



Research article

The Limbu and the Land: Exploring the Limbu Tribe's Cultural Traditions as Sites of Ecological Ethics

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Abstract

Indigenous communities have, since time immemorial, had an innate connection to the natural environment around them. Through the ages, these communities have learned to use the resources available in nature, sustain themselves, and have managed to establish an intrinsic and symbiotic relationship with nature. In this paper, the focus will be laid on one such community that showcases a deep sense of ecological consciousness through its socio-cultural practices. The community in focus is the Limbu community, located in the Himalayan region. By exploring their religious beliefs, agricultural practices, annual celebrations, and performative practices of song and dance, the paper aims to explore how the Limbu community has established a deep connection with nature rooted in respect and reciprocity, fostering an environment of ecological consciousness and sustainable living. Additionally, the paper also explores the impact that modernisation has brought to the community.

Keywords: Agricultural practices, Ecological ethic, Festivals, Limbu, Mundhum, Nature, Reciprocity.



An Overview of the Limbu Tribe: An Ancient Indigenous Tribe of the Himalayas

The Limbu tribe (also referred to as Limboos) is widely regarded as the descendant of ancient *Kirats*, who occupied areas of "*Limbuwan*" (the land of the Limbus), prior to Prithvi Narayan Shah's Gorkha invasion of 1774 (Subba 2016, p.297). The Limbus refer to themselves as "*Yakthung*". In the Limbu language, "*Yak*" means hills, and "*thung*" means heroes or warriors, translating to heroes/warriors of the hills. (T.S. Subba 2025, p.36) The term "*Kirat*" occurs in many ancient Indian texts and was used by the Aryan settlers to refer to the indigenous people inhabiting the Eastern Himalayan region (Driem, 1987, p. xx). The main ancestral homeland of

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the Limbus was called Limbuwan, which now comprises modern-day Eastern Nepal, Northern Sikkim, Kalimpong, and Western Bhutan (National Museum of Nepal, February 28, 2020). In today's time, the Limbu community is geographically scattered across Nepal, various regions of India (in Sikkim, Darjeeling, and Kalimpong districts of West Bengal, in the states of Assam, Nagaland, and other North Eastern states), Tibet, Bhutan, the United Kingdom, Hong Kong, the United States, and many other countries. In India, they officially come under the category of the Scheduled Tribes. This widespread migration of the Limbu Community can be attributed to a combination of economic, environmental, political, and social factors. This has definitely led to significant social and cultural impact on the community, most importantly, a loss of traditional social structures, cultural practices, and identity. As such, cultural practices of the Limbus ought to be recorded as they are a source of environmentally beneficial epistemological knowledge. The main purpose of the research is to examine the cultural traditions and festivals of the Limbu tribe, with a particular focus on their practices within the Indian Himalayan region. The intention of the study is to showcase how these unique socio-cultural practices of the Limbu community offer an insight into their interrelation with the natural environment and its cyclical changes, thereby exhibiting how ecological ethics are lived realities of many indigenous tribal communities.

Theories on the Origins of the Limbus

The history and origin of the Limbu tribe are still shrouded in contesting debates and theories based on historical records and oral traditions. We will take a look at the three most prominent theories on the origin of the Limbu tribe. The most popular and widely accepted perception is that the Limbus are the descendants of the ancient *Kirati/Kirata* people. The *Kirati* is considered to be one of the oldest tribes inhabiting the Eastern Himalayan region. They are a confederation consisting of many subgroups, including Rai, Limbu, Sunwar, and Yakkha, who practice their own distinct culture and beliefs. The Kirata/Kirati origin of the Limbu tribe is corroborated by many historians and is backed by numerous pieces of evidence. Ancient historical sources like the *Vedas* and epics like the *Mahabharata* make mention of the term "*Kirata*," which was used to describe Mongoloid tribes inhabiting the Himalayan region. Indian Linguist, Suniti Kumar Chatterjee in his book has made a detailed study on the word *Kirat* (Chatterjee 1951, 17-20). The word first appears in *Yajur Veda*, to refer to "the cave-dwelling people", *Atharva Veda* makes mention of a Kirata girl who "digs an herbal remedy on the ridges of the mountains" (Chatterjee 1951, p.17). Historian Kotturan refers to the mention of *Kirats* in the Rig Veda where there is a certain sacrifice conducted to "drive back the Kirat to his caverns". In the epic, the *Mahabharata*, they are mentioned as one of the tribes that took part in the Kurukshetra battle (Kotturan, 1983, pp. 22-23), suggesting their long-standing presence and significance in the region.

Origin theories put forth by HH Risley (Risley, 1894, p. 37) also suggest that the Limbu people may have migrated from the North-Tsang province of Tibet. According to Risley, they were the descendants of early Tibetan settlers. The notion of their migration from Tibet is most accepted by the Sikkimese Limbus. This is because in Sikkim, Limbus are referred to as *Tsong or Chong*, who migrated from the Tsong/Tsang province of Tibet. (Limbu 2019, 58).

Speculations about their migration from the Sichuan-Yunnan province of China due to tribal conflicts have also been put forth by historian Iman Singh Chemjong. (Chemjong 2003, p.3). Referring to the oral traditions of the Limbus (known as the *Mundhum*), Chemjong states that the Limbus migrated from China towards Burma and settled in a region called Nam Maw under the leadership of Pongba Hang. The population gradually spread out in different directions,

and one group, which spread in the southwest direction, made its way towards East Nepal. In East Nepal, they had conflicts with the already settled Kirat chiefs. The Limbu tribes emerged victorious, which led to the establishment of Limbuwan or the land of the Limbus (GM Subba 2013, 57). Out of these theories, the majority of the Limbu people identify themselves as a part of the Kirat lineage, sharing cultural and linguistic similarities with the Rais, Yakkhas, and Sunuwars. Nonetheless, going beyond these theories of migration and textual evidence, the Limbu community embraces its own theory of origin, emerging from their oral traditions and narratives. Folklore studies have brought to light the oral narratives and stories that have shaped their origin story. These stories have revealed how the Limbu community views their emergence from the natural world. One such belief is that the Limbus designate themselves as *Lungbongba Khambongbasa*, which translates to “the lineage which emerged from the rock and the soil”, revealing their embeddedness in nature (Limbu, 2013, p. 123). This shows how the Limbu people see themselves as a part of nature. For them, nature isn’t something separate from human life, but it is the very source of their existence. These beliefs have guided the Limbu people in their ways of living, thereby shaping their unique socio-cultural practices.

Significance of the Study

The study offers a deep dive into the rich and unique cultural traditions of the Limbu community, highlighting their festivals, culture of songs and dance, religious beliefs, and interesting folklore. By documenting their cultural practices, the study aims to preserve their cultural heritage and indigenous knowledge systems that are otherwise overlooked or marginalised in dominant narratives. Furthermore, this research brings to light the Limbu community’s deep reverence for its natural surroundings. Their agricultural practices and seasonal celebrations reveal how nature is central to their sustenance. The Limbus’ relationship with nature is deeply rooted in respect and reciprocity. They see themselves as a part of nature, challenging the anthropocentric view of humans acting as nature’s managers and saviours. The study brings to light how the deep connection with nature has fostered a way of living that enables a balanced use of natural resources and a way of giving back to nature.

Research Objectives

1. To analyse the cultural practices of the Limbu tribe and highlight their deep connection with nature.
2. To analyse how Limbu socio-cultural practices is rooted in deep reverence and reciprocity to nature
3. To evaluate how these practices contribute to ecological conservation and sustainable living.
4. To investigate the impact of modernisation on the cultural preservation of the Limbu tribe

Methodology

The study employs a variety of qualitative methods to explore the socio-cultural practices of the Limbu community. The research is mostly based on an integrative approach employing an ethnographic survey done on rural areas of the Darjeeling hills, literature analysis, and folklore studies to garner a more holistic approach to the ways of this indigenous community. Ethnographic fieldwork mostly includes participant observation and personal interviews with members of the community. The researcher’s ancestral village, situated in the rural area of

Bijanbari, and her own background rooted in the Limbu community have given her firsthand opportunity to interact with the elder members of the community who possess deep knowledge about the community. Existing literature on Limbu culture and society has further helped the researcher inform and support her research. Critical reading of books on environmental history, ecological ethics, and indigenous knowledge systems forms the backbone of my study. These sources help situate the Limbu community within broader theoretical discourses and trends. The use of folktales, though contested by many, is employed to look deeper into the ancient beliefs and rituals of the community. "The restoration of ancient beliefs, traditions, and rituals has been achieved by employing folklore as a methodology". (Saha and Chowdhary, 2024, p. 23). By integrating these methods, the research paper intends to engage with the indigenous knowledge produced and preserved through the ages.

Cultural Practices of the Limbus

Raymond Williams, in his book *Culture and Materialism*, talks about how Culture and cultural practices are not just abstract ideas but rather a result of the lived experiences of the people. Culture stems from the ground realities of their social structures and practices, economic standings, and historical traditions. The Limbu Community and their cultural practices is what William would refer to as the residual culture where indigenous practices are carried on despite modern changing times and the existence of dominant cultural institutions (Williams, 2005, p. 28). This is further complemented by Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, which can be defined as deeply ingrained habits or ways of living life which has been established through sustained generational practices. It is learned through families and communities and embodied and transmitted through physical action and not just beliefs (Bourdieu, 1977, p.72). The concept of *habitus* is evident in the Limbu community and their interaction with material conditions like land, nature, and even their oral traditions. These interactions have helped shape the way they live their everyday life and perform their socio-cultural practices, as can be evidenced in their festivals, their worship practices, beliefs, and their day-to-day practices. With this in mind, we will now look into how the Limbu culture is born out of their significant relationship with the Land.

Aldo Leopold, in his seminal work, *A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There* (1949), proposes the concept of "land ethics", which redefines the relationship between nature, land, and humans (Leopold, 1949, p.204). He advocates for the human society to look beyond anthropocentric frameworks and to recognize the value of nature, species, and ecosystems for their own sake. He states, "We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect." (Leopold, 1949, p. viii). This is the core argument of Leopold's proposition of "land ethics". This worldview resonates deeply with how the Limbu community engages with land and nature. For the Limbus, the land is not just a resource but a symbol of connection to the world. "It is from land/soil that people originated, and it is in land/soil that the people will ultimately dissolve" is a popular saying among the Limbus ("*Mato ko manche mato mai milne bho*"). The notion that the Limbus sees humans as a part of nature and not as their saviours is reflected in their religious beliefs, agricultural practices, and celebrations. The research paper will explore the following topics in detail.

Overview of the *Mundhum*

The Limbu belief system and way of life are centred around the *Mundhum*. In the Limbu language, *Mun* means oral/verbal, and *Dhum* means of great strength / powerful; therefore,

Mundhum can be translated as powerful oral narratives (Chongbang 2022, p. 44). The *Mundhum* can be defined as a corpus of oral traditions that contains vast information on the origins, ancestors, lifestyle, and religion of the Limbu people. The *Mundhum* acts as a guiding light for the Limbu people and largely governs their way of life. It is an indigenous knowledge sustained through centuries in an orally transmitted poetic tradition accompanied by ceremonies and rituals. As Dipak Lungeli notes, "Closely connected with indigenous spirituality, *Mundhum* is the guideline for systematic understanding of various natural and social phenomena and ways of living with them." (Lungeli, 2020, p. 15). The contents of the *Mundhum* bring to light the deep connection that the Limbu community shares with nature. The stories and teachings of the *Mundhum* showcase how they interact with land, water, forests, and other living beings. According to Hooks, *Mundhum* holds "the sense of union and harmony with nature" (Hooks, 2013, p. 140), which reflects the lived realities of the Limbu people rooted in ecological interdependence.

Religious Practices, Beliefs, and the Role of Shamans

While *Mundhum* is the wisdom, *Yuma* is the manifestation of that wisdom in the Limbu culture. *Yuma* is revered as the matriarchal ancestor of the limbus, their feminine divine, and their main deity. She is considered to be the embodiment of *Tagera Ningwaphuma*, a symbol of nature and creator of the universe. The Limbu thus worships *Yuma Samyo* and follows the religious teachings of Yumaism guided by the *Mundhum*. The religious practices are said to have been born out of ancient bon practices where people worshipped natural elements like trees, flowers, birds, and animals. Through these animistic practices, the Limbus are able to maintain a sustainable harmony with the environment (Subba, 2023, p. 871).



Figure 1: The place of ancestral worship in a Limbu household (kul). Since the Limbus does not worship idols, they dedicate a sacred place to the ancestors and worships them with different elements of nature.

Picture Courtesy: Personal Collection

They also practice ancestor worship, revered as their "*kul*" or "*kul devta*". In many Limbu homes, we can find a sacred place dedicated to their ancestors, *yumatheba* (grandfather and grandmother) (as seen in figure 1), alongside the photos and idols of various Hindu or Buddhist Gods. The Hinduization of tribal religions has been very popular, especially under Hindu rulers. Many Limbus are also practicing Christians. Here, we can see the effects of modernisation and colonisation, and the infiltration of external belief systems seeping into the homes of these tribal people. Nonetheless, their core practices of nature worship are still visible to this day. The Limbus have their own shaman priests collectively known as *Phedangba* (male) and *Phedangma* (female). They are further classified into nine types. (Subba, 2016, p. 307) They possess profound knowledge of the *Mundhum*. They are also well-versed in ethno-medicine and sacred groves and are believed to have healing powers (Limbu 2019, p. 226). Their ceremonies often incorporate natural elements ranging from peacock feathers, porcupine quills, mugwort herb (popularly known as *titepati*), fruits, uncooked rice kernels, and so on. (Limboo & Karki, 2025, p. 562)



Figure 2: Limbu shamans or Phedangbas performing their ritual.
Picture Courtesy: Himalayan Cultures

Overall, their religious beliefs and rituals reflect a deep sense of veneration for nature. Despite being infiltrated by the beliefs of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity, the Limbu community has managed to preserve its core ritualistic beliefs. Their shamans especially play a key role in preserving these traditions.

Limbu Festivals

The Limbu festivals are arranged in a chronological order starting from the beginning of the year to showcase how the Limbu people live according to nature's cycle. Most of the information presented below is derived from oral interviews conducted with the members of the Limbu Community. They are further supplemented by the various texts and visual materials. However, due to the overlapping narratives and similar information derived from these sources, it has not been possible to include specific citations in this particular section.

Traditionally, Limbus have largely been an agrarian community. They depend on agricultural produce grown in their *bari* (farms or vegetable gardens) and also rear a variety of livestock ranging from cows, pigs, chickens, goat, and so on. As such, the Limbus and their living practices greatly depend on the seasonal changes and various elements of the natural environment around them. As a result, most of the celebrations and festivals of the Limbu are centred around harvesting and plantation seasons. Let's take a look at the various festivals or *tangnam* that the Limbus celebrate throughout the year. The word "Tangnam" means festival in the Limbu language.

Kakphekwa Tangnam

This festival is popularly known as *Maghe Sankranti* in the Nepali society. The term *Kakphekwa* refers to the flowering of the *chaanp* plant, identified with the Magnolia flower. This festival is celebrated in the month of January on the date corresponding to the middle of the first day of the Nepali month *Magh*. It is considered to be the new year of the Limbu community. This is the period when the sun begins its journey towards the North, bringing warmer days and thereby marking an end to winter. On this auspicious day, the Limbu people start their day by engaging in a cleansing process by taking a bath or dipping themselves in rivers or natural springs. They first offer varieties of yams, tubers, and other indigenous roots to the natural deities and their ancestors, and then proceed to consume them themselves. *Bantarul* or wild yam is central to the festival, and everyone puts a *tika* mark from the wild yam on their foreheads. This is a way of giving thanks to the nature deities for providing them with the resources for their survival. This festival is specifically celebrated in honour of their ancestors who used to survive on wild yams and other tubers at times predating agricultural practices or in times of *anikaal* (famine or drought). The festival is an embodiment of memory, ancestral resilience, and human interdependence with nature, a relationship that has existed from the very beginning.



Figure 3: Yams and tubers, along with sweets, are consumed during Manghe Sankranti.

Picture Courtesy: Sara Koirala. Pinterest.com

Basant Panchami

Popularly known as Saraswati Puja, this festival is observed in the month of February. While the festival is not specific to the Limbu culture, it still holds significance within the community. This period is regarded as the ideal time for the plantation of various crops like maize and varieties of vegetables, including spinach, bitter gourd, beans, and cucumber. The community is known for its solid seed preservation techniques, which is a testament to the community's experiential learning.

Yakwa Tangnam / Ubhauri

This festival is celebrated with the onset of summer during the months of April and May. The term *Ubhauri* signifies the upward seasonal migration of people and animals towards higher altitudes as the weather begins to warm. It is a form of land worship where the community prays to Mother Earth and other natural deities prior to the sowing of crops. Offerings of rice, chicken, eggs, and pork are made to invoke the deities' blessings for their crops, land, and also to seek protection from evils (Limbu, 2019, p. 220). The festival is accompanied by traditional songs and dances performed in full Limbu attire, along with rituals performed by the *Phedangma* with the recitation of *Mundhum*. This festival reflects the significance of agricultural traditions in the Limbu community and also showcases a profound example of communal solidarity.



Figure 4: Men and Women in their traditional attire performing kelang / chyabrung dance during Ubhauri festival. Picture Courtesy: Sekmuri Foundation

Sisekpa Tangnam

Popularly known as Saune Sankranti, this festival falls in the month of July with the onset of the monsoon season. It is considered to be an auspicious day as it marks the end of the dry season. During this period, crops planted during the months of February and March finally bear fruit. Maize, millet, varieties of vegetables, and fruits are harvested, and this finally marks the end of *anikaal* (or drought). On this day, they hang all the ripe fruits, vegetables, and other

harvests on a rope around their homes. At night, they beat drums or utensils, chanting "*anikaal ja shakaal aija*". Or "Sakmang Pero Hangnam Tero" (Now hunger and starvation have gone and prosperity, good luck has come" (Buddhi L Khamdak blog titled "*Siseikpa Tummyen: a special festival of the Limboos*").

Balihang Tangnam

This festival is popularly known as Tihar among Nepali people and falls on the same day that the rest of India celebrates Diwali. In the Limbu culture, the genesis of the festival is related to their beloved king *Balihang*, who, through his wit and help from his community, evaded death by tricking Yamraj, the God of death. However, the ritual practices are akin to the broader Nepali festival of *Tihar*, thereby reflecting a cultural synthesis.

The festival is a five-day ritual and celebrates the bonds between humans, animals, and gods, and is largely marked by a seasonal renewal. The first day is dedicated to crows, known as *Kak Tihar*. In many cultures, Crows are a symbolic creature. In the Limbu and Nepali cultures, crows are believed to be messengers between the human world and the divine. On this day, people place offerings of rice, seeds, and grains on top of rocks or rooftops to eat. This ritual is important because it is believed that by feeding the crows, families can avoid bad luck and prevent any bad news from arriving at their homes. The second day is marked by a celebration of our loyal companions, the dogs. *Kukur Tihar* is celebrated to honour the protection that dogs provide to humans, both in the real world and in the spiritual world. The dogs (both home pets and stray dogs) are adorned with a garland of flowers around their necks, and offerings are made of food and sweets. The third day is the *Gai Tihar* or Cow festival. Gratitude and offerings of food and garlands are bestowed on cows as they are considered to be the symbols of peace and wealth. Later on, the same day, the Goddess Laxmi (the Goddess of Wealth in the Hindu religion) is worshipped to welcome peace and prosperity into the households. The houses that are deep-cleaned are adorned with diyas and garlands made of marigold flowers. The main door of the house is smeared with cow dung or *gobar* as a purification ritual to welcome Laxmi. This day is dedicated to *cheli beti* (daughters and sisters), characterised by the singing of *bhaileni* songs. The Fourth day is the *Goru Tihar*, dedicated to oxen. The day is marked by men dressed in cultural attire going from house to house singing *deusi*. Limbu, being a traditional agricultural community, considers cows and oxen to be important for their role in fields and agriculture. The final day is Bhai Tika, where we celebrate the connection between brothers and sisters. This festival is a true testament of the deep connection of all living things in the Limbu culture as well as the broader Nepali society.



Figure 5: Celebration of the five-day Tihar. Picture Courtesy: dhadingonline.com

Chasok Tangnam/ Udhauli

This festival constitutes the second half of the festival, Udhauli, together making up the two main harvest festivals structured around the seasonal changes of nature. Celebrated on a full moon day of the month of *Mangsir* (middle of November – middle of December), Udhauli marks the onset of winter, displayed by the downward migration of birds, animals, and fish towards warmer areas. On this day, the community offers the first harvest of the year to their deities and ancestors of the family. The offering consists of harvested rice, millet, grains, along with a traditional alcoholic drink called the *Tongba*, made out of millets. These offerings serve as acts of deep gratitude for an abundant agricultural year and also a ritual of giving back to nature what it endowed on humans.

These two festivals of *Udhauli* and *Ubhauli* demonstrate how the Limbu community possesses deep knowledge of the cyclical understanding of time. *Ubhauli* invokes the blessings of the land, and *Udhauli* expresses gratitude for those blessings. These festivals are also a site for celebrating communal solidarity and their long history and traditions. Through these festivals, we see how the Limbu people follow the movements of nature, and their perception of time is not limited to rigid calendars. It showcases how every living being in nature is involved in a larger picture of the workings of the universe. As such, nature is very much intertwined with the various celebrations in the Limbu culture. According to Prayana Subba, "It is a way to safeguard the archaic belief of intimacy with nature, ancient supreme power, and mother earth." These rituals bring out the interdependency of humans with nature, wilderness, and all living creatures. (Subba, 2023, p. 874). Their synergy with nature is further reflected in the performative song and dance culture of the Limbus.

Performative Arts and Kinship with Nature

Yalang, commonly known as *dhan nach* (literal translation: paddy dance), is a traditional dance performed by Limbu men and women during the sowing of paddy on the occasion of *Asaar Pandra*, a date that marks the beginning of rice cultivation in the Nepali community. While in today's time, *dhan nach* is associated with the sowing season, the tradition is actually said to have started during the time of paddy harvest. *Ya* meaning paddy with pod, and *lang* means to dance over it. A lot of labour was required to husk the paddy to separate the rice grains. As such, people used to step on the harvested paddy to separate the seed from its husk. (Limbu, 2013, p. 127) These dances are accompanied by *Palam Samlos*, traditional Limbu songs having different themes. Their dances are inspired by the natural world. Traditional dances like the *Yalang* and *Kelang* imitate the natural movements of birds, butterflies, and other animals. For instance, *Puttuke lang* (dove dance), *Takmi lang* (elephant dance), *Khire lang* (deer dance), and *Muya lang* (eagle dance) embody the gestures and rhythms of these animals and birds. (Subba, 2025, p. 3)

Another powerful symbol of Limbu's reverence for nature is the *Chyabrung*- a drum traditionally made out of animal hide, and considered to be the most important symbol of Limbu folk culture. The drum is played in almost every major Limbu festival as well as weddings. The folk tale on how the *Chyabrung* was formed depicts the co-existence of humans and animals in the Limbu culture. According to the folk tale, the first *chyabrung* was made by a man named *Namsami* with the hide of his elder brother *Kesami*, who was a tiger, and both of them were born from the womb of the same mother. This symbolises the deep kinship between humans and animals. The *Chyabrung's* sound is equated with the roar of *Kesami*, and the tradition has continued to be played in honour and respect of the tiger brother. ("The

Drum of the Tiger”, a Limbu Folktale sourced from himalayancultures.com). The *Chyabrung* is an embodiment of human animal kinship and their co-existence, forever preserved in the Limbu tradition.



Figure 6: Chyabrung, the most important instrument of the Limbu tribe.

Picture Courtesy: Limbu Gang

Among the Limbu community, the sounds of birds and animals hold meanings. They interpret the voices and sound of different animals and birds as omens of good or bad events. These natural sounds are seen as messages from the environment. I remember my *Su Boju* (Great grandmother) used to be very aware of the sounds made by birds and animals. As soon as the cuckoo bird used to sing, my grandmother would immediately forecast rain. Other such examples include the call of *Phattimba* (owl), which is believed to signal droughts and famine in the coming year. The Cuckoo, as mentioned earlier, forecasts the monsoon, and the crow is said to be the harbinger of good or bad news (Limbu 2019). The interpretations of sound from nature are an embodiment of ancestral knowledge that the Limbu community has carried on from generation to generation.

Further, their agricultural practices involve a deep resonance with the principles of sustainability and ecological conservation. A key example is their reliance on organic bio-fertilizers born out of animal waste and composted plant matter. The manure, particularly cow and goat manure, is used to enhance soil fertility. Cow dung is further used to generate power in the form of *gobar gas*. This renewable energy source offers enough support for basic household needs. Their seed preservation techniques also bear a testament to their indigenous knowledge systems. Seeds are selected from the best quality harvests of the previous year and preserved so that they can be used for the coming year. These seeds are shared communally. Further, by planting trees, offering their harvest, seed, and grains to birds and animals, not only helps in providing food to migrating birds and animals but also spreads seeds to other places, thereby supporting biodiversity conservation (Lepcha et al. 2021, p. 21). Water

conservation practices are evident in their terrace farming techniques prevalent in the Himalayan regions. This technique is especially important for preventing soil erosion, efficient irrigation, and water conservation. Together, these practices contribute to the formation of indigenous knowledge systems that foster sustainability and ecological conservation.



Figure 7: Seeds of beans, coriander, rice, soyabean, mustard, cucumber, and brinjal preserved for next season's sowing. Picture Courtesy: Personal Collection.

From the above discussion, we can see how the festivals celebrated by the Limbus, the songs and dance performances, and their agricultural rituals express a profound connection to nature and its workings. Their interaction with the Land and nature is not merely for utility purposes but is ingrained in their deep relationship with the land. The Limbu community showcases the true nature of the land ethics, where utilisation, reverence, and reciprocity are practiced.

Impact of modernisation

While the Limbu community exhibits a profound connection to nature and possesses significant knowledge on ecological practices, the factors of modernisation have, in fact, posed significant challenges and changes to their socio-cultural practices. Firstly, because of rapid population growth, there has been a decline in cultivable land. In the context of India, a large population of Limbus has migrated to urban centres in search of better living standards and employment opportunities. Limbus are increasingly depending on armed forces, wage labour, and entrepreneurial undertakings like home stays for their source of income. (Subba, 2013, p. 2).

The broader use of the Nepali language by different ethnic communities has led to the marginalisation of the Limbu language and their culture. *Yumaism* and *Mundhum* are still central in their everyday practices and religious traditions. However, the influence of Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian religious faiths is evident. They are placed within a broader identity of Nepalis and are officially regarded as Hindus or Christians. (Subba, 2018, p. 55). The Limbu community lives in harmony with other ethnic tribes and communities of the Himalayan region. This has resulted in a rich intermingling of their cultural traditions. While such exchanges reflect their shared histories and respect for each other, every community should

find a balance between intercultural relations and the preservation of its own unique cultural traditions and indigenous knowledge systems.

The Limbu shamans are said to have deep ethno-medicinal knowledge of medicinal herbs and natural remedies born out of centuries of living in intimacy with nature, and their spiritual healing practices are derived from the *Mundhum*. However, modern healthcare systems, along with the erosion of indigenous languages, have eradicated the transmission and practice of this knowledge (Limbu, 2013, p.129).

Significant shifts have also occurred in the agricultural practices of the Limbu community. An elderly member of the Limbu community from Bijanbari, Darjeeling, recalls how, earlier, people used to do plant crops for household consumption and communal sharing. In recent decades, more focus has been given on growing cash crops such as cardamom, ginger, and seasonal fruits like avocados and oranges since they produce higher monetary returns. While this transition has improved the economic standing of people, it has also disrupted traditional practices and reduced crop diversity. Moreover, chemical fertilisers like urea are being increasingly prioritised over organic manure, resulting in loss of soil fertility.

Therefore, in terms of the socio-cultural practices of the Limbu community, we can see a complex interplay of resilience in maintaining their traditional practices and preserving culture, as well as disruption in trying to keep up with the modern world and its never-ending needs for economic viability.

Measures to preserve Limbu Indigenous Knowledge and Culture

In today's ever-changing world shaped by globalisation, trends and homogenizing cultural elements, it has become vital than ever to preserve the uniqueness of socio-cultural practices. Key thinkers of Indigenous Knowledge Systems have time and again advocated for the preservation and recognition of indigenous knowledge as they are not merely cultural knowledge but lived realities of people and a way to express their common identity. This is especially relevant in marginalised and minority groups like the Limbu community whose dearth of historical records due to their reliance on oral traditions has led to a gradual erasure of their history and cultural practices. The complexities of the modern world and dispersal of the Limbu community add further hurdles to the preservation of the Limbu culture. Preservation efforts of cultural knowledge not only help in the protection of cultural identity but also serve as valuable repositories of information regarding indigenous practices.

Keeping this in mind, the Government has to take necessary steps to recognize and protect the indigenous language and culture that add to the diverse uniqueness of India. Some suggestions have been listed below:

1. Efforts should be made to preserve and protect the Limbu script (*Sirijunga script*) and language. Additionally, we need to promote the active use of the spoken Limbu language, especially among the young generation at homes, schools, and public spaces, to aid its revival.
2. Centres of learning and research are imminent for the study and transmission of the Limbu language, culture, and their history. Government policies and necessary funding have to be provided to establish and maintain these learning institutions.
3. Mundhum oral narratives have to be transcribed in textual form so that the upcoming generation can have access to their historical records. This will further help in promoting scholarly research on epistemological knowledge.

4. Community centres have to be created to encourage the organisation of Limbu cultural festivals and performances. This will foster unity among community members and serve as hubs of cultural expression.
5. Overall, the government should encourage and formulate spaces to nourish cultural identity. For instance, in the towns of Kalimpong and Darjeeling, people come together to organise a weekly gathering called the *Gorkhey Haat*. Here, people belonging to various tribes and other communities gather together to open their respective stores where they sell food, clothing, and other cultural items associated with their respective cultures. Such gatherings are essential to keep cultures intact as well as promote knowledge and understanding of different cultures.



Figure 8: Glimpses from the Gorkhey Haat of Darjeeling
Picture Courtesy: Medium.com

In the case of preservation and revival efforts, Sikkim has definitely come to the forefront. According to the 2011 census, the Limbu population in Sikkim amounts to approximately 60000 people. In Sikkim, Limbu has been recognised as one of the state's official languages since 1981. There are also academic institutions in Sikkim that offer the Limbu language as a subject. The Sikkim government has also established a Tribal Research Institute, aiming to understand, preserve, and promote various tribal cultures. ([Home - Tribal Research Institute - Sikkim](#)). The use of the Limbu language in their everyday life is also common among the Limbu community of Sikkim.

In contrast, places like Darjeeling and Kalimpong, with a sizable Limbu population (56,000 according to the 2011 census), have, however, adapted to the Nepali language. Speakers of the Limbu language are very few in the state of West Bengal. The people in the Bengali majority state of West Bengal have been relentlessly fighting for the recognition and respect of the Nepali language and community, so separate tribal languages and ethnicity recognition efforts have taken a backseat. Therefore, efforts have to be made by both the community as well as the government institutions to help sustain the unique tribal and cultural identities.

Conclusion

The above discussion on the Limbu community's socio-cultural way of life has brought to light how the Limbu community practices a way of living that is attuned to nature and its components. Through their agricultural festivals, rituals, and traditional practices, we see how the "land ethic" advocated by Aldo Leopold is not just an abstract philosophy but a lived reality. This reality is borne out of their deep and intentional connection with nature and its forces. Such a notion of interconnection between human and nature can be equated to what Arne Naess calls the "deep ecology movement," going beyond the "shallow ecology movement," which is only concerned with fighting pollution and conservation of resources. The deep ecology movement is rooted in ecocentrism, where humans are seen as part of nature and not above it (Naess 1986). Limbu Community's reverence for the natural world should bear a testament to the fact that human beings are capable of following practices grounded in ecological interdependence with nature. However, with changing times, the Limbu community and their traditional practices are also undergoing their own changes in the form of loss of tradition and assimilation with other cultures. The complex forces of modernisation, migration, religious and cultural assimilation, as well as language erosion, have led to constant dilemmas between maintaining traditions and embracing modernity.

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