

**MARRIAGE PRACTICE AMONG THE RANA THARU:  
CONTINUITY AND CHANGE  
AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY FROM FAR WESTERN NEPAL**

**A THESIS**

Submitted in Partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology**

By

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**Under the Supervision of  
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**March 2015**

## CERTIFICATE TO ACCOMPANY THE THESIS

It is certified that the thesis entitled “**Marriage Practice among the Rana Tharu; Continuity and Change: An Anthropological study from far western Nepal**” submitted by **Ganga K.C.** is an original piece of research work carried out by the candidate under my supervision.

Literary presentation is satisfactory and the thesis is in a form suitable for publication. Work evinces the capacity of the candidate for critical examination and independent judgment.

.....  
Prof. Ganesh Man Gurung, Ph. D.

April, 2015

## CERTIFICATE BY SCHOLAR

This is to certify that the thesis entitled “**Marriage Practice among the Rana Tharu; Continuity and Change: An Anthropological study from far western Nepal**” submitted by Ganga K.C. under the supervision of Prof. Ganesh Man Gurung, Ph. D. Enrollment No.1150100865 for award of Ph.D. Degree of the University carried out during the period of 2011 to 2015 embodies my original work has not formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma associate ship, fellowship, titles in this or any other University or other similar Institution of higher learning.

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This thesis entitled “Marriage Practice among the Rana Tharu; Continuity and Change: an anthropological study from far western Nepal”, was presented by Ganga K.C. on April, 2015 and Approved by

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Singhania University. My signature below authorized release of my thesis to any reader upon request for scholarly purpose.

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## ABSTRACT

This research is an attempt to document the overall status of Rana Tharu marriage practices and to highlight their traditional marriage practices and factors relating them. It explores those questions with special reference to the Rana Tharus of Kailali, a Tarai district in the far western region of Nepal. The Rana Tharus believe themselves to be the native inhabitants of the area. The traditional territory of the Tharu is called *Tharuwan* or *Tharuwot* (Bista, 1996; P. 130). There are different Tharu groups with different names throughout the Tarai region of the country from Far East to far west. They are *Rana*, *Khuna*, *Kathariya* and *Dangaura*, *Kochila*, *Lalpuriya*, *Lampuchhuwa*, *Lorangiya* and *Sunaha*. Each of the Tharu groups is more or less confined to a specific area. For instance the *Kochila* live in Mahottari, Saptari Morang and Jhapa districts. *Rajhatiya*, *Solariya*, *Dangoura* and *Khas* live in Dang Deukhuri. *Mardaniya*, *Chitauniya* and *Suncha* live in Chitwan district and Rana Tharu live only in Kailali and Kanchanpur districts close to Indian border. Rana Tharu is distinct Tharu group among the different Tharu groups who have their own indigenous traditions. They are totally different from other Tharu groups with their distinctive and significant cultural and social practices.

Nepal is culturally, racially, and ethnically a diverse country where the diversity of cultural values and norms seem to be practicing since the time immemorial. The cultural practices, followed by a particular community, make them survive in their own environment, however no culture does exist if adaptation is strictly imposed as a gradual change in the features of cultural practices occurs with a change in relation to time and context. In my understanding also the ritual of marriage in Rana Tharu community is not an exception. That's why the aim of this research is to identify the changes occurred in Rana Tharu marriage and continuity of it through an analysis of marriage practices and its rituals that are prevailing now a day. The contradictions between the continuity and the change over it is also over looked and tried to analyze the situation experience by Rana Tharus in Kailali of Nepal.



General objective of this research is to identify the various practices of Rana Tharu marriages. Precisely, the practices of marriage of Rana Tharus of Kailali, their procedures with various dimensions, culture, social context and time relative are also researched here. The conducted research explores more about different aspects of marriage of Rana Tharus “then and now”. This research found comparisons between the marriages among Rana Tharus in different time.

In the first chapter, I have concisely introduced the general practices of marriage around the human society. Meaning and functions of marriage is also defined. Likewise historical construction of origin of Tharus in general and Rana Tharus in particular and their ethnic identity are also discussed briefly. Marriage is discussed as a significant rite among the Rana Tharus. Which maintain a space that openly symbolizes their own special identity as a distinct group. Marriage has symbolic meaning in other respects as well. Kinship and biological linkages are based on marriage that constructs the ethnic identity. I further dealt about the status of Tharu community and especially Rana Tharus in the far-western regions of Nepal. Concerning ethnic and social-demographic setting, the most important point made is that what the common changes are in socio-cultural factors that help to change in the marriage of Rana Tharus. In context of society and culture changes in the components of micro social institutions like changes in family, religions, customs, traditions and kinship etc. are experienced particularly in marriages. That’s why my research was heavily influenced by this model (causal-relationship between socio-cultural changes impacts on changes in marriage of Rana Tharus) and can be expressed as “marriage among Rana Tharus: continuity and changes”.

In chapter two, one significant point is how and what are the abstract in the previous literatures and research documents about my research theme? Very interestingly, marriage is, was and will be in each and every society, but processes of it, rituals, procedures all are changing day by day, except objective because society and culture are dynamic. That’s why; it is obvious to gather previous literature and discuss about it and hoping that I did it very well as far as practicable and as far as available. Relevant theoretical perspectives and review of previous literatures are

discussed in this chapter. Marriage as a main theoretical framework is used to view the thematic issues. Various empirical researches on marriages, its processes, rituals and its various dimensions are discussed and so many cases are identified to crystallize the research theme clearly. Literature review helped me find out research gap in my topic to establish my research theme. To establish my thematic issue on “marriage and its changes” various thematic reviews of relevant topics along with other themes are reviewed to narrow down in various dimensions.

In chapter three, research methodology has been dealt very clearly. The chapter including research design, methods, tools and techniques also dealt very clearly. Defined universe, selecting samples, and its procedure were clearly mentioned. Ethnographic methods by using participatory methods, interview with key persons etc. were used as methods of data collection and information gathering tools and techniques. Variables are defined clearly and their relations with other variables were presented so as to conduct and precede research scientifically and concept of detailed research was conceptualized and it made research in pattern and helped more to make it empirical. In this chapter, carefully employed methodology of the research has determined the success of the research. So importantly, I selected appropriate methods of data collection tools and techniques, appropriate research design and so on, moreover time and area of research are also described properly.

In chapter four, information about area study, geographical and socio-cultural settings of characters; Urma and Urmi village are elaborated in relation to Kailali district and the far-western region as well as people and culture in detailed form. Various research, empirical data, theoretical proponents and relevant model along with references helped crystallize thematic issue i.e. the main objective of thematic review is to study and explain the subject matter based on the society and culture, depends on socio-cultural construction and it depends highly on components of that socio-cultural setting.

In chapter four, the study area as people and culture is presented and more detailed account of the Rana Tharu’s way of life in Nepali culture and society, their

micro socio-cultural institutions are described so as to make easy to know the current, past and future condition and situation. Mainly, socio-cultural settings along with marriage as an institution in relation to other micro-social and cultural institutions are explained. Various procedures of marriage practices of Rana Tharus have been given priority in the discussion of this chapter. Types of marriages, forms and functions, their meanings were discussed very clearly. Marriages have got priority, where relations between it and other social institutions are in center of analysis. Different types of marriage practices that are prevalent among the Rana Tharu are also clearly defined. The role of education in molding the original Rana Tharu identity is also deliberated. Process of Sanskritisation and Hinduisation also briefly discussed in relation to process of modernization. I argue in chapter four that rites of passage of Rana Tharu as birth, marriage and death are also elaborately discussed. The economic condition that directly reflects in ways of life of Rana Tharus is also identified. An indigenous deity of Rana Tharu and worshipping methods is also presented in religious practices that shape the religious life of Rana Tharu.

Chapter five deals with the traditional marriage process and practices among the Rana Tharu. Marriage is the most important Rana Tharu life-cycle rite and study of it elucidates many of the issues raised in this research concerning continuity and change. It is the most obvious way in which Rana Tharus have adjusted themselves to the cultural practices of their co-villagers of Dangaura Tharus and other caste Hindus. Whole processes of Rana Tharu marriage, and their various dimensions are elaborated clearly. This chapter has traced out clear-cut concept about traditional marriage practices and their procedures. Marriages and its various components have got priority in this chapter. After studying this chapter everybody can find out actual status of Rana Tharu marriage in the past. From the point of view of anthropology, traditional marriage of Rana Tharu was closely related to the agriculture; calendar, role or contribution and rituals. So, change in agriculture as an occupation and as chief economic factors ultimately change in the religious worship in nature, land, water, forest and even in their cultural practices. The main components of this chapter were co-relationship between marriage and all socio-cultural factors- economy, politics, religions, psychology etc.

Chapter five further deals the *Magani* institution. It shows how this ritual reflects the essential communal character of Rana Tharu communities. How the close and vital relationship between humans and deities in Rana Tharu communities is reflected in the fact that the deities are included in the ‘engagement’ relationship at an early stage. The open ‘give and take’ character of Rana Tharu *Maganis* and marriage in addition also parallels the emphasis on reciprocity and inter-dependency in these communities as such. It was also noted that the specific certain prestations carry symbolic meaning. Sweet as a ritual plays the most vital role here, and it was suggested that sweets have a range of connotations mainly centered on the value of women and their fertility. Finally it can say that the *Magani* period creates long term relationships between two equal houses while they are getting ready to have the young couple married.

Chapter five further describes the elaborated process of Rana Tharu marriage, which includes preparatory rituals including the *Puchhaichho* ceremony. It was pointed out that the preparatory rituals are concerned with preparing the two families for the eventual transfer of the bride to the groom’s side. The ways in which rituals are carried out reflects important norms and values in Rana Tharu community. First, the value put on village unity and cohesiveness is again underlined both in the use of personnel (*Karbariha, Bhujin, Dangiya, Chaukidar*) and in the auspicious *Bhuiya Pooja* and *Banaspati Pooja*. Secondly, it is properly described how aspects of femaleness are reflected in the roles women play in the preparatory rituals. Women’s auspiciousness as married women, their fertility, and their roles as nourishers are again symbolized.

Chapter six covers the traditional wedding rituals of Rana Tharu. This chapter includes the core traditional practices of proper wedding rituals from- preparation for the turmeric rituals to *Gulta Ullaune* ritual properly. Women’s positions are again reflected in the fact that no priest or male of the community or family lead rituals follow the women’s preparatory rituals as a more formal sequence of the wedding. Women usually continue to play vital roles throughout the wedding process from beginning to end, although male also participate. This chapter discusses about the use

of pan-Hindu symbolic objects and ritual sequences in Rana Tharu weddings. The meaning of symbol is highly versatile and can be alerted altogether depending on the context. It is also pointed out that the meaning of a symbol or a ritual may recline simply in the fact, which is regarded as tradition. In the study area, it also seen that Rana Tharu women hold a high position in the house and community also which makes them different from the women of other caste / ethnic community. They enjoy more freedom and power on their daily life and cultural performances than that of women in other communities.

Chapter seven covers continuity of traditional marriage and change on the practice of traditional marriage i.e. society and culture along with other changes in content of Rana Tharus of far-western Nepal is described. Various socio-political and economic conditions motivate change in value system, life pattern, status and position of Rana Tharus. They have been changing day by day as they are also described here with the help of changes in marriage among Rana Tharus. Various traditional customs, traditions, marriage processes and procedures are discussed importantly because it is the core ground of this research.

During fieldwork, Rana Tharu marriage practice was observed in and through different and various change day by day, in relation to time and context. It varied because cultural, social, political, psychological, economic factors related with society and culture and Rana Tharu marriage practice and Rana Tharu community were changed according to the time and context of the society. Because of change in western cultural pattern and impacts of global culture, Nepalese culture are on the verge of collapse and its original cultural characters are day by day changing its pattern. New modified characters of marriage events can be seen and practices on it now a days are of either politically evocative in nature or socially more populists in its agendas which are rising in the name of “our own cultural character or identity or its preservation.” “Ethnic or cultural” based issue on, cultural identity and common feelings, is at the center in Nepalese society as the matters of issue are becoming more open and more flexible than ever in Nepalese scenario. Due to the political instability and uncertainty socio-cultural norms and values are being changed time and again.

Moreover, the agents of change and the factors of central are fluctuating because the components of society and culture are spontaneously forced to change. Thus changes are seemed and observed in marriage, family, and kinship as well as in overall culture that relates on their society. So, Rana Tharu community is not also exception in this regard.

Both pull factors and push factors of cultural components are mainly responsible to change in context of the marriage at first. Globalization, life pattern, westernization, developments, politicization, ethnic awareness, development of technology, adoption of the western values and norms, role of mass media, various international declarations, communication etc. are common factors to attract towards new values that help us observe the context of the culture and society. Similarly, remittance economy, cultural contact, cultural assimilations, cultural diffusion, adoption of technology, global opportunities, urbanization, development of road networks, contact and interaction with people etc. function as push factors to change marriage as well as their value system and its features.

In conclusion, the central aspect of the marriage and its changing aspects is how their life pattern seems to influence and enhance the overall experiences of other Rana Tharus in case of their practices on changing pattern of marriage. At the end, a question remains, whether marriage among Rana Tharu is changing or not? And if yes, how significant is my orientation in this context?

After all facts gathered, it is concluded that Rana Tharu community is undergoing social dynamics rapidly and economic growth and development of Dhangadhi as growth axis within far-western region, are playing a big role in this process. My fieldwork shows that Rana Tharu youths are not aware about their higher education before 2063 B.S. however they have dominant position in local politics due to the ethnic and regional situations. It is true that Rana Tharus do not have more highly class administrative jobs in governmental or private sector but they have occupied many political and constitutional posts at local and regional level. Rana Tharu youths are ignoring and refusing their traditional cultural systems and customs,

so the main identity of Rana Tharu culture is getting lost, though, it is not only common in Tharu community. It is a part of global social change and it is the central problem of all communities of the world. At present, Rana Tharu youths are struggling for their rights and new identity but they will never get a bright future if they do not respect their past. So the preservation of their socio-cultural traditions is the most important scenario of their identity. Many scholars are studying about the amazing culture of Rana Tharu but its youths are not interested in this matter. But at present this is their moral duty that they must know the importance of their own culture. Support and financial help from the government is a must for the protecting Rana Tharu culture.

The Rana Tharus practiced various forms of marriage in the past but some of these have been given up now. For example, *Bigraida Bya* (pregnant before marriage by other), and *Leingeha Bya* (widow re-marriage) have come to be looked down upon by the community and are rarely resorted to these days. Marriage is obligatory for all adults-both males and females-as the unmarried man and woman do not enjoy a good reputation in society. Normally the single-wife system (monogamy) is practiced, and polygamy is not socially recognized in Rana Tharu society. At present, alongside the traditional marriage, certain other forms of women-friendly marriage are also practiced: Love marriage was prohibited, because *Magani* was prominently established, but if during the period of courtship, the woman becomes pregnant, the man has to marry her, or else he would be punished.

In conclusion, the most central question of the Rana Tharu marriage is either they follow continuity or change? In this sense, marriage as micro social institution is dynamic as society and culture and it is found that they change as those people or community they require can adopt it and it is continuous too. It is impossible that all factors should be changed without change in such institutions, though it is not possible practically. So, it is essential to change these factors as their requirements by themselves. Some factors that are core components of their culture cannot be changed and it is continuous even though they do not bears any meanings too but continue in the name of their fore ancestors made for them.

At the end, I like to know, how useful is my research about Rana Tharu marriage, its changes and continuation. It seemed likely that my theoretical orientation have drawn the focus of my research in a specific direction. How significant was my orientation in this context? In this sense, I also felt that how much Rana Tharu marriage change and how many the other changes make it possible to inspire the changes on Rana Tharus. There is always an unbridgeable gap between the Rana life and their cultural practices or culture in the present context.