The Quest to Restore NAALSABHA in Lamjung: Tamu Peoples' Customary Governance System

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Abstract

The NAALSABHA, historically a pivotal self-governance institution for the Tamu (Gurung) community, played a crucial role in cultural cohesion, natural resource management, customary rule-making, and mediating relations with the state. However, state interventions led to its decline. Despite this, its memory has been preserved through oral traditions, and recent efforts within the community aim to revive this institution. This article examines the emergence, functions, decline, and restoration attempts of the NAALSABHA through the frameworks of Indigenous self-governance, decolonization, and revitalization. The NAALSABHA, with successful revival contingent upon sustained community mobilization, advocacy for legal recognition, and strategic leadership.

Keywords:

Tamu (Gurung), NAALSABHA, Customary Institution, Indigenous Self-Governance, Decolonization, Restoration

1. Introduction

For centuries, the NAALSABHA functioned as the supreme governing body of the Tamu Indigenous community (commonly referred to as the Gurungs). This institution was last convened around 73 years ago, in 1951, at Morngi, Ghanpokhara in Lamjung district, as recalled by Khagendra Jung Gurung[1] (b. 1927). Today, only a few individuals who attended the NAALSABHA in their youth remain alive, yet its legacy persists in oral histories shared by elders in Lamjung and other Tamu communities.

The Tamu community traditionally occupied ancestral lands across the Gandaki Province, particuaLrly in districts like Lamjung, Kaski, Gorkha, Syangja, Parbat, Tanahun, and Manang, situated in the Himalayan foothills. SchoaLrs agree that their ancestors migrated southward across the Himalayas (Messerschmidt, 1976; Bista, 1967; Pignede, 1993; Macfarlane, 2003; Gurung, 2022). Today, the Tamu population extends beyond Nepal, with permanent settlements abroad. The National Census of 2021 records 543,790 Tamu individuals, of whom 328,074 are speakers of the Tamu language. In

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1   The conversation was held on March 8, 2023, with 96-year-old Khagendra Jung Gurung, a former state minister and advocate for Tamu rights, who had participated in the last NAALSABHA.

Lamjung, the Tamu are the aLrgest ethnic group, comprising approximately 30% of the district's population.

The NAALSABHA derives its name from two terms: "Naal" refers to a territorial zone or administrative boundary shaped by rivers, streams, and mountain settlements, while "Sabha," a Nepali term, means conference, convention, or meeting. Thus, the NAALSABHA was a convention of representatives from various Naals (territories), embodying a sense of governance akin to a Tamu nation-state.

A significant challenge in understanding the NAALSABHA lies in the absence of written records detailing its operations or decisions. Nevertheless, oral accounts from community elders underscore its importance and the growing desire to revive it amidst cultural disruption. Efforts to rekindle the NAALSABHA have occurred sporadically, such as the 2009 assembly organized by the Tamu Hyula Chonj Dhin Gurung Rashtriya Parishad Lamjung chapter and the 2015 Barthar NAALSABHA led by community elders. While these initiatives raised awareness, they struggled to gain momentum due to limited resources, inadequate awareness, and a lack of sustained campaigns.

2. The theoretical aspect of the NAALSABHA

The conquest of Tamu lands by the Shah dynasty led to significant distortions in the Tamu people's culture and history. The NAALSABHA served as a central institution, uniting the Tamu community and safeguarding against cultural upheavals while fostering a firm sense of identity. Given its pivotal role, there is an urgent need to document and restore this legacy, particuaLrly within the context of today's liberal socio-political environment, where such cultural revitalization efforts are both timely and achievable. This article focuses on the Tamu community of Lamjung, whose traditional boundaries extend from the Madi River in the west to the Chepe River in the east, encompassing the historical Naal territory. Specifically, fieldwork was conducted in areas such as Tasaa (Takshar), Sawaa (Majhgaun), Khasu (Khasur), Rhosi (Rapasing), Phojo (Bhujung), Koimly (Ghalegaun), and Maili (Mhaling). These historical NAALSABHA sites allowed for direct observation and verification of information, ensuring contextual accuracy and depth in the findings of this article. This article seeks to explore the historical significance, jurisdictions, and functions of the NAALSABHA. It also endeavors to systematically document this institution, examining the factors that contributed to its decline and identifying opportunities for its revival in contemporary society. By emphasizing the NAALSABHA's role in cultural cohesion, resource management, justice delivery, and mediating relations with the state, the study aspires to support the Tamu community in reclaiming and revitalizing this invaluable traditional governance system. The analysis part of this article is guided by three key theoretical frameworks: Indigenous self-governance, decolonization, and revitalization, which provide a comprehensive lens for examining the NAALSABHA's decline and potential restoration.

2.1. Indigenous Self-Governance

This framework draws on Articles 3 and 4 of the United Nations DecaLration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which affirm Indigenous peoples' rights to self-determination and governance according to their customs, laws, and traditions. The NAALSABHA historically served as the Tamu people's primary institution for self-governance, allowing them to exercise autonomy in managing internal affairs, resource distribution, and conflict resolution. This study explores how the NAALSABHA embodied these principles and assesses the consequences of its decline on Tamu's self-determination.

2.2. Decolonization Theory

Linda Tuhiwai Smith's Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples (1999) provides a critical framework for understanding how colonial policies and practices disrupted Indigenous governance systems. The study applies this theory to analyze how Nepal's centralized state-building processes marginalized the NAALSABHA and other Indigenous institutions, eroding Tamu's cultural and political autonomy. By engaging with decolonization methodologies, the study highlights pathways for the Tamu community to assert the validity and functionality of Indigenous governance systems in their cultural survival and political self-determination.

2.3. Revitalization Theory

Revitalization theory, as articulated by Anthony F.C. Wallace (1956), offers a framework for understanding how traditional institutions can be restored through community-led efforts while adapting to contemporary socio-political contexts. This study uses this lens to examine the Tamu community's aspirations to revive the NAALSABHA and assesses how these efforts can ensure its cultural authenticity and relevance in today's rapidly changing world.

By employing these methodological and theoretical approaches, the study ensures that the research maintains a community-centered perspective, prioritizing the Tamu people's knowledge and lived experiences. Simultaneously, it critically engages with the historical and socio-political contexts that contributed to the NAALSABHA's decline, offering actionable insights for its revival and future sustainability.

3. NAALSABHA as a Customary Governance System

3.1. Emergence of the NAALSABHA

In the oral traditions of the Tamu community, it is evident that significant decisions were historically made through assemblies referred to as Chonj (translated as "conference" or "convention" in contemporary terms). For instance, during the ancestral worship of Rildi Kle (Ghale ancestors) at Saindo, Tamu priests (Ghyabre) read prayers (Pye) that recall how the Kle ancestors would convene Chonj by summoning their brothers,

including those from the east and west. SimiaLrly, references to Chonj are found in other prayers recited by Tamu priests such as Pachyu and Ghyabre. This illustrates that the tradition of convening assemblies for major decision-making existed within the Tamu community long before the advent of the modern state system.

The evolution of this decision-making tradition into a formalized governance institution, the NAALSABHA, can be traced to the period following the loss of the Tamu people's autonomous rule under the Kle (Ghale) leadership. Historically, the term NAALSABHA appears to have derived from the Khas Nepali language, yet it has been widely embraced as a legitimate and historical institution within the Tamu community.

The dissolution of Tamu's Ghale governance is linked to the rise of Yashobram Shah in Lamjung, who was brought from Bhirkot (present-day Kaski) and installed as ruler (Panta, 1994). After the external invasion and eventual displacement of the Kle (Ghale) governance system, the NAALSABHA emerged as a form of autonomous governance. It functioned to maintain cultural cohesion, manage resources, and uphold justice within the community, while also mediating relations with the state. This evolution can be seen as a compromise made by the Tamu people to retain a degree of self-governance under the newly established political order.

It seems that the NAALSABHA developed during interactions with Khas Nepali rulers around the 15th century (Bikram Sambat) and persisted until the early 21st century (mid-20th century AD). In this context, the NAALSABHA can be understood as an institution born out of necessity—following the loss of the Tamu people's independent rule—to exercise autonomy while accommodating or to be accommodated with the new rulers.

Through the Chonj system, the Tamu community integrated their traditional decision-making processes into this new institution, ensuring the continuity of their internal governance. The NAALSABHA, therefore, represents a historical compromise, balancing the acceptance of external rulers with the preservation of the Tamu people's cultural and administrative autonomy.

3.2. Territorial Coverage of the NAALSABHA

The territorial boundaries of the NAALSABHA were defined by natural landmarks. The Chepe River marked its eastern limit, while the Madi River served as the western boundary. Within this region, the NAALSABHA governed eight distinct Naals (subregions), which were divided into two primary areas by the Marshyangdi River:

(a) Western Naals (Marsyangdi to Madi River)

- Chagaun[2] (Madi to Rudi)

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2   The region known as Chhagaon, stretching from the Rudi River to the Madi River, was originally part of Lamjung district. However, during the district re-demarcation, it was incorporated into Kaski district.

- Panchgaun (Rudi to Midgyum): Further divided into:
- Upper Panchgaun (from Bhujung to Lamagaun)
- Lower Panchgaun (from Kapurgaun to Nalma)
- Dashthar (Midgyum to Marsyangdi)
- Ubhokhola (also known as Chaudakhola; Bhulbhule to Tal): Subdivided into:
  - Lower Ubhokhola (from Bhulbhule to Bahundanda)
- Upper Ubhokhola (from Bahundanda to Tal)

(b) Eastern Naals (Marsyangdi to Chepe River)

- Bahrathar (Marsyangdi to Dordi)
- Nauthar (Dordi to Kisyandi)
- Chauthar (Kisyandi to Langdi)
- Charthar (Langdi to Chepe)

These eight Naals formed the historical jurisdiction of the NAALSABHA, serving as both administrative and cultural subdivisions. Each Naal upheld governance, maintained social order, and performed rituals integral to the Tamu community's cultural and spiritual practices.

(c) Representation of Villages in the NAALSABHA

The NAALSABHA represented a total of 125 Tamu villages across the eight Naals. However, as new settlements have emerged over time, the number of villages within these traditional Naal territories may have increased. Below is the list of participant villages as recorded by Indra Bahadur Gurung (2068 BS):

Name of villages of Marshyangdi river west four Naal area

Villages within the Dashthar Naal area	Villages within the Panchgaun Naal area	Villages within the Chagaun Naal area	Villages within Chaudh Khola Naal area
1. Pahjon (Bhujung)	1. Krapu (Karapu)	1. Tondhi (Tangting)	1. Lanka (Thaakaan)
2. Kadale (Upper Ghanpokhara)	2. Kailo (Kalyang)	2. Yongjukwe (Yangjakot)	2. Nasku (Shivadhunga)
3. Khoera (Lower Ghanpokhara)	3. Plahnasa (Lamagaon)	3. Hwaju (Warchoke)	3. Tonga (Mipra)
4. Nayun	4. Thadwa (Daduwa)	4. Naida (Nagidhar)	4. Takain (Dhakai)
5. Koyamlee (Ghalegaun)	5. Chaap	5. Gaade (Gahate)	5. Chiplo
6. Thanghi (Lamagaun)	6. Klinu (Geelung)	6. Hrabai (Rawaidanda)	6. Paidi (Bhirpustun)
7. Kone (Kapurgaun)	7. Tasaa	7. Klhemro (Ghyamrang)	7. Nibru

8. Hrosin (Raosin)	8. Kumlung	8. Varaldanda	8. Chamche
9. Najre	9. Chaara	9. Phaju (Bhachek)	9. Jagat
10. Poma	10. Ponje	10. Pargu (Pakhribot)	10. Dadai (Nayagaon)
11. Bimda	11. Komro (Ghamrang)		11. Kasirdu (Niuri)
12. Nhanda (Nalma)	12. Tobu (Tamu)		12. Chyujyu
13. Muili (Maling)	13. Kiche (Gheeche)		13. Sonbu (Sanjabu)
14. Sailung	14. Paigon (Pasgaon)		14. Uni (Thaalaajung)
15. Fulmro	15. Sindhi		15. Tarache (Tarachoke)
16. Phlamro			16. Phanche (Rintang)
17. Khagon			17. Chatkyu (Khanigaon)

Name of villages of Marshyangdi river east four Naal area

| Villages within the Bahrathar Naal area	Villages within the Nauthar Naal area	Villages within the Chauthar Naal area	Villages within the Chathar Naal area
1. Bandre	1. Taanje	1. Phocho (Paachok)	1. Phunj (Bhumlichowk)
2. Badagaun	2. Simi (Jhuyswar)	2. Betyani	2. Kamarjo (Ghamchonk)
3. Khasu (Khasur)	3. Karti (Kirtipur)	3. Telo (Bhirkuna)	3. Kalki (Dandagaun)
4. Mhrumanasa (Deujanthok)	4. Lhokyur Kurni (Upper Ghalegaun)	4. Hramko (Kalimati)	4. Phoro (Gairigaun)
5. Pojo (Gaunbhachok)	5. Tallo Kurni (Khepp Gaun)	5. Ukhari	5. Chheunas (Patale Village)
6. Tasaa (Taksar)	6. Jumdanda	6. Mhanja (Manjyang)	
7. Sawaa (Majgaun)	7. Sabhachho	7. Thonga (Sallabot)	
8. Hwanje (Lapsibot)	8. Chenas (Harigaun)	8. Fulgre (Phulangiri)	
9. Taap	9. Kalke (Kalche)	9. Salme	
10. Tuba (Bansar)	10. Saranchok	10. Thinigaun (Dhedogaun)	

11. Khinju (Khinchowk)	11. Nakronas (Jumdanda)	11. Dandathok	
12. Telo	12. Kupling	12. Yuri	
13. Tanchoyo	13. Kabkyu	13. Pleheswar (Kokegaun)	
	14. Sighra	14. Simghari	
	15. Kaamchok	15. Patlepani	
	16. Laamdanda	16. Hragini (Rainas)	
	17. Waakswar	17. Kundule	
	18. Phulko (Waarigaun)	18. Pejun (Pyaarjung)	
	19. Chhainlu	19. Simleko (Simalkot)	
	20. Kasidu	20. Tasyo	
	21. Phulcho	21. Bankot (Kolki)	
	22. Chatko (Chatigaun)	22. Namkhu (Narmakhu)	
		23. Taji (Taaji)	
		24. Kavre (Kabre)	
		25. Lodikhola (Langdikhola)	
		26. Durdi (Dordi)	

3.3. Structure and Participation in the NAALSABHA

The NAALSABHA was organized through a four-tiered vertical structure that ensured comprehensive governance across the Tamu community. These tiers were:

- Village Assembly (Gaunsabha)
- Single Naal Assembly (Ek NAALSABHA) – e.g., the Barthar NAALSABHA
- Four-Naal Assembly (Char NAALSABHA) – assemblies for regions divided by the Marshyangdi River
- The NAALSABHA – the collective assembly of all eight Naals
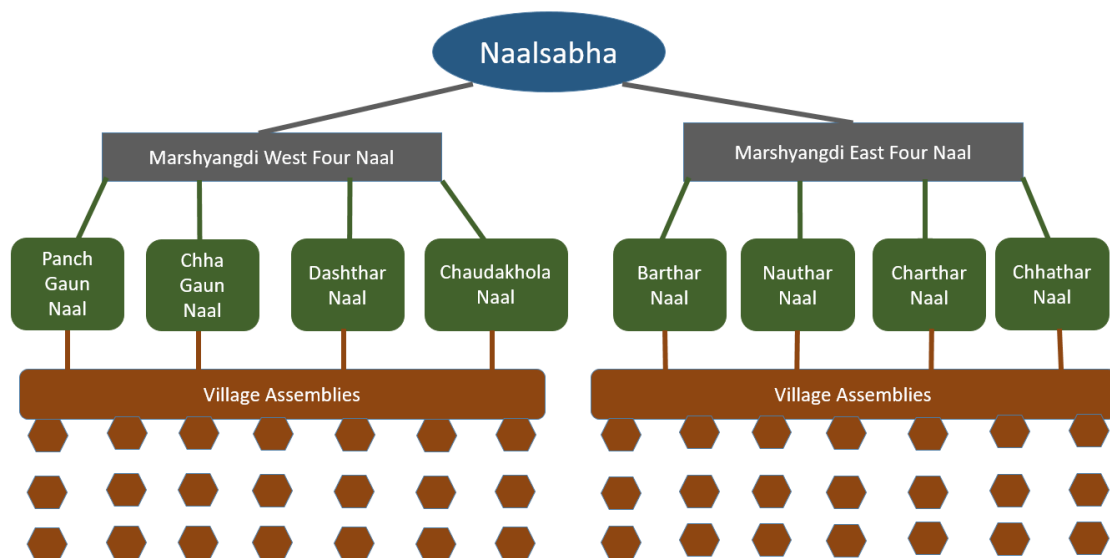
A schematic representation of the structure of the NAALSABHA.

(a) Village Assembly: The Foundational Layer

The Gaunsabha (village assembly) functioned as the primary and foundational governance body, responsible for implementing the decisions and regulations of the higher NAALSABHAs. These local assemblies governed village-specific issues, addressing cultural, social, and resource-related matters. In Tamu villages, all adult members—men and women—gathered once or twice a year to discuss and decide upon matters concerning their local community. The Gaunsabhas held authority comparable to the NAALSABHA within their respective territories. Today, some remnants of this self-governance system persist. For instance, the Bhadausabha in Bhujung village (Lamjung) operates under the Ritithiti Management Committee. It enacts local rules concerning cultural practices, resource management, and conflict resolution. These assemblies reflect the enduring influence of the NAALSABHA system at the grassroots level.

(b) Single Naal Assembly (Ek NAALSABHA)

When an issue extended beyond the scope of an individual village, the matter was referred to the NAALSABHA within a single Naal. For example, in 2015, the Barthar NAALSABHA convened to address regional concerns. The decisions made by these assemblies applied only to the villages within that particuaLr Naal, and participation was limited to representatives from those villages. If a single NAALSABHA could not resolve an issue, or if it involved multiple Naals, the matter was escalated to the next tier.

(c) Four-Naal Assembly (Char NAALSABHA)

Issues involving more than one Naal were discussed at the Four-Naal Assembly. The

Marshyangdi River divided the Naals into eastern and western regions, and the Char NAALSABHA was convened accordingly. Decisions made at this level were binding within the boundaries of the four Naals represented. Participation was restricted to representatives from these regions. If the four NAALSABHA could not resolve an issue, or if it involved the entire Tamu community, the matter was escalated to the NAALSABHA (eight Naal involved).

(d) The NAALSABHA

Matters of a broader concern that affected the entire Tamu community or required extensive resolution were addressed at the NAALSABHA, which included representatives from all eight Naals. This assembly was the ultimate governing body, and its decisions were binding for the entire Tamu community across the Naal territories. Villages that violated these decisions were subject to penalties, emphasizing the authority of the NAALSABHA.

Participants voluntarily attended the assemblies, covering their own expenses and often bringing helpers and supplies. This practice underscores the commitment of the Tamu people to collective governance.

Traditionally, the NAALSABHA used to be convened at Baglungpani, now part of Kholaswanthar Rural Municipality. This site featured a aLrge thanti (communal shelter) and ample space for gatherings. The location was strategically positioned between the eastern and western Naals. Although Baglungpani was the preferred site, the assembly location could be changed through mutual agreement. Sessions often extended for weeks, with participants setting up tents and kitchens organized by their respective villages.

Baglungpani, Kholaswanthar Rural Municipality. The NAALSABHA was ussally convened at Baglungpani.

Participants included village leaders (Krab, Taab, Chiba), Tamu astrologers (Paindi), priests (Khegi, Pachyu, Ghyabre, Lama), and government-appointed officials such as Subba, Umra, Dware, Jimmuwal, Mukhiya, and Talukdar from the Tamu community. This diverse and participatory structure highlights the NAALSABHA's critical role in uniting the Tamu people while ensuring inclusive decision-making and dispute resolution.

3.4. Scope of Work of the NAALSABHA

Based on insights from Tamu elders, the NAALSABHA held four primary areas of jurisdiction in its traditional framework:

(a) Cultural Uniformity and Adaptation Over Time

The Tamu community has a deep-rooted connection to its rich cultural traditions, customs, and rituals, practiced at individual, familial, and collective levels. These practices include rituals, dances, festivals, performances, and lifecycle events, spanning from birth to death. Historically, these traditions were regulated by the NAALSABHA, which played a central role in maintaining the Tamu community's identity and ensuring its survival as an Indigenous group.

Elders frequently emphasize the cultural disruptions that have arisen in the absence of customary institutions like the NAALSABHA. Historically, the NAALSABHA not only preserved the community's cultural norms but also adapted them to suit contemporary needs. It set minimum standards for rituals related to birth, marriage, and death, periodically updating them to maintain their relevance. This approach fostered cultural cohesion and ensured the continuity of traditional practices.

However, in recent years, the absence of the NAALSABHA has led to significant variations in cultural practices across Tamu villages. Elders lament that after the 'Nepal unification' cultural traditions have been replaced by inconsistencies and influences from external cultures. Notably, changes in death rituals—a deeply significant part of Tamu heritage can be attributed to the lack of a centralized institution like the NAALSABHA to uphold these practices.

While some local assemblies have attempted to standardize rituals at the village level, these efforts remain fragmented. The absence of a central institution has created gaps in ensuring cultural consistency across the broader Tamu community.

(b) Utilization and Management of Natural Resources

The NAALSABHA were instrumental in overseeing the management and equitable utilization of natural resources—an essential responsibility for the Tamu community, whose traditional livelihood depended heavily on agriculture and animal husbandry. Before diversifying into professions such as Gorkha soldiers or foreign employment, the Tamu people relied on communal grazing lands, forests, and other natural resources for their sustenance.

Disputes over resource use—including grazing lands, forest products, hunting grounds,

and honey-harvesting rocks—were common. The NAALSABHA mediated such disputes to ensure fair access and the protection of communal assets. For instance, the NAALSABHA implemented practices such as seasonal restrictions (*bandej*) on resource use and organized collective access (*banes chhadne*), where resources were made available to all at designated times. These measures eliminated the inequality of some accessing resources earlier than others and ensured that everyone benefited equally.

In some villages, such as Bhujung, these practices continue under local assemblies, which maintain seasonal restrictions and communal resource management, reflecting the enduring legacy of the NAALSABHA. For example:

- Timing of activities: Determining when firewood could be cut, bamboo harvested, or livestock grazed to promote sustainability.
- Regulation of grazing lands: Establishing rules for restrictions and access to communal pastures to prevent overuse.
- Trade management: Setting prices for grain, cattle, and other livestock to regulate commerce within the community.

These resource management strategies, including the implementation of bans and communal grazing practices, minimized conflicts and fostered harmony within the community. The NAALSABHA's ability to balance resource sustainability with equitable access played a critical role in maintaining the Tamu community's way of life.

(c) Ultimate Judicial Authority within the Community

The NAALSABHA served as the ultimate judicial authority within the Tamu customary governance system, operating across the four hierarchical levels previously described. Decisions made by the NAALSABHA, which included representatives from all eight Naals, were considered final and binding. The NAALSABHA also addressed unresolved disputes referred to by the lower assemblies (Gaunsabha, Ek NAALSABHA, and Char NAALSABHA) and provided overarching rulings that ensured social order, cultural continuity, and resource management.

At all levels, the assemblies formulated rules, enforced them, and imposed penalties for violations. This hierarchical system maintained a balance between localized governance and collective decision-making, ensuring that each village or region adhered to community norms.

(d) Judicial Philosophy and Practices

The Tamu community's judicial philosophy was deeply rooted in reconciliation and forgiveness, emphasizing restorative rather than punitive justice. A common practice involved the wrongdoer acknowledging their mistake and offering *Pa Pung*[3] (a bottle of local alcohol) as a symbolic gesture of apology. This act of contrition was accompanied

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3   Pa Pung holds great significance in our society. If someone makes a mistake, they can apologize by offering Pa Pung. It is also carried when seeking a daughter-in-law for marriage. SimiaLrly, sisters take Pa Pung with them when visiting their brothers, as well as when visiting other relatives.

by a commitment to rectify the wrongdoing, if possible, and a promise to avoid repeating it in the future. Decisions within the NAALSABHA were consensus-driven, reflecting a collective commitment to fairness and communal harmony. Penalties for non-compliance, such as fines or other corrective measures, were enforced to uphold the integrity of the rulings and deter future violations.

The NAALSABHA addressed a wide range of disputes, many of which were critical to maintaining harmony and sustainable resource use within the community. Some examples of these disputes often include:

- Village boundaries: Resolving conflicts over territorial claims between villages.
- Grazing lands: Mediating access and usage rights for communal pastures.
- Forest resources: Regulating the collection of firewood, timber, and other forest products.
- Honey-hunting sites: Allocating equitable access to shared natural resources.

By resolving such conflicts internally, the NAALSABHA ensured social harmony, protected communal interests, and strengthened the unity of the Tamu community. Its ability to provide fair, culturally aligned resolutions cemented its role as the supreme judicial body within the Tamu customary governance system.

(e) Managing Relationships with the State

Another critical jurisdiction of the NAALSABHA was managing the community's interactions with the state. The NAALSABHA responded collectively to state policies, orders, and taxes that impacted the Tamu people. Although there is limited written evidence, oral histories suggest that the NAALSABHA played a key role in shaping the community's responses to external pressures.

For instance, during the mid-19th century, the Tamu community faced royal decrees mandating the abandonment of their traditional priests (Gyabre and Lama) in favour of Brahman priests and Hindu rituals for post-funeral ceremonies. When most of the Tamu community resisted these orders, the NAALSABHA emerged as a unifying body that refused to comply with the state's division of the community into "pure" and "impure" groups.

Oral accounts and historical references indicate that resistance from the NAALSABHA ultimately led to the relaxation of these orders. Dhan Prasad Gurung—an activist for NAALSABHA revival—supported these observations by recounting:

> When I was a boy, I was curious about various issues related to culture and community affairs. I heard from my father and other elders in the village that when the King issued an order dividing the community into 'pure' and 'impure,' it was brought to the NAALSABHA for discussion. The NAALSABHA decided not to maintain a kingship relationship with those labeled 'pure' by the King.

This decision was crucial for maintaining cultural integrity within the Tamu community.

By resisting divisive orders from the King and penalizing or boycotting those who complied with them, the NAALSABHA emphasized solidarity and loyalty to cultural traditions.

Eighteen years after this initial order was issued by his Father Girbhanayudda Shaha—in 1883—King Rajendra Bikram Shah relaxed his decree allowing the Tamu community to perform their rituals with their own priests— Gyabre and Lama. The King's order stated that both groups—those using traditional Tamu priests and those adopting Brahman priests—could continue their respective practices (Pant, 2025 BS).

According to Dhan Prasad Gurung, this relaxation was likely compelled by NAALSABHA's unwavering stand on this issue. He argued that direct opposition to a King's decree would have been unthinkable in an autocratic regime; however, collective strength led by NAALSABHA likely influenced him to reconsider his decision.

(d) Function and Leadership Building

In terms of functionality, the NAALSABHA does not exhibit a separation of powers like the modern governance system, which divides responsibilities into executive, legislative, and judicial branches. Instead, like many other Indigenous customary governance systems, it operates with an integrated approach. The NAALSABHA creates rules, administers justice, and implements decisions as necessary.

The primary responsibility for executing the decisions of the NAALSABHA lies with the Gaunsabha (village assembly) and the leaders —Kraba, Taba, and Chiba—who participate in it. These local elders ensure the implementation of decisions at the village level, in accordance with the resolutions passed by the NAALSABHA and subsequently approved by the Gaunsabha. If a decision made by the NAALSABHA is not feasible, the Gaunsabha has the authority to prepare and propose an alternative for consideration at the next NAALSABHA.

Subject-specific leaders also play a vital role in the execution of decisions. For example: If the decision concerns cultural or ritual activities, its implementation is overseen by the priests (Pachyu, Ghabre, or Lama). If the decision pertains to grazing lands (Kharka or Chharan), its implementation falls under the responsibility of the herders. Village leaders monitor these processes to ensure compliance and effectiveness.

This governance model aligns with John Borrows' (2010) analysis in his book Canada's Indigenous Constitution, which highlights that Indigenous governance systems, such as the NAALSABHA, emphasize an integrated approach. Rather than separating powers, these systems foster collectivity and collaboration. Decisions are made with a spirit of communal consensus, rather than through majority rule.

4. Efforts for the Restoration of NAALSABHA

4.1. Efforts of the Recent Past

In recent decades, attempts to revive the NAALSABHA, a traditional institution of

the Tamu community, have gained momentum. For instance, a gathering organized by the Tamu Hyul Chhonj Dhin Gurung Rastriya Parishad (National Tamu Council) in Besisahar was labeled a NAALSABHA. However, its primary focus was to raise awareness about the cultural significance of NAALSABHA, rather than replicating its traditional decision-making functions. SimiaLrly, in 2015, elders from Barhathar brought together 214 community leaders for a three-day NAALSABHA to deliberate on cultural uniformity. Despite these commendable efforts, the initiatives failed to yield consensus, highlighting the challenges of revitalizing traditional institutions in the context of modern socio-political dynamics.

The restoration efforts, though well-intentioned, lacked a systematic approach and a clear strategic framework. There was little effort to comprehensively gather existing knowledge about NAALSABHA or to develop structured proposals for its revival. These attempts appeared more emotional than goal-oriented, with no evidence of community protocols, written deliberation records, or a robust plan for sustained revitalization. Additionally, there was no significant effort to adapt this age-old Indigenous governance system to contemporary socio-economic and political realities. The gradual erosion of NAALSABHA reflects the broader issue of state policies that fail to recognize or legitimize Indigenous governance systems. Revitalizing such institutions requires a systematic approach, community-wide engagement, and resilience against external pressures to restore their relevance in modern governance (Wallace, 1956).

Participants of Besisahar NAALSABHA, organized by Tamu Hyula Chonj Dhee Lamjung Chapter in 2009.

Participants of Besisahar NAALSABHA, organized by Tamu Hyula Chonj Dhee Lamjung Chapter in 2009.

4.2. Justifications for the NAALSABHA's Restoration

On the basis of foregone deliberations, the NAALSABHA is a historically significant customary institution for the Tamu community, playing a critical role in their self-governance and cultural identity. Its restoration is not just a necessity for the community but also an obligation under Nepal's Constitution and international instruments. Nepal's Constitution, 2015, under Article 51 (j) (8), mandates the state to ensure Indigenous peoples' rights to live with dignity and participate in decision-making processes concerning their affairs. It further emphasizes the preservation and promotion of traditional knowledge, skills, culture, and social practices. Moreover, Articles 56 (5), 59 (4), and 33 (5) enshrine provisions for autonomy and the recognition of protected and special areas, directly supporting the restoration of such institutions (Bhattachan, 2024).

Beyond the Constitution, international instruments like the United Nations DecaLration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the ILO Convention No. 169 emphasize the rights of Indigenous peoples to self-determination, self-governance, and the recognition of customary institutions. UNDRIP's Article 3 guarantees the right to self-determination, empowering Indigenous communities to govern themselves in alignment with their cultural values, traditions, and governance systems. Article 4 further reinforces their autonomy in internal and local affairs. SimiaLrly, ILO Convention No. 169 obligates states to protect and integrate Indigenous laws and institutions within national legal systems. UNDRIP's Articles 5 and 34 further affirm the rights of Indigenous peoples to maintain and strengthen their distinct institutions, reinforcing their role in governance. These provisions underscore that restoring the NAALSABHA is not only

an act of justice but also a legal and moral obligation for the state. The restoration of the NAALSABHA will empower the Tamu community by safeguarding their rights to self-determination, self-governance, and cultural preservation, while also ensuring the fulfillment of Nepal's constitutional and international commitments.

The same spirit of consensus that shapes decision-making also extends to leadership selection. In the Tamu community, leadership is not determined by majority votes or other formal methods. Roles such as Chiba, Taba, and Kraba are not fixed positions, but titles of honor and respect, simiaLr to the Nepali term bhadrabhaladmi (a respectable person). There are no strict rules regarding the number of leaders required. While factors such as ancestry and clan may influence leadership, the community's acceptance of an individual is the primary criterion. This recognition is based on: 1. their upbringing and character; 2. the impartiality of their decisions; and the depth and seriousness of their discourses.

Thus, the NAALSABHA reflects the collective and voluntary spirit of governance within the Tamu community, emphasizing consensus, community acceptance, and shared responsibility, rather than formalized structures or hierarchical authority.

5. Conclusion

Historically, the NAALSABHA served as a cornerstone of self-governance and cultural identity within the Tamu community. Today, it exists primarily in the memories of elders, many in their nineties, and through oral histories passed down through generations. Despite its significance, NAALSABHA remains absent from official records, highlighting a lack of state recognition for this customary institution and its decisions. This invisibility underscores how unregistered and non-state-sanctioned Indigenous governance structures are often overlooked in mainstream historical and legal frameworks. The origins of NAALSABHA can be traced to Tamu settlements between the Chepe and Madi rivers, emerging after contact with Khas Nepali-speaking groups and Thakuri rulers who overthrew the Tamu's separate state. As a customary institution, NAALSABHA played a vital role in preserving cultural cohesion, regulating natural resource management, mediating conflicts, and negotiating relations with the encroaching state. It ensured unity and self-determination within the Tamu community by functioning as an autonomous decision-making body. NAALSABHA exemplifies the exercise of Indigenous self-determination as conceptualized in Article 3 of the United Nations DecaLration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (United Nations, 2007). Decisions were made collectively, beginning at village-level assemblies and escalating to Naal-level and multi-Naal assemblies when issues affected broader sections of the community. This multilevel governance structure reflects a decentralized yet cohesive exercise of autonomy, allowing the community to address shared concerns while preserving their distinct cultural practices.

While there is no documented evidence of direct state intervention to dismantle

NAALSABHA, several structural and socio-political factors contributed to its extinction:

- The dominance of State-Appointed Subbas: Tamu Subbas, empowered by the state, monopolized decision-making within NAALSABHA, alienating other participants. Their adoption of Hindu rituals to align with the Rana oligarchy distanced them from Tamu cultural values.

- Panchayat System: The Panchayat system introduced formal political structures at the village level, replacing customary institutions like NAALSABHA.

- State Dependency and Accessibility: The increasing accessibility of state organs diminished reliance on NAALSABHA for conflict resolution and resource management.

- Perceived Modernity and Cultural Assimilation: The introduction of "modern" political systems and cultural practices led to a decline in the perceived value of Indigenous governance systems like NAALSABHA.

The disappearance of NAALSABHA has profound implications for the Tamu community. The Tamu have lost a vital mechanism for resolving internal disputes and managing resources autonomously. This dependency on state structures undermines their ability to exercise self-determination and autonomy. The uniformity in cultural practices once upheld by NAALSABHA has declined, creating inconsistencies in traditions that increase the risk of cultural erosion among younger generations who lack connections to these practices.

Although some resources are still managed communally, the community has aLrgely lost control over natural resources due to state centralization. Community elders recognize the absence of NAALSABHA as a primary cause of cultural deviation and loss of resource rights. They advocate for its restoration to re-establish cultural cohesion and address community-centered issues.

6. Recommendations for the Restoration of the NAALSABHA

Efforts to revive the NAALSABHA, such as gatherings in Besisahar and Barthar, have aLrgely been symbolic rather than functional. According to Anthony F.C. Wallace's (1956) revitalization theory, restoring a traditional institution like the NAALSABHA requires a deliberate and strategic campaign focused on leadership, collective action, and community mobilization. To make the restoration successful, various stakeholders must assume different roles in the process, with the community serving as the central pilaLr of the revival effort. Below are the recommended steps and considerations for restoring the NAALSABHA:

6.1. Community Awareness (Including Women and Youth)

The first and foremost condition for restoring the NAALSABHA is raising awareness within the community. Given that the institution ceased functioning over seven decades ago, there is a pressing need to educate community members about its importance. This is particuaLrly vital for younger generations, who must understand the significance of

the NAALSABHA and the impact it can have on their lives. Knowledge and experiences related to the NAALSABHA, held by elder community members, should be effectively shared with all social groups to foster a collective understanding.

6.2. Documentation of NAALSABHA Practices

Comprehensive documentation of the NAALSABHA is essential. This includes recording the knowledge, practices, and oral histories associated with the institution. Effective documentation not only preserves this information for future generations but also serves as a foundation for promoting the NAALSABHA within and beyond the community. This step is fundamental to the restoration process.

6.3. Leadership and Community Mobilization

The success of the restoration depends on leadership that can mobilize both community members and external stakeholders. Instead of relying on charismatic leadership alone, there is a need for organized leadership, which may include institutions or organizations. These leaders and entities must guide the restoration process, involving not only the community but also government bodies and other relevant stakeholders.

6.4. Adaptation to Contemporary Contexts

The viability of the NAALSABHA restoration will depend on its ability to adapt to modern socio-economic, political, and cultural realities. Restoring a centuries-old structure exactly as it was may lack relevance in today's context. However, if the NAALSABHA is overly modernized, it may lose its traditional essence. Therefore, a balance must be struck to preserve the core elements of the Tamu community's traditional governance system while ensuring its functionality in the present-day context.

6.5. Development of Operational Guidelines

Historically, the NAALSABHA operated informally and orally. For its effective operation in the modern era, a formal set of operational procedures must be developed. These guidelines should clearly define the NAALSABHA's formation, roles, responsibilities, and decision-making processes. Furthermore, there should be caLrity on the implementation of its policies, rules, and resolutions to ensure transparency and accountability.

6.6. Continuous Improvement and Sustainability

Restoring the NAALSABHA is not a one-time event but an ongoing process of refinement. ReguaLr feedback from community members should guide improvements to ensure its long-term sustainability. Collaboration with government agencies and other stakeholders will also help integrate the NAALSABHA into broader governance systems while retaining its unique cultural identity.

6.7. Role of the State/Government

The state plays a pivotal role in the restoration of the NAALSABHA. As mentioned earlier, the Nepalese Constitution mandates the implementation of provisions that protect

Indigenous rights. Furthermore, as a signatory to international laws, Nepal is obligated to provide legal, financial, and moral support to the restoration process. Additionally, the state should establish legal frameworks to formally recognize and legitimize such Indigenous institutions.

6.8. Role of External Stakeholders

External stakeholders, such as NGOs, cultural preservation organizations, and international allies, also have a significant role to play in the restoration of the NAALSABHA. They can contribute by funding the events and processes while also providing resources and sharing best practices from around the globe. Their support can promote cultural continuity, strengthen social unity, facilitate sustainable resource management, and improve equitable resource distribution and access to justice for the Tamu community.

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