Tharus and Pahariyas in Chitawan: observations on the multi-ethnic constellation in southern Nepal

Müller-Böker, U
The Culture Area Karakorum Scientific Studies series presents, in English or German, selected results of research being conducted in the high mountain regions of the Karakorum, Hindukush, and the Himalayas, in Pakistan and in the adjoining countries. The interdisciplinary approach involving cultural and environmental sciences offers the opportunity to arrive at a deeper understanding of the relationship between the high mountain environment, man and culture as well as on the changes occurring in the past and present.
Contents

Foreword ix

Dynamics of Highland-Lowland Interaction – Past and Present

Dynamics of Highland-Lowland Interaction in Northern Pakistan since the 19th Century
Imrtraud Stellrecht 3

Food Security and Vulnerability to Food Crises in the Northern Areas of Pakistan
Christoph Dittrich 23

Agrarian Transformation in Northern Pakistan and the Political Economy of Highland-Lowland Interaction
Benno Pilardeaux 43

Historical Relations between Northeastern Nepal and its Indian and Nepalese Foreland, Exemplified by Migration from the Solu-Khumbu District
Thomas Hoffmann 59

Trade and Trading Villages between Tibet and the Lowlands: The Districts of Mustang and Kaski
Rainer Graafen 71

The Current State of Research on Historical Development Processes in the Area of Mustang/Lo: Questions Concerning the Crystallization, Decline and Foundation of States and Settlements
Christian G. Seeber 81
Identity Formation in the Context of Change

Discourse and Action: Unequivocalness and Ambivalence in Identifications
Martin Sökefeld 101

Central Goods and Ethno-Linguistic Groups in the Bazaars of Northern Pakistan: An Example of Central Place Theory Modifications in Mountainous Environments
Andreas Dittmann 119

History as a Social Practice: An Example from Northern Pakistan
Johannes H. Löhr 135

Tharus and Pahariyas in Chitawan: Observations on the Multi-Ethnic Constellation in Southern Nepal
Ulrike Müller-Böker 157

Migration and the Danger of Loss: Some Aspects of Cultural Identity in Kumaon/Indian Himalaya
Monika Krengel 171

Transregional Buddhist Organizations in Indian Himalaya
Thierry Dodin 189

From Mountain Refuge to "Model Area": Transformation of Shi’i Communities in Northern Pakistan
Andreas Rieck 215

Environmental Resources – Utilization and Present Exploitation

Resource Management in Rupal Valley, Northern Pakistan: The Utilization of Forests and Pastures in the Nanga Parbat Area
Jürgen Clemens and Marcus Nüsger 235

Climatic Gradients in the Karakorum and their Effects on the Natural Vegetation
Thomas Cramer 265

Ecological Change as a Consequence of Recent Road Building: The Case of the High Altitude Forests of the Karakorum
Udo Schickhoff 277

Stand Structure as an Indicator of Forest Change Due to Human Impact: A Methodological Contribution with Examples from Nepal and Northern Thailand
Dietrich Schmidt-Vogt 287

Environment under Pressure – Strategies in the Context of Change

Sociological Observations on "Community Forestry" in Nepal
Klaus Seeland 305

Social Struggle and Conflict of Interests in the Garhwal Forest
Antje Linkenbach 325

Susanne von der Heide 345
Tharus and Pahariyas in Chitawan: Observations on the Multi-Ethnic Constellation in Southern Nepal

Ulrike Müller-Böker

1. Introduction

Chitawan is often referred to as the "melting pot" of Nepal. An official analysis of language statistics (HMG 1993) has shown that a large number of different ethnic groups live in this southern district of Nepal, this being a rather recent development. Until the mid-20th century, the largest of the synclinal depressions in the Siwalik Range was sparsely populated. The forested, undeveloped Chitawan was a place of refuge for a group of Tharus who were probably expelled from India.¹

While talking to the Tharus about their topical situation, the following comment is inevitably made: "Satjugi – formerly everything used to be better! Since these Pahariyas [pahar = hill, mountain] have come to Chitawan, we have been doing badly!" Such statements not only point to the apparently discordant multi-ethnic constellation in Chitawan, they also provide evidence of ethnicity – a strong identification with one's own ethnic group.

Firstly, I would like to examine the past in relation to the present situation in Chitawan, which entails focusing on the historical development. In the following, the ethnic constellation and socio-economic situation of the different groups will be dealt with so as to analyze the patterns characterizing the relationship between the Tharus and other ethnic groups.

2. The History of Chitawan

Up to the mid-20th century, the role of the inhabitants of Chitawan was so marginal, in political and economic terms, that they are not explicitly mentioned in historical sources. We could only establish that, before the unification of Nepal, during the reign of Mukunda Sen I (1518-1553),² the

¹ Culturally, the Chitawan Tharus differ distinctly from other Tharu groups living on both sides of the Indo-Nepalese border (Krauskopf 1987: 30; McDonagh 1989: 191).
² Oral tradition and the different religious rituals practiced by the Tharus show
region belonged to the territory of Palpa – an important kingdom included in the Chaubisi Raj (D.R. Regmi 1961: 27). In the later course of history, there were repeated territorial alterations (Hamilton 1971: 131ff.; Stiller 1973: 38f.). Chitawan was yielded to the kingdom of Tanahu (D.R. Regmi 1961: 31f.), and, according to M.C. Regmi (1978a: 3), at the end of the late 18th century, it partly belonged to the kingdom of Makawanpur. It was under the Gorkhali ruler Pratap S. Shah (1775-1777), the successor of Prithvi Narayan Shah, that Chitawan was absorbed into the kingdom of Nepal (D.R. Regmi 1961: 111f.; Stiller 1973: 151ff.).

The interests of the territorial rulers and, later on, of the central government in Chitawan were of a predominantly strategic nature. The undeveloped region was to serve as a barrier, thus protecting the hills and, later, the Kathmandu Valley, against hostile aggressors from the south. Especially after 1816, following the defeat by the East India Company, the Nepalese government pursued this strategy vehemently. For a while, they even considered the presence of the few inhabitants as obstructive. An order passed in 1817 (M.C. Regmi 1978b: 6) compelled the farmers to abandon their villages. According to the Tharus (Haffner 1979: 64), many families then moved southwards and settled in the more remote valley between the Churiya and Someshwor range.

After the rise of the Ranas (1846), Chitawan still remained unaffected by modernization or change. This was not only due to strategic reasons but also because Chitawan had ample stocks of big game. For this reason, the Ranas declared the whole region to be their private, exclusive hunting territory, with the maharajas inviting the nobility and prominent people from all over the world (Kinloch 1885; Oldfield 1974).

As the government saw the need for administration in remote Chitawan, functionaries were initially chosen from the ranks of the Tharus. With the introduction of the jimindari system in 1861, intended to effect revenue collection (M.C. Regmi 1976: 108), Pahariyajimindars were also appointed. Foreigners could initially establish themselves as a small but influential ruling elite in Chitawan. The Tharus also had contacts among members of other ethnic groups traditionally involved in trade. A certain occurrence offered a guarantee that these "foreigners' left - at the latest during the monsoon, due to severe seasonal malaria that was rampant in Chitawan. The Tharus, being permanently exposed to this infection, developed "active" immunity.

In assessing the situation of the Tharus up to the mid-20th century, it can be claimed that they did not experience interference by the central government. The protective policy, pursued for an extended period, harmonized with their economic situation: a shifting-cultivation system, for which sufficient arable land and forest was available.

After the upheaval in Nepal's political orientation in 1951, the Nepalese government started to implement land resettlement schemes in Chitawan with the objective of lowering the population density in the hill region and towards providing new areas for cultivation by the growing population. American aid contributed to a malaria eradication and land reclamation programme (Mihaly 1965).

After the initial success of the malaria eradication programme became evident, a flood of immigrants resulted in the mean annual growth rate of the district soaring: a national record (Figure 1), with the rate at 10.5 %, between 1961 and 1971, was set. Although a drop followed, the mean annual growth rate continued to be higher than the average rate in Nepal. Whereas fewer than 19 people per square kilometre lived there in 1952-1954, the ratio in 1991 was 160 : 1 sq. km.

The Nepali speakers form the majority – with 69 % – of Chitawan's inhabitants today. Tharu, as a mother tongue, is only spoken by a minority of nearly 13 %. Figure 2 also shows the diversity of languages. Both Tibeto-Burman as well as Indo-Aryan languages are common in present-day Chitawan.

5 In the dry season, traders from the hills and the Terai displayed their goods and bought mustard seed. There were close connections to the neighbouring Chepang, who exchanged vegetable fat and bark for rice, and also came to work seasonally as mustard harvesters.
So far, we have simplified the discussion on the Tharus and Pahariyas. In actual fact, the ethnic constellation is much more differentiated (Table 1).

Apart from the Tharus, there are some other smaller, native groups in Chitawan, including the Bote,\(^6\) Darai, Danuwar and Kumal. Hodgson (1880: 400) introduced the collective term "Awaliya" (aul or awal = lowland, fever) referring to the natives of the lowlands blighted by malaria. They are tribal groups who possibly belong to the "aboriginal races inhabiting other more or less secluded regions of India" (Bista 1976: 128).

\(^6\) Bista (1976: 128) uses the term "Majhi" for the Bote. It is a "term used by the hill peoples for those people called 'Bote' in the Terai ... They are also occasionally referred to as Kushar" (cf. Jest 1977; Subba 1989).
Table 1: The Ethnic Groups and Castes in Chitawan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Autochthonous Groups &quot;Awaliya&quot;</th>
<th>Allochthonous Groups &quot;Pahariya&quot;</th>
<th>Castes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tharu</td>
<td>Nepali-Speaker/Parbatiya</td>
<td>Bahun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danuwâr</td>
<td>Chhetri</td>
<td>Kami*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darâi</td>
<td>Kâmi*</td>
<td>Damâi*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bote</td>
<td>Stâki*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kumâl</td>
<td>Newâr</td>
<td>Šrestha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musahar*</td>
<td>Tämâng</td>
<td>Kumâle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gururig</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Magar</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chepâng</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* "Impure" Groups

Whereas the Tharus exclusively inhabit the Terai on both sides of the Indo-Nepalese border, as well as the Inner Terai, the Bote, Darai, Danuwâr and Kumâl also settled in the valleys further up the river. As these groups live along the rivers and get their livelihood from the rivers, Gaborieau (1978) describes them as "tribus des fleuves." Marriage alliances are only seldom contracted between the different groups, but the mutually amicable relations are, nevertheless, repeatedly emphasized. However, a clear distinction is made in reference to the "impure" Musahar, which, according to Bista (1976: 131), is a sub-group of the Bote.

Members of other ethnic groups who were, in the past, sporadically contacted, live in close proximity to the Tharus since the late 1950s. The large majority of them are Nepali speakers, i.e., members of an Indo-Aryan population group who are collectively termed "Parbatiya" in the literature. This group consists of different "pure" and "impure" castes. The "impure occupational castes" include the Kami, Sarki and Damai, the "pure castes"

The different languages of the groups are classified as "Indo-Aryan relic languages," i.e., they are not pure but predominantly Indo-Aryan languages (Hansson 1989). On the whole, the languages are closely related and form a relatively homogeneous group compared to the Nepali and Bihar languages.

The various groups of immigrants are heterogeneous not only as far as their ethnic origins are concerned but also in terms of their socio-economic status (Conway & Shrestha 1985; Shrestha 1989). As is the case in many other areas of Nepal (Pfäff-Czarnecka 1989), the high-caste Hindu – i.e., Bahun and Chhetri – complemented by the high-caste Newar, rapidly succeeded in taking control of a large part of the resources.

The mode of distribution in the resettlement projects made it possible for many privileged town dwellers and landlords, some of them members of the land distribution commission, to acquire land in the Rapti Valley (Mihaly 1965: 77; Haffner 1979: 65). In farms of up to 34 hectares, the land was cultivated by land workers or tenant farmers. The landlords extracted the profits but did not invest, contrary to the practice in an exemplary modern agricultural system. Many smaller farms, by contrast, were forced to let and later to sell their land due to shortage of capital. The newcomers thus quickly found themselves in such a cul-de-sac of landlessness.

As the resettlement projects terminated in 1961, colonization in the subsequent period continued without any planning. Uncontrolled clearings and an increase in the number of illegal settlements characterized the situation. One consequence of this development was that the government took steps to combat illegal colonization and deforestation. Under the management of a settlement commission, initiated by the forest department, 4,400 squatter families (approx. 22,000 persons) were resettled in 1964/65: it "cleared" the settlers from a large area of forest", to cite the chief conservator of forests (Willan 1965: 159). This campaign also "cleared" the forest of three old Tharu villages with approx. 4,000 people at the express request of King Mahendra. This can be understood as a nature conservation measure, as the area was declared a protected zone for the threatened species of rhinoceroses; thus making it possible for the national park to be established in 1973.

---

7 The different languages of the groups are classified as "Indo-Aryan relic languages," i.e., they are not pure but predominantly Indo-Aryan languages (Hansson 1989). On the whole, the languages are closely related and form a relatively homogeneous group compared to the Nepali and Bihar languages.

The problem of illegal squatting has still not been brought under control. Around 1979/80 there were some "sukumbasi" movements; estimates suggest between 14,000 and 32,000 families were involved in illegal squatting (Ojha 1983: 41; Kaplan & Shrestha 1982). In 1993, there were also several sukumbasi settlements along the East-West Highway.

In addition to the most populous group of "enforced migrants", the "dispatched migrants" also have to be considered (Conway & Shrestha 1985: 70) – members of well-situated families wishing to extend their economic activities to Chitawan.

In her ethno-historical study on Bandipur (Tanahu District), Ilitis (1980: 126f.) declares that the resident Newar traders regarded the opening up of Chitawan as an opportunity to extend their north-south trade. Bandipur-Shrestha established the trading place Narayanghat, from which the Indian border was accessible in a day's march. It is not surprising that some of the large safari hotels today belong to grandchildren of Bandipur-Shrestha.

Not only the traders, cleverly speculating with land, but also the established jimindars were able to improve their economic situation by acquiring land. The smallholders, on the other hand, were fighting for survival. Lack of capital caused problems, as did living and working in a strange environment. The colonists, who, of course, were not familiar with the ecological conditions in the Rapti Valley, built some settlements in areas prone to flood (Haffner 1979: 66f.). Some lost fields through flooding and river erosion and had to cope with crop damage caused by wild animals. If an attempt is now made to assess the socio-economic situation of the immigrants, it can be claimed that, after the difficult initial stages, the living situation in Chitawan has, nevertheless, improved for many colonists, in comparison to their earlier predicament.10

Of course, the rapid development and colonization of Chitawan did not leave the Tharus unaffected. The old, established Tharu jimindars mostly succeeded in keeping their property, but many small peasant farmers were apparently deprived of land during the development phase. Often, the ownership was unclear, and as the jimindari system was only altered after 1964, dubious land transactions could be made. Indeed, the traditional shifting cultivation system had already been abolished in 1951, but only after 1957 were land documents handed over to the farmers, and, moreover, this was done only for the plots that had actually been cultivated. Settlers who had not been granted any land by the project "... encroached not only the pasture land of the indigenous settlers but also the fields of the latter as well which enhanced the hostility of the indigenous settlers towards the hill people."

(Kansakar 1979: 138)

The inexperience of the Tharu population in money matters, especially in the valuation of their land – up to now it had been available in abundance – was welcomed by the business-minded bazaar dealers and landlords.

4. The Pattern of Relations between Tharus and Pahariyas
"We can only live happily in our own community"

If one considers the pattern of relationships between Tharus and Pahariyas, the following points become obvious: although the problems of the landless workers and small-scale farmers are similar and although the landlords of both groups are regarded as equally privileged, this socio-economically related classification of Chitawan's population is hardly recognized. The ethnic classification, the dichotomy between autochthonous and immigrant population groups, is one of the aspects to which the Tharus, especially, accord importance.

This strong ethnicity of the Tharus is, however, being eroded. As is evident in many ethnic groups that are integrated within a Hindu society or who are in the process of being hinduized, the Tharus have also accepted the Hindu ideal:
- They label themselves, in toto, as a pure Hindu caste (jat).11

---

9 Sukumbasi = people without any apparent means of livelihood.
10 The results of a study carried out in 1979 by Conway & Shrestha (1985) on the colonists' land property in the mountains before their emigration and in Chitawan at the time of the study reveal a modestly positive conclusion.
11 In the Muluki Ain (1854), they were classified as "enslavable alcohol drinkers" who just nearly qualified for classification in the "pure" or "water-acceptable castes" (Höfer 1979).
Among the various Tharu groups, different levels of status exist that do not allow intermarriage. The Chitawan Tharus are placed at the lowest level.

They have relinquished certain practices, such as keeping pigs, that are considered "impure".

They have introduced typical Hindu pujas (e.g., Satyanarayan puja) and the tendency to engage Pahariya Brahmins for certain rituals is on the rise.

However, these efforts of "becoming Hindu" seem to be halfhearted, because, on the other hand, the Tharus enjoy the fact that their life is less regulated from babyhood onwards, in many respects. To a certain degree, the stereotype with which the orthodox Hindus characterize the Tharus is a response to the free lifestyle of the Tharus, especially with respect to sexuality, but it may also be associated with their "backwardness" if criteria like education, mobility, etc. are applied.

A Nepali team of authors writes the following, for example:

"The Tharus are one of the most primitive races inhabiting Nepal ... They are by nature sincere and simple minded. This is especially true with the Tharus of Chitwan. They are steeped in the darkness of ignorance and are rather obstinate."

(Shrestha, Singh & Pradhan 1975: 27)

Similar stereotypes are also found on a local level. The insults that the Pahariyas use for the Tharus, e.g., "ghonghi khane manche" (= snail eater) and "ban manche" (= people from the forest), have the same message: Tharus are backward and uncivilized. Tharus, in turn, prefer to label the Pahariyas "garib chusa barai" (= blood suckers of the poor). On the other hand, they are collectively idealized as the more pure, the more competent people, who can cope better with a modern way of life.

The Tharus' attitude towards the Pahariyas, especially towards the Bahun and Chhetri, is thus extremely ambivalent: it reflects the ambivalence between Tharu identity (ethnicity) and Hindu ideal, between tradition and progress, between a "small and great tradition" (Kölver 1986).

It remains to be seen whether and to what extent the various ethnic groups inhabiting Chitawan will succeed in abandoning this rigid polarization. Only time will tell if foreign elements – as Erdheim (1988) describes it from a socio-psychological perspective – will not always be regarded as a threat but as a challenge to one's own identity development.

The beginnings of a constructive dissolution of the cliché may possibly be the attitude of some representatives of the Tharu elite who have thematized the "backwardness" of their own group and demanded better educational opportunities.12 On the other hand, traditional concepts of ethnic identity often remain in a "traditional, much weaker and largely implicit idea of identity", as Gellner (1986: 137) described it in the case of the Newar. These ideas, including idealizing one's own ethnic identity, are expressed – despite even malaria and a lack of infrastructure – by the Tharus, for example, in statements like "formerly everything used to be better!" These are statements, however, that are also frequently heard in our own culture.

\section*{References}


---

12 The Tharus in Chitawan are, however, far removed from creating an ethnic organization – like many ethnic groups, also including the Tharus in Dang (McDonough 1989).
HAMILTON, F.B. 1971 [1819]. An Account of the Kingdom of Nepal and of the Territories Annexed to this Dominion by the House of Gorkha. Manjusri Publishing House, New Delhi (= Bibliotheca Himalayaica, Series 1,10).


KINLOCH, A.A. 1885. Large Game Shooting in Tibet, the Himalayas, and Northern India. Thacker, Spink & Company, Calcutta.


