

THARUS OF DANG: THARU RELIGION

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1. Introduction

The religion of the Tharus, like that of other tribal peoples, is a complex system of beliefs and practices interwoven with the rest of their culture. These beliefs and practices are occasionally validated through dreams, visions or trances in which the deities and ancestral spirits instruct the ritual specialists in the practices and cult to be followed. There are also legends and myths telling the people about the creation of the world and ritual practices are not just taken for granted by the Tharus; they are learned from the elders in the same way as other patterns of culture are acquired. There is a hierarchy of ritual specialists who manipulate the supernatural and approach the gods and spirits on behalf of the people. They are also supposed to protect the people against the attacks of witches, chronic diseases and also some natural disasters.

According to Tharu beliefs, before the creation of this world the earth was burning hot. There was only fire and smoke everywhere but not a single 'strand' of life. After some time, water took the place of fire and there was water everywhere. The Almighty God flew all over, in the form of a bird, to see whether there was any trace of land to start the creation of the world. As no such land existed anywhere on the water, he sowed a lotus seed and, when the leaves of a lotus plant came out above the water, the Almighty God gave birth to Gurubaba

(the first Tharu god on earth) in the form of a *kwara* squash, (Benincasa hispida) that is to say, without limbs and sense organs. The Almighty God took pity on the creature he had made and gave limbs and all necessary organs one after another to Gurubaba. Gurubaba, after he had become like a complete man, ordered an earth-worm, named Dudhia, to bring some *ammar māti* (divine earth) from the *pātāl* (the world underneath) to start the worldly creation. The Dudhia, after having been thoroughly searched by the watchmen guarding the *amar māti* in *pātāl*, was somehow able to smuggle out a little bit of the earth by hiding it in his mouth. This *ammar māti* was scattered on the water, in the same way as a bit of curd is put into milk to curdle it. After that, the water turned into earth. Gurubaba then brought all earthly things into existence. Later on, when Gurubaba felt lonely, he created the goddess Maiya, who became his wife. All men and women on this earth today are the descendants of Gurubaba and Maiya.

According to the Tharus, the entire universe is peopled by several kinds of spirits. A human being can also become a spirit, after death. Spirits of all kinds, the Tharus believe, can be either benevolent or malevolent. The benevolent ones have to be approached with ritual performances, prayers and offerings for maintaining a happy and peaceful life for the people and security for their property. The malevolent spirits have to be checked either by pleasing them with occasional offerings, or by controlling them through spells, threats or other methods of magic. Some of the benevolent spirits which have proved very helpful to the people have been installed in appropriate places, for instance the deity-room of a house, the courtyard of a house, a village-level shrine (*deu thanwa*) or a region-level shrine (*pragannāk deutā*) of the district. There are some idols and artifacts, representing particular deities, installed inside the deity-room of a house. No verbal

distinction is made between a deity and a spirit. Both of them are called *bhutwā*. Powers and forces of Nature personified are also worshipped occasionally for protection and to help obtain a good harvest. The existence of a Supreme God is not denied, although he is known vaguely and is only mentioned occasionally, when Tharus seek to explain troubles or events beyond their control and understanding.

In order to understand the interwoven complex of Tharu religious practices and superstitions, we shall discuss various aspects of it separately under several sub-titles.

2. Deities and Ritual Objects Enshrined in the Deity-room

Inside each Tharu house there is a deity-room called *deurahar*. Among the Gamwa and Dhairahawa clans only a few deities and ritual objects are enshrined. They are kept at the base of the eastern wall of the deity-room. Inside this room, there are certain idols and artifacts some of them representing particular deities, enshrined near the north-west corner of the room, to the side of and below the *mani khambhā*. The *mani khambhā* is the first pillar fixed in the ground when constructing a Tharu house. Great importance is given to this pillar.

A. Deities and Ritual Objects Common to all Tharus

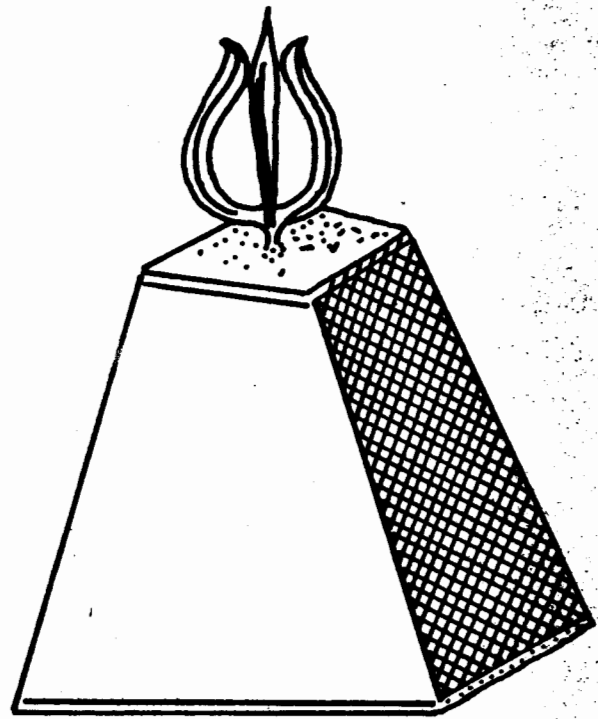
Except for the Gamwa and Bhairahawa clans, all other clans have the following divinities and ritual objects:

(i) Divinities

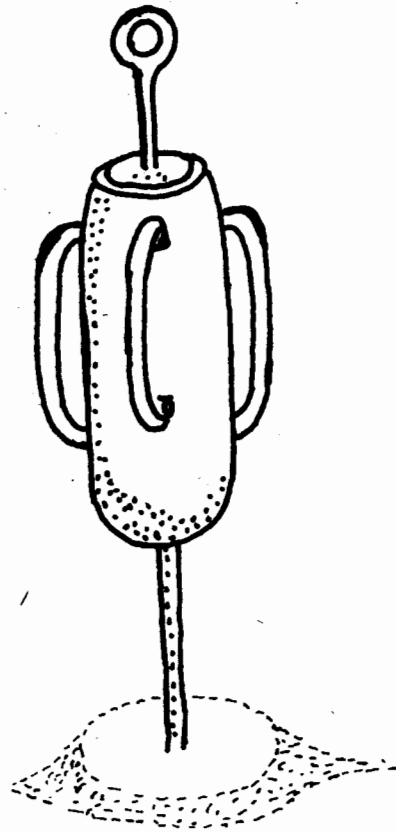
- (a) *Gurubabā* - He is a male deity and the first person created by the Almighty God. Later on Gurubaba created all other deities and also this earth, its contents and living beings. He is represented by a small, thumb-size piece of rough leather, fashioned into a human shape. A little



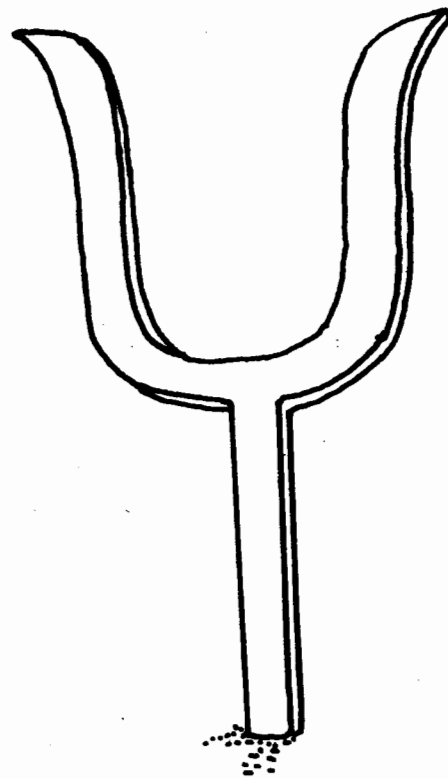
GURUBABA



MAIYA



KHEKHRI



HEGRI

string is tied round its neck, so as to make it easy to take it out of the holy sack (*jholi*). This Gurubaba is made and sold to Tharus by the *camārs* (cobblers of Indian origin) in return for some foodgrains or cash.

- (b) *Maiya* - She is a female deity, who was created by Gurubaba and later became his wife Maiya, is a very important goddess. She is linked to every shamanistic activity. She is the deity who controls a person when he goes into a state of trance, and to whom the chants and spells are directed when a person enters a trance. People being trained as new *guruvās* are brought and seated before Maiya.

An image of Maiya six inches long is made of clay and iron. The iron portion, which is the upper portion, looks like a trident except that all its three prongs join at the top. This portion is made by local non-Tharu black-smiths (*kāmī*). The lower part, which serves as a pedestal for the iron part, is twice the height of the upper part. It is made by the Tharus themselves out of unbaked clay.

- (c) *Khekhri* - She is a female deity but her role or function is not explicit. She is represented by a piece of wood resembling the handle of a screw-driver, with a small ring on top, four projections on the four sides of the handle, and a spike at the bottom. The ring, the projections and the spike are made of iron. The spike at the bottom serves to stand the deity upright on the ground. The total height of the Khekhri is about six inches. The wooden part is made by the Tharus themselves, and the iron parts are made by black-smiths (*lohār*).

- d) *Saurā* - *Saurā* is supposed to be a deity of valour and might and is represented by a thick, iron nail. Because of his valour and strength Tharus consider him a Tharu version of the famous monkey-god Hanuman of the Hindus. Whenever any important ritual or shamanistic performance is done, *Saura* is fixed in the ground just at the spot where the performance will occur; his presence is supposed to drive away the evil spirits from the spot. *Saura* is usually kept inside a *jholi* (a ritual bag). Only when the *jholi* is taken out of doors for a ritual performance, is *Saura* fixed in the ground.

(ii) Ritual Objects

- (a) *Byat* - This is a cane stick which is ritually handled by the *gardhurryā* (head of household) who is also the *gurawā* (household priest and shaman) of his house. This occurs on the ninth day of *Dasya* festival, when all *gurawās* of the village assemble in the deity room of a senior or more experienced *gurawā* for a mass trance. It is believed that this stick has supernatural power and protects the *gurawā*, and also his family, from bad spirits. It is also sometimes carried out of doors, along with *Saura* and other objects, for certain ritual performances. The rest of the time, it is kept inside the deity-room. Whenever other deities or ritual objects are worshipped or are given offerings, the *Byat* also gets its share.
- (b) *Jholi* (=bag) - It is a small bag, in which some of the deities, the *dhoop* (incense) and *bān* (lit.

"arrow" but here a mixture of husked rice and human blood) and a few other small items needed during worship or a ritual performance, are kept. Usually it is hung on the wall beside the deities and other objects which are kept on small circular clay platforms slightly raised off the floor.

- (c) *Barhani (broom)* - It is a ritual broom, also called *swān muth barhani*. It is made of a small bundle of *siru* grass strands which are supposed to be gold strands. It is the same quality as the *siru* strands which are used to sweep houses; a few strands of it are also offered to the deities or ancestors as tooth-picks during any offering. One similar bundle of this grass (like a broom) is tied near the top of the *dulāhā* post when fixing this post in the ground. This post is the northernmost post in the central row of posts planted when a house is built.
- (d) *Caitik Pathyā* - It is a very small or miniature basket. Some households keep this basket filled with rice as a symbolic token of prosperity. The word *pathyā* seems to have been derived from the word *pāthi*, a measure of volume for cereals.
- (e) *Either a Kharga (=a sword) or a Barchi (a spear)* - These are ritual objects carried by a bridegroom when he is wearing ceremonial robes during the marriage procession. The bridegroom is considered a king among Hindus for the day of his marriage. So, the sword or spear, taken by a Tharu bridegroom during his marriage procession, represents his royal status. The bridegroom carries one or

other of these objects to his bride's house during the procession. There he places the sword or spear in the deity-room of the bride's family; and brings it back with him when returning home. Before the bride is carried to the bridegroom's house by her party, the bridegroom fixes the sword or spear in front of the door of his house. There he sits like a door-attendant, as he must not enter the house until he is accompanied by his bride.

- (f) *Saksaki* - Some informants also called *Saksaki* *Latau Mahādeu*. *Saksaki* is represented by a thin, small bunch of peacock feathers about one foot in length. The ritual function or use of *Saksaki* is not explicit; it is not clear whether *Saksaki* is a deity or a ritual object.
- (g) *Curryā (bangles)* - There are a few glass bangles which are also hung on the nail where the *jholi* is hung. These bangles are put there in honour of the *curinnya* (witches). This is done to please the witches so that they will not trouble the family.

B. Optional Minor Deities and Ritual Objects

There are a few more deities or religious objects, some of which are kept inside the deity-room by different clans, according to their family traditions. There is no fixed rule or system about the enshrining of these minor deities, spirits and ritual objects. These deities and ritual objects are kept in the house to maintain prosperity and happiness. If anything bad happens to the family, and if any explanation (by any shaman or any experienced person)

relates this event or situation to any of these deities or religious objects, some or all of these deities enshrined in the deity-room (*deurahār*) may be neglected or abandoned in consequence of such advice. Sometimes such abandonment can take place because of instructions given by an ancestor, greater deity or any great shaman, in a dream, to the head of the family.

The following are some of these optional minor divinities, spirits and ritual objects found in some Tharu families:

(i) Divinities

- (a) *Lagubāsu* - Lagubāsu is the name given by the Tharu to the famous serpent Vasuki mentioned in Hindu literature. He is represented by a small iron hook, resembling the hood of a cobra. It is fixed over one of the miniature altars made in the deity-room.
- (b) *Ban Gaidu* - The nature and function of Ban Gaidu is not widely known. He is a male deity. Probably he has some relation with the Nepalese Hindu deity Gaidu.¹ The Tharu families of Dhairahawa clan in Lakhwar village of Dang worship this deity. One earthen horse is offered or his altar, probably as a mount for him.

(ii) Spirits

- (a) *Bhagmarrwa* - He is supposed to be the benevolent spirit of a saint or ancestor. A small unbaked

1. Turner, p. 147, Gaidu: "Name of the God of cowherds (to whom milk and ghee are offered in worship on the full-moon day of Magsir and Jeth)."

earthen horse, offered in his honour during Dasya ceremony, is kept on his altar as his mount.

- (b) *Ratanpurwa* - He is similar to Bhagmarra.
- (c) *Baidawa* (=a doctor or a healer) - He is supposed to be a benevolent spirit of a great traditional doctor or healer. One unbaked clay horse is offered to him as a mount. During every Dasya festival, he is given an offering of a cock.

(iii) Ritual Objects

- (a) *Hegri* - This is a small Y shaped iron piece. Its presence in the house is supposed to give a good yield of fish. Previously, whenever the family set out for fishing, it covered the deity with a net (*helka*) for a while, then took the net to the fishing site. Thus they could catch a lot of fish. This deity is common among the Kathpaulya Demandaura clan only.
- (b) *Jakhani* - Jakhani is an object which enables one to enlist supernatural power so as to maintain the prosperity of the family, especially with regard to the abundance of foodgrains. A few of my informants claimed that they had seen Jakhani. According to them, Jakhani were twins, and looked like two glass marbles. The twins, a boy and a girl, came inside the house, rolling on the floor. When they came rolling into the room the boy and girl, according to my informants, were kissing each other. Some informants said that these marbles disappeared as they had come, while others said that though they had kept them and buried them inside a pile of rice, for some time, later on they disappeared.

In practice, either one single, apple sized clay-model of Jakhani, or two small models, the size of chess-pieces, are enshrined in the *deurahār*.

3. The Four Deities Associated with the Gharguruwa Clans

Apart from the above-mentioned Deurahar deities, there is a whole system of deities represented by terracotta horses.² These deities are ritually manipulated by the *gharguruwas*, professional priest-shamans who perform rituals and give advice to householders (Barins). That society is divided into two groups: (1) Barins (lay-households). All households of either group have a *guruwa* (priest/shaman), a male member of the household who acts as priest or shaman in minor rituals concerning the household. During major rituals and important shamanistic performances, a *gharguruwa* guides and helps the *guruwa*. A *guruwa* from a Barin household can never become a *gharguruwa*.

In the eastern courtyard of each *gharguruwa* family's house, there is a *marrwa* (a shrine inside a miniature hut) where the terracotta horse (deity), of that *gharguruwa* family is kept enshrined. But, in a *barin* family, the same type of horse (or deity), which is manipulated by its *gharguruwa*, is enshrined in the northern-most altar, inside the *deurahar*. These terracotta horses are less than one foot in length. The horses are made by *kumhar* or *kumhal* (=potters) either in Parseni village of Dang valley or in a few villages in Deokhuri valley like Garhwa, Kolahi, Bankatwa, Khaira and Patringa, where the potters live.

2. There is mention of a deity Hayagriva, in the Hindu and Buddhist pantheon (B. Bhattacharyya, *The Indian Buddhist Iconography*). Hayagriva literally means 'Horse neck' and is always depicted with a horse-head. For Hindus he is a god of Fever (p. 233) and for Buddhists, one of the 108 forms of Avalokitesvara (p. 394). Without more evidence, it is however, difficult to ascertain any relation between the Tharu horse deities and Hayagriva.

During the Dasya festival, these horses are bought from them to replace those in the *deurahar* or in the *marrwa*. The horses are of four types; each type being associated with one or more Gharguruwa clans. These four types of horses are known as:

- (1) Jagarnatthya
- (2) Bherrwa:
 - (a) Dahit Bherrwa
 - (b) Sukhrorya Bherrw
- (3) Madua.
- (4) Raura or Demanraura.

With the exception of the Demanraura type of horse, which is easily identifiable from others by its funnel-shaped open mouth, all other horses look similar. They can be distinguished from one another only by the marks engraved on their necks.³ For example, the Jagarnatthya horse has got two straight rows of marks. These marks are supposed to represent the jingling bells, as sometimes worn by horses. There are two types of Bherrwa horses, each recognizable by particular marks. Sukhrorya Bherrwa have three rows of jingling-bell marks, alternating with three rows of crescent-shaped marks. Dahit Bherrwa have only one row of such marks.

According to a legend, these four types of horses are brothers. The eldest is Jagarnatthya, the second, Bherrwa, the third Madua and the youngest Demanraura. Of these, Madua was born from a step-mother while the three others were born from the same mother.

Jagarnatthya (Jagannath) is also worshipped by Rajis in Far Western Nepal in the area of Surkhet.⁴ According to Tharu

3. See photo No. 1.

4. Johan Reinhard, personal communication.

informants in Baibang village of Dang, Jagannath is also worshipped in the Far Western Hills but in the form of a tiger. According to the same informants, Bherrwa is also worshipped on the Indian border where he is known as Bheru Baba. Furthermore, one informant (not from Dang) told me that the name of Bheru, who is also sometimes called Bherū, is a Saivite and Buddhist deity.

These four deities differ from other deities in this respect that they are part of both the Gharguruwa and Barin traditional beliefs. Each of the Gharguruwa clans is linked with one of the four deities. And each Barin clan is related to one of the Gharguruwa clans.

Traditionally the whole of Dang valley was divided into five shamanistic sectors under five different shamans known as *desbandhya guruwa*. These sectors were as follows:

1. *Pachilla Praganna*

This was the extreme western part of Dang valley beyond the Gwar Khola. Now-a-days Ram Sharan Chaudhari of Rautgaon who has Jagarnatthya as his horse-deity, is the *desbandhya guruwa* of this sector.

2. *Pātu Pragannā*

This is the territory around the Patu Khola. The present shaman of this sector is Krishna Chaudhari of Chis village in Dang who also uses the Jagarnatthya horse.

3. *Chilli Praganna*

The shamanistic rights of this sector now-a-days are in the hands of Tek Bahadur Chaudhari's family; they have migrated to Gabdahawa village from Daruwa. This family uses the *bherrwa* horse.

4. *Pachillā Sawāri*

Jholahā and Chillu Chaudhari of Jalhaura village are the joint shamans of this sector. Their deity is the *madu* horse.

5. *Aghillā Sawāri*

Now-a-days Teju Guruwa is the shaman of this sector. His deity is also the *madua*. He is now living in Bhaishkurma village where he migrated from Chainpur village.

For each horse-deity, as seen above, there was at least one sector allotted but not for *demanraura*, because, according to some informants, he was too young and stupid.

All six shamans mentioned above are supposed to be the shamans of their sectors and authorised to perform the *pragannā* level rituals. They got their shamanistic rights by inheritance from one of their fore-fathers, who in turn had got his by royal orders either from a king or a magistrate as mentioned in *lāl mohārs*. Several persons received such *lāl mohārs*. The duties of these *desbandhyā guruwās* were to drive away the evil spirits, wild animals, diseases and pests, and to help, ritually and magically, to trap wild elephants for royal needs. In exchange for the ritual rights and powers (to collect fees impose fines, extract gifts etc.) given to them and confirmed by the administration in the form of royal decrees, the Desbandhya Guruwas were expected to make some fixed, annual payments in cash to the administration.

4. Deities of the Cattleshed

There are two deities concerned with the cattleshed, which are known as Bagar and Dhamraj. The shrine of Dhamraj is usually located in the centre of the fence which separates the *ghari*

(cattleshed section) and the *bahari* section of a house (open to all-comers) from one another. So Dhamraj is also considered to be a deity of the *bahari* section; he is the protective deity of household pets. His shrine is represented by one of the pegs, fixed beneath the *bahari* side of the partition-making fence.⁵ The space, at the limit of the *bahari* section, opposite the *ghari*, is used to keep small animals like sheep, goats, small calves, pigs and also one or two horses. The name Dhamraj seems to have been derived from Dharmaraj, which is also one of the names of Yamaraj (the Hindu deity of Death); but without further evidence, we cannot identify Dhamraj with Yamaraj.

The shrine of Bagar, the other deity concerned with cattle and livestock, is supposed to be in the south-east corner of the *ghari* section. There is nothing representing the Bagar and his shrine. People just suppose his shrine exists there and offer some cow-milk diluted with water, called *dhār* (this offering is limited to Bagar only), by pouring it on that spot along with other items given in offering during every ritual event in the house. Occasionally (once every five to twelve years) a goat or sheep is sacrificed to Bagar on the occasion of Bagar Puja. Some event such as the sudden death of cattle or livestock, or certain dreams experienced by the household-chief, or again the advice of any experienced shaman, may cause Barka Puja to be performed.

5. Deities and Spirits of the Courtyard

The following deity and spirits are enshrined on the eastern side of the courtyard of a Tharu house.

A. *Deity*

Patnahi Bhawani - She is a female goddess from Patan

5. See Sketch

or Devi Patan, an Indian border town, associated with the cult of Gorakhnath. It is said that the ancestors of some Tharu families went to Devi Patan on pilgrimage and brought this cult back with them. Usually, no figure of Bhawani is made. Sometimes just a small stone, half buried in the ground, represents her. She is the only deity enshrined in the courtyard.

B. *The Spirits*

- (i) Kolhu Masan is an evil spirit associated with the *kolh*. *Kolh* or *kolhu* is the word for the oil-crusher (See illustration on page). The oil-crusher, which is always installed in the eastern part of the courtyard of a house, represents Kolhu Masan itself. So the houses which have not been able to install this machine, whatever the reason may have been, don't have to worship or make offering to this spirit.
- (ii) Raksa: 'Raksa' is the Tharu version of the Hindu word *Rakshas* meaning a demon. He is a malevolent deity or spirit, and must be pacified with ritual offerings. Only those families who have tame buffaloes have this shrine. The peg representing Raksa is similar to the pegs to which buffaloes are tied. The name and origin of Raksa seems to have derived from the buffalo-headed demon called Mahishasur in the Hindu pantheon.

All the household and courtyard deities are worshipped by the household priest/shaman who is also the household chief. Each household of whatever clan or sub-group of Tharus, has one of their male members as their household priest/

shaman (*gurawa*). He must know some of the shamanistic craft and also the art of going into trance. The ceremony in which novices are brought into trance under the guidance of experienced shamans is known as *laulā gurawā banaina* (=making of new *gurawā*) ceremony. It is performed every year, on a Monday night of the bright fortnight between Aswin (September-October) and Mangsir (November-December) months. After being trained in this ceremony the novices are considered fit to conduct all household worship. These household and courtyard deities are worshipped on various occasions which will be discussed later.

The Village-level Deities and Spirits

In every village, there are some village-level deities and spirits. The deities are enshrined either inside a tiny hut, beneath a tree, or in an open space. Some villages have two such shrines one at the northern end and one at the southern limits. Each shrine houses the same deities but one of the shrines is used for *dhurriya gurai* (annual worship during maize cultivation) and the other for *harāhā gurai* (annual worship during rice cultivation). The village-level spirits are usually enshrined beneath a tree or a bush, or sometimes in an open space in a field, or again alongside a path.

In Sukhrwar village, there is only one shrine for village-level deities. By way of exception, it is located in the centre of the village. Such a village-level shrine (*deuthanmwa*) contains a pair of artistically carved wooden planks and a few pegs fixed in the ground (see photo no. 7). One of the carved wooden planks with a single prong on top is a male figure, representing Cabahwa, and the other, with five prongs is a female figure representing Daharcandi. The literal meaning of Cabahwa is "four-

armed". So Cabahwa is the deity who protects the earth with his four-arms, covering the four directions. According to common belief, this deity protects all people living inside the village along with their animals and other properties. Daharcandi is the female deity (*candi*) guarding the trails (*dahar*). She is the deity who prevents epidemics and blocks unwanted natural events like drought or famine from entering the village, and thus protects the villagers from their incursions. There are also five small wooden pegs fixed in a row besides Cabahwa and Daharcandi. These represent the five Pandava brothers of the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*. There is one more, larger peg fixed in the ground besides the Cabahwa and Daharcandi. This peg is known as *murāhmahton* (village-headman's peg). A new *murāhmahton* is fixed alongside the old one in the ground each time a Mahaton is changed, and each time the household of a Mahaton builds a new house or adds some more rooms to the old one. If a single piece of this set of planks and pegs is burned, the whole set has to be replaced by a new one after a special ritual.

In certain villages such as Sukhrwar there are also some village-level spirits known as Bhayar. These are enshrined beneath two Pipal trees at the southern limit of the village. Altogether there are nine. They are known as (i) Jogethwā (=a yogi) (ii) Raksā (=a demon) (iii) Camārin (=a female cobbler) (iv) Jhakri (=a shaman from the hills) (v) Bahirā Raksa (=a deaf demon) (vi) Dasaut Bhagaut (-a shaman ancestor of the present village-chief) (vii) Maiya Bherrwa (=a sheep belonging to the goddess Maiya) (viii) Bhawani (ix) Isara Bisara (=the forgotten spirit).⁶ In addition to these nine spirits, there are two more spirits whose shrine is located in a field to the south of Sukhrwar, beyond a stream. Both of these spirits are

6. Worship occurs at this shrine to appease any spirit that may have been forgotten or left out of worship.



1. The Terracotta Horse Deities



2. A *Mahaton* Offering Liquor to His Courtyard Deities



3. The Chief *Guruwā* Praying to Gods before Performing *Laula Guruwā* Ceremony



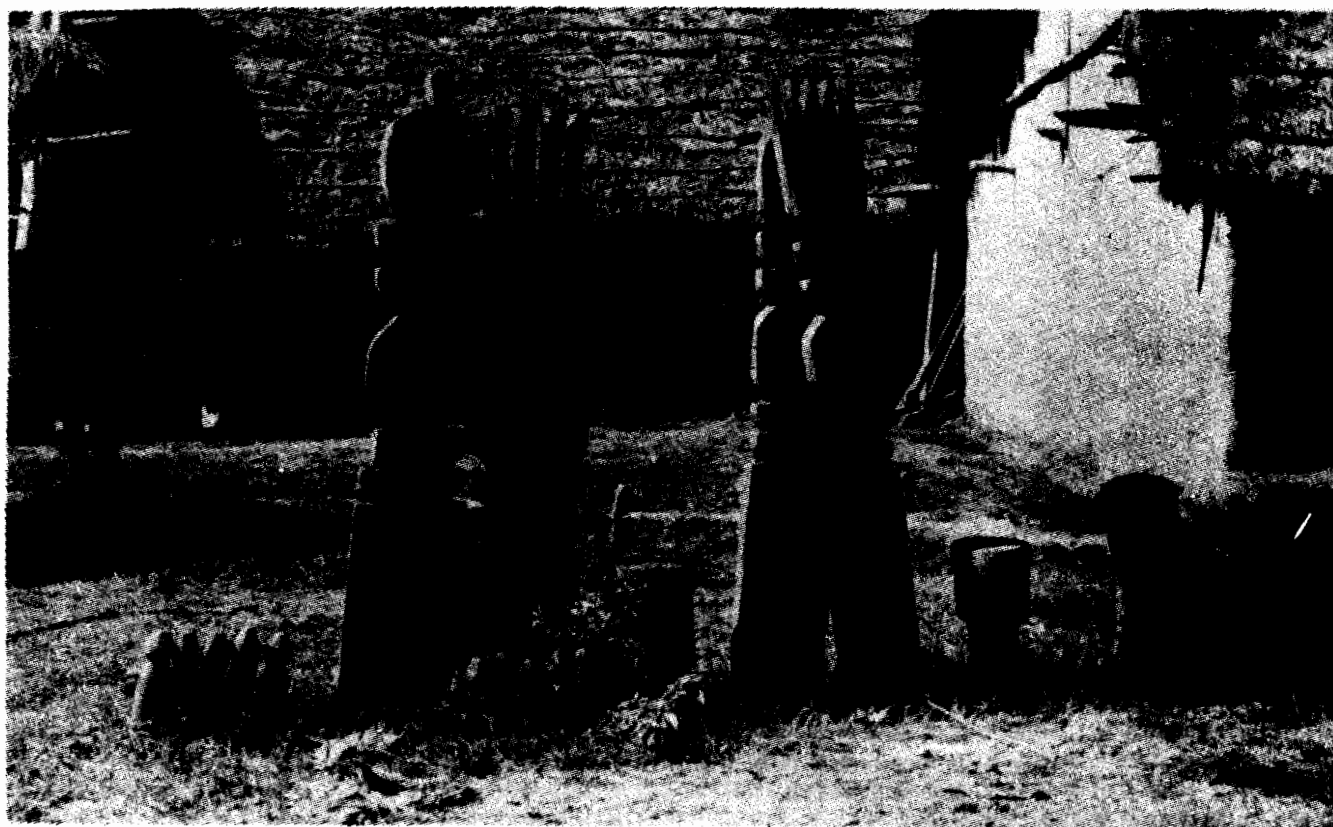
4. The *Laula Guruwās* Held Carefully by Others while in Trance



5. The *Laula Gwurws* Sitting in front of their Household Deities



6. The Standing Drummers



7. Artistic Wooden Planks Representing Village Level Deities



8. Marriage Procession Circumambulating Peepal Tree where Village Level Deities Reside

females known as (x) Saurinnya Pitarain (=the female ancestor from Sauri village) and (xi) Mari.

7. Modes and Occasions for Worship and Offerings

A. *Modes of Offering*

There are three main modes of offering each used on the appropriate occasion. These are as follows:

- (i) General worship made on occasions of minor ritual importance: The deities are simply offered liquor, *dhar* cakes and water. Such worship and offerings are made on occasions like Auli Puja (ceremony for eating new crop of rice), marriage etc. Such worship and offering is called *mad dharkainā* (pouring liquor)⁷ or *dhar denā* (offering (*dhār*)).
- (ii) Thanks-Offering: This is done when the worshipper himself or the household of the worshipper benefits from some unseen or unexpected event. For instance - the birth of a first son. Such offering is called Sarhauni or Barhanti Puja. *Sathyaura* (sweet balls made of parched rice flour mixed with raw sugar), which are especially prepared for this occasion, are offered to the household deities along with some liquor and water.
- (iii) Offering Made after contact has been established with a deity and/or spirit. This is called *gurai* (seance). After every stage of trance and dialogue with a deity or spirit offerings of water, milk and liquor are made to him/her. Such an

7. See photo no. 2.

offering is also called *minhi denā gurai* (seance for offering snacks). It is offered after rituals which are carried out in order to find-out the will of a certain spirit or deity. The deity or spirit concerned is pacified from time to time with *minhi* (=snacks) until the *pujā* (sacrifice) already promised for him is done.

- (iv) **Sacrifice:** A ritual, when one or more poultry or animal are sacrificed, is called *pujā* or *pujā carhainā*. Quite often, in consequence of the influence of the Hindu religion and the Sanskrit term '*pujā*' the word *pujā* is also applied to any kind of ritual, but, *pujā*, in the Tharu context means a "sacrifice", sometimes, to distinguish the Tharu meaning of *pujā* from that of the common Hindu term, the word *carhainā* (-to offer) is added immediately after the word '*pujā*'.

Pujā carhainā is usually done during Dasya festival and Dewari ceremony. Occasionally it is done during the ceremonies performed on the advice of some experienced shamans to fulfill the desires of unfed or ill-fed spirits and deities. The most important and elaborate *pujā* is the Barkapuja.

B. *Worship of the Household Deities and Spirits*

Though each clan has its own traditions concerning worship of its deities and/or spirits, generally they worship their household deities on the following occasions:

- (i) **Dasya festival:** A *pujā* is made during this festival. Most of the Tharus then sacrifice a cock at the base of the *mani khambhā* post. Some other

animals are also sacrificed, if the family can afford it.

- (ii) In Barkapuja.
- (iii) At the birth of a child: this is a *sarhauni* type of offering.
- (iv) At marriages: *Cuni* and *Barrya* dishes, along with liquor and milk, are offered.
- (v) When a house is being extended towards the north, or when a new house is being constructed, the household deities are offered *pujā* with a cock. In the case of a house being extended towards the south, (cattle-shed side) an uncastrated ram is offered as *pujā* to Bagar, the deity of the cat-tleshed.

C. *Worship of the Village-level Deities and Spirits*

The task of worshipping the village-level deities and spirits is that of the village-chief (Mahton). He worships these deities on behalf of the village. Some aged and more experienced persons may help and guide him in the worship. Apart from the two annual ceremonies (= *dhurrrya* and *haraha gurai*) these deities and spirits are worshipped immediately before the start and at the end of the Dasya dances. The Mahton bears the general expense of such worship and offerings; but the animals and fowls needed for sacrifice are either collected from each house, or the money to buy them is collected from each house. Generally fowls are collected, and money is collected for buying pigs, goats, or sheep. During a marriage in the village, the worship and offerings to these deities are carried out by the Mahaton on behalf of the family

concerned and at its own expense. The ritual for these deities and spirits, unlike the magico-religious ceremonies to drive away any evil or disease, is very simple. In this case a vermilion spot is first applied to each of these deities. A thread of raw-cotton is wound round them three or five times. Next some holy liquor, holy water and, occasionally, some cooked items, are also offered. Lastly, some water is sprinkled in the *parchanā* manner.⁸ Meanwhile the blessings requested on that particular occasion are solicited from the deities and spirits.

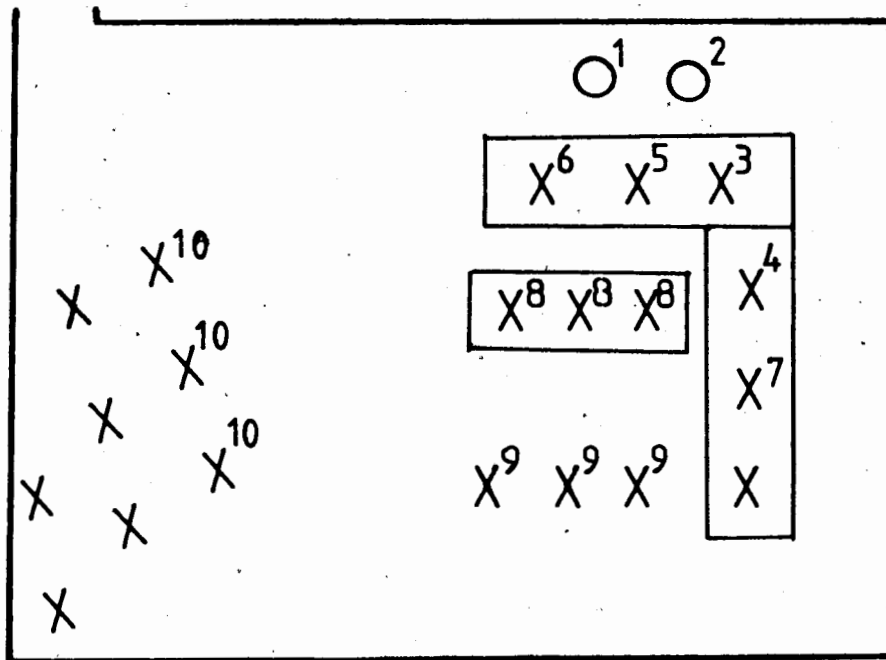
8. Laula Guruwa or the First Initiation

As every family needs a *guruwā* to perform its household rituals, it must have at least one of its male members trained as a *guruwā*. No man can become a *guruwā* unless he is brought into trance for the first time under some experienced *guruwās* in a ceremony specially arranged for this purpose. This ceremony is called the *laulā guruwā* (=new *guruwā*-making ceremony).

The *laulā guruwā* making ceremony must be performed on a Monday, during the bright fortnight of one of the three months of Ashwin (September-October), Kartik (October-November), and Mangsir (November-December). It is performed in the deity-room of one of the candidates. The number of *future guruwās* to be initiated is usually not more than five or six, all being members of the same extended family, including patrilineal cousins. I give a detailed description below of a *laulā guruwā* ceremony which I observed in Burhadabar village of Dhanauri Panchayat on the night of Monday, 4th Mangsir 2030 B.S. (November 1973).

8. *Parchanā*: Sprinkling of water over the offerings to a spirit. Made with both hands which are first dipped into water and immediately taken out in a praying posture: the drops are sprinkled to the right and left alternately.

All the men concerned gathered at about 8 p.m. Two experienced *gurawas*, especially invited for the occasion; and three other *gurawas*, invited for reasons of courtesy, had come. There were three drummers (their numbers must be either three or five, as an odd-number of drummers is considered more auspicious and more effective for bringing the novices into trance) and three or four persons to play the *majira* (small cymbals). There is no limitation on the number of *majira* players. There were also some more men who had come as spectators out of curiosity. After a while, all those concerned and the spectators went to the deity-room of the house. The seating plan was as follows:



Legend

1. Altar of Gurubaba, Khekhri and Maiya group of deities.
2. Altar of Jagarnatthya (the household deity of the *ghargurawa*) enshrined there, as the house belongs to one of the *barins* of Jagarnatthya *ghargurawa*.
3. The *ghargurawa* of the household who directs and leads the ceremony.
4. Another *gurawa*, functioning as the leader of the *pacara* (auspicious songs) singers.
5. One of the initiates.

6. The other initiate.
7. Persons playing *majira* and also singing *pacara* verses; some of them had problems as they had not yet learned the verses well.
8. Other invited guruwas.
9. The standing drummers.
10. The spectators.

Prior to the initiation ceremony the chief *guruwa* lit a lamp and worshipped the household deities. The initiates removed their caps, took some *acheta* in their hands and sat pressing their hands together before their faces, in front of the altars of the deities. The drummers, the *majira* players and the *pacara* singers then began to perform when the chief *guruwa* threw some *acheta* over the initiates, yelling out: "*Ca! Bhawani* (=act Bhawani)". The *pacara* singers began with the words 'Sri Ram (=Lord Ram)'. The *pacara* verses consisted of praises to Maiya and to Bhawani. The chief *guruwā*, encouraged by the beat of the drums and the *majirā*, continued his yelling, which got louder and louder, as the noise increased. The drum beats and *majirā* playing quickened. The face of the chief *guruwā* turned red and fierce; and his voice and spells resembled scolding until both of the initiates went into a trance after about fifteen minutes. Both of them were breathing heavily. A few other persons helped by holding carefully the initiates, who were going to lose control. Next, the noise of the drums and *majira* diminished but kept on in a slow rhythm. Then some of the other *guruwās* present there helped to collect all the household deities from the deity-room in two baskets. Each of the two novices was asked to carry one of the baskets in his hands. Then, all concerned (the novices, the *guruwās*, the drummers and the *majirā* players) came to the eastern courtyard where the novices danced and moved around the courtyard deities, making two anti-clockwise circumambulations. This act was called *kes pharainā*. Then both of the initiates were again taken to the previous site. Their heavy

breathing lessened and they seemed to be regaining consciousness. The voice, drums, and *majirā* were very low and finally stopped. Now the chief *guruwā* began to talk with the deities which had come on to the initiates. First of all, he asked whether the Maiya deity had come. When he was answered in the affirmative by the initiates, he again asked whether the ancestral deity⁹ had come or not. The initiates on behalf of the ancestral deities again replied in the affirmative. Again, the chief *guruwā* asked whether all of these deities were happy or not. The deities replied that they were happy. Then the chief *guruwā* asked whether the deities were ready to accept the offering of *minhi* (=snacks). The deities agreed. Then the conversation stopped. The initiates were asked to throw the *achetā*, which they held in their hands, over the baskets containing the household deities. During the conversation the voice of the *guruwā*, when putting questions to the deities, was normal except that he was using honorific speech each time; but the voices of the initiates, when replying on behalf of the deities, was a little different from their usual voices and they were using the speech used when talking to juniors. After this trance and conversation, all the household deities (including those in the cattleshed and the courtyard) were offered some liquor. The novices were served with some food and drink.

Early on the following morning exactly the same procedure was exactly repeated with the help of the *guruwā*, in order to check whether the initiates would again be possessed by the deities or not, and to verify whether they could again bring themselves into trance at will to contact the deities and spirits

9. Despite the fact that each lineage worships several ancestral deities, only one spirit comes (as representative of the other ancestral deities or ancestor spirits) to possess the novice.

and thus find out their desires.

To perfect their training as *gharguruwas*, the Gharguruwa clan-initiates are given further training in preparing *dhoop* and *bān*. They are trained to make small incisions in different parts of their bodies (the forehead, the tongue; the right side of the chest, the right thigh and the top of the right foot) with a sharp knife or razor, to draw out some blood which is then mixed with some hulled rice for making *bān*. They are also taught how to make incense (*dhoop*), which along with *bān*, has to be given to their *barin* families during the Dasya ceremonies. Such initiates have to learn several Mantras as well as other rituals, and also the herbal and mineral cures before becoming senior *guruwās*. Initiates from Barin group generally neither attempt nor do they need to go beyond learning how to go into trance and acquiring other skills needed for the performance of the minor household rituals.

9. Curing and Witchcraft

A. *Divination*

Apart from being possessed in order to converse with the deities so as to find out their desires, a *guruwā* also knows methods of finding out the cause of an illness. All these methods, including the most usual method of using hulled rice, are also common among the Raji people. As Johan Reinhard has described them well, I do not think it useful to describe them again here.¹⁰

B. *Preventive Cure Methods*

Apart from the curative techniques that are applied to the sick, Tharus have some prophylactic techniques too

10. Johan Reinhard, 1976 pp. 263-292.

which are performed to ensure protection from some particular types of illness. Some of these are as follows:

- (i) *Rath Lausari*: Rath is a malevolent spirit which, if angered, kills children. So, twice every year, during *kātiki puni* (bright fortnight in October-November) and *cāiti puni* (bright fortnight in March-April), a ritual is carried out in each household, where there is a woman of child-bearing age. It is practised by some non-Tharus also, who have been living alongside the Tharus in Dang-Deokhuri for five, six or more generations. But in any case, the shaman (*guruwā*) of *rath lausāri* is always a Tharu. The function of *rath lausāri* is not confined to the shamans from the Gharguruwa subgroup of clans only (like most of the major and the village-level rituals).

Rath lausāri is a ritual concerned with the worship and offering to the Rath spirit as well as to the spirits of the natal household of a woman. When a woman gives birth to her first baby, a certain set of objects is collected and preserved in a small bag on the advice and with the help of the *guruwā*. As I observed in a *rath lausāri* in Sukhrwar village this set consists of about twenty copper coins, as well as miniature replicas or symbolic objects, like a gun, representing the Shikari (hunter) spirit, a replica of *syāgu* (basketry-umbrella), and a small piece of *jābi* (a bag woven of threads) representing Magarahthen or a Magar spirit, and a replica of *dhak* (a kind of drum used by a deity or spirit). These objects may differ sometimes depending upon the

ritual practices of the clan or clans concerned.¹¹

In the ritual I witnessed in Sukhrwar, a little space, on the east-side courtyard of the house, was plastered with cow-dung. The *guruwā* then washed his hands, lit an oil-lamp and put some *achetā* on a plate in front of him over the plastered space. Then he sat facing east towards the plastered space, opened the bag and placed all the copper coins in a horizontal row from right to left. The coins in the row were kept in piles of two and four alternatively; but the last two piles consisted of two coins each. Next, the *guruwā* placed the miniature objects at the left end of the row and then applied vermilion to each pile of coins and to the other objects. Then the *guruwā* picked up one of the replicas in his left hand, along with three chickens. With the right hand, he poured some water and *achetā* over the chickens while saying Mantras. After this had been done, he put the replica back inside the bag. One by one he did the same with all the miniature replicas; sometimes he took a replica, sometimes a pile of coins. After each stage of the performances, he put the replica or the pile of coins inside the bag.

The *rath lausari*, performed by a *guruwā*, is done for several other reasons. First of all, Tharus are much attached to their traditions

11. The ritual traditions of the maternal family of the pregnant women are also enquired after and honoured in this ritual.

and try to follow them, as did their elders. So the elder son or the younger brother of a *guruwā* tries to become a *guruwā* of at least the same experience and wisdom as his elder. Again, *guruwās* have high social prestige, so men want to become *guruwās*. Thirdly, it is an obligation for a *guruwā* to look after and to help his clients. Each time a *guruwā* performs *rath lausāri* for his client, he is served with good drink and good food, chicken or pork being included in the menu. He is also recompensed with a little money, maybe half a rupee or one rupee, although this will not be of much importance in his budget.

- (ii) Dagar Bathanna: *Dagar bathannā* means literally "to watch or to guard a trail". In fact, it is a ritual performed to check the penetration of certain epidemics or evil spirits into the village. This ritual is performed on an auspicious day (as suggested or fixed by experienced *guruwās*) during the bright fortnight of Chaitra (March-April) month. It is performed on the last day of the fortnight when the people go to participate in the Patan Mela, an annual fair in Devipatan village near Tulsipur, a border-town in India.¹²

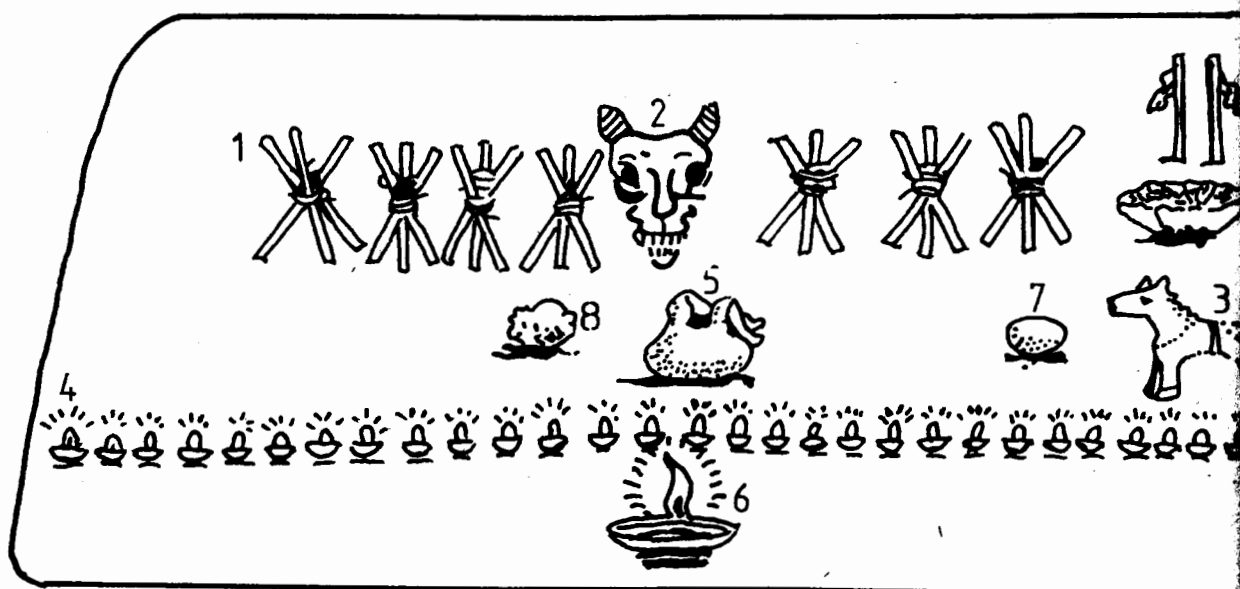
Here is the detail of a ceremony which I observed in Sukhrwar village on Friday, the 27th of Chaitra 2031 B.S. (second week of April 1973).

On the morning of that day, preparations began for *dagar bathannā*. Three men, Penal Chaudhari

12. See *Census of India, 1961*, volume XV, Uttar Pradesh Part VII B Fairs and Festivals in Uttar Pradesh, p. 110.

(a *guruwā*), Bhakamlal (a Patrilineal cousin of his, here performing as *kesaukā*)¹³ and Mohanlal Mahton took the leading roles though the congregation of the *gardhurryās* also helped them in many ways.

All these men, carrying various items needed for the performance, went to a plot of a field, at the south-east corner of the village, immediately after taking a bath. The necessary items for the ceremony were carried to the spot. There they were placed by the *pujari* (Mahton) as in the following plan:



ITEMS NEEDED FOR A DAGAR BATHANNĀ CEREMONY

Legend:

1. *Khappar*: tripods supporting leaf-cups, containing rice and other things, placed on them.

13. A shaman-assistant to a *gharguruwā* or a *desbandhya guruwā* whose role is somewhat similar to that of the *bijuwa* among the Limbus; through possession and trance he acts as a *nedivar* to communicate with the desired deities and spirits. See Sagant P., 1976.

2. Cow-skull.
3. Small clay horse.
4. Small leaf-cup oil-lamps.
5. The ritual bag containing some of Mahton's household deities and also the ritual cane (*byāt*).
6. The big oil-lamp.
7. The egg.
8. Termites 'nest'.
9. Clover, nutmeg, and *neem* seeds, soaked in water in a leaf cup.

To begin the ritual, the Mahaton sat to the west of the plastered space, and facing it. Other men sat on either side of him, keeping a few feet away from him. The Mahaton lit the big oil-lamp, and placed it in the centre of the plastered space, along with the ritual bag. He fixed the Saura deity there in the ground; and put the ritual cane down there. In front of the ritual-bag he put the cow-skull and then the seven tripods on either side. In front of the skull, the miniature-flags were hoisted in a row above the ground. The termites' 'nest' and the packet of black collgium and vermilion were placed near the deities. The leaf-cup containing the *neem*, the nutmeg and the clove soaked in water, along with the egg and the clay-horse, were put on the extreme right of the Mahaton inside the plastered space. Of the thirty-seven leaf-cup lamps, thirty were placed by the side of the main big oil-lamp, while six were put towards the left, out side of the plastered space. Then, the tripods (*khappar*) were erected and one leaf-dish containing rice and a coin was put upon each tripod, inside the plastered space. After that the Mahaton lit the leaf-cup lamps and applied vermilion spots to the ground, in front of each lamp.

Then, a seance (*gurai*) was performed to enter into contact with the deity. The *guruwā* (Penlal) threw some *achetā* over the *kesaukā* (Bhakamlal), who went into trance, very quickly. Then the *guruwā* and the *kesaukā* began to converse. The *kesaukā* began to reply on behalf of the deity. The conversation (*boli lagainā*) started like this:

- guruwā* - "Please, will you protect (the villagers) from contagious diseases or not?"
- kesaukā* - "Yes, I will do so."
- guruwā* - "Who is going to make a fence against the 'air' (*paun*; polluted air that blows and spreads diseases)?"
- kesaukā* - "I am going to do that."
- guruwā* - "Who is going to turn aside the resources of the enemy?"
- kesaukā* - "Myself".
- guruwā* - "Please, lead the tigers and bears away to the *kajari* (dark) forest and the serpents to *pātāl* (the under-world)".

After this, the *kesaukā*, still in a trance, picked up the clay horse, the leaf cup containing the three types of seed, the ritual cane, Saura and the miniature flags and moved further east to a new location in a field. A few *gardhurryās* also followed him carrying one *golrā* (pot) of holy liquor, one leaf-cup lamp, one chick and a few other things to be used there in the ritual. The *kesaukā* then fixed Saura in the ground, in that new spot, and put the ritual cane and the clay-horse on the ground. He held the chick in his left hand, and sprinkled the contents of the leaf cup (the three seeds soaked in water) over the chick with his right hand while quietly murmuring certain spells. He then left the spot, abandoning the chick as an offering to the evil spirits responsible for contagious diseases. In return for the

chick, these spirits were supposed to remain outside the village. The abandoned chick is usually picked up later on and eaten by vultures.

The *kesaukā* then took some liquor in a leaf and poured it over the ground, immediately after which some more liquor (now diluted with water) was poured there. Finally he performed *parchanā* and then returned with Saura and the cane to the original place, where the Mahton was. He then went to take a bath before beginning *pujā* (sacrifice). First he sacrificed seven chicks, by beheading them and then another one by knocking it down; one pig was also beheaded, all this being done inside the plastered area. Moreover, on the unplastered space too, where six leaf-cup oil-lamps had already been lit, the Mahton slaughtered six chickens. Next, milk, diluted with water was offered as *dhār* and was immediately followed by the offering of two types of liquor - the *sukhla* (undiluted) and the *panihā* (diluted with water) over the plastered area. Finally incense (*dhoop*) was lit (as must be done as a complement to a sacrifice) and *bān* (rice mixed with human blood) was sprinkled on the ground by the Mahton. All the parts of the sacrificed chickens and pig, except one chick's head were picked up, to be consumed later by the men, present there. The parts of the chickens sacrificed over the unplastered area were kept separate. The men then moved to a bamboo grove where the Mahton put his *jholi* and the ritual-cane on the ground, sacrificed one chick and again offered *dhār* and the two types of liquor. Offerings were also made there along with *dhoop* and the scattering of *ban* followed by *parchana*. Now the *dagar bathannā* ceremony was ended. The sacrificed parts of

the six chickens, which had been kept separate, were eaten on the spot after roasting, while the remaining parts were cooked and eaten in the Mahaton's house. The *gardhurryas* then brought some rice-beer from their homes which was drunk by them when they ate the meat of the sacrificed chickens.

9. Recent Trends in Tharu Religious Life

Tharus, though they are still much attached to their local religious traditions, have been influenced to some extent by the great tradition of their Hindu neighbours. However, it is not clear when this influence began. Stories from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* have become the themes of some of their songs. Songs sung in many villages during *Dasya*, or at the group dances performed at the same time, illustrate some of the scenes and stories from the *Mahabharata* or from the *Krishna Caritra*. Some of the *māgar* (auspicious) songs sung during weddings also contain themes from the *Ramayana*.

Besides these Hindu influences on the common religious way of Tharu life, Hindu manners are also spreading among the rich and literate Tharu families. As Hindu religion and culture is the religion and culture of the elite, so rich Tharus, while trying to upgrade their social status, have been adopting the Hindu way of religious life. They no longer want to be linked to the tradition of the poor class Tharus. At least they pretend not to follow the major Tharu tradition, nowadays associated with a backward and inferior class. The Tharus from prosperous and educated families try to direct the people under their influence towards change and higher standards. Even during the Rana regime, when some highly educated Tharus from Saptari and the adjacent Eastern Terai districts had impressed the then Rana Prime Minister with their erudition, they were

given permission to form the Tharu Kalyankarini Samiti (Welfare Committee for the Tharus) and to arrange talks and debates on Tharu welfare in order to influence the people in different parts of the country. Such a spirit continued even after the downfall of the Rana regime. In February, 1955 a big rally was organized in Gobardiha village of Deokhuri. This rally lasted for twelve days. Many Tharus from Dang, Deokhuri and other parts of Nepal participated. Tharu representatives, like Kewal Chaudhari from Saptari district, and Ram Prasad Chaudhari, from Butawal, were the chief figures in this rally, and had been especially invited to make speeches. The result of this rally was that many Tharu families began to give up the practice of taking liquor, pork and chicken and to introduce Hindu manners of worship or devotion.¹⁴ Meanwhile, some rich Tharu families of Dang and Deokhuri had already adopted the Hindu way of life. Some of them had adopted Vaishnavism strictly; they were wearing *dhotis, rudraksa malas*,¹⁵ applying Vaishnava *tikas* to their foreheads, and performing daily worship of Hindu deities in the Hindu manner. People like Dharnidhar Chaudhari of Hekuli village of Dang (who has married a Brahmin wife, along with other wives) and elders, such as Mr. Parsunarayan Chaudhari's family in Gobardiha village of Deokhuri, continue to maintain Hinduized traditions. But now with the influence of Western culture and English education, as well as the social changes taking place in Nepalese society, the rules and ideals of the Tharu Kalyankarini Samiti itself are also changing. The people, especially the modern educated young people, who play an active role, do not follow blindly the old reform ideals. Now they do not see any harm in eating pork and chicken, and less harm in liquor than other intoxicants like hashish and *bhang*.¹⁶

14. Compare Srivastava, p. 107-8.

15. A rosary made of 108 *Elaeocarpus ganitrus* seeds often worn around the neck by orthodox Hindus.

16. An extract from a plant like marijuana; it is mixed as a drink or put in sweets.

As the Tharu Kalyankarini Samiti was much concerned with reforms in dietary and religious customs, its effectiveness later diminished. Poor Tharus were least influenced by these reforms and continued with their own old traditions. While the old generation in the aristocratic and educated families has kept strictly to the proposed reforms, the young generation is more interested in high-lighting and publishing Tharu literature and folklore.