

THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE THARUS: AN ANNOTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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It is sometimes said that very little research on the Tharus has been done, or that the works dealing with Tharu culture are scarce or published in languages like French, rendering access difficult especially to Nepali readers. This is why it seems useful to me to present a bibliography on the anthropology of the Tharus, in the hope that this might open the way to further studies since, as we shall see, most of the existing research deals with the Tharus of the western Terai.

On Tharus and Tharu Groups

In the last census, the Tharus appear as one of the most numerous ethnic minorities of Nepal : 993,388 persons are classified as speakers of Tharu as their mother tongue, and 1,194,224 as Tharu (compared to, say, the Magars, for whom the corresponding figures are respectively 430,264 and 1,339,308). But whoever has been in contact with Tharus will immediately stress the great diversity of the different communities scattered over most of the Nepalese Terai and Inner Terai valleys. One might also wonder who identified themselves as Tharu and who did not compared to the previous census.¹ Ethnic boundaries have always been flexible, strongly influenced by

¹ For instance, in the Census of 1971 only five Tharu speakers were registered in the district of Saptari and in the 1991 Census 80,526! But since the 1971

the overall political or ideological context. However, within the last decade and particularly since the great political change which followed the return of the multi-party system and 'democracy' in 1991, it seems that the previous tendency to overemphasise differences between sub-groups has faded away in favour of a search for a Tharu pan-ethnic unity. Nevertheless, there are still many different Tharu subgroups, more or less numerous, more or less known, some sharing a very similar culture under different ethnic labels (e.g. Deshaurya Tharu and Dangaura Tharu in Western Terai), some having totally different customs though living in close proximity (Rana and Dangaura Tharu in Kailali and Kanchanpur districts). Besides marked cultural differences, the boundary between subgroups has been mostly based on marriage prohibitions, particularly marked, for instance, in the Western Terai between the Ranas and the Dangauras. It is noticeable in this regard that for the last few years most of the Tharu ethnic associations have been stressing the necessity to remove those marriage barriers.

By classifying groups which have always been changing, there is an unavoidable risk of reifying ethnic categories. Nevertheless, I shall stick to this sub-classification which is still meaningful for the Tharus themselves and gives a broad picture of their regional diversity, helping us to draw a kind of hypothetical ethnographic map of Tharu distribution before the great ecological and sociological change of the post-Rana years. The Unification of Nepal in the eighteenth century changed the situation in the Terai, a change that was further enforced under the Rana administration. But we should bear in mind that this Tharu population distribution, probably significant during the last two or three centuries, was also the result of unknown previous changes. Migrations or displacements of populations have shaped and reshaped group affiliation over centuries. The Panchayat years have nevertheless accelerated this process: there have been major changes in political and agrarian conditions, and also in relations between the Tharus and their neighbours from the middle hills who, in the sixties, settled permanently in the Terai.

Census does not provide data on ethnic groups, it is difficult to deduce how exactly the self-perception of the Saptari Tharu has changed (besides the data collection techniques which have a strong influence on the data themselves). Today the Saptari Tharu (Koshila) define themselves as Tharu-speaking Tharus but consider nevertheless that their language is close to Maithili. How did they present themselves previously to the 1971 surveyors: as Tharus speaking Maithili or as non-Tharus?

We now have a relatively clear picture of the different endogamous Tharu groups living in the Western and Far Western Terai. The two main and culturally contrasted communities are the Dangauras and the Ranas. 'Dangaura' refers to the Tharus who claim Dang as their original home (which includes the Deokhuri Valley, Dang denoting a 'country' larger than the Inner Terai valley of the same name), and 'Rana' to the Tharus of the far western Terai who claim to have a Rajput origin. We do not know exactly when this last appellation and the royal pedigree attached to it became an ethnic label. In fact 'Rana Tharu' is an anthropological creation, since the Ranas do not want to be called Tharu, preferring Rana or Rana Thakur. I am of the opinion that the process of 'kshatrisation' attached to this ethnonym could be a relatively recent phenomenon, linked to a general tendency of lower groups to raise their status particularly marked in colonial British India.²

Since at least the nineteenth century, the Dangauras have migrated, partly eastward (in Rupandehi and Kapilavastu districts or ex-Seoraj) but mostly westward, settling in Banke or Bardiya districts and in the Inner Terai valley of Surkhet. During the past few decades of this century, particularly after the land reform of the early sixties, new waves of Dangaura emigrants have gone further west, coming into closer contact with the Ranas who previously dominated the far western districts of Kailali and Kanchanpur. If we look at our hypothetical ethnographic map of Western Terai in the last century, the Karnali river would appear as a kind of boundary between these two main western cultural Tharu entities, Rana and Dangaura.

But other Tharu subgroups live in Western Terai: the Katharyas, mostly concentrated in India, south of Dangaura habitat, and in Kailali district, have clothes and houses quite similar to their western neighbours the Ranas, but their particular traditions are still unstudied. In Bardiya and Banke districts, the Dangaura Tharus distinguish themselves from the Deshaurya Tharus (lit. 'those of the country'). But Deshauriya culture is so close to that of Dangaura that I presume they could be an offshoot of an earlier wave of migrants from

² On the reform of customs at the beginning of the present century and the quest for a higher status among the Ranas, see Srivastava (1958). A similar process seems to have influenced the Tharu of Chitwan and Champaran who also claim to be Rajput (Choudhury 1952). By contrast, the Dangauras have no claim of that kind, maintaining that they have always been living in Dang. The Dangaura myth of origin significantly recalls the creation of the first (Tharu) human being in relation with that of the valley itself.

Dang or, at least, may testify to an ancient closer relation with Dang that was broken when the four districts of the Western Terai were under British administration from 1816 to 1860. It is significant that the Dangauras quite readily intermarry with the Deshauryas. The same can be said of the Rajhatyas of Banke (ex-Rajhat) who call themselves Tharu or Kusumya Tharu and whose culture and language are even closer to those of the Dangaura Tharus. These facts stress the crucial role of migrations and of settlements at different periods of time and under different political contexts in the shaping of group affiliation. It also shows that older geopolitical divisions (*thappa* and *parganna*, i.e. Rajhat) have influenced the distribution, the denomination and the relations of the different communities.

If we proceed eastward to Rupandehi and Kapilavastu our Tharu ethnographic map becomes blurred. No studies have been done in Nepal.³ Besides recent Dangaura Tharu migrants, the Tharus of this area, though called Katharya, do not seem to have much in common with the Katharyas of Kailali and from the scarce information I obtained appear to be more brahmanised than others Tharu groups of Nepal. An interesting fact is that the Katharya ethnonym seems to be in use all over the southern (and mostly Indian) Terai, in UP and possibly Bihar, without necessarily implying a common culture.⁴

In the Central Terai, the Inner Terai valley of Chitwan shelters an important Tharu population. The Tharus living in Nawal Parasi district are slightly different from their neighbours of Chitwan district proper, the Narayani River having created in the past a kind of boundary. But most studies have been done in Chitwan itself, on the eastern side of the Narayani.

The most imprecise part of our map and the least-known areas of Tharu habitat are the districts of Parsa Bara Rautahat, where Tharu speakers seem apparently less numerous. Some refer to themselves as Katharya (or Kacharya?), some are migrants of Eastern Terai or Koshila Tharus, intermixed

³ They are probably related to the Indian Tharus living around Gorakhpur. A PhD that I have been unable to find and read deals with the Tharus of Gorakhpur (Yadav 1978-86).

⁴ A distinction has been made in earlier mentions between the eastern and western Katharyas (for instance, see Nesfield 1885: 39).

with others minorities like the Danuwars.⁵ The Danuwars, whose main homeland is the Sindhuli Inner Terai valley around the Kamala river, are culturally and sociologically close to the Tharus, with whom they can intermarry. We do not know much about this part of Terai, but the Tharus living there are probably related to those living in the Indian Terai of Bihar, especially in Champaran.⁶

The eastern Tharus, called Koshi or Koshila or Kochila Tharus, are scattered in several districts from Morang to Rautahat, including Udayapur Inner Terai valley (in Jhapa district the Rajbamsis, sometimes called the 'Bengali Tharus', dominate). The Koshila Tharu, who seem to have mostly migrated westward are fewer and fewer in the districts West of Siraha. They claim Saptari and Siraha districts as their main home but many live also in Sunsari district on the other side of the river Koshi. Some Saptari Tharus pretend that until recently they would have not married Sunsari/Morang Tharus. There are also probably subgroups or endogamous units, such as the Lamputchwa Tharu of Morang district who are considered different by the Koshila Tharus.⁷ However, Saptari Tharus have recently migrated to Morang.

⁵ In the last census of 1991, there is a very noticeable difference for the district of Parsa between Tharu-speakers (1,203) and Tharu ethnics (32,701) which could indicate a greater integration of these Tharus in the Indianised or Hinduised local population. Even if less striking, the same discrepancy appears in Bara and Rautahat districts (where more Eastern Koshila Tharus seem to have migrated). Whatever may be the exact situation, the 1991 census has to be contrasted with the 1971 census in which nearly no Tharus (speakers) were recorded from Bara to Saptari districts! (see note 1). But to deepen the analysis we should know more about the language spoken by this sub-group (probably Bhojpuri, the dominant language of Bara and Parsa districts). An interesting fact can nevertheless be inferred from the census data: the Tharu population forms blocks divided by area with a much lower density of Tharu-speakers, characterised by a strong competitive and more Indianised cultural influence, as in Danusha and Mahottari districts we find Maithili Brahmanical influence, in Bara and Parsa districts Bhojpuri, and in Kapilavastu, Muslim.

⁶ An Indian Tharu geographer whom I briefly met in the eastern Terai, Dr Sharda Prasad, has written a thesis on the Champaran Tharus (Prasad 1992) but I have not been able to obtain a copy. See also Singh 1983, a PhD thesis referred to by Guneratne 1994.

⁷ It is said that they tie their clothes in such a way to form 'a long tail'; *lamputch*. Koshila were not supposed to intermarry with them. A clan of the same name is found in Chitwan and even among the western Dangaura Tharus,

The ethnonym Koshila or Kuchila could be related to the name of the river Koshi on the bank of which they used to live. As we have already noted rivers seem to have played a role not only as a focal area of Tharu settlement but as a cultural or sociological frontier. In spite of the importance of the Koshila Tharus, their ethnography is much less developed than for western Terai groups.

In contrast with western Terai where the Tharus are the only and dominant ethnic minority, the eastern - especially the far eastern - Terai is inhabited by several ethnic groups with very different linguistic affiliation, like the Dhimals or the Meches who speak Tibeto-Burman languages, the Rajbamsis or the Tharus who speak Indo-European idioms and even Munda speakers like the Satars. To give a sounder image of our map, another fact must be stressed: culturally affiliated groups live close by the Koshila Tharus, such as the Bantars or Raj Bantars (who can be found up to Chitwan), the Rautar, the Kebair and the Musahar. In Saptari, for instance, the Bantar are often the priests in Tharu villages but they are of lower status.⁸ The multiplicity of *jât* is a salient feature of Eastern Terai, and it seems that besides ethnic diversity, subdivisions through the paradigm of hierarchy have deeply moulded the sociological landscape. This hierarchic process is found up to Chitwan (where Bantar, for instance, are also living), an important difference with the ethnically more uniform Western Terai where such a 'castification' process is absent, especially among the Dangaura Tharu. On the contrary, the Dangaura Tharus used to integrate people from outside on a quite egalitarian basis.

In fact, the oldest reference we have concerning the Tharus refers precisely to the eastern Terai. In his book on India written in 1033, the Muslim scholar Alberuni mentioned the 'Taru, people of very black colour and flat nose like the Turks' who lived in Tilwat (Tirhut or Mithila).⁹ Later on, in the 13th century, a Persian historian cited the 'th'rw' near by the Meche and the Kooch but further east in Kamrup or north Bengal.¹⁰ We can therefore

pointing again to the role of migration in the shaping of group affiliation at different sociological levels.

⁸ Most of the Koshila Tharus call Maithili Brahmans for their domestic rituals.

⁹ Sachau (1888: 201).

¹⁰ See Chatterji (1974:101). In the 16th century Taranatha history of Buddhism, Champaran is equated with Tibetan *mtha'-ru'i brgyud* which has been

presume that people called Tharu have been living in the eastern Terai for at least a millennium. But one word is not enough to establish a direct cultural link between various present-day Tharu entities and ancient 'Tharu' settlers of the Terai. In terms of ethnogenesis, of migration and intermixing of groups of different origin under different ecological and political contexts, much has been happening in the Terai for the past thousand years. An interesting fact is nevertheless a general tendency of these very unsettled communities to migrate westward (at least during the past centuries). Actually the Western Terai has been deforested (or resettled) more recently than the Eastern Terai.

Concerning the languages spoken, the areas of linguistic affiliation encompass the proper endogamous Tharu social units. All the Tharu minorities speak Indo-European languages related to the North Indian ones. Despite many regional sub-variations, we can draw three main linguistic areas: Dangaura and Chitwanya Tharu dialects are different but exhibit Bhojpuri influence, Rana is closer to Hindi and Koshila to Maithili.¹¹ Finally, the related Rajbamsis speak a form of Bengali. We should, however, remark that the area of Bhojpuri influence extends much more westward for Tharu than for Indian Bhojpuri speaking groups,¹² a fact which could confirm a western migration (especially from Bihar) of Tharus otherwise noted. But regarding linguistic transformations or a hypothetical substratum of Tharu languages, more research is necessary. More generally, we need a better knowledge of the enigmatic old processes of Austro-Asiatic and Tibeto-Burman reciprocal influence in north-east India to understand the linguistic genesis of the distant past in the far eastern Terai.

It is not my intention to make definite statements on the diversity of the Tharus. For that purpose we need more ethnographic knowledge, and the main goal of the present paper is precisely to help further comparative research. But I should like to emphasise a few points. Whatever the future of the Tharu pan-ethnic movement and the building of a new Tharu identity which will support this revival in Nepal, published and unpublished studies show a striking diversity from one group to another, in social organisation, rituals and religious practices, village and domestic organisation, mythology

translated as 'the country of the Tharu' by S. Lévi, but could rather mean 'the country situated at the border', therefore without direct ethnic connotation.

¹¹ In the Census of 1971 a large number of Eastern Tharus have been classified as Bhojpuri or Maithili speakers. See notes 1 and 5.

¹² See the map on Bhojpuri and its sub-dialects drawn by U.N. Tiwari (1960: 283).

and festivals. The Tharus, like the other minorities living in the Terai share a similar ecological milieu and material culture - rice cultivation and fishing are the two main sources of production - but in each area they have developed a peculiar culture and social order. Two facts should be stressed: the influence of overall political and economic conditions, and a fission process which until recently created and recreated endogamous barriers. Alien influences, the loss of an improbable previous unique heritage or even the hypothesis of various origins are not sufficient to explain a diversity peculiarly marked in ritualistic organisation, kinship and social structure.¹³ More generally an opposition between the east and west Terai can be stressed, the Gandaki River delineating this passage, with significant differences in terms of hierarchical fission, economic and agrarian conditions and levels of deforestation.

I should like to emphasise here the significance of the region (*deśa*) in the sense of a political, ritual and economical space. Each local and particular 'Tharu' culture has developed in a wider context and a different geopolitical niche. The Terai is vast and the overall political and agrarian conditions of each region have changed over centuries. To give just one contrasted example, the Koshila Tharus have in the past been living in close contact with the Mithila kingdom (and its strong Brahmanical and Vaisnavite culture), whereas the Dangaura Tharus have been immersed in a very different context, the Himalayan Baisi kingdom of Dang-Salyan under a heavy Sivaite Nath Yogi influence. In one case the influence of the north Indian Brahmanical culture prevails, in the second we see the importance of western Himalaya Pahari culture.

A minority of Tharus live in India, and in the past relations used to be close on both sides of the border. It is still the case for the Rana Tharus, as numerous in the Nainital and Kheri Terai districts of India as in Nepalese Kanchanpur, who until recently were very far from Nepal's political centre. In fact, the most sizeable Indian Tharu population is in Nainital district where

¹³ For instance, the Dangaura Tharu have quite clear exogamous clans but the Koshila kinship system is closer to the Indo-Nepalese model of *gotra* and *thar*. Ritual organisation (specifically, priesthood) also differs greatly from one group to another, and even from one sub-group to another. Another striking example is the impact of the Hindu festival calendar: for the Dangauras, Dasai is the main festival, for the Ranas, it is Holi (Dasai is not really celebrated) and for the Koshila, it is the new year of Baisakh called Siruwa Pavan or Jur Sittal (Dasai is also not really important).

the Ranas live. A few scattered Tharu groups live south of the Nepal border in UP and in Bihar Champaran. (Further east in India we do not find any more Tharus.) This is probably why the earlier studies on the Tharus which dealt with the Indians Tharus concern mostly the Ranas. On the contrary, Dangauras as well as other 'Inner Terai Tharus' who are concentrated in Nepal, became a subject of academic study only after Nepal opened to research. Therefore generalisations on the Tharu tribe, current in writings from the beginning of the century, are biased by this restricted access: very little can be known of the Dangauras or the Chitwan Tharus from these earlier works.

The Indo-Nepalese political boundary does have a meaning. First, the political destinies of India and Nepal have split, especially since the colonial period; and second, border regulations have strengthened the barrier. Today the Tharus, except partly the Ranas who have maintained matrimonial and economic relations in spite of the border,¹⁴ are different on either side of the frontier, influenced by a different socio-political milieu. The Nepalese Tharus are more numerous and have remained generally more isolated until the middle of our century; moreover, their caste status and their relations with other castes have evolved differently ;¹⁵ sanskritisation or 'kshatrisation' have played a stronger role on the Indian side; finally, political and agrarian conditions, especially in the Inner Terai during the post-Unification period, have diverged over time.

In the following bibliography I shall present books and articles dealing directly with the Tharus. Short notes can be found scattered in different publications, especially those linked to the Terai, but the interested reader will easily obtain access to these secondary sources through the bibliographies of the works discussed here.

The bibliography will be divided into three periods, corresponding to methodology, tools of collection and analysis, and geographical area or groups concerned. For the third period - the richest in terms of anthropological works dealing with the Nepalese Tharus - I shall follow a thematic approach in order to bring out the main analytical and research trends.

¹⁴ On the close relationships between the Tharus of Kheri district in India and those of Kanchanpur and Kailali districts in Nepal, see Hassan (1993: 121-27).

¹⁵ The Tharus of UP in India were classified as a 'scheduled tribe' in 1967 with the ambiguous consequences this status brings.

Early Compilations: Colonial Encounters and Evolutionary Approaches

The first period cannot properly be called anthropological, since the publications rest mainly on the British residents' reports in India, very often second-hand material or simple repetitions of previous ones. They do not usually mention their sources or areas of collection, which are mixed up. Facts and customs are miscellaneously recorded without being related. These reports suffer from *a priori*, like the postulate of a unique and culturally uniform Tharu tribe, rooted in the ideological framework of colonial administration. They are in any case difficult to rely on, except maybe by those familiar with the field who, by a kind of informed rereading or by checking the area concerned, can make use of them. The presupposed idea of a unique Tharu tribe also goes hand in hand with preoccupations like origin, race, primitiveness and so forth.

The oldest available published mentions were compiled in the different Gazetteers of India (Imperial, NW Provinces, Oudh and Bengal among others), in Tribes and Castes series or in books of the same kind. Since most of these books repeat one another, only some of the earlier Gazetteers or representative texts are listed here. The most complete reference of that period is an article by Nesfield (1885) who, besides quoting the information of previous Gazetteers, includes material collected by himself. While it is full of details, this article suffers from too general an approach. Nesfield notes, for instance, that women elected for marriage must not bear any blood relation to the husband and may not be of the same village (*ibid.*: 13). But if village exogamy can be actually practised in the richest families or in the Tharu sub-groups more influenced by orthodox Hindu concepts like the Ranas, village endogamy is also very common, if not even a kind of rule at least among the Dangaura Tharus. In W. Crooke's *Tribes and Castes of the Northern Provinces of Oudh* (1896) which mainly relies on Nesfield's article, another source is quoted, S. Knowles' *Gospel in Gonda* (1889), which contains first-hand information on the Dangaura Tharus of Gonda district by a Christian missionary.¹⁶ But for this entire period the evaluation of the information given is a task in itself.

¹⁶ I have not been able to find this book in England or France, but some copies are available in America and maybe in India. A. Guneratne has been very kind in providing me some extracts from it.

There is not much difference between nineteenth century and early twentieth century Gazetteers, since the latter repeat the previous ones. An exception, however, in the sense that it introduces new materials, is the Census of 1931 compiled by Turner. But then a new period was starting, influenced by the development of anthropology, which strengthened the importance of fieldwork and of participant observation. The Census of India, a vast enterprise, slowly systematised the use of anthropological surveys, a trend reflected in later censuses which include detailed village survey monographs;¹⁷

The most valuable aspect of the older sources is nevertheless that they document a period when the Terai was still covered with forests and had a very low population density, with the Tharus comprising the majority of the population. But the quest for first-hand accounts, which requires searching through unpublished reports (of British administrators and surveyors) as well as archival material, is a painstaking and scarcely rewarding task.¹⁸

Buchanan Hamilton, F. *The History, Antiquities, Topography, and Statistics of Eastern India*, vol. 2, London: W.H. Allen & Co., 1838.

Carnegy, P. *Notes on the Races, Tribes and Castes Inhabiting the Province of Awadh*, Lucknow: Oudh Governmental Press, 1868.

Crooke W. *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh*, Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing of India, 1896.

Elliot, H. M. *Memoir on the History, Folklore, and Distribution of the Races of the North Western Provinces of India*. London: Trübner & Co., 1869.

Grierson, G.A. 'The Tharu broken dialects' in *The Linguistic Survey of India*, vol. 5, part 2, 1903, 311-24.

Hamilton W. *The East India Gazetteer*, vol. 1, London: Parbury, Allen & Co., 1828.

Hodgson B. H. 'Continuation of the comparative vocabulary of the languages of the broken tribes of Nepal', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal* 26, 1857.

¹⁷ See for instance Sharma(1964a; 1964b; 1965).

¹⁸ I have personally recently gone through an unpublished survey report of 1818 containing some interesting first-hand information on the Tharus of Western Nepal. Alas, preoccupied with the favourite question of his time, namely origin, the author considered that the stories he had collected were too illogical or false to be worth publishing in his report...

- Knowles, S. *The Gospel in Gonda: being a Narrative of Events in Connection with the Preaching of the Gospel in the Trans-Gaghra Country*, Lucknow: Methodist Publishing House, 1889.
- Nesfield, J. C. 'The Tharus and Bhogshas of upper India', *Calcutta Review* 80 (159), 1885, 1-46.
- Risley, H. H. *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal.*, Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, vol. 2, 1892.
- Turner, A. C. *Census of India*, vol. 18, part 1, Report, Allahabad: Superintendent of the Government Press, 1931.

Indian Anthropology and the Tharus of India

The second period, from the thirties onward, saw the beginning of proper ethnographic collection with deeper substantial field research, at a time when ethnography was developing. Like those of the first period, these works dealt with the Tharus living in India, and therefore the Ranas. Before the sixties, no research on the Tharus had been done in Nepal proper, and in the books of the first visitors to Nepal, mentions of the Tharus are nearly non-existent.¹⁹

The ethnographic research on the Tharus during this second period was done by Indian anthropologists. It is interesting to note in this regard that the first detailed studies were mostly produced by Census surveyors, anthropology and Census operations being tightly linked. An example of this trend is Majumdar's pioneering work done in the late thirties and especially during the Census of India operations of 1941. His most quoted work is his anthropometric and blood study of the Tharus (1942),²⁰ a topic related to the ideological preoccupations of his time with 'race', 'caste' and 'tribe' and with the

¹⁹ Hodgson's published works contain only some notes on the language. I have been unable to discover anything of particular interest in his unpublished manuscripts. The earlier mentions on the Tharus living in Nepal are mostly unpublished. See note 18.

²⁰ Here he argues, against the (mythical) theory of Rajput origins or the diverse speculations of earlier authors on the racial origin of the Tharus, that they are 'a Mongoloid tribe who have succeeded in assimilating non-Mongoloid physical features' (1944: 71). Majumdar also discusses the question of the relative malaria immunity of the Tharus in relation to blood groups, noting that Tharu children suffer from malaria as much as other children (*ibid.*: 74). For others physical anthropological studies related to the Tharus, see below.

composition (and classification) of the Indian population. But he also published a short monograph, including his anthropometric results (1944: 65-109) in which, besides his pervasive quest for Tharu origins, he dealt with the problems of cultural contacts and the (pseudo) superiority of Rana Tharu women. However, an earlier ethnographic study of the Tharu cycle of life customs (among the Ranas, although this is not explicitly stated) is a little-quoted article by Hari Dev (1932) who adopts an evolutionary perspective.²¹ Other early publications include H.D. Pradhan's work, with a misleading title on economy (1937-1938), the first one dealing with general information on the Tharus (origins, physical appearance and dress), the second with cycle of life rituals and practices which actually appears very close to the work of Hari Dev (1932). It is possible that the last two authors are one and the same person. Whatever the shortcomings of these studies they represent a total change of approach and methodology in data collection, and to this extent represent the beginning of the anthropological study of the Tharus.

The best representative of this period is S.K. Srivastava's monograph on the Ranas of Nainital district, Srivastava being himself a student of Majumdar at Lucknow University.²² His book (his PhD dissertation dating from 1951) includes his previous articles and describes several aspects of Rana Tharu life (material culture, economy, social organisation, religion, festivals, treatment of illness, incidence of crime, dances and songs, and riddles). His main analytic trend, as exemplified in the concluding chapter on problems of culture contacts and dynamics, is the transformation and adaptability of a tribe under a general Hindu influence. If his concluding part suffers from being insufficiently related to the main monographic bulk, for the first time research

²¹ This paper by Hari Dev is 'communicated' by D.N. Majumdar and has the misleading title 'Birth customs among the Tharus' (1932).

²² Lucknow University was a very active centre of anthropology from the late forties to the seventies linked to the foundation and development of that field of research in India. The *Eastern Anthropologist*, one of the leading anthropological journals of India (published by the Ethnographic and Folk Culture Society of UP, based in Lucknow), which includes most of the references to the Indian Tharus of this period, was founded by D.N. Majumdar in 1947. Since the Tharus live close to Lucknow some students were sent for field work in Tharu villages (concerning such a study among the (Dangaura?) Tharus, see Pandey 1979: 259-60). During a visit to Lucknow University's library at the beginning of the eighties, I tried unsuccessfully to collect unpublished and little-known references.

based on sociological questions and a precise description of facts was available. Another scholarly work is the geographer R.L. Singh's study on the Terai, which includes a chapter on the Ranas Tharus (1965, previously published as an article in 1956).

C. T. Hu wrote only two articles, but one deals with a very interesting anthropological phenomenon: marriage by exchange of sisters between two or more houses (1956), a typical marriage arrangement of the Dangaura Tharus. Hu's too brief work stands apart by trying to isolate a peculiar and meaningful social fact and by being the only one dealing exclusively with the Dangaura Tharus (in Gonda district) before Nepal opened to research.

The Census of 1961 gave way to three village survey monographs, that of the Rana Tharu village of Bankati in Kheri district (Sharma 1965) and of Dangaura Tharu Rajderwa and Suganagar Domri villages in Gonda (*ibid.* 1964a; 1964b). Their aim was to study 'the dynamic of change in the social, cultural and economic life of rural community' in order to promote rural development and the enforcement of social laws (*ibid.* 1965), an approach which actually illustrates most of the Indian anthropological studies on the Tharus. The most valuable part of these otherwise hastily-conducted surveys are the statistics on household and economy (which give a good picture of the Tharu joint family system), and the precise descriptions of dresses, jewellery and house building. The descriptions of birth, marriage and death customs, however detailed these may be, suffer from the methodology of the surveyors. Nevertheless the material provided could be the basis of fruitful comparison – for instance, with the Nepali Dangaura – the customs revealing a deeper impact of Hinduisation in Gonda district.

Another and more recent study of India's Tharus by an Indian of Lucknow is the work of A. Hasan. He was not trained as an anthropologist but was involved in Tribal Welfare functions and was mostly interested by folklore, economic change, sociology and more generally questions related to tribal development. Hasan's works do not offer a better structured approach but stand apart by his long term involvement with the Tharus (mainly the Ranas and others related groups like the Boksas), which culminated in his recent and last book dealing with a Rana Tharu village of Kheri district, close to Dudwa National Park and the Nepal border (1993). The best parts of it (containing new data) are the chapters describing the village relationships with the Nepalese Tharus and with the forest officials, the village being until

recently under the control of the Forest Department, which acts as a kind of zamindar, and those dealing with economic questions.

Other scattered studies in the form of very brief articles on different subjects have been published during the fifties and sixties: V.K. Kochar on the fission and composition of Tharu joint families (1963, 1965); S. Mathur, on marriage among the Ranas (1967); and a few very short papers on Tharu songs: Sohoni (1955), Chaubey (1957), Prasad (1959), Govila (1959).

So besides S.K. Srivastava's monograph and perhaps Hu's precise but isolated article, most of the research offers scattered results, and no general picture or strong analytic frame is therefore proposed. As we have noted before, the studies of this period owe their form and results to a general interest in the questions of tribal welfare, tribal contacts with the Hindus or with the government, changing economic and social situation or upgrading of the so-called 'backward' communities, which were crucial for the administrators of that time, specially after India's Independence.

If we try to sum up the studies done on the Indian Tharus, both periods reveal the impact of colonial anthropology through the census operations and related surveys. But the first and earlier period research, written only by the British and illustrated by the Gazetteers or the Tribes and Castes series, aimed to give a general and exhaustive picture of 'The Tharus' living in North India and in a way created an artificial ethnic category. The work of the second period, carried out by Indian anthropologists, emphasised a monographic approach; but by dealing mostly with the most numerous Indian Tharu subgroup, the Ranas of Nainital, ethnic generalisations have been built from this peculiar Tharu subculture. Nevertheless, their most noticeable contribution is the description of socio-economic conditions, house composition and material culture.

Chaubey, C. 'The Tharu songs', *Indian Folklore* 2 (1), 1957, 52-3.

Choudhury, P.C. Roy, 'The Tharus', *Man in India* 32 (4), 1952, 246-50.

Dev, Hari, 'Birth customs among the Tharus', *Man in India* 12, 1932, 116-60.

Govila, J. P. 'The Tharu of Terai and Bhabar', *Indian Folklore* 2, 1959, 248.

Hasan, A., 'The social profiles of a border Tharu village', *Vanyajati* 16, 1968, 133.

_____'The occupational pattern in a Terai village', *Eastern Anthropologist* 22, 1969a, 187-206.

_____'The economic structure of a border Tharu village', *Vanyajati* 17, 1969b, 19-27.

- _____ *A Bunch of Wild Flowers and Others Articles*, Lucknow: Ethnographic and Folk Culture Society, 1970.
- _____ *Affairs of an Indian Tribe, The Story of my Tharu Relatives*. Lucknow: New Royal Book Co., 1993.
- Hu, C.T. 'Demographic study of village Chandanpur' *Eastern Anthropologist* 9, 1955, 4-20.
- _____ 'Marriage by exchange among the Tharus', *Eastern Anthropologist* 10 (2), 1957, 116-29.
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- _____ 'The Tharus and their blood groups', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal* 8, 1942, 25-37.
- _____ *The Fortunes of Primitive Tribes*, Lucknow: Universal Publishers, 1944.
- Mathur, S. 'Marriage among the Tharus of Chandan Chowki', *Eastern Anthropologist* 20(1), 1967, 33-46.
- Pradhan, H. Dev, 'Social economy in the Terai (the Tharus)', *Journal of the United Provinces Historical Society* 10, 1937, 59-76.
- _____ 'Social economy in the Terai (The Tharus)', *Journal of the United Provinces Historical Society* 11, 1938, 51-73.
- Prasad, T. 'Folksongs of the Tharus', *Indian Folklore* 2, 1959, 144-48.
- Sharda, Prasad, *The Impact of Socio Economic Changes on the Tribal Life of the Tharu in Paschim Champaran District* (PhD dissertation?), Muzzafarpur, 1992.*²³
- Sharma, R.C. *Village Rajderwa Tharu (Tashil Balrampur, District Gonda)*. Village Survey Monograph 1. Census of India 1961, vol. 15, part 6. Delhi, the Manager of Publications, 1964a.
- _____ *Village Suganagar Domri (Tahsil Balrampur, District Gonda)*. Village survey monograph 3. Census of India 1961, vol. 15, part 6. Delhi, Manager of Publications, 1964b.

²³ * indicates a reference which has not been read or found, and therefore needs to be checked or its content examined.

- _____ *Village Bankati (Tahsil Nighasan, District Kheri)*. Village survey monograph 11, Census of India 1961, vol. 15, part 6. Delhi, Manager of Publications, 1965.
- Singh, P. Kumar, *A Tribe in Transition with Special Reference to Tharus of West Champaran, Bihar*, PhD thesis, University of Gorakhpur, 1983.*
- Singh, R.L. 'The Tharus: a study in human ecology', *NGJL* 2(3), 1956, 153-66.
- _____ *The Terai Region of UP, a Study in Human Geography*, Allahabad: Ram Narain Lal Beni, 1965.
- Sohoni, S. V. 'Tharu songs', *Journal of the Bihar Research Society* 42, 1955, 332-39.
- Srivastava, S.K. 'Spring festival among the Tharus', *Eastern Anthropologist* 2(1), 1948-49, 27-33.
- _____ 'The Diwali festival among the Tharus', *Man in India* 29(1), 1949, 29-35.
- _____ 'Some problems of culture contact among the Tharus', *Eastern Anthropologist* 3, 1949-50, 36-39.
- _____ *The Tharus: a Study in Cultural Dynamics*, PhD thesis, University of Lucknow, 1951.
- _____ 'Directed cultural change among the Tharus', *Agra University Journal of Research Letters* 4, 1956, 53-69.
- _____ *The Tharus: a Study in Culture Dynamics*, Agra, Agra University Press, 1958.
- _____ 'Culture dynamics among the Rana Tharus. The past in the present', in H.O. Skar and G. M. Gurung, eds, *Nepal: Tharus and their Neighbours*, Kathmandu: Bibliotheca Himalayica/ EMR Publications, 1996 forthcoming.
- Yadav, Phool Chandra Pd. *Acculturation among the Tribes in Uttar Pradesh with Particular Reference to the Tharus of Gorakhpur District.*, PhD thesis, University of Gorakhpur, 1976-86.*

During both the periods discussed above a recurrent question pervaded most of the works: the enigmatic origin of the Tharus. Compared with other topics, there is a surprisingly large number of physical anthropological studies of the Tharus, a racial approach which echoes the nineteenth century study of culture. In Indian universities, physical anthropology was closely associated with cultural anthropology, as illustrated by Majumdar's works. Following him and the earlier Gazetteers, several anthropometric and genetic studies addressing the mysterious racial mixture of the Tharus have been

systematically carried out to settle this question on a 'scientific basis', but without success.²⁴

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- Basu, S.K. and P.K. Chattopadhyaya 'ABO blood groups and ABH secretion in saliva of the Rana Tharus Thakurs', *Eastern Anthropologist* 20(3), 1967, 269-76.
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- Kumar, N and A.K. Mitra, 'Reproductive performance of Tharu women', *Eastern Anthropologist* 28(4), 1975, 349-57.
- Mahalanobis, P.C. 'Physical appearance in relation to ethnological evidence', *Sankhya* 9, 1948-1949, 181-202.
- Srivastava, R. P., 'Further data on non-tasters among the Tharus of Uttar Pradesh', *Eastern Anthropologist* 17(1), 1964, 19-22.
- _____ 'Blood groups in the Tharus of Uttar Pradesh and their bearing on ethnic and genetic relationships', *Human Biology* 37, 1965a, 1-12.
- _____ 'A quantitative analysis of the fingerprints of the Tharus of Uttar Pradesh', *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 23, 1965b, 99-106.

The Anthropology of Nepal's Tharus

The publications listed above are sufficient to belie the notion that no studies on the Tharus have been done. Nevertheless, this notion is not totally groundless, owing to the very scattered and disorganised approach of the first works and moreover to the fact that they deal with with a non-representative minority of Tharus, those living in India.

When Western anthropologists poured into Nepal after the country opened in the fifties, they were mostly interested in the Kathmandu Valley's rich heritage, the Himalayan Tibeto-Burman speakers and the ethnically Tibetan groups. The Terai sounded not much different from North India and

²⁴ Their mongoloid physical appearance is recurrently contrasted with the (Rana) claim to be Rajput giving way to the following question: are they mongoloid mixed with plains people or Dravidian or 'Kolarian' mixed with mongoloids of Nepal ?

the Tharus did not attract much attention. In his often quoted book *People of Nepal* (1967) the Nepalese anthropologist Dor Bahadur Bista offered the first account on the Nepal Tharus.²⁵ But due to the general approach of the book (echoing the survey style of the previous Indian 'Tribes and Castes' series) and the state of research at this time, his valuable first-hand data, collected in different Tharu communities, are diluted in a too general presentation of 'The Tharus'. Nevertheless, this first survey showed how little was known. Another book on the economy of Western Nepal by MacDougall (1968) gave in two of its chapters a very precise and enlightening study of landownership in Dang and in Kailali, two districts of Nepal mainly inhabited by Dangaura Tharus. But in both cases, the author's main goal was not to study the Tharus.

Modern anthropological research on the Tharus started in the late sixties with A.W. Macdonald's isolated French article describing two Tharu festivals (Holi and Maghe Sankranti) in Dang (1969, reprinted in English in 1975) and moreover with D. Rajaure's monograph on the Dangaura Tharus. An earlier, very brief Italian article by G. Tucci (1956) was also published. In fact, research among the Dangauras was stimulated by Rajaure himself who accompanied A.W. Macdonald to the field and made his home valley better known to French and other European scholars. Rajaure's field work culminated in a Master's degree from which three articles have been published in *Kailash* and in others journals. His study was shortly followed by two European PhD dissertations (McDonaugh 1984 and my own, Krauskopff 1985) based on field-work conducted in the late seventies and early eighties. My PhD dissertation was published in 1989, in French like most of my others articles.

The anthropology of Nepal's Tharus was first concentrated on the Dangauras and more precisely on those of Dang valley proper, Rajaure and McDonaugh having worked in the central eastern part, and I in the western.²⁶ Thus the anthropology of Nepal's Tharus started with a group markedly, if not totally, different from the Indian Rana Tharus. It was, therefore, nearly impossible to create a bridge with the earlier studies, not only because of a

²⁵ See note 18.

²⁶ I have personally carried out short studies in Deokhuri (see Krauskopff 1989a) where the Dangaura religious organisation differs, and in Banke, Bardiya, Kailali and Kanchanpur districts among Dangaura, Rajathya, Deshaurya and Rana Tharus (unpublished except for a very brief description of the Rana house, 1987d).

different ideological context, theoretical framework and approach, but also because of this gap.

Eastern Terai Tharus drew the early and brief attention of a Nepalese anthropologist who published in Nepali (Regmi 1973; 1978) and whose work did not circulate and was not discussed by others. Very recently a Master's dissertation in Nepali has also been submitted to Tribhuvan University (N. Sangroula 2053 V.S.). In spite of its proximity to Kathmandu and its easy access, the Chitwan Valley was not the subject of long-term, deep anthropological studies until very recently. K. Mikame published only two articles (1979; 1990); Pyakuryal's PhD dissertation (1982) dealt more specifically with sociological problems like inter-ethnic relations, and U. Müller-Böker's early publications with an ethno-geographical approach in a broader pan-Nepali context. But very recently, she has published a comprehensive book on the material culture and ethno-ecology of the Chitwan Tharus (1995). A. Guneratne has also recently submitted a very a detailed PhD on the same group (1994). The topic of this thesis, ethnicity, noticeably marks a change of approach that I shall discuss further presently. Finally and strangely enough, Nepal's Rana Tharus had to wait for the beginning of the nineties for a new wave of research, a Nepalese-Norwegian team of professionals and students, whose work is in progress. They are giving new impetus to the research, having succeeded recently in bringing together for a conference (Skar and Gurung 1996 forthcoming), three generations of scholars, from S.K. Srivastava, the eldest, and most of the people who have studied the Tharus of Nepal. It is to be hoped that the gap between research in Nepal and earlier Indian studies on the Ranas of Nainital will be bridged, since even today the Ranas of Kanchanpur district maintain close relations with Indian Tharus. Finally, a general public and amateur concern for this numerous people of the flat land of the Himalayan kingdom has also very recently arisen.

For this period, of which I am a part, I shall not discuss each work in detail but shall rather present thematic and analytic trends.

The purely descriptive approach is represented by the work of Nepalese scholars like D. Rajaure for the Dangauras and R.R. Regmi for the Koshilas. Rajaure's work is a classical village monograph dealing with economy, rites of passage, festivals and some village rituals as well as more specialised customs or subjects like tattooing, child-rearing and the status of women. The short work of R.R. Regmi on the Koshila is included in a book written in Nepali devoted to two other ethnic communities. It is not a village monograph proper but, starting with the classical Tharu origin controversy, he describes

Koshi Tharu customs collected in different districts of Eastern Nepal: house building and decorations, fishing, agriculture, social organisation (*thar* and *gotra*, marriage regulations and rituals), religious practices (*dhami* village rituals and healing practices) and rites of passage. A.W. Macdonald's pioneering article on Holi and Maghe Sankranti (1969) is also a purely descriptive work.

C. McDonough's and my own studies of the Dangaura Tharus, although they are both village monographs in the Western anthropological tradition, follow different approaches. McDonough puts emphasis on social organisation, more specifically on kinship relations, with ritual and mythology being used as a means to define kinship units. Based on an exhaustive description of village, domestic and 'forest' rituals, I broaden the scope of the village study to the overall ritual organisation of Dang valley in relation to the previous political and agrarian structure of the Baisi Hindu kingdom of Dang. This ethno-historical perspective developed in further articles emphasises the political aspect of the Hindu centralisation process. Ritual is, therefore, a tool to bring out the process by which Dangaura Tharu society developed in a wider Hindu kingdom strongly influenced by the Kanphata Yogi Saivaite order. It is noticeable that McDonough and I insisted on rituals as a research topic arising from the field itself, a necessary tool to understand the Dangaura Tharus' social organisation. In that regard both approaches are in keeping with a more general trend in western Nepalese studies, especially illustrated by recent French works, stressing the social and political role of ritual and echoing the analyses of Hocart and Mus. The bibliography will illustrate the other subjects treated by these authors, the French articles titles being translated into English for the convenience of the reader.

A totally different trend of anthropological research has been started recently, being best represented by Guneratne's recent American PhD dissertation (1994). The latter deals with ethnicity and the State, linking the ethnic movement of the Chitwan Tharus to the Tharu elite of landlords who emerged during the Rana period. I think this heavy influence of Chitwan Tharu landlords could be related to the major role of Dang Tharu landlords and regional priests in the genesis of the centralized and peculiar Dangaura culture (Krauskopff 1989a; 1990), a comparative fact which points to the importance of the specific agrarian conditions in the Terai in moulding Tharu cultures and societies.

Echoing a firm tradition of Norwegian anthropology, the Nepalese-Norwegian team presently working among the far western Rana Tharus confirms this new trend of research by dealing mainly with ethnic problems and processes, in relation with the new context brought about by the recent political changes in Nepal. A collective book to be published (Skar and Gurung 1996 forthcoming) gives a good idea of their results. The subject of ethnicity is closely related to the present new situation of Nepal's minorities and is in keeping with a more general interest in ethnicity in recent years. Particularly interesting in this regard is the recent ethnic movement which originated among the Dangauras (see S. Ødegaard's article on BASE in Skar and Gurung 1996 forthcoming), and differs in its genesis and strategies from the older Tharu Kalyankarini Sabha studied by Guneratne (1994). The latter association was born among the Tharu elite of the eastern Terai and developed in Chitwan, but had very little influence in Dang and the western Terai.

In the field of environmental studies and in a broader context, the geographer U. Müller-Böker has written on Chitwan Tharu ecological and botanic categories (on ethnobotany in Chitwan, see also Dangal and Gurung 1991, and on medicinal plants in Dang, Manandhar 1985). To conclude on subjects which are on the margin of anthropology strictly speaking, we should mention the very brief linguistic research done by the Summer Institute of Linguistics in Chitwan (1972). But Grierson's much earlier comments on the Tharu 'broken languages' (1903) and U.N. Tiwari's (1970) study of Bhojpuri still stand as references in a little-developed field of research.

Another topic of research has been the study of house-building and spatial organisation conducted by architects, mostly on the Dangaura Tharu house which is remarkable for its unusual length (Blair 1983, Millet Mondon 1981, reprinted in English 1990). A forthcoming paper (Meyer and Duel 1996) offers a more general scope, covering a wide range of Tharu house styles from the western to the eastern Terai.

Having evoked the recent ethnic revival and the Tharus' concern for their own traditions, I should like to conclude with a discussion of publications in the Tharu language that are flourishing nowadays. They are often privately published or circulate only locally. It is, therefore, difficult to list this very miscellaneous production since most of the journals and books are unavailable, being mostly confined to village archives. It would be impossible to give a fair account of all: some are quasi-ethnographic (especially collections

of myths, sacred and profane songs), some are a good example of the discourse of the Tharus on themselves, and others simply describe a custom or offer poems or songs (for the most prominent of these publications of myths and songs in the Dangaura Tharu language, see McDonough 1989 and Krauskopff 1996). It should be noted that a few small Nepali booklets and very short articles in English and Nepali have been published on the Tharus, but since their perspective is not properly anthropological they have not been included here. They are generally written by local or national erudites, mostly Brahmin. If representative of other Nepalese people's discourse on the Tharus, they cannot be considered as proper anthropological research. Some of these references are for instance listed in R.R. Regmi (1973, 1978) and exhaustively in Sangraula (2053 V.S. 3-4; 97-101).

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Dangaura Tharus

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- _____ 'La féminité des poissons. Un motif aquatique du mythe d'origine et des chants de mariage tharu (Népal)', *Cahiers de Littérature Orale* 22, 1987c, 13-28. (The femininity of fish: an aquatic motif in the origin myth and in marriage songs of the Tharu of Nepal).
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