

Faces of Faceless in Tamang's Paintings: Claiming for Identity

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Article History: Received 15 August 2022; Reviewed 30 October 2022; Revised 25 December 2022;

Accepted 25 January 2023

Abstract

The Tamang community has endured long history of structural hegemony and marginalization. The Rana rulers not only denied their ethnicity, but also enforced them for free labor. The rulers imposed main stream Khas language and Hindu culture looking-down upon their indigenous culture, language and distinct way of life. Moreover, they were always pushed towards the periphery in terms of education, opportunity and the resource-use. Against this backdrop, this paper analyzes Subas Tamang's paintings exhibited under the title Kaiten: History, Memory, Identity (2021). His paintings memorize atrocious and subjugated past of the Tamang community when they were treated nothing more than a working machine by the powerful local authorities and therulers. I have focused on three paintings that memorize the Tamang's history, predicaments and their ravished identity. For the theoretical backing, I have employed Stuart Hall's concept of cultural studies, concentrating on the issue of representation.

Keywords: *Tamang community, cultural hegemony, marginalization, facelessness, identity claim*

Introduction

The Tamang, one of the indigenous communities of Nepal embodies long history of structural domination and marginalization. They were immensely exploited during the Rana regime when Junga Bahadur Rana authenticated caste hierarchy through *Muluki Ain* (The Country Law) in 1854. Rana's law established and validated caste hierarchy, in which the Tamang was categorized as *masinyamatwali* (enslavable alcohol drinker). There onward, the free spirited Tamangs were incarcerated within the legal imprisonment when the powerful rulers snatched all of their freedom and treated as slaves. Against this backdrop, the paper critically analyzes visual artist Subas Tamang's selected paintings that concentrates on the Tamang's history of

exploitation and their search for identity. I have selected some of his paintings that were exhibited under the title *Kaiten: History, Memory, Identity* (2021). His arts portray the hurdlesome past and diminished identity of the Tamangs when the hegemonic power bloc had snatched their freedom; undermined their socio-cultural values; and enslaved and enforced them for free services. I have employed Stuart Hall's concept of cultural studies, mainly the issue of representation as theoretical backing and Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen's ideas and concept of visual semiotics for visual analysis of the text.

I have taken Tamang's paintings, "KagajiRakam" and "Mahendra Mala" for the textual analysis. The paintings narrate the history of structural hegemony, exploitation and cultural assassination of the Tamang community which have instigated for their identity crisis. The paper argues that the Hindu rulers of Nepal systematically hegemonized the Tamang community through country law, which not only dominated and marginalized them, but also initiated for their faceless condition. Moreover, it highlights the artist's claim for Tamang's identity through the visualization of past memory that on the one hand, explicates extreme state exploitation, whereas on the other hand, resists against the authoritative power blocs.



KagajiRakam



Kagaji Rakam



ब्रह्मर्षि मुनिजी की ओर से ।
जिनके अंतर्गत वेदवेदान्तके अथ अनुसंधानके विचार ।
प्रतिपादित हैं ।



मुद्राप्रकाशक संस्थाओं - हीनेन्द्रजी राधिका जी ।
जो अनेकानेक वर्षों से । जो अनेकानेक वर्षों से ।
विश्वको प्रकाशित कर रहे हैं । विभिन्न विभिन्न विभिन्न ।
एकदम हीनेन्द्रजी राधिकाजी की ओर से ।

संस्कृत । अथर्ववेद । अथर्ववेद । अथर्ववेद । अथर्ववेद ।
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Method

The paper has adopted qualitative research approach and visual analysis for the exploration of structural domination and exploitation on Tamang community and their claim for identity. For that, I have taken some selected paintings of Subas Tamang, which was exhibited under the title *Kaiten: History, Memory, Identity (2021)* as a primary text. My major concern lies on analyzing the issue of marginalization, exploitation and main stream cultural hegemony on the Tamang community. Since the paper is based on library research, I have consulted several research articles and the ideas of different scholars for the analysis of the primary text.

Theoretical Concept

Every society disseminates its ideology and value through specific belief system among people. People from the same group and community develop common values through common belief and idea they practice and that becomes a part of their culture. Culture is all about 'shared meanings', where language plays vital role for the access to the meanings (Hall, 1997). Mainly, mother tongue is the main medium of indigenous community including the Tamangs to express their thought, ideas, feelings and experiences of their life more comprehensively. In the absence of their language, they become unable to express their thoughts and idea properly. Tamang community had endured denial of their language and ethnic identity during the Rana regime when Junga Bahadur Rana's *Muluki Ain* (1854) validated caste system and prioritized Khas Nepali language. Rana's country law structurally rejected the Tamang community's language and cultural identity. They were systematically excluded by the state as they were categorized Murbhotia, which means their caste belong to masinyamatwali or enslavable alcohol drinker (Höfer, 2004, quotes Acharya, p.125). Language is not only a means of communication, it is also a medium through which our cultural values get communicated. Needless to say, culture is connected with the identity of the particular community. Apparently, rejection of someone's language indicates denial of their socio-cultural values: in fact, it is also the rejection of their identity. The Tamang community encountered similar situation imposed by the state authority when their ethno-cultural identity was assassinated. However, they comprise specific cultural features that kept them distinct to the other communities.

Indigenous communities of Nepal incorporate distinct phenotypes and socio-cultural values that explicate their uniqueness. Similarly, indigenous Tamang community embraces typical cultural features and unique ethnic characteristics. Ethnic groups distinguish themselves from other by cultural criteria and symbols such as language, belief, norms or history (Gabbert, 2006). The Tamang community is completely different from other community because of their cultural attributes as it inculcates rich cultural tradition through their mother language. The Tamangs celebrate several cultural festivals and rituals

that are far different from other caste and community. Moreover, their cultural heritages, costume, foods and distinct philosophy of life have authenticated their distinct cultural features. They acknowledge traditional narratives and ethnic symbols that guide them towards meaningful life. Nonetheless, the state authority and power holders have always exhibited indifference and biasness towards the indigenous community of Nepal.

Mainly, power blocs expand their exploitative measures on particular community through misrepresentation. The authority could spread negativity about the group of people envisioning the issue of race, color, caste, tone of their language or phenotypical characteristics. In this regards Hall presents an example of misrepresentation of black athletes. He postulates that the black athletes are treated as 'childish' which comprehends the conscious attitude of Whites that 'Blacks are not proper men, they are just simple children' (Hall, 1997, p.263). It portrays biased attitudes of Whites towards Black men. They could not acknowledge Black man-ness in comfortable manner. It is nothing more than 'racialized regime of representation' (Hall, 1997), which turns completely disgraceful and diminishing towards Black. Lama's claim on the (mis)representation of the Tamang community in Nepal aptly matches with the Hall's point of view. As she claims, "In Nepal, the Tamangs were taken as inferior in terms of their intelligence. There are still some common opinion and jokes that harshly humiliate and inferiorize the Tamang community. For instance, when they mess up something, people unhesitatingly spew their judgment: "*bhotekobuddhi!*" (Bhote's brain!) (Lama, 2022, p.68). In such a manner, The Tamangs were/are always put under the category of docile, unintelligent, uneducated, alcohol addicts and aggressive. Commonly circulated, such(mis)understanding about the Tamangs have not only misrepresented them, but also denied their real characteristics, disrespected them and attacked their self.

The power holders could easily manipulate the ongoing circumstances and push certain community into the periphery. They adopt the most effective tool, such as, stereotyping the particular groups for othering. Stereotyping has its own politics as it blends with power and operates through culture, production of knowledge, imagery and representation (Hall, 1997). Primarily, the authority attacks the cultural characteristics for the creation of completely different image of the targeted community. Such misrecognized and stereotyped images get permanently implanted within common people, which in long run validates the false representation. In the case of the Tamang community, similar power politics had played, which dumped them into the margin. Their self and ethnic values were razored by the state itself when the Rana's country law was imposed upon them. They had to wait quite long to get back their ethnic identity. King Tribhuvan and Prime Minister Bhim Samsar signed decree that they won't be called Bhote in document and allowed to be called Tamang (Höfer, 2004, p.125). This incident speaks about the austerity of power centers when someone's identity could be snatched or returned back as per the interest and

whim of the rulers. In fact, Rana's *Muluki Ain*'s hierarchical caste system had damaged the existing social harmony as it hierarchized people in terms of their caste. Rana's descendants and Shah rulers followed the same caste based social system which unremittingly dominated some caste, group and community.

The Tamang community has suffered systematic marginalization from the rulers. It began when Prithivi Narayan Shah started extending his territory to take hold over the whole country. For that, he started crushing all the small kingdoms and assimilate inside his nation. However, mostly he tricked the kings of small nations and invaded their kingdoms. Tamang King Rinjindorje was deceived and killed before Shah took hold over his territory. During Shah's territorial expansion, he calls King Rinjindorje of Timal for peaceful meeting, but he ends up deceitfully killing him (Dikpal, 2076 BS quotes Bhandari). Such was the gruesome reality connected with the history of domination of the community. Later, Rana rulers became even more rigid in terms of disseminating and authenticating Hindu socio-cultural values that systematically obliterated indigenous community's identity. People of different nationalities in Nepal could not realize their identity even after the revolution against Rana rulers and the establishment of democracy in 2007 BS. King Mahendra continued the hegemonic Hindu culture and Khas language as the national language. He came with the concept of homogenous national identity that compelled everyone to accept mainstream Nepali culture and language. "The primacy of Hinduism remains unquestioned... . Contrary to the wide-spread view, modern legislation has not explicitly abolished the caste hierarchy" (Höfer, 2004, 188). Moreover, the compulsory Khas language initiated complicated situation among some caste and community, who could not speak other than their mother tongue. They suffered a lot as it created difficulty for them to approach even for some official works. Gradually they lagged behind from every socio-economic activities and resource approaches.

Birta system of Nepal had played vital role for the enforcement of free labor and massive exploitation of indigenous communities. The term Birta has been derived from the Sanskrit word Vritti, which means livelihood. Birta meant an assignment of income by the state in favor of individuals in order to provide them a livelihood (Regmi, 1964). Normally, Birta was granted to the Brahmin priests and to the people, who had good relation with Ranas and power blocs. The Birta holders were granted with the rights of exacting unpaid labor from the people inhabiting the area mentioned in their grant (Regmi, 1964). Granting such rights, Ranas had handed power to the Birta holders that they could easily compel the inhabitants to work for them without any wages. Mainly, the Tamang communities suffered from such system, as they had to work for their masters without penny or very less money in their hand, whereas the owners got economic gain and social power. Sometime, they also have to obey state order and contribute their free service to the nation. In such a manner, the Tamang community was always left in the margin under every

rulers in the past. More importantly, they had to accept ruler's culture and mainstream Khas language putting aside their own socio-cultural values, which resulted into their misery loaded sense of identity crisis.

Culture and language comprise of specific features that explicitly articulate identity of the community. Culture is about the attachment, feelings, concept and ideas that 'says something' about who I am (identity) (Hall, 1997). Certainly, if someone snatches away culture and language from them, they face identity crisis. Similar thing has happened to the Tamang community. Their identity issue becomes more intense when they could not speak their mother tongue and practice their ethnic culture. They realize that the nation has rejected their language and cultural values to impose the mainstream culture. There onward, conscious people and dissents from the Tamang community have started raising their voice against state hegemony. Specifically, the artists and the writers take resisting position and voice for their communal identity. Subas Tamang has fore-fronted himself as a dissent and voiced through his latest visual arts. His paintings visualize the predicaments and atrocious past of the Tamang community when the structural authority strategically dumped them on the margin. Moreover, he pinpoints the structural misdeeds against Tamang and inculcates the urgency of addressing their identity issue through his arts.

Results and Discussion

The Tamang community had undergone through long structural hegemony, especially during the Rana-Shah rule, they were massively exploited and pushed towards the margin as outcasts. The power blocs denied their distinct language, culture and ethnic identity that only instigated for their facelessness. Their situation deteriorated even more when the authority enforced them for compulsory labor in royal fruit plantations and paper production processes that not only validated them as servitudes, but also brutally crushed their identity and converted them into faceless human-machines. Tamang's paintings exhibited under the title *Kaiten: History, Memory, Identity* (2021) conspicuously visualize the horrid past of the Tamangs when authority had systematically obliterated their identity and treated them as mere slaves. Moreover, his paintings raise dissenting voice against structural hegemony and claim for their identity. I have chosen Tamang's "KagajiRakam" and "Mahendra Mala" for the discussion and analysis.

Tamang's painting "KagajiRakam" portrays the plight and predicaments of the Tamangs, who were compelled to work in the royal plantation and enforced into the paper production processes. Mainly, it highlights their enslaved condition when they became faceless, subjugated and remained at the lowest social strata. I have chosen two paintings entitled "KagajiRakam", in which one of the face is covered by a bunch of flower and the other by a sheet of Nepali paper respectively. Only the faceless body part below the neck and hands are properly visible. Both paintings have concentrated on the enslaved past memory of the Tamang community and their underprivileged circumstances.

The male figures portrayed in the paintings have worn tattered and crumbled daura (a dress that Nepali males wear) on their bodies which explicates their poor economic condition. They seem to operate some heavy physical tasks, since they have wrapped patuka (long cloth belt) around their waste to support their body. They have lean and toned bodies rather than muscular and swollen physics, which could be due to their regular physical involvement. More importantly both figures are faceless: their faces are covered by flowers and paper. The faceless body symbolizes their identityless condition, which is mainly caused by the state's exploitative strategy. The Tamang community, mainly from Nuwakot and Rasuwa were enforced to compulsory labor in the royal gardens and treated them as slaves. Holmberg and March (1999) have extensive research on compulsory labor or rakam especially in the Tamang villages from the east and west of the Trisuli and Bhote river. The local tradition records that fruit plantations near Trisuli known by the Tamang name Khinchet began during the time of BhimsenThapa's muktiyari. They render details about enforced labor as such:

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. (Holmberg & March, 1999)

The details of work and responsibility on the Tamangs from Nuwakot and Rasuwa confirm the fact that they were enforced for the production of important administrative material and daily needed things such as fruit and butters for the royals. However, the serious thing had been the consistent demand and exploitation of the authority. There were several administrators above them to make them work hard and supervise their work. For instance, the villagers were in continuous threat of local royal herds and government appointees that they have to be mere bystander in-front of their misdeeds. One of the villagers shares the coercive and rather demeaning incident: "On the nights of big festivals there, the royal herders would just grab the girls and take them off. You were unable to say anything about this even it was one's own wife" (Holmberg & March, 1999, p.14). It comprehends the horrible time that had befallen on the whole community. Moreover, it unveils the several layers of measures the authorities had taken to deter and exploit them. The incident also clarifies the fact that, they had extremely abused the indigenous Tamang women for their pleasure purpose. Such incidents articulate the real attitudes of the rulers towards the innocent Tamangs.

The Tamangs were intensively subjugated and consistently hegemonized by the power centers and administrative authorities. The villagers had to plant, grow and take care of the garden, however, they were not permitted to use even a single fruit for them.

They had to spill their sweat and blood in the plantation whole year but there were other people to taste the fruit. Moreover, they need to deliver the fruits to the palaces in Kathmandu, walking many days on foot from their villages. Holmberg and March (1999) explain that the local administrator would beat and drive the villagers to the work or make them carry fruit and other produce to Kathmandu along with pulse, molasses, sugarcane juice and leaves of *sal* tree brought to the storage facilities of the garden from villages in Trisuli valley. Each and every activity that occurs in the fruit plantation postulates the bitter reality of the forced laborers. They are treated less as humans and more like objects or working -machines. The whole system, not only punish their physical body, but also penetrates their soul and injures their existence. The power blocs mistreated, misused, misrepresented and marginalized the Tamang community who always labored hard and spilled their sweat for them. Artist Tamang has pinpointed the gruesome past that the whole community had suffered the longest in the history of Nepal in “Kagaji Rakam”.

A bunch of beautiful flower and a sheet of paper that cover the whole face of the portrayed persons in the chosen paintings have metaphoric meaning. It is the flower of daphne plant, which is intricately connected with the plight of Tamangs. Bark of the same plant is used as main raw material for the production of Nepali paper. For this reason, both paintings have connection with the paper that were mainly produced by the Tamangs. The assigned villagers had to search for the plant in the dense forest and peel the bark off. It was such a laborious task that mostly they were physically so tired and exhausted. Furthermore, they had to process the bark in several steps before it became a smooth and long lasting papers. Nonetheless, their hard labor was not properly addressed by the then central authority. They used to get less amount for such massive physical task they performed. Not only that, but also the exploitative paper production continued for longer time even the fruit plantation and several other forms of slavery were abolished. In this regards, Holmberg and March (1999, 53) posit, “That forced production of paper endured the longest of any of the compulsory labour systems in the region, the majority of which were terminated almost ten years before the paper procurement system in 2017 V.S...”. It means, there was persistent exploitation of labor and disregard to the community from that areas. The artist has internalized the dire circumstances the Bomtang villagers had to suffer since they were the people who produced substantial amounts of the papers. He has adopted stippling art technique to acknowledge the intense and prolonged history of exploitation of the Tamang community during the paper production as he explains (Tamang, S.personal communication, August 10, 2022). Both of the paintings memorize the past history when the Tamang community came under the sharp razor of structural hegemony that slit their identity and left them faceless.

Tamang’s “Mahendra Mala” articulates the history of cultural assassination of the Tamang community when King Mahendra’s concept of single national identity

authenticated single national Nepali identity. When King Mahendra dismissed the then recently established democracy and re-enforced panchayat system in Nepal in 2017 BS, he gradually disseminated the idea of homogenous Nepali identity: khas Nepali language, Hindu culture and the issue of Nepali nationality were his prime priorities. Doing so, he absolutely disrespected the diverse ethnic communities of Nepal. In this regards, Sharma (2004) claims that the powerful instruments the Hindu used to extend communication across the various cultural-linguistic barriers that was their language, Nepali. Nevertheless, the nationwide extension of Nepali language and making it a national language, apparently created so lot of difficulties to the native language speakers. The state enforced Nepali language on the one hand developed more complication for the ethnic community people, whereas on the other hand, it attacked on the linguistic and cultural values of indigenous community. It is a proven fact that language doesn't merely communicate, rather it embodies socio-cultural values of the particular community. Several social theorists have claimed that if the language is destroyed, automatically, the socio-cultural values deplete. In the case of Nepal, the rulers could not envision the power of diverse culture, rather, they always imposed mainstream Hindu culture and Nepali language. In this regards, Tamang's "Mahendra Mala" resists against the hegemonic mainstream cultural values and claims for the Tamang cultural identity.

Contemporary artists, mainly delve upon their own circumstances and socio-cultural realities. Moreover, they have started reflecting on their own cultural tradition that complement for their identity search. Subedi (1992) sheds light on the 'self-reflexive' feature of modern paintings, which gets closer to the concept of self-search or the search for the communal identity. Especially, in contemporary Nepali context when the artists from ethnic communities visualize the painful history of their ancestors, they primarily aim at claiming for their identity rather than only exposing the sufferings and the oppressed past. Tamang as well claim for his cultural identity through "Mahendra Mala". Visual semiotics are powerful medium to convey the specified and intended meaning to the viewers. Basically, the sign and symbol comprehensively articulate the meanings in a piece of art. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006, 2) postulates, "Like linguistic structures, visual structures point to particular interpretations of experiences and form of social interaction." Their idea matches with the visual intention of Tamang's painting, as it shares the experience of the Tamang community and interact with the contemporary society. He interacts through culture symbol, such as damphu, which is one of the most important musical instruments that is played in each cultural ceremony. The damphu on the portraiture's face reveals rigorous interest of the artist towards his culture, whereas, the Nepali book holding on the hand intensified the invaded cultural space and identity of the community. Moreover Tamang's paintings deal with the issue of their ethnic identity claim alongside highlighting depressingly torturous and suppressive past of the community.

Conclusion

The paper critically analyzes the paintings of Subash Tamang that visualize the oppressed and subjugated position of the Tamang community when they were compelled for compulsory labor by the state authority. Moreover, it sheds light on the hegemonic structural power that disrespects the socio-cultural identity of the particular community and imposes its power only to obliterate their identity and enslave them. The Tamang people from Nuwakot and Rasuwa districts were continuously exploited by the state when they had to involve into compulsory labor work in the royal fruit plantation and paper production process. Consequently, they have remained at the lowest position of the social status and became far away from socio-economic resources. More importantly, they are biased, misrepresented and marginalized by the strategically imposed rules on them. Their existence and cultural identity were brutally crushed when Hindu ruler, King Mahendra imposed the concept of homogenous national identity. In such crucial context, visual artist Tamang has portrayed the gruesome past of the Tamangs as well as resisted against the hegemonic authority and raised his voice for cultural identity in his paintings.

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