

The Gurungs and Their Lhosar Festival

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Abstract

This study makes an attempt to trace the history and identity of the Gurungs who have been living, most densely in the districts of Gandaki province. In order to provide clear information about the physical constitution, the nature of the race belonging to this ethnic group has also been discussed. The study also tries to explore some aspects of Gurungs identity, particularly their identity as indigenous and ethnic people of Nepal given the fact that the Gurungs have been living in Nepal since ancient times. In doing so, the study delves deeper into the Gurung tradition of celebrating Lhosar festival as a New Year, exploring its origin and development. The objective of this study is to clarify what race the Gurungs belong to, where and when they entered Nepal and how it is linked with the way they celebrate the Lhosar festival. The major finding of the study is that the Gurungs are of Mongol race, who entered into Nepal from Tibet in ancient times and among the various Lhosars celebrated in Nepal, Tola Lhosar is celebrated by the Gurungs.

Keywords: community, ethnic, Gyarong, indigenous, Mongolian

Introduction

Nepal is one of the sites where people from different places have gathered. Due to this, Nepal became a meeting place of various castes and communities. Even today, people of different races living in Nepal have their own original way of life, religion, culture, tradition, customs, manners, dress, language, literature, festivals, celebrations, etc. The Gurungs are also one of the ethnic people which has been living in Nepal since ancient period (Rai, 2007). The Lhosar festival prevalent in this ethnic people is their own original festival.

Nepal is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious and multi-cultural nation. People of different ethnic groups like Aryans, Mongols, and Dravidians have been living since ancient period. Especially the migration of people, from neighboring countries like India, Tibet and China to Nepal since ancient times, the society has become diverse (Bantha Magar, 2007). People living in all places of Nepal from Himalayas, Hills, Terai have been maintaining their own original language, religion, and various

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social structures. Gurungs are one of the ethnic group which has been living in different districts of Gandaki province of Nepal since ancient times. Gurungs belong to a Mongolian race. This ethnic group has its own unique culture and traditions. Lhosar is one of such unique festivals. The Gurungs introduce themselves as 'Tamu' in their own language. The word 'Ta' and 'Mu' is a combination of two words in which 'Ta' means 'Horse' and 'Mu' means 'Man' which means horse rider people. This is also called Tamu Lhosar because it is celebrated by Tamu people. The research problem of this study is what is the race of Gurungs? Which Lhosar festival is celebrated by them? and how do they celebrate the Lhosar festival? The main objective of this research article is to make an exploratory presentation about the Gurung community, their race and the Lhosar festival celebrated by Gurungs.

Method

This study has been made on a qualitative research framework and historical research design. All the supporting materials used in the study are based on secondary sources. Such resources have been collected from various libraries and personal collections. The paper has been prepared by selecting some important and reliable sources collected through various methods. This study focuses on Tola Lhosar which is celebrated by the Gurungs, also called 'Tamu Lhosar'. A descriptive and analytical method has been adopted while preparing the paper using the collected resources.

Discussion

Human Development and Race

For food search, the discovery of new objects in different parts of the world, investigation and the ice age that came to the earth, people scattered to other parts of the world at various times. After living in a different place for a long time, even the physical appearance of people of same origin became different (Prashrit, 2014). Due to this reason, after a very long time, people appeared as different race. Initially, human beings evolved on the basis of the same cell, then different race of human beings evolved in the world on the basis of climate change, glandular process, biological change and the process of race mixing through migration (Kaushik, nd.). Different races evolved after the differences in the natures and forms of the people who reached different parts of the world due to various reasons.

There is still controversy in the world over the evolution of the human race and their numbers. In the 18th century, Linnaeus was the first to divide the human race into four groups: the European white race, the Asiatic yellow race, the American red race,

and the African black race (Marks, 2007). However, some scholars later accepted the classification of the race as European white, Mongoloid yellow, and Negroid black (Jotov, 1985). Prem Kumar Khatri, a culturologist, mentions in his book, *Origin: A Historical and Anthropological Study of Some Aspects of Human Civilization* (1995), that there are only three race in the world, including Caucasian, Mongol and Negros (52). Looking at such classifications, it seems that the basis of the division of human race is their physical appearance and skin color.

Race evolved in humans after the emergence of an independent and distinct lineage. The whole process of creating differences in lineage is expressed as a combination of the spiritual, mental and physical differences between the great lineages of mankind (Ombet, 2012). They are based on skin color, hair color, shape of head, nose, lips, height, facial features, eye color and texture, etc. Charles Darwin in his book *The Origin of Species* (2069) mentions, “all the differences of the human race are most evident from the color of its skin (417)”. The shape of the hair is more reliable than the others as the basis of race separation. Especially Indian, Nepali, West Asian, Australian and East African people have black and normal curly hair. But the hair of Mongols and Caucasians is somewhat straight and soft. Similarly, the hair of Negroes is a little thicker and curly than others. Among the races in the world, the people of the Gurung living in Nepal belong to the Mongols (Tamu, 2011). Mongols have a large face, a large head, a snub nose, and small, squinty eyes. Their eyes are covered with a thick layer of eyelids. The individual is short in stature and has a very low body hair. Other people belonging to the Mongol race that look like Gurungs are spread to China, Tibet, Japan, Mongolia, Vietnam, Kampuchea, Laos, Philippines, Thailand, Myanmar, Macau, Korea, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, Bhutan, India, etc. (Pandey, 2003). On the basis of facial and other appearance, the people of Gurung living in Nepal seem to be of Mongol origin.

The Gurungs

The Gurungs living in Nepal known as indigenous and ethnic groups. Ethnic groups are the people of Nepal, especially the Mongols, who do not fall under the Hindu caste system (Thapa Magar, 2007). They are also known as indigenous people. Comparable to the Red Indians of the United States, the Vyasi, Jumli, Humli, Mustangi, Magar, Gurung, Sherpa, Khas, Koche, Meche, Tharu, etc. people of Nepal are known both indigenous and ethnic group (Nath, 2012: 8). In the Nepali comprehensive dictionary, it is said that 'indigenous people are the community of backward group who have their own language, religion, culture, traditions, customs and living in a certain area and those indigenous peoples who hunt and make a living by hunting' (Nepali

Sabdakosh Samiti, 2012). The Gurungs are included in both the indigenous and ethnic group of Nepal as it is in line with this description.

Most of the Mongolians living in Nepal speak the language of the Burmese family, and the Gurungs also belong to the same family, so they appear to be of Mongolian descent (Tamu, 1999). Settlements of people of different castes and communities have been developing in Nepal since ancient period (Shrestha, 2009). Gandaki province is the main settlement of Gurungs in Nepal. After the unification of Nepal, Gurungs have expanded their settlements in various places of eastern Nepal like Rumjatar of Okhaldhunga, Pakhribas of Dhankuta, Khandwari of Sankhuwasabha and Chainpur of Ilam (Khatri, 1998). Despite this, the main settlements of the Gurungs are the districts of Kaski, Tanahu, Syangja, Gorkha, Lamjung, Manang and Parbat in the Gandaki region. There are some settlements of Gurungs from Baglung, Gulmi to Surkhet. Apart from urban areas like Chitwan, Nepalgunj, Kathmandu, Butwal and Bhairahawa; the Gurungs also dwell in Darjeeling, Sikkim areas of India; and other countries like UK, Hong Kong, Singapore due to migration. According to the census of 2068 BS, the population of this ethnic group in Nepal is 5,22,641 (CBS, 2012).

Although there is some controversy as to how the Gurungs spread to Nepal, the sources said that in ancient times there was a kind of nomadic race between Tibet and China. Due to their migration, they later spread to Mongolia and Sokopalin. Afterwards, it gradually spread to Lhasa, passing through the Chiang, Silingwa area. They then spread to a hilly area called Karola via Sankai, Huyaling. At the same time, they reached Mustang of present day Nepal or the then Bhu-sa-Thang. From there they spread to Manang. Initially, the Gurungs, who had spread to the Himalayan region of Nepal, gradually descended towards the Gandaki region (Gurung, 2004). Until then, they were nomad people. This event dates back to the seventh century. Then they gradually began to settle permanently.

The Gurungs, who first came to Mustang after entering Nepal, settled at a place called Khulli below the Machhapuchhe Himalayas on the west side of the road to Manang. Later, that place was called Koli. At the present, the priests of the Gurungs, Paju and Lkepre, call it Koolha Swanthar or Koolha Sopro (Tamu, 1999). At present, this place is still in Manang district. Therefore, this area has been the settlement of Gurungs⁰ from ancient times to the present.

Before spreading to different parts of western Nepal and establishing a separate identity as the Gurungs, they were known as the 'Gyarong' (Gurung, 1992). The names of some places in the Gandaki region are still found to be similar to the names of the Gyrong tribes. Such names are Ghandarong, Lunrong, Chamrong, Telvurong, Bhurung, Ramrong, etc. (Ghotane, 1993). The names of such places seem to be similar to

the language of the present Gurungs. As the settlement spread to the lower reaches of the mountains, the people of the Gyarong had even established their kingdom in the Gandaki region. In the 7th and 8th centuries, when there was a border dispute between the Gyarong rulers of Gandaki region and the rulers of Lamjung and Manang, the two groups discussed and established a definite border at Sukekhola. Then the people in higher altitude (living above that boundary) is called Bhote and the people living below/lower altitude is called Gurung (Tamu, 1999). Even today, the ancient settlement of the Gurungs, known as the Tamuwan region, is Annapurna and the southern foothills of the Mansalu Himalayas (Lama, 2008). Even today, the Gurungs living in the upper Himalayan region of Gandaki are known as Bhote. There are general differences between them in religion, culture, etc.

The Origin of the Word Gurung

There are different opinions regarding the meaning of the word 'Gurung' and why the name is Gurung. Yogi Narhari Nath and Krishna Bahadur Gurung, in the Gurung genealogy, made the ancestors of the Gurungs of present day Nepal, the masters of Tantra Mantra. At that time, they were also given sacred thread (Janai). But later, when they even started drinking alcohol, their sacred thread (Janai) was snatched and only part of the mantra-siddhi-guru or only a parts of preceptor (Guru Ansa) remained (Nath & Gurung, 1963). They were called 'Guru Ansa' and with time 'Guru Amsa' changed to 'Gurung'. The fact that there are many errors in the Gurung genealogy when there was no research and study on the Gurungs is now coming to light. Therefore, this description of yogis and Gurungs does not seem to be completely believable.

Another notion regarding the naming of the Gurung is that when the Greeks invaded the Gandaki region of western Nepal around the 7th century, many people of the Gyarong joined the army. At that time, the present mountain district was ruled by a Kirant king named Phungchong. The generals of that kingdom were people of the 'Psyche' and 'Sengop' clans. The Greek army, with the help of the Gyarong army, succeeded in conquering it. After the victory in the war, the Gyarong armies, realizing that the conquered area was suitable for animal husbandry and also safe to live so they began to settle there. Later, the same word Gyarong was revamped and then was called Gurung (Tamu, 1999). This argument seems a bit more convincing than the other assumptions made about the naming of Gurung.

According to further details about who the people of Gurungs were and how they entered Nepal, the Gurungs are called 'Tamu' in their own language. According to that language, 'Ta' means horse and 'Mu' means man. In this way, the word Tamu is formed from the combination of two words, Ta and Mu (Gurung, 1992). Even today, the word

Tamu means horseman soldiers and the people of this caste are found to be better in martial arts. According to another view, 'Ta' means above and 'Mu' means man (Tamu, Guru, 1990). In this sense, the Gurungs were considered to be the people of higher region/altitude. Actually, this view seems true as the Gurung people had spread to the upper part of the Gandaki region. It is found that later they gradually migrated to the lower part and settled down.

Lhosar Festival in Gurungs

Lhosar is a festival celebrated on the occasion of New Year. There are various festivals, dates and celebrations in the world, some in the name of God, and, some in honor of famous ancestors, some on the basis of special unforgettable events and some on the basis of the calendar prevalent in their caste group. People living in different places and of different groups celebrate New Year with joy, excitement and happiness on the occasion of the beginning of the new day, date or year. Lhosar is one of the popular New Year celebrations. This Lhosar festival is celebrated mainly in Tibetan Lama, Buddhist culture-influenced, societies and countries inhabited by people of Mongol race and ethnicity (Tamu, 2011). People of Baglung, Thudam, Tokpegola, Lhomi, Serpa, Holmo, Tamang, Gurung, Manange, Thakali, Syangten, Mugali, Barhagaunle, Chairotan, Dolpo, Tangwe, Lhopa, Siyar, Bhote and Larke, etc. living in Nepal celebrate this festival.

The Meaning of Lhosar

The Lhosar festival is also addressed by words like Lhosar, Losar, Lhochhar. All three words mean New Year and generally it is known as 'Barga'. Among these words, 'Lho' means year, sambat, age or Barga. Similarly, the word 'chhar or saar' means new. Thus the words 'Lho or Lo' and 'saar or chhar' mean new year or new Barga. This Lho or Barga is only one of the year (Tamu, 2011). There are 12 such Bargas. Since there is only one barga in a year, after 12 years, the same Barga comes again, so the period of 12 years is called 'Lhokor'. Lhokor means to go round or come back to the same place. Lhosar of the Gurungs starts from the 'Musa Barga' (Rat-year) and ends in the 'Mriga Barga' (Dear-year) and again starts from the 'Musa Barga' (Paidi Tamu, 2011). The Gurungs who calculate the year on the basis of Lhosar consider the period of one year as one Barga. In the Gurungs, the day of Poush 15 is considered as the day of change of year or change of Barga.

'Lho' or this Barga system is believed to have originated from Mongolia's Turkistan. Its impact has spread to China as well. There is no definite date to the origin of 'Lho' tradition. However, the tradition of counting on the basis of 'Lho' is found to

be the oldest tradition in the world. This calculation is a tradition based on the lunar calendar. The lunar calendar tradition in China is believed to date back to 2637 BC (Tamu, 2011). According to this lunar calendar, nights are calculated, i.e. months and years change according to the full moon. When calculating the date according to this lunar month, sometimes, there are 13 New moons and Full moons in a year and in some years, there may be only 11. This is the reason why the date of Lhosar celebration changes. People of different ethnic groups and classes celebrate Lhosar festival at different times and seasons.

Tola Lhosar is celebrated by the Gurungs. It is celebrated on the 15th day of Poush. Tola Lhosar has been celebrated on this day since the time of Rana Period. This festival was celebrated on the day of Poush Shukla Pratipada before 1961, but after that date the festival started to be celebrated according to solar calendar i.e. 15th Poush (Paindi Tamu, 2011). During the time the administrator confused on the date of lunar calendar, so they declared the date of new year according to solar calendar. From the month of Poush, Sun's run in relation to planet Earth will shift from the southern run to the northern run. From that day, the night begins to get shorter and the day to get longer. So, the tradition of Lhosar celebration started marking the very day according to the lunar calendar. In present day Nepal, people of Tamu or Gurungs celebrate this as the day of Barga change or Lhosar based on the factual tradition. December 22 is considered the shortest day of the year and the longest night. When calculating the age of a person of Gurung, every 12 years is considered to be a 'Lhokor' (Tamu, 2011). Similarly, after passing the next 12 years or a total of 24 years, there are two Lhokors. In this race, the year is counted in the same way as one is counted by completing one round by turning the clock hand. Thus, Lhosar or Lhoshar festival, which is celebrated in Nepal as New Year or New Year's Day, belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family and the ethnic group who use it are also found to be of Tibetan origin.

Types of Lhosar Festival

Lhosar is a New Year's celebration celebrated by a large part of the world's population. The Lhosar festival was celebrated under different names and at different times, depending on the Chinese calendar and the Tibetan calendar and tradition. According to Chinese traditional belief, the arrival of the new year and the departure of the old year are considered to be from the beginning of spring or the day of Maghshukla Pratipada. Such Lhosar is called Sonam Lhosar in Nepal. Similarly, according to the Tibetan tradition, there are three types of Lhosar. They are Tola, Sonam and Gyalpo Lhosar (Thapa, 2018). According to the Tibetan tradition, Tola Lhosar is considered

to be celebrated by common poor people. It is celebrated on the day of Poush Shukla Pratipada. Sonam Lhosar is celebrated by the middle class citizens of Tibet, especially the peasants and merchants. It is celebrated on the day of Magh Shukla Pratipada. Similarly, another Lhosar is Gyalpo Lhosar. This Lhosar festival is celebrated on the day of Falgun Shukla Pratipada. Gyalpo Lhosar is the Lhosar festival celebrated by the ruling class or kings in Tibet. Tola Lhosar has been celebrated by people living in western Tibet since ancient times and Gyalpo Lhosar by people living in eastern Tibet (Gurung, 2012). Later, as the Chinese influence spread in Tibet, Gyalpo Lhosar, celebrated by the Chinese rulers, was observed in most parts of Tibet.

Tola Lhosar Celebrated by Gurungs

In the world, the Kalachakra tradition has been introduced in both the solar month or day calendar and the Manjushri-speaking astronomical calendar (night counting). According to the Kalachakra tradition, the 1st of April is considered as the beginning of the new year in Nepal. But according to the lunar month tradition, the year changes on the basis of full moon and new moon from the calculation of night. Since, Tola Lhosar is celebrated in Poush as the year changes in Poush month on the basis of lunar month (Thapa, 2018). In Tibet, Tola Lhosar has been celebrated for centuries by the poor, economically disadvantaged people. The Gurungs of Nepal had spread from Tibet to Nepal in ancient times. Since there was no other Lhosar celebration in Tibet at that time, Gurungs used to celebrate the same Tola Lhosar and are still celebrating.

Tola Lhosar has been celebrated in different parts of Tibet and Nepal since ancient times according to the Manjubhasita Khagol or Negchis (astrology) calendar. Tola Lhosar is a Lhosar celebrated exactly one month before Sonam Lhosar or on the day of Poush Shukla Pratipada. In the Tibetan tradition, the word 'Tola' means playful. The word is believed to have come after Lhosar. Non-celebrating people teasing celebrating ones asking 'How many days are left to celebrate Lhosar?' So, it is believed to have been named on the basis of teasing (Ghale, 2015). People started migrating to Tibet about 5000 years ago. About 3800 years ago, the first state called Tibet was established by Nati Chanwo of the Chanwo dynasty. A great celebration was held to celebrate the establishment of the state. From that day on, Tola Lhosar was celebrated as the New Year in Tibet (Thapa, 2018). As a new state was established in Tibet, on the day of Poush Shukla Pratipada, the counting of new Sambats started from this day. Until then, there was no such thing as Lhosar. In that sense, Tola Lhosar is considered to be the oldest. Thus, Tola Lhosar started in Tibet before the arrival of people like Gurungs in Nepal and it seems that people of the same ethnic groups have spread Tola Lhosar in Nepal.

Method of Celebrating Lhosar Festival

Eighteen days before the arrival of Poush 15 on the day of Tola Lhosar, which is popular among the Gurungs of Nepal have been cleaning, painting, plastering, repairing their houses, wells, temples, monasteries, schools, etc. Using white flour on the walls, various swastikas, sun, moon and other images of gods are made (Gurung, 2011). In the Gurung settlements of western Nepal since ancient times, a few days before the arrival of Poush 15, the youths go to the forest to hunt wild boar. In the same way, women also make flour for the dishes made on the day of Lhosar. On the day of Poush 15 or Lhosar, after performing individual house worship, in the afternoon, all the people of a Tole, prepare and eat various dishes of kaidu (a kind of food), bread, yam and meat in one place. After that, they get entertained by organizing dancing, stone throwing and other competitive games. On this day, the Gurungs invite friends, relatives, cousins, brothers, sisters, etc. to have a feast. In the joy of Lhosar festival, they organize competitions such as street races, squatting, dancing, rehearsal songs, and exchanging good wishes of new year with each other. Even relatives who have gone abroad return home for the festival.

The Gurungs perform all the rituals, cultural activities and festivals on the basis of this Barga or Lho. It is customary to start every new task only by looking at 'Lho' completely. 'Lho' matching is important for marriage. In finding the auspicious day of travel, the rituals from birth to death, kshevar, nwaran, etc. are done on the basis of their Lho. In the Gurungs, it is customary to classify rats, tigers, wolves, eagles, sheep, snakes, horses, monkeys, dogs, cows and deer as Barga or Lho (Gurung, 2011). Even when looking at a person's daily planetarium, good and bad are distinguished on the basis of Lho. In this sense, in the Gurungs, Lho has been not only a New Year's celebration but also an integral part of every aspect of life.

Conclusion

Gurungs are one of the ethnic groups who have been living in Nepal since ancient times. Gandaki is the origin place and they belong to the Mongol race. At present, Gurungs are also known as indigenous and ethnic people of Nepal. The Gurungs, who are believed to have entered Nepal in ancient period, even administered the Gandaki region in the middle Age. The Gurungs, who initially came to Mustang from Tibet, later spread to the lower reaches of the Machhapuchhre Himalayas via Manang. At present, despite being scattered in other parts of Nepal, the Gandaki region is still inhabited by a large number of Gurungs. Most of them are in good financial condition as they are serving in the Indian and British armies. People of different castes living in Nepal celebrate different Lhosar festivals. Among them, Tola Lhosar is celebrated by

the Gurungs. This Lhosar festival is celebrated on the 15th Poush of the month of BS. It has been found that this festival has been celebrated on the 15th Poush only since the Rana period. Earlier, this festival was celebrated on the day of Poush Shukla Pratipada. Seen in this light, the Gurungs have been a resident of Nepal for a very long time and they have been able to maintain their separate identity till the present time.

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