

Tribal India: An Analysis of Socio-Economic Status and Cultural Heritage of The Tharus

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Abstract

Deep within the heart of Uttar Pradesh, a state celebrated for its rich cultural heritage and vibrant traditions, lies the enchanting realm of the Tharu tribe. Native to the picturesque Terai region, nestled in the foothills of the majestic Himalayas, the Tharu people proudly showcase their distinctive cultural legacy. Their intricate art forms and captivating dance performances serve as a testament to their profound connection with nature and their unique way of life.

The vibrant spirit of the Tharu community comes alive through their mesmerizing dance, a joyous celebration of life, rhythm, and harmony with nature. Tharu dance is the pulsating heartbeat of the tribe's cultural heritage, resonating with energy during festivals and special occasions. This captivating dance form is characterized by rhythmic movements, accompanied by the infectious beats of traditional instruments like the madal and dholak. Attired in resplendent traditional attire, Tharu men and women come together to dance in harmony, often reenacting scenes from their daily lives or rich folklore. This joyous celebration is a testament to the Tharu community's unyielding spirit, resilience, and zest for life.

Keywords: Tribes, Tharu, culture, folklore

Introduction

The term "tribe" has its origins in ancient times, dating back to the era of Greek city-states and the early formation of the Roman Empire. The Latin term, "tribus" has since been transformed to mean, "A group of persons forming a community and claiming descent from a common ancestor". The Imperial Gazetteer of India, 1911, defines a tribe as a "collection of families bearing a common name, speaking a common dialect, occupying or professing to occupy a common territory and is not usually endogamous though originally it might have been so."

Another definition of a tribe by D.N. Majumdar (1961,) is that "a tribe is a collection of families or group of families bearing a common name, members of which occupy the same territory, speak the same language and observe certain taboos regarding marriage, profession or occupation and have developed a well-assessed system of reciprocity and mutuality of obligations".

India is home to the world's second largest tribal population, after Africa, comprising approximately 700 distinct tribes dispersed across the country. Tribal culture is considered to be an integral part of our cultural heritage. Therefore, knowledge of tribal heritage is very important for understanding of the diverse Indian culture which is a symbol of unity in diversity. The tribes of India have their typical customs, traditions, rituals, beliefs and law which make them unique. The Indian Constitution provides for the protection of the tribes of India under various provisions of the supreme law of the land. Efforts for the protection of these tribes had also been made earlier under the British Government. **The Garo Hills Act of 1869** ("Garo Act") vested the colonial administration of significant tribal areas in Northeast India in such officers as the Lieutenant Governor. **The Government of India Act of 1870** extended the jurisdiction of the provisions of the Garo Act to the Assam Valley, Hill Districts, and Cachar in 1873. Other tribal areas were designated separately under subsequent legislation. Tribal areas were declared as "Scheduled Districts" by the **Scheduled Districts Act of 1874**; as "Backward Tracts" by the **Government of India Act of 1919**, and as "Excluded or Partially Excluded Area" by the **Government of India Act of 1935**. These laws were enforced by intermediaries (agents who administered the law), district administrators, or by the discretionary powers of the Governor. The categorization of the tribal areas as "backward" had already affected parts of the Indian legal system by the time the Constituent Assembly was formed in 1946. In keeping with the mandate of

the Cabinet Mission, the Constituent Assembly set up an advisory committee to determine the fundamental rights, minorities, and tribal areas.

Jaipal Singh Munda a sportsman, writer and Adivasi leader was elected to the Constituent Assembly as an independent candidate. He was, in his time, one of the few voicing his opinion on behalf of India's tribal community. During the period 1937-1950, the tribes expressed their demands and their collective agency had a deep impact on the constitution-making process. On December 19th 1946, the voice of Jaipal Singh was heard for the first time:

"I rise to speak on behalf of millions of unknown hordes - yet very important - of unrecognised warriors of freedom, the original people of India who have variously been known as backward tribes, primitive tribes, criminal tribes and everything else, Sir, I am proud to be a Jungli, that is the name by which we are known in my part of the country. As a jungli, as an Adivasi, I am not expected to understand the legal intricacies of the Resolution. You cannot teach democracy to the tribal people; you have to learn democratic ways from them. They are the most democratic people on earth."

"The whole history of my people is one of continuous exploitation and dispossession by the non-aboriginals of India punctuated by rebellions and disorder, and yet I take Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru at his word. I take you all at your word that now we are going to start a new chapter, a new chapter of Independent India where there is equality of opportunity, where no one would be neglected."

The Constituent Assembly's sub-committee on tribal rights, led by A.V. Thakkar, therefore played a crucial role in highlighting the concerns of tribal communities. This sub-committee was part of the Advisory Committee on Fundamental Rights, Minorities, and Tribal and Excluded Areas, which was chaired by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. The sub-committee's findings, combined with the passionate advocacy of Jaipal Singh Munda and others, helped raise awareness about the challenges faced by tribal populations.

Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland are the three Indian states with the maximum tribal population residing in tribal areas. Tribal areas constitute 32% of India's total area. Notably, the sex ratio among Scheduled Tribes (ST) is higher than the national average, with 990 females per 1,000 males, compared to 940 females per 1,000 males nationwide. According to the 2011 Census, 90 districts have an ST population of 50% or more, up from 75 districts in 2001. Of these, 48 districts are located in the eight North Eastern states. Mizoram, Meghalaya, and Nagaland have districts with over 60%

ST population. Madhya Pradesh has the largest ST population, accounting for 14.69% of India's total ST population.

The Scheduled Tribes in [Uttar Pradesh](#) comprise 16 tribes, with a population of 1,134,273, constituting 0.47% of the state's population according to the 2011 census. Until 2003, the recognized Scheduled Tribes in Uttar Pradesh were limited to five: [Buksa](#), [Bhotiya](#), Jaunsari, Raji, and Tharu. Subsequently, additional tribes were notified as Scheduled Tribes in the state, but their scheduled status is limited to specific districts.

CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS

1.1 Definition of Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe

Articles 341 and 342 of the Constitution of India define as to who would be Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes with respect to any State or Union Territory. The relevant Constitutional articles are quoted below :—

Article 341.—(1) The President may with respect to any State or Union Territory and where it is a State after consultation with the Governor thereof, by public notification specify the castes, races or tribes or parts of or groups within castes, races or tribes which shall for the purposes of this Constitution be deemed to be Scheduled Castes in relation to that State or Union Territory, as the case may be.

(2) Parliament may by law include in or exclude from the list of Scheduled Castes specified in a notification issued under clause (1) any caste, race or tribe or part of or group within any caste, race or tribe, but save as aforesaid a notification issued under the said clause shall not be varied by any subsequent notification.

Article 342. Scheduled Tribes.—(1) The President may with respect to any State or Union Territory and where it is a State, after consultation with the Governor thereof by public notification, specify the tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within tribes or tribal communities which shall for the purpose of this Constitution be deemed to be Scheduled Tribes in relation to that State or Union Territory, as the case may be.

(2) Parliament may by law include in or exclude from the list of Scheduled Tribes specified in a notification issued under clause (1) any tribe or tribal community or part of or group within any tribe or tribal community, but save as aforesaid a notification issued under the said clause shall not be varied by any subsequent notification.

1.2 Reservation in Services/posts.—The relevant Articles of the Constitution which govern the entire reservation set up are the following :—

Article 16(4) “Nothing in this Article shall prevent the State from making any provision for the reservation of appointments or posts in favour of any backward class of citizens which, in the opinion of the State, is not adequately represented in the services under the State.”

Article 46 “The State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, and, in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation.”

Article 335 “The claims of the members of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes shall be taken into consideration, consistently with the maintenance of efficiency of administration, in the making of appointments to services and posts in connection with the affairs of the Union or of a State.”

1.3 List of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.—The existing lists of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are to be found in the following Orders and Acts :—

- (1) *The Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950;
- (2) *The Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950;
- (3) *The Constitution (Scheduled Castes) (Union Territories) Order, 1951.
- (4) *The Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) (Union Territories) Order, 1951;

*As amended by the Scheduled Castes & Scheduled Tribes Lists (Modification) Order 1956, the Bombay Reorganisation Act, 1960, the Punjab Reorganisation Act, 1966, the State of Himachal Pradesh Act, 1970, The N. E. Area (Reorganisation) Act, 1971 and Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Order (Amendment) Act, 1976.

This study deals specifically with the Tharus of Bela Pursua, district Lakhimpur Kheri, Uttar Pradesh who claim descent from Maharana Pratap the valiant Rajput king of the 16th century. The Tharu tribe is a famous tribal community of India. Though playing very dominant roles in their community, the Tharus are still not connected with the main stream of development. The Tharu community is under the prevalent ethnic group, who are living in the Western Terai districts of Nepal from the ancient period. The Tharu people are an indigenous ethnic group who have lived in the lowlands of Nepal for centuries. As per the census 2011, the Tharu population of Nepal was censused at 1,737,470 people. The Terai region was covered by a thick malarial jungle that kept away outsiders and guaranteed the Tharus their freedom.

The etymology of the term "Tharu" remains a topic of debate among scholars. Various theories have been proposed, including derivations from "tahre," "tarhuwa," and "thaiharana," which reference the community's history and geography. Alternatively, S. Knowles suggests a connection to the hill dialect word "tharua," meaning "paddler." However, J. G. Nesfield disputes the theory linking "Tharu" to "athawaru," or "an eighth-day serf," citing the community's historical aversion to servitude. Their relative isolation led them to develop a distinct and self-sufficient society with their development, language, religion, and culture differing from the hill people. Many theories are put forward by historians and writers about the origin of the Tharus. *"Once upon a time in the remote past when the king of these parts was defeated by the forces of an invader, the women of the royal palace, rather than fall into the hands of foe, fled into the jungles with the Saises and Chamars belonging to the palace. From these sprang the Tharus wrote H.R. Neville, 1904(as published HimalSouthasian July 1995 print issue).* This tradition is further explained by the dominance of women among the Tharus.

The Tharu were described by ethnographers in the nineteenth century as representing either an East Asian phenotype or a somatological amalgam of 'Indo-Chinese' or 'Mongoloid racial stock' and a 'negrito' aboriginal substrate. The Tharu speak a number of related Indo-Aryan dialects collectively known as Tharuvani. The Linguistic Survey of India has described the peculiarities that distinguish Tharu speech from that of their Indo-Aryan neighbours as 'a few ignorant corruptions'. Despite their linguistic heterogeneity, the Tharu are strongly associated with the ecological region of the Tarai and claim a shared pan-Tharu ethnic identity a view supported by the results of some genetic studies. Resistance to malaria is widespread among the Tharu. This may support an origin for the Tharu within the Tarai jungles as prolonged exposure to swampy, that is, malarial rich environments which could have led to natural selection favouring resistance.

Tharu culture, is very eco – friendly, all cultural activities of this tribe are deeply related to nature. Their residence, food, clothes, art, religion, economy and many other aspects of life are based on nature and keep an ecological balance. Their culture is incredibly fascinating and unique, and this is visible in their music, dancing, tattoos, handicrafts and magic. Tharu people worship Hindu Gods/Goddesses but mainly they worship their tribal Goddess i.e., the mother Earth which they refer to as '**Bhuiya**' in their folk language.

The Tharus celebrate festivals with great enthusiasm. In the spring, the Tharus observe the annual festival of fire, resembling in many respects, the popular festival of Holi. A mound of earth is prepared, and a pole is fixed in its centre in a vertical position. The offerings of Haldi, hemp, dhatoora and other pungent or odorous herbs are placed upon the poles and mound by the assembled people. The straw stubble and sticks are then piled around the pole, and one of the most elderly man in the assembly puts fire to it. Thereafter, they indulge in revelry with dancing, playing of the drums and 'Mridang', sprinkling coloured powder on each other, singing amorous songs and having fun. In the evening, they feast with meat, rice and drink wine. The festival is celebrated for seven days from the commencement of Holi. A festival named 'Merhpooja' is celebrated during the later part of the rainy season by cutting grasses which is followed a month later by harvesting of rice crop.

In the Tharu community, the typical age of first marriage for both men and women is around seventeen or eighteen years. According to Nesfield (quoted in Crooke, 1896), the marriage contract is arranged by the fathers of both parties, with the couple having no say in the matter. The father of the groom visits the village or clan where the bride's father resides and, after proposing the price to be paid for the bride, offers him a drink of wine. If the gift is accepted, the bargain is sealed. Once the contract is made, it is faithfully upheld by both parties. Divorce is a relatively straightforward process, and widow remarriage is permissible. In some regions, the Tharu people practice both child and adult marriages.

The Tharus have their traditional dance performed by all members of the community, of all age groups. They dress themselves in colourful clothes and dance to the beats of the drum or 'Mridang'. The dancing pairs move in tandem, advancing and retreating with a fluid motion, as they artfully depict the ardent advances of the suitor and the coy reserve of the maiden.

The Tharus are very fond of their folk arts. Tharu songs, dance (Naach), tattoos, wall paintings, handicrafts, and magic are very special. One noteworthy fact is that they make handicrafts only for personal use and not for commercial purpose. They use contrasting colours for dressing and making wall paintings for decoration of the houses.

Tharu women, make handicrafts, like 'durries' (rugs) and decorative hand-held fans, for a living. While the red, white and blue striped 'durries' are made from cotton material, sourced from the local weekly markets, the fans and file folders are made from wool, leftover cloth pieces and bamboo sticks. Having got the opportunity to see their art live at village Bela Pursua we felt fortunate enough to be able to talk to the village ladies engrossed in the work of painting the walls of the houses. Pallavi Devi and Laxmi Devi (laxmi being a common name) were busy painting the walls of their houses in floral patterns. On being asked about the details they in a very friendly manner informed that this was a part of the tharu culture. On close observation one could see the raised designs like stucco done by hand on the walls. The women even went to the extent of not only showing me their traditional clothing but also wearing it and talking about the hand made attires. Pallavi Devi talked about how they would dress up on festive occasions and dance to celebrate the day. The dress was a lehenga choli in vibrant colours adorned with embroidery, flowers, balls and glass all made by hand which was definitely a master piece of their craftsmanship. The Tharu jewellery also happened to be unique in design and is usually made of silver. A Hasli which is a sickle shaped necklace, a long necklace and a head gear form the main pieces and are to be found in almost every household. Since silver is expensive, jewellery is also made of gillet an alloy which looks like silver. Besides the dresses, beautiful cane baskets are also made by the village folk which is a very good example of local tharu art and crafts. The locals informed that these baskets were woven out of the 'Bendu' material which is similar to jute and used for making baskets and bags. The most interesting aspect of these baskets being the decoration done with kaas and mooj which is a kind of wild grass. The use of a bead or moti which is found in the jungles and is popularly known as Gujji Gudiya was something spectacular and calls in for this art to be preserved which has grown in the lap of nature. These baskets of varying sizes are used for carrying gifts "shagun" on special occasions like weddings and baby shower. The tharus also smoke the huqqa which is procured locally. Other activities include fishing and hunting for which they have different kinds of fishing nets, traps and hunting weapons. A fishing net could be found in every Tharu house, fishing being one of the very important occupations of the community. The main food of the Tharus is fish and rice but they also use roti, vegetables, mutton, chicken and milk products. The Tharus believe in maintaining a good kitchen and attach great importance to possessing a complete set of cooking utensils including large vessels, such as, Taula and Kadhaw. The tharu males enjoy music and dancing as already mentioned and usually own drums and mridang (drum), dhol (a kind of drum), jhanjh (cymbals). Women own a dholak in almost every home. Tribal instruments used for music are also a good example of their handi crafts

and at the same time indicative of their love for music and fine arts. The Tharu magic tricks are very interesting and special. Almost all women in the village wear tattoos on their arms corresponding to their customs and beliefs. Amulets on arms were also spotted which makes obvious the fact that the Tharus believe in black magic and charms and have antidotes to ward off the same.

A careful analysis of the Tharu culture indicates that the community holds a lot of intangible and tangible heritage within its fold and needs to be protected and propagated for progeny. The identity of tribal communities is rooted in their culture. Its uniqueness lies in the unbreakable bond between the community and nature. As societies embrace modernised development, the richness, diversity, and depth of tribal cultures tend to fade away. They tend to get overshadowed by the homogeneity of globalised norms. Striking a balance between conservation and the rights and needs of indigenous communities is the need of the hour.

Regarding the tribes, the 2025 Mahakumbh aims to host the heads of the denotified tribes of India (DNT's) from various parts of the state. The DNT's have a population of several crores all across the country but no details and data regarding them is said to be available. These tribes have been subjected to alienation for decades with the earliest law labelling them as criminal tribes by the British Government in 1871. Though the tribes were freed from the limitations of this law post independence, they however continue to live on the edge seeking formal social inclusion while preserving unique cultural identities. The Social Welfare Department.

Government of Uttar Pradesh organised the first DNT Day on August 31, 2024 to commemorate the passing of the Denotified Tribes Act 1952 which witnessed the participation of 59 tribes and 29 nomadic tribes in large numbers.

Protecting the tribes of India is crucial for preserving their unique cultural heritage, languages, and traditional knowledge. Historically marginalized, tribes face social and economic disparities, exploitation, and violence, emphasizing the need for protection and empowerment. Safeguarding their rights ensures access to education, employment, and healthcare, while also preserving their ancestral lands, forests, and natural resources. Furthermore, protecting tribes' rights aligns with India's constitutional provisions and international commitments, such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, ultimately promoting social justice, economic empowerment, and environmental conservation.

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