

## **The Eco-friendly Tharu Tribe: A Study in Socio-cultural Dynamics**

---

**Subhash Chandra Verma**, Kumaun University (Nainital, India)<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *The Tharu culture is very Eco-Friendly, all cultural thing and activities of this tribe are deeply related with nature. Their residence, food, cloths, art, religion, economy and many other part of life are based on nature and keep ecological balance. Tharu people worship mainly their tribal Goddess (The Earth) called as 'Bhumsen' in their folk language. There is a well family system in this community. Women have high reputation, enough social and economic rights in their family system. This community has paternal family system but women have high position and more rights, this is a mark able fact. Tharu youth like changing so they are struggling for advance ness. There are many other communities existing in Tharu area by Industrialization and Business, so the process of cultural exchange is running in Tharu area. Tharu youth are attracting to new and charming life style. They are ignoring their traditional tribal culture that is why the identity of old Tharu culture is under dangerous. They must have to get advance education, communication, technology etc. But care of old culture is must too for keep their identity.*

**Keywords:** *Tharu Culture, Eco-friendly, Development, Industrialization*

### **1. Introduction**

The Tharu tribe is a most popular tribe of India and Nepal. The Tharu people are indigenous people living in the Terai plains on the border of Nepal and India. The population of Nepal is 28,287,147 (July 2006 est.), of which the Tharu people make up 6.6%. A smaller number of Tharus live in India, mostly in Champaran District of Bihar and in Udham Singh Nagar District of Utrakhand, Kheeri, Pilibhit, Gonda,

---

<sup>1</sup> I am especially thankful Tharu people Srikrishna and Hari singh of Nakulia and Baghori village those help me a lot in visit of Tharu villages and arranged all possible things for observation. I am also thankful of University Grants Commission of India for providing grants for my Research Project about Tribal Youth.

Balrampur, Gorakhpur, Bahirayach district of Uttar Pradesh. Population of Tharu tribe is 83544 in Uttar Pradesh and 85665 in Uttrakhand state Total Tharu Population is near about 169209 in India. The Tharu are recognized as scheduled tribes by the Government of India. Constitution of India gives many special social, educational and economic rights to these scheduled tribes and casts because they are the primary victims of the backwardness. The Tharus are struggling for their rights and cultural protection.

## **2. Methodology**

This study is based on a primary survey using Direct/Participant Observation and Interview methods to arrive at the conclusions. The available secondary resources, however, have also been used. At present author is conducting a research project on Tharu tribe about awareness in youth with financial help of University Grants Commission of India. That is why he has used Primary Survey data of this project. This article is part of underwriting report of this project. The primary information was collected from Nakulia, Sisona, Tharu Tisour and Baghori villages of Tahsil Siatrganj District Udham Singh Nagar State Uttrakhand, India. This work is presented in Exploratory and Analytic research design with help of statistical methods. . Some statements in this study are based on secondary data but maximum results are coming from primary data.

The Tharu is largest and oldest ethnic group of the Terai region, living in villages near dense malaria-infested jungles in regions that were isolated over the millennia, allowing them to develop a unique culture. They work usually as farmers or peddlers. Although physically the Tharu are similar to other peoples in the area, they speak their own language that originated in Sanskrit and is now recognised officially. Recent medical evidence supports the common belief that the Tharu people, having lived in the swampy Terai region for centuries, have developed an innate

resistance to malaria that is likely based on an unidentified genetic factor.

### **3. History**

According to Nepali author Subodh Kumar Singh, a series of invasions by the Rajput kings, eroded the influence of the indigenous Tharus. In 1854 Jung Bahadur, the first Rana prime minister of Nepal, developed the Mulki Ain, a codification of Nepal's indigenous legal system which divided society into a system of castes. The Tharus were placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Their land was taken away, disrupting their community and displacing the people. In the 1950s, World Health Organisation helped the Nepalese government eradicate malaria in the Terai region. This resulted in immigration of people from other areas to claim the fertile land, making the Tharus slaves of the new landowners and developing the kamaiya system of bonding generations of Tharus families to labour.

### **4. Social and Cultural Systems and Life Style**

The economy of Tharu community is based on Agriculture and forest (Pradhan, 1937 p59). Historically, they were the only ones that were able to reside in the malarial jungles on the Indo-Nepal border. But as mosquito control became available, many others have migrated into this tribe's areas. They have deep affiliation with forest and river. The population of Tharu tribe is near to one lac in India and in Nepal this figure is 1533879, it is 6.75% of total population of Nepal (Nepal online). This tribal community has many specialties about their culture and socio-economic systems. There are many clans in Tharu tribe those called *Kuri* in their local language, names of main clans (Kuri) are as followed Badwayak, Battha, Rawat, birtiya, Mahto, Dahait, Rajia, Bunka, Sansa, Jugia, Buxa, Dhangra, and Rana. All of

these Tharu clans are divided in lower and high status (Truner, 1931 p599). The Tharus followed Hindu religion, but after all they purely a tribal community by anthropological point of view. Tharu people worship mainly their tribal Goddess called as *Bhuiyan* or *Bhumsen* with other Hindu God & Goddess. Government of India has been accepted this community as a Scheduled Tribe. The fact is that the Tharu themselves did not keep written records and what is known of their early history is derived from passing references in religious texts and etymological evidence. It seems probable that there is not just one origin of the Tharu and that the people arrived in the area from different places at different places at different times. As such there may be truth in all the theories. The *Panchayat* system (Local Social Council) is very strong in this tribe; head of *panchayat* is called *Padhan* in local Tharu language. The Tharus love their folk arts. Tharu Songs, Tharu dance *Naach*, Tharu tattoos, Tharu wall paintings, Tharu handicrafts, and Tharu magic is very interesting and special. Mark able fact is this that they make handicrafts only for personal use doesn't for marketing purpose. They like contrast colures in dress and wall paintings for decoration of house (Govila, J.P.1959 p248) Main food of Tharus is Fish and Rice but they also used Roti, Vegetables, Mutton, Chicken, Milk products and more others But since hunting is banded in forest they can not use more non-vegetable food because of poverty they can not afford expensive Mutton and chicken, but they use more and more fishes in their food. Tharus are very host able and they respect their guests very much. They like to serve best and more food dishes for guests. Tharus have very friendly nature, every Tharu people have a best friend in their life, male best friend of male called as *Meet* or *Dilbar* and female best friend of female called as *Sangan*. Tharus treat their best friend as real brother and sister.

Some Tharu live in longhouses, which may hold up to 150 people. The longhouses are built of mud with lattice walls. They grow barley, wheat, maize, and rice, as well as raise animals such as chickens, ducks, pigs, and goats. In the big rivers, they use large nets to fish. Because the Tharu lived in isolation in malarial swamps until the recent use of DDT,

they developed a style of decorating the walls, rice containers and other objects in their environment. The Tharu women transform outer walls and verandahs of their homes into colorful paintings dedicated to Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of prosperity and fertility.

**Tharu Village:** - The Tharus have small populated villages and generally scattered and are often located at a minor distance. The Tharus are always in search of a good site for founding their villages. A good site in their judgment must be the land on a high level with proximity to river or some water supply yet safe from water-logging and inundation during the rainy season. (Srivastava 1958:19). The Tharus build their houses with enough distance to each other for better life style. The village does not have bachelor's dormitories or community houses, menstruation huts, guest houses and special granaries for common use and distribution. The House of *Padhan* (Chief of Village) is very important place of village. Even a casual visitor to a Tharu Village is impressed by the neat arrangement of the houses, their cleanliness in contrast with the congestion of other villages in India. A Tharu village, therefore, represents a closely knit society united of which have developed a bond of fellowship and corporate life through mutual obligations and co-partnership.

**Tharu Houses:-** The Tharus are famous for their clean houses. Generally Tharus build their house by Mud, Wood and Grass. The Tharus houses are always cool in summer and hot in winter, it is a specialty of Tharu houses. Each house with its field and a vegetable garden is a detached residence with a narrow or a broad alley separating it from the adjacent houses. The house must face the east to bring them prosperity, which in other directions of the house does not promise. The size of the house depends on the size of the family. The *Than* (place of worship) is present in every house. On the side of the main house the well-to-do Tharus build a *Bangla* (the Rest House). Both the exterior and interior of the Tharu houses present a neat and clean appearance. They are swept twice or thrice a day and the ashes and house-refuse are thrown near the cattle-shed or in fields.

**Religion:-** Tharus follow Hindu religion because they claim that they are migrated with *Rajputs of Rajasthan* by blood. This is very interesting fact because they have not any specialty of Rajasthan Rajputs in their Race and Culture but they claim blood relation with them (Kumar,N 1968 p39). Tharus are related with Mongoloid race and Rajputs have different race. Dr. D.N. Majumadar contested the supposed Rajput origin of the Tharus on the basis of blood group tests and they have found that Tharus have Mongoloid race, so they are not related with Rajputs (Majumadar 1941:33). The Tharus are adherents of Hinduism, but also held Islamic, Animist and Buddhist beliefs. Small numbers have converted to Buddhism in the recent years. Such syncretic practices have led Tharus to practice folk Hinduism. With the advent of religious freedom, others have converted to Christianity and there are a variety of congregations active in the various districts where Tharus are found. Traditional Tharu worship various gods in the form of animals such as dogs, crow, ox and cows. Such gods are seen in Hinduism. Every village has their own deity, commonly known as *Bhuinyar*. Tharus in East Nepal call their deity *Gor-raj*. Most Tharu households own a statue of a traditional god. Family members often offer animal's blood sacrifices to appease the god. Animals such as pigeons and chickens are used for sacrificial purposes. Milk and silk cloth are also used. Many Tharus would also use the blood of one of the male members in the family for such rituals. Such rituals are conducted through ceremonies, and superficial cuts are made on the forehead, arms, throat, legs, and/or chest. The gods are believed to have the ability to heal diseases and sickness. According to traditional legend, gods are given a *bhokal*, a promise of something, on condition that the sickness is cured, in any events of misfortunes, plagues and horror dreams. A relative's death is an event of great significance among Tharus, and rituals conducted varies in accordance to regions. Tharus would approach shamans as doctors, known as *Guruba*. Such shamans use Buddhist medicines to cure illness. Shamans will also try to appease gods through incantations, beating drums and offering sacrifices. The Tharus believe sickness comes when the gods are displeased, and the demons are at work. Buddhist converts among the Tharus are found in Saptari, Siraha and Udaypur. Currently it is believed that

there are more than one dozen of Buddhist monks and novices among the Tharus. Such practice was possibly based on the fact that they were inspired by the discovery of Lord Buddha as a member of the Tharu tribe.

## **5. Status of Awareness Environment and Pollution**

Historically The Tharu culture is very Eco-Friendly, all cultural thing and activities of this tribe are deeply related with nature. Their residence, food, cloths, art, religion, economy and many other part of life are based on nature and keep ecological balance. Tharu people worship mainly their tribal Goddess (The Earth) called as 'Bhumsen' in their folk language. The old generation of Tharu community is more aware about nature and environment than new generation. According to S. K. Srivastava (a famous Indian Anthropologist) in the year 1930 the Social Reform Movement which is popularly known as *Jati Sudhar* (reforms in cast) among the Tharus was initiated by a handful of educated Tharus. (Srivastava 1958:105) Main some Rules of this movement are as following (which are showing the care ness of old Tharu generation)-

1-Women in their menstrual period never to enter into the kitchen or cook meals.

2-Women must clean their hearths and put on clean cloths before cooking meals.

3-All rubbish of the house and refuse of the cattle must be thrown in a ditch outside the village or in fields and not on the path.

4-No liquor and meat to be served at any ceremony.

Traditional Tharu houses making system, Agriculture system, cooking system are based on a natural law that is why the environmental valance never disordered in past. But at present there are many other communities existing in Tharu area by Industrialization and Business, so the process of cultural exchange is running in Tharu area. Tharu youth are attracting to new and charming life style. They are

ignoring their traditional tribal culture that is why the identity of old Tharu culture is under dangerous. They must have to get advance education, communication, technology etc. But care of old culture is must too for keep their identity. Main problem of Tharus youth is that they want new life style but they do not know about new and current environmental issues.. They like using all type of modern thing (which make pollution) without care of environment. This is situation of highly educated youth than we can easily imaging the status of other general Tharu youth.

## **6. The Current Problems and Changes among the Tharu Society**

The Indian Tharu youth are very important wing of their community. They are playing very creative role in their community. But they are not connected with mainstream of development. Some youth are trying to get higher education and advanced technology but in little number. They have neither advance ness nor keep awareness about their traditional culture. They must have to get advance education, communication, technology and new life style but care of traditional culture is must too for keep their own identity. Youth of other tribes of this area (Bhotia and Jaunsari etc) are aggressive more than Tharu Youth. Many Bhotia and Jaunsari youths are working as administrative officers, professors, Doctors, Engineers, and Advocates etc. They are very advanced and also careful about their traditional culture. However, Tharu youth are very poor in this matter. Generally Tharu youth do not like to go in advanced cities for education. Nepalese Tharu youth are more aware and advanced than Indian Tharu youth because there are many youth organizations and groups are active in Nepalese Tharu community for development and extension of education, technology, health care etc.

The Tharu community has its amazing culture with many specialties but it is bad luck of this community that its own new generations especially highly educated youth are not so aware for care it. Some Tharus are trying to keep their own socio-cultural values but they are not success in their target till now. Large number of Tharu youth wants change

in their life, so they are ignoring their own cultural values. It is true that Tharu youth want change but it has not this meaning that they are very aggressive or advanced. They are only following other communities for a new life style. We can say in other words that the process of Sanskritization is still running in this community. Tharu youth are playing very creative role in their community but they are not connected with main stream of development even some youth are trying to get higher education and advanced technology but in few number. Maximum Tharu youth are trying to accept other culture only for leaving their old own culture. There are many Religious missionaries are working for conversion of Tharus in this area, that is why some Tharus have converted in other religions. The Tharu youth are ignoring their own culture and losing traditional values. Neither have they got advance ness nor do they aware about their traditional culture. *Tharu Rana Parishad* (Council of Tharu Community) is a main organization of this community which is active in this socio-cultural movement in this area. This organization is trying to keep traditional culture of Tharus. But this organization is not so success in its main goals.

The Tharu community is one of them Indian tribes which have not more and enough awareness about education. There are many educational institutes and organizations are working in Tharu area but percentage of educated people is very low in Tharu community. Most Tharu students want a job early that is why they are not interesting in post graduate level education. Graduation level is enough for a general job so they want only eligibility for a general job. Only those students are studying in post graduation level which want any special job or did not get a job still. Some students are taking education in post graduate level for doctorate degree but number of these students is few. There are only 2 students (1 male & 1 female) want to do research for Ph.D. level. There is only one Tharu man (Prem Singh Rana) has Ph.D. Degree in this area. At present he is Lecturer in college.

We have been said that also that Tharu Community is suffering form social changes and their youth are playing

active role in this process. Youths are refusing many old social rules and customs. In this era new Tharu generation do not like and support early age marriage, leadership & dictatorship of old aged people, Joint family System, Traditional typical Costumes, marriage with elder women. Tribal religious activities & Things etc. traditional Social values have lost their importance and new trends are still running. There is an interesting and amazing system of mutual friendship called as *Mitai* popular in Tharus community. In this system friends treat together as real brothers or sisters and they every help and support together without any formality. Male friend called as *Dilwar* or *Meet* and female Called as *Sangan*. This system shows the human social values and feeling of the Tharus but at present this system is losing its importance like many other old systems. Kinship system is also changing and materialistic culture is affecting badly on blood and marriage relationships. New generation is using new words on place of old words of relations for example- now *Dauwa* (Father) is called as *Papa* or *dady* and *Aiya* (mother) is called as *Mammy*. Many specialties of other communities have been accepted by Tharus at present so we can say that the process of cultural infection is killing the traditional Tharu social system.

In past there were many other communities was capturing Tharu's Forest and agricultural land but cool minded Tharus never conflicted with them. Many other communities like Muslims, Sikhs, Paharis etc. are Continuously capturing Tharu properties and also hurting their feelings since a long past. The Tharus say that outsiders are cheaters, they are cheating our community. But now situation has been changed because the Tharu youth do not like interfere of others in their own properties. Some educated and politically empowered youth know their rights very well so they are now struggling for freehold of their own agricultural land and other properties. Situation of social conflict is still running because other communities are counter attacking on the Tharus. Blast of population and disorganization of joint families are increasing need of more agricultural land and other natural resources so the Tharu youth are conducting social movements. At present Tharu community is suffering from problem of poverty, illiteracy,

social and cultural pollution but its youth are struggling for development.

## **7. Conclusion**

The culture of Tharu tribe is really Eco-friendly and represents a good social life system. The Tharus respect and care the natural resources like forest, rivers etc. The concept of women empowerment is not needed in this community because the Tharu women have already high status and enough rights in their own society. The old generation of Tharu tribe is more aware about environment than new generation. After all at present the Tharu tribe is suffering from Social and Cultural dynamics.

## **REFERENCES**

- Govila, J. P. 'The Tharu of Terai and Bhabar', Indian Folklore.-2, 1959,
- Kumar, N. 1968, 'A genetic survey among the Rana Tharus of Nainital District in Uttar Pradesh', Journal of the Indian Anthropological Society-3(1-2)
- Majumadar, D.N., 1941, 'The tharus and Their Blood Group'-Journal of Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, Vol. VIII No.1
- Nepal now online, <http://www.hariyaliclub.org/museum.php>
- Pradhan, H. Dev, 'Social economy in the Terai (the Tharus)', Journal of the United Provinces Historical Society -10, 1937
- Srivastav, S.K., 1958, The Tharus: A Study In Culture Dynamics, Agra University Press Agra
- Turner, A.C., 1931, Census Report of United Provinces of India, Vol. XVIII