

Special Section Guest Editorial

Guest Editorial for Special Section on Tharu

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The social science literature on the Tharu people of the Nepal Tarai (produced mainly by anthropologists) was once quite limited, especially when compared to the extensive documentation of the society and culture of the Nepal hills. In the last twenty years or so, however, there has been significant growth in our knowledge of Tharu communities in both Nepal and India. In the latter case, for instance, a preliminary examination of dissertations produced in Indian universities since 2000, as documented in the open access website Shodhganga, indicates at least twenty-nine theses in the vernacular and fifteen in English that deal directly with topics relevant to the study of Tharu society and culture. Many other relevant studies likely also exist in that database, although “Tharu” does not appear in their titles. Much of this work, however, including the excellent work done in Nepal by a new generation of scholars, has been

conducted in Chitwan and Champaran and points west; Tharu society and culture in the eastern Tarai is not much better known today than it was twenty years ago.

The collection of three papers that form part of this issue of HIMALAYA are a contribution to this expanding knowledge. If there is a theme that links them, it is that of social change in the context of modernity. My own paper, on the classification of the Tharu as a “tribal” group in the colonial literature, points to the variation in attributes deployed by western social science as it sorted Indic peoples into castes and tribes, which in turn distinguish Tharu communities in the Tarai on a west to east continuum. That is, Tharu communities in the west have more of the features of what colonial anthropology thought of as tribal, while in the east, Tharu communities are integrated into mixed caste communities and share in the attributes of caste.

I discuss this with special reference to the Tharu of Chitwan, whose society and cultural practices have been transformed by the malaria eradication project of the 1950s. Unlike in the past, however, where the integration of “tribal” people into “caste-based” societies was seen by anthropologists such as Marriott as bringing them into the caste order as new castes, I argue that by being integrated into the multi-ethnic polity of a modern state in the wake of the transformation of Chitwan, the Tharu are better described as an ethnic group rather than as a caste or a tribe.

Where malaria eradication initiated a dramatic transformation in the way Chitwan Tharu lived and worked, the beginning of labor migration abroad led to further transformation, particularly in the dynamics of family life. Andrea Grimaldi’s paper takes up this topic, by discussing how the remittance economy

that has emerged in Chitwan in the last few decades has altered gender roles, particularly that of young wives, who are often the recipients of remittances sent home by their husbands. Although this gives them a measure of autonomy, it also contributes to domestic conflict and tension within the family. Women also play a significant role in labor migration (although they do not form part of the labor pool) because their membership in microcredit organizations generates the financial resources that allow men to seek employment abroad. Grimaldi does not find much evidence, however, that women are able to maintain their autonomy and expanded role in society over the long term; the return of their husbands from work abroad also appears to be a return to more traditional gender roles.

The last article in this collection, by Maycock and Chaudhary, examines the changing role of the Tharu *guruwa* (or *gurau*, as they are known in Chitwan) in the context of the spread of Western medicine in Nepal, especially the ubiquity of pharmacies and health posts. Their particular focus is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which provided opportunities for the *guruwa* to redefine their traditional role. In the context of lockdowns and social distancing, people increasingly turned to the *guruwa* for help, and *guruwa* increasingly responded in creative ways, for instance by conducting long-distance consultations over the phone, and by using their supernatural powers to protect the village from this new and unanticipated affliction. The modern technology of the phone, ironically, has helped *guruwa* reclaim

their traditional status as healers in Tharu society in the context of a pandemic that modern public health systems struggled to deal with. The question remains, however, whether these changes can survive the disappearance of the conditions that allowed for them.

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