

Constructing the identity of a Tribe through Ethno-Music: A case study of Tamang

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Abstract:

The cultural identity of a certain community can also be studied through the perspective of ethnomusicology, in which music and musical behaviour of that community reflect the culture and cultural changes in it, because music is a reflector as well as effector in culture. The cultural identity of the community has been very much reflecting in their ethnographically identified music system. The paper discusses about the different aspects of this music system and how it can throw light on the history and tradition of the community.

Keywords: Tamang, Culture, Music, Damphu, Identity.

Defining Ethnomusicology

Musicology is a theoretical study of melody, pitch and related phenomenon including the study of scales and tonal system. But with the advent of the concept of ethnomusicology, it changed its dimension and definition. It put emphasis upon the relationship of music with culture. The music does not exist by itself but it is a part of the totality of human behavior. Ethnomusicology is an increasing awareness of the fact that there is more to study on music than to give description only of its form. Ethnomusicology is today being used by cultural anthropology.ⁱ

Journal of the American Musicology Society (Mantle Hood), for the first time defined that "Ethnomusicology is a field of knowledge having as its object the investigation of the art of music as a physical, psychological, aesthetic and cultural phenomenon."ⁱⁱⁱ Ethnomusicology is theoretical application of the music as universal aspect of man's activities. Its basic feature is to understand the people's culture in any form. In the present study a attempt would be made to discuss the cultural identity of Tamang, as reflected in their music, situating the issue in the conceptual framework of ethnomusicology. Moreover, the paper will highlight the social, cultural, psychological and aesthetic phenomenon in relation to their ethnic music. The traditional music and cultural identity blend together to give new dimensional characteristics to the community, but it has some ethno-musicological structural theory, which prescribed certain premises for the construction of cultural identity.

The structural construction of identity through ethno-music can be analysed under the following traits: firstly, the study of musical instruments and other implements by means of which the music is carried out. Secondly, study of song text, which may reveal history of the group, cultural aspects, rituals and customs which reflect the prevailing ethos of the society

and finally, analysis of the category of music and musicians and their role in the society. The present article is written from the viewpoint of the Tamangs, the delineation of the cultural identity being done through their music and musical behaviour. Therefore before going into the music of the Tamangs I would like to introduce the Tamang community in the context of India in general and North Bengal in particular.

Identifying Tamang

Tamangs are one of those Mongoloid races who speak Tibeto-Burmese dialect of Sino-Tibetan language group (Grierson, 1909; Glover, 1970; Hegen, 1960; Bhogalin & Bhogalin 1964).ⁱⁱⁱ Etymologically, the word 'Tamang' is derived from the Tibetan word rTa-dMag (Ta-Mag). Meaning 'Horse-rider' or Cavalry Force in the army of Tibetan King Srong-btSan-Gampo.^{iv} It is believed that Srong-btSan-sGampo was involved in a war with the kingdom of Nepal in 640 A.D. which eventually ended with a matrimonial alliance. However, even after the war, his cavalry did not leave the place but settled down and later came to be known as Tamang. But recent historians and researchers show that Tamangs are also called 'Murmi'^v which means 'inhabitant of borderland' or aborigines of the borderland of this Himalayan region. There are many historians, sociologists and social anthropologists who have tried to explore the history of the Tamangs and their socio-cultural pattern. This tribe of the Sub-Himalayan region has its own language, rituals and religious practices. The traditional belief system of the Tamang is very much similar to that of the primitive religion of ancient Tibet i.e. 'Bon'^{vi} which is purely animistic or similar to shamanism. As Tamangs were inhabitants of the frontier of Tibet in ancient time, they moved towards foothills of modern Nepal and Indian sub-continent in course of time, and were influenced by Hinduism and acculturated by Sanskritisation^{vii} of the area along with their ethnographically identified distinct culture.

This 'Tamang' tribe of the Tibeto-Mongoloid stock inhabiting the sub-Himalayan region is socially and culturally very primitive. Due to the lack of its own script, we have little written historical evidences and information to reconstruct the history of the Tamang community. Despite the dearth of recorded data and information, the community exhibits abundant alternative sources like folklore, folktales, folksongs, ancestral stories, apart from some Buddhist accounts. The finest example of the alternative sources can be seen in the form of Tamba and Ganba.^{viii} However, the Tamba is the story teller (through songs) of the Tamang, who is supposed to be a treasure of information about the culture, tradition and ancestral history of the tribe; the Ganba acts as custodian of the social customs of the Tamang community by supervising each and every ritual and ceremony. These two pillars of oral history of the tribe show the distinctiveness of their culture. The folksongs and folklore, which are the core of Tamang culture, have been transmitted orally through songs from generation to generation. The distinctive ethnographic cultural identity of the Tamangs has been preserved by songs in the beat of their pure ethnic musical instruments called Damphu. Yet the musical behavior of the Tamangs has rarely been studied to narrate their culture as well as their identity. In this backdrop, the present study is designed to capture the basics of Tamang music and musical behaviour which has carried on their cultural identity.

Most of the Tamangs follow the principle of Buddhism, but their social customs are headed by Tamba; literally 'speaker, talker, mouthpiece (guardian of the rites and ritual) and the damphu is a principal accompanying instrument to express his knowledge of rites and rituals. Therefore, the damphu is one of the most important symbols of Tamang ethnic culture. Tamba, being the head of social customs, transmits his knowledge through songs which is called Kairan or Kaiten Whai. The Kairan Whai is a poetic song. The Tamba tells the story starting from the origin of the universe to social behaviour and cultural customs of the Tamangs and thereby keep it alive. The Tamba not only works as bridge during the marriage ceremony between the wife giver and wife taker but, also plays significant role in the funeral ceremony of Tamangs. Tamba still firmly leads the society with customs and rites of high moral values and norms, with the help of his Kairan or Kaiten whai and there is another form of song called Whai or Loka dohari whai i.e. folk duet which is sung in good mood by youths in melodic tune. These songs are known as 'Tamang Selo' in Tamang community.

Traditional Tamang Music and Cultural Identity

Tamang community represents a culture in the rural settings. They are agriculturist or pastoralists in tracts of the sub-Himalayas. Culturally very distinct, the Tamangs are highly fond of music. Music constitutes the principal part of their amusement and is the basic means of sharing of feeling and transmission of knowledge. Their contribution in the field of folksongs, folklore and ethnic musical instrument is highly acknowledgeable. Tamang songs can describe the whole life style, narrate ancestral story and highlight cultural traits and all such things with the beat of damphu, the one and only musical instrument (one side beating drum).^{ix}

The 'damphu' is considered to be one of the basic ethnic identities of the Tamangs. The damphu is used by this community, especially during the social ceremonies like marriages, hair-cutting etc. as the symbol of their ethnic identity. The beating of damphu is an integral part of most of the cultural ceremonies, and this has made it the 'cultural symbol' of the Tamang community as a whole. In addition, the Tamangs actively participate in occasions like fairs and festivals (mela jatra) with dancing to the beat of damphu.

The Kairan whai says about the invention of this ethnic musical instrument in the section of "damphu seba la whai."^x In this we find the story of its invention. Some excerpts of the songs are given in the following photograph.

Damphu

The preparation of damphu has a certain style. Even though it does not have any established theoretical conception of its making there are many vague mythologies about its origin. Rajesh Gautam and Asoke K Thapa Magar recorded the origin of damphu,^{xi}

whai and Tamang belief, the story begins in ancient times, when a mant called Lama Pemdorje, went to the jungle to hunt. He is supposed to have killed and skinned off a ghoral (wild mountain bird). After this, it is believed that Pemdorje desired to make a musical instrument and so he, felt the need of a piece of wood. Thus he cut a branch of a koiralo

(Ambursing) tree and made a ring with the wood. Then he stretched the ghoral's skin over this wooden frame and fastened it at the edges with bamboo nails. Then he beat on this skin and heard the very soft sound. Just at that time, he saw a pair of Danphe and Munal (pigeon like Himalayan bird) birds, one of which, perhaps the male, was trying to impress the other by making a circular of movement -sometime flying and sometimes by sitting regularly. Pemdorje, being impressed by the act of Danphe and Munal, imitated the act and enjoyed it. So he made a replica of Danphe Bird and pasted at the top of damphu with the split of bamboo. While beating the damphu, he also played the split of bamboo, so that replica of the Danphe sprang with the beats of damphu. In this way Pemdorje spread the news of his invention by dancing like Danphe and Munal and popularized this instrument. Thus the majority of Tamang people are seen playing the damphu, which is said to have been invented by Lama Pemdorje. Even more, Lama Pemdorje is also said to have invented the typical Tamang Dance along with Tamang selo. Therefore, damphu, has become the principal cultural identity of the Tamangs in perspective of ethnomusicology.

The text of the Song/Whai/Selo

Another section deals with the text of songs or in Tamang dialect whai, or Selo. According to the Tibetan English dictionary Shey means to sing and Lu stands for song.^{xii} Hence, the word Selo may have been derived from Tibetan word Shelu, which means to sing a song. If we analyse the Tamang Selo, we can find socio-cultural and historical aspects of the community. It is held that song is the smallest poetic explanation of human expression while folksong is the spontaneous presentation of folk culture of human civilization. Bascom said that folklore is applied equally to music therefore music or folklore is studied in anthropology because it is a part of culture. It is a part of man's learned traditions and customs, a part of his social heritage. It can be analysed in the same way as other customs and traditions in terms of form and function, or of interrelations with other aspects of culture. It presents the same problems of growth and change, and is subject to the same process of diffusion, invention, acceptance or rejection and integration. It can be used, like other aspects of culture, for studies of these processes or those of acculturation, patterning, the relation between culture and the environment, or between culture and personality.^{xiii} Hence, folksongs can be grouped into the category of folk literature and Tamang selo is the part and parcel of folk songs.

Classification of Tamang Selo

Music is regarded as mirror of society. It reflects almost all the aspects of socio-cultural life of a community. The prevalent songs of Tamang community can be classified as per content, presentation and occasion of its performance. Folksong of this community presents firstly, historicity of damphu invention and selo by Lama Pemdorje and many ancestral stories, secondly, cultural aspect of the community concerned in which selo gets its meaning and presents the whole rites and customs of the community. Thirdly, social behaviour of the Tamangs through song manifests the ethnographic characteristics of the community.

The Tamangselo is to be performed by the community in all the rites and rituals, festivals, in affection, to welcome or in admiration of seasons and religious ceremony or occasion. Tamangs express their sorrow, happiness, desire and aspiration through the song. The text of

Tamang selo focuses on the importance of blessing of tutelary deity as well as customs attached to it. Such kind of songs basically performed in ceremony of cereal feeding to fant i.e. kankyaba, tonsure ceremony and marriages. The selo related to religious ceremony mainly praises the Buddha Dharma and sacred places of Buddhism. The Tamang selo illuminatingly describes the origin of this universe as per their understanding and beliefs. The songs admit the importance of fairs and festivals for social life and also the positive feelings like affection and adoration. Moreover it also acknowledges the seasonal changes and its usage in rural agriculturist life of the community.

The classification of Tamang selo as per its themes reflects the cultural, social and historical aspects of the community and its performance echoes the music of seasons, ceremonies, rituals, love affection and religion. Moreover, it can be seen from the perspective of nature, economy, and melody and even of the rhythmical elegance. The text contains the sorrow, happiness, aspiration and portrays the village life. It reveres the state and from the core of the heart remembers the ancestral history. Therefore it represents the historical identity of the Tamangs.

Although, the Tamangs recognize the importance of traditional musical genre as a core of their identity, the frequency and importance of performance of Damphu la whai and Tamang Selo seem to be diminishing. People either cannot do justice to its value or are unable to understand its language. It appears that they are losing interest in this traditional music, in the era of modern music system. In other words, it implies that they no longer relate to the traditional rituals and priorities associated with it. Younger educated Tamangs also regard them as outdated one.

However, from the second decade of 20th century, many Tamang organisations^{xiv} have been set up that are working for the revival, preservation and promotion of Tamang culture. Finally, following the establishment of All India Tamang Buddhist Association, in 1981 and its tireless effort the community got the recognition of Scheduled Tribe on 8th January, 2003^{xv} along with the recognition of its distinct ethnic identity. This led to the establishment of Tamang Development and Cultural Board, under Backward Classes Welfare Department, Government of West Bengal in 2014.

The Tamangs used to define their ethnic and cultural identity in relation to other ethnic groups and cultures living within close proximity. Musical traditions of different castes/communities living in the same area have not mixed, but have coexisted separately. However, Tamangs are challenged with adjusting themselves to the Indian national culture and with defining their cultural identity in relation to it. The increasing contact with other communities, influence of globalization, modern education system and influence of mass media has greatly influenced the Tamangs as well as the national culture. Whether the Tamangs can save their cultural heritage from extinction is yet to be seen.

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