

ETHNO HISTORY AND FLUID IDENTITY OF THE LIMBOO TRIBE OF SIKKIM

SUMMARY of THESIS

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BABASAHEB BHIMRAO AMBEDKAR UNIVERSITY
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[SUMMARY OF THESIS]

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Sikkim, before the formation of the Namgyal Dynasty was occupied by the Lepchas and the Limboos, ruled independently by their own chiefs. The political tension prevailing in Tibet made the Tibetan monks flee to Sikkim which led to the establishment of the Namgyal Dynasty and this dynasty unified the three ethnic communities of Sikkim i.e. the Lepchas, the Bhutia and the Limboos under one umbrella, established what is now known as ‘Sikkim’ and ruled this region for more than three hundred years. In the beginning, the Limboos opposed the rule of the Namgyals, fought against them but ended with the acceptance of the Namgyal rule, for they were offered better position by their ruler. The treaty of Lho Mon Tsong sum stands upright reminding of the old brotherhood treaty among the Lepchas, Bhutias and the Limboos. These three communities had taken a solemn oath that they would not fight among themselves and would remain united with one another.

The oral narrative of Limboos talks of their homeland Limbuwan (modern Eastern Nepal and modern Western Sikkim) which was divided into seventeen districts and was ruled by ten powerful chiefs. Though their oral narration talks about the ten Limboo chiefs, it never discusses about their supreme king. The absence of the supreme King might have made the Limboos get attached to Sikkim through an annual tribute; thereby accepting the suzerainty of Phuntsok Namgyal, the first king

of Sikkim. Later, the policies of the Namgyal rulers towards the Limboos and their weak administration made it easier for the neighbouring countries to raid on them quite often. The neighbouring countries such as Nepal and Bhutan kept on attacking Sikkim where both were successful in number of occasions. In fact, the ambition of the Gurkhas to control trade route to Tibet had lured them to conquer the part of Limbuwan (present east Nepal) for which the Gurkha rulers lured the Limboo chiefs with the right of land ownership. The Gurkha invasion as well as the willing submission through a generous treaty, battles of conquest and conspiracies made the land of the Limboos get divided into two making the Limboos straddle between the two nations of modern Nepal and India (Sikkim), thereby giving the Limboos two different identity.

This marginal hill tribe had collaborated with the state building processes both in Nepal and Sikkim. Political antagonism has resulted in their land being divided into two, thereby making the Limboos, a community which straddles the two nations of Nepal and India. Great battles were fought, political boundaries changed, old system of Governance was replaced by new ones; this ethnic group, however, has managed to survive despite such sharp changes. The identity of this community have been continuously re-defined and re-interpreted, which have made this tribe sustain fluid identity under their changing history. The history of the Limboos particularly rests on the narration of stories of their ancestors by different agents in different periods of time, sometimes constructed by people on the basis of their preferences. It is this fragmented memories that has gained acceptance in present day. Looking at the history and polity of the Limboos it has been examined that their identity has been changed time and again in the Namgyal era and after its downfall, in the way which would best suit the interest of the time. Their identity has been defined in different

ways fulfilling different need of the hour. This has made the researcher conclude that the Limboos were the aboriginal inhabitants of Sikkim who had undergone changes with change in time, thereby changing their identity. Their identity has been impermanent.

The change in the boundaries, trading occupation, shifting of the villages, scarcity of food and resources and the process of acculturation made the Limboos gain different identity in the modern era. With the influx of inexpensive Nepalese labour force by the British for raising the state revenues, the Limboos began to get acculturated into their fold, with the abolition of Tsong seat in the State Assembly they began to lose their distinct identity and finally got submerged into the Nepalese fold. Though they are acknowledged to be one of the earliest settlers of the Sikkim along with the Lepchas but the colonial administrative discourse progressively classified them as Nepalese when the land revenue rates were finalized. It is true that a small proportion of Limboos have migrated to Sikkim in the 19th century from Nepal and other surrounding areas but this later migration of the Limboos in small amount also to some extent changed the fate of the Limboos from being indigenous to migrant.

With the migration of the Nepalese, the Limboos mingled with the so called Nepalese section of Sikkimese citizenry over the period of time testifying their openness and high degree of tolerance, living side by side, unable to keep themselves largely to themselves. It seems that the preponderant Nepali culture against the Limboos never worried them until they submerged strongly within the Nepali fold where their own ethnic markers faded in the process. They intermingled to such an extent that made authors like Basnet (1974) to believe that the very name 'Sikkim' was the gift of the Nepalese, while the accepted fact is that the word 'Sikkim' is of the Limboo origin which means 'new house'.

The Limboos have adopted a new way of life influenced especially by the Hindu caste members, subjected to the process of Hinduization. The Hindu religion replaced their tribal faith whose oral tradition could not legitimize their tribal religion of Yumaism. Apart from the process of acculturation and assimilation, the influence of modernisation is clearly visible among this ethnic group. It is only recently while struggling for their rights and resources that they have started specifying their culture and religious symbols as a dagger in fighting their distinct identity. They have started rejecting the Hindu notions, reformed their religion and have even erected new religious structures. Marginalisation of Limboos has perhaps sharpened their ethnic identities and now they are trying to protect their identity from the onslaught of other culture.

With the fall of the Namgyal rule and the merger of the Sikkim with the Indian Union, the Limboos began to bargain with the newly formed democratic government, through the newly formed associations. In spite of individual differences, the sense of common ethnicity never remained excluded. With the coming up of democratic government or say perhaps before that, Limboos had already started coming under the so called 'Nepalese' fold. But the process of maintaining the distinct identity was greatly accelerated with the birth of democracy and the end of monarchy. The Limboos community used their history, religion and language as important symbolic sources for furthering ethnic claims of tribal identity and indigeneity. The struggle to be recognized as 'Scheduled tribe' in Sikkim indicates that tribal identity is no longer a sign and symbol of subalternity and oppression but political consciousness. Finally the Constitution Schedule Castes and Schedule Tribes Order (Amendment) Act, 2003 (No. 10 of 2003) dated January 8, 2003 included Limboos and Tamangs in the list of Schedule Tribes by the amendment of the Constitution (Sikkim) Schedule Tribes

Order, 1978 after entry 2, namely “3. Limboo and 4. Tamang”. With the inclusion of the Limboos in the category of Schedule tribes of India, they began to further their demand by asking for the allocation of seats for them in the State Assembly on the basis of their population. They were grieved to see that the history of the Limboos have been distorted which is not only damaging their seat reservation case but even making them lose their distinct identity. Meetings were held by the Limboo associations with an agenda for correcting the historical records. Issues of preservation of their identity, culture and tradition have raised the ethnic consciousness to such a high level that many Limboo associations belonging to both national as well as state level have been formed in Sikkim. In fact, the establishment of such ethnic groupings has been one way of bargaining with the state. In addition, cultural identity has become a means of economic survival. Such organisation can be seen all around Sikkim whether based on caste, community or religion. The dawn of democracy, the process of acculturation as well as assimilation etc might have led to the growth of ethnic consciousness which might have necessitated the formation of various associations which would help in their ethnic preservation.

The Limboos themselves have worked for attaining the rights and privileges that belonged to them. They worked through their associations, which fighting for their rights also worked for the preservation of their culture and traditions. Their associations have been successful in preserving those important ethnic markers which helps Limboos in claiming distinct identity. The associations became the voice of the Limboos that raised important questions about the representation and rights of the Limboos. These associations want the National Government to address their concerns and provide some kind of necessary solutions. Their effort is not to reduce to

separatist group but to create a situation to associate themselves as a group and to form powerful members who represent a specific group.

Cultural and religious practices have always served as a fertile ground for an identity production amongst the Sikkimese Limboos. With time as the Limboos became more confused about their identity, they began to emphasise more on cultural and religious preservation, thereby initiating their rites and rituals to be an influential element in the process of identity formation, thus making their culture a living tradition. Though at particular point of time this tribe had adopted both the elements of Hinduism as well as Buddhism; their ancient religion has served as a potential medium for differentiating them from other ethnic groups.

Finding it important to have a distinct identity, revivalism started taking place among the Limboos. Feeling it important to incorporate various elements while being involved in identity politics and trying to express their grievances; their religious elements became an important ethnic marker. Manghim, the Limboo prayer house, began to be constructed and the worship of Yuma gained ground. Historically, the Limboos were animist as well as Yumaist by faith. Though religion itself provide symbols of identity to people and help them find their identity but the absence of religious marker made religion of less value for defining the ethnic identity of the Yumaist Limboos. They don't even have idol of their supreme God. Such lack of religious symbolism creates suspicion as to what their ancestral religion really is. Along with the lack of religious symbols, the establishment of the Buddhist kingdom and the migration of the Hindu Nepalese into Sikkim added much flavor to the Limboo cult, so much so that, today in spite of their efforts of revivalism, the Limboos are not being able to return to their old tradition. If the conquest of 1774 by the Hindu colonizers strongly influenced and altered the Limboo way of life in Nepal;

in Sikkim both Hinduism as well as Buddhism marks their deep impact. It has been observed that during the interaction between the Hindus, Buddhists and the Yumaist Limboos, what emerged is the hinduisation of Limboos, though it could not totally destroy the Limboo cultural traits. It is only the Limboos settled in the western part of Sikkim near Pemayangtse, Sangacholing and Dubde who have accepted the Buddhist faith, moreover the Limboos are hinduised and when asked about their religion they identify themselves as Hindu rather than Yuma.

Though religion is seen as a system of beliefs and practices by which a group of people struggles with the ultimate problem of human life- suffering, injustice and meaninglessness. It expresses their refusal to capitulate to death, to give up in the face of frustration, to allow hostility to tear apart their human associations. The quality of being religious, seen from individual point of view, implies two things: a belief that evil, pain, bewilderment, and injustice are fundamental facts of existence; and the set of practices and related sanctified beliefs that express a conviction that he or she and all of those with whom one is most fundamentally connected can ultimately be saved from those facts; it seems to be different for this community. Religion instead of becoming an important medium for differentiating the Limboos from other ethnic groups is rather tearing up this tribe. It seems that the new religious movements would rather create a new group from amongst those who once had shared common set of ethnicity. Religion has become more important than what Marxist have perceived to be a part of dependent 'superstructure'. For the Limboos it is the religion that shapes their economy, culture, society as well as polity. Religion seems to play a negative role instead of becoming a potential force in binding them together.

The so-called revivalism brought about by the Darap-Yuma is now being blamed for further bringing division among the Limboos rather than bringing

monothesist view and softening the lines of division among the Limboos. The Limboos following the Phedangma tradition says that they find nothing religious in the new faith. The so-called revivalism in religion sometimes becomes wholly rootless, appropriating cultural symbols and metaphors that can be invoked in period of growing insecurity all around. With this goes the whole space that was preserved for the sacred and the revered and the mythical. Instead it becomes a take-religion-to-the street affair. The history of the Limboos has undergone several changes over time right from the monarchical form of Government to the merger of Sikkim with the Indian Union and thus the rise of democracy.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The general objective of the research are to describe the historical settlement of the Limboos in the present areas of Sikkim, their condition during the rise and fall of Namgyal dynasty, the loss of their distinct identity and the processes by which the Limboos of Sikkim are trying to construct distinct identity thereby using various symbols for preserving their distinctiveness. The main objectives of the study are:

- To historicise the settlement of the Limboo tribe in the Himalayan state of Sikkim.
- To investigate into the condition of the Limboos during the reign of Namgyal dynasty and after Sikkim's merger with India.
- To examine the interplay of various forces such as religion, society, culture and polity on the marginalization of the Limboos.
- To describe both forceful as well as peaceful encounter of the Limboos with various community and diverse religion.

- To analyze the assertion of Limboo cultural and social symbols for preserving their distinctness.
- To understand the factors behind the emerging need felt among the Limboos to preserve their identity on the basis of historical as well as cultural roots.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For this study a large number of primary sources have been consulted. The State Archives as well as National Archives have been visited. The Proceedings, memorandums, minutes as well as letters have been collected from both the Government as well as private archives. The prominent books as well as journals, Gazetteers and Government orders from various departments of Government of Sikkim, Reports of committees constituted by Government of Sikkim has been accessed. The Limboo populated villages as well as the villages having Limboos in minority have been visited. The Limboo villages as well as their historic places have been visited; ceremonial functions have been attended, religious priests as well as Tumyanghangs (Limboo elderly men) have been interviewed. For making the study effective, those Limboo populated areas have been selected where Limboos are found in majority and the data collected in these areas were compared to the data collected from the areas where Limboos are found in minority. Those areas have been frequently visited where people were prepared to share their feelings and opinions. All category of Limboo religious priests were interviewed, the family members of those Limboo headmen (mandals) who used to be in high administrative position during the reign of Namgyal dynasty were visited and interviewed. Leaders and founders of various associations, past and present political leaders belonging to various communities of Sikkim were interviewed and their interviews were

supplemented by the documentary sources. Those individuals who were the contemporaries of the Namgyal dynasty were interviewed as it helps in showing the fate of ordinary people during the time of merger. This helps in understanding the opinion of the ordinary which had remained silent for many years. Apart from the interviews, even folksongs have been taken into account as it contributes to our understanding of culture, geography, history of injustice as well as exploitation etc.

Thus, this work involves the use of both the primary and secondary data. The qualitative and quantitative data were collected through documents, participant observation, case studies etc. The Limboo Shamans, religious leaders, leaders of the Limboo associations, former Political leaders as well as Limboo commoners were interviewed. The researcher also participated in Limboo religious as well as cultural rituals.

The secondary sources for the study were chiefly consulted from the Libraries of Nehru Museum and Library at Teen Murti Delhi, Jawaharlal Nehru University at New Delhi, the Central Library of Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University, various District Libraries of the State of Sikkim, Research Institute of Tibetology and various other academic and public libraries of the state as well as centre. Some primary sources have been accessed through internet as in case of the online resources of JStore etc.

CHAPTERISATION

The first chapter 'Introduction' deals with the introduction where it deals with the basic concept of ethnicity, the factors that contribute to the rise of ethnic awareness among the Limboo populants of Sikkim.

The second chapter ‘Theories of Immigration’ examines different theories laid down by several authors regarding the origin and migration issues. The first part is the narration of the stories regarding the original homeland of the Limboos which has been told by various historians and writers and their writing has now become a dominant story. Here, it can be noted that some of the stories seems to be constructed over time and might continue to be constructed in the future. Such narratives made by various agents form the base of who the Limboos really are. It also examines the continuously re-defined and re-interpreted identity issue of the Limboo tribe of Sikkim. The researcher has argued that none of the explanation seems to be definitive and it seems that number of explanation that has been put forward does not seem appropriate. The chapter starts with what Limboos believes to be their historical land; battles and conquest and the drawing of the geographical boundaries which made the Limboo population straddle between the two nations of Nepal and India. Several names of places in Sikkim have been collected which in some way authenticate the presence of Limboos in the land of Sikkim from time immemorial.

The third chapter ‘Perspective of Limboos towards Namgyal Dynasty’ is intended to provide an account of the Limboo contemporaries of the Namgyal era and their opinion about monarchical form of Government and Democratic form of Government. The voice of illiterate as well as semi literate people who could only convey their experience orally is brought to the surface. Silent experiences are brought out through this chapter. The main objective of this chapter is to find out the status of Limboos during the pre-merger period and their opinion regarding the rule of the Namgyal dynasty. It also helps in understanding the perspective of Limboos towards the monarchy and their support or rejection towards the merger of Sikkim with the Indian Union.

The fourth chapter 'The Dawn of Democracy' critically examines whether the Sikkim merger with Indian Union was boon or curse on the Limboo populants of Sikkim. Here, the researcher have explored as how the Indian Government has led to the destruction of the Limboo identity in the state of Sikkim and what has led to the rise of separate identity awareness among the Limboos of Sikkim. Identity production, here, seems a political process. It also focuses on the steps that are being taken by various Limboo organizations in order to preserve their identity and cultural heritage, the problem that has crept into the Tsong society and the programmes made by the Tsong association for relieving their community from such kind of problems. Limboo identity also involves imaginations as well as expectations of their so termed local leaders who seem busy working on various agendas of their associations.

The fifth chapter 'Limboo Way of Life, Getting Marginalised', is an attempt to study the Limboo past culture and tradition, the process of disintegration as well as their division due to the outcome of different religious philosophy. The Limboos like other tribes and communities are very rich in their culture and tradition, but their ancestral tradition is beginning to withered away perhaps due to various processes such as acculturation, modernization etc. The fear of disintegration has made them revive their past tradition which in turn has further started disintegrating their society. So, this chapter will focus on their religion and the reason behind the process of their assimilation and the outcome of their assimilation process. It will discuss in length the effect of modernization on the Limboos.

Lastly, the sixth chapter 'Conclusion' deals with the summary of the findings. Through this work the unknown history of the Limboos has been brought into living memory.