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Research Article

## **Tracing the Roots of Ascribed Tharu Identity in the Context of Nepal**

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### **Abstract**

Tharus, an indigenous people of Nepal, spread throughout Tarai and inner Tarai of Nepal. There is the controversial understanding on origin of the Tharus of Nepal. This paper aims to review the various anthropological and other literatures regarding the origin of Tharus of Nepal, one of the oldest ethnic people of Nepal. This article employs a tripartite sociological framework—Prescribed, Ascribed, and Described identity—to analyze how Tharus in 22 districts navigate their status in a federalizing Nepal. Throughout the course of the past century, numerous academic articles have been dedicated to exploring the intricacies of the Tharu ethnic group. These publications have delved into various aspects of their society, including social structure, economy, women's roles, religious practices and customs, folklore, homes, and demographics. However, a significant gap remains in our understanding of the Tharu language, its dialects, and the sociolinguistic factors that shape it. The history of the Tharu origin tells that there are prescribed, described and ascribed identities. Because of these differences, Tharu students face an identity crisis. So, I have critically analyzed the history from various lenses to challenge the prescribed and described Tharu identities by the ascribed identity in the curriculum. Thematically, I argue the origin of the Tharus connection with the vedic era. This study will be helpful for opening the way of studying the various aspect of Tharus in Nepal.

**Keywords:** Tharu, Adivasi Janajati, vedic era, Ascribed identity.

### **Introduction**

Nepal is a country with diverse cultures, languages, religions, and ethnicities. There are people of indigenous origin, settlers' origin, and mixed origin. Out of these three groups, Tharus are considered as a people of indigenous origin. There are three contending words: Indigenous

Nationalities (*Adibasi, Janajati*) and in English Indigenous People to indicate people like the Tharu. Each of these words has a controversial meaning. For example, *Adibasi* connotes temporal groups of people; *Janajati* connotes the impoverished group who are outside the Hindu caste hierarchy; indigenous connotes with internationally recognized treaty groups (United Nations Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator's Office, 2011). This echoes that all the *Adibasis* are not *Janajati*; all the *Janajatis* are not *Adibasi*; and all *Janajati* and *Adibasi* are not indigenous peoples. However, for convenience, I have interchangeably used these competing terms which go along with the National Foundation for Development Indigenous Nationalities's (NFDIN) definition to represent 59 groups of people of Nepal. Some researchers like Ashokakriti (2008), Chaudhary (2012), McDonough (1997) and Sapkota (2014) think that Tharus are among the oldest ethnic group.

Indigenous peoples are estimated to make up roughly 35 percent of the country's total population (Subba et al., 2014). The Tharus, the second largest ethnic group, make up 6.6 percent of the population. Central Bureau of Statistics (2012) indicates 125 different caste and ethnic groups, whereas the National Population and Housing Census (2021) shows 142 caste and ethnic groups (National Statistics Office, 2023). The latest census 2021 identified 17 additional caste and ethnic groups that had not been included before. Hence, this new dataset depicts a more diverse and intricate ethnic Nepali community than what was previously understood. Among these different groups, Nepal government has categorized 60 *Adibasi/ Janajati* into five categories, and the Tharus are considered as one of the marginalized groups.

Both the experience and the literature helped me state some problems to be addressed through this study. The first problem is to address Dangaura Tharu students' confusion about their identity as Hindu (Nesfield, 1885), Rajput (Meyer, 1995), Buddhist (Dahit, 2017), Kirant (Sankrityayana, 1957), and Mogoloid (Chemjong, 2003).

## **Methods and Procedure**

The research methodology employed in this study is qualitative, primarily centered around document analysis, complemented by personal reflection. The study aims to explore the in-depth understanding of the origin of the Tharus of Nepal. The most relevant literature regarding historical to academic ones, such as academic articles, reports, policy documents, and

research-based books, was systematically reviewed. These selected documents served as the primary data sources, and each was carefully reviewed to identify recurring patterns, concepts, and meanings that could help to extract the origin of Tharus. Additionally, I integrated my personal insights and experiences to cross-triangulate the data. It also helped to bridge the gap between documented evidence and real-world observation.

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which consists of coding the data, collecting related codes, and making them into meaningful themes. Firstly, I familiarized myself with the data through reading the data repeatedly noting the initial ideas. I generated initial codes systematically and collated information relevant to each code. Next, I organized all the initial codes into potential themes and named each theme. Finally, I produced thematic analysis, selecting various representative extracts to illustrate each theme regarding each research questions. As a researcher, I made an effort to convince my audience that the whole research process was reliable (Creswell & Miller, 2000). To do this, I employed 'trustworthiness' which involves credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. For credibility, I carefully assessed the context and quality of the existing information and compared it with multiple sources of information to check for consistency of interpretations. I supported transferability by thick and contextualized description of the original information sources. Finally, through using reflexive notes to all the sources my assumptions, positionality and biases in engaging with other's sources.

## **Results of the Study**

The findings of the study is thematically analyzed the secondary information, organized around the key themes which address the research questions.

## **Tharus in Hindu Connection**

Tharus religious texts such as three great epic- Barkimar (Tharu Mahabharat), Gurbabak Jalmauti (Tharu cosmology) and Phulwar , Sakhya songs (Tharu Bhagwat Gita), Rambihegra songs (Tharu Ramayan), Samrauti (opening songs), Mantras of Gururwas, Krishna jalmauti, etcives knowledge that they are Hindus. As (Gramsci, 1971) said, folklore represents an important medium of people's worldviews where they are preserved and passed on. Their greeting like Ram Ram, and Sitaram their their worshipping the deities such as *Gurbaba*,*latau*

Mahadev, gaura parbati, maiya, bhawani, Gorakhnath, Jagannath, Patan devi, Five Pandavs, Krishna (kanha), etc, and the Vedic connection such as Gram Sabha in vedic period, as Khyala or *Khojnibojni* general assembly of the village is still in practice, are examples of this claim. The tabular display of the word Tharu indicates their different origins. Srivastava (1958, pp.13-15) explained the origin of Tharu based on three words: *tahre*, *tarhuwa*, and *thatharana*. Firstly, '*tahre*' which means halted at dense forest. Similarly, another word, '*tarhuwa*,' which denotes "became wet," and the thirdly "*thatharana*," word clearly denotes that "trembling" or "quaking" during the battle between Rajputs and Muslims. Similarly, Nesfield (1885) also suggests that the name of the Tharu tribe is derived from their own dialect rather than from Sanskrit sources. He claims that the word "thar" is the Tharu word which means 'man of the forest' (Nesfield 1885, p.115, as cited in Srivastava 1958, p.14). In this regard, Sharma (1961) also agreed that Tharus are the jungle tribes, and he described the Tharu words originated from two Hindi words- Thahrey and tarhua which means people halted in the forest and wet/ swampy land where they inhabit respectively. Gautam (B.S. 2044) argues that the term 'Tharu' is derived from the Sanskrit root 'Tharwa' as noted in Pre-paninian Sanskrit Grammars. Tharwa means the hunting and of staying in a single place. Gautam (B. S. 2044) also says that the word perfectly reflects the lifestyle of the Tharu people who live in nature and move about during hunts. According to Nath, The Tharu term came from sanskrit word 'Stahru' (as cited in Gautam, 1987). Similarly, Gautam explains the meaning of Tharu by referring to the words Tharva and Tharvan, both of which may have originated in classical Sanskrit. The Classical Sanskrit grammar, previous than Panini grammar, contains such words as 'Tharva' or 'Tharvan'. Therefore, Tharva or Tharva means, the inability to live in one place for a long time, thus leading a nomadic life.

### **Tharus as Kirati Descendants.**

There is a lot of debate surrounding the origin of the Tharu. A clear and definite conclusion about the origin of Tharu has not been reached by the scholars. Etymologies have been the basis for some scholars to derive the origin of their people and some try to trace their ancestry through alleged. From their physical features, it appears that Tharu possess Mongoloid traits. Tharus are either Kirats or people of mixed blood living in Tarai. In this connection, Sankrityayana (1957) has emphasized that Tharus are a branch of Kirat. Similarly, Majumdar (1944) stated that the Tharus possess the mongoloid racial traits, and they cannot claim their

origin as Rajputs in terms of blood group tests or serology. They do not show any known distinctive features that would connect them to Rajputs of Rajasthan, either in their cultural or racial practices. Srivastava (1965) further elaborates on Tharu that they have mongoloid features, which he sees as a beneficial mixture of non, mongoloid races as well (Yadav, 2017). Chemjong (2003) argues that Tharus and Donbas are a sub-lineage of Thangdao (Kirat) as written in the Kirant genealogy.

The Tharu people belonged to the other Kirati groups and worshipped Mother Nature and Earth. Nevertheless, the changeover of Tharus to Hinduism had the result that they became Hindu culture followers. A few Tharu individuals display Mongoloid features, and some others have Australoid features; this means that the Tharu community is a mixture of Kirat and Nishadhas.

The first inhabitants of the Himalayan region were Kirantas and Nishadhas. Singh (1990) have already confirmed that Tharu is Kirat's offspring. In the same way, Bista (2004) revealed that Tharu is from the Kirat clan. Singh (1990) wrote, "The Thadus or Tharus occupying the Tarai region from Nepal and eastern Rohilkhanda along the frontiers of Oudh to Gorakhpur are supposed to be identical with the Kiratas".

### **Tharus as the Descendants of Buddha**

Tharus are believed to be descendants of Lord Buddha, and according to them, the Tharus are Mongols inhabiting between the Himalayas and the basins of the Ganga and Yamuna rivers in India (Dahit, 2009). In ancient times, Sukauragadh was the capital of the Tharu kingdom and was ruled by the Tharu for a long time. However, in the 14th century, Ratan Pande, a feudal lord from the hills, attacked and took over the Sukaura Tharu state. This is documented by Diwasa and Bhattarai (Ed) in 2009.

The Tharu, primarily inhabiting the Tarai region spanning Nepal and northern India, are frequently associated with Buddhist heritage and potentially descended from Lord Buddha himself. Scholars such as Panjiyar (1993, 1994) and Dwivedi (1955) posit direct lineage from Buddha, while others like Singh (1998) and Sharma (2009BS) suggest connections to ancient clans such as the Sakyas and Koliyas. This Buddhist link is further reinforced by linguistic analyses connecting the term "Tharu" to early Buddhist traditions like Theravada.

Geographically, the Tharu's presence extends from Kapilvastu to the Ganga and Yamuna river basins, indicating a historically significant settlement area. Ethnically, multiple researchers

characterize the Tharu as having Mongol origins, potentially representing a pre-Aryan population in the region. Some accounts, notably by Dwivedi, suggest that the Tharu established their own federal state 2500 years ago, implying a sophisticated political organization in ancient times. The diversity of scholarly perspectives presented here underscores the complex nature of Tharu origins and their potential significance in ancient South Asia's religious and cultural landscape. While these theories provide valuable insights into Tharu history, they also highlight the need for continued research to fully understand the intricate tapestry of Tharu identity and its place in the broader context of South Asian civilization. Reflecting on the claims and reclaims, I came up with the understanding that the Tharu community has a rich historical presence in the Tarai region, which covers parts of Nepal and northern India. They seem to strongly connect to Buddhist history and terminology, indicating a deep cultural and possibly genetic link to early Buddhist communities.

### **Tharu as the Descendants of Kshatriya**

Tharu people believe that they left Rajputana, India, following the Islamic invasions (Boehm, 1998). Some scholars claimed that they are the descendants of Rajput women who settled in the forests and intermarried with their servants after the exodus from Rajasthan. This information has been recorded in Bista's 1972 book (page 119). Most of the scholars focused on the connection of Tharu origin to the Rajput women. According to multiple sources (Boehm, 1997; Bista, 2004; Sharma, 2036 B.S.), the Tharus are said to have originated from Rajputana (Rajasthan) and then migrated to the Tarai region of Nepal during Islamic invasions. Some theories (Bista, 2004; Meyer, 1995) suggest that the Tharus are descendants of Rajput women who either fled with their servants or intermarried with local people after settling in the forests. However, Meyer (1995) casts doubt on this origin story, proposing that some clans may have created the Rajasthan migration narrative to enhance their social status. There is a consistent theme of linking Tharu origins to Rajput nobility and the Islamic invasions of India. However, My understanding of the origin of Tharus is based on four parameters- Locationality adaptation, Localization, religious, and genetic adaptation to the environment.

### **Bases of Ascribed Tharu Identity**

In this section, I have mentioned different bases to replace the prescribed and described Tharu identity mentioned in the school textbooks thereby promote ascribed identity. The bases to nurture the ascribed Tharu identity are as follows:

The Tarai region, where the Tharu people predominantly live, is significantly different from Rajasthan in terms of climate, topography, and ecology. Rajasthan is largely arid and desert-like, while the Tarai is a humid, subtropical lowland with dense forests and wetlands. The Tharu people show remarkable adaptation to the Tarai's environment, including natural resistance to malaria, which suggests a much longer period of habitation than the proposed migration timeline.

The Tharu people have a strong connection to the Tarai region, with unique cultural practices and traditions that are well-suited to the local environment. Their agricultural methods, house-building techniques, and overall lifestyle are highly specialized for the unique ecological conditions of the Tarai. This deep localization indicates a much longer history in the region than the relatively recent Islamic invasions would suggest.

The Tharu people have their own unique religious practices that blend animism, nature worship, and some Hindu elements. If they were recent migrants from Rajasthan, one would expect their religious practices to more closely align with mainstream Hinduism as practiced in Rajasthan. The presence of strong animistic and nature-worshipping elements suggests a more indigenous origin or at least a much longer presence in the Tarai region.

### **Genetic Adaptation to the Environment of Tharu Origin**

The Tharu people's resistance to malaria in the Tarai region, where the disease is prevalent, indicates genetic adaptation over a much longer period than the proposed migration timeline allows. Genetic adaptations like this usually take thousands of years to develop, suggesting a much longer presence in the region.

The Tharus are believed to originate from East Asia based on their physical characteristics (Bista, 1980) and immunoglobulin markers (Chopra, 1970). However, when compared to other Oriental groups, they tend to be darker (Bista, 1980). Research involving various mtDNA markers (Brega et al., 1986; Passarino et al., 1992) has further reinforced that the Tharus have their origins in the Orient. This suggests that they share a common ancestry.

A significant portion of the mtDNA found in the Tharu population is derived from East Asian sources. Therefore, common narratives suggesting a strong Hindu maternal lineage for the Tharus appear to be contradicted by genetic evidence.

### **Tharu as the Indigenous-settler of Nepal**

The malaria control program in Nepal began in 1950 with the establishment of a unit for the Gandki hydropower project. In 1954, the Insect-borne Disease Control unit was established with assistance from the United States Overseas Mission (USOM), US government. On December 4, 1958, the Malaria Eradication Programme was launched under the Nepal Malaria Eradication Organization with assistance from USOM and World Health Organization (Terrenato et al., 1988).

Large areas of the country are covered by mountains, but the southern part along the Indian border, the Tarai, is largely flat. This region used to be heavily infested with malaria until about 25 years ago. According to tradition, there was only one group of people, the Tharus, who were able to survive in this harsh environment. Accounts of European explorers also supported this view. Sir Richard Temple (1887, p. 228) wrote: "The feverish jungles of the Tarai, again, are inhabited in Nepal, as elsewhere, by primitive tribes, called there generically Awalies, whose position is peculiar in that they can dwell with impunity in places where the terrible 'awal' or malarial fever is sure to destroy the rest of their kind, and that quickly" (Temple, 1977).

Back in 1977, it was not easy for the Italian Tibetologist Tucci to hire porters for crossing the Tarai region between Surketh and Nepalganji. The reason was what the locals from the neighboring villages told the porters that they would not go through the Tarai until December. Only Tharus were able to survive in this environment. In 1956, the Nepal Malaria Eradication Organization (NMEO) was established, leading to successful malaria control and the growth of settlements by non-Tharu people, causing an increase in population size. The data presented confirm that Tharu people have a less incidence of being infected by the malaria in comparison with non-Tharus, for both *P. vivax* and *P. falciparum*. Below are the testimonies of their claim that Tharus are bhumiputra/indigenous people of Tarai.

Based on the literature reviewed, there is a strong case to be made that the Tharus are indeed long-time settlers and indigenous inhabitants of the Tarai region. The voices of scholars

are summarized as follows: Gisele Krauskopff (1995) said that the Tharus have been inhabitants of the eastern Tarai long before the 10th century. Dwivedi (1955) mentioned a Tharu king ruling in Gorakhpur in the 10th century, suggesting an established presence. Crooke (1973) described the Tarai as the "headquarters" of the Tharu tribe. Similarly, Multiple sources (Whelpton, Temple, Tucci) mention the Tharus' unique immunity to malaria, which was prevalent in the region until the 1950s. Hodgson (1874) stated that developing such immunity takes at least 3000 years, implying a very long-term presence in the area. Likewise, Guneratne (1995) defines "Tharu" as an ethnonym that refers to a linguistically and culturally distinct group specific to the Tarai region.

In addition to this, Gisèle Krauskopff (2018) noted that the Tharus were sophisticated farmers and pioneers in cultivating the Tarai, contradicting earlier notions of them being merely "backward" or isolated. And, multiple sources (Panjiar, Gurung, Bist) explicitly refer to Tharus as indigenous to the Tarai. Chaudhary (2014) argues that their continued presence in the challenging Tarai environment demonstrates their deep connection to the land. While some sources, such as Kaushic (1996), propose broader theories regarding the origin of indigenous groups in the region, they still position the Tharus' origins within the general geographical area of the Shivalik Hills, which includes the Tarai.

### **Historical Connection of Tharus With Various Kingdoms**

The Brahmaputra-Tista valley was inhabited by non-Aryan tribes such as Kiratas, Koches, and Meches. The 13th-century Persian work *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* describes this area as the territory between Bengal and Tibet, where communities like Koch, Mech, and Tharu lived. The tribal people lived in clan communities and adhered to traditional customs passed down for generations (Bapari, 2010). Chaudhary (2064 BS) argues that the Tharus might be the descendants of Gautam Buddha's dynasty as well as the Sen Kings, who were Hindu rulers of different areas in present, day Nepal until the early twentieth century.

In Magar mythology, during the *kulpuja* ritual (lineage worship), Tharus recite the names of their ancestors. It is believed that in ancient times, there were two families of cave-dwellers called *Sherappa* and *Gorappa*, who were brothers. Eventually, the two brothers parted ways and migrated to different places. Sherappa chose to live near the Himalayas, while Gorappa settled close to the Mahabharata hill. The inhabitants of the Himalayan area were recognized as Tamang,

Sherpa, Gurung, etc. , and those inhabiting near the Mahabharata range were known as Limbu, Rai, Tharu, and Magar(Kharel, 2021).

The word Tharu is derived from the Magar language where 'Tha' stands for courtyard, plain area, and open space. The kingdom of the Tha area was called Thar, and the kingdoms of the Tha region were called Tharaj. The people living in the territory of Tharaj were called Tharu. Among the descendants of Gorappa, Jhimje, Airu, and Harje were three brave brothers, according to the legend. Harje, the youngest brother, was into cow, farming and was very successful and prosperous. 'Har' means cow and 'je' means possessor in the Magar language.Hence, those who possess cows were named Harj (Kharel, 2021). I also agree that the Tharu people in Dang-Deukhuri still have many cows due to their tradition of cow farming. Historically, the Tharu people were the original inhabitants of the Tarai region, inner Madhesh, and the plains.

In a nutshell, the prescribed identity is that Tharus are animists (Chemjong, 2003) and the Bhumiputra (the people of the land). Their described identity is that they are Buddhist but not the Hindus Panjiyar (1993, 1994), Singh (1998), Sharma (2049BS) and Dahit (2009). But the ascribed identity to be inculcated among the Tharu students through textbook is that they are the people of the mixed blood (Boehm, 1997; Webster,1993; Bista,2004; Sharma, 2036 B.S.), mixed culture and thereby the special group of Bhumiputras of Nepal who have own scoi-cultural and public health structure that requires to be included in the textbooks and make education culturally responsive.

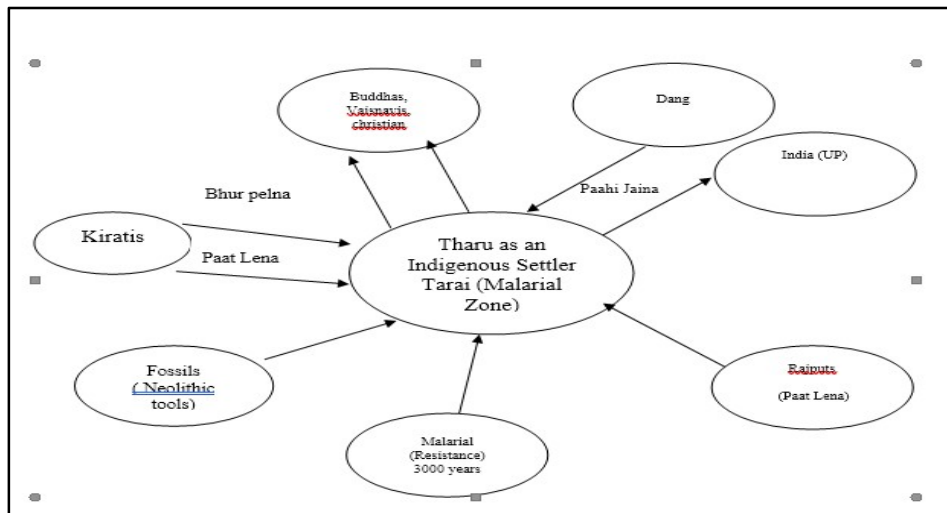
## **Discussion**

Reflecting on this chapter, I tried to figure out the religious connections, settlement connections, historical connections, biological connections, and cultural connections with the ascribed identity of Tharus which needs to be included in the textbooks. Before people settled in the Tarai region, it was a swampy area full of dense Saal trees, wild animals, and harmful insects. This led to epidemic diseases such as malaria, cholera, and smallpox. The area was only suitable for certain individuals who had genetic immunity to these diseases and the courage to face the challenges of the environment. These qualities were found in the Indigenous Tharus. I have explained the genetic, historical, professional, fossil, demographic, and ruling aspects to show

that the Tharus were the pioneering people of the Tarai and Inner Tarai, also known as Tharuhat, the homeland of the Tharus.

### Figure 1.

*Reflection on Tharu as an Indigenous Settler of Tarai*



The following are the additional evidences of the ascribed Tharu identity.

### Based on the Oldest Fossils and Artifacts

The evidence presented under this sub-heading aims to establish that the Tarai and Inner Tarai regions were once inhabited by ancient humans who had genetic and cultural connections with the present-day Tharu people. The discovery of Ramapithecus fossils in Butwal, as well as Palaeolithic, Microlithic, and Neolithic artifacts found in various places such as Dang, Deokhuri, Tui Dang, Kathmandu valley, Siraha, and Mahottari districts, indicates that human habitation in this area dates back to around eleven million years ago (Mishra (1996), Kaushic (1994) as cited in Ashokakirti, 1999, p. 102), suggesting that the Shivalik hill is the original homeland of Homosapiens, from where they migrated to Tibet and Oxas. It is also proposed that the

Australoid stock might have originated in India. As a result, it is deemed more logical and realistic to link the Kirat and other indigenous people of India and Nepal to the Shivalik origin, rather than the Pekingmen, discovered in 1921. When referring to the indigenous people of India and Nepal in this context, it includes those who live in the basin of the Shivalik hills, like the Tharu, Danuwar, Rajbanshi, Dhanuk, etc.

Based on historical evidence, I argue that the Tharus are the earliest inhabitants of the Dang-Deukhuri valley, dating back to the Stone Age. Adding weight to this claim, Banerjee and Sharma (1969), in their book *Neolithic Tools from Nepal-Sikkim*, they stated that the Tharus have been residing in Nepal for the past 2 lakh years. This suggests that the Tharus have a rich and extensive history across the Tarai and Inner-Tarai regions.

### **Based on Genetic Power against Malaria**

Before the eradication of Malaria, daily life in the Tarai and Inner Tarai regions was very risky and unhealthy due to the Malaria epidemic. These areas had swampy, wet, and dense land, with large-scale paddy cultivation, making it a highly conducive environment for mosquitoes, the main malaria sources. According to Webber (1902), "plainsmen and Paharis (hill people) generally die if they sleep in the Tarai before November 1 and after June 1." Shafey (1997, p. 34) further argued, "Hill people and the people of the Gangetic plains do not have this genetic adaptation, which disrupts the invasion and multiplication of plasmodium parasites." On the other hand, the land was very fruitful for Indigenous Tharus because they had developed immune power against the malaria epidemic by sacrificing many descendants. Modiano and colleagues (1991, as cited in Shafey, 1997, p. 34) found out that the Tharu people had made a hemoglobin variant, alpha, thalassemia, which helped them to survive malaria congestion in the lowland jungle.

The Tharu people have developed a strong resistance to malaria (Modiano et al., 1991). This would imply that the Tharu people could have been the inhabitants of the Tarai jungle and thus the continuous exposure to the swampy, malaria, rich environment would have brought about mutation in the direction of resistance (Terrenato et al., 1988). Similarly, Arif (2007) Emphasized that the Sickle cell trait is a genetic condition more common in regions with endemic malaria.

Likewise, Ashokakirti (2008, p. 25), "Tharus are in reality not only of Nepal but also one of the ancient castes in the world."

Through genetic analysis of the Tharu people, I conclude that they have a significantly higher resistance to malaria due to the development of a hemoglobin variant and alpha-thalassemia gene. This heightened immunity is believed to result from thousands of years of exposure to malaria in the Tarai and inner Tarai regions, known for being wet, swampy, and malarial. It is also suggested that before the Tharu inhabitants, these areas were uninhabitable due to the prevalence of epidemic diseases. Over time, the Tharu people developed immunity to malaria through natural selection, allowing them to thrive and establish human civilization in these regions. As a result, the Tharu are pioneers of human civilization in the Tarai and Inner Tarai of Nepal.

### **Connection With the Royal Dynasty and Paant Lena System of Tharu**

The historical evidence provided by Hodgson (1874), Acharya (2010) and Sharma (2039 B.S.) indicates that Tharus have been living in the Tarai and inner Tarai regions of present-day Nepal for at least 3,000 years Dahit (2009). Furthermore, he mentioned that Padma Uga Sambhawa, a "Yoga" professor at Nalanda University, reportedly visited Kamru, Tharu, and Tirhut in the 8th century, suggesting the prior presence of Tharus. During the 13th to 16th centuries, migration from the Thar Desert and the flight of Rajput women from Chittorgarh took place. This refutes the idea that all Tharus are descendants of fleeing Rajput women and their servants, or that they migrated from the Thar Desert. Additionally, research by Chaudhary (1999), Singh (2006), Mc Donough (1984), Crooke (1896), and Risley (1892) found no connection between Dangaura Tharus and the local people or the history of the Thar Desert and Chittorgarh. Likewise, Bista (2002) claims that Tharus have been living in the Tarai of Nepal for 3000 years and the connection of Tharus' origination with the Rajput women is only five years. From this historical evidence, I argue that Dangaura Tharus, originating from Dang-Deukhuri, has no historical or genetic connection with Rajput descendants and Tharus' settlement begins before Buddha period. It was concluded that individuals who migrated from the Thar Desert and fled Rajput women and their servants from Chittorgarh during Muslim invasions may have assimilated into the existing Tharu community.

The Tharu community had been inhabiting the Tarai and inner Tarai regions for thousands of years, and Tharus had the "*Paant Lena*" system. The Tharu king Dangisaran and subsequent rulers adopted a system known as "*Paant Lena*," which involved assimilating people of other castes into the Tharu community. " Rajaure (1981) discovered that individuals who were not Tharu were not allowed to migrate to the malarial zone- Tarai. The Tharu people had the right by the Royal Decrees to assimilate or adopt individuals from other castes into the Tharu community through a process called "*Paant Lena*." People from outside could become recognized as genuine Tharu by either deeds or by caste. Another ritual of the Tharus is the marriage system called "*Bhurpelana*," where a man assimilates into the clan of the widow he marries. Therefore, it can be concluded that regardless of an outsider's caste, they can become part of the Tharu clan, and this serves as ritual evidence to support the claim that the Tharus are the true inhabitants of the Tarai region."

The famous and influential Tharu King Dangisaran and his descendants ruled from Dang-Deukhuri from the beginning of the 12th to the 16th century (Chaudhary, 2012). The Ruler kings' names were Dangisaran, Laghudangi, Apardangi, Chittaldangi, Angardangi, Sarangdangi, Tuidangi, Upardangi, Ugarsendangi, Madhavrajadangi, Madalsa queen, Manik Parakhu (Manikya Pariskhyak), and Ratan Parakhu, totaling 14 Tharu kings who ruled in Dang. Similarly, Subedi (Subedi, 2062 B.S. Mangsir) claimed, "the four state boundary pillars of King Dangisaran were up to the Madi river in the east, up to the Sarada river (Mahakali) in the west, up to the Ari river through the Siwalic mountain in the north, and in the south up to Baharaich and Balarampur." Sharma (2039 B.S.) has the same version. According to him, "after the 10th century, there, at any time, was a king in Dang Deukhuri named Ratannath or a saint named Ratannath, whose command area was Salyan and the plain area up to Gorakhpur." He was the last Tharu King in Dang.

Also, regarding the geographical state from the Thar desert to the Plain Gange River and Nepal, it is difficult to cross the plain area of the Ganga River from Chittorgarh. Thus, I argue that Tharus were the settlers of Tarai.

### **Connection with Bajji Terminology about the Origin of Tharus**

Meche, Koche. and other tribes were immune from malaria. It takes at least 3000 years or more to gain this immunity power (Hodgson, 1874). This evidence clearly states the origin of Tharu before Buddha. It also proves that Tharus are not descendants of Rajput and their servants. Likewise, the term "Bajjiya" has been used by Tharus from the beginning, but it is considered derogatory. It is used to refer to outsiders, especially people of Indian origin. At that time, there were two powerful Republic states, the Sakya state and the Bajji state, and it is speculated that they were rebels (Sharma, 2039 B.S., p. 358; Singh, 2006). This historical context and my personal experience in daily life show that most of the Tharu people refer to the Indians who came to Nepal for business purposes as Bajjiya/Baji. In this regard, Sharma (2039 B.S.) added that "after the 10th century, there, at any time, was a king in Dang Deukhuri named Ratannath, whose command area was Salyan and the plain area up to Gorakhpur." He was the last Tharu King in Dang. Thus, I conclude that the Tharus have resided in the Tarai area since the Sakya and Bajji states, with their own Tharu state in Dang-Deukhuri.

### **Connecting Paahi System and Origin of Tharus**

*Paahi* is one of the traditional systems of Tharu community. The main purpose of *Paahi* is to scaffold the family in terms of the economy and upgrade the family's socio-economic status through working and sending money to the original place. Another reason behind the *Paahi* tradition was to fill the shortage of crop production, especially cash crops like maize and mustard. the farmer working as a *Paahi* man reviews the financial point of view. If he feels a better standard of living, then he decides to continue the *Paahi kheti* as a permanent worker at that place for some time until it makes life easier. If he felt it was worse than the previous place from a different perspective, as mentioned above, then he shifted from there according to the networking and connections of his main household (Personal Communication, 2023). I understand that the phenomenon "*PaahiKheti*" is one of the causes of migration from Dang to the Tarai region and the northern part of India. Thus, Tharus are the settlers of Nepal's Dang-Deukhuri or Tarai region. After that, Tharus of Dang migrated towards various parts of Nepal and the northern parts of India, where their own cultural system, like 'Paahi kheti', is reflected.

## **Conclusion**

This paper explores the deeply rooted and resistant history of the Tharu community and presents them as the first inhabitants of the area who have continuously resided in Nepal's Tarai and Inner, Tarai regions. The biological and environmental adjustments of the Tharus are the strongest proof of their indigeneity. The identification of the alpha, thalassemia gene that allows the Tharu to have a natural resistance to malaria is a strong indication that they have been living in the marshy Tarai area for over 3,000 years. This genetic finding is a strong argument against the "recent migration" story from Rajasthan (14th century) and points out that the Tharu people, by and large, existed way before the infiltration of Rajput refugees through the Paant Lena system, which might have just been some cultural assimilation. Besides, the finding of fossils and relics in the Shivalik hills that are linked to early human civilization indicate that the Tharu lineage goes back to the very first human settlement in South Asia.

Overall, Tharu identity as strong, ancient, and deeply rooted in the Tarai, with its own history, culture, language, and belief systems that developed independently rather than being borrowed from hill or Indian societies. The evidences of King Dangisaran and the fourteen Tharu kings reveal that Tharus once had an organized and politically advanced state, while practices like Paahi Kheti and Bhurpelana show how their social systems helped communities grow, adapt, and survive over time. Their language and religious beliefs, reflected in the great epic of Tharu i.e., Barkimar, combine nature worship, animism, and Vedic elements, proving a close relationship with the land rather than blind acceptance of outside religions. However, I concluded that Nepal's current school curriculum fails to reflect these complexities and instead often presents Tharus as marginalized or backward migrants. Tharus should be recognized as the first people of the Tarai, whose identity is shaped by mixed culture and shared survival, and updating textbooks is essential to give Tharu students an education that respects their heritage, builds self-worth, and nurtures pride in their history.

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