Scarcity and Sacredness:

A STUDY OF WATER MANAGEMENT AND INDIGENOUS SOVEREIGNTY IN NEPAL

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Introduction

- Water management is a pressing issue in Nepal, ever-evolving due to rapid urbanization, persistent barriers to access, and human impact
- **The hiti, an ancient network of stone fountains**, has successfully supplied water in the city of Lalitpur, Nepal, for millennia
- The hiti system is deeply embedded in religious and cultural practices, providing a view into how indigenous sovereignty can work hand-in-hand with resource management

Research Question

How do residents choose to access water, and how are these decisions shaped by cultural, infrastructural, and changing factors?

Modern Crisis

- **Urbanization**: increased developement and urban density degrades the hiti system, and contaminants including industrial and human waste impact water quality
- **Reliability**: because of seasonal extremes, resident's are often left patching together sources of water during the dry season (winter)
- **Ecological Strain:** As the Himalayas face the impacts of climate change and groundwater sources continue to be over-extracted, the water access landscape will continue to evolve

Methods

- **Participant Observation**: Participant observation was conducted along the Gosaikunda pilgrimage route and at hiti locations in Lalitpur.
- **Interviewing**: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with both local experts and residents who use the hiti spouts.

Key Findings

- **Spiritual Ecology & Naga**: nagas, serpents that are believed to have given the hiti as a gift, may disrupt health and water availability when they become agitated due to pollution or insufficient offerings
- **Hiti use**: Though tap water is now available in homes in Lalitpur, many residents prefer to use the hiti spouts as their source, drinking the hiti water directly but only using the tap for cooking or housework
- **Change**: residents described seeing fewer nagas due to a decline in habitat space as a result of rapid urbanization. Residents also described a loosening of community expectations with the rapidly growing population

Field Sites

Kathmandu Valley, Nepal:

- Hiti sites in Lalitpur
- Gosaikunda Pilgrimage route (Langtang National Park)

Conclusion

Water governance interventions (governmental or NGO) often misstep when they neglect the social, cultural, and religious frameworks that impact how residents use water. Achieving long-term water security requires an approach that utilizes this millennia-old system and understands the community stewardship that culturally relevant resource management systems nurture.

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