

Tradition in Transition: The Tharu Tribe of Sitarganj and Khatima, Uttarakhand

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Abstract

The Tharu tribe of Uttarakhand, concentrated largely in the Sitarganj and Khatima Block of Udham Singh Nagar district, is one of the state's most populous Scheduled Tribes. Despite extensive literature on individual aspects of Tharu life, few studies integrate its historical, economic, cultural, and gender dimensions within a single, theoretically grounded, locality-specific framework. Drawing primarily on secondary literature, supported by the authors' field observations in Sitarganj and Khatima, and reading this material through theories of acculturation, modernization, multiple modernities, tribal marginality, and hybrid identity negotiation, this paper finds that the Tharus post-independence trajectory is best described as sustained but uneven acculturation rather than assimilation. Agrarian modernisation and industrialisation around the SIDCUL estates have brought economic contact without proportionate inclusion, leaving Tharu households in precarious, low-skilled work despite their proximity to industrial growth. Cultural practices, oral tradition, ecological knowledge, and distinctive jewellery persist through active, hybrid adaptation rather than static preservation. Education and gender relations reveal a pattern of 'conditional empowerment', in which women's advancement is tolerated only where it does not disrupt patriarchal family structures, while globalisation both erodes and revitalises Tharu identity. Together, these findings suggest that the Tharus of Sitarganj and Khatima are continuously negotiating a distinct, hybrid trajectory of change, with implications for wider debates on indigeneity, marginality, and state tribe relations in contemporary India.

Keywords: Tharu Tribe, Sitarganj and Khatima, Acculturation and Modernization, Tribal Marginality and Hybrid Identity, Gender and Empowerment

1. Introduction

The Tharu tribe, one of the most prominent Scheduled Tribes of Uttarakhand, resides in the Terai region, particularly in the districts of Udham Singh Nagar, where Sitarganj and Khatima are situated. With a long history of inhabiting the Himalayan foothills and the adjoining plains of Nepal and India, the Tharus possess a rich cultural heritage rooted in agrarian traditions, oral narratives, folk art, and strong community solidarity (Benazeer, 2016; Bhatt et al., 2018) [1, 2]. Their identity has often been described as ambiguous because colonial writers and administrators labelled them variously as a "tribe", a "caste", or something in between — an ambiguity that has shaped state policy and social perceptions over time (Guneratne, 2022; Joshi, 2021) [3, 4].

This ambiguity, and the transformations that have followed it, are best understood through a small set of complementary sociological and anthropological frameworks. Yogendra Singh's (1973) [5] account of modernization as a relational and structural process rather than the simple adoption of Western technology or lifestyle offers a way of reading Tharu change as a reorganisation of social relationships (kinship, land, labour, gender) rather than mere cultural imitation. Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits' (1936) [6] classical definition of acculturation, as change arising from continuous first-hand contact between groups with different cultures, is useful for distinguishing the Tharu experience from outright cultural assimilation: where assimilation implies the eventual absorption and disappearance of a minority culture into a dominant one, acculturation allows for mutual, if unequal, exchange that produces new and lasting hybrid forms without erasing the original culture. Eisenstadt's (2000) [7] notion of "multiple modernities" further cautions against treating Tharu change as a delayed or incomplete copy of a single, Western-defined modernity; instead, it invites an account of Tharu modernity as its own distinct trajectory, shaped by local history, colonial categorisation, and contemporary industrialisation alike.

Scholars have documented how industrialisation, land alienation, and migration have reshaped Tharu livelihoods that were once closely tied to subsistence agriculture and forest resources (Pant & Pal, 2017; Verma, 2011) [8, 9]. Sitarganj and Khatima are key sites where rapid urbanisation, industrial projects, and demographic shifts challenge traditional ways of life. Younger Tharus balance aspirations for education and employment with the weight of cultural traditions that anchor community identity (Verma, 2011) [9]. This study situates the Tharus of these localities not as passive recipients of change but as actors who negotiate the contradictions between tradition and modernity, reading this negotiation through the combined lenses of tribal marginality (Chatterjee, 1996) [10], acculturation and modernization (Singh, 1973; Redfield et al., 1936) [5, 6], and multiple modernities and hybrid identity formation under globalisation (Eisenstadt, 2000; Guneratne, 2022) [7, 3].

While the socio-economic and cultural dimensions of Tharu life have each received scholarly attention individually through studies of health-seeking behaviour, jewellery and material culture, land alienation, and migration comparatively few accounts bring these strands together within a single, theoretically grounded, localised framework for Sitarganj and Khatima specifically, or connect them explicitly to recent developments such as continued industrial expansion and shifting educational aspirations after 2020. This paper addresses that gap by offering an integrated, theory-driven synthesis of the historical, economic, cultural, and gender dimensions of Tharu life in these two tehsils, so as to better capture how tradition and change are negotiated together as an acculturative and multiply-modern process rather than as separate, unrelated developments.

2. Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative, literature-based approach as its primary method, synthesising published secondary sources rather than presenting a systematic primary study. This secondary material is supplemented by the authors' own field observations gathered during visits to Tharu villages in Sitarganj and Khatima. These observations are used illustratively, as supporting and corroborating evidence for instance, to ground claims about jewellery, ritual practice, or livelihood change in what was directly observed rather than as a substitute for systematic primary data collection through structured interviews or surveys, no such structured primary instrument was administered as part of this study.

The combined material was organised thematically historical and colonial categorisation, socio-economic conditions, cultural identity, education and gender, and globalisation and read through the theoretical

framework outlined in the Introduction, modernization as relational and structural change (Singh, 1973) [5], acculturation as contact-induced but non-erasive cultural change (Redfield et al., 1936) [6], multiple modernities as a corrective to single-track Westernisation narratives (Eisenstadt, 2000) [7], and tribal marginality and hybrid identity negotiation (Chatterjee, 1996; Guneratne, 2022) [10, 3]. This allows continuities and changes across themes to be traced together, and interpreted consistently, rather than in isolation.

3. Historical and Colonial Categorisation of the Tharus

3.1 Origins and Early Settlement of the Tharu Tribe

The origins of the Tharu tribe have been a subject of ongoing scholarly debate among anthropologists, historians, and sociologists. One scholarly perspective emphasises their indigenous nature, tracing their roots to the forests and Terai plains of northern India and Nepal, where they have resided for centuries in close proximity to land, agriculture, and forest resources (Pant & Pal, 2017) [8]. Another viewpoint links their ancestry to Rajput lineages, an origin narrative first recorded in the colonial ethnographic surveys of the late nineteenth century, which described Rajput women fleeing invasions in medieval India, relocating to the Terai forests, and intermarrying with local communities (Risley, 1892) [11]. This Rajput-descent theory, despite being contested and shaped by the biases of its colonial recorders, has persisted in both early ethnographic writings and local oral traditions.

A third view highlights cross-border histories and linguistic continuities across the Indo–Nepal region, arguing that settlement along the border complicates rigid categorisation and blends indigenous resilience with sustained exchange (Guneratne, 2022) [3]. In Sitarganj and Khatima, these competing narratives continue to shape contemporary claims to tribal authenticity and state recognition.

3.2 Colonial Ethnographies and Shifting Identities

The colonial encounter profoundly altered perceptions and classifications of the Tharus. British administrators and ethnographers struggled to fit them into rigid ‘tribe’ and ‘caste’ frameworks. Guneratne (2022) [3] argues that this ambiguity resulted in inconsistent portrayals: at times the Tharus were depicted as isolated and primitive tribes, and at other times as backward castes integrated into, yet marginalised within, the agrarian economy.

Colonial census operations further confused matters by switching between tribal and caste classifications depending on region and administrative priorities (Joshi, 2021) [4]. These inconsistencies in early records later complicated efforts by Tharus in Uttarakhand to assert a distinct identity and claim appropriate protections.

3.3 Postcolonial Continuities and Shifts

After independence, the Indian state formally recognised the Tharus as a Scheduled Tribe (ST), partly to undo colonial legacies. This recognition provided constitutional protections and welfare benefits, but it also reproduced colonial stereotypes portraying the community as needing ‘upliftment’. Such policies risk reducing indigenous communities to passive recipients of state benevolence, overlooking their agency and self-defined identities (Chatterjee, 1996) [10].

In Uttarakhand, especially in Sitarganj and Khatima, colonial stereotypes persist in land ownership disputes, development projects, and everyday discrimination. Many younger community members find themselves celebrated as ‘authentic tribes’ for cultural tourism while remaining marginalised socio-economically (Verma, 2011) [9]. This paradox reflects the lasting impact of colonial categorisations on both external perceptions and the community’s own self-understanding.

4. Socio-Economic Conditions and Livelihood Patterns

4.1 Agriculture, Land Ownership, and Economic Marginality

The Tharu tribe, traditionally an agrarian community, relies on the fertile Terai plains for its livelihood. In Sitarganj and Khatima, agriculture remains central, but patterns of land ownership reflect historical inequalities. Post-independence redistribution policies and development projects in Uttarakhand displaced many Tharu families from fertile agricultural zones, leaving them with fragmented holdings or dependence on agricultural labour (Pant & Pal, 2017; Verma, 2011) [8, 9].

Despite their traditional agricultural knowledge particularly in rice cultivation and multi-cropping Tharu farmers have been marginalised by the shift towards commercial agriculture. In Khatima, where sugarcane and wheat dominate, small landholdings and limited access to modern technology hinder their competitiveness in the market economy, perpetuating cycles of poverty and indebtedness (Dwivedi et al., 2018) [12].

4.2 Industrialisation and the Transformation of Livelihoods

The establishment of the Govind Ballabh Pant University of Agriculture and Technology (GBPUAT) at Pantnagar in 1960 Asia's first agricultural university brought prosperity to many migrant farming families, but Tharu households largely lacked access to the capital, credit, and institutional networks needed to benefit from this agricultural modernisation (Pant & Pal, 2017) [8]. This period laid the groundwork for the region's subsequent industrialisation, lands that had once been forest frontiers, and later fertile farms, became sites of industrial estates in Pant Nagar and Sitarganj under the State Infrastructure and Industrial Development Corporation of Uttarakhand (SIDCUL) from the early 2000s.

SIDCUL's integrated industrial estates transformed the economy of Udham Singh Nagar, attracting automobile, pharmaceutical, and textile firms and creating wage-labour opportunities in factories, service sectors, and ancillary industries. Read through Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits' (1936) [6] concept of acculturation, this sustained industrial contact has reshaped Tharu economic life without simply erasing it, employment for the Tharus has been absorbed unevenly and often on unequal terms precarious, low-paying, and exploitative, especially for first-generation workers with limited formal education while land alienation increased as families sold or leased holdings for industrial development. While migrant groups from other states secured comparatively stable positions in the industrial workforce, Tharus faced limited education and a lack of access to skill-development programmes (Pant & Pal, 2017; Verma, 2011) [8, 9]. Despite being geographically located within an industrial hub, the community thus remained largely excluded from its economic benefits a pattern that exemplifies the 'development paradox' confronting indigenous groups. Recent reporting confirms that this pressure has continued: an influx of migrants following statehood and industrial expansion has continued to raise land demand and prices in the terai, contributing to the erosion of Tharu weaving traditions that depend on disappearing grassland and wetland resources (Kandpal, 2024) [13]. Field observations in Sitarganj corroborate this picture of uneven inclusion, with Tharu households visibly concentrated in lower-tier factory and contract labour despite the proximity of major industrial estates. The community's economic trajectory, from forest dwellers to cultivators to marginalised industrial workers, is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Phases of Economic Transition among the Tharus of Sitarganj and Khatima

Phase	Approximate Period	Key Characteristics
Forest-Based Subsistence	Pre-20th century	Livelihoods based on farming, fishing, and forest produce; close ties to land and forest resources.
Agrarian Modernisation	From 1960 (GBPUAT established)	Shift towards settled and commercial agriculture; migrant farming families gain access to capital and institutional networks, largely bypassing Tharu households.
Industrial Expansion	Early 2000s onward (SIDCUL estates)	Wage labour in automobile, pharmaceutical, and textile units; employment mostly low-skilled, contractual, and precarious.
Migration and Urban Integration	Ongoing	Youth migration to Haldwani, Rudrapur, Delhi, and Lucknow; informal-sector employment and a growing remittance economy.

Source: Compiled by the authors from Pant & Pal (2017) [8] and Verma (2011) [9].

4.3 Migration, Labour Markets, and Urban Integration

As agricultural livelihoods decline and industrial jobs fail to provide stability, many Tharu youths from Sitarganj and Khatima migrate to urban centres such as Haldwani, Rudrapur, Delhi, and Lucknow. This migration is driven by economic necessity as well as aspirations for social mobility, education, and modern lifestyles. Migration, however, comes at a cost: migrant Tharus often struggle to assimilate into urban labour markets where their tribal identity is sometimes stigmatised, and they frequently find themselves confined to informal sectors with limited social security.

Remittances have become an important part of household income, but they also reshape local economies by altering consumption patterns and social hierarchies within Tharu villages (Verma, 2011) [9]. Migration further exposes Tharu youths to globalised cultural influences that feed into ongoing identity negotiations. Socio-economic conditions in Sitarganj and Khatima are thus deeply tied to mobility, labour-market transformations, and the community's navigation of both rural and urban worlds.

5. Cultural Identity and Material Traditions

5.1 Folklore, Rituals, and Oral Traditions

The Tharu tribe, known for its rich oral traditions, practises folktales, myths, songs, and rituals during agricultural cycles, festivals, and community gatherings. Folklore serves as a means of transmitting ecological knowledge, social values, and community solidarity across generations (Benazeer, 2016) [1]. This transmission of ecological knowledge is not merely symbolic, a recent fieldwork-based study of 21 Tharu villages across the Khatima and Sitarganj blocks documented 71 medicinal plant species still actively used by traditional healers for common ailments, underscoring the continued practical relevance of orally transmitted ecological knowledge alongside its cultural significance (Das & Singh Maurya, 2026) [14]. Rituals related to fertility, harvest, and ancestor worship reaffirm the Tharus' deep connection to

land and agrarian life. Globalisation and urbanisation, however, pose new threats to these practices: younger Tharus, influenced by popular media and formal education, often distance themselves from folklore, raising concerns about cultural erosion. Community elders nonetheless actively sustain these oral traditions, framing them as markers of tribal identity in Uttarakhand a pattern consistent with acculturation rather than assimilation, in that contact with dominant, urban-mediated culture has altered but not erased the underlying tradition (Redfield et al., 1936) [6].

5.2 Tharu Jewellery and Aesthetics as Markers of Identity

Material culture, particularly jewellery, is central to Tharu identity. Bhatt, Rani, and Gahlot (2018) [2] document the elaborate silver ornaments traditionally worn by Tharu women, including the hansuli, chura, and paijeb, which together signify social meanings such as marital status, age, and clan affiliation. In Sitarganj and Khatima, jewellery continues to connect women to ancestral customs despite changing socio-economic contexts, a continuity also visible in field observations of ceremonial dress at local weddings and festivals.

The aesthetics of jewellery also reflect the community's adaptability. While younger women increasingly prefer lighter, modern designs for everyday wear, ceremonial occasions still call for traditional pieces, as shown in Table 2. This duality demonstrates how Tharu cultural identity is negotiated between heritage and modernity, with jewellery serving as a lens through which to examine cultural pride amid socio-economic change illustrating Eisenstadt's (2000) [7] point that modern and traditional forms need not be mutually exclusive but can coexist within a single, locally distinct modernity.

Table 2: Traditional Tharu Silver Jewellery — Form and Contemporary Use

Ornament	Type	Everyday Use Today	Ceremonial Use
Hansuli	Silver neck ornament	Increasingly replaced by lighter, modern designs	Traditional piece still worn
Chura	Silver bangles	Increasingly replaced by lighter, modern designs	Traditional piece still worn
Paijeb	Silver anklet	Increasingly replaced by lighter, modern designs	Traditional piece still worn

Note. Collectively, these ornaments traditionally signal a woman's marital status, age, and clan affiliation (Bhatt et al., 2018) [2].

5.3 Resilience of Cultural Practices in Modern Contexts

Despite industrialisation, migration, and globalisation, the Tharus of Sitarganj and Khatima have shown remarkable cultural resilience. Festivals such as Maghi and Jitia continue to shape community life, strengthening kinship bonds and reaffirming tribal identity. Table 3 summarises the principal mechanisms through which this resilience is expressed; its political dimension is discussed further in Section 7 alongside globalisation.

Table 3: Mechanisms of Cultural Resilience among the Tharus of Sitarganj and Khatima

Mechanism	Example	Function
Festivals	Maghi, Jitia	Strengthen kinship bonds and reaffirm tribal identity.
Hybrid Cultural Expression	Folk dances with Bollywood music; rituals adapted to urban schedules	Blends tradition and modernity, consistent with a distinctly Tharu modernity rather than simple Westernisation (Eisenstadt, 2000) [7].
Digital Cultural Visibility	Youth use of social media to showcase dance, music, and everyday life	Builds cultural pride and visibility while raising awareness of socio-economic inequality.
Political Mobilisation	Cultural pride linked to identity-based claims	Basis for demands for recognition and rights (Verma, 2011) [9].

6. Education, Gender, and Empowerment

Tharu women in Sitarganj and Khatima face a dual burden, balancing cultural traditions with education for social mobility. Historically defined by domestic responsibilities, agriculture, and ritual observance, they have found in education a new space for agency yet social expectations continue to pull them back towards traditional roles. Read through Yogendra Singh's (1973) [5] account of modernization as a restructuring of social relationships rather than a simple accumulation of new skills or credentials, this tension is unsurprising: education has expanded women's opportunities without proportionately altering the underlying kinship and authority structures that govern their lives. While some families encourage education, many view it chiefly as a way to improve marriage prospects rather than to build autonomy. The concept of 'conditional empowerment' captures this well: women's empowerment is tolerated only insofar as it does not disrupt patriarchal family structures (Puri, 2021) [15]. In Sitarganj and Khatima, where industrialisation has created wage-labour opportunities, education is increasingly a prerequisite for accessing semi-formal jobs, but cultural restrictions still limit women's travel and employment after marriage. This tension is echoed in a qualitative study of Tharu and Buksa households in Uttarakhand, which found that families frequently weighed the perceived value of girls' education and formal healthcare against competing domestic and economic priorities, reflecting broader attitudinal barriers to both educational and health-service uptake in these communities (Bharti, Rani, & Gahlot, 2023) [16].

Tharu youth in Khatima, educated and exposed to urban lifestyles, increasingly aspire to government jobs, higher education, and stable employment outside agriculture. Structural barriers poor schools, lack of coaching facilities, and financial constraints nonetheless hinder these aspirations (Verma, 2011) [9]. This frustration drives many to migrate to cities for better opportunities, often finding precarious work in informal sectors instead. Migration, however, also exposes them to modern lifestyles, digital culture, and political awareness, which in turn enrich their home communities.

Education and gender are reshaping family and community relations more broadly. Women who pursue higher education challenge traditional norms, delaying marriage or gaining greater decision-making power, though generational divides persist: elders often view education as a threat to cultural continuity, while younger women see it as a gateway to autonomy and respect. The pace of this change varies by

locality: in some Sitarganj villages, patriarchal norms remain strong, whereas in Khatima, where migration and industrialisation have had a greater influence on gender roles, attitudes appear more flexible. Field observations across the two tehsils suggest a similar contrast in everyday household decision-making. Empowerment, in this sense, is a continuing negotiation shaped by local economies, family structures, and exposure to modern institutions (Puri, 2021) [15].

7. Globalisation, Modernisation, and Identity Negotiations

Globalisation has transformed and, in many respects, disrupted the lives of the Tharus of Sitarganj and Khatima. New media, consumer goods, and urban lifestyles have produced what may be described, in acculturation terms, as sustained contact-induced change rather than outright assimilation (Redfield et al., 1936) [6]: younger generations are increasingly detached from folklore, traditional attire, and ritual practice, preferring modern entertainment and forms of self-expression, yet this same globalisation has paradoxically stimulated efforts to preserve heritage, as elders and cultural activists have come to view traditional practices as a source of pride and identity (Benazeer, 2016; Verma, 2011) [1, 9]. Festivals such as Maghi and Jitia now carry added meaning as acts of cultural assertion against homogenising global forces; in Sitarganj, for instance, cultural organisations stage events where Tharu dances and songs are performed alongside popular Hindi numbers, illustrating how revival often occurs in hybrid forms consistent with a distinctly Tharu modernity rather than a delayed copy of a single, Western-defined one (Eisenstadt, 2000) [7].

Globalisation has also broadened horizons for Tharu youth. Access to smartphones, social media, and migration has inspired aspirations that extend beyond agriculture. In Khatima, young Tharus use digital platforms to showcase dance, music, and everyday life, both for entertainment and for cultural visibility. This exposure fosters self-expression but also heightens awareness of socio-economic inequality. Participation in mainstream society, moreover, remains uneven: Dwivedi et al. (2022) [17] note that Tharu migrants face discrimination in urban labour markets on account of their tribal background, suggesting that while globalisation offers new opportunities for visibility and mobility, it simultaneously subjects them to new forms of exclusion.

The interaction between globalisation and Tharu identity in contemporary India is thus best understood as an ongoing negotiation rather than a simple erosion of tradition, or its opposite, a simple assimilation into a homogeneous modern culture. Chatterjee's (1996) [10] analysis shows how globalisation can intensify marginality while also opening new political avenues. The Tharus of Sitarganj and Khatima negotiate their identity by reclaiming oral traditions, reinterpreting cultural symbols, participating in cultural associations, and asserting Scheduled Tribe status. Youth in particular navigate between being modern citizens and 'authentic' tribespeople, strategically emphasising tribal belonging where it confers benefits while downplaying it in mainstream education and employment (Chatterjee, 1996; Guneratne, 2022) [10, 3]. Cultural revival thus functions as a form of resistance against homogenisation, asserting dignity in the face of marginalisation. Read together, Singh's (1973) [5] relational modernization, Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits' (1936) [6] acculturation, and Eisenstadt's (2000) [7] multiple modernities suggest that globalisation in Sitarganj and Khatima has not erased Tharu culture but has instead created a dynamic context for its constant redefinition, the community demonstrating both vulnerability to cultural erosion and remarkable resilience in crafting a hybrid identity that accommodates tradition and modernity on its own terms.

8. Conclusion

The Tharu tribe's journey in Sitarganj and Khatima illustrates how history, economy, and culture together shape the trajectory of a tribal community undergoing acculturation and modernization rather than assimilation. From contested origins to present-day struggles, the Tharus have faced continuous change, and their resilience is evident throughout. Tribal identity shifts with each generation, adapting to new challenges and opportunities: industrialisation and migration disrupt traditional ways of life but also open avenues for education and empowerment, while globalisation brings both the risk of cultural dilution and new possibilities for cultural expression and recognition. Understood through the combined lenses of modernization as relational change (Singh, 1973) [5], acculturation as contact without erasure (Redfield et al., 1936) [6], multiple modernities (Eisenstadt, 2000) [7], and tribal marginality and hybridity (Chatterjee, 1996; Guneratne, 2022) [10, 3], the Tharus of Sitarganj and Khatima embody both the vulnerabilities and the strengths of tribal life in contemporary India. Their story is a reminder that development must account for cultural survival, social justice, and dignity and that by listening to their voices, we can better understand the wider tribal transition between tradition and change.

9. Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, it relies primarily on secondary, published sources; the authors' own field observations from Sitarganj and Khatima are used as supporting, illustrative evidence rather than as a systematic primary dataset, since no structured interviews or surveys were administered. Second, while the reference base spans several decades, many of the socio-economic and cultural claims draw on a relatively small number of frequently-cited studies, several of which are more than ten years old; more recent, Sitarganj- and Khatima-specific primary research remains comparatively scarce in the published literature. Third, the geographic focus on two tehsils, while allowing for a locally grounded account, limits the extent to which conclusions can be generalised to Tharu communities elsewhere in Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, or across the border in Nepal, where historical, administrative, and economic conditions differ. Future research combining structured primary fieldwork in Sitarganj and Khatima with a wider comparative lens across Tharu communities would help address these gaps.

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