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Balkrishna Basnet

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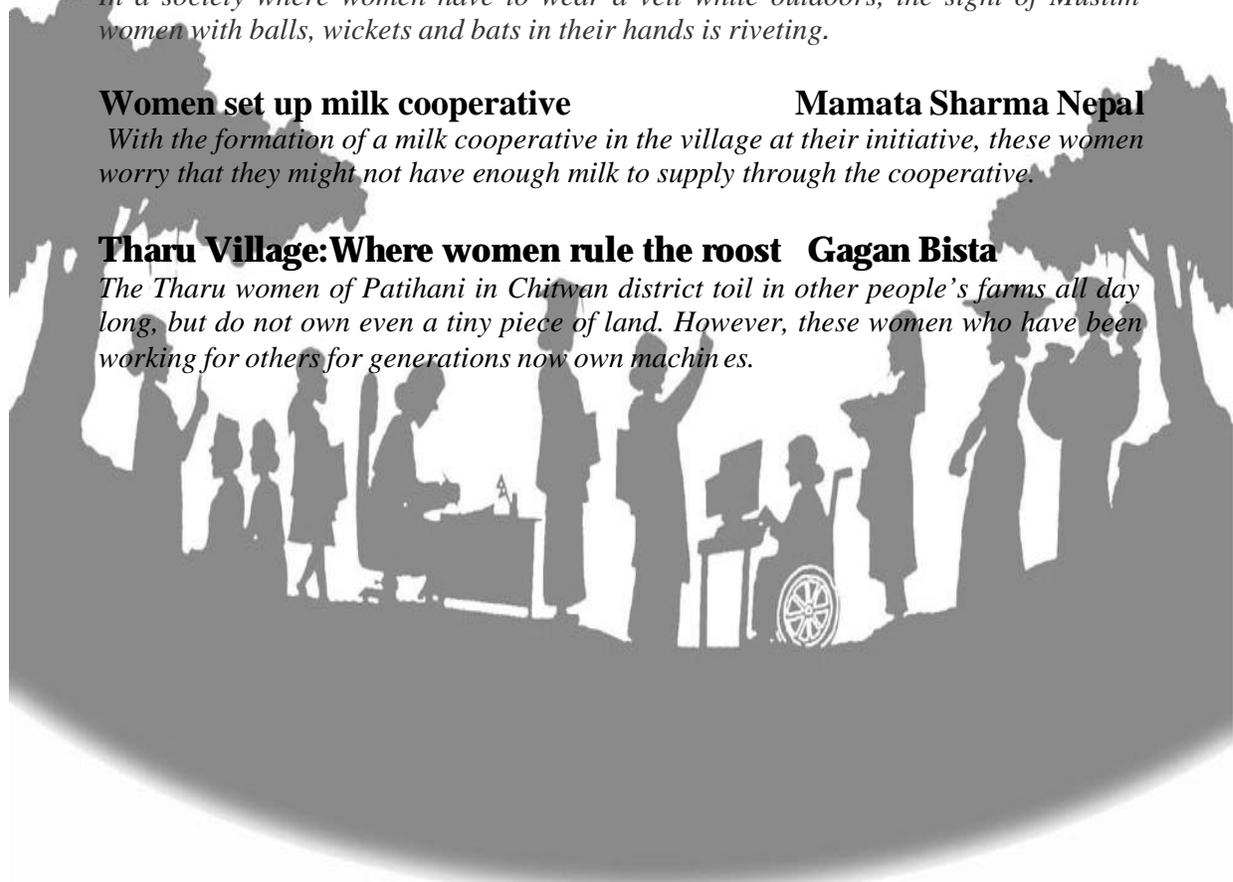
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Tharu Village: Where women rule the roost

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Injustice within an esteemed practice

➤ **By Balkrishna Basnet**

On the surface, it is associated with religion and culture. Therefore, it cannot be opposed. But when the constitution itself has declared all citizens equal, doesn't the tradition in which girls have to become a Kumari just because of their sex and thereby suffer all sorts of restrictions, fall under violence against women? The following is a report on a writ petition filed at the Supreme Court with this argument

If exploitation exists in the name of religion and culture, can't it be stopped? Such a controversy is surrounding the centuries-old Kumari practice of Kathmandu Valley. Taking a legal dimension, it has made it to the Supreme Court. The petition filed at the apex court does not seek to end the Kumari practice, which carries great cultural importance, but demands that the inhuman behavior carried out in its name be stopped so as to make it even more respected.

The Kumari of Basantapur is prohibited from going outdoors. She has to follow a rigorous set of rules. She is allowed to move only on the first and second floors. She poses for tourists at the second floor window. Interviewing or taking a photo of the Kumari is forbidden... Patan's Kumari is banned from stepping out of her abode's main gate. For the past three years she has not set foot on the main road adjoining the gate...

These are some excerpts from the writ petition against the Kumari practice of the Kathmandu Valley that dates back to the Malla period. A woman lawyer

who believes in the practice recently filed the petition at the Supreme Court. This has made public the darker side of a respected practice. However, the petitioner is by no means demanding an end to the practice that carries a long history and tradition. The case demands an end to discrimination against girls and inhuman acts carried out in the name of the practice. Advocate Pundevi Maharjan 'Srijana'

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of Sanepa, Lalitpur-2, filed the petition demanding an appropriate order from the apex court to end disgraceful behavior towards the living goddess, Kumari. This is the

first time such a case has been filed at the Supreme Court.

"I'm not saying that the Kumari practice is improper and that it should be banned," says Maharjan, pointing out that she has first hand knowledge of the practice. "I am a member of the community which believes in this practice. But no girl must be subjected to inhuman behavior and discrimination in the name of a practice. My plea is that rights guaranteed by the constitution and the law should not be seized."

From the gender angle too, the Kumari practice is discriminatory. Simply because they were made Kumaris, girls have had to forgo many rights guaranteed by the constitution and law. The variety of restrictions imposed on them is clearly a case of gender discrimination, and it violates the convention on abolishment of discrimination against women. A year ago, a committee on ending discrimination against women had drawn the government's attention to the Kumari practice and recommended strong action to reform the tradition. The state has so far shown interest in this regard.

The constitution has a clear provision that makes all citizens equal in the eyes of the law and ensures that no one is left out of the protection of the law. Article 11

(3) of the constitution specifies that the state must not discriminate between citizens on religion, creed, caste, sex, community or ideology. Despite these provisions, the Kumaris of Kathmandu are being denied legal rights just because they are girls. This has impeded their educational, social and mental development. Being declared Kumari has robbed them of various aspects of human freedom. Even more disheartening is that no steps have been taken to rehabilitate the girls after they retire as Kumari and provide them with social security. "This is extreme discrimination. It is an injustice against girls. Such exploitation in the name of

religion or culture cannot be allowed," emphasizes advocate Maharjan. The case in the court has raised serious constitutional and legal questions. The petition claims that girls who have been made Kumari have been denied their constitutionally-guaranteed rights to equality, individual freedom, human dignity, education, health, food, movement and residence. Likewise, the petition also states that because the Kumaris are not allowed to assemble peacefully, express their views, play sports, or engage in entertainment, their physical and mental development will

be adversely affected, which makes their retired life difficult.

The Kumari practice of the Kathmandu Valley has its own historical and cultural background. In different places in the valley, 11 Newar girls are worshipped as

living goddesses or Kumaris. Out of them, four are from Kathmandu, three from Bhaktapur, two from Patan and one each from Bungmati and Deupatan. Also worshipped by the King, the current Kumari of Basantapur is Priti Shakya. She was selected as Kumari at the age of six in 2058 B.S. Her day begins at seven in the morning with routine rituals followed by being decorated by a family member before she sits on a throne to be worshipped by the priest of Taleju temple. She has to follow stringent rules. She is prohibited from going outdoors.

Advocate Maharjan considers it as a height of gender discrimination and violation of the law that Kumaris are prohibited from going outdoors, put on a separate diet, denied school education and provided solitary tutorials for only three hours a day, forced to always dress up in red, and paraded before devotees everyday.

She is always in red attire along with red bangles and *tika*. Her presence is mandatory in various festivals throughout the year. The present Kumari in Patan is eight-year-old Chanira Bajracharya. Barring special festivals, she is prohibited from stepping out of her residence. She is worshipped every morning till nine by her father. Then other devotees pay homage to her. Only on special occasions like Rato Machhindranath Jatra and Dashain is she brought outdoors. In general, all Kumaris have been following stringent rules as those of Basantapur and Patan.

Advocate Maharjan considers it a height of gender discrimination and violation of constitutional provisions because Kumaris are prohibited from going outdoors, put on a separate diet, denied school education and provided solitary tutorials for only three hours a day, forced to always dress up in red and paraded before devotees everyday. "The girls' fundamental freedom is being denied," she says.

In her petition, she has mentioned that denial of fundamental rights and freedom is directly affecting Kumaris' physical and mental development. The rules that the Kumari of Bhaktapur has to follow are a bit lenient, though. Among the city's Kumari's, the Ekanta Kumari is of special importance. For the past two years, Sajani Shakya, 6, has been the Kumari. She is allowed to study and go out. She lives at Dipankar Baha's Kumarighar, built as a residence for Kumaris. She does not always have to wear red clothes and is

allowed to stay with her family except during special *pujas*.

On the one hand, as Kumaris the girls face a litany of rights violation while on the other hand, after retirement the ex-Kumaris face an extremely difficult life ahead, claim lawyers. The state should have been lobbying for social security for ex-Kumaris as compensation and for their rehabilitation. But that has not happened. Moreover, the offerings made to Kumaris are not being utilized properly. Advocate Chandrakant Gyawali argues that once Kumaris have been worshipped as goddess they are provided with special benefits. "It is not enough to give Kumaris the rights and benefits that were granted hundreds of years ago. There must be reforms in it," he says.

However, the religious aspect of the Kumari practice should be considered with utter sensitivity and restraint. The petitioner has made her position clear in this regard. Notwithstanding the gravity of the issue of the rights of girls, one cannot belittle the religious and cultural rights of several communities of the valley. Their religious freedom should not be violated either. But if the law is being violated in the name of religion reforms are certainly necessary. Violation of law is creating a conflict of sorts between communities' religious and cultural rights and the right to individual freedom of girls who are made Kumaris. The Supreme Court has put the petition on its priority list considering it as being of special public importance.

“If illegal activities are going on in the name of religion and culture, the court should stop them. It is the court’s duty to issue an appropriate order to bring any practice or tradition in tune with

changing times,” says advocate Gyawali.

Courtesy By
Sancharika Samuha

Muslim women start playing cricket

➤ By **Janak Nepal**

In a society where women have to wear a veil while outdoors, the sight of Muslim women with balls, wickets and bats in their hands is riveting. Fields in Banke are packed with spectators who have come to watch Muslim women play.

When Noorjahan Khan, 61, heard rumors that Muslim women would appear on play grounds, she stuck out her tongue in disbelief. She exclaimed: “What are you saying? How can women play games!” She had never imagined that women are also free to play games.

The fault is not Noorjahan’s. The misconception was a product of a traditional value that Muslim women must never shed their burkas [veils]. But a cricket tournament that was held in Banke [mid-west Nepal] recently dispelled such wrong values. That is why even Noorjahan takes satisfaction seeing the freedom enjoyed by women today.

A positive change has been marked in the Muslim society where the male members of the family must escort women outside the house. Noorjahan did not allow her granddaughter to venture out of the house; but she has changed. She is ready to allow her granddaughter to go anywhere to participate in sport events. Now she says: “Times have changed. We were wrong.”

The Muslim community, which did not want to see their daughters on playgrounds earlier, has become open. Parents agree that children should be given equal opportunities for sport activity. At Gausiya Islamic School in Nepalgunj [mid-west Nepal], girls were

not even permitted to touch sport gadgets. Given such a situation, participation in sport events was out of the question. They could not take part in the annual Birendra Running Shield competition. Only male students used to participate in such events.

They had heard about district-level women tournaments, but they could not go there. But with the beginning of women’s cricket tournament, these girls have started to get equal opportunities to participate in sport events. For the first in two decades since the establishment of the school, girls were sent to play cricket. More than 350 girls are studying at this school.

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Some fundamentalists even protested against this decision, citing cultural and religious reasons. “This was the first decision taken in favor of girls. That is why there were some difficulties,” says Mohammed Haroon, secretary of the school’s management committee. “The school was able to participate only after convincing those who did not want to send girls to play grounds,” he says.

cultural and religious reasons. “This was the first decision taken in favor of girls. That is why there were some difficulties,” says Mohammed Haroon, secretary of the school’s management committee. “The school was able to participate only after convincing those who did not want to send girls to play grounds,” he says.

He believes that it is the girls’ right to play whatever games they like. He argued at the time of making the “historical” decision that such a move would not spawn anomalies in society; rather it would bring about positive changes.

After holding discussions with parents and girls who love sports, the age-old tradition that held back girl students from taking up sports was dismantled. As a result, girls now enjoy the freedom of participating in sport events. The school administration also gives permission to girls to play. Apart from cricket, they play volleyball, badminton and table tennis during recess. No one can stop them from carrying or taking sport gadgets to school.

“Earlier, girls could not play at school. None of them could enter the school with balls or badminton rackets,” says Ayesha Khan, 10, who performed well in the women’s cricket tournament, “These days, we can play on school premises as well.” She is a student of Grade Five. The happiness of the girls of Gaisiya High School knows no

bound for having received an opportunity to participate in the tournament, just like men, without any hindrance.

Not only them, Hasina and Rukaiya, who went to the play ground as the representatives of the school for the first time, share a similar feeling. When the wave of women’s cricket hit Banke, girls students of private and community schools were already playing on the ground fearlessly and cheerfully. The Muslim girls had no interest in it. Even if they had shown any interest, there was no possibility of being allowed to

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play. But the school made a decision they had never imagined. The joy is boundless. “There was no expectation. Brothers used to play; but we were not allowed,” she says. Although she was defeated in the tournament, she takes pride in having received an opportunity to

participate.

Even those, who criticized the decision to let women play cricket, are now surprised by the success it has brought about. Parents, who were not interested in sending their daughters to play grounds, have become enthusiastic. Sahana Begum, mother of Ayesha, is happy to see her daughter’s interest in sport. “My daughter desired [to play cricket]. I couldn’t say no. That is why I gave her permission,” she says.

No one has imagined that a small sport competition would bring about such a change in society. Mohammed

Siddhiqui, who shed her veil to come out in society, is happy that the tournament has sent positive signals to the Muslim community. “Such incidents can change society,” she says. “Small instances will provide society with a new path. Slowly, flexibility is coming into our society. This is good news.”

Though the need for gender equality was raised everywhere, a similar concern was not shown in the sport sector. But the slogan of “cricket for gender equality” has effected tangible changes in Banke. L B Shrestha, chairman of the Cricket Development Committee, which organized the tournament, says: “This is a good beginning. This has brought about gender equality in sport.” He says such competitions must be held across the nation.

Nearly 400 girls went to the playing field after the competition. Most of the teenagers have never touched bat and ball. But within a few days, they made

a remarkable progress. They have dispelled the notion that cricket is men’s game. Be it on the streets or in alleys of Nepalgunj, girls are seen walking around boldly with bats and balls. Till three months ago, they had not touched the bat and ball. Now cricket is their favorite game. As soon as they get free time, they practice cricket.

Now the question is: How to give continuity to this game? Many people are yet to pay attention to this issue. Plan Nepal, which financed the cricket tournament, pledges that it will help if a long-term plan for women’s cricket is formulated. But adequate homework for making this plan has not been done.

“This is our major challenge,” says Chairman Shrestha.

Courtesy By
Sancharika Samuha

Women set up milk cooperative

➤ **By Mamata Sharma Nepal**

Extremely busy raising animals, these village women are also the ones who take milk to cities to earn an income. They get worried when they do not get a proper price for their product. But after joining forces to solve their problems, women of Mulpani are now able to catch their breath. With the formation of a milk cooperative in the village at their initiative, these women worry that they might not have enough milk to supply through the cooperative.

Sita Dhakal, 41, of Mulpani VDC-9 is nowadays busy in agriculture and animal husbandry. At daybreak she carries a bucket full of milk to a milk cooperative, a three-minute walk from her house. Other women like her also gather at the cooperative at that time.

Says Sita: “After the formation of the cooperative, the daily life of many women in the village has changed.” Just a literate, Sita exudes enthusiasm and satisfaction. At times, some of the villagers had ridiculed the formation of the cooperative. There

are also those who suggested that the organization be run individually, in an apparent attempt to discourage the enterprising women. Says Sita: “We did not get any support from outside. But male members of the cooperative did encourage us. Now all of us have a single goal—anyhow not to let this cooperative become bankrupt.”

Adds the cooperative’s Vice President Ruku Dhakal: “We face various problems. But still I am devoting my morning hours to this cooperative. I have also received support from my home. This cooperative has been established to ensure that our sisters do

not have to travel far to sell milk.”

At first we did not get much support. But our enthusiasm did not wane. As we gradually convinced the village’s women, the required number was reached and this organization opened. Initially, the cooperative received around 60 liters of milk, though at one point of time the cooperative came close to closure. But we did not lose hope.

“Earlier the surplus of cow milk in the house just went to waste. Taking it to the city to sell it was full of hassles. Even when I took the milk to the city, people rejected it saying that it was not thick enough,” says

Ruku. The village women began to discuss the problems they faced while selling milk in the city. They felt that setting up a cooperative would be a good idea. Says Ruku: “We got the idea while attending a district agricultural training program. The officers told us that the registration of a cooperative requires 25 members. Thereafter, with a male associate’s help, we went around the village

seeking membership. At first we did not get much support. But our enthusiasm did not wane. As we gradually convinced the village's women, the required number was reached and this organization was opened. Initially, the cooperative received around 60 liters of milk, though at one point of time the cooperative came close to closure. But we did not lose hope. Now even those who opposed it yesterday have begun to support it."

Bhawani Dhakal, 50, of the same village explains her relation with the cooperative: "The price of milk offered by this cooperative is low but even then we supply it with milk to help it. We feel that if we are able to keep the cooperative alive, it will be good for the future."

The diligence of these women of a village, which lies some 11 km away from the capital city Kathmandu, indicates that women are more qualified than men in running a cooperative. Their day starts before sunrise at the district's first and only cooperative, the Manohara Dairy Production Cooperative Ltd.

The cooperative currently has three employees. Durga Dhungel measures the quantities of lacto and fat in milk brought by farmers while Sarala Dhakal presides over the organization's accounts. The two women have a male assistant, Ramesh Dahal, who visits the Dairy Development Corporation center

and assists in banking transactions. Asked about salary, they reply that they are happy to be able to give their time to the cooperative. Nonetheless, they receive Rs 1,000 each every month.

Out of the 11 members of the cooperative's main working committee, seven are women and four men. In terms of membership and investment, about 44 individuals are directly involved in the cooperative, of which 34 are women. For its establishment 26 individuals had invested Rs 1,325 each in shares, thereby collecting a capital of nearly Rs 35,000.

The members hold a meeting once every month. As the cooperative collects only cow milk, the base area of the cooperative has been declared a "cow area," comprising three VDCs—Mulpani, Gothatar and Danchhi.

Besides these villages, the cooperative receives a daily supply of 30 liters from Bhaktapur district. It collects between 160-190 liters of milk every day. In return for supplying it with milk on a daily basis, the DDC gives a 15 percent commission to the cooperative.

The farmers are paid every month, or if necessary every 15 days. The price charged to the DDC and the price at which the milk is bought from the farmers are the same. The rates are Rs 1.13 per lacto and Rs 1.57 per fat. The cooperative's members say that the milk collected by the cooperative is

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found to contain at most five percent and at least 3.5 percent fat. So far, the DDC is satisfied with the quality of milk supplied by the cooperative. “It is a matter of happiness for us,” says Ramesh Dahal.

Says Deepak Prakash Baskota, president of National Cooperatives’ Association Ltd., of the cooperative run by women: “Cooperatives run by women are found to be disciplined and fulfilling all rules, regulations and required procedures. Such organizations are more successful than those run by men.”

Supporting the initiative of women to come out of traditional household chores, Narayan Dhakal, a former Member of Parliament of Mulpani VDC-5, says: “Women are involved in this cooperative with enthusiasm. This has brought about a change in the traditional mindset. It is an example that when women move ahead the outcome is even better.”

Likewise, appreciating these women’s perseverance and pointing out their problems, former chairman of Mulpani VDC, Bharat Phuyal says: “One can’t deny the boost in the morale and self-confidence of women due to this cooperative, which was set up at the initiative of women, but from the economic point of view benefits from it are minimal. The price offered to farmers by the DDC is not enough.”

Although the cooperative is not completely run by women, the participants are mostly women. Ruku Dhakal, the cooperative’s vice-president who has played a leading role in its formation and survival, says that the cooperative owes its existence to women’s initiative and drive. “Opening an organization requires manpower, and is able to do many things quickly. Due to lack of knowledge about rules, procedures and laws related to cooperatives, we enlisted the participation of some men to aid us. Now we have reached the point when we can say that we women are capable of running the cooperative on our own.”

Despite the optimism, with farmers not getting a proper price for milk, there remains the possibility of such women-led cooperatives closing down. Thus it’s high time the authorities concerned recognized the problems of the cooperatives and encouraged them to stay in business.

Courtesy By
Sancharika Samuha

Tharu Village: Where women rule the roost

➤ **BY Gagan Bista**

The Tharu women of Patihani in Chitwan district toil in other people's farms all day long, but do not own even a tiny piece of land. However, these women who have been working for others for generations now own machines. Having opened a cooperative with the money saved from stitching and sewing after acquiring vocational skills, they have no regrets about not owning land. These days they have begun to give loans to others, something that gives them immense pleasure.

The number of families that making a living through sewing and knitting in the country is extremely low. Lower still is the number of women in that category. So, it is surprising to hear of people not only meeting household expenses from earnings from sewing and knitting but also managing to making some savings and using it to operate a cooperative. However, it is a fact that the landless women of an impoverished Tharu settlement in Patahara, Chitwan have opened a cooperative for themselves.

The Tharu community of Patahara in Patihani VDC, considered to be a remote area in Chitwan, is known for its poor farmers. They farm but do not possess even a tiny piece of land in their name. Working as helpers in other households for generations, community members have been living as landless squatters. With their vocational works Tharu women have been on the one hand meeting their families' financial needs while on the other hand saving

money for the community and thus obviating the compulsion to take loans from employers. They say: "We have started a group work by making savings for ourselves. This has encouraged us."

The 35-family settlement of Tharu squatters is known by the name of Tharu Village. Its women have taken up sewing and knitting as a means of becoming self-dependant. Cooperation and group work have been a tradition of the Tharu families. The

Actively engaged in sewing and knitting work, over one and a half dozen women like Asani Mahato, Renu Mahato and Basmati Mahato have made it a habit to save a part of their incomes.

formation of the Shristi Women's Cooperative Group, though, is a path-breaking exercise in the community. The group has made it obligatory to save ten percent of monthly earnings. Every member of an income-earning family deposits her saving in the cooperative. The saved amount is used to give low-interest loans to needy families. Says the group's President Mohani Mahato: "We have successful in finding new employment by sewing and knitting. This work is attracting us

and has made it easier to earn income. By using the savings to educate children and provide loans at low interest rates, Tharu families have benefited a lot.”

As per their ancestral tradition, Tharu men work as agricultural laborers on the fields of landlords and perform songs and dances for livelihood. Most of them are illiterate. The level of social awareness is abysmal. But now the women of the community are drawn towards a new vocation to escape from poverty and lack of awareness, and to attain all-round development. They have identified a source of earnings necessary to fulfill their goals. This small settlement of landless people is greatly attracted to the savings drive. While women are educating their children with their earnings, men keep the household running with wages earned by selling labor.

Women make up 60 percent of the community’s 300 members. Capable women are interested in new training. Women of one and a half dozen families are engaged in sewing and knitting. They have also been encouraging other women to join the vocation. Says Sita Mahato, who is engaged in sewing and knitting: “Learning the skill has helped us with household expenses” According to Mahato, women involved in the

vocation earn between Rs 3,000 to Rs 5,000 every month. “The amount saved from the earnings has made it easier to start new group works,” she adds.

The group’s President Mohani says that products produced by women are also being sold to foreign tourists. Inspired by the women’s group, the male youths of the community have opened the Shristi Youth Club. Like the women’s group, the Youth Club is also striving to alleviate poverty, illiteracy and ignorance prevalent in the Tharu community. The Club’s President

With their vocational works, Tharu women have been on the one hand meeting their families’ financial needs while on the other hand saving money for the community and thus obviating the compulsion to take loans from employers. They say: “We have started a group work by making savings for ourselves. This has encouraged us.”

Prashanta Mahato says club is trying to raise social awareness and emulate the work of the women’s group. He says: “It has made a substantial contribution to our community’s development.”

Women have made a highly important contribution to making the Tharu Village independent. Says Shanti Mahato, a contributor to the effort: “We have developed a culture of doing our own work. We have benefited from it.” Actively engaged in sewing and knitting work, over one and a half dozen women like Asani Mahato, Renu Mahato and Basmati Mahato have made it a habit to save a part of their incomes. Although they lack access to banks, they save whatever little amount they can in the group. This practice has reportedly made a positive influence in neighboring villages as well.

The women say they have made savings to the tune of Rs 50,000. The Tharu families have done lots of community development work with the savings. But they complain that the earnings are not sufficient for livelihood. Educating their children and acquiring skills are a big challenge for them. They say that the Royal Chitwan National Park and Hotel Narayani Safari have been providing financial assistance to them. These organizations have been helping Tharu women a lot by providing them training and taking

their goods to foreigners, says President Mohani.

The improvement in their families' living standard and overall condition of their settlement brought about by women of landless families has become a role model. Tharu families have started a tradition of solving their problems collectively. What they have achieved in spite of their landless status is indeed exemplary.

Courtesy By
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Sancharika Samuha was established by a group of women communicator's in April 1996, with the primary aim of promotion of gender equality in Nepal. The Sancharika Feature Service incorporates monthly articles/features on the grave situation of women and children in our country, the social outlook towards them, the pain and agony that they have faced and the courageous steps that women have taken in this regard. We hope to fulfill the lack of news and articles on women and children to some extent through this feature service and we look forward to your kind support in publishing these articles in your respective newspapers. We would also like to request you to send us a copy of the published article and to mention 'Sancharika Feature Service' below the published article.

● **Sancharika Samuha Nepal**