

THE INFLUENCE OF THE THARUHAT AUTONOMOUS STATE COUNCIL (TASC) IN KAILALI DISTRICT IN THE FAR-WESTERN TARAI

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ABSTRACT

The signing of the Comprehensive Peace Accord in 2006 and Nepal entering a post-conflict era have been associated with the emergence of various organisations and movements often formed along ethnic lines. The Tharuhat Autonomous State Council (TASC) is one such movement that is the focus of this paper but more generally has received relatively limited focus within academia. Within the context of Kailali district in far-west Nepal, this paper explores various characteristics and policies of the wider Tharuhat movement focusing on the vision for an autonomous Tharu state. It will highlight some of the successes and problems that the movement faces. Furthermore, this paper will explore a number of tensions between the national Tharuhat discourse and how this finds meaning and resonance at the local level where activists are attempting to engage with the Tharu community. Ultimately this paper examines the extent to which the Tharuhat movement represents a new more political stage in the wider Tharu ethnic movement.

Key words: Tharuhat; Madhesh; identity politics; movement; Western Tarai

INTRODUCTION

This paper will briefly explore and analyse various aspects of the Tharuhat Autonomous State Council (TASC) led Tharuhat movement in reference to perceptions of the movement in Kailali district, far-west Nepal. Furthermore, the paper will explore the reasons why the TASC was initiated; some of its principal policies and the meaning the Tharuhat has

for a number of predominantly Kamaiya informants in Kailali District. The inroads the TASC have made in generating support in Kailali emerges as, at times, quite narrow pointing towards limited resources (at a range of levels) which to an extent has impeded the development and influence of TASC at the local level. It will also explore how experiences of the People's War have contributed to shaping political allegiances and persuasions within post-conflict Nepal.

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Ultimately, I will argue that a number of inter-linked factors can help to understand the emergence and form of movements such as the TASC in post-2006 Nepal. The United Community Party of Nepal (Maoist) (UCPN(M)) through the 10 year long People's War is often credited with having led to the increase in political awareness amongst various disadvantaged groups such as the lower castes, women and ethnic groups in Nepal. Therefore, the extent to which the People's War can account for the politicisation of Tharu identity will be critically engaged with throughout.¹ Contextually this paper will not principally engage with the political processes that the TASC is involved with in Kathmandu, but will explore how the nationally represented discourses find meaning and resonance at the local level where activists are attempting to engage with the Tharu community.² Before exploring these processes in more detail I will now turn to a number of contextual necessities, beginning with a background to the Tharuhat. As will emerge below the Tharuhat represents in some ways a change from the sorts of Tharu specific political bodies that pre-exist this movement and it is this that forms the central concern of this paper.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE TASC

The meaning of the term Tharuhat seems quite interchangeable in various contexts. For example, it is commonly considered a movement, a political entity as well as a specific region of the western and far-western Tarai (and for some the entire Tarai). Throughout this paper I refer to the Tharuhat in this broad sense in reference to the ways this term is understood and discussed in the areas in which I undertook fieldwork. However, more specifically as will become clear below the implicit understanding of the term Tharuhat is that it is closely associated with the TASC. The TASC was established following the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2006 and to an extent is a movement incorporating a range of pre-existing Tharu organisations^{3, 4} of and for the specific demands of post-conflict Nepal. Essentially the TASC is an umbrella movement of Tharu organisations working towards achieving a shared agenda (principally for an autonomous state within a federal Nepal). When discussing the actual vision of this state with activists it sounded very much like a kind of socialist vision. For example, there was a consistent emphasis

¹ While beyond the scope of this paper *Jan Andolan* I and II also have had an important influence in the rise of rights and identity based politics in Nepal. Furthermore, although it would be unlikely for a Tharuhat leader to admit it, the success of the Madhesi Jana Adhikar Forum (MJF) in 2008 CA elections and resultant prominence of Madeshi issues would have also provided impetus for the inception of the Tharuhat and other similar organisations.

² This paper relates to ESRC funded fieldwork undertaken principally in the east of Kailali district as well as Dhangadi throughout 2009.

³ And therefore incorporates a specific Tharu elite from these organisations which include the Tharu Welfare Society and BASE.

⁴ The number of associated organisations has varied over time since the inception of the movement.

on equality of opportunity and the equal distribution of land and resources. It is a movement principally relevant in the districts of the mid and far-western Tarai in districts in which the Tharu constitute a high proportion of the population.

The wider Tharuhat movement is mainly composed of the Tharuhat Autonomous State Council (TASC) and Tharuhat Joint Struggle Committee (TJSC) with the latter having a stronger focus on agitating against the 'one madhes one state' political movement.⁵ However, while this paper refers to the Tharuhat throughout in a general sense (in reference to the use of this term locally) this is largely in reference to the TASC who are leading the representation of Tharu concerns in relation to the writing of a new constitution. Furthermore, the relationship between the TJSC and TASC has at times been strained due to an earlier alliance between the TJSC and the Madeshi Jana Adhikar Forum (MJF),⁶ an alliance that was unexpected given the predominance of anti-Madeshi sentiment within the Tharuhat movement (and especially the TJSC). However, due to an apparent 'Maoist line' within the MJF this alliance was short lived. Former PLA Commander, Laxman Tharu was central to establishing both the

TASC and TJSC and his leadership and position of prominence remained relatively unchallenged until the alliance with the MJF. However, subsequent to this alliance some ideological differences in the leadership of the TJSC and TASC have perhaps emerged, although the two bodies work closely together and certainly at the local level this distinction has little significance. The TASC is also a member of the Federal Democratic National Forum (FDNF) along with other state councils such as Limbuwan, Khambuwan and Tamangsaling. This alliance constitutes a specific vision of a new federal Nepal in which ILO 169⁷ is consistently mentioned.

Currently the TASC is the pre-eminent Tharu movement/organisation in Nepal. It is commonly represented as a movement by the Tharu and for the Tharu. However, it did not emerge without being preceded by a range of organisations representing quite different stages and tones of the Tharu ethnic movement. Of the multiple Tharu organisations pre-dating the TASC, Gisele Krauskopff (2008) identifies the Tharu Welfare Society and the Backward Society Education (BASE) as the two preeminent Tharu organisations.⁸ Both these organisations have been associated with the TASC and TJSC (with for example, senior

⁵ There are also a range of additional associated bodies such as the Tharu Student Society and Tharu Artist Committee.

⁶ The MJF is currently a political party in Nepal focused on the creation of a Madhes autonomous region in the Nepali Tarai (although more orientated towards the east while the Tharuhat focus on the western Tarai).

⁷ ILO convention 169 was adopted at the International Labour Conference in Geneva in 1989. This convention focuses on the human rights of Indigenous and Tribal People (such as the Tharu). Nepal became the first country in South Asia to ratify the convention in 2007.

⁸ There are of course a broad range of additional Tharu organisations some affiliated to the Tharuhat, some not (associations became more fragmented after the Tharuhat's association with the MJF). These include, the Nepal Loktantrik Tharu Sangh, Tharu Rastriya Mukti Morcha etc. However, it is

members from each organisation on the TASC central committee). However, recently (as of February 2010) the Tharu Welfare Society removed its support from the TJSC due to the 'betrayal' of the association with the MJF. However, BASE has remained consistently engaged perhaps reflecting some of the differences Krauskopff identifies between the two organisations (2008: 228-9). Therefore, one cannot consider the politicisation of Tharu identity in the form of the Tharuhat without incorporating the influence of these two (and other) organisations and the wider Tharu ethnic movement.

With the existence of the well-established Tharu organisations and Tharu ethnic movement they represented, one naturally arrives at a number of critical questions: what are the objectives of the TASC and why did it emerge? As will transpire below there are some critical differences between the TASC and the nature of the Tharu movement and associated organisations that came before. Initially these changes seem to represent an evolution from a Tharu ethnic movement to a more adversarial Tharu political movement complemented by a reconfigured relationship to a reconfigured, post-conflict state. Furthermore, the predominant TASC demand for a Tharu autonomous state represents a direct challenge to the current state and political structure in Nepal.⁹ However, TASC leaders confirmed though that their vision for this autonomous state was contained in the

overarching framework of a broader Nepali state, which would be constituted of a number of other ethnically orientated autonomous states (the other members of FDNF for example). There were no calls for independence from Nepal but an implicit acceptance of working within the boundaries (not just geographic) of the Nepali nation state. Critically the emergence of the TASC has to be situated within a very different set of circumstances i.e. volatile and frequently violent post-conflict situation, and this following a conflict that contributed to the increased political awareness of many disadvantaged and disempowered groups across Nepal.

The TASC's structure is organised with a President, vice-President and Treasurer who are all central committee members. The original central committee members were selected at their first conference (around May 2008) by election. Now they are selected in general meetings (which take place sporadically) and elections don't appear to be held anymore. The national structure is reflected at district level. While in relation to TASC funding (at both local and national levels) there is little clarity in where the movement gets its funding from. I met several TASC activists from Dang who talked about the system of taxation (largely focusing on natural resources) that the TASC implemented with some businessmen and landowners in the district, however, there didn't seem to be a similar system evident in Kailali. When I discussed funding with TASC

beyond the scope of this paper to explore the implications of the PW for these organisations and the nature of their association with the Tharuhat. This is not to say that they are not significant in Kailali and further afield, but the Tharuhat is very much currently the predominant Tharu organisation in Kailali.

⁹ There are a range of additional demands such as invoking ILO 169, the higher representation of Tharu across all areas of the state that are invoked to greater or lesser extent at different times.

leaders in Kailali I was told that most of the funding they received was from donations from a range of Tharuhat supporters who tended to be affluent and Tharu. This was supplemented by both cross border and natural resource taxation although the leaders I spoke to were less clear on the details of this (or were less willing to talk to me about such forms of income).

Laxman Tharu is an extremely influential figure and reference for activists at a range of levels within the wider Tharuhat movement. He is presented as someone who comes from a very humble background and lives simply. The popular discourse amongst activists is that he rose from humble beginnings to be a leading Tharu within the PLA (People's Liberation Army), and was then subsequently marginalised.¹⁰ Perhaps as a result of the lack of personal opportunity in the PLA he began the Tharuhat. Alternatively, some view his leaving the PLA as more ideological referring to his criticisms of the Brahmin bias in the upper echelons of the PLA. The predominant Tharuhat discourse relating to Laxman Tharu's background that he comes from a poor background is functional for the Tharuhat at a number of levels, not least that it helps protect the movement from criticisms of elitism and ensures the engagement of activists from more humble backgrounds. Furthermore, the reasons given for him having left the PLA (then called Comrade Roshan where he was a Battalion Commander in the now 7th Division) are many and contradictory.

According to Laxman he left the PLA because of the lack of opportunity for him and other Tharu within the UCPN(M) due to it being Brahmin dominated. This perhaps refers to the Maoist affiliated Tharuwan being Brahmin led. That the former leader of the TASC and TJSC is both so influential and controversial is of particular relevance for the Tharuhat at the district and local levels, to which I will now turn.

THE THARUHAT IN KAILALI

Local meanings

Importantly the local understanding of the differences between the TJSC and TASC are blurred with respondents consistently simply referring to the Tharuhat movement. And it is within these limitations that the discussion below will be framed. This also in part refers to the then closeness of the TJSC and TASC while this fieldwork was undertaken (throughout 2009) while more recently at times there seems to be a more pronounced distinction between these two entities (as well as instances of collaboration). While the national background is, of course, important the principal focus of this paper is local activism and reflections on the Tharuhat. Along with Dang, Kailali district is considered by Tharuhat activists as something of a Tharuhat stronghold. I was told on many occasions by Tharuhat activists and members that the Tharu are the largest group in Kailali, something confirmed by the last census.¹¹ This as well

¹⁰ He was well respected as a committed fighter and leader within the PLA although the cadres currently in the cantonments (both Tharu and non-Tharu) were quite reluctant to talk about him due to his desertion.

¹¹ According to Population census 2058 (AD 2001) Tharu was spoken by 47.5% i.e. 198497 people in Kailali.

as Laxman Tharu coming from the district perhaps explain why the movement is so popular in Kailali. At several pan-district meetings there were many interesting discussions between activists from various districts (the discussions outside of the meetings in local Tharu restaurants seemed to be most engaging). These conversations tended to involve a great deal of competition mainly between the young men present. For example, activists from Kailali were convinced this is the district with the strongest Tharuhat support, a fact that was reflected by it having the most comprehensive *bandh*¹². At the various times when *bandh* were called how tight it was, (in relation to length of *bandh* as well as the extent to which the it was observed) was considered a direct reflection of the strength of the organisation in this specific district. Stories were also compared about the number and type of vehicles that had been torched in order to enforce the *bandh*.

The Kailali the Tharuhat have entered into is not a politically vacant district ready to receive its various messages but one in which the UCPN(M) were and to a significant extent still are the predominant political force. The strength of support for the UCPN(M) is reflected in the CA election results in 2008 when they won all 6 seats in the CA (prior to this election, Kailali was previously a Nepali Congress stronghold).¹³ Although at the time the Tharuhat was not in a strong enough position to field any candidates. Furthermore, Kailali is home to the cantonments of the People's Liberation

Army (PLA) 7th Division and the Young Communist League (YCL) are a visible and strong presence across the district. So much so that in some villages the Nepali state still had not returned with VDC office or staff, health posts or a police presence.

Of the more locally focused Tharu organisations, perhaps the one that troubled local activists most was the Tharuwan (and the associated branch of the YCL).¹⁴ This should be contrasted with the national Tharuhat leaders more Kathmandu orientated discourse focusing on the Madeshi parties (at least up until the alliance with the MJF in early 2010). This was one area in which the peripheral and central Tharuhat discourses had quite a different emphasis. Unlike many of the other Tharu organisations the Tharuwan is not aligned to the Tharuhat (as it is Maoist affiliated) and the two have an adversarial relationship with a number of low level skirmishes being mentioned by activists from both sides.

These two bodies are sometimes, mistakenly, conflated but there are important differences between the two. While the Tharuwan is the Tharu wing of the UCPN(M), the leader of the Tharuwan in Kailali district (Comrade Akhanda) is not only a Brahmin but also a Pahari. This was regularly invoked by Tharuhat activists as a sign of the lack of true engagement with the issues of the various ethnic groups in Nepal. Tharuhat members and supporters would often ask me to highlight where the leading Tharus are in the PLA or UCPN(M)

¹² Meaning strike

¹³ The Tharuhat have 1 CA member - Rukmani Chaudhary.

¹⁴ The Tharuhat do have an associated youth wing the Tharu Students Society (Tharu Bidyarthi Samaj) although this is not as prominent in Kailali as the YCL or Youth Force.

both nationally and locally as they considered this impossible to do. However, this does overlook the four (out of a total of six) Tharu UCPN(M) CA members from Kailali elected, all of whom are not considered to be overly influential and senior within the wider Maoist movement. The lack of representation at the higher levels of the UCPN(M) by the Tharu both locally and nationally was clearly a motivation for some Tharu leaders such as Laxman Tharu to join the Tharuhat. While some within the group of largely Dhangadi based Tharu elites would not have joined the Tharuwan at any stage due to ideological reasons anyway.

An important event in Kailali helps to illustrate some of the differences between the Tharuhat and Tharuwan. In early December 2009 there were a number of violent clashes between forest settlers and the Nepal Police in Baliya VDC in the east of Kailali district. The police stated that these settlers (largely landless Paharis) had settled illegally and the clashes led to five people being killed. This made headline news across Nepal for a number of days and resulted in a UCPN(M) led nationwide *bandh*. Instantly the UCPN(M) (including some members of the Tharuwan) supported the settlers and sent YCL members to support them in their fight against the police. Conversely, locally the Tharuhat refused to support the settlers, refusing to acknowledge that they might have any claim to this land, as this was considered part of the Tharuhat region and therefore any Pahadis, however unfortunate, should not be entitled to settle. The responses to this event are illuminating

in so far as they refer to quite different visions of what a future Tharu state would look like. The vision expressed by leaders in Kathmandu is perhaps more inclusive than the vision expressed locally in Kailali where there is a stronger emphasis on the Tharu as opposed to those living in the autonomous state area. Furthermore, the Tharuhat response to the Baliya clashes seemed to be of concern quite a large range of non-Tharu groups in Kailali as it was mentioned to me on a number of occasions as an indication of the Tharuhat's lack of consideration for non-Tharu groups in the district. Therefore, locally the vision of the Tharuhat autonomous state is a state predominantly for the Tharu community who have an exclusive claim to be indigenous to the proposed region.

Bandh

Alongside the violence that has been a peripheral part of the Tharuhat's day to day workings a number of specific areas warrant attention in relation to the movement's emergence in a post-conflict situation. These are the Tharuhat's use of *bandh* and the Tharuhat Liberation Army which was established and now principally based in Kailali. While other Tharu organisations have used *bandh* as part of their protests, the Tharuhat have taken this to new levels. *Bandh* as we all know have been daily occurrences throughout post-conflict Nepal and this is an approach that the Tharuhat deploy on a quite regular basis (not least with two major *bandh* in early 2009).¹⁵ While *bandh* are a major feature of post-conflict Nepal, causing significant

¹⁵ These were principally against the 'one Madhesh' demands of the Madheshi political parties and the inclusion of the Tharu in the category Madeshi. This bandh initially seemed to be successful in its aims as the two week bandh that ended on March 15th 2009 with an agreement between the

disruption to daily life they have not as yet received significant academic analysis.¹⁶ Tharuhat *bandh* had three main demands: an autonomous state; that the Tharu to be appropriately represented in the new constitution; and to be considered distinct from the Madhesi category. As a *bideshi* (foreigner) who often cycled around the eastern villages of Kailali, I consistently encountered local activists enforcing the *bandh*. I spent some time on an impromptu barricades that Tharuhat activists had built and that were manned by groups of young men during a number of local *bandhs* in order to stop the flow of traffic (which was in any case non-existent). The atmosphere at barricades was rather convivial with a significant amount of *raksi* (locally brewed alcohol) drunk and Tharu songs sung.

Violence and the Tharu army

Violence (or the threat of violence) is, to some extent, integral to *bandh* culture. For example during the *Bandh* in April 2009 several VDC offices were destroyed in Dang and Kailali. Many vehicles were destroyed along the highways during this *bandh* as well - in order to enforce the *bandh*. More generally low-level violence has at times been a part of the activity of the Tharuhat within Kailali. However, this was often reported as being far less central to the workings of the Tharuhat than the YCL which was more closely associated with the PLA and the People's War than the Tharuhat. The establishment of the Tharuhat Liberation Army in Kailali was announced in November 2008 and represents a new chapter in the Tharuhat's struggle for rights and autonomy. This is

unprecedented in previous Tharu organisations and is specific to 'post'-conflict Nepal. Clearly several forms of violence (many more deadly) have ceased with the signing of the CPA in 2006, however there are still new forms of violence (and associated threats) that in some senses are becoming more mainstream in contemporary Nepal. For example, this might include new forms of low level violence and disruption of local lives and opportunities. The stated aim of the Tharuhat Army is: "to make the revolt of the indigenous people successful".¹⁷ It was established in part to repel anyone who might threaten or oppress Tharus. According to local leaders in Kailali the Tharuhat Army is also for the protection of the border with India and is established for law and order purposes and the protection of the Tharuhat Autonomous region. The Tharu army also serves an important function of indicating the strength and capacity of the Tharu community to the Government of Nepal as well as to other parties and organisations in the proposed Tharuhat Autonomous State region. There are many rumours amongst Tharuhat activists of a Tharu Army barracks within the forests of Kailali. This is where training is received from former PLA combatants and I was told that this would be the starting place for any future Tharu army offensive against the Pahari's and Madheshi's. In some respects the links between this army and Tharus who were formerly in the PLA appear to be quite strong as all the leading members and trainers in the Tharuhat Liberation Army I met had previously been in the PLA. The barracks seemed to have an

then government and the TJSC which led to statement that the Tharu would be removed from the Madhesi category (although I was told later that in reality this didn't happen due, in part, to a change in government).

¹⁶ It would be interesting to undertake an analysis of pre and post-PW forms of protests and *bandh*.

¹⁷ Laxman Tharu quoted in <http://www.nepalnews.com/archive/2008/nov/nov04/news06.php>

almost mythical status amongst activists although I didn't meet one who had actually been there (or was willing to talk to me about it). Whether the army actually exists or not doesn't in some sense seem to be of critical importance. More importantly for the activists I met is an understanding that a Tharu army is possible (and mythologised) and that the Tharu community are able to mobilise in this way should it be necessary.

The rhetoric surrounding the Tharu Army amongst Tharuhat leaders and activists varies significantly and is often contradictory. For example, it is called a 'Peaceful Army' or an army without weapons by many Tharuhat supporters.¹⁸ It has also been described as something similar to the YCL or Youth Force, acting simply as a means of engaging with younger Tharus. Furthermore, Laxman Tharu has mentioned that the Tharuhat Armies arsenal of weapons is not sophisticated.¹⁹ Therefore, the Tharuhat seem to want to be taken seriously in relation to their capacity to orchestrate violence (perhaps in reference to armed groups in the Eastern Tarai). However, in reality perhaps the movement does not have the intention or capacity to realistically do so to the levels experienced in other parts of Nepal.

While the number of young men and women who have been trained to form the ranks of cadre subsequent to them having joined the Tharuhat is unclear, I know from several confirmed sources that the Tharuhat ordered 4000 uniforms from a uniform factory in Kathmandu. Laxman Tharu has stated the somewhat ambitious

aim of having an army of 100,000. However, it has been reported that the Tharuhat have not been very successful in recruiting members to their army,²⁰ although local leaders dispute this. Ultimately, there are areas in which there appears a continuity of violence within a post-conflict Nepal not least in relation to low level violence and *bandh* but importantly a number of discontinuations. For example, when one considers the rise of a PLA up to and prior to 1996 there appears to be little synergy with events and formations in relation to this and the formation of the Tharuhat Liberation Army. This 'army' appears to be a quite different entity in so far as it is formed very much within existing state structures (with associated monopolies of violence) as opposed to constituting an ideological alternative to the state.

CONCLUSION

The 10 years of the People's War and the subsequent post-conflict environment are critical to understanding the emergence of the TASC and some ways in which it functions. Following the signing of the CPA in 2006 violent behaviours took new forms and found new meaning in a range of new organisations and groups. These organisations facilitate the continuation of certain types of violence into post-conflict Nepal. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is the Young Communist League (YCL) and the Madeshi movement in the eastern Tarai although the TASC and TJSC certainly contribute to these processes and the frequent instances of low-level violence in

¹⁸ Raising in one sense an interesting question as to what constitutes an army.

¹⁹ "Nepal: Tharu Revolt imminent if identity ignored," Telegraph Weekly Magazine, 25 October 2008,

²⁰ As noted by Oliver Housden http://173.201.29.101/portal/index.php?action=news_details&news_id=15904

Kailali. Therefore, the People's War can help to understand some of the more violent and disruptive aspects of the TASC's daily workings. Furthermore, the volatile post-conflict situation in many regards helps to explain some of the specific aspects of the TASC, not least the propensity of specific kinds of often low-level violence and *bandh*.

There are a number of important synergies between the TASC and other movements in Nepal especially in relation to ideology where a certain socialist vision infiltrates many visions of autonomous states (especially within the FDNF). While the TASC also represents a number of significant differences from the other movements one currently observes in Nepal, especially in relation to the reiteration of a specifically mythologised shared history and a linked claim to a specific area of land. The TASC movement was principally established in order to ensure the creation of the Tharuhat Autonomous State. While it is unclear if and when this might happen (as of June 2011–) one has to ask what would happen if this were actually achieved. For example, some (mainly supporters of the UCPN (M) in Kailali) have asked if there were enough skilled Tharu to be able to enable the various elements of a Tharu autonomous state to function properly. What would the situation be for non-Tharus within an autonomous state? What would the establishment of Tharuhat Autonomous State mean for the various Tharu sub-groups such as the Kamaiya and Rana Tharu? Would it be beneficial to all Tharu or a more specific group (perhaps the current leaders of the movement)? Answers to these questions remain unclear, however if and when a Tharuhat Autonomous State is established

it will be extremely interesting to see how the internal dynamics of the state develops.

The TASC has circumvented the restrictions on the establishment of ethnically orientated political parties through its membership of the FDNF. Despite not fielding candidates in the 2008 CA election, currently the TASC has one representative in the CA (Rukmini Chaudhary) under the auspices of the FDNF.²¹ It will be interesting to see how the Tharuhat fares in Kailali and across the rest of the Tarai in the next election (whenever that might happen) when it will be able to field candidates across the proposed Tharuhat Autonomous State area. However, currently there is clearly limited local awareness of the Tharuhat and its policies and mixed support for the movement. Furthermore, the UCPN(M) has a much stronger and more comprehensive network of activists and more funding. The UCPN(M)'s vision for a federal Nepal encompasses the Tharuwan which is similar in some respects to the vision for the Tharuhat Autonomous State. This represents the most fundamental challenge to the TASC, a challenge that shows no sign of receding. Success for the TASC in terms of the mainstream political process in Nepal is perhaps improbable anytime soon and a great deal of work remains to be done by activists both nationally and locally to increase awareness and support for the movement.

While this is very much a work in progress I have tried in this paper to explore some of the areas of influence and also some of the limitations of the TASC in Kailali. It is clear that within Kailali the TASC and TJSC represent an important movement with

²¹ Although there are Tharu CA members from other parties, principally the UCPN(M).

influence and support within a range of Tharu groups and villages. However, the extent to which the TASC leadership (and therefore to an extent the Tharu leaders who came before) have been successful in creating a pan-Tharu identity is very much in question. It is not uncommon to meet Tharus who show little interest in the Tharuhat, or simply do not support it. With the lack of representation of a range of Tharu sub-groups (not least the Kamaiya and Rana Tharu) these questions constitute a significant challenge to the TASC from within the diverse Tharu community. However, in my conversations with TASC leaders both in Dhangadi and Kathmandu it became clear that this is a challenge that the leaders of the movement are largely not concerned about. The leaders I met seem far more concerned with building a movement quickly, a movement with significant influence in Kathmandu and Dhangadi leading to an autonomous state. I met a number of Tharu in Kailali who told me that they viewed the movement's leaders as having in some ways 'Brahmin like' tendencies.²² This was due to the predominance at senior levels in the TASC of a specific class of Tharu and their apparent lack of meaningful engagement with the broader range of Tharu sub-groups. Furthermore, there is a conspicuous lack of women in senior positions in the movement (other than perhaps Rukmini Chaudhary). This is also reflected at the district level in Dhangadhi where women are rarely actively involved in Tharuhat meetings and discussions. Therefore, one then has to question the solidity of the movement with significant potential for internal splits and fragmentation (which to an extent one can

already observe in relation the TJSC and TASC) although the TASC seem to be coping better with such challenges. Furthermore, this raises important questions about who will be the beneficiaries of the TASC policies should some of these be achieved. Would the interests of the Tharu elites that dominate leadership positions within the movement be met? Or conversely would a successful TASC transform and improve the lives of the diverse Tharu sub-groups across the proposed Tharuhat autonomous region? Without a Tharuhat autonomous state in existence answers to such questions are quite unclear. However, there currently emerge a number of disconnections between the leadership and the wider Tharu community that if the TASC and TJSC is to generate widespread support will clearly need to be addressed.

Giselle Krauskopff in her excellent chapter exploring a quite different, earlier stage of Tharu ethnic movement (principally focusing on the Tharu Welfare Society and BASE) asks whether this movement can lead to "ethnic politicisation in a more radical and oppositional sense than so far seen" (2008: 240). As this paper indicates in some respects the TASC and TJSC do both represent a more radical and oppositional stage in a wider Tharu ethnic movement and there have considerable achievements to date for example in raising Tharu issues in Kathmandu and mobilising many (but not all) Tharu at local and regional levels. However, the extent to which the TASC and TJSC will successfully establish a politicised pan-Tharu identity, an autonomous state and ultimately lead to improvements in the lives of Tharu across Nepal currently remains unclear.

²² These informants meant this is a negative sense in reference to a perceived Brahmin dominance of Nepali politics.

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