

**Dalits and Their Traditional Medicinal Practices in Bhanu VDC of
Tanahun District, Western Nepal**

**A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Humanities and Social Science in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in
Anthropology**

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TRIBHUVAN UNVIRSITY

KIRTIPUR, KATHMANDU

NEPAL

2013

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LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION

This is to certify that Laxmi Mahat has completed the dissertation entitled **Dalits and Their Traditional Medicinal Practices in Bhanu VDC of Tanahun District, Western Nepal** under my guidance and supervision. I am satisfied with her dissertation, therefore I recommend the dissertation committee for the evaluation and approval.

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Date: November, 2013

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APPROVAL LETTER

The dissertation entitled **Dalits and Their Traditional Medicinal Practices in Bhanu VDC of Tanahun District, Western Nepal** has been evaluated to accept for partial fulfillment of the requirement for the Degree of Masters in Anthropology.

Evaluation Committee

For Head of the Department

Dr. Suresh Dhakal

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In the course of the grounding of this dissertation it would not have been possible without the help of supervisor, friends, respondents of the study area and related institutions. So, first of all, I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Lecturer Dr. Suresh Dhakal, Central Department of Sociology/Anthropology for his idea, support, encouragement and constructive comments and suggestions during various stages of this dissertation.

I would like to show my gratitude to my respected teacher Prof. Dr. Om Gurung Head of the Department of Sociology/Anthropology for his valuable input to this study. Similarly my sincere thanks go to for Head of the Department of Sociology/Anthropology Mr. Binod Pokharel and all my respected teachers of the department.

I would like to thank to the Villagers of Bhanu for their positive support and cooperation during my field study.

Last but not least. I owe to my parents whose contribution made me to achieve Master Degree from Tribhuvan University. Similarly I would like to thank my husband Mr. Ripu M. Kunwar, other well wishers Saraswati Pandey, Mina Lamichhane, Sangita Uprety, Rosni Mahat, Upendra Rimal, Puskar Parajuli and Parshu R. Pandey for their direct and in directing helping.

Laxmi Mahat
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November, 2013

Abstract

Dalits, known and considered as the 'untouchables' in the country, are about 13 per cent but in the VDC and Tanahun district they are dominant. Dalits groups are frequently oppressed and centrifuged to mainstream and are always considered as secondary interest of research due to deep rooted socio-economic and cultural structure and value. Majority of them use forests and forest products (medicinal plants) by utilizing their traditional knowledge, occupation and skills eking out their living. Forests are considered as free commodity and the forest products particularly medicinal plants are open accessed in Nepal. Due to direct or indirect connection with forests and other natural resources, *Dalits* may know better than others about natural resources and forests, their uses, importance and management practices. The collection is important for primary health care of Dalits groups because the groups have limited options for modern medication as a consequence of socio-economic conditions.

The present study attempts to analyze the dependency of *Dalit* groups (who are at the bottom in the caste ladder and traditionally 'untouchables') on forests for their subsistence and health care. Again there are a very few studies integrating traditional medicinal practices, their resources and conservation initiatives and such studies from Dalits are largely under-studied. Information were collected using field visits, household survey, key informant interview, group discussion and snow-ball sampling between August and September, 2013. Prior informed consent from the informants was granted. Altogether 36 *Dalit* individuals were consulted in questionnaire survey to generate information about dependency on forests, traditional knowledge on medicinal plants and their use in healing practices. Collected information were triangulated and validated following standard procedures. Secondary (literature review) data/information were extensively reviewed and intensively used while discussing the findings and cross-checking the information.

As found elsewhere, health of *Dalits* of Bhanu VDC was complicated by fever, typhoid, gastric, common cold, pregnancy and delivery and diarrhea ailments. Only 55 percent of *Dalits* preferred health centers access to other means. Though the access to allopathic

medicines has been easier and increasing, *Dalits* of the study area were still dependant on folklore shamans (*Dhami-Jhankri*), faith-healers (*jharne-phukne*) and herbal treatment because *Dalits* and all local communities in the VDC believe that health is more than wrong with an individual. In shamanism and faith healing, people seek help for physical and emotional healings as well as betterment of their animals and crops from natural calamities. So shamans and faith healers are the first line of help that a *Dalit* household looks for in many situations. Both shamanism and faith healing commonly use representations of the five gross elements of nature (earth, air, fire, water and aether/aakash) and some medicinal plants but fire and water was more frequent. Medicinal plants were frequently applied in traditional healing next to water and fire. Altogether 65 plants have been used in Bhanu VDC. Among them only Sipligan, Sikari lahara, Nirmasi and Neem have been used for multiple ailments. There are only 6 herbal healers in the VDC and they have been working for healing for centuries. Home herbal healing is arduous work because it needs particular medicinal plants and materials that are difficult to harvest and get in today's situation, resulting in declining in practice. Both the knowledge and resources therefore are necessary to manage for their sustainability for wellbeing of *Dalits* and entire community.

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Abbreviation and acronyms

CF	Community Forest
CFUG	Community forest user group
IoF	Institute of Forestry
%	Percentage
FGD	Focus group discussion
HH	Household
ILO	International Labor Organization
LF	Leasehold forest
m	meter
PF	Private forest
PRA	Participatory rural appraisal
sq. km	Square kilometer
TU	Tribhuvan University
VDC	Village Development Committee