

A GLIMPSE OF TAMANG MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

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ABSTRACT

The Tamangs, basically a hilly tribe, are among the forty listed scheduled tribes of West Bengal. In spite of being a colorful tribe, these people have always been neglected. The most popular among all Tamang musical instruments is the damphu, and the instrument is essentially the most prominent symbol of Tamang culture. Tamangs play on the damphu on occasions of worship and prayer, during social picnics or get-togethers, or during any significant occasion for that matter. They generally dance to songs using various bodily postures and steps, keeping rhythm with a bamboo stick. However, keeping in pace with natural laws of change and evolution, the Tamang tribe has undergone seas of change, as there has been transformations in the damphu, the corporeal representation of the Tamang tribal entity. This evolution of the damphu has been both formational and functional.

KEYWORDS: Peng Dorje Anecdote, Tamang Race, Tamang Musical Instruments, The Damphu;

Santveer Lama has mentioned a tradition in his ‘Tamba-koiten’:

Once, when King Peng Dorje and his wife, Ruisang, were tired traveling in the Himalayas, they took shelter beneath a tree, and spotted a herd of tangsaris or ghorals (wild Himalayan goat). King Peng was eager shooting down one with his arrow, but his queen impeded him. The king, however, ignored his wife’s requests not to hurt the animals, and shot a goat dead. This deeply grieved the queen who urged the king over and again to bring the poor animal back to life. The king explained that it was no longer possible to give the dead animal its life back, although he was likely to devise ways in which the memories of the dead goat became immortal among humans. The king then cut off the dead goat’s skin and crafted a damphu out of it, and together with his consort, started dancing the ‘dafa-munal’ or the ‘peacock dance’ – the dance of amorous passions – to the tunes of the damphu. In this context, King Peng is the Tamang equivalent of the Hindu deity ‘Mahadeva’, while Queen Ruisang is the Tamang representation of Goddess ‘Parvati’. The Tamang word ‘tamba’ refers to an old sagacious person in the society through whom unsaid lore of the forefathers are revealed. Henceforth the Tamangs are of firm conviction that they are the descendants of ‘Shiva’ or ‘Mahadeva’.

In reality, the Tamangs are one of the oldest tribes of Nepal. 'Ta' means horse, while 'Mang' refers to ghost or spirit. Thus the word 'Tamang' should be taken to mean the 'horse-riding spirit'. Historically, the Tamangs are also known as 'Murmis', meaning 'people of the frontiers or borderlands'. They are alternately known as Ishang or Sain. The Tamangs were, in reality, outstanding horsemen, and hence possibly their name 'Tamang' or 'horse-riding spirits'. The word 'Tamang' has been derived from the Tibetan 'Tamak' meaning 'cavalry'. According to traditions, the Bonpo faith was prevalent in Tibet prior to Buddhism, and the word 'Bonpo' referred to ghosts and spirits. During those days the Tamangs were in fact regarded as demons or devils. According to another popular belief, the Tamangs are a branch of the Tibetan Tantric Vajrayana sect of Buddhism known as 'Ningmapa Panth'. The Tamang tribe is found extensively in Nepal, East Bhutan, Myanmar, and in Sikkim and the tea garden areas of the Duars region in the Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal.

The Bhutanese kingdom engaged itself in war against the then British Indian government between 1864 and 1865. Bhutan was defeated, and consequently the Duars area was annexed into British India. In 1876 the East India Company decided to clear off dense forests to set up tea estates. During this time, thousands of Tamang people evicted from their places by oppressive Nepali feudal lords, migrated to the Duars region and started working in British tea gardens as cheap laborers. Even today these people, in most cases, are deprived and neglected in the society. Losing lives in simple black-fever is too common a phenomenon among the Tamang tribal people even in today's medically advanced society. No one seems much bothered about their plight, perhaps not even the Tamangs themselves.

Presently, the Tamangs form members of the speakers of the Tibeto-Burman language family belonging to the Sino-Tibetan group of the Mongolian division. The Tamang musical instruments may be divided into the five following groups:

- (i) Stringed instruments – played with the finger;
- (ii) Stringed instruments – played with a bow;
- (iii) Percussion instruments;
- (iv) Wind instruments played by blowing in air from the mouth and
- (v) Wind instruments played with the fingers

The instruments are crafted out of (a) wood; (b) metal; (c) mud; (d) hide and (e) human leg bones. The notable Tamang musical instruments include (1) kaling (made out of human leg bone, tibia); (2) khandi; (3) ganggop; (4) jarunge; (5) gyapung; (6) damba; (7) dilbu; (8)

Tamang ghyaling; (9) Tamang tungna which resembles the 'dutarā'; (10) pihung; (11) thunder; (12) tung; (13) puli; (14) bupsul; (15) bhatu madal; (16) sindung; (17) silyang; (18) lava; (19) choidor; (20) muchunga; (21) dhangroo and (22) damphu.

As has already been mentioned, the damphu is the most important musical instrument of the Tamangs. This completely spherical instrument somewhat resembles a tambourine. It is basically an accompanying instrument and its sound is baritone. The damphu is generally of two types: (a) regular damphu, and (b) bird-shaped damphu. A regular damphu generally comes with a small bamboo stick to keep rhythm, while in a bird-shaped damphu, an extra wooden bird carved with exceptional craftsmanship, is attached. The wooden bird in a bird-shaped damphu is so adjusted that when the damphu is played upon the bird seems to dance to the rhythm of its tune. The damphu is made out of the soft dermis of goat-skin. Thirty two small wooden pieces are used to augment the tension of the membrane. On the outer portion of the instrument the epidermis of the skin, along with the cuticles, is clearly visible along its circumference.

The damphu is quite simple to be played. It expresses simple rhythms like the cataśra (4/4 beat). The second and third strikes are made with four fingers of the right hand in a straight fashion. On the other hand, both the suspension and intensity of the first strike are comparatively higher. A long stick is used to generate the sound. The instrument is struck near its periphery while playing. The end of the periphery is a constant motionless node, and hence there is always a chance of special secondary notes being generated. Damphu is marked by the absence of khiran, and hence cannot be categorized as a loaded membrane.

On striking a damphu the leather membrane vibrates, alternately compressing and releasing air. In this way the constant vibration generates a deep-toned sound.

Songs sung along with a damphu are called 'ohai'. During an ohai performance group dances, known as 'damphu dance', are performed. Although the damphu is not played in religious dance performances like the bakpa, jungba or choi, yet it must be said that the social life of the Tamang ethnic people are tuned to the deep tones of the damphu.

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