"Modernization, the state, and the construction of a Tharu identity in Nepal."

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In the lowlands of Nainital District in northwestern Uttar Pradesh, occupying discrete and adjacent territories, live two ethnic groups known as the Tharu and the Buxa.1 Both are indigenous to the area. They have much in common, in their dress, language, and ritual practices, and their origin myths even posit a shared ancestry for both groups (Hasan 1979). Despite these similarities, the two groups consider themselves to be distinct peoples or jāt2 (Stewart 1865, 148; Hasan 1979); they do not intermarry, although elopements (socially disapproved unions) are not uncommon. Both are listed as Scheduled Tribes in the Indian Constitution, a status that entitles them to special protection and benefit in education and government service. The Buxas live in the westernmost part of the district, while the Rana Tharu to their east also live in large numbers in the adjacent Nepali district of Kanchanpur.

That the Buxas and the Rana Tharus do not think of themselves as possessing a common identity is not particularly remarkable. What is worthy of note, however, is that across the border in the Tarai region of Nepal, culturally and linguistically distinct groups of people also known collectively as Tharu insist on their ethnic unity. Tharu leaders are given to reiterating in their public rhetoric the claim that “From the Mechi to the Mahakali, we are all members of a single jāt.”3 This essay seeks to explain why this might be the case, and its implications for our understanding of ethnic identity and the development of ethnic consciousness in general.

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1The 1981 census gave the numbers of Buxa speakers in India as 20,000, and of Rana Tharu speakers as 64,000 (Grimes 1996).

2The term jāt in the languages of northern India connotes sort, group, kind, species, and so on, and when applied to human populations, has generally been glossed by social scientists writing in English as caste, tribe, ethnic group, and nationality.

3The two rivers referred to in this statement form, respectively, the eastern and western borders of Nepal, and are about 800 kilometers apart.

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The notion of a common jāt identity implies that all members of the group share in some kind of essence that unites them and distinguishes them from all other jāt. The concept of jāt operates at many levels: thus, the many different endogamous Tharu groups were once separate jāt, but are now considered to be subsections of an overarching Tharu jāt. This essay is concerned not with the subunits but with the question of why an overarching identity has emerged at all. Why, in other words, should the different groups of Nepali Tharus not have continued to regard each other as separate people, much like the Buxas and the Rana Tharus do in India? In modern Nepal, the claim of the Tharu elite to a common Tharu jāt identity is contested by no one; the Tharus, numbering almost a million people by official count, are treated as one of the numerous ethnic groups that together constitute the population of the country. Had the boundaries of the Nepali state extended westward to incorporate Naini Tal, it is very likely that the Buxas, too, would have been subsumed by the ethnonym "Tharu."

By focusing on the Tharus of Nepal, I shall argue that the key to this difference in the formation of ethnic boundaries lies in the different ways that the states of India and Nepal structure their relationship to subordinate and marginal population groups. The Indian state has chosen to recognize the historical disabilities under which certain segments of its population—the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes—have

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4 One Tharu intellectual, Ramanand Singh, has argued that jāt is altogether an inappropriate concept to describe the current situation, and that samāj (society) better sums up the diversity collectivized by the common ethnonym. Most Tharus, however, continue to refer to themselves as a jāt, or, when using the English term, as a caste.
suffered, and to pursue policies of “compensatory discrimination” (Galanter 1989) designed to benefit those sections of society. The Nepali state has not made, and continues to be opposed to making any such concession to its own “tribal” population. Thus, given their historical separateness, there is no particular reason why Rana Tharus and Buxas should redefine their ethnicity; given their minuscule numbers in the population of Uttar Pradesh, there is no advantage to be gained from doing so that they do not already possess as Scheduled Tribes. Numerically, however, Tharus loom much larger in the Nepali polity, and larger still in the population of the Tarai; the calculus of numbers is thus a positive inducement to ethnic unification.

I shall also argue, against theories that have emphasized the salience of cultural symbols (language, religion, dress, and so on) as the basis for ethnic identity, that a sense of peoplehood can emerge even when common cultural symbols of any significance are absent, and that the explanation for the emergence of ethnic consciousness must be sought in politics and not in culture. Following Comaroff (1987), I take ethnicity to be not a “thing” but a summation of a set of relations; in this case, not simply with the “other” against whom Tharu identity is defined but relations among Tharus as well. Every Tharu individual, like other Nepalis, has potentially a vast number of identities (such as those of family, clan, village, or region) which are relevant in different contexts; the Tharu identity is superimposed on these others and is most salient in the multiethnic villages that have come into being since large-scale immigration into the Tarai began over forty years ago. While group identity may be articulated in cultural terms, the case of the Tharus demonstrates that a common, distinctive culture is not a necessary basis for that identity. This seeming paradox is what I shall seek to explain.

While there is no consensus on how the concept of ethnicity should be defined (Isajiw 1974; Williams 1989), there is general agreement that it is a form of culturally based group identity (e.g., Royce 1982; de Vos 1975; Keyes 1981; Toland 1993). In the same vein, others, most notably Shils (1957), Geertz (1963), and Isaacs (1975) have argued that ethnicity is the contemporary expression of a primordial sentiment. Anthony Smith, in a more nuanced version of the primordialist thesis, sees a distinctive shared culture and a shared history as being important components of the foundation of ethnic community (1986). Barth, in his critique of perspectives that equate an ethnic identity with a given cultural content, nevertheless acknowledges the role of culture by noting that actors in a given group use some cultural features of the variety available to them as “overt signals or signs—the diacritical features that people look for and exhibit to show identity, often such features as dress, language, house-form, or general style of life . . . ” (Barth 1969, 14). His point in essence is that the ethnic boundary is reinforced by a cultural scaffolding of some sort and endures because of persisting cultural differences (15).

It is not, however, the substantive content of their cultural systems that shapes a people’s ethnic identity but the history of their relationship to the state and their position in the structure of society as a whole (cf. Comaroff 1987, Devalle 1992). It is not cultural symbols and primordial loyalties that generate ethnic consciousness, but the nature and dynamic of the relationship that exists both among different communities of people and between them and the state.3 This is not to deny that

3Nepal, perhaps because of its immensely varied ethnic mix, has proved to be a fertile ground for more historically based and instrumentalist approaches to the study of ethnicity, particularly those that emphasize the role of the state. They include among others Gellner (1986), Levine (1987), Fisher (1987), and Holmberg (1989).
cultural symbols may be potent shapers of consciousness. Because such symbols are potentially unlimited, however, those that are emphasized in the discourse of ethnicity are a function of political and historical circumstances. It is not a common culture that draws Nepali Tharus together (for they share none) but certain historical forces that have made their unification as an ethnic group a reasonable and even desirable act in the present context. These include the process of state formation in nineteenth-century Nepal and the political and economic modernization of the state undertaken since the 1950s. By the same token, different circumstances in India have shaped different political responses among the various aboriginal groups across the border.

The unity posited by the Tharu elite in Nepal is not obvious; that, perhaps, is why they need to stress it. The Tharus comprise a number of culturally distinctive and localized (and formerly endogamous) groups, all of which considered each other to be separate jāt. To marry outside the jāt (even to a member of another Tharu jāt) was to run the risk of being made an outcaste. This is no longer the case today, for reasons discussed below. Among the largest and most important of these groups, from west to east along the Tarai, are the Rana, the Katharya, the Dangaura, the Tharus of Chitwan and Nawalparasi, and the Kochila, who occupy the territory between the Bagmati and Kosi rivers. Among them, especially in the east, live numerically smaller groups, traditionally considered by those locally dominant to be socially inferior. Most Tharus live in Nepal, but there are large populations in the Indian districts of Naini Tal (in Uttar Pradesh) and West Champaran (in Bihar). These various groups share no common speech; their languages show the influence, or are dialects, of important regional languages of North India, mainly Maithili, Bhojpuri, and Avadhi. Apart from language, Tharu groups differ in social customs, social organization, dress and ritual; the point is that, objectively speaking, they differ as much from each other as they do from non-Tharu ethnic groups living around them. In the eastern Tarai, for example, the material culture, language, dress, and patterns of worship of Tharus and non-Tharus do not differ significantly from one another, but there is a wide gap between the common symbols and practices of these Tharus and those of the far west. Eastern Tharus also tend to be more “Hinduized” than those to the west, especially the Rana Tharus and the Dangaura. In short, the Tharus are culturally and linguistically very heterogeneous; they share no common cultural symbol, such as language or religion, or even a common myth of origin on which they might anchor their imagining of community. Nevertheless, they have come to constitute their identity subjectively in modern times as a single ethnic group in a multiethnic state.

The Tharus are a curious example of the social organization of identity precisely because their ethnic boundary does not enclose a social group which shares any unique cultural feature. What they do have in common with each other is drawn more generally from the culture common to northern India. In other words, a shared, distinctive culture is not a necessary basis for ethnicity. However, “ethnicizing” groups usually find it necessary to posit the existence of such a shared culture, in effect, to imagine that culture into being, and the Tharus are no exception. The shared symbol of choice for Tharus is language, a topic discussed below. To understand how

"Colonial British accounts are often puzzled by this fact; the British assumed the Tharus were a single tribe. A census official, Elliot Colvin, noted, “Tharoos in this district declare themselves distinct from those who live to the east of the Kauriala river in Oudh, whom they declare to be of very inferior caste—a compliment invariably returned by the few Tharoos I have met from that locality. These do not intermarry” (quoted in Carlleyle 1879, 138). Tharus today who hold such sentiments tend to be members of the older generation, and are typically illiterate or less literate than the men who are forging a sense of Tharu peoplehood."
population groups which are so dissimilar to each other come to have a consciousness of a shared identity, a sense of peoplehood, to use Richard Fox's phrase (Fox 1990, 3), it is necessary to look at the social, political, and economic circumstances in which their lives are embedded. What, in other words, are the conditions under which they reproduce their societies? What is the relationship between those conditions, social identity, and ethnic consciousness?

I shall distinguish in this essay between two levels of group identity. The first is implicit or unselfconscious, associated with the traditional, local, endogamous group (corresponding to Tonnies' idea of the *gemeinschaft*). In Bourdieu's terms, it exists as doxa or the unreflected upon and "naturalized" process of social reproduction of the community (Bourdieu 1977). As he puts it, "the natural and social world appears as self-evident" because "there is a quasi-perfect correspondence between the objective order and the subjective principles of organization" (Bourdieu 1977, 164). The "natural" character of social facts, hitherto accepted as part of the given order, becomes subject to critique when an objective crisis brings some aspect of doxa—like identity—into question. This is a necessary precondition for the emergence of the second level of identity I wish to distinguish.

This second or more encompassing level of identity is a self-conscious—"From the Mechi to the Mahakali, we are all one jāi"—and politically oriented identity that draws together various local communities and groups and endows them with an imagined coherence (cf. Anderson 1991). It is imagined in the sense that the structural linkages (most importantly, of marriage, as I discuss below) that help to shape the first level of group identity defined above do not exist at this level. The different Tharu communities in Nepal are being drawn together into something larger as the state penetrates their lives—a state large enough to encompass all of them and to relate to all of them in more or less identical ways. The process through which this politically oriented, self-aware, pan-Tharu identity is emerging is the subject of this paper.

The Terrain of Ethnicity

The Tarai historically has been an interstitial and marginal area in a number of respects. It stretches from India's Arunachal Pradesh in the east to Naini Tal district in the west; it varies in breadth from a few kilometers to 53 at its broadest span. The Tarai proper is contiguous with the Indo-Gangetic plain, and is known as the Outer Tarai, to distinguish it from the Inner Tarai, which consists of a number of valleys lying between the Mahabharat range south of the Himalaya and a more southerly range of low hills known as the Churia or the Siwaliks. Ecologically and culturally, this region, once heavily forested, has been a zone of transition: from the Indo-Gangetic plain to the Himalayan foothills, and from the plains culture to that of the hills. It was a region into which few cared to venture, for the Tarai was virtually synonymous with malaria. Malaria discouraged settlement, and, for the most part, the land was left to the Tharus, who came to be regarded as its original inhabitants. One Nepali writer has observed, commenting on the stereotype his countrymen have of their country's most important region outside the Kathmandu valley, "Many Nepalis . . . think of the tarai merely as a strip of sub-tropical flatlands . . . inhabited by the gracious Tharus" (Dixit 1990, 5).

Although Tharus are popularly believed to be immune to malaria, it is more probable that the populations which came to be known as Tharu lived here because
they could establish themselves nowhere else. Colonial British accounts characterize the Tharus as timid and retiring in the face of more organized and aggressive agricultural people, abandoning their land and retiring deeper into the forest in the face of encroachment (Benett 1878; Cruickshank 1891; Stevenson-Moore 1900; Nevill 1905). But the Tharus (and the Buxas also) were imbued, in the imagination of the North Indian peasant, with some of the malign power of the forest itself. Many accounts speak of peasant belief in Tharu and Buxa witchcraft (Stewart 1865, 149; Crooke 1896, 405; Srivastava 1958, 208–9); a British missionary in Gonda reported that “the forest officer . . . had the greatest difficulty in getting carpenters and masons to come out and build his house; because they were afraid of Thāru tona!” [the power of the Evil Eye] (Knowles 1889, 215).

For most of the millennium, the Tarai was a wilderness and relatively marginal to the economy of the north Indian states. It was however, more important to the rulers of the petty principalities in the hills. When these began to be annexed by the emerging power of the kingdom of Gorkha, a process of conquest beginning in the mid-eighteenth century and ending in the formation of the modern state of Nepal, the Tarai became essential to the economic viability of the new state. The growing importance of the region to Nepal lay not only in its forest produce, such as timber and elephants, but also in the availability of land for cultivation (and hence for revenue) if only settlers could be found. The Tharus, who provided an important source of labor for felling timber, for capturing elephants, and for agriculture, were too few in number to carry on the economic activity required. Fear of malaria kept hill people out of the Tarai, except during the winter months, when danger of infection was low; the Nepal government began, therefore, to encourage immigration from India (Regmi 1978, 139–51). Most of these settlers, pushed into the Tarai by famine and natural disasters in their home villages, settled in the lands east of the Bagmati river. Many of the revenue collectors (known as jimidārs) recruited by the state to collect the land revenue in the Tarai and undertake the work of agricultural development were locally important Tharus. The descendants of this elite class, who continue to dominate Tharu society, are the moving force behind the shaping of a Tharu ethnic identity in modern Nepal.

Ethnicity and the Nineteenth-Century State

During the nineteenth century, the new state of Nepal, confined in 1816 within its present borders by British power, began a process of political consolidation. A key act in this process was the adoption in 1854 of a detailed legal code which attempted to organize, in a coherent and systematic way, the innumerable cultural and linguistic groups that made up the population ruled by the House of Gorkha. This document was known as the Muluki Ain (Chief Law). It was introduced by the Rana regime that had seized power in 1846 and was revised several times until it was finally repealed in 1963. The Muluki Ain functioned, in effect, as a constitution: a codification, but also a reification and homogenization of existing customs, usages, and practices, particularly those which governed the relations among caste/ethnic groups (cf. Höfer 1979). Through this legal code, the Rana State classified the Nepali population into five categories, as follows:

(1) Castes wearing sacred thread: Brahmins, Thakuris, Chetris, and analogous Newar castes.
(2) Nonenslaveable alcohol-drinking castes (*namasine matvāli*): “Tribal” groups including the Magar, Gurung, Rai, and Limbu; also Newars.

(3) Enslaveable alcohol-drinking castes (*masine matvāli*): People of Tibetan origin, and a number of less important “tribal” groups, including the Tharus.

(4) Low service castes: Mostly Newar; their touch is not considered defiling but higher castes cannot accept water from them; also includes Muslims and Europeans.

(5) Untouchable castes: Blacksmiths, Tanners, Musicians, Newar scavengers, and the like.

The principle which underlies the way the *Muluki Ain* organized the population was that of ascribed status. The status of different population groups depended on their relative purity (or lack of it). What marked a given population in this way was the nature of its social and cultural practice; liquor drinking, for example, was a sign of impurity. While for the Hindu rulers of Nepal the two end points of this continuum were easy enough to establish (the Brahmins, Chetris, and Thakuris occupied one end, the untouchable Hindu castes the other), the organization of the middle layers, as elsewhere in the subcontinent, was less clear cut. Into this area fell a large population of so-called tribal people, Tibetans, and Muslims. A near universal characteristic of “tribal” people in Nepal (and in India) is that they habitually consume liquor, an important aspect of their social and ritual practices. They were therefore placed in the category of alcohol-drinker (*matvāli*) and further subdivided into two groups. The higher ranked group, consisting of ethnic categories such as the Magar, Gurung, Rai, and Limbu, were considered to be nonenslaveable (e.g., for indebtedness), while the lower ranked or enslaveable group consisted of Tharus, Gharti (the descendants of freed slaves), minor groups such as the Kumal and the Chepang, and, finally, the Bhote (people of Tibetan origin). Into the fourth group, ranking below the two *matvāli* categories, but above untouchables, were placed Europeans and Muslims.

The Tharus are, relatively speaking, a large population; there are more Tharus in Nepal (993,388 according to the 1991 census) than there are members of any one of the higher ranked, nonenslaveable, alcohol-drinking groups. The key difference that relegated them to a lower social status in the eyes of the ruling elite in Kathmandu was probably their relative political marginality to the state. The Magars and the Gurungs—the “beau ideal” of the Gurkha soldier (Vansittart 1894, 223)—and later on the Rai and Limbu, formed and continue to form an important component of the Nepali military; they played a significant role in the expansion first of the principality of Gorkha and subsequently of the Nepali state. These ethnic groups were later characterized by the British as “martial races” and recruited into the British Indian army (Vansittart 1894; Des Chene 1993, 68–69). They were in effect population groups of some importance to the ruling elite. In contrast, the peaceable Tharus’ posed no imaginable threat to the ruling order and were politically and geographically marginal. The other groups in the category of enslaveable *matvāli* were even more marginal; small, forest dwelling groups whose population is to be counted in the low thousands, or small groups of Tibetans living in the high reaches of the Himalaya.

There is no consensus on the etymology of the term “Tharu.” It is possible that the term was originally applied to the native people of the Tarai. According to

"The Rana Tharus, for example, were characterized in the Oudh Gazetteer as people who “will on no account take service as soldiers” and as “a cowardly race” (Government of Oudh 1877, 208–9)."
Krauskopff, “Terms such as Tharu ... seem to refer more to an area of habitat and the idea one had of its inhabitants than to a specific tribe” (1989, 33; my translation). She notes that in Taranatha’s history of Buddhism, which dates to the beginning of the sixteenth century, reference is made in Tibetan to Champaran as *mtha’ru-y brgyud*. The term *mtha’ru* refers to the people (“-y” being the genitive), while *brgyud* may be glossed as the borderland, frontier, buffer zone, or land-in-between. A literal translation of the term might be “the Tharu frontier” or “the Tharu region,” or “the frontier region where the Tharus live.” It is possible that the term *Tharu* came to be used to describe the unstable and marginal population occupying the Tarai, a frontier region for both the hill principalities of Nepal and the Gangetic kingdoms to their south. It is also possible that Tharu, like the term Magar for certain groups of hill people (Fisher 1986, 3), perhaps originally an ethnic label for one particular local population, came to be a status summation for the various peripheral aboriginal groups that occupied the Tarai (cf. Krauskopff 1990, 32). Because an individual’s personal and public rights under the old Nepali legal code were tied to ethnic (*jāt*) identity, membership in a named ethnic category recognized in the *Muluki Ain* became of central importance, and it was not unknown for population groups to seek to change their ethnic label to better their status and privileges (Levine 1987). On occasion, as in the case of the Tamang (Höfer 1979, 146–49; Holmberg 1989, 11), the Rana state intervened to stipulate that different population groups should refer to themselves by a common ethnic label.

Whatever the provenance of the term, by the turn of this century there was a well-established ethnic category called *Tharu* in the Tarai, encompassing several population groups, large and small, which had little in common in a cultural sense that might have served to distinguish them collectively from non-Tharu population groups living in the region. The cultural differences among Tharu groups was at least as great as the differences between any given Tharu community and those not included under the rubric of *Tharu*. Conversely, in some parts of the Tarai, particularly in the east, Tharus have relatively more in common culturally with non-Tharus (such as a common language and ritual practice) than they do with others sharing that ethnonym.

One factor that distinguishes the category of Tharu in an objective sense is its close association with the Tarai; settlements of people identified by this ethnonym are not to be found outside this region. This also helps explain why certain populations inhabiting the Tarai were not included within this category; they are not exclusively Tarai people. In the Inner Tarai district of Chitwan in central Nepal, for example, there are communities of an ethnic group known as the Darai who live among the Tharu settlements, speak the local Tharu language as their “native” language, and practice many of the rituals of their Tharu neighbors. Culturally, the Darai are more like the Tharus of Chitwan than the Tharus of Chitwan are like, for example, the Rana Tharus mentioned at the beginning of this essay. They are not, however, considered to be Tharu; among other things, they are not exclusively identified with the Tarai, for Darai communities are also found in the lower hills. The Musaher furnish another example. Like the Darai, they have many cultural features, including language, in common with their Tharu neighbors. In one British colonial account

8I am indebted to Asif Agha for this information. The French Orientalist Sylvain Levi translated this as “the country of the Tharus,” but Chattopadhyaya, who translated Taranatha’s history into English, rendered it as “the frontier country” (Krauskopff 1990, 34; Lama Chimpu and Chattopadhyaya 1970).
they are listed as a Tharu group (Crooke 1896, 385–87) but Chitwan Tharus emphatically deny any ethnic connection to the Musaher. The Musaher are a caste category found throughout northern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, and are immigrants into the Tarai. In Chitwan, their origins are comparatively recent, going back only a few generations, and they maintain close contact with their kin across the border. In addition, they are an untouchable caste; quite apart from the prejudices of Tharus regarding this matter, they would also have been beyond the pale in terms of the old legal code.

The Tharus then are closely identified with the Tarai and treated today as its indigene. But this association cannot, in and of itself, account for the development of an ethnic consciousness among them or the political articulation of an ethnic identity. The mere existence of potentially unifying cultural symbols, even such powerful ones as a common language, does not necessarily mean that those who share in that system of symbols will come to think of themselves as sharing in some essential identity that must be preeminent over other identities. Brass has shown this in his analysis of the failure of the Maithili language movement in North Bihar (Brass 1974). On the other hand, ethnicizing groups seek out cultural symbols of some sort around which to organize (or anchor) their identity. Where such symbols do not already exist, they may come into existence through a process of creative imagining. I shall show that this is what the Tharu elite is attempting to do today. But while elites are often the principal agents engaged in the engendering of ethnic (or national) identity (and the dimension of class must be a part of any analysis of ethnicity), their actions must speak to issues with which the population group they wish to mobilize can identify. Failure to do so, as Brass points out with reference to the Maithili language movement, will lead to the failure of the elite project (Brass 1974).

Nationalism and Cultural Stabilization

Through both neglect and policy, the Rana dictatorship that ruled Nepal since the mid-nineteenth century had kept the country’s social and economic infrastructure largely undeveloped; paved roads were virtually nonexistent, there were no schools, much less a system of formal schooling, and health services or any of the other features of a “modern” society and polity were not present even in embryonic form. The Tarai, even though it remained malarial, had become the backbone of the Nepali economy, but through the labor of Indian immigrants; it remained a region the hill people preferred to avoid. Nevertheless, there was land to be had in the Tarai that would serve to assuage the growing land hunger in the hills and expand agricultural production at the same time. The post-Rana state sought to remedy decades of Rana misrule by actively integrating Nepal into the world economy and seeking to “modernize” the country; the Tarai, with its immense agricultural potential and reserves of land, became an inevitable target of these efforts. From the point of view of the state, developing the Tarai and opening it to settlement would simultaneously serve two purposes that were central to the concerns of the elite in Kathmandu: it would bring about economic growth on the one hand (and thus serve to legitimize an autocratic regime), and it would “culturally stabilize” the border region on the other.

The last-mentioned factor requires a closer examination. Nepal is a state created by hill people, who, despite their cultural and linguistic differences, have more in
common with each other than they do with the people of the plains. Centuries of dominance by Brahmin-Chetri elites in the hills have also meant that many aspects of the elite culture, particularly language and religion, have come to be adopted, to varying degrees, by other ethnic groups. Nepali nationalism—meaning the construction of a particular distinctive Nepali identity—had never been a crucial issue when the British ruled India; the Raj had arrived at a modus vivendi with the Ranas that was satisfactory to both, which in no way threatened the Nepali elite’s control of the state. An independent and largely Hindu India was another matter. Given that Nepal defines itself as a Hindu state, and that its economy is largely an extension of—and dependent on—that of its giant neighbor, the elite had to define a distinctive sense of Nepali nationhood. It was not enough to define the political boundary; it had to be reinforced internally by a cultural framework of some sort. In this endeavor, the key symbols came to be drawn from the culture of the dominant ethnic groups, the Brahmins and the Chetris. The most important of these symbols was the Nepali language (Gaige 1975; Hutt 1988). As the National Education Planning Commission argued in justifying its recommendations for the government’s language policy, “to solve the problems of multiplicity of language, stress and importance will have to be laid on one language, if the integrity and sovereignty of Nepal is to be maintained” (quoted in Gaige 1975, 109).

In contrast, the Tarai is, culturally, an extension of northern India; the dominant symbols that organize the identity of most of the people there (caste, language, religious rituals, styles of dressing, eating, living) are those of the plains. The descendants of the Indian immigrants who settled the region at the behest of the Rana state maintain close links to their brethren across the border. The situation is further complicated because the idea of citizenship came late to Nepal. Before, there had been only subjects and tenants; there had been no record then, and no systematic record is kept even today, of births, deaths, and marriages, much less certification of citizenship. From the point of view of the Rana state, there had been only human labor power, and its control did not require the more sophisticated methods of order and rule (and of national identity formation) that are an essential prerequisite of modern states. Furthermore, Nepal’s treaty obligations with independent India has established both an open border and the right of citizens of both countries to work in either economy (cf. Gaige 1975, 87–107). One other important factor shaping the attitude of the state to the Tarai people is the controversy over Hindi that broke out in the early 1950s, following the declaration of Nepali as the national language for administration and schooling. The cause of Hindi was championed in the Tarai against the new language policy, and the agitation simmered on until the end of the decade (cf. discussion in Gaige 1975, 108–19). The Tarai was defined by pro-Hindi forces as a Hindi-speaking area; to bolster this argument, various regional languages such as Maithili and Bhojpuri were treated by them as dialects of Hindi. It was partly to dilute the force of the pro-Hindi agitation that the state, in its first census, defined Maithili, Bhojpuri, and Avadhi as languages rather than as dialects, thereby reducing those who chose to identify their native language as Hindi to an insignificant minority. The implications of this move for the question of Tharu identity will become apparent below. In short, as the national elite set about the task of reconstructing the Rana state in a modern image, the issue of the political loyalty of the inhabitants of an economically important region was brought into focus.

The idea of cultural stabilization must be seen against this background. The hill people, particularly the high castes, were the carriers of the new Nepali identity that
was being forged; indeed, essential aspects of high caste identity were being universalized as the national norm. The settlement of the Tarai by hill people, particularly those of the high castes, would thus serve to strengthen the hold of the state on a region that was economically vital to its existence. A significant obstruction to such a process of economic development and nation-building, however, was the region’s endemic malaria, which discouraged hill people from settling there.

**Malaria, Development, and Land**

One of the most significant activities of the post-Rana state was the implementation of a project to eradicate malaria in the Tarai. A pilot project was established in Chitwan in the mid-1950s, and later extended to the entire Tarai region. Also beginning in the 1950s, the state developed a system of highways: an east-west highway in the Tarai was linked to other highways snaking up river valleys to towns in the hills. This highway system, in conjunction with the dramatic reduction in the incidence of malaria following DDT spraying and the ready availability of land in the Tarai, encouraged a large-scale migration of people from the hills to the lowlands; today, the region is home to nearly half the national population. The towns of the Tarai grew rapidly and are now the largest urban areas outside the Kathmandu valley. Many peasant cultivators were settled on government-organized settlement projects, but a far greater number set up spontaneous (squatter) settlements, encroaching on state land and clearing forest (Ghimire 1992; Shrestha 1990). The Tharus, particularly those in the western Tarai, whose forms of social organization and limited articulation with the Nepali state had left them singularly unprepared to cope with this influx, were early victims of this population transfer. In this respect, the Tharus have suffered the fate of other so-called tribal groups in India who have lost land, status, and autonomy to high-caste Hindu settlers (Devalle 1992).

The first two decades after the ending of Rana rule was a period of rapid transformation, including in legislation pertaining to land tenure and revenue collection, which was brought into line with modern practices. The ready availability of land in the Tarai had left most Tharus with little appreciation of its value; the constraining factor on development in the Tarai had always been labor, which had been limited by the endemic malaria. The most immediate consequence to Tharus throughout the Tarai of the malaria eradication program was that they lost land. The situation was particularly devastating in some of the western districts, especially Dang, where much of the land formerly controlled by Tharus passed into the hands of immigrants, mostly Brahmans, Chetris, and Thakuris from the hills. Many of these immigrants used their education, and their caste and kinship affiliations with local government functionaries, to appropriate Tharu land.9 In addition, thousands of Tharu

9 An example will illustrate the sorts of methods used. A Brahmin who came to Chitwan after the malaria eradication program became notorious in the surrounding villages for the way he amassed land. He readily provided loans to Tharus; when they found themselves unable to pay back the loan within the stipulated time, he would extend the repayment period, but in return they would be asked to agree to the addition of another zero to the sum specified on the promissory note. The Tharus, illiterate and unfamiliar with written documents, would fail to see the significance of this and would readily consent. The debtor, eventually confronted by the moneylender with a promissory note for a sum far greater than that which he had originally borrowed, and well beyond his ability to repay, would lose all or part of his land in fulfillment of the debt. Similar examples are given by Caplan (1970) in his discussion of Brahmin-Limbu relations in East Nepal.
peasants fell into debt and became bonded labor for their new landlords (Cox 1990; n.d., 9–11).

The way in which Tharu society was organized probably accelerated this process of dispossession. Having adequate labor for cultivation was, as I have described elsewhere (Guneratne 1996), a perennial problem in Tharu villages. The large joint-families into which Tharu households were organized, comprising as many as fifty or more individuals under one roof, was one solution to the problem of labor. The household head (usually the father, sometimes the eldest son, or some other older male) had virtually unquestioned control over its affairs, and was the principal mediator between the household and the outside world. A mistake on his part could transform several dozen individuals from being members of a relatively autonomous peasant household into (at best) tenants or (at worst) bonded labor. The social organization of Tharu households thus served to magnify the consequences of an individual’s folly or naïveté.

The economic development of the Tarai therefore had serious implications for the ability of various Tharu groups to reproduce their societies in the customary way. The intensive settlement of the region led to the loss of forest and pasture land as these lands were brought under cultivation, and to the closing off of the land frontier. The transformation of the economic base of society had consequences for the conduct of ritual life in the short term and for cosmological beliefs in the long. In many areas of the Tarai, Tharus were no longer able to perform customary rituals, because they no longer had the resources to do so; these rituals became abbreviated in their performance or fell into disuse entirely. In Dang, following on “loss of land, mass migration and poverty . . . [s]everal major festivals that were previously celebrated annually are now no longer celebrated at all, because of a lack of economic resources” (Cox n.d., 11). In Chitwan, the wholesale destruction of the forest by settlers following the success of the malaria eradication project removed from the ritual calendar the worship of many gods whose jungle shrines had been destroyed in the process. Chitwan Tharus believe that the power of their deities is closely linked to the presence of forests; when the forests are destroyed, they believe the gods abandon the area. When rituals are no longer performed, the young are no longer socialized into their performance, and they disappear from the local knowledge system.

Younger Tharus who have grown up with these changes know no other world. They have other, and powerful, sources of knowledge and entertainment: the school, the cinema, the developing bazaar towns, and the fact that they now live in mixed caste villages, with the immigrant Brahmins and Chetris present as a powerful economic, political, and cultural force (Guneratne forthcoming). While the cultural practices of their elders become in one sense marginal to their everyday concerns, in another sense they undergo a reification and reappears as an essential aspect of their modern identity. It is no longer culture as doxa in Bourdieu’s sense but culture as performance, a tale that Tharus tell themselves about themselves. This is seen, for example, in the elaborate cultural shows organized by the Tharu social movement in western Nepal known as BASE (Backward Society Education; see below); the ostensible purpose of these performances is to teach Tharu youth their ancestral culture, and so preserve it.

The process of modernization has had certain consequences for Tharu ethnic consciousness: it has created the “pan-Tharu” identity referred to earlier. The land question impinges very heavily on Tharus; it has created the feeling of a common predicament and has structured the relations Tharus throughout the Tarai have with primarily high-caste hill immigrants in similar ways. The establishment of schools
led to an increase in literacy among Tharus and also furnished them with a lingua franca, Nepali, through which Tharus from all over the Tarai could communicate with one another; Hindi also serves this purpose. The development of a system of all-weather roads in the Tarai made travel easier and brought Tharus into contact with one another. As Ramanand Singh, a Tharu from Saptari who once served King Mahendra as attorney-general of Nepal, recalled in an interview, “As a matter of fact when we became educated, we thought of exploring for ourselves, we used to hear that [there are Tharus everywhere in the Tarai] . . . So we used to go from one district to another . . . to inform others about their own common origin” (emphasis added).

Education, “Backwardness,” and the Tharu Elite

A key concept in the way Tharus think of themselves (and the way they are thought of by others) is the concept of pichari, “backward” (Guneratne forthcoming). The term as used here implies a lack of education, which handicaps backward groups in politics and economic life. Tharus throughout the Tarai identify their backwardness with the general illiteracy characteristic of their communities, which, they believe, made them susceptible to exploitation by outsiders. Education has become a central theme in Tharu organizing, most successfully and spectacularly in the activities of the 100,000-strong Tharu social movement called Backward Society Education (BASE), which has set up night schools in hundreds of Tharu villages in the western Tarai and used them as a springboard for further organizing against the power of exploitative landlords (Cox n.d.).

“Backwardness” has come to be a group attribute, in a social context where the status of the individual is closely tied to the status of the group. Common action by the group is required to change the attributes. However well-educated and successful an individual Tharu, his status is likely to be affected by his group identity. This observation applies with far greater force to Tharus of whatever class position in rural areas (which is to say, the vast majority) than it does to members of the “national” elite (see below), whose wealth, status, and primarily urban lifestyle help to insulate them from such considerations.

The establishment of a school system where none existed before, a vital aspect of the state’s modernization project, has been an important catalyst in the construction of identity among Tharus. As schools were first set up in the 1950s and 1960s in Tarai towns such as Birganj, they also became the avenue through which the children of the Tharu elite from different areas could come into contact with one another. They not only became literate in a common language (Nepali), they also learnt a common set of values and shared a common experience vis-à-vis the numerically much larger body of high-caste students, an experience which endures. A Tharu youth organization in Biratnagar, for example, was founded by students in order to counter the discrimination and isolation they felt on campus, both at the hands of high-caste students and the (Brahmin-dominated) administration (Guneratne 1994, 355). Their social experience has both sharpened and framed the analysis a younger generation of Tharus has made of the material situation that has resulted from the opening up of the Tarai to settlement. Education has been the issue around which to organize. These organizing efforts range from the phenomenally successful efforts of BASE to more modest efforts by village youth clubs in Chitwan to persuade young Tharus to stay in school, and their parents to keep them there.
A central argument of this paper is that the motive force for the construction of ethnic identity comes from elites, who have the most to gain by promoting a form of identity that subordinates all others and that can plausibly represent itself as claiming ultimate loyalty, transcending all other group loyalties, including that of class. The vehicle for such construction is very often ethnic associations of some sort; in India, for example, caste associations played a major role in bringing together local caste groups from different areas that shared the same caste label. The situation of the Tharus in modern Nepal is very similar; the process of ethnic identity formation is largely an elite project, and the leading instrument of this work is an organization known as the Tharu Welfare Society (Tharu Kalyan karini Sabha).

The Tharu Welfare Society was founded during the last years of Rana rule by men from large landowning families in the eastern Tarai. It was given legal recognition by the Rana regime in the Nepali year Bikram Samvat 2007 (C.E. 1950/51), shortly before the insurrection that drove the Ranas from power. Over the years, members of Tharu elites from other Tarai districts joined the organization, and from 1980 Tharus from every district in the Nepal Tarai and from sister Tharu organizations in Naini Tal and Champaran districts in India began sending representatives to its biannual conventions. The Tharu elite believes the perceived “backwardness” of the Tharu community may be attributed to its general illiteracy and lack of education, which makes Tharus vulnerable to exploitation by other groups. The elite measures educational success by the numbers of doctors and engineers the Tharu community produces. There are very few of these, and the lack of such professionals is treated as one sign of the community’s general backwardness. As a consequence, a large part of the Tharu Welfare Society’s energies have been devoted to the promotion of education through the establishment, for example, of a student hostel as well as through claims pressed on the government, so far unsuccessfully, to reserve places in the university for Tharu students. The inspiration here, of course, is the system of reservations in education and government service for Scheduled Tribes in India. When putting forward such demands the Tharu Welfare Society claims to be acting on behalf of all Tharus, although only the elite itself is in a position to benefit from the fruits of such activities.

The organization of the Tharu Welfare Society is based on local committees in each Tarai district with a central coordinating committee located in Kathmandu. This central committee is a self-selecting body of Tharus who have achieved some sort of national prominence and who have access to power at the national level. This group consists of, among others, a former cabinet minister, a former attorney general, and a former zonal commissioner, as well as sundry civil servants. The various district committees consist of locally prominent people, such as landlords and schoolteachers. Although these two groups may overlap to some extent, I distinguish them here as a national elite (exercising some influence and recognition throughout the Tharu community) and a local elite.

The Tharu Welfare Society holds a convention every two years in different Tarai districts. These meetings draw Tharus from all over the country to discuss issues of importance and concern to their community. On the agenda at the convention in 1991, for example, was a discussion of what the restoration of multiparty democracy in Nepal meant for Tharus and what they might do to take advantage of it. These conventions concretely express, in the physical juxtaposition of Tharus from all over the country in a common space, the ethnic unity the Tharus claim for themselves. The convention is an important event in the life of Tharus in the district in which it takes place and few Tharus (from that particular area), especially those with social and
Marriage, Class, and the Boundaries of Jāt

Rules about who one may or may not marry are among the most fundamental ways of maintaining group boundaries. The Tharu Welfare Society determined several years ago that customary rules prohibiting marriage with outsiders no longer applied to intermarriage between members of different Tharu communities. While this is a significant symbolic statement of Tharu unity, it has had little practical consequences for the Tharu population at large, at least as far as intermarriage between Tharus living in different districts is concerned. The expense involved in seeking a marriage partner from a village more distant than a bullock cart can travel in a day is prohibitive by village standards. Almost all the marriages I know of which have since taken place between Tharus of geographically separate groups were those of the elite, who have the resources and motivation to seek marriage partners outside the district. But it does serve to legitimize unions between members of hierarchically ranked Tharu groups living in the same district; this is the principal way in which ordinary Tharus experience this particular decision of the Tharu Welfare Society. In other words, they can no longer turn to the village elite for help in imposing sanctions on members of their family who might have married a Tharu of “inferior” status (cf. Guneratne 1994, 365–72).

The Tharu elite constitutes a very small fraction of the Tharu population. Where Chitwan is concerned, considerations of class and economic status appear to have been much less important before the area’s economic development (starting in the early 1960s) than they are today. Among the older generation of Tharus, the children of revenue collectors and other influential villagers appear to have readily married with humbler families, including those of their servants. In terms of the material conditions of life in Chirwan, there was no significant gap between the standard of living of the dominant stratum in village society and the poor. What distinguished them was quantity of material goods rather than their kind or quality; this reflected the existence of a largely unmonetized economy. The economic development of Chitwan, however, which has led to an increase in the monetary wealth and consumption of the economically dominant stratum of the Tharu population, has contributed to a marked symbolic differentiation of class. One consequence has been the decline in marriages between members of the elite and the ordinary peasantry. Because the pool of suitable marriage partners within a particular endogamous group is thus reduced (and reduced even more for the national elite who dominate the Tharu Welfare Society) the abrogation of rules of group endogamy is a strategy with definite benefits to the elite. In essence it expands the pool of possible marriage partners and permits people who are locally powerful or influential to establish alliances with others of their class throughout the Tarai.

Why should ordinary Tharus accept the resolutions of the Tharu Welfare Society on such personal matters as matrimonial decisions? Traditionally, of course, they have not been personal matters but social ones, and the jimidār (the term applied to the
village revenue collector) was entrusted with the task of ensuring that the interests of society were properly taken into account. Under the Ranas, the jimidārs were not only responsible for the collection of revenue and the exercise of juridical authority within the village, but they were also the arbiters of that compendium of traditions and customs which we may term “caste law.” It was the jimidār who decided when caste law, particularly in the case of marriage relations, had been infringed, and he had the authority to punish violators and annul inappropriate marriages. Today, however, the jimidār has no power to enforce caste law, and as many Tharus in Chitwan admit, there is little if anything anyone can do to sanction such infringement.

Although the institution of jimidār was abolished almost thirty years ago, and the former jimidārs no longer carry institutional authority nor exercise formal coercive power, the strength of this institution in the imagination of ordinary Tharus (or at least older ones who grew up under its authority), and the political and economic influence former jimidārs still wield in their villages, continue to be important factors in social life in Chitwan. If this elite, traditionally vested with the authority to rule on such matters, decides to redefine the boundaries of the jāt, there is no other group or institution with either the prestige, the authority, or the interest to oppose or deny this. From the point of view of ordinary Tharus, there is no reason why other groups of people, also called Tharu, occupying adjacent districts of the Tarai, experiencing similar forms of discrimination and exploitation and defined as a category in common opposition to the category of pahāriyā (hill person), and who may be symbolically linked to their own society through marriages between their respective elites, should not also be Tharu, the same kind of people as themselves, different and distinct from non-Tharus. While the state and its works are the conduit through which Tharu elites are able to establish relationships with each other, those same elite are the conduit through which different Tharu societies begin to forge relationships with others like themselves. As the jimidār has been the traditional source of authority on these matters, the perception Tharus have of other Tharus is influenced by the thinking of elites in their own local society; in this matter, the elite has acted to liberalize the social norms that formerly it was responsible for upholding. In any case, ordinary Tharus (which is to say the vast majority) are in no position to ostracize or outcaste the elite; ultimately whether the poor agree or disagree is irrelevant.

This does not mean that the poor uncritically follow the lead of their elites. The proposition that all Tharus are one jāt does not contradict their own experience; rather, it is either neutral or it reinforces that experience, by reaching out to others who have been similarly disabled by the transformation of the Tarai (thus, the opposition between Tharu: pahāriyā [a generic term for someone from the hills] maps onto that between Tarai: Hill [pahār]). Class and ethnic identity exist in tension with each other. Class consciousness (of being poor, “backward,” and exploited, a belief which is widespread among Tharus throughout the Tarai) dovetails easily with the belief that in the Tarai, those who are poor, backward, and exploited are Tharus. The existence of the common ethnonym facilitates this process.

Language, Identity, and the Census

The Tharu Welfare Society is a group in search of a unifying symbol. The symbol of choice—indeed, in the opinion of the elite, the symbol of necessity—is language. Tharus, like many other Nepalis, believe that a common language is a defining aspect of a jāt. Ramanand Singh put it in dire terms to the 1991 Tharu convention in Biratnagar (ironically, perhaps, he also put it in Nepali): “Bhāsa gayo bhanē thāru jāti
“chainā” (If the language is lost, there won’t be a Tharu jāt). Tharus, however, do not share a “Tharu” language. Tharu intellectuals insist that all Tharus once spoke a common language, and that this language has become differentiated over time as a consequence of the isolation of Tharus from each other in the vast forests of the Tarai. They cannot agree, however, on which of the existing languages is closest to the original; all claim that honor for their own tongue. The notion that Tharus speak, or must speak, a common language arises from the belief that all Tharus belong to one ethnic group and must, therefore, share a common culture, and language is seen as being synonymous with culture in this context. While this suggests the power of language as a unifying symbol even in cases where objectively a common language does not exist, this power is also derived from the way the modern state classifies its population—Nepal does so on the basis of a number of linguistic categories. Language becomes the vehicle through which an ethnic group can make its presence known to the polity.

Tharus believe that they have been consistently underenumerated in the census. This underenumeration was virtually total in the Bhojpuri- and Maithili-speaking Eastern Tarai districts in the 1971 census. In Saptari, the home district of Ramanand Singh, the 1971 census recorded only five Tharus in the district (Aryal, Regmi, and Rimal 1982). Whatever this might say about the effectiveness of the organization in raising Tharu consciousness even in its heartland, in 1991 the Tharu Welfare Society made a determined effort to rectify the situation at the decennial census that year. One of the resolutions adopted by the Society at its convention in Biratnagar was that Tharus should be urged to give their native language as Tharu, rather than as Maithili, at the census. For good measure, a leading member of the national elite urged in a speech at the convention that Tharus should append the term “Tharu” after their name in the census returns. The rise in the proportion of Tharus in the total population, from 3.6 percent in 1981 (Central Bureau of Statistics 1986) to 5.4 percent in 1991 (Central Bureau of Statistics 1993), is perhaps attributable to these tactics.

The complexities of this issue can be illustrated with reference to Maithili, a North Indian language spoken in parts of northern Bihar in India and in adjacent areas of Nepal. The foremost exponent of the view that Tharus share a common language is Ramanand Singh. He is from the Maithili-speaking region in eastern Nepal and is an important figure in the Tharu Welfare Society. One of his goals is to establish that the Tharu dialect he speaks is a language distinct from and prior to Maithili. Singh claims that Maithili has its roots in Tharu; he attempts to demonstrate this by looking at the etymology of various Maithili words to find their Tharu origins. More generally, he places great emphasis on developing and standardizing the various Tharu languages, and was engaged when I met him in 1991 in compiling a comparative dictionary (or vocabulary list) of the different dialects. Other Tharus from that area of eastern Nepal, however, will simply say that they speak Maithili, and presumably return this answer at the census. As a consequence, the numbers of Maithili speakers are over 90 percent in some districts with large Tharu populations, while “Tharu” speakers in those same districts are negligible in number.

As I noted above, the census enumerates by language, not by ethnicity. Unlike in Chitwan, where language is an unambiguous aspect of Tharu identity (only Tharus and some peripheral groups such as the Darai and Musaher speak Tharu), in the Maithili-speaking east it is an important area of contestation; here, almost everyone speaks Maithili, and language has been defined, a priori, as a key symbol of identity. If one is Tharu, then one, by definition, must speak Tharu. The Nepali state has had
great antipathy to enumerating people by their ethnic affiliation, because that is considered to be subversive of the civic religion of "national integration"; therefore, it is only by demarcating themselves linguistically from other Maithili speakers that Tharus in these districts can make themselves visible in the Nepali polity. If, in Chitwan and the western Tarai, Tharu identity defines itself in contrast to that of hill immigrants, it is possible (and this requires further inquiry) that in the east Tharus contrast themselves with the Maithili-speaking descendants of Indian immigrants into the Tarai.

The following extract from a leaflet published by the Progressive Tharu Youth Organization (Pragatisil Tharu Yuvā Sangathan), a group with close ties to Ramanand Singh, and entitled "An Appeal to the Tharu Society," clearly demonstrates his views on the Maithili question.

This is an appeal, to protect, foster and to firmly establish our . . . honored traditions. . . . Therefore, in the national census of the coming year 2048 [C.E. 1991], let all the individuals in Tharu society not forget to write down, and cause to be written down, that their mother tongue is Tharu bhāśā.

It has already been proved that the Maithili language, which, up to now, has obtained for itself the position of Nepal’s second language, is the Tharu language in disguise. In reality, the progenitor of Maithili is the Tharu language. In a majority of the Tarai districts Tharu bhāśā is spoken. There is only a small percentage, not even worth counting, of Maithili speakers. In terms of districts, in only two or three [is Maithili spoken] and even in those, one finds it spoken by only one or two jāt in a few pockets.

Those individuals deputed [to carry out the census] in past censuses ( . . . of whom a majority supported Maithili) took advantage of the simplicity and uprightness of the illiterate rural members of Tharu society to mislead them, and because, in place of Tharu bhāśā, they wrote down Maithili [i.e., in the Census return], Maithili has come to occupy the position of Nepal’s second language . . . This organization makes a heartfelt appeal to Tharu society, to all intellectuals, teachers, government officials, students, businessmen and farmers, let us enter our mother tongue in the forthcoming national election as “Tharu bhāśā” and cause [the census enumerators] to do the same [i.e., ensure that census enumerators enter the language in the return as Tharu, not Maithili].

The most significant aspect of this document is the last paragraph, which accuses the census enumerators of deliberately entering the language of Tharus as Maithili in the census returns. The effect of such an action is to swell the apparent support base for various political organizations which claim to represent the interests of “Tarai” people. This category is thought of as those people in the Tarai who are of recent Indian descent and who may be identified in the census by the languages they speak—Maithili, Bhojpuri, and Avadhī. The Tharus, on the other hand, have been part of the Nepali polity since the unification of Nepal, and their elites functioned as revenue collectors for the state in the Tarai. In other words, the Tharus consider themselves to be of Nepali extraction rather than of Indian origin. The census enumerators are also those people—who are schoolteachers and minor government officials—who are likely to be active in ethnic or caste associations of their own, and to have an interest

10According to Whelpton, while questions on caste/ethnic affiliation have been included in previous censuses, the results were never released prior to the census of 1991 because of their potential sensitivity (1997, 51). The 1991 census is the first to make those numbers available.
in swelling the number of one linguistic category rather than another. Implicit in this document is the accusation that the census enumerators were working to further the interests of those who stand to gain some political benefit from expanding statistically the number of Maithili speakers in the population. Thus, the last sentence in the “Appeal” emphasizes that not only must the Tharu affirm that his mother tongue is Tharu, but he must also ensure that this is what the enumerator writes down. Whether the language spoken by Tharus in Siraha and Saptari is distinct from the Maithili spoken by others in those districts is a moot point; what is important is that the state recognize the linguistic category “Tharu,” which is explicitly identified with a particular ethnic community. What is at issue in the census is not language, per se, but ethnic (jāt) identity, for which language, in this instance, is simply the vehicle.

Class and Ethnicity

The Tharu elite promotes a common Tharu identity by conjoining through material and symbolic acts—the establishment of a caste association, the promotion of intermarriage, the rhetoric of ethnic unity, and so on—the various different endogamous groups sharing a common ethnonym that inhabit the Tarai. They are helped in this endeavor by the existence of a named category recognized by the state, which they can build upon as they organize themselves to meet the challenges of a society undergoing rapid political and economic transformation.

While the Tharu communities that have come increasingly into contact with each other, as forests were cleared and networks of communication established, continue to reproduce themselves as societies and moral communities distinct from one another, their elites have begun to reconstitute themselves as new subunits of social reproduction. They have established marriage ties with their class fellows in other groups, and have come to share symbolic forms based on a common education and assimilation (in varying degrees) to the dominant Nepali culture. Their material culture and styles of consumption have also diverged from that of the poorer strata within their local societies. The twin projects of modernization and nationalism pursued by the state have culturally homogenized (and Nepalized), to some degree, the upper levels of Tharu society. The Tharu poor, on the other hand, participate in these processes to a much lesser extent. They have little access to schools, and they are less likely (particularly women) to be bilingual or Nepalized in culture. Their relative economic deprivation reinforces, however, their sense of being Tharu, for they are more likely to be treated with disdain and condescension by high-caste villagers than are their better-off fellows. What the high castes disdain is not their poverty but their Tharu-ness; poverty makes them vulnerable to such disdain.

Between the vast mass of ordinary Tharu peasants, most of whom are illiterate, economically exploited, and treated with varying degrees of contempt and patronage by members of dominant castes, and the well-educated, relatively urbanized, well-to-do national elite that controls the Tharu Welfare Society, is a class of local elites, who are influential among Tharus in their own villages and districts. The class position of the national elite more than compensates for its membership in an ethnic group of relatively low status in Nepali society. Local elites are relatively more insecure. The status of Tharu landowners and schoolteachers in the Tarai, in the perceptions of non-Tharus, is linked to the status of Tharus generally, and it is they who are the most
enthusiastic proponents of proposals and programs to increase Tharu access to education (and via education to status) and to white-collar jobs. The national elite does not need special provisions to avail itself of either, while both are beyond the expectation of the mass of Tharu peasantry. The local elite, however, are often in danger of slipping back into the ranks of the peasantry, either by losing land to debt or through its subdivision into smaller parcels as the next generation inherits. While they may be respected as large landowners by high-caste immigrants settled among them in their villages, they are merely Tharus when they go into the bazaar or to government offices, and are often treated with condescension. These midlevel elites, then, are a crucial link between the national elite and the mass of ordinary Tharus, and play an extremely important role in mediating class and status and in fashioning identity. It is they who are responsible for the way the Tharu Welfare Society’s activities are experienced at the village level.

In contemporary politics, when issues of class and status become congruent—or can be made to seem congruent—with ethnic identity, the politics of ethnicity becomes a powerful countervailing force to the politics of class. In Nepal, Tharus share a group status that is seen by other Nepalis as being fairly low in the hierarchy of the clean castes. Tharus oppose their own identity to that of Brahmins, who are not only of high caste but also enjoy economic and political power both locally and nationally. In the villages of Chitwan, while the local Brahmin elite has extensive social and political interrelationships with their Tharu counterparts, there is much less social intercourse between the lower class members of these two ethnic groups. In fact, in the perception of Tharus, it is the poor Brahmin who is responsible for dispossessing Tharus of their land; a popular Tharu account in both Chitwan and Dang of pahāriya exploitation concerns the poor Brahmin who arrives in the village and begs of the Tharus a little piece of land on which to support himself. This they readily grant him, out of compassion for his poverty and because they do not lack for land. Little by little, however, the Brahmin begins to aggrandize himself, and ends by taking control of the village. Tharus in general see themselves as being poor, backward, and exploited, and although the national elite share none of these disabilities, they are able to build upon these sentiments to promote a sense of ethnic unity.

The ethnic identity that is politically significant, then, is what we might term the pan-Tharu one: the identity that subsumes all Tharus in Nepal. Other Nepalis tend to treat Tharus as a uniform group, not distinguishing between different local communities. What feeds into this pan-Tharu identity is the confrontation at the local level between particular Tharu groups (whether in Chitwan, in Dang, or elsewhere) and hill immigrants, which generates the consciousness on which the more inclusive Tharu identity can be based. This includes the idea of being ādivāsi (literally, original inhabitants: a self-ascribed category widely used in the subcontinent today to designate so-called “tribal” peoples) and of not only being ādivāsi but also dispossessed and exploited ādivāsi. These ideas, while they have helped unite Tharus, also have the potential to forge links between Tharus and other ethnic groups espousing similar ideas.12

11In Chitwan, the landholdings of the local elite are fairly modest, 10 to 15 hectares being considered a large landholding; in comparison, most peasant cultivators in the district own less than a hectare.

12Present at the Tharu convention in Biratnagar was Sitaram Tamang, President of an organization called the Forum for the Rights of All Nationalities. He defined “nationalities” to include all “tribal” groups, but excluded those referred to as Hindus (Brahmins, Chhetris, service castes, and Tarai Hindus). All of these he characterized as recent immigrants to Nepal, compared to the “nationalities” who, he asserted, were the country’s original inhabitants.
Conclusion

Ethnicity has been a preoccupation for the social sciences since the late sixties. The fact of its increasing presence in academic discourse in this period reflects a growing awareness of the political salience of cultural identity in the modern world. While many have seen ethnicity as a reaction to processes of modernization (cf. Eriksen 1993, 9), I have argued in this paper that it is modernization that facilitates the development of ethnic consciousness. Where communication (whether of transport, literacy, or any other) is poorly developed, identity tends to be localized, concentrated on the local community or network of kin. Modernization, including the expansion of the technologies and possibilities of communication, enables such identities to expand to include others in response to the new circumstances that the very process of modernization brings into play.

Ethnicity was not an adequate or sufficient basis for political action in premodern Nepal. When Prithvi Narayan Shah, the founder of modern Nepal, set out to conquer his neighbors in the mid-eighteenth century, he ruled over a society consisting of different linguistic and cultural groups, of “caste-Hindus” and “tribes.” Insofar as they participated at all in the affairs of the polity, it was on the basis of a structured, codified inequality. The salient forms of identity were those of the local community (a village or a cluster of villages) and, beyond that, the group within which marriages could appropriately be contracted. People identified, in other words, with their local units of social reproduction, with local networks of villages and circles of kin. Ethnic labels that were once simply “a convenient status summation . . . readily and incontestably claimed by anyone (except untouchables) who wants it” (Fisher 1986, 3), are today becoming reified as something more enduring: not simply a summation of status but a description of the very essence of one’s particular humanity, and an umbrella under which many different and distinctive local communities can comfortably coalesce.

The situation of Tharus in India is very different to that prevailing in Nepal. Firstly, in proportion to the total population of the country (or even the populations of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar), the number of Tharus is infinitesimal. They can have no political impact. In Nepal, on the other hand, a country in which no single ethnic group enjoys a clear majority, the Tharus are the most numerous of the many so-called “tribal” groups and are a significant part of the population in a vitally important part of the country. Secondly, the system of reservations guaranteed by the Indian Constitution already provides the Tharus and Buxas (in principle) the benefits for which Tharus in Nepal are petitioning the government. Their status as Scheduled Tribes is politically more significant than their particular ethnic identities; the same is not true for Nepali Tharus. The conjunction of forces, historical and contemporary, that has propelled the different Tharu communities in Nepal into fashioning a pan-Tharu identity do not exist across the border. Instead, elites in the two main concentrations of Tharus in India are organized into two separate ethnic associations: the Tharu Rana Parishad in Naini Tal and the Bharatiya Tharu Kalyan Maha Sangh in Champaran. In Uttar Pradesh, the Rana Tharus are a Scheduled Tribe, and have been so since British times. In Champaran, the Tharus were classified as a Scheduled Tribe in the Census of 1941. However, being greatly sanskritized, they objected to that status, which they considered demeaning, and at their own instance were removed from the list and reclassified instead as a Backward Class in the 1951 Census (Roy Choudhuri 1952, 248). They presumably realized their error, for in 1990, almost forty
years later, the primary political objective of the Bharatiya Tharu Kalyan Maha Sangh was to be included once again as a Scheduled Tribe. An alliance with the Rana Tharus of Naini Tal (who, being in Uttar Pradesh, are in any case under a different jurisdiction) would make no difference to this endeavor.

The process of ethnic identity formation is often described in terms of the play of cultural symbols. A common view is that ethnicity is a primordial attribute of the group; the group (and its ethnonym) is thought to have some sort of essential quality to it that is unchanging. To name something is to give it permanence. There is no necessary connection, however, between the label and what it refers to through time; the relationship is a contingent one. What was meant by “Tharu” in earlier centuries is not what is meant by the term today. As we have seen, it has been redefined to bind together very different groups of people, not by enculturating them to the culture of a dominant elite (Anthony Smith’s [1986] notion of a “lateral ethnie”), but by conjoining those cultures as equals: an approach that stresses “unity in diversity.” This was most obviously symbolized in the Tharu Welfare Society’s now defunct magazine, Tharu Sanskriti (Tharu Culture). It avoided the contentious issue of what constitutes the true Tharu language by publishing contributions in the original regional Tharu language in which they were written.

Although ethnicity presents itself to us as a cultural phenomenon, its genesis and development must be sought in the socioeconomic conditions—such as class relationships, the state, and the processes of modernization—that make it relevant as a principle of identity formation. Identities are formed and transformed, and ethnic boundaries are contracted and expanded as the circumstances in which individuals and societies find themselves change. Ethnicity must be thought of not as a thing, but as a fluid and malleable process, shaping and being shaped by a constantly changing social situation. Ethnicity is the cultural expression of a political-economic fact: the confrontation between groups over resources of some kind. When Tharus believe that some culturally defined group—not the rich but the Brahmins—benefit disproportionately or unfairly in the allocation of resources, then ethnicity is likely to come into play as a “mask of confrontation.”

List of References


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