

The Paraphernalia of the Shamans of the Nepalese Community in Darjeeling Himalaya

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Abstract

This paper examines the significance of paraphernalia used by the shamans of Darjeeling Himalaya. The grant of Darjeeling on the 1st of February 1835 by the Chogyal of Sikkim to the English became a major turning point in the history of Darjeeling. The plantation of tea in the hills intensified the migration from Nepal. The emigrants carried their culture and traditions along with them. The legends of the sacred drum, Ban-Jhankri, porcupine quills, and pheasant feathers are frequently stated in the Nepalese population of Darjeeling. The shamans of different Nepalese ethnic groups acquired these gears. Each gear carries its own prominence and is used to cure people who are suffering from the malevolent spirits. The philosophy of animism relies on the idea of spirits present in both moving and stagnant entities. They held that rivers, forests, mountains, and trees are a living entity that consists of spirits. If humans disturb them with their undertakings, they tend to cause illness. The study delves into the uses of different shamanic items to cure illness; if they fail, then the séance has to be conducted by the family of fatalities. The shamans fall into a trance and act as the intermediaries between the human realm and the spirit realm. Shamans are also experts in herbal medicine. The medicines are supplemented with faith healing for better recovery. The paper also vividly points out the shamanic concepts of Phuk-fak, Jhar-phuk, and Jokhana. The findings suggest that although modernisation and cultural assimilation have obscured certain rituals, the people of Darjeeling preserve the shamanic knowledge while adapting to changing socio-historical contexts.

INTRODUCTION:

Darjeeling is home to diverse ethnic groups, comprising the *Lepchas*, *Bhutias*, and *Nepalese*. Among the three, Nepalese are in the preponderance. People from discrete corners of the Indian subcontinent live in Darjeeling. Asit Rai's novel, '*Naya chitis ko khoj*,' alludes to the communal harmony of the people living in the Darjeeling hills during the colonial period. He wrote about the Marwaris and other populations who migrated sideways with the Nepalese in the hills¹. The Nepalese are opulent with their cultures. They carry innumerable historical consequences in their traditions. The legends and folk tales of their indigenous healing practices throw light on the society and historical base. Nepalese are the amalgamation of different tribal and non-tribal groups. Despite diversity, there are binding elements like a conjoint communicating language and their ethos of animism. Prevailing folktales of each group display the animistic character of a fraternity. It discourses about the mountains, rivers, trees, sky, sun, and moon as living entities. The shamans act as intermediaries between the spirit realm and the human realm to maintain equilibrium.² The generic terms for shaman in the Nepali language, "*Dhami*," "*Jhankri*," and "*bijuwa*,"

¹ Asit Rai, *Naya Chitis ko Khoj*. 3rd edn (Darjeeling: Shyam Prakashan, 2016).

² Yishey Doma, *Faith Healers of Sikkim: Traditions, Legends and Rituals* (Haryana, India: Trysts & Traces, 2018), 19.

are used interchangeably by Nepali ethnic groups of Darjeeling. Nonetheless, they are also called *Mun-Padim* by Lepchas, *Pawo/Nejum* by Bhutias, *Mangpa/Mangma* by the Rai, *Phedangma/Samba/Yebba/Yema* by the Limboos, *Poibo/Ngyami* by Sunuwars, *Guruappa/Guruamma* by Thamis, and *Poju/Klhebri* by Gurungs, etc.³ The shamans plunge into a trance during a séance, where spirits move into their bodies and correspond with tangible entities. They heal the patients by performing oracles, rituals, and sacrifices. To perform, the shamans need paraphernalia like the *khurpa*, *dhyangro*, and *aina*. The shaman's mirror, the *mala*, the *Trishula* or trident, the altar, the costume, porcelain quills, pheasant feathers, and conch shells are major paraphernalia used by faith healers during healing. The shamanic mirror consists of two sides: convex and concave. The convex side repels negative energy, while the concave side focuses on positive energy.⁴ They also hold profound knowledge about the herbal medicines. Along with the invocation, they provide medicines to the patients.

Shamanism practices in the Darjeeling Himalayas are analogous to those of the Nepalese people residing in Nepal and other parts of the Indian subcontinent. The advent of English in Nepal under Captain Kinloch was repulsed by the Gorkhas in 1765. Several treaties signed between the two empires later prepared the ground for the Anglo-Nepalese War in 1814⁵. The frequent Gurkha invasion in Sikkim opened the gate for the migration, and treaties like Sagauli (1816) and bilateral and tripartite agreements for recruitment between the governments of Nepal, Britain, and India strengthened the migration process.⁶ The Grant of Darjeeling on 1st February, 1835, from the Chogyal of Sikkim to the East India Company was granted.⁷ The company started planting tea all around the hills. For plantation, a bulk of migration took place from Nepal to Darjeeling. In the words of Michael Hunt, a migration from *Mulk* to *Mugalan*⁸. They not only migrated labour but also the cultures, particularly the animistic culture.

*“Macdonald refers to Jhankris as magico-religious specialists whom one can provisionally designate as healers, and recalls the above definition in order to look at it again from the perspective of certain documents. He then goes on to stress that he believes “that the true jhakri is he who, after having first of all suffered possession by a spirit foreign to his everyday world, manages to control it and to regulate it”*⁹. The legend of *Ban Jhankri*¹⁰ and the abduction of the young boy continues in the Nepalese society. Candidates for *ban-jhankri* must be pure and must not have any physical scars; if found, they will be thrown away from the cave of *Ban-Jhankri*.¹¹ Larry G. Peters tried to connect *Ban-Jhankri* with *Yeti*. However, the abduction of Bhola in Nepal, as pointed out by Evelyn C. Rysdyk, and Yam Bahadur Thapa in Sikkim, as pointed out by Yishey Doma, are likewise akin. They were abducted by Ban-Jhankri and were taught healing rituals and how to handle spirits. Once the spirits choose the people, they need to take

³ Ibid., 39.

⁴ Evelyn C. Rysdyk with Bhola Nath Banstola, *The Nepalese Shamanic Path: Practices for Negotiating the Spirit World* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 2018), 94.

⁵ Daniel Wright (ed.), *History of Nepal*, trans. Munshi Shew Shunker Singh and Pandit Sri Gunanand (Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1990), 35.

⁶ Bernard Pignède, *The Gurungs: A Himalayan Population of Nepal*, English Edition edited by Sarah Harrison and Alan Macfarlane (Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar, 1993), 423.

⁷ L. S. S. O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetters: Darjeeling* (Calcutta: The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1907), 27.

⁸ Michael Hutt, 'Going to Mugalan: Nepali Literary Representations of Migration to India and Bhutan', *South Asian Research* 18, no. 2 (1998): p.195.

⁹ Doma, *Faith Healers of Sikkim*, 1.

¹⁰ Ban-Jhankri is a legendary character in Nepali cultures whose body is covered with fur and foot pointed backwards. He resides in a cave beyond waterfall. He abducted the young boy to teach the shamanic knowledge.

¹¹ Larry G. Peters, 'The "Calling," The Yeti, and The Ban Jhakri ("Forest Shaman") in Nepalese Shamanism', in *Trance, Initiation and Psychotherapy in Nepalese Shamanism*, ed. By Larry Peters (Westwood, CA: Transpersonal Institute; published in *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, Vol. 29, No.1, 1997), p. 47.

a human teacher from any caste to ascertain whether the spirits are benevolent or malevolent. On the occasion of *Guru Purnima*, the *Guru* asks various questions; if the answers are good, he will gift him a *jhankri* dress and other gear. The process is called “*Kairan linu*” in the native language. In the ceremony, the grant of gear like a *jama* (a shaman's dress), headgear called *pairan*, a *diyoy*, a lamp, the drum, and a bamboo basket to hold the necessary items is granted by a teacher.¹² The Tamang shamans, during the rituals, are possessed by different neophytes’ ancestors and later set apart for their students.¹³ The faith healers of various ethnic communities go into a trance to diagnose the cause of illness by throwing rice in the plate with the help of mugwort leaves. The native name of mugwort is *Titepati*, as it acts as a medicinal plant in the Darjeeling Himalayas. *Totola ko phul* (*Oroxylum indicum*) is considered to be holy and is used by shamans during the process of soul retrieval or spirit restoration.¹⁴ The tree of *Totola ko phul* can be found in different villages of Darjeeling, including Moonda. The white fibres covering the seeds were hidden inside spade-like fruit. The seeds are used as tilak in many of the ethnic communities of Darjeeling. During the trance, the environment around the shamans will be so pure that even breathing and wiping all the negative energy with a broom made of yak’s tail or *chammar* helps in curing the patient. The process is called “*Phukphak/Jharne*” in the native language. If it didn’t work, then bigger sacrifices have to be offered, like *chinta* or *séance*. In a *séance*, the spirit of the dead enters the body of shamans and interacts with the people. Tamang shamans blow a *Kangling* or trumpet made of a human thigh bone to call spirits. In Nepali, the instrument is called *thayrei*. The jogis of Nepal Himalaya and the native place often visit the village of Darjeeling. They blow out the human shinbone/*thayrei* or conch shells at night to drive away the evil spirits from the village. The rhythm is accompanied by mantras. The next day, they will return to the same village to collect alms.

Other important items used in a *séance* are *the doni*, or thunderbolt, and a headdress made of cowries and feathers of birds. a *phurpa*, or magic dagger, and a necklace of bells and rudraksha beads.¹⁵ *Khurpi* is a curved knife carried by shamans to drive away the dark forces.¹⁶ In case of weak spirits, shamans suggested offering a trident, which represents the three worlds and maintains balance within them. The blowing of the conch shell trumpet by the *jhankri* clears the presence of any dark forces in the house and the property during healing rituals.¹⁷ In a funeral, the conch will be blown in a single breath, producing a single sound, while in Pujas it is blown, giving the repeated sound.

The porcupine and its quills are mentioned frequently in the legends of *Jhankris*. Shamans use porcupine quills in their headgear and also to choose the tree to make a shamanic drum. The headgear is also decorated with peacock and pheasant feathers. The pheasant features are well preferred by *Poju* in the Gurung community.¹⁸ The Gurung deity *Sildo-naldo* also takes the form of a pheasant in Gurung folktales, connecting the significance of pheasant feathers during sacrifices.¹⁹ Many of the houses in Darjeeling keep a porcupine’s quill above the main door to protect their family from the malevolent spirits. While invoking, shamans, with the help of a *gajo* or drumstick, hit the drum or *dhangro*. The Gurungs followed a single-headed cover with hides of deer or mountain goat. *Dhangro*, the folktale relating to *Poju* and

¹² Doma, *Faith Healers of Sikkim*, 39.

¹³ Larry G. Peters, *Ecstasy and Healing in Nepal: An Ethnopsychiatric Study of Tamang Shanaism* (Malibu, CA: Undena Publications, 1981),85.

¹⁴ Rysdyk, *The Nepalese Shamanic Path*, 66.

¹⁵ Doma, *Faith Healers of Sikkim*, 39-40.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁷ Rysdyk, *The Nepalese Shamanic Path*, 60.

¹⁸ Pignède, *The Gurungs*, 409-410.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 411.

Klherba, where the *Klherba* drum was destroyed by Poju from one side. Other clans from Darjeeling use the double-headed covered drum, except the Limboos. The *Phedangma* of the Limboos preferred a brass plate instead of a drum. As per legend, it is believed in the Nepali ethnic community that inside the Dhangro, there is a *sirin sikari*, or hunting dog. The drum is also used to trap the evil spirits and to release them to the appropriate locations.²⁰ The rhythmic combination of Shamans with his drum and his assistant with *jhyamta*, or cymbal, is a pivotal part of the séance²¹. In the Parvatiya or Nepali language, the assistants are also referred to as *janne manche* (a knowing man) or *dholay*, who knows something about the rituals but has not reached the stage of knowledge as a *jhankri*.²² Aligned with the drumhead, the *dhangro* can be differentiated as male and female.²³ The *dhambaru*, a small two-sided hand drum used by lamas and some Himalayan shamans, is used during the healing process, where the shamans play the *dhambaru*, rotating the wrist.²⁴ The mala is a key piece of paraphernalia of the Nepalese shamans. The *rudraksha* are often used by shamans; some powerful shamans use a snake necklace.²⁵ The mala is attached with a bell signifying religious importance. In many cases, there are 108 beads in Malas. They are said to be the number 108 because of 108 peethas, 108 Upanishads, or energy points of body.²⁶ In Tamang shamanism, the spirits choose the person after his previous shaman is dead. This person will inherit the deceased's ritual gear: a drum, magical dagger, rosaries, and bells bound to wear crisscrossed around his shoulder.²⁷ The mythological description of *Ban-Jhokrini* carrying a golden sickle is also widespread, so the shamans also use small sickles during sacrifices. Mention of ginger is frequent in shamanic practices. The shaman cuts ginger with the sickle while diagnosing the cause of the illness. Bamboos are important shamanic items, as they are found in Darjeeling abundantly. The shamanic altar, along with Gurung altars are prepared with bamboo. The Lepcha uses shamanic leaves during a shamanic trance. As per Lepcha tradition, their mother goddess *Nyulik Nyosong* gave items like garlic, multi-colored threads of the nettle plants, and broom grass to avert evil spirits.²⁸

The folk tale of *Amliso*, or broom grass, is very interesting. The fight between *Boksi* and *Jhankri*, or Shamans, to showcase their powers. The *Jhankri* swallowed the leaves, but the witch failed to do so. In rural areas, it can be seen that broom leaves are placed beneath the stone in crossroads. It is believed that the patient who is suffering from malevolent spirits and having physical pain can be cured by shamanic rituals. The *jhankri* wipes the leaves around the body, as it is believed that it wipes all the negative energy that hides inside the body. The leaves were later placed in the crossroad far from the patient's home. Offering burning incense to deities is prevalent in many religions. It is also followed by shamans as well. To please the spirits, the offering of the incense are made by shamans. Even in Gurung clans, offering of incense to their ancestors is practiced. Generally, the spirit restoration can be performed by both shamans and laymen. If it fails, then a chicken is sacrificed and blood offered in exchange for the soul of the sick

²⁰ Doma, *Faith Healers of Sikkim*, 47.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 43.

²² *Ibid.*, 12.

²³ Rysdyk, *The Nepalese Shamanic Path*, 90.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁵ Doma, *Faith Healers of Sikkim*, 45.

²⁶ *Why 108 is the chosen number for chanting mantras across cultures and traditions*, *The Times of India* (18 Nov. 2025) <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/astrology/zodiacs-astrology/why-108-is-the-chosen-number-for-chanting-mantras-across-cultures-and-traditions/articleshow/125391240.cms> accessed 13 Feb. 2026.

²⁷ Peters, *Tamang Shamans*, 79.

²⁸ Doma, *Faith Healers of Sikkim*, 77.

person, and after returning, Poju will tie thread, symbolizing the return of soul.²⁹ In Nepalese shamanic studies, animal horns and teeth are given greater importance, as some animals have greater healing effects and are used to make protective amulets.³⁰

The limbo followed Yumanism, or animism. The temple of Limboo can also be seen in Mirik, Sonada, and different corners of Darjeeling Himalaya. They followed Mundhum, a sacred text, where a complete guide and philosophical discussion are given.³¹ The *Phedangba* or *Sambha* practices are guided by principles mentioned in the book. Throwing light on the historical context, the mention of Ashoka's visit to Nepal during the tenure of Kirat king Stungko is mentioned in Mundhan.³² The seven-step bamboo ladders are being used while preparing séance altars. The ladders are called *yeba/yema*. It is believed the shaman's soul will travel all seven celestial realms.³³ The séance will be the means of entertainment for the villagers. They watched the whole night and listened to the shaman's invocation carefully. During the spirits' possession of the dead, the family of the dead offered their favorite items.³⁴ In the Rai community, the folktale of *Sunnima* and *Paruhang*, the mother of *Sunnima*, gifted ginger, cardamom, and basil flower³⁵. The *Sunnima* gifted *Khurmi/Kombi* (a small knife) to slash a ginger as an offering, as I have discussed above.³⁶ *Boju*, a female deity, is often worshipped in the family of Kirats in Darjeeling. Sickles and bamboo baskets are the major paraphernalia of *boju*/grandmother. There is a particular *type* of *boju* in Senchal Dham/Tiger Hill. There is a popular belief that the agricultural land of Rais is protected by spirits themselves. The people felt uncomfortable committing mischief in their houses and agricultural lands because of *Rai ko Deuta*, or the spirit of Rai. The mention of bow and arrow is frequent in folktales of different ethnic groups, showing the nature of their ancestors. Shamans also carry a bow and arrow to warn malevolent spirits. During *the pae*, or dead ceremony, in the Mohoriya village of Nepal, the son of the dead person carries a bow and arrow following the lama.³⁷ In Darjeeling certain practices are not seen. Their funeral can be according to their will. However, the lamas are preferred most. The interview was conducted in the village of Nayakaman, which is approx. 5 km from Sonada Railway Station. The funeral of Jethi Gurung on Jan 22, 2024, used *Sadhu* instead of Lama or Priest.³⁸ Before burial, the *Dhak Bhatti* has to be given for the demise. It is placed on the mouth of demise by the *sadhu*, as it is believed that it will show the way to the soul after life. The night of the funeral, the relatives performed sacrifices for the well-being of her soul. The *Sadhu* was assisted by his assistant. Instead of a drum, they use an ektara and bell. The rhythm was accompanied by bhajans of Hinduism.³⁹ There is often a description of Lord Shiva in the Tamang folktale and the folktale of *Ban-Jhankri*.⁴⁰

The spiral-shaped *shila*, or fossil, represents the cycle of birth and annihilation. The fossils also represent *nag* deities and in folktales as the ladders of heaven.⁴¹ Oral invocation of mantras is a common element

²⁹ Pignède, *The Gurungs*, 346.

³⁰ Rysdyk, *The Nepalese Shamanic Path*, 58.

³¹ Mohan Kumar Tumbahang, *The Limbu Mundhum and its Linguistic Feature* (Nepal: Research Management Cell (RMC), Sukuna Multiple Campus, 2021), 03.

³² *Ibid.*, 154.

³³ Doma, *Faith Healers of Sikkim*, 121.

³⁴ Kabita Subba, interview by Mukesh Gurung, Moonda, Sonada, Darjeeling, 27 January 2026.

³⁵ Doma, *Faith Healers of Sikkim*, 131.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.

³⁷ Pignède, *The Gurungs*, 370.

³⁸ Sahadev Gurung, interview by Mukesh Gurung, Nayakaman, Sonada, Darjeeling, 27 January 2026.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Casper J. Miller, S.J., *Faith-Healers in the Himalaya* (Delhi: Book Faith India, 1997), 42.

⁴¹ Rysdyk, *The Nepalese Shamanic Path*, 60.

among the shamans of different ethnic groups. In Tamang Shamanism, the conflict is between *Guru Rinpoche* and *Nara Bon*. According to myth, *Guru Rinpoche* insisted that *Nara* to throw his book of spells into the fire. When he realized he had fallen into a trap, he swallowed all the ashes of the book and started invoking mantras orally.⁴² The same story has been mentioned in a folktale of the Gurung. Tamang bombo are classified into two groups: white bombo and Black bombo. The latter keeps malevolent spirits under them by feeding them. Shamans use the spirits to protect their houses and land.⁴³ The food offerings before eating are common in the culture of Nepalese people in Darjeeling. In the native language, they called it *Mansawnu*, i.e., offering food to the spirits. It is placed outside the house or crossroads far from the house. People believe that without offering, the spirits will harm them and bring malady into the house. It is believed that *bokshi* have control over malevolent spirits and will be sent to harm victims.⁴⁴ The pieces of fingernails, hair, and clothing are collected to fulfill his intention.⁴⁵ The shamanic dance accompanied by his assistance is bewitching. The shamans revolve around the altars, beating a drum or brass plate. Limboo Shamans jump into burning coal in the trance. The rituals are, moreover, similar to those of different tribal groups of India. When the *jhankri* fell into a trance and started shaking his body, the most famous phrase was “*satya satya vannu hos Parmeswar* (You speak truly, o supreme god). The same concept is being described in Casper J. Miller, S.J.’s seminal work *Faith Healers in the Himalayas*, which shows despite migration, the people followed their original culture and tried to preserve it. However, the purest form of shamanism can’t be found in Darjeeling. Migration, cultural assimilation, and modernity have made the shamanic practices obscure.

Evelyn C. Rysdyk (2018), *The Nepalese Shamanic Path: Practices for Negotiating the Spirit World*, chapter 16, talks about using the voice of a shamanic tool. She pointed to oral invocation as a key element of shamanic healing.⁴⁶ The *dhami/jhankri* in Darjeeling recites oral invocation effortlessly. The invocations are not like the Vedic hymns. It narrates the names of the regional river, mountains, and spirits living there. He who listens to the cries, joys, and anger of nature is a shaman. The shamans seek forgiveness from the spirit orally if a mistake has been committed by humans. The phrases “*bal magnu*” or “*asking for strength*” are the most common phrases the shaman talks about in Darjeeling. Casper J. Miller, S.J., also mentioned this phrase in the context of shamanism followed in Nepal.⁴⁷ When it comes to the discussion on Tantra and shamanism. The mention of Tara Mandir, Mahakal Mandir, Senchal Dham, and other sacred sites of Darjeeling can’t be ignored. There are many *Jhankri* along with their respective *thaan* present in Mahakal Mandir. I have mentioned Rai *boju* of Senchal temple. In Dali, every Thursday, people waited in a queue to worship Green Tara. Tara is a feminine deity often worshipped by Buddhist people. Nevertheless, even the Hindus also visited the temple to seek blessings. There has hardly been any religious violence that has happened in the past, which destroys the harmony of the hills.

Conclusion:

“*Jhankri*” is a pan-Nepali word for he who is expert in communication with intangible matter, whether spirits or souls as well. The bulk of migration takes place during the plantation of tea in Darjeeling. The people carried their respective culture and their beliefs with them. The cluster of indigenous culture and

⁴² Peters, *Tamang Shamans*, 60.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 70

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁴⁶ Rysdyk, *The Nepalese Shamanic Path*, 145.

⁴⁷ Miller, *Faith-Healers in the Himalaya*, 23.

other culture took place in their original homeland, as there was frequent communication between two countries. Nepali classical books often describe the *jhankris* prevalent in Darjeeling, which shows that, even after migration, people carried their shamanic culture. Before the introduction of Western medicines, the masses of Darjeeling relied on shamans. They are not only experts of rituals but also experts of medicinal plants. Along with the paraphernalia, the shaman uses medicinal plants like mugwort, *totala ko phul*, and many more. It is believed that illness is caused by spirits. It could be mountain spirits, river spirits, forest spirits, swarm spirits, and many other spirits. The spirits could be both benevolent and malevolent. The patients are treated in two phases: primary and secondary. In primary healing, a basic *jokhana* and *jar-phuk* are done. If it fails, then the secondary healing or rituals like séances are done. The Shamans wear their white dress or jama along with headgear decorated with porcupine quills, peacock feathers, pheasant feathers, and sometimes with cowries as well. They wore the malas crisscrossed round his shoulder and started beating his shamanic drum. The variation of the drum is used to know the period of possession and release of spirit. The oral invocation, use of dagger, animal bones, offering of incense, shamanic mirror, *dambaru*, and other important paraphernalia are widely used by the Shamans of Darjeeling. The folktales justified the use of every item during the healing process. There is a folktale regarding a drum, porcupine quills, pheasant feathers, ginger, a sickle, and many other items. The preservation of important shamanic sites by the people of the hills and religious harmony made the place more captive than others. The migration and inclusion of different cultures made the people of Darjeeling open-minded rather than conservative. Despite diversity, the Nepalese ethnic groups carried their respective cultures. Nevertheless, the binding character is paraphernalia, which are similar in all Nepalese ethnic groups.

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