

Limbu Ethnic Music: A Cultural and Ethnic Identity

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Abstract: *Recently, the major focus of Ethnomusicological research is on the study of the relationship among most of the world's culture through music. Since Ethnomusicology followed the methodology to study the kinds of music with a socio-cultural perspective, therefore it will be more appropriate to describe Ethnomusicology as a study of Intercultural Musicology than cultural musicology. The Eastern Himalaya region is home to multiple ethnic groups and cultures. The socio-cultural study of these groups through Inter cultural Musicology methodology will help in understanding some ethnic groups of this region. Limbu ethnic people are an important group residing in the hilly regions of Eastern Nepal, Sikkim, Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Bhutan and other parts of North East India and the socio-cultural study of this group in identifying their ethnic identity through Intercultural Musicology will be an interesting exploration.*

Keywords: Culture, Music, Methodology, Limbu, Ethnic

Culture and identity hold significant value as they provide means of representation to individuals of any group, community, society, gender, class, race and ethnicity. The traditional music of any ethnic group or region is one of the basic elements which represent the symbol of their culture and ethnicity. In this paper, an attempt has been made to discuss the history and relevance of ethnic music of Limbu ethnic people which is instrumental for their cultural and ethnic identity.

The Limbu or Yakthung tribes or clans belong to the Kirata nation or the Kirata Confederation. They are indigenous to the hills or mountainous regions of East Nepal from Arun river to Mechi rivers as far as Southern Tibet, Bhutan, Sikkim, Darjeeling, Kalimpong, and some parts of North East India. Today they have been scattered all over the world. 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 a female is known as Yakthungma (Subba. 2017). Their language is known as Yak Thung Pan the language belongs to the Himalayan group of Tibeto-Burman eastern sub-groups of complex pronominal dialects. It is placed in the Austro-Asiatic

linguistic group. Their script is called 'Srijinga Lipi'. They are also known as Tsong in Sikkim and Subba within the Nepali community.

Limbu culture and traditions

The Limbus are rich in folk literature that includes mundhum, proverbs, folklore, folk songs, etc. In the Limbu folk literature, the Mundhum is a broad umbrella term that incorporates various entities such as legends, myths, folklores, prehistoric accounts, sermons and moral and philosophical exhortations in oral poetic language. They have a long tradition of narrating or reciting Mundhums and performing certain rituals and ceremonies in their distinctive ways. The primary religious authorities among the Limbu are shamans (known as Phedangma) who preside over important rituals and social events such as weddings, birth rites and funerals (Limbu. 2015). It has its philosophy of life and world, its Tumyang tradition of organising society, its own Yakthung Pan (Limbu Language) and Srijings Limbu script. They have their rich folklore, folk music, art and skills. They have their traditions and culture.

The folk literature of the Limbus is very rich and because of this, the Limbus residing in Sikkim, Darjeeling, Assam, Nepal and Bhutan, have their own identity. Their traditions and cultures are still alive. Yumawad is a type of religious scripture, which have been continuously kept alive by their religious head and handed over from generation to generation verbally. The oral transmission of religious and traditional teachings is called Yumawad. It is also included in Limbu traditional music with the mixture of social stories, dreams, or just plain everyday life (Subba, 2017). There has been a rich tradition of Limbu folk-songs like Palam songs, Hakpare songs, Khyali, Tumhyang, Loi, Ollo songs, etc (Subba. 1999).

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 (Subba. 2018).

Limbu Ethnic Songs and Dances

Limbu ethnic music, dance and musical instruments are the resources of Limbu culture and identity. The ethnic music of Limbus is tremendously rich. There are songs and dances in Limbu culture from birth to death. There are songs which sing in group, duet and solo style. This ethnic music reflects the joy, sorrow, traditions, religious beliefs, likes and dislikes of the Limbu society. In fact, the way of conversation of Limbus is itself very poetic, musical. Amongst various Limbu songs 'Hakpare' is one important type which is sung by Fehangbas (religious gurus) in a very lyrical and experimental manner.

Other types of songs include Labour songs, agricultural songs, sad songs (hamlapwah), songs of joy, etc. Among sad songs, there are songs right for the sick condition to death lamentation songs. There are songs even for things left behind after death called 'Ningwahso Samlo'. Some important Limbu songs are like Palam, Hakparey, Pangkhyali, lamri, dange or namringey, tamke, mangsamlo, mering, lori, kelang, mehngtang, kengjori, chirak, lak, tumyyang, pang etc (Dhanhang subba. 2017). Thus a detailed discussion of Limbu ethnic music can give us a lucid idea about their traditional music and its relation with their culture and identity.

Palam Samlo:

The word Palam is the combination of two Limbu words, 'Pan' which means dialect or dialogue and 'Lam' means way or medium and Samlo means song. Samlo means song. In this way, Palam means a medium of talking (Subba. 2017). Today Palam denotes tune, poem, word, rhythm and an established form of music.

Some limbus believes that there is a folk story behind this Palam song and dance. In the early days when hunting and natural foods became not sufficient for the people to feed properly. In such a situation the leader of the Limbu group ordered a group of birds to provide the paddy seeds. But the agreement was that when the corps would ripe these both groups will share the food. So during the harvesting time, these birds started to eat the ready corps. According to the agreement, people could not stop the birds. In such a situation people gather together holding their hand started singing and dancing making a common sound like 'ha ha ha ha...'. stepping on the paddy they can thresh it and can also sacred the birds from coming closer to the paddy fields. This kind of song and dance with time developed as Palam Song and dance (Subba. 2017). At the end of each line of the song, a sound of ha ha ha... is drawn. It was in whatever form in initial days, in the latter days it was developed as the medium to exchange the feelings of each other. That is why Palam is considered as the romantic ethnic song of the Limbus.

Palam's song is sing in three parts. The first part is called 'Kai Semma', the introductory part where one people or groups ask each other whether they have any blood relation or not. If the partners or group have any blood relationship they have to go through some customary obligation by touching the feet and cannot take part in song with such individual or group. If they do not have any blood relation then only they can continue with the next part of the song which is called 'Mayyapi'. This is the main part of the song.

In Palam songs, there works a poetic and rhythmic tune. These songs express personal past and present experiences, knowledgeable things, true love and affectional relationship. This particular song cannot express any kind of vulgar or immoral feelings. Generally Palam songs are singing between

young boys and girls as a verbal competitive manner or it is a kind of question-answer song between these groups. First an individual starts a line of the song then the group follow his or her line. In this way it takes the form of group song. Mainly in Palam there are the exchange of romantic words among young boys and girls (Subba.2017).

In the third part of the song singers sing the 'Semmui' (departing) Palam. This will be full of painful emotions to depart from one another. In this part singers use the words describing the uncertainty of life in this world. Emotions of imagination, expectation, difficulties are expressed by the singers. They pledge to meet again to sing and dance again in any particular place, festival or in some occasion. Finally they bid farewell to each other with love and respect.

Hakparey samlo

Hakparey is another form of Limbu ethnic song. This type of song is sing in groups, duet or solo. Melody and rhythm are the main characteristics of this type of song. Lyrics full of joy and sorrow make this song more touching and effective. To start the song singers take the permission (tuttummyang) from the listeners and take permission to end. Within the song the singers also recite Mundhum (Subba.2017).

According to Mundhum Hakparey Samlo was introduced during the rule of Limbu king Yehang. The young daughter named Idukhang of eldest king Sodahang was died in very young age. King was in immense grief. He closed himself within the room and did not talk to anybody for many days. People were waiting when their king would come out of this grief. One day suddenly king came out of his palace and talked to the people. There was the celebration among the people after this. People shouted Hang Parey which means King Speaks. So many believes that in course of time this Hang Parey took the trend of Hakparey (Subba. 2017).

There is a tradition to sing Hakparey after the completion of new House. There we found the description of Mundhum where Paijaba built a new house to marry Lulipna Badanma which Limbus believed to be the first house built by the humans on this earth. They also sing the Mundhum of envy and jealousy when Paijaba married Iduknama the own sister of Lilipna.

Inu Tukhewa which is sing during the time of someone's death is also Hakparey Samlo. The story behind this is also that of Paijaba and Lulipna. When Paijaba and Lilupna incidentally killed Iduknama her son Lakerek and Namkerek became parentless. During that time Samkelo Kewafung Maang expressed sympathy to those parentless children through Hakparey Saamlo. Hakparey is sing by combining the same Mundhum during the time of death ceremony within the Limbu community. Thus Hakparey saamlo is the song of expression of grief, pain, sorrow and other such emotions.

Khyali Samlo

Khyali is also a popular song in the Limbu folk tradition. Khyali is very much similar to that of Palam songs. But in this particular song there is no such kind of dance and songs as performed during the time of paddy harvesting. It is just like a musical competition between two young groups of boys and girls. This type of songs are simple but rhythmic, has both Limbu and Nepali words. It is customary for one to ask a question through song and the other to take turns answering. Like Palam the basic characteristic of this type of song is also that of sorrow and joys of life and romance. Since there are two sides, naturally there are questions, answers and interactions. It is poetic.

The origin of Khyali music dates back to the agricultural era when people use to work together. It was customary to assist each other's family. The families were also united during that time. Still there is tradition to help in farming called 'Parma' in villages. It was during such gatherings that the tradition of Khyali originated. In Limbu's traditions during the time of any social and family celebration the guests are ask for any help through Khyali (Subba. 2017).

Tamke Samlo

It is believed that the Tamke song started during the agricultural era. The story behind the origination of this song is when in the old days, young people were too lazy for cultivation and became engrossed only in playing and hunting the fertility of the soil and production of crops was seriously affected. So there emerged the possibility of famine. So an old man named Kusaraka came up with a solution. He encourage the young boys and girls to compete with each other while planting paddy with singing songs. He made a dove in a semi circular field by measuring three steps by standing in a wave and planting paddy by dancing three steps. After the paddy gets ripe again young girls gathered in a place, measuring five steps ask to stepped on the ripen paddy to thresh. While doing work in that way they even could not sense the tiredness and passing of time. In that way the sense of work collectively enjoying the work developed from such situation.

Tamke song was used to sing in Palam verses with Kusarapa dance while planting crops like paddy, millet, maize etc. Especially young boys and girls used to sing Tamke during cleaning the maize field. The rhythm of the song is slow but sounds very soothing and melodious.

This song is very much related with agriculture, that is the reason Limbus called this type of songs as tamke which means Tamma means to flourish and kema means to plant or strengthen. During the song they pray for the fertility of the soil and good production (Subba. 2017).

Pang Samlo

Pang Samlo is another popular folk song of Limbu community. It can be

entertaining and instructive depending on the time and situation. Rhythm and melody are the basis of this type of the song. Through this, the feeling of love, sorrow, happiness, hope and despair that are grown in the mind are expressed. Through this song feelings of loneliness are poured out in the memory of loved ones somewhere in forest, remote countryside, or by herdsman. Especially this type of song is sung in loneliness in the memory of love and close friends (Subba. 2017).

Nuwamphma (Lolori)

Lolori Samlo is the song for babies. A mother and other member of the family make a baby laugh, play and sleep through this type of songs. There are variety of baby songs (lullaby) in Limbu traditions

Kesam

Ke (Chabrung) has many rhythms and dances. These rhythms and dances are believed to have been started by an old man named Kusarakpa. He is also believed to have sung Keasm. Kesam is sung to increase happiness, auspiciousness or joy.

Hamlakwa

In Limbu culture Hamlakwa is the mourning song which is sing during the time of the death of some dear and close relatives. It is very touching and heartbreaking. Hamlakwa means the sound of crying.

Amubawa Hamlakwa

In life everybody has to pass through different situations. If someone cries in a difficult situation, he or she also can cry in happiness. so, Amubawa Hamlakwa expresses such emotions when some cry out of happiness.

Semui Hamlakwa

This type of song is sing during the time of departing with some near and dear one. This song express the agony and pain while getting part with some love ones.

Meringenn Hamlakwa

This song is sing during the time when someone is on deathbed. At the last moment of life. The crying sound of such situation is Meringenn Hamlakwa.

Sangu Sakma Pengma Hamlakwa

Human birth is predictable. Probable date and month of birth are specified. But nobody can predict death. Life entangled in the dilemma of life

and death. Sangu Sakma is the outburst of such emotional expression (Subba. 2017).

Semering Hamlakwa

This particular song is the expression of grief during the time of burying someone near and dear ones after death. Semering Hamlakwa is the emotions when the relatives of the deceased weep bitterly.

Niwangso Hamlakwa

This type of song expresses the painful emotions when someone misses and remembers dear ones who have passed away. Events, occasions or things that are related with the death person reminds the moments with him or her and make someone weep (Subba. 2017).

Kengjori Samlo

Kengjori Lang is a form of dance. Keng means the large hip bone and Jori means to knock. Thus this is a fun dance so the songs for this also require humour. There is question answer through songs between two groups in a humorous way. Dancers dance dashing their hips. The song resembles with the Palam but bit slow in rhythm

Chirak Lang Samlo

Chiral lang Samlo meaning the song sing during threshing the paddy straw. Generally healthy youths participate in this kind of dance. They move three steps forward and backward holding their hands, dance like threshing the straw with their legs. The song related to this type of dance is also full of fun.

Chelekwa Pang Samlo

In Limbu folklore there is an abundance of songs related with imitation. Especially during festivals, gatherings Limbus perform this songs and dance for entertainment.

Limbu Dances

Limbu culture is also rich in folk dances. To every particular music or song or occasion they have some specific dance. Among some culturally significant folk dances are -

Yalang

Yalang dance originated since the time of the beginning of the ideas of the agriculture. In Limbu language 'Ya' means paddy and 'Lang' means dance. Thus Yalang means the dance danced during the time of harvesting season of

paddy. This dance of Limbus dance throughout the year during the time of celebration or any festival. This is a group dance which can be group of two people to a large group. Focus of the dance is in coordinating the footsteps. People with blood relations cannot take part in this kind of dance.

Right in the beginning of the song it is ask whether any dancers have any blood relations? After that dancers holding hands stand in row or in circle. This dance is performed in a grand and civilized manner. There is no room for arrogance, vulgarity, indecent behaviour and obscenity.

After holding hands and standing in a circle, the dance starts from the left step. Singing palam, the group moves forward and backward shaking hands and dancing. While dancing if someone by mistake touches the feet of anybody she has to apologise. In this dance, there is the tradition of arranging the dancing partners by brothers and sisters. There is no specific time for this dance. it may be for a short while or may continue whole night and day. Even some fall in love during this type of dance.

K Lang

K means Chyabrung (a musical instrument, drum) and Lang means dance which is performed only during some auspicious occasions. Generally it is performed without any song. The Chabrung player stand in a line and dance, women also join them.

Thakmama is a kind of K Lang which is performed during house worming ceremony. During dance they pray for the longevity and security of house to the god Aukwanama. To performed K Lang dance is customary during any Limbu wedding. There are variety of Chabrung dances specially in the name of of some animals and birds like Yasa Lang, Khire Lang, Miluk Lang, Mora Lang, Muya Lang, Phungpith Lang, sawa Lang and many.

Limbu Folk Musical Instrument Chabrung

It is a percussion instrument generally used and is an important component of Folk Culture of Limbu Community. Limbu Chabrung is called Kay which means Tiger, an etymological meaning. Chabrung is a kind of drum made up of Tiger's skin. The Nepali name Chabrung came from the sound this instrument produces. Man who plays Chabrung is called 'Ke Sangla'. In old days Chabrong used to make only from the trunk of yeast tree. They used to cut out the middle portion of the tree making holes from both the sides which would covered with the skin of the tiger. Then the skin would stretched. To make the sound more melodious, a small hole is in the middle of the Chabrong trunk and a small bamboo stick is inserted and the wheel is placed on its top, which is called 'Laikpa'. However, in time, it was not possible to make Chabrung by using tiger's skin. In time, the skins of deer, chital, etc. were used to make Chabrong. Nowadays even the skins of goat, cow or calf are use. To

the left of the Chabrong is a small wooden piece called goja with small woollen pieces and a bell called 'Singchangey' and to the right side is called 'Hukchangey'.

Kom

Kom, in Nepali called Binayo is an ancient musical instrument of the Limbus. It is made from a small type of bamboo. A small piece of dried bamboo (2-3 inch) making a small hole a needle is pulled out of it. To hold it, a short thread is tied at the base and a long thread at the top. A kind of melodious sound comes out when the thread on the top is shaken and pulled. It is placed between both the lips and the long thread of the tip is shaken to release the rhythm from the breath. This instrument cannot give a perfect melody but can help in providing rhythm to a song.

Marchunga (Fenjey Com)

This instrument was very much famous during earlier times . It symbolizes love. Murchunga was played to exchange the feelings of love among the youths. The technique to play this instrument is by holding it by the teeth and plugging it by one finger at the end point of the instrument. Today the importance of these instruments endangered as the young generation has no more interest in it (Barman. 2016).

Negra Mung

In Mundhum language it is called 'Perage' and in common language Negra. It is a traditional percussion instrument of Limbu Community and played mainly in occasions like weddings, in welcoming someone or something and in funerals. It has no implements on songs. It has two parts male and female. Kumba is male and Kumma is female. Kumba is bigger than Kumma. And Negra is accompanied by a bell. It dates back to the history and is considered to be the gift of the Chogyal Kingdom to the Limbu people (Barman. 2016).

Kingana

It is a bell like musical instrument, which is made up of circular of bronze leaf. Making a hole in one side and make hanging with a thread it is play with a stick. It is play with the rhythm of Negra. In Limbu language ' Negrare Kugamphma Kingana' means Kingana's pair is Negara.

Conclusion

Limbu culture is thus so rich in traditional music, dance and songs. Ethnomusicological study of Limbu community is an interesting subject. The social fabric of Limbu ethnic people is vibrant with the existence of rich traditional music. This unique feature of Limbu culture and traditions is

instrumental in maintaining the identity of Limbu community even amongst the multi ethnic societies like of Nepal, Darjeeling, Sikkim and other places. In almost all social and religious ceremonies Limbu people involve in music, dance and use musical instruments.

When look at from the ethnomusical prospective, in Limbu traditional rites, rituals and ceremonies their ethnic music plays the central role. Right from the birth to death the Limbu traditions employ a great deal of music. Thus, it may be claimed that communication of limbu ethnic identity is carried out in rites and ceremonies consisting largely of music. In this respect, in Limbu ethnic group music serves as an essential criterion of their identity. It is an inseparable part of their social and cultural life. But in this age of globalization and digitalization the ethnic values are losing its significance gradually. All these root and rich traditional and cultural ethnic legacies have been limited within a formal customs only.

Ethnic music of Limbus definitely have created positive aspect in the movement for building and consolidating common ethnic identity. In India the Limbus received the tribal status in 2003 and the West Bengal Limbu Cultural Board was established by a resolution dated 10th February 2016 by West Bengal Government. Every cultural aspects of Limbu community deals a typical tribal features and music being one of the detrimental factors greatly contribute in retaining the tribal character of the Limbu ethnic people.

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