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# Resisting For the River: Local Struggle Against the Proposed Saptakoshi River Dam

Janika Oza  
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# Resisting For the River: Local Struggle Against the Proposed Saptakoshi River Dam

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South Asia, Nepal, Sunsari, Koshi Basin

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## **Abstract**

On the Saptakoshi River in Nepal, the proposed construction of a hydropower dam may represent progress for parts of the country but loss for local communities. This paper draws on the experiences of people living in villages by the river who will be affected if the proposed high dam is built. By using qualitative information generated from interviews with villagers, the paper is an ethnographic account of the experiences and perspectives of the local populations that will be most directly affected by the dam. It was found that most subjects interviewed believe that the high dam would cause extreme environmental, cultural, and religious loss for Nepal and would result in more disadvantages than benefits. Due to trauma from past floods and distrust of the government's promises of compensation, there is a strong fear of the dam project and many people are planning actions to resist. The paper explores the importance of the river to the affected communities, followed by a discussion of the ways in which local communities believe they will be affected by the dam, examining both perceived benefits and drawbacks of the project. The paper then examines the methods of anti-dam resistance, with a focus on the demands for and perceptions of compensation. Finally, the paper analyzes the beliefs about local wellbeing in relation to the greater good of Nepal and discusses the challenges faced by communities interacting with large-scale development projects.

Key Words: Environmental Studies, Natural Resources and Conservation, Anthropology

## **Dedication**

To the people living by the Saptakoshi River

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*'jal, jangal, jamin, maathi adibaasi janajatiko adhikaar sunischit gara'*

*('ensure the rights of indigenous people to water, forest, and land'). – Painted on the rocks leading to the proposed dam site along the Saptakoshi River, Sunsari*

## **Introduction**

The Saptakoshi River, which flows through Tibet, Nepal, and the Indian border state of Bihar, is also known as the “Sorrow of Bihar” due to the annual destructive floods during the monsoon season that immerse agricultural lands and result in a significant loss of life, most notably in the 1954 and 2008 floods that submerged several districts in both India and Nepal (Agarwal and Chak 1991). In the late 1950s, the Indian government built an embankment known as the Koshi Barrage under a bilateral agreement on the Koshi River near the India-Nepal border to control the flooding in Bihar. However, in 2008 the Koshi Barrage breached and collapsed, displacing millions of people in Nepal and Bihar and sweeping away entire villages (see Table 1) (Dixit 2009). This embankment breach was not a rare occurrence—in fact, breaches are “an inherent feature of any flood control embankment system, and the August 2008 event was actually the eighth major breach since the embankments were completed in 1959” (ibid, 77). Nearly 30,000 families are still awaiting compensation, rehabilitation, and livelihood support in the form of land and animals from the government as promised.

Following the 2008 breach, a Nepal-India commission on water resources issued a report stating the need for a new strategy to control the flooding of the Saptakoshi River (ibid). The idea of building a multipurpose high dam on the river with the benefits of flood control, irrigation, and hydropower had been a

subject of discussion between the Nepali and Indian governments since it was initially proposed in 1953. The initial proposal had been dropped following a feasibility report that cited high costs; instead, several embankments and barrages were built along the river. And yet, after the 2008 flood, the high dam came to be seen as the “preferred method for controlling the flooding,” as it was more permanent than the embankments that were so susceptible to breaching (ibid, 76). The proposal to construct a high dam upstream of the Koshi Barrage thus re-entered the discussion of how to mitigate flooding and prevent further disaster.

The Indian government has proposed the construction of this multipurpose high dam on the Saptakoshi River in the Sunsari district of Nepal, 2 km upstream of the Barakhshetra temple and Hindu pilgrimage site. It is said that this 269 meter-high dam would provide 3300 MW of electricity and irrigation to land in both India and Nepal, while also controlling the floods downstream in Bihar (Saurabh 2012). And yet, if constructed, the dam would displace thousands of people in over 80 Village Development Committees (VDCs) from above the dam site down into India, destroying homes, culture, land, and a way of life.

The project has thus been met with opposition from local communities, postponing the research for and construction of the dam for the last 14 years. Efforts to restart the dam planning and construction began in 2008, with the Indian government and the Saptakoshi Joint Commissions Offices sending representatives into the village communities to conduct Detailed Project Report (DPR) surveys assessing the potential impacts of the high dam. However, many locals have objected to the DPR representatives entering their communities, choosing to withhold information and refusing to speak with them. While some

drilling work has taken place along the river to assess the safety of the dam site and the stability of the rock under water pressure, the locals have largely obstructed the work through protest action and destruction of construction equipment. Many people are joining together to make demands for the Indian and Nepali governments in an attempt to have their voices included in the discussion and negotiation process. While the governments are promising benefits to Nepali citizens, many local people along the Koshi Basin are choosing to resist the dam project in an effort to preserve their culture, traditions, environment, and homes.

### **Saptakoshi River and Dams:**

Although it is a small landlocked nation, Nepal has a great wealth of natural freshwater resources, with the source of several of the largest rivers in Asia originating in the Himalayas (Petheram 2010). The transboundary Saptakoshi is the largest river basin in Nepal, draining a total area of 71,500 km<sup>2</sup> with seven major tributaries (see Figure 1). The river is extremely unstable in nature: the great change in altitude and rainfall in the catchment area during monsoon season results in the river carrying one of the highest sediment loads in the world, causing landslides, flooding, and soil erosion and making the Koshi a “very violent river” (Dixit 2009, 72). The country’s abundance of water resources means that Nepal has great potential for hydropower development, with current estimates stating that the country has a total hydroelectric potential of 83,000 MW, of which only 1% is being used (ibid). Large multipurpose dam projects such as the one proposed for the Saptakoshi River have historically been viewed as an effective way of meeting the energy and water demands of a nation, but have become controversial and gathered international activism and opposition

due to the social, cultural, and environmental impacts. Despite its energy potential, some scholars are now suggesting that constructing a high dam on the Saptakoshi is dangerous due to the many risks of sedimentation and floods caused by in-catchment rainfall, as well as earth tremors in the high-earthquake zone of the proposed dam site (ibid). International institutions such as the World Bank and the World Commission on Dams have thus introduced guidelines for impact assessment of the social and environmental aspects of large dam projects (Petheram 2010).

### **Research Objectives:**

This research tells the stories of the people of the Koshi Basin, exploring their perspectives on how the dam would affect their lives if built, their plans for resistance, and the idea of the greater good of the nation state of Nepal in relation to their own wellbeing. The research seeks to answer the following questions: what is the importance of the river to these communities in terms of culture, religion, and livelihood, and how is the dam perceived in relation to this? What are the motivations for opposition to the project and the methods of resistance that will be/are being used? What is the project promising, and what are the local attitudes towards the offers? The research questions the environmental, social, and cultural impacts that a large-scale dam project would have on Nepal's rural communities and questions whether the supposed nation-wide benefits of the project would reach these more vulnerable populations. Specifically, this project hopes to expose local perceptions of the transnational dam project and spark a dialogue about the inclusion of community-level voices in large-scale

development endeavors. The focus of the research is on the experiences of the people who live astride the river as they interact with both tradition and progress.

The literature covering peasant-level resistance in South Asia in general, and the Saptakoshi dam project in particular, remains scarce, and the existing reports do not explore the local perceptions of the project or the loss it would incur, their motivations for resistance, and the perspectives of acceptance or rejection of the dam. Saurabh's (2012) report mentions the opposition to the dam by various local populations through obstructing the survey of the dam site, writing a letter to the senior engineer in charge of the project, and threatening to launch a large-scale protest if the DPR for the dam was not stopped. He also mentions the possibility of the Indian government providing compensation to the Nepalese communities whose land would be lost, and recommends bringing these protesting groups "to the negotiating table" to ensure that their needs be met (Saurabh 2012, 6). However, Saurabh fails to give any detail in regards to the reasons for the resistance to the dam or the complexity of the perspectives of these local populations: rather, he cites "mutual distrust" and effects on "the local environment" as the motivations for resistance (Saurabh 2012, 3-4). Gupta discusses the "Standing Committee on Inundation Problems," which is a group established in 1986 to assess and address the issue of inundation caused by dam construction, as a solution to the issue of displacement, but overlooks the complexity of the resistance to the Saptakoshi Dam and the possibility that monetary compensation may not be perceived as adequate compensation to local populations (Gupta 2008, 221).

Fisher's (1995) account of local resistance to the Narmada Dam in India explains how activists from the affected communities engaged in Gandhian non-violent resistance through marches, music, hunger strikes, and peaceful sit-ins until the government agreed to reconsider the project. Further, he explores the question of nation-wide benefit in explaining the pro-dam position that the projected benefits were at the cost of relatively few, against the anti-dam position that the benefits of the project were overestimated while the human and environmental costs in terms of number of people affected and loss of culture and significant land were underestimated. The Saptakoshi project likewise claims to harm a few for the greater good of the nations involved, but must consider the full scope of the losses for the less powerful and more voiceless groups who would be affected by the dam. In a more broad discussion of resistance, Scott (1990) describes how all subordinated groups, peasant or not, resist authority and do not consent to domination: in public, these groups adopt "forms of deference and respect" for those in power in order to avoid being punished, while in private they adopt an "off-stage" behaviour of criticism and self-affirmation. While this theory is useful in considering systems of power present in development projects, it groups 'peasants' and 'subordinate groups' together without differentiating based on location, history, or culture, which are relevant distinctions to be made in the case of the Saptakoshi project (Scott 1990). Gyawali and Dixit (1999) explain the social and economic dynamics of the Koshi dam conflict, such as pressure by the Indian government on Nepal to sign water treaties and unfavourable perceptions of the Indian government by Nepali communities due to past broken treaties. Rotberg and Swain (2007) explain the political nature of water resource management in Nepal, as Nepal lacks the technology and capital

required for large water projects such as dams and has thus involved India in these projects, which has led to controversy and conflict in the past. They explain how past negotiations between India and Nepal relating to hydropower and flood control development projects have been controversial because Nepalese people have historically felt that they were not treated equitably in the agreements, which relates to the negative perceptions of the Saptakoshi dam project and negotiation process with the Indian government.

Dixit (2009) argues that the physical characteristics of the Koshi river and the past Koshi Barrage embankment breaches imply a great risk to the environment and local communities if the high dam is built and proposes that flooding be mitigated through alternate means to dams, specifically by shifting away from flood control towards improving drainage and minimizing vulnerability in riverside communities. Petheram (2010) explains the 'hydropolitical theory' of access to bodies of water that intersect political boundaries through a case study of the West Seti Hydroelectric large-scale dam project proposed in rural Western Nepal. She explains how a combination of international and local stakeholders exerted their influence over the transboundary waters, with large business-oriented actors having the greatest influence over the Nepali government, and how the weakness of Nepal's policies constrained the progress of hydropower development. Hydropolitical theory can similarly be applied to the Saptakoshi dam project through its transnational nature and the presence of various local and international stakeholders attempting to influence the government. Dore et al. (2010) argue that new stakeholders in dam development such as climate scientists have emerged in the last decade,

demonstrating the need for “multi-stakeholder dialogue at multiple levels” in order to find effective and just solutions for water resource management (Dore et al., 3). They argue that the cost versus benefit approach to dam-related decision making is inadequate due to the social inequality of dam beneficiaries in relation to those being disadvantaged and that a new risk assessment strategy must be created. While the literature thus discusses the history of the Saptakoshi dam project and different forms of resistance towards large development projects, there are significant gaps in relation to the perspectives of locals and marginalized groups implicated in these projects.

### **Methodology**

Various methodologies were used to collect information for this project, including semi-structured and informal interviews, participant observation, and focus group meetings. The majority of the interviews were conducted with residents of some of the affected villages: community members and self-proclaimed pro-dam or anti-dam activists. While some of these were scheduled meetings, others involved informally speaking with those who were available in the villages at the time of my stay. The study was conducted in the Koshi Basin in Sunsari District along the Saptakoshi River, specifically in the villages of Tribeni, Simli, Barakhshetra, Chatara, Mahendra Nagar, and Prakaspur.

Scheduled interviews and meetings with various journalists and professors connected to the Saptakoshi dam project in Sunsari district began my research to build a basis of information about the project. Through connections from this level, my research expanded to the affected villages, where I met community activists as well as spoke with community members. I was also able

to attend a larger Saptakoshi *janaadhikaar* (people's rights) meeting in Dharan that brought together anti-dam activists and community members from various villages along the river, and was able to ask questions to the group towards the end of the meeting as well as conduct individual interviews with some of the meeting participants.

Interviews with community members allowed for an understanding of the common perceptions of the dam project in local communities, as well as the specific knowledge about the dam that had been shared with these villages. Through these interviews, villagers' accounts of the proposed dam's influence on their communities, natural environment, and lives were collected. Interviews with community activists and participation in community meetings allowed for an understanding of the methods of resistance currently taking place and the planning process for future actions. The semi-structured and informal nature of all of these interviews allowed the participants to share stories, thoughts, or information in addition to the questions asked, and allowed for greater trust through the more conversational and less formal feeling of the research.

Visits to the Saptakoshi river and villages, and in some cases staying in the villages, allowed me the opportunity to observe the everyday uses of and activities involving the river, giving me the chance to understand the connection to this natural space. This was particularly relevant at Barahkshetra, the site of one of the holiest Hindu *mandirs* (temples) along the river, where thousands of Hindus come to pray, bathe in the water, and bring offerings to the temple. The month of my research period coincided with the *Kumbha Melaa*, which is a religious celebration that takes place once every 12 years at Barahkshetra, at which time hundreds of thousands of people from across Nepal and India come to

make the pilgrimage and pray. Participant observation here allowed for a greater understanding of the rituals and traditions surrounding the holy river.

Throughout the course of the fieldwork, care was taken to build trust with the participants before asking them to share their personal beliefs about the high dam project. However, because of the political nature of this topic and the history of government officials performing surveys in the villages, some community members were unsure of my research intentions and may have withheld some opinions or information as a result. By using a combination of methods—semi-structured and informal interviews, background interviews, attending meetings, and participant observation, I was able to gain a broader understanding of the perceptions of the high dam project. All subjects were informed of the purpose of this project before participating and were given the option to remain anonymous in the report, and no vulnerable people were consulted in the research. All quotations in this paper are the author’s translations unless stated otherwise.

## **Research Findings**

### ***The Meaning of the Koshi***

The Saptakoshi River is laden with cultural, religious, traditional, environmental, and practical significance, all of which can be seen when observing the nearby residents interact with the water in a multitude of ways. “River is mother,” said Deb Narayan Ray, a representative from the Saptari district present at the *janaadhikaar* meeting, “in our culture the river is like a god; so many places are established by the river. River is life.” The river is seen as a creator and destroyer, both sustaining and taking life and commanding respect for all that it provides and all that it can take.

In daily life, the river is used for bathing, drinking, washing clothes and dishes, collecting water, sending animals to drink, and transporting goods and crops on bamboo rafts from the higher hill villages to the more populated Terai area. Sand from the exceptionally high sediment-producing river is collected to construct village homes, and red and white mud is taken and mixed with the water to colour the outside of homes as well. According to Ranabattrra Rai, a resident of the Barakhshetra village, during the monsoon season the river brings firewood from far distances, which people then collect to use for cooking or to sell in the market and earn some money.

Another important use of the river is irrigation for crops, as much of the area surrounding the Koshi is fertile farmland used to grow rice, garlic, ginger, corn, and other crops to be sold downstream. In the lower villages below Chatara, several canals from the Koshi provide water to irrigate 25,000 hectares of land, providing for Sunsari and Saptari districts, according to Sir Mukhya, a resident of Chatara. “There are several benefits we get from living by the river...it is important for the people’s lives, it supports local business and trade. It is an identification of Nepal, it is our Saptakoshi River.” People living downstream of Chatara in the area near the Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve, which is commonly referred to as the Buffer Zone, also use the river for fishing, out of which a large fishing business has emerged.

The traditions and rituals performed along the river have their roots in various religions and cultures that view the Koshi as a sacred place. In Hinduism, the Koshi is believed to be one of the holiest sites in Nepal, and the bank of the river is marked by many temples and religious heritage sites to which devout Hindus will make yearly pilgrimages to bathe and pray. The temple of

Barahkshetra, which lies 2 km downstream from the proposed dam site, is said to be the place where Ganesh the elephant god descended to bathe and is also the confluence of all seven river tributaries, making it one of the holiest sites. “If we pray and bathe there,” said Deepa Shrestha, a resident of Barahkshetra village, “we gain religious power. Lots of people wish to come here to Barahkshetra and Chatara because they are attached to the Koshi.” It is also said that Hindu religious scriptures mention the god and goddess of the Koshi as the most powerful beings such that strength and luxury will come to those who pray to the river. “Koshi is our *maharani* (goddess),” said Devi Maya Khardka, a farmer in Mahendra Nagar, “so we go to her to pray.”

Various rituals take place along the Saptakoshi with a multitude of purposes: to worship the river itself, to cleanse one of one’s errors, to ask for power or help, or to mark important occasions. According to Kamal Bahadur Katwal, a resident of Mahendra Nagar, there are two main ways to pray to Koshi as the goddess: one is to put flowers in the river and perform a *puja* (worship ritual), while another is to sacrifice goats or buffalos by the river while praying for a good life and relief from problems. The river can be especially significant for women during religious festivals such as *Teej* and *Chatth*, at which time the women bathe and worship the Koshi. Another traditional practice called *Shrada*, or the remembrance of past parents, is celebrated once a year by performing a *puja* by the riverbank at the confluence of the Koshi and Koka rivers. It is believed that this ritual will send one’s parents to the next life with no trouble.

Chatara Maya Shrestha, a woman living in Barahkshetra village near the temple, explained how drinking the water from the river is a cultural practice that is also viewed as sacred: by drinking the water of the Koshi and Koka river, there

is a traditional belief that “we will go directly to heaven, there will be no trouble in our life. The water of the Koshi is mineral water, there is no need to clean it.” The water is believed to have a cleansing power which, through bathing and drinking, can bring great power or relief to the worshippers.

For people outside of the Hindu faith, the Koshi is still considered to be a sacred and powerful river along which many rituals and festivals take place. For instance, as described by Ranabattrai Rai, followers of the Kirat religion in Nepal perform a *puja* at the Koshi twice a year during *Udhauli* (harvest season) and *Ubhauri* (plantation season), as the Kirat Rai worship nature and believe it will bring them prosperity. “In this philosophy the Koshi river is holy—in the winter season, the god and goddess of Kirat come down to the riverside, so we go down to pray there,” he explained. Other *pujas* and ceremonies take place at various points along the river to bring health or wellness to communities. For the people living by the Saptakoshi, the sanctity of the river holds a place in many of the most important religious celebrations and festivals.

### ***Perceptions of the High Dam Project***

The information known about the high dam project is varied throughout the villages, although most people have some awareness of the ongoing project. Most local people have gathered their information about the dam through newspapers, Indian and Nepali government representatives coming to the villages to conduct DPR surveys, and through word of mouth from the community. Pradeep Shrestha, a resident of Barakhshetra village, described the general lack of clarity regarding the dam in the surrounding villages: “most people are in confusion. The concrete ideas about the dam have not been explained to the local community, and this is the big problem.” Women especially claimed to know

little about the dam project, and among all people there was a lack of consensus about the main purpose of the dam and the benefits or harms that it would bring. People felt that they were not being given the information that they deserved: as Deb Narayan Ray said, “the right to information of Nepali people is not being applied.” Still, there is a common belief that the dam will bring destruction in the realms of environment, culture, religion, and displacement. While there is some belief that the dam could represent positive development for Nepal, the response to the proposed dam project is largely negative, with the anti-dam sentiment stemming from fear of the changes it will bring.

#### *Environment and Agriculture*

If the high dam is constructed, the surrounding natural environment will be harmed—the current state of the land, animals, water, and crops will be changed by the project. For many of the residents of the villages by the Koshi, the environmental costs of the dam are some of the greatest causes of fear and motivations to resist the implementation of the project. The worry ranges from fear of death or displacement by natural disasters to loss of fertile land, animals, and ecosystems.

Many people are aware that the dam is proposed to be built on an immature hillside in a high earthquake zone, making the surrounding area very vulnerable to disaster if the water level rises and the rock cannot bear the water pressure. There is a common fear that the dam or the rock above the dam site might “explode,” causing landslides or floods that would sweep away entire areas. “The flow of the river is a natural process. If they block its way, the river itself will create a new way,” said Sir Mukhya. “If the river finds a weak place or a place without compact soil, it may break the mountain or hill and cause an

explosion. It will force its way through and make a new place for itself...the explosion will be a very dangerous situation and may be the biggest disaster to happen in Nepal.” Due to past flooding from the volatile nature of the river, many village residents fear that the dam could burst at any time and sweep away the area “all the way to Jappa and into India.”

From an ecological perspective, people fear that the dam will mean immense loss for the biodiversity of the Koshi area. According to Ashok Thapa, one of the self-proclaimed leaders of pro-dam activism in Chatara, the water will rise to such a level after the dam is built that all of the fish and reptile species will disappear. Moreover, the Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve, which is a nature conservation area on the river near Prakaspur that attracts many tourists each year, will begin to dry up as the course of the river changes, which will drive the animals away and negatively impact tourism and local business. As Maya Thapa, a woman in Prakaspur village, remarked, “how can water buffalo and migratory water birds stay if there is no water?”

The loss of wildlife from the Reserve will not only harm tourism but will also affect surrounding villages through the invasion of wild animals that would leave the Reserve area in search of water and enter the nearby villages. Dev Prasad Chaulagai, a representative from the Buffer Zone present at the *janaadhikaar* meeting, foresaw this problem in saying, “Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve is a wild buffalo reservation area, and those buffalo will come to the village, destroy our crops, destroy homes, and kill people. This has already happened from the Koshi Barrage flooding...last time a wild buffalo hurt my brother and there are seven cases of people being killed by animals there.” The

changes in water access could thus represent danger for residents of the Buffer Zone, who fear that the government will not take their issue seriously.

The people in the villages by the Koshi fear change in the form of both flooding and dryness caused by the high dam. It is believed that the land upstream of the dam will be flooded due to rising water levels as well as landslides and soil erosion, while the area downstream will become a “desert” due to the diversion of the river flow, while also being in constant danger of flooding from a collapse of the dam. Through changes upstream and downstream, people fear the loss of “fertile land, plants, trees, forests, medicinal plants, animals, reptiles, fish, and insects,” as stated by Kamal Bahadur Katwal. These parts of the Terai contain some of the most fertile land in Nepal, and many of the communities are based entirely around farming as a source of income and livelihood; the dam project is thus a cause of great concern to many community members and this was often cited as a reason to protest the dam, as the loss of agriculture would harm not only the small farming communities but also the greater nation of Nepal. According to Sangeeta Rai, a resident of Prakaspur, “most of us in this village are farmers, so if downstream of the dam becomes dry, agriculture will suffer and income will decrease. For technical reasons we do not know, but we are against building the high dam because we are scared...crops will decrease, corn will not grow and our income will suffer, soil will not be moist and we can’t get water.” The inability to grow crops due to a lack of irrigation, or the loss of farmland altogether from flooding, is a looming issue for the residents of these communities whose lives depend on their land.

Many people of these regions, particularly those living in the Buffer Zone, have taken out agricultural loans from the government. However, they fear

that if their crops fail due to a lack of irrigation or a flood sweeps away their land entirely, they will not be able to pay back their loans and may find themselves in trouble with the government, according to Buffer Zone resident Mustak Ansari. Others fear that the government will stop giving them agricultural loans because the areas will become too “risky” after the dam is built. They hope that the government will build canals or irrigation systems to allow the downstream areas to access water so that they can continue to be agriculturally productive.

The female members of the affected communities would be especially negatively impacted by the dam project, as women are expected to do the farm labour in these areas and would thus face the challenges if the land and water situation were to change. Maya Thapa referred to the division of labour along gender lines in rural areas of Nepal as a “social and economic issue” that would greatly affect women if the dam were to be constructed. “Most women here are agricultural, house, and field workers, but men in these areas are not. When the river is not near and we must get water for our crops, it will be difficult,” she explained. Devi Maya Khardka of Mahendra Nagar, who is now living in a new settlement because her home and land were swept away by the Koshi Barrage floods in 2008, described how she and other women like her have had the burden of making the new land productive after the floods, and how she fears that this will be the case again if the dam is to change her land once more. “We [women] have to spend our lives in hard work; if we do not work then we cannot eat morning or night. But we lost our land in the flood, this is a new settlement and we have a small piece of land now. Women do the hard work and we have the pressure to make this work.” The high dam thus represents not only an ecological crisis but also a new challenge for the women of the surrounding communities.

## *Displacement*

For most of the small villages near the proposed high dam, the project represents displacement from homes, land, ancestral setting, and community. People fear that before, during, and after the dam construction they will be forced to leave their homes and find settlement elsewhere, with or without the help of the government. The lack of widespread information regarding the dam project means that many village residents feel that they have been left in the dark about the impending changes to their villages. However, there is a general belief that they will be displaced through floods, drought, landslides, earthquakes, or construction. The displacement and forced resettlement of their communities is one of the greatest motivating factors in choosing to resist the dam project.

According to several community members, the displacement of people would begin well before the dam is in place through the construction process. Sir Mukhya believes that it will start with the materials: “all of the people of the Koshi Corridor, from the highway to Chatara, will be displaced because the raw materials for the dam brought over from Calcutta will be stored in this Terai region and carried slowly up to the construction area. For this they may need a big area in Mahendra Nagar and Prakaspur, so these people will all be displaced.” Ranabattrai Rai believes the construction equipment in the dam survey area will also contribute to this issue, occupying “many acres of land” by the dam site.

Currently, the villages in the hillside by the river are only accessible by a small path cut into the hill, wide enough only for people to travel by foot. However, many residents believe that a road will be constructed in the hilly area leading to the dam site if the dam is built, as this would be necessary to transport construction materials and people to the dam area. While some residents feel that

the building of a road could represent positive development for the district and a possible benefit of the dam, bringing employment, ease of movement, and business, others believe that the “54 km long” road would be yet another cause of displacement. “If the dam is built, they will build a very wide and long road with four, five, even six lanes. At that time, all of these people will be displaced from the roadside and will have to leave,” explained Ranabattrra Rai, who believes that the dam construction will bring more losses than can be anticipated.

Still, the largest fear about displacement stems from the flooding that will inevitably occur if the dam is constructed and causes the water level to rise. According to Chitra Bahadur Rai, self-proclaimed indigenous leader and lead anti-dam activist from Bojpur district, the dam will affect nine districts and destroy 83 VDCs, displacing people above and below the dam site. This is especially true for the people of Sunsari, Dhankuta, Saptari, Udaypur, and Bojpur districts, as the dam is closest to these areas. As stated by Mohan Rai of Dhankuta district, “nowadays we are owners of our land, but if we are displaced, we will be landless people.”

If the dam is constructed and the floods come, people fear that they will lose all of their land and possessions and are even afraid for their lives. “People say if they build the dam, our lives will be in danger,” said Devi Maya Khardka. “Much volume of water flows in the river and if they construct the dam, I don’t know if the water will sweep us away. We are afraid of the dam because we are already victims of the flood.” After having lost one *bigha* (6,772.63 m<sup>2</sup>) of land, all of her crops and livestock, her family’s property, and her home “where life was easy” to the Koshi Barrage floods and having been forced to relocate to a “congested” settlement area with a smaller piece of land and no government

compensation, Devi is keenly aware of the hardships of displacement and resettlement. She says that she and all the others in the area are afraid of once more losing everything they have built and cultivated, and with no alternatives, will be forced to resettle somewhere smaller and more challenging.

There is a shared belief that the “poorer” people of these areas—those living in the small remote villages and farming settlements along the river—will be most adversely affected by the dam project, as they will be displaced with no alternatives for settlement. According to Chatara Maya Shrestha, “landlords and rich people can easily settle somewhere else if they are displaced, but we are poor here, so we cannot easily do this...if the dam is built in this area, we don’t have another place to go, we don’t have land somewhere else, we don’t have more money or property.” She explains how, through “hard work and labour,” she and her family collected land in the area, “broke stones and built our home,” and now run a small shop to earn money, which are opportunities that she feels lucky to have. “Everyone knows me here and I am happy here with them—this is my small happy world and I won’t be happy if they shift us from here.”

For Shrestha and others like her, the possibility of being forced to leave the home and community that they have built and the area that is so familiar to them is upsetting. Many people cited tradition and ancestral land as a reason why staying was important—for them, the location represents comfort, stability, and history that cannot be replaced elsewhere. “We have been living here since our birth, we are familiar with this nature and we know everything here...if we are displaced from here and go to another place, our daily lifestyle and practices would be new. We cannot exist as we are doing here,” said Shrestha. Durga Pariyar, a resident of Barakhshetra village, explained how the generation before

her bought this land “more than 100 years ago” and left it for her generation in tradition, for which she is immensely grateful. She feels that displacement and forced resettlement would be a change too traumatic to inflict upon the generations before her. “The older generation spent their whole life here and they want to die in this place...If the government forcefully shifts them to a new settlement area, that may be a new cause of their death.”

### *Religion and Culture*

The loss of tradition that comes with displacement also extends to the realm of cultural and religious change. Many residents believe that they will not be able to perform the same cultural practices in a new setting and will lose the spiritual and religious traditions of their people. With less access to the river, people feel that it will be more difficult to perform the rituals and *pujas* in the same way and will soon lose their traditions or bring bad luck upon themselves.

Along the Saptakoshi River can be found many temples, shrines, deities, caves in the rock, and holy sites that are visited and worshipped by community members as well as people from outside of the area. There is a great concern among the people that the construction and floods from the dam will destroy these sacred places and monuments entirely. Another fear is that, once displaced and resettled, it will be impossible to reestablish these sites or symbols of religious significance elsewhere, and the local cultural practices will be lost. For Sitaraam Rai of Bojpur district, the dam will be “the destroyer of culture” that will force them to leave their cultural setting, destroy places of spiritual importance, and prevent them from returning to their holy areas.

One such sacred place is the Barahkshetra *mandir*—a beautiful white temple built on a raised platform on the riverbank, with steep steps descending

down to the river for people to go bathe themselves, give offerings, fill bottles of holy water, pray, and perform *puja* by the Koshi. Less than a 2 km walk from the *mandir* into the hills is the proposed site for the high dam, meaning that the *mandir* would be destroyed if the dam were constructed. The possibility of this sacred site being destroyed by the dam is, for some, an irreparable loss. Durga Pariyar said that the people of her area are “lucky” to have the “natural gift” of the *mandir*, which “should not be destroyed in the name of the high dam.” Pradeep Shrestha, another resident of Barahkshetra, questioned what would happen to the famous religious site if the dam were to be built. “The *mandir* would be swept away and this is a great cost. If its beauty is lost, we cannot compare this loss to the benefits of the dam,” he said.

According to Pariyar, some of the officials who visited the area discussed the idea of “shifting” the Barahkshetra and Chatara temples when they construct the high dam, meaning that temples would be reconstructed elsewhere for people to visit and pray. And yet, she is skeptical that people will believe in the sanctity of the new location, saying that the gods will return to this holy place and people will stop believing. To the prospect of shifting the temples, she said, “but how can they shift god?”

### *Psychological Impacts*

There is a great deal of fear and sadness surrounding the idea of the high dam being built on the Saptakoshi River. The lack of concrete information about the dam project and construction, the possibility of displacement, and the constant fear of flooding by the Koshi are causing many people in the surrounding villages to suffer psychologically. Several people mentioned “mental disturbance” or “mental suffering” as a result of the fear brought about by the

dam project. Chakra Regmi from Mahendra Nagar, for instance, said that those people living downstream of the dam site are “sleeping on a bomb.”

Much of the fear about the flooding comes from past trauma from the numerous Koshi Barrage floods that have impacted many of the villages in the area. Kamal Bahadur Katwal of Mahendra Nagar, for instance, spoke extensively about the many failed water agreements and projects between Nepal and India that have affected his life, culminating in the 2008 Koshi Barrage breach that destroyed his land and home and forced him to move to a settlement. “At 11pm Koshi entered the village at night; at that time it was dark and people couldn’t go anywhere, take their animals or belongings. The water level came up to 6 feet and people went to their rooves, but the flood swept the farms and animals and most of them died,” he described. Maya Thapa and Sangeeta Rai shared similar stories and fears from an earlier flood: “25 years ago a big flood came and the Koshi devoured ward 5 and 6 of Prakaspur. After that, the river diverged its course and many people were displaced; like landless people they live outside. At night we always fear that the floods will come...We are mentally tortured by the worry of an earthquake or another disaster if the dam is built. We cannot sleep at night.” They and others like them share a collective trauma from these events that make them fear recurrence with the high dam.

### *Perceived Benefits*

While all of the interviewees believe that the dam will lead to many losses for the surrounding communities and environment, some people acknowledged the possibility of certain benefits from the project. Generally, people were unclear about the kinds of development that the dam could bring, but speculated about transportation, electricity, tourism, and business. People cited the construction

and maintenance of a proper road as a possible benefit of the project, although others believed the road would bring more harm than benefit, and some residents of the more isolated villages are afraid that the road will bring too many outsiders and too much change to their lifestyle.

Another perceived benefit of the project is possible employment opportunities through construction work on the road and dam. People also mentioned that a large development project in this rural area could improve business, allow for new restaurants or shops to start, and create a strong tourism industry with the possibility of “rafting, boating, and water attractions” on the river. According to Katwal, the Indian government is planning to start a water transportation project to transport goods and people down the river; however, he is skeptical that Nepal will profit from this project, as they currently have “not even one steamer or boat” travelling down the Koshi. In the vein of transportation, Ashok Thapa believes that people from the Koshi area could “directly reach Kathmandu by boat or road” if the dam is constructed.

Some people believe the dam project could help Nepal progress in terms of improving electricity and water resources across the country. People were largely aware that the project is promising 3800 MW of electricity, although according to Katwal, “300 MW of the electricity is reserved to be used by Nepali people, and the rest of the electricity will be taken by India.” Other people had a similar impression that India would take at least 2700 MW of the electricity and were skeptical that they would receive any power at all.

There is a common perception that ‘rich’ people may benefit from the dam, while local village residents will incur the greatest losses without reaping the same benefits. According to Ranabattrai Rai, “[rich people] can run water

transportation, restaurants, the tourism business here, but the poor people do not have enough capital to invest in those areas, so they will not benefit. The dam may be positive for rich people, but it will be very harmful for poor people.” Many people thus believe that even if the dam promises irrigation, electricity, or other kinds of development to the people of Nepal, these benefits will not be evenly distributed and the village people will face greater losses than gains.

### *Perceptions of India*

It is largely believed that the greatest benefits brought by the dam will be “taken” by India, with the Nepali people not receiving their fair share of power or water from the project and being exploited for labour and materials. There is thus a widespread perception that the losses will be greater than the benefits for Nepal, while the benefits may be greater than the losses for India, leaving Nepal in a powerless and unfair position. “For Nepal, what benefits can there be?” asked Pariyar. “India will get more benefits than Nepal. We have so many natural resources here like stones, sand, and water, and if they build the high dam then all of these resources may be taken by India and Nepal will lose them.”

According to Katwal, India has exploited Nepal in water treaties in the past and reaped the benefits on multiple occasions, making him suspicious that the same will be true of the high dam project. “India’s vested interest in building the dam is harmful for Nepal,” he said. “India did not follow the last agreement with the Koshi barrage...the Indian government took so many stones and wood from here, but Nepal didn’t get any compensation.” He explains how, according to past agreements, the Indian government should be maintaining two canals in Saptari and Sunkoshi, but up until now they have denied doing so. He fears that they will continue to deny their responsibilities to the Nepali people if they

construct the dam. “The Indian government dominates Nepal. If they construct the dam, we can guess that most of the rights will go to India and the Nepali people will be exploited.” He further explains how the DPR surveyors did not mention where the “electricity service station” from the high dam would be, but that he is aware that India is planning to keep it on their land. He describes how the Indian government took 400 acres of Nepal’s land when building a barrage in Saptari without creating a clear provision to return the land. “Knowingly or unknowingly, India took our land. This may happen with the Koshi dam also,” he says. Through past failed treaties and exploitation by the Indian government, Katwal and many others feel that India will reap all of the benefits of the high dam while taking resources and land from Nepal and causing harm to Nepali people and their homes.

Others such as Rabin Ghimire of Prakaspur believe that India wants to “capture the full right to the Koshi,” as India is currently facing issues with drinking water supply. He explains how, in the case of the Koshi Barrage, only India has benefitted, as the canal gives irrigation to India but has only caused destruction for Nepal. “Nepal will not get benefits, that’s sure,” he stated firmly. Mohan Rai of Dhankuta district explained how the Indian government has made several canals and river dams in Nepal, but that all of the water goes to India, and the canals are always dry in Nepal in the winter. “The canals have water for us in the summer, but Nepali farmers don’t need water from canals in the summer,” he explained, later saying that he too feels that only India will benefit from the dam.

The general perception is thus that India would get more benefits from the dam in the form of irrigation, fertile land, and electricity, while Nepal would not benefit and will be left to suffer from the losses of people, land, and water. Still,

many people believe that the Indian state of Bihar will be even worse affected by the flooding than Nepal, displacing thousands of people and sweeping away land and homes once more. “If the dam explodes, the poorer people in Nepal will lose their lives or land, but there will be even more loss in India, so this dam is not in favour of the Nepalese or the Indian people,” said Ranabattrra Rai. According to Rai, the treaty between Nepal and India regarding the high dam will most likely not reach the local people, leaving them unaware of whether the dam will be “harmful or profitable for the nation.” He believes that the treaty should be shared with local people in Nepal and India in order to gage the costs versus benefits for the people who will be most affected by the dam.

### ***The Politics of Compensation***

Compensation is one of the most contested issues in regards to the Koshi high dam, with much confusion and lack of a common understanding over what will happen and what is desired. The Indian and Nepali governments have not shared a comprehensive plan about the proposed high dam project or a compensation package with the affected communities; many people have merely heard rumours about compensation or are basing their knowledge off of past promises made by the governments.

Most subjects claim that they have been offered no compensation by the government whatsoever, saying that no officials have approached them and no package has been offered, and leading them to believe that they will not be compensated for their losses. Chitra Bahadur Rai believed that his community was not being offered any compensation until he found “an appeal on a flyer” saying that they would be compensated for all of their “fruits and belongings” lost in the flood. However, the flyer said nothing of who would provide the

compensation or how the provisions would be made. “It is just a lollipop to convince the people and make them favour the dam,” said Rai. According to Mukhya, it is the responsibility of the government to make all of the “provisions of settlement and displacement” clear to the affected people beforehand. “It is unclear what will happen and we cannot believe that the government will arrange it perfectly and give us compensation...The right of the decisions should be given to the people of these communities.” Like Mukhya, many people are in confusion about the kind of compensation, if any, that the government would offer, and are frustrated by the lack of communication and transparency in the process.

There is a strong sense of skepticism that the governments will follow through with any promises of compensation that they make. This lack of faith comes from the broken treaties and compensation promises from the Koshi Barrage flooding and other water treaties involving India and Nepal. The Koshi Barrage breach flooded many VDCs and destroyed 4500 *bigha* of land, and yet, despite the promises of compensation from the Indian government, the victims of the flood are still awaiting compensation, which many people cited as a reason why they could not trust the government to provide for them this time around. Moreover, according to Chitra Bahadur Rai, those people who were displaced by the construction of the Koshi Barrage and various other projects such as the Koshi Bridge have still not gotten their promised compensation over 50 years later, leaving him with little reason to believe that the Indian government is planning to provide anything for his community this time.

Devi Maya Khardka and Kamal Bahadur Katwal, both victims of the Koshi Barrage floods, explained how they and the rest of their community lost to the river over 1 *bigha* land each along with their homes and property, and yet

were never compensated for any of the loss. “India did not follow the last Koshi Barrage agreement, so it is not certain that we’ll get compensation from India after building the dam,” said Katwal. According to him, after the floods the government only provided “medicine for the diseases spread by the water” but gave no other compensation. He also says that his community was promised a health post, school, concrete road, and canal as part of the compensation package, none of which have been provided. The failure of the government to follow through with past agreements means that most residents of these communities do not trust that they will receive compensation even if it is offered.

Mustak Ansari of the Buffer Zone says he has heard that the government is offering compensation to the affected areas depending on the scale of loss. He says that the government has divided the affected area into three zones: green—slightly affected by floods and receiving no compensation, yellow—up to 50% of the land affected and receiving compensation for 25% of crops and livestock, and red—100% of land affected and receiving compensation for 50% of the losses. However, according to Ansari, most of these people have small pieces of land ranging from .5 *bigha* to 2 *bigha*; getting 25% compensation if the flood destroys this land is thus not enough. He also fears that the compensation will not be fully given, as in the past only some residents received compensation, and it was not the full amount that was promised. Dili Bimali from Udaypur says that some of the people in his village believe they will receive 300,000 NPR in compensation, while others believe they will receive more. “It is not clear why the same people would get different compensation for being displaced by dam construction,” he says, illustrating the lack of widespread information available about the issue.

Another fear about compensation is the issue of unregistered land: many people are using *aailani* land, or land that is undeclared, meaning that this land belongs to the government and the people do not own land registry certificates. According to Bimali, people living on this “occupied land” are afraid that they will not be compensated for their losses if the land is destroyed, as the government will not count the occupied land as owned land. Another issue foreseen by the people is the rate of compensation offered by the government: in Nepal, the government rate is low while the market rate is high, and the government will evaluate the economic value of land and provide compensation according to the government rate. According to Ghimire, 1 hectare of land at the government rate equals 20,000 NPR, while in the market it equals 1 *lakh* NPR (100,000 NPR), meaning that the compensation given will be lower. “If we have to leave here, we demand compensation at the market rate,” says Sir Mukhya. “If the market price of this good is 20 rupees, the government will evaluate its price as 2 rupees, and the 18 rupees will be lost for the community people. But who will get those 18 rupees?”

While a clear compensation package has not yet been offered, many village residents have an idea of the kind of compensation that they would require in order to consider leaving. In addition to being compensated at the market rate, people had many other demands such as being fully compensated for all of the crops, houses, animals, and land that are lost. “We want land in another area that is as fertile as ours was,” says Devi Maya Khardka. One of the most common demands was for a new settlement area that has the same provisions as what they currently have. “The compensation should be enough for all people,” said Ranabattrra Rai. “In the new settlement we need this sort of setting with water

taps, water facilities, electricity, and even the same neighbours. We need our temple nearby like we have here.” Moreover, if communities are displaced, people fear that they will lose their traditional way of life and would have no source of income in their new settlement area. There is thus a demand that the government provide an alternative way of generating income as a part of the compensation package. “If they want us to shift from here then they have to provide us with training, business help, they have to support the education of our children,” said Pradeep Shrestha. “Here we already have a system that works.”

Despite these demands for compensation, many people still feel that the losses caused by the dam cannot be compensated by money or land. When asked about compensation, many people replied that their only demand is that the government does not construct the dam. “We are not thinking about compensation because we don’t want them to build the dam. We are saying to the government, don’t build the dam!” said Maya Thapa. Similarly, Katwal said that it is “not necessary to talk about compensation” because he is against the dam and the demand of his community is “to not make the dam that will destroy all of these things.” People also feel that it is necessary for the Indo-Nepal treaties to be revised in favour of the Nepali people.

Many village residents feel that no amount of compensation can measure to the losses of culture, religious sites, and their homes. “Most of the people in this community do not want to leave their homes and settlements, even if they will get new homes or more sophisticated homes,” said Ranabattrai Rai, saying that even offers of land or settlement that are better than their current setting would not compensate for the losses. Chatara Maya Shrestha is afraid of the challenges of adjusting to a new environment and losing her community in a new

settlement. “This does not compare with compensation,” she says. While some feel that the government must create a clear compensation policy before they can make a decision, others have decided to stand against the dam regardless of compensation offers.

### ***Resistance to the Project***

While there is a great deal of uncertainty in regards to the proposed dam project, there is a general desire to resist the project and stop it from progressing. The kinds of resistance range from people speaking against the dam with their friends and neighbours to actively forming committees and performing direct actions against the dam project.

### ***Struggle Committees***

Many of the VDCs that will be affected by the proposed dam project have formed “Struggle Committees,” which bring together individuals to discuss resistance measures, create demands, meet with government officials, and spread awareness about the costs of the dam project to surrounding communities. According to Bardam Rai of Dhankuta, the movement has been going on for nine years, starting with the creation of a “Saptakoshi People’s Committee,” under which there are separate district and VDC level committees, and under which there are toll and ward committees. He explains that all of these people are combined in one network so that if the government decides to build the dam, they can all rally together and form a movement.

According to Chakra Regmi, 14 Struggle Committees have formed around Mahendra Nagar VDC, including a youth committee with regular meetings and discussions. These village level committees work to disseminate information at the village level and stimulate more involvement in the movement.

According to Bardam Rai, they also hold discussions with local stakeholders, non-governmental organizations, religious institutions, and community members to “build a network that will support this movement effectively.” Many of the committees have a small membership fee or a cooperative in which people regularly deposit money for the movement. Some committees have also started a campaign called the “Koshi Education School” to spread information and awareness at the community level. There is also some interest in “joining hands” with Indian activists, and an Indo-Nepal Committee has formed to bring together people from both countries in a collective push against the dam. According to Kesab Dahal, a lead activist from Sunsari, “the movement is going on, a network is forming from the public side; we are moving ahead on this issue. From the community level, we should make one strong collective plan to lead action.”

#### *Direct Action*

Although a network of local committees has formed, many community members and activists have performed and continue to perform direct actions to protest the dam project. The DPR study was stopped due to public pressure and protest: according to Krishna Prashad Bhattarai, a coordinating member of the Saptakoshi *janaadikhaar* forums, in past years many activists went to the dam area, threw out the instruments used to test the rock-face, and thereby stopped the DPR officials from completing the physical survey of the site. According to Chakra Regmi, the Indian government has brought construction equipment to a town near the Indian border, meaning that they are “ready and standing by; once they get a signal, they will start to construct the dam.” He says his local committee has decided that they will obstruct them if they come with the equipment: “we will not give them a chance to construct the dam.”

In Bojpur district, Chitra Bahadur Rai explains how they have created a local committee to monitor if Indian and Nepali government representatives, surveyors, and construction workers are coming to the dam area. Many of the activists say that the people plan to protest and disturb the work as they have done in the past. Durga Pariyar explains that she has witnessed anti-dam rallies in Chatara for the last 5 to 6 years. According to Pariyar, the Indian government previously established a DPR office in Chatara, at which time people “got angry and ran to the office, broke all of the doors, tables, computers, and everything else, shut it down forever.” Many village residents say that if the government comes to build the dam and force people to leave, they will gather at the dam site and protest. According to Ranabattrai Rai, “every person of this affected area will unite and start campaigning against the government. If the community people do not support it, it is quite impossible for the construction to happen.”

#### *Government Interaction*

According to those present at the *janaadhikar* forum, various committees have organized dialogues with government representatives in an attempt to make them aware of the local people’s perspectives and to offer alternatives to the dam project. Many activists who have met with government officials believe that, while their plea has reached the government, the government is not responding to their demands. Bhattarai feels that the interest of political parties in the dam issue is increasing due to public pressure but is still not enough, and that some parties have made promises to help the people without following through. He says that the people’s demand is mounting but that the government is “not taking responsibility;” rather, the people have had to initiate discussion and the government neglects to settle on any conclusions. According to Ansari, the

government has formed an “advisory committee” to evaluate the losses by the dam, but so far nothing has come of this development. Many people also feel that the current political instability, such as the parliament collapse and the lack of policies, is harming their negotiation efforts.

### *Alternative Approaches*

While the committees and community members have many demands ranging from ending the project to receiving full compensation, some people have alternative propositions that they feel could achieve the goals of the nation without causing harm to local communities. One such proposition is creating several small dams along Nepal’s many river systems rather than one multipurpose high dam; some people feel that this could generate electricity and irrigation without harming the local environment and communities. Another proposition is that the government establishes an early warning system for high water levels and flooding on the Koshi River with a function that can disseminate the information to local people.

### **Discussion/Analysis**

While there is much confusion over the logistics of the proposed dam project and the effects it may have, there is a general belief that the dam will bring great destruction and loss to local communities, the environment, and to Nepal as a whole. Most people feel compelled to resist the project for a combination of reasons—namely, to prevent the loss of culture and religion, to preserve the sanctity of the natural space, and for fear of being displaced from their homes with a lack of alternatives in terms of land, settlement, and a source of income. The ease of access to water and proximity of the villages to the riverbank has shaped the daily practices and lifestyle of the local residents,

making the Koshi central to their everyday lives. Moreover, the cultural and religious practices of these villages in many cases revolve around the river; the loss of this setting would thus change their ability to perform their practices and live in their traditional manner. The river is thus an integral element to the lives and cultures of these village communities, making the threat of displacement and relocation an incomparable loss.

There is a strong sense of fear and sadness among the people of the affected communities and a sense of urgency among the activist communities in their plans to resist. The fear stems not only from the idea of displacement and becoming “landless,” but also from the past experiences with flooding, failed treaties, and lack of government compensation. Still recovering from the impact of being relocated and attempting to rebuild what was lost to them, many people are living in fear that the Koshi floods will come again if the dam is constructed and that they will have to face the challenges of relocation and loss once more.

Still, despite the fear of change and loss, it seems that many community members are concerned about the greater good of Nepal and feel that, if Nepal as a whole will truly benefit from the dam, they are willing to make the sacrifice. And yet, the failure of the governments to communicate the details of the dam project, provide a compensation package, and generally maintain any transparency throughout this process, as well as the failure of past treaties and promises by both governments and the Indian domination in past projects, has resulted in a belief that Nepal will not benefit from the dam. The many issues on the part of the government have created an attitude of distrust and frustration within the local communities, leading them to believe that their perspectives will ultimately not be taken into account. The belief that India will dominate in this

process brings up the political nature of water resource management, as Nepal does not have the technological or financial resources to develop this project alone and thus must rely on India, thereby causing transboundary conflict or, in the case of local communities, disregard and little communication between the external Indian officials and the local people (Petheram 2010).

In the case of the Saptakoshi river dam, the local communities who would be most harmed by the consequences of the dam are not being included in discussion about the project. The Indian and Nepali governments are employing a top-down approach to this development project in which the attitudes and desires of the local communities, which are more marginalized and hold less power, are not considered (Esteva 2000). Despite the promised benefits of the dam project, it is likely that these benefits will not reach the local communities; rather, they will face the worst consequences of the project without reaping the rewards. While this project claims to be in the name of progress for Nepal, it must be questioned for its disregard of the local perspective and the prioritization of the interests of development experts such as the DPR surveyors and government officials.

The lack of attention paid to the cultural, social, and ecological importance of the river to the local people and the exclusion of these groups from discussion and negotiation is not attentive to the wants or needs of these communities. Rather than taking into account local cultures and priorities, the project is being imposed by an exterior group, creating a power dynamic in which the project experts and government committees such as the Saptakoshi Joint Commissions Offices make the decisions while excluding the perspectives of those who will be implicated in the project (Esteva 2000). The international nature of the dam proposal, centralized in the Indian and Nepali governments,

means that the decision makers are external to the affected communities and that those who are marginalized remain voiceless, thus creating a hierarchy of power in which the project 'experts' dominate. This power dynamic points to the inadequacy of the 'cost versus benefit' approach to development decisions, as the overall benefits of the project for the country will likely not reach the local level of the vulnerable populations who are bearing the losses (Dore et al., 2010). The inequality of the dam beneficiaries and the local populations, who are socially and spatially disadvantaged in this case, is further reason for the decision-making process to include the local communities and for the negotiations to be most sensitive to their needs and desires.

In this situation, many of the local people are not willing to accept the imposition, but are instead choosing to resist in an effort to have their voices heard. And yet, the hierarchical power structure present here is such that, despite their struggles, the local people are not being involved in negotiations with the 'experts' and are thus resorting to resistance, fighting, and protest measures to make their demands heard, and plan to do so until "the action of the government will stop," as stated by Krishna Prashad Bhattarai (Fisher 1995). By failing to initiate negotiations or discussions with the local communities as well as maintaining little transparency in the decision-making process, the government is reifying the hierarchical power structure while ignoring the local context, which is creating a sense of desperation among the local people as they resort to direct action resistance measures.

Despite the widespread local resistance to the dam project, the goals and desires of the governments and the local communities are not entirely in opposition. Throughout the communities there is some desire for developments

such as electricity and irrigation, both in the local area and for the greater nation of Nepal, as well as for a reduction in the impacts of flooding, all of which coincide with the goals of the dam project. However, the local desire is also for preservation of the natural environment, sacred places, and the ability to stay in their homes and communities rather than being displaced. The question is then whether large-scale development projects in rural areas can coexist with the preservation of local culture and environment, or if inherent in such projects is some disregard for local context as well as cultural and environmental loss.

### **Conclusion**

The wealth of water resources in Nepal combined with the nation's water and electricity shortages makes the proposal to construct a multipurpose hydropower dam seem like a natural step on the path of 'progress'. And yet, without the inclusion of the perspectives of local communities in the decision-making process, this kind of development becomes exclusionary towards the people whose lives would be most immediately impacted by the project and creates an inequitable power structure, as those people who are excluded from the decisions are also those who have less political and social standing and less ability to make their demands heard. By excluding these voices from the negotiation process, this project further marginalizes these communities and will continue to do so if they must endure the consequences of the dam project without reaping the benefits.

To the communities living along the Saptakoshi, the river represents culture, religion, home, and a way of life. The construction of the high dam would thus mean a great loss for these people, which in many ways, cannot be replaced. While some people are willing to make the sacrifice if the project is to

truly benefit the nation, most people believe that Nepal will not benefit from the dam due to the poorly enacted water treaties with India in the past, and thus feel that they would be losing their culture, environment, and home without receiving any benefits in return. The lack of communication by the government and confusion over the offers of compensation mean that most of the village residents have little reason to believe that they are being considered in the process.

To these communities, the environmental, social, and cultural impacts do not equate to the perceived gains of the project, especially considering that no compensation has been offered. Along with the unstable nature of the river and surrounding rock, it seems that there are several foreseeable issues with the dam project that the governments should consider before making their decision. The motivations for local resistance to the dam encompass many realms, from environmental destruction to cultural loss, demonstrating the diverse perspectives found at the community level that should be taken into account by the project planners and government officials. The stories of the people living by the Koshi river bring up questions about the power relations inherent in development projects and call into question whether the larger benefits of these projects will reach the level of marginalized communities, while exposing how these communities are often excluded from the negotiation process entirely. This is a narrative that is relevant not only in Nepal, but in regions all across the world where large-scale development meets tradition and history.

## **Glossary of Terms**

*Mandir* - temple

*Bigha* – a measurement of land equivalent to 6,772.63 m<sup>2</sup>

*Janaadhikaar* – people's rights

*Aailani* – unregistered or undeclared (land)

*Maharani* - goddess

*Puja* – a religious worship ceremony or ritual

*Teej* – a Hindu religious ceremony observed by women for good health of their husbands and purification of the body

*Chatth* – a Hindu religious ceremony dedicated to the Hindu Sun God for wellness and prosperity

*Shrada* – a religious ceremony to honour deceased parents

## Appendix

**Table 1: Losses Due to Breach**

	Districts	Affected Population	Affected Family	Death	Missing	Loss of Agriculture Land	Road km
Nepal	Sunsari	50,000	7,102	22	21	5,592	0
Bihar	Saharsa, Supaul, Araria, Madhepura, Khagaria and Purnia	3.5 million	30,000	76	NA	35,000	NA

Source: Agencies.

Table 1: Losses due to the 2008 Koshi Barrage Breach. Dixit, Ajaya. 2009. Kosi Embankment Breach in Nepal: Need for a Paradigm Shift in Responding to Floods. *Economic and Political Weekly*, February 7.

**Figure 1: The Kosi River Catchment Area**

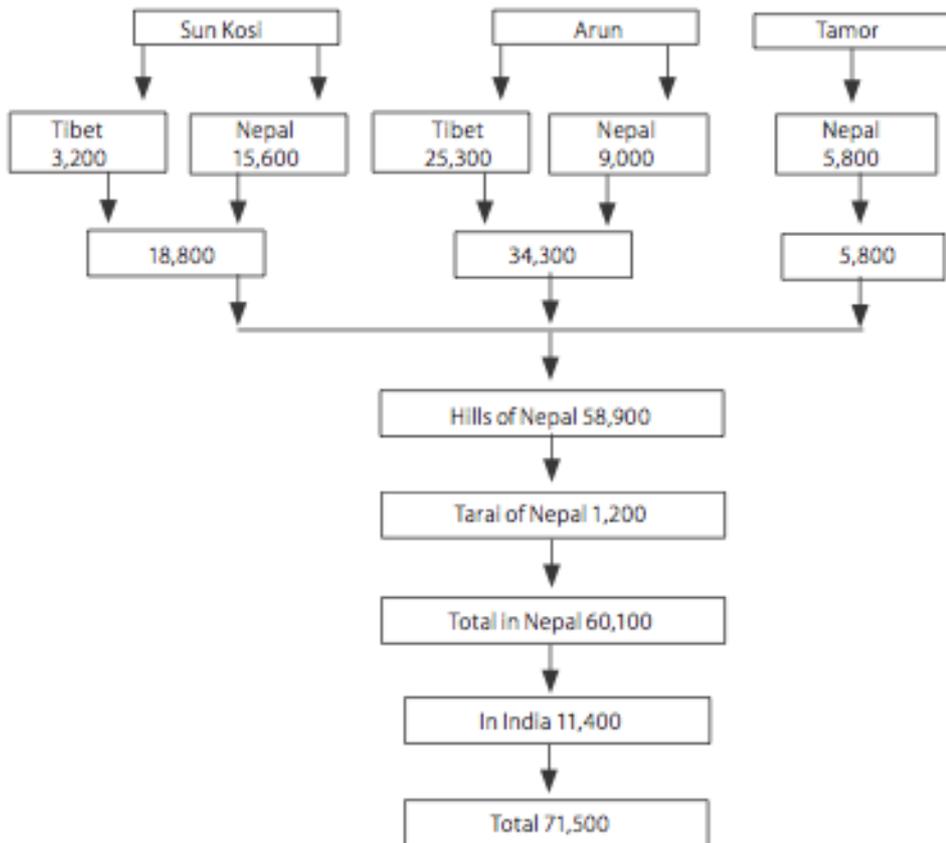


Figure 1: The Kosi River Catchment Area. Dixit, Ajaya. 2009. Kosi Embankment Breach in Nepal: Need for a Paradigm Shift in Responding to Floods. *Economic and Political Weekly*, February 7.

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