

# Continuity and Change among Tharu Tribe: A Socio-Cultural Study

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**Abstract:** *Ideal definitions of a 'Tribe' is limited to some well-formed notions i.e. the tribal society is culture bound, non-stratified, casteless, classless, territorially bounded, isolated and homogenous society. But in this modern era of social change where people are competing with each other for advancement, 'tribes' of an ideal type can be hardly found. In the present times tribes are no more independent and isolated social groups. In this regard commonly encountered problem is socio-cultural change. Tharu tribes of Uttar Pradesh are no exception; they are one of the most affected indigenous group in the country who are facing the problems arising out of the socio-cultural change and struggling with issues of their identity.*

*This paper presents a brief account of the processes and patterns of the socio-cultural change among Tharu tribes of Uttar Pradesh in India as evident by several available studies in the context. This paper is divided into three parts, first part is introduction, dealing with the origin of Tharus, their demography and distribution pattern in the country and with focus on the available secondary literatures, second part is dealing with the processes and patterns of socio-cultural change among Tharus and last part deals with the observations and concluding remarks.*

**Key Words:** *Tharu Tribes, Change, Development, Modernization, Sanskritization, Hinduization.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

India is a country of multi-ethnic groups and Tharu tribe is one of them. They are largest and one of the oldest tribal community in the region. They are generally cultivators and peddlers. They speak their own Tharu language known as "Tharuhati" and script is Devnagiri and for communication purpose they speak Hindi as well. Tharu people who lived in Terai dense forest areas for centuries infected with Malaria, developed an inborn resistance against malaria.<sup>1</sup>

The Tharus got the status of scheduled tribes with four other tribes (Buxa, Bhotia, Jaunsari and Raji) in Uttar Pradesh through the constitution (Scheduled Tribes) (Uttar Pradesh) order, 1967.<sup>2</sup> Population wise, Tharus are most populous group among all existing five tribal groups in Uttar Pradesh. Most of the population of Tharu community exists in the Bhabhar Tarai region at Indo-Nepal border (Srivastava, 1958).<sup>3</sup> Tharus are mainly inhabited in Udham Singh Nagar District of Uttrakhand, Lakhiempur Kheri, Bahraich, Basti, Gonda, Balrampur, and Gorakhpur districts of Uttar Pradesh and Champaran District of Bihar.<sup>4</sup> Total population of Tharu tribe in Uttrakhand is 91,342 and 1,05,291 in Uttar Pradesh.<sup>5</sup> Tharu people worship various gods and Goddess as their local deities. They are adherents mainly of Hindu religion, but also hold Islamic, Animist and Buddhist beliefs.<sup>6</sup>

Tharus in Nepal called their local deity 'Gor-Raja'.<sup>7</sup> They also believe in animal sacrifices to pacify their traditional local god. The main occupations of this community are fishing, hunting and agriculture. Tharu people do not partake in the national level politics but they are active in local politics as 'Pradhan' and 'Guruwa' (head of the traditional Panchayat). Though they are practicing the patriarchal and patrilineal notion of the Hindu caste society, the status of women in the Tharu community is relatively better and they enjoy considerable amount of freedom. "Tharu women dominate in decision making and managing the affairs of the family"<sup>8</sup> although they are not educated.

While studying the origins of great civilizations and cultures a writer can be fall back upon available secondary literatures on the topic. Unfortunately it is not the case with Tharu tribes; scholars have to contend with the arbitrary knowledge sources of the tribes, mainly oral traditions, which makes it difficult for the sociologists and social anthropologists to study the community. Recurrent ongoing argument about origin of the term "Tharu" is denoted to the "Thar Dessert" in Rajasthan. A number of scholars put forth this argument without any considerable evidence that the Tharu people have migrated from the Thar Dessert in the 13<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> century to other regions of the country.<sup>9</sup> According to a folk story, in the remote past when the king was defeated by the forces of an invader, the woman of the royal palace rather than fall into the hands of foe fled into the jungles with the Saises and Chamars (menial castes) belonging to the palace. This assertion gets further support as it is observed that women among Tharus dominate.<sup>10</sup> Women dominance of the Tharu community is explained by the tradition that the Tharus are off springs of mixed marriages between Rajput women and their servants, Saises and Chamars.<sup>11</sup> W.Crooke (1896) is of the view that the

origin of the Tharus can be traced to the word "Tharu" signifying a 'wine bibber'.<sup>12</sup> It is believed that this name has been given to the Tharus by one of the Khastriya Rajas of the plains seeing the Tharu's thirst and capacity for drinking wine.<sup>13</sup>

D.N.Majumdar (1944) described that the Tharus have mongoloid racial affiliation and they cannot claim their origin to Rajputs on the basis of blood group tests or serology. They do not have any known distinctive characteristics which relate them to Rajputs of Rajasthan in their cultural or racial practices.<sup>14</sup> Srivastava (1965) talks about Tharus that they have mongoloid physical appearances, which are profitably merged with non- mongoloid race as well.<sup>15</sup>

Social change can be defined as a process by which the existing orders of any society, it can be material civilization, and spiritual, social and cultural is transformed into another cultural society. According to Malinowski "cultural change is the process by which the existing orders of the society, thus is, its social, spiritual and material civilization is transformed from one type to another".<sup>16</sup> Nesfield, V.K. Kochar, D.N. Majumdar, T.N. Madan, R.P.Srivastava, Sameera Maiti, R.C.Verma, Nadeem Hasnain, Narendra S. Bisht & T. S. Bankoti, Mary Ann Maslak, Amir Hasan, C.T.Hu, S.K. Shrivastava. B.S.Bist, Jagdev Sinsh and many others have contributed in the study of the socio-cultural change among Tharu community. These scholars have also dealt with the reasons behind the change; the main reason being the contact with non-tribal communities, developmental schemes and education. The adoption by the Tharu communities of the changes occurring due to the above mentioned factors are different from processes such as modernization, Sanskritization and Hinduization.

## 2. SOCIO-CULTURAL STATUS OF THARU TRIBES IN INDIA:

The socio-cultural aspect includes several factors such as traditions, customs, education level, rituals, religious practices, etc. According to Tharu traditions, the joint family system used to be the norm, but due to the changing practices some of them are moving to a nuclear family system. In Tharu social tradition every family member contributes in earning livelihood. It is observed that, the joint families in Tharus are more contributive and productive, than nuclear families in order to carry out their traditional work of agriculture. But now because of the continuous migration in Tharu society the agricultural land is divided and it's affecting the working traditions of the joint family among tharus. In regard to other professional skills of the Tharu people, they are highly skilled in making of fishing nets, traps, household utensils and other crafts.

The Tharus do not have single language but the language spoken by the Tharus is called *Tharuhati*, which is related to the Indo-Aryan group of languages. But, as a matter of fact, it is believed that Tharus have no specific language of their own. They used to speak great mixture of languages which is commonly used in the region they live. They usually use to speak the mixture of the Bojpuri, Awadhi, Maithli and other regional languages.<sup>17</sup>

Beliefs, superstitions and supernatural practices among Tharus are bound by some social beliefs and practices. They perform puja or jadutona as commonly known among the tribal people. Different beliefs connect Tharu society to social harmony and make them unique. There are a number of deities and gods whom the Tharu tribes worship. If we talk about the beliefs of Tharu tribe, then we can say that "The Tharu ethnic communities are followers of animistic beliefs as defined by Tylor they believe in life after death, about good and bad spirits, fetish, they are believers of spirits that dwell on stones, animals, tree, Steams Mountains as in Vedic ages. The general belief that persists is that, if the spirits are displeased then the evils in form of natural calamities epidemics befall them and modes to please such deities".<sup>18</sup> In the south- west part of the Tharu area, there is a deity named Bhumia or Bhuiyan Bhawani, which is believed to dwell in the pipal or neem tree in the village. Tharu people worship this deity only once a year in the Indian month of Asadh. Deity Bhuiyan is considered as a protector at the time when epidemics or any natural calamity happens in the village. "Some of the important Tharu deities are Nagrahai or Nagaria, Niradhar, Kariyadeva, Bisihar, Purvi, Gulladevta, Kalka, Parwatiya, Banaspati, Bhera Baba, Kausam baba, Turkia, etc".<sup>19</sup> Due to the constant involvement of the main religions as Hindu, Islam, and Sikhism, Tharu people started worshiping god and goddesses as Shiva, Krishna, Hanuman, Sarasvati, Santoshi, Imam Hussain, Bhale Mian, Guru Nanak Dev, etc, in order to enhance peace and prosperity.<sup>20</sup>

They use to celebrate different kind of festivals and every festival has its own specific peculiarities. Among other festivals there is a festival called Asadhi, which is a month when people please the god of rain. The purpose of worshiping the god of rain is to please the god after sowing the crop as it needs rainwater to grow. There are number of festivals, which are celebrated individually or collectively because of the Tharus coming into contact with the Hindu traditions. Hindu festival Diwali is considered as Barshi, a day when Tharu worship and please their ancestor's spirits and organize a feast called Bhandara. But as a tradition shift many Tharu family started celebrating Diwali with lights like Hindus. Holi is a special festival for Tharus and is celebrated for a month long period.<sup>21</sup>

Marriages among Tharu have different forms. There are two special forms which needs to be mentioned here, which are Magi biwaha and Choribiwaha. "Magi biwaha where all the relevant rituals are completed and other is the

Choribiwaha where female is stolen meaning take away without consent. Due to the fact that boys are married off at an early age with girls in their mid-teens, there seems to be no question of love marriages and the concept also seems absent among these people".<sup>22</sup>

Tharu tribes are non-vegetarians and they include in their meal, fish, chicken and vegetables. Tharus consider rice as their main food, they call it bhat and a diet for them without rice is not possible. Tharu's consume rice or bhat three times a day. The reason of this more consumption of rice by Tharu is that the area where Tharu reside has fertile soil for rice production. Chachi or Chichor is a special dish prepared by Tharus for festivals and marriage ceremonies. Tharu's love for rice inspired them to produce multiple varieties of rice such as, Bagari, Anajanava, Dudharaj, Sartij, Barchha, Devasar, Sathi, Kankarjira, Basabhoga, Gharitakumari, Basmati etc.<sup>23</sup> In beverages, Tharu people are known to consume a lot of wine. That's why few scholars trace that the name Tharu is given after their wine drinking capacity. Tharu people produce wine at home and their home-made wine has two varieties – *Jand* and *Daru*. *Jand* is found to be less alcoholic and is considered like a beer.<sup>24</sup>

As in the case of status of Tharu women, the scenario is quite interesting that the Tharu women play a dominant role in the society. They can go anywhere without permission of the male counterpart. They stand an equal share in economic and social affairs. Their reputation in Tharu tribe as comparison to other tribes is very high. Although Tharus practice patriarchy, women have all the rights to equally stand their position. Among the Tharu community, women of Tharus known to enjoy a very dominant and high position. D.N. Majumdar, Amir Hasan and R.P. Srivastava all supported this fact in their works.<sup>25</sup> Tharu women define this dominance on the basis of their origin to Rajput ancestry.

### 3. SOCIO-CULTURAL CHANGE AMONG THARUS:

The socio-cultural change among the Tharus has taken place after independence due to the continuous developmental programs taken up by the government and increased contact with non-tribal communities in the area. The discourse of socio-cultural change emerged in the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century and initial period of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the imagination of how societies engaged with their initial primitive life. Charles Darwin propounded the Theory of Evolution. That was also the time when numerous ways of analyzing the change or transformation of human society were theorized by sociologists such as Auguste Comte, John Stuart Mill, Karl Max and Herbert Spencer etc.<sup>26</sup>

Tribes in India are very rich in the terms of their traditional culture and customs. They practice unique type of culture and traditions. Their culture is very much related to the natural environments in the area where they inhabit. They have their own territories in which tribal communities live together with the common notion of surviving. A.C. Sinha describes that the tribal communities "are isolated in ecology, demography, economy, politics and other ethnical groups. Such historical image differentiates the tribal communities from the non-tribal and provides them tribal identity".<sup>27</sup> But these specific characteristics have been greatly affected with the continuous interruption of so called civilized people. Due to the continuous interruption of non-tribals into Tharu's culture, changes have taken place. With the passing of time, their amazing culture and traditions have started losing importance among the tribal people. A general uneasiness is felt within the community as they are going through this transition phase.

### 4. EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT:

Educational development of any society or tribe is associated with the access to education, so that they can equally compete with the rest in other developed societies. It is a matter of concern that the Tharu tribes are less aware about education. During the past decades, Tharu people were not interested in gaining the knowledge to read and write. Only family education for different situations in life was given to children by parents, so that they can understand their responsibilities in the society. Children help their parents in everyday work and gradually learn how to handle economic tasks. That's why, education in a formal way stands null for Tharu tribe. But now there is increased awareness about education among the Tharus and an understanding that education is essential for bright future.

Many social workers local as well as from outside have been struggling for improving the educational standards among the Tharus. Regarding the establishment of the educational institutions, "The first school to be established here was an Ashram Type School (A.T.S.) which was started as part of the Third Five Year Plan. Concrete steps in the direction of educating the Tharu began only after they were declared a Scheduled Tribe in 1967. At present the area can boast of a number of primary school, and a few secondary and ashram type schools".<sup>28</sup>

Tharus are one of the many Indian communities who are not aware about educational institutions even in the area where they inhabit. There are a number of educational organizations and institutions but the percentage of educated people in the community is very low. The educated among the Tharus want an early job, that's one reason why they don't opt for higher education.<sup>29</sup> There may also be another reason behind this notion, that they are economically not very strong.

## **5. MODERNIZATION:**

Modernization as a discourse emerged in India during the national movement for freedom from British regime.<sup>30</sup> The regulative and architectural ideals were, the rebuilding of the country to make it an economically developed and socially egalitarian. The idea was greatly debated and eventually cherished in the Indian constitution.<sup>31</sup> Modernization theory was used as a tool to explain the shift from a traditional society to a modern one. This concept arose during 1950s and emerged from the western intelligentsia. The theory of modernization has been used to denote the process of social change and changes occur in clusters, not in isolation, for instance economic modernization. “Economic modernization (increasing division of labour, manufacture for commercial markets, improved technology, professional management) brings with it urbanization, literacy and a decline in traditional authority”.<sup>32</sup> A good relation between social aspects and economic aspects of modernization is acknowledged in the different editions of the World Value Survey, which find a common firm connection between growing individualism and growing prosperity.<sup>33</sup>

Regarding the social change of the Tharu society, S.C.Verma says that, youths are very important for any society, they play very important role in all arena of the development of any stream in the society. Tharu youth too are very progressive in this manner. Some of them are working as school teachers, in police service and some are interested in politics at the village level. Even though they are aware about developmental programs, they are not involved with any of the mainstream developmental projects directly. According to Verma, they have neither advancement nor the awareness about their tradition and culture.<sup>34</sup> Large number of youth from Tharu community wants change, so they are neglecting their traditional cultural values. This kind of notion of change in Tharu society is due the influence of modernization.

## **6. SANSKRITIZATION:**

M.N.Srinivas has proposed the concept of Sanskritization as the process of social change or acculturation among the Hindu castes of India. He puts forth this concept to explain some of the features of social change in India society, culture and religion. According to Srinivas, sanskritization process is also occurring among some of the tribal communities such as Bhils and Oraons. Sanskritization as defined by M.N. Srinivas in his book Social Change in Modern India (1966) is “the process by which a low Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology and way of life in the direction of a high and frequently, “twice born” caste”.<sup>35</sup> Basically these changes are chased by an assertion to achieve a high position in the social hierarchy in comparison to historically accepted claimant position or caste by the local communities of area. It is a time taking process, usually it takes a long period of time, indeed, a generation or more, before the time of ‘appearance’ is accepted. Generally, this change of claimant position is not acceptable by the existing neighboring castes but by the time, by the gap of one generation or two, claimant’s position gets conceded by the neighboring castes. It shows the social and cultural mobility among the established framework. The process of sanskritization, usually affects the position of a group which is trying to achieve a high position in the local social hierarchy. Srinivas also affirmed that this concept is also pertinent in connection to the tribals and semi tribal groups e.g. the Bhils, Oraons of central India and the Paharis of Himalayan regions.<sup>36</sup>

According to Verma, the problems are arising because of social change within their community itself as they are following the life style of other mainstream societies for the betterment of their own life style. Here, it can be said, the process of sanskritization is still active within the Tharu society. Many Tharu youth are trying to mimic other cultures under the influence of modernism and educational development. They are ignoring their own cultures and losing their traditional values.<sup>37</sup>

## **7. HINDUIZATION**

Hinduization has been a dominant phenomenon in the tribal communities for a long time in Uttar Pradesh as well as in other parts of India. Tharu tribes of Uttar Pradesh are not an exception to this. They are living in the state where Hindu castes are dominant numerically and Tharus are surrounded by Hindu and Muslim communities. The tribes of U.P. have expanded their networks with the neighboring non-tribals. Thus, the process of Hinduization is more dominant in the area. Prime reason of tribal’s attraction towards Hinduism may be Hindu ceremonies, rituals and beliefs which is modified from the culture and practices of tribes. Hindus were the earliest immigrants into the tribal spaces. Social change among tribals started in twentieth century especially among hill tribes. Census of India, 1901, Madras stated as following:

“The forest and hill tribes, however, are well-known to be undergoing a slow process of Hinduizing, or rather Brahmanization, as a result of their contact with the Brahmin customs of their neighbors on the plains, and to often pay a sort of reverence to the Hindu gods while they simultaneously worship their original spirit deities”.<sup>38</sup>

## **8. CONCLUSION**

The culture of Tharu tribe is amazing as it is very much related to nature and represent a good kind of social life. They respect their women and family. There is a close bond among them and a great respect for their elders. They live in the lap of nature so their religious practices are very much related to nature. They strongly believe in nature, super-

natural power, sprits, soul, and ancestors. Their festivals are very eco-friendly but due to influence of Hindu culture they also celebrate Hindu's festivals like Holi and Diwali. They are mainly agriculturist and live in permanent villages. Socio-economic condition of Tharu women is very good. Men and women of the family are engaged in agriculture work. Women of Tharus enjoy more freedom than women from non-tribal communities. But with the passing period of time and due to the modernization, educational development and continuous contact with non-tribal neighbors in the area they live, they have started losing their original socio-cultural norms and values and they are facing the problem of social change through the process of Sanskritization and Hinduization. Increasing influence of Modernization and Hinduization have significant impact on the traditional culture on the Tharu Tribes. So in conclusion we can say that such influence of acculturation made the Tharu culture very dynamic in nature and with period of time it is influenced by the dominant culture of Hindus too. Tharus are closely associated with nature but due to influence of Hindu population their cultural practices have undergone sea change.

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