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Conservation and the Impact of Relocation on the Tharus of Chitwan, Nepal

Joanne McLean

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Since the establishment of the first national park in the United States in the nineteenth century, indigenous peoples have been forced to move from regions designated as parks. Some of these people have been relocated to other areas by the government, more often they have been told to leave the area and are given no alternatives (Clay, 1985:2).

Introduction

The relocation of indigenous people from national parks has become standard practice in developing countries with little regard for the impacts it imposes on a community's cultural patterns and means for survival. Since the forced relocation of the Tharu people from the Royal Chitwan National Park in Nepal prior to its establishment in 1973, the indigenous Tharus have been competing with the conservation of wildlife and the rapid development of tourism for the use of park resources. The continued relocation of the Tharu from the northern boundary of the national park is restricting access to natural resources, shifting the economy, disrupting social and cultural institutions and ultimately threatening the survival of Tharu culture.

The relocation of resident or indigenous peoples as a result of protected areas establishment has been widely documented (Turnbull 1972; Clay, 1985; Rao and Geisler, 1990; Calhoun, 1991; Kutay, 1991; West and Brechin, 1991; Kemf, 1993; Geisler, 1993; Colchester, 1994; Kothari, Suri & Singh, 1995; Hitchcock, 1995; Stycos and Duarte, 1995; Stevens, 1997). These studies have shown that relocation of people from protected areas shows little understanding of the people being displaced and little respect for their spiritual values and strong links to the land. Eventually the relocated people are forced to give up their independent and dignified lives and end up as exploited and alienated communities (Rao & Geisler, 1990).

The Tharu are made up of a number of endogamous groups that are linguistically and culturally different inhabiting the lowland plains of Nepal, commonly known as the Tarai. With the exception of small populations of Tharu in India, they are represented as one of the largest ethnic groups in the Tarai, with a population of 1.2 million

(Guneratne 1994; Skar 1999). The Tharu are often described as one people. However, many subgroups exist: Kochila Tharu in the eastern Tarai, Chitwaniya and Desauri in the central Tarai, and Kathariya, Dangaura and Rana Tharu in the western Tarai (Meyer & Deuel, 1999). The Tharu people who inhabit the valley of Chitwan are just one of these many sub-groups. They are considered the true residents of Chitwan and were the main inhabitants of the valley until the early 1950's (Pyakuryal, 1982).

This study of the past and present impacts of relocation on the Tharu people of Chitwan, Nepal is being carried out using multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995). The study documents Tharu accounts of relocation, its consequences and its implications for their cultural survival. Most of the data was collected during fieldwork in Nepal. I utilized methods of participant observation, semi-structured interviews, life histories, photography, and a village census as the research tools. I have also drawn on historical materials.¹ Information was also collected from the Padampur Village Development Committee (VDC), the Padampur Migrations Board, a household survey, and group discussion. Though the larger body of my research focuses on several villages, this article aims at highlighting the situation of two villages that have already relocated. The analysis presented in this text is based on the study of Jayamangala and Bankatta villages of Padampur VDC and Saguntole village of the newly relocated area. All three villages lie in Chitwan district.

The Chitwan district lies 147 kilometres south of Kathmandu, forming part of the Narayani Zone. I spent a total of twenty months in the villages of Badreni, Sauraha,

¹I have consulted historical documents and maps at the Department of National Parks & Wildlife Conservation, and at the Department of Survey in Kathmandu, Nepal.

Debauli, Saguntole, Odara, Bachhauri, Dhidauri, and Kurchauri in Chitwan. Fieldwork was carried out over a number of visits between January 1997 and August 1999. Among the villages mentioned, it was primarily the people from Jayamangala and Bankatta who moved to Saguntole for their relocation. After relocation, Saguntole was renamed the New Padampur VDC. The name has been borrowed from the original settlement of Tharus and non-Tharus known as Padampur VDC, where the Tharus formed the majority of the population. New Padampur is surrounded by Jutpani VDC (where hill migrants, especially flood victims have resettled), Daha Khani VDC, the Barandabar Forest, and Pithuwa VDC. The relocated area is approximately 13 to 15 kilometres north of the urbanized center of Tandi Bazaar and approximately four kilometres south west of the resettled area of Jutpani.

In 1994, for the first time in the history of relocation of the people of Padampur, the Padampur Migrations Board under the direction of the Department of Forests and the Ministry of Local Development compelled the people of that area to resettle at Saguntole. In 1993, a flood that affected the whole of the Chitwan district also damaged some of the lands of two villages situated on the north-western boundary of Padampur, closest to the Rapti River. Prior to this the government had refrained from doing any development work in Padampur to protect the villages from flooding, as a decision had long been made to extend the Royal Chitwan National Park eastwards into Padampur VDC².

After the 1993 flood there were altogether 10,607 people living in Padampur. Approximately 1000 people from the two villages Jayamangala and Bankatta gradually moved to Saguntole in groups at different times in a process of relocation. The total budget and area of land required to resettle all the villages from Padampur to New Padampur was estimated at 300 million rupees and 1000 hectares of land. The relocation of two villages to New Padampur has taken four years. The Padampur Migrations board has spent nearly 250 lakh (approximately 400,000 US dollars) on administration costs and compensation. This budget includes compensation, land and development in New Padampur such as road construction, a school, a post office and drinking water supplies.³

²In 1975, Bolton's recommendation from the Plan of Management prepared for the Royal Chitwan National Park proposed the resettlement of the villages inside Padampur VDC. Milton and Binney's report (1980) also concluded that the villages located in Padampur should be resettled. The report suggested that resettlement is beneficial for the park by creating more wildlife habitats and resolving local conflicts.

³Information was collected from the Padampur Migrations Board

As far as relocation is concerned all the households of Wards number one, two and nine have received allocations of land in Saguntole (New Padampur). All the households of Jayamangala and Bankatta, which comprise ward number eight have been totally resettled. The Resettlement process intended to move the people of all nine wards out of Padampur within four to five years, but the process was not accomplished in the time frame planned. However, the people of Jayamangala and Bankatta villages were constrained to relocate to Saguntole.

The Tharu: A people of the forests

The origin of the Tharu has been the subject of controversy. There have been many attempts to classify their origin on the basis of the meaning of the word Tharu. Nesfield (cited in Crooke, 1896: 381) suggests that the word Thar signifies forest and explains the term as meaning "man [sic] of the forest". Similarly, the Tharu people themselves say that they are a people of the forest (Muller-Böcker, 1993: 44). I follow that etymology here. The Tharu people of Chitwan are indigenous to the Chitwan region of Nepal. The land shapes their culture and their identity. The Tharu have lived in the forests of the Chitwan district for hundreds of years maintaining strong economic, spiritual and cultural links to the forests. Now the Tharu in the Chitwan region have become a minority in their own land owing to the migration of hill people after the apparent eradication of malaria. This demographic transformation has dramatically influenced their traditions and agricultural practices.

Prior to the land registration system and land reform in the early nineteen sixties, the Tharus in Chitwan were a semi-nomadic people who practiced shifting cultivation. Sometimes they lived in one place while cultivating in another. According to Muller-Böcker (1991a:29) the Tharus of Chitwan practiced a short fallow shifting cultivation (2-4 years rice cultivation; 3-12 years fallow). The Tharus relied heavily on the collection of forest products such as wild fruits and vegetables and medicinal plants. Their traditional resource use included burning, medicinal plant collection, hunting deer, rabbit and wild boar, fishing, planting crops such as rice, mustard, corn, and lentils, harvesting a variety of species of grass; and collecting wild fruits and vegetables. The Tharu residing in the Chitwan region have a strong interconnectedness with their environment. They see the forest and the village as one entity. As one villager states:

Office, an office that was set up by the Ministry of Local Development to facilitate the relocation process. Population data was collected from the Padampur Village Development Committee (VDC).

Tharu people were dependent on the forest a lot. Tharus were also part of the forest and the forest was part of the Tharus. They were dependent on the forest for vegetables, fruits, medicines, and material to build their houses such as *dabhi*⁴ grass and *dhadhi*⁵ grass and woods.

The Tharus have struggled to maintain their resource needs of gathering, fishing, grazing and hunting from the forests given the restrictions placed on them after the establishment of the Royal Chitwan National Park.

The customs, spiritual beliefs and moral values of the Tharu are closely linked to the natural environment. Every year many festivals are celebrated which rely on the extraction of natural resources. According to Muller-Böker, the pantheon of Tharu gods exhibits a large number of deities that live in the forest, and they may feel disturbed by the inappropriate behaviour of intruding humans... Before going into the forest, one recalls the name of the forest deities and asks them for their aid; in the forest one avoids doing "bad things" (1991b: 112).

Migration, forest depletion and the Tharu

After the malaria eradication program during the 1950s, large numbers of hill migrants settled in the Tarai, including the Chitwan valley, and a high proportion of the valley's forests disappeared (Elder *et al.* 1976). The government of Nepal established resettlement offices in the Tarai, encouraging hill people to acquire land by settling and clearing the sal forests. According to Gurung (1996) 52 percent of the total population of Nepal now reside in the Tarai region.

In 1953 floods washed away hundreds of farms in the hill region of Nepal. As a result one of the goals of the Rapti Valley Multi-purpose Development Project was to convert forests into farmlands and so the government encouraged flood victims to migrate to the Chitwan district to clear and cultivate land which they could eventually hope to own (*Ibid.*). This had devastating impacts on the Tharus system of land ownership, as not only did the Tharus lose their forests, but many uneducated Tharu families lost land because of the exploitation of hill people claiming ownership of Tharu lands.

⁴Dabhi (*Imperata cylindrica*) is the Tharu name for the grass used for thatching.

⁵Dhadhi (*Saccharum*) is the Tharu name for the reeds used for making house walls.

Relocation and its consequences

The Mahendra Deer Park and the Rhinoceros Sanctuary, the forerunners to the modern national park, were established in areas heavily populated by hill migrants and the indigenous Tharus. The department responsible for wildlife preservation and national parks forcibly expelled the people living inside the designated park and rhino sanctuary boundaries. Conservation policies administered under the direction of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) deemed it necessary to exclude humans from inhabiting lands designated as national parks, and restricted local use of natural resources found inside the park boundaries.

Since the adoption of conservation policies in the Chitwan valley with the establishment of the Mahendra Deer Park and adjacent Rhino Sanctuary, later forming the Royal Chitwan National Park, its indigenous inhabitants have suffered. Not only have the Tharu people been totally excluded from park management planning but their access to much valued natural resources such as *dabhi* grass became illegal. Conservation policies adopted by the government and endorsed by conservation agencies and scientists have resulted in the relocation of Tharu communities from their traditional lands, denying them their rights to land and forcing them into a situation of landlessness and poverty.

One of my informants, who lived in Amiliya village inside the designated national park boundary tells the story that as a result of the establishment of the national park she became landless. When Bikiya's family was forced to move from their village by the army they found shelter with their relatives who owned land in a nearby village outside the park. Bikiya tells the story of how her family fought hard for their land in court, but they did not win their fight. She says in the past when people were moved they did not get land, but now people from Padampur are getting land compensation. Since losing land inside the park and her husband, Bikiya has had to work for daily wages. She has become landless and poor. She says, what was once a good life inside the park, cultivating large land holdings is now gone and she has not only lost her land, but also her quality of life and ultimately her dignity.

The history of forced relocation of human settlements prior to the designation of the Royal Chitwan National Park in 1973 is a story still untold. My informants told me how soldiers forcibly removed all the villages located inside the designated boundary of the park. Houses were burned down, fields and houses were trampled by elephants, men, women and children were threatened sometimes at gun point. Those who lived inside the boundaries tried to fight for their land, but lost and as a result became landless for life.

The villages that form Padampur VDC, did not succumb to the force of the army. There were many conflicts between the villages in Padampur and soldiers. The soldiers seized some village land, but the people continued to resist. When the soldiers seized the land the local people tried to plough their fields, but were badly beaten by the soldiers. The people of Padampur also had proof of permanent residence in the form of land registration papers. Over time the people of Padampur gradually suffered from increased wildlife depredation on their crops, restricted access to traditional resources and grazing grounds and constant surveillance by the army.

The forest for the Tharu was a most important pasturage. After the establishment of the Royal Chitwan National Park grazing was prohibited in the forest and the number of cattle declined in some villages by 80%. With wildlife numbers on the increase the Tharu suffered losses of harvest and livestock, gaining no compensation. The collection of wild fruits, vegetables, medicinal plants and materials for making houses and household items became impossible (Muller-Böcker, 1991a).

While the act of relocation forces indigenous people to relinquish their traditional territories it also results in a loss of inherited knowledge of the land once passed on from older generations. Adapting to the new situation and the social changes that relocation brings results in people losing their traditional knowledge, as the older population dies out and the younger generation is forced to adapt to their new circumstances. As Clay (1985) points out in many cases the access indigenous peoples have to their former lands is limited. The knowledge that indigenous people have of their environment is in any case devalued, and they are excluded from its management.

The impacts of relocation

The relocation of the Tharu communities to New Padampur has impacted their economic, social, spiritual and cultural well being. The villagers who owned the majority of lands have been able to get some compensation for lands lost in Jayamangala and Bankatta villages.

Land in New Padampur has been distributed according to a system of land registration. Each relocated family in New Padampur is entitled to a maximum of two *bigha* of land, which is equal to 1.36 hectares. If families owned more land they are entitled to receive monetary compensation. If families owned less than two *bigha* they are entitled to receive the same amount of land owned in Padampur. Landless families relocating to New Padampur are entitled to three *khatta* of land, which is equal to one tenth of a hectare.

In Padampur, the majority of Tharu landowners have their land registered in one family's name. The land allocation system for New Padampur has not considered how many people are in one family and land is therefore being distributed in small amounts for large families. Some Tharu were clever enough to distribute the registering of their land, dividing it among the family members. These people were able to maximize the amount of land they could receive in New Padampur.

The relocated families were also allocated 3500 rupees (approximately 50 US dollars) each to assist with transportation of their belongings to resettle in New Padampur. However, if their relocation costs were more than the allocated amount they did not receive any additional money to cover their costs. Although the relocated villagers have been compensated for lands lost and also for their relocation expenses, the major loss is that the new settlers do not have the opportunities to become economically established as work is limited in the area and unemployment is high. As a result the standard of living has decreased and the people have lost their economic self-sufficiency.

Baji Ram Mahato is an eighty-four year old Tharu elder whose family has been relocated to New Padampur. He is considered the head of the village called Jayamangala that once thrived inside Padampur VDC. When Jayamangala village was moved to New Padampur most of its inhabitants had little idea of the difficulties they would have to face in setting up their new houses and fields. Baji's family transferred to New Padampur in 1996. He tells the story of how much his family has suffered since relocating to New Padampur.

Life in Jayamangala was so nice. There were facilities to collect everything, to collect grass, to feed the animals, to collect materials for making houses. Only in the monsoon for a few days it was difficult to cross the river, nothing more. We had such a beautiful life in Jayamangala. Here in New Padampur life is very difficult, there is no place to graze the cattle, we are not able to keep our animals. We had to sell our animals and some we have given to our neighbors to keep for a few days, but probably we will have to sell these animals too. How can we keep our animals if we bring them here, how can we feed them and provide them water?

Aggravating these problems is a lack of infrastructure and basic services. There are no irrigation facilities. There is an insufficient supply of drinking water, limited education and medical facilities. The limited supply of water has forced the Tharu to change their crop production and they are now forced to grow maize instead of their staple, rice. The majority of villagers are suffering economically

because they cannot grow rice. Now the Tharu, who are traditionally rice growers, are forced to grow and eat maize. One landless woman explains her desperate situation:

We feel like crying here all the time as we are unable to eat maize. We are not maize eaters. We are crying when we are eating, as it is very difficult to swallow the maize. Sometimes the food doesn't go inside it comes out. I had never eaten any maize flour in my life. When I moved to New Padampur that was the first time I had eaten it and it was so difficult for me to eat. We are always sick, we have no energy in the body. We are so unhealthy.

The relocation of the villages Jayamangala and Bankatta from Padampur to New Padampur is a case of thoughtless government planning. As far as the settlement pattern in New Padampur is concerned, previously the Tharus were a homogeneous group while living in Padampur. After relocation the new villages became more ethnically heterogeneous. Though there were different ethnic groups living in Padampur they had formed their own segment within their own cultural boundary.

In Padampur, Jayamangala and Bankatta were compact villages located separately and functioning autonomously. Since relocating to New Padampur both villages are now mixed together and the traditional village structures have been lost. Socially, the lack of structure in the village has had repercussions on relations among neighbors. In the past, Tharu people lived together in extended families, where compact village structures played a vital social role. In New Padampur the structure of the village has been designed around symmetrical roads, where each family has been allocated land according to their status.

The layout of the village is structured so that families who owned the majority of land (there is no distinction between Jayamangala or Bankatta village) were allocated land in the north section of the new settlement. Those families who were landless in Padampur were allocated land at the south section of the new settlement. Those with average amounts of land were allocated land in between the landless and the landowners and their relatives. What remains a difficulty for Tharu families is the integration of Tharu castes and hill castes. A middle aged Tharu woman explained when I asked her about the cohesiveness of village social life,

There is no unity. One house is Tharu, another is hill people, and another is another caste. It is not possible to have unity. There is no unity. Social work is very difficult. We are not getting help from each other. One family is suffering from problems while others are just watching. It is difficult too,

because most people are suffering. How can you get help from your neighbor if your neighbor is suffering?

When the Tharu people moved to New Padampur they left behind their identity, their dignity and their respect for nature in the form of their village god. The spiritual values have been slowly eroded and forgotten as the people have lost their sense of place and belonging. A village elder responsible for the worship of the village god expresses the sense of loss:

In Jayamangala we used to worship our own village god, but here nobody is worshipping our god. Here is no god. It is not possible to bring all the gods here, because those places were the gods' places but how can we bring those gods here? Now we do not have even the village god to protect the crops, animals and the family. We don't have any gods here now.

The relocation of the Tharu people to New Padampur has brought about rapid changes. The changes that have rapidly impacted on the Tharu are more devastating than the changes that resulted from land reform during the nineteen sixties when their semi-nomadic lifestyle of shifting cultivation was transformed into sedentary farming. Then, they were still able to inhabit lands and keep livestock that were of central importance to their identity and self-sufficiency. Now, they are forced to relinquish the land that formed the basis of their economic and cultural survival. As Goodland says "rapid change can separate tribal people from their cultural identity: a form of extinction" (1985:28).

The cultural traditions of the Tharu are at risk of becoming extinct. The relocation process has forced a situation of cultural deprivation, as Tharu families are no longer able to celebrate their festivals and practice their traditions. Traditionally, in every festival Tharu people enjoy the practice of fishing. The women would also collect snails. There is no river system in New Padampur for Tharu people to continue this practice. They miss fish from their diet and feel sad at festival time. As one Tharu put it,

We are missing our traditions, there is no place to collect snails because there are no rivers in New Padampur. The snail is very important food for us. There is not enough water here. It is a very hard life here. Even during the festivals we are compelled not to do some things, because we are not able to collect resources for the festivals.

Conclusion

On the front page of the *Kantipur* (Nepali National Daily Newspaper) Baji Ram Mahato is quoted as saying:

Jayamangala was so easy for agriculture. We were all part of nature and wildlife. Here in New Padampur only our body has come. Our tradition, culture, festivals and heart is left in Jayamangala (Maharjan, 1998).

The cultural survival of the Tharu people who have been relocated to New Padampur is threatened. Respect for Tharu settlement and natural resource use has been undermined due to the policy of establishing protected areas. The cultural survival of the Tharu depends on their continued interaction with the environment. The forests, wild animals, grasslands and rivers are essential links in the survival of Tharu culture. The connection the Tharu have to their environment and their access to natural resources has become a conservation issue, controlled by the Royal Chitwan National Park.

This article has briefly examined the impacts of the relocation process of two villages, as a result of the establishment of the Royal Chitwan National Park. Protected areas in Nepal emerged from a western conservation model, often enforcing the exclusion of human populations. The global conservation movement has since recognized the significance of indigenous participation in protected areas, the reality is that in Nepal's Royal Chitwan National Park relocation is still taking place and threatening the very survival of its indigenous people.

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