

LIMBU NATIONALISM AND INTEGRATION

T. B. SUBBA

Introduction

The Limbus (also called 'Chong' in Sikkim) live in the geographically contiguous areas of East Nepal, West Sikkim, and the hill areas of Darjeeling district. They call themselves 'Yakthungba'. The word 'Limbu' literally means 'archers' and, on the authority of Chemjong, this name was given to them by themselves (1966 : 63). He even dates when this naming took place, which was after the sixth century.

'Yakthungba' is a combination of three Limbu words : *yak* or hill, *thum* or place/district, and *ba* (or *pa*) meaning people or inhabitant. Thus, when translated, it means 'hillmen', which has many parallels among the tribes of North-East India. However, van Driem contends that the word 'Yakthungba' means 'Yakherders' (1987:xv). This cannot be discarded right away just because they are now middle-hill dwellers where *yak* (a cross between bison and cow) is rare; the Lhasa Gotra Limbus have legends about their migration from the north, high altitude, *yak*-populated area.

Regarding the word 'Chong', it is derived from the place of their origin—Tsang of Tibet—from where they are believed to have come to Sikkim following their *guru* called Matog Lama (namgyal and Drolma 1908 :21). This is plausibly one reason why Limbus have been described to be Buddhists by many European writers who but had little acquaintance with them as they inhabited a region which was away from the Indo-Tibetan trade route. Though a Buddhist monk is always revered by them there is no other proof of their ever being Buddhist.

As regards their population figures, the records are neither up to date nor reliable. One source shows, for instance, that their population in Darjeeling in 1901 was

14,305 but in 1951 it had increased to 19,835 only (Bagchi 1972 : 62). In Sikkim, the figures for the Limbus is even more strange : it was 3356 in 1891 (Risley 1972:27) and 4955 in 1961 whereas it was 15,495 in 1951. A major reason for this is perhaps that they had declared their mother tongue to be 'Nepali' to the census enumerators in the wake of the Nepali Bhasa Movement. Their figures for Nepal are however more reliable : they number 129,234 or 0.8 per cent of the population of Nepal according to Census of 1981 (Central Bureau of Statistics, 1981). Their total population at present is not exactly known but it is estimated to be about 2.5 lakhs.

History of Marginalisation

No one questions the fact that the Limbus are the original inhabitants of eastern Nepal but they are often alleged to be migrants in Sikkim and Darjeeling due to their association with the wider identity of 'Nepali'. Regarding Darjeeling, the *Darjeeling District Gazetteer* of 1907 writers : "Beyond a few Lapchas (sic) and Limbus with their little clearing in the forests, an occasional raid from Nepal, or a stray visitor from the table-lands of Tibet, the Darjeeling Hills are practically uninhabited" (O'Malley 1907 :29). About Sikkim, the authoritative texts like the *Himalaya Journals* (1891) by Joseph Hooker and *History of Sikkim* (1908) by Maharaja Thutob Namgyal and Maharani Yeshe Drolma have clearly established the early inhabitancy of the Limbus there. Fr. Matthias Hermanns has also written that they "occupied the land as far as Sikkim where they were known as the Tsongpa by the Tibetans" (1954 : 10). One may also refer here to a map of "British Sikkim (sic) comprising the Darjeeling Hill Territory and two Morung Purgunnahs" drawn by Captain W.S. Sherwille in 1852. At the bottom of this map it is written : "The (m)ountaineous country from 1500 to 4000 feet above the sea is inhabited by a warlike, beardless Mongolian race named LIMBOOS (sic) who are by turns Hindoos, Bhudhists (sic) and (p)olytheists according to circumstances or conveniences" (IOL 1852 X/1280/I).

Coming to their history of marginalisation, the writing of Ludwig P Stiller (1975 : 136-43) and Kumar Pradhan (1991:

106-49) clearly indicate that Prithivinarayan Shah, the Gorkha king who brought about political unification of Nepal, had fully exploited the Aryan cultural and racial linkages to 'sub-jugate' the Limbu kingdom of Makwanpur in early 1770s. The word 'subjugation' is perhaps more appropriate than 'conquest' though the latter word is a favourite for the mainstream Nepali scholars. Apart from the popular belief among the Limbus that the Gorkhas could never 'conquer' them, there are historical writings in support of this belief. Shrestha gives a detailed account of the three wars fought between the Limbus and the Gorkha forces and says that in all the three wars the latter were vanquished (1985 :43-44). The *Limbu History* written by Jobhan Singh Phago in 1843 and translated by I.S. Chemjong in 1962 when he was in London also clearly indicates that the Limbus had conquered the Gorkha forces in all the wars fought between them (IOL MSS Eur D 537). But the fact remains that they finally conceded in 1774 to the suzerainty of the Gorkha ruler and in lieu of that their chiefs were granted with special titles and privileges, which were however gradually withdrawn by the subsequent Gorkha rulers.

The Limbus had, since time immemorial, a Kipat system, which is "a form of communal landownership" (Regmi 1976:87). Due to various socio-political and demographic developments in Nepal since the last quarter of the eighteenth century this system of landownership faced severe crisis and it was finally abolished during the 60s of the present century. The resession of this system leading ultimately to its abolition may be briefly mentioned here.

Prithivinarayan Shah, after subjugating the Limbus, issued a royal order in July 1774 confirming "the customs and traditions, rights and privileges" of the Limbus. This order further says that "(i)n case we confiscate your land, may our ancestral gods destroy our kingdom" (*Regmi Research Collections* 6 (5) 1974 : 85). This order is important not only in view of the stature of the person who issued it but also for the fact that his descendants did not honour the promise he had made to the Limbus. Whether or not it was possible to honour his promise by the subsequent rulers is

debatable but the fact that it was not honoured has become a major cause of the resurgence of Limbu nationalism in Nepal.

Regarding the gradual transfer of the Kipat land into the high caste Gorkhas, Caplan writes : "On the one hand, they (the Gorkha rulers) sought to placate the Limbus, ever jealous of their rights, by providing safeguards of their lands. On the other hand, they lost no opportunity to reduce the area under Kipat tenure and at the same time convert these lands to raikar tenure (government land)" (1970:56). The 'eating' of the Kipat land, as the Limbus put it, was possible because the documents confirming Kipat holdings did not specify the areas and boundaries : they simply said "lands being cultivated from the time of your ancestors" (Regmi 1976 : 94). Hence, it was up to a high caste official to interpret the documents in favour of his caste member and encroach upon such lands.

In 1866, the Nepalese government passed a discriminatory legislation allowing the non-Limbus, referring to Bahuns and Chhetris mainly, to convert all such Kipat lands which were mortgaged to them into government lands. This legislation also provided that all such lands which were converted into government land could not be reconverted into Kipat even if their original owners cleared the mortgage. The Limbus revolted against this legislation and as a result of this a series of orders were passed between 1901 and 1903 banning the transfer of cultivable lands from Limbus to non-Limbus. But since such orders were prospective a lot of Kipat holdings had already gone out of the Limbu hands. The significance of the impact of such discriminatory legislations can be guessed from the fact that only one-third of the cultivable land was under the Kipat system by the end of the Rana regime (Caplan 1970:56).

Limbu Nationalism and Integration

Unmaking of the Limbu 'nation' seems to have begun in 1641 in Sikkim with the establishment of the Namgyal dynasty and in 1774 in Nepal after their subjugation by King

Prithivinarayan Shah. Gradually, bit by bit, they lost their political autonomy, their Kipat, their language, their religion, and their culture. They were represented as 'Nepalis': their language was 'Nepali', and their religion 'Hindu'. On the other hand, any effort on the part of the Limbus to revive their language/script was a national offence deserving the severest of punishment. Limbu books were sometimes smuggled into Nepal from India with no less fear than smuggling a contraband. In other words, an 'ethnocide' was committed on the Limbus by the Aryan-centric state of Nepal.

It is only recently, after a sort of democracy was established in Nepal and Sikkim that the Limbus are gradually trying to revitalise their nationalism. Though some of the leaders may be nurturing some difficult/distant political ambitions of creating a Limbu nation-state, as most mainstream scholars in Nepal and Sikkim would like to believe, their efforts at present may perhaps be better understood as a fight against the existing nation-states of Nepal and India.

This fight is in many ways an unequal fight. The hegemonic state is firmly backed by what is called the 'official discourse' by which Burton and Carlen mean "the systemization of modes of argument that proclaim the state's legal and administrative rationality" (1979 :48). This discourse is maintained by a section of the privileged class of high caste members because they realise that it is essential "not only to achieve the political incorporation of the dominated classes" but also to "sustain the confidence and knowledge of the hegemonic factions" (Burton and Carlen 1979 : 48). In other words, to integrate them.

The most unfortunate part of the development is that the dominated people are not themselves free from this discourse. For instance, during my fieldwork in Dungra village in Kalimpong, one scholarly Limbu came out with a theory to explain their backwardness : the Limbus are backward because they drink and eat the entrails of the pig. Alcoholism and non-vegetarian habits are considered by the Limbus themselves to be the main causes of their backwardness

elsewhere as well. I also remember my mother often saying that the Limbus have lost their lands due to their ill-habits like alcoholism, gambling, and short-temper. But, citing Franz Fanon, Kuper writes : "...the colonized were brought to admit that their misfortune resulted directly from their racial and cultural characteristics, and that they tried to escape the guilt and inferiority they experienced by proclaiming total and unconditional adoption of the new cultural models and irreversible condemnation of their own" (1974:18). The above Kipat story shows how true it is.

The Limbu nation is today actively involved in what Anderson (1991) calls 'imagining' their nation. This imagining not only seems to require the nation to retreat to an ideal and convenient past, which is often fused with the history of other neighbouring nations, but also draw boundaries between themselves and the others, particularly the dominant other – the Tagadhari Nepalis. Further, it requires a cultural and ideological homogenization of its people, just as with nation-building at the nation-state level. This is not easy due to various cultural and religious influences the Limbus have received in their respective milieus over the last few centuries. Let me cite some concrete examples of such difficulties they are facing today.

The Kipat system and the *mundhum* (repository of oral traditions) are considered to be traditionally uncontested symbols of their nation. Similarly, the worshipping of *Tagera Nyingmaphuma* or the supreme deity is accepted by all Limbus, excepting some who have become Christians recently. But with the abolition of the Kipat system and the simultaneous influence of Hinduism on them these symbols have lost their valour, specially outside Nepal. *Tagera Nyingmaphuma* being often personified as *Shiva* makes the situation difficult because *Shiva* is not only considered as a Limbu god but also as an incarnate of *Vishnu* by the Hindus, and therefore equally worshipped by them. Though the Limbus often refer to *Shiva* as "our god" they are aware of the fact that he is not their exclusive god.

Coming to dance forms, *Yalang* or *Dhan Nach* and *Kelang*

or *Chyabhrung Nach* are being promoted as Limbu national symbols. The Yalang begins in December after the harvest is over and continues till February or so though in Yangnam, Panchthar district of Nepal, I saw such dance being performed even in May. This dance does not really have any sacred content and therefore the priest is not required. In this dance, young men and women lock their elbows or fingers and dance with a vigorous swing. They sing couplets while dancing and many a time elopement takes place after it. The Kelang on the other hand is a drum dance in which huge drums are hung across the shoulders by men while women may join them without such instrument. This dance takes place in any happy occasion such as marriage and festival. The dancers are normally young men and women but they do not hold hands with each other in this dance as in Yalang. One may contest these dance forms as exclusive national symbols of the Limbus on the plea that such dances are quite common among many other tribes in Nepal and India. But despite the apparent similarities in these dance forms across cultures, they can have special significance for each culture and can well serve as its symbols.

Such efforts at 'inventing' the symbols of Limbu nation are, however, seldom smooth and uncontested. This is perhaps inevitable because any 'invention of tradition' involves certain kind of imposition of the values and ideologies of a dominant section of people over others.

Conclusion

The Limbu nationalism in the eastern Himalayas resembles what Clifford Geertz calls the "formative state of nationalism", which consists of "confronting the dense assemblage of cultural, racial, local, and linguistic categories of self-identification and social reality that centuries of an instructed history had produced with a simple, abstract, deliberately constructed, and almost painfully self-conscious concept of political ethnicity—a proper 'nationality' in the modern manner" (1975:239).

It appears that such a confrontation is still on as the

Limbus are yet to delineate the boundaries of their nation from those of the neighbouring nations. The efforts seem to be thwarted by their own realisation that there is no single boundary but layers of boundaries which are not only overlapping but also intermeshed. They are, in other words, not just Limbus, but also Mongols, Janajatis, Paharis, Nepalis, Gorkhalis, and the like. Further, they are also peasants, landlords, tenants, etc. besides being members of various political parties championing various ideologies. Then there are strong regional/local identities like Darjeeling, Sikkime, Kalimponge, Panchthare, Terethumme, Yasoke, and so on, not to talk of their religious differences as well.

Such multiple identities are more often than not responsible for delaying the process of nation-formation among the Limbus. This problem will remain unresolved unless the leaders can hold the masses on to some consciously chosen boundaries and not let them spill over the same. This is not easy for the social reality is different from their 'imagined' reality.

Theoretically, the Limbu case shows that integration at one level means disintegration at another level. The disintegration is not only with the surrogate state or the nation-state but also with those cultures or nations which are equally marginalised by the nation-state such as Yakha, Rai, Mangar, Gurung, and the like. It is the latter aspect of disintegration which has created political ambiguities in them for they know that only a common front of the marginalised nations can bring about a political change in the stage. But how to reconcile the political integration of the marginalised nations with the cultural boundary-maintenance at the Limbu level has not yet been sorted out.

It may be noted here that the redressal sought by various organisations in the region is, with the probably exception of Limbuan Mukti Morcha, within the nation-state framework. It is also indicated that most organisations would be satisfied with some kind of constitutional safeguards as those which exist in India for the scheduled castes and tribes. But if such limited aspirations are ignored, as it is likely, the

Limbus may strive for a confrontation with the nation-states either singly or in association with other such marginalised nations. This may not pose as much threat to India as it may to Nepal but the latter might well grow sensitive to such trends in its geographical and cultural peripheries. The cost of acceding to such demands as most Limbu organisations are raising is definitely much less than the cost of containing their more militant steps that they might take due to state arrogance.

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