

## THARUS OF DANG: THE PEOPLE AND THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

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### *Introduction*

The Tharus are one of the indigenous tribal peoples scattered all along the southern foot-hills of the Himalayas. The greater part of their population resides in Nepal, although some Tharus are also scattered in the adjacent Indian districts of Champaran, Gorakhpur, Basti, Gonda and Nainital. In Nepal, the total population of the Tharus, according to the 1971 census, is 495,881.

There are several endogamous sub-groups of Tharus, such as Rana, Katharia, Dangaura, Kochila and Mech. This work will concentrate on the Tharus of Dang, dealing mainly with the Dangaura Tharus living in the terai of the Far-Western Development Region of Nepal.

### *Village Organization*

A Tharu village consists of several families living in a compact social unit which benefits them both socially and economically. Several families within this unit are related to each other by affinal and consanguineal relationships, while all are linked with each other at least by religious and economic ties. Villages generally range from four or five to thirty or more houses. Some Tharu villages in Dang which have been affected by the mass-migration of Tharus to the far-western terai districts have been abandoned.

In a Tharu village the duty of maintaining good relations among villagers, as well as conducting the village's affairs, falls on the *mahaton* (village chief). A *mahaton* is elected by the *gardhurryās* (Tharu household chiefs) from among themselves; however there is one rare case of a Brahmin Jeewaraj Acharya of Lahlaura village in Dang who was once elected *mahaton* of his village. A *gardhurryā* coming from an influential and numerous family with a proper knowledge of priestly craft has a better chance of being elected as a *mahaton* than others. A *mahaton* is elected, but once elected, the office becomes hereditary, unless a particular incumbent is considered a misfit. The assembly of the *gardhurryās* (*khel*) can remove an unsuccessful *mahaton*. An existing *mahaton*'s family can also retire from this office in case of any imminent movement of the family or any severe economic crisis in the family brought about by unforeseen circumstances or a shortage of manpower available for village affairs.

The election of a new *mahaton* is very simple. All the *gardhurryās* assemble in the existing *mahaton*'s house or in an open space. A few aged and experienced *gardhurryās* propose a name for the *mahaton*-to-be, a name which they have previously selected in earlier informal gatherings like a feast, a ceremony, a dance or a construction work. During the election day there is some light discussion concerning the proposed name but usually there is no opposition and all of them recognize the proposed person unanimously as their new *mahaton*.

A *khel* is composed of all the *gardhurryās* of the village. Any other man of the family (household) can be a representative in the *khel* in lieu of the concerned *gardhurryā* if the *gardhurryā* cannot be present at the time. The chief male member of the household is appointed as a *gardhurryā* by other male members of the household. This is determined mainly on the principle of patrilineal descent but experience and age seniority are also

important factors. Usually the post of *gardhurryā* also becomes hereditary until the household splits or a particular incumbent proves to be a misfit.

The role of the *mahaton* in the *khel* is like that of a chairman and a judge who, keeping others' views in mind, gives the final communal decision. Whenever the *mahaton* wants to summon a *khel* he informs all the *gardhurryās* a few hours or some days earlier, depending on how important the business is. Any villager can carry this message from the *mahaton* to the *gardhurryās*. There is no servant or peon paid for that purpose. During my field studies the *khels* which I observed were held for arranging voluntary services concerned with some social or religious performances like a marriage, death, or *barkā puajā* and sometimes in connection with dramatic performances done on behalf of the village.<sup>1</sup>

The word *mahaton* seems to be derived from the Persian '*Mokaddam*', later on reshaped as a Sanskrit word '*mahatam*' which means great, superior, or chief. *Mokaddam* was a village level functionary in charge of settlement operations and the allotment of uncultivated lands in the villages during the Moghul rule in India. In the 18th and early 19th centuries there were *mokaddams* appointed in Chitawan District and a few eastern Terai districts of Nepal also.

The earliest mention of the word *mahatam* in Nepal so far is in the A.D. 1336 (1258 Shake *Sambat*) copper plate inscription of King Punya Malla in the Karnali region. In this copper plate

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1 *Barkā puajā* is the greatest religious ceremony performed by every household or extended family. All male-line cousins of the concerned household or family within seven generations also take part in this performance. Several animals and fowls are sacrificed. It is performed usually every ten to twelve years, according to the advice of the priest of the household.

the King gives some administrative orders to some of his officials of Dang including the *mahatams*. But except for the information that the *mahatams* were some of the principal officials (along with *adai*, *adhikāri* and *mahar*, also mentioned on the plate), no further details are given in the plate regarding their status or administrative powers.

Though there are some instances of official appointments of *mokaddams* in some villages of Chitawan and Eastern Terai, none so far are known for Dang Deokhuri District. Probably the unofficially appointed *mahatons* were doing village-level administrative jobs except for the business of land settlement and the collection of the revenues for which Zemindars (functionaries responsible for revenue collection) and Patwaris (village-level functionaries in the Terai districts who maintained land and revenue records) were appointed, and also gave them full assistance to perform their work well, regarding the revenue collections. According to information collected in the field, the *mahaton* used to play a significant role inside the village. During Rana rule he was the *de facto* link between the administration and the people. There were Zemindars and Chaudharis. But they had very little time left to look after a particular village in detail.<sup>2</sup> Hence the *mahaton* was the first person responsible for keeping the administration informed of each and every activity inside the village.

A *mahaton* in Dang Deokhuri has today the following traditional obligations:

- A. *He is a senior priest:* He is the principal executant of the village-level religious performances. He

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<sup>2</sup> Chaudhari is a functionary working as a co-ordinator between several Zemindars and Chaudharis as well as a semi-government administrator in a Praganna, an administrative unit composed of several villages.

himself, or any other male member of his family, paints the *astimki* on a *dehri* in his house where all the women and girls from the village gather to celebrate *astimki* festival on *astami* or *janmastami*, the birthday of Lord Krishna. The *mahaton* himself, sometimes aided by a still more senior *desbandhyā* priest, performs several rites to appease various spirits and divinities so that they will not damage the crops, kill or trouble the inhabitants and their domestic animals and poultry. Though each household of the village supplies its share for village festivals and worship and assists financially in the supply of chickens, pigs, liquor and (if needed) vegetables, oil, ghee, and flour, certain expenses are born by the *mahaton's* family.

- B. *He is an administrator:* He is the person who organizes the villagers who participate in public works for the welfare of either the community or a particular household. In case of food shortage or man-power shortage during the agricultural season, he helps the person concerned and makes arrangements to deal with the problem.
- C. *He is a judge:* During quarrels between Tharus in the village, he is the first person to be approached. Though usually minor cases are judged by him, he may try to settle major conflicts too. He is empowered to impose fines on cattle-owners who let their animals stray during the crop-season and in the case of other minor offences such as playing instruments during certain prohibited periods of the year (such violations do not occur often), causing bodily hurt to others, insulting a person, and cases concerned with abduction.

Here are two examples from Sukhrwar villages:

- i. In December 1966, during a fight between a Tharu woman and an old Brahmin woman, the former knocked down the other, breaking one of her teeth. The *mahaton* fined the offender (the Tharu woman) Rs fifteen and handed it over to the Brahmin woman.
- ii. In May 1971, during a fight in the street between two male buffaloes, a bullock passed by and was accidentally crushed between the two buffaloes. The case went to the *mahaton* who asked the two owners of the fighting buffaloes to pay 25 percent each of the original price of the bullock.

In return for the services rendered to the village, the *mahaton* is compensated by voluntary services and gifts on several occasions from the villagers. Twice a year (during the sowing and the harvest of paddy) the villagers give him labour free of charge. On these occasions the *mahaton* has to supply the labourers with three meals daily.

During the time of sowing or cultivation of paddy, for each *hal* (the amount of land ploughed by a pair of bullocks in one morning) of land cultivated by a household in the village, the household has to offer one plough team to plough for a *mahaton's* family. A large household cultivating eight or ten *hals* for itself thus has to supply eight or ten plough teams. The plougher has to plough one full day having a break of about two hours at midday. One female worker from the plougher's family has to work in the same area for one afternoon. The ploughman ploughs the field in the morning and after the midday meal (*mār*) repairs the weather-worn terrace-bunds; in the late afternoon and evening he does the *loor* type of ploughing (mud ploughing or smooth ploughing with sufficient water in the terrace). The woman is engaged in the *loor phijnā* (levelling of the mud-ploughed terrace by hands) task. The

service offered during this period is called *buini begāri* (service granted for sowing). The next period of such service, known as *katauni begāri*, comes during the harvest of paddy. Then one member per *hal*-cultivating household has to give two full days' work of which one day is spent in cutting the paddy and one more day later on in carrying the dried paddy to the *khenwā* or *khalihān*.

#### *Recent Changes and Some Consequences*

According to my informants, the *mahaton* used to play a significant role in the village. His post was so prestigious that the word '*mahaton*' was later on used as a surname by several backward communities like the Tharus of Chitawan, Kailali, or the Koiri caste of central Terai.

Today, the *mahaton* has been stripped of much of his earlier power and position. Officially the village-level judicial power has shifted to the *pradhan pancha* (chairman of a village or town *panchayat* elected by the villagers) and the *mahaton's* position as a real village-chief has been challenged by the *pancha-sadasya* (ward representative in a village or town *panchayat*). If either the *pradhan pancha* or an *upa-pradhan pancha* is selected from his village, the *mahaton* remains subservient to them.

But the Tharu villagers still respect the *mahaton* as he is the person responsible for the performance of the village-level religious performances. For the common villager, he is the only person to approach for getting help from the community in circumstances like the roofing of a house or the rebuilding after a fire or in case of delays in sowing or harvesting of a crop. The *mahaton* is still the leading figure in the village-level construction projects, undertaken traditionally by the village itself. Tharus have much more faith in him than in the

*pradhan pancha* or the *pancha sadasya* for a *mahaton* is always a Tharu, while a *pradhan pancha* or *pancha sadasya* may not be. A Tharu, they feel, understands better the problems of other Tharus.

Their social, economic and educational backwardness, the effects of the old civil code (*muluki ain*), the behaviour of the landlords, merchants, and local officials have all combined to induce a sense of tribal inferiority among the Tharus who lack faith in administrators and officials. Therefore, whenever there is a conflict between Tharus, the *mahatons* of the concerned villages (sometimes, if necessary, with the help of other Tharu notables) settle the problem. If the conflict occurs between a Tharu and a non-Tharu both persons involved, at the request of the Tharu, appear before the *mahaton*. If the non-Tharu does not agree to abide by the decision of the *mahaton*, the case goes up to the *pradhan pancha* where the Tharu tries hard to get the case settled, though the decision may be less favourable to him than what it would have been if he had the capacity to put the case before a higher court or office. The Tharu does not dare to go higher, unless the case is very serious or associated with a large amount of property. A Tharu attending the court or office with his sense of tribal inferiority, thinks that his non-Tharu opponent (who is most probably a native speaker of Nepali the official language) may influence the official or the judge since both share a common culture and language. Moreover it is easier for a non-Tharu to become literate and educated. So the Tharu is suspicious that the decision in the long run will not be in his favour.

A Tharu, again, does not have much faith in the present judicial procedure, which seems quite lengthy to him. According to him it is quite useless to attend the court or pass through several channels during the procedure and very often



is a waste of time. The amount of time spent going many times to the different offices, waiting there and then returning home, just to attend the *tārikh* (date, for an official appointment), hampers a Tharu's household routine very much, and this is particularly so during the cultivation period, as it may severely affect the yield of the crops.

#### *A Case Study*

In a small village, neighbouring Sukhrwar, a Brahmin family and a Tharu family have their farms side by side. The farm of the Brahmin is lower in elevation than that of the Tharu. Each year the Brahmin family digs some inches of the soil at the bottom of the fence that forms the boundary between the properties, thus moving the fence a bit further and adding the space of a few more inches to their own farm. Finally the patience of the Tharu family was exhausted and the young headman of the Tharu family asked the Brahmin family to stop doing this. The Brahmin family remained quiet for some weeks but then started doing this again. The Tharu went and complained to the *mahaton* about it but the Brahmin family was notorious for such activities in the village and did not comply. The Tharu went to some noble high-caste men in the village but none of them dared to say anything against the notorious Brahmin family for it was in a position to upset the balance of village politics. While all this was happening, a weak and old bull belonging to the Tharu family entered the farm of the Brahmin through a break in the fence. The bull died there and thus caused great trouble. The Brahmin family became furious. Some of its members went to the Tharu family and asked them to pay compensation for the 'damage' done to the crops inside their farm. The Tharu family begged pardon but said that the bull had been weak and had done practically no harm except for gnawing some grass near the fence and that they were unable to pay any compensation. Thereupon a member

of the Brahmin family picked up a pot from the Tharu kitchen and all the Brahmins returned home with the pot, saying that it would be held until the Tharu family supplied them with three loads of fire wood, At first the Tharu family thought this was a joke and did not take it seriously, believing that one day the vessel would be returned. But this did not happen. The Tharus went to the *mahaton* but the *mahaton* could not help since he was unable to execute his decision due to the lack of any official power or recognition behind him. Then the poor Tharu went to the high caste landlords to plead his cause but once again he was unable to get justice as none of them took any interest in this for the reason already mentioned, namely that Brahmin family could upset the political balance in that small village. The headman of the Tharu family did not dare to go to the *pradhan pancha* for several reasons. He did not want to waste at least two or three days in the office waiting for him to arrive and then investigate the case for a further few more days before giving any judgement. All he wants is a prompt judgement within the village, so that his farm-routine might not be disturbed. The Tharu family does not know what can be done in this respect. It is waiting anxiously to get mercy from the Brahmin family; however this seems unlikely. Four or five years have passed and the pot is still held by the Brahmin family.

The above example does not seek to minimize the importance of the *mahaton*. Generally such cases occur when there is conflict between a Tharu and a non-Tharu; otherwise, for example in case of a conflict between Tharus themselves, they very often agree with the *mahaton's* ruling since none of them is likely to carry the case further, for the reasons already mentioned.

#### *Groups and Clans*

Tharus as a whole are divided into several endogamous

groups such as the Rana, Katharai, Dangaura (the name given by other Tharus as well as other ethnic groups to the Tharus of Dang or immigrants of Dang origin in far-western Terai districts), Chitawania, Kochila and Morangia. Each endogamous group has developed a slightly different dialect and life-style.

Notions concerning the clan system among the Tharus, Dangauras as well as others, are vague. They do not have any proper Tharu word for clan. When a Tharu wants to know another Tharu's clan name, he simply asks "*kā (kām) tharu hoitho?*" meaning "what (type of) Tharu are you?". Sometimes they use terms like *thahar* or *pad* (borrowed from Nepali) but only a few Tharus understand these terms. In the Tharu context, males belonging to a particular clan are the descendants of one particular ancestor, who may be either a shaman, a ghost, a spirit or a totem. The clan is exogamous and patrilineal. Its distinctions are important on two occasions: 1. when fixing wedding arrangements and 2. at any religious-shamanistic performance.

The Tharus of Dang Deokhuri as well as the Dangauras (recent immigrant Tharus or descendants of previous immigrant Tharus to far-western Terai districts from Dang Deokhuri) can first of all be classified collectively under one term Dangaura or Dangaha (a term preferred by the Tharus of Dang to distinguish them from other endogamous Tharu groups). This endogamous Dangaura Tharu group can be further divided into three sub-groups which are:

- A. Gharguruwa sub-group,
- B. Barin sub-group and
- C. The sub-group of 'in-between's'.

The Gharguruwa sub-group is the sub-group of priests while Barin is the sub-group of laymen. Both of these two

sub-groups are complementary to each other. There is, however, a third sub-group which can be called the sub-group of 'in-between'. Tharus do not have any name or word for this sub-group. This sub-group neither obtains any priestly service from any household of Gharguruwa sub-group nor does any household of Barin sub-group ask for any such kind of service from this (the 'in-between') sub-group. No man can change his sub-group status at will. Yet, this sub-group distinction has no hierarchical significance at all. It creates no status gap among these three sub-groups who inter-dine, intermarry and mix freely without having any kind of claims for sub-group superiority.

The above sub-groups are further divided into several clans and in, a few cases, into sub-clans also.

(A) *Clans and Sub-Clans in the Gharguruwa Sub-Group*

1. DAHIT. According to a legend Dahits are ex-Ahirs (milkman caste). *Dahi* (curd of yogurt) was the main dish served to the people during the *pat lena* (integration) ceremony for converting the Ahir ancestors into Tharu caste and so they were called Dahit. The household deity manipulated by this clan for priestly craft is Bherrwa (further details will be given below). Dahits are divided into four sub-clans which are as follows:

- a. KHAS DAHIT (the real Dahit).
- b. GADDAGGYA DAHIT (Dahits with a burnt buttock).  
According to a legend they are descendants of a Dahit whose buttock was burnt in an accident.
- c. KAJPUJWA DAHIT (Dahits offering *kaj*).  
*Kaj* is the soured scum of boiled rice. According to tradition, this sub-clan offers some soured rice scum to its deities during the Dasya festival.
- d. GANGWA DAHIT: No legend or story is known about the origin of this sub-clan name.

2. SUKHRORYA GURRWA: Members of this clan are supposed to be the descendants of a great priest and shaman of Sukhrwar who was known as Sukhrorya Gurrwa (priest-shaman of Sukhrwar). There are eight large households representing this clan in Sukhrwar village. The members of this clan are in the majority (40%) within the village. This clan too has Bherrwa as its household deity but in a slightly different model known as Sukhrorya Bherrwa (see illustration No. 1).

3. KATKATWA: The household deity of this clan is Madua. Little is known about the origin of this clan.

4. PACHAL DANGYA or RAJI: People of this clan claim to be the descendants of some Rajis (another ethnic group of Western Nepal) who were integrated or converted into Tharus. Their household deity is Jagarnatthya, who is also worshipped by Rajis.<sup>3</sup>

(B) *Clans and Sub-Clans in the Barin Sub-Group*

There are several clans, a few having their sub-clans too in this sub-group.

1. GAMMWA.

2. NAMMWA: According to a belief, because of a shortage of other animal victims their ancestors offered a *nammwa* or *nampucchi* (long tail, slang for a cat) to the deities; since then they have been called NAMMWA.

3. JINGUNI.

4. BHALUGUNI.

5. KOTALWAN.

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3 Johan Reinhard; personal communication.

6. MAGARATHEN (descendants of a man belonging to the Magar ethnic group).
7. GHAT CWAR (stealer of a cow-bell). According to the common belief, the household deity of this clan once stole a cow-bell from another clan. Since then the deity, as well as the clan of its followers, is named GHAT CWAR.
8. CILRAHAWA.
9. KHON.
10. GHECKATWA (throat-cutter). The explanation given for this name is that the household chief of this clan cut the throat of a chicken before going into trance during the Dasya ritual performance.
11. BASGODRYA.
12. BABHAN or BAMAN (Brahmin). People of this clan claim to be the descendants of a Brahmin converted into a Tharu.
13. KHARAGYA or DHAKEHAR. The household deity of this clan is Kharagi (probably derived from the Sanskrit word *kharga* meaning a sword or dagger). This female deity is supposed to be holding a sword in one hand and a small drum (*dhak*) in another. The name of this clan is based on the words *kharga* (sword) and *dhak* (drum).
14. CWAKHA DOM (the clean *Doms*). *Doms* are untouchables in the Hindu caste hierarchy but these Tharu *Doms* are not untouchable, they are *cwākhā* (sacred or clean). Little is known about the origin of this clan.
15. RAJATTEWA.
16. TERRA.
17. KOTAURYA.
18. AHIR (milk-man). The descendants claim that their ancestors were the Ahirs (milk-man caste).

19. OKHARRYA MAHATAN. Members of this clan suppose themselves to be the descendants of a renowned *mahatan* of Okhra village in Dang valley.

20. BHAGWARYA MAHATAN. As above, except that this lineage traces itself to a renowned *mahatan* of Bhagwar village in Dang valley.

21. KARRYA KARANGAWAN.

22. KARRYA BHAMKYAN. Very little is known about these two (nos. 21 and 22) clan names, except that the last word in the name indicates the two villages Karanga and Bhamki, both in Dang.

23. PANSAGGA or LAL DARIA. *Lal dari* literally means a red pole. In fact it is a pole from which the bridal palanquin is suspended. It is believed that the people in this clan are the descendants of slaves who were the only people employed to carry bridal palanquins in Nepal.

24. DHAMLAHAWAS.

25. ULTAHAWAS. Literally the word *ultahawa* means "doing the reverse". This clan is unique among the Tharus for its house-plan. The plan of their house is the reverse of the normal. If you imagine uplifting a whole Tharu house from the ground and putting it down again in the same place, except that the north-south ends of the house are turned around, this gives an idea of a ULTAHAWA house plan. There are four sub-clans in this clan:

- a. BAUKHAHI ULTAHAWA. They believe that once a *baukhā* (wind) blew and put their ancestor's house in the reverse position.
- b. BAKHARRYA ULTAHAWA. They keep all their deities inside a Bakhari (a matting enclosure).
- c. GHANTAHI ULTAHAWA. They keep one small bell (*ghant*) enshrined in their divinity-room.

- d. KAWA ULTAHAWA. During the Dasya ritual performance, the household chief of this sub-clan mounts the roof of his house and cries as a *Kawa* (crow) before going into trance.

C. *Clans in the Sub-Group of the 'In-betweens'*

There are very few clans in this sub-group. I was able to collect only two clan names in this sub-group which are as follows:

1. DHAIRAHAWA. Their household deity is Satehria who is also worshipped by the Dhamlahawa (see No. 24 above). Some of the shamans in this clan perform *rath lausari* craft (not necessarily done by renowned shamans). Further explanation of *rath lausari* will be found below. Some of the households in Lokhwar village of Dang belong to this clan.
2. BABHAN or BAMAN. According to legend, the people of this clan are the descendants of a Brahmin.

The above list of clans is not complete. This list enumerates only those names which were collected by me in Dang valley during my field study. Still more clan names can be collected in further investigations. However, as far I know, there are fewer chances to find further clan names in Char-guruwa and the 'in-between' sub-group than in the Barin group which abounds in such names.

As seen above some clans are named after a real or imaginary ancestor (Sukhrorya Gurrwa, Bagwarya Mahtan, Okharrya Mahatan), others after his caste or ethnic group of real or supposed descent (Ahir, Babhan, Magrahthen etc.), the deity of the family (Kharagya) or a particular way of life (the Ultahawas, their house-plan being the reverse of a common Tharu house) or because of a particular way of performing certain rituals



(Kajpujwa Dahit, Gheckatwa, Kawa Ultahawa etc.). According to the information collected in my field studies, the clan names resembling the name of a caste or an ethnic group originated due to the integration of persons from other castes or ethnic groups into Tharu society or 'caste',<sup>4</sup> either by marriage, by a special ceremony arranged to accept (*pāt lenā*) outsiders into the group or caste. Informants in Rautgaon and Baibang villages of Hekuli Panchayat maintained that when in the old days the forested Dang valley was being opened for agriculture, some Tharu nobles like Mohlal and Raghunath (ancestors of some of the Tharu families of Dhanaura and Baibang villages) were granted certain rights (by royal decrees) to assimilate or adopt (*pāt lenā*) people into Tharu society. In those days there was a shortage of manpower for farmwork since normally no person, other than a Tharu, dared to stay in that malarial valley. Persons who "became" Tharus, according to the informants, were encouraged to clear and cultivate some of the forest land in their vicinity. Thus an immigrant from outside, of whatever caste or ethnic background, once converted and settled there became a bonafide Tharu by deed as well as by 'caste', preserving the remembrance of his original caste or ethnic identity in his Tharu clan name.

In Sukhrwar village, there are altogether eleven clans (from the three sub-groups) represented by twenty-three households. These are as follows:

A. Clan from Gharguruwa sub-group

1. SUKHRORRYA GURRWA (eight households).

B. Clans from Barin sub-group

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<sup>4</sup> 'Caste' is the literal translation of the Nepali word *jāt*, which is used in the Muluki Ain 2012 B.S. (1955) in referring to the Tharus as a group.

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| 1. CHATCWAR              | (three households). |
| 2. NAMMWA                | (two households).   |
| 3. GHECKATWA             | (two households).   |
| 4. BHALUGUNI             | (two households).   |
| 5. KARRYA BHAMKYAN       | (one household).    |
| 6. CILRAHAWA             | (one household).    |
| 7. KARRYA KARANGAWAN     | (one household).    |
| 8. BHAGWARYA MAHTAN      | (one household).    |
| 9. LOTAURYA or NAMKOHLYA | (one household).    |

C. Clans in the 'in-between' sub-group

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| 1. BAMAN | (one household). |
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People of Sukhrorya Gurrwa, Ghatcwar and Gheckatwa clan are supposed to be the earliest settlers in Sukhrwar village. All these three clans have had matrimonial relations with each other. The rest of the above clans immigrated a little later from other villages, when some of their relatives in Sukhrwar village persuaded them to join them. The Baman, Cilrahawa, Karrya Karangawan and one of the Checkatwa households (that of Kalesu) are comparatively very recent (eight to twelve years ago) immigrants to this village.

*The Ghargurwa and Barin System*

The word *ghargurwa* is derived from *ghar* (meaning a house) and *guru* (a Sanskrit word meaning a teacher). *Guru* in other communities usually refers to a Brahmin priest or a teacher, which is distinct from a shaman. However among Tharus this distinction is not made. In fact, a man cannot become a priest unless he knows a bit of shamanistic craft; for shamanism is an integral part of Tharu religious life. Each household, no matter of what clan, has one man as *gurwā* (priest-shaman) from among its members who is also usually the household chief. His job is to look after the religious affairs (of a minor nature) of

the house as well as to cure some minor health complications; yet there is one sub-group of clans which supplies the professional *guruwās* known as *gharguruwās*. Each *Barin* clan household needs their services on several occasions. A *gharguruwā* serves as a priest during any major household ceremony in his layman's (*barin*) family. During ill health or any kind of trouble that comes to a member of the layman's family or to his animals and poultry, or in case of any kind of harm to property the reasons for which cannot be known, the *gharguruwā* has to discover the cause (which will be found to be, generally, an unfed or ill-fed spirit or divinity) and to root it out by sacrificing some animal (a goat, a sheep or a pig) or fowl (a chicken).

The most striking characteristic of this priest-layman relationship among Tharus is that, unlike the orthodox Hindus, they are not so free to select or change their priests (*gharguruwā*) since traditionally, different *Barin* lineages are associated with certain lineages of *Gharguruwa*. Yet, there is no hard and fast rule or guide-line controlling such a relationship. A *Barin* family traditionally gets priestly services from a particular *Gharguruwa* family; even if its members migrate or settle elsewhere they will be served by the same family or the same lineage or at least from the same clan of *Gharguruwa*. In case of migrations or new settlements, efforts are made to continue the same relationship but sometimes this is impossible and so a search will be made for the same clan of *Gharguruwa* in the neighbourhood to fill the gap. I observed in the field that such traditional relationships are maintained within a distance of a one or two days walk. When the distance stretches beyond that, a cousin of the original *Gharguruwa* family or a man from the same clan is sought out and appointed.

Each year on the *pancami* (fifth) day of the *Dasya* festival (falling in the bright fortnight in October), a man from every

*barin* family goes to his *gharguruwā* to bring *dhoop* and *ban*; while going, he carries some gift for the Gharguruwa family. This gift consists of four or five bunches of maize cobs, some seasonal vegetables like pumpkin, egg-plant gourd and green chillies accompanied by a small jar of special liquor (especially distilled for the occasion). The *dhoop* and *bān* which he brings home is preserved, to be used at several religious and shamanistic performances to be held during the period until the next *Dasya*. Several persons going to and returning from their *gharguruwās* passed me on that day. Some of the Barins had come from Sunar area (Banke District) while others were from Deokhuri valley. Some from the easternmost part of Dang valley were going to the remote western part while a few others were coming from Deokhuri valley.

During any marriage ceremony the *gharguruwā* must be invited. Without his presence or that of another *guruwā* from the same lineage, the ceremony cannot be fully performed. On such occasions, his role is to keep the family's household deities quiet and pleased. He is the person who lights the fire in the holy oven in which the special dishes of *cuni* and *barrya* are fried in mustard oil. The mustard oil has already been purified by the *gharguruwā* who recites certain Mantras and turns a finger-size bunch of *kush* (*Poa cynosuroides*) and *doob* (*Cynodon dactylon*) grass into it.

Twice a year during the *cait puni* (bright fortnight in April) and the *kātiki puni* (bright fortnight in November), the *gharguruwā* performs *rath lausari*. Sometimes, if the *gharguruwā* is not free, any other *guruwā* (from a Gharguruwa group clan or from a clan belonging to the 'in between' group), can perform *rath lausari*.

If someone becomes ill suddenly, or if anything harmful happens to a man or his family, his animals or his property,

the *gharguruwā* is called. He examines the rice-grains (about a quarter handfull) brought out and given to him by the suffering person or the house chief. The *gharguruwā* keeps it in his hand for a few minutes reciting certain Mantras while moving a lighted oil lamp (hanging inside a twine supporter from his hand) moving it slowly to-and-fro in front of him. In this way he finds out the cause and identifies the spirit, ghost, or witch responsible for the mischief. Such an act of diagnosis is called *pāti baithnā*. The *gharguruwā* usually determines that the trouble has been caused either by a previously unknown spirit which is seeking to be worshiped and fed or by a known deity or spirit which has been neglected. In the latter case the family may have forgotten to worship the deity or spirit during certain annual festivals or the family may have promised a special offering to the spirit during some time of misfortune<sup>5</sup> or an suspicious occasion<sup>6</sup> and then forgotten to keep their promise. According to the cause of the trouble rites are performed, if it costs less money and labour. Otherwise promises are made for the implementation, on the nearest convenient occasion.

In case of clans under Gharguruwa and the 'in-between' sub-groups they produce their own *dhoop* and *ban*. Usually they get their patients cured through the *guruwā* within their own family or clan. Sometimes they may call some other *guruwā* from any other clan, if they consider him to be more experienced (*barā sipār guruwā*). The work of such traditional diagnosis and cure, can also be done by other *guruwās* from any clan or sub-group, though the Gharguruwa group clans are supposed to be the professional clans for this craft.

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5 For instance illness or death of a member of the family or any harm or damage to the pets or to the property.

6 For instance a marriage or the birth of a child after a long period of barrenness.

The *gharguruwā* house, having the largest number of its *barin* client houses in my sample village, was the house of the Mahaton Mohanlal, which had to serve 30 houses of which the most remote was within six or seven hours walk. The cousins of Mohanlal (already separated and living in the same village) were also serving in the same way to other *barins*. After the death of the *gharguruwā* or any of the *barins* or in case of separations in any of the two (*gharguruwā* and *barin*) families, their descendants and cousins may compromise in choosing a man as their *gharguruwā* or vice versa.

In return for his services the *gharguruwā* is paid back with a hindleg and the head of the sacrificed animal (pig, goat or sheep) plus one rupee in cash in addition to food and drinks whenever he performs any rite in his *barin*'s family. Whenever the *barin* wants to send for the *gharguruwā* for his services, the person going to call him must carry one little jar of holy liquor, and some vegetables or fruit, as a gift for the *gharguruwā* family.

In cases of shortage of labour, the *barin*'s family assists the *gharguruwā*'s family in agricultural work such as ploughing, sowing, or threshing. During any financial problem, they help their *gharguruwā* by giving loans. The *gharguruwā* may also help his *barin*, in the reverse situation. Gharguruwas also play a prominent role in solving disputes in their *barins* families. As they enjoy a respected position and also command the faith of their *barins*, their decisions are well accepted by the *barin* families. In rare cases, situations may happen to the contrary also, as in 1958 A.D. a *gharguruwā* (of another village) had abducted a woman from his *barin*'s family in Sukhrwar. The result was that the *barin* family dismissed the *gharguruwā* and appointed a cousin of the same person (already separated from the same *gharguruwā* family) as a new *gharguruwā*.

*Family Life*

Most of the Tharus live in joint families. This is of help to them in many ways, primarily in providing man-power for their every-day farming, and gives them the benefit of skilled, specialized labour. Some supervise grazing or looking after domestic animals (cows, buffaloes or sheep), others plough, dig or drive the pack animals, while others again look after the domestic and religious affairs of the house.

In Sukhrwar village there are only four nuclear families out of 23. One of these four nuclear families belongs to a recent immigrant who moved here with his family a few years ago after separating from his joint family living in another village. One house belongs to a person who separated from his extended family within the village. The other two houses belong to persons who, when other members of the previous joint family migrated to the far western Terai or moved to other villages in Dang, remained with their immediate families in the village. In 19 out of 23 households, either both or one of the grandparents are living with their sons, unmarried daughters and grandchildren in the same house.

The richer houses in Sukhrwar village are the larger joint family houses. Each house needs at least one cowherd, one shepherd, one grass-cutter, many ploughmen, and others to manage the affairs of the whole family. Women and girls contribute farm labour, like cutting the crops and transporting them to the threshing area or to the house for storage, collecting cow-dung or fire-wood for fuel, and pounding and grinding grains. If the family is small, it can neither breed cattle, sheep nor goats, nor can the members plough much land. Such families are short of bulls, seeds and labour. An ordinary farmer or tenant can hardly afford all these things. Thus the few men (one or two) living in a nuclear family can cultivate

only very little land and thus have small yields. During the non-cultivation period too, there is very little time for individuals of nuclear families to do other seasonal out-door jobs or business, in addition to their regular domestic responsibilities.

The above reasons explain why the Tharus prefer to live within a large family. During my stay among the Tharus, I realized that the lure of a better salary or better facilities would not motivate a Tharu to leave his kinfolk. Tharus do not go far from home. They do not like to go to other non-Tharu areas of Nepal. They rarely go to the hills or to any non-Tharu areas for more than a couple of days. No Tharu goes to Lahur.<sup>7</sup> Military service which attracts a lot of other Nepalese, does not attract these people.

Inside the village, the adults are busy with their out-door farming jobs, young children are busy playing with their old grandparents. All children in the joint family get equal care. Whenever any special dish is prepared in the house, all members of the joint family, without distinction of age or sex, get an equal share of it. Even the babies are given their shares, although their share is consumed by their nursing mothers. Beating or scolding very young children is rare. Some of the Tharu parents complained to me that as their children were beaten at school, they stopped sending them to school. All men and women except the very old and the very young get up early in the morning to begin their work. Women

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7 Derived from the name 'Lahore' which is a city in Pakistan. Before the partition of India, the British rulers had one recruiting centre there; many Nepalese went there to join the British army. Later on the expression '*lahur janu*' (to go to Lahur) became the popular idiom for foreign military service, and later for any kind of work outside Nepal.



grind or pound grain while men go to plough, cut or thresh the crops, or go to the forest to bring fire-wood. One of the old ladies, or the junior-most daughter-in-law does the cooking. If the family is quite large and needs a large quantity of food prepared, one more lady helps the cook. Boys and girls either cut grass and look after the cattle or help their seniors. During the day, some boys look after the grazing cattle, buffaloes or sheep and goats; others cut grass while the girls also sometimes guard grazing animals or collect dried cow-dung on the pastures.

Traditionally the house chief is exempted from ploughing and his wife from pounding, if possible. Tharu women have their own personality. They are not mere shadows of their husbands, as they are in a Hindu society. Their interests and suggestions are also considered when making any household decision. A husband tries to keep his wife happy and satisfied, otherwise she might take another husband or run away to her parents. The newly married wives, who are more sentimental and emotional have a greater tendency to do thus.

Relations among the house-wives in a Tharu family, are generally speaking better in comparison to Brahman-Chetri families, Relations between a mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law/s are usually cordial and peaceful. A mother-in-law does not misbehave or do injustice to her daughter-in-law, for she fears that in retaliation the same treatment will be meted out to her own daughter or whatever other girl from her own household was given in exchange for the daughter-in-law. Moreover, in joint Tharu families, there is often more than one daughter-in-law/s in a house. So, it is not so easy for a mother-in-law to dominate or be unfair to a daughter-in-law. Again, making a daughter-in-law unhappy, results not only in driving her away but her husband also and he is one of the most important earning members of the family. An unhappy

daughter-in-law might convince her husband to move away or split off from the family; this means a severe blow to an agrarian Tharu family.

Relations between daughter-in-law/s too, are quite cardinal. The Tharu family context leaves very little scope for tensions among them. According to the Tharu concept of property, each member of the family, is a co-owner of the property. So its income and resources, too, must be group, utilised for the equal welfare of all members. All persons of the same age-group, same sex and same status in the family hierarchy, get the same care and an equal share of any family privilege. For example, they will get the same quality and same number of clothes or the same number of shoes. In case of anything expensive, efforts are made up to buy that item for each person annually. Similarly, all persons, of the same sex and age group have to devote the same amount of labour or time to the family. The ill or the physically handicapped are exceptions. Most of the family income is spent on food and maintenance of the family.

A social relationship is called *sohri*. Among the Tharus, there are three types of social relationships: (i) A relationship which is the consequence of marriage ties is called *māmāorik sohri* (relationship from the maternal uncle's side) or *sasurāarak sohri* (relationship from the wife's parents, side) (ii) A relationship by blood or a consanguineal relationship, is called *gotyār sohri*. (iii) *Mit-sohri* is a relationship of ritual friendship established between two males or two females, most often belonging to different castes or different ethnic groups, whether having the same marital status or not.

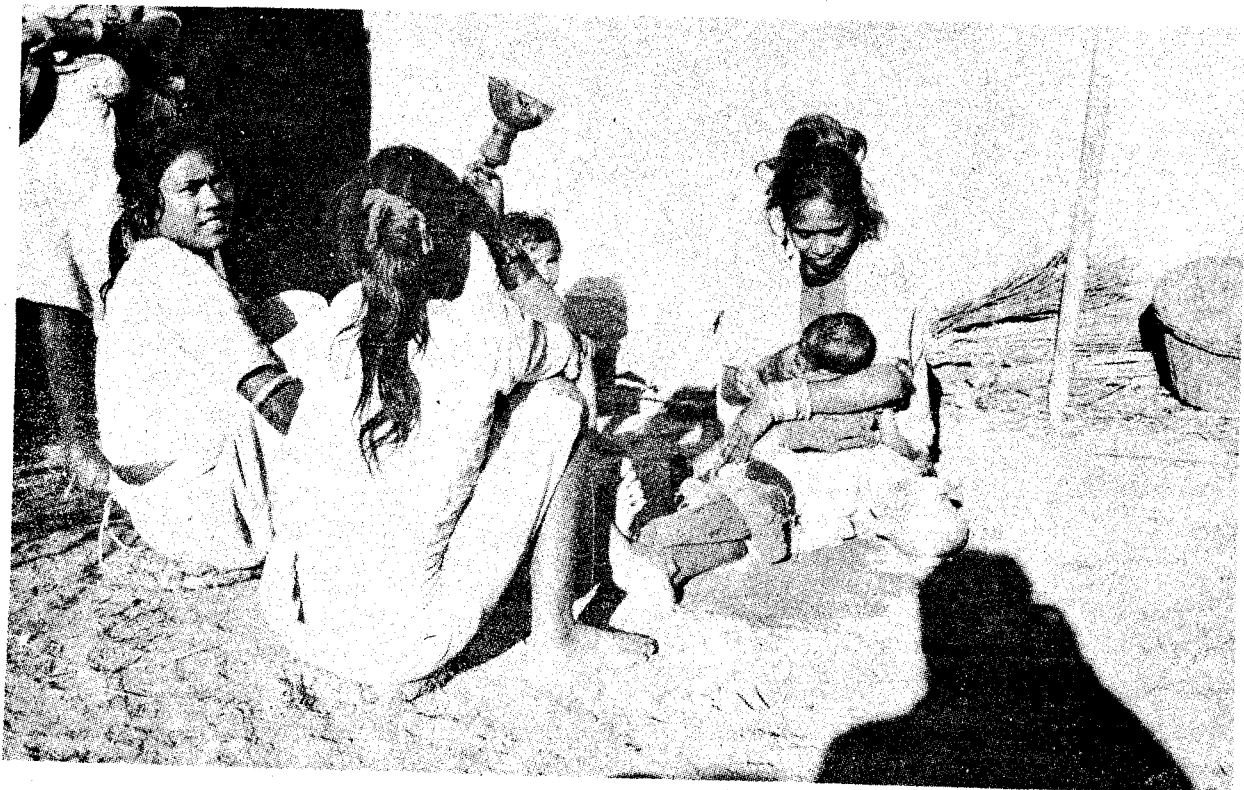
The relationship of *mit-sohri* strengthens the friendship or increases the sense of co-operation between two families. Sometimes, when an old rivalry or enmity is to be ended by

mutual compromise, the parties or families arrange for making such a relationship between two of their members one from each group or party. Some families do this to raise their social status in their locality. Nobody readily dares to challenge or appose such families who are linked by ritual friendship and therefore stronger. This relationship can be easily established between any two males or two females of whatever caste or ethnic group.

In Sukhrwar village one such relationship was established between the daughter of the village *mahaton* (a Tharu) and the wife of Navaraj (one of the Brahmin landowners) in 1965 when a mutual compromise was established between the land owners and the tenants (Tharus) after a long conflict concerning tenancy rights. Both of the parties, when tired and wearied by the long judicial procedure, came to a compromise.



Tharu Beauties



Women at Leisure



Paddy Harvest



Dasya Festival Dance

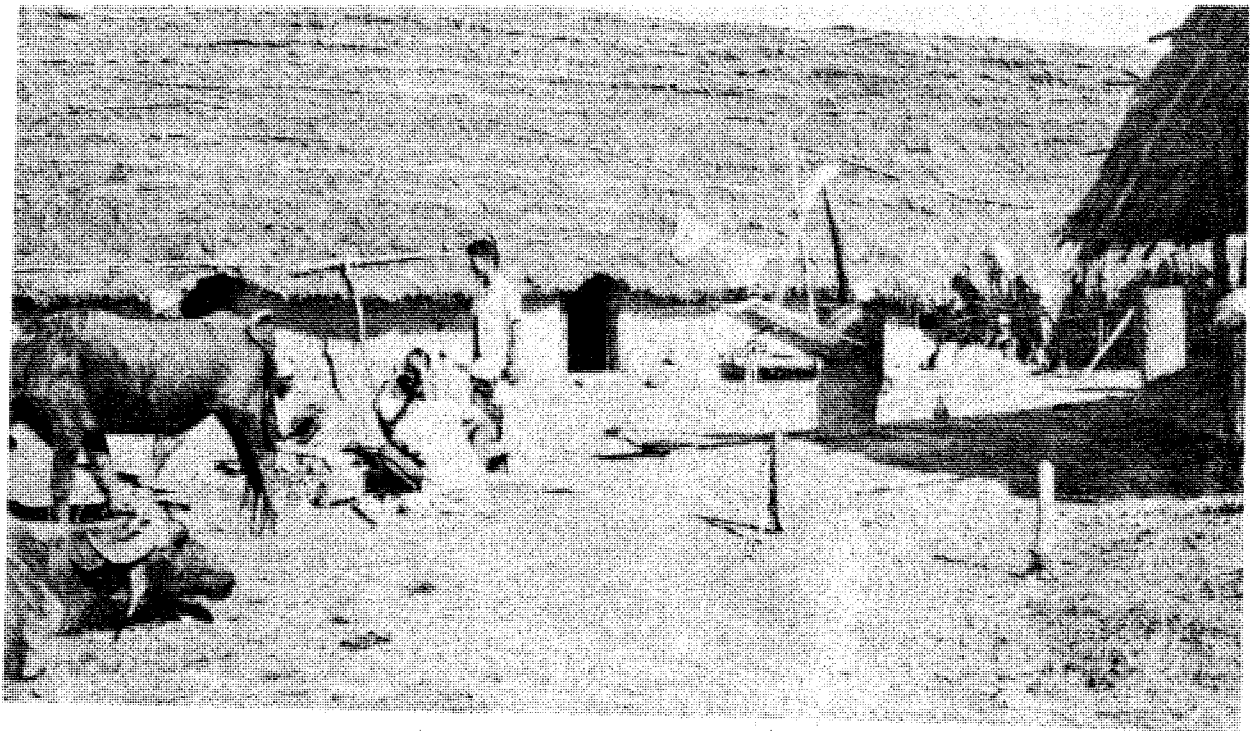




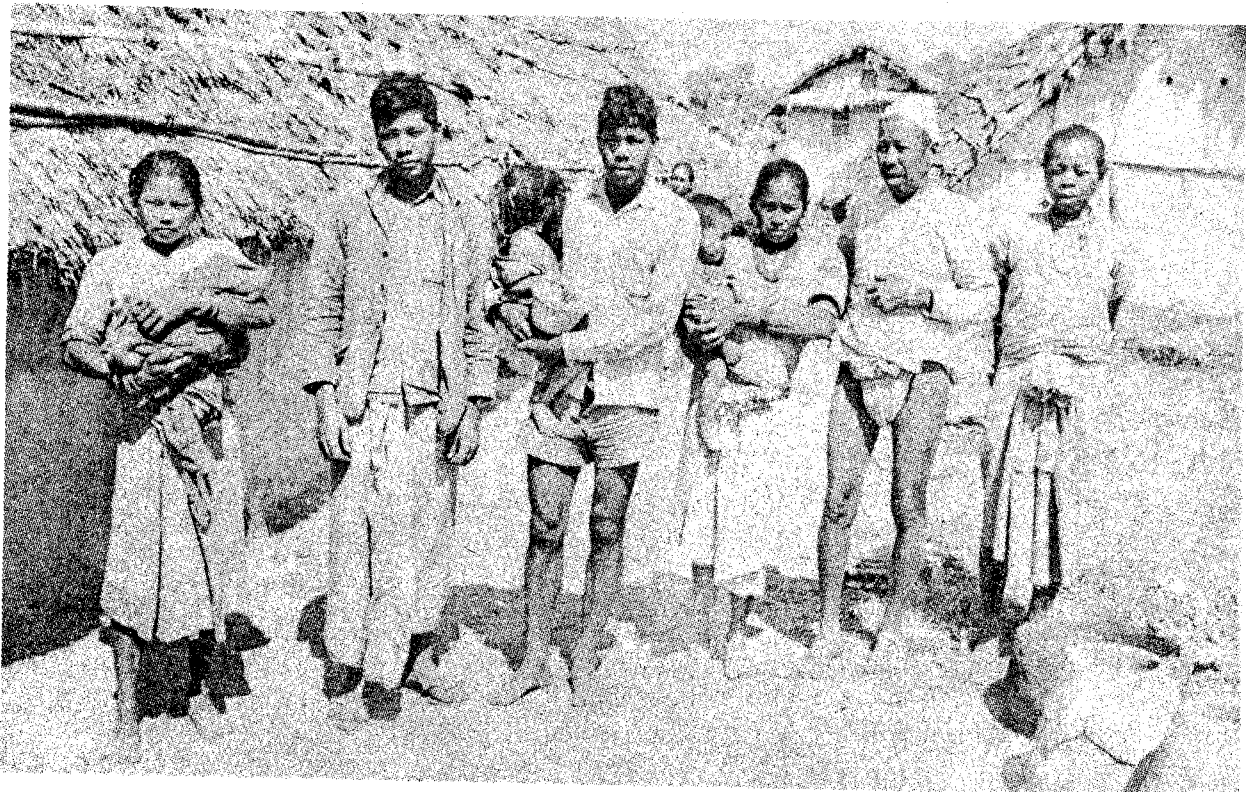
Sukhrwar Village--View from the North



Tharu Boys Returning Home from School



A Courtyard Scene



A Tharu Family (Note the alien influence in the dress of two of the men)