

## Indigenous Oral History Tradition in Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalayas

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### Abstract

The term 'oral' has been widely used in oral literature and tradition. Even though literature may itself signify the aspect of writing, oral literature speaks of literature in an oral culture. The mode of composition, transmission, including performance and the source of the oral literature is important while trying to understand the oral literature. This paper will discuss the indigenous oral tradition of Tamang community from Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalayas. Tamang language and culture being primarily oral in nature, many forms of oral traditions exist. This paper shall particularly speak about the *Tamba* tradition of the Tamang community. *Tamba* is one of the social leaders in a traditional Tamang community. He acts as a master of ceremony in important functions and is both a poet and a historian. In his oral texts, the distinction between history and poetry, factual and fictional, reality and fantasy becomes blurred and hence complicates the notions of literary genres. Discussing the above mentioned modes of composition, transmission and source of the oral literature the paper also elaborate on the question of authorship and the dynamics between the written and the spoken.

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**Keywords:** Tamba, Indigenous, Darjeeling, Sikkim, Himalayas, Tamang.

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Darjeeling is popularly known to us and to the world as a beautiful hill station, famous for tea, the panoramic view of the Kanchenjunga range, toy train and the recollection of the colonial past. Surrounded by Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh, and China, keeping in mind the *Jelep-la* pass from Kalimpong, Darjeeling has always had great strategic importance in socio-political and economic terms. While locating Darjeeling within these boundaries we do have to remember that these international borders are modern constructs, and history, language and culture have always been shared across these regions providing and shaping it with its own unique identity. It is said that the history of Darjeeling is incomplete without the history of Sikkim, Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet. Therefore, my research interest deals with Darjeeling hills in particular and Eastern Himalayas in general. Historically, Darjeeling<sup>1</sup> was a territory of constant dispute between the kingdom of Nepal and Sikkim and it came under British India in 1835. Today, sharing international border with Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh, Darjeeling has a dynamic, active cultural exchange across these borders which is reflected in its language, culture and art.

Despite being a strategic point historically, the history of Darjeeling has almost no record of the indigenous voices. Various folk forms, distinct indigenous oral history traditions and personal narratives can be valued as resources yet often they are not

<sup>1</sup> Darjeeling is a hill town in North Bengal located in the lesser Himalaya at an average elevation of 6710 ft. Darjeeling, West Bengal.

considered historical or even literary enough to be taken seriously as a resource. Unavailability of written published material taking account of the indigenous perspective is a prevalent problem with research in this area. Perhaps it was the late arrival of literacy that could not facilitate the voice of the indigenous communities, or just the extremely heterogeneous make-up of the Nepali community which did not allow a unified history or may be History has always been written by the powerful which has led to such exclusion. State History or other forms of institutionalised history, very often do not include or are not able to include voices from the margins. In order to incorporate and understand a much more inclusive history, oral history method is very imperative and the art of listening is central to it.

An enquiry into the History of Darjeeling from the perspective of the indigenous community I find History in fragments in various folk forms, personal narratives and distinct indigenous oral traditions of various ethnic groups under the larger Nepali community. Folk forms such as *lahiri-sawai* were written in couplets ranging from spiritual to experiences of daily life. Many *sawais*, first-hand battle accounts written by Gorkha soldiers posted in North Eastern regions of India, have deep historical significance. Yet these resources are often not accepted as reliable historical sources. The absence of historical representation can also be linked with the identity crisis which has now become an important aspect of the region, both politically and socially. Due to the lack of history written from within, research on the inclusive history of Darjeeling concerning any aspect would face problem of unavailability of published material and personal narratives and folk traditions would be an undeniably important material.

The method followed in this paper includes interviews, personal narratives, oral history traditions and methodology of oral history method. Oral history is an engagement with people recounting their experiences and speaking of memory and hence the art of listening is an extremely important component. Often memory is accused of being inconsistent and deceptive and hence the reliability of oral history method is often questioned. This is also one of the major hurdles that researchers face while working on oral history traditions and the question of reliability on them comes up more than once. But it is important to realise that oral history as a source is as accurate as any other written form which can be verified and cross-checked. What is important to understand is that the very quality of memory, what we choose to remember and what we choose to forget, cyclical rather than chronological remembrance, the way we construct and reconstruct what is meaningful to us is what gives oral history method more than just facts. A subjective relationship with facts is the quality of oral history that makes it more engaging. In oral history method, events can be understood and often we come across social narratives which are opposing to the recorded facts. For an oral historian or when working with oral history, interview or conversation is of primary necessity. There are certain things that are to be kept in mind for a fruitful interview. What I mean by Fruitful is not in terms of gathering information or finding a useful narrative for work but in terms of a learning experience. As a researcher and an interviewer it could be easier to be driven with an objective, a fact-finding zeal in an interview but it is necessary to remember that it is a process of mutual observation and communication. Taking an interview with an approach of a listener

and not of an enquirer is very important and it gives respect, humility and meaning to the conversation for it is their memory and experience that we are asking for. An interview is a dialogue and there is always a line that separates the interviewee and the interviewer. Even if it is an interview being conducted in one's own community there are always differences. It could be differences in ethnicity, language, culture, age and so on. Recognising the differences also means realising what we do not know as an interviewer.

The Nepali population in India is spread across the Himalayan region; they are a majority in Darjeeling and Sikkim. The expansion of British in the North East of India also resulted in settlement of the Nepali community in these regions. Nepali community is not homogenous; it includes diverse ethnic groups and is a multilingual community. In this paper, I shall focus on the Tamang *tamba* tradition. The paper will put forward argument keeping in mind that various ethnic communities together form the larger Nepali identity and that these ethnic identities and culture is in a constant exchange with one another which further allows for constant negotiation of culture and identity.

Tamang community belongs to the Tibeto-Burman ethnic group and is part of the larger Nepali community. In this paper I shall discuss the indigenous oral *tamba* tradition of Tamangs in the Darjeeling region. It will be discussed as a repository of history, culture and identity. It is important to keep in mind that Tamang culture and identity are constantly reacting and adjusting to the changing social and political scenario and these traditions are increasingly diminishing which makes understanding and archiving of these oral traditions imperative.

Oral traditions are one of the oldest forms of expression practiced by human civilization. In human existence the earliest script dates back to only about 6000 years ago<sup>2</sup>. The term literature has been derived from the Latin literature, from *litera* which signifies the letters of the alphabet. The term literature, derived from Latin signifies the letters of the alphabet and means writing or any written knowledge. With time the word literature in itself has evolved to denote certain characteristic attributes. And today literature is recognized by its special use of language which differentiates it from non-literary writings.<sup>3</sup> While literature itself may signify the aspect of writing, oral literature speaks of literature in an oral culture. The term 'oral' in oral literature has been very useful in differentiating literature which is not written from those which are written. We can use the term 'oral' rather than 'unwritten'.

In the traditional Tamang community, one of the most important social roles was that of the *tamba* who is like a poet and a historian of the community. Tamang language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman group without a script and hence Tamang culture is primarily oral in nature making the *tamba* indispensable carriers of the indigenous knowledge and history. Their importance is also reflected in one of the theories which suggests that the origin of the word Tamang itself arises from the word

<sup>2</sup> Ong, J. Walter. *Orality and Literacy* (Oxon: Routledge, 2002), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Culler, Jonathan. *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

*tamba*. In the word *tamba*, *tam* means speech and *ba* is the agent of speech, making him not only a master of ceremonies but also a keeper of traditional oral tales and history. The tales of *tamba* are both history and poetry and includes ancient history of civilization, clan history, family history, origin stories and *whai* which are Tamang songs associated with rituals, customs, philosophy and everyday life. In these oral histories the distinction between history and poetry, factual and fictional, realistic and fantastic becomes blurred and hence complicates and questions the established genres.

Seventy year old S. Golay a *tamba* from Mirik<sup>4</sup> narrated the following story in Nepali. I have translated into English, keeping it as close to the original as possible:

The earth was an empty space and gods decided that they would create humans. Gods tried to create humans out of gold, silver, bronze and other metals but none were able to instil life in the metal body. The metal bodies did not speak and hence there was no life. The daughter of the gods asked them if she would be given a chance to create humans and finally she was allowed. With the ash of burnt sandalwood and excreta of a fowl she created the first human, when ordered to speak the creation spoke and hence human life began on earth.<sup>5</sup>

He further said that speech is related to life itself, it is only when you breathe out words you breathe life. The tale specifies the vital relationship of language and humans and the primacy of spoken words in all oral cultures. Storytelling is at the heart of most oral traditions be it in the form of songs or intertwined within a ritual. These stories are not simply for amusement but they have always been carriers of histories, beliefs, genealogy and communicating knowledge from lived experiences.

In another narrative given to me by *tamba*, Prem Singh Golay<sup>6</sup> from Mirik he narrates the story of migration of his family towards the second half of the 19th century. In his detailed narrative he describes the journey from Sa Thangbul in Nepal to present day India. The story also gives an account of how they began to work in Tea plantations in Darjeeling and were in fact largely associated with establishing many of these tea gardens. The majority population of the Darjeeling area is associated with the Tea gardens. Tea-gardens are not only crucial for our socio-economic condition but over the years our identity has also been built around these Tea-gardens. These oral narratives can be studied not only as resources for indigenous history but could also be useful in understanding migration history and the history of the tea gardens.

Walter Ong in his work *Orality and Literacy* has spoken of the inter relationship between studying and writing. He writes, "Human beings in primary oral cultures, those untouched by writing in any form, learn a great deal and possess and practice great wisdom, but they do not study."<sup>7</sup> A *tamba* learns his craft by way of following an established and socially accepted *tamba*. S/he learns by listening and observing

<sup>4</sup> Mirik is at a distance of 40km from Darjeeling town at an average elevation of 1495 meters (4904 ft).

<sup>5</sup> Salam Singh Golay, (Age: 70, Dus Mile, Mirik), in discussion with the author, 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> May, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Prem Singh Golay, (Age: 96, Dus Mile, Mirik) in discussion with the author, 10<sup>th</sup> May 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Ong, J. Walter. *Orality and Literacy* (Oxon: Routledge, 2002).

and practicing. There are no books or a learner's course available which would train one to become a *tamba*. With his performance and practice the community accepts and gives him the status of a *tamba*. Having said this it is also important to remember that it is possible that each culture today has some influence of the written culture. The degree of the impact of literacy on the oral text and the mutual influence of the written and the oral form is essential to understand. Tamang oral tradition too does not live insulated from the influence of written culture. During my research I have come across a few *tamba*-s who have not only written down the oral traditions but have also made photocopies which they have given away to interested people. But despite this the performance still remains spontaneous and composition and performance go hand in hand with re-composition and improvisation.

The composition of the oral text could be a fixed one which could be carried forward by way of memorizing, while at many other instances only a faint outline of the oral text may be kept. Various kinds of oral texts may exist between these two poles. The oral text of the *tamba*, for the ritual performance during birth, wedding, or death is inclined towards a more free form. The performance of the *tamba* in a particular social event cannot be duplicated. The triad of the oral text or story, the narrator and the audience of a single sitting cannot be reproduced again. The knowledge of stock languages, stock imagery, catchphrases and idioms work as a mnemonic tools and the creative ability to use these makes them poets for the community. The audience is equally important and in many ways it acts like a censor. What is 'traditional' is decided by the acceptability of the audience. In case of the *tamba* oral tradition it is important to understand that a *tamba* also becomes the voice for others who do not carry his knowledge. He speaks for the father of the bride in a wedding and speaks for the family who has lost their dear ones. Therefore these oral traditions also become personal recitals rather than performance only for amusement. Such personal quality further allows the orator to improvise, leading to changes in different situational recitals. Improvisation further leads to multiple versions of the same narratives thereby speaking of the important quality of plurality in oral traditions.

The *tamba* oral tradition only exists in Tamang language<sup>8</sup> and with the decreasing number of Tamang speakers the *tamba* tradition is slowly getting lost and along with it the stories, myths legends and histories too will disappear. As most of the Tamang community has accepted Buddhism as their religion often a conflict is noticed between *tamba* and *lama* traditions. The *tambas* along with the *bonbos*, who are the shamans of the traditional Tamang community were once not just functionaries, but today are in many ways replaced by institutionalized Buddhism. The struggle between the *tamba* tradition and Buddhism can also be seen as a contest between written and the oral, institutionalized and the folk.

There is a steady decline in Tamang speakers and less regard for the *tamba* tradition today. The stories do not belong to the story teller or the listener but exists as a collective shared history and narrative and hence its survival is seen in many different forms.

<sup>8</sup> Tamang language falls under the Tibeto-Burman family. It largely uses Tibetan, Devnagari and other modified version of Tibetan script for its transcription.

*Whai* are traditional songs in Tamang language, rich in Tamang culture and identity. The emergence of Tamang *selo*, a Nepali folk genre, which is similar to *whai* in tune, beat and often in theme but in Nepali language speaks of such continuity and evolution. Some of the Tamang catchphrases and idioms are retained in Tamang language, while the songs are in Nepali language which reminds us of the *Whai*. For example one of the common traits of *selo* which is an integral part of *whai* tradition is that it starts with *amailey jankhailala*. This phrase is retained in Tamang language even though *whai* has already been converted into Nepali *selo*. *Amailey jankhailala* is sung thrice at the beginning of the song and thereby pays homage to mother, mother nature and land. The popularity of Tamang *selo* among all Nepali ethnic communities and its establishment as a distinct Nepali genre in itself speaks of the various cultural and political confluences in the region. It can also be seen as a survival attempt by way of evolution under the pressure of socio-political factors.

## Conclusion

In a story told by 89 year old Dhiring Yonzan<sup>9</sup> from Takling two Buddhist monks visited Nepal and settled there, with time they had learnt to speak Gurung and Nepali. The lamas were now versed in three languages, Tibetan, Gurung and Nepali. And hence they were called Tamangs, for *tam* also signifies speech and *mang* meaning plurality or many. And therefore they were called Tamangs or speakers of many languages. True to this story today Tamangs speak many languages but very few speak Tamang language. Tamang identity has always been in contact with various other cultures and has been evolving and constantly negotiating. As an impact of socio-political changes, the growing dominance of Nepali language, the absence of the state recognition for Tamang language, the absence of script and an overall globalization effect has led to steady decline of Tamang language. With the loss of language there is also the failure of passing the oral history to the newer generations. The absence of transference of such indigenous knowledge system will not only create a gap in studying the Tamang community but it will also be a loss in the holistic understanding of Nepali history and identity.

<sup>9</sup> Dhiring Gyalpo (Age: 86, Takling Busty), in discussion with the author, 15<sup>th</sup> May 2011.