

## LANGTANG TIBETANS AND HINDU NORMS AS POLITICAL LANGUAGE: A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE ON SANSKRITIZATION THEORY

Thomas Cox

### Introduction

Sanskritization can be defined as a socialization process in which low caste people attempt to raise their status in society by adopting the values, rituals, eating habits and dress of upper (twice-born) castes. When a social group is undergoing Sanskritization they may also express their, "new values and ideals in theological and scholarly literature" (Gurung 1988: 43). People going through Sanskritization also often claim to be direct descendents of twice-born castes. For example, the Kusunda, a tribal group of west Nepal, claim to be the descendents of Thakuris, and have even adopted Thakuri clan names (Reinhard 1976: 6). Similarly, members of some Thakali communities claim to be descendents of Thakuris who migrated from west Nepal (Gurung 1988: 46)

The introduction of the concept of *Sanskritization* (by M.N. Srinivas in 1952)<sup>1</sup> constituted a real landmark in South Asian studies, for it showed that the caste system is not static, but rather has a more fluid, dynamic form of organization which allows for considerable social mobility. Several scholars have described the process of Sanskritization among different ethnic groups in Nepal (Gurung 1988; Jones 1976; Ijima 1963; Rose 1974; Sharma 1977).

The purpose of this article is to show; (1) the ways in which members of the Langtang Tibetan community use Hindu norms, as a political language, to protect their interests in specific contexts of interaction with Hindu caste Nepalis and; (2) to demonstrate that the political use of Hindu norms is *not* a sign that Langtang Tibetans are becoming Sanskritized. On the contrary, my argument is that Langtang Tibetans, by using Hindu norms as a political resource, have been better able to maintain their Tibetan Buddhist cultural autonomy<sup>2</sup> and identity, in the face of integration into Nepal's national political-economic system.

The paper begins with a discussion of how certain Hindu norms, which have been sanctioned by Nepal's national political system, have affected the relationship between tribal peoples and the Nepali government. The second section describes the basic features of Langtang Tibetan society and ethnic identity. The third section focuses on the relationship between the Langtang Tibetan community and the Nepali state. The fourth section discusses the precise ways in which Langtang Tibetans use Hindu norms, as a political resource, in their interactions with Nepali government officials, and examines the implication of this for theories of Sanskritization in Nepal.

### Hindu Norms and The Nepali Polity

Hindus first began coming to Nepal in the "first century of the Christian era" (Sharma 1977: 291). This was followed by another wave of Hindu migration which began in the 12th century and lasted until the 14th. The vast majority of this second wave of migrants settled in the Jumla area of western Nepal (Sharma 1977: 291). These first two waves of migrants helped lay the foundation of Hinduized legal, administrative and political institutions in Nepal. However, it was not until Nepal was unified by Prithivi Narayan Shah in the late 18th century that Hindu-based legal and administrative institutions were established at a national level, making their impact felt throughout Nepal.

For over 60 years after the political unification of Nepal, Hindu based legal codes were instituted in an inconsistent and diffuse fashion, resulting in a situation where the law was interpreted in different ways by administrators throughout Nepal (Sharma 1977: 278). In an effort to improve Nepal's legal administration the Ranas introduced, in 1853, a standardized legal code, the *muluki ain*, which was based on; "The *Shastras* (the principles of social and political organization in a Hindu polity) and particularly upon a later abbreviated version of the *Manusmriti* (code of *Manu*), which prescribed the maintenance of a rigidly hierarchical caste structure as the primary duty of a Hindu monarch" (Rose 1974:39).

The *muluki ain* also legally sanctioned the ritual status of the twice-born Brahman and Chetri caste people. For example, under the *muluki ain* Brahmans and Chetris were exempted from certain forms of tax and compulsory labor for the government, which were required from other castes (Caplan 1970: 71).

The *muluki ain* remained in effect until 1951, when the Rana regime was overthrown. In 1963 King Mahendra, while establishing the *panchayat* system, instituted a new legal code which banned all discrimination on the basis of caste, "thus essentially nullifying the *Shastric* base that had underlain all previous codes" (Rose 1974:41). King Mahendra added other important secular elements to the 1963 *panchayat* constitution. Perhaps the most significant of these was the development of a political-

bureaucratic framework to facilitate economic development and political modernization in Nepal.

Despite the presence of secular elements in the panchayat constitution Nepal, in many respects, is still a Hindu polity. For example, the panchayat constitution describes Nepal as a Hindu state with a king who must be a member of the Hindu religion. The constitution also refers to the Nepali people in traditional Hindu terms, as organized into four *varnas* (categories) and 36 *jats* (castes) (Rose 1974:33). The *panchayat* constitution also forbids the slaughter of cattle and the sale or consumption of beef, thus legally sanctioning one of Hinduism's most sacred rules (Rose 1974: 41). Finally, the majority of Nepal's ruling class (including those people who hold the most powerful positions in the army, ministries and national parliament, and including the royal family) are members of Nepal's highest Hindu castes; Brahmans, Chetris and Thakuris. Rose (1974: 36) argued that political modernization in Nepal will continue to;

"occur within a framework of limited secularization and that this polity, while constantly changing, will be more notable for the persistence of traditional Hindu values and behavior patterns" (Rose 1974:36).

Rose (1974: 34) further concluded that through policies of political modernization and integration the Nepali government is, in fact, attempting to standardize Hindu norms throughout Nepal's population. Finally, Rose (1974:35) also concluded that Hindu norms, sanctioned by Nepal's national political system, are being widely accepted by Nepal's diverse ethnic groups and, indeed, that political integration in Nepal is being accomplished through Sanskritization.

To obtain resources from the government, non-Hindu ethnic groups are often put in the position of having to convince Nepali officials that they have conformed to those Hindu norms sanctioned by the panchayat constitution. The strategies that Langtang Tibetans use, to convince Nepali officials that they follow certain Hindu norms, will be discussed later in the paper. Before that however, it is necessary to describe the social organization, religious life, economic system, political institutions and ethnic identity of the Langtang people, as well as the process of their integration into Nepal's national political-economic system.

### Langtang Tibetan Society

Langtang is an east-west running Himalayan valley which lies along the Tibetan border in the north-central Nepali district of Rasuwa. The Langtang Tibetan community consists of approximately 450 people who live in three separate villages, which lie between 11,500 and 12, 700 feet in elevation.

The Langtang Tibetan economy is based on subsistence agriculture (the crops grown include potatoes, buckwheat and barley), livestock husbandry and trade with both Nepali and other Tibetan communities (see Hall 1976). Virtually everyone in the Langtang community is devout Tibetan Buddhists, who support two large monasteries, a number of resident monks and a rich ceremonial-ritual life.

Langtang Tibetans are organized into 12 patrilineal clans. The descendents of nine of these clans came from the Kyirong district of southern Tibet, which lies directly north of Langtang. The other three clans are believed to be Tamang (a large Tibeto-Burman ethnic group indigenous to Nepal) in origin. Despite this presence of Tamang descendents however, Langtang still maintains a distinctly Tibetan identity. This Tibetan identity manifests itself in a number of ways. For example, (1) inhabitants of Langtang will often intermarry with Tibetan refugees (who have settled in nearby communities), but almost never with members of neighboring Tamang communities.<sup>3</sup> Langtang Tibetans have also practiced polyandry, a distinctly Tibetan marriage institution. (2) The Langtang Tibetan dialect is almost identical with the Tibetan language spoken just over the border, in the Tibetan district of Kyirong (see also Hall 1976: 60). Langtang Tibetans themselves also refer to their language as an important aspect of their continued Tibetan identity. (3) When a person dies in Langtang his/her relatives must invite the whole village to a *gyowa* (funeral ceremony), in which rituals and prayers are performed so that the dead person may achieve a good reincarnation. Tibetans from the neighboring village of Briddim and Syabru Bensi are often invited to *gyowas* in Langtang, and reciprocate by inviting Langtang residents to *gyowas* in their communities. Tamangs from nearby communities, however, are not invited to attend funeral ceremonies in Langtang, even though they ostensibly worship the same religion, Tibetan Buddhism. Langtang Tibetans consider the Tibetan *gyowa* to be a particularly sacred ceremony in which only Tibetan Buddhists should participate. The reasons why Langtang Tibetans do not consider some *Tamangs* to be true Buddhists becomes apparent when analyzing the Nepali festival of *Dasai*.

(4) like the *gyowa*, the ritual activity of *Dasai* expresses differences in the ethnic identity of Langtang Tibetans and their Tamang neighbors. *Dasai* celebrates the victory of good over evil in the Hindu epic of the Ramayana. One of the most important activities of *Dasai* is the sacrifice of domestic animals to the goddess Durga. The celebration of *Dasai* is seen by many Nepalis as an important expression of national unity and dedication to the Hindu culture of Nepal.

Tamangs in nearby villages celebrate *Dasai* in the same way as most other Nepalis, by singing, feasting and, most importantly for this discussion, sacrificing sheep and other livestock. Langtang Tibetans, on the other hand, view *Dasai* as a profoundly evil event in which Nepalis commit great sin by sacrificing animals. Instead

of celebrating *Dasai*, as the neighboring Tamangs do, Langtang Tibetans gather in the village monastery and fast and pray for the souls of the sacrificed animals. When Langtang villagers were asked why they did not celebrate *Dasai* like their Tamang neighbors, they simply answered, "they are Nepali; we are Tibetan."

### **A Short History of Langtang's Integration into Nepal's National Political Economic System**

Until the early 1960's the Langtang community remained on the periphery of Nepal's national political-economic system. The only government representatives who stayed permanently in Langtang were a few Nepali personnel at the local cheese factory. Nepali officials rarely visited the Langtang community, and the Tibetans rarely went out of their way to contact central government offices at either the district or national levels. During the course of trading expeditions Langtang Tibetans would often visit Hindu-caste Nepali communities. The Langtang Tibetan community, however, was rarely visited by Hindu-caste Nepalis or other outsiders.

Langtang's isolation came to an end with the institution of the *panchayat* system in 1963. Nepal's *panchayat* government greatly increased the number of civil servants, and health, education and agricultural facilities, in Nepal's rural areas, as part of an overall policy of socioeconomic development (see Blaike et. al. 1980; 101; Chauhan 1971: 207). By 1973 the Nepali government had established a primary school and police station in the Langtang Tibetan community, and an army post in the near vicinity. In 1970 the Rasuwa district headquarters moved from Trisuli (5 days walk from Langtang) to Dhunche, a town lying just two days walk from Langtang. Dhunche's proximity enabled *panchayat* officials to increase the number of their annual visits to Langtang. In 1974 the Nepali government established a national park which encompassed the Langtang valley and adjacent areas. This park greatly increased the rate of contact between Langtang Tibetans and Nepali government officials. Officials regularly visit Langtang to enforce national park rules and question the Tibetan people concerning wildlife, agriculture and other matters.

The *panchayat* system also greatly increased opportunities for Langtang Tibetans to acquire political representation, and resources for community development, from Nepal's central government. The Langtang Tibetan community has taken full advantage of these opportunities by choosing a *pradhan panch* (community leader) and political skills to successfully obtain considerable resources (i.e. money for health posts, trail repair, water systems, bridge construction, monastery renovation and government subsidized rice) from the Nepali government.

A deteriorating local economy has made Langtang community members very eager to take advantage of the opportunities for resource acquisition offered to them by

the panchayat system. Langtang's economic problems have been caused by a variety of factors including overpopulation (caused by an influx of refugees from Tibet), overgrazing (and a subsequent decline in livestock production), inflation in the price of food grains and national park restrictions on the gathering of medicinal herbs, previously a valuable source of income. The increasing need for government resources has also caused Langtang Tibetans to place a new emphasis on pursuing a Nepali medium education, so as to acquire the literacy and knowledge necessary to effectively deal with *panchayat* officials.

An increasing number of locally present Nepali government officials, who enforce laws and implement development policies, an expansion in the number of opportunities to acquire political representation in the panchayat system, and a growing dependence on government economic resources, all contributed to the integration of the Langtang Tibetan community, into Nepal's national political-economic system, throughout the 1970's and 1980's

#### **Hindu Norms and Routines of Self-Presentation in Political Action**

The Langtang community's success in obtaining economic resources, from the Nepali government, has been due, in large part, to routines of self-presentation,<sup>4</sup> which Langtang Tibetans implement during interactions with central *panchayat* officials. In these routines of self-presentation Langtang Tibetans present themselves as patriotic, progressive, knowledgeable Hindu citizens who have conformed to social, cultural and political norms instituted in the *panchayat* constitution, and who thus deserve the rights and resources due to them under panchayat law. Langtang Tibetans, in their routines of self-presentation to Nepali government officials, avoid all reference to traditional Tibetan cultural life. Instead, they make a point to discuss Nepali politics, history and other issues of national importance (see Berreman 1982; Manzardo 1978 for important discussions on routines of self-presentation in other Himalayan Communities). When visiting government officials Langtang Tibetans also make a point of discarding their traditional Tibetan robes (*choba*) for the tight fitting pants, cotton tunic and *tope* (traditional Nepali cap) worn by most Hindu caste Nepalis. In their routines of self-presentation Langtang Tibetans also follow important rules of Hindu-caste society, such as avoiding all contact with untouchables, refraining from the consumption of beef and adhering to the purity-pollution rules which govern the treatment of food. Finally, Langtang Tibetans, in their routines of self-presentation, often do not even admit to being Tibetan, but instead claim to be *Tamang* (see Levine 1987 for a further discussion of *Tamang* as an ethnic label). The *Tamang*, as previously described, are a large, well-known, indigenous Tibeto-Burman ethnic group in Nepal. By identifying themselves as *Tamangs* Langtang Tibetans reinforce their self-presentation as well-integrated citizens of Nepal, and avoid being disparaged as "squatters from Tibet."

The Hindu norms used in routines of self-presentation do not carry over into other realms of Langtang Tibetan social life. Within the context of their own community Langtang Tibetans do not refer to themselves as *Tamang*, do not adhere to purity-pollution restrictions governing the treatment of food, wear traditional Tibetan *chobas* and make no effort to discriminate among any visiting Nepalis on the basis of caste.

In short, the Hindu norms which Langtang Tibetans use in routines of self-presentation have not compromised their traditional Tibetan identity, or in any way Sanskritized them. On the contrary, the political use of Hindu norms has actually enriched certain aspects of Langtang's Tibetan Buddhist culture, in the face of the community's integration into Nepal's national political-economic system. For example, the successful use of routines of self-presentation have facilitated Langtang Tibetan efforts to obtain government funds which have, since 1982, enabled the Langtang community to hold the *Kangyur Tengyur* on an annual basis. The *Kangyur Tengyur* is an important Buddhist ceremony which involves the reading of the entire *Kangyur* (Tibetan canon). Before 1982 this ceremony was rarely held, due to a lack of funds. *Panchayat* government funds have also allowed Langtang Tibetans to renovate their monastery and support a greater number of monks. This shows how members of Buddhist and Animist ethnic minority groups can draw upon Hindu norms (in specific interactional contexts), to protect their interests, without necessarily becoming Sanskritized. This, in turn, provides important evidence to the contrary of Rose's (1974) theory that political modernization and integration in Nepal has been taking place through Sanskritization.

## Conclusion

This paper has discussed the ways in which Langtang Tibetans also politically use Hindu norms to protect their interests and obtain economic resources in the face of integration into Nepal's national political-economic system. This paper began with a definition of Sanskritization and a short discussion of its relevance to this analysis. In the second section I discussed the history of the relationship between Hindu norms and the Nepali polity, both before and after institution of the *panchayat* system. In the third section I examined religious and social organizational features of Langtang Tibetan society. In the fourth section I gave a short history of the Langtang Tibetan community's integration into Nepal's national political-economic system. In the fifth section I showed how Langtang Tibetans politically use Hindu norms in specific contexts of interaction with Hindu caste Nepalis.<sup>5</sup> I also concluded that while Langtang Tibetans use Hindu norms as a political resource, they have in no way become Sanskritized. I conclude further that drawing on Hindu norms as a political resource has actually strengthened Langtang's Tibetan Buddhist culture.

## Notes

- 1 Srinivas, M.N.  
*1952 Religion and Society Among The Coorgs of South India*. London: Clarendon Press.
- 2 Autonomy, in the context of this discussion, can be defined as, "the degree of self-determination or political control possessed by a minority group in its relations to the state of which it forms a part, and extending from local self-government to complete independence' (Gove et. al. 1971: 148).
- 3 There is one Langtang Tibetan woman who has a *Tamang* husband, Lakpa, who is a fully accepted member of the Langtang community, even though he often lives apart (with another wife) in the nearby village of Tulo Syabru. The reason for Lakpa's acceptance into the Langtang Tibetan community is that he is a shaman (*pomboo*) who provides a vitally important service by treating emotionally troubled people in Langtang. Thus, the *pomboo's* important position in Langtang society has enabled Lakpa to transcend the usual cultural boundaries which separate *Tamangs* and Tibetans.
- 4 There is an excellent discussion of routines of self-presentation in Neils Braroe's (1975) book, *Indian and White: Self-image and Interaction in a Canadian Plains community*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- 5 To understand Langtang Tibetan's political usage of Hindu norms it was necessary to participate in, and carefully record, many different cases of interaction between Langtang community members and Nepali outsiders. This demonstrates just how essential rigorous field work (based on intensive participant/observation in all realms of native social life) is to good ethnography. In his 1976 article, *From the Natives Point of View: On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding*, Clifford Geertz held up Malinowski's diary as evidence that good anthropology was more dependent on a rather detached understanding of the symbolic structures through which natives make sense of the world, than on intense immersion into native life. While I agree with Geertz that good anthropology is not just a matter of going native, I also believe that a high level of integration into native life is not incompatible with social scientific objectivity, and, indeed, may even facilitate the collection of ethnographic data. Whether Geertz intended it or not, his influential 1976 article has had the unfortunate consequence of deemphasizing the importance of field work, and more specifically, participant observation, to anthropology.

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