

Chitwan Valley is located in the southern plains of Nepal, close to the border with India. It is the home of the indigenous Tharu, who used to have animistic beliefs but have gradually become Hindu. In 1957, the Gurung - mainly Bhuddists from the mid-hills - migrated to Chitwan Valley as a result of government policies. Ecoscentre is a NGO working in the area and assists both groups to develop sustainable agriculture. It wants to develop an understanding of the dynamics and influence of the Gurung on the Tharu as far as indigenous knowledge, astrology and cosmovision are concerned. Both Chitwan Valley and working with cosmovision are new for Ecoscentre. This article describes the initial experiences.

Tharu farmers relate soil and soul

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Photo: Bertus Havenkort

In Nepal, from the lowland southern plains of Tarai to the high hills of the Himalayas, there are some 36 different ethnic groups each with their own identity, indigenous knowledge and practices. The Tharu are the indigenous people of the Southern plains, concentrated in the Chitwan Valley where our programme is based. They have developed their own practices in agricultural, medicinal, natural resources management and architecture and these are essentially ecologically-friendly, harmonious and holistic.

Soil fertility improvement in the context of cosmovision and indigenous institutions was chosen as Ecoscentre's focus in the farmers' workshops held in the village of Dibya Nagar in 1998. The Tharu are mainly farmers and they have special affinity with soil and land. Apart from farming they also engage in hunting, especially birds, and collecting minor forest products such as wild fruits and vegetables. Some Tharu tribes are fishermen. From historical and archaeological information we know that the Tharu have been living in Chitwan for 3000 years. Their attachment

to the soil, land and nature where their ancestors settled, is very strong.

Traditional practices

Before the arrival of the migrant Gurung in Chitwan Valley about 1957, the farming system was based on locally available natural resources and a great affection for Mother Earth (*Dharti Mata*). Traditional soil conservation methods include keeping animals for manure, part of which is brought to the uplands, especially prior to sowing maize and mustard. Composting, growing legume crops in rotation with agricultural crops and mixing cereals with legumes are other common practices particularly amongst the Tharu farmers of Dibya Nagar.

Farm animals are kept for manure, milk and traction. As the rice grows, the animals graze and manure the fields, public lands, forests and riverbanks. Farm animals are important for the family economy as they can be exchanged in times of need. Before 1957, the Tharu had a small local cattle breed of cow and they did not keep buffaloes. Milking was not common;

most milk was used for the calves. After the establishment of the Royal Chitwan National Park, it was no longer possible for the farmers to let their animals graze in the forests and river banks. The number of cows decreased and some were replaced by buffaloes. Buffaloes produce more manure than the local cows. However, cattle products are highly valued by the Tharu for their nutritional value, for purifying places of worship and for cleaning their houses. Buffalo manure is only suitable as fertiliser.

Legumes and other green manuring plants like lentil, lathyrus and gram are commonly used in the irrigated lowlands after paddy rice has been harvested. In the uplands cowpeas and various types of beans are common. These are planted throughout the year as an intercrop with cereals and as a main crop before cereal or oilseed crops are planted. Other plants with green manuring properties are *Adhatoda visa*, *Albizia* spp. and sesame. Sesame is considered a sacred grain crop and is used in rituals. It is also an indicator plant that reflects the fertility of the soil.

If sesame does not grow well, no other crop grown in that field will give a good harvest. Tharu people also use wood ash from specific trees, which they consider rich in nutrients, to strengthen crops against diseases and pests. So far, these trees have not been identified.

Chemical farming

Chemical fertilisers are replacing traditional methods of managing soil fertility. Older Tharu farmers are unhappy with this development. They believe they damage the soil, because they have observed that they need more and more chemical fertiliser each year to maintain yields. If rainfall is good during the monsoon, it is possible to get good biomass and this can be converted into compost when it is mixed with manure. After the establishment of the Chitwan National Park in 1971, the Tharu farmers had to reduce the number of animals and gradually the use of chemical fertilisers increased. Chemicals were introduced by government officers and extension agents as part of the Green Revolution message. Plots near the homestead however continued to be fertilised only with organic manure. These plots are used to grow vegetables for home consumption and cereals, which are offered to the family god, *KulDewata*.

Astrology and Gurus

Tharu farmers take astrological prescriptions into account. Full moon, the day of new moon, solar and lunar eclipses are observed. During an eclipse, no new agricultural tasks will be initiated. The location of different planets such as Mercury, Venus, Saturn, Jupiter and stars are all taken into account while farming. Certain plants and trees are best planted during the waxing moon to secured good growth and harvest. Cows are given special treatment during the day of full moon in November to request plentiful milk, manure

and healthy calves. In the cow shed *Agnihotra* and other rituals are performed (see page 23). Some trees, plants and animals are considered sacred: the pipal tree (*Ficus religiosa*), the bael tree (*Aegle marmelos*) and the Tulasi Basil (*Occimum* spp.).

When bad weather affects the soil and plants, Tharu farmers ask for help from their traditional priest or *Gurau*. He is the faith healer, local priest and sometimes the village leader as well. He performs rituals intended to attract the attention of heavenly forces. Gurus are the astrologers of the community and consult the same type of calendar as Hindu priests. Before the arrival of the migrant Gurung, the Gurus took most of the decisions when it came to farming, cultural ceremonies, marriages and other ritual matters. Today, however, their role is less prominent.

Gurus have spiritual powers, handed down by the previous spiritual leader of the community. Sometimes one Gurau can provide services to ten villages with a total population of about 10,000 people. Normally, the main Gurau is a healer, but he can also be asked to forecast the weather and perform other shaman functions. When rain is needed, he may meditate, pray and often enters into a trance as he dances to attract rain clouds. Assistant Gurus are more concerned with agriculture and livestock matters. They identify the best times for collecting grains for seed, planting and harvesting. They are also consulted when an animal shed or barn has to be constructed or changed.

So far we have not identified any female Gurau.

Relationships amongst the Gurus are very good. In accordance with their cultural beliefs they must meet once a year to meditate in the forest for seven days. Gurus seem frustrated with the developmental trend in Chitwan and neighbouring

districts. Phenomena such as migration, the establishment of Royal Chitwan National Park and the arrival of tourists and developmental experts have introduced the ideas of modern development. Meanwhile the living conditions of the indigenous Tharu have deteriorated and the gap between poor and rich in the region has become wider.

Ecoscentre's activities

The challenge for Ecoscentre is to work with the farmers to develop sustainable and, if possible organic agriculture. Many farmers are now looking at ways of restoring soil fertility and reducing the level of chemical inputs. The organic production already used in homestead plots can be taken as a starting point. In the process of farmer experimentation, we are developing criteria and indicators based on information from the traditional agricultural calendar and the suggestions of the Gurau. We also draw on experiences of sustainable agriculture worldwide. When we carry out experiments, we intend to involve school pupils as well.

We have established a good relationship with Sikha Gurau of Dibya Nagar. He is very positive about our interests in reviving traditions. He assured us that Gurau will do all they can to get organic products which can be offered to gods, goddesses and deities, because these days they are very difficult to find. We feel he might be a very good resource person for our Compas programme.



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Sikha Gurau, the traditional priest of Dibya Nagar, is keen to participate in the Compas programme. In his hand he holds a pendulum, a spiritual tool which is used while treating patients.



Tharu farmer Giridhau Mahato makes compost to improve soil fertility and reduce chemical inputs.