

# JOURNAL OF NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

PEER REVIEWED, INDEXED & REFEREED BI-ANNUAL INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

ISSN 0972-8309

<https://www.jndmeerut.org>

[Vol. 37, No. 2 (Winter), 2024]

<https://doi.org/10.62047/JND.2024.12.31.31>

## Understanding the Gurungs: Culture, Identity and Practices

*Sudeep Singh Nakarmi*

Head of Department at the Central Department of Gender Studies and  
Faculty Member of the Central Department of Sociology, Tribhuvan  
University, Kathmandu (Nepal) E-mail:<[sudipnakarmi@gmail.com](mailto:sudipnakarmi@gmail.com)>

### Abstract

*The population history of Nepal is deeply intertwined with migration. Over time, people from different directions and backgrounds migrated to Nepal. They brought unique languages, cultures, and customs with them, which later became defining features of the Indigenous communities of these regions. The Gurung community is one such example. The Gurung also known as Tamu, mainly live in the hilly areas of western and central Nepal, in districts like Lamjung, Kaski, Syangja, Gorkha, and Manang. Their roots are closely linked to the Tibetan and Himalayan populations. The dominance of Hindu rulers led to Hinduization within these communities, however, Indigenous and ethnic communities were largely autonomous before the influence of the Hindus. The Gurung community is no exception. Despite socio-cultural changes over time, the Gurungs are trying to balance their traditional practices with the changes brought. As a result, they have managed to retain their distinct practices, which sets them apart from other Indigenous and ethnic communities. The paper reflects insights gained from the author's experiences with the Gurung community, highlighting their cultural practices, traditions, and the transformations they have undergone.*

### Keywords

The Gurungs, Ethnic group, Culture, Identity, Tradition and Practices.

**Centre For Studies of National Development, Meerut**

Editorial Office : D-59, Shastri Nagar, Meerut - 250 004 (INDIA)

Ph. : 0121-2763765, +91-9997771669, +91-9412200765

# 3

## **Understanding the Gurungs: Culture, Identity and Practices**

### **1. Introduction**

Although a small country, Nepal is rich in natural and cultural diversity. Over time, people from different directions and backgrounds migrated to Nepal. Many of these groups brought unique languages, cultures, and customs with them, which later became defining features of the indigenous communities of these regions (Tamang, 2004). Even today, the languages, cultures, and customs of Nepal's ethnic groups differ widely based on their location and identity. The history of Nepal's indigenous peoples is predominantly transmitted through oral traditions, with few written records available.

There is no uniformity in the social, political, and economic conditions of indigenous groups within Nepal. Although agriculture serves as the primary livelihood for all indigenous communities, significant economic disparities exist among them. Similar inequalities are evident in social and political realms as well. For instance, it is impossible to compare the conditions of the Raute community with those of the Gurung, Magar, or even Newar and Thakali groups in any aspect. Recognizing this diversity, the Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) classified different listed indigenous groups into five categories based on their social, economic political and other situations in 2004. They are advanced, disadvantaged, marginalized, highly marginalized, and endangered. The Newar and Thakali communities were categorized as advanced, while Gurung, Rai, Limbu, Magar, Sherpa, and others were placed in the disadvantaged group. Groups like the Sunuwar, Tharu, Tamang, and Bhujel were classified as marginalized. The highly marginalized category included communities such as Chepang, Siyar, and Majhi. Lastly, endangered groups like Kusunda, Raute, and Banariya were identified.

Indigenous communities were largely autonomous before the unification of Nepal initiated by Prithvi Narayan Shah (Nakarmi, 2022). The arrival of the Aryans, along with their dominance in

politics and culture, significantly impacted the way of life, traditions, and social structures of these indigenous communities. Many scholars believe that the caste-based social stratification introduced by King Jayasthiti Malla in the 14<sup>th</sup> century in the Kathmandu Valley was the initial undemocratic encroachment on indigenous rights (Tamang, 2004). Further, it was institutionalized by Prime Minister Jung Bahadur Rana through the enactment of the first Muluki Ain (National Code) in 1854. Hindu rulers had historically maintained a dominant role in Nepal's political system; however, the introduction of the Muluki Ain greatly increased the discrimination and marginalization of indigenous peoples. It systematically framed indigenous communities into the Hindu caste hierarchy by categorizing them into lower tiers and placing Brahmins and Kshatriyas at the top of the social hierarchy (Hofer, 1979). This paper aims to highlight the Gurungs as a distinctive and significant ethnic group in Nepal, emphasizing their cultural heritage, traditions, and the transformations they have undergone. This paper begins with a brief introduction to the diversity of Nepal in terms of cultural groups followed by a methodological part. The subsequent sections explore ethnic groups and their perceptions of Nepal, the Gurungs' ancestral connections, their social structure and practices, occupations, the unique institution of Rodi, and their traditional attire.

## **2. Methodology**

This paper is based on the author's personal experience and interactions with the Gurung community. Being closely connected through familial ties, as the author's spouse is from this community, the author has had numerous informal conversations with relatives, friends, and other members over the years. These discussions, often held in family or community settings, have provided meaningful insights. However, the author's familial ties are limited to the Gurungs of Lamjung, so some discussions in the paper may not be generalisable to the community. To further enhance understanding, the author also reviewed a wide range of literature on the Gurungs.

## **3. Ethnic Group**

A group characterized by distinct oral or written history, specific geographical area, cultural heritage, native language, traditions, and customs is recognized as an indigenous group or *Janajati* (Ethnic Group). The National Foundation for Development

of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN) uses similar criteria to classify indigenous and ethnic communities in Nepal. In Nepal, indigenous people are considered native ethnic groups and are often referred to as indigenous nationalities. They are unique and not part of the Hindu caste system. There is a general assumption that indigenous groups do not have hierarchical structures, concepts of purity and impurity, or untouchability like the Hindus (Onta, 2006). However, Hierarchical notions can be observed among some of the ethnic groups, such as the Newar, Gurung, etc. Despite the influence of the Hindu caste system, the Newar hierarchy is not entirely the same as the Hindu model (Nakarmi, 2024), and the clan divisions among the Gurung are even more distinct than the Hindu system. This highlights the need for a unique indigenous perspective to better understand Ethnicity and Ethnic groups in Nepal's context. Frederic Barth's concept of ethnicity could be useful in addressing this complex issue. According to Barth, it is not sufficient for a group to claim its cultural aspects are different from others; others must also recognize and acknowledge these differences (Barth, 1996). The cultural characteristics of groups such as the Newar, Gurung, etc. are unique and do not entirely match with other indigenous and ethnic groups. Every indigenous and ethnic group listed by The National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN) are widely recognized as a distinct cultural group.

## **4. Understanding the Gurungs as an Indigenous Ethnic Group**

### **4.1 Ancestral Linkage**

The Gurung also known as Tamu mainly live in the hilly areas of western Nepal, in districts like Lamjung, Kaski, Syangja, Gorkha, and Manang. Their roots are closely linked to the Himalayan region, and their history reflects a journey shaped by migration, cultural changes, and social and political developments in Nepal. The Gurungs are thought to have come from Tibet and other Himalayan areas. Their language, which belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family, supports this connection to the Tibetan Plateau (Messerschmidt, 1972; Pignede, 1993; Gurung, 2023). The Gurungs' linguistic and genetic heritage links them to the Tibeto-Burman group, which migrated from the Tibetan Plateau. Their language, a part of the Sino-Tibetan family, supports the idea that their ancestors were likely nomadic or semi-nomadic people who moved south into the

hills of Nepal, seeking better grazing lands and climates. However, some tried to link their ancestral linkage with the Huns of Central Asia. The Huns were a nomadic group from Central Asia in ancient times, known for their horse riding skills and lifestyle based on herding (Bista, 1972). However, there is no clear evidence of a direct ancestral connection between the Huns and the Gurungs. Instead, the Gurungs' lineage is more closely linked to the Tibetan and Himalayan populations than to the Huns. According to the oral history, their ancestors, known as Tamu-mai, came from the Tibetan region. They moved south in search of better places to live. In Gurung traditions, their ancestors are believed to have come from sacred Himalayan regions. Mountains like Machhapuchhre (Fishtail) and the Annapurna range are considered spiritually important and seen as their divine homeland.

#### **4.2 Social Structure and Practices**

Traditionally, the Gurungs had an open society with no discrimination. Over time, however, they developed a two-tier social hierarchy and divided themselves into two main clans. One is Char Jat (Four Clans), which includes Lama, Lamichhane, ghale and Ghotane. They are considered ritually superior to other clans. The other is called Sorha Jat (Sixteen Clans), which is regarded as a subordinate group within the Gurung community. Traditionally, these two groups do not intermarry under normal circumstances (Bista, 1972). In some cases, the Gurung community, especially in urban areas, has accepted love marriages between the two clans. However, arranged marriages remain quite challenging. Marriage practices among the Gurungs are distinctive. Traditionally, they preferred cross-cousin marriages, referring to a cousin boy as Nholo (Solti) and a cousin girl as Nohlosy (Soltinee), though this practice has been declining in recent times. The Gurungs strictly prohibit marriage between parallel cousins. Marriage partners may be chosen from within or outside the home village.

The Gurungs are believed to have originally practised animism and followed an ancient pre-Buddhist religion similar to Bon. Pachyu are the traditional priests of the Gurung community, performing rituals and ceremonies tied to their indigenous Bon religion. They handle life events like births, marriages, and funerals, lead communal worship of nature and ancestors, and preserve oral traditions. Similarly, Gyabre are shamans and spiritual healers in

the Gurung tradition. They act as bridges between the physical and spiritual worlds. Gyabre performs a healing ritual. In the Gurung tradition, the roles of both priests (Pachyu and Gyabre) are essential. Pachyu is primarily responsible for conducting ceremonies and rituals as priests, while Gyabre focuses on shamanic healing and communicating with the spiritual realm (Pignede, 1993). Apart from them, Buddhist Lamas who practice Vajrayana Buddhism serve as spiritual leaders and priests for the Gurung community who practice Buddhism. Many Gurungs follow this practice. However, the influence of Hindu rulers led to Hinduization within the Gurungs, mostly among the influential and dominant members of the community. They began employing Hindu priests. Despite this, with the growth of the Indigenous movement, many Gurungs are now returning to their ethnic and traditional practices. They have started employing Pachyu and Gyabre and trying to preserve their traditional practices or started employing Buddhist Lama and practising Vajrayana Buddhism.

The Gurungs have their language, which is called TamuKi. It belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family. The Gurung population speaks the Gurung language. When looking at Nepal's history closely, it is clear that as the Gorkha kingdom expanded, the Khas language later known as Nepali Language was given priority and protection, while other local and indigenous languages were gradually excluded and marginalized (Gurung et al., 2014). Over time, the Nepali language became the national and official language. During the Rana period, which lasted for 104 years many indigenous languages in the Kathmandu Valley were banned. Even after democracy was established in 1951, the government's control over language did not stop. During the Panchayat system, the government implemented a 'One Nation, One Language' Policy, which excluded languages other than Nepali. This negatively affected the participation of Indigenous communities, as their native languages were overlooked, limiting their involvement in various sectors. The Gurung community was not excluded from this. According to the 2021 Census of Nepal, approximately 1.12% of the total population speak the Gurung language, indicating that many young Gurungs are losing connection with their mother tongue. However, the Gurung language remains widely spoken within the Gurung community, especially in Gurung villages in the western hilly regions, where it continues to be an important part of daily life and cultural identity.

### **4.3 Occupations**

The Gurungs were historically involved in Himalayan trade and pastoralism. They were renowned for their sheep and yak herding. Transhumance pastoralism is also traditionally practised by the Gurung community and known as *Qu Pron* in their language. This is a traditional method of sheep herding where herders move their livestock to different locations during specific seasons to ensure adequate food and water. Livestock are taken to highland grazing areas during summer and brought down to the lowland in winter (Gurung, 2024). During the summer, herders spend a few months in the highlands where there is enough food to feed their sheep. Before winter begins, they gradually bring their herds down to the lower hills to protect the sheep from cold temperatures and to find fresh pasture and water sources. Transhumance herders possess traditional knowledge about using grazing areas at different altitudes. This practice is an important cultural tradition especially in Hilly areas of Nepal now gradually declining. Over the past few decades, pastoralists worldwide have faced numerous challenges, including climate change, social change, conservation, government policies population growth, etc.

After democracy was restored in 1990, Nepal adopted a liberal market policy, which expanded markets in rural areas and led to changes in transhumance pastoralism. Government policies on community forests and grazing areas have also significantly influenced this shift. These policies have affected farming in lower hilly areas by breaking the link between farming and livestock, increasing unused land, and pushing herders aside in winter. This change threatens not only the traditional way of life but also valuable local knowledge like seasonal herding cycles, environmental practices, and medicinal herb use (Gurung, 2024). As transhumance pastoralism declines, the younger generation of the Gurung community is exploring different ways of earning income. Some have started commercial sheep farming while others are involved in foreign employment, teaching profession, hotels and restaurant business, homestay business, and other businesses.

The Gurungs have a long history of military service, both in Nepal and abroad. They are known worldwide for their bravery as soldiers in the Gurkha Regiments in the U.K., India, and Singapore. They also played a key role in the unification of Nepal through their

military skills. After the Treaty of Sugauli in 1816, the British Indian government began recruiting them. Since then, many young Gurungs have eagerly sought to join the British Army, and if not, the Indian Army because of the good pay. If they are unable to do so, they look for work abroad. Today, the money earned from working abroad, whether through military service or labour migration, has become an important part of the Gurung community's economy.

#### **4.4 A Fading Tradition 'Rodighar'**

Rodighar, a traditional practice of Gurung community, seems to be disappearing in the Gurung villages. However, in cities like Kathmandu, Chitwan, Butwal, and Pokhara, many restaurants are now being opened using the name Rodighar. Such restaurants do not represent the essence of the traditional Rodhi culture. Hence, experts believe this is harmful to the traditional Rodighar culture of the Gurung community. Rodighar is a unique part of Gurung traditions. Rodighar is a unique socio-cultural institution of the Gurungs where young unmarried boys and girls gather in a communal space. It is a place for recreation, learning, and social interaction. Older generations share their wisdom, traditions, and stories with the youth. Young people learn societal values, cultural practices, and responsibilities (Bista, 1972).

Rodighar helps in the process of socialization of young Gurungs. It also helps develop skills like singing, dancing, and handicrafts. Traditional Gurung songs and dances like Ghatu and Sorathi are performed and taught here. Rodighar promotes communal spirit, mutual respect, cooperation, and cultural preservation. Ghatu dance songs reflect different aspects of life, such as birth, actions, hunting, and farming. The dance begins with two non-menstruating girls dressed in traditional clothes. The number of girls chosen for the performance depends on the story. The start and end of the dance are particularly interesting, according to Ghatu dance expert Gurung. Similarly, Sorathi is a traditional Gurung dance that narrates the story of a king who has seven wives but no children (Bista, 1972). This dance lasts for sixteen days and takes place between Dasain and Tihar. Sorathi dance is also popular amongst the Magars of Nepal

Rodighar serves as an institution managing social, cultural, economic, religious, and educational activities in the community. However, due to the influence of Hindu culture, it is declining and may soon disappear. Gurung villages no longer have dedicated



Rodighar. Rodighar was more important when other entertainment options were limited in society. It is a social place where people gather to have fun, share ideas, and exchange emotions. Over time, many social practices have disappeared. Rodighar helps with cultural growth, entertainment, labour exchange, marriage, and passing culture between generations. However, it is declining in the Gurung villages. In the Gurung community, there are separate Rodi houses for girls and boys. Sometimes, the boys' group invites the girls' group, or vice versa, to enjoy and dance together. Occasionally, one village invites another village's group for such gatherings. Instruments like madal, majura, murali, bansuri, and khajadi are commonly played during these dances. Today, the new generation has completely moved away from Rodighar culture. Young Gurung boys and girls are not familiar with it. Instead, they are more interested in using the internet, watching television, and movies for entertainment.

#### **4.5 Traditional Dresses**

Gurung men and women have their own traditional clothes. Women wear velvet or velvet-bordered cholo, ghalek, cotton lungi, black velvet tiki, patuka, and pachyauri. They also wear ornaments like bangles, rings, green necklace, jantars, mugga necklaces, naugedi, shirbandi, lahure phuli, etc. Similarly, men wear white kachhad, peti, white bhoto, black velvet stakot, etc. along with ear rings and a galbandi around their neck (Gurung, 2035). These clothes are usually worn on special occasions like Lhosar and other festivals. After the restoration of democracy, Nepal gave priority to diversity, which led various ethnic groups to take pride in their cultures. As a result, Gurungs have also shown increased interest in their traditional attire .

Today, especially during the Gurung New Year known as Lhosar, young boys and girls celebrate in their cultural dress. Lhosar refers to the day when the old year is celebrated farewell and the new year is welcomed. This shows the increasing connection and awareness among the Gurung youth towards their traditional clothing. However, on days other than special occasions, they are usually seen preferring modern clothing. In Nepal, there are three main types of Lhosar celebrated. Gurungs observe Tamu Lhosar, while Sonam Lhosar is celebrated by the Tamang community, and Gyalbo Lhosar by the Sherpas. Tamu Lhosar is celebrated annually

on the 15th of Push according to the Nepali calendar. In communities that celebrate Lhosar, people's age and years are calculated on the basis of the Lhosar cycle. There are twelve different years, each named after animals and creatures like the rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, bird, dog, and pig.

## **5. Conclusion**

The Gurungs' ancestry is closely linked to the Tibetan and Himalayan populations. Their language and genetic heritage connect them more to the Tibeto-Burman Himalayan people who migrated to Nepal. Their unique traditions and culture set them apart from other indigenous and ethnic groups. During Shah regimes in Nepal, the dominance of Hindu rulers led to Hinduization within the Gurungs, mostly among the influential and dominant members of the community. After democracy was restored and with the rise of the Indigenous movement, many Gurungs are now returning to their traditional customs. As a result, they are showing more interest in their culture, clothing, and practices, and are proud of their heritage. We can witness this, especially during Tamu Lhosar.

Factors like globalization, modernization, and political changes significantly impact people worldwide, the Gurung community is no exception. Socio-cultural transformation is a continuous process observed throughout human history. However, the Gurungs are currently trying to balance their traditional practices with the changes brought by modernity. Changes are now visible in both their material and cultural aspects. A key factor driving this change is their exposure to the outside world through service in the British and Indian armies, as well as more recently through overseas employment. The younger generation born abroad naturally expects more in terms of material comforts.

The family and social structures are evolving, with a shift from traditional roles to more modern, individualistic ways of living. The rise of English-medium boarding schools, the influence of mass media, the internet, and social media, along with the increasing dominance of cities and towns and the migration of people to these areas, has begun to erode the language and culture of society as a whole. The new generation of Gurung youth has also become an agent of positive change. Like other ethnic communities, the Gurungs are now actively involved in all areas of socio-economic,

cultural, and political life. The Gurung youth are better educated and in a stronger position to express their concerns on behalf of the community. Traditionally, the Gurungs had an open society without discrimination.

## References

- Barth, Fredrik, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1969.
- Bista, Dor Bahadur, *People of Nepal*, Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar, 1972.
- Gurung, Jagman, *Gurung Jati Tatha Sanskriti*, Pokhara, 2035.
- Gurung, Om, Tamang, M. S. & Turin, M., *Perspective on social inclusion and exclusion in Nepal*, Kathmandu: Central Department of Sociology and Anthropology, 2014.
- Gurung, M. R., “Historical Processes of Power, Knowledge, and Identity Change in Gurungs: With Relevancy to Identity Conflict and Modern Debates in Nepal”, *Patan Prospective Journal*, 3(1), 2023, 35-47.
- Gurung, Dil Bahadur, *Transhumance Pastoralism and Livelihood Change Among Sheep Herders of Gorkha, Nepal*, PhD Thesis submitted to Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal, 2024].
- Hofer, Andres, *The Caste Hierarchy and the State in Nepal: A Study of the Muluki ain of 1854*, Innsbruck: Universitatsverlag Wagner, 1979.
- Onta, Pratyoush, “The Growth of the Adivasi Janajati Movement in Nepal after 1990: The Non- Political Institutional Agents”, *Studies in Nepali History and Society*, 11(2), 2006, 303-354.
- Nakarmi, Sudeep Singh, “Matribhasaprati Rajyako Udasinata: Samajit Bahiskaran Ko Kaaran”, *Patan Pragya*, 10(1), 202, 282-291. <https://doi.org/10.3126/pragya.v10i01.50820>
- Nakarmi, Sudeep Singh, “Changing Practices among the Newars: A Study from Kirtipur”, *Contemporary Social Sciences*, 33(3), 2024, 84-96. <https://doi.org/10.62047/CSS.2024.09.30.84>
- Messerschmidt, D. A., *The Gurungs of Nepal: Conflict and Change in a Village Society*, Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1976.
- Pignede, Bernard, *The Gurungs: A Himalayan Population of Nepal*, Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar, 1993.
- Tamang, Mukta Singh, *Adivasi Janajati re Manavadhikar, Manavadhikar Varsha Pustak 2004*, Kathmandu: INSEC, 109-130. ★