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Indigenous Peoples of Nepal and Traditional Knowledge

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INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF NEPAL AND TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

1. BACKGROUND

Nepal is a sovereignty country with 0.1% world's land and is rich in biodiversity and natural resources due to its' diverse geography, ecosystem and cultures. Nepal is leading 25th and 11th position on biodiversity in the World and Asia respectively. Also, Nepal is 2nd World largest in water resources. It is reported that 118 types of ecosystems are naturally occurred in different geography. Each geography, ecosystem, biodiversity bears a long historical attachment of native society as their cultural identities. With distinct language, religion, customs, folklore, culture, knowledge, ancient territory, 59 indigenous nationalities are legally recognised and has formed Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) as umbrella organisation. There are still groups of indigenous peoples beyond the right to affiliate on the federation. Nepalese indigenous nationalities are excluded from main streams of national policies and are being legally apart from their ancient natural heritages, biodiversity, ethnobiology, ancient foods, medicines, agro biodiversity, skills, technology, knowledge, customary law/lore/practice/values, traditional ethnics and sacred sites. Indigenous peoples are contributing own cultural wisdom on restoration, conservation, and wise use of biodiversity, natural resources, and traditional knowledge's associated with their life from millennia.

Nepalese indigenous peoples are residing on different geographic belts with traditional life styles are closely attached with ecosystem, biodiversity, natural resources, and environment from millennia. Indigenous societies bear dynamic ancient epistemology, wisdom, knowledge, skills, technologies, endogenous or cosmological believe, folklore, customs, oral tradition associate with nature, earth, biodiversity, and natural resources. Biodiversity and natural resources are valuable sources for foods, medicines, vitamins, minerals, threads, building materials, and ritual, intrinsic, spiritual, customs, religious, cultural significances of the society. Biodiversity and natural resources i.e. wetlands, rivers, rivulets, ponds, lakes, water, stones, landscapes, natural objects and archaeological symbols are sacred objects, places bear religious, cultural, aesthetic values in the societies such biocultural heritages are identities of indigenous peoples need to account in national legislation and have international standard legal right .

National Policies

None of national policy and legislation has emphasised on indigenous issues. Such as leasehold Forestry Policy (2002) and 10th Forest Action Plan (2002-2007) and Forest Act 1993 are silent in the case of indigenous peoples. National Reserves, Protected Areas and National Parks Acts and policies are not recognised indigenous peoples' rights over traditional lands, bio and natural resources along with their historical territories. Wetland Policy 2002 (2059 B.S.) also have not respect customary rights of indigenous nationalities.

His Majesty's Government of Nepal has prepared a draft national legislation 2002 (2059 B.S.) regarding biodiversity and traditional knowledge (access to genetic resources, right and benefit sharing) without recognised and participation of indigenous nationalities. Based on the draft legislation, World Conservation Union Nepal has completed community registration and documentation programme on traditional knowledge about biodiversity in more than 20 districts in historical territory of indigenous peoples without consulting with indigenous peoples and respect the theme of Convention of Biological Diversity 1992, RAMSAR Iran 1971.

The draft legislation 2002 on access to genetic resource, right and benefit sharing itself incomplete, unfavourable to indigenous. The activities of registration and documentation programme of World Conservation Union (IUCN) Nepal encourage to bio piracy and violate indigenous peoples' customary rights over their resources and knowledge. Indigenous voice was

raised to World Conservation Union (IUCN) Nepal to stop collect information, and the collected informations should back to proper indigenous peoples till the draft legislation recognise indigenous peoples as well as confirm their participation in each step of decision making and should not even disclose the report to funding organisation. Similarly, different multilateral, bilateral organisations, INGOs, NGOs are working at indigenous peoples' territories in the sense of conservation, sustainable, development and sustainable livelihoods of people without respecting indigenous issues. There are not any sign and symbol of existing activities to address indigenous issues such as Terai Arc Land (TAL) programme of World Wide Fund (WWF) Nepal, biodiversity translocation programme of International Centre for integrated Mountain (ICIMOD). Also, researchers, development workers are collecting indigenous informations related with natural resources, biodiversity, traditional knowledge, skills, technologies, traditional life style, archaeological research without any legal frame i.e. Free prior and inform consent, participation in decision making, censorship, co author and ownership of the products and mechanism of benefit sharing are the ethical issues of indigenous nationalities.

INTERNATIONAL CONVENTIONS

Nepal has ratified different conventions e.g. wetland convention (Ramsar 1971), Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD 1992), Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage 1972, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC 1992). National sovereignty over biodiversity, natural and genetic resources seems any country is free under CBD to close its borders and stop gene export (GRAIN 2005)⁷/CBD Article 15(1). CBD article 15(5) address each member country should have national legislation with mechanism of Free prior and inform consent and equal benefit sharing by using of a components of biodiversity, natural and genetic resources. That could be bioprospecting or genetic resources and knowledge of indigenous peoples and local communities. Prior inform consent is an international legal frame which leads customary rights of indigenous peoples over natural resources, biodiversity, and whole environment. There is provision to account the legal term (prior inform consent) before implement any kinds of activities in indigenous historical territories and indigenous peoples have right of censorship, co authorised as well as ownership on the out comes of the activities. It needs to clearly illustrate in national legislation and subject to indigenous peoples' participation in each step.

CBD article 8(j) states on indigenous peoples' rights over biodiversity and contribution of indigenous peoples for conservation, restoration and sustainable uses from millennia. It is a provision as a member of the convention, Nepal should build respective national legislation or the convention can acts as national law. As a citizen of member country of the convention each individual, policy makers, researcher, and any organisation should respect and obey the rules and regulations of the conventions. UN indigenous peoples draft declaration 1993 has clearly emphasised on indigenous issues are in human right to maintain and strengthen their distinctive spiritual and material relationships with lands, territories, waters, costal seas, flora and fauna and other resources have traditionally owned or occupied or used. Indigenous peoples have right for restitution of lands, territories, bio and natural resources and have been confiscated or occupied, used or damaged without their free and prior informed consent. ILO 196 respects the collective aspects of land, territory, biodiversity and natural resources, culture, customary relationship of indigenous peoples.

⁷ Seedling, Biodiversity, Rights and Livelihood 2005

3. TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGES OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Nepal, in this context, is one of the richest sources of traditional knowledge. Since Nepal is a country of geographical diversities and consists of different communities, it is obvious that all these communities have some amount of traditional knowledge. Although Nepal is a small country, it consists of different multi-cultural, multi-lingual and multi-ethnic diversities. The traditional knowledge mentioned below is only a small fraction of the combined traditional knowledge of the communities. To learn about the TK of all these communities, there has to be a wide range of research on them.

3.1 PEST MANAGEMENT

The Mewahang Rais have indigenous methods of pest management that are heavily relied on in areas where external inputs (e.g., chemical pesticides) are in short supply. In remote areas, common pests such as stem borer (*chillozonellis*) attack wheat and maize stocks. The grounded pulp of the Khira leaf is spread on the wheat crop and the scent of the pulp is sufficient to kill the pests.

In the case of paddy, the pulp is introduced into the paddy field through the irrigation channel. In the case of specific pest attacks, like the rice moth which creates clusters of rice on paddy, they are combed out with sticks and the moths deposited in the water; to ensure decomposition, the operation is carried out in sunlight. In maize, the dried disease-infected stalks are manually removed.

3.2 WEED CONTROL

Fields are ploughed approximately fifteen days before planting in the belief that exposure to the sun will kill the weeds. During intercultural operations, manual weeding is carried out and burning is still prevalent. On rainfed field, flooding through irrigation is carried out for effective weed control. This kind of TK is practicing regional level.

3.3 SINGI NAWA

This is one of the important community level traditional knowledge of the Himalayan people, living in the highest part of the world to conserve the forest and wildlife. 'Singi', in Sherpa language, means wood or trees and 'Nawa' means to ask. So 'Singi Nawa' means to ask someone before cutting any trees or woods. This is a custom the Sherpas have been practicing for many years. People choose a leader, old but an intellectual person, among them who can perfectly handle the community. The leader prepares a calendar, where it is mentioned that people are allowed to cut trees on that date only otherwise some dreadful things may happen in the community. The people of the community ask the leader when they are allowed to cut trees. Because of him, the people maintain their discipline and do not cut trees anytime. This, in the long run, conserves the forest.

Nowadays, because of the system of Wildlife Reserve introduced by the government, this tradition has been endangered. People are not allowed to go to the forest and so it is difficult to follow the tradition.

3.4 WATER SHADE

This is also one of the national level traditional knowledge which helps in the conservation of forest as well as keeping the source of water clean. People have the belief that they should not cut trees or woods surrounding the source of water. They should not throw litter around the water shade. If they do not obey, bad things may occur to them. This tradition or belief preserves the forest as well as it preserves and keeps the source of water clean. This is still practiced nowadays in the remote villages of the country.

Since some areas have been occupied by the National Parks, the tradition is slowly disappearing as people do not have access to these forests and water shades.

3.5 USING 'SYOSIM' FOR ACCLIMATIZATION

One of the effective community level traditional knowledge icy cold place of Himalayan region is 'Syosim'. It is a kind of medicine used to cure altitude sickness. To prepare this, milk is kept in a wooden container for many days. Once the milk is poured out, the thick layer of the milk is seen stuck on the walls of the container. This is scrubbed and fried for some time. Then it is boiled deeply. The liquid you get is called 'syosim'.

It has been found to be very effective in case of altitude sickness. Nowadays it has become so popular that the local mountaineers use it as an acclimatization diet.

3.6 DHUKUTI, TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE AS SMALL BANKING

This is one of the most successful traditional knowledge of national level. Most of the communities practice this tradition to uplift their living standards. It was first started by the Gurung and Thakali communities. *Dhukuti* is the way of saving and investing the money accumulated by a group of people in the community. In this tradition, people form a group and collect the same amount of money from each member every month. The money collected will be given to one of the members who is in need and so every month, by rotation or priority, one of the members gets the money collected by the group. The person who gets the money is free to invest in anything. This tradition will allow the people to be self-dependent and help in poverty alleviation. Overall, people will be benefited by 'Dhukuti' in a number of ways like investing in some business, educating some family members or carrying out ceremonies etc. Ultimately, this will make the people self-dependent and alleviate the poverty of the community.

3.7 KWATI (MIXED CEREAL SOUP)

This is a community level traditional knowledge of Newar community living within or the surrounding areas of Kathmandu valley. 'Kwati' is one of the important cuisines of the community prepared during many occasions or festivals of Newars. It is a soup prepared by the mixture of many types of beans and lentils. This cuisine is one of the favourites of the Newar community. It is delicious as well as good for the body. Since this dish contains a lot of vitamins, people become healthy after having it. Although it is just a tradition, Kwati is a good dish scientifically as well. It strengthens and makes the body warm during winter.

Although it was originally a tradition of the Newar community, it is found in other communities also. Nowadays, most of the communities of Nepal have 'Kwati' during the festivals.

3.8 'SIMRIK' CRIMSON AS A MEDICINE

This is a regional level traditional knowledge practiced by most of the communities in Nepal. 'Simrik' Crimson it seems deep red is used as medicine in the villages. It helps cure infections and mostly cures injuries to bone in animals like cows, buffaloes etc. People believe that consuming 'simrik' will join the fractured bone, especially of the animals. So whenever, there are injuries to the bones of these animals, 'simrik' is fed to the animals. Although, this is yet to be scientifically proved, it has been noticed to work successfully. This tradition is practiced since there are no veterinary hospitals in the villages and people would have to walk many days just to reach these hospitals. So a short and effective way to heal these injuries is to follow this tradition. This sort of treatment is found to be very effective and very inexpensive so people resort to this tradition rather than visiting the veterinary hospitals which is very far away and expensive.

3.9 PONGMAR (MEDICINE)

This is also one of the national level traditional knowledge of the country. Pongmar is a kind of herb found in the remote villages towards the himalayas. Since the villages are remote and hospitals are out of reach of these villagers, people opt for this tradition to cure poison. For a person who has just taken poison, 'pongmar' has been very effective. It is found to cut the poison and save the life of the person if given in time.

People in the remote villages are still found following this tradition. This is so because there are no hospitals in the villages. The nearest hospital would be 4-5 days walk and anyone consuming poison would be dead before reaching the hospital. Even if he/she reaches the hospital, it would be very expensive to save the person's life. So people in most of the villages of Nepal use 'pongmar' to cure poison. Pongmar is found to be effective and cheap.

3.10 PARMA, (NGALOK), *EXCHANGE LABOUR*

Ngalok is a Sherpa word meaning exchanging labour. Parma (Ngalok) is a regional level TK of the indigenous community. In this system, people form a group and work for each other without paying money. Since it is hard for one man to work in own field, people form a group for this purpose. This group of people works on the field of one of the members of the group whenever necessary. If there is a need to work on the field of another member of the group, they again work for that person. Simultaneously, this group of people works on each and every field of the members of the group without receiving or paying. This tradition is called 'Parma' or the exchange of labour.

This is also one of the effective traditions of the community. People help each other by exchange of labour. Here, no cost is incurred and people get a lot of benefit from it.

3.11 YARSAGUMBA

Yarsagumba literally means summer plant and winter insect in himalayan community. Before the rainy season begins, spores of this herb settle on the heads of caterpillars' that lives

underground. The fungus gets so much into the body of the caterpillars' that it grows out through its head and drains all the energy from the insect and ultimately it dies.

Yarsagumba, Yarshagumba or Yarchagumba is a rare and unique herb that grows in the meadows above 3,500 meters (11,483 feet) in the Himalayan region of Nepal. There are various types of famous medicinal plants found in Nepal but the popularity of yarsagumba is simply overwhelming. For the last couple of years, the trade of yarsagumba is increasing and it has been regarded as an expensive life saving tonic. Headache, toothache or any other disease - yarsagumba is the remedy. And not only that, it is also believed to be a cure for sexual impotency – a Himalayan Herbal Viagra.

Collection of yarsagumba was illegal until 2001 but following its popularity and the lobbying from various organizations, the Government lifted the ban but imposed a royalty rate of Rs. 20,000 (US\$ 280) per kilogram (2.2lbs). One kilo of yarsagumba that costs about Rs. 315 (US\$ 5/6) in 1992 increased to Rs. 105,000 (US\$ 1,435) by the year 2002 and the price has been shooting up so as the international interest on the mysterious half-caterpillar-half-mushroom known as yarsagumba.

3.12 CROSS-BRED ANIMALS

This is also one of the regional level traditional knowledge practiced by different indigenous communities of the region. Here animals are cross-bred so that the outcome will be more strong and healthy.

In the Indigenous people of Nepal, domestic yak is cross-bred with a wild yak in Tibet. People believe that the cross-bred yak would be bigger and stronger since the wild yaks are bigger and stronger than the domestic yaks. A number of cross-bred yaks are found to be much bigger and stronger than the domestic yaks. These types of yaks give much more milk and their meats are delectable too.

In other communities, buffaloes have been cross-bred with bison so the baby would be a strong and big buffalo. There are many other animals which have been cross-bred in different communities.

Nowadays, wildlife reserves have been established to protect wildlife and this has led to the endangerment of this tradition since domestic animals are not allowed to enter the reserves.

3.13 DUNG AS ALTERNATIVE SOURCE OF FUEL

This is one of the popular regional level traditional knowledge acquired by the communities. In the himalayan communities, yak dung is collected and dried for many days in the sun. This dried dung becomes very hard and can be substituted for wood. This TK is innovated after the fire's invention it has been providing the communities an alternative source of fuel and has helped in the conservation of the forest. Similarly, in the Terai region of Nepal, dried cow dung are used for cooking food and for keeping the house warm, as an alternative of wood.

3.14 TITEPATI, A HERB

'Titepati' is plant meaning bitter leaves in Nepali language. It is also an effective TK at a regional level. This plant is used as herb in most of the communities of the Soth Asian region. It

is a small green plant found in mostly hilly areas. 'Titepati' is used as herb for many kinds of diseases. It is used as a paste for any cuts or bruises. It is also used as a cleansing agent. The herb is boiled in water for few minutes and left to cool down. People drink this liquid as they believe that it washes away all the dirt or diseases inside the body. So this herb has a very important value in the communities.

4. THREATS ON TK

Although the traditional knowledge of the Indigenous Peoples has been found to be very useful and effective, it has still been neglected by the world. There are many threats like environment, urbanization, globalization etc on TK, some of which are mentioned below:

- Climate change or Global Warming is one of the major threats on the TK of the communities. This has led to the displacement of the communities from their places and made difficult to pass down the TK.
- Urbanization (Globalization) also poses threats on Indigenous peoples' TK. It has occupied the territory of these communities which, in turn, has displaced them.
- The contradiction between the national policy, constitution and legislation with customary laws of the Indigenous peoples is also seen as one of the major threats on TK.
- Negotiations for access to global market has posed a threat on TK of the indigenous communities as the government's negotiations has neglected specific needs of the indigenous peoples to protect traditional farming systems.
- The national parks or wildlife reserves established by the government without the involvement of the indigenous peoples are also one of the major threats. The establishment of these parks or reserves has led to the occupation of the territories of these communities and has resulted in the loss of TK.
- Loss of Indigenous languages is also a threat on TK since the traditional knowledge of the communities is passed down orally.
- Loss or disappearance of traditional knowledge, particularly from indigenous peoples, is rapidly occurring due to the encroachment (intrusion) of State and market forces and the decrease of elders carrying that knowledge. Once lost, orally based knowledge cannot be retrieved.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE UN AGENCIES, NGO'S, INGO'S AND GO'S

Nepalese indigenous nationalities are neither recognised nor emphasise on any of national policy that deals about biodiversity and natural resources. Indigenous associations or organisations are formed but most of them are unaware on national and international legal scenario for indigenous peoples. Lack of information, awareness, education, proper coordination, lobbying, networking and communication indigenous peoples are out of any kinds of service. It is being important for unification of collective indigenous voice and promote rapid capacity building, awareness, campaigning, networking among indigenous peoples' associations and lobbying and advocacy for the right.

- An awareness program regarding existence and importance of TK of indigenous peoples should be launched through medias, publications and electronic means. Effective measures should be implemented to recognize, respect, protect and maintain traditional knowledge.
- UN Agencies or any NGOs, INGOs and GOs dealing with the TK of Indigenous peoples should give priority to the indigenous peoples having knowledge and experience rather than any other people having little or no knowledge. There should be active participation of the people of the indigenous communities at local level and policy making level regarding indigenous knowledges.
- The customary laws of the indigenous communities should be recognized and included in the national policies of the government.
- Any ratified conventions regarding the indigenous peoples' issues should be implemented. The conventions, yet to be endorsed, should be ratified and implemented as soon as possible.
- The UN or other organizations should make policies to preserve and promote the traditional knowledges of the indigenous communities.
- Before making use of TK, free and prior informed consent must be granted by the Indigenous Peoples and communities who are the holders to the traditional knowledge. Legal provision should be made for this purpose.
- TK of Indigenous peoples should be included in the textbooks of the students according to its importance and applications.