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### Research Article



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## Socio-Economic Transformation Among the Indigenous Raji of Surkhet, Nepal

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### Abstract

This study aims to analyze the socioeconomic transformation of the Indigenous Raji community in the Surkhet District focusing on changes in gender roles, cultural identity, livelihoods, education, and health. In order to achieve the objective, the study combined exploratory and descriptive methods in a mixed-methods design. In Thauri Village, Surkhet all 11 Raji households took part in a comprehensive household census, which provided the study with both qualitative and quantitative data. Among the methods used to gather the data were structured questionnaires, key informant interviews, and field observations. According to the findings, there has been a notable shift from a traditional, forest-dependent way of life to a more settled and diversified economy that includes small businesses, wage labor, salaried jobs, and migration, mostly to India. Although problems like school dropouts, under-representation in decision-making, and the loss of traditional culture, language, and attire persist, there has been progress in the areas of education, healthcare, sanitation, and women's participation. All 11 Raji households, with a literacy rate of 35.06 percent, are still below the poverty line, according to a census. The necessity for culturally sensitive development is highlighted by the fact that 72.72 percent of respondents still rely on wells or streams for water, even though all of them use contemporary medical care. The study concludes that in order to support sustainable development, particular policy interventions are needed to reduce poverty, improve the standard of living for Raji people, and protect their declining indigenous language, culture, and knowledge.

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## Introduction

The Raji people are one of Nepal's most endangered ethnic groups; they are an indigenous community that has historically been neglected and is economically marginalized (Rajis & Region, 2012). The Rajis, who are mostly found in Surkhet district but have migrated from other districts, are considered to be one of Nepal's endangered indigenous tribes. They lived a nomadic lifestyle in the past. The rich cultural diversity of Nepal is highlighted in the paper's introduction, which also points out that indigenous groups like the Rajis continue to practice their own traditional healing methods, folk culture, and beliefs. Nonetheless, it highlights how the Raji community is under a lot of pressure from modernization, migration, and population growth, which is causing them to alter their customs and endanger the survival of their priceless indigenous knowledge and plant practices (Thapa, 2013).

Tribal groups are the main context in which the term "indigenous" is used, especially when discussing land ownership and the affirmation of cultural identity. Its significance goes beyond this limited interpretation, though. Indigenous is also used in claims to historical precedence, cultural authenticity, and ethnic legitimacy in larger sociopolitical discourse. It frequently provides a framework for underrepresented groups to demand recognition of their unique cultural heritage and assert rights over ancestral lands, occasionally opposing prevailing narratives or systems of ethnic and cultural hegemony (Benjamin, 2016). Nepal is known for its wide range of castes, customs, and cultures. According to Bhattachan (2000), every indigenous group has its own unique language, customs, belief systems, and traditional methods of healing. Historically centered in Surkhet, the Raji are an endangered indigenous group in Nepal that has since migrated to the districts of Kailali, Kanchanpur, Dang, and Bardia. In the past, the Rajis lived as nomads (Gautam & Thapa Magar, 1994).

In Nepal, the Raji community is acknowledged as an indigenous group that is endangered, economically disadvantaged, and neglected. Their ancestors were the first people to live on the land, and they survived by hunting, gathering, fishing, shifting cultivation, and ferrying. Their way of life changed toward semi-nomadic and sedentary pursuits like farming and husbandry as a result of these traditional means of survival being insufficient (Oli, 2023).

The Raji community is experiencing significant changes in their means of subsistence, moving away from customary jobs in fishing, boating, and agriculture. They are increasingly turning to other sources of income, such as market-oriented farming, horticulture, wage labor, small-scale businesses, and labor migration, especially to India. The diminishing sustainability of traditional practices is a major factor in these changes, which are also influenced by outside factors like urbanization, globalization, increased educational opportunities, scientific advancements, and cross-cultural interactions. Furthermore, social security policies and infrastructure development have improved their access to contemporary facilities and improved their economic circumstances. But there is also a serious chance that these adaptations will undermine indigenous knowledge, abilities, and unique cultural traditions (Adhikari, 2022).

An indigenous and historically nomadic group living in India's Central Himalayas, the Raji community has a unique socioeconomic and demographic makeup that has not gotten much scholarly attention. Despite having a rich cultural history, the Rajis face many difficulties, chief among them being pervasive poverty, as all households are said to be below the poverty line. Despite comparatively high fertility rates, their demographic condition is further characterized by a worrying slowdown in population growth, which dropped from 3.31 percent in 1981 to 1.24 percent in 1996 (Oli, & Woli, 2024). Even though the Raji community now has a 35.06 percent literacy rate, the fact that so few people work in the service industry means that this progress has not resulted in many job opportunities. The goal of this study is to provide a thorough analysis of the socioeconomic circumstances and

demographic trends of the Raji people in order to better understand their current situation and draw attention to the urgent need for focused interventions to raise their standard of living and protect their cultural heritage. In tackling these issues, the study aims to close current knowledge gaps and offer perspectives that could direct policy actions meant to advance the well-being of this underprivileged group (Samal et al., n.d.).

Regarding the Raji, who live in various districts of Western Nepal, (Bennett, et al, 2008), Because of their interactions with external socio-cultural systems, the Raji community's traditional lifestyles and cultural practices have experienced significant transformation. However, the extent of change varies greatly between urban and rural settings, reflecting differences in educational access and literacy levels. Globalization, urbanization, formal education, technological advancement, rising patterns of production and consumption, and increased interaction with other ethnic groups have all had a significant impact on the Raji population in Birendranagar Municipality-2, for example, causing significant changes in their ways of living, belief systems, and social attitudes.

On the other hand, Rajis living in rural villages with low literacy rates, few employment options, and restricted access to natural resources still rely mostly on agriculture and government-issued subsidies to survive (Oli, 2023). Even though these shifting conditions have brought about some beneficial effects, there is still serious concern about the slow loss of the Rajis' traditional knowledge, skills, and unique cultural customs. As a result, it is essential to systematically document and strategically apply this knowledge in order to protect the community's cultural heritage and promote economic development.

A deep and fundamental process of change that gives rise to a new form, state, or character is referred to as transformation. It indicates a complete change, frequently involving significant adjustments to identity, structure, or function (Pathak, 2023). Over time, the Raji community's socioeconomic structure has experienced significant change, primarily due to the effects of globalization and modernization. Traditional practices and customs have been gradually eroding as a result of these influences. Nevertheless, the Raji people's ability to bounce back from primarily agricultural livelihoods to more varied economic pursuits is a testament to their resilience. Their ability to adapt to shifting socioeconomic conditions shows a calculated reaction to both long-standing difficulties and recently presented opportunities (Oli & Woli, 2024). The Raji community's current socioeconomic situation highlights the continuous conflict between the forces of social change and the preservation of cultural continuity by reflecting a complex interaction between historical adversity and modern transformation.

One of Nepal's most economically marginalized and vulnerable indigenous communities, the Raji community is usually overlooked in discussions of national development. Their livelihood has historically been based on semi-sedentary and nomadic activities like ferrying, hunting, fishing, gathering, and shifting cultivation. However, these subsistence methods are no longer viable in light of the shifting socioeconomic and environmental landscape. As a result, the community has been forced to gradually transition to more stable jobs, especially farming and raising animals.

The Raji community in Thauri village has undergone a substantial socioeconomic shift in recent years, marked by a slow shift away from traditional subsistence methods and an increase in involvement in a variety of economic pursuits, including wage labor, market-oriented agriculture, small-scale entrepreneurship, salaried employment, and labor migration. Infrastructure improvements, such as the building of the valley ring road, have further influenced this change. Both internal and external factors most notably urbanization, globalization, increased educational opportunities, better

infrastructure, government welfare programs, and the increasing unviability of traditional livelihoods are the main drivers of these changes.

The preservation of the Raji community's indigenous knowledge, cultural traditions, language, and identity is seriously threatened by these changes, despite the fact that they have improved access to contemporary services and opened up new economic opportunities. Concerns regarding cultural deterioration and the disappearance of traditional values and lifestyles are raised by the growing integration into mainstream socioeconomic systems. Examining the nature, causes, and effects of this change is crucial in light of these developments. Thus, the researcher determined that it was necessary to look into the socioeconomic changes that the Raji community has undergone in recent decades.

### **Objective**

The objective of this paper is to investigate the socioeconomic transformations of the indigenous Raji people in the research area.

### **Literature Review**

Indigenous peoples denote culturally distinct groups worldwide that share a common historical experience characterized by colonization, territorial dispossession, and cultural marginalization. These communities frequently reside in or uphold a profound relationship with particular ancestral territories, while preserving distinct cultural, social, economic, and political systems. The lasting impacts of colonial rule persist in influencing current conditions, leading to proactive opposition via international Indigenous movements. This characterization highlights their common historical experiences and enduring resilience (Hall et al., n.d.). Socio-economic transformation among indigenous peoples entails significant changes in their social structures and economic systems, influenced by both internal dynamics and external forces, affecting traditional lifestyles and cultural practices (Pathak, 2024).

Globalization and socioeconomic change are changing the way of life for the Raji people. Data was gathered from 37 households using a combination of key informant interviews and surveys. The results demonstrate how economic hardships have prompted diversification, encompassing small businesses and salaried employment. The study emphasizes the significance of comprehending local contexts in poverty alleviation by drawing on sustainable livelihood theory. Additionally, it highlights how critical it is to record and conserve indigenous knowledge throughout this shift. Adhikari (2022). A community is a collection of individuals who work together to promote, develop, and maintain their social, cultural, and environmental well-being via collaboration and support among themselves, whether they have similar interests, values, or geographic locations (Oli et al., 2025).

The study "Numbers Matter: Raji Tribe and Their Interaction(s) with State Institutions" explores the social struggles and daily lives of the Raji tribe, a vulnerable and marginalized group in Uttarakhand, India. The study uses ethnographic methods and is based on a large-scale field study conducted in six villages in the Pithoragarh district between April 2021 and August 2022. The results show that proxy politics are still in place, which restricts the Raji community's ability to participate in larger political processes. Significant cultural changes have also occurred, primarily as a result of modifications to forest management regulations. The study points out a crucial knowledge gap regarding how these social and political factors influence the identity and agency of the Raji people. In the end, the paper offers a critical evaluation of current tribal policies and highlights the precarious situation facing the Raji community, advocating for more flexible and responsive approaches to help them negotiate the intricate and constrictive conditions shaped by numerous interlocking forces. (Samal and others, n.d.).

Alam & Jha's (2018) study emphasizes the Raji tribe's health and nutritional status in Uttarakhand, India, with a focus on body mass index (BMI) as a key health indicator. They used background interviews and common anthropometric measures to gather information from 94 adults in ten villages. According to the results, the average BMI was significantly lower than that observed among other Indian tribal populations, and about 45.7% of participants were undernourished. These findings highlight how the socioeconomic struggles of the community have a detrimental impact on the health of its members. In order to address the pressing needs of the Raji population, their study also highlights the larger problem of insufficient nutritional data pertaining to tribal groups in India and promotes focused nutrition programs and community-based health awareness campaigns (Alam & Jha, 2018).

This study examines the traditional healing practices of the Raji community, specifically the use of ten commonly used medicinal plants in the creation of traditional remedies, as well as how this knowledge is evolving over time and how the community participates in conservation efforts. The study was carried out in two rural municipalities of Surkhet district using surveys, oral interviews, and group discussions with 39 participants, with a focus on elders and traditional healers who are considered to be the primary keepers of this knowledge. The results show that the Raji people have a vast amount of indigenous knowledge about medicinal plants, but that this knowledge is dwindling over time due to the influence of modernization and a lack of interest among younger generations. The study found a clear generational divide, with older participants showing more proficiency in making traditional medicines than younger ones. The transmission of traditional knowledge and the potential extinction of essential cultural practices are gravely threatened by this decline. To sum up, even though the Raji community still heavily relies on traditional healing methods, immediate action is needed to record and conserve this knowledge before it is lost (Thapa, 2013).

This study focuses on the socio-economic conditions and demographic patterns of the Raji community, an indigenous group that is largely underrepresented in academic research. Using ethnographic methods for socio-economic assessment and demographic enumeration, the results show that all surveyed households are below the poverty line (Oli, 2020). The Raji community has a low literacy rate of 35.06 percent and a low level of formal employment participation. Furthermore, the data show a sharp slowdown in population growth, highlighting a substantial gap in the body of knowledge about the demographic and socioeconomic vulnerabilities of this population. Therefore, the study highlights the pressing need for focused policy interventions meant to enhance their quality of life and protect their cultural identity. (Samal and others, n.d.).

The growing threat to and possible loss of the rich indigenous knowledge of the Raji community is the identified research gap concerning their socio-economic transformation. Migration, population growth, socioeconomic shifts, and modernization have all put a lot of strain on the community and caused changes in customs, beliefs, and decision-making methods. There is a severe risk that priceless cultural customs and practices will vanish forever because younger members are not as interested in this knowledge, which was previously passed down orally through the generations (Thapa, 2013).

### **Methodology**

To accomplish its goals, this study combines exploratory and descriptive research methods in a mixed-methods approach. Both qualitative and quantitative methodologies are used in research. By combining the two approaches, it makes use of their advantages and offers a thorough comprehension of research issues. Concurrent or sequential data collection is possible (Stadtländer, 2009). This study used a combination of methods to get a thorough grasp of the socioeconomic changes in the

neighborhood. Analyzing the socioeconomic shifts that the indigenous Raji community in the study area had to deal with was the main goal. The Surkhet Valley's Thauri village served as the study's location. Owing to the small population, all 11 Raji households in the village were included in the census method used to collect data. There were seven men (63.63%) and four women (36.36%) among the 11 responders.

Although the census method allowed for a thorough investigation of local experiences, the results' broader applicability to other Raji settlements is constrained by the small sample size. Structured questionnaires were used for household surveys, key informant interviews were conducted to obtain a deeper understanding of socioeconomic shifts, and field observations were conducted to better understand the changing circumstances in the community.

### Results

This section provides a thorough analysis of the information gathered from multiple sources. It makes sure that the analysis is in line with the goals of the study by methodically interpreting the results to find patterns, trends, and implications pertaining to the socioeconomic transformation of the Raji community. The results are shown in detail below:

**Table 1:** *Profile of the respondent in different Sources/types*

Profile of the Respondent	Sources/ Types	No. of Respondent	Percent (%)
Gender	Male	7	63.63
	Female	4	36.36
Age Group	Below 40	3	27.27
	41 to 59	5	45.45
	60 to above	3	27.27
	Literate	2	18.18
Education	Primary Education (Grade 1-8)	6	54.54
	Secondary Education (Grade 9-12)	3	27.27
	Nuclear	2	18.18
Family	Joint Family	9	81.81
	Extended Family	0	0
	Homemaker (Family Manager)	2	18.18
Occupation	Agriculture	6	54.54
	Skilled Labour (Mistri)	2	18.18
	Foreign Job (India)	1	9.09
	Pakki with pillar	5	45.45
House Structure	Semi-Permanent	5	45.45
	Kachhi	1	9.09
Drinking Water (Multiple Answer)	Tap	5	45.45
	Well or Stream	8	72.72
	Jar/Bottled	1	9.09
Types of Toilet	Toilet with Flush	8	72.72
	Traditional Simple	3	27.27
	Jungle	0	0
Treatment Pattern (Multiple Answer)	Hospital/Clinic	11	100
	Dhami/Jhakri	9	81.81

Fuel of Cooking (Multiple Answer)	Jadibuti	3	27.27
	Firewood	9	81.81
	LPG Gas	7	63.63
	Electricity	1	9.09

Source: Field Survey 2025

Based on the tabulated data, the sociodemographic and economic characteristics of the respondents are thoroughly analyzed in table 1 above. The respondents are a small, targeted sample that offers information on a range of topics related to their housing, education, livelihood, and resource accessibility. There are comparatively more male respondents than female respondents in the eleven Raji community households that were surveyed, with males making up 63.63 percent and females 36.36 percent.

A preponderance of middle-aged people (n=5) is indicated by the fact that the majority of respondents (45.45%) are between the ages of 41 and 59. Three people each make up the younger cohort (those under 40) and the elderly population (those 60 and over), which have equal percentages (27.27%). This distribution points to a base of respondents who are probably fairly mature and have both firsthand knowledge and a historical recollection of socioeconomic developments.

The respondents' levels of education are modest. The largest percentage (54.54%) has completed primary school (Grades 1–8), and the next highest percentage (27.27%) has completed secondary school (Grades 9–12). Just 18.18% of people are literate and have never attended formal schooling. Significantly, none of the respondents mentioned having a college degree, indicating that access to opportunities for advanced education is restricted. Joint family systems make up the majority of respondents' family structures (81.81% of them live in such arrangements). Only 18.18% of respondents said they lived in a nuclear family, and none of them mentioned being part of an extended family. This pattern suggests that traditional family values and communal living are still prevalent in the population under study.

With 54.54% of respondents, agriculture continues to be the most common occupation. Homemakers (18.18%), skilled workers (also known as mistri) (18.18%), and a small percentage (9.09%) working abroad, particularly in India, are among the other occupations. The dependence on local informal labor markets and subsistence farming is highlighted by this occupational pattern. Just one respondent (9.09%) lives in a raw (kachhi) home, whereas an equal percentage of respondents (45.45%) live in solid (pakki) homes with pillars and semi-permanent structures. Although a complete shift to permanent housing has not yet occurred, this distribution points to a certain level of physical infrastructure development within the community.

There are several ways to obtain drinking water. Most people use streams or wells (72.72%), then tap water (45.45%). Just one respondent (9.09%) said they used bottled or jarred water. The ongoing reliance on conventional sources, such as streams and wells, suggests possible weaknesses in the infrastructure for piped and safe water. 72.72% of homes have flushing toilets. The remaining people (27.27%) continue to use basic, conventional toilets. Interestingly, none of the respondents said they used open defecation in jungle regions, indicating that infrastructure and sanitation awareness have improved. Healthcare utilization reflects both modern and traditional practices. All respondents (100%) seek services from hospitals or clinics. However, a significant proportion (81.81%) also consult Dhami/Jhakri (traditional healers), while 27.27% rely on herbal medicine (jadibuti). An example of a pluralistic approach to health and well-being is the coexistence of indigenous and biomedical healing systems. The fact that firewood is still the most common cooking fuel (81.81%) suggests that traditional biomass is still being used. However, 63.63% of them also use LPG gas, indicating a slow transition to

cleaner energy. Just 9.09 percent cook with electricity, probably due to infrastructure or cost constraints.

Accordingly, the profile of the respondents shows a community in transition, characterized by a degree of modernization in housing, sanitation, education, and fuel consumption, but still firmly entrenched in traditional family structures, healthcare procedures, and work patterns. Designing context-sensitive development interventions and comprehending socioeconomic changes require these insights. The Raji are an ethnically distinct indigenous group that originated in Latikoili and Naya Gaun, which are about five kilometers south of the Ratna Highway. They are notable for their distinctive socio-cultural traditions, which include particular rituals, customs, dress, and eating habits.

Later, they built a permanent settlement in what is now Pragati Nagar, which is bounded to the south by hills and forests and crossed by a pitched ring road. The Raji and Tharu were among the first people to live in the area for almost 80 to 90 years, with other caste groups gradually assimilating. The Raji community actively participates in community and development-related activities and currently coexists peacefully with nearby groups. There are eleven Raji households in the village.

Using a variety of sources, this study investigates the socioeconomic development of the Raji community. Field visits, participant observation, and one-on-one interviews with key informants form the basis of the qualitative component, which is covered below.

### **Socio-Economic Transformation of the Raji Community**

One specific indigenous group that is well-known for its distinct socio-cultural identity which includes customs, rituals, dress, and food habits is the Raji community. In the past, the Raji were mostly involved in jobs that were directly related to their ancestry. However, the community has experienced significant changes in social, cultural, political, and infrastructure aspects over time. The villages of Latikoili and Naya Gaun in the Birendranagar valley are the ancestral homes of the Raji in this area. They eventually moved from these areas and made Thauri village, which is now officially known as Pragatinagar and Samabeshi Tol Vikas Sanstha, under Ward No. 2 of Birendranagar Municipality, Surkhet, their permanent home.

This region has been home to the Raji for eight to nine decades. They were historically among the first people to settle in the area, along with the Tharu community. Other caste groups later began to integrate into the area. The Raji now actively participate in local development projects and communal affairs while living in close proximity to people from various castes and ethnic groups. There are eleven Raji households in the current settlement. Subsistence farming and forest-based resources have historically been major sources of income for the community. Ancestors sustained daily life through hunting, fishing, honey collection, and ferrying individuals across rivers, practices that reflected both their ecological knowledge and sustainable engagement with natural ecosystems. These activities not only exemplified their adaptive skills but also reinforced a cultural identity closely tied to the natural landscape.

The Raji have undergone a substantial transition from their traditional nomadic, forest-dependent way of life to a more sedentary and settled one, according to field observations and interviews with the president of Tol Bikas Samitte conducted for this study. Gradual infrastructure development, such as the building of roads (most notably the Ring Road), medical facilities, and educational establishments, has made this transition easier. As a result, the community now lives in permanent homes furnished with contemporary conveniences.

As a result of this socioeconomic shift, everyday routines have undergone significant modifications, and the community's collective identity has been redefined within the larger

sociopolitical framework of contemporary Nepali society. Although they still maintain some aspects of their indigenous culture, the Raji are becoming more and more assimilated into the mainstream social and economic structures of today. Their experience highlights indigenous adaptation and resilience in the face of changing socioeconomic conditions, illuminating the dynamic interplay between tradition and change.

### **Evolution in Agricultural Practices**

Agriculture remains a central economic activity for the Raji community, although its practices and significance have undergone considerable transformation, said a 51-year-old senior male farmer in the village, who was interviewed by the researcher regarding the evolution of agricultural practices. The group has historically practiced subsistence farming, growing crops like rice, millet, and maize with simple implements like wooden plows and tilling them with bullocks. Particularly during times of high labor demand, agricultural labor was frequently organized through unofficial labor-exchange systems like *parma*. On the other hand, modern practices show both diversification and modernization. Iron plows, power tillers, and tractors have largely replaced traditional wooden tools, enabling fields that once took days to cultivate to be ready in a matter of hours. Even though six out of the eleven households own land, mechanization has significantly increased the community's agricultural productivity and efficiency.

But today, there are other sources of income besides agriculture. The significance of wage labor, seasonal migration, and participation in non-farm pursuits like beekeeping and horticulture has grown. These alternative revenue streams serve as flexible solutions to problems like shifting weather patterns, degraded soil, and consumer demands. A diversified approach to maintaining livelihoods is reflected in the community's integration of agriculture with various economic avenues, despite the preservation of its traditional connection to the land.

### **Changing Perceptions and Participation in Education**

In the Raji community, education is now a major force behind socioeconomic change. Historically, the community was mainly shut out of formal education, and children had little parental support and little access to education. As a result, several generations got only rudimentary education or remained illiterate. We talked about this with a 47-year-old man who works as a village social worker. He talked about his own educational experiences, stating that their parents' lack of awareness and motivation prevented them and their siblings from having access to a quality education. However, attitudes regarding education have changed significantly in recent years.

The importance of formal education is becoming more widely acknowledged among the current generation. Raji girls have benefited greatly from government programs like the Auxiliary Nurse Midwife (ANM) training and reservation quotas in higher education, which demonstrate a growing commitment to education as a tool for social advancement. With numerous public and private schools now within walking distance, access to educational facilities has also improved. Literacy levels are gradually improving, but poverty and a lack of educational resources continue to contribute to high dropout rates. However, there are still issues that prevent full educational attainment, such as caste-based exclusion, poor teaching infrastructure, and household financial strains.

### **Transformation in Health-Seeking Behaviors and Sanitation**

As we talked about with a village senior woman of forty years old. She talked about her experiences with health behavior and sanitation. Traditionally, the Raji community's healthcare system was based on spiritual healing and indigenous customs, with shamans (*Dhami* and *Jhankri*) acting as the main medical professionals who used local herbs and ceremonial techniques to diagnose and treat illnesses. Despite their cultural significance, these customs frequently caused delays in receiving

official medical care, which led to negative health consequences. She underlined that the use of traditional medicine has significantly decreased in recent years. Even for minor illnesses, more and more community members are turning to hospitals and clinics for contemporary healthcare services.

According to field observations, access to prompt and competent medical care has improved due to the presence and close proximity of private clinics and health posts. Significant progress has also been made in sanitation practices. Permanent household toilets and increased community awareness of hygiene have largely replaced open defecation, which was once common due to a lack of toilet facilities. An important turning point was the COVID-19 pandemic, which emphasized the significance of sanitation practices at the individual and community levels.

### **Shifting Gender Roles and Empowerment of Women**

The social roles of women in the Raji community have changed gradually but significantly. Additionally, the researcher talked about gender roles and empowerment with a 41-year-old village woman. Their assistance with household duties and agricultural work, especially post-harvest chores like threshing and winnowing, has historically been the extent of their contributions. Despite their importance, these roles were frequently devalued and influenced by patriarchal conventions. However, women's roles have significantly increased in recent decades. In addition to taking part in community gatherings and development projects hosted by regional NGOs and governmental organizations, they are becoming more involved in formal education, vocational training, and income-generating activities. Mechanization has changed women's daily routines and lessened the physical labor burden on them. For example, rice mills have replaced traditional tools like dhikki, jhato, and musal.

Even with these developments, there are still many obstacles to overcome. Social constraints, a lack of decision-making power, and discrimination based on gender still affect women. Adolescent girls' high dropout rates, which are caused by early marriage and financial hardships, further restrict their access to higher education. Targeted interventions that advance gender equity and create secure, encouraging work and educational environments for women are necessary to address these issues.

### **Improvements in Infrastructure and Living Standards**

In addition to enhancing transportation, economic opportunities, healthcare, education, social interaction, and tourism, road access between rural and urban areas may also degrade the environment (Pandey et al., 2025). The Raji community's access to basic services has been greatly improved by the building of the valley ring road, the installation of both public and private schools, the supply of piped drinking water, and electricity, according to our observations in the village. Their living conditions have therefore significantly improved as a result of advancements in social and physical infrastructure. Concrete and brick homes are gradually replacing traditional thatch, mud, and timber homes because they offer better security and hygiene as well as increased protection from environmental threats. In addition to making daily life easier, these infrastructure improvements have closer incorporated communities into larger economic and social structures, which is crucial for encouraging upward mobility and raising involvement in the development of the country.

### **Changes in Cultural Practices and Identity**

External socioeconomic influences are posing a growing threat to the Raji community's cultural continuity. Traditionally observed with elaborate preparations and communal feasts, rituals like Ghiu Sankranti are now celebrated in a more straightforward and economical way. Similarly, traditional language and dress, which were once significant indicators of ethnic identity, are dwindling in number. According to interviews, only older members of the community still speak fluent Raji, and

traditional male and female clothing, such as Aas and Chhakko Gunne, are rarely worn today. Core principles like respect for elders, cooperation amongst people, and community solidarity endure despite these shifts. Even as external manifestations of cultural identity change, the community is still bound by these social values. The Raji people maintain a unique identity through enduring social norms and collective historical memory, even though the decline in traditional language and attire reflects a certain amount of cultural assimilation.

### **Community-Based Interventions and Institutional Support**

Governmental and non-governmental organizations have been essential in helping the Raji community undergo socioeconomic change. Initiatives focusing on income generation, skill development, and indigenous rights have increased the resilience and capacity of communities. Notably, community forestry promotion has been especially successful in raising ecological awareness and resource management. There are still major obstacles to overcome, though. Several Raji community members lack the education and self-assurance necessary to fully engage in local governance, which limits their ability to advocate for community needs and their representation in decision-making processes. Leadership development programs, participatory planning, and increased community mobilization are crucial to addressing these problems.

### **Integration and Inter-Caste Relations**

when the researcher went to see the village's Raji and non-Raji residents. In Birendranagar Municipality-2, we discovered that the Raji community now lives alongside several caste groups. According to informants, intercaste marriages, which were formerly thought to be rare, are becoming more common as a result of softer caste lines and greater social inclusion. Along with other caste groups, the community actively takes part in cooperative development projects, contributing to community infrastructure and farming together. Mutual respect and adaptability are demonstrated by this pluralistic coexistence.

The Raji community's shift to a modern, settled way of life represents significant socioeconomic change, marked by both increased access to essential services and a certain amount of cultural deterioration. Long-term community well-being requires striking a balance between cultural preservation and development, which can be achieved through education, inclusive governance, and increased community resilience.

### **Discussion**

The study's conclusions demonstrate notable socioeconomic changes in Thauri Village, Surkhet District's Indigenous Raji community. The traditional forest-dependent way of life has given way to a more settled and socially integrated way of life for the community. This shift is consistent with the study's goal of examining shifts in gender relations, cultural identity, health practices, livelihood strategies, and educational attainment. An increasing shift away from subsistence-based activities is reflected in the diversification of income sources, which include wage labor, small-scale businesses, and labor migration to India. These changes show how forest-based livelihoods are becoming less viable and how the community is able to adjust to changing economic conditions. The increasing use of mechanized farming and participation in non-agricultural jobs further demonstrates the Raji community's adaptability and alignment with market-oriented and modernized practices, which are in line with the framework for sustainable livelihood in indigenous contexts. In line with the findings of Bista (2024) and Sharma (2020), the results show a transition from traditional to modern agriculture.

In contrast to their historical marginalization and reliance on spiritual healing practices, the

Raji have made significant social progress in valuing formal education and contemporary healthcare. According to the respondent profile of all 11 Raji households in Thauri village, the majority of respondents (63.63%) are male, joint families predominate (81.81%), agriculture is the primary occupation (54.54%), education is modest and limited to the primary level (54.54%), healthcare is pluralistic (100% hospitals, 81.81% traditional healers), infrastructure is partially improved (72.72% wells, 72.72% flush toilets), and there is a gradual energy shift from firewood (81.81%) to LPG gas (63.63%). An emerging pluralistic health system is suggested by the fact that all survey participants seek medical care from hospitals or clinics, and that 81.81 percent of households continue to consult Dhami/Jhakri. Compared to past research that showed malnutrition and poor health among Raji groups in other areas, this shift to modern medicine represents a significant improvement. Traditional health-related issues are gradually declining as a result of improved health awareness and easier access to healthcare facilities. However, enduring problems like high school dropout rates which are mostly brought on by financial instability and hardship continue to obstruct educational attainment. This continuous battle supports the body of research showing that improved employment opportunities for marginalized indigenous groups are not always correlated with literacy alone.

Overall living conditions have improved as a result of infrastructure development, especially the building of the valley ring road and better sanitation systems. However, since all of the households surveyed are still below the poverty line, these gains are part of a larger framework of vulnerability. The conflict between apparent development results and underlying structural marginalization is highlighted by this persistent poverty. Furthermore, the increasing pressure of modernization and intercultural contact is reflected in the decline of traditional cultural expressions like language, dress, and indigenous customs. This observation is consistent with earlier research by Thapa (2013), which found that generational gaps and the impact of contemporary lifestyles are causing indigenous knowledge, particularly in the use of medicinal plants and traditional healing, to decline. As a result, the study highlights two pressing policy imperatives: encouraging equitable economic growth and protecting indigenous culture through initiatives for documentation, revitalization, and preservation.

Another example of systemic barriers stemming from low educational attainment and low self-confidence is the Raji's limited representation in local decision-making processes. This circumstance is comparable to the "proxy politics" phenomenon that has been discussed in previous studies, in which outside parties frequently speak for underrepresented groups. Targeted interventions centered on empowerment, leadership development, and capacity-building programs to improve self-representation and agency are necessary to address this problem.

### **Limitation**

The small sample size of this study, which comprises all eleven Raji households in Thauri village, is one of its main limitations. Although the census method offers thorough understanding of a particular local setting, it restricts the applicability of results to other Raji communities in Surkhet and Western Nepal. In order to evaluate differences in livelihood transition and cultural retention, future research should compare urban-adjacent and remote settlements. Furthermore, it is advised that comprehensive ethnographic research be conducted to investigate the generational transmission of cultural knowledge as well as the long-term psychological and social effects of language loss among Raji youth. Designing development interventions that are both culturally grounded and sustainable will require this kind of research.

### **Conclusion**

This study examined how the Indigenous Raji community in Birendranagar-2, Surkhet, is changing socioeconomically, paying special attention to changes in gender roles, cultural identity,

education, health, and livelihood patterns. Using census data from all 11 Raji households in Thauri village, the study used a mixed-methods approach to address the urgent need for evidence-based understanding of a historically marginalized and endangered group. The results show that the Raji people have changed from living as nomadic, forest-dependent people to having a more settled, diverse socioeconomic structure. With the help of better infrastructure and market access, their means of subsistence farming have given way to wage labor, small enterprises, salaried positions, and labor migration. Male predominance (63.63%), joint family prevalence (81.81%), limited primary education (54.54%), agricultural reliance (54.54%), pluralistic healthcare use (100% hospitals, 81.81% healers), partial infrastructure (72.72% wells, 72.72% toilets), and shifting energy use (81.81% firewood, 63.63% LPG) are all revealed by the 11 Raji households in Thauri village that responded.

Despite enduring issues like poverty-driven school dropouts, notable advancements can be seen in sanitation, health-seeking behavior, and educational access, especially for girls. In the Raji community, gender roles are changing dramatically as more women engage in economic, educational, and vocational training. Concerns regarding cultural deterioration in the context of modernization have been raised, though, as these advancements have been accompanied by a drop in traditional cultural practices, such as the use of the native tongue and traditional dress.

The study emphasizes the significance of culturally aware policy interventions that strike a balance between heritage preservation and socioeconomic development. The Raji community's limited involvement in governance and decision-making processes, despite the fact that external support has enabled significant development gains, highlights the necessity of focused empowerment initiatives.

This study lays the groundwork for future comparative and longitudinal research while offering insightful information about the socioeconomic changes of a vulnerable indigenous group. Future studies should evaluate the generational transfer of cultural knowledge and investigate differences in transformation among various Raji settlements. Designing inclusive and sustainable development frameworks that safeguard the socioeconomic rights and cultural identity of the Raji community will also require assessing the long-term effects of employment and education policies.

#### Disclosure Statements

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s). Author(s) read and reviewed the final version and agreed consent for publication. All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

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