

Literature Review Essay

THE ORDINARY EARLY LIFE OF A PROLIFIC *JANAJĀTI* ACTIVIST-ACADEMIC

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Amrit Yonjan-Tamang. 2010. *Tilpuṅge Ṭhiṭo: Sanskr̥ti-Vimarśa*. Kathmandu: Tamang Prakashan Kosh.

Amrit Yonjan-Tamang. 2011. *Tilpuṅge Ṭhiṭo (Dosro Khaṇḍa): Sāgartaṭdekhī Sailuṅg Śikharsamma*. Kathmandu: Tamang Prakashan Kosh.

Introduction

After spending most of the previous eight years as a student in two different American universities, I returned to Nepal in early 1992 to begin my doctoral research on the cultural history of Nepali nationalism. Among the many things that made me feel that I had definitely returned to a post-Panchayat System Nepal were *Janaḷāti* magazines being sold in Kathmandu's shops. These magazines were part of a different kind of public sphere than the one in which I had grown up during the Pachayat era in the 1970s and the early 1980s. Since I felt that the contents of *Janaḷāti* magazines were important not only for my understanding of what was happening in post-Panchayat Nepal but also for my research on the cultural history of Nepali nationalism, I started buying and collecting these magazines wherever and whenever I came across them.

One such magazine was *Kairan* which began publication in mid-1991. By early 1992, five issues of this magazine had already been published and its premier issue was no longer available in the shops. Although I cannot recall where I first saw a copy of this magazine, I assume that I must have seen a current issue (perhaps the sixth issue dated January-February 1992) in some shop and then searched for and found all the still-available back issues. In the following months, I bought each new issue of this magazine when it became available in the market and read it with great interest. After eleven separate issues and a special reprint collection of some popular articles

from early issues had been published, new issues suddenly stopped showing up in Kathmandu's shops. Eventually I found out, much to my dismay, that the editors had decided not to continue its publication.

In its short-lived existence of about one and half years, *Kairan* published various texts that provided critical commentary on or analyses of cultural, historical, linguistic and religious aspects of Nepali identities from various *Janajāti* perspectives. In other words, issues that had been hardly available for critical *public* scrutiny from these perspectives during the Panchayat era were reported, discussed and analyzed in the pages of this magazine. *Kairan* was published in the Nepali language. In terms of its focus, it was a pan-*Janajāti* magazine. It was edited by Amrit Yonjan-Tamang, a name that I had not heard before. Apart from appreciating the work that went into magazine production,¹ I also liked the editor's take on what needed to be done in the *Janajāti* movement. Although I did not get to see a copy of the premier issue of *Kairan* until 2015, the editorial from that issue was reprinted in *Kairan Reprint 1* (c. 1991) in which it was stated:

It is not enough to just wait for the Government to do everything. We have to rise and organize ourselves to preserve and promote our culture and fight against cultural terrorism [inherent in the monoculture promoted during the Panchayat era]. It is in this spirit that we have started the publication of *Kairan* monthly. (*Kairan* n.d.: 2)

This dual agenda, first to oppose the dominance of the legacy of Panchayati monoculture and second to “preserve and promote” specific *Janajāti* cultures would be the *raison d'être* of *Kairan*. This dual task seemed both important and realizable to me as part of the new social contract between the post-Panchayat state and citizens of Nepal during the early 1990s.

Starting in the mid-1990s, some scholars of Nepal began to analyze the contents of *Janajāti* magazines for various purposes.² While reviewing the early years of the post-1990 *Janajāti* movement I also paid some attention to

¹ I had been the editor of the school magazine, *The Godavarian*, at St. Xavier's Jawalakhel during 1980 and also the editor of *The GAA Bulletin* during 1982–84 and hence had a fairly good idea of how labor-intensive magazine production work was.

² See Des Chene (1996) for a pioneering effort in the study of *Janajāti* magazines. That article has been described as important but also, for reasons not explained, “controversial” by Anne de Sales (2005: 238). In several articles, anthropologist Marie Lecomte-Tilouine has used the contents of Magar magazines to make interesting arguments about Magar re-presentations of history and much more in post-Panchayat Nepal (e.g., Lecomte-Tilouine 2003, 2009[2002]).

these magazines (Onta 2006) but it wasn't until 2010 that I began to develop a full-length article on the *Janajāti* magazines published during the 1990s (later published as Onta 2014). A longer version in Nepali, co-written with a colleague, included content analysis of *Kairan* and *Janajāti Mañca* (another magazine that was started in the mid-1990s). It was published in an edited volume that discussed and analyzed magazines in post-Panchayat Nepal (Onta and Humagain 2013).

In both the English and Nepali versions of this work, some of the key editors involved in the production of *Janajāti* magazines and quite a few of the contributors were identified by name, but we did not discuss the personal life trajectories that enabled them to be activist-academics who transformed the Panchayati public sphere they inherited by the act of writing and voicing their opinions from various *Janajāti* perspectives.³ Other scholars of Nepal who have written about the *Janajāti* movement have also had little to say about the pre-1990 life trajectories of important *Janajāti* activist-academics.⁴

With the publication of the first two volumes of the autobiography of Amrit Yonjan-Tamang, this lack begins to be redressed. Amrit's contributions are not limited to being the founding editor of the innovative, if short lived magazine *Kairan*.⁵ He has had a prolific and influential career devoted to

³ Gellner describes activism as “the practice of campaigning to re-make the world in line with a consciously articulated programme” (2009a: 1). I find this definition of activism to be unnecessarily narrow. For me activism can be broadly defined as a commitment to realizing a ‘better’ future even when the means to do so are not articulated or vague or one’s practice very tentative and/or not deserving to be called a campaign as such. An activist is then an individual committed to activism as broadly defined here. ‘Academic’ in this essay refers broadly to a knowledge producer. For the purposes of this essay, these terms should be understood as set out here.

⁴ There are a few exceptions. Hangen (2010: 60–65) briefly discusses the life of Gopal Gurung, editor of the newspaper *New Light* and author of the 1985 book, *Nepali Rājñitīmā Adekhā Sacāi*. Gurung founded the Mongol National Organization in 1989 and its post-1990 work is the main focus of Hangen’s book. See also Krauskoff (2009) for an analysis of the work of two Tharu intellectuals, Ramananda Prasad Singh and Tej Narayan Panjiyar during and after the Panchayat years. See Holmberg (2014) for a discussion of how his initial informant and research assistant, Suryaman Tamang, later became a research collaborator and an authority on Tamang culture and society. Compare Gellner (2009b) for chapters devoted to ‘ethnic’ activists and activism in South Asia. Other types of activists have received attention in the chapters in Gellner (2010).

⁵ I shall use the author’s first name and not Yonjan-Tamang to refer to him in this review. This might seem unusual for academic writings in the Anglo-American traditions but referring

the study of Tamang language, literature, publications, culture, and to a lesser extent, politics. His published works, both single-authored and those he has written/edited in collaboration with others, have made him one of the most important activist-academics in post-Panchayat Nepal. With more than 40 books published and several more in the pipeline, he is now the world's leading scholar of Tamang language and literature. These later years of Amrit's life, spectacularly and publicly productive are not, however, the subject of the first two volumes of his autobiography, which cover the period between his birth in 1955 and 1987, some two and half years *prior* to the end of the Panchayat regime. In other words, these volumes enable us to focus on the life trajectory of one very important *Janaajāti* activist-academic *during* the Panchayat era. They allow us to think about how particular encounters and experiences of an individual during the years that Nepal was ruled by absolute monarchs enabled him to become an activist-academic committed to realizing equality for all *Janaājātis* in *post*-Panchayat Nepal. In so doing, they illuminate for us some aspects of the social history of the Panchayat years from yet another vantage point.

In the preface to the first part of his autobiography, Amrit informs us that in early January 2010 he came across an issue of the Hindi monthly magazine *Navnit* which was focused on autobiographical writings and their criticisms. After reading this magazine, Amrit says that he was inspired to write his own autobiography. However, having lived, in his own words, “a life without dramatic upheavals and substantial achievements,” he suspected that the average reader would be bored by the story of his “ordinary” life. Amrit adds that he decided to make his autobiography public anyway so that his “relatives and well-wishers can learn about the turns of his life and about his life-sources” (2010: preface). In the preface to the second volume, the author says that after writing the first volume, he now feels that all seniors should write about their life experiences so that they become public and so the genre of autobiography can flourish.

This review is organized in a straightforward manner; I follow Amrit's life by recounting it as he has *presented* it to us. I assume the integrity of his presentation and do not question its truthfulness here. However I do point out some internal inconsistencies and absences in his presentation that I think could have been avoided had he made different editorial decisions

to writers/actors/singers by their first name is rather common in Nepal/Nepali writing traditions. Think of the poet Bhupi (Sherchan) and singer Narayangopal (Gurubacharya) as examples.

regarding what he wanted to share with the readers in these two volumes of his autobiography. The life recounted in these volumes is not that of a precocious child and an exceptional young adult. It is rather a commonplace story of the formative years of an ordinary *thiṭo* (boy) who grew up as a Tamang in rural Nepal. The contrast between the non-exceptional *thiṭo* and the spectacularly prolific activist-academic is precisely why I am interested in this autobiography, two volumes of which were made public recently without much fuss and buzz in the Nepali book market (cf. Panthi and Humagain 2014).

Growing up in Tilpung

The 68-page first volume of the autobiography covers the first 16 years of Amrit's life (November 1955–February 1972). He was born in 1955 in Calcutta where his father Bakhat Bahadur Tamang (alias Makar Bahadur Lama, 1927–2005) worked at the Shalimar Paints Factory. While he was still a child, his parents decided to bring him back to his ancestral village of Tale Ghale in current day Tilpung Village Development Committee in Ramechhap district, some 10–12 kilometers north-east of the current district headquarters, Manthali. Leaving his wife Moti (Pakhrin) Tamang and Amrit at the village, Bakhat Bahadur returned to Calcutta. Sometime after her husband had returned to work, Moti decided to re-marry. Bakhat Bahadur also remarried more than once and paid little attention to Amrit during his entire childhood years.⁶

Abandoned by both of his parents, Amrit grew up in a household led by his grandfather Gore (b. 1896) and grandmother Kali Tamang (b. 1903). Gore was the second son of Jandabir. The latter had gotten the title *gairung* (alternate pronunciation *gaurung*), making him the deputy of the village *mukhiyā* and hence Gore was also known by his alias Gaurung Maila. Gore had been conscripted into the army during the First World War and had been gone from his village for a full nine years without any communication before returning home, putting to rest the worst fears of his family members.⁷ He

⁶ The connection between long-distance labor and broken marriages has been made frequently in journalistic writings in Nepal in recent years. However this is a phenomenon whose longer history is yet to be written.

⁷ It is not clear which army he joined. Possibilities include the Nepal Army (Uprety 1984) or the British Indian Army (Des Chene 1993; Banskota 1997). In one place (2010: 24) Amrit mentions that his grandfather Gore was involved in the Second World War. Based on other

did not return to the army subsequently and he and his wife Kali had 12 children, nine of whom grew up to be adults.

Tale Ghale village was the ancestral home of the Yonjan-Tamangs although it was not clear for how many generations they had lived there. The village faced Tilpung River and the Gaurishankar Himal range. The weather was relatively warm and the village soil very fertile, making it possible to grow three harvests a year. Amrit grew up in the large household of his grandparents in the company of his youngest paternal uncle and aunts, doing things that all boys of his age did in rural Nepal then: looking for grass for the animals in the house and wood for the family kitchen, shepherding goats in the jungles near the village, fishing in the nearby streams, ploughing the fields with the help of oxen, and laboring in one's own fields and those of others. For entertainment he and his friends climbed up and down the hills, swam in the near-by ponds and streams (as a not-so-good swimmer, he almost drowned once) and played other games.

But in this first volume, one does not get to read a straightforward narrative about Amrit's life. After a short introductory chapter on himself, the author offers us three short chapters that describe his village Tilpung, the Yonjans of that village, and general description of Tamangs as an *Ādivāsī Janajāti* community. Those are followed by two chapters on the ancestors of Yonjans and on the families of his great-grandfather and grand-uncles. Then comes the very interesting chapter about his grandparents and his parents from which the afore-mentioned details have been extracted. This is followed by a chapter on his friends and peers, some of whom have passed away already, while others are now scattered in different parts of Nepal and beyond.

We also get to read chapters that suggest some of the ways in which Amrit got immersed in Tamang experiences and beliefs, including ideas of death, as he grew up in Tilpung. Some examples of everyday life, including extracts of songs sung by his grandparents, enrich the description of his childhood. Another chapter is devoted to songs sung and other entertainment during *jātrās* in Tilpung and its vicinity. It also mentions *lauro khel*, a game played with specially prepared sticks that was part entertainment and part 'gang fight.' While on most occasions, the game was an exercise to draw attention

information provided in the same volume, this is certainly an error. Amrit (2010: 28) mentions that his grandfather and grandmother were 27 and 17 respectively at the time of their marriage. Given that they are reported to have been born seven years apart, this is yet another example of an internal inconsistency in the book.

to oneself and one's team, on some occasions it was a business of beating each other with sticks with serious physical consequences.⁸

In the first volume of his autobiography then, Amrit shares some descriptions and vignettes of the rural Tamang world of Tilpung in which he grew up. Amrit's life story as presented here is located in the larger context of eastern Tamang culture and society. Hence we could say that there is a blurring of the genres of autobiography and ethnography in this volume, although the author does not make any explicit links between the two in his narrative. Instead the readers are left to make those connections themselves and assume that Amrit's Tamang identity emanates from his immersion in eastern Tamang culture and society. In these pages, there is very little that might give us clues regarding how, later in his life, he became one of the most prolific activist-academics in post-Panchayat Nepal. However there are two chapters that give us some hint.

First, in Chapter 11, Amrit shares with us two experiences of his encounters with the Nepali *rājya* (state) and its functionaries. One time such functionaries came to his village and assembled in a nearby house where they always did their official work. But then they demanded to be fed chicken and *raksī* (home brewed alcohol). When the message arrived in his house, it was Amrit's task to deliver both of these items. When he arrived in that house, he heard elder women relatives whispering to each other, "They only eat rice. They don't eat *dhiḍo*. They also don't eat chicken heads, legs and wings" (2010: 49). Amrit was confused and wondered what the connection was between being able to read and write and not eating those foods – his favorites. Years later he concluded that there was no such connection apart from wanting to show off the distinction of the ruling class.⁹

Another time, in the early days of the Panchayat era, some officials connected to the government's land reform program arrived in the village and wanted to examine some *khet* lands by cutting the rice that was growing

⁸ Many Nepali writers (e.g., Sangraula 2000; Bikal 2060 v.s.) have written about the games they used to play during their childhood. Social scientists and historians have paid little attention to the games played by children over the recent decades. As an exception, Vaidya, Manandhar and Joshi (1993: ch. 8) discuss sports and children's games in Nepali history.

⁹ This should remind us that there have been many ways in which social difference has been felt and understood in Nepal even during the recent decades. This particular way of understanding class distinction does not necessarily overlap with the *bikāsīt/abikāsīt* distinction made famous by Stacy Pigg (1992, 1996) and many other anthropologists who have followed her analysis of "inventing social categories" in post-Rana Nepal in reference to the discourse of development.

on them. Perhaps due to lack of proper communication, this was interpreted by Amrit's relatives and co-villagers as a prelude to how the *sarkār* was planning to "eat the *khet* lands" (2010: 50), namely, confiscate the land. The villagers decided not to allow the officials to cut anyone's rice. After Amrit's grandfather Gore had returned to his house from the meeting, apparently there was further discussion and once it was clear that the *sarkār* was not going to confiscate their *khet* lands, those gathered reversed their earlier decision but failed to inform Gore in a timely manner. When two functionaries showed up in his *khet* and demanded to cut his rice, Gore defied them and gave them a piece of his mind. Later he was summoned to someone else's house and censored for defying government officials who demanded that he be required to pay NRs. 500 to the local school. After some bargaining, this 'fine' was reduced to two chickens and one jar of *raksi*. From that time on, writes Amrit, he remained suspicious of Panchayati rulers of Nepal and their village-based agents. He writes, "My inner self (*antarman*) understood that the king was the source of injustice and the leaders were its instigators (*pr̥ṣṭapoṣak*)" (2010: 51).

The second experience is more than an encounter. It is more of a deprivation experience related to Amrit's efforts to gain formal education. He had learnt to recognize the alphabet in Calcutta but after returning to his village, his formal schooling did not proceed smoothly. The nearest primary school to his village, the Tilpung Katahare Primary School, was an hour's walk from his home. Amrit joined class one when he was about five years old. The school year would start in late December and the Tamang children would attend classes through May after which the school would be closed for two months during the rice planting season. When school reopened, the Tamang children would be so busy with agricultural work, they would not be able to attend it. Subsequently they would be busy preparing for their *kulpūjā*, *Daśāī* and *Tihār* and then it would be time to harvest the rice. After the final exams, most who had missed many months of classes would get themselves re-admitted into the same class. Because of this cycle of class repetitions, it took Amrit almost ten years to pass through grade five, the highest grade in that school. There was yet another reason for this delay. When the family did not have money to pay his fees, Amrit did not go to school and did not have the courage to ask for the money again and again since such demand would have inevitably drawn the scolding: "Has your father sent any money?" (2010: 54)?

When he got to attend classes, Amrit was good in his studies. He came first in grade three and was double promoted to grade five. When he completed grade five, he became the first person in his village to do so, perhaps signaling the persistence that would become the hallmark of his later activist-academic self. To study further, he would have had to go to some other school located at a greater distance from his home but that was not possible due to lack of family resources. As a male teenager, his labor was desperately needed by the family which, despite pooling all the resources, did not have enough to feed all its members throughout the year. As a result Amrit tells us that his life was oriented towards ploughing the fields.¹⁰ As he completed his 16th year in late 1971 there was even talk of his marriage since that would have brought an additional set of helping hands into the house. His grandfather was already in his mid 70s and his grandmother was approaching 70 and there were no other adult men in the house.

Around that time while going to a *jātrā* to be held at a half-day's walk from his village along with a group of villagers, an elder remarked, “*Ū pani ustai hune ho. Bihe garcha, ghar thāmcha, bascha*” (He is going to be like the rest [of us]. He will get married; manage his house and stay) [2010: 66]. Sensing that this remark was meant for him, Amrit now thinks that his unconscious self (*avacetan man*) took up the challenge to show that that was not going to be the case. Quite by coincidence his father, who had shown no interest in Amrit all these years, asked for him to come down to Calcutta. The first volume ends with Amrit following his *mitbā* Lalbahadur Ale out of the village, both headed to *talatira* (India in Tilpung-speak).¹¹ After walking to Manthali and then Sindhuli bazaar over the course of two days, they got into a jeep that took them to Janakpur from whence they boarded the train to Jayanagar. As the train from there to Calcutta picked up speed, Amrit tells us that he started dreaming a different future than the one assigned to him by his village elder.

¹⁰ While there is a lot of attention given to barriers to girls' education in Nepal for all the right reasons, it is also important to note that the labor power of young boys in poor families has often also acted as a barrier to their further education. Amrit does not provide precise information about the land tenure situation in his village when he was growing up nor does he provide details of the lands owned by his grandfather's family. Further details about the village economy, agricultural practices and labor conditions would have certainly helped the readers better understand the political economy of the world of Amrit's childhood and adolescence.

¹¹ *Talatira* literally means 'toward down' or 'down there.'

Coming of Age in Calcutta

The 101-page second volume of the autobiography is divided into two parts and both give us ample clues regarding the making of Amrit as an important activist-academic in post-Panchayat Nepal. The second volume covers the period between early February 1972 and December 1987. The first part covers the nine years he spent as a student in Calcutta. The second covers roughly seven years of his life after he returned to Nepal again.

After his arrival in Calcutta during the second week of February 1972, Amrit was enrolled in grade seven in the co-ed Shalimar Hindi High School. For someone who did not even speak Nepali fluently, attending a Hindi medium school meant that he did not understand much of what happened in the classroom. He made mistakes when teachers called upon him to explain things in class, and was tormented by his fellow students and teachers. As a result he says he became an introvert. At the end of his first school year, he failed in two subjects, but was promoted to grade eight. Nevertheless he decided to transfer schools and moved to the all-boys Ambika Hindi High School from where he passed tenth grade in 1976 and twelfth grade in 1978. Subsequently he joined the Shivapur Dinbandhu College where he appeared for his BA exams in 1980.

The linguistic challenges he faced after arrival in Calcutta became more manageable as the months went by. Living and studying in a multilingual environment meant that Amrit began to grow intellectually in a context where he was exposed to Hindi, Urdu, Maithili, Bhojpuri, Awadhi, Nepali and of course English and Bangla. After mastering Bangla at a certain level, he also began to understand Assamese (also known as Asamiya) and Odia (also known as Oriya). Over the years of his living in Calcutta, he gained the ability to comprehend and use about 12 languages at various competence levels. It was in this milieu that he gained life experiences that prompted him to consciously think about his own language, Tamang. The first foundations of his later work as a researcher of languages and his mastery of Tamang language, literature and publications were laid during these years. He credits his friends in the schools and the college in Calcutta for his facility in many languages and for inculcating an approach to languages that has served him well in his later years.

He lived with his father, step-mother and step-siblings in the quarters of the Shalimar Paints Factory which was also called Rangkal. There were more than 25 Nepalis who were employed there, and all but one worked as

a security guard. Many lived with their families while some had no families with them. All Nepalis there had little experience of higher education. According to Amrit, this community felt alienated from Nepal and was well on its way to becoming a diasporic community. The sense of alienation that he experienced was crucial to his later decision to return to Nepal.

Amrit credits two individuals for his interest in literature. First was his teacher of Hindi in Class 9, Ambika, who taught him poetry through performance and contextual explanations. The second was Dhruba Subba of Darjeeling who introduced him to Nepali literature. Subba also provided Amrit with information about the Nepali *bhāṣā* movement in India that eventually led to Nepali being listed in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India in 1992 (Sarkar 2008).¹² According to Amrit, during the period 1978–1980, he wrote poems in Nepali and Hindi, some of which got published. During the same years, Amrit says he got involved in the Nepali *bhāṣā* movement in Calcutta and attended various events that were organized in that city. He also read *Hāmro Bhāṣā* (Our Language) published from Darjeeling and *Aba* (Now) published from Kalimpong, among other periodicals. Both of these publications were part of the Movement and carried its news and programs as well as writings that provoked his imagination about the connections between languages and cultural identities. He also mentions that an essay by Gandhi in one of his textbooks on the importance of the mother tongue influenced him a lot. He now concludes that the study of literature and the desire to write were the permanent achievements of his student days in Calcutta.¹³

While in college he was increasingly drawn towards philosophy and began to question the existence of god and the religious regimes that had been established in the latter's name. He began to read non-textbook items on this theme and neglected his formal studies. As a result he failed a subject

¹² See Onta (1996) for one description of the Nepali *bhāṣā* movement in Darjeeling during the early decades of the 20th century and Onta (1999) for an analysis of its connection with the development of monocultural Nepali identity inside Nepal during the later decades of the 20th century.

¹³ It is useful to remember here that many Nepalis had preceded Amrit in going to Calcutta for their studies. By the early 20th century, Calcutta was already a viable alternative to Banaras for studies for some Nepalis. See Kedarmani Acharya Dixit (2034 v.s.: 14–25) for one account of Nepali student life in Calcutta for a 12-year period ending in 1925. Incidentally, late in his life, Acharya Dixit regretted the fact that he did not pursue the reading of books in Bangla during his student days in Calcutta.

in his BA exams. He lost interest in continuing his studies in Calcutta and decided to return to Nepal. After spending more than nine years in Calcutta, he boarded the train back to Nepal as a man who did not have a BA certificate but certainly carried with him a good bundle of practical knowledge based on his lively contacts and networks, social service, various experiences in a major metropolitan city and familiarity with many languages, literatures and philosophy.

Getting to Know Nepal Differently

The second part of volume two of Amrit's autobiography begins with his return to Nepal in February 1981. He first headed home to make his citizenship certificate and, after he had one, returned to Kathmandu to try out his luck in the job market. Three months into his search, partially spent reading newspapers in Kathmandu's libraries, he came across the weekly *New Light* edited by Gopal Gurung. Finding its contents to be pushing the *mūlbāsi* agenda in post-Referendum Nepal, Amrit met with the editor and was offered a job at the paper for Rs 300 a month.¹⁴ He took up the offer – he was in desperate need for a regular income – and became the de facto office assistant. Although he also wrote news reports, initially they were not published. After six months at the paper, he was officially recognized as its assistant editor and given a byline in the newspaper.

More importantly, his job in *New Light* provided him the opportunity to meet relatively senior *Janajāti* intellectuals, activists and editors. Some of the people he met included Biswajit Kirat (editor of *Hālcāl* weekly), Ghala Rai (editor of *Koṅgpī* monthly),¹⁵ Tilak Chamling (editor of *Pāruhāng* monthly), Gopal Changcha (editor of *Chaharā* monthly), and Suresh Ale Magar who later became the founding general secretary of Nepal Janajati Mahasang, and subsequently a leader of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist). Amrit also mentions reading the book *Nepalko Gṛhanīti ra Prajātantra* (Nepal's

¹⁴ *Mūlbāsi* (ancestral residents) is a term Gopal Gurung (1992) preferred over *Janajāti* since he thought that the concepts embedded in the terms *jāt* and *jāti* only existed within Hinduism. See Onta (2006) for further details about the politics involved in the use of the various terms *mūlbāsi*, *Janajāti* and *Ādivāsi Janajāti*. See Hangen (2010) for more on Gopal Gurung and his life as a newspaper editor and *Janajāti* activist-politician. In 1980, a national referendum had been held to decide between a 'reformed' Partyless Panchayat System and multiparty democracy. When the results were tallied, the final verdict went in favor of the 'reformed' Panchayat System by a margin of about 400,000 votes (Baral 1983).

¹⁵ See Yonjan-Tamang (2068 v.s.) for a memoir essay on Ghala Rai.

Domestic Policy and Democracy) written by Jaya Bahadur Hitan Magar several times. Listening to conversations between these individuals in his office and reading the work written by some of them offered invaluable opportunities for Amrit to learn about the problems facing the *Ādivāsī Janajātis* in Nepal. He also got to know a lot about their incipient movement and its activities and plans.

While this job provided him invaluable knowledge for his later work, the salary he got from it was never enough to live on in Kathmandu, even on a shared-room basis. He initially asked for supplemental funds from his father but was embarrassed to do so in the long-run. Hence when the politician Motilal Tamang of Ramechhap district arranged for a job for Amrit in a field survey being carried out by the company East Consult, he took up the offer and headed to western Nepal. His team was supposed to do the survey for the Babai Irrigation Project and hence Amrit spent six months between November 1981 and April 1982 in the jungles of Bardiya. His job was to record the field data observed by his overseer boss, but Amrit soon learnt how to do his boss' job while the latter was taking his afternoon siestas. In addition to taking part in *śikār* (hunting) teams, he got opportunities to talk with local Tharus and observe *bādīs* engage in commercial sexual solicitations. Those six months were important to Amrit for his experiences in a different part of Nepal and exposure to what he now considers to be some social traditions and culture that “devalue human values” (2011: 61).¹⁶

After returning to Kathmandu, he was engaged in the processing of the field data when someone at his office offered him an interpreter's job (Tamang to English and vice versa) for a French research team heading to Tamang villages in Nuwakot, northwest of Kathmandu. For about a month during October-November 1982, he and Tashi Thokar (who was from the area) worked not only as interpreters but also as research assistants to an anthropologist (whom he later thought was Andrés Höfer, but the latter is certainly not French so there is some confusion here). It sounds like Amrit and Tashi had to do what many Nepali research assistants have done for many *vidēsī* anthropologists since the 1950s: be the medium of conversation with informants, take photographs, collect items of material culture and

¹⁶ I have not come across many lengthy accounts of experiences gathered by Nepali consultant field workers. For one exception see Prasai (2060 v.s.) who recounts his difficult travels to Dolpa in 1978 as part of a team doing a health survey for the consultancy firm New Era. Many short accounts do exist (e.g., Khatri 2070 v.s.: ch. 9).

related tasks. Although this job turned out to be a financial disaster for Amrit (reportedly he was paid a pittance by his anthropologist boss and he could not continue his position at East Consult), he says that the experiences he accrued during this trip “expanded his cultural thinking” (2011: 62). Difficulties of mutual comprehensibility and embarrassing conversations (where he used words that turned out to be vulgar in western Tamang) made him realize that there were linguistic differences in the Tamang language spoken in various places. The immersion in field research in Nuwakot provided him the opportunity to see and experience the various song performance formats of the western Tamang and later enabled him to publish an article on the Tamangs of Nuwakot and their songs in the magazine *Koṅpi*.¹⁷ It also enhanced his Tamang vocabulary and laid the strong foundations for all of his later work on Tamang language, literature and culture. He writes:

I learnt the Tamang language spoken in the Salme region of Nuwakot. I observed the local Tamang culture from a close distance. The horizons of my knowledge about linguistic and cultural knowledge were expanded. This experience increased my interest in serious study and research. Reflecting back, I learnt a lot of useful things for my (later) life as a researcher from this trip. (2011: 67)

From March 1983 to December 1987, Amrit taught at and managed two schools. While the initial school job was taken up in desperation after several months of being unemployed in Kathmandu, it and the subsequent job were also manifestations of Amrit’s commitment to his own community of Tamangs. Initially he worked as the headmaster of Manedanda Lower Secondary School in Pingkhuri in the western part of Ramechhap district.¹⁸ Most of the students were Tamang but the language of instruction in the school was Nepali. When he arrived, the management aspects of the school were a big mess. According to Amrit, most of the teachers were local folks and there was hardly any discipline regarding how classes were operated.¹⁹

¹⁷ I have not seen the original publication. This article was later included in the second major volume of his collected essays (2010a: 268–280). Western Tamangs have been the subject of research by Holmberg (1989) and March (2002), among others.

¹⁸ For more on the Tamangs of Ramechhap district, see Yonjan-Tamang (2012c).

¹⁹ In Amrit’s rendition, the local origin of these teachers and their lack of discipline is connected. However this need not be the case everywhere. In fact the exact opposite has been argued by Shrochis Karki in a forthcoming article about a successful public school located in south Lalitpur.

It took Amrit a while to deal with these management challenges. Later on he organized a picnic for the teachers of all the primary schools in the area and even organized a regional Nepali literature seminar. During his stay in Pingkhuri, he got further opportunities to observe Tamang life and culture in another area from a close distance. While there, Amrit also got married to Mina Muktan in late February 1984. Their marriage had been engineered by villagers who thought that it would force Amrit to continue in his position at the Manedanda School.

From mid-1987, he worked as a teacher (and initially also the headmaster) of the Kakling Secondary School in Doramba, a Yonjan-Tamang village, also in Ramechhap district. Apparently this was the first school that had attained high school status in any Tamang village. The school had problems retaining its teachers. Amrit was reluctant to go but eventually agreed to do so upon the urging of Dik Bahadur Yonjan who was the head of the school management committee. There too he had to clean up the management mess he inherited, apart from teaching intensive remedial classes to grade ten students who were to appear for the School Leaving Certificate examination shortly.

His activities in both schools had come to the notice of local Panchayat functionaries and the district education officer. While Amrit was still at the first school, the district education office started creating obstructions by delaying his salary and the renewal of his appointment (which apparently had to be done every six months). One time the district education officer asked him to furnish a written explanation regarding why he had organized a picnic, the literary seminar and a teachers' meet. Only later did Amrit realize that this was all a pretext to get him arrested. While Panchayati control over public life had been relaxed somewhat during 1979–1980, that is, during the months leading up to and immediately after the 1980 National Referendum (Nepal 2057 v.s.), it was being strongly re-asserted by the mid-1980s. Smart and educated teachers who did not belong to the Panchayati fold or whose activities challenged the interests of those who belonged to that fold were obvious targets for harassment and taming by Panchayat's functionaries.²⁰

In late December 1987, Amrit had taken some of his students to Ramechhap bazaar, the then district headquarters, for a district-wide sporting

²⁰ Various former teachers have published accounts of the harassment they experienced during the Panchayat era. See for example Sangraula (2060 v.s.) which is an essay originally published in the mid-1990s.

competition to mark the birthday of the then King Birendra.²¹ While there he was tipped off by someone that the district administrator's office had issued a warrant for his arrest. Not wanting to surrender tamely to the Panchayati State, Amrit left Ramechhap bazaar promptly, telling a relative that he was going to Pingkhuri. The second volume of his autobiography ends without Amrit telling us if he arrived there or went somewhere else to evade the Panchayati police.

Expectations as Criticism

With the two published volumes reviewed here, we now have an account of Amrit's life from his birth in 1955 to the end of 1987. Coming of age in a multilingual environment in Calcutta was a life changing experience for Amrit. His own initial linguistic challenges and his gradual overcoming of them made him very sensitive to the social life of languages and influenced him to dedicate his later life to the study of his own language, Tamang, its literature and publications and more generally to the preservation and enhancement of it and other minority and endangered languages of Nepal. After he returned to Nepal, a short stint at a newspaper provided him orientation in the incipient *Janaajāti* movement for equality. Teaching in two schools, dealing with their management challenges, organizing community events for teachers and being harassed by agents of the state enabled Amrit to better understand local and national politics of the late Panchayat era. All these experiences gave him firsthand comparative knowledge of life with freedom of association but alienation in Calcutta, and life under financial and political constraints in Nepal during the 1980s. Teaching and managing schools in Tamang villages also enabled him to get a better sense of what could be done when committed community leaders and individuals got together to support institutions such as the two schools where he taught. The latter experience, most probably, influenced his own ideas regarding why *Janaajātis* needed to self-organize to 'preserve and promote' specific *Janaajāti* cultures and languages while also demanding equality from the state in post-Panchayat Nepal.

What did he do in the years that followed immediately? In particular what else happened in his life from early 1988? How did he manage to continue his higher studies and get formal training to become a leading

²¹ Such competitions were already a regular feature of Nepali school life by the second half of the 1970s. The winning schools used to be awarded 'Birendra Shields.'

socio-linguist? What life experiences did he have between 1988 and early 1991 that led him to decide that a periodical such as *Kairan* was needed as a platform off for *Janajāti* activism and that he would edit it himself? What was his role during the first *jana āndolan* of 1990? After *Kairan* folded in late 1992, Amrit went on to edit many other periodicals²² and to author, edit and co-edit many articles, books, edited volumes and anthologies. What has kept him motivated to keep editing these periodicals and to continue writing prolifically about Tamang language, literature, culture and politics (e.g., Yonjan-Tamang 1998, 2006b, 2010a, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2070 v.s.; Yonjan-Tamang and Yonjan-Lama 2011) even when financial support for such work has been wanting?²³ What has prompted him most recently to work tirelessly to promote language development plans and programs, in particular mother tongue education in Nepal's minority languages (e.g., Yonjan-Tamang 2006a, 2069 v.s.; Yonjan-Tamang and Paudel 2066 v.s.)? What other life experiences have made him an advocate of linguistic human rights, someone who believes that "to attain social justice, one needs to honestly give continuity to linguistic movements" (2011: 37)?

I look forward to reading the third and later volumes of Amrit's autobiography so that we will know the answers to these and related questions. I anticipate that the third volume in particular will decisively show us how Amrit Yonjan-Tamang's later life trajectory has been spectacularly different from those of other Tilpunge *thiṭos*, or for that matter, most other *thiṭos* and *thiṭis* (girls) of his generation. In addition, hopefully it will also help us to understand how the work of individuals such as Amrit compares and combines with that of other Nepalis who have contributed to knowledge production about *Janajāti* cultures and histories in post-Panchayat Nepal. If it does that, it will enhance our understanding of the single and collective lives of agents who have played a significant role in creating what academics have often referred to as the *Janajāti* movement in post-1990 Nepal.

As should be obvious from what I have written above, the life story narrated in these two volumes of autobiography is fascinating in its ordinariness. However I was somewhat disappointed by two aspects of these books. The first of them relates to the poor quality of the writing and editing in some parts of the narrative presented in the two volumes. The author is an

²² These include the premier and only issue of the *Tamang Journal* in 2009. This academic journal was published by Tamang Pragyasabha which was founded in 2006.

²³ See Yonjan-Tamang (1998: 73–74) for a list of his publications for the years 1982–1998.

accomplished writer in the Nepali language as has been demonstrated in his dozens of other available writings and publications. Hence it is quite normal to expect the writing in these volumes to be grammatically acceptable and the text edited for internal consistency and accuracy. At various places, the writing is grammatically incorrect. Several dates provided about the life details of his family members are inconsistent.²⁴ Attentive editing and close proof-reading by an experienced editor could have easily taken care of these problems. Instead they distract from what could have been a very fine reading experience. I hope that before the future volumes of his autobiography are published, Amrit will either take the time to edit the manuscript or seek the help of an editor who will go through the manuscript meticulously, cleaning it up for publication while retaining his flavor of Nepali writing.²⁵

The second disappointment relates to the choices he has made regarding what to include (or not include) in these two volumes. To explain what I mean, I will just give a couple of examples. As has been mentioned above, Amrit says in passing that while working for *New Light* under Gopal Gurung, he got to meet many *Janajāti* activist-intellectuals such as Ghala Rai who edited *Koṅgpī* monthly. Before the second volume of his autobiography had been published, Amrit had already written a memoir essay on Rai (Yonjan-Tamang 2068 v.s.), describing at some length their meetings, how he provided assistance to Rai in the production of some issues of *Koṅgpī* and more generally what he learnt from Rai about mission journalism from *Janajāti* perspectives. Many of these details could have been incorporated into the second volume of his autobiography rather easily and the quality of that essay indicates that Amrit could have written about his interactions with some of the other people named earlier in a similar manner. Why he did not do that is not explained in the published second volume. Perhaps he was in a hurry to complete the manuscript and did not stop to think how texts that he had generated separately for other purposes could be incorporated into his autobiography.

²⁴ See footnote 7 above where two examples of inconsistency are mentioned.

²⁵ Or better still one of the new and successful Nepali private publishers (Panthi and Humagain 2014) or the Nepal Academy should publish Amrit's consolidated autobiography consisting of not only volumes one and two but also the as-yet unpublished volumes. This the private publishing house or the Nepal Academy could do to demonstrate their commitment to publishing important works by individuals who are not part of the mainstream of Nepali letters but offer important perspectives that make a plural, multicultural Nepal realizable as a routine achievement.

The second example relates to what he chooses to omit from his narrative. As a teacher and manager in two schools in Ramechhap in the mid-1980s, he would have been witness to various types of anti-Panchayat political mobilizations led by the then banned political parties (cf. Shneiderman 2012) and the Panchayat state's own *bikās*-oriented practices. He would have come into contact with different political workers from across the political spectrum who held different views on how the disenfranchised communities in Nepal, *Janajāti* and others, could be empowered. For some such individuals, the end of the Panchayat System was a basic requirement of all politics; for others, empowerment was considered possible from within Panchayat's own *bikās* apparatus. In the Tamang communities that supported the two schools where Amrit taught, it is almost inevitable that such different views would have come to the surface whether the problems being tackled were issues related to school management or the future of *Janajātis* in a post-Referendum Nepal. Had Amrit given us some description of these politics as he experienced or observed them, the latter half of the second volume of his autobiography would have been much richer and more insightful.

According to Victor Pradhan (2044 v.s.), weaknesses of the second kind mentioned here were also present in the autobiographies written in Nepali during the two decades between the mid-1960s and the mid-1980s.²⁶ Pradhan attributes these weaknesses on the part of an earlier generation of writers to their carelessness, traits that Amrit has also shown in executing some parts of his autobiography as I have noted above. However I also wonder if Amrit's choices of inclusion and omission in his autobiography are influenced by limited and limiting ways of thinking about the autobiography genre in Nepali writing tradition. Given that the volume of autobiographical writings in Nepali languages has increased rapidly in recent years and some such books have sold in the thousands, we can only hope that writers including Amrit will overcome these limitations and give us more books to read that are better executed in terms of their writing and editing. Such books will enhance our collective understanding of the recent history of Nepal – during the Panchayat and post-Panchayat eras – and of the lives of the individuals described therein.

²⁶ Although dated, Pradhan's book is still the most comprehensive guide to Nepali biographies and autobiographies published before the early 1980s.

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