

Displaced Toponyms, Disrupted Identities: Ethnography of Magar Place Names in the Siddhartha Highway Sector Butwal-Palpa Corridor

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Abstract

Toponyms are more than geographic markers; they embody collective memory, cultural identity, and indigenous epistemologies. The translation of Magar toponyms into Nepali reflects a governance-driven politics of homogenization, where linguistic standardization functions as a subtle instrument of cultural erasure and identity reconfiguration. This paper critically examines the governance practices of place name translation/displacement along Nepal's Siddhartha National Highway, focusing on the displacement of Magar language toponyms by so-called standardized Nepali forms. Employing an ethnographic approach, the study combines participant observation, archival mapping, and conversation analysis to document how translational governance reshapes the cultural landscape between the Butwal and Palpa corridor. Findings reveal that the renaming of Magar places undermines indigenous identity, weakens community ties to land, and perpetuates epistemic injustice. At the same time, local narratives of resistance highlight the enduring significance of indigenous naming practices as acts of cultural preservation and political assertion. By situating toponymic translation within broader debates on governance, identity, and social transformation in Nepal, the paper argues that naming practices are central to the politics of inclusion, recognition, and justice. It calls for a rethinking of governance frameworks to embrace toponymic justice, respect cultural diversity, and foster participatory approaches that honor indigenous epistemologies. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that renaming the land is inseparable from rewriting identity, with profound implications for decolonial governance and the resilience of marginalized communities.

Keywords: Cultural erasure, decolonial pedagogy, indigenous identity, translation governance

Introduction

On the foundation of the National Education System Plan (NESP), 1971, and after the restoration of democracy in 1990, Nepali society shifted towards economic liberalization and globalization aggressively. These transformations were not merely economic but deeply social, reshaping collective identities, cultural practices, and political imaginaries. The practice has emerged of erasing the contributions of past agencies to advance one's own narrative. Some practices are historiography, toponymic politics, and global parallels. This study focuses on toponymic politics in which

indigenous toponyms were replaced with the so-called standardized Nepali form, illustrating how erasure of past contributions is embedded in governance and the act of renaming displaces local histories and legitimizes state narratives. This aligns with the fact that place name translation in South Asia, such as *Calcutta* for *Kolkata*, and *Bombay* to *Mumbai*, symbolized resistance to colonial legacies and affirmation of local identity (Basik, 2022).

From a governance perspective, translation and renaming are tied to state-building and administrative standardization. Official maps, census records, and legal documents require uniformity, yet this often privileges dominant languages and marginalizes minority communities of developing countries like Nepal. Culturally, place names are anchors of collective memory. Their translation or renaming signals shifts in political regimes and cultural priorities. Thus, place name translation is not neutral; it is a negotiation between governance imperatives and cultural politics.

Siddhartha National Highway, connecting Sunauli (Nepal-India border) to Pokhara, is approximately 182 Km long, passes through Butwal, Palpa, and Syanja, featuring significant hilly terrain, narrow curves, and rocky sections between Butwal and Pokhara. The construction and expansion of this highway have facilitated connectivity between the Terai and hill regions, crossing the Magar community, whose settlements historically lined this corridor. The road has facilitated the development of a lifeline for those people, but it has also contributed to the gradual displacement of indigenous Magar toponyms and administrative standardization with Nepali forms. This process reflects broader governance priorities of uniformity and modernization, but it simultaneously undermines indigenous cultural politics. Place names are not merely geographic markers; they embody cultural memory, linguistic heritage, and community identity. When indigenous names are replaced or translated into dominant languages, they risk erasing the historical presence of marginalized groups and victimized as a symbol of exclusion. Toponyms are never neutral; they are embedded in power relations that determine whose histories are remembered and whose are erased (Rose-Redwood et al., 2010). So, it is officially denying indigenous groups visibility in the cultural landscape in Nepal. In this context, the Magar community loses recognition in the cultural landscape, and the research problem centers on how infrastructural development along the Siddhartha National Highway has accelerated the erasure of Magar toponyms, raising critical questions about governance, identity, and epistemic justice. Thus, the paper aims to critically examine how governance practices of translation reshape identity and cultural landscapes. The purpose of the study is tailored by research questions of how local people respond to the displaced names. And how does this practice align with the principle of indigenous rights? The issue is inseparable from indigenous rights.

Literature Review

The prior study has foregrounded a critical lens for examining toponym issues regarding governance, identity, and cultural memory. Scholars argue that naming practices are not

neutral but deeply political, functioning as instruments of power and symbolic control. Rose-Redwood (2010) argues that political toponymy must move beyond descriptive accounts to critically interrogate the commodification, rescaling, and contested politics of naming in the global lingual context. Woodman (Woodman, 2014) argued that toponymy and identity are inseparable, dynamic, and multi-directional. However, there is still a need for systematic, community-centered, and interdisciplinary research to fully understand these interconnections. Tittel (2022) argued that toponyms are entangled with rituals, offices, land ownership, slavery practices, and migration patterns. It has coverage limitations of local sites (ghats, pastures, and shrines are absent). Toponyms are central to identity construction. Similarly, Verma (2015) argued that toponyms are a cultural memory, a sense of belonging, and a political symbol. The study missing micro-level study based on particular research sites.

These reviews highlight that the trends in toponym research studies are related to the new generation, migration, and new settlements. They lack insight into the marginalized context, linguistic translation due to uniformity, and symbolic exclusion of the indigenous community (like Magar community), who were permanently settling along the national highway corridor. Therefore, tailoring to this research gap, the study seeks to address how they were excluded and how they were impacted thereafter. Do these practices align with indigenous rights, and what is next? Are the further directions of this paper?

Method and Materials

Based on the aim of this paper, research was conducted on the Siddhartha highway from Butwal to Palpa-Ramdighat corridor sector with geographical criteria and marginalized socio-cultural contexts, embedded in local linguistic and cultural practices (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Spradley, 1980, p. 52), and displaced toponyms of the Magar language (Figure 1).

Simultaneously, personal interest, time limitations, resource constraints, and theoretical concerns were also considered to balance the choice of research sites.

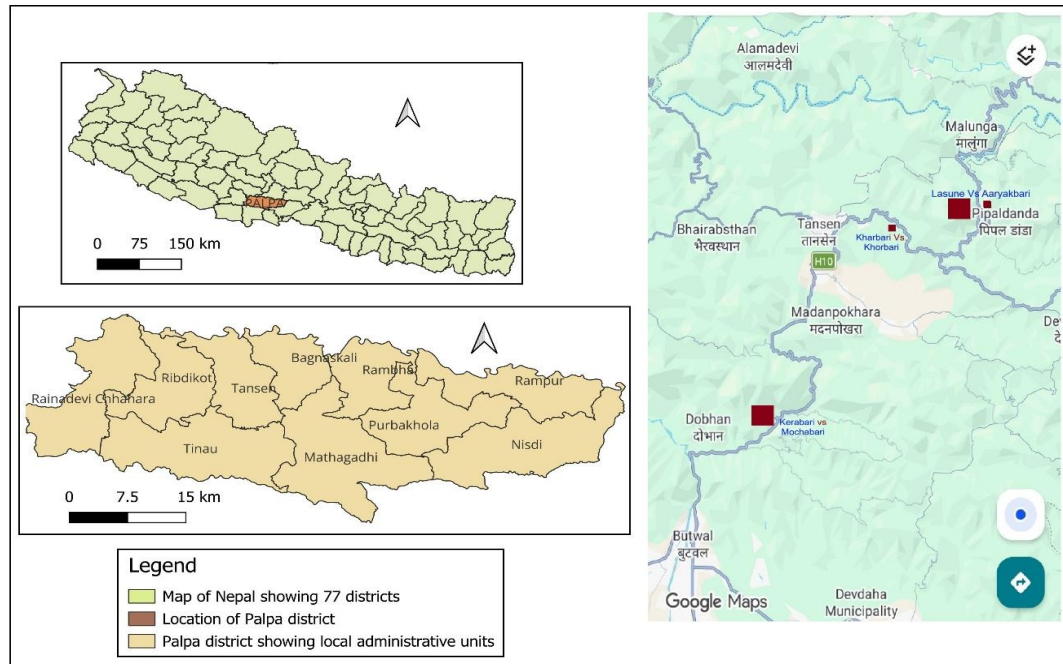


Figure 1 Map of Study Area

Altogether, ten research participants were selected based on employing purposive sampling for local school teachers (3), local community leaders (3), local senior members (2), and official persons (2) [representing local government units and road division] with rigorous consideration of gender, performance, linguistic background, and willingness to contribute personal insights. Field observation schedule, in-depth interview protocols, and field note diary were tools of research. The researcher entered the field as a novice ethnographer, following the research design of building rapport, systematic documentation, relational engagement, and iterative reflection strategies. It was acknowledged that both the challenges and opportunities of reflexive positioning exist. Through ethnographic information collection and analysis procedures, this paper was operated with thick description, reflexive commentary, and iterative analysis to ensure methodological rigor (Kawulich, 2005).

The ethical considerations were strictly followed, securing informed consents to minimize participants' harm, maintaining transparency and integrity, and safeguarding the anonymity of all the participants with responsive and meticulous respect (Jones & Smith, 2017; Mannik & McGrey, 2017).

Findings

The Siddhartha Highway, Butwal-Palpa section (57 Km) corridor passes through Magar settlements and places. Most of those toponyms are translated into Nepali, and out of them, Kera Bari and Lasune are the focus of this study. According to the aim of this study and data obtained from the ethnography, themes were generated and analyzed in this section as the findings.

Systematic Replacement of Magar Toponyms

The translation of Magar toponyms of the study area corridors into Nepali reflects a broader governance pattern of linguistic homogenization. This process is not random but systematic, driven by administrative, cartographic, and educational policies that privilege Nepali as the national language. Chaudhary (2023) notes that official naming practices in Nepal often erase indigenous linguistic diversity by so-called standardizing into Nepali forms, thereby embedding state authority into everyday geography. Travelling from Butwal to the end point of the Palpa-Randighat, there are so many places that were erased by this Highway governance while driving along the road.

An elder participant (75 years, male) from the 'Kera Bari' village narrated (translated from Magar language), *"Our ancestors had named this place 'Mocha Bari' in our tongue, as each name carried a particular significance, like the spirits of the land. There used to be thick banana groves along the hillsides, and still, we can see them. At the beginning, the government boards were also in this name. Beyond the 'Panchayet regime', the board was replaced by the Nepali name 'Kera Bari'. It feels like our memory is being erased."*

The testimonies from community members of *Kera Bari* (formerly *Mocha Bari*) reveal how toponymic displacement is deeply entangled with memory, identity, and power. The elder's recollection situates naming as a spiritual practice, where each place name embodied the "spirits of the land." His lament that official boards once carried the indigenous name but were later replaced by so-called standardized Nepali labels reflects a broader erasure of cultural memory. This resonates with scholarship showing that modernization and state-led standardization often undermine indigenous epistemologies in Nepal (Chaudhary, 2023). Magar names encode ecological knowledge, oral histories, and spiritual associations, which are lost when replaced by functional Nepali terms. Thapamagar & Mani (2014) emphasize that this displacement constitutes symbolic exclusion, erasing indigenous communities from the cultural landscape. The systematic nature of translation thus reflects not only linguistic hierarchy but also cultural erasure. With another meeting, a middle-aged participant (50-year-old male) from the *Aaryak Bari*, translated into *Lasune*, shared;

"In young age, when I returned from anywhere by bus and told the bus helper that I had to get off at Aaryak Bari, he scolded me, saying he didn't know where that was. Later, I knew that the place we knew as had been renamed Lasune. After then I used to be confused about my get-off point sharing."

The participant's confusion at bus stops illustrates the everyday disorientation caused by renaming. Place names are not merely symbolic; they function as navigational anchors. When *Aaryak Bari* was replaced by *Lasune*, his lived geography was destabilized. This aligns with linguistic landscape research, which emphasizes that names and signs are semiotic resources shaping mobility and belonging (Hu, 2022).

Regarding the same issue, a participant from the community leader (40 years old, male) responded, *"Toponyms are not just labels. They are our heritage. When Magar names*

are displaced, our identity is displaced. This highway has brought development, yes, but it has also carried away our voice."

The community leader's assertion that toponyms are not just labels. They are their heritage, which underscores the political dimension of naming. For the Magar community, displacement of indigenous names equates to displacement of identity. This echoes findings that Magars, among other groups, actively construct identity through cultural codes and collective memory, resisting homogenization (Thapamagar & Mani, 2014). The Siddhartha Highway, while enabling development, simultaneously facilitated linguistic and cultural erasure, illustrating the paradox of infrastructure-led modernization. Rose-Redwood et al. (2010) argue that naming is a form of inscription of power, and in Nepal, this inscription manifests through the dominance of Nepali over minority languages.

Whereas the response of the road division section officer (35 years old, female) said, *"In my view, for official documentation and reporting at the national and international level, it is easier and more standardized to use the formal language rather than the local one. Because of this, such changes might have been made. Within the broader context of globalization, this does not seem like an objection."*

In contrast, the road division officer's perspective reflects a bureaucratic logic of efficiency and globalization. She views formal language standardization as pragmatic for documentation and reporting. This position mirrors global trends where local languages are sidelined in favor of standardized, "commodified" linguistic forms deemed more legible in global systems (Liu & Ma, 2024). This stance highlights the tension between administrative rationality and community heritage.

Ultimately, these narratives reveal a layered conflict of memory vs. modernity (Elders emphasize ancestral continuity, while officials prioritize standardized documentation), identity vs. efficiency (community leaders frame naming as heritage, while bureaucrats frame it as technical convenience), and development vs. displacement (infrastructure projects bring mobility and growth but simultaneously erase indigenous voices). This case exemplifies how toponymic displacement is not a neutral act of renaming but a contested process that reshapes cultural landscapes, identities, and power relations. Furthermore, it demands asset-based decolonial approaches that honor indigenous naming practices as epistemic heritage rather than administrative inconvenience.

Governance Rationales in Place Naming

The systematic replacement of indigenous toponyms in Nepal, such as Magar names along this corridor, is often justified by governance rationales of standardization, administrative convenience, and national integration. These rationales reflect state priorities of efficiency and cohesion, but simultaneously contribute to cultural erasure and linguistic homogenization. The response from the elder community leader (80 years old, male) was as;

"I was elected rural chief at that period. I was manipulated by a high authority that local names were confusing in official documentation. It was added that formal language translation solves administrative inconveniency, makes the place recognizable in the world, and attracts development funding from national/international donors" (conversation with participant, 22 October 2025).

The rural chief's testimony illustrates how governance rationales often override local cultural practices in the toponyms. His account reveals that the decision to replace Magar toponyms was not merely administrative but also strategic and intended to align local spaces with national and global systems of recognition. The rationale was framed as pragmatic: Nepali names were said to facilitate official documentation, reduce confusion, and attract external funding for infrastructure projects. This reflects a broader pattern where state authorities prioritize standardized linguistic forms to ensure legibility in bureaucratic and international contexts.

From a critical perspective, this narrative highlights the tension between administrative efficiency and cultural erasure. While the chief was persuaded that Nepali names would make reports "recognizable" in national and abroad, the underlying effect was the displacement of indigenous identities embedded in local toponyms. Scholars argue that such renaming practices are not neutral acts but instruments of power, reshaping landscapes to reflect dominant ideologies while silencing indigenous voices (Chaudhary, 2023). In Nepal, this has been observed as part of a broader homogenizing project where linguistic diversity is subordinated to the national language for purposes of governance and development (Karki & Wenner, 2020).

The narrative also underscores the globalization dimension of place naming. The chief's reference to international recognition and donor attraction reveals how local naming practices are subordinated to global flows of capital and development discourse. This resonates with findings that globalization often legitimizes the replacement of indigenous toponyms with standardized forms, presenting erasure as modernization (Lim & Perono Cacciafoco, 2021). Yet, such rationales mask the symbolic violence of erasing ancestral names that carry cultural memory and spiritual significance.

The researcher was involved with participants from different sectors. The local community leader (45 years, same ethnic group, male) shared his opinions as; *"Officials argue that translated toponyms are modern and systematic. They say it is for development and globalization. But for us, every Magar name carries history. Governance rationales may sound logical, but they erase our identity."*

The officials' claim that Nepali names are "modern and systematic" reflects a governance rationale rooted in administrative efficiency and globalization. Their argument positions standardized Nepali toponyms as tools for development, donor recognition, and bureaucratic clarity. Yet, for the Magar community, each indigenous name carries ancestral history and cultural memory. The tension here lies between state rationality and community heritage. This narrative demonstrates how modernization

discourses often mask cultural erasure. Scholars Darshan Karki and Miriam Wenner (2020) argue that elites and governing authorities in Nepal have historically deployed toponyms as tools to reinforce territorial claims and national belonging, while marginalizing indigenous voices. Their study shows how naming practices are not neutral but deeply political, used both to consolidate state power and, conversely, to inspire symbolic resistance among marginalized groups seeking recognition and belonging. In this study, Magar toponyms are not simply a linguistic adjustment but a symbolic act that undermines identity and belonging. So, the toponyms are deeply political rather than neutral.

The officials' emphasis on globalization further illustrates how local heritage is subordinated to international legibility. In development contexts, standardized names are presented as necessary for attracting external recognition and resources. However, this rationale obscures the symbolic violence of erasing indigenous epistemologies. Tittel (2022) highlights that indigenous toponyms embody stories, cosmologies, and interpretive attributes that cannot be replaced by standardized labels without loss of meaning. Thus, governance rationales may sound logical, but they enact identity displacement under the guise of modernization.

Ultimately, the replacement of Magar toponyms with so-called standardized reflects an administrative logic that values efficiency and global visibility over cultural continuity. Whereas, this practice erases ancestral memory, spiritual ties to land, and indigenous identity. Translation, thus, becomes a tool of governance, embedding state authority into everyday landscapes and reshaping them to reflect dominant ideologies. Yet, community resistance to renaming shows that toponyms are not neutral; they are sites of cultural survival and political struggle. This case highlights the paradox of so-called development and the undermining of indigenous voices.

Consequences of Toponymic Displacement

The systematic replacement of Magar toponyms of the study area has profound consequences for indigenous identity, community cohesion, and epistemic justice. These consequences extend beyond language, reshaping cultural landscapes and weakening the symbolic anchors of Magar heritage. The community people participant said;

"When Aaryak Bari disappeared, our stories disappeared too. The land no longer speaks our language. Children cannot trace the meanings behind the new Nepali names, so our memory is fading."

The participant reflects on the contexts of toponyms, which are their stories that capture the intimate link between language, land, and collective memory. Place names are not merely geographic markers; they are repositories of oral histories, cosmologies, and cultural identity. The disappearance of Magar toponyms signifies more than linguistic substitution; it represents the erosion of narrative traditions that once animated the landscape. As the participant notes, "the land no longer speaks our language,"

highlighting how renaming severs the dialogic relationship between community and territory. Children's inability to trace meanings behind new Nepali names illustrates the intergenerational rupture caused by toponymic displacement. Without access to indigenous names, younger generations lose the symbolic anchors that connect them to ancestral stories and cultural heritage. Scholars argue that such erasures weaken cultural continuity and diminish the transmission of indigenous knowledge systems (Tittel, 2022). In Nepal, this process has been documented as part of broader state-led homogenization, where local languages and identities are subordinated to national linguistic frameworks (Karki & Wenner, 2020).

The fading of memory described by the participant resonates with global research on linguistic landscapes. Hu (2022) emphasizes that names and signs are semiotic resources that shape belonging and identity. When indigenous toponyms are systematically replaced, the semiotic environment shifts, privileging dominant languages while silencing minority voices. This aligns with ethnographic observation that globalization and standardization in place naming often present erasure as modernization, masking the cultural violence embedded in such practices.

This cultural tension was further clarified by a community leader (51 years, male) through his opinion.

"The displacement of our toponyms has consequences for identity. It weakens our claim to the land. If the names are not ours, people begin to think the land is not ours either."

The participant's reflection, the displacement of their toponyms, has consequences for identity. It weakens their claim to the first community of the land. If the names are not ours, people begin to think the land is not ours either," reveals the profound political and cultural implications of renaming. Place names are not neutral; they are symbolic markers of belonging, authority, and heritage. When indigenous Magar names are replaced by standardized Nepali ones, the community's historical claim to the land is undermined, as naming practices are closely tied to territorial legitimacy and cultural continuity. Their displacement through Nepali translation weakens these anchors, contributing to epistemic injustice. This pattern reveals how translation operates as a governance tool that reshapes cultural memory in favor of dominant narratives. This narrative shows how the systematic translation of Magar toponyms into Nepali equivalents is both a governance strategy and a cultural politics issue, producing erasure of indigenous knowledge and weakening cultural anchors.

Scholars argue that toponyms function as "linguistic ownership" of space, embedding collective memory and identity into the landscape. The erasure of indigenous names, therefore, constitutes a form of symbolic dispossession, where communities lose not only linguistic heritage but also the legitimacy of their ancestral ties. In Nepal, this process has been documented as part of broader state-led homogenization, where local languages and identities are subordinated to the national language for administrative and developmental purposes (Karki & Wenner, 2020). Such practices weaken indigenous claims to land by reframing space through dominant linguistic and political lenses.

The participant's concern that "people begin to think the land is not ours either" illustrates how renaming reshapes perceptions of ownership. Karki and Wenner (2020) highlight that toponymic ambivalence in Nepal's flatlands often leads to contested identities, where communities resist erasure by asserting symbolic resistance through oral traditions and cultural practices. Yet, when official maps, boards, and documents adopt standardized names, the indigenous voice is silenced, and external actors, whether state authorities or donors, interpret the land as detached from its original custodians.

Globally, Woodman (2014) observes that globalization and standardization in place naming often present erasure as modernization, masking the cultural violence embedded in such practices. The Magar case exemplifies this paradox: while renaming is justified as rational and modern, it simultaneously erodes indigenous identity and weakens territorial claims. Thus, governance rationales in place naming are not merely administrative decisions but acts of power that redefine ownership and belonging.

Ultimately, the displacement of Magar place names is not just an administrative change but a political act that erases memory, weakens identity, and disrupts cultural transmission. Indigenous names carry ancestral stories, ecological knowledge, and territorial legitimacy, so their loss creates confusion and disconnection across generations. Preserving these names is therefore essential for protecting heritage, sustaining cultural voices, and resisting the hidden forms of erasure that modernization and globalization often impose. Naming practices are more than labels; they are central to struggles over identity, land, and power.

Discussion

This ethnographic paper argued on how Magar toponyms of the Siddhartha Highway spots were replaced into so-called Nepali language and what impacts can be observed in the field. Now, the key points of the paper in three sub-headings: systematic replacement of Magar toponyms, governance rationales in placing names, and consequences of toponymic displacements were discussed. It may help the reader understand the work's alignment with previous works, its originality, and the messages conveyed in this work.

Systematic Replacement of Magar Toponym

The testimonies from Kera Bari and Lasune (formerly *Mocha Bari* and *Aaryak Bari*, respectively) reveal how place naming is entangled with memory, identity, and power. For elders, names are spiritual anchors embodying the "spirits of the land," and their replacement with standardized Nepali labels represents cultural erasure. This resonates with Chaudhary (2023), who shows that modernization and state-led standardization in Nepal often marginalize indigenous epistemologies. The middle-aged participant's confusion at bus stops illustrates how renaming destabilizes everyday geographies, aligning with Hu's (2022) observation that names and signs are semiotic resources shaping mobility and belonging. The community leader's assertion that "toponyms are not just labels; they are our heritage" underscores the political dimension of naming. For the Magar community, displacement of indigenous names equates to displacement

of identity. Thapamagar and Mani (2014) document how Magars actively construct identity through cultural codes and collective memory, resisting homogenization. Yet, infrastructure projects such as the Siddhartha Highway simultaneously enable development and facilitate linguistic erasure, illustrating the paradox of modernization. In contrast, the bureaucratic perspective views national language standardization as rational and pragmatic for documentation and reporting, mirroring global trends in which local languages are sidelined in favor of standardized, commodified forms deemed more legible in global systems (Liu & Ma, 2024). The participant's stance highlights the tension between administrative efficiency and community heritage, showing how globalization legitimizes erasure by presenting it as modernization. The authors emphasize that such rationales mask cultural violence, reframing erasure as progress.

From the discourse of this study, the community member participants have emphasized ancestral continuity, while officials prioritize standardized documentation. There is the tension between identity vs. efficiency, and development vs. displacement. The state has a duty to respect, protect, and promote all kinds of social and cultural diversity within its boundaries. But in the past, the essence of the first Civil Code, 1853, and the report of education in Nepal, 1954, treated the socio-cultural diversity of Nepal as a problem for national unity. This shows that the government at that time wanted uniformity instead of valuing differences, and how marginalized voices are silenced through dominant authority power. The case demonstrates that toponymic displacement is not a neutral act of renaming but a contested process that reshapes cultural landscapes, identities, and power relations. It highlights the need for asset-based and decolonial approaches, which should respect indigenous naming practices as epistemic heritage rather than treating them as an administrative inconvenience.

Governance Rationales in Place Naming

The rural chief's testimony shows how governance rationales often override local cultural practices in naming places. The replacement of Magar toponyms with standardized Nepali names was framed as pragmatic, intended to simplify documentation, reduce confusion, and attract donor funding. Yet, this rationale reveals a deeper tension: administrative efficiency is achieved at the cost of cultural erasure. As Liu and Ma (2024) note, state authorities frequently prioritize so-called standardized linguistic forms to ensure legibility in bureaucratic and international contexts, but such practices reshape landscapes to reflect dominant ideologies.

From a critical perspective, renaming is not neutral. It displaces indigenous Magar identities embedded in local toponyms, weakening cultural continuity and silencing community voices. Scholars argue that toponyms function as "linguistic ownership" of space, embedding collective memory and identity into the landscape. Their erasure constitutes symbolic dispossession, undermining ancestral claims to land. In Nepal, this has been observed as part of a broader homogenizing project where linguistic diversity is subordinated to the national language for governance and development (Karki & Wenner, 2020).

The globalization dimension further complicates this process. The chief's reference to donor recognition and international legibility illustrates how local heritage is subordinated to global flows of capital and development discourse. Lim and Perono (2021) emphasize that globalization often legitimizes the replacement of indigenous toponyms with standardized forms, presenting erasure as modernization. Yet, such rationales mask the symbolic violence of erasing ancestral names that carry cultural memory and spiritual significance. Communities respond with symbolic resistance, contesting renaming as a form of cultural survival (Karki & Wenner, 2020).

Ultimately, this discussion demonstrates that governance rationales in place naming are not merely technical decisions but deeply political acts. They reshape landscapes to reflect dominant ideologies, silence indigenous voices, and reveal the paradox of development that simultaneously enables progress and erases heritage.

Consequences of Toponymic Displacement

The testimonies reveal that the disappearance of Magar toponyms is not a neutral linguistic shift but a profound act of cultural and political displacement. Place names embody oral histories, cosmologies, and collective memory; when they are replaced, communities lose symbolic anchors to their ancestral heritage. This rupture weakens intergenerational transmission, leaving children unable to access meanings embedded in indigenous names. Such erasure aligns with describe as symbolic dispossession, where the removal of indigenous toponyms undermines both cultural continuity and territorial legitimacy.

In Nepal, renaming practices have been documented as part of state-led homogenization, subordinating local languages to the national framework for administrative and developmental purposes (Karki & Wenner, 2020). This governance rationale, framed as modernization and globalization, masks the cultural violence of erasure. As Verma (2021) notes, standardization in place naming often presents itself as rational progress, yet it simultaneously destabilizes identity and weakens indigenous claims to land. The participant's concern that "if the names are not ours, people begin to think the land is not ours either" illustrates how renaming reshapes perceptions of ownership, reframing landscapes through dominant political lenses.

Globally, linguistic landscape research emphasizes that names and signs are semiotic resources shaping belonging and identity (Hu, 2022). When indigenous voices are silenced through renaming, landscapes lose their dialogic relationship with communities, becoming sites of exclusion rather than heritage. The Magar case exemplifies this paradox: infrastructure and globalization bring development, but they also accelerate memory loss, weaken identity, and create ecological disconnect. Thus, toponymic displacement emerges as a deeply political act, reshaping cultural landscapes, silencing indigenous voices, and destabilizing claims to land. Moreover, feelings of rebellion and dissatisfaction arise among the marginalized people.

Conclusion

Toponymic displacement along the Siddhartha National Highway is not a neutral linguistic adjustment but a political act reshaping landscapes, identities, and power relations. Place names embody ancestral memory, cosmology, and cultural continuity; their erasure constitutes *symbolic dispossession*, undermining indigenous claims to land and weakening intergenerational transmission. Karki and Wenner (2020) show how Tarai toponyms serve as symbolic resistance to homogenizing state narratives, while Gautam et al. (2025) demonstrate that Kirāti naming practices, tied to ecological knowledge and heritage, are disrupted by displacement.

This paradox, development through infrastructure alongside linguistic erasure, illustrates Basik's (2022) argument that space is socially produced and inscribed with authority. Bureaucratic rationales of efficiency and donor recognition reframe erasure as progress, legitimizing displacement through globalization's demand for standardized forms. Kerfoot (2024) cautions that such rationales conceal cultural violence, presenting erasure as modernization while silencing indigenous voices.

The Magar case exemplifies this tension: identity vs. efficiency, heritage vs. documentation, development vs. displacement. Leaders' insistence that "toponyms are our heritage" underscores renaming as existential, threatening cultural survival. As Hu (2022) notes, names and signs are semiotic resources shaping belonging; their removal destabilizes everyday geographies and weakens dialogic ties between communities and landscapes.

Ultimately, the disappearance of Magar toponyms reveals governance rationales in naming as epistemic and cultural violence. They silence marginalized voices, destabilize ancestral continuity, and inscribe dominant ideologies onto landscapes. Countering this requires asset-based and decolonial approaches that respect indigenous naming practices as epistemic heritage. Communities' symbolic resistance, as Karki and Wenner (2020) argue, is not nostalgic but cultural survival, asserting that naming is inseparable from identity, memory, and belonging.

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