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Cultural framework for studying a Tharu community in Nepal

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Abstract

Tharus are one of the largest ethnic groups in Nepal making up 6.75 percentage of the total population, and yet one of the weakest and most marginalized populace. Tharus have unique linguistic and cultural heritages to their credit. Tharus that inhabit Nepal from east to west are composed of various endogamous groups with different cultural practices and languages. The present study deals with the socio-economic status, demographic characteristics and cultural pattern of the Tharu community living in Fattepur VDC of Bara district. A very little research on the Tharus has been done or that the works dealing with Tharu culture are published in very low volumes. The main aim of the work will be to study the cultural aspect of the Tharus that live in Fattepur VDC of Bara district. The poor and minorities are often left by the researchers while they might have a key role in development process. Very fewer researches have been made on Tharu Community and till now, no research has been made on the Tharu Community in the specified area. Living in substance land, Tharus are comparatively sidelined and deprived. In this context, this study will be very important and helpful to solve their basic problems such as illiteracy, poverty, poor health status, poor land for agricultural production, low socio-economic status, etc. The conceptual framework which incorporates parts of the theories of frameworks such as religion, clothing style, language, political participation, and customs and traditions.

Keywords: Tharu community, Cultural Framework, Political Participation, Customs and Traditions

Background of the Study

Nepal, sandwiched between India and China, is a home to different ethnic groups and prides in possessing a diverse socio-cultural history. Nepal's geography sprawls over 1,47,181 sq. Km. with 885 km length (east to west) and 193 km width (north to south). It lies 300 meter to 8848 meter above the sea level. The percentage of land that Nepal covers in the world is 0.03 % and that in Asia is 0.3%. Nepal's topographic varieties correlate to linguistic,

multi-religious and multi-ethnic societies. Nepal has more than 61 ethnic groups scattered throughout the country (Census-2001). All these groups possess their own distinct cultures, following varied religions coupled with their adherence to different social norms and values. Many ethnic communities inhabit different geographical sites in the world and, in particular, their concentration is higher in the Third World Countries like Nepal as compared to other developed countries. That given, most of the ethnic groups in the developing countries have been left out from the mainstream development.

Starting with the working definition of an ethnic group, anthropologists define an ethnic group as a collection of groups of people who share patterns of speech, basic cultural characteristics and in the traditional sense, a common territory. The most prominent feature, however, is that members of the ethnic group feel that they have more in common with each other than with neighboring groups. This sense of unity has both binding and distancing effect as they align with members of their group and maintain boundaries with other groups. In regards to the Nepalese context, we have the presence of lot of indigenous peoples or tribes. These groups, despite having inhabited the land for thousands of years, unfortunately, are still systematically kept on the margin and left where they were by the ruling class. This also keeps them separated from the development mainstream, compelling them to still continue practicing primitive lifestyles, which keeps them struggling to access the most basic needs for mere survival, such as food, cloths shelters etc. In other words, though a big chunk of the world is already enjoying the modern lifestyle of the 21st century, a lot of ethnic groups in Nepal are still suffering from hand to mouth problem and living in a state of penury. **Tharu**, Magar, Tamang, Gurung, Rai, Limbu, Sherpa, Kumal, Dhimal, Chepang etc. are some of the major ethnic groups that have been living in Nepal since a very long time ago.

Among these tribal groups in Nepal, The Tharu tribe is one of the most populated tribes. The Tharu are an indigenous people living in the Terai plains that border India. Tharus claim that of all the indigenous peoples in Nepal, they are *the oldest indigenous community*, "*Adivasi*". The population of Nepal is 2, 31, 51, 423 (Census 2001), in which the share of Tharu population is 6.75%. The Tharu population, though in small number, live in India too, mostly in Champaran District of Bihar and in Udham Singh Nagar District of Uttrakhand, Kheeri, Pilibhit, Gonda, Balrampur, Gorakhpur, Bahirayach of Uttar Pradesh. Their total number is 83,544 in Uttar Pradesh and 85,665 in Uttrakhand State, which totals to 169,209 in India. The Indian government recognizes Tharus as a scheduled tribe. The Tharus, whether they are the ones residing in different locations in India or in different physical spaces in Nepal, have been struggling for their rights and cultural protection for long. The present study

deals with the socio-economic status, demographic characteristics and cultural pattern of the Tharu community living in Fattepur VDC of Bara district.

Objective of the Study

The main objective of this research is to analyze the cultural pattern of the Tharu community.

Conceptual Framework of the Study

The primary goal of this project is to study the cultural aspect of the Tharus that live in Fattepur, Bara, Nepal. The conceptual framework, which entails parts of the theories of frameworks, will be as shown in the ensuing diagram.

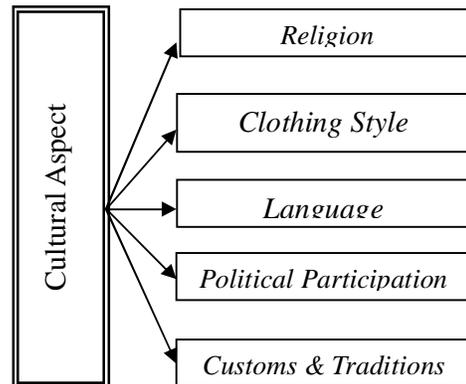


Figure 1

Little research on the Tharus has been done so far, or that the works dealing with Tharu culture are very rarely published. Even the works published on Tharu culture are published in languages like French, which makes it difficult for the Nepalese audience to comprehend the texts. With the realization of this gap, I strongly feel that it would be to present a bibliography on the anthropology of the Tharus. I argue that this will pave way for further studies about the culture of Tharus, as we shall see, most of the existing research revolves around the Tharus of the western Terai. Hitherto, no research has been carried out on the Tharus of this Fattepur VDC.

This study mainly hopes to unravel the cultural practices of the Tharu community in Fattepur, Bara, Nepal. One of the missing points in most of the researches is that the poor and minorities are often ignored by the researchers despite the key role they may play in development processes. That given, very few researches have been done on Tharu Community so far, and no research in particular has been done on the specified area of the Tharu Community. The Tharus in this research site are, as compared to Tharus on other sites, are comparatively more

sidelined and deprived. In this context, this study will be very important and helpful to address their basic problems such as illiteracy, poverty, poor health status, poor land for agricultural production, low socio-economic status, etc. It should also prove to be instrumental in planning programs for this community. Further, it will be a reference material to the students, teachers and useful source to researchers, planners, policy makers all those who are interested in knowing more about this community. In the same way, the study may also help NGOs/INGOs to consider an input to plan and implement various programs targeting the needs of the Tharu community.

Research Design

The current study rests on descriptive research design. It is descriptive because the study attempts to display different cultural practices of Tharu people as they go about with different aspects of their lives.

Universe and Sampling

The Tharu household is the unit of study for this research. The wards no 1, 2, 3 of Fattepur VDC have been selected for the study on purpose due to those wards housing the majority of the Tharu population. Of the total 289 Tharu households, 100 households have been selected for the study. The selection was done through random sampling. That makes 289 the universe and sample size is more than one-third (34.60%) of the universe. The researcher has selected both male and female respondents of aged 20-60⁺ to obtain information from the sample households.

Data Collection Technique

The following tools and techniques of data collection have been employed to study the site of my research.

Interview Schedule

The open-end questionnaire has been developed for the interview schedule and with the help of that structured questionnaire, the respondents have been asked to provide responses regarding the questions supplied by the researcher. The interview schedule has been mainly based on the categories of age, sex and literacy status.

Interview with key informants

An informal interview with some key informants has been conducted with the help of checklist. The informal interview was mainly taken to get information on ethnic history, cultural activities, backwardness and participation of the Tharu people in different development activities. The key informants were school teachers, social workers, political leaders and local member of Tharu organization.

Non-participant observation

During the period of field survey, the researcher adopted the non-participant observation technique to collect the relevant information. It was mainly focused on geographical setting, natural resources, plants and birds, housing structure, sanitation condition, settlement pattern, dressing pattern, etc.

Limitation of the Study

Defining the parameter for a social study itself is a task far from easy. The difficulty lies in devising measurable / tangible social parameters. The proposed study was focused only on the Tharus of Fattepur VDC, Bara. Even within the VDC, the study centered on the sample of selected area. For these reasons, the finding of the study may not be applicable to all the Tharu community as a whole.

Geographical Setting and Climate of the Study Area

The environment i. e. the geographical conditions, climates, natural resources which human community use, directly or indirectly affect the human society and impacts their cultural structure. Contact behavior of different ethnic group and community have important roles in changing and developing the culture.

Bara is one of the 5 districts of Narayani zone which belongs to the Central Development Region. Topographically it is located between 26° 51' to 27°2' north longitude and 84°51' to 85°16' east latitude. It lies at the height of 152 m to 915 m from the sea level. It occupies an area of 1190 sq km. Geographically, the district borders Rautahat in the East, Parsa in the west and Makawanpur in the North. The southern part of the district borders East Champaran District of India . There are 98 VDCs and only one municipality (Kalaiya) in this district. Fattepur VDC, covers an area of 16.20 square km, and is located close to the central part of the district. As for its accessibility, it is about 9 km away from the Mahendra Highway, Simara Airport, and its headquarter is Kalaiya. Fattepur VDC consists of 9 wards. Its geographical positioning on the tropical region causes the temperature to be higher in the summer season. The temperature ranges from about 38⁰C to 9⁰C (Appx.) in the summer and winter season.

Natural Resources, Plants and Animals

The study area lies in the plain Terai which is fertile for agricultural production. However, the irrigation facilities are underdeveloped. The government's focus on this is indispensable to boost agriculture. Rice, pulse, wheat, maize etc are the main crops grown in the area. Fruits such as banana, guava, jackfruit, starfruit, datepalm, litchi,

blackberry, plum etc. also thrive well in this area. There is a dense forest , Charkoshe jhadi, that spreads over 7 kilometers to the north of the village.

This area is also home to different types of animals and birds. The wild animals such as leopards, wild cats, jackal etc and birds such as *Crow, Eagle, Sparrow, Pigeon, Parrot, Jurelo, Dhukur, Koili, Kalij, Mynah, Chutki* etc also use this area as their home.

Population of the Study Area

The population structure of a caste is impacted by a social activity. For social, economic, and physical change of human society, population plays a crucial role. According to the national census 2001, the total population of Bara is 559,135 of which Tharu population is 63,259. That represents 11.31 percent of the total population in the district. The total population of the Fattepur VDC is 7,517 (Census 2001). According to JJYC (*Jana Jagaran Chetana Abhiyan Kendra, 2064*), Bara, the total population of Fattepur VDC is 12,290 out of which 7251 (59%) are Tharus. This shows that the percentage of the Tharu population has increased as compared to that of the census 2001. The other castes around the Tharu community of Fattepur VDC are Lohar, Koiri, Kumal, Kanu, Dom, Muslims, Kalwar, Dhobi, Chamar, Dushadh, Kurmi, Koiri, Mali, Malah, Teli, Musahar, Rajput, Brahmin, Chhetri etc.

Educational Condition

In any country, education is one of the primary indicators of socio-economic development. Education enlightens human beings; it helps one to judge between right and wrong. Socio-economic status of people, thus, directly relates to education. How prosperous a community is determined on the basis of the quality of education provided by educational institutes operating in that area. For educational programs, information and entertainment, many of the Tharus use the radio and tape recorders. Some of them, however, do not have access to these devices. The only way of acquiring education for the poor people is either formal or informal education programs offered by the government. One higher secondary school and one private school operate in the study area. Some of the major hindrances for the lack of quality education can be attributed to factors such as lack of school building, educational materials, furniture facilities, lack of well trained teachers, inactive school management committee and inadequate supervision by district education office.

Literacy Status

One of the major indicators of socio-economic development of the nation is literacy. It reflects the status of women/men in the society. Literacy rate of females is lower than that of male in Nepal. Gender disparity is still a

grave problem in the Nepalese education sector. We need to highlight “suppression tactics used to marginalize or ignore [female rhetoricians]” (Bhusal, 2017, p. 54) and reclaim contributions of females in society.

As Ashok Bhusal (2019) explains in his “The rhetoric of racism in society” that “racist attitudes and behaviors cause problems for the marginalized communities” (p. 114) such as the Tharu. The government should pay attention to this race and its concerns. In his another article “The rhetoric of racism and anti-miscegenation Laws in the United States,” Bhusal states that “What is necessary at this point is, with the tools offered in critical race theory, is to complete a deeper study of minorities and bring their stories, their voices, into academic scholarship” (p. 88).

Among the Tharu people very few are monolingual, some are bilingual and some are multilingual speakers. Nepali, Hindi and English are the other languages spoken by the bilingual and the multilingual Tharu people. That said, the state tacitly or overtly nurses the desire to make Tharus conform to the dominant Nepali language. In this light Suresh Lohani (2019), in “Constructing non-traditional rhetoric: Critical Study of Gloria Anzaldua and Suresh Canagarajah” states that “the best the dominant culture can do is attempt subduing other cultures through discouraging and humiliating their language, affecting all available means, in the name of making these linguistic variants conform to the standard academic language” (p.117). Thus, if the Tharu community is made aware of the design that the dominant language orchestrates to impose its hegemony through the promoted use of the Nepali language, not only will they safeguard their cultural identity, but also enhance their academic standing.

Cultural Activities and Change

This topic talks about religion and politics in Tharu community. This includes housing structure, dress pattern, food and drinking habits, festivals, social hierarchy, life cycle and change, birth, marriage and death ceremony.

Religion

Religion is the belief of super natural power and the nature of that force is mainly based on socioeconomic and environmental aspects of the believers. That causes people spread across different locations to practice different religions. However, the religions help people to seek answers about the meaning and existence of life and death. The religious interpretations on these issues help people to manage their livelihood as well maintain their day to day life. Similarly, religious beliefs bring the individuals together and lessens the gap between them.

Talking about the study area there are some people of different castes as well those who follow different religions. However, so far as Tharus are concerned, almost all the Tharus of Fattepur VDC are practitioners of Hindu Religion. Suresh Lohani (2019) in “LGBTI in NEPAL, Pakistan, and India: Law, Religion, and Individuals” states

that “the legal system of the geography or the religious texts of the community may seem to bind the people living within that geography”(p.63). Thus, the conformity of all the Tharus in this site to Hindu religion is one of their uniting factors.

Language

Tharu language is unique to Tharus, which has 29 consonants and 8 vowels. Nazalisation is also quite distinct in this language. Tharus have two number singular and plural, and two genders masculine and feminine. The language has nominal classifiers. Ergative, instrumental, accusative and four moods, dative, genitive, and locative cases are marked with suffixes in the language. There are three tenses (past, present and future), and four moods (indicative, interrogative, imperative and optative) found in the language. This is a Subject – Object – Verb language which has interrogation, negation, causativization and and paasivization syntactic processes. In this language, subordination and coordination are used for clause combining processes. However, the Tharu dialect of the study area sounds little different from the Tharu Language of the other districts. The Tharu language of the study areas appears more like the fusion of Tharu, Bhojpuri, Awadhi and Maithili. The language, however, is very close to Bhojpuri. Almost all the people of the study area are acquainted with the local language. Even the people of other communities are influenced by the language. Tharus in Fatehpur also use Nepali language as their second language.

Tharu community has very few monolingual speakers; many are bilingual, and some are multilingual speakers. Nepali, Hindi and English are the other languages spoken by the bilingual and the multilingual Tharu people. In the context of teaching English and other languages to the Tharu community, it is important that instructors employ multimodal pedagogies, which respect linguistic resources of minorities as resources. As Ashok Bhusal in “Addressing FYC instructors' lack of technological expertise in implementing multimodal assignments,” says that “in the classroom where multimodality is integrated, students are in the forefront of the activities and so teachers play the role of a facilitator” (p. 169). However, it is essential that “classrooms be equipped with computers and LCD projectors which should provide a good environment for students to work on multimodal assignments” (p. 169). Next, Suresh Lohani (2019) in “The history of multimodal composition, its implementation, and challenges” opines that “multimodality ...is a challenge to autonomous orientation to literacy that advocates for the conformation to the dominant language conventions” (p.124). Thus, for the Tharu community too multimodal writing practices would be helpful as these allow them to resist the dominance of the Nepalese language and

engage in reading and writing practices that endorse either different variants of the Nepalese or their very own vernacular language.

Dress Pattern

The climatic condition of a place directly affects the clothing style of the people inhabiting that geography. Since the study area is situated in the comparatively hotter region of Nepal, people there wear light colored clothes. It is also affected by the age group. The old aged people wear Lungi and also white dhoti and kurta. Women wear white and colorful sarees. The younger population of females wear shirt and trousers, whereas the girls wear kurta and salwar. However, the younger generation seem more fascinated towards the fashionable dresses that hit the market based on time and context. Tharu women adorn themselves with different type of ornaments from head to foot. They sport tikuli on their forehead. They wear Fuli on their nose, tops, and earrings in their ears. Similarly, they wear heavy ornament around their neck called hansuli. They decorate their arms with bangles. They wear finger rings and bichhiya in their toes.

Food and drinking habits

Most of the Tharu community members of Fattepur VDC are non-vegetarians. They mainly consume grain, meat, fruits, and other edibles fetched from the forest. GHONGHI, a kind of edible snail found in fresh water, is one of the unique food varieties that finds place on the table of Tharus. They eat meat of goat, duck, pigeon, chicken, etc. Some of them also eat Pork. Depending on what they eat ordinarily and on special occasions, the Tharu foods can be classified into ordinary food and special food respectively. Cooked rice in the morning and wheat bread in the evening is the general food in the Tharu community. Other items in the ordinary food are sinki (gundruk), sukuti of vegetables like gourd, brinjal, etc. Besides, the chatni and pickles of salt and pepper also is a part of ordinary food. Among the special food items are meat, crab, fish, cell-fish and steamed and oiled food made of rice flour (*Thekuwa, Bageya etc.*). Mutton, Chicken and meats of other animals such as pigeon and other wild animals are often enjoyed as special food.

Chewing tobacco, Smoking and drinking are not the traditional habits of Tharu of Fattepur VDC. However, many people, males in particular, are found to be habituated to drinking local wine, popularly known as *Daru*. For smoking they use tobacco, cigarette and *bindi* in their daily life. They smoke it through two methods: sometimes they smoke tobacco rolling up on the leaf of chestnut, and sometimes they put the tobacco in the Chilim (*the cup of Hukah*) and burn it. They set it at *Hukah* and smoke through it.

Festivals

Tharus, as stated earlier, practice Hindu religion. They celebrate all the national festivals such as Dashain, Tihar, Krishna Janmastami, Maghe Sankranti etc. However, they celebrate the following feasts and festivals with extra zeal:

1. **Fagua:** Tharus of Fattepur call Holi or Fagu poornima as Fagua. This is also grandly celebrated festival for Tharus after they celebrate Holika Dahan(Holika Jalaune).
At Fagua, they invite their relatives and close friends called sanhati (Meet) to their home and celebrate it by eating delicious foods. They celebrate by playing with colours along with songs and dances. They use “Hori” songs related to holi playing between Krishna and Radha.
2. **Jeetiya:** This is another festival celebrated by the Tharus. The Tharu women are keep a fast with a view to offering blessings to their husband and children. They pray for their long lives. They believe that their offsprings will live longer if they keep this fast. Nowadays in urban or city areas, Tharu people have started celebrating this festivity in groups.

In conclusion, this paper that chiefly discusses various cultural and socio-economic dimensions of Tharu communities points to the need for the government and concerned organizations to do more for the preservation of their culture, and overall development. The government should launch programs with a view to uplifting the life standard of this heavily marginalized indigenous community. These should be aimed at further honing and preserving indigenous skills. Similarly, handicraft production that Tharus are skilled at should be promoted. To elevate the educational standard of Tharus, they should be offered the option to receive education in the language of comfort and different multimodal composition practices should be used to make education more equitable. To preserve their culture from the modern cultural invasion, Tharu community and organization associated with Tharus should be aware of their cultural assets such as dress, language, customs, feasts and festivals.

Conflict of interest: The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

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