

# SOCIOECONOMIC NETWORK OF A TERAI VILLAGE: AN ACCOUNT OF THE RANA THARUS OF URMA-URMI

Ganesh Man Gurung  
CNAS, T.U.  
Kirtipur

## Introduction

The primary objective is to examine the socioeconomic network of a Terai village of the Far-Western region of Nepal. An attempt has been made in the exposition of various socio-cultural institutions prevalent among the Rana Tharus of a Terai village in relation to their socioeconomic network, which has been in existence since long ago. A research question has been formulated to achieve the above mentioned objective.

How have the various socio-cultural institutions such as *Kamaiya*, *Munimji*, *Desi Mahajana* and *Desi Contractors* functioned in the maintenance of the livelihood of the Rana Tharus of Kailali district?

## Brief Review of Tharu Studies

The Tharus are one of the largest groups of people scattered from East to West across the Terai portion of Nepal, including the Uttar Pradesh of India. The Tharus are mostly concentrated in the Mid-Western and Far-Western Terai regions, especially in Kailali, Bardiya, and Dang-Deokhuri. But they remain the least known group of Nepal, as they have always been engaged in agriculture and never went to the Army, to Indian cities, or abroad for employment. Their agricultural life kept them isolated from the outside world in their own localities, though they migrate from one place to another in search of better agricultural farms. A great effort is needed in order to make a detailed and systematic study of the Tharus, as they have not been given much attention by either foreign or native sociologists and anthropologists. A few of the studies on the Tharus have been done by scholars as Dor Bahadur Bista (1967), Dron Pd. Rajaure (1977) and Rishikesab Raj Regmi

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(1978). The first western scholar who gave information on the Tharus is Hamilton (1971). Among the Nepalese anthropologists, Dron P. Rajaure is the first scholar who gave detailed empirical information on the Tharus after his field work in Dang. The doctoral research studies done by Prof. S.K. Srivastava (1958) on the Tharus of Northern province of India and by Prof. Kailash N. Pyakurel (1982) on the Tharus of Chitwan are notable contributions to the literature of sociology/anthropology. But there is lack of literature on the Rana Tharus. The present study owes its authenticity to first-hand knowledge of the Rana Tharus.

### **Ethnographic Account of the Field Area**

The ethnic group selected for the present study is the Rana Tharus living in Urma-Urmi Village of the Kailali district. About the origin of the Tharus, most of anthropologists (Bista, Rajaure, Risley) believe that Thar, the desert land of Rajasthan, India, is their ancestral homeland from where they fled away. They became tharu due to their migration from "Thar". But in regard to the Rana Tharus, as explained by the respondents, the Rajputs were Rana Thakur from a Chhetry group, and when there was Muslim invasion they fled away with their servants. The descendants from these Rajput women and their servants became Rana Tharus. Some of the respondents informed that they were untouchables, so that they had to respect their non-untouchable tharu women. They complained that even a few years back they were not allowed to enter the kitchen, and their wives used to push the plates of food to their husbands with their foot. The village Urma-Urmi is situated in a forest clearing approximately twelve kilometers southeast of the town of Dhangadi. It takes a little over an hour by jeep to reach the village, and the road is only accessible in the dry season, as it has to cross two rivers. The village is surrounded with jungle. Urma and Urmi are geographically united in the sense that they occupy the same forest clearing, so they have been taken here as one unit. This paper is based on the field data collected in Urma-Urmi, of Kailali district during the months April-May 1989.

### **Socioeconomic Network**

The socioeconomic network of the Rana Tharus of Urma-Urmi should be understood in relation to its cultural factors. The major cultural institutions which regulate the economic activities of the Rana Tharus have been given as follows:

#### **Kamaiya**

One of the surprising features of Tharu life is the institution of *Kamaiya*.<sup>1</sup> Since agriculture is mainly based on manual labour in Urma-Urmi, there

must be an equilibrium of labour power and land holding size for an ideal subsistence farming household. A household with a larger landholding size in the absence of sufficient manpower needs to employ some labourers. Similarly, a household with a smaller landholding size or a landless family with many members needs to employ some of their family members as *Kamaiya* somewhere for their living. The case of Bhanu Chaudhary may illustrate the poor socioeconomic condition of a *Kamaiya* as follows:

“Bhanu is living with his wife and five children; two sons and three daughters. He has been working as a *Kamaiya* for three years in the house of Karna Chaudhary, a local political leader. Bhanu has been provided with 60 kg. of rice seed and some land for his subsistence on account of his service to his *Kisan* (master). The land is infertile, and it is very difficult for him to support his children. He requested his *Kisan* to be very kind to his starving children by providing him fertile pieces of land also. But his master did not accept his request. For the last two years, his elder son has also been employed by another *Kisan*, Lok Chaudhary. This made it a little easier to solve his hand-to-mouth problem. The youngest son, 10 years old, has been herding the cattle of *Kisan*, Tana Rana. He provides meals and clothes for his service. His two little daughters look after the younger baby at home. His brother has cleared some forest for cultivation, but it has not been registered.”

A *Kamaiya* is generally given a fixed size of land to support his family, a house and a kitchen garden around it, and some lentils and mustard for oil at each harvesting. He does not have to pay interest to the master if he takes loan. But the *Kamaiya* has to give first priority to his master's work according to the annual contract between him and the host family. This cultural institution, as practised among the Tharus, is seen as the predecessor of what today can be called human right abuse, bonded labour or slavery. The *Kamaiyas* have tended to become indebted to their masters and thus unable to escape from the 'host family.' Though they are not sold, debts incurred by the labourer are repaid to the previous master by any new one who may care to take them over. The case of a *Rana Kamaiya* shows how he has been changing his *Kisans* (masters) for his survival:

“Shiva Rana started out as a *Kamaiya* in Chaumala **Village**, where he worked for 11 years owing Rs. 700. This money had been spent on buying clothes and food-grains. A *Kamaiya* need not pay interest on such loans as interest is paid through the work obligations. Then he moved to Bhadra, a Dangaura Tharu Village neighbouring Urma. His new *Kisan* (master) paid Rs. 700. to the former *Kisan*, and he stayed with him for 2 years. He then moved to Belik Village in Urma and his new master paid Rs. 800. He stayed with this master for 4 years, until he moved to Pataribiku near Urma. Here his new master treated him well and during the next 4 years he was able to

pay back Rs. 500, so that he presently only owes Rs. 300. Besides, he has recently been given a paper by the village leader stating that he was landless, so he could hope to be included in a government settlement scheme in the future. Now he owns a few cattle, also. His case is one of the most fortunate ones among the *Kamaiya* in Urma-Urmi, after the change of many Kisans or masters.”

Contracts may only be renewed or changed once a year during the first week of January. As mentioned in the field, some families have been working as *Kamaiya* for so many generation that they do not know how it all began and how they got into debt. The traditional contract would generally run for generations, as our law states that sons and daughters automatically must take on the debt responsibilities of their fathers upon their death.

### **Desi Mahajans**

*Desi Mahajans*,<sup>2</sup> another ethnic group from India, are called money-lenders as well as traders. The *Desi Mahajans* have a mutual understanding and relationship with the Tharus. They function as a market credit institution among the Tharus. The *Desi Mahajans* have been dealing in Urma-Urmi since the time of their fore-fathers. They don't live permanently but arrive there for a shorter period twice or thrice a year. They visit in September-October just before Dashain, (a Hindu festival), again in December after paddy harvest, and then after the wheat and mustard harvest in April-May. On their first visit, they bring their merchandise from India, such as cloth, spices, sugar, kerosene, salt and sweets. They provide the villagers with these items, and in return they collect agricultural products such as paddy, wheat, lentils and mustard at harvest time. Barter is the locally preferred system, and little money circulates in the village. A very high interest rate is charged on this credit as the villagers will have to pay twice the price asked at the regular market. Besides, the Tharus take a loan from the *Desi Mahajans* for various purposes such as to buy bullocks and to pay land tax. As noted in the field area, loans are charged a rate of one hundred percent interest in approximately six months. However, they don't take interest from the Tharus. They just purchases the agricultural products at cheap rates and then sell it in Dhangadi bazaar or export it to Indian markets.<sup>3</sup> Due to a lack of education as well as craftiness, the Tharus don't know how they have been exploited by the *Desi Mahajans*.

### **Munimji**

*Munimji*, a liquor store-clerk in Urma-Urmi, represents a very powerful local landlord. The liquor store was established on a central piece of public land in Urma. Liquor would be sold through a dog door (a door too small for a

human being to go through) on the one side of the house so far down that the customer would have to crawl to get his bottle. Such an arrangement is made to keep the cash-box and store safe from outsiders. Men come and drink in the hot spell from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m., when the warm and gusty wind makes it intolerable to be out in the sun. This is the time when the *Munimji* makes his best sale of liquor. He charges 25 rupees a bottle for the homemade *raksi* and 50 rupees for the stronger liquor bottle. Surprisingly, a large amount of cash is to be seen at the liquor store, so that the place indeed functions as a rich man's club-house in the village. According to the record of the *Munimji* (1988/89), his monthly sale of liquor averages twenty thousand rupees.<sup>4</sup> Tharu women were found against the liquor-store. Because of the high expenses on liquor, discussions and disputes were common affairs. Consequently, the common topic of conversation among Tharu women was how to separate their husbands from *Munimji*.

### Desi Share-Croppers

The another category of *Desi share-croppers* found in Urma-Urmi are Indians. They have been living in the village for many years. They do not own any land themselves, but cultivate the irrigated lands on a share-cropping basis. As observed in the field, onions, chilli, ladies finger, tomato, and high priced vegetables like cauliflower are grown on a fifty-fifty basis. It is strange why the Rana Tharus don't grow vegetables themselves, indicating either their little knowledge of the production of vegetables or little knowledge of potential profit from their sale in near by markets. Besides, the long contracts may discourage them.

### Conclusion

*Kamaiya*, *Desi Mahajan*, *Munimji*, and *Desi-share-croppers* are socio-cultural institutions among the Rana Tharus of Urma-Urmi which have existed and been effective since their arrival in the area. These institutions have been functional as well as important; in their absence the age-old socioeconomic network might become terminated or broken apart. Thus, these have contributed in the maintenance of the age-old socioeconomic network of Rana Tharus, a particular ethnic group of the Terai village of the Far Western region of Nepal.

### Notes

1. A householder who owns some land is locally called "*Kisan*", which means a peasant, whereas a labourer employed by a *Kisan* to fulfil the work of the household is called '*Kamaiya*'. The separate term known as *Tahaluwa* (service man or servant) is often used for '*Kamaiya*' among

the Rana Tharus. A rich Tharu may have two or three *Kamaiyas* working for him. In Urma-Urmi, 48 *Kamaiyas* were discovered among 127 households. This is the basis for early feudal systems, as practised in Europe and elsewhere, and which one can find today in many neo-feudal forms around the world e.g. as practised in the 'hacienda system in South America, the 'husman system' of Norway, and the 'torpare system' of Sweden, etc. (Gurung & O. Skar 1989:39).

2. They are Mohhomed Sarif, Mohommed Ejaj, Mohhomed Ishak and Mohhomed Sahid who came from the nearby Indian city, Locknow. In Urmi, the investment of Mohhomed Sarif this year is Rs. 35,000.00. But he did not like to give the name of indebted Tharus. Another money-lender, Mohhomed Ishak, gave us the name list of 26 Tharus, and the average loan was Rs. 20,000.00 to each. During the field visit, Mohhomed Ejaj and Mohhomed Sahid were out of Urma-Urmi, so no data could be collected from them.
3. As noted in Dhangadi bazaar in April, 1989, the price was Rs. 3.57 per kg. for medium quality paddy and Rs. 3.85 for high quality paddy. But, as informed in the field, on account of the investment, the price of paddy for the *Desi-Mohjans* was Rs. 1.50 per kg. for medium quality and Rs. 2.00 for high quality. The Tharus were found to be similarly cheated in other food items and merchandise.
4. The record of the sale of liquor from *Munimji* is as follows:

Months (1987/1988)	Amount (in Rs.)
April	19,320.00
May	44,069.00
June	17,256.00
July	13,846.00
August	12,256.00
September	11,090.00
October	15,393.00
November	19,223.00
December	25,237.00
January	24,692.00
February	19,426.00
March	23,665.00
Total:	245,474.00
Per month in average: Rs.	20,372.00

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