
Beyond the Dam: Intangible Loss and Damage to the Magar Indigenous Communities in Nepal

A case study of the Magar Indigenous Communities
affected by the Tanahu Hydro Project



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Cover Photo: Seti River seen from the village of Paltyang, Tanahu

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ABBREVIATION

ADB	Asian Development Bank
EIB	European Investment Bank
MW	Megawatt
GoN	Government of Nepal
ILO	International Labour Organization
THP	Tanahu Hydro Project

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JUNE 2025

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research documents the profound intangible and long-term losses experienced by the Indigenous Magar community affected by the 140 MW Tanahu Hydropower Project on Nepal's Seti River. Using participatory research methods, we captured cultural heritage erosion, identity and language disruption, and undermining Indigenous knowledge systems. The findings reveal that while Nepal pursues hydropower development to meet national energy needs, Indigenous communities face multi-generational losses that extend far beyond

economic considerations. The Seti River represents not merely a natural resource but a sacred entity integral to Magar cultural identity, spiritual practices, and community governance structures. This report highlights the urgent need for development approaches that recognize and protect these irreplaceable cultural assets.

■ INTRODUCTION

Background

Nepal harbors immense hydropower potential, estimated at approximately 83,000 MW, due to its steep river systems and Himalayan geography. Yet, to date, only about 1,000 MW (1%) has been harnessed, signaling a vast gap between theoretical capacity and realized output.¹ While this untapped potential presents a significant opportunity for energy security and economic growth, it also raises critical questions about the social, cultural, and environmental implications of large-scale dam projects.

The Tanahu Hydropower Project (THP) on the Seti River exemplifies this tension. For many Indigenous communities in the region,

the Seti is more than a waterway; it is sacred, woven into their cosmologies, spiritual rituals, and intergenerational practices. Large dams alter the river's flow and ecology, disrupting not only physical habitats but also intangible cultural heritage such as sacred sites, ritual use, ancestral narratives, and eco-spiritual relationships, losses that are difficult to quantify yet deeply felt.²

Although direct, publicly available studies on THP's cultural impacts are limited, analogous research, such as studies on the Upper Seti or Arun hydropower projects, documents how dam construction undermines river-based rituals and severs generational knowledge

transmission. These cases illustrate a common pattern where infrastructure-driven development conflicts with Indigenous spiritual and cultural values rooted in waterways.³

From an academic standpoint, these disruptions fall under the domain of “cultural ecosystem services”—the non-material benefits people derive from ecosystems (e.g., spiritual fulfillment, identity, cultural continuity). Recognizing these dimensions aligns the research with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which emphasizes rights to cultural preservation, spiritual practices, and self-determination.⁴

This research situates itself within this critical context, seeking to highlight the lived experiences of communities impacted by hydropower expansion and to question the dominant development paradigms that often equate progress with infrastructure while overlooking the cultural and spiritual foundations of Indigenous life.

Research Objectives

This study aimed to:

- Document the intangible cultural and spiritual losses experienced by Magar Indigenous communities affected by the Tanahu Hydropower Project
- Examine the disruption of traditional knowledge systems and self-governance structures
- Amplify the voices and perspectives of affected community members
- Contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of balancing development with human rights and cultural preservation

Methodology

The research employed a participatory, community-based approach centered on the experiences and perspectives of the Magar people. Qualitative methods included:

- In-depth interviews with community elders, spiritual leaders, and affected families
- Focus group discussions organized by age and gender
- Documentation of oral histories and traditional practices
- Participatory analysis sessions where community members validated findings and interpretations

Data Analysis

The collected data was analyzed using **thematic analysis**, a qualitative method that involves identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns or themes within the data. This approach allowed us to uncover recurring narratives, concerns, and cultural meanings expressed by community members throughout interviews, focus group discussions, and field observations. By coding the data inductively, we were able to surface key issues such as loss of spiritual sites, disruption of traditional livelihoods, and the weakening of social cohesion—all of which are central to the cultural identity and resilience of the affected Magar communities. Thematic analysis provided a structured yet flexible framework for capturing both the explicit content and the deeper cultural significance embedded in participants' lived experiences and oral testimonies.

TANAHU HYDRO PROJECT

Project Description

Tanahu Hydropower Limited (THL), a subsidiary of the Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA), was established in 2012 to develop the 140 MW Tanahu Hydropower Project. This is a storage-based hydropower project designed to generate an average of 587.7 GWh of electricity annually during its first 10 years of operation, and 489.9 GWh per year thereafter. The project has secured \$505 million in funding from the Asian Development Bank (ADB), Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), European Investment Bank (EIB), and the Government of Nepal.⁵ The Project site is situated 150 km west

of Kathmandu on Seti River near Damauli of Tanahu District the Gandaki Province of Nepal. The project area covers two Municipalities (Vyas and Bhimad) and two Rural Municipalities (Rising and Myagde). (Source: Environmental Safeguards Monitoring Report, Semi-annual Report, Tanahu Hydropower Project, July 2020.⁶ Additionally, it is claimed to be the largest dam under construction in Nepal.

Impact of the Project

Tanahu Seti is a storage dam project and the reservoir will submerge land, community forest, communities, public structures, and cremation sites etc. The dam will also regulate the river flow downstream. Thus, the project will have the following environmental and social impacts.⁷

Community Affected

The Magar Indigenous Peoples from Paltyan, Rishing Patan, Ladan, Jalberi, and Wantangitar claim that their ancestral land will be inundated, displacing them, causing them to lose their livelihoods, and threatening their indigenous identity, language, and culture.

Community Grievances

Communities affected by the Tanahu Hydropower Project, who will face displacement and loss of land and resources without Free, Prior and Informed Consent, demand development practices that ensure meaningful consultation, just and timely compensation, and equitable access to energy benefits. Development cannot come at the cost of rights, livelihoods, and dignity.⁸

Investment/Co Financing

Asian Development Bank (150 Million USD), European Investment Bank (70 million USD), JICA (184 million USD), the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development (ADFD (30 million USD), and 71 million of NEA, with a total cost of 505 million USD.⁹

Current Status of the Project

The supporting work needed for the river diversion was completed in November 2023. Currently, the Seti River, which flows from the Annapurna Massif toward the Bay of Bengal, has been successfully redirected around the dam construction site. Once the dam is finished as planned, the diversion tunnels will be permanently closed.¹⁰

The first part of the project, which includes building a 140-meter-tall dam and related structures, is being carried out by a joint team from Song Da Corporation (Vietnam) and Kalika Construction Pvt. Ltd. According to Bhandari, about 36% of this work is now complete.

In the second part of the project, workers are currently adding a concrete layer inside a 1,493-meter-long tunnel. This tunnel runs from where water enters the reservoir to where it flows into the penstock pipe.¹¹

Whereas the THP is yet to prepare for the social impact assessment and household survey for the Buffer zone area. They claim that this will support updating the Resettlement and Indigenous Peoples Plan (RIPP). This method is being finalized and includes feedback from THL, ADB, and EIB.¹²



Findings

Thematic analysis of interviews, focus groups, and field observations revealed a complex web of intangible loss experienced by Magar communities affected by the Tanahu Hydropower Project. These findings reflect not only what was said but also how meaning was conveyed through stories, emotions, silences, and cultural references.

The voices of participants consistently pointed to deep disruptions that extend beyond material displacement. From the loss of ancestral and spiritual sites to the unraveling of intergenerational practices and communal ties, the narratives illustrate a broader erosion of identity, belonging, and cultural continuity. The following themes emerged as central to understanding the intangible loss and damage experienced by the Magar people

Agricultural Traditions and River Connections

The research revealed deeply rooted agricultural traditions that are inseparable from the Seti River ecosystem. Magar communities have maintained these practices for four to five generations, including:

Seasonal Agricultural Rituals:

- *Asharey Bhaka*: Traditional songs sung during rice planting in Ashadh
- *Bayu Puja/Pitri Puja*: Ancestral worship ceremonies are conducted before agricultural activities
- *Baisakhe Puja* and *Khet Puja*: Field blessing ceremonies
- *Kulo Puja*: Rituals performed at irrigation canals to ensure successful planting.

Role of Traditional Spiritual Leaders:

- *Thane Jhankri* (spiritual healers) perform essential ceremonies to ensure prosperous harvests and livestock protection
- Ceremonies include offerings to deities like Naag (serpent deity) and Siddha
- *Bhumi Puja* (earth worship) serves as a final ceremony to seek blessings for the land

The hydropower project has disrupted irrigation systems, altered river flows, and submerged traditional agricultural lands, making it increasingly difficult to maintain these practices. Community members reported that without access to traditional agricultural settings, the songs, rituals, and associated knowledge are rapidly disappearing, particularly among younger generations.

Self-Governance and Collective Systems

The research documented sophisticated Indigenous governance systems that maintain social harmony and resilience:

Bheja System:

- A communal institution providing collective support during difficult times
- Ensures moral and material support (*Saath-Sahayog*) for families facing illness, death, or economic hardship
- Distributes work and resources based on collective needs

Parma System:

- Traditional labor-exchange practice, where community members assist each other in demanding tasks
- Includes agricultural cooperation like *Goru Haalne* (plowing fields) and harvesting
- Ensures collective food security through shared storage of staple crops

The displacement of families and fragmentation of communities due to the hydropower project have severely weakened these governance systems. Interviews revealed that:

- Dispersed communities cannot effectively maintain Bheja practices
- The Parma labor exchange becomes impractical when families relocate to different areas.
- Economic pressures from displacement push community members toward individual rather than collective survival strategies

Spiritual and Cultural Significance of the Seti River

The Seti River emerged as fundamental to Magar identity and spirituality, with numerous rituals requiring direct access to the river and its resources:

Life Cycle Rituals:

- Newborn naming ceremonies (*Nawaran*) and first rice feeding (*Bhatkhulai*) require fish from the river
- Wedding ceremonies involve building *Pirango* (bamboo platforms) and using river resources
- Death rituals include riverbank ceremonies like *Masan Puja*

Ritual Offerings and Sacred Sites:

- *Kul Rani* (ancestral deity) worship requires river-sourced offerings

- *Binapat* (sacred plants) from the riverbanks are essential for ceremonies
- Full moon rituals (*Jestha Purnima* and *Baishakh Purnima*) involve river connections
- *Jaldevi Puja* (river goddess worship) includes releasing pigeons and raising prayer flags

The damming of the river has profoundly disrupted these practices by:

- Altering river flow and reducing fish populations needed for rituals
- Submerging sacred sites along the riverbanks
- Changing the river's character from flowing water (spiritually significant) to reservoir water



Kul Rani (ancestral deity) worship requires river-sourced offerings



Jaldevi Puja (river goddess worship) includes releasing pigeons and raising prayer flags

- ⦿ Restricting access to traditional ceremonial locations

Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer

The research highlighted how environmental changes associated with the hydropower project have disrupted knowledge transmission:

- ⦿ Agricultural songs and practices are losing relevance when traditional farming areas are submerged
- ⦿ Young people increasingly migrate away from affected areas, creating a generational disconnect
- ⦿ Spiritual practices tied to specific river locations cannot be properly taught when those locations disappear
- ⦿ Traditional ecological knowledge about fish species, river patterns, and forest resources becomes obsolete when environments change dramatically
- ⦿ Community elders expressed deep concern that their knowledge would die with them, as the physical context for transmitting this knowledge has been fundamentally altered.

DISCUSSION

Beyond Economic Compensation

The research findings demonstrate that conventional compensation approaches focusing on monetary payments and resettlement housing fail to address the profound cultural losses experienced by Magar communities. While economic losses can be relatively quantified, the erosion of cultural heritage, disruption of knowledge systems, and loss of spiritual connection to place represent irreplaceable damages that cannot be adequately compensated through financial means.

Cumulative and Long-term Impacts

The impacts documented in this research are not immediate or one-dimensional but cumulative and multi-generational. The loss of agricultural traditions, disruption of self-governance systems, and disconnection from river-based spiritual practices combine to threaten the very foundation of Magar cultural identity. These impacts will continue to unfold over generations as knowledge gaps widen and cultural practices cannot be maintained in new environments.

Development Paradigms and Indigenous Rights

The research highlights tensions between Nepal's national development objectives and Indigenous communities' rights to maintain their cultural practices and traditional livelihoods. While hydropower development may bring benefits at a national level, the cultural costs borne by Indigenous communities raise important questions about equitable development. The findings suggest a need for development approaches that recognize cultural heritage as integral to sustainable development rather than as an obstacle to overcome.

CONCLUSION

The Magar communities affected by the Tanahu Hydropower Project are experiencing profound intangible losses that extend far beyond economic considerations. Their agricultural traditions, self-governance systems, and spiritual practices—maintained for generations—are threatened by environmental changes that fundamentally alter their relationship with the Seti River.

These findings highlight the need to broaden development frameworks to properly account for cultural and spiritual dimensions of loss and damage. While Nepal's hydropower development continues to advance national energy goals, greater attention must be paid to ensuring this development does not come at the expense of irreplaceable Indigenous cultural heritage.

The voices and experiences documented in this research call for development approaches that respect the profound relationships Indigenous communities have with their territories and support their right to maintain cultural practices essential to their identity and well-being.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research findings, we propose the following recommendations:

FOR POLICYMAKERS AND PROJECT DEVELOPERS

- **Cultural Impact Assessments:** Mandate comprehensive cultural impact assessments alongside environmental assessments for all infrastructure projects affecting Indigenous territories.
- **Cultural Heritage Protection:** Develop protocols to identify and protect sacred sites, ceremonial locations, and culturally significant natural features before project implementation.
- **Indigenous Participation:** Ensure meaningful participation of Indigenous communities in all phases of project planning, implementation, and monitoring, with particular attention to cultural impacts. Assurance of the FPIC in every development process is ensured by the ILO C. 169
- **Cultural Mitigation Measures:** Design specific mitigation measures for cultural impacts, including:
 - Supporting documentation and preservation of traditional knowledge
 - Ensuring continued access to sacred sites when possible

- ▶ Creating cultural heritage centers in affected communities

- Funding cultural revitalization programs

For Indigenous Communities

- **Cultural Documentation:** Establish community-led initiatives to document traditional practices, language, and spiritual knowledge for future generations.
- **Adaptive Cultural Practices:** Explore ways to adapt traditional practices to new environmental realities while maintaining their core cultural significance.
- **Knowledge Exchange:** Foster intergenerational knowledge exchange through cultural programs, especially focusing on youth engagement.
- **Network Building:** Connect with other Indigenous communities facing similar challenges to share strategies for cultural preservation and advocacy.

For Researchers and Civil Society

- **Methodological Development:** Develop and refine methodologies for assessing intangible cultural impacts of development projects.
- **Advocacy Support:** Provide technical and advocacy support to affected communities to articulate cultural impacts in development decision-making processes.
- **Knowledge Translation:** Help translate community concerns into formats accessible to policymakers and project planners.

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ANNEX 1

Questionnaire

I. Focus Group Discussion (FGD) Questions-

1. Cultural Heritage & Traditional Practices

- a. How will the THP project impact your traditional rituals, ceremonies, and spiritual practices, particularly those connected to the Seti River? (THP परियोजनाले तपाईंको परम्परागत अनुष्ठान, समारोह, र आध्यात्मिक अभ्यासहरू, विशेष गरी सेती नदीसँग जोडिएकाहरूलाई कसरी प्रभाव पार्छ?)
- b. What specific cultural traditions have been lost or altered due to environmental changes and displacement? (पर्यावरणीय परिवर्तन र विस्थापनका कारण कुन विशिष्ट सांस्कृतिक परम्परा हराउने वा परिवर्तन हुनेछ?)
- c. Have there been any efforts to preserve or adapt these practices in response to these challenges? (यी चुनौतीहरूको जवाफमा यी अभ्यासहरूलाई जोगाउन वा अनुकूलन गर्ने प्रयासहरू भएका छन्?)

2. Social, Cultural, and Spiritual Losses

- a. What long-term social and spiritual losses has your community experienced due to the THP project? (THP परियोजनाका कारण तपाईंको समुदायले के दीर्घकालीन सामाजिक र आध्यात्मिक हानिहरू अनुभव गर्नेछ?)
- b. How has the displacement and environmental degradation affected your connection to ancestral lands and sacred sites? (विस्थापन र वातावरणीय ह्रासले पैतृक भूमि र पवित्र स्थलहरूसँगको तपाईंको सम्बन्धलाई कसरी असर गर्नेछ?)
- c. How do you see these changes affecting future generations' ability to connect with their cultural heritage? (यी परिवर्तनहरूले भविष्यका पुस्ताहरूलाई उनीहरूको सांस्कृतिक सम्पदासँग जोड्ने क्षमतालाई कसरी असर गरिरहेको देख्नुहुन्छ?)

3. Erosion of Identity and Language

- a. Has displacement and environmental change affected the use of your Indigenous language within your community? (के तपाईं विस्थापन र वातावरणीय परिवर्तनले तपाईंको आदिवासी भाषाको प्रयोगलाई असर गर्छ भन्ने सोच्नुहुन्छ?)
- b. Are younger generations still learning and using the traditional language and expressions? If not, why? (के युवा पुस्ताले अझै पनि परम्परागत भाषा र अभिव्यक्तिहरू सिक्किरहेका र प्रयोग गरिरहेका छन्? यदि छैनन् भने, किन?)

- c. What measures do you think are needed to protect and revitalize your language and cultural expressions?
(तपाईंको भाषा र सांस्कृतिक अभिव्यक्तिको संरक्षण र पुनरुत्थान गर्न के उपायहरू आवश्यक छ जस्तो लाग्छ?)

4. **Disruption of Indigenous Knowledge Systems**

- a. How has the THP project affected traditional knowledge related to natural resource management, agriculture, and fishing?
(THP परियोजनाले प्राकृतिक स्रोत व्यवस्थापन, कृषि र माछा मार्ने परम्परागत ज्ञानलाई कसरी असर गरेको छ?)
- b. What challenges will your community face in continuing Indigenous governance systems and decision-making structures?
(यदि यस क्षेत्रबाट विस्थापित भएमा तपाईंको समुदायले आदिवासी शासन प्रणाली र निर्णय गर्ने संरचनालाई निरन्तरता दिन के कस्ता चुनौतीहरूको सामना गर्नेछ भन्ने तपाईंलाई लाग्छ?)
- c. Have there been any community-led initiatives to document and preserve traditional knowledge?
(परम्परागत ज्ञानको अभिलेखीकरण र संरक्षण गर्न समुदायको नेतृत्वमा कुनै पहल भएको छ ?

II Key Informant Interview (KII) Questions:

For Indigenous Elders & Cultural Leaders:

- a. How has the THP project altered the spiritual and cultural significance of the Seti River for your community?
(THP परियोजनाले तपाईंको समुदायको लागि सेती नदीको आध्यात्मिक र सांस्कृतिक महत्वलाई कसरी परिवर्तन गरेको छ?)
- b. In what ways has displacement disrupted traditional ceremonies and Indigenous governance systems?
-विस्थापनले परम्परागत समारोह र आदिवासी शासन प्रणालीलाई कुन तरिकामा बाधा पुर्‍याएको

III. For Community Leaders & Activists:

What are the major social and cultural challenges your community is facing due to the THP project?
(THP परियोजनाको कारणले तपाईंको समुदायले सामना गरिरहेको प्रमुख सामाजिक र सांस्कृतिक चुनौतीहरू के हुन्)

Have there been any initiatives taken to mitigate the loss of Indigenous knowledge, language, and identity? (आदिवासी जनजातिको ज्ञान, भाषा र पहिचान गुम्न नदिन कुनै पहल भएको छ ?)

ANNEX II

Photographs



Figure 1: Broom Plant - protects soil erosion and maintains soil nutrients.



Figure 2: Rituals to ancestors by the community.



Figure 3: Handmade rotor - community cohesion.

Figure 4: Flora of the forest





Figure 5: Rituals performed as the Magar Indigenous community.

Figure 6: A traditional weaving from the bamboo







Figure 7: A Plate of leaves used during rituals





Figure 8: A Kuwa- a place of significant importance for ancestral rituals and as source of water

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The **Indigenous Women Legal Awareness Group (INWOLAG)** was founded in 2000 and is a nonprofit, non-governmental, and non-political organization. Indigenous women legal experts and professionals make up INWOLAG, an organization devoted to defending human rights of indigenous women.

In terms of culture, language, way of life, status, position, literacy, access to resources, access to decision-making, and access to services, INWOLAG views women as diverse, not homogenous groups. Since gender equality is essential to development, INWOLAG incorporates a gender perspective into all of its operations.

Women who have experienced different forms of violence can receive free legal assistance from INWOLAG. The federal (national), provincial, and local levels of government are all where INWOLAG has been active.

