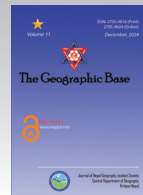




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Shifting Livelihood Strategies of the Raji Community in Surkhet, Nepal

Bhupendra Bahadur Shahi ¹, Lal Bahadur Oli ^{2, *}

¹Mid-West University and PhD Scholar, Tribhuvan University, Nepal.

²Central Department of Geography, Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur, 44613 Kathmandu, Nepal.

*Corresponding Author: olilalbahadur5@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-7163-5684>

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Abstract

This study focuses on the shifting livelihood strategies of the Raji community in Panchapuri Municipality, Surkhet, Nepal. The study employs quantitative as well as qualitative methods. Quantitative data were collected through census-based interviews with all 49 Raji household heads in the municipality. Similarly, qualitative information was also gathered through interviews with four key informants. The findings show that traditionally, a hunter-gathering and forest-dwelling indigenous group, the Raji community, has undergone significant changes in their way of life because of development interventions and the modernization process. They are experiencing increasing acculturation and assimilation into the mainstream culture of other caste people. Thus, the Raji community now commonly celebrates the mainstream Hindu festivals (Dashain, Tihar, Holi, Chaite Dashain, and Maghe Sankranti), reflecting broader cultural integration. Economically, many Raji people are now engaged in agriculture and

other alternative forms of employment instead of their traditional occupation in fishing and boating. Economic necessity and limited opportunities are major causes of these changes to sustain their indigenous practices. Notably, the skill level in traditional fishing-based occupations is found to be declining, reflecting both generational shift and decreased dependence on these practices.

Introduction

Raji community, an indigenous ethnic group in Nepal, has historically experienced marginalization, as they have been excluded from the mainstream of development, with their survival closely linked to forest resources. However, recent development projects aimed at including remote villages in the national economy have caused significant changes in the lifestyles of the Raji people, especially in Panchapuri Municipality, Surkhet (Municipality Profile, 2017).

Changing livelihood strategies of the people generally employs improvement on economic, sociocultural, physical, and environmental assets; however, in addition to what people do to make a living, the livelihood concept aims to explain the resources that enable them to do so. The risk factors they must consider when managing those resources, and the institutional and policy framework that either facilitates or hinders their efforts to achieve a sustainable or rising standard of living. It displays the basic livelihoods framework or plan (Ellis, 2000).

The concept of livelihoods strategy was significantly shaped by Robert Chambers and Conway's (1992). They stated the idea that was anticipated in the Brundtland Report, Our Common Future (WECD, 1987), which conceptualized sustainable livelihoods, and DFID (2000) later expanded it by explaining how people pursue livelihood strategies within a context of vulnerability shaped by shocks, trends, and seasonal changes during a changing period. It emphasizes the use of various types of capital, influenced by institutions and processes, to develop livelihood strategies. Similarly, the first Human Development Report is also key to conceptualizing the livelihoods approach to different issues (Solesbury, 2003).

Indigenous nationalities in Nepal possess their culture, language, belief systems, and traditional health care practices. Raji is an indigenous group, originally residing in Surkhet and now settled in districts including Kailali, Kanchanpur, Dang, and Bardia (Bhattachan, 2003). Historically, the Raji people were nomads (Gautam&Thapa, 1994). Over time, many indigenous communities lose their knowledge of plants as a result of abandoning their traditional practices. Due to pressure from numerous reasons, such as migration and industrialization, the Raji people are being forced to alter their habits, beliefs, decision-making processes, and methods of plant resource gathering; as a result, their traditional knowledge and customs are in danger of

disappearing. The arts and crafts skills of the Raji people, together with their herbal medicinal techniques, are sacred by technique and unique by nature. NEFIN reports that fishing and forest hunting are the traditional means of subsistence for Raji families. Their decreasing number in the census may be because many have migrated to India, or they are dispersed around the country in an effort to make a living (UN, 2010).

Typically, the Raji community of Nepal has a traditional skill in boating and fishing. Skill refers to the ability, capacity, or proficiency to perform work within a production system or machinery. Skill is an activity to complete work and can exist in various forms, such as machinery, equipment, documentation, or processes. Skill is specified in terms of its source, intention, and character to avoid ambiguity (Sharma, 2015).

The process through which a group or civilization's fundamental values, beliefs, and customs undergo significant change is called cultural transformation. This process was triggered by external factors, such as development, modernization, and cross-cultural interactions (Schein, 2010). Acculturation and socialization play a crucial role in the changing livelihood, as individuals or groups leave their own socio-cultural elements to adopt the others in cultural change (Smith, 2020). Acculturation is a core part of the process, initiating modernization (Johnson, 2018). Modernization in developing and least-developed societies typically

starts through acculturation, leading to multidimensional change that mitigates living conditions and encourages adaptability (Kumar & Shah, 2020). Currently, the Raji people are increasingly adopting new ways of life, mostly relying on traditional agriculture (Thapa, 2021). Their interaction with broader Nepalese society has changed their livelihood, values, beliefs, and behaviors (Singh, 2022). Similarly, these changes have profoundly changed how they relate to the environment and their orientation to the world. The Raji people have demonstrated evidence for the broader acculturation process by adapting to the new socio-political context, specifically in terms of their livelihood practices and cultural traditions (Maharjan, 2023).

Historically, the Raji community has depended on traditional fishing and boating occupations and has gradually shifted to agriculture and other alternative forms of employment. It is still necessary to explore how these changes are influencing cultural practices, values, and identities. In this context, the Raji community of Panchapuri municipality, Surkhet, represents a typical case of how indigenous livelihoods are shaped and reshaped by spatial forces and cultural landscape change. Thus, this study attempts to explore how the Raji community is undergoing cultural change over time, with a focus on the relationship between shifting livelihood strategies and cultural change.

Methods and Materials

Study area

In this study, Panchapuri Municipality was selected as the study area. The Municipality is situated in the western part of Surkhet District and covers approximately 329.9 sq. km. This municipality connects the mid-Hills and a Terai regions, providing an ideal ground for studying human-environment interaction. The former Village Development Committees (VDCs) of Babiychaur, Vidyapur, Chhapre, Salkot, and Tatopani were merged to form this municipality. Geographically, it lies between latitudes 28°39'46" North to 28°54'50" North and longitudes 81°15'27" East to 81°31'29" East. The total area of the municipality is approximately 329.9 square kilometers (Fig. 1). Likewise, the total population of Panchapuri Municipality, Surkhet, was 32,231, among which 322 individuals belonged to the Raji community, comprising 49 households (Municipality Profile, 2017). The Raji people in the study area live on the side of the Bheri River in wards 5, 10, and 11 of Panchapuri Municipality in Surkhet.

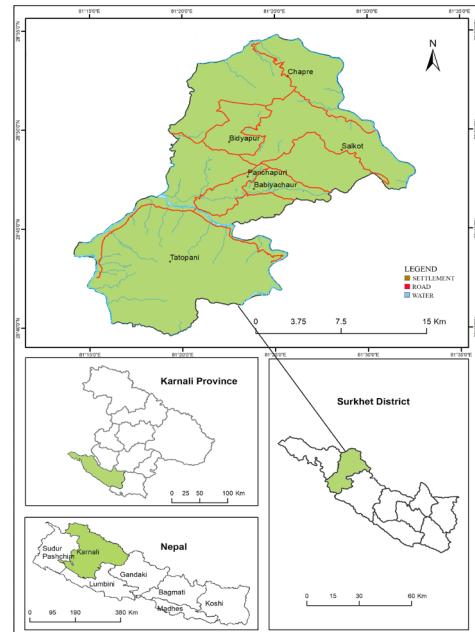


Figure 1. Location map of the Panchapuri Municipality.

The study uses quantitative as well as qualitative methods (mixed-method). The data were gathered through interviews using a census method, selecting the whole 49 respondents of Raji of Panchapuri municipality, Surkhet. Among them, 19 respondents from Ward No. 5, 17 from Ward No. 9, 9 from Ward No. 10, and 4 from Ward No. 11 were taken from Panchapuri Municipality in Surkhet. Four key informants were interviewed in-depth to collect qualitative data in the second phase. To protect confidentiality, all informants' names in this study are pseudonyms. The purpose of these interviews was to enhance and broaden comprehension of the quantitative results. Furthermore, secondary data

were obtained from academic literature and government reports to support the analysis and provide a broader context.

Results and Discussion

Historical account and changing livelihood of the Raji community

The Raji are a native ethnic group largely populated in the mid-hills of western Nepal, including Surkhet, Jajarkot, and some portions of the far-western districts. The traditional occupation of the Raji people was semi-nomadic in nature, with the majority of the families depending on hunting, fishing, and shifting cultivation as their main sources of livelihood (Shrestha, 2005). They lived in isolation from mainstream society, with little access to modern amenities like health, education, and infrastructure (Chhetri & Gautam, 2017).

Similarly, the Raji people worship fish and boats, and few forest plants. These instances depict the irreparable relationship between indigenous people and their livelihood and nature. Because natural resources play such an integral role in their culture, the deterioration in access to natural resources has profound significance for their identity and sense of self. Thus, hunting and fishing were key to Raji's identity and subsistence, and small-scale agriculture was practised by most families using shifting cultivation in many cases. The Raji people's close affinity with the forested landscapes of their native places ensured that their social and economic systems were highly

shaped by their environment (Thapa & Bhatta, 2020).

However, these traditional practices have been repeatedly threatened by numerous factors, including government policies, land encroachment, environmental degradation, and rapid urbanization in Nepal's rural areas. Therefore, a good example of such a livelihood change strategy is seen in Panchapuri Municipality of Surkhet District in Karnali Province, where the livelihood of the Raji people has transformed based on local as well as national changes.

In the context of the Raji people, the issues of food, clothes, and shelter are equally problematic in Surkhet. While a small percentage of the population earns a living wage, they do not work in indigenous skill-related occupations like basketry, boating, or fishing. Joining the service industry, business, agriculture, and other fields is the top priority for the majority of individuals. In order to alter their way of life, the Raji people of Surkhet district have also been shown to be significantly impacted by the status of social adaptation.

Indigenous knowledge of the Raji community

The people of the Raji Community have different indigenous knowledge-based skills as their main activities. Individuals differ in their livelihood based on their community or sociocultural background. The primary purpose of skills is to earn a

living. **Figure 2** illustrates the indigenous knowledge-based skill of Raji.

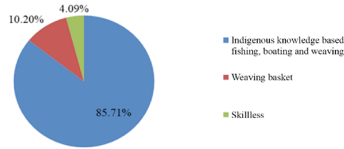


Figure 2. Level of Indigenous Skill of the Raji community (in %)

Source: Field study, 2024

As shown in Figure 2, 85.71 per cent of the Raji household heads had the indigenous skill of fishing and weaving nets, whereas 10.20 per cent of the household heads had the basic skill of weaving baskets. Similarly, 4.09 percent of household heads were found skill-less. The majority of the Raji people have the skill based on their indigenous knowledge; however, they do not consider it their primary occupation.

Similarly, to better understand the level of indigenous skills among the Raji community and to support the quantitative data presented in Figure 1, key informant from the Raji community narrated several interview transcripts. For instance, Chandra Raji said:

"My father would say, grandfather used to sail a boat and fish, he had no land for doing agriculture, therefore, he fully used to engage in boating in the day on serving the people to cross the Bheri

River, and used to fishing daily in the evening and some cases at night until the date 2041BS of construction Suspension Bridge in our village Jamu. My father, Bore, also continues this profession; however, he started farming along with this fishing activity because in 2025 BS, my community cleared the jungle for permanent settlement, and farming, for which my father received a temporary landownership certificate, is still not registered. I also possess skills and know-how in boating and fishing, but I am not interested in this profession because it is a risky job and insufficient to sustain the basic needs of my family. Thus, I have managed this retail shop in collaboration with Chiya-Nasta Pasal. However, I am continuing this fishing activity as my alternative source of income in the evening from 8 pm to 10 pm two times a week, but it is only a way of consuming the time due to the limited availability of fish in the Bheri River and Chaure Khola (C. Raji, interview 12/10/2024)."

In a similar way but contradictory response, Dipin Raji suggests:

"I know, my father Man Bahadur used to have this idea about this fishing and boating profession, but I have no perfect idea about this, how to catch fish and sail a boat, because I have done the job in a private company located in Surat, India, for nine years, at the age of 24. However, my family is involved in agriculture as my family's primary occupation (D. Raji, interview, 13/10/2024)."

The narratives suggest a trend of changing and shifting livelihood strategies among the Raji community people. Both Chandra and Dipin argue that their past generations used to do fishing and boating; however, Chandra is farming and running a tea shop, whereas Dipin is working abroad in India instead of fishing and boating. They are found to be sustained in their livelihood activities, continuing their generational livelihood activities, including fishing and boating, in the study area.

Occupational involvement of the Raji community

Raji people are involved in different occupation. Their traditional economic activities were hunting, gathering, fishing, and boating that has changed into other sectors due to social adaptation in a changed socioeconomic setting. Together, this occupational involvement would clarify how the Raji people have contributed to changes in both their social structures and economic opportunities in the context of a growing municipality.

Table 1. Distribution of Raji households based on occupational involvement.

Major occupation	Participant Household Heads	Percent
Fishing and Boating	1	2.04
Business (<i>Khudrapasal and Chiya-Nastapasal</i>)	7	14.28
Agriculture	41	83.67
Total	49	10

Source: Field survey, 2024

As shown in Table 1, the Raji community is undergoing a significant occupational shift. Agriculture currently provides the primary source of income for about 83.67 percent of Raji people, while 14.28 percent work in small-scale enterprises like tea-snack stalls (*chiya-nastapasal*) and neighbourhood stores (*khudra pasal*). In contrast, the traditional occupation of fishing is practiced by only 2.04 percent of the population. These numbers show the substantial shift in livelihood patterns away from native jobs and

toward agriculture and entrepreneurship. Thus, the livelihood of the Raji people is found to have been changed from their traditional mode of living to a new agricultural and business sector due to social adaptation and acculturation practices among them. The qualitative information from key participants further deepens this understanding. For example, key informant Jhupa mentioned her views as follows:

"I have all my indigenous skills, such as basket weaving, making fishing nets,

boating, and fishing, all of which I learned from my father. I have only two Ropani of land, which became sandy after the heavy flood of the Bheri River in 2071 BS. This land is not sufficient to secure my family's food needs through agriculture alone. Thus, it is my compulsion to continue fishing in the river and stream. Therefore, I am giving continuity to the indigenous fishing profession as my main occupation, along with doing wage-based labour, even though it is difficult, risky, uncertain, and it is not a sustainable source of earning like other businesses and jobs. (J.Raji, Interview, 11/10/2024)."

Following in the spirit of agricultural occupation, another key informant, Mim Bahadur Raji, mentioned as follows:

"Agriculture is my major occupation for the family's survival; however, I also go fishing to generate alternative income. I have seven Ropani of agricultural land, which hardly meets our annual family's food requirements. On this land, I produce rice, wheat, maize, and vegetables. I also have reared two oxen for ploughing the fields and one buffalo for providing milk to the family (M. B. Raji, interview, 11/12/2024)."

Another key informant, Chandra, suggested the overall situation of the indigenous skill-based profession, saying,

"I think we are forty-nine households in this Panchapuri municipality. Among these households, only one household (Jhupa) fully depends on fishing due

to economic hardship and lack of a productive piece of land. Majority of the other household heads have left this profession and adopted agriculture, shop, and others as our major occupation; however, most of us have the knowledge of fishing and boating based on our indigenous skill, but we use it as our alternative source of income (C. Raji, interview, 12/12/2024)."

According to these qualitative narratives, the Raji community is shifting from its traditional fishing-based livelihood to more socially accepted and sustainable jobs, especially in agriculture and small businesses. Various factors, such as economic necessity, environmental changes, social stigma, and an increased awareness of alternative livelihood opportunities, are major causes for this shift. These factors are wisely explained as the changing livelihood strategies for cultural transformation of the Raji community in the study area.

Changing attitudes of Raji on their indigenous occupation

The current generation individuals of Raji have no interest in pursuing their traditional fishing and boating occupation as their major occupation because of the complexity they experience of a lack of fish in the rivers and streams, physical hardship in this occupation, domination, and Humiliation associated with this occupation.

Today, the Raji people are increasingly aware of their legal rights and entitlements, which has encouraged them to seek employment in diverse sectors. As a result, the traditional practices of fishing and boating are gradually decreasing and fading. Most Raji individuals no longer encourage their children to follow their traditional occupation.

A broader process of socioeconomic adaptation is the cause of Raji's shifting occupational preferences. These changes include shifts in family structure, marriage practices, education, land ownership and use, income levels, and domestic energy consumption, in addition to shifts in sociocultural norms, values, festivals, customs, and everyday community life. It is necessary to comprehend these factors to analyze how the traditional livelihoods of the Raji have changed in the study areas.

Role of education for shifting the livelihoods strategy of the Raji community

The contribution of education in improving the livelihood of the Raji cannot be overstated. The Raji historically had poor access to education, with most families giving priority to basic survival demands over education (Shrestha, 2005). There has been some improvement in recent times with an increase in the infrastructure of schools in Panchapuri Municipality, with more Raji children attending schools (Gurung & Thapa, 2019). It is not easy to improve

one's life and engage in decision-making roles without education. Therefore, awareness can be one of the significant tools for acculturation activities in the life of the Raji. **Table 2** shows the educational status of the households of the respondents given below.

Table 2. Educational status of the household heads of Raji.

Level education	Respondents
Illiterate	2
Literate (read and write)	34
Eight class passes to under SEE	12
SLC/SEE above	1
Total	49

Source: Field survey, 2024

As shown in Table 2, out of the 49 respondent's majority were *literate*, *accounting for 34*, whereas only 2 respondents were *illiterate*. Likewise, 12 respondents passed *class eight to under SEE*, and only one respondent of the Raji had the education above the level of SLC/SEE. There is no available the data about the education of the Raji people from forty years back; however, they agreed that most of them were illiterate. The satisfactory data on educational status among the Raji community indicate a better understanding of their rights, particularly in the context of a changed socioeconomic situation, which enables them to gain better opportunities.

This change in the education level has contributed to changes in their livelihoods, and the younger people

have the possibility of choosing diverse professions, with an enhanced socioeconomic status. Financial constraints, the absence of means of transport, and cultural attitudes that prioritize male education over female education remain significant barriers (Adhikari, 2020). Ensuring equal opportunities for education for boys and girls, and addressing the language barrier faced by the Raji children, is of extreme importance in empowering the community

Similarly, one of the participant household heads of the Raji community, Mim Bahadur Raji, suggests:

"I am literate, I can only read and write however, I can know about my social obligations, rights, and family betterment due to my involvement in the socio-political activities in the party Nepali congress at ward level; members our new generation who have passed SEE and above they are more aware than me in this issue (M. B. Raji, interview, 11/10/2024)."

Thus, this narrative of Mim Bahadur Raji suggests that the level of awareness of Raji can be the key to change and transform their livelihood from fishing and boating occupations to different sectors of occupation in agriculture and business in the study area, adding here with some supporting socio-political argument.

Urbanization and infrastructure development

Panchapuri Municipality has been undergoing urbanization in recent decades, which is also affecting the indigenous modes of existence of the Raji people. The Municipality has enhanced access to markets, health facilities, and schools for them (Gurung, 2016). The construction of roads, the expansion of electricity lines, and the opening of market facilities opened up new doors for the Raji people to be acculturated and change (Sapkota, 2017). As the forest and river resources became increasingly inaccessible, the Raji people were pushed to a more sedentary lifestyle. Though there are still some people who engage in hunting and fishing, these have lessened due to environmental conservation policies, resource degradation, and land use transformation (Bhandari, 2018). As a result, many Raji families in Panchapuri Municipality have started farming or looked for jobs in urban centers. However, increasing market participation can result in economic opportunities as well as competitiveness and price volatility, making it impossible for the poor and marginalized people to live sustainably (Brown & Green, 2022).

Regarding understanding the infrastructural facility and influence of the urbanization process in the research area, Jhupa said the following interesting view as follows:

"I have access to a graveled road, I am using electricity for lighting, there is a school nearer to my home, security is good, and healthcare facilities are also available through the government health center or health post and private hospitals, and polyclinic or medical. However, it is all useless for me because of my poverty, as I still used to go on foot everywhere, and private hospitals are beyond my purchasing capacity (J. Raji, interview, 11/10/2024)."

According to the narratives argued by Jhupa, there is a paradox of development of infrastructure: although physical access has improved, economic access remains unattainable. If targeted support is not provided, the very institutions intended to uplift the marginalized may unintentionally exclude them. Regarding the case of Jhupa, the need for inclusive policies that reveal how poverty can mediate access to the benefits of development, underscoring the need for inclusive policies that bridge the gap between infrastructural provision and practical accessibility for marginalized populations like the Raji community.

Thus, the increasing urbanization and development of infrastructure can create a complex situation for the poor and marginalized sections of the population, such as Jhupa. In contrast, in the case of Chandra, a shopkeeper could take advantage of more opportunities in the journey of changing livelihood.

Agriculture and farming practices of the Raji community

Agriculture has become an important livelihood activity of the Raji people by replacing hunting and fishing as the major livelihood source. The Raji people traditionally practised shifting cultivation, which was sustainable and appropriate to their nomadic lifestyle. The practice caused adverse environmental impacts, such as deforestation and soil erosion (Ojha, 2016). In response to such problems, the majority of the Raji people have moved on to settled farming practices from their indigenous livelihoods of fishing and boating, where they sow definite plots of land (Gurung & Thapa, 2019).

The housing and land ownership patterns as a livelihood asset

The housing and land ownership patterns of the Raji community in Panchapuri Municipality reflect their overall socioeconomic status and levels of livelihood security. As shown in Table 3, the majority of Raji people (61.22%) lived in mud houses with thatched roofs, indicating continued reliance on traditional building materials and limited economic resources. A smaller proportion of the Raji people (36.74%) live in concrete houses with zinc sheet (*Jasta pata*) roofing, reflecting some improvement in housing conditions among better-off households. Only 2.04 percent of Raji people lived in the Hut due to extreme poverty and marginalization.

Overall, all the Raji people have their own houses to live and nobody is found homeless and landless. The result shows the Raji people have been completely

shifted in their structure of houses and living in a housing pattern where their ancestors did not have permanent houses to live.

Table 3. House ownership and land ownership status

S.N.	Type of house	Household heads	percent	S.N.	land ownership	Household heads	Percent
1.	Concrete house with Zinc leaf (<i>Jasta pata</i>)	18	36.74	1	Below 5 <i>ropani</i>	11	22.45
2.	Mud house with thatched roof	30	61.22	2	5-10 <i>ropani</i>	33	67.35
3	Hut	1	2.04	3	Above 10 <i>ropani</i>	5	10.20
<i>Total</i>		<i>49</i>	<i>100</i>			<i>49</i>	<i>100</i>

Source: Field study, 2024

In terms of land ownership, the majority of Raji people (67.35%) are found to have land ranging from 5-10 Ropani of land. Similarly, approximately 22.45% of households have less than five Ropani. A small percentage of Raji people (10.20%) have more than 10 Ropani. The result shows the unequal distribution of productive land resources within the Raji community.

Overall, the study shows that although housing conditions and land accessibility have been somewhat improved, a considerable section of the Raji population still faces major obstacles in obtaining suitable housing and land for agriculture. Therefore, specific measures in land reform, housing assistance, and livelihood assistance programs are essential for promoting the livelihood of the Raji community.

Situation of food security of the Raji community

The food security level of the household represents the economic and nutritional health sustainability in the livelihood development of the people. As shown in Table 4, the majority of the Raji people (46.49 percent) are able to secure the food for their family for 7-11 months, and only 6.12 percent Raji people are found able to secure the food for their family for 12 months or above than a year. Thus, the majority of people still face the problem of securing food and nutrition for their family; however, the Raji in the study area have been found as shifted from their fishing and boating profession into as the farmers.

Table 4. Situation of food security of the Raji households

S. N.	Food security duration	No. of household heads	Percent
1.	Up to 3 Months	11	22.45
2.	4-6 Months	12	24.49
3.	7-11 Months	23	46.94
4.	12 Months and above	3	6.12
Total		49	100

Source: field study, 2024

This shift has not been an easy transition. Few Raji farmers' access to improved farm techniques, machines, and quality seeds. The majority of them still rely on less efficient traditional farming systems, and this has yielded poor crop outcomes (Sharma, 2015). Additionally, inadequate irrigation facilities and poor training in agriculture have constrained Raji farmers' capacity to increase their productivity (Nepal Rastra Bank, 2017). Despite all these issues, some Raji families have managed by diversifying livestock and crops. Vegetable, fruit, and cash crops, such as peanut farming, maize farming, with goats and poultry rearing, have generated additional income for many families (Shrestha & Gautam, 2020). These changes prove an adaptive shift to the new agricultural economy, though still facing numerous obstacles.

Health and well-being situation of the Raji community

Healthcare access has been improved to the Raji population with urbanization in Panchapuri, but there are still health challenges. The Raji lived in remote areas with minimal access to healthcare facilities, and as a result, malnutrition, infant mortality, and other preventable

diseases were prevalent (Sharma, 2015). Despite the improvement in healthcare facilities with the expansion of Panchapuri, the community still suffers from severe health inequalities, particularly regarding access to malnutrition, waterborne diseases, and sanitation (Nepal Health Research Council, 2018). In the question of respecting the issue of health care and well-being as the source of safe drinking water, Mim Bahadur Raji reflected his view as follows:

"My family does not the access to safe drinking water, and still depends on the water of the Bheri River, which flows nearer to our community. However, in the case of other communities of Wari Jamu, Parijamu, Galfa, Kuine, and Bachhi, they have access to safe drinking water that they obtained through deep boring, and the pure water (M. B. Raji, interview, 11/10/2024)."

Dietary changes have introduced nutrition and food security issues as the Raji community increasingly settles down in their way of life. In addition, access to clean water and sanitation remains low in the majority of Raji settlements, which contributes to health issues (Bhandari, 2018).

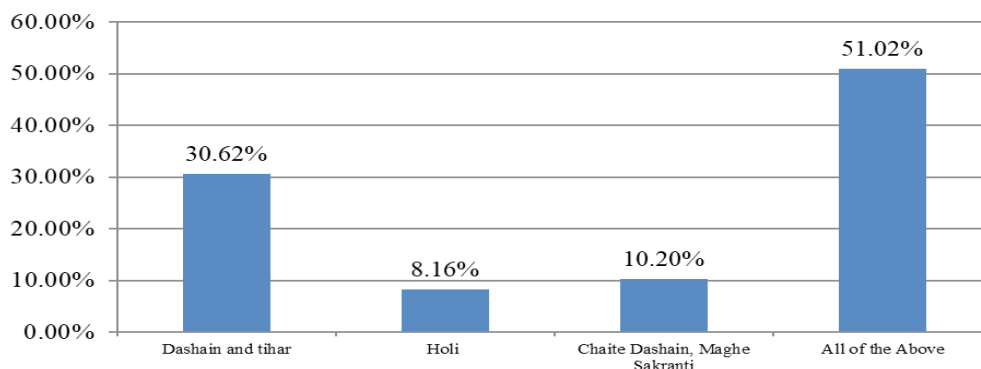


Figure 3. Major festivals of the Raji community

Source: Field study, 2024

Figure 3 shows the social-cultural identity and social system of the Raji people. It is clearly found that the Raji people predominantly follow Hinduism, with the majority of Raji people identifying Dashain as their major festival. Similarly, 8.16 percent of Raji people emphasize Holi, and 10.20 percent emphasize Chaite Dashain and Maghe Sankranti as their major celebrations. Thus, the Raji people agreed that their primary celebrations were Dashain, Tihar, Holi, Chaite Dashain, and Maghe Sankranti.

For understanding the cultural celebrations, dresses, and social integration level in the society with other non-Raji community people, qualitative information was collected through key informant interviews, where Mim agrees and argues as:

“As I remember, in our past, at the time of my grandfather, we used to celebrate our feasts and festivals in different ways limited within the Raji community; marrying other castes was not allowed,

but now it is easily acceptable in our community. The examples, my younger sister Bhurki Raji has married the son of a Brahmin, and similarly, my younger brother Dhan Bahadur Raji (passed away) has married the daughter of a Thakuri. We all left our culture except our language, Raji Kham, Kulpuja (Sunpal Puja), Guruwa, and Deuti Puja. Our celebrations and lifestyle are similar to the Pahadi other caste people (Brahmin and Chhetri) because our children are brother in-laws and sons-in-law of the Pahadi people. Thus, I think it is a challenging task to preserve and promote our traditional culture; young members of the community do not listen to us” (Interview with Mim Bahadur Raji, 14/07/2025).

Organizational support for the development of the Raji community in Nepal

Organizational support to the Raji people of Nepal is offered by various local, national, and international organizations

interested in their socio-economic problems, as well as ensuring their existence as a people. The government has recognized the Raji people as a "Scheduled Tribe," to which they can gain access through a number of welfare provisions like scholarships in education, employment reservation, and health services. NGOs, such as the Nepal Indigenous Nationalities Alliance (NINA) and the Social Inclusion Research Fund (SIRF), invest in activities to educate, offer health services, and provide livelihood assistance to marginalized communities, like the Raji people (Arpanuk, 2020). Likewise, NGOs such as the Nepal Academy of Music and Drama have contributed towards the preservation of indigenous languages and cultures, such as that of the Raji community, through documentation and cultural events. International organizations, including UNESCO, offer grants and technical support for sustainable development activities and cultural conservation in indigenous communities, including the Raji people (UN Info, 2021). Local organizations also engage in support at the community level by endeavoring to improve the Raji people's access to resources, rights, and social inclusion in Nepal.

Thus, the Raji people have gradually lost their traditional knowledge as a result of this transition from hunting and gathering to agriculture and urban. Younger generations of Raji no longer follow the traditions and practices that

defined their ancestors, like hunting abilities fishing abilities, and traditional crafts like basketry and textile making (Thapa & Bhatta, 2020). In a similar way, it is equally significant that this loss of traditional knowledge has prompted fear in the elders of the Raji community; their cultural heritage would be lost in the course of modernization. While members of the Raji community are making some efforts to revive traditional crafts and arts in the community, these efforts are few and far between (Sapkota, 2017). To address this gap, cultural revitalization programs, heritage conservation efforts, and educational initiatives with a focus on the history of the Raji people and their traditions are needed.

Conclusion

The Raji community has undergone significant changes in its way of life over the time. Traditionally relying on hunting, fishing, and shifting cultivation, the Raji community has increasingly been engaged in agriculture and small business as sources of earning for their livelihood. The majority of the Raji people have hunting and fishing skills based on their indigenous knowledge, still they do not consider it as their major occupation. However, one household head has continued his traditional fishing and boating occupation as a primary occupation. Socio-culturally, Raji people are found mostly being acculturated as they are easily allowed the inter-caste marriage and prefer secular living and celebrating different festivals as similar to non-Raji

people. The municipal urbanization and development infrastructures' availability opened up new opportunities and new challenges as well. The loss of traditional knowledge of the Raji is one of the key losses because it is associated with their identity as the indigenous group. If they lose their traditional identity, like group living and fishing, and boating professions, then they will lose their identity as an indigenous tribe. Therefore, while the Raji people adapt to this change, they will have to preserve their identity. Educational improvement, agrarian reform, improved health care, and social services will prove critical in preparing the Raji community to flourish in the midst of continued urbanization and economic change in Surkhet.

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