

## Tanganas: An Ancient Trading Community of Central Himalaya

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### I

Tanganas were inhabitants of the Central Himalayan region of Garhwal and Kumaon during, and sometime after the epic age. Information about the origin, identity, social organization and economic activities of the Tanganas is very scanty. Nevertheless, even these limited references can be utilized for the identification of the ancient Tanganas and, more importantly, their present descendents.

The paucity of information makes it rather difficult to trace with certainty who these people were, when and where they came from and who their present descendents are. Are they Bhotiyas? Mazumdar has observed that, 'no anthropological study of this tribe has been undertaken so far and our information about the race elements in the population of the Himalayan region is extremely meagre'.<sup>1</sup> However, we can try to throw some light on the racial elements and cultural affinity of the Tanganas by probing into their cultural history.

### II

Due to the absence of documentary sources; lack of archaeological evidence and a complete absence of information regarding the ethnic stock of the people who occupied this region in prehistoric times, it is very difficult to determine correctly the earliest entrance of man in the Central Himalayan region of Garhwal-Kumaon. Some details about the tribal population inhabiting the hilly tracts of the Uttarakhand region are available from the Vedic literature as well as from the two great epics of early Indian literature, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. According to the ethnographic evidence available in the Vedas, there evidently dwelt three classes of people in the upper part of India: the aboriginal tribes, people akin to Aryans but who had

independent religious system, and a branch of Aryans. It is, however, rather difficult to trace a definite, direct and unbroken connection between the various earlier immigrants, who originally occupied this area and its present inhabitants. In fact, 'what little historical records exist show us great waves of invasion and conquest over all upper India from the earliest times and bitter dynastic and religious struggles. Many different tribes who joined in these wars have not been superimposed without disturbance, one on the other like deposits of inorganic matter, so as to enable us like the geologist at once to declare the order of their coming from their ascertained portion, but rather they are in the position of a range of mountains full of faults, inversions and folds'.<sup>2</sup>

Ancient records refer to the different non-Aryan aborigines such as Kinnaras, Gandharvas, Asuras and Yakshas, who inhabited the Himalayan region during pre-historic times. The principal ancient aboriginal tribes, which formed the bulk of the population at the time, were the Kiratas, Tanganas, and Asuras. According to the Puranas, the tribes inhabiting this region were mostly the Kols and Kiratas.<sup>3</sup>

The Kiratas were of Mongoloid origin who, due to their primitive way of life, came to be regarded as a barbarous people.<sup>4</sup> They were, perhaps, the first to arrive in this region. It is very likely that these Tibeto-Burman language speaking, Mongoloids with yellow complexion came to be known among the Vedic Aryans as the Kiratas. Their presence here by about 1000 B.C. is attested to by evidence in the *Yajur Veda* and the *Atharva Veda*. Trigartas,<sup>5</sup> and Tanganas lived in the realm of king Subahu, in the mid-Himalayan region along with the Jagura and some other communities.<sup>6</sup> They used stones as weapons in battle and were skilled in slinging them.<sup>7</sup> The *Mahabharata* states that they, along with other vagrant tribes like the Khasa and Jyoha camped on the bank of Sailoda which may be identified with the river Yarkand in Central Asia.<sup>8</sup> From there they collected *Pipilaka* gold and brought it to this land. Tanganapur, probably the capital of a Tangana settlement, is known to have existed in the upper course of the Ganga, in the basin between the Bhagirathi and Alakananda though later the people migrated towards Nepal.<sup>9</sup>

'Tangana' is the Sanskrit word for borax (*suhaga*). It was the most important item of trade between India and Tibet apart from gold and salt. Tibet was the only source of borax for the growing

needs of several parts of south Asia. The people who were engaged in the borax trade that flourished along the Indo-Tibetan border later on came to be known as the Tanganas.<sup>10</sup> There is inscriptional evidence, dating back to the tenth century, indicating that people who inhabited the upper region of the Ganga in Central Himalaya and engaged primarily in the borax trade with Tibet, established a settlement named Tanganapura.

The *Vayu* and *Brahmanda* Puranas locate the Tanganas in Udichya as well as in Parvatay divisions.<sup>11</sup> The *Markandeya Purana* locates them only in Udichya whereas the *Vamana* locates them only in Parvatasrayin division.<sup>12</sup> The 'Tanganas' mentioned in the Janapada list of the *Garuda Purana*, were the same people.<sup>13</sup> In the *Markandeya Purana*, the Tanganas are mentioned with the Dardas and the Kulutas.<sup>14</sup> The *Padma Purana* refers to the Tanganas and the Partanganas probably as two branches of the same people. The *Brahama Purana* regards Tanganas as people of low and humble origin when it considers the country of the Tanganas as being unfit for the performance of *sraddha*.<sup>15</sup> The Kiratas are also mentioned in other early Sanskrit works like the *Mahabharata* and *Manu-Samhita*.

Some historians believe that the Kiratas entered India through the north-eastern passes and were followed by other tribes of Mongoloid stock. Karve says, 'the same corridor of migration admitted Mongoloid people who spread through Assam into Burma and represent the Tibeto-Burman stock. The same stock has penetrated into India along the whole Tibeto-Indian frontier including the Central Himalayas'.<sup>16</sup> It is also held by Sankrityayan that the Kiratas spread slowly in the lesser Himalaya and later occupied almost the entire Himalayan region.<sup>17</sup>

The Tanganas are often believed to have been a branch of the Kiratas because the region had witnessed the presence of the Kiratas in ancient times and the latter were the dominant community there. But before outrightly accepting or rejecting this argument it would be proper to go back to the ancient literary, mythological and historical references about the Tanganas.

The Tanganas were a well known northern mountain people frequently mentioned in epic and Puranic literature. The *Mahabharata* mentions the Khasas and the Tanganas together.

## III

As to the location of these people, the river Chaksu i.e. Oxus is mentioned as passing through their territory. It is also mentioned that the horses of good quality are found in the Tangana country.<sup>18</sup>

The other sources seem to indicate that the Tanganas lived near the upper course of the Ganga. In the *Mahabharata* the Tanganas have been clubbed with other people of the Himalayan region, viz.—the Pulindas and the Kiratas.<sup>19</sup> The Tanganas along with the Pulindas and the Kunindas are said to have been the subjects of the Visaya of Kirataraja, *Subahu*. The Tanganas along with the Pradas, the Kunindas and the Khasas are stated to have presented to Yudhisthira gold dug by ants. At one place, the *Mahabharata* seems to suggest that the Tanganas were the neighbours of the Strirajyas, who are associated with Kumaon-Garhwal.<sup>20</sup> The horse of the Asvamedha sacrifice of the Pandavas reached the dominion of the Tanganas just after crossing the territory of the Kiratas. The best known settlement of the Kiratas lay to the north of the Kuru Panchala dominion. The location of the Tanganas must, therefore, be traced along the slopes of the Himalaya, to somewhere between the Ganga and the Yamuna rivers. According to a Jaina canonical text,<sup>21</sup> the Tanganas lived in the hilly regions. According to *Avasyaka Churni, mlechha* Tanganas are said to have lived in the northern region.<sup>22</sup>

Ptolemy mentions the Ganganoi (Tanganoi) as the inhabitants of the area lying along the eastern banks of the northernmost part of the Ganga. He also speaks of the Sarbos (Sarayu) flowing through their dominion.<sup>23</sup> According to Atkinson the Tanganas held the entire hilly region from the Yamuna to the Sharda. A city named Tanganpur mentioned in an inscription is said to have existed on the upper course of the Ganga near Joshimath in the modern Garhwal district of Uttar Pradesh.<sup>24</sup> Rahul Sankrityayan is of the opinion that the Tanganas and Partanaganas inhabited the northern region of the Alakananda and Mandakini rivers. Despite being treated as a people different from the Khasas, they were virtually a part of that vast tribe.<sup>25</sup>

Judging from the available references pertaining to the identity of the Tanganas and the area they inhabited during ancient times, it is clear that they were of humble origin and did not occupy a respectable status in Aryan society. In terms of the social hierarchy of the period they were almost at the bottom

as they have been regarded as *mlechhas* in some of the above-mentioned literary texts.

Significantly, therefore, the Tanganas can be placed amongst other non-Aryan communities such as the Kiratas, Nagas, Kunindas, Rajaya-Kiratas, Kinnaras, Daradas, Sulikas etc. As earlier stated a few scholars treat the Tanganas as a branch of the Kiratas. The justifications of such a contention is yet to be examined. No doubt, the Kiratas were spread over large parts of the northern region of Bharatavarsha. Yet the presence of the another major community, the Khasas, cannot be denied. The Kiratas and the Khasas were inhabitants of the same region and were almost contemporaries. But the Tanganas were not merely a branch of either of these communities. They have been mentioned separately as a community inhabiting the northern region of Bharatavarsha. This indicates that along with the Kiratas and the Khasas, they too were inhabitants of the Himalayan region. It can also be argued that since they belonged to a later period, and descriptions of their physical features and complexion reflect characteristics of both the Kiratas and the Khasas, the Tanganas were of mixed origin. Moreover, the 'cruel' nature of the Tanganas, as mentioned in the *Mahabharata*, may, perhaps, imply that they had some traits in common with the primitive Kirata community.

About the area of Tangana settlement, the numerous references, earlier mentioned,<sup>26</sup> indicate that they were concentrated primarily in the Garhwal-Kumaon region of the Central Himalaya. Some scholars<sup>27</sup> have even sought to locate the area of Tangana settlement either somewhere near the source of the Ganga or between the Alakananda and Mandakini rivers. Therefore, it seems logical to locate their settlement in the Garhwal and Kumaon region of Central Himalaya. They seem to have resided within a rather limited area. It is likely that there were two settlements of the Tanganas:<sup>28</sup> one in the Oxus region, and the second in the upper part of the Ganga in the hilly region of Garhwal and Kumaon. The former were probably known as the Paratanaganas and the later as Tanganas.<sup>29</sup> Quite possibly, the people in both regions were primarily involved in borax trade. The Paratanaganas of the Oxus region may have brought borax into the north-west of India from the Central Asian region, while the Tanganas of the upper part of the Ganga carried it from Tibet.

Tanganas were an ancient trading community of the

Himalayan region. Although the paucity of information makes it difficult to describe the economic organization of these people, it appears quite likely that a pastoral economy existed among the Tanganas, as was the case of their kins, i.e. the Kiratas and Khasas. In the Mahabharata, occasional references to the Tanganas reveal that they were engaged in the gold trade. There are also some remarks about a northern tribal community, which occasionally brought presents of gold to Yudhishthira and had been present at the Rajasuya.<sup>30</sup> They were, perhaps, the chief carriers of trade in gold dust from Tibet. They exchanged gold, ivory and other commodities for the commodities of Dakshinapatha.<sup>31</sup> The Tanganas also brought 'Lecha' salt from Tibet to India, a practice which was most widespread among the Bhotiyas until recently.<sup>32</sup> In the absence of a common language they resorted to a particular method of business transaction. They covered the heaps of their merchandise with both hands and did not lift them until they obtained the desired price. It appears from the *Mahabharata* that the Tanganas brought gold dust, beautiful *chaunwar* (the yak-tail used as handfans), Himalayan *khudra madhu* (honey), precious stones for necklaces, sacred water from Uttar Kurudesh and the 'Mahavala', drug from Kailash in the north for the Rajasuya-Yagana of Yudhishthira. Yodhyan has also described their food habits and other economic practices. It is mentioned that they drank wine, dealt in wool, gold, sheep and goats and carried trade in ornaments.<sup>33</sup> There is, therefore, adequate reason to argue that the Tanganas were a community of traders that dealt in gold, gold-dust, ivory, a special category of salt, borax, ornaments and several other commodities.

The trade practices of the Tanganas may also enable us to trace their descendants amongst the present ethnic communities of Central Himalaya. There is a striking resemblance between the trade practices of Tanganas and those of the Bhotiyas during their transactions with Tibet and parts of Northern India. Though such methods gradually disappeared the earliest form of trade negotiation by the Bhotiyas was, perhaps, of a similar nature. This was often referred to as *Gamgiya*.

On the basis of the description provided by Puranic literature and considering the similarity of economic and social practices among the ancient Tanganas and the present Bhotiyas it may not be incorrect to trace the origin of the latter from the Tanganas. Owing to the protracted intermixing with later racial groups of the Himalayan region during different times of its

history, the Bhotiyas, however, have not retained all the characteristics of their ancestors (Tanganas).

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

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