

Shifting Identity of Tamu Lhosar From Cultural To Political

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Abstract

Tamu Lhosar is Gurungs' New Year which is celebrated every year in the 15th of Poush (approximately December 30) is the biggest festival for Gurungs (Tamu). Tamu Lhosar has become a national festival and enjoys public holiday. This paper aims at exploring out the changing practice of Tamu Lhosar celebrated in Kathmandu Valley through ethnographic approach. Interview, interaction, participant's observation were done to gather information. Besides, relevant literature was reviewed and, speech given in the program, press release and media news were also analyzed. I tried to apply both in *emic* and *etic* perspective in this research. The research found that Tamu Lhosar was stated to celebrate in Kathmandu in 2036 BS (1979 A.D) and then every year. It has been celebrating not only for preserving their culture, cultural identity, and uniting all Tamus residing in Kathmandu valley but also for raising awareness, demonstrating strength and advocating for their rights and issues. Along with changing socio-cultural and political context of the country, the practice of Tamu Lhosar is changing. The move is looking towards social and political transformation. In the starting years, it was celebrated with aim to preserve and promote culture, language and cultural identity of the Gurung community. But nowadays, its purpose has become wider and multipurpose. Tamu Lhosar is more focused in cities and urban areas. The inter organizations (Tamu samaj) of Gurung community actively participate in the festivals demonstrating their folk songs, dance, dresses and ritual activities. Now, Gurungs use this festival also as a platform to expose their cultural identity and political power as well. The big mass of the community that gather every year in the open central space of Kathmandu city has drawn the attraction of the people nationwide, activist and major political parties and leaders. The young generation are also boosting up the importance of Tamu Lhosar in the urban context. The celebration of Tamu Lhosar

no more carry the message of their cultural preservation but its practice has shifted beyond it and demands for the institutionalization of their rights through their own federal state in the country. The ethnic identity of Gurungs thus now is marching for political identity.

Keywords: Tamu Lhosar, barga, cultural identity, political identity, ethnic identity.

Introduction

The Gurung is one of the indigenous communities of Nepal, particularly the hill and mountain. They live primarily in the Gandaki zone, mainly Lanjung, Kaski, Tanahu, Gorkha, Parbat, Syangja, Mustang, Manang and Dolpa. At present, Gurungs have migrated all over Nepal and live in big cities mostly in the north-western part of Nepal, and also live in many places of India, Bhutan and western countries. They have businesses in the large cities of Kathmandu and Pokhara. Gurung people, also is called Tamu, have their own language (Gurung language), typical culture, religion, belief and lifestyle. Gurungs have a rich tradition of music and culture. They have their own music and dancing history.

Gurung community predominantly practices ancient Bon religion, which is Shamanistic and animistic in nature, but later they came to adopt Tibetan Buddhism. Gurung *Pye* refers to the very beginning of civilization, more than eight or nine thousand years ago (Gurung, 2035 BS). They tell the origin of human beings and of the materials that they used. Tamu Priests still use some of these primitive utensils in their rituals. Agriculture and animal husbandry traditionally the sheep keeping is their main traditional occupation. There are roughly 450,000 Gurungs in Nepal totaling about 2.43% of the population (CBS, 2012). Rodhi, a typical institution, folk dances like Ghatu, Chudka, and Ghumauneghar (rounded house) etc. are famous for knowing Gurung community.

Tamu Lhosar (Gurung new year) is the main festival of this community, however there are also two other types of Lhosars called Sonam Lhosar (of Tamang) and Gyalpoor GyalmoLhosar (of Sherpa) (Sherpa, 2014 in www.ekantipur.com). TamuLhosar is also known as 'Tolo' or 'tola' Lhosar (Tamu, n.d.). Tamu Lhosar is

celebrated on every 15 Poush of the Nepali calendar (approx. 30 December). It is important as it is welcoming new year and cultural festival of the Gurung community. Gurungs all around the world celebrate this festival as a special and the most important festival by organizing several kinds of cultural and non-cultural activities. Lhosar has become a national festival as well as, nowadays, it has become a cross-culture tools (ibid).

Tamu Lhosar is not only their socio-cultural aspect but also political aspect. Along with changing context of the whole society and the state -Nepal, purpose of celebrating Tamu Lhosar has been changed from cultural identity to political identity. It does not mean that it has lost its purpose but the political aspect has been strongly associated with it. A culture expert, Dr. Jagaman Gurung, recalls that, in his childhood time, it was celebrated only in village, gradually started to celebrate in cities (Kathmandu, Pokhara) and it was purely cultural but it has become more political too (in the sense of a way to raise Gurungs' political issues as their rights. It indicates that Gurung community especially the organizers in the major cities of the country use this festival as an important and special occasion to put their political agendas and get response/support from the political leaders.

This paper has been prepared based on an ethnographic study. The main purpose of my research was to explore the past and present practices of Tamu Lhosar celebration, the shifting messages with the festival from local to national and international community. Based on this, paper discusses on how do Gurungs celebrate their Lhosar in Kathmandu Valley and what are meanings and messages are carried behind its celebration. This ethnography paper includes introduction of Tamu Lhosar, research methodology, research findings, discussion linking with theory, conclusion and implications.

Research Methods

Under the non-positivistic research paradigm, I applied ethnographic research approach in this study. I purposively selected Tamu Lhosar, as an event, celebrated in this year (Poush 15, 2071 BS) in Kathmandu. I focused my ethnographic study with aim to

know the shifting practice of Tamul Lhosar from cultural identity to political identity. Ethnography is defined as the process of immersing oneself as a researcher in the social setting to be studied, and this typically involves methods of participant observation, interviews and/or documentary analysis (Cresswell, 2007). So far, for collecting the information, I applied some popular qualitative methods such as participant observation, interview and discussion, and review literature including media news, articles and opinion expressed by political parties and their leaders. I prepared some probing questions and I made further questions by following their answers/information during the interaction.

As a participant observer, I was involved and observed various activities and functions that organized / conducted in the occasion of Tamu Lhosar. I engaged nearly a month - from preparatory meeting of different organizer Tamu organizations to review after celebration the main program that was organized in Tudikhel (Sainik Munch). In the process of collecting information, I conducted special interview with 12 participants like culture experts, leaders, chairperson of the Tamu Dhin Nepal, Tamu Samaj, Paiyu Khola Tamu Samaj and activists. I conducted interview both formal and informal. Besides, I discussed with some of them in small groups (male youths, students and female home-makers). I also informally talked with Gurung children and non-Gurung people who have been observing this festival since few years.

As I delimited the scope of the study because of the limited time duration, I conducted this study with focus to this year's Lhosar (one event). An ethnographer can become involved in the activities of the group that they are studying (Mills & Morton, 2013). In addition to researcher, as I am from Gurung community, I tried to analyze this festival or conducted research both *emic* and *etic* perspective. But, as a researcher, I tried to maintain researcher's ethics while discussion, analyzing and concluding the research work and maintain the quality standard of this research.

Brief Introduction of Tamu Lhosar

Literally, the term "Lhosar" is composed from two words "Lho" which means "barga or Group" and "Sar" which means

“New”. Gurungs divide time into cycles of 12 years (which is called “lohokor”), to each year of which a special name is given, which is known as barga (Lho). Lhosar also heralds the change in ‘Lho’. According to the oriental astrological system, there are 12 Lhos namely “garuda”, “serpent”, “horse”, “sheep”, “monkey”, “bird”, “dog”, “deer”, “mouse”, “cow”, “tiger” and “cat”. Therefore, each year is marked by a particular animal and they are arranged in a single circle (on paper), closely following the Tibetan calendar with its’ 12 animals. In early days, when there was no calendar system in Nepal, the 12 rotation system was used to calculate peoples’ ages (Tamu, n.d., in www.escnepal.com.np).

There is no any record when it was started but elderly Gurungs also believe that it was started with civilization of this community (Gurung, 2035 BS). Tamu Lhosar is celebrated on every 15th of the ninth month (Poush) of the Nepali calendar (approx. 30 December). These days, especially in major cities, Gurungs come together to celebrate Tamu Lhosar at a common place and rejoice in various cultural processions, feasting and merry-making. In the past, this Lhosar was celebrated only in Gurung villages and still they celebrate it there. Since more than three decades, Gurungs celebrate this festival in cities where they became united.

Tamu Lhosar Celebrated in Kathmandu This Year

In Kathmandu valley, Tamu Lhosar of this year (Poush 15, 2072 BS or December 2015) was celebrated by organizing a big program at Tudikhel. There was an organizer committee which had formed in the representatives of the Gurung organizations. In the occasion of this festival, a week long program was programs were carried out in the valley. A week long program included various kinds of activities like interaction and talk program, book release, honour to the journalists and chairpersons of regional branches of Tamu Samaj and prominent personalities, sports competition, cultural programs and dancing and singing competition etc. in Kathmandu valley, there are more than one and half dozen national level organizations of Gurungs (e.g. Tamu Chhochdi, Tamu Students’ Society, Tamu Artists, etc.) which involve in the programs.

In the main day (Poush 15), main program was organized in

Tudikhel where Gurungs of the Kathmandu valley came together and participated in different activities like cultural rally, food festival, dancing and singing, playing and wishing each other. In the day, one of the main part of that day program was speech (express of opinion by the guests). Not only Gurung, personalities from different fields but also Prime Minister, minister, representatives of the political parties and other social organizations expressed wishes and put their view in the current political agendas. As I observed, most of the Gurungs (both men and women) who presented their cultural dress and ornaments, and organizations were with their banners. I observed that there was a large number of non-Gurung people too in the program. If those who are in Kathmandu valley then they celebrate it in Tundikhel ground. The government has declared this day as public holiday for celebrating this festival. As I got informed from a culture expert Dr Jagaman Gurung, in his initiative, they started to celebrate Tamu Lhosar in Kathmandu in 2036 BS in a home of Krishna Bahadur Gurung, and then in 2037 BS and 2038 BS in Kanya Campus, Thamel.

Research Findings

In this ethnographic study I explored that Tamu Lhosar is still in practice not only in rural village but also in capital city Kathmandu but practices is being change along with changing context. Its purpose has become widen than the past. For instant, it was celebrated by focusing to its socio-cultural values and importance but, at present, it is additionally used as an effective platform to raise their political agendas. Major findings of this studies are present as below:

Tamu Lhosar as a way of cultural identity of Gurungs

When I observed this year's Tamu Lhosar, most of Gurungs of all age-groups were wearing their cultural dress and ornaments (Bhangra, Kachhad and Topi by males, and Ghalek, blouses, patuka, large gold earrings and semi-precious stone necklaces by females). In the main Lhosar day, it was easily observed that they organized Dohori songs, dances, typical and traditional sports of this community; stalls of typical; Gurung dishes (food items) including home-made alcohol (raksi). Besides, that as a part of

the main program, Gurungs participated in cultural rally holding banners, their playing instruments (that were played). Within the Tundikhhen, it could be easily observed that there were many small groups of Gurung people who were sitting together, talking each other, entertaining and sharing foods among the group participants. All these were showing Gurung culture. When I asked the participants of some groups what they are doing and why? Then they immediately replied that that was their culture and they were there to celebrate Lhosar and enjoy in the group.

In this regards, one of the participants, Mrs Hai Kumari Gurung, a vice-president of Tamu Mahila Sangh, said:

My permanent home is Parbat. Now, I live in Lalitpur since last 15 years. I am regularly involving in Lhosar when I came to Kathmandu. We also used to celebrate Lhosar in our village. We have an organization namely Paiyu Khola Mahila Samaj, in which we all are from our origin plan - Paiyukhola. We celebrate Lhosarin Kathmandu by gathering in Tundikhel every year. It is our culture and identity which we should preserve.

Indeed, Gurungs get opportunity to show their culture and preserving and promoting their cultural identity. Traditional belief is also associated with culture or considered as a part of this. Gurungs have a traditional belief associated with Lhosar and still they practice. In this Lhosar, a new *barga* or calendar was changed (i.e. sheep *barga*). A special ritual was done for goodness and peace so that it is believed that any barrier will not come whole year for those people who are under this *barga*. Another female member of Paiyu Khola Tamu Samaj explained;

In Lhosar, for new *barga*, we also do a ritual hoping that there will be goodness (any barriers will not come) whole year. This ritual is called 'syaisyaigarne;. This holy ritual is done by everyone who is under the new *barga* and 'Rup' (holly thread) is tied in hand. My *barga* is Sheep-*barga*, which was started today; we did 'syaisyai' today morning and then wore this 'rupa'.

In my experience and observation, we can find no one Gurung for whom syaisyai has not yet done if he or she is Buddhist, may he or she is educated or uneducated, may he or she is high profiled personality or layman. It is a belief associated with their culture and

which is expressed and practiced in Lhosar.

Tamu Lhosar as a way of culture transformation generation to generation

It is said that culture is developed to fulfill the human needs and transformed from one generation to next generation if it is needed in the society. The history of Lhosar indicates that ancient societies have adjusted and reorganised their celebrations to suit their needs (Sherpa, 2014). Culture is embodied in public symbols; the symbols through which the members of a society communicate their world-view, value-orientation, ethos, and all the rest to one another, to future generation (Geertz, 1973). Tamu Lhosar has been practicing not only in rural village but also in cities like Kathmandu and outside the country like UK, USA, Qatar, UAE etc. Likewise, Lhosar has been transforming generation to generation. In this regards, one of the Nepali Anthropologists, Dr Om Gurung expressed his view while giving speech in a program in this way “..... we are aware on our culture, identity and rights. Our young generation is slowly understanding about the importance of culture and it is being transferred gradually.”

When I have been participating in Tamu Lhosar since last four years in Kathmandu then I am feeling that the number of youths and young generation of the Gurung community is increasing every year. In the recently went Lhosar, I observed that the number of youths, young and children were more than half of the present adult and senior aged-Gurungs. Adolescence and children were in their cultural dress. I talked with a Gurung child - Ms Prachi Gurung (8) about her dress and why she was coming there they she said,

Dress what I am wearing is Gurung dress. I like it. I wore this dress (cholo) myself and remaining by my Mummy. I like to come in Lhosar. Today is school holiday. Mummy, my brother and me came here. He is wearing dress. He wore all his dress without any help of Mummy.

This narrative view indicates that Lhosar has become a good way to transform the culture from generation to generation. In the occasion of this Lhosar, Training of Gurung language was started in Qatar.

Tamu Lhosar as a way of social integration and harmony among Gurungs

Tamu Lhosar has become a good way to promote social integration and social harmony in the society. Honourable state minister for Labour Mr. Tek Bahadur Gurung viewed that Gurung community has been contributing for integrating and harmony in the society from long history as Nepal is multilingual, multi-ethnic and multicultural, and it should continue even in the coming days. A female participant, Mrs. Purnima Gurung said,

We (ladies) prepared curry, pickles, latte (a special type of rice, which is like rice pudding), *raksi*, *roti* etc. Our males and brother (*chhoramanche* and *maiti*) buy other things like cock or goat (meat), cold drinks and alcohol of market (rum/beer) if somebody does not drink home-made. We make some items in a group and some items bring from home. Our all family members are present here. We share all things to eat. If in case, somebody members of any family could to be present then we send his/her share (*bhag*). We ask all whether all of our family members are present or not. If somebody is absent then we do this. It is like picnic.

This is one of the ways to tie up the persons in their community and creating social integration and harmony. A culture expert Dr. Gurung added that Tamu Lhosar is not just a festival and new-year celebration and we should not understand in this way but also a very important medium to create social integration and social harmony among the Gurungs. When I saw non-Gurung youths dancing and observing singing and dancing program then I met a couple of them. I knew that they were there with their Gurung friends. According to them, they love and like Gurung songs and dances. A Magar youth activist expressed his view that they participate each other's program.

Tamu Lhosar as a way of raising rights issues

In the starting time, up to 2 decades ago, in Tamu Lhosar was fully used to demonstrate Gurung culture and cultural identity as well as uniting them and entertaining the whole day. But, speech program is considered as the main part of the day program. Even

in rally, they try to disseminate message raising their rights issues. Nowadays, organizer and participant organizations utilize the Tamu Lhosar as medium to raise their voices and issues related to their rights guaranteed in international treaties and Nepal's constitution and laws. Ms Mina Gurung, a rights activist and representative of an organization, expressed her view,

Lhosar is not only a our festival but also an open forum from which we make louder our voices, raise our issues and warn the government to guarantee our rights and address our issues. On the other hand, through this forum we make aware our people (*hamromnchhe*) so that they understand their own rights and our ethnic, linguistic, socio-cultural, economic and political issues and rights.

Role of the Lhosar has been changing with changing socio-cultural and political context of the country. A culture expert Dr Jagman Gurung remembers in such a way,

When they started to celebrate Lhosar three decade ago then their main purpose was to unite the Gurungs who were living in Kathmandu valley ad working in different fields so they used organize program just one day and within a closed room. Gradually, Gurungs became aware and started about their rights, realized its importance. Program became bigger year after year then started to organize in open space. Now, speech is delivered. Nowadays, the guests spend almost of their speech-time in explaining the rights issues.

Gurung youths, who were participants in this Lhosar, were found that they were really aware on their issues related their rights and interest. When I participated in the whole day, I experienced that guests of the program gave their speeches by raising their issues. Even in rally, I noticed that there were a number of play-cards, in which words related to their rights and issues had been written over there. For example, 'implement ILO-169', 'ensure ethnic people's rights in new constitution' etc.

Tamu Lhosar as a way of raising political agenda

It was found that Gurung people are using Lhosar celebration program as the special platform to put their political agendas.

Coordinator of Tamu Lhosar 2071, celebration committee Mr D.B. Gurung said that the new constitution should ensure equal opportunity for the Tamu community and their identity. One of the Gurung Youth activists, during his speech, said “we need federalism. We need federalism including *Tamuwan*. We deny the constitution without *Tamuwan*.” Another guest of the program spoke in his speech that new constitution should come as per the main purpose and sentiment of the people’s movement - II and commitment of the major political parties.

I observed that participants of cultural rally were holding banners and play-cards in which political slogan and words had written over there. Some of them were - ‘issue constitution having federalism’, ‘*Tamuwan* is our identity’, ‘let we all Adibasi/Janajati be united’, ‘we deny constitution without *Tamuwan*’, ‘assure Adibasi/Janjatis; rights’, ‘end caste-discrimination’, ‘terminate discriminatory laws against Janjatis’ rights’, ‘execute ILO 169 and other international conventions’.

In the special occasion of this Lhosar, President Dr Ram Baran Yadav, Vice president Parmananda Jha, Prime Minister -Sushil Koirala, former prime minister -Sher Bahadur Deuba, former prime minister and chairperson of ICPN- Maoist -Puspa Kamal Dahal (Prachanda), Chairperson of CPN-UML– K. P. Sharma Oli, Chairperson of Rastriya Prajatantra Party–Pashupati Shamsher JBR, Vice-chairperson of Nepali Congress Party– Ram Chandra Poudel expressed their wishes to the Gurung community and also expressed their own (party’s) view on current political issues. Prime minister Mr Koirala was the chief-guest of the Lhosar program organized in Kathmandu-Tundikhel. Ministers, representatives of major political parties, ethnic communities organizations and civil societies and independent intellectual personalities were also guests in the program and they expressed their wishes of Lhosar to the Gurung community and also expressed their view on current political issue and national agendas.

Rt Hon’ble President Dr Ram Baran Yadav, in his press release, expressed thatmay contribute this Lhosar to deepen feeling of brotherhoods and unity among Nepali (RSS). In this occasion, Rt Hon’ble Prime minister Sushil Koirala said,

The rights of people of various ethnicities and languages can be ensured only in the institutional development of democracy. The role played by the Tamu community in Nepal since the unification to the restoration of democracy in the country.

Mr Koirala also appealed the political parties to support for institutionalization of historical achievements like federalism, republic, inclusive democracy that have been got from more than six decades' movement.

Former prime minister and chairperson-comrade Prachanda further expressed his commitment in such a way that his party will make efforts till the last minute to ensure rights of all in people's new constitution. Conveying wishes message, Prachanda said "... our responsibility is to ensure rights of all oppressed class, caste/ethnicity, region, gender including women, Adibasi/Janajati, Muslim from the second constituent assembly."

During the program, State minister Mr. Tek Bahadur Gurung said that Nepal is the multi-lingual, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural nation, and the age-old unity and goodwill existing in the society should be maintained. Also speaking at the program, UCPN (Maoist) standing committee member Agni Sapkota said that identity of different ethnic community was needed in the new constitution. In a press release, Chairperson of CPN-UML - Mr K. P. Oli promised from the side his party for making new federal democratic republic constitution within Magh 8.

In this way, nowadays, Gurungs have started to use the Tamu Lhosar as an effective means to raise their political agendas, advocate and lobby to the government, representatives of the government and political parties. At the same time, representatives of the government and political leaders use this forum to express own and parties' opinion on current national political issues to the people and try to get supports ad sympathy. Besides, media also covered the news and activities of the program and it helped both Gurung community and political parties to convey message and own view and agendas to each other.

Discussion

Tamu Lhosar was just a Gurung's identity - more over their cultural identity. Even, this situation was experience in Kathmandu valley when they used to celebrate it up to one and half decade ago. This Lhosar has become national festival. It is not limited on it. It has become not only identity of Gurung but also ethnic identity and it has become. Self-consciousness and ethnic awareness form the basis of ethnic identity (Devkota & Ojha, 2013). Lhosar became an effective way to create self-consciousness and community awareness among the Gurung who were in Kathmandu valley.

Tamu Lhosar is a symbolic form of their collective identity which can be understood and analyzed in the context of underlying structures of political, economic and social relations. that generate them. Identities are formed and transformed as the circumstances in which individuals and societies find themselves (Devkota & Ojha, 2013). Gurung identity has been expressed in different forms like cultural identity, political identity, social identity, ethnic identity. For example, when Gurung are gathered in Lhosar then everyone observer can say it is so big mass as larger political parties demonstrate. Besides, they using the their Lhosar for multi-purpose ways from festival celebration to advocate for their rights and political issues.

Gunaratne (2002) argues in his research publication about Tharu Identity, identity is created and recreated over the period of time, and shaping of ethnic consciousness emerges from the intersection of social and political process. To some extent, this argument is applied in case of Gurung. For instance, there were limited Gurung in Kathmandu when they initiated to celebrated Lhosar, and socio-political situation of the country was not favorable to raise their voice for their rights and political agendas. But when the political situation was changed, social and other context was changed then Gurungs also changed their identity issues from cultural to political. This situation has clearly been seen in the context of Kathmandu.

Tamu Lhosar has made a meta-identity of whole Gurung community due to the spirit of common peoplehood or we-feeling (Gunaratne, 2002) however it took time. On the other hand, it can be said that they gradually become oriented culturally and the politically

by using platform of Lhosar festival, and now large political parties and their leaders understands the Gurung community not only as the vote bank but also as political power. As an example, in this Lhosar, leaders of the large political parties went in the program as a guest and spoke even in the favour of the Gurung community and for their rights and in their political agendas.

In another angle, it can be seen that it has become more fashionable and superficial in nature. Now, it has been more politicized or becoming political organization or group by leaving its main purpose to preserve and promote culture and unite the Gurungs who are in Kathmandu valley. On the other hand, it is becoming centralized in capital city, and as a result originality of Lhosar which was found in the rural Gurung village is being loosed. If it is continued then a time can be come that they should come to Kathmandu or cities to celebrate Lhosar.

Conclusion

From this study, it is explored that the Tamu Lhosar has become national festival and it has been using as multi-purposive platform of the Gurungs, for the Gurungs and by the Gurungs. Not only its mass and presentation (quantitative and physical values) is being increased year by year but also its vested interest (which is not bad for the whole community) or purpose is being widened. It has been changed in many ways such as from Gurung identity to whole ethnic identity, from local festival to national and trans-national festival, from cultural festival to advocacy forum, from cultural identity to political identity. Based on the aforementioned research finding, discussion, and my observation, we can conclude that practice of Tamu Lhosar celebrated in Kathmandu Valley has been shifted from cultural identity to political identity but there is not missing or loosing of cultural identity - it has become more important in every aspect -from awareness raising to common people to advocating and pressure creating to the government and political parties to address the issues and ensure the rights of entire ethnic community and excluded/oppressed groups/community in general and of Gurung community in particular.

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