

## ***Oh Pengdorje: The Voice of Margin for Liberation***

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### **Abstract**

*This article aims to establish connections between the Tamang community, the Tamang people, and the poet's introspective observations of his own circumstances. It provides a comprehensive exploration of this concept and its application to the communal perception within the Tamang community. The poet achieves a heightened level of imagination, thanks to his Marxist outlook and ideology, gaining recognition in both political and cultural spheres. Furthermore, the article delves into the role of class within the literary work, examining characters, and battling oppression. The poet's discussion on oppression as a pervasive societal issue takes center stage in this paper. The reviewed collection of poems establishes a powerful link between subjective experiences and an objective world, serving as a conduit to engage readers in societal reflections. Writing, as emphasized by many previous authors in this series, serves to explore, learn, and contribute. While the desire to become a writer may carry a scent of vanity and ambition, this writing style stands out for its focus on compassion and inquiry. The poet Raju Syangtan elaborates on his personal journey towards adopting this distinctive writing style. The narrative style in his writing revolves around themes of family, history, class struggle, departure from home, the quest for truth, return from fighting, forging a unique path, and embracing compassion and curiosity from the past to the present. The Marxist school of literary criticism serves as the guiding principle in the investigation of select poems within this framework.*

**Keywords:** culture, community, identity, consciousness, *damphu*, Mhendo, liberation

### **Introduction**

Only a tiny portion of Nepali society produced literary writings in Nepali language during the twentieth century. The academic publications in Kathmandu were basically into three categories - state-sponsored organizations, publication for-profit companies, and non-profit organizations. Among the state-sponsored organizations, *SajhaPrakashan* established in 1913 and the Nepal Academy 1957 have emerged as prominent players. In addition to its artistic works, *SajhaPrakashan* has authored a few academic books on history and sociology. With the establishment of *Sajha Publication* -the oldest publishing house of Nepal, and [Royal] Nepal Academy established, and a few small private publishers i.e. writing in Nepali language and reading appeared in Nepali language.

Political hegemony of Rana system restricted to publish and distribution of any reading materials. BhimNathRegmi points out, "... Rana rulers exploited Nepalese politics for 104 years in line with the political support of British rulers in India" (4). However, Chandra Shamsershad established *Gorkha Bhasa Prakishini Samiti* in 1913 "...played a paradoxical role of publishing books as well as imposing strong code of censorship" (13). Rhoderick Chalmers views,

“[Beneras] occupied a central position in the development of Nepali writing from the end of nineteenth century...” (35) and prepared the ground for the establishment of a democratic regime. With a few noteworthy exceptions, Michael Hutt points out, “Apart from a handful of notable exceptions, its authors were male, either Brahman or high-caste Newar, and based in Kathmandu. Nepali literary criticism was the preserve of a small circle of scholars with very similar profiles” (19). Following the implementation of the New Education Plan in 1971 AD, numerous Nepali literary books became accessible to the public through the national curriculum. However, the government became increasingly resistant to publishing books that addressed the voices of marginalized people. A few Nepali individuals had the desire to buy books other than those required by the schools and universities where they or their children were enrolled.

Based on a Marxist ideological framework, this essay offers a worldview of political consciousness that creates new awareness in Tamang community. After end of *Panchayat* system, the Constitution, which was adopted in November 1990, provided new opportunities for Nepali society, and especially after waging the People's War in 1996, it opened a new horizon of socio-political consciousness in Nepali society. Antonio Gramsci views as:

In every country the process is different, although the content is the same. And the content is the crisis of the ruling class's hegemony, which occurs either because the ruling class has failed in some major political undertaking... or because huge masses... have passed suddenly from a state of political passivity to a certain activity, and put forward demands which taken together, albeit not organically formulated, add up to a revolution. A 'crisis of authority' is spoken of is precisely the crisis of hegemony, or crisis of the state. Antonio Gramsci (as cited in Forgas 2000, 218)

The number of politically educated people continued to rise with the adoption of the *Interim Constitution* in 2006, which provided additional freedom of expression and publishing rights to writers. Social being determines the consciousness, as it is the basic tenet of Marxism, Raman Selden quotes, “The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, the point is to change it” (82). After the political shift of 2006, the enormous rise of the development of print and broadcast media, both Nepali and non-Nepali researchers have studied about Nepali society which brought changes in composing Nepali poetry, short stories, novels, etc. Leo Lowenthal observes that the time of any state contributes to our knowledge of “the kind of perception which a specific social group—writers—has of specific social phenomena” and it deals with the “history and sociology of shared consciousness” (143).

This paper concentrates on some prominent pieces of poetry collected in *Oh Pengdorje* published in 2023 which revolves around the military war between the Nepal Communist Party (Maoist) and the monarchical political system that lasted from 1996 to 2006, the subsequent political change, and the Constitution in 2015 that accomplished the shift of Nepal from previous legislative monarchy to republicanism and from a unitary system to federalism. Sara Beth Shneiderman observes, “...many fundamental questions concerning the processes through which political consciousness has been forged in local contexts across Nepal remain remarkably relevant, yet poorly addressed” (288). For this, Raju Syangtan's poems were the most extensively read and debated at present, and as a result, we may view them as both literary works of interest and components of a current socio-political discourse. They have established the connection between their ideas and Nepal's shared consciousness in the early and late post-conflict periods. The observation of the poet Syangtan is that the political rebellion

that started in Nepal in 1996 has changed the top level of political structure, but it could not change the society at marginal level. It is the conclusion of the poet that the movement could not bring any changes in Tamang community, which has been in trouble from the central government for a long time in history.

*Oh Pengdorje* is a collection of fifty-one poems expressing the essence of the present time. By connecting the poem with the political structure of society, he has used vivid colors to portray the landscape of Tamang community and the social understanding of oppressed people. Being able to keep it consciously, the poet refuses to become Pipa. The title of the collection is *Oh Pengdorje* was the creator of *Damphu* –musical instrument of Tamang community. The color of the cover of the text is associated with the color of the Mhendo and the myth of the Tamang community. The Tamang community is called Hwolmo (*Damphu*) in Tamang language. Their round face is called 'Gramba or Damba' in Tamang language and because of the round face, it is believed that 'Gramba or Damba' and later it became popular '*damphu*'. The myth of *damphu* and the bird relate to their social and cultural aspects. Their Mheme (great grandfather) named Pengdorje climbed Shailung Hill to hunt *Tangsara* (deer) during the hunting age. The death of a deer saddened his wife and to make her happy, he made a *damphu* from the skin of the deer. When Pengdorje saw the excited bird dancing, he danced together. After seeing the dance, Pengdorje made a symbol of the bird on top of *damphu*'s circle. The picture of four people seen below the *damphu* in the cover picture represents the cultural unity of the Tamang people.

## Poetic Narration and Social Context

Daily, individuals grapple with political and cultural issues, shaped by factors such as nationality, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic class, generation, locale, and other social group affiliations, each with its distinctive consciousness. Cultural identity, encompassing self-concept and self-perception, is significantly influenced by these elements. Syangtan's poems exhibit a literary quality, blending elements of fiction with introspection. These writings intricately connect individual selfhood with the specific social identities of the Tamang community. It is a process that is always changing because of many social, cultural, and historical events.

Cultural identity varies more frequently for some people than for others; those who change less frequently have a distinct cultural identity. It is commendable for those who change more to recognize the adjustments in their lives that are necessary and best suited to them. It shows that their assimilation of their culture is dynamic but secure. These two separate paths that the ostracizing operation can take place -the path of the object and the path of the subject, the historical beginnings of the things themselves and that more ethereal historicity of the concepts and categories by which we try to understand those things.

*Oh Pengdorje*, viewed as a politico-cultural text, encompasses its objective structures, including the historical context of its forms and content, the linguistic possibilities emerging at its historical inception, the situation-specific function of its aesthetics, or other elements that establish the interpretive categories guiding our understanding of the text. As a component of cultural studies, it consistently directs its attention to its subject, dynamically shifting its significance to foster a vibrant interaction between the poet and the Tamang people. The larger historical context of the poems strengthens the voices of marginal people. The notion of Fredric

Jameson in his book *The Political Unconscious*, “turns on the dynamics of the act of interpretation and presupposes, as its organizational fiction, that we never really confront a text immediately, in all its freshness as a thing-in-itself” (ix).

Stuart Hall developed the idea of cultural representation. Hall is credited with making significant contributions to the cultural sector, notably in bringing more attention to cultural representations of gender, race, and ethnicity. Whereas Marx “could only express himself creatively after detailed study and systematic examination of the material and after a long struggle, Engels had an astonishing gift for speedy orientation” (Blumenberg, 64). The conscious responsibilities of speakers, one authority to represent another, and the ethics that come with representation motivate the readers. He states, “...the notion that Marxism and the cultural studies slipped into place, recognized an immediate affinity” (37) turns to be a specific example to teach us about the future of academic work. Giddens and Held observe, “the class in its turn achieves an independent existence over against the individuals, so that the latter find their conditions of existence predestined, and hence have their position in life and their personal development assigned to them by their class, become subsumed under it” (20). The poet observes the same echo and inspire the people as in “Departed Prachanda”:

Our history  
That is also unwritten  
Ours present time  
That is also painful  
In our epic of sorrows  
Another new page is added. (My translation, 79-84)

Marginalization is a fluid concept, and it challenges the status quo understandings and images of individuals across the world. Fredric Jameson argues the significance of the political interpretation of any literary writings perceive of the radical outlook “not as some supplementary method, not as an optional auxiliary to other interpretive methods..., but rather as the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation” (1). The aforementioned lines serve as a historical revelation of the challenges within Nepali society. They are intertwined with the struggle for the liberation of an oppressed group that continues to perceive unaddressed grievances, further compounded by the sorrows of the present era.

The poet himself has experienced the sad images of life. His words are the voices of sorrow that reflect the ability to fill the color of politics within the framework of moral consciousness of the present time. Northrop Frye “Hence, the opposite poles of the cycles of nature are assimilated to the opposition of the hero and his enemy. The enemy is associated with winter, darkness, confusion, sterility, moribund life, and old age, and the hero with spring, dawn, order, fertility, vigor, and youth” (188). The poet Syangtan, who has become *Pendorje* of the new age, has sung the song of social change in this way to take those communities to a new path of struggle. The poet writes in *Anvil* and *Damphu*:

In this fight for humanity  
You are not alone my friend  
Descendants of '*MasinyaMatwali*'  
Standing with you on the bank

I carry gunpowder in the *dampfu*  
You become a fire and burn. (My translation, 24-29)

The primary determinants of the main social classes, conflicts within the community, and the experiences of marginalized individuals are predominantly shaped by class systems. Under the Rana regime, an old law labeled the Tamang community as *Masinya Matawali*, placing them in an inhuman category. Despite advancements, ethnic and gender disparities persist, along with various secondary forms of oppression within each society.

His poems, written in six sections, include the dramatization of time. The understanding of the painful poignancy of the characters, the recognition of time, the suppressed voices of the neglected society and the images of the moral consciousness are depicted. His brother was lost and became a martyr in the struggle, expressing hope and pain. The unwritten history of Ram Bahadur, the voice of the story of the lost village, Democracy at the time of Panchayat, multi-party system of governance has been included in the collection. Syangtan has filled the voices of many people who are involved in the struggle who are oppressed by the state power. Laborers who walked thousands of miles to survive even though they are born without rights, youths who left their motherland despite their love for their country, mothers who were angry because of the pressure of time, uncles who crossed the border under the guise of power, leaders who changed their class after the war, citizens who are confused in the battle of the hope of recognition. In short, he has written poems in memory of the ancestors.

Marxist criticism looks at literary creation on the analogy of class. It creates ideas about class, rights and social change. The basis of Marxist criticism is to look at literature ideologically.

It establishes a correlation between literary texts and the society, history, as well as cultural and political systems from which they emerge. It dismisses the notion of isolating a literary text from its author and the influences shaping the author's perspective. Writers are regarded as products of their own era, molded by various historical epochs. It assesses literature through a historical perspective, considering the social and material conditions prevalent during the composition period. As this, Syangtan's poetry has also become a vehicle for philosophical commentary. The description of the society he created in the poem "Desire of Chyangba" as:

Chayangba, you said I will go to Yambu  
Can you buy the path?  
Can you buy soil?  
You have to buy love there  
You have to buy your own shade  
.....  
If you can't buy  
Yambu will buy you  
After he bought you  
Your heart will ask  
Your eyes will ask  
your tongue

*Bakkhu, Tagi, Damphuu*  
And also the bird above *Damphu*

.....  
And let's say it all -to everyone  
That was ours robbed  
The story of Yambu (My translation, 1-47)

In this text, the marginalized population is perceived as socially and economically disadvantaged across all dimensions. Political considerations influencing the marginalized also shape the representation of ideas. The poet underscores that the conflict lies not in ideas but in their struggle with material needs, a concept known as dialectical materialism, propelled by the pursuit of personal survival. The idea of a world without class division or currency is seen as utopian. Capital concentration in the hands of individuals, coupled with the pursuit of maximizing profit, results in significant wealth accumulation. This capitalist economic system thrives on exploitation, where workers are denied the happiness, they rightfully deserve due to inadequate compensation.

The assertion of Pan-Himalayan Tamang identity in Nepal becomes more pronounced within the framework of contemporary nation-centric politics. The scrutiny and proclamation of Tamang identity re-enter the discourse, examining how ethnicity, identity politics, religion, and various cultural facets dynamically interact to shape and reshape the existence of communities within South Asian nation-states. Bhattacharyya states, "The Tamangs began to lose their preeminent social position, dispossessed of their land and were forced to migrate to the marginal lands of Nepal" (33). His poetry is the voice of rebellion. If this statement is true, there are two main interests in literature. First, the context of art and literature connects the past and the present. The relevance of the second is base and superstructure. The superstructure is born from the base in which law, politics, religion and literature legitimize the power of the social classes formed on the base.

Consciousness in politics indicates the bright path of faith and belief. His poetry has consciously become a means of expressing the ideologies of society. How the capitalistic economic system controls or influences creation in Nepali society today is also portrayed here. The references mentioned are not only the mythical Sisyphusean imagination but also the pictorial voice of the people who created Sisyphus in time. He observes the same in the poem "Those who departed":

Like an endless web of ants  
Those Sisyphus  
Lips chapped with hunger  
Covered with a mask of ten rupees (My translation, 36-39)

How literary creation interacts with the ideologies in society has clearly been shown by Syangtan. *Oh Pengdorje* has become a mirror of the present time to understand how and to what extent the author's social and political background informs the reader and how literature reflects the surrounding world in its portrayal of characters and their lives with an emphasis on class. Its

goal is to provide a more thorough explanation of the literary work, which necessitates paying close attention to its forms, styles, and meanings.

### **Cultural Narration and Freedom**

Human beings engage in certain social production, which is necessary and independent of their will, relationships that are matched to a specific stage of development of their material producing powers. The whole of these production relations makes up the economic structure of society, which is the true base on which a legal and political superstructure is built, and to which certain social consciousness is correlated. The process of social, political, and intellectual life is generally conditioned by production of material life. Instead of men's consciousness determining their being, it is their social being that shapes their consciousness. Within the context of Marxist theory, culture is recognized as a product, instrument, and dynamic process influenced by the construction and utilization of diverse social groups. These groups have varied experiences and identities, including considerations of gender, race, social class, and other factors.

In the poem entitled "Who Mhendo is", Syangtan has mentioned the importance of the *totola* flower refers to Mhendo is considered a part of cultural identity that connects their community with the beauty of nature. The color of the cover of the text named *Oh Pengdorje* looks like that of Mhendo. *Damphu*, the instrument played by the Tamang community, and the bird sitting on the *damphu*, have tried to connect the readers with cultural and social relations. Marxist feminists claim that "within any class, women are less advantaged than men in their access to material goods, power, status, and possibilities for self-actualization. The causes of this inequality lie in the organization of capitalism itself" (Ritzer, 468-9). In this process, the poet, the readers and the audience become allies of the same line and feel the reality of society. The poet has sung a song to address a Tamang lady 'Mhendo Maya' in "New Song" as:

Come on Mhendo Maya!  
Why didn't the time change?  
Why didn't our actions change?  
Let's stay in this *chautari*  
Let's make a promise today  
I play *Damphu*  
You play *tungna*  
Let us compose  
A new song

The song of Freedom (My translation, 50-60)

In this collection, at its essence, Marxism vehemently opposes the idea of governing individuals based on perceived racial or social inferiority. Instead, it consistently champions human freedom as a universal ideal. The poet's plea in the song "New Song" to 'Mhendo Maya' assures that despite facing challenges in an obscure path or standing on the brink of daunting abysses, there is no need for fear. The song functions as an empowering anthem, encouraging individuals to embrace freedom and envision the emergence of a new dawn after navigating through the dark night. Here, one can see the poet's fierceness against the oppressive power of the state. By documenting every event in history, the poet has repeatedly questioned the power of power. The

people have raised their voice for their existence and rights. He has said in the poem that the importance of rewriting history by talking about the creation of the present time, which has been distorted by modernity. In the poem "Manifesto of a Slave" the poet has brought out the voice of *Appas* who are chained till death.

By keeping the bones of ancestors as witnesses  
I reject slavery now  
Crush invisible chains  
And I write with the ink of my own blood  
On the forehead of this earth  
'This world is ours.' (My translation, 55-60)

His charming etching *MasinyaMatwali*, which spans the paper and tells the tale of decades of suffering endured by Tamang people, is one of his works that vividly depicts the tale and history of the Tamang community. Jang Bahadur Rana's 1854 *Muluki Ain* (The Law of the Nation), which labeled Tamang people as *MasinyaMatwali*, or it has categorized the Tamang community as "Enslavable Alcohol-Drinker, they naturally became murmibhotiya. In fact, they had to struggle and wait for almost eight decades to get back their caste" (Höfer 125). There was no opportunity to improving the awareness of the Tamang people through literature when they were surrounded by such oppressive practices of the Hindu authorities.

In the poem "Childhood Friend" the poet has made a distinction between 'You and I', and the ideas of the ruling class are always the ideas of those who support the political system. The poet emphasizes that only the class that has the material means of production gives expression to the material relationship. By rejecting the relationships created in this way, he has raised 'you' as the ruling class and 'I' as a symbol of change. The poet says that the difference between 'I' who is in favor of the poor and 'you' who is in favor of power results from the understanding that society has not changed. He states the same as:

After a long gap of time  
I listened today  
You have reached Singha Durbar  
I was born in a poor family  
I reached the slums of the poor (My translation, 43-47)

The poet has shown that society and social classes are defined in terms of economic status by stratifying social inequality along economic lines. Here too, the fact that life colored by glory and the will to change society is different is shown in "A Question Paper". Economic status is the relationship to the means of production that defines social class as:

You are painted with splendor  
We talk about finding Indranagar, Aishwarya  
I am a free man  
I talk about finding a happy world  
You're a madman  
We talk about false things  
Gathering my broken hearts  
The point of equality I talk about  
The hatred you imagine in your heart is different



The dream that beats in my heart is different  
You sing a good tune to make the people sleep  
I say the moon is good for hungry people (My translation, 12-23)

Living society is found in Syangtan's poems. The voices of the speakers are heard in the poem. His poetry makes people listen. Certainly, these poems are not poems of small sorrows. The sadness of the characters is hazy. There are colors of concern and society for those who understand.

In "In Memory of Predecessors", the pain of the heart relates to the old days of the people. The "Ram Bahadur Marg" that was not complete and named as the Mahendra Highway and the brother who painted the whole town and built a house and got no shelter in his life. The pain of a non-citizen who was born nineteen years ago, not being able to become a citizen, the dream of comrade Bijay who lost his life, the story of the martyr Sangmo, etc. are found in the poem. By connecting the history and the world and the story of the ancestors are depicted in "In Memory of Predecessors" as:

you don't know  
Killed in Mesopotamia  
Killed in the jungles of Burma  
Are you left on the banks of the river in Egypt?  
Buried in the desert of Iraq  
Rotten in the mountains of Turkey  
Abandoned in the jungles of Malaya  
Did you get lost in the Japanese fortress?  
Trampled by a German tank (My translation, 49-57)

The history of the oppressed informs us that the current state of emergency is the norm made by the so-called elite. The development of a concept of history that fits with this must be rewritten. Implementing a true state of emergency becomes apparent, and this strengthens the position in the fight against oppressor. It is not the beginning of knowledge unless it is the realization that the historical paradigm upon which it is based is flawed. The goal of historical materialism is to preserve the memory of the past as it unexpectedly manifested itself into the individual that history had protected in a time of peril. It contains the entirety of human history in a vast abridgment and corresponds perfectly to the status that human history holds in the cosmos. The goal of historicism is to show a causal link between distinct historical events.

It is as if the words the poems such as the appeal of the story of the suffering of those who do not have borders to the picture of *dampfu* made by *Pengdorje* from those words, the suicide of a brother who tried to go with everyone to avoid being sold for ten thousand, Surya Bahadur who died on the street of Kirtipur during the corona epidemic, etc. are the voices of your heart. The poet has also requested the South American, Canadian, Australian, African people to find their own Pengdorje. The poet gives a message to liberate classes and communities from exploitation and oppression by starting from the premise that social change takes place due to the struggle between different classes opposing each other in society. In the poem "Bellow of Pipa" he expresses his voices as:

Floating in the Ranidah of Sunkoshi  
Carrying RenzenDorje's head

Two hundred and eight years later today  
I am standing on the road in Yambu  
Ruling in Yambu  
Crushing me under the statue  
Oh rulers!  
to the chariot of time  
Where are you hiding?  
Come to the street. (My translation, 53-62)

This empty cityscape's oppressed silence and unnatural neutrality may serve as a metaphor for contemporary fantastic literature. Its expectant stillness reveals an object world that is perpetually poised to receive a revelation of either good or bad that never materializes. Walter Benjamin states, "As in all previous history, whoever emerges as victor still takes part in that triumph in which today's rulers march over the prostrate bodies of their victims" (vii). Society is reflected in literature, and vice versa. Every country, every society, and every culture have its own literature. In a manner, literature highlights problems that are seen in society and among the members of that culture. One might also claim that literature depicts and represents society and its inhabitants, illustrating pre-existing notions and conceptions in a society.

## **Conclusion**

Literature is intrinsically tied to the time of its creation. The Marxist perspective closely examines literature in its historical context, highlighting the socio-economic class conflicts evident in diverse forms of artistic expression, such as music, art, literature, and visual arts. The poet's unique observation of society plays a crucial role in understanding the socio-cultural reality of Tamang people. This study delves into and underscores the presence of liberty, often overlooked in prevailing historical narratives. Its aim is to narrow the gap and cultivate awareness through a Marxist interpretation of literature. In the texts, the poet's concern is intricately tied to the liberation, identity, and independent existence of both humanity as a whole and the Tamang community in. In the realm of the arts, it is widely acknowledged that certain pinnacle periods often surpass the overall progress of civilization. Moreover, the observation that specific art forms can only truly flourish during the early stages of creative development suggests that certain art forms may no longer attain their epoch-making, classical stature. Understanding the interplay between different forms of art within the artistic domain makes it less puzzling to recognize a similar relationship between the entire artistic field and the broader progress of civilization. Concurrently, contemporary literature holds the potency to influence politics and mold the collective mindset of a society, ultimately benefiting its citizens.

This piece primarily focuses on characters grappling against oppression, with the poet's keen observations of oppression forming a major thematic exploration. Additionally, it delves into the significance of class within the discussed literary works. The analysis of literature and art, grounded in the dialectical theory of knowledge, asserts that creative expression serves as a powerful means to both reflect and comprehend reality simultaneously. It stands as one of the most influential tools for shaping the spiritual progression of humanity. The materialist understanding of art's social significance and its pivotal role in societal progress is rooted in this method of interpretation. Art consistently functions as a social servant, historically practical

within the context of an objective historical process. It adeptly articulates the words needed to convey bright, dark, and ambiguous moods, bridging, or contrasting thought and feeling. Art enhances individual and communal experiences, refining and rendering feelings more adaptable and responsive. It expands the realm of thought beyond personal accumulated experiences and serves as an educator for individuals, social groups, classes, and nations. This holds true regardless of whether art presents itself as purely artistic or overtly tendentious in a particular instance. Syangtan's poems embody all these dimensions, ushering in the era of social revolution.

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