



# Beyond Tokenism: Indigenous Peoples' Participation in Decision-Making in Community and National Park Governance in Nepal

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## ABSTRACT

*Indigenous Peoples living in and around national parks and conservation areas continue to face persistent challenges, including human-wildlife conflict, crop and shelter damage, restricted access to natural resources, bureaucratic obstacles in accessing compensation and inadequate institutional support. Addressing these issues requires not only more streamlined relief processes but also the meaningful participation of Indigenous Peoples communities in decision-making and culturally appropriate grievance redressal mechanism. Against this backdrop, employing Indigenous peoples and the capability approach and Arnstein's Ladder of Participation as an analytical framework, this paper critically examines the extent and nature of Indigenous Peoples participation in the governance of community and national parks and Tharu peoples' lived experiences of exclusion and inequality in the decision-making processes in Nepal. The study finds that many initiatives labelled as inclusive and participatory are largely tokenistic, failing to provide genuine community empowerment for their meaningful participation in decision making. This tokenism reinforces structural inequalities, limits Indigenous agency, and prevents communities from influencing decisions that directly affect their lands and livelihoods. This lack of meaningful participation perpetuates difficulties in securing compensation, maintains inefficient procedures, restricts access to resources, and ultimately reinforces the marginalization of Indigenous Peoples. The study findings reveal that without a shift from symbolic involvement to substantive authority and partnership, current governance frameworks risk perpetuating the marginalization they claim to address.*

**Keywords:** meaningful participation, tokenism, decision-making, protected areas, Indigenous Peoples

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## INTRODUCTION

In Nepal, national park governance has historically followed a top-down, exclusionary model justified in the name of scientific conservation, which has displaced Indigenous Peoples and marginalized them from decision-making processes (Paudel et al., 2012). Although participatory frameworks such as buffer zone management committees were introduced to enhance community involvement, these often remain elite-dominated and bureaucratic, offering limited space for genuine Indigenous voices (Yadav et al., 2015).

Participation must be seen not merely as individual engagement but as a collective right linked to Indigenous self-determination and customary governance. Scholars like Kymlicka (1995) argue for multicultural citizenship and group-differentiated rights, while Fraser (2000) emphasizes “participatory parity,” where institutions enable marginalized groups to participate as equals. In conservation governance, this means formally integrating Indigenous Peoples knowledge systems, institutions, and languages into decision-making processes.

Meaningful participation goes beyond consultation; it requires power-sharing and genuine influence over decisions that affect Indigenous Peoples territories and livelihoods (Arnstein, 1969; Gaventa, 2004). Arnstein (1969) distinguishes between tokenistic and empowering participation, highlighting that without redistributing power, participation becomes symbolic. In Nepal’s national parks governance, Indigenous Peoples are not consulted meaningfully.

Giddens (1984) reminds us that agency is constrained by historical and institutional structures. The conservation model adopted in Nepal, influenced by colonial practices, has systematically excluded Indigenous Peoples communities from governance (West et al., 2006).

Globally, meaningful participation remains vague and contested (Niedzialkowski et al., 2012; Bobbio, 2019). Challenges include legal and structural barriers, cultural and linguistic exclusion, limited access to information, and historical power imbalances (Paulson et al., 2012; Ruwhiu & Carter, 2016). Participation is often reduced to a procedural checklist rather than an iterative, deliberative process involving diverse Indigenous perspectives.

In conservation, participatory approaches can enhance sustainability, adaptability, and capacity for collective action (Evely et al., 2011). Yet achieving this requires addressing underlying structural inequalities, ensuring free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC).

Against this backdrop, this study examines the extent to which Indigenous Peoples in Nepal participate meaningfully and effectively in national park governance and decision-making in the community levels. It assesses barriers and enabling factors, such as the presence of Indigenous Peoples representatives, gender inclusion, support for capacity buildings and status of customary institutions. By using Arnstein’s Ladder of Participation as an analytical framework, the study aims to identify whether existing participatory structures empower Indigenous communities or reinforce marginalization.

Ultimately, this research seeks to provide insights into promoting equitable conservation practices and inclusive governance in Nepal’s protected areas. Recognizing Indigenous

Peoples not merely as stakeholders but as rights-holders and knowledge-holders is essential for transforming participation from tokenism into meaningful self-determination.

### **Meaningful participation for Indigenous Peoples**

Meaningful participation of Indigenous Peoples enables decision-making at all levels and ensures their rights, voices, and needs are fully integrated into decision-making processes (Brock et al., 2023). Without meaningful participation, Indigenous Peoples face marginalization, loss of land rights, and exclusion from benefits. True participation ensures sustainable development, reduces conflicts, and strengthens conservation and social justice efforts.

Meaningful participation in conservation governance is vital to uphold Indigenous Peoples' rights, ensure equity, and achieve just, sustainable outcomes. It values Indigenous knowledge, socio-cultural experience, and technological innovations that support biodiversity conservation (Bajracharya et al., 2007).

It has been necessary to develop culturally appropriate and need-based support systems and ensure meaningful participation of the community members where they are informed and engaged in decisions, policies, and programs that affect their rights, lands, resources, traditional knowledge, and livelihoods. Involvement and engagement go beyond mere consultation and ensure that Indigenous Peoples communities, including women, youth, senior citizens, differently abled, and marginalized groups.

### **Treaties and conventions related to Indigenous Peoples' participation**

Community participation and empowerment are core principles underpinning local, national, and international levels. Several laws and policies have been designed to ensure an inclusive approach in Nepal's development sector. The 16th Five-Year Plan of the government of Nepal mentions inclusive development with the meaningful participation of all state citizens in their vision. The country has also signed many international conventions and treaties to ensure no one is left behind.

International frameworks uphold the right to participation in decision-making. UNDRIP (Arts. 18 & 19) guarantees Indigenous Peoples' participation through representative organizations, while ILO C169 (Arts. 2 & 6) obliges governments to consult them at all levels. The CBD Global Biodiversity Framework (Target 22) ensures participation and rights for Indigenous Peoples and other groups.

### **RESEARCH METHODS**

This article is based on research conducted in 2023 in Kanchanpur, Bardiya, Udaypur, and Saptari districts of Nepal. These areas were purposively selected as they include Indigenous Peoples' communities highly affected by forced relocation, severe human wildlife conflict, and restrictions on livelihood opportunities due to national parks and protected areas. In Kanchanpur District, the study focused on Punarbas, Belauri, and Laljhadi Rural Municipalities; in Bardiya, on Madhuwan and Thakurbaba Municipalities; in Udaypur, on

Belaka Municipality; and in Saptari, on Saptakoshi Municipality.

The research primarily employed qualitative methods. Primary data were collected through interviews and focus group discussions with Indigenous community leaders, knowledge holders, women, youth, and senior citizens. Secondary data were gathered from published journal articles, books, and reports. Relevant information was recorded with the prior consent of participants and later transcribed.

This study applies Arnstein's Ladder of Participation perspective, which distinguishes non-participation, tokenism, and citizen power, to assess Indigenous Peoples' meaningful participation in national park governance and community organizations. Arnstein (2019) shows that many 'participatory' programs mask the absence of real power, categorizing participation into eight rungs from manipulation to citizen control, and highlighting the need for structural change to ensure genuine influence.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results of the study are presented under the following subheadings, followed by a discussion of the findings.

### Power Dynamics and Vested Interests in Participation

In the Terai, Tharu communities around national parks engage in formal politics and conservation governance, holding positions in ward, municipal, and political parties, and buffer zone committees. Yet decision-making is dominated by economically and socially powerful groups – often non-Indigenous actors – who shape policies and resource allocation to serve their interests (Niedzialkowski et al., 2012). Their dominance persists through both active resistance to Indigenous voices and passive exclusion of less powerful members.

Despite their participation in the formal political system, there is a growing wave of dissatisfaction with political parties among Indigenous Peoples communities. This disillusionment stems from the gap between formal political participation and actual influence over decisions that affect their lives, territories, and access to protected area resources.

The power concentration among community elites creates a self-reinforcing cycle of exclusion. Those with existing power and resources can easily access information, influence decision-makers, and shape policy outcomes. At the same time, Indigenous Peoples face structural barriers that limit their ability to compete on equal terms.

This dynamic is particularly pronounced in the governance of national parks and conservation areas, where decisions about land use, forest resource access, and conservation policies directly affect the livelihoods of Indigenous Peoples. Yet these policies are often formulated without meaningful consultation and participation of Indigenous Peoples, whose priorities and interests may differ significantly from those of state authorities.

During key informant interviews, participants mentioned that formal channels used to disseminate information about ward, municipality and community levels meetings and gatherings often fail to reach Indigenous communities. These communication mechanisms

are shaped by the preferences of dominant groups and overlook Indigenous languages, communication systems, and community protocols.

There is a distinction between participating in an empty ritual and having the genuine power to influence the result of the process. This further combines helpless people with the powerful to show their basic differences (Arnstein, 1969). This raises the question of the motives of individuals who use the ladder to study participation and how the ladder itself is an act of power. Only individuals who are already politically active and have connections to communication networks receive advance notice about important decisions, meetings, or policy changes.

### **Stigma and Exclusion: Gender roles restrictions on participation**

In Tharu communities, strict rules governed social conduct, confined women to their homes, excluded their participation in community meetings, and prohibited them from speaking to certain male family members, a rule that persists but is gradually fading. Women are confined to domestic duties, enous, with relatively equal social and economic conditions. As a result, serious discrimination was not found.

### **Tokenistic Participation of Indigenous Peoples**

Tharu Peoples experience severely limited involvement in governance structures, with their participation remaining largely symbolic rather than substantive. Various community organizations, including forest user groups, women's associations, local clubs, and political entities, operate under formal regulations that systematically exclude their voices from meaningful decision-making roles.

While Indigenous Peoples' representation in decision-making bodies has been increasing over time, however, this is primarily concentrated at community and local levels, with nominal presence in provincial and federal institutions. This pattern reflects structural barriers that prevent Indigenous communities from accessing key decision-making bodies and conservation governance structures. During group discussions, participants shared that non-Indigenous Peoples continue to hold and influence key decision-making positions across all levels of governance structure.

Gender disparities further hinder Indigenous participation, as women face greater barriers than men. Decision-making is often led by elders, while women have limited access to accurate information on ward-level decisions, leaving them poorly informed and excluded from meaningful engagement.

A critical knowledge gap exists regarding Indigenous Peoples' rights to FPIC for development initiatives affecting their territories. Community members lack awareness of existing legal frameworks that should guarantee their participation in development decisions, undermining their ability to exercise self-determination over matters that directly impact their lands and livelihoods.

The distribution of benefits from development programs is heavily influenced by political considerations rather than equitable principles or Indigenous Peoples rights.

Government authorities have not acknowledged and integrated Indigenous Peoples benefit-sharing mechanisms into contemporary governance frameworks.

### **Women Participation in Decision-Making**

In Thakurbaba and Madhuwan Municipalities, participants reported that Tharu women face barriers to participation due to poverty, limited awareness, and gender discrimination. While women are encouraged to join committees, leadership roles—such as Chairperson or Secretary—are usually held by men, with women relegated to vice-chair or treasurer positions. Men dominate mayoral posts, while women are typically deputies, despite state quotas. Although women perform equally, they are still seen as weaker, leaving their full participation minimal.

From local to central levels, the representation of Tharu in government bodies is very low despite their large population. In Thakurbaba Municipality, there is one female ward chairperson, but none in Madhuwan Municipality.

The representation of Tharus at the central level has historically been minimal, and their voices and concerns often remain unheard. Before the establishment of democracy in Nepal, many Tharus from various districts in the Terai region worked as bonded laborers in others' households, which severely limited their ability to advocate for their rights. In development and construction committees, the male population continue to dominate, and there is no representation of persons with disabilities at either local or central levels. According to Sumitra Chaudhary, Chairperson of a community forest users' group composed of 11 women and two men, there is no participation from Indigenous communities. Similarly, in the Suryapatwa Consumer Committee of Bardiya National Park, only one out of four representatives are an Indigenous woman. Despite existing laws and policies for Indigenous Peoples' rights, the local communities are unaware of their rights.

Despite reserved quotas being allocated by the state in different bodies for the Indigenous Peoples, women, Tharus, and persons with disabilities. There is no representation of the Tharu people at the decision-making bodies.

### **Access to and dissemination of information**

Traditionally, Tharu communities shared information through the village *Chaukidar* (also known as *Chiraki*). Today, this has mostly shifted to telephone communication. However, few villagers have access to accurate and timely information due to the migration of educated youth to cities and the widespread prevalence of illiteracy and poverty, which limit awareness. In Pattharbojhi village, illiteracy, poverty, and gender discrimination further prevent local indigenous communities from receiving information promptly and in languages they understand.

Village leaders and the watchman share information about developments like roads, schools, bridges, concrete pavements, and canals. Even during floods or wildlife damage, the ward office often shows nepotism, leaving the actual victims without support. A participant from Pattharbojhi village mentioned the participation mechanism in the



discussion: “If there is any information on grant or aid, local representatives tend to keep it for themselves or distribute it among their close relatives and friends.” This shows that there is critical information about policies affecting protected areas and Indigenous rights that may not reach the communities most directly impacted by these decisions. Hence, the information has not reached the community level. Participant further mentioned, “There is a lack of comprehensive information about social services. Tharu women are often limited to household chores, restricting them from accessing necessary information.

### **Participation in Decision-Making Process: now and then**

Traditional decision-making in Tharu communities is participatory, involving village elders, community leaders, and social workers. Customary institutions known as Badghar/Barghar/Bhalmansa and Jewar Menjan in different Tharu communities—lead community development and cultural activities. Traditionally, only Tharu individuals would be village chiefs, but since municipalities and wards began recognizing this practice, people from other castes/ethnic groups have also aspired to these roles.

During a group discussion, one participant expressed frustration, noting that Indigenous Peoples’ participation in decision-making is often considered insignificant. They are stigmatized as alcohol drinkers and rarely considered for higher positions in national development or other organizations. No institution proactively includes Indigenous Peoples in decision-making, and programs in villages typically target the general population rather than Indigenous interests. Although the state mandates a quota for one Indigenous woman or man at the local ward level, meaningful inclusion remains limited.

Information about any development, construction, or organizational plans are provided to concerned communities, including village leaders and community level committees from municipalities, and ward offices.

True participation encompasses meaningful engagement in every stage of decision-making processes. However, contemporary democratic systems face significant challenges in achieving this ideal, as numerous structural, social, and individual barriers prevent communities from participating effectively in the decisions that affect their lives. At a global level, the conditions that limit participation for Indigenous Peoples include unequal power relations between Indigenous Peoples and the global north. This democratic deliberation is often treated as a checkbox item, with limited resources such as monetary and cultural capital to facilitate inclusion and political legitimacy challenges for some at more local scales (Paulson et al., 2012). The failures of participatory programs lie not in the methodology of participation but due to historical, political, and narrow structural approach (Peterson et al., 2010).

### **Capability of Indigenous Peoples in Participation**

In human development and the capability approach, people are both the ends and means of development, understood as the expansion of capabilities they have reason to value. However, this approach can limit Indigenous Peoples from fully actualizing their rights to control their lives and determine their futures (Bockstael & Watene, 2016). Sociologists argue

that one of the key barriers to meaningful participation lies in capability-related constraints, particularly those arising from educational limitations and skill gaps (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011; Bourdieu, 1986).

The use of the capability approach to justify imposing stringent top-down policies on Indigenous Communities prevents Indigenous Peoples from rights to self-determination in development, and determine their futures.

Tackling the language barrier, raising awareness about cultural values differences, and increasing doctors' cultural competencies to communicate adequately and respectfully with migrant patients is required to raise participation levels, improve health outcomes, and reduce ethnic inequalities (Schinkel et al., 2019). These language barriers exacerbate challenges, as official proceedings in dominant languages systematically exclude non-native speakers from participating.

### **Social status, economic factors for participation**

Social status and economic factors are also major categories to determine the level of meaningful, full and effective participation in any activities and discussions. Disadvantaged and marginalized socio-economic status of Indigenous Peoples represents a barrier to participation in large-scale resource developments. Economic constraints create immediate practical obstacles, as many individuals cannot afford to take time off work to attend meetings, cannot arrange childcare, or lack the resources to travel to venues where decisions are being made. Poor socio-economic status and significant barriers emanate from colonization's generational effects (Stokes et. al., 2019). These economic barriers are particularly acute for low-income communities, which often face the most significant impacts from policy decisions but have the least capacity to influence those decisions. Geographic isolation compounds these challenges, especially in rural areas where physical distance from centers of power creates additional barriers to meaningful participation.

The influence of entrenched social hierarchies cannot be understated in understanding why effective participation remains elusive. Systems based on class, caste, ethnicity, gender, religion, or other social identities create systematic patterns of exclusion that prevent marginalized groups from having their voices heard. These hierarchies are often reinforced by cultural norms and traditions that explicitly or implicitly restrict certain groups from speaking in public forums, challenging authority figures, or asserting their rights. Institutional discrimination further entrenches these patterns by creating hostile environments that actively discourage participation from underrepresented communities, whether through formal rules that favor certain groups or informal practices that make others feel unwelcome or unsafe. Lack of respect of Indigenous rights, inadequate provision of basic services in Indigenous communities, land conflicts, and negative stereotyping are examples of modern colonialism (Le Billon & Middeldorp, 2021).

Most significantly, structural and institutional barriers prevent communities from directly influencing major decisions that affect their lives. Critical policy choices are frequently made in closed-door meetings, expert committees, or elite circles where ordinary people have no access or representation. When public consultation does occur, it is often tokenistic,



taking place after fundamental decisions have already been made and serving primarily to legitimize predetermined outcomes rather than genuinely incorporate community input. The complex bureaucratic structures that characterize modern governance create multiple layers of decision-making that are opaque and inaccessible to the general public, making it difficult for Indigenous Peoples to understand where and how decisions are made, let alone how to influence them.

### **Ladder of Citizen Participation**

The paradox of meaningful, full, and effective participation for Indigenous Peoples can be observed at the community level, as evidenced by experiences from Tharu communities across different districts. Based on Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation, the participation of Tharu communities in Nepal falls overwhelmingly into the lower rungs of non-participation and tokenism, with no meaningful attainment of citizen power.

Manipulation remains widespread, where participation mechanisms are used by powerholders to maintain control rather than share authority. Evidence of this is seen in the distribution of development benefits, which is based on political patronage ("nepotism") rather than genuine need or rights. Local representatives frequently divert grants and aid intended for vulnerable groups towards their own relatives and friends, systematically excluding actual victims, such as those affected by floods or wildlife damage. Furthermore, the strategic placement of women into mandatory but subordinate roles like vice-chair or treasurer-while men retain the powerful positions of chairperson and secretary-alongside the placement of Indigenous Peoples in low-level positions, creates a superficial appearance of inclusion. This manipulation of quotas serves to maintain the existing status quo by preventing the transfer of actual decision-making power.

Informing serves as the primary mode of communication from authorities to Indigenous communities, but it functions as an ineffective, top-down, and one-way process. Critical information is disseminated through formal channels such as ward meetings, public announcements, or the village watchman (Chaukidar/Chiraki), which systematically fail to accommodate Indigenous communication patterns, language preferences, literacy levels, or cultural protocols. The selective sharing of information about programs and grants by elites allows them to manipulate who benefits from resources and who remains dependent and excluded.

This results in a profound information gap, where essential details about policies, program, meetings, and development projects consistently fail to reach the community level. The gap disproportionately affects women, the elderly, and those living in poverty, creating an exclusive "information elite" with access to knowledge. The information about vital social services often fails to reach women confined by traditional household roles, leaving them further marginalized and unable to act on available resources or rights. Thus, informing remains a passive, inadequate mechanism that perpetuates exclusion rather than enabling meaningful engagement.

Consultation, when it occurs, is superficial. Indigenous peoples, and particularly women, are sometimes included in committees (forest user groups, consumer committees,

etc.), but often in non-influential roles. Their presence is symbolic, as decisions remain dominated by non-Indigenous groups and men, and traditional governance systems are ignored.

There is no evidence of genuine co-governance, as decision-making over protected areas, resource allocation, and development planning remains firmly dominated by non-Indigenous actors and government officials, who do not treat Indigenous communities as equal partners. Furthermore, the potential foundation for partnership is actively negated by the complete disregard for Indigenous Peoples traditional customary governance system, decision making and benefit-sharing mechanisms are ignored within National parks governance structures. The absence of shared leadership is stark, with key positions such as Chair, Secretary, and Mayor overwhelmingly held by non-Indigenous Peoples, dominated by males, preventing any meaningful power-sharing at the helm and systematically excluding Indigenous voices from key decision-making processes.

There has been no substantive transfer of significant decision-making authority to Indigenous communities. While minimal Indigenous representation exists at the municipal or ward level, it lacks any real influence over critical issues such as protected area management, major resource allocation, or land use planning, as key decisions remain controlled by higher-level authorities or dominant non-Indigenous groups. Crucially, communities exercise no delegated authority over the vital resources (land, forests) within protected areas that are fundamental to their livelihoods. Furthermore, pervasive structural barriers—including poverty, lack of education, and discrimination – actively prevent Indigenous Peoples, particularly women, from accessing provincial or national positions where any theoretical potential for delegated power might exist, ensuring their continued exclusion from meaningful authority.

Tharu communities exercise no autonomous authority over the policies, programs, or territories that directly impact their culture, practices and traditional livelihoods. They face systematic exclusion from key decisions including those governing protected areas, land use, resource access, and major development projects which are unilaterally made by government bodies and non-Indigenous elites without community consultation. Despite formal mechanisms suggesting inclusion, participation of Tharu communities in community and national park governance in Nepal remains tokenistic and controlled by dominant groups. Moving beyond tokenism requires dismantling structural inequalities, recognizing and integrating Indigenous customary governance, ensuring FPIC, and transferring real decision-making power to Indigenous communities to shape their lands, resources, and futures.

## CONCLUSION

Indigenous Peoples should benefit from rights to prior consultation in any policies, plans, programs, and activities. Many governments, corporations, and international development agencies have agreed to adhere to the principles of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) as a prerequisite for policy formulation and implementing projects and

programs. It is necessary to ensure Indigenous Peoples' meaningful participation, in all decision-making processes of policies, programs, and activities where it directly or indirectly impacted them. It is essential to have meaningful, full and effective participation to ensure Indigenous Peoples' control over their territories and support their self-governance, cultural practices, traditional livelihoods, and land tenure rights in and around protected areas (Stevens, 2014). Nepal's Tharu communities' meaningful participation in national parks, conservation areas and community governance are manifested as a systematic disenfranchisement disguised as inclusion. Their engagement is overwhelmingly confined to the lower strata where authorities manipulate communities through nepotistic benefit distribution and tokenistic quota fulfilment, inform them inadequately through culturally inappropriate, one-way channels that create exclusionary information gaps, and engage in superficial consultation where Indigenous voices, particularly women's, are heard but ignored. The analysis reveals a complete absence of meaningful power-sharing; there is no evidence of partnership, delegated power, or citizen control. Decision-making authority over vital resources, land, and policies remains firmly monopolized by non-Indigenous actors and higher government bodies, while traditional governance systems are disregarded and structural barriers prevent access to influential positions. Thus, despite formal mechanisms, the current paradigm perpetuates Tharu marginalization, denying them genuine agency, self-determination and any substantive role in shaping the decisions that most directly impact their lives, lands and territories, solidifying their position at the bottom.

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