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Development and Erosion of Folk Dances among Magars in Syangja District

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ABSTRACT

The area of confluence of the Aandi and the Kali Gandaki Rivers of Syangja has been the habitat of Magars from time immemorial. This research was carried out in these nine VDCs of Syangja district in 2015, through the qualitative method. During the 1960s, the Siddartha highway crossed the district, and after the policy of 'aphno gau aphai banau' by the government of Nepal, village roads were constructed touching all the villages of Magar settlements. Similarly, there were two hydropower stations, providing electricity in every village. The schools and colleges from both the government and private sectors mushroomed, and the media, such as FM radios and TV cables, also reached into Magar society. But, the cables, But the traditional songs and dances such as Sorathi (Karhaang-Naach), Ghāntu, and Rodi-culture But the Rodi culture, and so on, were found rusting. The new generations were found forgetting them. Rarely has such a culture had traditional and cultural events conducted these days. In the development process, there was low priority given to IPIA, SIA, the development of SIA, and IPP from the development agency, SIA, and Magars were found unaware about it. Therefore, such heritages of Nepal are eroding and dying. If such intangible heritages die, it will be costly to make them revive. The folk dances and songs of Magars are endangered heritages that will die, an endangered situation in the district due to unplanned development.

Key words: development, Magar, folk song district duesongsand dances, intangible heritage

INTRODUCTION

Nepal is a country characterized by rich biodiversity and remarkable cultural and linguistic diversity. It is home to a wide range of multicultural practices and multilingual communities (Bista, 2011). Among these communities are the Magars, one of the major Indigenous nationalities of Nepal, possessing distinct cultural traditions and linguistic heritage. Magar culture and the Magar language represent significant forms of intangible

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cultural heritage that contribute to the broader cultural and linguistic diversity of Nepalese society.

Although Magars are distributed throughout the country, their traditional homeland lies primarily between the Sapta-Gandaki River and the eastern region of the Karnali River basin. According to the 2021 national census, the Magar population stands at 2,013,498, comprising 1,064,393 females and 949,105 males, which accounts for 6.9% of the total population of Nepal (CBS, 2021). Census data further indicate a gradual decline in the proportional population of Magars, from 7.14% in the 2001 census to 7.12% in the 2011 census. This trend suggests a slow decrease in their relative demographic representation.

Language shift within the Magar community is also evident. Only 903,703 individuals (44.88% of the Magar population), including 477,469 females and 426,234 males, currently speak their ancestral Magar language, while the remaining 55.12% have experienced language loss (CBS, 2021). Despite these challenges, Magars have made substantial contributions to the political, social, and historical development of Nepal, including the unification of the country, democratic movements, republican transformations, and broader nation-building processes. Socio-economically, Magars generally occupy an average position within the national context; however, their representation and participation in mainstream state institutions remain below the national average relative to their population size.

The Magar community exhibits considerable diversity in both culture and language. At least four major dialects of the Magar language are spoken: Magar Kura (Dhut), Magar Khām (Pang), Magar Kāike (Kāike), and Tichhurung Poike. Traditionally, Magar society has been rich in folk songs and dances that function as important expressions of cultural identity. Lyrical and dramatic folk dances such as Sorathi (Maruni/Nachari), Ghāntu, Kaurha, Jiwthe Kaurha, and Andai Māmā (Jyo-ma-re, Kalash Judhaune) are widely recognized. Similarly, seasonal folk songs, including Sālaijo, Yānimāyā, Sunimāyā, Thādo Bhāka, Phāgu, Wāhāli Kaurha, and Wāhāli, constitute an essential part of Magar musical traditions. Other dances, such as Hurrā (performed by eastern Magars), Nokobāngyā (practiced in Rukum and Rolpa), Paiseru, Sarangyā, and Syāi, further reflect the diversity of Magar intangible cultural heritage (Baral Magar, 2050 BS).

Syangja District, located in the Gandaki Zone of central Nepal, is characterized by significant linguistic, cultural, and geographical diversity. Dense Magar settlements are primarily found in the southern parts of the district and along the Kaligandaki River basin. Following the political changes of the 1950s, the district experienced increased development in education, infrastructure, road connectivity, media, and information and communication technology (ICT). At present, Syangja District benefits from improved educational facilities, expanded access to modern media and ICT, the Siddhartha Highway and village road networks, and hydroelectric power.

However, unplanned and development-centered interventions by national and development agencies have contributed to the erosion of indigenous languages and cultural practices. Traditional Magar folk songs and dances, as forms of intangible cultural heritage, have been particularly affected by these processes. The dominant monolingual and monocultural perspectives of policymakers, bureaucrats, and development experts

have resulted in insufficient attention to the protection of indigenous cultural heritage during infrastructure development, educational expansion, and media growth. Notably, development projects have rarely incorporated Language Impact Assessments (LIA), Cultural Impact Assessments (CIA), or cultural mitigation strategies.

As a consequence, many traditional Magar folk songs and dances have gradually declined and disappeared from everyday practice. Within this broader context of diminishing indigenous languages and cultures in Nepal, this study examines the impact of development processes in Syangja District on the erosion of Magar folk songs and dances. Specifically, it explores which traditional cultural forms are most affected by contemporary development policies and how these intangible cultural expressions are being lost within Magar society.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study employed a qualitative research approach. Data were collected in 2015 during fieldwork conducted for a PhD dissertation under Tribhuvan University. For the purpose of this article, nine Village Development Committees (VDCs) surrounding Tammkikot Hill in Syangja District were selected as the study sites: Chandibhanjyang, Lasargha, Birgha, Shreekrishna-Gandaki, Malhunggha, Jagatradevi, Pelakot, Nibuwakharka, and Pindikhola.

Key informants were selected purposively and included senior citizens, social workers, and individuals with in-depth knowledge of Magar society, culture, and traditions. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and participant observation, with particular attention given to Magar cultural performances and everyday cultural practices observed during field visits.

In addition to primary data, secondary sources such as books and published materials related to Magar culture, language, folk songs, and dances were consulted to supplement and contextualize the findings. Nevertheless, the study relies primarily on primary data sources.

Syangja District and the Magars

Syangja District is one of the hilly districts of Nepal, located in the mid-hill region and situated approximately at the geographical center of the country, both longitudinally and latitudinally. The district covers 0.79% of the total land area of Nepal (DDC Syangja, 2067 BS,p.2). Geographically, Syangja extends between 83°27″ and 84°02″ east longitudes and 27°50″ and 28°15″ north latitudes, with a total area of 1,164 square kilometers (DDC Syangja, 2064 BS, p. 4). The east–west length of the district ranges from 22.508 km to 52.355 km, while the north–south width varies between 2.773 km and 37.839 km (p. 4).

The physical landscape of Syangja District is characterized by highly varied terrain, including steep slopes, rugged uplands, and low-lying areas. The geological structure consists primarily of stratified metamorphic rocks, both hard and soft in composition (p. 5). Altitudinally, the district ranges from 366 meters above sea level at Keladighat to 2,512 meters at Panchase Peak (p.3), contributing to its ecological and cultural diversity.

The name of the district is derived from the settlement of Syangja, now known as

Putalibazar, which currently serves as the district headquarters. Although no definitive historical evidence exists regarding the origin of the name "Syangja," several interpretations have been documented. One account suggests that during a natural disaster caused by flooding and landslides, a religious elder prayed using the phrase "Syaiya ja," after which the river obstruction was cleared, and the phrase gradually evolved into "Syangja." Another explanation links the name to the Chaubise-era Magarat region, where a ruling Sen clan resided; the term "Sen+jā" (son of Sen) is believed to have been phonetically transformed into Syangja. A third interpretation attributes the name to the dense settlement of the Singjāli Magars, a Magar clan historically inhabiting the area (Karmachari Milan Kendra, 2060 BS, p. 1; DDC Syangja, 2064 BS, p. 4; Sinjali & Rana, 2073 BS, pp. 105–106; Rai, 2023 p.25).

Additional explanations associate the name with hunting and foraging practices, suggesting that the phrase *Syā Jyācha* (meaning "eating meat") was used to describe the area and later evolved into Syangja. Some interpretations also connect the name to Hindu sages, reflecting the influence of Sanskritization. Linguistic interpretations rooted in the Magar language further suggest that *Sing* refers to wood, *Jyāhāke* to craftsmanship, and *Jā* to son or offspring, collectively implying "the settlement of the son of a woodcraftsman" (Sinjali & Rana, 2073 BS). These multiple narratives reflect the complex cultural, linguistic, and historical layers associated with the naming of Syangja.

Syangja District exhibits considerable diversity in terms of geography, biodiversity, language, culture, caste, and ethnicity. According to the national censuses of 2001 and 2011, more than fifty caste and ethnic groups reside in the district. The expansion of infrastructure and road connectivity has contributed to increased population mobility, resulting in the inclusion of additional caste and ethnic groups over time. The ethnic and caste-wise population distribution of Syangja District is presented in Table 1 (See Annex-I).

Annex-I shows that Brahmin-Hill constitutes the largest population group in the district, followed by the Indigenous people, the Magars, who represent the second-largest population. Chhetri occupy the third position, followed by Gurung in the fourth, Bishwakarma in the fifth, Mijar in the sixth, and Pariyar in the seventh position, along with other ethnic and caste groups across different census periods. The Magar population is predominantly concentrated in the southern part of the district, where several densely settled Magar villages are located.

Comparative analysis of census data reveals a decline in both the overall district population and the Magar population in the 2021 census compared to the 2011 and 2001 censuses. This population decline is largely attributed to internal migration, foreign employment, and remittance-based mobility. Despite these demographic changes, the district historically forms part of the ancient Magarānt territory.

Folk Songs and Dances among the Magars of Syangja District and the Study Area

The Magars possess their own language, commonly known as Magar Kura or Dhut. According to the 2021 national census, Magars constitute 21.97% of the total population of Syangja District; however, only 15.39% of the district population reported Magar as their mother tongue (CBS, 2021). Census data further indicate an increasing trend of language

shift within the Magar community. In the 2001 census, 16.87% of the district population reported speaking the Magar language, while this proportion declined to 15.97% in 2011 and further in 2021 (CBS, 2001; CBS, 2011; CBS, 2021). This disparity reveals a gap of 6.58% between the Magar population and Magar language speakers in the district.

The Magars maintain a rich body of cultural heritage that is distinct from that of other ethnic and caste groups. These cultural expressions represent valuable creations passed down from their ancestors and form an important part of human civilization. Within Magar culture, a variety of folk songs and dances are practiced in Syangja District and the selected study areas, serving as significant markers of cultural identity and social life.

Lyrical Dramatic Dances

Sorathi

Sorathi is a form of lyrical dramatic performance also known by several alternative names, including Karhāng Nāch, Nachari, Pāngdure Nāch, and Māruni (Baral Magar, 2050 BS, p. 86). The performance consists of sixteen dramatic acts (*angka*) accompanied by sixteen rhythmic cycles (*tāl*) played on the *madal*, a traditional Nepali percussion instrument.

The narrative centers on royal characters such as King Jayasingge, Queen Hemawanti, the Sorathi Queen, Bijaya Jaisi, Kumale, and Katuwale. Bijaya Jaisi is portrayed as the royal priest and spiritual advisor to the king. The storyline begins with the tragic fate of Queen Hemawanti's daughter, resulting from a conspiracy orchestrated by Bijaya Jaisi and the senior queen. The drama explores themes of political intrigue, royal succession, courtly life, hunting practices, and domestic affairs. The performance concludes with the rediscovery of the Sorathi Queen, her marriage, and her eventual accession to royal authority.

Ghāntu

Ghāntu (also spelled *Ghānto*) is another form of lyrical dramatic dance among the Magars and is classified into three types: (1) Rāchya, (2) Bāhramāse, and (3) Mārāchya (Baral Magar, 2050 BS, pp. 100–101). The Mārāchya and Bāhramāse forms are primarily performed for entertainment during feasts, festivals, rituals, and other social occasions. In contrast, the Rāchya Ghāntu is performed for religious purposes, including faith healing and ritual observance.

In the study area, the Ghāntu narrative revolves around three queens—Satyawati, Bidyawati, and Yamphbawati—and two kings, Rithubartan and Kailash Narsing (Sinjali, 2071 BS, p. 30). The drama is tragic in nature, depicting the death of the kings in warfare and the subsequent unconsciousness of the queens upon receiving the news. The performance culminates in the revival of the queens by the *Guruma* (female ritual specialist) through a ritual song known as *Sotke* in the Magar language. Owing to this theme, the performance is also referred to as *Sati Ghāntu*.

Jiwai Māmā

Jiwai Māmā is a lyrical dramatic dance based on a conversational narrative between *Māmā* (maternal uncle) and *Bhanjā* (sister's son) concerning marriage to the *Sāli* (the maternal uncle's younger daughter). In Rukum and Rolpa districts, the performance is known respectively as *Jyo-mā-re* and *Kalash Judhāune*, and it is also practiced in parts of Myagdi District, particularly in Chimkhola. In the study area, Jiwai Māmā is traditionally performed during the Magar Yaunāt festival, which coincides with Phagu Purnima.

Kaurhā

Kaurhā (also known as Karuwā or Kaurā) is another prominent form of lyrical dramatic dance among the Magars. Historically, the performance comprised multiple acts that varied according to time, context, and social circumstances. The themes addressed in Kaurhā include romantic relationships, initial encounters, courtship, marriage, future aspirations, agricultural practices, and everyday life skills. The primary musical instrument used in Kaurhā performances is the *khaijari*, which provides rhythmic accompaniment to the dance and song.

Other Folk Dances and Songs

Jhorā:

Jhorā is a folk song and dance performed primarily during the month of August, particularly around the Teej festival. The performance is characterized by slow-paced rhythms played on the *madal*, accompanied by lyrical singing. This tradition is also known as *Jorā* in some local contexts.

Jhāmre:

Jhāmre is a fast-paced folk song and dance distinguished by energetic movements and at least seven rhythmic cycles (*tāl*) played on the *madal*. It is commonly performed during social gatherings such as *rodi-im*, feasts, and festivals, especially in contexts where young people assemble for entertainment and social interaction.

In addition to these dances, the Magars practice a wide range of folk songs and lyrical tunes, including Sālaijo, Yāhāni Māyā, Sunimāyā, Thādo Bhāka, Ashare Bhāka, and other seasonal compositions. Many of these songs are closely associated with agricultural activities and festival cycles. During Phagu Purnima, Magars sing specific lyrical tunes known as Phagu songs and collect gifts from households through a practice similar to the *Bhailo* system. These contributions are later used to organize communal feasts or picnic-style gatherings for collective entertainment.

Customary Institutions for Conducting Folk Songs and Dances

Among the Magars and other Indigenous communities of the Gandaki River region, the *Rodi* institution historically played a central role in the creation, transmission, and preservation of folk songs and dances. In the Rukum and Rolpa districts, this institution is

known as *Thakanyā*. Traditionally, *Rodi-im* were common in Magar villages and functioned as informal cultural centers where youth gathered to learn and perform folk songs and dances.

Beyond entertainment, the *Rodi* institution served broader social functions, including the transmission of kinship norms, social customs, Indigenous knowledge, and practical skills. Similarly, *Bheja* functioned as a customary institution for community governance and the regulation of social and cultural life, including the organization of folk performances (Baral Magar, 2050 BS; Dhakal, 1996). Another traditional institution, *Pathebhai Gumasthā*, also played a role in maintaining cultural practices within Magar villages.

Development Activities in the District and Study Area

Following the establishment of the multiparty democratic system in 2007 BS (1950 AD), Nepalese society increasingly came under the influence of Western models of development. Educational institutions such as schools and colleges expanded rapidly, and infrastructure projects—including roads, bridges, airports, electricity, and communication networks—were implemented across the country. Mass media also expanded significantly during this period.

Development policies prioritized infrastructural growth and the adoption of Western technologies, often at the expense of traditional technologies, Indigenous knowledge systems, and local skills. As Nepal transitioned rapidly toward modern development paradigms, many Indigenous and marginalized communities were unable to adapt at the same pace. Consequently, these communities experienced increasing cultural and linguistic disconnection from the national development process. This mismatch contributed to the marginalization of Indigenous languages and cultural practices, including traditional Magar folk songs and dances, within the changing socio-economic landscape.

Development of Education

The political changes of 1950 AD marked a significant turning point in the expansion of formal education in Nepal, leading to increased public interest in schooling. As a result, numerous schools were established in Syangja District, including within Magar settlements. The growth of educational institutions continued progressively during the Panchayat period and accelerated further following the restoration of multiparty democracy in 1990. During this period, both the government and private sectors played an active role in expanding educational infrastructure.

In the study area, government policy emphasized the establishment of at least one secondary-level school and one basic-level school in each ward of the Village Development Committees. Consequently, educational institutions became widely accessible across settlement areas, contributing to substantial improvements in educational attainment within the district. As a result, the literacy rate increased to 76.6%, with 86.05% among males and 69.5% among females (CBS). This figure further rose to 97.6% by 2072 BS (DDC Syangja, 2072 BS, pp. 6–7).

According to the District Education Office (DEO Syangja, 2069 BS, p. 2), Syangja District hosts

a total of 588 pre-primary or child development centers, of which 507 are community-based and 81 are institutional (private). At the primary level, there are 387 schools (357 community and 30 institutional), while the lower-secondary level comprises 73 schools (57 community and 16 institutional). The district also includes 74 secondary schools (49 community and 25 institutional) and 85 higher-secondary schools (75 community and 10 institutional/ private). At the tertiary level, 18 campuses or colleges operate within the district, including 15 community-run and 3 institutional (private) institutions.

In addition to formal secular education, the district accommodates religious educational institutions, including three *Ashrams* (Hindu religious schools) and six *Madrasas* (Muslim religious schools). Furthermore, two technical colleges provide vocational training in fields such as Community Medical Assistance (CMA) and Junior Technical Assistance (JTA) in agriculture and veterinary sciences, contributing to skill development and employment opportunities.

Development of ICT and Mass Media

Traditional systems of communication—such as the *Katuwāl Prathā*, itinerant *Gaine* song transmission, and postal services—were gradually displaced by the advancement of modern science and technology. Following the political changes of 1950, the development of information and communication technology (ICT) accelerated significantly across Nepal. In the initial phase, telephone exchanges were established, followed by the introduction of telegraph services and the gradual expansion of landline telephony.

With the decline of the party-less Panchayat regime, communication technologies advanced rapidly, culminating in the widespread adoption of mobile telephony. At present, mobile phone towers are installed throughout Syangja District and the study area, ensuring near-universal access to mobile and internet services. In addition, private cable service providers supply television and internet connectivity to both urban and rural settlements.

Mass media have likewise expanded in tandem with technological developments. Initially, Radio Nepal served as the primary broadcast medium across the country. Following the restoration of multiparty democracy in 1990 AD, Nepal Television and various foreign television channels became accessible through cable networks. By 2015 AD, most villages in the study area had been connected to cable television services.

The district also hosts multiple FM radio stations located in urban centers such as Syangja Bazaar, Waling, and Galyang. Furthermore, FM broadcasts from neighboring regions, including Tansen (Palpa) and Rampur, extend radio coverage to the district. Access to print media is also well established, encompassing national newspapers, regional publications from Pokhara and Butwal, and locally produced newspapers circulating within the district and the study area.

Development of Health Care Services

Prior to the political changes of 1950 AD, the Magar community primarily relied on traditional healers such as *Lāmā* and *Wārch Bharmi*, who possessed extensive indigenous knowledge of medicinal plants and healing practices. These systems were based on locally available botanical and natural resources. Following the political changes of the 1950s, allopathic medicine began to spread widely throughout Nepal.

In Syangja District, government health infrastructure includes one district hospital with 15 beds, three primary health care centers, 18 health posts, 47 sub-health posts, and one District Ayurvedic Center. The district also maintains six doctors' posts and eight ambulances (DDC Syangja, 2072 BS, p. 7). In urban centers and market areas, private healthcare facilities such as pharmacies, polyclinics, and at least four private hospitals are operational. The District Public Health Office (DPHO) has established 236 immunization centers (*Khop Kendra*) and 208 *Gāughar* clinics to provide family planning services, preventive healthcare, health education, and minor curative care (DPHO Syangja, 2071 BS, pp. 12, 35).

For specialized medical services, residents of Syangja have access to higher-level allopathic facilities in neighboring districts such as Kaski (Pokhara), Tansen (Palpa), and Rupandehi. Prominent institutions include United Mission Hospital in Tansen, Palpa, and Lumbini Medical College Hospital. Furthermore, improved road connectivity facilitates access to medical services in Butwal, Bhairahawa, Chitwan, Pokhara, and Kathmandu, where advanced healthcare facilities are available.

Development of Transport Connectivity and Other Infrastructures

During the 1960s, the construction of the Siddhartha Highway through Syangja District significantly enhanced transport connectivity. Later, under the *Afno Gau Afai Banau* program initiated in 2051 BS, village roads were constructed, connecting all Village Development Committees (VDCs) prior to 2006 AD. Following political changes in 2006 AD, road construction accelerated, and most villages established access roads, though many remained gravelled and seasonal. Bridges and culverts were also constructed to further improve mobility.

In addition to transportation, a range of infrastructure was developed, including community buildings, government offices, educational institutions, health posts and hospitals, electricity distribution, agricultural facilities, temples, and other religious structures. Major hydropower projects, such as the Andhikhola Hydropower (1990s) and Kaligandaki Hydropower (2000s), were established, bringing migrant laborers into local communities. While these projects contributed to regional development, incoming workers were generally not exposed to local or indigenous languages and cultural practices, limiting cultural exchange despite their participation in construction and operation.

Erosion of Magar Folk Songs and Dances Due to Development

Historically, the study area was rich in Magar folk songs and dances. Each village maintained a *Rodi* institution, which, although functioning as a youth club, also operated as

a form of community oversight, with senior and respected members monitoring discipline and activities. In most major Magar settlements, at least one dedicated *Rodi-im* (Rodi house) served as a community building for cultural practice. These institutions facilitated the teaching of folk songs and dances, transmission of knowledge, and socialization within the community. However, following the expansion of formal education and development of infrastructure, the Rodi culture gradually declined. Presently, remnants of the Rodi survive only as informal gatherings in which older songs and dances are occasionally sung, with *Rodi-im* no longer active in Magar villages (based on conversations with key informants).

During the 1960s and 1970s, Sorathi, a lyrical dramatic dance, was widely performed across the study area. It featured in major festivals such as Badā Dashain, local feasts, building inaugurations, worship rituals, weaning ceremonies (*Chho Kāske*), and marriage celebrations. At that time, Sorathi dance teams existed in nearly every village across the nine VDCs of the study area. However, the proliferation of radio, television, and audio-visual media reduced the cultural prominence of Sorathi. In addition, formal education has largely excluded local language and culture from curricula, resulting in younger generations showing little interest in folk performance, sometimes even discouraging it. Economic pressures associated with modernization have also compelled many youths to migrate to urban centers, the Terai region, and abroad in search of employment. Consequently, older dance leaders (*Raura*, *Garra*, *Madalya*) passed away without transferring knowledge to new generations, rendering these performances increasingly endangered. Whereas Sorathi dance teams were once active in 30–40 villages, currently only 4–5 teams remain within the nine VDCs.

Other traditional dances have experienced similar declines. Ghāntu, Jhorā, and Jiwai Māmā were once practiced widely, but today Ghāntu is performed only in Ramche (Pelakot VDC) and Chitung (Pindikhola VDC), while Jiwai Māmā is limited to Lasargha Besi (Lasargha VDC). Jhorā has completely disappeared from the study area, and Kaurhā is now confined to the eastern part of the district, no longer observed locally (based on key informant interviews).

Folk songs such as Sālaijo, Yānimāyā, Sunimāyā, Thādo Bhākā, and others are similarly in decline and can now be heard only occasionally. Popular songs and dances, including Jhāmryā, occur sporadically. Traditional Phāgu songs, melodies, and associated dances have been altered, with festival celebrations increasingly influenced by Indian cultural practices, including forced use of colors and incorporation of Indian songs and dances.

Youths educated under the national education system often show limited interest in Magar language, culture, and intangible heritage such as folk songs and dances. They frequently dismiss traditional practices, including Ghāntu, as superstitious, failing to recognize their historical and scientific significance. Furthermore, continued infrastructure development and migration for employment have disrupted the intergenerational transmission of cultural practices. Migrating youths are unable to carry local folk traditions with them, contributing to the gradual disappearance of Magar language, culture, and folk arts, which are now endangered elements of both community life and human cultural heritage (based on conversations with key informants).

Mitigation Measures in the Development Process

Current development initiatives in Nepal have predominantly focused on the expansion of infrastructure, such as schools, colleges, healthcare facilities, roads, connectivity networks, and tourism-related structures. However, insufficient attention has been given to the inclusion and preservation of Indigenous languages and cultures within these development processes. In the education system, for example, Magar language and cultural content are largely absent from curricula. Similarly, mass media development has largely neglected local languages and cultural practices.

A pervasive monolingual and monocultural mindset among bureaucrats, educators, journalists, development experts, engineers, social workers, and policymakers has contributed to the neglect and gradual erosion of Magar language and culture. Traditional place names and sacred sites (*Thān* lands) are being altered or repurposed without regard for their cultural significance. Moreover, systematic tools such as Cultural Impact Assessments (CIA), Language Impact Assessments (LIA), Indigenous Impact Assessments, or resettlement plans accounting for language and culture are rarely conducted in infrastructure, educational, media, or social development projects.

The protection and restoration of both natural and social environments—including Indigenous languages, cultural practices, and local knowledge systems—is fundamental to sustainable development. Sustainable development not only promotes prosperity and self-reliance but also fosters social respect and community well-being. In contrast, current development approaches in Nepal often undermine intangible cultural heritage, offering little investment or policy support for its protection and revitalization.

In Syangja District, infrastructure projects such as roads, buildings, and hydropower plants have been implemented without consideration for LIA or CIA. Policies supporting the integration of Indigenous culture and language in education have been minimal. Development projects and national education and media policies have, at times, fostered cultural alienation, portraying Indigenous healing practices and local medicinal knowledge negatively, often labeling them as superstition. This has weakened the authority and social role of traditional *Lāmā* (shamans and healers), who historically served as philosophers, oral historians, and custodians of Magar religion, language, and culture.

The construction of the Siddhartha Highway in the 1960s and subsequent development during the Party-less Panchayat regime proceeded without LIA, CIA, or Indigenous people plans, reflecting the monolingual and monocultural policy orientation of the time. After the restoration of democracy in 1990 AD, programs such as *Afno Gau Afai Banau* extended village roads throughout VDCs; yet, Social Impact Assessments (SIA), LIA, CIA, or resettlement plans incorporating Indigenous language and culture were not conducted. Similarly, although SIAs were undertaken during the construction of the Kaligandaki and Andhikhola hydropower projects, no cultural or linguistic impact assessments were carried out.

The influx of migrant laborers, tourists, and other outsiders facilitated by increased connectivity, combined with education and media systems that undervalue local culture, has contributed to the erosion of Indigenous cultural practices. Consequently, government and

development agencies have not played a sufficient role in safeguarding Magar language, culture, folk songs, and dances in Syangja District, leading to the gradual disappearance of these intangible heritages.

CONCLUSION

The development of infrastructure, services, and technology is an inherent aspect of societal progress. Advances in science and technology have brought significant transformations across development sectors. However, sustainable development has emerged as a critical global concern, emphasizing the need for progress without compromising natural or social environments and for restoring any aspects that are lost in the process. To this end, Social Impact Assessments (SIA) and Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) are typically conducted within development projects.

Despite these measures, conventional SIAs and resettlement plans often neglect critical dimensions, including the cultural impacts, effects on Indigenous peoples, language preservation, and the loss of intangible heritage among marginalized communities. Language Impact Assessments (LIA), Cultural Impact Assessments (CIA), and mitigation strategies are rarely integrated into development planning. Culture and language constitute the primary identities of Indigenous peoples in Nepal, yet development agencies and government bodies frequently fail to align infrastructure, education, media, and ICT development with the protection of these cultural assets. Budgetary allocations and policy frameworks for cultural and linguistic mitigation remain insufficient.

In Syangja District, Magar folk songs and dances exemplify the consequences of such oversight. Although the district has achieved numerous developmental milestones over the past 70–80 years, the traditional Magar folk arts have gradually eroded. The ongoing modernization and expansion of infrastructure, education, and media have contributed to the decline of these intangible cultural practices, placing them in an increasingly endangered state.

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ANNEX-I

Ethnicity/Caste-Wise Population Distribution of The Syangja District

SN	Ethnicity/ Caste	NSO 2021		CBS 2011				CBS 2001			
		%	Total	%	Total	Male	Female	%	Total	Male	Female
1	Brahman - Hill	28.144	71210	30.881	89,291	38,837	50,454	32.884	104,348	46,797	57,551
2	Magar	21.972	55594	21.468	62,074	26,985	35,089	21.192	67,245	30,809	36,436
3	Chhetri	11.927	30178	11.526	33,327	14,254	19,073	11.172	35,452	15,648	19,804
4	Gurung	8.872	22448	8.966	25,926	11,416	14,510	9.986	31,687	14,304	17,383
5	Biswakarma	8.276	20941	8.022	23,195	9,993	13,202	6.671	21,167	9,593	11,574
6	Mijar	4.689	11865	4.032	11,658	5,029	6,629	3.308	10,497	4,788	5,709
7	Pariyar	4.086	10338	3.711	10,731	4,613	6,118	3.235	10,266	4,693	5,573
8	Newar	3.417	8647	3.332	9,635	4,237	5,398	3.328	10,559	4,842	5,717
9	Thakuri	2.677	6774	2.454	7,097	3,043	4,054	2.478	7,863	3,566	4,297
10	Gharti/Bhujel	2.248	5689	2.429	7,022	3,068	3,954	2.221	7,049	3,183	3,866
11	Musalman	0.866	2190	0.687	1,986	936	1,050	0.578	1835	886	949
12	Dashnami/ Sanyasi	0.694	1757	0.574	1,659	706	953	0.747	2371	1,063	1,308
13	Kumal	0.381	963	0.563	1,629	744	885	0.451	1,431	686	745
14	Majhi	0.360	910	0.286	828	404	424	0.332	1,054	516	538
15	Khawas	0.251	635	0.162	467	194	273	0	-	-	-
16	Tharu	0.224	568	0.12	346	252	94	0.075	239	179	60
17	Tamang	0.090	228	0.094	271	133	138	0.065	205	148	57
18	Bote	0.085	215	0.091	263	130	133	0.001	2	0	2

19	Rai	0.070	178	0.088	254	135	119	0.049	155	89	66
20	Badi	0.009	22	0.056	162	79	83	0.01	31	14	17
21	Brahman -Tarai	0.036	92	0.049	142	59	83	0.004	12	11	1
22	Gaine	0.046	116	0.046	133	54	79	0.043	136	61	75
23	Kathbaniyan	–	–	0.037	107	56	51	0.024	76	51	25
24	Hajam/Thakur	0.014	35	0.031	90	50	40	0.005	15	11	4
25	Thakali	0.022	55	0.024	70	33	37	0.024	77	38	39
26	Sunuwar	0.164	415	0.021	61	31	30	0	0	0	0
27	Yadav	0.036	91	0.017	50	34	16	0.018	58	35	23
28	Teli	0.017	42	0.013	38	25	13	0.049	157	33	124
29	Limbu/Yakthung	0.011	27	0.012	36	20	16	0.014	45	35	10
30	Haluwai	–	–	0.011	31	17	14	0	0	0	0
31	Kurmi	0.006	15	0.01	30	18	12	0.002	7	5	2
32	Dura	–	–	0.009	27	12	15	0.002	5	1	4
33	Kalwar	0.013	33	0.008	22	12	10	0.01	32	19	13
34	Koiri/Kushwaha	–	–	0.006	17	6	11	0.009	28	8	20
35	Dhanuk	0.009	22	0.005	14	5	9	0.003	8	7	1
36	Sherpa	0.014	36	0.005	14	8	6	0.008	24	14	10
37	Bangali	–	–	0.005	14	11	3	0	0	0	0
38	Dusadh/ Pasawan/Pasi	–	–	0.004	13	4	9	0.001	3	1	2
39	Ghale	–	–	0.004	13	3	10	0	0	0	0
40	Musahar	–	–	0.004	11	2	9	0.002	6	6	0
42	Sonar	0.037	93	0.004	11	3	8	0	0	0	0
43	Sudhi	–	–	0.004	11	7	4	0	1	0	1
44	Others	0.09	227	0.04	115	60	55	0.626	1,986	902	1,084
45	Dalit Others	–	–	0.008	24	15	9	0.257	815	364	451
46	Terai Others	–	–	0.062	180	80	100	0	0	0	0
47	Undefined Others	–	–	0.014	40	15	25	0.118	373	213	160
48	Foreigner	0.148	375	0.004	13	5	8	0	0	0	0
	Total	**100.000**	**253024**	**100**	**289,148**	**125,833**	**163,315**	**100**	**317,320**	**143,619**	**173,701**

Source: CBS 2001, CBS 2011, NSO 2021