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# Urban Open Space as a Place for Social and Physical Well-being: Narratives from two Different Urban Settings of Kathmandu, Nepal

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ABSTRACT

Increasing population and densification of the cities lead to increasing land value by the high demand of land for housing and other infrastructure developments are the reasons that tend to decreasing open spaces in Kathmandu Valley in general, and Kathmandu Metropolitan City (KMC) in particular. Urban open space has been considered as a place that is accessible to all residents and is important in the urban context as such space provides an opportunity as a place for social interaction, networking, recreation, and various physical health exercises. However, different social and economic contexts of the society reflect different patterns of its uses. Two different urban settings (core urban areas having indigenous dominant population and fringe urban areas having migrants' dominant population) have been taken as a basis for analysis in this paper to look at how different urban societies use open spaces differently. Open spaces are not only important for maintaining urban greenery and beauty for the city but are valued for accumulating social capital and enhancing physical well-being to urban communities. These issues are analyzed through the interpretative research methodology by collecting the data through in-depth interviews, key informants' interviews, informal conversational interviews, and non-participatory observation from two different urban settings of KMC.

## 1. Introduction

Cities in developing countries reveal complex socio-economic and spatial systems with diverse cultural inhabitants of migrants and non-migrants people residing in different urban settings and this has always been a contention<sup>[1]</sup>. The debate is seen in the uses of urban public spaces in different urban settings. Urban open space as a public space is well discussed in the literature under urban studies. The idea of urban space is an interesting field of socio-spatial research in the present decade which analyzes open spaces as a place of social, economic, political

as well as ecological functions of a city<sup>[2-4]</sup>. Urban open space is contributing to developing different aspects in urban society including social, physical, cultural, environmental, risk resilience, and psychological benefits<sup>[5-7]</sup>. Different societies at various times in history have placed more or less attention to the creation and maintenance of public space as it serves as a setting for community activities for collective urban life<sup>[8-12]</sup>. The collective urban life has turned spaces into places as human interactions with these spaces give meaning. Different communities have developed space as a place reflecting their social, cultural,

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and economic values to create meaning.

As cities are composed up of different social, cultural, and community diversities, those living in an urban area; at least at a community level; share the same space territory and get benefited from the same socio-spatial systems. However, the importance of open space is well explained among urban designers as greenery and recreational places in urban development planning rather it is overlooked in studying the perspectives of social capital and well-being. Urban open space is more than a greenery and recreational place for urban communities and it has a magnitude of potentialities to community people as a shared place for socio-physical and socio-cultural significance<sup>[13-14]</sup>. Open space contributes to developing social capital<sup>[15]</sup> and provides an opportunity of earning livelihoods to urban poor<sup>[16]</sup>, that would enhance the well-being of urban residents.

Public space is a place that is generally open and accessible to all people and is publicly owned or of public use, accessible and enjoyable by all for free and without a profit motive<sup>[3,17]</sup>. Roads, public squares, parks, *Bahas* (courtyards), *Chautara* (rest places) are typically considered public spaces. Looking at the nature of public open spaces, some open spaces are very limited to public access and some others are having more access to them<sup>[18]</sup>. Government entities such as public libraries, government offices are open to the public although they tend to have restricted areas. However, institutional open spaces such as hospitals, government offices, schools, and colleges, etc. have more open to the public even though they have different purposes of use.

Urban open spaces play a vital role in the public social life of urban communities. The society acts as a self-organizing public service with a shared space in which experiences and values are created, shared and interactions among the community people established<sup>[19-20]</sup>. The public place can be a place for sharing feelings, experiences, knowledge and sometimes people get engaged in caring and nurturing at the spaces keep them busy working in their old ages. Physical exercise comes in front while talking about the uses of public open spaces. Such spaces are more important in densely populated cities like KMC as people hardly get open spaces to get engaged in different physical exercises.

This paper will contribute to the academic field of space, place, people, and well-being under urban geography. Such studies are very limited in social science and geographic disciplines. In health science, well-being is simply a multi-faceted construct best described as a state of physical, psychological, and social health<sup>[21]</sup>. However, this paper explores more than a physical “well-being”;

a widely used term in health science, rather analyzes how open spaces are connected to accumulating social capital and enhance well-being for the urban communities. Public urban open spaces find their meaning with human presence and activities, and more than physical role, they are important for creating social interactions among citizens<sup>[21,17]</sup>. In addition to this, the paper explores public open spaces as Bourdieuian perspectives of social capital<sup>[15]</sup>, how it contributes to well-being. Bourdieu argues that social capital is “*the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition or the membership in a group*”<sup>[15]</sup>. Besides, enhancing physical health has also been explored to look at as a form of well-being using the open spaces in different urban settings.

## 2.The Context

The population of Kathmandu Metropolitan City (KMC) has been increasing rapidly over the last decade. In-migration towards the city is increasing due to the income and employment opportunities, available urban facilities and services, and of course, being the Federal Capital City of Nepal. Kathmandu Valley has been the most common destination of inter-district current migrants as nearly 38% of current migrants go to the central hill, out of which 34% are based in the three districts (Kathmandu, Lalitpur, and Bhaktapur) of Kathmandu Valley<sup>[22]</sup>. KMC is one of the major destinations of migrants as it has several potentialities to cater to migrants’ populations here in different economic sectors. As a result, KMC’s population has grown by about 48 percent over the decade (2011-2019), from 975,453 people in 2011 to 1,442,271 people in 2019<sup>[23-24]</sup>.

Kathmandu has multi-ethnic demography although *Newars*, one of the indigenous groups, still comprise a large segment of the population. Historically known as *Newar* settlement<sup>[25]</sup>. KMC is the most densely populated city in Nepal with a density of 132.34 people per hectare which is higher compared to the aggregate urban population density of all the cities of Nepal recorded at only 3.77 persons per hectare. There is a growing tendency of decreasing public open spaces having unprecedented urban growth trends in the Kathmandu Valley<sup>[26-27]</sup> and KMC is at the centre of the valley (Map 1) has its central attraction of in-migrants.

As a piloting study for the Ph.D. project of the author, two different sites from two different urban contexts of KMC were taken as the study areas for empirical analysis in this research paper. With the diversified nature of functions, composition, structures, and physiography, KMC

poses more dynamic urban landscapes in terms of uses of public open spaces in different urban settings. Two different urban settings (core urban area having a dominant indigenous population and fringe area having dominant migrants' population) were selected for the piloting study. Yatakha Baha from the core urban setting and Suryamukhi Garden (an open space allocated in the planned development area) from the fringe urban area were selected (Map 1). Having a high population density, the core urban area consists of traditional urban settings with typical Newar (indigenous caste/ethnic group of Kathmandu) residents having their typical cultural specialties. Newar communities are more ritual and comparatively rigid on their social and cultural values which are quite different than urban fringe communities in KMC. They have allocated some open spaces for organizing ritual and cultural activities from the pre-historic period. Locally these spaces are called Baha (courtyards- open spaces allocated surrounding the buildings in the community) quite often used for social and cultural activities among the Newar culture.

Similarly, the fringe urban area is having a comparatively low population density compared to the core area. Some areas are having a planned area with dedicated

open spaces within it. As these areas are dominated by the migrants' population, they pose a mixed-up of cultures and form a heterogeneous society. These two different sites were selected to compare different urban as well as socio-cultural settings to look at how the open spaces are being used as a place for accumulating social capital and well-being.

### 3.The Methods and Materials

This research paper is the product of the piloting study for the author's Ph.D. research project in which primary sources of data were collected through different methods and tools. Standardized semi-structured interviews, key informants' interviews, informal conversational interviews, and observation were used to collect the required information. Being a pilot study, two purposive sites were selected for observation to see how people are using open spaces in different socio-cultural settings of the urban area of KMC. This study will help to validate the checklist and questionnaire and further guidance to the researcher to elaborate methodology.

Standardized semi-structured interviews were conducted with 2 respondents from each site (core urban and

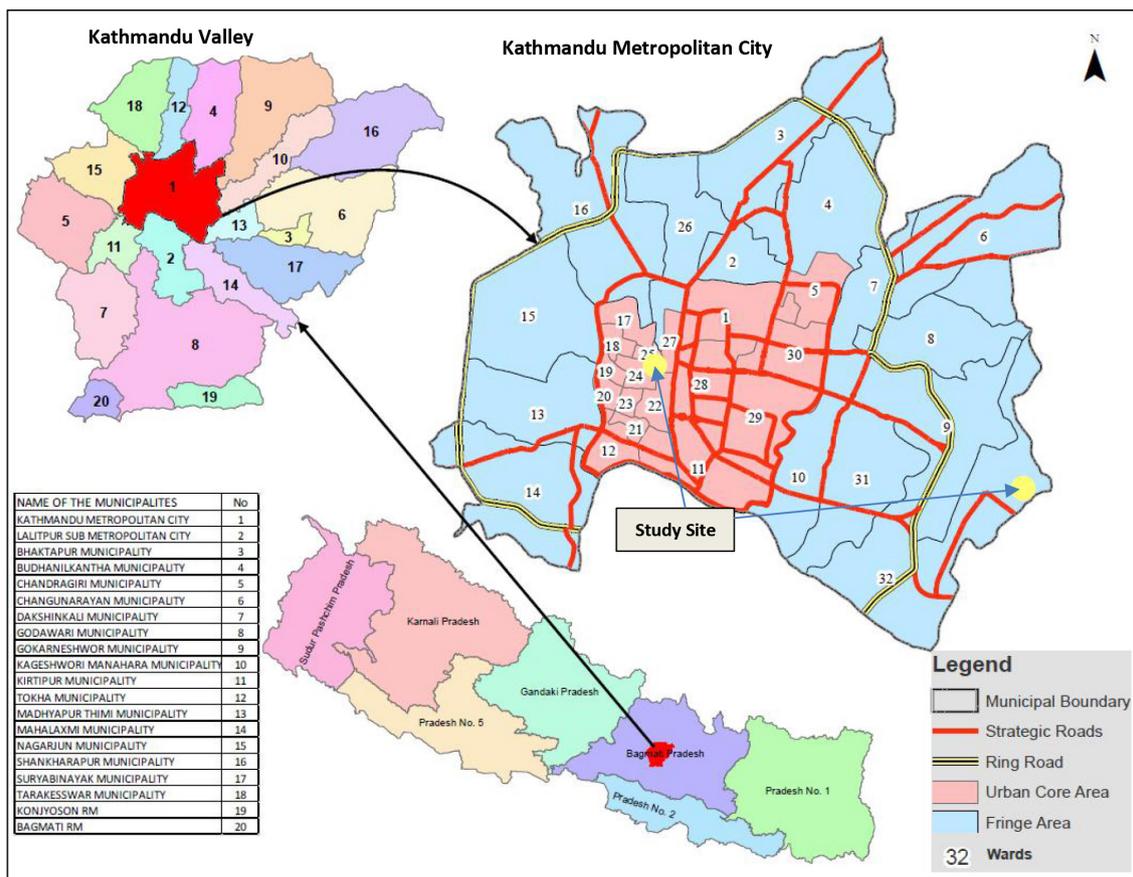


Figure 1. Locational context of the study area

fringe area) which were in-depth in nature. All together 4 in-depth interviews were conducted. Questions were standardized and open-ended to explore data on the uses, functions, and different social and physical activities they accomplish in the open spaces. Two key informants' interviews from each site were conducted to get the information relating to views on the importance, role, functions, and how public open spaces are being used in different social and physical activities for well-being at the community level in different urban settings. The Chairperson of the open space management committee and Yoga Teacher of Evergreen Health Club were interviewed from the urban fringe area whereas a resident and an aged visitor were interviewed from core urban settings as a key informant. Similarly, 2 more informal conversational interviews were also conducted to get insights.

The non-participant observation was used as being an unobtrusive observer to collect information relating to the issue like, why people are visiting the open space, what types of functions the people have been operating at the open space, what kinds of social events organized, how people are using the open spaces over there. Existing use and present functions of the open spaces were thoroughly observed. The observation was made three times a day in consecutive three days regularly on each site to see the different phenomena going on over there. The visitors were thoroughly observed and counted according to their purpose of visit and the activities they perform over there. The observational information was systematically noted down daily as "observation notes" and visitors were counted and get averaged of three consecutive days' participation in different socio-cultural activities.

The collected data then analyzed to look at insights into different contexts in different settings of KMC. Discourse analysis as the method has been done to interpret meaning-making analytical approaches<sup>[28-29]</sup> to present urban open space as a place for well-being in two different urban settings of KMC.

## 4. Result and Discussions

### 4.1 Narratives from the Indigenous Community

Public open space in the core city, the dominant residence of indigenous communities of KMC and typically known as *Baha* in local dialects of *Newar* communities are successful open space practice of KMC. *Baha* is a type of courtyard found amongst *Newar* communities in KMC with *Newari* Architecture. *Baha* is a Buddhist Monastery and derives its name from the Sanskrit word *Bihara*, meaning joy or enchantment, and thus, it is a place of religious bliss<sup>[27]</sup>. The *Bahas* are generally constructed by a family

and their descendants reside in it for generations<sup>[30]</sup>. A community is formed to use and protect the *Baha* as it is surrounded by the indigenous residents and they have common rights to use them. These *Bahas* are open spaces for the community to use in different socio-cultural activities and other different purposes in that community.

These *Bahas* seem more important for socio-cultural purposes rather than physical and recreational activities. Since the core urban area poses densely populated with the domination of *Newar* communities, they are using the public open spaces as a place for their cultural ceremony (e.g. marriage, *Pashni*- the naming of newly born babies, *Belbibaha*-symbolic marriage of baby girls culturally practiced in *Newar* culture and other religious and cultural *Bhoj*-a type of gatherings for offering the food). Being an indigenous community of Kathmandu, their culture is more typical in the core city and the public open spaces as *Baha* is more common to them. Data shows that there are more than 1363 small to large-sized *Bahas* (Courtyards) in the city core area of Kathmandu<sup>[31]</sup> which are being used mostly for social and cultural purposes. In the historical past, these open spaces would be used for agriculture associated purposes particularly for grain processing, drying too. Nowadays, as farmland in KMC is almost distinct, such grain processing and drying are almost disappeared. Thus, the use of patterns of such open space has changed over time.

#### **Box 1: Narratives from urban core Area (Yatakha Baha)**

*In the past, there were farmland within KMC and we used to produce much paddy, wheat and maize. At that time these Bahas were used to dry the grains so that we could preserve the grains longer. All these households had produced grains and this Baha was occupied fully for drying the grains in the seasons (68 years Old woman of Yatakha Baha).*

*This Baha is our historical asset tied with cultural and religious purposes. All the community members in the past used to use this place as space for Bhoj. In the past there were no party venues as these days do in Kathmandu, and all the community members used this place for offering the Bhoj (63 years community member-Yatakha Baha).*

*Still these days some families of this community use this Baha as place for offering their Bhoj (Party). We have some typical system of Bhoj to be served in the community for which our ancestor had preserved such spaces in the community (70 years community member- Yatakha Baha).*

Looking at the narratives from indigenous residents of urban core areas on the use of public open spaces, different views have been made during the interviews (Box-1). It has been observed that the *Bahas* of the core urban area of KMC were historical assets that used to be protected by community groups mainly for different so-

cial and cultural activities and grain processing. So, in the past, besides historical and socio-cultural importance, the public open space would be used for crop drying and processing as they used to produce crops on their farmland in and around KMC. Hence, historically the open spaces in the core urban were in diverse uses and also indicates the household's economy of that time. But with time being the communities have been changing the uses of open space for recreational and physical health-enhancing activities as farming activities almost disappeared now. The changes have also been brought about by the social transformation by which party palaces are now replaced the traditional practice of *Bhoj* at public open spaces [27].

#### 4.2 Narratives from the Migrants Community

**Box 2: Narratives from fringe urban area (Survaymukhi Garden, Pepsi Planning)**

*I am living at this community for 20 years with my youngest son and daughter-in-law. My older son and his family are abroad. When I remember them and want to call them abroad, I use to come this place and connected with them. I feel more comfortable talking with them from this place than from home (65 years old man- an informal conversational interviewee).*

*I visit regularly at this place during the morning and in the evening. I have some close friends who also visit this place regularly and we share our feelings, our experience, life stories and get time pass. This place is not only for time pass of our ages but makes us refreshed hearing other life stories (65 years old man-regular visitor, an informal conversational interviewee).*

*I am now 92 years old and still able to walk. I used to come at this place twice a day (in the morning and in the evening). I walk, rest and get time pass here for two hours a day. This place has been an important for me to get engaged with community people and sharing my feelings (92 years old Key Informant).*

If we look at the uses of public open spaces in the fringe urban areas of KMC, it is more dynamic and very different than that of core areas (indigenous). The public open spaces in the urban fringe area are being used as social and physical well-being for the society. As the residents of the fringe areas are dominantly migrants, they pose more heterogeneity in culture and social diversity. People get gathered and share their personal feelings, ideas, and get connected among the community people in the shared spaces for social interactions, networking, and recreation. They develop social networking through regular interaction, communication, and the sharing of ideas. Social networking is an important phenomenon through interactions, yoga, sports activities that community people are engaging in the public open spaces here (Box:2). The open space has become valued for developing social capital enabling community institutions such as community

groups and developing different forms of social networking in society [15].

**Box 3: Narratives from urban fringe area (Suryamukhi Garden, Pepsi Planning)**

*I have been getting physical exercise at this place for 3 years. I personally have found many changes in my physical health since I joined with this team. I was suggested to get regular physical exercises by a Doctor as I had pre-diabetes three years ago. Since I started to get physical exercise with this group, I have managed the diabetes and getting better my physical health. Nowadays, if I missed a day to get exercise, whole day becomes uncomfortable as I feel something missing on that day (48 years lady, local visitors).*

*On the one hand, the regular group exercise (Evergreen Health Club) has been a very good step for improving our health; on the other hand, it has been a good platform for us in social networking. We are now 20 members in this group and get registered in the municipality forming a committee to act as a social organization. We are planning to contribute to manage street children and single women living in the society (52 years Chairperson of Evergreen Health Club, Pepsi Planning).*

*One day a member of our committee got ill at home and immediately got admitted at Hospital with the immediate response by our community organization. We have a group in a social network media by which she got immediate treatment which is a social benefit of being a member in this organization (52 years Chairperson of Evergreen Health Club, Pepsi Planning).*

*I am a regular player at this Badminton court. I am a diabetes patient. Doctor has referred me metformin twice a day and suggested regular exercise. I started playing badminton for 6 months. I have now felt more comfortable and diabetes is under control. Therefore, this open space has been habitual for me in healing the diabetes (A 55 years man-visitor).*

*I am a medical professional and use to get a regular walk at this place. I also suggest my patients for regular walk daily which helps healing different diseases resulting through busy urban life and hectic daily schedule (40 years medical professional, an informal conversational interviewee).*

Moreover, the open spaces are being mostly used in different forms of physical exercise which has great implications for healing the different diseases for younger to old age people. People walk and run, get different physical exercises, and get yoga and meditation at a dedicated public open space in the urban area. Physical exercise is more common in fringe urban areas in KMC as the spaces are comparatively well managed by community groups with greenery and provisions of sports infrastructures over there. People get engaged in different physical exercises such as walk, yoga, group exercises, playing badminton, etc. They have been improving their health on the one hand and developing social capital through social networking and the formation of community groups and organizations in society. Evergreen Health Club is one

of the examples of community organizations activated during regular yoga exercise which is now actively getting engaged in different social activities in the society (Box:3). So, open spaces in fringe urban areas in KMC have more dynamics on social and physical aspects of urban life enabling their well-being.

## 5. Findings

There is a strong argument that a city needs sufficient open spaces not only for regulating spatial urban form but for developing social capital to enabling well-being for the urban communities. The need for public open spaces as a place for well-being has been discussed taking the cases of two different urban social settings. Indigenous *Newar* communities from the core area and migrants' communities from the fringe area of KMC were taken as study cases to compare among the different social settings. Being a piloting study, the present finding is based on the study of two different sites of core and fringe areas of KMC. Looking at the uses of public open spaces in different urban contexts in KMC, the result varies according to the community composition, social dynamics, and cultural practices amongst the communities.

Public open spaces in the cities are heart as they serve urban communities not only for urban beautification but for enhancing their well-being. Developing social capital through community organizations, networking, interactions, communications, and organizing communities' social and cultural events as well as physical health enhancement through sport, run, walk, yoga, meditations, etc. are the forms of well-being. Result reveals that there were 152 visitors encountered at the selected open space from core urban open space and 290 visitors at the selected open space in the fringe urban area. The data reveals that different urban settings have different uses of open spaces in Kathmandu<sup>①</sup> (Table:1). Observation is that visitors in the core area have been using public open spaces for cultural and religious activities (36.2%), organizing community meetings (21.1%), walk/run/yoga and exercises (18.4%), recreational and entertainment (14.5%) and sports (9.9%). Similarly, people from the fringe area visit open space for organizing community meetings (6.9%), walk, run and yoga (41.4%) recreation and entertainment (31%), sports (20.7%). It reveals that there are different

patterns of visiting for the use of open spaces in different urban settings in the city. However, all their visits are associated with enhancing social capital and improving their health for well-being purposes.

**Table 1.** Activities observed at the urban open space

S.No.	Used for	Core Area	Percent	Fringe Area	Percent
1	Cultural and religious activities	55	36.2	-	-
2	Organizing community events (meetings)	32	21.1	20	6.9
3	Walk/run/Yoga and exercises	28	18.4	120	41.4
4	Recreation/entertainment	22	14.5	90	31.0
5	Sport related (Badminton)	15	9.9	60	20.7
	<b>Total</b>	<b>152</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>290</b>	<b>100</b>

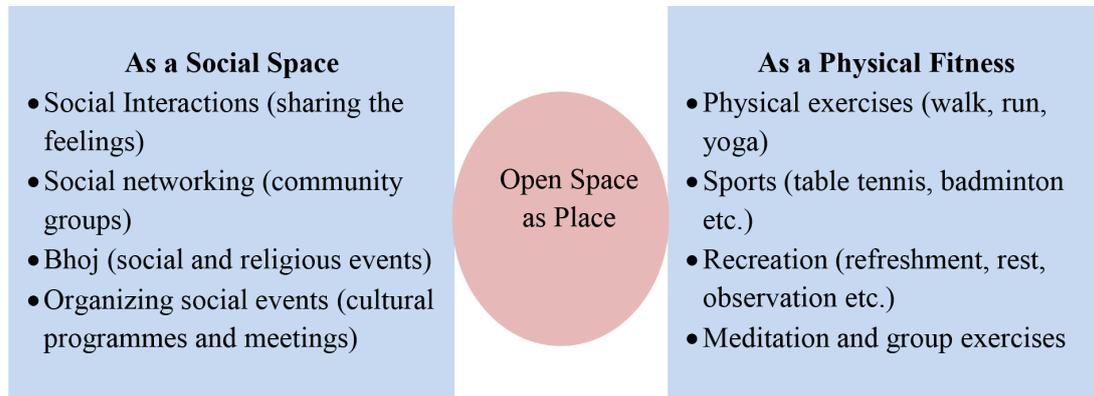
Source: Field Observation, 2020

Empirical evidence also suggests that open spaces and parks in urban areas serve to improve the physical, social and psychological health of the city as they enhance not only the city's beauty but provide spaces for social interaction and recreation and contribute to the livability of a city, and serve critical purposes of evacuation during disasters<sup>[32-33]</sup>. The central focus of discussion in this paper is on exploring the importance of public open spaces as a place for well-being such as enabling social capital and enhancing physical health. But the author also intends to discuss the importance of public open spaces for disaster risk management in another paper.

People in historic core urban settings in KMC have been using open spaces for cultural and religious purposes as they have allocated *Baha* with *Newari* Architecture. Historically the *Bahas* were used religious and cultural activities along with drying and processing the grains as much area in Kathmandu was dominantly used in farming. However, with rapidly growing urbanization and the disappearing of the cultivable land with increasing land value and land fragmentation, urban expansion rapidly took place, and uses of such *Bahas* are getting changed. Nowadays, cultivation within the KMC is almost extinct and the built-up area dominated the land use/cover<sup>[26-27]</sup>. These *Bahas* are now been mostly used in cultural activities in different social and cultural activities of the communities functioning to develop well-being developing social capital.

As the different stories of urban fringe areas of KMC

① The data presents the number of visitors per day encountered at the selected sites during the field observation. Three times a day (morning, afternoon and evening) was visited to observe the details of visitors' activities and averaged to get the total number of three consecutive days visitors' data. The number of visitors may vary according to the seasons and the cultural and ritual seasons of the indigenous *Newar* community because the frequency of cultural and religious activities is more in some specific seasons of *Newar* communities.



**Figure 2.** Urban open space as place for social and physical well-being

explained above were quite different than that of the core urban area, the uses of open space are more dynamics there. This dynamism may appear due to the social composition as the urban fringe areas of KMC is more heterogenous having mixed up of different cultures of migrants' population. They were mostly migrated from other districts and have different ethnicities and cultures <sup>[25]</sup>. Migrants communities usually organize social and cultural activities in the party venues/palaces. But they have been using the open spaces for more social as community networking and as improving their physical health through different physical exercises. However, the traditional community uses open spaces more on organizing cultural events and *Bhoj* and less on social interaction and physical exercises as these spaces are less likely to appropriate for physical exercises (Table:1). Public open space has been observed as a place for well-being contributing as a social space and physical fitness as shown in the following figure (Figure 2);

## 6. Conclusions

Urban open space in the study of socio-spatial perspectives is getting its pace in the recent academic discourse worldwide. But still, it is less studied in the Geographic discipline in Nepal to analyze how space as a place is functioning in enabling social and community well-being. The public open spaces in Kathmandu are decreasing with the increasing expansion of the built-up area. The historically preserved *Bahas* is a successful open space practice at the community level in the core urban areas. In the past, the *Bahas* in the core urban areas were in extensive use for religious and cultural purposes and for processing the grains as the households had been involved in agricultural-related works. The uses of open spaces now have changed over time with social transformation, and there are also different patterns in the uses of open spaces

in the core and fringe urban areas representing different social and cultural settings. In the core urban context with the indigenous *Newar* communities have been using open spaces more culturally which is quite different in the fringe urban contexts. In the fringe urban context, community people have been using open spaces for developing social capital and enhancing physical health well-being. This means urban open spaces are functioning as a place that is more linked to the social dynamics of society. It has been found that the fringe urban context, being a heterogeneous social composition is more dynamics for using open spaces than that of the core urban settings. They have been using open space for developing social capital and enhancing health well-being.

Hence, it is concluded that open spaces are needed in the urban context not only for maintaining greenery and recreational place in the built environment but it has more important for accumulating social capital and enhancing physical health in both urban settings. The case studied urban open spaces as a place for well-being in both settings have highly determined by social and cultural contexts. Accumulation of social capital and well-being is associated with social and cultural contexts and vary according to social settings. The more heterogeneous the society, the more dynamics it performs, and the less heterogeneous the society, the less likely the dynamism it poses in enabling social and physical well-being.

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