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**INTERVIEW**

**Ethnicity and National Integration in Nepal  
A Conversation with Parshuram Tamang**

**Karl-Heinz Krämer**

Parshuram Tamang, lecturer for economics at the Sarasvati Multiple Campus of Tribhuvan-University, Kathmandu, is Secretary-General of the Nepal Tamang Ghedung, a socio-cultural Tamang-Organization, which was founded as early as 1956, as well as Chairman of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists, Nepal Chapter. Last year he functioned as Secretary of the National Committee for the International Year for the World's Indigenous Peoples, Nepal. In July 1990 he was one of the founders of the Nepal Janajati Mahasangh, a kind of umbrella organization of the Tibeto-Mongolic peoples' organizations of Nepal. This organization had been preceded by Sarvajati Adhikar Manch (Forum for the Rights of all Nationalities), which was founded in 1986 and Visidh Dharma, Bhasha, Jati tatha Janajati Samgharsha Samiti (Various Religions, Languages and Nationalities Action Committee), which had been active during the movement for democracy of 1990, then presided by Parshuram Tamang. He is the author of several articles relevant to the history and ethnicity of the Tamang, as well as to questions concerning status and rights of the Tibeto-Mongolic peoples in general. The question of the national integration of these ethnic groups and the related increase of politicization of the ethnic organizations in Nepal were the topics of our conversation on 10th April 1994 in Kathmandu.

**K-HK:** Could you please tell me something about the history and organization of the Nepal Tamang Ghedung? What is the purpose of your organization?

**PT:** The Nepal Tamang Ghedung is a social Tamang Organization. It is not like an NGO. It is not an organization of only a few people but of the whole Tamang people. Its purpose is to develop a people's movement. The Nepal Tamang Ghedung works for the preservation, support and development of the common

language, religion, culture and identity. This is the main concern of the Nepal Tamang Ghedung. As you can see, these concerns are all within the scope of human rights. We are engaged in everything concerning the development of the Tamang people. Our organization was founded in 1956. When all political parties were forbidden at the end of 1960, the Nepal Tamang Ghedung was affected as well. Although this prohibition was effective until 1990, our organisation continued operating underground in different ways. Outwardly, we again became particularly active in 1979 when the King announced that a referendum was to be held about the abolition or maintenance of the Panchayat system. It was then that we held our first national conference. From 1979 to 1988 we continued working in different ways. Until 1988 a number of different Tamang organizations existed. In 1988 we tried to unite these different organisations under one roof. For this reason a common organization committee was formed. After the peoples' movement of 1990 we held our second national conference. Later on, a third conference was held. Within our organization we founded a National Education Committee, consisting of 45 members of different districts. Today our organization is represented in 62 out of 75 Nepalese districts. So you could call it a country-wide spreading. The Nepal Tamang Ghedung used to be restricted to a certain elitist class in the Kathmandu Valley, which was engaged in political issues. Today we have become a genuine people's organization which is supported by all social classes of the Tamang people.

**K-HK:** How many members does your organization approximately have today?

**PT:** That is difficult to say. The organization and registration of the members are subject to the particular local district committee. The central registration of this data has not yet been established but is intended to be in the near future. Through our organization we also try to motivate other ethnic groups to organize themselves in a similar manner. As a result, in the meantime a number of similar organizations have been founded by different ethnic groups. Today 19 of these organizations are integrated into the Nepal Janajati Mahasangh. Our organization is among the founding members of the Nepal Janajati Mahasangh. At that time (1990) the Janajati Mahasangh only consisted of 7 or 8 member organizations.

**K-HK:** What is the programmatic demand of the Nepal Tamang Ghedung?

**PT:** The Nepal Tamang Ghedung works for the improvement of the Tamang people's situation. We talk about all the problems concerning the Tamang people, like language, religion, culture, identity and the right of development. Unfortunately, the new Nepali Constitution declared Nepal to be a Hindu state. Therefore, we demand a transformation into a secular state. This means if Nepal is by definition a Hindu state, it is only a state for Hindus. But Nepal is a multinational state. Therefore, we demand equal rights for all religious groups of the country. This is also a question of our identity. If Nepal is a Hindu state one has to ask what the status of the non-Hindus is. Another problem concerns our language. We are fighting for its acknowledgement. Although the new constitution has pronounced the formal acknowledgement of the ethnic languages as one of the basic rights, this does not mean an acknowledgement of equal rights. We demand of the state to treat all languages equally. The government provides money for the development of Nepali which was declared the national language. No effort is made whatsoever towards a development of the country's

other languages. Consequently, we demand instruction of our children in their mother tongue. Moreover, we demand that our languages also should be used in the media. The constitution guarantees the right of information to all the citizens of Nepal. But in Nepal all the news and information, laws and decrees are only spread in one single language, Nepali. Even according to the latest census at least fifty percent of the population speak Nepali rather insufficiently, or not at all. Now, if all information in Nepal is spread in Nepali only, this means that half of the Nepalese population are deprived of their basic right of information. Consequently, we demand a translation of all information, news, proclamations, decrees etc. into the other languages of the country also. A different question is the right of development. The Tamang people can look back on a long history of their own. But it is also a history of oppression. Accordingly, we demand an upgrading of our history. Even the ruling class of our country should analyse our history from a new point of view and acknowledge the actual state of our position. The numerous ethnic groups of Nepal - especially the non-Hindu ones - were subject to a very strong oppression and discrimination in the course of history. You know the history of this country. It was written by members of Nepal's ruling class. They are very strongly prejudiced in their presentation and interpretation of the Nepalese history. What you read in Nepalese history books is not our history but the history of the ruling class only. It was written according to their own values, their way of thinking and their ideology. With their idea of a super caste they tried to point out their superiority. Our social history has not been written yet. We demand that this be brought up now. I would like to mention an example of our history. In our history books we still read that Jaya Stithi Malla undertook great reforms by introducing the caste system to Nepalese Society. Out of that we can not make out any positive social reform. Nevertheless, we are forced to read it like this in our history books. Another example: The Licchavi period is celebrated by the Nepalese historians as being the Golden Age of Nepalese history. How can we regard this period to be the Golden Age of Nepal, knowing that it was then that the system of slavery was introduced to Nepal? Therefore, we urgently demand a reevaluation of Nepal's history where all of Nepal's ethnic groups hold an appropriate place and a revision of the development programme which must also take Nepal's ethnic groups into consideration.

**K-HK:** The members of the various ethnic groups should, of course, be involved in such a reevaluation and revision of Nepalese history. Has anything been undertaken in this respect so far? For example, has the attempt yet been made to write a history of the Tamang people or to present the Nepalese history from the Tamang people's point of view?

**PT:** We are still working on it. We are trying to motivate suitable Tamang to write about this problem. I believe that there are quite a number of Tamang who are able to write their history much better than it is presented in Nepalese history books, simply because they have an understanding of themselves. The members of the country's ruling class do not understand the history and the problems of the Tamang people. For centuries now our people have not had the right to decide for themselves. How is it possible to form a consciousness of development in a situation like that? You know that there have been two political systems in Nepal. In Panchayat times the National Panchayat was located at the



top and the local and district panchayats underneath it. The People's Movement of 1990 brought about a parliamentary system. Nowadays, the Parliament is at the top and the district and village committees are underneath. What is the difference between these two systems? At the upper level some changes have, without doubt, taken place because today we have a Parliament which consists of two chambers. It used to be only one, today there are two; this is a change. But what kind of changes occurred on the lower level? There we find no changes whatsoever apart from the new name. How are we to expect any kind of progress with the structure remaining unchanged? There are the same laws, the same structure, the same people as before. No decisions are being made at the lower level.

**KH-K:** What do you imagine the necessary political changes to be like?

**PT:** The ethnic groups demand a restructuring of the political system. On the one hand, there is the House of Commons which is a house of representatives. The delegates are from the different electoral divisions and represent the various political ideologies of the country. On the other hand, there is the House of Lords which now is merely a doubling of the House of Commons. Accordingly, we demand the conversion of the House of Lords. In Nepal there are numerous groups of inhabitants. Some of them are big in number, others are very small. Even the small populations ought to be given an opportunity to participate in the process of decision-making. How else can it be possible for them to communicate their opinions and requests? How else can they say: "This is our Parliament, this is our country, these are things done for us."? We, the ethnic organizations, therefore demand to change the House of Lords into a House of Nationalities where all groups, the small as well as the big ones, are to be represented. It is only when all populations of the country are able to participate in such a way that they will feel the sovereignty of the country to be in the hands of all the people and believe that they are a part of this sovereign people. But with things being as they are nothing has changed. The state has remained the same, the Nepali language is the national language and all of the communication media are in the hands of the very same population group. The whole of the administration is likewise dominated by the same group of high-caste Hindus. The same is true for law, military and police. Our organization works in different ways. Firstly, we try to organize our people and to sharpen their consciousness. Secondly, we put pressure on the government to make them consider our requests adequately. Thirdly, we try to make a contribution to the development of our society by cultivating and promoting our language and by spreading information in our language. Moreover, we conduct training and seminars and the like to strengthen and develop the basic structures of our society.

**K-HK:** What about a participation within the political parties? Today, politicians are substantially responsible for the decision process. It seems to me that the participation of the ethnic groups is very small. If I take your share in the controlling groups of the political parties into account, it seems obvious that they are still mainly dominated by Bahun, Chetri and high-caste Newar. How are the chances of the ethnic groups and their requests to be estimated in this situation?

**PT:** Well, our organization is not a political but a social organization, although we also pick up and respond to political questions and problems. That means, we differ from political parties both in what we are and how we work. We present

political problems from a social point of view. Today, the people and their leaders are all politically divided. If we join the political level, we, too, will have the same kinds of difficulties. Therefore, we will continue to work on the social level. To this end, we organize certain symposia from time to time, to which we also invite parliamentarians. Politicians always look at all problems from a political point of view and in so doing are usually guided by their particular ideology. We, on the other hand, are trying to present our opinions from a purely social point of view and thereby to influence their political thinking. This organizational work is supported by an occasional distribution of leaflets and posters or by articles in newspapers. On a few occasions, we were thus able to make politicians support our requests. So, you could say that we are trying to educate and inform parliamentarians, politicians and parties in this way. Through them we are putting pressure on the government as well.

**K-HK:** If you are trying to change something, you naturally need the support of the political parties. Are there certain parties you or the other member organizations of the Nepal Janajati Mahasangh are on better terms with than others?

**PT:** In this respect, all organizations are independent. They are all social organizations which are not related to any of the political parties at all. But it is natural, that some individual persons are members of our ethnic organizations and, at the same time, commit themselves to a political party. For example, some members of our Nepal Tamang Ghedung are members of the Nepali Congress, in the NCP (UML), the Janvadi Morcha, the Rashtriya Prajatantrik Party or in some other political parties. Party affiliations are, therefore, very diverse. But this has nothing to do with the orientation and the commitment of our organization. We feel unified through our common problems. There are problems common to all Tamang, to all indigenous peoples, to all ethnic groups of Nepal. This is our common bond. You know from history that the Tamang people was very much oppressed under the Rana regime. The Tamang didn't have access to the government or administrative system and were not allowed to leave the country. The Tamang were held as cheap labourers. Under the Rana system, education of any kind was a monopoly of the country's ruling class. Participation in the decision process did not exist. Today's situation is a direct result of that system. Today our people are backward not through any fault of theirs, but because they were oppressed and discriminated against. Therefore, a compensation programme has to be introduced. The Tamang's situation today does not result from a mistake of the people but from a mistake of the country's government. It was the state's mistake that made them backward. Therefore, the state has to compensate the Tamang.

**K-HK:** Today, there are quite a number of people who do acknowledge the disadvantaged position of the ethnic groups, and who try to picture it as being primarily an economic problem. The cultural, social, political and historical causes are thereby either minimized or even completely denied. What is your opinion on this issue?

**PT:** The economic disadvantage of the ethnic groups may well be a consequence of the general discrimination against these peoples, but not its cause. If we lived in a communal system like the *kipat*-system, the situation would be completely different. *Kipat* means that the land belongs to the community not to the whole

community but to a certain clan. This was a system in which we were able to unfold and develop our own cultural and social values. For example, in our society man and woman are equal. These, our own value systems, still continue to exist. Now, what is the reason for our being backward compared to the country's ruling class? The reason is that they have destroyed our traditional system. First they destroyed our social and economical system. Then, finally, they destroyed our cultural values. They confiscated the land of our people and made themselves landlord, *jamindār*, *tālukdār*. That the people are economically poor today is a consequence of this policy. But the cause is the confiscation of our land, the *kīpaṭ*-land. The cause is political oppression. Take a look at the Muluki Ain, the country's civil code. They have incorporated our society into their four-level social system. In their system, they made us *Śūdras*. This meant that members of our people did not have any rights or prospects. They were only allowed to do what the ruling class ordered them to do.

**K-HK:** I see. This is the consequence of the introduction of the Hindu state. Today, too, the constitution calls Nepal a Hindu state. How great is your confidence in the constitution, the laws, the judicial system? How about the chances of the legal equality of all citizens which is guaranteed in the constitution?

**PT:** The constitution itself is already discriminatory when it talks about the legal equality of all citizens on the one hand, but declares Nepal to be a Hindu state on the other. I think it will hardly be necessary to illustrate this any further. The contradiction in the constitution speaks for itself.

**K-HK:** How about the acceptance of your organization or corresponding ethnic organizations by the respectively represented ethnic group? Is your work being accepted? How great is the striving for participation?

**PT:** I have already mentioned that we held a national convention. 750 people from different districts participated in this event. They all mentioned the support of our organization by the Tamang people. There is a great confidence in our work. This also becomes clear when we occasionally hold meetings and seminars. We are always trying to secure the people's opinions. I would consider it dangerous if we did not. In the meantime, 62 district-committees of our organization also contribute. They enable us to reach basically every village and every house and to talk to every Tamang individually. For example, 6 or 7 days ago there was a meeting of our national education committee with the participation of 29 members from 29 districts. At this meeting, they talked about our work in different villages. It became clear that our organization keeps expanding further and further. This is only possible if it meets with wide support among the Tamang people. The charter of our organization, our requests and aims meet with unanimous approval because they are identical with the hopes and wishes of the Tamang people.

**K-HK:** Are the problems with the diversity of languages for the Tamang similar to those of, for example, the Rai, who speak quite a number of totally autonomous languages? Western researches often stress that the Tamang are a very differentiated people, which becomes particularly apparent through the distinct linguistic variants which are sometimes not mere dialects but virtually autonomous languages. How are you trying to solve this problem? Are efforts being made in the direction of standardizing the Tamang language?

**PT:** Our problems are somewhat different from the Rai's. The Rai do indeed have a number of different languages; in their case it is not a matter of different dialects. Efforts towards a single standardized language would for them be senseless as they should rather strive for the development of all of their languages. In our case though, there is only one language, even though there might be a number of different dialects. This common language we have to develop and cultivate. But in doing so, we are trying not to favour a certain dialect above the others. All members of the Tamang people should be able to call this language their own. Therefore, we are eager to let the dialects of all social groups merge into that one language.

**K-HK:** The Tamang language is not originally a literary language. Which kind of writing do you use today for the development and standardization of your language?

**PT:** The educated Tamang are using the Devanagari writing, which is also used for Nepali. But we have come to the conclusion that we should use the writing which is used for the Tibetan language if we really want to develop our own language. It is only in this writing, that the Tamang sounds can be reproduced correctly. The main reason for this is that the roots of our language lie in the Tibetan language. This also fits with our religious tradition. Accordingly, today we are trying to revive our old tradition and culture.

**K-HK:** How about women's participation in your organization? In the whole of the Nepali society women's participation is very low. Does your organization try to address women in any particular way?

**PT:** Women's participation is indeed very low. This is a matter of forming a consciousness. Beneath our executive committee we have a number of sub-committees. Through these committees with their special programmes we are trying to aim at the Tamang women and to sharpen their consciousness.

**K-HK:** Many Tamang use the word Lama as their surname, others, like yourself, call themselves Tamang. What is the difference between these two variations?

**PT:** In the past, it was very common for the Tamang to use the name 'Lama' (*lāmā*) as their surname. This happened through a certain pressure from outside. In Nepali society the word 'Tamang' was looked upon as being very abusive. I would like to mention a national event in this context. Under King Tribhuvan and Prime Minister Bhim Shamsher, a new name was given to the Tamang (*tāmāṅg*) in 1932. By then, the Nepalese King officially granted the Tamang the right to call themselves 'Tamang'. From then on, all members of the Tamang people were to be registered under the surname 'Tamang'. This proclamation was a consequence of the Tamang demands. Until then, Tamang were registered under a number of names, including the names of numerous other ethnic groups, which made a classification of the Tamang much more difficult. It was with the proclamation of 1932 that the traditional name of the Tamang was officially acknowledged. Various researchers have written about the Tamang. I would like to refer to Hamilton here. When the current Nepalese state was created, that means when the Gorkha leaders conquered the remaining parts of today's Nepal, a time of oppression began for the Tamang. They were directly assigned to state administration. But the Tamang differed from the country's ruling class in having a different religion, a different language, a different social system,

different values and a different culture. The Tamang resisted the social fusion. They remained true to their culture and their social values. In order to escape this discriminatory existence, some Tamang proceeded to call themselves 'Lama'. 'Lama' was, of course, a clerical expression, but other people also assumed this name because priests were particularly respected persons. One group of Tamang who had a good relationship to the Ranas, such as the brothers of the wife of the prime minister Bhim Shamsher, were revalued. But the greater part of the Tamang were still discriminated against. They were not allowed into the parliamentary service, or to leave the country. In order to escape from this restriction, many Tamang took on names of other ethnic groups, for example the Gurung.

**K-HK:** There exists a certain controversy about the term *janajāti* which is used by the ethnic organizations of Nepal. A few days ago I talked to Gopal Gurung of the Mongol National Organization. He strongly criticizes the use of this term. What is your opinion about this?

**PT:** It is well known that Gopal Gurung criticizes the usage of the term *janajāti* and our organization as well. He obviously misunderstands the original meaning of the word *janajāti* on the one hand. On the other hand, he denies his own pursuit of confessional politics. Apart from that, it is sometimes not that easy to decide on the right translation of certain Nepali terms into English. Sometimes a certain word is used to express a broader range of meanings. We prefer the English term 'nationalities' for a translation of *janajāti*. Others prefer to say 'ethnic groups' or *ādivāsī*, the latter being deprecatory in its use. I do not believe that the terminology should be considered that important; the crucial point being the substance of our statement.

**K-HK:** Thank you very much.

