



Limbus' Traditional Headmanship *Subhangi*: An Overview of Its Emergence and Disappearance (1774-1964)

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Abstract: In the case of Limbus (Indigenous peoples of Nepal), both chieftaincy and headmanship existed prior to the treaty in 1774 between Gorkha rulers and Limbu chiefs. *Subhas*, Limbu clan headmen, were subordinate to the Limbu chiefs. Later, the *Subhas* emerged as a strong institution and again, gradually became weak and disappeared in 1964. In this paper, the (re)interpretation is based primarily on the ethnography, ethnohistory, and historical documents related to Limbus. This paper explores how the Gorkha rulers once treated *Subhas* as equal to their nobles in order to control their own territory through “indirect rule,” and how the Gorkha rulers ignored the Treaty of Salt Water (“Nun-Paani Sandhi”) in 1774 in order to displace and destroy the *Subhangi* in Limbuwan (the homeland of the Limbus). The Gorkha rulers were previously unsuccessful in establishing direct rule over Limbuwan, so they gradually adopted a policy against the *Subhangi* to weaken the system. This paper finds that the surroundings were created and developed in such a way that the *Subhas* remained “faithful to salt” (*nunko sojho*) to the rulers and behaved as superior to their fellow Limbus. The *Subhas* had started to follow and favor statutory law rather than customary law. The Limbu system was being disconnected from its very base and uprooted; however, common Limbus had not felt any difference in their daily life and did not raise their voices in favor of the *Subhangi*. The

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reestablishment of the Limbu customary law is likely due to an increased trend of creating new clan organizations in Limbu society in present day.

Key words: *Limbus, Kipat, Subha, Subhangi, traditional leadership, Limbuwan*

Introduction

It is said that traditional leadership is one of the oldest institutions of government across the world. The Limbus, Indigenous people of Nepal, had practiced the institution until the 1960s. The account of ethnography, ethnohistory, and other historical materials related to the Limbus clearly reveal that the two forms—chieftaincy and headmanship—of traditional leadership were both prevalent in the territory of the Limbus. The headmanship was primarily based on clans of Limbus, which are still a fundamental unit of Limbu society. The clan members were organized under the leadership of their clan headman called the *Subha*, while the *Subhangi* was the system that governed the headmanship of the Limbus. The treaty (known as The “Nun-Pani Sandhi” or The Salt-Water Treaty) held between King Prithivi Narayan Shah of Gorkha and the Chiefs of Limbus in 1774 CE can be marked as the fall of chieftaincy and as the emergence of strong headmanship *Subhangi* in the homeland of the Limbus—popularly known as Limbuwan.

According to the Nun-Pani Treaty of 1774, the Limbu chiefs had accepted “the general suzerainty of Gorkha Dynasty” whereas the Gorkha king had made a commitment for the continuation of “the traditional rights and privileges and their land” that was enjoyed by the Limbus in the past (Regmi, 1970, p. 29). In fact, the treaty laid the foundation of “indirect rule” over Limbuwan *vis-à-vis* the Gorkha king's mission of political unification of Limbuwan using the policy of diplomacy. The indirect rule of Gorkha rulers had been implemented in Limbuwan with the support of the *Subhas*. However, the *Subhas*, as headmen and defenders of Limbus' rights and privileges, had been considered one of the major obstacles to complete the Gorkha rulers' mission to establish “direct rule” over Limbuwan. It has been taken into account that the *Subhangi* is a part of the traditional communal land ownership system called the *Kipat* system. The *Kipat* system was the most important system for the Limbus; it represents not only land but also natural resources as a whole. Both systems—*Subhangi* and *Kipat*—had a symbiotic relationship. In other words, the survival of one system was dependent on the other's existence. This paper discusses the *Subhangi* system and its significance for the continuity of the *Kipat* system.

After the Nun-Pani Sandhi in the late 18th century, *Subhas* had a political, economic, and socio-cultural role. The Gorkha rulers had considered the *Subhangi* as an obstacle to their goal of abolishing the *Kipat* system. One may assume that the *Subhangi* could have been transformed into an institution that would have worked as an economical and socio-cultural institution of Limbus. However, instead the *Subhangi* disappeared along with the abolishment of the *Kipat* land system. The Limbus did not defend the

untimely fall of the system. This situation raises many questions such as: why were Limbus reluctant to keep the system, at least as a socio-cultural organization? And, will the Limbus one day will relink current practices with native kinds of *Subhangi* for safeguarding their cultural aspects and for promoting their socio-economic status?

Subha as a Limbu Headman

Traditional leaders' authority was primarily based on customary law. The definition adhered to here is as Keulder (2010) writes: "[a] traditional leader can be defined as individuals that are appointed by members of a specific ethnically-defined community by means of the accepted customs of the day, to preside of that community" (p. 154). The existence of *Subhas* predates the treaty of 1774 as subordinate to the Limbu chiefs, but did not emerge as a "strong" political institution until later. The early forms or even terms of the Limbu traditional leadership may have had different forms than that of "*Subha*." Chemjong (2003) was of the view that the *Tumyanghang* institution (traditional institution) was in existence as a political institution of the Limbus in ancient times. Some traits as relics of *Tumyanghang* institution are still found in the socio-cultural activities in Limbus. The *Tumyanghang* institution was replaced by a new institution called "*Subha* organization."

There are two conflicting arguments among Limbus regarding the origin of the *Subha* institution. The first argues that the *Subha* institution was alien to Limbu traditions and was created by the Gorkha ruler after the political unification of their territory to serve their interests. This argument is primarily based on two logics. First, the term "*Subha*" itself does not belong to the Limbu language. Second, the Gorkha ruler created the *Subha* institution to establish indirect rule in Limbuwan. The argument is supported by the fact that the colonialist had previously used this policy to rule in Africa and Asia. Referring to African experience, Keulder (2010) is of the view that traditional headmen have been created by colonial administration or in some cases, replaced other forms of traditional leadership to assert control over to resettled communities or "acephalous communities."

The other argument regarding the origin of the *Subha* institution states that the Limbu community could not be considered an "acephalous community," and that the traditional leadership (*Subhas* as headmen and *Subhangi* as a system) evolved through the passage of time. The existence of *Subhas* predates Limbuwan's acceptance to remain under the rule of the Gorkha Kingdom (Ingram & Ingram, 2070 BS; Mabuhang, 2073 BS). Yet, Ingram and Ingram (2070 BS) and Mabuhang (2073 BS) do not put forward any views regarding the origin of the *Subha* institution. As far as the origin of *Subha* is concerned, Chemjong (2003) is of the opinion that one group of Shan people of Burma migrated to Assam. The Shan people further moved from Assam and settled in Limbuwan (Chemjong, 2003). Tun (2009) also writes, "The Shan belong to the Mongoloid stock of the Tai ethnic group who are spread over southwestern China, Hainan, Vietnam,

Laos, Thailand, Cambodia (Kampuchea), Myanmar and north India in Assam" (p. 3). The Shan people of Burma have a traditional system of leadership whose leaders are known as *Saohpa* (Tun, 2009) and *Showba* (Chemjong, 2003). According to Chemjong (2003), the term "*Subha*" is derived from the word "*Showba*." Certainly, the term *Subha* was quite frequently used in historical documents after the treaty of 1774.

It is found that many administrative terms used in Nepal were highly influenced by the *Mughal*, India's administrative and revenue system. The term "*Subah*," however, was used in Nepal as an administrative position of district chief by Gorkha rulers (Hamilton, p. 151). While the term "*Subah*" means province in Persian, the "*Subah*" status of province was given to the conquered states in Mughal, India (Wilson, 1855). Das (2016) concludes that most of the administrative positions during the period of the Sen Dynasty in the Kingdom of Makawanpur were adopted from Mughal, India, except the administrative position *Subba*, and it seemed to be influenced by the language of the hill tribes (Das, 2016). It can be noted that the Limbus are one of the hill tribes who used the word *Subba* to refer to their traditional headmen.

The Limbus' *Subhas* and the *Subhangi* system have a significant presence in the history of Limbus from 1774 to 1964, whether it is a native or alien system. The origin of the term *Subha* is unclear. Even both terms *Subba* and *Subhangi* are found to be used interchangeably in the available historical documents. While speaking Limbu, the term *Subba* seems to be native as well, as speakers prefer to use "*Subha*" and "*Subhangi*" instead of "*Subba*" and "*Subbangi*." Moreover, the etymology of the term "*Subhangi*" is also unclear. However, it is certain that the term "*Subhangi*" referred to a system that governs the *Subha* institution. The *Subha* organization emerged after the political unification of their territory into the Gorkha kingdom as a strong political, social and cultural institution of Limbus. In the beginning, the *Subhas* were the "natural leader" and "custodian and symbol of unity of Limbu society" (Bista, 1967; Caplan, 1970; Sagant, 1996). However, after the influence of Gorkha rulers, *Subhas* had played conflicting roles in terms of the Limbus concerns. On one hand, they resisted any measures undertaken against the Limbus by Gorkha rulers; on the other hand, they became a subordinating agency to the Gorkha rulers and an appropriate agency of implementing policies and laws in their land.

Limbu Chiefs: Becoming *Subhas*

The Gorkha King Prithivi Narayan Shah was in favor of using a "policy of diplomacy" to politically unify the country. He persuaded chiefs and influential people of chiefdom rather than wage war for the unification (Bajracharya, 1982). The "policy of diplomacy" as Regmi (1978) defines is:

A few principalities...incorporated into the Gorkhali Empire by diplomacy, rather than by conquest. The erstwhile ruler was permitted to retain his authority with some measure of autonomy in internal administration, subject to the general suzerainty of Kathmandu. Such a policy made it possible for the Gorkhali rulers to achieve the political unification of the country with a minimum of military and administrative effort. (p. 35)

The Gorkha King Prithivi Narayan Shah applied the policy of diplomacy to the Limbu chiefs for having achieved his goal of annexing the Limbus' homeland within the Gorkha Kingdom. If we examine the text of the treaty of 1774 (The Royal Order of 1774) meticulously, we find three things that had been enough to bring the Limbu chiefs under the general suzerainty of Gorkha Kingdom. First, the Gorkha King Prithivi Narayan Shah had used a high-grade honorific term *Rajbhara Samartha* in The Royal Order of 1774 to address the Limbu chiefs. In fact, such terms were used to address the generals, members of the court, and ministers of the Gorkha Kingdom (Shrestha, 2042 BS, p. 21). For instance, these terms were used by King Prithivi Narayan Shah to address the four *Sardars* (generals), Abhiman Sing Basnet, Parath Bhandari, Kirtising Khawas, and Bali Baniya, in a letter written in 1774. These four *Sardars* were given responsibility to bring Limbuwan under the rule of the Gorkha kingdom. This shows that the Gorkha regimes treated the Limbu chiefs as equivalent to the Gorkha generals.

Second, the Gorkha king pledged in the treaty of 1774 that the Limbus' "traditional rights and privileges and land enjoyed in the past" would be respected and continued in their area. Before the arrival of Gorkha, Limbuwan was composed of ten regions, and they had formed a federation with the Sen Dynasty of Vijayapur. These respective regions were ruled by *Hangs*, or Chiefs of Limbus. They had enjoyed and exercised their authority to the fullest extent of autonomy with the Sen Dynasty as the center in Vijayapur Kingdom. It is quite obvious that most of the Limbu chiefs, considering the terms of the treaty, did not find any difference between this Gorkha Kingdom and the Sen Dynasty of Vijayapur with respect to their status. They believed that they were recognized as chiefs and their regions as vassal principalities. Yet, some Limbu chiefs were against the agreement and waged wars against the Gorkha rulers for a long time. The chief of the Yangrok regions, Hillihang, was the last one to accept the general suzerainty of the Gorkha Kingdom in 1782 (Sangroula, 2067 BS).

Last, the Gorkha king pledged that their ancestral god would destroy their kingdom if he and his successors failed to obey the promises made for the Limbus. The king also addressed the Limbu chiefs as brothers. The Limbu chiefs had a strong belief that the king and his successors would not go against the oath taken in the name of their ancestral gods. In short, they were recognized and treated as chiefs and their respective regions as vassal principalities. Consequently, the Gorkha rulers had succeeded in achieving support from Limbu chiefs to establish indirect rule over the Limbus' territory.

The available documents, most of which are royal orders, directives, and letters

from Gorkha rulers to the Limbu chiefs, reveal that Limbu chiefs had been given the political and administrative authority to manage and control the “newly annexed territory”; as written in one letter from the Gorkha ruler sent in response to a Limbu chiefs' letter, a *Subha* mentioned as *Subha Rajdal Raya* was against the political unification and creating trouble for the country. The fate of *Subha Rajdal Raya* is unknown in the history of Limbus. In a similar way, the Limbu chiefs were given guns and other weapons and were ordered to take part in wars and safeguarding of the country. More importantly, they were granted flags and drums (*Nagara Nishan*) as a symbol of chieftaincy. The tradition of demonstration of the *Nagara Nishan* in Yangrup and Chhathar areas during the *Dhasain* Festival (the national festival) is continued to this day as living history. This clearly shows that initially they were treated as chiefs and their respective regions were principalities.

The strength and influence of Limbu chiefs depended upon the *Subhas* of the Limbu clans residing in their particular territories. Both Limbu chiefs and clan headmen were in existence prior to the unification. Only their roles had differentiated them. In fact, Limbu Indigenous peoples are still consisted of different clans. The clans for the Limbus were (and still are) the basic political, cultural and social unit. The lands were owned by the clan and lineage (Caplan, 1970; Sagant, 1996). The lands distributed among them were along the line of their respective clans. The land settled and owned is still considered as ancestral land of each clan. Each and every clan would have at least one “*Subha*.” As Caplan (1970) rightly points out, “the *Subba* is traditionally associated with a lineage” (p.133). Even the name of the village is named after the name of clan, and this shows that the name of a village is a relic of clan land ownership. For instance, *Lingkhim* is one of the clans of Limbus and they have been residing in a particular territory or village called *Lingkhim*, named after their clan. It can be correlated to say “*Lingkhim* village for the *Lingkhim* clan” and in a similar way, “Limbuwan for all Limbu clans.” The Limbuwan, homeland of the Limbus, is buttressed by ancestral land of each clan as a building block.

It is likely that a certain number of Limbu clans within a region would have one Limbu chief to represent all the clans of the region. For example, Limbu chief Aata Hang Raya, the chief of the Phedap region, would have represented the *Subhas* of all clans of the region during the time when Limbuwan was under Gorkha attack. This fact indicates that the Limbu chiefs were the “The *Subha of Subhas*” or “Main *Subha*” of Limbus in the particular territory. Similarly, Kum Raya was the Limbu chief of the *Panthar* region (Aangdembe, 2066 BS). There is little information available about their power or functions, including the system or rules on how to elect or become the “*Subha of Subhas*” of an entire region.

The historical evidence shows that slowly Gorkha rulers adopted a policy to ignore the honorific terms *Rajbhara Samartha* to address the Limbu chiefs. The five Limbu chiefs (Sri Phago, Sri Deo Raya, Sri Sering Raya, Sri Libang Shubhakant Raya and Sri Aata Hang Raya) were the last five who had been treated as chiefs until 1782. After 1782, the fates of these Limbu chiefs (other Limbus chiefs as well) are unclear as there is little

information on this matter. However, it can be assumed that they, in turn, would have been recognized only as *Subhas* of their respective territories. This assumption is supported by two facts. First, Manjit Raya, son of Limbu Chief Aatahang Raya, is considered the first Limbu who was conferred the title of *Subha* in 1780 (Tumbahangphe, 2063 BS, Ingnam & Ingnam, 2070 BS). In fact, he, on behalf of his father the Limbu chief of the Phedap region, went to the agent of the Gorkha rulers at Chainpur with *Sirtok* (tribute payable) to garner the continuity of chieftaincy (see royal orders annexed Tumbahangphe, 2063 BS). Second, Sri Deo Raya, one of the famous Limbu chiefs, was earlier addressed as a Limbu chief and behaved accordingly and later he was addressed only as *Subha* (Subba, 2016). In short, Limbu chiefs became *Subhas* without formal order from Gorkha rulers. However, it would be conjectured to say that all Limbu chiefs became *Subhas* of Limbus.

Conversion of *Kipat* Land into Raikar Land: First Attack to *Subhangi*

The *Subhangi* system had a symbiotic relationship with the *Kipat* land system. The threat to one's existence would have had a major impact on the others. However, the term "*Kipat*" itself does not belong to Limbu language, similar to the etymology of "*Subha*" discussed earlier. The term was used in the western part of Nepal with which Gorkha rulers were familiar. The Limbus' term regarding the communally owned land was *Tangsing Khoksing*, which was replaced with the term *Kipat* by the imposition of Gorkha rulers. As Regmi (1978) defines, "Land is held on a tribal, village, kindred or family Land, and individuals have definite rights in this land by virtue of their membership in the relevant social unit" (p. 29).

Under the *Kipat* system, land belongs to Limbu clans and lineages under customary laws rather than to the state under statutory law. In other words, *Kipat* land was owned communally and managed under the customary law and traditionally tax free, whereas Raikar land was owned and regulated by the state under statutory law. *Kipat* was a form of communal land ownership, under which each person as a member of the clan had a particular piece of land (Caplan, 1970; Sagant, 1996; Shrestha, 2042 BS; Sangroula, 2067 BS). Later, Gorkha rulers used this provision of individual land holding extensively to create "new" *Subhas* against the will of existing *Subhas* by converting *Kipat* land holdings into *Raikar* land holdings (to be discussed later). *Subhas*, as headmen of clans, had a responsibility to distribute communally owned lands among the individuals of clans. The *Subhas* were also held responsible to monitor whether the land allocated was properly cultivated or not. To receive a piece of land for cultivation, the members must have gone to the *Subha* with gifts. Such authority of *Subhas* was based on customary law. Communally owned land was against the opposing concept of a "centralized system of authority" of Gorkha rulers. Their primary aim was to convert the communally owned land (*Kipat* land) into state owned land (*Raikar* land) by applying

various policies. These policies, such as encouraging the non-Limbus to settle in Limbuwan, imposition of various tax systems, creation of new *Subhas*, surrendering *Kipat* land for the *Hulak* system (postal system), and allocation of land for the *Jangi Paltan* (army) were applied by Gorkha rulers (Regmi, 1978; Caplan, 1970; Sagant, 1996; Shrestha, 2042 BS; Limbu, 2001; Sangroula, 2067 BS). As a result of these policies, a significant amount of *Kipat* land was converted into *Raikar* land holdings. However, *Subhas* as Limbu headmen were in favor of safeguarding *Kipat* land holdings whereas the government was forcing and trying to increase *Raikar* land holdings. Ironically, the Gorkha rulers appointed the *Subhas* as contractors of revenue collection and later as tax collectors.

Subhas as Tax Collector Talukdars

The Gorkha rulers had a clear mission to establish centralized or direct rule over Limbuwan. At that time, land was the most important source of revenue. The mode of collection of tax revenues determined whether the territory was governed under the direct or indirect rule. The Gorkha rulers did not introduce a taxation system to Limbuwan until 1820. However, the *Bhedbhara* tax of 0.06 Rupees and the *Saune Fagu* tax of 0.25 Rupees per homestead were paid to the government by Limbu *Kipat* land holders. In fact, *Bhedbhara* and *Saune Fagu* were festive occasions where the *Subhas* had to give gifts or cash to the government (Sangant, 1978). It is unclear whether the *Subhas* would have collected such gifts from the members of their jurisdiction or territories, or if they paid it themselves. This kind of relation between the Gorkha rulers and *Subhas* in terms of taxation continued until the introduction of new system called *Thekthiti* in 1820.

It is a well-known fact that the Limbu-owned *Kipat* land was tax free before and after the political unification in 1820. During the period from 1820-27, the Gorkha rulers brought a taxation system called *Thekthiti*. The introduction of *Thekthiti* was the first attempt to violate the treaty of 1774. It was an indirect attack to internal autonomy of the Limbus. As defined by Regmi (1978), "Under the *Thekthiti* system, the village community as a whole, represented by the *Mukhiya* (local headman), not the *Mukhiya* in his individual capacity, was held liable for the full payment of the revenue" (p. 72). The system as such was modified and imposed on the Limbus' traditional land system. Limbus first resisted the efforts of imposition of such a system, but later it was accepted.

In regard to tax collection, *Subhas* were considered equal to the *Mukhiya* (village headman) of Western Nepal. However, in practice the *Subhas* were dealt with differently under the *Thekthiti* system. The differences between them can be seen in two aspects. First, *Mukhiya* received an amount of Rs. 2.50 per every Rs. 102.50 fixed tax as a commission (tax was fixed during the revenue settlement) whereas *Subhas* were not entitled to any such commission. Moreover, *Mukhiya* could keep the money that was collected more than that of the fixed tax. Second, the *Mukhiya* had been privileged to tax

remission in the course of the next revenue settlement on land on the basis of uncultivation and depopulation of homesteads under his jurisdiction, while *Subhas* were deprived of such facilities (Regmi, 1978 p. 561). This is when the *Subhas* became Limbu *Talukdar*, contractors of revenue collection under the *Thekthiti* taxation system, to collect tax from homesteads of communal land holdings as well as tax on *Raikar* land holdings. Under the *Thekthiti* taxation system, a *Subha*, on behalf of the community, had to raise a fixed amount of revenue from *Kipat* land holders and deposit it to the government during the revenue settlement. The revenue was fixed on the basis of homesteads rather than land holdings in *Kipat* land, while tax was collected on the basis of land holdings from *Raikar* land holders. *Subhas* as tax collectors had the responsibility to collect revenue from homesteads and land holdings.

The (re)settlement policy for non-Limbus, one of the key policies implemented to convert the *Kipat* land into *Raikar* land, was imposed on the *Subhas*. The policy, widely referred to as *Rasti Chalaune* or *Basti Basaune* (resettlement policy) in historical documents, was being forcibly implemented in Limbuwan through *Subhas*. Initially, the *Subhas* were reluctant to implement the policy, or in some places some historical documents showed that the *Subhas* disobeyed the policy, but the government gave them the choice to either increase the amount of the contract of *Thekka Thiti* (land tax) or implement the (re)settlement policy. They preferred the resettlement policy since there was plenty of arable land in their territory. One would assume that *Subhas* might have benefitted from this policy in the beginning, but later it had profound negative impact to the *Subhangi* since the population of non-Limbus increased gradually until they outnumbered the population of Limbus.

Creation of New *Subhas* and *Tharis*: A Major Blow to *Subhangi*

Right after the accomplishment of the *Thekthiti* system in Limbuwan, Gorkha rulers implemented a more controversial policy: appointment of new *Subhas* during the years 1827-1834. The policy seems to be associated or to be a part of the modified *Thekthiti* system. The motive of the Gorkha rulers was to increase the amount of *Raikar* land holdings so that it would increase revenue. According to the policy, a Limbu could obtain the title of "*Subha*" by surrendering Rs. 52.00 along with converting an area of *Kipat* land that produced 60 *Muris* (traditional measurement) of grain into *Raikar* land. In addition, the policy created a hierarchical division within the *Subhangi*. Another title called *Rai* could be obtained from the government just by submitting Rs 26.00 and converting a *Kipat* land that produced 30 *Muris* of grain (Caplan, 1970; Ingnam and Ingnam, 2073 BS, Regmi, 1978; Sagant, 1996; Sangroula, 2067; Shrestha, 2042 BS). The existing *Subhas* were against this policy of government. According to Regmi (1978), *Subhas* complained to the government, stating "Our kinsmen and relatives separated from us and became new *Subbas* and *Rais*. Several disputes thus arise in the land. If this state of affairs

continues, we shall have to leave for Tibet or India" (as referred to in *Sankarman Rajbansi*, a collection of ancient documents). The government did not respond to the complaint. As a result, the policy not only exacerbated the conversion of *Kipat* land holding into *Raikar* land holding, but also created conflict between the existing (traditional) *Subhas* and new *Subhas*.

The decrease of *Kipat* land holdings and increase in *Raikar* land holdings is directly proportional to the increase in the number of *Subhas*. The traditional *Subhas* tried to resist the policy by discouraging the new *Subhas*. Broadly speaking, the new *Subhas* were called the derogatory and humiliating name of *Tiruwa* (gained title by payment) *Subha* since the title of *Subha* was granted to them by payment. More importantly, they were not recognized or treated as *Subhas* nor were they given the privileges of *Subhas*. However, their complaints against the traditional *Subhas* were responded to quickly. The government issued a decree ordering the traditional *Subhas* that all revenues and tax collection functions should be shared with new *Subhas* (Regmi, 1978). It is, indeed, natural that the new *Subhas* were more loyal toward the government, and they had undertaken action against the Limbus' interest just for proving their allegiance to the rulers.

According to Ingnam and Ingnam (2073 BS), prior to the introduction of such policy, there were only 15 recognized *Subhas* in the *Terhthum* district. There were competitions among the Limbus to become *Subhas*. The number of *Subhas* increased so significantly that their numbers reached 804 *Subhas* by the end of the year 1940 in the *Terhthum* district alone. One estimate shows that there were 8000 *Subhas* in Limbuwan (Ingnam & Ingnam, 2073). In a similar way, the government created another title called *Thari* that further weakened the power and authority of *Subhas*.

The number of non-Limbus increased significantly in Limbuwan as result of the Gorkha rulers' migration policy as well as the amount of land under *Raikar* holding. With claim to represent non-Limbus and to manage the *Raikar* land holding, a new functionary called *Thari* was introduced in *Subhangi* in 1884 BS. In fact, *Thari* existed in the western part of Nepal as a village headman and an important member of *Amal* (justice system). *Thari* were to work as a subordinate to *Subhas*. They had the function to collect taxes from non-Limbus residing in *Raikar* land holdings under the jurisdiction of a *Subha*, and they were to deposit the amount to the *Subhas*.

A *Subha* could appoint a *Thari* with the permission of the government. It is said that before becoming a *Thari*, a *Subha* sought support from non-Limbus (most of them were *Bahun-Chhetri*) to accompany him while he went to the tax office to hand over taxes collected from his jurisdiction. Owing to their similar language and culture, their accompaniment was found to be effective. The subordinate role was so natural that it led to introduce a new functionary. The existing system of the *Thari* was prevalent in the west and was borrowed and inculcated into the *Subhangi* system. The *Thari* was, as said by Caplan, 1970, the "*Raikar* headman" (p. 143) who was appointed by the government with

consultation of *Subhas*. One non-Limbu would have 10 households of non-Limbus under his area to become a *Thari*. His primary duty was to collect taxes from these households and give it to the *Subha*. The *Tharis* had played three roles to gradually weaken *Subhangi*. First, the government appointed the *Thari* directly without consultation of *Subhas*. This act of government was against the earlier policy. Second, they had started to deposit taxes collected from non-Limbus directly to the tax office instead of going through *Subhas*. Last, they helped the government to introduce new policies that were useful for the speedy conversion of *Kipat* land holding into *Raikar* land holding.

Amal Justice System: A Replacement of the Traditional Justice System

The *Subhas* also had the duty to provide justice to the members of their community on the basis of customary law. Regmi (1978) writes, "According to traditional system of the Limbus in Pallo-Kirat, Subbas, Rais, and Tiruwa Subbas (all from present Limbuwan, not Khambus or Rais) enjoy judicial authority in the area under their jurisdiction" (p. 570). There seems to be a native name and a traditional way of sanctioning justice based on their own customary law. Amrita Thebe has undertaken an in-depth study on Limbus' traditional justice system. She referred to the system as the "*Tumyanghang* Judiciary System" and listed some areas, powers, and functions as well (Thebe, 2070 BS). However, Gorkha rulers ideologically and politically distorted and modified this traditional justice system for their own purposes and convenience and replaced the native name with the *Amal* justice system.

The term "*Amal*" has Persian origins, a language which was prevalent in the western part of the country that was then borrowed by, imposed on, and infused in Limbus' traditional justice system. Following the imposition, the *Subha* as a head of *Amal* became an "*Amali*." The arguments that the term "*Amal*" was borrowed and was imposed to Limbus are supported by the fact that the words used to denote the functionaries "court of *Subhas*" (Caplan, 1970) did not belong to Limbus. The "court of *Subhas*" consisted of four functionaries: Rai, Karta, Karbari, and Budhouli and they had been nominated by a *Subha* as his subordinates (see Caplan, 1970; Regmi, 1978; Sangroula, 2067 BS; Shrestha, 2042 BS). In fact, these are not native Limbu words. It is noted that even the equivalent terms used to describe their functions, with the exception of "*Budhouli*," are not found in Limbu.

An *Amali* of Limbus had similar power and authority in his jurisdiction as practiced by *Amali* of the Chainpur district. The territory of Limbuwan was divided into two districts: Morang and Chainpur. The Chainpur district was frequently referred to in historical documents as *Amal* with *Amali* as its chief. Gorkha rulers had issued a decree in 1880 to confirm the traditional authority of *Subhangi*. It can be said that the decree formally replaced the native name of the traditional judicial system of the Limbus. According to the confirmation, all other crimes, except the crimes of serious nature which were collectively

known as *Panchkhat* (five major crimes), were kept under the jurisdiction of *Amali*. The *Panchkhat* (five major crimes) included offenses punishable by death, shaving of the head, branding with degradation of caste and loss of caste, or life imprisonment. But the situation did not remain the same. The curtailing of *Subhas*' authority was inevitable.

The traditional authority of *Amali* as confirmed earlier was curtailed significantly by introducing another policy. According to the new policy, the cases which involved amounts less than Rs. 100.00 and punishment with fines not exceeding Rs. 25.00 were kept under the jurisdiction of the *Subhas* (Regmi, 1978; Shrestha, 2042 BS; Sangroula, 2067 BS). All other cases were under the jurisdiction of the regional court. Most of the *Subhas* had been humiliated, particularly in cases where non-Limbus had been involved as one part of the issue to be resolved. *Subhas* were not found to be fluent in Nepali. In addition, they were illiterate, and *Amal* (the court of *Subhas*) had to use Khas Nepali as a language medium. Owing to the question of literacy and fluency of Nepali, *Subhas*' authority as *Amali* was challenged, and they were considered inefficient by non-Limbus, especially by the ethnic groups Bahun and Chhetri. They put forward their demand to the government that their cases should be adjudicated only in the regional court (Regmi, 1978).

Another more controversial policy was introduced in 1926 to replace the *Amal* with the *Panchayat* system at village level as a government institution. The Limbus had considered this policy as a threat to the *Amal* and therefore their traditional authority. Regmi (1978) points out, "Orders were subsequently promulgated to but the Limbus were opposed to them since village Panchayat in Pallo-Kirat would not be consistent with the traditional judicial authority of the Limbus" (p. 572). The Limbus opposed it for a long time and succeeded in repelling its implementation in their territory. In addition, the socio-economic changes were taking place in Limbuwan and elsewhere. The internal dynamics in terms of socio-economic changes had been taking place in Limbu society. The *Tharis* that once worked as subordinate to *Subhas* had emerged as leaders in villages. They felt culturally superior to Limbus and now due to government policy they became more economically and politically powerful than *Subhas*. As a result, they challenged the authority of *Subhas* in many cases in Limbuwan. Apart from the *Tharis*, some Limbus who got an opportunity to work in the Gorkha army had a potential to become a threat to *Subhas*' authority and were considered to be so. They had not only earned money and achieved status in the Gorkha army, but also acquired some knowledge through their interaction with outsiders during their work in the army. With the money, status, and knowledge, an affluent class within Limbu community was formed that had gradually reduced, to some extent, the power and influence of *Subhas* in the settlement (Caplan, 1970; Sagant, 1998).

Cultural and Social Roles of *Subhas*

The political role of *Subhas* was so significant that the socio-cultural roles and functions were overshadowed, and it was not paid adequate attention in any study. It seems the socio-cultural role of *Subhas* was undermined in the light of their political role. In fact, they were the Clan Headmen and the symbol of unity of their respective clans. The clan members' sense of security and of pride was dependent on the fame of their *Subha*. Keeping all these facts in mind, it can be assumed that their socioeconomic and cultural role would have been significant in Limbu society. Some information in this regard is found even after the disappearance of the *Subhangi* system.

Subhas' role as a guardian of their clans was prevalent in Limbu society. For instance, in the Limbu marriage system, a gift known as "*Subha Cha*" is still allocated in the name of the *Subha*. This act has a symbolic value that signifies the importance of their headman in their life. This ritual helps to keep a record of the incoming and outgoing of a bride. Jone and Jons (1976) state, "Marriages were arranged between patrilineal kin groups headed by a chief who was paid to recognize the legality of the union" (p. 47). In other rituals, the *Subhas'* presence in a *Mellungphu?ma* ritual as witness is essential.

The intriguing question to answer is what the factors were that the *Subhangi* could not change as a socio-cultural organization. One may argue with the example of the *Majhi* organization. The *Manjhi* organization, traditional leadership of Santhal, in Bengal, underwent a similar situation as the *Subhangi*, and once existed as a political organization, but was transformed into a socio-cultural body (Ali, 1998). The dilemma of *Subhas* was one of the major factors that have inhibited the *Subhangi* to be transformed into socio-cultural organization.

Dilemmas of *Subhas*: Remaining "Faithful to Salt" and Becoming Village Headman

The dilemmas of *Subhas* was revealed in two ways. One way it was revealed was the fact that the *Subhas* were in a state of confusion with respect to loyalties, whether they should remain faithful to their own people or to the Gorkha rulers. This dilemma can be considered as one of the major weaknesses of *Subhas* and a contributing factor to their disappearance. The frequently used phrase "Remain Faithful to Salt" in the royal orders and letters from the Gorkha rulers to the *Subhas* had profound impact on the *Subhas*. As Mabutla (nd) points out about headmen that "... their existence is deeply rooted in the culture of their people. They are much more closely associated with culture or the tradition of their people." Further, he opines that the traditional leadership authority comes from the wishes which in harmony with the people that the concept is deep rooted into them (Mabult, nd). But the *Subhas'* loyalties had been shifted from their clans to the Gorkha rulers. However, the "traditional *Subha*" had an obligation and duty to protect their people and tried their best to do so as compared to *Tiruwa Subha*.

In fact, the “*Tiruwa Subhas*” were created by Gorkha rulers as a short-term objective to increase *Raikar* landholding. It is a well-known fact that the long-term goal of the Gorkha rulers was to weaken the *Subhangi* system, and that would have been considered an obstacle to establish direct rule over Limbuwan. The *Tiruwa Subhas* were created and, therefore, their allegiance was much more to the state rather than their clan members. However, because of the dilemma of *Subhas*, both *Subhas* were used to implement government policies in the Limbus settlements (Caplan, 1970). The second dilemma is the fact that *Subhas* of Limbus clan headmen became village headmen. Limbu settlements became more and more multiethnic due to the (re)settlement policy of the government. The change in social composition led them to become village headmen instead of clan headmen. As being *Amali* of the village, he had to dispense justice to all of the people residing in his jurisdiction, but he was found in a peculiar position, since the non-Limbus, especially Bahun-Chhetri, urged *Amali* to use statutory law; whereas, Limbus were in favor of being provided justice on the basis of customary law. This context, ultimately, made *Amali* incapable and their works ineffective and consequently, they were forced to think that the *Subhas* as village headmen became irrelevant and ineffective.

More importantly, the *Subhas*, including Limbus as a whole, were considering Bahun-Chhetri's culture as superior to their Limbu culture. In the beginning, they had strived to protect and promote their customary law as distinctly as possible. They were ready to pay Rs 1.00 per household as “*Niti ka*” (to pay tax for the continuation of customary law) just for the preservation of their customary law. Gradually, they started viewing Bahun-Chhetri's culture superior because, as opined by Limbu (2017), the Limbus have been paracolnised for centuries and their epistemology and knowledge has been undermined. Limbu (2017) states, "...Yakthung knowledge and/or Yakthung epistemology needs to be de-naturalized; they need to be de-colonized in multiple fields and in multiple ways" (p. 572).

“New” Clan Organization: Linking the Limbus in the Past

Many people may raise their eyebrows at the idea of the resilience of the *Subhangi* system. They believe resilience to be unlikely in the case of *Subhangi*. The *Subhangi* system was distorted, destroyed, and uprooted from its very foundation. As we discussed, the basic foundation of the *Subhangi* rested on the clan organizations in the past. The concept of the clan in Limbus' context is complex and there is a need to explore more on the Limbus' clan system relating it to *Yakthung* epistemology. The system seems to be complex in the sense that there are a large number of clans of Limbus and some clans have totems or totem equivalents, but most of the clans do not have totems.

Limbus are consisted of more than 300 clans and some are still yet to be listed. Every clan of Limbus must have *Yoke* or *Yak* (literally translated as fort) rather than having the totem of clans of elsewhere, and Limbus have considered *Yoke* as a place of origin of their clan (Laoti, 2062 BS; Tumbahang, 2068 BS; Shrestha, 2042 BS). The concept of *Yoke* in Limbu culture symbolizes that they are the descendants of the first settlers of the land. The *Yoke* of a clan signifies that the place or land where the *Yoke* is found is their ancestral land and through this concept they would be connected to not only the land but also to their ancestors. After the 1990s, clan members started to unite forming clan organizations.

I use the term “new” only to differentiate currently formed clan organizations with the traditional clan organizations. There is an increased trend in Limbus establishing clan organizations. There are more than 50 clan organizations of Limbus (out of 300 clans) that have already been established with the purpose to prepare and publish genealogy, and to support clan members during times of difficulties. Some of them have succeeded in publishing their genealogy and felt that it helps to strengthen and embolden their unity as clan members. There is strong support from clan members, but challenges lie ahead for new clan organizations.

The challenges of new clan organizations can be dealt with in two aspects: settlement and migration of clan members and knowledge of forming organizations. As we know, most of the clan members have migrated from their native place to the other places in Nepal and beyond. This setting shows that the clan organization would be no more limited to certain areas of settlement. Next, the knowledge of forming organizations should be based on Limbus’ own culture rather than on alien culture, and also link to their own epistemology which is buried under the debris of adopting alien culture and lately influenced by the new concept of organization. The success of new clan organizations to become a native and effective socio-cultural organization depends on how much it will be able to link with the concept of organization existed prior to the contact of emigrants in their territory. No doubt, the new clan organization would strengthen the unity among the clan members. The unity of clansmen should be the foundation for the unity of all Limbus.

Conclusion

Subhas as Limbu headmen and *Subhangi* as a traditional headmanship system existed prior to the political unification of Limbuwan under the Gorkha Kingdom, but emerged as a strong political and socio-cultural organization of the Limbus after the treaty of 1774 and prevailed as such for almost 200 years (1774 -1964). The Limbu chiefs, who were held responsible for signing the treaty, were almost forgotten in later years and some of them were converted or even reduced from the Limbu chiefs to *Subhas*. The *Subha* was, in fact, clan headman of Limbus. The number of *Subhas* for a particular clan might have had more than one *Subha*, it was clearly based on their population. The clan members

residing in their *Kipat* land, more precisely to be called their ancestral land, was the *Subha's* jurisdiction where he, along with elders of his clan, had received a sole responsibility and authority to implement and practice customary law. The Gorkha ruler had applied a migration policy "*Rasti Basaune, Basti Basaune*" in Limbuwan area. Because of the policy, many non-Limbus started to settle in Limbuwan. What was once clan settlement was then converted into multiethnic society; as a result, Limbu clan headmen became village headmen. It is obvious that they were neither able to follow the customary law of Limbus nor willing to adopt the statutory law set by the government. *Subhas* had strived to maintain their position and authority for 200 years despite being humiliated and discouraged and suffered from intrigues of rulers. All these had a cumulative impact to their existence. Therefore, they were uprooted from their culture and tradition and detached themselves from the wishes of their brothers and sisters, resulting in disappearance. There is an increasing trend to establish "new" clan organizations that will work to relink Limbus to their past.

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