in Patan, which was established in 1415 AD by Tumha Dev Bajracharya (UN-HABITAT, 2008). Tumha Dev constructed the *hiti*, allocated a significant area of arable land for maintenance costs, and established a guthi for its maintenance and conducting the ritual requirements. Additionally, instructions were left behind in the form of inscriptions (UN-HABITAT 2008).

Tiwari (2007) argued that channeling “individual wealth” to the public through committees, recognized as permanent entities, was the main point of the Guthi. The wealth of an individual was utilized for the benefit of many and its sustainability ensured, adhering to the Buddhist principle of “*bahujanahitāya bahujanasukhāya*” or the welfare and happiness of many.<sup>6</sup>

Buddhism is an integral part of the Newar identity (Gellner, 1986/1992), and the Guthi is a distinct and in many ways typical form of Buddhist Economics (S. Shakya & Drechsler, 2019).<sup>7</sup> This makes it particularly interesting, at least as a model from which to learn, in a context where Buddhist Economics has become prominent in its happiness and sustainability orientation, as well as its conduciveness for attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (Drechsler, 2019/2020). However, its Buddhist nature was especially objectionable to Nepali-Hindu homogenizing nationalism, already since the late 18th century<sup>8</sup>, as well as to economic and development

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<sup>6</sup> This expression often appears in the Buddhist Pāli Canon (see, e. g., Pali Canon, Itivuttaka 84) and is generally regarded as the main reason for teaching the Buddhist *Dhamma*.

<sup>7</sup> That said, they were also fairly common amongst Hindu residents of the Kathmandu Valley and its periphery, and some of them, especially among Hindu Newars, still remain despite the Buddhist origins (Gellner, 1992; Levy, 1992; S. Shakya & Drechsler, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Tiwari (2007, pp. 81) mentions that the property of many of the guthis associated with the Buddhist institutions of Patan was expropriated and transferred to others as a result of the political changes after 1786 (the year of the

ideologies that were less community- and permanence-driven and more market-, exploitation-, and material-gains-focused (M. Shakya, 2008).

The membership within a particular guthi would usually be based on kinship or territory (Gellner, 1992), and memberships would pass down through lineage (Toffin, 2005). Though a sense of hierarchy exists within the organizations, with seniority being honored, the institution has been acknowledged to be democratic and egalitarian with the duties passing amongst the members in a rotational manner and decisions being made through mutual agreements (Gellner, 1992). There is a principle of sharing too, with properties of a guthi being shared assets of all the members. The surplus of the income from funding the activities of the guthi would be shared amongst the members (Sharma, 2015).

In its essence, the Newar Guthi existed as an institution of participatory governance which oversaw several aspects of the administration of urban spaces in the Kathmandu Valley.

### The decline

After the Prithvi Narayan Shah takeover in 1768 (Whelpton, 2005), eventually a hegemonic, Hindu rule of the *Parbatiya Bahun* and *Chhetri* communities (Hindu “higher class” groups mostly from the hills of Western Nepal) was established and structurally discriminated against several, previously existing now minority groups, including Newars (Bhattachan, 2003/2005). Nepal then went through a phase of autocratic rule by the *Hausmeier* Rana dynasty from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century (Whelpton, 2005). After a short stint of democracy, the returning Shah monarchy took absolute power from 1960 to 1990 in the so-called *Panchayat* regime, after which multi-party democracy was (re-)established if often in a highly deficient version (Bhattachan, 2005; Gellner, 2016; Whelpton, 2005).

The Panchayat regime’s ideology of the time was based on developmentalism, suppression of political parties, pro-Hindu religiosity, and nationalism (Gellner, 2016, p. 17). Legal reforms were introduced to sideline the pre-existing institutions of governance, including the Guthi, thus reducing either of them to semi-formal status or abolishing them altogether (for example, the Kipat system was completely abolished). The Land Reform Act of 1964, the Guthi Samsthan (Corporation) Act of the same year and the subsequent act of 1976 sidelined the Guthi, with most of their property nationalized and brought under the control of said Guthi Samsthan<sup>9</sup>, a non-Newar state agency. Their scope was restricted to primarily religious and cultural activities

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completed Gorkha takeover of Kathmandu). Prithvi Narayan Shah’s vision of “Asali Hindustan” (“true Hindus’ land”) (see Bhattachan, 2003, 2005) and Jung Bahadur’s “Muluki Ain” (National Code) of 1854, based entirely on a Hindu framework (see Khatiwoda et al., 2021), would seem to indicate that Gorkhali policy, since the takeover of Nepal Mandala, was geared towards Hindu homogenization, which continued with the later Panchayat period (Whelpton, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Guthis were categorized as *Raj* Guthi and *Niji* Guthi. Properties of the former were expropriated, nationalized and brought under the ownership of the Guthi Samsthan while *Niji* Guthi were deemed private and allowed to keep their property (Regmi, 1977).

(M. Maharjan & Barata, 2020; S. Shakya & Drechsler, 2019).<sup>10</sup> Additionally the Land Acquisition Act of 1977, which allowed for the expropriation of private or Guthi land for development purposes), was part of the reforms aimed at modernizing and developing the country. The Act, in effect, worked against the Newars with their guthis being left without resources to self-finance, and their lands were acquired for infrastructure projects (K. Maharjan, 2017; N. Pradhananga et al., 2010; Sunar, 2017).

But while the anti-Guthi reforms did largely sideline the institution, they did not cause a complete demise. Having been embedded into the fabric of the Newar lifestyle, the Guthi continued to be the means of self-governing, but more privately as the friction between the state and the interests of the Newars continued, despite the democratic transition in 1990 and further political shifts.

### **The Earthquake, the Heritage Movement and ICT**

In 2015, a massive earthquake struck Nepal, taking over 9,000 lives (DPNet-Nepal, 2015). In the Kathmandu Valley, historical monuments were destroyed, several of which were part of the sites inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage List (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n. d.). The urgency for the heritage structures to be reconstructed was strongly felt locally, nationally, and internationally (Sengupta, 2015; Wolfson, 2015).

The government's flawed initial efforts at reconstruction drew criticism with the lack of focus on the authenticity and use of vernacular materials and methods in reconstruction (for example, the Rani Pokhari and Balgopaleshwor temple project, see S. B. Pradhananga 2016). Resultantly, a "heritage movement" emerged, led by the local community of the valley, demanding stakeholder participation and focus on authenticity and integrity with use of indigenous building techniques, methods, and materials (Bhattarai, 2018; A. Tuladhar, 2018). The Guthi was at the center of this discussion given the role of the organizations in the past (KC, 2016; Sekhsaria, 2016). Few cases of successful community involvement emerged, even if only indirectly or partly involving guthis (Lekakis et al., 2018; S. Shakya & Drechsler, 2019; S. Shakya, 2020; S. Shakya, 2021).

As Newar youth activists started to take their agenda to social media through groups and pages on Facebook, which was and is still by far the most popular social media platform in the country (StatsCounter, 2021), ICT became a driving factor. Pressure groups (see Save Heritage, n. d.; Save Nepa Valley Movement, n. d.; Nepal Sanskritik Punarjagaran Abhiyan, n. d.) started to increase their activities largely utilizing the "affordances"<sup>11</sup> provided by the internet to disseminate information and collaborate in protest activities.

There was evidently a strong critical agency amongst the Newars. This was the key factor behind the success of the massive "Guthi protest" of 2019 as series of demonstrations that were

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<sup>10</sup> Historian Tri Ratna Manandhar has argued that the legal reforms introduced during the Panchayat regime ended up being the root cause of the decline of the Guthi, although the reforms were ostensibly intended to improve the economic status of tenant farmers (Manandhar, 2019; Manandhar, Triratna, personal communication, July 2018).

<sup>11</sup> "Affordance" concerns the "transactional" relationship between human beings and their environment (see Gibson 2015). The concept has been extensively used in Information Systems literature.

directed against the “Guthi bill”, which attempted to bring all guthis under an authoritative government body lacking local representation, in effect being designed to finish them off once and for all as serious players (Gellner, 2019; S. Shakya, 2019; Toffin, 2019). The bill was eventually withdrawn (Sunuwar, 2019). The demonstration held, considered exemplary in terms of size and coordination, was not led by political parties, but by an ad-hoc committee involving Newar community leaders and directly involved guthis, thus hinting at the potential of the Guthi in generating social capital and effective collective action (Sunuwar, 2019; Satyal, 2019). ICT played a vital role in all this, with several coordinating and dissemination activities organized via ICT means.

The events from 2019 clearly showed that the Guthi institution was evidently in a transformative process exhibiting institutional resilience with ICT in the mix of things. The question of how needs a better elaboration.

### **Findings: The Guthi goes digital and different**

The communication aspect of ICT is relevant for guthis which organize festivities and see value in advertisement of such events. A prime example is the festival of Bunga Dyo, the pre-Buddhist “God of Rain”, who is worshipped by Buddhists as an aspect of the Avalokiteshvara (Vergati, 1995; Slusser, 1982). *“It is not officially [part of the guthi] but there are several yonwā and sons of pānejyu associated with the Facebook page. Everything is purely non-profit oriented.”* (Robinson Maharjan, personal communication, 23 April, 2021)

The festival involves pulling a massive wooden chariot around the city of Lalitpur, uniting more than a dozen guthis that work together. There have been several social media pages dedicated to promoting and organizing the festival which effectively emboldens the cultural practice.<sup>12</sup> The point here is not a generic “they’re-on-FB-also,” but that potentially fading-away community practices were rejuvenated cross-generationally, as we shall establish.

Many guthis that are more private, such as those that organize worship of tutelary deities and maintain their temples, also find use of ICT in their organizational activities. These guthis mostly have used private Facebook groups, examples being Bishnudevi Guthi (Etee Tole Bishnudevi Guthi Pariwar, n. d.) and Upakarma Guthi (Upakarma Guthi Lalitpur, n. d.). Correspondence with the guthi members showed that the social media, specifically Facebook groups, was primarily used to communicate and make general announcements within the membership.

We conduct our meetings on Zoom already since the pandemic... We have also create a IT group amongst the guthi members to help other members with online meeting and working through internet... Before the pandemic we shared decisions of meetings to private groups; on facebook page we share more information regarding public functions... Time related of technology has been adopted, but for formal requirement

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Rato Machhindranath (n.d)

we still deliver papers to home of each guthi members and send SMS to them too. (Bhushan Sharma, Upakarma Guthi, personal communication, July 16, 2020)

In addition to Facebook groups, these guthis were using traditional SMS for this purpose, which was much more convenient than the even more traditional way of going door to door making announcements. Yet, to uphold the traditions they still use door-to-door visits on formal occasions for general discussions and announcements, the guthis have increasingly relied on ICT tools. That has arguably made them more up-to-date, inclusive, and relevant.

Close observation of the Guthi in present context reveals there are organizations in their penumbra that are closely related to the ancient institution. However, not all principles behind the Guthi are being followed by the newer iterations. For instance, kinship might be a principle central to traditional guthis that have been discontinued with newer iterations. Yet other principles like consensus decisions, honoring seniority within the organizational dynamics, and some level of rotation of duties are often continued. This likeness of characteristics in new organizations in comparison to the traditional institution has also been noted in the secondary literature (Pathak, 2020; Toffin, 2016), without there being a taxonomy built on this. Classifying and typologizing guthis, however, is a time-honoured practice among experts. Gellner (1992) has presented a typology based on functions and Toffin (2005) has presented his own typology. Broadly, there can be three types based on their functions: (1) public utilities and organizing of festivities; (2) community welfare; and (3) religious rituals. But we look at functional organization, as this will help us to recognize what the Guthi now *is* and what part ICT plays here.

We argue that to understand the 21st-century Guthi, it is pivotal to recognize how the ancient guthis in various ways have “spun off” other forms of related organizations that are best understood as iterations of Guthi. This is crucial because if one focused on the ancient Guthi only which is limited by the socio-political context, one would not be able to recognize how they are rejuvenated. The ancient guthis remained how they always were, but both technologically and sociologically, “progress” was “outsourced” to other variants. In our ICT context, it is those other forms that have been created for or even by ICT.

**We see three types of Guthi having emerged in parallel to the ancient one: quasi-guthis, neo-guthis, and sub-guthis.** The first are guthis that are “created” by Nepali anti-Guthi discrimination, i.e., organizations with the Guthi purpose that are not allowed to emerge due to the existing laws making it difficult to establish a new guthi. Therefore, at the end of the 20th century, new organizations started being registered in the form of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) with some keeping the Guthi name (see some listed as NGOs in Social Welfare Council, 2019). Being in essence a group of new guthis, but not in legal form, we call the form **quasi-Guthi**. Studying them close-up (also partly discussed in S. Shakya, 2020) shows that they are extensively using ICT. Their ICT-based activities range from virtual meetings and seminars as well as conducting language classes to posting notifications or announcements. Generally, all these activities take place in addition to offline activities, but one notices a much greater propensity towards ICT. A prime example of such a guthi in function and name, but not in a legal sense, is Nepal Lipi Guthi (Nepal Lipi Guthi, n. d).

Nepal Lipi Guthi (NLG) was established as NGO in 1980 with the aim of promoting Nepal's native scripts (lipi).<sup>13</sup> The mode of establishment is similar to how the guthis of the past would have been established with a charitable purpose in mind.

Guthi is Newa tradition for social and community activities. So we followed the Newa tradition ... we developed Nepal Lipi and Ranjana Lipi true type and Unicode Fonts too ... we also engaged for Unicode project of Nepal Lipi since 2008 and are coordinating for finalization. (Anil Sthapit, Nepal Lipi Guthi, personal communication, March 12, 2021)

Though the earliest activities of NLG were not always ICT-based, it became important for the organization to adapt to ICT-based activities. For a guthi that specifically dealt with preserving and promoting endangered native writing scripts, enabling the use of such writing scripts in digital mediums was an obvious goal. NLG has also been collaborating with activists and youth volunteering teams for various activities like developing smartphone apps and fonts and organizing online classes (P. Tuladhar, 2018). One such team that has been collaborating with NLG is the Callijatra team, a group formed by youth activists (Callijatra, n. d.). Though NLG was already working on creating fonts for word processing and digitally encoding the native scripts as unicode (Hall et al., 2014; P. Tuladhar, 2018), activities have been more leveraged by the use of ICT through collaborating with Callijatra (Deupala, 2018).

Then, there are several Newar organizations even in Nepal (outside the Nepalmandala), but most prominently abroad, that have been largely established as community groups in the diaspora, focusing on social interaction and welfare among their members. Taking up the important concept of the Guthi (in itself a sign for its resilience), these are what we call **neo-Guthi**. The most prominent and active, even activist, neo-guthis are the ones in the United States and the United Kingdom, such as Pasa Puchah Guthi UK (n. d.), founded in 2000, and Newa Guthi New York (Newa Guthi NY, n. d.), founded in 2007. Canadian Newa Guthi (n. d.), founded in 2005, has been similarly active. There is a better visibility of neo-guthis outside of Nepal, but there have been active neo-guthis within Nepal too, an example being Tansen Guthi (n. d. a/b), established in 1993.

Our community organization is not a guthi per-say but we followed the tradition to name our organization guthi... in one of our program, culturist Satya Mohan Joshi commended us for choosing the guthi name. (Shanti Shakya, Tansen Guthi, personal communication, June 30, 2021)

It almost goes without saying that the organization of the former two neo-guthis happens primarily via ICT. It is even questionable whether they could have emerged and be maintained without such a platform (S. Shakya, 2022).

The biggest challenge to tackle is to retain the members of younger generation... we have technical difficulties to maintain website... but we do use Viber and Facebook to

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<sup>13</sup> Nepal Lipi Guthi, personal communication, 12 March, 2021. See also Hall et al. (2014).

engage communication and organize activities of the guthi. (Prami Shrestha, Tansen Guthi, personal communication, June 30, 2021)

The fact that the geographically very dispersed neo-Guthis have closely cooperated has led to an almost automatically ICT-based federation. The World Newah Organization (WNO), an organization registered as a non-profit in the US, functions as a federation of non-Nepali neo-Guthis, with several neo-Guthis such as Canadian Newa Guthi and Newa Guthi New York being affiliated with the organization. WNO was established through a series of virtual meetings between 26 scholars and activists from various parts of the world (S. Shakya, 2022; WNO, 2010).

Once conference calls were possible to do via Skype, we started using Skype for communication ... it was in the US that the idea that an international guthi like organization should be started. (Bal Gopal Shrestha, World Newah Organization, personal communication, July 21, 2019)

Their activities, too, go beyond just being ICT-based, with key activities including the development of an online dictionary (WNO, 2020), organizing online conferences (WNO, 2021a), and organizing online quiz games with self-developed software (WNO, 2021b).

The neo-Guthis, via the WNO, have even gone a step further – not being ICT-enabled, but enabling or at least influencing and creating key content for the ICT world. Their latest project has been to make Nepalbhasa<sup>14</sup> available for Google Translate. The project was initiated by WNO and taken forward through community contributions with joint sessions held on a daily basis over Zoom to feed translation data to Google’s translation algorithm. A beta release of the translation service has already been launched on Google Translate (WNO, 2021c).

The level of importance of ICT in the establishment and organization of neo-guthis within Nepal may not be exactly the same as compared to those outside. Taking the example of Tansen Guthi, however, the relationship of ICT with neo-guthis remains similar. Tansen Guthi was established in 1993 in Kathmandu by Newars who returned from Tansen in the Palpa district back to their ancestral cities. Owing to the fact that many families still remained in Tansen and some even migrated to other cities in Nepal, two additional branches of the guthi were established, one in Butwal and one in Tansen itself (S. Shakya, 2018). This created a scenario not different from that of neo-guthis outside Nepal, where organizational efforts needed to utilize electronic communication channels. Looking at the Twitter handle of the guthi (Tansen Guthi, n. d. b), it is clear that already by 2015, the organization was internally promoting use of ICT amongst their members. Today, the organization’s organizing is completely based on the messaging app Viber, and the members of the guthi see the further use of ICT as the only possible way forward.<sup>15</sup>

And finally, since the ancient Guthi is under such duress in Nepal, guthis themselves have adapted to the laws and regulations in the country, as well. Guthi members started registering “Committees” with the municipalities, thus making it easier to receive grants from the

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<sup>14</sup> Nepalbhasa is the native language of Newars and the historical lingua franca of Nepalmandala. Though the term “Newari” is often used, the correct term is Nepalbhasa.

<sup>15</sup> Shrestha, Prami, personal discussion, 30 July, 2021.

municipality offices. In general, for many temples and quarters, Committees handling them consisted of a subset of the members of the guthi in question. As these are not independent organizations but depend on specific ancient guthis, but are legally autonomous, we call them **sub-Guthi**.

We decided to establish a new parallel organization that would help the seniors of the guthi to better manage the guthi ... if we are to formally register the guthi itself, we need to report everything concerning the guthi to the authorities ... we also cannot deny membership to people outside from our kinship ... it is impractical to formally register a guthi. (Bhushan Sharma, Upakarma Guthi, personal communication, July 16, 2020)

The need to become transparent regarding their activities and spending, as well as showing appreciation to donors, became important for these organizations, and social media became a useful outlet.

The renovation committee is formally registered with the Kathmandu city office, we cannot get grants from the government without it ... it is all the members of the Mahavihara who are involved in the committee. (Milan Ratna Bajracharya, Maitripur Mahavihara, personal communication, July 1, 2018)

Several Committees established to conduct reconstruction/renovation of the monasteries and monuments or to handle other activities of importance amongst the communities have used social media in attempts to make their activities more transparent. Guthis associated with Maitripur Mahavihara (n. d.) in Kathmandu as well as Rudra Varna Mahavihara (Rudravarna Mahavihar, n. d.) and Upakarma Guthi in Patan (Upakarma Guthi Lalitpur, n. d.) are among the many which have registered such committees to officially work with the municipal offices.

In short, the typology we suggest can be summed up as follows:

Table 1: Typology of organizations that form the contemporary Guthi (Source: Authors’ own elaboration)

	Description	Social character	Role of ICT	Key ICT Tools used
Ancient Guthi	Corresponds to the description provided in section 3.	Traditional, mirroring Newar culture rather than challenging it	Internal communication; advertising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SMS</li> <li>• messaging apps</li> <li>• social media</li> </ul>
Quasi-Guthi	New Nepali orgs which are contemporary iterations of the Guthi principle	Less but still traditional	More ICT-based	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SMS, messaging apps, and social media</li> <li>• online conferencing</li> <li>• video and multimedia</li> <li>• creation of font faces</li> </ul>
Neo-Guthi	New guthis, also in name, founded abroad (or outside the Kathmandu Valley) for the diaspora	Places of reflected, “progressive” transformation	Often primarily ICT-based	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Online conferencing</li> <li>• Contributing to Google Translate</li> <li>• cloud storage, social media</li> <li>• animation tools</li> <li>• video and multimedia software</li> <li>• capable of self-developing ICT solutions</li> </ul>
Sub-Guthi	Orgs related to ancient Guthi in order to operate better in today’s Nepal	More pragmatic and technical	Using ICT also for communication with the government and especially for transparency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SMS</li> <li>• social media</li> <li>• word processing and spreadsheets</li> </ul>

How important it is to differentiate between these, but also to look at all of them when we discuss the Guthi today, is reflexively shown if we emphasize ICT. This is because if one just looks at the ancient guthis, arguably less than half the picture is seen. But this is even more strikingly visible if we look at the challenges the latter face in local and especially global academic and social-media discourse. We will examine this issue next.

## Discussion

Although generally praised, Global-Northern criticism of the Guthi is not missing either. Rankin (2003/2004) provides a good example of this by outlining the standard critique from a traditional global-academic perspective. Rankin sees the Guthi as a kind of “honor economy” of the Newars, which works “agentively to maintain and defend caste and gender hierarchies.” According to her, guthis, being strictly segregated by caste, mark the differences within the Newar society. Regarding gender discrimination, she claims that the Guthi “marginalizes women from the male-dominated centers of ritual life – and attendant circles of political power – while at the same time depending concretely on women’s labor for their routine functioning” (Rankin, 2003, p. 118). She also sees the Guthi as a practice that puts Newars at odds with accepting modernity – “the surest mechanism for protecting ‘traditional Newar culture’ against ‘outside’ influences of modernization” (Rankin, 2004, p. 123).

Beyond passing normative judgement of Newar culture from the outside, regarding whether some of it may be acceptable from a perspective of modernization (Shrestha, N. R., 2006), seeing the Guthi as something that blocks modernity in a technical sense has been a common view. Among the Newars, too, this narrative is not uncommon. However, misunderstanding the Guthi as ancient, even atavistic, and immobile is frequently premised on outdated modernization theories – which often go hand in hand with authoritarianism, not least in Asia – and implicit global-Western standards of normal progress (Attir, 1981; Fakhri, 2020).

Possibly more prominent, however, is a lack of *au courant*, empirical, stakeholder-driven research among Newars and guthis, and a misconception of what the Guthi really is today. As we have just outlined, there are four discernible forms of the Guthi today. Functionally speaking, all four are Guthi; all four are part of what Newar cooperative self-determination means. The standard criticism as mentioned above, however, almost universally goes against the ancient Guthi. Whereas the other three types are the ones in which progress as envisioned, technological as well as with societal according to the Newars’ own best standards, is actually and demonstrably taking place.

When it comes to caste discrimination, this is a serious issue as Newars, being a hierarchal community, do have upper and lower castes and traditional occupational roles assigned to community sub-groups, even though not as rigid as it may appear to be.<sup>16</sup> But today, there are on-going efforts for unification and cooperation among different caste-based associations (Ashanbare, 2020). Quasi-Guthi and neo-Guthi tend to be much more open and non-discriminatory in this respect, with the ICT-driven neo-guthis, PPGUK (n. d) and Newa Guthi New York (NGNY, n. d) having members from all Newar castes (S. Shakya, 2022). Guthi Australia has also been noted by Pariyar (2019, p. 97) for including all Newar castes. It could be argued that the Guthi is developing into being instrumental for creating a platform for cooperation among the several sub-groups (castes) among the Newars. In spite of different developments in history,

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<sup>16</sup> The fluid nature of Newar caste hierarchy historically and today is, e. g., discussed in Gellner & Quigley (1995); Levy (1992); Sharma (2015).

space and subgroups, the essence of Buddhism is anti-caste, both originally and with high political relevance in the last century and even today (Omvedt, 2003; Wright, 2020).

The criticism of the Guthi around gender-related issues is similar, meaning that it is a rightly serious charge and with obvious *prima-facie* validity, given that guthis are traditionally male-member-only organizations with women involved but in exactly such supporting roles as in male social and service clubs in Western contexts. However, the ancient Guthi of category 1 is part of a historically male-dominated society, and therefore, first of all, one might ask, even while risking a copout, whether they are not reflecting, rather than promoting, traditional gender roles. Once the latter are changing, it is correct to say that such organizations might reinforce what is now the past – but once again, this is only the case if we fixate on the ancient guthis, which is problematic at best inasmuch as their inflexible makeup is arguably caused by state discrimination against them, so that we cannot know how they would develop otherwise.

Within the sub-Guthi already (2), but especially among quasi-Guthi and certainly neo-Guthi (3 and 4), even short-term change is not only possible, but even happening as we speak. For example, PPGUK and NGNY have had inclusive executive committees for around a decade now, with the former already having a female vice president in 2012 and as of December 2021, having a female president (PPGUK, n. d.). The latter had a female vice president until September 2021, who had previously been appointed treasurer in 2013 (NGNY, n. d.). Here, both Buddhist traditions which diverged from a more gender-inclusive concept since the times of the Buddha merge with recent advances in Buddhist Feminist approaches and implementations as well (Farrer-Halls, 2002; Tsomo, 1999; Yeng, 2020).

## Conclusion and Implications

There is a spontaneity to how the Guthi has taken up utilizing ICT for their benefit. It has not been planned, but rather it was a reaction to the demand of the times as well as utilizing the tools available and even adapting the organization(s) to do so. Such process of “enactment” or “appropriation” of digital technologies have been looked at through the lenses of structuration theory (Vyas et al., 2017). The use of ICT across the newer iterations of guthis has led not only to better information dissemination, discussion, and engagement among and beyond the community, but also made their activities more transparent, inclusive, and capable towards providing efficient public utility functions – at a juncture when the ancient Guthi seemed poised to fade away.

In the case of Nepal, the centralized and top-down planning and reforms brought about under the Panchayat regime in a bid to “modernize” the country (in an authoritarian way), despite having been in line with the global standards of the time, failed to take into consideration how pervasive pre-existing practices were within the population. Despite conscious efforts and plans to slowly cull the Guthi and community participation, the institutional design stuck on. The communities retained the ability towards grassroots initiatives and critical agency following the same blueprint as in the past, which then ICT would resuscitate, meanwhile also creating new

permutations of the institution. And this building-back is building-back better, more inclusive and more equitable, *nota bene* by the Newar's own Buddhist standards.

The Guthi certainly was (and is) not perfect from today's standards and values in many aspects, but the core characteristics of the institution were clearly effective in what they were intended for – governing through participation. ICT, not least together with a hostile political environment, and other factors as well, prompted the creation of various iterations of the Guthi that had and have an at least indirectly equity-propelling effect, as well.

The rejuvenation of the Guthi in its current form is hardly imaginable without ICT. This becomes obvious when analyzing the institution through the typology provided in this essay. Not only are the ancient guthis using ICT for communication, the newer iterations in the form of quasi-, neo- and sub-Guthi are largely ICT-enabled. So we can say, even without any global-Western pretense or linear theories of development and technology, that the case of the Guthi and its rejuvenation is an example of ICT helping to recreate an indigenous institution for autonomous yet solidary human living-together in the 21st century. As Colton (2016) has said, a country – and we can widen that here to an organization like the Guthi – “can and must become a better edition of itself” (p. 248). ICT has enabled the Guthi to do just that in virtually all realms that matter. Even though most ‘niche’ area related studies like the one that we have undertaken are limited towards generalization, this does open various points of consideration for future research and practice. Seeing the institution's significance both nationally for Nepal and internationally as an example of how cooperativism can work successfully across the centuries, we submit that this is an important example not only for the Global South that will have implications in various dimensions of researching communities, institutions, and informatics.

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