



An Introduction To The Environmental Dimensions Of Limbu Shamanism

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Abstract:

It is a common known fact that the world today is challenged by several environmental issues. Awareness programs and actions to protect nature are not absent altogether. Yet we, in our day to day basis, witness how grave this crisis is heaping around. We are well aware of the accelerating demands of modern day lifestyle yet bound to it.

In the above context this paper would like to present a tribal practice rather a belief in the simplicity of livelihood in the tribal Limbu community of Darjeeling hills. Shamanism is a worldwide phenomenon, prevalent among the tribal communities. Ever since the archaic period the practice has been an eternal part of the community, having faith in animism. The faith which believes that the natural entities like mountain, hills, spring, rain, forest, fire and everything around us has spirit in them. The spirits are capable of effecting human life if acted accordingly or adversely. The faith claims that their ancestors are residing with them in 'pitri kotha' as guardians.

The proposed work aims to bring forward the aspects of limbu culture which involves their *mundhum* (oral scripture), rituals, practices, beliefs in consideration to environment around them. With very little focus, the simplistic tradition still adhered in rural setup of Darjeeling hills, has been a pioneer of harmony between man and nature. This paper would like to bring forth the significance of the culture as nature's defender ever since.

Keywords: Shamanism, tribal limbu community, nature, Darjeeling hills

INTRODUCTION:

Living in this twenty first century is definitely not an easy task, that we are well aware of. Equipped with latest technological devices, humans are facilitated with least of physical labour and more of their precious time. Precious time to invest upon growth, development and more production. But who is paying the price for this growth? Of course capital funding and the profits are in their place. For instance, while fetching anything in the market, majority will be provided with either polythene bag, wrappers or a plastic bottle. What happens to these containers after the consumption of the product? They either make their way to the waste bin or streets. What's the story then after? These smallest of the small plastic waste heaps over the open space. Very few are recycled.

M Scott Taylor defines environmental crisis as '*a dramatic, unexpected and irreversible worsening of the environment leading to significant welfare losses.*' (Taylor, 2009) According to 2015 stats, about 419-million-ton plastic was in production per year. Out of which 14 million tons ended up in oceans every year. And the consequences we are very well aware of. Yet to highlight a few – soil infertility, landslides, water clogging, degrading biodiversity, animals eating up these products, water pollution and numerous environmental issues. Not to forget locality dumping zones which provides us a great view and an awesome odour. WHO reports that '*24% of all estimated global deaths are linked to the environmental issues.*'

With this melancholic but a realistic picture of today's developing world, let us relate our paradigm to a tribal ways of living with nature in the hills of Darjeeling. Although in general we consider limbus of the lower Himalayas but specifically referring to those inhabited in Darjeeling. Therefore, the paper ahead aims to uncover the tribal shamanic ways of limbu community in Darjeeling hills, of North Bengal dealing with nature.

Not a solution to the world problems but definitely an insight into how adhering traditional beliefs can actually save disasters of the day.

II. LIMBUS OF DARJEELING HILLS:

Historically rulers and the inhabitants of 'Limbuwan' kingdom, Limbus today are an important social fabric of eastern Nepal, Darjeeling hills, Kalimpong and Sikkim Himalayas. We can trace the reminiscence of Limbuwan in their folk songs and geographically along the borderlines of India and eastern Nepal. They are inhabited in the counties like Nepal, Bhutan and West Bengal, Sikkim, Assam and other North Eastern states of India. The very term Limbu is believed to have been derived from the word "*Lingdong*" meaning "the bearer of bows and arrows." Limbus are listed among the descendants of three Kirata groups, namely Lhasagotra (Northern Tibet province), Kasigotra (South Eastern India) and Khanbonba- Lungbongba (indigenous of the land). They identify themselves as Yakthumba, their language as Yakthungpan and they are also rich with script called Srijunga Lipi. Their origin is quite uncertain but they are clearly mongoloid descendants. Pradhan (Pradhan,1991) claims that before the Gorkha unification under Prithivi Narayan Shan, Limbus inhabited themselves between Kali Gandaki river and Nepal valley in the east. While Chemjong believes that they migrated from Northern Burma via Assam and settled and gained control over eastern Nepal. The 2011 Census of Darjeeling reports a total population of 1,84,034 out of which Limbus constituted 51, 265, more than one third of the same. After enduring a long struggle, they have secured tribal status in Darjeeling and Sikkim in the December 2002.

Though very much modern in their approach today, we find Limbus still adhering to their traditional beliefs and practices. They conduct annual ancestral homage, harvest festivals, animal sacrifices, marriages and death rituals according to their customs. They are not allowed to marry within their clan. They are believed to be the earliest settlers of the land along with Lepchas. With a pastoralist background, today they are engaged in various livelihood activities, namely government sectors, private entrepreneurs, teachers, tea garden workers, agriculturists, migrant workers and others. Limbus are settled over the city, towns, villages and garden areas of the district. Yet few villages namely Bijanbari, Margaret's Hope, Moonda Tea Estate, Narbung, Pokhreybung shows higher concentration of them. They believe in animism and worship their ancestors. They call their religion Yumaism, a belief on a feminine great Goddess Tagera Ningwaphuma.

II.1. Yumaism

The term Yuma literally means grandmother. Mr. J.R. Subba in his article "Yumaism, the Limboo Way of Life: A Philosophical Analysis" defines Yumaism as a belief "on the idea of a Cosmic Consciousness or Universal Goddess, Tagera Ningwaphuma." In Limbu language Tagera means omnipresent, Ningwa means mind, Phu means earliest and Ma is used as suffix for motherhood. So collectively that would mean omnipresent supreme motherhood mind of antiquity. Mr. Subba believes Yumaism is a practice that falls under the category of Trinitarian Monotheism which believes in Tagera Ningwaphuma as the supreme reality, "Yuma Sam" her earthly motherhood-manifestation and "Thoba Pa- Sam" the ancestral divinity. Yumaism also keeps faith in the existence of divinities dwelling on the inanimate objects. They say "a plethora of other earthly spirit or energy known as Sammangs (divinities), Sammang-chyangs (descendants of Sammangs), Sam Sire (non- physical spirits) and Phesam (evil spirits)." also exists in the parallel universe. (Subba, 2013)



puja ko thana (freshly prepared place for worship showing all the required natural objects)

II.2. Phedangba: Limbu Shaman

Phedangba, the term for a limbu shaman, is an intermediary who is believed to be chosen and professed with the knowledge of divinity. Also we find the existence of Limbu shamans with the name of as Yeba, Yema, Samba, Mangba, Mangma and others. They are differentiated based on the rituals they perform. But the general term used for a Limbu Shaman is Phedangba and Phedangma (female). In order to connect with the higher authority an ordinary Limbu individual would seek the guidance and rituals performed by a Phedangba. The different kinds of festivities and rituals that Limbus celebrate are – *Fasekpa in Sawan Sankrati Magh Festival, Khet puja during Dusserah, Polyhang at Deepawali, Undhouli or the KarticPuja, Nowagi in Kartic, Agrahayanpurnima, Chait Darsh, Chait- Baisakh Undbhoulipuja.* (Debnath, 2020). All of these celebrations are incomplete without the performance of correct rites and rituals by a Phedangba. One cannot choose to become a Phedangba. He is chosen and guided by their tutelary spirits. They are hereditary, not chosen by anyone but their ancestors. Therefore, it is in their bloodline. Their initiation starts at a young age without their consent. And if the divine wish is objected, the angry spirit causes misfortune or harms the individual throughout their lifetime. Though, Shamanism is their full time profession but it hardly pays off their livelihood. For the rituals they perform, they never charge any amount. But the members of the family who perform the ritual, as a token of respect and love performs the rite of ‘*sir uthawnu*’ or to maintain the high prestige of Phedangba, offers him with eatables, drinks and cash as well. Other than performing rituals which is not a constant source of stable income, in a day to day life, Phedangbas are also engaged in ordinary earning chores of livelihood. They domesticate animals, do farming and may even engage in ordinary jobs. But they are highly respected in their community and will not engage in certain tasks that may hamper their prestige. They do not practice any kind of abstinence be it food, marriage, social-political or economic affairs. Their ecclesiastical profession affects their life as an ordinary human being in manifold ways. But they hardly have any choice rather to serve the community they live in throughout their lifetime.



Phedangba Tek Bahadur Subba



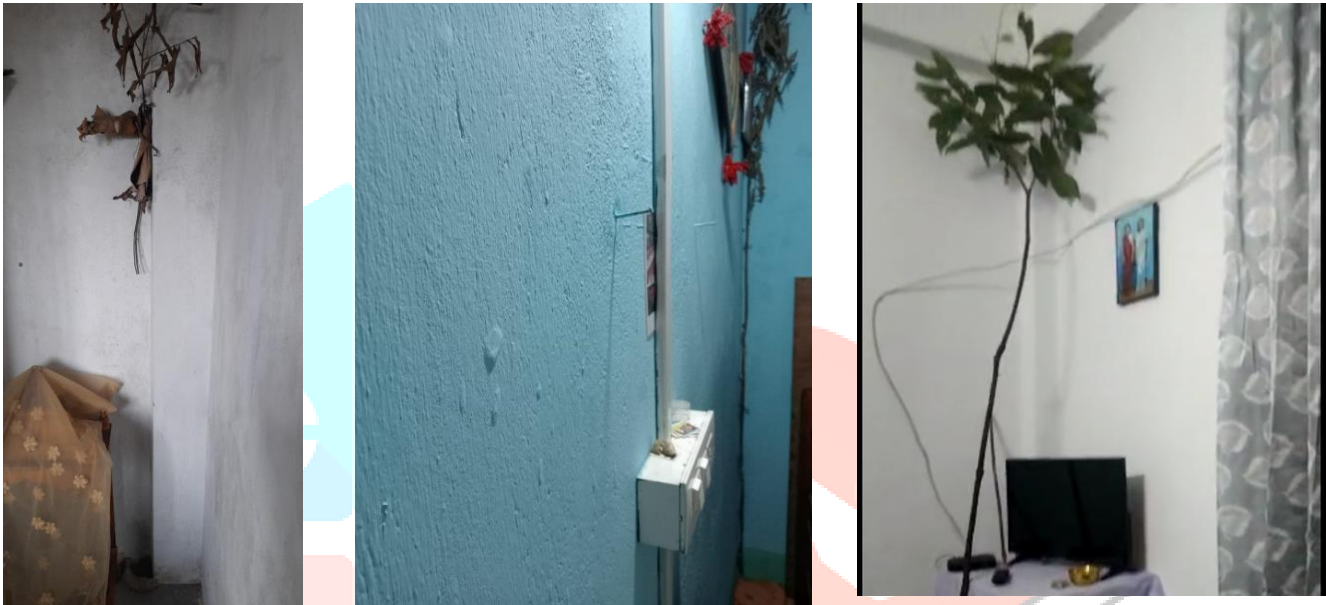
Phedangba Desh Bahadur Subba

III. Relation with Nature: *Prakriti Pujari (Nature Worshippers)*

Yumaism and Shamanism are the two aspects of the Limbu society which is very significant to understand the Limbu culture. To quote TB Subba:

For Limbus "...the physical environment is not just physical but also spiritual, as various gods, goddesses, spirits, and deities reside in the forests, streams, waterfalls, mountains, animals, and most importantly human beings as well. Human beings do not apparently occupy any superior position in relation to the physical and spiritual worlds; rather their health, prosperity, etc. are dependent on the pleasure of the supernatural beings." (Subba, 2020 p.127)

Having faith in Animism Limbus has been able to maintain a sustainable harmony with the environment. Their faith tells them that even the jungle has a spirit which protects the divine creation in it. Hence, their way of approaching nature is unique. Further we will list out certain aspects, beliefs and rituals of the tribe that will help us understand their relationship with nature more vividly.



Dhuri Khamba/ Murum Sillang in a Limbu household (A twig of chestnut tree symbolizing the pillar withholding the three worlds).

IV. RUDIMENTS OF LIMBU SHAMANISM

IV.1. Mundhum

A Limbu Mundhum is the collection of their myths, stories, prayers, faith, rites, rituals, customs and the knowledge of their ultimate divinity, Tagera Ningwaphungma. However, we do not find any written evidence of archaic Mundhum being preserved but certainly works of interpretation and preservation of the knowledge is being done lately. It is entirely an oral tradition. The knowledge of Mundhum automatically comes to Phedangba while in trance. Otherwise they have to learn it with their guru as stated by Phedangba Mr. Tek Bahadur Subba.¹ It is passed on to them during the process of initiation. The knowledge of Mundhum is all that makes him a Limbu Shaman. There are different kinds of Mundhum related to different themes of the ritual. While performing ancestral worship Sashi Mundhum is recited. Mr. Prashant Rai, a 30 years old kirati adult defines Mundhum as "a lifeline of kiratis".² Nothing is prior to Mundhum. Mundhum is the ultimate truth."

Kirati Mundhum narrates the story of creation of the world, stages of the development of human civilization, interdependence with nature, history, geography and cultural aspects. (Rai, 2020) "These oral traditions are basically accounts of the origin of various flora, fauna, clans, routes of migration and procedures of conducting rites de passage." (Subba, 2010) It talks about how life originated inside water. It refers to their early ancestors as living beings under water, probably water creatures. Mundhum talks about

¹ In an interview with Mr. Tek Bahadur Subba, 71 years old Limbu shaman from Manah Busty, Sittong II, Kurseong, Darjeeling. Dated 5th Dec 2022

² The earliest tribal inhabitants of eastern Nepal, including Rai, Limbu and Yakha communities.

how they fed themselves with sea weed (lew and jhew in nepali). The weed is still required while performing rituals, one of their modest gestures to remain grounded and reminiscing their origin. An act of paying gratitude to ancestors for all the trouble they endured for betterment of progeny. Mudhum provides a moral code in accordance to the will of Goddess Tagera Ningwaphuma.

Mr. J.R. Subba writes “According to Mundhum, a number of Sammangs were originated during the period of biosphere creation on the Earth and also during the early period of human evolution due to unnatural deaths, emotions, anger, envy and jealousy, incest, delusion, sorrow, ignorance while using the natural resources of the world by mankind. During the course of evolution of human being on earth, evil spirits of unnatural death, incest, fire divinity, devils and ghosts and other sammangs originated on the earth. Yumaism believes that the Sammangs are having the power to affect worldly events in much the same way as humans and animals have the power to do so.” (Subba, 2013)

Culturally Limbus have assimilated and adhered to the idea of respect towards this parallel universe and to their best try not to cause any discomfort to spirits dwelling in the nature. They seek forgiveness if anything unpleasant occurs from their end. Since the Sammangs have the power to affect their livelihood, these people remain highly alert to always remain connected.

IV.2. Rituals

Limbus perform a number of rituals throughout the year. Right from the birth until death they make sure to please their ancestor’s spirit guiding them and protecting them throughout. A Phedangba is summoned at every occasion where the family pursues divine intervention. A Phedangba requires whole lot of tools and implements to conduct the assigned ritual. Some of those are as such-*Kash ko thaal* (brass plate), *Kalasa* (Sacred water pitcher), Peacock Feather, *Thaal and Nanglo* (Plate and Bamboo Winnowing Basket), *Chongey* (Pointed bamboo sticks), *Dhupauro* (Incense burner), *Khurpa* (Magical dagger), *Dumsiko Kanda* (Porcupine Quill), *Titepati* (The Mugwort herb), *Kera* (Banana), *Bans* (Bamboo), Banana Leaf, *Tulsi* (Basil Plant), *Jana war ko sing ra dara* (Animal’s horns and teeth), *Khurungi* (curved sickle), *Dhanus/kand* (the bow and arrow), *Dhyangro* (double headed drum), *Gujo* (‘S’ shaped drum beater), *Jhyamta* (two piece cymbals), *Ghanti* (bells), *Mala of seeds of Rudraksha or Ritha* (Soap-nut Plant *eloeocarpus sphaerucus*), *Sankha* (conch shell), *Nalihar* (human Forearm Bone), *Sarpa Malla* (Rosary Made out of snake vertebrae), *Amilson* (Broom Plant), *Chommar* (Yak’s Tail), *Akchata* (Uncooked rice kernels), *Thumchey* (Bamboo Basket), *Supari* (Betle nut), *Tapari* (Plates of sacred plant), etc³

All of the above tools are deeply related with human beings and significant dimensions of nature. They have immense magnitude in Phedangba’s practice. We can take an example of a Limbu family which conducts *Kul Puja* (Worship of ancestors) to seek divine blessing and forgiveness for the act of butchering a year-old domesticated swine. Domesticating cattle specially pigs are traditional practices among Limbus. They do it to support their family economically, since the meat constitutes an important Limbu cuisine during feasts. 3rd of October 2022, family of Arun Subba⁴ arranges the ritual in his native place Mahaldhiran teagarden. 71 years old, Phedangba Tek Bahadur Subba is summoned. A clean floor is prepared in the pitri kotha, a sacred place assigned for ancestors, usually a room smaller than other rooms or a corner of the house. He guides members of the family to arrange brass plate, water pitches filled with fresh flowers and mugwort herb, *Chongey* (Bamboos stems cut pointed), lighted *diya*, incense burner with burning coal on them, unstirred cooked rice, boiled egg, fermented millet and wheat in a jar. *Mainam*, any attire of each individual in the family is also kept beside the ritual place. The very requirements speak for the nature of the ritual. Every object is found naturally or extracted from nature. After the fulfillment of the required items, Phedangba starts the ceremony. The animal is to be slaughtered only after seeking the forgiveness from the divine.

³ Mr. Tek Bahadur Subba op. cit.

⁴ Mr. Arun Subba is a 54 years old Limbu adult belonging to kubeknimba Limbu clan. He is a compounder in Mahaldhiran tea garden, Sittong II, Kurseong, Darjeeling.



Pictures from the ritual mentioned in the text. Phedangba worshipping in the pitri kotha, elderlies preparing chongey and members of the house dragging the slaughtered animal.

IV.3. BELIEFS

Their belief in the existence of living spirits dwelling over natural entities, protecting the creation and maintaining the harmony has shaped their livelihood pattern. To make the idea vivid let us have few examples. In a Limbu community, young children are always taught:

- not to cross any water body without acknowledging forgiveness and mindful gratitude
- not to pluck flowers in the evening or make noise during dusk which may cause tension to resting spirits.
- not to use bow and arrow as a play thing which is an entity related to ideas of origin and the greater power
- not to indulge in hunting without considering the wellbeing of the creation
- not to desire to extract excessive from nature which may upset the guiding energy. Resources from nature should always be exchanged with gratitude and forgiveness.



Phedangba offering food and seeking blessings from the forest deities.

V. ANNUAL EVENTS

As mentioned earlier Limbus fall under the umbrella of Kiratis. Therefore, there are certain yearly rituals which they perform in order to appease their Goddess and divinities. Mostly they are related to nature worship. Rajen Khimbule Rai explains in his nepali article titled “*Sakela k ho? Ubhawli- Udhawli⁵ kina manayincha?*” to explain why Kiratis celebrate these annual festivities. He based his argument upon Mundhum, which has answers to everything. He narrates the story of early ancestors of the Kiratas and their way of livelihood. In context of the Kirati beliefs he clearly states them as ‘Naturalists’ and ‘Animists’. Answering to the question being proposed in his title he explains that the two festivals celebrated by Kiratis today are actually seasons falling under the nepali month *mangsir Purnima* (Nov.- Dec.) and *BaisakhPurnima* (April-May). The festival is celebrated under various names *Sakela*, *Sakenwa,tiso*, *Sakel*, *dongwanga dhirinam*, *yakwa tangnam* but with the same theme of paying gratitude to motherly earth. It is also a way to safeguard the archaic belief of intimacy with nature, ancient supreme power and mother earth. This festival is celebrated according to the guidelines of Mundhum, with pomp and grandeur these days. Usually the ritual is performed along the bank of streams or into the woods. In the rituals they try to depict the human interdependency with nature, wilderness and all the living creatures. The various stages of the evolution of Kirata civilization is also celebrated, right from the age of wilderness to hunting-gathering and then production.



Sakela celebration among the kiratis of different regions

⁵ Ubhawli literally means upwards and Udhawli means downwards. Both symbolizing the change of season and migration of living beings.

VI. Environmental Sustainability: An Insight

TB. Subba writes, once a community is labelled as a 'tribe' "...its relationship with nature is taken for granted. The tribes are conceived almost everywhere as people with symbiotic relationship with nature." But then he mentions the variations of such relationship at different levels. He adds how tribes are tagged with proper management of natural resources ignoring the requirement of updating the anthropological data. Today we find them moving ahead in the rat race and the traditional knowledge eroding over time and space.

Moreover, animism not being a recognized religion they survive under different religious heads and categories. Most of the Limbus are recognized Hindus. Therefore, they celebrate all the major hindu festivals like Dusherra and Diwali with pomp and grandeur. We also have to consider that they prefer a brahman to conduct hindu rituals whenever required. A Shaman could be of least preference in this criteria. Therefore, all the ideologies of hindu religion also goes hand in hand with traditional animistic beliefs. Not a single limbu household exists completely adhering just one of them. They will have a sacred *kul pitri kotha* and also a small separate place for hindu deities. As a part of daily ritual bells are used, incense and diya are lighted for hindu deities while *pitri kotha* is smoked with dry mogurt leaves and ancestors are remembered.

Also due to migration of Limbu population over plains and foreign lands, it has become quite a challenge for them to sustain their traditional beliefs and rituals. Even if they manage to carry their beliefs around, the most tough job is to find a Phedangba in a foreign land.

With the passage of time the incredible traditional knowledge of the tribe is diminishing silently. The new generation being caught up in the rat race do not find time nor interest in the traditional skills and practices. Such knowledge is being taken for granted and left as a responsibility of adults in the family. Phedangba Tek Bahadur Subba expresses his grief over the loss and worries "*hami pachi ta kasley garney?*" (who shall be the torchbearers for days to come?). Phedangbas are getting rare and so as the elderly knowledgeable personals in the community. Yet no significant task is being done to save the crisis.

Influence of global culture upon the youth is accelerating the process further. The fantasies and sparkling modern day lifestyle does not stop them from going against their ethnic beliefs. They hardly pay gratitude for the natural resources around, hardly pays homage to ancestors or asks for forgiveness.



Tribute to Phedangba at the end of entire ritual.

VII. Conclusion

However, we cannot come to a conclusion with the same melancholic scenario as in the first section. Referring TB Subba again, no matter how heavily Limbus are influenced by Hinduism, Christianity and many other religions, Animism still forms the sub-stratum of Limbu beliefs. Therefore, he quite confidently puts forward his theoretical position as the concept of Limbus' physical environment being inseparable from their social and spiritual world. He mentions Aggarwal and Russell putting forth the idea of how for Limbus the sacred and the profane world actually overlaps.

Justifying the point further, it is not untrue when we say Limbus have evolved over time. With their religious practices and thoughts, they have come a far way along. Change is the order of the day. While some aspects of cultural amalgamation are an undeniable truth so as the initiatives of preservation and adherence. No matter how far a Limbu is from his place of origin, he cannot live in denials of certain rituals to be performed yearly, during birth or death. Although they are officially hindus but in the beliefs related to divinities and spirits they dare not go otherwise to upset any. Without fail they perform all the yearly rituals to appease their ancestors, seek strength and forgiveness from the great Goddess Tagera Ningwaphungma. Although complexities of life have made them exploit natural resources and speak of evil about each other yet they make sure to perform an annual ritual "*gali sarap bagawnu*" literally to be translated as "to wash away vices and curses". The community performs this ritual along the side of local streams or any water body nearby to offer appropriate kind of sacrifices to précised deity.

Hence, we can imagine of Limbus as an evolving community in the hills. They are certainly no exception to the influence of global culture yet in the rural and community level, they still hold a very strong link to their enriched culture. Rich in their ethnic language, script, dress, jewelries, food and incredible knowledge and respect for nature Limbus still are an embodiment of nature worshippers in the hills. As stated earlier not a solution to world's environmental adversities but definitely an approach, a way of living, practices and beliefs in a community level that dwells with forces of nature in a very symbiotic patterns. Nature is not adhered as an entity of exploitation rather as a divine energy, protecting and preserving righteousness. The paper ends with a note of possibility for further research in the field. An approach that can be undertaken to study the deeper dimensions of relation between Shamanism and Environment as a whole and tribal practices in particular. The magnitude of consequences can be measured through quantitative perspectives, further addition to the existing knowledge.

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