

# A Dying Indigenous Village of Lo

Tunga Bhadra Rai and Tsering Wangmo Gurung

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## Foreword

This paper clearly speaks the fact that it took centuries for our ancestors to shape our Indigenous treasures. No matter how hard it was to face the ups and downs of their times, our ancestors safely inherited us the homeland and the virtues of our identity. These days, we the Indigenous Peoples and our heritages are under multiple pressures. We are losing our culture and the distinct identity day by day. Many of our tangible and intangible treasures are lost and many are at the verge of extinction. The natural calamities, climate change, imprudent policies and the lack of safeguard measures, is aggravating more risks for us and for our future generation. This case study is just a representative case of many stories of Indigenous Peoples in Nepal. Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities as a mother organization of all Indigenous Peoples and all Indigenous Peoples Organizations of Nepal appreciates the effort of authors in keeping Sam Dzung's story in writing. This is a loud and clear call for climate action, and to address loss and damage of Indigenous Peoples happening in many places. I hope that Indigenous Peoples who are less responsible for climate change, would not have to pay anymore of such social-cultural cost in future.



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*A uniquely situated centuries old cave near Sam Dzong*

# **A Dying Indigenous Village of Lo**

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This article summarizes a story of a dying Indigenous village of Lo the Upper Mustang in Nepal. The Sam Dzong village in Lo, one of the ancestral villages of Loba Indigenous People, faces water scarcity, forcing its people to abandon their homeland. People of this centuries-old village are left with no option but to resettle themselves in new location named Namashung. People face dilemmas in this new place. The recollections of their childhood, traits and teaching of their ancestors, and treasure of their homeland keeps following them; the memories of their properties left back in ancestral homeland become priceless for the people who have moved to Namashung. Despite the fact that this new place is relatively in safer place in terms of natural disaster, relocated people feel many things missing in their life. They try to fulfil such emptiness they feel in absence of their ancestral belongings. However, they are unable to repair the loss and damage of their homeland nor fulfil the emptiness they go through. They are left with unrepairable loss of a way of life treasured by the Loba Indigenous People of Sam Dzong. This is a sad reality of climate crisis in Sam



Dzong. This is just one of many cases of climate change-induced loss and damage to Indigenous Peoples of Nepal.

The authors' anthropological field work, including participant observation, key informant interviews and focused group discussions carried out in 2019 and 2023, focused on exchanges with Loba knowledge holders in different occasions, lays the foundation of knowledge shared in this article.

Above all, this article extends due recognition to the fact that Loba Indigenous People hold unique knowledge systems and lifeways, and disclaims any misappropriation of any piece of the Loba knowledge and practices presented in this article.

## Background

Mustang district is one of the mountainous districts of Nepal, divided into two regions: Lower Mustang and Upper Mustang. Upper Mustang is also called “Lo” or “*Lo-Tso-Dhyun*” (nine villages in Lo). The entire Lo region is unique in terms of its geographic and ecological atmosphere. This region is situated in a high-altitude rain shadow of the Annapurna Himalayan range of the country. It receives only occasional drizzle in the summer but good snowfall in the winter. The temperature in the region generally drops to minus ten to minus twenty degrees Celsius (-10°C to -20°C) from December to March in the winter. It remains around fifteen degrees Celsius (15°C) to zero degrees Celsius (0°C) in the summer (Chhetri 2008). The Lo region spreads along the Kaligandaki Valley. The Kaligandaki is the main river flowing from the mountains through Mustang. Snowmelt rivers are tributaries of the Kaligandaki River and sources of water in many villages in Lo. Indigenous water harvesting grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems is a lifeline for the villages in the high-altitude desert of the Himalayan rain shadow in Lo. This region is also home to endangered wildlife species like snow leopards, blue sheep, wild donkeys, and musk deer (ACAP 2019). It is a corridor for migrant birds coming from the Siberian and Tibetan plateaus to many parts of Nepal in early winter and going back the same route in spring.

The social background of Lo is also very distinct. The *Lo-Tso-Dhyun* is the ancestral homeland of the Loba Indigenous People of Nepal. The term ‘Loba’ is sometimes spelled as ‘Lowa’ or ‘Lhoba’; they are one of the 59 indigenous nationalities recognized by the Nepal

government. Loba people have unique cultural lifeways. They recognize Lo-menthang generally spelled as ‘Lomanthang,’ the traditional capital of *Lo-Tso-Dhyun*. Traditionally, *Lho Ghyalpo*<sup>1</sup> is the cultural-traditional King of *Lo-Tso-Dhyun*. They have *Tashi De-Phel* (the royal palace) in Lo-menthang and summer and winter palaces in several places in Lo. The whole Lo region holds a strong treasure trove of Buddhism and Loba culture. Centuries old *Gumbas* (Nep: monasteries), *Tsortens* (Lob: Buddhist shrine/stupa), *Mhane* (Lob: prayer wall), *Dzong* (Lob: fort, fortress), *Lha-Khang* (Lob: places of deities), *Phuu* (Lob: caves), *Kagni* (Lob: traditional entrance gate with art and with peculiar beliefs attached to it), and many more unique assets exist in Lo.

Until 1992 AD, the Lo region was restricted for foreigners to enter. That is why it is also called “The Last Forbidden Kingdom of Lo.”, The Lo region thrives at the juncture of natural and cultural peculiarities. Loba Indigenous People are the owners and keepers of those unique natural and cultural treasures in the region.

Sam Dzong is one of the villages in Lo, located in the northeast of the region. The village is situated at an elevation of about 4,000 meters above sea level, roughly 9 kilometers northeast of Lo-menthang village<sup>2</sup>, the

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1. *Ghyalpo* can be referred to as king these days, though king, kingship and kingdom are more of a concept influenced by the colonization against indigenous peoples. Dr. K.B. Bhattachan also maintains: “I do not think that any indigenous peoples have a concept and practice of kingship. The use of the concept of kingship is a part of the colonization or Nepalization/Hinduization or Brahmanization. *Ghyalpo* looks to be a Loba term but if it really means a king, it is due to influence of others”. That when and how the Lobas began to use the term *Ghyalpo*. The history and dynamics around the term king in this context could be a topic of another study.
  2. Kam For Sud, "Moving Down or Not?" A key question for Samzong, Yara and Dheyee, three villages in Upper Mustang, Mustang District, Nepal Part II: SAMZON, November 2012

historical capital of *Lo-Tso-Dhyun*. Sam Dzong is the nearest Lo village to Nepal's border with Tibet, the autonomous region of China, and to one of the ancestral homelands of the Loba people. There was no road connectivity to this village until 2019 AD. To arrive in Sam Dzong, it is about 3 to 4 hours walking distance from Nyanol village, situated just north of Lo-menthang on the left bank of the Kali Gandaki River. Like other villages of *Lo-Tso-Dhyun*, Sam Dzong lies in the high-altitude desert of the Himalayan rain shadow.



*Figure 1: Lomanthang, the traditional capital of Lo*

*(Photo: Chhime Rinzing Gurung)*

The original name of Sam Dzong is 'Sarung' (Lob: 'Sa' meaning soil or land, and 'Rung' meaning caretaker or watchman). Sam Dzong people are Loba Indigenous Peoples; they sometimes call themselves Sam Dzong Ngas as well. Sam Dzong village is claimed to have been the first Lo village in which Guru Rinpoche (Guru Padmasambhava), a Buddhist leader, who arrived Lo around the seventh century, stepped foot. When he first

arrived at the Koralha [chasing demon]<sup>3</sup>, the present-day Nepal's border with Tibet in Mustang, he came across an *Evi* (Lob: grandmother) at the *Lha* (Lob: a hill) and asked her the name of the *Lha*. The grandmother answered, "*Kora Lha*." Thereafter, the Guru came to Sam Dzung village first and then to other Lo villages. In short, it is clear from this story that the village is remarkably old.<sup>4</sup>

Sam Dzung village, like the other Lo villages in Upper Mustang, boasts an incredibly distinctive landscape in addition to a wealth of diverse natural resources and cultural heritage. The village once owned two monasteries. However, several centuries later, the monasteries of Sam Dzung were destroyed, leaving only the ruins, as a result of chaos and a curse from the monastery of Konchokling in the nearby village.<sup>5</sup> Within the village, there are four *Tsortens* named Tsorten Kau, Ripri Gang Tsorten, Pote Gang Tsorten, and Cho Dokpo Gortsa Tsorten, one *Mang Gang* (Lob: a small house with a very big prayer wheel called *Thukchi Chepo*), and one *Mhane* wall. The village is well-known for its exceptionally situated cave system, which includes more than 25 caves, to name a few: Phuu Dzung Sangma, Phuu Shaelungma, Phuu Gyaa, and Phuu Gyaee. The caves are thought to be the ancestral homes of the villagers, located amid a distinctive sequence of cliffs that go by no particular name. Additionally, the village has a *Chuku Sadi* (Lob: a tiny water source) where reddish-

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3. Chasing Demon is a well-known historical event took place in Upper Mustang region in about 7th century. The event is well known among Loba Indigenous People. Many places of upper Mustang are named after the different series of activities occurred during the chasing demon at respective places.
  4. Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions
  5. Upper Mustang Trek, "Konchok Ling Cave in Upper Mustang an ancient mystery Nepal"



colored water is visible and is purported to be a holy location forbidden from being ruined or contaminated. Regretfully, the village doesn't have any *Tsam-dang* (Lob: comparatively large rivers); instead, it has three *Yukas* (Lob: small streams) called Dhip Yuka, Bhue Yuka, and Ying Yuka. Two of the three *Yukas* dried up, leaving only Ying Yuka with water flowing through it these days. The village has two *Kagni* (Lob: the traditional entrance gate that protects village from bad omens), one old and one new. They have Tsorten Mako; upon arriving there, people had to get down from their horses, remove their hats and caps, and proceed on foot through the village. They have another *Kagni* located at the highest pass next to village.

Sam Dzong also owns numerous other valuable common properties, including a *Jhiu* (Lob: water reservoir), two drinking water taps, a solar mill, a museum, a *Tsokhang* (Lob: community hall), a *Zimzang* (Lob: grassland where Zimbu herb is found), a *Sotang* (Lob: wild garlic field), and seven *Lhae* (Lob: shed for sheep and goats).



*Figure 2: Sam Dzong village from a distance*

Sam Dzong village is home to 18 Loba households with a total of 82 residents. As the Loba Indigenous People of Lo are divided into three distinct sub-groups, namely, Kuthag, Phalpa, and Gharpa<sup>6</sup>, the people of Sam Dzong belong to the Phalpa group, which is further divided into sub-groups called the Dhongba family and the Samasumae family. Of the total 18 households, six are the Dhangba family and 12 are the Samasumae family—Dhongba families are the ancestral originating households of related families. They are expected to hold certain social-cultural roles, responsibility and accountability within their related families and communities. They also hold the greatest share of ancestral properties like homes, jewelry *Dzi*, *Jhuru* (Lob: coral), *Yuu* (Lob: turquoise), *Shuelae* (Lob: head wear made with coral, turquoise, silver and other precious gems), *Ku* (Lob: statues of the God), *Poeja* (Lob: prayer books/religious text book), and other precious items of *Choekhang* (Lob: prayer room), passed down from their older generations. The Dhongba are an affluent family possessing numerous distinctive cultural and ancestral

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6. Even if Loba people are a distinct Indigenous Nationality of Nepal, they had to use Hindu surnames as the government had not recognized the Lobas as an Indigenous Nationality at the time when they had to present their surnames for government documentation. Therefore, Kuthag and Phalpa had to equate themselves with Bista/Thakuri (hill high castes) and Gurung (an indigenous group) respectively, whereas Gharpa was considered as Biswakarma, also abbreviated as BK. Most of the rituals and values of Loba people show that the Lobas, like any other Indigenous Nationalities, are an egalitarian society. The literature on the topic by both foreign and Nepalese scholars have described the three sub-groups of Loba people as the hierarchical categorizations of castes in Hindu ideology. It is very much evident that these hierarchical categorizations and the adoption of such surnames as Bista, Gurung and BK are due to the influence of the rulers of the southern hills and colonization, Brahmization, Hinduization or Sanskritization. They prefer endogamy, i.e., to marry within the same sub-group. However, in Loba society, the concept of touchability and untouchability (purity and impurity) are nonexistent, unlike in Hindu caste system.

attributes. Dhongba families are responsible for a great deal of extra work and tasks in the village. Among many examples, are the facts that Dhongba families take major roles in the customary village chieftdom, the *Ghyamba* system (village chief system), mandatorily take part in the celebration of Yartung festival, and perform dances and songs during marriages of any couples in the village as *Bhak-youma and Bhak-yowa* (Lob: women and men who perform traditional marriage songs and dances during marriage). Samasumae families are sub-houses or families, descended from the main house holds known as Dhongba. As an illustration, suppose a family has two sons. The elder son inherits all the family's possessions, making the house the Dhongba family; the younger son, on the other hand, inherits only a small portion, such as clothing and fields, and moves into a new home or to a small old house of the family. That makes the Samasumae family.

In such a social-cultural and physical background, the primary means of subsistence for the residents of Sam Dzong village are farming, raising livestock, and handicraft production such as *Keden* (Lob: traditional wears), *Pangden* (Lob: traditional apron), *Kaw* (Lob: traditional belt), *Mazin* (Lob: thin woolen blanket), *Teyn* (Lob: woolen mat), *Tsuk-tuk* (Lob: thick woolen blanket), *Lubi-kenang* (Lob: warm woolen trouser), *Lubi-phuje* (Lob: woolen Bhakhu), *Sang-goe* (Lob: woolen shawl), *Soemba* (Lob: traditional woolen shoe with leather sole), etc. Handicraft productions are mostly for family use, and they are presented as gifts to loved ones in faraway lands. The richness of a family is determined by the number of handicrafts, such as *Kaw, Pangden, Keden, Mazin, Tsuk-tuk, Teyn, etc.*, owned by the family. There is not enough

agricultural yield to sell and make money; it is only enough for family consumption. Occasionally, they must purchase fodder (grasses for livestock), grains, and seeds from neighboring villages. Although raising livestock is a common household activity, very few households raise livestock on a large scale for financial gain. During the winter season, they migrate to the lowlands for small businesses to earn their livelihood through so-called mobile marketing. However, compared to the other villages in Lo, Sam Dzong village has a comparatively low winter migration rate.



*Figure 3: Lhae or Chhuprang, a traditional structure of keeping goats, near drying river*

Similar to other villages in Lo, Sam Dzong has customary institution locally called *Ghyamba* also spelled as *Kghyamba* system (village chief system), which is essential to upholding social order as well as protecting and sustaining their material and social capital.



There are very minimal differences in the many social-cultural systems between villages in Lo. For example, the team of *Ghyamba* in Lo-menthang village is made up of nine individuals: one *Ghyamba* selected from the Kuthag groups and two *Mhetees*, and six *Tsumes* from the Phalpa group. In the case of Sam Dzong, there are two key personnel (*Ghyamba* and *Tsume*) chosen from the six Dhongba families on a rotational basis. The main responsibilities of *Ghyamaba* and *Tsume* include managing irrigation systems, maintaining village fields, managing livestock in fields, keeping an eye on and controlling the timing of fodder grass cutting,



*Figure 4: Drinking water tap at the village*



farming, and making decisions regarding various village matters. They settle disputes in the village as well. So, the *Ghyamba* system also has social control, grievance redress, conflict management, and resolution mechanisms.

Despite of such a unique heritage and lifeways of people of Sam Dzung, the government assistance and facilities hardly reach out to them. Nyochung Gurung, aged 67 years stated, “We don’t have many important facilities like health posts, government offices, government-funded irrigations, and communication networks.” The village was isolated from road connectivity until recently. Only after 2020 AD, the villagers witnessed a rough vehicle road supported by Nepal government. In the old days, there used to be two types of extremely narrow and steep trails: a) *Talam* (Lob: *Ta* meaning horse and *Lam* meaning road), b) *Meelam* (Lob: *Mee* meaning human and *Lam* meaning road). The route for people to use on foot was a shortcut and steeper. The route for the horses is longer and relatively plainer, reaching all the curves and twists of every hill and pass. There was a tin-roofed primary school up to grade three. Tsomo Gurung, a young lady in her late twenties, said, “The school was located across the Ying stream opposite side of the village. Due to the risk of a potential flood from the river, the school was shifted to the same side of the village”. Dhoka Gurung, a woman aged 40, stated that they have only two drinking water taps supported by Nepal government. This drinking water is fitted through pipelines from far away spring. They must do maintenance now and then. During the winter season, the pipes get broken due to freezing ice and frost inside pipes. Then, they must go to the place where the pipes are broken to fetch water from

that point when maintenance is impossible. Other than that, they don't have any government-funded irrigation or any facilities. Whatever they have so far is from their own initiation and contribution.

In these ways, life went on in the village with ups and down. However, in quite short time span, Sam Dzong changed unexpectedly and severely. Many traditions of everyday life, including livelihood practices were jeopardized; some traditions of the village became just memories that can never happen again in Sam Dong.

## What Happened in Sam Dzong

One of the oldest residents of Sam Dzong village recalled her earlier days with a sad notion:

“While flipping back some pages of my life, I clearly remember several years of peaceful life with the beautiful creations of nature. Although we remained untouched by the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we were fulfilled, blessed, and favored by nature in our small universe. We were so much in touch with nature that we had very exact ideas about several practices, like when to plant crops, when and how often to water them, when to harvest, and when and where to take our animals for grazing. We have never had the privilege of wearing watches on our wrists, and if we did, we would never be able to read them. Instead, we confidently used to measure the everyday time just by looking at the Sun or the shadows of objects moving with the position of the Sun. This peaceful life of modesty didn’t last forever. We started experiencing different unusual things, like scorching sunshine, untimely and unexpected heavy rainfall, changes in snowfall patterns, snow melting earlier and faster than usual, floods, and drying water sources. We couldn’t figure out what those were or what caused them. We invited great *Lamas* (Nep: monk) and conducted many rituals, thinking nature was upset with us. However, the mysterious chaos didn’t go away; instead, it kept worsening every year, and we suffered a lot.”

The matter of the fact was that people of Sam Dzong experienced unusual challenges in their homeland.

The root cause of the challenges was water scarcity, which created many more consequences in agriculture production, livestock raising, and to the livelihood system as a whole.<sup>7</sup> People of Sam Dzong can recount a lot details about depth of their sufferings and the facts of how their beautiful homeland and rivers turned into a *Shaktang* (Lob: empty, sandy, stony barren, full of debris, wide gorges, and plains created by flood). To cite some of their expressions that Dhoka Gurung shared, “If it doesn’t snow on time and as usual manner, the little water we could witness in our streams dries up. In such situations, how could we dream of quenching the thirst of our fields when the streams themselves are dried and thirsty?” Precisely, water harvesting for irrigation and daily use become more and more difficult due to two main reasons:



*Figure 5: The only source of water for Sam Dzong drying out*

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7. Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions

- a) Drying out of water sources (too little water),
- b) Destruction of remaining water sources and the streams by flooding triggered by unusual rainfall (too much water).

The water sources started drying out due to uneven weather patterns such as no snow fall on usual season and increasing heat and sunny days. On the other hand, incidences of frequent flooding caused by unusual rain increased. The arid and fragile landscape in the rain shadow of Himalaya kept eroding fast by unusual rain fall and subsequent flood, during the summer seasons. The streams, which are also the sources of irrigation, were devastatingly flooded and turned into *Shaktang*. Due to the widening of the stream routes turning into *Shaktang*, the Indigenous ways of water harvesting became impossible; whatever amount of water remained



*Figure 6: One of the many Shaktangs*



available got seeped and soaked into the ground along its way in the arid landscape. Year by year, the water got so scarce that it took three to four days to accumulate and fill a single *Jhiu* (Lob: traditional water pond/traditional water reservoir) for irrigation. In addition to this, while channeling water from *Jhiu* to the fields, the water gets drenched in dry and arid soil that eventually does not reach the village nor to the agriculture field. In the end, only a limited number of agricultural fields could get irrigated for cultivation, while the rest are dried by drought.<sup>8</sup>



*Figure 7: Irrigation canal with no water*

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8. Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions

As water becomes scarce, cultivated seeds are eaten by birds before they germinate. Seeds and compost are blown away by the wind due to the dry fields of arid environments. Even if the seeds germinate, they cannot grow well afterwards. All these situations lead to the shortage of not only grains but also of fodder for animals (grasses, hay, etc) forcing people to buy grains and grasses from other villages. Even some trees at the village died due to drought. The suffering increased year by year; every year, people had to abandon several plots of agriculture field.<sup>9</sup>

One of a resident of Sam Dzong told us, “One year, we could not do the cultivation at all; we had to buy grasses, grains, flour, and oils from other villages. We went to collect green leaves and different types of wild vegetables from fields of other villages. We dried and stored them for consumption during the winter. Recollecting their situation of the times, Mrs. Passang Gurung, a grandma in her late sixties added, “Our relatives from Chhoser village were visiting our village to pay condolences to one of the deceased family at the village. Our sister named Tsering Doma (pseudonym) could not control her tears by witnessing the village dying out with no crops and no greenery in the fields. She felt immensely sad for us and for our village”. Yan Cheng Gurung, a woman in her late 40s said, “It has been 40 years—years nearly equal to my age—since that we abandoned one area of agriculture field situated on the other side of the river, just opposite the village due to water scarcity.” Such abandonment was happening due to no water to support the harvest.

On the other hand, people of Sam Dzong sometimes

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9. Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions

experience unpredictable and unusual rain, whereas typically in the whole Lo region, including in Sam Dzong, does not receive rainfall as the region is situated in the rain shadow of the Himalayas. Both traditional infrastructures, like housing, and the landscape are fragile when rained on. The rocky hills and mountains have no trees, but gorges and ditches in-between them. Uncommon rainfall in summer season damages traditional housing made of mud with flat roofing, and floods the ditches and gullies between houses. As the Sam Dzong village is situated at the foot of a golden-brown rocky landscape, both the rainfall and fast melting of snow cause flood into the ditches, gullies, and the settlement. The steep and fragile landscape erodes with rain and fast melting of snow. Flood destroys small tributary streams widening its routes. Dhoka Gurung commented:

“If it rains heavily, a flood is sure to come; if it doesn’t rain and is sizzling outside, then our water source dries. Without a mild snow melt, *Luma* (Lob: green wetlands) and water flowing in the routes dries too. We don’t understand what is happening.”

The fact is that it now snows in unusual seasons and also melts too fast. Rainfall is not a normal natural occurrence in Lo. Damage to houses, irrigation canal, crops, animals, and even human life, sometimes by flood, has been suffered in Sam Dzong. People had to spend several sleepless nights with panic, stress, and sadness thinking about the possibility of floods and other catastrophes. Ouki Sangmo said, “The flood became so troublesome for us. Sometimes, we repair irrigation canal in the morning, it would be destroyed by flood in the evening,” She further

added, “I remember one particular incident: we all [the villagers], built a cemented irrigation canal, spending few days. On the very first night of its completion, flood by heavy rain swept away the canal. Our goats were swept away the by flood from *Ghyara* (Lob: sheds of goats) too. The entire village was heartbroken and frustrated with the situation.” One participant of the Focus Group added:

“Unlike other villages, if it floods at Sam Dzong, the entire irrigation canal gets destroyed from the source to the end of agriculture fields. Then we have to redo everything from the scratch. We abandoned one entire area of agriculture field due water scarcity. Needless to say, the flood even destroyed our rivers; the river contributing to agriculture field. We were forced to abandon a lot of crop fields on the other side of the river. We never understood what is wrong with the climate.”

Recollection of suffers of Sam Dzong Ngas continues: “The natural disasters caused us to suffer so devastatingly that I remember myself saying-*Konjo Sumbo, Lungba Dhuru Ta Ghala Leptso* (Lob: My Goodness, why have I come to this place),” Ms. Ouki Sangmo shared. Ms. Sangmo was born and brought up in Chhoser village and later married to a man from Sam Dzong village.

Indeed, rain did not help to boost water sources nor increased water availability at Sam Dzong. Instead, too much rain triggering devastating floods, destruction of water sources and paths for irrigation flow. Then drying of water sources started to multiply. Life had to move on despite these problems; People of Sam Dzong kept looking for remedies to overcoming those challenge at their village.

## Efforts to Overcome Challenges

Disaster continued, the villagers installed netted rock and stone net bags at the riverbank and field sides to prevent erosion and the effects of flooding, but all these efforts were in vain. They had to water their kitchen garden by bringing water in containers from far distances.

One of the villagers recalled, “There was a year; I was young then, and I don’t remember the name of the great *Lama* who came to our village and planted six trees for each of the Dhongba families with great religious blessings, enchantments, and prayers. He further quoted a statement: “If this village sustains, all the six trees shall grow, and if this village doesn’t sustain for long, all six trees shall dry and die.” Accordingly, all the trees grew well with big branches. However, later on, another great *Lama* named Khungba Shaptun was invited to our village for blessings and *Puja*, and he prophesied that the trees were harming the village. He therefore asked people to cut down all the trees”.

Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) also mobilized a team of engineers to Sam Dzong to look for subterranean water sources. The team excavated a couple of places and drilled underneath the ground surface. They traced water underground, but they were unable to pump the water up. In addition, the ACAP team and villagers explored a few more water sources, and the villagers constructed a concrete water canal connecting them to the water reservoir by carrying water pipes,



sand, cement, and pebbles all the way from Lo-menthang village. Unfortunately, the canal flooded following fifteen days of productive labor.<sup>10</sup>

In a similar vein, a few non-governmental organizations (NGOs) visited Sam Dzong to investigate the reasons behind the water scarcity and potential fixes. They looked everywhere for potential water sources and conducted several studies, not missing a single detail. They discovered how crucial it is to link water sources and reservoirs with pipelines to avoid water leaks, soil saturation, and drying out during hot weather. To connect the water source directly to the water reservoir, they kindly donated water pipes. Once more, the villagers spent the entire day and night personally transporting every pipe from Lo-menthang to Sam Dzong. It is impossible to put into words how difficult their struggles were. Then, they connected all the pipes, and at some places, they erected the pipes with logs, preventing the higher exposure to flooding. The work remained a nightmare for the entire village. Connecting the pipe wasn't the final solution. It did not help the villagers; there was high siltation and gravel stocked inside the pipe.<sup>11</sup>

“I don't remember the exact year, but for sure it was long ago that we didn't have any tools to measure the requirement of pipes, and we tied all the *Thakpa* (Lob: a long, narrow, flat rope used for fastening purposes) of the villagers to measure the distance, and as a *Ghyamba* of the village in the year, I carried the entire ropes to Lomanthng to let them know the requirement of the

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10. Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions

11. Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions

length or measurement of pipes. The rope wasn't the thin and light one, but rather the thick and heavy one," Nyochung Gurung narrated.



*Figure 8: Harvesting the scarce water*

On the spiritual side, the people of Sam Dzong invited great *Lamas* to conduct *Puja* praying smooth water flow, good weather and well-being of the village. Every water source was visited by the *Lamas* and bestowed on them for betterment and nourishment. The project under Sam Dzong village, organized by Manuel Bauer, also put in some specific efforts with the hope of managing water at Sam Dzong, thinking relocation is not the ultimate solution. Unfortunately, nothing helped the search for decent water supply; Sam Dzong had to be relocated somewhere else.<sup>12</sup>

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12. Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions

## **Relocation of Sam Dzong in Namashung**

Sam Dzong, a peaceful village in Lo, is dying due to those changing climatic patterns. Such climatic change has handicapped Sam Dzong. It has become sick with a plethora of climate-induced crises. The people of Sam Dzong had no choice except to leave their ancestral land. It was felt, while talking to people of Sam Dzong, that no matter how difficult it is to live in ancestral land, people feel their land is like their parents and creator, to which they have unconditional feelings and attachment. People of Sam Dzong feel Sam Dzong is like their parents and ancestors, incomparable to anything else in many regards. Despite this sentiment, the people of Sam Dzong decided to resettle their village somewhere. They started to look for a suitable location to move into. They thought of requesting a slum area where possible.<sup>13</sup>

Beginning with the search for a suitable location, people of Sam Dzong initiated relocation process in 2008 AD. They wondered around, looking for a suitable place. For practicality and suitability, they visited several locations, including Namgyal Ghumba and Chorten Chema. Following a string of setbacks, they made it to the Chhoser Village Development Committee of that time --local government units were called Village Development Committee before the promulgation of federalism by Nepal's Constitution-2015. Sam Dzong was under Chhoser Village Development Committee administration during that time. The Chhoser Village Development Committee was unable to help the people of Sam Dzong. Seeking help for their desperate need, the Sam Dzong people approached local leaders. In

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the meantime, they encountered Mr. Lama Ngwang Kunga Bista, a social worker and the founder of Great Compassion Boarding School based in Lo-menthang, a well-known school in Upper Mustang. Mr. Bista suggested potential names of people and offices to approach. The people of Sam Dzung later visited *Lo Oung Khar* (Lob: Royal Kingdom), located in Lo-menthang, and shared their problem, *Khataks*, and token money to *Oung Kumden* (Lob: King of Lo then, Jigme Dorge Palbar Bista)—Lo has cultural king for many generations.<sup>14</sup> Monarchy/King, Monk, and Monasteries, the three ‘M’s, are integral parts of Loba lifeways in Lo. His Highness remained silent and accepted the Khatak exclusively. “I remember that particular day, the king asked us with great enthusiasm and anxiety if we wanted to abandon our ancestral homeland, Sam Dzung, and all we could say was not at all your Highness, but we are facing a severe water problem,” Nyochung Gurung recalled.

Afterward, the Sam Dzung people received Namashung, the land owned by the Royal family, from Jigme Palbar Bista. Namashung, a ten-hectare plain, lies northeast of Lo-menthang village, on the banks of the Kali Gandaki River. Locally, the term Namashung refers to verdant plains next to rivers or streams where people can relax, enjoy picnics, and let animals graze. In the Lo region, such places are arguably the most pleasant locations. In stark contrast to what the name implies, Namashung, given to the people of Sam Dzung, is a plain covered with massive boulders and debris from the previous extreme catastrophic flood event, known as the Glacier Lake Outburst Flood (GLOF), occurred in 1987 AD. The

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villagers' happiness at getting the land didn't last long; instead, they continued to be very confused and tense about when and how to begin the relocation as well as where and who to ask for assistance. They experienced the greatest agony of making Namashung a suitable place to settle down by clearing out derbies of GLOF that happened in Namashung about 36 years ago. In addition to causing the need for laborious clearing, this condition raised questions about whether Namashung is still prone to GLOF risk. But, for the people of Sam Dzong, the main challenge remained how to clear up the debris from the places to settle new homes. They had no clue how to start or where to get money to build new houses and move in. Some of the families were considering starting to occupy the portion of the land given to them, but they had no money to build a house for relocation. The people of Sam Dzong followed the adage, "United we stand, divided we fall," and decided not to start any work until they found a whole package supporter for every household. They kept knocking on the doors of leaders for help in finding potential funders.<sup>15</sup>

The Sam Dzong people called it coincidence, if not luck, that in the same year of 2008 AD, Manuel Bauer, well known as the official photographer of the Dalai Lama from Switzerland, visited Lo. On his arrival in Lo-menthang village, some representatives from Sam Dzong village, along with Lama Ngawang Kunga Bista, approached him, seeking his help on the resettlement. After the successful outreach, a project named Sam Dzong Village was started, with Mr. Manuel Bauer serving as the project's Swiss coordinator.<sup>16</sup> Dhoka Gurung recalled, "It was the time

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when my second daughter was just a year old, and I had to carry her and rush here and there for meetings, work, and photo sessions to raise funds for the relocation.” The project agreed to help Sam Dzong with their relocation.

Relocation work started. The people of Sam Dzong played a significant role in the village building and agricultural land preparation by utilizing their Indigenous knowledge. Workers from the lowlands were hired for some work. The relocation of Sam Dzong village to Namashung was officially inaugurated on May 19, 2015 AD. Mr. Manual Bouer and Mr. Lama Ngwang Kunga Bista attended the grand procession of people of Sam Dzong approaching Namashung on their horses dressed in the most distinctive traditional attire. Employing a lottery method, the 18 families were given an equal area of land, roughly two Ropni (0.1 Hectare) for housing, a kitchen garden or shed for livestock, and precisely the same-sized house for each family. Every house is the same, with a single-story, four rooms, and a small compound for pets or other uses. With regard to the agriculture field, it was agreed that villagers would cultivate and harvest collectively for some years. In the spring of 2016 AD, the villagers were able to sow their first seed on the new fields in Namashung and bring in their first harvest. In the year 2019 AD, Sam Dzong village was relocated almost completely to Namashung. Later in 2022 AD, the crop fields were distributed equally among all eighteen households, except for a small plot reserved for the growth of mustard, to produce oil for the royal family. Thus, two agricultural fields of the same dimensions and shape are now owned by every household.<sup>17</sup>

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*Figure 9: Sam Dzong village (2023)*



*Figure 10: Relocated settlement at Namashung*

Now, people live in a juncture of memories and practicalities as they witness failing crop fields in their village and also in some other villages of Lo. They said that agricultural fields are turning into barren, dried, and empty lands. Traditional water canals and

reservoirs have been left with only their ruins. One of the participants of the FGDs shared, “*Ebi Meme Shing Pura Kam-di, Dhadha Gya Medha Lak*” (Lob: our grandparents’ fields have dried, and now there is nothing left). Another participant added, “For sure, we have enough space and fields back there at Sam Dzong. But what is the use of it if we are not able to grow crops, nor can sell them, nor bring them pulling by rope with us to new locations (*Tsori Ring Khukkuni Malak, Dhak Gyuri Kherti Hung Yae Ni Medhalak*).”

However, memories do not die with a dying homeland, nor do they fade out like drying water in the arid land of Sam Dzong.

## Memories and Relationships with Sam Dzong

The people of Sam Dzong moved to Namashung not by their choice; the push factor pushed them so hard that they could not cope with nor resist the situation for their survival. When they were given land at Namashung, they were very happy with that because they desperately needed land. Even after that, they struggled with a lot of dilemmas about leaving their ancestral homeland and being able to bring their ancestral treasures with them. They say that they are happy in Namashung. Yet then they also say that people miss their ancestral houses with several rooms and unique structures typically suitable for their culture and environment. Many families own caves and use them for storing dried grasses back home. They still miss their crop fields, *Riga* (Lob: green pasturelands) for animal grazing, and centuries-old *Tsortens*, *Mhane Wall*, and *Mang Gang*. Moreover, the villagers felt the loss of their *Dhumda* (Lob: Bhote Pipal plot compounded with a traditional mud wall).

Once one gets into deeper conversation, undeniably, the expression shows several intangible things people lost by leaving their village. Childhood memories, parents' and grandparents' lifeways, and a series of struggles in pastureland, where people spent most of their childhood with their animals, are roots and sources of their distinct knowledge systems and culture. One of the participants shared, "We miss all the things of Sam Dzong that are not at all here at Namashung; otherwise, they are in poor conditions." She further added, "We don't have *Tsortens*, *Mang Gang*, *Mhane Walls*, Caves, Water Taps, *Riga*, and many parts of our traditional houses; we miss them all very much." From the expressions of the interviewee, it



is evident that a house becomes a real home only if it accommodates the traditions and culture of the dwellers. One of the other participants interjected, “We miss our old houses a lot because we have enough space and diverse rooms there with *Ghyara* (Lob: space for livestock), *Tseprak* (Lob: space for hay storage), and *Ouza* (Lob: space for threshing, drying kind of processing of grains) for our animals.” It is quite obvious to them that Sam Dzung village is warmer and greener than Namashung. People of Sam Dzung even return to Sam Dzung to get warmth during the winter season.



*Figure 11: Ms. Nyochung Gurung looking back at her old home at Sam Dzung*

The villagers expressed the abundance of firewood in Sam Dzung. Ms. Nyochung recalls a question asked to her before relocating from Sam Dzung by one of the Sam Dzung Project team members: “Grandma, if you are relocated to Namashung, what will make you the most concerned?” Her response then was, “If we come to Namashung, the only worry I feel about is firewood,



because I need it most often, and I have grown older and my children have gone far seeking their future. I don't have anyone to collect firewood from far distances, and here at Sam Dzong, we have in abundance and it is easy to collect.”

In addition to those fields, houses, and other properties, there are a lot more treasures in Sam Dzong that people could not relocate. There was no choice for people other than to abandon them. The following section discuss some of what was lost.

## Priceless Properties in Unrepairable Loss

### Tsortens

The *Tsortens* of Sam Dzong are thousands and thousands of years old. They carry distinct significance, recollections, and reminders of their existence as the Loba Indigenous People of Sam Dzong. As explained in some of the above paragraphs, there is a *Tsorten* named Cho Dokpo Gortsa Tsorten situated in-between a *Shaktang* and a *Dokpo* (Lob: a snowmelt river or a ditch or a narrow gorge between two high hills or places having traces of flood occurrences). Regardless of its vulnerable situation, people believe it is safe from flooding because it is a very important and precious symbol of spirituality and stands with its own power.



*Figure 12: Tsorten Mako at Sam Dzong*

Moreover, *Tsorten Mako* holds value and history for itself and the people of Sam Dzong. Every person passing by the *Tsorten* gets off their horses and takes off their caps (hats) to express respect. Even great *Lamas* follow this culture. These *Tsortens* are very important and priceless ancestral assets holding dynamic structures, compositions, worldviews, values, and traditions of Sam Dzong Ngas.<sup>18</sup>

### Caves

Likewise, there are several caves that are believed to be the homes of villager's ancestors. People later used to keep wheat hay, buckwheat hay, dried fodder, grass, etc. in the nearby ones that were easy to access. These caves add uniqueness to the village.



*Figure 13: Centuries-old caves near Sam Dzong*

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Many foreigners come to visit the village to observe these caves. Some groups of foreigners had done cave searching expeditions among the hard-to-reach caves, and they discovered evidence of people living there, such as smoked ceilings, small stairs, windows, places to keep things, and so forth. They even discovered the skeletons of humans and animals in the caves. They excavated all those skeletons and built a museum of skeletons at Sam Dzong. Some of the nearby caves were used as a *phota* (a place where all people take the sun and bask, do wool processing tasks, or just gossip) during the spring season. Overall, these caves are part of the history of Sam Dzong.<sup>19</sup>

### Remains of Gumba

It is said that there used to be two *Gumbas*. Long time back, the *Lamas* of Konchokling Gumba and the *Lamas* of the Sam Dzong Gumba envied each other, and the *Lama* of Konchokling *Gumba* (Thughyapti) cursed upon the *Gumbas* of Sam Dzong, and eventually *Gumbas* got destroyed. These days, they only have the remains of the *Gumba*, and occasionally, the villagers go there to offer Sang (Lob: herbal incense). During Saka Dawa, they color the walls of the *Gumba*. (Tsak Tang-ye). The ruins of *Gumbas* are the remainder and reminder of their history (the *Lamas* war). After moving at Namashung, the villagers don't have *Gumba* around them, not even the remains of *Gumba*. They are deprived of the cultural and social feelings provided by the proximity of the *Gumba*.<sup>20</sup>

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## Jhiu (Water Pond)

*Jhiu* is a commonly practiced arrangement in all villages in Lo. It is an Indigenous irrigation water reservoir constructed with Indigenous knowledge systems. *Jhiu* is one of the Indigenous innovations that supports irrigation and agriculture in an arid land of high-altitude rain shadows. People used to have *Jhiu* at Sam Dzong as well. Like in the repair, maintenance, and operation of irrigation canals, people work hand in hand in all activities related to *Jhiu*.



*Figure 14: Jhiu, a traditional water reservoir at Sam Dzong*

Collective activities associated with *Jhiu*, like others, are occasions to enforce and remind people of collectivism, build community bounds, share gains and pains, transfer knowledge to each other, and many more functions. But they don't have *Jhiu* at Namashung, as they have only a small area of agricultural land. They are losing not only *Jhiu* as such but every aspect, such as the Indigenous knowledge system, skills, customary institutions,



traditional livelihood, and its value to Loba lifeways as a whole. It is evident that when people lose any collective domains and collective cores, they lose relationships; they lose the core of production, reproduction, and transformation of values and knowledge systems.

### **Food System with Cultural Values**

As a rule, the Sam Dzong Nga food system is based on local crops such as wheat, buckwheat, naked barley, peas, potatoes, and mustard. Different types of cultural food items are prepared from those grains. For example, *Yoe* (Lob: roasted wheat and buckwheat grains) -- a flat container is half-filled with sand and heated for a while. Raw wheat and buckwheat grains are poured on the sand and roasted. *Rhaema* (Lob: roasted pea grains, similar way of preparation of wheat), *Rhaema Tsoetsoeya* (Lob: boiled pea), *Tingmok* (Lob: a steamed bun with a soft, fluffy texture), *Moktong* (Lob: a steamed cone-shaped bun with a soft and fluffy texture), *Bhuktuwa* (Lob: small round piece of steamed flour paste fried with butter, oil mixed with sugar, *Churpi* grains), *Maldak* (Lob: paste of flour prepared with oil, butter, sugar, *Churpi* grains), *Yoezen* (Lob: Dheedo in Nepali), *Gyeuma* (Lob: sausage or all internal parts of animals cut into pieces and mixed in the blood and then filled into intestine of animals and boiled into water), different types of *Thukpa*, varieties of Salads, *Champa*, *Laou* (Lob: Tsampa added in boiled curd), *Khapsey*. This is not an exhaustive list; there are many other items besides these. People prepare those food items on various occasions. These food items have been replaced by junk food and other food items supplied in general market. For instance, *Yoe* is replaced by beaten rice or *Bhuza*. People after relocating to Namashung

don't produce enough local grains rather have easier access to junk food, and it has become more convenient to consume fast food rather than home-grown grain-based food items.<sup>21</sup> It is alarmingly apparent that the Loba way of grain procession and food preparation knowledge and practices have diminished; cultural food values have declined; and traditional livelihoods have changed to a great extent. In addition to the health benefits and disadvantages of different food systems, food systems carry different science and knowledge systems. They are part and parcel of culture and identities, which are impacted after moving in a new place.

### **Agricultural Practices and Associated Knowledge Systems**

Culturally, at Sam Dzong, there used to be two types of households holding different social-cultural roles and responsibilities: a) Dhongba and b) Samasumae—this part is explained in a bit more detail in the background section of this article. Briefly, Dhongba families hold specific roles, responsibilities, and inheritance passed down from their elders and ancestors. Likewise, Samasumae families hold fewer responsibilities and parental properties than Dhangba families do. The idea of such differentiated roles and entitlements to parental property, mostly within Dhongba families, is to keep ancestral assets solid and undivided for generations. This idea also helps to keep ancestral treasure in Dhongba families as the center of the clan groups, which saves wealth from being divided into smaller portions and sometimes getting diminished eventually. Such traditional and cultural values and role division among households are broken after moving to

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Namashung. At Namashung, people hold an equal area of agricultural land. Meanwhile, some of the other customary institutional practices have also changed. For instance, at Sam Dzong village, the roles of *Ghyamba* and *Tsume* were circulated among all six Dhongba families; however, now at Namashung, the roles are circulated to all 18 households. This happened all because of changes in land holding size, land tenure, and different livelihoods in Namashung. These changes might relate to the spiritual and cultural life of Sam Dzong Ngas.

### **Spiritual Values**

One of the interviewees stated that the more people witness spiritual bodies like *Gumba*, *Tsorten*, and *Mang Gang* and the passes with *Lungda* (Lob: prayer flags), the more they feel faithful, honest, loyal, harmonious, and virtuous. For example, when people come across and pass by a *Tsorten*, they make sure to choose the correct side to walk by so that the walk becomes like doing a *Kora* around *Tsorten*. It seemed like the more religious or spiritual sites in the village, the higher the feeling of co-existence and the higher the chances of maintaining environmental sanitation, religious practices, and community coherence. The more religious and spiritual sites, the greater the chances of building harmony, faith, and trust among villagers. Unfortunately, at the new location, they don't have any *Tsortens* to make *Kora*. On the other side, the family members are divided between the two villages. Some family members live at Namashung, and some others are still at Sam Dzong, taking care of their houses and livestock.<sup>22</sup>

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22. Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions



*Figure 15: Mang Gang and Mhane wall at Sam Dzong*

### **Breaking Down of Collective Practices and Relationships**

All 18 households in Sam Dzong village have been relocated to Namashung with much uniformity. All the villagers have the same houses and the same portion of agricultural land. At some point, it is quite apparent that there is no breakdown of communities and their relationships and bounds. However, Nyochung Gurung shared, “All my children have migrated to the lowlands of Nepal for their future, and now I and my youngest daughter are here at the village, and even we two are staying separately because we have several chores at Sam Dzong and Namashung. So, my daughter lives in Namashung, and I am living in Sam Dzong, and it is a similar case with some other families”.

Meanwhile, before the final decision to relocate, a few families migrated and settled in some parts of the lowland outside Mustang because they were not able to withstand the natural crisis they faced at Sam Dzong.

These families who migrated out of Sam Dzong earlier didn't get anything at Namashung, even if they are still landless somewhere else. The other side of the fact is that those who migrated out of Sam Dzong earlier have already lost connection with their community; they are somehow forgotten. Sonam Gurung (not real name), originally from Sam Dzong village, living in Pokhara (a town in the lowlands), shared:

“It has been more than 20 years since we migrated to Pokhara, leaving behind our village because of many problems we never understood; we did not migrate to Pokhara by our choice but by push factors. I gave birth to my children in Pokhara, and they grew up here. It has been a few years since Sam Dzong village was relocated to Namashung, and all the villagers got land and houses. I am happy for them, but meanwhile, I am sad for myself and some other families like mine. We didn't get any land or houses at Namashung, nor do we have any land or houses here at Pokhara. We feel that we belong nowhere; it is quite sad and low feelings for us when we are no longer part of Sam Dzong Ngas relocated to Namashung”.

Relationships, emotional attachments, and mental health, which are important assets of human society, are impacted.

### **Health Impacts and Emotional Anguish**

People still remember the untold extent to which they suffered about 30 or 40 years ago. They embraced every suffering with grace as a natural pattern. Now, if they



flip back the pages of their past lives, we feel those days were a nightmare for them, and now they are lucky that they are relocated to Namashung. Yet when it was first confirmed that they were to relocate to Namashung, how, when, funding, etc. were not confirmed, the entire village went through emotional anguish, tension, and panic for several months and years. They worried about the budget to build a new house in Namashung.

Every family was poor. They only had enough to eat in their storerooms, but very little or almost no money to buy anything. The village really went into stress and frustration, and everyone talked about how to manage the money to construct houses. If there wasn't the project to fund and support the Sam Dzong people, many would have gone into depression; many would not have covered the cost yet and suffered with mental anguish; and few would have claimed their part of the land but no house.<sup>23</sup>

**Some of the Heritages Sam Dzong Ngas could not Relocate to Namashung:**

S.N.	Treasures Left Behind	Quantity	Description
1.	Remains of old Gumba	2	The village owned two monasteries several centuries ago, and later, due to chaos and a curse from the neighboring village monastery of Konchokling, the monasteries of Sam Dzong were destroyed, and now we could only witness the ruins. The villager offers Sang (Lob: Dhup) and colors them on special occasions.

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2.	Tsorten (Lob: stupa)	4	Names: Tsorten Kau, Ripri Gang Tsorten, Pote Gang Tsorten, and Cho Dokpo Gortsa Tsorten. All four Tsortens are very old and hold various cultural, social, and spiritual values in the village. Tsorten Mako marked the entry into the village, and people had to take off their hats and caps, get down from the horse, and walk for a while.
3.	Mang Gang (Lob: a small room containing Thukche Cheypo)	1	A small Mang Gang containing a big Thukche Cheypo meaning prayer wheel.
4.	Mhane wall	1	One short length Mhane wall adding holiness to the village.
5.	Caves	20-30	Approximately 30 historical caves are situated within a unique series of cliffs in the village without specific names and are assumed to be the homes of their ancestors. Some caves that goes by names are Phuu Dzong Sangma, Phuu Shaelungma, Phuu Gyaa, and Phuu Gyae.
6.	Rivers/ Streams	3 streams in the past and now only one	There used to be three small streams named based on their location. Due to the swiftly flowing waters, the streams got destroyed and dried slowly. Now, the village has only one stream.
7.	Kagni (Lob: a traditional entrance to village)	2	The village has two Kagni, one old and one new. The former one is the Tsorten Mako; reaching there marked the entry into the village, and people had to take off their hats and caps, get down from the horse, and walk for a while. The latter one is the modern Kagni, situated at the highest pass while coming to and returning from the village through the motor road.

8.	Riga (Lob: Patan or green pastureland)	several	The village is very rich in Patan for grazing their animals all summer and winter.
9.	Rocky landscape unique to eyes	many	Many rocky landscapes are uniquely situated in different places. Some of the rocky mass encompasses several series of caves.
10.	Traditional houses	18	The houses are two-story mud houses with unique features. Each house has several rooms for different purposes. Most of the families have rooms for the winter and summer seasons separately. The room for winter is mostly on the ground floor, completely enclosed, with no window, and the summer room is on the 1 <sup>st</sup> floor, more open, and has windows.
11.	Shing-zang (Lob: a small room for storing fire woods)	>18	Each house has a Shing-zang within house or just nearby for storing dried firewood such as cow, goat, sheep, and horse dung.
12.	Ghyara (Lob: shed for livestock like cows, goats, horses just nearby houses)	>18	Each house has more than one Ghyara for their livestock. The Ghyara with roof is for winter use and one without roof is for summer use.
13.	Tsebrag (Lob: an enclosed and deep place to keep hay)	18	Each house has one or more Tsebrags just attached to the Ghyaras to store and keep hay for livestock. Some families also use some nearby caves for these purposes.

14.	Ouza (Lob: a fenced large area used for various purposes)	18	Each house has an Ouza. It is used for various purposes. It is mostly used during crop harvest for drying grasses, separating seeds, weaning, etc. also used for drying different animal dungs for burning purposes. Sometimes, when the big animal herds are brought to the village from Patan, they are kept there.
15.	Lhazuk (Lob: a small stupa at the top of each house)	18	Each house has a Lhazuk, with different colors and prayer flags hung.
16.	Lhu (Lob: a small structure in the darkest room of the house representing the God or Goddesses of the family)	18	Lhu is the god and goddess of the family since their ancestors, and if any sins or wrong deeds are done by the family, then the Lhu of the family becomes upset and harms and punishes the family in different forms. So, one of the villagers said, none of the families have shifted their Lhu to Namashung to date. If they want to shit it, they have to call upon a Lama and conduct Puja.
17.	Dhumda (Lob: Bhote Pipal trees plot compounded with traditional mud wall)	several	Each household has a minimum of one Dhumda of Bhote Pipal particularly valuable and extensively used as construction material for houses.
18.	Fields	several	There are several abandoned and not-abandoned fields despite the insufficient water and poor irrigation system
19.	School building	2	Two tin roofed school buildings

20.	Tsokhang (Lob: community building)	1	The village has one Tsokhang for different community works like pujas, festival celebrations, and meetings.
21.	Museum	1	There is a museum containing skeletons of animals and humans, many ancient wooden structures, and a centuries-old golden face mask. The museum was constructed by foreigners with contents excavated from the archeologically promising cave of Sam Dzong in an expedition pioneered by Finkel in 2011/12. They entered different, hard-to-reach caves, excavated all the remains, and built the museum. The entry fee to the museum is NRS. 100 for local visitors and NRS. 500 for foreigners.
22.	Water taps	2	The village has a constant supply of drinking water from two concrete water taps. The water from a small spring is captured in a small concrete chamber at a distance of about 400 m above the village. The water is brought to the village through a small-diameter pipe installation.
23.	Jhiu (Lob: water reservoir)	1	The village has one Jhiu, which plays a vital role in the irrigation system of the village. The Jhiu sustained the village for this long.
24.	Tsakma Rong	1	It is a place where very fine and good-quality red clay is found. The clay is used for coloring stupas, monasteries and many other religious monuments. People from other villages come to collect it.



25.	Zimzang	1	It is a place where medicinal herbs called Zimbu are found. The place is very near the autonomous Tibet (China) border. People from other villages either go there or to other places that belong to China.
26.	Sotang	1	Sotang is a place where garlic herbs are found, and people can collect them there.
27.	Lhae or Chuprang (Lob: goat and sheep sheds far from human settlements)	6	Lhae, or Chuprang, are special types of sheds built on high pastureland far from human settlement. So, the village has three Lhae for the winter season and four Lhae for the autumn season.
28.	Solar mill building	1	The village has one solar mill used for grinding grains to produce flour and oils.
29.	Dzong	several	Dzong are fort-like structures found in different places. Sam Dzong village has many Dzongs.

Source: Field Visit 2023

Until date, Sam Dzong village is not completely abandoned. People still go back to their village, look after their houses, and live there for days and nights. People cannot abandon their house, agriculture field, trees, community building, school, museum houses, and many more things in which they have generations of attachment and investment. Those houses and properties stand still without people in the village taking care of them and living in them in a traditional manner. Certain dilemmas still persist among the people of Sam Dzong.

## Dilemma in New Place

Most of the people in the focus group discussion's response to the question of whether they are content to be relocated to Namashung said that they are relieved after moving there. Ourki Sangmo added, "*Kyayela Nyipchi Jung, Tang Lha Youl Du Laep Lae Chokra Dhuk* (Lob: the relocation has helped us; we feel that we are in a safer place and have reached the place of God and goddess.) One participant seated near Ourki Sangmo added, "Here at Namashung, wherever we go, we can see houses in neighboring villages, but Sam Dzong is so isolated that we don't see any neighboring villages."



*Figure 16: Namashung with not much spiritual infrastructure*

Yet then, Dolkar Gurung, thinking profoundly and rubbing her head, said, "At the moment of locking the doors of our old houses in Sam Dzong for coming to Namshung, we really felt bad, sad, and emotionally panicked. While walking out from the Sam Dzong to the new place, we even looked behind towards our old

village several times, recalling old memories.” Other participants nodded their heads, and Dolkar Gurung further added, “For the time being, we are happy; we never know what will happen in the near future. We are quite worried that we are living in the houses without land registration.” Chichik Gurung, a woman aged around 45, shared the very sad notion that they are quite worried about the situation of having no land registration. Other participants in the FGDs further added that they wonder if anyone could make an effort to make the land registration certificate for them. In terms of agricultural productivity, Namashung, with easy irrigation access, gives 4–5 times better yields than the agriculture field in Sam Dzung. However, the limited area of agriculture fields at Namashung is not enough to grow food for themselves most of the time. They sometimes have to buy seeds, grains, and grass from other villages, as before.

Moreover, informants also added that they are lacking many important components in their village. They don’t have *Tsortens*, *Mhane Walls*, and *Mang Gang* to make *Kora* and observe and carry on different spiritual activities. The villagers expressed that they are missing their pastureland and are compelled to return to Sam Dzung for their animal grazing. Furthermore, they noted that they don’t have *Dhumda* (Lob: Bhote Pipal tree plot compounded with traditional mud wall), which is useful in many regards, like grazing their calves, collecting tree leaves and grasses for their animals, and also keeping their environment green.

People have such mixed feelings and complex situations in Namashung. One of the participants stated that she

heard most of the elderly population saying, “We have our old houses back at Sam Dzong to treasure and rely on and return there whenever we feel abandoned by our family at Namashung. Some are even thinking about going back to Sam Dzong and raising goats, sheep, and cows there.” She further emphasized that elderly people really feel great attachments to the village, and they often show low and sad feelings, leaving behind the village. Many of the elderly people choose to return to Sam Dzong and stay there, even alone in the old house, looking after the family animals and fields. They even express sad notions about villagers taking wood away from Sam Dzong to Namashung and argue not to take them away.

Since Sam Dzong is not completely abandoned, there is mobility for the villagers to and from their old village. Some families are still living there. People go to Sam Dzong on various occasions, like small-scale cultivation, irrigation, harvesting, animal grazing, and collecting wood. During winter, almost every family who doesn’t migrate to the lowlands of Nepal goes to Sam Dzong village with their animals to stay the whole winter because it is warmer and they have traditionally-equipped houses with specific rooms and cooking stoves for the winter for themselves and enough *Riga* and *Chuprang* (Lob: shed for sheep and goats far from human settlement) for their animals.

Likewise, Nyochung Gurung said that she has chosen to stay back at Sam Dzong because she felt many things missing in Namashung, such as *Tsorten*, *Mhane Walls*, *Mang Gang*, *Ghumba*, *Dhumda*, *Riga*, and many components of houses like *Ghyara*, *Tseprag*, *Ouza*, and a

lot more. Beside those feelings, many participants agreed that the relocation has caused the small population of Sam Dzong to be divided into two villages.

Overall, it seems that most young people are relieved from natural disasters like floods and the heck of a water shortage for irrigation and livelihood opportunities after coming to Namashung, which is closer to other neighboring villages. They seem happy to be closer to other neighboring villages.

However, in the deeper feeling, elderly people that feel so many things missing in the new location despite being relocated to a safer place in terms of flood and water availability. At times, they feel some emptiness in the new settlement.



## Efforts of Fulfilling Emptiness

As a reality, no one finds a single village in the Lo region without *Gumba*, *Tsorten*, *Mhane Walls*, and *Kagni*. These structures are part and parcel of the cultural-spiritual life of Loba Indigenous Peoples. However, if one comes across a village without these infrastructures by chance, that village will be none other than Namashung. The village appeared on the map of Upper Mustang just recently, and the map doesn't have an index for *Gumba*, *Tsorten*, *Mhane Walls*, or *Kagni*, unlike for other villages. Practically, in the absence of those cultural domains in the new location, the people of Sam Dzong are not able to make Kora, offer Sang, and many more such activities are missed. The absence of those aspects deprived people of enjoying community gatherings during special occasions, like Saka Dawa. During Saka Dawa, Loba people gather at places and put new colors, *Khataks*, and prayers in *Tsortens*, *Gumba*, and *Mhane Walls*. They clean, renovate, and put new colors and prayer flags on sacred spaces and structures. Yangchen Gurung, a woman in her early fifties, said, "We miss our *Tsortens*, *Mhane Walls*, and *Mang Gang*, and we are quite hopeful that we might have some *Tsortens*, if not exactly like the one we have at Sam Dzong." Some other villagers added with a sad note, "We have started to build a *Mang Gang* by raising donations from other villages. We wish to build *Gumba*, *Tsorten*, and *Mhane* walls but have no confidence in finding land, budget, and human resources."

As part of the common festivals of the Loba people, the people of Sam Dzong also celebrate Losar, Saka Luka, Saka Dawa, Teeji, Yartung, and Nyune at Sam Dzong, and they are trying to continue celebrating those occasions

after coming to Namashung. However, while measuring the pros and cons and changes of the celebrations after the relocation, the villagers are facing difficulties and the absence of cultural infrastructure and space for Losar, Saka Luka, Saka Dawa, and Yartung. In the case of Teeji, it is observed and celebrated only in Lo-menthang village; people from other villages in Lo travel to Lo-menthang for Teeji. In that case, it has become easier and closer for Sam Dzong Ngas from Namashung to go to Lo-menthang for the Teeji celebration. One of the participants of FGD stated, “In the past, only the youngster of Sam Dzong used to go to Lo-menthang to observe the festival; the old population and those with long-distance walking issues used to remain back.” Furthermore, he elaborated on the Yartung festival:



*Figure 17: Newly built Mang Gang at Namashung*

“We celebrate the Yartung festival at Namashung as we did at Sam Dzong. Now, things have changed a lot while celebrating this festival. In the past, at Sam Dzong, only the Dhongba family use to celebrate the festival only six male and six female representatives of the Dhongba family with their respective horses on respective days of male and female. The rest of the villagers are the audience of the festival. However, now the entire village is considered equal, with no title of Dongba or Samasume. All 18 households take part in the festival with 18 horses. Needless to say, back there at Sam Dzong, we have had enough space to do the horse race, but here at Namashung, we have space constraints for a horse race.”

For subsistence, the people of Sam Dzong are able to raise livestock and do other traditional occupations at Namashung, but they don't have their own *Riga* (Lob: Green Pastureland) for grazing their animals at Namashung. The families rearing a huge herd of animals go to the *Riga* of nearby villages like Chhoser, Bartsa, and Dhuk. Some of the families are taking care of their animals back at Sam Dzong. Nyochung Gurung said, “We have two cows and a few goats, so I look after them at Sam Dzong, and my daughter stays at Namashung doing all the house chores.” Similarly, the people are able to continue traditional occupations like wool processing and weaving of traditional cloths and items such as Keden, Pangden, Kaw, Tyen, Tsuk-tuk, Mazin, etc. at Namashung. On a positive note, relocation to Namashung has opened more opportunities for girls to earn from traditional weaving. As Namashung is closer to many other villages, people from other villages approach Sam Dzong Ngas to come

to their houses for weaving. “At Sam Dzong, I weaved for my family, and sometimes I used to go to the house of neighbors to weave; at Namashung, I even go to other villages for weaving and earn a little living for my family,” the daughter of Nyochung Gurung shared with a happy face. On the other hand, with relatively easier access to markets in Namashung, the young generations have started aligning towards wearing more modern clothes, resulting in a decline in the use of traditional clothes.

As such, the villagers do not have any challenges to continue with their traditional knowledge, skills, and technologies at Namashung. However, the continuation of traditional knowledge, skills, and technologies will gradually decline due to some other intangible factors, like declining opportunities for community gathering, which build community boundaries. Some new challenges were raised with the relocation of the settlement. For instance, Sam Dzong Ngas does not have any funeral places in Namashung. It has been a complete 5 years since the inhabitants of Sam Dzong village were relocated to Namashung, and no deaths have since occurred thankfully. The villagers have not asked for or decided about an appropriate funeral place yet. One of the villagers mentioned, “We will be in great trouble regarding the funeral place if any unforeseen demise occurs shortly, and now it is high time that we find a funeral place.” Informants said that finding an appropriate funeral place will be difficult for them as they don’t have the landownership certificate for Namashung. They must get permission from the royal family, as the land belongs to them. Likewise, people have to hire *Lamas* to forecast an appropriate area for the funeral site.

Many problems have not ended with relocation of the settlement.

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This article summarizes a story of a dying Indigenous village of Lo the Upper Mustang in Nepal. The Sam Dzung village in Lo, one of the ancestral villages of Loba Indigenous People, faces water scarcity, forcing its people to abandon their homeland. People of this centuries-old village are left with no option but to resettle themselves in new location named Namashung. People face dilemmas in this new place. The recollections of their childhood, traits and teaching of their ancestors, and treasure of their homeland keeps following them; the memories of their properties left back in ancestral homeland become priceless for the people who have moved to Namashung. Despite the fact that this new place is relatively in safer place in terms of natural disaster, relocated people feel many things missing in their life. They try to fulfil such emptiness they feel in absence of their ancestral belongings. However, they are unable to repair the loss and damage of their homeland nor fulfil the emptiness they go through. They are left with unrepairable loss of a way of life treasured by the Loba Indigenous People of Sam Dzung. This is a sad reality of climate crisis in Sam Dzung. This is just one of many cases of climate change-induced loss and damage to Indigenous Peoples of Nepal.



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