

# Indigenous Magars in the Squatter Areas in Kathmandu: A Case Study

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## Abstract

This article looks at the real lives of the Magar community, an indigenous tribe that lives in squatter communities in Kathmandu, with an emphasis on Sinamangal. It looks at how cultural identity, economic hardship, and systematic exclusion all come together to affect daily living in urban informal settings. The study underscores the ongoing difficulties encountered by Magar families, such as restricted access to housing, education, healthcare, and employment prospects, as well as experiences of marginalization within urban governance frameworks. The research utilizes field observations and comprehensive interviews to record patterns of survival, resilience, and collective support that maintain community cohesion in the face of difficult conditions. It also talks about how cultural practices and identity negotiations are developing in cities. The findings show how being an indigenous person affects your access to rights, resources, and social recognition in the city. This article advocates for immediate policy measures to combat urban poverty while promoting inclusive development frameworks that respect indigenous rights, dignity, and wellbeing. The study ultimately contributes to broader discourses on indigeneity, urbanization, and social justice in Nepal.

*Keywords:* indigenous people, Magars, urban poverty, squatter areas, socio-economic exclusion, aspirations

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## Introduction

The Magars, one of Nepal's most well-known native communities, have long had problems with being economically and socially marginalized and culturally invisible. The fast growth of cities in Kathmandu has made inequities worse, especially for people living in squatter areas. Urban poverty is not just an economic problem; it is a complex issue that includes social exclusion, a lack of opportunity, and systemic neglect (Nadvi & Barrietos, 2004). This essay examines Magar households in the squatter settlement of Sinamangal, investigating their lived experiences and the socio-cultural influences that shape them. Suparlan (2004) contends that urban poverty constitutes a hidden and intricate issue, with social and cultural ramifications that extend beyond the immediate social challenges present in the affected city, ultimately impacting the impoverished population therein. Poverty in cities is caused by a lot of people moving from rural areas to cities, mainly because of

bad living circumstances, low pay, and not enough rules in the formal labor market. The industrial sector also has financial problems. workforce that isn't official. K. Ariyanto (2023). Poverty in cities is growing more common in Nepal. In cities, the rate of poverty is going up, whereas in rural regions, it is going down (ADB, 2013; UNDP, 2014). The rural Human Development Index (HDI) value has gone up a lot from 2006 to 2011, whereas the urban HDI value has stayed the same (UNDP, 2014). The rate of poverty in cities in Nepal varies greatly. The hill ecological zone has the lowest rate of poverty at 8.7 percent. In metropolitan areas of the Tarai, this number rises to 22 percent, whereas in Kathmandu, it is 11.5 percent (CBS, 2012). Informal settlements are a relatively new issue in Nepal, and there is a poor knowledge of the entire context of slums and squatter communities (UN, 2013).

## Problem Statement

Urbanization in Kathmandu has resulted in the proliferation of squatter settlements, where marginalized groups face significant social and economic challenges. The Magar people, who are native to the area, experience economic hardship, social exclusion, and cultural displacement in these informal urban settings. Limited access to housing, education, healthcare, and employment, together with marginalization in urban governance, affects their daily life and sense of self. However, their lived experiences and coping strategies are hardly analyzed, leading to a lack of understanding and the formulation of inclusive policies. So, it is really important to look into how urban poverty and tribal identity come together for the Magars in Kathmandu.

## Research Objective

To investigate the influence of urban poverty, systematic exclusion, and cultural identity on the lived experiences and survival tactics of the Magar people in the squatter settlements of Kathmandu.

## Methodology

This qualitative study utilizes field observation and comprehensive interviews to comprehend the

lived experiences of Magar families. Data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews with family heads and other members to investigate their socio-economic status, aspirations, and obstacles. The research concentrated on four Magar households living in the Sinamangal squatter zone. Researchers watched them to learn about their living conditions, access to resources, and how they interacted with other people in the community.

## Results and Disussion

**Income and Employment:** The households that were interviewed mostly depend on informal work. One family has two individuals who make less than \$2.15 a day. These professions usually involve simple tasks like housework, building things, or working for a daily wage. Systemic prejudice and a lack of educational qualifications make it even harder for them to find permanent work, which greatly limits their chances of moving up in the world. Also, inconsistent pay schedules and being taken advantage of by employers make their financial problems worse.

**Access to Resources:** Basic amenities like clean drinking water, decent housing, and sanitation are still hard to get. Devi's family lives in a homemade shelter made from salvaged materials that doesn't protect them very well from bad weather. Health and hygiene problems are made worse by cramped spaces that are shared by people of different ages. Water supplies, which are typically polluted by adjacent trash, need standard filtration technologies that aren't very effective or completely safe. The fact that they don't have stable tenure makes them more likely to be evicted suddenly, which keeps the cycle of precarity going.

Education is a very important goal for Magar families. Older generations are mostly uninformed because they were pushed to the side in the past and didn't have access to schools. However, younger members are being sent to private schools. For example, Devi's granddaughter is the first person in her family to go to school. Families put education first, even when they don't have a lot of money. They often give up other things they need to pay

for school supplies and tuition. Their shared goal of getting an education shows their optimism of breaking the cycle of poverty and moving up in society.

**Social Exclusion and Housing:** Families of Magars are systematically excluded since they live in squatter areas. Discrimination in work, school, and social situations keeps them in a low position. People who live in squatter settlements are even more isolated because of social perceptions that link them to crime and dirtiness. People who live in these conditions have small living quarters, no privacy, and are at risk of health problems including flooding during the monsoon season. Even with these problems, the families keep pushing for their communities to be officially recognized and for access to basic services.

**Social Capital and Community Networks:** Even if the system keeps people out, the squatters have strong social networks that provide them a sense of safety and support. Joining the Slum Dwellers Association shows how people are working together to fight for stable homes and access to essential amenities. These networks are also very important for bringing Magar families together and keeping their traditions and relationships to each other strong. For example, cultural festivals and shared traditions bring people together and provide them a break from their daily problems. These networks also help people in practical ways, including by providing shared childcare and cooperative savings plans. This shows how strong and resourceful the community is.

The household interviewed for this story contains six members, but only two of them are women who work for pay and make less than \$2.15 a day. The family that was interviewed lives in the Sinamangal squatter settlement on the banks of the Bagmati River. They have lived there for the previous 19 years. The family has very few resources, whether they are money, skills, or access to them. The only choice they see is to

unlawfully seize a vacant piece of land on the edge of the river area to build a temporary shelter. The family is already in a group that is hidden and not counted. We shall call this family Devi's family (a fake name) in this piece. There are 105 indigenous households and 40 Magar households in Jagritinagar, Sinamangal squatter colonies, which is similar to Devi's family.

Material deprivation is when people can't get the goods and services they need to live a basic life. This can mean not having enough food, not being able to get clean water and sanitary facilities, not having enough shelter, and not being able to get medical care. Marlier, E., & Atkinson, A. B. (2010). Poor nutrition and health outcomes are two of the most important signs of poverty. Marlier, E., & Atkinson, A. B. say that one's economic level has a direct effect on their ability to get basic things that are good for their health, such clean water, sanitary food, and medical care. (2010). Devi's family has to cut back on things like healthy food and live in a small, unsafe space that is always at risk of being taken down. They only have a little money each month. The family filters water in traditional ways to make it safe to drink because they don't have access to clean drinking water. The river that runs by has become a place where people can utilize water and dispose their trash for good. Families like Devi's who live in squatter settlements in rich cities in the country deal with this every day. A family of six lives in a small two-bedroom area in the squatter area. This shows that they don't have enough space or safe protection. There are 3 men and 3 women in the space, which is not enough, clean, or private. They have gotten so used to it that it feels like a part of their existence. But health care is very important to the family because they go to private hospitals nearby to take care of any health problems. This shows that they really want to live a healthy life. They may not be able to make social and economic advancement if they can't get these services.

Two essential things to look at in these households are how much education they have and

how easy it is for them to get good education. A lack of education can lead to poverty that lasts for generations, but higher levels of education are often associated to better job opportunities and higher pay (Marlier, E., & Atkinson, A. B.). (2010). Two generations of Devi's family are not very literate and have never gone to school. But they know that education is important for improving their quality of life, so they are sending their youngest member, their granddaughter, to a private school nearby. She is now the first person in the family to go to school. This has made it very evident that you need a decent education to get out of poverty.

People living in squatter settlements are even more economically insecure because they are underemployed (working part-time or for low pay), unemployed, or have uncertain job arrangements. This is definitely true for this family living in the squatter area because they have a hard time finding daily wage jobs, and when they do, they don't always get paid. People look down on them, which makes it harder for them to find good jobs. They don't have the right education, and they aren't offered any chances to work in a good position or area. They have to choose low-paying, menial occupations, and often even riskier and more physical jobs.

Social exclusion is a significant sign. It means not being able to fully engage in social, economic, and political life because of poverty. Discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, or other traits that limit opportunities and access to resources is one of these reasons. This is one reason why Devi's family agrees that they are discriminated against every day and everywhere because they live in a squat. They have many stories about how they have been hurt, discriminated against, or abused just because they are poor.

Poor housing, too many people living in one place, being homeless, and not having a secure place to live can make social and economic problems worse (Marlier, E., & Atkinson, A. B.).

(2010). This is true for the families who live in the squatter area. This place has too many people living in it and not enough space. The families are always in danger of being kicked out or flooded. This is one of the most important times in their lives since they are always worried about having a safe and stable place to reside. Devi's family has to stay in the squatter area because they don't own any land. However, they are hopeful that the government will give them stable homes or land soon. This is still a significant goal for her and her family.

The word "social capital" refers to the connections, networks, and relationships that people and families can use to seek help and resources. Poverty can have an influence on social capital since it limits access to social networks and opportunities for upward social mobility. That is true for Devi's family. This is their way of staying in touch with one other and getting help when the government threatens them. They are part of the wider social movement called the Slum Dwellers Association. They also have a great culture of assisting their neighbors when they need it or are in trouble. These networks make them feel comfortable. This network is also a strong one that brings all of these people together in the squatter area. But social capital and vulnerability are connected. A lot of social capital can make people less vulnerable by making them more resilient and able to adjust. On the other hand, excessive vulnerability can weaken social capital by putting stress on social networks and resources Prowse (2003).

Devi's family believes that the only way they may be happy and satisfied is if they buy a piece of land or a house. Based on the conversation they had with them, they aspire to one day own land, which will improve their quality of life and make them feel fulfilled, stable, and happy.

Aspiration as a scientific term informs conversations on poverty, economic development, and cultural elements that shape futures and economic decision-making (Appadurai 2004,

Ray 2006). This paper examined the formation of ambitions within a joint family in the Sinamangal squatter area, particularly during significant uncertainty, and how they develop future-oriented livelihood plans, both individually and collectively.

In his book chapter "The Capacity to Inspire," Appadurai endeavors to fortify the concept of ambition as a cultural capacity (2004, p. 62). using the word to talk about how cultures see the future. Appadurai posits that cultural capacities are inherently collaborative in nature. To examine aspirations necessitates a retreat to contemplate the formation of social vistas. People talk about and act out their hopes and dreams through verbal and material rituals and performances (Appadurai 2004).

The Cost of Basic Needs (CBN) Approach is used to figure out Nepal's poverty level. CBN says that a poverty line is the least amount of money a person needs to spend to meet their basic food and non-food needs. (NLSS Survey IV, 2022-23). According to NLSS IV, 20.27 percent of the people in Nepal live below the new poverty level. In rural areas, 24.66 percent of people live in poverty, while in urban areas, just 18.34 percent do. The first thing that comes to mind when thinking about this squatter area is the high levels of poverty that its residents live in and the social exclusion they face. They don't have enough money to meet their basic needs (Paudel, 2003) and they need to own land (Vajra, 2003), which makes them squatter dwellers and therefore lawbreakers. They are unprotected or at risk, facing inadequate health, literacy, education, and the variety and quality of services (Paudel, 2003).

Sen introduced the capacity approach to understanding poverty, stressing the importance of people's freedom to live the life they want. He characterized poverty not solely by income but as a lack of talents or opportunity to attain well-being. Sen's methodology emphasizes the augmentation of individual capabilities via education, healthcare, and social policies that foster economic and social

opportunities (Knecht, A.). (2012). This is very clear and real in Devi's family.

## Conclusion

The lives of Magar families living in Kathmandu's squatter settlements show how urban poverty and indigenous identity are connected. Their problems show that there are problems in the system, like not having enough resources, being left out of society, and not having strong enough policies. But their strength and desire for education and stable housing show that they can see a better future even when things are tough. To deal with these problems, cities need to plan and make policies that include everyone and put the rights and well-being of indigenous groups first. To end the cycle of poverty and promote fair urban development, it is important to recognize their lived experiences.

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