

The Vanishing Treasure: An Anthropological Study on Changing Social Relationships, Values, Belief System and Language Pattern of the Limbus in Kalimpong Sub-Division of the Darjeeling District in West Bengal, India

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Abstract : India is a melting pot of races, tribes, castes and communities. The population of India can be roughly branched into the huge majority of "Civilized" Indians of the Plains and the minority of Tribal population of the hill area and the forest who constituting almost 16 percent of total population of India. The Kirat community composed of four ethnic tribes: Limbu, Lepcha, Dhimal, and Rai. These Kirat people were found to be rich in indigenous knowledge, skill and practices especially for the use on medicinal plants and livelihood purposes. The "Mundhum" is the oral scripture or the "Bible of the Limbus" which serves as the canon of the codes of the Limbu socialization, their moral values and the very orientation of their lifestyle. From birth till death the Limbus are disciplined in the life with full of religious rituals, traditions and culture governed by community norms with a rich legacy of indigenous knowledge and traditional practices. The present study has been conducted using both secondary as well as primary data by applying social methodology consisting of the social survey, questionnaire, interviews and observations in the Kalimpong Block-I of Darjeeling District of west Bengal of India, which is a heterogeneous zone in terms of its ethnic composition and where the Limbus are pre-dominantly concentrated. Due to their close contact with other caste and communities Limbus are now adjusted with the changing situation by borrowing some cultural traits from the other communities and changes that have taken place in their cultural practices, religious beliefs, economic aspects, languages and in social roles and relationships which is bringing the change in their material culture. Limbu language is placed in the Tibeto-Burman Language category. But due to the political and cultural domination of educationally sound and numerically dominant Bengali race, the different communities in this area forced to come under the one umbrella of the Nepali or Gorkhali nation (nation-people). Their respective identities had to be submerged in order to constitute as a strong force to resist Nepali domination and ensure their common survival. As Nepali is a lingua-franca of the area knowing and speaking Nepali language helps them in procuring economic and occupational facilities. Ironically, present day younger generation does not feel comfortable speaking in their own Limbu tongue. The traditional knowledge about medicinal plants, healing, and health culture is found to be wear away due to the lack of interest of young generation. Not only poverty, along with exclusion due to policies they are in the phase of extinction, but their capabilities are ignored and not documented and preserved especially in the case of Limbus who having a great cultural heritage of an oral tradition. Attempts have been made to discuss the persistence and changes in socioeconomic pattern of life in relation to the social structure, material culture, cultural practices, social relationships, indigenous technology, ethos and their values and belief system.

Keywords : changing social relationship, cultural transition, identity, indigenous knowledge, language

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