Indigenous Voices on "No Koshi" Movement

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Article History
Received:
12-06-2025

Reviewed & Revised:
18 -08-2025

Accepted:
24-08-2025

Abstract

This study explores the politics of naming and Indigenous recognition in Nepal through an analysis of the "No Koshi" movement following the renaming of Province No. 1 as Koshi Province. Grounded in critical toponymy and decolonial theory, the research aimed to examine how Indigenous communities interpret naming as a site of recognition, erasure, and resistance within Nepal's federal restructuring. Guided by an interpretive philosophical position, this study followed a qualitative approach using an ethnographic research design. The data for the study came from multiple sources: 30 semi-structured interviews, 3 FGDs, 5 participatory observations, and secondary materials. All the collected data were carefully examined and interpreted through thematic analysis. The findings revealed six interrelated themes-highlighting that naming is both a symbolic and political act tied to collective memory, procedural legitimacy, protest, and aspirations for inclusive federalism. The study concludes that Indigenous voices were marginalized in the renaming process, undermining principles of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC). It recommends institutional reforms to ensure participatory governance, cultural recognition, and equitable representation within Nepal's federal framework.

Keywords: *Indigenous voices, "No Koshi" movement, Cultural Sovereignty, Nepal*

Introduction

On March 1, 2023, the Provincial Assembly of Nepal's then–Province No. 1 adopted the name Koshi Province with the constitutionally required two-thirds majority. The decision immediately sparked protests across the eastern hills and Tarai, led largely by Indigenous (in Nepali termed as Adivasi Janajati) organizations who argued the hydronym "Koshi" erases territory-based Indigenous histories, languages, and political

claims long associated with names such as Kirat (orig. Oirat see Rapacha 2019 and 2018 and elsewhere) and Limbuwan (e.g., Kirat–Limbuwan Sangharsh Committee, The Kathmandu Post, 2023a; DRCN, 2023). These mobilizations-widely referred to by organizers and media as the "No Koshi" movement-link symbolic recognition (what the province is called) with long-standing struggles over autonomy, land, languages, cultures, and meaningful representation in Nepal's federal order (IWGIA, 2024; Tamang, 2014/2015).

The naming controversy sits at the intersection of constitutional design and identity politics. Nepal's 2015 Constitution created a federal republic and assigned provincial naming to each assembly, requiring a two-thirds vote (Government of Nepal, 2015; Constitute Project, n. d.). Yet, critics contend that procedural compliance did not amount to substantive consultation with the Indigenous constituencies numerically and historically embedded in the province, where Kirat-Rungku (Rai), Kirat-Kõits (Sunwar/Mukhiya), Kirat-Yakthung (Limbu/Subba), Tamang, Magar and other Indigenous communities constitute sizeable shares of the population (FNCCI-Koshi, n.d.). The resulting contention highlights a core paradox of Nepal's post-conflict federalism: a state that proclaims inclusion but struggles to institutionalize Indigenous self-identification at provincial scales (DRCN, 2023; IWGIA, 2024).

Understanding Indigenous perspectives is especially salient given the demographic and legal contexts. The Government of Nepal officially recognizes 59 Indigenous nationalities under the NFDIN Act, and census-based estimates place Indigenous peoples at roughly one-third of the national population (Indigenous Voice, n.d.; IWGIA, 2023). In Koshi specifically, publicly available profiles show double-digit provincial shares for Kirat-Rungku (Rai/Dewan formerly Yakkha also), Kirat-Kõits (Sunwar/Mukhiya) and notable proportions for Yakthung (Limbu/Subba), among other Adivasi Janajati groups-an ethnic geography that underpins claims for names reflecting Indigenous histories such as Kirat or Limbuwan or Khambuwan or Kõitswan (FNCCI-Koshi, n.d.). As protests escalated through 2023-including highways blocked and mass rallies in Biratnagar, Dharan, and Lalitpur -advocates framed "No Koshi" as a demand for recognition with consent, not merely renaming (Kathmandu Post, 2023a, 2023b; Setopati, 2023).

Beyond naming, the movement links to broader Indigenous agenda: protection of sacred landscapes, resistance to extractive or touristic projects perceived as dispossessive, and calls for meaningful participation in executive decision-making-as seen in parallel legal and political crises in the provincial government in mid-2023 (Nepal Live Today, 2023; Kathmandu Post, 2023c, 2023d). This article centers Indigenous voices within that conjuncture. Specifically, it asks, "How do Indigenous activists, elders, and cultural leaders interpret the stakes of "No Koshi"? What forms of history, place-attachment, and rights discourse are mobilized? How do these articulations envision a more inclusive federalism?"

Empirically, the study contributes a grounded account of Indigenous meanings and motivations that are often flattened in policy debates. Theoretically, it connects recognition politics and federal naming to scholarship on decolonial geography and participatory constitutionalism in South Asia. Practically, it informs ongoing conversations on inclusive provin-

cial toponymy, consultation standards, and mechanisms for consent in Nepal's multi-level governance. By foregrounding Indigenous narratives, we aim to move beyond a binary of "for or against renaming" toward a more textured understanding of what recognition, autonomy, and belonging mean in contemporary "Koshi"- widely advocated to be as Kirat, reflecting its deep historical and civilizational roots.

Literature review

1. Federal restructuring, identity politics, and Indigenous movements in Nepal

Research on Nepal's post-2006 transformation shows that federal restructuring opened new terrains for identity claims while also institutionalizing procedures - such as supermajority rules for naming provinces - that can mute historically marginalized voices (e.g., Article 295(2) requiring a two-thirds vote of a provincial assembly). Classic syntheses by policy and election observers argued that identity-based mobilization would shape federal outcomes, with the eastern hills-home to Kirat-Rungku (Rai/Dewan formerly Yakkha also), Kõits (Sunwar/Mukhiya), Yakkha and Yakthung (Limbu/Subba) peoples-standing out for autonomy demands (e.g., Kirat Limbuwan) even before the 2015 Constitution was promulgated (Carter Center, 2013; International Crisis Group, 2010). Studies of the constitution-building process likewise trace how inclusive promises often narrowed in practice, leaving unresolved questions about recognition, language status, and sub-provincial autonomy that later reappeared in provincial naming disputes.

Parallel literatures on legal standards note that Nepal ratified ILO Convention No. 169 in 2007 and has endorsed UNDRIP 2007, establishing expectations for consultation and consent with Indigenous peoples in state decision-making. However, national bodies and civil society assessments highlight gaps between formal commitments and implementation, a tension that directly informs Indigenous critiques of top-down provincial naming (ILO, n.d.; UN, 2007; IWGIA, 2024). Conceptual and doctrinal work on Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) elaborates its linkage to self-determination and outlines practical protocols that are often absent from provincial-level processes in Nepal (Barelli, 2012; IWGIA, 2023).

2. The "No Koshi" movement and contemporary documentation

Focused analyses of the 2023–2024 "No Koshi" protests-organized largely by Indigenous networks in what is now Koshi Province-emphasize both symbolic and procedural grievances. Democracy Resource Center Nepal's (DRCN, 2023) policy brief synthesizes interviews with movement actors, situating the agitation within longer genealogies of Kirat (Rapacha, 2018, 2019) and Limbuwan (orig. Yakthung Laje) claims and warning of governance risks if recognition deficits persist (DRCN, 2023). Reporting by human-rights and Indigenous organizations documents policing practices and episodes of violence; these include the widely reported killing of Padam Limbu (Lajehang) in Dharan, Sunsari and mass arrests in December 2023 - events that elevated protester calls for meaningful consultation rather than mere-

ly retroactive outreach (IWGIA, 2024; U.S. Department of State, 2024; LAHURNIP, 2025; Ninglekhu,2024). News coverage provides contemporaneous accounts of road blockades, rallies, and coalition-building by groups such as the Kirat–Limbuwan Sangharsh Committee immediately after the provincial assembly adopted the name "Koshi" in March 2023 (Kathmandu Post, 2023a, 2023b).

Beyond the renaming itself, newer movement-facing commentary traces how "No Koshi" became an umbrella for broader Indigenous claims about land, sacred landscapes, and development pathways (e.g., contesting tourism megaprojects without consent), a frame that connects the naming dispute to FPIC and environmental governance (Ninglekhu, 2024). Notably, while media and NGO reports are rich, peer-reviewed scholarship dedicated specifically to "No Koshi" remains sparse-indicating a gap this study addresses by foregrounding Indigenous voices.

3. Indigenous histories, ethnolinguistic geography, and Kirat/ Limbuwan scholarship

Longer-arc scholarship on the eastern hills contextualizes why names such as Kirat and or Limbuwan carry political weight. Analyses of autonomy movements in the east predate federal restructuring and document institutional ruptures (e.g., the dismantling of Kipat 'communal land tenure') that reconfigured Yakthung (Limbu) political economy and identity (Hangen, 2010). Paired with rhetorical and movement analyses, these works show how Indigenous leaders mobilize rights discourse alongside historical memory to articulate claims over territory, culture, and representation (Lawoti & Hangen, 2013; Tamang, 2015).

A new micro-literature on Kirāti and Limbu toponymy-linking clan histories, settlement ecologies, and place-names-demonstrates how names are repositories of Indigenous social geography. Recent studies of Athrai and broader Kirāti toponyms (2024–2025) provide methodological templates (historical-linguistic and ethnographic) to read toponyms as claims to belonging and governance, resonating directly with the politics of provincial naming (Subba, 2025; Gautam et al., 2025).

4. Critical toponymy and recognition politics

Theoretical work in critical toponymy argues that place names are instruments of power that territorialize authority and encode dominant histories; renaming struggles therefore surface conflicts over who decides, whose pasts are honored, and how recognition is materialized (Rose-Redwood et al., 2010). Global syntheses and case studies-from colonial Nairobi to Antarctica-illustrate how naming operates across scales, while recent interventions push beyond a simple power/resistance binary to everyday, relational practices of naming (Giraut & Houssay-Holzschuch, 2022; Wanjiru-Mwita & Giraut, 2020). Cutting-edge theoretical proposals (Misco et al. 2025) explicitly tie decolonization to toponymic critique, offering conceptual tools for reading movements like "No Koshi" (Taylor & Francis Online).

Crucially for Nepal, emerging scholarship examines toponymic struggles under federal restructuring, arguing that names have become proxies for ethnic or Indigenous recognition,

belonging, and language rights, especially where constitutional procedure (two-thirds voting) is not paired with robust consent practices (Karki & Wenner 2020). This literature suggests that evaluating the legitimacy of provincial names requires attention to both (a) process (consultation/consent norms under ILO 169/UNDRIP) and (b) substance (the semiotics of Indigenous place-names and their historic geographies).

5. Synthesis and identified gaps

Across these strands, three gaps appear. First, while legal and policy texts foreground constitutional procedure, few studies assess these processes against FPIC standards from the perspective of affected Indigenous communities in Koshi. Second, most accounts are event-driven; systematic, qualitative documentation of Indigenous meanings attached to alternative names (e.g., Kirat, Limbuwan) is only beginning to emerge (Gautam et al., 2025; Subba, 2025). Third, cross-fertilization between critical toponymy and Nepal-specific Indigenous studies remains limited. This article addresses these gaps by centering Indigenous narratives about naming, authority, memory, and consent, and by situating those narratives within both Nepal's federal architecture and global debates on decolonizing place-names (Wu & Young, 2022).

Method and Materials

This study adopted interpretive philosophy based on the understanding that people create meaning through their experiences and interactions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). To truly understand the "No Koshi" movement, this study focused on listening to how participants themselves interpret their struggle and symbols.

Consequently, a qualitative research approach was the only logical part forward. As Braun and Clarke (2006) argue, qualitative methods are designed for this kind of deep, contextual understanding. This approach was particularly adept at unpacking the power dynamics and historical memories that are woven into contested political symbols (Rose, 2016; Wu & Young, 2022).

With regard to research design, an ethnographic design was selected as the study involved sustained immersion in the "No Koshi" movement to properly center community narratives and oral histories (Bernard, 2017). This design also aligned with design of Nepali Indigenous studies (Subba, 2024; Tamang, 2015).

The study drew on both primary and secondary data to build a comprehensive picture. Primary data was collected through semi-structured interview, focus group discussions (FGDs), and participative observation, conducted between October 2023 and February 2024. First, semi-structured interviews were held with 30 individuals including Indigenous leaders, activists, cultural elders, and youth representatives from groups like kirat-Limbuwan Sangharsh Samiti and various Janajati federations. These conversations, which lasted between 45-90 minutes, were conducted primarily in Nepali, Yakthung Pa:n (Limbu), and Kirawa Yang (Bantawa), with translators assisting where necessary. The interview guides were flexible, following the ethnographic protocols suggested by Kvale and Brinkmann (2015) to en-

courage personal narratives while maintaining a coherent line of inquiry.

Second, three FDGs were organized in the towns of Dharan, Dhankuta, and Biratnagar, each involving eight to ten participants. These sessions were vital. They became spaces for collective reflection, where the symbolic weight of names like "Kirat," "Limbuwan," and "Koshi" was debated and defined by the community itself. The FDGs proved especially valuable for drawing out the perspectives of youth and women, whose voices are sometimes marginalized in more formal leadership settings.

Third, the research included participant observation at five separate protest events in Dharan and Biratnagar during November 2023. This was not a passive activity. It involved documenting the sights and sounds of the mobilizations – the specific slogans on banners, the rhythm of chants, and the emotional charge of speeches. This methods, well-established in the study of Nepali politics by scholars like Hangen (2010) and Lawoti and Hangen (2013), captured the performative and affective dimensions of the protest, elements that are often lost in the transcribed text of an interview.

After primary, secondary data was gathered through a review of news reports from sources like The Kathmandu Post and Setoapti, policy briefs from NGOs including the Democracy Resource Center Nepal ad IWGIA, and official government documents such as the 2015 constitution. These materials helped to construct a timeline of events and to understand the state's official response to the protests. Furthermore, the study engaged with existing scholarly work on Indigenous rights, federalism, and critical toponymy (Wu & Young, 2022; Misco et al., 2025; Carter Center, 2013) to situate its findings within a broader academic conversation.

Given the specific focus on the "No Koshi" movement, a purposive sampling technique was used to identify and recruit individuals with direct experience of the protests. This was supplemented with snowball sampling, where initial participants helped to connect the study with other community members, ensuring that grassroots voices beyond formal organizational structures were included. This technique is widely recommended for reaching marginalized populations where standard sampling frames for ineffective (Bernand, 2017).

In order to maintain ethical integrity, this study explicitly designed to adhere to the principles of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), in line with in international standards set by ILO Convention 169 (ILO, 1989) and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UN, 2007), which Nepal has ratified. Before any data collection, participants were thoroughly briefed on the study's aims, assured of their anonymity, and informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Pseudonyms are used throughout this work to protect their identities. Acknowledging the real risks of surveillance and police reprisal for activists in Nepal (IWGIA, 2024), extra precautions were taken, including secure data storage and the omission of potentially identifying details. Ultimately, the methodology was shaped by the Indigenous research ethics championed by scholars like Smith (2012), which prioritize reciprocal, respectful, and relationally accountable engagement with communities.

All interviews and FDGs were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English. The

analysis was an iterative process. Using NVivo 12 software, the data underwent thematic coding. Initial codes were informed by the study's theoretical interests – recognition, FPIC, critical toponymy. However, the process remained open to inductive codes that emerged directly from the participants' own language and concepts, such as aamru (ancestral land) and namrakhne ko adhikar (the right to name). The nalaysis followed the systematic six-step framework for thematic analysis outlines by Braun and Clarke (2006), moving from data familiarization to the final reporting of themes. To bolster the validity of the findings, the emerging themes were constantly checked against the observation notes and secondary documents in a process of triangulation.

Results

1. Naming as Recognition and Erasure

This was the first and most dominant theme emerging from the semi-structured interviews, focus group and discussions, participatory observations, and secondary data analysis. This theme captured how Indigenous participants interpreted the renaming of Province No. 1 as Koshi Province as both a symbolic act of exclusion and a continuation of historical marginalization. The data revealed that for Indigenous communities, names are not merely administrative levels but expressions of collective identity, memory, and sovereignty over ancestral territories.

During interviews, nearly all participants described the term Koshi as *"thoparieko naam"* – an imposed name disconnected from their cultural and historical roots. A limbu elder explained, *"Koshi is only a river, not our history. When they named our province after it, they washed away our identity."* Similar sentiments were echoed in focus group discussions held in Dharan and Biratnagar, where participants argued that Kirat, Limbuwan, or Kõitswan would have represented their ancestral continuity and shared sense of belonging. The emotional tone of these discussions reflected a deep awareness that the provincial name was not a neutral choice, but a politically charged act that erased Indigenous narratives from official recognition.

Analysis of secondary sources, including NGO reports and policy documents, supported these findings, the DRCN (2023) and IWGIA (2024) both observed that the renaming process was conducted without meaningful consultation with Indigenous stakeholders, despite Nepal's commitments to Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) under ILO Convention No. 169 and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). The lack of consultation reinforced participants' perceptions that state-led procedures prioritized legal formality over cultural legitimacy.

Triangulation of data across all sources thus revealed a consistent narrative: naming in inherently political. For Indigenous respondents, the choice of Koshi represented a deliberate of symbolic erasure, undermining their right to self-identification and recognition within Nepal's federal structure. In contrasts, Indigenous toponyms such as Kirat or Limbuwan were seen as carriers of history, spirituality, and collective memory. As one youth activist

summarized in a focus group, “To rename us without asking us is to erase us once again.”

In general, this theme illustrate that the controversy over the name Koshi extends beyond semantics. It reflects a struggles over whole histories are legitimized in the public sphere and shoes voices are silenced in the processes of state formation. The act of naming, as interpreted through voices Indigenous perspectives, becomes both marker of exclusion and a site of resistance – linking cultural recognition to political self-determination.

2. Collective Memory and Historical Continuities

Data from interviews, focus group discussions, and participatory observations revealed that Indigenous participants framed the “No Koshi” movement as an isolated reaction to provincial renaming, but as part of a long continuum of historical struggles against dispossession and cultural marginalization.

Elders and community leaders frequently recalled earlier events as the dismantling of the Kipat (communal lad tenure) system, land alienation during the Rana regime, and discriminatory policies during the Panchayat era. These collective memories were narrated as precedents to the present act of exclusion symbolized by the name Koshi. One Kirat elder stated in an interview, *“When they removed Kipat, we lost out land. Now with ‘Koshi,’ they are taking even our name. Both are the story of loss. ”*

Focus group discussions in Dhankuta and Dharan reinforced this statement. Participants described the No Koshi protest as a *“revival of unfinished history,”* connecting present grievances with ancestral resistance movements such as the Limbuwan movement and the Kirat Federation’s campaigns for autonomy. Youth participants also emphasized that the intergenerational transmission of these memories – through oral histories, folktales, and local rituals – has preserved a sense of continuity that sustains contemporary mobilization.

Participant observation during protests events revealed how historical memory was symbolically invoked in public spaces. Demonstrators displayed portraits of Indigenous ancestors and carried placards dances performed during rallies served as embodied acts of remembrance. These performances fused political protest with cultural continuity, asserting that the denial of Indigenous naming rights is inseparable from the long history of territorial and cultural erasure.

Secondary data supported these interpretations. Reports by DRCN (2023) and scholarly analyses by Hangen (2010) and Lawoti & Hangen (2013) have documented how Indigenous struggles in eastern Nepal are rooted in memory and land-based identity. Triangulation of interview narratives with such sources confirmed that collective memory operates as both a repository of historical consciousness and a mobilizing resource for present resistance.

In essence, this theme shows that Indigenous opposition to Koshi is not merely reactive; it is historically grounded and culturally continuous. The act of recalling and reinterpreting past injustices reinforces the moral legitimacy of the movement, transforming remembrance into a political tool of decolonial resistance.

3. Consent, Exclusion, and Procedural Legitimacy

This theme centers on participants’ perceptions that the provincial naming process lacked

genuine consultation and thereby failed to meet standards of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC). Interviews and group discussions consistently revealed a deep sense of exclusion from the state's decision-making mechanisms.

Although the two-third majority vote in the Provincial Assembly met constitutional requirements under Article 295 (2) of Nepal's 2015 Constitution, most respondents questioned the democratic legitimacy of the process. A Sunwar youth activist remarked "They say it was legal, but who did they ask? We were never consulted. Without our voice, this democracy does not belong to us." Such statements reflect a shared sentiment that compliance cannot substitute for participatory legitimacy.

Focus group participants emphasized that true recognition requires decision-making that is consultative, inclusive, and reflective of Indigenous worldviews. Women and youth participants in Biratnagar expressed frustration that their communities were merely "informed after the fact," highlighting how consultation was reduced to tokenism. They contrasted this with international framework under ILO Convention No. 169 and UNDRIP (UN, 2007), both of which Nepal has endorsed but inadequately implemented.

Observation during protest gatherings further illustrated this perception of exclusion. Slogans such as "No Decision Without Us" and "FPIC and Our Rights" were common across protest sites. Activists repeatedly invoked the concept of "legitimacy with consent," highlighting their demand for participatory governance.

Secondary sources confirmed these findings. Policy briefs by LAHURNIP (2023) and IWGIA (2024) reported that Indigenous communities were not meaningfully consulted before the provincial assembly's decision, directly contravening the FPIC principle. The convergence of these multiple data sources – interviews, FGDs, observations, and documentary evidence – demonstrates that Indigenous dissatisfaction stems less from the legal naming outcome itself and more from the process through which it was reached.

In essence, this theme highlights a critical tension between constitutional procedure and Indigenous legitimacy. While the state upheld formal democratic norms, Indigenous peoples perceived the outcomes as undemocratic because it excluded their participation. The analysis reveals that for these communities, legitimacy is not derived from parliamentary arithmetic but from reciprocal consultation, cultural respect, and acknowledgement of their right to self-determination.

4. Protest as Voice and Visibility

Evidence gathered through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, participatory observations, and secondary data revealed that the *"No Koshi"* movement functioned not only as political resistance but also as a performative and symbolic expression of Indigenous identity and collective visibility.

Participants consistently described the protests as a vital means to *"speak when ignored."* Interviews with youth activists and community leaders emphasized that the streets had become their *"only parliament,"* where they could express grievances that formal institutions had failed to acknowledge. A young participant from Dharan remarked, *"They did not*

hear us in the Assembly, so we made them hear us in the streets."

Observational data from rallies in Dharan, Biratnagar, and Dhankuta further demonstrated that these protests were deeply cultural in form and meaning. Demonstrators wore traditional attire, carried chhyamsing (bamboo drums) and selinge (bells), and waved multi-colored Kirat, Limbuwan, and Janajati flags. Protesters performed Indigenous rituals and chants invoking ancestral spirits, transforming public spaces into arenas of cultural affirmation. Such performative actions turned protest sites into embodiments of what Wu and Young (2022) describe as "decolonial place-making" - reclaiming symbolic and physical spaces through Indigenous expression.

Focus group discussions revealed that participants viewed these performative elements as essential to asserting their visibility in a state system that has historically rendered Indigenous identities invisible. One FGD participant stated, "Our attire, our songs, our banners-they are not decoration; they are declaration." The integration of cultural expression into political protest blurred the line between activism and ritual, embodying the Indigenous epistemology that politics and culture are inseparable.

Secondary documents, including reports from DRCN (2023) and Setopati (2023), corroborated these findings, noting that visual symbols such as the crossed-out "Koshi" banners and hashtags like #NoKoshi played a significant role in amplifying the movement's visibility both locally and digitally. Digital media became a supplementary arena of protest, allowing Indigenous youth to connect across geographical boundaries and sustain collective momentum through online advocacy.

This theme thus demonstrates that the "No Koshi" movement transcended traditional forms of political mobilization. It combined cultural performance, spiritual invocation, and digital activism to articulate Indigenous presence and agency in public discourse. Protest, therefore, became not only a reaction to exclusion but also a creative act of reclaiming visibility, voice, and dignity within Nepal's contested federal landscape.

5. Divergent Intra-Indigenous Perspectives

The theme revealed that while Indigenous participants were united in their rejection of the name "Koshi," they expressed differing preferences regarding alternative provincial names and representational strategies.

Interviews highlighted two major tendencies within the movement. The first group, comprising mostly leaders from Kirat federations and linguistic activists, supported the name "Kirat Province," arguing that it would encompass the shared historical and cultural identity of various Kirati subgroups, including Yakthung (Limbu), Rungku (Rai/Dewan), Yakkha, and Kõits (Sunwar). They described "Kirat" as a unifying civilizational term that symbolizes ancestral continuity and collective belonging.

The second group, consisting primarily of Limbu intellectuals and activists, preferred the name "Limbuwan," emphasizing its historical association with the Limbu homeland and its relevance to precolonial territorial boundaries. One participant asserted, "Kirat is our larger civilization, but Limbuwan is our home. It reminds us where we come from."

Focus group discussions further revealed nuanced debates within these positions. Some participants advocated for inclusive naming that would acknowledge multi-ethnic coexistence in the region, while others insisted that historical names should take precedence as a corrective to centuries of erasure. A Tamang participant in Biratnagar expressed support for Indigenous naming but noted, "Whether it is Kirat or Limbuwan, the main issue is that our name should not be decided by others."

Despite these internal variations, the thematic pattern revealed a strong overarching consensus: the rejection of "Koshi" as an imposed and culturally disconnected name. Observational data from joint rallies confirmed that, regardless of their preferred alternatives, diverse Indigenous groups marched together under the common banner of #NoKoshi. This unity amid difference illustrated what Tamang (2015) describes as "coalitional Indigeneity," where multiple Indigenous identities converge around shared principles of recognition and self-determination.

Secondary analyses, including DRCN (2023) and IWGIA (2024), validated this finding by noting that intra-Indigenous diversity has not weakened the movement but rather enriched its representational legitimacy. The co-existence of differing views-Kirat, Limbuwan, Kõitswan-demonstrates the plural and dialogical nature of Indigenous politics in Nepal's eastern hills.

In conclusion, this theme underscores that the "No Koshi" movement is both unified and diverse. While participants differ in preferred symbols and narratives, they collectively resist the homogenizing tendencies of the state. This pluralism within unity exemplifies a mature Indigenous consciousness-one that values diversity as strength and positions internal dialogue as a vital part of the struggle for recognition and equitable federalism.

6. Toward Inclusive Federalism (Transitional Theme)

Data drawn from semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, participatory observations, and secondary sources revealed that Indigenous participants viewed the "No Koshi" movement as not only a contestation over naming, but also a broader political project envisioning a more inclusive, participatory, and just federal system in Nepal.

Across all data sets, participants emphasized that the struggle for recognition through naming was symbolic of larger structural concerns related to representation, resource distribution, and cultural autonomy. An Indigenous youth activist in Dharan summarized this connection succinctly: "Renaming is only the doorway. What we really want is a system that hears us, includes us, and respects our ways of living." This perspective highlights how the act of naming is interpreted as both a cultural right and an entry point to institutional transformation.

Focus group discussions consistently reflected this integrative vision. Participants articulated that meaningful federalism should go beyond administrative restructuring to include mechanisms for Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC), Indigenous language recognition in provincial assemblies, and proportional representation in decision-making bodies. A women's representative in Biratnagar explained, "If they can name our province without asking us, they can also make policies without us. Inclusion means participation from the

start, not after decisions are made." This reflects a demand for procedural fairness as well as substantive justice.

Observations from protest sites further supported this interpretation. Demonstrations often carried banners not only rejecting "Koshi" but also calling for systemic reforms, such as "Federalism with Inclusion" and "Respect FPIC, Respect Constitution." These public expressions signified that participants viewed the "No Koshi" struggle as part of a continuing effort to democratize Nepal's post-conflict federal architecture and to align governance with the principles of multiculturalism enshrined in the Constitution.

Secondary data complemented these grassroots perspectives. Reports from DRCN (2023) and IWGIA (2024) similarly documented that Indigenous activists perceive the naming conflict as symptomatic of broader governance failures—particularly the gap between constitutional commitments to inclusion and their limited implementation in practice. These findings collectively underscore that the movement seeks not only the symbolic restoration of Indigenous names but also the substantive realization of participatory rights within the federal framework.

Overall, this theme bridges the analytical focus of the Results with the conceptual implications of the Discussion. It demonstrates that Indigenous participants interpret the "No Koshi" movement as both a protest against erasure and a vision for reform. Their narratives reveal a forward-looking aspiration: a form of inclusive federalism grounded in cultural recognition, equitable representation, and reciprocal consultation.

As the following Discussion section elaborates, these findings suggest that naming disputes in Nepal are not isolated identity conflicts but are deeply embedded in questions of democratic legitimacy, decolonization, and the pursuit of an inclusive state that acknowledges the plural sovereignties of its Indigenous peoples.

Discussion

The findings of this study substantiate and deepen existing scholarship on Indigenous rights, critical toponymy, and Nepal's post-conflict federal restructuring. Through six interrelated themes, the results demonstrate that the "No Koshi" movement is more than a symbolic resistance to an imposed provincial name-it is a decolonial struggle for recognition, memory, and participatory federalism.

The first theme, Naming as Recognition and Erasure, aligns with critical toponymic scholarship asserting that naming is a political act that legitimizes certain histories while marginalizing others (Rose-Redwood et al., 2010; Giraut & Houssay-Holzschuch, 2022). Participants' characterization of "Koshi" as an imposed, ahistorical label echoes global findings that colonial or elite toponyms function as tools of symbolic domination (Azaryahu & Kook, 2002; Wanjiru-Mwita & Giraut, 2020). Their advocacy for Indigenous names such as Kirat and Limbuwan parallels Subba's (2025) and Gautam et al.'s (2025) documentation of Kirati toponyms as repositories of ancestral geography and cultural continuity.

The theme of Collective Memory and Historical Continuities reinforces Hangen's (2010)

and Lawoti and Hangen's (2013) argument that Indigenous movements in eastern Nepal are grounded in historical struggles over land, language, and autonomy. Participants' recollection of the loss of Kipat land tenure and other historical injustices situates the "No Koshi" protest within a continuum of resistance rather than a singular event. These lived memories function as what Tamang (2015) calls "historical consciousness," where remembrance becomes a tool of decolonial resistance and moral legitimacy.

Similarly, Consent, Exclusion, and Procedural Legitimacy expands on Barelli's (2012) and ILO (1989) discussions of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) by illustrating how legal compliance without consultation perpetuates exclusion. While the two-thirds vote in the Provincial Assembly satisfied constitutional formality (Government of Nepal, 2015), respondents emphasized that procedural legality failed to ensure participatory legitimacy, echoing DRCN's (2023) critique of Nepal's federalism as "procedural without inclusion."

The theme of Protest as Voice and Visibility resonates with Wu and Young's (2022) notion of "decolonial place-making." Observations of Indigenous attire, flags, and chants show how public protest became a performative assertion of identity and visibility. This supports Alfred and Corntassel's (2005) view that Indigenous resurgence is both political and cultural renewal.

At the same time, Divergent Intra-Indigenous Perspectives affirm that Indigenous movements are plural yet cohesive. As noted by Tamang (2015) and Lawoti and Hangen (2013), internal diversity-such as preferences for Kirat, Limbuwan, or Kõitswan-does not fragment Indigenous politics but strengthens its democratic inclusivity.

Finally, the transitional theme Toward Inclusive Federalism reflects emerging debates on participatory governance and plural sovereignty (Karki & Wenner, 2020; Smith, 2012). Participants' calls for FPIC-based decision-making, language recognition, and proportional representation align with IWGIA's (2024) argument that genuine inclusion in Nepal requires institutional reform beyond symbolic gestures.

Overall, the results validate and extend the literature by grounding theoretical concepts of recognition, memory, and decolonization in the lived experiences of Nepal's Indigenous peoples. The "No Koshi" movement, as revealed through these themes, transforms the politics of naming into a broader call for inclusive, dialogic, and participatory federalism.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how Indigenous communities in eastern Nepal interpret and respond to the renaming of Province No. 1 as Koshi Province, with particular focus on issues of recognition, legitimacy, and inclusion within Nepal's federal system. Using data collected from semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, participatory observations, and secondary sources, the study aimed to explore how the politics of naming reflects broader struggles over identity, history, and representation among Indigenous peoples.

The findings revealed six interrelated themes-Naming as Recognition and Erasure, Collective Memory and Historical Continuities, Consent, Exclusion, and Procedural Legitimacy,

Protest as Voice and Visibility, Divergent Intra-Indigenous Perspectives, and Toward Inclusive Federalism. Collectively, these results show that naming is not merely an administrative process but a deeply political and cultural act. Indigenous participants viewed the name "Koshi" as a continuation of historical erasure, while protests and collective memory served as tools of resistance and self-affirmation. Moreover, the study found that the absence of genuine consultation violated the principles of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC), weakening the legitimacy of the naming process in the eyes of Indigenous communities.

Interpreting these findings within the frameworks of critical toponymy (Rose-Redwood et al., 2010) and decolonial theory (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005), the study supports the argument that Indigenous struggles for recognition are simultaneously cultural and political. The "No Koshi" movement embodies a demand for participatory federalism rooted in historical consciousness and inclusive governance, reinforcing earlier scholarship on identity, memory, and representation in Nepal (Hangen, 2010; Tamang, 2015).

The implications of these findings are both practical and theoretical. They call for institutional reforms that ensure Indigenous participation in decision-making, promote linguistic and cultural recognition, and strengthen procedural fairness in federal governance.

However, the study's scope was limited to selected districts and participants, which may restrict the generalizability of its conclusions. Future research should incorporate broader regional perspectives and comparative studies across provinces.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing body of scholarship on Indigenous rights and federal restructuring in Nepal. By situating the politics of naming within the broader struggle for inclusive federalism, it underscores the enduring importance of recognition, dialogue, and participation in building a truly pluralistic nation.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to journalist, YouTuber and digital activist Mr. Lalit Sen Kõits (Sunwar) from Chuplung, Kõitswan, Wollo Kirat, Eastern Nepal for his courage to raise voices on #NoKoshi and for providing me his documents on "No Koshi" movements from dozens of indigenous researchers, writers and organizations. I owe him a great deal. Additionally, I am thankful to the anonymous reviewer of my paper and the editorial team of *UJIS*.

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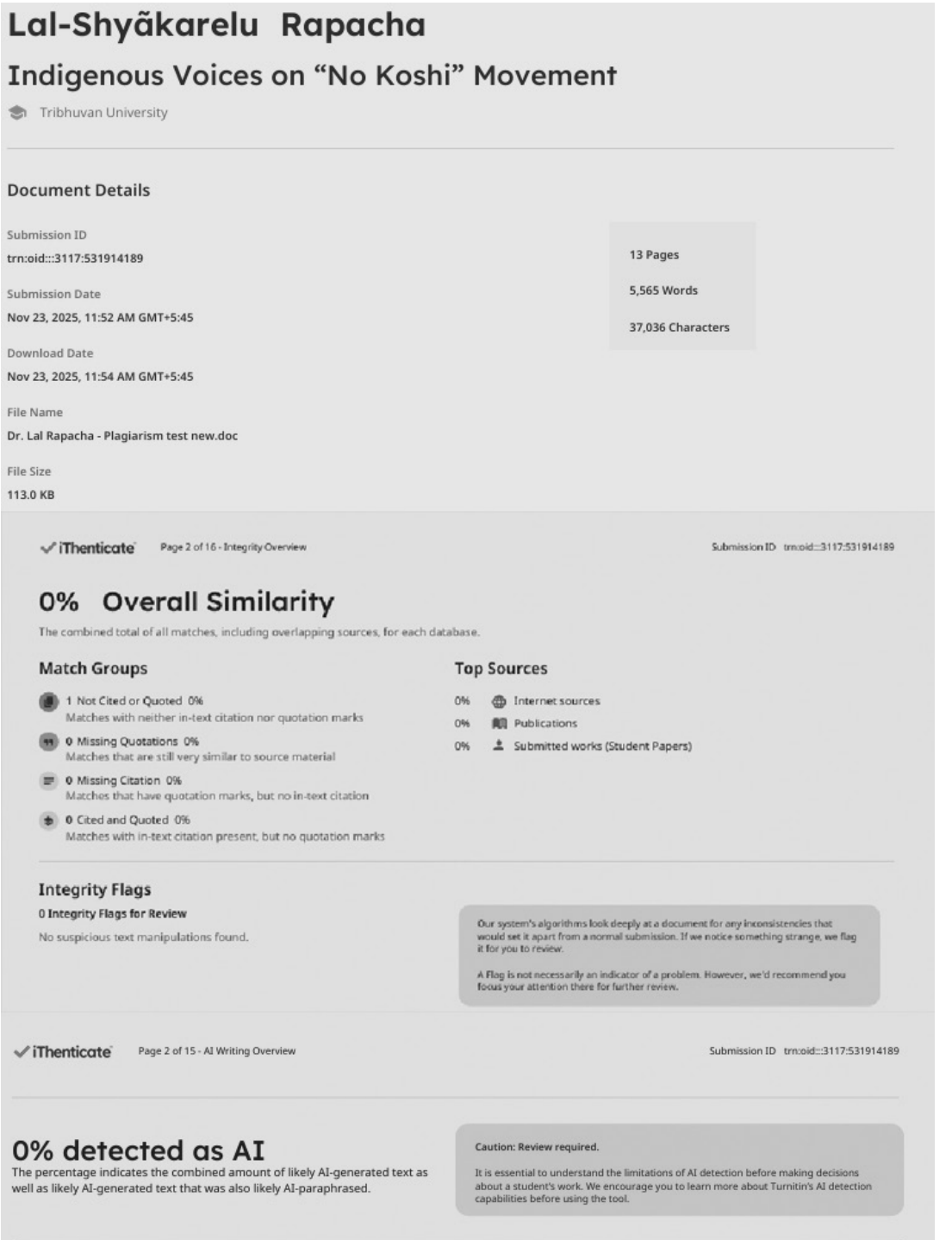

Lal-Shyãkarelu Rapacha

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