

ETHNO-HISTORY OF THARU COMMUNITY: A STUDY ON WEST CHAMPARAN (BIHAR)

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SUMMARY

In the last four decades, there has been a significant shift in the discipline of history from above to below in terms of focus. The conceptual domain of ‘history from below’ has acquired importance in Indian academia in the last three decades. Under this, the history of less visible communities attracted the attention of historians. The progress of these communities was conceived as a critical necessity for India's march towards an inclusive nation and society. The proposed study attempts to pursue this concern by the way of exploring the history of the Tharu community located in the Champaran district of Bihar (a north Indian state). The main objective of this study is to construct the history of the Tharu community by using an ethnohistory framework. It helps us to locate the navigation of a community from the margins to the mainstream by the way of using historical memory as a source of identity needed for assertion and negotiation. In short, this study attempts to explore the ethnohistory of the Tharu tribal community as a case study to expand the domain of history from below in India.

The study of tribes, indeed, emerged as an established academic field within the social sciences in India. It traces back generally to social anthropology and has been closely linked to it from the beginning. Throughout history, this concept has evolved into an interdisciplinary field. The key areas from several social sciences have been incorporated to enhance its knowledge among the academic community. One can observe a current trend in the social sciences towards embracing an interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary approach to understanding social phenomena. This can be seen clearly by examining the concept of development. In the past, the notion of development was solely focused on economic growth. This understanding was once more rooted in the confines of specific academic disciplines. Thus, it can be observed

that economic development alone did not lead to progress in other areas of life. In today's world, the idea of development has expanded beyond just economic growth. Now, it encompasses the development of human beings, society, and culture. As we delve into the study of humankind and its various facets, we must explore the origins of the holistic perspective we seek. The important point is that historical research recently adopted a multidisciplinary approach to capture the histories of marginalized communities such as tribes.

It would be helpful to deliberate upon the concept of ethnohistory as it is a central framework with which this study has been designed. Ethnohistory, as a domain of writing tribal history, focuses on the intersection of anthropology and history to study indigenous peoples' cultural and social development. It is particularly suited for studying tribal history, cultural context, social and political structures, their relationship with the environment, colonialism and modernization; therefore, this study on the ethno-history of the Tharu community of Champaran presents a compelling and multifaceted area of research.

The Tharu community in West Champaran (Bihar) has a rich and complex history, shaped by their deep connection to the region's forests, cultural heritage, and the external forces that have influenced their lives. Tharu's Cultural context has not been extensively documented in traditional historical records. So, ethnohistorical methods have been used to gather oral histories, cultural artefacts, and other evidence to reconstruct the past from a cultural perspective. This study explores their unique social and political structure that differs from those of larger, more centralized societies through ethnohistory. Tharu tribal cultures, which are deeply connected to their natural environments, have been examined to determine how these relationships have shaped their history, cultural practices, and economic activities. It has also explored the

processes of colonialism and the effect of modernization on their tribal cultures, including displacement, loss of land, and cultural erosion. The study aims to give voice to Indigenous perspectives by centering the experiences and narratives of tribal people; it challenges Eurocentric historical narratives and provides a more balanced understanding of their history. Ethno-history has provided a framework for understanding Tharu tribal history that goes beyond traditional historical accounts, incorporating cultural, social, and environmental factors to offer a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of indigenous peoples. So, it is this dimension this study intends to explore and document.

AREA OF THE RESEARCH

The study area of the present research is West Champaran District, Bihar, with its largest Tharu settlements, popularly known as Tharuhat. Following the separation from Jharkhand, the Tharus tribes have emerged as a prominent tribe in Bihar who inhabit the terai region of West Champaran with a substantial population. The outer Siwalik belt, also known as the outer Himalayas, encompasses an area of 784.8 sq. km, which accounts for 34.36% of the Tharuhat region, specifically the Dun and Someshwar mountain ranges. The official designation for this location is Topo Forest Area. In the North-Western corner of the West Champaran district, Tharus inhabit an expanse of 2,284 square kilometres, mainly consisting of approximately 50 Tharu villages located in various portions of the Bagaha-II, Gaunaha, Mainatad, Nautan, and Ramnagar Blocks of the West Champaran district in the Tirhut division of Bihar.

Since they were not listed in the official category of Scheduled Tribes of Bihar till 2003, facilities and concessions, including reservations which their brethren from Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh have been availing for five decades, remained deprived

of these benefits. At the same time, the Tharus of Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand have received adequate attention from scholars, while The Tharus of Bihar, despite having a significant population, has been overlooked by historians and anthropologists, minimizing their significance in historical discussions. Consequently, the limited access to information about the Tharu tribe has resulted in biased generalizations in early writings. As a result, very little knowledge is available about the Tharus of Champaran from these earlier works. Therefore, the proposed study attempts to study the comprehensive perspective and issues concerning their historical process.

CONTEXTUAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study falls within the broader multi-disciplinary approaches of anthropology, sociology, history, and ecology, explicitly focusing on two subfields: ethnology and ethnohistory. Ethnology focuses on the customs, languages, social structures, and material culture of specific ethnic groups. Examining the Tharu community in West Champaran would involve understanding their traditional way of life, social organization, language use, and material possessions. On the other hand, ethnohistory focuses on the history of ethnic groups, often using a combination of oral traditions, archaeological evidence, and written records. Studying the Tharu community's ethnohistory in Modern Champaran would entail reconstructing their historical narrative, encompassing their migration patterns, evolving social and cultural dynamics, and their interactions with other communities and the prevailing cultural norms. The contextual significance of studying the Tharu community in West Champaran helps in preserving their cultural heritage, understanding social change, examining land rights and livelihood, and exploring marginalization and identity. Studying their ethnohistory aids in recording and safeguarding their heritage for future generations, illuminates their ability to adjust to changing circumstances, and helps in

understanding their historical relationship with the land in addressing land ownership and displacement issues. Furthermore, it enhances comprehension of their cultural identity and societal challenges.

The Tharu people have historically held expertise in sustainable resource management. Hence, examining the historical and cultural background of a particular ethnic group might provide valuable insights for conservation initiatives in the region. Overall, studying the ethnohistory of the Tharu community in West Champaran (Bihar) offers valuable insights into their culture, history, and their place in the region's social and ecological landscape. This knowledge can be used for cultural preservation, addressing issues of marginalization, and promoting sustainability.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The scope of the study would likely to include several essential domains. Concerning the temporal span, the Tharu community in West Champaran during the contemporary age would be the primary focus of attention. It is possible that this chronology could be malleable. Yet, it is quite probable that it began during the colonial period (around the 18th century) and continues to the present day. Geographically, the scope of the study is confined to the West Champaran region within the state of Bihar, India. It explores regional variations and problems, such as if there are distinct Tharu subgroups or settlements. This will unveil the issue from a historical perspective. The thematic scope will explore the social structure of the Tharu community, encompassing aspects such as family organization, leadership patterns, and kinship networks. The study examines customary vocations, linguistic practices, and material artefacts (attire, tools, ornaments, etc.). The other aspect would focus on the reconstruction of the historical narrative of the Tharu community in West Champaran. The study utilizes oral

traditions, historical documents, and archaeological data occasionally to comprehend their migration patterns and social and cultural transformations across history, as well as contact with other communities and the prevailing culture. Overall, the scope of the study would be to create a comprehensive picture of the Tharu community in modern Champaran, considering their social structures, cultural practices, historical background, and the challenges and opportunities they face in the contemporary world.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To document and analyze the historical evolution of the Tharu community in West Champaran, including their origins, migration patterns, and settlement history.
- To examine the Tharus' cultural heritage and traditions, such as their customs, beliefs, and social structures.
- To investigate the Tharus' relationship with the natural environment, particularly their dependence on the forests and their interactions with other communities.
- To explore the impact of external forces, such as colonialism and post-colonialism land reforms, on the Tharu community's development and well-being.
- To identify the factors those have contributed to the Tharu community's resilience and adaptability in the face of historical and contemporary challenges.
- To promote understanding and appreciation of the Tharu community's cultural heritage and contribute to efforts to preserve and revitalize their traditions.

- To capture the invocation of historical narratives by the Tharus for construction of identity.

The main objective of this study is to explore and document the life-world of the Tharu embedded in their ethnohistory before the gust of transformation eradicates their distinctive culture. These objectives are pursued in organizing this study.

HYPOTHESIS OF THE STUDY

Ethnohistorical studies are primarily characterized by their descriptive and exploratory nature to comprehend a particular society's historical and cultural aspects. Therefore, the proposed research is unlikely to have a single, overarching hypothesis. The following hypothetical points are tested in this study:

- The study likely assumes that oral traditions passed down through generations hold valuable information about the Tharu community's history and cultural practices.
- The Tharus of the west Champaran district maintained socio-cultural distinctness in comparison with other Tharu tribal settlements in north India.
- The Tharus possess a deep sense of historical consciousness often used to carve out respectable identity.
- The Tharu community's historical relationship with the forests of West Champaran has been deeply intertwined, shaping their cultural identity, economic practices, and social structures.
- Colonial rule and subsequent land reforms have significantly impacted the Tharu community in West Champaran, leading to displacement, marginalization, and changes in their traditional practices.

- The Tharu community in West Champaran has demonstrated resilience and adaptability in the face of historical challenges, preserving aspects of their cultural heritage while adapting to changing circumstances.
- The Tharu community's cultural identity is reflected in their traditional practices, beliefs, and social structures, which have been passed down through generations.
- The Tharu community's relationship with other communities in West Champaran reflects the complex dynamics of the region.

These are the fundamental assumptions or ideas that direct the research process. The study aims to examine the accuracy of these assumptions and develop a more comprehensive picture of the Tharu community's ethnohistory in West Champaran.

METHODOLOGY OF STUDY

The study is structured with historical research methods. This study involves the collection and utilization of both primary and secondary sources. In the case of primary source, the researcher has done ethnographic fieldwork for data collection and conducted unstructured interviews with Tharu community members from different age groups and social backgrounds, which involved participant observation, attending community events, collaborating with researchers from the Tharu community and documenting their daily lives. Oral traditions like stories, songs, and proverbs that are passed down through generations and hold historical and cultural significance are recorded and analyzed. Archival or historical records, such as colonial documents, government reports, provincial gazetteers, district gazetteers, population census data, and proceedings from the state and regional archives of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar are consulted and studied to understand the Tharu community's past interactions with the

dominant culture and changes in their social and economic conditions. Visual documentation, such as photographs and videos (with informed consent), is conducted to record the material culture, traditional houses, and ritual practices of the Tharu community. The mixed methods approach, such as combining ethnographic methods with archival research, offered a comprehensive understanding of the Tharu community's ethnohistory.

Regarding secondary sources, various types of materials have been utilized, including published books on tribal literature, articles in academic journals, research studies from different libraries, published and unpublished thesis, media reports, and reports from committees and organizations, as well as information from websites and other online resources.

For data analysis, thematic analysis was taken into consideration. This method involved identifying recurring themes and patterns within the obtained data to gain a better understanding of the Tharu community's social organization, values, beliefs, and historical experiences. Triangulation of data and historical contextualization were additional factors analyzed for data analysis. Data triangulation helped verify information from one source (e.g., oral traditions) by comparing it with information from other sources like historical records and ethnographic observations. Historical contextualization helped interpret the collected data within the broader historical context of Champaran, considering factors like colonialism, regional politics, and economic changes. Overall, thorough attention has been given to gathering source material, verifying its validity, examining its substance, and developing a consistent approach to interpreting it.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

This study of the Tharu community in modern Champaran (Bihar) takes a multifaceted approach, acknowledging the importance of tribal perspectives in reconstructing their ethnohistory. This will weave together oral traditions, a cornerstone of tribal knowledge transmission, with historical records and archaeological evidence (where accessible) to construct a more comprehensive understanding of Tharu's history.

The conceptual framework of ethnohistory that has been employed in this study is essentially taken from diversified sources that attempted to capture tribal history and society. It borrows the theoretical framework used by pioneering tribal studies specialist, i.e., Verrier Elwin, a prominent advocate for the exploration of tribal self-governance and social structures which critically supported their existence. This approach would be used to analyze the Tharu community's distinct social organization, kinship systems, and traditional leadership patterns. Additionally, following in the footsteps of Virginius Xaxa, a prominent voice for Adivasi rights, it will explore how the Tharu community has navigated the challenges of colonialism and contemporary marginalization.

This study recognizes the importance of cultural resilience, as emphasized by scholars like Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf. It will analyze how the Tharu have adapted their land use practices, religious beliefs, and material culture in response to modernization and development projects in Champaran. By integrating these diverse tribal historian perspectives, this research aims to not only document the Tharu's ethnohistory but also amplify their voices and advocate for their cultural preservation within the social landscape of modern India.

The overarching conceptual framework of this study has been designed by a harmonious blend of approaches of ethnohistory and historical methods. It means anthropologically informed history which enabled us to capture the minute details and their essence, which help to construct the past of the Tharus more efficiently.

CHAPTERISATION OF STUDY

The study is relevant to the modern context of West Champaran. All chapters are designed to narrate the underlying theme of contextual significance of studying the Tharu community in West Champaran, which helps preserve their cultural heritage, understand social change, examine land rights and livelihood, and explore marginalization and identity. This task was achieved by focusing on a specific theme of the ethno-history of Tharus in each chapter, which explains the particular theme and proceeds to the subsequent theme. This is how the chapters of the study have been organized to prove our hypothesis of an ethno-historical dimension of the Tharus community in West Champaran.

Chapter One discussed the arrangement and content of the planned study. A comprehensive research framework has been proposed, including the research statement and design. This chapter offered a comprehensive overview of the various components involved in introducing a research statement. These include defining the study's boundaries, providing an overview of the study's context, stating the study's objectives and hypotheses, outlining the study's methodology, reviewing relevant literature, and providing a summary of the subsequent chapters. The main aim of this chapter was to elucidate the conceptual framework that is utilized to structure and carry out this study.

The second chapter explored the intricate and diverse fabric of the Tharu general history, focusing on their longstanding connection to the Terai region in the West Champaran district. This chapter also explored their identity and origin by examining the historical consciousness embedded in the world of life of the Tharu communities. This endeavour proved helpful on account of the paucity of historical memory encountered by the Tharus through multiple documented narratives on the history of the Tharus. The chapter's primary objective is to document and analyze the historical evolution of the Tharu community in West Champaran, including their origin, migration patterns, and settlement history. It likely assumes that oral traditions passed down through generations hold valuable information about Tharu's history and origin. The chapters conclude with a view that the Tharu community's relationship with the Terai region is complex and multifaceted, with a solid and inseparable connection rooted in their historical origins, cultural identity, economic practices, and environmental challenges. This relationship helped me understand and appreciate Tharus' unique contribution to the region and the challenges it continues to face. Their origins, while uncertain, are believed to be linked to the broader area of the Terai, which has served as a crossroads for various ethnic groups over centuries. The discussed historical outlines in the chapters provide a valuable foundation for understanding their enigmatic origin, though further research is needed to unravel the intricacies of Tharu origin fully.

The third chapter of this study highlights the connection of the Tharus with the colonial perspective and explores post-colonial state formations and apparatus. This process embedded the dual role of positive and negative changes that affected Tharu communities in Champaran. Focusing on the Tharu community, this chapter proposed that modern state systems, including colonial and post-colonial periods, play an

important role in shaping the socio-economic and cultural conditions of the Tharu community. Broader political developments, including colonialism, land reforms, and state policies have influenced the Tharus' position within the Terai region.

The Tharu tribes have experienced a complex relationship with colonial and post-colonial authorities, characterized by a range of attitudes from indifference and exploitation to paternalism and protection. During the colonial period, the Tharus were often marginalized and exploited, with their lands and resources appropriated for colonial interests. During post-independence, the Indian government adopted a more paternalistic approach towards the Tharus, recognizing their marginalized status and implementing policies to improve their conditions. However, these policies often faced challenges in implementation, and the Tharus continued to experience discrimination and exclusion.

In recent decades, there has been a growing awareness of the importance of understanding the Tharu perspective and recognizing their agency in shaping their own history. This has shifted towards more participatory and inclusive development and cultural preservation approaches. However, despite progress in recent years, the Tharu community continues to face significant challenges, including poverty, land rights issues, and cultural erosion. Addressing these challenges requires a continued commitment to understanding the Tharu perspective and implementing policies that respect their cultural identity and promote their well-being.

The fourth chapter of this study proposes Tharu socio-cultural dimensions. This chapter aims to extend the framework of Bernard Cohn's and Ajay Skaria's ethno-historical methods, which is a shift in historical studies, focusing on the social aspects of history to capture the history of the Tharu community by focusing on their socio-

cultural factors. The chapter sheds light on Tharu cultural practices and reconstructs how their cultural practices (marriage, childbirth, and death rituals) have adapted to changing circumstances. This chapter also explored their unique material culture, examining how traditional dwellings, clothing, crafts, and food habits reflected their adaptation to the Terai environment.

The chapter observes several factors that have influenced the transformation of Tharu tribal culture in contemporary society. The influx of Western education and the adoption of modern lifestyles have significantly impacted the community's worldview and values. Industrialization and urbanization have also shaped the Tharu experience, as traditional ways of life have been disrupted by economic development and social change. Despite these external influences, the Tharu people have shown a strong desire to preserve their tribal identity. By continuing to practice certain cultural traditions, such as traditional dances, songs, and rituals, they actively resist the homogenizing forces of globalization and maintain a sense of continuity with their ancestors.

In this chapter, the Tharu tribal culture presents a fascinating case study of how indigenous traditions can adapt and evolve in the face of modernity. While the advancement of human civilization has often led to the erosion of traditional cultural practices, the Tharu community has demonstrated remarkable resilience in preserving their unique heritage. The chapters conclude with the facts that Tharu tribal culture offers a compelling example of how indigenous communities can navigate the complexities of modernity while preserving their cultural heritage.

The fifth chapter focuses on the Tharu religious-cultural dimensions. One of the primary objectives of this chapter is to document the ethno-history of Tharu's religious and cultural forms. However, this chapter aims to extend its framework on the

proposition of the religion for tribal society, which represents a system of practice that facilitates their everyday life and helps them to sustain their life process. The religious system of the Tharus is no different from this proposition. The religious and cultural traditions of the Tharu community serve as a valuable source of information about their past, providing insights into their social structures, beliefs, and values.

The religious system of the Tharu people plays a central role in their everyday lives, providing a framework for understanding their world and guiding their actions. This chapter explores the interconnectedness of the religious and cultural dimensions of Tharu society, with a particular focus on how these practices serve as a repository of historical memory. The religious practices and beliefs of the Tharu people are not merely abstract concepts but are grounded in the practicalities of daily life. Attributing to spirits or souls, embodying sacred symbols of plants and animals, and revering the power of natural elements is a traditional practice seen as a repository of natural conservation.

Moreover, the interplay of religious beliefs and the acquisition of tangible and non-material cultural resources has further contributed to the evolution of Tharu culture. While religious traditions may have provided a foundation for cultural identity, the incorporation of new ideas and practices has led to a dynamic and multifaceted cultural landscape.

In conclusion, this chapter provides a religious and cultural matrix of Tharu society, representing a complex and interconnected system that shapes the lives of its members. By exploring the relationship between religion and culture, the chapter sheds light on the ways in which the Tharu people have used their traditions to preserve nature and their historical memory and sense of identity.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

- Tharus' deep connection to the forests of Terai has been central to their cultural identity and economic practices.
- Colonial rule and subsequent land reforms had a profound impact on the Tharu community, leading to displacement, marginalization, and changes in their traditional ways of life.
- The Tharu community has a rich cultural heritage, including their customs, beliefs, and social structures.
- The Tharus have faced significant challenges related to poverty, land rights, and cultural preservation in recent decades.
- The Tharu community's resilience and adaptability are rooted in their strong cultural identity, traditional knowledge, community-based initiatives, and individual resilience.

The ethno-history of the Tharu community in West Champaran offers a compelling narrative of resilience and perseverance in the face of adversity. Throughout their history, the Tharu people have endured a myriad of challenges, including political instability, economic hardship, and social marginalization. Yet, despite these obstacles, they have managed to maintain their cultural identity and continue to thrive as a vibrant community. Their resilience is evident in their ability to adapt to changing historical contexts. They have successfully integrated elements from other cultures into their own traditions, creating a unique and dynamic cultural heritage. Moreover, the Tharu people have demonstrated a strong commitment to preserving their traditional practices despite modernization and globalization. The Tharu community's perseverance is also reflected

in their ongoing struggles for recognition and equality. Despite facing discrimination and marginalization, the Tharu people have actively advocated for their rights and fought for social justice. Their perseverance has led to significant progress in recent years, as they have gained greater recognition and visibility within Indian society.

In conclusion, the ethno-history of the Tharu community in West Champaran is a testament to their remarkable resilience and perseverance. Their ability to overcome adversity, maintain their cultural identity, and advocate for their rights serves as an inspiration to others. The Tharu people's story is a reminder of the enduring power of the human spirit and the importance of preserving cultural diversity. They have managed to maintain their cultural heritage and continue to thrive. By understanding their history and experiences, we can better appreciate their unique contributions to the region and support their ongoing efforts to address the challenges they face.