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## Tharu-State Relations in Nepal and India

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## THARU – STATE RELATIONS IN NEPAL AND INDIA

This paper examines the relationship of the Tharu, one of the more numerous of the ethnic groups that inhabit the Tarai, to the various states that encompassed them during the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These include the British colonial state and its Indian successor, the Shah and Rana states of nineteenth and early twentieth century Nepal, and the modern Nepali state as it has developed since 1951. The paper argues that the political ecology of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the Tarai made the Tharu an indispensable part of state building for both the British and for Rana Nepal. The capacity of Tharu society to survive in often extreme malarial conditions made them an irreplaceable source of labor in the Tarai while the Tharu elite furnished the state with a necessary cadre of lower-level administrators. However, following on the economic and political transformations that took place in the post-1951 period, the Nepali state's interest in the Tarai changed, both as a function of bureaucratic development that made the administrative role the Tharu had played largely irrelevant, as well as the emergence of the Tarai as a crucial site of national identity building. The consequent marginalization of the Tharu was an important factor shaping Tharu ethnic consciousness in the modern period.

When I arrived in Nepal in 1989 to carry out research among the Tharu, I paid a courtesy call on a high Nepali official close to the center of power. After we had chatted politely of this and that for a few minutes, he asked me about what I planned to do, and I replied I intended to carry out a research project about the Tharu. His reply was instructive; it was a dismissive “Oh, those Indians!” That throwaway remark encapsulates some of the problems of state-building, national identity formation and democratic participation that characterizes Nepal today. That such attitudes and perceptions endure, despite a decade of “Peoples’ War” based in part on the recognition of ethnic rights, is suggested in the recent attempt (in 2009) by the late Maoist government of Nepal to classify the Tharu as Madhesi (a word dominant groups in Nepal have understood to mean an “Indian” inhabitant of the Tarai)—a move that led to the mobilization of Tharu throughout the Tarai in protest, and the loss of several lives.

Although the Tarai has been central to the economic viability of the Nepali state since its inception, the people of that region have been politically marginalized and treated with suspicion by the hill-based elites who ruled the country. The Tharu are not Madhesi and the Madhesi are not Indian, and that remark indicates the limitations, and indeed the failure, of the policy of “national integration” favored by the *panchayat* regime to create a cohesive and distinctive cultural identity that could encompass all Nepalis. Where the Tharu are concerned, although they were essential to the state when the Tarai was

malarial (both for their labor and for their role as revenue collectors), they became marginalized when malaria was controlled and it became possible for hill people to settle in the Tarai year round. That marginalization in turn led to a movement by Tharu elites (a social stratum originating in the large landlords and revenue collectors of former times) to develop a sense of ethnic self-hood in the context of a modernizing and centralizing state (see Guneratne 2002). At the same time, a great many Tharu, especially in the Western Tarai, lost control of land to settlers from the hills, and were reduced to conditions of semi-serfdom. The movement to free these bonded labor (*kamaiya*) became one of the defining political struggles for western Tharu in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and coupled with the violence they endured at the hands of the state—whose agents viewed all Tharu in the Western Tarai as Maoists during the Peoples’ War—radicalized them, reinforced their ethnic consciousness and enhanced their organizational skills, all of which were on display during the two Tharu *andolan* of 2009.

The ethnic label Tharu is shared by well over a million people who live in the Tarai. According to the 2001 census, there were over 1.5 million Tharus in Nepal, while smaller populations live in adjacent areas of India. The Tharu consider themselves to be indigenous to the Tarai, predating both Madhesi and hill people as inhabitants of that region, and playing an essential if subordinate role in the emergence of the modern Nepali state. Although they share the same ethnonym, the people known as the Tharu belong to

a number of communities that vary greatly over the extent of the Tarai, in terms of the languages they speak and their cultural practices. The various Tharu languages are related to each other in much the same way that the Romance languages are; that is, they all belong to the great North Indian branch of the Indo-European language family. When Tharus from different areas gather, they usually turn to Hindi or Nepali to communicate. These languages are widely spoken by most Tarai people, Tharu and non-Tharu alike. Life for most Tharu has changed dramatically in the last 50 years because the Tarai has become the focus of the largest population shift in Nepal's history, which has brought hill people in their hundreds of thousands to settle in Nepal's fertile lowlands. This process has been encouraged by the state as a way to consolidate its control over a region whose population was viewed with distrust.

I examine in this paper the relations of the various ethnic groups that share the ethnonym Tharu to the states that encompassed them during the past two centuries. As the hill politics evolved into the modern state of Nepal, defined by national boundaries, Weberian bureaucratization and centralized political control, there has been a sharpening and politicization of group identities that formerly had little or no political significance. As in many multi-ethnic states, national identity formation was based on the culture and practices of the ruling elites and their ethnic kin, and provided no space for the culture of subaltern populations, which were collectively in the majority. Nepal's approach has been different from that pursued in India, which has dealt with its diversity by embracing it; Indian nationalism is not predicated on the language and culture of a single group but of loyalty to the state as the representative of all its people (cf. Roy 2007). In contrast, the ideology of national integration as it has been deployed in Nepal has essentially meant, to the country's political elite, the organization of identity around the cultural symbol of the dominant classes. This is the process that Bista has called *nepalization* (which many Tarai activists prefer to call *paharization*). This concept of national integration emphasizes the cultural (narrowly conceived) at the expense of the political; what it does not do is to provide those historically marginal and subaltern groups an equal place at the table, nor does it provide space for their cultures in the envisioning of Nepali nationhood. Mishra has pointed out with respect to the Tarai, for example, the poor representation of Tarai people in positions of power nationally, and notes that their relatively low representation in parliament is due in part to the preference of national political parties to nominate hill immigrants to the Tarai for Tarai seats (Mishra 1992). It is also the case that parliamentary constituencies in the Tarai represent larger populations than do hill constituencies, thereby diluting even further the potential impact of the Tarai and its non-*pahari* population in national politics. This lack of integration into the administration of the state and to state patronage, as well as the pervasive discrimination encountered by both the Madeshi and the Tharu, has undermined both the

cultural and political projects of the Nepali state.

The central point with regard to Tharu-state relations is that in the period before the 1950s, the Tharus were essential to the successful accomplishment of state projects in the Tarai and in the post-1950s period, they were not. The Tharu were reputedly the only people who could survive in the malarial Tarai (although there was significant Indian immigration into some regions of the Tarai, especially in the east), and as such were an essential source of both labor and revenue administration. While the Tharu were essential to the successful exploitation of the Tarai in pre-modern times, the Tarai was essential to the economic well-being of the emerging Nepali state. It is perhaps even more important today. Before modern times, the revenues that hill states derived from the Tarai came from agriculture, timber (to feed the railways of British India), the capture and sale of elephants and pasturage of cattle. In all these activities, Tharus played important roles. They were first of all a source of labor in agriculture, although their numbers never proved adequate for this task. But local Tharu elites were also indispensable to the state as intermediaries between the state and the local societies that the state sought to control; they were revenue collectors, minor judicial officials and were entrusted with various administrative tasks. Many Tharus were active in the timber trade. Finally, Tharus dominated (and still do) work related to elephants. In the post 1950s period however, the Tharu ceased to play these roles, with the exception of their role in the elephant stables, where they still predominate. The bureaucratization of the revenue administration marginalized the Tharu even as it benefitted hill castes with closer ties to state power. Finally, the eradication of malaria resolved once and for all the Tarai's perennial problem of labor. As I will discuss below, this transformation had its impact on the shaping of Tharu ethnic identity.

In what follows, I shall examine the relations that existed between Tharu societies and the states that encompassed them, focusing on the state policies that shaped Tharu identity in the modern period in India and Nepal.

## THE THARU AND THE STATE IN INDIA

Judging by the disproportionate attention paid to them in the writings of colonial officials in the northern districts of the United Provinces, the British seem to have been particularly fascinated by the Tharu, whose diligence as cultivators was often used as a foil to make more disparaging observations about the peasantry settled in caste-based villages. Walter Hamilton, for instance, devotes a third of his account of Gorakhpur District to the Tharu, who formed only a minute part of its population (Hamilton 1820). W.W.Hunter noted approvingly, "They are first-rate cultivators . . . Those who have dealings with them say they are far more upright and honest than the ordinary Champaran rayat" (Hunter 1877: 245). Nesfield spoke of them in the following terms: "The Tharus are, for the most part, a peaceful and good-natured race, following without question, as if by a law of nature, the

customs and maxims of their ancestors” (quoted in Crooke 1896: 403), while Charles Williams described them in the Oudh Census report in 1869 as “courageous and good-natured, peaceful and hardworking . . . mutually helping each other in cultivation and adjusting among themselves all the affairs of their little communities” (Williams 1869: 111). The generally positive characterization of the Tharu in the colonial accounts was doubtless reinforced by the British assumption that the Tharus were immune to malaria (although some officials disputed that; see for example Cavenagh 1851: 94) and thus the only people who could be depended on to provide labor in the Tarai districts of the Raj. By the same token, some British officials were reluctant to enforce policies that might drive the Tharu across the border into Nepal. For instance, the British gave the Tharu some latitude to distill their own liquor (a practice otherwise prohibited to the peasantry), subscribing to the belief, apparently promoted by the Tharu themselves, that liquor was essential for their survival in the unhealthy climate of the Tarai (Crooke 1896: 405). The Tharu thus appear to have enjoyed a relatively privileged position—privileged, that is, relative to adjacent Indian ethnic groups—in those areas of the Tarai controlled by the British following the conclusion of the Anglo-Nepal War.

The importance of the Tharu to the economy of the Tarai is particularly salient in the British accounts. The problem the British faced was that of finding adequate labor in their state forests in the Tarai, as well as to cultivate land in the Tarai districts, and the Tharu apparently furnished a reliable supply. An excellent example of this understanding and how it operated to the advantage of the Tharu comes from the Pilibhit district in 1851. The Board of Revenue was asked to rule on a claim by a local raja to an estate (the *taluka* of Namikmutta), which was occupied by a community of Tharu who had made a separate revenue settlement with a British official. The Board ruled against the raja, justifying their decision in the following terms:

The arrangement . . . was, in the opinion of the Board, likely to conduce to clearing and populating a part of the country which it had not only been found hitherto impossible to improve, but which had been in a state of continual deterioration, and as the people in question [i.e. the Tharu] . . . are described as . . . the only persons whose lives are safe in the climate had expressed the desire to undertake the cultivation of the Tract at their own risk . . . the Board were of opinion that they ought not to cramped in their undertaking by any official control.<sup>1</sup>

The British categorized the Tharu under a variety of

1. The Governor-General in Council, Revenue Department, 13<sup>th</sup> August 1851. India and Bengal Despatches, 6<sup>th</sup> – 27<sup>th</sup> August, 1851, Vol. 72. India Office Library, E/4/811.

different labels in the various censuses, from aboriginal tribe in the first countrywide census of 1872 to forest tribe in 1891 and later, in 1921, to “hill and forest tribe” (Srinivasan and Ranjan 2003: 204-205). There is of course no objective definition of “tribe”, and the British used different criteria at different times. In general, groups of people living beyond the control of caste-based states in ecologically remote areas were thought of as tribal. In the 1872 census, religion was used to distinguish aboriginal people from Hindus, while in the 1935 Government of India Act, religion, which had come in for a great deal of criticism from census officials as a useful criterion by which to distinguish between “tribal” and “Hindu” was abandoned in favor of ecological criteria (i.e., people living in “forests, hills and mountains” were considered backward tribes) (Srinivasan and Ranjan 2003: 205). The Tharu however, did not receive the legal status of “tribe” in India in the immediate aftermath of independence, but had to struggle for many years to achieve it.

### From Backward Class to Scheduled Tribe

Where the Tharus of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh are concerned, despite their classification as “tribal” in colonial India, they did not immediately receive the status of Scheduled Tribe following independence. It took a protracted struggle lasting half a century for the Tharu of Champaran (Bihar) to achieve reclassification as a Scheduled Tribe (see below). The Tharu in Uttar Pradesh, who were the largest of the five “tribes” of that state prior to the separation of Uttaranchal (Uttarakhand) (Maiti 2004: 26) did not achieve Scheduled Tribe status until 1967, because the first Chief Minister of the state, G.B.Pant, was opposed to the recognition of any tribes within the state “to avoid the politics of tribalism” (Srinivasan and Ranjan 2003: 219). Following the separation of Uttaranchal, the Tharu are the sole remaining Scheduled Tribe in U.P. According to Srinivasan and Ranjan, the Tharu in U.P. were eventually granted Scheduled Tribe (ST) status because “their small numbers did not affect state politics in any significant way” (ibid). They add, “The privileges flowing from ST status as also the economic opportunities opened up by the aggressive cultivation of the western terai . . . helped U.P. Tharus achieve a much more ‘developed’ status than their Bihar brethren. For that very reason however, they have become assimilated in the mainstream and lost their singular identity” (ibid).

The most salient aspect of the relation between Tharus and the state in post-independence India is that the various Tharu populations are now classified as Scheduled Tribes, which give them in principle access to certain privileges and benefits. These included reserved seats in the legislature, as well as reservations in government posts and in university admissions (Galanter 1984). This is, in effect, a policy of national integration, whose import is as much symbolic as it is material. While these benefits encouraged groups to hold on to their “tribal” identity (rather than, for instance, seek to assimilate to “caste” society through processes of

sanskritization), they did not necessarily encourage the formation of pan-ethnic identities of the sort that took place among the Tharu in Nepal (see Guneratne 2002).

During the British period, so-called tribal areas were given a special status as “Scheduled Tracts” (Srinivasan & Ranjan 2003: 204). According to these authors, while one reason for such special status—which exempted these areas from the normal regulations—was the need to prevent tribal revolts, such as had occurred in Bihar at various times during the nineteenth century, it was also recognition of the particular value of the forest and its produce. The forest provisions of the British appear to have carried over to independent India because we hear from R.C. Sharma, the author of some monographs on Tharu villages that were part of the 1961 census that outsiders could not settle in the Rana Tharu village of Bankati without the permission of the Divisional Forest Officer, and that villagers were subject to his order. Sharma adds that the Forest Department allowed forest villages such as this within their jurisdiction “solely to afford a permanent supply of suitable local labour” (Sharma, 1965:17). In addition, the Tharu living under the jurisdiction of the Forest Department were apparently prohibited from seeking outside employment under the terms of the settlement that allowed them to live in these forest villages. Sharma’s account suggests that local officials of the Forest Department exercised a great deal of power over the lives of the Tharu under their jurisdiction. The Forest Department dealt with Tharu villagers through the Tharu *pradhan*, who was also responsible for collecting the revenue and delivering it to the Forest office. That Tharu relations with the Forest Department were often contentious is indicated by one of the aims of the local Tharu Association, which was to safeguard Tharus “from harassment by the officials of the Forest Department” (Sharma 1965: 35).<sup>2</sup> Forest Officers would sometimes remove Tharu *pradhans* from their posts, an action that would invite the intervention of the Tharu Association to redress. Even so, Sharma characterizes the Tharu of this forest village as docile, illiterate people lacking “any political consciousness” (Sharma, 1965: 36); even the President and the Secretary of the Tharu Association, he notes, were non-Tharu.

I have argued elsewhere (Guneratne 2002) that an important factor for the different approaches taken by the Tharu in Nepal and India to the question of their unity as an ethnic category was that they inhabited two different states, which structured in different ways their relations with ethnic groups within their boundaries. Furthermore, in India, the Tharu fell within two different political jurisdictions, the states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Recent work by two Indian anthropologists, Amrit Srinivasan and Akhilesh Ranjan, enable me to fill out the details of that argument, with particular reference to the struggles of the Tharu of

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2. This contentiousness continues today, as described in a recent news report in the *Hindustan Times*, which refers to over 200 cases being filed against Tharu villagers living in the Valmikinagar Tiger Sanctuary’s buffer zone in Bihar for various infringements of the Forest Act (Verma 2010).

Champanan to achieve recognition as a Scheduled Tribe, which they accomplished on January 8, 2003 after a 50-year campaign. The following discussion is based on their paper (Srinivasan and Ranjan 2003).

Although the Tharus of Champanan were given the status of a scheduled tribe in the census of 1941, they were not included in the Scheduled Tribes Order of 1950, which gave tribal people Scheduled status—and thus access to certain privileges and benefits—in independent India for the first time. Instead, in 1951, they were listed as a Backward Class, a status that, in effect, placed them in the lower rungs of the local caste hierarchy. This move was resisted by the Tharu, who had been claiming Ksatriya status since the 1940s, but to no avail; according to Srinivasan and Ranjan, “Their economic deprivation worked against them and they could not achieve their goal” (2003: 211). In fact, in 1955 the first Backward Classes Commission had also recommended that they be listed as a Scheduled Tribe, and the Tharu in Uttar Pradesh had enjoyed that status since 1967. The Champanan Tharu used both these facts to argue for a change in their official status. The Bihar state government, however, was reluctant to list the Tharu in the Schedule because of the high concentration of tribal people in southern Bihar (which separated from the rest of Bihar in 2000 to form the new state of Jharkhand); they had no desire to increase the numbers of tribals in the state, presumably for political reasons. According to Srinivasan and Ranjan,

The Tharu of Champanan lost their bargaining power vis-à-vis the state on two counts: (i) they were ‘tribals’ but isolated in the wrong part of the state—northwest, whereas it is the south which has today won full statehood for themselves, on the basis of an autonomous tribal identity, and (ii) They were BC but in a state where it was eventually the Backwards such as the Yadav, Koeri and Kurmi, commercially wealthier and better integrated with the upper caste society, who would gain power (2003: 212).

The status of the Tharu as a Backward Class meant that they were effectively marginalized in the politics of Bihar. First of all, they were unable to benefit from programs directed at Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes; they lost out again in the political decentralization that took place with the implementation of *panchayati raj*, when special provisions were made for the political representation of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, for Backward Classes received no special consideration. Nor were the Tharus, who were politically marginalized and largely illiterate, able to compete with more powerful, better organized and more numerous Backward Class groups such as the Yadavs for the benefits that were available to the Backward Classes.

The Tharu began an organized effort to change their status in 1973, because as Srinivasan and Ranjan note, “The educated youth wanted this for jobs, the uneducated for financial

support from the state agency and the rich Tharus for more legal/financial benefits based on state assistance” (2003: 214). The state government eventually submitted the claims of the Tharu to Scheduled Tribe status to the Union government in 1996, and final approval, as I have noted above, did not arrive until 2003. By that time, with the inclusion of most of Bihar’s tribal population in the new state of Jharkhand, the Tharu as a tribal category represented only a small and marginal minority with little impact on state politics. According to the Hunger Free Bihar Campaign, following on the partition of Bihar, the State government has no data on the current extent of its tribal population and lacks a tribal commission, making it virtually impossible for Tharu and other tribals (Gond and Santhal) to benefit from the Centre’s programs for tribals (Banerjee 2009). As happened in Nepal, the poverty of their communities and the exploitation and marginalization to which they are subject, have attracted many Tharu in Bihar to the ranks of India’s Maoists (Jha 2010).

The status of Scheduled Tribe, with its attendant benefits and linked to the fact of the minuscule numbers of Tharu in the populations of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar means that pan-Tharu ethnic unity is politically less salient in India than it is in Nepal. Thus, while the trend in Nepal has been to ethnic consolidation of the various Tharu groups, in India this has not occurred. The two main concentrations of Tharu population, in Champaran and Naini Tal, have maintained separate ethnic organizations or caste associations. India’s approach to state building allows for cultural difference (given the size and complexity of India, and its democratic politics, it has little alternative) while also allowing for the more privileged and fortunate members of marginalized communities opportunities for advancement. In Nepal, in contrast, not only was cultural difference not recognized, the state refused to create avenues to proactively integrate into national public life historically marginalized groups and provide them avenues for advancement within the structures of the state. Although this is beginning to change under the pressure of the various ethnically based political movements that have emerged since 1990, and especially in the aftermath of the Maoist insurgency, the face of the state in Nepal does not truly reflect the cultural complexity of its population.

### THE THARU AND THE STATE IN NEPAL

The Tharu enjoyed a great deal of autonomy with the various states and principalities that existed in the hills prior to the unification of Nepal. Our insight into the nature of these relations owes a great deal to the *lal mohar* (royal edicts) collected by the Tharu historian Tej Narayan Panjiar, and published with commentaries (Krauskopff and Meyer 2000). What these documents, some of which date back three hundred years, show is the reliance that the hill states placed on local Tharu elites to manage the affairs of Tarai lands to yield revenue to the state, and the great degree of autonomy the Tharus appear to have enjoyed in their affairs. As revenue collectors for the hill states, Tharu elites enjoyed the political

support of their masters, but were apparently left to manage other aspects of their affairs more or less on their own terms.

There was relatively less impact on Tharu societies from outside groups for a number of reasons. Observers in the colonial period have remarked on the tendency of the Tharu to retreat in the face of competition from other, perhaps better-organized and more powerful ethnic groups. The Tarai was a last refuge, whose malarial properties discouraged other settlers from moving into the area. In addition, certain qualities were attributed to the Tharu by their neighbors, a fact remarked on by British writers. The British missionary Knowles for instance noted that Tharu women of post-marriageable age were believed by outsiders to be witches, with the power to turn a *desi* or a stranger into a wild animal or destroy him slowly by fever. Tharuhat, he adds, is a synonym for witch land (in Crooke 1896: 405). Fear of the Tharu and fear of malaria kept outsiders at bay in many areas of the Tarai, including Chitwan and the Naya Muluk, until the malaria eradication program of the 1950s made Tarai lands available to hill people for settlement. In the less malarial Eastern Tarai however, there was an influx of people from across the border, encouraged by the state, looking for land; in these areas the Tharu appeared to have played the role of a dominant, land-controlling caste.

The unification of Nepal led to a general erosion of the autonomy that the Tharu elites had enjoyed in the conduct of their affairs in the Tarai, as the state now sought to rationalize the revenue collecting system. The Tharu *jimidars* became agents of the state in a much more defined and centralized bureaucratic hierarchy, a process that accelerated during the Rana period, until, in the post-Rana period, they were made redundant with the institution of a modern bureaucratic apparatus. The Tharu elite went from being “little kings” to servants of the state and then to being quite marginal to the state’s administration of the Tarai.

### The modern state

The radical transformation in the fortunes of the Tharu begins in the 1950s. While the period of state consolidation during the nineteenth century had seen erosion in the autonomy of their position, Tharu communities in the Tarai had had the access to resources they needed for their social and cultural reproduction. The malaria eradication program set in motion a process that brought various Tharu communities into conflict with other ethnic groups as well as into contact with each other and with the new values of modernization and national integration as Nepalis enjoying—on paper at least—the same rights as all other Nepalis. It is not that these transformations had the same effect on all Tharus equally; rather, what is significant is their impact on Tharu elites.

The most important change of course was in the nature of the polity, which shifted from emphasizing the cultural difference and fundamental inequality that characterizes the subjects of the state and was the basis on which they were to be ruled, to an emphasis on their cultural similarity (“national

integration”) and their right to equal treatment. Thus the 1962 constitution of Nepal declares that all citizens have the right to equal protection of the laws, and asserts that there shall be no discrimination on grounds of religion, race, sex, caste, or tribe in application of the general laws and in respect of appointment to public service (Agrawal, 1980). This of course is the complete reverse of the legal principles enshrined in the *muluki ain* of 1854. These ideals are reaffirmed in the 1990 constitution:

it is expedient to promulgate and enforce this Constitution . . . by promoting amongst the people of Nepal the spirit of fraternity and the bond of unity on the basis of liberty and equality (Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal, 1991: 19)

The point is not that these admirable ideas were implemented, for by and large they were not; what is important is their impact on the consciousness of the rapidly emerging educated and middle classes in Nepal, including significant numbers of Tharu throughout the Tarai, and especially in the eastern districts. This is well exemplified in the position taken by elites in the Tharu Kalyankarini Sabha to the census of 1991. There, equipped with an acute understanding of the significance of labels and their enumeration, they organized to ensure that their ethnic brethren in villages across the Tarai identified themselves as “Tharu” to the census enumerators. The implication of this action is that the political significance of the concept “Tharu” was less evident to the ordinary Tharu, who had to be mobilized to give the politically necessary response. If the numbers in that census are anything to go by, this campaign had a very positive outcome.

The other changes that took place were the social, political, and economic transformation of the Tarai, which was made possible by the Malaria Eradication Project of the 1950s. There is no denying that the Malaria Eradication Project was a positive, desirable and necessary step in the development and political evolution of Nepal. Like all development projects however, the redistribution of land that took place as a result of it created both beneficiaries and victims, and many of those victims were people who had been living in these areas before the malaria eradication project was implemented. The impact on the Tharu was two fold. First, it closed off the land frontier and brought to an end the mobility of Tharu society, which derived from different kinds of tenurial systems and adjustments to the burden of taxation (see Guneratne 1996). Second, many Tharu lost land to better organized, literate and sometimes-unscrupulous immigrants from the hills, who acquired land cultivated by the Tharu in ways both legal and illegal (Guneratne 2002). Tharus throughout the Tarai but especially in the west came to share a common experience in respect of hill immigrants, in which high castes from the hills were blamed for the misfortunes that had overtaken Tharu society.

The second transformation concerns the development of

the Tarai. The opening of the Tarai brought in two significant forms of development that shaped the relationship of the Tharu to the state. The first of these was the establishment of a road network connecting the eastern and the western Tarai and the Tarai region to the hills. These roads facilitated the movement of hill people into the Tarai, but they also made it easier for Tharu in different districts to establish contact and interact with one another in ways they could not have contemplated earlier. This was further facilitated by the second important infrastructural innovation: the establishment of schools and the creation of a national curriculum based on the teaching of the Nepali language and an interpretation of Nepali history, culture and society based on the experience of the high caste *pahari* groups that dominate the Nepali state. Roads and schools gave the Tharu elite opportunities to engage one another but also a language—Nepali—through which such communication could be carried out. These schools became a crucible in which a new ethnic consciousness began to take shape.

The third transformation contributing to the delineating of a Tharu identity was the socializing of the Tharu elite into high caste cultural norms. For instance, the *kanyadan* became the normative marriage ceremony, which facilitated marriage across the boundaries of the different Tharu *jat*. In other words, through the process of Nepalization, the Tharu elite came to share cultural practices that facilitated the establishment of relations among them and made possible the emergence of a common Tharu identity. As I have argued elsewhere (Guneratne 2002), one of the bases of Tharu ethnic identity formation was the forging of kinship links among the families of elite Tharu drawn from every corner of the Tarai, which had not existed earlier. Prior to the malaria eradication program, different groups of Tharu, even those living in adjacent areas, had regarded each other as belonging to different *jat*, and intermarriage was prohibited. Now, not only have these prohibitions fallen by the wayside with the emergence of a Tharu ethnic consciousness, but the socializing of the elite into the national culture also gives them a shared cultural idiom through which to communicate. Thus, infrastructural changes have themselves helped to shape a new symbolic framework in which people act and give meaning to their world. The problem of intermarriage in the absence of such a shared cultural idiom is succinctly summed up in the words of a Tharu from Chitwan (note that “language” here is also a metonym for culture in general):

It's better to marry within your district. Chaudharys of other districts speak somewhat differently. So one would need to make some changes in the way one speaks. This will be a little difficult for one's daughter. But if you marry her off within your own district, there is no language problem.

The malaria eradication program brought large numbers of hill people to settle in the Tarai, turning the Tharu who had

lived there before they arrived into disadvantaged minorities. The relations between Tharu and hill settlers appear to differ qualitatively from the relations between Tharu and immigrants into the Tarai from the border districts of India in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the latter case, although these relations have not, to my knowledge, been studied in any detail, there is some evidence to suggest that the Tharu often occupied a position of power vis-à-vis the newcomers. The Tharu, or at least their elites, served the hill states as revenue functionaries, and thus were in a position of authority from the outset, a fact indicated in the Panjiar documents (Krauskopff and Meyer 2000) and the recollections of Ramanand Singh (Guneratne 2002: 35). The position however was very different with regard to the hill immigrants in the post-Rana state. The impact of this immigration was most strongly felt in the western half of the Tarai, especially in the Far West and in the Inner Tarai valleys, and here the Tharu were almost invariably on the losing side. At worst, they lost land and ended up as bonded labor; at best, local elites became junior partners in political processes dominated by high-caste immigrants.

Chitwan exemplifies a situation where the immigration of hill people have reduced the Tharu to a small minority, led to the loss of Tharu land—but without the extreme effects, such as *kamaiya* labor, found in the western Tarai—and made Tharus the junior partners in the political affairs of every major political party. One major difference between Chitwan and some of the districts to the west is that although many Tharus have lost land in the aftermath of the malaria eradication program, the district lacks the landlords and large estates dominated by high castes that characterize the western Tarai districts. Relations between Tharus and Brahmins in Chitwan are less imbued with the tension and hostility that I noticed in Dang in the early 1990s, and this is probably due to the absence of a system of bonded labor delineated along ethnic lines, the presence of large (by local standards) Tharu landowners in almost every village in the heavily Tharu-populated eastern part of the district, and the fact that most households control some land, however inadequate. The peculiar circumstances of Chitwan during Rana times—first, its position as a buffer between Nepal and the British, and subsequently its status as a hunting preserve for the Ranas—meant that there was no significant proportion of its land under *birta* tenure. While there does not appear to be much social interaction among ordinary Brahmin and Tharu villagers, each group keeping more or less to itself, there is a great deal more among the elites, who may have political ties by working together in the same political parties and who invite each other to ritual occasions and life cycle rites.

Even the elite, however, which has the closest ties—personal, ritual, and political—to Brahmin society, views it with reserve. It is the Brahmin *qua* Brahmin who is singled out for opprobrium, Chhetris and Newars somewhat less so (although Chhetri tends to be a category lumped together with Brahmin as one undifferentiated whole). Gurungs,

Magars, Tamangs and Tarai ethnic groups are not marked in rural Chitwan in the way the first three mentioned ethnic groups are. It is at the hands of Brahmins, and to a lesser extent, of Chhetris and Newars, that Tharus have lost land and have felt themselves to be cheated and exploited. This has been a cause of resentment among Tharus throughout the Tarai, wherever they have been brought into contact with large numbers of hill settlers.

These factors have led many Tharus to interpret their experiences in a particular way. The state policies referred to above—malaria eradication, the development of communications, the creation of a national system of education, the incorporation of peripheral regions into a national economy which in turn is tightly integrated into the regional and ultimately the global economy, and the creation of a modern bureaucracy (modern in its form, although not necessarily in the value system of its cadre)—is part and parcel of contemporary state building. The political buzzword in Nepal in the *panchayat* era was national integration and certain kinds of integration—economic and administrative—did in fact take place. But, as the case of the Tharu indicates, the creation of a national identity proved to be a much more complex task. It is clear that from the perspective of the government, national integration meant the subsuming of ethnic particularities in a greater, “Nepali” whole. But the practice of the state (or of its agents) served more to remind those groups not at the center of power of their marginality and otherness and thus reinforce an emerging sense of the importance of ethnic distinctiveness.

Two things should be remembered here. The first is that the official ideology and rhetoric of the modernizing state promises one thing even as it delivers another. What it promises, through documents such as the constitution, through public rhetoric but also through such rituals as the vote, is the putative political equality of all Nepal's people. But what is more important are not these promises but the impact of these ideas on the leaders and intellectuals of the various communities. For most of Nepal's impoverished villagers, engaged in the daily hardscrabble of existence, these promises may not have meant much, but they had a much greater impact on the thinking of those with some education who, in the absence of a private sector of any importance, looked to the state for advancement. But for many of them such advancement was not forthcoming; playing by the rules—passing the SLC, going to college—did not lead to employment in the state sector, in which the game of patronage politics is played out, and this was interpreted by many Tharu as discrimination against them.

### **The *kamaiya* problem and the Maoist insurgency**

Given the fundamental historical inequality among the different ethnic groups of Nepal, which was grounded in and structured by the law of the state until 1963, one cannot treat as equal people who are not in fact equal. Structural inequality cannot be eliminated by simple fiat; the structure

itself must be disassembled and the relations among the various components of society reconstituted. In a primarily agrarian society, this would require a comprehensive agrarian reform, which Nepal has hitherto avoided. This problem is highlighted in the state's response to the *kamaiya* problem, arguably one of the most salient issues for western Tharu in the 1990s, which exemplified this structural inequality in an extreme form. A significant proportion of Tharu labor in the western Tarai was bonded to the service of mostly high-caste landlords (although some Tharu landlords also use bonded labor), a state of affairs that developed in the post-Rana period with origins in pre-existing systems of labor relations (Guneratne 2002: 96-107; Krauskopff 2008: 216-228; Rankin 1999). Bonded labor is not of course confined to either the Tharu or the Western Tarai, but it is among the Tharu and in the Western Tarai that the movement to eliminate this form of labor exploitation received its strongest expression.

That it became a salient issue was due to the initiative of young men from Dang, who founded the NGO known as Backward Society Education (BASE) and struggled for many years, often at great personal risk to themselves, to bring the system to an end (Guneratne 2002; Krauskopff 2008). Their struggle was not simply against the existing structures of power in rural western Nepal, but against bureaucratic indifference and the hostility of the state apparatus. Despite the presence of Tharu landlords who controlled *kamaiya*, the *kamaiya* issue was understood by Tharu activists in Dang in the early 1990s as a problem that Tharus had with high caste immigrants from the hills. A class issue had taken on a distinct ethnic tinge, and the government's lack of interest in the issue could only be understood as support for landlords, many of whom were important local members of national political parties or local employees of the state bureaucracy. While the government's hand on the *kamaiya* issue was eventually forced by NGO activists and mass demonstrations, the state gave in with poor grace, and took no steps to provide either land or livelihood to the *kamaiya* following their emancipation. One commentator describes the process of *kamaiya* emancipation as "haphazard, inhuman and careless" (Chhetri 2005:41).

One last factor shaping Tharu identity in the present—at least as far as the Western Tarai is concerned—must be mentioned. That is the Maoist Insurgency or People's War (1996-2006), which took the lives of 1200 Tharu in Bardiya,<sup>3</sup> and hundreds more in other Tarai districts. If the estimate of 14,000 dead in the decade-long conflict is accurate, the Tharu as an ethnic group bore a disproportionately high share of the human cost of the war—perhaps ten percent of the fatalities. According to the UN-OHCHR,

Local people and Tharu and non-Tharu civil society representatives repeatedly stated to OHCHR that the distinction between the

CPN-M insurgency and ongoing Tharu and land rights movements became blurred for many high-caste landowners. The Tharu population was increasingly associated with the CPN-M and the view that "all Tharus are Maoists" became common among the landowning class. Furthermore, through the links of kinship and caste between these landowners and members of the high-caste groups of hill origin that dominated State institutions, this became the prevailing mentality of local authorities and security forces alike. In this context, members of the Tharu and other marginalised groups claiming their rights vis a vis landowners or State authorities were at increasing risk of being labeled as Maoists and insurgents (UN-OHCHR 2008: 19-20).

Many Tharu in the western districts were recruited by the Maoists (and some of them were very likely liberated *kamaiya* left destitute to their own devices). Many others, like ordinary villagers throughout Nepal during this period, were coerced into helping them, but the military and police came to see all Tharu as Maoists and carried out a campaign of repression, rape, torture and extra judicial killings against the Tharu population. The most intense period of violence was during 2002. According to the UN, Tharu accounted "for over 85% (135) of the persons disappeared by State authorities in cases documented by OHCHR" (UN-OHCHR 2008: 6). Tharu organizations and leaders were also targeted by the Maoists, who saw in Backward Society Education (BASE) a serious rival which could claim the loyalty of most of the Tharu population of the Western Tarai districts and which was effectively organized on the ground. A number of Tharu leaders were assassinated and on a number of occasions, Maoists destroyed BASE infrastructure, including the BASE training center in Chakhaura village in Dang, one of the original villages in which BASE began.

The militancy demonstrated by the Tharu and the expansion of their Tarai-wide organizing, most recently in the establishment of a federation of Tharu NGOs (Tharu Indigenous NGO federation, with Dilli Chaudhary of BASE as its general secretary) has its roots in this intense experience of violence. But it must be noted that the Tharu have demonstrated over the years an ability to organize nationally right down to the village level, first in the organization of the Tharu Kalyankarini Sabha, and then, more effectively perhaps in terms of mobilizing popular support, in the organization of BASE in the five western Tarai districts. The accommodationist approach of the Tharu Kalyankarini Sabha towards the state has been replaced by a much more confrontationalist and militant approach by the Tharu leadership (of which BASE and the Sabha are but two, albeit important, components), exemplified in the *bandhs* of 2009 against the Maoist government's attempt to categorize the Tharu as Madhesi. The new politics of the Tharu, inspired by the provisions of the International Labor Organization's convention 169 on the

3. See United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN-OHCHR) (2008), for documentation of atrocities committed on Tharu in Bardiya district.

rights of indigenous people, seeks a federal province of their own, proportional representation in every sphere of the state based on caste/ethnicity in which the Tharu will be treated as a separate ethnic group and not subsumed under a broader category such as *madhesi* or *janajati*, the appointment of Tharu to major state offices in the area of Tharuhath (which is coterminous with the Tarai) and the rehabilitation of the *kamaiyas*. These are the main demands of the newly established Tharu Indigenous NGO Federation.<sup>4</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The official culture of the Nepali state until quite recently was based, as I pointed out earlier, on the culture of the dominant ethnic groups. In some respects, this was inevitable; it is the language (or dialect) and culture of the elites in society that achieve prestige and status, and, where the state is concerned, becomes the basis around which national identities are usually organized. For Nepal, it was also one of the most politically effective ways to mark the country's autonomous identity vis-à-vis India. Thus, the culture and religion of the dominant ethnic groups was congruent with that officially espoused and promoted by the state. The domination of Nepali society by high castes thus had three bases of support: the economic, political and cultural, each reinforcing the others. In pre-modern Nepal, this fact was of less consequence politically; there was no proactive attempt on the part of the state to shape a common culture or national identity.

It is probably uncontroversial to argue that there was no official national culture as such in the Rana state and its predecessors, even though the cultural assumptions of the elites who controlled the state informed their approach to matters of governance. Jang Bahadur's *muluki ain* is very much of an elite document elucidating an elite point of view, but its point was to emphasize the difference between rulers and ruled, to stress the various things that the different components of the Nepali population did not share. State-building in modern Nepal however is predicated on the assumption that a state must have a national culture and a national identity, and this is pursued through both formal legislative enactments—such as the legal status of Nepal as a Hindu state, in force until 2006—and through more indirect means, such as a national system of education in which instruction is carried out in the national language and through which a national ideology can be imparted. The state's project had been, to paraphrase Eugen Weber, to turn peasants into Nepalis, but without much commitment to liberty, equality or fraternity. The difference between the Rana state and its successor was that for the first, the organization of the population and its relation to the state was predicated on the fact of cultural difference, which was stressed; for its successor, this relationship was based on a wish for cultural similarity on the state's terms and the rejection of those politically salient aspects of cultural

difference, such as ethnicity and language.

And yet modern Nepal's attempts to create a national identity around the symbols meaningful to those elites at the center of national power have not borne much fruit, as political events in Nepal over the last dozen years or so demonstrate. The rise of both the *janajati* and *madhesi* movement and the Maoist insurgency, as well as social movements to press for Dalit demands, speaks to a profound alienation from both the structure and the symbols of the Nepali state. Dev Raj Dahal has commented that "the movements of ethnic groups and nationalities tend to challenge the self-referential rationality of the unitary Hindu state and argue for its federalization and secularization" and he quotes Mario Diani to this effect: "What is challenged is not only the uneven distribution of power and/or economic goods, but socially shared meanings as well, that is the ways of defining and interpreting reality" (Dahal, n.d.; Diani 2000: 163). The removal of the heavy handed repression of ethnic identities that occurred during the *panchayat* period has led to the efflorescence of the politicized ethnic identities that were waiting in the wings for their moment on the national stage, and the case of the Tharu, who have the oldest registered ethnic association in Nepal, is a good example of this.

Nepal failed in the post-Rana period to come to terms with its feudal history and its history of fundamental inequality among ethnic groups and transform those conditions in democratic ways. Consequently, it seems they are likely to be transformed in undemocratic ways, and one sort of ethnic repression might well be replaced by another. The ugly underside of ethnic federalism is ethnic cleansing, and there are reports that this is already happening in some parts of the Tarai—although the Tharu are not involved (see Miklian 2008: 8; Tiwari 2007). The Rana state and the states that preceded it acknowledged and legitimized the reality of status inequality among ethnic groups; that, it might be argued, was a fundamental aspect of their purpose. The Rana state enshrined that inequality in the legal code of 1854, and the post-Rana state, in an admirable acknowledgement of democratic ideas, abolished formal recognition of it. In *panchayat* Nepal, dependent both on the ideology of modernization and on the fiscal support of the outside world, it was necessary that all ethnic groups should be granted formal equality, whatever the social reality. The failure to make that promise meaningful accounts in large part for the current state of affairs, and certainly for the resonance of ethnic issues in what would otherwise be a class struggle. Krauskopff has pointed out that the purely class (or economic) aspects have been pushed aside by ethnic demands (Krauskopff 2008: 241). That ethnicity is bound up with class is a fact of Nepali life that the CPN-Maoist has been able to successfully exploit in its quest for power, but whether it can control or channel the ethnic demands it has helped to unleash is another matter altogether. Events in the Tarai of the last four years suggest that it cannot. Contrary to the views of that highly placed Nepali official over twenty years ago, the Tharu (and the Madhesi) are Nepali and

4. See the Federation's website at <http://www.tharufed.org.np>

not Indian, but they seek to be Nepali on their own terms, not those historically imposed on them by the state.

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