Tharus and Pahariyas in Chitawan: some observations concerning the question of multiethnity of Nepal

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Some Observations Concerning the Question
of Multiethnicity in Nepal

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In a multiethnic country like Nepal cultural assimilation and syncretism as well as persistence can especially be observed in those places where different ethnic groups collide together or co-exist. Taking Citawan as an example of the changing process induced by an enormous immigration is traced back, by reporting about the development of the region from the «fever hell» to the so-called «melting pot of Nepal». To elucidate what has resisted as an aggregate in this «melting pot» the Tharu and Pahāriya house exposition concept as well as their style of agriculture, are compared. The last section of this contribution focusses on the interethnic notions and clichés, so an impression can be conveyed of how the varied groups react to the multiethnic constellation.

CITAWAN: FROM THE «FEVER HELL»
TO THE «MELTING POT» OF NEPAL

Citawan, the largest of the broad valleys north of the Curiyā Range was only sparsely populated up until the middle of this century. The forested, undeveloped Curiyā Range in the South and the steep southern flanks of the Māhābhrat Range in the North made access difficult (fig. 1). Riverine forests and grasslands were, in addition, breeding grounds for malarial mosquitoes (Haffner, 1979, p. 51 ff.). During the period of Nepal’s policy of limiting foreign influence (1816-1950) the interests of the government were consciously geared to preserving this protective zone of forests and swamps, all the more so for its constituting one of the best territories for hunting big game.
In his travel report of the year 1939 Filchner characterized Citawan as the «fever hell of Nepal», where, nevertheless, human beings and animals are living, but «they are starving apparently between life and death» (1951, p. 26, transl.). In fact, 71% of the children in Citawan were infected with malaria up to as recently as 1956 (Journal of the Medical Association, 1966, p. 160). The autochthonous inhabitants of Citawan, the majority of whom are Tharus, if they had survived malaria as child, were on the whole immune to a renewed infection for the rest of their lives. Today they maintain that the strangers who occasionally came to Citawan died in far greater numbers than the locals – and this sounds quite plausible.

At the beginning of Rāma-uthe the jimidārī-system (Regmi, 1976, p. 104 ff.; 1978) was introduced in Citawan; it was based, however, mainly on the traditional Tharu hierarchy. It seems that the Tharus lived relatively undisturbed despite of the intervention of the State in this peripheral region and disposed of sufficient arable land and forest. Concerning the whole Rāma-
Fig. 2. – Mother Tongue of the population in Citawan District (1981) in % (Nepal District Profile, 1987, p. 232).

Fig. 3. – The increase of Population in Nepal and the Citawan District (1920-1981).
time not one single Tharu uttered a really negative word in all the talks we had. On the contrary, they tended to glorify the past: formerly — satjugi — everything had been better!

In 1953 the Nepalese government started an experiment of resettling people from the mountains in Citawan and at the same time developing the region (Elder et al., 1976, p. 11ff.). However, only after the first results of the malaria eradication programme starting in 1954, did the immigrants come in large numbers. Either land was allotted to them or they encroached on new land as squatters. Beside these rather poor immigrants a group of wealthy people, mainly Chetris and Brahmins, managed to get large tracts of land using it in a feudal-capitalist manner (Haffner, 1979, p. 65).

The Nepali-speakers form the majority of Citawans population today with more than 70 % (fig. 2). Tharu as mother tongue is only spoken by the minority of 12 %. Figure 2 also shows the diversity of languages common in today's Citawan. The Tharus subsume the immigrants from the mountains, the Bahun and Chetris, Tamangs, Gurungs, Magars and Cepangs, under the name « Paharinya ». The Newars are explicitly mentioned.

We can trace the numerical development of Citawan's population back as far as 1920 (fig. 3). For the period 1920 to 1941 the mean annual growth rate amounted to only 1.2 %. In the following years the rate increased considerably, especially in the period 1961 to 1971. The very high mean annual growth rate of 10.5 % was brought about by the immigration but also by the increase in life expectancy. From 1971 to 1981 the mean annual growth rate slowed down to 3.5 %, but it is still higher than Nepal's average as a whole. The population of Citawan has increased thirteenthfold since 1920, in Nepal only — and that's also high — threefold!

To protect the rich fauna of Citawan which became more and more endangered by this development, the Royal Citawan National Park was established in 1973, an area of c. 1,000 sq.km is under protection today. Structurally the region is well developed. Since the end of the 70s the main junction from Kathmandu to India goes through the Narayani and Rapti Valley, many bazar-settlements came into being, the most important one is Narayanaghat.

In fact, Citawan has developed in less than a half century from a sparsely populated periphery to an attractive multiethnical center. With the designation « melting pot », however, which is readily used in Nepal, one tends to associate « assimilating ». Two examples focusing on the house exposition concept and the style of agriculture illustrate what has assimilated and what has persisted within the recently arisen multiethnical society of Citawan.

THE THARU AND PAHARIYA HOUSE EXPOSITION CONCEPT

Tharus live even today in compact villages — often exclusively within their group. It is striking that the long side of their dwelling-houses is orien-
tated to the North-South direction (fig. 4, 5 et 6). Krauskopff (1987, p. 18f.) and McDonough (1984) are describing the same phenomena for the Tharu house in Dang Valley. In the conception of the Citawan Tharus – only in this so-called rasiya ghar can the kuldeutā feel comfortable and be well-disposed to the inhabitants (fig. 7). In an East-West exposed house, in a surbed ghar, where the sun would shine on its long side, the deity would feel uncomfortably hot – like the people, too. Therefore the windows are very small, as well, during daytime inside the house it is indeed cool and dark. Another idea behind the Tharu house exposition concept is: « The head of the earth is in the North. » The house entrance is situated in the Eastern house wall directed towards the shrine of the village deity Baram Bābā. His shrine is again rasiya orientated (fig. 8).

The most positive space inside the house is consequently situated in the North-East. Here the kuldeutā is sheltered, here is the kitchen with the halfmoon-shaped fireplace again opened towards the East. Inside the house its inhabitants conform to rules of exposition, too, when placing their bedding. Because the sun has no influence in the night one prefers to sleep in the East-West direction. The feet should never face the East, towards the Baram-thān. The rasiya direction is reserved for the deceased when laid out inside the house.

The Pahāriyas live in scattered settlements, the particular ethnic groups tend to live in the neighbourhood with members of their own group. They have no rules for the house construction concerning the cardinal points. In their mountainous native place the house orientation was determined by the topographical situation. But as a rule the buildings of one family or within a scattered settlement must be situated in one line, because « intersecting ridge beams are unfavourable for the house deity and have a bad influence on the family’s welfare » (fig. 4-5, fig. 9).

In the house construction techniques, in the selection of material and in the house form itself many ethnospecific differences can also be observed. The type of settlement and the house exposition concept of both groups are preserved in their traditional fashion, the Tharu house exposition concept is even maintained in modern brick buildings. Tharu and Pahāriya style is clearly differentiated and named – the traditional house exposition concept has resisted as an aggregate in the « melting pot ».

**THE THARU AND PAHĀRIYA AGRICULTURE**

The Pahāriyas and Tharus both had to develop a new style of agriculture. The mountain farmers had to adapt their way of farming to the lowland conditions, the autochthonous population had to adapt to a much more intensive agriculture with less arable land and to manage without large tracts of the forest and the grasslands.
Fig. 4 et 5. - Forms of settlements in Citiwan. A small linear Pahariya hamlet and a compact Tharu village with North-South orientated dwelling houses (Khaarani Paicayat).
Fig. 6. – (Schneider, Nov. 1983): Aerial photo of the villages of the Padampur-Pañcāyat. Tharus live in compact villages with North-South orientated dwelling-houses, Pahāriyas in scattered linear settlements.

Fig. 7. – (May 1986): Tharu houses in Pachasī.
Fig. 8. – (Oct. 1986): The North-South - rasiya - orientated shrine of Baram Baba is located in the East of the village Dhijauli.

Fig. 9. – (Nov. 1987): Pahariya house in the Pachauli-Pañcayat. As a rule the buildings within a hamlet should be situated in one line.
Until the 1950s the Tharu's economy was based on sari khei, a short fallow shifting cultivation system, supplemented by collecting wild plants and fishing (Müller-Böker, 1991a and b). After the prohibition of shifting cultivation following the allocation of land-titles, the Tharus had to change to a permanent farming thus necessitating regular manuring\(^{10}\). In the traditional Tharu agriculture cattle-rearing on forest pasture played an important role. Some of the Tharu landlords had sometimes more than 25 pairs of oxen. Above all since the National Park was established, pastures are rare; in some areas the number of cattle was reduced by 80%, the animals starved to death!\(^{11}\). The lack of dung had the quick result that more and more Tharu farmers have to use the costly and less effective mineral fertilizer. There is also a lack of working-animals, during the peak working time it's often necessary to rent tractors. The cattle of the Tharu farmers graze on very degraded grasslands or on fallow fields, they are extremely badly fed (fig. 10-11). Only the working-animals are fed occasionally with straw – «they had learned this from the mountain people», the Tharus say.

When requested to compare their way of agriculture with that of the Pahāriyas, they admit: «We are the worse farmers, we are too lazy and wait for god to help us!» It's a matter of fact that the Pahāriyas, manage their farms more successfully. They obtain higher yields, because they have a well-devised crop-rotation, they weed the fields more often, protect them against the wild animals and not least of all they attend to good irrigation and manuring. More of natural manure is available, because Pahāriyas don't use dung for the house construction and as fuel as the Tharus do and above all, because they keep the cattle mainly in the stable and feed them. Cows are also kept for milk, unlike in Tharu farms. Collecting fodder by grasscutting and lopping, an activity in which Pahāriya women invest plenty of their time (fig. 12), is something exotic for the Tharus. They say: «We used to have plenty of pasture land, we never had to work hard to get our animals fed. Nowadays we don't go in the forest for collecting fodder, because we are not allowed and we are frightened.»

The Pahāriyas have kept their complicated techniques of hill agriculture and continued to develop them under the more favourable conditions of the lowland. The Tharus – and here the landlords are the outliers – managed only by a certain extent to adapt their economy to the changed conditions in Citawan. They are less successful than the immigrants, although they should be much more familiar with their natural environment. The very intensive agriculture typical of many parts of Nepal is not found among the Tharus, the fishing and collecting tradition and the extensive cattle-breeding still influence their economic thinking.

«Tharus spend hours and hours catching a hand of small fishes, thereby forget» so the Pahāriyas say, «to cultivate their fields». This statement approaches the question of the common interethnical clichés and notions.
Fig. 10. – (Oct. 1987): The cow herd of Sultana is grazing on very degraded grassland.

Fig. 11. – (Oct. 1986): Oxen are used for the second threshing of rice.
INTERETHNICAL CLICHÉS AND NOTIONS

Sterotypes, the judgements about « the others », are formalized valuations, reflecting on the quality of co-existence (Allport, 1971 [1954], p. 201; Campbell, 1967; Schweizer, 1980, p. 17ff.). The collection of interethnical clichés, common among Tharus and Pahāriyas, is the result of many individual talks and informal discussions involving both groups. The discussions usually followed the same pattern: the Pahāriyas were talking while the Tharus were silent and nodded. When I was alone with the Tharus they tended to make some bitter remarks.

Let’s start with the nicknames or insults: Pahāriyas call the Tharus: « Tharu goru » (= ox), gholiki khañe māńche (= snail eater) and ban māńche (= people from the forest). To quote a Nepali development expert using the word « wildlife » for Tharus follows on naturally from this. All these insults have the same message: Tharus are backward, uncouth, uneducated and uncivilized.

Tharus, in turn, when asked about their insults for the Pahāriyas, replied: Pahāriya nahariya (= penis), garib cusai bațai (= blood suckers of the poor) and bhaisi khañe Pahāriya (= buffalo eater) — to counteract the snails. Somebody said a remarkable thing in this connection: « We use insults for them, even though we are sad, because they look down on us. »

Fig. 12. — (Oct. 1986): Grass is brought by Pahāriyas from the other side of the Rapti, from Rhino grazing grounds.
The Tharus feel pained by the confrontation with the «potent» Pahāriya
mahāriya. They regard the garib cusa barai Pahāriya as the root of all evil
and claim that since this mountain people has been in Citawan, they have
taken large tracts of Tharu land, new they aim to take over more land and
to deprive the Tharus of their independence. The general consensus – even
among the wealthy Tharu landlords – is: «The Pahāriya are doing much
better than we are!» The Tharus believe as if they are not on an equal
footing with the Pahāriyas at all. They are convinced the Pahāriyas are more
capable and more hard working. I kept hearing sentences like: «Tharus only
know how to sell land, not how to buy it.» «Pahāriyas know how to deal
with the soldiers and the forest wardens» – relating to stealing wood.

The Hindu conception is adopted by the Tharus as an unattainable ideal.
It can be observed that they are giving up certain things – like keeping pigs
- that are considered «impure», or that they are introducing typical Hindu
pūjā (Satyanārāyan pūjā) and engaging more and more Pahāriya Brahmins
for certain rituals – although they don’t really like the latter and regard them
as greedy. Nevertheless they admit they can never correspond to the Hindu
ideal – and I suspect they don’t want to, either. For example the men justify
themselves by saying their wives unfortunately can’t keep all the rules with
food preparation although they would like to, because they have to work too
hard. Or they complain that the Tharunis often have sexual contacts with
other men (this implies that they do likewise), that means the Tharunis are
far removed from the ideal image of a good Hindu wife.

The ‘Tharus’ attitude towards the Bahun and Chetris as the repre-
sentatives of Hinduism is thus extremely ambivalent. On the one hand they
are collectively regarded as bloodsuckers on the other hand they are collec-
tively idealized as the more pure, the more competent people, that can cope
better with a modern way of life. The intra-ethnic hierarchies and economic
differences are completely ignored. On the one hand the whole Tharu group
tries to climb up the ladder in the Hindu hierarchy, on the other hand, how-
ever, they do enjoy the pleasant sides of their life which is in many respects
less regulated – and this way of life starts from babyhood. This ambivalence
between Tharu identity and Hindu concept entail some conflicts in everyday
life, stirred up by Brahmins, who try to hinduize and thus to increase their
number of clients.

In this connection an incident from Saurahā:

A son of the mahato had planned to make a new house. He asked one local
panḍit to inspect the piece of land. Pandit Ji stated that the land was appro-
priate to build a house, provided it would be in an East-West direction. As
you remember: the Tharu only consider a North-South directed house as
inhabitable. The Tharu family voiced their reservations about living in a
surbad house, as they wanted to avoid angering the kuldevat and living in
internal discord. The panḍit refused to change his mind for several days.
After the family’s urgent request «to do something», to enable them to build
a rasiya ghar on this piece of land, he performed a pūjā, which cost the
family a good milk cow.
In this case the Tharu family could preserve their cultural identity, but by accepting the Brahmans’ competence they also bowed to foreign values.

The statute of the Tharu Welfare Community of Citawan District founded in 1985 by the Citawan Pañcāyat Community on the concept of the so-called «organizations», clarifies the values concerning the Tharu question on the political level:

«This organization aims to look after the welfare of the natives, to eradicate illiteracy, lack of education, useless and destructive traditions and mistakes, that are ingrained in the traditional way of life and to improve the economic situation and education. The Tharus have to be woken up, because they have been backward from generation to generation. For they, too, are needed to build up the country» (transl.)

Despite these sentences it’s to be hoped that all Tharus will be able to survive economically in the melting pot of Nepal and to weigh up with self-confidence, what they want to learn and accept from their new neighbours and how much of their own culture they want to preserve.

Notes

1. The main theme of the DFG Nepal research programme (1980-1990): «Small and Great tradition» pointed to this question.
2. Apart from the Tharus, also Darai, Bote and Danuwār consider themselves as members of the autochthonous population of Citawan. Between these groups marriage relations are rare, but the everyday social life seems to run smoothly and without hierarchical differentiations. The landless Musahar – following Bista (1976, p. 131) a subgroup of the Bote – are considered as an impure group. Next to the villages Kāmis have lived and worked as blacksmiths for long time, regarded by the Tharus and the fishing groups as impure.
3. The Tharus characterize malaria, the aula-k jār, as the fever which infected the mountain people severely when coming to Citawan. They themselves were adapted to the gas, arisen in the forest of rotten leaves and underwood, which causes aul.
4. Individuals were employed by the government to collect land and other taxes at the village level. As tax-collectors the local maharos and caudharis were appointed, strangers applied for a jirāyat only seldom – except a few Bāhun and Chetris landlords.
5. Sporadic contacts to other ethnic groups resulted from exchange and trade relations. During the dry season mainly Newar traders offered their goods at seasonal markets, other groups, like the Cēpāngs – moving from village to village – exchanged cikarti («butter») and bark for rice and oilseeds. Direct contacts to the Rāpās and their large number of attendants existed because of the big game huntings.
6. The Nepal Eradication Organization aimed at the eradication of the potentially infectious Anopheles by the use of insecticides. Since 1964 Citawan is largely free of malaria, but all of the formerly contamined areas are again at risk of malaria.
7. The people of the South (Tera) are called Dakhināna.
8. In 1953 only 19 people were sharing one sq.km, today they are about 120.
9. The Bāhuns and Chetris regard a pāc balo ghar (five beamed house) as exceedingly unfavourable – unlike the Tharus; only the tin balo ghar (three beamed house) is built (and less timber is needed). The walls of the Tharu houses are plastered with a mixture of cowdung and mātto (soil), the Pahariya-houses only with mātto. Bāhun and Chetris use rāto mātto (red soil) – brought from far away – for painting their houses, whereas the Tharunis decorate the house walls with paintings of white colour. The grass roofs are also different from each other:
the Tharu grass roof is first of all thinner and every year before rainy season starts, a new layer is put on; only after a few years is the whole grass layer removed. The Pahariya-chāna is much thicker right from the beginning, but is changed completely after 4 to 5 years.

10. Only the actually cultivated fields were regarded as ownership. Because many Tharus believed land is available in plenty and a registration of land means paying taxes, it was easy for many new settlers to get their land. The registration of the land also meant that land lost by riverbed changing or flooding has gone for ever.

11. The Padampur Pañcāyati had the greatest loss. Before the National Park was established there was an average livestock per household of ca. 30-35 cattle, nowadays only of 5,5 (data of three investigated villages).

12. With the help of the «contrasting method of interview » (cf. Fischer, 1985, p. 34; Mischnic, 1988, p. 90) various information about different topics were obtained.

13. Some of the rules and regulations of the Tharu Welfare Community:

- Prohibition of children's marriage, of marriages between partners of great age difference and of polygamy (polygyny)
- Reduction of the expenses of family ceremonies (marriage, funeral), total abandonment of costly rituals
- Eradication of traditions and superstition by advertisement and lectures
- Reservation of one place in every district campus for a Tharu student
- Protection of Tharu culture (songs, tales, handicraft)
- Transcription of the language.

Bibliography

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