

# **Carrying the Burden: Negotiating Ethnicity, Identity, and Power among the Tamangs and Sherpas of Nepal**

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## *Abstract*

Ethnic, caste, and national identities play a critical role in defining individuals in the politically volatile environment of Nepal. This study explores how Tamangs and Sherpas, two ethnic groups in the Himalayas of Nepal, have been differentially affected by the centralizing processes of Nepali statecraft and, more recently, by the mountaineering industry. I trace the historical, cultural, social, economic, and political factors that create and perpetuate a system of differential access for these ethnic groups. The data I gather from ethnographic interviews with Tamangs and Sherpas from across the occupational hierarchy of the mountaineering industry highlight a complex dialectic that reveals rapid social change. I focus on discourses of ethnic identity as expressions of agency. I argue that although ethnic identity in Nepal is informed in large part by the state and the rise of global tourism, it also continues to be characterized by a set of shifting definitions, which Tamangs and Sherpas alike produce according to their own desires.

**KEY WORDS:** ethnicity, identity; nationalism; agency; social change; Tamang.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The people of the Himalayan region of Nepal represent a unique cultural mosaic of incredible diversity. The dynamic political environment of Nepal today particularly highlights discourses of ethnicity and nationalism, drawing boundaries and definitions of identity. Two major factors that form and inform such discourses of identity are the policies of the Nepali state and the rising prominence of global forces such as tourism. I examine how these two processes have affected Tamangs working in the mountaineering and trekking industry and compare the history and experience of Tamangs to that of Sherpas. In particular, I address why the production of identity plays such a central role in local, national, and global interactions in Nepal.

Tamangs are the largest ethnic group among the Tibeto-Burman speaking people of the Himalayan region and are among the poorest and least privileged people of Nepal. Tamangs inhabit more than half of the area of the central hills of Nepal surrounding the capital, Kathmandu Valley

(Gurung et al. 2006:83). The history of their relationship with the Nepali state has largely been characterized by inequity and discrimination. Tamangs have been associated with menial labor and, in particular, portering (Campbell 1997). Their involvement in the tourist industry over the past half century has largely been that of carrying the heavy loads of mountaineering expeditions and trekking excursions.

The popular image of mountaineering and the Himalayas is often associated with Sherpas, an ethnic group living in the Solu-Khumbu region of Nepal by Mt. Everest. In comparison, Tamangs live further south and west of the Himalayan crest. Tamang participation in the mountaineering industry has grown in recent years, and today there are Tamangs in all levels of the occupational hierarchy. Some have summited Mt. Everest and are renowned mountaineers, while others operate their own trekking agencies. However, a large majority of Tamangs still work as porters at the bottom of the expedition hierarchy. In an industry that is predominantly associated with Sherpas by both Nepalis and international tourists, Tamangs increasingly face difficulties expressing and affirming their ethnic identity.

The problem can be framed by asking what historical processes create, perpetuate, and emphasize ethnic distinctions in Nepal. Why is ethnic identity such a critical issue for Tamangs in the mountaineering industry, and how do individuals negotiate problems associated with it? Why do some Tamangs resist and contest dominant constructions, while others accept or avoid them altogether? And finally, what are the experiences of Tamangs in the various occupational roles of the mountaineering industry vis-à-vis Sherpas?

In the following pages, I review the sociohistorical context of the study, tracing the processes of nation building and globalism before examining the ongoing theoretical debates about

ethnicity and identity. I then summarize my methods, present an analysis of the ethnographic data collected, and discuss the significance of the findings.