

Religion, Faith and Empowerment: Hindu Women's Agency and Sacred Spaces in Far-West Nepal

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Abstract

Contrary to dominant development narrative that views religion as an obstructing force, this study highlights how local religious spaces, family rituals, and festival-specific celebrations provide Hindu women in Far-West Nepal distinct pathways to assert agency, build protective social networks, and re-define their status. Explaining the deep-rooted religious practices, like daily household worships, weekly fasts, temple singing and dancing groups, and observance of wide-ranging festivals, the paper examines how religiosity acts as a vital platform in power game of life. By reviewing the local field evidence on regional gender and celebratory customs, this study provides a comprehensive qualitative finding that the assertive presence of Hindu women in domestic and public religious spaces allows them challenge gender stereotypes and accumulate social capital despite structural patriarchal barriers. This article lastly argues that understanding Hindu women's psycho-social empowerment in Far-West Nepal requires a culturally sensitive approach that recognizes transformative potential of everyday religiosity.

Introduction

The Far-Western region of Nepal is frequently characterized in international development literature as an area marked by explicit socio-economic marginalization and conservative worldview. Within this setting, the life experiences of women are depicted through a debated lens of systemic vulnerability, patriarchal subordination, and physical isolation. Mainstream development reports regularly highlight a wide range of utter institutional limitations including heavy economic dependence on household males, low educational levels, restricted outdoor movement, and deep-rooted exclusionary structures. While these hardships show an undeniably struggling reality of women's experiences in the region, labeling them as passively silent victims of a rigid patriarchal hierarchy is just contrary to the creatively profound ways in which they have been reshaping their social worlds through active 'household and community' engagement.

A significant but largely overlooked aspects of this quiet social transformation include Hindu women's everyday religiosity, family rituals, and community festivities. In traditional Nepalese societies, religion is not an isolated institution that operates separately from others around. Rather, it is deeply interwoven with the basic fabric of people's culture, kinship systems, and daily socialization practices. Traditional sociological frameworks have often focused heavily on orthodox texts or male-dominated institutional leadership, which historically used religious scriptures to justify strict gender hierarchies and assign women to secondary submissive roles. However, when researchers shift their focus to the actual 'lived practice' of religion at the grassroots level, a far more fluid, dynamic, and encouraging story begins to emerge.

In the hilly areas of Far-West Nepal, Hindu women function as the primary custodians and organizers of domestic rituals, seasonal fasts, gatherings for devotional singing and dancing, and regional festivities. This paper focuses directly on how the immersive engagement of Hindu women in their local sacred spaces serves as a practical instrument for their social empowerment. By stepping into the public spheres during the accepted religious occasions, women find cultural

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platforms to assemble without male supervision, build close solidarity networks, and articulate their collective joys, worries, and daily struggles. This qualitative exploration simply moves beyond materialistic indicators of empowerment that rely solely on economic income or political demographic data. Instead, it seeks to capture a rich description of how women utilize their own expressions of faith, ritual performance, and sacred storytelling to claim a sense of personal dignity, community voice, and collective agency in life.

Bradley (2007) argues that contemporary research must move away from creating static homogenous descriptions of traditional communities, and instead, look closely at how local individuals actively use and reshape cultural symbols to handle their changing social realities. To sketch the concrete geographic reality of Far-West Nepal, this study integrates grassroot-findings of the secondary literature with my own experiential reflexivity as I belong to the same region. Rather than presenting quantitative tables, statistical charts, or numbered lists, this study employs a smooth story-telling approach. It focuses on extracting deep meaning from women's oral traditions, everyday ritual behaviors, and cooperative social interactions, as documented by the field researchers. By treating these secondary texts as active dialogical materials, this paper traces the real flow of local female agency, showing how Hindu women use the familiar language of faith to secure better space within their homes and wider local communities.

Objectives

This study is guided by the contemporarily relevant issue of women's social empowerment, linking it to their religious participation in Far-West Nepal. In this backdrop, the paper aims to meet two objectives: (a) To analyze Hindu women's religious life and how that impacts their empowerment; and (c) To explain the interplay between religious practices, women's performance of rituals, and transformational power they gain.

Methodology

This study is designed mainly as a qualitative secondary literature review that synthesizes insights from the anthropological researches, related gender studies, and development reports concerning Nepal. To ensure the highest level of academic accountability and trustworthiness, this paper delimits its review to such literatures that are entirely public and accessible worldwide online. Besides, I have also blended the description with my personal reflexivity based on 'lived experience' as a woman from Far-West Nepal

Religion and empowerment: A connect

For many decades, majority of the international development organizations held a firm assumption that socio-economic progress required complete secularization. Within this classic capitalistic framework, local religious traditions in developing countries of Global South were universally viewed as regressive obstacles, superstitions, and primary sources of gender oppression that needed to be dismantled before true liberation of women could occur. However, contemporary anthropological researches have largely challenged this 'fallible' perspective. As Bradley (2007) puts it, religion is not a fixed set of dogmatic texts but a living cultural space where values and beliefs continuously drive the real actions, interactions, and choices of ordinary individuals. Religion provides a dynamic conceptual framework to understand life and culture functions as the practical mechanism through which these profound beliefs are translated into daily social structures, family organization, and community behaviors.

The strong integration between faith and culture means that religious spaces carry an immense amount of social power and legitimacy in conservative environments. Bradley (2007) notes that the sacred ideas and traditional values possess an ultimate authority that restricts the degree to which they can be openly challenged by secular groups. Consequently, when marginalized individuals including women establish an assertively active presence within these sacred spaces, they gain access to a platform of 'power' that earns them respect of the broader community. Women's such active participation in religious activities frees them from the invisible barriers that traditionally blocked their previous generations. Therefore, true social empowerment often occurs more naturally and effectively when women utilize the legitimate expressions of their own faith to negotiate for equal acceptance, protecting their overall well-being, and claiming personal dignity.

Women's life in the region: Hard realities

To genuinely appreciate the transformative potential of religious engagement, we must fully understand the patriarchal structures that govern everyday realities of Hindu women in Far-West Nepal. Social assessments conducted in the region reveal a deeply unequal distribution of power, resources, and freedom of movement. According to the regional research compiled by Search for Common Ground (2017), women in the Far-Western districts experience high levels of gender-based isolation and economic marginalization. The traditional family structure in these hill communities

is strictly patrilocal and patriarchal, meaning that a young woman must leave her parental home upon marriage to live in her husband's home, where she automatically occupies the lowest hierarchical position.

In the dominantly agricultural villages, physical workload placed on women is immense, who are even responsible for collecting firewood from distant forests, cutting fodder grass on steep hillsides, fetching water, cooking, and performing heavy farm labor. Yet they rarely hold any legal ownership over the land they cultivate or the income generated by their duties. As critically analyzed by Pokharel (2024), these deep-fixed inequalities stem directly from persistent socio-cultural norms, resource disparities, and systematic barriers that keep most of the female population tied to unpaid structural or domestic labor.

Despite the above constraints, Hindu women in the region have mobilized highly empowering traditions that elevate their individual status. As noted in the research on women's empowerment by PSD Nepal (2018), women actively use the localized religious networks to build self-esteem and create own spaces when they face harsher social restrictions. These practices ensure that women retain moral authority over the religious continuity of their families, making the culturally accepted pathways incredibly vital for their dignified individuality and social equality.

Women's religious agency in family

Everyday performance of religious duties within the domestic household is largely on the shoulders of women. Every morning, before the rest of the family awakens, the house woman begins her duties by sweeping the floors, cleaning the courtyard with or without the purified mud and cow dung, cleansing her body, and conducting morning *puja* (worship) of *Kuldevata* (family Deity). She lights the oil lamp, burns incense, prepares *prasad* (special food offerings) to seek the blessings of God and ancestral spirits. Far from being a mere passive chore, this daily domestic routine holds immense structural significance in the local belief system. Because women serve as the exclusive performers of this daily Divine service, they exercise an essential form of micro-authority within the household. This reveals a highly complex internal manifestation of female agency.

Hindu women often approach daily religious boundaries as spaces of personal negotiation using their exclusive ritual responsibilities to preserve internal family control, maintain domestic moral standing, and construct a unique sense of local cultural heritage. Similarly, performance of regular *vratas* (fasts) presents a vibrant platform for personal autonomy. While traditional interpretations suggest that a wife must fast primarily to ensure the longevity of her husband, the actual lived performance of *vratas* (fasts) fills a deep sense of moral pride, mental discipline, and self-control in the woman herself. Furthermore, these fasts offer women a legitimate and culturally honest justification to temporarily pause their hard physical labor, shift their energy inward, and gather with other fasting neighborhood women to share oral histories away from immediate domestic obligations.

Community rituals and women's space

Moving beyond the household boundaries, women in Far-West Nepal actively claim public authority by joining a variety of periodic religious activities. Notable among these at the village level are *Bhajan* (hymn-singing) groups, where women gather at neighborhood temple courtyards during specific holy months, full moons, or weekly prayer nights to collectively sing devotional songs and dance, play traditional instruments, and recite sacred verses. These periodic gatherings serve as a crucial social bridge for women who are geographically and socially isolated within their separate marital homes. When females leave their home to attend a neighborhood *Bhajan* (hymn-singing) session, they are utilizing an absolutely sacred justification that male family members cannot easily deny or restrict. Within the protective boundaries of the temple courtyard, a highly supportive independent female space is instantly created. Free from the immediate monitoring and commands of men, women utilize these periodic gatherings to loudly sing, dance, talk, and laugh openly. *Bhajan* (hymn-singing) group works effectively as a cross-generational informal school where senior local women offer emotional support, survival advice, and intense solidarity to newly married young daughters-in-law who have recently migrated to the area and struggling to adjust to the acute pressures of their new households.

On a very large scale, the annual celebration of Gaura Parva festival represents the ultimate periodic manifestation of female leadership and public agency in Far-West Nepal. This major regional festival, which honors Goddess Gauri (Parvati) as the ultimate Divine mother, is unique because its elaborate structural preparation, complex ritual logistics, and emotional core are directed and managed entirely by women. Men step back completely during these holy days, openly acknowledging that women alone possess the intricate ritual knowledge, vocal melodies, and spiritual authority

required to invoke the blessings of Goddess Gauri (Parvati) for longevity and prosperity of the entire community.

In my personal understanding and experience, Gaura Parva represents a highly sophisticated indigenous amalgamation of nature, culture, and 'situated religiosity' (Awasthi, 2024). The festival requires women to manage complex ecological and social operations, including the ritual harvesting and processing of *biruda* (a holy mixture of five grains) and the structural creation of Gaura idol using specific local grasses. Women lead the public distribution of these sacred offerings, manage the festival's physical spaces, and co-ordinate massive gatherings, directly shattering the patriarchal stereotype that women comparatively are incapable of managing complex public events.

Songs and dances: Women's collective expressions

The absolute artistic and therapeutic core of periodic religious gatherings, most visibly during Gaura Parva celebrations, is the performance of traditional Deuda dance. In this ritual art form, women link their arms tightly together to form a massive, slowly rotating human circle, stepping in harmony to rhythmic group singing (Kalauni, 2024). While the apparent purpose of Deuda is to praise the mythological endurance and holy virtues of Goddess, the 'live' performance of songs works as a magnificent platform for collective storytelling, narrative processing, and open sharing of grievances.

Inside the protective safety of the Deuda dance circle, women use the socially accepted language of artistic performance to openly voice their rawest personal emotions, structural frustrations, and daily hardships. The verses they sing focus heavily on the extreme physical exhaustion and pain of carrying heavy bundles of grass and firewood down dangerously steep mountain trails. They also explicitly capture the intense long loneliness and domestic vulnerability they experience because their young husbands have migrated away for labor. Furthermore, these songs publicly detail the unfair treatment, emotional aloofness, or harsh verbal commands they sometimes receive from strict mothers-in-law or elderly male relatives, alongside the profound, enduring grief of leaving their loving parents, childhood friends, and natal (parental) villages behind on the day of their marriage.

The above religious practice functions as an indigenous form of group counseling and mental health processing. This process directly mirrors what academic literature defines as a patriarchal bargain, where women intentionally work within a highly restrictive system to extract personal security and psychological relief. As evaluated by Air (2025), the performance ground of Deuda goes far beyond a simple geographic location since it operates as a socially situated theater split across private, domestic, and public spheres where performers and audiences co-create meaning, utilizing the space as a primary medium for social commentary and thematic reflection. Within this moving collective circle, a young woman by watching and listening realizes that her private feelings are shared by her peers, fostering an intense sense of group identity, emotional validation, and collective resilience that allows them to withstand the systemic inequalities of their daily routines.

Women's support networks: Building social power

Being born and raised in Far-West Nepal, my own 'observed and lived experience' has been that simple religious participation acts as a primary catalyst to build social capital and strong solidarity networks of women. Because of the patrilocal marriage restrictions, most women in the past used to live in isolation within their family boundaries and limitations. But now they use the 'social lifeline' of regular meetings in the name of temple service, prayer-gatherings on auspicious *tithi* (special days of Hindu calendar), and seasonal festivals. Inside these sacred spaces, a solid network of mutual support is established. On those sacred spaces, women have started talking freely about their real-world agenda, sharing private stories of maternal health, childcare situation, cure for illness, strategies for controlling household tension, and cooperative exchange of goods and labor. These faith-based informal support groups have become an essence of community life in Far-West Nepal today. Sociological evaluations show that *Aama Samuha* (Mothers' Groups), Community Forestry Committees, and Saving Cooperatives have lately emerged out of the smaller groups founded for religious prayers, songs, and dances.

Notably, active religious engagement correlates directly with the increase in personal self-confidence and public self-esteem. A woman who stands proud in religious circles, commands the attention of a devoted crowd, manages a festival fund, or leads intense devotional singing in religious gatherings, is indirectly having a leadership training. She carries her 'developed confidence' when she steps into the predominantly male spaces of family responsibility, speaks firmly even in non-religious events, and defends openly her independent identity, equal voice, and unrestrained choice.

Conclusion

For many decades, Western-centric growth models assumed prominence under a narrow secular bias that local religious traditions were ‘regressive obstacles’ to full-scale modern development of the third-world countries in Global South. The loud advocacy was to eliminate this religiosity even ‘for women to achieve true freedom’. But ‘lived choices’ of religious engagement by Hindu women in Far-West Nepal prove that the above argument is a ‘superficially superfluous view’ that completely misses the uniquely contextual and deeply effective vocabularies of local agency, which beautifully operates within women’s sacred spaces. Through their leading involvement in festivals, their quiet authority over daily household worships, and their participation in community singing and dancing groups, women softly overcome their domestic loneliness, build strong lifelines of mutual safety, heal their deep emotional pain, and claim a powerful sense of human dignity. These everyday religious activities do not automatically fix women’s all sufferings. But the rituals work like ‘cultural school’ where women practice wider socializing, discover the power of their voices, and learn solidarity.

A Hindu woman in Far-West Nepal does not experience her faith as a battle between the patriarchal influence and freedom of choice. Instead, she engages in a conciliatory process of cultural bargaining. She complies with the customary family rules to maintain essential harmony and community protection while simultaneously claiming her agency, voice, and choice within the traditional setting. This brilliant capacity to live within an orthodox structure, while quietly converting its most sacred symbols into tools for personal dignity and collective solidarity, proves that everyday religiosity is one of the most organic, authentic, and powerful pathways for women to achieve true empowerment in and in the contexts similar to Far-West Nepal.

To end, the qualitative literatures reviewed in this study expose a compelling paradox that highlights how women’s religious engagement simultaneously operates as a key pathway for their voice, choice, and social transformation. The solution to this is recognizing the critical difference between the misread Hindu religious scriptures and the ‘lived reality’ of everyday religiosity practiced by women at the life’s grassroots. While some classical literature may mention highly restrictive boundaries for women, their daily religious behavior in Far-West Nepal has been increasingly proactive and visibly focused around asserting their true ‘womanhood’.

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