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Table of Content

From Access to Ability: Bridging Digital Skills Gaps and AI Literacy in Higher Education A Comparative Study of Australia and Nepal

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Abstract

The digital transformation of higher education has shifted the discourse on equity from issues of access toward questions of ability, competence, and critical engagement with technologies. This comparative study examines digital skill disparities and the emerging domain of artificial intelligence (AI) literacy among university students and teachers in Australia and Nepal. Employing a mixed-methods approach that integrates surveys, focus group discussions, and classroom observations, the study investigates how inquiry-based learning (IBL) and formative assessment function as pedagogical strategies for addressing these divides. Findings indicate that while Australian students and teachers at the university benefit from advanced infrastructures, licensed software ecosystems, and institutional policies guiding AI adoption, Nepalese students face foundational barriers related to affordability, infrastructural gaps, and limited professional development opportunities for teachers. The results reveal that teacher's digital competence is a pivotal determinant of student outcomes across both contexts. Theoretically grounded in sociocultural and constructivist traditions, the study underscores that digital divides must be reconceptualized. The research contributes to global discussions on digital inclusion by offering comparative insights from developed and developing educational systems. Policy recommendations include expanding teacher professional development, embedding AI literacy within curricula, and ensuring affordable access to licensed digital platforms. The study concludes by arguing that bridging the transition from access to ability is central for preparing higher education graduates to thrive in an AI-driven future.

Keywords: digital divide, AI literacy, higher education, Australia, Nepal, teacher competence, inquiry-based learning

From Access to Ability:
Bridging Digital Skills Gaps and AI Literacy in Higher Education
A Comparative Study of Australia and Nepal

Introduction

The landscape of higher education has been transformed by the rapid proliferation of digital technologies. Once limited to basic computing and connectivity, contemporary universities now function as complex digital ecosystems where students are expected not only to access but also to critically and creatively use advanced digital and artificial intelligence (AI) tools. This shift demands a reframing of the "digital divide" discourse. Traditionally, the divide was understood primarily in terms of physical access to devices and infrastructure. Today, however, the more pressing challenge lies in disparities of ability and competency, particularly the differences in how learners and educators engage with, adapt to, and make sense of digital technologies (Van Dijk, 2005).

The introduction of AI into higher education has magnified these dis parities in both of the countries. Generative AI systems such as ChatGPT, image generators, and AI-powered data tools present new opportunities for learning, but also new ethical, pedagogical, and cultural challenges. UNESCO (2021) stresses that AI literacy is becoming an indispensable skill for graduates, encompassing not only the technical ability to use AI tools but also the critical capacity to interrogate algorithmic bias, data ethics, and social consequences of automation.

In developed nations such as Australia, universities typically operate with advanced infrastructures, licensed software environments, and institutional strategies for integrating AI into teaching and learning (TEQSA, 2024). In contrast, developing contexts such as Nepal present starkly different realities: infrastructural fragility, widespread reliance on pirated software, and limited access to global digital platforms due to currency restrictions. Yet, these contexts are equally pressured to prepare graduates for a globalized digital economy.

This study undertakes a comparative investigation of digital skill gaps and AI literacy between higher education institutions in Australia and Nepal. It asks:

- How do university students in Australia and Nepal differ in terms of digital skills and AI literacy?
- What role do teachers' digital competence and pedagogical strategies play in bridging these gaps?
- What policy and curricular implications emerge from comparing developed and developing contexts?

By addressing these questions, the study aims to contribute both empirically and theoretically to the global conversation on digital inclusion.

Literature Review

Early scholarship conceptualized the digital divide primarily as unequal access to hardware, software, and internet connectivity (Warschauer, 2003). Van Dijk (2005) argued that the divide deepened not only due to access but also because of socio-economic, cultural, and motivational factors shaping use. Eshet-Alkalai (2004) extended this framework by introducing the concept of digital literacy, emphasizing that competencies extend beyond operational skills to include cognitive, critical, and socio-emotional dimensions.

The distinction between having access and being able to use technologies meaningfully remains central. While Australian students largely overcame the access phase, inequities in ability persist in terms of advanced literacies such as data analysis, AI use, and ethical reasoning. For Nepal, the dual burden of limited access and uneven competencies persists, creating multilayered divides. Particularly in the case of Nepal, access to technology and the ability to use it effectively are strongly influenced by the socio-economic background of university students, particularly their family or individual income levels. Students from higher-income families are more likely to have personal digital devices, reliable internet access, and opportunities to develop digital competencies, whereas students with lower income often face limited access and support.

AI literacy is increasingly recognized as an essential component of digital competence. Floridi (2019) emphasized that societies must establish clear ethical and regulatory frameworks to ensure responsible AI adoption. UNESCO (2021) defined AI literacy as encompassing technical, ethical, and socio-cultural dimensions, urging higher education systems to prepare students to critically evaluate and use AI technologies.

Studies in developed nations show that students are quick to adopt AI tools for writing, research, and design (TEQSA, 2023). Yet concerns remain regarding plagiarism, critical thinking erosion, and biases embedded in algorithms. In developing contexts, AI adoption is constrained by infrastructural barriers but equally marked by optimism about its transformative potential.

Teachers are frontline mediators of students' digital experiences. The European Commission's (2017) DigComp 2.1 framework and the ISTE Standards for Students (2016) stress that teacher competence in technology adaptation directly influences student learning outcomes. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory positions educators as mediators of learning environments, where their ability to scaffold digital tools determines students' developmental pathways.

Research indicates that teachers with high digital competence are more likely to employ innovative strategies such as inquiry-based learning (IBL) and formative assessment, thereby enhancing students' critical and creative engagements with technology (Paul & Elder, 2002). Conversely, low teacher competence can entrench divides, particularly in resource-constrained environments (World Bank, 2016).

Pedagogical strategies are crucial in addressing digital divides. Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL) emphasizes active, student-centered engagement with problems, fostering critical thinking and digital exploration (Dillenbourg, 1999). Formative assessment, meanwhile, allows ongoing feedback loops, enabling students to develop competence incrementally (Prensky, 2001). Studies show that when combined with digital tools, these approaches can empower students to navigate complex AI-driven tasks (UNESCO, 2018).

This study is theoretically anchored in three traditions:

1. Diffusion of Innovation (Rogers, 2003): Explains how innovations such as AI spread across contexts and the barriers to adoption.
2. Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1973): Examines how individuals actively select technologies to meet needs, relevant to students' choices of AI tools.
3. Sociocultural and Constructivist Theories (Vygotsky, 1978): Highlight how learning is mediated by social context and teacher facilitation, central for understanding teacher influence.

Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive lens for analyzing digital and AI literacy across diverse educational settings.

Methodology

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. The initial quantitative phase surveyed 100 students and 20 teachers in each country in March 2024, followed by a qualitative phase of focus groups, in-depth teacher interviews, and classroom observations expanded over subsequent six months or the entire semesters. Being faculties of university and colleges, we both researchers had better access to these surveys, interviews, observations and group discussions. Research participants were found eager to share their knowledge and experiences regarding their access to digital space and AI.

In Australia, participants were drawn from universities representing metropolitan and regional settings. In Nepal, participants were primarily selected from Kathmandu University, School of Arts and Pulchowk Engineering Campus, Nepal Commerce Campus and Patan Multiple campus of Tribhuvan University. Convenience and purposive sampling methods were adopted for the purpose of this study. Consent and permission of the participants were obtained before administering the data collection methods and tools.

The survey instrument was aligned with the DigComp 2.1 (European Commission, 2017), ISTE Standards (2016), and UNESCO ICT Competency Framework (2018). Questions assessed five dimensions:

1. Information and data literacy
2. Digital communication and collaboration
3. Content creation

4. Safety and security
5. AI and computational thinking awareness

Qualitative tools included focus group discussion guides (students), semi-structured interview protocols (teachers), and structured classroom observation checklists. All the quantitative and qualitative data generated through these tools were triangulated to grab grounded realities.

Findings and Discussions

Digital Access and Usage Patterns

Access to devices and infrastructure was almost universal among Australian participants. Out of the 60 participants, 97% reported owning a personal laptop, and 92% had reliable broadband or campus Wi-Fi access. Students typically used laptops as their primary academic device, supplemented by smartphones and tablets. Software access was facilitated by institutional subscriptions to platforms such as Microsoft 365, Adobe Creative Cloud, and licensed statistical packages (SPSS, NVivo). Several focus group participants highlighted that access to such resources was embedded into their tuition fees:

"We don't really think about software access as an issue; it's just part of being a student here. Everything is there on the university portal." (Australian student, FGD)

Teachers similarly benefited from institutionally supported learning management systems (LMS) such as Moodle or Blackboard, as well as institutional IT support.

However, in Nepal, in stark contrast, only 38% of Nepalese students reported owning a personal laptop, while 65% relied on smartphones as their main device for academic work. Internet access was unreliable, with 43% reporting frequent outages or slow speeds. Students from provincial campuses often accessed the internet through shared cyber cafés. Pirated software use was widespread, with 72% reporting reliance on cracked versions of Microsoft Office or Adobe products. One student from Kathmandu studying in Tribhuvan University explained:

"We can't afford original software, and even if we could, paying in dollars is a barrier. Everyone shares cracked versions or uses free alternatives like Google Docs." (Nepalese student, FGD)

Classroom observations confirmed infrastructural limitations. In one provincial university, computer labs had outdated hardware and limited maintenance. Teachers admitted to struggling with projecting multimedia content due to unstable electricity supply.

While Australian students faced no significant access barriers, their concern was more about managing the saturation of tools. Nepalese students faced foundational infrastructural barriers, reflecting what Warschauer (2003) termed the "second-level divide," where access issues intersect with socio-economic inequities.

Perceived Digital Competencies

Australian students rated themselves highly across most dimensions of digital competence. In surveys, 68% reported being "confident" or "very confident" in digital content creation, and 74% felt skilled in collaboration using platforms such as Teams, Zoom, or Slack. Observations confirmed students' fluency in integrating multiple digital tools during group projects. Teachers likewise described themselves as comfortable with digital instruction, with 81% reporting that they regularly integrated digital tools into lessons.

However, gaps were observed in critical and ethical aspects. Only 41% of students felt confident in understanding algorithmic bias or data privacy regulations.

On the other hand, Nepalese students expressed competence mainly in basic operational skills like word processing, browsing, and using social media. Only 22% reported confidence in coding or advanced digital creation. Self-assessment on data privacy knowledge was low (19%). Teachers reflected similar limitations: only 27% reported being confident in their ability to integrate new digital tools in learning and teaching.

During interviews, Nepalese teachers often described themselves as "digital immigrants" (Prensky, 2001), struggling to adapt to newer technologies. Australian students and teachers were more advanced but still lacked deep critical literacy. Nepalese participants lagged both technically and critically. These disparities reflect Eshet-Alkalai's (2004) argument that digital literacy is multidimensional, requiring not just technical skill but also cognitive and ethical competence.

AI Literacy and Adoption

AI tools were widely integrated by the research participants into academic practices. In the survey, 71% of Australian students reported using generative AI tools at least once a week, primarily for brainstorming, summarizing readings, or drafting initial essay outlines. Around 60% had experimented with AI-based design tools (e.g., Canva AI, MidJourney) for presentations. Teachers described a growing institutional push to provide AI literacy workshops.

Despite adoption, ethical uncertainties remained. In FGDs, students expressed anxiety over whether AI use constituted plagiarism. One remarked:

"We know AI is here to stay, but we are still guessing where the line is in terms of ethics and academic integrity." (Australian student, FGD)

Teachers reported being caught between encouraging innovation and enforcing academic integrity. One explained:

"I encourage students to use AI critically, but the policy landscape is unclear. Institutions are still drafting guidelines." (Australian teacher, interview)

Nepalese students showed limited but emerging engagement with AI. Only 18% reported having used ChatGPT or similar tools. Usage was mostly curiosity-driven, accessed through mobile apps. Teachers were more skeptical, with 62% believing AI "diminishes student originality." In classrooms, AI was virtually absent. Observations revealed traditional lecture methods with minimal technology.

Teacher Competence and Pedagogical Practices

Teacher competence emerged as a critical driver of student digital and AI literacy. In classrooms where educators modeled digital use by integrating Inquiry-based Learning (IBL) activities, encouraging students to test AI prompts, or conducting digital ethics debates, it was found that the student engagement was higher.

"When my teacher used AI in class, it made me realize it's not about avoiding the tool but using it intelligently." (Australian student, FGD)

Teachers emphasized the importance of professional development. Over 70% reported participating in AI-related workshops offered by their universities in 2023.

Unlike in Australia, Nepalese teachers faced structural and professional barriers. Professional development opportunities were rare, often limited to donor-funded short trainings. Most admitted lacking confidence in AI integration. One teacher confessed:

"I feel like students know more about these tools than I do. Without training, I cannot guide them." (Nepalese teacher, interview)

Teacher competence was the strongest determinant of student digital outcomes. Where teachers were digitally skilled, students engaged critically; where teachers lacked competence, students' skills plateaued. This finding reinforces Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural model that argues that teachers mediate learning and create zones of proximal development.

The findings reveal that the digital divide has shifted decisively from questions of access to those of ability and competence. While Australian and Nepalese contexts differ in infrastructural realities, both confront challenges in fostering AI literacy and equipping educators with the skills to integrate digital pedagogy.

The results support Van Dijk's (2005) argument that the divide has deepened beyond mere physical access. Australian students, despite universal access, struggle with critical engagement and ethical understanding of AI. Nepalese students, meanwhile, face both infrastructural barriers and skill gaps. Warschauer's (2003) "second-level digital divide" is evident: the challenge is not only owning devices but knowing how to use them meaningfully.

Perhaps the most striking finding is the role of teacher competence. In both contexts, teachers emerged as gatekeepers of digital and AI adoption. Australian teachers with high digital competence fostered innovative, inquiry-driven classrooms. Nepalese teachers lacking competence often reverted to traditional methods, limiting student opportunities.

This reinforces Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory. Vygotsky had argued that learning is mediated by teachers, whose scaffolding creates zones of proximal development. Teachers' digital competence determines whether students engage with AI as critical thinkers or passive users.

Rogers' (2003) diffusion of innovation theory also applies. Teachers acted as early adopters or laggards, shaping the rate of AI adoption in classrooms. In Australia, innovators spread practices rapidly; in Nepal, low exposure slowed adoption.

The findings illustrate that AI is not just another digital tool but a transformative shift creating new divides. In Australia, widespread adoption coexists with ethical dilemmas. Students often rely on AI uncritically, echoing Floridi's (2019) warning about the "moral gap." In Nepal, infrastructural barriers and teacher skepticism restrict engagement altogether.

The cross-cultural comparison highlights that digital equity must be contextualized. In Australia, the challenge is not about access but about developing critical, ethical, and responsible AI literacy. Policy responses must focus on embedding AI ethics, academic integrity, and digital citizenship in curricula.

In Nepal, foundational barriers remain urgent. Investment in infrastructure, affordable access to licensed platforms, and professional development for teachers are prerequisites before AI literacy can be meaningfully embedded. Without addressing these, students will be more vulnerable in the context of the global digital economy.

Conclusions

This comparative study demonstrates that bridging digital divides in higher education now requires shifting focus from access to ability. AI literacy has emerged as a critical competency, reshaping the meaning of digital inclusion. Across both contexts, teacher competence was the strongest determinant of student outcomes, underscoring the urgent need for professional development.

By integrating inquiry-based learning and formative assessment into AI-rich pedagogies, institutions can cultivate critically literate graduates capable of navigating a digitalized and AI-driven world. For developing nations such as Nepal, policies must prioritize foundational infrastructure while simultaneously embedding AI literacy in higher education. For developed systems such as Australia, the challenge lies in ensuring critical, ethical engagement rather than mere technical adoption.

Ultimately, the path forward requires educational systems to embrace the transition from access to ability by equipping and employing not only digitally connected but also digitally competent and AI-literate graduates.

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Exploring the Causes of forced Eviction of squatters in Thapathali Settlement, Kathmandu

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Abstract

Squatter settlements in Kathmandu, particularly Thapathali encounter repeated forced evictions promoted by state-led neoliberal urban restructuring, donor-funded beautification of cities and real state bubble. These evictions take place within a circle of political contradictions, where parties in power and opposition alternately promote and protest demolition attempts aligned with shifting political priorities. The paper argues that eviction comes as a structural consequence of market led governing system that gets connected with patronage politics and adverse urban planning. The research uses a qualitative ethnographic approach held between February and September 2024, using purposive and snowball sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Findings of this paper reveal that while neoliberal redevelopment programs justify eviction under the logic of beautification of city, they simultaneously reproduce tenure insecurity and socio-spatial marginalization. Squatters survive threats engaging in negotiation with political parties, developing grassroots mobilization and every day resistance highlighting the link between survival strategies and urban change in Kathmandu.

Key Words; Forced eviction, Kathmandu, neoliberal urbanism, political patronage, squatters

Exploring the Causes of forced Eviction of squatters in Thapathali Settlement, Kathmandu

Introduction

The abrupt, involuntary removal of individuals and groups from their settlements without proper legal and political alternative is considered eviction. Such phenomenon has been underlying feature in contemporary urban transformations. While prevalent across the globe, it is particularly found in global south cities where rapid urbanization crisscrosses with lack of tenure security, adaptation of market-dominated development programs and political instability. The term global south refers to the concept of 'other' which indicates 'formerly and currently colonized world'(Ai-Harden, 2022). Unplanned urbanization has been the defining factor of global south where forced eviction takes place instead of ensuring security of tenure. Security of tenure means the rights of all individuals and groups of protection by the state against forced evictions (Payne & Durand-Lasserve, 2012). Security of tenure shows an agreement of groups and individuals with the state about land occupation and residential property guided by certain administrative and legal framework (UN-Habitat, 2006). Sociologically, forced eviction refers not only to consequence of failure of housing policies but also a strategy to restructure urban space, create the environment to accumulate capital for the capitalists and focus on rebranding cities as the epicenters of global economy (Weinstein, 2021). It acts out as both a tool of spatial control and a catalyst for resistance together where displaced assert their voices through grassroots mobilization.

At the heart of many eviction incidents lies the phenomenon of squatting—capturing the public and private land without the consent of owner. While states frequently hail squatting as an illegal occupation of land, practice enjoyed politically and socially that find roots in survival strategies and claim-making. In much of the literature on squatting, it is described as a form of quiet encroachment (Bayat, 2013) or a space of grassroots collective mobilization where deprived groups ascertain demands for recognition (Martínez, 2020). In this light, eviction is not only neutral or fully legal question; it is a deliberately a political action that frames who belongs in the city and under what conditions.

In South Asia, forced eviction links with huge scale development projects, infrastructure centric programs and environmental restoration programs. Governments often use the tool of modernization or beautification of city to justify the demolition of informal settlements, while overlooking the structural disruption and cultural loss it produces. These processes are further pushed by deep rooted adversities based on caste, class, gender and ethnicity that shape the vulnerable homes prone to eviction and the legitimacy issues of the poor.

Kathmandu as a urban center of Nepal witnesses steady growth of squatter populations due to rural urban migration, political movement and lack of affordable housing. The first squatter settlement noticeably emerged during 1970s as the poor people from rural areas migrated to Kathmandu valley in search of livelihood opportunities who chose the squatter settlements such as Teku, Shankhamul and Thapathali especially at riverbanks where they could find enough water and job opportunities in informal market due to proximity of such places with core cities (Lumanti, 2010). Settlements such as Teku and Thapathali are not temporary settlements but a intricate social-spatial structure constructed by long-term inhabitants, recently migrated and excluded caste groups. Moreover, migration from rural to urban area that followed 1990 popular movement gave rise to the numbers of squatters in Kathmandu with the rise from 17 to 60 settlements between 1990 to 2010 (Lumanti, 2010). Over time, inhabitants have developed multiple strategies - political engagements, partnership with NGOs, economic networks in the process of negotiating state to avoid eviction. Yet, these strategies are unequally distributed; some are privileged from politics of patronage while some other remain largely vulnerable. Eviction threats in Thapathali are also determined by contradiction between political parties who tend to use squatters as a tool of political gain and conflict between municipal and federal governments.

To address the question of eviction, evolving corpus of literature concentrates housing policies gaps, political patronage and informal urbanism in Nepal (Tanaka, 2009; Shrestha, 2010). These few research are conducted with ethnographically grounded accounts of causes of eviction such as location and accessibility, development schemes, legal categories of squatters and opportunistic political manipulation. However, this research explores sociopolitical, spatial and economic forces that give rise to eviction of squatter settlements linking local dynamics of squatters with global process of neoliberal urbanism and state sponsored reordering of cities through ethnographic accounts of Thapathali squatter settlement. The squatters of Thapathali faced evictions two times in the past. During the premiership of Baburam Bhattarai in 2012 AD, eviction was imposed upon them which they bravely resisted. Later, in 2022 AD, Municipal police devastated huts in settlements yet they resettled after series of confrontation for two weeks. This paper explores the nuanced causes of state led evictions from the perspective of the squatters who successfully defended settlements demonstrating collective strength.

From Survival to Politics: A Critical Review of Squatting in Global and Nepali Perspectives

Research on squatting surpasses geographical locations and fixed analytical underpinnings that revel it as a multidimensional phenomenon including the issues such as subsistence, activism and urban practices. Early classical research by Turner (1976) defined squatting as self-help housing empowering for achieving autonomy and progress, which was mirrored the studies of Kathmandu Valley (Tanaka, 1999). However, Turner's romanticization of autonomy was heavily criticized for neglecting the questions of structural adversities, political manipulation, and gendered issues (Tanaka, 2009).

Pruijt's (2013) classifications of squatting such as deprivation-based, political, entrepreneurial, conservational, and alternative squatting—provides micro analytical observation. According to Pruijt, deprivation based squatters are poor who have no alternatives than squatting the land. They have severe housing needs. Political squatters are activists who engage in protest against the housing policies and they are anti-capitalist and anti-systemic. Entrepreneurial squatters tend to sue empty space to establish workshops, cafes and artist spaces avoiding the rent. Moreover, conservational squatters go against gentrification, urban development and intended eviction. Finally, squatters for alternative housing aim to create space for alternative and counter-cultural living arrangement. Despite of its development in Europe, it offers substantial guidelines into Nepali contexts where squatting signals both deprivation and political patronage (Shrestha, 2010). Gallaghar (2016) also states that the nature of Nepali squatters is political and deprivation based. On one hand, The squatting takes place because people are displaced from the rural area and attempts to resettle in Kathmandu valley's squatter settlement and on the other, many squatters are politically driven and affiliated to political parties who stand for them (Acharya, 2024).

Martínez(2020) locates squatting within neoliberal structuring of the urban spaces, attesting with the issue of austerity and housing commodification that gave rise to grass roots movements influencing policy if broader coalitions between the groups become possible. This applies with the scenery of Nepal after 1990 movement where alliances between cooperatives and NGOs jointed collaborated with the identity agendas of squatters in Kathmandu (Tanaka, 2009). Nevertheless, Martínez's emphasis on Europe underrates the sustained threat of eviction under semi-legal regimes like Kathmandu's.

Slater's (2009) "revanchist city" thesis describes how the squatting is considered criminalized part of neoliberal urban restricting reinforcing spatial control by the state echoed in Nepal's episodic evictions such as the 2012 Thapathali clearance. Yet, Slater's analysis misses tactical and strategic negotiations with political parties, as studied by Tanaka (2009).

Cattaneo and Martínez (2014) emphasized squatting as self-management by cooperative's networks and symbolic production. While implicating this in Nepali cooperatives, this view tends to overlooking possibility of co-option and internal diversity and contradiction among squatters, particularly along caste and gender lines.

Empirical studies like García-Lamarca (2017) demonstrates squatting's potential opportunities to achieve policy gains via broad alliance building and favorable political momentum. Similar sort of gains are achieved by squatters in Kathmandu through the support of NGOs .

Bayat's (2013) concept of "quiet encroachment" further clarifies understanding by focusing on squatters' tactical, silenced resistance to avoid or delay direct state confrontation, pinpointing squatting's tactical and collaborative move rather than overt protest.

In way of conclusion, squatting carries the spirit of a diversified, transactional social movement determined by by survival necessity, favorable political momentum and neoliberal urban restricting. While global squatting analyses share substantial typologies, political economy linking intersectional approaches on caste, gender, and local power relations remains unanswered prevalent in South Asia and beyond.

Conceptualizing Eviction as Political and structural

Eviction is concerned not merely with legal phenomenon but socio-political process deeply entrenched in capitalist urban restructuring. Early scholarship, such as Marcuse (1985), differentiates displacement with compensation from dispossession without redress, often tied to urban renewal. Relied on his analysis, Slater (2009) explains eviction as a neoliberal reaction that reinforces the control of urban landscape under the guise of moral order. Yet, beyond these macro perspectives, Desmond's (2017) ethnography explores that eviction is cyclical process in U.S. cities that gives rise to fragmentation of solidarity networks and persists poverty, promoting socioeconomic instability.

In the Global South, eviction often crisscrosses with legal confusion and spectacular urban politics. Fernandes (2007) demonstrates how beautification campaigns in Brazil and India gives legitimacy to mass clearances of informal communities. Roy (2009) makes this clear via his concept about urban informality machine in which legal confusion promotes selective negotiation which has been clearly reflected in Nepali case where state tolerates some squatters community while attempts to evict others(Shrestha, 2010).

Across contexts, market oriented, state-led and hybrid political logics of eviction prevails. Market-oriented eviction is driven by the logics of real state price bubble and branding of neoliberal city as observed in the context of US contexts (Marcuse, 1985) to Mumbai and Delhi (Appadurai, 2001; Dupont, 2011), considering informal spaces as hindrance to capital investment while state led eviction is justified for infrastructural development and progress (Huchzermeyer, 2011). Hybrid political eviction surfaces as the politics of patronage which is reflected in Nepal that ruling factions frequently pose threats of eviction to sideline oppositional forces (Shrestha, 2010).

Eviction also explodes resistance potential to build up stronger urban belonging. Pruijt (2013) argues that defense is maintained by squatters amid the eviction pressure. Grassroots movements in the Global South often organize alternative strategies; Shack/Slum Dwellers International, for example, uses participatory mapping and mobilize savings groups to give legitimacy to urban claims by negotiating with authorities in Mumbai case (Appadurai, 2001; Holston, 2021). In Nepal, Tanaka (2009) emphasizes on the transformations of violent protest to more subtler negotiation intensified by NGOs and parties in opposition. Although such negotiation by the help from political parties contributed to delay eviction, this may invite the patronage politics rather than fostering the autonomy of squatters, Protest of squatters also conveys the symbolic meaning. For instance, housing movements in Latin America exposes to media coverage and street demonstrations for their recognition (Fernandes, 2007), mirroring the case of Nepal in which squatters claim that they have contributed to enhance urban labor markets.

In way of conclusion, eviction must be comprehended as a complex political and structural process determined by market priority, paradoxical state role and patronage politics. It aims to simultaneously displace squatter populations because of their claims to right to city that may challenge dominant urban orderings. The game between legality, power, and protest reveals eviction as a contested space where urban belonging and exclusion are concurrently negotiated.

Neoliberal Urban Restructuring and the Logic of Forced Eviction

Neoliberal urban restructuring relates with forced eviction by prioritizing market-oriented strategies over social rights, considering urban landscape as a site for capital accumulation rather than collective shelter (Harvey, 2005). Cities are taken as competitive commodities in the global economy that treats land as investment initiative rather than the social relations it prevails. Since the late 20th century, this theoretical transformation has resurfaced how eviction is initiated and contested. Displacement is considered as the process of modernization, ecological balance and maintaining of public order, yet its significant driver force is the reshaping urban space to serve capital flows (Marcuse, 1985; Slater, 2009).

In the Global North, neoliberalism has defined eviction as a way of geographical restructuring. Slater (2009) and Marcuse (1985) demonstrate how gentrification policies victimize excluded groups under the guise of restoration of order and social balance to attract reinvestment. Desmond's (2016) ethnographic work in the U.S. shows eviction as both a cause and outcome of poverty, promoting a feedback loop in which displacement intensifies exclusion which in turn accepts further demolition of squatter settlement.

In the Global South, these dynamics are driven by cities' structural status in global capital flows. Fernandes (2007) and Roy (2009) connect eviction to global agendas, where mega-projects, infrastructure advancement, and real estate bubble lead to clearance of squatter settlement. Squatter communities albeit central site to supply labor market force are taken as illegally captured places. In Delhi, Dupont (2011) pinpoints how attempts of making success of 2010 Commonwealth Games threw away thousands of poor for beautification of cities that privileged real estate speculators.

A unique feature in the South is the utilization of legal ambiguity to selectively execute eviction. Roy's (2009) concept of urban informality highlights how states love to criminalize squatters depending heavily on political engagement. Martínez (2019) highlights that such selective eviction tendency of the state promotes clintelist networks that rewards some for their unprecedented loyalty and punishes others for their dissent. In Nepal, Shrestha (2010) and Tanaka (2009) reveal that squatters engaged with powerful political parties secure the settlement while unaffiliated with the parties lose the protection of their settlement and encounter the massive eviction.

In Nepal, neoliberal restructuring is shaped by post-conflict political transformations and intent for global economic link. 10 years old conflict displaced the people from the rural to cities that gave rise to real state bubble with expansion of urban space in Kathmandu pushing poor inhabitants from core settlements to peripheral areas with less services. Increasing population in Kathmandu valley pushed poor to the squatter settlement that resulted into forceful demolition of such squatters in disguise of river beautification linked with ecological restoration with political momentum, leaving settlements with weak advocacy. Here, market-driven land bubble aligned with national political strategies, showing that eviction is framed by both global neoliberal intent and local political balance.

Resistance takes multiple contexts. In the North, anti-gentrification movements utilize legal challenges, promotes advocacy, and build up alliances with policymakers. In the South, protests takes the shape as insurgent citizenship (Appadurai, 2001; Holston, 2008), claiming rights through grassroots collectivity participatory mapping, and solidarity networks like Shack/Slum Dwellers International in the case of Mumbai slum and joint landless federations in Nepal. In Nepal, squatters' mobilization have transformed from conflictual demonstrations to peaceful negotiations through NGOs, cooperatives and political parties (Tanaka, 2009), mirroring co-option with to a neoliberalized political milieu.

Neoliberalism does not reject the role of the state in eviction- it reinforces this. States works as both promoters and executers producing amicable regulations for investment while using coercive power to remove urban poor (Harvey, 2005). Urban renewal and squatter free projects frequently vows relocation but service inadequate or inaccessible housing (Huchzermeyer, 2011). In Nepal, relocation projects often lose its momentum to live up the needs of survival for squatters, positioning new cycle of informal status, fracturing communities and dismantling bargaining capacity.

Eviction is also rooted in international development discussion. Multilateral agencies often fund projects aligned with displacement intent exaggerating them as the projects to alleviate poverty and ecological advancement. Yet, as Huchzermeyer (2011) reveals in African contexts, such initiatives tend to focus on building up the confidence of investors and overlooking genuine participation of squatters. In Nepal, donor-supported river restoration programs have caused immense displacement to riverside squatters without adequate alternatives of habitation.

Under neoliberalism, eviction is not only clears the squatters from land rather it is an attempt to reconceptualize who holds legitimacy to claim city rights. This privileges those holding momentum with market dynamics and political power while rendering others disposable. Effective reactions needs to link grassroots mobilization with structural reforms that pose challenges to political, economic dominance must link grassroots mobilization to structural reforms that challenge the dominant political economy making displacement routine.

Methods and Materials

This research used a qualitative ethnographic approach to explore the lived experiences and perceptions, political engagement, spatial realities of squatters in Thapathali settlements in Kathmandu. I used ethnography to allow me for in-depth observation of how squatters perceive eviction, how they negotiate and contest in everyday life. Moreover, I aimed to draw how squatters understand political and historical process that lead to the incident of eviction. I had prolonged engagement in the field between February and September 2024 during which I participated in the community's celebrations and plight, their interactions with the state and non-state forces, I selected 11 participants based on time of staying, such as both old residents and recent migrants, local squatters community leaders, political parties affiliate, youth actors and women activists within the settlement. 3 political activists, 3 community leaders including one women activist, 2 youth actors, 2 old residents (living there over two decades) and 1 new resident (living there over a decade). The interview process became complex since the participants had more probability of sharing false data to prove their longer stay in settlement. I found the participants suspicious with the new people. They were afraid of being negatively reported to state officials. Therefore, initially, it took me some weeks to convince them that the researcher was purely engaged in knowledge production through deep engagement with community people. With the consent of anonymity, the participants made them ready to interact with the researcher.

Purposive sampling was utilized to maintain proper representation across gender, duration of stay in settlement, caste groups and politically engaged and non-engaged groups. I used snowball sampling to identify key informants engaged in negotiation, resistance and debates of relocation.

I used semi-structured interviews, focus group discussion and participant observation supported by field notes. Interviews were planned to explore narratives of the eviction from both individual and collective level, livelihood techniques, political campaigns, their engagement with parties and negotiation, their experiences about development projects like Bagmati civilization projects, gendered experiences of eviction threats, relocation programs and resistance and grassroots mobilization. I used participant observation to document everyday practices, confrontation histories and experiences with state authorities and collective mobilization experiences. I also held informal interactions with municipal officers, local political actors and NGOs members to grasp how the eviction plan is initiated from institutional level.

I followed inductive thematic coding process in which interview information and field notes were coded manually to identify the most repeated themes such as urban development pressure, rejection of relocation plan, political clintelism and political contradiction and location and accessibility. These themes were further described to link micro-level experiences to macro-level processes of neoliberal urban restructuring and political patronage.

Results and Discussion

Location and Accessibility

The main causes of eviction of squatters from Thapathali are location and accessibility from the squatters' perspective. The settlement is situated in the heart of Kathmandu, only a short distance from Nepal's political and administrative core. This centrality provides squatters access to employments, basic services, and networks, yet, it also makes the area highly visible to government agencies, media, and real estate actors. As Shrestha (2013) states , prime central locations in Kathmandu attract intense redevelopment interest, and informal settlements in such spaces are often viewed as incompatible with the city's beautification and global competitiveness agendas.

The core city areas like Thapathali proliferates the land values giving rise to the attention of contractors. They might mount pressure on government authorities to evict the squatter settlement. Urban land in Kathmandu Valley has experienced sea change with built –up areas growing more than 400 percent between the time of 1989 and 2016 particularly along transportation corridors and riverbanks. This growth has promoted high transactions of land, and targeting high value plots near the central areas for eviction.. Squatters capture the public land with no fixed tenure security. Thus, their settled areas are more vulnerable and once evicted squatters find no secured places for habitation. A participant, Rita Basnet shared her plight,

> We don't have land back in the village. Many families who live here are wealthy: some of them even have their own land and house. In difficult times, they can get back to their houses, but we are homeless. We have nowhere to go once we are evicted. The same happened in 2012 eviction. When we were evicted and our all belongings were thrown out of the houses, we had to stay at street for few days.

My observations do not necessarily prove that core locations are only vulnerable for evictions. Urban fringes are also in target. However, they escape the direct surveillance from the government and private builders. Thus, Acharya (2025) argues that peripheral squatters are frequently less contact with government surveillance that delays their elimination but they are also in fear of eviction drives. In context of Thapathali, its accessibility and proximity to main development areas make them more vulnerable to eviction drives.

The absence of tenure security and policy limbo further reveals the eviction possibility in the core areas. As Upreti (2010) highlights, squatters in Kathmandu live in a policy limbo-identified as residents in necessity but deprived of citizenship. When the development of infrastructure is concerned, they are legally insecure. The soaring land prices also produce pressure from neighboring non-squatters, who consider eviction as the tool of increasing their price values.

These issues combined pressurizes the government authorities to execute eviction drives as happened in 2012 and 2022. Their settlements were bulldozed with the strong police barricade without proper relocation plan. Being Retrospect to the past events, a participant shared what she responded at that moment,

> Are you trying to remove us from here? We do not want to live in the terror of dozer. We no longer bear the tag of illegal residents. How long to tolerate the accusations of being a criminal? If the Kathmandu Metropolis comes up with an alternative, we are ready to leave this place," said Pramila Shrestha, one among the landless squatters residing long in this settlement.

In practice, eviction in Thapathali is not only the outcome of legal or ecological concerns but also the consequence of intersecting forces: lack of security of tenure, political manipulation, soaring land prices and urban image making. Centrality of location serves both the reason of squatting and being evicted.

Urban Planning

The development pressure is a key driver of evictions. Big private entrepreneurs and the authorities are lured by the high profits possible in the area once the squatters are evicted. In the case of Nepal, the pressure stems from large-scale projects such as the Bagmati Civilization initiative, funded by international agencies. This project positions the government against the interests of squatters, as launching mega-development schemes often risks the livelihoods of the poor. People are compelled to lose their homes in pursuit of projects expected to generate significant economic gains and enhance the country's symbolic cultural values. Despite debates around gentrification, proponents argue that economic growth from such projects surpasses the local inhabitants' claims of residency, ultimately leading to eviction.

Eviction pressures intensify when landowners push public authorities to reclaim occupied land for alternative, high-gain uses. Urban land for commercial purposes is often supported by administrative and political authorities. The eviction practices in Bangkok, for example, demonstrate that post-eviction land use typically includes road construction, commercial complexes, public buildings, and residential development (Angel and Boonyabancha, 1988). In the context of Nepal, this study examines the government's potential strategies for the use of public land after eviction, excluding private land occupations.

Furthermore, in Kathmandu, demolition attempts are often justified by the need to utilize squatted land for the beautification of the metropolis through the Green Bagmati Project. The High-Powered Committee for Integrated Development of the Bagmati Civilization has launched programs to clean and green the Bagmati area, aiming to revive its environmental and cultural significance. Initiatives include monitoring water quality, organizing large-scale cleaning campaigns, and constructing parks and infrastructure. These efforts receive financial and technical backing from the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank. According to a project official, the presence of squatters along the Bagmati River corridor discouraged ADB investment, thereby increasing government pressure to remove so-called illegal occupations.

However, squatters strongly contest this framing. As one resident explained,

> We have never been against the city's development. When they said the park would be built, we kept that land aside. We left the 20-meter space from the river as the rules say, even if our houses are small and crowded. We are not stopping Kathmandu from becoming beautiful; we are part of it. But every time they come with eviction orders, they act as if we are the ones blocking the progress.

A major justification for eviction is the claim that squatters contribute to environmental pollution by dumping waste into the river, creating a public health hazard and obstructing the gentrification of the metropolis. Squatters rule out this blame that they are culprits. As one woman remarked:

> They call us the polluters of Bagmati, but we never throw sacks or garbage into the river. It is people from outside, early in the morning, who dump waste here. Many times, we caught them, took photos, and handed them to the police. Still, the government uses this excuse to say we must go, as if we are the reason the river is dirty.

For squatters, the Bagmati project promotes eviction pressures for urban development. While such development programs make promises to provide public benefits, they absolutely overlook the displacement of the poor. As another long-term resident noted:

> We feel that Bagmati Plan is good on documentation but it is about losing our shelter. The powerful people and agencies aspire to see fancy roads, cleaned surrounding, water parks but they neglect where we go after being evicted. We have been living here for decades . We love our settlements. We are contributing the economy of the city in our own way. Yet they only target managed city planning and land value soaring but overlook the lives built here since decades.

These narratives reveal delinking between development goals and the lived realities of the squatters. While squatter perceptions demonstrate their willingness to actively participate and cooperate with the city beautification aims, continuous portrayal of the squatters as ecological threats reinforces their displacement in disguise of urban development planning.

The Status of the Squatters and Rejection of Relocation Program

The eviction of squatters in Kathmandu is deeply rooted with their status in terms of both social and legal status. In the face of legality, squatting is taken as the unauthorized occupation of the land without owner's consent rendering such settlement unlawful and prone to eviction (Payne, 2002). This perceived illegality becomes a cause for eviction policies from the state. Within the Thapathali settlements, squatters are often classified into three groups: Swabasi, Dalits, and Sukumbasis. Swabasis are long-term residents in the settlement who have inhabited there over decades possessing no piece of land and house elsewhere around the country. Dalits are the most marginalized caste group experiencing multiple vulnerabilities. Sukumbasis are more recent people migrated to city searching for employment opportunities in the capital city.

The core agenda of the squatters has been legal recognition of the space they occupy, with their principal demand of Lal Purja (land certificates). As one participant from Thapathali living there since the late 1970s, explained:

> We have been here over more than forty years. The soil here understand us and vice-versa. Giving up this land is uprooting the foundation of our own. This place is not just land; it is our life, our neighbors, our children's playground, and the temple we visit daily. Every brick and bamboo pole we put together with our own hands has a story. When the government talks about eviction, they are not just taking away a plot of land — they are tearing apart decades of our existence.

This attachment echoes in what anthropologists define have defined" place attachment" (Manzo & Devine-Wright, 2020) and aligns with research findings that Kathmandu squatters build up the bond with spatiality and social interaction that relocation of them sounds emotionally and culturally disruptive. This paper discloses that such attachments are often linked with spiritual geographies where inhabitants tie up their everyday cultural practices with specific land.

For many, securing fixed tenure in their current settlement. Nonetheless, they have shared that they require a minimum of plot of four anna to make a comfortable house in within Kathmandu Valley so that they could find the job opportunities such as workers in construction sites, street vendor and domestic labor. They rejected relocation plans during the premiership of Baburam Bhattarai in 2012 to settle them in a single housing complex stating inadequacy of living space and scarcity of job opportunities. One female leader in the settlement stated:

> What is the use of a roof if you have no bread? We cannot survive in a place where there is no work. In Nagarjun, there may be houses, but no construction work for our men and no homes to clean for our women. Here, we earn and survive together. If they push us to the edge of the city, they are pushing us to hunger. Even the cost of bus fare would swallow the little we earn each day.

This sentiment reflects Tanaka's (2009) finding that relocation plan failing to avail livelihood chances often provide economic tension and social disaffiliation. In alignment with this, this research revealed that evicted households lost income opportunities on one side and social isolation on the other rising to drop out rates of children increased dependence on moneylenders.

The economic aspect of squatters is vulnerable. Most male members of the households engage in risky construction sites while many women involve in insecure. Relocation to peripheral areas would compel them losing such jobs that compound their vulnerability. A younger male resident who have recently migrated from Sarlahi explained:

> I work as a mason's helper. Every day I get a call from contractors for small jobs around the city. If I am moved far away, no one will hire me because it will take hours to reach the site. Even if the rent is free there, my children will be hungry here. Work is our lifeline, and without it, no house will feel like home.

Peripheral relocation not only severs to deter livelihoods but also complicates social exclusion (Durand-Lasserve & Royston, 2002). This also indicates that access to informal labor markets serves as substantial factor in relocation schemes.

Finally, Government-sponsored relocated residence failed to receive squatters' nod that provoked the state to opt for eviction. This tension mirrors broader political contest over urban landscape where state sponsored development agendas collide with the ground reality.

Paradoxical role of parties and contradiction between the Federal and Local Government

This study reveals that paradoxical role of political parties and contradiction between the federal and local government also promotes eviction of squatters. Kathmandu metropolitan city often tends to evict them under the logics of urban development and beautification of city. The local authorities often threaten the squatters for city development for building up infrastructure. When the squatters reach out the local authorities to settle community actions, they are asked to leave the settlement because they told that road is being constructed and gardening near the riverbank is planned. The city authorities blame them that they have spoilt the city beautification which requires to be restored. The municipal police frequently attempt to bulldoze the settlement as was the case in 2022 AD where municipal police demolished the houses which ended after the fearless resistance from the squatters.

Moreover, the contradiction between the parties such as the ruling parties support eviction whereas opposition parties reject this- complicates the issues. This shifting political line of the parties is shaped by the politics of clientelism in Nepal. Political clientelism implies that political parties mobilize squatters during elections to fulfill their vested interests but they often overlook the structural limitations. They completely forget the issues of squatters once political motto has been achieved (Shrestha, 2013). Thus, parties utilize the squatters as a vote bank. Moreover, squatters are mobilized during the moments of public demonstrations and also rebellion as reflected in the Maoists movement. During a decade armed conflict (1996-2006 AD) and subsequent peace process, squatters supported them by providing lodging, food, and shelter to the underground cadres. They were almost disappointed with the then major parties who used squatters for the election. Thus, they were directly and indirectly engaged in Maoist movement so that they could receive land ownership. A dozen of youths joined the people liberation army and served the parties living in cantonments before their cooption in Nepal army (Upreti, 2012). However, they lost the access to the high level of parties committees once the party makes its step into government. During fieldwork in Thapathali Basti, a squatter woman, Rasmita (pseudonym), shared a story that captured this sense of betrayal:

> We fed them, gave them our beds, cooked for them, and even risked being arrested to hide them from the police. They said, 'Once we win, the land will be yours.' But after the election, they disappeared. Not even a single leader comes to ask how we are doing now. The only thing that visits us is the flood, and when it comes, we are left alone to deal with it.

Eviction becomes more complicated due to contradiction of federal and local government. While the Kathmandu Metropolitan City under the leadership of mayor Balen Shah supported by municipal police takes eviction as inevitable action to implement giant development projects like Bagmati civilization project, federal level political actors both in government and opposition often take the side of resistance and attempts to capture the momentum for election. But they acted as the real defenders of urban. In practice, a political hide-and-seek is evidently apparent in which parties push them out in the morning and pull back in at afternoon that complicates the tenure security of the squatters. One such incident was narrated by Hari (pseudonym), a local leader in Thapathali, recollects a day when bulldozers arrived early morning in 2022 to evict the settlements:

> They came at dawn, bringing bulldozers and police with shields. We were already preparing to grab whatever belongings we could. But just before they started, leaders from the opposition came

The opportunistic nature of political parties is visible during election time when leaders approach the squatter settlement promising safe relocation schemes or granting Lal Purja. These promises are easily broken once the elections are over and the parties step into authority, they begin creating pressure for eviction. At a mass meeting in Thapathali Basti in 2023, attended by former Speaker of the House and the senior Maoist leaders currently in opposition Agni Sapkota declared that his party is committed to put emphasis on land ownership agenda of squatters. Months later, they shared that no progress was seen. Deepak (pseudonym), the chairperson of a local squatter committee made this pattern clear:

> Every election, it's the same. They come with their flags and loudspeakers, promise us the lal purja, and take our votes. For weeks, they walk around our settlement as if we are their people. But after their victory in election, they never visit us again until the next election comes. The speech of leaders is full of promises of granting us land ownership certificate but we have never achieved it till now.

Such cycles of mobilization and neglect have deepened distrust in political institution reinforcing the perception that squatters are treated as mere vote banks rather than citizens with legitimate rights.

In way of conclusion, the paradoxical role of political parties engaged in opportunistic contradiction and the conflict of federal and local governments give rise to a situation in which squatters are simultaneously marginalized. Bulldozers of state and sweet speeches of political parties, persistent demolition threats and fake promises of their security, federal and local government contradiction produces chronic deprivation.

Conclusion

The eviction of squatters in Thapathali mirrors combining factors such as location and accessibility, neoliberal urban planning, politics of patronage reflected in the paradoxical role of government and political parties and rejection of relocation programs. Centrality of location offers squatters substantial access to earn livelihoods. However, their settlements in the prime location collide with urban development agendas supported by state and private sectors. In Thapathali settlement, they are destined to face displacement without favorable relocation alternatives as they are framed ecological threats and hindrance to modernization thrusts. Soon after they rejected the relocation plans of Baburam Bhattarai led government in 2012 in a building of Nagarjun municipality, a peripheral area in city fearing the loss of their job opportunities and the networks they have built up, the eviction drive came up as repeated challenge to their lives. Based on rejecting relocation sites, Kathmandu Metropolitan city later in 2022 bulldozed their settlement yet rebuilt, supported by civil society and their own resistance. Moreover, the political parties' vested interests to collect the vote in elections and abandon them once in power generate cycle of eviction attempts. The interplay of these factors produces insecurity revealing that evictions do not only reflect legal enforcement but also political contest over the urban space. Sustainable solutions for the safe living of squatters require tenure security, livelihood sensitive planning and governance tendency that emphasizes lived realities of squatters while conducting development projects.

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Perception towards Homestay Development: A Case of Ghale Gaun in Lamjung, Nepal

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Abstract

This study examined host families' perception of homestay tourism in Gale Gaun, a beautiful Gurung-majority village in Lamjung District, Nepal. As an alternative to mass tourism, homestays aim to foster poverty alleviation and sustainable development by integrating tourists into the local cultural fabric. Employing a mixed-methods approach including household surveys, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) the research assessed the socio-economic and cultural perceptions of host families.

The study revealed that Ghale Gaun has emerged as a successful homestay destination with immense opportunities of socio-cultural and economic benefits such as promotion, restoration and preservation of traditional culture and opening up opportunity for local people to interact with other cultures all over the world without leaving their homes had been the major perceived impacts. Nevertheless, the study identified emerging challenges, including issues such as decline in participation in festivals, fairs and labour–sharing (parma), friction between tourists and residents and the emerging social inequality between the hosts and non-hosts families in the study area existed. Despite these pressures on traditional way of life, the study concluded that he positive impacts of homestay development outweigh the losses, supporting its role in grassroots community empowerment.

Keywords: Homestay, perception, host family, guest, dalit

Introduction

In response to the growing concerns surrounding mass tourism, homestay tourism has emerged as a form of alternative tourism that plays a significant role in bringing sustainable development (Kwaramba et al., 2012). Although the concept of homestay carries varying connotations across different regions of the world, it is broadly understood as a type of accommodation in which tourists have the opportunity to reside with a host family, immersing themselves in the family's daily routines and way of life (Hussain, 2008). This form of tourism involves not only the sharing of living space but also meaningful engagement with host families, allowing visitors to authentically experience local lifestyles (Kulshrestha & Kulshrestha, 2019).

In the context of Nepal, the government formalized this concept through the 'Homestay Working Procedure 2010 (2067 B.S.)', which defined homestay as an arrangement in which a host provides food, accommodation, and related services to guests, either individually or through community-based operations. These homestays are predominantly situated in rural areas and are actively owned, managed, and operated by local communities, offering tourists an opportunity to participate in traditional activities and cultural performances (Jamal et al., 2011).

Guided by the principles of sustainable development and eco-tourism, the Government of Nepal (GoN) introduced homestay tourism through the enactment of the Homestay Working Procedure, 2010 (MoCTCA, 2010). Community homestays in Nepal are largely concentrated in attractive rural villages where traditional ways of life remain intact, offering a welcome retreat from the demands of urban living (HTN, 2012).

More than any other industries, tourism holds exceptional potential to drive positive local development across cultural, social, and economic dimensions (Thompson, 2012). Within this broader context, homestay tourism has proven particularly impactful, fostering meaningful interactions between hosts and guests while simultaneously strengthening community empowerment (KC & Thapa, 2024). For many homestay operators, venturing into this form of tourism has translated into tangible financial gains, enabling them to generate higher incomes and more effectively meet their households' everyday needs (Pradhan, 2024). At its core, homestay tourism is oriented toward improving the livelihoods of local communities through the economic opportunities it creates (Bhuiyan et al., 2012). However, despite its promise as a vehicle for economic advancement, the rapid expansion of homestay tourism in Nepal has not been without scrutiny. Observers have increasingly raised questions about its broader social acceptability and whether it truly functions as an inclusive and sustainable tool for economic development in the communities it serves.

In the context of alternative tourism like homestay, the host family engages in interaction with tourist so long the interaction is significant at cultural, economic and environmental level. The host families engage in offering services both material (local dishes, arts, crafts etc.) and non-material (hospitality, recreation etc.) in reciprocity with the cash income along with enhancement of social (positive change such as cultural revival, health and education awareness etc.), psychological (satisfaction) and environmental (eco-tourism) (Ap, 1992; Thapa, 2005). Thus, the Social Exchange Theory (SET) described by Ap (1992), in particular had been adopted as the theoretical foundation for analysis of hosts' perceptions (acceptance and rejection) to homestay development. The perception is influenced by their understanding of impacts in the community. It is postulated that residents support tourism in order to fulfill their economic, social, psychological (Ap, 1992) and environmental needs of the host community. An innovative strategy for increasing tourism in Nepal is through homestays, which provide a unique opportunity to engage with, share, and understand the diverse rural lifestyles, traditions, and cultures. Homestay tourism has the potential to contribute to poverty alleviation. This form of tourism, considered one of the primary economic catalysts, supports the empowerment of local communities by preserving their rich cultural heritage (Regmi et al., 2023)

While mass tourism has been widely criticized for its flaws to benefit local community and causing environmental and cultural degradation (Budhathoki, 2014), the study of homestay tourism in this dimension of culture has not yet been explored, that too in the Nepalese context. There are contradictory opinions that focus on negative impacts of tourism that has to pay social costs and thus some people reject the notion that tourism could be an agent of development.

In this context, homestay tourism and its socio-cultural impacts could be another problem of statement that forms the basis for this study. Predominantly, the culturally unique ethnic village, Ghale Gaun is no exception to socio-cultural and economic impacts of homestay. Thus, the study aimed to assess the homestay host families' perception towards homestay development.

Research Methodology

The study adopted mixed methods research design. The fieldwork was conducted in the month of May, 2025. The household questionnaire survey and in-depth interviews were used to collect data. FGD and KII were also conducted to supplement the quantitative data with qualitative data. In addition, the secondary sources like research reports, journal articles, and village profile data published by various authentic institutions were also included

Multistage sampling was conducted. Firstly, Ghale Gaun was selected based on non-probability purposive sampling and then through random systematic sampling 10 hosts- family households were sampled. Descriptive analysis involved the use of Statistical Package for Social Science and MS-Excel software to measure host families' perception on socio- cultural and economic impacts of homestay. The 5-point Likert-scale were used to rate the respondents' opinions.

Results and Discussion

Ghale Gaun village holds a total of 130 households (HHs), out of which 88 are Gurung HHs, 41 are Dalit HHs and 1 Chhetri HH. The total of fourty six host families had operated the homestays, out of which only two homestays were operated by dalit households.

Table 1

Caste/Ethnic Composition of Ghale Gaun, Kwholasotthar Rural Municipality-3,

S.N.	Caste/Ethnic Group	Number of HHs	Percentage
1	Gurung (Ghale)	88	67.70
2	Dalits	41	31.53
3	Chhetri	1	0.769
Total		130	100

**Note: The data was obtained from Ghale Gaun Village Profile, 2025 (2082 B.S.) & field survey, 2025*

The perception and attitudes of the hosts' families (households) towards homestay development in Ghale Gaun was based on impacts assessment. The study revealed that homestay impacts was not limited to economic benefits only but was also found to render social and cultural benefits. Unlike, mass tourism, homestay is community managed and offers cultural interaction with the guests that has resulted in impacts on social and cultural spheres. These findings coincide with the Social Exchange Theory proposed by Ap (1992), which suggests that residents view tourism positively when the perceived socio-cultural and economic benefits outweigh the costs.

Table 2

Perception of Socio-Cultural and Economic Impacts of Homestay on Hosts Families

Statements	Mean	Median	Std. Deviation
Homestay has strengthened inter-household cooperation and community participation during cultural programs and festivals in Ghale Gaun.	1.36	1.00	0.49
Homestay has encouraged younger generations to learn and continue local Gurung customs, songs, and hospitality practices.	1.58	2.00	0.510
Homestay has reduced seasonal migration of youth in the village.	2.88	3.00	0.86
Homestay has increased market opportunities for locally produced food items, handicrafts, and agricultural products.	1.62	2.00	0.500
Homestay has generated supplementary household income and reduced dependence on farming alone.	1.66	2.00	0.54
Homestay has weakened labour-sharing practices (*parma*) among community members	2.20	2.00	0.816
There is growing social inequality between host families and non-host families.	2.10	2.00	0.994
Tourists' behavior has created disturbance in the village.	3.12	3.00	0.79

Note: Field Survey, 2025.

From the result in table 2, homestay operating households were found to be highly positive regarding the role of homestay in strengthening inter-household cooperation and community participation during cultural programs and festivals (Mean = 1.36, Median = 1.00, Std. Dev. = 0.49). This suggests that most respondents strongly agreed that homestay has not remained limited to individual households only, but has contributed to wider collective action in the village. In Ghale Gaun, hospitality activities often require joint efforts in cultural performances, food preparation, guest reception, and village-level organization. Such cooperation helps reinforce social harmony and local solidarity. This interpretation is consistent with the resident perception approach of tourism impacts discussed by Ap (1992), who argues that local support for tourism increases when communities perceive meaningful social benefits.

Similarly, respondents generally agreed that homestay has encouraged younger generations to learn and continue local Gurung customs, songs, and hospitality practices (Mean = 1.58, Median = 2.00, Std. Dev. = 0.51). This implies a favorable perception that tourism is helping cultural knowledge move from older generations to the youth. In many rural tourism destinations, culture becomes more visible and valued when it is performed, explained, and practiced before visitors. In the context of Ghale Gaun, local dances, food traditions, dress, and ways of welcoming guests may motivate younger people to maintain their heritage with greater pride. This kind of result is close to the findings of Thapaliya et al. (2012), who observed that homestay tourism could support cultural revival in rural Nepal. It also reflects the idea that homestay tourism is not merely an economic activity, but a medium of cultural continuity and identity preservation.

The result shows that respondents were mostly neutral about whether homestay has reduced seasonal migration of youth in the village (Mean = 2.88, Median = 3.00, Std. Dev. = 0.86). This means homestay may have created some local opportunities, but not enough to clearly stop youth from migrating. So, homestay operation does not seem to have a significant linear impact on reducing migration. It can be interpreted that the cultural tradition of joining the foreign army (locally called, ‘Lahure banney”) is still deep-rooted in Ghalegaun village.

The result also shows strong agreement that homestay has increased market opportunities for locally produced food items, handicrafts, and agricultural products (Mean = 1.62, Median = 2.00, Std. Dev. = 0.50). This means that respondents largely viewed homestay as beneficial for the local economy beyond room accommodation alone. In Ghale Gaun, tourists often consume local vegetables, milk products, traditional meals, and handmade goods, which creates market linkages for both homestay and non-homestay households. Therefore, the economic benefits of homestay may spread across the wider village economy. This pattern supports the argument made by Budhathoki (2014) in the case of Ghale Gaun that homestay tourism contributes to livelihood improvement. It is also in line with Pradhan (2024) and Regmi et al. (2023), who emphasize the pro-poor and livelihood-supporting potential of community-based homestays.

In addition, the respondents appeared positive toward the statement that homestay has generated supplementary household income and reduced dependence on farming alone (Mean = 1.66, Median = 2.00, Std. Dev. = 0.54). This indicates that homestay is perceived as an important additional source of earning for local households. In rural settings like Ghale Gaun, where agriculture may be seasonal and limited in return, tourism income can diversify livelihood strategies and increase household resilience. Income from lodging, food services, guiding, transport support, and local product sales can help families manage daily expenses, education costs, and other needs. This interpretation also aligns with Kwaramba et al. (2012), who connect tourism development with poverty reduction and improved emotional and economic confidence at the local level.

However, a more significant concern was identified regarding the traditional labor-sharing system, parma. The findings indicate that homestay tourism has notably weakened these practices (Mean = 2.20, Median = 2.00, SD = 0.816). As host families dedicate more time to the logistics of tourism, such as food preparation, guest reception, and cleaning; they have less flexibility to participate in the reciprocal agricultural labor exchange that once defined the village economy. This shift suggests that the transition to a service-based economy is gradually replacing communal interdependence with a more individualistic, cash-based labor model.

Similarly, the study revealed a perception of growing social inequality between host and non-host families (Mean = 2.10, Median = 2.00, SD = 0.994). While the homestay program aims for community-wide benefits, the direct financial gains and access to global networks are primarily concentrated among the registered host households. Although non-host families benefit indirectly by supplying local produce and crafts, the disparity in "prestige" and steady income has created a visible social gap. This emerging inequality poses a challenge to the egalitarian social structure traditionally found in Gurung villages. This finding closely coincides with Hussin (2008), who found that although villagers recognized the economic benefits of homestay, those benefits remained limited because the majority of local people were still not involved in the programme.

The result indicates a moderate perception regarding the statement that tourists' behavior has created disturbance in Ghale Gaun village (Mean = 3.12, Median = 3.00, Std. Dev. = 0.79). The cherished Nepali saying "Atithi Devo Bhava" meaning 'Guests are Gods' encapsulates the deeply rooted hospitality tradition that transcends caste and ethnic boundaries across Nepal. In Ghale Gaun too, respectful reception of visitors remains the dominant community norm. However, though very rare, but one-third of the respondents reported that incidents of unethical demand by the guests, excessive noise and intoxicated guests had at times caused disruption; not only to the host households themselves but also to neighboring families. While these occurrences remain peripheral rather than systemic, they nonetheless point to the existence of a degree of friction between tourists and local residents in Ghale Gaun. This tension, although mild, finds theoretical grounding in Doxey's Irridex Model (1975), which proposes that resident irritation towards tourists tends to surface when tourist behavior comes into conflict with prevailing local values, customs, and social norms.

Conclusion

The study concludes that homestay tourism in Ghale Gaun has generated notable socio-cultural and economic benefits, including cultural preservation, intergenerational knowledge transmission, income diversification, and expanded market opportunities for local products. However, emerging challenges such as weakening of traditional parma practices, growing inequality between host and non-host families, and occasional tourist-related disturbances warrant careful attention. Despite these concerns, the perceived benefits considerably outweigh the costs, affirming homestay tourism's role as a viable grassroots development strategy and community empowerment tool for rural Nepali communities like Ghale Gaun.

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Shamanism: An Alternative Healing Practice in Nepal

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Abstract

Shamanism is recognized as the oldest healing tradition in the world, with its roots in the Siberian region. In South Asia, particularly in Nepal and India, it is believed that the supreme gods, such as Shiva and Rama, embody the shamanic role. A notable feature common to shamans across Nepal, including the area I researched, is their distinctive shamanistic tools and the mantras they recite to connect with tutelary spirits and to manage or subdue spirits, ghosts, and witches. The essential equipment typically includes a drum (dhyãngro), a distinctive costume and headgear, along with belts of bells that are either worn around the waist or slung over the shoulders in a bandolier manner. There are mainly two categories of shamans in Nepal: Kul-dhami and Dhami-jhankri. Despite some differences between them, both integrate chanting, vigorous shaking of leaf bundles (syauli), and their closeness to the household area where ancestral deities reside, which accelerates the possession process. Primarily, the shaman conducts their rituals independently, with the emphasis of their healing practices being on individuals and families, rather than the community as a whole. This article draws on data obtained from field research carried out in 2021 in Dang Pyuthan district of Nepal and employs an ethnographic research design. It also uses the related secondary sources of data published by various authors, research institutions, and researchers. It aims is to investigate the shamanistic practices of Kusunda and other ethnic groups of western Nepal, particularly highlighting the healing methods of shamans within the Kusunda tribe. Additionally, it delves into the tools used in these healing practices and the processes involved.

Keywords: Healing Practices, Drum, Dhami-Jhakri, Earth-ceremony, treatment.

Introduction

The word Shaman originates from the Evenk people of Siberian Tungus, referring to someone who experiences excitement, movement, and elevation. This term describes a prominent feature of the Shaman's trance dance and is used to denote various ritual practitioners within their culture (Shirokogoroff, 1935). However, Bailey believes that the term Shaman ultimately stems from the Vedic word Sram, which means to heat oneself or engage in austerity, along with sramana, which translates to monk or ascetic (cited from Peters 1998). This concept made its journey from India across central Asia to China (sha-men) and Japan (sha mon), eventually reaching Siberia through the spread of Tantric Buddhism (Mironov & Shirokogoroff, 1924). In Nepal, Shamans, referred to as "Dhamis" or "Jhankris," are highly respected spiritual figures and healers in their communities. They have extensive knowledge of the unseen dimensions and serve as connectors between the material and spiritual realms (Pande, 2024). Typically, both Dhami and Jhankri act as conduits for divine communication, whereas the Dangri functions as the spiritual assistant and facilitator between humans and the Dhami-Jhakri (Lama and Lama, 2023).

Although the term's roots lie in Asia, it has been adopted by researchers to describe similar occurrences across various regions, including among hunters as well as among modern peasants, nomadic groups, and urban populations (Peters, 1998). Firth (1959) uses the term Shaman to refer to individuals who enter controlled trances and engage with spirits in socially recognized manners (masters of spirits), thereby differentiating between Shamans and spirit mediums. Some scholars, like Hulkrantz (1978), have advocated for an ethnographically focused interpretation of Shamanism, yet anthropologists, religious historians, and psychologists have applied the term more broadly, incorporating diverse practices from around the globe into a distinct area of study. Shamanism persists in contemporary research, unlike concepts such as animism, animatism, totemism, ancestor worship, and other classifications within the anthropology of religion, which Geertz (1973) deemed uninspired. Various general explanatory frameworks for Shamanism have been proposed within the field of anthropology.

Some reconstruct Shamanism as a fundamental religious phenomenon linked with hunter-gatherer societies; an old anthropological saying even suggests that the earliest profession was that of a Shaman. As stated by Maddox (1923), the Shaman was a prominent figure in primitive cultures, and Landy (1974) examined the innovative social role of the Shaman as a cultural mediator in contexts of acculturation. It represents a unique type of religious specialist. Generally, Shamans work part-time in this role, and any income generated is typically supplementary. In contrast, priests are usually full-time professionals, and this role tends to occur mainly in complex and hierarchical societies. Although definitions vary from different perspectives, it is commonly accepted that the Shaman enters a trance state for the benefit of their community. Levi-Strauss (1963) noted that the Shaman's function within the community is often likened to that of a healer or psychotherapist. Thus, Shamanism refers to a religious vocation recognized by the community that involves achieving altered states of consciousness. As per Krippner (1972), an altered state of consciousness is a mental condition that can be recognized subjectively by an individual (or by an external observer of the individual) as differing from the person's normal, alert waking state. These perspectives draw on historical developments to explain ritual systems in which Shamanism is merely one component among many; ancient Shamanism was historically complemented by other types of ritual practices. It is believed that Shamanism represents humanity's oldest religion, potentially extending back 100,000 years or more; it might have even been practiced by Neanderthals (Furst, 1990). Shamanism is thought to have arisen in connection with the hunting-gathering lifestyle, and numerous researchers assert that the role of the Shaman is depicted in the upper Paleolithic cave paintings of Southern France (Campbell, 1959; Furst, 1974 & Lommel, 1967). Similarly, Moerman (1979) claims that the original profession was that of the Shaman-curer. Like certain evolutionary theories, some perspectives on Shamanism trace its roots not to ancient human history but to the underlying aspects of the human psyche. In these viewpoints, Shamanism is characterized as a state of altered consciousness linked to trance experiences, which are often associated with phenomena like spirit possession, soul journeys, and magical flights, some of which are connected to the use of hallucinogens in various regions and historical contexts (Holmberg, 1989). There are multiple interpretations concerning the mind, psychology, and behaviors of Shamans. A cross-cultural study examining 42 societies where Shamanism is noted, conducted by Peters and Price-Williams (1980), revealed that 18 cultures reported solely spirit possession, 10 only magical flights, 11 both concepts, and 13 did not utilize either explanation for the trance state. The researchers discovered that in 81% of the 42 cultures surveyed, the entranced Shaman maintained a communicative connection with the audience and the patient. Among the Kusunda, the Shaman or Jhankri plays a crucial role in rituals as well as hunting and gathering practices. The Jhankri oversees domestic and jungle tasks, fulfilling the roles of healer during illness, priest in rituals, master planner for hunting and gathering efforts, and guiding other daily activities. This article investigates the shamanistic traditions of western Nepal, with a focus on the healing practices of the Shaman within the Kusunda tribe.

Theory and Method

This article employs Harner's theory for the analysis. The Foundation for Shamanic Studies was established by anthropologist Harner in 1990. He characterized a shaman as an individual of any gender who possesses a unique connection to the spirits or unseen energies of the universe and can utilize this ability to influence those affected by these same spirits. After researching a variety of civilizations, tribes, and shamans, he compiled a list of traits he found common among all shamans, which he referred to as the Core Shamanic Principles. These principles include: 1) the notion that one is called to be a healer rather than seeking this path independently; 2) shamans can operate in both the physical and spiritual realms; 3) their understanding of the otherworld is unified; 4) they might enter a different state of consciousness that permits them to navigate the spirit world; 5) they each possess sacred items; and 6) they all hold a belief that they are responsible to their community (Harner, 1990).

The data for the article is primarily qualitative, collected through field studies, with additional information sourced from secondary materials. Data collection involved participant observation and comprehensive interviews with key individuals. Discussions with Dhami-Jhankri, Janne Maanchhe, and other knowledgeable parties were also carried out to gather information. The field study was carried out in June and July 2021 and followed up in 2024 in Ghorahi and Shikta of Dang district. Additionally, some secondary sources, including the Central Bureau of Statistics (now NSO), various books and journals authored by both national and international scholars, and other websites, were referenced for this article.

Literature Review

The origins of *Jhankri* date back to when Mahadev initiated this creation alongside it. Shamanistic traditions significantly influence a variety of ethnic groups, such as Magar, Gurung, Tharu, and Newar in the central regions of Nepal. Research has primarily focused on the distinct components of *Khasa* culture and its historical events, often neglecting the interconnections between them. Additionally, scholars have paid insufficient attention to the oral histories of the *Khasa Chhetri*, resulting in a skewed interpretation informed by Western viewpoints. This oversight undermines the authenticity of *Khasa* heritage and limits the depth of analysis. As a result, there is a substantial gap in the literature regarding the perspective of the *Khasa Chhetri*, emphasizing the need for in-depth research into their cultural dynamics, including oral traditions, to provide a more accurate portrayal of their history and heritage (Karki and Chetri, 2023).

In a similar vein, a Shaman functions as both a priest and healer among the Kirati Rai in Eastern Nepal. As highlighted by Rai (2020), *Nachhung* is the chief priest and shaman for the Rai community, tasked with performing various cultural rituals. Moreover, *Nachhung* serves as an intermediary for the veneration of natural elements and ancestors. The Rai people regard their ancestors' souls as eternal, relying on *Nachhung* to offer rest to these souls in Chula, which is considered a household deity. *Nachhung* pays tribute to the ancestor spirits during the festivals of *Udhauli* and *Ubhauli*, celebrated biannually. The lineage of *Nachhung* can be linked back to *Paruhang*, who is thought to have created the universe, living beings, and animals. God designated *Nachhung* to supervise all creatures on Earth, positioning him as a link between the divine and creation. Personal desires and ambitions do not correspond with the purpose of *Nachhung's* existence. He has been chosen by *Paruhang* and *Nayiama*, the deity of the earth.

In a distinct *pahiran*, performing with the drums, *dhyanggro*, and other instruments, various deities express the narratives of creation through unique rhythms, languages, and styles, reciting tantra mantras and dancing on the *dhyanggro* floor, using both physical and supernatural powers to cure various ailments. A person who can invoke different gods and goddesses within themselves and receive specific guidance from them is referred to as a *Dhami Jhankri* in our community. The seven brothers are known as *Jhankri*: Sun *Jhankri*, Late *Jhankri*, Ritthe *Jhankri*, Dughe *Jhankri*, Lato *Jhankri*, Van *Jhankri*, and Kathe *Jhankri*. Based on the classification and definition provided, the different religious practitioners outlined in the book "Spirit Possession and Sorcery in Nepal" can be categorized as follows.

1. Peripheral possession includes Limbu women as described by Shirley Kurz Jones; additionally, those individuals who have been 'sorcerized', 'cursed', or have fallen 'ill' due to spirit possession, often the shaman's patient, client, or an observer at a séance.
2. Reincarnate possession refers to the Tibetan reincarnate lama as detailed by Aziz (tulku), and also mentioned by Messerschmidt among the Gurung and by Paul among the Sherpa.
3. Tutelary possession consists of the Limbu phedangma, samba, yeba, yema, and mangba; man the Sunuwar puimbo or ngiami; the Thulung Rai jhakri; as well as the Magar, Chantel, and Nepali jhakri; the Raji and Tharu gurau in southern Nepal.
4. Oracular possession encompasses the Nepali dhāmi from western Nepal; the vajramaster of Tibetan Buddhism; Tibetan oracle mediums; and the Satya Hangma ascetic of the Limbu. (Jones, 1976).

The act of connecting with spirits or ancestors is often termed as summoning the ancestors or calling the spirit (Hawa). If an individual passes away unexpectedly at a young age and their soul cannot find rest in heaven, hell, or any other realm, it must return to the Earth. With their physical form destroyed, their souls remain in the atmosphere, entering into the body of a relative's child, conveying the tale of their life and death, the journey to heaven and hell, and how they transformed into a wind through the voice of a living person. After undergoing specific trials, they are placed into a fire pit, which is prepared with heavy wood. This individual is regarded as the master of the wind. Psychologists and scientists have observed that such individuals may experience multiple personality disorders. They reveal the complete truth about their family ancestors, showcasing the ability to endure great challenges or tests.

A *Dhami Jhankri* should possess the capacity to connect with the elements like sky, fire, water, earth, and other invisible entities, including ghosts, demons, spirits, etc. (Gurushankar, 2017), and embody a form of the divine. The Dhami is guided by Bathpala (who operates under the direction of the Mashta God), who effortlessly recites Vedic hymns for hours on end. The Dhami doesn't need to be a Brahmin; they can belong to any caste. The people revere the god Mashta, regardless of whether it is raining or not. Mashta is recognized as the environmental deity governing the weather in the Karnali region of Nepal. The Masto culture does not create distinct communities or factions, and society remains unified (Khadka, 2023). They prepare alcohol at home, offer it to their deities, and partake in it themselves during shamanic practices (Bista, 2000).

In *Ghara* Mandu or Bana *Mandu*, the *mastos* receive worship. The term Masto, meaning "God" in *Khasa*, is facilitated by the *dhami*. The blood from a goat sacrifice, known as *bhog khani*, is also consumed by the *Mudula* Karki *dhami* of *Kalosilito* Masto in Bhojpur (Karki and Chetri, 2023).

The practice of Dhami Jhankri has been a tradition among various ethnic communities in Nepal since ancient times. Nearly all ethnic groups in Nepal regard the Kul-dhami as a divine figure and engage in specific religious rituals, with *Dhami-jhankri* serving as a community healer. While there are some distinctions between them, both perform chants, vigorously shake bundles of leaves (syauli), and their possession is expedited by their closeness to the household area that holds the ancestral deities. In contrast to the *kul-dhami*, the location where the *dhami-jhãkri* carries out his rituals is not fixed and is mainly influenced by the circumstances at hand. The *kul-dhami*, on the other hand, does not need a drum to channel the deities that possess him. As Winkelman (2011) points out, shamanism is differentiated from other religious practices by various factors, including the methods of selection and training; the techniques used for ritual induction and their features; how altered states of consciousness are labeled; the sources of power and the relationships with spirit beings; the types of magico-religious activities; the healing and divination methods employed; the contexts and motivations behind professional practices; and sociopolitical influences and activities. It is observed across numerous ethnic groups, including Tamang, Gurung, Rai, Magar, Chepang, and Tharu, among others. They serve as the traditional healers of Nepal, addressing a wide range of ailments through allopathic, homeopathic, and Ayurvedic techniques, in addition to mantra tantra rooted in divine powers (Maharjan, 2022).

Results and Discussion

Shamans as a Dhami - Jhankri

Many ethnic communities, such as the Kusunda in Nepal, have adopted Hinduism; however, despite their later separation, these communities share ancestral ties with those who became the protagonists of the significant Sanskrit mythological tales like the Ramayana. The Kusunda are believed to be descendants of Kusha, one of Sita's (Ram's) sons during her time in forest exile. Another example can be observed among the Kham Magars of the Himalayas, who call their shamans *rma* or *armā* (possibly deriving from *rama*); however, Das (1902:984) suggested that it might have an etymological connection to the Tibetan term *rma-bya* (with bya meaning 'bird'), which translates to 'peacock' or 'mottled bird'. In many areas, the local term *rmā* has been replaced by the Nepali word *jhankri* (Watters, 1973).

The first significant attempt to define a *Jhakri* occurred in 1962 when Macdonald stated that it is a being who enters a trance and, during this state, voices communicate through their body, enabling them to diagnose ailments, provide insights about the future, and explain current situations in light of past events. However, his comprehensive exploration of Shamanism within the context of Nepal appeared in a subsequent article published in 1975. In that article, Macdonald describes *jhankris* as magico-religious practitioners who can be tentatively categorized as healers and revisits the earlier definition in relation to specific documents. He further emphasizes that the authentic *jhankri* is one who, after experiencing possession by a foreign spirit outside his normal realm, succeeds in gaining control over it and managing it (Macdonald, 1975).

In a similar vein, Miller (1997) noted that it is important to understand that *Jhankris* are also ordinary individuals, and none of them dedicates their full time to this role based on his observations. In their everyday economic and social lives, they appear much like any other men; almost all of their specific work as *Jhankris* occurs at night. During daylight hours, they engage in farming and herding like their neighbors or work as artisans such as blacksmiths or cobblers. They need to earn a livelihood like everyone else, and the payments they receive for their healing services merely provide a small boost to their primary income. Sharma (2004) researched Shamanism in the western region of Nepal, primarily examining the Raute, Khas, and Kusunda communities. He notes that this area exhibits some remarkable features in its religious practices that set it apart from other parts of the country. The most noticeable difference is that the principal deities are represented through a human oracle known locally as the Dhami. The institution of the Dhami operates under the concept of incarnation. When an elderly Dhami passes away, their role is taken over after some time by another member of the same family or clan whom the deity has chosen to embody (*autinu*). During the period of possession, referred to as paturnu, the Dhami acts as the incarnate God for the deity they represent; they perform various socio-religious duties in the village, acting as a priest, astrologer, healer, mediator in disputes, etc., for their clients. Possession occurs during major worship events (Paith) or whenever the villagers invoke the deity for special guidance (Sharma, 2004).

According to Gyani Maiya (2024), the daŋbəi is the word for shaman in the Kusunda language. They were a well-respected member of the band. Through divination, he would determine where the Kusunda would stay (Bodt and Aaley, 2024). The Kusunda community holds a strong belief in ghosts, witch spirits, devil spirits, and other invisible forces. They regard *Jhankri* with great respect as their spiritual guide and turn to him first when they fall ill. This indicates that they seek treatment from *Jhankri* before consulting a doctor. The Kusunda people believe that a *Jhankri's* knowledge is innate. Prem Bahadur Kusunda categorizes Jhankris into two types: Ban-Jhankri (Who live in the Ban or the Jungle) and Ghar Jhankri (Who live in a Village with other people) . Lila Bahadur Kusunda from Pyuthan and Prem Bahadur Kusunda from Dang both firmly believe in the power of *Jhankri*. Their fathers were also *Jhankris*, and they believe they have inherited certain mantras from them (Personal conversation in June, 2021). Lila Bahadur Kusunda provides cure to individuals when they are unwell. He reports having identified illnesses in various people and describes an incident in which he acted as a *Jhankri* while treating his sister, Gyaani Maiya, and even has a video recording of that event. Lila Bahadur Kusunda emphasizes that when someone is sick, it is essential first to recognize the illnesses they are experiencing and the underlying causes. Sometimes, he explains, the deity enters the *Jhankri* as soon as he views the rice and pulses of the afflicted individual and begins to communicate (Personnel conversation with Lila Bahadur in July, 2021). When a patient inquires about their condition, *Jhankris* discusses the illness. After determining the nature of the ailments, *Jhankris* chant mantras for healing.

When *Jhankri* encounters a ghost, devil, witch, or spirit, the avoidance of these entities occurs at night. This procedure was also documented by Reinhard in 1969 during his field study. To evade a ghost or devil spirit, a small area is consecrated by scattering barley and sesame seeds. *Jhankri* occupies a seat fashioned from Saal tree leaves. He ignites an oil lamp. Strips of cloth are dyed with turmeric powder and affixed to four posts to repel '*lagobhago*. Following this, Jhankri uses a broom made from a Saal leaf to beat the afflicted individual while chanting his mantras to drive away the '*lago*' from the person. Even if the patient does not experience improvement after this, they may sacrifice a cock at a crossroads during the night based on the circumstances. After the offering of blood, *Jhankri* consumes the flesh along with local alcoholic beverages. Throughout this entire process, the recitation of mantras by *Jhankri* is crucial, as he repeats them frequently. A capable *Jhankri* is believed to have the strength to fend off every witch or so-called lago. Lila Bahadur Kusunda also states that if the Jhankri is less powerful than the witch, there exists a risk of the *Jhankri's* demise. In this manner, the Kusunda hold the belief that *Jhankri* provides them protection from all manifestations of malevolent spirits (Personnel conversation with Lila Bahadur in July, 2021).

The Kusunda, Raute, and other ethnic groups are aware of another fearsome variant of Jhankri, referred to as *Banjhakri*. As per Gyani Maya Sen, *Banjhakri* are diminutive (three to five feet tall), exclusively male, and possess large ears. When sitting, their unkempt hair obscures their entire bodies. Extremely long hair is also characteristic of the ancient Tibetan Black Bon Shamans (Ekvall, 1964, cited from Peters, 1997)). The wives of *Banjhakri* practitioners, known as *Banjhakrini*, are fierce, taller than the males, and have long breasts draped over their backs, similar to the female nyalmo yeti, the prominent matriarchal yeti. Additionally, the *Banjhakrini* is frequently called *Nyaimo* (Peters, 1981, 1990). In response to the question, "Were your ancestors, Ban Jhakris?", Prem Bahadur Kusunda says that he received the mantra as a descendant of a Ban *Jhakri* and is still treating them. He has mentioned that he also invokes Ban Jhakri to treat certain diseases, through which he receives guidance and treatment (Personal conversation with Prem Bahadur Kusunda in July, 2021). However, neither Lila Bahadur nor Gyani Maya has ever witnessed a Banjhakri; they have only received tales about it from their ancestors, such as their parents and grandparents.

Tools of Shamanism

Nepalese shamans, including those from the Kusunda community, utilize various tools in their Shamanic practices. According to Lila Bahadur Kusunda and Prem Bahadur Kusunda, shamanism involves a variety of plants, stones, animal parts, musical instruments, and masks. Below is a list of certain tools and instruments employed by Kusunda shamans, which are common in Western Nepal:

1. Drum

The drum is crafted from wood and covered with the skin of deer or wild animals, featuring a handle adorned with a unique iconographic design. The rhythm of the drum resonates with the Earth's heartbeat and is deeply rooted in Shamanic traditions. Shamanic journeys are initiated with the drumbeat as the shaman transitions into the Spirit world and returns empowered. Both the drum and the rattle possess their own inherent power and spirit. Traditionally, handheld tambourine-like drums are used alongside a drumstick, and these drums are typically handmade, producing a pleasing sound. It is believed that all drums carry a spirit power.

2. Trident (*Trisul*)

This divine symbol represents the three realms, the cycles of birth, death, and rebirth, the three aspects of God (Brahma, Vishnu, and Maheshwar), as well as the triad of creation, preservation, and destruction leading to reconstruction. Shamans wield it for protection against malevolent spirits.

3. Thal and Nanglo

The Thal is a plate made of steel or copper for holding rice, serving as the main element of the altar where sacred items are placed. The Nanglo is a bamboo winnowing basket that can be utilized to create an altar or to make offerings in certain contexts.

4. Chammar/ Amliso broom/ Tite Pati

Constructed from a Yak's tail, the Chammar is used to cleanse a person's spiritual body and promote mental clarity. If a Chammar is unavailable, shamans use the Amliso broom for similar cleansing purposes. Referred to as the witch plant, this tool helps transmute negative energies into light and convert regular water into healing water. According to Lila Bahadur Kusunda, Tite Pati serves the same purpose as Amliso, as it is employed for purifying the aatma and extracting evil spirits from the body.

5. Knives (*Khurpa/Khukuri*)

This iron tool symbolizes the three realms, three temporal dimensions, and three emotional states—joyful, melancholic, and sorrowful. It is utilized for healing, grounding, protection, and harmonizing energies. Additionally, it serves cutting purposes.

6. Mala

Shamans also incorporate the mala, typically made from Rudraksha or Ritha. Most malas consist of 108 beads and are used for protection, honoring deities, and harmonizing bodily energy.

7. Flutes

Flutes are played to enhance awareness and alter consciousness. Deeper-toned flutes demand longer fingers, while the 5-holed flute is simpler to play compared to the 6-holed flute, which offers more versatility. Among these instruments, shamans also use Akkheata, Than, Pagari, Patuka, Bhoto, Tapari, Tulasi leaves, Kalash, Dumsiko Kanda, Dhupauro, Ghee, Batti, and Dhunga, among others. Incense engages our souls and senses; the smoke can invoke, purify through ritual, and bless. Alongside drumming, singing, and rattling, the smoke forms a significant component of powerful rituals. Various Shamanic traditions see the use of different types of incense, with the Kusunda people primarily utilizing herbs, wildlife, and other natural elements in their Shamanic practices.

Performance of Shaman on Healing

According to Prem Bahadur Kusunda, Kusunda Shamans seldom utilize hallucinogenic substances or alcohol. The Shaman possesses a double-headed drum that produces a very high vibration, which is positioned in front of his chest and face. The Shaman initiates drumming and ‘opens’ his body to receive the spirits with whom he interacts. He safeguards his body by creating various layers of colors and protective spiritual energies, placing his guiding spirits on both sides, as well as in front and behind him, invoking the spirits from different directions. In doing so, a Shaman links his energy with the entire universe. Upon completing this invocation, the Shaman sings the song of his assisting spirits and recalls and relives the moment when the spirits first connected with him, during his initiation. During this time, the Shaman experiences a physical sensation of cold in his heart area and warmth in the region of the navel, causing his body to tremble (Prem Bahadur Shahi, personal communication, July 17, 2021). With the intentions for the ceremony or ritual already set, the Shaman journeys to that specific level or direction.

In a similar vein, Lila Bahadur Kusunda from Pyuthan states that Shamans are “masters of spirits” who have honed techniques to control them. They can use this power to fight against evil spirits, thus assisting those afflicted by them. “Shamans are universal,” asserts Larry Peters, a well-known scholar and an initiated Shaman within the Tibetan tradition. “While their rituals and methods may vary, their intentions and principles remain consistent,” he continues. This ancient wisdom, transmitted from one Shaman to another, has endured through time and coexists with modern medicine. Occasionally, a Shaman emerges who has been initiated by a Goddess or some other higher entity (Peters, 1981). As explained by Lila Bahadur Kusunda and Prem Bahadur Kusunda, they wear beads worn around their necks and along their sides, crossing their chests like a bandolier. They also sport a string of bells attached to their attire, headgear, and drumsticks. They adorn themselves with headdresses, typically made of peacock feathers, and circular garments (pheta). Their drum is circular with two sides and includes a handle. Before summoning the spirit, the Shaman presents offerings of fire, incense, homemade liquor, as well as various fruits and sweets. The Shaman sings a power song to facilitate the invocation of the spirit. When the spirit or deity manifests through the Shaman's body, they often shake intensely throughout the ceremony; their eyes may be either open or closed, and their language can be fragmented yet comprehensible, either in Nepali or another language, should the spirit communicate in the Shaman's native tongue. The spirits also employ a broom and feathers in a similar fashion to 'disperse' and 'release' energy. They additionally blow on their patients to effect healing. However, they do not consume the physical offerings themselves. Instead, they derive energy from them while leaving the physical offerings untouched. The drumming persists throughout the ceremony, performed either by the possessed Shaman or another Shaman, although it may occasionally pause. The spirit may also drum itself out of the Shaman's body. At times, the Shaman recalls what transpired; at other times, they do not (Baltis & Mayo, 2012).

The Kusunda Shaman utilizes rice (Akshyata) to identify the reasons behind simple illnesses. He places some rice in a thal or tapari and attempts to discern the causes of ailments by making specific sounds. He identifies the sources of sickness and also suggests remedies. Following Jokhana, he selects the appropriate treatment methods for healing. In cases of illnesses related to deities, he performs a sacrifice of either a male goat or a hen. When illness is attributed to witch (Boksi), the shaman employs more intense healing techniques. During mantra chanting and tantric practices, sound vibrations operate subtly at the quantum level; thus, it is essential to maintain correct body posture, meditation, and pronunciation. This practice can also be understood as tantra and mantra therapy. Tantra is recognized as a scientific discipline and is increasingly being implemented in various areas. However, in rural regions, there exists a tradition of chanting mantras in a manner that renders them inaudible. This practice is known as jharfook. The mantra is recited silently, and upon completion, it is released with a blow and a pinch. This practice is termed blowing (Acharya, 2021). A Kusunda shaman possesses a considerable range of mantras that he invokes during ceremonies. He can cast spells for affection as well as those to control the wilderness. For more severe illnesses, he conducts a nighttime ceremony. Lila Bahadur Kusunda mentions that a small designated space is necessary for this purpose. This space must be cleansed, and water is sprinkled around for the sake of purification (Lila Bahadur Kusunda, personal communication, July 28, 2014).

Steps in Healing

For a simple disease such as stomachache, fewer, headache, etc, Kusunda and other Shamans follow Jhar-Phuk methods in which they use cleansing and energize the healing spirit . Offerings are generally quite simple and often involve only akkheta, a piece of cloth, incense, fire, a special liquid, and an animal like cock to be sacrificed. For complex diseases, such as heart problems, continuous stomach, etc they use the following steps:

1. **Earth ceremony:** The healing starts with honoring the mother-earth and the spirits of earth by offering rice and singing earth spirit power songs. It is done for the sick person (patient) for emotional stability.
2. **Water ceremon**y: For cleansing and awaking of patience or a sick person, the Kusuanda Jharki uses flowers and pure water, which is sprinkled over the body of the patient. To evade ghosts or pacify angry spirits like ancestral beings, or nature spirits.
3. **Fire ceremony:** For refining the spirit, they light the candle or oil lamp and it is passed over the patient's body.
4. **Air ceremony**: To polish the spiritual body, the Shaman uses the broom, yak tail, medicinal plants, or other plants such as *amriso*, and it is for the preparation to blow the healing mantras.
5. **Ether or sky ceremony:** To heighten the level of consciousness, the Shaman spells different types of mantras, binds the areas like the east, west, north, and south directions. In healing activities, Kusunda Shaman frequently spells *Ban Jhakri, Bhuyar, Arimal, Gwang, Quali, Naag,* and *Kalimata*. He requests these deities to protect themselves as well as the patient.
6. **Preparation of healing water:** It is the final stage of healing practices, if there is no need for animal sacrifice. The Shaman prepares the healing water by mixing the different elements like *Jawau-til,* salt, ashes, crystals, metal pieces, etc, and it is used to cure diseases by drinking water or sprinkling it over different parts of the body.

The chanting of mantras is crucial for the entire healing processes. The shaman often engages in chanting mantras throughout this ritual. An example of such a mantra is: "Om Birbir Narasimha Nau Gyani Chausthi Jogini Chaurasi Siddha Bhakta Gyani Sarbjat Himal, Kasya Himal, Debi Somal, Debi Malika, Debi Tin Bhuvan, Tien Lok Sudhari Patal Jharu Saurya Mukh Paru Guru Mukh Paru Bacha Badhu Phat" (Khawas Udas, 2017). Reinhard (1968) notes that a Kusunda shaman recites both incantations and mantras during the healing process. He invokes the four cardinal directions – Purba (east), Pachhim (west), Uttara (north), and Dakshin (south) – employing words and phrases to encircle these areas for his protection. For about half an hour, he calls upon his guru, Purkha, as well as the Bayu, the river, and the hills. The places and direction of Mantra citing depend upon the ethnic communities. Holmberg (2002) noted that Bomba, a Tamang Shaman, embarks on journeys that stretch to the farthest reaches of the known universe: descending to di/li (Delhi), bombe (Bombay), and amrika (America), and eventually ascending into Tibet beyond the towering Himalayas. Most of these locations, except for the most remote ones, are familiar to the villagers due to trade, herding, job searches, or pilgrimage journeys. The exact practices can vary based on the local deity or deities involved, such as

Bayu, Masan, and so on For example, Lila Bahadur Kusunda invokes the deity of Pyuthan, while Prem Bahadur Kusunda invokes the deities of the Dang Area.

Furthermore, even if the patient does not experience relief after all these rituals, the Kusunda shaman might conduct a sacrificial ceremony. Depending on the type of illness, he may sacrifice a goat, a cock, or a hen, which is done at a crossroads, in the jungle, or at a specific site during the night. Larger offerings might be deferred if a special vow has been made. After the blood offering, Jhankri consumes the meat along with local alcohol. Lila Bahadur adds that if Jhankri is weaker than a witch or the specific gods or goddesses, there is a risk of Jhankri's death. Thus, the Kusunda community believes that Jhankri safeguards them against ghosts, witches, malevolent spirits, as well as divine forces. According to Judithane's (1981) study, most ailments in western Nepal are treated with meals and natural remedies while patients remain at home.

Treatment Pattern

Kusunda of Pyuthan, Surkhet, and Sikta, Dang has no access to health posts, Hospitals, and other health centers. They have no toilets or good sanitation. Some of them are using open areas or forest areas for toilet purposes. Only a few of them have toilets in their homes. Kusunda have a poor health status. They rely on stream water for all purposes. The lack of these basic services is certainly a problem among the Kusunda. Again, poor economic condition is referred to as a primary reason for poor health, as they cannot afford to improve their living conditions. Kusunda have a religious belief system that they use traditional healers (Dhami/ Jhakri). After illness, some people go to the health post, whereas some go to consult Dhami and Jhakri and the local family guidance. One of them said that traditional beliefs may be a barrier to using available health services. Most of them have inadequate knowledge, and they have many conventional methods for curing illness. But it is not the view of Kusunda shamans.

Conclusion

Cross-cultural studies confirm that shamans and other shamanistic healers are found universally in human cultures, and all societies have people who use altered states of consciousness (ASC) to interact with the spirit world on behalf of their communities. Shamans, shaman/healers, mediums, and healers—referred to in this issue as "shamanistic healers"—are found worldwide, including Nepal, because their activities are based on biological potentials involving ASC, healing, and visual thought processes. Most of the ethnic communities of Nepal have also been practicing shamanism (in the Nepali term Dhami-Jhankri) since the hunting–gathering periods. It is still a very popular healing technique in most parts of the world, as well as in Nepal. All shamans, including Kusunda, have common practices in the healing process, like chanting mantras, using vigorous shaking of bundles of leaves (syauli) or Kucho, Dhyangro, wearing mala and Pheta, labeling of altered states of consciousness, calling of sources of power and relationships to spirit entities, and using sociopolitical powers and activities. Kusunda is recognized as one of the most endangered ethnic communities of Nepal and has been practicing Dhami/Jhakri since the ancient period, and it still continues as an alternative healing technique. Kusunda Dhami/Jhakri uses various types of herbal medicine, modern medicine, as well as traditional shamanistic practices. So, it should be modernized as an alternative healing practice and should not be ignored in the name of Superstition.

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"Speaking Through Performance: Ritual as Resistance in Contemporary Nepal"

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Abstract

In an era of political transition, how do communities use cultural performances to articulate dissent and reinforce social bonds? This paper examines how rituals in Nepal function as dynamic spaces where socio-political conflicts are negotiated. Drawing on multi-sited ethnography conducted in Kathmandu valley between 2024 and 2025, I analyze three cases: the Gai Jatra festival, the Guthi protest against state legislation, and transformations in Hindu death rites performed by daughters. The study demonstrates how communities exploit ritual's culturally legitimate spaces to challenge state power and patriarchal norms. Rather than viewing rituals as static traditions, I show how they become arenas for what I conceptualize as "Constructive Preservation"- the strategic adaptation of cultural forms for contemporary political ends. This framework reveals a dialectical relationship: while grassroots actors use ritual for resistance, the state employs what I term "Structural Patronage" to control and manage dissent. The paper further contributes to the anthropological understanding of ritual, resistance, and power in 21st century Nepal.

Keywords: Ritual, resistance, semiotics, gender, state power, Nepal

Introduction: The Ritual as Political Space

During the 2025 Gai Jatra festival in Bhaktapur's historic streets, a performer donned a mask caricaturing a former prime minister. His exaggerated gestures and satirical skits drew laughter from crowds, but his message was serious- a pointed critique of corruption and what one collaborator called "Legal Violence" against ordinary citizens. This spectacle, simultaneously traditional and fiercely contemporary, raises a central question: how do rituals become vehicles for expressing resistance, forging community cohesion, and negotiating power?

In Nepal, where rapid political change intersects with deeply embedded cultural traditions, the ritual sphere has transformed into a crucial arena for socio-political dialogue. This paper examines three ritual contexts where this dynamic unfolds: the Gai Jatra festival's tradition of sanctioned mockery, the Guthi institution's mobilization against state expropriation, and the transformation of death rites as daughters claim ritual roles traditionally reserved for sons.

This study builds upon and extends existing anthropological work on ritual and resistance. David Holmberg (2000), in his analysis of ritual among the Tamang communities, demonstrated how ritual constitutes a significant domain for understanding power relations and resistance. Similarly, numerous ethnographic studies have examined how subordinate groups use cultural forms to express dissent (Scott, 1985; Ortner, 1995; Comaroff & Comaroff, 1991). However, less attention has been paid to the conscious, strategic dimensions of such cultural performances- the way actors deliberately reframe tradition for political ends.

I argue that Nepali society operates through what I call "Socio-Cultural Consciousness"- a reflexive awareness among individuals and communities of their cultural heritage and its potential strategic utility. This awareness enables a process I term "Constructive Preservation" *(Samrachanatmak Samrakshyan):* the deliberate adaptation of cultural forms to ensure their relevance and efficacy in changing political circumstances. Within the culturally legitimate space of ritual, communities and the state engage in a semiotic struggle, re-purposing traditional performances to address contemporary issues of gender inequality, state power, and geopolitical anxiety.

This paper outlines its theoretical framework, engaging with existing scholarship on practice theory, liminality, and power. It then describes the multi-sited ethnographic methodology employed. Finally, it presents three case studies analyzing how resistance, cohesion, and power are performed, before discussing the state's counter-strategies and concluding with implications for understanding contemporary political life in Nepal.

Theoretical Framework: Understanding Ritual, Resistance, and Power

To analyze how rituals function as political spaces in contemporary Nepal, this paper engages with several interconnected theoretical traditions while developing concepts grounded in ethnographic observation.

Practice Theory and Its Limits

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's work on practice offers a starting point for understanding how social arrangements become embedded in everyday life. Bourdieu (1977) argued that social actors internalize the structures around them through "*habitus*"-durable dispositions that shape perception, thought, and action without conscious calculation. The habitus makes certain ways of being feel natural, even inevitable. When I observed funeral rites in Lalitpur, I saw this unconscious reproduction at work: elderly relatives directed sons through prescribed motions, everyone assuming this was simply "how things are done."

Yet what happens when someone deliberately breaks these patterns? When daughters step forward to perform rites reserved for sons, they do not act from unconscious disposition. They act with awareness of tradition and deliberate intention to transform it. This resonates with what Saba Mahmood (2005) observed in Egypt, moments when embodied practice becomes conscious intervention. Unlike Bourdieu's framework, which emphasizes reproduction, these cases reveal rupture.

British Sociologist Anthony Giddens (1984) offered a different lens through his structuration theory, proposing that structure enables action even as action reproduces structure. This captures something important: the daughter performing death rites draws on existing ritual forms even as she transforms who can perform them. Yet Giddens' framework does not fully explain moments when actors explicitly aim to transform rather than reproduce. When my collaborator Didi stated, "From now on, we will perform all rites like sons," she announced not reproduction but transformation- a remaking of normative order (Sewell, 1992).

Understanding Liminality as a Strategic Resource

Victor Turner's (1969) analysis of ritual process provides another crucial lens. Turner studied Ndembu rituals in Zambia, developing the concept of *liminality*- the "betwixt-and-between" phase in ritual when participants exist outside normal social structures. In this liminal space, hierarchy dissolves into *communitas*, an undifferentiated bond between participants. Turner saw liminality as temporarily liberating but ultimately reinforcing social order through contained release.

During Gai Jatra in Bhaktapur, I observed something that both resembles and differs from Turner's formulation. The Festival certainly creates liminal space- normal rules suspend, satire flows freely, and social hierarchies temporarily invert. Yet this is not merely an escape valve. When performers don masks caricaturing the prime minister, they engage in deliberate political commentary. As one participant explained, "We must make people aware." This liminality is weaponized- not passive transition but an active intervention.

My observation aligns with Max Gluckman's (1963) concept of "rituals of rebellion," where apparently subversive performances actually reinforce social order by permitting controlled dissent. Yet Gluckman emphasized how such rituals ultimately stabilize hierarchy. In contemporary Nepal, the outcome is less certain. Satirical performances sometimes spark public discussion that outlasts the festival. The liminal space becomes not just a release but a resource- a scheduled, culturally legitimate platform for critique that state power cannot easily suppress.

This strategic dimension resonates with Achille Mbembe's (1992) analysis of postcolonial politics. Writing about Cameroon, Mbembe showed how mockery and caricature become ambiguous spaces where power is simultaneously challenged and reproduced. The Gai Jatra performer operates in precisely this ambiguity- his critique permitted, even expected, yet contained within ritual boundaries that limit its transformative potential.

State Power and Management of Ritual

Understanding ritual resistance requires equally understanding how state power responds. Michel Foucault's later work on *governmentality* (1991) illuminates this dynamic. Foucault shifted from analyzing disciplinary institutions to examining how modern states govern populations through managing conduct rather than merely exercising force. Governmentality operates through techniques that shape what seems possible, normal, and desirable.

From this perspective, the state's tolerance of Gai Jatra satire appears not as weakness but as sophisticated governance. Permitting ritualized critique within contained temporal and spatial boundaries allows dissent expression while managing its potential to disrupt. As Timothy Mitchell (1991) argued, the state is not a fixed entity but an effect produced through such regulatory practices- the appearance of a coherent state emerges from dispersed techniques of control.

What I observed during the Guthi protests reveals both the operation and limits of this governmentality. For months, authorities tolerated cultural performances expressing opposition to the Guthi Bill. Traditional music, dance, and processions filled Kathmandu's streets. Yet when protests intensified and threatened to expand beyond ritual containment, tolerance gave way to coercion. The state's response revealed what lay beneath governmentality's soft management: coercive capacity held in reserve.

This pattern-tolerance within limits, suppression beyond them- characterizes what I term structural patronage. The term captures how state-community relations operate through networks of obligation and reciprocity that manage dissent while maintaining elite control. When ritual critique remains symbolic, it receives the patron's tolerance. When it threatens material interests, patronage reveals its coercive face.

Concepts Emerging from Ethnographic Observation

Building on and extending these theoretical frameworks, this study employs two concepts developed through ethnographic engagement with Nepali communities.

Socio-cultural consciousness emerged from conversations with research participants who reflected explicitly on their cultural practices. When Didi (pseudonymized) explained her decision to perform death rites, she demonstrated awareness not just of ritual procedure but of its symbolic weight and strategic possibilities. “It is also our duty,” she said- claiming ritual rights through conscious reference to moral obligation. This concept differs from habitus in emphasizing explicit awareness rather than unconscious disposition. It differs from abstract ideology in being practically embedded in specific contexts. It names the faculty through which communities recognize their cultural heritage as a resource for contemporary struggle.

Constructive preservation (*samrachanatmak samrakshyan*) describes the process this consciousness enables. When Guthi members mobilize traditional performance for political protest, they preserve cultural forms while transforming their meaning. When daughters perform death rites, they preserve the ritual’s solemn structure while reconstructing its gender assumptions. This is not passive conservation but active adaptation- what Marshal Sahlins (1981) called “structure of the conjuncture,” where cultural categories are reworked through practice. Yet these cases reveal more than unconscious structural transformation. They show deliberate, strategic deployment of culture for political ends.

These concepts bridge existing theoretical frameworks with grounded ethnographic observation. They allow analysis that respects both the weight of tradition and the creativity of those who wield it for contemporary purposes.

Methodology: Tracing Ritual Across Physical and Digital Spaces

This research emerged from eleven months of ethnographic engagement in the Kathmandu Valley between August 2024 and July 2025. I conducted fieldwork in Lalitpur and Bhaktapur districts, where Newar cultural traditions remain particularly Vibrant while also undergoing significant transformation.

Multi-Sited Ethnography

I chose multi-sited ethnography because the rituals I sought to understand do not stay in one place. George Marcus (1995) developed this approach to follow cultural phenomena across locations, recognizing that contemporary practices cannot be understood within single bounded sites. Gai Jatra processions move through city streets. Guthi protests unfold simultaneously in physical space and digital platforms. Death rites occur in domestic spaces, but their meanings circulate through social media and community discussion.

This approach proved essential. Following rituals across sites revealed connections I might otherwise have missed- how a daughter's performance of death rites in one household became the topic of discussion in neighborhood WhatsApp groups, how Gai Jatra satire recorded on Phones reached audiences far beyond festival crowds.

Research Sites and Methods

I conducted participant observation at three types of ritual events:

Bisket Jatra in Bhaktapur (April, 2025): This New Year festival centers on chariot processions and collective pulling of ceremonial vehicles. I observed for ten days, participating in processions, documenting interactions, and conducting informal interviews with participants. The festival's display of collective power offered insight into how ritual generates and demonstrates community cohesion.

Gai *Jatra* processions in Lalitpur and Bhaktapur (August, 2025): I followed processions through both cities over seven days, documenting satirical performances, interviewing participants and audiences, and observing interactions with authorities. The festival's tradition of sanctioned mockery provided rich material for understanding ritualized critique.

Domestic death rites (*kriya basne*) in multiple household settings: Over the fieldwork period, I observed thirteen death ritual sequences in Lalitpur households, ranging from immediate post-death rites to thirteen-day ceremonies. This included the case of Didi (Pseudonymized) and her sister performing rites for their father, which became central to my analysis.

Participant observation combined etic and emic perspectives- what linguist Kenneth Pike (1967) distinguished as an outsider's analytical view and an insider's experiential understanding. As a researcher from within the Nepali cultural context, I had deep emic access. People spoke with me in shared languages- Nepali and Newari- and assumed familiarity with ritual practices. My anthropological knowledge provided analytical distance, allowing me to question assumptions that might otherwise remain invisible. This dual position required continuous reflexivity: noting when my insider knowledge illuminated meaning and when it might blind me to alternative interpretations (Narayan, 1993).

Digital Ethnography

Recognizing that contemporary ritual unfolds online as well as in physical space, I conducted digital ethnography throughout fieldwork. Following Sarah Pink and colleagues' (2016) approach, I treated digital platforms as sites of ethnographic engagement rather than mere sources of data.

I tracked public discussions related to #GuthiBidheyak, #GaiJatra, and #Kaalapani on Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok- platforms widely used in Nepal. This generated a corpus of several hundred posts, including memes, videos, photographs, and comment threads. I analyzed this material using multimodal discourse analysis (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001), attending to how meaning emerges from the interaction of image, text, and video. This approach treats online content not as separate from "real" ritual but as digitally mediated ritual performance- extensions of practice into new spaces.

The digital dimension proved particularly significant for Guthi protests, where organizers used social media to coordinate actions and circulate images of cultural performances. Online circulation amplified the ritual's reach beyond physical participants, transforming local events into nationally visible statements.

Research Participants

Rather than employing formal sampling, I selected research participants through purposive identification of individuals involved in relevant practices, supplemented by snowball referrals. Key collaborators included:

"Collaborator Dai" (pseudonym), a Gai Jatra participant in his mid-forties from Bhaktapur. A painter by profession, he had designed and performed satirical masks for eighteen years. Our conversations- more than a dozen over fieldwork- traced how Gai Jatra satire evolved alongside Nepal's Political transformations.

"Didi" (pseudonym), a woman in her mid-thirties from Lalitpur. A school teacher and mother of two, she and her younger sister performed their father's death rites after their brother's earlier death left no male heir. Her willingness to discuss this decision, including family negotiations and community responses, provided rich material for understanding ritual transformation.

Guthi members and activists: I interviewed eight individuals involved in protests against the Guthi Bill, including traditional Guthi trustees and younger activists who mobilized through social media. These conversations illuminated how an institution rooted in tradition became vehicle for contemporary political mobilization.

Community elders and ritual specialists: Five elderly men and women, aged sixty-five to eighty-two, shared perspectives on ritual change across their lifetimes. Their accounts contextualized contemporary transformations within longer histories.

All interviews were open-ended and conversational, conducted in Nepali and Newari, recorded with participants' informed consent, and later transcribed and translated. Following American Anthropological Association ethical guidelines (Madison, 2012), I use pseudonyms throughout and have altered identifying details to protect participant confidentiality.

Positionality and Ethical Considerations

My position as a researcher from within this cultural context shaped every aspect of fieldwork. People often addressed me as "brother" (*dai*) or "son" (*chora*), placing me within kinship frameworks that facilitated access but also carried expectations. I navigated this through explicit discussion of my research role while honoring relational obligations- attending life-cycle events when invited, offering assistance when appropriate.

My epistemological commitments- shaped by anthropological understanding at Patan Multiple Campus and engagement with critical ethnography- provided tools for analyzing rather than merely reproducing cultural assumptions. Yet these tools also risked imposing frameworks not shared by participants. I addressed this through member-checking: sharing draft interpretations with key collaborators and incorporating their responses. When Didi read my analysis of her case, she offered corrections that deepened my understanding- insisting, for example, that her action was not primarily "feminist" but filial, though its effects challenged patriarchy.

This iterative process- moving between participant observation, analysis, and participant response- generated interpretations accountable to those whose lives they represent.

Analysis: Three Cases of Ritual as Resistance

Reclaiming Ritual Space: Daughters Performing Death Rites

The Hindu death ritual of *Kriya basne* has long been a key institution for reproducing patrilineality and patriarchy in Nepal (Bennett, 1983). Traditionally, the son is the essential ritual actor- a notion encapsulated in the conventional saying, "*Choro le ho baitarni nadi tarne ra dhan ko pujari*" ("It is the son who crosses the river of no return and who is the authorized inheritor of property").

My ethnography documented a conscious rupture of this structure. In one case, "Didi" and her sister performed the thirteen-day death rites after their father's passing. When I asked why they had taken this step, Didi explained: "we discussed it as a family. There was no son, our brother had passed away years ago. The relatives said we should find a male relative to perform the rites. But we thought, why? We loved our father. We were with him when he died. Why should some distant cousin perform his final rites? So we decided: we will do it ourselves". Her statement, "*Hami le aba agami din ma sabai chora jastai saradhako karya pani garne chau*" ("From now on, we will perform all ancestral rites like sons"), was not merely an assertion of agency (Ahearn, 2001) but a declarative act of resistance and a claim to gender equality.

The community's response was mixed but significant. One elderly neighbor observed, "*Yo dekhda ta chora bhanda chori kam pani chainan ra jaati pani chan*" ("Seeing this, daughters seem better and more capable than sons"). Another commented more cautiously, "Time are changing. What can we do?" These responses signal incipient transformation in the social habitus itself- driven by conscious, individual, and collective action.

Didi was preserving the ritual's core function- honoring and propitiating the deceased- while reconstructing its gender-specific form (cf.Raheja & Gold, 1994). This is constructive preservation in action: maintaining cultural continuity while challenging patriarchal exclusion.

Figure 1: Daughters Performing Kriya Basne Ritual

Note. From "*Daughters perform final rites of their mother*, "My Republica, 2023. (https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/daughters-perform-final-rites-of-their-mother).

This act of constructive preservation reconstructs a patriarchal ritual into a symbol of gender equality and redefined filial duty.

Sanctioned Mockery: Gai Jatra as Political Commentary

The Gai Jatra ("Cow Festival") festival, observed annually in August/September, commemorates deceased family members. Its tradition of satire and mockery has deep historical roots- legend holds that a medieval king instituted comic performances to console his grieving queen. In contemporary Nepal, this tradition has evolved into a platform for political commentary.

During the 2025 Gai Jatra, performers in Lalitpurand Bhaktapur created skits and caricatures targeting then-Prime Minister K.P. Oli and political figures. One participant, "Collaborator Dai," explained the rationale: "We have been doing this for years. Every year, we look at what has happened in the country- what the leaders have done, what they have failed to do. Then we make fun of it. The leaders come to watch sometimes. They laugh. But the message is clear; we are watching you. You cannot hide."

The mask of the prime minister functioned as a powerful symbol (Peirce, 1955) of state authority, while the performance indexed specific public grievances about corruption and governance failures (Gupta, 1995). Collaborator Dai's further explanation revealed the conscious strategy underlying the performance: "*Yiniharule desh bigarisake…sachet banauna ta paryo*" ("These leaders have ruined the country… we must make people aware”). This was not unconscious practice but calculated use of a culturally legitimate platform for political critique (Mbembe, 1992); ritual as grammar of dissent.

Yet the state’s tolerance of such critique is itself strategic. As one local observer noted, “They let us make fun of them for a few days. Then they go back to doing whatever they want.” This observation illuminates the dialectic of structural patronage: ritual critique is permitted, even expected, but contained within temporal and spatial boundaries that limit its transformative potential.

Figure 2: Gai Jatra Performers with Satirical Masks

Note. From fieldwork documentation, 2025.

Collective Power: Guthi Protests and Cultural Mobilization

The Guthi system, traditional trust institutions managing religious and communal assets, has long been central to Newar social organization. In 2019, the government introduced the Guthi Bill (Guthi Bidheyak), proposing to bring Guthi lands under state control. This triggered massive protests, with Newar communities mobilizing through cultural performances that transformed religious institutions into political rallying points.

During protests in Patan and Bhaktapur, participants performed traditional music, dance, and processions; cultural forms usually reserved for festivals- now deployed as acts of resistance. One Guthi member explained, “The Guthi is not just land. It is our identity, our way of life. If the government takes it, they take our culture. So we must protect it, not just through petitions but through showing who we are. When we dance in the streets, when we play our music, we are saying: we are still here. This is our culture. You cannot take it.”

This mobilization exemplifies constructive preservation: preserving the Guthi not as an archaic trust but as a living symbol of ethnic identity and sovereignty (Tamang, 2009). The cultural performances simultaneously expressed resistance and reinforced community cohesion, what Durkheim (1912) identified as ritual’s function in generating collective effervescence.

The state’s response revealed the limits of structural patronage. Initial tolerance gave way to coercion as protests intensified. Yet the cultural framing of resistance proved powerful, the government eventually modified some provisions, and the protests remain a reference point for subsequent mobilizations.

Figure 3: Guthi Protest with Traditional Cultural Performance

Note. *From Bajrabarahi Dheme Khala…*, by A. Kapali, 2019, Facebook.

The cohesive and powerful cultural protest against state-led expropriation through the act and performativity (Austin, 1962), through the collective socio-cultural consciousness, to protect the ethno-historical rights and lands.

Discussion: Ritual as Arena for Political Negotiation

The cases presented above reveal several interconnected dynamics in the relationship between ritual, resistance, and power in contemporary Nepal.

From Unconscious practice to strategic Intervention

These cases expose a critical gap in practice theory. Where Bourdieu's (1977) habitus explains unconscious reproduction of structure, the performances documented here constitute deliberate interventions. Didi's performance of death rites was not habitual but calculated, a conscious claim to ritual rights previously denied to women. The Gai Jatra performers' satire was not spontaneous jest but planned political commentary. Guthi protesters' cultural performances were not mere tradition but strategic mobilization.

This is not to deny the importance of habitus but to suggest that moments of rupture reveal its limits. As Mahmood (2005) argues, agency may take forms not anticipated by Western feminist theory- including pious submission to tradition. Yet in these Nepali cases, agency takes the form of conscious appropriation and transformation of tradition itself. Actors are not merely reproducing structure but intentionally transforming it (Sewell, 1992).

Liminality as Weaponized Space

These cases also extend Turner's (1969) concept of liminality. Gai Jatra's ritual space is not merely transitional or anti-structural; it is a weaponized arena where critique is not just permitted but potent. The liminal period becomes a scheduled platform for political commentary, transforming what Turner saw as a passive transition into active intervention.

Yet this weaponization has limits. As the Guthi protests demonstrated, when ritualized dissent threatens material interests- state control over resources- the liminal space collapses. The state's tolerance extends only so far. This dialectic between permitted critique and suppressed challenge characterizes contemporary power dynamics.

Constructive Preservation as Political Strategy

The concept of constructive preservation illuminates what links these cases. In each, actors preserve cultural forms while transforming their meanings: Death rites preserved in structure but reconstructed to challenge gender hierarchy, Gai Jatra's Satirical tradition preserved but directed toward contemporary political critique, and Guthi preserved as an institution but mobilized as a symbol of ethnic sovereignty.

This is not passive conservation but active adaptation; what Sahlins (1981) called "structure of the conjuncture," where cultural categories are reworked in practice. Yet these cases show more than unconscious structural transformation. They reveal conscious, strategic deployment of culture for political ends.

The State's Counter-Strategy: Structural Patronage

The state responds to grassroots mobilization with its own form of constructive preservation, which I term structural patronage. This operates through several mechanisms:

First, tolerance of ritual critique functions as governmentality (Foucault, 1991); a safety valve that manages dissent by containing it within ritual boundaries. As one observer noted of Gai Jatra, “They let us make fun of them for a few days.”

Second, this tolerance is sustained not merely by state policy but by dense political networks that extend into communities. These networks manage dissent through culturally resonant idioms of reciprocity and patronage.

Third, when managed performances threaten to become material challenges, as with Guthi protests, patronage reveals its coercive dimension. The state’s structural patronage thus encompasses both tolerance and suppression, maintaining hegemony through a flexible response to challenge.

Conclusion

This paper has examined how rituals in Contemporary Nepal become arenas for negotiating power, expressing resistance, and forging social cohesion. Through analysis of three cases: daughters performing rites, Gai Jatra satire, and Guthi protests, I have argued that communities consciously deploy cultural forms for political ends, a process I term constructive preservation (*samrachanatmak samrakshyan*).

The analysis leads to several dimensions of cultural perception depending upon the context and the need to understand the awareness of social, political, economic, and institutional structures and practices.

First, ritual in Nepal is not merely tradition reproduced but a dynamic field where social arrangements are contested and transformed. The daughter performing death rites and the satirist mocking the prime minister are not simply repeating inherited forms but actively reframing them for contemporary purposes.

Second, this reframing is enabled by what I have called socio-cultural consciousness, a reflexive awareness among individuals and communities of their cultural heritage and its strategic potential. This concept helps bridge the gap between theories emphasizing unconscious reproduction (*habitus*) and those emphasizing abstract agency.

Third, the state responds to grassroots mobilization with its own strategies of containment and co-optation, structural patronage that tolerates ritual critique while limiting its transformative potential. The relationship between grassroots resistance and state power is thus dialectical, each shaping the other’s strategies.

Finally, these dynamics reveal that contemporary political struggles in Nepal cannot be understood without attention to the ritual sphere. From the streets of Bhaktapur to the Guthi protests in Kathmandu, Nepalis are speaking through performance, using deep cultural resources to navigate and challenge the complex power dynamics of the twenty-first century. This study contributes to anthropological understanding of ritual, resistance, and power by demonstrating the conscious, strategic dimensions of cultural performance. Future research might examine how these dynamics unfold in other cultural contexts, how digital media transforms ritual practice, and under what conditions ritual critique translates into lasting social transformation.

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From ‘Bhumiputra’ to ‘Bhumihin’: Landlessness and Marginalization of the Bankariya People

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Abstract

The study highlights the significance of the Bankariya community, their unique traditional lifestyle, and the challenges they have faced. It emphasizes the importance of protecting and supporting this group, one of Nepal's ten officially recognized endangered indigenous communities. The main objective of the study is to conduct an in-depth anthropological investigation of the Bankariya community, including an examination of their historical background, cultural practices, economic activities, and the challenges they face in the modern context. A descriptive research approach was used to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. For this purpose, 25 Bankariya individuals between the ages of 18 and 65 were selected for interviews using purposive sampling to gather household information, behaviors, attitudes, opinions, and knowledge, including that of the Bankariya leader. To validate the qualitative findings, both primary and secondary data sources were used, and informal conversations were held with key local authorities. The study undertakes a critical examination of the ethnographic and socio-political conditions of the Bankariya people. The Bankariya people of Makwanpur are a critically endangered and marginalized Indigenous group whose traditional lifestyle and language are under severe threat. Displacement, deforestation, and socio-economic pressures have disrupted their cultural practices, while younger generations increasingly adopt Nepali language, endangering their language and oral traditions. Despite their resilience, lack of institutional support and poverty worsen their vulnerability. The study highlights the urgent need for state recognition, inclusive policies, and cultural preservation to protect the Bankariya's language, identity, and way of life.

Keywords: Sedentary, endangered, Indigenous, landlessness, marginalization, lifestyle.

Introduction

Across the world, many small-scale and marginalized communities struggle to sustain their identity amid globalization, state integration, and rapid social change (Hodgson, 2011; Kingsbury, 2012). Such groups often experience the gradual erosion of language, customary practices, and social institutions, making them increasingly vulnerable to assimilation and cultural disappearance. Nepal renowned for its ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity and hosts more than a hundred Indigenous nationalities, yet many remain excluded from political representation, economic resources, and meaningful cultural protection (Bista, 1967; NEFIN, 2025). Within this wider context, the Bankariya stand out as one of the most critically endangered Indigenous peoples in the country. Despite their distinct language, forest-based heritage, and unique socio-cultural identity, they face the threat of extinction due to their extremely small population and persistent socio-economic vulnerability (Gyanwali, 2022; Oli, 2023).

The Government of Nepal recognizes the Bankariya as one of the most endangered Indigenous communities (NEFIN, 2025). According to the national census of 2078 B.S., their total population is only 95 (47 males and 48 females) (CBS, 2078 B.S.; Manahari Rural Municipality Profile, 2079 B.S.). Historically, the Bankariya were nomadic forest dwellers who lived in the Chure hills of Makwanpur District and depended on hunting, foraging, and the collection of wild foods subsistence practices that reflect deep ecological knowledge and long-standing ties to forest landscapes (Bista, 1967; Adhikari, 1919). Their forest-centric way of life also shaped their name: “Bankariya,” referring to those who lived in and through the forest (Moktan, 2004). Today, however, most Bankariya are concentrated in Musedhap, Manahari Rural Municipality - 4, roughly 30 km west of Hetauda, with a small presence in other parts of southern Makwanpur.

The transition from a nomadic forest-based livelihood to a settled life was not a voluntary cultural shift but the result of displacement and administrative intervention. With the expansion of conservation regimes, forest restrictions, and the creation of protected areas and buffer zones, the Bankariya were gradually pushed out of their traditional habitat. In 2061 B.S., the state relocated them to Twangre Dada/Musedhap and provided approximately six hectares of land under leasehold arrangements. However, the community was not granted formal ownership rights, and their settlement remains legally insecure because it lies within the buffer zone of Parsa National Park. This unresolved land tenure has left the Bankariya vulnerable to eviction and has limited their access to basic state services and long-term livelihood security.

This historical trajectory reflects a deeper structural transformation in the relationship between the Bankariya people and land. Historically, the Bankariya can be understood as *bhumiputra*[1] an Indigenous community whose identity, livelihood, and cultural continuity were

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1 sons of the soil / original inhabitants with ancestral claims to the land

closely tied to ancestral territories and forest-based ways of life. However, over time, processes such as state territorialization, forest governance, land registration systems, and expanding settlement have steadily weakened their customary claims and everyday access to land. As a result, the Bankariya have increasingly been pushed into the condition of *bhumihin* where their historical belonging to the land is not legally recognized, and their survival depends on insecure livelihoods, marginal spaces, and external support.

Landlessness has intensified the Bankariya's marginalization across multiple dimensions. Economically, the absence of secure land rights has pushed them into precarious livelihoods, including agricultural wage labor and the sale of minor forest products. These forms of work are often unstable, exploitative, and disconnected from traditional knowledge systems, reinforcing cycles of poverty and dependency. Socially, their small population and long history of isolation have positioned them at the margins of local power structures, where they continue to experience discrimination and invisibility. Culturally, displacement and poverty have weakened intergenerational transmission of language, oral tradition, and ritual practice. Youth migration, schooling in Nepali, and pressures to adapt to mainstream society further accelerate language loss and cultural erosion, creating growing identity insecurity among younger generations.

My fieldwork in the Bankariya settlement of Musedhap, Manahari Rural Municipality, provided preliminary insights into how these pressures are shaping everyday life. Using an ethnographic approach, observation, informal conversations, and in-depth interviews, I documented how community members narrate their past as forest dwellers while simultaneously confronting the realities of landlessness, restricted forest access, and limited livelihood options.

Although the Bankariya possess a rich oral tradition, kinship-based social organization, and distinct ecological knowledge, these cultural resources are increasingly strained by displacement and socio-economic hardship. Field interactions revealed that state recognition as an endangered Indigenous group has not translated into meaningful structural support, secure land tenure, or sustained cultural protection.

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2 landless people

Despite Nepal's growing academic attention to nomadic and forest-based groups such as the Raute (e.g., Bista, 1978; Reinhard, 1974; Yasin, 2017), research on the Bankariya remains limited. Existing studies have primarily focused on descriptive accounts of their culture, livelihood, education, and health, but fewer works have examined how displacement and landlessness are reshaping their ethnic identity, cultural continuity, and political positioning. Given the community's critically endangered status, there is an urgent need for holistic anthropological inquiry that links historical dispossession with contemporary struggles over recognition, belonging, and survival. This study responds to that gap by exploring the Bankariya's historical background, cultural practices, livelihood transformations, and the structural challenges they face in the modern context particularly the unresolved question of land, which remains central to their marginalization and identity formation.

The Bankariya face a wide range of socio-economic and cultural challenges that hinder their development and integration into mainstream society. Increasing environmental restrictions and deforestation have rendered their dependence on the forest for food, medicine, and shelter unsustainable. Additionally, the tribe suffers from social isolation, making it difficult for them to engage with broader social, political, and economic systems. Drawing from literature and studies of other anthropologists mentioned earlier, this study of Bankariya people aims to explore the historical background, cultural practices, economic activities, and the challenges they face in the modern context.

Research Methods and Materials

The study employed a descriptive research design to analyze qualitative data gathered during the fieldwork. The target population comprised 95 individuals (Rural Municipality Profile, 2079), of whom 25 were selected for the study between the ages of 18 and 65 years. Interviews were conducted with these 25 Bankariya individuals, along with the head of the Bankariya community. Purposive sampling was used in the study area to gather information on the Bankariya people's behaviors, attitudes, opinions, and knowledge. The household's survey was carried out to collect household information. The sources of data for the study were both primary and secondary. The quantitative and qualitative data were gathered from primary and secondary

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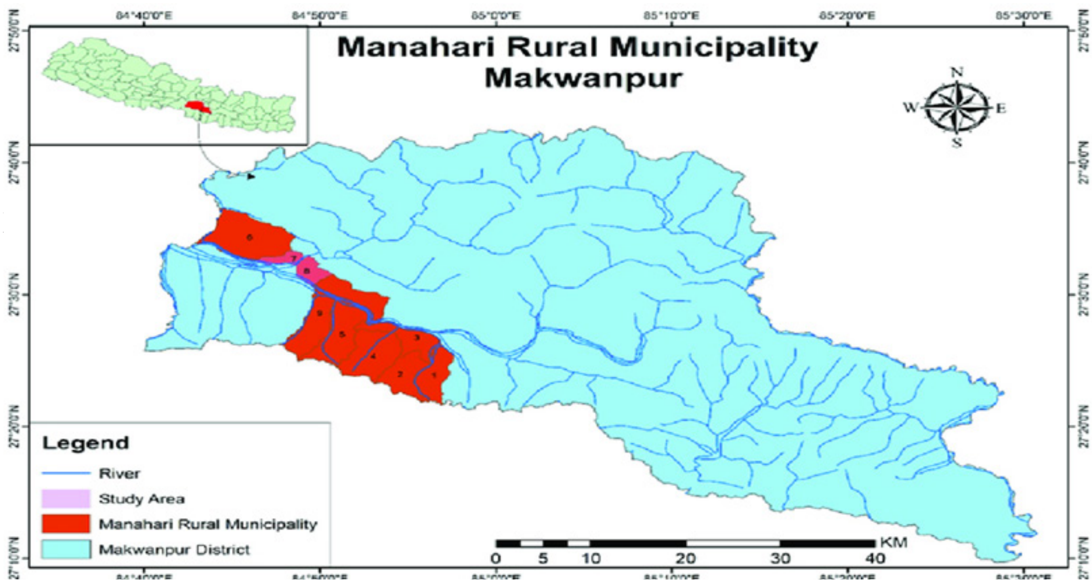
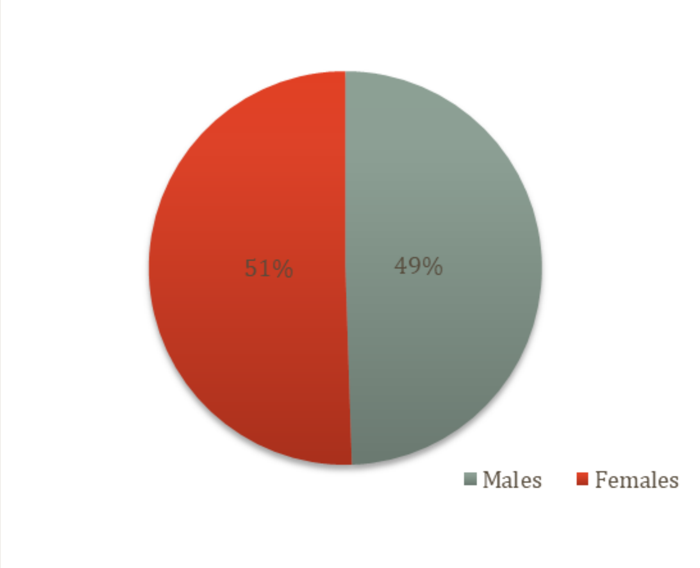


The study area of this research is Musidhap Area in Twangra, ward no. 4 of Manahari Rural Municipality, Makawanpur District. There is a small and close-knit settlement of the Banakariya community, an ethnic group recognized as endangered in Nepal. This community comprises 25 households, with a total population of 95 individuals. The gender distribution is fairly balanced, consisting of 48 females and 47 males. The figures 1 shows the gender wise distribution of people of Bankariya communities.

Despite being a marginalized group facing numerous socio-economic challenges, the Banakariya community has shown some progress in the area of education at present. Among the children of school-going age, 16 are currently attending school 7 of them are girls and 9 are boys. While this shows a promising trend towards educational participation, especially among boys, it also highlights the need for greater support and encouragement for girls' education within the community.

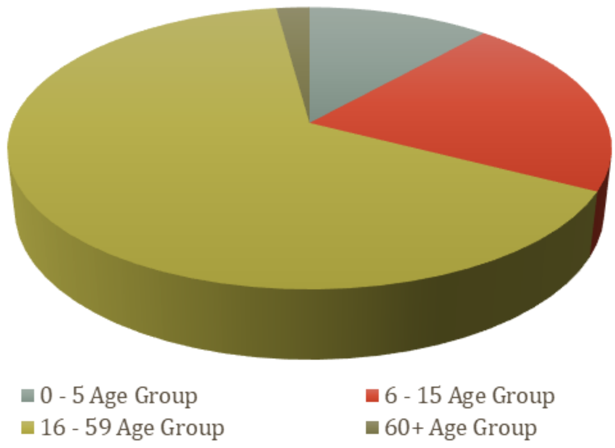
Figure 1: Gender Distribution of Bankariya People



When it comes to higher education, the representation becomes significantly lower. Only 3 young women from the entire Banakariya population are reported to be attending college. This low number suggests ongoing barriers to access and continuation of education at the tertiary level, particularly for girls, possibly due to economic constraints, early marriage, lack of awareness, or cultural factors.

This data underscores both the resilience and the vulnerability of the Banakariya community. While some educational progress has been made, especially at the basic level, targeted interventions are essential to improve educational access, retention, and advancement, particularly for girls and young women, in this endangered marginalized group.

Figure 2: Demography of Bankariya



The figure 2 illustrates the age-wise distribution of the Bankariya population, revealing a dominant proportion of individuals within the 16-59 age group. This working age group forms the majority, suggesting that most members of the community are engaged in productive or subsistence activities. The 6-15 age group occupies a moderate portion, indicating a noticeable presence of school aged children, while the 0-5 age group is relatively small, reflecting a low birth rate or declining fertility trend. Notably, the population of individuals aged 60 and above is minimal, which may point to a lower life expectancy, limited access to healthcare, or other socio-economic challenges. Overall, the chart highlights a community with a strong working-age base but with potential concerns regarding population sustainability and generational continuity, especially crucial for an endangered group like the Bankariya.

Result and Discussion

Settlement Patterns and Housing of the Bankariya

The Bankariya primarily reside in the central southern part of Nepal, in Makwanpur districts. The Bankariya settlement is in Ward No. 4 of Manahara Rural Municipality, particularly in Musidhap, where there are 25 Bankariya households with 95 individuals. These settlements are typically located near forest edges or in remote hilly and foothill areas, allowing them access to forest resources, which remain central to their way of life.

Bankariya settlements are small and scattered, often consisting of a cluster of a few houses belonging to extended families. The choice of location is influenced by proximity to natural resources especially forests and water sources as well as the availability of land for subsistence farming.

Despite efforts at resettlement, many Bankariya prefer to live in traditional areas rather than urban or highly developed regions. This is due to cultural ties, subsistence needs, and a sense of identity connected to the forest.

Bankariya houses are generally modest and built using locally available materials. Common construction materials are Mud and bamboo for walls, thatch or tin sheets for roofing, Wooden poles and stone for structural support. The houses are usually single-roomed or two-roomed, serving multiple purposes such as sleeping, cooking, and storage. Ventilation and sanitation facilities are often lacking, which poses health and hygiene challenges.

In recent years, with some support from the government and NGOs, a few families have begun upgrading their homes using corrugated metal roofs and cement walls, though such improvements remain limited due to poverty and marginalization.

The Endangered Culture, Language, and Bankariya People

Globally, nearly half of the world's languages are predicted to disappear within this century, and with them, countless small-scale populations risk losing their cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2019). Marginalized groups often face assimilation pressures, land dispossession, and socio-political exclusion, which make their identities highly fragile (Hodgson, 2011; Kingsbury, 2012). Nepal, despite being celebrated for its remarkable ethnic and cultural diversity, is home to several Indigenous nationalities that remain on the margins of society (Bista, 1967; NEFIN, 2025). Among these, the Bankariya stand out as one of the most critically endangered groups. Their distinct language, culture, and way of life are on the verge of extinction due to their extremely small population (95 individuals) and precarious socio-economic condition (Gyanwali, 2022; Oli, 2023).

Currently, the Bankariya reside in Musedhap, Makwanpur District, where they were granted six hectares of land under a 20-year lease in 2061 BS. The lease is set to expire in 2084 BS, raising fears of eviction by Parsa National Park authorities. Despite repeated appeals to government officials, including a delegation visit to Kathmandu in 2079 BS, no concrete measures have been implemented. Consequently, the community continues to live under constant uncertainty, further threatening the survival of their cultural and linguistic heritage.

Traditionally forest dwellers, the Bankariya possess a cultural system shaped by their close relationship with the natural environment, encompassing unique oral traditions, kinship structures, and ritual practices. However, displacement from ancestral lands, the loss of traditional livelihoods, and pressures of assimilation into dominant social groups have eroded their cultural identity. Their language belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family (Yadava & Turin, 2007) was once a vital medium for transmitting collective knowledge and heritage but is now spoken by only a few elderly members. Younger generations increasingly communicate in Nepali, the national lingua franca, resulting in a severe disruption of intergenerational language transmission and a gradual loss of ancestral knowledge.

Research indicates that most Bankariya children grow up with little or no fluency in their native tongue, often incorporating words from neighboring languages such as Chepang (Gurung, 2014). This rapid linguistic shift, driven by poverty, marginalization, and the need to adapt for survival, has rendered the Bankariya language critically endangered. According to UNESCO (2019), it is now spoken by so few individuals that natural transmission to children has virtually ceased. The disappearance of the Bankariya language would mean more than the loss of communication; it would erase oral traditions, ecological wisdom, and collective memory unique to the community.

Recognized as one of Nepal’s most marginalized Indigenous communities (NFDIN, 2024; IWGIA, 2022; UNDP, 2019), the Bankariya have faced severe disruption to their traditional way of life due to deforestation, resettlement policies, and socio-economic marginalization. My field study revealed a steady decline in the population of the Bankariya people over the years. A significant contributing factor to this decrease is the growing trend of inter-caste marriages, particularly between Bankariya individuals and members of the Tamang and Chepang communities. Such intermarriages, while reflecting broader processes of social integration, have also led to the gradual erosion of distinct ethnic group Bankariya people, their cultural identity and traditional practices.

The Landless: Struggling for Survival in Parsa’s Buffer Zone

In the southern plains of Nepal, at the margins of dense forest landscapes and expanding state regulation, the endangered Bankariya community faces a profound existential challenge: sustaining their livelihoods and cultural continuity on ancestral lands over which they lack formal legal ownership.

Once a nomadic tribe that called the Chure hills their home, the Bankariya now find themselves confined to the buffer zone of Parsa National Park displaced, landless, and uncertain of their future. Though they have transitioned to settled life, built homes, cultivated crops, and educated their children, they remain squatters in the land they have always called their own.

Parsa Wildlife Reserve was designated a protected area in 2041 BS, and in 2062 BS, a buffer zone was created, further tightening restrictions on local forest use. When the reserve was upgraded to Parsa National Park in 2074 BS, restrictions intensified especially for indigenous groups like the Bankariya. Governed by the National Park and Wildlife Conservation Act (NPWCA) of 2030 BS, the laws have long been criticized for prioritizing wildlife at the expense of the people who live around and within protected areas.

Activists, researchers, and community leaders argue that despite five amendments, the NPWCA still fails to protect the fundamental rights of indigenous communities like the Bankariya. Their movement through ancestral forests once free and integral to their way of life has been criminalized, forcing them into displacement and economic hardship.

The lack of land rights directly affects the community's survival. Without land, they cannot start businesses, access loans, or receive housing grants. One of the respondend reported that in 2081 BS, seven Bankariya individuals were detained by park rangers on accusations of entering the core zone formerly their foraging grounds. "We are treated like criminals for stepping into the forest we once protected and now we became landless on our ancestral land." says Santoshi Bankariya, aged 29, a local leader and community organizer. Santoshi, however, has become a symbol of resilience. She has spearheaded several initiatives to empower her people economically and educationally.

Until the early 2000s, the Bankariyas were a nomadic tribe subsisting on wild herbs, roots, and hunted game. Now settled in Musedhap, Manahari Rural Municipality ward no. 4 of Makwanpur district, they live in uncertainty on land without legal ownership. Their transition from forest to settlement was not voluntary it was shaped by political upheaval and conservation policies.

In 2062 BS, the government granted them a 20-year lease to cultivate 10 acres of land as a *kabuliyati ban* (leasehold forest), which expires in April 2083 BS. While the lease provided temporary relief, the absence of ownership means they cannot legally build permanent homes or register businesses. Their rights to food, shelter, health, and dignity remain fragile.

Nepal's constitution clearly enshrines the protection and promotion of land rights for marginalized groups, acknowledging the historic injustices endured by Indigenous peoples. Moreover, Nepal is a signatory to the International Labour Organization's Convention No. 169 an international legal instrument that affirms Indigenous peoples' rights to maintain their distinct cultures, manage their lands and resources, and be meaningfully consulted on matters affecting their lives. Article 14 of this Convention, in particular, obligates the state to recognize and protect the customary land tenure systems of Indigenous populations (ILO, 1989).

Yet, despite these legal commitments, the lived experiences of the Bankariya one of Nepal's most endangered Indigenous communities. In my time with the community, I have seen firsthand how these constitutional and international promises remain largely unfulfilled. The Bankariya have persistently appealed to state institutions submitting memoranda, engaging in dialogue with local authorities, and voicing their demands through formal channels. However, these efforts have largely been met with silence or slow-moving bureaucracy. Their legal recognition exists on paper, but in practice, they remain landless, vulnerable, and politically invisible.

On my field study, one of the respondents, a 64-year-old woman, posed a deeply poignant question: “How did the people of the land become landless in their own land?” This statement is far more than rhetorical it serves as a powerful indictment of the systemic marginalization endured by Nepal’s indigenous Bankariya community. Her words encapsulate the profound sense of dislocation, dispossession, and identity loss that has accompanied the community’s forced transition from self-sustaining, nomadic forest dwellers to stateless squatters within their own ancestral lands. It reflects the historical injustices that have stripped the Bankariya of their rights, autonomy, and cultural continuity. She further said, “We left the forest for security, yet we are still insecure. My husband and I have spent our lives worrying, and now my children do too. I don’t want the same fate for my grandchildren.”

Through my research, I have come to understand that the Bankariya’s struggle is not theirs alone it is emblematic of deeper systemic failures. Repeatedly, I have listened to stories of perseverance and quiet strength, but also of frustration, disillusionment, and exclusion.

“We left the forest for security, yet we are still insecure,” says Santamaya Bankariya, aged 60, who recalls a childhood of foraging and freedom. “I fear that even in death, I won’t find peace, knowing that my children and grandchildren might face eviction at any time and have nowhere to go.”

Contradiction between Conservation and the Displacement

While national parks and wildlife reserves are often renowned for their role in preserving biodiversity and ecological integrity, they simultaneously serve as tools of state authority over indigenous territories. This dual role becomes particularly evident in the creation of buffer zones areas surrounding protected lands where displaced indigenous communities, such as the Bankariya of Nepal, are resettled. These zones are not neutral spaces; they are heavily regulated, closely monitored, and legally ambiguous, resulting in significant limitations on indigenous autonomy and mobility.

For communities like the Bankariya, who have traditionally depended on forest ecosystems for their livelihoods, the imposition of conservation laws has brought a new form of marginalization. Arrests for “illegal” entry into ancestral forests a landscape that has sustained them for generations highlight the stark disconnect between state-led conservation frameworks and indigenous customary rights. The criminalization subsistence practices underscores a broader pattern in which environmental protection is pursued at the expense of indigenous existence.

Compounding the effects of ecological displacement is a persistent neglect in developmental support. The Bankariya, already pushed to the fringes of society, face serious barriers in accessing essential services such as healthcare, education, and economic infrastructure. Their entrepreneurial initiatives like the Bankariya Chepang Women's Soap Industry demonstrate resilience and innovation but are stifled by structural inequalities. The absence of land ownership, often a legal requirement for formal enterprise registration, effectively blocks these communities from achieving economic self-sufficiency and institutional recognition.

National parks, while essential for conserving biodiversity and protecting natural landscapes, have often led to the displacement of indigenous and local communities around the world. In the name of conservation, governments and environmental organizations have historically removed people from lands they have inhabited for generations. These evictions are based on the idea that human presence is incompatible with wilderness preservation. As a result, countless individuals have lost their homes, livelihoods, and cultural ties to the land. In Africa and Asia, for instance, tribal communities have been forced out of forested areas to create wildlife reserves, leaving them marginalized and without access to basic resources. Similarly, in the Americas, Native American groups have been denied their traditional hunting and gathering rights in parklands. This form of "green grabbing" often ignores the fact that many indigenous communities have sustainably managed their environments long before modern conservation began. Therefore, while national parks serve ecological purposes, their creation has also raised serious ethical and human rights concerns by displacing vulnerable populations and disrupting their way of life.

National parks have displaced numerous ethnic and Indigenous groups around the world, often under the banner of conservation (West, Igoe, & Brockington, 2006). In Africa, the Maasai people of Kenya and Tanzania have been repeatedly evicted from their ancestral lands to make way for national parks and game reserves such as Serengeti and Ngorongoro (Dowie, 2009). Similarly, the Batwa people, also known as Twa, were forcibly removed from forests in Uganda, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo during the creation of parks like Bwindi Impenetrable National Park (Brockington, Duffy, & Igoe, 2008). In Asia, the Karen people of Myanmar and Thailand have been displaced by conservation projects in protected forest areas. In India, tribal communities such as the Baiga and Gond have been removed from tiger reserves like Kanha and Bandhavgarh. In the Americas, the Native American Blackfeet and Shoshone-Bannock tribes were affected by the establishment of Yellowstone National Park in the United States (Chhatre & Agrawal, 2009; Spence, 1999). Likewise, the Guarani and other Indigenous peoples in South America have faced displacement due to conservation zones in the Amazon (Colchester, 1994; Neumann, 1998). These cases highlight how conservation efforts, though well-intentioned, have often ignored the rights of Indigenous peoples and disrupted their traditional ways of life.

The researcher spent time with the Bankariya people observed that their history, identity, and everyday survival have long been interwoven with the forest, which serves not only as a source of food, medicine, and firewood, but also as a cornerstone of their cultural and spiritual life.

However, this vital connection has been increasingly disrupted by the conservation regime under Parsa National Park. The enforcement of strict park regulations has placed severe limits on the Bankariya's access to forest resources, fundamentally altering the rhythms of their daily life. What once sustained them wild foods, medicinal plants, firewood is now largely out of reach. Inevitably, these constraints have led to tensions between community members and park authorities.

Livelihood Strategies of the Bankariya People

The livelihood strategies of the Bankariya people reflect a deep connection to their forest environment, traditional knowledge systems, and adaptive responses to changing socio-political contexts. Historically, the Bankariya sustained themselves through a semi-nomadic lifestyle centered on hunting, gathering, and small-scale shifting cultivation. They relied heavily on forest resources for food, medicinal plants, firewood, and materials for shelter, while also practicing subsistence agriculture on small plots when available. Hunting small animals, fishing, and foraging for wild fruits, tubers, and honey formed essential components of their diet and cultural identity.

However, the enforcement of conservation laws particularly after the expansion of Parsa National Park has severely restricted their access to forest resources, forcing the community to modify their traditional livelihood practices. In response, many Bankariya households have turned to wage labor, seasonal agricultural work on others' land, and small-scale trade, such as selling forest products where permitted. Some engage in handicraft production, while others participate in local markets through the sale of poultry, vegetables, or collected goods. Despite these adaptations, the absence of secure land tenure, limited access to education, and legal invisibility continue to undermine their economic stability.

In recent years, some individuals have explored alternative income-generating activities such as operating small shops, working in construction, or engaging in micro-enterprises though these opportunities remain constrained by a lack of capital and institutional support. Overall, the livelihood strategies of the Bankariya today are shaped by a delicate balance between preserving cultural traditions and navigating the pressures of modern economic survival, with resilience and adaptability at the core of their everyday life.

Currently, Bankariya women have initiated soap production using locally available herbs such as Aloevera, Mugwort, and Neem. This enterprise, registered as the Bankariya Chepang Women's Soap Industry, has provided a modest source of economic relief. However, the lack of land ownership hinders their ability to expand the business, as legal land registration is required for further development.

A prominent figure in this transformation is Santoshi Bankkariya, who has led the Bankariya community toward self-sufficiency through three key initiatives: a soap-making industry, homestay tourism, and adult literacy and education. With support from the National Indigenous

Women Forum (NIWF), Santoshi established the Bankariya Chepang Women's Soap Industry, involving 25 local women. They produce soaps and mouthwash from herbs such as Neem, Aloevera, and Titepati. With an initial investment of Rs. 100,000 and registration under the Cottage Industries Office, the business now generates Rs. 4,000-5,000 per day, with notable achievements such as selling Rs. 25,000 worth of products at a local festival.

Santoshi has also supported education in the community. From tutoring children at the age of 15 to launching adult literacy classes, she has significantly improved access to learning. Today, all 13 school-aged children in the community attend nearby schools, and six have passed the Secondary Education Examination (SEE). Santoshi says, "Education is our only hope." It means that Santoshi sees education as the most important and possibly the only reliable path for the Bankariya community to improve their lives, escape poverty, and overcome the challenges they face.

Conclusion

The case of the Bankariya people in Nepal reveals the deep contradictions within contemporary conservation and development paradigms. While national parks and wildlife reserves are promoted as vital for environmental sustainability, they often serve as instruments of state control that displace and marginalize indigenous communities. The creation of buffer zones and the criminalization of traditional practices of Bankariya People illustrate how conservation, when separated from the rights and knowledge of local populations. At the same time, the lack of meaningful development support leaves communities like the Bankariya trapped in persistent cycles of poverty and exclusion, with their adaptive strategies such as entrepreneurship and resilience consistently undermined by institutional barriers, including landlessness and legal invisibility.

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In Pursuit of "New Life": Navigating the Renal Transplant Complex in Nepal

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Abstract

This study explores how patients with chronic kidney disease, who seek a "new life" through renal transplantation, navigate the intricate bureaucratic processes associated with medical compliance. It examines how these processes shape patients' lived experiences and, in turn, inform their perceptions of the state. Grounded on ethnographic data gathered through negotiated interactive observation of the transplant procedure, while accompanying a chronic kidney disease patient as a caregiver until his passing, the study reveals that the renal transplant is not merely an autonomous biomedical procedure; rather, it encompasses a complex array of practices, including multiple medical consultations, mandatory legal paperwork, and extensive administrative scrutiny. The intricacies of these processes create significant intimate uncertainties, placing patients in a state of persistent liminality. Consequently, the mechanisms of renal care regimes contribute to a deeply negative perception of the state, which is viewed as failing to provide essential life-saving healthcare services.

Keywords: chronic kidney disease, transplant procedure, bureaucratic practices, uncertainties, the state

Introduction

On the evening of October 23, 2024, one of my relatives (uncle by relation), who had been residing in Punjab, India, for over twenty years for work, called me via Messenger. With a somber tone, he shared that he required a kidney transplant because both of his kidneys had reached the end stages of functioning. He had been diagnosed with Chronic Kidney Disease (CKD) stage five approximately a month ago at Dayanand Medical College & Hospital, Ludhiana, Punjab. The nephrologist explained that his renal failure was most likely caused by the diabetes and hypertension he had been suffering from for the past three years. He pointed out two treatment options: lifelong hemodialysis or a kidney transplant. However, he preferentially suggested a kidney transplant for better long-term survival and quality of life. In the meantime, the nephrologist recommended that my uncle undergo hemodialysis at least twice a week while awaiting the transplant.

After much consideration, my uncle decided to come to Nepal for a kidney transplantation, after knowing that the Human Organ Transplant Center (HOTC), also called Sahid Dharmabhakta National Transplant Center (SDNTC), is a specialized hospital specifically dedicated to organ transplants in Nepal, providing government subsidies. Furthermore, he felt optimistic about the convenience of completing the required legal and administrative procedures in his home country. As his blood type matched that of his wife, and she made a voluntary decision to donate her kidney, he expressed high expectations and hope for a normal life situation once the kidney transplant is performed.

He sent me scanned copies of his medical reports via WhatsApp and asked me to inquire about the kidney transplant process at the SDNTC. On October 25, I visited SDNTC with printed copies of the patient's medical reports. After inquiring at the reception desk, I went to the Transplant Coordination Unit. There, I presented the medical reports to the medical staff and asked for information about the transplantation procedure. After reviewing the reports, the medical staff, who was designated as a counsellor on behalf of the coordination unit, explained:

> Both the patient and the prospective donor must undergo a thorough medical examination. If the prospective donor is found to be medically and psychologically fit, and the recipient's health condition is suitable for a transplant, certain mandatory legal and administrative procedures must be completed. These procedures include signing a consent form by both the prospective recipient and donor, obtaining a certificate of relatedness, and a poor identification certificate from the local government to receive a government subsidy. Once the medical examination and legal procedures are completed, a file enclosing all necessary documents must be submitted. After the approval of eligibility, the Transplant Coordination Unit will officially place the patient on the waiting list.

She pointed out a list of patients displayed on the wall who were awaiting transplant after completing all the required tests. In addition, she estimated the number of patients who had received counselling and were currently undergoing tests but had not yet been placed on the waiting list. Based on this calculation, she projected that it would take approximately six months for a transplant to become available.

This briefing underscored two critical issues surrounding kidney transplantation in Nepal. First and foremost, the demand for kidney transplants far exceeds the available resources of service provision. Owing to a shortage of dialysis centers and government-sponsored transplant facilities, most patients are unable to access appropriate kidney replacement therapy (Sharma et al., 2026). Second, CKD patients seeking a "new life" through kidney transplantation must navigate a series of arduous bureaucratic formalities, which Gupta (2012) calls 'authenticating procedures.' These procedures entail not merely medical considerations but also administrative/bureaucratic ones. In essence, patients are required to comply with what Cicourel (2005) refers to as 'bureaucratic medical rituals,' - the routine adherence to administrative practices. This context ignited my interest in exploring how transplant medicine is practiced and experienced in Nepal.

Over the years, the incidence of CKD has emerged as a significant burden in Nepal (Mishra et al., 2025; McGee et al., 2018; Shah et al., 2013), with an overwhelming number of patients undergoing life-long dialysis and many of them awaiting transplant. Though determining the exact incidence of renal failure in Nepal is challenging due to the absence of a formal renal registry, it is estimated that approximately 3000 cases of renal failure are reported each year (Shrestha et al., 2022). Moreover, there is a lack of data on individuals who can access renal replacement therapy. It is estimated that more than 90% of patients awaiting renal transplantation die without getting a kidney for transplantation (Shrestha et al., 2022). It is often cited that key challenges in addressing the growing burden of CKD include limited financial resources, insufficient infrastructure, a lack of specialized manpower, cultural and religious beliefs, and a lack of public awareness (Atreya et al., 2023).

In Nepal, the transplantation of human body organs was legalized in 1998, with the enactment of the Human Body Organ Transplantation (Regulation and Prohibition) Act, 1998 (Government of Nepal, 1999). However, the successful renal transplantation service began at Tribhuvan University Teaching Hospital (TUTH) in 2008 (Chalise et al., 2010), marking the beginning of a new era for renal services in the country (Shah et al., 2013). Since then, numerous studies conducted by medical practitioners have concentrated on transplant outcomes and the challenges associated with transplant medicine (Shrestha et al., 2022; Shah et al., 2013; Chalise et al., 2010). Informed by biomedical perspectives, this body of literature has emphasized triumphant narratives of success, specifically the expansion and success rates of renal transplants in Nepal. In doing so, they often tend to compare replacing a failed organ to simply substituting "spare parts" (Fox & Swazey, 1992) or "faulty motor parts" (Crowley-Matoka, 2005) through advanced medicine technology. Such comparisons reflect an objectified and mechanistic vision of the body that undermines individuals' embodied experiences (Crowley-Matoka & Lock, 2006).

Viewing transplantation exclusively as a biomedical advancement overlooks the critical familial, sociocultural, and political contexts that shape its implementation. It is important to recognize that transplantation is a 'complex,' a vast assemblage of people, places, practices, and procedures which intersect medical, social, and cultural domains (Kierans, 2011). Few studies have examined the ethical, legal, and practical issues surrounding the procurement of organs from living and brain-dead donors that facilitate transplantation processes in Nepal (Atreya et al., 2023; Atreya et al., 2022). However, they have neither focused on how organ transplant technology has been embedded in the social and cultural context of Nepal nor on the specific cases where particular cultural values and ethics have impacted both living and deceased-donor transplants.

A small strand of research has shown that access to kidney transplantation in Nepal is inequitable, with significant disparities based on gender, geography, economic status, and caste (Shah et al., 2023; Rasmussen et al., 2016). While this research is rich in quantitative data, it lacks in-depth discussions on inequalities that are experienced by individuals of particular social categories. Another crucial theme that has largely remained unexplored is the "transformative experiences" (Sharp, 1995) and "persistent liminality" (Crowley-Matoka, 2005) of transplant recipients. However, while some studies have focused on the embodied experiences of dialysis patients (Sah et al., 2024; Bhattarai & Sharma, 2022), others have investigated levels of anxiety and depression among individuals who donate and receive kidneys through living-donor transplants (Bhurtyal et al., 2022) and those undergoing hemodialysis (Sharma et al., 2022).

The literature survey reveals that socially situated perspectives on CKD and renal transplant in Nepal have largely remained outside the purview of social science research. The complex "social system" of organ transplantation, which is composed of a network of interacting individuals, including prospective recipients, donors, their family members, and medical staff (Fox & Swazey, 2009 [1978]), has not received sufficient attention. Put differently, the intricate connections among institutions, protocol, professionals, and the administrative processes that shape the routine tasks of CKD patients (Manderson, 2020) are inadequately addressed in the existing literature.

As pointed out above, there are many issues surrounding the practices of transplant medicine in Nepal that deserve social scientific attention. However, this study is limited to exploring how medical procedures are intertwined with bureaucratic processes and how both are enacted within the transplantation context in Nepal. Specifically, I am intrigued by the questions of how CKD patients, who seek a "new life" through renal transplantation, navigate the complex bureaucratic procedures associated with medical compliance, how this process shapes patients' lived experiences, and, in turn, informs their perceptions of the state.

To delve into these questions, this study builds on the literature in medical anthropology and the anthropology of bureaucracy. Anthropology has been involved with the field of organ transplantation almost since its inception (Ikels, 2013). In Particular, medical anthropologists have demonstrated that organ transplantation involves not only medical technology, but also sociocultural values, ethics, and moral norms about the human body, life, and death (Crowley-Matoka & Lock, 2006; Sharp, 2006; Crowley-Matoka, 2005). Moreover, it has been illustrated that the practices and experiences associated with transplant medicine vary significantly across different political, economic, sociocultural, and bureaucratic contexts within countries (Jacob, 2012; Hamdy, 2008; Sharp, 2006; Crowley-Matoka, 2005; Schaper-Hughes, 2000; Cohen, 1999; Hogle, 1996).

Engaging the works of Michael Foucault, medical anthropologists have analyzed transplantation through the lens of "biopolitics" (Cohen, 2001; Kierans, 2015). In this perspective, transplantation is not just a medical procedure but a form of biopower. This concept refers to how power manifests in daily practices and routines through which individuals engage in self-surveillance and self-discipline, thereby subjugating themselves (Pylypa, 1998). According to Foucault (1978), biopower involves the biopolitics of the population and the biopolitics of individual bodies. While the former concerns the regulation of the population through the application of science, the latter concerns the manipulation and control of particular bodies. Cohen (2001) examines the biopolitics of organ transplantation, focusing on the shift from the biopolitics of recognition to a more pragmatic biopolitics of suppression. Building on this idea, Kierans (2016, 2015) explores the biopolitical consequences – the social, cultural, political, economic, and embodied implications - of organ transplantation technologies, with reference to the transplantation context of Mexico.

Viewing renal transplantation as a biopolitical technology offers important insights into how the state in Nepal, through its transplantation legislation, policies, and procedures, governs the care of CKD patients by defining who is eligible and ineligible, who receives a kidney, and who donates one. Moreover, how the power imposed in the form of self-regulation is exerted on the individual body through bureaucratically structured medical procedures, what Foucault calls "anatomopolitics," can be captured through the lens of biopolitics.

How biopolitics operates through "normal" bureaucratic procedures has remained a dominant theme in the literature on the anthropology of bureaucracy (Gupta, 2012). This body of literature has shown that through their biopolitical arrangements, as reflected in laws, policies, programs, and practices, state bureaucracies produce indifference or arbitrary effects on the population. It has been emphasized that, in effect, bureaucratic practices are often intertwined with structural violence (Graeber, 2015; Gupta, 2012), which likely causes physical or psychological harm to a certain portion of the population. Gupta (2012, p. 6) argues that bureaucratic (in) action repeatedly and systematically produces arbitrary outcomes in the provision of care. As bureaucratic procedures often ignore "the subtleties of real social existence and reduce everything to preconceived mechanical or statistical formulae" (Graeber, 2015, p.75), they lead to a dehumanizing effect on the human condition (Herzfeld, 1992).

Anthropologists have examined how healthcare systems are intertwined with complex bureaucratic procedures. For instance, Abadia and Oviedo (2009) have shown how legal mechanisms have become part of the obligatory bureaucratic steps that delay care, and question whether legal proficiency should decide people's healthcare needs in Colombia. In Nepal, various scholars have examined the bureaucratic context of healthcare services. Harper (2014) explores how people negotiate complex bureaucratic norms and procedures to gain access to tuberculosis treatment. Justice (1986) critically examines how the machinery of health bureaucracies underestimates the specific local cultural context and actual needs of local people and, in turn, becomes ineffective in delivering health services. Dahal (2020) highlights that bureaucratic procedures act as structural forces in shaping the limits of health facilities to deliver care services. Bhandari (2025) examines how people experience state-delivered healthcare services and how these experiences shape their perceptions of the state's legitimacy. This study contributes to and expands on the body of literature, demonstrating that the renal transplant is not merely an autonomous biomedical practice; rather, it is a social relationship deeply intertwined with legal and bureaucratic practices.

Methodology

This study is based on ethnographic data collected through "negotiated interactive observation" (Wind, 2008) of the transplant procedures, focusing on how CKD patients seeking a renal transplant navigate and experience these procedures in Nepal. This method, according to Wind (2008), is a more appropriate way to describe ethnographic fieldwork in hospital settings, allowing researchers to become receptive to the experiences of the people being studied and to the ongoing activities and events. My observations and interactions in the waiting hall and OPD rooms of the transplant center were shaped by negotiations with potential recipients and donors, as well as with administrative and medical staff. This allowed me to capture and reflect on what happens in the patients' and potential donors' itinerary of medical evaluations and bureaucratic practices associated with them.

My position as a caregiver for a CKD patient, from his arrival in Kathmandu on October 28, 2024, until his demise on January 13, 2025, provided me with an opportunity to observe medical examination procedures and also engage in interactions with other potential recipients and donors undergoing those procedures. During several follow-up visits to the transplant center, I engaged in informal conversations with other CKD patients and their prospective donors in the nephrology department's waiting hall at SDNTC. These patients were desperately eager to meet the eligibility requirements for transplantation. I also had an informal conversation with two prospective donors in the waiting area outside the hemodialysis unit of TUTH, where they shared their concerns regarding the transplant process. Listening to their stories, expressions, and opinions provided me with rich qualitative data about their subjective experiences, their perceptions of the healthcare system, and, in turn, the state. Tracking and tracing the trajectories of CKD patients undergoing hemodialysis and awaiting transplants not only helped me understand the logistical challenges associated with their chronic kidney disease but also helped me reflect on the experience of living with kidney failure and the complexities of being a patient seeking “new life” through transplantation.

My approach to analyzing the data was inductive. It was guided by the interpretive understandings and accounts of patients’ experiences in their everyday encounters with transplant medicine. I specifically focused on how these patients interpreted and assigned meanings to the significant events and processes they encountered throughout their journey.

This study does not intend to critique the practices of administrative staff and healthcare personnel, nor does it seek to evaluate the transplant center’s efficiency. Instead, it focuses exclusively on the transplant system as experienced by the patients. These patients were those who had living family members as donors and were undergoing eligibility evaluations for kidney transplantation. These patients were at different stages of evaluation: some were just initiating their medical examinations, while others were midway through the required tests, and some were approaching the final stages. The experiences and perspectives of patients who have already undergone transplantation were not included in this study.

Legal and Administrative Context of Renal Transplantation in Nepal

The prevailing law governing kidney transplantation in Nepal is the Human Body Organ Transplantation (Regulation and Prohibition) Act (HBOTA) of 1998, along with its amendment in 2016 and the Human Body Organ Transplantation (Regulation and Prohibition) Regulation of 2016. The HBOTA outlines the bureaucratic procedures and medical context necessary for conducting organ transplants. It establishes protocols for the authorization of organ procurement and transplantation. The Ministry of Health and Population is the central authority responsible for overseeing the implementation of this Act.

The Act initially limited organ transplants to “close relatives,” which included immediate family members such as sons, daughters, mother, father, brothers, and sisters, as well as some paternal relatives. However, the 2016 amendment broadened the definition of “close relatives” to encompass maternal relatives, distant relatives, and even arrangements for paired exchange between two or more unrelated families. It also recognized deceased (brain-dead) donors as legitimate sources of multiple organs and established procedures to define and determine brain death, intending to increase the supply of available organs. Despite the legalization of cadaver donations and paired exchanges, the primary source of transplants still relies overwhelmingly on living related organ donors. It is disheartening to note that the brain-dead donor transplant program has not expanded significantly even though the law allows for it, and the availability of organs from brain-dead donors has been on the rise (Shrestha et al., 2022).

The legislation requires the production of legal paperwork along with medical documents. These include identification papers, such as copies of the citizenship certificate and the certificate of relatedness between donors and recipients from the local level government where they belong. They should submit an application to the Transplant Approval Committee attesting to the voluntary consent forms of both donor and recipient, with two witnesses of each, in the given format. These consent forms are legally binding agreements when signed by both donor and recipient, authorizing bureaucratic proceedings for transplantation. At least two doctors should certify that the patient needs to undergo organ transplantation. They should also certify by declaring that no physical harm will be seen on the donor after donating the organ.

Besides the transplantation legislation, transplant procedure intersects other policies and programs, which include the National Health Insurance Policy, 2017, and the Guideline for Medical Treatment of Deprived Citizens Program, 2023. Through these policies and programs, the government provides financial assistance to support CKD patients undergoing lifelong dialysis, kidney transplantation, and post-transplant care only in government-approved healthcare sites (Sharma et al., 2026). To receive these subsidized renal care services, patients must produce a health insurance card and a recommendation certificate from local government authorities confirming that the patient's financial condition is not good enough to bear the cost of treatment.

After the submission of all required documents – legal, medical, and administrative - the Transplant Approval Committee scrutinizes the authenticity of both the kidney donor and recipient to maintain ethical and legal compliance. Then the patients are listed in the official waiting list. The patients who will receive an organ are prioritized based on certain criteria as prescribed in the regulation.

This reveals that a renal transplant occurs in a social environment where different institutions, rules, and practices intersect. Put differently, a transplant occurs in what Smith (1999) calls 'textually mediated' social environments. Smith (1999) argues that the texts embedded in documents – forms, recommendations, procedures, policies, and rules form the ruling relations, which in turn, constitute a "complex field of coordination and control." In the transplant context, the bureaucratically organized ruling relations shape not only the practices of patients but also those of health personnel and administrative staff.

Following the Procedure

Kidney transplant is a last resort for CKD patients, who view it as the route to a "new lease of life" and an opportunity to no longer depend on a dialysis machine (Kierans, 2016). Many patients and their family members see it as "an end game" (Kierans, 2005, p.345), believing that it will end their struggles with CKD. Receiving a kidney transplant is viewed as "new life" because it helps restore the recipient's health to normal condition, independent of a dialysis machine. Therefore, they seek a transplant with the hope of life at all costs. However, transplantation is a complicated, time-consuming, and physically and emotionally draining process for organ recipients and their families (Sharp, 1995).

From its inception to its implementation, transplant technology involves various ethical, legal, and medical considerations (Das, 2000). The journey toward qualifying for living donation and undergoing transplantation is lengthy and filled with medical jargon (Bhurtyal et al., 2022). This process is multifaceted and can take several weeks or months to complete. Throughout this entire procedure, patients are often expected to engage in a system of bureaucratic medical compliance. Bureaucratic rendering of the patient pathway is assumed to be predictable, routine, and with explicit formalizations of responsibility and accountability (Kierans, 2018).

The legislation urges patients to submit a multitude of documents, including medical reports and legal documents, to prove their eligibility for transplantation. These documents are not merely bureaucratic instruments; they play a crucial role in shaping practices and outcomes (Hull, 2012; Gupta, 2012). By submitting these documents, patients become “legible” (Scott, 1998) and manageable within the transplantation system. This emphasis on paperwork places the responsibility on patients as the primary agents in the treatment of their condition, thereby mediating the clinical interaction with specialists (Kierans, 2019).

The process of producing and circulating these documents begins when CKD patients are medically recommended as potential transplant recipients and choose to move forward with the transplant procedure. Since SDNTC is regarded as one of the most trusted government institutions offering transplantation services with government subsidies, many CKD patients with low to moderate incomes choose it as their primary option for receiving a transplant. To date, the majority of kidney transplants performed in Nepal have taken place at this center.

The ground floor at SDNTC is the main site of activity for the nephrology department. Usually, three days a week – Sunday, Tuesday, and Thursday - it looks busy with kidney outpatients and their family members. It is the site where outpatients receive medical consultation, diagnostic services, and follow-up care. For each consecutive consultation with the nephrologists, both patients and their potential donors must navigate certain bureaucratic processes.

Starting early in the morning, patients’ caregivers and the prospective donors encounter the security guards, referred to as gatekeepers. These gatekeepers interact directly with patients and their caregivers. They issue tokens required for purchasing an official ticket (OPD book) and receive the stamp on the ticket to reserve the appointment with the doctor for the particular day. They manage the queues in the hospital, controlling access to the doctors’ room or allowing patients to enter in an orderly manner. While they enforce rules about where patients and caregivers are permitted to wait, sit, or stand, or go in or go out, many patients express their frustration. Patients and their caregivers often blame gatekeepers for simply adhering to administrative procedures rather than showing empathy.

After obtaining a token, patients or their caregivers and prospective donors must wait again in front of the ticket counter to purchase a ticket or receive a stamp on it. Once the patients or their prospective donors have their ticket, they may be required to meet the nurse in the OPD nursing room to have their vital signs recorded. After this, patients or prospective donors should submit their ticket to the security guard at the entrance of the nephrology department and then wait in the waiting area until their name or token number is called. Following these procedural rules is a regular and essential activity for being eligible to see the doctors. This is how patients encounter bureaucratically structured practices to consult with doctors.

The consultation with doctors lures the patients into the transplant procedure. The transplantation evaluation process begins with a series of comprehensive medical tests and consultations. Initially, medical screening of a prospective donor is recommended to determine whether or not she/he meet predetermined eligibility criteria. The nephrologist provides a detailed list of tests that the prospective donor must undergo to assess his/her overall health and kidney function. This process typically entails multiple visits to hospitals and laboratories.

In general, the evaluation consists of three sequential steps. It starts with basic diagnostic tests, such as blood and urine tests, X-ray, and ultrasound. If any contraindications are identified, further testing may be suggested, or another donor may need to be found. This progresses to more complex tests, including CT-scan and renal scan, along with consultations from multiple medical specialists. These specialists include a nephrologist, cardiologist, pulmonologist, gynecologist (if applicable), urologist, psychiatrist, and dentist. Both patients and potential donors must produce separate OPD tickets for each consultation with these specialists. Each specialist may recommend additional tests related to their specific area of expertise and must provide certification of clearance.

If a prospective donor is deemed eligible, the patient will need to undergo a similar series of medical tests. They may also require additional assessments, such as cardiac angiography. Patient's medical evaluation unfolds in the broader context of the patient's other health conditions. During the process, patients may witness other health-related complexities, which may require treatment by halting the evaluation process. In these instances, patients may need to move between different hospitals and laboratories. This may make the evaluation process lengthier.

It is essential for patients and prospective donors to carry the cumulative documents for each consultation with doctors or while moving between hospitals and laboratories. The documents mediate the doctor-patient communications, out of which clinical narratives are produced. Using medical records, doctors standardize whether or not a donor can donate and a recipient can receive the kidneys.

Patients' and donors' medical documents are not enough for the transplant to be executed. As discussed in the preceding section, besides medical documents, they must produce legal paperwork for meeting administrative criteria. After the submission of all required documents, the Transplant Approval Committee scrutinizes the authenticity of both the kidney donor and recipient to maintain ethical and legal compliance. Receiving multiple approvals at various stages may prolong the transplantation process.

Adherence to procedures, often accompanied by paperwork, is common in the medical field. Harper (2014, p. 9) draws from his experiences with the Tuberculosis control program to illustrate this point. He notes that, although it may seem boring at first glance, reflecting on the making of inscriptions on paper in clinics and following trials of reports through various offices sheds light on how the state operates in Nepal.

Though patients do not deny that thorough examinations of both the recipient and donor are essential for successful transplantation and to ensure their safety, they perceive that the lengthy procedures often create extra burdens for patients confronting severe health challenges. Their common complaint was that in the name of procedures, their trauma and distress are often overlooked. Patients express a desire for a speedy process and urge doctors to show serious concern and empathy for their deteriorating health conditions. But they experience that these pleas often go unacknowledged.

A patient in his early fifties narrated his experience in this way.

> Kidney transplant is not easily accessible. Too much emphasis on procedure has made it complicated. We should make several back-and-forth movements. Routine dialysis, appointments with different specialists across various departments and hospitals, visits to imaging centers and laboratories, and the inevitable waiting times at each stage create significant stress for us. We have no options. We have to comply with the instructions given to us.

After follow-up appointments, my uncle often voiced his dissatisfaction with the doctor's focus on the procedure rather than on his deteriorating health. He felt that his problems were not given the attention they deserved. He used to say, "The doctors consult the papers, not the patients." In a similar vein, another patient remarked, "Doctors have no time to listen to patients. They rush to write in the paper and instruct us to come with reports at the next visit." This implies that during clinical interactions, patients seek not only medical goods and services but also recognition, respect, care, and solidarity from doctors (Cooper, 2015).

A prospective donor, undergoing eligibility tests to donate a kidney to her husband, gets confused by the multiple documents she possesses. She noted:

> I have a pile of documents – lab reports, tickets, and bills. I often get confused about which documents to carry to follow-up visits and which are not. Separate tickets for different doctors and multiple lab reports create confusion. I do not know why the reports produced in the same hospital are not circulated electronically.

Medical procedures are considered inescapable, taken-for-granted. While navigating a series of hospital procedures and protocols in the iterative process of evaluation, both CKD patients and prospective donors must become part of an uncompromising "medical order" (Harper, 2014, p.8), which involves the process of objectification where patients are abstracted from the disease. As a patient, one becomes a participant in a techno-scientific practice infused with norms and values that both transform and promise a retention of certain taken-for-granted conceptions, actions, and desires (Gunnarson, 2016).

Transplant technology, like any other biomedical technology, can be viewed as the product of rationally ordered sociotechnical complexes in which it must be embedded to function (Lock & Nguyen, 2010). Patients are bound to adhere to a strict regimen of medication and behavior modification to ensure the success of their transplant. By engaging in these self-disciplinary and self-regulating practices, they effectively transform their bodies into what Michel Foucault describes as a "docile body" (Foucault, 1979, 1980), which becomes an object of scientific medical examination and analysis (Foucault, 1973). The procedures of renal transplant are, what Foucault says, "technologies of bodily governance."

Experiences of Uncertainties

A layered and complex entanglement of medical, legal, and bureaucratic procedures gives rise to experiences of uncertainty among patients. Almost all patients with whom I had conversations narrated that they were living at the intersection of life and death, between optimism and pessimism in the face of indeterminacy caused by their vulnerable health condition and the arduous procedure of transplant. In the course of medical examinations, they gradually realized that they must adhere to the rationality and coherence required by each step of the procedure, even as their health continues to deteriorate. They are bound to wait for their reports, for being eligible to receive a transplant, for being listed on the official waiting list, and to receive a transplant. On-the-day and to-and-fro waiting shapes CKD patients' circulatory and prolonged encounter with the transplant procedure, which, in turn, generates experiences of uncertainty.

My uncle's fluctuating health, along with hold-ups in his donor's medical examination due to certain contraindications in her reports, intensified his feelings of uncertainty. In the course of a medical examination, he was admitted to a private hospital twice, where he used to take routine dialysis because of his severe health condition. The first time, blood infection led him to admit in intensive care unit, while the second time, he had fluctuating blood pressure and glucose levels in his body. After each recovery, he expected a speedy process of medical evaluation.

As his medical examination approached its final stages, he expressed his concerns that the uncertainty surrounding his health had created financial scarcity for his family. The extended duration of his medical examination led him to question whether he had made the right decision to initiate the procedure of renal transplant. Yet, he had hope of living independent of the dialysis machine and strict dietary restrictions. The things did not happen as expected. Unfortunately, like many others, he was unable to undergo a transplant, as he passed away because of a perceived heart attack before being placed on the official transplantation waiting list.

A mother of a twenty-one-year-old son undergoing hemodialysis in TUTH and initiating medical examination appeared worried as she struggled to understand the complex transplant procedure. Donating her kidney, she was determined to do whatever was needed to save her son's life. However, she was uncertain about how she would meet paperwork requirements moving back and forth between far western Nepal, where she belongs, and Kathmandu. For being simply literate, she expected that doctors would provide sufficient information, ensuring that she would understand when her son would receive her kidney. She was also not sure whether her financial condition could bear the cost of a transplant and post-transplant care.

How long would it take to transplant? This question often troubles patients and their families. A patient, aged 34, returned from Qatar with a serious health condition and, after being diagnosed with CKD, travelled from Rupandehi to SDNTC to seek a kidney transplant. He had recently rented a room near SDNTC, believing that it would be easy to attend the follow-up visits. As his donor's medical examination extended, he expressed his aggression:

> Neither the hospital nor the doctors had to search for a donor for me. My wife offered to donate her kidney to save my life. However, due to the lengthy and complex procedures involved, it is uncertain when I will actually receive a kidney and regain a new life. As the days are passing, I am losing hope. I am tired of waiting for my wife's test results. I don't know when my tests will begin. When I asked the doctors how long it would take to complete all the tests, they advised me to follow their guidance and take things step by step.

Another patient, aged 44, completed all the requirements for a transplant and was placed on the waiting list. I met him at SDNTC when he came there for a follow-up visit and to get information on when his turn for transplantation would come. He was optimistic about gaining a new life as he believed that SDNTC is the most trusted transplant center led by a recognized transplant surgeon. However, he was equally apprehensive about knowing that a patient undergoing medical examination for a transplant had passed away recently. As his health used to fluctuate repetitively, he was not sure whether he would receive a transplant. He stated:

> When I started to receive dialysis twice a week, my everyday life became limited. I had to quit my job, which directly affected my family's expenses. The strict rules regarding my diet and liquid intake have weakened my body. My social engagements are now restricted. Without a caregiver, I struggle to manage everyday activities smoothly. Now, I feel like I am running out of time.

These narratives reveal that sense of temporal uncertainty, having no idea about how long it would take to transplant a kidney, is almost uniformly experienced. The experiences of uncertainty are often amplified by the lengthy medical procedures and the systemic primacy of waiting. CKD patients find themselves in the 'liminal space' (Turner, 1969; Van Gennep, 1960), where they ambiguously experience that receiving a transplant is uncertain. They live an in-between life of treatment and the threat of death. As patients struggle to understand the medical interpretation of their condition, their ability to plan or imagine their future is obscured. This lived reality suggests that patients live with precarious and liminal everyday realities (Kierans, 2018; Crowley-Matoka, 2005).

Waiting is not always an empty experience, however. During the exhausting wait on the ground floor of SDNTC, patients share their experiences on the journey toward transplantation. They share personal narratives of struggling under the burdens of CKD, navigating the stringent transplantation procedures, and coping with emotional distress and financial scarcity. These narratives include corporeal experiences of impairment, obstacles encountered during diagnosis, severe health issues stemming from kidney failure, and the psychological stress they have faced. They also recount the hospitals they visited, the various doctors they consulted, the medications they received, the challenges they faced in finding routine dialysis, and how they ultimately arrived at the transplant center. Moreover, everyday constraints, such as lifestyle limitations, dietary restrictions, and reduced mobility, become part of conversations. Financial scarcity stemming from unexpected treatment expenses is another common subject of discussion; many had to quit their jobs due to their health challenges and seek debt for treatment. These personal stories have immense heuristic value for patients. They have the potential to be a powerful conduit of meaning, unravelling the complex relationships that lie between the high technologies of medical interventions and the subtle ordinariness of the day-to-day (as cited in Kierans, 2005, p.343).

Patients share stories regarding the successes and failures of individuals who have undergone transplants in the past, known through media reports or social connections. Citing the failure stories, they come to realize that engaging in the transplant process does not guarantee a positive outcome. They are also aware of the risks associated with the potential failure of body systems and recognize that many patients do not reach the organ transplant waiting stage; before they fully comply with the legal and medical protocol, they die during the process. This awareness brings to light the unpredictability of current and future circumstances, which often lie beyond their control. Over time, they come to understand that events associated with treatment do not always unfold as planned. As a result, these patients strive to mentally prepare themselves for any eventuality. They believe that there are no alternatives except to submit to and accept the circumstances they are likely to face.

In the midst of uncertainty, as Scheper-Hughes (2008) notes, CKD patients are living and surviving to tell the tale. Their stories are not simply juxtapositions to medical accounts, but instead are narrative forms *shaped* by the properties of medical outcome, reflecting the unique meaning of individual experience (Kierans, 2005, p.344). By sharing their embodied sensations, patients intend to help one another cope with the anxieties associated with pre-transplantation.

Patients' narratives reflect that the unpredictability of illness, the uncertainties regarding the future, and the unexpected implications of medical interventions contribute to discontinuities in experience and in the very construction of time itself (Kierans, 2005). Patients' experiences of deeply personal and systematic challenges faced while navigating the transplant process, which are described as "intimate uncertainties" (Kierans, 2018), manifest as the constant, daily pressure of managing a failing body under conditions of unpredictable and systematic procedures of treatment. Thus, the intimate experiences of patients living with CKD become a diagnostic site for assessing how renal care is actually practiced in Nepal.

Imagining the State

The encounters with the mundane bureaucratic practices are the primary arena in which people learn about the state (Sharma & Gupta, 2006; Gupta, 1995). Moreover, mundane bureaucratic procedures provide important clues to understanding the micro-politics of state work, how state authority and government operate in people's daily lives, and how the state comes to be imagined, encountered, and re-imagined by the local population (Sharma & Gupta, 2006).

Patients' encounters with the renal care system provide crucial ethnographic data on how they perceive the efficacy and morality of the Nepali state. A patient, who was in his mid-forties, was diagnosed with end-stage kidney failure two years ago. Previously, he owned a small retail shop that served as his source of income. But, he had to quit it to focus on his treatment. When he felt that the constant need to be within a dialysis machine three days a week for four hours was challenging, he decided to pursue a kidney transplant, and his wife offered to donate her kidney.

Initially, he consulted a private hospital. However, he ultimately chose the SDNTC due to financial constraints. At the time of our conversation, he was approaching the final stage of medical evaluation in about five months. In the course of his evaluation, he learned that the efforts of the government are negligible in healthcare provision. He expressed his frustrations with the government for its failure to address the needs of poor patients.

> The government of our country does not take people's health seriously. Instead of providing life-saving healthcare services, it wastes money on unnecessary projects, such as constructing view towers. A significant portion of the taxes we (people) pay is misused due to rampant corruption. But many kidney patients are losing their lives due to a shortage of dialysis machines. Those seeking kidney transplants face long waiting times because of inadequate hospital infrastructures, technologies, and qualified doctors.
>
> Top political leaders, bureaucrats, and their families can easily access healthcare services, both within the country and abroad, often at the expense of national funds. They are not required to follow the same procedures or wait for treatment like ordinary citizens. Financially well-off people can receive transplants in private hospitals or travel abroad for medical care. In contrast, ordinary people are left to suffer from poor health conditions

> and often die without timely treatment. In these situations, how can we trust that the government truly exists to serve us?

In a similar vein, another patient pointed out a rumor that the healthcare system has not remained untouched by corruption. He stated:

> The media reminds us every day that the state's money is misused. Even the lifesaving health sector has been caught up in the corruption trap. We read and hear news reports of a network of corruption among politicians, bureaucrats, and traders in the purchase of medical equipment. Not only the lack of money, but also illegitimate compensation is the cause of the inadequate supply of medicine and equipment.

These narratives imply that the discourse of corruption turns out to be a key arena through which the state comes to be imagined (Gupta, 1995). Though among the patients, corruption talk centers less around facts than around rumors and gossip, they come to believe that corruption has become a commonplace activity, even in the healthcare system. The corruption cases filed against the financial irregularities involved in the procurement of medical equipment reported in the media (Republica, 2025, October 9, April 28; The Kathmandu Post, 2025, October 19) have led to widespread distrust in state institutions, including the healthcare system.

Patients do not blame SDNTC and the doctors working there for their hardships in accessing renal care. However, they believe that the image of the state is reflected in its provision of healthcare services. They criticize the government for its inability to manage life-saving dialysis machines required for kidney patients and the medical infrastructure required for transplants.

My uncle had returned from India, where access to renal care was more straightforward compared to Nepal. However, due to financial constraints and assumed administrative inconvenience in India, he decided to undergo a transplant in Nepal. When he arrived in Kathmandu, he struggled to find a routine dialysis service, which was crucial for his survival. On the first consultation at SDNTC, the nephrologist recommended continuing the dialysis along with initiating the transplant procedure. But the doctor's recommendation does not ensure that the patient will get dialysis. When we went to the dialysis unit at SDNTC, a nurse told us that there is no chance at all for a new patient to get routine dialysis service, as many patients are waiting for their turn. Pointing out a list of hospitals that provide dialysis service under government subsidy, she suggested that we inquire at other hospitals. However, my uncle received an emergency dialysis there following the required blood tests.

He received two subsequent urgent dialysis treatments from the Department of Emergency, TUTH, following emergency medical protocols. He did not get a bed there either for routine dialysis. Making rounds of contacts at several hospitals, he received a routine dialysis under government subsidy at the Himal Hospital located at Gyaneshwor, Kathmandu, after three paid services.

Other patients whom I met at SDNTC also shared similar kinds of stories of challenges they faced while finding dialysis services. Studies have shown that dialysis care in Nepal faces significant challenges due to limited resources and infrastructure, leading to long waiting times and inadequate access to life-sustaining treatment for patients with end-stage kidney disease (Mishra et al., 2025; McGee et al., 2018). In some instances, hospitals are suspected of financial irregularities while claiming reimbursement from the government (Republica, 2019, October 2).

CKD patients' narratives reveal that it is the obligation of the state to be involved as a key actor in the provision of basic services, including healthcare services. They hold an 'ideal image' of the state that it should serve public interests and has an obligation to them as it survives on the taxes they pay. However, they reveal their experiences of divergence between the 'image' of the state and its actual 'practice.' For them, the state becomes visible or invisible as they experience its policies and practices in the hospital setting. The process of receiving renal care is the site where the state's successes and failures in providing healthcare services become evident. Moreover, patients criticize this life-saving biomedical technology for becoming caught up in the procedures, replicating other bureaucratic organizations.

Inadequate healthcare services are attributed to the negligence and lack of commitment of political leaders. Based on their routine encounter with the transplantation procedure, both patients and their families portray a negative image of the state in Nepal. This clearly aligns with the notion that people's encounters with the routine bureaucratic procedures shape what the state means to people (Sharma & Gupta, 2006). In the context of transplantation, the intimate experiences of CKD patients in their everyday encounter with the bureaucratic procedures significantly shape their perceptions of the state. As Dahal (2025) argues, citizens who are supposed to use healthcare services understand and experience the government from their locations.

As Crowley-Matoka (2016) notes in the case of Mexico, Nepal also resembles a "slippery state." This term describes a situation characterized by unsettled and unstable political conditions, in which the state is perceived as a source of distrust and disappointment rather than as a reliable provider of services. CKD patients in Nepal do not blame the state for the cause of their disease, as the poor Egyptian patients understand and experience their illness in terms of Egypt's larger social, economic, and political ills, as discussed by Hamdy (2008). However, they blame the state for its negligence and inability to deliver health care services.

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the intricate institutional networks that patients with failed kidneys must traverse when seeking living-donor kidney transplantation. Specifically, it focused on the intimate uncertainties experienced by CKD patients who were in desperate need of a kidney transplant. The findings revealed that the suffering, experiences, and sacrifices of patients and their families provide an effective entry point to examine renal care (Manderson, 2019, p. xi). It also highlighted that bureaucratically structured medical procedures governing renal transplant in Nepal create a complex system that requires patients to engage in prolonged negotiations with medical personnel, hospital administration, and authorities at government institutions.

The procedural rigor encompassing multiple medical consultations, mandatory legal paperwork, and layered administrative scrutiny revealed that the transplant technology, one of the biomedicine technologies, is not an autonomous entity: its development and implementation are enmeshed with medical, social, and political interests that have practical and moral consequences (Lock & Nguyen, 2010). It also becomes explicit that a kidney transplant is not merely a life-extending biomedicine but a complex sociopolitical system that administers the life and death of patients. Bureaucratic procedures do not depend on patients' needs, but on meeting the system's administrative norms. The path consisting of the following mandatory medical protocols and various legislations is what Abadia and Oviedo (2009) call "bureaucratic itineraries" of the transplant system, which have a profound effect on CKD patients' access to a renal transplant.

Despite the availability of donors, lengthy eligibility evaluation procedures often lead to the premature death of CKD patients desiring a transplant. The problem lies not only in the transplant center's surgical capacity but also, significantly, in the pre-transplant medical process. The system's structural complexity leads to catastrophic outcomes for many patients, as in the case of my uncle, who passed away without receiving a kidney. The emphasis on the rule-bound adherence, documentation, and objectification of the patient's body and the denial of his subjective suffering, as seen in his encounter with transplant procedures, manifests the anatomopolitics.

The organization of the transplant system involves a high degree of complexity, not only because of its particular medical technologies and procedures, but also because of the various types of social relationships it embodies. The need for strict "bureaucratic proceduralism" (Sharma & Gupta, 2006) turns the transplant evaluation process into a burdensome regime of mandatory medical and legal compliance. This complexity creates significant "intimate uncertainties," pushing patients into a state of "persistent liminality." Consequently, the mechanisms of renal care regimes contribute to a deeply negative perception of the state, which is seen as failing to deliver essential life-saving healthcare services. To put it differently, the state's perceived failures are inscribed upon the bodies and experiences of citizens seeking fundamental healthcare services.

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Causes of Abroad Studies among Students in Nepal: An Anthropological Analysis of Motives, Trends, and Impacts

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Abstract

Over the past decade, Nepal has witnessed an unprecedented surge in outbound student mobility. This article constitutes a secondary analysis and synthesis of two recent master's theses (Dhungana, 2025; Uprety, 2024), employing a qualitatively driven mixed-methods approach. Anchored in a critical juxtaposition of push-pull theory and neoliberal globalization theory, and framed through an anthropological lens that prioritizes lived experience, cultural meaning-making, and kinship dynamics, the study explores why Nepali students are eager to leave at an early age and how this trend affects students, families, and the national economy. The findings reveal that the decision to study abroad is shaped by structural pushes such as political instability, inadequate educational quality, and limited job prospects and powerful cultural pulls, including the prestige of foreign degrees, the influence of kinship networks abroad, and a pervasive "culture of migration" fueled by peer pressure, social media, and aggressive consultancy marketing. Narratives drawn from the theses show that motivations are stratified by caste, class, and gender, and that the migration industrial complex in places like Putalisadak actively manufactures the desire to leave. The consequences are profound: while individual students gain global exposure and families receive remittances, Nepal experiences a critical brain drain, capital outflow, and a hollowing out of its academic institutions. The study concludes that student migration is not merely an educational choice but a deeply embedded sociocultural phenomenon requiring comprehensive policy interventions that address both structural deficiencies and the cultural aspirations driving this exodus.

Keywords: student migration, Nepal, anthropological analysis, brain drain, transnationalism, culture of migration

Introduction

I have been writing about migration of youth either for employment or for the abroad Studies as major challenges of contemporary Nepal not only because it is about brain drain but also it has direct impact on youth in agriculture in parts and politico-economy and sovereignty of the country as a whole (Pokharel, 2022). Uprety (2024) illustrates the stark contemporary reality in Nepal where the pervasive imagery of "ghost towns" and "empty villages" has transitioned from rural landscapes into the nation's academic institutions. This demographic shift is punctuated by record-breaking student mobility, with over 100,000 "No Objection Certificates" (NOC) issued in a single year, signaling a crisis that extends beyond labor migration to a fundamental hollowing out of domestic university classrooms. Consequently, the discourse surrounding "brain drain" and "capital outflow" is no longer just a policy concern but a daily reality reflected in both mainstream media and the social fabric of Nepali youth.

This alarming scenario is also recognized by the state. Amid growing calls to improve the quality of education in Nepal's universities to retain students within the country, the Nepal Rastra Bank (NRB) has reported a significant outflow of funds for study abroad. According to the central bank's latest report, Nepal spent Rs 64.15 billion on foreign education in the first seven months of the current fiscal year (NRB, 2025). Ministry reports show, in 2023 alone, over 108,000 Nepalis left the country on study visas, nearly matching the outflow of labor migrants for Gulf jobs (MoE, 2024). Kathmandu's streets are lined with IELTS banners, and plus-two graduate queue daily for the Ministry's No-Objection Certificate. Dhungana (2025) has rightly mentioned, "student migration has become increasingly prevalent in Nepalese society, with a growing number of students opting to study abroad." Therefore, abroad studies is not only about migration. It is about brain drain as well as capital outflow. This study seeks to move beyond the mere counting of departures, instead documenting the messy, lived realities and the aggressive, profit-driven "migration industrial complex" that transforms education into a ticket for displacement. Both from academic point of view and applied aspects of addressing the burning issues of contemporary Nepal, this study tried to look the phenomenon from Anthropological lens.

Research Gap

A vast body of literature has documented labor migration from Nepal, and most of the work is based on macroeconomic data and push-pull frameworks that capture the structural dimensions of mobility but not human experience. What remains missing is a qualitative, human-centered understanding of the current student exodus—an anthropological understanding that takes seriously the aspirations, anxieties, and relational worlds of young people contemplating departure. Existing studies often map the contours of migration flows but seldom illuminate the lived realities that pulse beneath statistical surfaces: the family conversations held in cramped kitchens, the quiet accumulation of debt, the hopeful scrolling through university websites late at night.

There is a noticeable, urgent lack of research that employs a rigorous sociological or anthropological lens to bridge the chasm between the systemic pressures of neoliberal globalization and the intimate, heavy micro-narratives of those navigating these commodified paths. In this pressing context, the foundational ethnographic work found in the recent theses of Dhungana (2025) and Uprety (2024) offers a fertile ground that demands further, critical analysis and a more robust, radical theoretical grounding. This paper seeks to move beyond the mere counting of departures, instead documenting the messy, lived realities and the aggressive, profit-driven "migration industrial complex" that transforms education into a ticket for displacement.

Research Objectives

This synthetic paper has the following objectives:

1. Why are Nepali students eager to leave the country at an early age?
2. How does the trend affect students, families, and the national economy?

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

To study the causes of abroad studies and its impacts, various theories can be used ranging from Marxist, neoliberal, globalization, etc. Classical push-pull theory is also significant to study the push and pull factors triggering migration of different types. In this study both push-pull theory and neoliberal globalization theory are used, while other theories also help to analyze the findings.

Push-Pull Theory

Lee's (1965) classic model frames migration decisions as a balance of origin-side "pushes" (unemployment, political instability) and destination "pulls" (better wages, prestige). Nepali cases echo this: dissatisfaction with "low quality education and limited career opportunities" pushes youth outward, whereas "the currency of a foreign degree" pulls them in (Gyanwali & Bashyal, 2025). Yet this framework has been critiqued for its mechanistic portrayal of migration as rational utility-maximizing behavior, failing to account for the affective, aspirational, and socially embedded dimensions of decision-making (Koirala, 2025).

Neoliberal Globalization

Harvey (2005) argues that deregulated markets commodify higher education. Knight (2011) adds that employers prize global credentials, making study abroad an "investment in employability." Nepali media narratives glorify the "Australian dream," reinforcing a neoliberal imaginary.

Based on the theory, after neoliberalism started by the 1970s, it has reshaped migration trends. International student mobility has risen from 0.8 million in 1975 to over 6 million in 2023 (OECD, 2024). Guruz (2008) links the boom to the knowledge economy and English-medium hubs. Nepal mirrors this shift but from a periphery position; only 470 foreign students entered Nepal in 2022 while 110,217 Nepalis secured NOCs to leave. This theory, rooted in Marxist political economy, draws ideas from dependency and world-system perspectives on how capitalist core countries benefit from capitalist policies. David Harvey also concludes that neoliberalism is a process of displacement and dispossession of people in countries like Nepal.

An Anthropological Juxtaposition: Aspiration, Kinship, and Social Capital

To move beyond these structural theories, this study incorporates anthropological frameworks that explain the *cultural* logic of migration. Arjun Appadurai's (2004) concept of the "capacity to aspire" is central. For Nepali youth, migration aspirations are not individual preferences but are cultivated within family strategies and mediated by global "ethnoscapes" and "mediascapes" that render certain futures imaginable (Appadurai, 1996). Koirala (2025) extends this to the Nepali context, demonstrating how migration imaginaries are structured through the interdependent cultural logics of *rahar* (desire) and *badhyata* (compulsion). The aspirational pull of cosmopolitan modernity coexists dialectically with the coercive pressures of structural precarity. Chuwan (2026) further reveals how these aspirations are stratified by class, showing that education-led migrants to the Global North—typically possessing higher economic and cultural capital—frame migration as an individual "self-project" for career advancement, whereas labor-led migrants approach migration as a familial "survival project" financed through high-risk debt.

Simultaneously, Janet Carsten's (2004) theorization of "relatedness" illuminates the social impacts. In contexts of transnational migration, kinship is actively made through practices of cohabitation, shared care, and financial support across borders. The departure of young people for education abroad creates what may be termed a "care drain," as grandparents assume parenting responsibilities and family obligations are transformed into transnational circuits of remittances and emotional maintenance (Gurung, 2025). Sunam (2020) demonstrates that in Nepal's remittance villages, this migration fundamentally reconfigures rural social and economic life, producing paradoxical outcomes where remittances sustain households but the loss of educated youth undermines local innovation.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitatively driven mixed-methods approach (QUAL-quant), situated at the intersection of sociology and anthropology. The qualitatively oriented design is particularly used for examining student migration from Nepal, as it prioritizes the lived experiences, cultural meaning-making, and kinship dynamics that underpin mobility decisions—domains best accessed through qualitative inquiry—while incorporating quantitative techniques to systematically document demographic patterns and rank push-pull factors (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Appadurai, 2004).

Data derive from three sources:

1. Document analysis of two recent ethnographic theses conducted in Nepal: Dhungana (2025), which examined student perceptions among +2 graduates in Kathmandu, and Uprety (2024), which investigated the causes and impacts among students applying through consultancies in Kathmandu.
2. Secondary statistics from the Ministry of Education, OnlineKhabar, and the International Labour Organization.
3. Narrative case studies documented in the original theses, which provide the ethnographic depth for this analysis.

Both theses employed nonrandom, purposive sampling to select information-rich informants with direct experience of student migration. Uprety's (2024) study involved 40 students visiting three consultancies in Kathmandu, while Dhungana's (2025) study involved 15 students from ten educational consultancies. Primary data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews and case studies, allowing for thick description of migration aspirations and impacts. Interview data were analyzed thematically, with push-pull categories serving as initial coding frameworks. Therefore, this study has the benefit of also comparing the two sets of data with theoretical and methodological similarity. Quantitative treatment was limited to simple frequency counts and rank-order analyses of push-pull factors, employed not for statistical inference but to illuminate distribution patterns within the purposive sample. Economic determinism and globalization theory served as overarching analytical lenses, situating individual narratives within Nepal's broader political-economic transformations. No primary data collection was undertaken for this synthetic paper, and ethnographic materials have not been previously published except in their original thesis form submitted to the departments.

Findings and Analysis

The combined findings from the ethnographic fieldwork of Dhungana (2025) and Uprety (2024) unveil a remarkably consistent, nuanced profile of the contemporary Nepali student migrant.

The Profile of a Migrant Student

While popular media often paints a picture of impulsive, teenage departures, these primary accounts reveal that the gender ratio remains strikingly balanced, though leaning slightly toward a higher concentration of male applicants. Uprety (2024) found that 55% of her respondents were male and 45% female. Interestingly, and contrary to the prevailing, generalized perceptions found in much of the existing literature, the majority of these aspiring scholars are mature individuals over the age of 25 who are strategically pursuing specialized postgraduate programs. In Uprety's sample, 22 out of 40 students were above 25 years, and most were applying for postgraduate programs.

These students predominantly emerge from the bustling, urban heartlands and the relative comfort of financially stable, middle-class households. In Uprety's study, 75% came from cities. While many parents are anchored in the dynamic private sector (60% in Uprety's sample), a significant number of these families are also deeply embedded in the influential spheres of public service and national politics, suggesting that the drive to depart transcends various professional boundaries. Furthermore, the data indicates that this migratory path is most frequently tread by members of the Brahmin and Chhetri communities, highlighting how the "capacity to aspire" is often concentrated within specific, historically privileged caste landscapes (Uprety, 2024: 23–24). Dhungana (2025) adds that gender representation is becoming more balanced, though the motivations and family pressures can differ.

Complex, Interlinked Motivations

Based on the field study of 40 students in Kathmandu, Uprety (2024) found that the causes behind the decision to study abroad were complex and interlinked, involving personal ambition, social influence, cultural aspiration, and economic considerations. The most frequently cited reason was the attraction toward Westernization, with 35% of students naming it as their primary motivation. Others mentioned the desire for personal freedom (30%), modernization (17.5%), imitation of Western lifestyle (12.5%), and family pressure (5%). These findings reflect a significant cultural and ideological shift among the youth, who perceive life in the West as offering better individual autonomy, job prospects, and societal values compared to the rigid and limited environment in Nepal.

What is important here is that internal motivations driving this exodus are a complex, often heavy blend of personal ambition, social imitation, and intense family expectations. At the core of these decisions lies a powerful, almost magnetic attraction to the glittering ideals of Westernization, the seductive promise of individual freedom, and a pervasive, digital-age desire to imitate a modern, cosmopolitan lifestyle.

The "Social Passport" and Peer Pressure

Dhungana (2025) highlights the powerful influence of peer dynamics. In 2024, three higher-secondary students who visited IAE Global Consultancy in Dillibazar shed light on this. Students like Binod expressed a fear of being left behind, stating, "The guy who used to get C+ in class is now in Canada. If he can go, why not me? I feel like a loser staying here." This sentiment reveals a shift in social values, where staying in Nepal is increasingly viewed as a failure, while leaving is seen as a sign of success. This peer pressure is a significant factor in the early exodus of students, as exemplified by seventeen-year-old Dipesh, who felt an “urgency to plan my future” because “most of my friends are applying abroad.”

The symbolism of studying abroad becomes a “social passport”, conferring prestige regardless of academic or professional success. As one mother in Uprety’s (2024) study said proudly of her daughter in Korea, “She has not sent money yet, but we feel proud when people say our daughter is in Seoul.” In Jaisithok village (Gulmi), students who returned even briefly from Australia or the UK are addressed with honorifics like Australia-bata farkeko? (Didn’t he return from Australia?). If I take my own self reflection, this is similar, one of my relatives was looking for a foreign returnee to marry his daughter, indicating that parents sometimes do not care about the income, character, or education of the foreign returnee and will happily accept them to make their son-in-law.

Familial Expectations and Kinship

Families often act as both supporters and pressure points, pooling resources and hopes for a brighter future, sometimes viewing education abroad as a family investment. Relatives settled overseas frequently inspire younger members, offering financial aid and cultural footholds, yet this collective dream can weigh heavily on students striving to meet expectations.

Dhungana (2025) presents the case of Rashila, who grew up in a family that highly valued education. From a young age, her parents encouraged her to aim for international studies. They believed that a foreign degree would give her better career prospects and long-term stability. Additionally, her uncle, who had studied in the United States, frequently shared his experiences and the benefits of studying abroad. His success further reinforced her family’s belief that overseas education was the right choice for her. Unlike students who struggle with family approval, Rashila had full support, which gave her confidence in her decision.

Conversely, the case of Ashish in Uprety’s (2024) thesis shows the opposite. From Dhankuta, Ashish’s father sold land to pay for a “Study in Poland” consultancy offer. Ashish, just 17, confessed, “I had no clue where Poland was. I wanted to do music in Kathmandu. But my baba said, ‘No future here. Go abroad and earn.’” His voice cracked during the interview. “Now I’m alone in Łódź, working in a restaurant at night. Classes are in Polish. I miss home.” His experience shows how family aspirations can override personal desires, and that “abroad” is often romanticized regardless of fit or outcome.

Gendered Dimensions

The study also revealed gendered dimensions. In Uprety’s (2024) case study of Pramila from Chitwan, a 19-year-old from an uneducated Tharu household, she shared how her desire to study in Canada emerged less from academic ambition and more from a longing for independence. “Here, girls are told when to speak, what to wear, and whom to marry. My brother studied in Sydney. He told me—‘If you can get out, do it.’ So I studied IELTS in secret at night.” Her story reflects how student migration is increasingly feminized and embedded in struggles for gender autonomy—especially in semi-urban and rural areas where patriarchal values remain entrenched.

Economic Pragmatism and Career Pathways

Economically, students are drawn by the promise of better salaries, career growth, and residency opportunities in developed countries—prospects starkly contrasted by Nepal's limited job market. The courses students apply for reflect this pragmatism. Uprety (2024) found that the most sought-after courses were hotel management (37.5%), nursing (30%), childcare (20%), and information technology (7.5%). These practical, job-oriented disciplines are chosen with a singular focus on their global portability and their potential to secure the elusive financial stability and permanent residency that the stagnant domestic labor market in Nepal currently fails to provide.

While all respondents in Uprety's study claimed their families could afford the initial expenses of studying abroad, many admitted that sustaining the full course would depend on part-time work or future earnings. This suggests that abroad education is viewed not only as academic advancement but also as a long-term migration strategy.

The Role of Media and Digital Exposure

Social media plays a powerful role in shaping students' perceptions. Dhungana (2025) presents the case of Rohan Shrestha, a 20-year-old student from Kathmandu who was inspired by social media to pursue his dream of studying abroad. Rohan had always wanted to study abroad but believed it was beyond his reach. While browsing social media, he came across numerous posts from Nepalese students studying in countries like the U.S., Canada, and Australia. These posts featured university experiences, internships, and travel, highlighting the benefits of studying abroad beyond just academics. One particular post about a Nepalese student who secured a scholarship at a top U.S. university deeply inspired him. It gave him the confidence to believe that he, too, could achieve the same. Motivated by these stories, Rohan started researching universities, scholarships, and visa processes. His journey shows that digital platforms provide not only inspiration but also valuable information, making the study-abroad process more accessible.

The Migration Industrial Complex

Field observations at Putalisadak—Kathmandu's epicenter of education consultancies—reveal a culture of salesmanship. One agent candidly shared with Uprety (2024): "We package everything—course, visa, housing, bank statements, income statements, even job links. Many kids don't care about the subject. They want a ticket out." Such statements reveal how study abroad has become less about learning and more about a socially accepted migration channel. Consultancies sometimes use fake bank statements or property documents to fulfill visa demands. Over 2,000 licensed agencies advertise “study-plus-work” packages, and some mislead students about post-study employment. This migration industrial complex—the network of state and non-state actors including consultancies and destination regimes—not only helps but manufactures the desire to leave through aggressive marketing and salesmanship.

Impacts: Pride, Strain, and Disruption

The studies also highlighted the impacts of studying abroad. Families who send their children experience both pride and emotional distress. Students face personal challenges such as loneliness, increased responsibility, and the need to adapt to new cultural environments both in the country of origin and the country of destination.

On Students

Uprety (2024) found significant emotional and psychological challenges among students preparing to migrate. Commonly cited difficulties included loneliness (50%), the burden of personal responsibility (32.5%), and challenges related to adaptability in new cultural settings (17.5%). Students grapple with cultural shock, language barriers, and the stress of balancing academics with part-time jobs. Unreliable educational consultants compound these struggles, with some misleading students about opportunities.

On Families

Families experience a “care drain.” Krishna Bahadur BC from Jajarkot told Uprety that for every six months, he has to send money to his daughter in Canada, though she left two years ago. The collective family investment often leads to significant debt. Moreover, the departure of young people leaves elderly parents behind, transforming family obligations into transnational circuits of financial support and emotional maintenance. In many cases, the decision to study abroad is not just personal but is influenced by family goals and long-term migration plans.

On National Economy and Society

The outflow of capital is massive. According to the Nepal Rastra Bank (2025), Rs 64.15 billion was spent on foreign education in seven months. The loss of skilled youth—the “brain drain”—undermines local innovation and governance capacity (Sunam, 2020). While remittances stabilize the balance of payments, they perpetuate a dependency dynamic. Domestic universities face declining enrollment; classrooms are emptying. The trend also leads to a shift in social norms where “staying in Nepal” is sometimes equated with failure. Yet, there is also potential for “brain gain” through remittances, knowledge transfer, and transnational networks, though these are not yet fully harnessed.

Discussion

The findings reveal that the migration of Nepali students is not a simple response to economic push-pull factors. It is a deeply embedded sociocultural phenomenon. Appadurai's (2004) "capacity to aspire" is vividly illustrated: for students in Kathmandu, the "good life" has become geographically displaced, achievable only by crossing a border. The rahar (desire) for a cosmopolitan, modern identity is made tangible through social media posts from friends in Australia, while badhyata (compulsion) is felt as a stark hopelessness regarding the opportunities within Nepal (Koirala, 2025).

Carsten's (2004) concept of "relatedness" helps explain the impacts. The family is no longer a unit living under one roof but a transnational network held together by remittances, WhatsApp calls, and the shared project of the student's migration. This "kinship as being, doing, and becoming" transforms familial obligations and creates new forms of intimacy and distance. The "care drain" is palpable, with elderly parents left behind and young people forced into adult responsibilities prematurely.

Furthermore, this analysis reveals a class and caste dimension to migration. While the trend is increasingly widespread, it is still disproportionately the Brahmin and Chhetri middle classes who have the necessary economic and cultural capital to navigate the migration industrial complex (Chuwan, 2026). The massive outflow of this talent reinforces Nepal's peripheral position in the global economy, as it serves as a supplier of human capital to the Global North.

The migration industrial complex operates as a key intermediary, not merely facilitating but actively shaping aspirations. Consultancies in Putalisadak and elsewhere use aggressive marketing, fake documentation, and sales tactics that transform education into a commodity. This complex is a product of neoliberal deregulation and global demand for migrant labor, and it accelerates the exodus by lowering barriers and manufacturing a sense of urgency.

The Cultural Economy of Aspiration and the Unequal Geography of Hope

The narratives from Dhungana (2025) and Uprety (2024) reveal that student migration is not merely a response to structural deficits but a practice deeply embedded in the uneven distribution of what Arjun Appadurai calls the "capacity to aspire." For Nepali youth, aspiration is not an abstract hope but a culturally shaped resource, one that is thickened or thinned by their position within class, caste, and kinship networks. In the case of Arjun Mandal (Uprety, 2024), the 25yearold hotel management graduate from Sarlahi, his aspiration crystallized during a 1.5year internship in Dubai, where he witnessed a hospitality industry far more sophisticated than anything in Nepal. His desire was not born in a vacuum; it was cultivated through international exposure, which itself was made possible by his family's ability to finance a degree at an expensive private college affiliated with a European university. This exemplifies Bourdieu's notion of social capital, the conversion of economic resources into privileged educational trajectories, which then yield cultural capital (a foreign credential) that promises further mobility. Yet aspiration is also stratified by caste and gender. The overwhelming BrahminChhetri dominance among aspirants (Uprety, 2024: 23–24) shows that the “capacity to aspire” is historically sedimented in communities that have long possessed the cultural and economic resources to imagine and realize transnational futures. My own reflection of working with the peasants communities of Nepal and also as a teacher for the graduate and undergraduates give me confidence to claim that youths are more influenced by modernization, westernization and migratory choice rather than choosing similar education and profession in Nepal. For a gril like Pramila from Chitwan (Uprety, 2024), aspiration takes on an added dimension: migration becomes a means of escaping patriarchal constraints, yet even that desire is mediated by male kin (her brother’s advice, her secret IELTS preparation). Her story reveals how aspiration is simultaneously liberatory and constrained by the very social structures it seeks to transcend. One of my female student before used to tell me that its old traditional socio-cultural setting which she try to escape going to different countries where no body interfere her personal life. Meanwhile, the case of Ashish (Uprety, 2024) the 17yearold sent to Poland against his will exposes the dark side of collective aspiration: when family strategies override individual agency, the “good life” becomes a form of dispossession. Here, Janet Carsten’s concept of “relatedness” is critical. In Ashish’s family, kinship ties are enacted through economic sacrifice (selling land) and through the imposition of a dream that is not his own. Relatedness becomes a site of both support and compulsion, binding individuals to migration projects that may not align with their own aspirations. The migration industrial complex, the consultancies in Putalisadak that package everything from bank statements to “job links” operates as a perverse broker of social capital, commodifying kinship networks and manufacturing the very aspirations it claims to serve. Thus, the decision to study abroad is not a linear calculation of push and pull; it is a cultural process shaped by the unequal distribution of aspirational resources, the reproduction of class and caste privilege, and the transformation of kinship into a transnational project of survival and hope.

Conclusion: Push Factors at Origin triggered by Migration Industrial Complex and the Anthropology of Displacement and Becoming

The eagerness of Nepali students to depart at ever-younger ages stems from an intersection of economic precarity, political instability, and a culturally manufactured desire for a life perceived to be only possible abroad. The study confirms:

1. Structural pushes: A stagnant labor market, politicized campuses, and a perceived decline in local educational quality nudge youth outward.
2. Powerful pulls: Globally portable credentials, the promise of permanent residency, and established kinship networks abroad magnify the allure.
3. Systemic impacts: The nation faces a critical brain drain, significant capital outflow, and rising class divides between those who can and cannot afford foreign education.

The decision to study abroad, as revealed through the narratives of Dhungana and Uprety, is a testament to the resilience and ambition of Nepali youth, but it is also a symptom of a deeper systemic failure. Short-term policy recommendations include tighter regulation of consultancies, targeted scholarships linked to return-service, and incentives for graduate reintegration. However, the long-term solution lies in challenging the very structures of neoliberal globalization that create this uneven playing field, while simultaneously transforming Nepal toward a self-reliant state capable of generating dignified employment and developing a high-quality, accessible education system that its youth do not feel compelled to flee.

This study demonstrates that the mass exodus of Nepali students is neither a simple brain drain nor a series of individual choices, but a profound reconfiguration of social life under neoliberal globalization. The theoretical juxtaposition of pushpull theory with anthropological frameworks reveals that migration decisions are mediated by what Bourdieu termed the "habitus", the deeply internalized dispositions that make certain futures feel natural and others unthinkable. For Nepali middle class families, the habitus now includes a takenforgranted imperative to send children abroad; staying home has come to signify stagnation. This cultural shift is reinforced by the migration industrial complex, which transforms the desire for education into a commodity, and by transnational kinship networks that turn foreign lands into extensions of the family. The abroad studies is also about jobs and permanent residency, a move away from rural agriculture and developing country, a byproduct of neoliberal globalization and migration industrial complex. Yet as Carsten's work reminds us, kinship is not static; it is "being, doing, and becoming." In the process of migration, families become remade: grandparents become parents, remittances become the substance of obligation, and the joint family disperses across continents. The "care drain" that follows is not merely an emotional loss but a restructuring of intergenerational responsibility. Appadurai's insight that "the capacity to aspire" is a cultural resource helps us understand why, despite the immense costs of debt, loneliness, family separation, young Nepalis continue to leave. Aspiration, once thickened, is not easily reversed. It becomes a cultural fact, a horizon against which a life is measured. To stem the tide, therefore, requires more than policy tweaks; it demands a fundamental reimagining of what a "good life" in Nepal might look like, one where dignity, opportunity, and a sense of futurity are not contingent on leaving. Until that reimagination takes hold, student migration will remain not just an economic strategy but a deeply felt, culturally driven act of becoming, in which young Nepalis are simultaneously agents of their own futures and unwitting participants in the ongoing remaking of global inequality.

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Book Review

From the Fat of Our Souls

Social Change, Political Process, and Medical Pluralism in Bolivia

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Libbet Crandon-Malamud.

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This book is the outcome of eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted by Libbet Crandon-Malamud in Chojana Kanata, Kachitu, in Highland Bolivia, among three categories of people: Mestizos (or Vecinos), Campesinos, and Methodists. The author chose Kachitu (pseudonym) as a research site, due to its medical and, in her words, self-proclaimed cultural plurality as well as the crisis of cultural identity prevailing in such a scenario. Crandon-Malamud employed historical analysis, especially when collating data related to the national political process, which is, in fact, instability, and its socio-cultural-health consequences. The political revolution of 1952 in Bolivia was a landmark point in time, which not only altered many aspects of the social status and situation of Aymara and Vecino people but also led to remarkable alterations in their medical ideology.

Crandon-Malamud exclusively solicited primary qualitative information generated by employing participant observation and extensive and repeated interviews. She explored and analyzed the people's understanding of their life situation and reconstruction of their past. Rather than an orthodox scientific attempt to know "the reality" per se, she went with people's perception and meaning to it. She emphasizes the significance of such an epistemological position, which counts much for the anthropologists as "What really happened is secondary to people's perceptions of what happened" (p.181).

Despite their respective strengths, the author is dissatisfied with the decision-making and explanatory model widely used in medical anthropological research, as these models do not address the political and economic contexts in which medical decisions are made. Rather, she is more interested in how individuals make decisions in altered situations for their (perceived) benefit, which made her go with an interpretative procedure.

The lucidity of the author's writing is reflected in each chapter as well as the coherence and constellation of the whole book in portraying how medicine is a "primary resource" through which one can gain access to other "secondary resources". Her theorization builds upon an idea originally indicated by Paul Unschald (Unschald, 1975, quoted in Crandon-Malamud, 2023: ix) that people use medicine as a primary resource through which they get access to secondary resources, particularly where multiple resources exist and the choice between them becomes socially and politically significant. Her efforts are also praiseworthy in showing how medical choice in a plural medical setting restructures social relations outside the medical context, such as in the form of class mobility, political change, and ethnic identity. The author's craftsmanship is reflected in exemplifying such a real-life picture through the illustration of several key ethnographic figures, such as the case of the illness of Seferino (p.3), an Aymara from the area.

Shift in medical belief serves as a strategy to acquire resources pertinent to society. Such resources are not only medical but also economic, social, and political ones. All parties involved reaped the reward of resources obtained through medicines with varying degrees of success. This model is employed not only on the assumption that ideologies are conditioned by material circumstances and class relations, but that individuals select and use them to accomplish their own ends. Thus, the use of a particular kind of medical ideology envisages the individual as a conscious actor who often maintains what outsiders might consider as conflicting ideologies or even the primitive ones.

Crandon-Malamud had come up with the idea that medical systems serve extra medical functions. In the context of medical pluralism, the principal secondary resources for which medicine is a primary resource are social relations and material resources that permit social mobility. It also facilitates negotiating cultural identities. Methodists' arrival in the area was facilitated by modern medicine, actually, the politics of medicine. A particular form of medication, affecting the very existence of people, also denotes a specific type of cultural identity. At that time, only a few Vecinos visited the biomedical clinics, perceived as Methodist territory. On the other hand, between the clinic visitors, there is a conflict between Methodists and non-Methodist Campesinos about the issue of who will manage the clinic. The management of the clinic is related to the control over it and ultimately the source of power.

Four themes in the form of metaphors constantly appear in discussions about medical atiology and diagnosis in Kachitu- insatiable hunger, vulnerability of subordination, victimization and exploitation- emerged from the historical circumstances and concrete events. For instance, Khan Achachi, a kind of supernatural being, eat the spirit, soul or heart of only Indians, and only the subordinates are vulnerable. Bolivian elites and supernatural beings exhibit the commonalities that both have insatiable hunger that depends upon human beings for their sustenance, and thus exploit people and trouble them.

People express their values through medical dialogue. The medical dialogue, about what illness will surely befall whom and what the sick person is suffering from, often carries the identity of each person taking part in the dialogue. Through medical dialogue in the form of interpretation and prediction of a particular type of illness, social image and status of the people are questioned, constructed and strengthened. The rationale for the speaker to take part in such medical dialogue is to convince other people and thus to accrue consequent benefits.

Before the revolution of 1952, Mestizos (Vecinos) had exploited Campesinos' resources, especially the labor resources, through the institution of Compadrazgo (God parenthood), which till then was not forgotten by Campesinos. Brought down by the revolution, some Mestizos, mostly landless or near landless widows or women, had tried to use medical dialogue to establish egalitarian relationships with Aymara, while the latter is emerging as a powerful group. In the absence of the facilitation provided by medical dialogue, it would have been difficult for Mestizos to deal with Campesinos in other terms and harmonize relationships.

Medical dialogue, along with medicine, is a powerful mechanism for creating social space in a constantly changing environment. Due to political transformation, instability and social change, all groups are facing a cultural identity crisis. Medical dialogue facilitates people in different strata to get access to a variety of social settings and resources. Vecinos who are in the process of downward social mobility use medical dialogue to show egalitarian relations with Campesinos to get agricultural resources. Likewise, on the other hand, Campesinos use medical dialogue as a means of upward mobility. In this way, Kachitunos try to negotiate their way to power, resources and security through medical dialogue. Two analytically identifiable processes are taking place in Kachitu- medical and social. The author argues that there are constant frictions between these two processes that affect each other and transform the other. Along with their shift in social position, such as the deteriorating situation of Mestios in the past thirty years, they are shifting their medical ideologies and practices.

Medical pluralism facilitates the permeability of ethnic and religious boundaries as well as movement across class lines, because, as people talk about medicine, they are also negotiating a redefinition of their own identities. Moreover, medical options available in a plural context provide an opportunity to negotiate social relations. People choose alternative medical practices in various orders, not necessarily opting for conventional medicine as the ultimate option.

Three social groups, Mestizos, Campesinos, and Methodists, have fluid boundaries. In different epochs in history, they have tried to employ diverse strategies in altered contexts for membership in different groups. They reconstruct and negotiate different identities. Often, their strategies varied as per the economic and political conditions of the individual. But in a changed socio-political-economic context, they employed different medical ideologies for negotiations. For them, then, these alternative medical ideologies do not contradict but often serve as inevitable choices for different kinds of illness. So, all of them practice these, but at different times and to different degrees, but only those which are meaningful to them.

The local explanation of illness illustrates the (oppressive) nature of social relations within the historically defined cultural context. The author beautifully exemplifies this with the help of a changing notion of an illness, the Kharisiri. Kharisiri, during the Spanish colonial era, was widely known as a fatal phantom, which magically removed the fat from the victim's kidneys and gave it to the bishop. Later on, before the revolution, Kharisiri was known as a Mestizo involved in the trade of human kidney fat, referring to the oppressive nature of the capitalist economy. It clearly indicates how Kachitunos understand the social relations and their relations to health. It also denotes the continuity of oppression, although the oppressors have been different.

The book is divided into twelve different chapters. The first chapter of the book deals with the medical, ethnic and religious pluralism as well as the crisis embedded in the cultural identity in Kachitu. The second chapter is about the research design and methods employed in the study, whereas the historical context of the emergence of medical ideology in Kachitu is contained in the third chapter. The fourth one embraces the context of dependency in the wider Kachitu. The Indigenous medical system is portrayed in Chapter 5. The sixth chapter deals with the choices and strategies of people and how people adopted medicine as a means to negotiate their identities, and how medicine has been employed as a metaphor in creating ethnic boundaries and the political danger of such boundaries is highlighted in the subsequent chapter.

The seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth chapters deal with illustrative cases about the implications of such ethnic boundaries. In doing so, chapter eight sheds light on the use and abuse of such boundaries in the area, and chapter ten shows the dynamics of ideological shift and power acquisition. Chapter eleven presents the competing claims of biomedicine and the indigenous healing system, in which the anthropologist also recognizes her epistemic limits. It also illustrates how the medical failure can be read as broader anxieties of modernization and marginalization. The final chapter represents the theoretical synthesis of the book, drawing on the preceding ethnographic chapters, and shows that medical choices in a plural medical setting are not mere pragmatic or technical acts; rather, they are rooted in their ideology and reflect and shape political inequalities, social identities and power relations in Bolivian society. All three groups of people use medical ideology not as a static body of beliefs but as strategies employed to explore options. People choose a specific type of medication not only for the healing of the body but also to heal their social situation.

I have found that the author who considers broader environmental factors and adopts the transactionalist model can analyze and convince the readers about how the individuals in a particular place at a certain historical point can use medicine as a primary resource to gain access to other derivative resources. To substantiate her arguments, she presents some crucial cases, which make readers feel as if they are also witnessing and experiencing the situation. Nevertheless, some critical readers may find that the process and role of medical choices for restructuring social relationships, to some extent, are a bit inflated.