

Changing Livelihood Strategies of the Tharu Community in Tilpur, Surkhet: Drivers, Trends, and Impacts

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Abstract

This research focuses on Tilpur, the Tharu community in Nepal's Surkhet District, in Birendranagar Municipality. The Tharu are one of Nepal's Indigenous groups. Ethnographically, subsistence farming had been the primary and only occupation, diversified only since other socio-economic, infrastructural, and cultural changes have occurred. This research used a mixed-methods approach, including a household survey, interviews, and participant observation, with a sample of 44 Tharu households to capture changes and their effects on the community's structure from demographic, economic, and cultural perspectives. The predominant occupation in the community is agriculture, and is practised by 72% of the community. However, the community is shifting towards agricultural practices and diversifying into other business activities and foreign employment. Farming practices have changed due to factors such as land fragmentation and use, as well as urbanisation, leading to greater adoption of modern agriculture. Educational attainment in the community remains moderate, and a very small proportion of the population pursues studies beyond the School Leaving Certificate. The community is influenced by modernisation, and marriage trends, cultural patterns, dress, and celebrations are shifting towards those of neighbouring societies. Fuel energy consumption trends also reflect a shift from conventional fuels to biogas and LPG. Although there are positive changes in income and awareness, issues regarding smallholder land, poor agricultural inputs, and cultural protective risks still remain. The research underscores the need for integrating comprehensive policies that economically benefit and protect the Tharu community's cultural traits. The results document indigenous populations' livelihood practices and community responses to rapid changes in Nepal's rural economy.

Keywords: Tharu community, Livelihood strategies, Socio-economic change, Cultural transformation, Indigenous people, Nepal

Introduction

Nepal is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and multi-religious nation, rich in cultural diversity and a variety of native populations. Nepal's national census showed that there are 125 ethnic and caste groups, each with its own distinct cultural traditions, customs, belief systems, and social norms (CBS, 2001). Typically, these communities retain a strong sense of internal identity and peer solidarity, which promotes both social cohesion and social closure with other peer groups (Chaudhary, 2013). Although these native tribes, including the Tharu, Magar, Tamang, Gurung, Rai, Limbu, Sherpa, and Chepang, have been settled in Nepal for many centuries, they have consistently

been socioeconomically marginalised and excluded from the central development processes (Gurung, 2019).

The Tharu community is one of Nepal's oldest and largest indigenous populations (Chaudhary, 2019). They are settled in the Terai and Inner Terai in 24 districts, including Jhapa, Sunsari, Saptari, Rupandehi, Dang, Bardiya, Kailali, Banke and Surkhet (Gautam & Thapa, 1994). The Tharu community's occupation is predominantly farming, closely linked to the Terai's forested plains. They are known as *Aadivasi*, meaning the first settlers, and illustrate the deep bond this community has with the land (Chaudhary, 1999). Some of the community's distinct features, which form the basis of their identity, are their celebrations, dialect, textiles, architectural designs and farming (MechiDekhi Mahakali Samma, 2031).

The Tharu's age and diverse culture are historically and structurally neglected, which has also affected their representation in Nepal's National Development (Upadhyay, 2021). This community's lack of power (politically), and the absence of economic resources, as well as education, are the reasons for the persistent impoverishment and the absence of even the basic social services (K.C., 1995). The Tharu community (especially in Surkhet and Tilpur village of Birendranagar Municipality Ward No. 9) has faced extensive socio-economic problems and has also remained passive in the Government's Development Activities. Recently, urbanisation, migration, globalisation, democratisation, and technology have started to have significant impacts on the Tharu community. The influences of the 1950s and subsequent decades have transformed the Tharu people's customs and ways of living (K.C., 1995). Transport and market access, education and communication technology, and other currently available resources have influenced numerous changes. These changes modernised land use. New forms of employment became available. Households reported higher incomes than before. The educational status of members of Tharu families improved, and a modernised cooking method using more sophisticated fuels became available. In subsistence-farming families, members found other ways to earn a living. Tharu families became more involved in diverse economic activities, including wage employment, small businesses, and migration to other countries (Gartaula, 2011).

However, the complexity of these changes can be improved. Erosion of traditional knowledge, indigenous technology, and cultural identity will be a greater threat than the promise of improved living standards. In changes of this nature, a region's people typically undergo the first stages of a modern sociological and anthropological culture. In these rapid, innovative modern transformations, there is little to no evidence of this process occurring among the Tharu of Tilpur. Some studies have addressed the broader Tharu culture, but few have examined the socio-economic and cultural transitions within this localized context. Therefore, this study can fill that gap by exploring the livelihood strategies of the Tharus of Tilpur and examining the drivers and impacts of their economic & cultural transformation.

Literature Review

The Tharu community is among the most prominent and historically rooted indigenous groups in Nepal's Terai and Inner Terai regions. Scholars agree that the Tharus are descendants of the early forest-dwelling inhabitants of the Terai, with their settlement tracing back several centuries

(Hechler, 2003). While their exact origin remains debated, some researchers believe they migrated from the Thar Desert in Rajasthan, India (Bista, 1980), whereas others believe they might be the descendants of Rajput refugees or even linked to the Sakya clan of Gautama Buddha (Singh, 1997). Anthropological studies, such as those by Majumdar (1942) and Shrivastava (1958), characterize the Tharus as having Mongoloid features, supporting the notion of their distinct racial and cultural identity. In the past, the Tharu community earned the respect of the community for their adaptability and fortitude as they made a living in the dense, forested, and malaria ridden areas of the Terai Region as they made a living in the Terai Region (Chaudhary, 1999). Tharu contributions have been overshadowed because they made a living in the forested areas of the Terai Region, and they have been socially and politically oppressed and marginalized. As outlined in the Muluki Ain of 1854, Tharu community members were assigned a lower caste status, which restricted their freedom of movement and land ownership (Karki & Chetri, 2025). The Tharu Welfare Society in the 1940s was a primary focus in the Tharu community's organised struggle for social and cultural acknowledgement.

The Tharu community is diverse and has its own language, cultural traditions, and customs. Spiritual and seasonal ceremonies such as *Maghi*, *Fagu*, and *Astimki* mark significant periods of their lives (Dahit, 2005). Traditions have been a focus of social cohesion, as noted by anthropologists MacDonald (1969) and Regmi (1978). Traditions have been a focus of social cohesion. However, traditions have been the primary focus of the community's social cohesion. The educational opportunities offered by modernization and by Hindu migrants have given the community new traditions and rituals. Generate noted (1994) that as new opportunities were presented to specific Tharu community members, there was a movement toward cultural assimilation and a loss of the traditions outlined by Rajaure (1981) to describe a community. Changes in the Tharu way of life have been particularly noticeable in the last few decades. Formerly focusing only on subsistence farming, forest products, and barter trade, many Tharu families have had to adapt to wage work, petty trading, and seasonal migrations owing to the loss of land, increased population pressure, and urban encroachment (K.C., 1995; Bhatta, 1996). This is the same as what is happening in other marginalised groups, the Kumals and the Baramus, who left traditional crafts and practices for other means of livelihood because of socio-economic pressures (Bhurtel, 2000; Dahal, 2001). Contemporary development, especially road and market construction, has had a disproportionate impact on livelihood strategies. Timilsina (2003) notes that improved roads increase rural mobility and access to markets and enhance employment opportunities. The sustainable livelihoods (DFID, 2018) theory champions flexibility and adaptability, which is what Tharu families, like those in Tilpur, are demonstrating. Meanwhile, the influx of cultural tourism views the Tharu heritage as a cultural asset, thereby heightening concerns about cultural commodification (Koirala, 2016).

The Tharu community exhibits a unique phenomenon of cultural endurance amid evolutionary shifts. They hold on to many of their customs while simultaneously adjusting to transformations in the economy, politics, and environment. Nonetheless, there is a greater need for localised, interdisciplinary research to capture the realities of Tharu groups, especially in less studied areas like Tilpur, Surkhet.

Methodology

In this research, a mixed-methods approach was used to study the Tharu community's adaptive livelihood strategies in Tilpur, Surkhet. The fieldwork strategies were employed for primary data collection, while secondary data sources were used to gain contextual and comparative insights. This research primarily sought to understand what community members viewed as the cultural, social, and economic changes experienced by the Tharu community over the past decade.

This study was mainly concerned with the socio-cultural manifestations of the Tharu community and aimed to detail and analyse them through careful measurement and documentation of the population, their economic and cultural attributes, and all the characteristics that encompass the community. A comparative approach was used to examine the social circumstances and livelihood practices of the past and the present, and to understand the changes that occurred over the years. Tilpur, ward number 9 of the Birendranagar Municipality, Surkhet District, was intentionally selected as the research location. This region is three kilometres north of the Mangalgadhi Chowk. This area is particularly important because of its transitional. It portrays a Tharu ethnic group settlement in an area experiencing rapid urban and modern development. As the Mid-western development region's administrative center, Birendranagar is a center of socio-economic activity. This attribute makes Tilpur a relevant location to assess how traditional societies have embraced new opportunities and challenges. It has been noted that the Tharu people of this area have a rich and diverse culture, and the changes in this community's livelihoods, which made it a fitting research location.

For this study, data was collected from both primary and secondary sources. A structured household survey was administered to collect the quantitative demographic and economic data. Cultural and social changes were collected through interviews, observations, and discussions. It was also important to validate and supplement secondary data with sources such as books, journals, previous research, government documents, and census data. There were 80 Tharu households in the selected area. Given the limited time and available resources, purposive sampling was employed to select 45 households. To achieve sampling equity and appropriate spatial representation, data collection was conducted every second household within the linear Tharu settlement. Surveys targeting household units were conducted using the Direct Interview Survey Method, in which the interviewer and respondent were physically present at the same location, and a semi-structured questionnaire was employed, directed to the head of household or an adult in the household. The surveys covered, but were not limited to, income, land access and utilisation, educational attainment, customs, food self-sufficiency, and migration, as well as the history of settlement and habitation within the area.

Another key method employed in the field was that of Participant Observation. The researcher immersed himself in the community for long periods, during which he practised observing its daily routines, cultural displays, and events. The observation captured the community's customs, language and ritual practices, and the festivals they hosted. This provided an opportunity to understand the community's cultural continuity and change, and key informant interviews were

conducted with sampled *Mapari* (elders), *Gurus* (spiritual leaders), and educated community members knowledgeable in Tharu customs and social change.

The processed and analysed data were organised systematically, utilising appropriate statistical and descriptive techniques. Data findings are shown in tables, figures, and charts as relevant. The analysis was supported by basic statistical tools, including mean and percentage. Ethical issues were addressed during the survey by ensuring respondents' opinions were accurately and impartially presented. The privacy and confidentiality of individuals were preserved, and no data was used in a way that could pose a risk or misrepresent the community.

Results

The findings are based on primary data from Tharu households, supplemented by other relevant secondary sources. The findings include descriptions of the demographic structure, education, occupation, land ownership, food sufficiency, income level, and the use of fuel and other socio-cultural changes.

Demographic and Family Structure

The number and gender structure of the Tharu households in Tilpur, Surkhet, are shown in Table 1, which indicates a predominantly youthful population. Approximately 30.68% of the total population was below 20 years old; 14.77% and 15.91% were in the 10-19 and 0-9 age groups, respectively. This indicates a young population and a rising birth rate. 55.69 per cent of the population, a large part of the population, lies in the economically active age of 20 to 49 years, out of which 20.46 per cent are in the age group 20-29, 18.56 per cent are in 30-39, and 16.67 per cent are in 40-49. This population structure shows the demographic composition and the strong labour potential. This population will be active in the community's livelihood strategies, which are derived from traditional agriculture or branching out into other activities which can generate income, such as diversified agriculture.

The percentage of the older population (60 years and older) is particularly low at 2.65% (may be due to low life expectancy, inadequate health care, and/or out-migration). The gender distribution of the population across age categories was fairly even, with a slight excess of females in the 0-9 and 30-39 age categories, indicating no major gaps in the population gender balance. The largest relative population was in the 20 to 29 age group (20.46%), confirming that have a larger population in the years of active work and reproduction. Such a structure indicates that the area's population has the potential to respond to and support socio-economic changes, with a strong base of an active population to support economic changes and community development initiatives.

Table 1: Age Group and Gender Details of the Tharu Household

Age Group	Male (%)	Female (%)	Total (%)
0-9	13.84	15.67	14.77
10-19	17.70	14.18	15.91
20-29	20.00	20.90	20.46
30-39	18.46	18.65	18.56
40-49	16.16	17.17	16.67
50-59	10.76	11.20	10.98
60+	3.08	2.23	2.65

Education and Occupational Change

The levels of education among the Tharu community in Tilpur, Surkhet, are concerning, with high rates of illiteracy. As observed in Table 2, 38.10% of the community has not received any education. This illustrates that the community has not benefited from any education initiatives taken. Undoubtedly, the high illiteracy levels are attributable to the impoverished, disengaged, and culturally stagnant communities in the area with little to no educational infrastructure, especially for women, the elderly, and those from a historically educationally deprived background.

Based on available data, at least 58.44% of this community's members can read and write, indicating positive changes in the community's educational attainment. Regarding the availability of primary education and the schooling of the younger population, it can be inferred that there is advocacy for education and the establishment of educational institutions and facilities for the younger population. Moreover, the data indicate that very few have an education beyond primary school. Such a capacity is indicative of a population that is mostly literate and has a basic level of education without more advanced educational attainment. Just 3.46% of the population holds an SLC certificate. Basic education without advanced attainment indicates a mostly literate population. This educational framework illustrates the condition of the Tharu community.

Access to secondary education is limited; however, the Tharu community has higher public literacy. This stark constriction illustrates the community's transitional condition. This educational stagnation creates barriers to diversifying livelihood strategies, achieving socio-economic mobility, and accessing skilled employment opportunities. The future of the Tharu community, and the transition to more sustainable socio-economic models, will depend on the integration of purposeful educational initiatives.

Table 2: *Educational Status of the Participants*

Level	Percentage (%)
Illiterate	38.10
Literate	58.44
SLC and above	3.46

The Tharu people have gradually changed from customary farming activities to a mix of other economic activities. Although farming remains the primary economic activity for 72% of households, many have adopted wage employment, office work, business activities, and overseas employment.

Land Ownership, Income and Food Sufficiency

The information on the food sufficiency situation of Tharu households in Tilpur, Surkhet, indicates both subsistence and dependency. In Table 3, only 22.22% of households reported having a surplus of food production, meaning that a little over one-fourth of the population is able to produce more food than they consume. This group most likely has better access to land, other resources, and agricultural skills. Approximately a third of households are able to sustain themselves self sufficiently for 9 to 12 months of the year. This, however, shows significant risk of sudden subsistence failures, emergencies, and general risk of having to consume beyond the bare essentials.

This demographic also shows the bare subsistence level and shows just how survive just with the essentials. This is then followed by 20% of the population who have food sufficiency for 6

to 9 months of the year, then 15.55% of the population for having food sufficiency of 3 to 6 months of the year. This shows that a significant section of the population end up having to endure food insecurity and so rely on outside sources of support to meet their fundamental basic needs. Only 2.22% have food sufficiency for less than 3 months, while 6.66% are entirely market-dependent for their food. This level of dependence indicates vulnerability, especially regarding price fluctuations, inflation, and market disruptions. So, while a segment of the Tharu community has year-round food security or a food surplus, a significant part continues to experience seasonal food shortages or is entirely dependent on the market, underscoring the need for greater agricultural productivity, diversified income, and targeted support to ensure food security for all households.

Table 3: *Condition of the Food Sufficiency of the Participants*

Time Period	Households (%)
Completely Dependent on the Market	6.66
Less than 3 months	2.22
3–6 months	15.55
6–9 months	20.00
9–12 months	33.33
Surplus	22.22

A considerable 75.55% of these households' report earning more than NPR 40,000, indicating improved but still low economic well-being.

Energy Use and Technological Shift

There is a gradual transition from the traditional to modern forms of energy. Still, the majority of households (44.44%) continue to use dried dung and firewood for cooking and heating. This retention of previous practices reflects the relative ease, lower cost, and/or cultural acceptability of these methods. There are, however, significant drawbacks to continuing to use these fuels, including indoor air pollution and deforestation. About one third (33.33%) of households are making a positive change in their primary fuel to biogas. This, as well as the subsidized programs aimed toward biogas digesters, indicates growing awareness of the positive aspects of biogas as a clean, renewable fuel source. Decreasing indoor air pollution and utilizing community generated organic waste also fosters better health outcomes.

A more commercialized form of convenient energy evidenced by the 22.22% of households utilizing liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) as an energy source. To illustrate, LPG is a more efficient fuel source than other alternatives and with respect to the environmental impacts, there is a smaller footprint. On the other hand, more expensive fuel within these rural households, limited gas availability, and higher costs of fuels, gas, and particles are antithetical to a large portion of households in the region. The use of fuels within the Tharu people demonstrates a new trend and gradual change as seen in the type of energy that is used. Although there is an overwhelming dependence on the older forms of energy, the usage of LPG and biogas is becoming more and more frequent, and demonstrates a growing use of energy that is more efficient and a source that is more environmentally and health sustainable. The further and continued developing of infrastructure in these rural communities and educated is brought to these individuals, there is little doubt that the energy systems in place today will continue to improve in systems and technologies. The same is true

when it comes to the quality of life and overall improvement of rural communities within the areas today.

Table 4: *Domestic Fuel Use*

Fuel Type	Households (%)
Dried Dung/Wood	44.44
Biogas	33.33
LPG	22.22

Cultural and Social Shifts

The Tharu community in Tilpur has begun integrating elements of modern culture. This leads to a gradual transformation in their lifestyles. One of the major changes is in the marriage system. Arranged marriages were seen as the only form of marriage in the Tharu community. However, the younger generation is increasingly accepting love marriages. This shows a shift from the traditional family control system to greater autonomy in marriage decisions. In addition to love marriages, inter-caste marriages are increasingly common. These marriages were previously seen as taboo and highly restricted. This change reflects a more progressive social attitude toward inter-caste relationships. The community is also influenced by the Tharu communities from Nepal's hill regions. Most of these changes can be seen in the younger generation, who are abandoning traditional Tharu styles in favour of Pahadi, modern, urban clothing. The Tharu language is also being replaced by Nepali, while the younger generation is prioritising education over the community's traditional art forms.

Discussion

The results of the current study indicate a notable change in participants' livelihood strategies within a framework of socio-economic, cultural, and environmental interrelations among the indigenous populace of Nepal. These changes are the result of interlinked minimal historical popularisation, modernisation, and the growing incorporation of the people into the market economy and urban centres. Tharu households have a demographic profile of a young, economically active population, indicative of the country as a whole and perhaps also underscoring the prospects and challenges of revenue generation and social mobility (CBS, 2001). While the community's literacy rate of 58.44% for the year is quite low, even given the country's low average, it is still lower than the average, indicating the educational deficit of which the community is a part (K.C. 1995). The educational deficit is the absence of the lowest level of educational achievement, with respect to the educational attainment of the school leaving certificate, SLC, and hence higher education. Hence, higher education is also a necessary determinant of the proportion of Tharu youths and a viable alternative for higher-level job placements or self-employment (entrepreneurship) to break the cycle of poverty.

Changes in employment indicate a shift from traditional subsistence agriculture to a more varied livelihood strategy that incorporates wage work, self-employment, and migration abroad. This pattern is consistent with prior research, which describes the diversification of livelihoods as a strategy of adaptation employed by marginalised and indigenous populations plagued by land fragmentation, increased population density, and the attraction of urban employment opportunities (K.C. 1995, Bhatta 1996). Although 72 per cent of households in the community continue to practice

farming, agriculture's viability is severely undermined by the loss of land as holdings shrink and by the pressures of urbanisation. This shift towards a more varied livelihood is a testament to the community's adaptive resilience, which is essential for building sustainable livelihoods (DFID 2018). Livelihood diversification is also accompanied by several drawbacks, notably increased vulnerability due to the loss of traditional agrarian knowledge, and a reliance on precarious wage employment (Bhurteel 2000). Data on food sufficiency also points to the ongoing unsustainability of agriculture in the community. The dominant food-gathering strategy for the greater part of the population is market reliance, and thus 78 per cent of households do not attain surplus production. This type of market dependence also exposes food supply to market forces and poses a threat to food sovereignty, particularly for indigenous groups that once practised self-sufficient agriculture (Chaudhary 1999). The socio-economic challenges of sustaining food security have also been documented for other Terai indigenous groups (Dahal 2001).

The shift in domestic energy consumption from biomass fuels to biogas and LPG is positive because it promotes the adoption of cleaner, more efficient technologies. Almost 50% of households still use traditional fuels with their attendant adverse health and environmental impacts. However, the use of biogas and LPG signifies greater access to and use of modern energy fuels and a changed lifestyle. This change also reflects the tendency of rural areas of Nepal to modernise their energy technology use and to develop greater Nepalese infrastructure and development (Timilsina 2003). In Tilpur, the Tharu Community is also exhibiting change and continuity. The replacement of arranged marriages by love marriages and the practice of inter-caste marriage is a change in social behaviour, more modern, and, perhaps, the result of greater inter-cultural relations with Pahadi groups. There are also changes in the community's traditional customs. Although the festivals are still celebrated, commercialisation, a community of absent participants, and adaptations to the festivals may result from economic tensions. These changes result from the retention of festival customs. This combination of observations is also evident in Guneratne (1994), where Sanskritization and cultural assimilation are evident among the more prosperous subgroups of the Tharu, and in Rajaure (1981), in the appreciation of differences in cultural change and the retention of practices across regions.

The variety and observed transformations in livelihoods and Tharu culture highlight the complexity of indigenous adaptation to urbanisation and globalisation. While diversified livelihoods and improved educational opportunities create opportunities to cross economic frontiers, there is a likelihood that culture will erode, and social divisions will increase. Wage work and Tharu migration participation are socio-economically integrated into indigenous communities, but also worldwide, softening the preservation of traditions and ethnolinguistic identity (Boniface and Fowler, 1993; Sofield and Birtles, 1996). Furthermore, there are these shifts in relationships with policy and the development intervention. Enhancing educational opportunities, clarifying land rights, and advocating sustainable agriculture could help reduce soil erosion. At the same time, preserving the festivals' social and cultural norms, language, and rituals would elaborate on the chord and help shift to adapt.

Conclusion

The primary economic activity of the Tharu community is subsistence farming. However, sustained farming of the land is economically marginal as 72% of households continue to constrain land and other critical inputs, and remain vulnerable to the pressures of urbanization. The subsistence farming community is, of necessity, diversifying. The Tilpur Tharu community is experiencing greater educational achievement and better access to and awareness of developmental infrastructure. However, the community remains characterized by low literacy levels, and there is a high incidence of non-completion of education at the School Leaving Certificate level. Community education is completely stagnant, and in the context of deepening socioeconomic marginalisation, it is a major determinant of the low level of community action in initiatives to enhance community self-development. The community's readiness to adopt modern agrarian technologies reflects their desire to embrace enhanced livelihood opportunities, as evidenced by their access to agricultural tools and their use of modern technologies. The Tilpur Tharu community is increasingly willing to adopt modern agrarian technologies.

There are also notable cultural changes. There is a shift from traditional arranged marriages to inter-caste marriages and marriages based on love, and neighbouring communities and modernisation are also influencing cultural practices, including language and the observance of festivals. Although there is an ongoing preference for the community's own customs, dress, and language, and a strong concern for preserving these cultural practices, there is an obvious erosion of these cultural assets due to modern economic opportunities. The Tharu community in Tilpur suffers from restricted land ownership, insufficient agricultural support, unemployment, and an endangered culture. The protection and development of the Tharu community's culture requires improvements in educational access, the advancement of local handicrafts, support for land and development equity, and targeted efforts by government and non-profit organisations.

Authors' Biography

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