Indigenous Knowledge and Public Welfare: Insights from Rural Nepal

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Abstract:
This paper offers a sociological examination of the intersections between indigenous knowledge systems and public welfare practices in rural Nepal. Challenging the hegemony of state-centred and Eurocentric development paradigms, it argues for the inclusion of alternative epistemologies embedded in the lived experiences of Nepal's indigenous communities. Drawing upon communitarianism, post-development theory, and the concept of epistemologies of the South, the study highlights how collective action, mutual aid, and traditional ecological knowledge contribute substantively to localized welfare mechanisms. Case studies from Magar, Newar, Sherpa, and Tharu communities illustrate how these systems function as forms of embedded welfare institutions. The paper concludes by advocating for epistemic justice and participatory governance in welfare policy discourse.

Keywords: Indigenous knowledge, public welfare, sociology of development, communitarianism, epistemic justice.

1. Background

Public welfare, conventionally understood through the lens of modern nation-states, often revolves around centralized institutions such as formal education,

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healthcare, and social insurance systems. In Nepal, the expansion of the welfare state has been constrained by political instability, geographical inaccessibility, and limited bureaucratic outreach. As a result, rural populations—particularly indigenous communities—have historically relied on alternative modes of welfare rooted in cultural traditions, ecological knowledge, and communal reciprocity (Ghale & Karki, 2012).

Sociologically, indigenous welfare systems challenge the Weberian bureaucratic ideal by emphasising affective ties, moral economies, and symbolic exchanges rather than rational-legal authority. Durkheim's (1893/1984) notion of mechanical solidarity is particularly relevant in understanding how such communities maintain cohesion through shared norms and collective rituals. Furthermore, indigenous epistemologies—transmitted orally and enacted through daily practices—offer socioculturally embedded mechanisms of well-being that resist commodification and formal institutionalisation.

Despite constitutional recognition of indigenous groups in the 2015 Nepali Constitution and the establishment of bodies such as the National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN), formal public policy remains heavily influenced by modernization Theory and neoliberal development agendas. These paradigms often marginalise indigenous ways of knowing, perceiving them as backwards or pre-modern (Escobar, 1995). Consequently, the current welfare apparatus is marked by a cognitive dissonance between formal policy and grassroots practices.

2. Analysis

2.1. Theoretical Framework

Post-Development theory, exemplified by Arturo Escobar's (1995) critique, challenges the ethnocentric foundations of conventional development paradigms that universalise Western models of progress, arguing that these frameworks construct the Global South as perpetually deficient and underdeveloped. In Nepal, this critique exposes how indigenous systems, rooted in collective land stewardship, spiritual relationships with nature, and community-centric welfare, have been systematically pathologised and marginalised. Indigenous communities, constituting over 35% of Nepal's population, have historically sustained sophisticated knowledge systems for managing natural resources, yet state-led development and conservation policies, such as the establishment of national parks in the 1960s, criminalised their practices, severing ancestral ties to land and eroding cultural identities. This epistemic violence not only dispossesses communities materially but also inflicts psychological trauma, as generations internalise the devaluation of their heritage within dominant narratives of "modernity." Despite constitutional recognition of indigenous rights in 2007, their contributions remain invisible in national development agendas, which prioritise imported economic models over localised solutions. Advocates like Madhukar SJB Rana call for a revolutionary reorientation of Nepal's development philosophy—one that centres indigenous wisdom as a counter to Western-centric progress and addresses structural inequalities through pluralistic, community-driven frameworks. By humanising this struggle, post-development theory underscores the urgent need to decolonise development

discourse, validating indigenous knowledge not as relics of the past but as vital pathways for sustainable and equitable futures.

Communitarianism

Amitai Etzioni's (1995) communitarianism- a normative framework balancing individual rights with collective responsibilities—finds profound resonance in Nepal's indigenous contexts, where welfare operates as a lived social ethic rather than institutional obligation. The parma system, a reciprocal labor exchange practiced by communities like the Newar, exemplifies this ethos: when 20 villagers gather to plant rice, they reinforce a web of mutual care where labor replaces currency, trust binds social contracts, and contributions like oxen (counted as two "labor credits") blend ecological interdependence with human cooperation (Etzioni, 1995). This indigenous communitarianism thrives through cultural enforcement mechanisms—neglecting obligations risks social dissolution in villages where survival hinges on neighbourly support—and intergenerational knowledge transmission, as elder Jyapu farmers mentor youth in traditional irrigation during parma exchanges while women coordinate planting via oral monsoon histories. Etzioni's vision of moral obligations materialises as kincentric accountability, evident in rituals like Sithi Nakha that renew communal bonds, yet carries human costs: landless Dalit families navigate unspoken hierarchies, and migrant youth strain reciprocity chains. When national parks banned indigenous resource management in the 1960s, communities adapted to stealth forest stewardship, showcasing communitarianism's resilience against state-imposed individualism (Etzioni, 1995). Nepal's 2007 constitutional recognition of indigenous rights created paradoxical tensions, as state-led "development" programs often erode the communal fabric sustaining parma—a tension

Etzioni (1995) Preemptively cautioned against, warning that neglecting such "social scaffolding" risks reducing welfare to transactional calculations. Amid Kathmandu's urbanisation, the Newars' enduring bola exchanges testify to communitarianism's adaptive power, not as abstract theory but as a breathing practice of collective survival.

Epistemologies of the South

Boaventura de Sousa Santos' concept of "epistemologies of the South" (2014) critiques the epistemic hegemony of Northern knowledge systems, exposing how Nepal's exclusion of Indigenous knowledge from curricula, policy-making, and scientific discourse perpetuates epistemicide—the systematic erasure of alternative knowledges—while Bourdieu's (1984) notion of symbolic violence reveals how dominant frameworks delegitimize subaltern worldviews. This epistemic marginalisation manifests through curriculum colonialism, where education systems prioritise Nepali and English, alienating students from Indigenous languages like Newari and Tamang that encode ecological wisdom and communal ethics, despite 37% of Nepali children being taught in languages they don't understand (World Bank). State conservation policies since the 1960s have banned Indigenous practices like parma (reciprocal labour systems), replacing them with Western models that sever spiritual ties to land, exemplifying Bourdieu's symbolic power in framing Indigenous stewardship as "backwards" (Bourdieu, 1984). Meanwhile, scientific discourse dismisses Indigenous agricultural techniques, such as polyculture farming adapted to Himalayan microclimates, as "unscientific," reflecting Santos' critique of the "monoculture of scientific reason" (Santos, 2014). To counter this epistemicide, Santos advocates for cognitive justice, urging Nepal to integrate Indigenous languages into curricula, formalize

traditional land stewardship in policy, and adopt dialogical frameworks (e.g., Mi'kmaq Etuaptmumk) that blend Western science with Indigenous ecological knowledge, dismantling the "abyssal thinking" that renders Southern epistemologies invisible (Santos, 2014).

2.2. Case- Based Insights from Rural Nepal

Magar Community (Sindhupalchok District)

The Magar community's communitarian welfare systems, deeply rooted in their cultural and ecological cosmology, exemplify how Indigenous knowledge sustains both social and environmental resilience. Practices like panisindai—traditional irrigation networks managed through clan-based labour-sharing—are not merely technical solutions but are interwoven with spiritual rituals and seasonal calendars that align agricultural activities with lunar cycles and ancestral veneration. For instance, water distribution in panisindai is governed by bheja or guthi councils, where elders enforce customary laws ensuring equitable access, even during droughts, through a principle of aphno manche (kinship obligation) that prioritises collective survival over individual gain. Rotational grazing systems, similarly, integrate ecological knowledge by designating pasturelands according to altitude and monsoon patterns, allowing soil regeneration while maintaining livestock health—a practice upheld through oral histories and intergenerational mentorship (Ghale & Karki, 2012). These communal frameworks extend to forest management, where sacred groves (deurali) are protected through taboos and rituals, blending spiritual stewardship with biodiversity conservation. Ghale and Karki (2012) emphasise that such systems mitigate food insecurity by leveraging localised knowledge of crop diversity, such as cultivating

drought-resistant millets and tubers in microclimates, while redistributing harvests through parma-like labour exchanges that reinforce social cohesion. Crucially, these practices operate outside formal state mechanisms, relying instead on dharma (moral duty) and samajik kartavya (social responsibility) encoded in oral traditions, which Bourdieu might recognise as a counter to symbolic violence by centring Indigenous epistemologies in daily survival. The Magars' resilience thus lies in their ability to adapt these non-monetary values to contemporary challenges, such as climate unpredictability, while resisting the epistemicide (Santos, 2014) that dismisses such systems as "primitive" within mainstream development paradigms. By institutionalising reciprocity and ecological ethics as cultural imperatives, the Magar model offers a blueprint for sustainable lifeways that transcend the extractive logic of modern economies.

Newar Community and the Guthi System

The guthi system among the Newars stands as a centuries-old socio-religious institution that integrates land trusts, ritual obligations, and communal infrastructure maintenance into a cohesive framework for public welfare, with roots tracing back to at least the 5th century BC. Land donated to guthis generates revenue used for restoring temples, maintaining water spouts (hiti), supporting festivals, and providing social services, thus performing distributive functions similar to those of modern welfare states but grounded in ritual duty and collective memory rather than codified law. Organizationally, guthis are structured along caste and lineage lines, with leadership vested in elders known as thakali, whose authority is maintained through sacred legitimisation and ritual participation, exemplifying what Weber described as traditional authority. Membership in key guthis, such as

death guthis, is often compulsory, ensuring that every household participates in networks of mutual aid, ritual support, and social responsibility, while other guthis manage lineage deities or festivals, reinforcing social cohesion and cultural continuity. The guthi system also plays a vital role in heritage conservation, with traditional artisans and masons historically organised through guthis to build and restore the Kathmandu Valley's iconic temples and public spaces despite pressures from modernisation, land reform, and recent state attempts at nationalization, the guthi system remains a vital pillar of Newar society, preserving both tangible and intangible heritage and binding individuals to the community through shared sacred duties and intergenerational memory.

Sherpa Community (Khumbu Region)

The Sherpa agricultural system exemplifies a profound integration of Buddhist cosmology, ecological wisdom, and communal reciprocity, where practices such as the stewardship of sacred forests (lhakhangs) and shared granaries are both ecologically sustainable and socially cohesive. These forests, protected through taboos linked to local spirits (lu) and Buddhist principles of nonviolence (ahimsa), serve as biodiversity sanctuaries while symbolising the spiritual interconnectedness of all life (Skog, 2010). Agricultural rhythms are synchronised with empirical climate observations, such as snowmelt patterns and bird migrations, and spiritual calendars, ensuring crop cycles align with lunar phases and monastic festivals. Communal labour systems, particularly during terrace farming and irrigation maintenance, are sanctified through Buddhist ideals of karma and interdependence, transforming agricultural work into acts of collective merit-making (Moktan, Sherpa, & Rai, 2023). Rituals like Dumje, a week-long festival featuring masked dances and communal

feasting, generate what Durkheim (1912/1995) termed "collective effervescence," binding individuals into moral communities through shared cosmological commitments to prosperity and harmony. The concept of beyul— sacred hidden valleys believed to shelter Buddhist teachings and biodiversity during crises— embodies this synthesis of ecology and spirituality, framing environmental stewardship as a sacred duty (Skog, 2010). By embedding agricultural practices within rituals, kinship networks, and cosmic order, Sherpa knowledge systems sustain what Durkheim identified as "organic solidarity," where communal survival hinges on adherence to shared sacred truths rather than individualistic pursuits (Durkheim, 1912/1995). This holistic approach not only mitigates food insecurity through equitable grain redistribution but also resists the fragmentation of modern economies by centring non-material values like spiritual merit and intergenerational continuity (Moktan, Sherpa, & Rai, 2023).

Tharu Community (Terai Region)

Among the Tharu community, indigenous healing practices, midwifery, and an extensive herbal pharmacopoeia form the backbone of community health, particularly in rural areas where formal healthcare is limited or absent. These systems are highly accessible and trusted, with specialized healers such as guruwa, baidawa, and surenya employing a three-pronged approach: chanting mantras to address spiritual causes of illness, administering herbal remedies prepared from over a hundred plant species, and providing therapeutic massage, especially in the context of midwifery and women's health. Illness is understood through a dual lens—rog (disease caused by physical factors like contaminated food or weather changes) and laagu-bhagu (afflictions attributed to evil spirits, deities, or supernatural forces)—with healers adept at discerning

and treating both, often integrating ritual offerings and promises to gods as part of the healing process. These practices are deeply embedded in gendered labour divisions, with women playing central roles in midwifery and massage, and are passed down orally across generations, reflecting a rich tradition of experiential and spiritual knowledge. Despite their proven cultural and practical significance, Tharu healing systems are marginalised by biomedical paradigms, which privilege written, laboratory-based knowledge and often dismiss orally transmitted expertise as unscientific. This marginalisation exemplifies what Foucault (1973) termed "subjugated knowledges"—forms of understanding disqualified by dominant regimes of truth, reinforcing broader patterns of epistemic hierarchy and erasure even as these indigenous systems continue to sustain health and social cohesion within Tharu society.

2.3. Challenges to Indigenous Welfare Systems

Modernisation and Youth Migration

Sociologically, modernisation entails not only infrastructural change but also cultural dislocation. The migration of rural youth to urban areas or abroad disrupts intergenerational knowledge transmission, resulting in what Mannheim (1952) might consider a rupture in generational consciousness. As young people increasingly align with globalised lifestyles, traditional roles and practices lose their prestige and continuity.

Climate Change and Ecological Stress

Ecological knowledge systems are increasingly strained by climate unpredictability. For instance, glacial retreat in the Himalayas has impacted Sherpa agricultural patterns, while erratic rainfall has disrupted Magar

irrigation cycles (Moktan et al., 2023). These shifts demand adaptive strategies, yet the capacity to innovate within indigenous paradigms is constrained by structural neglect and lack of institutional support.

Top-Down Development and NGOization

Many development programs, even those with participatory rhetoric, are designed and implemented through technocratic frameworks that fail to account for local specificity. This reflects what James Ferguson (1990) called the "anti-politics machine," wherein development depoliticises structural inequalities by framing them as technical problems. Consequently, indigenous institutions are bypassed or co-opted without genuine empowerment.

Epistemic Marginalization

Indigenous knowledge systems are often rendered illegible in policy and academic settings due to their non-textual, experiential nature. The privileging of positivist methodologies and the written word serves to exclude oral, ritualistic, and performative knowledge. This exclusion constitutes a form of symbolic domination (Bourdieu, 1984), wherein epistemic authority is monopolized by formally trained experts.

2.4. Reimagining Policy through Indigenous Knowledge

Although the 2015 Constitution and various state-level documents acknowledge ethnic pluralism, policy frameworks remain rigidly state-centric. Programs such as community forestry have shown promise but often operate under bureaucratic logics that restrict local autonomy (World Bank, 2024). A sociological reimagining of welfare policy must begin with the recognition that welfare is not a mere technocratic deliverable but a socially embedded process.

Strategies for meaningful inclusion could involve:

- Institutional pluralism: Legal recognition of indigenous governance structures such as guthis, Baras, and panisindai within local governance frameworks.

- Curricular reforms: Inclusion of indigenous histories, environmental ethics, and healing practices in national education systems to counter epistemicide.

- Participatory governance: Enabling indigenous communities to co-design welfare policies rather than being passive recipients of aid.

- Knowledge diplomacy: Creating platforms where traditional practitioners and state officials engage in mutual learning and policy co-production.

Such reforms align with a broader vision of epistemic justice, which requires not only the redistribution of resources but also the redistribution of cognitive authority.

3. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that indigenous knowledge systems in rural Nepal are not residual or archaic but represent sophisticated, socially embedded forms of public welfare. These systems encompass a wide range of practices—from ecological management and healing traditions to ritual redistribution and collective labour—that contribute meaningfully to community well-being.

From a sociological standpoint, welfare must be viewed as a moral and cultural construct, shaped by local histories, ontologies, and forms of solidarity. The theoretical perspectives of post-development, communitarianism, and epistemologies of the South offer robust critiques of state-centric, technocratic, and epistemically exclusive paradigms.

To advance a just and inclusive model of public welfare, it is imperative to:

- Recognise indigenous systems as legitimate and autonomous sources of knowledge.
- Develop participatory mechanisms that institutionalise local voices.
- Reconstruct the discourse on welfare to incorporate multiple epistemologies and lifeworlds.

Nepal stands at a critical juncture where it can move beyond tokenistic multiculturalism and toward a genuinely pluralistic and democratic vision of welfare rooted in epistemic justice and sociological inclusion.

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