

Tharu Tribe of India: Tracing Contours of Livelihood, Employment and Financial Inclusion

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Tribes, due to their geographical distribution in inhospitable terrains such as forest and mountains, have historically led a life away from the mainstream where the modern development has taken place and have subsequently remained largely restricted to their primitive modes of production and sustenance. While their lives are in better consonance with Nature and have contributed to preservation of natural ecosystem, it has also restricted their access to health, education and employment facilities, as a result of which their voices have lingered on the periphery and it has manifested in the lack of adequate representation at the political level, policy making and decision power. While the modern state, and even before that, the colonial administration has claimed ownership on their natural habitat to extract resources, they have not been benefited proportionately, rather they have been displaced and disinherited in some instances, further pushing them into poverty and backwardness. This paper deals with the traditional livelihoods methods of Tharu Tribe of India, the changes thereto due to the interaction with and interference of the modern state and policies, various government efforts for their economic empowerment and financial inclusion, their impact, emerging scenarios, existing structural barriers, the tribe's aspirations and the way forward. The paper adopts descriptive, and analytical approach and relies upon the government data, limited participant observation and interaction, books, research papers, and newspaper reports etc.

Keywords: Tharu, Tribe, Financial Inclusion, Marginalization, Livelihood.

Introduction

Human race, though a single entity, exists on this planet in such myriad ways! The umbilical cord with the mother earth stays with them in varying quantities. Beginning from living in the caves and forests, most have moved on to concrete houses, some have ejected even the earth's orbit and gone to other planets though not yet to inhabit them, while a miniscule percentage stays true to their primitive ways, residing in the most inhospitable terrains, surviving on the most basic and natural elements. What is to be called progress is a question the world faces today. A few have pillaged the natural resources to an extent to endanger the survival of all. The natural justice says that every living creature holds equal right to the resources available, however, leave alone the plants, the animals and the insects, even within humans, the resources were captured by a handful while

others lingered in abject poverty. The lopsided development has left behind a huge population even in the cities. And the crisis of climate change hovers dangerously over the planet and its beings because of the greed of a few. In such a scenario, two aspects need inquiry- one of the equitable division of the resources, second of the sustainable way of life. On both the counts, the tribal people shall figure high. They are the ones left behind on the path of development and the benefits that accrue from it, the ones whose voices are not included in policy-making regarding the habitats they naturally reside in, and they are the ones who still manage their lives in harmony with nature, holding her sacred and extracting only as much as can naturally be replenished. Rather pained at the crude, insensitive exploitation of the regions, and the features they held sacred such as the rivers, mountains, the forest, they were displaced, and disinherited and looked down upon. The term 'backward' stamped upon

them, they were for a very long time, perceived as an oddity among the so-called civilized world.

The treatment towards them can be categorised into colonial and postcolonial period since the perception towards them changed slightly. This paper aims to bring forth their traditional ways of subsistence, their marginalization, a partial transition to the modern means of livelihood, the balance between the two, their aspirations, challenges thereto, the relevant policy interventions, their effects and the way forward.

The Concept of Tribes

In layman understanding tribals are indigenous people living in natural habitats such as forests, mountains or even plains, maintaining to a large extent their primitive ways of life. However, anthropologists, sociologist, social workers and administrators are still not on the same line about defining the term "Tribe". Noted ethnologists such as H. H. Risley, W. V. Grigson, R. V. Russel have described them as "aborigines" or "aboriginals", J. H. Hutton has called them the "Primitive Tribes" while Verrier Elwin has called them the "Forest Tribes" or "Folk". G.S. Ghurye considers them the "Backward Hindus". Some other scholars have called them "Adivasis".¹ D.N. Majumdar has given the following definition of a tribe: "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."² He defines a tribe as a social group with a specific territory, where members primarily marry within the group (endogamous), and there is no division of labor based on specialized functions. The group is led by tribal leaders, who may be hereditary or chosen in other ways. They share a common language or dialect and maintain a sense of social distance from other tribes or castes.³ A common denominator, however, remains the backwardness which characterises the tribal identity.

During the colonial period, the lens used by the British and other foreign ethnographers were tainted by the State intention to control the resources. They called Tharus a tribe because they lived in terai region, a densely forested area on the border of India and Nepal. Thus, after being termed, 'Aboriginals' in the earlier census, they were called 'Forest Tribe' in the Census of 1891. J. H. Hutton in the Census of 1931 classified them as 'Primitive Tribe'.⁴ In Census of India of 1941 Tharus were put under 'Tribes'.⁵

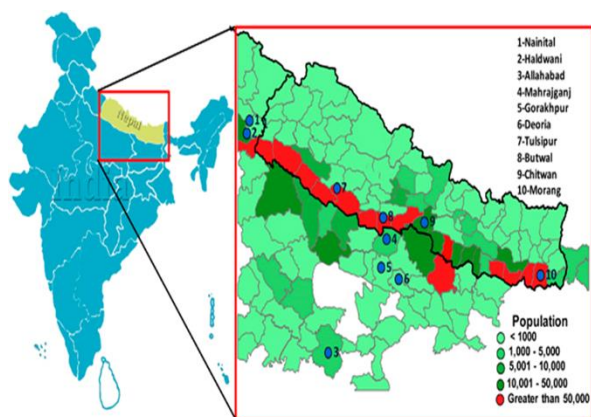
After independence, the ethnic groups recognized as 'Tribes' during the colonial administration were categorized as 'Scheduled Tribes', as Xaxa Committee 2014 described in its Preface. Article 342 of the Constitution provided for their listing in the schedule. Since no criteria in the Constitution was laid down for defining a tribe, Lokur Committee constituted in 1965 prescribed five conditions to be considered while listing tribes into the Schedule; i.e. (i) primitive traits (ii) distinct culture, (iii) geographical isolation, (iv) shyness of contact with the community at large

and (v) backwardness.⁶ Tharus were categorized as Scheduled Tribe in 1967 by the President of India.⁷

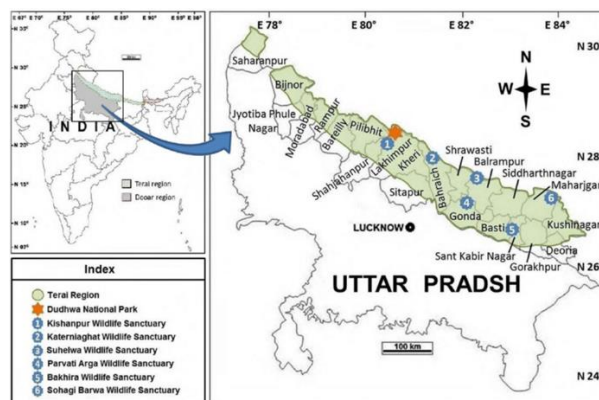
Territorial Distribution of Tharu Tribe

Tharus are inhabitants of Terai region on both sides of the border between India and Nepal which lies south of the Shivalik range of lower Himalaya. In India they reside in Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, mainly near the Nepal border in thickly forested areas. S K Srivastava (1958) describes Terai as “a vast alluvial land lying at the foot of the Himalayas bordering densely populated Gangetic plains of the south. It comprises a narrow strip of the country running 90 miles along the foot of the hills with an area of 589,359 acres or 920.8 square miles.”⁸

As per Census 2011, the tribal population of India is 10.45 crore, which represents 8.6% of the country’s total population. The Tharu population in U.P. is 83,544, in Bihar 105,291, in Uttarakhand 89,399, and total 278234.⁹ The tracts inhabited by Tharus are called Tharuhat.



Source: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-geographical-distribution-of-the-Tharu-in-South-Asia-The-sampling-locations-are_fig3_261103440



Source: <https://officerspulse.com/2020/12/12/who-are-the-tharu-tribals-of-the-up-terai/>

Traditional Methods of Livelihood

Terai- the area inhabited by Tharus was quite inhospitable and did not provide much opportunities in terms of sustenance except relying on the land and the forest. S K Srivastava acknowledges this fact in his book, *The Tharus: A Study in Culture Dynamics* (1958). He also praises the Tharus for having brilliantly adapted to their environment by indulging in various economic activities such as agriculture, which forms the main work, fishing, hunting, forest produce collection, and other supplementary activities of involving craftsmanship such as house construction, basketry, rope and mat making, pottery. He even gives a detailed season-wise account of these economic activities throughout the year.¹⁰

Agriculture

Kharif and Rabi crops are cultivated in alternate seasons. Maize and Rice are the main Kharif crops while wheat is the main rabi crop. Other crops in the rabi season are gram, red-gram, masur, peas, and lahi. The harvesting month for wheat and gram are March and April, while masur and lahi are harvested a

little earlier. Paddy fields are harvested in September-October. Cucumber, tomato, potato and beans are cultivated as Zaid crops. Men, women and children all contribute to agricultures chores.

S K Srivastava points out the variation in the size of landholding among Tharus and ascribes the breaking of the joint families as the reason for small landholdings.¹¹ In Henry Elliot's book, 'In Memoirs on The History, Folk-Lore and Distribution of The Races of The North Western Provinces of India' in the supplementary section, E. Colvin described the primitive method of agriculture by the Tharus stating that they cultivated the land until it was exhausted and then moved on to a new piece. They used water unmindfully inundating the area and creating swamps.¹²

From the colonial standards their methods certainly must have looked primitive, however, some amount of racial and colonial bias cannot be denied to be percolating this observation. Earlier Tharus used agricultural implements such as hare, kilwai, juwn, patela, now modern equipment like tractors, threshers, deep tube wells are also being utilized for agriculture. Cowdung is used as fertilizer in the fields. The agricultural produce in most of the Tharu fields is only sufficient to cater to the household. If a little surplus is produced, it is sold at nearby towns. A field Survey of a Tharu village in Nagrota Bagwan, Kangra in December 2022 done by students of Government College, Nagrota Bagwan, Kangra, Himachal Pradesh attests to the subsistence level of farming due to primitive techniques.¹³

Historically, after gaining the Diwani rights of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa in 1965, the British initiated several land revenue experiments in the region containing Tharu population also. Later the Permanent Settlement, introduced in 1793 in eastern provinces (Bengal, Bihar and Orissa) significantly affected the Tharu population which like other peasants of India, had to bear the burden of colonial greed. After the independence, government attitude towards tribes in general has altered, and various schemes have been initiated for their economic welfare, which we will discuss later in this paper.

Arts and Crafts

Another major occupation of the Tharus is craftsmanship, which reflects in the making of their daily use articles, some of which are even sold in the markets for a living. In tribal societies art and craft are generally intermixed, and art is not necessarily something only for pleasure; the element of everyday utility is not completely excluded from it. Sameera Maiti in her book, *The Tharus: Their Arts and Crafts (2004)* quotes Lomrnel (1968, 10), "though primitive cultures may be inferior to the mature cultures in the level of material culture and of economy and technological development, this is not true of their art".¹⁴ A high level of skill and beauty is reflected in their crafts.

Tharus indulge in house construction for which the material is generally collected from the forests, basket-making, rope and mat-making, and pottery making etc. Pots and vessels of various shapes and sizes are made

by the women for daily use such as storage of grains, cooking and eating. Fishing nets are made by men.

Challenges Faced by Tharus

(i) Lack of Infrastructure

In agricultural sector, lack of access to modern implements and infrastructure related to irrigation, storage and transportation of farm produce, market linkage is the main problem. Tharus still do farming using the primitive methods and knowledge. Ashok Kumar Pathak in his Ph.D. Thesis (2006) provides data regarding the presence of comparatively less irrigation facilities in Tharu inhabited areas. He states that the percentage of irrigated area in Tharu inhabited development blocks is lesser than the other areas, the number of canals as well as the area irrigated through government handpumps is also lesser. He further presents that in the Terai region, pond-irrigated areas are more in number. In the Terai region of Uttar Pradesh the average length of canals is 52.33 km, which is less than the average in non-Tharu inhabited areas i.e. 68.14 km. The number of drilling handpumps was 440.678 in Tharu areas, as compared to average 1101.30 in other development blocks.¹⁵

In terms of Arts and Crafts, Tharus face lack of access to market, technology deprivation, adequate promotion of their handicraft and other handmade items on national and international platforms. Craft-making is still at family level and thus the potential of larger production for sale is still untapped due to absence of organizational support.

During his survey Ashok Kumar Pathak found that 43.33% people had changed their previous occupation from agriculture, livestock rearing, labour, shop, construction, private enterprise to something else, in recent times, and expressed interest in works such as running a kirana shop, or floor mill or oil mill, buying a jeep or taxi for running a transportation business, buying a tractor for providing ploughing service for hire, some wanted to make items of grass/leaves with the help of machines, some wanted to do furniture making, rope making, bamboo or cane items business. Some showed interest in fishery, running private schools, poultry farm, dairy motorcycle/tractor/cycle repair.¹⁶ It showed that Tharus were inclined towards a shift from the traditional modes of livelihood to adopting newer modes of employment.

The main problems encountered by them in pursuing these occupations were reported to be lack of funds, unavailability of loans, no access to raw material, information deficit, lack of transportation, electricity, technology deficit, lack of market access, and corruption.

(ii) Outmigration

Due to inadequate educational and employment facilities in the Tharu inhabited areas, migration to towns and cities is taking place. Ashok Kumar Pathak (2006) in his survey in the Terai areas of Uttar Pradesh states that 64.67 percent Tharus are in favour of migration to cities, 22 percent are neutral, only 13.33 percent disapprove of it. Thus, a huge number of Tharus see a glimmer of bright future in the cities and not in their native

places.¹⁷ Though it may raise their socio-economic status but in the long term it may lead to other adverse impacts such as change of demography, loss of the traditional knowledge of arts and crafts and the sustainable ways of life with nature, loss of native language, acculturation, change in social relations, dwindling community life, adverse impact on culture, and the increased burden on the nearby cities reflecting in myriad problems of civil management. Additionally, at a new place they may not get appropriate remuneration for their work, and may be forced to lead a life of comparative poverty, less dignity and as a wage labourer rather than free, independent workers on their own land.

(iii) Development Vs. Displacement

The colonial administration before independence treated tribals as lesser, uncultured beings who were viewed more as an inconvenience and barrier to the colonial policies aimed at maximum extraction of natural resources from the tribal areas. Thus, the colonial laws prohibited or severely restricted the movement, habitation, farming and forest produce collection by the tribals including Tharus. Though certain changes were made after independence, the colonial mindset has lingered on to a large extent. After the Forest Rights Acts 2006 which acknowledges the tribals' rights over forest, Tharus have been embroiled in a legal battle with the Forest Department to reclaim their access to the forest. Dipti Arora (2023) in an article for Global Resilience Partnerships brings attention to the organization called

Tharu Adivasi Mahila Mazdoor Kisan Manch, which is actively demanding their rightful access to the forest for their livelihood and other cultural associations.¹⁸

(iv) Low Representation in Government Jobs

The lack of adequate education facilities, skilling, technology and information deficit result in very low representation of Tharus in the government services. Ashok Kumar Pathak in a survey in Uttar Pradesh Terai region (2006) found that only 12 percent income in the Tharu households came from the government jobs. Most of the Tharus in government services worked as third or fourth grade workers. Though reservation has improved the situation slightly, more needs to be done to ensure equal opportunities to Tharus in the government jobs.¹⁹

Government Initiatives for Development

To provide education and health services, which form the basic requirement of development of any community, the government has started Ashram Type Schools in Tharu villages as well as Eklavya Residential Schools. Various scholarships are also provided to the students to pursue studies including higher studies. Primary Health Centres and regular Medical Camps are organized by the government. Development projects such as road construction, electrification, toilet construction, handpump installation etc. have been taken up by the government.

For economic welfare, there is a provision for providing loans, subsidies of

various kinds, boring of irrigation tubewells, supply of seeds and fertilizers to the farmers etc. However, the full benefit of these schemes has yet not reached the Tharus due to various structural and systematic barriers which still keeps them at the edge of the developmental bandwagon.²⁰ Tharus are still grappling with seasonal unemployment and hidden unemployment.

There are 28 Tribal Research Institutes on State level (TRIs) supported by ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India,²¹ which do the ground surveys, data collection and help in policy formulation. States have separate Tribal Development Directorates for implementation of these policies to ensure maximum benefit reaches the tribes. Recently Uttar Pradesh government has launched One District One Product (ODOP) scheme to showcase and market distinct items from regions and Homestay Scheme in which rural and tribal tourism is focused upon and Tharus are encouraged to utilize their homes as homestays to earn revenue. These will be helpful in providing them employment opportunities in their native area itself and avoid the need for migration to cities.

On national level Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India (TRIFED) promotes tribal products through its TRIBES India outlets and e-commerce platforms, providing sustainable livelihood opportunities to tribal artisans. By promoting handicrafts, textiles, and other tribal products, TRIFED creates market linkages for these communities. The Adivasi Mahila Sashaktikaran Yojna (AMSY) is tailored for tribal women, providing concessional loans of

up to ₹2 lakhs at just 4% interest. Additionally, the Micro Credit Scheme supports tribal self-help groups (SHGs) by offering loans of up to ₹5 lakhs per SHG.²²

Way Forward

Under the Indian constitution every citizen of India holds equal right to the opportunities for their optimum development. It is the duty of the state to ensure not only basic amenities but also skill training, access to technology, finance modules, and proper market linkage so that every citizen can utilize his or her potential fully and lead a dignified life. Tharus have contributed to the nation by ecological preservation and adding richly to the cultural landscape of India as well as their handicraft is a matter of pride. Noted anthropologist Varrier Elwin had praised the richness of their indigenous culture. Though various government schemes are in place for their overall development, the benefits are yet to percolate down fully. Comprehensive and coordinated efforts by the various government departments such as Forest Department, Tribal Development Departments, Arts and Culture Department and Women Development and Small Industries Departments, along with non-governmental organisations should come together to leverage the traditional knowledge and craftsmanship of the Tharu tribe to provide ample employment opportunities and financial inclusion through promotion of community groupings such as Self-Help Groups, micro financing organisations, Farmer Producer Organisations, NABARD etc. The potential for small scale industries based on honey, medicinal plants, wood items,

and food processing industries shall be explored and tapped. Technology should be utilized to disseminate education, knowledge of various schemes and market linkages. Utilise women's potential in small scale industries and grass-root economic development.

Conclusion

Tharus weave a beautiful pattern in India's tribal mosaic. They hold indigenous knowledge and sustainable way of life in alignment with nature which may be utilized to combat climate change and ecological preservation. Their integration in the mainstream from economical point of view is obligatory on the state; at the same time their culture and unique identity deserves respect and promotion. It adds vibrantly to India's vivid cultural landscape. We can be equal while being different. India has a long legacy of this tradition.

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