

THE MYTHOLOGY OF THE THARU: Aspects of Cultural Identity in Dang, West Nepal

Christian McDonough
Oxford Polytechnic

In this paper I shall discuss the traditional sense of identity and how this is changing among the Dangaura Tharu of Dang.* It is important to establish at the outset that I am only dealing with Dangaura Tharu, that is those Tharu who live in or trace their origin to the valley of Dang. The Dangaura are to be kept clearly distinct from the neighbouring Tharu groups such as the Rana and Kathariya. Probably about as many Dangaura are now to be found living outside Dang as there are in the valley, but in the main my comments will apply to those in the valley itself.

The situation of the Tharu of Dang seems to present both similarities and contrasts to the Newar case. Gellner (1986:137) distinguishes between a "modern assertive form of Newar identity" and behind this a "traditional, much weaker and largely implicit idea of identity". These both coexist because of a general condition of rapid social change. The new assertive identity is restricted to a small part of the population, mostly the young educated city dwellers. The majority, that is the older generation, the illiterate, the peasant farmers, are at the moment not interested in asserting their Newar identity, because they do not see themselves under threat (Gellner 1986:143, 144). This would accord with the view that identity, although in Quigley's (1987:168) terms a more generalized sociological condition than ethnicity, like ethnicity clearly emerges in situations where groups are defining themselves in opposition to other groups, and especially where competitive political and economic relations pertain. Quigley argues that any sense of a collective Newar identity in the past would hardly have existed, and

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today the sense of Newar ethnicity is similarly weak. The reason for this is quite simply the divisive nature of caste and the way it operates in Newar Society. There is, then, no effective Newar group to define itself in contrast to other groups. Instead the salient opposition is between Nepali as against being Indian (Quigley 1978: 152-3).

In the Dangaura case, like Gellner, we can distinguish between a traditional, diffuse sense of identity, and a new emergent more assertive sense of identity which is largely restricted to the educated and politically active minority in the community. Unlike the Newar, however, the Dangaura are not internally divided by caste or caste ideology. There are other significant social divisions, but in this respect as a group they possess a more homogeneous character. It is too early to say, however, if the newer assertive identity will take root.

As this paper will seek to show, the Dangaura mythology provides us with a link between these two identities. On the one hand the mythology constitutes part of the underlying framework for their traditional outlook, but on the other hand and perhaps for this very reason the mythology has played a part in recent moves to shape a more self-conscious sense of Tharu culture and identity. In the last few years several books in the Dangaura language have been published in Dang. I shall refer to all of these books but in the main I shall concentrate on the one entitled *Guru Babak Jalmauti*, or 'the birth of *Guru Bābā*', which gives a version of the creation mythology. Before I look in more detail at the mythology, some general remarks are necessary to situate the Dangaura more fully.

The earliest references to the Tharu in the regions roughly to the west and south of Butwal describe them as shifting cultivators living on the fringes of the forests and retreating ever further with the forests in the face of encroaching populations from the plains. These Tharu communities appear as relatively isolated and keen to preserve their separateness and with it their own way of life.¹ Despite this tendency to shift and to avoid confrontation and contact with neighbouring populations, the Tharu in Dang have developed a more settled, cohesive and sophisticated cultural order.

In the past the Dangaura had the valley to themselves, largely because of the endemic malaria. This did not mean that they owned the land or worked it in isolation. Dang formed part of the kingdoms of Sallyan and Phalabang, and later of the Nepalese state. The Tharu paid tribute to the absentee *birtā* landlords, and to the state via the

¹See e. g. Atkinson 1884:600, Carnegy 1868:10, Nestfield 1885:4. For fuller discussion of the sources relating to the history of the Dangaura and other Tharu groups in the western Terai see McDonough 1984:chaps. 2 and 3, Krauskopff 1985:chaps. 1 and 2, and Rajaure 1978.

Chaudhari, the revenue collectors for the *pargannā* administrative divisions of the valley. The cool season was the time for the visits of landlords and government officials. It was also the time when the Lohar and Damai service castes, and the Magar, trading blankets and baskets, would come down from the hills to the Tharu villages. In recent decades and especially since the eradication of malaria there has been an enormous influx of people from the hills. This has caused problems for the Tharu who have characteristically reacted to conflicts with new landlords and immigrant Paharis by leaving Dang to settle new land in the far western Terai. On occasion whole villages have been abandoned in the space of a few days. Tharu migration from Dang is still continuing but at slower rate than fifteen or twenty years ago.

In the local hierarchy the Dangaura form a single caste (*jāt*) which ranks third, below the Brahman and Chetri, but above the untouchable service castes. The Dangaura are careful to maintain their status vis-à-vis the groups below them, and in regions outside Dang they remain distinct from other Tharu groups, the Rana and Kathariya. These three groups do not intermarry and effectively regard each other as separate castes. Within the Dangaura community, however, cast ideology has little significance. That is to say one does not find differences of status based on relative purity. In principle and in practice marriage is possible between any Dangaura who are not excluded by the rule of clan exogamy, although this is qualified in very few instances where there are marked differences of wealth and education. While operating as part of the local caste system in terms of relations with other *jāt*, the Dangaura as yet remain largely untouched by caste ideology in their relations with each other.

From the outside the Dangaura are seen as distinctive, with higher castes drawing attention to their *jaṅgali* ways, depicting them as uneducated, backward, dirty, and as so often with "tribals", given to drink and sexual license. The Dangaura, then, see themselves and are seen by others as both forming a caste and yet different from other castes. They still possess many of the features of a typical "tribe", in particular in having little internal stratification and division of labour, and most important perhaps in having their own religious specialists (cf. Gellner 1986:114). It is only a few of the wealthier families which now employ Brahmans for marriages. The group with whom the Dangaura consider they share most are the Magar to the north, with whom contacts are longstanding but still relatively limited.

Language is another feature which distinguishes the Dangaura from other castes locally. Their language is structurally close to Nepali and is already much influenced by borrowings from it. Yet it is still sufficiently different as to be initially unintelligible to Nepali speakers, though it does not take very long for them to learn it. School education, the radio and the relatively recent presence of resident Paharis in significant

numbers in the villages, are all eroding the local Tharu language, and as we shall see this has been one of the issues in the attempts to forge a new sense of identity.

The point I wish to emphasize, then, is that despite longstanding and now much more intense social and economic interaction with other groups, and despite very clear evidence of extensive borrowing and influence in linguistic and religious spheres, the Tharu of Dang have preserved a distinct character, socially and culturally. In traditional terms this identity is diffuse and difficult to pin down. Notions were and sometimes still are rather vague about how far Dangaura settlements extend in space. Until recently for most Dangaura the village itself and to a lesser extent the surrounding villages, perhaps up to a few hours walking distance, have been the effective limits of their social world. Nevertheless despite a tendency to atomisation into rather closed nucleated village communities, there are common elements in Dangaura culture, and especially religion, which make a Dang Tharu village instantly recognisable to the Dangaura themselves as well as to anyone else.

Höfer (1979:46-7) has proposed a definition for "ethnic groups" like the Dangaura as groups:

who have a subjective ethnic identity i.e. conscious of a solidarity due to a (mostly mythical) common ancestry and of sharing specific linguistic and cultural phenomena. In the main this identity is expressed by an ethnonym often covering a certain local or regional range of dialectical and/or, cultural features.

It is this mythical element which I wish to explore here, when I try to show how the creation mythology of the Dangaura serves as one of the central strands in what I have referred to as their traditional sense of cultural identity.

The Dangaura Tharu have a rich body of oral traditions. Apart from a number of folk tales (*batkahi*) the rest of this corpus consists of a series of songs (*git*) as follows:

-A group of songs which comprise the creation mythology. This includes Guru Bābak JImauti "the birth of Guru Bābā", the creator god, and a number of other long songs called "gardens" (*phulwār*) which relate the further adventures of Guru Bābā, now become Mahādeo, and his consort Pārbati. We must also include here the song called Pacrā which induces possession and accompanies initiation as *guruwā*, which we may translate roughly as "ordinary priest", a status that is open to all men.

-Several epic songs including the Barkimār or "great war" which is the Dangaura version of the Mahābhārata, the story of the King Lākhi, and some songs concerning

Ram, Laxman and Sita. The Barkimār is probably the most well known and popular of all the epic songs, and verses are sung in the period between the end of the monsoon and the Dasya festival, the Dangaura version of Dasain.²

-Sakhiyā, the song which relates the birth of Kānhā (Krishna) and his struggles with Kangsa Māmā. Unlike the other songs which are mostly sung by men, this is sung exclusively by women.

-The group of songs called Māngar which accompany wedding rituals.

-A series of songs which are sung according to the season of the year and often to accompany work of various kinds.

-A body of songs which are composed and sung specifically for dances.³

Although I have singled out a set of songs as "myths", the Dangaura Tharu have no such term, using instead the general term *git* for all songs, or the specific name given to certain songs. The mythology, however, can be distinguished as *sriṣṭik bāt* that is the "talk" which has to do with origins and creation. Other reasons why the mythology cannot be detached straight forwardly from much of the rest of the corpus is because other songs especially at marriage and initiation take up or echo themes from the myths, and because all these songs including the myth are related together as a whole since each has its specific place in the annual round of seasons, work and rituals. In this regard it might not be going too far perhaps to describe Dangaura culture as a "song and dance" culture.

The creation myth recounts how the world, -- and by implication the scene is the Dang valley -- was covered by water. Guru Bābā was created on a lotus leaf floating on the water. Eventually with the help of a worm he obtains earth from the underworld with which he churns the ocean and creates land. There then follows the creation of various grasses, trees and various creatures. Eventually he creates a daughter who wants to marry him and pursues him with this intent. After overcoming a number of obstacles she

²The Barkimār is distinguished by the elaborate "peacock" dance which accompanies it. In the past this dance seems to have been exclusively staged by the village of Jalhaura in central Dang, the village of a branch of the Dahit priestly clan. Members of this village made up a large troupe, each playing different roles in a complex ensemble which toured around Dang. The dance was overseen and "protected" by the leading priests of Jalhaura and certain other villages. Unfortunately this dance has not been staged for some years now.

³Krauskopff (1987b:14) gives a similar list of the main elements of the Dangaura oral traditions.

succeeds. Guru Baba at this point is transformed from leprous ascetic, a form he has taken in order to put off his daughter, into the resplendent incarnation of Mahadeo. His daughter becomes Gauri-Pārbati. At this point the myth diverges into the various "garden" episodes. These describe how Pārbati leaves Mahādeo/Guru Bābā in Harikabilās (see below) and sets out to have a series of amorous encounters with wild ducks or geese.⁴ These episodes provide the basis for the rituals which concern women's fertility and which take place twice a year for the married women in every household.⁵ Another version of the creation myth, the Barnāknā, is chanted by the village priest in front of the village shrine during Hariyā Gurai, the annual ritual for the protection and fertility of the crop. This version continues on from the creation of the world to describe the marriage between Mahādeo and Pārbati and the origin of rice cultivation. The Pacrā song introduces a further and very important episode: it describes the journey of the goddess, with Saurā her eldest son, from Harikabilās down to her temple at Patan, near Tulsipur across the border in India. For the Dangaura in cosmological terms this temple is situated at the centre or "navel" of the world.

The mythology provides the basis for Dangaura cosmology. To the north up in the mountains lies Harikabilās, which is the abode of Guru Bābā the primordial ancestor but also the first human being in the world. He presides in Harikabilās with all the subsequent ancestors, since this is where the ancestors go and whence they return to the house once a year in Dasya when they are fed. By contrast to the distant Guru Bābā and ancestors up in the north, Debi is the active and immanent divinity in the world. Correspondingly her main location is her temple in the centre of the world down in the plains to the south of Dang. Rather than Guru Bābā, Debi in her various aspects is the dominant figure in most ritual. The mythology also provides for the annual renewal and recreation of the world in each village when the Barnāknā is chanted by the village priest. Periodically at intervals of several years or longer the more elaborate Jakheri ritual is performed when the episodes from the Barnāknā concerning Mahādeo and Pārbati's marriage and the origin of rice cultivation are literally acted out as a drama by members of the village (Krauskopff 1987b:149-150).

In addition to embodying a particular cosmology, the mythology also serves to contribute towards the identification of a household as a Dangaura one. Every house, in order to be classed as a proper house (*ghar*), installs a series of divinities. Some have

⁴Harikabilās is the Dangaura equivalent of Mt. Kailash, but for most Dangaura, one mountain is much like another, and ideas as to the precise location of Harikabilās are very vague.

⁵For further details on these very important *rath lausārnā* rituals see Krauskopff 1985: chap IX, and McDonaugh 1988.

representations, others do not, but all have particular locations (*thān*) where they receive offerings and worship. The majority are collected in the *deurār* or "divinity room", one of the innermost rooms situated in the north east corner furthest away from the main entrance to the house. The particular combination of divinities of a household determines and defines its membership of a particular *gotyār* or clan, the loosely structured patrilineal exogamous groups that make up Dangaura society. The divinities serve to distinguish households of one clan from those of another, and similarly certain of the divinities distinguish priestly (*gharguruwā*) clans from each other and from households of client (*barin*) clans. Guru Bābā and Debi, under her aspect of Māiyā, however, are represented in the households of every clan. As befits their fundamental cosmological significance, these two divinities are placed centrally in the main household shrine. Guru Bābā, represented by a small flat human-shaped leather figure hangs directly above Māiyā, who occupies the centre of the main altar (*pāīā*), surrounded by Saurā, and the other members of this central group.⁶ On the one hand, then, taken together divinities mark crucial divisions within the Dangaura social order: between clans, between priests, and between priests and their client class. On the other hand, however, the divinities of the mythology through their presence in every house serve to unify by constituting the core element in the identification of a house as Dangaura Tharu.⁷

The context of the village presents a similar pattern. On the one hand the village, a rather introverted and closed community, is the dominant context for one's identity. So for instance one of the first questions between strangers will be to establish the name of each other's village of residence. The distinctive identity of villages is constituted by and arises from a range of features, including a fairly high level of village endogamy, a defined territory, the institution of village headman (*mahataū*) and council (*khel*), and the shrine for the village divinities (*bhūhyār*). On the other hand in ritual contexts, and in particular in Hariyā Gurai with the recitation of the Bārāknā, every village becomes a microcosm of the cosmos and thus at this level every village is the same, sharing the same mythology and cosmological orientation.

The striking feature of the creation mythology is the way it provides an account of origins of a broad, undifferentiated, global kind. It accounts for the origin of the world and of human beings in a generic sense, rather than asserting a more particular pedigree or genealogy which could become the vehicle for claims to some kind of status. The

⁶The household divinities which are crucial for Dangaura social organisation are discussed in McDonough 1984:chaps. 12 and 13 and Krauskopff 1985:Part 2.

⁷It seems likely that the divinities distinguish Dangaura households from those of the Kathariya and Rana Tharu groups, but unfortunately we have very little information on these latter two groups.

generality and breadth of the creation mythology contrasts with the curious, piecemeal and truncated origin myths held by some clans. These clan myths share little in common except for some which claim origins from a variety of different groups including the Magar and Newar, as well as Ahir, Kahar, Dom and Brahman castes among others. Other than possibly indicating that the Dangaura have incorporated members of other castes, these traditions present no coherent pattern. I have never encountered claims either by a clan or in reference to the Dangaura as a whole to a Rajput origin, such as one finds among the Rana Tharu (Srivastava 1958:14; Majumdar 1944:68; Nevill 1904:107) and among tribal populations in India.

The most elaborate clan myth concerns the priestly clans whose four or five ancestor divinities are portrayed as brothers who enter the Dang valley and divide it up amongst them. This is a widely known myth which occurs in different versions (McDonough 1984:322-325; Macdonald 1969:87; Krauskopff 1985:155-156), but it differs markedly from the creation mythology proper in that it is never sung and plays no direct role in ritual. The priests' origin myth, however, simultaneously reflects important social divisions and presents a unifying schema. In principle nearly all other clans are hereditarily linked as clients to one or other of the priestly clans. The priests' myth, therefore, embodies a structure which in terms of kinship and territory unites the whole of Dangaura society in relation to the valley of Dang through its various divisions between the four or five brothers. There is then, a further difference from the creation mythology in that unlike it the priests' myth relates directly to significant structural relations within Dangaura society.

The creation mythology, then, constitutes one of the main elements of the traditional Dangaura world view, and thus underpins a traditional sense of identity albeit of a weak and diffuse kind. To establish a more satisfactory account of such identity would require discussion of many other aspects of Dangaura culture. Thus far, however, let us note that the mythology establishes the origin of Dangaura but at a very distant and cosmic level, and it embodies a cosmology which orients the Dangaura in their world, giving meaning to the very landscape which surrounds them -- the mountains to the north and the plains to the south. The mythology is also very rich and its themes and imagery resonate throughout the songs which form such a fundamental part of Dangaura culture. As with all songs, the mythology as song is also entertaining, and even aesthetically pleasing to the Dangaura.⁸ The myths represent a crucial part of their cultural "capital". Everyone knows something of the myths, but only a few men, usually prominent and

⁸In the village of Sukhrwar where I did most of my fieldwork, it is the custom to dance and sing Guru Bābak Jalmauti all night after performing the Hariyā Gurai.

respected priests, have the enviable reputation of knowing the mythology properly. This accomplishment carries status, but it also constitutes an indispensable part of the ritual knowledge and power of the priests and especially of the priests who may perform village level rituals. In fact several versions of the myths exist in handwritten form, though such manuscripts tend to be guarded jealously so it is not always easy to gain access to them.

The sense of separateness held by the Dangaura has surely emerged much more strongly in recent decades as a result of the influx of Pahari immigrants.⁹ Not only has the widespread presence of the Brahman-Chetri and other castes pointed up cultural contrasts between them and the Dangaura in a variety of ways, but also and more significantly the economic impact on the Dangaura has had important consequences in this regard. The exact details are not clear but it is apparent that in many cases where the Dangaura did own land, they have lost it. At the same time the large landholdings have been broken up. Traditional longstanding relationships with the previous landowners have given way to fraught relations with new Pahari landlords who have sought to raise their share of the crop and to resist registration of their tenants' legal rights, often so as to be able to sell land more easily in the future. This has led to widespread disputes and confrontation between the Tharu tenant farmers and the Pahari landowners. Not all Dangaura are tenants of course, but the great majority either are or in addition to share-cropping own only small amounts of land themselves. The effect has been to engender a feeling of threat to their livelihood, or even of oppression. As noted above this has led to considerable Tharu emigration to the south and west. The confrontation and competition for resources with some of the Pahari immigrants has provided probably the key factor in promoting a new sense of identity, one based on a shared experience of adversity. One must be careful, however, not to overlook the fact that in this respect this identity is not restricted solely to the Dangaura, but would seem to some extent to embrace tenant households of other castes who are facing the same problems.

Over the last thirty years though the publication of books in the Dangaura language, the mythology along with other parts of the oral traditions has become a vehicle in attempts to create a sharper and more assertive Dangaura identity. The first move in this direction was the publication in 1959/60 of a book containing the story of the legendary local king Dangisaran, and excerpts from the Barkimār and from the creation myth Guru

⁹According to a recent survey (USAID/APROSC 1980:32) the Dangaura now comprise only about 39% of the population in Dang. The most recent census figures (1971) gives about 72,500 Tharu living in Dang-Deokhuri, and Krauskopff (1985:15) is probably correct in estimating a total Dangaura population of around 150,000 when one includes those living in other Terai districts.

Bābak Jalmāuti (Badrinath et al. 1959/60).¹⁰ I do not know the background to this book but Krauskopff (1987a:14) is almost certainly right when she states that this book was brought out at a time when the local Dangaura leaders saw their position weakened by the central government's policy of national unification.

There followed a gap of some dozen years until the emergence of a Dang-based group calling itself "The association for the improvement of Tharu language and literature, in the west of Nepal". Its members were young, educated and politically active. In the early 1970's this group brought out one or possibly two issues of a journal entitled *Gotcāli*, written in the Dangaura language, and also a book *Māngar*, a very popular collection of wedding songs (Chaudhari 1972).¹¹ The journal *Gotcāli* was rather too radical in tone with the result that after the first issue the publication was banned and all available copies confiscated. Since no copies exist and people are not keen to talk about the journal it is not easy to ascertain in detail what it contained. In broad terms, however it seems to have consisted of a collection of songs and articles which highlighted the feelings of adversity and oppression experienced by the Tharu tenants farmers at the hands of the Bahun-Chetri landlords. There were calls for the Tharu to unite in the face of adversity to fight for their rights. At times the language may have been frankly left-wing with the implication that the Tharu farmers' predicament should be seen in the more global context of the peasant class struggle. At the same time, however, reflecting the higher castes' negative stereotype of the Tharu as primitive, *jaṅgali* and low caste, there were also calls for the Tharu to reform themselves by abandoning drink and other customs such as their "needless" expenditure on marriage feasts and so on. The other key themes were demands for economic reform, the need for the recognition by the Tharu of the importance of education to better their position, and the need to preserve and foster the Tharu language and literature. The programme presented as a solution to the Tharu predicament was then, a curious blend of socialist inspired political and economic reform combined with a call for reform of customs in imitation of the higher castes and championing of Tharu language and literature. The proposed caste reforms were not popular and met with little response, but the other themes of the songs and articles, and in particular, their reference to the Tharu farmers' economic problems were very popular. The rapid suppression of the journal, however, appears to have checked the possible development of a popular Tharu political movement. There consequently followed another gap until the early 1980's with the publication of three books: *Barkimār* (Chaudhari & Chaudhari 1981/82), *Guru Bābak Jalmāuti* (Chaudhari 1982/83) and *Jhumrā Git* (Chaudhari 1982/83) a collection of dance

¹⁰Naraharinath (1965) gives a version of the creation mythology taken from this earlier publication (Badrinath et al. 1959/60). Yogi Naraharinath himself contributed to the earlier volume.

¹¹*gotcāli* means "friend", but in the context of this publication it would seem to have had a more left-wing shade of meaning though less so perhaps than that evoked by "comrade".

songs. All three of these volumes carried the description "Tharu folk songs" under the main title.

Some of the thinking which lies behind these publications of the 1970's and 80's is given in the introductory pieces, usually one or two pages long under the heading "Two Words" (*dui śabda*) or "My Opinion" (*mwār kahai*). The preface to Mangar highlights key themes concerning the importance of the local Tharu language and literature, which are echoed in all the later books though in a slightly muted form. These prefaces are written in the Dangaura language and speak of "our songs" and "our language" etc. throughout, thus obviously and directly addressing a Dangaura Tharu readership. We are told that the Tharu have a language and a literature consisting of an extensive body of fine and ancient songs, but these are in danger of being forgotten.¹² In the past the Tharu forbears knew these songs but now the Tharu are in danger of losing their language and literature which will have disastrous consequences for future generations. The key point that is emphasised is that if a *jāt* loses its language and its literature, then it loses itself. Any real chance of developing, of *bikās*, is linked to preserving and fostering the language, so we are told "we shall not advance, we shall not achieve development as long as our language remains overshadowed and hidden" (Chaudhari 1972:2).

The preface to the creation mythology is similar but it makes some interesting additions. We are told that this is the oldest tradition of the Tharu, containing hidden within it much ancient history. It also contains "the history of Tharu *dharma*" (*thāru jātkē dhārmik itihās*, Chaudhari 1982/83:3). In other words this very important text deals with Tharu *dharma* and so places them, the Dangaura Tharu, in the wider order of things. Significantly, therefore the editor identifies the Tharu as "*śiv puja*", worshippers of Śiva, on the grounds that for ages now they have done *pujā* in the names of Mahādeo and Pārbati.

The preface to Jhumrā introduces the new idea that although the Tharu are to some extent mixed as a result of incorporating members of other groups, nevertheless all the Tharu groups from the Mechi to the Mahakali (i.e. throughout Nepal) are one. It is claimed that they share common songs and a common origin, having migrated westwards from Assam. The work of Iman Singh Chemjong is cited in support of this and so as to claim a common original Tharu identity as Kirānti. Reference is also made to the king Khān, by implication a Tharu/Kiranti king who ruled in northern Bihar. Apparently even today in Bara and Parsa districts one can find Khan as a Tharu clan name.

¹²In these editorials as in normal usage the Dangaura are not referred to by this name which they rarely use themselves. Instead the ethnonym Tharu is used.

In sum, these publications represent the attempt on the part of some of the younger educated Tharu to develop a stronger sense of identity among the Dangaura Tharu as a whole. From my review of the editor's prefaces it is clear that the elements which make up this new identity share something in common with the list given by Gellner (1986:119) for the Newar. These elements here include: a vague idea of a glorious past which contrasts with a subject present, and a distinct language and a rich literature which are now in danger of being lost. The idea is stressed that the survival of the *jāt* depends on the survival of the language. Unlike the Newar situation not surprisingly perhaps there is no mention of a script, a calendar, an era, nor is there any specific mention of a territory. There is, however, a myth of common origin, but here the matter is not clear since there now seems to be more than one. On the one hand we have Guru Babak Jalmauti, and on the other there is the recent though limited attempt to merge the Dang Tharu in a wider pan-Nepal Tharu identity, linking them with Tharu groups to the east and west and citing a common Kirānti origin.

The publication of these books constitutes a concrete step to halt what the younger educated and politically active minority see as the erosion of Tharu culture in the face of rapid "nepalisation". There is no doubt that they link this cultural predicament with their perception that the majority of Dangaura farmers are facing social and economic disadvantages arising in particular from loss of land ownership and problems in securing proper tenancy rights. These wider social and economic issues were expressed in the Gotcali journal but are not overtly referred to in the subsequent publications which instead emphasize language and literature in the attempt to foster a new sense of cultural identity.

The books of songs represent valued cultural resources both in terms of entertainment and aesthetic pleasure and in relation to ritual and religious knowledge. Consequently they have been very popular. Those who can read are happy to possess, often for the first time, versions of famous songs previously known in full to relatively few individuals. The books, then, could provide an excellent vehicle for communicating and shaping a more self-conscious sense of identity among the Dangaura population as a whole. It is too early to judge, but in its present form I think this campaign based as it is on the issues of language and literature is unlikely to have very much effect. There is some response to the idea of preserving the Dangaura language and its songs, but the efficacy of the mythology itself seems limited. The creation mythology is culturally fundamental but simultaneously as a text it seems too broad to provide a focus for this new identity. The attempt to trace an origin to the Kiranti and to promote a pan-Nepal Tharu identity has met with little response as far as I can tell. The fact is that in Dang local political and economic issues, and in particular problems surrounding land tenure, are much more important. Any attempt to create a new identity must address such concerns. An emphasis

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on language, literature and myth is not enough. It must be emphasized that the Nepali language is gaining ground: it is indispensable for dealing with officials, for operating in the local panchayat and for obtaining educational qualifications. Similarly, any sense of a shared identity with other Tharu groups elsewhere in the Terai is largely eclipsed by a growing sense of national identity. The Tharu of Dang at this most inclusive level identify strongly as Nepalese in opposition to the mistrusted *deshi* in India.

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