

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/shaheedsmriti.v13i10.76804>**Cultural Significance and Evolution of Tharu Festivals****Narayan Babu Shrestha**

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Abstract:

This article examines the cultural significance and evolution of Tharu festivals, focusing on their role in preserving the community's identity and heritage. The primary aim is to explore how these festivals reflect the spiritual beliefs, historical narratives, and social cohesion of the Tharu people, while also assessing the impact of modernization on their practices. Using interviews with community members and cultural analysis, the study highlights the challenges posed by urbanization, commercialization, and generational shifts. Key findings reveal a strong sense of cultural pride within the Tharu community, despite these pressures, and a growing effort to adapt the festivals while maintaining their authenticity. The article concludes by emphasizing the importance of proactive measures such as incorporating Tharu culture into educational curricula, fostering youth participation, and securing institutional support to safeguard these traditions. By balancing tradition with contemporary influences, Tharu festivals can continue to thrive, ensuring their cultural legacy endures for future generations.

Keywords: *Tharu festivals, cultural identity, modernization, traditional practices, Nepal, social cohesion.*

Introduction

Nepal, though geographically small, is home to an extraordinary diversity of castes, ethnic groups, cultures, and languages. Among these, the Tharu people constitute the fifth-largest ethnic group, primarily residing in the Terai and inner Terai regions. According to the 2021 census, the Tharu population in Nepal was recorded at 1,807,124, making up 6.2% of the total population. The concentration of Tharu communities is notably high in districts such as Chitwan, Morang, Dang, Bardiya, Kalaiya, and Janakpur, where their cultural practices have been preserved for generations. As Guneratne (2002) points out, the Tharu language, belonging to the Eastern Bihari language family, plays a crucial role in maintaining their cultural identity. Despite the pressures of modernization and socio-economic change, the Tharu people continue to uphold their distinct heritage, contributing significantly to Nepal's cultural diversity.

The Tharu people have historically maintained a unique identity, reflected in their traditional dress, festivals, language, religious practices, and rituals. Their society has largely been agrarian, with livelihoods deeply connected to nature and agriculture (Guneratne, 1998). In the past, Tharus lived in forested regions, relatively isolated

from other communities, but this isolation also left them vulnerable to economic exploitation. Many Tharus have faced cycles of debt and landlessness, partly due to a lack of financial literacy and access to economic resources.

Tharu cultural identity is vividly expressed through their attire, ornaments, and elaborate festival celebrations. Tharu men traditionally wear 'Langoti' and 'Bhoto,' while women distinguish themselves with intricate tattoos and unique ornaments, reflecting their cultural roots (Chaudhary, 2019). The Tharu people maintain a deep spiritual connection to nature, which is evident in their festivals, such as Maghi, Holi, Jitiya, and Yasoma. Among these, Maghi stands out as the most significant, marking the New Year and reinforcing social harmony through communal feasts and cultural performances. The Tharu community itself is not homogenous; it is divided into several subgroups, including the Rana Tharu, Dangura Tharu, Kathariya Tharu, Chitwaniya Tharu, and Kochila Tharu, each of which possesses distinct cultural traits and localized traditions.

Despite their rich cultural heritage, the influence of modernization and Westernization is increasingly evident among younger Tharu generations. Traditional customs and rituals are gradually fading as younger individuals migrate to urban centers and assimilate into mainstream Nepali culture. The adoption of modern lifestyles and shifts in economic structures have reduced the prominence of many Tharu festivals, threatening the continuity of their cultural identity. These transformations raise pressing concerns regarding the sustainability of Tharu traditions in a rapidly changing world.

This study seeks to examine the cultural significance of Tharu festivals, exploring how these celebrations contribute to the preservation of community identity and traditions. Furthermore, it aims to analyze the evolution of these festivals over time and assess the impact of modernization on traditional practices. By focusing on the Tharu community in Ratnanagar-4, Bhokaha, this research will provide insights into the ways cultural heritage is being reshaped by socio-economic changes. Understanding these dynamics is essential to developing strategies that balance cultural preservation with the evolving needs of the community. Through this study, we aim to highlight the importance of safeguarding Tharu festivals as living traditions that continue to define the identity of one of Nepal's most distinct indigenous communities.

Literature Review

The Tharu community, one of the indigenous ethnic groups in Nepal, has been extensively studied in terms of its cultural practices, socio-economic conditions, and historical significance. However, research on the evolution and cultural significance of Tharu festivals remains fragmented, with scholars focusing on isolated aspects of Tharu identity rather than a holistic understanding of their festival traditions. Existing studies highlight the interplay between Tharu socio-economic conditions and their cultural expressions but fail to provide a comprehensive narrative of how their festivals have evolved over time.

Guneratne (2016) describes the Tharu people as historically linked to forest life, practicing shifting cultivation and maintaining a distinct cultural identity. However, this research primarily focuses on economic activities rather than the role of festivals in sustaining their cultural heritage. Similarly, Bista Turin (2003) provides an ethnographic account of the Tharu community, detailing their socio-economic

struggles and geographical isolation. While he acknowledges their cultural traditions, his work does not explore the deeper meanings and transformations of Tharu festivals.

Scholars such as Srivastava (1963) and Macdonald (1975) have discussed the significance of Maghi, one of the most important Tharu festivals. Srivastava notes that Maghi serves as a time of social integration and cultural reaffirmation, while Macdonald emphasizes its function in labor contracts and economic transactions. Despite these insights, there is a gap in understanding how Maghi and other Tharu festivals have evolved in response to external influences, such as migration, economic shifts, and globalization.

Chaudhary (2019) made notable contributions by documenting two Dangura Tharu festivals, marking an initial step toward systematic study. However, the focus remains on descriptive ethnography rather than analytical discourse on the transformation of Tharu festivals. Pyakural (1982) further explores Tharu socio-economic conditions but does not explicitly link them to the cultural shifts in festival celebrations.

While previous studies have examined various dimensions of Tharu culture, including social structure, land tenure, and economic marginalization, the role of festivals as a dynamic cultural expression remains underexplored. Future research should integrate historical, sociological, and anthropological perspectives to analyze how Tharu festivals serve as adaptive cultural practices amidst changing socio-political and economic landscapes.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for understanding the cultural significance and evolution of Tharu festivals is grounded in the interplay between cultural traditions, socio-economic structures, and external influences. Drawing from World Systems Theory (Wallerstein, 1974), the Tharu community's historical marginalization and economic struggles have shaped their cultural expressions, particularly their festivals. The core-periphery dynamics in Nepal's development have influenced the way Tharus celebrate their traditions, reflecting adaptations in response to external pressures.

Festivals serve as a medium for cultural preservation, social cohesion, and economic restructuring within Tharu society. According to Srivastava (1963), Tharu festivals reinforce community bonds and uphold traditional norms while also accommodating elements of external cultural influences. The influx of hill migrants into Tharu lands (Chaudhary et al., 2021) has altered the socio-economic fabric of Tharu settlements, leading to adaptations in festival practices.

Maghi, as noted by Macdonald (1975), functions both as a cultural celebration and an economic event, marking the renewal of labor contracts. This underscores the economic significance of festivals within the Tharu livelihood structure. Moreover, Pyakural (1982) identifies socio-economic disparities within Tharu society, which have influenced their ability to sustain traditional festivals. Globalization and modernization (Upadhyay et al., 2018) have also played a role in reshaping Tharu cultural identity, as seen in the gradual integration of modern educational and medical concepts into traditional festival practices.

The cultural identity, economic conditions, external influences, and festival evolution—can be visualized through a dynamic process of cultural adaptation. Tharu festivals function as both a response to historical socio-economic marginalization and a strategy for cultural resilience. Understanding these festivals through an interdisciplinary lens that incorporates anthropology, sociology, and development

studies allows for a deeper comprehension of how traditions evolve in response to changing socio-political contexts. This framework provides a foundation for future research, emphasizing the need for a more nuanced exploration of Tharu festivals as a reflection of their historical experiences and contemporary challenges.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design with a survey approach to explore the cultural significance of Tharu festivals and their transformation over time. The research was conducted in Ratnanagar Ward No. 4, Bhokaha, a region predominantly inhabited by the Tharu community. The target population consisted of Tharu individuals, including elders, youth, and cultural experts, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the evolution of these festivals. A total of 64 respondents were selected using a purposive sampling technique, allowing for the collection of in-depth and relevant data.

Data collection was carried out using semi-structured interviews, enabling participants to share their perspectives while maintaining a standardized framework for comparison. Additionally, participant observations and secondary sources, such as previous research and cultural records, were utilized to enhance data validity. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze qualitative data, identifying recurring themes and patterns in responses. Coding techniques were used to categorize findings, ensuring systematic interpretation and meaningful conclusions.

The Analysis and Interpretation of the Data

The Cultural and Historical Significance of Tharu Festivals

Tharu festivals are deeply woven into the social and spiritual fabric of the Tharu community, serving as living expressions of their history, traditions, and collective identity. Through interviews with community elders, youth, and cultural scholars, it becomes evident that these celebrations are more than just rituals; they act as mediums for preserving cultural heritage, reinforcing social bonds, and passing knowledge from one generation to another. However, as society modernizes and external influences seep into Tharu traditions, the nature of these festivals has evolved, sometimes at the cost of losing certain indigenous elements.

The study indicates that Tharu festivals primarily revolve around nature worship, agricultural cycles, and communal solidarity. Festivals such as Maghi, Jitiya, Faguwa, and Saune Sakranti are not just occasions for celebration but also hold socio-economic and religious significance. Maghi, for instance, is not only a New Year festival but also a time for family restructuring, settling debts, and community feasting, reinforcing the communal aspect of Tharu society. Similarly, Jitiya, observed predominantly by Tharu women, embodies maternal devotion and the well-being of future generations.

Through the accounts of interviewees, it is evident that these festivals provide a vital link to the past, with oral traditions, storytelling, and folklore being integral components. Elders emphasize that these celebrations keep historical narratives alive, fostering a sense of continuity and belonging among younger generations. However, challenges such as urban migration, commercialization, and diminishing interest among youth have led to concerns about the sustainability of these rich cultural practices.

Transformation and Modernization of Tharu Festivals

One of the key findings of the study is that modernization has had a dual impact on Tharu festivals. On one hand, it has facilitated broader recognition and appreciation of Tharu traditions, while on the other, it has led to the dilution and adaptation of certain customs.

Urbanization and Migration

With an increasing number of Tharu youth migrating to urban areas for education and employment, the way these festivals are celebrated has undergone a shift. Many respondents pointed out that while festivals like Maghi were once grand affairs involving extended family gatherings, they are now often observed in smaller groups due to geographical separation. This shift has affected the collective spirit of celebration, as urbanized individuals may not have the time or resources to engage in traditional customs as their ancestors did.

Moreover, urbanization has introduced new forms of entertainment and leisure activities, leading to reduced participation in traditional rituals. Several young respondents admitted that while they enjoy the social aspects of festivals, such as music and dance, they are less inclined toward ritualistic and spiritual components. This generational shift is a pressing concern for cultural preservationists.

Media and Technology

The rise of digital platforms has played a paradoxical role in the evolution of Tharu festivals. Social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok have allowed Tharu communities to document and share their traditions, creating a digital archive of cultural practices. This has, to some extent, rekindled interest in Tharu heritage, as younger generations find creative ways to engage with their traditions.

However, the accessibility of mainstream entertainment and cultural content has also led to the blending of Tharu customs with dominant Nepali and global cultures. This influence is evident in the increasing use of modern musical instruments and contemporary attire in festival celebrations, sometimes replacing traditional Tharu elements. While some respondents view this integration as a natural evolution of culture, others see it as a gradual erosion of authentic Tharu practices.

Religious Influences

Another significant transformation observed in the study is the gradual assimilation of Hindu and Buddhist influences into Tharu festivals. Traditionally, Tharu spiritual practices were rooted in animism and nature worship, with a strong emphasis on ancestral reverence. However, exposure to mainstream religious practices has led to the adoption of Hindu and Buddhist rituals within Tharu festivals. For example, the celebration of Faguwa (Tharu Holi) now bears more resemblance to mainstream Hindu Holi than its original form, which focused more on honoring ancestors and natural elements.

Challenges in Preserving Tharu Festivals

The research highlights several challenges in ensuring the continuity of Tharu festivals in their traditional form. These challenges include:

Loss of Indigenous Knowledge

Many elders expressed concerns that as they age, invaluable knowledge regarding Tharu rituals, folk songs, and oral histories is being lost. Younger generations, while aware of these festivals, are often unaware of their deeper meanings and historical

contexts. This gap in knowledge transmission is one of the biggest threats to the preservation of Tharu cultural identity.

Commercialization and Cultural Dilution

The growing commercialization of festivals has also contributed to changes in the way they are celebrated. Many respondents noted that the economic potential of Tharu festivals has led to increased tourism and media attention, which, while beneficial in terms of cultural promotion, has also resulted in alterations to traditional practices. Vendors selling mass-produced decorations, event sponsorships, and modern entertainment replacing traditional performances have, in some cases, shifted the focus from cultural preservation to economic gain.

Lack of Institutional Support

Several respondents emphasized that government policies regarding cultural preservation are inadequate. While there are efforts to promote Tharu heritage, more institutional support is needed to ensure these festivals remain intact for future generations. Suggestions from respondents included integrating Tharu history and traditions into educational curricula and providing funding for cultural initiatives at the community level.

Measures for Cultural Preservation

Despite these challenges, the study reveals strong community interest in preserving Tharu festivals. Based on respondents' insights, the following measures can be implemented to sustain and promote these traditions:

Cultural Documentation

One of the most effective ways to safeguard Tharu traditions is through systematic documentation. Recording oral histories, rituals, and folk songs can help preserve knowledge for future generations. Community-led initiatives, supported by academic institutions and cultural organizations, could play a key role in this process.

Youth Engagement and Education

Encouraging younger generations to actively participate in festival celebrations is crucial for cultural continuity. Integrating Tharu heritage into school curricula and organizing cultural workshops can help bridge the knowledge gap between generations. Respondents suggested that storytelling sessions, folk dance performances, and interactive learning experiences could make cultural education more engaging for young people.

Strengthening Community Involvement

Community-driven initiatives can play a pivotal role in keeping Tharu festivals alive. Organizing cultural events, supporting traditional artisans, and involving local leaders in festival planning can strengthen the community's commitment to preserving its heritage. Many respondents emphasized the importance of passing down responsibilities to younger members to ensure sustained participation.

Government and NGO Support

Institutional support is essential for the long-term preservation of Tharu festivals. Advocacy for cultural preservation policies, financial assistance for traditional events, and the establishment of cultural centers dedicated to Tharu heritage can help maintain these traditions in the face of modernization.

Findings and Discussion

Tharu festivals hold deep cultural significance, serving as expressions of heritage, spirituality, and communal unity. Rooted in agrarian traditions and nature worship, these festivals have evolved over time due to modernization, migration, and external cultural influences. The findings from this study indicate that while Tharu festivals continue to play a crucial role in preserving cultural identity, changing social structures and contemporary influences have impacted their practice and perception. The analysis of these findings is best understood through the lens of cultural theory, modernization theory, and social constructivism.

Cultural Identity and Social Cohesion

Tharu festivals such as Maghi, Jitiya, and Faguwa act as markers of cultural identity, reinforcing a shared sense of belonging within the community. As Hall (1990) suggests in cultural identity theory, traditions and collective memories play a critical role in shaping group identity. Many respondents emphasized that these festivals are not merely annual celebrations but platforms for passing down ancestral knowledge, folklore, and social customs to younger generations. The communal aspect of these festivals—such as collective feasting, folk dances, and religious rituals—aligns with Durkheim's (1912) theory on the social function of religion, which states that shared rituals strengthen social bonds and maintain group solidarity. Elders in the study particularly stressed the importance of upholding these traditions as a means of cultural preservation in an era of rapid societal transformation.

Modernization and Changing Practices

The impact of modernization on Tharu festivals reflects broader sociological theories on cultural change. According to Inglehart and Welzel's (2005) modernization theory, economic and technological advancements often lead to shifts in cultural values and traditional practices. The study found that urbanization and migration have altered festival celebrations, particularly among younger generations who increasingly prioritize social aspects over religious and ritualistic elements. Many respondents acknowledged that while digital platforms such as social media have helped raise awareness about Tharu traditions, they have also contributed to cultural dilution by blending Tharu customs with mainstream Nepali and global influences. This aligns with the concerns of Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) in their work on the "invention of tradition," where evolving customs may either reinforce or reshape cultural heritage in response to contemporary realities.

Challenges in Cultural Preservation

One of the major challenges highlighted in the findings is the declining transmission of traditional knowledge. Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory emphasizes the role of cultural tools and social interaction in learning. However, the study indicates that younger generations are becoming increasingly detached from indigenous knowledge systems as formal education and modern lifestyles take precedence. Additionally, the commercialization of festivals has altered their authenticity, with market-driven influences introducing new elements that sometimes overshadow traditional rituals. Some respondents suggested that government and

cultural institutions should play a more active role in preserving Tharu heritage through formal education, funding for cultural programs, and the establishment of community-based cultural centers.

Adapting Traditions for the Future

Despite the challenges, many respondents expressed optimism about the future of Tharu festivals, suggesting that adaptation is key to their survival. Theories of cultural resilience, such as those proposed by Berkes and Folke (1998), highlight the importance of flexibility in preserving cultural traditions while allowing them to evolve. Several interviewees recommended integrating Tharu festivals into cultural tourism initiatives, which could provide both economic opportunities and cultural sustainability. Others emphasized the need for intergenerational collaboration, where elders actively engage with youth through workshops, storytelling, and digital documentation efforts. By embracing both tradition and innovation, the Tharu community can ensure that its festivals remain vibrant symbols of cultural identity while adapting to contemporary social dynamics.

Conclusion

Tharu festivals are more than just annual celebrations—they are a reflection of the community's deep spiritual beliefs, historical traditions, and social bonds. While modernization and changing lifestyles pose challenges, the Tharu people take immense pride in their heritage. Their festivals serve as a bridge between past and present, keeping their cultural identity alive.

To ensure these traditions continue, proactive efforts are needed. Integrating Tharu cultural education into schools, securing government and institutional support, and preserving oral histories, folk songs, and rituals can strengthen cultural continuity. Encouraging youth participation through interactive and digital platforms can further inspire a sense of belonging and pride.

Balancing tradition with modern influences is essential. Though urbanization and commercialization may bring change, the Tharu people's dedication ensures their festivals remain an integral part of Nepal's rich cultural landscape. With collective commitment, these vibrant celebrations will thrive for generations to come.

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