

A Review of Tamang Marriage System

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Generally, social recognition of a man and woman as husband and wife is called 'marriage'. It is a legal right of a man on women and vice versa. It is an institution in which interpersonal relationships usually intimate and sexual, are acknowledged in variety of ways, depending on the culture or sub-culture in which it is found. Marriage is a social knot, which brings the people of two clan into one and gives the hope of new beginning. The marriage system represents the exchange and unity among the families and also a stepping stone for making an individual family. Marriage practices are very diverse across the culture, may take many forms, and are often formalized by a wedding. Here in the article I am going to discourse upon the marriage system of the Tamang community. But it seems necessary here to trace a brief history of Tamang people before going through main topic of the paper.

There are different views regarding the Tamang people. Some have views that Tamangs belong to the **Indo-Mongoloid Tribe**¹ and speak the 'non-pronominalised'² dialects of Tibeto Burman group. Their traditional area is sub-Himalayan tracts of India and Nepal. At present, they live in large number in different districts of Nepal. Outside Nepal they are found in Darjeeling, Sikkim, Assam, Nagaland within India and also in Burma and Bhutan. The Tamang were addressed in a derogatory manner as '**Bhote**' (impure and unclean) and '**Murmi**'³. The Tamangs have a system of different types of societal leaders: *Tamba* (Traditional historian or oral historian), *Ganba* (elderly respected person of the village who knows rites and customs), *Banbo* (Witch priest), *Lama* (Chief priest) and *Choho* (village headmen) – to keep the Tamang society continuously alive and dynamic. There are more than hundred sub-groups (*thar* (gotra) as well as *sub-thar*) within the Tamang community, and marriage between same sub-group (*thar* and *sub-thar*) is not practiced. But out of these groups, only 12 Tamang⁴ or *Thar* (Gotra) is believed to be pure. The study of the Tamang community makes it clear that these people have their own traditional culture which they practice in their own way. Marriage is an important aspect of culture. It is practiced by the Tamangs with great joy following different kinds of rituals. Since the earlier period they are known as band society having their own cultural prosperity. But now-a-days Tamang culture has been influenced by the culture of other communities due to close association.

Among the Tamang people marriage is taken as an important ritual like that of other communities. There is the prevalence of **cross-cousin**⁵ marriage practise i.e. as in the case with some other hill tribes like Magar, Gurung etc. The one is called **Mama Cheli Phupu Chela** (the marriage between daughter of maternal uncle and son of paternal aunty) type and other is called **Phupu Cheli Mama Chela** (i.e marriage between daughter of paternal aunty and son of maternal uncle). But in the Tamang society marriage within the

same *Thar* (Gotra) is strictly prohibited. Among, the Tamangs a person's marriage is celebrated as a community festival. After a boy marries a girl and takes her, to his village, every household in his village sends presents for him and his wife. Thus customarily the couple must reciprocate this magnanimity of the villagers by arranging a grand feast for the entire village. Among the Tamang people the girl's side is given more importance than that of the boy. In the performance and accomplishment of a marriage *Tamba*, *Ganba*, *Banbo* and *Lama* play an important role in Tamang society. Beside this, maternal uncle of a boy or a girl also play an important role. Uncle's main work during marriage is to bring cloths for the boy or the girl.

Before fixing the particular date for marriage Tamang people use to consult with the *Lama* (priest of Buddhism). The *Lama* fixes a particular date after seeing a ritual book which is called '*Chi*' (religious text of birth and death). Besides this there is the tradition of matching '*Lho*'⁶ and '*Kham*'. There are five *Kham* which are the five elements of this universe and have male and female effects. These are *Mey* (fire), *Sha* (Soil), *Cha* (Iron), *Kui* (Water), and *Sin* (Wood). There are twelve *Lho* consisting of twelve different animals and birds like *Chya* (bird), *Khi* (Dog), *Fak* (Pig) *Jhiwa* (mouse), *Lang* (cow), *Tak* (Tiger), *Hyuie* (Cat), *Dug* (dragon), *Dhul* (snake), *Ta* (Horse), *Luk* (Sheep) and *Tay* (monkey). Before marriage is fixed *Lho* and *Kham* should be matched.

Forms of marriage system

There are different types of marriages prevalent among the Tamang people, *Magi Biwaha* (arranged marriage), *Chori Biwaha* or *Prem Biwaha* (elope marriage or love marriage), *Dhansing Biwaha* (marriage through purchase) *Balsing Biwaha* (capture marriage), *jari Biwaha* (compensatory marriage), *Biduwa Biwaha* (widow marriage)

Magi Biwaha (Arranged Marriage)

The marriage system where consent of parents of bride and bridegroom is more important than that of the boy and girl, is called arranged marriage or *Whiva*⁷ (in Tamang dialect). This type of marriage is a traditional one. In *magi biwaha* there is the custom of sending the *lami*⁸ or matchmaker, representing boy's family, going to the girl's house. The *Tamba* is the person who functions as the *lami*, because he is knowledgeable in matters of ancient rituals and the family genealogy. Once the talks are over and the finalization is made by the *lami*, *Saagun* or gifts consisting of one hen or fried Chicken, one bottle of country liquor etc are sent to the girl's house by the boy's family, which is called *Karjel Pong*⁹. It is at this time the actual date of the marriage is fixed.

The *janti* (procession of the bridegroom) leaves for the girl's house on the scheduled date, as per their custom. While the *Janti* makes its way towards the girl's house, exotic rhythms are beaten on *Damphu* (Tamang's most important musical instrument) or large one side open hand beating drums. The marriage starts with the *Tambas* of both the side beginning to praise the ancestors and ancestry of their respective sides, narrating exploits and incidents, adventures and deeds of valour, and the like. This is followed by a duet where the *Damphu* beaters of one side ask their counter part questions in a certain tune or *bhaka* (rhythm) and these questions are answered by the other side in the same *bhaka*. The next part of the

marriage is the *Ratri bhoj* or night feast, where the bride, groom and all present eat and drink together. After the feast is over, the solemn ceremony or the most important ritual of the tamang community *Karjel Chol or Chardam* (giving away the virgin) is performed, consisting of 1 mana (a pot of bronze to measure rice) of rice, 1 paisa (in early time of Nepal 1 paisa was equal to 4 Dam), drink's like *jaad raksi* (local rice beer, and country liquor) as much as they can afford, which is essential for the *Karjel Chol* (Kanyadan) ritual. As like that of other communities, a Tamang does not handover his daughter whole heartedly because in the Tamang custom, *Rhui* (Gotra) remained in paternal group. Accordingly in Tamang social custom, the husband of a deceased woman does not have funeral right, which remains with the brother of the deceased women. Therefore in Tamang society women will not change her surname after marriage. After the *Chardan* is presented to the groom's party, the Kanyadan ritual in Tamang society is considered concluded.

The next morning, prior to the departure of the *Janti*, groom and *Samdhi bhoj* (in-laws feast) is given. This is to celebrate the occasion where in laws of both the sides meet and have *dhog-bhet* (bowing down to each other). It means that introductions have been completed and relationships have been acknowledged. At this point of the wedding, the *Tamba*, in the presence of the gathering, makes the parents of the groom promise never to let the bride suffer in the future and the groom is made to vow in a similar way also, by the *Tamba*. The rituals that follow are first the couple's heads are gently banged thrice and then they feed each other with what they have eaten (polluted food) or *Jutho Khuaune* and change their seats. The final ritual is the placing of the *Tika* (made of rice and curd) on their foreheads and receiving blessings from the elders. This concludes the marriage.

Prem Biwaha or Chori Biwaha (*Hyo Laba or Rang Tangba*)

In the Nepali society love marriage is not given much importance but in Tamang community love marriage is accepted. If there is love between a boy and a girl they can marry. If parents are not ready to accept their relationship, in that condition too they may prefer marriage. In love marriage a girl uses to leave her house and flee away with the boy. On reaching boy's house, his father and mother use to welcome them by placing light in front of the door. *Tika* is also placed on the forehead of both boy and girl. Within three to five days from the entering of a girl in boy's house, *Sagun* (gifts) is sent to the girl's parents which is called *Chor Ko Swar Pong*¹⁰. If it is accepted then relation is acknowledged otherwise the girl may be sent back to her house. *Ganba* or *Tamba* who goes to girl's house with *Sagun*, informs the girl's parents that their daughter is in safe in her husband's house and there is no need to worry. After this *Gamba* or *Tamba* presents *Saguns* before the parents by saying "Ashang (respect to someone) accept this"

Biduwa Biwaha (Widow Marriage)

The Tamang People practice widow remarriage. There are many examples of widow remarriage. A widow can marry with a boy whom she likes and such marriage may not hamper her social status in the Tamang society. In the earlier days there was a tradition of marrying sister-in-law after the death of her husband, by younger brother. A widow can marry younger brother of her husband but not the elder one.

Anterjatia Biwaha (Inter-Caste Marriage)

Inter-caste marriage gets recognition in the Tamang Society and very much prevalent among the Tamang people. Interestingly, inter-caste marriage particularly with the *Newar*, *Chettri*, and *Rai*, etc has given birth to new castes like *Nharba*¹¹, *Chiri* etc. But such marriage has to be purified by observing rituals like *Ritbhat* and *Chardam*. Earlier, girl had to make parents from Tamang community with whom the boy can make matrimonial relation and had to give social feast, and secondly, after making religious parents they had to go through the sacred ritual *Chardam*.

Dhanshing Biwaha

This kind of marriage is generally performed by the rich families and it is termed as *Dhanshing* (**Dhan meaning 'wealth'**) because of enormous expenses involved. Since most Tamangs are not wealthy, this type of marriage is rare. In such marriages, the parents of both the bride and groom discuss and finalize the wedding. They agree to the marriage so as to establish a relationship between the two families because they are rich. It is performed with great pomp and extravagance.

Balsing Biwaha (Forced Marriage)

In case of *Balsing Biwaha* or forced marriage a girl is forcibly abducted or carried off from some local fair where she goes to enjoy herself or while she is walking along the road or any such scope is available. This is purely marriage by capture as can be seen from the way it is performed. The abducted girl is taken to the boy's house directly or to a friend's place and kept hidden there. The next step is to dispatch the *Syalker* or *Sagun* (gifts) consisting of *Rakshi* (country made liquor) and money to the girl's parents and kin. In such circumstances, the *Syalker* (gifts) may be within the range of Rs. 5 to Rs. 50, and if this is accepted by the girl's parents, it is considered that the marriage has been authorized. In spite of this acceptance, the girl's parents have a right to demand a compensatory fee or fine called **Hazranaa** for the forcible abduction of their daughter. From this it is seen that '*Bal*' Meaning 'force' in Nepali is used and so the name *Balsing*.

Besides the above mentioned marriages, there are other kinds of marriages like *Jari Biwaha* (compensatory marriage), popular among the Tamang people. In this case a married or unmarried man can marry a woman who is already married, it is called *Jari Biwaha* or compensatory marriage. In Tamang society such marriage is not neglected but to get social status they have to pay compensation like expense of marriage or a lump sum amount demanded by earlier husband.

Divorce or Parpachuke

Divorce or *Parpachuke* can be availed of in a rather simple way among the Tamang. If a couple wish to separate or if the husband is attracted to another woman or if it is the wife, they can sever their knot of marriage by mutual understanding or placing the matter in front of *pancha* (a group of elder person meant to solve the social problem) thus completing the divorce formalities. In payment of the thread severing, the *Pancha* must be compensated with a very nominal fee as a formality. Couple so divorced can remarry and the society does not look down upon them with hate and they have nothing to be ashamed of.

Polygamy System

Polygamy is prevalent among the Tamangs and so a person is permitted to have a couple of wives simultaneously. In some villages in the northern areas of the country the practice of Polyandry was also previously prevalent, where two or more brothers were married to single woman. This has however, become extinct now-a-days.

Gharjuwai System

A person who lives uxorilocally (in wife's house) is called *Gharjuwai*. He is not permitted to marry polygamously. This means the boy who lives with his wife's family as a *Gharjuwai* cannot marry another women as long as he lives there. If such a *Gharjuwai* does marry another woman, he automatically forfeits his right on his first wife. Or if his first wife brings another man to live with her, then the former husband (the *Gharjuwai*) has no right to live in that house from then on.

The Role of Tamba and Lama

In marriage the *Tamba* and *Lama* play an important role. The marriage without a *Tamba* is taken as to remain away from rituals of the Tamangs. According to *dastur* or tradition, from the very period of choosing a girl by a boy to the day of marriage, *Tamba* plays an important role. After the marriage is over the *Tamba* suggests both the boy and girl regarding *Dharma, karma* and *Kartabya*¹². Beside the *Tamba*, a *Lama* plays an important role in marriage. In the earlier days *Lama's* role was only as a helper in needs. But later at present, *Lama's* role is becoming increasingly important in the Tamang society, marriages are presided over by the *Lama*. It is *Lama* who fixes a particular date for marriage.

Property Right of Women

The right to property is given to the women in the Tamang society. After marriage girl lives with her husband but she has right over the property of her parents legally and she also has property right to her husband's property. If her relation is cut off with her husband, in that condition also she doesn't lose her property right. So there is dual right of women over property.

Influence of other Rituals on Tamang Marriage System

Since a long time Tamang has been regarded as band society because of its cultural difference. But now-a-days there can be seen direct influence of other communities. For example earlier, Tamang people did not use *sindur* or vermilion in marriage but in the present day they have begun to use *sindur* because of Hindu influence. Generally or Traditionally, Tamang people make marriage relations within their society. But because of the contact with other community this kind of relation is at the point of decline today. The marriage rituals like *Ritbhat, Chardaan*, the procession or *Janti* etc are getting out of vogue. In the marriage the use of foreign music is increasing in the place of traditional *Tamang salo* or *damphu Geet*.

Conclusion

The above account makes it clear that Tamang society has some unique system of marriage but at the same time it is also clear that many forms of marriage are similar to

ancient marriage system of Hindu civilization like Asura, Raksasa etc which were prevalent among the *Vaisya* and *Kshatriya* community. Nevertheless it does not prove that the Tamang marriage system is totally influenced by Hindu marriage system rather most of the tribal communities use to follow their own tradition of marriage. The system that makes the Tamang marriage a unique one is the funeral right of women, it does not allow her husband, but this right goes to the parents of women or the brother of the deceased woman. Therefore, Tamang woman can not change her surname after marriage. In conclusion it can be said that the Tamangs, whatever may be the views of the scholars regarding their racial origin, are culturally rich one. Example may be cited as their marriage which is followed by different kinds of rituals of their own. But in the present day context the cultural uniqueness of Tamang people is at the stage of decline because of the globalization and cross cultural relation.

Notes and References:

- 1 Chatterjee Suniti Kumar *Kirata-jana-kriti*, The Asiatic Society, Kolkata, (2007 reprint), p. 41.
- 2 Which speaks pure Tibetan Burman dialect, pronominalised group speaks Tibetan Burman with Austric influence, *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- 3 People of the frontier. In Tibetan *mur* stands for frontier and *mi* for people. See Holmberg David H. (reprint 2005) *Order in Paradox, Myth , Ritual and Exchange among Nepal's Taman*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, p. 17.
- 4 Tamang social system is based on pure and mixed, these are 12 Tamang and 18 Jaat, This 12 Tamang are believed to be pure whereas 18 jaat are of mixed. See *Tamang Jati* (sambat 2051) Parsuram Tamang , Nepal Rajkiya pragya pratisthan, Kathmandu, Nepal, p. 55.
- 5 Generally, among the Tamangs, bridegroom's father likes to give marriage to the daughter of his sister or in this system son and daughter of maternal uncle and son and daughter of paternal aunties are eligible to get married. *Ibid.*, p. 134.
- 6 According to the Chinese lunar calendar, a year is combination of five elements these are fire, soil, iron, water, and wood and these elements have effect of male and female; for counting the age there is 12 animals representing one for a year, like 1) mouse, 2) Cow 3) Tiger 4) Cat 5) Dragon 6) Snake 7) Horse 8) Sheep 9) Monkey 10) Bird 11) Dog 12) Pig. See *A Brief history of Lhochhar and Tamang Calendar* (2005) Ajitman Tamang , Nepal Tamang Vidyarthi Ghedung, Kathmandu, Nepal, p.10.
- 7 See *Tamangs Jati* (sambat 2051) Parsuram Tamang, Nepal Rajkiya Pragya Pratisthan, Nepal, p.135.
- 8 In Tamang society *Lami* does not have social obligation but they think that they know some tradition and clan groups, for match making *Lami* will get nothing other than respect in both house. *Ibid* p.134
- 9 This is called *Mangni* pong or Begging Gifts because in arranged marriage system first the boy's family has to send *karjel* pong, if parents of girl accept the gift then followed by

second pong or gifts which is called *Hyotpapong* which needs traditional Salleroti (a kind of circular Nepalese loaf of rice flour cooked in ghee or oil) a cock, 2/4 bottle of country liquor. In this *pong* they fix the date of marriage. *Ibid.*, p.136

10 In this *pong* or gifts, the parents of the groom responsible for the theft of the daughter must inform them by placing liquor and meat that their daughter is safe and with marriageable *tharor gotra*. *Ibid.*, p.145.

11 According to tradition a Tamang can not marry to Newar because sometime in early time they were religious brothers, whoever get married they will get new caste *Nharba*, They can be pure only after three generations. And *Chiri*, if a Tamang marries a woman of higher caste like Chettri, Bhahun, their child will get *Chiricaste*. See *Tamang Sanskar r Sanskriti* (2004), Rudra Sing Tamang, Tamang Society Research and Development Centre, Nepal, p. 158.

12 *Tamba* is an authorized person to tell the new bride and bridegroom about their rights, duties and religion, that they must live happily, a man can not go for another marriage till his wife is alive, same of wife too, woman has full right on her husband and for husband too has full right on his wife except funeral right which lies in the hands of girls parents. See *Tamang Jati* (sambat 2051), Parsuram Tamang, Nepal Rajkiya Praga Prathisthan, Nepal, p. 139.