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THE HILLS ARE ALIVE WITH THE SENSE OF MOVEMENT: MIGRATION AND IDENTITY AMONGST THE YAKHA OF EAST NEPAL¹

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Introduction

The main message a long-stay visitor to the hills of Nepal is likely to hear from local people about the condition of their lives is encapsulated in the Nepali word *dukkha*.² This broadly translates as ‘suffering’, ‘pain’ or ‘trouble’ and is used in a multitude of contexts, but is often more specifically linked to the toil surrounding subsistence living (i.e. people’s painful struggle to eke a living from the soil). In Yakha (the language of the Tibeto-Burmese ethnic group on which the research for this paper is based³) the word was pronounced *tukhi*, and we heard it used most in relation to the suffering involved in living in a village, where it was tagged alliteratively with the Yakha word for village to make *tukhi ten*.

For the anthropologist trained to espouse the relative value of all cultures and to look with a certain degree of optimism at the way of life of those studied, it was sometimes difficult to come to terms with the vehemence with which the hardship of life in the hills was expressed. “It’s not such a *tukhi ten*” one could assert while sitting by the warm embers of a smoky fire on a crisp winter’s morning, snow glinting on the peaks of the distant Himalaya and a glass of freshly distilled *raksi* (N. - liquor) in hand. “See how clean the air is outside, the weather is lovely, how sociable everyone is.” But in the summer monsoon, with views long forgotten replaced by a blank wall of cloudy whiteness, and ubiquitous stomach ailments having already precipitated multiple visits to the latrine that morning, it was tempting to agree with what people were saying about their village as they prepared to go off for yet another back-breaking day working in leech-infested fields. “Yes, it is a *tukhi ten*.”

While opinions amongst academics vary as to the relative weight of ‘pull’ and ‘push’ factors (Rana and Thapa, 1974:82) on migration from the hills of Nepal, and the situation differs markedly in different regions and amongst different strata of society,⁴ it was this perception of hill life as a source of suffering and hardship which appeared to be a primary stimulus for migration from Tamaphok. Migration is often peripheralized as a process in anthropological accounts, since it muddies the boundaries of neat, community based studies. Studies (usually by scholars in other disciplines) which have looked specifically at migration in Nepal (e.g. Rana and Thapa, 1974; M.N. Shrestha, 1979; Conway and Shrestha, 1981; N.R. Shrestha, 1982, 1985a, 1985b, 1990; Gurung, 1987; Thapa, 1989), have tended to look at only one aspect of the process, such as internal migration or migration by men, measured in quantitative not qualitative terms. Thus a sense of the full meaning and importance of migration to the people of the Nepalese hills has been lacking.

This paper, by contrast, does not aim to present material representative of migration patterns across the whole of Nepal, but instead to provide a picture of the changing nature of Yakha migration from Tamaphok and how the different environments to which members of this ethnic group have been moving were perceived by the migrants themselves. It is predominantly male-focused, and should be read in conjunction with Tamara Kohn’s paper (this volume) which presents a different sort of migration through women’s eyes. Rather than a necessary but dislocating evil, I would argue that the Yakha saw migration as an intrinsic part of their culture and identity.⁵ This paper attempts to elucidate some of the social and cultural factors which conditioned and reflected such a profound ‘sense of movement’ in Yakha society, and investigates in particular the way in which

the Yakha manipulated various names in their dealings with the world they experienced through migration. The fundamental importance of migration for the Tamaphok household economy was evidenced by the fact that at any one time, particularly in the winter months, up to 25% of the adult male population was likely to be absent. This absence was reflected in the census figures collected for the government by the *pañcāyat* secretary and an assistant during the summer of 1989. In ward 5, where the population was 95% Yakha, less than 40% of the total population of 832 was male. This compared with a virtually 50:50 ratio of males to females in the *pañcāyat* as a whole. We were frequently told that every household had some male members working away, an assertion verified both by the census figures and our own smaller survey. I shall look first at the main destinations involved in this movement, followed by the social and cultural factors which are an integral part of it.

Army Service

The traditional recruitment for service in the British Gurkhas was economically important but a rather small and dwindling proportion of the total. The British Gurkhas were seen as offering the highest salaries and best amenities. Of the five infantry battalions in existence the '1st/2nd' and '7th' were known as the 'eastern regiments' since they recruited mainly from the east. The normal length of service was fifteen years: a minimum of ten years had to be served to receive a pension, and fifteen were required for a full pension. This pension was often higher than the regular wage of a soldier in the Indian army (the other main source of military service). Thus it was highly prestigious and lucrative for a family to have a son in the British Gurkhas. However, during the period of our fieldwork the British military camp in Dharan, previously the centre for Gurkha recruitment in the eastern hills, was closed. While arrangements were made for potential recruits to be taken by bus from Dharan to Pokhara in the mid-west of Nepal in future, it was hard to imagine recruitment from the eastern hills would persist at its previous levels. This pessimism was justified: after our fieldwork, Gurkha recruitment in 1991 was reduced from 300 to 240 (according to Major Nigel Collett at a recent talk given in London on February 7th 1991), and the reduction in infantry battalions from five to three was announced in May 1991.

The Indian army was a more common source of employment than the British Gurkhas, although financially it was 'second best' to them. This said, one woman reported that her Indian army widow's pension had increased from 30 to 500 rupees (\$1 to \$16.50) a month over the previous eleven years, and the pension for a retired regular soldier from the Indian army was 1,500 rupees (\$50) a month, which compared favourably with the working salary of a teacher in Tamaphok school. The nearest recruiting centre was Darjeeling, and from people's reports it seemed that selection methods were every bit as tough as for the British Gurkhas. An advantage of serving in the Indian army was that it allowed the soldier the chance to return home on leave at regular intervals: once every six months seemed to be the norm, but this depended on the inclination of the man concerned and the distance of his army barracks from East Nepal. Soldiers in the British Gurkhas, by contrast, came home on a longer, six month leave once every three years: they could come more frequently only if they could obtain clearance, and were prepared to pay their own airfares to and from their posting. Furthermore, the British Military Hospital had been closed along with the British Gurkha camp in Dharan, and with it had gone the benefit of treatment for ex-British army servicemen and their families outside the Nepalese health service. Indian army ex-servicemen, on the other hand, could still go to India for treatment in Indian military hospitals.

The Nepalese army ranked a poor third in salary and Yakha men's job aspirations. The *pradhān pāñca* (N. - *pañcāyat* leader) could only think of two men from the Yakha population in Tamaphok serving in the Nepalese army, compared to five in the British Gurkhas and an uncertain but larger number (possibly thirty) working in the Indian army.

North-east India, Sikkim and Bhutan

After the army, a second major migrant destination was Assam and the other hill states of north-east India, together with Sikkim and Bhutan. Yakha families with kin permanently residing in these places (of which there were many) were likely to use these links to find employment there in a wide range of activities - wood-cutting, house construction and agricultural labour, to name but a few. To the outside observer, this movement could seem sudden, but it was certainly not spontaneous. A young man threshing rice straw one day in November passed us by on the path out of the village the next with a cheery "I'm off to Nagaland today, see you in April!". The eastern states of India exerted far more of a migratory 'pull' on the inhabitants of east Nepal than did the Nepalese capital Kathmandu to the west. However, the situation was changing. Some twenty years ago the Indian government was offering enticing land grants to ex-servicemen to clear the jungles of Assam. Many of the men who moved there then took their families across and never returned. However, in the more recent political and economic climate that form of permanent migration had become more difficult and was being replaced by seasonal migration or migration for a period of years. Even this could be problematic. The man we met on the path was back in Tamaphok three days later having been denied entry into India since it was the time of the Nepal-India trade and transit treaty dispute.

Those going to Assam almost always spoke highly of the place - the land was said to be more fertile than Tamaphok, and the opportunities were better. The cultural differences were also much remarked upon. One woman commented that her son had married a Rai woman (originally from another part of the Koshi Hills) in Assam, and told us of what she considered the significant differences in his wedding. Instead of preparing buffalo meat and rice for the wedding guests, a goat was killed, and its meat was served with biscuits and *puri* (N. - fried bread). There was also a ceremony involving the cutting of three or four gourds, and a gift of *raksi* and a duck (rather than the *sunauli* (N. -bridewealth) given by Yakha in Tamaphok) to the bride. She said the Yakha were quite flexible in taking up the customs of other places they visited. Yet those Yakha who had returned to Tamaphok after a period in Assam continued to be known as *Achame* (Y. - literally 'Assamese') because they were seen as somehow irreversibly affected by its culture and traditions, and not to have totally re-adopted Yakha culture.

The Tarai

The Tarai (the southern lowlands of Nepal) was another destination for permanent migration frequently mentioned in the literature, but which had declined in importance by the time of our fieldwork. Following the commencement of malaria eradication in the three easternmost districts of the Nepal Tarai in 1962, the Tarai population grew rapidly, increasing by 59% in the decade 1970-80 (Gurung, 1987:112). The Nepalese government established a Resettlement Department in 1969 which offered new land in the Tarai at subsidized rates.⁶ However, by the beginning of the 1980s most land had been used up and prices had risen alarmingly so that few could contemplate moving permanently to this area.⁷ Many Tamaphok Yakha also expressed prejudice against the climate and water of the Tarai as a place for long-term settlement. However, it continued to be a magnet for individual men, particularly middle-born sons who lacked work or inheritance opportunities in the village and sought economic advancement. While some married in the Tarai (often to other Kiranti women) and appeared to be more permanently settled there, they often continued to return home for important festivals such as *Dasain* and maintained close links with their natal home.

Educational Opportunities

Rather than the decline of certain types of migration having led to the weakening of migratory movement altogether, new venues had opened up to take their place. The first of these was the result of education, as the 10 to 15 young people on average attending Tamaphok High School who were lucky enough to pass their tenth grade School Leaver's Certificate (SLC) exams each year left to take up educational opportunities at campuses in other parts of the hills, the Tarai or even Kathmandu. Not all could afford to do this straight away. One young man who had passed his SLC went to Kathmandu and found a job working in a carpet factory owned

by a Tibetan businessman. He worked from dawn to 9 p.m. and was paid on a per carpet basis, 600 rupees (\$20) each for a carpet which took six people about a week to make. The expenses of Kathmandu made it unprofitable, he said. He therefore returned and ran a small school for 1st and 2nd grade students to ease the pressure on the main Tamaphok school. He planned to go away to study further the following year. It was too early during the period of our fieldwork to say what sort of long-term trends were developing amongst the Yakha students going away to study, as the school had only been entering students for their SLC exams for ten years, but experience showed that of those going away, less than half returned to take up what few job opportunities might have been available in their natal home. One man, who had gone to Kathmandu to study for a B.Ed degree, used some capital from his father (an ex-Indian army soldier) to start up a *chakla*- (N. - candy) manufacturing enterprise. As might be imagined, this unusual enterprise had become a magnet for many Tamaphok Yakha going to Kathmandu.

The Middle East

The Middle East (or 'Arab' as it was known vernacularly) had become a major new destination for temporary male workers in the 1980s. In the year 1989-90, 27 young men left Tamaphok to work in Saudi Arabia or Bahrain. Frequently borrowing money from female relatives (who pawned their gold at the bank on the understanding that they would receive it back and double its worth at the end of a three year contract), the average cost of a trip to 'Arab' was 30,000 rupees (about \$1,000). This money paid agents in Kathmandu who arranged work permits (usually for carpentry or construction work), flight tickets, visas and the like. Some agents could be quite unscrupulous, collecting up the money of a group of would-be migrants in Kathmandu and absconding to Bombay with the proceeds. This had happened to one unfortunate man in the village who was left owing people a total of nearly 50,000 rupees, but there were enough success stories to convince people that the risks involved were worth it. "Going to Arab? We think about it all the time. We can't stop thinking about it", one young man told me at *Dasain* festival in 1990.

After the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the Nepalese government canceled all further labour migration to 'Arab' from August 31st 1990 until the political situation was resolved, but this only led to people broadening their horizons still further, to take in Taiwan, Japan and even the USA. However, we were told it was going to cost an individual over \$2,000 to go for six months to work in a factory in Japan, and when our fieldwork ended we had yet to meet anyone who had taken up the challenge. The changing opportunities were discussed around the kitchen fires daily, and some people were critical of these new labour destinations. "There is no pension from three years in 'Arab'", commented a prominent village leader who had the benefit of a regular pension from his service in the British Gurkhas in Malaya, Borneo and Hong Kong. The death of one Yakha migrant worker in mysterious circumstances in Saudi Arabia (which left his impoverished wife and two young children with the inevitable debts) also gave some pause for thought.

Sociocultural Background to Migration

These then were some of the changing patterns of migration from Tamaphok at the time of our fieldwork. The outward focus of Yakha society was historical.⁸ It was also reflected in myths recited by *mañanba* (Y.) and other shamans in the course of their healing work. The language of these myths was a mixture of Yakha, Nepali, Limbu, Rai and 'mañanba's language', and the myths themselves were often like geography lessons in their descriptions of the movement of spirit heroes around Nepal and beyond. While not denying the fear, uncertainty and sense of dislocation involved in going to new places, it could be argued that the Yakha enjoyed hearing about and experiencing the exotic and 'other'.⁹ When going away for any length of time it was unheard of for a man not to leave an article of clothing (*dasi* - N.) with his family for a shaman to work on should he fall ill whilst away. However, while this item of clothing acted as a physical link to the home and its spirit world, in many respects going away was a source of liberation for a Yakha male from the power of the home spirits. While foreign spirits might have tried to plague him when he was abroad, he was free of the danger from some of the more manipulative and powerful spirits of the home base.

Aspects of Yakha social structure were also supportive of out-migration. Chief amongst these was the position of women, who were generally well able to manage their household affairs single-handedly for many years while their husbands were away. The keynote to Yakha social structure was its flexibility. If not summoned by their husbands to live with them while working outside Tamaphok, women could return to their natal home (*m'iti ghar* - N.) if this was the most convenient option for them and their families. Some women chose to cohabit with other members of the husband's extended family, while others preferred to raise their families in a separate home. "It's their own choice", we were frequently told, when trying to elucidate patterns underlying what the wives of migrant workers did.

So what did the migratory patterns observed imply for Yakha identity and sense of self? Manzardo (1982:51) described how Thakali hotel owners on the trail from Jomsom to Pokhara followed the religious practices of their immediate neighbours, while at the same time maintaining a set of idiosyncratic and largely secret ritual practices 'behind the scenes'. Manzardo attributed this apparent fluidity of Thakali religion to a process he called 'impression management' (following Goffman, 1959), whereby the Thakali had tended to prosper by appearing to adopt the religion of the groups amongst whom they lived and traded.

The contemporary anthropologist might wish to question the basis for Manzardo's psychological model, and would argue for the consideration of the political, economic and ideological forces which themselves may condition the process of 'impression management.'¹⁰ However, Manzardo's model was not wholly inappropriate to the Yakha case. The adaptability of the Yakha to the customs of other places has already been mentioned.

Like the Thakali, the Yakha had their own religion which was largely inaccessible to outsiders, although they had adopted those elements of Hinduism (such as worship of the goddess Durga, killer of demons) which could be seen as best fitting into their spiritual pantheon. Above all, they were able to play on the meanings of the various names which they felt justified in using in their dealings with the outside world. This manipulation is the focus of the rest of this paper.

The term 'Yakha' was only one of a range of verbal identity markers which an individual could use. At one end of the scale was the term 'Kiranti', encompassing the neighbouring Limbu and Rai groups, which an educated Yakha might use in expressing his identity in opposition to the nation state. One might predict that this term would come to be more widely used in the wake of the political changes in Nepal which were giving freer rein to the ethnic voice (if not vote) in the country during the period of our fieldwork. While the Limbu, a much larger and more well known ethnic group had their 'Limbuwan Liberation Front',¹¹ one could not expect the Yakha (population in Nepal between 5,000 and 10,000) to make much headway with their own version of the same, unless they were to tie their allegiance to a Kiranti flag!

At the next level came the use of the term 'Rai' which Yakha migrants used to identity themselves to outsiders such as Gurkha recruiting officers. Most Yakha in the Gurkhas called themselves 'Rai', even though they saw themselves as culturally and linguistically much more closely related to the neighbouring Limbu. My interpretation of this was that Yakha males realised their identification as 'Rai' made it easier for outsiders to place them in the tribal mosaic, and it enabled them to benefit from the fearsome reputation the Rai had in the British Gurkhas. To identity themselves with the Limbu, in their eyes, would have been to risk becoming totally absorbed in this numerically and politically more powerful ethnic group.

The title 'Yakha' was in fact of rather limited use, but was anthropologically the most appropriate designation for the ethnic group midway between the Rai and Limbu but separate from both. However, while the term was recognized at the group level, it was never used as an individual's personal marker. If identifying oneself to those with some familiarity with the eastern hills and the ethnic groups found there, terms such as 'Dewan' (reflecting the kingly status of the Yakha in the past) or 'Jimi' (a reflection of their indigenous rights to land and a term increasingly popular amongst young people) were likely to be used.

In the more private sphere, however, less readily presented and accessible to the outside world, Yakha tended to use their clan names, for example 'Linkha', 'Challa', and 'Koyonga'. These were the lowest units which Yakha were likely to recognize, and were important in establishing potential marriage partners amongst

them and funeral and other ritual obligations. Below this certain clans could be divided into subclans such as the 'Panch bhair' or 'Iknep' Linkha, but such subclans were an unmarked category in the Yakha language.

The personal first name distinguished people within the clan, although such names were rarely used except in dealings with officialdom. Within Tamaphok, *phu ni* (Y.) or 'flower names' (names selected while the child is still young for everyday use), nicknames (never used to a person's face) or, most commonly, terms denoting kinship positions were used. Finally there was the *sammetli* (Y.), an identity which was gender-linked and was sometimes shared by several clans. This category was used in dealings with the spirit world and was rarely acknowledged to outsiders.

As can be seen, there were a great variety of names available for an individual Yakha to use. Their use was regulated according to people's knowledge of, and expectations surrounding, the names in question. In this there is evidence of 'impression management', easing the passage of Yakha as they interact with other worlds including the nation state, the military and even the spirit world.

Conclusion

This paper has looked at the nature and meaning of migration to many Yakha of Tamaphok during the time of my fieldwork. The migration patterns of adult males from Tamaphok were diverse and changed with the waxing and waning of opportunities in the outside world. However, migration itself was no new thing, and a sense of movement was an integral part of Yakha society and culture. Names in particular were manipulated and changed in dealings with the outside world as it was experienced through migration. Taken to its conclusion, this should be seen as a challenge to the propensity of social scientists to bind an ethnic group such as the Yakha in either time or space.

During my fieldwork, like many anthropologists, I am sure, there was an unwritten novel constantly circulating in my head. A central scene of this novel saw the heroine, an anthropologist conducting fieldwork in a hill community somewhere in the eastern Himalaya, escaping for a torrid affair with a fellow anthropologist in Thailand. At Bangkok airport she was amazed to see her village father passing in the opposite direction on a moving walkway, and he was amazed to see her. Why was he there? And why was she? I hope this paper may have suggested some reasons, and illuminated the bankruptcy of her surprise.

Notes

¹ Paper presented at the American Anthropological Association meetings in New Orleans on 29th November 1990 in the session 'Rethinking Commonplaces: Place and Identity in Nepal'. I am indebted to Prof. Mary Des Chene for organizing the session, and to Prof. Kathryn March for her useful comments as discussant.

² Cf. Allen (1987:26): "An almost proverbial comment made to outsiders is that hill life is arduous (*dukkhi* N.) because to eat one must plough and carry loads; at the birth of a male child in Mukli a miniature plough may be made to symbolize the life of toil that lies ahead".

³ The Yakha live primarily in the middle hill districts of the Koshi Zone, East Nepal. The paper is based on 21 months of fieldwork (funded by the U.K. Economic and Social Research Council) from January 1989 to October 1990, during which time my wife, Tamara Kohn, and I were based in Tamaphok, southern Sankhuwasabha. Tamaphok was the name given both to the *pañc'yat* (N. - a political and administrative unit based on a political system which was disbanded during the period of our fieldwork) and to the dispersed community within this *pañc'yat* which had the highest concentration of Yakha found

in any one place in Nepal. Due to the extensive changes which have been experienced and continue to be experienced both by the group and their migrant destinations the past tense has been used throughout to situate the descriptions given.

⁴ Poffenberger concludes that “migration is a result primarily of economic needs, particularly the need for cash which can purchase consumer goods which, in turn, are a reflection of the rising standard of living of hill people over the past one hundred years or so” (1980:66). For Gurung, by contrast, “out-migration from rural areas is primarily due to the growth of the local population beyond the carrying capacity of the land” (1987:94). However, the surveys he cites which record the numbers of people said to have migrated due to inadequate land and economic hardship at their place of origin give figures ranging from 392% to 682% of the total, which is hardly conclusive for his argument that “migrants in Nepal are mainly of the ‘subsistence’ category rather than the ‘betterment’ ones”(1987:95). The problem surely derives partly from trying to generalize about what is probably, for its size, the most geographically and culturally diverse country on earth. This leads to confusion and uncertainty about what facts can be ascertained and what they really are (Thompson, Warburton and Hatley, 1986).

⁵ Cf. Poffenberger, (1980:64): “A final group of variables that have not been examined are the differential cultural determinants of migration. For example, it seems reasonable to assume that attitudes towards and beliefs about the benefits of seasonal, semi-permanent, and permanent migration might vary considerably from group to group and village to village. Attitudes would in part be determined by the historical experiences of a village or a family with regard to migration. Those villages and families which have had members serving in the British and Indian armies for the past one hundred and fifty years would have a long tradition of migration, and probably highly favorable attitudes towards it. Other villages whose members have had no military experience, because they were not from desirable ethnic groups, would have no tradition of migration”.

⁶ It would appear that between 1970/1 and 1980/1, only 259,600 of the 678,178 people (i.e. 38%) calculated to have moved to the Tarai from the Hills did so under the aegis of the Resettlement Department (ERL, 1988:A42). The department was dissolved in 1988. The three districts of the far eastern Tarai (Sunsari, Morang and Jhapa) are said to have increased their population by 59% (from 665,593 to 1,058,242) in this period (Gurung, 1987:112): only a proportion of this increase can have come from hill-to-plains migration, however.

⁷ We only found one example of a Yakha family that had migrated to the Tarai from Tamaphok in the previous ten years. The second born son of the family had returned from army service in India and had bought land in the Tarai for himself. His parents had moved to join him and his wife. The following year his older brother also returned from army service and bought land in the same Tarai community. He abandoned his own house in Tamaphok, but the main house was left for the youngest born son (who had not been in army service) to occupy with his family. This son went to the Tarai on occasion when summoned to sharecrop some of the land his brothers had bought. The land-holdings the family had left in Tamaphok were not great, and the wife of the youngest son seemed to resent the relative prosperity of the rest of the family living in the Tarai.

⁸ Gurung (1987:96) states that “the hill economy since the mid-19th century has been partly sustained by seasonal, circular and permanent migration”. Judging from the reports of Limbu migration to India and Sikkim during the time of the Gorkha conquest (Regmi, 1978:540) and the recruitment of Limbu warriors into both Gorkhali and Sikkimese armies before the battle of Chainpur in 1776 (Stiller, 1973: 150,281) it seems that both migration and mercenary service were part of the cultural repertoire of at least some of the Kiranti nearly a century earlier than Gurung’s date for the economic impact of migration.

⁹ Cf. the frequent migration of women to and from other ethnic groups as marriage partners (Tamara Kohn, this issue).

¹⁰ On the rise and importance of “the various contexts within which meanings were negotiated” see Farndon (1985:5). Although she drew from different sources, I am indebted to Prof. Kathryn March for drawing my attention to the work of writers who see reality as a process of negotiation rather than ‘impression management’.

¹¹ “A leaflet circulated in the name of the Limbuwan Liberation Front demanded that there should be a separate state of Limbuwan (in the far-eastern hill region), with full autonomy, except on matters concerning currency, foreign affairs and defense. It also demanded a federal system in Nepal (Samaj, May 18). The leaflet was signed by Bir Newang, President of the Front. (Hindu, May 24)” (Nepal Press Digest, 1990:220).

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