

# Hariprasad Tamta: Father of Shilpkar Revolution in India

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## Abstract

Uttarakhand is a region replete with social diversity. This can be observed in its culture, customs and language. The social perspective of these diversities is outwardly similar but in the social and economic perspective the discrimination between Dalits and upper castes can be easily seen. The Shilpkar (the term used for Dalit caste) here also suffer from untouchability, inequality, humiliation and discrimination like Dalits of other areas. Munshi Hariprasad Tamta fought against these inequalities and untouchability throughout his life to educate, create awareness and provide leadership to the Shilpkar during the British and post Independence era. Hariprasad Tamta: The Father of Shilpkar Revolution has remained anonymous in the local history of Uttarakhand. This article attempts to re-analyze the personality, political and social works of Hariprasad Tamta and to provide new insight into the Shilpkar struggle. Alongside, an attempt has also been made to redefine the prevailing concept of social scientists to define the ideology of Hariprasad Tamta as class interest and pro-British.

## Keywords

Shilpkar, consciousness, contempt, suppression

## Introduction

Hariparasad Tamta was named as Himshilpi for supporting Dalits & their wellbeing (Shilpkar referred to in the hills). In the extreme times of social discrimination, he ignited a new consciousness in the heart of Shilpkar by standing firm even in adverse conditions like the Himalayas, as no less than a guide in establishing humanity and social equality. The life of the Shilpkar then and even today is still very sore. Even today, Shilpkar face social discrimination, disdain, boycott, untouchability and social stigmas which make their life more painful. Hariprasad Tamta is not less than that

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Jyotipunj, which will burn itself and provide the path of illumination to the Shilpkar society with its own light. Not knowing that the full moon of the month of Shravan that had risen on 26 August 1887 would always be remembered as a new chapter in Dalit history, Hariprasad Tamta was born on this day. His father's name was Govind Prasad and mother's name was Govindi Devi. There were two brothers and one sister in the family, the brother's name was Lalta Prasad and sister's name was Kokila Devi. His father Govind Prasad was a famous trader of copper, due to which his family background and status was better than others in the Shilpkar community, and his family was respected in society. At the age of 14, he was married to Panna (Parvati Devi), a resident of Pahal village, according to the wish of his father. She was a soft spoken, cultured, kind and Dalit loving woman like Hariprasad Tamta.

After the death of his father in childhood, he came under the protection of his maternal uncle Krishna Tamta, who was then a famous businessman of Almora city. Krishna Tamta was a leading social worker, under whose guidance he moved towards social service. The early and middle education of Hariprasad Tamta was completed in Diggi Bangla School and Mission School respectively. He had good knowledge of Hindi, English, Persian, Urdu, and Kumaoni languages that is why he also assumed the title of Munshi. Hariprasad Tamta's role is significant in bringing forward Shilpkar suffering from social and economic difficulties in the social sector. He died on 23 February 1960 at Prayag, the place of confluence.

Hariprasad Tamta has an important contribution in giving a new conceptual dimension to the Shilpkar consciousness. The factors that were involved in the formation of this consciousness were contempt and oppression. This contempt and oppression has been with the Shilpkar for centuries. Shilpkar have always been considered as bearing an inferiority complex by the oppressors, which they have used only to fulfill the principle of social, economic, and religious superiority. Hariprasad Tamta had to bear the brunt of oppression and contempt throughout his life. Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar had suffered with the same disgusting and contemptuous mentality throughout his life, the same situation was also in the Kumaon, getting education was like an arduous dream for the Shilpkar's. Weaker sections and untouchable persons were not allowed to enter into any school at that period of time (Tamta, 1995). Untouchables did not have the right to sit on the mat like the upper castes. The upper caste persons would abhor untouchables.

Hariprasad Tamta wrote in the editorial of "*Samta*" on 6 May 1935 in the context of contempt and harassment: "Even after a long time, i.e. 25 years, I have not been able to forget that incident of 1911. The coronation of George V<sup>th</sup> took place in 1911 and happiness was celebrated all over India. I and my brother [had] not got the right to celebrate this in the court which was held for the celebration on the honor of coronation in Almora Badreshwar. Still I remember that people had even said that if you "people like me (untouchable)" attend this event then there is a possibility of insurgence. Thanks a million to those peoples for such a thing that they woke me and my brothers from the sleep".

The above incident took place in this manner:

On the fixed day, Hariprasad Tamta and his maternal uncle Krishna Tamta got ready and set out to see the court. When he reached Badreshwar Maidan, he saw the pandal and the podium, the cloth was given by Hariprasad and the podium was decorated with it. It was a beautiful scene. When both of them reached near the stage, they saw that there were chairs, they put their hands on two chairs and intended to sit, at which moment two upper caste individuals came there. The upper caste individuals did not allow them to sit on the chair, and using very contemptuous language said, 'How dare you sit on par with us? Stay in your position, you people are untouchables, your place is out there, look from there.' Krishna Tamta said that we have given a lot of money. They shouted again, 'If you donated, will you sit next to us, get out from here or else there will be insurgency (Ram, 2014).'

In the words of Bhikhu Parekh, for the removal of contempt due to lack of social recognition, the dominant culture should be strongly criticized and the structure of economic-political power should be changed unequally. Hariprasad Tamta wanted the complete abolition of the elements of the structure of contempt of Shilpkar. The aims and objectives of Tamta Sudhar Sabha, the first Shilpkar organization established by Munshi Hariprasad Tamta in 1905, were as follows:

- To propagate education among all the sub-castes of the untouchables.
- To encourage youth to acquire proficiency in art and handicrafts.
- Establishment of cottage industries in hilly areas.
- To inform people about health.
- To find out schemes for the mental development of youth.
- To create awareness among the people about their backwardness.
- To inculcate moral values in the youth.
- Finding employment/self-employment avenues for youth (Ram, 2014).

In 1914, Tamta Sudhar Sabha was renamed as Kumaon Shilpkar Sabha. Tamta was elected unanimously as the president of Kumaon Shilpkar Sabha. He remained its president for life (Ram, 2014). The following works were done by the Shilpkar Sabha for the benefit of the Shilpkar:

- Demand from the government and district and municipal boards to make elementary education compulsory and free in Kumaon.
- In Kumaon, the Shilpkar should get the right to send representatives to the panchayat, district and municipal boards and to the council according to their numbers, like the Muslims.
- Like in the Punjab province, some pieces of land should be provided to the Shilpkar.
- Make arrangements to open more schools for Shilpkar according to Section 77 of the Provincial Legislation.

- Our fellow countrymen, those called upper caste have invented the word Dom for us out of hatred and malice. This is a hindrance to our progress. Therefore, the government should immediately reject it from official documents and use the word Shilpkar in its place.
- A branch should be opened in every village of the Sarva Kumaoni Shilpkar Conference, which should do the following: prohibition of child marriage, promote widow marriage, drug prevention, publicity for health and virtue, education and home crafts, etc. Art skills should be promoted among men and women. Every Shilpkar should give at least Rs. 2 to the assembly at the end of every crop or six months so that the Shilpkar bank can be established by which expenditure should be made for the education of Shilpkar's, social reform (Sharma & Sharma, 2015). (The above demands were placed in the Shilpkar's conference by the Shilpkar's Sabha Kumaon at Deyolidanda, Almora.)
- Apart from this, the Kumaon Shilpkar Sabha, under the leadership of Hariprasad Tamta, in its suggestion submitted to the Delimitation Commission in 1935, asked to reserve a seat for women in Kumaon. And on January 9, 1941, organized the first Shilpkar Teachers Conference at Almora Narsinghwadi.

The biggest problem in the context of harassment and contempt was having a respectable name and identity. The Shilpkar is not focused only on one name or caste group, but it is an invented journey of identity, which has progressed historically by discarding the abhorrent names like Dom, Untouchable, etc. The Shilpkar's name and identity have arisen against the culture of marginalization, oppression, and exploitation, that they have received over the centuries as a result of the caste system. In the traditional Uttarakhand society, the position of the Shilpkar was that of an outcast society, from which not only the upper castes kept a distance, but this entire social group was considered polluting and infectious. They were often considered worthy of impure rituals or deeds such as leatherwork, animal carcasses, rubbish removal, etc. The struggle for the name and existence of the Shilpkar is the result of a long struggle journey, for which many ideological levels were fought. Limiting it to the struggle of just one person is equivalent to tying the Shilpkar's ideology to a limited scope. On the other hand, an ideology of the Shilpkar leadership struggled to get the name of the Shilpkar on the basis of persuasion and applications from the British government. At the same time, the second ideology of the Shilpkar leadership inspired the struggle of identity not only to include the Shilpkar in the mainstream by sanskritizing them, but by connecting them with the stream of the national movement, the work was done to link the struggle of the Shilpkar's name and identity in the national perspective.

The first call for the name Shilpkar was made by the nationalist leader Lala Lajpat Rai. In the Janu program held in Sunakia in 1913, he condemned the lower caste people from being called untouchables by the upper castes and asked to use the name Shilpkar in its place because they are good artisans. Hariprasad Tamta sent a report to this effect to the British government. But after not getting any positive

assurance, Hariprasad Tamta, along with Khushiram (a supporter of Gandhian and Arya Samaji ideology), sent a report named Shilpkar to the British government in 1925 in the Shilpkar's conference of Doolidanda. And continued to put pressure on the British government for this. Finally, in 1926, the British government notified the Shilpkar caste, accepting the demand of Hariprasad Tamta. In this way the Shilpkar's completed the first battle of their name and existence.

Till 1920, to reach Almora, the journey could only be done by foot. These mountain hikes were very painful. Hariprasad Tamta started Hill Motors Transport Company in 1920 to facilitate the commuters from Almora to Nainital-Haldwani (*Amar Ujala*, 5 June, 2000), and also established training institute for drivers in Haldwani. It is worth mentioning here that Almora was a city of intellectuals and rich people. If it is called Bhadraklok of Uttarakhand, then it will not be an exaggeration. And the mainstream party of the freedom struggle, the Congress had an epi center in Uttarakhand. Still, this important problem went unnoticed, because the main objective of the freedom struggle was to get political power and to get only a few facilities of representation in those times. Social problems were not referred to independently. This was replaced as a post-independence problem.

The year 1925 proved to be a revolutionary year in the history of the Shilpkar class of Uttarakhand. This year Hariprasad Tamta organized two huge Shilpkar conferences. The first conference was held in Narsinghbadi in 1925 and the second conference was held at Deyolidanda on 24–25 September (Samata Swarna Jayanti, 1984). Through the 1925 Deyolidanda Shilpkar Conference, he created a new social consciousness and a sense of respect among the Shilpkar. With the efforts of Hariprasad Tamta and leaders of the Arya Samaj, a grand Shilpkar's conference was organized at a place known as Granite Hill near Almora. This was a historic convention. It was the first step in Indian history when the British government provided 30,000 acres of land to the landless Shilpkar class. Reservation in local seats, free education, army recruitment, a local bank and free land grants were demanded in the conference. The speakers complained to the British government that the upper castes did not allow them to use their own flourmills, their cattle were driven away from the pasture. They were refused a share of the crops from the land on which their ancestors had been tilling. All this when the freedom movement was raging in the region (Joshi, 2012).

On the one hand, the war of liberation from colonial rule was being fought on the principles of liberty, equality and justice, while on the other hand the horrific form of caste hatred against the low caste Shilpkar of their own region continued. When the Shilpkar's organizations demanded the allotment of land for the Shilpkars, the administration started thinking of a solution to this issue. Land areas were identified for building their houses. Although these were not in the main city areas, but in the forests adjacent to the towns. If this is not the case, the upper caste anger would be provoked. In this regard the Deputy Commissioner of Almora wrote to Hariprasad Tamta in 1934 – 'Dear Raisaheb, I am happy to inform you that the Government has approved the proposed Shilpkar Colony' (Joshi, 2012). On the basis of the above facts, it is to be noted that the landless Shilpkar were removed from the main administrative

centers and towns areas by the Bhadrakalok and Congress leadership of the freedom movement and given land on the forest side, or urged the British government for this.

The important fact here is that most scholars consider these areas made of land allotted to them, which have been named as Harinagar, related to Gandhi's Harijan-uplift movement, but in fact these areas are named because of the efforts made by Hariprasad Tamta, related to his own name. Many villages were named after Hariprasad Tamta like Haripur in Champawat, Harinagar in Nainital (which is in Nathuwakhan, Aksoda, Chandadevi) and Harinagar, Harikot, Haripur, etc., in Almora.

During the Poona Pact and the Second Round Table Conference in 1931, Hari Prasad Tamta fully supported Babasaheb Ambedkar in the matters of Dalit representation and reservation and fulfilled his responsibility by sending a telegram to London on this issue to be with Ambedkar and by declaring him a Dalit representative in the round table conference. It is worth mentioning that Gandhi continued to refuse Ambedkar as a Dalit representative. The importance of liberation for Shilpkar's creativity is known from Hariprasad Tamta's personal life. He started the publication of Hindi weekly paper *Samta* in 1934 with the aim of including the Shilpkar in the mainstream and to give a public platform to the problems of the Shilpkar. Hariprasad Tamta's personal thoughts also affected his family, his niece Lakshmi Devi Tamta was the first Dalit graduate of Uttarakhand and the first woman editor (*Samta*). In 1934, Hariprasad Tamta used to say:

Do not take out the swords, nor the swords, If the cannon is suitable, then take out the newspaper (khechonakamnoko, natalwernikalo, gertoapmukabil ho, to akhbarnikalo)

When Mahatma Gandhi came to Almora in 1935, Hariprasad Tamta presented a copy of *Samta*. Gandhi said to him, 'I was very surprised that how did you choose such a beautiful name?' At present, *Samta*, the weekly paper is operated from Tamta Printing, Press Hari Niwas, Thana Bazaar, Almonda. *Samta* newspaper was published at a time when casteism was at its peak.

The year 1934 has been of special significance for all the depressed classes of India, including the people of Uttarakhand. The Uttar Pradesh Depressed Class organized a conference on 7 January 1934 in Lucknow. Hariprasad Tamta presided over the conference where thousands were present. After this a meeting was convened in Kanpur on 11 March 1934 and Hariprasad Tamta was elected the President of Kanpur Depressed Classes Association. Seeing his popularity, the then government appointed him as a special magistrate in 1935 (*Samta*, 10 July, 1935). In the Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly in 1937, he was elected unopposed as an MLA from Gonda.

In 1940, Hariprasad Tamta donated his land in the city area for the establishment of a high school in Almora. Whereas before this the big upper-caste wealthy class of the

city had refused to donate their land to the high school management, and Tamta had started building hotels on that land. But in the desire to help the future generation, he donated that land without caring about his expenditure. Such an example of human goodwill and inspiration will be rarely found in history. Apart from this, he also established “Gyanodaya Hostel” for the students of the Shilpkar’s (*Samta*, 12 February 2004), and also opened a night school for the Shilpkar. On 9 January 1941, the first conference of Shilpkar teachers of district Almora was organized by Hariprasad Tamta under the chairmanship Balkrishna Patwari at Narsinghbad. As Hariprasad Tamta was concerned about women’s empowerment, he opened a women’s craft school in her home. Thus, Hari Niwas also came to be known as Mahila Shilp Vidyalaya. Hariprasad Tamta used to pay 15 rupees per month to each female trainee on his behalf.

In 1943, there was a terrible famine in North India. Due to the Second World War, the British were ignoring this problem faced by the Indians. The Shilpkar class was affected the most in the hills due to starvation, due to poverty and social status. At such a time, Hariprasad Tamta opened cheap galley shops in Kumaon, so that the poor could get food items at affordable rates. In 1944, an infectious disease called influenza made a big attack in the hills. The most sick were the Shilpkar. In these difficult circumstances, Tamta appointed 1500 scouts, whose job was to provide free medicines from village to village. He himself used to bear all the expenses. Such a true lover of humanity is rarely seen in history.

In August 1941, as a distinguished citizen of India, the Third Battalion of the Pioneer Regiment Honored Rai Saheb Hariprasad Tamta with the Guard of Honour at Lucknow. He was the first Indian civilian to receive the Guard of Honor from the army. Hariprasad Tamta was a member of the Municipal Board Almora from 1941-44. He was elected the chairman of Almora Municipality in 1945. The upper caste people did not like that their head should be of a Shilpkar class. The residents of Almora were facing the problem of drinking water for a long time. When Hariprasad Tamta took over the post of Municipal President in 1947, he tried to solve the water problem, and proposed Dol Water Project. The scheme was beneficial as well as economical. But due to the personal interests of some people, this plan was not allowed to be implemented. One of the reasons for this was that this plan was brought by a Shilpkar. The Indian Constitution came into force on 26 January 1950. Caste discrimination and caste prejudice started showing its effect in administrative work. On 13 February 1952, a no-confidence motion was passed against Hariprasad Tamta. In the context of this no-confidence motion, he said: “I knew it was certain to happen, but it was not certain that it would happen so soon. I can claim with confidence that not a single illegal or illegitimate or partial act has been done by me and I am fully satisfied that I have performed my duty with complete truth and honesty. On this occasion, I would like to say that I have no complaints against my opponents. I am grateful to all the

citizens of the city who have shown complete faith in me by taking out a procession in thousands of signing and sending telegrams and letters to the authorities. I am good at this goodwill and full trust of people” (Tamta, 1995).

In 1953, he was the Senior Vice President, District Board, Almora. Hariprasad Tamta had a special contribution in the electrification of Almora city. On 13 October 1953, Govind Ballabh Pant had said in reference to Hariprasad Tamta: ‘Tamtaji has done a very good job of development and maintenance of Almora city. In the context of temples, Hariprasad Tamta had said – ‘What can be the benefit of entering temples made of brick-lime and stone with conditions. God can be worshiped everywhere. He is not imprisoned in their (Hindus) temples’ (Jigyasu, 1934).

Hariprasad Tamta was given the title of Raisahab on 03 June 1933, and was the first Shilpkar of the hill area to get the above honor (Ram, 2014). “He is presented by a large section of historians and social scientists within the pro-government image or pro-British image. One reason for this is that the politics of Congress was opposed by Hariprasad Tamta, Krishna Chandra Tamta, etc., leader of the alternative movement of Shilpkar. He demanded the creation of an independent situation for the Shilpkar. “Ambedkar’s remarks on the nationalist character of the Congress and the representation of the whole of India during freedom struggle fit right – it would be foolish to assume that since the Congress is fighting for the freedom of India, it is also fighting for the freedom of the people of India and fighting for the smallest person. The question that Congress is fighting for freedom is not as important as the question of whose freedom the Congress is fighting for (Roy, 2019).”

Like Ambedkar, Hariprasad Tamta strategically sought to maintain neutrality in the face of the colonial state. It was not possible for the resourceless Shilpkar to fight their two rivals simultaneously. He did not want to end and waste his limited resources on many fronts. He was attacking the roots of imperialism and all those so-called nationalists who were trying to eradicate colonial imperialism, but outright denied the internal imperialism that they were doing to the Shilpkar (Teltumde, 2016).

The colonial administration did nothing to change the discriminatory treatment of Shilpkars. Instead of removing the caste system, the British did the work of polarization. The provision and encouragement of separate schools for Shilpkar, digging of wells, special government assistance were part of this polarization. The leader of the Shilpkar movement (Hariprasad Tamta) was aware that if the British had not ruled India, they would not have been free from their caste shackles. All the leaders of the anti-caste movement were fully aware that the colonial strategy of the British was to exploit the people by creating discrimination, yet they used this as an opportunity to conduct their liberation struggles. In the context of the strategy of the British colonialists, the D.L. Seth explanation is important: “The colonial state adopted a dual character: their first role was that of a superior Brahmin in which he determined

the conflict between caste superiority and social existence according to the traditional hierarchies and it redefined the rights of its weak and poor subjects and helped to save the colonial, political economy of the state from emerging aggression. At the same time, the British colonialists induced the people to organize so that they could represent themselves in politics in the sense of caste identity and participate in the economy on their terms established by the colonial polity” (Teltumde, 2010). The institutions set up by the colonialists formed political representations. Hariprasad Tamta was actively involved in the state intervention to bring the Shilpkar into the modern realm, as this promised legal and social equality, but not in practice.

Here the fact becomes important that the Shilpkar’s discourse and consciousness are often given a second fiddle. A large section of historians and social writers term the consciousness against the colonial rule as the real consciousness. It is defined as a national movement against imperialism, those with other views have been portrayed as supporting the British government or anti-national movement. The same Marxist ideology has been spreading the Shilpkar as a class narrow ideology. And on the basis of class consciousness, while limiting the discussion of the Shilpkar on economic basis, it completely denies social cozenage. It is important to note here that Hariprasad Tamta was financially prosperous. And as a resident of Bhadrlok under the British rule, he was given the title of Rai Bahadur. But socially, they were the last rung of people who were harassed from time to time by the Bhadrlok residents of Uttarakhand on the basis of religious and social representation. His position therefore was equal to that of an economically poor Shilpkar, and perhaps even worse. This was because they had the consciousness against that oppression, and also the means to fight against that oppression. But due to their socio-caste identity, they also endured that internal social oppression throughout their life, which the Shilpkar society has been suffering from centuries. But they have been successful in awakening the suppressed consciousness which dreams of establishing an egalitarian society. Hariprasad Tamta’s life as a whole is a source of such human sensibilities, values, creativity, struggling inspiration, under whose influence even the light of the sun shining in the sky seems to be zero. He had envisioned an era without conservatism, social discrimination, untouchability, superstition dissipated, gender discrimination, free and selfless politics in that era when scientific ideological emptiness was at its peak and freedom of expression was a daydream. In such an era, Hariprasad Tamta, who envisioned the Shilpkar’s new consciousness and social harmony and transformed it into reality, gave a sweet path to the consciousness of the Navrangs in the dawn of a new rise to the future generation, will surely make his place in history one day.

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