

Sustainable practices and the role of tribal communities in Environmental Conservation: A special mention of the Tharu Tribe

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Abstract

*T*ribal communities have long been stewards of the environment, employing sustainable practices that ensure the preservation of natural resources and biodiversity. Among these communities, the Tharu tribe, indigenous to the Terai region of Nepal and India, stands out for their exemplary contributions to environmental conservation. The Tharu people's sustainable agricultural practices, such as mixed cropping and organic farming, play a vital role in maintaining soil fertility and promoting biodiversity. Their traditional water management techniques, including the construction of ponds and canals, effectively manage water resources and reduce soil erosion.

The Tharu tribe's deep respect for forests and wildlife is evident in their protection of sacred groves and involvement in community-based conservation initiatives. This community's indigenous knowledge, passed down through generations, includes valuable insights into

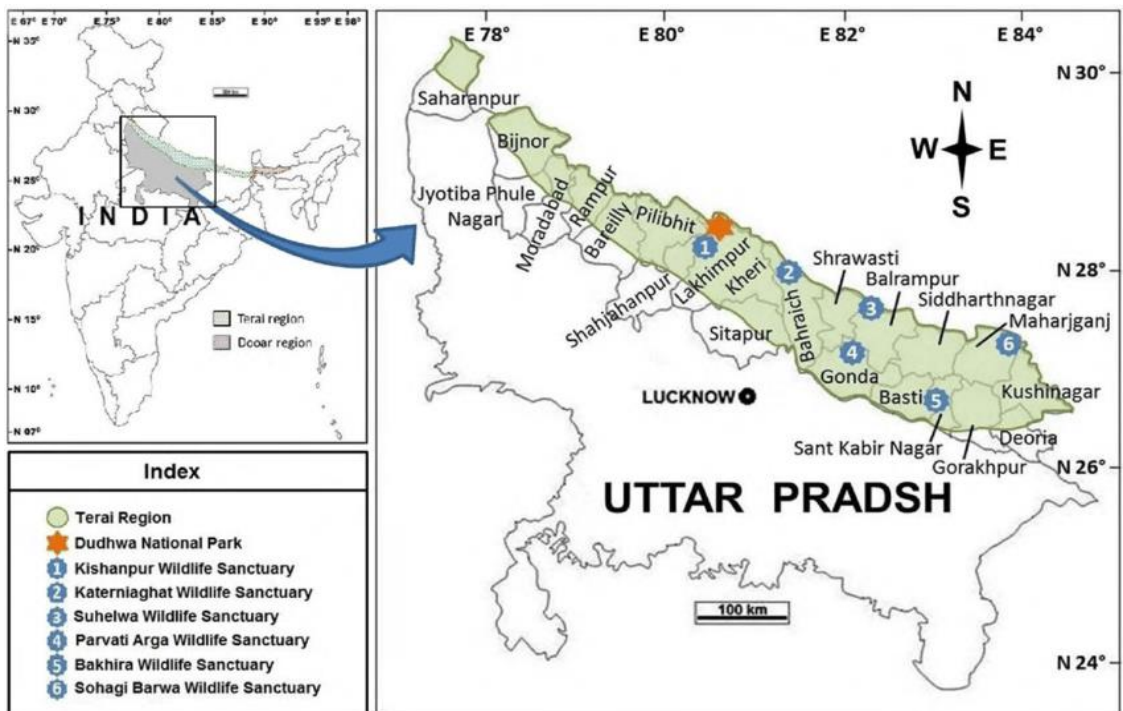
medicinal plants and natural resource management, which are crucial for modern conservation efforts.

Despite facing challenges such as displacement and the impact of development projects, the Tharu tribe continues to advocate for their rights and sustainable practices. Empowering the Tharu community and integrating their traditional knowledge into mainstream conservation strategies can significantly enhance global efforts to protect the environment. This abstract, highlights the importance of recognizing and supporting the sustainable practices of the Tharu tribe in the broader context of environmental conservation.

Keywords- Sustainable practices, Terai region, Preservation, Natural resources, Environment conservation, Resource management.

Introduction

Tribal communities across the world have long been the custodians of nature, employing sustainable practices that have ensured the preservation of their



environment for generations. Among these communities, the Tharu tribe, residing in the Terai region of Nepal and India, has exemplified environmental stewardship through their traditional and sustainable ways of living. This paper explores the sustainable practices of tribal communities, with a special focus on the Tharu tribe, and highlights their significant role in environmental conservation.

Sl. No.	District	Population
1	Lakhimpur Kheri	37949
2	Balrampur	19347
3	Bahraich	8558
4	Shravasti	4756
5	Maharajganj	2564
6	Scattered Tharus in then districts	32362
Total population		105536

Source: Directorate of Tribal Development, Uttar Pradesh, India

Field Survey Data

Sno.	Sample Villages	Literacy Rate Total Persons (%)	Literacy Rate Total (%) Male	Literacy Rate Total (%) Female	Gender gap in Literacy Rate (%)
1	Barkidandi	73.8	84.3	63.4	20.9
2	Baruwabag	69.9	83.0	58.3	24.7
3	Biriya	65.7	74.8	54.3	20.4
4	Bidaura	77.4	94.6	60.3	34.3

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5	Bihi	74.1	93.0	52.6	40.4
6	Dhusari	73.4	86.6	59.2	27.4
7	Harraiya	73.2	84.2	61.6	22.6
8	Navinagar	50.0	91.3	59.5	31.8
9	Pindari	19.1	78.7	46.8	31.9
10	Sadhonagar	65.6	76.0	53.4	22.6
11	Saronja	63.8	77.9	45.3	32.5
12	Bharabhuriya	79.1	91.4	66.2	25.1
13	Charubeta	71.5	89.0	51.9	37.2
14	Chhinki	69.1	84.6	52.1	32.5
15	Diya	67.0	82.4	51.4	31.0
16	Gauharpatia	66.9	75.6	57.6	18.0
17	Jogitharnagla	67.7	80.3	54.1	26.2
18	Khetalsanda	79.5	92.2	67.0	25.2
19	Kumraha	70.4	82.0	58.1	23.9
20	Mohd. Bhuriya	72.7	90.6	54.1	36.6
21	Uldhan	72.8	86.5	58.0	28.5
22	Umrukala	75.9	86.8	65.3	21.5
	Total/ Average	69.0	84.3	56.9	27.4

Source- Field Survey 2006-2007.

Background

The Tharu tribe is one of the largest indigenous communities in the Terai region, known for their unique cultural heritage and deep connection to the natural

environment. Their traditional knowledge and practices have played a crucial role in maintaining ecological balance and conserving biodiversity.

Sustainable Practices of Tribal Communities



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1. **Traditional Agriculture:** Many tribal communities practice sustainable agriculture techniques such as shifting cultivation, mixed cropping, and organic farming. These methods help maintain soil fertility, reduce the need for chemical inputs, and promote biodiversity.
2. **Water Management:** Traditional water management practices, including rainwater harvesting, construction of small dams, and maintenance of ponds, ensure efficient use and conservation of water resources.
3. **Forest Conservation:** Tribal communities often protect forests through community-based conservation efforts. Sacred groves and biodiversity hotspots are preserved, and sustainable harvesting methods are used to maintain forest health.
4. **Biodiversity Conservation:** Indigenous knowledge about medicinal plants, wildlife, and natural resource management is crucial for conserving biodiversity. Tribal communities have a deep understanding of the ecosystem and employ practices that enhance biodiversity.

The Role of the Tharu Tribe in Environmental Conservation



26 women selected from 53 Self Help Groups developed new products in woven grass using their traditional skills and locally available material in the workshop. Photo: Subrat K Behera / WTI

1. **Agricultural Practices:** The Tharu tribe employs sustainable agricultural practices such as mixed cropping and organic farming. These methods help maintain soil fertility and reduce the reliance on chemical fertilizers and pesticides.
2. **Water Management:** The Tharu use traditional water management techniques, including the construction of ponds and canals, to ensure a steady supply of water for irrigation and domestic use. These practices help in reducing soil erosion and improving water availability.
3. **Forest and Biodiversity Conservation:** The Tharu people have a deep respect for forests and wildlife, often protecting sacred groves and engaging in community-based conservation initiatives. Their knowledge of medicinal plants and sustainable harvesting methods is invaluable for biodiversity conservation.
4. **Community-Based Conservation:** The Tharu tribe is actively involved in community-based conservation efforts, where decisions are made collectively to ensure sustainable use of resources. This participatory approach enhances the effectiveness of conservation initiatives and empowers the community.



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Challenges and Opportunities

1. Displacement and Development Projects: Large-scale development projects, such as dam construction and mining, pose significant threats to tribal lands and disrupt their sustainable practices. Ensuring proper implementation of policies like the Forest Rights Act can help protect their rights and promote sustainable development.
2. Empowerment and Education: Empowering tribal communities through education and access to resources can enhance their role in environmental conservation. Recognizing and integrating their traditional knowledge into mainstream conservation strategies is crucial for sustainable development.



Tharu leaders helping in the transformation of their community.

CASE STUDIES

(credit-Childhood Explorer is a publication of [Childhood Education International](#))

When attending a gender equity training in Nepal, led by Backward Society Education (BASE), I learned much about the lives of the Tharu men and women who participated. The Tharu people are an ethnic group indigenous to the southern foothills

of the Himalayas. In particular, I learned that Tharu women work hard. As the women listed out their daily tasks, from domestic chores to back-breaking labour, it was clear to everyone in that concrete classroom that women share a disproportionate burden of the workload. In addition, they are severely under-valued and lack basic rights and decision-making powers. Despite the significant strides toward achieving gender equity that were made at the training, there is still a long way to go.

Within this context, I present the story of Sumitra, a young BASE staff member and shining star, who has overcome many of the challenges of being . . . a girl.



Sumitra's Story in Her Own Words:

My parents know the value of education. My father always encouraged me to go to school. In my village, my family was the first to send a daughter to school. Despite being very interested in studying, my cousin only made it through the 3rd grade. She married at age 21. Next, my elder sister was enrolled. She made it through secondary school before being married at age 19. That's what girls did. They got married and took care of their new families.

Finally, it was my turn. While most girls didn't want to go to school because the classes were full of boys and parents didn't see the value of investing in education for

girls, I was able to complete secondary school. I wanted to continue studying, but my family wasn't ready to invest. They didn't want to spend money on me for higher education, because I was a girl. I cried a lot to my father and uncles. I begged them over and over to let me go to college. Finally, my father agreed, though he couldn't convince my uncles.

First, I got an intermediate degree at a local college. Then, I went to a university in the city of Nepalgunj for my bachelor's degree. During my second year, I was hired to participate in on-the-job training with BASE. Due to the hours and location of the office, I was no longer able to attend class. However, with my earnings, I could afford to purchase the books and course materials and study independently. For three years I did this, only going to the university campus to complete the exams. My friends said that I was doing really hard work. It was challenging, since I couldn't attend the lectures, but I always preferred to study and so I didn't mind. At work, I encouraged my colleagues to attend college, although they felt it was impossible to manage their time between work and school. From 9:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m., I worked at the office. In the evenings, I studied.

Once I got my bachelor's degree, I felt I had to leave BASE and go for a higher degree in Kathmandu. At that time, Dilli Chaudhary, the President of BASE, encouraged me to apply for a scholarship though the Nepal Embassy, offered by the Rai Foundation. With BASE's recommendation, I was awarded the scholarship and



went to Delhi, India, for my MBA. Now I am working for BASE as a Program Coordinator of the Youth Action Fund and simultaneously completing a second master's degree in Public Administration.

Being Tharu

In my Village Development Committee (a collection of about 10 villages), I am the only Tharu girl who has earned a master's degree. In total, there are only six people from my village who have received a master's. Of the other five, all boys, only two are Tharu.

Everyone says that the Tharu community is backward. I think we are not backward, but that we are made backward by other castes. Many years ago, the Tharu used to produce crops, but they didn't get proper wages or benefits for their labour. As a result, they didn't have sufficient funds to send their children to school. Money is important for education. The Tharu had land, but they didn't have the knowledge that they were required to legally register their land with the government. Other castes took advantage of their ignorance and seized ownership of the land. You see, Tharus lost their land due to their lack of education.

Tharu are very hard-working people. You will never see a Tharu sitting idle. They just don't earn enough, and they don't know how to modernize their agricultural practices so they are stuck in poverty. As a result, the Tharu don't have access to the government and lack political representation. I think we have to get to the top. Education is the way to get to there.

Conclusion

Tribal communities, with their deep-rooted sustainable practices and profound connection to nature, play a vital role in environmental conservation. The Tharu tribe, through their traditional agricultural practices, water management techniques, and forest conservation efforts, exemplifies the contributions of indigenous communities to environmental sustainability. Empowering these communities and integrating their traditional knowledge into modern conservation strategies can significantly enhance global efforts to protect the environment.

This research underscores the importance of recognizing and supporting the sustainable practices of tribal communities, particularly the Tharu tribe, in the broader context of environmental conservation. By doing so, we can ensure the preservation of

biodiversity, natural resources, and cultural heritage for future generations. This paper provides a comprehensive look at the sustainable practices of tribal communities, focusing on the Tharu tribe's contributions to environmental conservation.

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