

Tharu Folktales: Preserving Beliefs and Cultural Values Across Generations

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Abstract:

Values and beliefs are the crucial elements of the culture of any community. These two, components of culture allow the community members to rejuvenate themselves in the process of learning. In this process of learning, storytelling is an important tool which is utilized by the community to culturally transmit their values and beliefs. The folktales of a community have the power to shape the understanding of the community members and how they interact with others. The community frequently makes use of the cultural transmission process, as proposed by L. L. Cavalli-Sforza and M. W. Feldman, to share these folktales and other stories. The folktales of a community also work on the basis of mechanism of transmission processes of a culture, where the storyteller works as a cultural preserver who transmits the cultural knowledge and the listener works as receiver of that knowledge. The current study investigates how the Tharu community in West-Champaran uses folktales to transmit their cultural beliefs and values. The current study also examines the process of cultural transmission of the Tharu Tribe through folktales along with the role of the story teller as a cultural preserver of the community and how these folktales spread their values and beliefs. For this present study, ethnographic data has been collected through participation and in-depth interviews of the community members of Tharu Tribe. The findings demonstrated how the Tharu people of West-Champaran have been using folktales to spread their cultural beliefs and values.

Keywords: Tharu Tribe, Culture-preservers, Folktales, Cultural Transmission, Storytelling.

Introduction:

Folktales are traditional stories passed down from generation to generation within a culture or community (Africa Reviewer, 2023). It usually includes elements of myth, legend, fairy tale, fable, and moral lessons. Folktales usually reflect the values, beliefs and customs of the community and its people who tell them. In the UNESCO convention for the safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003), it has been mentioned that folktales play a crucial role in the transmission of cultural tradition by bringing people together and “ensuring exchange and understanding among them”. Folktales also represent the community’s beliefs, values, and cultural characteristics.

Storytelling is an act of conveying events about experiences through words, images, sounds, or gestures. Essentially, it is a traditional method of disseminating knowledge, values, and wisdom (Ginz, 2001). Stories transmit the concepts of varied cultures, traditions, customs, values, beliefs, and ways of living (Sarah, 2014). The stories are used to teach facts, experiences, information, and daily activities, much like anecdotes or narratives.

Mphasha (2015) suggested that the Narrator (Writer), the Folktale (Text) and the Audience (Readers/Listeners) are the three components that represent the interrelationship during the folktale-telling process. These three elements work together during the initiation and dissemination of the folktales.

Folktales play a vital role in communities by fostering trust, reinforcing cultural values, preserving indigenous wisdom, supporting education, and strengthening emotional connection (Sole, 2002). It is a strong way to propagate cultural information and practices of the community. It is often transmitted from one generation to another within the family. In fact, through the stories, the elders may also have shared their personal life experiences with the younger generation, which shape their moral and social norms.

Folktales also play a key role in promoting and preserving community culture by conveying the cultural traits and traditions through storytelling. Folktales also play a key role in preserving and sustaining the traditional communication systems of indigenous communities. Community members can use it as a platform to engage with society and discover moral principles and beliefs.

Tharu Community

Different academics have differing opinions regarding the Tharu Tribe's origins. Often, they look at the origin of the Tharu tribe from the etymological point of view. The word "Tharu" consists of "thar" which means "hill" and "ru" which means "nearby". As "Tarahuwa" which means "became wet" it refers to the swampy nature of the region. "Thatharana" signifying "trembling" or "quaking" during a flight from Hastinapur to the Tarai after a fierce battle between the Rajputs and the Muslims.

Crooke (1896) mentioned that the origin of the Tharus can be trace to the word "Tharu", illustrating a 'wine bibber' based on the belief that this name was given to them by one of the Kshatriya kings of the plain after witnessing the Tharus capacity for drinking wine. Nesfield (1885) opined that the word "thar" which in the colloquial dialect of the lowest classes means 'a man of the forest' is more suitable to these people because it describes the status of the tribe.

Buchanan had a different opinion about the Tharu tribe. He believed that the Tharus had displaced the Gorkha of Magdha. Basically, they moved from the hills and dispersed across the entire region north of the Ghaghra River. But this perspective remains questionable and uncertain because the Tharus themselves claim Chittor as their original home and to have descended from the Sisodiya clan of the Rajputs. They claim that they were driven out probably in the third siege of Chittor by Akbar in 1567 AD and originally, they were Rajputs who lost caste by using intoxicating liquor and rearing fowls.

However, in search of the origin of the Tharus, Majumdar (1942) wrote an article 'The Tharu and their Blood Group' which is based on an anthropometric and blood group survey. This article helps in the settlement of the argument about the Tharu's origin and different viewpoints on the racial affinities by mentioning in the conclusion that the Tharu belongs to Mongoloid race and has been discredited as of Rajput origin.

Risley (1994) mentioned that the Tharus inhabiting the Champaran region of Bihar are farmers and elephant caretakers. Primarily, they are scattered in the northern Bihar and the West and East Champaran districts. He believed that the Tharus lived a nomadic life in earlier days and they kept on changing their place.

Tharus in Bihar

The Tharu are an indigenous community who resides in the Terai region of northern India and Nepal. They are mainly divided into 15 sub-castes. They are Chitauniya, Ahirwat, Kochila, Bantar, Purbiya, Pachhimaha, Gaurihar, Kharsiya, Rautar, Kathkhalla, Mahaut, Kanfata, Gorait and Lampochha. These subtribes mainly reside in Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar of the Indian states. The presence of the Tharu community in Bihar has been significant enough, as this is the most populated tribal community in Bihar. After the separation of Bihar and Jharkhand in 2000, most of the tribal population came under the jurisdiction of Jharkhand. This posed a problem for the policy makers and social workers about the issues of tribal development in the state. Even though the government has different development plans and schemes, the tribes are not in a strong enough position to protect their identity, individuality and existence. In such circumstances, the government of India added three communities; Kol, Kavar, and Tharu in the list of Scheduled Tribes of Bihar on 8th January, 2003. Among them, the Tharu community has the largest population. The survival and development of the Tharu community became a matter of concern for the Bihar government. That is why the Bihar government established a special wing 'Samekit

Tharuhat Vikas Abhikaran' (STVA) in 2009 to look into the development process of the Tharu community.

Cultural Transmission

Trommsdorff (2009) mentioned that “the community and change over the generations are affected by cultural transmission.” Therefore, examining the process of cultural transmission is essential in this study to understand how values and beliefs are conveyed and preserved through the folktales of the Tharu community. The cultural transmission process helps in understanding human behaviors, which is shaped by the cultural context of the individual. It is the cultural transmission process that determines the characteristics of the individual. It also helps to preserve the cultural values and beliefs across generations. Basically, cultural transmission is a process of passing cultural knowledge, values, and practices from one generation to the next and across different communities. Cavalli-Sforza and Feldman proposed the concept of cultural transmission in 1981. They described cultural transmission as a process through which group culture becomes part of an individual's being, insisting that a meaningful association must exist between communal values and personal nature. This linkage and connections are shaped by the cultural transmission process (Cavalli-Sforza and Feldman, 1981).

Berry, Poortinga, and Segall (2002) have divided the whole process of cultural transmission into three different sub-process.

1. Enculturation- It is an acquired learning process where he/she learned the culture of his/her own, without any particular learning instructions. In this process, the individual learn through his surroundings in which parents and other elders of the family are involved.

2. Socialization- Cultural learning also unfolds within a person's own cultural sphere, guided by certain defined norms, where intentional guidance and structured teaching play a crucial role in helping individuals internalize cultural traits.

3. Acculturation- In this mode of learning, a person acquires knowledge from individuals outside their own cultural group, and the instructional methods involved may draw from both enculturation and socialization process. There is no defined boundary for learning.

The three major process of cultural transmission are:

1. Vertical Cultural Transmission- The process in which parents pass cultural knowledge to their children is termed as vertical cultural transmission by Cavalli-Sforza and Feldman. It enables the flow of diverse cultural elements, including linguistic styles, moral values, beliefs systems, gender roles, occupational choices, personal motivations, and political beliefs.

2. Horizontal Cultural Transmission Process- It refers to the transmission of culture from peers within primary and secondary groups to an individual as they grow from childhood to adulthood. Through this pathway, various cultural elements-such as attitudes, behaviors, career aspirations, social mobility patterns, children's games, riddles, rituals, stories and rhymes are conveyed.

3. Oblique Cultural Transmission- In this form of cultural transmission process, individuals acquire knowledge from other adults- including members of the extended family as well as from various institutions such as community organizations and formal educational system.

Objective of the research

The objective of this study is to explore the process of cultural transmission within the Tharu community through folktales, focusing on how these narratives help to preserve cultural identity over time along with the role of storyteller as a cultural custodian, and the community members as recipients/acceptors.

Research Methodology

For the present study, the research investigator has used ethnographical approach as this helps in understanding an indigenous society's social and cultural phenomenon. The research

data was collected through the participatory approach, and observation method and in-depth interviews were conducted with the elders and the community members of the Tharu tribe of West Champaran of Bihar.

Tharu Folktales

Stories not only reside in our memories, but they actively configure our memories, knowledge, and beliefs (Achank & Berman, 2002). In the same manner, the Tharu community's folktales work as a tool in continuing their traditional cultural system and indigenous knowledge system. Their folktales revolve around the Tharu tribe's relation to nature, mythological, devotional, knowledge system, and socio-cultural and economic ethos. Anyone from the community who can narrate well and has knowledge about folktales acts as the narrator. Traditionally, this role was often held by the headman (Gumasta) of the community. In the Tharu community, the Gumasta (Headman of the community) can also act like a storyteller. He is among the community members, who usually tell stories to children and other community member. Gumasta works as a storyteller for the community members at the community level, but the elders of the family tell stories to the family or any individual.

While collecting data for the research on the folk literature of the Tharu tribe, the investigator met a few distinguished persons belonging to the Tharu tribe and explored more about the Tharu folktales and stories. The opinions of these experts are discussed below:

Sonu (19, Student and community member) said, "I used to listen stories from mine "Gumasta Baba" in my childhood days. Every evening, mine friends and I used to gather at the house of Gumasta Baba to listen to stories. He used to tell stories related to forests, nature, and mythology. Sometimes he also shared his experiences of fishing, hunting, and collecting sabai (grass) and wood from the forest."

The Gumasta (Community headman) plays a crucial role in the transmission and preservation of the Tharu community's cultural values and belief systems. He possesses a deep

understanding of the community's cultural attributes, which enables him to shape and uphold its intricate value system.

Virendra (26, Research Scholar) said, "I heard stories from my grandmother. Whenever my siblings and I were free at night, we used to listen to her stories. She used to tell stories related to friendship among animals and humans, and mythological and personal life experiences. We learned many things from her stories. She imparted us the wisdom to help us face any difficulties of life. Through the stories she teaches us different techniques that would eventually help us in our daily life. In our community, we have stories that revolve around farming, fishing and livestock rearing. Through these stories, we also know about our traditional systems that were used by our ancestors.

The Tharu community's elders also knew of many folktales which, they narrated to younger generations. Some of the folktales of the Tharu community are as follows:

Bechan Mahto (78, Headman of the community) told a story: Long ago, in a quiet forest, a pair of rats lived happily together, deeply in love and overjoyed to share their lives.

One day, while wandering, the husband rat told his wife, "Hey, do you know I am the king of this jungle? The land as far as your eyes can see belongs to me." At that special moment, an eagle flew down, and took the rat with it. Wife rat shouted and wailed but no one listened to her. The rat captured in the paws of the eagle tried hard but failed to escape its grip. He thought that the eagle must have heard his self-declaration of being the king of this dense forest, which is why he captured him. Unable to escape the eagle's claw, the rat felt sad and defeated. At that moment, the eagle saw a Deer's dead body, and so he released the rat and plunged at the dead body. The rat escaped from the eagle and his life was saved. From there, the rat returned to his wife. When she saw him, his wife was overjoyed. Then she asked him,

“You told me that you are the king of this dense forest, then why did the eagle take you with it”? Then he replied “Who told you that he took me? He is my servant; we went for a visit to my kingdom.

Through this folktale, the Tharu community express their belief in survival against all odds, casting the clever rat as hero and the powerful eagle as the villain. This folktale exemplifies the Tharu community’s well- organized and cohesive storytelling tradition. Due to their location in the Himalayan foothills, the community has long faced challenges to its survival. That is why the weather in this area is not good for farming or easy living. In these areas, people always suffer from drought or flood every year. Mr. Suresh Mahto (56, farmer) said that, “In my childhood, every year flood or drought occurred in my village. Mainly, the condition was worse during the flood because we struggled to get any food and to go out of our homes. So, we used to store food grains for the three months of the rainy season.” That is why their survival is one of the most intricate discourses of the community which they tried to discuss in this folktale.

Sonam (28, High Secondary School teacher) told a story: A farmer was digging his field near the dense forest during the rainy season. As he was digging his field, he found a crab, and to cook it he went to get fire from the village near his land. While the farmer went to fetch fire, a tiger emerged from the forest and asked the spade, “Chargorwa puchhe ekgorwa se, dugorwa kaha gail (चरगोरवा पूछे येकगोरवा से, दूगोरवा कहा गईल)” “Where is your master?” The spade replied, Das gor ke saavaj marleba aagi lehe gail (दस गोर के सावज मरलेबा आगी लेहे गइल) “He has gone to get fire to cook a ten-legged creature he just hunted.” The tiger got scared after hearing this and thought, I have just four legs, but he hunted something with ten. He must be stronger than me and he quickly left the place.

In this folktale, the Tharu community tries to symbolise the deep bond between a farmer and its farming tools as well as the significance of every creature in this world. Through this folktale, the community also shows his love for nature and their deep connection with farming.

Shital (29, Assistant professor) told a story: Long ago, a man from the Mushar caste lived in a small village. He became a rich man from his hard work. He wanted to marry his younger daughter to the world's best man. So, he called a meeting of all the wise people of his region. He asked them, "Who is the best man in this world?" An older man said that the whole world is under the care of lord Bishnu. He is the one who makes and destroys every element on the earth. Then who will be bigger than him? Then, another man said, "No, no! Himalaya is the strongest in this world and big in size. So, it is the greatest on this earth." Then, another man said, "No, no! Grass is stronger than Himalaya. They grow over the Himalaya by tearing its hard surface. So, it is the strongest among them. Then another man said, "Rats eat grass, so rats are stronger". Then another man again said, "But rats are caught by Musahar (it is a socially backward caste in India). So, I think they are the greatest among everyone." In this manner the discussion about the greatest man on earth ended here and the man married his daughter to a Musahar man.

This tale of the Tharu community is structured on the relationship and their bonding between the community members and nature. In this story they also tried to empathize with the social structure of their community and how people from other communities take them. Being a traditional society, members of other communities consider them as a member of the lower caste which also degrades their identity in the society.

Conclusion

The Tharu community of Bihar preserve its storytelling practices through the process of cultural transmission across generations. The people of the Tharu community are

propagating their values and beliefs with the help of folktales. Their folktales reflect the emotions, beliefs, norms, and values of the community. The folktales of the Tharu community also reflect the resilience of their cultural identity over time and illustrate how they have survived for generations despite the harsh climate of the Himalayan foothills.

The transmission occurs through three distinct modes: vertical, horizontal, and oblique. In the process of vertical transmission, the older generation serves as cultural custodians, passing down their cultural traits to the younger generation, who actively receive and internalise the community's practices as guided by family elders- thus ensuring the continuation of the family's values and beliefs. Whereas, in oblique transmission, the headman of the Tharu community works as a cultural caretaker as well as preserver and the listeners accept the folktales as they are following their values and beliefs which are visible in their lifestyle.

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