

## ABSTRACT

Darjeeling Himalaya is the small frontier region located on the laps of snow clad mountains, traversed by rugged valleys and turbulent streams. It looks like a sentinel from the heat shimmering plains of North Bengal. The serene and pristine environment of Darjeeling dragged the colonials to establish it as their Sanatorium for treating the invalid soldiers of warfare in 1835. Much before, the encroachment of Colonials the vast tract of this Himalayan region was under the jurisdiction of Nepal and Sikkim rulers. Hidden beneath the histories of this region lies the story of emergence of a tribe, and their struggle and survival, the Limbus. According to Hooker (1999) “Limbus were brave and cruel in battle, putting the old and weak to sword, carrying the younger to the slavery and killing on the march such captives as are unable to proceed”. Limbu marginal hill tribe 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 Limbus, a community which straddles the two nations of Nepal and India (Subba, 2013).

The population of Limbu is spatially distributed over the Eastern Himalayas. Most of them reside in East Nepal comprising of nine districts. The census of India (2001) reports that 37,265 people speak the Limbu language, most of them probably lives in Sikkim and with some smaller populations in Assam (Fitzpatrick, 2011). A smaller portion of the Limbu population is scattered throughout the areas of Darjeeling and Kalimpong in West Bengal, India. The word ‘Limbu’ means as an archer or ‘the bearer of bows and arrows’. The Limbus likes to identify them as *Yakthumba* or *Yakthungba*. They are also known as *Drejongka* in Tibet and *Chong* or *Tsong* in Sikkim. Northern Tibetans call them ‘*Monpa*’, meaning those who live south of the Himalayas (Dutta, 2014).

Racially, Limbu are purely Mongoloids with epicanthic fold (a small normal fold of skin from the upper eyelid, sometimes covering the inner corner of the eye). The cheekbones are high, with a small flat nose without facial hairs. The complexion is fair to pinkish and the body stature is agile, sturdy and strong with short to medium height in size. Linguistically, they belong to the Tibeto-Burman groups of complex pronominal dialects. It is placed in the Austro-Asiatic linguistic group. They refer their language as *Yakthungpan*. The Limbu script is called '*Srijunga lipi*'.

The exact origin of Limbu is not known. It is believed that they once lived in the Northern regions of *Tsang* province of Tibet and had migrated to their present habitat. Francis Buchanan Hamilton in his *Account of the Kingdom of Nepal* (1819) has listed Limbu as one of the Kiranti groups. Sources reveal that the Kathmandu valley was under the rule of Kiranti (Rai and Limbu are known as Kiranti) from approximately the first century B.C., to the second Century A.D., and according to *Gopal Vamsabali*, about thirty-two Kiranti kings ruled the valley (ibid). According to Chatterjee (1951) the Kirata or Kiranti were usually described as hunter – gatherers who live in the forested mountainous areas on the fringes of civilized India. There are no clear and consistent accounts of the historical origin of the Limbus and many ethnographers have dealt with this problem by simply not addressing it in detail. The Tibetans believe that Yakthungba, the ancestors of the Limbus, migrated into Limbuwan through the Kangla Pass and settled in the *Yangma* valley in the *Tamar Khola* region (Dutta 2014). Chaitanya Subba (1995) elucidates the theory of Limbu origin in the light of the Kiratas notions. He postulated that the Limbu are descended from the three groups of Kiratas. The *Lhasagotra* migrated from the Northern Tibet province; the *Kasigotra* migrated from the south and south east of Indian territories; and the *Khambonba – Lungbongba* who were the indigenous to the areas of Eastern Nepal.

According to Chemjong (1966), Limbu are the descendant of *Shan Mokwan* of Northern Burma. They migrated from there via Assam route and settled in east Nepal. Before their arrival the east Nepal was ruled by the eight feudal chiefs. They gained permission from the feudal chiefs to settle in east Nepal. Eventually, they revolted against them and won the battle. They delineated their politically boundary of newly won territory. The demarcations of the borders were Tibet in Northern side, Jalal Garh near Purnea at the southern side, the eastern boundary at River Teesta and the western boundary at River Dudhkosi. They named this territory as Limbuwan and divided it into ten kingdoms to be ruled by the “Ten Leaders of Shan – Mokwan People” (Fitzpatrick, 2011). This area is also known as *Pallo Kirant*. The history of Limbuwan is very much tied to the history of the modern state of Nepal and annexation policy of Prithvi Narayan Shah. According to Pradhan’s (1991) history of the Gorkha conquest, the Kiranti people were enjoying political autonomy under the suzerainty of Sena dynasty which controlled the region between the Kali Gandaki River and Nepal valley to the East. The annexation and conquest policy of the Gorkha ruler completely altered the political geography of the region. They captured and controlled the *Wallo* and *Majh Kirant*. These Kirati who had accepted the sovereignty of the Gorkha rule were asked to do away with their chiefs. They reinforced their troops further in Limbuwan which resulted into the battle of Chainpur (1776) and by 1786 the annexation of Further Kirant *Pallo* was completed and the war in Limbuwan ended (Pradhan, 1991). The battles were fought, political boundaries changed, old system of Governance was replaced by new ones; Limbu as an ethnic group, however, has managed to survive despite such sharp changes. The political unification of modern Nepal in 1774 in the Eastern Nepal and socio-political relation of Namgyal with Limbus of Sikkim is very important in understanding the Limbus of Darjeeling Himalaya.

Nepal and India are the two independent states in their own context of development. But the nation building process in these two countries had directly or indirectly influenced the Limbus, if the Limbus of Darjeeling and Sikkim, an Indian origin is different from the Limbu of Eastern Nepal origin. Why does Eastern Nepal always remain a reference point while discussing issues of Limbus? The answer is politically ambiguous because of the open border policy between two nations and migration history. Culturally, however it is important to note that history plays an important role in any ethnic mobilization. The lack of archival and concrete historical evidence among the Limbus of Darjeeling has made them to depend on Eastern Nepal and Sikkim Himalaya for their ancestry and understanding the community history. Therefore, the present thesis is an ethnographic research and study. It examines the Limbus society and their cultural set up in the fragile environment of Darjeeling Himalayas. In order to understand the Limbu community of Darjeeling Himalaya the researcher has carefully selected the areas dominated by the Limbu population. The study is based on data collected through intensive field investigation. Both primary and secondary data is collected. Simple random sampling method is adopted. The basic primary data is gathered from house to house census survey. Conventional tools and Anthropology techniques like household survey, interview, key informant interview, group discussion and participation observation etc was adopted for data collection.

The three Limbu villages namely Teesta Valley Tea Garden from Darjeeling Subdivision, Dunga Khasmahal from Kalimpong Subdivision and Bungkulung from Kurseong Subdivision were studied. The study areas exhibits the diverse geographical features of landforms formed during tertiary period due to plate tectonic movement. The larger portion of this region is composed of granite and gneissic rocks. The study area of Teesta Valley comes under the Darjeeling range which forms the northernmost portion of the

region with an elevation varying from 400 meters to 3000 meters. Teesta river flows southward with radial drainage pattern. Bungkulung falls under Kurseong range where the general slope of the region is from North to South with varying altitude of 300 to 800 metres. The important river draining in the study area is Balasan which occupies the central part. The boundary of Kurseong range is well demarcated by River Mechi in the west and Teesta in the east. Dungra Khasmahal falls under the south east of Darjeeling Himalayas in Kalimpong range. The range has abruptly rising hills with numerous streams and small torrents as marking physiographic units lying within 300 to 3000 metres between Darjeeling gneiss and Daling series.

Limbus of Darjeeling Himalaya lives in both heterogeneous and homogenous society. The present study is limited only to 369 households who have been living permanently in the fragile and undulating valley for at least fourth and more generations in the study areas of Teesta valley, Dungra Khasmahal of Kalimpong and Bungkulung of Kurseong subdivision. In Teesta Valley 150 households were taken as samples for the research study which represents more than 50 % of sample size giving an in depth details of population characteristics. It also helps us to understand the changing pattern of population growth. The total population of Limbus in the study area was 708 out of which the total numbers of males are 345 and the total numbers of females are 363. In Dungra Khasmahal the total number of household sample is 112 which constitute 45 percent. The total population is 496 out of which male population is 242 and female population is 254. In Bungkulung the total households' is 107, which constitute 100 %. The total population is 441 with 235 male and 206 with female population. The Bungkulung is only the study area where male population is more than female counterparts. The higher sex ratio of female shows a better social status of women in Limbu society.

The study of complex social fabric of Limbu is incomplete without taking into consideration of its social structure and cultural dynamics through clan and kinship in understanding the ethnographic account of a community through

which we look their interpersonal interaction of day to day life. Limbu society evolves certain terms to denote and refer one's own descend line and kin through patrilineal ties. Limbu society is a patriarchal in nature. The father is the head of the family and is considered as the most universal social group. In the study areas families are largely nuclear in structure and small proportions have joint family with more than 7-8 members. The interpersonal relation is cordial. In Limbu society *Chori Biha* (elopement) is the most common form of marriage. The Limbu religion may be defined as a elementary form of Shamanistic animism in which the Bijua and *Phedangba* play the part of Shaman, the former operating on the demons and latter having for his department the God (Sagant,1996). The worshipping of *Tagera Ningwaphuma* or the supreme deity is accepted by all Limbus, except a few who have become Christians recently. *Tagera Ningwaphuma* being often personified as Shiva makes the situation difficult because Shiva is not only considered as a Limbu god but also equally worshipped by Hindus. Though the Limbus often refers to Shiva as “*Our God*” they are aware of the fact that he is not their exclusive God (Subba, 1999).

In the study areas the majority of Limbus follows Hinduism, *Yumaism*, *Satyahangma* and Christianity. The Limbus of the study areas has perfectly blended with the process of religion syncretism. They worship the different Hindu pools of God, Goddess and Deities but they also firmly believe in the supreme power of Limbu deity *Tagera Ningwaphuma*. The senior and knowledgeable Limbu are doing their best to incorporate themselves into core *Yumaism*, which is the true religion of Limbu tribes. They are also propagating the principles of *Yumaism* among the fellow Limbus who are divulge into other religion. They are celebrating all the major Limbu festivals and rituals essentially to mark a line of difference from other. Even the different Limbu outfits are making their best effort to spread their religion. Lastly the understanding of Limbu Identity dynamics and (re) construction of Identity

through political discourse, religious and cultural attributes is studied. Considering these changing parameters the author has attempt to study the formation of Limbu Identity based on religious and cultural transition on one hand showing how the new ritual a landscape, folk culture has become an important aspect in (re) defining ethnic identity among Limbus in their habitat. The associations' members' acts as cultural promoters which enables the Limbus to further define and re-define religious and cultural aspects in accordance to their interests.

The present thesis is organized into eight chapters minutely studying the details of Limbu community. Each chapter had made an attempt to understand the peculiarity of the statement of problems. Thus, the present study on Limbus of Darjeeling Himalaya: Aspects of their Economy, Society and Culture in relation to their Habitat is exploratory in nature. It attempts to provide the scientific information based on empirical findings. The data collected from the extensive field work will provide a guide for the researcher, planner and administrators belonging to the various fields and departments to understand Limbu community in better ways for the holistic development. The findings of the present study will surely enhance the knowledge about the Limbu tribe who has been living obscure in the fragile terrain of Darjeeling Himalayas. Therefore, this study made a humble attempt to present and understand the ethnographic detail of the Limbu living in Darjeeling Himalaya.