

# Sikkim's Indigenous Limboo Language and Culture

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## Abstract:

Limboo (Exonym) the autochthonous tribes of the southern part of the Eastern Himalayas in Sikkim, Darjeeling district of West Bengal, Assam, Eastern Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar (Burma). The original Limboo culture not only came in contact with the alien culture but in the course of time influenced by them. The undercurrent has both implicit and explicit impact on the original Limboo culture, tradition and religion. They consider themselves as a nature worshipper, and have their own mythology (Mundhum), and healer or priest known as Phedangba, Samba, Yeba, Yema. Today, Limboo beliefs and practices are also called Yumaism. Melanie Pappadis, in her book Limbu Folklore (1993) stated-that Limboo believes that the god resides in nature and, therefore, has a very animistic view of nature and its elements. They are free from any icons or images of god, and they separate to themselves from Hinduism and Buddhism.

## Introduction

Like the Lepchas, the Limboos are inhabited the land of present Sikkim from immemorial (Sanyal, 1979,p.7). In his 'The Culture and Religion of Limbu,(1995), Chaitanya Subba states that Limboo is one of the ethnic groups of East Nepal, who has their own distinct culture. They are mostly dominant in Taplegung, Panchthor, Illam, Jhapa, Morong, Sunsari, Dhankutta, Terathum and Sangkhuwa sabha district in an area of 16,358 square kilometers, historically known as "Limbuwan—the abode of the Limbus". This area lies between the Arun River in the west, Sikkim, and the West Bengal state of India in the East. The Northern parts of the plains of Morong, Sunsari and Jhapa in the South and the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), China in the North, almost covering an area of 11,655 square Kilometres. This region is also known as Pallo Kirat. The Koshi, Mechi, and Limbuwan are the original homelands of Limboos, but the language and literature have not flourished compared to Sikkim.

Thanks to the language policy of Sikkim and supported by the Indian Union, the Limboo language was recognized as an official language in 1981 as per the Sikkim Official Languages Act, 1977 (5 of 1977). In Sikkim, as opined by George. Kotturaen in (The Himalayan Gateway, (1983, page 22), the Limboos of Sikkim are an aboriginal tribe of Sikkim, and they occupy the southern slope of Kanchendzonga and settle down mostly in west Sikkim, Daramdan, Sombaria, Thambong, Samdong, Timburbung, Ambotay, Tenjirbung, Hee-Yang-thang, Martam, Samok, So-pakha, Timloon, Sedang, Permak, Chinthang, Tendham, Uttarey, Bandukay, Sopakha, Somak, Sardung, Lingchom, Tickjeck, Langang, Darap, Kurumpangphey, Namphu, Laghay, Siddingbung, Singpheng, Lingbit, Pachaybung, Tamabung, Khesebung, Tamatam, Thingleng, Tingting, Mangsabung, Labing, Gerathang and Tshong are major Limbu inhabited places.

In south Sikkim, some prominent places are Namthang, Tingmu, Namphok, Yangang, and Sokpay. Similarly, Ahoo, Assam Linjay, Bering, Losing, Sowranee, Chota Singtam, Singtam, Namlee, Namchey Bung, Bashilakha, Khamdong Lingsay are in East Sikkim. In North Sikkim, the most prominent is Mangsilla , Tinjir, Namok village.

In Sikkim, the Limbu population, as per the 2011, census released by the Directorate of Economics, Statistics & Monitoring and Evaluation (DES & ME). Government of Sikkim, there are 34292 Limboo speakers, out of 53,703 total population of Sikkim recorded 6,10,577. In West Bengal, Limbu numbered 46,847(2011), and- in 100,550 (2011) in the country (Source, Limbu People-Wikipedia.org)

### **Who is a Limboo?**

According to Iman Sing Chemjong, before the Limboos was called Shen-Mokwan, they came from Mongolia and entered through Lhasa (Tibet) into a province presently called Nepal (formed in 1774 A.D). There were four Mokwan brothers. Among the m, two brothers entered the Eastern part of Nepal, and the other two brothers moved towards the South of India, and finally, they came back to the East part of Nepal through Tista valley and again met their two brothers and decided to leave together in the same place. At that time, said the province had been ruled by the Kiratians. The ruler of Kiratians did not permit the other communities to settle within their province. But finally, after observing the miserable condition of the Shen-Mokwan brothers, they were allowed to settle down within the allotted piece of land.

As a place-prayer, they planted three Aambe Pojama (Mango trees) and surrounded them with three stones and considered them as Sewa-loong, Chang-Jang-Loong, and Phak-tang-Loong and started worshipping before the battle. Large numbers of ascendants were increasing day by day from that Shen-Mokwan family. With the consequence of increasing ascendants of the Shen-Mokwan family, Kiratians was considered insecure and threat. Then the Kitarians ruler planned to drive them out, which resulted in an aggression on the part of the Shen-Mokwan families also. Shen-Mokwan also started to fight against and ultimately they defeated the Kiratians and occupied the area, and settled the Eastern part of Nepal. The leaders of Shen-Mokwan renamed that place “Limbuwan,” and they changed their name from Shen Mokwan to Yakthungba (endonym), which means ford defender, and later the entire Yakthugba race began to call themselves Limbu(exonym), presently also known as Subba. Literally, Lingba denotes “self-grown” or Emerged. Limbuwan may be derived from Lingba”. (Kainla, 1992). The Lilimhang of Susuwaden (within the region of seven rivers) and comes under the progeny of Limbukhang and “Limbus” were great-grandson of Lelimhang.(Mabohang and Dhunge,1955).

During the latter half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, the local people drove the troops of Lhaso mong from their Janapandas (Small Republic), who were ruling for about 12 years in the near west of the Singalila range and later captured by the local people with the help of their weapon Bow(Li) and Arrow (Toong), then began to call their land as Limbuwan and their troops were called Limboos(Dahal, 1984). Administrative power (Subangi), special land tax and judicial power (Anmal System), and autonomy power were granted to Limboos (Shrestha, 1985d). Limbus were functioning their administrative power smoothly, and laws and acts were implemented in their region or locality accordingly in favours of the local public interest. They never misused their power and autonomy.

Rejoice their power and administration (As Subangi) till 1960 and with some conspiracy took place and the land reform act was implemented in 1966. After that power, privileges, and facilities of Limboo were ended. Most Limboo communities are depend on Agriculture and traditional farming is the main source of income and population of Limboo in Nepal is presently 700000 (Nepal Census, 2011 (National Report/November 2012) source [www.ethnologue.com/Latest](http://www.ethnologue.com/Latest) Nepal census data.

### **Language:**

As regards, Limboo Language comes under the Tibeto-Burman Family or commonly considered as trans-Himalayan language. It has accents i.e.

1. Panch-Tharey

2. Tcha-Tharey
3. Tam-barey
4. Phedapay (Widart and Subba 1985. Vandriem 1987. Kaila 2002).

It doesn't mean that the four dialects are significantly different. They are interrelated each other. The way of conversation and understanding of language is the same, but the speaking tone is different because of the regional settlement and the local environment. At literary and educational aspects, the developments of Limboo grammar and fonts have undoubtedly helped in the development of the language in the community. The contribution by late Shri. B. B. Muringla, an eminent author and Limbu linguist has been tremendous.

### Education:

In Sikkim, since the year 1968, Limboo language was started to educate as a vernacular or optional subject. After a continuous efforts placed by the Limboo leaders before the Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal (1923-82). Chogyal Palden Thodup Namgyal, finally in the year 1968 approved the order to teach the Limboo language up to Class II level. Late. Itcha Purna Das Limboo of Samdong, West Sikkim was appointed on 21.03.1968, as a first Limboo language Teacher, by the Govt of Sikkim, and posted him at Government Samdong Primary School, West Sikkim, "Subba JR" Page 28.

Subsequently, Limboo Language classes was upgraded upto Class V in the year 1975, Class VII in 1979 and Class VIII in 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1980, Class IX and X in 1981 and XI in 1983 & XII in 1984. (Subba JR, 2019).

The Limboo language was taught up to undergraduate level as MIL (Modern Indian Language) as an optional subjects under North Bengal University since 2000, in two different Sikkim Government Colleges, i.e in Sikkim Government College- Tadong, under Shri. A. B. Subba (Muringla), and Sikkim Government College, Namchi, under Shri. Bhogishor Limboo. Respectively, it was further upgraded as an Elective subject and included as one of the Compulsory Regional Language /Languages (CRL) under Sikkim University in July 2008.

Again from 2012 onward, the Limboo language has been further upgraded as an honours subject at the under graduate level on par with other general disciplines. In 2016 and 2021, Limboo was introduced at the post-graduate and doctoral Levels respectively, under Sikkim Central University. Apart from the earlier two colleges at Gangtok and Namchi, other higher institutes of higher learning are also imparting Limboo teaching in the state. It is noteworthy that even the newly established Government College at, Gyalshing, West Sikkim, began teaching Limboo since its inception in July 2011. Shri Birkha Man Subba and Shri Bhim Bahadur Limboo are the first two Limboo Assistant Professors of the Sikkim Government College, Gyalshing, West Sikkim.

In addition to Limboo pedagogy, Limboo magazines, papers, and leaflets are published regularly in Sikkim. Publication work exists not only in Sikkim but also in other states of India like Darjeeling, Assam, Nepal, and Burma etc. However, Sikkim plays a crucial role to promulgating and flourishing the Limboo language, religion and culture. Besides this Post graduate course started in 2016 and PhD 2021 from Sikkim Central University with Shri Bal Bahadur Limboo as Associate professor cum Head, and two Assistant Professors Mr Tej Raj Limboo and Ms. Kausila Limboo with first batch 20 Limboo Students from 1<sup>st</sup> August 2016. (Limbu Folklore, 2020, page 33/34).

1. Ash Bahadur Limboo
2. Budhi Lall Limboo
3. Bhim Bahadur Limboo
4. Birkha Man Limboo

5. Asha Limboo
6. Hangma Limboo
7. Mona Hang Limboo
8. Samphungma Limboo
9. Mohan Limboo
10. Bisen Limboo
11. Sanjyoti Limboo
12. Teju Limboo
13. Bina Kumari Limboo
14. Sushma Limboo
15. Man Rani Limboo
16. Suhang Lall Limboo
17. Suk Hangma Limboo
18. Najum Hangma Limboo
19. Chandra Kala Limboo
20. Binod Limboo

Shri , A.B Subba, who now teaches at Sikkim University and he is the first Limboo Phd scholar from the Limboo Department, stated that the ‘Limboo language is one of the oldest languages of North East India and Nepal.

Table- 01

Limboo reading students in PG & PhD Level in Sikkim University

SL.NO	Intake Capacity	PG		Admitted for PG	PhD	Pass out PG	Drop Out
2016-18	20	Boys	09	20	-	20	-
		Girls	11				
2017-19	20	Boys	07	20	-	19	01
		Girls	13				
2018-20	20	Boys	10	20	-	17	03
		Girls	10				
2019-21	20	Boys	10	20	-	20	-
		Girls	10				
2020-22	20	Boys	7	20	01	19	01
		Girls	13				
2021-23	20	Boys	9	20	-	09	11
		Girls	11				
2022-24	20	Boys	04	20	-	19	01
		Girls	16				
2023-25	20	Boys	04	11	-	-	-
		Girls	07				
<b>Total</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>Boys</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>151</b>	<b>01</b>	<b>123</b>	<b>17</b>
		<b>Girls</b>	<b>91</b>				

Sources: Department of Limboo, Sikkim University and Field work.

Limboo language is spoken in Sikkim, Darjeeling hills and in some part of North East State of India, Bhutan and Burma etc., who consider themselves as they are not a Nepali (Smarika, the Limboo language: its origin and development, 2010).

### **Occupation:**

Limboo communities are nature lover and mostly they are settle down in the hilly terrain region, they are mostly engage their live in agriculture. And agriculture is the main source of income and not only that they are also considered as expert in the rearing of cattle, mulching cows, piggery and poultry etc. They cultivate all kinds of seasonal crops; most of their lands are used in the farming of cardamom and ginger, in order to generate their income source. At present, hopefully 15% of the total population of Limboo community are engaged in the state and government sector and least 5% are in the business and other activities.

### **Culture and traditional Practice:**

The Limboo societies are bound by the Compaq law and social antiquity. They have their own cultural pattern and Religious practices. Like maternal culture, Festivals, auspicious Days, months, calendars, and years cycle systems.

In a religious point of view, they have their own religious Leader or Priest, like as under:-

1. Phejukum Phedangba
2. Sawale Samba
3. Yeboko Yeba/Yemas
4. Yetcham sambha
5. Ongsisis and
6. Yuma sam etc.

The priest has their own duties to perform the religious rites, such as Death Rites, Mangena, Nahngma, Tongsing, Phungsok thim. Here they have a functional division, Phedangba, sambha, Yeba, and Yema are different among themselves and social boundaries in the Natural Mundhums. Although, they are not able to act all kinds of Mundhums. When I entered into my deep research project work, I found, many people do not know how many types of priests are there in the Limboo community and what kinds of mythology, they can able to chant by a specific priest, the people treated as same, but as per my understanding, they are different and we should not treat them as same, because they are bound by religious law and their duties are very specific and they are distinct by their own way.

Otherwise, if we cannot check on time and the same practices are lying for long, then Limboo's religious specialty will be become extinct. From the future perspective, we should have to specify those priests and check unlawful practices, by providing separate identities and preservative thought needed to improve the community, which can only help us to mould and save the desire of the Limboo community.

The Folk culture is considered as one of the backbone of the community. Folk songs, riddles, idioms, proverbs, and verses are oral literature, Logical, reality, specialty is sheep inside the Folk, in Limboo community, they have their own Oral tradition history, culture, place, monuments, secret places, and mundhums and it plays a vital role to shape, promulgate and develop community.

### **Folk songs:**

Buddhi Lal Khamdhak states that oral literature interrelated with different social ethics and belief system, Limboos is deeply rich and distinctive in tradition. They have their own mythology, legend, myths and corpus of songs. (Smarika, Limboo Folk Literature, 2010).

Ancient Limboo traditional songs, which carry their own value and significance.

Folk songs

1. Mundhum Samlo
2. Tumyanghang samlo
3. Hakparay
4. Tam o:kay
5. Phungwa:changma
6. Em:lo
7. Khyali
8. Abu
9. Khoi Khoi
10. Po?ha etc.

### **Limboo's Pilgrimage Places:**

History related Limboo secret Places in present Nepal are Yasok(Kumma Yok and Kusa Yok), Bijaypur(Dharan), Bura Subba(Dharan), Phaktep, Sa:ho namphet lung, Tamor, Muring-yok, Namyobung, Sinam, and in Sikkim Srijunga Wadhen(Martam), Saplung(Martam), Lebumma Pungwane yuk him(Darap), Mangsilla(North Sikkim), Aho, Srijunga Martam Manghim, Srijunga Study Centre at Yumang Thegu, West Sikkim and research centre in Sikkim(India).

### **Traditional Instruments:**

Besides, among the Limboo performing art and culture, Limboo Musical instrument, which shows its own uniqueness and antiquity, like-

1. Ke or Chyabrung (a hallow cylindrical drum)
2. Negra(Kettle Drum or Royal Drum)
3. Phenje:kom(iron harp) Machunga
4. Mikla:kom(Bamboo harp) simikla-Binayo
5. Udungna(Bamboo gutire) commonly called Tungna.
6. Mephra(Murowle)
7. Muk:phra(Basure)
8. Kengna(Brass Bell)
9. Sengphek:wa(Leaf)
10. Chet:theya/ Yethala
11. Sirpong
12. Pongay

### **Politics:**

Limboo communities are active in the politics as well as in the social activities from the ancient times and now in the present outlook, there is no any kind of restriction to participate women's in the social functions, man and women are treated equally in the mundhum as well as in the Limboo society. The Limboo communities played crucial role to consecration of Chogyal Dynasty in Sikkim (Kirat-janakriti(1974), In the context of Sikkim(India) Limboo community have bunch of historical evidences are found in ancient history as well as in the present democratic state. According to Hooker's 'Himalayan Journals' "Sikkim itself meaning new house in the Limbu Langauge "Songhim" or "Songkhim", "Sukhim" then "Sikhim" or "Sikkim". Tibetan call Denzong-"bras;ljong" and lepcha- "renjong" and LHO-MON-TSHONG-SUM which identifies the TIBETAN, LEPCHAS and LIMBUS as the three ORIGINAL RACES OF THE KINGDOM OF SIKKIM. During Chogyal's Kingdom(1642-1975 AD) Limboo communities was ignore by the Government of India even as Sikkim are happen to an 22<sup>nd</sup> state of Indian union.



Further, in the Namgyal Dynasty, all the sections of the communities are protected by providing reservations seats in the State Council of Ministers in 1967 election was conducted as accordingly.

1. Bhutua-Lepcha- 7 seats
2. Nepali- 7 seats
3. Sangha- 1 seat
4. Tsong(Limboo)- 1 seat
5. Scheduled Caste- 1 seat
6. General- 1 seat
7. Chogyal's Nominations- 6 seats

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Total - 24 seats

Late Harka Dhoj Tshong was elected as first councillors from Tshong seat in 1967 from National Party. Consequently after him lethal people manipulate Limboo leaders and One own Tshong seat are dilute in the General Seat in the daylight hours. They consider 1973 -75 as dark year year for Limboo community.

Thus after merged into Indian union on 16 May 1975, all the sections of Sikkim's communities Bhutia, Lepcha and Nepali including (Tshong) Limboo are protected under the Article 371F.

After a long struggling of both the communities (Limboo and Tamang), the movement was started by Tamang Buddhist Association in early 1950 from Darjeeling west Bengal, after the alien contact with Limboo organisation like. Akhil Sikkim Kirat Chumlung was formed in Tharpu, West Sikkim in 1973 lead by Ashok Kumar Limboo as Leader and supported by Sancha Man Limboo, Birbal Limboo and others Limboo Associations and similarly movement was jointly started by Akhil Sikkim Kirat Chumlung and all India Tamang Buddhist Association in 1981, Sikkim state govt and members of the association submit memorandum to INDIA lead Central Govt to put forward to grant schedule tribe status and seat reservation to Limboo and Tamang Community, as a result in the year of 2003. NDA Govt. Led by Atal Bihari Vajpayee and finally Schedule Tribe bill was place and the parliament has declared on 3 January 2003, according to Article 342(1) with the support of many others state MPs, like Promod Mahajan, 8 TMC MPs and Miss Mamta Banerjee the than Union Cabinet Minister of Indian Rail ways, they all support strongly for ST status in the Parliament then after bills get final assent from the President of India on 7 January 2003. 21<sup>st</sup> February letter vide D.O. NO12016/62/2000-ta (rl). (Vol.III), Mr B.S Basin, Secretary of the Tribal Affairs Govt of India, enclosed copy of the Schedule Caste and Schedule Tribe orders, (Amendment Act) of 2002. Directed to sate Govt to provide ST/SC status then Governor of Sikkim act accordingly on 25 Feb 2003, in order maintain status Quos, reservation seat, delimitation and examine 371(F) 12 member of committee was formed and instead of having all evidences both the community are politically suppress and victimize to gets their constitutional seats in the state assembly till date.

Limbu are considered themselves as Sikkimese origin Limboo, not Nepali, they speak Nepali as idiomatic language only, and they have their own Religion called Yumaism, customs, culture, tradition, language. Even though Bhutia and Lepcha called them as Tshong, which means Limboo, not Nepali (Hooker 1854, 1905:128, Richard Rislely 1894, 1989:37. Hudson, Pandulepi VOL-60, page-240).

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**भारत का राजपत्र**  
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EXTRAORDINARY

भाग II — खण्ड 1

PART II — Section 1

प्रतिबन्ध से प्रकाशित

PUBLISHED BY AUTHORITY

सं- 10] नई दिल्ली, बुधवार, जनवरी 8, 2003/पौष 18, 1924  
 No. 10] NEW DELHI, WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 8, 2003/PAUSA 18, 1924

इस भाग में दिए हुए संख्या दी जाती है जिससे कि यह अलग संकलन के रूप में रखा जा सके।  
 Separate paging is given to this Part in order that it may be filed as a separate compilation.

**MINISTRY OF LAW AND JUSTICE**

(Legislative Department)

New Delhi, the 8th January, 2003/PAUSA 8, 1924 (Saka)

The following Act of Parliament received the assent of the President on the 7th January, 2003 and is hereby published for general information:—

**THE SCHEDULED CASTES AND SCHEDULED TRIBES ORDERS  
(AMENDMENT) ACT, 2002**

No. 10 of 2003

[7th January, 2003]

An Act to provide for the inclusion in the lists of Scheduled Tribes, of certain tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within tribes or tribal communities, equivalent names or synonyms of such tribes or communities, removal of area restrictions and bifurcation and clubbing of entries; imposition of area restriction in respect of certain castes in the lists of Scheduled Castes, and the exclusion of certain castes and tribes from the lists of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, in relation to the States of Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Goa, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Manipur, Mizoram, Orissa, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu, Tripura, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal:

Enacted by Parliament in the Fifty-third Year of the Republic of India as follows:—

1. This Act may be called the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Orders (Amendment) Act, 2002. Short title.

2 THE GAZETTE OF INDIA EXTRAORDINARY [PART II—

Definitions.

2. In this Act, unless the context otherwise requires,—

(a) "Scheduled Castes Order" means the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950, made by the President under article 341 of the Constitution;

(b) "Scheduled Tribes Orders" means the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950, the Constitution (Uttar Pradesh) Scheduled Tribes Order, 1967 and the Constitution (Sikkim) Scheduled Tribes Order, 1978, made by the President under article 342 of the Constitution.

Amendment of Scheduled Castes Order.

3. The Scheduled Castes Order is hereby amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the First Schedule.

Amendment of Scheduled Tribes Orders.

4. The Scheduled Tribes Orders are hereby amended in the manner and to the extent specified in the Second Schedule.



## Conclusion

In the above all observation, the Limboo community have its own unique history and various living oral tradition, still exist in the society, but it needs more preservation and develop humanism for future generation, in the Limboo culture and folk literature, there is Large scope is still lying for research scholars.

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