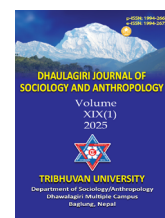


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Public Service Delivery at Local Level: Role of Bhalmansa in Community Access to Municipal Services

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/dsaj.v19i1.80830>**Abstract**

This article explores the role of *Bhalmansa*, an indigenous governance institution of the *Tharu* community, in enhancing community access to municipal services. The primary objective is to examine the intersection between *Tharu* indigenous governance practices and the contemporary local governance system to understand socio-culturally resonant service delivery. Using a sequential mixed-methods approach, data were collected through a household survey, the Key Informant Interviews (KII) and *Kuragraphy* (informal discussion). The quantitative findings reveal that two-thirds of those who accessed public services required more than three attempts, relying significantly on informal channels such as friends and family members to navigate the challenge of getting services. The qualitative study findings show that, despite the *Bhalmansa* system's enduring role in securing community ownership of local development and public service delivery, its influence has weakened. This decline is primarily due to non-recognition by local governments and rigid bureaucratic procedures that undermine the indigenous governance system. The study's findings underline the need for local policy reforms that integrate indigenous structures like *Bhalmansa* into local governance. Such integration can foster co-creation and co-production in service delivery and access to education, transforming inclusive public service delivery from a rhetorical commitment into a genuinely community-driven practice.

Keywords: Bhalmansa, indigenous practices, local overnment and public services

Introduction

In the past fifty years, ideas about decentralization have evolved significantly, reflecting shifts in governance strategies aimed at transferring authority, responsibilities, and resources. The transformation has been executed in the name of deconcentration, delegation, and, ultimately, devolution from central to lower levels of administration (Cheema & Rondinelli, 2007). These changes emphasize the growing necessity of decentralization as a foundation of inclusive governance, ensuring service proximity to citizens and responsiveness to their needs (Dias & Sudarshan, 2007). Despite these shifts, local governance practices in many areas remain deeply embedded in

indigenous institutions and social structures. In Nepal, *Bhalmansa*, a traditional governance mechanism among *Tharu* (including *Rana Tharu*), continues to influence community life and has the potential to shape local government practices. Nevertheless, critical questions remain about its role and relevance in the contemporary federal system. Understanding the community-led governance system function would fill the knowledge gap, particularly from a political anthropological perspective. Exploring the intersection of such traditional practices within modern local governance frameworks is essential for ensuring socio-culturally resonant service.

Within the discourse, a precise definition of local



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government remains elusive. Local governments, the closest entities to people, are led by elected representatives who primarily deliver public services to citizens (Ndreu, 2016). Given its role as a public service entity, the subsidiarity principle assumes central importance. The principle of subsidiarity, which strengthens local governance in one way or another, emphasizes that decisions and services are best managed by the government closest to the people (Sidgwick, 2012). This principle reflects the context-specific nature of intervention and community empowerment, prioritizing local knowledge, practices, and decision-making frameworks (Aijaz, 2007). As public entities, local governments are therefore endowed with the authority to implement public policies for managing local affairs, primarily public services (Lockard, 1963). They function as a distinct sphere of governance (Hasluck, 1948) with the power to develop and implement policies and rules within their jurisdictions (Sidgwick, 2012). These governments are primarily responsible for the "housework" of governance, focusing on delivering essential public services within defined sectors (Stones, 1968). In this context, "housework" metaphorically refers to the routine yet critical functions that sustain the local administrative system, such as public service.

Public services themselves feature key attributes such as the distinction between public and private sectors, the composition of service recipients, role intensity, public accountability, and public trust (Haque, 2001). These features describe how public service delivery fosters essential connections between citizens and the state through governance systems and institutional mechanisms. These relationships and exchanges illustrate how the state imagines itself and operates through the delivery of public services (Bierschenk & Olivier De Sardan, 2014; Thelen et al., 2014). These dynamics are relevant in Nepal, where federalism is still in its formative phase and society is diverse, shared by a mixture of caste/ethnic groups, including Tharu, who is regarded as one of the indigenous groups in Nepal.

Bista (2013) observes the status of Nepali Tharu, emphasizing their historical role as agricultural peasants living under the control of *Zamindars* (landlords). Like other ethnic groups in Nepal, the Tharus have multiple identities linked to their family, clan, village, etc. These identities, layered over these various connections, become particularly prominent in multiethnic villages that emerged from the mass migration to the Tarai (Regmi, 1978). While the Tharu over the decades are strongly associated with the Tarai, they are not originally from there (Guneratne, 1998). There are different sub-groups within the Tharu community, including *Dagaura*, *Chitwaniya*, *Kochila*, *Rana*, *Kathriya*, and *Desaura* (Kharel, 2019).

The Tharu community has long adhered to customary laws, with the *Barghar* or *Bhalmansa* system serving as the customary foundation of their self-governance. Their cultural identity is also reflected in their rituals and

festivals, such as *Maghi*, *Dashain*, *Hardhauwa*, *Dewari*, *Atwari*, *Astimki*, *Dhurhorhi* and *Pendya*. The Tharu indigenous system is rich and has faced challenges due to different reasons (i.e. assimilations), but this article does not dwell on these discussions. Instead, the focus is on describing the linkage between municipal services and the *Bhalmansa* system, narrating the role of this traditional governance structure in municipal public service delivery. Similar to other districts, the Tharu community in Kailali endures its long-standing tradition of the *Bhalmansa* system. This practice, collectively called the *Bhalmansa* in Banke, Kailali and Kanchanpur (*Barghar* in Bardiya, *Matawa* in Dang, *Kakandar* in Deukhuri), represents an indigenous democratic governance model.

Federalism in Nepal represents a profound shift from a centralized monarchy system to a republican democratic state with a three-tier governance structure (Government of Nepal, 2015). This political transformation was an immediate result of the Second People's Movement, which led to the abolition of the monarchy (Khanal, 2006). The shift aimed to deliver public services in an accountable and inclusive manner. Consequently, the federal framework established a federal government, seven provincial governments, and 753 local governments, each vested with exclusive and concurrent powers to operate under cooperation, coordination, and collaboration (Acharya, 2018; Government of Nepal, 2015). In line with the 2015 Constitution, the second local election held in 2022, which elected local leadership, ensured inclusive elected representation with 41.22% women, 4.4% women as Mayors, and disadvantaged people (20% Dalits), as assured by the constitution (Campaign for Peace-COCAP, 2022).

This transformation aimed to constitutionally empower local governments by equipping them with the authority, resources, and institutional frameworks to deliver public services inclusively (Menocal, 2020). Education, healthcare, drinking water supply, sanitation, animal husbandry, agriculture, and other critical community infrastructure (road) stipulated by their exclusive and concurrent rights are the mandated areas (Government of Nepal, 2015). The three tiers of governance structure were designed to bridge the gap between the state and citizens, fostering greater accountability and inclusivity in public service delivery. However, a key challenge persists: To what extent are municipal services (including access to education) responsive to local socio-cultural dynamics? This study argues that the functional dynamics of local governance must align with the local socio-cultural context to ensure effective service delivery. Using *Bhalmansa* as a case, this study seeks to understand the operation of local public service at the intersection of modern governance frameworks and indigenous practices (Bellamy, 2009), through a theoretically grounded and methodologically rigorous approach.

Theoretical framework

For this study, Ortner's theory of practice and James Scott's concept of state legibility serve as a broader theoretical framework to examine public service delivery and its intersection with the indigenous governance system through the lens of political anthropology. Ortner (1984, 2006) redefines practice as all human action influenced by structures of power, historical context, and cultural frameworks and argues that to understand human practice, it must be situated historically, as present actions are informed by past structures while also shaping new ones. Critiquing the traditional notion of culture, Ortner advocates for a dynamic view, suggesting that culture functions as a medium of agency, constantly produced and reproduced through struggles over meaning, authority, and identity (Ortner, 1984, 2006). Similarly, Scott's notion of legibility helps me understand how government renders complex local realities manageable through standardized classifications and administrative procedures, disregarding local knowledge and diversity, and how this reinforces existing hierarchies (Scott, 1999). The combination of these frameworks offers a comprehensive view of how power is exercised in socio-historical dynamics of practice by employing sequential mixed methods, as discussed under the following heading.

Methods

This study was conducted in Ward No. 5 of Godawari Municipality, Kailali district, Sudurpaschim province, Nepal. The field site was selected for its socio-cultural diversity where indigenous *Tharu* (including the *Rana Tharu*) is the dominant groups, coexisting with other caste/ethnic groups such as *Chhetri*, *Tharu*, *Rana Tharu*, *Hill Brahman*, *Bishwokarma*, *Pariyar*, *Thakuri*, *Maji*, *Tamang*, *Newar*, *Rai*, *Gurung*, *Limbu*, *Dasnami*, *Kumal*, *Rajput*, *Badi*, *Bhote*, *Mali*, and *Sunuwar*. This cultural mosaic of indigenous people and migrants from different hill and mountain districts of Sudurpaschim province was a rich and complex cultural fabric.

Guided by dialectical pluralism as the study's philosophical paradigm (Creswell & Clark, 2017), a mixed-method design was used to explore public service phenomena. The studies argue that the inclusive service realities are both subjectively revealed and empirically measured through community engagement, reflecting the multidimensional nature of participation in service delivery. While maintaining a value-neutral stance, the study holistically captures community perspectives

to understand *Bhalmansa* and public service from the community's perspective.

A household survey was conducted using a random sampling technique (Glasow, 2005). Since a complete list of households was not available, a sampling frame was developed to systematically guide the procedure. The ward comprised 1,170 households, categorized by caste and ethnicity: *Brahmin/Chhetri* (50%), *Tarai Janajati-Tharu and Rana Tharu* (34.8%), *Dalit* (15%), and advanced ethnic groups (0.2%). Given its minimal representation, the advanced ethnic group was excluded, yielding a target population of 1,168 households. The final sample was determined using the *Krejcie and Morgan formula* (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970), ensuring proportional representation across caste/ethnic groups. The questionnaire was adapted from the 2021 governance survey, originally developed by the Nepal Administrative Staff College, which was contextualized following the expert consultation. The collected data were systematically arranged, coded and analyzed using SPSS. Since the focus of the article is on *Tharu* community's access to municipal service, the presentation, description and interpretation apart from the socio-demographic overview are limited to this group.

To complement the survey, seven (four male and three female) Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with members of the *Tharu* communities, including *Bhalmansa*, including four men and three women. The participants included elected ward representatives, female community health volunteers, schoolteachers, and police officers, who were selected using an ethnographic approach (Brewer, 2010; Gubrium et al., 2012). *Kuragraphy* was also employed to capture casual conversation in natural settings (Desjarlais, 2003).

Data from quantitative and qualitative techniques were presented and analyzed concurrently by juxtaposing and counterposing findings. Ethical and procedural rigor was

Table 1

Category	Attribute	<i>n</i>	%	Category	Attribute	<i>n</i>	%
Ethnicity (N=305)				Age (N=304)			
	<i>Dalit</i>	49	16.1%		Up to 19	1	0.3%
	<i>Terai Jana-jati</i>	108	35.4%		20-24	4	1.3%
	<i>Bhraman/Chhetri</i>	148	48.5%				4.9%
Sex (N=305)				25-29	15		
	Male	167	54.8%	30-34	21	6.9%	
	Female	138	45.2%	35-39	31	10.2%	
				40-44	37	12.2%	
				45-49	43	14.2%	
				50-54	41	13.5%	
				55-59	37	12.2%	
				60 and above	74	24.3%	

Source: Household Survey, 2023

maintained throughout data collection and interpretation, ensuring accountability and adherence to the “do no harm” principle (American Anthropological Association, 2012; Bos, 2020; Sluka, 2012).

Findings

Socio-demographic Status

The survey included 305 households (Table 1), encompassing 148 *Bhraman/Chhetri* (48.5%), 108 *Terai Janajati*, particularly *Tharu*, including *Rana Tharu* (35.4%) and 49 *Dalit* (16.1%). Of the total, 54.8% of respondents were male, while 45.2% were female. As the article centers on *Tharu* community, presentation, description and interpretation, beyond the socio-demographic overview is confined particularly to this group.

Table 1

Sample Distribution and Socio-demographic Status of the Household Respondents

The Table presents that more than 40.8% of the population comprises middle-aged individuals (40-54 years), and a notable portion (24.3%) consists of elderly respondents (60 years and above). More than half of the respondents (64.3%) were 40 and above. The relatively lower representation of individuals aged 20-39 may be attributed to various factors, including migration driven by both push and pull factors.

Access of Tharu to Municipal Services

There are several attributes that affect people’s access to municipal services. However, rather than exploring each of these in detail, there was a question: What services did respondents receive from ward office or municipality over the past 12 months? The household survey results, as shown in the Table below, indicate that the *Tharu* community had limited access to municipal service.

Table 2

Access of People to Municipal Services

Municipal services (Multiple options)	Response = Yes (N=108)	%	Gender Disaggregation	
			Male (N=61)	Female (N=47)
Social security	11	10.2%	11.5%	8.5%
Vital registration	7	6.5%	6.6%	6.4%
Health	9	8.3%	9.8%	6.4%
Education	1	0.9%	1.6%	0.0%
Water service	4	3.7%	3.3%	4.3%
Electricity service	19	17.6%	13.1%	23.4%
Disaster-related	4	3.7%	4.9%	2.1%

Development-related/ project contract	5	4.6%	4.9%	4.3%
Agriculture/ livestock	18	16.7%	14.8%	19.1%
General administration (recommendation, registration, relationship verification)	3	2.8%	1.6%	4.3%
Judicial service	1	0.9%	1.6%	0.0%
Land administration/ <i>Naksa Pass</i>	25	23.1%	26.2%	19.1%

Source: Household Survey, 2023

Table 2 shows that land administration services (23.1%) and electricity (17.6%) have the highest reported access, with men (26.2%) accessing land services more than women (19.1%). In comparison, women (23.4%) report higher access to electricity than men (13.1%). Social security services (10.2%) and health services (8.3%) show slightly higher access for men, suggesting possible gender-based barriers for women. Education services have the lowest access (0.9%), indicating potential structural inequalities. Water services (3.7%) are accessed slightly more by women (4.3%) than men (3.3%), possibly due to traditional gender roles in household water management. Disaster-related (3.7%) and development-related services (4.6%) have nearly equal gender distribution. Agricultural services (16.7%) show higher female access (19.1%) compared to men (14.8%), likely reflecting women's engagement in household-based farming. Judicial (0.9%) and general administrative services (2.8%) remain minimally accessed, with slightly higher female access to administrative support (4.3%). These findings highlight the need for inclusive policies to improve women's access to essential municipal services, particularly in health, education, and judicial sectors, ensuring equitable service provision for all.

Regarding the low access to municipal services, I inquired about the underlying reasons for their limited involvement and lower access to municipal services. A former *Bhalmansa* responded by describing the changing pattern of the local development process and stated:

In the past, all government officials used to come to *Bhalmansa's* house as the primary contact person for any tasks concerning social work, projects, or community initiatives. The *Bhalmansa* used to work as a local leader, coordinating among community members associated with the system. However, with the establishment of modern formal institutions, this system has weakened, as the *Bhalmansa* is no longer recognized as a key figure in disseminating messages or

encouraging people's participation in local discussions.

The narration emphasizes the historical role of the *Bhalmansa* as a key intermediary between the community and state institutions, while also pointing to how indigenous governance structures have been overlooked, unrecognized and weakened by formal bureaucratic processes. To further substantiate the analysis of *Tharu* access to municipal service at multiple levels, one of the household questions asked respondents how many attempts they had to make to access a particular service (consider the last service the respondent received). The data on the number of attempts made by *Tharu* respondents (see Table 3) reveals significant challenges in obtaining services efficiently.

Table 3

Frequency of Attempts Required to Access Municipal Services by Tharu

Number of attempts	% (Overall)	Male	Female
First Attempt	13.9%	5.3%	23.5%
Second Attempt	16.7%	21.1%	11.8%
Third Attempt	36.1%	31.6%	41.2%
More than a third attempt	33.3%	42.1%	23.5%

Source: Household Survey, 2023

Overall, 13.9% of women (23.5%), fared better than men (5.3%) of *Tharu* successfully accessed services on their first attempt. 16.7% needed a second attempt (with men 21.1% and women 11.8%), suggesting that while some faced initial difficulties, they managed to navigate the system with moderate effort. Surprisingly, more than one-third (36.1%) received services on three attempts, and perfectly one-third (33.3%) required more than three, with men (42.1%) facing greater difficulties than women (23.5%).

Source of Service Information among *Tharu*

I inquired about the reasons behind the need for multiple attempts to access the service, and one *Tharu* man responded, "Both service providers and people blame each other. Service seekers lack awareness of required documents, while municipal staff often delay services, citing missing paperwork." This response underlines several factors, including systemic inefficiencies, highlighting the need for a more inclusive approach to ensure equitable access for women and *Tharu* to municipal services. From the perspective of people, awareness and prior information concerning the service are crucial for improving access. Therefore, I further probed by asking, how did you receive information about the service? Table 4 shows the sources of information, both formal and informal, that people rely on to learn about municipal services.

Table 4

Information Sources for Accessing Services

Source of information	Number (N=54)	%	Gender disaggregation	
			Male (N=27)	Female (N=27)
Citizen charter	10	18.5	22.2%	14.8%
Friends	17	31.5	22.2%	40.7%
Family members	11	20.4	18.5%	22.2%
Political party's members	3	5.6	7.4%	3.7%
Service providers	2	3.7	7.4%	0.0%
Official website and social media	1	1.9	3.7%	0.0%
Own experience	8	14.8	11.1%	18.5%
Others	2	3.6	3.7%	3.7%
Total	54	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Household Survey, 2023

Table 4 highlights gendered differences in information sources for accessing municipal services, with women relying more on friends (40.7%) and family (22.2%) and men mainly on citizen charters and friends (22.2% and 22.2% equal) and family members (18.5%). Negligible reliance is observed on political parity, service providers, websites, and social media. This pattern suggests that *Tharu* mostly depends on personal networks for information concerning public services. The data underscores the need to strengthen both community networks and formal communication strategies to enhance access to services, particularly for marginalized groups. However, the ethnographic data shows that the municipality focuses on promoting formal sources (citizen charter and through service providers), completely unrecognized the existing community networks and customary institutions. Socio-culturally, the *Tharu*, including the *Rana Tharu* communities, exhibit high cohesion facilitated by *Bhalmansa*, which provides a strong foundation for information sharing, awareness creation through non-formal education, and communal governance. Given this strong indigenous governance system, I explored why the *Tharu* continue to face challenges in accessing public services despite their well-established communal structures. Additionally, I uncovered the socio-cultural factors that could enhance their service access.

In response to this inquiry, a former *Bhalmansa* emphasized that *Bhalmansa* functions as a traditional institution that serves as a platform for exchanging ideas and information on public affairs, creating community awareness, including community initiatives, development projects, and community-specific actions. When asked about the roles and approaches of *Bhalmansa*, another former leader stated:

It has executive, legislative, and judicial roles and functions that are socio-culturally embedded

within the Tharu community. Whether it concerns a marriage, funeral, road construction, or irrigation canal project, health service camp Bhalmansa historically led discussions, mediated disputes, and facilitated community activities. However, it has become isolated due to the lack of recognition of its historical roles and its disconnection from the local service delivery system.

The narration provided valuable insights into the functional aspects of *Bhalmansa*. Despite the historical strengths of the *Tharu* community, its disconnection raises the question of why the *Bhalmansa* is not being recognized or mobilized to bridge the gap between the community and the modern service delivery system.

Bhalmansa and Municipal Services

The *Bhalmansa* holds an informal yet important act as intermediaries between the *Tharu* community and government entity, helping facilitate access to public services and resolving minor disputes. Though not legally recognized, their involvement in local development and community mobilization complements formal governance through customary leadership practices. Although Nepal's legal system does not formally recognize the *Bhalmansa*, there is indirect space within existing laws that allows for the inclusion of customary practices. The Civil Code, 2074, particularly in Part 1, Chapter 1, acknowledges the country's social and cultural diversity and permits the use of established local customs in dispute resolution when formal law is silent provided such customs do not contradict existing laws, public order, or morality (Government of Nepal, 2017). This opens a limited but meaningful room for *Bhalmansa* to act as informal mediators or advisors within their communities. Similarly, the Mediation Act, 2068, provides complementary recognition by allowing community-based dispute resolution through local mediators (Government of Nepal, 2011). While *Bhalmansas* are not officially appointed under this Act, their respected status enables them to serve as *de facto* mediators, particularly in areas where they are accepted by the community and acknowledged by local authorities. However, the focus of this article is *Bhalmansa*'s social roles in facilitating people's access to services.

Within *Bhalmansa* system, leadership positions such as *Bhalmansa* (chief leader, also called *Aghariya*), secretary, *Guruwa* (shaman), *Chaukidar* (messenger), and others are selected through community consensus. A *Bhalmansa* functions as the traditional communal leader, planning community priorities, facilitating volunteer community activities, organizing villagers for significant social events, including communal death rituals, marriage ceremonies, and other community activities. Their role extends beyond mere announcements, encompassing responsibilities such as coordinating firewood collection for feasts and festivals, facilitating the plucking of leaves for *Tapari* (leaf plates used in rituals), and managing symbiotic labor (*Begari*).

With development, educated youth and women are increasing taking over the role of *Bhalmansa*, expanding it beyond traditional to connect their communities with external actors and drive local development. More importantly, in response to my inquiry regarding the role of the *Bhalmansa*, one *Tharu* informant explained:

The role of the *Bhalmansa* is essentially democratic. Every year, on Magh 2, villagers gather at *Bhalmansa*'s house or another community member's residence to assess the past year's efforts in communal work. This includes irrigation canals, road construction, and other development initiatives. This gathering, called *Bakheri*, serves as an annual review, and discussions are formally recorded in the presence of all members. The *Bakheri* identifies the major development priorities of the community for the upcoming year. The *Bhalmansa* and community members use the priorities as the advocacy talking points to visit local wards, municipalities, and other stakeholders to mobilize resources. The community collectively decides whether the current *Bhalmansa*, *Chirakiya*, and *Chaukidar* should continue or if new leaders should be chosen.

When a community needs justice, social disputes, marriage, divorce, or development works, the *Bhalmansa* instructs the *Chaukidar* to call a meeting of community members. A woman who is also a freed bonded laborer shared, "The *Bhalmansa* himself might inform the villagers by chanting from the center of the village or through messengers, calling out 'Khyala Aawo Re' (Everyone must gather at the *Bhalmansa*'s house today). Upon receiving the message, villagers gather attentively."

When I inquired about the frequency of meetings led by the *Bhalmansa*, a community member remarked, "Meetings (*Khyala*) are held monthly, during which members of the *Bhalmansa* system share information and exchange ideas." The data indicates that the role of *Bhalmansa* is crucial, as they dedicate significant time to community work. Consequently, each household contributes a certain amount of paddy or its equivalent in cash as subsistence support for the *Bhalmansa*. This contribution is considered an integral part of their indigenous democratic system.

When asked how this indigenous practice influences non-*Tharu* residents in the same community, a current *Bhalmansa* from Ward No. 5 stated, "There are 264 households in my community, including one Brahmin household. That household also contributes to the *Bhalmansa* and also follows my guidance in social matters. Despite not being *Tharu*, I still consider them as a member."

The statements from community members regarding the *Bhalmansa* system reveal critical insights into social cohesion and collective identity. The monthly meetings led by the *Bhalmansa* serve not only as a platform for sharing information and exchanging ideas but also as a mechanism for sustaining communal ties and ensuring participatory governance. The inclusion of non-*Tharu* residents, such as the *Brahmin* household, in the *Bhalmansa* shows a facet

of ethnic interaction and integration. The adherence of the *Brahmin* family to the *Bhalmansa's* guidance illustrates a flexible identity framework that accommodates diversity while fostering unity. In a follow-up inquiry regarding the coordination between the *Bhalmansa* and the ward office, as well as the inclusion of non-*Tharu* individuals in the communal system, a *Tharu*-elected ward representative noted:

There are three Bhalmansas and one sub-group in Ward No. 5, each in the Geta, Geti, and Barbatta cluster. They are socially accepted. However, differences exist between *Tharu* community members and those who migrated from outside. Unlike *Tharu* households, immigrants neither acknowledge the *Bhalmansa* nor receive visits from them. An exception exists in Geti, where a *Brahmin* family remain connected to the *Bhalmansa* system.

This narration raises an essential question regarding integrating non-*Tharu* populations within the *Bhalmansa* system. Is this phenomenon an example of modernization or *Sanskritization* (Sadana, 2015)? In exploring whether a dichotomy exists between *Tharu* and non-*Tharu* communities, a middle-aged *Tharu* man reflected, "Theoretically, yes! But practically, no. Non-*Tharus* also contribute payments to the *Bhalmansa* and participate in all community activities. This varies on a case-by-case basis."

During ethnographic field discussions, community members noted that selecting a *Bhalmansa* has evolved. Notable changes include the introduction of elections, the inclusion of female and youth leaders, and the selection of educated individuals with leadership skills. Despite these traditional system changes, the institution remains an important community platform. A *Tharu* man from Dang explained the potential for leveraging the *Bhalmansa* system for municipal service delivery, stating,

Any gathering (Khyala) could be utilized to inform people about public services, and discuss on pertinent issues, challenges and opportunities of the village. They include vitamin B capsule distribution for children, registration of birth, certification of citizenship, antenatal and postnatal care visits for mothers, school enrollment campaigns, and efforts to end child marriage.

When asked about the potential benefits of mobilizing the *Bhalmansa* for development work, he further emphasized:

All the households are cohesively associated, and the chain of command on social work remains with *Bhalmansa*. Their verdict is acceptable. The community members discuss services and development work. This would ensure the quality of community work due to their full attention, participation, and contribution. It would also foster local awareness and increase community ownership of development projects.

However, the *Bhalmansa* system has weakened despite its continued relevance as an intermediary role between

the community and local government in the federal system compared to the past. The geographical expansion of settlements has also created capacity limitations, where the *Bhalmansa* could have been supportive of disseminating information concerning the local services. I observed that the primary reason for this weakening is that people now have direct access to local legal committees, police, and other ward office services.

In response to my questions about why health institutions do not coordinate with the *Bhalmansa* in conducting preventive and promotional health services for the community, one Female Health Volunteer from the *Tharu* community stated:

Not all community members are part of it. Therefore, rather than relying solely on the *Bhalmansa*, we reach out to all clusters to communicate important messages to mother groups through our channels. We are not asked to go through *Bhalmansa* for this purpose. However, it would be helpful to mobilize the *Bhalmansa* to communicate messages and ensure no one is left behind in accessing health services. They have a substantial reach within the community.

In a similar vein, a freed woman bonded laborer and the vice-chairperson of the bonded labor community residing in a camp near the ward office shared that there are 35 households in the freed bonded labor camp, where a *Bhalmansa* serves as a leader, assisted by the *Chirakya* as a messenger. This cluster is a sub-system of the *Geti* community. According to her, the *Bhalmansa's* role is to mediate local disputes and advise community members on their responsibilities, which are unconditionally accepted by the community. Whenever there is an issue or opportunity, they spontaneously come forward and facilitate resolutions. To further understand the extent to which *Bhalmansa* serves as a local leader in mediating local issues and disputes, I inquired with a local police officer. He explained:

If cases involve the *Tharu* community, the *Bhalmansa* is automatically engaged and comes to the police officer, accompanying both the complainant (*Badi*) and the accused (*Pratibadi*). The *Bhalmansa* coordinates with both parties and facilitates a common ground for resolution. Most cases involve physical violence and alcohol-related disputes. The *Bhalmansa* tries to resolve these issues within the community's informal framework. However, if the matter remains unresolved, they eventually bring it to the police.

I asked whether the verdicts given by the *Bhalmansa* align with the formal legal and justice system. A police officer responded affirmatively, noting that this indigenous communal system has proven effective in maintaining law and order, a role primarily associated with the police and other security forces. However, he confirmed that while members of *Bhalmansa* informally contribute to these efforts, during his eight-month tenure as a police officer deputed in the units, he has not formally coordinated with

them for support. Instead, the *Bhalmansa* themselves approach police officers from within their cultural framework.

The ethnographic data and insights underscore the *Bhalmansa* system's potential as an indigenous grassroots governance structure that not only preserves indigenous leadership but also enhances community participation in development and public service initiatives. However, despite its cultural significance and the strong trust it commands within the community, the *Bhalmansa* system faces certain limitations. In particular, it was reported that in some case when *Bhalmansas* lack adequate knowledge or skills, their decisions may inadvertently result in actions that contravene legal norms, including the mediation of criminal matters.

While some local governments (Kailari and Janaki Rural Municipality, Kailali, Rajapur Municipality, Bardiya and Krishnapur Municipality, Kanchanpur) have begun recognizing and incorporating this system, broader institutional acknowledgment remains a key challenge in Godawari municipality. Despite facing challenges from external influences, the system continues to create cohesion within *Tharu* and voluntarily disseminate information concerning public service delivery. However, for this system to effectively fulfil its potential, a formal recognition by the provincial and local government would increase *Tharu* including *Rana Tharu* access to municipal public services.

Discussions

The preceding section detailed the state of municipal services, mainly focusing on the *Tharu* people to municipal services. The results are both consistent and contradictory with the existing knowledge in the field of inclusive governance. Anthropologists argue that modern public service delivery has evolved through various cultural groups historically embedded in socio-cultural structures (Malinowski, 1922; Mauss, 1950). Contemporary public services originate in cultural traditions (Blomberg & Darrah, 2015) and reflect broader patterns of social organizations (Lévi-Strauss, 1969). These findings describe culture as the way of life, learned behaviors, and social practices passed down through generations, which can be recognized by formal entities over time (Geertz, 1973) as there is a trend of increasing recognition of community governance structure (Agrawal, 2001). This aligns with the view that culture is a dynamic medium of agency, shaped by power and historical forces through everyday practices (Ortner, 2006).

The results indicate that the inclusive participation of women and the *Tharu* (including *Rana Tharu*) in local governance and municipal services remains challenging. This difficulty arises from the diminished historical role of the *Bhalmansa* in community governance, which has been undermined by modern bureaucratic systems, revealing

structural obstacles that hinder the effective participation of marginalized groups. This observation is consistent with Ferguson's (1994) concept of "anti-politics," which critiques how technical solutions proposed by the state agency often depoliticize structural inequalities and reinforce state control (Ferguson, 1994). Furthermore, at the local level, planning and policy discussion usually become a mechanism that legitimizes the means of control employed by state entities (Murray, 2007). However, this contradicts the capability approach, as local government does not serve as an analytical catalyst for increasing the participation of women and *Tharu* (Sen, 1999). The underlying issue may stem from power asymmetries within the governance system (Arnstein, 1969), leaving existing community governance without influence. The limited participation represents a form of "tyranny" where bureaucratic discussions primarily serve as a mechanism to legitimize decisions that have already been made (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). This reflects that power is embedded in practices where certain actors are well-positioned to dominate over others (Ortner, 2006).

The finding is consistent with the idea that formal inclusion does not translate into meaningful participation (Mosse, 2015). The historical role of the *Bhalmansa* as a key intermediary between the community and state institutions further emphasizes how indigenous governance structures have been unrecognized by formal bureaucratic processes. However, this also highlights how state-led formalization of governance often ignores traditional structures, contributing to the low participation of marginalized groups in service delivery (Gupta, 2012; Scott, 1999). Furthermore, Scott's (1999) notion of legibility describes how the state simplifies and standardizes existing social realities, often overlooking indigenous institutions such as *Bhalmansa*, normalizing administrative practices. The high frequency of multiple attempts among the *Tharu* to access municipal services reflects broader structural inequalities, bureaucratic barriers, and social exclusion. Bureaucratic hurdles often disproportionately affect women and marginalized ethnic groups, reinforcing systemic disparities in governance (Bourdieu, 2002; Scott, 1999). In contrast, the low first-attempt success rate (13.9%) suggests that municipal processes may be shaped by unequal citizenship experiences, reinforcing ethnographic patterns of exclusion and administrative bias in public service delivery (Gupta, 2012; Mosse, 2015).

The *Bhalmansa* system within the *Tharu* community serves as a vital indigenous network, connecting people with the municipality by disseminating public information and facilitating access to services. It bridges the gaps between communities and the formal state system (Gardner & Hobart, 1995). Study suggests that such a traditional structure fosters participatory governance by enabling community members to engage in collective decision-making and service delivery (Ortner, 1984). Beyond service facilitation, the *Bhalmansa* also plays a

crucial role in mediating local disputes, functioning as a robust network that strengthens local agencies (Gupta & Sharma, 2006). Therefore, recognizing and integrating such indigenous structures can reinforce community ties and improve access to essential services. This aligns with the core principles of subsidiarity, ensuring that governance outcomes are shaped through local agencies in a meaningful and effective manner (Merry, 2007). Furthermore, building on Ortner's (2006) practice theory, this highlights that the *Bhalmansa* system is influenced by changed contexts; however, it still functions as a space for agency. Similarly, Scott's (2006) observation warns that state agencies must regard these structures in the pursuit of administrative order.

Conclusion

Based on constitutional power, Godawari Municipality has been fully functional in providing services in different sectors. However, household survey data revealed that two-thirds of people had to make more than three attempts to obtain required local services. They heavily relied on informal networks such as friends and family members to overcome obstacles during the service interface. Although the *Bhalmansa* system has historically played a crucial role in fostering community ownership in local development and public service delivery, its influence has weakened. This finding on the decline represents more than the erosion of indigenous governance practice; it singles out the marginalization of localized forms of knowledge, leading to low participation of the *Tharu* community in governance and public service delivery. This decline is primarily attributed to local governments' lack of recognition and rigid bureaucratic procedures to formalize such structures through local policies.

Indigenous governance systems, such as the *Bhalmansa* structure, are not merely traditional network but contextually embedded, community-owned institutions that have long played a pivotal role in co-creation and co-production of public service delivery. Deeply rooted in localized norms of legitimacy, trust, and collective responsibility, this system continued community governance at the grassroots level. However, the expansion of modern bureaucratic governance has displaced these well-established indigenous governance structures. Although Nepal's normative frameworks formally promote inclusion, their practical enactment is often constrained by inflexible bureaucratic practices, uniform and top-down approaches over contextual responsiveness. Bridging this gap requires an intersectional and pluralistic approach, one that challenges one-size-fits-all models and acknowledges the heterogeneity of local contexts.

Declarations

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Not applicable.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

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Yes, data and materials are available.

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I have not use generative AI while writing this paper.

Ethical Conduct of Research

This research follow basic ethical values.

Author Disclaimer

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