



Transformation of Tharu Culture through the Market in Mid-Western, Nepal

Anil Belbase

Central Department of Anthropology, Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur, Nepal
belbaseanil@gmail.com

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Abstract

This paper examines how the market contributes to the transformation of the Tharu culture in western Nepal. This study employs the concept of the neoliberal self, or agency, to examine how market-mediated neoliberal self-mediation leads to changes in culture. Earlier research primarily focused on the general patterns of the economic practices of community, exchange, consumption, and distribution, but did not precisely answer how the market determines these processes. Similarly, previous studies overlooked how such changes in exchange, consumption, and distribution impact the everyday life of the community and their cultural practices. To explore and capture perspectives on both the market and the Tharu culture, an ethnographic approach is employed to collect qualitative data through observation, personal narratives, and key-informant interviews. A grounded theory was used to analyze the collected data. A Tanku village Ward no. 3 of Buddhabhumi Municipality was selected as the research site to collect primary data. The findings indicate that the market serves as a motivational factor driving transformation in the culture. Similarly, it depicts that the market reconstructs, reshapes, and innovates the culture and everyday life of the Tharu. Therefore, market principles are essential for promoting and developing a market-based society and culture. The paper concludes that market-based human agency, in the form of neoliberal self-consciousness, is responsible for the transformation of the Tharu culture.

Keywords: cultural transformation, customary organizations, neoliberal-Market, self-consciousness

Introduction

This paper is primarily an ethnographic study of the market and its impact on the Tharu culture, an indigenous group in Nepal. Nepal entered the free market in the late 1980s following the formal adoption of neoliberal policies. However, Nepal entered world markets much earlier through the recruitment of Gurkha soldiers into the British Army and through trade with India and China (Mishra, 2006 (2062 B.S.)). These early connections began to shape the cultural practices and rituals of different indigenous peoples in Nepal. Such interconnectedness with the global market not only modified their cultural practices but also restructured their everyday lives.

The Tharu are Nepal's second-largest indigenous group, constituting 6.2 percent of the total population (NSO, 2023). They have distinct cultural practices and ways of life (Guneratne, 1994). This society is considered a "non-market economy" (Polanyi, 1944). The *Lal Mohar* (royal edict) indicates that the Tharu were the principal settlers of the Tarai, cultivating the land to feed the population and paying taxes to the royal treasury (Krauskopff, & Meyer, 2000). The Tharu were skilled cultivators who produced primarily to meet

their households' needs. Still, they sold their produce in the bazaar (i.e., *haatbazaar*) to raise cash, which was used to pay taxes and purchase essentials such as clothing and kerosene (Guneratne, 1996). However, their everyday practices and culture have undergone rapid changes, particularly after the 1950s. Their subsistence agriculture and livestock production system, *madatiya* (volunteer labor), *sakhlaraa* (mutual labor exchange), and *begari* (corvée labor) labor system, land tenure, and services have also changed.

According to English (1985), both rural and urban areas of the Tarai, Middle Hills, and Himalayas have long practiced *haatbazaars* and religious fairs. Religious fairs (*mela*) held regularly throughout the year at various shrines of Nepal also primarily provided an opportunity for trade (Guneratne, 2022). They were, and still are, the principal means of circulating and exchanging agricultural and domestic commodities produced by peasants and artisans (English, 1985). In such fairs and *haatbazaars*, culture is exchanged and consumed. Earlier studies in Nepal suggest that culture is also embedded within the market. For example, Liechty (Liechty, 2002) argues that consumption, either in the form of goods or of culture,



equally contributes to the restructuring of culture. Similarly, Rankin (2004) argues that, due to neoliberalism and open-market policies, lower-caste Newar groups in the town of Sankhu, north of the Kathmandu Valley, have capitalized on economic opportunities. As a result, their cultural practices have changed. All these studies show that neoliberalism is not only a “political ideology,” as Thorsen and Lie (Thorsen, & Lie, 2007) describe, but also a cultural form that controls the everyday life of the Global/Third World in the name of maintaining the system and governmentality (Hilgers, 2011). Hence, the market shapes people’s everyday lives (Rankin, 2004).

Historically, the Tharus had a subsistence economy in which agricultural products were circulated, traded, and exchanged at *haatbazaars*. However, following the implementation of free-market and neoliberal policies in Nepal, the “economics of practices” (Bourdieu, 1977) were gradually shaped by industrial and commercial markets. This transformation in economic practices and markets also restructured their cultural practices and social institutions.

However, market implications for Tharu’s everyday life reveal deep contradictions that require examination. The commodification of land and labor contributed to income generation, but they are increasingly marginalized and are becoming tenant farmers; Kamaiya requires investigation. The commodification of the land and labor system brought changes in the Tharu’s economic life; economic activity, culture, everyday life, relations, houses, traditions, Tharu villages, customary organization, and kinship that require examination. The Maghi festival, embedded in ritual and customary organizations such as Badhghar’s and Guruwa’s roles, has also changed; however, how markets have contributed to these changes require examination. Similarly, the Tharu people, who have maintained a subsistence livelihood system and an economic life embedded in their rituals, labor, land ownership, and local exchange, have changed, but how they have changed requires further examination.

This paper, therefore, focuses on how the market has shaped their cultural practices, rituals, rites of passage, and social institutions. It investigates the everyday life of Tharu as shaped by the market forces. Therefore, it examines changing cultural practices among the Tharu.

Methodology

This study primarily relies on a qualitative research method, using an ethnographic approach for data collection. A total of 16 informants were purposively selected for personal narratives and key-informant interviews. Participant observation, personal narratives, key informant interviews, and unstructured interview instruments/tools were used for collect data. Data analysis primarily involves systematically classifying, categorizing, and patterning collected data. The collected data were analyzed after coding. All collected data were reviewed and cross-checked to address the research questions. Relevant and essential quotations from all interviews, informal conversations, and narratives were included in the final analysis and incorporated into this study as informants’ quotations. The collected data were coded using grounded theory’s open, axial, and selective coding. Finally, the empirical data and the theoretical memos and variables were integrated. The integration of both was further developed in parallel and prepared for assembly within the conceptual sets. The fieldwork was conducted in Tanku village, Buddhabhumi Municipality, Ward

No. 3, Kapilvastu District, Lumbini Province, from January 2016 to May 2016. It was previously a Tharu dominant village, but with market expansion, the village experienced high rates of migration in recent years. As a result, the village gradually became a melting pot of people of different cultures. In this context, such migration led to the commoditization of Tharu land and labor. As the number of Tharu youth employed abroad increases, they are increasingly interconnected with the global market through labor, finance, and commodities.

Findings

Theoretical Perspectives on Market and Culture

The market is one of the major economic institutions through which people exchange goods and services. The market is not only external to culture but also a socio-culturally constructed system embedded in rituals, norms, meanings, institutions, and everyday practices that are shaped and reshaped by the market process (Ghaffari et al., 2019). Similarly, Polanyi (1944) argued that markets are embedded within cultural ideology and social institutions. Material and non-material cultures are circulated and traded in the market. But culture is not only determinative of material and non-material culture, but it also encompasses specific human actions. Culture is also a historical process (Wolf, 1982) in which individual actions intersect in a world of symbolic systems (Sahlins, 1976, as cited in Moore, 2000, p. 372). Therefore, “culture is not a once-for-all influence but an ongoing process, continuously constructed and reconstructed during interaction” (Granovetter, 1985).

Today, land, labor, and money are controlled and determined by the market, which has become a central institution of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism represents an expansion of economic opportunity, market, consumption, western knowledge, practices, science and technology, education, dress, and food habits. Therefore, Harvey (2005) argued that neoliberalism seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market. Neoliberalism is, hence, an ideological campaign that is responsible for “erasing and remaking the world” (Klein, 2008) that impacts individual everyday practices (Hoffman et al., 2006). Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1977) argued that the “economics of practices” examines the cultural processes through which value is created in both material and symbolic domains. This influence on everyday economic processes also shapes people’s everyday lives. Hence, neoliberalism and the market are responsible for cultural production and social production (Rankin, 2004).

Polanyi (1957) argued that market and exchange are coextensive. The market functions as an exchange institution. Although market institutions are exchange institutions, market and exchange are not coterminous: exchange at set rates occurs under reciprocative or redistributive forms of integration, whereas exchange at bargained rates is limited to price-making markets (Polanyi, 1957, pp. 266-267). In other words, Polanyi argues that substantivist economic human activities are embedded in social institutions. They are not independent of cultural ideology or of social institutions such as the kinship system, religion, politics, family, and social structure. Hence, the market is not disembedded from culture, institution, and society (Polanyi, 1957). Similarly, there is a change in the forms of land, labor, and money. When land, labor, and money are commodified, they are produced for trade, which affects the restructuring and shifts

in the culture and society of any group (Polanyi, 1944; Rankin, 2004). Hence, when land, labor, and money were disembedded from cultural ideology, social institutions, and social structure, they brought change in the society, which is principally responsible for “The Great Transformation” (Polanyi, 1944) of culture and everyday practices of any cultural group.

Market and Transformation in the Society

The weekly market is one of the factors transforming the culture in the study area. In this regard, Srivastava argued that the influence of commercial contact through biweekly markets and fairs that are held in the Tarai is considerably felt among the Tharus, and it tends to facilitate the transmission of new ideas along with the import of new goods and articles among Tharu individuals (Srivastava, 1999). The Tharus formulated some rules to control them. Among various rules, one states that women must not visit marketplaces; if they are found there, their husbands must pay a fine of Rs. 25 (Srivastava, 1999). Similarly, it is in the sphere of economic contact that the gravest problems arise, for here the aim of the traders, merchants, and contractors is absolutely irreconcilable with the aspirations of the Tharus. As a result, the market and money economies introduce new problems in Tharu society through monetization (Srivastava, 1999). These open-market policies, markets, and monetization are responsible for bringing about changes in everyday life that restructure and reshape cultural practices.

Guneratne (1999) observed that the market became increasingly dominant in mediating the relations between human beings. In Chitwan, though the economy remained overwhelmingly agrarian, the market (in both labor and other commodities) has become increasingly important in the district. However, Tharus in Chitwan perceive bazaars and towns as symbols of wealth and progress, which are dominated by high-caste groups. For them, the high-caste Brahmins and their values represent the best available model for surviving and succeeding in a society in which relationships with both people and things are mediated by cash. Well-off Tharus, particularly large landowners engaged in farming primarily as a capitalist venture, successfully transitioned to the new economy on the one hand. The *bahariya* (laborer Tharu), who lived by selling their labor power, suffered most from the development of a modern economy based on wage labor and the market. Now, to enter trade or to obtain salaried employment is more desirable than hard labor in the field. Their lifestyle and consumption patterns began to diverge from those of Tharus at large. The elite Tharu could afford brick houses, motorcycles, tractors, and television sets, thereby transforming their everyday lives (Guneratne, 1999). In this context, the development of the homestay market has contributed to economic and monetary activity in Tharu village, which has also encouraged the Tharu to preserve traditional architecture and revitalize bamboo crafting and artisanal skills (Karmacharya et al., 2025). While discussing the culturally embedded storage structures of Tharu practices, Chaudhry et al. (Chaudhary et al., 2025) argued that *Dehari* is an earthen storage structure, built at home by Tharu women using a Tharu indigenous technology. This technology is gradually being replaced by market-based aluminum and plastic bin storage promoted in Tharu villages by governmental and non-governmental organizations. This shows that the traditional Tharu indigenous knowledge-based handmade items were replaced by cheap

market-based manufacturing, which also contributed to restructuring their everyday life and labor system. In this way, their cultural practices and everyday life have been restructured and reshaped by the new economy, the market, and cash, i.e., monetization.

Market and Transformation of Culture Economy and Production

The primary components of neoliberalization are the market and the economy. It is the most important element responsible for restructuring Tharu cultural practices, because the economy is a social symbol with a specific function in social processes (Marx, 1972). In the past, most Tharu owned large amounts of land, and some were large landowners and therefore economically well-off. They were self-sufficient by agricultural products. However, the breakdown of the joint family, the migration of the Pahari group, and economic changes altered land ownership, which affected their everyday lives. It reshaped their cultural practices because land had been central to production. Production was subsistence-based in the past. But today production has become commercial. The integration of Tharu into the marketplace contributed to a cultural transformation by shifting the community's logic from subsistence to commercialization (Vishwokarma, 2024). Most Tharu have now begun both commercial and subsistence agriculture. They select market seeds that yield more. They are attracted to mass-production systems. The surplus production is sold in the market. Their agricultural system became monetized. The monetized production system gradually changed its everyday practices. Similarly, they started to reform their economic process. They have left some economic processes that are unbeneficial to the new economic process. One elder Tharu informant said:

In the past, there was subsistence agriculture and an economy. We worked accordingly. But today it is commercial and driven by business motives... the Tharu now buy *Bazaariya* things from local shops and consume them, which was almost impossible in the past due to lack of money. But today Tharu youths are involved in foreign employment, and they send the money to their family. Therefore, most of Tharu family have cash now. It was impossible to see cash in past. Similarly, there were no shops in this village, but now there are five to six shops in the village. It means rural economy has become monetized.

It illustrates that changes in the Tharu people's economic processes restructured their everyday practices. The market is primarily responsible for the change in their “economics of practice” (Bourdieu, 1977). Today's economic processes and practices of the Tharu are determined by the market. It reveals that “markets themselves as a mechanism of governance that carefully regulates individual behavior” (Rankin, 2001. p. 33). Similarly, the neoliberal economy comprises local economic practices and explores the cultural process through which value is created in both material and symbolic domains (Bourdieu, 1977).

A consensus among neoliberal scholars emphasized the expanding role of market forces (Rankin, 2004). But the market was very limited one decade ago. They went to the market in groups and bought the necessary things. In the past, markets were limited to Butwal, Bhairahawa, Taulihawa, Krishnanagar as well as *haatbazaar* (weekly

market) at Maharajung. It was impossible to find any shops, and no Tharu were involved in business. Some Baniya (Madheshi) and Dhuniya (Muslim small traders) brought what they could carry on their heads. However, markets have now extended from village to village. The village is full of shops. All types of shops and outlets selling commodities are open in the village. As a result, in a market-led economy, everything required or desired is readily available in the village. On the question of how the market affected the village life of the Tharu, the informant, who is a district-level Tharu leader, said:

Today market is everywhere. We found *Ghar Ghar Bazaar* (every house has market) today. Everyone purchases and consumes commodities from those shops if you desire and require that things. For instance, if you do not have cauliflower on your land, you may go to the shops and purchase it. But in the past, even if you wanted cauliflower, due to the absence of markets and shops, you consumed vegetables that you had on your land. In this way, our village life has been affected by the market.

It illustrates a massive expansion of the market in contemporary times, which has contributed to the restructuring and modification of the daily life of the Tharu village. This supports that neoliberalism promotes and produces market-based sociality and culture (Harvey, 2005). Due to the spread of market-based culture, daily life, which was limited to agriculture, is now being drawn toward other activities. Entrepreneurship has started in agriculture, farming, and other businesses. Urbanization, along with greater adoption of modern agriculture, also brought changes to their everyday lives (Sharma et al., 2026). The entrepreneurial and business-related attitudes have increased among the Tharu. The Tharu, who were previously dependent on subsistence agriculture, are now entering other businesses and enterprises due to market demand. It supports that neoliberalism is a regime of immanent social control through the market (Deleuze, 1992), on the one hand, and on the other hand, neoliberalism is a way of life, and to live and survive in a market-based society, thus is to reproduce this understanding in the practice of one's daily life (Kiersey, 2011). Similarly, due to market opportunities, the commodities they produce are readily traded in the village market. In the past, people exchanged their products for other products. Guilds were the primary intermediaries for the sale of agricultural products. Today, the Tharu sell their agricultural products, such as paddy, to the mills, and their vegetable products at the *haatbazaar* (weekly market). As a result, competition, entrepreneurship, and profitability became their primary norms instead of subsistence livelihood.

Consumption and Lifestyle

The increase in consumption is significant in restructuring "the self" (McGuigan, 2014) of the Tharu. This self is more oriented by the choices of freedom in consumption. Their choices of food, dress, and technology have expanded. Their food consumption behavior has changed. For instance, they only took meat during the festival time a decade ago. But today, they consume it whenever they desire due to the market. Their food items also expanded from agricultural products like rice to noodles and other dry foods. The domestic traditional *Mauha Daru* has been replaced by the refinery alcohol.

The traditional Tharu dresses are replaced by fashionable and Western-style dresses. This is all due to the market and technology. The uses of technology have also changed. Now everyone has a cellular phone and a TV, which are the primary sources of information on new goods and commodities in the market. Hence, they have contributed to increased consumption of mass-produced commodities. As a result, their traditional food and dress patterns have been restructured. Their food and dress are also gradually subject to market control. In this context, a young Tharu local leader and activist said, "The market is the place of consumption of culture, food, dress, and technology as well as other commodities". This means the market has influenced the Tharu's consumption behavior. This is a "self that is produced through an engagement with a market" (Gershon, 2011, p. 539). Tharu youth consume both material and non-material goods. Hence, this finding supports that choice is vital in the sphere of consumption and the consumer is sovereign (McGuigan, 2014). Similarly, the desire among Tharu youth for market goods has increased over time. It portrays that "the commodity fetishism" (Marx, 1972) of market goods is increasing among the Tharu. The young Tharu informant said:

Commodities and items are becoming closer day by day as markets expand. Today, the readymade items and commodities are available at your doorstep. It means you do not need to store any items and commodities in your house. You obtain what you desire at any time. For instance, in the past, girls spent months weaving the *Dhakiya*. But today it is readily available in the market when you need it. As a result, the girls are not interested in weaving the *Dhakiya*. In this way, what do you desire when you get it at any time? Due to this, the traditional skills and knowledge are also disappearing.

It illustrates that, due to the availability of mass-produced, readymade items in the market, the Tharu are attracted to such items. As a result, their traditional skills and knowledge are in a critical state, and some informants indicated that most of these have disappeared. This shows that due to the market, their traditional culture is influenced by modern market tradition, and consumption becomes a sign of modernity. Similarly, the market encourages the consumption of commodities. The influence of commercial contact through biweekly markets and fairs held in the Tarai tends to facilitate the transmission of new ideas and the import of new goods and articles (Srivastava, 1999). As a result, their "taste" (Bourdieu, 1984) has been shaped by the market. Their taste has changed and been restructured by the consumption of the commodities available in the market. It means it contributed to the transformation of their everyday practices and way of life from subsistence and non-market to the market and consumerism.

Land, Labor and Money

The Tharus were big landlords in the past. They practiced specialized labor services. But later, for various reasons, they gradually lost their landholdings. The past big landlords now have only a small amount of land. Hence, they become small farmers. In this context, even after selling their land, they reclaimed it in *Bataiya* for sharecropping. It means that rent serves as the market price for the use of land (Polanyi, 1944). Furthermore, the trade in land and

rents, in the form of sharing crops for cultivation, is responsible for the transformation of land into a commodity and its commodification. Hence, land becomes the source of income for those who supply it (Polanyi, 1944).

Traditionally, land and labor were not separated; labor formed part of life, land remained part of nature, life and nature formed an articulate whole (Polanyi, 1957). But this has changed. The change in the land tenure system also affected their traditional labor systems. In other words, land rent is responsible for bringing about change in traditional kin- and village-based volunteer labor services. The paid labor system replaced the volunteer labor system. Hence, the free-labor or communal village-labor system in Tharu culture in the past has broken down due to the new system of paid labor (Krauskopff, 1999; McDonough, 1999). Similarly, the kin- and village-based labor services are replaced by the market-based or demand-and-supply-based wage labor services. The labor system was also modified in response to market demand and supply. It shows that wages are the price for the use of labor power (Polanyi, 1944). According to informants, labor also becomes commodified today. Labor services demand wages. The market opportunity, rationality, and profitability modified and restructured the land tenure system and labor system. They have now become sources of income rather than a means of subsistence. Therefore, the use of labor power could be universally bought and sold at a price called wages, and the use of land could be negotiated for a price called rent (Polanyi, 1944). Changes in the agricultural system, the expansion of markets, the rise in consumerism, and the commodification of land and labor services increased the supply of money.

As a result, the money-lending system also increased in the Tharu village. The Tharu village, which was primarily based on a subsistence economy, has now become a money-based economy. In this context, the money has also become a source of income through interest. It means the money also becomes a commodity. They invest cash to earn interest. The interest is the price for the use of money (Polanyi, 1944). As a result, land, labor, and money have become commodities sold in the market. They are now elements of the market. The land, labor, and money are commodified, and their prices are called, respectively, rent, wages, and interest (Polanyi, 1944). This commodification of land, labor, and money contributed to modifying their everyday practices, way of life, and cultural practices. The subsistence becomes profit. The non-market Tharu society and culture have now become a market-based, profitability-based society. The market gradually controlled their culture and way of life. In this context, the conversion of land, labor, and money into commodities is the "Great Transformation" (Polanyi, 1944). In addition, money has become the primary means of barter. Hence, money is only another name for a commodity used in exchange more often than another, and which is therefore acquired mainly to facilitate exchange (Polanyi, 1944). This shows that the market transforms land, labor, and money into commodities, treating them as marketable goods.

Family, Kinship, and Traditional Organizations

The market refigures the relationship and leads a cohesive, collective society toward individualism and autonomy (Gershon, 2011). Similarly, the Tharu are more focused on individual benefit than on collective benefit today. They are not very concerned about the

groups' integration today. They perceive collectiveness as a constraint for individual benefits and development. The elder Tharus realize that the Tharu youths are more autonomous. Hence, an increase in autonomy, i.e., neoliberal agent, among the Tharu led towards a market-based society. Their primary norm has now shifted from collectivity and cohesion toward individualism and the self. Therefore, the neoliberal self is composed of usable traits and skills (Gershon, 2011).

They believe that they can earn as much as they want and consume commodities as much as they want. As a result, the emphasis on the self and individuality reshaped the cultural practices and norms that underpinned the Tharu's social solidarity, collectivity, and cohesion. Moreover, the increasing sense of autonomy and self among the Tharu led them toward individualism. As a result, a sense of autonomous self among the Tharu is one primary reason for the breakdown of joint families. This kind of self is a "neoliberal self, figuring a competitive individual who is exceptionally self-reliant and rather indifferent to the fact that his or her predicament is shared with others" (McGuigan, 2014; p. 236). As a result, they are more attracted to the nuclear family. They perceived the joint family as a barrier to their desires. It indicates that the traditional agricultural Tharu society has gradually shifted toward and been controlled by a market-based social order and culture. It illustrates that the market promotes and produces market-based sociality and culture (Harvey, 2007). Furthermore, transformation in the family system also affected the Tharu kinship system. Most Tharu youth are not familiar with secondary and tertiary kin. They are focused primarily on the kin. This change in the Tharu family system impacted the responsibility toward kin. The bond of biological or blood-relatedness and of marriage (affinal) relatedness is weaker today. Most Tharu youth use "freedom of choice" even in kin selection. They are more calculative. They are making their decisions based on profitability. Hence, neoliberalism has entered kinship domains through the idioms of autonomy, responsibility, and choice (Ellison, 2009). They were attracted to new forms of kinship in society for their survival.

Similarly, weakness in kinship role, increasing sense of autonomous self and individualism gradually impacted the traditional Tharu organization – *Badhghar*, *Kisan*, *Chaukidar*, *Naun*, *Lohara* – of the Tharu. The *Badhghar* system is an important traditional/customary institution among the Tharu and in the village. The traditional/customary institution, *Badhghar*, has traditionally organized and managed the community and is a democratic system of governance (Dhakal, 2024). The *Badhghar* is the premier of the Tharu village. Everyone respects him and is obligated to fulfill his decisions. His duties range from canal maintenance to peacekeeping and the control of village strife. He has the authority to reward or punish the villagers for their activities. He is also the chief judge of the village council. However, due to declining cohesion and collectivity and increasing individualism and autonomy, the *Badhghar* role is also diminished. As a result, the youth have begun to disobey *Badhghar*'s decision. It illustrates that the importance of *Badhghar* is declining and that its role is limited to *Kulahi* (canal maintenance).

Everyday Life and Cultural Expression

The commercialization of Tharu festivals and the

urbanization of Tharu villages also contributed to changes in their festivals and culture (Shrestha, & Gajurel, 2024). The highway is responsible for expanding the market. The spread of the market primarily changed the homogeneous Tharu village into a heterogeneous village. The different groups of people migrated to the Tharu village. Especially, the Pahari hill people have migrated. Due to the influx of other people, interaction between the Tharu and others increased significantly. Similarly, cultural contacts and commodity contacts also increased. Their behavioral phenomenon was influenced and structured by “market-based sociality and culture” (Harvey, 2005). Their way of life was restructured and modified “to live and survive in a market-based society” (Kiersey, 2011). In addition, the market is the foremost factor behind the changes in the Tharu’s cultural practices. The Tharu cultural norms, beliefs, values, as well as individual behavior, were based on a non-market-based society and culture, but this has been restructured by the neoliberal self, which plays an important motivating role to gear towards the autonomous subject of the economic rationality, profitability, and competitiveness (skills). The market is not only the place of goods, commodities, and items, but it is also a labor services trade, and it is also a place of skills, capacities, and cultural exchange.

Moreover, language is a means of interaction between two persons. But in a market conversation between two people, the conversation is in the dominant language. They interact in the dominant language. In other words, the market indirectly promotes the dominant language. Similarly, due to the marketplace and people involved in the business, the Tharu are forced to speak other people’s languages. Apart from this, the education system is also in the dominant language. As a result, the Tharu are forced to speak other people’s language. The market and education are responsible for restructuring and modifying their language skills. But due to the Tharus’ determination to preserve their language, elder Tharus are now encouraging their children to use Tharu in their daily conversations in both private (home) and public (market) spaces.

The Tharu had long one-story houses made of wood, mud, and *batti* (branches and grass from various shrubs and trees), with *Khapari* (tiles) roofing. These houses had small types of *Konti* (room) inside. These *Konti* were separated by *Dehari* (grain store mud container). The *Dehari* is used for seed and grain storage and for the *Konti* separator, and has cultural importance, such as wall paintings (*Astimki*) to celebrate the birthday of Lord Krishna (Chaudhary et al., 2025). On the wall, they printed various pictures and art. As a result, the village was easily recognized as a Tharu village and Tharu house. But due to the expansion, this housing structure has also been modified. In this context, the Tharu practiced a large extended joint family in the past. Therefore, their house was also long

with several *Konti*. The house is also a ritual and economic unit, and its size depends on the siblings’ relationship and on the household’s agrarian situation (Krauskopff, 1999). However, “the consumption aspect of neoliberal self” (McGuigan, 2014, p. 235) motivated the Tharu to construct cemented houses without wall paintings.

Notably, their settlement also spread from the main village. The expansion of the market is responsible for the dispersion of their settlement. The spread of the market restructured the traditional Tharu village. There are several Tharu cultural features that revealed the Tharu village as an important marker of Tharu culture in the past, but now new houses are being built away from the main settlement on the one hand, and on the other hand, new buildings are dispersing the new Tharu households out across the village landscape (McDonaugh, 1999). This change shows shifts in the settlement pattern, the landscape of the Tharu village, house patterns, and Tharu culture. The market helps sustain festivals by providing material and economic support, thereby contributing to cultural revival (Shrestha, & Gajurel, 2024). In the past, Tharu celebrated Maghi in a traditional way at the village level by conducting different rituals. The Tharu did not celebrate Maghi carnival like today. But today the market promotes the Tharu to celebrate the Maghi carnival from east to west of Nepal. Therefore, they organize the Maghi carnival. According to the informants, the Maghi carnival is now an important event for promoting Tharu culture. The Tharu are organizing the Maghi festival from east to west with food stalls, dance competitions, drama competitions, and songs by Tharu singers. During the Maghi festivals, Tharu foods are sold, and people from other communities come to eat them, such as *Gonghi* (a type of snail), rat pickle, and *Dhikari* (a food item prepared from rice floor). It illustrates that the market has promoted the indigenous peoples’ culture. In this context, the market believes in demand and supply. Therefore, the market promotes the Maghi carnival due to demand for Tharu food items and attire among other communities. Due to market promotion of Maghi carnival, it contributed to the revival of *Gonghi*, rat pickle, *Dhikari*, production of *Dhakiya* (basket), *Machiya* (stool), *Gonari* (carpet), and the wearing of Tharu dress among the east-to-west Tharu. However, it has commercialized the Maghi rituals. This shows how the commodification of Tharu culture changes the Tharu cultural and social life into market goods.

The above analysis shows that with market expansion in the Tharu village, the market separated and disembedded the Tharu economy and economic life from its social institutions, customary institutions, traditional culture, and social life. The Tharu village, governed by Tharu culture, norms, and customs, has changed and now operates under market-based norms. With the spread of markets, Tharu individuals are

no longer interested in the community but in cash income, and their everyday lives are driven by market aspirations. The collective society, subsistence livelihood, and land-based Tharu community are shifting toward a market-oriented, individualistic society. This means that this structural shift has transformed Tharu's everyday life and culture. Therefore, this research has shown that the transformation of Tharu's everyday life and culture due to the market is a salient example of the "Great Transformation" (Polanyi, 1944) at the local level.

Conclusion

It is concluded that market-based human agency, in the form of neoliberal self-consciousness, is responsible for the transformation of Tharu culture. In other words, the market-induced market-based everyday life among the Tharus of Nepal. Neoliberalization, coupled with the expansion of markets in the rural region of the western Tarai and the emergence of human agency shaped by the neoliberal self-mediated through the market, is the primary factor driving transformation in Tharu action, practices, and both material and non-material culture. Furthermore, Neoliberalization, together with the growing penetration of the market in the rural economy and the neoliberal self, is a major factor in bringing changes to their rites de passage, economic practices and processes, and way of life. Similarly, the nuclear family system, modified marriage system, modified *Rotibhat*, modified and added festivals and process of its celebration, patterns of foods, dress, modified norms and values, market-based way of life, and society from a non-market-based society and agricultural way of life to modified economic actions and economics of practices can be taken as examples that Tharu culture is changing.

The increasing consumption of market-produced commodities instead of domestic products, engagement in wage labor instead of volunteer services like *Sakhlaaraa* and *Madatiya*, trade of land, and market-based economic processes can be taken as examples that the market has targeted for reshaping not only the economy but also the society, culture, and everyday life of the Tharu. In this sense, market principles play a central role in promoting and producing a market-oriented society and culture. Similar trends can be found among other indigenous groups of Nepal.

Declarations

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About the Authors

Anil Belbase  holds an MPhil in Anthropology from the Central Department of Anthropology, Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur, Nepal. He has successfully completed his PhD

pre-viva and is awaiting the final viva examination. He has expertise in both quantitative and qualitative research. He has presented papers at national and international conferences and has published articles and research reports.

Email: belbaseanil@gmail.com