

THE MYTH AND REALITY OF THARU TRIBAL ORIGIN

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ABSTRACT

People everywhere around the globe have an insatiable desire to identify their rootstock and the Tharu Tribes are no exception. Whatever the Tharu community represents today is an intuitional respect for their cultural heritage and tradition. They, too, want to know about their tribe's past tribulations and triumphs because relating to ancestral stories helps to create narratives of one's culture and helps to establish a unique identity. Knowing our history, origin, and cultural background helps to develop a more robust understanding of who we are and deepens the roots of our descendants. While contemplating the origin of great civilizations and cultures, one can look upon available written texts and literature on the topic, which is not in case with Tharu tribes. Although they lack written texts, their knowledge is preserved and perpetuated through oral tradition, music, and visual art. Their tribal heritage includes myths, artistic creations, symbols, beliefs, and customs. Tharu people have their tales enacted on specific rites and occasions to create a situation of the primordial time. They use different types of myths or tales to reflect Tharu culture, practices, and beliefs that form their identity.

Keywords: Tharu, Oral Tradition, Myth, origin, Tribe.

INTRODUCTION

The study primarily focuses on the various constructed tales of the history of Tharu origin and the portrayal of their existing past transferred from one generation to another in oral form predominately documented by British ethnographers, Christian missionaries and colonial officials. The sources used to describe Tharu origin are mainly taken from Government records, reports of individual officers, published monographs, and valuable articles on Tharu tribes by ethnographers and anthropologists. This attempt is useful to capture dynamics of Tharu identity formation process, however, from historical perspective. The main objective of this paper is to present a historical

trajectory of identity formation process embedded in myth making process of undertaken by Tharu tribal community.

Capturing identity formation process of tribes emerged as an important phenomenon in social sciences in India. Historians engaged in tribal history invest significant labour to explore identify formation process of tribes. There are 730 tribal communities recognized by the Indian constitution. Interestingly each tribal community possesses its own identity consciousness preserved in the form of myth and existential consciousness. Attempt has been made by some studies to capture the identity formation process in India.¹ This process needs further augmentation in order to capture the wider picture on the tribal identity formation process in different parts of India. This paper attempts to capture the narratives centered on origin claimed by Tharus and documented by colonial ethnographers.

Several academic studies attempted to capture life world of Tharu tribal community. The art forms preserved by Tharu tribes were particular attraction for many scholars. In nutshell, the socio-economic conditions and cultural aspects of Tharu tribes are being explored by studies.² The existing studies, however, did not give adequate importance to historical trajectory of the origin of Tharu tribe. In view of this, this paper attempts to capture this conceptual gap in the literature on history of Tharu tribe.

GENERAL HISTORICITY OF THARU HABITAT

The Tharu are tribal people predominately live in the patches of a plain area surrounded by dense forest in the narrow belt of Terai, amidst the Sivaliks or lower Himalayas, located in the southern part of Nepal and northern part of India. Tharus constitute a significant tribal population living in Nepal, North Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and various parts of Uttarakhand. Tharu is a largely populated indigenous people in Nepal, who have settled over 20 different districts alongside the whole Terai and Inner Terai, the Southern plain lands of Nepal. Their total estimated population is 1,737,470.ⁱ Culturally and linguistically, they are divided into different sub-groups and mainly concentrated in the districts of Jhapa, Morang, Sunsari, Udayapur, and Saptahari. It is also one of the most populous tribes in India, with a total population of 356,572.ⁱⁱ In Uttarakhand, Tharu concentration primarily lies in Khatima and Sitarganj Tehsil of Uddham Singh Nagar, with a population of 91,342.ⁱⁱⁱ In Uttar Pradesh, the people of Tharu comprises 105,291 highly concentrated in the areas of Lakhimpur Kheri, Gorakhpur, Pilibhit, Bahraich, Balrampur, Shravasti, and Maharajganj.^{iv} In Bihar, their population is reported to be about 159,939. Most reside in West Champaran District, Madhubani, Araria, and Sitamarhi.^v They are the largest and one of the oldest ethnic groups in the Terai region.

Ecological conditions of Terai region, covered by thick malaria jungle kept away intruders and guaranteed Tharu's freedom. They live in the villages near dense malaria-infested jungles in areas isolated over the millennia. Their relative isolation led them to develop a self-sufficient economy consisted of practicing rudimentary

¹ Pradip Chattopadhyaya, *Redefining Tribal Identity: Changing Identity of the Santhals of South West Bengal*, Primus, New Delhi, 2014; Jesurathnam Devarapalli, *Tribal Identity: Contradictions Of Ascribed And Self-Asserted Perspectives*, Kalpaz, New Delhi, 2022.

² Sameera Maiti, *The Tharu: Their Arts and Crafts*, Northern books, New Delhi, 2004; Arjun Gunaratne, *Many tongues and one people: making of Tharu identity in Nepal*, Cornell University, 2002.

agriculture, gathering from nearby jungle and occasional migration in search of labor. This largely self sufficient economic condition resulted in socio-cultural formations which evolved over a period of time.

Being less literate tribal society, Tharu community preserved their life experiences with myriad forms of oral traditions. The social collectivity forms of Tharus as follows: folklore, folk arts, and literature, which seems very close to their tradition, culture, and history. Though the term 'Tharu' is understood as a single community within the community, it shows several subgroups and sub-clans with cultural and linguistic diversity. They have a distinct language, culture, rituals, customs, unique ornaments, and lifestyles. Tharu internal organization is very indefinite and varies from region to region. Names of main clans are Badwayak, Battha, Rawat, Birtiya, Mahto, Dahait, Rajia, Bunka, Sansa, Jugia, Buxa, Dhangra etc. All of these Tharu sub-clans are divided into superior and inferior status.^{vi} Moreover, they are also known on a regional basis as Rana in Far-Western Terai, Kochila in the Eastern Terai, Chitwaniya and Desaura in the middle region of Terai, Kathariya residing in Western Terai and Dangarua in Mid-Western Terai where Dang Valley considered to be their original home.

ORAL TRADITIONS OF THARU ORIGIN: COLONIAL ENCOUNTERS

Unfortunately, the history of the Tharu tribe is veiled in the haze of undocumented history and is surrounded by several myths and oral traditions. They don't have written records of their own. Archaeological remains like thatch-covered bamboo and mud structures leave no trace. The ruins regress to earth once stranded. Thus, whatever is known of their history is derived from passing references in a few texts found in the early writings, often by British explorers or civil servants and through etymological shreds of evidence.

Tharu appears to be an exciting tribe with a vague floating tradition connected to their origins and history. Nothing conclusive can be ascertained with certainty concerning this curious race origin. But one can't avoid the hidden truth lurking at the bottom of all these startling facts. Making myth history is essential in maintaining cultural continuity and helps preserve belief structure.

Among the vast old-aged tradition, a critical myth, Tharu claiming them to be the proper descendants of the solar family, comes up to shed light on the early history of Tharus. This affirmation can be visible in Dr. Buchanan's accounts, where he seems compatible with Tharu's pretentiousness of being of the solar race just on the exposition of Gorkha getting expelled from their usurped estates by Tharu. The story begins with the Raja of Kashi, who has been drummed out by a people called Gorkha (Followers of Gorakhnath), leaving numerous marks of their powers and few remnants in the district. They also destroyed the adjoining kingdom of the Sun family in Ayodhya and the Moon family in Magadha. Soon Gorkha was thrown out by people called 'Tharu', who are said to have descended from the hills and extended themselves to every part of North Ghagara to Mithila (once a part of the patrimony of the sun dynasty).^{vii} Further, P. Carnegy's reports provided a cautious note on genealogical inquiries on the races of Awadh and listed different sects of Chhatris (Kshatriya). His gathered information on the Forest tribe 'Tharu' designates the belief that Gorakhpur Tharus are descended from the 'Autar' or 'Utar'(Northern) Chhatris Ratan Sen, who belonged to Aditya dynasty, sprung from Gehlotes, Balharas, and primarily from Surajbhans, the solar race of Ajudhia (Ayodhya).^{viii}

However, regarding the above Story, Carnegie says, "One thing seems probable, and that is, that the origin of these foresters is of a much older date than the time of Ratan sen; and yet I find as will be seen hereafter, that several tribes in these parts besides the Tharus of the sub-Himalayan districts, for instance, the Nats, the kanjars, the Sermars, and the Brajbasis, all tell the same story of their having been Chhatris."^x

Another Tharu tradition states that they come from Chittor and refer to Jaimal and Pattah (great names in the annals of Rajasthan). Akbar's forces killed both in about 1567 A.D. The men of their race fled to the jungle of Nepal and settled there. They claim to be originally Rajputs whose ancestors further lost their caste by taking intoxicating liquors and rearing fowls. Sir H. Elliot says the origin and lineage of Tharus are in many obscurities. Nevertheless, he asserts Tharu as a most exciting race and refers to them to be of hill origin, as the features of Tharu itself suggest.^x

Regarding the Chithor story, Nesfield says- "Some Tharus know nothing about this tradition, and those who do are not able to tell you whether it was the sack by Alauddin (A.D. 1303), or that by Bahadur Shah (A.D. 1533), or that by Akbar (A.D. 1567). The story is absurd on the face of it; not the slightest allusion to Tharus in connection with any of these events is made by the Muhammadan historians. Some clans invented the fiction of having come from Rajputana merely to raise themselves in their own and their neighbours' estimation. There is scarcely a hunting tribe or caste in Upper India which has not set up a similar claim."^{xi}

On the other hand, W. C. Benett is also doubtful of Tharu arrogating them a descent from the Rajput of Chittor. Instead, he asserts Tharus to Turanian origin due to their physical physiognomy, like flat faces, scanty beards, and high cheekbones. However, he further believes that the peculiar Mongolian appearance is not marked strongly with them as with the lower classes of Nepalese and Tibetans. Therefore, they may descend from a Chattri horde inter-married to aboriginal women.^{xii}

According to A. C. L. Carlleyle, "Tharus generally looked upon a sort of hill tribe, yet it is very certain, both from their traditions and also from certain traditions still current about them among the natives of this part of the country, that the Tharus were once the possessors of some considerable portion of the plains, both in the Basti district and in the district of Gonda, which originally formed portions of the region anciently called Kosala. And yet, as far as I know, no information about any people bearing the name of Tharu would appear to be obtainable from any of the Buddhist chronicles! the Tharus were an ancient people within the limit of the kingdom of which Kapilavastu was the capital; either history must be unaccountably silent about them, or else the people who are now known under the name "Tharu", must anciently have been known under some other different name. Perhaps, as I suspect, and as I have already suggested, the Tharus may have been a branch of the same race as the Khasas or Khasyas, and the Magas, "Mags," or Magars, who are now also a hill tribe on the western confines of Nepal."^{xiii}

Nesfield besides quoting the information of previous gazetteers includes material collected by him in detail. He found that according to the vogue among the Thârus of Kheri, Riksheshwar or Raksha (Patron saint) was a founder of Tharu. This deified founder was the son of the famous aboriginal king, Raja Ben, whose fame still spread in many of the oldest cities of Upper India and Behar as one who held the rank and title of Chakravarti or universal emperor in the olden times. Riksheshwar or Raksha was banished, he was told from his father's court and

ordered with his male followers to seek a new home in the north, from which they were never to return. Setting out on their wanderings, they took as wives any women whom they could steal or capture on the road, and in this way, the Tharu tribe was founded. Benbans is still a title of several Dravidian tribes on the Vindhyan range.^{xiv} This tradition is scattered in various places where Tharu is no longer found, but the memory of their former dominion is still alive.

S. Knowles (a Christian Missionary), one of his chapters, "SPECIAL WORK AMONG THE THARU DURING APRIL AND MAY OF 1886" collected first-hand information on the Dangarua Tharus of Gonda District. He got another version of the Tharu tradition, claiming to be initially from the South. He quotes, "If you ask any of the latter where they originally came from, they will tell you at once, from the South. I thus asked an aged Tharu from Bhagwanpur, whom I had baptized, and whom the oldest inhabitants of the place declared to be a hundred years old, where his tribe came from, and he readily answered—"Dakhin," or from the South." Hence, he believes Tharus to be the children of the Forests and true aborigines of the country. Doubtlessly on account of the mentioned vogue, he connects Gond of the South of India and Tharu, belonging to the same race, before the Aryan immigration to this land.^{xv}

W.C. Crookes quotes down another tradition prevalent in East Oudh, primarily based on a valuable report of Benett, that after the fall of the Buddhist dynasty of Kanauj, the Tharus came down from the hills and occupied Ajudhya (Ayodhya). They dispossessed the Buddhists and called Raja Sri Chandra, of Srinagar, in the mountains, about Badari Nath, who drove back the Thârus. Raja Sri Chandra and Tharus marched north and founded Chandravatipur, now known as Sahet-Mahet (Sravasti).^{xvi} Bennet further, in his report, states that after Tharu occupancy to the district of Kanauj, who hardly wholly disappeared and are probably the ancestors of the local clans of Sombansis, Jinwars, Bissen, Bais, and are undoubted autochthones tribes who have adopted the names of Rajput and claim descent from Rajput clans.^{xvii}

ETHNOGRAPHIC EVOLUTIONARY APPROACHES ON THARU

In the late thirties, the beginning of the proper ethnographic collection and the development of anthropology strengthened the importance of fieldwork and participant observation. The best representative of this period who did pioneering work studying Tharu is D. N. Majumdar, S. K. Srivastava, C. Chaubey, P. C. Chaudhary, A. Hasan, etc. The work carried out by these anthropologists emphasized a monographic approach. They dealt with the most numerous Tharu subgroups, like Ranas, Dangaura, Kochila, and Chitwaniya Tharus, and built ethnic generalization from this peculiar Tharu Subculture.

The mentioned tradition of Tharu origin is mostly not prevalent (except for the memory of believing to be Rajput) in the Tharu region. Today, popular oral belief among Rana Tharu of Uttar Pradesh and Utrakhand on their history and origin is that; they consider themselves of Rajput origin and relate their place of ancestry with 'Gadh Chittor'. They are believed to have migrated from the Thar desert of Rajasthan to the far western Terai regions of Nepal after the sack of their native villages by the Muslim rulers and Mughals. And asserts since they migrated from the Thar desert, they are called 'Tharu'. It is fascinating that they don't have any specialty of Rajasthani Rajputs in their race and culture, but they claim blood relation with them. D. N. Majumdar's quoted work based on the anthropometric and serology of Tharu argues against the mythical theory of Rajput origins or

the diverse speculations of earlier authors on the racial origin of Tharu. He asserted Tharu are a Mongoloid tribe who succeeded in assimilating non-Mongoloid physical features.^{xviii}

P K Shukla contested the supposed Rajput origin and stated that Tharu people were influenced by the revivalist movements based on caste identity during the 1930s and 1940s and launched a campaign for cultural superiority; they wanted to be called Rajputs or Thakurs.^{xi} The argument ‘Tharus migrated from the Thar Desert is put forth by several scholars without any considerable evidence. However, the belief of Rajput ancestries is often not mentioned by all Tharu, particularly the elderly and intellectually conscious Tharu of Tharuhat in West Champaran in Bihar and the Tharus of Naini Tal. They describe themselves as a native of Terai. It is commonly believed by the Tharu themselves and by neighbors that they are so-called ‘Tharu’ because they live in the Terai. The Tharu themselves have little idea of their origin and how they came to inhabit the Terai, but they allege this much that they originally lived in the hills of Nepal.^{xx} Ramanand Prasad Singh, Ex-Attorney General of Nepal, speaks about the Tharu roots at a press conference in Patna, India, on 17 May 1988. The fanciful, unfounded, maligned, and false story about the Tharu community's origin, of the name ‘Tharu’ from the ‘Tharu desert’, has damaged the community’s growth and progress. He rejects these theories and agrees with D.N. Majumdar's theory, an anthropologist who through anthropometric and serological studies discovered ‘Tharus a pre-Aryan race of Mongoloid origin’.

CONCLUSION

The fact remains that the origination of Tharu Tribes is assorted in controversy and nothing conclusive can be said with certitude about the enigmatic origin of Tharu. It is difficult for sociologists, social anthropologists, and ethnologists to study community as scholars have to contend with the expert knowledge sources of the tribes, mainly oral tradition. Oral traditions and memories of the people are very likelihood of producing “golden past” or the “present contrasts”. Over the years, repetition of the same facts collected from myths, times and again by different writers, historically made the Tharu tribe a Rajput clan. But a definite history cannot be reconstructed out of myths only. The facts collected from tales to reconstruct history must be corroborated by primary sources other than myths. It is necessary to investigate the region's historical literature over the years. A type of oral history certainly can't be overlooked and needs to find its proper place in search of Tharu history.

It seems probable that there is not just one origin of the Tharu Tribe because historically, people arrived at the Tharu habitat from divergent locus at different times. As such, there may be truth in all the theories. However, several anthropometric and genetic studies addressing the mysterious racial mixture of the Tharu, which had been carried out systematically to settle the question on a ‘scientific basis’ didn't succeed much. Other known theories have no historical references and are just based on word-of-mouth recitals by old tribesmen or plane guesses with cooked stories. Tharu society is very significant but limited due to the paucity of information. Either one had to remain content with tidbits located at random, mainly myths and oral tradition, or strive to investigate its reality. So, the search for authentic origin of Tharu goes on further.

ENDNOTES

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- ⁱⁱⁱ Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India. Population Census 2011. Table A-11 Appendix: District wise scheduled tribe population (Appendix), Uttarakhand – 2011.
- ^{iv} Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India. Population Census 2011. Table A-11 Appendix: District wise scheduled tribe population (Appendix), Uttar Pradesh – 2011.
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