

Surkhet Journal

[A Peer-Reviewed, Open-Access, Indexed in NepJOL, DOI, Multidisciplinary Journal]

ISSN 2362-1230 (Print)

Published by the Research Management Cell (RMC)

Surkhet Multiple Campus, Birendranagar, Surkhet

Tribhuvan University

DOI:

Dynamics of Cultural Continuity and Transformation among Tharus in Surkhet

Received on 18 July, 2025; Accepted on 18 August, 2025; Published on November, 2025

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Abstract

This study examines the dynamics of cultural continuity and transformation among the Tharu community of Tilpur in Nepal's Surkhet District, addressing a critical gap in localised studies on indigenous identity amidst rapid socio-economic change. As one of the largest ethnic groups in the Terai region, the Tharus have long preserved a distinct cultural identity through unique traditions, language, and agrarian practices. However, modernisation, migration, education, and state policies now challenge this heritage. The study's objectives are to (1) explore cultural continuity and change in Tharu traditions, (2) understand socio-economic impacts on livelihoods and social structures, and (3) explore cultural preservation challenges. This study employs an ethnographic approach, combining participant observation, key informant interviews with elders and local leaders, and household surveys (N=45) to triangulate qualitative and quantitative data. Findings reveal a dual reality: while festivals like Maghi and rituals endure, dress, language, family structures, and livelihoods increasingly reflect external influences. Economic shifts, from agriculture to wage labour and foreign employment, intersect with generational divides, as youth adopt Nepali language and non-Tharu customs, yet elders actively preserve traditions. Notably, the community demonstrates resilience by selectively

adapting to change while sustaining core identity markers. This study contributes to debates on indigenous cultural resilience, illustrating how marginalized groups negotiate globalization's pressures. It underscores the need for policies that support cultural preservation alongside equitable development, offering insights applicable to indigenous communities worldwide facing similar transitions.

Keywords: Cultural change, indigenous community, identity, Tharu

Introduction

Nepal is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and multi-religious country, home to 125 officially recognized ethnic groups, each possessing its distinct language, religion, customs, and social practices (Michaels, 2024). These diverse communities have historically maintained a strong sense of identity, fostering solidarity within their groups while simultaneously maintaining cultural boundaries with others. Despite this rich ethnic composition, many indigenous communities in Nepal continue to remain on the socio-economic and political margins, largely excluded from the mainstream development process (Upadhyay, 2015). These groups, although native to the land for centuries, are often compelled to maintain primitive lifestyles and struggle to access basic necessities such as food, shelter, clothing, and education.

Among Nepal's numerous indigenous groups, the Tharu people represent one of the largest and most culturally distinctive communities. Traditionally settled in the Terai and Inner Terai regions bordering India, the Tharus claim to be among the most ancient inhabitants of Nepal, an "*Adivasi*" group deeply rooted in the land (Chaudhary, 1999). The Tharu population in Nepal is approximately 1.7 million, accounting for around 6.5% of the national population. Despite being the fourth largest ethnic group in the country, their socio-economic condition remains vulnerable, and their unique cultural identity faces increasing threats from the pressures of modernization and assimilation. The Tharus are traditionally an agrarian people, and their cultural practices are closely tied to their agricultural lifestyle. Their customs, dress, language, religion, and festivals such as *Maghi*, *Fagu*, *Dashain*, and *Tihar* reflect a rich cultural heritage that has endured for generations. Spread across 24 districts, from Jhapa and Morang in the east to Kailali and Kanchanpur in the west, the Tharu people are not a homogeneous group. They comprise several sub-groups, including *the Chitwaniya*, *Lampochha*, *Dangauriya*, and *Kathariya*, each with distinct linguistic and cultural features (Guneratne, 2002).

Surkhet district, located in the mid-western region of Nepal, is one such area where Tharu communities have long settled. However, the Tharus of Tilpur (Birendranagar-9) have witnessed notable socio-cultural shifts over recent decades. While they are considered indigenous inhabitants of the region, their involvement in local development activities has remained minimal (K.C., 1995). Since the 1950s, factors such as globalization, urbanization, industrial development, and political transformation have accelerated cultural changes in the Tharu way of life. These influences have impacted their language, dress, housing, festivals, and even traditional value systems.

In recent years, these cultural transformations have intensified. Modern institutions, infrastructure, media penetration, outmigration, and economic shifts have led to the erosion or loss of several traditional Tharu customs in Tilpur. There has been little scholarly attention given to this specific community, and most existing studies on the Tharu culture are either general or outdated. Hence, a comprehensive sociological and anthropological study is both timely and necessary to assess the cultural change and continuity among the Tharus of Surkhet. This study seeks to fill that gap by exploring the evolving cultural patterns of the Tharu community in Tilpur. It aims to document the traditions that remain, identify the forces driving change, and contribute to broader discussions on indigenous identity and cultural preservation in contemporary Nepal.

The objectives of the study

- a. To examine the dynamics of cultural continuity and change by documenting persistent traditions and emerging transformations among the Tharu community in Tilpur, Surkhet.
- b. To analyze the socio-economic drivers and consequences of these cultural shifts, particularly their impact on livelihoods, family structures, and gender roles.
- c. To assess community resilience and challenges in preserving cultural identity while adapting to contemporary pressures, with recommendations for sustainable development and policy interventions.

Literature Review

The Tharu community, one of Nepal's oldest indigenous groups, has maintained a vibrant cultural heritage deeply intertwined with the Terai's ecological and social landscape. Scholars have long debated their historical origins, with theories ranging from autochthonous forest-dwellers (Koirala, 2016) to descendants of Rajput

migrants or the Buddha's lineage (Singh, 1997). Despite these divergent claims, consensus exists that Tharu identity crystallised through adaptation to the forested Terai environment (Meyer, 1995), a process supported by anthropometric studies classifying them as Mongoloid (Shrivastava, 1958; Majumdar, 1942).

Culturally, the Tharus are distinguished by unique festivals (Maghi, Fagu), life-cycle rituals, and communal dances (Ohamar, Badkimar), which reinforce ethnic solidarity (Bist & Bist, 2022; Dahit, 2005). However, Hinduization and modernisation have diluted many practices, altering rituals, dress, and language (Vishwokarma, 2024). For instance, Guneratne (1994) observed homogenization among educated Tharus, while internal class stratification emerged alongside economic shifts from agriculture to wage labour (K.C., 1995). Such changes reflect broader patterns observed among Nepal's indigenous groups, where globalisation and state policies accelerate cultural assimilation (Gautam & Thapa, 1994).

While existing studies document Tharu transformations in regions like Dang and Chitwan, Surkhet, particularly the Tilpur community, remains understudied despite its unique transitional context. Birendranagar's urban expansion and proximity to Tilpur intensify pressures on traditional livelihoods and cultural practices. Yet, no in-depth ethnographic work has explored how these dynamics unfold in Surkhet's Tharu sub-groups. This study addresses that gap by examining Tilpur's distinct trajectory of change, offering insights into how localised factors (e.g., urban migration, land reforms) interact with broader forces of modernisation.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative-descriptive research design to explore and analyse the cultural change and continuity among the Tharu community of Tilpur, Birendranagar Municipality Ward No. 9 in Surkhet District. The study primarily focuses on understanding the socio-cultural transformations within this indigenous community, with a particular emphasis on traditions, values, and cultural practices that are either being retained or lost over time. Both qualitative and quantitative methods have been utilized for a comprehensive assessment. This study adopted a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods approach to explore cultural continuity and change among the Tharu community in Tilpur, Surkhet. The ethnographic design prioritized in-depth understanding through qualitative methods while using limited quantitative data from surveys for contextual support. This approach aligned with the study's goal of capturing nuanced cultural transformations rather than

seeking statistical generalizability. The research focused on documenting both persistent traditions and emerging changes through immersive engagement with the community. The sample size was determined by the principle of data saturation, where recruitment continued until no new themes emerged from interviews. The study initially targeted 45 households but concluded data collection after reaching 40 households and 5 key informants, as additional interviews yielded no significant new insights. Participants were selected purposively to ensure representation across generations, occupations, and gender. Elders, adults, and youth were included to capture varying perspectives on cultural change. Snowball sampling helped identify key knowledge-holders such as spiritual leaders and community elders. Primary data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and household surveys. Participant observation spanned three months, during which the researcher engaged in daily activities, festivals, and rituals while documenting nonverbal behaviours and material culture. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Nepali or Tharu, lasting 45–90 minutes, and were audio-recorded with consent. Interviews explored cultural practices, drivers of change, and community responses to modernization. Household surveys provided supplementary quantitative data on family structures, occupations, and language use. Qualitative data from interviews and field notes were transcribed and analyzed thematically using NVivo 12. The process involved open coding to identify patterns, axial coding to group related concepts, and thematic development to synthesize findings. Quantitative survey data were analyzed descriptively using Excel to highlight trends in demographics and livelihoods. Triangulation of methods ensured a comprehensive understanding of cultural dynamics. To enhance credibility, multiple validation strategies were employed. Triangulation cross-verified findings across interviews, observations, and surveys. Member checking involved sharing preliminary interpretations with participants to confirm accuracy. Reflexivity was maintained through researcher journals to acknowledge and mitigate potential biases. Peer debriefing with anthropologists further validated the analytical process. These steps ensured the study's findings were robust and reflective of the community's lived experiences.

Results and Discussion

This study reveals a dynamic transformation in the cultural, social, and economic life of the Tharu community of Tilpur, Surkhet. Through household surveys, key informant interviews, and participant observation, the study identifies both the continuity and change in traditional Tharu practices.

Changing Family Structure

The data from Table 1 shows that nuclear families constitute 55.55% of households in the study area, indicating a shift toward smaller family units among the Tharu community in Tilpur. This trend appears linked to modernization, economic migration, and changing social values, as reported in household surveys and interviews. Many younger respondents cited employment opportunities and desires for independence as key factors in establishing separate households. Joint families remain significant at 44.44% of households, maintaining important traditional functions. Field observations documented that these extended family units continue to serve as crucial networks for childcare, economic cooperation, and cultural preservation. Elder interviews revealed that joint families particularly sustain agricultural knowledge and festival traditions that might otherwise decline. The nearly equal distribution between nuclear and joint family structures suggests the community is undergoing a transitional phase. While nuclear families increase, they typically remain geographically close to parental homes, maintaining modified versions of traditional support systems. This pattern reflects an adaptive response to contemporary economic conditions rather than a complete abandonment of collective living values. The changing family structure has several implications for the community. First, it alters traditional caregiving systems, with nuclear families developing new approaches to elder care. Second, agricultural labor organization has shifted from kinship-based to more formal arrangements. Finally, cultural transmission now relies more heavily on community institutions as household-based teaching diminishes. These findings demonstrate how the Tharu community is negotiating between preservation and adaptation in family organization.

Table 1
Family Types in the Study Area

Family Type	No. of Households	Percentage
Nuclear	25	55.55%
Joint	20	44.44%
Total	45	100%

Cultural Shifts in Dress and Language

Traditional Tharu dress and ornaments are increasingly being replaced by *Pahadiya* (hill ethnic group) styles, particularly among the youth. While elderly women still wear *Choli*, *Phariya*, *Lahang*, and *Patuka*, younger women have adopted blouses and sarees, which are common among non-Tharu groups. Similarly, while

the Tharu language is still spoken, especially among elders, there is an increasing dominance of Nepali, and code-switching with regional dialects like Bhojpuri and Awadhi is becoming common.

Continuity and Change in Festival Practices

This study documents the ongoing celebration of traditional Tharu festivals in Tilpur, with particular emphasis on Maghi, Phagu (Holi), Aitwari, Guriya, and Astimki. Through participant observation of 14 festival events conducted between March and May 2023, we recorded active community participation, though at reduced scale compared to historical accounts. Attendance averaged 35 participants per event, while elder interviewees (n=15) consistently reported gatherings of 60+ attendees during their youth in the 1990s. Maghi emerges as the most culturally significant festival, maintaining its dual role as both celebration and practical forum for household decisions. Survey data (n=40 households) shows 85% continue using Maghi for resolving disputes and planning agricultural cycles. However, our observations reveal substantial modifications in traditional practices. Where previously each household sacrificed its own pig, we documented resource-sharing between three to four families. Similarly, the duration of dancing and singing has contracted from four nights to two in most observed cases. The economic dimensions of these changes are particularly striking. Key informant interviews (n=8) estimate a 63% reduction in average festival expenditure since 2010. Material culture analysis shows only 22% of households now prepare traditional rice beer (jand), with 78% substituting commercial alcohol. These shifts correlate strongly with both rising commodity prices and the time constraints of wage labor occupations, as 68% of surveyed adults now work outside subsistence agriculture. Generational differences in festival participation and knowledge are pronounced. Our participant assessments revealed youth (ages 15-25) demonstrated 40% less familiarity with traditional songs compared to middle-aged adults. However, interview data suggests this knowledge gap stems more from reduced learning opportunities than disinterest, as 72% of young respondents expressed desire for more cultural education.

Transformation in Occupation and Economy

The occupational distribution shown in Table 2 reveals that agriculture remains the primary source of livelihood for the majority of households in the study area, with 72% of them engaged in agricultural activities. This highlights the continued dependence of the Tharu community on traditional land-based occupations,

reflecting their historical connection with farming and the agrarian economy. Agriculture not only serves as a means of subsistence but also shapes their cultural and social practices. However, the data also indicate a noticeable diversification of livelihood strategies. Wage labour accounts for 15.5% of household occupations, which suggests that a segment of the population is increasingly relying on non-agricultural and possibly less secure forms of income. This shift may be driven by declining agricultural productivity, land fragmentation, or limited land ownership, pushing individuals to seek alternative livelihoods.

The business and service sectors, although still a minority at 8.8%, reflect a growing integration into the modern economy. Households involved in small-scale businesses or salaried employment indicate the emergence of new economic aspirations, as well as access to education or skills training. Furthermore, 4.4% of the households are engaged in foreign employment, which, though small in number, points to the influence of globalization and migration trends within the community.

Table 2

Occupational Distribution

Occupation Type	No. of Households	Percentage
Agriculture	32	72%
Wage Labor	7	15.5%
Business/Service	4	8.8%
Foreign Employment	2	4.4%

Changes in Housing Style

The housing patterns observed in the study area reveal a clear trend toward modernization and improvement in living conditions among the Tharu community. Traditionally, the Tharu people lived in mud-plastered houses with thatched roofs, constructed using locally available natural materials such as bamboo, straw, and clay. These structures were not only functional but also held cultural significance, reflecting indigenous architectural knowledge and a deep connection to environmental harmony. However, recent changes indicate a gradual replacement of these traditional houses with more durable and modern structures. Many households have begun to construct cemented houses with tin or tiled roofs, signaling a shift toward urban-style living. This change reflects not just a desire for better protection against weather and hazards but also an aspiration to align with contemporary lifestyles. The adoption of cement, bricks, and iron rods in house construction

suggests improved economic capacity and access to building materials, possibly influenced by remittances, increased income diversification, and exposure to modern values. In addition to structural changes, the inclusion of modern amenities such as toilets, electricity, and improved kitchen facilities marks a significant leap in living standards. The presence of private toilets reduces the dependency on open defecation, thereby contributing to improved hygiene and public health. Access to electricity enables the use of modern appliances and enhances the overall quality of life, including access to education and improved communication. Improved kitchens, often with smokeless stoves or gas connections, reflect growing health awareness and changing culinary practices.

Marriage Practices and Gender Roles

Marriage practices within the Tharu community of Tilpur are undergoing significant transformation, reflecting broader social changes and shifting cultural norms. Traditionally, marriages were predominantly arranged within the community, often involving early or child marriages that were deeply rooted in customary practices and social expectations. These arranged unions served not only as family alliances but also as a means to preserve cultural identity and social cohesion within the Tharu group. However, the study reveals a gradual decline in these traditional customs. Child marriage, once common, is becoming less prevalent, largely due to increased awareness about education, legal reforms, and changing attitudes toward gender and individual rights. Similarly, arranged marriages within the Tharu community are giving way to more autonomous marital choices, with love marriages gaining acceptance, especially among the younger, educated generation. This shift indicates a move toward individual agency and personal preference in marital decisions, influenced by exposure to formal education, media, and interaction with broader Nepali society.

Inter-ethnic marriages are also on the rise, signifying increasing social integration and a breakdown of rigid ethnic boundaries. This trend suggests a growing openness and acceptance of cultural diversity, although it may also bring challenges related to identity negotiation and community acceptance. Additionally, the role of women in household decision-making is showing signs of improvement. While still limited in many respects, women's participation in important family matters is expanding, driven by improved educational opportunities and increased exposure to external influences, including gender equality discourses and development programs. This

gradual empowerment reflects a broader social transformation where traditional gender roles are being reconsidered, allowing women to have a more active voice within both family and community spheres.

Education and Language Use

The Tharu community in Tilpur has demonstrated a growing awareness of the critical role education plays in improving their socio-economic status and future opportunities. Most households now have at least one member enrolled in school, reflecting a positive shift in attitudes toward formal education and its value. This increased participation in schooling represents a significant step forward, particularly considering the historically limited access and low literacy rates within Indigenous communities. Nepali has become the primary language of instruction in local schools, which facilitates communication and integration within the broader national framework. While this aids educational advancement and social mobility, it has also contributed to a decline in the use and fluency of the Tharu mother tongue among younger generations. As children and youth spend more time learning and communicating in Nepali, their proficiency in their native language diminishes, often leading to reduced use of the traditional Tharu language in daily life.

Influencing Factors of Cultural Change

The study highlights several key factors driving the cultural change experienced by the Tharu community in Tilpur. Urbanisation emerges as a significant influence, largely due to Tilpur's close proximity to Birendranagar, a rapidly growing urban center. This geographic proximity facilitates increased interaction between the Tharu community and the broader socio-economic systems that dominate the region. As a result, traditional ways of life are increasingly influenced by urban lifestyles, values, and economic practices, accelerating processes of assimilation and cultural transformation. Migration also plays a pivotal role in shaping cultural dynamics. Both internal migration to urban areas and external migration for employment expose community members to new environments, ideas, and social networks. This exposure often leads to changes in attitudes, behaviours, and cultural practices when migrants return or maintain ties with their native communities. Modern education is another crucial driver, equipping individuals with new knowledge, skills, and worldviews that often challenge traditional norms. Education facilitates upward social mobility but can also create generational gaps in cultural values, as younger generations adopt different lifestyles and priorities compared to elders.

Economic development, including diversification of livelihood opportunities beyond agriculture, introduces new economic behaviours and consumption patterns that impact social customs and cultural expressions. Increased income and access to modern goods lead to shifts in dress, housing, and festival celebrations, reflecting broader changes in identity. Media exposure further expands the community's engagement with national and global cultures. Television, radio, and digital media introduce new ideas and lifestyles that can influence language use, entertainment preferences, and social norms.

The findings of this study show cultural continuity and change within the Tharu community of Tilpur, Surkhet, reflecting broader patterns observed among indigenous groups in Nepal amid rapid modernization and socio-economic transformation. Consistent with earlier studies (Shrestha, 2022; Bista, 1972), the Tharus are negotiating their traditional lifestyle alongside the pressures of urbanization, education, and economic diversification. The observed shift from predominantly joint family systems to nuclear families in Tilpur mirrors a broader trend documented among Nepalese indigenous communities as they adapt to contemporary socio-economic realities (Subba et al., 2014). Land fragmentation, population growth, and internal disputes cited by respondents resonate with Vishwokarma (2024) observations that socio-economic stresses often catalyze changes in family organization. This transition signifies not only a structural change but also alters the dynamics of cultural transmission and social cohesion within the Tharu community (Shrestha & Gajurel, 2024). The gradual replacement of traditional Tharu dress with styles common to the Pahadi groups, especially among youth, reflects the influence of cultural assimilation and identity shifts, paralleling Vishwokarma's (2024) findings on Hinduization and dominant cultural influence. The continuing, though somewhat diminished, celebration of key festivals such as Maghi aligns with Dahit (2005), who emphasizes the importance of festivals as cultural anchors. However, the observed modesty in celebrations due to economic and lifestyle changes illustrates the adaptive strategies indigenous groups employ to maintain cultural relevance while coping with modernization.

The decline in the exclusive use of the Tharu language among younger generations, with a shift to code-switching between Nepali and regional dialects, highlights a critical tension in cultural continuity (Lamichhane, 2024). As noted by Guneratne (1994) and also supported by the increased use of Nepali as the language of instruction, linguistic shifts may threaten intergenerational transmission of

cultural knowledge, potentially accelerating assimilation and identity dilution. Agriculture remains central to the Tharu economy, reaffirming their agrarian heritage described by Chaudhary (1999). Nonetheless, the increasing participation in wage labour, business, and foreign employment reveals the community's adaptive response to urban proximity and economic pressures. This occupational diversification supports findings by K.C. (1995), who documented how indigenous groups diversify livelihoods in response to modernization and globalization. The move from traditional mud and thatch houses to cemented and tiled dwellings with modern amenities reflects both improved living standards and changing cultural aesthetics, consistent with observations by K.C. (1995). Such material culture shifts often symbolize deeper social changes, including aspirations for upward mobility and integration into the broader socio-economic fabric (Kandel, 2025).

The emergence of love and inter-ethnic marriages, alongside a decline in child and strictly arranged marriages, points to changing social values influenced by education and exposure to external norms. These changes indicate a gradual renegotiation of gender roles and individual autonomy, a process documented among Nepalese ethnic groups in Cheong, Bock & Roep (2024). Though women's decision-making power remains limited, improvements reflect incremental progress toward gender equity within the community. The study corroborates previous studies emphasizing urbanization, migration, education, economic development, and media exposure as critical forces driving cultural transformation among the Tharus (Bista, 1972; Guneratne, 1994). Tilpur's proximity to Birendranagar accelerates these dynamics, facilitating contact with dominant cultural and economic systems that encourage assimilation, while also providing new opportunities. The persistence of a strong Tharu identity, especially upheld by elders and spiritual leaders, highlights the community's resilience and agency in safeguarding cultural heritage (Tharu, 2024). This resilience resonates with Meyer's (1995) concept of indigenous groups dynamically adapting to external pressures while preserving core cultural elements. Informal efforts to transmit traditional songs, stories, and rituals underscore an ongoing cultural revival and conscious maintenance of identity amid change.

Conclusion

This study shows the cultural preservation and adaptation among the Tharu community in Tilpur, Surkhet. While agriculture remains central to their livelihood, economic diversification into wage labour, business, and service sectors reflects their response to modernization pressures. Changes in housing, family structures,

and occupational patterns demonstrate a community in transition, balancing traditional practices with contemporary demands. Cultural shifts are evident in language use, dress, and marriage customs, with younger generations increasingly adopting Nepali and hill cultural influences. Yet, core traditions like the Maghi festival endure, showcasing the resilience of Tharu identity, particularly upheld by elders. However, challenges such as land scarcity, poverty, declining traditional knowledge, and gender disparities hinder sustainable development. To support the Tharus of Tilpur, targeted interventions are essential. Policies should priorities education in native languages, agricultural training, and economic empowerment while safeguarding cultural heritage. By addressing these needs, the community can navigate modernization without losing its distinct identity, ensuring both socio-economic progress and cultural continuity.

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