

## Social and Cultural Transformation Among the Tharu of Rajderwa and Bhaurisal

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### Abstract:

This article explains how the Tharu communities living in the border villages of Rajderwa and Bhaurisal, between India and Nepal, have changed socially and culturally over time. Using direct observations and census data, it looks at the history of these changes and studies the Tharu people's family systems, traditional rituals, and community identity. The study shows that globalization has disturbed some traditional customs but also encouraged new ways of cultural expression and economic growth. These findings add to larger discussions about indigenous identity, life in border areas, and how traditions are being reshaped in modern India.

**Keywords:** Social, Cultural, Historical, Ethnographic, Customary practices.

### Introduction

The Tharu people constitute a distinctive ethnic group indigenous to the Terai region, a fertile lowland stretch lying along the foothills of the Himalayas in Northern India. Ethnographically, they form a cohesive cultural cluster recognized for their agricultural proficiency, artisan skills, and strong socio-cultural ties to their ancestral lands (Guneratne 2002 and Chaudhary 2018), the Tharu have maintained a vibrant cultural identity, shaped by both environmental factors and historical experiences. Their identity is deeply embedded in the landscape of the Terai, and their long-standing presence in this region has allowed them to develop unique survival strategies, belief systems, and modes of living that differentiate them from other ethnic groups in the Indian subcontinent. Historically, the Tharu have resided in the foothills of Himalayas for centuries, a region that offers both ecological richness and complex challenges. This geographical zone is characterized by dense forests, fertile agricultural plains, and a subtropical monsoon climate, which together provide the basis for both sustenance and cultural adaptation. A critical environmental feature of this region is its historically high prevalence of malaria, dengue, and jaundice which persisted until eradication efforts in the mid-20th century (McDonaugh 1984) emphasizes, this disease environment inadvertently shaped the demographics and social isolation of the region. Due to their relative resistance to malaria—a trait often attributed to long-term adaptation—the Tharu were able to inhabit and cultivate these lands while other populations avoided them, further strengthening their connection to the land and reinforcing their cultural distinctiveness. The purpose behind mentioning this is to understand how sometimes disease shapes the relation with land. Further economically, the Tharu are traditionally known as skilled agriculturalists and hard manual worker. Their intimate knowledge of the land and seasonal cycles enables them to practice sustainable farming, often

with communal or kin-based systems of land use. In addition to agriculture, the Tharu have developed and preserved a variety of handicrafts and artisanal traditions, particularly in weaving, basket-making, and decorative arts. These crafts are not only economic activities but also serve as cultural expressions of identity and heritage. Such practices often carry symbolic meanings tied to ritual life, social structure, and the community's relationship with the natural world. And culturally, the Tharu people maintain distinct religious practices, linguistic variations, and oral traditions that reflect a syncretic blend of indigenous beliefs and broader Hindu influences. Their festivals, dance forms, clothing styles, and household structures are often unique to their communities, further illustrating the depth and richness of their cultural heritage. Importantly, their powerful attachment to their homeland is evident not only in their economic dependence on the land but also in their collective memory, storytelling traditions, and resistance to cultural assimilation.

In contemporary times, however, the Tharu face various socio-economic pressures stemming from modernization, deforestation, land dispossession, and socio-political marginalization. While development and health interventions, such as malaria eradication programs, have opened the Terai to non-indigenous populations, they have also led to increased competition for land and resources, thereby threatening the Tharu's traditional livelihoods and cultural autonomy. Nonetheless, the community continues to assert its identity and adapt to changing conditions, balancing modern influences with a resilient commitment to its ancestral ways.

Border villages along the Indo-Nepal region, such as Rajderwa and Bhaurisal, exemplify the evolving socio-cultural and motivational dynamics within Tharu society. Traditionally characterized by deeply rooted kinship systems, ritual practices, and a distinct cultural identity maintained over centuries, these communities are now experiencing notable transformations under the influence of education, globalization, and modernization. These external forces are gradually reshaping long-standing social structures, fostering new aspirations, and challenging inherited customs. Ritual events such as *Budhwar*, *Awan*, and *Bala Barsi* not only serve as markers of cultural continuity but also illustrate the subtle yet significant shifts in how the Tharu people engage with their heritage. The observed transition underscores a broader narrative of cultural negotiation, wherein traditional norms are being reinterpreted or, in some cases, irreversibly altered (documented in the *District Census Handbook, Balrampur, 2011*), such communities provide valuable insights into how indigenous societies at geographic and cultural margins respond to socio-economic change in the modern era.

The Tharu in Rajderwa and Bhaurisal have traditionally lived in extended family systems, a hallmark of their community-oriented culture (McDonaugh, 1984). Families often reside in joint households, with multiple generations grandparents, parents, and children living together in longhouses or closely clustered homes. These dwellings, constructed from mud, straw, bamboo, and increasingly from cement and bricks, are designed to withstand the humid Terai climate and reflect the Tharu's practical, ecofriendly approach to living (District Census Handbook, Gonda, 2011). The extended family structure fosters mutual support and shared responsibilities. Childcare, farming, and household chores are collectively managed, with each member contributing according to age, gender, and ability. This collective ethos is particularly evident during agricultural cycles, when the entire family participates in planting, weeding, and

harvesting. The joint family system not only ensures labor efficiency in an agrarian economy but also reinforces social bonds and intergenerational solidarity. Despite the resilience of the joint family system, recent decades have witnessed a gradual transition toward nuclear family arrangement.

One of the most distinctive features of the Tharu communities in Rajderwa and Bhaurisal is their traditional matrilineal system of inheritance. Unlike the dominant patrilineal inheritance patterns found in much of South Asia, the Tharu customarily pass property, especially land and livestock through the mother's lineage. This practice is rooted in the Tharu's reverence for maternal ancestry and their deep connection to the land, which is seen as the foundation of family security and continuity (Guneratne, 2002). The matrilineal system empowers women by granting them direct rights to inherit and control property. Daughters typically receive equal shares of the family's agricultural land, while sons may be provided with movable assets such as livestock, agricultural tools, or cash. This arrangement not only ensures the economic security of women but also reinforces their influence within the household and the broader community. Land ownership by women is a source of social status and provides leverage in family decisions, including those related to marriage, education, and resource allocation.

The Tharu lifestyle in Rajderwa and Bhaurisal has been historically anchored in agriculture, collective labour, and a close relationship with the natural environment. Farming is not only the primary economic activity but also the axis around which social life, rituals, and community organization revolve. Families typically cultivate rice, wheat, lentils, and a variety of vegetables, employing both traditional and, increasingly, mechanized methods. The architecture of Tharu homes reflects both ecological adaptation and artistic sensibility. Traditionally, houses are constructed from mud, straw, and bamboo, with thick walls to insulate against the heat and humidity of the Terai. Walls and courtyards are often adorned with floral and animal motifs, showcasing the community's artistic heritage and reverence for nature. In recent years, concrete houses funded by government schemes have become common, but these are typically smaller and less suited to joint family living, subtly reshaping household structures and daily routines. Food is another cornerstone of Tharu culture. The diet is based on locally available ingredients, with staples such as Bagiya (steamed rice flour dumplings), Ghonghi (snail curry), and seasonal vegetables. Meals are communal, reinforcing family bonds and the ethos of sharing. Tharu women are skilled in food preservation, pickling, and the preparation of traditional beverages such as roxy, a local rice brew.

Social life in Rajderwa and Bhaurisal is deeply community oriented. Villages are organized around compact clusters of homes, with shared courtyards and common spaces for gatherings. This spatial arrangement facilitates cooperation in farming, childcare, and the celebration of festivals. Festivals are central to the Tharu cultural calendar and serve as key moments for reinforcing social cohesion and cultural identity. Maghi, the harvest festival and Tharu New Year, is the most significant, marked by communal feasts, music, and dance. Other important celebrations include Jitiya (a women's fasting ritual for the wellbeing of children), Faguwa (Tharu Holi), and various life cycle rituals such as marriages and naming ceremonies. These events are characterized by vibrant folk performances, storytelling, and the exchange of gifts, all of which strengthen intergenerational ties and community solidarity.

## Religious Beliefs and Ritual Practices

The religious life of the Tharu community in Rajderwa and Bhaurisal is deeply intertwined with their history, environment, and collective memory. The Tharu are believed to have settled in the Terai since at least the 10th century, with subgroups like the Rana Tharu tracing their lineage to Rajput migrations from Rajasthan in the 16th century (Guneratne, 2002). The Terai's dense forests, fertile plains, and abundant water bodies have profoundly shaped Tharu spirituality, fostering a worldview that reveres nature as sacred and animates every aspect of daily life. Tharu religion is best described as syncretic, blending animism, nature worship, ancestral veneration, and elements of Hinduism and Buddhism. The very etymology of "Tharu" is linked by some scholars to "sthavir," meaning followers of Theravada Buddhism, though in practice, the Tharu's beliefs are a unique amalgam reflecting centuries of interaction with neighboring cultures (McDonaugh, 1984). Animism and Nature Worship:

Central to Tharu spirituality is the belief that natural elements, forests, rivers, fields, and animals are inhabited by spirits and deities. Rituals are performed to honor these entities, seek their blessings for good harvests, and ward off misfortune. The forest, in particular, is seen as both a provider and a realm of powerful spirits, requiring regular propitiation through offerings and ceremonies.

The Tharu maintain strong ties to their ancestors, who are believed to watch over the family and intervene in worldly affairs. Ancestral spirits are honored during major life events and agricultural cycles, with offerings of food, flowers, and incense at household shrines.

Over time, the Tharu have incorporated Hindu deities such as Krishna, Shiva, and Durga into their pantheon, celebrating festivals like Janmashtami, Ekadashi, and Baishakh Purnima. Elements of Theravada Buddhism are also evident, particularly in ritual language and concepts of karma and rebirth.

The Tharu pantheon is diverse and regionally specific, but some deities are widely venerated across Rajderwa and Bhaurisal:

**Goraiya and Mainya:** Forest and ancestral spirits central to household and village rituals.

**Bhuinyar/Bhumsen:** The earth goddess, invoked for fertility and protection of crops.

**Churaini:** A guardian deity believed to protect women and children.

**Guruwa:** The village shaman or priest, who mediates between the human and spirit worlds, conducts healing rituals, and leads major ceremonies. Major rites of passage birth, marriage, and death are marked by elaborate ceremonies. Naming ceremonies (Chhati) and tonsure rituals (Mundan) are increasingly celebrated among educated and affluent families, reflecting both tradition and social mobility.

Religious life in Rajderwa and Bhaurisal is organized around ritual specialists:

**Guruwa:** The shaman, responsible for healing, divination, and leading ceremonies.

**Padhana:** The head of the village Panchayat, who oversees social and religious disputes.

Aama Samuha (Mothers' Group): Women's collectives that organize festivals and manage community shrines. These roles are highly respected and central to maintaining social harmony and spiritual wellbeing.

Modernization, migration, and exposure to external influences have introduced changes in religious practice. Younger Tharu may participate less in traditional rituals, favoring Hindu or Buddhist ceremonies, or even secular celebrations. However, there is also a revivalist trend, with community leaders and youth organizations working to preserve Tharu language, rituals, and festivals as markers of ethnic identity (Chaudhary, 2018). Despite these changes, the core of Tharu religious life reverence for nature, ancestors, and community remains resilient. Rituals continue to structure the agricultural calendar, mediate social relations, and provide a sense of belonging in a rapidly changing world.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative ethnographic approach to examine the social and cultural transformation occurring among the Tharu communities in the Indo-Nepal border villages of Rajderwa and Bhaurisal, located in the Balrampur district of Uttar Pradesh, India. The research is grounded in fieldwork conducted over a period of four months between November 2023 and February 2024, supplemented by secondary data analysis from census reports, academic literature, and governmental records.

### **Research Design**

The research employed a case study design, focusing specifically on Rajderwa and Bhaurisal as representative Tharu settlements undergoing socio-cultural shifts due to increasing exposure to modernization, education, and globalization. These villages were selected based on their demographic composition (predominantly Tharu), geographic proximity to the Nepal border, and evidence of recent socio-economic changes as documented in the *District Census Handbook, Balrampur (2011)*.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Data were collected using a combination of the following methods:

**Participant Observation:** The researcher engaged in immersive observation of daily life, rituals, festivals (e.g., *Budhwar*, *Bala Barsi*), and kinship interactions within the villages. Notes were taken on behaviors, symbolic practices, and social dynamics, with particular attention to intergenerational differences and gender roles.

**Un-Structured Interviews:** A total of 30 in-depth interviews were conducted with Tharu villagers, including elders, youth, school teachers, local leaders, and women. The interviews explored topics such as changes in traditional customs, the impact of formal education, migration, shifts in livelihood practices, and perceptions of cultural identity.

**Focus Group Discussions:** Three focus group discussions were held, one in each village and one combined group with cross-generational participants, to gain community-level insights on collective memory, cultural change, and community responses to modernization.



**Document and Archival Analysis:** Secondary data sources, including the District Census Handbook (2011), government reports, and relevant scholarly publications (e.g., Guneratne, 2002; Chaudhary, 2018; McDonaugh, 1984), were reviewed to contextualize the field data and identify historical and policy trends impacting Tharu communities.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Identities have been anonymized to protect privacy. The research was conducted in accordance with ethical standards for fieldwork in indigenous communities, with sensitivity to cultural norms and respect for local authority structures.

### **Conclusion**

The Tharu communities of Rajderwa and Bhaurisal present a compelling case of cultural resilience, adaptation, and transformation in the face of changing socioeconomic, political, and environmental realities. Their traditional extended family systems, matrilineal inheritance, and eco-friendly lifestyle have long distinguished the Tharu from neighboring groups in the Terai. However, the forces of modernization, legal reform, migration, and exposure to global influences are reshaping the contours of daily life and social institutions. Modernization has brought both opportunities and challenges to the Tharu lifestyle. The proliferation of television, smartphones, and social media has introduced new forms of entertainment, communication, and consumer culture. Youth in Rajderwa and Bhaurisal are as likely to follow Nepali pop music and Bollywood films as they are to participate in traditional folk dances. This exposure to global culture has influenced tastes in fashion, food, and leisure, contributing to the hybridization of Tharu identity.

The persistence of joint families, even as nuclearization trends emerge, speaks to the enduring value of collective labor and mutual support in Tharu society. The matrilineal inheritance system empowers women and grants them economic autonomy, setting the Tharu apart in a region dominated by patriarchal norms. Yet, this empowerment is largely domestic; public leadership and political participation for women remain works in progress, with legal reforms and community activism slowly expanding their roles.

The Tharu's adaptation to the Terai's challenging environment is evident in their agricultural expertise, knowledge of forest resources, and sustainable practices. Deforestation, land fragmentation, and mechanization have forced many to diversify their livelihoods, with tourism, wage labor, and urban migration becoming increasingly important. Education and media exposure are shifting aspirations, especially among youth, who seek new opportunities while negotiating the preservation of cultural identity. Tharu cultural life remains vibrant, with festivals, rituals, and crafts reinforcing community bonds. The syncretic religious tradition, blending animism, Hinduism, and Buddhist influences, reflects both historical continuity and openness to change. Material and nonmaterial cultural shifts are most visible among women and youth, who blend tradition with modernity in clothing, values, and social mobility.

Political agency among the Tharu is growing, driven by ethnic mobilization, constitutional reforms, and the emergence of new leadership models. Women's groups, youth organizations,

and advocacy for the recognition of traditional governance systems signal a dynamic interplay between heritage and modernity. The future of the Tharu in Rajderwa and Bhaurisal will depend on their ability to balance tradition and innovation, sustain their unique identity, and secure equitable participation in the wider society. Their story is one of both continuity and change, offering valuable insights for the study of indigenous communities in South Asia and beyond.

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