

Socio-Cultural Changing Pattern of Tharu Community**Tej Bahadur Vishwokarma**

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Abstract

This study examines the socio-cultural changes within the Tharu community in Khairahani Municipality, Ward No. 12, Chitwan. The research is based on interviews with key informants, participant observation, and secondary data analysis from various sources. Socio-cultural assimilation occurs when two different cultural groups coexist, with the more dominant culture eventually influencing the local one. The study highlights the significant impact of the migrant hill populations on Tharu culture, particularly through modernization and urbanization. The research identifies dramatic shifts in cultural practices, especially in life cycle rituals such as birth, naming ceremonies, marriage, death, and festivals. These changes, driven by both internal and external factors, are explored in-depth, reflecting the evolution of Tharu culture from past traditions to present-day practices. Data collected from focused group discussions and interviews with key informants provide rich insights into these transformations within the community.

Key Words: Socio-cultural, changing pattern, indigenous, globalization,

Introduction

Nepal, a country renowned for its multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society, is home to 142 distinct ethnic groups and a variety of belief systems. Among these diverse communities, the Tharu people stand as the second-largest indigenous group. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS, 2021), approximately 1,807,124 Tharu individuals, or 6.2% of the country's population, reside primarily in the Terai region. Their historical homeland, known as Tharwot, lies in the southern, forested areas of the Siwalik Hills, which stretches across Nepal's Inner Terai. Historically, the Tharu people are believed to have originated from the Thar Desert of India, with lineage traced to a mix of Rajput and Muslim ancestry (Pilgrims, 2007). Throughout history, they have developed a distinct cultural identity, deeply rooted in reverence for nature, spirits, and the forest, which served as their livelihood and spiritual sanctuary (Kunwar, 2002). However, in recent times, the Tharu community's traditional way of life has been undergoing significant changes due to socio-cultural transformations, influenced both by internal shifts and external forces.

The Tharu community's profound connection with the forest and their traditional agricultural lifestyle has been a cornerstone of their identity. Their deep respect for nature, where the forest is regarded as a divine realm filled with gods and spirits, has shaped their rituals, customs, and daily lives (Kunwar, 2002). However, rapid changes in Nepal's socio-economic and cultural landscapes have impacted the way of life of many indigenous communities, particularly in areas like Chitwan, a thriving tourist destination that has become a melting pot of diverse cultures. With the growth of tourism, interactions with tourists and the increasing presence of hill-caste

communities have led to the blending of cultures. The increasing influence of these external factors, including economic pressures and the transformation of social values, has caused significant shifts in the Tharu people's cultural practices and traditions.

This research aims to examine the socio-cultural changes in the Tharu community of Khairahani-12, Chitwan, focusing on how external cultural influences, particularly those from the hill people and tourism, are reshaping their traditional beliefs and customs. The study intends to explore the frequency of participation in Tharu cultural practices, identify the impact of tourism and external cultural forces, and investigate changes in traditional rituals such as those related to birth, marriage, and death. By analyzing these aspects, the study will provide insights into the evolving nature of Tharu identity in the face of modern pressures, offering a sociological perspective on the implications of cultural blending in contemporary Nepal.

The significance of this study lies not only in its theoretical contributions to understanding the socio-cultural dynamics of indigenous groups but also in its timely exploration of the challenges faced by the Tharu people in preserving their cultural heritage. The rapid changes within the Tharu community's socio-cultural fabric have profound implications for their cultural identity, social cohesion, and survival of traditional practices. As Nepal modernizes and its cultural diversity increasingly intermingles, there is a pressing need to examine the impacts of such transitions on indigenous communities. By exploring these socio-cultural changes, this research will provide valuable insights into the broader dynamics of cultural preservation, identity, and adaptation in the face of globalization and cultural homogenization.

The Tharu community, with its rich cultural heritage and deep connection to the forest, faces an era of cultural transformation, influenced by external forces like tourism and the neighboring hill-caste populations. Understanding the extent and nature of these changes is crucial not only for preserving the Tharu people's cultural legacy but also for promoting policies that support the sustainable and respectful integration of diverse cultural identities within Nepal's broader social fabric. This research, therefore, holds both academic and practical significance in the study of cultural adaptation and indigenous rights in a rapidly changing world.

Review of Literature and Conceptual Framework

The study of the Tharu community and its socio-cultural practices has been an area of growing interest among scholars, particularly about its transformation over time due to external influences such as geographical migration, religious changes, and modernization. Various researchers, both Nepali and foreign, have contributed significantly to understanding the unique lifestyle, cultural practices, and the historical context of the Tharu people. The literature surrounding the Tharu community covers a range of topics from agricultural practices, religious beliefs, interactions with neighboring hill communities, to the influences of global health initiatives and land reforms. This review synthesizes the contributions of scholars such as Bista (2000), Upadhaya (1999), and others, highlighting the themes, gaps, and theoretical underpinnings in the existing body of work.

One of the key observations made by Bista (2000) in his study of Tharu culture is the community's traditional resistance to migrating for employment opportunities, particularly to India, a common trend among hill people. Bista highlights that unlike their hill counterparts, Tharus were primarily agriculturalists, choosing to remain in their localities and focusing on farming, which they believed was the core of their

existence. This theme of isolation from external labor markets underscores a significant aspect of Tharu identity, which has been preserved over generations through deep-rooted cultural and occupational ties to the land. However, the trend of educated young Tharus seeking employment in the army has marked a subtle shift in their traditional way of life, which Bista mentions as an exception rather than the norm (Bista, 2000). This shift suggests that modernity, particularly through education and changing economic opportunities, is influencing the younger generation's cultural priorities and career choices.

The historical context of the Tharu community's interactions with external groups, especially during and after the malaria eradication programs in the 1950s, has been well documented by Upadhaya (1999). The World Health Organization's efforts to eradicate malaria in the Terai belt not only improved public health but also catalyzed the migration of hill people into the region. This influx of new settlers, coupled with land reform programs, played a crucial role in the cultural and socio-economic dynamics of the Terai. Upadhaya (1999) discusses how these external influences led to the 'Nepalization' of the Tharu community, which resulted in the assimilation of Tharus into mainstream Hinduism. Tharu worship, previously centered around their tribal deities such as Bhuiyan or Bhumsen, was gradually supplanted by Hindu gods and practices, with the adoption of Hindu rituals and customs. This religious transformation reflects the broader trend of cultural diffusion and hybridization, as the Tharu people navigated the pressures of integrating into a larger national identity.

Additionally, the role of traditional healers or shamans, known as Guruba or Gurau, in the Tharu community has been an area of focus in the literature. Before the eradication of malaria, Tharus relied heavily on these shamans for health-related issues, and they were considered as important spiritual and medical authorities within the community. These healers were integral to the Tharu worldview, which is deeply spiritual and nature based. However, with the arrival of hill communities and the infusion of formal healthcare systems, particularly in the aftermath of malaria eradication, the reliance on traditional healing practices has diminished. The shift from indigenous to more conventional forms of medical care represent the broader socio-cultural changes occurring in Tharu communities.

The empirical studies conducted by scholars such as Babu Ram Acharya (1953), Dor Bahadur Bista (1967), and others provide important historical and anthropological insights into the socio-cultural fabric of the Tharu people. These early works offer foundational understandings of the Tharu community's cultural practices, social structure, and responses to external changes. However, there remain significant gaps in the contemporary understanding of how globalization, urbanization, and continued migration influence Tharu cultural identity in the modern era. Although studies have documented the historical transformations within the community, there is a need for more recent research that delves into the ongoing cultural adaptations and the challenges faced by the Tharu community in preserving their traditional practices amidst the pressures of development and modernization.

In terms of theoretical frameworks, the existing literature largely draws upon concepts from cultural assimilation, identity theory, and cultural diffusion. The notion of cultural assimilation is particularly relevant when discussing the Nepalization of the Tharu people, as they adopted elements of Hindu culture and practices. This assimilation process, however, has not been one-sided. The Tharu community has retained significant aspects of their culture, particularly in rural areas, and continues

to practice traditional rituals despite the influence of external forces. The theory of cultural hybridity, as proposed by Homi K. Bhabha, is also useful in understanding how the Tharu people have adapted to the cultural influences of hill communities while maintaining their unique identity. The concept of cultural hybridity suggests that cultural exchange does not necessarily result in the loss of identity but can lead to the creation of new, hybrid cultural forms.

A significant gap in literature is the need for more in-depth studies on the changing cultural practices of the Tharu people in contemporary times, especially in relation to the younger generation's attitudes toward traditional rituals and occupations. While the earlier works provide a historical perspective, there is limited research on the current socio-cultural dynamics within the Tharu community, particularly in urbanized regions like Chitwan. Additionally, there is a lack of empirical studies focusing on the influence of tourism on Tharu cultural practices and the preservation of their indigenous knowledge systems. Understanding how Tharu people navigate the pressures of globalization, tourism, and modern education will be crucial in assessing the future of their cultural identity.

The literature on the Tharu community offers valuable insights into the historical and cultural transformations that have shaped their identity. However, there remains a need for more focused research on the contemporary challenges faced by the Tharu people, especially in the context of globalization and cultural interchanges with other communities. Theories of cultural assimilation and hybridity provide a useful lens for understanding these transformations, but further empirical studies are required to address the gaps in our understanding of how the Tharu community adapts to modern pressures while striving to retain their cultural heritage.

Methodology

The study is based on exploratory and descriptive research design to analyze the socio-cultural changing pattern of Tharu community. Modern theory was used to analyze the changes due to modernization, urbanization, and westernization.

Exploratory research method was used to seek how the Tharu people are involved in various socio-cultural activities. In this method, the information were extracted by face-to-face interview. The frequencies and averages of Tharu people adopting own tribal dresses, ornaments, food habits, traditional houses, language, agricultural activities livestock farming, religion, god and goddess, festivals, ritual activities, and folk-culture. Tharus are one of the indigenous ethnic people with their own language, culture and history who live in the Terai as well as extend across 550 miles of the southern border of Nepal. They are assumed to be the first settlers in the Terai region. In the past, Tharu people had started to settle, resisting to the Malaria and developed the region for settlement and agricultural land. Historically, they have unique immune power fighting against Malaria (WHO).

Gentle and simple natured Tharus are laborious in agricultural products and traditional life throughout the whole Terai lowlands of Nepal. Tharus are in various groups which are distinguished by their territories, cultural features and languages. Tharus have been adopting doctrines of Lord Buddha from their early descendants. (Sharma, 2049).

Tharu tribes living in Chitwan are known as Chitoniya Tharus, whose dresses, festivals, cultural and ritual activities are different from Tharus inhabiting in other places of Nepal. Nepali and Chitoniya Tharus are titled and subtitled with different

surnames like Rajput, Tharbot, Tharkuhar, Batar, Mardania, Pawe, Disawaha, Panjiyar, Khausia, Batha, Khojobar, Gorat, Dahit, Raut, Kataharia, Kochilla etc.

Analysis and Interpretation of the Data

The study aimed to explore the socio-cultural changes within the Tharu community due to their close contact with hill-origin people, particularly Brahmins and Chhetris. This research sheds light on how external influences, such as globalization, advancements in communication technology, and the migration of hill communities, have affected the Tharu people's traditional life-cycle rituals and festivals. The researcher aimed to contribute to sociological literature by examining how such cultural shifts have altered Tharu's identity. The findings suggest that globalization and modernization have played significant roles in changing the social structures, values, norms, and cultural practices of the Tharu people, leading to a gradual shift away from their traditional lifestyle.

The influence of modernization is evident in various aspects of Tharu life, including their family structure, marriage customs, language, and festivals. The study indicates that traditional forms of family life, such as joint families, are becoming less common in favor of nuclear families, particularly in urbanized areas like Khairahani Municipality. While the Tharu people have preserved much of their traditional agricultural lifestyle, which includes farming, livestock, and hunting, the external influence of hill-origin people has gradually shaped their socio-cultural practices. For example, marriage customs have evolved, with the younger generation now more inclined to pursue love marriages instead of arranged marriages, a tradition that was once more prevalent among the Tharu.

One of the most notable impacts of the cultural interaction between Tharu and hill-origin people is the shift in religious and cultural practices. While the Tharus traditionally worshipped their tribal goddess Bhuiyan or Bhumsen, they have also adopted Hindu practices. This includes celebrating Hindu festivals such as Krishna Janmashthami, Thulo Ekadashi, and Baishakh Purnima, which were not part of Tharu traditions in the past. Moreover, the naming of children, formerly an exclusively Tharu practice, has now incorporated Hindu customs, with the use of Brahmin priests and adherence to birth pollution norms. This shift signifies how the Tharu community has integrated elements of hill-origin culture, influencing their religious and social rituals.

The study also reveals how the Tharu people's language and dress have undergone significant changes due to their interaction with other communities. Historically, the Tharus spoke their own language, but the younger generation is increasingly adopting Nepali as their primary language, while still retaining their native tongue. This bilingual capacity is a testament to the Tharu people's adaptability and their ability to navigate between their traditional culture and the wider, more globalized society. Similarly, Tharu's traditional attire, which was once distinctive with colorful patterns and decorations, has seen a shift as more people begin to adopt modern clothing styles influenced by external cultures.

Furthermore, the impact of external cultural influences is not limited to personal practices but extends to the community's celebrations and social interactions. In the study area, festivals such as Jitiya, Phaguwa, and Maghi Parba, once central to Tharu life, are now celebrated alongside newly adopted Hindu festivals. The integration of Hindu practices into Tharu traditions has led to a blending of cultural customs, where

the community simultaneously honors their indigenous festivals while participating in those of their hill-origin neighbors. The continuation of festivals like Fagu, Maghi, Jitia, and Nag Panchami reflects the Tharu people's determination to preserve their cultural heritage despite the influence of modernization.

The analysis also highlights the significant role of education and economic change in shaping the Tharu community's response to modernization. While traditional agricultural practices remain a cornerstone of the Tharu economy, there is a growing desire among younger generations to pursue formal education and diversify their occupations. This shift is contributing to the erosion of traditional occupational roles, as more Tharus are venturing into business and other sectors. As a result, the socio-economic structure of the Tharu community is transforming, with new opportunities for employment and social mobility emerging, albeit at the cost of their traditional lifestyle.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that while the Tharu people have undergone significant socio-cultural changes due to their contact with hill-origin people, they continue to retain aspects of their traditional culture. The integration of external influences has resulted in a hybrid cultural identity, where Tharu traditions coexist with Hindu practices and modern societal norms. Despite the challenges posed by globalization and modernization, the Tharu community's adaptability, multilingualism, and commitment to preserving their heritage ensure that their culture remains a vital part of Nepal's diverse socio-cultural landscape. However, the study suggests the need for greater awareness and participation in preserving the Tharu's cultural practices, as their traditional ways of life face ongoing pressures from external cultural forces.

Findings and Discussion

The study explores the socio-cultural transformations in the Tharu community, especially the changes in life-cycle rituals and festivals due to their proximity to the hill-origin people. The findings suggest that globalization, technological advances, and political shifts have significantly impacted traditional practices. These influences align with Talcott Parsons' Modernization Theory, which posits that societies evolve from simple structures to complex, differentiated ones (Parsons, 1964). The Tharu people, while continuing to preserve core aspects of their culture, have increasingly integrated customs from neighboring hill communities, particularly in their rituals, festivals, and social practices. This cross-cultural exchange has reshaped their social fabric, making it more fluid and dynamic.

In the context of the Tharu community, the study found notable changes in socio-cultural practices, including the adoption of Hindu customs such as birth pollution, child naming ceremonies, and the involvement of Brahmin priests in religious events. These practices were previously absent in traditional Tharu culture but have gained prominence due to the interaction with hill-origin populations. This transformation demonstrates the process of cultural assimilation, where external influences lead to the integration of new practices while still maintaining traditional elements. The influence of Hindu festivals such as Krishna Janmashthami and Thulo Ekadashi has also become widespread, although indigenous Tharu festivals like Fagu, Maghi, and Jitia continue to be celebrated. These shifts reflect the broader socio-cultural changes experienced by many indigenous communities in the wake of modernization (Gellner, 1997).

The influence of modernization and urbanization has not only affected religious practices but has also led to changes in family structures, occupations, and language use among the Tharu people. While agriculture remains the primary occupation, the younger generation is increasingly inclined towards education and urban careers, which has diluted the significance of traditional livelihood practices. Furthermore, the Tharu language, which was once predominantly spoken, is now often supplemented with Nepali, creating a multilingual society. This linguistic shift underscores the adaptability of the Tharu community to the changing socio-political landscape of Nepal, particularly in urban areas like Khairahani Municipality (CBS, 2021). The erosion of traditional customs in favor of a more homogenized cultural identity is a key feature of this ongoing transformation.

Despite these changes, the Tharu community still cherishes certain aspects of their cultural heritage. Many continue to practice traditional agricultural methods, retain their indigenous food preferences, and maintain deep-rooted connections to their religious beliefs. However, the younger generation faces a tension between preserving these traditions and embracing the modern, globalized world. This tension is evident in marriage practices, where love marriages are becoming more common, replacing the older, arranged marriage system. The challenge lies in balancing the preservation of their cultural identity with the pressures of modernity, globalization, and the influence of hill-origin communities. Thus, while the Tharu people are undergoing significant socio-cultural changes, these changes do not completely erase their traditional identity but rather transform it into ways that reflect the broader processes of cultural adaptation and change (Upadhaya, 1999).

Conclusion

This study underscores the dynamic balance between tradition and modernity within the Tharu community. While external influences such as globalization, modernization, and the integration with hill-origin cultures have led to changes in rituals, festivals, and daily life, the Tharu people have shown resilience in preserving core aspects of their cultural identity. Despite adopting certain Hindu practices and participating in new festivals, they continue to maintain traditional customs, agricultural practices, and language. This ongoing cultural assimilation reflects a negotiation process where the Tharu people actively adapt to modernity while safeguarding their heritage. The findings emphasize the need for further research into how indigenous communities, like the Tharus, can navigate the complexities of cultural transformation in an increasingly globalized world, ensuring the preservation of their unique traditions while embracing new opportunities for growth and integration.

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