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 लोम 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 तन्ना and तान्ना, of which the latter has both transitive and intransitive manifestations (through Sanskrit तानयित and तान्यते respectively). Here are the OHED entries:

1. तन्ना 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. मैंह—, 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).

2. 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. तनाब).

3. तान्ना [tānnā], 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) तान्कर सोना, to stretch out (the legs) and go to sleep.

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

The plot thickens considerably in the second of these four entries, where OHED points to the existence of the word طناب tanāb तनाब, 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 tanāb, or tināb (prob. corr. of A. اطناب aṭnāb, pl. of ṭunāb, ‘a tent rope’; rt. طناب), 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 तार, whose meanings include wire, thread, lute-string, and which appears in the Persian loan word सिह (etymologically a ‘three-stringed’ instrument, the Persian word سه ‘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 — ...
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) Sanskritic words तन 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 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 pālkī, or the iron bar of a cart, or across a bedstead):—

- tān urānā, tān tornā, 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 jōrnā, v.n. To strike up a tune; to sing or play in tune;—to poke fun (at), to crack a joke (=thaṭṭhā 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 तान tān [S. तन+कः, rt. तन्], s.m. The threads that are extended lengthwise upon a loom, the warp;—tānā-bīnā, 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.

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

- [Making] paintings removes “tension”.
- Which of these ten symptoms of tension do you suffer from?
- If you want to reduce tension, give up these 5 bad habits.
- A mantra is a powerful way of escaping from tension and illnesses.
- 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:

- 5 easy ways to deal with tension.
- Say goodbye to tension…
- Pensions for the poor…tension gone for good.
- These 10 New Year’s resolutions will get rid of every tension.
- 5 minutes of yoga may get rid of the illness of tension.
If you die don’t get uptight, this doctor will bring you back to life.

Don’t worry, we have a complete solution.

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 ध्यान as chán. Something to meditate about!

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