

Nepal

Chapter 4: The Life of an Indigenous Youth

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Being an Indigenous youth can provide a world full of opportunities as well as serve as a barrier. Youth hold the power to shift the dynamics of the world. If we want change, we must provide leadership support for youth to make change possible. Indigenous youth, in particular, continue to face racism and discrimination and are marginalized in society, but when they have a sense of belonging and a strong cultural identity, they become resilient, powerful individuals. They have roots through their ancestral lineage, wisdom, and intelligence. They are the future leaders of their communities. It is critical to restore leadership from the erosion of their traditional knowledge practices and ancestral lands so that they can begin to create a more sustainable, interdependent system for the coming generations.

The Newar community is one of the oldest communities living in Nepal, with a history dating back many centuries. The Newars are one of the many Indigenous communities that reside in the country of Nepal. This is an Indigenous community that has its own separate knowledge systems and culture. One of the chief systems in this community is that of the community organization known as

“Guthi.” The “Guthis” are Indigenous organizations of the Newari community that oversee social and cultural functioning of the Indigenous community. Every Newar is in one way or another bound to the Guthi. This is one of the main reasons for the respect earned by the Newari community in Nepal. This is a form of community organization that has provided the Newari society with sound and stable management since ancient times. This is, in a sense, one of the Indigenous knowledge systems of the Newari community. The Newar community speaks the Newari language and their native settlement has been in the Kathmandu Valley since ancient times. Migration out of the valley began in the Medieval Period (Bikram Era 937-1826) and the Newari people have settled in many countries around the world, especially in recent times. Amongst Nepal's various ethnic communities, Newar is a cultured and, as a whole, prosperous community.

The Newari community has its own caste systems. It is composed of followers of both Hinduism as well as Buddhism. Due to this, both the Hindu Newar community and the Buddhist Newar community have separate caste systems. While the Rajopadhyaya, Shrestha, Pradhan and Joshi are regarded as the highest castes among the Hindu Newars, the Bajracharya, Shakya and Rajopadhyaya are regarded as the highest castes among the Buddhist Newars. The Newari community has over one hundred and fifteen different surnames.

I have had the privilege of meeting many other Newari and non-Newari people in my life, and this range of experiences has allowed me to understand my role in relation to my Indigenous community as well as in relation to the non-Indigenous world around me. There have been moments where I felt extremely supported and there have also been moments when I experienced clashes between my ideas and the ideas of my community. Each moment has taught me something and helped me understand the world around me. This chapter will showcase my experiences as an Indigenous youth in various sectors, primarily in the area of human rights.

Human rights are one of the most important topics of discussion in the present context of the world. It is a topic spoken about by many but understood by few. People claim they advocate for human rights but in truth, many are not even aware of what human rights are. I have been working in the field of human rights education for about a year. Before that, I knew that we have rights because we are humans but not any more than that. Most of the youth that I encounter, in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, are in most cases unaware of human rights and also unaware of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). This lack of basic information on their rights is one of the major challenges in the field of human rights among Indigenous youths.

The government of Nepal has signed the UDHR and has recognized many rights for all of its citizens. One of these is the right to equality. However, this is one of the human rights of the Indigenous community in Nepal that has not been recognized by the government. The participation of Indigenous Peoples in politics and in the public sector is quite limited. The word “Indigenous” itself has become a form of discrimination. The word “Indigenous” separates the Indigenous People from the rest of the population and implies that such people are supposedly backwards. This line of thought has become quite prevalent in the present Nepalese society. The government of Nepal has been unable to guarantee the right to equality for Indigenous youth in every sector, although it claims that it has.

In the same way, the human rights of many other Indigenous communities have also been exploited. The systems and beliefs that have existed among the various communities of Nepal have created a barrier between various communities. For example, the Brahmin community of Nepal does not accept the partaking of buffalo meat whereas the Newari community is one of those communities that consumes buffalo meat in large quantities. Due to this, the traditional Brahmins cannot stand the presence of the Newari people. Right to equality has been officially recognized for all, but can we say that the right has been implemented for all?

I have conducted a few human rights seminars in various schools and colleges as a part of my duty as a human rights educator. In all the institutions where I conducted these seminars, my first question has always been, “What are human rights?” To my surprise, not even a single student has been able to give an answer to this question. This is a topic that has been ignored in most educational institutions.

Just as I am an Indigenous youth, I am also a social work student. During my course of study, I have seen many Indigenous youths from various Indigenous communities. As I travelled to different parts of the country for my fieldwork, I saw many different Indigenous communities all experiencing similar discrimination. For example, in 2017, I travelled to the district of Jhapa in the easternmost corner of Nepal. Jhapa, a region famous for its tea gardens and factories, is populated by people of varied communities. However, regardless of which area I visited, the people of the Indigenous communities were either working as laborers in the tea gardens and factories or running extremely small businesses. Not one garden or factory was owned by an Indigenous person.

People believe that all the various communities live in peace and harmony with each other in Nepal. It is claimed that there is no barriers between the communities. However, I say that this is not true. Though the youths are taking steps to

make this harmony a reality, such efforts have not been fully successful in many cases. I think an actual incident might be able to explain this better than simple statements. However, in order to protect the right to privacy of my friend and her family, I will not use their real names. I have a friend, Anna, who belongs to the Brahmin (Bahun) community. Her elder brother, Rohan, loved a Newari girl, Anu, but their love was not accepted by Anna's father, Manish, and her uncles. However, their love was accepted by the rest of the family, as the rest of the family members accepted inter-caste relationships. Rohan, therefore, ran away with Anu. Even today, Manish does not let Rohan attend family functions or stay at their home. As Manish lives in another district and visits his wife and daughters only at certain periods of time, Rohan and his mother and sisters tend to meet while their father is away. This is a situation that was created by the dislike and distrust that exists between the people of these two communities, simply because of their Indigenous identities.

Differences in traditions between various communities have also led to increased distance and separation between those living in Nepal. Even today, most of the Indigenous communities strictly adhere to their ancient beliefs and traditions. In a sense, this is good because the traditions are what define the community for what it is. If an Indigenous community stops all its traditions, how is it different from the other communities? This would be like losing the Indigenous identity.

However, the value that many Indigenous communities put on protecting their traditions has, in some cases, hurt their own members. As a member of an Indigenous community, I have seen a few such situations.

A short story from an Indigenous youth can provide a better understanding of the situation:

Being born and raised in a Newari family can be quite challenging for girls, especially as we have to adapt to societal norms while also having modern thinking. My name is Jemie Shrestha, a proud Indigenous woman from the Newar community. The Newar community is the fifth largest Indigenous group in Nepal and within that group, there are many sub-groups. In particular, I belong to the city of Bhaktapur, often known as the Bhaktapuri Newar, who have their own beliefs and practices. To add to this, my mother is Shakya, a high caste and Buddhist, while my father is Hindu and from a medium caste. Therefore, I have a mixture of cultural practices. For example, Kathmandu Newar celebrate Ghode Jatra, where the horse is worshipped and taken around the ancient city, while Lalitpur Newar celebrate Machhindranath Jatra, where the god Machhindranath is worshipped and the deity's chariot is taken around the ancient city of Patan for a certain period of time depending upon the lunar calendar. The Bhaktapur Newars happen to

celebrate Bisket Jatra, which marks the New Year, wherein family members gather.

The Newar community is quite conservative in discussions about sex and sexuality. Though I am quite comfortable talking about sex, sexuality and sexual protection in my community, I cannot imagine talking about this with my parents. I believe our cultural practices depict sexuality in a variety ways. The Newars practice Gufa, which celebrates girls entering into womanhood; this ceremony is conducted before girls menstruate for the first time in their lives. I also practiced Gufa before I reached puberty. Instead of staying for 12 days for Gufa, I stayed for only three days in a Vihar (Buddhist Monastery). The area of residence during the ceremony can vary depending upon the practice of the family (i.e., it can be at home or monastery). After I got my first period, I was worshipped and everything was separated from me by my family. The plate I used to eat from was not used by others and I was made to sit separately while partaking in any meal during my menstrual periods. I was not even allowed to mention the name of boys or see them. I believe every community, both Indigenous and non- Indigenous, have their own way of practicing and acknowledging sexuality.

In Nepal's political sector, the Constitution states that every political party must present an Indigenous person as a candidate for a pre-

determined number of seats, as per Articles 40 and 51 of the Constitution of Nepal. However, this law has often been ignored by many. Also, the Indigenous candidates presented by some parties are unable to gather much support. The main cause of this is that the people tend to vote for people from their own communities rather than Indigenous candidates who come from other communities. Hence, as the Indigenous communities in Nepal are small and scattered, most Indigenous candidates are unable to win the elections in their areas.

Thankfully, this is not so in the case of local administrations. Each local administration is composed mainly of people of the same area and so Indigenous candidates are able to obtain seats in their local administrations with ease.

Through law, the government has made provisions about inclusiveness. The Public Service Commission (PSC) has allocated a 45% quota of seats for inclusion of Indigenous Peoples in the PSC. Here is where a contradiction of words and actions can be noted. The government has violated its own provisions; not many representatives of Indigenous communities have been appointed in vacant posts of constitutional bodies. Those who have been selected as Indigenous candidates do not truly represent Indigenous communities. They are either Chhetri-Bahun women married to Indigenous men or Indigenous women married to Chhetri-Bahun men. The Chhetris and the Bahuns are two of

the major communities in Nepal. They are communities formed by the Hindu caste system.

In recent appointments in constitutional bodies, non-Indigenous women and Madhesi (the people living in the Terai region of Nepal or “Madhes” are known as Madhesi) have been elected in a larger proportion when compared to Indigenous Peoples. There could be two reasons for this. Firstly, the ruling parties are not against the inclusion of women as much as they are against the inclusion of Indigenous Peoples. Since the Madhes movement (a movement demanding a separate state for the people of the Terai region of Nepal that started during the economic blockade by India after the Nepal earthquake of 2015), Madhesi parties have emerged as a strong political force. They can raise their voices on the streets and in the Parliament without receiving backlash from the majority. Even within the Nepali Congress (NC) and the Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML), the voice of the Madhesi is strong. This is not the case with Adivasi Janjati, another term for Indigenous Peoples in Nepal. Adivasi Janjati are weak in the Parliament. Most of them fear being labeled as anti-social elements if they raise their voices to protest something. So, can we truly call this government one that has people from all communities? Can we truly call it a people’s government?

As a student of social work, I have been to many communities throughout the country, particularly Indigenous communities. In my visits, I have been a witness to the problem of migration out of many Indigenous communities. The youths in most Indigenous communities tend to migrate abroad or to urban areas from the rural areas in the hopes of receiving better opportunities for employment. Most of the Indigenous communities in the rural areas of Nepal have mainly women, elderly people and children in their villages. Migration out of Indigenous communities is actually similar to migration out of other communities in Nepal. Most youths in Nepal prefer to go abroad for higher studies and work. This is because the education system and the methods of teaching in most universities are quite outdated; furthermore, there is a lack of job opportunities available in the country. Some have suggested that entrepreneurship is the solution to such situations but this is not always successful. The finance needed for entrepreneurship is difficult to obtain for most youths and even if the funding is obtained, the economic situation of the nation is not stable enough for adequate profit to be made. In the present circumstances of Nepal, very few entrepreneurs actually succeed. The rising taxes, the costs of materials and equipment, and the relatively high living expenses can all cause the failure of entrepreneurs in Nepal. It is due to these factors that the youths of our country fear economic and professional failure in Nepal and tend to migrate abroad.

Technology is something that has become a crucial part of our daily lives. It has been a boon in many ways. Technology has made our lives much easier than ever dreamed of before. However, it is truly a boon?

Technology also becomes a source of discrimination in Nepal. While it is true that technology is easily available in the urban areas of Nepal and is slowly becoming available in the rural areas of the country too, many Indigenous People in rural Nepal are unable to afford technology due to poverty. Their children see that their friends use such technologies and develop a desire to obtain them as well. They firstly pressure their parents, who are unable to afford it. In many cases, children turn to stealing to get it. In a sense, this creates a negative psychology in the minds of the poor. It is true that this does not apply to all Indigenous People; however, extremely poor Indigenous communities like many of the Musahar are not even able to afford electricity in their homes and such technologies are dreams like a star in the sky for them. Many Indigenous People in the rural parts of Nepal are so poor that they are not even able to have adequate housing. In such situations, if their children come in contact with such technology, will they not be psychologically affected? If technology generates such negative effects, can it be viewed as a boon to all?

I am frequently asked, “What differentiates Indigenous Peoples from non-Indigenous Peoples?”

The answer to this is simple. It is their culture and traditions. In the present day, people of all communities are busy earning a living. The modern life is such that one has no free time to do much else. At present, the younger generations show less concern regarding their cultures and traditions because they are so caught up in modern life. This is one of the greatest threats to the existence of Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous communities have diverse cultural traditions and practices. As time passes, the younger generations avoid taking part in these cultural practices. They therefore do not learn about these practices and are unable to pass them on to the next generation. This process continues and eventually leads to the extinction of the culture. One example is the script of the Newari community, which is known as “Nepa: Bhasa.” The ancient Indigenous Newars had the knowledge of writing and reading this script. However, at the present time, not even 10% of the Newar population is able to understand this script. Most of the ancient texts written in this Indigenous script have been lost and only a few remain. Though efforts are being made to revive the skill of writing this script, this is happening on a small scale. In a sense, these efforts are the boundary line that prevents this script from vanishing into memories and museums.

If we look at the Indigenous Peoples of western Nepal, the Chepangs are an Indigenous community who have just recently begun to abandon their traditional forest homes and begun to live a life in the rural and urban parts of the nation. They have begun taking part in the economic activities associated with a modern lifestyle. As a result, many of them have lost their ancient Indigenous skills. Only those Chepangs living in the forest in their ancient mode of life are able to retain their skills, including the art of making wooden bowls. Such bowls are purchased by traders from various parts of the nation and even sent to India for refinement. However, those Chepangs living the modern life no longer have time to spend on making such works and are only engaged in earning money. As a result, the day is not far when such items become extinct.

Festivals are one of the most important aspects of culture. They all have something to teach and they bring us together. Every community, both Indigenous as well as non-Indigenous, has their own festivals. Festivals have been celebrated since the dawn of communities and cultures. Even today, we celebrate these festivals with great joy and energy. However, the meaning of festivals has changed over generations. For example, Dashain, one of the major festivals of the Hindu community, used to be celebrated so as to teach people the importance of good behavior. Rather, in present times, we slaughter hundreds of goats, buffaloes, ducks and chicken each year to celebrate this festival just

because we desire to eat meat during the festival and in the name of gods. Is this what we wish to teach our future generations about good behavior? We spend thousands of rupees to celebrate a festival that teaches us about humbleness. We now spend the days of the festival partying all day long and consuming alcohol. Does this teach good behavior? Is this the practice we wish to pass on to our future generations?

The Newari community also has a deep devotion and belief in the gods and goddesses. One such belief is that of “Mata” wherein a woman is believed to have the divine powers to solve problems. Such people are regarded to have been blessed by the divinity. There is a belief that the women become “Mata” when the gods send a message by the medium of dreams that they are special and that they have the ability to solve the problems of another. As the doctors examine the human body for treatments, the “Mata” examine the same person by the mediums of rice, palm and forehead reading in order to understand the problem and see the solution. As the doctor provides medicines as a cure, the “Mata” provides holy offerings and uses traditional means such as beating with brooms to scare off the evil spirits. This may seem as though we Newars are blindfolded by our traditional beliefs, yet the results have never failed. There are hundreds of devotees who have been blessed by the “Mata” and live prosperous lives.

Another such belief prevalent in the Newari community is what is locally known as “Dya-Waa,” or, in other words, the entry of divinity. In this belief, the spirits of the gods are believed to enter the body of human beings. On a personal note, I have once been a witness to such an incident. It was during the festival of “Bhimsen Jatra” that I experienced this, of which I had only heard stories earlier. Bhimsen Jatra is the festival of the people living in the ancient city of Patan wherein the great god Bhimsen is worshipped and taken around the city in his chariot. I was a volunteer helping out in the temple of Lord Bhimsen on that night. Hundreds of devotees visited the temple and suddenly people began to move aside as they worshipped one person. The person was shaking a lot but the shaking started only after he had entered the temple premises and stopped when he left the premises. This was what the Newari people regard as “Dya-Waa.” This incident occurs only during specific festivals. In the case of my experience, it was known as “Bhimsen Chadeko,” as the people believe that the spirit of the Lord Bhimsen had entered into the body of the person.

There are many such beliefs and practices in many Indigenous communities that are not known by outsiders. They may seem to be superstitious or blind belief to many in the modern age. But seeing the results of such beliefs, what would you say it is? Can we really call it a superstition and ignore all the results?

Indigenous Peoples exist because of their cultures and, without their cultures, these communities cannot be said to be Indigenous. At present, many Indigenous communities are on the verge of extinction as they are slowly but surely losing their identity. The youths of today are no longer interested in the ancient practices and the ancestral traditions of their communities. This has led to the extinction of many Indigenous scriptures, languages, practices and traditions.

Most youths are engaged in modern lifestyles and many feel ashamed to practice the ancestral traditions. Festivals have become events for simply eating and drinking in many instances, rather than a moment to pass on ancestral knowledge. Indigenous Peoples used to take steps to support their own communities and push for their own progress, whereas now Indigenous Peoples look to others for this. What is needed is for Indigenous People themselves to take action.

The government has recognized various rights and benefits for Indigenous communities. However, Indigenous Peoples themselves are not aware of their human rights. It is necessary that Indigenous Peoples, primarily Indigenous youths, be taught and be made aware of their rights and the benefits ascribed to them. Isn't obtaining some basic knowledge of human rights that which helps an individual in his/her struggle for existence?

In terms of culture and tradition, their Indigenous ancestors must teach the youths about the present properly. The value and meaning of Indigenous practices, festivals and traditions must be taught to Indigenous youths so that they may in turn be capable of passing on these cultures, traditions, practices and festivals in their truest sense to the generations that follow. The programs that already exist in order to promote cultural knowledge, language, scriptures and skills need to be introduced at a larger scale and also need to be supported by Indigenous Peoples themselves so that these remain vibrant for generations to come.