



Religious Marginalization and Livelihood Transformation of the Community

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the changing livelihood strategies of the Danuwar community in Tama Ghat, Nepal, focusing on the intersection of economic adaptation, cultural identity, and religious marginalization. As an indigenous group historically positioned at the religious and socio-political margins, the Danuwars have long faced systemic exclusion from land ownership, education, and formal institutions. Employing a qualitative, multi-paradigmatic methodology that integrates ethnography and autoethnography, the study explores how globalization, infrastructure development, and dominant religious hierarchies have shaped the shift from traditional subsistence practices to wage labor, foreign migration, and market-oriented agriculture. While modern tools and increased mobility have improved access to income opportunities, they have also accelerated the erosion of traditional agricultural knowledge, religious customs, and indigenous language. This disruption of cultural and religious identity undermines the community's resilience and cohesion. The study emphasizes the need for development models that are both culturally sensitive and religiously inclusive, allowing marginalized groups like the Danuwars to regain agency over their livelihood and heritage.

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1. INTRODUCTION

“I have come only to see whether you are ‘you, but you have become unrecognizable”. The poem quoted in the box reflects the condition of the Danuwar people of Tama Ghat. It points out the situation of those ethnic groups who are deprived of their identity. They are believed to have a long history, but it has yet to be researched and archived formally because they have their language and culture (Dahal & Aram, 2013). It is not only related to Danuwars, but many of the ethnic groups have also faced such a serious problem. More specifically, focusing on Danuwars, what the researcher found was that the word ‘Danuwar’ was a curse to them. They do not like to be called ‘Danuwar’ by other people, also because they feel humiliated due to their complexion. “Danuwar is an ethnic group classified as enslaved alcohol drinkers. The term Danuwar is derived from the Sanskrit word droni, which refers to dun (foothill) between two mountains, so the inhabitants of dun are called Danuwar” (Shahu, 2023). Henceforth, they have faced the challenges in the context of livelihood practices. There are about a handful of Danuwar people who are rich. Those who are in the village are engaged in agriculture. Their life is not comfortable. They are facing poverty; they are not in a position to live a healthy life. The cities and towns are better places for education, health, and employment opportunities. However, it has not found Danuwars with better facilities. Though the government has directly and indirectly supported the development of rural areas anyway, as per my study and dealing with people clarifies that the service delivery is still poor in rural areas. That is the reason poverty is a curse among the Danuwar people, which has an interrelation with livelihood insecurity. Their community in the Tama Ghat area suffered much socially, economically, marginalized politically. That is why it is a tremendous challenge to initiate inclusive development for poor and disadvantaged groups like them. It finds relevancy to jot down the points related to the great revolution of 2007 A.D, with ideas of inclusiveness (equality, liberty, social justice, and human rights) allowing voices of different ethnic groups and communities who had found the platform to go against every kind of discrimination in a heterogeneous society. The Millennium Development Goal (MDG) has promised to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger from Nepal. But no substantial changes took place among Danuwars. Henceforth, at present, Indigenous people have their organisation to raise their voice to the government level to fulfil their demands.

Poverty is the main cause of livelihood insecurity in the context of Nepal. Still, more than 25.16% of the people are below the absolute poverty line. One of them is the Danuwar people, who are economically backward and educationally deprived. The indigenous people have raised their voice against all kinds of discrimination. Like other ethnic groups, the Danuwar community felt that they have been exploited socially and economically for a long time to these days though they represent one of the main cultural groups with a unique cultural identity. Most of the people in the community are illiterate. Tama Ghat ward No.3 (includes Danuwar Community) at present is suffering from a lack of basic needs like food, employment, education, health facilities, and water. The village is in a vicious circle of poverty.

In recent years Danuwar community has changed its livelihood to some extent. They have followed multiple ways to earn their living. They no longer depend upon the fishing, agricultural land, and forest only due to the increased population and as well as the trend of globalization. How has their livelihood changed? Although a lot of donations have been collected in the name of development, there is livelihood insecurity among the Danuwar people of Panchkhal. Who is going to take responsibility to support them? What do they think of their livelihood practices in the present critical political situation of a nation? What’s the role the education in changing the Danuwars’ livelihood practices? What are the results of all

such changes? These are the vital issues that have not been addressed yet. Thus, it focused on these matters in the following section.

This study was designed to address the following research questions to meet the purpose of the study.

- (i) How do the Danuwar community perceive changed livelihood Practices at present? How did it become more understandable?
- (ii) What are the challenges associated with their changed livelihood practices? How did we challenge the livelihood?
- (iii) How have they been coping with their changed livelihood?

2. METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to explore the livelihood practices of the Danuwar community through interpretive and critical paradigms. The methodology serves as both the theoretical compass and practical toolset—akin to a brush, canvas, and color palette—guiding the narrative construction of this research.

2.1. Philosophical Assumptions

The research is grounded in several philosophical assumptions. Ontologically, it assumes that reality is socially constructed and dynamic, shaped by the experiences and interactions of the Danuwar people. Epistemologically, knowledge is viewed as co-created through researcher-participant engagement, emphasizing the lived realities of the community. Axiologically, the research acknowledges and embraces the presence of values, both of the researcher and the participants. Rhetorically, the narrative style is reflective and personal, consistent with autoethnographic inquiry.

2.2. Research Paradigm

The study operates within an interpretivist paradigm, focusing on understanding social phenomena from the perspective of those experiencing them. This lens acts as a mirror reflecting the meanings embedded in everyday interactions. Simultaneously, elements of criticism provide a telescopic depth, interrogating power structures and marginalization that shape Danuwar's livelihoods.

2.3. Research Approach and Design

This research employs autoethnography and ethnography as its primary approaches. Autoethnography allows for reflexive engagement, where personal experiences are interwoven with the community narrative. Ethnography provides a broader cultural context, enabling an immersive exploration of the Danuwar's socio-economic strategies. The research design was developed in iterative phases: conceptualizing the study, selecting the site, collecting field data, and interpreting texts. Fieldwork involved prolonged engagement, observations, and narrative interviews, allowing for the co-construction of meaning and thick description.

2.4. Data Collection and Interpretation

Data were collected through a combination of participant observation, reflexive journaling, and in-depth interviews within the Danuwar community. Interpretive analysis was conducted through iterative reading, thematic coding, and textual layering to evoke the complexity and richness of the field story.

2.5. Quality Standards and Ethical Considerations

To ensure trustworthiness, the research adheres to criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Reflexivity was maintained throughout to minimize bias. Ethical considerations were central to the research process, including informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for community values and narratives.

In addition to these, this study would apply a qualitative textual analysis approach to examine the living conditions of the Danuwar community in Nepal. The primary data source was the field trip (interview), while secondary sources included peer-reviewed articles, books, and supporting literature within the scope of the study.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Literature Review

Livelihood is the process to sustain the life of people, whether in rural or urban areas. Nonetheless, this study sheds light on rural areas only. For me, as per my experiences, 'livelihood' is the way to run life smoothly. Livelihood is not a single procedure; it is the challenges of multiple supportive livelihood practices (Scoones, 2009), which means people practice various ways to survive. Livelihood includes both the material and nonmaterial resources that are capabilities and assets. The use of natural resources and the dependence on agriculture is a way to reduce poverty and manage the environment, which is the process of sustainable livelihood (Scoones, 1998). This study found the meaning of livelihood from the Danuwar's day-to-day activity. There is a diverse rural livelihood process by which every household performs some activities to support their living (Ellis, 2000), like the cultivation of cauliflowers, potatoes, tomatoes, and engages in non-farm activities.

Nonetheless, there is more emphasis on providing a suitable definition as (Scoones, 1998), who has pointed out three broad livelihood strategies of agriculture intensification/extensification, livelihood diversification, and migration. These are the main options for people who live in rural areas. The agricultural intensification (more output per unit area through capital investment or increases in labour inputs) or extensification (more land under cultivation), livelihood diversification which involves developing a wide income earning activities (includes off-farm wage works, non-farm activities, self-employment), and migration, which may be voluntary and involuntary or may be seasonal (Shrestha, 2017).

This study adopted 'Human Capability', the economic concept to visualize the livelihood of Danuwar of Tama Ghat. The United Nations Development Programme has adopted Sen's capability approach since 1990 in contemporary development challenges (Parr, 2003). It gave the core idea of development through the diverse challenges that the poor people and poor countries faced. Economically, those people become rich who are well-educated; on average, they earn more than those who are not qualified (Blaug, 1970). If someone is not qualified, it is difficult to develop any kind of skill. Skilled human power, along with education, is the way to economic emergence to build the nation. But, it has not been possible in the Danuwar community. They live in poverty and anxiety. Freedom should be the primary element of development; first, the only acceptable evaluation of human progress is primarily and ultimately the enhancement of freedom; second, the achievement of development is dependent on the free agency of people (concentrate on the agency of human beings).

This study has articulated some of the international documents regarding the policies to protect and promote the indigenous people of the world. Hence, this study reviewed a few papers and documents. The first ever resolution was passed in 1957 AD in favour of indigenous people known as No. 107 Indigenous and Tribal Population Convention (ITPC) by the International Labour Organization. It is the first international law that speaks clearly about

the land of indigenous people, their occupational strategies, health condition, and their education.

The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples of the 13th of September 2007 meeting of the General Assembly comprises 46 articles regarding the life and protection of Indigenous peoples, like that of other people. Article 2 states, "Indigenous peoples and individuals are free and equal to all other peoples and individuals and have the right to be free from any kind of discrimination, in the exercise of their rights, in particular that based on their indigenous origin or identity".

In the continent of North America, there are some important legal policies of the government to protect indigenous people. Let me jot down a few points about the Canadian people. "Canada must now work out fair and lasting terms of coexistence with Aboriginal people. Canada claims to be a fair and enlightened society depends on it", Recommendation of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. When we study literature, we are likely to find that indigenous people are most marginalized and victimized in the global society.

Regarding the rights of Nepalese indigenous people, it has been found that until 1990 and these people were excluded from the mainstream. The declaration of Nepal as a Hindu Kingdom and Nepali as the official language has excluded indigenous people. The report was prepared by Rodolfo Stavenhagen, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of Indigenous Peoples.

In Nepal, Indigenous nationalities and other minorities are against domination, subjugation, suppression, oppression, depression, compression, exploitation, monopoly, etc. by dominant castes (Bahun-Chhetri), religion (Hindu), language (Nepali), and culture (Hindu), sex (male), and region (the Kathmandu Valley). They are against all forms of discrimination. Those groups of people who do not fall into the Hindu Varna, with their distinctive features, own culture, mother tongue, having geographical region, are indigenous people in Nepal.

According to the Constitution of Nepal 2015 (promulgated on 20th September 2015 AD), all Adhivasi, Janajati, Dalit, Madhesi have equal rights to take part in the state affairs and administration. Besides, these people had their ideology as per their capability and identity through their mother tongue, ancestral land-specific customs, and culture. The Fundamental Rights (Articles 21-51) explain the rights of the indigenous people.

3.2. Findings and Reflections

3.2.1. Wage Labour to Cope with Livelihood

The livelihoods of the Danuwar Community depend on land cultivation. It is not the traditional method these days. If they do not have their land, they take the land on lease and cultivate. Nowadays, they are well equipped with modern devices. However, it is experienced from the field observation that farming alone does not always support, so they find out a diversified livelihood process. They are marginal cultivator due to the domination of high-class society. The Danuwars could not pay the loan, so Danuwar's property was seized. They became the feudal lords until the introduction Civil Code (Muluki Ain) of 2020 BS and the Land and Land Reforms Act of 2021; it is not the Danuwars community. If we look at the Indian Dalits scenario, there is an increase in the number of Christians through NGO like USAID indirectly. It is the process of funneling US financial aid to India through mostly Christian NGOs. Even the Obama administration has done the same thing after the appointment of a Hindu Indian American person named Rajiv Shah. Very few Danuwar people owned surplus land for production; others do not have much more land to cultivate. Though they are marginalized, compared to the past, they are happy these days; they have become wage labourers to support their livelihood. Henceforth, people must have responsibility for the

development and change of the world in which they live. One does not have to be either devout or non-devout to accept this basic connection. My field experience also gives the same idea to live a life even in a critical situation. Everyone must use their knowledge to utilize the resources that they possess.

3.2.2. Present is far better than the past tension

Livelihood practices of the past and present of the Danuwars relied on their housing pattern, costume pattern, materials they use, festivals they celebrate, food habits, their behaviour, and their family deity. They explained that their life of present life is far better than the past tension. They live in a house that is made of bricks, cement, and roofs of tiles or zinc sheets. In many concrete buildings, flat roofs are found. Previously, they had thatched roofs. These days their houses are full of modern equipment like television, radio, cable line, pressure cooker, rice cooker, refrigerator, cooking gas, biogas, etc. Even their dresses have changed. This study may be wrong to add their change as self-directing change like the principle of Sorokin, or the conflict theorist's "change as the essential condition of social order at all times" (ibid., 1999, p.108).

3.2.3. Threat to culture and development as identity crisis

It is the post-modern era. The way we live and think today, with a true concept, may be wrong tomorrow. We got the insight from the university professors (in 2011 at Kathmandu University as a student of Development Studies) that Michel Foucault, the thinker of our time, is also in confusion about the post-modern era of development thinking and process. Nothing is permanent; everything changes within a second. The main principle is nothingness, or absurdity; truth is variable, and everything is dynamic. Thus, why do changes not occur? The changes take place. It is said, "Time and tide wait for no one", exactly. The whole system of a society changes with the change in people, thought process, and knowledge. However, the old Danuwars in Tama Ghat hardly accept the change. They blame others; they want to keep their traditional norms and values as it was before, which is almost impossible, we think, since many things have changed in the way they live.

Language and religion are the prominent subjects to influence their community and change the entire social order. The development would no longer be the central organizing principle of socio-cultural life. In this context, there is no need for expertise to define the term development; rather, the local people explain themselves. There is an influence of the postmodern trend. Intercultural activities have changed Danuwars' local language to the Nepali language. Anyone can be surprised to find them speaking Nepali more fluently than their native language. It shows that the Danuwars are losing their identity from a linguistic point of view. Language domination is like class domination for ages and ages, and they had to struggle to maintain equality. Moreover, different classes or groups of people conflict in a situation.

3.3. Implications

Since historical time, the Danuwars have been exploited, there has been unequal land resource distribution among them and others. They lived in what is called astray in the existing society. Though there seems to be gender equality, women are not given land ownership. Therefore, there is a need for agrarian land reforms to make a healthy and just society (Poudel, 2024). The land reformation and the distribution in a scientific manner are the way to solve the problem of economically poor Danuwars. It is the only way to achieve resources under their control, which enables them to identify themselves as the Danuwars. It

leads to the decision-making power in their hands to make their society better. The Elites also understand the facts and make healthy relations with them, forgetting all their past thoughts and ideas.

If the existing local government can recognize the indigenous knowledge as the greatest gift of the Danuwar community, a society develops. The knowledge and the natural resources could be utilized and promoted through the education system at the local and national levels. Moreover, it is felt that the use of indigenous knowledge may play a vital role in the development of Nepal. The creative knowledge needs to be included in the curriculum at the school level and in higher education. If it is done, the young generation will be able to understand the value of agriculture and could make their livelihood far better. That's why education is essential in this post-modern era. The livelihood of the Danuwar people is changing along with the position of the globalization process. Henceforth, it is necessary to adopt the positive aspects of the global scenario rather than accepting everything to disguise the community as a whole. It is also better to accept the localization process to sustain life. Thus, both the mixture of global and local ways of livelihood may promote resilient livelihood in a better way. Multiple livelihood strategies are essential for comfortable assets to achieve a resilient livelihood. That is what the Danuwars do. Respecting local expertise, adopting a "holistic approach, incorporating indigenous wisdom and ethical stewardship is crucial for tackling environmental [, economic, social, and cultural] challenges effectively" (Sherma *et al.*, 2024).

There is neither an end nor a peak of the development of cultural perspectives. It keeps on developing from generation to generation, changing out of its comfort zone from a rigid atmosphere. The people also know that there is a fear of losing identity, therefore, they follow their ancestral traditions in the modern trend inside their home. They are rigid in the ritual ceremonies, creating some meaning with their explanation. If it is changed, they may be positioned to lose their originality. Hence, the Government must preserve such indigenous people, their indigenous knowledge, and culture. They need to be given a chance to take part in participate in each phase of the developmental process. This leads to self-determination in the field of the development of a particular community in their own will. It saves them from the path of extinction.

Finally, the Danuwars have lived in Tama Ghat since ancient times. They need to have access to decision-making power for the equilibrium of economic, political, and social justice. If extinct from the society country shall lose its indigenous people with the culture and history of Nepal undoubtedly in one part. Following the principle of "Let's live and let others live" is the only way to protect and preserve indigenous people like the Danuwars in Nepal.

3.4. Discussion

The Danuwars were originally from Tama Ghat since historical times. They lived by hunting, foraging, and fishing, and later they adopted farming. It was because the rivers dried up, and they had to find an alternative source of livelihood. Thus, they have become expert in the cultivation of land. They owned and settled in vast tar (low-lying plain land near the riverside), farming. But they became marginal cultivators when their land was under the control of elites. This led to unequal land distribution between elites and the Danuwars. Though there is the presence of states, their recognition is less. It is due to less participation in local-level governance. From the Danuwars' perspective Government paid a deaf ear to the marginalized community, denying their identity as the Danuwars. They were forced to be economically poor, socially backward, and politically unidentified, and educationally illiterate. Finally, they

came to the situation of loss of their ancestral land, and they denied themselves to be called the Danuwars because of their inferior complexity.

Danuvars work on a daily wage. They are given two meals and more than NPR 1000 for a day's work. It became the best way to sustain their livelihood. Irrigation facilities are scarce, so people go near the river and supply water to the field with the help of an electric pump. They have left traditional cultivation of paddy in the comfortable land (the land where they could easily work) and started cultivating cauliflower, potatoes, and tomatoes to meet the demand of the market. It is quick work in the field and a rush to the market. Similarly, quarrelling has become common among them; poverty creates conflict. Few people are conscious and have adopted other cultural activities and tried to make their life go smoothly, because some aspects of their life are still difficult to date. Women are not in a position in the land tenure system. Women having land ownership as their fixed property and having a bank account are rare in Tama Ghat. It means they are not empowered yet, though a few things have changed; they are in a crucial condition. Although they work in the field, they need to borrow food and money. Many of the women have started a homemade liquor business to make their living. The government has banned people from entering the forest. They do not earn from the forest. Only during the time of ritual ceremonies and construction works, the forest consumer groups provide logs and firewood. Thus, the youths are distracted and have migrated to city areas and as well as to the Gulf countries.

The Danuwars in Tama Ghat are regarded as excellent farmers for cultivating crops. They know how to keep the seedlings of each crop. I came to know that they possess specific indigenous knowledge. The knowledge has been divided into three categories: empirical-analytic knowledge, historical-hermeneutic knowledge, and critical-emancipatory knowledge. Knowledge means power, but it is neglected in Nepal. They have achieved a resilient livelihood. They are in a position to achieve sustainability from shocks and stress. The lack of agricultural education may further obstruct livelihood. It has made them accept diverse assets (human capital, physical capital, natural capital, and financial capital). Globalization took place in food habits, clothing, and housing patterns, whereas localization in rituals, ceremonies, and festivals. Hence, there is the creation of a mixed mode of culture. It is the process of shifting the Danuwars' cultural identity at Tama Ghat.

There is a direct influence of globalization on the cultural aspects of the Danuwar community at Tama Ghat. Due to this fact, their livelihood changed in such a way that most of them forgot their originality. They are not in a position to go back to the past, and they are not in a position to create a new society. Finally, they have compromised to work in their small portion of land to overcome their health problems. Moreover, they cultivate land for extra income generation. Similarly, they have migrated to the local market and Kathmandu to work in the urban (life) area.

The Danuwars youths' main intention is to join the army or to be a police officer after the completion of school-level education. Very few of them have completed a Bachelor's degree. But it is ironic to say that due to power hegemony, they are put far behind. These days, they go to Gulf countries like Malaysia, Dubai, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Bahrain to sustain their livelihood. Their traditional crops of cultivation are maize, wheat, and paddy for the preparation of alcohol. But, due to the increased population and global influence, they need quick earnings for their sustainability. Therefore, they have adopted hybrid cauliflower seeds, potato seeds, and tomato seeds to cultivate excessively for the supply. This is also the transmission of the new farming system from other countries to our country. They have adopted so quickly and the easily that these days they seem to forget their indigenous knowledge of farming vegetables. It is found that local seeds sometimes do not grow well

without any food crops. The priority of the young generation in non-farming activities and technological development and use in agriculture may lead to the disappearance of the traditional farming system.

4. CONCLUSION

The Danuwar community of Tama Ghat has experienced a significant transformation in livelihood, shifting from traditional practices such as fishing and subsistence farming to diverse strategies including wage labor, foreign employment, and intensive crop production. While these transitions have contributed to increased economic activity, they have simultaneously resulted in the loss of indigenous knowledge, weakening of cultural rituals, and marginalization of native religious practices.

Religious marginalization has played a crucial role in this transition. The dominance of state-sponsored religion and national language has suppressed local spiritual customs, sidelining the Danuwar's cultural and religious identity. Traditional beliefs have gradually been displaced by institutional religious norms, which often fail to recognize the spiritual heritage of indigenous communities. Furthermore, women in the Danuwar community remain largely excluded from land ownership and religious leadership, perpetuating gender-based inequality.

This study underscores the urgent need to implement inclusive development policies that acknowledge and protect indigenous religious traditions. Sustainable and equitable progress must be rooted in the recognition of local cultural wisdom and religious diversity. The Danuwar's resilience does not lie solely in economic adaptation, but also in the preservation and revitalization of their religious and cultural identity as a source of dignity, unity, and strength.

5. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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