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# An Anthropological Venture into the Rai Community of Darjeeling Hills, West Bengal, India

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**Abstract:** *The Khambu Rais or Rais are one of the most ancient indigenous ethnolinguistic groups of Nepal, the Indian State of Sikkim and Darjeeling Hills. They were Rai meaning king (Rai means King in old Khas kura). Once someone was recognized as a ruler, Hindus awarded them the title Rai. The title of Rai instead khambu kirant people who used to live in wallo kirant and majh kirant for particular reason. The Rais of Darjeeling Hills are distributed mainly in Algarh, Songche and Laba in the district of Darjeeling and in the adjoining district of Jalpaiguri of West Bengal. They inhabit in the hilly terrain region with cold climate and medium to heavy rainfall during rainy season. Rais are nature worshippers. They believe in spirits who live in nature and natural surroundings and may be benevolent or malevolent for their life and livelihood. Their healing system rests on traditional knowledge of identification of disease and the process of cure and indigenous medicine through their traditional priests.*

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**Keywords:** Darjeeling Hill, Ethnic History, Rai Community, Economy, Religion, Cultural Tradition, Art and Craft

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## Introduction

Darjeeling as we know of it today, tucked away in the eastern region of the Himalayas takes its name from 'Dorje-ling' or the land of the thunderbolt. It is one of the districts of West Bengal, comprising of four sub-divisions of Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Kurseong hills and the Siliguri Terai. Darjeeling is located between 27° 16' 05" and 26° 27' 10" North latitude and 88° 53' 00" and 87° 59' 30" East Longitude. It runs up between Nepal and Bhutan and stretches from the plains of Bengal in the South to the state of Sikkim in the North. Its altitude ranges from 300 to 12000 feet above sea level.<sup>1</sup> In order to understand the history of Darjeeling, it is imperative to look into the history of Nepal and Sikkim as well. Nepal as we know it today, in fact in the olden days, was geographically divided into Western Nepal, Kathmandu Valley and Eastern Nepal. The rich Kathmandu Valley was inhabited by the Newars. However, the Licchavis, Karnatakas and Mallas brought the Valley under their control. Later in the 18th Century, the Valley was divided into Kathmandu, Bhaktapur and Patan. The Eastern Hills were inhabited by the Kiratas, which consisted of the three main communities, Limbus, Rais and Yakkas. In the Western Hills, where the Nepali- Pahari culture was dominant, Gorkha was one of the

important states. It was after the fall of the Mallas in the 14th Century, that this kingdom became prominent. Prithivi Narayan Shah, born in 1723 was the son of Raja Narbhupal Singh. He became the King of Gorkha in 1742 and he soon became determined to re-organize the whole of Nepal under one banner. He is remembered for his efforts to unite the people with a new Nepali consciousness and is also known as the founding father of the Nepali kingdom. "It was mainly because of his efforts that hindered British trade with Tibet, as his conquests cut off the main route to Lhasa from India through the Kathmandu Valley." Various political thinkers also lay down that the *raison d'être* for the conquest of Prithivi Narayan Shah and his "secession was personal ambition and dynastic supremacy". But it is generally accepted that it was him who infused a feeling of nationalism into the minds and hearts of the Nepalese. It was during the years 1803-1809, that full western Sikkim in the east, long strip of the Terai, Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh in the south, Garhwal and other hill principalities further to the west were conquered.

The Gorkha encroachment upon the low-lying lands within the British dominion in India brought a conflict between Nepal and the East India Company. It was mainly to expand their territories that the Nepal rulers encouraged migration to these areas. It was during these times that the Britishers had set foot in the Himalayas. Conflicts were already there between Nepal and Sikkim and it was mainly because of some disagreement with the Gorkhas, that the British had declared war with them. The Anglo-Gorkha Wars were fought between 1814-16. The Gorkhas proved their prowess and fighting capacities in the 1st Anglo-Gorkha War but unfortunately, they were defeated in the 2nd War under General Ochterlony. Soon the Treaty of Segauli was signed and it was decided that the area conquered from Sikkim by Nepal was to be given to the East India Company. Immediately after this, in 1817, the Treaty of Titalia was signed, under which the whole area between Mechi and Teesta was given to the Raja of Sikkim and his sovereignty granted by the Company. After ten years again, there was a dispute between Nepal and Sikkim. Captain Lloyd and J.W. Grant were asked to settle the dispute. Penetrating the hills, they came across the old Gorkha station called Darjeeling. It was Captain Lloyd who initiated the idea that Darjeeling could be developed as a sanitarium for the weary and sick British soldiers. Apart from this, it would be the centre, which would engross all the trade of the country and as a position of great strategic importance commanding the entrance into Nepal and Bhutan.

Rai, also refer themselves as Khambu or Khambas traces their migration from Tibet in some remote past. They identify themselves with the Kirati group or the Kirat confederation that includes the communities Limbu, Sunuwar, Yakkha Dhimal, Koche, Meche, and Hayu. According to one version Kirats migrated from east via north Burma and Assam along the mid-hills (lower mountains) with their pigs in ancient times. According to Prof. Suniti Kumar Chatterji (linguist and kiratologist) and other prominent linguists, Rai, Limbu, and Dhimal languages are Pronominalised (Austrian/Kol influence) strongly indicating earliest migratory wave of these peoples compared to other Tibeto-Burmans whose languages are non-pronominalised. The

percentage of Khambu Rai in Darjeeling district based on 2001 census is 11.5 that is 1,92,672 which is the highest among all ethnic group of the district and according to 2011 census, the population of Rai community is 2,50,000 in Darjeeling District. But as per the census of 1931, they were categorized into Jimdar, Khambu and Rai. In physical characteristics they show Mongoloid racial strain. The Khambu Rais are mountain people residing in the foothills of the Himalayas. They are an ancient race, once spread across the Himalayas, cultivating lands, creating villages, warring, hunting, living in the lap of nature and accomplishing wonders. They have found mention in epics like the Ramayana, Mahabharata and also the Yajur Veda. Khambus are nature worshippers, calling the sky, their father...and the earth, their mother. The Rais' have own language and are also well conversant in Nepali, the Lingua Franca of the area.

### **Ethnic History of Darjeeling**

Darjeeling District, comprising of Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Kurseong Hills and the Siliguri plains was not the same Darjeeling we know today. When a greater part of Darjeeling Sadar was ceded to British India by Sikkim in 1835, it just comprised 357.4sq.km. "It was wholly covered by forests and it has been said that there were not even twenty resident families or households in the area.". The Darjeeling District today has an area of 1,164sq miles. The growth and development of Darjeeling took a massive turn with the appointment of Dr. A Campbell as Superintendent of the area in 1839. The credit of starting the tea industry in Darjeeling goes to Campbell among others. The establishment of the first tea plantations on a commercial basis was in 1856 in Aloori and Lebong. By 1866, there were about 39 gardens in the region. The clearing of the forests, opening out of land to people, the introduction and establishment of machinery, the establishment of the tea industry, agriculture all required more labour. The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway was also opened in Darjeeling in 1881. All these stimulated the growth of Darjeeling population. If we see the population of Darjeeling today, it has increased steadily.

The Darjeeling Hills consist of a wide variety of people belonging to different ethnic groups, languages, religions and customs. Here we have the Lepchas, Bhutias, Nepalis, plainsmen, consisting of Bengalis, Biharis and Marwaris. It has been rightly described as the "Babel of tribes and nations". Darjeeling offers a perfect example of the growth of population because of immigration from outside. Each community today wants to prove that they are the real indigenous people of the area. This is so because it is the 'sons of the soil' who are going to get access to the best jobs. Not only this, ethnicity also involves competition for the resources of a certain territory. To the claims of ethnicity is "closely linked to the question of equal rights and opportunities in politics, economy and society". It is also at such times that identity comes to play an important role. Identity can be defined as consciousness of any group of people that in reality is the outcome of the idea of common origin in order to achieve the privileges and opportunities for realizing the country's resources. Moreover the 'we' feeling of a particular group or groups may remain dormant until they come in contact with another group. Ethnicity

thus involves resource competition so as to promote 'us' and deny 'them'. "Migration creates an awareness or consciousness of ethnic identities."

When the British were trying to increase their influence on the North Eastern parts of the country, in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, they found out that the Nepalis were a very hardworking and laborious working force. This was an advantage to the British as the Lepchas were thought to be lazy and Bhutias were only interested in trade. Darjeeling had been made into a sanitarium for the weary British soldiers. But one of the most important factors for the large inflow of the Nepalis was the establishment of the tea industry which required a large labour force. Construction of roads and railways all demanded workers. The first tea plantation was established in 1856 and by 1866 there were 39 tea gardens. According to the Census of 1901, tea garden labourers and their dependents constituted 2/3rd of the total population in the District. In 1931, they formed 42.25%. In the three sub-divisions, they formed 31.52% of the total population.

Agriculture also encouraged immigration. If we see the sub-divisions of Darjeeling District, Kalimpong has the highest percentage of the total population involved in agriculture. On an average, for every 100 cultivators, there are 26 agricultural labourers. Both agriculture and tea plantations greatly increased the population of the area, also improving the prospects of trade and commerce. Besides these, there were other factors also which led to the flow of the Nepalis. Nepalis in Nepal had heard stories from their brothers in Munger (India), that money grew in tea bushes. Therefore, many thronged in millions. Moreover, the social, economic and political conditions in British India was much better when compared to Nepal. Here, evils like slavery, caste rigours and customs like Sati were being abolished or reformed. But in Nepal, such evil systems were still prevailing. Moreover, the caste system had become very rigid in Nepal. Even tribes like Kiratas were assigned to the status of Sudras and were subject to the Brahmin- Chettri tyranny. Strict rules of caste had to be followed otherwise they would be socially ostracized.

Increase in population in Nepal Hills brought about pressure on land, which further led to their movement to Darjeeling and Sikkim, where land was plenty at that time. Another factor was the recruitment of the Nepalis into the British Indian Army, which had already started after the Anglo- Gorkha War of 1814-16. Greatly impressed by the fighting skills of the Gorkhas, (Nepalis were called Gorkhas irrespective of the fact whether they came from Gorkha or not), the 1<sup>st</sup> Gorkha Rifles was soon formed after the Anglo - Gorkha War. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Nusuree and Sirmoor Battalion were also formed subsequently. There were also the mercenary soldiers who settled in these areas after retirement. "Only about one third of the 11,000 Gorkhas discharged from the British and Indian armies after the 151 World War opted to return to Nepal." The term Nepali has been used but Nepali is a heterogeneous community having within it various sub-communities, having their own traditions, origins, customs and languages. The term 'Nepali' represents a cultural linguistic denomination. If we see the socio-cultural fabric of the Nepali society, we can divide them as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Socio-cultural Fabric of the Nepali Society**

<b>Community</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Language</b>
Bahun	Caucasoid	Indo-Aryan
Thakuri	Caucasoid	Indo-Aryan
Chettri	Caucasoid	Indo-Aryan
Kami	Caucasoid	Indo-Aryan
Damai	Caucasoid	Indo-Aryan
Sarki	Caucasoid	Indo-Aryan
Newar	Mongoloid	Tibeto- Burman
Tamang	Mongoloid	Tibeto- Burman
Sherpa	Mongoloid	Tibeto- Burman
Yolmo	Mongoloid	Tibeto- Burman
Limbu	Mongoloid	Tibeto- Burman
Rai	Mongoloid	Tibeto- Burman
Yakha	Mongoloid	Tibeto- Burman
Magar	Mongoloid	Tibeto- Burman
Guruna	Mongoloid	Tibeto- Burman

The political history of Darjeeling, Sikkim and Nepal are interlinked with each other. We cannot study Darjeeling's history without Nepal's history. In fact it was the coming of the lichchavis, (who were of Indo-Aryan origin and Hindu by religion), in around the 14<sup>th</sup> Century from the North Western parts of India, which helped to bring the domination of the Brahmins over the Mongoloid and other tribes who were already there in Nepal. Prithivi Narayan Shah had ascended the Gorkha throne in 1743 and from the beginning he wanted to bring about the unification of Nepal, which was divided into various states having different tribes and groups. He had his eyes on the Kathmandu Valley which was rich in architecture, crafts and also had good trade links with Tibet. It was only after twenty-five years of his reign, that he was finally successful in reaching the Valley. The Kathmandu Valley was inhabited by the Newars. Among them are 26 Castes, each having a hereditary occupation from Brahmins to untouchables. Thus Jyapu Newar (farmers) could claim to be Shrestas (Brahmin Caste). But with the Gorkha conquests, the Newars just became a 'jat' or caste within the emerging Nepali society. There was the infiltration of the Brahmin and Chettri everywhere in Nepal except in the high hills. Wherever they settled, even in the areas of other castes, Nepali became the lingua franca. Within two or three generations, Newar language lost its importance and it was never adopted as the second language of any other ethnic group. Racially, the Bahuns, Thakuris and Chettris are Caucasoid and have only Nepali as their main language, which is an Indo-Aryan language.

The Newars, Tamangs, Sherpas and others are Mongoloid and have their own Tibeto-Burman languages. In their caste system, there was the absence of Vaishyas and Sudras. There were the occupational castes like the Kamis (iron smiths), Damais (tailors) and Sarkis (cobblers or leather workers) who were regarded as outcastes. They too are Indo-

Aryan racially and have Nepali as their mother tongue. The Mangars and Gurungs were initially treated as the Kshatriyas and had some common titles. (E.g. Thapa can either be a Chettri or Mangar). But later they were relegated to the status of Sudras. In fact the entire Nepali society was divided into two broad categories namely the Tagadharis, (the sacred thread wearing communities which include the Bahuns, Chettris and Thakuris ) and the others can be categorized as the Matwalis (to whom drinking is not taboo). The Eastern parts of Nepal were inhabited mostly by the Kiratas (the Rais, Limbus and Yakkas are given this appellation) and were known as the "wild non -Aryan tribes living in the mountains , particularly the Himalayas and in the North-Eastern areas of India, who were Mongoloid in origin".

### **Brief Historical Account of Kirati Khambu Rai**

Nepal is a very ancient country, which was ruled by many dynasties in the past. Among them, the Kirat rule is taken as a very significant one, being the longest period that extended from pre-historic to historic period. In ancient Hindu scriptures, Nepal is referred as the "Kirat Desh" or "the Land of Kirats". When the 28<sup>th</sup> Kirat King Paruka was ruling in the valley, the Sombanshi ruler attacked his regime many times from the west. Although he successfully repelled their attacks, he was forced to move to Shankhamul from Gokarna. He had built a Royal Palace called "Patuka" for himself. The Patuka Palace is no more to be seen, except its ruins in the form of a mound.

"Patuka" had changed Shankhamul into a beautiful town. The last King of the Kirat dynasty was Gasti. He proved to be a weak ruler and was overthrown by the Sombanshi ruler Nimisha. It brought to the end of the powerful Kirat dynasty that had lasted for about 1225 years. After their defeat, Kirats moved to the eastern hills of Nepal and settled down divided into small principalities. Their settlements were divided into three regions; namely, "Wallo-Kirant" or "near Kirant" that lay to the east of Kathmandu, "Majh-Kirat" or "central Kirat," and "Pallo-Kirat" that lay to the far east of the Kathmandu valley. These regions are still heavily populated by Kirats. Rai (Khambu) are the inhabitants of near and central Kirat although, they are also quite densely populated in "pallo-Kirat".

### **Habitat and House Type**

The Rai people live in villages on the stiff hill slopes of Darjeeling Himalayas. A typical Rai house is built with wooden planks/logs, half walled and having open space in the front. Earlier they used to have thatched roof which has largely been replaced by the tin roof in recent years. Each Rai house is having a small room in one corner where Samkhalung, the sacred structure made of three erected stones for the purpose of performing all the sacred family rites, is kept. No one other than family members would be allowed to enter into that sacred and secret place. Even married daughters are not allowed to enter into this sacred place. It is believed that the souls of their ancestors dwell in this place. Of the three stones one represents their male ancestor; one female ancestor and the third one represents the society. Similar kind of structure with three stones is also used as hearth for daily cooking.

## Food and Drink

The Rais claim themselves as traditional hunters and gatherers. In their religious and magico-religious practices the presence of bow and arrow is a must. They eat meat (Figure 1), egg, chicken, pork, fish, frog, vegetables, and edible roots, tubers, yam, mushroom collected from the surrounding forests. Intoxicating homemade liquor made out of finger millet, maize (Figure 2), wheat or burley is a favorite drink for both the sexes and consumed frequently. Millet beer is offered to the guests as a gesture of honour. They offer the drinks to the ancestors and deities during worship. Millet juice is a favourite drink for all ages.



Figure 1: Preparation of Food- Roasting Meat

## Economy

The Rais are primarily cultivators (Figure 3) and grow finger millet, maize, rice etc. on terraced field. Most of them own land. They also grow ginger as cash crop. For daily consumption they grow vegetables. Edible mushroom, yam etc. are collected from surrounding forest. They sometimes go for fishing in rivers and streams. They extract edible oil from fruits of gantey and use it in cooking. Fruits are harvested and the seeds are separated which are pressed hard using bullocks in a special structure called pecha from which oil comes out by pressure exerted by bullocks which is collected. They also extract oil from mustard (*Brassica juncea*) in the similar manner. That is why the Rais prefer to stay in the proximity of river and forest. In earlier days, besides 'Guleli' (a type

of bow made of bamboo), they use to hunt with spears, snares, swords and poisoned arrows. The importance of the bow and arrow in the life of Khambu Rai can be gauged by the fact that bows and arrows are still worshiped even today during the rituals like birth and death of a Khambu Rai. When sufficient meat was not available, even feathers were made into delicacy which is in practice even today in the form of 'Wachippa' which is made from chicken feathers. It is mixed with chicken and cooked along with rice and eaten during religious occasion and festivities these days.



**Figure 2: Preservation of Maize**



**Figure 3: Agricultural Implements**

## **Religion**

The Rais are nature worshipers. Their traditional priest/magico-religious practitioner is known as Mangpa (male) and Mangma (female) (Figure 4). They worship nature and natural phenomena such as rocks, mountain, river, stream, thunder and lightning, tree, and ascribe all of them as having a soul. They respect their natural surrounding but do

not ascribe souls to them. They believe that these are the places where the spirits dwell. They also profess Buddhism. The Rais also worship their ancestors. It is believed that their ancestors reside in the 'three-stoned hearth' (i.e. tin chula dhunga in their term) in Samkhalung (Figure 5). But the soul of a Mangpa, their traditional priest doesn't stay there. It becomes Sikari, their deity.



**Figure 4: Traditional Priest – Mangpa and Their Performance**



**Figure 5: Three-stoned Hearth**

They do not believe in heaven and hell. Their deities are the creator and protector for them. A Shaman (Mangpa) decides the date to perform 'chinta' on the house of the deceased. On this ritual, the Mangpa guides the spirit of the departed to his ancestral hearth in the spiritual world. A Hophthang Shrine is made up of bamboo with also a rooster on which the Mangpa cast a spell and the petrified rooster remains still up in the shrine. They also create a bamboo ladder which will be sued by the dead man's spirit to enter the spiritual realm.

According to the belief Mangpa possesses supernatural power and plays an important role in the rites and rituals of Rais. Anybody cannot become a Mangpa simply by wishing to become one. The person chosen by the Pitri (ancestor/sainted dead) can only become a Mangpa. The chosen one shows some traits like shaking his body continuously and chanting the Mudhum. After fully transforming to a Mangpa, he can even forecast many things in one's life. Likewise, the chosen person receives 'chhu' or 'chhi' during the beginning of his birth cycle. This 'chhu' or 'chhi' has three categories: Saku 'chhu' or 'chhi', Dikku 'chhu' or 'chhi' and Kuru 'chhu or 'chhi'. Besides them, there are many Mangpas chosen by 'NayaDev', 'AathanaDev', "bureni, 'Shikari'" etc. who are all form of demigods themselves.

In Khambu society the existence of Mangpas and the rituals they perform are indeed one of the identities of the Rai existence. For the betterment of the society, the Mangpas performs various tasks like Yasangwa i.e to wash away one's sins and curse, Halla setma i.e. to guide the spirit of a dead male, Mamang setma i.e. to guide the spirit of a dead female, Sari sammang chumma to evade results of bad luck and evil spirit, Samkhada pakma i.e. to provide a place in the ancestral hearth and so on. This practice is very much similar to that Lepcha people as came out from the field work done by the team of Anthropological Survey of India among the Lepcha of Lingthem village in North Sikkim. Interestingly egg plays an important role in their traditional religious practice. An unboiled egg is must in the offerings made to the supernatural (Figure 6).



**Figure 6: Socio-cultural Practices - Forecast of Future Using Egg**

## Cultural Traditions

Rais have distinct cultural tradition. The community is divided into 28 Thar. Within the Thar there are clan division called pacha. Clans are exogamous. There is further classification within the Pacha known as Samet. Samet traces the relationship of a person to his/her ancestor. Community endogamy is practiced. Nowadays sometimes inter-community marriage takes place but even after marriage the spouse from the other community is not allowed to enter into the sacred place for ancestor in the house. Marriage is settled through negotiation (*dotma khatma*), or elopement (*khama, khatma*). In case of negotiation all arrangement are done mutually and negotiation is facilitated by Kongpi, the mediator. In case of elopement the boy and girl after some period of courtship decide to start a conjugal live. Elopement is usually arranged by boy's family. They have few customs which are related to marriage such as:

**Bulukhum:** Custom of 'bulukhum' is unique among the Rai community. By this custom metal containers are considered as the true witness of the marriage. At the time of solemnizing the marriage, a metal container (*bulukhum/ Kasey Dabuka*) made up of brass and a silver coin is presented from the bridegroom's side and '*fengma kongpi*' (the mediator from girl's side) and '*lepa kongpi*' (mediator from groom's side) have to beat the container with the silver coin thrice alternatively after promising to fulfill the words spoken by them for the wellbeing of the bride. The Rais believe that the human beings can change their mind any time but the sound of that particular metal container does not change and hence, any violation of the promise made by them at the time of beating the metal container with silver coin will bring misfortune to the bridegroom.

**Sapten Sengma:** After elopement or after taking the girl by force, the bridegroom's family has to send mediators called Kongpi to the house of the girl within three days. Once the reporting is done by the mediators (*kongpis*) and the reporting is accepted, a day is fixed for Sapten Sengma, i.e., a ceremony for appeasing the village deity (*saptenhang*) for forgiving the boy and the girl for having eloped without remembering the village deity. This is done in a place nearby the girl's house. Members only from the boy's side can join. Prayers are offered to 'saptenhang' for forgiving the boy and the girl by sacrificing a cock. The cock's meat has to be cooked at that particular spot using utensils brought from the boy's side and all has to be consumed by the members of the boy's side only. The members of the girl's side cannot eat it. If it is not done, it is believed that the village deity would curse the villagers and little children and village elders would suffer from breathlessness and would even die. Once it is done, the boy and the girl are presumed to be forgiven by the *saptenhang* and villagers would also not suffer.

Residence after marriage is patrilocal. Both husband and wife can divorce each other with social approval, the reasons generally are adultery, infertility, maladjustments, impotency, chronic sickness, cruelty, insanity, practice of witchcraft and sorcery etc. If wife runs away with another man, her husband is entitled to receive compensation (*Jarikal* or *Jaridanda*) from the paramour. If the wife does not remarry after divorce, she

receives alimony from the husband. Children are the liability of the father in case of divorce. Remarriage of widow and widower is permissible.

Rais bury their death. Mourning is observed by the nearest Kins who abstain from eating salt, oil, meat and milk during pollution period. The dead body is buried near the house. The Rais perform the death rites in two parts. The first part called mishia is performed soon after the burial. It is mandatory to call Rai priests (Mangpa, Nokchho or Nakchung) in Mishia, but one is usually summoned. One unit of grain is collected from every household in the village; if they attend the funeral they must bring liquor also. Clansmen of the deceased bring an offering of buckwheat (*Fagopyron esculentus*) in a basket; in addition they bring a small offering of liquor and beer. The priest or an elderly Raipa addresses the deceased, explains to him that he is being put to rest, and ritually feeds him some buckwheat and beer. The last rite called Shilum Kattu is performed on the third day for females and on fifth day for males. It varies from clan to clan and in Kulunge Rais a minimum of one month should transpire before the Shilun Kattu rite is performed. The rite cannot be performed unless there is some beef on hand (as token amount) some dried beef is kept for such occasions. All households contribute cooked grain, fermented beer etc. It is mandatory to summon a priest (Mabimi) on the occasion of 'Shilum Kattu'. Nuclear family is common. Rais have their own festivals. A few important festivals are sakewa related to agriculture, sakela related to harvest, sikari puja, in which lord of forest is worshipped. They also worship a hunter god known as Dwbung Sikari. In this worship they sacrifice a pair of pigeon, a pair of fowl and a pair of kharowa (quill of porcupine) etc.

### **Traditional Health Care Practices**

Rais still practice their traditional medicines. They do not make use of modern medicines. They use the plants around them for their treatment. For minor ailments, ladies in the family themselves know what is to be given to a sick person. They keep plants that are required for the treatment of common ailments and also plant in and around their houses. For the ailments that are not cured with the treatment given by the mother of the house, Mangpa or Mabimi is called who treats the patients. Depending on the type of the problem, sometimes Mangpa or Mabimi ask the evil spirit to reside in the body of chick, kid or piglet. Then the animals are driven far away so that the evil spirit also goes away leaving the patient. It is believed that the evil spirits troubling the patient will leave and goes along with the above-mentioned animal(s). Such animal is let free to far off places often to the mountain cliff and hill top after completion of all the rituals. Some of the medicinal plants will not be available throughout the year and such plants are harvested at the time of their availability and are properly preserved for future use. They also perform such folk medicinal practices for the treatment of domestic animals.

### **Costumes and Dresses**

The Rai women wear Tangfey or Fariya, Loklak or Choli, Tangrima, a kind of scarf put on just above the forehead and Phopma (sawl) (Figure 7). They wear precious ornaments like Nathen, Nabit on nose made of Gold, Natip on the ear, Paruwa, Wai and

Sayamnat round the neck and brace, Waichuk on hand, Langkungma on feet which are made of Gold. Paruwa is made of silver. Sayamsang or Pagari is an important head dress of the Kirat Rai Community especially on the occasion of great festivity, which is arrayed on the head like crown. Males wear langsup (Suruwal), lakyum (Daura), Phenga (waist Coat) etc. They use Talek (bow), Bhey (arrow), Bichan (sword), Wangcheng (seal), Dabi, Komwitcha etc. as their traditional weapons.



**Figure 7: Traditional Attire of Rai Community**



**Figure 8: Playing of a Musical Instrument by a Rai Person**

## Music and Instruments

The Rai community has its traditional musical instruments (Figure 8) made out of wood and bamboo, made by them using leaves (*bimbilia sumbak*), *binayo* (*dosangwa*), *marchunga* (*tangmuwa*) and the most important *Dhol-jhamta* (*Ken-Chamukhi*). *Dokan* and *bausang* are flutes made from bamboo.

## Dance

For the Khambus, dancing is not just an expression of joy or worship. Dancing hold lessons from our ancestors. It depicts their lives, our present and past. It commemorates their relationship with nature simply because the forces of nature must be imitated-to show reverence to it, out of love and reverence. Kirat Khambu Rais have their own dance form called “*Sili*” based on the movements of animals and creatures in nature. “*Sili*” (Figure 9) is also based on various agricultural activities right from tilling the land for cultivation to harvesting.



Figure 9: Performance of Sili Dance

## Festivals of Rais

Different festivals are celebrated by the Rai community and also certain places are considered very sacred by them. This indicates their deep-rooted faith in their ancestors, deities and mother-nature. Their main festivals are:

**Ubhaili:** It is celebrated with great enthusiasm by all Rais (Figure 10). During *Sakewa*, prayers are done by chanting *Mundhums* at a place called *Sakewa thampu* for good rain,

good sunshine, good harvest and for good health, peace and prosperity of all villagers. Other communities call it a kind of *bhumi puja*. It is celebrated on full moon day of Baisakh i.e May-June. On this day, people in the village gather in huge circles and dance. This dance is called *Sili*. Rais have their own dance form called “*Sili*” based on the movements of animals and creatures in nature. “*Sili*” is also based on various agricultural activities right from tilling the land for cultivation to harvesting. Of various *Silis*, Chasum *Sili* is very popular. This dance depicts various agricultural operations like planting of paddy, harvesting, husking, etc and also cooking and finally eating.



**Figure 10: Ubhaili Festival**

**Udhauli:** This festival is celebrated on full moon day of Mangsheer (November-December) signifying thanks giving for good harvest and congenial climate. Once or twice a year thanks giving are offered to Mother- Nature. Grains are offered, and sacrifices made for good rain and good sunshine.

### **Art and Craft**

The Community has a tradition of art and crafts (Figure 11). They are expert in making household items out of bamboo and wood. They have earned fame in stone carving, music, literature and various fields. A glaring example of stone carving is by a septuagenarian Lal Prasad Rai, who, in his consummate artistic skill was able to carve many statues of God and Goddesses in Sikkim and Darjeeling. He has even carved a statue of God Paruhang or Kirateswar installed in Baiguney, alongside of Jorethang and Legship road of West Sikkim. The statue of Hanuman carved on the wall stone in front of temple at Hanuman tok, Gangtok is another piece of his work.

In bygone days, Rai would carry a Wabuk (ritual pot made of fruit’s shell) while crossing big rivers. They would cover the mouth of the Wabuk (Figure 12) and strap it to their waist. This prevented them from drowning. The inside crust of the Wabuk (Chindo) is bitter. When ash is added to it, the crust becomes even bitter. This bitterness regulates the density or quantity of fat and cholesterol in a person’s body. When millet beer (*jaand*) is added to the bitter crust, it mixes perfectly to kill any poisonous substance that might

be formed over long hours of traveling and exposure. The consumption of this millet beer will control high blood pressure and the infestation of worms inside the stomach. This purification or distillation process is the exact reason why millet beer from a Wabuk is/was considered holy and offered to the Pitris during Mangsewa. Hence Wabuk is used by the Kirati Rai people in their daily and religious rituals.



**Figure 11: Basketry by Rai Community**



**Figure 12: Wabuk (Ritual Pot Made of Fruit's Shell)**



Figure 13: During “Tin Chula Dunga” Worship Sacrifice of a Pig

### Observations

The Rais traces their migration from Tibet. They live in the stiff hills of Darjeeling Himalayas and Sikkim. The Rais have own language and they are also conversant in Nepali, the Lingua Franca of the region. They are non-vegetarian food habit and eat pork, beef, chicken, meat, egg, fishes, frogs, and vegetables. They eat rice, millet, wheat as staple food. Millet juice and intoxicating liquor out of finger millet, maize, wheat and barley is their favourite drink. Traditionally the Rais were hunters and gathers. Presently they are primarily agriculturist and cultivate on the terraced field on the hill slopes. Rais are nature worshippers and worship hills, river, stone, tree etc. Pig and fowl sacrifice is a customary practice during worship of spirits and ancestors. Head of the slaughtered pig is offered to the deities and also to the ancestors (Figure 13). They have their own

magico-religious practitioner called Mangpa. Mangpa is selected by their ancestors. The process of ascribing Mangpa hood by the supernaturals is very much similar to the process of Mun-Pudim and Bongthing in the Lepcha society as has been observed by the researchers from Anthropological Survey of India during field work in a Lepcha village in North Sikkim. Nature, the sum total of all living and non-living things, is very special to human beings in general and to the tribal communities in particular. Nature is the sole provider of life support system to the tribal community. There is close and intimate relation between the tribes and the nature. Because of their close association, tribal communities understand, know, read, judge, assess and interpret nature more correctly and accurately. Rai livelihood is totally dependent on their natural surroundings—starting from wild edibles to cultivated plants, local drinks to beverage, firewood to light generation, fish poisoning to hunting devices, gum yielding techniques to extraction of dyes, fodder to fibre, timber to building construction, incense to worship and lastly ethno-medicine to medico-religious beliefs. They live in nature with harmony and accommodated themselves in nature by using and preserving it. This makes a two way interconnectedness between the people and the nature. In Rai society, religion and nature are linked very closely. They worship almost all natural objects of the region. As a religion the practice of Mangpa deeply rooted in the Rai culture. The practice is basically based on belief on god, demon and spirit. In the cognition of Rai all these divinities have specific functions to gain the potential strength through performance. To them, the religious manifestation depends on faith in supernatural power, whose angers causes harm to their society. It is important to note that nowadays their dependency on nature is gradually decreasing with their changing living style and exposure to the outer world through growing communication system, education, service and other developmental activities like construction of roads, bridges and tourism.

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