

# POLICY BRIEF

Traditional and local knowledge to disaster risk reduction

January 2024 | No. 09

## The Role of Cultural Beliefs, Myths, and Faith Needs to Be Acknowledged in Strengthening Community Response to Disaster Risk Reduction

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### SUMMARY

Cultural beliefs, myths, and faith are integral components of local knowledge and practices, playing an important role in strengthening community responses to disaster risk reduction through various pathways. Firstly, these aspects influence people's understanding of the risks associated with disasters (e.g., risk perception) and their responses to such events. Gobargada Village in the Koshi region serves as a living example of how cultural beliefs, myths, and faith deeply influence community life. These traditions not only shape the identity of the residents but also act as strong pillars during the times of crisis. They are often intertwined with natural elements, historical events, local landscapes, and ecosystems, reflecting a deep understanding of the environment and its challenges. This policy brief suggests recognizing and incorporating cultural beliefs, myths, and faith into disaster plans, using Gobargada as a case study. It proposes that local governments value and promote these cultural elements into broader resilience strategies.

### Background

Culture is not only a set of meanings and practices consistent across time, but a collection of rituals, beliefs, and fixed traits carried from place to place (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). In Gobargada Village, people view the Koshi River as a revered mother figure, a belief system contributing to the community's identity and worldview. Local communities never blame the river for any misfortunes such as loss of land and houses; rather, they attribute them to human intervention. There are dedicated cultural rituals to the Koshi River, such as *Ganga Dussehra* and *Jitiya Parba*, accompanied by specific songs. Such elements serve as vital assets in disaster resilience (Krüger, 2015).

The Koshi River is revered as '*Koshi Mai*', with people believing that the river provides for their needs. The river is seen as a protector from floods, and this strong belief offers hope and strength during emergencies. Mr. Misra Lal Yadav, 89, shares an anecdote of prayers yielding a successful rescue during a flood.

*"My son fell into the river while crossing it during a flood. Despite hours of searching by the locals, they couldn't locate him. Eventually, we prayed to the Koshi River. Following the prayers, we successfully found my son."*

There are dedicated religious worship for the river. For example, *Akhadi* and *Aathjam puja* are dedicated to the Triyuga River, a small tributary of the Koshi River, as *Thakur Baba*, while *Koshi Mela* is organized for the Koshi River. Villagers sacrifice she-goats in Koshi and he-goats in Triyuga. There is also a tradition of offering sweets to the river before boarding the boat. Such practices are common in all villages, notably among older generations.

According to local people, such rituals help them to come together, make sense of what might happen and give a strong sense of ownership. They also facilitate trauma healing and create an atmosphere of harmony and peace rather than

the initial fear and panic in the communities as soon as disasters events anticipated.

Different songs dedicated to the Koshi River are routinely sung during floods and while crossing the river by boat. A woman in her mid-50s vividly outlines the situation when floods inundate the village:

*"The entire village gets covered by flood up to our knees. We see water everywhere. This time we are panicked, although we have a strong faith that nothing seriously would happen. Water remains 3-4 hours to 1-2 days, depending on the situation. We sing a song calling, Koshi Mai, not to harm in any way, as we always and will remain your servitude".*

Such songs are repositories of knowledge, including memories of past events and coping strategies (e.g., avoiding particular situations). They not only provide psychological support and coping mechanisms during crises but also align with the local ecosystem, promoting sustainable practices (Al-Nammari & Alzaghal, 2015; Krüger, 2015; Kuper, 2003; Southwick et al., 2014). These cultural practices, explored through the lens of the Koshi River rituals, showcase the community's unique approach to disasters.

### Challenges

Rural communities like Gobargada possess a rich set of cultural beliefs and faith that have been integral to their identity and way of life for generations. These beliefs have existed from centuries and have developed their own systems and mechanisms to deal with disasters, playing a crucial role in their resilience against such events. However, the challenges of integrating these cultural aspects into modern disaster management practices are considerable. Local institutions and governments have largely neglected to recognize their significance while developing disaster management programs.

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## Policy Recommendations

Policymakers need to acknowledge and leverage cultural practices for social cohesion, fostering a shared sense of purpose in community preparedness. This could be done by supporting such cultural events and documenting them at the local level. Provincial and federal governments can play an instrumental role by incorporating local knowledge as an integral part of disaster risk reduction strategy.

## References

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## About Us

This policy brief is part of a project titled “*Enhancing ecosystem-based adaptation to disaster risk reduction in the Himalayan river basin: Integrating traditional and local knowledge in disaster management plan in Nepal, India and Bangladesh*” which is funded by Asia Pacific Network for Global Change Research under grant number *CRRP2021-04MY-Paudel*. More information about the project can be found on the [APN](#) and [KIAS](#) websites.

## Citation

Timilsina, R. R. C., Paudel, P. K. (2024). The Role of Cultural Beliefs, Myths, and Faith Needs to Be Acknowledged in Strengthening Community Response to Disaster Risk. Policy Brief No. 09. Center for Conservation Biology, Kathmandu Institute of Applied Sciences, Kathmandu, Nepal.