

Religio-Cultural Transitions in the Limbu Community of Darjeeling District: A Historical perspective

Sushna Subba is an Assistant Professor in the Department of History in Tufanganj Mahavidyalaya, Coochbehar.

Abstract

Religion and culture are neatly interwoven making one composite whole in a tribal community. Yet it is possible to determine religious and cultural elements separately for our studies. It is impossible to conceive of a tribal identity in absence of such religio-cultural elements. The Limbus are one of the prominent ethnic tribes of East Nepal, Sikkim and Darjeeling Hills having their own religious belief system, rich culture and a unique history. In the ancient past the Limbus had their own independent Kingdom called *Limbuwan*, which comprised of the present day Eastern Nepal from Arun river to Sikkim and Northern parts of West Bengal. The process of the disintegration of the Limbuwan seems to have begun in 1641 in Sikkim with the establishment of Namgyal Dynasty and in 1774 in Nepal after their subjugation by the Gorkha King Prithvi Narayan Shah. Unfortunately, the boundaries of the land within which the Limbus were dwelling were shifted again and again influencing their religio-cultural life. Thus, a history of religio-cultural transition was initiated. As time passed waves of changes were visible in the religio-cultural arena of the Limbu community due to the societal amalgamation, modernisation, globalisation and so on. The thrust of the paper will be on such religio-cultural transitions in the Limbu community of Darjeeling.

Keywords: Darjeeling, Limbu, Religion, Culture, Transition

The *Limbus* (also known as *Limboos*) are one of the prominent ethnic tribes of Darjeeling, Sikkim and Nepal Himalayas. They are of the Mongolian origin and belong to the *Kirata* Confederation. The word Limbu means an archer, or bearer of bow and arrow. The Limbus are known as *Yakthung Thi-bon* or Des Limbu (Ten Limboo), from which thirteen Limbu sub-tribes have emerged. A Limbu male is called *Yakthumba* and female is known as *Yakthungma*. Their language is known as *Yak Thung Pan* which falls under the Tibeto- Burman language and includes various dialects in it. Their script is called Kirati *Sirijonga* script. In the ancient past the Limbus had their own kingdom which was known as Limbuwan. The *Limbuwan*, the ancient historical country of the Limbus comprises the present Eastern Nepal from Arun river to Sikkim, and northern parts of West Bengal and Bihar.¹ It was divided into ten provinces during the sixth century known as Thums, each having an independent fort of their own known as *Yiok* or *Yok*.² After the establishment of the Namgyal dynasty in Sikkim in 1641 most of the petty kings of Limbuwan accepted the Kingship of Shri Phuntsog Namgyal, by signing

¹ J. R. Subba, *Yumaism, the Limboo Way of Life: A Philosophical Analysis* (Gangtok: Yakthung Mundhum Saplapa, 2012), 213.

² Cf. *Ibid.*, 216.

the tripartite agreement of 'Lho-Mon-Tsong-Sum'.³ The northern areas of Limbuwan was under Greater Sikkim before the Gorkha invasion. The frontier of Sikkim and Darjeeling were constantly changing over the past three hundred years or so as its possession changed hands owing to various aggression, treaties as well as agreements. According to Kumar Pradhan (2009) there was no definite boundary between the Limbu land and Sikkim.⁴ The lands of Darjeeling were always in the hands of either Sikkim or Limbuwan or Nepal and for a while the Kalimpong part of it was even under Bhutan. Finally, in 1835, it was acquired by the British East India Company.⁵ Darjeeling was often described as the British Sikkim.⁶ The process of the disintegration of the Limbuwan seems to have begun in 1641 in Sikkim with the establishment of Namgyal Dynasty and, in 1774, in Nepal after their subjugation by the Gorkha King Prithvi Narayan Shah. Unfortunately, the boundaries of the land within which the Limbus were dwelling were shifted again and again influencing their religio-cultural life. Thus a history of religio-cultural transition was initiated. Further, the advent of the British and the role of the Christian missionaries as well as the spread of western education in the 19th century also influenced the religio-cultural life of the Limbus in Darjeeling. Thus, different waves of changes were visible in the religio-cultural arena of the Limbu community as time passed by. According to the survey of Central Institute of Indian Languages, the Limbus in India are found in Sikkim, West Bengal, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Tripura. They also reside in the eastern part of Nepal and some parts of Bhutan. Today they have been scattered all over the world.

Objective of the Study

Various ethnic communities have been residing in Darjeeling and its vicinity from time immemorial. They have their own indigenous cultures, languages, traditions and belief systems. In the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-lingual society, we find fusion of different cultures and traditions. It is being widely seen today that the traditional features of tribal life have become the prey of the modernized and globalized world. The Limbus, one of the prominent ethnic tribes of Darjeeling, has distinct social and religio-cultural life that makes them distinct from the other tribal and non-tribal groups. Today, the Limbus of Darjeeling think that their religion and culture have suffered a major set back and their very identity tends to get lost due to societal amalgamation, modernization, globalization, political and as well as economic factors. The thrust of the paper will be on such religio-cultural transitions in the Limbu community of Darjeeling and to determine the factors effecting such transitions.

The Limbus of Darjeeling

The Limbus are scattered in all the three sub-divisions of Darjeeling District i.e. Darjeeling, Kurseong and Siliguri. According to the data collected by the Limbu

³ R. Moktan, *Sikkim-Darjeeling: Compendium of Documents* (Kalimpong, Darjeeling: 2004), 1.

⁴ Kumar Pradhan, *The Gorkha Conquests: The Process and Consequences of the Unification of Nepal, with Particular Reference to Eastern Nepal* (Kathmandu: Himal Books, 2009), 78.

⁵ Basant Lama, *The Story of Darjeeling* (2nded) (Kurseong, Darjeeling: NilimaYonzone Lama Publications, 2009), 4.

⁶ Kumar Pradhan, *Op. Cit.*, 209.

Association of Darjeeling in 2005, the approximate population of the Limbus in the Darjeeling district was 50,000. The Limbus have been living in Darjeeling in peace and harmony along with the other ethnic communities from time immemorial. They are regarded as one of the indigenous tribes having their own unique belief system, language and culture. According to Magrath's District Census Compilation of 1872, the Limbus numbered 4,663 and they were included in the Nepali ethnic community.⁷ Risley (1998 reprint) mentions that according to the census report of 1881 the Limbus numbered 2429 in the district of Darjeeling and they were commonly found in Nepal, Darjeeling and Sikkim.⁸ According to the Census of 1931 the Limbus numbered 17,506 in West Bengal out of which 16,238 lived in Darjeeling alone. The Limbus and Rais belong to *Kiranti* confederation. They profess Hinduism but worship *Kuldevata* (ancestral deity) at home. The Limbus received the tribal status in 2003 and the West Bengal Limbu Cultural Board was established by a resolution dated 10th February 2016.

Traditional Belief System and Culture of the Limbu Community

Religion and culture are deeply interlinked in case of a tribal belief system making it difficult to separate one from the other. Belief system gives religious identity, whereas culture gives a cultural identity. Therefore, ethnic identity is not given by religion or belief system alone. In all the tribal societies, religion is considered as an important aspect of their life and they have a deep rooted feeling for their religion and their world of deities and spirits. The Limbus have their own religious belief system, free from images of Gods and Goddesses unlike Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity.⁹ According to Campbell (1869), they believe in the existence of Great God, '*Sham Mung*' and worship other deities *Nihang-mo*, *Takpoopa*, *Hem Sum-Mung* and they do not build any temples nor make idols. They worship their Gods by offering grain, vegetables and by sacrificing cows, buffaloes, pigs, fowls, sheep and goats. They usually offer their sacrifices at road sides or at the junction of two roads and after offering their sacrifices bamboo poles tied by consecrated rags are erected in order to mark the place.¹⁰ Risley (1891) describes their religion as animism. According to him the Limbu religion is like Shamanistic animism where *Phedengma* or Limbu priest play the part of Shaman.¹¹ Pradhan (1982) also mentions that the Limbus had their own indigenous religion and so they were neither Hindus nor Buddhists. J.R. Subba, a Limbu Scholar, says that the Limbus have their own distinct religion known as "*Yuma Religion*" or "*Yuma Samyo*" or "*Yumaism*".¹² The term Yumaism was first used by Limbu Scholar Iman Singh Chemjong. They worshipped a formless God called *Tagera Ningwaphuma* who is regarded as the creator of this universe. The Limbu concept of the supreme

⁷ W. W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal: Darjeeling*, reprint (Shiv Mandir, Siliguri: N. L. Publishers, 2012), 29.

⁸ Risley, H. H. *The Tribes and Caste of Bengal*, Vol. II, reprint (Calcutta: P. Mukherjee, 1998), 21.

⁹ Melanie Pappadis, *Limbu Folklore: A Collection of Folklore from the Limbu People of Northeast Nepal* (Varanasi: Pilgrims Publishing, 2001), 1.

¹⁰ A. Campbell, "On the Tribes around Darjeeling", *Transactions of the Ethnological Society of London* 7, (1869): 153-154.

¹¹ Risley, H. H. *Gazetteer of Sikkim*, (Delhi: 1894), 18.

¹² J.R. Subba, *History, Culture, and Customs of Sikkim*, reprint (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2008), 306.

deity, the creator is female which keeps it distinct from the mainstream religion. Though the Limbu society is patriarchal but the religion is still matriarchal as it was in the beginning. The Limbu belief system is a kind of shamanism where their shamans (Limbu priests) play a leading role. The *Fedengba*, *Samba*, *Yema*, *Yeba* are the Priests of the Limbus. They perform all the religious rituals. *Fedengba* performs religious rites mostly linked to the various life cycle ceremonies like birth, marriage etc. *Samba* is the master of the *Mundhum*, the oral religious verse. He is the person who can voluntarily help the dead, in the last rites and with the help of *Mundhum*, makes a safe way to heaven for the dead. *Yeba* and *Yema* are the two male and female Shamans who can control the spirits. They use a bronze plate and beat it like a drum while performing the ritual. They use *dyangro*, a kind of drum.¹³

The traditional belief system of the Limbus has been based on *Mundhum*. The term *Mundhum* means myth in Limbu language. It is the elementary idea, ethnic or folk idea of the Limbu community. It has been defined as a sacred narrative explaining how the world and humankind came to be in the present form.¹⁴ Thus, *Mundhum* has been considered as an oral sacred religious scripture which has an important place in the culture, tradition and religion of the Limbu community. It is also known as *Yumawad*. It is interwoven with the Limbu society and serves as a foundation of Limbu belief system and culture. The narratives regarding the origin of the universe as well as all the living and non-living beings are contained in it. It is regarded as a true account of remote past of humanity. The *Mundhum* has been taught and transmitted orally since generations and it takes usually three days and nights to complete the recitation. It is recited during all the religious rituals and festivals. The Limbus call the universe as *Choit Lungma* which means heart of nature¹⁵. All the religious rituals right from birth till death have been mentioned in the *Mundhum*. "The *Mundhum* is taught orally by a *Samba* or *Yeba* to a Limbu when a Limbu shows some god-gifted quality of becoming a *Fedangma*, *Samba*, or *Yeba* himself. This Limbu who is orally taught the *Mundhum* is called *Yogasiba*".¹⁶

The Limbus construct their traditional houses to reflect their religious belief system. The traditional houses are constructed with *Murumsitlang* or main pillar, as the main pillar of a Limbu house symbolizes the 'Centre of the World'. The divinity '*Sewaklung Aakwanama*' is initiated and consecrated at the main pillar of the newly built house. Apart from main pillar, *Mangdhan* or a place for private worship, *Sumhatlung* or fire place and *Wadhambruk* or smoky stair are also constructed where *Thapura Theyongey Sammang* is consecrated at the time of new house warming ceremony.¹⁷ The Limbu religious institutions are called *Yehang* and the Limbu social institutions are called *Tumyahang*.

¹³ Min Liwang, *The Gorkha: A Glance at Their Culture and Tradition* (Kalimpong: Himtal (India) Printing and Publishing House, 2008), 26.

¹⁴ J. R. Subba, *Op. Cit.*, 29.

¹⁵ Melanie Pappadis, *Op. Cit.*, 62.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁷ J. R. Subba, *Op. Cit.*, 45.

The Limbus from birth to death follow various religious rituals and traditions. They observe rituals related to various stages of life cycle such as conception (*hangsingma*), Birth (*sawan*), name giving ceremony (*yangdangfongma*), hair cutting ceremony (*chewar*), dress changing ceremony (*Ta kings changlalekma*), marriage (*mékhim*) and death ritual (*yoggungshi ma/ mashingma*). The Limbus have a rich culture, folklore and traditions. Their language, religion, history and folklore are unique in themselves. Their folk dances, folk songs, folk music and folk musical instruments are very primitive. The Limbu folk songs and music have kept alive their original belief as the retellings of *Mundhums* are included in Limbu traditional music with moral and social stories related to everyday life. The word *Lang* means dance, *Samlo* means music and the words *Mukla* and *Mungsama* mean musical instrument in Limbu language. *Ke* or *Chyabrun* is the ethno-religio-cultural musical instrument of the Limbu tribe. This is often played to accompany the dancers, and it is called *Ke-Lang* or *Chyabrun Lang*. Further, *Yalang* or *Dhaan Naach* (Paddy dance), *Nahangma* (War Dance) and Historical Dance are other most popular forms of Limbu cultural dance. There are various types of Limbu folk songs such as *Sakpa Palam*, *KembaYealang Samlo*, *Nisammang Sewa Samlo*, *Hakpare Samlo* etc. The Limbus are also unique in their food habits, dresses, ornaments, family pattern, kingship and social organization. The Limbu people's ancient garments were *Mekhli* for men and *Daugari* for women. They have number of social and seasonal festivals such as, *Mangey Sankrati*, *Udahowli* and *Ubhouli* and so on, which are celebrated with much pomp and grandeur.

Beginning of Transition in the Limbu Community

As change is a natural phenomenon no society can escape the clutches of change. We cannot find anything that has been preserved in its pristine purity, uncontaminated by change. It is an undeniable fact that change is occurring and it is a continuous process. The Limbu tribal community in Darjeeling have undergone a huge transition. History bears testimony to the fact that Darjeeling was once an integral part of Sikkim. The lands of Darjeeling were always in the hands of either Sikkim or Limbuwan or Nepal. Finally, in 1835, it was acquired by the British East India Company.¹⁸ The regional frontiers were usually flexible in the past and as time passed by, the demarcation of the borders changed according to the historical situations and according to the way regions were defined. The boundaries of the land within which the Limbus were dwelling shifted again and again. After the establishment of the Namgyal Dynasty in Sikkim in 1641 and their subjugation by King Prithivi Narayan Shah of Nepal in 1774, the Limbus were subjected to the influence of two powerful religions, Buddhism first, followed by Hinduism. The Limbu tradition and culture suffered a major setback. In Sikkim, the Limbus were oppressed during the Namgyal Dynasty. It is said that they were forced to be converted to Buddhism. They were not allowed to learn or practice Limbu language and their rituals were banned. The Limbus threw off their allegiance and joined Nepal during the reign of Sir Gyurmed Namgyal (1707-1734) due to the ruthless treatment of the Sikkim Raja towards the Limbu subjects.¹⁹

¹⁸ Basant Lama, *Op. Cit.*, 4.

¹⁹ Riskey, *Op. Cit.*

J. R. Subba (2008) also mentions that the Limbus were not given their due share either in the administration or in other matters since the beginning of the Namgyal dynasty. In Nepal, the Limbus had a 'Kipat' system (communal land ownership) which faced severe crisis and it was fully abolished during the 60s of the last century due to various socio-political and demographic changes. During the Rana regime in Nepal the Limbus were not allowed to use their script nor allowed to speak in their language. According to Pradhan (2009), 'The process of Sanskritisation was nothing but the subjugation of tribes by dominant, ruling class of high castes in Nepal'.²⁰ The Limbus were restricted to recite *Mundhum* and perform their rituals. However, the great Limbu religious reformer Guru Phalgunanda tactfully preserved and protected the Limbu script, religion and culture by reforming and assimilating the rituals of Hinduism with Yumaism.²¹ The followers of Guru Phalgunanda bestowed the title of *Sattehangma* upon Phalgunanda. The *Sattehangma* movement represented a process of sanskritization where elements of Hindu traditions were syncretized with Limbu deities and rituals. Though the Limbus are neither Hindus nor Buddhist but syncretic elements appear in their belief system. The advent of the British and the Christian missionaries form the major factors of change in the 19th century. Webster (1976) writes, "Historians and social scientists have generally spoken of change in India during the nineteenth century in terms of such all-embracing processes of change as its 'westernization', its 'modernization', or its transformation under the impact of British capitalism from a feudal to a capitalist economy with feudal survivals."²² Westernization of (India has been viewed in terms of both a synthesis of Indian and western ideas and the expression of that synthesis in outward forms. Christian missionaries played an important 'westernizing influence' or agency through which western ideas and values reached the Indian middle classes who then worked out their synthesis between India and the West.²³ This is true in the case of the Limbu tribal communities in Darjeeling as well. The Christian missionaries as well as the British officials fostered change in the Limbu tribal communities through westernization and modernization after it acquired Darjeeling in 1835.

Transitions of the Limbu Community in Darjeeling

In a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic society like Darjeeling where diverse ethnic tribes and castes resides, the processes of acculturation, societal amalgamation and assimilation are natural phenomena. We get fusion of different cultures in Darjeeling. The generic term Gorkha denotes all the ethnic tribes and castes and hence all the ethnic communities and tribes live together in perfect communal harmony. The Nepali language is the *lingua-franca* of Darjeeling and all the inhabitants speak in this language. The religious festivals of all communities such as Hindus, Muslims,

²⁰ Kumar Pradhan, *Op. Cit.*, 180.

²¹ Uday Subba, *Muhigum Angsimang Falgunandaani Satyahangma Pantha, Pancha-Dham – Rajat Jayanti Smarika* (Sonada: Pandit Durgaprasad Bhandari, 2016), 71.

²² Webster, J.C.B. *The Christian Community and Change in Nineteenth Century North India* (Delhi: Macmillan Company of India Limited, 1976), 261.

²³ *Ibid.*

Christians, Buddhists etc. are celebrated almost by all. Moreover, the inter-castes marriages have created a mixed cultural identity.

In Darjeeling, tribal language, religion and culture have become prey to the modern culture and modern language. Apart from globalisation and modernization, the various social and political and economic factors have influenced both the core and peripheral aspects of the tribal religion and culture. The Limbu religion and culture have been undergoing massive changes in Darjeeling initiating religio-cultural transitions.

The traditional spiritual life of the Limbus has undergone changes as many have embraced religious movements like Sai dharma of Sathya Sai Baba, Manav Dharma, Pranami, Radha Swami etc. Some of them have become Christians, Buddhists and Hindus. Nevertheless, we find both the sects of *Yumaism* (*Yuma Dharma*) as well as *Sattehangma*. The followers of *Yuma Dharma* or *Yumaism* follow the original belief system where as the followers of *Sattehangma* perform the rituals according to Hindu tradition but at same time, they recite the traditional *Mundhum*. Though the Limbus have their own distinct religion titled *Yumaism*, yet they are commonly placed in the heterogeneous group of Nepalis and are officially recognized as Hindus. It has been observed that a number of religious elements in their day to day life are carried on with great devotion, yet some elements have been modified over a period of time. Moreover, due to the modern educational and economic impact, the Limbu people have given up many traditional rituals such as the extensive ritual related to *Mekhim* or Marriage ceremony. Today, we hardly see the Limbus following *Char Kalam Das Rit* during marriage. Death rituals too have met with several changes. Once upon a time, alcohol and meat were central part of the ritual and the guests would be served these items in large quantities. Nowadays, alcohol and meat are not served during death rituals. Today, we do not find traditional Limbu houses in town areas in Darjeeling yet in remote villages, where the Limbus dwell in groups the old Limbu houses still exist. It is generally believed that there are no elements of idol worship in Limbu ritual practice. The Limbus did not build temples in honour of their deities, nor made idols in the past.²⁴ However, a huge transition has been noticed in this area today. They have built *Mangheem-s* (Limbu temples) in several places at present in order to revive the original belief system. Today, the Limbus can be seen having worship in the *Mangheem-s* which is rather a recent development. Due to societal amalgamation they have adopted several Hindu rituals and have started worshipping various images and pictures of Hindu Gods and Goddesses. Modern Limbus have also been influenced by Christianity. The life style and leisure time activities of the modern generation have brought further changes which are visible in their present dresses, food habits and ways of living. Earlier, there was no use of *sindhur* (vermilion) by the married Limbu women. The use of vermilion shows the impact of the Hindu marriage rituals. The use of traditional dresses like *Mekhli* and *Daugari* has been limited to special occasions as in cases of many other ethnic communities.

²⁴ A. Campbell, *Op. Cit.*, 153.

Language is an important identification marker of any community. The Limbus have their own script and language. Today, majority of the Limbus in Darjeeling do not know their language. After the advent of East India Company and the introduction of the tea plantation in the Darjeeling Hills, the various ethnic communities began to work in the Tea gardens and hence it became easier for them to converse in one language i.e. Nepali language became popular and consequently it became the lingua-franca of the people residing in Darjeeling. The ethnic languages became insignificant and the younger generation gradually began to forget their medium of speech. The Limbu language also lost its significance as the younger generation did not find it necessary. This affected Limbu society and culture in several ways. However, there are still some places in remote areas of Darjeeling, where the Limbus have settled in groups, speaking in their own language and following their traditional belief system. The Limbus who are settled in various places with other communities do not know their own language as they are highly influenced by other culture and religion. However, the Limbus all over are becoming conscious of the transitions taking place in their basic belief system which is intimately integrated with their culture and way of living related to their Limbu identity. Therefore, they are feeling a need to preserve their language, religion and culture lest their identity gets muddled further. Consequently, there has been a move today for recognition of their language and religion while keeping harmony with other communities intact.

Conclusion

Today, the entire ethnic communities in Darjeeling have become very much conscious of their roots, history, language, belief system, culture and identity. They want to revive and preserve these elements while remaining in unity with others. The Limbu Associations in Darjeeling are actively involved in conscientizing the Limbus about the importance of preserving and conserving their indigenous belief system on which stands their identity and culture. Further, the Government of West Bengal declared the Limbu Cultural Board for the Limbus of Darjeeling, which is an important step for preserving, revitalizing and reconstructing the Limbu identity. The Limbus want their language which is on the verge of extinction in Darjeeling to be recognized and taught at least in the primary schools. The Limbu Associations are taking initiative to conduct Limbu language classes at many places in Darjeeling which is praiseworthy. The original belief system of the Limbus has not become extinct in Darjeeling. The Limbu tribe in Darjeeling has been able to maintain their ethnicity to some extent because of a strong belief in *Yumawad*. The Limbu shamans have kept alive their religious rituals and practices. The Limbu traditional music and folk songs with social stories, dreams etc. include some of the retellings of *Yumawad* which not only entertain the audience but helps in preserving their culture and maintain their ethnicity in the multi-ethnic society to some extent. In an inter-play of traditionalization, modernization and identity formation, some Limbus are confused, some are going with the flow of modernization, whereas, a huge group is moving towards extreme measures of re-creating the past. Time will tell where the religio-cultural transitions will lead the Limbus of Darjeeling district.