

The Endangered Wayu (Hayu) Ethnic Group of Nepal: Examining Policy Gaps in Cultural Preservation

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Doi: 10.3126/voh.v33i1.87283

Abstract

The Wayu (Hayu), an indigenous ethnic group in Nepal, face significant socio-political and cultural marginalization. Over time, their cultural heritage has been increasingly threatened due to systemic exclusion and ineffective policy implementation. This study examines Nepal's public policy framework, including the Constitution of Nepal (2015), the National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN) Act (2002), the Local Government Operation Act (2017), the National Education Act and Policy (2019), and the Social Security Act (2018), to evaluate their effectiveness in addressing the challenges faced by the Wayu community. Utilizing a qualitative research approach grounded in a transformative paradigm, this study highlights the policy gaps and barriers to the effective implementation of constitutional rights, social justice provisions, and cultural preservation efforts. Despite legal frameworks ensuring equality and inclusion, systemic biases, lack of targeted programs, and poor inter-agency coordination have hindered meaningful progress. The study finds that government policies often adopt a blanket approach that fails to address the specific socio-economic and cultural contexts of smaller communities like the Wayu. Additionally, local government priorities remain skewed toward physical infrastructure, further side-lining marginalised ethnic groups. Education emerges as a crucial factor in cultural preservation and socio-economic empowerment; however, inadequate support for mother-tongue education and limited higher education opportunities exacerbate the cycle of marginalisation. This study underscores the need for reparation policy enforcement with a robust mechanism that are context-specific, inclusive, and actively responsive to the needs of endangered ethnic groups like the Wayu. By addressing these shortcomings, Nepal can ensure the cultural resilience and social justice of its indigenous communities.

Keywords: *Wayu (Hayu) community, cultural erosion, language endangerment, systemic marginalization, policy enforcement, social justice*

Introduction

The Wayu (Hayu) is an indigenous ethnic group in Nepal with a small population (Hodgson, 1858). Their original self-designation, or endonym, is *Wayu* (Michailovsky, 1973). They have their own language, traditions, and cultural identity (Michailovsky, 1973; Pokhrel,

2013; Rai, 2017). However, over time, they have faced social and political marginalization, leading to a decline in the passing down of their cultural heritage. This has made them an ethnic minority experiencing severe marginalization (Pokhrel, 2013). Nepal is endowed with diverse ethnic composition, including endangered groups such as Kusunda, Raute, Kisan, Meche, Bankariya, Surel, Raji, Lepcha, and Kuswadiya. Among them the Wayu are classified as most endangered group under Nepal's Social Security Act of 2018. These communities experience social and economic exclusion, political neglect, and cultural loss, putting their unique traditions and way of life at risk (Hayu, 2024). Although ethnic communities suffer from the fragility of their existence, the nature of their marginalization and cultural vulnerability varies between them. According to the National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN) Act, 2002, endangered ethnic groups are identified by their shrinking population, critically vanishing languages, and fading cultural practices. Indigenous ethnic minorities are much more likely to live in poverty than the ethnic majority or others in any given country (Hall and Patrinos, 2012). Moreover, members of those groups experience deeper poverty compared to the other population (UN, 2018). Ethnic culture marginalisation is a global phenomenon which varies on the country specific context. Largely, the government policies are key to deal with marginalisation process and environment. Therefore, policy enforcement plays a pivotal role, that the mechanisms and tools are used to ensure the implementation of a defined set of actions within a system (Anderson, 2020). Government policies are guided by political decisions, which are reflected in plans, acts, regulations, and procedures with established standards (Smith & Brown, 2018). For policies to be effective, they must be enforceable and consistently applied (Jones, 2019).

The overall context of contemporary public policy is governed by a number of contexts, the historical context is one of them (Theodoulou & Cahn, 1995:91). In general, public policy gaps disproportionately affect marginalized communities, whose voices are often overlooked, manipulated, or ignored (Fraser, 2009). Marginalized voices refer to the perspectives, experiences, and narratives of individuals or groups systematically excluded, oppressed, or disadvantaged within society due to factors such as ethnicity, race, gender, class, religion, or other social, political, and economic inequalities (Sue & Sue, 2016). As a result, these voices are often underrepresented or ignored in mainstream discourse, policymaking, and cultural narratives, further perpetuating their marginalization (Fraser, 2009).

In this article, marginalized voices spotlight the Wayu (Hayu) ethnic communities, whose needs, rights, and identities are frequently overlooked during the course of public policies and provisions enforcement. As transformative theory says, people who are born into circumstances associated with a greater probability of discrimination and oppression (due to physical, historical, economic, or other factors) continue to experience lower access to resources, as well as a greater likelihood that they will have a lower quality of life (whether due to educational, health, psychological, or social variables) (Mertens, 2009).

Against this backdrop, this study investigates the challenges faced by the Wayu people, aiming to uncover emerging realities within Wayu culture, with the main objective of exploring strategies to enhance its resilience through the review of major policies.

As scholars have suggested, policies should be evaluated based on their effectiveness (Dunn, 2018), efficiency (Weimer and Vining, 2017), and equity (Stone, 2012). Following these criteria, this study focuses on three major leading questions: What are policy provisions for marginalised communities mentioned in the policy instruments? Do the policies address the problem of the Wayu community? Is there an effective implementation mechanism mentioned? Is it fair and justice?

This review focuses specifically on constitutional provisions and legislative acts related to the rights and protections of endangered ethnic groups in Nepal. It does not provide a comprehensive analysis of the entire policy landscape. Therefore, there may be additional policies, regulations, and provisions pertinent to endangered ethnic communities that are not covered in this study. The findings of the research will contribute to and add value to scientific knowledge by providing new insights into the impacts of long-term subjugation and systemic marginalization in ethnically rich, multicultural, developing countries, using Nepal as a case study.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in a transformative paradigm, which seeks to challenge existing power structures and amplifies the voices of marginalized communities (Mertens, 2016). The transformative approach is particularly suited to this research, as it aims to uncover nuanced perspectives through critical discourse analysis of government policies and practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The study primarily focuses on the reviews of major policies and frameworks that were concluded and implemented during different periods. The in-depth reviews include primarily constitution and acts as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Selected policy instruments for reviews

SN	Policy instruments
1	Constitution of Nepal 2015: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fundamental Rights and Duties; Article 18, 26, 32, 42 & 43• Article 51 State Polices: (c) Policies regarding social and cultural transformation: (5), (6) (j) Policies regarding social justice and inclusion (8)
2	The National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN) Act, 2002:
3	Local Government Operation Act, 2017
4	The National Education Act and Policy, 2019
5	Social Security Act of 2018

The study also involves an in-depth exploration based on public and community experiences and understanding. The policy-practice and gaps, focusing on the socio-political dynamics that shape the cultural identity of the Wayu community. This study focuses on policy content analysis, primarily following the policy analysis approach (e.g., Darjee, 2024; Darjee et al., 2021). The study analyses the goals and focus of the policy, the provisions mentioned, and the institutional approaches for implementation.

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Results and Discussion

Policy Overview

The Constitution of Nepal 2015 sets the foundational legal and political framework for the country’s transformation into a federal democratic republic. Its primary objective is to ensure inclusive governance, uphold human rights, and promote social justice by decentralizing authority across federal, provincial, and local levels. The Constitution strongly emphasizes the protection and promotion of the rights of marginalized communities, including women, Dalits, indigenous nationalities (Aadibasi Janajati), Madhesi, Tharu, persons with disabilities, and other disadvantaged groups. Key articles such as Article 18 (Right to Equality), Article 42 (Right to Social Justice), and Article 43 (Right to Social Security) guarantee equal treatment under the law and access to state-supported services for these groups. Article 32 ensures the right to language and culture, enabling communities to preserve their mother tongues, traditions, and indigenous knowledge. Additionally, Article 26 secures religious freedom, while Article 51 outlines state policies aimed at eliminating discrimination and fostering social and cultural transformation. To implement these rights, the Constitution has established institutional mechanisms such as the National Inclusion Commission (Article 258) and the Indigenous Nationalities Commission (Article 261), ensuring the representation and development of ethnic communities and other historically excluded populations. Overall, the Constitution promotes an inclusive and multicultural state, committed to equitable participation and identity-based empowerment.

The following prevailing legislations are presented in the table 2.

Table 2: Policy’s goal, provision and institutional mechanisms for implementation

Pol icies	Objectives/ Focus	Provision for marginalised communities	Institutional mechanism for implementation
NF DIN Act 2002	The Act focuses to safeguard the rights of indigenous and endangered groups,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensures the overall upliftment of Aadibasi/Janjati by formulating and implementing programs related to their social, educational, economic, and cultural development. 	NFDIN itself is a national level umbrella institution for all ethnic groups of Nepal. It has

	<p>providing ample legal space for their development.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preserves and promote the language, script, culture, literature, arts, and history of Aadibasi/Janjati. • Preserves and promotes traditional knowledge, skills, technology, and special expertise of Aadibasi/Janjati, while providing assistance for their vocational application. • Facilitates the participation of Aadibasi/Janjati in the mainstream of national development by fostering goodwill, harmony, and cooperation among diverse ethnic, caste, and tribal communities. • Assists in building an equitable society through the social, economic, religious, and cultural development of Aadibasi/Janjati. 	<p>mandated with dual role, regulatory as well as service provider.</p>
<p>Local Government Operation Act, 2017</p>	<p>The Act mandates the inclusion of marginalized communities in local development planning. The LGOA itself enables local government exclusive rights. Each local constituency has its</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designs, implements, monitors, and evaluates development plans related to economic, social, cultural, environmental, technological, and infrastructure growth. • Approves, regulates, and monitors schools teaching in the mother tongue. • Manages free education, scholarships, and student motivation at the local level. 	<p>The Ward level committee is responsible and mandated its functions and duties as assigned by the local executive.</p>

	<p>own unique identities and context based on demography, geographic location and ethnic cultural practices. The Act also provides space for cultural promotional and protection right for the local government.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develops local policies, laws, and standards for preserving language, culture, and fine arts. • Protects and promotes archaeological sites, ancient memorials, and museums. • Records and maintains data on heritage sites, public and community properties. • Preserves and promotes local customs and cultural uniqueness. • Keeps records of disadvantaged groups (e.g., women, children, Dalits, minorities). • Supports their social and economic development. 	
<p>The National Education Act and Policy, 2019</p>	<p>Regulates and develops school-level education in Nepal.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Originally enacted during the Panchayat regime; has undergone multiple amendments. • Still in effect, though a new Act aligning 	<p>Education Act, 1971</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishes a uniform school education system across the country. • Regulates school operations, teacher recruitment, and curriculum development. • Promotes literacy and basic education for the general population. • Provides a structured framework for primary, lower secondary, secondary, and higher secondary education. <p>Education Policy, 2019</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All public and community schools across country • Local and Provincial government

	<p>with the Constitution is needed.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Primarily governs basic and secondary education. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensures access to free, compulsory, and equitable education up to Grade 12 for all. Promotes inclusive education, focusing on marginalized, disadvantaged, and differently-abled groups. Strengthens mother-tongue and multilingual education to preserve local languages and cultures. Integrates indigenous knowledge and local culture into curricula to preserve identity and heritage. Fosters participatory governance and decentralization in education management. 	
<p>Social Security Act of 2018</p>	<p>Protects and fulfills the constitutional right to social security for vulnerable and marginalized citizens by ensuring their dignity, inclusion, and basic livelihood support.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Act guarantees social security allowances to the marginalized and vulnerable groups: Citizens from tribes on the verge of extinction. Endangered ethnic groups (tribes on the verge of extinction) are entitled to a specific allowance, as determined by the Government of Nepal. This recognizes their critical status and cultural vulnerability, ensuring targeted support. The government is responsible for identifying eligible individuals and 	<p>Local Governments are responsible to execute focused and targeted plan and programme.</p>

		ensuring fair distribution of allowances to prevent exclusion.	
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Table 3: Inclusion policies for Wayu community

Policies	Provision for Wayu		Implementation mechanism		Constitutional mandates	
	Exclusive	Inclusive	National responsible	Local responsible	Exclusive powers	Concurrent functions
NFDIN Act 2002	-	Yes	National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN)	Local Government	Federal Government (Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration)	Not clear
Local Government Operation Act, 2017	Yes	-	The Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration	Local Government and Ward Committee	Local Government	-
The National Education Act and Policy, 2019	-	Yes	The Federal Ministry of Education,	Local Government and Ward Committee	Local Government	Federal and Province Government

			Science and Technology				
Social Security Act of 2018	es	Y	-	The Federal Ministry of Finance	Local Government and Ward Committee	Federal Government	Province and Local Government

Legislative provisions and enforcement mechanism

The legislative and policy frameworks in Nepal collectively aim to promote inclusive governance, safeguard cultural heritage, and enhance the socio-economic status of marginalized communities, particularly indigenous nationalities as mentioned in the table 2 and 3. The National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN) Act, 2002 provides a comprehensive legal mechanism for the protection, promotion, and development of Aadibasi/Janajati communities. It focuses on their social, educational, economic, and cultural upliftment, preservation of indigenous languages and knowledge, and integration into national development processes. Since its promulgation, ethnic concerns and issues are being recognised and evolving over time. Specifically, the inclusion, identities, culture promotion and legal rights are being improving trends.

The Local Government Operation Act, 2017 decentralizes authority and grants local governments the power to formulate and implement development policies tailored to local contexts. This includes the protection of cultural heritage, promotion of mother-tongue education, and targeted support for disadvantaged groups such as Dalits, indigenous peoples, and persons with disabilities. It mandates local and ward-level authorities to maintain records of marginalized populations and heritage sites while advancing social inclusion through development initiatives.

The Education Act of 1971 and Education Policy of 2019 provide the foundation for school-level education reform. While the Act aims to regulate and standardize school education across the country, the Policy emphasizes inclusive, equitable, and multilingual education. It promotes the use of native languages in instruction, the integration of indigenous knowledge into curricula, and the provision of free basic education up to grade 12. However, higher education governance under the University Grant Commission Act, 1993 lacks targeted strategies for endangered ethnic groups.

Finally, the Social Security Act of 2018 enshrines the right to social protection for vulnerable citizens, including indigenous communities at risk of extinction. The Act provides allowances to various marginalized groups and recognizes the unique vulnerability of endangered tribes, mandating specific support measures to uphold their dignity and survival.

Together, these laws and policies form an integrated approach to fostering equity, cultural preservation, and social justice within Nepal's evolving federal structure.

Systemic Discrimination and Policy Gaps

Historically, systemic discrimination has marginalized the Wayu people. During the Rana regime (pre-1950), Nepal was promoted as a homogenous Hindu nation, enforcing monolingual and mono-religious policies (Dahal, 2001). Institutional exclusion was further entrenched when the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) omitted caste and ethnicity data from official publications between 1961 and 1981 (Dahal, 2001). Consequently, the Wayu have faced persistent social discrimination, including stigma, exclusion from opportunities, and linguistic marginalization. Politically, their underrepresentation in governance structures has limited their access to resources and advocacy.

To analyse this issue, I draw upon Roy Bhaskar's *A Realist Theory of Science*, which argues that understanding reality requires looking beyond empirical observations to uncover deeper structures and mechanisms shaping social dynamics. Bhaskar's critical realism highlights that social phenomena are not merely a sum of observable events but are influenced by hidden causal forces, historical contexts, and power relations (Bhaskar, 2008).

Despite the existence of policy frameworks ostensibly designed to protect and uplift marginalized communities, the persistent failure in their effective implementation continues to impede substantive progress (United Nations, 2009). This enduring shortfall invites a critical examination of the concept of reparations, particularly when framed as redress for historical injustices perpetrated under previous legal or political regimes (Posner, 2003). The absence of context-sensitive and culturally attuned strategies has significantly intensified the challenges faced by the Wayu people, especially in areas such as language preservation, institutional representation, and socio-economic advancement (Minority Rights Group International, 2022).

Current development programs, including the NEDIN plan, demonstrate a disproportionate emphasis on meeting broad quantitative benchmarks rather than implementing need-based, community-specific interventions (Inter-American Development Bank [IDB], 2020). This approach tends to marginalize the most vulnerable ethnic groups whose realities do not conform to standardized development models. Furthermore, the lack of inter-agency coordination, targeted strategies, and actionable implementation plans continues to erode the efficacy of these initiatives (United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues [UNPFII], 2021).

The government's prevailing one-size-fits-all policy framework neglects the diverse socio-economic and cultural contexts of smaller indigenous communities such as the Wayu. Consequently, these communities often receive inadequate support that fails to address their particular needs and aspirations. The failure to ensure equitable distribution of resources reinforces patterns of asymmetrical development, thereby perpetuating structural inequities (Hall & Patrinos, 2012).

Importantly, the legislative instrument governing indigenous development—the Act itself—functions as an umbrella framework encompassing all indigenous groups, each of which possesses its own distinct historical, cultural, and socio-political context. This generalized approach dilutes the specificity required for meaningful impact. Therefore, it is imperative that the NEDIN plan expands its operational reach through diversified approaches, inclusive mechanisms, and culturally responsive interventions tailored to the unique realities of each ethnic group (World Bank, 2021).

Similarly, local governments tend to prioritize physical infrastructure projects such as roads, bridges, and buildings, reflecting their investment priorities. This focus diverts attention from the pressing needs of marginalized communities, including the Wayu, whose concerns are frequently overlooked in local development plans, further deepening their exclusion. Due to lack of own source of revenue, the local governments are facing difficulties to execute their exclusive rights mandated by the constitution.

While education policies are inclusive in principle, their implementation remains inconsistent. The Wayu language is absent from school curricula, and there are no trained teachers to provide instruction in their native tongue. Even community-led initiatives, such as Wayu language classes introduced by a lower secondary school in Ramechhap Municipality-7, have gone

unrecognized by local, provincial, and federal governments. This lack of institutional support undermines grassroots efforts to preserve the Wayu language and culture. Furthermore, access to higher education remains a significant challenge for Wayu students, perpetuating cycles of educational inequality and social marginalization. Existing education policies are misaligned with constitutional mandates, with the exception of the Council for Technical Education and Vocational Training (CTEVT) Scholarship Programme launched in 2007. This initiative, designed for endangered ethnic groups and Dalit students, aligns with the government's broader goal of fostering inclusive education by facilitating access to technical and vocational training for marginalized communities.

Education serves as a critical tool for socio-economic advancement and cultural preservation. Offering free education and dedicated scholarship programs up to the university level for endangered groups like the Wayu can help bridge the educational gap. Additionally, incorporating mother-tongue education at the primary level and training teachers to instruct in the Wayu language would play a crucial role in revitalizing the language and fostering cultural pride among younger generations.

Posner (2003) argues that a normative recommendation for or against any particular grant of reparations must be highly sensitive to the question of how the reparations scheme is to be designed. Without knowing its nuanced idea behind Social Security Allowance to Wayu, there are baseless arguments found in the literature. In reality the **Social Security Allowance Programme**, introduced under the *Social Security Act of 2018*, stands out as a significant government initiative that has positively impacted marginalized communities, including the Wayu. While widely appreciated, this program remains disconnected from broader livelihood initiatives. Integrating it with other socio-economic interventions could enhance the economic resilience of historically marginalized groups. Without transformative, tailored programs linking with social security allowance, isolated initiatives are unlikely to yield sustainable growth for communities that have long faced systemic exclusion. It is because of the absence of an overarching social protection policy framework, the various laws, policies, and programs do not always come together effectively to deliver social protection (World Bank, 2021). The various legislations are largely independent of each other and serve to provide legal basis for various programs. No overarching policy or institutional framework exists to bring these policies and programs together into a

coherent whole to ensure that all the poor and vulnerable are covered with adequate levels of support (World Bank, 2021).

Conclusion

The marginalization of endangered Wayu (Hayu) ethnic community in Nepal underscores the urgent need for inclusive policies and practices that recognize and address their unique vulnerabilities. While Nepal's legal and policy frameworks provide a foundation for the protection and promotion of endangered cultures, effective implementation remains a significant challenge. To bridge this gap, fostering resilience, promoting cultural preservation, and ensuring the meaningful participation of marginalized communities in decision-making processes are essential steps toward addressing systemic inequalities and empowering Nepal's most vulnerable populations.

This study contributes to the growing body of research on marginalized voices by highlighting the experiences of the Wayu community and offering insights into pathways for their empowerment and cultural preservation. By prioritizing the needs of endangered communities, Nepal can work toward preserving its rich cultural diversity while promoting social justice and equity. These efforts will not only empower marginalized groups but also support the nation's broader goals of inclusive development and sustainable progress.

Through targeted interventions, community engagement, and an unwavering commitment to equity, Nepal can ensure that the voices of the Wayu and other endangered communities are heard, valued, and integrated into the nation's future. There is an urgent need for reparation policy and enforcement with a robust mechanism that are context-specific, inclusive, and actively responsive to the needs of endangered ethnic groups like the Wayu. Without immediate and dedicated intervention, the Wayu risk further marginalization, underscoring the urgent need for inclusive, community-centered Tailored policies that align with Nepal's constitutional commitment to indigenous rights and cultural diversity.

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