



Tharu Indigenous Heritage: Language, Culture, Festivals, and Social Practices

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the origins, historical development, and cultural practices of the Tharu community, one of the oldest and most significant indigenous groups in Nepal. Mainly residing in the Terai region, the Tharus have a deep cultural legacy characterized by distinctive traditions, a unique language, special festivals, and specific religious and social beliefs. The article presents various theories about their origins, such as connections to Rajput heritage, Buddhist Shakya ancestry, and ancient roots in forest life. It also emphasizes the community's internal diversity, with many subgroups and dialects found throughout Nepal. The article pays particular attention to their traditional ways of governing, roles of men and women, daily life, animistic beliefs, and lively cultural expressions such as Maghi, Asare Puja, and Gothale. Despite experiencing social and economic difficulties, the Tharu people have preserved their strong cultural identity and played a key role in shaping Nepal's diverse cultural environment. The study concludes that Tharu culture is an essential part of Nepal's heritage and continues to reflect indigenous wisdom and values in a living and evolving manner.

Introduction

The Tharu ethnic group is one of the oldest, most varied, and culturally rich indigenous communities in Nepal. They mainly live in the Terai region, stretching from the Mechi River in the east to the Mahakali River in the west. The Tharus have maintained a unique lifestyle based on a strong sense of community,

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lively traditions, and deep connections with nature and the land. As revealed by the 2021 national census, the Tharu population surpasses 1.7 million, making up about 7% of Nepal's population. This places them among the largest indigenous groups in the nation (Census 2021).

Despite living in different parts of the country, the Tharu people have preserved a strong cultural identity, reflected in unique customs, festivals, oral stories, and social systems like the Barghar system of governance.

Historically, they have been referred to as "sons of the soil," being native inhabitants of the inner Terai and Chure areas. Scholars have proposed several theories about their origins, including the idea that they are descendants of Rajputs who fled Muslim invasions, or members of the Shakya clan of the Buddha, or indigenous forest dwellers with animist beliefs and a deep reverence for nature.

The Tharu community is linguistically and culturally diverse, with various subgroups such as Dangoura, Rana, Kochila, Chitwania, and Kathariya.

Each group has its own dialect, customs, and religious practices. Their cultural heritage includes oral stories, traditional songs, folktales, and dances like Menhri and Jhumra. They also celebrate festivals like Maghi, Asare Puja, and Gothale. Tharu women are actively involved in farming, daily household tasks, and rituals, showing that the community has long supported a gender-inclusive way of life.

In recent years, the Tharu society has seen both changes and challenges.

While groups such as the Tharu Welfare Assembly and Tharu Upliftment Society have worked to improve education and political awareness, the community still faces issues such as poverty, lack of land, limited representation in government, and the ongoing impact of past conflicts and displacement.

This research article provides a detailed look at the Tharu people, focusing on their origins, cultural practices, social structures, religious beliefs, and how modern changes have affected them. Using historical records, ethnographic studies, and recent research, the article portrays the Tharu as a historically important group that is also actively shaping its identity and traditions in a changing Nepal.

Traditional History of Origin

There is no general agreement among scholars about the origins of the Tharu community. Various theories have been put forward to explain their beginnings. One belief is that the Tharus are descendants of the Rajput community from ancient India. During Muslim invasions, some Rajput women, along with their



servants, took refuge in the jungles of the Terai. They waited for their husbands for a long time, but they never returned. Eventually, through relationships with their servants, a new ethnic group emerged, which came to be known as the Tharu. This belief is especially strong among the Rana Tharus (Sharma 357).

Historically, the Tharu people have lived in the Inner Terai valleys and the northern plains of the Terai, located between the Chure and Mahabharat hill ranges.

Despite the difficult climate, they have developed a deep love for the land and have not shown a strong desire to move elsewhere. This long-term presence supports the idea that the Tharus are indigenous to this area (Sharma 357). They see themselves as a separate ethnic group and refer to people from the south as Baji. They have their own distinct language and culture that spans the northern part of the Terai from Mechi in the east to Mahakali in the west.

Some scholars think that the Tharu people originated from the western region.

They base this view on the Tharu language, names, customs, and legends, which they believe connect the Tharu to western lands and ethnicities (Gautam 15). Others suggest that the Tharu name comes from the Thar region of Sindh, indicating a possible migration from that area.

Some researchers believe that the Tharus are descendants of the Shakya clan.

About a century after the death of Gautama Buddha, Buddhism split into two major groups—Mahasanghika and Sthavira. It is thought that the Shakya clan supported the Sthavira group, and over time, those who followed the Sthavira tradition came to be known by that name. Over time, the term Sthavira was spoken as Thavira and then as Tharu (Sharma 358).

The respected historian Baburam Acharya, in his book **Nepalko Sanskritik Parampara** (“Cultural Traditions of Nepal”), suggests that the word Tharu comes from the term Gram Pramukh, meaning village chief (13).

He links the word Tharu to the Sanskrit word Sthala, which means place or ground. Similarly, Tharu scholar Ramanand Prasad Singh, in his book **History of Tharus**, views the Tharu people as descendants of Lord Buddha. Tharu intellectuals Tej Narayan Chaudhary and Bhulai Chaudhary wrote in the magazine **Tharu Sanskriti** that the word Tharu comes from the combination of Tha, meaning the Terai, and Ru, meaning the original settlers—hence referring to the original inhabitants of the Terai.



The Tharu are recognized as indigenous, aboriginal, and native people of Nepal's Terai region. Dr. Harka Gurung, in his book **Faces of Nepal**, writes that “the Tharus are possibly the oldest and aboriginal ethnic group of the Terai.” Similarly, Bryan H. Hodgson, in his work **Essays on the Language, Literature, and Religion of Nepal and Tibet**, states that “based on DNA evidence, the Tharus have genetic resistance to malaria, which suggests they must have lived in malaria-infested regions for at least three thousand years.” He also points out that other communities came to the Terai after the Tharus.

The German archaeologist Alois Anton Führer, in his 1897 book **Antiquities of Buddha Shakyamuni's Birthplace in the Nepalese Terai: The Modern Descendants of the Shakyas**, claimed that the modern inhabitants of the Terai—the Tharus—are the living descendants of the Shakya clan.

According to him, the Tharu people living in Nepal's Terai and forested valleys are likely the descendants of the Shakyas. They refer to themselves as “Kings of the Forest” (Rājā of the Jungle) and live a simple, independent forest life. The Tharu consider themselves to be of the solar race (Suryavanshi) and claim to be direct descendants of the solar dynasty. They also assert that they were once Rajputs of Hastinapur, but after a major battle loss and due to alcohol addiction, they lost their caste status (Führer 45).

Today, the Tharu people live in the flat inner areas of the Terai and the Chure belt, stretching from Mechi in the east to Mahakali in the west.

They are known for their hard work, honesty, and simplicity—qualities that are central to their ethnic identity.

Internal Diversity among Tharus

The Tharu people are widely regarded as the indigenous inhabitants of Nepal's inner Madhes and the northern Terai plains. Their long history of living in this region, stretching from the eastern Mechi to the western Mahakali, shows a continuous cultural presence. Because they are spread out across a wide area, there are visible differences within the community based on regional ties. These include subgroups such as Rana, Kathariya, Maloriya, Rajhetiya, Dangoriya, Bhaunrahiya, Deshauriya/Budhaniya, Solariya, Surkhetiya, Deukhariya, Butauliya, Nawalpuriya, Chitauniya, Saptariya/Kochila, Morangiya/Lampuchhiya, Gorakhpuriya, and Rajasthani (Chaudhary 62). The Tharus identify themselves as Adivasi or indigenous people of Nepal.

According to their belief, they have historically lived in the jungles and riverbanks of the Chure and Terai regions. Their language, culture, and traditions are different from both Aryan and non-Aryan ethnic groups,



which supports their unique indigenous status (Bhattarai 35) The Tharu community is made up of various subgroups, such as Dangoura, Chitwania, Deukhuriya, Rana, and Kochila, among others.

Each subgroup shows variations in language and cultural practices. The language spoken by the Tharus is generally called "Tharu language," and most members use it as their first language. There are noticeable differences in vocabulary and structure across these subgroups (Tsuyoshi 78) Although there is no agreement among scholars on the exact origin of the Tharu language, most linguists believe it is a blend of Ardhamagadhi and Apabhramsha dialects.

The Tharu language includes several dialects such as Dangoura, Rana, Kathariya, Sonha, Rautar, Chitwania, Kochila, Danuwar, and Lampuchhwa. Modern influences from languages like Nepali, Maithili, Bhojpuri, Awadhi, and Hindi are also present in the language today. The dialect spoken in the Nawalpur region is very similar to that in Chitwan, but slight differences have led scholars to classify it as "Nawalpuriya" (Bhattarai 35) Cultural Practices and Social Organization

The Tharus of Nepal are a culturally rich indigenous community known for their strong sense of collectivism and communal life. Their society is built on cooperation and values related to work. A clear division of labor exists between men and women, but women are actively involved in farming, household tasks, and cultural celebrations (Gautam 333) Traditional Tharu homes are made from natural materials like mud, bamboo, and grass.

The practice of decorating walls and floors with clay art is still common. Men usually wear dhoti and kurta, while women wear cholo, pheta, sari, or ghaghra. The Tharu diet typically includes rice, dhido (a maize or millet-based food), green vegetables, meat, fish, and homemade liquor. Child marriage remains a common practice in many Tharu communities, with marriage rituals sometimes starting at the ages of 8 or 9. However, the bride generally moves in with her husband only after reaching 16 or 17 years of age. Tharus mostly follow Hindu rituals for birth, marriage, and death (Gautam 333) The Tharu have developed an indigenous system of village governance.

Their household and community structures show a division of labor based on family, communal, and ritual roles connected to agriculture. Household roles include Kisanwa (farmer), Kisinnya (female farmer), Kamaiya (bonded laborer), Bukrahi, Kamalhari (female bonded laborer), Bhaisarwa, Chegrahwa, Bherhwa, Gayurwa, Lahriuna, Barherwa, Panherwa, Bhansariya, Upariya, and Larka Kheluhiya (Dahith 253–258) At the communal level, positions like Barghar (village head), assistant Barghar, Chaukidar (watchman), Chirkya, Kodarihwa, and Kisinnya are important.



Within the clan-based Kulapani system, roles include Kulapani Chaudhary, assistant Chaudhary, Barghar, assistant Barghar, Chaukidar, Kisan, Jharali, Nadha Daruiya/Aghariya, and Panbharuwa. Each role has specific responsibilities, ensuring the effective completion of communal and agricultural work in a timely manner (Dahith 258). Leadership in a Tharu village is held by the Aguwa (chief), who is elected annually during the Maghi festival.

The village head, known as Mahtawa, Barghar, Kakandaar, Pradhanwa, or Bhalmansa depending on the region, is responsible for settling disputes, organizing communal labor for irrigation or road construction, and managing religious events and weddings. This person plays a vital role in maintaining unity and leading social, judicial, cultural, and religious matters. Interestingly, there is little difference in village administration between Tharu communities in Nepal and India. In India, the Barghar is referred to as Gumasta (Sarwahari 143). For spiritual healing and the protection of crops, the Tharus continue to offer animal sacrifices, such as pigs, goats, kids, and chickens, along with alcohol at sacred shrines known as Deusthan.

They strongly believe in spirits and supernatural beings. Some trees, places, or homes are thought to be haunted, and ritual purification is performed by shamans called Jhankri and healers known as Dhamibaje. Animal sacrifices, particularly of goats, are still made during festivals like Maghi and Asare. The tradition of offering liquor to deities remains ongoing. Some caste-like distinctions still exist within the community, where certain groups are seen as "Patal" or untouchable. However, this practice has greatly reduced over time (Sarwahari 149). Religious Beliefs and Festivals The religious practices of the Tharu community align with Hindu traditions, but they also include unique deities and indigenous rituals.

One of their main festivals is Maghi, celebrated on the first day of the Nepali month of Magh. This marks the beginning of the Tharu New Year and is marked by feasting, dancing, and making community decisions (Bhagat, "Kantipur", 2073 B.S.) Another important religious event is Asare Puja, a rain-invocation ritual that starts the agricultural season.

Animal sacrifices are made during this event to please the gods and ensure good harvests. Aghan, a festival that takes place after the harvest, is widely celebrated. During this time, the rice crop is worshipped, and large communal feasts are held. Women also observe Jitiya, a strict fast without water, in hopes of their children's longevity and prosperity, making it a unique aspect of Tharu spiritual life (Gautam 1994: 335). The Gothale Festival is another significant event among the Tharus.

It is believed to have origins in the time of Lord Krishna during the Dvapara Yuga. "Go" refers to oxen, and "thale" to a place, so Gothale means "the festival of the place of oxen." It commemorates Krishna's



legendary act of lifting Mount Govardhan to protect both people and cattle from heavy rains. This highlights the importance of oxen in Tharu agricultural practices. This festival is held annually on the full moon day of Kojagrat Purnima, thenight after the Dashain Tika is immersed. It is believed that Goddess Lakshmi visits homes on this night, bringing wealth and prosperity. Married daughters return to their parental homes, where they enjoy greater freedom from customary restrictions. The day is a time for family gatherings, sharing of joy and sorrow, and preparing traditional dishes for friends and relatives (Bhagat, "Kantipur", 2073 B.S.) Another deeply spiritual celebration is Atwari, primarily observed by western Tharu communities.

This festival involves fasting rituals by men, aimed at promoting longevity, good health, and a prosperous life. During Atwari, men perform all religious ceremonies, including cooking traditional foods like roti, pakki, and khurma. However, those who are not familiar with food preparation are assisted by women, who are also required to fast. Those who do not fast are not allowed to enter the cooking or ritual areas, as doing so is considered to be defiling. Thus, even the women who help are required to fast (Kopila, Goraksha, 2081 B.S.) According to local mythology, the Tharu king Dangeesharan had a close relationship with Bhima, one of the five Pandava brothers.

When Dangeesharan was away at Kankre Bihar in Surkhet, enemies attacked his kingdom. Bhima came to help, drove out the invaders, and restored peace. As a sign of gratitude, the Tharu started worshipping Bhima as a deity. Today, men emulate Bhima's strength by fasting and offering prayers during Atwari, seeking his blessings for physical strength and protection (Kopila, 2081 B.S.) Scholars like William Crooke and Brian H.

Hodgson have observed the syncretic religious practices of the Tharus, which combine elements of Hinduism with animist and tribal traditions. Tharu ritual cycles focus on agricultural fertility, ancestral worship, and protection from harmful spirits, reflecting broader patterns in the religious practices of South Asian tribal communities.

Tharu Art and Culture The Tharu people live in a geographical area in Nepal known as Tharuhat, Tharuwa, or Buhran. Their communities are spread from the capital, Kathmandu, to 22 districts in the Terai region. The Tharu community is known for its strong oral literature tradition, which includes many types of folk songs and stories. Their folk literature includes ballads and epic tales such as Gurubak Janmouti, Sakhia, Phulwar, Rambihagra, Barkimar, Siruwa Pawan, Jatajatin, and Sadiyo Dhamij. These stories have been shared from generation to generation (Bajjnath 2076 B.S.: Satyapati). Folk stories and legends like those of Hitwa, Shatalesingh Rajwa, Benturnia Rani, Samparjwa, and Dangisharan Rajwa are also important parts of Tharu culture. Seasonal songs contribute greatly to their cultural expression. These include Maghota songs



during the Magh season, Hurdangwa songs, wedding songs called Mangar, and songs for different times of the year such as Sajana in summer and Maina in winter. Other seasonal songs include Barkimar, Chokra, Mahotiya, Jhumra, and Baithakkuj, which show a lively musical tradition (Bhattarai 2077 B.S.: 36). The Tharu people also have a rich collection of folk epics, proverbs, and stories. They are traditionally nature worshippers, and they show this respect in their cultural practices (Bajinath 2076 B.S.). The Tharu Kalyankari Sabha recognizes many Tharus as followers of Buddhism, but there is a wide range of religious beliefs within the community. Today, Tharu people identify themselves as Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, and followers of Guruwawa, a new faith that has developed in response to changes in their environment. The Tharu people are recognized as a culturally rich ethnic group in Nepal. Among their major festivals, Maghi is especially significant as it marks the start of the new year. Other important celebrations include Holi, Chaitra Dashain, Guriya, Krishna Ashtami, Atwari, Anttar, Jitiya, Samachkhewa, Chhath, Dashain, and Tihar (Bhattarai 2077 B.S.). One of the significant traditional dances of the Tharu is the Menri Dance, which is commonly performed in the Nawalpur area of Gandaki Province. The dance season begins with the Bada Dashain festival. After the Ghatasthapana ritual, drums like dhol and madal are played to celebrate the sprouting of barley (jamara). The dance continues until Haribodhini Ekadashi, when it concludes. This dance can include thirty-six or more male participants. Around fifteen to twenty of them play large drums or madals, while others carry shields, swords, or cymbals and perform mock battle scenes. The drum beats start with prayers to deities, and the battle sequences often act out famous scenes from the Ramayana or Mahabharata. For example, one dancer portrays Ravana, with two others representing Rama and Lakshmana. Songs related to the Mahabharata, Krishna's life, the abduction of Sita (Sitarahan), and plowing season songs (Chaniwar) are also performed. The dancers wear white dhotis and shirts with gamchas around their heads, and the drums are decorated with white, red, and yellow cloth. The dance forms a circle with drummers, sword and shield bearers, and cymbal players, while a group in the center sings and dances (Bhattarai 2077 B.S.: 36). Jhumra is another traditional dance that can be performed at any time. The word jhumra comes from jhumnu, which means 'to sway', suggesting a dance that involves swaying movements. In some areas, Jhumra is performed only by women, but in Nawalpur, men dress in female clothing to perform it. They wear skirts (ghanghar), blouses (cholo), crowns, and wigs, imitating female dancers who place bells on their ankles. Male musicians wear white dhotis and kurtas with gamchas on their heads. A group of dancers and musicians perform together, often consisting of one or two dancers, two or three madal players, and five to seven singers (Tharu, 2069 B.S.: 264–267). Rasdhari Dance is usually performed during religious events, mourning ceremonies (kiriya), or fairs. It takes place near the place where the deceased person is laid to rest (kiriya putri), and it is believed to please the ancestors. Items like



money bags, tridents, ashes, and household objects are placed at the ritual site, symbolizing offerings to the departed soul. The patterns and markings on the ashes are thought to indicate the soul's arrival or presence (Bhattarai 2077 B.S.: 37). Jogeda is another ceremonial dance that involves singing and is performed by up to twenty-five people. Both men and women dress in traditional clothing with bells and blouses, performing coordinated steps. Musicians play instruments such as tabla, dugi, cymbals, harmonium, and khainjadi. The dancers perform movements that go from front to back (Bhattarai 2077 B.S.). The singing tradition of Jhamta is associated with festivals like Jitiya, prayers for drought relief, fasting periods, and other celebrations. Both men and women sing songs that cover themes such as love, religion, culture, agriculture, history, and social life (Bhattarai 2077 B.S.). The Tharu culture, which is closely connected to nature worship, agricultural rhythms, and oral storytelling, is one of the most lively indigenous traditions in Nepal (Stirrat 1983). Research by Brian H. Hodgson and recent ethnographers emphasize the complex mixture of Hindu, Buddhist, and animist influences in Tharu cultural life, which is evident in their festivals and performing arts (Hodgson 1999). The unique dialects and folk music of the Tharu contribute to Nepal's multicultural scene and offer important insights into the religious and social development of the Terai plains (Regmi 2004).

Modern Context and Social Change In recent years, the Tharu community has experienced important progress in education. Groups such as the Tharu Utthan Samaj (Tharu Upliftment Society) and the Tharu Kalyankari Sabha (Tharu Welfare Society) have contributed to improving education, advocating for their rights, and safeguarding their cultural heritage. There has been a clear shift in the kinds of work, businesses, and cultural practices followed by the Tharu, with traditional beliefs being reassessed and reinterpreted in a more progressive way (Gautam 2015; Sharma 2018). Despite these positive changes, the Tharu community still faces serious challenges like poverty, limited access to good education, lack of secure land ownership, and poor representation in government services. The armed conflict in Nepal worsened their situation, causing the displacement of several Tharu families (Sharma 2075 B.S.: 125). Socioeconomic inequality combined with political instability has made it difficult for the Tharu to fully reach their social and economic potential (Regmi 2007).

Despite these challenges, community groups, non-governmental organizations, and government initiatives continue to work towards empowering the Tharu people. These efforts focus on providing inclusive education, legal support for land rights, and the revival of cultural practices. This ongoing development shows how the Tharu society maintains its traditional values while also adapting to modern changes in Nepal (Malla 2012).



Research shows that local organizations have played a key role in improving Tharu literacy and encouraging political involvement (Adhikari 2014). The combination of traditional culture with modern education has created a distinctive socio-political environment within the Tharu community (Stirrat 2000). Land reform remains an important issue, as lack of land affects both economic stability and social standing (World Bank 2010).

Conclusion

The Tharu community in Nepal is a significant indigenous group with a rich cultural background, many different subgroups, and their own unique language. They are an essential part of the local population living in the Terai and Inner Madhes regions. Throughout history, they have faced various challenges, including being displaced during conflicts, experiencing economic and social disadvantages, and having limited political voice. However, the Tharu people have shown great strength and ability to adapt. Their lively traditions, such as special festivals, traditional art, and social systems, remain strong even as they gradually embrace modern education and social changes. Community groups and government programs are helping to tackle long-standing problems like poverty, land ownership issues, and unequal access to education. To support lasting growth and maintain their cultural identity, future plans should focus on development that includes everyone and balances progress with the protection of Tharu traditions. Acknowledging the Tharu as a key indigenous group in Nepal is important for promoting national unity and celebrating cultural diversity in the country's changing society.

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