

Literary Studies

Volume 38, March 2025, pp. 70-79

[Peer-reviewed, Open Access, Indexed in NepJOL]

Print ISSN: 2091-1637

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/litstud.v38i01.75937>**Literary Association of Nepal (LAN)**

Dillibazar, Kathmandu, Nepal

URL: www.literarynepal.org.np

Eco-tourism and Associate Lives across Tharu-inhabited Region of India-Nepal Border

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Abstract

This paper explores the potential for developing the Tharu-inhabited region along the India-Nepal border, specifically focusing on the Far western region of Nepal and the Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand regions of India. The areas of Kailali, Kanchanpur, Bardia, and Banke in the Far-Western and Lumbini States are connected to India through various wildlife reserves, including the Kishanpur Wildlife Sanctuary, Pilibhit Tiger Reserve, Dudhwa Tiger Reserve, and Katerniyaghat Wildlife Sanctuary. The Tharu communities residing in these border areas share many similarities in terms of language, dress, food, houses, and cultural practices. Despite being separated by rivers and jungles rather than concrete boundaries, these shared cultural aspects make the Tharu-populated border region an ideal location for the development of a biological corridor and international eco-tourism hub. However, despite some local efforts to develop the villages into homestays and promote cultural exchange between the two countries, there is a lack of support and promotion from both social organizations and the government. Additionally, it has been observed that the Tharus in Nepal often receive fewer government allowances, development schemes, and programs for upliftment compared to their counterparts across the border. As a result, many Tharus from Nepal migrate to India in search of employment, career opportunities, and better education policies. Despite occasional political tensions between the two countries, the Tharu communities on both sides of the border have maintained a harmonious relationship and have provided each other with support and brotherly sentiments. Given the immense potential for eco-tourism in this region, it is crucial for the government and social organizations to provide the necessary assistance and support to facilitate its development.

Keywords: *Tharu, borderland, ecology, performance and agency*

Introduction

The western Nepal's Tarai districts: Dang, Banke, Bardia, Kailali, and Kanchanpur make borders with the Indian states Uttar Pradesh and Utrkhand. Across the borderland of these districts Tharus and non-Tharus abode from the ancient time. The Tharus and Rana Tharus both have been the natives across the borderland of two nations exchanging their socio-cultural rituals and economic activities. Moreover, the borderland culture also holds the huge scope for borderland tourism as India

Nepal's important and huge tiger sanctuaries and national parks are located here. Nepal's side Banke National Park, Bardiya National Park and Shuklaphanta Wildlife Reserve are not only the abode of different rare and ecologically vital wildlife species but also on properly managed and advertised have potentiality to lure tourists from foreign states as well. Moreover, from India's side Dudhwa Tiger Reserve and Pilibhit Tiger Reserve equally are the nature's best ecological destination for the national and international tourists. However, the major factor that these places should be groomed and visited as the ecological destination is the habitat of the tribes: Tharus and Ranatharus of this place. These tribes are the natives of this place. Their livelihood has close connection with the nature around them. It has greatly shaped and molded their socio-cultural and economic lifestyle. The initiation of homestays and local tourism can flourish in a great scale here. Such initiatives will not only provide ex factor to the tourists, moreover they will also boost the tribes' economy, will help to sustain their livelihood and cement the sustainable development of the borderland.

The borderland area of Nepal is occupied primarily by Tharus, Ranatharus and Kathariya Tharus along with other immigrants from hilly regions. However, the Tharu tribe being the oldest and native of this region has its own ritual, culture and distinct way of life. Their life is based on agrarian mode and has their rituals as the epitome of ecological tribe. Tharus have been residing at this border keeping harmony with wilderness, nature and sometimes, border conflict as well. Their cultural performances, folk rituals all include the reflection of nature and deeply associate themselves with the caretaker of nature. They hardly exclude themselves from the primary nature lover and its caretaker. Similarly, Tharus residing at Indian borderside living in the villages: Paliya, Suda, Najahuta, Singhada, Chandan Chowki, Maghauta, Nighasan, Sampurna Nagar live in close association to Dudhwa and Pilibhit Tiger Reserves. Their agrarian lives, food resources, cultural and economic dependence to these wildlife preserves have developed as the part of them. The Mohana and Sharada River dividing the Kailai and Kanchanpur district have naturally located the geographically divided same tribes.

The availability of roads, local markets have geographically connected the two states. However, the absence of central universities, colleges, major railways stations, international airports and trade centers negatively affected the tribes of the both states. Due to the absence of national universities, hospitals, trade centers, and good lodging facilities Tharus of this area often suffer from the educational and economic growth. Thus, by establishing these borderlands as the site of the major tourist destinations as the ecological park for research and amusement, the socio-economic and education status of the tribe can be uplifted.

Methodology

The study explores the relationship between borderland tribes, their literature, socioeconomic lifestyle and the development of ecotourism. The study aims to understand the comprehensive development of borderland Tharu community. It critically analyzes how their agrarian lifestyle promotes ecotourism initiatives and contributes to sustainable development. The study applies qualitative approach to interpret the library findings on the borderland and ecotourism literature. The study incorporates literary analysis, cultural studies, and tourism development theories. The study has discussed literary works that focus on borderland regions. The study discusses the lifestyle of Tharu community considering them as the biological being crucial for preserving nature and associate border lives. It interprets the lifestyle of the Tharu community with their ecological and cultural practices observed during fieldwork.

The study maintains the research ethics respecting the cultural sensitivity of the borderland Tharu community.

Literature Review

Tharu inhabited borderland of India and Nepal incorporates huge potentiality to attract tourists and grow itself as the sustainable regions for the both nations. Development of borderlands will significantly strengthen the socio cultural connectedness. According to Simon J. Bronner, phrases like “national, ethnic, religious, folk, cultural, family, and local” paces a feeling of social connectedness, a collective memory in an identifiable niche with mass society (69). Such connectedness and social activities are necessary for fostering a sense of national unity and a multicultural community.

For the development of Tharu inhabited borderlands, their representation at policy and decision making level should be guaranteed. Their representation at policy making level will help them to draft policies that will promote the ecotourism, cultural exhibits and economic trades. Similarly, such ecotourism also helps to keep the society updated, connected and regulated. According to Gunes Murat Tezcur and Mehmet Gurses, a number of newly formed nation-states create national ideology based on the cultural traits and values of the majority ethnic group and disproportionately appoint people of that community to positions of governmental authority (215). Such practices hinder the socio economic development of the marginalized group keeping their motivation low and politically undifferentiated. However, nation building should move in harmonious course of action. It must include the marginalized, borderland group with the dominant group. Therefore, nation building can only be effective and have a consensual quality when the state elite’s country building effort combines with minority ethnic people’s repositioning tactics by integrating into dominant ethnic groupings.

It is important to compare and evaluate Tharus’ movement from the Dang inner valley to the borders in light of other ethnic groups’ large migrations and displacements around the globe. This method aids in comprehending the fundamental cause of all of the ethnic conflict and forced migration. Comparative thinking, according to Ilaria Giglioli, is essential to migrant rights activism because it fosters relationships of cooperation and solidarity between individuals impacted by border violence around the globe as well as between those affected and their allies (para 2). Giglioli makes this argument in her discussion of tearing down borders and fostering solidarity.

Deborah Bird Rose makes a similar argument, contending that an ecological self is both constitutive of the cosmos and materially entrenched in particular locations (312). The ecologically positioned person is porous; the body melts into its environment and the environment melts into the body. The majority of Ranatharus continue their connection by getting married across the border, while discussing the borderland connectedness and acculturation of the Tharu tribe. Researchers Gamkrelidze and Ivanov from Russia concluded that marriage and kinship were the foundations of peoples’ social structures.

Disparities are created and mixed by boundaries. Although Tharus living on opposite sides of the border are geographically separated, their shared agricultural way of life and sociocultural customs bind them together. According to Rose Deborah, the original idea of a border for exclusion serves to encourage self-sufficiency. The second example, common to Aboriginal and other kin-based civilizations, shows that boundaries are necessary to bridge differences and promote interdependence (314). The first

creates boundaries as means of resolving differences, whereas the second, dialogical mode, maintains relationships and differences while being always in progress.

But borders frequently lead to differences, and those differences frequently result in structural differences that negate one another. It is also possible for Tharus of Nepal to place Tharus of India in a lower social status, and vice versa. A framework of difference, otherness, negation, and exclusion, the dualistic understanding of difference is founded on hierarchical oppositions, as Val Plumwood observes (117). The challenge of creating borders remains as the threat as it leads to the hierarchy build up between same group and community. But there is also a non-hierarchical way to conceptualize difference; this way, it produces the idea of another that may be described independently of itself. It is different without being demeaning (Plumwood 132). It is other but not lacking.

The social exchange of the Tharus of both countries is necessary for acculturation. The Tharu tribe's cross-border activities are a legitimate means of fostering intercultural understanding. Something sweet or fragrant might be used to identify a person's distinct essence. For instance, in customs wherein natives welcome guests into their land, they must mix their perspiration with that of the visitor and wash it in with water (Deborah 320). In the earthly reciprocates of being, becoming, and dying, we and other living things share a role. Deborah contends that a dialogical interpretation implies that we are physically and intimately attached to our violent pasts, rather than being removed from them (322). A tribe's embeddedness inside another is justified by its connections to other earthly species and beings, in addition to other tribes.

The Tharus inhabit not only the geographical but also the ethnic borderlands, where their identity serves as a rainbow's solitary tint next to that of the Ranatharus, Kathariaytharus, and other non-Tharu ethnic groups. Ethnic borderlands, according to Fadda-Conrey Carol, are beneficial areas where interethnic relationships may be formed and preserved both inside and between various groups (187). Creating a multi-ethnic refuge like the multicultural borderland eliminates the possibility of interethnic violence. According to Gloria Anzaldua (19), borderlands are physically present anywhere two or more cultures meet, where people from diverse cultural backgrounds inhabit the same space, where members of the poor, middle, and higher classes come into contact, and where the distance between people gets less as they go closer. The borderland is described as the multicultural zone in Anzaldua's concept.

Borders, according to Newman and Paasi, define a territory's internal and exterior identities (qtd.in Ullah and Kumpon 4). The internal identities of Tharus residing in the borderland are formed by the marginalized group that has suffered from the state's absence from the decision-making process. On the other hand, Tharus are regarded as one of the dominating tribes in India and are given several government subsidies and affiliates. States and boundaries should complement one another, according to Friedrich and Julian Minghi (qtd. in Ullah and Kumpon 2). The best course of action could be for the governments of the two states to work together to establish policies that will help the common group's socioeconomic lifestyle and position the region as the top ecotourism destination.

Spolare and Wacziarg, however, advocate for the abolition of national boundaries in a different manner, arguing that doing so will enhance economic growth and enable the creation of a bigger economic zone (qtd. in Ullah and Kumpon 3). Removing national boundaries might lead to economic growth since they prevent some countries from expanding as slowly as their neighbors. There are parallels between India and Nepal, where company owners in Nepal have faced challenges due to Nepal's border procedures and economic expansion. Mauss claims that the concepts, customs, and goods that are more

or less shared by several particular cultures add up to the shape of a civilization (Ullah and Kumpon 63). Their common cultural practice of performing is the foundation of Tharu culture, along with their agrarian lifestyle. Through customs, festivals, spirit plays, and finally written books, civilization transmits values.

Likewise, borders, for Kikhi and Lanamai should not be interpreted as simply marking the boundaries between one civilization or state and another; rather, borders should be seen as a reflection of the processes by which societies are formed and organized (1). In terms of mutual respect and culture, the boundary between India and Nepal is formed by two ethnic groups that are similar to each other. Nonetheless, there is a risk that the ultra-ethnic identity movement may transform identity politics into separatist movement. According to Heredia, the process by which an ethnic group transforms into an ethnic community, which then grows into an ethnic country and wants its own nation state (5). The possibility that identification movements may evolve into separatist movements so exists.

Result and Discussion

Creating an ecotourism hub in the Tharu Borderland might be one way to enhance the area. For social scientists and anthropologists, it might be developed as a research location. In the same way, an exotic recreation area may be established there as well. Martha Honey in *Who Own Paradise* defines ecotourism as:

A way to fund conservation and scientific research, protect fragile and pristine ecosystems, benefit rural communities, promote development in poor countries, enhance ecological and cultural sensitivity, instill environmental awareness and a social conscience in the travel industry, satisfy and educate the discriminating tourist, and build world peace. (4)

Research and the promotion of peace can both benefit from the development of the Tharu-inhabited area as a global tourism destination. Such programs support the spread of environmental consciousness in addition to aiding in the preservation of natural resources. Comparably, the first ecotourism organization in the world, The International Ecotourism Society (TIES), defined ecotourism as “Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people” (qtd. in Honey 5) in 1990. The purpose of visiting the Tharu-inhabited area should be to gain an insight of their way of life, culture, and socioeconomic struggles. In order to incorporate the Tharu tribe into the decision-making process, effective policies and measures must be produced by the research on them.

Similarly, Kurt Kutay argues:

Real Ecotourism includes minimization of environmental and cultural consequences, contributions to conservation and community projects in developing countries, and environmental education and political consciousness-raising, such as the establishment of codes of conduct for travelers as well as wide variety of certification programs for components of the travel industry. (qtd. in Honey 12).

Everyone involved in ecotourism should adhere to the values of low-impact, instructive, and culturally and ecologically sensitive travel that enhances the host nation and local populations. To govern their cultural identity, Tharus employ folklore. The songs and performance encapsulate their history,

culture, and rituals to make them seem like a cohesive, culturally diverse community. *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Cultures* by anthropologist Clifford Geertz contends that culture is a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms that men use to communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life (qtd. in Matteoni 89). Culture is a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols.

Tharus as the underprivileged have frequently been disregarded in the mainstream political, economic, and policy-making arenas. They have, meanwhile, consistently resisted being incorporated in state affairs. As per the cultural historian Peter Burke, the conventional interpretation of “people” in Western culture stems from diametrically opposite categories: the impoverished for the wealthy, the clergy for the laity, the commoners for the nobles, and the ignorant for the educated (5–13). For the privileged segment of the state, Tharus frequently appear as the impoverished and ignorant.

Environmental factors shape the subjectivity of Tharu. They draw great inspiration from nature and ecology for their clothing, food, housing, and cultural practices. According to Mikhail Bakhtin (1968), the body is never fully isolated from its surroundings; rather, it is always impacted by other bodies and outside factors, sometimes even reflecting or translating into them (349). Thus, it would be easy to monitor the border commerce and biological channels by looking at the Tharus that live along the border between India and Nepal. The local ecosystem has influenced their performance, which is closely linked to their way of life.

For the residents in the tribal territory, ecotourism frequently generates material benefits. Such a business strategy might address health issues, poverty, and low living standards. In similar case, Davidov Veronica in “Ecotourism and Cultural Production 2013” argues:

Ecotourism profits marginalized from their cultural location with subjects whose very poverty and exclusion from global economic flows has become a valuable commodity, because it signifies the coveted alterity, and with the locals for whom ecotourism is inherently a political enterprise, even as their visitors fail to grasp that dimension of it. (47)

Ecotourism should thus be encouraged on tribal grounds in order to improve their poor quality of living, promote sustainable development, and provide education. Authentic indigenous cultural forms are viewed as an organic part of the environment, and ecotourism is the consumption of local nature and culture.

Duffy, though, refers to ecotourism as the extractive sector (Veronica 49). The local areas are effectively disembodied and fragmented from their ecology and social structure. Therefore, ecotourism may occasionally be seen as a sector that undermines the traditional values and tastes of the tribal community, culture, and social structure. These kinds of projects might lead to a narrative that views the tribal people, who are rich in culture, as being powerless and excluded from society at large. Such views therefore have the potential to denigrate the tribal group’s autonomy. Duffy argues that preserving nature implies that the indigenous people have restricted and constrained agency (Veronica 49). Therefore, it is important to constantly assess the possibility of eradicating local culture and traditional values while implementing ecotourism on tribal grounds.

According to Viranco, “environmental discourse has permitted the authority of indigenous knowledge and practices through green primitivism” (qtd. in Veronica 58). Therefore, autonomy over their ancestral land is necessary to enable tribal groups to use it in a sustainable manner. The creation of

laws and regulations pertaining to national parks, wildlife reserves, and conservation zones should take Tharus into consideration. Similarly, the state should never treat the indigenous people unfairly even while designating their ancestral territory as a reserve or park and as a tourist destination. They are typically forced to live as bondage laborers on their property after having their holdings taken from them. During the Rana era, this similar procedure changed the Tharus into Kamaiya.

According to Viranco, indigenous groups oppose top-down eco-conservation projects mostly because they are disenfranchised or marginalized during the process, resulting in an unjustifiable loss of agricultural land that has been declared protected (Veronica 59). This resistance validates the necessity of local institutional governance. In *Eco-tourism and Environmental Sustainability*, Tim Gale and Jennifer Hill provide a novel strategy for preserving the natural world. They talk of banking its parks and natural reserves to foreign organizations that support the development of developing countries. They argue:

“Debt-for-nature Swaps” are one strategy to help poor nations conserve their natural resources. This strategy is based on the idea that a non-governmental organization (NGO) dedicated to conservation will purchase a portion of a nation’s national debt in exchange for promises that the debtor nation will oversee and assist the preservation of a specified region, such a national park. (23)

As a subsystem of society, tourism will also change to take new environmental concerns, ethical standards, and priorities into account. Gale and Hill debate whether the goal of a safari should be to kill animals or just to observe them (24). Therefore, moral ethics should be taken into account when determining what percentage of nature should be designated as protected territory and how it should be exploited.

In nature, everything is related. Nature and its constituent parts are intimately linked to human existence. In *The Ecological Self*, Freya Mathews discusses Newtonian atomism and makes the case that metaphysics and ethics are related since everything is interrelated (44). According to her, God initially created matter as immobile, solid, hard, and impenetrable particles of all sizes and shapes. Every alteration in the natural world should be understood as the separations, affiliations, and movements of these eternal atoms.

Collective Remembrance in the Historiography of Tharu Memory

The emotional outcomes of collective remembering, according to Beristain et al., include social sharing and funeral customs. Memories were especially significant for people who had been victims of mass killings (118). These groups rarely made an attempt to oppose it. Silence was a useful coping mechanism for the most of the time. But when modernity increased and had an effect on their awareness, they gained agency and rebelled against all kinds of repression.

According to Pennebaker, social sharing and disinhibition aid in overcoming emotional and painful occurrences. This also applies to culture, silence, and social sharing of emotions (qtd. in Beristain et al. 118). Furthermore, over the medium and long term, social sharing is linked to gains in subjective well-being and health. Affected individuals can also define, express, and cope with the traumatic event in ways that are culturally acceptable through social sharing. The foundations of collective memory are feelings and trauma experienced by the group. The sorrow of exile, injustice, and Kamaiya practice is

evident in Tharu songs. Both dread and despair are present in their performances. According to Beristain et al. (p. 118), the predominant emotion of mourning, sadness, promotes social cohesiveness and collective survival by fortifying social relationships.

Additionally, sadness is meant to help with reality-checking, loss acceptance, and making plans for future performance that will be even greater. According to Beristain et al. (119), fear is a prevalent feeling among victims of violence that drives them to run away. It also serves as a guide for self-defense activity by drawing attention to the threat. The unfairness of the repressive dictatorship is also shown in their performances, along with rage. While they may not always lead to violence, anger and a sense of injustice can inspire and maintain goal-directed behavior. Beristain et al. quote authors like Oberschall who argue that social insurrection stems psychologically from feelings of wrath and injustice (120). Tharu resistance and hardship during the Kamaiya practice are reflected in most of their songs.

Snyder Greta Fowler in her discussion of identity politics fluidity advocates for the multivalent recognition movement as a superior means of establishing excluded identity. Because of her, multivalent recognition subverts the predominance of prevailing identity groups, lessens internal suppression, and deters marginalization (250). Social devaluation leads to dominance. It disperses the dominating group. Social devaluation causes material misery because it limits the oppressed groups through the proliferation of negative or constricting group stereotypes (Fowler 251). Regaining lost agency and a distinct identity, however, is the purpose of the recognition movement. Through institutional, legal, and cultural-political techniques, recognition movements, as stated by Fowler (249), revalue previously marginalized collective identities. In their pursuit of multivalent recognition, actors and leaders ought to contribute to the evolving collective identity.

Via the disruption of the symbolic framework that serves the hegemonic group, actors participating in the multivalent recognition movement should constructively revalue a communal identity (Fowler 254). Thus, the only way forward for her is through coalition work. A multicultural society should liberate identity politics from monovalent recognition. Differentiated tribes must be represented in a multicultural society. Recognizing one group diminishes social cohesion and stifles the existence of other groups. Accordingly, a politics of multivalent recognition can help cultivate the cross-identity alliances required to provoke dramatic shifts in an identity field (257). Intersectionality, diverse identities, and multicultural society are all brought together by such an approach.

Tharu lifestyle has been impacted by modernity. They haven't really had the progressive growth, agency, and change they were hoping for. According to Marshall Berman, modernity is "being in a setting that offers us adventure, power, joy, growth, and transformation of the world and ourselves" (qtd. in Bush 15). The community's current struggle is to accept the change that fosters their agency and economic development. David Harvey discovers that many oppressed groups have adopted a scientific worldview due to the logical supremacy of science. He contends that science allowed modernity to rule nature and create a logical social structure (qtd. in Bush 12). Modernity instilled reason into their prehistoric way of thinking. According to Paul G. Hiebert, modernity appeals to the idea of rationality embedded in the machine. A large portion of life became commodified and commercialized as a result of rational order, control, efficiency, production, and profit being major values (qtd. in Bush 15). The main disadvantage for the indigenous communities was that they were compelled to commercialize their lives.

Conclusion

The Tharu population of Nepal and India, which is split by the border between the two countries yet bound together by a shared culture and destiny, is the subject of this paper's critical observation. Similar sociocultural experiences are shared by the Tharus residing across the borderland, who are frequently sidelined in their representation while mainstream policies and strategies are being drafted. In order to strengthen the local economy, the conclusion of this paper makes the case that both countries' governments ought to work together on the common tribal area development initiatives. The region and its abundant forest resources may be developed and promoted in order to turn them into genuine ecological parks and popular tourist attractions. Engaging in such endeavors will contribute to the advancement of the community's economic and educational standards, in addition to safeguarding the ecology and purity of nature.

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