

## IDENTITY FORMATION AMONG LIMBOO TRIBE OF SIKKIM

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### ABSTRACT

*This research paper deals with the challenges in a Himalayas community living in the hills of Sikkim is facing on account of their gradual subjugated by the Chogyals (king) of Sikkim. Limboo tribes remained subjugated till date and identified as 'Sikkimese Nepali' (immigrants from Nepal) and regarded as the Hindu Nepalese. Referring to the history of Sikkim Limboo is one the indigenous tribes of Sikkim along with Lepchas but the claim of being indigenous inhabitant of Sikkim is still lack. The Limboo tribes are in stage of ethnic mobilization through culturally and politically. They are fighting for the rights and going back to their histories and more oriented towards their culture, traditional habitat, reshaping their identity, trying to do away this immigrant status with political and cultural processes and claims for the distinct ethnic identity,*

**KEY WORDS:** Limboo, Sikkim, Tribes, Identity.

### INTRODUCTION

Sikkim is a second smallest state among the Indian states. Sikkim is in Northeast India having least population of 6.11 Lakhs according to the 2011 census. Sikkim is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi cultural state. Sikkim is inhabited by multiple cultural-racial group like Lepchas, Bhutias and Nepalese, etc which Nepalese constitute the majority. Apart from them there are some other groups like Sherpa, Tshong (Limboo) etc who are indentified as Nepalese in Sikkim. The Limboo community is living in Sikkim, Darjeeling, Assam, Nepal, Myanmar and other parts different of India. In Sikkim and Darjeeling their constitutional status is Schedule Tribe. Though Limboo tribes are numerically small, representing fourth highest community of the total population in Sikkim they are historically, culturally and linguistically very important. Limboo tribes are referred to as *Tshong* 'a merchant' called by Lepchas and Bhutias in Sikkim, *Subba* means chief of the village, and *Yakthung* means 'Yak-herds', another meaning '*Yak*' means hills and '*Thungs*' means heroes i.e. heroes of the hill, thus Yakthung have various meanings and interpretations and *Limboo* means 'archers' that name given by Nepalese or Gorkhas (Subba, 1999, p.84-87). The name Limboo and Subba is most widely common in this region as well as outside. Limboo tribe has own script called '*Sirijonga*' based on Brahmi script. Limboo has own language associated with a Tibeto-Burman language. Rishley says the leading principle of the Limboo religion is animism. The Limboo have their own religion called

'Yumaism', worshipped the universal mother goddess '*Tagira Ningwaphuma*'. The Limboo has its own Shamans called '*Phedandagmas*' and the ritual traditions are based on *Mundhum* (oral traditions which pass down generation orally) (Subba, 2008, p151-175).

### OBJECTIVES

The current paper is focused on the following objectives:

1. To understand the historicity of Limboo Tribe of Sikkim.
2. To understand the political and cultural process in identity formation among Limboo tribe of Sikkim.

### METHODOLOGY AND UNIVERSE OF THE STUDY

This study comprises both primary and secondary data for data collection. The universe of the study is two hundred respondents in the villages of West Sikkim as majority of Limboo tribes is residing. This study comprises both historical analysis and exploratory approach. Interview and Questionnaire schedule has been used to analyze the ethnic mobilization of Limboo tribes and felicitate the process of articulation as well legitimization of rights and demands through cultural and political processes.

### LIMBOO ETHNICITY IN PRE-MERGER INDIA

The first Namgyal Dynasty was installed by the Phuntok Namgyal, the descendents of Kheybumsa in 1642 AD. During the reign of Phunshog Namgyal the Bhutias from Tibet and Bhutan migrated in huge number in Sikkim and thus threatened the Limboos and Lepchas of Sikkim. The

most significant event in a history of Sikkim by signing the "Tripartite Agreement" historically known as "*Lho-Men-Tsong-Sum*" i.e. between Lho means Bhutia, Men means Lepcha and Tsong means Limboo. They pledged and put their seals to the agreement that people of "*Lho-Men-Tsong-Sum*" will hereafter not have separate self government and to abide by the command of the king, his guru and his son and will never let arise a bad thought against Sikkim. It has also been documented that the name of the country Sikkim was also derived from the Limboo word '*Sukhim*' which *Su* means New and *Khim* means Palace i.e. '*New Palace*' and later corrupted into '*Sikkim*' (Subba, 1999, p35). The history told that when Bhutia first came into Sikkim from Tibet during 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries they found Sikkim was inhabited by the Lepchas and the Limboos (Subba, 2008, p145-146). Sikkim has been in existence only since 1642 AD in the year which Phuntsog Namgyal ascended throne as the 1<sup>st</sup> Chogyal (King) at Yoksum which is in West Sikkim and witnessed that Limboos were one of the ethnic group who witnessed the consecration ceremony of the first Chogyal. . Limboos in Sikkim tend to describe during the Namgyal Dynasty as a dark and oppressive phase. After coming of Bhutia to Sikkim from Tibet, the Buddhism began to flourish in Sikkim. History narrates that the Limboos along with Lepchas were forced to convert to Buddhism and learn and they have restricted neither to learn nor practice their own language nor to conduct their rituals. The turning came when Teyongsi Sirijonga Thebe entered Sikkim in 1734 from Nepal knowing the declining faith of the Limboo community of Sikkim, He is an inspiration to the entire Limboo community of the world for revival of Limboo language and later the development of Limboo language and promotion work carried by incarnated Sirijonga Hang (Subba, 2008, p150).

Though the treaty of "*Lho-Men-Tsong-Sum*" mentioned as son of Bhutia and Lepcha but the Limboo continue to face unequal treatment. The Revenue order No.1 of 1917 did not include Limboos as one of the protected members of the Chogyal's subjects. They were treated at par with other Nepalese and paid higher revenue. In 1961 the Chogyal promulgated the Sikkim Subject Regulation and identifies one of the Limboo as one of the indigenous subject of Sikkim. In 1967 one '*Tshong*' seat was reserved for the Limboos in the Sikkim Council and also in 1968 royal permission was granted for teaching Limboo language in government schools. However, '*Tshong*' seat continued till 1973 and abolished for all practical purposes that community was clubbed with the Nepali Community. In 1973, The Akhil Sikkim Kirat Limbu Chumling was established at Tharpu

West Sikkim. These organization made resolution declaring that Tshongs/Limboos as one of the indigenous tribes of Sikkim and were not Nepalese (Gurung, 2011, p129-130).

Seats were arranged in the council under the Representation of the People (Amendment) Ordinance, 1979, the seats were allocated as 12 for BL, 1 for Sangha, 17 for General, 2 for Scheduled Castes (Gurung, 2011, p268-272). The Tshong seat were left out and Limboo community were deprived from their rights. This unconstitutional and irrational act has paved the way for the gradual erosion and degradation of distinct identity of Limboos of Sikkim.

### LIMBOO ETHNICITY IN POST-MERGER INDIA

In 1975, Sikkim merged with India which resulted into massive changes in the society. Sikkimese society has gone through transition phase in the social and economic structure. In 1970s Sikkim was in state of politically transition. The changes and growing consciousness of an autonomous political identity constitute the matrix of political development in Sikkim (Sinha, 2008, p20-23). New policies were introduced and debates on ethnicity and indigeniety emerged in the public sphere. The Lepcha, Bhutia and Nepali were recognized as the three main ethnic group of Sikkim. In 1976, the newly established government did not recommend Limboos as the Scheduled tribe of Sikkim though the Central Home Ministry particularly asked for clarification from State government as to why Limboos are not included in the list of Scheduled Tribes of Sikkim (Gurung, 2011, p130). The Constitution (Sikkim) Scheduled Tribes Order, 1978 was promulgated only the Lepchas and Bhutias including Chumbipa, Dophapa, Dukpa, Kagatey, Sherpa, Tibetan, Tromopa and Yalmo were declared as Scheduled Tribe of Sikkim while other groups like Limboo, Tamang, Gurung, Rai, Mangars were denied as Scheduled Tribe status as they have their distinct culture, language, religion and overall backwardness (Gurung, 2012, p75-76). Many of the communities conventionally counted within the Nepalese social commonwealth which claims distinct ethnic to be treated as 'Scheduled Tribe' and they began displaying social distance from caste Hindus. The symptoms for an ethnic movement can be identified in Sikkim (Sinha, 2008, p23).

The organization and association has been established and grew stronger after Sikkim merged with India. Today there are number of ethnic organizations to develop, preserve and revitalize. The Limboos of Sikkim have highest number of registered association, like Sukhim Yakthung Sapsok Songjumbo (Literary society), Sukhim Yakthung Wenchha Chumbo (Youth), Sirijunga Yakthung

Sakthim Phojumbo Art and Culture, Sukhim Yakthung Nichhamcha Sapsok Chumbo (Student literary society), Namdha Sukhim Yakthung Saplan Chumbho (Publication) Teymen Yakthung ma- chumbho (National level) and etc (Subba, 2012, p.250). The Sirijunga Limboo Cultural Society established in 1979 in a place called Tharpu West Sikkim. The main objective of this society is to preserve the Limboo culture and tradition alive which became more significance for the Limboo community. In every year of the 23<sup>rd</sup> August celebrated as the foundation day which gave an opportunity to represent and flourish the Limboo culture all over the world. Limboo is one of the official languages recognized by the Government of Sikkim on 31<sup>st</sup> March, 1981. Limboo language as a optional subject in the schools was started in 1968, which was upgraded to formal education as the first vernacular or mother tongue in the Government schools of Sikkim in 1975 and later in 2000 the Limboo language as a core subject for undergraduate study in the North Bengal University (Subba, 2002, p. 1-20). Recently the Limboo language along with Bhutia and Lepcha language has been introduced in a post graduate degree in Sikkim University under the School of Languages & Literature. There three languages are enlisted as endangered by UNESCO. The Limboo language introduced in Sikkim Public Service Commission as a optional subject for Civil Service Examination. There is one translator for Limboo in Sikkim Legislative Assembly. Unicode of Limboo is available in websites (Subba, 2012, p254). The craftwork has been revitalized; the blue, white and green color of the Limboo flag has been flourishing that can found flattering in every house of Limboo tribes. *Silamsakma* which is a symbol of protecting from evil spirit that now become trend as a symbol of being the oneness and represents the Limboo identity and the centers for Limboo culture has been constructed. From 1990s, the Limboo ethnic associations have started more in physical forms like constructing "*Manghim*" (temple) in many places of Sikkim, which number of Manghim has increased. Limboos tribes attend community rituals and worship to *Yuma* Mother Goddess at Manghim and it is a development of Limboo culture and religion (Subba, 2008, p.152).

However, with the aim to improve their Socio-economic status and to protect political rights and since 1976 Limboos started the demand for their inclusion in the Scheduled Tribe list. They also reiterated the demand of the restoration of their seat in the State Legislative Assembly. The Limboos claims of being Scheduled Tribe community led to the debates stating that Limboos should not claim to be Scheduled Tribe in Sikkim while claiming Kirati and should

treated as Nepalese because their community is not enough to stand on their own. The Limboos also claims that they are the most backward group in all aspects like culturally, politically, economically and socially and do not perceive their future as bright in 'their state of origin' and also they claimed that they have a distinct identity and should not be lumped with the 'Nepalese'. The Bhutia and Lepcha communities were enlisted as Scheduled Tribes under the ST and SC (Sikkim) order of 1978 which they have got many benefits and enhanced political representation. In contrast, the Limboos remain left out due to political sabotage and deprived from the rights and commonly placed in the heterogeneous group called 'Nepalese' and after that recognized as Hindus. The Nepalese bears connotations of foreigners i.e. migrated from Nepal.

In 1990, the Limboos were accorded in the list of Other Backward Classes (OBC) of Sikkim and the State government headed by Chief Minister Nar Bdr. Bhandari refused to implement the Mandal Commission recommendation in Sikkim. Again in 1994 with the coming of new Chief Minister Pawan Kumar Chamling implement the Mandal Commission recommendation as the recognition of Limboo Language in the Eight Scheduled of the Indian Constitution, inclusion of Limboo community in the Scheduled tribe list of Sikkim and reservation of seats in the Sikkim Legislative Assembly (Gurung, 2011, p. 132). Despite with lots of up and down, Limboos persistently pursued their demand untiring efforts. In 2003, the two communities Limboo and Tamang were included in the list of Scheduled Tribes by the Amendment of Act of ST and SC (Sikkim) order 2003 under Article 342(2) of the constitution without fixing the number of seats to be reserved for them in State Assembly in respect to fulfilled the article 332 of the Constitution of India. In 2003, The Sikkim Limboo-Tamang Joint Action Committee (SLTJAC) was with an objective to work for the demanding of reservation seats within the special provision of article 371F and 332 (1) of the Constitution of India Gurung, 2011, p. 133-134).

The present scenario in Sikkim, the long pending issue of Limboo-Tamang (LT) seat reservation in the Sikkim Legislative Assembly has been evolved. The Limboos demands for the restoration of seats to get their political right and to make distinct identity. The LT Voluntary Committee (LTVC) is a political organization to pursue the matter and press for their demands. The interesting feature in this seat reservation issue is the involvement of the student community and highly educated youth from both the Limboo and Tamang communities. The meetings and conference are

taking place. This mass movement in Sikkim brought the consciousness about the political and made realized of subjugation.

## CONCLUSION

The process of identity is not static, identity develops through self-definition and definition by others. The understanding of community self-definition and self-perception is important (Gurung, 2011, p. 91-92). The origin of Limboos is veiled in a great obscurity. The theories led down by the several authors and the theories of Limboo origin and histories, territorial boundaries shared with Limboos of Nepal have made confusion and controversies that gave the immigrant status to the Limboos of Sikkim (Subba, 2013, p. 56). Limboos do not identify themselves with the larger Nepali identity (Gurung, 2011, p. 94). The question of indigeneity of Limboo tribe is whether they are native to Sikkim is complex and it's highly politicized. The case of the Nepali immigration or immigrant status of Limboo tribe is a contested issue.

Now-a-days people are very conscious about their life style and food habits. Every community in Sikkim today's day is becoming more and more rigidity towards their culture and tradition. The revival of food culture, the old culture, customs and tradition are re-shaping their identity. The fact that Limboos traditional attire and ornaments now becoming prominent with new varieties design. The revival of traditional dress represent that Limboos are becoming more conscious and being attached to their Limboo identity. Now-a-days it became a trend among people to write clan name instead of surname. The Limboo community welcomed modernity and somehow resulted in cultural shift and hybridity but besides this they want to sustain their culture and claims for the distinct identity. Limboos of Sikkim are trying to do away with the immigrant status and being an inhabitant of Sikkim the status of immigrant is the biggest drawback for the Limboo communities.

Today's in Sikkim the mass movement of Limboo Tamang tribal seats reservation in resulted it into the political turmoil. Finally, the reservation of seat in Sikkim Legislative Assembly has been expand from existing thirty-two to feasible forty seats for resolving Limboo Tamang tribal seats and promised to deliver the reservation seats within the coming general election 2019. The Limboo communities are politically left out from Chogyal time to till date and State government is working on providing tribal seats with all rights and benefits. Limboo community is hoping for the demand seats will resolve soon and the ethic mobilization

among Limboo community strengthened them for the fruitful in the future.

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