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CUSTOMARY GOVERNANCE AND SOCIAL DYNAMICS IN NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AMONG MOUNTAIN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES IN UPPER MANANG

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of customary governance in the sustainable management of natural resources within the Ngishyangba community of Upper Manang. The study is grounded in empirical research conducted in two phases, in 2014 and 2022, utilizing key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and observational methods to explore how the traditional Mithewa system facilitates cooperation, resolves conflicts, and adapts to external pressures such as climate change, tourism, and state interventions. The study highlights the intricate relationship between customary governance and social dynamics in the sustainable management of natural resources within this high-altitude region. The study explains the complex construct and interaction of the Mithewa system, with the community and its surroundings, for the management of the natural resources and maintaining harmony in the society. In explaining the effective function of Mithewa, the study also highlights the concurrent worldview of the Ngishyangba people, using the ethno-ecological framework. The framework unravels the Ngishyangba's intrinsic relationship with their environment and how such interconnectivity is realized, through their worldview based on spirituality, traditional occupation, rituals and practices, and decision-making process. The Ngishyangba, Indigenous communities in Nepal, exhibit robust and intricate connections with the land, forests, and other natural resources, spanning social, cultural, spiritual, religious, and economic dimensions. They have their own customary laws and practices in the sustainable

management of forests, agriculture, and pasture lands. These resources not only serve as the foundation of their livelihoods but are also deeply interwoven with their worldviews and ways of life. The Mithewa customary governance practices have been functioning effectively addressing socio-cultural conflicts, sustainable management of natural resources, and distribution. These governing bodies play an integral role in sustaining traditional knowledge and customary practices in natural resource use and management. They also play an equally important role in maintaining peace, unity, and harmony within the community by addressing the grievances and conflicts arising in the community.

Keywords: indigenous peoples, customary laws, nature, sustainable management, natural resources, social interaction

INTRODUCTION

Mountain Indigenous peoples maintain a symbiotic and reciprocal relationship with land, forests, water, and other natural resources. These resources not only sustain their livelihoods but also form the foundation of their identity, knowledge, and cultural practices, which are deeply aligned with ecological health. In Indigenous worldviews, the dichotomy between nature and people dissolves; nature is perceived as an extension of themselves. This perspective fosters a moral and ethical approach to interacting with the environment. Such values, along with ecosystem knowledge and cosmic worldviews, are transmitted across generations through songs, folklore, dances, and rituals, nurturing sustainable practices (Sherpa, 2018).

In Upper Manang, the Ngishyangba community has long relied on customary governance systems to manage its natural resources. Grounded in traditional knowledge and cultural practices, these systems reflect a profound understanding of ecological balance and community welfare. Through customary rules, the Ngishyangba regulate access to and use of vital resources such as water, grazing lands, and forests, ensuring sustainability and social harmony.

Indigenous communities possess intricate and time-tested customary governance systems for natural resource management. These systems are deeply rooted in cultural traditions, Indigenous knowledge, and their intimate connection with the natural environment. Customary institutions play a central role in community life, regulating resource use, organizing festivals, gathering consensus, performing rituals, facilitating benefit-sharing, and resolving conflicts. As such, these institutions are

fundamental to governing social affairs and ensuring sustainable resource management, making them indispensable for maintaining social harmony.

The custom refers to the set of behaviors of any community from a specific area that reflects in their everyday life (CIRUM, 2012). Whereas, “Laws” refers to the governing tools based on the principles, rules, rights, and obligations that shape the social interactions and processes. There has always remained some form of written or unwritten codes of conduct that governed society since the beginning of human history, which later developed into sophisticated legal instruments to cater to the challenges and complexity of modern societies.

“Customary laws” are a set of ancient rules based on the ways of life and natural wants of the community. It is there for shared knowledge of the community that has continued to evolve through generations, retained in the memory of elders, and passed down through generations until forgotten or until they become part of the immemorial rules (Roy, 2005).

Customary law is ‘grounded in the operations of the mind that lead people to conceptualize legal rules as normative propositions that are binding and mandatory since they are supported by sanctions’ (Orebech *et al.*, 2005).

It can, therefore, be deduced that laws developed from the social norms of any community, and are customary laws. Customary laws come into being as customs evolve into a norm of a group. Hence, customary law is value-driven; it is connected to the perception of self and the interconnected world. It is based on the principle of morality and ethics of doing well and avoiding harm.

In the same way, recent research on effective customary practices and laws shows how the customary laws have prevented the overuse of common resources and maintained a balance in ecosystem conservation and biodiversity. (Orebech *et al.*, 2005). Customary laws are developed through mutual understanding and a feeling of ownership among the community members. The laws are backed by the beliefs and values, developed through their myths of origin, their connectivity to the bigger cosmic realm, ancestral ties, and the knowledge of fair use and management of the resources. Such value-based laws are by default practiced and performed by Indigenous

communities, contributing to the efficient use of common pool resources, and maintaining a balance between animals, humans, and nature.

Indigenous Peoples living in Nepal have diverse customary institutions that were functioning way before the demarcation of modern boundaries and have continued to function despite the several social and political changes in the country. These customary institutions played a significant role in perpetuating the community's beliefs and values, ritualistic practices and customs, and rendering the smooth operation of the community. Different works of scholars suggest these institutions play a pivotal role in natural resources management and conservation. The *Mithewa* system in the Ngishyangba community in Manang is a particularly remarkable example in Nepal.

The customary law of Ngishyangbas has contributed significantly to the conservation of natural resources, sustainable management of forests, lands, and pasture lands, and maintained a close relationship with their territories and natural resources. These conservation values shaped by their close dependence and spiritual and cultural ties with their surrounding environment, have helped in sustainable conservation and management of the resources since time immemorial,

These core values within the *Mithewa* system have also proven to be ecologically sustainable and efficient in resource management practices. Furthermore, their rich knowledge and strong communality have come handy in adapting to climate change posed threats and dangers, which are more recurrent and alarming in recent times, in the mountainous regions of Nepal.

Traditionally, the *Dhawa Shyarpa* played a profound role in socio-cultural governance and resource management. The responsibilities of this institution, were later continued by the *Mithewas*. The *Mithewas* constituted and appointed under customary laws in Ngishyang Valley, is an exemplary Indigenous governance practice in the sustainable conservation and management of forests, agricultural lands, and pasture lands. *Mithewa* also holds a remarkable role in maintaining social order, harmony, and unity and undertaking developmental activities in their communities. These customary governance systems and practices have persisted for generations, contesting the several social and political changes taking place in the country, and adapting to these changes.

STUDY AREA AND RESEARCH METHODS

This study was conducted in the Ngishyang Valley of Upper Manang in two phases, in 2014 and 2022. The first phase focused on understanding the role of the Dhawa Shyarpa in the sustainable management of natural resources. The second phase examined the continuation of this role by the Mithewa system, exploring the intricate relationship between customary governance and social dynamics in resource management. It also analyzed how these traditional systems facilitate cooperation, resolve conflicts, and adapt to external pressures such as climate change, tourism, and state interventions.

This study employed a qualitative research method. Information were collected through observations, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions with community members. Snowball sampling was used in identifying key informants and focus group participants. Different community-based organizations and community representatives including Mithewa, mother groups, youth groups, political leaders, indigenous leaders Social workers, activists, religious leaders, and school teachers, were selected as key informants and focus group participants.

Thematic inquiry on traditional livelihoods, the nature of dependence on natural resources, core values, and beliefs, governance systems of Ngishyangbas, and their interrelationship with the land, forest, and other natural resources were collected and interpreted to derive a holistic understanding of the community. Likewise, the role of customary laws and practices in socio-cultural governance and natural resources management related information were collected through focus groups and key informant interview guidelines.

Theoretical Lenses

Structural-functional perspective is applied to understand the complex, interrelated aspects connecting the spiritual, socio-cultural, livelihood, and environmental domains of the Ngishyangba communities. This theory maps the structural roles played by customary institutions in regulating and maintaining the systematic functioning of these various domains, such as socio-cultural governance, resource management, pasture land administration, and the community's spiritual life. The structural-functional theory explains how the Mithewa customary institution and other social institutions are functionally interrelated and interdependent,

contributing to the continuity of the social system and the maintenance of the social structure.

Similarly, an ethno-ecological framework is used to elucidate the complex worldview of the Ngishyangba people. Ethno-ecology, defined as an interdisciplinary approach that examines how human groups perceive nature through a lens of beliefs and knowledge, and how they use or manage natural resources based on these perceptions (Toledo, 2000), helps in describing the holistic worldview surrounding their communities and natural environment. For the Ngishyangba, land and forest resources are not merely sources of livelihood and income generation; they also hold cultural, social, and spiritual significance, shaping their lifestyle and behavior. Their strong connection with the land has fostered a worldview that guides their customary laws, practices, and norms, significantly contributing to the protection and management of natural resources in their environment.

Worldviews are often considered a set of beliefs and values of individuals or communities, shaped by their interactions and knowledge transfer across generations (ICT, 2016). The Ngishyangba worldview, formed through their knowledge, skills, culture, and practices, reflects their interactions with the world around them. They hold deep, tacit knowledge of pastoralism, the selection of customary leaders, resource use, benefit-sharing, ritual practices, and conflict resolution. This knowledge has developed over time through prolonged engagement and various experiences, making it highly relevant and effective.

Traditional Livelihoods and Natural Resources Management

Traditionally, the Ngishyangbas practiced farming coupled with animal husbandry and trans-boundary trade for their livelihood. They grew crops such as wheat, potatoes, buckwheat and barley (Karu in native tongue) as their staple crops. Nevertheless, in recent years, the community has also diversified its production to other crops such as mustard, cabbage, cauliflowers, broccolis, carrots, and beans. Likewise, the choices of animals for animal husbandry were; yaks, naks (female yak), cows, oxen, horses, sheep, and goats. They reared yaks to carry loads at high altitudes and for meat while sheep were reared for the meat and wool and Horses, for transportation. Besides these mostly preferred quadruped animals, other were also kept for obtaining manure for their farmland or fulfilling the needs of transportation. Animal husbandry was a reliable source of the

traditional economy. As animal husbandry is the major source of earnings and subsistence, along with farming, every people in the village have their own pasture lands. In recent years, the declining human population and increasing inclination to trade, has threatened the discontinuation of transhumance pastoralism in the region.

Every village of the upper Manang has its own forests, from where the community people procure firewood, timber, and medicinal herbs, following the customary laws of the village. As per the law, villagers are only allowed to collect forest products in a specific time and prescribed quantity. The forest in Pisang is mostly Chir-pines (Thangsing), cedars (Kelsing), and junipers (Sangsing) and they make up the deepest and largest forest in an entire area. Villagers collect firewood, grass, fallen leaves, and timber for household use. Besides these, over the last five or seven years, the locals have been collecting cordyceps (Yarchagunbu) which is contributing significantly to their economy.

Another prominent traditional occupation of the Ngishyangba is the trans-border trade. Due to the extreme environment, and the proximity to Tibet, trans-Himalayan trading, has been an important characteristic and way of life of Indigenous Ngishyangbas. Likewise, owing to the geographical remoteness and the unfertile environment the then Government of Nepal had granted passports to Ngishyangbas in the year 1962, allowing them to travel and trade internationally, with various countries in South and Southeast Asia. This led them to expand their business internationally in Southeast Asia and beyond to Korea (Gurung, 1976). This special provision was short-lived and was abolished in 1976. In the years that followed people of Ngishyang valley opened their doors to tourism.

The Gurung and Ghales were the two Indigenous communities living in Ngishyang valley, since time immemorial. These communities have different sub-clans (Fowe in local dialect) such as Tonde, Samwe, Ngarchong, Bhrakalama, Ghurchyakchyak, Kandedu, Kale, Ngimchhiring, Bagting, Kamisatar, Khen, Jimalthoki, Pantilama, and Prop (Gurung and Neupane, 1969). These communities followed Buddhism as their major religion and spoke the Ngishyangte language. The language, Ngishyangte closely resembles with Tamang language and sounds like the Thakali languages of Mustang and of the Chhantyalys in Myagdi and Baglung. Although the lands were strictly restricted for selling to the outer

communities, in recent years, there has been an increase in the number of Tamang, Rai, Magar, Kshetri, and Kami households in the valley. Most of the new and non-Indigenous Peoples are there to look after the locals' homes, run small-scale businesses and do wage-based jobs.

Mithewa: A Customary Institution of Ngishyangba

Mithewa is a prominent customary institution prevailing among the Ngishyangba community today. Prior to its introduction, this system was known as Dhawa Shyarpa. Considering the importance of resources for their livelihood, the community has developed a set of rich customary laws and practices by which the community strictly abides.

These customary laws and practices which are based on the needs and values of the community have contributed to the behavior of sustainable use and management of resources. Traditionally, Dhawa Shyarpa was responsible for the administration and maintenance of socio-cultural and resource governance in the region. However, in later years, the responsibility of administering and managing various aspects of the communities has been undertaken by Mithewas. Mithewas have been playing a crucial role in conserving, promoting, and managing forests, agricultural lands and pasture lands.

Although the guiding principles of Dhawa Shyarpa practices prevailed in the shared memory of the community, no one knows for sure the time and how the custom came into place. Some believe that the tradition of Dhawa Shyarpa in Manang Valley could be as old as three hundred years or more. (Gurung, 1977).

In the local language, Dhawa and Shyarpa are called Kha-mba Lhen-nji, meaning the head or leader of the village. Customarily there are four Dhawas (Kh-ha-mwas), four Shyarpas (Lhen-nji), and one Katuwal (Choun). The *Choun*, *Thopip* in the local dialect, is a messenger.

The selection of Dhawa and Shyarpa follows a democratic process, where the four eldest members of the village are selected as Dhawa and Shyarpa, provided they must be between the ages of 18 and 70. If the elders are of the same age, a lottery system is used for selection. Traditionally, Dhawas and Shyarpas served a one-year term. Upon completing their term, Shyarpas are appointed as Dhawas for the following year, primarily due to their seniority. Individuals who have previously served as Dhawas may

be reappointed only after all other heads of the family in the village have completed their term.

The selection of Dhawa Shyarpa, in Ngishyang Valley, is made on the ceremonial darting-day or an archery festival, (*mitha* in local language). The festival takes place during March or April. Depending on the total household and the representation of the clans the selection of Dhawa Shyarpa is done. The three major clans; Sakrong (Gurung), Puine; and Thate (Katuwal), in Pisang village. Two representatives, each from the Sakrong and Puine clans are selected as Dhawa Shyarpa. Since the post of *katuwal* is reserved for Thate, they can only carry the role of a Thate and cannot represent Dhawa Shyarpa. Each clan holds the meeting and nominates the leader unanimously. Information about the recommendation is passed to Choun, or messenger. The Choun circulates the information regarding the selection of the Dhawa Shyarpa, to the villagers. In order to recognize and congratulate their newly elected representatives, villagers go to the newly appointed Dhawa Shyarpas homes with brewed barley and millet beer, and *khada*, a silk scarf used mainly by Buddhist communities on auspicious occasions.

Dhawa Shyarpa looks after the social, cultural, political, legal, and even development works in the village. He plays a prominent role in perpetuating the customs, customary laws, rituals, maintaining order, peace, and harmony in their community. Dhawa Shyarpas also plays judicial role in settling disputes and quarrels in village. Moreover, it is Dhawa Shyarpa responsible for the continuation of religious and cultural activities and resource management including the conservation of forests through controlled action against illegal hunting and proper management of pastures and farmlands. It is he who determines the time for seasonal transhumance mobility and pasture lands (Sherpa, 2018). Moreover, they also actively engage in contextualizing the social norms and orders depending on the changing time and context.

Dhawa Shyarpa also specifies the time and quantity of firewood collection from their forests. The decision to open and close the forest and to set the quantity of harvest is determined through the joint meeting of the community and Dhawa Shyarpa. Community members, who failing to abide by the decision, are fined a certain amount of money. The penalty for disobedience of community law is double for those who breach the social

contract intentionally. Even more, the community members who disobey the laws more than two times are fined through a joint meeting of all the clans in the village. Since the locals are generally honest and obedient, rather than objecting to the decisions, they simply follow the prevailing customary law and practices.

In the past, the Dhawa Shyarpas of Manang village were the most powerful and considered superior to other Dhawa Shyarpas, throughout the district. For instance, people dissatisfied with decisions taken by the Dhawa Shyarpa of Ngishyang community could appeal to the Dhawa Shyapra of Manang for justice, and accept his decision as a final verdict. The Dhawa Shyarpa of Ngishyang Valley was also known for looking after the socio-political governance of the people from Nar and Phu villages (Gurung, 1977).

The once dominant Dhawa Shyarpa system started weakening, after the introduction of the party-less Panchayat system in the country in 1960. However, the roles of the Dhawa Shyarpa system in exercising customary laws regained attention in the absence of local government representatives. To some degree, the Mithewa, locally known as “great or respected person”, has been carrying out the role and responsibilities that had previously been accomplished by the Dhawa Shyarpa.

Traditionally, the culprit or offenders had to compensate with labourous tasks, such as carrying stones for construction. However, with the change in traditional economy, and the increasing use of money, the monetary fine has replaced the earlier ways of compensating through labor (Pokharel, 2008).

Structurally Dhawa Shyarpa in Manang village is slightly different from other communities of the valley. In Manang, the Dhawa Shyarpa comprises a nine-member committee; one Falasin, four Kh-hamwas, two M-hitis, and two Shyarpas. The selection time of the administrator under Dhawa Shyarpa falls on a similar occasion to the Mitha (Archery Festival). The time of the festival also marks the beginning of cultivation and the end of winter, usually during this time snow melts and people are ready to sow their crops. It is customary for all community members over the age of 15 and under 60 to attend the festival. Those failing to attend were subject to punishment. Traditionally the final justice was rendered through Kh-hamwas, usually the cases unresolved by the Falasin. Likewise, M-hiti would play a role to pass the information and notices to the villagers.

Shyarpas, were like a modern day policeman, taking hold of suspects and presenting them before the Kh-hamwas or Falasin. Mithewas had previously held the position of Dhawa Shyarpa also called Kh-hamwa-Lhen-njin.

Role of Mithewa in Natural Resource Management

Ngishyangbas have been conserving, and sustainably managing forests, agricultural land and pasture lands through the customary institution of Mithewa. The forests of the Ngishyang Valley are customarily governed; seasonally opening and closing and deciding on the quantity of the resources, timbers, and non-timber forest products. A protected forest, in the local dialect, is called “Teising”.

Various villages have a range of protected forests, each tied to specific locations and cultural landmarks. In Pisang, forests such as Mekena, Chyongda, and Pinti are situated near Upper Pisang village and around the Urgen Thoche Chholin Monastery. In Gyaru, the Hyumafo forest lies on the steep slopes above the village, while Na is located at the bottom part. Nga-wal features forests like Chikung (Raniban), Upen, Thakri, and Thanggung, spread across the upper and lower parts of the village. Bhraka is home to forests like Mungjina, Jyulana, Chenangche, Kresadche, Frawal, and Chinkre, extending around the Sher Monastery and across the Masyangni River. The Tanki and Manang areas include the Teising forest on the steep slopes of Tanki Manang, while Khangsar has the Tare Gumba Forest surrounding the Tare Monastery. These forests play vital roles in ecological preservation and the cultural life of these communities.

There are different species of trees; *Thangsing* (sallo), *Syukpa* (Dhupi), *Khoti* (Bhojpatra), and *Khe* (kalo sallo) in the forests Protected by the village. Villagers procure dry firewood, and fallen leaves to make compost, herbs, and wild vegetables from the forest, but, no one is allowed to trim green branches or foliage. However, people can collect timber for the construction of a monastery, school, or a bridge, with the permission of Mithewas. Unlike other protected forests, the Ngishyangbas, are prohibited from collecting firewood and fallen leaves from the Teising forest of Tanki Manang and Chikung forest of Ngawal. The failure to abide by the rules was met with the consequences, where the Dhawa Shyarpa penalized the people disobeying the traditional forest law. Nevertheless, in recent years, it is the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) that takes over charge of the use, management and action against the illegal logging.

At present, there is a growing consciousness to protect trees on sloped land and around the monastery, to avoid natural disasters. The Ngishyangbas also seem to be engaged in afforestation and protecting plants in critical places in order to mitigate the hazards posed by landslides, rock slides, and floods. There also appears to be increased awareness of the impacts of climate change such as floods, landslides, drought, expediting glacial melt, and the increasing size of glacial lakes. The change however is not new, indigenous Ngisyanwas have, over centuries, been adapting to changing weather patterns through their own indigenous ways. This place-based knowledge has helped them thrive and develop appropriate adaptation methods, in times of adversities. This knowledge plays a vital role in enhancing the resilience of the local communities and in sustainably managing forests and other natural resources in their territories. These communally protected forests also contribute to maintain balance in the ecosystem, promote the conservation of biodiversity, and help reduce the climate change impacts. It further adds to the the aesthetic of the village with greenery and perennial flowers.

Apart from slope Ngishyangbas also refrain from cutting down of trees from around the religious sites and sacred places, such as monasteries, water bodies; lakes and ponds believed to be the abode of L-hu, the snake god. In this way, religious beliefs, cultural norms and values and growing awareness of climate change impact among Ngishyangbas appear to have contributed to the conservation and sustainable management of land and forest resources in Manang Valley.

The customary laws also appear to increase the ownership of people over the forest and resources around them. If a person or village has to use the natural resources belonging to another community, they are bound to obtain consent, in the first place, from the concerned Dhawa Shyarpa or Mithewa. According to the Customary laws, the local community peoples have prerogative rights over the natural resources prevailing in their community, giving them ultimate power to decide on the use and management of the resources.

Management of Farmland, Crops and Pasture Land

The transhumance system and agricultural practices are in sync, there is a positive correlation between the mobility of animals and the crops grown in the field. Because the animals are taken to high altitudes when the crops are growing it is protected against the raid by livestock. Customarily,

the villagers start moving to high altitudes to graze their livestock starting mid-May. In the past, the date for mobility was determined by the Dhawa Shyarpa but is now done by the Mithewas. Mithewas decide on the date to move upward and the date and time to enter back, Choun (Katuwal) informs the villagers about the decision.

For the protection of crops against the animal raid, every year, Chhowa (crop guard) is selected for policing and surveillance of the farm against the animal. The Chhowa carries his role for a year, until the next Chhowa is selected, and he hands over the responsibilities to newly selected Chhowa. The total number of Chhowa can differ from one village to another, depending upon the number of households and the size of the farmland. Some villages assign four or five and even seven crop-guards.

Just like Chhow to protect farm, villagers also select three types of herdsmen locally called; Ta Chhen; Ra Chhen; and Me Chhen; two individuals in each category. They are responsible for moving the livestock from the village to rangeland. As per the rule, Ta Chhens looks after the horses, Ra Chhens looks after the goats and sheep while Me Chhens looks after the cows and oxen.

The selection process of Chhowa and assigning specific roles is done through the meeting, where the community people discuss and decide on the roles and responsibilities for each other. If the animal is left back in the village even after the scheduled date, and if it destroys crops in the village, Chhowas take control over it and fine its owner. Chhowas are vigilant to keep away the animals from entering the farmland. As per customary laws, no animals should be brought back to the village until all the crops have been harvested. Once harvesting is over, Mithewas and Chhowas hold a joint meeting and set the date to bring back the livestock to the village. People can collect grass from the grassland for three or four days after the Mithewas specify a date for grass collection. After cultivation, milk-yielding animals and their kids are kept to graze in the nearby pasture lands while the rest of the animals are taken to more distant pasture lands and left free to graze.

In Ngisyang Valley, if a farm animal damages crops, the owner has to pay a fine amount depending on the type of animal, the extent of the damage, and the efforts put by farmers in the plantation. There is also a discrepancy in the fines between the insider and outsider to the village, in comparison to the insider the outsiders has to pay higher fines. For example,

in Manang, the damage to the crops by horses, the horse owners have to pay fine between Rs. 10 and Rs. 100, and cow and ox owners between Rs. 5 and Rs. 50, goat and sheep owners between Rs. 3 and Rs. 10, and yak owners between Rs. 50 and Rs. 100. If the same animal repeatedly destroys crops, the fine amount can increase. In cases where a herd causes damage, the Mithewas, the community leaders, decide the fine. The amount collected from fines, in some villages, is divided between Mithewas while in other villages they deposit the amount in a fund allocated for religious activities.

Horses have always been a prime means of transportation for Ngishyangbas. People who have traveled through distances can tie their horses in an empty or barren part of the village, taking permission from the Mithewas. Similarly, injured animals can be cared for in the village but with Mithewas' permission. As per the customary laws, Mithewa and chief Lama, are allowed to keep a horse in the village, ensuring their horses do not destroy other villagers' crops.

DISCUSSION

The Ngishyangba Indigenous Peoples have a symbiotic relationship with the natural resources, mainly land and forests for their social, cultural, religious, economic, and spiritual wellbeing. For centuries, they have been practicing customary laws in the conservation and sustainable management of the lands and forests. Due to the intervention of the state policies on forest and land in Nepal, such knowledge and practices in most of the indigenous communities mainly hills and the plains in Nepal are at the edge of disappearing, however in the mountain indigenous communities of Ngishyangba are still strongly under practices and continue transferring their traditional knowledge and cultural practices through the customary laws to future generations with the fusions of the principles of continuity and interactions by the Dhawa Shyarpa and Mithewa institutions in Manang for sustainable management of the land and forest.

The Ngishyangbas still have been practicing collective ownership and management system of pasture lands, forests, and water resources. They have their own worldviews towards nature, culture, and communities. For them, the natural resources like land, forest, ponds, lakes, rivers and mountains are not only sources for their livelihoods and economic values but they are spiritually and culturally interconnected to each other, and believe

it a sacred mother earth that to be protected and managed collectively for the future generations as well as for the whole sentient beings on Earth.

Mithewa customary governance system of the Indigenous Ngisyangba community is an example of the Indigenous Peoples, sustainable natural resource management and self-governance system. The Mithewa governance system of the Ngisyangba community is not just a law-implementing institution, but it is a social contract that binds the communities together and perpetuates the social norms and values through generations.

Due to its value-laden principles of perceiving nature as a protector and provider, the Indigenous Ngisyangba community is found to be engaged in a range of activities that are essential for their survival as well as activities that cater to the spiritual needs of the community. The spiritual worldview of the water bodies, forests, and mountains shapes their ethical ways of interacting and appropriating the resources around them (Negi, 2010). Moreover, the time-tested place-based knowledge of Indigenous Ngisyangba communities come in handy when they experience any disruptions due to natural calamities. The Ngisyangba community's rich knowledge of the resources, use, and availability and overall their strong sense of communality are the major drivers of their resilience to climate threats. The shared knowledge and the collective memory of the governance and customary laws that are symmetrical to the Ngisyangwa ways of life and their world views of the nature and spiritual powers around them guide their behavior of sustainable natural resources use and management.

Hence, as the global discourse on sustainable development, climate change, and biodiversity loss continues to take central attention in the national and international platforms. We are missing out on the rich value-driven practices of Indigenous Peoples that are already sustainable and are contributing to climate change mitigation and adaptation and the conservation of biodiversity.

CONCLUSION

The customary institutions of Ngishyangba have remained resilient and effective despite significant political and administrative changes in Nepal. The Mithewa, a key customary governance mechanism, has played a crucial role in addressing social conflicts, managing resource use, and

distributing resources within the community. This system has helped sustain traditional knowledge and practices related to natural resource management, while also maintaining social harmony by resolving grievances and conflicts. Even through major political shifts and a stateless situation, the Mithewa system has remained operational, with several factors contributing to its continued importance. These include the system's deep connection to ancestral memory, its involvement of community members, its alignment with the community's worldview, and its integration with local occupations and religious calendars. The active participation of the community in the Mithewa system has made it highly desirable and effective.

Additionally, the study highlighted the significant role of Ngishyangba's cosmic worldview in shaping decision-making. The Mithewas often consult with lamas or religious leaders to determine the appropriate times for activities like planting and harvesting crops, as well as for rituals before heading to high-altitude pasture lands or using water resources. This spiritual connection to the environment reinforces moral and ethical values that guide the sustainable management of resources such as pasture lands, forests, water, and agricultural lands. Thus, the customary governance system of Ngishyangba is more than just a set of laws; it is a rich repository of knowledge that encompasses their cosmic vision and environmental awareness, developed through generations of interaction with the land, nature, and environment.

In contemporary times, the Mithewa system continues to be an essential customary institution for the transfer of traditional knowledge and cultural practices, addressing the spiritual, cultural, and livelihood needs of the community. Religious beliefs, social values, and a deep connection to nature have facilitated the conservation and sustainable management of natural resources in the Ngishyang Valley. These values have contributed to ecological health and climate change mitigation. However, modern government policies, such as land and forest regulations, national parks, and conservation acts and regulations have often ignored or undermined the rich, sustainable practices embedded in Indigenous governance systems. These exclusionary policies have severed the relationship between Indigenous peoples and their land, depriving them of ownership and rights to forests and pasture lands. Despite these challenges, Indigenous communities continue to rely on their ancestral wisdom and place-based knowledge to navigate an uncertain future.

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