

# Dhartiputras: The Tharus, Their Indigeneity, and the Effects of Modernity

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## Abstract

*The paper explores how modernity has affected the indigeneity of the Tharu people who have lived for years on the outskirts of the Chitwan National Park in Sauraha. Once their residence before the park was established, Chitwan National Park is mostly unreachable to them. This paper investigates the indigeneity of the Tharus living especially in and around Sauraha, Chitwan, with regard to their survival, which is mostly dependent on nature and natural entities. Furthermore, the paper also explores how the shifting ritis affect their way of life. Modernity has negatively impacted the Tharu people, therefore influencing not only their way of life but also their indigeneity. The main professions—farming, fishing, and tourism—they used to depend on have now been greatly influenced by the modern practices that have easily devalued their traditional practices. This study is carried out based on the interviews between 2017 and 2020 with some local Tharus and additional secondary sources that read Tharus as the Dhartiputras.*

**Keywords:** *Tharu; indigeneity; Dhartiputra; Chitwan; modernity; ritis*

## Introduction

Tharu<sup>2</sup>, an Indigenous group residing in the Terai region of the Himalayan foothills in southern Nepal, is mostly located nearby the rivers and forests. This Indigenous group is scattered throughout the foothills of the Himalayas. My aim in this paper is to explore the ancestral history of the Tharus by looking into their culture, tradition, and relationship with nature and natural entities; their day-to-day livelihood activities; and their cultural practices. Their embeddedness with nature has a boundless significance for their livelihood, and so they are also known as Dhartiputra<sup>3</sup>—children of the earth. The 2021 census on Caste/Ethnicity, Language & Religions of Nepal reported by the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) states that the population of Tharus in Nepal is 1,807,124, which constitutes 6.2 percent of the total population and is the fourth largest population group in Nepal (p. 31).

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1 Mr. Paudel is a PhD scholar at the University of Texas at El Paso, US.

2 the aborigines/Indigenous group of the Terai region. In Chitwan there are several Tharu Villages near and around Chitwan National Park.

3 the vernacular name of the child of the earth.

This research specifically involves the Tharu community of Chitwan National Park in and around Sauraha region. It is an ethnographic research; therefore, my major primary resources are the interviews with the local Indigenous Tharus during my visit to Chitwan between 2017 and 2020, and the secondary resources are some of the scholarly research based on them. To survey and compare the rhetorical traditions, cultural practices, and the effects of modernity in their community, I have brought references of some Asian, Native American, and Indigenous Studies scholars. I have also brought references from the interviews (2019-2020) that I have taken with some local Tharu people of Sauraha, Chitwan, during my frequent visits (2017-2020) to the site.

## **The Origin**

Tharus are considered to be the original settlers of the Terai region; however, their origin always remains in debate. The Tharus are probably the oldest groups inhabiting the Terai belt of Nepal, very close to the heavily forested regions (p. 118), writes Dor Bahadur Bista in his book “People of Nepal.” Mclean (1999) also, in her work “Conservation and the Impact of Relocation on the Tharus of Chitwan, Nepal,” brings the reference of Nesfield about Tharus in Chitwan, who suggests that the word Tharu comes from “Thar,” which signifies forest, and hence Tharu means “the people of the forest” (p. 39). Similarly, the Tharus themselves say that they are the people of the forest (Müller- Böker, 1993). In an interview<sup>4</sup>, Dukhana Mahato (2020), a traditional dance instructor, dancer, and the permanent inhabitant of Bachhauli, based on his knowledge passed through the stories by his grand and great grandparents, talks about the origin of the Tharus:

I don't know exactly when our forefathers started living here, but from most of the stories my late grandfather used to tell me, I can say that we were here from the time of Gautam Buddha. We have lived in the forests for hundreds of years before any other groups settled here. Our forefathers settled here by cutting down the forests. We own this place. We are Indigenous to this place. Nature is our everything. We rely on the forests and the rivers for our rituals and all cultural performances. We are Dhartiputras. (Translated from Personal Communication, June 2020)

While taking interviews with individuals in Chitwan, specifically around Chitwan National Park and the Rapti River, almost everyone claimed that they are the children of the earth and nature; they are Dhartiputras. McLean (1999), in her study, brings the reference that tries to clarify the ties of Tharus with nature: “The land shapes their culture and their identity. The Tharus have lived in the forests of the Chitwan district

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4 a personal interview taken with Dukhana Mahato during the visit to Bachhauli nearby Chitwan National Park (2020, June).

for hundreds of years, maintaining strong economic, spiritual, and cultural links to the forests (p. 39).” McLean further elaborates on the connection and dependency of Tharus with nature:

The Tharus relied heavily on the collection of forest products such as wild fruits and vegetables and medicinal plants. Their traditional resource use included firewood, medicinal plant collection, hunting deer, rabbit, and wild boar; fishing; planting crops such as rice, mustard, corn, and lentils; harvesting a variety of species of grass; and collecting wild fruits and vegetables. The Tharus residing in the Chitwan region have a strong interconnectedness with their environment. They see the forest and the village as one entity. (p. 39)

In another interview<sup>5</sup>, Birendra Mahato (2020), the founder chair of the Tharu Cultural Museum and Research Center and also a local resident of Bachhauli, stresses the indigeneity of Tharus and their years of history in Chitwan:

The Tharu community had settled in the place many years ago before the establishment of the Chitwan National Park. The place then was very contagious for malaria. Our forefathers struggled a lot in the earlier days. We have always been helpful in the conservation of wildlife and supportive of conserving forests. We are the worshippers of Nature and consider nature as our god. We never build temples; rather, we identify a tree and worship it. Nature and Tharus are synonymous to each other. So, we are the Indigenous and aborigines to this place. (Translated from Personal Communication, June 2020)

A genetic study of Tharus done by a group of researchers (2014) about the Tharus in connection to their origin within the Terai jungle also supports their association with nature:

The Tharu are strongly associated with the ecological region of the Terai and claim a shared pan-Tharu ethnic identity—a view supported by the results of some genetic studies. Resistance to malaria is widespread among the Tharu. This may support an origin for the Tharu within the Terai jungles, as prolonged exposure to swampy, that is, malaria-rich environments could have led to natural selection favoring resistance. (p. 1405)

The indigeneity of the group could be possibly inculcated from all these references to how they belong to the place.

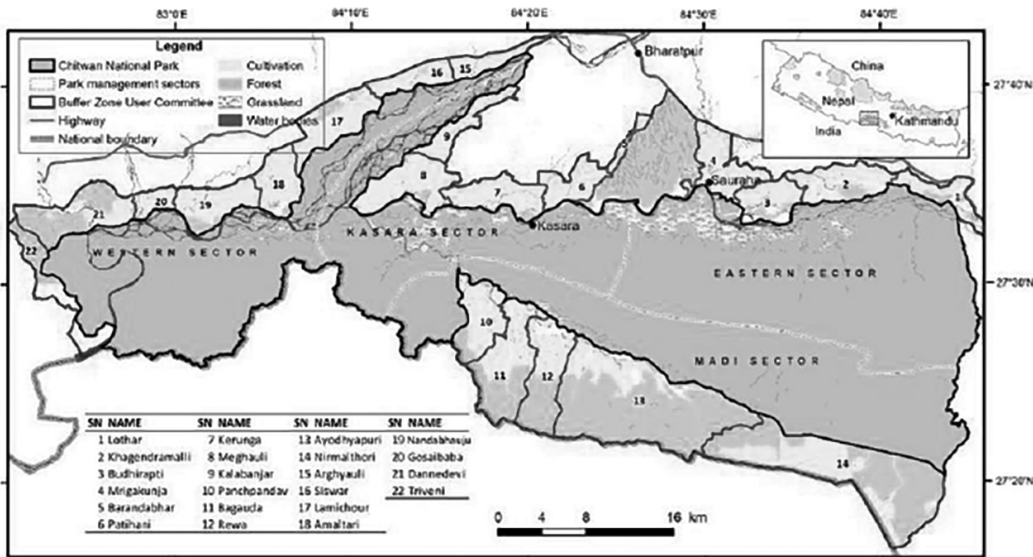
### **Chitwan: Home to Tharus**

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5 a personal interview taken with Birendra Mahato during the visit to Bachhauli nearby Chitwan National Park (2020, June).

Figure 1

Map of Chitwan showing Chitwan National Park and its territory



Chitwan, one of the seventy-seven districts of Nepal, is named after the Chitwan Valley, which lies in between the Mahabharata and Siwalik ranges, which are the foothills of the Himalayas. The major rivers of Chitwan are Rapti and Narayani. The Narayani River, also known as Sapta Gandaki, originates at the border with Tibet at the Nhubine Glacier in the Mustang region. The name changes as it comes downwards. Initially known as Kali Gandaki, it comes across Myagdi, Parbat, Gulmi, and Nawalparasi districts and then descends to Chitwan. In a place called Devghat, north of Chitwan, it mixes with Trishuli and is finally called Narayani. The seven tributaries of the Narayani are Kali Gandaki, the Trishuli, the Daraudi, Seti, Madi, Marsyangdi, and Budhi Gandaki. It travels all the way from Nepal and merges in the Ganges in India. Narayangadh, the major city of Chitwan, is located on the banks of the Narayani River. Rapti is another major river of Chitwan. There are two Raptis— East and West. The East Rapti merges with the Narayani River in Chitwan National Park, whereas the West Rapti merges with the Karnali and enters India. The origin of the Rapti River is in the mid-Himalayas. In the course of its flow from the Himalayas to the Terai region of Nepal, Rapti crosses Dang, Rupandehi, Nawalparasi, and Chitwan districts.

The majority of the population residing nearby the rivers in Chitwan: Narayani, and Rapti, and the national park area comprises the Tharu community. The dependency of the Tharus on these two major elements of nature, river and forest, is remarkable. The two rivers and the forests were the source of their livelihood before the establishment of

the Chitwan National Park. There was once a time when they used to fish in the rivers and sell them in the nearest market for their day-to-day living. Slowly and gradually, after the forest was established as a national park, the livelihood has been affected. Access to the resources, such as fishing in the Rapti during peak seasons and collecting fodder from the national park, which they had been doing for years, was restricted (McLean, p. 40). It has been affecting the cultural practices and traditional celebrations of the community. The new rules for using the fodder, timber, firewood, and other products from the forests and the development of the Rapti River as the site of Gharial (a species of crocodile) breeding has made the use of the products difficult. To add more to it, according to Mahato (2021), forced resettlement and forest closures in the push to establish Chitwan National Park resulted in the loss of thousands of Tharus' ancestral lands and rights (para 1).

### ***Ritus*<sup>6</sup> and their Effects on Tharu's Livelihood**

Ritus are the seasons of the Nepali calendar. Unlike the four seasons in the English calendar, the Nepali calendar follows the pattern of six ritus. All the ritus have their own special features. The best ritu for the Tharu people of Bachhauli is Hemanta (Pre-Winter Season), according to Birendra Mahato. The season is pleasing as it is harvesting time, and neither is it too cold nor too hot; it's moderate. *Basanta Ritu* (Spring season), *Sharad Ritu* (Autumn Season), *Hemanta Ritu* (Pre-Winter Season), and *Shishir Ritu* (Winter Season) are favorable for tourism, and the seasons are liked by the locals. But again, the other *Ritus* are not considered good, as during the period of time, the livelihoods of the people are challenged economically. The best and worst Ritus are obvious anthropocentric ideologies.

**Farming**, fishing, and tourism are among the major occupations of the Tharus. The change in seasons plays a vital role in all of their activities. There are advantages as well as difficulties in their livelihood in different seasons in terms of interaction with the river. Most of the occupations have direct interaction with rivers in various rituals, due to which people have more collective memories of the seizures, and they tend to express their problems in a fixed way.

Farming. Chitwan is one of the major crop-producing districts of Nepal. The major crop of Chitwan is paddy, which is followed by wheat, maize, mustard, buckwheat, and sesame. These crops are grown in different seasons. For cultivation, the river water is the major source. Chitwan gets its water for irrigation from the Narayani and Rapti

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6 The word *Ritu* is derived from the Vedic Sanskrit word *Rtu*, a fixed or appointed time, especially the proper time for sacrifice (*yajna*) or ritual in Vedic religion. Nepal has six *Ritus*: *Basanta* (spring), *Grishma* (summer), *Barsha* (rainy), *Sharad* (early autumn), *Hemanta* (pre-winter), and *Shishir* (winter).

rivers. The major canal systems for irrigation in Chitwan are the Khageri Canal System and the Narayani Lift System. These irrigation systems have two-way benefits to the locals. On the one hand, they get job opportunities, and on the other hand, the crop productivity increases. Since the water for irrigation is supplied from the rivers, the seasonal change in the level of water matters.

Changing *ritu* affects the irrigation requirements of a crop highly. The amount of timely precipitation is important for the crops to be healthy and productive. The rivers lack water during Basanta, Grishma, and Shishir, which affects the cultivation and the productivity. At the same time, during Barsha, the rainfall is so high that the flood inundated the landmass, and the agricultural activities are hindered. Sometimes hailstorms destroy the crops in Barsha. It makes the livelihood of the people troublesome due to the lack of food for the year and the consecutive years too. The effect in the source of water in *Barsha* is quite devastating. The parts of Tharu village remain under threat of flood. With changing *ritus*, the patterns of livelihood change. The locals of Chitwan, especially the Tharu community living nearby the rivers, are widely dependent on the rivers in multiple ways, ranging from cultivation, fishing, fodder collection, and tourism. The role of rivers in various *ritus* affects the people economically. The struggle and seizure follow.

The events of human struggle during the rainy season are enacted by capturing the nature and rivers in this context by multiple human habitations, mainly in the form of housing, even in those areas where flood deposits alluvial soil and makes the land fertile for crops. On the one hand, by the change of shape and size of the river in rainy seasons, the struggle begins, and the seizure is evident in building houses as soon as the season ends, thus blocking the entire nature space with developmental obstacles. Bharatpur teems with housing on the side of the Narayani River.

**Fishing.** Fishing is a major economic activity of the people of the area, and it too is affected as seasons change. One of the sources of livelihood for the local Tharu community residing near Rapti and Narayani is fishing. It is not always easy because of the change in season. Basanta *ritu* (mid-March to mid-May) and Sharad *ritu* (mid-September to mid-November) are best for fishing. These seasons support the local fishermen to generate income in these *ritus*. The inconsistency in temperature.

Fishing used to be another major economic activity of the people of the area, but after the establishment of the Chitwan National Park, the rules and regulations of fishing have been stricter than before. Due to certain legal bounds and the conservation purpose of critically endangered gharial species, fishing is restricted in certain areas of the Rapti River, a major site of gharials. The conservation of the gharial has become one of the major reasons to ban fishing, and that led to the disturbance in the livelihood of the Tharu fishermen community, which used to be their traditional occupation. Dhital, Jha,

and Campus (2002) suggest that habitat improvement will improve the fish quality and avoid winter desiccation.

Habitat improvement is an essential factor for fishery improvement. To avoid seasonal changes of water level, suitable pools should be created under the management of the local development authority. Such a practice will improve the fish habitat quality and avoid the winter desiccation. (p. 55)

The habitat improvement, in turn, will benefit the local fishermen and their livelihoods. This form of seasonal connection of the locals with rivers for their living instances is the economic interconnection with rivers. The dependence on fish farming has caused excessive pressure on the river and the surrounding nature.

**Tourism.** Like fishing and farming, tourism is also affected due to the change in Ritus. The tourism activities are more during September-November and February-April but are affected during barsha and grishma. The visit to the national park and the recreational activities are not accessible due to the climatic condition during those rituals. One of the chief sources of livelihood for the community people in Meghauli, situated in the outer core of Chitwan National Park and two big rivers, Narayani and Rapti, is ecotourism. Subedi (2017) writes:

Some of the prime tourism attractions of Meghauli are the rare flora and fauna, natural beauty, villages, community forests, cultural diversity, religious places, rivers, lakes, the world heritage CNP, eco-parks, picnic parks, and the sunset viewpoint. Due to these various tourism attractions, Meghauli has potential for the establishment of magnificent resorts and future development of tourism. Meghauli is situated by the side banks of CNP and two big rivers: Rapti and Narayani. The community forest and CNP are home to many types of wildlife. Almost 500 species of birds and a wide variety of vegetation can be found in Meghauli. The dense forests, grasslands, rivers, and many lakes embrace a balanced park ecology, providing an environment suitable for animals, birds, insects, and other forms of life. (p. 74)

Boating, fishing, kayaking, rafting, educational tours, film shootings, etc. are some regular and adventurous activities that are carried out in the rivers and other water bodies. The broader aspects of the tourism in this area are the source of day-to-day life of the Tharus of that place. Most of the Tharus are engaged in the hospitality and tourism industry as mahouts, nature guides, boatmen, hotel staff, and guides for jungle safaris on foot or by jeep.

In an interview<sup>7</sup> with Mahato (2019), he highlights the impact of changing seasons on tourism:

The source of income for the people of the community is highly dependent on the tourism industry. There is a big impact of seasonal change on the livelihood. *Basanta*, *Sharad*, and *Hemanta* are comparatively favorable seasons as tourists' flow is more in this place. The canoeing, boating, elephant bathing, and river-related activities increase, which increases the income of the local people. But *Grishma*, *Barsha*, and *Shishir* are not people friendly. Since the economic activity has slowed in these *ritus* there is a problem in the hand-to-mouth for the community people. (Translated from Personal Communication, October 2019)

This indicates the dependency of the Tharu community on tourism, which has become the source of income for them. The river cannot be used for water-related recreational activities in the unfavorable *ritus* for two reasons: one, the decline in the number of tourists, and two, the condition of river water, which does not allow the activities. In *Grishma*, the weather of Chitwan is so hot that it resists the tourist flow in the region. *Shishir* is too cold again, and very few tourists visit the place, and in *Barsha*, heavy rainfall and flooding in Narayani and Rapti hinders the activities in and around the National Park.

Rivers are also the connectors of the descendants with their deceased parents, forefathers, and relatives. Narayani and Rapti rivers are sites of the rituals of the local residents. From a religious point of view, most of the rituals of Tharus are carried out in or by the side of the river. For instance, the ritual of Chhath Parva has a direct relationship with the river; the funeral process is carried out on the Ghaat<sup>8</sup>, and the remaining ash of the funeral procession is later flown in the river. The *shraaddha*<sup>9</sup> ritual in most of the cases is completed on the bank of the rivers. There is a belief that all the sinful acts that anyone has done throughout his/her life would be cleansed if bathed or sprinkled by the water of Narayani on some special occasions, such as *tithi*<sup>10</sup>. Thus, the river as a natural entity has a very close relationship with the Indigenous Tharu people.

### **Oral Tradition: Keeping the Culture Alive**

The oral tradition has a significant role in the preservation of Tharu culture. The oral traditions of scriptless communities help us to understand much about their history,

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7 In October 2019 at Sauraha in the Tharu Cultural Museum and Research Center

8 the bank of the river where the funeral procession is carried out

9 a Hindu religious ritual performed by the family members for their deceased ancestors in specific times of a year

10 a specific lunar day in the Hindu calendar



livelihood strategies, evaluation of the natural environment, and last but not least, their culture (Müller-Böker Ulrike, 1999). A story of Ban Dewi<sup>11</sup> cited in Ulrike's article, which is the translation of a narration of Budhi Ram Mahato, shows how Tharus worship forests as goddesses:

The *gurau's*<sup>12</sup> mistress is *Ban Dewi*, the forest goddess created from the earth. One day a Tharu man came upon her—she who lives in the forest on fruits and berries. Since a son had been denied him, he had left his village in order to live in solitude in the forest. *Ban Dewi* invited him to stay with her. He worshipped her and served her. Because she was very happy at this, she wanted to fulfill his deepest wish: he wished for one of his own seed, who would be very learned. He obtained a son. For twelve years, *Ban Dewi* taught him tantra, mantra, and medicine; she instructed him in the knowledge of a *gurau*. When he had learned everything, she called upon him to go to the village and serve the people. He was the first *gurau*. (p. 46)

Another story narrated by Som Lal Mahato, translated and cited in Ulrike's article, shows the river as a goddess. The story is of *Chhita Mai*<sup>13</sup>:

Once, long ago, when the Tharus were fishing, all of the nets were full of fish. One man, though, had only a large stone in his net. He threw this stone in anger onto the shore. But the Mahato of Patlahara had a dream during the night that he should do 46 *pujas*<sup>14</sup> to a certain stone, because that stone was a goddess. The next morning, he went to the stone that the fisher had thrown onto the shore and worshipped it. Thereupon, *Chhita Mai* appeared in the form of a woman. From that time on she has protected the humans and the villagers' animals and has been happy. (p. 46)

There are multiple stories of forests, rivers, air, soil, and other natural entities as gods and goddesses for Tharus. The stories of Ban Dewi and Chhita Mai imply the importance of nature, especially forests and rivers here, to Tharus. These stories have left a deep mark on the community that helps in the conservation of nature and natural resources. These have been transferred from generation to generation.

The same kind of tradition of telling stories is prevalent in many Native American tribes. Jackson (n.d.) in his online article writes about the oral tradition of Oklahoma Indians:

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11 the forest goddess

12 typically, a Tharu villager who has learned his art by apprenticing himself to a master of it

13 the water goddess

14 prayer/worships

Less-often-documented oral traditions also play an important role in Oklahoma Indian life. Historical information, such as family genealogy and cultural knowledge held within a tribal group, will most often be transmitted between generations through spoken narratives. Talk about tribal history and culture is pervasive in Indian communities. Today, through video and audio recording, Indian people are ever more frequently preserving permanent records of such knowledge. The elders who transmit important information through narratives do more than provide knowledge. They communicate it in locally appropriate ways that are an often-unrecognized form of verbal art.

Like the Tharus, the Indian tribes have the practice of storytelling, which passes from generation to generation. It seems that the oral tradition is prevalent in all the Indigenous groups around the world. Jackson continues about Oklahoma Indian:

Mythology, religion, history, and ritual were not separate things for Native American peoples. They were strands woven together in the various tales and stories that defined people's identities and gave order and meaning to their lives. The most serious of these were myths about how the gods created and ordered the universe and about the origins of important things, such as humans, landforms, food, and death.

The idea of myth, mythology, and oral narratives is very common in the South Asian context. In the *Goddesses of Kathmandu Valley*, Gupto (2016) writes about the multi-faceted goddesses, which resemble the practices of Tharus and Indian tribes:

The uncountable, innumerable, and multi-faceted goddesses range from human to insect-like forms, reside from cosmic to domestic domains and possess motherly to lustful attributes. Such goddesses conceptualized and worshipped in South Asia act upon our daily lives extremely pervasively as universal beings to bacterial forms. (p. 2)

Goddess culture is prevalent in most of the Indigenous groups throughout the world. They mostly worship nature and different physical forms of nature, including even insects, birds, animals, and plants. Multiple goddesses that are celebrated in Indian tribes, ranging from the goddess of the Atina-Arikara, goddess of the spirit of corn, to the Evaki-Bakairi night goddess. The form of goddesses in Indian and Tharu cultures resembles each other.

### **Effects of Modernity on Tharus**

Tharu peoples' lifestyle is badly affected by modernity nowadays. The practice of being in a community, performing cultural activities together, herding cattle, fishing, and, overall, the complete reliance on nature of Tharus is slowly taking a turn due to the

massive encroachment of ‘other’ non-Tharu in the region. The tradition and culture that the Tharu were recognized for are slowly being invaded by the non-traditional pop culture. The traditional mud houses are slowly converting into cemented ones. The traditional practices of farming and fishing are affected by tourism.

Sauraha, the most popular tourist destination in Chitwan, is one of the ancestral territories of the Tharus. After the establishment of Chitwan National Park in 1973, the Tharu community fell victim to modernity as people from home and abroad started visiting the place. Mahato expresses his dissatisfaction:

Although Tharus are involved in the hospitality sector in Sauraha, the Indigenous traditional practices are slowly being forgotten. Everyone is interested in materialistic life. The government does not have any plan for the protection of the indigeneity of Tharus, and at the same time, youths are not interested in preserving our culture. We have established a museum, the Tharu Cultural Museum and Research Center, in Bachhauri, which is the only one in Nepal that has the colorful murals and exhibits on artifacts and local dress. Scholars from the USA, France, Germany, the UK, and many other countries come for research on Tharus for their unique cultural practices, but our own Nepali scholars and youths take us as a backward community. (Translation from Personal Communication, October 2019)

The sadness of Mahato is obvious. The community is encroached upon from all aspects—the government and the local non-Tharus, pop culture and modernity, interest in a materialistic lifestyle, and many other factors are slowly hindering the preservation of the years-long history of Tharus. The tourists from different parts of the world influence the local Tharu people’s lifestyle. The youths easily get impressed by their lifestyle and try to imitate it, which leads to the degradation of their own culture. Even though education is made mandatory, the number of school-going children is not satisfactory.

The natives/aborigines/indigenes have fallen into the same trap, somewhere physical colonization and somewhere mental. Education can play an important role in the preservation of ethnicity, but if the education is imparted by the side of the colonizer, it has distractions. The Tharus have started facing the consequences. All the adult Tharus who were interviewed were concerned with the ongoing events and direct and indirect encroachment in their culture. They are finding a way out to integrate “Tharuness” in their lives by imparting their long-practiced traditions.

## **Conclusion**

Tharus—the Dharti putras of Chitwan—have carried a long history and legacy of

indigenouness and Indigenous practices. All their activities are directly or indirectly connected to natural components. Likewise, the seasonal change plays a crucial role in their day-to-day activities. The interviews with the local Tharus and some secondary sources from scholars demonstrate how they belong to the place and what makes them Indigenous. Fishing and farming used to be their source of livelihood, which are now encroached upon by modernity. The establishment of the Chitwan National Park, on the one hand, played an important role in uplifting their economic status as they started working in the tourism sector as nature guides, traditional cultural artists, and hospitality business members; on the other hand, its establishment brought restrictions in the utilization of the natural resources from the forest and the rivers. The inferences from the interviews intend to show that the identity of typical Tharu culture is slowly deteriorating, which needs the concern and measures of strengthening the Dhartiputra's indigeneity.

The oral tradition of the Tharu is one of the most common features of Indigenous groups, even in other parts of the world. Their worshipping of natural entities like forests, rivers, soil, etc., as gods and goddesses resembles the practices of the aborigines/ethnic groups/natives/Indigenous groups in different parts of the world. Although non-Tharus and other communities of so-called mainstream non-Indigenous people consider them as 'backward,' their skills of farming, fishing, and other traditional Indigenous environmental knowledge and practices cannot be neglected.

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