



ARII Presents

# *Balancing*

Progress & Preservation  
ethnographic theatre sharing

Directed by Sarah Hart

Research by Sapana Lohani, Nara Sritharan, and  
Patton Burchett

May 10th at 7 pm PBK Memorial Hall Lab Theatre  
601 Jamestown Road, Williamsburg

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## Theatre As Research:

*Balancing Progress and Preservation: Examining the Trade-offs Between Economic Development, Cultural Preservation, and Conservation in Nepal's Riparian Indigenous & Marginalized Communities* is an interdisciplinary research project funded by the Applied Research and Innovation Initiative.

The performance aspect of this project has been directed by co-researcher **Sarah Hart** (Theatre & Performance), with contributions from co-researcher **Nara Sritharan** (AidData) and PI **Sapana Lohani** (Institute for Integrative Conservation). It draws on ethnographic research by co-researcher **Patton Burchett** (Religious Studies) and interview data collected by Sritharan & Lohani, which together shaped the project's conceptual framing and grant development.

Using ethnographic theatre as a research method, this collaborative project explores how to translate different perspectives on the need for development versus the need to keep culture and community alive within Nepal's changing Koshi River ecosystem into expressive vocabularies for performance. Applying the devising technique of Moment Work (Tectonic Theatre), we explore how multiple elements of the stage, including light, sound, spatial relationships, objects, embodied movement, and story, can create moments of theatre. These moments are structured into sequences with multiple narrative throughlines, complicating our understanding of the ethnographic material and revealing new possible meanings, in affective, somatic, semiotic, and material terms.

This performance invites reflection and feedback on how theatre-making can offer a way of feeling-thinking together about the pressing themes of development, cultural preservation, and conservation in the context of Nepal's riparian indigenous communities. We also consider how we, as researchers, are called upon to locate our connection and response to the complex relational dynamics this creative work reveals.

### Student Co-Researcher-Performers:

Delena Markos

Satta Sheriff

Andrew McKee

Jerry Zhou

Maya Sakai-Chen

Sofia Hurlbert

Lauren Nash

Nathan Klintworth (Lighting, Projections and Sound)

Photos in the performance taken by **Patton Burchett**

***\*Please turn off your cell phone and other electronic devices.***

***\*Please note that you will be invited to participate in some of the theatrical moments we have created, but participation is always voluntary.***

### **Background on Cultural Preservation and Development:**

Nepal's development trajectory reflects an ongoing tension between economic growth, environmental conservation, and the preservation of indigenous lifeways. While agriculture remains central to the economy, the country's rivers have increasingly been positioned as a key resource for energy generation. Hydropower development, in particular, has become a major focus of national planning, driven by rising domestic demand and the prospect of electricity exports.

This project centers on the Koshi River Basin in eastern Nepal, where hydropower expansion is reshaping both landscapes and livelihoods. Large-scale projects, including those along the broader Koshi system, have brought new investment and infrastructure, but have also introduced new forms of risk, uncertainty, and uneven development outcomes across communities.

Our research focuses on the indigenous Majhi and Sunwar communities, whose social, cultural, and economic lives are closely tied to river ecosystems. For the Majhi, practices such as *Ladi Pooja* involve offering fish from the river as part of seasonal and life-cycle rituals. Similarly, Sunwar communities maintain spiritual and subsistence relationships with the river, including rituals connected to *Neng* fish. Across both groups, rivers are not only sources of livelihood but also sites of cultural meaning, identity, and continuity. Hydropower development and river diversion projects have altered these relationships in significant ways. Changes to water flow and fish populations, land acquisition, and resettlement processes have disrupted both livelihoods and cultural practices. While some community members recognize the broader economic rationale for development, many describe limited participation in decision-making, inconsistent or insufficient compensation, and uncertainty about long-term outcomes.

Rather than presenting development and preservation as mutually exclusive, this project examines how these trade-offs are experienced on the ground. It highlights how large-scale infrastructure projects redistribute both benefits and costs, often unevenly, and raises questions about whose priorities shape development decisions and whose voices are included in the process.

This work complements the broader [Nepal Water Initiative](#).

### Special Thanks:

Mark Williams, Marla Jones, Kelly Bashinskaya, Shawnay Jamison, Veronique MacDonald, Kellie McDowel.

#### ***Institute for Integrative Conservation***

*A research and education institute aimed at solving critical conservation issues that impact global biodiversity. Working closely with a network of conservation partners, it integrates expertise from across disciplines, blends diverse knowledge systems, and fosters collaboration between academia, public and private sectors, Indigenous peoples, and local communities.*



#### ***AidData***

*Housed at William & Mary, AidData is a leading international development research lab. We connect decision-makers and researchers who share an interest in working together, using granular data and innovative tools to solve pressing problems, precisely target resources, and use rigorous evidence to measure the impacts—intended and unintended—of policies and investments.*



#### ***Wildlife Conservation Nepal***

*WCN, a non-governmental organization registered with the Government of Nepal, supports nature conservation beyond protected areas, by bringing different stakeholders of development, line agencies of conservation, civil society and communities to work together for building a more sustained world. WCN promotes conservation and environment activities by bringing different stakeholders – judicial bodies, Nepal Administrative Staff College, Nepal Police, line agencies and conservation partners through seminars, workshops and trainings including in policy development.*



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