

**Study on Tharu Women in Uttar Pradesh- Graduating from Tradition to Modernity:  
(A case Study of Lakhimpur Kheri District )**

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The Tharu people live in Tarai, a narrow strip of land which extends across 550 miles of the Southern border of Nepal, next to North East India. In India, they are scattered across various regions especially Gonda , Lakhimpur Kheri and Nainital. **Tharus constitute 77.4% of the total tribal population of Uttar Pradesh.** They claim themselves to be descendants of Ranas of Chittor. The study will focus on Tharu women who are supposed to be seeped in traditional milieu of their society. It will explore whether mass media, interpersonal communication or group communication has acted as an agent of social change. Are the customs and traditions of Tharu people being influenced by the changing environment around them? The researchers will focus on the LakhimpurKheri district of Uttar Pradesh which has a substantial Tharu population. Using qualitative research methods of focus group discussion and intensive interviews (including secondary data), the researchers attempt to showcase the metamorphosis of the Tharu culture.

*Key words: Tharu, interpersonal communication, group communication, social change*

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Tribal population in India**

Indian tribal people are a part of strong cultural heritage and occupy a major part in the history of India as they are considered as the true habitants of India. History says that India

was the abode of various tribal groups which were spread in different parts of the country - from North, East, West, Central and South to north India . The traditional and cultural distinction of each tribal community has made them distinguishable from each other and their cultural and traditional heritage add colour and variation to the Indian culture as a whole and form a compact culture. Indian tribal people reside in approximately fifteen percent of the country`s area. They primarily live in various ecological and geo-climatic conditions ranging from plains, forests, hills and inaccessible areas that perhaps lie dotted in the panoramic Indian terrain.

Article 342 of the Indian Constitution put them in 697 tribal communities as notified by the Central Government. Though the tribal or the primitive people in the earlier eras were not much forward but in recent times they are seen in some sectors of economical, educational and social development (India Tourism e Catalog, 2016).

### **Tharus of Lakhimpur Kheri**

The present study aims at studying the lifestyle , cultural and socio –economic fabric of India`s one of the most primitive Tharu tribes of Lakhimpur Kheri district mainly focusing on Tharu women in order to find out what has been the transition from traditional outlook to the modernity. It is based on the field work done on the Tharus of Lakhimpur Kheri of Uttar Pradesh by the researchers. In the plainest of terms case study is the method of exploring and analyzing the life of a social unit- be it an individual, a family, a community or an institution. Thus case studies/ interviews will refer to the intensive investigation of a particular unit.

The history of their origin as the Tharus narrate is not uniform. The scholars who have tried to trace the origin of the Tharus also have conflicting views on the subject. Tharus, believed to be of Rajput origin, are a jungle tribe. According to some, the word Tharu is derived from the Hindi word '*Thahrey*' (halted) because they are said to have halted after the alleged flight into the forest. The origin is also traced to the Hindi word '*tarhua*', wet, an allusion to the swampy land they live in. Some say the name simply means '*resident of the tarai*'. Now a days the Tharu mainly speak western Hindi as it is spoken in the rural areas. It has proved helpful for not only developing contact with other groups but also for facilitating a smooth and convenient tool of communication between them (Maiti, 2004)

**According to 2011 census their total population in Lakhimpur Kheri district is around 49,675 of which 21,458 are males and rest females spread in 37 villages of Pallian Kalan and four in Nighasan tehsil of Lakhimpur Kheri district.**

### **Tharu Women**

Positioning of women in the Tharu tribe in relation to family, social structures, customs and rituals and demonstrate, on the basis of empirical data, that Tharu women, who claim to have Rajput blood in their veins and are thought to be the descendants of Rajput queens, occupy an empowered space both in the family and the community. This is in stark contrast to the positioning of women in the urban metropolises of India (and other rural areas), where they are discriminated against, exploited, battered, raped and are forced to remain on the margins of the family-society power matrix. Women in the urban areas are still struggling for the rights and freedoms, which are enjoyed by the women of the Tharu tribe (United Nations Office on Drug & Crime, 2003)

Subhash Chandra Verma in his work on Tharus, also tells us about Tharu women. Tharus, has been a society in which women wield considerable power, which has profoundly influenced the cultural pattern of Tharus. They have considerable freedom and wield great influence in the domestic sphere. The majority of women do all the outdoor jobs , while their husbands only assist them or manage house hold chores . Tharu women also enjoy greater socio-economic rights and gender freedom, which is the product of the tribal social system, governing their lives and day-to-day living. Men have a great respect for all women, even in some of the families which no longer follow the joint family system, which was popular until recently. Tharu women wield power in the family set up, as permission of the mother, the wife or some other active woman of the family is compulsory for economic, social, religious, cultural and all other activities. The socio-economic rights of Tharu women are considered inviolable.

Even today, Tharu women are considered hard working and actively assist their men in agricultural and other outside work. But interestingly, they are, by far, the best caregivers in the family. In short, they play an important role both in and outside the family, making a significant contribution to the cultural and socio-economic activities of the community. Tharu women keep their houses clean and decorated. They like to visit local markets, fairs and festivals and occupy an empowered position(Dev, 1932)

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

The Mongolian features of the Tharus are quite evident - their eyes are more or less oblique, their complexion mostly brown or yellow-brown, the hair on the body and face very scanty

and straight, their nose thin and of medium size, while other features affiliate them more with the Nepalese. *Tharuhati*, the language of the Tharus is a Hindi dialect belonging to the Indo-Aryan group of languages. It is a mixed dialect which draws from the stocks of Hindi, and its other forms namely, Kanauji and Brajbhasha, Kumaonese and Urdu. This is certainly and evidence of their contact with the people who speak these languages and dialects. (Majumdar, 1942).

In his study of socio-cultural dynamics of the Tharu Tribe, Subhash Chandra Verma says, "Some Tharus are trying to keep their own socio-cultural values but they are not successful in their target till now. Large number of Tharu youth wants change in their life, so they are ignoring their own cultural values.". "We can say in other words that the process of Sanskritization is still running in this community. Tharu youth are playing very creative role in their community but they are not connected with main stream of development even some youth are trying to get higher education and advanced technology but in few number. Maximum Tharu youth are trying to accept other culture only for leaving their old own culture." (Verma, 2010).

Indian anthropologists have mostly accepted the fact that women occupy a position of power in the Tharu tribe. In 1941, D.N. Majumdar used the term **matriarchy** to refer to the Tharu people. He wrote, 'The dominance of women, their rights to property, their maltreatment of their husbands, their active role in fishing, the chase and business negotiations, all these reproduce conditions of matriarchal society.' The Khasas, with whom Tharus have interactions, also show the vestiges of strong, powerful women. So, it is possible that in the Tarai and the Himalayan region, among the aboriginal Tharus, a society in which women exerted considerable power existed in the past, which has profoundly influenced the cultural pattern of Khasas as well as Tharus.' (Srivastava, 1958). He adds, 'Even today [1958] the position of [Tharu] women is not that of the family drudge as one may find in some lowly

societies. They have considerable freedom and wield great influence in the domestic sphere. The majority of women in the crowded markets and fairs do all the marketing and move about freely, while their husbands only assist them in bringing the articles home, purchased by their wives.'

## **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

**1)The present study seeks to find out the change in life style of Tharus in general and Tharu women in particular who are supposed to be seeped in traditional milieu of their society.**

The government by way of initiating a series of steps in respect of empowering the community with education, a chain of schools has today made them realise how important is the education to one and all. Girls in large number have come forward to acquire knowledge. There are degree colleges with hostel facilities in order to ensure that Tharu girls from far flung villages need not commute everyday. The concept is of *Gurukul Shikhsha* and even intermediate colleges have been set up to ensure that they focus themselves towards a career.

The government through social communication and mass media has been trying to create an awareness as to how technical college can help them acquire knowledge in computers and for this Skill Development Programme has been initiated in batches.

**2) The study by taking Lakhimpur Kheri district as a case study explores as to how mass media, interpersonal communication or group communication has acted as an agent of social change.**

3) Are the customs and traditions of Tharu people being influenced by the changing environment around them?

## DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS

Interview with Santosh Tripathi (Master Ji) Suda Village, Pallian Kalan

### (The Game Changer)

When *Santosh Tripathi* (76) visited Suda village in 1963, it was all a thick forest inhabited by one of the most primitive tribal community *Tharus* in Pallian Kalan tehsil of Lakhimpur Kheri district and literally cut off from rest of the world. The community was mainly dependent on whatever was grown here in a wild manner and Tharu women remain engaged in fishing. Fish-Rice was their diet while men, mostly staying indoors, consumed locally prepared liquor. In fact everyone in the community used liquor and enjoyed in evening.

In a detailed interview Mr Tripathi recalled as to how *Tharus* stayed in pockets in the dense forest devoid of any facilities like education, health and their awareness towards land and human rights. Age old customs and culture were followed in the community with women having more say in family matters. No one was interested in education and they were happy to be illiterate.

***Santosh Tripathi is today acclaimed and highly respected because he has been a Game Changer and one who brought revolution among Tharus about their rights and made them empowered to raise their voice.***

***Researcher: Tell us how did the change in outlook towards education and thereby women empowerment start?***

I came to Suda village on December 10, 1963 as a forest labourer from Eastern Uttar Pradesh and watched the community closely . Although I am eight standard pass, I started '*Paathshaala*' in a thatched house in order to educate Tharu children. "No one was willing to send his child for education. I had to go house to house to bring these children for imparting tuitions for few hours."

It required lot of patience to convince the community about the importance of education .

Today you will hardly find a girl or boy who is not going to school . Many of them are in the job even outside U.P. Girls are becoming graduates and applying for jobs.

Traditionally though women have greater authority in family matters but with change of time and awareness now men and women both work towards the betterment of family. Marriages were settled when a girl or boy was just four year old. *Tharu* and *Daru* (Liquor) were synonym to each other but you will now find Tharus consuming liquor only when there is occasion to celebrate.

***Researcher: What about the role of government in spreading awareness for uplifting the Tharu tribe?***

The government and its schemes have to be complimented for the general upliftment and awareness among Tharu community . You have Primary Schools , Inter Colleges all around , Health Care Centres and even *Satsang* (Spritual ) Centres where they avail all the facilities. Transport and communication is better with BSNL tower and many of them using mobiles .



Is it not a transformation and sign of empowerment in the community which was completely away from the outside world? I hope “The community will one day be at par with any of the urban area in terms of facilities”.

There are, however, pockets in the deeper forest which do remain disconnected to the community at the periphery and they prefer to crossover to the adjoining Nepal border and are happily engaged in the trade between Indo-Nepal Border.

### **Interview with M P Tripathi , Senior Official, Integrated Tribal Development Scheme**

**Chandan Chowki**

*Researcher: Tell us about the Integrated Tribal Development Scheme and its role in bringing about change among the Tharus?*

The Integrated Tribal Development Scheme through its Project Office in Chandan Chowki of Pallian Kalan tehsil , 100 kms from District headquarters of Lakhimpur Kheri was launched in 1976 by the Uttar Pradesh Government and is a centrally funded scheme through the State.

It is a scheme for the all-round development of the Tharu Tribal community, be it education , health care , agriculture farming with modern techniques , fish development , handicraft training or skill development programme in different areas , M P Tripathi a senior official with the project explained. We invite scientists from Pusa Institute New Delhi to train tribal farming community on how to improve crop production.

“Our machinery is here since 1976 and a lot many programmes for the development and upliftment of tribals have been undertaken with great success”, MrTripathi said . In the

agriculture farming newer techniques have been made available to the farmers and the crop production of both the Paddy and Wheat has increased. One could see good wheat crop in the region.

While the Primary Health Care centre had OPD patients , The Computer Centre had an Skill Development Program being undertaken for 150 Tribal Girls in batches. The Schools and Intermediate College have come up in the region with hostel facility. These centres are run under “Eklavya” and “Gurukul” scheme wherein students have residence facility so that they do not have to come from far flung areas, the official said.

He claimed 80 percent of the area of the Tharus has been saturated with one or other development and welfare schemes and they were getting benefits of these.

***Researcher: Development often comes at a price. Have the Tharus given up on their culture and traditions?***

I would not say they have given up their traditions and customs but they are now very much part of the “changed Society.”

You will hardly witness Tharu men and women wearing traditional dresses. From typical Lehnga –Choli , they have changed to sarees and jeans. Is it not the way they are changing towards modern society? Many of them have understood the ill-effects of liquor and attend Satsang run by Radhaswami religious group. They have got converted into Bhagtas (spiritual people) and hence given up non-vegetarian food.. However their normal food comprises of Rice and Fish.

The official’s claims were verified with many tribals who during interview admitted that they have been benefitted greatly by the government schemes.

If you don't want to change , you cannot , said Tripathi when asked about the Tribals who live deep into the forest. "Yes, in some pockets neither we are able to penetrate nor they are willing to change".

## FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

**Focus Group Discussion involving 11 educated girls among Tharus. The discussion was held on two parameters.**

*Figure 1. Matrix for assessing level of consensus in focus group*

<u>Focus</u> <u>Group</u> <u>Question</u>	<u>Me</u> <u>mber</u> <u>1</u>	<u>Me</u> <u>mber</u> <u>2</u>	<u>Me</u> <u>mber</u> <u>3</u>	<u>Me</u> <u>mber</u> <u>4</u>	<u>Me</u> <u>mber</u> <u>5</u>	<u>Me</u> <u>mber</u> <u>6</u>	<u>Me</u> <u>mber</u> <u>7</u>	<u>Me</u> <u>mber</u> <u>8</u>	<u>Me</u> <u>mber</u> <u>9</u>	<u>Me</u> <u>mber</u> <u>10</u>	<u>Me</u> <u>mber</u> <u>11</u>
1) Education along with mass media & interperson al/group communica tion has brought social	<u>A</u>	<u>SE</u>	<u>SE</u>	<u>A</u>	<u>SE</u>	<u>A</u>	<u>SE</u>	<u>SE</u>	<u>SE</u>	<u>A</u>	<u>A</u>

change											
2) Customs & traditions of Tharus are being influenced by changing environmen t	<u>D</u>	<u>SE</u>	<u>A</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>A</u>	<u>A</u>	<u>SE</u>	<u>SE</u>	<u>SE</u>	<u>SE</u>	<u>D</u>

A = Indicated agreement (i.e., verbal or nonverbal)

D = Indicated dissent (i.e., verbal or nonverbal)

SE = Provided significant statement or example suggesting agreement

SD = Provided significant statement or example suggesting dissent

NR = Did not indicate agreement or dissent (i.e., nonresponse)

Question 1

**Education along with mass media & interpersonal/group communication has brought social change.**

**M1: This respondent indicated agreement with the statement.**

**M2: This respondent provided significant statement suggesting agreement. She has persuaded lot many girls from the Tharu Community to take up schooling since**

Schools have been opened in the vicinity of ChandanWadi , the hub in PalianKalan Tehsil of LakhimpurKheri district where Tharu Community thrive since aegis.

**M3: This respondent provided significant statement suggesting agreement.**

She just completed her training in computers through a Skill Development Program and was joined by a batch of 150 Girls together in batches.

**M4: This respondent indicated agreement with the statement.**

**M5: This respondent provided significant statement suggesting agreement.**

**M6: This respondent indicated agreement with the statement.**

Meera , pursuing the second year Graduation finds herself more confident because she is the first one from a Tharu Tribal family who has come out from home to become a Teacher. Her elder sister did not like to study but Government's awareness program made her convince that without education, there can never be prosperity in the family and in her village. "I am out of rudimentary culture of being confined to home", Meera said.

**M7: This respondent provided significant statement suggesting agreement.**

I commute through a Bus to pursue Graduation and come from a distance of 15 Kms. I also want to become a Teacher and my preference is Home Science.

**M8: This respondent provided significant statement suggesting agreement.**

I was influenced by my friends to take up education and feel confident now.

**M9: This respondent provided significant statement suggesting agreement.**

All the girls in our group decided to study as we aspire better and respectable lives for ourselves and our family.

**M10: This respondent indicated agreement with the statement.**

**M11: This respondent indicated agreement with the statement.**

Question 2

**Customs & traditions of Tharus are being influenced by changing environment**

**M1: This respondent indicated dissent.**

**M2: This respondent provided significant statement suggesting agreement.**

We have been part of the great values of primitive Tharu tribes but we take pride in changing towards modernity.

**M3: This respondent provided significant statement suggesting dissent.**

We are actually trying to maintain a balance between our traditional culture and modernity in the form of education, employment and increased opportunities.

**M4: This respondent indicated agreement.**

**M5: This respondent provided significant statement suggesting dissent.**

Traditions and culture may not be evident strongly as these were in the yesteryears but these are preserved through paintings, handicraft and artefacts and very much preserved by our parents.

**M6: This respondent indicated agreement.**

**M7: This respondent provided significant statement suggesting agreement.**

Gone are the days when our marriages were settled by parents when we were five to six years old , they remarked . Nowadays decisions are taken by us and there are no

restrictions from parents in choosing a right partner. Marriages are not performed early but only after the age of 21-22 years .

**M8: This respondent provided significant statement suggesting agreement.**

We take pride in our culture but we also know that unless we change , we cannot compete with the modern world.

**M9: This respondent provided significant statement suggesting agreement.**

Tharu Community in general trying to adapt the technology and modern means of communication as it firmly believes change is necessary for the upliftment and betterment.

**M10: This respondent provided significant statement suggesting agreement.**

**I really feel that change is necessary to adapt to the fast paced environment around us.**

**M11: This respondent indicated dissent.**

**When we analyse the results of Question 1**, all the 11 respondents have agreed with the statement or have provided a significant statement or example indicating agreement with the question. This means education along with interpersonal/group communication has brought social change among Tharu women.

**After analysing the results of Question 2**, we find that **8 out of 11 respondents** have agreed with the statement or have provided a significant statement or example indicating agreement with the question. This means customs and traditions of Tharus

are being influenced by the changing environment although efforts are being made to safeguard the distinctive character of Tharu culture.

## **CONCLUSION**

On the basis of the available information and data, it can be concluded that the Tharu community continues to be one of the few tribal communities of India in which women still enjoy a reasonably empowered status. Women live with fewer restrictions and enjoy respect in the family and in the community. They enjoy enough social and economic rights to give them autonomy in their day-to-day lives. Married life for women is peaceful and they have considerable freedom in sexual relations within the marriage relationship. Crimes against Tharu women continue to be quite low. Whereas women across India are struggling for their empowerment, Tharu women have long enjoyed an empowered lifestyle. However, it is important to mention the process of modernisation appears visible with the community focusing on education in general and girls in particular taking lead to move to higher education in good number. The community is adopting modern farming techniques , better crop production , health care and awareness towards their land and human rights.. At a time when the movement for the empowerment of women is active in India and throughout the world, in Tharu society, women's position is also going strong especially girls taking up to education and becoming socially aware. Roughly, 80 percent of Tharu houses had dish antennae and access to newspapers, magazines, radio and television was there. New media has also made inroads, thanks to mobiles and internet. Undoubtedly, the mass media and interpersonal/group communication has played a part. While the community has preserved its rich traditions and culture it feels the necessity of adopting to modern living and an aware citizen.



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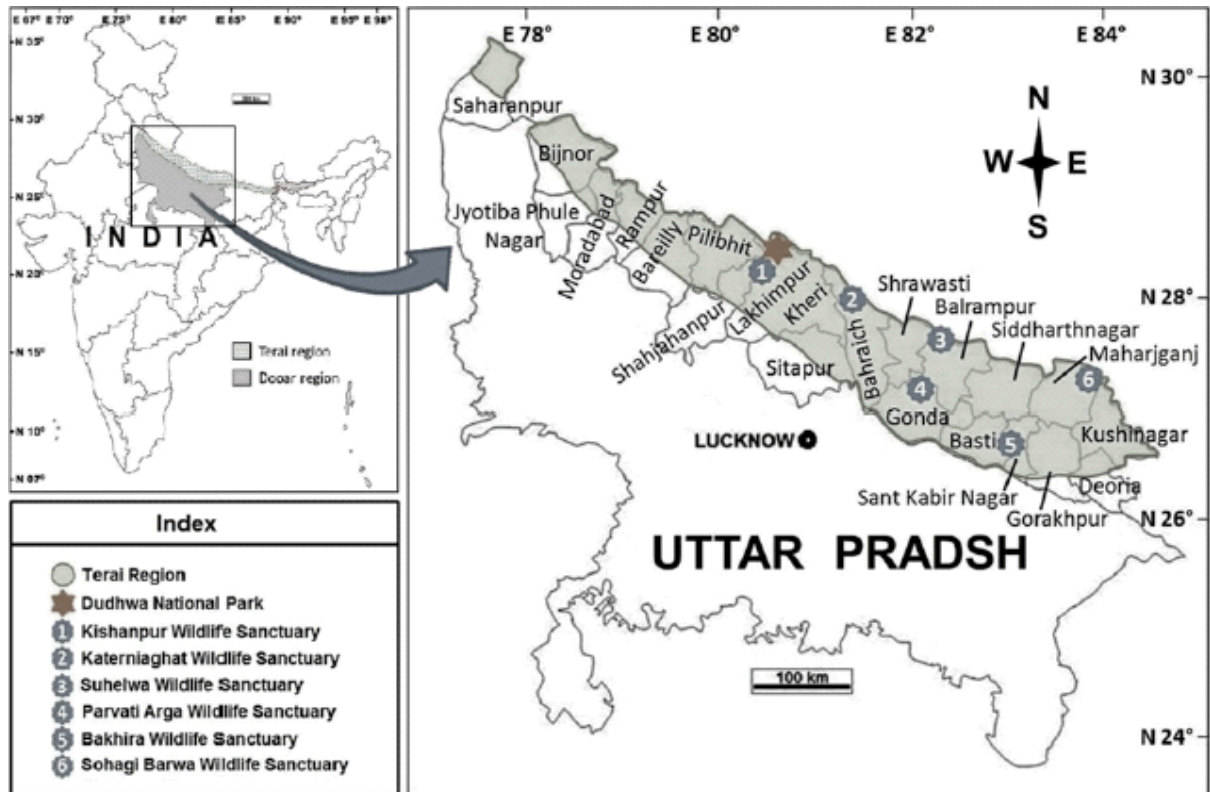
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The Study Area (Map)



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