

THE RAUTE

Nomadic Ethnic Group of Nepal



AEIN LUXEMBOURG

SOSEC NEPAL

The Raute 2024



**AEIN - Aide à l'Enfance de l'Inde et du Népal
Luxembourg**



SOSEC Nepal

The findings presented in this book do not necessarily represent the views of SOSEC Nepal and are solely the authors' presentation. The contents of the book do not imply that SOSEC Nepal has taken any specific position regarding the situation of the Raute community. SOSEC Nepal is committed to the principle of serving vulnerable populations and amplifying the voices of the voiceless. As a non-governmental organization, SOSEC Nepal, with support from AEIN Luxembourg, has worked to improve the daily lives of the Raute community. Additionally, SOSEC Nepal continues to serve and protect the rights of children, women, Dalits, persons with disabilities, and those living below the poverty line.

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List of Translations

Chheula tree	Tree from which cloth fabric is made
Dhedo	Traditional Nepali thick porridge
Gaba	Yam Leaf
Guna	Gray Langur
Koshi	Bowl
Lingo and Khamo	Tree pillars
Madhus	Box
Masta Devta	Raute God
Mukhiya	Chief
Pauroti	Bread
Pipal Pani	A funeral ritual
Pirka	Floor seat
Prasadi	Offerings to God
Roti	Unleavened Bread
Saraddha	Ceremonial Offerings to ancestors
Selroti	Traditional Nepali fried bread
Sisnu	Stinging nettle
Sukuti	Dried meat
Tarul	Yam
Thalu, Nayak	Designations in Raute heirarchy
Tyagna	Dioscorea

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Foreword

We are delighted to present this book, which serves as a documentary on the remarkable Raute community, through The Raute Project. Implemented in July 2018 in a harmonious partnership with AEIN Luxembourg, The Raute Project continues to play a vital role in serving and supporting the Raute community for their livelihood, informal education and health.

Highlighting the vibrant lifestyle of the Raute community, the book offers an in-depth commentary on their social structure and rich cultural heritage. Through thorough longitudinal and cross-sectional observations, The Raute Project book seeks to uncover the nuances of their way of life, traditions, and the significant challenges they face. We believe that both directly involved stakeholders and those with a broader interest will find our exploration engaging and enlightening.

We extend our heartfelt appreciation to all the dedicated members of the publication team, board members, staff, stakeholders, partners, and donors who have contributed to the success of this book. Your dedicated support has been instrumental in bringing this publication to fruition. We are confident that this book will serve as a valuable asset for SOSEC Nepal and AEIN Luxembourg, accurately reflecting the true essence of the Raute community as a whole.

Lastly, we kindly request your valuable suggestions and feedback, highlighting any errors and providing suggestions for further improvements to enhance the quality of this book. Your input will be invaluable in shaping future endeavors and ensuring the continued success of The Raute Project.

Thank you for joining us on this insightful journey into the world of the Raute community.

Hira Singh Thapa
Executive Director
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What makes the Raute, Raute ?

- The Raute shun the use of sewn clothing. Should the need arise for garments, they personally sew them with needle and thread, embracing a handcrafted approach.
- The community holds a strong belief in collective unity, never allowing any member to reside outside their settlement. Yet, in exceptional circumstances such as intense illness or necessary meetings with government officials, flexibility is granted. Members are expected to inform their leaders of their estimated departure and return dates.
- Counting their population is a practice the Raute staunchly avoid, as they believe that enumerating their members will result in a decrease in numbers.
- The Rautes regard spring water as pure and prioritize finding it when relocating to new settlements. However, in recent times, they have also started considering proximity to markets in their search for new locations. In situations where spring water is unavailable, they resort to using flowing water. Despite these adjustments, they remain cautious of piped water, believing it may be contaminated.
- Personal grooming is minimal in the Raute community: they do not comb their hair, and women refrain from wearing makeup. Additionally, women are prohibited from adorning themselves with tika.
- The Raute have an unconventional approach to food preparation. Rather than cooking, they prefer to barbecue meat, as they believe cooking would compromise its taste.
- Marriage traditions are deeply rooted in the community's values. Raute girls marry only after reaching menstruation, and only within the community—marriage beyond their community is strictly forbidden.
- Girls must wait until the boys reach the age of 15 before they can marry, unless a suitable match within their caste is unavailable.
- Traditionally, marriage arrangements are made by the community leaders, but in recent years, a more flexible approach has been adopted, allowing parents to choose the bride or groom for their children.
- Polygamy is not permitted within the Raute community. Single women are not allowed to remarry, nor may men whose wives have passed.

- On the wedding day, a new shelter is constructed for the newlywed couple. The use of family planning is not part of their practices.
- Strict monogamy is a cornerstone of their beliefs; sexual relations are only permitted within the bounds of marriage.
- A strong sense of solidarity permeates the Raute community, with special care and support given to the elderly, single women, disadvantaged members, and children.
- When in need, the Raute will beg from others, but they never steal or resort to robbery.
- In the market, they are known for their bargaining skills, though they never accept anything for free. Each person is expected to pay individually for goods, even if the purchase is made in a group.
- Meals are eaten in groups once they are prepared, though members do not wait for others to join before they begin eating.
- The Raute hold sacred the practice of worshipping their deities at midnight, a time of quiet reverence.
- In the upbringing of children, the Raute prioritize guidance over punishment. While they admonish children for their wrongdoings, corporal punishment is never a recourse.
- Disputes within the community are entrusted to the wisdom of the leader, whose decision is final and binding for all members, ensuring peace and preventing conflict.
- A single woman's dwelling is always positioned differently from others, symbolically facing the opposite direction—while others' homes may face east, a widow's will face west.
- The passing of a community member is marked by immediate migration. The Raute do not return to the site of death for 12 years, signifying the closure of that chapter.
- The Raute only migrate to places that are half a day's journey from their current location, as they must carry all their belongings with them during each move.
- Hair cutting is done only with a blade, never with scissors. Children under the age of 10 are prohibited from cutting their hair.
- There is no discrimination against women during pregnancy or menstruation. They are allowed to remain in the same dwelling as others, and their condition is not viewed as impure.

The Raute: Nomads of The Forest

The Raute are a nomadic ethnic group officially recognized by the Government of Nepal. Renowned for their forest-dwelling lifestyle, they have historically sustained themselves by hunting langurs and monkeys, while also foraging wild forest tubers, fruits, and greens. Traditionally, they would craft wooden bowls and boxes, bartering these items with local farmers for essentials like grain (rice), iron, cloth, and jewelry, though in recent years, monetary transactions have replaced this practice.

Rooted in their ancestral heritage, the Raute possess a distinct language, customs, and beliefs that have been cherished and transmitted across generations. Their profound affinity for the forests, which they regard as their abode, permeates every aspect of their existence. While the tribe once flourished with greater numbers, their population has steadily declined over time.

Despite challenges, including constraints on their nomadic lifestyle and governmental regulations governing forest resource utilization, the Raute have admirably safeguarded their cultural legacy and mode of existence. Firmly standing against assimilation into mainstream society, they hold genuine concerns of losing their unique identity and way of life.

The Raute's distinct cultural practices and traditions continue to intrigue all who visit their communities. Renowned for their unique clothing, music, and dance, which reflect their deep connection to the forest, they offer visitors a glimpse into their traditional way of life. From the craft of basket making to the preparation of traditional hunting tools and the communal experience of cooking over open fires, their customs are both fascinating and enriching.

In conclusion, the Raute people represent an extraordinary community with a deeply ingrained cultural legacy deserving of recognition and support. Their way of life and cherished traditions serve as powerful reminders of the vital importance of preserving indigenous cultures and the natural environment they call home.



Fig 1: Tranquility greets the Raute with the first morning sunlight.

The Rituals and Rhythm of the Raute Morning

At the break of dawn, the Raute greet the first sunlight, attending to their natural needs before convening for their morning meal preparation. Following breakfast, the men of the community typically engage in the crafting of wooden utensils for their livelihood or engage in leisurely conversations with their companions. If the day calls for a hunting expedition, preparations commence, and the hunting group sets out after completing their morning meal typically between 9 to 11 am. This group predominantly comprises males, while the Raute women undertake various household responsibilities. These tasks include washing utensils and clothing, visiting nearby villages to procure food, and fetching water from the river. The women dedicate themselves to the art of brewing and preserving alcohol, infusing Raute mornings with a vibrant energy.

The Origins of Raute

As the Raute community thrives on oral transmission of knowledge through generations, some aspects of their origin story have faded into obscurity over the passage of time. However, the consistent narrative shared by each of the three Mukhiyas, the leaders of the Raute community, recounts the legend of Tele Shahi, the revered first leader. According to their accounts, Tele Shahi was not only a local prince but also made the deliberate choice to leave behind his royal livelihood and thrive in the forests. Tele Shahi was not only a local prince but also a courageous individual who made the deliberate choice to forsake his royal livelihood and seek a life of survival in the forests. This decision was driven by an intense inheritance dispute with his six brothers, which ultimately led him to embrace the untamed wilderness as his new home.

The three castes of the kingdom, namely the Raskoti, the Kalyal, and the Sobamsi, showed their support for Tele Shahi and accompanied him into the forest. However, Tele's brothers continued to harass him and make his life challenging in the wilderness. Consequently, Tele and his supporters began a nomadic lifestyle, constantly migrating from one place to another. Tele Shahi also imparted the belief that immediate migration after a tribe member's death was necessary, as death was perceived to bring bad luck. These teachings by Mukhiya Tele Shahi initiated the enduring tradition of the Raute, which involves migrating after the passing of a tribe member and laid the foundation for the Rautes' tradition of post-death migration, a custom that endures to this day.

The three castes within the Raute community, namely the Raskoti, the Kalyal, and the Sobamsi, have their origins from different places. According to the Mukhiya, the Kalyal are said to have originated from the Baas River in Baidyanath, located in the Achham district. The Sobamsi, on the other hand, are believed to have originated from the Kalikot district. Lastly, the Raskoti trace their origins to Raskot, situated on the border of the Achham and Doti districts, which is the last surname within the Raute community. These castes within the Raute community have distinct origins and contribute to the diversity and richness of the Raute culture and heritage.



Fig 2: Mukhiya or leader of Raute tribe

Mukhiya - Guardians of Tradition

According to the information provided by the Mukhiya, the Raute community has three Mukhiyas who oversee their respective caste members. The current supreme Mukhiya is Surya Narayan Shahi, who is also the Mukhiya of the Raskoti. Additionally, Bir Bahadur Shahi and Dil Bahadur Shahi serve as the Mukhiyas of the Kalyal and Sobansi castes, respectively. The selection of a Mukhiya within the Raute community is based on certain criteria. They are chosen based on their cleanliness, gentleness, understanding of the outer language, and their ability to maintain good relations with all members of the Raute community.

The previous Mukhiya was Mahim Bahadur Shahi and before him Man Bahadur Shahi. In the time of Mahim and Man Bahadur Shahi only one mukhiya was in their community, while in the time of Surya Narayan (son in law of Mahim Bahadur Shahi) additional two mukhiyas from other caste were established, representing the Raute community and maintaining their cultural traditions and practices.

Population and Language

The Raute tribe currently has a population of 135 people, consisting of 64 males and 71 females. They are organized into 42 families, with each family living in their own personal house. Additionally, separate houses are made for single women within the Raute community. It should be highlighted that the Raute population has experienced fluctuations in the past. At one point, there were around 265 Raute living in Babiya Chaur of Surkhet. However, the population decreased suddenly and dropped below 150. Currently, the population of the Rautes' has remained relatively stable over the years.

In terms of language, the Raute speak their own Raute tongue, which they developed themselves and use to communicate with fellow tribe members. They also speak Nepali, which they have learned through interactions in the market while buying and selling goods.

The entire tribe is quite balanced in the age-based demographic which is demonstrated in the table.

As of November 10th 2024

Age	0 - 5	6 - 12	13 - 18	19 - 24	25 - 40	41 - 60	60+	Total
Population	10	38	17	11	21	24	14	135

Fig 3: As the Raute community does not keep official records of their ages, the ages mentioned are based on information by Raute themselves



Fig 4: Raute children joyfully living their heritage everyday

The Rautes' Way of Life

The Raute tribe follows a unique dietary pattern that combines traditional food choices with occasional access to market-sourced items. Rice and dhedo, a traditional Nepali thick porridge, form the foundation of their meals, with rice constituting about 75% of their diet and dhedo making up approximately 20%. On occasion, if provided with flour by villagers, the Raute also enjoy roti, a type of flatbread, which accounts for around 5% of their food consumption. Besides grains, the Raute incorporate a variety of vegetables into their diet, selecting them based on climate and local availability. This includes mushrooms, radishes, cauliflower, tori, garden beet (toriko saag), spinach, ash gourd, pumpkin, and yam. However, meat plays a significant role in their diet, with the Raute consuming meat at least 20 days a month.

They source their meat from chickens, goats, sheep, monkeys, gray langurs, and fish. To meet their dietary needs, the Raute have specific purchasing practices. They are obligated to buy salt, uncooked rice, and alcohol using their government allowance and the income generated from selling their handicrafts. They engage in selling their handicrafts in nearby markets where they also purchase rice paddy. They process the rice paddy by beating it, subsequently enjoying the beaten rice for approximately a month. Additionally, they procure honey to feed infants when they are away from their mothers. In recent times, the Raute have also incorporated curd and factory-made bread known as Pauroti into their diet.



Fig 5: Unleashing the tastehackers for future flavours

The Art of Raute Clothing



Fig 6: The distinctive clothing of Raute Woman and Man

The Raute tribe has a distinct approach to clothing, adhering to a minimalistic style by wearing only what is necessary. The attire of Raute males consists of a simple white gown crafted from fabric extracted from the Chheula tree. This fabric serves a dual purpose, as it is also utilized to create caps for added warmth during the winter season. Additionally, the same fabric is ingeniously used as undergarments, where individuals wrap it around their private parts and secure it with a knot. To distinguish themselves within the community, the tribe's chief (Mukhiya), Thalu, and Nayak, who hold positions of hierarchy, wear respective turbans. This distinction helps establish their roles and responsibilities within the tribe. Another characteristic garment worn by every Raute male, regardless of age, is the "Dhaka topi," a traditional Nepali cap.

Footwear choices among the Raute community vary, with the majority opting for slippers or shoes. However, it is worth noting that some Raute prefer to embrace a more primal connection with their surroundings by walking barefoot. The Rautes' clothing choices reflect their values of simplicity and practicality, focusing on utilizing local resources to meet their needs. It is through their minimalistic attire that the Raute tribe upholds their cultural traditions and sustains their unique identity. In addition to their gowns, Raute women complement their attire with blouses and lungis, which they skillfully create using the same fabric. While Raute boys opt for plain gowns, females take pride in adorning their gowns with decorative elements.

Interestingly, according to some girls within the community, the Raute boys are often perceived as lazy and lacking the necessary skill to decorate their garments. Jewelry holds a significant place in the adornment of Raute women. Alongside earrings, they wear "chura" or bangles, which are skillfully crafted by the Kaamis, a caste in Nepal renowned for their blacksmithing skills. Some women also opt for rings made of coins, which they acquire from goldsmiths for approximately Rs. 100. Regardless of their marital status, Raute women have a strong inclination for adorning themselves with jewelry as a form of personal expression. Married women often wear a glass beads necklace called "pote," which serves as a symbol of their marital status. However, in the unfortunate event of their husband's passing, single women from the Raute community abstain from wearing any ornaments for a year, including the steel bangles and glass beads necklace (pote). The attire and jewelry choices of Raute women reflect their cultural heritage and individual style. By skillfully crafting their clothing and adorning themselves with jewelry, they celebrate their identity within the community, embracing the artistry and traditions that have been passed down through generations.

The Art of Shelter Making

The Raute males take on the responsibility of building a tent house for themselves and their families, prioritizing their shelter before assisting single women in constructing their own tents. Typically, 2-3 people are involved in the house-building process, which generally takes about an hour to complete. The initial step involves digging the ground to create a clean base for the house, followed by planting branches that serve as support for the tent structure.

Traditionally, Raute homes consist of tents made from cloth. However, with the generous donations of tarpoulin by organizations like SOSEC and other individuals and agencies, some Raute homes now have proper tarpoulin that provide protection from sunlight, rain, and wind. These improved tents have enhanced the living conditions of the community.

In addition to building new homes after migration, the Raute also relocate to a new house if their current dwelling becomes too dirty for their liking. This demonstrates their preference for cleanliness and hygiene within their living spaces.



Fig 7: Raute woman engaging in house making process



Fig 8: Male Raute engaging in house making process

Raute Migration

The Raute community's decision to migrate is influenced by a combination of practical, cultural, and environmental factors. When the Raute community embarks on their migrations, they typically choose destinations that are reachable within a day's travel. This approach allows for practicality and convenience during the journey. By focusing on locations that can be reached within a day, the Raute can effectively manage the logistics of transporting their belongings and ensure the well-being of the entire community throughout the migration process.

Cultural Significance of Clan Member's Death

The Raute attach great significance to the death of a clan member. They believe it brings negative energy and disrupts the harmony within their community. To counteract this perceived bad omen, they choose to migrate to a new location, leaving behind the lingering effects of death and embracing a fresh start. The Raute also take into account the time of year and the natural surroundings when deciding to migrate. They have adapted their migration patterns to match with the changing seasons and the availability of resources. During winter, they tend to migrate to warmer places where they can find shelter and sustenance. In summer, they move to hilly areas where they can benefit from cooler temperatures and a different range of resources.

Resource Scarcity and Adaptability

As a nomadic community, the Raute depend on the availability of natural resources for their survival. They have a deep understanding of the availability of food sources, the movement of wildlife, and the changing landscapes. This knowledge guides their decision-making process and helps them identify suitable locations for migration. When their current location experiences a lack of resources such as wood and water, they display remarkable adaptability by migrating to areas where these resources are more abundant. It showcases their ability to navigate and thrive in different environments.

Hunting and Food Sources

Raute traditionally rely on hunting as a means of sustenance. However, when prey becomes scarce in their current location, they migrate to areas where there is a higher abundance. This movement allows them to ensure a stable food supply and maintain their traditional hunting practices.

Market Dynamics and Artistic Expression

The Raute are skilled artisans known for their exquisite wooden utensils and finely crafted baskets. However, their migratory patterns are not solely driven by the need for resources. They also consider the market demand for their handicrafts. If their products are not selling well or face limited competition in their current location, they venture to new areas where their skills and creations will be highly sought after. This demonstrates their entrepreneurial spirit and artistic expression.

Seeking Acceptance and Tolerance

Mistreatment and discrimination have unfortunately been part of the Rautes' history. When faced with hostility or mistreatment from local communities, they choose to migrate in pursuit of acceptance and a more welcoming environment. Their migrations become a search for places where they can freely practice their traditional way of life without fear of prejudice, fostering a sense of belonging and cultural preservation.

Conscious Migration: The Raute value their well-being and consider health factors in their migration decisions. They stay informed about prevalent communicable diseases, adapting their movements to avoid areas with a high risk of disease transmission ensuring safeguarding their community's health.

The Raute community has been observed to stay in one place for varying durations. The longest recorded time that they have stayed in a single location, based on observations from 2018 to 2022, is 45 days. On the other hand, the shortest recorded time that the Raute have stayed in one place within the same observation period is 7 days. This shorter duration may be influenced by factors such as the availability of resources, the success of their handicraft sales, or the need to move to a new location for various reasons. These observations provide insights into the flexibility and adaptability of the Raute community's migration patterns.

Migration Process

The Raute clan chief, along with the youth of the clan, takes the lead in searching for suitable migration locations after conducting informal meetings. One important aspect they take into account is the ability of the new settlement area to accommodate all of the Rautes' houses. They look for spacious areas where they can set up their tents and create a temporary settlement. This ensures that the entire community can be comfortably accommodated during their stay. Moreover, proximity to rivers, forests, and roads holds significance for the Raute community. Being near a river provides them with a reliable water source for drinking, cooking, and other daily activities. The availability of forests is crucial as it allows them to gather wood for their handicrafts, which are not only important for their livelihood but also hold cultural and traditional significance. Additionally, being close to roads offers convenient access to nearby markets where they can sell their wood-based handicrafts and generate income. During the migration process, the Raute carefully plan and prepare for the move. They prioritize shifting heavy loads ahead of time to ensure a smooth transition. This may include dismantling and transporting larger items, such as tent poles and other equipment, in advance. Lighter belongings and personal items are then carried by the community members themselves. Upon reaching the new settlement area, the Raute mark the locations where they plan to build their shelter in the future. They do so by placing branches with stones as markers, indicating the spots where they intend to set up their temporary shelters. This helps them establish a sense of familiarity and ensure proper management of their new surroundings.



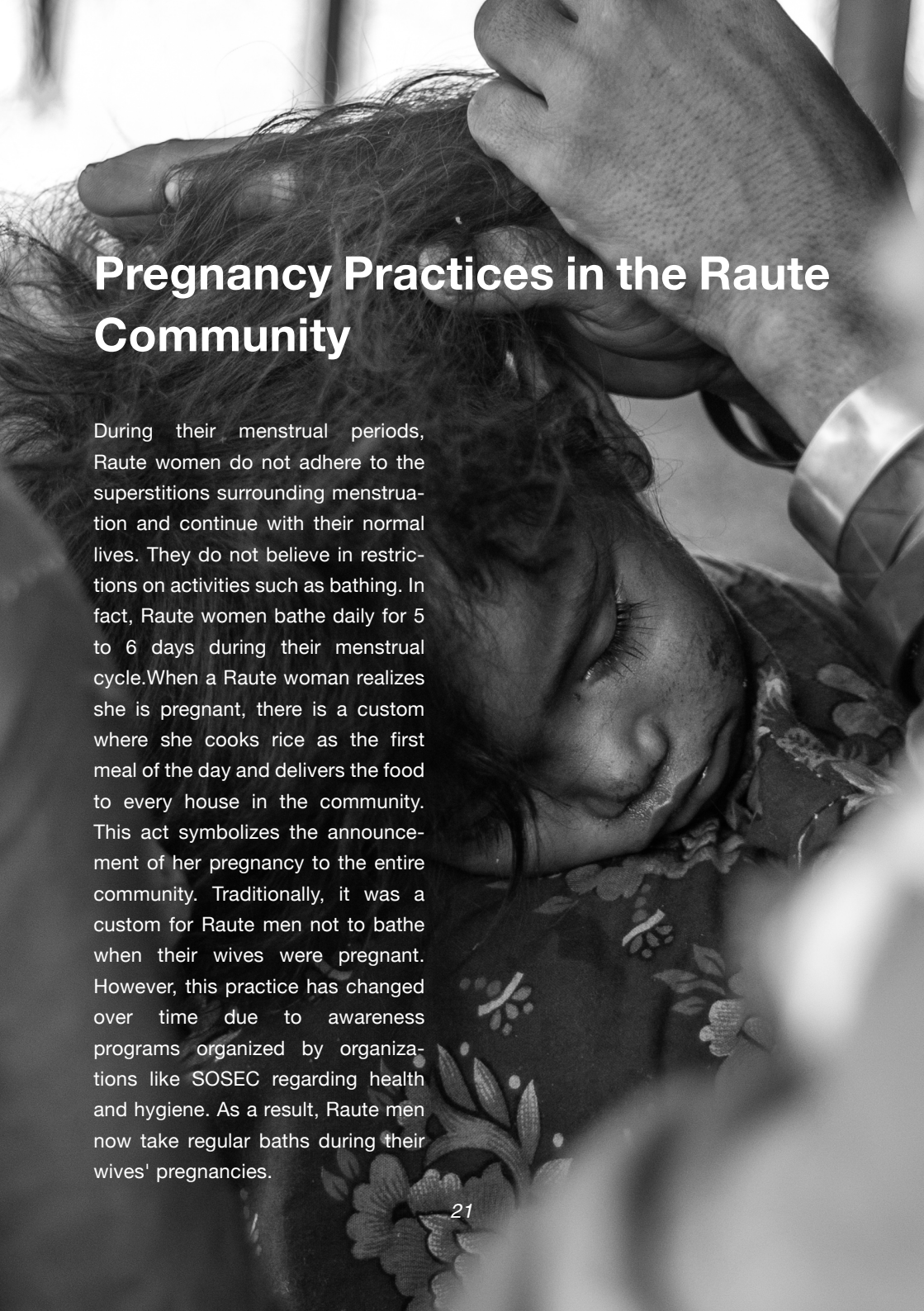
Fig 9: A cute little migrator



A Living Portrait



of Cultural Heritage



Pregnancy Practices in the Raute Community

During their menstrual periods, Raute women do not adhere to the superstitions surrounding menstruation and continue with their normal lives. They do not believe in restrictions on activities such as bathing. In fact, Raute women bathe daily for 5 to 6 days during their menstrual cycle. When a Raute woman realizes she is pregnant, there is a custom where she cooks rice as the first meal of the day and delivers the food to every house in the community. This act symbolizes the announcement of her pregnancy to the entire community. Traditionally, it was a custom for Raute men not to bathe when their wives were pregnant. However, this practice has changed over time due to awareness programs organized by organizations like SOSEC regarding health and hygiene. As a result, Raute men now take regular baths during their wives' pregnancies.

Rooted in the Freedom

In the Raute community, the life of a child is characterized by a unique set of customs and beliefs that promote their independence and freedom. From the early days of their birth, Raute children are immersed in a nurturing environment that promotes exploration and a lot of forgiveness. On the third day after a baby is born, a special tradition takes place. The infant is introduced to all the homes within the Raute community, symbolizing their arrival and welcoming them to the new world. This act serves to strengthen the bond between the child and the community from the very beginning.

Once a Raute baby reaches 15 days old, the parents begin a practice of leaving the child alone throughout the day. During this time, the child is not accompanied or monitored closely by their parents. Instead, they are encouraged to play and interact with other children in the community. This approach promotes independence and allows the children to develop their social skills through unstructured play.

In Raute culture, there is a belief that a child's fecal matter should not be left outside until they are 3 years old. Even if a child defecates outside, the parents take the waste and bury it within their house. This practice is rooted in the belief that the child's waste carries spiritual significance and should be handled respectfully. Raute parents demonstrate remarkable patience and understanding towards their children's mistakes. Regardless of the nature of the error, children are forgiven and not subjected to physical punishment or scolding. The community recognizes that children are still learning and growing, and their actions are seen as part of their development rather than intentional wrongdoing.

The life of a Raute child is characterized by the freedom to explore, play, and learn from their experiences. The nurturing environment provided by their community allows them to develop independence, social skills, and a sense of responsibility over time.



Fig 10: Raute's future flourishing in the joy of children's laughter



Fig 11: Carrying the weight of their heritage, one stick at a time



Fig 12: Little Raute boy's flaunting his haircut ceremony delight

In the Raute community, there are special rituals associated with children's haircuts and the transition into adulthood.

1. Raute children do not cut their hair until they reach the age of 8. It is a significant milestone in their lives when they are considered old enough to have their first haircut. This ritual is performed by the child's mother, symbolizing their growing maturity. However, if the mother has passed away, the responsibility falls upon the child's maternal relatives to carry out this important ceremony. The act of cutting the child's hair marks their readiness to join the hunting expeditions conducted by the Raute community. It is a moment when they are considered capable of taking on more responsibilities and participating in the activities of the clan.

2. When Raute boys reach the age of 15, they undergo a significant rite known as the Bartamanda ritual. This ceremony signifies the transition from boyhood to manhood and is a momentous occasion for the entire community. To celebrate their son's coming of adulthood, the boy's parents organize a special banquet for the entire Raute community. This celebratory feast includes traditional dishes such as goat meat, roti (unleavened bread), and, of course, alcohol. It is a time for joyous celebration and recognition of the young man's growth and maturity.

Fig 13: Raute Tradition through the eyes of a little boy





Fig 14: Raute: A perfect example of communal harmony - dialogue over discord.

One remarkable aspect of the Raute community is their adherence to non-violence and the maintenance of harmony within their clan. Even in situations where disagreements arise or tempers flare, the Raute people never resort to physical violence. Instead, they handle disputes through peaceful and verbal means. This commitment to non-violence extends to their domestic lives as well, with no incidents of domestic violence reported among Raute males. They also demonstrate respect for their wives and obey them.

Furthermore, the Raute community showcases harmony among the different castes living together. They fulfill their individual roles within the community, fostering a sense of unity and cooperation.

A Peek into the Festivals in the Raute Community

The Raute community revels in the joy of five momentous festivals that grace their calendar year. These vibrant celebrations are steeped in Raute traditions, which are joyfully observed and cherished. In bygone days, the Raute would allocate a single goat or sheep, along with a chicken, to each household as part of their festivities. However, in recent times, a shift has occurred, resulting in the sacrifice of one goat per household and one chicken per male member during Saune Sankranti, Maghi Parba, and Mangsir Purnima. During these auspicious occasions, a Priest is chosen through an ancestral process, embodying the wisdom and connection to the divine that runs deep within the Raute community. This revered figure assumes the crucial role of guiding and assisting the congregation in their worship, ensuring that the sacred rituals are carried out with utmost reverence and devotion.



Fig 15: The warmth of a hold, a living reminder of the beautiful balance between Raute and nature.

The five major festivals that illuminate the Raute community's calendar and infuse their lives with boundless joy and spiritual significance are as follows:

Saune Sankranti

Saune Sankranti is celebrated on the 1st of Shrawan, which marks the beginning of the month of Shrawan in the Nepali calendar which is a significant festival celebrated throughout Nepal. Likewise, Saune Sankranti is not just a celebration for the Raute; it is a time to come together as a community, reaffirm their beliefs, and pray for the safety and well-being of their settlement. The Raute, celebrate Saune Sankranti with great enthusiasm and grandeur. This festival holds immense significance for them as they gather on the 1st of Shrawan, praying that their current settlement remains unaffected by the floods and landslides that accompany the heavy rainfall in this season. To mark the occasion, each household in the Raute community prepares one or two goats and a chicken for each male Raute, depending on their capacity. The meat is then preserved by drying it into Sukuti, a form of dried meat. This Sukuti becomes their primary source of sustenance for the months to come. During the celebration, the Raute come together at the house of a respected member of the community. They indulge in a lavish feast of meat and alcohol, which is contributed by all the households.



Fig 16: Raute male playing madal

Mangshir Purnima

Mangshir Purnima holds a special place in the hearts of the Raute community as it is dedicated to worshipping their Kuldevta, the ancestral deity. Celebrated on the auspicious full moon of Mangsir, this festival is a time for the Raute to express their gratitude and seek blessings from the Gods for their well-being and protection against famines and natural disasters. The Raute community worships the forest and Dod-Masta, the name of their deity. If a Raute family is unable to manage the required goat or funds by the full moon, they continue to celebrate the festival until the end of Mangsir, once all the necessary resources are allocated. This flexibility allows the entire community to participate and ensures that everyone can partake in the celebrations and seek the blessings of their Kuldevta.

On the day after the worship, every married Raute woman takes part in a special ritual. They offer prayers to ward off any harm to the forest itself, recognizing the importance of the forest in their lives and the sustenance it provides. They also pray for the safety and success of the Raute hunters who rely on the forest for their livelihood. Mangshir Purnima strengthens their connection with their ancestral deity, the forest, and each other. Through their worship and offerings, they seek divine protection, blessings, and good health. The festival also serves as a reminder of the interdependence between the Raute and their natural surroundings.

Maaghi Parva

Maaghi Parva is a significant festival for the Raute community as it signifies the transition from winter to spring. It is a time of celebration, togetherness, and gratitude for the abundance of food and the arrival of a new season. The festival displays the Rautes' cultural traditions, their connection to nature, and their communal spirit. The Raute community celebrates Maaghi Parva on the first day of Maagh, according to Hindu traditions. This festival is a way for them to mark the end of winter and celebrate the arrival of spring. As part of the celebrations, the Raute consume yams (tarul), sweet potatoes, and dioscorea (tyagna). Similar to other festivals, the Raute allocate goats and chickens to all households and feast on them on the day of the festival. They invite each other to their houses and treat their guests with meat and alcohol, along with the yams, sweet potatoes, dioscorea, and selroti (a special type of bread made from rice flour) that they have prepared. The Raute come together, sing songs in their native language, and enjoy dancing. After the feast, the meat is dried so that it can be consumed for months to come. This method of preserving the meat allows the Raute to have a source of sustenance even after the festival is over.

Dashain

The Raute community observes Dashain in a distinctive manner, deviating from the conventional practices of Nepalese Hindus. Unlike the customary Ghatasthapana ritual of cultivating Jamara, they postpone this until each household has procured at least one goat and every Raute possesses a chicken for sacrifice. While Jamara is still kept as an offering in each home, Raute refrain from adorning themselves with it.

In preparation for Dashain, Raute allocate 1 to 3 goats per household and assign a chicken per individual for sacrifice, which takes place on the eve of Bijaya Dashami. Each Raute personally conducts the sacrifice of the chicken allocated to them as an offering to the deities. On Bijaya Dashami, Raute apply Tika to their children, as well as to the shamans and priests of Masta Devta, their ancestral gods. Starting from the seventh day, known as Saptami, a communal campfire is ignited daily in a designated location, typically in front of a respected tribe member's residence. All Raute actively participate in these campfires, from which they carry flames back to their homes. The day following Bijaya Dashami sees Raute of similar castes congregating in a chosen household, where they engage in fun filled activities such as comparing the weight of their goats, reveling in alcoholic beverages, and indulging in barbecued delicacies made from the fat of the animals.

During Dashain, the Raute community sacrifices a larger number of animals compared to their other festivals, with each family preparing up to 3 goats. The sacrifices made during this celebration inevitably leave behind traces of blood, fur, and bones. Consequently, after the conclusion of Dashain, Raute begin exploring new territories for migration.

New Year Celebration

As the new year dawns, the Raute commence with an intense act of house decoration. With a mixture of dung and mud, they lovingly daub their homes, creating a sacred space that resonates with the earth's embrace. This simple gesture not only strengthens their connection to the land but also symbolizes unity among neighbors. But the spirit of togetherness doesn't end there. The Raute women take the lead, carving pathways that link the entire community. Through digging and daubing with dung, they connect each house to the shaman's home, towards the shared destiny.

Step by step, they manifest the physical and spiritual unity that binds their village. After the daubing process, a significant ritual takes place among the Raute community. The women gather and make their way to the nearby river for a communal bathing ceremony. This act of purification holds deep meaning for the entire community, but it carries special significance for the Raute single women who deeply believe in their own existence as ones burdened with sorrow. During this ceremony, they mourn for their departed husbands and offer prayers for the protection and guidance of their children, who now face life without the comforting presence of a father.

The single women gently rub each other with stinging nettles. While this ritual unfolds, the men of the community, aged five and above, start on a barefoot hunting expedition only while returning to the village when the sun has set. Through their communal bathing, mourning, and hunting, they honor their connection to nature, and the well-being of their children. As this sacred ritual unfolds, the men of the Raute community, aged five and above, commence on a remarkable barefoot hunting expedition. They only return to their village when the sun gracefully sets.

On the night of the new year, a unique custom begins within the Raute community. During this time, all children aged three years and younger are kept at the shamans' house, accompanied by their mothers, for three consecutive nights. . During these three nights, the shaman offers prayers and performs rituals to ensure the protection and guidance of the children. This ritual holds great significance as the shaman worships and nourishes the children, aiming to protect them from any future harm. The shaman's role in this custom reflects their central position within the community as a mediator between the spiritual and physical realms.



Fig 17: Raute community rejoicing in festive unity



Fig 18 : Raute women drying meat during festival for their future needs

Marriage in the Raute Community

In the Raute community, a girl is considered fit for marriage after her second menstrual cycle. Prior to the marriage, the bride and groom spend time together, getting to know each other, sometimes also engage in sexual activities with each other, excluding their own mothers and siblings, without formal marriage. Within the Raute community, it is known that individuals may engage in sexual activities with each other, excluding their own mother and siblings, without formal marriage.

The process of marriage within the Raute community begins when the groom, accompanied by his family, visits the bride's family. As part of this tradition, they bring alcohol and formally request the hand of the girl for marriage. It is worth noting that Raute males typically seek younger girls' hands in marriage, as they hold a belief that older girls or women may have a shorter lifespan, leaving them alone. In fact, adult males between the ages of 30-35 sometimes wait for a newborn to grow up before marrying her when she reaches a suitable age. Additionally, Raute males do not typically seek to marry single women, as they hold a belief that single women are "husband-biters." Single women themselves also choose not to remarry, as they believe doing so would not bring peace to their late husband's soul.



The marriage ceremony takes place overnight in the presence of a Raute priest. During this ceremony, the couple celebrates their union by installing tree pillars known as "lingo" and "khamo" and tying red and white ribbons. The marriage is considered complete when the bride wears a black glass beaded necklace called "pote" from the groom's hands. Additionally, the relatives of both the bride and groom put yellow tika on their foreheads as a symbol of blessings and well-wishes.



Fig 19: Warmth of Raute family life Inside their hut.

After marriage in the Raute community, if a couple needs to separate from the community, they move together as a family unit. It is important to note that Raute do not practice polygamy, as they consider seeking another woman while being married as a sin. In the event of the death of a wife, Raute males typically seek to marry their sister-in-law (sali) as a replacement. In the Raute community, the responsibility of separating the newly married couple within seven days of the marriage falls upon the father or elder brother of the groom. This separation involves preparing separate shelter, clothes, houses, food, utensils, and mattresses for the couple. The purpose of this separation is to establish separate living arrangements for the couple, allowing them to have their own space within the community.

Honoring the Departed

In the Raute community, when a member passes away, they have distinct customs for burial and mourning. When a Raute male passes away, his body is respectfully wrapped in a hunting net and buried at a location slightly distant from the community. However, if a Raute child aged 8 or younger dies, they are buried relatively closer to the community. When it comes to Raute women, the funeral arrangements depend on their marital status. If a married Raute woman passes away, it is a collective affair involving the entire Raute clan. The entire community comes together to bury her, honoring her life and offering support to her grieving family. In the event of an unmarried Raute woman's death, the funeral is attended by her close relatives and friends. The community shows their support and respects the deceased by participating in a more intimate gathering. After the death of an adult Raute, the community typically migrates on the same day or shortly after the funeral. However, when a Raute child passes away, the community may delay their migration for a period of 10 to 20 days. Before migrating, the Raute symbolically cover the house of the deceased with green branches. The Raute observe a mourning period of 13 days. During this time, they refrain from cooking meat but still consume roasted meat. On the 13th day, known as Pipal Pani, the Raute, who have already migrated, engage in various rituals. These rituals include washing their clothes, cleaning their new houses, and performing ceremonies that involve sacrificing chickens and offering their blood to the Gods.

These funeral customs and mourning practices hold deep cultural significance within the Raute community, reflecting their beliefs and traditions surrounding death and honoring the departed.

The Raute also partake in a significant ceremony called Shraddha, which serves as a way to honor and remember their ancestors. During this ceremony, the Raute engage in various customs and rituals. The Raute decorate their houses and apply dung on the walls as part of the Shraddha ceremony. They reorganize their house, creating a temple-like structure with three enclosed sides and a wide opening. Inside this structure, they place and worship mud statues representing their ancestors. The Raute family conducting the Shraddha ceremony gathers together to individually remember and pray for each ancestor. They invite their ancestors to the venue and offer a range of items as symbolic gifts. These offerings include grains, cereals, fruits, selroti (a traditional bread), meat, alcohol, and utensils. The purpose is to ensure that their ancestors are well-fed and satisfied in the afterlife.

The Raute also pray to their ancestors, seeking their guidance and protection, particularly during challenging times. They believe that their ancestors will watch over and support them when faced with difficulties. The offerings made during shraddha are made based on the nature of their ancestors' deaths. For instance, hunting nets are offered to ancestors who died while hunting, and koshi (traditional utensils) are given to ancestors who passed away while cutting trees. These offerings symbolize the continuation of ancestral skills and traditions and are believed to ensure the well-being of the Raute children under their ancestors' care.

The Shraddha ceremony is performed every two years and is typically carried out by the eldest son of the Raute family. After the completion of the ceremony, one member of the Raute community takes a bath and distributes blessed offerings, such as alcohol, roti, fruits, grains, and cereals, to those in attendance. The Shraddha ceremony holds deep spiritual significance for the Raute community, allowing them to maintain a strong connection with their ancestors and honor their legacy. It is a time for remembrance, gratitude, and seeking blessings and guidance from their ancestral spirits.



Fig 20: Raute's Handcrafted treasures from Nepal's forests

Raute Handicrafts

The Raute are resourceful and exhibit their mastery of woodworking by harnessing the wood of Redcedar (Tuni) and Nepalese Alder (Utis) trees to create a diverse range of handicrafts. Their skillful utilization of natural resources results in not only practical items but also demonstrates their cultural heritage and exceptional craftsmanship. With expertise passed down through generations, the Raute skillfully chop down trees from the nearby forest, selecting the finest wood for their creations. These exquisite handicrafts are then sold in nearby markets, attracting admirers with their beauty and functionality.

One of their peculiarities is the crafting of koshi, bowl-like round utensils primarily utilized for dining purposes. Diligently carved and shaped, these versatile pieces serve as essential food containers. The Raute also offer a variation of koshi that includes a covering lid, enhancing their practicality and convenience.

Another remarkable creation by the Raute is the construction of large wooden boxes known as madhus. These boxes, equipped with doors and locking mechanisms, serve as ideal cupboards or storage units. The designs and sturdy construction of these wooden boxes are proof of the Rautes' exceptional craftsmanship.

In addition to larger items, the Raute also prepare simple yet functional wooden seats called pirkas. These seats, resembling planks with four sturdy bases, offer a comfortable place to sit. Available in both round and flat shapes, pirkas provide various seating preferences and needs.

Further exhibiting their woodworking expertise, the Raute craft small wooden kitchen utensils. Their collection includes flat and round spatulas known as dadu punyau, which prove to be indispensable tools for cooking and food preparation. These utensils reflect the Rautes' keen attention to detail and their ability to transform wood into practical and aesthetically pleasing objects. The Rautes' handicrafts not only serve as functional items but also exemplify their cultural heritage and artistic expertise. Their dedication to creating beautiful and high-quality wooden crafts to their rich traditions and skills passed down through generations.

Fig 21: Raute selling their craft in one of the historic cities of Nepal, Bhaktapur



The Raute Project

The Raute Project, in collaboration with AEIN Luxembourg, has been actively working since July 2018 to address the basic needs of the Raute community. Being a nomadic tribe in Nepal, the community faced significant challenges in areas like health, sanitation, education, and subsistence. Since the initiation of the project, there have been noticeable and positive improvements in the overall well-being of the Raute community. Through a combination of strategic interventions, effective coordination, and partnerships with municipalities, line agencies, and stakeholders, meaningful change has been achieved. One noteworthy area of progress has been in the field of sanitation and hygiene. The project has focused on providing access to proper sanitation facilities and promoting hygienic practices within the community. As a result, the health and hygiene conditions of the Raute people have significantly improved. Additionally, the project has successfully facilitated educational opportunities for Raute children. By encouraging the community to engage in selling items rather than bartering, children have had the chance to participate in personal and transactional interactions, thereby enhancing their overall learning experiences.

The Raute Project has expanded its impact through various initiatives. One such effort is the implementation of The Raute Exhibition and demonstrations, where the community showcases and sells their handicrafts. These exhibitions have taken place in Kathmandu and Bhaktapur valley, providing opportunities for people to interact with the Raute community and learn about their culture, products, lifestyles, and languages.

Furthermore, the Raute Project has selected five Raute as Parasocial Workers (PSWs), who actively contribute to social welfare in their locality. These PSWs not only support their own community but also contribute to society as a whole. With the intervention of the project and exposure to the outside world, the Raute have started making gradual progress in areas of sanitation and health. They have begun brooming their houses, washing clothes, bathing regularly, and maintaining personal grooming habits such as cutting nails, hair, and beards.

Moreover, the Raute have shown an eagerness to engage in informal education practices, demonstrating their willingness to learn and grow. They have also embraced allopathic medicine and started visiting hospitals for health checkups, a positive change compared to their previous reluctance to use medicines or seek medical help. Through these additional interventions, the Raute Project has not only tried to empower the community economically but also facilitated their progress in areas such as sanitation, health, education, and social integration.

The Raute Project has been accompanying the Raute community on their journey for the past five years, starting from Guras Municipality, Dailekh in July 2018, and continuing to the present day, with the Raute currently residing in Navisthan of Bharabi Rural Municipality. Throughout this time period, the project has traveled alongside the Raute community to 76 different places across four districts.

The project's presence and support have been influential in facilitating the community's movement and ensuring their well-being. By traveling together, the project has been able to provide continuous support and address the needs of the Raute community as they transition from one location to another ensuring their access to essential resources, and promoting their overall welfare.



Fig 22: Glimpse of SOSEC Nepal's efforts with Raute Community

Key Steps Toward Progress

1. Implications of Excessive Drinking in the Raute Community

In the Raute community, it is observed that at least one person is often intoxicated at any given time of the day. Some individuals may be enjoying themselves while others may be completely incapacitated due to excessive alcohol consumption. This pattern of alcohol consumption is prevalent throughout the day. Even the hunting group, which goes out to hunt, indulges in alcohol, leading them to disregard their own safety and well-being during the hunt. Among the Raute community, it has also been observed that individuals who are not even part of the hunting group also often engage in the consumption of alcohol. It is important to highlight that some Raute start drinking early in the morning and jokingly claim to have a hangover that can only be cured by consuming more alcohol. This pattern of behavior raises concerns about the excessive and potentially harmful use of alcohol within the community. The Raute community has developed a habit of extensively consuming alcohol before and during various activities, irrespective of whether they are auspicious or sorrowful, physically demanding or not. Unfortunately, this intensive alcohol abuse has had significant impact, including a decline in the fertility rate within the Raute community, resulting in a decrease in their overall birth rate. The issue of excessive alcohol abuse within the Raute community has not only affected the health and well-being of its members but also has long-term implications for their population and cultural heritage. Efforts are being made to raise awareness about the risks associated with excessive drinking, including the negative impact on physical and mental health, relationships, and overall well-being.

2. Fading Forests

According to Mr. Suryanarayan Shahi, a leader of the Raute community, there has been a significant change in the forested paths they used to travel through decades ago. At that time, the forests were dense, and both famine and forest fires were uncommon. The Raute community did not need to migrate close to villages for food because they could readily find a variety of wild animals and edible plants in the forest. However, recent aggressive deforestation efforts have contributed to an increase in the frequency of forest fires, posing a pressing concern for the Raute community. The Raute community, often referred to as the "Kings of the forests," is witnessing the gradual thinning of their kingdom due to deforestation. This loss of forest cover not only affects their traditional way of life but also threatens their access to essential resources for sustenance and cultural practices.

3. Population Crisis and Marriage Patterns in Raute Community

The Raute community has been experiencing a significant decrease in population in recent years. This decline is primarily attributed to the scarcity of suitable couples for marriage within the community. The Raute community consists of three distinct castes: Raskoti, Kalyal, and Sobansi. Marriage within the community is only permitted between individuals of the same caste. This requirement, along with a higher number of children and elderly members, has resulted in a shortage of eligible young adults for marriage. Adding to the impending population crisis is the reluctance of Raute men to marry older women. Despite the presence of numerous single, young women capable of bearing children, they are not viewed as potential partners by male Raute. Furthermore, the fertility rate of the Raute community has been adversely affected by excessive alcohol consumption, exacerbating the existing decline in population.

The high mortality rate in the Raute community is also a contributing factor to the population decline. This is due to the lack of acceptance and regular practice of health and hygiene measures. The nomadic lifestyle of the Raute, which often leads to unstable living conditions and limited access to healthcare, also contributes to the high mortality rate.

4. The Toll of Household Duties on Raute Women

The Raute women shoulder the responsibility of managing all household activities, which requires them to work for more than 8 hours every day. This intense workload has significant consequences for their well-being. As a result of their demanding work hours, Raute women often experience body aches and tiredness. Their physical fragility leaves them vulnerable to the strain imposed by these extended periods of labor, which can result in long-term health challenges and a reduced quality of life.

One of the concerning outcomes of the intense workload faced by Raute women is the high rate of maternal mortality. Insufficient care and nourishment during pregnancy, combined with the lack of attention to their health, contribute to this alarming issue. It is distressing that many young women lose their lives during the crucial period of pregnancy. Another worrying concern is that the Raute women themselves pay little attention to their health. This lack of focus on self-care and well-being further exacerbates their vulnerability to health issues.

Fig 23: Wooden craft called Dunga (boat) made by Raute.





Fig 24: Little Raute adventurers in the treetops



Fig 25: Shelter of the Nomads

The Raute Community's Journey of Adaptation

Within the Raute community, there exists a set of firm taboos that shape their distinctive culture. Three activities are considered absolutely forbidden: permanent settlement, education, and agriculture. For generations, the use of money was also held in the same regard, but the community's perspective on this taboo has undergone a transformation. While the Raute continue to respect their cultural traditions regarding settlement and education, they have discarded the belief that the use of money is inherently sinful.

This evolution in attitude towards money can be attributed to the changing circumstances faced by the Raute. With forests becoming thinner and food sources becoming scarce, the community has found itself increasingly dependent on money to fulfill their basic needs. The once-taboo currency has now somehow become a necessity for their survival and well-being. The scarcity of resources, added with the excessive alcohol abuse within the community, has further heightened their reliance on monetary transactions.

In the Raute community, a subtle but noticeable transformation is underway despite their deep-rooted adherence to tradition. A new generation is emerging, diverging from the established norms and showing a keen interest in formal education. Surprisingly, this includes a desire to learn to read and write, activities previously strictly forbidden. These young Raute are challenging long-held beliefs, seeking knowledge and skills to empower themselves in a changing world.

The Raute are on a journey to maintain a fine balance between preserving their cultural heritage and adapting to the modern world. While they hold their traditions close to their hearts, the realities of survival have forced them to reconsider certain taboos. As the world evolves, so do the Raute, exploring new opportunities and pathways that were once unimaginable. The Raute have somehow been able to adapt to the changing reality while also sternly preserving their cultural roots.

