

Indigenous Oral History Tradition in Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalayas

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Abstract

The term 'oral' has been widely used in oral literature and tradition. Even though literature may itself signify the aspect of writing, oral literature speaks of literature in an oral culture. The mode of composition, transmission, including performance and the source of the oral literature is important while trying to understand the oral literature. This paper will discuss the indigenous oral tradition of Tamang community from Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalayas. Tamang language and culture being primarily oral in nature, many forms of oral traditions exist. This paper shall particularly speak about the *Tamba* tradition of the Tamang community. *Tamba* is one of the social leaders in a traditional Tamang community. He acts as a master of ceremony in important functions and is both a poet and a historian. In his oral texts, the distinction between history and poetry, factual and fictional, reality and fantasy becomes blurred and hence complicates the notions of literary genres. Discussing the above mentioned modes of composition, transmission and source of the oral literature the paper also elaborate on the question of authorship and the dynamics between the written and the spoken.

Keywords: Tamba, Indigenous, Darjeeling, Sikkim, Himalayas, Tamang.

Darjeeling is popularly known to us and to the world as a beautiful hill station, famous for tea, the panoramic view of the Kanchenjunga range, toy train and the recollection of the colonial past. Surrounded by Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh, and China, keeping in mind the *Jelep-la* pass from Kalimpong, Darjeeling has always had great strategic importance in socio-political and economic terms. While locating Darjeeling within these boundaries we do have to remember that these international borders are modern constructs, and history, language and culture have always been shared across these regions providing and shaping it with its own unique identity. It is said that the history of Darjeeling is incomplete without the history of Sikkim, Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet. Therefore, my research interest deals with Darjeeling hills in particular and Eastern Himalayas in general. Historically, Darjeeling¹ was a territory of constant dispute between the kingdom of Nepal and Sikkim and it came under British India in 1835. Today, sharing international border with Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh, Darjeeling has a dynamic, active cultural exchange across these borders which is reflected in its language, culture and art.

Despite being a strategic point historically, the history of Darjeeling has almost no record of the indigenous voices. Various folk forms, distinct indigenous oral history traditions and personal narratives can be valued as resources yet often they are not

¹ Darjeeling is a hill town in North Bengal located in the lesser Himalaya at an average elevation of 6710 ft. Darjeeling, West Bengal.