

The Limbu Community: A Cultural and Socio-Economic Analysis

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Abstract

The Limbu community belongs to the Mongoloid race who are known as the nature worshippers and followers of the *Yuma* religion. They are the followers of supreme goddess *Tagera Ningwazphuma* who is the symbol of a feministic figure and is also regarded as the symbol of nature. According to the belief of the Limbu community, she is the creator of the universe, earth, celestial beings, and sentient and non-sentient beings. The Limbu community is rich in culture, customs, traditions, and language. They have their own mythology, legends, folklore, and oral and written literature. The community belongs to the egalitarian and agrarian society. *Samjik mundhum* is their philosophy of Limbu life. It contains holy narratives, a classical language used during the performance of social rites and rituals. The main purpose of the study is to keep the culture related subjects at one place to understand them in effortless way. Another purpose of this study is to protect and preserve the cultural heritage of Limbus through the academic work. In the past, many Limbu cultural heritage, folklore have been already lost by the community due to the cultural invasion and ignorance. These are the means of identity of Limbus which defines the ethnicity of Limbus. This study may be a good source for the academic society and the concerned community to seek the knowledge on the particular subject.

Keywords: Yakthung, Samjik Mundhum, Tagera Ningwazphuma, Manghim

Introduction

Limbus are an ethnic community primarily one of the natives of India and Nepal. Here the write up is on Indian context. In India, they are one of the Schedule Tribes belonging to Mongolian race. Limbu has considerable population in Sikkim who are known as oldest inhabitants. Apart from Sikkim, they are living in West Bengal, Assam, Uttarakhand, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and so on. There are more than one lakh Limbu population in India. The estimated total population of Limbu community in the world is approximately more than seven lakhs but unfortunately, there is no adequate data to support it.

A vast majority of Limbu people are living in Nepal, Myanmar, England, Hongkong, Bhutan etc. The culture, customs and traditions and language are deeply rooted to India and Nepal. Hence, Nepal has remained the ancestral place of Limbus which has shared borders with India, linguistic and cultural practices. As per the *yakthung samjik mundhum* this itself was created in the Limbuwana areas of present Nepal. The Limbus called themselves as *yakthung* which is an endonym and *limbu*, *subba* and *tsong/chang* are the exonyms.

Anthropologist Tylor (2016, 7) has defined culture as “Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom,

and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” As per the above definition Limbus have well defined culture and civilizations.

The main purpose of the research is to examine the Limbu cultural, traditions, languages and practices that contribute to a unique identity and continuity of heritage. The study investigates the impacts of modernization and globalization on the preservation of Limbu culture and traditions etc. For the particular study, not much secondary sources have been cited. Data have been collected from the field work and interviews from the Limbu shamans of both India and Nepal a few years ago.

Socio-Economic Structure

The Limbu community has basically an agrarian society. They depend on the agricultural products they produce from their farms. They also keep livestock rearing such as cows, pigs, fowls, fish, goat, sheep etc. for their livelihood. Now-a-days, they have started weaving of Limbu costumes and to earn little money to meet up daily expenses for their family. Due to the increasing population, not much cultivable lands have been left for agriculture, people have opted to run business, shopkeeping, home stay, green house and so on for their income. Many Limbu people are serving in armed forces, state and central government services and public enterprises but none of them are billionaires so far.

Language and Literature

Limbus have well developed language belong to the Trans-Himalayan language family. They called it “*yakthung pa:n*” with four dialects viz. *chathare*, *panthare*, *tamorkhole*, and *phedappe* (van Driem 1987: Subba, 2016, 52). The speakers are conversant to any dialect. They are not specific to any Limbu sub-clans. There are approximately four lakhs Limbu speakers around the globe. Along with Limbu language, all forms of literature are taught in the Post Graduate level in Sikkim University, Alpine University (Private) and Kangchenjunga State University and Ph.D course is offered in the Sikkim University. They have their own script which is known as *Sirijunga* or Limbu script. It was coined by *Sirijunga Hang* or *Sirijunga-I* in between ninth and tenth century.

Religious Practices

Limbus have a common belief system where ever they live. They are nature worshippers and do not worship idol. Their religion is called *yuma* which is embedded in nature and human and guided by the *yakthung samjik mundhum*. *Mundhum* is their grand philosophy based on the oral tradition. Most important aspect of creation of earth was to bring life, nature, beauty, development and creation of human being. They are the followers of supreme goddess *Tagera Ningwaphuma*. *pheli phangsams* (Limbu shamans) are the repository of *samjik mundhum* and perform as the mediator between human, deities and gods. They are the guardians of Limbu society. Even they work for the welfare of other living beings and non-living things too. Apart from this, many Limbus follow Christianity and Hinduism.

Traditional Dresses and Ornaments

The Limbu people are rich in culture, customs and traditions. Limbu women wear traditional dresses such as *mekhli*, *pathang*, *hembari*. They wear jewelry like *samyangphung*, *namphung*, *yang itchi*, *langbangi*, *hukpangi*, *nesse*, *swagepcho*, *thungri*, *mundri*, *kandhi* and *labena*. The traditional dresses of males are *lape:ta*, *su:mba*, *topri*, *ningkipma te:t*, *lang majaa*, *pangmori itchi* etc. They use to keep *pheja* (khukuri) as the weapon for self-defense and also as a tool for day-to-day domestic works. Offering of *paga* in case

of male and *patha:ng* (shawl) for female to honor the chief guest in the meeting or programmes is an important tradition in the society. Only the chief guests of the meeting or occasion and *pele phangsams* can wear it. Now-a-days, there are some transformations in the Limbu culture that *silam sakma* (symbol of protection) has become quite popular among the Limbus. They wear it with much respect and love anywhere and anytime irrespective of age and gender.

Traditional Songs

The traditional Limbu songs are called *pa:lam* considered as the soul of Limbus. *Pa:lams* are song in different occasions like marriage ceremony, fairs, harvesting season, during weeding of maize plants, travelling and the like. There are various kind of *pa:lams* such as *cha:rkhole*, *tamor khole*, *mewa khole*, *phedappe* etc. The Limbu community has another type of traditional song called *hakpa:re* or gentleman song which is song by learned men and women folks of the society. It is song during marriage ceremony to bless the bride and bridegroom and *netti phungwa cha:ngma samlo* to foretell their future happenings. *Hakpa:re* singing competition also takes place during the ceremony. Both ladies and gentlemen can participate in the competition. It becomes a group song where they gather in a place. A learned man or female starts to sing the song which is to be followed by other fellows for chorus. It is like teacher-student teaching and learning process. *Tamke o:kma samlo* is song in the field to encourage farmers during weeding of maize plants. A gentle lullaby song called *ollo samlo* is song to let child to sleep. *Kheyali* is a very typical song with less tuning but have greater depth in meaning. It is just like a reciting the poem on the spot. It is like a dialogue poem. For this, one should have proficiency in particular language and also should have good presence of mind to reply the indirect questions of first person or who started the *kheyali*. They can introduce to each other through *kheyali*. It can be performed specially by the young adult girls and boys and also by the aged people of the community. It is like a conversation between two to three persons. They introduce to each other and have talks through this medium. There is another song called *tumyehang samlo* which is song by learned old folks and *pele-phangsams* (Limbu shamans) in the marriage ceremonies, end of the final day of death ritual and after the performance of one night and three night's *tongsing* (biggest ritual).

Traditional Dance and Music

Limbus have various kind of traditional dances. *Yazlang* or paddy dance word seems to be common and performed along with *pa:lam* but the type of dance depends on the song you sing. There are slow and fast dances which are imitated from the birds and animals. *Yazlang* was created and imitated from a bird of sparrow family and the tuning of song ends with “*ha..ha..ha.*” There are some rules to be followed while dancing with partners. If you have blood relationship with your partner, you are not allowed to dance. They have to introduce each other first whether they belong to same blood relationship. In case if they find themselves in such relationship, they should give up the dance immediately and find another partner who is free from such relationship. Everyone and every age group irrespective of gender may participate and enjoy their culture. Other community people also join and dance together. The traditional dance called *ke la:ng* (a dance along with drum) is the most valued dance because it is a symbol of Limbu folk culture. It is danced during marriage ceremonies, to receive very important dignitaries in functions and happy moments. These traditional dances are imitated from the bird, butterfly and the animals such as *puttuke la:ng* (dove dance), *takmi la:ng* (elephant dance), *khire?la:ng* (deer dance), *muya la:ng* (eagle) etc.

Limbus have two types of musical drums. *Ke* or *cheyabrung* is a symbol of Limbu folk culture as stated above. As per Khajum (2071 BS), it is made up of skin of tiger and *hongsing* (*Gmelia Arborea sp.*) and *sangesing* (*Tsuga Brunoniana sp.*) trees (14-15). It depicts the characters of human-being and animal. It was made by *namsami* who was a human, in the memory of his eldest brother *kesami* (tiger). Limbus play this *ke* during the marriage ceremony, house warming and during the reception of high dignitaries in some special occasions. It is played in the memory and honour of brother *kesami* followed by songs and dances. Another instrument is *negara* (kettle drum) which is considered as royal drum of Limbus. It is a pair of two drums made up of copper with minor and major scales. These are played during the marriage ceremony, death rites, Limbu *manghim* (temple) and reception of high dignitaries in some special occasions. In the past, it was played during the victory in the war. It is used in Sikkim and some places of West Bengal. A hand made small *miklakom* and *phenjekom* are common musical instruments. They even use plant leaves to enjoy music.

Foods and Drinks

Food habit of Limbus is more or less common to other communities do. The staple foods are rice, curry, wheat, meat, vegetables and side dishes. They are mostly non-vegetarian and some of them are vegetarians. Apart from these, there are some traditional foods such as *sekarjiyang*, *yangben*, *mangdak tak*, *phappa tak*, *ha:kwa*, *ma:nda*, *mangdak khareng*, *kerez khareng* etc. *kinama/chembigik* or fermented soybean food is important dish for them to consume. These are the main source of protein, fat, vitamins etc. In Limbu, *thi* is an integral part of food culture. It is a type of traditional beer extracted specially from millet, rice, wheat and fruits. Further, *laksi* a traditional alcohol which is extracted from *thi* by the process of evaporation. *Tongba* has a great cultural significance in Limbu culture. It is widely used in various rituals as offerings during the invocation of gods and deities. Offering of *tongba* is an honour to the guests who comes to visit one's home. It has remained an inevitable part of the Limbu culture and tradition.

Traditional Sports

The Limbu community has two kinds of sports viz. *to:ng apma* and *ponglung lepma*. Former one is associated with the archery and later one is related with shot put. Both are closely related with the *samjik mundhum* and day today cultural practices. They gather together and play those sports in special occasions.

Folk Arts

There are a few folk arts to mention here that Limbus are good wood crafters. They have expertise in building beautiful traditional houses using maximum wood products. One can see those arts in Limbu *manghim(s)* and traditional Limbu houses. They have expertise in making *ke* in scientific way and make all the objects they require in day today life. Weaving of *thakka* (dhaka-a corrupt word of *thakka*) clothes is also an art for them to meet their expenses, employment, and means to develop and promote their culture.

Festivals

In Limbu society, festivals are observed in different seasons. *Chasok tongnam* is a harvest festival. It is celebrated in the month of November to December. Newly harvested rice, millet beer, fruits etc are offered to deities for good yielding of crops in coming days and it is celebrated to thank deities and gods for letting them alive by offering foods and good health. Another festival *yokwa tongnam* is one of the important

festivals. It is also called *yumang tongnam*. The entire village people gather and celebrate the festival. It is a festival of worshipping the nature and deities before sowing of crops for bumper crops, fruits etc. *Kokphekla tongnam* falls on the month of mid-January. They worship the deities and offer roots, tubers, greater yams, wild yams, sweet potato etc. *Sisekpa tongnam* which falls in the month of July. It is an auspicious day for them as it is the end of the famine, hunger etc. It is said that the goddess of harvest may bring plenty of fruits, crops, flowers etc in the future too.

Conclusion

As stated above, Limbus are rich in culture, customs and tradition, language and history. To some extent, they have well preserved so far. They are rich folklore which are source for indigenous knowledge for generations to come. The Limbu language is well developed in comparison to other contemporary languages. Majority of Limbus are well educated but everyone is busy for the livelihood, no time for family, no time for society, no time for own culture, no time for learning one's own mother tongue and so on. They are on the verge of losing their identity. Nobody and nothing can be blamed for the loss. The community itself is responsible for the cause. Just being educated, earning money and becoming rich and earning name and fame is nothing without these valuable identities. Therefore, they are to be promoted and conserved by each and every person concerned, which is the utmost need of hour. Globalization has affected the Limbu culture and traditions by the changing life styles, rapidly growing technologies, new ideas which has significantly overshadowed the existing traditional practices and belief systems. In other hand, Limbus are connected to cultural exchanges and global markets, it may shift to more homogenized cultural expressions which is potential to lead towards the dilution of uniqueness of one's customs, religion, and language. However, globalization may provide opportunities for revitalization and preservation of Limbu identity through broader awareness and appreciation of their cultural heritage. It has remained the potential area of interest for the researchers and community for the future.

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