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# Land, Livelihood and Rana Tharu Identity Transformations In Far-Western Nepal

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# LAND, LIVELIHOOD AND RANA THARU IDENTITY TRANSFORMATIONS IN FAR-WESTERN NEPAL

This paper focuses on the identity of the Tharu, who live throughout the Tarai region. There have been social movements among Tharus that aim to promote their ethnic identity by opposing the Hindu identity and caste system. However, my ethnographic study of the Rana Tharu, a sub-group of Tharu in far-western Nepal, shows that the everyday practice of ethnic identity is fluid and dynamic, and cannot be understood in terms of a single ideology. While ideologies concerning “Sanskritization” and “Indigenusness” have dominated the discussion of social reforms and ethnic movements in Nepal, I find that a hybrid approach is more relevant to the Rana Tharu situation. The Rana Tharu adopted social movement strategies that differed from those of other Tharu groups. Ranas actively used different identities and cultural practices to achieve an equal social footing with the dominant hill settlers (Pahaaris). They imitated hill cultures on the one hand but also clung to some of their traditional customs and were proud of “being Rana.” The motivation behind this was not merely to gain more political power but also to obtain a better livelihood and self-identity. This paper adopts a bottom-up perspective by viewing ethnicity at the local level. The Rana case illustrates that the nature of ethnicity was situational, topical and dynamic. Ranas practiced different forms of identity when reacting to social change, history and livelihood. Ranas were engaged in a kind of complex balancing and interweaving of identity strategies that combine aspects of the discourses of both Sanskritization and Indigenusness. This identity and cultural management was the major force in the transformation of Rana Tharu society.

## INTRODUCTION

The Tharu people are one of the largest ethnic minorities in Nepal and they make up 6.6 percent of the total population. They live throughout the southern belt of Nepal called the Tarai from the east through to the west and the adjacent valleys between the Churia Range and the Mahabharat called the Inner Tarai. Most of the Tharu people are known in terms of the territory that they occupy or from where they have migrated (Guneratne 2002).<sup>1</sup> The Tarai had previously suffered from endemic malaria, which made extensive cultivation almost impossible. Therefore, until the 1950s, it was mainly covered by forest with a sparse population consisting mainly of Tharus, who were believed to have strong resistance to malaria. However, recent history shows that the Tarai experienced remarkable socio-economic change, including shifts in demography and rising conflicts over the control of land. Following the success of the malaria eradication program in the Tarai region during the 1950s, the area became not only favorable to Tharus but all other people, particularly the hill population. Many Tharus

lost their land to hill migrants and their customs were threatened. Significant scholarly work has documented the ways in which Tharus reacted to these social changes (Guneratne 2002; Krauskopff 2002; Odegaard 1997).

According to the literature, mainstream Tharu social reforms can be divided into two periods: before the 1990s and after the 1990s. The Tharu reform processes can be summarized in terms of two important ideologies, “Sanskritization” and “Indigenusness”, which have long influenced the history of Nepalese ethnic movements and indeed analyses of them. Despite their differences, they have been closely linked to issues of livelihood and economic matters. In particular, changes in landownership have long played a key role in shaping relations between high-castes and ethnic groups (Caplan 1970; Jones 1967) and inter-ethnic group relations (Campbell 1997; Odegaard 1997). The concept of Sanskritization was first developed by Srinivas (1962) and widely used in describing the social mobility of Hindu caste groups. According to Jones (1967:63), Sanskritization describes “a process by which a lower caste or non-Hindu group adopts the ideology or parts of ideology of Hinduism in an attempt to raise its economic, political, and social status in the caste hierarchy of a given area.” He

1. For example, Kochila Tharu in eastern Tarai; Chitwaniya and Deshaurya Tharu in central Tarai; Dangaura Tharu in western Tarai and Rana Tharu in far western Tarai.

points out that the acceptance of caste is the first step in Sanskritization, and the adoption of the language, dress and religious practices of the high Hindu castes is its core process. Levine (1987) further argues that economic and political factors are the underlying motivation for Sanskritization by ethnic groups.

However, Sanskritization is not the only strategy that ethnic groups use to respond to the domination of high Hindu caste groups. Sanskritization can be understood as a product of the early stage of nation-building (Pfaff-Czarnecka 1997; Sharma 1997), while Indigenism seems to be a social product that responds to global social movements and in particular post-1990s Nepal. According to Wilmer and Martin's (2006) analysis, the indigenous rights movement that emerged in the 1990s greatly influenced minorities, resource-poor groups and local activists in every corner of the world; Nepal was no exception. Meanwhile, the downfall of communism in Eastern Europe also inspired the first nationwide social movement, the *Jan Andolan* (People's Movement), which arose in Nepal in 1990, and that campaign ended the monarchical Panchayat system. Instead of being known as the "Hindu kingdom," the 1990 Constitution declared Nepal a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual state (Gurung 1997).<sup>2</sup> This new polity has provided an opportunity for many socially deprived ethnic groups to "discover pride in their ethnic identity" and become "conscious that they can take advantage of the democratic situation and bargain for a good share in the political and economic pie" (Sharma 1997: 482). Many ethnic groups realized the advantages of claiming indigenous status and preserving their traditional customs. In the new ethnic social movement, most ethnic activists use anti-Hindu and anti-caste campaign slogans. Furthermore these social campaigns emphasize the promotion of indigenous language, religious practices and dress.

Ideologies that claim to have originated out of Sanskritization or Indigenism have deeply influenced Tharu social movements. The earliest Tharu social movement emerged in 1949 when the first Tharu organization—the Tharu Welfare Society (TWS)—was formed by the elites of the eastern Tharus (Guneratne 2002; Krauskopff 2002; Odegaard 1997). Its establishment was mainly a response to increased contacts with the hill people and their cultures. The early strategy of TWS was much like Sanskritization because the campaign specifically focused on emulating high Hindu caste behavior. Through the promotion of abstinence from alcohol, and efforts to have women wear blouses and saris instead of traditional dress, the TWS sought to raise the social status of Tharus. Many Tharu groups also claimed they were descendents of high Hindu castes. For example, Tharus from Chitwan believed that they had blood relations with

2. In 28 May 2008, the elected Assembly voted to abolish the monarchy and declared that Nepal has become a democratic republic.

Rajputs, and Dangauras traced their origin to the Thakurs<sup>3</sup> in Ayodhya and to King Ram Chandra.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, in an attempt to improve people's economic status, the TWS advocated reducing life-cycle ceremony expenditures. The TWS, however, was perceived to be an elite organization and it failed to gain complete support from the different Tharu groups throughout the Tarai, particularly those from the western Tarai like Dangauras and Ranas. They had not even heard of the TWS (Odegaard 1997). The strategies also contradicted local Tharu cultural practices.<sup>5</sup> As a result, the campaign did not have any significant impact.

Another Tharu organization, the precursor to Backward Society Education (BASE), was appeared in 1985. Its formation was a reaction to the rising conflict over land resources, which most Tharu communities had endured for nearly half a century. The founder of that organization was a Tharu named Dilli Bahadur Chaudhary from Dang district. His family had lost substantial land to Pahaaris and was seriously in debt. Dilli thought illiteracy was one of the most important reasons for the subordinate position of Tharus so the promotion of education was his top priority.<sup>6</sup> BASE focused on the loss of their land as the most critical issue Tharus faced, and as a result it enjoyed widespread support from western Tharus. This was the first grass roots Tharu social movement. Dilli also successfully drew on the ideology of the global indigenous rights movement to assert the claim of Tharus as indigenous people.

On the other hand, TWS also realized that its old strategy did not work. Influenced by the new democratic reality created by the 1990 people's movement and the global indigenous movement, TWS developed new social reform strategies. According to Odegaard (1997), in order to link themselves more effectively to the international indigenous movement and obtain aid from foreign donor agencies, the leaders of TWS sought to portray the Tharu as indigenous people. The brotherhood of all Tharus and their indigenous status was therefore highlighted in the new ideology. The TWS rejected caste ideology and became affiliated with the anti-Hindu, anti-Brahmin organization Janajati Mahasangh (The Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities). In 1993, a well known Tharu leader of the TWS, Ramanand Prasad Singh, even wrote a book, *The Real Story of the Tharu*, which claimed that Tharus were descendents of the Buddha. It was expected that this claim would not be accepted by all Tharu

3. Both Ranas and Dangauras claim that the term "Tharu" is a misnomer for "Thakur". Thakur refers to the descendants of kings, particularly Rajput descendants (Odegaard 1997).

4. The term "Rajput" refers to plain caste (lit. "Kings' sons") (Gellner et al. 1997: 547). The claim of being descendants from Rajput is a common strategy for many low castes and ethnic groups wanting a higher caste position (Odegaard 1997).

5. Most Tharu groups used to consume much alcohol and a large variety of meats. The imposed non-alcoholism and vegetarian policies were seldom found at the local level.

6. For the impacts of BASE on Tharu communities, see Odegaard (1997; 1999).

groups but its importance lay in raising consciousness of Tharu identity. Several national Tharu conferences were held during the 1990s and all participants from different Tarai areas were aware of the importance of cultural preservation. Speaking the Tharu language, wearing Tharu clothes, and practicing Tharu rituals were symbols of being Tharus. The campaign was summed up as a “pan-Tharu movement” by Odegaard (1997).

One of the most important factors in the consolidation of a Tharu identity is land. McDonough (1989) and Guneratne (2002) analyzed the appearance of contemporary Tharu movements as being associated with the problem of unequal land distribution. Guneratne (2002: 68) concludes that “Tharu ethnic identity is formed not on the basis of shared cultural features but in terms of particular structural relationship to the State.” He points out that “[w]here Tharus are concerned, [the mobilizing factor] is access to and control of land” (2002: 18). His comment has clearly highlighted the close relationships between ethnicity, social movement and livelihood.

In this paper, using my ethnographic study of a sub-Tharu group — the Rana Tharus in far-western Nepal — I argue that complex interactions between land, livelihood and local histories have played a key role in the identity formation of contemporary Rana society. My ethnographic data has supported that although they shared the problems faced by Tharus throughout the Tarai, the Ranas did not join the Pan-Tharu movement but continued to claim a high caste status and royal pedigree and preserved their unique culture, which distanced them from other Tharus. Why did Ranas react to social changes differently than other Tharu communities? Most Ranas even refused to be labeled “Tharus”. This paper intends to explore the identity formation of Ranas through a closer examination of the relationships between ethnicity, local histories, livelihoods and social changes and their influence on Rana identity strategies. The paper echoes the critique of other scholars that the problems consist of dichotomous analytical perspectives in understanding social relations in South Asian literature (Dahal 1979; Fisher 2001; Gellner 1991; Gellner et al. 1997; Jaffrelot 2003; Levine 1987). Dahal (1979) critiques that no cultural group in Nepal can be neatly defined as a tribe and that adopting the Hindu-tribal perspective is only imagined by scholars and not the people they are studying. Levine’s study (1987) of the ethnic identity of three ethnic groups in Humla district has shown that the classical social categories were not the key determinant of ethnic relations. More realistically, economic and political motivations could shape ethnic relations. I feel that neither Sanskritization nor indigenosity can explain the ethnic character of a social group; other approaches are often completely ignored. The Rana example indicates that self-identity and ethnic relations with others can take on many forms. In addition, there is a tendency for scholars to rely too much on ethnicity that is focused at the national level and on the elite classes.

If we adopt a bottom-up perspective by viewing ethnicity at the local level, we will find that the nature of ethnicity is not a fixed historical and cultural product but it can be interpreted in different ways, modified and transformed (Eriksen 1993:16). In this process, livelihood issues and local histories have significantly influenced the formation and transformation of ethnic identity.

This paper is divided into three parts. In the first part, I provide a detailed history of the Ranas. History played a critical role in shaping the identity of Ranas as shown in the latter stages of this paper. In the second part, I will discuss the impacts of social changes on Rana society. In particular I will look at how Ranas changed from a majority to a minority group, from big landlords to small landholders or even nearly landless people because of the land registration system, hill migration and the creation of the Shuklaphanta Wildlife Reserve. These socio-economic changes mobilized the ethnic consciousness of Ranas. In the last part, using the ethnographic data, I will analyze how livelihood realities interact with local histories and the contemporary ethnic movement, resulting in the complex ways Ranas feel about themselves and other social groups.<sup>7</sup>

## THE HISTORY OF THE RANA IN FAR-WESTERN NEPAL

My fieldwork was carried out in villages neighboring Shuklaphanta Wildlife Reserve located in the westernmost part of Nepal, Kanchanpur district, 750 kilometers from the capital city, Kathmandu. Kanchanpur is a part of the western Tarai, which Nepal conceded to the British after the Anglo-Nepal war (1814-1816). However, the British Government returned it to Nepal in 1860, as a reward for assisting the British to quell the Indian Mutiny of 1857. This area was known as *Naya Muluk* and consists of the districts of Banke, Bardia, Kailali and Kanchanpur (Guneratne 2002). Kanchanpur had previously suffered from an extensive malaria epidemic, which made extension of the cultivated area almost impossible. Therefore, until 1963, it was mainly covered by forest with a sparse population and scattered settlements. The majority of the population consisted of the indigenous Tharu people who were believed to have strong resistance to malaria. Tharus were divided into two subgroups—Rana and Dangaura—that were significantly different in language and customs (see Odegaard 1997). The paper mainly focuses on Rauteli Bichawa Village which was the first human settlement in Kanchanpur. The Ranas originally settled in this particular forest frontier (KDDC 2002).

### Royal Ethnic Label

Despite the fact that written histories regarding the

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7. Note: In order to protect interviewees’ privacy, some names published in this paper are pseudonyms. Also, because the Rana language is an unwritten one, I rendered what was said into Devanagari and then transliterated it into English.

origin of Ranas in Kanchanpur are very few, their past has been recorded via local oral traditions. Rauteli Bichawa Ranas claimed that they were descendants from the Rajputs (Thakuri) of Chittogarh in Rajasthan. When the Muslims invaded, the king and his twelve retainers fled Chittogarh and some settled in BaraRana (meaning twelve Ranas, possibly modern *Garwal*), while others fled until they came to Sukala, which is now under Nepal's jurisdiction and has been officially renamed Shuklaphanta. At that time, there was one Brahmin girl in the group and she fell in love with one of the retainers. Due to her higher caste status, it was agreed that her husband could never enter the kitchen when she made food. Their descendants are today known as Rana Tharus. The earliest settlements were Iymilia, Hariya, Bataya and Bichawa, which were located in the southern part of the reserve; settlements were later extended to other areas such as the neighboring district, Kailali. Today, the Rana population is found in Kanchanpur and Kailali districts in Nepal and the States of Uttaranchal and Uttar Pradesh in India. Afterwards, the Dangauras who originally came from the western district of Dang moved into Rauteli Bichawa and worked for Rana families. Some people from the neighboring hill districts occasionally visited Rauteli Bichawa Village for casual agricultural work. The hill people were afraid to live in this region because of their fear of malaria.

However, another version of the origins of the Ranas was told by a Rana from another village in Kanchanpur. After the downfall of Maha Rana Pratap (a ruler of Rajasthan), many Ranas were killed in battle. Instead of taking *jauhar* (in ancient Hindu times, upon the death of their husbands in battle, Rajput women were expected to immolate themselves), Rana queens were sent to safer places in Nepal with their Rana guards. However, they lost their way in the forest and settled down, in Kanchanpur, Kailali, Dudhwa National Park and Nainital district in the Indian State of Uttaranchal. The queens waited for their husbands to join them but they did not. So the queens and the Rana guards agreed to lead a conjugal life. Their descendants are known as Rana Tharus. None of the Rauteli Bichawas Ranas had heard this story. The conflicting views about the origins of Ranas illustrate the issue of self-identity of Ranas and how they relate to others, which will be discussed later in the paper.

According to Srivastava's (1958) and Krauskopf's (2002) analysis, because of the close links Ranas have to India and their living in isolation, a strong Nepali identity did not develop in the Rana community. Both of them point out that Ranas do not claim Tharu ethnicity but often cling to their royal pedigree, which left deep marks on every aspect of their culture (see examples below). This suggests that despite the rise of democracy and ethnic politics in Nepal since the 1990s, the Rana social movement is more influenced by the tribal rights movements in India. For example, in 1995, Ranas formed their own organization called the Rana Reform Society (Rana Sudhar Samaj) and it

is a movement more like the earlier caste association marked by "Sanskritization".<sup>8</sup>

Rauteli Bichawa Ranas share the same situation. My ethnographic data shows that administrative control of the State in the Kanchanpur district was very limited. I was told that some old Rauteli Bichawa Ranas did not know that Nepal existed as a country. Interactions with the outside world were almost absent in geographically isolated villages like Rauteli Bichawa. Contact between the State and Rauteli Bichawa has existed for less than a century. According to a Rana ex-Jimidar<sup>9</sup>, the first time government officers visited the place was c. 1935. This means that after the restoration of the Naya Muluk to Nepal in 1860, the Rauteli Bichawa has not been governed directly by the State for 72 years, only through local functionaries like the jimidars. The power was thus wielded by local elites who owned large amounts of land. The ex-leader of Rauteli Bichawa, Mandal Upadhyaya, pointed out that the existence of Rana settlements was not known to the State until the 1950s. Such historical and geographical circumstances thus contributed to alternative social movements in the Rana community to those developing among other Tharu groups.

### **SOCIAL CHANGES SINCE THE 1950s**

In Nepal, many studies have demonstrated that ethnicity is dynamic during different political periods (Pfaff-Czarnecka 1997; Sharma 1997) and the change in landownership is a crucial factor for shaping ethnic relationships (Caplan 1970; Jones 1967). It is likely that when more violent social changes occur, a more active ethnic consciousness develops among social groups. Similar to other Tharu groups, recent history shows that Rauteli Bichawa Ranas experienced remarkable socio-economic changes, including shifts in demography and rising conflicts over land resources. The government enacted a resettlement and land tenure policy and the introduction of protected areas that were responsible for these changes. As a result, Ranas became a minority group and lost substantial land to hill migrants and the State. These dramatic changes in socio-economic status made them search for a new identity.

### **Government-activated Resettlement programs and Forest loss**

Following the success of the malaria eradication program in the Tarai region during the 1950s, Kanchanpur became more hospitable not only to Tharus but for all other people, particularly the hill population. The biggest resettlement project was carried out in Kanchanpur in 1971. Thousands

8. In his detailed analysis on cultural changes of Ranas, Srivastava (1958) observes that the caste climbing based social movement is not necessarily adopted by all classes of Ranas. At the local level, the identity strategies are often shaped by different livelihood realities.

9. *Jimidars* were the local elites who were officially appointed by the State to collect taxes from other cultivators. They often owned vast amounts of land and their influence on local politics and economics was significant.



of families from Jhapa, Bhojpur, Chitwan, Dhading and Nawalparasi were resettled on forest land in Kanchanpur. Apart from government-sponsored resettled programs, large scale uncontrolled migration also occurred in Kanchanpur following the eradication of malaria. Many migrants from neighboring hill districts moved down in order to search for fertile land, better education and job opportunities.

This migration resulted in Kanchanpur changing from the least populated district in the Tarai to becoming a major destination for hill migrants. In 1961, it had a population of only 17,000. With an average 6.02 percent growth, its population reached 68,863 in 1972 and 377,899 in 2000. The increase was largely generated by the influx of hill migrants over the past thirty years (Pandey & Yonzon 2003). Nowadays, the dominant population consists of the hill migrants rather than the indigenous Tharu. The Nepalese government ever distinguishes between different Tharu groups in the national population census, so Ranas are only broadly categorized into the “Tharu” group. According to the 2001 census data, the caste and ethnic distribution of the population in Kanchanpur were as follows: Chettri (30 percent); Tharu (20 percent); Brahmin (17 percent); Dalits (14 percent); Thakuri (5 percent); and others (14 percent).

The dramatic increase in population in Kanchanpur after the 1950s was accompanied by the significant loss of forest tracts due to increasing demands on agricultural land and forest-related resources. Responding to the shrinkage of forest, the government established the Royal Shuklaphanta Wildlife Reserve (hereafter referred to as “the Park”) in 1976 with a total area 155 sq.km. However, the ongoing development of new settlements adjoining the Park and illegal settlement in the whole district has hindered preservation efforts in the Park. Activities such as logging, grazing and poaching have seriously damaged the natural environment and wildlife habitats. The reserve was therefore considered too small for wildlife and encroached on by humans too often (Bhattarai 2001). An extension of the Park was launched in 1981 to strengthen conservation of the flora and fauna in the area (Bhattarai 2001). It proposed to establish another 155 sq.km for the reserve. This time, a total of seventeen existing blocks of five villages inside the proposed extension area were affected and Rauteli Bichawa was the largest affected village.

Although official data concerning the Rana population in Rauteli Bichawa was not available, two sources of data I collected from the field showed that the village experienced significant changes in its demographic landscape due to the hill migration and the creation of the Park. According to ex-leader Vagat Rana, the total population of Rauteli Bichawa at one time had been estimated to be about 30,000 to 35,000 of which 20,000 were Ranas. An ex-secretary of the Rauteli Bichawa Village Development Committee Office indicated that before the displacement, the total population of Rauteli Bichawa was 9,956 with 1,642 households in 2000. The largest population group consisted of twice-born Pahaaris—

Chettri (33.81 percent) and Brahmin (9.78 percent)-- and the Tharu population was second (31.45 percent). The third group consisted of untouchable castes (7.48 percent). A secretary who was a local villager, and therefore familiar with the composition of the local population, pointed out that the total number of Rana households was 350 (21 percent) and they were distributed unevenly in the nine wards. After the park-induced displacement in 2001, Rauteli Bichawa became the smallest administrative village in Kanchanpur district with only three existing hamlets, while six wards were included in the new boundary of the park. A total of 1,061 households from Wards 1 to 6 and a few from Wards 7 and 8 were therefore relocated, including 204 Rana households. The displacement has resulted in the total number of Rana households living in Rauteli Bichawa Village dropping to only 150. The scope of this paper covers both resettled and non-resettled Rauteli Bichawa Ranas. While the above data on Rana population seem contradictory, they reflect the fact that the Rana population in Rauteli Bichawa has declined dramatically in recent decades.

### The Transformation of Landownership

Meanwhile, Kanchanpur also experienced substantial transformation of landownership. Until the 1930s, the development of property rights was restricted to the Tarai region. At that time, property rights were granted to Tarai cultivators in return for paying taxes to the local administration. These cultivators were allowed to sell or to mortgage their *raikar*<sup>10</sup> land under certain conditions. This was a response to the problem of abundant wasteland in the Tarai so a more competitive and flexible land policy was introduced to encourage economic development. At that time, the State had to rely on the cooperation of local elites to exercise its power over land resources indirectly. This situation changed completely after the introduction of a series of land reforms in the 1950s. Under this new land policy, all *raikar* cultivators were upgraded to landowners who could trade their land freely and landownership would only be granted through official land registration documents and an obligation to pay taxes to the State (Regmi 1999). The policy caused dramatic changes in landownership in Kanchanpur. Before the hill migration and land reforms, almost all land in Kanchanpur was controlled by indigenous Ranas. Afterwards, landownership rapidly transferred from the Ranas to the hill migrants. There was no exception for Rauteli Bichawa Ranas. I was told by local informants that Ranas were dispersed because of hill migration and park-induced resettlement, and many of them became small landholders or even landless.

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10. Land was the property of the State and this type of land was known as *raikar*. All land tenure in Kanchanpur was thus considered part of the *raikar* system. Under this state-as-landlord system, the government had absolute power to grant and confiscate land and could appropriate land for its own needs (Regmi 1963; 1999).

## IDENTITY TRANSFORMATIONS IN RANA SOCIETY

The identity of Rauteli Bichawa Ranas is closely related to territories, common origin and shared cultural practices. They believe that their ancestors came from India and they are descendants of Rajputs. They speak the Rana language, wear traditional dress and practice the same customs. All of these make them a distinctive ethnic group (Smith 1986). However, Rana ethnicity is not solely bound up with cultural and historical factors. Its development is in fact a balanced response to being poor, a minority and to claiming royal descent. Before I turn to discuss the identity of Rauteli Bichawa Ranas, it is worth looking at the work of Odegaard (1997) and Skar (1999). Their studies show that the Rana identity is dynamic and takes on many different forms.

### An Alternative Rana Reform Movement: Hindu and Tribal

The most extensive study of Rana social reforms was done by Odegaard (1997), who observes that “contrary to the pan-ideology which rejects the hierarchical caste structure, the Ranas’ strategy [is to] optimize social status first in what is commonly referred to as caste-climbing.” She points out that the most critical obstacle for Ranas in Nepal to overcome in their drive to affiliate with the pan-Tharu movement was their “caste” status. Like the Ranas in India, they claimed they were descendants of Rajputs. They strongly felt that they were not indigenous to the Tarai and believed they originally derived from Chittogarh in India (Odegaard 1997). Their belief hardly fitted into the new ideology of the pan-Tharu movement. Moreover, Ranas lived in the remote western Tarai, and this separated them from the other Tharu groups. They had very few opportunities to participate in the pan-Tharu movement. For example, when the first International Tharu Culture Conference was held in 1995, participants included Tharus from both India and Nepal except for Ranas from Kalaili and Kanchanpur (Odegaard 1997). The Rana elites blamed the problems of distance and non-existence of well-established Rana organizations as the two major reasons for their non-participation. As Odegaard (1997) records, an influential member of the Rana elite queried the unity of all Tharu groups in one social movement, commenting that “Since there are so many Tharu groups differing in several aspects, a collective reform movement becomes difficult. Each group has to start with itself.”

In fact, the Rana reform moment in Nepal was more likely a part of a pan-Rana movement in India (Krauskopf 2002; Odegaard 1997; Srivastava 1958). The Rana social movement in India had started in the 1930s. The Rana community was aware of its own social and economic backwardness so 18 rules were set up to improve their social status. For example, alcohol and meat (particularly pork) were prohibited and social prestige was not attached to social

practices like bride price, intercaste marriage<sup>11</sup> and sharing water pipes with lower castes. Ranas, furthermore, wore the holy cord as twice-born castes did. Later, the reform focused on adopting high Hindu castes’ socio-religious practices. The Rana elites advocated that Ranas should use Brahmins for various ceremonies and Rana women should behave like high Hindu caste women. However, the reform did not achieve much at the local level, as many Ranas still practiced their old customs. In 1967, the Ranas with other five tribes in Uttar Pradesh successfully got themselves declared as a “scheduled tribe,” which meant they had certain privileges in education and political participation. The better-off Ranas in India were admired by the Ranas in Nepal.

Motivated by the success of Ranas in India and sharing their origin myth encouraged Ranas in Nepal to participate in the pan-Rana movement, rather than the pan-Tharu movement. According to Odegaard (1997), the Rana social reform movement in Nepal started in 1991 and an elite-based organization known as *Rana Samaaj Sudhaar* (Rana Reform Society) was formed. Instead of struggling for more political power, it emphasized that Ranas’ first priority was to modernize. Two large Rana meetings were held in Kalaili and Kanchanpur in 1993 and 1994 respectively. More than 250 Rana delegates attended these meetings and most of them were educated elites who owned much land. They wanted to be more ‘developed’ and share equal social status with the other castes of Nepal. The reform activists strongly felt that Ranas should abandon their old concerns of simply living as they put it, “to eat and sleep”. They advocated the abolition of customs like *Magani* (child marriage), and advocated learning Nepali and providing a good education for children. These approaches were similar to that of the pan-Rana movement in India.

Another anthropologist, Harald Skar, shows in his study on Rana identity (1999) that most Ranas in Nepal think themselves as being Hindus. He points out that Ranas never eat beef or buffalo because such food is perceived as low-status, impure and only to be consumed by the lower caste groups. Although according to tradition Ranas bury their dead along riverbanks, they now also perform a ritual of sending the spirit down the river, and go to the holy shrine of Haridwar to perform rituals as Hindus, in honor of their dead. After long contact with Ranas, Skar concludes that the identities of Ranas are both situational and topical because Ranas categorize themselves as Hindu and tribal. My observation of everyday ethnic relations of Rauteli Bichawa Ranas echoes these scholars’ analyses. Furthermore, my data shows that ethnicity is a product of specific political circumstances, but its nature varies. It is a strategy that human agents can utilize and modify on the basis of their histories and livelihood realities. Growing

11. Inter-caste marriage remains contentious in Nepal as marriages in the Hindu society are caste driven. Inter-caste marriages are considered to be a sin and are not approved by the elders. As a result, the couple will suffer the loss of social prestige.

from their experience of similar social changes (e.g. the transformation of landownership, the introduction of dominant hill cultures and conservation policies), Rana social movements represent an alternative to the mainstream pan-Tharu movement.

### Multiple Identities as a Social Climbing Strategy

My ethnographic data has shown that caste ideology had significantly influenced the self-identity of Ranas and their relationships with other Tharu groups. A detailed look at the myth of Rana origin allows us to examine more closely how Ranas thought about and valued themselves. Fisher (2001) comments that different versions of their origin myth allow people to adapt to different socio-political environments. An absence of written histories about Kanchanpur Ranas was one of the major difficulties of my fieldwork; Ranas created histories of origin that favored their interests. My discussion of their myth of origin therefore does not focus on historical reliability but on understanding what Ranas claim themselves to be and their motivation for this claim.

In one version of their myth, a former Rana village leader, Vagat Rana, claims that Ranas were not Tharus.<sup>12</sup> He explained that Ranas had become Tharus today because people did not know much about their own history:

Our ancestors moved from India to here to escape the Muslim enemies. At that time, they were scared of being killed. Later, they realized that their features were similar to the Tarai people - Tharus. With a consideration of defence, they started to introduce themselves as 'Tharus'. As time went by, people often call us 'Tharus'. Actually, we are very different from 'Tharus'; we are Rana.

He also argued that Ranas were in fact the same caste as the Chettri (see Figure 1). His evidence was that Rana males used to wear the sacred thread, which was the most important symbol of people from twice-born castes. He blamed the disappearance of this particular tradition on security concerns. In the past, wearing the sacred thread made their ancestors vulnerable to attacks by Muslims, for their status could easily be seen. Therefore, they chose to take off their threads, and since then Rana males do not wear the sacred thread any more.<sup>12</sup>

Similar findings are noted by Odegaard (1997). She

12. As mentioned in earlier sections, practicing twice-born caste culture was one of the major strategies used by the pan-Rana movement in India. Although there was no evidence that Ranas from RSWR were influenced by the pan-Rana movement, they adopted similar approaches to the Ranas in India.



FIGURE 1. THE RANA GROOM STILL HOLDS A KNIFE (IN HIS RIGHT HAND) TO SYMBOLIZE THE WARRIOR STATUS OF ANCIENT TIMES. (PHOTO: LAI MING LAM).

observes that Ranas from Kalaili district insisted on the belief that Ranas were descendants of Rajputs. They criticized the version of the myth that claimed that Ranas were descended from the queen and her servant, claiming this was incorrect and an insult to Ranas.<sup>13</sup> According to one of the most influential Ranas in Kalaili, Hari Lal Rana, Ranas were descended from a Rajput and a Brahmin. This version was the same as the one I heard from Rauteli Bichawa Ranas. He further claimed that Ranas were descendants of the glorious and famous Hindu hero Maharana Pratap Singh.<sup>14</sup> He remarked:

We Ranas are not indigenous . . . We came from India, from Rajasthan. . . . The Rana Thakurs are thus descendents of Rajputs and Brahmins. We always wear the white turnan (phagya) and we always had a knife (talwar) in our belt (like Rajputs/ warriors) . . . We also take our purification baths together with people from Rajasthan and not with other Tharus and Nepalese people (cited in Odegaard 1997).

13. For a detailed account of different versions of the myth of Rana origins, see Odegaard (1997).

14. Maharana Pratap Singh remains a great hero in the eyes of most Indians because he never compromised his honor and he fought the Moghul invaders bravely.



Hari Lal Rana's statement clearly demonstrated that Ranas utilize caste ideology and the origin myth to identify themselves as high caste people and disassociate themselves from other lower caste groups, particularly the Tharus. This happened in the relationship between Ranas and Dangauras. Most Rauteli Bichawa Ranas were reluctant to accept the name "Tharu" because Tharu meant lower caste groups in the eyes of most Ranas. Many old Ranas still felt that Dangauras were backward people and they did not share the same hygienic concerns as the Ranas did.<sup>15</sup> Even though the Dangauras had experienced significant social and economic development<sup>16</sup> and this was widely recognized by Ranas, deeply-rooted prejudices affected the ethnic relations between Ranas and Dangauras. A comment made by a young and educated Rana clearly illustrates the sharp caste and cultural divisions between these two groups:

We are different. We don't practise intermarriage.<sup>17</sup> I think Rana is better than Dangauras. But the government only calls us "Tharus." Dangauras are from the eastern part of Nepal [actually, Dangauras are from western part of Nepal. East is a relative term] and close to the government so they are smarter than us. I don't think there is any domination between us, however, I never can agree we are the same caste. We write our name Rana and they write Dangauras or Chaudhary. Although I know we are both categorised as the second lower caste under the caste system, we have our own cultures. Dangauras are always socially lower than Ranas.

It was apparent that the Rana acceptance of caste ideology and social exclusion of "lower caste" Dangauras fit into the typical caste-climbing approach called Sanskritization. However, we cannot reject the existence of egalitarian concepts in the formation of Rana identity. It was ironic that twice-born Pahaaris and Ranas had different caste positions under the *Muluki Ain* (national legal code). While the Pahaaris (Brahmins and Chhetris) were ranked high and granted great social prestige, Ranas were categorized as the second lowest caste (*masinya matwali* or enslavable alcohol-drinkers). Although this externally imposed social hierarchy was probably not accepted by Ranas, it influenced their ethnic relations with Pahaaris. Most RSWR Ranas in

15. I observed that the Ranas were very concerned about cleanliness, so their houses always looked very tidy compared to those of other ethnic groups.

16. The Dangauras were very adaptable and many of them were economically and educationally more advanced than Ranas.

17. In analyzing the relationships between hierarchy and endogamy, Quigley (1993: 112) points out that strict control over affiliation by marriage is one way for a cultural group to prevent another group entering its ranks.

fact felt that they shared the same social status as Pahaaris. They interpreted the castes in a different way. They thought different castes meant different *jaats* and did not imply any social ranking. They did not feel themselves inferior to the Pahaaris. One Rana shared his view of caste with me:

Caste, I know, I know there are five different caste groups (*jaats*) under the caste system. I don't think there are ranking relations between different caste groups. These groups are different only because they have different cultural practices and lineage.

One wealthier Rana expressed his feeling of being a Rana in this way:

My parents were born in this caste. I grew up in this culture. I don't have any feeling that I want to be of other castes. I love my own culture. I feel that there are no differences between Brahmins, Chhetris and Ranas. The only problem is that different caste people will try to dominate others. Just like some people will easily say that you are Ranas or Brahmins to justify your social position. I don't like this kind of domination.

Similar feelings were shared by another poorer Rana:

I never feel sad to be a Rana. Maybe Brahmins will think they are big people. Pahaaris will think they are big people. I think I am (Rana) also big people. I feel there is no difference between Ranas and other caste people. Probably, the only difference is that we are poor because we can't provide education to our children.

Ranas do not passively accept caste ideology and it does not determine their self-identity. The formation of Rana identity is a process of negotiation between local histories, local power structures and the caste system. This view is shared by Russell (1997: 326-327), who argues that "rather than seeing people as passive recipients of the forces of modernization, Hinduization, or nation-state, prefers to see them as potentially active manipulators, negotiators and transformers of the cultural forms." In the case of Rauteli Bichawa Ranas, they selectively used and modified the caste system and articulated it into their histories and finally a local caste category was established whereby Ranas had a higher social ranking than Dangauras and the same caste position as Pahaari Chhetris.

It is important for us to understand what caste means to the people themselves. As Hocart puts it:

We must search for that principle not in our minds, but in the minds of those people who practice the caste system, who have daily experience of it, and are thus most likely to have a feeling for what is most essential in it (cited in Dumont & Pocock 1958: 46).

Odegaard also comments that:

There exists no single caste system, but local and regional variations of communities which arrange themselves hierarchically in relation to one another within a particular territory (1997).

Ranas and Pahaaris positioned themselves as higher caste groups and Dangauras as inferior to them. The multiple identities of Ranas became their management strategy<sup>18</sup> for dealing with everyday ethnic relationships. However, similar to the situation concerning the Dangauras, no matter how Ranas reclaimed their high caste status, they were not treated as such by the twice-born Pahaaris. A comment made by one Iymilia Pahaari woman indicates that different caste status remained a deep-rooted demarcation for Ranas and Pahaaris. Another version regarding the origin of Ranas was provided by her, and this story was generally believed by most old Pahaaris settlers:

Ranas are Tharus. This is the fact. Long time ago, those Tharus worked in the palace. Later, the Rana king was killed and his daughter fled with a group of Tharu. Finally, she got married to one of the Tharus. After that, their descendants become 'Rana Tharus'. Fundamentally, they are no different to Tharus. Like my father, he even perceives Ranas as an 'untouchable caste' and refuses to accept their water.

### **Cultural Adaptation and Preservation and Identity Consciousness**

Over the last few decades, due to the influence of hill cultures, Rauteli Bichawa Ranas have made significant changes to their own cultural practices to fit the high caste model. These included changes in gender relations and many customs. For example, the outsiders' image of Rana males' inferior social status in the family and in society made them embarrassed, particularly when they interacted

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18. Regarding the concept of "management identity" see Allen (1997) and Russell (1997). For example, Allen (1997) points out that the Thulung community has its own interpretation for the difference between untouchable castes, higher Hindu castes and themselves. Russell also notes (1997:331) that the identity labels of the Yakkha group in Nepal are changing in terms of home, village, the nation-state, the world beyond, and the spirit world.

with Pahaaris. Rana males therefore wanted to "reportray" their domination over women to enhance their self-esteem. Most Rana women pointed out that they suffered more at the hands of male authority than in the past. The level of control significantly increased particularly after marriage and motherhood. They often needed permission from their husbands if they planned to go somewhere (see detailed discussion on gender relations in Rana society in Lam 2009). Hill cultures also significant influenced the daily customs of Ranas. For example, some Rana elites promoted the prohibition of pork consumption and followed the high Hindu castes by only eating goat meat. Traditionally, *Deepawali* was not only a Hindu festival but also a special time for Ranas' ritual ceremonies to honour their ancestors. Unlike the Pahaari customs, Ranas' *Deepawali* was not a five-day-long festival. They would only celebrate one special day which was the last day of *Deepawali (Bhaaitikka)*. On the night before *Bhaaitikka*, they would kill many chickens to worship their gods before sunrise. For the poor Ranas, they would make flour-chicken for worship. After that, sisters would give *tikka* (red powder on the forehead means blessing) and flower necklaces to their brothers. Nowadays, most relatively wealthier Ranas emulate Pahaari cultures by worshipping dogs and cows.

Furthermore, more Ranas spoke Nepali and gave up their traditional dress. One old Rana man blamed the loss of Rana tradition on the moving-in of Pahaaris: "when we wore our traditional clothes, Pahaaris would find it easy to say 'how nice' (*kati raamro*). We men felt very uncomfortable and finally gave up wearing our clothes any more" (see Figure 2). On the other hand, Rana women turned to wearing more saris because they were cheaper and more comfortable to work in as they attended to their duties in the fields. It was difficult to determine if the transformation of Rana culture was due to Sanskritization<sup>19</sup> because the new Rana cultural practices might not have the same meaning attached to them as Pahaari cultures do. On the contrary, often they were a form of articulation of both Ranas and Pahaaris cultures. A similar observation is made by Buggeland (1994) in her study of Kali worship among the Santals of Nepal. She finds that although the ways in which Santals worshipped Kali are similar as Pahaaris, Santals interpret the ritual differently as part of their own cosmological ideology. Russell (1997: 370) also comments that scholars' recognition of 'culture itself may be subject to change' is important for understanding the formation of ethnicity. As Srivastava (1958) points out, the cultural changes of Ranas are through adoption, assimilation and acculturation.

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19. Allen (1997: 318) argues that cultural assimilation or process of Sanskritization may not necessarily be decided by non-Hindu castes and Hindu castes because these cultural practices are deeply embedded in their daily interactions.



FIGURE 2. FEW YOUNG RANA MALES WEAR TRADITIONAL CLOTHING (LONG WHITE DRESS WITH RED DECORATIONS) TO PERFORM THE HOLI DANCE. (PHOTO: LAI MING LAM).

Rauteli Bichawa Ranas incorporated aspects of many new cultures into their own in order to make themselves fit into the wider society. However, when such cultural adaptation occurred in Rana society, a sense of cultural preservation emerged along with it. This was a challenge in retaining ethnicity. In the identity management process, the more Ranas adopted the new cultures, the more they were aware of their own culture. This was evident with the Rauteli Bichawa Ranas. Speaking the Rana language, wearing the traditional *Gangriya* dress and celebrating the *Holi* festival all became symbolic of being Rana. This cultural revival might not help Ranas resist the continuous influence of hill cultures which have more vigorous and powerful identities. However, when opportunities do become available to Ranas, their traditional cultures would be a powerful weapon with which to reclaim the value of the group within a complex and hierarchical society. A few examples below help to illustrate this argument.

Firstly, language was a key element in maintaining the Rana identity. In my observation, many older generation Rauteli Bichawa Ranas hesitated in claiming to be Nepalese because of different languages. One old Rana said to me that “I feel good to be a Rana. I don’t know why I have this feeling. You know, we have one national language — Nepali — but I can’t speak it.” The story of a young Rana demonstrated how linguistic barriers prevented the Ranas from being assimilated into the cultural melting pot to some extent.<sup>20</sup> Krishanna Rana was thirteen years old and had completed grade four. He found it very difficult to continue his studies because he could not speak Nepali very well. In

20. On the other hand, language is one of the main reasons for increasing social exclusion because it often prevents powerless social groups from integrating into mainstream society (Gaige 1975).

his class, less than ten percent of students were Ranas. He was shy about learning and speaking Nepali and finally he decided to quit his studies. He said that because he spoke the Rana language, he considered himself to be a Rana rather than a Nepalese:

I feel good when people call me Rana. I really feel myself a Rana. I never think I am a Nepali and I have no intention of being a Nepali also. Probably, the basic criterion for being a Nepali is to learn Nepali. I can’t write and speak Nepali well. I always feel uncomfortable when speaking Nepali. I prefer to speak the Rana language if the choice is available.

Secondly, the Rana identity was also reflected in the *Holi* celebration. Although most Rauteli Bichawa Ranas were not enthusiastic about celebrating *Holi* due to economic hardship, the symbolic meaning of *Holi* to most Ranas should not be neglected. Celebrating *Holi* was not simply a matter of praying to the Hindu gods; it represented the solidarity of Rana society and ethnic identity. Today, its continuation symbolizes the survival of Rana cultures. I recalled an instance during the March 2005 *Holi* festival in a new resettlement area. A few dancing groups formed as usual but the festival atmosphere was strained among the displaced Rauteli Bichawa Ranas. Only a few Rana families planned to invite dancing groups and organized *Holi* parties. My host family in the resettlement area was one of the wealthiest Rana families but they did not plan to do so. Three nights of celebrations passed and by noon on the fourth day, I still did not hear any news whether the celebration could continue. The Ranas felt sad that this year’s *Holi* celebration activities lasted only three days. Suddenly, a celebration was held by my host family and the decision was made by the elder son who had just come back from another village. That night, the family used almost 50 kilos of rice and 30 kilos of potatoes. Later, the son explained that the *Holi* celebration was one of the most important Rana customs and they used to have a one-month long celebration, so he felt very upset when he heard the celebration had to stop on the third day. He pointed out that increased poverty and separated population had weakened the cultural identity of Ranas:

Of course, nowadays we can’t celebrate festivals together because all of us are getting poorer than before. When it was inside the park, we were always together. Today, we are resettled in different areas and we are far from each other. People also get less food than before so everyone just looks for their own family how to survive and are not interested in celebrating festivals together. If we were not moved out, we would have a big *Holi* celebration like those



Ranas in the old settlements. Also, now the new generation is really not interested in celebration, they can't sing Rana *Holi* songs. In my place, there are only a few Rana families, so I need to bring back my children to here to see how Rana celebrate *Holi*. I feel if Ranas only look after themselves, many changes will happen in the future. Like my son, he never knows what Rana or *Holi* are. Ten years ago, I celebrated *Holi* and it was really very nice, may be after 10 years, all these traditions will disappear.

He also mentioned that Ranas were proud of their culture and would like to continue religious performances such as *Holi* dancing if opportunities arose. On hearing this, I told him that even though film makers might be interested in shooting a film regarding the *Holi* celebration, it would be too late because Rana culture was disappearing rapidly. He disagreed with me by saying, "If we were informed earlier about the film maker's visit, we would prepare and perform our cultures to him, particularly our women would wear the local *Gangriya* dress again." One educated Rana knew I had planned to write a book about Rana society; he repeatedly requested me to include the Rana *Holi* celebration.

The third example concerned Rana dress. As I have mentioned previously, the traditional Rana dress was completely replaced by the mainstream Nepalese dress for social and economic reasons. However, this transformed culture did not necessarily mean the abandonment of the old culture. Both new and old cultures existed simultaneously but served different functions. Wearing traditional dress had become a cultural performance (see Figure 3 and 4 below). During my fieldwork, I was asked many times to photograph Rana women. They would emphasize that they were wearing the traditional *Gangriya*. Obviously, they were aware that to others their clothes were unique and were confident that this tradition would attract outsiders like me. Since most Rana women did not know how to sew their own *Gangriya* like older generations did, they had to borrow *Gangriya* from friends. They all felt that *Gangriya* was beautiful. After taking photos, one Rana woman said to me that the photo was a good memento of her life. Realizing the value of *gangriya*, a Rana woman even sold this "tradition" to me. She made a new *gangriya* and sold it to me for Rs 3,000. Odegaard expresses a similar finding (1997). She was requested to take photos many times by Dangauras, and Ranas during her fieldwork. Odegaard shared her feelings in this way:

When Tharus in Geti saw that "important people" and foreigners were interested in Tharu culture, their apprehension of "their culture" also changed. The fact that they were urged to "protect" their culture" has engendered a new self-understanding and a new relation to their cultural identity (1997).



FIGURE 3. NO MATTER HOW DIFFICULT IT IS TO WEAR *GANGRIYA* AND TO PUT SILVER RINGS ON THEIR LEGS, RANAS WERE STILL ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT SHOWING THEIR CUSTOM TO ME. (PHOTO: LAI MING LAM).

## CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed the interdependent and dynamic relationships of ethnicity, history, cultural practices and changes in people's livelihoods. The above discussion has not argued that Ranas have a strong sense of cultural preservation. Instead, it demonstrated that after extensive contacts with others, the formation and transformation of Rana ethnic identity and cultural practices were so complicated that one single approach could not explain it. The ethnographic data supported the contention that the Rana reform movement was neither one of Sanskritization or Indigenism. Their identities are many-stranded, situational and topical (Skar 1999: 196-198). They resisted the "Tharu" label and strongly claimed to have the same caste status as the high Hindu caste Pahaaris. Regarding cultural changes, Rana did not accept all hill cultures but they selected and modified aspects of them into their own, for example the *Dipawaali* festival. Meanwhile, vanishing aspects of their culture—particularly *Holi* and traditional dress—might be caused by many factors such as conservation-induced displacement and poverty. Therefore they had to adjust the way they responded to these economic realities. When cultural reforms became necessary in Rana society, Ranas' self-consciousness of their own culture's values increased simultaneously. Indeed, these practices became a cultural performance and a new meaning emerged.

My finding echoes that of Oakdale (2004) and Turner (1991). Their studies have clearly shown that people from traditional societies, like those of Indians in Brazil, are having their cultures modified or recreated after contact with outside world. In the process of cultural change, instead of being completely assimilated, they actively negotiate and manage their identity and cultural practice. For example,



Turner observes that in the 1960s, almost all Kayapo Indians wore full Western clothing. However, since the 1990s, they have chosen “half-and half” with long pants or shorts and no shirt or jacket. Their faces and upper bodies are painted and they wear traditional shell necklaces and bead earrings. The explanation for this change is the global indigenous movement; Kayapo Indians increasingly value the social, economic and political traditions of their own cultures. It is thus predictable that the Rana culture will be further transformed in this way. The articulation of growing ethnic identity and the new national and global political environments are an opportunity for Ranas to remodel themselves and avoid dissolving into the “national melting pot.”<sup>21</sup> However, it is too early to comment on the extent to which this has happened because cultural survival is often closely associated with the Ranas’ livelihoods.

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21. Russell (1997: 329) comments that Yakkha should establish a stronger Yakkha identity to avoid dissolving into the “national melting pot.”



FIGURE 4. WEARING THE GANGRIYA HAS BECOME A CULTURAL PERFORMANCE SYMBOLIZING THE RANA IDENTITY. (PHOTO: LAI MING LAM).

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