

The predicament of the Tamangs in search of identity

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It is in the frame of recent nation-centric politics – in patterns of ethnic (caste/tribe/religion/language) strategizing common to greater South Asia – that pan-Himalayan Tamang identity begins to be more forcefully asserted in Nepal and India. To examine the nature of formation and assertion of Tamang identity is to revisit the debate over the relationship of ethnicity, identity politics, religion and other aspects of culture in defining and redefining the nature of communities in the South-Asian nation-states. In the history of modern India as in other parts of greater South Asia, the concept and reality of ‘nation’ has acquired very great importance. It is true of both colonial and post-colonial experience. Alongside, the notions of tradition and traditionalism, modern and modernism, ethnicity as construction and ethnicity as reality have gained renewed importance in considerations of socio-economic and cultural realities in today’s world (cf. Bhattacharyya 1990; Bhattacharyya 2012; Heelas, Lash and Morris 1996; Hutchinson and Smith 1996; Weber 1967; Weber 1978).

The story of emergence and evolution of Tamangs as a distinct group provides a case in point. Originally, a Tibeto-Mongoloid group, the Tamangs came to India, particularly to the north-eastern part, from Tibet *via* Nepal. In Nepal, they have a cruel and unkind history. Being a beef-eating community migrating from Tibet, they were looked down upon by the caste-ridden society of Nepal. But, initially, as claimed by Mukta Tamang (2009), they enjoyed a more or less good position in the Nepalese society as is evidenced by their holding of land, property and their access to other amenities of social life. The situation, however, changed after the ascent to power of the Shah dynasty. The Tamangs began to lose their pre-eminent social position, dispossessed of their land and were forced to migrate to the marginal lands of Nepal. They also ceased to get jobs in the army which they earlier got because of their good physique. They were forced to come to India. In fact, the present generation of Tamangs residing in India is mostly born in India. Most of them are very good-

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looking and speak Nepali with an intermixture of Tamang words. They have embraced Buddhism in India.

There is a debate over the issue whether the Tamangs were Buddhists when they were in Tibet. Many of them claim that they had been Buddhists, thanks to the preaching of Guru Padmasambhabe, while they were in Tibet. And they had to adopt Hinduism when they were in Nepal, particularly during the reign of the Shah dynasty. After migrating to India, they have stuck to their original religion.

Reasons for Selecting the Community: The Tamangs, like any other migrating community, save and except the Lepchas, do not at first sight appear extraordinary. But, one is struck with awe when one gets into the meandering path of their evolution and history. The first is their representation in the Census document.

Table 1: The Tamangs in the Censuses

Year	Population of Tamangs
1872	6,557
1901	24,465
1911	27,226
1921	30,450
1931	33,481
1941	43,114
1951	49,890
1961	4,939

Source: Census, Government of India

A few points are evident from the table above. First, while the number of Tamangs was only 6557 in 1872, it rose to 49,890 in 1951. The growing number may be explained by a) migration from Nepal and b) the internal natural growth of the population. It must also be mentioned here that the 1951 Census was made in independent India. But, why did the Tamang population fall down so drastically to only 4939 in 1961 Census? Ashok Mitra, the Chief Census Commissioner, pointed out in the Census that “perhaps, the Tamangs have been absorbed into the Nepali-speaking community”. And, unfortunately, one does not find any entry of the

Tamangs either as an ethnic group or as a linguistic group in the Censuses thereafter till 2011. The official data of the 2011 Census are not ready as yet. The Tamangs have, however, become a Scheduled Tribe in 2002. How could it happen?

First, the Government of India accepted Nepali as an official language in its Sixth Schedule. One finds from the District Handbooks, a rise of Nepali-speaking people in the areas of North Bengal who have left their mother-tongues like Limbu, Murmi, Tamang, etc. Speaking Nepali in the place of one's mother-tongue ensured at that time good education, better job opportunities and higher social position.

Second, the demand for Gorkhaland, a separate state for the hill - people, had already started in the late seventies of the twentieth century. The movement was spearheaded by Subas Ghising, himself a Tamang. Perhaps it will not be out of place here that in 1951 with population strength of 49,890, it would have been easier for the Tamangs to acquire a Scheduled Tribe status from the Government of India. But they did not do that simply because of the fact that they considered themselves to be higher in status than the 'Bhotes' (spoken with disrespect) or the Lepchas. What was the reason behind it? A section of the Tamangs had gained higher social status thanks to good education, jobs in the army or in the police force, and doing good business. They mainly belong to the urban centers. This elite section from among the Tamangs was perhaps cherishing the idea of getting a separate state of Gorkhaland under the aegis of Mr. Subas Ghising who had succeeded as far as snatching a sixth schedule for the Gorkhas in North Bengal. The Tamangs thought that they would be enjoying a preeminent position in the new state. But Ghising soon fell from his position. Ghising was deposed on charges of corruption and was replaced by Mr. Bimal Gurung who formed the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJMM).

The Morcha has a wider following comprising of the Chhetris, Bauns (Brahmins), Scheduled Castes, OBCs and Scheduled Tribes. But, what is the position of the Bengalis, Christians and Missionaries who still happen to reside in the place? A Tamang gentleman has, however, told the present researcher that the Marwaris who continue with their trade and business in the area are also included in this proposed Gorkhaland. But voices are heard against these Marwaris from among the Tamangs only who allege that Marwaris are engaged in business in the area rather illegally.

It is apparent from the above that the Tamangs do not constitute a homogenous group – there are the elites and the commoners. Do the elites again constitute a uniform community? There exist dissensions within the elites when one comes across their stand on the people to be included within their ‘imagined Gorkhland’ or on their views regarding the Marwari businessmen or on their silence over the status of the other communities residing in the land. Further, there lies the question of being regarded as a Scheduled Tribe. Being a Scheduled Tribe means a lot of facilities from the Government of India, facilities the Tamangs have gradually become aware of. In fact, the Tamangs have long become conscious of not conceding to the status of a Scheduled Tribe (cf. Bomjan, M.S. 2009). The number game becomes important here again. With population strength of about five thousand, can the Tamangs claim the status of a Scheduled Tribe?

How Strong are the Tamangs Numerically? To gain a Scheduled Tribe status, a tribe must have, according to the norms as laid down by the Government of India, strength of fifty thousand heads. Can the Tamangs claim that strength? The current number of Tamang population (as received from the President of the Tamang Development and Cultural Board) is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Total Number of Tamangs in North Bengal (August 2014)

District Names	Municipality	Various Blocks			Total
Kalimpong	2000	Block I	Block II	Block III	102,000
		32,000	29,000	32,000	
Darjeeling	18,000	Pul Bijanbari Block	Sukhia Block	Rangli Rangliot	1,24,000
		32,000	22,000	52,000	
Karseong	7,200	Karseong Block			49,200
		42,000			
Mirik	6,800	Mirik Block			53,800
		47,000			
Siliguri					25,000
Alipuduar					1,35,000
Jalpaiguri					52,000

This growing population of the Tamangs is spread over the urban and rural centers of North Bengal. Most of this population is Buddhist with streaks of their 'Bon' culture. They are sought to be brought under the supervision and administration of the All India Tamang Buddhist Association (AITBA). This attempt is particularly felt during the time of 'Loshar' or Tamang New Year. Loshar is generally held in the urban centers of North Bengal hills under the aegis of the AITBA. Tamangs from the rural areas congregate together during the three days of the conference held during the Loshar ceremony, stay in the tent where the ceremony is being held on beds of straw provided by the organizers. Important Tamang personalities in politics, academics and other fields from the Country and abroad speak on the occasion. People from other communities are also invited to address the conference. The conference starts with the holy incantation of a Buddhist monk or a Rimpoche and also ends with the blessings of the holy person. During the three days, the common people are fed by the AITBA. Different stalls selling food, Tamang dress and other consumable items are erected. People are also found playing amusing games in the gathering. It is noteworthy that the Tamang dress is very popular among the more or less well-off sections of the Tamang population. Almost all the organizers, both male and female, put on the traditional Tamang dress. The ruralites, the less well-off in particular, do not afford to wear it. (A moderate Tamang dress costs about Rs. 1600 nowadays which was much higher earlier). It is to be noted further that the AITBA wants more and more Tamangs to be included in its fold. But it is hard for the masses to pay the little subscription that the AITBA charges annually (personal communication with Mr. M.S. Bomjan). The organizers arrange cultural programs during the two nights of the conference. Local and sometimes invited artists perform items like Tamang 'celo' (music typical of the Tamangs) and light music in Nepali or Hindi. This musical soiree is particularly popular among young Tamang boys and girls.

The present researcher has found that a Tamang Youth Association is working among the Tamangs, sensitizing them of their culture and identity, their mundane problems related to land, water, and sanitation as well as their problems of earning a livelihood for themselves. This young brigade is also vociferous about the non-availability of Government funds for development of different segments, absence of welfare programs (like the Self-Help Groups) by the banks, lack of educational facilities for the children, etc. This youth organization often alleges the older generation, holding key-positions in the AITBA, of not listening to these problems upheld by the younger generation. Meanwhile, there was a change in the

State Government and the Young Brigade (perhaps without the knowledge of the elders of the community) contacted the new Government of the State and gradually earned the confidence of the present Chief Minister who agreed to the point of forming a Tamang Development and Cultural Board (TDCB) meant exclusively for the development of the Tamang community. This attempt by the youth organization was not looked upon by the elder members of AITBA favorably and it led to the expulsion of the President of TDCB of his primary membership of the AITBA.

Renewed emphasis on Tamang culture: Since the time Gurung rose to power, one of the agenda of his party (GJMM) was to highlight the cultural specificity of each ethnic group residing in the hills of North Bengal. This was seen in the wearing of one community's own dress, at least on ceremonial occasions, emphasizing one's cultural ethos reflected through songs, dances, etc. In the case of the Tamangs, such a tendency is further refurbished by the AITBA. The AITBA recommends:

a) the Tamangs should observe 'Loshar' instead of Dusserah, b) Tamang women should refrain from putting vermilion on their forehead and parting of the hair and should not wear the garland of beads, c) Tamang boys and girls should marry according to the rules prescribed in the Buddhist horoscope, follow the rules of 'Thar' (segments within the Tamang society prescribing who can marry whom; if the rules of Thar cannot be observed in cases of love-marriage, the rules of 'Chardam' must be strictly observed), d) Tamang boys and girls should not marry Scheduled Castes, e) Tamang boys and girls should refrain from the practice of 'marriage by elopement', f) the mandatory services of the Lama (Buddhist religious leader), the native religious leader or the 'Bon', 'Ganba' (old people), 'Tanba' (mythologists stating the life histories of the bride and the groom) and the 'Damphure' (the man who plays the 'Damphu', the typical Tamang musical instrument made from goat-skin and a few pins), g) the use of 'Kokomendo' (the purest flower that blooms after dusk and fades away before dawn without being touched by honey-bee), h) the consumption of 'chang' or country liquor, etc.

In addition, the AITBA further proposes to erect a separate monastery in each village for the Tamangs wherefrom lessons in Tamang language would be disseminated. Some villages have already made some advances to this effect. Perhaps, the young brigades from the Tamangs were not happy over this overarching importance on the cultural aspects by the AITBA. Moreover, they were also not satisfied with the pattern of distribution of power in the AITBA.

Prospects of further study: The Tamang Development and Cultural Board, though very young, has already started working on development matters relating to distribution of Government funds for repair and construction of roads, erection of houses by poor Tamangs from distant villages, etc. The Board, however, has two challenges before it – i) how far they will succeed in executing their plans for development of the Tamangs as the Board is overburdened with persons from the Government and ii) to what extent they can negotiate with and manage the elders from the AITBA in their execution of the plans of development of the Tamangs. The spread and development of Tamang language by the monasteries provide another fertile ground for carrying out the research further. Last but not the least, the role of women in the Board is yet to be tested.

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