

Tharu of/at Margin: Ethnicity, Shared Life and Ecological Arbitration of Borderland

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Abstract: This paper studies the impact of historical repercussions on the Tharu ethnicity of Nepal residing at the borderland of Nepal and India to generalise the reasons for promoting their locality as an eco-resort. For this, it examines how ecology and nature shape their sociocultural and economic consciousness. It critically analyses how the agrarian lifestyle promotes ecotourism in Tharu space. The study incorporates folk literature, primarily folk-dance songs of the community, postcolonial ideas on peasants' consciousness, cultural studies, and tourism development theories. In their consideration of agency, autonomy, and territoriality, Marcela Tovar-Restrepo, Clara Irazabal, and Deborah Bird Rose contend that some types of sociability, agency, and autonomy in the case of Indigenous people manifest themselves as a relationship between them and their territories (43, 312). Discussing territoriality as one of the elementary aspects of Tharu consciousness and the dominant theme of their folk-dance songs uses Ranajit Guha's idea of rewriting the peasants' historiography. Understanding their folk literature from the cultural critical perspective of subalternity, dominance, and the peasants' consciousness can work effectively for their sustainable growth. In her book *Ecotourism and Sustainable Development: Who Owns Paradise*, Martha Honey argues that such programs support the spread of environmental consciousness and aid in preserving natural resources. The Tharus inhabit not only the geographical borderland but also the socio-political borderlands, where their agency and identity become inevitable in developing their land as an eco-resort.

Keywords: Tharu, Borderland, Ecology, Performance, Agency

Introduction

Tharu folk literature comprises sentiments of their historiography and the celebration of their rich eco-spiritual life. Folk dance songs signify their connectedness to the land around which they inhabit.

The songs, Jhumra and Maina, have rich embeddedness of their deep ecological conscience as they consider nature their first God and land his precious gift. Their interconnectedness with nature could be observed by critically examining their Jhumra and Maina songs. Moreover, their land or physical and cultural space could be developed as an ecological and cultural resort to alleviate their economic poverty. Understanding their sociopolitical history, cultural practices, and literature can help secure their social, cultural, and economic progress. Thus, this paper argues for uplifting their socioeconomic situation by transforming and utilizing their rich sociocultural phenomenon into educational and economic activities in the form such as tribal museums and tribal eco-resorts.

Methodological Interpretation

Guha in his seminal texts, presents some core aspects of peasants' lives and how these factors shaped their consciousness and agency. He invented seven key factors for the process of insurgency formation; negation, negative consciousness, ambiguity, modality, solidarity, transmission and territoriality as key factors affecting the peasants' insurgency in South Asia. Similarly, in *History at the Limit of World History*, he finds "history" the product of the ruling ideas. He sees world history as the postcolonial term that ignores the history of the tribes, peasants or Gramscian and Spivakan subalterns. Guha argues that the actual wonder of the peasantry's daily experiences, tribe and other socio-politically subaltern groups were excluded from the writing of history, aka 'world-history.'

Gramsci argues that the peasants' folk literature, culture and everyday experiences hold the gem of their intelligentsia, consciousness and civility. The issue of territoriality was and is the primary issue of any peasantry or tribal group. Without it, almost the entire history and struggle would have become meaningless. Therefore, the longing for the arbitration of their un-privatization of the ancestral land which was the basis of their survival and collective consciousness, could be noticed in most of their folk literature and performances. Tharu consciousness, agency and insurgency during the Kamaiya practice too emerged from the similar lived experiences that Gramsci, E. P. Thompson, Guha and Guneratne have discussed. This paper discusses the border life of the Tharu community as discussed by William Crooke in his text *The Tribes and Castes of the North Western Province and Oudh*. It

discusses the ideas of promoting the tribal inhabited area as the tribal organic museum to know about their actual lived experiences that could function as an important economic activity for the tribal group making their agency stronger.

The historiography of the community is the conscious historiography of their struggle against oppressive landlordism, semi-feudal taxation, unjust treatment to their subjectship, and physical assault on their and the women of their community's bodies. However, these experiences do not own space in an elaborated mode in any official history except in a few cases where the journals were published either by foreign organizations or the research by French authors Gisele Kauskropff and Pamela Meyers. In the analysis of the early field reports and researches which have often functioned as the primary documentation of the experiences of Tharus of Dang and Chitwan, it could be noticed that the community members have justified their consciousness and identity based on their distinguished cultural practices. The tribal consciousness as Guha argues hovers around their daily lived experiences, regulating and trying to regulate some of their seemingly forgotten practices. In living their practices, when they realise that they have been subject to political miscarriage, they might develop feelings of resistance.

The consciousness of losing their territory and the sovereignty it provided them have ignited their struggles and political movements. To readdress their suffering and compensate for the loss of their land, as Guha argues, the organic lived experiences; and distinct cultural practices should be recorded, made to re-perform and re-inform to the new members of their community. Contradictory to Hegel's arguments, Guha sees no meaning in not writing the history of the *classi subalterne* or the people who are often termed as history-less people as Hegelian notion puts such people at inferiority level who in fact as per him own sort of nothing to be written about or to be designated as people with history as such. Hegel believes that "A people or a nation lacked history, not because they knew no writing but because they had nothing to write about" (Guha 9). However, he does not deny the presence of intelligence in his lived experiences to be written as history. Still, Hegel seems to argue that such groups lack the necessary apparatus to write their history, that is "state." Therefore, the issue

of having one's state that empowers them to write about their experiences makes the primary sense of why the Gramscian *classi subalterne* does not own history.

Again, making judgments from Guhaian perspective, we should understand that he aims to include the wonders of ancient India and its subjects' experiences that have got entangled into the wonderful grand narratives like Mahabharata and Ramayana. Guha, taking reference to ancient Indian storytelling, mythology and Sanskrit, points to the need to write a wonderful history that is eternal and divine. He also differentiates the “World-History” blaming it too lame with data, facts and figures lacking any interest and arousing no further interest after the first reading. Nonetheless, Guha argues that the “re-reading and retelling” inherent quality of great narratives like Ramayan and Mahabharat, which are the actual history of South Asia, holds the spiritual power to regenerate itself and its listeners.

Drawing exactly from the similar arguments of Guha, we find the unwritten history of Tharus without tagging the Kamaiya practice to it. Thus, interpreting the shared lives of different Tharu communities, their history must include their natural life and how they judge their consciousness based on their territoriality, consciousness and folk literature. Guha argues they need an autonomous state. The state means history, and having no history means owning no state. He justifies not the separatist movement but the extended autonomy of sociopolitical power these *classi subalterne* or the peasants and tribes need to write their own experiences, which is more poetic, and rhythmic. According to Hegel, “It is the state which first supplies a content,” he says, “which not only lends itself to the prose of history but actually helps to produce it” (Guha 15). Thus, to sneak through the border of exclusion somehow, they need the recognition of their works of literature as Guha brings the example of Bengali authors *Ramram Basu* and Tagore, whose literatures own the spiritual, poetic and sublime history of the pre-colonized Indian subcontinent.

As per the cultural historian Peter Burke, the conventional interpretation of “people” in Western culture stems from diametrically opposite categories: the impoverished for the wealthy, the clergy for the laity, the commoners for the nobles, and the ignorant for the educated (5-13). Biological

nature shapes the subjectivity of Tharu. They draw great inspiration from nature and ecology for their clothing, food, housing, and cultural practices. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, the body is never fully isolated from its surroundings; rather, it is always impacted by other bodies and outside factors, sometimes even reflecting or translating into them (349). The local ecosystem has influenced their performance, which is closely linked to their way of life. For the residents in the tribal territory, ecotourism frequently generates material benefits as well. Such a business strategy might address health issues, poverty, and low living standards. In a similar case, Davidov Veronica argues that ecotourism profits marginalised subjects from their poverty and exclusion from the global economy (47). Ecotourism should thus be encouraged on tribal grounds to improve their poor quality of living and promote sustainable development.

Vivanco states, “environmental discourse has permitted the authority of indigenous knowledge and practices through green primitivism” (qtd. in Veronica 58). Therefore, autonomy over their ancestral land is necessary to enable tribal groups to use it sustainably. In *Ecotourism and Environmental Sustainability*, Tim Gale and Jennifer Hill provide a novel strategy for preserving the natural world. They argue for banking its parks and natural reserves to foreign organizations supporting developing countries (23). As a subsystem of society, tourism will also change to consider new environmental concerns, ethical standards, and priorities. In nature, everything is related. Nature and its constituent parts are intimately linked to human existence. In *The Ecological Self*, Freya Mathews discusses Newtonian atomism and makes the case that metaphysics and ethics are related since everything is interrelated (44). According to her, every alteration in the natural world should be understood as the separations, affiliations, and movements of these eternal atoms.

The Tharu community often performs their ritual mourning over their traumatic past. They even remember the inhuman killings of their ancestors from state torture and policies. In a similar vein, Casey High contends that local manifestations of cultural identity and social memory are fundamentally shaped by past homicides (723). These incidents represent a grave moral breach connected to their ancestors' agony in the past. The Tharu community still suffers from inadequate

representation at the national and international levels. According to Joseph P. Gone, the state's eviction and enslavement of Indigenous people has left them facing extreme levels of demoralization, suffering, and incapacity (132). Historical trauma ripples through oppressive events and practices.

Tharu community's socio-economic development is hence only possible if they are merged socio-culturally in a dominant group's discourse. However, such unity should function as the building block for the community's mutual growth. According to Austin Sarat's theory on the micropolitics of identity, cultural differences can support and obstruct accomplishments of a way of life (149). Furthermore, it is necessary to reclaim the lost concepts of solidarity and community. Chris Wilson contends against providing regional autonomy to only one tribe, as doing so, there always remains the risk and danger of creating new layers of marginalization, creating autonomous states (73). Tharus often express their socio-cultural history through their performances. In his analysis of the intricate dynamics of group life, Mark F. Ettin contends that the social-political unconscious may be in charge of preserving elements of structural violence, a sense of group cohesion, and background forces that members must navigate (265). In songs of Tharu's performance, the accumulation of painful memories could easily be observed and felt.

In her commentary on the nation's belonging, Smitu Kothari claims that governments and courts continue to use the constitution to defend massive land acquisitions that are purportedly “for the public good” (1476). The lack of the Tharu population in the strong economic zone may be attributed to their antiquated knowledge, which frequently falls short of keeping up with contemporary machines and technological breakthroughs. The protracted relocation process has had far-reaching, traumatizing psychological and sociocultural effects. According to Michael Cernea, forced relocations lead to a vicious cycle of poverty; the community's and each person's cultural identities are upended, greatly increasing physical and mental strain (3661-62). Such displacements affected Tharus disrupting their stable agrarian life, low economic activities and joint family culture.

In his discussion of collective victimization, Felix Mukwiza Ndahinda contends that colonial institutionalization of ethnicity through territorial demarcation and post-colonial exploitation of

ethnic identities by ruthless politicians for personal gain have rendered public institutions, including the judiciary, essentially dysfunctional and that offenders have enjoyed impunity (177). Tharus failed to successfully implement changes to state policies and regulations in the border regions of Nepal and India. In his book *Holy Science*, Banu Subramaniam argues for the return of the native, nation, nature, and postcolonial environmentalism (117). He examines how the Ramayana in modern India forcefully highlights the politics of rescue and return, as well as the strength of nativism. In actuality, Rama's homecoming represents the return of uprooted tribes to their original homeland. In their folk performance, Tharus heavily use nativist vocabulary to advocate for their restoration to their legitimate position inside a democratic nation.

In their consideration of agency, autonomy, and territoriality, Marcela Tovar-Restrepo and Clara Irazabal contend that some types of sociability, agency, and autonomy in the case of indigenous people manifest themselves as a relationship between them and their territories (43). They have access to a variety of resources via agency, such as the ability to make decisions and have their wants and interests met. The Tharu community's demand for self-autonomy over their ancestral territory is fundamental to their struggle for agency. It plays a crucial role in how people establish collective identities, negotiate power, and form perspectives on their world.

Ecological Conscience and Kamaiya Life in Tharu Folksongs

Tharu folk songs frequently highlight the significance of nature in their religion and way of life. In the Ramayan song “Baname Chalatai Dunu Bhai” in Tharu, Rama, Laxman, and Sita are said to subsist on the produce found in the forest. In this song, written and performed by Maniram and Santaram Tharu, Ram and Sita are portrayed as their own gods who, with the aid of trees, managed to endure their banishment:

The Lord Dasharath sobs, beating his chest, and Ram sets out toward Madhuban Woods.

Kaushalya sobs, holding Ram's shoulder, and demands she not leave the castle.

The body without food will rot, and the faker will pass on appetite and thirst.

The semul tree is their home and asylum.

The two siblings might be getting wet under the bell tree. (*Indian bael*)

The hymn mentioned above demonstrates Tharus' belief that nature—including their idol, God Ram—is the ultimate deity for life. Therefore, the explanation of nature's function and strength in preserving human life profoundly represents Tharu subjectivity's biological self. Comparably, in “Maname Sochu Karam Lage Aaj,” one of the songs of Tharu Dhamar, the forlorn and lonely woman tries her hardest to find comfort in the home of nature but is unsuccessful everywhere. She believes that nature is incapable of giving her the necessary remedial measures:

I feel in my heart that if my own karma is cursed, whom should I accuse?

Suffering from pain, I visited the trees, but all their leaves were withered.

What pity the trees could have done to me when my own fate is doomed...

I feel in my heart that if my own karma is cursed, whom should I accuse?

Suffering from pain, I visited the flower garden, but all the flowers had fallen.

What pity the innocent flowers could have done to me when my own karma is doomed.

When the woman goes to see the trees, she discovers that they are suffering from the dry branches in the fall. Their leaves have fallen, and they are unable to offer her any solace or Indigeneity. When she returns to the garden, all she sees is fallen flowers, symbolizing the suffering that childlessness and barrenness have given her. This song recounts the heartbreaking experiences of a lonely, depressed lady who looks to the surroundings and nature for blessings, but nature itself seems to suffer from the barren season and is unable to comfort her:

Try not to slash down these backwoods; the woods give haven to every one of the animals.

At the point when you will go to look for the cool under the tree, the trees may lose their leaves.

At that point, where you get a cool wind, your destiny will be damned.

Don't cut down the forest where the peacock dances.

The streams will go dry, the water source will go dry, and the fields will parch.

There will be extreme heat and heavy rainfall in September.

Similar pleas are made not to harm the jungle in the song “Yee Bana Koina Binasyo” mentioned above. It further warns that if these pleas are disregarded, one would suffer from the heat and severe weather conditions. It alerts us to the devastation of water supplies and the danger of desertification by pointing out that human concern for the preservation of nature is being neglected. Similar to how the devastation of the natural world results in high rainfall, which then produces disasters like landslides and floods:

The mahuwa blossoms sprout and fall in the forest.

The mahuwa blossoms fall in the breeze like water drops.

The young women go to reap them promptly toward the beginning of the day.

The buck and doe live in the forest.

The wild hoard runs fiercely in the wilderness.

The artistic qualities of the jungle and the diversity of nature are similarly conveyed in the song “The Tiger and Tigress are in the Forest.” The song embodies the wild fruit, like mahuwa, which is frequently the community's source of real wine. There is also the statement that human life depends on maintaining the wilderness areas of nature. This is why the song begs to protect the thick forest that encircles the Tharu settlement. Nonetheless, during the Kamaiya ritual, Tharu songs also convey the anguish of their difficult life. The Tharus were subjected to cruel treatment and exploitation under the Kamaiya system. Something like this is mirrored in one of the Tharu Mynah songs:

Oh, Mynah, I worked on the farm as a sharecropper.

Will pay the tax after the cropping and will still be in the same condition.

The kokni (broken rice) will last up to Maghi, and the rice will last only up to Dashain.

I will pack up my belongings and leave for Buhran. Oh Maina I left my father, and I left my mother.

According to the song mentioned above, Kamaiyas were forced to labour for minimum wage while going without enough food, clothes, or housing, which was an exploitative practice. Tharus had already migrated in large numbers from the inner Dang valley to the plains of Tarai to flee such an

agonizing situation. They had to abandon their belongings, their land, and even their elderly mother and father, who were unable to accompany them, as a result of their hurried departure from their homeland:

The labourer woke up in the shivering cold of dusk.

The she-labour woke up in the early morning to beat the wooden rice grinder.

The tattered blouse and skirt, the worn-out patched shirt

With ups and downs, life passed, digging the watercourse (man-made streams in villages),

The rice flour soup with sinki (gundruk, a preserved fermented vegetable) is one of our delicious dishes.

The sufferings of the kamaiyas are also depicted in the song above. It illustrates how the kamaiya people were compelled to survive on extremely little. To maintain their bondage as exploited labour, they had to get up early despite the chaos of nature and could rarely afford excellent food and nice clothes. Their inability to organize and sustain a powerful opposition was largely due to the living being denigrated:

Had cleared all the jungles in the olden days...

When firewood and fodder became scarce, people thought of saving trees.

In the Kandra River, we catch fish.

Don't mix the poison in the river; it will kill the fish.

Furthermore, Tharu Jhumra songs are frequently regarded as the symbol of the natural world, the people who sing them, and their ecological consciousness. The aforementioned songs contrast and juxtapose the area inhabited by the Tharu with nature. It was formerly the home of plenty, with an abundance of natural resources; but, in the present era, those resources have been depleted and destroyed, negatively affecting them:

The birds sing in the lake Ghorighora. Oh dear, how beautiful the lake looks...

Oh, friends, don't kill the birds of the lake; the lake will become melancholic.

The Gangetic dolphins play in the river Mohana. Oh, friends, how beautiful the lake looks...

Oh, friends, don't fish the jalkapur fish; the dolphins will vanish.

Similarly, in the song "Lake Ghorighora," the earnest appeal has been made not to pollute the lake and river. The song functions as a consciousness campaign, disseminating the importance of preserving the serenity of lake and river water. As the water from these natural resources gets polluted, it will hurt the livelihood of the community. Thus, the songs of the community are a witness to environmental change, ecological diversity, and human effects on nature.

Conclusion

Tharus living at physical and socio-political borders possesses a rich culture, literature, ecological conscience and history. However, the community suffers from economic privilege due to the absence of proficient higher education opportunities, enough employment chances, and inclusive socio-political policies of the state. The state can implement effective economic policies and strategies to develop the entire borderland and the tribe by bringing action such as establishing tribal homestays, eco-resorts, tribal studies, tribal research institutes and projects. Tharus consciousness is directly related to the ethics of their territorial hospitality. The territory has never been just a material object to be exploited and wasted for them. In fact, it was their whole way of life as it produced the primary discourse of their culture and consciousness. Hence, the state can develop their socio-economic status by adhering to their conscience of land hospitality and implementing the new eco-conservation policies. For this, the researchers, the policy makers and the ones who love the tribal lifestyle must understand and feel the narratives of their works of literature; dance songs. The whole must listen to the echoes of their territory that produce the sweet rhythm of their morality, honesty and ecological being.

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