



An Overview Of The Limboo Community's Ethno-Demographic Profile In Assam: Factors Associated With Their History, Culture, And Identity

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Abstract: The Limboo community, an indigenous group primarily residing in Sikkim, West Bengal, Assam, and other parts of Northeast India, holds a distinctive cultural, historical, and linguistic identity. This study explores their origin, traditions, and cultural practices, emphasizing their connection to the broader Kirat heritage. The Limboos have retained their unique language, Yakthungpan, and their spiritual practices rooted in animism and the oral scripture "Mundhum." Key cultural elements, including traditional dances, rituals, festivals, and folk songs, highlight their vibrant heritage. Despite their integration into Nepali society and Indian states, the Limboos face challenges in preserving their identity due to socio-political marginalization and the effects of modernization. The concept of Limbuwan, a historical homeland and cultural symbol, represents their enduring aspiration for autonomy and recognition. This study underscores the importance of preserving Limboo history, language, and traditions to safeguard their cultural and social legacy in the evolving regional landscape.

Index Terms - Limboo, Limbuwan, Kirat, North East India

I. INTRODUCTION:

The Limbu or Limboo are a native group in Northeast India who mostly live in Sikkim and portions of West Bengal and followed by Assam, Nagaland, and Manipur etc. It is to be mentioned that ethnic history rewriting has gained a momentum in recent past and opened newer dimension of history. Studies has revealed that limboo's are the original inhabitants of Sikkim and the name of the states itself given by Limboo. Constitution of India give them schedule tribe status in Indian states of west Bengal to protect their land , language, culture, tradition to promote and preserve the same. Limboo's are the part of greater Nepali society and it is come under umbrella Nepali samaj. Limboo language are spoken in the Eastern parts of Nepal called Limbuwan region and it is fortunate to seen that Limbu language Sirijonga or Yakthung: Pan is reviving in Indian states. Sikkim, Darjeeling, Assam, Nagaland and other parts of the North Eastern state. As various Limboo socio-cultural, political and religious organization have emerged and take a healthy steps to promote their history, culture, tradition, language, religion, education etc.

The Limboo people, who have maintained a distinct identity in the face of outside influences and shifting times, are examined in this study along with their history, culture, and identity. Oral traditions, farming methods, and a rich folklore that is captured in traditional dance forms like the "Chyabrung" dance, which is performed during festivals and rituals, are characteristics of their unique culture.

Thirteen Limbu sub-tribes have split out from the Limbus, who are known as Das Limbu (Ten Limboo) or Yakthung Thi-bon. A Limbu woman is called Yakthungma, and a Limbu man is called Yakthumba. They speak a language called Yak Thung Pan, which is a subset of Tibeto-Burman and has several dialects. Kirati Sirijonga script is the name of their script. The Limbus had their own kingdom, called Limbuwan, in the distant past.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

The objective of the Study are as below –

- a. To know the rich cultural heritage of the Limboo people that specially lived in the Indian states of Assam
- b. To understand the origin and History of Limboo.
- c. To explore traditional belief and rituals
- d. For preserve the rich cultural heritage of Limbu and promote them

III. METHOD AND METHODOLOGY :

A variety of secondary sources, including research papers, articles, journals, Wikipedia, and artificial intelligence, were used to gather data for this study. Secondary sources are the main basis of the research.

IV. ORIGIN AND HISTORY :

It's really difficult to get a holistic view regarding the origin of the Limbu tribe. They belong to the family of the Kirats as found in the Rig Veda or the Mahabharata. They also might have migrated from Tibet or From China. There is a widely accepted theory of Kirat origins which states that; the Limbus have Descended from Kirat Ashura, who once fought against the Aryans.

Two versions are there about the origin of the Limbus. Their tradition reveals that they were known as Sewa-Yethang-sa from time immemorial, derived from their Legendry, eight brothers (Sewa Yethang), who were left by their father Sutsuru Suhangpheba with their mother Tetlara Lahadhongna at Sangaek Nugarek Tembhe Of this part of Himalayas. The father Sutsuru Suhangpheba had to leave for Muringla Kharingla Tembha with his nine sons known as Phanghangs due to his incestuous Relations with his own sister.

Later on, he changes his name and also known as the Demigod Sodhuh Lepmuhang. Sewa Yethangs. Those eight brothers were multiplied Into large numbers and established their homeland by fighting with the eight kings Of the inhabited areas; they divided their homeland into Thibong (Ten) Yioks (Regions) and 17 Thums (sub-regions), that was ruled by the Thibong (Ten) Chiefs. Thereafter, they were known as “Susuwa Lilim Yakthumba” (means the descendants). The Limbus have their own story about the origin of human civilization and “Mundhum”, the oral scripture of the Limbus, which has been handed down to Generation next, by the word of mouth exclusively.

This Mundhum serves as the Canon of the codes of the Limbu socialization, their moral values and the very Orientation of their lifestyle. From the time of birth till death the Limbus are Disciplined in the life full of religious rituals, traditions and culture, devi-devta, bhut-Pret, sime-bhume, nag-nagin and the natural elements. “out of all religions known To this world, only these two religions believe in multiple soul theory” (Subba, 1999).

V. CULTURAL AND TRADITIONAL ASPECTS OF LIMBOO

5.1 LIMBOO LANGUAGE:

Limbu language or yakthunpan is a Sino-Tibetan spoken by the Limbu people of Nepal and Northeastern India (particularly Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Sikkim, Assam and Nagaland) as well as expatriate communities in Bhutan. The Limbu refer to themselves as Yakthung and their language as Yakthungpan. Yakthungpan has four main dialects: Phedape, Chhathare, Tambarkhole and Panthare dialects. Among four dialects, the Phedape dialect is widely spoken and well understood by most Yakthungpan speakers. However, as there are some dominant Panthare scholars who have role to create knowledge and control knowledge in the Limbu communities, Panthare dialect is being popularized as a “standard” Limbu language.

5.2 FAMILY AND MARRIAGE:

The Nuclear family is most prevalent, but vertically Extended families are also common. All the family members are tied together by Bonds of love and affection. The father's property is equally divided among the sons And unmarried daughters. They are divided into a number of exogenous patrilineal clans or thars, Differentiated on a social bar to regulate marriage. All these thars enjoy equal status and thars are totemic regulation of marriage alliance and an indication of descent.

5.3 RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES:

The Limbu cultural and religious life are guided by Mundhum, a religious scripture existing for centuries through oral practice. They have a long tradition of narrating or reciting mundhums and performing rituals and ceremonies in their own distinctive Ways. There are several mundhums as sources of inspiration, information and Enlightenment which considerably help shape the way of life, customs, rites and Rituals from pre-birth rites to after death, knowledge of everyday activities to the Universe, and so on. Limbus believe in their multiple gods and perform 'puja' or Worship to their primitive and animistic deities of the forest and homes. From birth to death, they are disciplined in their lives, which are full of religious rituals and Traditions. They believe in devi-devta (deities), bhut-pret (evil spirits). Men and women Worship the forest deities, but only the women worship women deities.

On the basis of the religious beliefs, the Limbus are divided into two: Yumasiem Who are nature worshippers and are vegetarian, who do not take alcohol. They believe in the godly incarnation, who appears as a saint and known as Yumasiem .The other group is Shremasiam who is a non-vegetarians and takes alcohol. Three stocks of Kiranti people came from the north, known as Lhasagotra the second came from the south and south-east India is known as Kasigotra and the third stock is known as Khambongba-Lungbongba. The young Limbu boy is free to choose His marriage partner within the tribe. But they are strictly exogamous (the custom of Marrying only outside one's own clan) and should marry outside the family kind and class.

5.4 RITUALS

Limbus perform a number of rituals throughout the year. Right from the birth until death they make sure to please their ancestor's spirit guiding them and protecting them throughout. A Phedangba is summoned at every occasion where the family pursues divine intervention.

A Phedangba requires whole lot of tools and Implements to conduct the assigned ritual. Some of those are as such-Kash ko thaal (brass plate), Kalasa (Sacred water pitcher), Peacock Feather, Thaal and Nanglo (Plate and Bamboo Winnowing Basket), Chongey (Pointed bamboo sticks), Dhupauro (Incense burner), Khurpa (Magical dagger), Dumsiko Kanda (Porcupine Quill), Titepati (The Mugwort herb), Kera (Banana), Bans (Bamboo), Banana Leaf, Tulsi (Basil Plant), Jana war ko sing ra dara (Animal's horns and teeth), Khurungi (curved sickle), Dhanus/kand (the Bow and arrow), Dhyangro (double headed drum), Gujo ('S' shaped drum beater), Jhyamta (two piece Cymbals), Ghanti (bells), Mala of seeds of Rudraksha or Ritha (Soap-nut Plant eloeocarpus sphaerucus), Sankha (conch shell), Nalihar(human Forearm Bone), Sarpa Malla (Rosary Made out of snake vertebrate), Amilson (Broom Plant), Chommar (Yak's Tail), Akchata (Uncooked rice kernels), Thunmchey (Bamboo Basket), Supari (Betle nut), Tapari (Plates of sacred plant), etc.

5.5 SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL LIFE

They have a segmentary social system with patrilineal, patrilocal and patrilocal clan Divisions. They are divided into a number of exogenous patrilineal clans or thars, Differentiated on a social bar to regulate marriage. The Nuclear family is most Prevalent, but vertically extended families are also common. The father's property is equally divided among the sons and unmarried daughters. The Limbus are endogamous at the community level and exogamous at the thar level at the time of marriage. Junior levirate and sororate marriage are permissible. Polygamy is not widely practiced.

Living in remote areas, they are leading a life of economic hardship and social Deprivation. Nowadays, they are primarily agriculturists by nature and give less attention to horticultural cash crops. The land is the main resource for them. They used to own a vast area of land. Because of their pecuniary difficulties, most of them had to sell their cultivable lands to other people. As a consequence, they became Agricultural labourers. Able bodied young men of this community have joined defence or in police forces. A very negligible number of families have ventured into setting up a small business. Some of the members of this community are employed

in government services. But this number is also negligible. At present, it is seen that some of them are engaged in various white-collar jobs like teaching at schools and civil servants etc.

5.6 FESTIVALS:

Some of the major festivals observed by Limbu tribes are -

Chasok Tangnam: Also known as Udhauli, this festival is celebrated on the full moon day of the month of Senchengla or Mangsir. It is considered one of the most important cultural festivals of the Limbu community. During the festival, the Limbu community offers the first harvest of the year to their deities and goddess.

Kakphekwa Tangnam: Also known as Maghe Sankranti, this festival is celebrated as the Limbu New Year. During the festival, the Limbu community eats yams, tubers, and sweet potatoes, takes baths, and puts a “tika” mark of the wild yam on their foreheads.

Sisekwa Tangnam: This festival is celebrated on the full moon day of Srawan.

Balihang Tangnam: This is the Limbu version of the Tihar festival.

Sakela: Sakela is a festival primarily observed by the Kirat Rai and Limbu communities, indigenous ethnic groups from Nepal and parts of India.

Sakela Udhauli (going upwards): Celebrated in December, marking the migration of the Kirat people from the plains to the hills.

Sakela Ubhauli (going downwards): Celebrated in May/June, marking the beginning of the monsoon season. During Sakela, the communities worship their ancestral gods, goddesses, and natural deities, seeking blessings, prosperity, and protection.

5.7 LIMBU DANCE:

- a) **Dhan Nach (Paddy Dance):** Celebrates the harvest season, typically performed during Chasamba festival.
- b) **Chyabrung Dance:** Performed during Sakela Udhauli and Ubhauli festivals.
- c) **Palam Nach (Butterfly Dance):** Showcase of Limbu culture and beauty.
- d) **Yakthungba Dance:** Honors the Limbu god, Tagera Ningwaphuma.
- e) **Samyok Khola Dance:** Performed during weddings and social gatherings.

5.8. LIMBU FOLK SONGS:

Limbu folk songs, also known as Samlo, are a variety of ethnic songs from the Limbu community in Nepal.

Paalam Samlo:

A popular Limbu folk song that is sung during chores, work, weddings, festivals, and other social events. It is typically sung in a question and answer format between a boy and a girl, and covers topics such as the origin of creation, human civilization, and love. Traditionally, Paalam was sung without instruments, but today both traditional and modern instruments are used.

Hakparey, tumyanghang, kheeyali, taam-okey, yehang, keylaang, simering, and mundhum samlo.

Other Limbu folk songs that are sung during different occasions with different themes and meanings.

5.9 LIMBU TRADITIONAL INSTRUMENTS:

Limbu Traditional Instruments:

a) Chyabrung:

A hollow, oblong wooden drum that is about two meters in diameter and two feet in length. In Limbu, it is also known as Kay or Ke. In the traditional folk dance of the Limbu, the dancers wear the Chyabrung around their neck and beat it with a palm on one side and a stick on the other.

b) Dhyāngro:

A double-headed membranophone that is used as a ritual frame drum by shamans of the Limbu, Sunuwar, and Tamang peoples.

5.10 LIMBU AND THEIR IDENTITY :

Silam sakma :

Silam Sakma is a symbol that identifies Limbus. A version of this symbol is placed outside house to announce the house belongs to Limbu residents. Limbus belief is this symbol blocks the path of death and protects family members. It is also worn by the community people on their left chest during an event. According to the mythology when Mallas invaded Kiratis in Kathmandu. Mallas started chasing them and Kiratis hid into a cave. They started praying gods and some of them started weaving Silam Sakma. Because of their prayer, the entrance of cave got covered by cobwebs by which the attackers thought there was no one inside and they moved from there. This is how the lives of all hiding kiratis were saved, hence, since then Kiratis started worshipping Silam Sakma and believed that it has the highest religious value.

Tongba :

Tongba is a traditional alcoholic beverage enjoyed by the Limbu people of eastern Nepal and other ethnic groups in the region. This drink is made by fermenting millet and is popular in Himalayan areas due to its warming qualities, especially in colder climates. It is sipped through a bamboo straw, which has a filter at the bottom to keep the millet grains out of the straw. Once the liquid is finished, more hot water is added, allowing one to enjoy multiple rounds of Tongba from the same millet base. For the Limbu people, Tongba is not only a drink but also a symbol of hospitality and community. It's common to share Tongba during gatherings, ceremonies, and festivals.

Limbu art and architecture:

The house of the Limbu is a symbolic representation of a goddess of the Limbu community called yuma. The details of the windows and doors are embroidered with wood carvings depicting different flowers which are used by the Limbu during rituals. Some decorative embroideries done in the wood carvings of the door and windows of the house are the direct representation of gold jewelry worn by Limbu women. In a traditional house of the Limbu, the skirting of the wall is generally painted manually with red mud paint. This is also a symbolic representation of the patuka or the belt worn by the Limbu women.

VI. LIMBUWAN A VANISHING DREAM AND IDENTITY ISSUES:

Limbuwan, the historical region in eastern Nepal, has a deep cultural and political significance for the Limbu people and other indigenous communities of the area. Historically, Limbuwan was an autonomous kingdom until it became part of the unified Nepali state in the 18th century under King Prithvi Narayan Shah. Limboo's are the part of greater Nepali society and It is come under umbrella Nepali samaj. It is always debated in the public discourse by Limboo intellectual that Limboo's are always suppressed by greater Nepali samaj in various front and their culture and Traditions has been dominated through the process of Sanskritisation and Brahminization problems are overlooked. It is noteworthy to mention that Limboo's are neither a part Nepali society before the unification of Nepal by Gorkha king Prithvi Narayana shah in the Limbuwan region. They are never a part of Hindu Barna system, they are tribal animists and worshipper of nature. However it is true that they accept the Nepali culture as the most of Limboo's Speak Nepali as a Lingua franca . Limboo language are spoken in the Eastern parts of Nepal called Limbuwan region i.e Taplejung, Panchthar and Terthum(mostly spoken) Dhankuta, Ilam, Morang , Jhapa, Sunsari , Sankhuasabha district of Nepal .For many Limbus and other communities, the idea of a distinct Limbuwan remains both a cultural identity and a political aspiration, often fueled by the desire for more local autonomy, recognition, and preservation of indigenous rights. Since the 1990s, various political movements have sought to re-establish some form of autonomy or federal province representing Limbuwan. These groups argue that self-governance would allow Limbuwan to preserve its language, culture, and indigenous practices while addressing local needs more effectively. The aspiration gained momentum during Nepal's transition from monarchy to republic, with federalism being introduced in the 2015 constitution. However, the new federal structure did not create a separate Limbuwan province, leading to disappointment and frustration among its proponents.

So, whether Limbuwan is a "vanishing dream" largely depends on the persistence of its advocates, the Nepali state's responsiveness to indigenous rights, and broader public support for local governance. While its full realization seems difficult under the current political framework, Limbuwan continues to live on in the cultural

consciousness and in the form of ongoing advocacy for indigenous rights and regional autonomy. As a dream, it remains alive, though challenging.

VII. CONCLUSION:

The Limboo people of Northeast India, particularly in Sikkim and West Bengal, have a rich history intertwined with the broader historical and cultural fabric of the Himalayan region. Traditionally, the Limboos have shared close ties with the Limbu people in Nepal, with common roots, language, and cultural heritage. They are known for their unique language, “Yakthungpan,” which is part of the Tibeto-Burman family, and a distinct spiritual tradition rooted in animism and shamanism, reflecting their deep connection to nature.

Historically, the Limboos were one of the indigenous communities recognized by the Kingdom of Sikkim, which allowed them a significant degree of cultural autonomy and land rights. Despite integration into the Indian state, they have maintained their heritage through traditional practices, festivals, and rituals, such as Chasok Tongnam, which celebrates harvest and gratitude to nature. Their history is preserved in oral traditions, myths, and folklore, while their distinctive attires, folk dances, and musical forms serve as a testament to their cultural vibrancy.

However, the Limboos continue to face challenges related to the preservation of their language and traditions amid modernization. They have been advocating for recognition as a Scheduled Tribe in Sikkim and greater representation to protect their rights and heritage. In this way, the Limboos of Northeast India are a community deeply rooted in their traditions while navigating the complexities of modern identity and political rights. Their history and culture remain a resilient symbol of their identity, evolving yet steadfast in the face of changing times.

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