

## Revisiting the History to Reclaim Identities: A Critical Analysis of Syangtan and Tamang's Texts

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**Abstract:** The indigenous *Tamang* community incorporates an arduous history of marginalisation since they were categorised as 'enslavable alcohol drinkers' and unremittingly exploited by the *Rana* and *Shah* rulers of Nepal. Junga Bahadur Rana's *Muluki Ain* (The Country Code, 1854) adopted Hindu religious values and validated caste-based social hierarchy dominated the *Tamang* community and rejected their identities. However, after the latest democratic movement of 2006, each peripheral community, including the *Tamang*, started rigorously raising their voice and fore-fronted the issue of their identity. In this regard, the paper critically analyses Raju Syangtan's poem "What does Pipa mean?" (2023) and Subas Tamang's painting "Study of History IV" (2021), which extensively portray *Tamang's* history of marginalisation and consistent effort to reclaim their identity. Both texts unfold the plights and predicaments of the *Tamangs* when the state devalued them as mere porters, subdued their voices and pushed them towards the margin. Moreover, they revisit the past and raise questions against the state authority, which becomes instrumental to their identity claim. To analyse the structural marginalisation of the *Tamangs*, I have employed Michel Foucault's concept of "power" along with Stuart Hall's idea of "representation and misrepresentation" as theoretical backing.

**Keywords:** Indigenous Community, Tamang, Marginalisation, Resistance, Identity Reclaim

### Introduction

The indigenous *Tamang* community of Nepal has a long history of state domination and marginalisation. They suffered due to the implementation of Prime Minister Junga Bahadur Rana's

*Muluki Ain* (The Country Code), which authenticated the Hindu social system and caste hierarchy. The state-enforced caste division provided higher status to Brahmin and Chhetri, whereas *Dalit* (untouchable) and some other groups, including the *Tamang*, were placed at the lower rank in the social structure. Even though the *Tamangs* were not untouchable, they were placed just an inch above the *Dalit* when the nation preserved every right to regulate their life. Since *Muluki Ain* categorised them as ‘enslavable alcohol drinkers’, the ruling class and elites got full authority to control and even enslave them.

Consequently, the state law itself became instrumental in the structural oppression and unremitting sufferings of the *Tamang* community. In this context, the paper concentrates on “What does Pipa mean?” (2023), a poem by Raju Syangtan and “Study of History IV” (2021), a painting by Subas Tamang, to critically analyse how these creative works revisit the *Tamang’s* history and reclaim their identity. Regarding structural power-game as a vital means to misrepresentation and domination of the Tamangs, I have employed Michel Foucault’s (1978) concept of “power” and Stuart Hall’s (1997) idea of “representation” as theoretical support.

Raju Syantana is a poet from the indigenous *Tamang* community who has been raising their voice against structural biases towards the *Tamangs* through his poems. Mainly, his poems concentrate on marginalised communities, their issues of subjugation and their strong voice for equality, justice and identity. His latest anthology of poems, *O Pengdorje!* (2023), has been a critically acclaimed collection that mainly raises the voice of the *Tamangs* and peripheral groups. Similarly, Subas Tamang is a renowned visual artist from the *Tamang* community of Nepal who has exhibited his art in solo exhibitions that trace out the predicaments and history of marginalisation of the community. His latest solo exhibition, *History, Memory, Identity* (2021), has profusely portrayed several measures of state domination on the *Tamangs* and their identity claim. Both *Syangtan* and *Tamang* have conspicuously explained the power game, the horrid experiences of *Tamangs* and their resisting voices through their creative works. I have selected them since they not only unveil the issue of *Tamang’s* marginalisation but also provide ample space to explore the issue of identity.

Concentrating on the issue of the Tamang community, this paper focuses on revisiting the terrible past, painful memories and the issue of their identity claim exhibited in the creative expression of *Syangtan* and *Tamang*.

### **Revisiting the History**

Autocratic ruler Junga Bahadur Rana's *Muluki Ain* had not only established a social hierarchy based on castes but also immensely exploited untouchable and indigenous communities. Among the indigenous people, the *Tamang* had suffered massively due to the biased state law and the attitude of the rulers. They were not even allowed to write their caste, '*Tamang*'. In this regard, Raj Kumar Dikpal states that the documents of the Shah era had addressed today's *Tamangs* as '*Murmi/Bhotiya*' (43). The *Tamangs* had to resist and wait for eight decades to regain their real caste with social validation. Related to this issue, András Hófer reminds the history when they were allowed to write their caste, "A decree signed by king Tribhuwan and the then Rana Prime Minister Bhim Samser lays down that, instead of the hitherto employed designations Lama and Bhote, henceforth the designation *Tamang* from among the caste of the Bhote (12 Tamang Jatika bhoteko jat) shall not be called *Lama* (or) *Bhote* in documents...but shall be called *Tamang*" (125). There onwards, the *Tamangs* were officially permitted to write their caste '*Tamang*' in 1932; otherwise, they were addressed with derogatory terms and represented quite negatively.

During the Rana regime, the *Tamangs* were prohibited from joining any prestigious governmental posts and services. They got no chance of recruitment in the army. In this context, D. B. Lama shares the bitter reality that his father had to change his caste from Lalitman Lama to 'Lalitman Ghale' to join the army (9). In those days, the other ethnic communities, such as Rai, Limbu, Gurung, and Magar, had easy access to the army, whereas the *Tamangs* were excluded entirely. The ones who wanted the job were compelled to change their caste to meet the minimum requirement secretly. It shows structural brutality that had crushed the dignity of the *Tamangs* and impelled them to sacrifice their real caste. Different researchers have focused on similar issues and pointed out the historical injustices and negative portrayal of the *Tamangs*. Francis Buchanan

Hamilton has unveiled a dominating state attitude towards the community. He describes that the doctrines of *Lamas (Tamangs)*, who were called *Murmi* and *Bhotiya*, were unacceptable to *Gorkhalese*, that they were taken as thieves and therefore not permitted to enter the Kathmandu valley (49). Hamilton's explanation exposes the austere Hindu rulers' hegemony, who deliberately excluded the *Tamang* community and devalued them, disseminating several misrepresentations and negativity about them.

The issue of representation and misrepresentation of people, communities or places articulate imbalanced power relationships. The one who holds power has the full authority to represent or stereotype the other groups. Fore-fronting the case of representation of Black people, Hall sheds light upon the representation and stereotyping of Blacks. He argues that representation is a complex business dealing with the 'differences' (226). Typically, 'difference' invokes negative feelings for others. Therefore, it splits and divides the people.

Similarly, Hall highlights the danger of representing some groups through stereotyping. As he argues, "Stereotypes get hold of the few 'simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognised' characteristics about a person, reduce everything about the person to those traits, ...stereotypes reduce, essentialises, naturalises and fixes 'difference'" (258). Hall has taken the case of Black people; however, in the context of Nepal, the indigenous *Tamang* community has been stereotyped as less intelligent and only valid for physical labour. There are several stereotypical and derogatory perspectives about the *Tamangs*; for instance, they are generally understood as 'aggressive,' 'angry,' 'unintellectual' and 'pigheaded.' Such representation and images deplete their real personality to just fixed characteristics, which is equally disrespectful to the whole community. The power centres play a huge role in the formation of such negative images of the particular caste or community. Several institutions in society regulate power over people with or without their knowledge. Foucault claims that power is present at every level of the social body, which is utilised by very diverse institutions and becomes the factor of segregation and social hierarchisation (141). In fact, several social institutions, from family to prison, disseminate power and control people. In a

similar manner, every state and power bloc exercises power upon less powerful and marginal people. For centuries, the Shah and the Rana rulers of Nepal exercised excessive power, exploited the indigenous *Tamang* community and forced them to be labourers and *Pipa* (a porter and the lowest rank in the army).

Visual artist Subas Tamang revisits the past and traces the unimaginably painful time his ancestors had come across. His painting ‘Study of History IV’ visualises the enslavement and hard labour of his forefathers, who were compelled to carry the Rana’s cars and walk along innumerable hills and mountains to land in Kathmandu valley.



Fig 1. ‘Study of History IV’ by Subas Tamang

Until Tribhuvan Highway was constructed in 1956, Kathmandu valley was isolated and unlinked to *Terai* through roadways. The *Rana* and *Shah* nobilities hired robust and sturdy *Tamang* porters to carry every necessary goods for the capital, including cars. The porters who carried the cars through the steep hills of *Bhimphedi* to *Thankot* were mostly *Tamangs*. It was due to the state law and the

structural domination that a particular caste group was involved in such hard labour. The *Rana* rulers continuously assigned the *Tamangs* as porter and forced them into compulsory labour. Several writers and researchers have discussed their involvement in such toil. Among them, Dor Bahadur Bista internalises the *Tamangs*' condition and narrates their perspective, "During the *Rana* period, they assigned us as porters and for low-level jobs inside and outside their palace. Even in the army, they used to recruit us only for load carrying battalion" (42). Bista's description comprehends the biased state attitudes towards the *Tamangs*. It seems they were only taken as physical bodies, which comply with their misunderstanding or misrepresentations of the *Tamang* community as less brainy and, therefore, are only suitable for physical works. In this regard, *Tamang's* painting conspicuously narrates the story of the *Tamang* people's predicaments, helplessness, and suffering.

The artist has chosen black and grey colours, most probably to shed light upon the arduous journey and hardship of the *Tamang* porters. Most of them are sparsely dressed and barefoot. The high-raised position of the car and the stooped shoulders of the porters symbolise the *Tamangs*' lowly and brutally crushed position. Nadine Plachta and Subas Tamang portray the actual condition of the car carrier porters. They postulate:

Sixty-four men, most of them *Tamangs* from villages of Makwanpur district, were hired to balance the vehicle on their shoulders. Sweat dripped down their weathered faces. Loose shirts and pants were gridded with cotton cloths around their waists. Some men walked barefoot, while others had made slippers woven from straw. They earned less than a rupee for the whole treacherous eight-day journey, which traversed two steep mountain passes.  
(25)

*Plachta* and *Tamang* depict the heart-wrenching conditions and circumstances of the *Tamang* porters, who were paid less despite their bone-breaking labour for more than a week. The last car carrier in Nepal, Dhan Bahadur Gole, shared his car-carrying experience and about payment to Suraj Kumar Bhujel. He describes that he carried the cars for two decades when he received only five anna (less than a rupee) for each carrying (2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph). The rulers were so exploitative toward the *Tamangs*

that they could enforce them to work either for free or with meager wages. Moreover, they compelled the community to serve them based on biased *Muluki Ain*, which categorised the *Tamangs* as an ‘enslavable’ group. Consequently, they had to provide their free service to their masters without any complaints. *Tamang’s* painting vividly visualises the hardship and sufferings of the *Tamang* people, who spilt their sweat and blood for the luxurious life of the aristocratic Rana rulers and the royalties.

### **Reclaiming the Identity**

After the downfall of the Rana regime in 1951, Nepal received democracy and also witnessed the novel consciousness of the common people. From there onward, people started raising strong voices for their space, rights, and freedom. However, it did not last long since King Mahendra imposed a *panchayat* system (no party system) through a coup d’état in December 1960. His action revived the authoritarian Hindu ruling system, which was based on caste hierarchy and the exclusion of several castes and communities. However, the marginalised people from different castes and communities were united to tackle the newly developed political scenario and also to resist the autocratic ruler. In this regard, Mahendra Lawati posits, “The CHHEM (Caste Hill Hindu Elite Males) consolidated their hold with the consolidation of the state and inequality as well as the exclusion of numerous ethnic, caste, religious and linguistic group began or became consolidated during this period” (2). The solidarity of several groups, on the one hand, became instrumental in the restoration of democracy, whereas, on the other hand, it made people aware of the issue of identity. After the restoration of democracy in 1990, the mobilisation of ethnic groups accelerated. Lawati’s opinion is more appropriate to recall the rise of ethnic voices during the 1990s and the new millennium. He states that many ethnic organisations built cultural capital by reasserting their religious culture and also spreading the discourses related to their rights (15). It was after the 2005 democratic movement the indigenous community became more vocal about the issue of their identity. The marginalised people started consistently raising questions against the authorities and the power blocs. Syangtan’s poem “What does ‘Pipa’ mean?” captures dissenting voices of the marginalised *Tamang* community, which have been presented through several questions.

Syangtan's poem portrays the enslaved and oppressed condition of the *Tamangs* as well as their realisation of past sufferings. Several socio-political changes and, mainly, the second democratic movement of 2005/06 have implanted resisting consciousness in every marginalised caste, group, and community. After the historical movement, the *Tamang* community started questioning the authority and raising their voices of dissent. The poem narrates the story of a *Tamang* child who is born to be a labourer or a porter, just like his father and forefathers. He is the descendant of the same caste group who were enforced into compulsory labour by the *Rana* rulers in the past. David Holmberg and Kathryn S. March's research on the ethnic *Tamang* community has revealed the state's oppression of them. Especially *Nuwakot* and *Rasuwa* districts are principally inhabited by the ethnic community known as *Tamang*, who were brought under the compulsory labour system named *rakam* for the production of paper, charcoal and the necessary things for the state. In this regard, Holmberg and March depict:

Tamang villagers from these regions were required to work in royal fruit plantations to produce paper for the administration, to cut fodder and transport herding stations which supplied clarified butter to royal palaces, to act as regular porters for the military and civil administrations, and to produce and grind charcoal for the production of gunpowder at a factory in Nuwakot. These forms of compulsory labour were known locally as *byengi rakam*... (11)

It clarifies the fact that the *Rana* rulers and the state agents had brutally exploited the *Tamang* community for the production and transportation of necessary things to the capital. The *Tamangs* were always under state surveillance, and they could not escape their fate. Consequently, they were deprived of economic resources and remained in poverty and socially backward conditions. Nowadays, they don't work in royal herds or fruit plantations; nonetheless, they are compelled to move from their village to *Yambu* (Kathmandu) in search of some labour work due to the lack of resource reach and education. The bitter fact is that even today, most of the porters, labourers and rickshaw pullers in Kathmandu are the *Tamangs*. Because of the state bias, the ethnic *Tamang*



community had suffered in the past, which has been continuing. *Syangtan*, in his poem, presents the same reality:

Today, in my house  
a chained baby has been born  
... ..  
He cannot go to school.  
Instead, he will be compelled to go to *Yambu*  
To become a conductor of a mini-bus  
To wash dishes in a hotel.

(*Syangtan*, 113, Trans. Lama)

The *Tamang* people leave their village in search of a better life. However, they are compelled to be involved in lowly jobs. It happens mostly due to their lack of proper education and qualifications. For being so, several things are responsible—the most important is the state law and the rulers' attitudes towards them. They were deprived of education and resources in the past. They were rejected for any government services except the post, *Pipa*, in the army. *Pipa* is the lowest rank in the army, just like a porter, who had to support every necessary logistic arrangement for the battalion. Lama reminds us that the department named *pipa goswara* was established in the army for the recruitment of the *Tamangs*. He states, “In *pipa goswara*, mainly they were limited to physical tasks such as cutting timber, carrying loads, erecting tents, etc” (9). It shows that they were treated completely as slaves and put aside from any higher and intellectual jobs. The nation still shows an indifferent attitude towards this community. As a result, their forefathers' time and predicaments have reappeared in grandchildren's lives, too. Despite several political movements and social changes in Nepal, overall, the life of the *Tamang* community has not been drastically changed yet. They are still struggling at the margin. However, they have started internalising the painful past of their ancestors, the suppression of the rulers, and their state-dominated condition. Exposure to such unimaginable facts

has throbbled their heart and minds, which have led them to the path of dissidence. These days, they have started questioning and claiming their identity. The following stanzas unveil the same thing:

Why at midnight  
uncountable beheaded people  
carrying broken *damphu*  
gather beside the statute of Junga Bahadur *apa?*

... ..

My grandchildren will ask him again.

What does *Pipa* mean *apa?*

(Syangtan, 115, Trans. Lama)

Syangtan has used “beheaded people” as a symbol of the immensely subjugated *Tamang* community, whose head or brain was never acknowledged and only represented as physical labourers by the state authority. It could also be the symbolic representation of the *Tamang* rebels who were massively butchered by the state. It is said that a thousand *Tamangs* were beheaded when they raised their voice and revolted. Mohan Gole Tamang mentioned that when the *Tamangs* from *Lachyang, Nuwakot*, revolted against the state in 1793, a huge number of the army went from Kathmandu and massacred a thousand *Tamang* rebels (72). The then rulers silenced the voices of the common people through violence. However, these days, the same people come out at midnight, carrying their *damphu* (a *Tamang* musical instrument) and gathering beside the statue of Junga Bahadur, who had authenticated caste hierarchy through *Muluki Ain*. They meet at midnight to threaten the dominating rulers and to claim their snatched spaces. Moreover, the exposure of the *Tamang* ancestors’ musical instruments, such as *damphu* and *tungna*, also “articulates their identity” (65) in Lama's perception. In fact, such cultural symbols are powerful means to exhibit the socio-cultural identity of any ethnic community.

The new socio-political phenomenon developed after the 2005/06 democratic movement has inspired every marginalised caste and community to raise their voice. As a result, the grandchildren of the state-dominated *Tamangs* have broken their silence and started questioning the authority. In

fact, only conscious and politically aware people could raise questions and point towards the ruler's misdeeds. In this sense, today's *Tamang* youths are conscious enough to revisit their past and question the state, which has become instrumental to their identity reclaim.

### **Conclusion**

Despite immense capabilities, the indigenous *Tamang* community was consistently dominated by the *Shah* and *Rana* rulers of Nepal. They were forced into compulsory physical labour and involved in the lowest job in the army. The then rulers could exercise any exploitative measures on the *Tamangs* since Junga Bahadur's *Muluki Ain* categorised them as "enslavable alcohol drinkers." Through the imposition of state law, the *Tamangs* were extremely dominated and devalued. The rulers subdued their voices and treated them as mere slaves. The authority only involved them in hard jobs, such as paper production, working in the royal fruit plantation and car carrying tasks. Amid unfavourable structural subjugation, the whole community was deprived of education, resources and identity. However, when the country entered into the new socio-political scenario, particularly after the 2005/06 democratic movement, every marginalised caste and community, including the *Tamangs*, started raising the issue of identity, space and equality. Against this background, the paper has critically analysed Raju Syangtan's poem "What does 'Pipa' mean?" and Subas Tamang's visual art "Study of History IV" that recall the past to claim their identity.

Both *Syangtan* and *Tamang* have revisited the past and explored biases and oppressive attitudes of the state and rulers towards the *Tamang* community. The *Tamangs* were misrepresented as porters, labourers and brainless communities only for the validation of Hindu caste-based social hierarchy. Trapped by the law for centuries, the *Tamangs* only nodded their head and followed the orders of their masters. However, the recent democratic movements and social changes have ignited their consciousness and rebellious spirit, which have encouraged them to revisit their past and raise questions against the rulers and the power centres. Their continuous intervention against the discriminatory measures of the state and dissenting voices authenticate their identities reclaim.

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