Available on: https://jsshrs.ep-journals.org/ E-ISSN: 3051-3561, P-ISSN: 3051-3553

Journal of Social Science and Human Research Studies

Volume : 02 Issue : 06 June-2026

Indigenous Knowledge of the Majhi Community of Manthali Municipality, Ramechhap

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Published Date: June 30, 2026 **Article DOI: 10.65150/EP-jsshrs/V2E6/2026-33**

ABSTRACT: The Majhi is one of the indigenous nationalities (Adivasi Janajati) of Nepal, whose lives, culture, and socio-economic identities depend on river areas. This study is based on systematically evaluated literature on the Majhi community, Government records, available ethnographic data, and socio-economic census analyses of documents relating to Manthali Municipality in Ramechhap District, to assess the indigenous knowledge systems practiced by the Majhi community. The study highlights their traditional modes of resource appropriation (fishing, boat construction, and agriculture along the river), their linguistic diversity, and their belief systems (sociocultural idiosyncrasies). The findings show that although the Majhi have a vast body of ecological knowledge that can contribute to adapting to climate change and conserving biodiversity, this knowledge faces severe threats. Every practice is rapidly being lost/destroyed by modern infrastructure encroachment, accelerated urbanization (of settlements along the Tama Kosi river corridor), economic displacement through mechanized sand mining, and linguistic assimilation. The conclusions of this study warn of the need to protect the intangible cultural heritage of the Majhi and call for inclusion in environmental policies and municipal-level local governance structures to ensure sustainable local development.

KEYWORDS: Majhi Community, Indigenous Knowledge, Manthali Municipality, Riverine Ecology, Cultural Conservation, Sustainable Resource Management.

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous knowledge systems encompass the sum of knowledge, practices, and representations of the people who have long histories of living in interaction with their natural environments (Berkes, 2012). They are highly functional and flexible, reflecting their cultural context and the outcomes of experience, learning, and experimentation (Folke et al., 2003, pp.). 352–387). Nepal is an ethnically and ecologically diverse country, and the Indigenous nationalities (Adivasi Janajati) have always continued their own localized ecological knowledge systems for resource extraction, community organization, and spiritual life (CBS, 2014). Among the most disadvantaged communities in Nepal's northern river basins is the Majhi community. Its socio-ecological sustainability and distribution have historically been linked to larger river basins indigenous to it.

The Majhi community has lived for decades in a permanent settlement along the Tama Kosi River in Ramechhap District, Bagmati Province (Nepal). The Majhi of Manthali Municipality live in and depend on the river, mainly for fishing, running ferries (Ghat), and riverbank farming in the fertile yet erratic riverbed (Subba, 2002). This close association with the riverine environment has, over the centuries, given rise to an elaborate indigenous knowledge system. This involves conventional weather prediction, sustainable harvesting of fish resources in water bodies, local medicine, and community-based dispute resolution systems.

Statement of the Problem

While Majhi's indigenous knowledge is extremely fragile and marginalized within dominant development and academic agendas, it has substantial ecological and cultural value (Gurung, 2005, pp. 18–35). The rapid growth of urban infrastructure, such as motorable bridges over the river built in place of traditional ferries, and the commercialization of the riverbed for sand and aggregate extraction have disrupted the material base of Majhi livelihoods in the Manthali Municipality (Dahal, 2018, p. 91). 112–126).

Formal education and state-led development models also tend to look down on indigenous practices and consider them to be primitive or non-scientific. A profound 'inter-generational rupture' occurs when older generations pass away, and the oral world is not systematically made available. With a further increasing marginalization of economic activities along with the decrease in access to the river and hence their livelihood, the younger generation of Majhis have been increasingly drifting towards cities or other countries' labor market, leading to the rapid assimilation of their language and the final loss of their ancestral knowledge system (Shrestha, 2021, pp. 45– 62).

Research Objectives

The main objectives of this research are:

1. Document and analyze traditional knowledge of biodiversity, ecosystem guardianship, and resource management among the Majhi tribe in Manthali Municipality, Ramechhap.

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2. Study where Majhi socio-cultural institutions, rituals, and language end and where their rivers begin.
3. Evaluate current drivers of change and threats to the preservation of Majhi indigenous knowledge systems.
4. Recommend policy interventions to include Majhi indigenous knowledge in localized climate adaptation and sustainable development plans.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study used an exploratory, desk-based research approach that involved the descriptiveanalytical interpretation of secondary data. At best, you have access to field procurement, and because the need is to synthesize the socio-ecological history, an analysis based on such data would be a robust methodology given limited access to primary data.

Sources of Data

The data used in this paper were obtained from a variety of secondary sources, listed below:

- **Government Records/Census Data:** National census (Pop & housing national 2011, 2011,2021)-National Statistics Office (former CBS); Manthali Municipality- Local level profile- NFDIN (National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities).
- **Academic and Ethnographic Literature:** Peer-reviewed journal articles, Ph.D. dissertations, anthropological monographs, and research books focusing on the Majhi and other riverine communities of Nepal (e.g., Bista, 1967; Subba, 2002; Gautam & Thapa-Magar, 1994; Lamsal, 2019, pp. 3821–3836).
- Civil Society and NGO Reports and Publications by the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) and local non-governmental organizations working in Ramechhap district related to land issues and cultural preservation.

Data Analysis Framework

The collected textual, demographic, and qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Secondary sources were systematically coded along four dimensions of interest:

1. Resource management and material culture in antiquity
2. Socio-cultural practices, worldviews, and institutions
3. Linguistic structures and oral lore
4. Anthropogenic and structural conditions of indigenous continuity.

State-level demographic data were cross-checked against anthropological case study data from the Tama Kosi river corridor to ensure the internal and contextual validity of the Manthali Municipality data.

The Socio-Demographic Context of Manthali Municipality

The system of administration of Ramechhap District is headquartered in Manthali Municipality.

Geographically, the Municipality lies along the valley floor and the surrounding hills of Tama Kosi, a central economic route linking the mid-hills with the Tarai plain via the regional highway network.

Majhi is an ethnolinguistic minority group in the municipality, found in the wards (e.g., 1 and 2) and in pockets in wards 7 and 8 along the river (CBS, 2022). History has shown that the Majhi population has been localized around the major Ghats of the river. Education. The Majhis of Manthali are highly dependent on traditional livelihoods, have a lower level of formal education than dominant caste groups, and suffer from considerable economic vulnerability due to landlessness or unproductive land (Ailan land) (Subba, 2002).

Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Resource Management

What is special about Majhi's indigenous knowledge is their relationship with the river, which they do not see as merely an economic resource but as a vast living entity.

Fishing Technologies and Ethics of Indigenous Peoples

The traditional foundation of the Majhi culture is fishing. Although modern commercial fishing can use destructive methods, such as electrofishing, dynamiting, or chemical poisoning, the traditional fishing method of the Majhi is free from such practices, with well-established ecological morality and a selective extraction method (Gautam & Thapa-Magar, 1994).

However, secondary records indicate that the Majhi of Rametechhap use locally available fibrous plant materials to make indigenous fishing nets and other fishing traps. Key instruments include:

- **Jal (cast net):** Cast net made with a knotted mesh, which is also made using a particular technique so that only a particular type of mature fish can be caught in the net, and the young fish are released through the standardized mesh.
- **Duwali (River Diversion):** Drainage of water during the season (Duwali, River Diversion) in a minor part of the river bed, through the use of stones and mud. However, the Majhi siphons off only the adult sardines that have gotten stuck in the pools; after which it releases the flow to its normal course.
- **Pasu and Dhadiya:** traps in the form of cones made of bamboo, located in the narrow river passages. The design of these traps is based on natural flow patterns and fish behavior and will not affect water chemistry or benthic ecology (Gautam & ThapaMagar, 1994).

Notably, Majhi's belief is against fishing during the critical spawning period for fish. It is a means of self-regulation in conservation, which ensures fish stocks in the Tama Kosi never collapse.

Building and Ghat Management

In Ramechhap's pre-concrete and suspension-bridge days, the Majhi dominated the structure of the regional transport system with Ghats (ferry crossings). The Dunga, a traditional dugout canoe, was made from certain tree species that required silvicultural knowledge.

Sal (Shorea robusta) and Simal (Bombax ceiba) were the species Majhi artisans chose, as these trees are found only in the community forests of Ramechhap. The selection was based on buoyancy, grain density, and the tree's tolerance to waterlogging. The canoe itself was painstakingly

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carved from a single log; local geometric and structural scale information was passed down through oral apprenticeship. This necessitated a more sophisticated cognitive mapping of the river current, undercurrent, whirlpools, and shallow depths (Subba, 2002) when operating these boats during monsters, when the Turtle River is in flood.

Riverbank Agriculture and Bio-Indicators

Back before the advent of Ramechhap, there were concrete and suspension bridges, and the Majhi maintained a monopoly over the regional transport networks they dominated – owning the Ghats (ferry crossings). The dugout canoes that Dungas built were archetypal and made from specific tree species, demonstrating their knowledge of silviculture.

The majhi artisans selected Sal (Shorea robusta) or Simal (Bombax ceiba) trees, which can be found only in the community forests of Ramechhap. The trees were chosen based on their floatability, grain density, and tolerance to waterlogging. The canoes have been painstakingly carved from a single log to match the surrounding structures and convey information passed down through oral history. When the Tama Kosi was in flood, navigating these boats was more complex and required a more detailed cognitive map of river currents, depths, and whirlpools (Subba, 2002).

Socio-Cultural Frameworks and Spiritual Connections

Indigenous knowledge is inscribed in social frameworks, life-cycle rituals, and spiritual topographies among the Majhi.

Worship of Water Deity: Ladi Puja

The communal worship of the river deity, Ladi Puja or Koshi Puja, is considered the most characteristic cultural institution of this community. This ritual is a testament to the continuity of the socio-ecological covenant between the village and its water.

Ladi Puja is performed in a group on the banks of the Tama Kosi to ensure a safe crossing of the river, an ample supply of fish, and protection from destructive monsoonal flooding. She involves prayer, offerings of local grains, and sacrifice to a water deity (Subba, 2002). The local traditional priest (Majhi Dhami) is a spiritual mediator, assisted by a Ghatbale (Majhi). Ladi Puja is perceived as a binding thread, and it is believed to be our concerted effort to preserve the sanctity of this water body. There are sacred areas, particularly the riverbanks, where no defilement or waste disposal occurs, and no overexploitation of resources is allowed, especially during ritual periods.

Social Governance and the Majhi Customary Council

In the Majhi ethnic areas of Ramechhap, an autonomous customary council led by a village chief, Majhi Thari or Mahan, has traditionally been responsible for governance. The council had judicial and executive powers over the cluster of villages.

The council resolved conflicts related to land boundaries along the river floodplain, the allocation of fishing zones, and violations of cultural rules. It adapted the restorative justice approach with the Mahan to focus on symbolic fines, reconciliation, and community service rather than punishment and separation, both of which have their benefits. This locally defined package of actions ensured social equilibrium. It stopped intra-household resource contestation, allowing for collective action of all households to common-pool resources in the Mundo River basin.

Linguistic Heritage and Oral Traditions

Indigenous ecological knowledge is encapsulated, preserved, and transmitted via language.

Majhi is an Indo-Aryan language. Notably, it also has numerous local variations rooted in ancient Austroasiatic and/or Tibeto-Burman terms that have been adapted over time to local ecological conditions (NEFIN, 2018).

The Majhi language in Manthali Municipality has a wide range of terms to describe specific aspects of river morphology, fish anatomy, and aquatic conditions, which cannot be translated into standard Nepali. The term “rapids” refers to a specific combination of current, wave action, and silt level.

Further, their oral history, in the form of riddles, folktales, and songs in Ghatbale, is an oral archive of Ramechhap’s geography. These stories, in turn, refer to changes in the course of the Tama Kosi River, earthquake histories, and migration. This structural memory gives the community a historical continuity and mental resilience in the face of environmental shocks.

Contemporary Threats and Drivers of Knowledge Erosion

The Indigenous knowledge system remains resilient in Majhi Municipality, though current structural pressures are unprecedented and may lead to its extinction.

Infrastructure and Technological Displacement

The Tama Kosi corridor has been modernized at a very rapid pace, and most of the Majhi’s traditional occupations have become redundant. The traditional wooden horse is now called Dunga and is no longer used because motorable suspension bridges have been built over the river. Consequently, boat-building skills, the selection of silvicultural wood, and techniques of river navigation are no longer practiced or taught to children. The Ghats, which used to be vibrant and significant socio-economic and cultural centers in Majhi, have now been abandoned or annexed by non-tribal business interests and turned into highway intersections.

Commercial Resource Exploitation and Hydropower Projects

River resources have been monetized, leading to destructive changes in the ecology. Dahal (2018, p. 165) notes that the local fish spawning grounds have been repeatedly eroded due to the extraction of sand, gravel, and boulders from the Tama Kosi riverbed using heavy, mechanized excavators. 112–126). Additionally, ongoing dam construction in the area has disrupted the river’s hydrology, leading to rapid fluctuations in water levels and shifts in fish migration patterns. Major decline in fish stocks and no economic use of Majhi fishing implements, such as Jal and Dhadiya. Consequently, sustainable fishing practices are abandoned, and the community engages in urban construction and/or work in limestone quarries.

Linguistic Assimilation and Socio-Economic Marginalization

In Manthali, the national education curriculum was dominant, and young people were being educated to lose their roots in indigenous languages and localized ecological histories sooner than any wind of change. In Nepali, terminology for explaining river ecosystems is virtually lost due to extreme linguistic disorder. As per the National Population and Housing Census 2011 (CBS, 2014), younger Majhis use Nepali as their first language.

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Moreover, the Majhi families have not grown up owning (Lalpurja) lands on the banks of the river due to historical processes of structural exclusion. Increased urbanization and colonization are likely to expose these communities to losing their place-based Indigenous knowledge and to exclude them from the riverine environment that has supported the knowledge and practices of these community members for generations. When the Majhi indigenous knowledge is lost, it will not only be a loss for the Majhi ethnic minority but also a critical issue for environmental governance and sustainable development in Manthali Municipality.

According to political ecologists, local knowledge systems offer significant lessons for adaptation to climate change, decentralized resource management, and conservation strategies (Berkes, 2012). The knowledge gained from Majhi on flood dynamics, seasonal changes, and biological precursors of floods will be used to support community-based disaster risk reduction (DRR) in the Municipality. Linking Majhi's warning signals to NbS might enable the addition of local communities' capabilities to cope with climate-change-driven flash flooding.

Besides, the revitalization of Majhi cultural institutions can serve as an example for building community-based ecotourism and sustainable fisheries. If the municipality of Manthali recognizes the traditional rights of the Majhis over certain parts of the riverbed in the Ghat and incorporates their ecological values into the ordinances, it can help reduce riverbed mining by mechanical machines, which can have adverse environmental effects. This is in keeping with the International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention 169 and the provisions of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which both highlight states' duty not to harm or threaten the cultural or economic integrity of indigenous nations (ILO, 1989; UN, 2007).

CONCLUSION

The Majhi community of Manthali Municipality, Ramechhap, has a very rich indigenous knowledge system that is holistic and has evolved over many centuries through a mono interaction with the Tama Kosi river ecosystem. For example, sustainable fishing practices, local weather forecasting, unique material culture, and riverine customs like Ladi Puja manifest a socio-ecological paradigm in which income generation is tightly coupled with species preservation. However, fast-paced modernization, degradation caused by infrastructure and housing projects, commercial excavation of river beds, and institutional neglect are threatening this heritage at an unprecedented rate. If population levels and languages continue unchecked, this rich, localized knowledge base can be lost forever. A shift in mindset is needed to preserve Majhi indigenous knowledge from being viewed as passive recipients of development to being seen as active agents of stewardship over the environment.

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