

Tharu as tribal, Tharu as caste: Reflections on Colonial Categories along the Indo-Nepal border

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Abstract

The Tharu are a culturally diverse ethnic group that inhabit the Tarai of Nepal, whose culture shifts from being more ‘tribe’-like to being more ‘caste’-like on a west to east continuum. I focus on one district in the Nepal Tarai, Chitwan, to show that this continuum, which indexes certain cultural attributes, can be explained by ecological, geographical, and historical facts that have differentially shaped the relation between different areas of the Tarai to the states that encompassed them. Although Chitwan lies on the border between Nepal and India, the major socio-cultural influences that have shaped it in modern times have come mainly from the Hindu societies of the hills. Before the 1950s’ malaria eradication program, the Chitwan valley was inhabited mainly by Tharu, who had kinfolk across the border in West Champaran, India. Despite these cultural connections, however, and the political fact of an open border in the legal sense, the Indo-Nepal border at Chitwan has constrained cross-border exchanges and flows for ecological reasons. Historically, the Tharu of both Chitwan and Champaran were buffered by those ecological conditions from the caste societies of both the hills and the plains. Although the Chitwan Tharu might once have fit the concept of a tribe, the cultural transformation brought about by close contact with hill Nepali society since the malaria eradication program has transformed them not into a ‘caste’, as might have happened in earlier historical periods, but into an ethnic group in the context of a modern state.

Keywords

Tharu; Chitwan; tribe; caste; cultural change

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Introduction

The ethnic group known as the Tharu that inhabits the Tarai region along Nepal's southern border are a culturally diverse people who seem to conform in different places and at different times to two sociological types that are still current in South Asian studies—that of 'tribe' and 'caste'. Although the term 'tribe' has a different value in South Asian studies than it does elsewhere, as Sumit Guha has argued (2015), its meaning in the ethnology of the Indian subcontinent has required the existence of castes: a tribe is what castes are not but which they might once have been. A caste, on the other hand, does not require the existence of tribes, only the existence of other castes, without which the concept loses meaning. These two concepts have no deep roots in South Asian cultures; both are of foreign provenance, used by outsiders to describe the complexity of South Asian societies. Terms like *janajati* or *adivasi* (in Nepal) that correlate with tribe are of relatively recent origin as well. They are grounded more in political activism (such as the assertion of indigeneity, a form of identity that has become significant in modern times) than in ethnological concerns about social taxonomies. How then does the case of the Tharu help us understand the relation of caste to tribe in colonial and twentieth-century anthropology and the value of those concepts to the anthropology of Nepal?

I argue in this paper that 'tribe' and 'caste' index clusters of attributes that are always in dynamic relation. They index, for observers, the kinds of relations social groups labeled with these terms have with their natural and socio-political environments. These two terms constitute the poles of a dynamic continuum of ethnicity formation, which is defined in relation to state power - not just any state but those organized to uphold a particular sort of ethnic organization, which is summed up by the term caste society. This is different from the existence of prejudice and discrimination based on caste status, which exist independently of the state and can transcend

the boundaries of the polity in which they were formed. For an ethnic group to be a caste, it must fall within the ambit of such a state, and be in regulated interaction with other ethnic groups subjected in similar ways to state power - which is why to be a caste requires the presence of other castes. 'Tribalness' is a colonial concept that indexes relative distance (or relative buffering) from the power of states devoted to upholding caste systems. As Krauskopff has shown, Tharu societies in western Nepal achieved that distance through their mobility, which they used to resist overly intrusive attempts at state control over their labor (Krauskopff 2018). Where the state - as in modern South Asian democracies - no longer upholds the caste order, it is no longer useful to talk of castes or even of tribes - what one has are ethnic groups in plural societies jockeying for position and power, based on criteria different from those of the caste order.

The concept of an ethnic group has broader scope than either caste or tribe; it refers to a social group with a belief in its cultural distinctiveness from other such groups in its orbit (even when that distinctiveness may be largely illusory, as I have argued elsewhere; Guneratne 2002). Significantly for my argument, the concept of ethnicity does not require a particular kind of society or socio-political features to be useful in analysis. It may be deployed to describe social groups ranging from foragers, to nomadic pastoralists, to farming people and to the populations of modern states, in every sort of social formation, from kin-based groups to what Anderson (1991) described as 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1991). Castes are ethnic groups; what makes them castes is that they exist in a hierarchical system characterized by certain kinds of beliefs about the relative worth of the groups that constitutes the system, practices that relate to those beliefs, and importantly for my argument, a state that sees such a system as the necessary basis for social, political and economic activity. Castes require states; tribes (as the term has been used in South Asia) do not. Where the modern states of South Asia no longer uphold the caste

order or see it as legitimate, caste begins to decompose into ethnic groups competing in a different kind of political field, even though vestiges of the old order remain. Indeed, this may explain the enormity of the violence visited upon Dalits in both Nepal and India; they are attempts to maintain the old order even as the new offers it no legitimacy.

Tharu as Tribal, Tharu as Caste

The interplay between ecological conditions and the dynamics of political and economic control along the Tarai frontier - and its attendant social systems - shaped the relations that the Tharu, considered indigenous to the region, had with their neighbors. It was this dynamic that produced different communities of Tharu as people of one or the other of these two cultural types. Different Tharu groups shift from being more 'tribe'-like to more 'caste'-like on a west to east continuum along the Tarai. This dynamic owes much to the way different political powers - primarily the East India Company Raj, the Gorkhali state, and the modern Nepali State - engaged with and shaped the Tarai borderland and its ecology in pursuit of their own interests. The Tharu today consider themselves a single ethnic group even though the various communities that identify with that ethnic label share none of the conventional symbols of ethnic identity identified by scholars; they lack a common language, shared ritual practices or common myths of origin. Different communities of Tharu, separated from each other by language and culture, have cultural attributes that are to varying degrees 'tribal' or 'caste-like.' The attributes these terms index are the dynamic product of shifting ecological, economic, and political conditions. As Angma Dey Jhala's work on the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) suggests, however, these attribute bundles - in her work, as they relate to 'tribes' - are themselves fluid and inconsistent. Tribes were heavily shaped by their encounters with Buddhists, Muslims and Hindus; ethnic and cultural identities in the CHT, Jhala argues, were fluid and their boundaries porous,

realities unrecognized by colonial ethnography (Jhala 2019).

The term Tharu encompasses a range of ethnic groups that inhabit the Tarai, mostly in Nepal. They speak different Indo-European languages derived from or with strong affinities to, the languages spoken by their neighbours - Awadhi, Bhojpuri and Maithili - with distinct differences among them in material culture, ritual practices and the other attributes of ethnicity. As I have noted elsewhere (Guneratne 2002), in modern times (i.e., post-Rana Nepal), Tharu communities in Nepal, under the aegis of various ethnic associations, most especially an organization known as the Tharu Kalyankarini Sabha (Tharu Welfare Association), have constituted themselves as a single ethnic group (*jat* in Nepali), and, at the level of the elite at least, have dissolved the cultural boundaries that once constituted them as separate cultural entities, most notably in promoting marriage relations across once inviolable boundaries (Guneratne 1998: 763-764; Ødegaard, 1997).

The distinction between caste and tribe is useful insofar as it indexes the factors that shaped relations between different Tharu communities and the pre-modern states (including the British Raj) that encompassed them. It is important to note, however, that these terms have no precise analogues in South Asian languages, although the terms *adivasi* and *janajati*, both of relatively recent provenance, are used self-referentially today by people whom the British regarded as tribal, while the English word caste has passed into the South Asian lexicon. Thus, Tharu activists might use both *janajati* (or *adivasi*) as well as *caste*, as in 'hamro caste' [our caste] to describe themselves. Nepal has in fact been a 'caste' society for as long as the British have known it, even though colonial officials saw it as quintessentially a 'tribal' society (Holmberg 1988). That a Nepali speaker might also use the term *janajati* or *adivasi* to talk about the Tharu, but also use the English term 'caste', suggests a different way of thinking about the relation among these terms than a colonial ethnographer

might deploy. Nepal's old legal code, which organized Nepal's many ethnic groups into a caste system in 1854 and survived for a hundred years, recognized none of these distinctions; in the *Muluki Ain*, the operative term is *jat*, which may be translated as species or kind and which was applied as a descriptive label to all the kinds of people who inhabited the kingdom, all of whom were assigned a place in a single all-encompassing social order (Höfer 2004; Sharma 1977). *Jat*, of course, is a term that continues to be used, by Tharu and others.

The notion of caste, as used in both colonial and contemporary scholarship, refers to social groups based on kinship that are integrated into complex social and political orders in terms of a hierarchy of statuses imbued with differing values, held together and upheld by political and economic power. A caste system requires a centralized political system and a ruler whose responsibility it is to maintain the order of that system. The *Muluki Ain* of 1854 exemplifies how the state might order such a system, frame it ideologically, and work to uphold it. When colonial ethnographers and twentieth century anthropologists encountered Indian societies, they found societies trying to perdure in the absence of such states, which had largely been dismantled by colonial power, keeping the system going instead through an enduring ideology that buttressed the position of the privileged and was upheld by the power of the dominant landowning castes (Quigley 1993). However, in the context of modern democratic politics, castes transform into ethnic groups in plural societies, contesting for status and power (Gupta 2005). This process is well underway in Nepal, and groups such as Bahuns and Chhetris should be seen as ethnic groups dominating multi-ethnic plural societies rather than as high castes in a caste system.

Tribes, in contrast, were ethnic groups characterized in the colonial literature by their relative autonomy from and marginality to caste society, in terms both of their practices, beliefs, the extent of their integration into the wider social and political systems

characteristic of castes, and their location in space. In the colonial imagination, tribes occupied the geographical margins of forest and mountain, not the cultivated plains, which were the domain of castes. The Tarai, forested, malarial, and to outsiders at least, ominous, was quintessentially one of those tribal places. The people who lived there tended to be mobile, to practice swidden cultivation as opposed to settled agriculture and to live in mono-ethnic communities, in contrast to the mixed caste villages and *jajmani* (patron-client) relations (see Quigley 1993) that characterized caste societies. Tribal peoples in South Asia were conceptualized as those isolated from state-based caste society and its control, but also as the raw material for the caste order. According to Beteille, "in India tribes have always been in transition [to caste], at least since the beginning of recorded history" (1986: 298). Or as Marriott puts it, "The present highly differentiated and extensive caste system may be regarded . . . as a living monument to a primary adjustment among tribal peoples emerging into a civilization of greater organized range and scope" (1955:188). How this transition happens is explored later in this paper.

The Tharu in the Colonial Literature

To the British, the Tharu were tribal, most notably because they occupied an interstitial territory. The Tarai itself has been conceptualized by outsiders as a peripheral region, a no-man's land on the edge of civilized life. The westernmost part of the Tarai, from the district of Naini Tal in India to the four western-most Tarai districts of Nepal - what used to be known as the *Naya Muluk* - have historically been the most forested and remote (from Kathmandu) of the Tarai districts. Although Tharu are associated with the Tarai as a whole, it is the western Tarai that the Tharu call Tharuhāt. The various Tharu communities that lived there and in adjacent Indian districts share cultural features that recall the attributes of tribes. Much of the colonial literature on the Tharu - of Williams (1869), Rowney (1882), Nesfield (1885), Risley (1892) and Crooke

(1896) were about the Tharu of the western Tarai. For these colonial ethnographers, the Tharu were quintessentially tribal. Notably, they lived in mono-ethnic villages in forested areas, were mobile and not tied to the land and did not include Brahmin priests in their rituals. Nesfield wrote they were “an aboriginal, casteless and un-Brahmanized tribe whose customs have been only slightly modified by contact with those of the Aryan invader” (Nesfield 1896: 3). Risley, again generalizing broadly across the various Tharu communities, comments on their nomadism and writes, “they live their own life on the outskirts of Hindu civilization, and no place has as yet been allotted in the Hindu social system” (1892: 319).

Risley has little to say that is original about the Tharu (Risley 1892: 312-321). His observations about Tharu east of the Gandak deals with the Chitwaniya, and I will return to them below. What is noteworthy is that Tharu do not figure much in colonial accounts of Bihar and Bengal, except in discussions of Champaran; the British would not have come into extended contact with Tharu communities because their settlements east of Champaran were all in Nepali territory, in areas into which British travellers were not ordinarily allowed to go during colonial times.

The eastern Tarai was always economically more vital for the Himalayan states, and its society was shaped over the centuries by immigration from the border districts of India, which provided a source of labour for the region’s development. It is likely that Tharu in the eastern districts of the Tarai were also more tribe-like than caste-like earlier in their history; Sugden (2013:526) citing Hamilton (1818), claims that the indigenous people east of the Koshi “carried out a form of slash and burn agriculture and hoe cultivation” and speculates on the existence then of a more egalitarian economy. Famines in late-eighteenth century India, such as the Bengal famine of 1769-1770, as well as the demand for labour to develop the Tarai by the hill states that controlled the region, contributed to the emergence of a plural, multi-ethnic society in the Tarai

east of Chitwan, as well as in some areas of the central Tarai. The descendants of those immigrants call themselves Madhesi and the region they inhabit Madhes. What is significant is that although Tharus in the western Tarai reject both the term Madhesi as a descriptor of themselves and the term Madhes as a label for the Tarai, insofar as there are Tharu supporters of the Madhesi movement—and there are some—they are most likely to come from the eastern Tarai and to view themselves as Madhesi. This political difference is probably associated with the cultural differences indexed by the tribe-caste continuum that I have referred to above.

The Tarai Environment

I turn now to the natural environment of the Tarai as a factor shaping relations among human communities. The Tarai was shrouded in pre-modern times by dense forest cover and inhabited not only by wild animals but for the Tharu and their neighbours, by malevolent spirits. Nesfield writes of Tharu villages in the western Tarai, “During the night the crops and the cattle are kept constantly under watch to prevent the inroads of wild animals; while the forest, which forms the hunting ground in the day time, bounds the horizon on all sides” (1885: 5). He also characterized Tharu in the west (probably the Rana Tharu) as being averse to both manual labour and working for Hindu landlords (he is referring to those who live on the edge of the forest rather than deeper in), and subsisting on the hunting of game and on swidden cultivation, including of rice (1885:4-5).

The natural dangers that affected all who would settle in this challenging environment are also captured in a land grant issued to a Tharu *gurau* (shaman) in Chitwan in 1807 that admonishes him to “Cultivate and make the land populous and protect the people from the threats of elephants, tigers, evil spirits, disease and epidemics” (Krauskopff and Meyer, 2000: 160). The Tarai was a place to be feared for all of these reasons, but especially for its virulent malaria. The Tharu were

considered by the British to be the only people who could survive malaria and work the land, and the British were prepared to make concessions to accommodate them, for they were regarded as highly mobile and apt to migrate to Nepal were their situation to become too oppressive (Guneratne 2002: 56; Krauskopff 2018). This mobility, which challenges the state's control over its population, is itself an attribute of 'tribalness.'

Malaria, however, was not equally virulent everywhere in the Tarai. Recent work by the environmental historian Tom Robertson has shown that the incidence of malaria varied by region and by the species of mosquito vector. It was at its most virulent in the forest belt that stretched along the Churia, encompassing dun valleys such as Chitwan, but its incidence was low in the broad and agricultural plains of the eastern Outer Tarai, the districts that stretch from Bara to Morang (Robertson 2016). The degree of deforestation taking place can affect which species of *Anopheles*, the mosquito vector of malaria, becomes established in a given region; these species vary in the degree of transmission and morbidity of their parasites. *Plasmodium vivax*, for instance, is the commonest malarial parasite found in Nepal, and its effects are, relatively speaking mild; *P. falciparum* is far more deadly in its effects, and was historically present in certain areas of the Tarai, including Inner Tarai valleys such as Chitwan. According to one authority, "tropical forests and hilly areas with streams" are especially favorable for the "proliferation of mosquito vectors when humans are present" (Schapira 2002:105). This is a fair description of conditions in Chitwan and Dang. The eastern part of the Outer Tarai, on the other hand, which shares a border with the Indian state of Bihar, had been largely cleared of forest by the nineteenth century and the incidence of malaria was low. It had also been a magnet, since at least the eighteenth century, for migration from the border districts of India, of people fleeing famine, whose activity helped to engineer that ecological transformation. Where the presence both of forests and malaria constrains relations between

Tharu and caste society in either the hills or the plains (because, for instance, malaria discourages the settlement of other ethnic groups in Tharu villages), one will expect to find the Tharu more tribe-like in their attributes. In the eastern Tarai on the other hand, ecological conditions allowed the Tharu to be more readily integrated (sometimes as a dominant caste) into the caste societies that developed there as a result of Indian migration.

Society and polity in the Tarai

The other kind of environment is the socio-political environment of Tharu society and Tharu relations with the state and with the people who lived to the north and south of them. Although the existence of a political border dividing the territories of Gorkha from the East India Company's territories and later that of the Raj, did not impede movement, western Tharu (the more 'tribe'-like populations) did not live in multi-caste villages, had limited contact with caste populations, and were apt to pack up and move if harassed. Although Tharu everywhere, including those categorized as tribal, were subject to state control, as Krauskopff (2018) has argued, their mobility was itself an act of resistance to attempts by states to over-reach, and the extent of forest land as well as a border that could be crossed to exchange one state for another facilitated such resistance. The more developed eastern Tarai probably presented fewer opportunities for such strategies. Both the forests and malaria constituted an ecological barrier to migration and settlement by both plains and hill people; by the end of the nineteenth century there was less of both in the east.

The eastern Tarai was subject to forces that did not impinge on the west. One of these was the great famine of Bengal of 1770, engineered by the East India Company's misrule, which is said to have cost ten million lives or a third of the population (Drèze 1995: 72, 76). Champaran (Bettiah), which lies south of Chitwan, may have lost nearly half its inhabitants to the 1770 famine, and many who survived abandoned

the district (Hamilton 1820). This and other famines, and the density of population in India's border districts, were a major impetus for migration into the Tarai, providing the labour that the hill states needed for its agricultural development (Ojha 1983: 24). The eastern Tarai and some areas of the central Tarai thus developed in a different way from the relatively more isolated regions of the far west, and their settlement patterns evolved differently.

Over the centuries, a multi-ethnic (or 'multi-caste') society developed in the eastern Tarai, the region from Bara to Jhapa. The dynamics of this process is documented in the *lal mohar* ('red seal' land grants) collected by the Tharu historian Tej Narayan Panjiar and published with commentary by Krauskopff and Meyer (2000). Before the rise of the hill states and the development of their policies towards the Tarai, the Tharu of that area may have resembled Tharu in the west both in their practices and their distance from Brahminical norms, but as a consequence of their closer integration into the multi-ethnic and plural society that formed in the eastern Tarai, they began to sanskritize - notably, to summon Brahmin priests to conduct their life-cycle rituals and to preside over 'great tradition' rituals which are distant from the experience of many western Tharu. The late Ramanand Prasad Singh recalled for me his childhood in Saptari in the early twentieth century; he seems to describe a caste system based on *jajmani* relationships:

We had a Brahmin teacher or the village schoolmaster . . . there were some oil men [Teli caste] who had settled on our land and we permitted them to stay there, we used to get our oil seeds pressed by them, and the whole village used to pay a certain amount to the oil people pressers, that was the system. So they used to press oil for a whole village and every household used to pay them something in kind, paddy and all those things, so they were getting from the whole village. Similar was the case with the barber, and then

these menial castes like Chamars and Doms, they used to take away the dead animals . . . We were almost an agricultural caste, community, we had no other obligation than agriculture. [in English].

In the western Tarai and especially in the districts of Kailali, Kanchanpur, Bardiya and Dang, Tharu had a preponderance if not an outright majority of the population as late as 1971; they lost ground not as a result of migration from India but migration from the hills following the malaria eradication program. In the east, on the other hand, the relative decline in the proportion of Tharu in the population came much earlier, as Indian labour was recruited, often by Tharu chiefs themselves, to develop the region (Krauskopff and Meyer 2000). This labour represented many different caste groups of the plains, and they reconstituted their social systems in the new contexts of the Tarai. It is probable that the same processes of cultural transformation took place in the east that I describe for Chitwan below; first the elite and then the other social strata would likely have been incorporated into the network of relationships being constituted in this new context. Because of the strong connections that local Tharu elites (at least in Chitwan) had to the state and to local Brahmin-Chhetri elites, they were probably influenced by Brahmanical norms to a greater degree than other Tharu, a phenomenon I noticed in western Dang in the late 1980s and early 1990s; that, and the presence of multiple castes in eastern Tarai villages would have been a factor reshaping Tharu practices to accord with what the observer expects to see among castes. I turn now to examining how this process of elite emulation might have taken place more generally by examining the case of the Tharu of Chitwan.

The Cultural Transformation of Chitwan

The cultural processes that in all likelihood led to eastern Tharu becoming 'caste-like' have also taken place in Chitwan,

but much more recently. Well into the twentieth century, despite a significant amount of Hinduization (or in Bista's terms, Nepalization, which amounts to much the same thing) that had taken place since the demise of the Rana regime, the Chitwan Tharu retained many features of 'tribal' society. An example is the worship of local as opposed to pan-Indic deities, and the reliance on indigenous religious specialists, but the turn to Brahmin priests to conduct mortuary rituals had already been established at the time of the Malaria Eradication Project of the 1950s (Guneratne 2021).

Seventy years ago, one might have placed the Tharu of Chitwan in the more tribe-like end of the continuum I have discussed above. Since the Malaria Eradication project of the 1950s, however, their society has been increasingly shaped by hill culture. They have taken on many of the attributes of caste, notably through the expansion of the role that Brahmin priests play in their ritual lives. The Chitwan Tharu today resemble a mid-level agricultural caste, the kind of socially and educationally disadvantaged castes that in India are called Other Backward Classes (OBCs). Their close relations in West Champaran, however, were classified in 1941 as a Scheduled Tribe, a status their elites contested and campaigned to have changed, which happened in 1951 when they were re-classified as a Backward Class. Realizing that this offered them fewer benefits than their prior status, the Tharu of Champaran (or at least their elites) set in motion another campaign to revert to their original status, which they only achieved in 2003.¹ The catalyst for this movement between different categories was clearly the policies of this state, but even in the Chitwan Tharu case, the policies of the state, although less overtly, influence the process of cultural transformation.

Although Chitwan lies on the Indo-Nepal border, the major socio-cultural influences that have shaped it in modern times have come mainly from the Hindu societies of the hills rather than from India. Prior to the 1950s, the Chitwan valley was inhabited mainly by the Tharu. Despite their

connections of culture and shared ethnicity to the Tharu areas of Champaran, and the political fact of a border that has been 'open' since before the founding of the modern states of India and Nepal, geographical and historical factors have constrained cultural flows across the frontier. In colonial times, the forest that covered the valley of Chitwan extended as far south as Bagaha in West Champaran, a distance of up to thirty miles from the border. The barrier that this forest posed to north-south travel was compounded by the malarial nature of the region. The Tharu lived in agricultural enclaves in the forest on both sides of the frontier, and were linked by ties of kinship, but people of other ethnic groups from the Indo-Gangetic plain avoided the region for the most part, from fear of malaria. Labour for cultivation depended largely on the Tharu. Bernardo Michael notes that while land slipped in and out of different categories of use (forest, fallow, fallow grassland, cultivated etc) depending on the availability of labour, "Considerable tracts of land on the Champaran-tarriani frontier remained uncultivated" during the period of the East India Company's rule (2007: 322). Prior even to the malaria eradication project, Chitwan Tharus had greater exposure to ideas and practices carried down from the hills during the winter (when malaria was absent) than came north from India during the entire year. Penetration by outsiders into the Tharu areas of Champaran was limited in the nineteenth century and is difficult even today (see Kumar 2009). The limited east-west links prior to the 1950s also constrained communication into the valley. Thus, the Chitwan Tharu were a once tribe-like people who, after the cultural transformations brought about by the Malaria Eradication Project in Nepal in the 1950s, could be readily 'Hinduized' along Nepali lines and take on more of the attributes of caste. But, as I will show below, what those attributes mean have changed.

Outsiders avoided year-round settlement in the valley from fear of malaria, allowing the Tharu to maintain a relative autonomy well into the twentieth century. Brahmins and Brahminical rituals played little role

in their lives and their settlements were for the most part mono-ethnic. The only significant role of the Brahmin priest prior to malaria eradication was to preside over funerary rituals, and then only in the cold season, when the danger from malaria was at its lowest. It is possible that some local elites sponsored rituals such as the Satya Narayan *puja* in the winter, when Brahmins could be found to perform it - an expression of piety, certainly, but also an expression of adherence to the state and its norms. In the late eighties and early nineties, during the period of my first fieldwork in Chitwan, old Tharus who remembered the time before the malaria eradication project would speak of travel to Bhikna Thori, a railhead² on the Indian border (even today an area of heavy forest cover), which was their principal bazaar, but they had little to say about the wider world outside Chitwan. The anthropologist McKim Marriott (1955: 175) sees the distribution of pilgrimage sites as a way to gauge the extent of the links the Indian village community as it existed in his day had with a wider world (he is writing in the 1950s). The major pilgrimage sites of the Chitwan Tharu lie mostly within the valley and in the adjacent Churia hills. In short, the Tharu had relatively weak links to the world outside the valley, and little to do with powerful outsiders except on those transient occasions when the most powerful of them (the Rana elite) came to Chitwan to hunt. On those occasions, their labour was corvèed to make those hunts possible.

Despite its political and economic importance today, Chitwan was a Tarai backwater at a time, as late as 1950, when the districts of the eastern Tarai were well settled and a mainstay of government revenue. Conditions in Chitwan, a strategically important border district, differed for a number of reasons. Following the Anglo-Nepal war of 1814-16, the Gorkha state de-populated Chitwan, which up to that time appears to have been well settled, by moving a large part of the population out of the district into villages in the surrounding hills, and allowing much of the valley to revert to jungle (Oldfield 1880: 49; 140). This measure was aimed at deterring a

possible British invasion through this route, which provided the quickest access to Kathmandu from India.

Chitwan was known for malaria during the nineteenth century, and avoided by hill people; the endemic malaria caused Chitwan to be known as 'Kalapani' or the Valley of Death (Elder et al. 1976: 11-12a). Unlike the Outer Tarai, Chitwan never became a destination for Indian immigrants, although there was movement of Tharus back and forth across the border with Champaran. With the exception of government officials and police (who were present in the valley only during the winter months), the population was mostly Tharu, along with a number of other, smaller indigenous groups.³

Apart from malaria, plains people were deterred from moving into the valley by its dense forest cover, lack of roads, and the existence of similar conditions in a broad buffer along the frontier in the Tarai areas of Bihar's district of West Champaran. Unlike the valleys of the Inner Tarai, the Outer Tarai of Nepal is an extension of the North Indian plain, and consequently lacks geographical barriers to movement across the border. Chitwan, on the other hand is difficult of access because of its location; unlike the Outer Tarai, it is separated from the plains (and from West Champaran) by the thickly forested slopes of the Churia, which rise to 3000 feet in this part of their range. The hills are bisected only by the pass that leads from Madi in southern Chitwan to Bhikna Thori. The adjoining areas of Champaran were malarial and sparsely populated until modern times, and the population was mostly Tharu (Blyth 1892). As a consequence, there was no significant pressure (such as famine) on the population across the border from Chitwan that would encourage them to seek land in Nepal, and those that might have been moved to do so would have found it easier to travel east and cross the border at Birgunj.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Chitwan appears to have been unimportant economically to the Rana state, particularly by comparison with the

Eastern Tarai. The *Nepal Trade Directory* of 1959 lists its important products as oil seeds and big game. Mustard seeds were traded by Tharu at Hetauda and Bhikna Thori to raise the cash they needed to pay the land tax and to buy cloth, kerosene and salt. There were no permanent bazaars located in Chitwan itself, although itinerant traders used to come down into the valley from the hills during the winter. Religious fairs (*mela*) held regularly throughout the year at various shrines also provided an opportunity for trade. Unlike the eastern Tarai, Chitwan during this period did not produce a surplus of rice. As far as the state was concerned, Chitwan served primarily as a prime hunting preserve located relatively close to Kathmandu for the Rana aristocracy. Although the initial security requirements that kept Chitwan undeveloped diminished in significance as relations improved between Nepal and British India, its value as a hunting preserve probably played some part in keeping it forested until the Ranas were overthrown in 1951.

Malaria Eradication, Development, and Cultural Change

Beginning in the third quarter of the twentieth century, Chitwan was transformed from a wilderness of forest and grassland to one of the most heavily settled parts of the country outside the Kathmandu valley. In 1955, most of the district was under dense forests, with only 2500 *bigha* (about 1700 hectares) under cultivation. By the 1980s, this figure had increased to 40,000 *bigha* (27,200 hectares) (Bhandari 1985: 13), and Chitwan had lost about 70 percent of its forest cover. What remains is mostly within the national park. The majority of its inhabitants today are recent migrants from the hills; apart from members of the dominant Brahmin-Chhetri ethnic groups, many of Nepal's hill Dalits and *janajati* groups are also represented, with the Tamang forming a significant minority.

A successful malaria eradication program was begun in Chitwan in 1954, and by 1960, the threat of malaria had been rendered insignificant. The Malaria Eradication

Organization was set up in 1958, and entrusted the task of eradicating malaria throughout the country. These developments, coupled with the construction of an all-weather road linking Chitwan to Kathmandu and Pokhara, opened up a flood of immigration that brought hill people into the valley. In 1961, the Central Inner Tarai, including the modern districts of Chitwan and Nawal Parasi, was second only to the Eastern Tarai in the number of immigrants it received - 27,560 vs. 72,030 (Ram Bahadur KC 1986: 10). By 1971, the population of Chitwan was about 183,644, of whom 24,718 (about 13.5%) were Tharu (Chand et al 1975: 6). The Tharu population of Chitwan was about 63,000 in 2011, barely 12% of the district-wide population of 579,984 (Government of Nepal 2011: 40). This influx proved too great to be controlled or managed in planned government settlements, and most immigrants encroached illegally on state land, a process which has been described as spontaneous settlement (Shrestha (1990) provides an extensive discussion of immigration into the valley).

The state's development policy changed the social makeup of the valley, turning the Tharu into a minority and transforming the social composition of their once mono-ethnic villages. More importantly, it set in motion a process of intentional cultural change, a process initially pursued by local Tharu elites to make their own practices conform to the culturally prestigious practices associated with state power and a socially dominant immigrant population that was now intruding directly and continuously into their own lives. Individual families, originally of the *jimidari* class,⁴ sought to align themselves culturally with their more powerful new neighbors, but this acquisition of cultural capital also distinguished them in both symbolic and material ways from their other, Tharu neighbors. Over time, these practices percolated down into other strata in Tharu society, as others strove to emulate, in a process of status seeking, what was becoming normative - the practices of the high castes now in their midst. The example of how Tharu marriage practices changed

after the Malaria Eradication Project enabled immigration into Chitwan shows how this happened.

Kanyadan in Tharu Society

The British colonial ethnographer H.H. Risley suggests that the Chitwan Tharu used to pay bridewealth; he writes “The traditional amount of the bride-price is supposed to be Rs. 9, but this is liable to vary according to the circumstances of the family” (1892: 314). By the time of my fieldwork, however, brideprice had entirely given way to dowry. The few sentences that Risley devotes to describing the actual ceremony accords well with my own observations of what I call the traditional Tharu practice of marriage: the groom and a small group of his kin known as the *bariyat* go to the home of the bride and return the next day with the bride and without ceremony; a feast is eaten at the bride’s house and a ritual is performed at the groom’s house on their return to incorporate the bride into his lineage, and there the matter ends.

After Brahmins and Chhetris settled in the valley in increasing numbers, *kanyadan* and dowry came to replace the traditional form of marriage and bridewealth as the dominant practice within Tharu society. *Kanyadan* requires both economic and cultural capital, and in a context where *kanyadan* has become widespread, economic capital helps to maintain social distinctions. Thus, *kanyadan* was initially adopted by elite Tharu families in eastern Chitwan by the 1970s; a few elderly men I interviewed in 1989-90 claimed that their families were the first to introduce the practice. Although the traditional practice of the *bariyat* was retained, once the *bariyat* arrived at the bride’s house, the *kanyadan* ceremony was performed there. This also became the place for the public and elaborate presentation of the dowry, and the public giving of wedding gifts to the bridal couple, practices which did not exist before. In eastern Chitwan, inter-ethnic social intercourse is primarily a matter for the elites, usually their male members, while the rest of society largely remain within

their own social groups. While the *kanyadan* ceremony aligned the Tharu elite with the prestige of ‘high caste’ culture (understood by everyone as the normative culture of Nepal, not because it was high caste but because it was Hindu), it also distinguished them from their social inferiors in Tharu society. But as *kanyadan* percolated through society - not because the elites promoted it but because their social inferiors saw it as a mark of personal or familial status to be emulated - the *kanyadan* ceremony itself and the practices of feasting came to be elaborated on as a way to maintain social distinction. Conspicuous consumption, especially where the dowry was concerned, marked status, and the traditional Tharu marriage practice referred to earlier came to be regarded as a sign of poverty.

There is social pressure to make the *kanyadan* ceremony as elaborate as possible (it has, as people tell me, to be *ramailo*, i.e., pleasurable), with a lavish dowry that include furniture, household goods and clothing, as well as cash, for the bride. These are costs not associated with the traditional ceremony, and are borne by the bride’s family, which must also pay for the services of a Brahmin priest. While the Tharu elite emulate Brahmin-Chhetri customs to align themselves culturally with politically influential newcomers whose culture happens also to be that promoted by the state, their social inferiors seek to emulate their own elites to seek status for themselves. The marriage ceremony lends itself to this sort of status claim because of its very public nature, but it also imposes a tremendous burden on those with few resources. It is, of course, beyond the reach of the poorest, such as those with little to no land. Besides that, however, it is a ritual in which a Brahmin priest plays a public and visible role, complementing the role he plays in the performance of the funeral rites.

As this practice of social emulation spreads through society, the demand for services of Brahmin priests expands as well. There was one Brahmin *purohit* for the Tharu households in the village where I did fieldwork, and he made a good living. This is not

however sanskritization in Srinivas's terms, in which a subordinate caste collectively emulates the customs of the dominant caste (Srinivas 1966); this cultural transformation is the outcome of people (and households) pursuing their individual desires for status rather than acting in accordance with the edicts of a caste association seeking to collectively raise the status of the group. In other words, it focuses on the individual rather than the group; it is about class more than it is about caste.

Besides the imperatives of status seeking, social pressure is also exerted on Tharus by hill people to conform to high caste norms. One Tharu woman commented,

There's a lot of contact with *pahadiyas* [hill people] now, and they come to the weddings, and they ask why we haven't given anything to the *dulahi* [the bride] and they laugh. And they say you must give these various things—necklaces etc.—to the *dulahi*. And because of this our customs are disappearing, because of the *pahadiya* society.

Marriage according to the traditional rituals, was, and continues to be, a low-key affair, in which there are few opportunities for a public display of wealth and status; it has come to be associated with poverty. The *kanyadan* ceremony has been valorized not only because it is normatively both Hindu and Nepali, but also because it is modern; it was, in the 1990s, still a relatively new practice for Tharu people, and one closely associated with that segment of the population - the 'high castes' - who are seen by them as the most advanced and modern of their neighbors. The elaborate *kanyadan* ceremony is now the focus of the whole marriage process, taking place after the *bariyat* arrives in the bride's village. The traditional Tharu practices that bookend it - such as the particular form of the *bariyat* and the rituals performed on return to the groom's village - now serve as markers of a distinctive Tharu identity that must define itself against other identities present in the village.

The interpolation of the Brahmanical marriage ritual into traditional practice and the major role played by Brahman priests is of relatively recent origin. The widespread employment of Brahman priests became possible only after hill people settled permanently in Chitwan. It required the year-round presence of a caste society, with its more prestigious practices and the social pressures it could exert, as well as the ready availability of its ritual specialists, for Tharu practices to change in the direction of 'caste-like' forms. And it required also the transformation of their environment - the eradication of malaria. Once Brahman priests became available year-round, a variety of factors encouraged increasing numbers of Tharus to incorporate the *kanyadan* ceremony into their traditional marriage practices. This influence is expressed in the words of one Tharu, who invokes the Hinduness of Tharus as the explanation for the shift.

In the old days, Tharus didn't even meet Bahuns [Brahmans]. They lived in the hills and didn't come here for fear of malaria. Where then could one go to find a Bahun for a wedding? So the Chaudharis got married according to their own customs [*apno hisab-kitab lé*]... There were no *pujas* of any kind at all. The Brahmans would not come to perform weddings because they said they would get malaria. . . Now there are Bahuns in every village. Seeing that they are there, why should we not do it according to sanskritic ways? We should do it according to our *dharma*. . . . Now most people will not marry without a Brahman. Only one or two marriages are conducted now according to the old way.

Conclusion

Ecological conditions in the Tarai served to limit migration into it for much of the region's modern history. Conditions in the east had changed over the centuries as labor became more readily available to

supplement that of the Tarai's indigenous people, thanks to push factors such as famine that encouraged immigration into the Tarai, but this had much less, if any, impact on the westernmost Tarai districts and in Inner Tarai valleys such as Chitwan. As the eastern Tarai became deforested and well-settled by an ethnically heterogeneous population, Tharus in the east grew to be more like their neighbors from the plains and over time took on more of the attributes of caste; in Chitwan, however, those neighbors did not arrive until the malaria eradication project of the 1950s, and Tharus retained more of the attributes of what colonial ethnographers referred to as 'tribes'. The explanation for the cultural differences indexed by the two concepts of caste and tribe among the different social units of what today is considered to be a single ethnic group, lies with the changing and inter-linked ecological and social conditions of the Tarai borderland.

It is well known but usually forgotten that neither tribe nor caste are indigenous concepts to South Asian societies. In Nepal, the social forms that these concepts strove to distinguish were simply treated under the concept of *jat*, a term that encompasses all the meanings of the English terms and more besides, and a term that can also readily be rendered in English as ethnic group. To render it as caste on the other hand brings with it the baggage that accrues to the concept, and raises the problem of the *matwali* groups, which are also *jat* but which, to the British, were tribes. In the context of the *Muluki Ain*, the use of caste for *jat* in English translation is appropriate, as the MA is a codification of a caste system by the state, which sought to regulate inter-group relations. In the modern context, neither of those terms (tribe and caste) has much value, for the social groups they purport to describe must all operate in the shared political space of the modern nation-state. From being concepts initially introduced to describe social forms that existed in the eye of the (Western) observer, they became, instead, ways in which the social groups so described could compete for status, resources and power in the

context of a particular political order, as the Tharu of Champaran did with their switch from Scheduled Tribe to Backward Class and back again. A generalized drift towards caste identified by twentieth century anthropology ('Sanskritization,' or the formulations of Marriott and of Beteille, cited earlier) has taken a turn towards ethnicity with the rise of republican forms of government in South Asia, and the politicization of caste by such institutions as the colonial census.

The concept of Sanskritization was developed by M.N.Srinivas and others to account for the way that mobility occurred in the caste system. Individuals could not achieve caste mobility; only the community as a whole could, usually under the prompting of their elites, and by adopting the attributes of locally dominant castes to claim a higher status (i.e., more social honour) than the one accorded them. That is not what is happening in contemporary Tharu society in Chitwan. Here, as in the case of the changes in marriage practice, it is the pursuit of individual or family status. Attributes that once signalled caste status now are attributes of modernity and national belonging. Older attributes of social honour now no longer count for much; alcohol consumption, for example, which once marked a clear boundary between the pure and the impure in the old legal code, are now consumed by elite Brahmans (local businessmen, government officials and the like) who socialize with their Tharu counterparts in Chitwan. Social honor is indexed by new markers of status that are not grounded in the caste order. Notably, they are the acquisition of education, and entry into the professions. The Brahmans' superordinate position is based on their 'cornering the market', so to speak, of these attributes; they have become a model of the modernity that Tharu seek to emulate (Guneratne, 1999).

Caste is not a useful concept to describe the Tharu of Chitwan today. Nor are they a tribe, emerging, in Marriott's phrase, "into a civilization of greater organized range and scope" (1955:188). These concepts have

no purchase in Chitwan, which is today a plural society of many ethnic groups, some with more privileges than others, but all formally equal in the eyes of the state. The Tharu are an ethnic group in a modern polity drawing on the cultural symbols - once associated with ritual status - that have now become markers of modernity, religious affiliation, and national belonging, to maneuver from a position of disadvantage or fewer privileges in a field of political action where power is unevenly distributed.

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Endnotes

1. *Times of India*, "Tharus given the status of Scheduled Tribe." May 25, 2003. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/patna/Tharus-given-the-status-of-Scheduled-Tribe/articleshow/47408792.cms>. (Accessed July 13, 2022).
2. The railway was extended to Bhikna Thori after a rail link was established between Bettiah and Muzaffarpur in 1888 (Kumar 2009: 13).
3. Daniel Wright, the British Residency surgeon at Kathmandu, noted that Hetauda, a town in the foothills overlooking the Chitwan valley, was "a considerable village in the cold season, but the place is almost deserted in the hot season and during the rains [from April to November], on account of the aoul or malarious fever, which is deadly to all but the aborigines of the teraie" (Wright 1872: 1).
4. Local elites; originally revenue collectors and local magistrates, who served as village heads for ritual purposes as well.

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