

## Research Article

# ECONOMIC AND SOCIOCULTURAL IMPACTS OF THE ESTABLISHMENT OF NATIONAL PARK AND ASSOCIATED TOURISM ON THE THARU PEOPLE OF SAURAHA IN CHITWAN, NEPAL

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines economic and sociocultural impacts of the establishment of the Chitwan National Park (CNP) and associated tourism on the indigenous Tharu people of Sauraha in Chitwan District of Nepal. Findings are the analysis of data obtained from 100 face to face household survey, 10 in-depth interviews and six key informant interviews. Equal number of participants were purposefully selected from the study sites-Bachhauli ward and Harnari ward (see Figure 1). These are the two closest wards from northeastern entry point of CNP as well as with high concentration of Tharu population in Sauraha. The study results revealed comparatively greater economic impacts for the participants of Harnari ward. However, sociocultural impacts were found moderate for the participants of both wards. Besides the establishment of CNP, influx of international tourists in Sauraha, in-migration of people from other parts of Nepal to Chitwan, and the influence of modernization particularly led by the growth of CNP tourism were identified as other key factors of social, economic and cultural changes in both study wards. Broadly, the study results and discussion are presented under three key themes: (1) economic impacts, (2) sociocultural impacts, and (3) contributions of Non-Governmental Organization (NGO)s in the preservation of Tharu culture. The article concludes by offering some suggestions to concerned authorities for planning and working better to achieve improved livelihood outcomes of the Tharu people of Sauraha together with the prospects for future sustainability of CNP tourism, particularly by promoting Tharu culture and tradition.

**Keywords:** CNP, Bachhauli, Hamari, tourism, impact.

### INTRODUCTION

Chitwan National Park (CNP), established as the first national park of Nepal in 1973 lies within the subtropical lowlands of the inner Terai in Chitwan District. Including buffer zone (729.37 sq. km.) the total area of the CNP is 1682 km<sup>2</sup>. In 1984, the United Nations Environmental, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) gave CNP a designation of World Heritage Site (WHS) recognizing its unique ecosystems and artistic surrounding (Pandit, Dhakal & Polyakov, 2015). CNP extends over the four districts of Chitwan, Nawalparasi, Parsa, and Makawanpur (Gautam, 2005). Most of the adjacent areas of CNP are inhabited by the Tharu population which represents one of the seventy indigenous groups of Nepal (Bhattarai, 2009). Tharus are believed to be the first indigenous group of Nepal following the Magar. According to the latest population census of Nepal, the Magars hold 7.12% (1,887,733) and the Tharus hold 6.56% (1,737,470) of the total population (26,494,504) of the country (Nepal Central Bureau, [CBS] 2011). Tharu, like many other minority castes of Nepal is observed as a marginalized group of people in the eyes of so-called high caste people whose representation in administrative as well as political structures of the country is greater (Paudel, 2016). Tharu can be Hindu or Buddhist (Guneratne, 2002). The unique Tharu culture and their religious heritage are valuable assets of Nepal. Tharus' residence, food, clothes, art, religion, economy, and many other parts of their life resemble close interactions with nature while balancing ecological sustainability (Muller-Boker, 1999). Despite the CNP's establishment as policy goal for biodiversity conservation and tourism development in Chitwan, arguments about the actual benefits of these initiatives for economic development as well as livelihood sustainability of the local Tharu people have always been the issues of key concern and topics for critical discussions.

Not only the creation of a national park and influx of international tourists in Chitwan, but also the migration of other ethnic groups to this district influenced livelihood pattern of many communities including the Tharus of Sauraha, driving them to adopt new and modern lifestyles, and thus resulting in the loss of their traditional practices, sociocultural norms, values and belief systems (Bhattarai, 2009). Tharu culture is vital as it is the nation's asset, and this form of tourism generates economic benefits to the local Tharu people as well as revenue for the country through CNP tourism. Several studies such as; with focus on Tharu culture and local economy (e.g., Chhetri, 2005; Muller-Boker, 1999; Poudel, 2014), effects of hill migrants on Tharu people (e.g., Gunaratne, 2002; Singh, 1988), and conflicts between local people and CNP (e.g., Gautam, 2005; Stræde & Helles, 2000; Sharma, 1990; Shrestha, 1995) have been published in the context of CNP and Tharu people in the past. However, the issues associated to the impacts, either of CNP creation and or CNP tourism on socioeconomic and or cultural aspects of the Tharu people of Sauraha are yet to be explored. My paper aims to contribute to minimize the gap in research associated to these issues to some extent by exploring and examining the economic and sociocultural impacts of the establishment of CNP and associated tourism on the indigenous Tharu people of Sauraha, Chitwan.

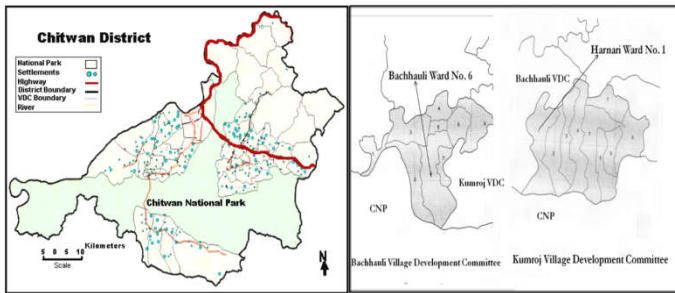
### STUDY AREA

A new constitution (2015) of the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal has restructured the nation into seven provinces and 77 districts, with further divisions of districts into metropolitan cities, sub-metropolitan cities, (urban) municipalities, (rural) municipalities (*gaunpalika* in Nepali), and (ward)s as their lowest unit. In the former administrative divisions of Nepal or when the fieldwork of this study was undertaken in 2007, wards were governed either by a municipality or a VDC (Village Development Committee). The study sites of this research were Bachhauli ward of Bachhauli VDC and

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Harnariward of Kumroj VDC in Ratnanagar Municipality of Chitwan District, which at present lies within the Bagmati Pradesh (Province Number 3) of Nepal.



**Figure 1. A map of Chitwan District showing the area of Chitwan National Park and study wards; Source: Bhattarai, 2009**

Distance between the study wards and their locations from the entry point of CNP in Sauraha is approximately one kilometer from each other. Sauraha is the most popular tourist hub for CNP visitors. As of 2007, the total population of Bachhauri VDC was 10,443, of which almost half (5016) were Tharu people. Likewise, of the total 1872 households of Bachhauri VDC, 263 were inhabited by Tharu with their population of 1575. Similarly, the total population of Kumroj VDC in 2007 was 7,561 within its 1,488 households. Of this, the Tharu population consisted 2,642 representing 34.94% of the total. Furthermore, Harnariward consisted 169 households, of which 100 were of Tharus with their population of 859. Like the size of population, availability of and access to physical facilities and infrastructures were also greater in Bachhauri ward than in Harnariward. Demographic data used in this section were provided by the secretaries of Bachhauri and Kumroj VDCs.

## METHODS

This study has employed quantitative and qualitative data gathered through primary as well as secondary sources. Primary data were gathered from 100 face to face household survey and 10 in-depth interviews with Tharu participants and six key informant interviews with CNP officials (2), Tharu village leaders (2) and tourist guides (2) of Sauraha. In the same way, secondary data were borrowed from the published research reports, journal articles, dissertations, and the government archives such as; the offices of Bachhauri and Kumroj VDCs and Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS). Secondary data were mostly useful in understanding the basic characteristics of local Tharu people as well as the research site. Fieldwork was conducted during the cold dry season in 2007. Initially, purposive and later snowball sampling techniques were used identifying and selecting the most appropriate participants for survey and interview. Correspondingly, key informants were accessed through the researcher's personal approach. This study is based on descriptive research design in which the analysis and discussion of data are presented under key themes.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The establishment of CNP and associated tourism brought several changes and challenges on economic as well as socio-cultural aspects of livelihoods of the Tharu people of both study wards. These included both positive as well as negative implications. Insights about positive and negative implications were based on the evaluations of changes observed and experienced by participants in their households' economic and socio-cultural situations before and after

the establishment of CNP. These are analyzed and discussed under three key themes in the following sections.

### Economic Impacts

The participants evaluated economic impacts of the establishment of CNP and associated tourism on Tharu livelihoods based on the extent of tourism related employment opportunities for the people of respective study wards. It is evident that the majority of wage labor employment in Sauraha is in tourism sector, such as; hotels, lodges, and restaurants including handicrafts works and teashops that have begun to spawn lately (Bhattarai, 2009). Some of the Tharu youths of Sauraha also work in travel and tourism agencies in Sauraha as well as in Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal. All participants considered this situation as a positive implication of CNP tourism on the Tharu economy of Sauraha. However, the majority of interviewees (60% in Bachhauri and 80% in Harnari) took it as a negative implication in considerations that the earnings of Tharu from their traditional activities such as; canoeing to help people cross rivers as well as sale of fish, medicinal plants, and firewood would exceed the value of present day income what Tharu can generate from tourism based activities in the region. These participants further argued that the rate of biodiversity loss would also decrease in Chitwan if CNP was not established and associated tourism was not flourished attracting more tourists.

Economic benefits were revealed more for the participants of Harnariward. This is because 88% of the survey participants of Bachhauri ward and 100% of the survey participants of Harnariward were able to draw income from tourism-based activities. At least one member of each surveyed households in Harnari was drawing income from tourism. More than 50% of the interviewees who drew income in Bachhauri ward informed their engagement in non-tourism activities such as; salesperson, helper and assistant in shops; mechanics in auto works; construction worker including electrician, vendor, driver, and waiter/waitress in hotels and restaurants in or outside Sauraha. More than 60% of the income of the participants of Harnariward was tourism based, such as; park guard, caretaker of CNP elephant, elephant driver (mahout), jeep driver, office assistant, nature guide, receptionist in visiting the center, cook, waiter, helper and so on. However, most of these are temporary and casual jobs. Many of the CNP employees as well as workers in the hotels, lodges and restaurants are seasonal. Therefore, their chances of being laid off from work and thus facing financial problem have been a common phenomenon within a big circle of the working age population of Sauraha including Tharus.

Most of the interviewees (70%) of Bachhauri and Harnari(80%) wards informed that the Tharu people who work as seasonal employees in CNP as well as tourism sector in Sauraha also get involved in other off farm activities such as; construction (house and road building), loading and unloading of sand, soil, stones, bricks to and from trucks, portering, vegetable farming, livestock raising such as; buffaloes, goats, cows and pigs. However, due to the lack of local market in Sauraha and the tradition among many hotel/lodge owners as well as local people of buying almost everything from outside markets such as Tandi and Narayangarh has dejected locally grown vegetables and dairy products. This situation was reported by many participants of both study wards. For example, an interviewee mentioned "...we grow vegetables and make surpluses, but the hoteliers of Sauraha do not buy our products. They bring milk, yogurt, and all kinds of fruits and vegetables from Narayangarh and or Tandi Bazaar. We do not have local market to sale our harvests in Sauraha. Tandi is the nearest market town from here but the problem is that we don't have our private vehicles and there is also no easy access to public

transport. So, we are wondering if the concerned authorities could help us by implying some mechanisms so that we would be able to sell our goods and vegetables in Sauraha" (M 46, Bachhauli). A few of the survey participants (44% of Bachhauli and 28% of Harnari) reported that the seasonal workers of Sauraha also work as rickshaw puller when tourism and agriculture related works are unavailable in the area. Notably, 30% of the total interviewees in both wards mentioned that they used to fish in Rapti and Reu rivers in the spring season, although the activity of fishing inside the Park Rivers is illegal. All interviewees in both wards accorded that the Tharu people of Chitwan should receive fishing right, which they thought would help not only to generate additional income for many Tharu households but also support and encourage for the preservation and promotion of traditional Tharu fishing culture. However, none of the park officials (key informant interviewees) provided any information or clue about park's provision of policy of permitting fishing right to the Tharu people at present or in the future. Furthermore, the idea of many participants of resuming the bull cart culture in Sauraha for transporting tourists between Tandi and Sauraha for additional income was also criticized as an unrealistic act in the present context. Rather, the provision of providing an employment quota system (for permanent job) to the Tharu people of Sauraha to work inside the CNP in its lodges was viewed as an impressive and practical idea according to the majority of interviewees in both wards (88% of Bachhauli and 72% of Harnari) as well as all key informants. However, this concept contradicts with the opinion of one of the interviewees who was also the owner of a hotel/lodge in Sauraha. He reported that the decision about hiring permanent employees in Sauraha hotel/lodge/restaurant was a difficult task given that the CNP tourism is a seasonal business and runs only for about four to six months during a year between February and April in Spring, and August, September and October in Autumn. This interviewee asserted "...now, it is very hard to run hotel/lodge business in Sauraha because there are many lodges, hotels and restaurants of different sizes and standards, some cheap and some expensive. In fact, it is very hard to find classy guests in Sauraha because most of them prefer to eat in cheaper hotels and restaurants and stay in low-cost lodges. Sometimes, we go in loss if we have very a small number of classy tourists. So, in such situation, how can we keep many staff members at our hotels and lodges and pay them...unwontedly we have to ask them to leave and find other works" (F 37, Bachhauli).

### Sociocultural Impacts

Participants evaluated their socio-cultural statuses by assessing the level of living standards including the types of houses they live in, land ownership, types of schools their family study in, clothes they wear or can afford to buy, food they eat at home or can afford to buy and so on. All participants including key informants perceived that the help provided to the Tharu people of Sauraha by non-governmental organizations such as; Park and People Program (PPP), Terai Arc-Landscape (TAL), and Nepal Indigenous Society (NIDS) for enhancing their level of awareness through education on the importance of health, hygiene, and sanitation was due to the consequence of the development of CNP tourism. However, more than half of the survey participants (64% of Bachhauli and 73% of Harnari) perceived that the influx of international tourists in Sauraha was the most influential factor to cause negative effects on the Tharu culture of Sauraha. Other instances of Tharus' social and cultural degradation in Sauraha were the growing trend among young Tharu of disrespecting their elders, Tharu's involvement in drugs, alcoholism, quarrels, prostitution, including gradual losses in the pattern of celebrating Tharu festivals, speaking in Tharu language, performing rituals, and wearing traditional costumes. One of the

common comments of the majority of interviewees in both wards (80% of Bachhauli and 90% of Harnari) was disrespect shown by tourist guides and visitors to the local Tharu people of Sauraha. Likewise, several Tharu respondents as well as key informants of both villages reported that the tendency of alluring and trading Tharu girls to foreign tourists for the purpose of sexual intercourse by taking them to the Sauraha hotels was increasing among the tourist guides. However, an interviewee added, "...not only the foreign tourists but many domestic tourists also ask tourist guides to arrange prostitutes as well as marijuana for them with the tourist guides of Sauraha. Now, Sauraha is a complex word, many people from different parts of Nepal including hills and mountains have begun to live here permanently. This is why the Tharu people of Sauraha are blended with new culture and lifestyles" (M 28, Harnari). These instances and activities are the negative costs of CNP tourism to Tharu society because they invite and increase sociocultural threats. All interviewees realized that the patterns of celebrating Tharu feasts and including their cultural performances and religious activities were being significantly transformed over the recent decades.

The majority of survey participants (89% of Bachhauli and 94% of Harnari) as well as all key informants viewed that the tendency of ignoring the values and importance of Tharu culture especially by a large group of Tharu youths was the main cause of attrition in their culture. The trend of emulating others' lifestyles was perceived as another reason to cause deterioration in Tharus' social and cultural assets. Likewise, the tradition of imitating clothing style mostly of the international tourists and the food habits of tourists as well as other caste peoples in the locality were identified as the third cause to deteriorate Tharu's sociocultural standards. All participants liked modern clothes and stated that they were easy and comfortable to wear unlike the traditional Tharu dresses. The traditional Tharu dresses for male are *Bhegva* (a loin cloth made up of white cotton cloth) and a half or full sleeved *bhoto* (waist coat). With this, they also wear a *topi* (cap) on their heads. For Tharu women, *thetuwa/guneu* (long unstitched garment) is a traditional dress which is a knee length dress, unfolded in the front. For, young unmarried girls in Tharu community, *cholya* (blouse) that has strings on the back to tie it up is a traditional wear. If married women wear this type of blouse, then their strings are in the front. During the fieldwork, I did not see the Tharu people of any age group wearing Tharu dresses in both study villages. This indicates that the traditional Tharu costumes might have become obsolete in Sauraha. Comparatively, the adult Tharus of Bachhauli and younger Tharus of Harnari wards were the most influenced groups by tourists' behaviors and attires. In Harnari, I observed many Tharu children running after foreign tourists asking them for chocolates and their photographs taken, whereas in Bachhauli these scenes were rarely observed.

Despite the loss of Tharu culture and tradition, there is also an indication of good start for their promotion and sustainability in Sauraha. For example, while the Tharu people of both study wards were found taking initiatives from their sides for preserving and promoting their culture, outsiders' support such as of non-governmental and development organizations were instrumental in encouraging and uplifting these activities to a greater extent. Some of these activities in recent decades are the efforts made to preserve Tharu culture by establishing Tharu museums in both wards. Others are the performance of Tharu cultural shows through different programs; video making, documentaries, and movies on Tharu culture; and the opening of a souvenir shop in Sauraha where traditional Tharu weaved baskets and woodworks are sold. Additional activities performed by local Tharu people were the gathering of their traditional art and crafts. These infer that the Tharu people of Sauraha are deeply motivated in preserving the Tharu culture for its promotion and sustainability.

## Contributions of NGOs in the Preservation of Tharu Culture

As stated in the above section, establishments of Tharu cultural museum in both study wards were the indications of the initiatives taken by the Tharu people of Sauraha for the preservation and promotion of Tharuculture at local level. The village leaders of Harnariward informed that the Tharu people of this ward were extremely dedicated to preserving and promoting their Tharuculture and tradition while also seeking financial and technical assistance for its management and extension from government as well as non-government and donor agencies. They also reported that the Tharu Cultural Museum and Research Center (TCMRC) of Bachhauriward was larger and systematized compared to the one at Harnari ward. Three NGOs namely, National Trust for Nature Conservation, Biodiversity Conservation Center, and Rhino Conservation Project, including Mrigakunj Buffer zone User Committee and the CNP were supporting TCMRC, both technically and financially. The establishment of TCMRC must have encouraged the Tharu people of Harnariward to establish Tharu cultural museum in their ward too. This is because the museum of Harnariward was established a year later the TCMRC was established in 2005. This must be considered as a positive remark as the activity of one Tharu community is inspiring the people of another Tharu community to do good things. Many participants uttered that Tharu culture was the nation's ornament. One of the interviewees stated, "...we really want to see our Tharu culture and tradition in its typical form" (F 54, Harnari). Like in Bachhauri, both technical and financial assistance are required for the Tharu cultural museum of Harnari for its proper management and extension. Participants of this ward are seeking support from the government as well as nongovernment organizations. Most of the participants of Harnari ward put forward the idea of implying entry fees to visitors of Tharucultural museum as one of the ways of raising money for this museum. In Bachhauri, all interviewees as well as key informants specified that the goal of Tharucultural museum in their ward was also to advance it as a research center. Tharu cultural museum of both study wards are in need of technical and financial support for the promotion and sustainability of Tharuculture, not only as the nation's asset but also as an important form of the CNP tourism.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined the impacts of the establishment of the Chitwan National Park and associated tourism on economic and sociocultural aspects of the indigenous Tharupeople of Sauraha. Findings of this study are vital as these stretch out some of the previously unexplored issues associated to the Tharu livelihoods in Sauraha. The results were discussed in line with the objective of this study, categorizing them into three broad themes. However, given a small sample size of this study, its results may differ from the results obtained from those studies using larger samples. The study results revealed more positive and less negative impacts of the establishment of the CNP and associated tourism on livelihoods of the Tharu people of both wards. While most of the positive implications were perceived in economic term or the level of income generated through CNP tourism, changes occurred in the tradition of perceiving and practicing Tharu culture as well as the extent of valuing social norms and standards that affect the pattern of celebrating festivals, performing rituals, wearing costumes, speaking language and so on of the Tharu people were used as the main pointers to assess sociocultural costs of the park establishment and associated tourism in Sauraha. Negative implication was also due to the restriction put by park on public (Tharu people) from having their access to its resources such as, cutting of timber; gathering of firewood, fodder, medicinal plants

including fishing right inside the Park Rivers. Likewise, sociocultural changes were due to Nepal's resettlement policy of 1960s because it brought a large number of hill migrants to Chitwan making it a hub of multilingual, multicultural and multireligious people. Consequently, the influence transpired on Tharu culture and their livelihoods. It is evident that the CNP tourism has benefited Tharu as well as non-Tharu people of Sauraha. However, it is to be noted that most of the hotels, lodges, and restaurants of this area are owned by non-Tharu people. Local people also reported that the trend of buying lands for building big hotels and lodges in Sauraha was extremely growing among non-local and non-Tharu people in recent years. Contrarily, a large group of the Tharu households in Sauraha still struggles to fulfill their basic needs such as; food, clothes, shelter including the expenses for education, drinking water, health, and other utility bills.

In Nepal, the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation (MoTCA) is the governmental body for promoting tourism, culture and private sector involvement. Accordingly, MoTCA is responsible for making policies, programmes and strategies for the preservation and promotion of Tharu culture. However, good coordination is required within the entities working for the betterment of Tharu livelihoods and their culture at local level as well; for example, community, government, non-government and private sector-based institutions and organizations. This paper further suggests the need of a participatory approach for incorporating Tharu people at all levels of the programmes, projects and activities aimed at achieving their improved livelihood outcomes as well as cultural sustainability. In other words, Tharu people of Sauraha must be assured that their voices are heard, and needs are addressed in all projects, programmes and activities aimed at improving their livelihood situation and preserving and promoting Tharu culture. Also, the CNP administration may rethink of its management policy to make it flexible to permit at least some access to its natural resources such as collection of firewood and fishing right to the local Tharu people as this provision would help manage a part or parts of livelihood of many Tharu households in Chitwan while also supporting for the preservation and promotion of Tharu culture and keeping their traditional activities intact.

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