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Arjun Guneratne
Macalester College

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THE THARU

Editorial by Arjun Guneratne

The Tharu, more than any other in the imagination of both Nepalis and foreigners, are associated with the Tarai. The ethnonym Tharu is shared by a large number of culturally very different people living throughout this region; nevertheless, in the context of modern Nepal, they have begun to constitute themselves as a single ethnic group, process primarily driven by the activity of a country-wide ethnic association known as the Tharu Kalyankarini Sabha (Tharu Welfare Association). This issue of *Himalayan Research Bulletin* focuses attention on the Tharu, who see themselves and who are seen by others, as being the Tarai's indigenes, its *adivasis*.

While the Tarai is the most important region of Nepal outside the Kathmandu Valley, it has garnered relatively little scholarly attention. Although it accounts for only 23 percent of the land area, it is home, according to the 1991 census to almost half of Nepal's population. It is economically essential to the country and has always been so - so essential that the Gorkhas, when faced with the loss of it at the end of the Anglo-Nepal war, threatened to continue the fight rather than accept the conditions the British offered them. Nevertheless, the Tarai has been the focus of relatively little ethnographic work, especially when compared to the vast number of studies that has been produced on the societies and cultures of the mountain peoples. Furthermore, a good deal of the literature that has been produced on the Tarai has dealt with the migration of hill people to the lowlands; that, and the ethnographic description of the Tharu, has been the foci of most of the work on the Tarai. The earliest description of Nepali Tharus appears to have been an article published by Tucci in 1956; nothing more was published until MacDonald produced two essays on Tharu festivals in the late 1960s.

Since the 1980s however, there has come into existence a growing body of scholarship in the United States and Europe on the Tharu, although the societies being described continue to be those in the central and western parts of the Tarai. In a bibliographic essay published in *Kailash* in 1995, Krauskopff lists only three works (two articles and an MA thesis) on the Tharu of the Eastern Tarai, all in Nepali, while publications on the Rana Tharu of Nepal's far west date only from the 1990s. In fact, almost half of the approximately 63 articles that have been published on the Tharu of Nepal appeared in the 1990s. Since Krauskopff's *Maîtres et Possédés* appeared in 1989, about six books (including a collection of essays edited by Harald Skar that accounts for a large part of the scholarly output of the 1990s) have appeared dealing with various aspects of Tharu society and culture; two of those books are reviewed in this issue.

The core of this issue consists of three papers, two by anthropologists and one by a student of environmental sciences. The lead essay, by Gisele Krauskopff, provides a detailed description of the part that fishing plays in Tharu culture; al-



though the Tharu are a farming people, fishing is integral to their way of life and a rich source of metaphors. Arjun Guneratne's essay describes the work of two ritual specialists in Chitwan Tharu society--the Brahman priest and the Tharu gurau or shaman--and discusses their very different roles in ordering Tharu belief in malevolent spirits and ghosts. The final paper, by Joanne McLean deals with the impact on Tharus of their relocation from an enclave within the Royal Chitwan National Park, to make room for an expansion of the park. Her paper is a critique of the western conservation models uncritically accepted by Nepal, that works to exclude human beings from protected areas, and she documents the Tharu experience of relocation and its impact on their cultural practices.

The remainder of this issue also focuses on the Tharu. Ulrik Muller-Boker reports briefly on Tharu oral narratives collected over many years of doing fieldwork in Chitwan. Two books also are reviewed here. The first is a Tharu version of the Mahabharata from the Dang valley; the text has been published in both Nepali and the Dangaura Tharu language, as well as in the English translation reviewed here. The second is an account of life in a Tharu village by Katharine Bjork Guneratne, who spent a year in Chitwan while accompanying her husband in the field.

We had hoped to make this a special issue on the Tarai. That it became, somewhere along the way a special issue on the Tharu, indicates not only the relatively small number of scholars who work on the ethnology of the Tarai, but also how over represented among them are those with interests in Tharu society and culture. We hope this issue will help stimulate interest in a relatively neglected part of Nepal, a place where hill cultures and plains cultures meet and contend.

