



A Bibliographical Conspectus of Indigenous Peoples' Customary Institutions: From 1990 to 2020 Onwards

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Article Info

Received: 5 May 2026

Reviewed: 27 May 2026

Revised Received: 16 June 2026

Accepted: 25 June 2026

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/nsj.v2i1.97165>

Abstract

This bibliographical review traces studies of Indigenous Peoples' and their customary institutions, showcasing their significance and meaning by charting the larger body of literature published from 1990 to 2025. It locates and assesses these works to foreground the nature and approaches of studies on Nepal's environmental issues and conservation initiatives, which are intertwined with and inseparable from IPs' long-held customary institutions and governance system. It then engages with the epistemic content of these works, the issues they address, and the themes, perspectives, developed lexicons and narratives, focusing on the positions taken by various researchers in exploring IPs and their customary traditions and practices within a shifting social and political context. These shifts in the national and global spheres have also influenced the study of Nepal's IPs and their customary practices, as evidenced in publications after 1990. The review, therefore calls for future sociological exploration and a comprehensive assessment of these works published during this period. The study finds a co-relationship between the publications on Indigenous peoples customary institutions and the social, political, and economic shifts in the national and global spheres.

Keywords

customary institutions; Indigenous Peoples; Indigenous worldviews; governance; commons

Introduction

Apart from its scenic and natural richness, Nepal's past and present are rooted in the cultural vibrancy of Indigenous Peoples (IPs), expressed through long-held customary traditions and institutions. From time immemorial, IPs has lived and deepened its symbiotic relationship with nature as its true stewards. In doing so, it has developed unique cultures, lifeways, worldviews and knowledge accordingly. This shows that the essence or core of the term 'sustainability' lies on what IPs had institutionalized and practiced long ago, rooted in their informal customary institutions and traditional governance systems.

Helmke and Levitsky (2004) define informal institutions as 'socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated, and enforced outside officially sanctioned channels. Indigenous governance systems are therefore locally evolved, operated and performed by local elders and experienced members of society, and function through unwritten laws, ethics, and values (Larson, 1998). Customary self-government of IPs refers to their capacity to exercise their inherent, inviolable, inseparable, and natural right to self-determination, spiritual power, and collective power through the freedom to rule without obstruction by external forces or colonialism (Bhattachan, 2023; Thami, 2024).

Despite their enormous significance for environmental balance, maintenance, conservation and cultural heritage, IPs had long struggled for their rights, self-determination, self-rule and autonomy, and for the protection of their customary traditions in human-nature interactions. With the formation of the modern state and colonial expansion into Indigenous territories, many customary institutions lost their autonomy to dominant state laws, which either criminalized or diminished the relevance of customary governance practices. Moreover, the imposition of Western values in the name of laws, policies and development further deteriorated Indigenous relationships with the land and people (Kopnina, 2013).

Equally in Nepal, authoritative state-led laws, policies and projects, along with repressive cultural imposition, unjust assimilation and development-led resource extraction, destruction, forceful encroachment and displacement have historically oppressed and marginalized IPs from their land and dependent natural resources. However, after 2007, Nepal's political landscape underwent a structural shift it had never witnessed before, bringing multiple reforms and granting IPs self-determination and autonomy at the policy and judicial levels. Despite this commendable shift, lacunas still remain and need timely revision and proper legal execution.

With this backdrop, this paper provides a brief overview of published works on IPs in Nepal, along with the issues, perspectives and positions taken by various researchers

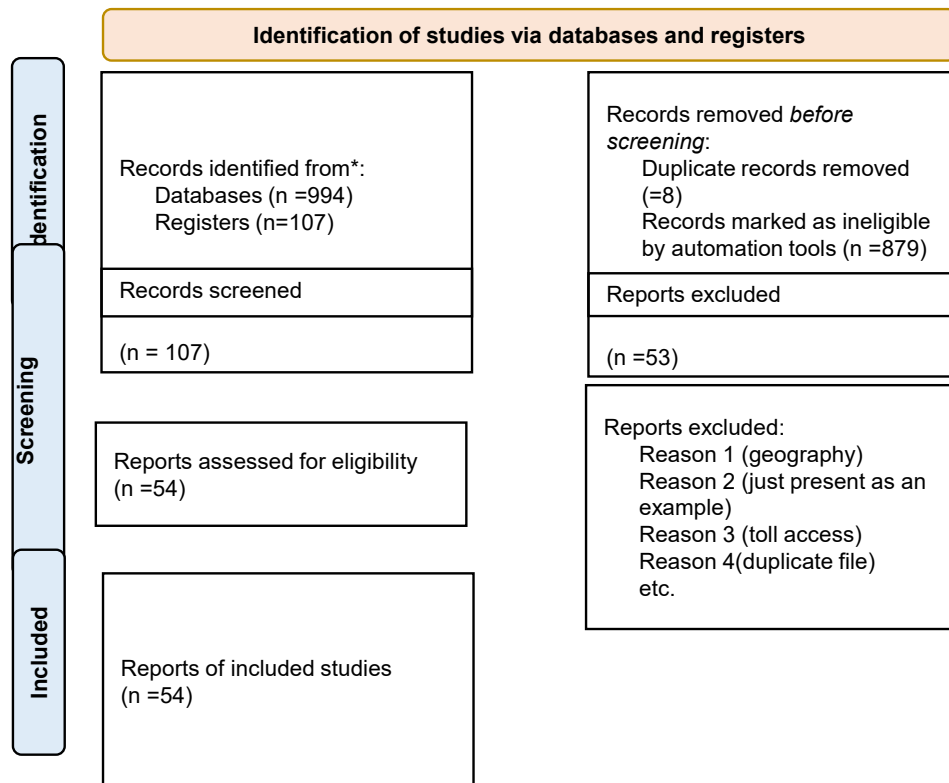
in exploring IP and their customary traditions and practices. We review selected works spanning more than three decades, from 1990 to 2020 onwards, in a changing political context. However, this is not an extensive bibliographical assessment, due to time constraints. This is why we call it a bibliographical conspectus, focusing on a select few works. Nevertheless, this assessment is necessary for understanding, evaluating, interpreting, reflecting, analyzing and critiquing. Moreover, our assessment aids in understanding particular ideas, prisms and the episteme produced in the exploration of IPs issues at specified timelines. We believe this work can be of academic value to future researchers and writers, encouraging them to delve further into the reappraisal of what has been published so far on and about the IPs issue in Nepal.

Methodology

As stated in our Introduction, this study provides a synoptic bibliographical overview of the nature and contents of those published works on Nepal's IP and their customary institutions, spanning more than thirty years. In doing so, PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines are applied to make the review process transparent and increase the credibility of research. Within this process, we used keywords such as Nepal's Indigenous Peoples, customary governance, customary institutions, Indigenous customary governance *and* Indigenous institutions *to* search the literature on internet sites like Google Scholar, NEPJOL, JSTOR, BioOne, Academia, Springer, I/NGO publications, Government publications and Reports, academic dissertations, conference proceedings, among others. A total of 994 journals were cataloged in Excel. After deleting 8 duplicates and 879 ineligible articles, 107 articles remained, of which 53 were further screened based on inclusion and exclusion criteria.

One of the major determinants in searching the inclusion and exclusion criteria was the research question: What are the customary institutions and how has the research on customary institutions changed over time? The second criterion for selecting articles was publication after 1990. The third criterion was the article status (open or toll); only open-access articles were considered for review. The fourth criterion was that only publications related to the customary institutions of Indigenous communities in Nepal were considered for review. After screening based on these inclusion and exclusion criteria, 54 articles were selected for the study.

The Prisma 2020 flow diagram for systematic review has been used to elicit the process of systematic literature review (Page, 2021).

Figure 1*Systematic Literature Review Framework***Results and Discussion****Formative Period: 1990-2000**

The decade 1990-2000 marked a shifting political juncture for Nepal. Power was transferred back to political parties from the Monarch and the newly reformed Constitution was enacted. As a result, citizens felt free to express collective voices through their associational organizations and to claim equal participation and identity rights. In this context, various rights-based organizations began to emerge one after another. Particularly, Indigenous Peoples' (IPs') organizations, such as NEFIN (formerly NEFEN) and NIWF, were registered. Consequently, these organizations systematically launched rights-based campaigns against historic injustices that IPs had long faced. Later, their voices gained traction in the civic, developmental and academic domains. Globally, the fall of the Berlin Wall ended the Cold War, providing momentum for the advancement of civil, political and cultural rights. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, free-market economies and pro-market policies triumphed globally (Bagchi, 2018). The Earth Summit held in Brazil's Rio de Janeiro in 1992 recognized and secured legal standards for IPs' rights to customary practices and participation at

cultural, legal and political levels. These shifts also redefined development debates and discourse, with ideas such as “participatory development”, the “capability approach”, and the “community-based” approach.

This global shift towards a liberal, people-centered, community-based approach to sustainability also influenced Nepal's development and conservation practices. In Nepal's forestry sector, these concepts emerged as an exemplary feature of the forest regime (Acharya et al., 2008). For instance, the Buffer zone measures of 1998 shifted conservation from a fortress model to a people-centered approach by addressing the social and development needs of community members. Against this backdrop, customary institutions and practices of the IPs became an important area of enquiry for harmonizing conservation and defining a development paradigm.

Amid this social and political backdrop, and alongside campaigns and movements, publications on customary practices and Indigenous governance in Nepal quickly gained attention. To illustrate the importance and effectiveness of Indigenous customary practices: Barlett and Malla's (1992) study on the *Kipat* and *Talukdari* systems of the Tamang community in Chisa Pani. The study highlighted a pre-existing Indigenous forest governance system that predates the notion of participatory community forestry. The study argued that effective “people-centered” community forestry requires Indigenous management systems like *Kipat* and *Talukdari*. Likewise, Beltrán and Phillips (1998) emphasized participation, recognition of rights, and the harmonious blending of Indigenous governance with modern conservation initiatives for sustainable development. Their report, focusing on the *Singhi Nawa* customary forest management of the Sherpa community in Sagarmatha district, depicted how customary forest management has contributed to conservation and community practices, and recommended aligning conservation efforts with community aspirations to avoid conflict with protected areas.

Similarly, the study by Miiller-Boker and Kollmair (2000) in the Kanchanjunga Conservation Area Project (KCAP) focuses on how a new participatory conservation project is perceived by a local community. Jointly managed by the Department of National Park and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC) and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), the project reveals a notable gap between its conservation priorities and the community's actual needs. While the KCAP emphasizes conservation and increased public awareness of its importance, the community itself struggles with basic transportation, access to drinking water, and health services, among other challenges. Few even saw the KCAP itself as the major problem impeding their lifeways. The study concludes by emphasizing the community approach to conservation and the need to increase awareness of the roles of the different partners involved in

conservation projects, suggesting that these gaps must be addressed for the project to be effective. Although the study highlights some Indigenous values and practices that contribute to conservation, it does not explicitly discuss the functioning of customary institutions.

The period from 1990 to 2000 can be considered formative for the emergence of associational and organizational formations advocating IPs' cultural, legal and political rights. During this period, many Nepali and non-Nepali scholars produced substantial academic and developmental works on IPs and their long-standing customary traditions. We therefore call this decade formative for organizational growth and development, alongside the social, developmental and academic agendas that emerged particularly after 1990. However, this should not be misunderstood to mean that there were no collective initiatives led by IPs to raise their voices before 1990.

Transitional Period: 2000-2010

The first decade of the millennium witnessed a surge that brought a notable shift in the country's social, political and rights-based foundations. More than 200 years of the monarchical system came to an end. Likewise, the decade-long Maoist insurgency was politically settled, bringing structural transformations and the opening new civic spaces. Nevertheless, the period remained transitional, and the long, demanding struggle for IPs' rights and autonomy remained uncertain, leading to animosity. However, collective campaigns and movements shaped the atmosphere for framing the new constitution, thereby assuring hope for secularism, proportional representation, ethnicity-based federalism, creating space for self-rule, self-determination, and Indigenous rights. Around the same time, Nepal ratified the International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention 169 and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007), an international legal instrument that would shape the future course of Indigenous movements and rights. These shifting socio-political contexts, together with increasing Indigenous consciousness, and the provisions of international conventions and laws, also help explain the growing number of publications on issues related to Indigenous rights, representation, identity and related issues. As these conditions changed, publications of the time increasingly contrasted customary and formal governance systems. Several authors, such as Wakiyama (2004), Uprety (2008), and Acharya et al. (2008), explored numerous conservation practices of Indigenous communities through comparative analysis. Thus, these studies were mostly exploratory and comparative, as they primarily focused on differences between Indigenous and state-led conservation practices.

Although these studies positioned the customary institutions of Indigenous Peoples communities as functional and effective (Wakiyama, 2004; Uprety, 2008)

or, in some cases, as feudal and oppressive (Acharya et al. 2008), they nonetheless suggested that customary institutions held immense potential for a participatory and community-based approach. Gurung's (2008) PhD dissertation extended these discussions by bringing together customary systems and contemporary biodiversity conservation initiatives and by suggesting hybridization in practice. The study also explored customary governance using Indigenous methodologies, including oral history interviews, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, documentary materials, and local-level *chhalphal* and discussion forums, embedded within Indigenous epistemological perspectives and interpreted using grounded theory. Gurung's methodological approach left an impression on other researchers.

Around the same time, Banjade et al. (2008) drew attention to the pastoral systems of Indigenous communities in mountain regions. This study reviews the existing systems and laws that have challenged the continued functioning of traditional customary institutions. It also draws attention to the emerging conflict emerging over the governance of the commons between the highland Sherpa and the hilly Thami and Brahmin communities. In doing so, it provides a different lens on the commons, beyond the forest and conservation areas, mostly studied by earlier scholars. Although earlier studies by Miiller-Boker and Kollmair (2000) and Uprety (2008) discuss the pastoral land management practices of Indigenous communities, they do not engage extensively with how the customary institutions enact the management function.

In the years 2008, 2009, and 2010, the idea of the Indigenous and Community Conserved Area (ICCA) was gaining attention. Stevens' publications (2008; 2009) on ICCA present an alternative conservation strategy grounded in the principles and values of Indigenous conservation. These publications aim to justify the designation of Sagamatha National Park (SNP) as an ICCA. In contrast to earlier conservation approaches it draws attention to Indigenous relationality with the land and to how spiritually informed values ameliorate conservation practices among the Indigenous Sherpa community in the *Khumbu* region. In the same way, Jana and Paudel's (2010) book presents rich evidence of Indigenous and Community conservation practices, which are culturally rooted and spiritually based. It suggests the importance of the effectiveness of such culturally and spiritually informed conservation values and practices.

Likewise, Aryal et al. (2010) draw attention to shifting cultivation among the Rai, Limbu, and Sherpa communities. They present shifting cultivation as Indigenous knowledge that farmers have practiced for generations. To manage natural resources, they assess the existing constraints on shifting cultivation and suggest that maintaining and improving it offers many benefits for practitioners, nature conservation and

the emergent climate crisis. This reemphasizes the importance of recognizing such Indigenous Peoples practices in policies concerning natural resource management.

Even though the period was politically void and transitional, Nepal's transformation into a Republican country, continued advocacy for self-determination and autonomy, policy and legal changes, and the continuous publication of works reflecting IPs customs, traditions, practices, and rights, together with the Nepali state's ratification of ILO 169, appeared to mark a new watershed in revising indignity and rights. These developments reinforced long-standing cultural traditions and safeguarded them culturally, politically and legally.

Transformative Period: 2011-2020

The years 2011 to 2020 marked a period of change in Nepal's policy and legal domain. After almost 7 years of political vacuum, the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal finally promulgated a new Constitution. The period also witnessed an increasing number of publications on customary institutions and the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity and the Aichi targets, with the motto "living in harmony with nature". In 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were launched, with 17 goals and 168 targets. Together, these CBD development goals and plans reflect, respect and recognize IPs' customary traditions and practices. The decade also saw an increasing number of Indigenous scholars and development practitioners engaged in research and publications on customary institutions, with new perspectives and an expanded scope beyond the ecological to the social and economic dimensions. These publications mostly centered on social, economic, and climate justice, REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation), and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK).

For instance, Kattel's (2011) publication on the conflict management practices of the Kisan community through their customary Baiga system elucidated the system's structure and function. The study demonstrates how these customary institutions can aid the modern justice system and how their traditions facilitate access to justice and conflict resolution within the community through different subsystems such as Mahato, Wakil, and Sipahi. Similarly, Ghimire's (2018) PhD dissertation uses a pluriverse lens to enhance the justice system. By embodying legal pluralism, a human rights-based theoretical approach, and critical legal theories and decolonial methodologies, the study analyzes the selected Traditional Justice Systems (TJS) like Shir Uthaune, Badghar, and Mukhiya of Rai, Tharu, and Thakali, respectively, and describes the relationship between TJS and the formal justice system (FJS), highlighting the potential for establishing a relationship between the two systems to improve access to justice, especially for TJS users. .

Another study by Pant et al. (2017) reveals the growing conflict between the Byansi *Sauka* (rung) community and non-Indigenous communities living at lower altitudes in the Api *Nampa* conservation area in far western Nepal. The study demonstrates how the increasing economic values of *Yarsagunbu* (*Ophiocordyceps sinensis*), found at high altitude, has created conflict and weakened the traditional relationship between the high-altitude *Byansi Sauka* community and lower altitude collectors. These restrictions have led to the Shaukha communities being disallowed from grazing their cattle at lower altitudes during harsh winters. Similarly, Wallrapp et al. (2019), identify a discrepancy between local and formal legal provisions in *Yarsagunbu* governance and recommend linking local-community level amendments with formal policies and frameworks to ensure the sustainable use of common-pool natural resources.

The publications on customary institutions also continued, with increased inquiry into other Indigenous communities. Chidi's (2013) study, for example, presents an anthropological account of the *Bheja* system in the Magar community, explaining its nature, role and selection process. It also underscores the system's adaptability to modern times and state governance. Likewise, Parajuli et al. (2019) examine the roles and contributions of *Choho*, a customary institution of the Tamang community, in forest governance and schools. The study shows how such institutions can regulate their traditional lifeways while adopting modern apparatuses, such as schools, into their governance, adding evidence of their adaptability to modern/state-form mechanisms.

In the same spirit, Kotru et al. (2012) draw attention to the Thakali community's natural resource management practices through its customary Mukhiya system. They unveil the adaptability of Thakali's customary common-pool resource management practices in a rapidly degrading landscape shaped by changing economic and social contexts, migration, emerging issues in natural resource governance, the state policies and climate change. Likewise, Sherpa (2015) inspects the customary institution of *Ngisyanwas* in the Manang valley offering a holistic view of its diverse roles and functions in smooth social-cultural governance. Similarly, Acharya & Baral (2017) illuminate the social organization and holistic function of the *Barghar/badghar* system of the Tharu community showing its administrative, leadership, judicial, ritual, development and planning roles in the village. Chaudhary (2018) further elaborates on *Barghar's* role in Tharu social mobilization assesses these practices in Janaki Rural Municipality. Together, these studies offer the functioning of these customary institutions and their adaptability to changing times.

In critiquing the state-led conservation practices, Stevens (2013) continued to critique the state-led conservation practices and their implications for IPs' arguing

that their sustainable contributions to conservation in national parks are undermined and threatened by inadequate recognition and respect for their ICCAs in national legislation, Department of National Park and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC) policies and practices, and national park management planning. His earlier works (Stevens 2008; 2009) highlighted the potential for Indigenous conservation practices, primarily the customary practices of the Sherpa's *Singhi Nawa* and the *beyul* (sacred hidden land) concept, to be recognized as ICCAs. His 2013 work explores the political ecology of ICCAs in Nepal's Himalayan region, where national parks have been superimposed on pre-existing IPs' customary territories, institutions, and practices, which constitute Indigenous Conserved Territories (ICTs) and ICCAs. It discusses how these Himalayan national parks and ICCAs, in the context of evolving international protected area and rights standards, are integral to implementing rights-based conservation and international human and indigenous rights treaties and conventions, including the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), and current international protected area policy.

Climate change emerged as another dominant theme, especially after 2015, with publications on its impacts and justice becoming a key area of enquiry. Earlier studies linked the climate crisis to issues affecting Indigenous communities or to areas they could help address, but these insights came from the studies themselves (Kotru et al., 2012; Aryal et al., 2010). Topics centered around reduced emissions from deforestation, forest degradation (REDD) mitigation plans and adaptation plans relating to IPs. For instance, Gentle and Thwaites (2016) discuss the adaptability of transhumant pastoralism in the context of socioeconomic and climate change in Ghermu village, Lamjung. The study appraises the status, opportunities, and constraints of pastoralism in the shifting socio-political atmosphere and suggests that Indigenous and traditional knowledge, cultural identity, collective ownership, income, and mutual benefits have sustained transhumant pastoralism for generations. Recent climate impacts on mountain ecosystems, socioeconomic changes, market influence on livelihood decisions, youth migration and labor shortage, low motivation among local people to engage in livestock rearing, and conflicts between herder and non-herder communities and institutions, as well as inadequate policy support and institutional arrangements, now threaten the continuation of customary institutions such as *Thithi*.

Contrarily, other studies position Indigenous Peoples customary institutions as strong agents in mitigating climate change and ensuring social justice. Baral's (2015) report for the REDD Implementation Center aims to identify the most suitable customary forest and pasture management categories, approaches, and structures for inclusion in Nepal's REDD+ program. It assesses the effects of policy changes over various

periods on forest and pasture land management practices. Based on the overall assessment, socio-economic features, the status of Indigenous forests and pasture management systems, and national and international policy and legal instruments related to Indigenous Peoples, it develops and recommends priority programs and activities for REDD+ as strategic options for Indigenous-friendly policy instruments. Similarly, Sherpa et al. (2018) highlight the interplay between customary tenure systems and REDD+ to ensure that Indigenous Peoples benefit. The study suggests that the REDD+ effort is positive because it aims to include representatives from Indigenous communities in the working group. It also draws attention to factors that could affect the fair and equal distribution of benefits, such as the historical marginalization of Indigenous communities, the Land Reform Act 1964, and the Forest Act 1993, which seizes IPs' ownership of their territory, as well as intersectionality within the Indigenous community, where women were found to be more dependent on resources, equally affected by the loss of ownership.

Against a backdrop of increasing climate vulnerability, Acharya et al. (2016) highlight how the *Mukhiya system* and mother groups support climate adaptation through good governance and natural resource management practices. The authors identify a key limitation of the modern participatory approach and its inability to recognize and uphold customary systems within the participatory process, which weakens its effectiveness. The study recommends that bringing together meaningful practices within the formal and customary systems can enhance adaptive capacity.

Coupled with climate issues, sustainability has been a recurring theme in the social, political, and economic spheres since 2015. Karki and Adhikari (2015) emphasize integrating Indigenous, local, and modern knowledge for sustainable conservation and management of forest ecosystems in Nepal. Their study documents and assesses community-based practices from five districts of Nepal highlighting the evolution, innovations, and adaptation processes of community resource management. It presents the Mukhiya system in ACAP and the *Singhi Nawa* in SNP, and discusses their collaboration with the conservation areas, suggesting that *Singhi Nawa* is more effective because it is included in the buffer-zone committee staff, whereas Mukhiya functions in parallel and has not been recognized by the ACAP. Likewise, Basnet & Chaudhary (2017) provides insight into the adaptability and potential of the *Limi* community's customary institutions for sustainable resource management while ensuring equitable distribution, linking these findings to sustainability and benefit-sharing mechanisms within customary institutions.

The study, published after 2015, also draws attention to heritage protection and restoration. The 2015 mega earthquake destroyed many significant monuments

and heritage sites, and the effort that followed to rebuild, piqued many researchers interest in the role of customary institutions in heritage protection and management. For instance, Tripathi (2016) prioritizes the effectiveness of the traditional *Ghuthi* system for managing water sprouts issuing the community's common ownership of water rights, leading to effective management and sustainability. The study draws insight that although stone spouts will not be the absolute solution to water scarcity, this ancient system could continue to play an important role in reducing water stresses in the Kathmandu Valley while also contributing to social, cultural, and economic outcomes if well-managed. Similarly, Shakya (2018) contrasts this customary approach with public administration and governance in heritage restoration. The study illustrates how the governance framework has shifted with the country's historical transition, and how the globalized, modernizing, and Western frame has dominated public administration and governance practices in heritage governance. This paper concludes that the negative result in the rebuilding process emerges from the local government's framework, which is heavily influenced by global-Western best practices, and ignores the traditional Ghuthi system of Newars, which had played a significant role in heritage management.

Period of Disruptions and Normalcy: 2020 Onwards

In 2020, the world experienced one of the deadliest pandemics, COVID-19, which caused many deaths and economic damage. According to various scholars, COVID-19 was the final nail in the coffin for the neoliberal political economy (Gracia-Lopez et al., 2021). What followed was increased state intervention, surveillance, and compliance produced by the contingency of COVID-19, yet these remain unchanged afterward. As the old political-economic order based on capitalism shifted, the new direction appears to be toward the 'commons', primarily focused on protecting and securing the shared natural spaces that IP depend on every day, along with addressing the climate crisis and land related issues. Thus, publications after 2020 on customary institutions capture the essence of communing, as seen in the work of authors such as Parajuli et al., (2021), where the study highlights volunteerism under the Guthi of Newar and *Barghar* of Tharu community practice, based on the collective interest over the individual where the priority is given to the common recourses and the collective addressing of shared individual and community problems. The article recommends culturally embedded community values as a strong means to improve the planning and implementation of various local government-aspired projects.

Khatti and Pandey (2023) describe the roles of the *Gyalbo* (Lo King), *Ghenpa* (Village Chief), Lama (Monk), and *Dhongba* (Household) as local institutions that work closely together and make community-level decisions in Lo Manthang. The findings reveal that this locally and culturally grounded governance practice ensures compliance

and sustain governance within agreed rules, norms, and values. The study concludes that these institutions protect existing practices while also navigating changing times efficiently. Sherpa (2024) further explores customary governance and social dynamics in natural resource management in the *Ngishyangba* community in Upper Manang. Using an ethno-ecological framework, the study shows how customary governance and social dynamics support sustainable natural resource management through the *Mithewa* system, which facilitates cooperation, resolves conflict, and adapts to external pressures such as climate change, tourism, and state interventions. Bhattarai and Mohapatra (2023) stresses the significance of the culturally rooted conservation ethical values of Limi's people in resource management. They also shed light on the factors affecting these values in recent times. Similarly, Chaudhary (2023) specifies westernization and globalization effect on the Tharu's Barghar system and counters it through their strong agency and adaptability. Bhattachan (2023) illuminates the similar crisis experienced by the Indigenous Tamhang (Thakali) community due to extensive exposure to colonization, Hinduization, and globalization, which have eroded traditional land and resource ownership, and drawn attention to Thakali's collective way of life and their active customary self- government system. Likewise, Rai et al. (2025) engage with Kham Magar's self-governing institution, Gwala Raikar Samiti, and remind us of its weakening due to declining youth engagement and limited state recognition. Paudel (2024), on the other hand, points out the *Maji* community's resistance to the endangered customary *Majhe Sabha* through the revival of traditional ways to uphold the *Majhi service* committee. In a similar study, Ghale (2025) examines the emergence, functions, decline, and restoration attempts of *Nalshabha*, a customary institution of the Gurung community, through the frameworks of Indigenous self-governance, decolonization, and revitalization. The study emphasizes *Nalshabha's* roles in preserving cultural cohesion, regulating natural resource management, mediating conflicts, and negotiating relations with the encroaching state and suggests its restoration.

In their study of Kathmandu Valley's heritage, Subedi and Shrestha (2024) note Ghuthi's role in managing cultural heritage. The authors argue that heritage conservation should prioritize Indigenous systems and traditional design using local materials over modern technology. They also note that state policies focus solely on tangible heritage while ignoring intangible cultures, urging policymakers to recognize the importance and contributions of informal Indigenous systems to sustainable heritage protection and management.

In taking pluralistic lens on governance practices, Sherpa's (2024). paper on the customary governance system of the Loba community of Upper Mustang outlines

the resource management practices under the *Ghenpa* system., The paper critiques top-down, state-centric conservation and resource management practices and suggests recognizing and legitimizing customary governance and legal pluralism for effective conservation. Drawing on the practices of Magar, Newar, Sherpa, and Tharu communities' practices, Tripathi (2025) challenges the prevailing Western, Eurocentric approaches and epistemes and proposes more inclusive and effective strategies grounded in the lived experiences of Indigenous Peoples of Nepal.

Regarding self-rule and autonomy, Thami (2024a; 2024b) underscores the legal instruments that recognize Indigenous Peoples' customary governing systems by assessing their self-rule and autonomy. How are self-rule and autonomy exercised among Indigenous Peoples of Nepal? How do customary governance systems interact with state governance systems? He argues that the growing legitimization and recognition of Indigenous customary institutions at the local level does not empower their self-determination and sovereignty. Instead, it subordinates customary governance and brings it under the control and jurisdiction of state law.

From the conceptual standpoint of 'moral ecology, Rai (2024) adopts a critical ethnographic frame to argue that conservation efforts often fail to recognize and respect the long-standing moral ecology in Magar agro-pastoralism in the *Dhorpatan* Hunting Reserve. He illustrates this through *Kachahari* (social, cultural, resource, and rangeland) and *Gwala* (herd management) practices among the Magars in managing rangelands. Rai further claims that traditional institutions play a pivotal role in fostering strong community ethics and a sense of responsibility for preserving biodiversity and in recognizing self-governance and self-determination in rangeland and agro-pastoral management.

From a religio-cultural perspective, Mohapatra and Bhattarai (2024) explore the deep and intricate relationships among people and the environment, of Limi Valley inhabitants. They note that the sacred monasteries support peace, harmony, and effective resource management practices and stress the need to promote and recognize locally led, ecologically sensitive governance approaches.

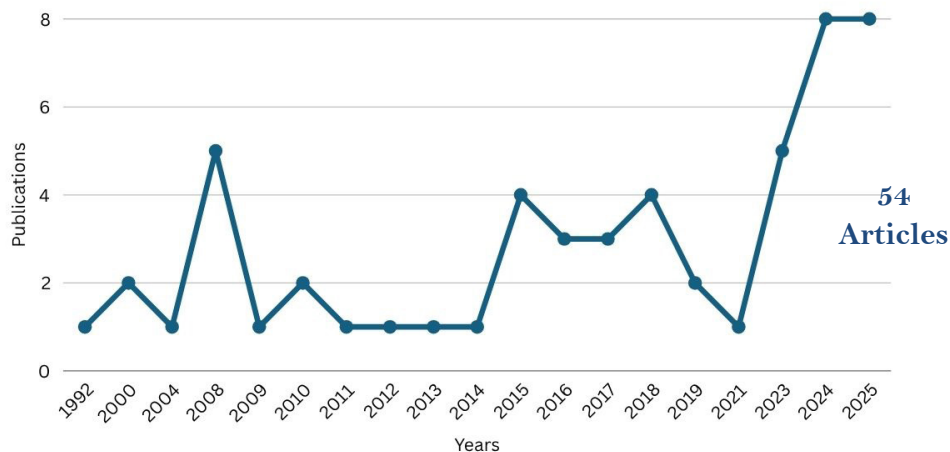
Insights and Discussion from the Review

It can be said that political and developmental contexts and factors trigger and set epistemic trends and productions. Nepal is not an exception. After 1990, the publication trend reflects what developed, materialized and influenced conditions and circumstances at global, regional, national and local levels. Organizational growth and set-up could not prosper before 1990, however, systematic conservation initiatives were followed and formalized after 1950. After 1970, the growing tendency toward

a community-based participatory approach introduced the richness of Indigenous communal and conservation practices. Nevertheless, the state led organizational set up took place, but the increasing tendency toward these models can be traced to the historical regulation of top-down and nation-centric approaches, resulting from the nationalization of forests and commons through the 1957 land reform act, the 1962 nationalization of forests, and the nationalization of pasture lands (1985).

With the advent of the party system after 1990, and the rise of community forestry, Indigenous conservation practices such as *Kipat* of Rai/Limbu, *Mukhiya* and *Talukdari* of Tamang, Sunuwar, Dura and *Singhi Nawa* of Sherpa provided a strong basis for community-led conservation. Publications in this decade presented the Indigenous Peoples customary forest regime as strong evidence for a community and participatory approach. However, these studies did not devote much comprehensive attention to the underlying values and structures of the institutions themselves. They were more interested in the effectiveness and outputs of these customary institutions. Publications on these were insignificant and the indigenous customary governance system was not wholly explored with efforts mostly focused on fitting Indigenous practices into the broader conservation regime of the National Park and forestry.

Figure 2
Publication trend, 1990-2025 December



After 2000, the number of publications appears to have gradually increased. Consequently, scholars began examining formal and customary conservation practices. A wave of publications compared formal and informal forest and biodiversity conservation regimes. Scholars such as Banjade (2008) drew attention to conflicts in common governance caused by the presence of formal and informal laws. Studies on customary institutions also expanded to include the governance of

pastureland. Gurung's (2008) PhD dissertation on governance introduced the notion of hybridization. Stevens (2013), meanwhile actively engaged with more indigenous-centered conservation practices through ICCA. The 2000- 2010 publications shifted the perception from the role of Indigenous customary institutions in conservation to Indigenous conservation. This created a strong base for Indigenous governance and advocacy.

The third decade, 2011-2020, saw further expansion of the roles of customary institutions. During this decade publications mapped out the integrated role in ensuring social justice, climate justice, benefit sharing, heritage protection, and rebuilding. There was also increasing engagement of Indigenous scholars in writing and publications. Development and political growth during this time appear to have significantly affected publications, including the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals, the CBD Aichi Biodiversity Strategic Plan, the Earthquake 2015 and the Local Government Operation Act 2017, among others. These developments and political growth also appear to have driven the increased publications on Indigenous Peoples and REDD+, sustainable development, legal pluralism, and biodiversity conservation, among others.

In the fourth decade after 2020, publications on customary institutions focus on their effective roles in social, cultural, and resource governance, as well as on the need for state legitimization. The discourse on their function and roles also appears to gain philosophical depth, with authors highlighting the intangible, spiritual, and ethical aspects underpinning community members' values. This legitimization is critically appraised through the lens of self-determination. Few scholars further assess the state's legitimization of customary institutions and conclude that these forms of legitimization were primarily intended to ease the government's role rather than respect Indigenous Peoples sovereignty and self-determination.

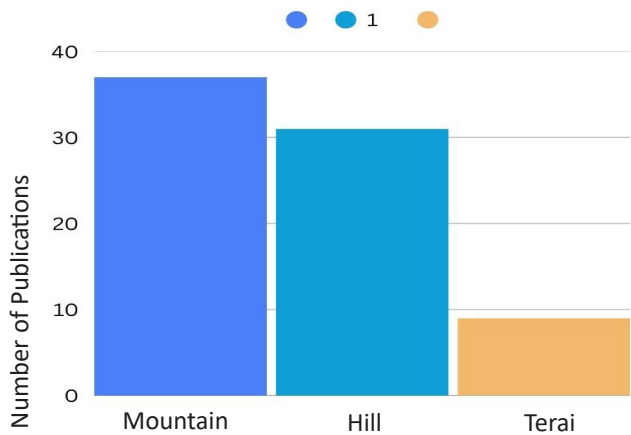
Hence, based on the literature reviewed and subsequent discourses across different decades, it is evident that scholars, conservationists, development practitioners, policymakers, and economists, have shown growing interest in Indigenous Peoples customary institutions. The articles published across different timelines also reflect shifting perceptions and attitude towards Indigenous Peoples customary institutions, for instance, publications around the 1990 and 2000s mostly extended the community and participatory approach, but by 2025, they are more centered on autonomy, self-determination, pluralism, and ethics. Earlier research in the 1990s used a functional/structuralist lens, examining the role of Indigenous Peoples customary institutions in the conservation and management of commons. Theoretical preferences eventually shifted towards the hybridization, or decolonial, lens of ICCA (Gurung, 2008; Stevens,

2008, 2009, 2013). From 2011-2020 legal pluralism and ecological theories also gained use, and, since 2021, there has been increased use of critical decolonial theories and farmwork in the study of customary institutions. Although this shift in discourse and outlook on customary institutions unfolded over 35 years, it is still forming and shaping.

Publication Based on Ecological Regions of Nepal

Based on the systematic literature review, most articles on customary institutions of Indigenous communities in Nepal appear to have been published by the mountain Indigenous communities. Among the 19 mountain Indigenous communities, Singhi Nawa, the customary forest and pasture land governance system of Sherpa (Acharya & Baral 2017; Beltran & Phillips, 2004; Jana & Paudel, 2010; Karki & Adhikari, 2015; Ranjit, 2019; Stevens, 2013, 2009, 2008; Uprety, 2007; Wakiyama, 2001), and the Mukhiya System (Acharya & Baral, 2017; Acharya et al., 2016; Acharya et al., 2008; Bhattachan, 2023; Ghimire, 2018; Kotru et al., 2012; Uprety, 2008) are the most researched and referenced. These works shift from natural resources governance, to social cultural governance and conflict management in the Loba and Thakali communities.

Figure 3
Publications on customary institutions from three ecological regions



Likewise, in the hilly region, customary Newari institutions are among the most researched governance systems. Their *Ghuthi* system plays varied roles in socio-cultural governance, resource management, peacebuilding, conflict management, and canal and water management. The Newari community and its culture, which are mainly concentrated in Kathmandu could be one reason for the high number of studies on them. Likewise, in the Terai region, *Barghar/Badghar/ Bhalmansha* of the Tharu community are among the most researched customary institutions. These

institutions maintains multiple roles in peacebuilding, resource management, socio-cultural functioning, benefit sharing, and natural resource management.

Conclusion

Social issues and enquiries are largely influenced and shaped by factors such as social, political, historical and natural disruptions. This is equally true for the study of IP, their everyday life and customary practices. Major events, changes and developments in a particular historical period also shape what is produced as knowledge. Before 1990 and afterward, especially for anthropologists, sociologists, environmentalists and Geographers, IPs and their customary practices became a major focus of study, aligning with events at local and global levels.

Changing socio-political contexts, developmental paradigms and models and the lexicons developed in different historical periods shaped the study and narratives of IP's research, influencing academic works, developmental reports, advocacy and activism. To understand and reappraise knowledge production on IPs and the nature of academic enquiry and exchanged lexicons, it is important to categorically decode them within social, political and historical context. Doing so will provide insights into the sociological, anthropological, environmental, historical and geographical domains. In the first decade, published works focused on the effects of customary institutions on participatory conservation and natural resources management. During the second decade, comparative studies examined IPs' customary and state-led institutions. The latter part of the decade also saw publications proposing the hybridization of customary and formal institutions and developing models for Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas (ICCA). In the third decade, publications on customary institutions expanded beyond conservation and natural resource management to climate change, REDD+, customary justice system, and legal pluralism, among others. By 2025, more scholars were publishing on the deeper philosophical foundations of customary institutions, the Indigenous worldview, and Indigenous ethics.

This bibliographical conspectus at least sheds light on those bodies of knowledge published in Nepal over the period of more than 30 years. The synoptic overview of these published works shows the values and importance of IPs' customary traditions and institutions, their conservation initiatives and the significance of their traditional practices in nature conservation and cultural heritage. It also pinpoints the sustainability of their practices in biodiversity conservation, as well as the effects on their long-standing knowledge and practices made by external factors, unsustainable development projects, top-down state-led policies and laws, capitalistic market and modernization and the after effects of climate change.

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