

Philosophy, History and Religio-cultural Transitions of the Tamang Tribe in the Darjeeling Hills

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Abstract

Ascertaining the philosophy of the tribes from the standpoint of the mainstream is always fraught with certain fundamental difficulties, and the case of the tribes of Darjeeling hills is no different. The fluidity of the oral tradition prevalent among the tribes is a major area of concern. Lack of written records is another problem. Despite such difficulties, this paper attempts to present the Tamang worldview, their dharma, ethics, culture, etc. in a philosophical way. Today the Tamang community is in a transitional period. They have become very much conscious of their root, culture and identity. The present religious pursuit of the Tamangs is a mixture of Bon dharma and Tibetan Buddhism (Lamaism). They are feeling the need of going back to their root, culture and thus maintain their distinct identity. Definitely, a unique type of philosophy is emerging, which needs to be acknowledged.

Keywords: Tribal philosophy, Tamangs, Bon dharma, Lamaism,

Introduction

The possibility of ascertaining the philosophy of the tribes is fraught with certain fundamental difficulties, and the case of the tribes of Darjeeling hills is no different. Firstly, the fluidity of the oral tradition does not allow us to find a reliable source. As a result of a powerful oral tradition we find the tribal situation always in a transition. Lack of written records is a problem. Even if there are written records they are scanty and not enough to infer conclusions regarding their philosophy. Secondly, interviewing meets with a failure due to the lack of reliable informants. We have a very heterogeneous community. So there is no consensus. If there is a consensus then we can infer. If we want to form a 'knowledge system' or 'philosophy' then majority should agree. Without consensus and without reliable sources we cannot go ahead with generalisation. So the real problem is the problem of generalisation. However, to go ahead with one small section was easier. Therefore, in this paper I have attempted to present the Tamang worldview, their *dharma*, ethics, culture, etc. in a philosophical way. Thus, my focus will be on the Tamang community of Darjeeling, India.

Tamang Community in a Transitional Period

Today, the whole of Darjeeling has been witnessing a craze of 'search for identity'. This 'search for identity' has manifested itself at two distinct levels. Firstly, each community is searching for its root, that is, its origin, culture, language, tradition, literature, etc. Secondly, as a whole, all the communities have been fighting for their national identity as Indian Gorkhas. As a result an 'aggressive thinking' is taking place among the various linguistic communities of the Darjeeling hills. So, the entire tribal community of the Darjeeling hill is in a transitional period since the hills are in a period of transition. The Tamangs, being one such tribe, is also in a transitional period. The Tamangs underwent a humiliating treatment under the Hindu regime in Nepal. Their original religion and culture were at threat. Further, the present religious pursuit of the Tamangs is a mixture of *Bon dharma* and Tibetan Buddhism (Lamaism). They are feeling the need of going back to their root culture and thus maintain their distinct identity. Definitely, a unique type of philosophy is emerging, which needs to be acknowledged.

Belief, Myths and Folklores as sources of Tamang Philosophy

Religion or belief systems are a very powerful source of unity. If there is a unifying factor in a group there will be a common goal too, and religion as a unifying factor is no exception. The search for a common goal definitely leads to more organised philosophies. Therefore, if we want to study the tribal philosophy we must look into their belief systems. Interestingly, such belief systems are not without myths. Tribal worldviews are found, among others, in their myths and folklores. The myths and folklores are very important sources to understand the tribal worldviews. Such beliefs, myths and folklores are the entry points into the tribal philosophy.

Among the indigenous tribes of the Darjeeling hills, the Tamangs, the Bhutias, the Lepchas and the Sherpas, save Limbus, profess one belief system - Buddhism. All of them come under the Mahayana sect of Buddhism. However, apart from this Buddhist influence, their philosophy is moulded by their unique language, culture and tradition.

Tamang's myth of Creation and their Origin

According to a Tamang myth there was formless sky in the beginning. Once there appeared a bright light in the formless sky. Earth appeared below that light and sky appeared above it. Water drops were seen in the middle of the sky and slowly they began to fall on earth. The water drops formed a lake on earth. Moss and foam appeared in the water. Sand particles could be seen in the moss. The sand particles developed further and gave rise to mud and stone. The mud and stone began to gain heights and as a result mountains and hills were formed. The four directions, seven big continents and eight sub-continents were made. Oceans were formed, seeds were seen. *MÜ* (ether), *Laba* or (wind), *Mé* (fire), *Safra* (earth) and *Kui* (water) were separated from one another. Various colours came into being. Gods remained in the Akasha (sky), Nag in

Patal (under-world), Hunters in Antariksha (space) and eighteen ruis or *thars* (clan) of Tamangs were created on earth. Accordingly, their *Bapsa* (place of origin) of each *ruis* (clan) and *Phola* or *Kuldevta* (god of the clan) also appeared.¹ Today Tamangs talk about 226 *ruis* or *thars*.² According to the Mahayana tradition humans were created when the sun reached the tropic of Capricorn.³ There are two more versions regarding the origin of Tamang tribes. One is the Lamaistic version and another is the bonistic version based on bon *dharma*.

Lamaistic Version: Herein, *Dorjegyadem* is considered as the creator of the universe. Once he appointed Mahaguru Rimpoche to protect the world. There was no human on earth. So Dorjegyadem requested Mahaguru Rimpoche to create human beings. Mahaguru instead created three *Vikshus*: *Chegu*, *Lungu* and *Tulgu*. These three *Vikshus* managed to create human bodies but could not instil life in them. So they turned to Mahaguru who in turn had taken recourse to Dorjegyadem. Dorjegyadem then gave a *Vajra* to Mahaguru to create humans. Mahaguru broke the *Vajra* into three pieces and from these three pieces he created three women: *Dashing Dolma*, *Dashing Tashi* and *Dashing Tuku*. These three were kept at the service of the *Vikshus*. While going to fetch water for ceremonial rites they were always disturbed by a monkey. When the *Vikshus* found it out and discovered that the monkey too was created by their *guru* they decided to give the three women to the monkey in marriage. So the monkey married the three women and had offsprings. According to this myth, the Tamangs are the descendents of the monkey and the three women.⁴

Bonbo Version: A Bonbo myth talks about a new creation after a destruction. Once upon a time oppression and injustice crossed all its limits in this world. So the gods and goddesses decided to create a new world. Nine *dini* (suns) and nine *lani* (moons) appeared together for nine days continuously. All the creatures were burnt to ashes. However, Nag which lives in patallok (underworld) had secretly hidden a man and a woman. The man called *Phadong Chenpo* and the woman called *Mamwali Sangmo* appeared in the cave of Kailash after the great destruction. They got married and had nine sons and nine daughters. The nine sons and nine daughter got married among themselves and had offsprings, the Tamangs. So *Phadong Chenpo* and *Mamwali Sangmo* were the first parents of the Tamangs.⁵

According to the *Bon dharma* of Tamangs, *dubo* (a type of soft grass) was the first thing to be sprouted on earth. They believe that a human stamps on the grass from birth till death. So during important ceremonies they make sure that a bundle of *dubo* is there.

1 Cfr. Parshuram Tamang, *Tamang Genealogy: An Outline*, Kathmandu, 2005 (B.S. 2062), p.7.

2 Cfr. Pratap Bal Tamang, *Tamang Sanskritika Vivid Paksha*, (*Various Dimensions of Tamang Culture*), Katmandu, by the author, 2005, p.6.

3 Cfr. D.T. Zimba, *Tamangko Itihas ani Tambako Charbar* (*History and the Feasts of Tamang*), Darjeeling, by the author, 2002, p. 74.

4 Cfr. Parshuram Tamang, *op.cit.*, pp. 7-8.

5 Cfr. *ibid.*, p. 9.

Religio-Cultural Transition and Culture Consciousness

The Tamangs were the followers of *Bon dharma*. When they embraced Buddhism a mixed form of Bonism and Buddhism developed which is known as *Lamaism* or most commonly known as Tibetan Buddhism. Here if we examine the Tamang consciousness we find two contradictory elements - one autonomous and the other borrowed. The entire history of the religion is full of it. We find two opposed tendencies: the attempt to articulate a universal code for the society as a whole, and the struggle by the subordinated to resist such domination. Cultural transition brought about by Buddhism was great. Here my task is to critically examine the Tamang consciousness. I would like to extract the implicit elements which stand in opposition to the immediately believed and practiced religion of the scheduled tribe known as Tamangs. The immediately believed and practiced religion of the Tamangs is Buddhism (very few are Christians). They follow a branch of Buddhism known as Lamaism or Tibetan Buddhism. But the implicit element which stands in opposition to this is their original belief which we call Bonism, a type of Shamanism.

The struggle between this dominant form and the subordinate form led the Tamangs to question their identity. The other communities had already started calling them by various names such as *Bhoté*, Tibetan, etc. What was it that gave them their distinct identity? The Tamang scholars soon found out that their *rim-thim* (traditional culture) and *Kairan* (history or root) were proofs to their distinct identity, which is at stake. The conversion of Tamangs to Christianity too is felt as a threat. Many such reasons have made them culture conscious and they have started tracing their history as a whole. That is why today the Tamangs have been trying their best to maintain their distinct identity as Tamang Buddhists and not Tibetan Buddhists. They do follow all the forms of *Lamaism* but they follow their own *rim-thim* (*riti-riwaz* or cultural and religious rites) not prevalent among the Tibetans.

Akhil Bharatiya Tamang Baudha Sangh (All India Tamang Buddhist Association) was established on 23 January 1981. The government was planning to give OBC status to the Tamang community but the Tamangs opposed the decision. The community spirit of the Tamangs was quite clear when they converted their demand into a socio-political movement. On 18th December 2002, the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha declared 130 tribes of India as the Scheduled Tribes. Tamangs and Limbus of Sikkim and West Bengal were in the list.⁶ This was a temporary victory for the Tamangs.⁷ However, the Tamangs who were living in other parts of India could not enjoy this status.

6 Cfr. Ishamani Pakhrin, "Tamang Janjati", (*Tamang Scheduled Tribes*), *Baudhick Jagaran*, 1/2, 2005, Darjeeling, Tamang Baudha Ghedung, 2005, p. 21.

7 Scheduled Tribes (ST) are notified by the President of India under Article 342 of the Constitution of India. The first notification was issued in the year 1950. Today 75 of the 698 STs are identified as Primitive Tribal Groups (PTG) considering they are more backward than the STs.

Tamang Rim-Thim: Tamangs use the word *Fyafulla* (equivalent of *Namaste*) to greet each other. Though they recognize lama as their religious head yet they have their own ritual priest known as Bonbo (*jhakri* or a type of shaman). Moreover, *Tamba*, the expert in Tamang *rim-thim* (rituals) and *kairan* (history), is held in high esteem. Even a lama cannot go over the words of Tamba and it is he who presides over various cultural rites. The followers of *Bon dharma* were a type of animists who believed in devils, spirits and the healing powers of *Bonbos* or *Jhankris* and their capacity to control all sorts of spirits and devils.

The Tamangs perform *meen thamba* (name giving ceremony) which they believe was prevalent even before they embraced Buddhism. That is why at times they go ahead with this function even without a lama. It is also called *Thapsang-Thui*. *Kan Chwaba* (feeding rice) is another ceremony where a child is fed rice for the first time. It is performed normally after five months if it is a daughter and it is done after six months if it is a son.⁸ *Tap-chyo* (also called *Kra-breba*) is a ceremony where the uncle of the child gives a haircut to the child for the first time. It is performed normally after three years. During the marriage ceremony they perform *Damen Bli* also known as *chardam* before giving the daughter to their son-in-law. It is a moving ceremonial function presided over by a *Tamba* who declares that everything (body with flesh, blood and breath) is given to the husband and in-laws except the *ruiba*. *Ruiba* means a flat bone (of forehead) which should be brought back by the husband or the in-laws after the death of the daughter-in-law. It is believed that the *ruiba* is the proof that one belongs to one particular clan (*rui*). That is why even after the marriage a Tamang woman does not change her title and the clan name (*rui*). Moreover, in a Tamang community women have equal status to that of a man. They hold equal right over the family property. *Ghewa* is the most important and the costliest ceremonial function of the Tamangs. During this ceremony lamas perform the last rites to send the soul of the dead person to *Sange Hopame's Singkham* (abode of Amitab Buddha) so that the soul may be ready for re-cycle of birth. So, *ghewa* actually means to lead the soul of a *chéndé* (dead person) to the abode of *amitab* Buddha by performing a proper ceremonial function of the dead.⁹ They believe in *phola dala* (*kul devta* or clan god). They have *chyokhang* (altar) at home where they keep *chyoy* (scriptures) and some even keep the statues. *Lyakhang* (*Gompa* or monastery) is the house of god. They believe in the existence of soul. All these aspects of Tamang Buddhism make it unique.

Tamangs celebrate *Lyhochar* whereas Tibetans call it *Lyhoshar*. *Lyochar* means a new year. But Tamangs' concept of New Year is different from the western concept. They have twelve *lyhos* (years). These twelve *lyhos* are named after birds and animals. Once a new year is celebrated it comes back after 12 years. But in western system every New Year is a new year and it does not come back.

8 Cfr. Gyabak Rabindra Tamang, *Tamang Rim-Thim (Tamang Culture)*, Kathmandu, Prativa Samuha, B.S. 2054, pp. 10-14.

9 Cfr. Pratap Bal Tamang, *Tamang Sanskritika Vivid Paksha*, pp. 14-34.

There can be matrimonial relation between cousins (between *phupu-chéli* and *mama-chéla* which means between the aunt's daughters and uncle's sons) in Tamang community, but it is not found among the Tibetans. However such matrimonial relationship is not maintained today. *Shamanism* is a distinct trait of the Tamang tribe which is absent among the Tibetans. Further, the Tamangs while following Buddhism have their own *Rim-Thim* (riti-riwaz or cultural norms) which makes them distinctively different from the Tibetans.

Tracing the Root - A Short History

Scholars claim that the Tamang tribes are the descendents of pure mongoloids belonging to the *pashan* period or Neolithic age. Jadyan (today's Karnali area, Nepal) was an independent kingdom. People of Jadyan were the Tamangs. Towards the north of Jadyan there was another independent kingdom known as Toling (today's western Tibet, Khadi Pradesh). The people of Toling were the Tibetans. They often entered into skirmish with the *Jadés* (Tamangs) with regard to the boundaries. The historians say that it was due to the close geographical location that the *Vajrayani Ningmapa Buddhism* was accepted by the *Jadés* or Tamangs. Tibetans call Tamangs as *Rongpa*, meaning 'foreigner'. Nepal, Bhutan and other neighbouring countries were termed as *Rongyul* (foreign country) by the Tibetans.¹⁰

Tamangs as *Jadés*: According to Kirkpatrick, Tamangs were the rulers of Nepal before the Newars. Tamangs were rulers of Jadyan Pradesh till 11th century A.D. So they are also known as *Jadés*, people of Jadyan. Tamang ruled lower Mustang till 13th century. Today Thakalis of this place call themselves *Hyang Tamang*.¹¹ Tracing the root of his ancestors B. P. Yonzon, a Tamang writer writes that there was a kingdom called Jadyan in today's Karnali area. The *Jadés* were the ancestors of Tamangs. They had their own culture and language.

Tamangs as *Bhotés* and the meaning of Bhot

The word *bhot* does not mean Tibet here. Actually many hilly areas near the Himalayas had this suffix '*bhot*' attached to their names (e.g. Manang Bhot, Mustang Bhot, Laké Bhot, Tibet Bhot, etc. the historians are not very certain about the origin and meaning of this word *bhot*). The southern part of the Himalayas which was occupied by the Tamangs was also known as *Bhot*. Tamangs were called as *Bhotés* in a humiliating way. *Bhotés* were considered as the *pipas* (coolies) or as the people doing some menial jobs. The caste classification made by the Hindu kings has listed the *Bhotés* as the *tsudras*. Today the Tamangs hate to be called *Bhoté* since a painful history is attached to this word. However, the word *Jadé* for the Tamangs is older than the word *Bhoté*. During

10 Ajitman Tamang, "Tamang Sabdako Artha Itihasko Khoji," (A search for meaning and root of the Tamangs), *Fyafulla*, p. 33.

11 Ishamani Pakhrin, "Tamang Jatiko Aitihaskik Pristabhumi", *Baudhick Jagaran*, 1/3, Darjeeling, Tamang Baudha Ghedung, 2005, p. 10.

the Rana Regime in Nepal the Tamangs suffered a lot. According to the Rana laws, the Tamangs could be hanged to death for certain crimes whereas other castes were spared their lives. Sri, Sri, Sri Chandra Samser introduced *pipa* system (Coolie system) for the Tamangs. They were not allowed to write their title as Tamangs. It was only after 1932, they could use the title Tamang according to the order issued by Sri Sri Sri Bhim Samser.¹² Many other tribes were also known by the title *Bhoté* and lama. So it was difficult to make a differentiation among them. Jangabir Tamang appealed to the Sri Sri Sri Bhimser, the then prime-minister of Sri Pach Maharaj Tribhuwan Bir Bikram Shah, to allow Tamangs to use 'Tamang' as their title officially. The request was granted and it was made public by the declaration of Bhadra 6, B.S.1989 (August 1932 CE).¹³

Tamangs as Murmis

The Tamangs were termed as the Murmis by outsiders. Murmi means 'one who dwells in the border or boundary line'. L S S O'Malley writes:

The *Murmis*, who number 25,400, are a Mongolian or semi Mongolian caste who claims to be among the earliest settlers of Nepal. They are probably descended from a Tibetan stock which has been modified by intermixture with Nepalese races. They are also known as Tamang Bhotia and bear the title of Lama. The bulk of them are cultivators and regard agriculture as their original and fitting occupation. Many of them, however, serve in the police and some in the army, and a very large proportion in this district are employed as labourers in the tea-gardens. They are gradually adopting the Nepalese form of Hinduism, and Buddhist usages are on the decline, though Lamas still serve as priests for their weddings, and flags stamped with the Buddhist formula, the sacred *om mani padme hum*, may be seen flying from their homesteads.¹⁴

The account of Hooker (which appeared first in 1855) shows that the Murmis or the Tamangs had adapted to Tibetan language and religion (Buddhism). Hooker writes about the Murmis:

The Murmis are the only other native tribe remaining in any other numbers in Sikkim..., and the Mechis of the pestilential Terai, the forests of which they never leave. The Moormis are a scattered people, of Tibetan origin, and called "Nishung," for being composed of two branches, respectively from the districts of *Nimo* and *Shung*, both on the road between Sikkim and Lhasa. They are now most numerous in central and eastern Nepal, and are a pastoral and agricultural people, inhabiting elevations of 4000 to 6000 feet, and living in stone houses, thatched with grass. They are a large,

12 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

13 Cfr. Gyabak Rabindra Tamang, *Tamang Rim-Thim*, pp. 2-3. [There is a difference of 57 years between Nepali year *Bikram Sambat* (B.S.) and English year Common Era (CE) . To convert B.S. into CE we have to add 57 years to B.S.]

14 L S S O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers - Darjeeling*, New Delhi, Logos Press, 1999, p. 42.

powerful, and active race, grave, very plain in features, with little hair on the face. Both their language and religion are purely Tibetan.¹⁵

Contextualising Tamang Philosophy

Here, the oppression of the Tamangs forms the context of their philosophy. The Tamangs underwent a humiliating treatment during the Gorkha regime in Nepal. During the reign of Malla Kings, Tamangs were defeated in some places but the Kakani area was always under the Tamangs. Tamangs formed a good majority even in the Malla army. Though Malla kings tried to suppress the Tamangs they could not do without Tamangs for their security.

It is said that Prithvi Narayan Shah was the main person for the sad plight of the Tamangs. The view of M. C. Regmi is supported by Pempa Tamang as far as the negative impact of this movement on the Tamangs is concerned. The political unification of the country did not lead to the emergence of a nation because of a complex of political administration, social and economic factors. Rather we see the disintegration of the Tamangs in the hand of the ruler.¹⁶ Shah rulers did not like Tamangs following Tibetan Buddhism. Janga Bahadur Rana passed a civil code in 1854 which was very humiliating to the Tamangs. The primary purpose of the Shah ruler was to convert everybody to Hinduism. When this failed Tamangs were made *pipa* (coolies).¹⁷ Tamangs faced genocide. Many males were killed, the senior women were made slaves and the young women were used for flesh trade. This is one of the reasons why Tamangs till today have to face the consequence of this humiliating act.¹⁸ It is said that towards the end of the unification of Nepal the entire Tamang *kipats* were abolished. *Kipats* were the ancestral lands owned by a tribal community. There could be no individual owner of the *kipats* but the land was held in common. Even a king had no right over such *kipats*. The king treacherously converted such *kipat* lands into *raikar*¹⁹ lands and the Tamangs were just the caretakers of such lands. They had to pay tax. When they could not pay tax imposed on them their lands were confiscated. In order to get back the due the king made it compulsory for them to do manual labour which was known as *jhara* system. *Jhara* system included carrying loads, building roads, repairing bridges, etc. This *jhara* system gave rise to *pipa* (coolie) system. They had no other means left

15 Joseph Dalton Hooker, *Himalayan Journals - Notes of a Naturalist*, New Delhi, Today & Tomorrow, 1987, p. 130.

16 Cfr. M.C. Pempa Tamang, *Nepalko Itihasma Kipat Pratha ra Tamang Jati*, Upper Sichy, Hyonzon Publications, 2005, p. 11.

17 Cfr. D. T. Zimba, *Tamangko Itihas ani Tambako Charbar*, pp. 33-34.

18 Ishamani Pakhrin, *op.cit.*, p. 11.

19 The land in Nepal had five basic divisions: *Raikar*, *Birta*, *Guthi*, *Sera* and *Kipat*. *Raikar* lands were the lands owned by the state and the cultivators were just the caretakers. They had to submit a heavy tax to the state. *Birta* lands were the lands given as gift by the king to some persons especially to soldiers. *Guthis* were the lands donated to the temples and monasteries by the king. *Sera* lands were the lands kept by the king for his personal investment. *Kipats* were the lands held by a tribe or community in common which had no individual ownership and even a king did not have authority over *kipats*.

for their livelihood than to work as *pipa*. During this time many Tamangs came to Darjeeling and other places in search of peace and a living.

Tamangs had revolted at least twice in the army. Some of them were even dismissed. That's why Tamangs were not allowed to join the army once upon a time. Tamangs were not allowed to join even the British Gorkha regiment. According to a secret agreement between the Nepal regime and the British, soon after the Treaty of Segauli, it was decided that the people living up to Eastern Nepal No.1 (today's Ramechhap, Tam Koshi West, Sindhuli District) and up to Western Nepal No. 1 (today's Dhadir District) were not to be recruited in the army. As a result many Tamangs changed their titles to Gurungs, Rais, Magars etc. to join the army.²⁰ Some Tamangs who were already in the army were also not spared. They were debarred from carrying arms and were asked to carry loads and do menial jobs in the army.²¹ Tamangs were considered as carrion eaters. They were known as *siyena Bhotiyas* (*Bhotiya* people who eat carrion). On the pretext that they were cow eaters, the Hindu regime of Nepal did not permit them to hold any good job in the country. They were made to work as *pipas* (coolies).

Some writers say that Tamangs were the horse riding soldiers (cavalry) who had come from Tibet during Nepal-Tibet war. Later they settled in Nepal and flourished. It is said so because in Tibetan language '*ta*' means 'horse' and '*damag*' means 'soldier'. The two words give rise to a word '*tamag*' which literally means horse riding soldier (cavalry). But the Tamang scholars do not agree with this view and they say that Tamangs neither resemble the Tibetans in their language, culture and behaviour nor do they possess the cavalry art of the Tibetans.²²

Tamang Ethics and Salvation

Tamang ethics is based on the four noble truths (*arya sathya*) and eightfold paths (*astangika marga*) of Buddhism. The *arya* satyas are: there is suffering; there is a cause of suffering; suffering can be removed; there is a way for the removal of suffering. The *astangika marga* (eightfold path) of Buddhism²³ for the removal of suffering or evil is a way of life for the Tamangs as well. Evil is related to suffering and the good is the cessation of suffering. Meditation and walking along the eightfold path would lead us to become *Buddha* (enlightened or purified one). *Nirvana* is the highest good. If the life is not lived in line with *astangika marga* cessation of suffering is out of question. As a result one would not be able to achieve *Bodanga* after death and a new cycle of life will begin. Tamangs believe that everybody either knowingly or unknowingly commits sin in this world. In order to wash away our sins we should do meditations and recite the

20 Cfr. Moktan Dupwangel Tamang, *Rajtantra ra Tamang*, Kathmandu, (published by the author), 1995, pp. 3-5 & 41.

21 Cfr. Ishamani Pakhrin, *op.cit.*, p. 11.

22 Cfr. Ajitman Tamang, *op.cit.*, p. 29.

23 *Astangika margas* are: *samyak drsti*, *samyak smrti*, *samyak vyayama*, *samayak sankalpa*, *samyak vachya*, *samyak karmanta*, *samyak ajiwan* and *samyak samadhi*.

thenga with mantras. *Thenga* is a rosary with 108 beads. One holds each bead and says the mantra *om mani padma hum* (Jewel on the lotus). Tamangs believe that there are eight *lokas* (world or places) and we can be born in any of these eight loks according to our deeds during our lifetime. A person is re-born in either of these places if the sins are not remitted. The proper recitation of the above mantra remits our sins and our birth in any of these *lokas* is stopped. Then we reach Sange Hopamé's kingdom and we need not be born again. They also have the system of rotating *mani dhungyur khorlo* (mystic prayer wheel). A total of 108 prayer wheels are kept round the monasteries. The prayer wheels contain the mantra *om mani padma hum* printed on them. According to their belief the mantra is so powerful that the mere rotating of these wheels could remit the sins. After the death of a person *dhwaja*, religious flags, with the same mantra printed in them, are hoisted. Again the belief is that the mere shaking of the flags by the wind is enough to wash away the sins of the dead person.

Tamangs of Darjeeling and Sikkim

The oppression of the Tamangs under the Gorkha regime was the main reason why they fled to different places. The Tamangs of Darjeeling, Sikkim and Duars are the descendants of Tamangs who migrated from the kingdom of Nepal in search of employment; to work as labourers in construction of roads, railway line and in tea gardens.²⁴ So the history of Tamangs is full of oppression and painful moments. They were ever in search of a new situation and longing for a liberating experience.

Tamangs were the second largest group of people living in the Darjeeling district. However, according to the census of 1961, they overtook the Rais who were the largest in number. According to the census of 1991 there were 2, 75, 000 Tamangs in the Darjeeling and 1, 75, 000 in Jalpaiguri. According to the census collected by the Tamang community itself in 2006, the population of Tamangs in Darjeeling (D.G.H.C.²⁵ area) was 1, 20, 000, which was 32 percent of the total population of Darjeeling (DGHC area only).

Conclusion

Today the Tamang community is in a transitional period. They have become very much conscious of their root culture and identity. They hold seminars at regional, state, national and international levels to keep their culture and identity vibrating with life. The Tamangs, united as one, are fighting for obtaining the status of Scheduled tribe for the Tamangs scattered in many other parts of India. They hold the view that they would like to be liberated from a dominated situation as a whole. After all, as a tribal community, they believe in community spirit. They have their different and unique way of looking at life and the world. The four noble truths (*caturi arya satyani*) and the eightfold paths (*astangika marga*) given by Lord Buddha are surely the basis of their

24 Cfr. Sri Santa Bir Zimba, *Who are Tamangs - A Write Up*, Siliguri, (published by the Author), 1996, p. 3.

25 Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council, presently Gorka Territorial Authority (GTA).

ethics, religion and philosophy. However, their religion at present is a mixture of *Bon dharma* and Buddhism which makes it unique. So one cannot generalise and say that everything about Buddhism is true of the Tamang community and Tamangs are just Buddhists. Surely the *pratityasamutpada*, *tsanikavada*, etc. have good bearings on their belief, thinking and behaving, yet they have their own original belief, thinking, culture and behavioural patterns. All this go on to make the Tamangs, a scheduled tribe of the hills, distinctly unique. Indeed a search for a Tamang philosophy is a worthwhile exercise.