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Female Agency in Indigenous Performance Traditions: Music and Dance in Tamang and Limbu Societies

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Abstract

Music and dance are not merely forms of entertainment, but they carry deep cultural significance. The tribal communities of India possess their own distinct musical and dance traditions. These give us an insight into their social structures, belief systems, practices, traditions and cultural values. Women's participation in these indigenous practices mirror their role and status within the society. Tamang and Limbu women of the eastern Himalayan region actively participate in their musical traditions. They also take part in various forms of dance. This has evolved their role as custodians of intangible cultural heritage. They also transmit it to the future generations. Using both primary and secondary sources, this paper aims to make an analysis of the Tamang and Limbu women in their respective traditional music and dance in Darjeeling Hills.

Keywords: Tamang, Limbu, Whai, Selo, Lang, Samlo

Introduction:

Indigenous women occupy a significant and respected position within their societies. As guardians of cultural heritage, they play vital role in preserving and transmitting traditions, customs and knowledge to the future generations. Their position as knowledge keepers enables them to preserve oral traditions, practice sustainable indigenous skills and transfer their cherished values to the young ones. They also safeguard the intangible cultural heritage including folk narratives, folk songs and dance forms that are markers of their distinct identity. Often, they also assume leadership roles in their communities. They have an extensive knowledge about various rituals, festivals and traditional healing practices. Their active engagement in the tribal social and cultural sphere enhances the indigenous way of life.

The Tamang and Limbu Tribes:

The offshoots of the eastern Himalayas are home to many indigenous communities who have been living there since time immemorial. Among these ancient communities, Tamang and Limbu are also included. Both have a unique history of origin. Despite sharing the same geographical location i.e. eastern Himalayas, they have distinct yet vibrant culture and traditions. Their social system is also different. Their religious adherence is also different.

Tamangs are majorly the followers of Buddhism while the Limbu tribe practice animism and shamanism.

It is said that the word "Limbu" has its origins in the word "Lingdong" which means bow and arrow. Hence, we can say that Limbus denotes a bow shooter or an archer. (Debnath, 2020) They speak their own language called Limbu Paan and their script is known as Sirijunga script named after their 17th century scholar Sirijunga Teyongsi. They are one of the oldest inhabitants of the Eastern Himalayas comprising eastern Nepal, Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Sikkim. In fact, the word Sikkim comes from two Limbu words, "Su" meaning new and "Khim" meaning place. They are also scattered in North eastern states of Assam and Nagaland as well as the western parts of Bhutan. A census conducted by the Limbu Association of Darjeeling reports that the Limbus numbered around 50000 in the Darjeeling district and its sub-division including Kalimpong (S. Subba, 2018). They are also found in the plains of Duars (Debnath,2020). They call themselves as "Yakthung" or "Yakthum" which means "heroes of the hills."

The word Tamang is a connotative of two words "Ta" meaning horse and "Mang" means "warrior". Thus, it is commonly believed that Tamangs were the cavalry during the reign of King Srong Tsen Gampo in Tibet. Some scholars opine that the word Tamang came from their principal occupation as horse traders (Tamang, 2016). There remains a controversy regarding their homeland. Some scholars say that they were from Tibet while others opine that they used to inhabit the border areas of Nepal and Tibet. While the Tibetans history refers to them as Rongpa meaning foreigner indicating their origin outside Tibetan valley. Sudipa Lama (2024) writes that they were the cavalry who entered Nepal and settled in the Eastern Himalayan region. Eventually from there they also migrated to the neighbouring Darjeeling Hills and Sikkim. Today Tamangs are largely found in Darjeeling, Kalimpong and neighbouring state of Sikkim in addition to Nepal. They are also living in Assam, parts of North-east India and Bhutan. They have their own language which belongs to the Tibeto-Burman group of languages. They practiced oral traditions and did not have a script. Recently a new script called Tamyik Lipi has been developed by Tamangs based in Nepal. Tamangs are also known by different names such as Murmi, Mulmi, Lama, Bhootiya, Ishang, Nishung, Saing and Siyena Bhutia.

Position Of Women in Limbu and Tamang Community:

The Tamang and Limbu communities were given Scheduled Tribe Status in India in the year 2003 by the government of India after an extended struggle to attain tribal status. Both these communities possess a rich culture and unique customs and traditions that set them apart from each other and other communities of the region. The status of women in these communities can be understood from their beliefs and customs.

The Tamang community is essentially patriarchal but they consider women as significant part of their society. There is no inequality or oppression against women. The Tamang whai or song itself testifies the fact. A Tamba, who is regarded as a ritual expert or poet historian of the Tamang society, sings "Amailey hoi Amailey" three times at the start of Whai. It is an appeal to the mother. It honors Goddess Saraswati, also known as Rhuisang or Parvati, who is both the Tamang people's mother and their progenitor. This in a way indicates the crucial position of mother or female in the Tamang society. Not much is known about the traditional Tamang women. An appearance of Tamang women can be described as wearing an upper blouse called as Khenja and a lower long gown often resembling a long skirt. A pangden or

Female Agency in Indigeneous Performance Traditions: Music and Dance in Tamang and... Manisha Tamang piece of thick handwoven apron is wrapped around their lower body. Married women wrap the pangden on the front while unmarried women wrap it in the back. They also wear a traditional hat often having an embroidery of their cultural symbols like totola ful (trumpet flower) and dilbo.

Various customs and traditions of the Tamang janjati such as Chardam (Marriage ritual) helps to provide security and empowerment to women. Sudipa Lama (2024) has discussed extensively about the Chardam ritual that is performed in Tamang marriage in the bride's house.

“According to ancestral tradition, the Tamba from the bride's side makes a statement, declaring that the maiti (immediate family) gives their daughter to the groom's family as a promise that even though their daughter is taken away, she will still be a part of their family until her death and that her family still holds the right to her except her blood, flesh, and body.” Lama S (2024)

This ensures that the Tamang woman is treated well by her in laws and she also gets the right to retain her surname the entire life. Another important custom is that the groom's family starts looking for the bride. They send a Pong/Shyalgar to the bride's family. If the bride's family do not accept the pong, the marriage proposal is considered rejected. Widow Remarriage is also prevalent among the Tamangs. Majority of the Tamang people are followers of Buddhism. Tamang Buddhist women have a key role in Buddhist Gonpa or monasteries. They are essential part of any ritual and observations in the monastery. They are also active members of the Gonpa administrative committee as well. Their role is organising Buddha Purnima, Sonam Lhochar and other pujas along with men is indeed remarkable. Some women even lead the members. In addition, women as lay followers also form “Mhanipa Sanga” or prayer groups. These groups comprise of both old and young women. Men are also part of these shangas. Whenever any death occurs in their immediate society the members visit the bereaved family and conducts prayers for the departed soul. They provide consolation to the bereaved family. Today Tamang women have a good socio-cultural status. They are educated and empowered. We find them working in various fields as doctors, teachers, scholars, nurses etc.

Limbu society accords a high religious and socio-cultural status to women in comparison to other communities in the eastern hill (Chatterjee, 2021). They have myriads of roles to perform in their family matters and community. It is seen that these women take part in decision making and no festivals and rituals can be performed without the presence of women. The elevated position enjoyed by women is reflected in their religious practices. “Yuma” or the female deity is revered as their supreme God. Yuma or grandmother is considered as the creator and worshipped in all the occasions. The Limbu concept of the supreme deity, the creator is female which keeps it distinct from the mainstream religion (S. Subba, 2018). Various folk tales of Limbu also reveal the tribe's perspective about women. One such tale is about Mujingna Kheyongna;

“The narrative surrounding “Mujingna Kheyongna”, the first woman created exemplifies the intrinsic feminism. Mujungna Kheyongna depicted as a self-reliant and industrious is a paragon of female independence symbolising the foundational role women play within the community. Her journey to self-sufficiency demonstrated through her learning to sew clothes and adapt top her environment reveals a

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Limbu society is considered as patriarchal but their customs and practices like worship of female goddess, Sappok Chomen or womb worship, absence of polygamy, permission of widow remarriage etc. shows their attitude towards women is not biased. Their marriage rituals also provide women with security and rights including the right to dissolve the marriage if she is not given good treatment. They are provided equal opportunities in education and treated at par with men. Limbu women can be seen in many areas today as independent and successful.

Women In Indigenous Musical Traditions:

Music is an important identity marker of an indigenous community. Folk music is of profound cultural and historical significance. We can gain the knowledge about history, cultures, rituals etc by attending and perhaps listening to the songs and musical instruments of a particular community (Barman & Alone Hung Subba, 2022). Their songs provide an insight into their way of life and traditions. They speak about their origin, ancestors, and beliefs and help us to understand their social structure as well as relations with nature. Musical instruments are also part of indigenous identity and gives us glimpse of their arts and crafts as well. In addition, the involvement of women in the songs, dances and playing of instruments helps us to get an idea about the position of females in their society. In many tribal societies women are important part of the folk music. The Tamang and Limbu women are also actively engaged in their folksongs and dances. Their participation in fact helps in the promotion as well as preservation of the tribal music, songs and dances. Various form of dance is performed by Tamang and Limbu women across eastern Himalayas. However, considering the geographical limitations and scope of the study this paper focuses on the dance and song traditions practiced among the Tamang and Limbu women in the Darjeeling Hills.

Members of the Tamang community are highly fond of music. Music constitutes the principal part of their amusement and is the basic means of sharing of feeling and transmission of knowledge (Lama, 2014). Their songs are of different types. One important genre of songs is known as "whai. It is usually sung in Tamang language particularly by the Tamba. Tamba is usually an aged person and knows the Tamang rimthim (beliefs and practices). He is well-versed in Tamang language and is an essential part of the tribe's ritual and ceremonies. Tamang people also sing songs in Nepali language and it is known as "Tamang selo." Rhama is sung during the Tamang wedding by the Tambas. The tribe people also have an inherent love for dancing. Their dance is known as Shyaba (Tamang, 2016).

Both men and women enjoy dancing and singing. Tamangs songs and dances are usually accompanied with the playing of their main musical instrument, "Damphu". There exists an interesting folklore behind the creation of Damphu. This narration is found in the Tamang whai called "Damphu se Bala Whai". According to this whai, Tamang ancestor named Pengdorjee *memey* (great grandfather) created the instrument Damphu. Once he killed a wild deer (ghoral) and skinned it, dried the skin in the sun, made a circular frame from the koiralo tree and stretched the hide across the frame and fixed it all around with 32 little pegs made of the malla bamboo (Pyaasi Yonjan, 2017). Later he saw a Danphe (male pheasant) bird hopping and dancing. He really liked it and copied the bird's dance while playing the Damphu. It is said that Damphu was named after the bird Danphe. He also attached a

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wooden replica of the bird on top of the instrument. A tyap tyapey or splint to play the instrument is also present. This kind of Damphu is still made today. Raju Moktan a famous Damphu maker from Jorbungalow, Darjeeling said that that the 32 pegs and the splint represent different Buddhist Lakshanas or signs. (Ethnic cords, 2022. 12:01). Whenever a Damphare plays the Damphu, the wooden bird sprang with the beats of the instrument. Another important Tamang instrument is the Tungna which resembles a harp. It used to be played by the Tamang shepherd in the Himalayas.

In the Tamang musical traditions, women play an important role, often singing and dancing along with the menfolk. Their musical performances form an essential part of any Tamang festivals and ceremonies. They also play their musical instrument Damphu.

Whai / Damphu song: As discussed earlier Whai or whaee are songs in Tamang language. Whai is sung by the Tamba and accompanied with the beating of the Damphu. Whai varies in rhythm and tune. Some whai begins slowly and then gains pace gradually. It is often witnessed that Tamang women sing whai but are usually accompanied by men. In recent times, women's performance without any male involvement is increasingly seen during the Sonam Lhochar or Tamang New Year celebration. Sonam Lhochar is celebrated in the month of January or February. On the occasion of Sonam Lhochar, a three day's conference is held every year where all the Tamang people gather and celebrate the beginning of a new year with grandeur. Women also attends this celebration. Cultural Dances and songs are performed during these three days along with other items. Here women are seen participating in musical performances such as singing of whai and also playing of the Damphu. On many occasions, in Tamang villages like weddings, we often find old men and women sing whai to the beats of the Damphu.

Damphu Shyaba/ Damphu Naach: Women are also found participating in Damphu Shyaba or Naach within the Tamang tribe. This dance is performed while playing the Damphu by the men. They slowly twist their bodies to the beatings of the instrument. This is also copied by the women. Together they enjoy the Damphu Naach while singing the Tamang whai. There exist religious dances in the Tamang community as well.

Tamang Selo and Selo Dance: Women of the Tamang janjati also take part in singing Tamang selo and also performs selo Dance. Selo songs are sung in Nepali language by men and women. Selo is a combination of two Tibetan words Shey meaning sing and Lu means song. Hence, selo have been derived from the Tibetan word Shelu which means to sing a song (Lama, 2014). Like whai selo songs narrates the origin of the universe and humankind, the past of the Tamangs while also depicting their culture. The singing of selo takes place in different occasions, both religious and non-religious. Selos are sung in rituals as well as festivals such as New Year, wedding and even rice feeding ceremony of an infant. The context of the selo also includes various aspects of life such as love, feelings etc and as full of fun. One feels happy while listening to Tamang selo. Tamang selo is quite popular among the people of the tribe and also liked by people belonging to other communities. Like every Tamang song Damphu playing is necessary while singing selo.

Selo Dance is an interesting and energetic Tamang folk dance. It is performed by male and females together as well as singularly. Men plays the damphu in selo dance and women joins them. However, on festivals like Sonam Lhochar women are also seen playing Damphu and doing the selo shyaba. All the Tamang people enjoys the selo dance in wedding

Female Agency in Indigeneous Performance Traditions: Music and Dance in Tamang and... Manisha Tamang ceremonies. Tamangs people are traditionally agriculturist, some of the selos depict women in the Himalayas (add)

Juwari: Women also participates in musical duels like Juwari within the Tamang janjati. Juwari is also sung by people belonging to other communities in the eastern Himalayas. In Tamang community, Juwari was an important part of their musical traditions and a medium of entertainment. On occasions particularly like wedding, men and women finds amusement in engaging themselves in Juwari. Men and women form group and there is a competition between them. One group starts questioning and another group give answers. An interesting feature of this musical duel is that the questions are asked as songs and the answers are also given as songs. Juwari is sung with the accompaniment of Damphu. " Often it happens that the vanquished has to surrender to the victor (winner) who will elope with the former to become his/her life partner" Lama (2014).

It is sad to reflect that this tradition is gradually getting lost and the present Tamang people are least concerned about reviving their slowly diminishing customs. While Tamang organisations like All India Tamang Buddhist Association (AITBA) based in Darjeeling is working for the promotion and preservation of Tamang culture since its establishment in 1981, however the response from the present generation is quite disappointing. Sisir Moktan , a member of the youth wing of AITBA said that efforts are being made by the Tamang organisation to promote the Tamang culture and make the young generation more aware about their practices and customs. (Interview with Sishir Moktan, 28 August 2025)

Music and songs are indispensable part of Limbu culture. Just like Tamangs, Limbu people love music and incorporate songs and dances in their festivals and rituals. Limbu folk songs and dances are very diverse. Limbu songs are relevant in order to have a deep understanding of the Limbu culture and society. These songs are in one hand, recreational but on the other they also help to get an insight in to the social life of the tribe. Their songs are the medium through which the mundhum or oral scripture is transmitted and kept alive. The Limbu word for song is "samlo" while dance is called as "lang". There are various types of Limbu songs such as Khyali, Sakpa, Palam, Kemba, Domke, Akma, Haakparey, Nisammang Sewa and others (Dutta, 2014). Another important part of Limbu oral traditions is the Mundhum. It is in fact considered as the very first song of the Limbus (Barman & Alone Hung Subba, 2022). Limbu dance or samlo is also of various kinds. Ke-lang, Yarakma or Ya-lang, Nahangma or war dance, Yagrangsing, Pungsok, Tongsing etc are important Limbu dances. (Dutta, 2014). Limbu community also has their own traditional musical instruments. These instruments are played in their ceremonies, both religious and non-religious. Both men and women play musical instruments. Their important folk musical instruments are Chyabrun, Binayo, Murchunga, Negra, Mung & Kingana (Sherpa, 2021). Limbu women are traditionally known as Yakthungma. Women are an important part of the folk music and dances. They sing many Limbu songs and take part in their dances. Their participation in various genres of Limbu songs is discussed below.

Palam Samlo: It is one of the popular Limbu folk songs. The word Palam comes from two words. "Pan" which means dialect or dialogue and "Lam" which means way or medium (Sherpa, 2021). It is sung widely in various occasions like weddings, festivals and other events. In addition, it is also sung while doing chores. Its most important association is with the Ya-Lang or Dhaan Naach so it is often known as the agricultural song. Since women are an important part of dhaan nach, they also sing the Palam. It has been seen that women sing

this song in social gatherings as well. In addition, Palam Samlo is also sung in a question answer format between a boy and a girl and covers topics such as human civilisation and love ((Limboo et al., 2025) Some consider it as the romantic song of the Limbus as it expresses the sentiment of love. Through Palam past and present experiences, romantic feelings and knowledge are conveyed. It is also called as the romantic song of the Limbus. Palam Samlo has become increasingly popular over the years among the Limbu community.

Khyali Samlo: While the Tamang song duel is called as Juwari, musical competition among the Limbu people takes the form of Khyali Samlo. Young boys and girls of the Limbu tribe take part in singing Khyali. The Palam Salmo is dialogic whereas Khyali is a singing competition where females compete with males. One asks questions through song and other answers through song. They use both Limbu and Nepali words while singing this song. Boys and girls also joke among themselves through the Khyali Samlo.

Tamke Samlo: Traditionally, Limbus was an agricultural community. Therefore, many of their songs and dances are related to agriculture. Tamke Samlo is one such agricultural song which originated in the past. Almost all the Limbu people are aware of the story of an old man named Kusarakpa, who started the Tamke song. According to the folk tale, Kusarakpa wanted the lazy girls and boys to work as they had been struck by famine situation, so he motivated the boys and girls to work in the paddy fields while also singing the Tamke in a competitive manner (Sherpa, 2021).

Haakparey Samlo: It is considered as the most important folk song of the Limbu tribe. It is sung in a slow manner, usually by middle aged Limbu men and women who have dhaangood knowledge about the Mundhum, the oral scripture of the tribe (Sherpa, 2021). It is sung in various ways. It can be sung in groups or as duets or even solo. It is usually sung in three different occasions-birth, marriage and funeral (Barman & Alone Hung Subba, 2022). Women also sing other type of songs such as the Swampy Samlo or lullaby and Domke Akma while doing chores.

Limbu folk songs are associated with dance performances most of the time. Limbu women like to dance various kinds of dances. They take part in the Ke lang or Chyabung Dance, Dhaan Naach or Ya lang along with men and sometimes groups consisting of only women.

Ke Lang: One of the most popular dances of the Limbus janjati is the Ke lang or the Chyabung dance. Ke means "Chyabung", which is the musical instrument of the community. It is also considered as the cultural symbol of the Limbu tribe as it is played in almost all the occasions, festivals and religious rituals. Chyabung resembles a drum. It is made of a hollowed tree trunk which makes it heavy to carry. The two openings on the side are covered with animal hides. The drum is carried by men and women follows the men and together they dance merrily making a circle. The lead is often provided by one person who instructs the other performers. "The female performers move their hand's steps that sync with the drum beat; usually of 12 beats while the male performers play the drum." Thapa Magar (2014)

Thus, Ke lang is a group dance. The dancers imitate the action of many insects, animals and other living beings during this dance (Dutta, 2014). On interviewing an old Limbu lady Smt. Lakhmati Subba, a resident of Pudung Busty Kalimpong, she talked about *Hatti* or Elephant Lang and *Kawwa* or Crow Lang used to be performed in olden days. Ke lang is mandatory in Limbu weddings and even the bride and the groom perform the dance after

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the completion of the wedding ritual. (Interview with Smt. Lakhmati Subba, 03 November 2025)

Ya Lang: Another significant dance of the Limbu men and women is the Ya-lang. In Limbu language, "Ya" means Paddy. Ya-lang or Paddy Dance is traditionally an agricultural dance which has turned into a recreational dance form in the present day. It is also known as dhaan nach. Both men and women take part in this dance. Traditionally it was performed during the harvesting season of paddy (Sherpa, 2021). Yalang being a duet performance necessitates the involvement of both male and female youths; the absence of either renders it inauthentic and therefore, not definable as a Yalang (R. K. Limbu & Nepal Sanskrit University, 2011). As discussed earlier, the dance is performed by singing the Palam song. Men and women move together in a gentle circular dance singing and saying "Ha ha ha". Today, we can see Limbu people performing the Yalang in many festivals and celebrations of their community. This dance is performed in groups.

Limbu Women and Musical Instruments:

Limbu folk musical instruments are rich and varied. These musical instruments are symbolic of the rich art of the Limbu janjati. No study of musical traditions become complete without knowing about the various musical instruments. Limbu women play few musical instruments. Nerbu Chemzong, a resident of Jorbungalow and a Limbu cultural expert said that Limbu women play the Murchunga and Binayo. (Interview with Nerbu Chemzong, 31.07.2025) While another individual named, N B Subba, a resident of Bunkulung said that women also play the Jyamta which resembles cymbal. (Interview with N B Subba, 28.07.2025) Nerbu Chemjong clarified by saying "traditionally Jyamta did not belong to the Limbus but the new generation has adopted the playing of this instrument as well." Today women can also be seen playing the Chyabrung as lighter ones made of steel are available. (Interview with Maden, 28 August 2025)

Conclusion:

Thus, the music and dance traditions of eastern Himalayan tribes like the Limbu and Tamang are incomplete without the participation of women. Women in both these communities enjoy a respectable position in their societies. This is reflected in their beliefs and traditions. The worship of Goddess Yuma by the Limbu community as their supreme deity testifies their favourable attitude towards women. Similarly, the invocation of the mother before singing songs reflects the Tamangs' respect for females. Tamang and Limbu women play important roles within their families and actively participates in decision-making processes along with men. Tamang women's performance of the whai, selo and shyaba have always been encouraged and appreciated by the members of the community. The Yalang or the paddy dance is incomplete without the involvement of Limbu women. In both these tribal communities' women retain the right to agree or to refuse to take part in singing and dancing. Group performances of women are commonly seen during festivals, weddings and New Year celebration. The musical instruments are also played by these women and contribute significantly to preserve cultural traditions. Over time, the tribal societies of Tamang and Limbu have witnessed considerable progress and development. Particularly after the attainment of tribal status in 2003 they have benefitted from various governmental schemes. Women have received many educational scholarships and opportunities and today many Tamang and Limbu women are visible in diverse professional fields. Their role in society has expanded in multiple ways.

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