

The Tharu of Don

Tharu women, inhabiting the Valley of Don in the Valmiki Tiger Reserve, present a unique blend of tradition and progress worth emulating

STORY SULAGNA CHATTOPADHYAY PHOTO PRASAD

Phulvati shyly extended a small intricately woven basket full of semi puffed rice, *anandi*, urging me to eat more. It was a splendid meal - replete with fresh sugarcane juice, thick curd and a dash of garlic-amlachilli paste that was so exquisite that I couldn't stop myself from asking for several helpings. Washing my fingers near the motif laden door I marvelled at the ingenuity of the Tharu people living within the deep jungles of the alleged Mao-infested Valmiki Tiger Reserve, West Champaran in Bihar. With land holdings ranging from mere 1 to 2 *katthas*, these people's hand to mouth existence is evident. Yet the upkeep of their mud baked houses, well oiled hair, clean clothes and general appearance speak of higher cultural endowment. Hospitality aside, the Tharu of the Naurangia village of Don are a quiet lot with almost every question being thwarted with a pretty smile or a counter question. Unlike their tribal cousins some 25 odd kilometers away in the so-called capital of Tharuvat at Harnatand, the Tharu of Samrahni and Naurangia in Don are tight lipped about most issues.

Tharu tribe, as folklore tells us, apparently has its roots in Rajasthan. It is said that some 400 years ago a noble lady eloped with her trusted servant leaving the desert sands to colonise







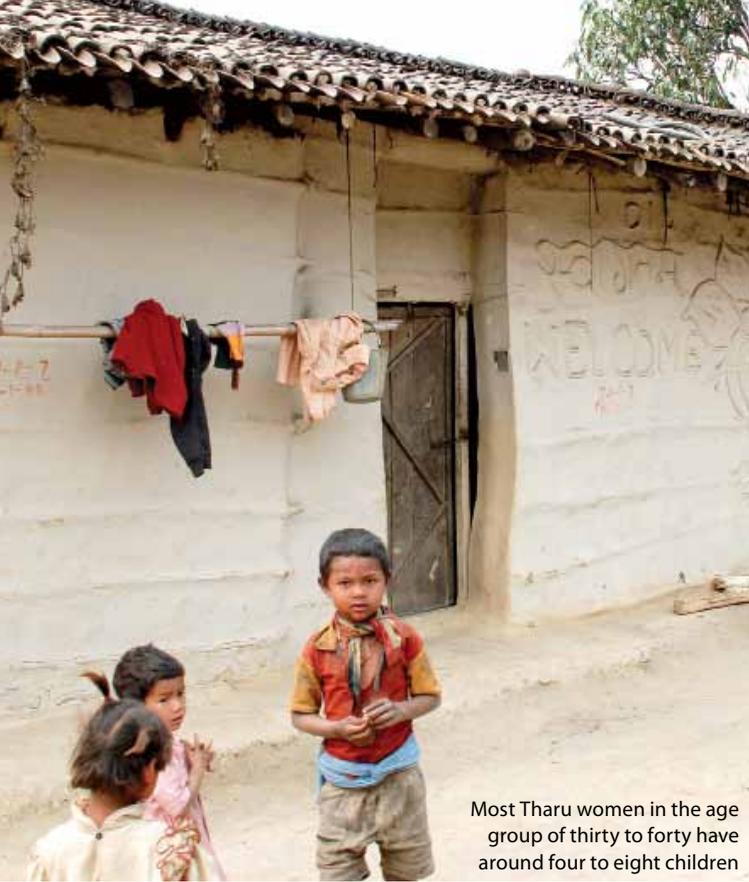
THE THARU AS A COMMUNITY is today scattered across the Himalayan foothills of Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Bihar in India, and along the southern forested regions in Nepal. In Bihar, the Tharu settlements are concentrated in Harnatand - a flat stretch of about 45 square kilometres, surrounded by the Don and Someshwar hills. Within the Valmiki Reserve Forest area, there are 25 Tharu dominated villages, largely agrarian in character.

the mosquito infested terai. The myth justifies the higher social position of women within the Tharu, resulting in their greater autonomy in decision making, higher literacy as compared to their Bihari counterparts, and general well being. Interestingly, they pursue education and attend regular classes even after marriage - completely unheard of among non Tharu women in the vicinity.

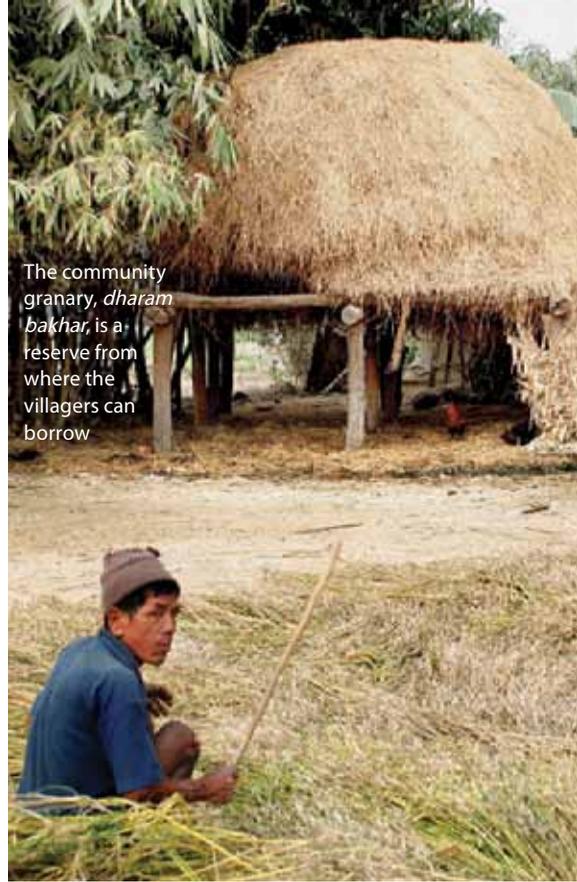
Phulvati's husband is a Nepalese and unlike a Tharu male - hardworking, returning home to his toddler and wife every evening. As Phulvati's busy fingers continued to wind loop after loop of coloured *sabai* grass into a patterned basket, she recounted how she returned to work just the day after her marriage, tending to a near ripe paddy crop and fetching soil, cowdung and water for a fresh coat of motifs on the outer wall of her home. "We are supposed to earn and look after every need of our husbands, quite the opposite of the *bajijan*, non Tharu living here. In fact in a traditional chant during our marriage, the bride beseeches the groom atop the roof of their nuptial home to consent for marriage, with a promise that she will work readily to feed and clothe him", adds Phulvati. Handicraft

is her passion she insists, showing me the other items that she has painstakingly woven. Although she believes that marketing their craft would be a viable employment alternative, she finds few takers. As her peers gathered around, Phulvati withdrew into a shell, preferring to answer in monosyllables. Rukmani, a young student returning home from the only girls' school in the vicinity, fanned the dying conversation with an interesting revelation about paddy cultivation similar to tribal traditions in Jharkhand. Certain proportion of the paddy cultivated is placed in a community granary, *dharam bakhar*, a reserve from where the villagers can borrow, not for direct marketing or monetary benefits, but for household consumption. The only condition is that borrower has to return the borrowed quantity on an agreed upon date. Women, as is usual among this community, maintains the granary and its records. No Tharu, Rukmani proudly adds, goes hungry.

A religious lot, the Tharu women of Don are more Hindu than tribal, with *Shivaratri* and *Dassera* occupying a prominent place. Wearing the orange vermillion mark of marriage, the Tharu



Most Tharu women in the age group of thirty to forty have around four to eight children



The community granary, *dharam bakhar*, is a reserve from where the villagers can borrow



Phulvati serving *anandi* in an exquisite basket

ACREAGE OF THE CULTIVATED area within the Don valley is inching up as more and more area is falling under the plough. "Easy pastures for our domestic animals, fish from the river and small game are bonuses that make up for the lack of amenities within the forest," exclaimed Tetradevi, an octogenarian living in Naurangia village since birth.

women sport accessories almost similar to their non Tharu counterparts. One significant difference in attire is the acceptance of *salwar kameez* as regular wear post marriage and the beaded neck pieces with silver or gold lockets, reminiscent of Nepali marriage norms. Guffawing heartily, Ramavati, another Don inhabitant, added "I wear such clothes by choice, my husband never objects like the *bajiyan* men. Also wearing *salwar kameez* makes it easier to cycle." Cycling, I came to understand is the lifeline of this area. Every individual and perhaps even the toddlers are expert cyclists. Moving around in bands, the women here adjust their day to day routine in such a manner that they are never alone, out in the wilderness, cycling. Although women emancipation appeared alive and kicking in this region, yet the norm of underage marriages was disquieting. By the time the girls are ten or twelve, marriage proposals are sought and the first child in most cases is born around fifteen.

Bhagmati has six children and most of the women in her age group have around four to eight. Although the figures they claim are falling, but the rise in population to nearly 4000 households in these stressed environs is enough to cause substantive damage to the ecology of the area. The attraction is such that despite lack of medical facilities, schools and markets, Tharu women belonging to these villages prefer to pull in their marriage partners, rather than shift out to live with them. This phenomenon translates into a sharper rise in the population within. In this respect, the non Tharu living within the forest precincts too behave in a similar fashion.

But they have their share of everyday fun too. "Only last night", gushed Jayavachan, "we had a CD show. More than three hundred people from around the area gathered. Such occasions are like

night long festivities." The CD show I gathered, was a movie and judging by their Bollywood knowledge, such arrangements where the CD player is brought in from beyond the forest boundaries for a night, seemed quite frequent. The crowd she added never turns rowdy, despite the fact that *gadla*, locally brewed rice liquor, flows freely. A bonus of female domination perhaps!

These revenue villages within the forest area were traditionally rice growing. In recent times the shift is palpable with sugarcane dominating the landscape. A more water intensive option, sugarcane farming the Tharu say provides better remuneration than paddy. Unable to access the only sugar mill in the locality, the Bagaha Sugar Mill, some 40 kms away in a precarious terrain and in retaliation to exploitative mill owner keeping payment pending for two or three years - small illegal *gur* or jaggery making units have cropped up in an around the villages. As these villages are located near the core forest area, extraction of fuelwood is easy and is used in abundance to process the sugarcane juice to *gur*. But these small scale units, often produce inferior quality jaggery, which has less market value and poor consumption potential. Instead, it is transported to Nepal and also sold in the Indian market to prepare liquor. While the Tharu of Don replace paddy with sugarcane to earn more from their land, many are now faced with food crisis and have become dependent on either government or village granaries.

As night fell, I left Phulvati's charming cottage adorned with posters of Lord Krishna alongside Jesus Christ and motifs in English, which read 'welcome' and 'Prem'. Juxtaposed against habitations beyond the forest boundary, such inclusions seemed out of place. Perhaps the linkages of these groups need further exploration. 

THE VALMIKI is the only Tiger Reserve in the State of Bihar covering 840 km². For management purposes the forest is divided into two broad divisions, which is further divided into six ranges. The core area of the forest and the Valley of Don lies in Division Two, within the Harnatand Range.

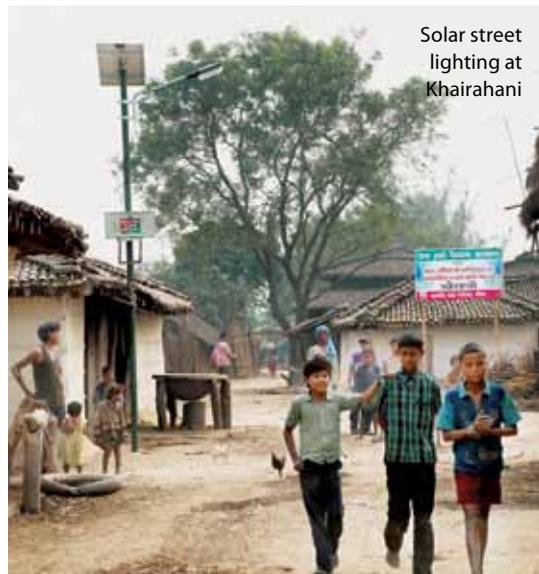
Forests of Don

The Bihar State and Central forest officers have implemented several eco development, entry level, activities within the Forests of Don to promote the equation between the foresters and the people. Providing potable water through tube wells, street lighting through solar technology, sterilisation programmes and organising health camps, the officials here have, to an extent, won the trust of the forest dwellers. The Tharu, who form the prominent tribal group here are however skeptical about the intent of the government. With displacement from the core areas in the offing, Tharu are tight lipped about what their rights would entail. As H K Rai, Assistant Conservator of Forest, Valmiki Tiger Project, claims, “In a recent meeting with the Tharu of Naurangia, deep in the heart of the core forest of Don, I found their representatives uncommunicative and their responses skewed. We are not here to forcefully displace anyone, but freeing the core area will enable greater conservation measures.” Understanding, he feels, is the key to protection. “They have to feel that this is their resource -exploiting it continually through increased population pressure will hardly leave much a forest to conserve,” he reiterates.

The officers are however apprehensive about the protection of wildlife here, with unprecedented population growth in the recognised revenue villages that lie in the heart of these forest lands. “We strictly prohibit any fishing, trapping or hunting activities,” added V Sinha, Forest Range Officer at Harnatand. The buffer zone they say will be a better option for such habitation, where they can still be part of the forest and at the same time allow conservation measures to bear fruit. “In the two years of my tenure, I have conducted various core area programmes such as undergrowth clearance, but I haven’t spotted a tiger yet, although I have chanced upon other predators,” pointed out Sinha. Surprisingly one cannot even spot groups of herbivores, abundantly visible in other forests of the terai, such as Rajaji and Corbett National Park. Crime records and poor law and order situation have also inhibited the development of this wildlife zone, with locals rarely venturing in to forest lands and tourist strength down to a zero. “After the advent of the SSB (*Sashastra Seema Bal*) along the border, crime rates as well as poaching are down - but Maoist insurgencies spreading over the Nepal border cannot be ruled out,” adds Rai. 



V Sinha, Harnatand Range Officer, near the rivulet Harha



Solar street lighting at Khairahani



Removal of Phoenix grass in over 30 hectares in the core area of Harnatand Range to promote grassland development

Rights of Traditional Forest Dwellers

The Supreme Court of India passed a far reaching order in February 2002 directing state governments against removing dead, dying or wind fallen trees and grass from any National Parks or Wildlife Sanctuary. In view of the Supreme Court's Order, the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF), distributed a handbook, prohibiting tribals and traditional forest dwellers from using any forest produce for their livelihood. The Supreme Court appointed a committee, Central Empowered Committee (CEC) in July 2004, which prohibited any foliage removal from the 'protected areas' such as 'national parks and sanctuaries'. The CEC declared the tribals as 'encroachers' and recommended for their immediate eviction. It asked for strong contingent of police force with immunity, bestowing dictatorial powers on state governments. CEC further demanded liability of the state government to the tune of Rs 1000 per hectare per month as compensation for environmental losses caused by continuing encroachment. Following the Supreme Court's Order an amendment was effected in the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, declaring the

national parks and sanctuaries, protected area. As per an estimate of Centre for Equity Studies (2007) nearly 4 million people live inside the country's protected areas and depend on forest resources for their survival. Amendments such as these, is tantamount to restrictions which would result in forced displacement.

After deliberations by civil right activists, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA), put forward a bill, The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Bill, 2006, in order to recognise and vest the forest rights and occupation in forest land for forest dwelling tribals and other traditional people. The rights include the responsibilities and authority for sustainable use, conservation of biodiversity and maintenance of ecological balance and thereby strengthening the conservation regime of the forests while ensuring livelihood and food security of the forest dwellers. The Bill became an Act in 2007, but the rights of the forest dwellers are yet to be recognised. The conflict between the MoTA of MoEF persists. On one hand MoTA is trying to recognise the rights of the forest dwellers over the forest land and forest produce and on the other, MoEF, appointed CEC, trying to evict forest dwellers on the pretext of the Supreme Court's Order of 2002. In fact, evictions are taking place in various parts of the country, with Assam alone recording an eviction of about 40,000 families.

Though the Forests of Don in Harnatand Range is neither a national park, nor strictly a sanctuary but the Supreme Court's order of 2002, meticulously implemented, is turning the traditional forest dwellers into encroachers, depriving them of their livelihood. 