

तनाव — *tension*

There's maybe *just* enough time to write this note before the English loanword टेंशन completely ousts the fine word तनाव from Hindi usage! The two words are in fact related to each other, which may account for the...er...*tension* between them.

Long story short: we begin with the Proto Indo-European root **ten-*, meaning 'to stretch'. This extends in a variety of directions to yield an astonishing range of related words in modern Indo-European languages, often with meanings relating directly to that primary sense of *stretching*. The English list looks back to the Latin verbs *tendere* 'to stretch' and *tenere* 'to hold', and includes such words as *tent* ('stretched' over a frame), *tenuous*, *tone*, *tune*, *tenet*, *tenant* (& *lieutenant*), *tenor*, *maintain*, *obtain*, *attend*, *extend*, *pretend* and many more.

The Indo-Aryan branch of Indo-European features the Sanskrit root *tan-* and yields such words as तंत्र *loom* (and many extended meanings such as 'system', 'theory'), *loom-warp*, *lute-string*; and also तान, which comes into Hindi as a musical term — a rapidly sung or played sequence of notes. Through the same Sanskrit root (or route!) we have the Hindi verbs तानना and तानना, of which the latter has both transitive and intransitive manifestations (through Sanskrit तानयति and तान्यते respectively). Here are the OHED entries:

तानना *tannā* [cf. H. *tānnā*], v.i. 1. to be stretched; to be made taut, tight. 2. to be spread, to spread. 3. to be pitched (a tent). 4. to hold oneself erect; to move or act in a stiff or pompous way. 5. to be tense with emotion. भौहें ~, the brows to be knitted (in anger, irritation). 6. to be at the ready, raised to strike (swords, staves). 7. [Engl.] to grow firm (prices).

तनाव *tanāv* [cf. H. *tannā*], m. 1. tightness, tension. 2. tension (nervous, emotional, &c.). — ~ तना, v.t. Brbh. to make fast (as tent-ropes: cf. तनाव).

¹तानना *tānnā* [*tānayati*], v.t. 1. to stretch, to extend; to expand; to pull over (as a sheet). 2. to tighten; to clench (fists); to draw (a bow); to knit (the brow). 3. to pitch (a tent); to erect. 4. to raise (a stick, the hand: in threat or violence); to aim (a weapon). — (पैर) तानकर सोना, to stretch out (the legs) and go to sleep.

²तानना *tānnā* [*tānyate*], v.i. 1. to be stretched out, to lie full length; to sleep, to rest. 2. fig. to die. — लंबी तानकर सोना, to sleep stretched out or comfortably. तानकर सोना, to sleep deeply, or untroubled (? see also s.v. ¹तानना).

The plot thickens considerably in the second of these four entries, where OHED points to the existence of the word طناب *tanāb* तनाव, a Persian word derived from Arabic (and hence coming from *outside* the Indo-European family). Here is the entry for this word in Platts:

P طناب *tanāb*, or *tināb* (prob. corr. of A. اطناب *aṭnāb*, pl. of *tunub*, 'a tent rope'; rt. طنب), s.f. A tent-rope; a long rope used in measuring land.

Another Hindi word that has come through the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European family is تار *tār* तार, whose meanings include *wire, thread, lute-string*, and which appears in the Persian loan word सितार (etymologically a ‘three-stringed’ instrument, the Persian word سه *sih* ‘three’ being cognate with Sanskrit त्रि and hence Hindi तीन — as well as English *three* and *tri*-). One of the many functions of the word तार is — or *was* — as a translation of English ‘wire’ in the meaning of ‘telegram’; the usage gradually lost currency as the telegraph became superseded by more modern forms of communication, the coup de grâce coming in July 2013 when the grand Indian telegraph system was finally terminated. Stop. The BBC Hindi service reported this historical moment with this headline:

अब कौन कहेगा ! तार आया है...
Now who will say, “A telegram has come!”

Returning to the musical connection, it is worth noting that the word तानपूरा, the name of the stringed instrument that supplies the background drone for a singer or instrumentalist, comes from Persian *tambūra* — but has been ‘Indianised’ by assimilation to the existing (but unconnected) Sanskrit words तान and पूरा. Both तानपूरा and तंबूरा are current today (an example of cultural harmony, so to speak), though तानपूरा and its English form ‘tanpura’ are generally preferred in formal and written contexts. The history of the interplay of Persianate and Sanskritic vocabulary in Hindustani music is a subject ripe for research!

The word तान has, or had, a range of extended and idiomatic meanings that were listed by Platts in 1884 thus:

S تان तान *tān*, s.f. A tone; a tune; the key-note (in music);—stretching, tension; knitting (the eyebrows);—a thread; a stretched or tight cord or rope; a rigid rod or bar, a tie-rod (as the rods which give fixity to the poles of a *pālki*, or the iron bar of a cart, or across a bedstead):—*tān uṛānā*, *tān toṛnā*, v.n. To beat time; to strike up a tune; to strike the key-note;—to crack a joke; to drop a word which induces conversation or excites a quarrel; to animadvert:—*tān joṛnā*, v.n. To strike up a tune; to sing or play in tune;—to poke fun (at), to crack a joke (= *ḥaṭṭhā mārnā*):—*tān lenā*, v.n. To pitch or to catch the key-note; to tune.

We also need to consider ताना, the *warp* of a loom, which brings us back to the original sense of ‘stretching taut’. Here’s Platts again:

H ताना *tānā* [S. तान+कं, rt. तन्], s.m. The threads that are extended lengthwise upon a loom, the warp:—*tānā-bānā*, s.m. Warp and woof:—*tānā-bānā karnā*, v.n. To fidget, to dance attendance:—*tāne tannā* (-ke), To set or dispose the warp (of a piece of cloth); to weave;—to wander hither and thither without profit; to plan and exert oneself to no purpose.

Coming back at last to our headword, तनाव, we find internet headlines such as the following:

पेंटिंग्स दूर करती हैं "तनाव"

[Making] paintings removes "tension".

तनाव के इन दस लक्षणों में से आप किसके शिकार हैं?

Which of these ten symptoms of tension do you suffer from?

तनाव मुक्त जीवन के कुछ उपाय

Some measures for a tension-free life.

तनाव कम करना है तो छोड़ दें ये 5 बुरी आदतें

If you want to reduce tension, give up these 5 bad habits.

तनाव व रोगों से बचने का सशक्त उपाय है मंत्र

A mantra is a powerful way of escaping from tension and illnesses.

मानसिक तनाव से मुक्त रखेगा ध्यान

Meditation will keep you free from mental tension.

The scare quotes on the first example show a self-consciousness about the concept of तनाव (or about the use of the Hindi word in this new meaning) as a relatively new feature in India's psychological landscape. (In English, too, 'tension' is frequently associated with the stresses of *modern* life — as if existence in earlier times was a bed of roses.) The second example, by contrast, seems to expect that *everybody* suffers from tension in one form or another. Even though it may be a newcomer to the Hindi lexicon, तनाव in its sense of 'mental tension' rules the roost in current sources: the first several hits in my Google search related to this meaning exclusively.

Running in parallel to these occurrences of तनाव, and making us question whether तनाव or टेंशन is the more 'authentic' term in Hindi, examples such as these below throng the internet news pages:

टेंशन से निपटने के 5 सरल उपाय

5 easy ways to deal with tension.

टेंशन को कहें टाटा...

Say goodbye to tension...

गरीबों को पेंशन..दूर होगी टेंशन

Pensions for the poor...tension gone for good.

ये 10 न्यू ईयर रिजोल्यूशन, दूर करेंगे हर टेंशन

These 10 New Year's resolutions will get rid of every tension.

सोते वक्त टेंशन

Tension as you sleep.

5 मिनट का योग, दूर हो टेंशन रोग

5 minutes of yoga may get rid of the illness of tension.

मर जाओ तो टेंशन मत लेना, यह डॉक्टर जिंदा कर देगा
If you die don't get uptight, this doctor will bring you back to life.

टेंशन मत लेना, हमारे पास है पूरा सॉल्यूशन
Don't worry, we have a complete solution.

ये दस न्यू ईयर के रिजोल्यूशन दूर करेंगे हर टेंशन
These ten new year's resolutions will remove every anxiety.

The above references to meditation and yoga provide a segue to one final example of the way in which words and their meanings can stride across the world: the Sanskrit word ध्यान is the source for the Japanese word 'Zen' in the Buddhist context. The concept reached Japan through China, where a branch of Mahayana Buddhism pronounced *dhyān* as *chán*. Something to meditate about!

टेंशन नहीं लेने का ! तनाव से दूर रहें !