



**The Tsongs (Limbus) Down the Ages in Sikkim**

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**Abstract:** The Limbus, *Yakthungs* or *Tsongs*, who have inhabited the Himalayan belt of Kanchanjanga since time immemorial, are one of the Indigenous people of Sikkim (India), Nepal, Bhutan, Burma, and Thailand. They are neither Nepalis by ethnicity nor Hindus by religion. Historically, linguistically, and culturally they have a distinct identity; however, over the centuries, they have been denied and deprived of Indigenous rights and justice. In this article, I will demonstrate the socio-cultural and linguistic conditions of Limbus in Sikkim prior, and during, the Namgyal/Chogyal reign. Then, I will argue how the Limbus were deprived of all their rights and justice in Sikkim.

**Keywords:** Sikkim/Sukhim, Tsong, Yakthung, Lho-Men-Tsong-Sum, Chogyal, Citizenship Rights

**Introduction**

The Sikkimi Tsongs, Limbus or *Yakthungs*, are the Indigenous inhabitants of Sikkim. They are also commonly called “*Tsong*” by the Bhutias and Lepchas in Sikkim. The Limbus call themselves “*Yakthung*,” and they share very close historical and socio-cultural ties with

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the Lepchas<sup>2</sup> and linguistic affinity with the Bhutias<sup>3</sup> of Sikkim. The total population of Limbus in Sikkim is 56,650, which is approximately 9.32% of the total population of the state (6,07,688 people according to the 2011 Census). The Limbus mostly live in Singpheng, Darap, Nambu, Lungang, Lingbit, Timlon, Daramdin, Tharpu, Sombaria, Soreng, Timburbung, Khanisirbung, Samdong, Martam, Bermoik, Hee-Pangbhay, Uttarey, Lingchom, Tikject, Langang, Changay, Lungjik, Yoksam, Gerethang, Thinling, Mangsabung in the West district, Sokay and Rabitar in South district, Mangsila in the North district, and Aho, Assam Lingjay, Biring, and Losing in the East district.

The Limbu literacy rate in Sikkim is 69.94%. By profession, the Sikkimi Limbus are agriculturalists (60.73%), depending mainly on their own land and other land-based activities (CRESP, 2008, p. 196). The land is owned by individual proprietors, and most Limbus have their own land. Until recently, the Sikkimi Limbus' main source of income was from the terrace cultivation of agricultural and horticultural crops as well as livestock. Some Limbus are also engaged in government jobs and private jobs (Subba, 2008, p. 304). They are animists<sup>4</sup> by faith and belief. They speak "*Yakthung-pan*" a Tibeto-Burman language family and their script is the "*Sirijanga Script*." Despite the Limbus being Indigenous to Sikkim, they have been overlooked and marginalized since their motherland, "*Limbuwan*," was straddled between two nations: present Sikkim and Nepal. Based on the background information, I will demonstrate the socio-cultural and linguistic conditions of Limbus in Sikkim prior and during the Bhutia reign; then, I will argue how the Limbus were deprived of all their rights and justice in Sikkim.

### **Limbu Proto State Before the Namgyal Kingdom**

Regarding the political organization of the Limbu in Sikkim before the Namgyal Dynasty, one of the eminent anthropologists of India, Sinha records:

The Bhutias were traders, farmers and lamas searching for new land long before the 15<sup>th</sup> century for colonization. Sikkim at that time was very sparsely inhabited by Rong (Lepchas) and Tsong (Limbus). Those grazers and Buddhists missionary were possibly the earlier immigrant to Sikkim in search of new pastures and potential converts to their religion. The traders in the pursuit of bartering their goods followed them and farmers came in search of the rich rice field Denjong, the *Valley of Rice*. (2008, p. 31)

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<sup>2</sup>Lepchas are one of the indigenous people of Sikkim who share close historical and socio-cultural affinity with the Limbus.

<sup>3</sup>Bhutias are also called as the *Lhopas* or *Lhorees* in Sikkim which refers to the southern Tibetans who settled in Sikkim and Bhutan.

<sup>4</sup> Animist is an anthropological term used by anthropologists for those who worship supernatural power and believe that non-human entities; such as animals, plants, and inanimate objects possess a spiritual essence.

This statement made by Sinha acknowledges the presence of Tsongs in Sikkim before the existence of the Kingdom of Sikkim.

Saul Mullard (2011) and Charu Chandra Sanyal (1979) record that the Limbus are one of the earlier inhabitants of Sikkim. Sonam Wangdi (Sikkim Express, 2010), glorifies the Sikkimese Tsongs as “greater than any other community in Sikkim” (p. 32). In the record of R. K. Sprigg, the Limbus of Sikkim were living for a long time in the place that later became Sikkim. Sikkim came into existence only after 1642, Chu-Ta (Water Horse Year in Tibetan language), the year in which Phuntsok Namgyal (the First King of Sikkim) ascended the throne in Yoksam Norbugang, now in West Sikkim (Sprigg, 1999, p. V). The Limbus under ten Chieftains, “*Theebong Yakthungs*,” ruled the territory Limbuwan (the motherland of Limbus). The boundary of Limbuwan at that point in time extended right from the Arun River in Nepal, the Teesta River of Sikkim, the Great Himalayans, and to the Great Indian Plains in the south (Sanyal, 1979, p. 6). The Lepchas were also ruled by their Chieftains over the century and their first Chieftain was Turvey Panu (Gurung & Lama, 2004, p. 108; Siinger, 1967, p. 26). The Chieftains ruled land bounded by the river of Teesta in the east and Rangit in the west (Chaudhury, 2006, p. 23).

According to Iman Singh Chemjong (2003, p. 51), the land extending from Tibet in the north to Jalalgarh near Purnea (Indian Plain) in the south, River Teesta in the east to River Dudhkoshi in the west was Limbuwan: land of Limbus. However, both the Lepchas and Limbus could not develop a full-fledged state (Datta, 1994, p. 70), and finally, they lost control over their principalities in the late medieval times when the Namgyal dynasty<sup>5</sup> was established in Sikkim (Das, 1992, p. 10; Sangkrityayana, 1994, p. 209). According to Foning (1987), when the Namgyal Dynasty was established in Sikkim the Limbus and the Lepchas – who originated from one single clan – had recently reached a stage where they were in the process of being culturally separated, but not quite estranged from each other. As such, socially and culturally, there were strong ties between the Lepcha and Limbu communities, despite there being an absence of a well-developed, fully-fledged state prior to the emergence of Chogyal reign.

### **The Limbus under the Namgyal Rule**

In the early 1640s, three prominent Buddhist monks, Gyalwa Lachen Chempo, Kardok Rigzin Chempo, and Ngadak Sempa Chempo, arrived in West Sikkim at Yoksam<sup>6</sup> and decided to spread the “*Cho*” (dharma) of Buddhism. For this purpose, the installation of a Chogyal (Dharma King) felt necessary (in Tibetan language, “*Cho*” means “*Dharma*” and

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<sup>5</sup> The kingdom which was established in 1642 AD in Sikkim by the Bhutias of Tibetan origin and ruled over 333 years until Sikkim became part of India in 1975.

<sup>6</sup> Also in Limbu language, ‘*Yak*’ means to halt and ‘*Sum*’ means three.

“Gyal” means “King”). The three ethnic groups *Lhoree* (Bhutia), *Menree* (Lepchas), and *Tsongree* or *Yakthung* (Limbus) came together and constituted a council historically known as “*Lho-Men-Tsong-Sum*.” Thereafter, the three ethnic groups, *Lho* (Bhutia), *Men* (Lepchas), and *Tsong* (*Yakthung* or Limbus), accepted Phuntsok Namgyal, the descendent of Khye-Bumsa, as their first ruler (Tulku, 1991, p. 50). The Tripartite Agreement, “*Lho-Men-Tsong-Sum*,” (1663) was signed by the trinity at Denjong Phuntsok Khangsar between the Ministers of Chogyal Chempo on one side, and the leaders of Lepcha and Limbu on the other side, invoking the local deities of Pahungree, Phamurong, Tashiding, Pemayangtse, Thekchoyangtse, Rabdentse, etc. (*Lho-Men-Tsong-Sum* Document, Kharel, 2002, p. 33; Subba, 1999, p. 125).

In the account of Foning, the “*Lho-Men-Tsong-Sum*” agreement was an adroitful<sup>7</sup> idea of the Lho-rees to encompass the Lepcha and Limbu tribes within the jurisdiction of the Namgyal Kingdom and their sphere of influence (1987, p. 138). Foning further reminiscences the famous Chinese saying “*Han-Man-Mon-Hui-Tsang*” meaning, the inseparable Han-“*China*,” Man-“*Manchuria*,” Mon-“*Mongolia*,” Hui- “*Chinese*” “*Turkestan*,” and Tsang- “*Tibet*” as an example replicated by the Chogyal to adopt “*Lho-Men-Tsong-Sum*” in Sikkim to unite the “*Threesome*” who inhabited Sikkim at that point of time. Regarding the demographics of Sikkim when the Namgyal Dynasty came into power in Sikkim in 1642, “Sikkim was represented by the popular Tibetan phrase ‘*Lho-Men-Tsong-Sum*,’ the three Indigenous people of the newly emerged Himalayan kingdom” (Chaudhury, 2006, p. 23). While signing the tripartite agreement, they pledged and placed their seals on the agreement that they (Bhutia, Lepcha, and Limbu) will not have any separate government, but they follow one order, one destiny, one government, and one religion (Subba, 1999, p. 125). The Buddhist Monasteries at Dubdi, Khechopalri, and Sangachoeling were built mainly for *Rong* and *Tsong* (Lepcha and Limbu in Sikkim) with the motive to convert to Buddhist religion and culture (Khamdhak, 2004, p. 276).

The “*Lho-Men-Tsong-sum*” agreement suggests that the “*threesome*” were supposed to be the members of the same family: the Bhutia being the father, the Lepcha the mother, and the Limbu, the son (Mullard, 2011, p. 139). Through the council, “*Lho-Men-Tsong-Sum*,” the kingdom was to be ruled. They all had to be equally represented in the council. They were not supposed to fight against each other. If one tribe thought ill of any other tribe, the culprit was to be vexed by the promise (Gurung, 1985, p. 69). The main reason behind this agreement was to establish “*Communicracy*” and consolidate unity and cooperation among the *Lhoree*, *Menree*, and *Tsongree* who inhabited Sikkim at that time (Kazi, 1983, p. 1; Basnet, 1974, p. 16). This event marked the emergence of a new sovereign state and beginning of the control by the Buddhist theocrats over the *Rongs* and *Tsongs* (Lepchas and Limbus) with an effective propagation of Buddhist culture and religion. Large parts of the land inhabited by the two tribal communities came

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<sup>7</sup> Diplomacy or skill used by the Tibetans to bring the Limbus and Lepchas into their fold for the establishment of their rule in Sikkim.

under the sway of temporal rule with subsequent process of settlement in Sikkim in time. After 1642, the boundary of the new kingdom extended as far as the Chumbi Valley in Tibet, Thangla in Bhutan, Titalia in Bihar, Devagaon in Bangladesh, and Arun Valley in present-day Nepal (Gurung, 2011, p. 34; Risley, 1894; Sanyal, 1979; Subba, 1999; Wangchuk & Zulca, 2007; Thutob & Dolma, 1908). The territory Limbuwan came under the sway of Tibetan theocracy<sup>8</sup> and Buddhist culture, as well as religion.

In 1670, Tensung Namgyal succeeded his father as second Chogyal of Sikkim. Tensung Namgyal married three women: a *Bhutanese*, a *Tibetan*, and a *Tsong*. The third queen, named Yoyohangma, also referred to as *Thungwamukma*, was the daughter of a Limbu Chief of Limbuwan. After the marriage, the three women started to quarrel (Sikkim: Concise Chronicles, 1963; Kharel, 2002, p. 35). The inevitable circumstance led to the construction of the new capital of Sikkim at Rabdentse for the third wife. Due to the new palace, the capital was shifted from Yoksam to Rabdentse. The Limbu queen, *Yoyohangma*, while entering the newly built palace, was asked to name it. She named it "*Sukhim*," which in her expression in the Limbu language, meant "*what a new beautiful, peaceful house!*" Since then, *Sukhim* became the name of the newly built palace of Rabdentse.

At a later stage, the word "*Su-Khim*" became the name of the whole country (Risley, 1894, p. 40). In the following years, due to mispronunciation, "*Su-Khim*" was metamorphosed into "*Sikkom*," "*Sukhim*," and then finally "*Sikkim*." Therefore, the very name of *Sikkim* originated from two Limbu words: "*Su*" and "*Khim*" meaning "a new house" in the Limbu language. In glorifying the fact, Sinha (1975) states, "the appellation '*Sikkim*' is the greatest contribution of the Limbus to Sikkim" (p. 3). This is an indisputable fact that has been aptly glorified by all research scholars and historians, and officially accepted and authenticated by "*The Gazetteer of Sikkim*" (Risley, 1894). Referring to the contribution of the Sikkimese Tsongs to mother Sikkim, Sonam Wangdi (Sikkim Express, 2010) praises the Tsongs as the "*Greatest Limbus*" among the people of Sikkim. This is the reason why the Sikkimi Limbus today consider the word "*Sikkim*" as an epitaph of their Queen, Yoyohangma, and still call Sikkim "*Sukhim*," not Sikkim.

After the enthronement of the Chogyal, Tensung Namgyal, the matrimonial alliance between the King, Royal Tibetan families, and the *Tsongs* also strengthened and culminated to a great significance in the history of Sikkim. Even the royal Tibetan family members married a number of Limbu women (Basnet, 1974, p. 17). The Chogyal also granted Royal Decrees "*Lahalmor*" to the Limbus, permitting them to use their customary drums like *Negra*, a royal kettle drum, and *Ke*, Chyabrung, while observing their religious gatherings, rituals, and festivals which they had possessed since time immemorial. Through this decree, the Limbu Chiefs were permitted to look after the affairs of their

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<sup>8</sup> A system of government based on Buddhist doctrine adopted by the Tibetan Buddhist monks to ruled Sikkim for the spread Buddhist religion and culture.

“thumbs,” or administrative centers (Gurung, 1985, p. 69). The Limbus during this period of time were even said to be *Charinangmoo*, “royal and pro-national people” in Bhutia dialect, of the palace.

The Limbus have also played a crucial role in shaping the history of Sikkim from time immemorial (Kazi, 1983, p. 1). During the time of Chador Namgyal, when the Bhutanese invaded Sikkim and the capital of Sikkim, Rabdentse was captured for eight years. The *Tsongs*, along with the *Lepchas* and *Bhutias*, fought against the Bhutanese enemies. They helped Yugthing Yeshe to carry the minor king to Lhasa via Ilam and Walong to avoid being assassinated by his half-sister, Pedi Wangmo. During this time, Rhenock and Kalimpong in Sikkim were lost to Bhutan (Sikkim Darbar, 1963; Kharel, 2002, p.13). In 1705, Chador Namgyal built the Pemayangtse Monastery and commanded that the second of every three sons of a Bhutia family must be ordained a monk of the monastery. The Chogyal also made special provision for the *Tsongs* to get admitted to the Pemayangtse Monastery as monks to learn Buddhist culture and religion (Sikkim Darbar, 1963, p. 5). Such a provision was made in recognition of the paramount role and sacrifices they had to make for the sake of Sikkim.

In the 1770s, new nation-building was taking place under the regime of Prithivirayan Shah, the ruler of a small principality of Gorkha in Western Nepal, with the motive of making Nepal into a strong and unified nation. From 1775, the Gorkha soldiers frequently invaded Sikkim. In 1788-1789, during the reign of the Sixth Chogyal of Sikkim, Tenzing Namgyal, the Gorkha force finally occupied Sikkim, and Rabdentse remained under the Gorkhas for several years (Gurung, 2011, p. 29). The *Tsongs*, along with the *Bhutias* and *Lepchas*, fought to expel the aggression and succeeded in defeating the Gorkhas (Sikkim Darbar, 1963, p. 8), even though Sikkim lost some parts of it to the Gorkhas. In the 1860s, the East India Company attacked and captured most parts of West Sikkim. In this situation, the Limbus sacrificed their lives, fought jointly with Bhutia and Lepcha and resisted the rivals (Subba, 1983). Ilam Singh Tsong, Premier of Sikkim, who was considered by Dr. Chambell as “*the only individual in Sikkim whom would be trusted in word of deed*” (Wangdi, 2013, p. 92), had also played a crucial role in resolving the crisis between the East India Company and Sikkim in the 1840s. As such, the history behind the Limbus in Sikkim has many folds of greatness and sacrifices which no other communities of Sikkim can surpass.

### **Denial and Exclusion of the Limbus During Chogyal Time**

Though the “*Lho-Men-Tsong-sum*” suggested that the Bhutia, Lepcha, and Limbu should be equal, and this equality formed the basis of the Bhutia Kingdom, at various times, the policy of the successive Chogyals of Sikkim toward the Limbus had been ambiguous. Sometimes, the Chogyals treated the Limbus as original inhabitants of Sikkim by referring

to the “*Lho-Men-Tsong-Sum*” and sometimes they discriminated against them on the grounds of their cultural and linguistic differences (Gurung, 2011, p. 208). Sometimes Limbus were clubbed with the Bhutia-Lepchas with the use of the popular expression “*Lho-Men-Tsong-Sum*” and sometimes with the Nepalis in terms of revenue or tax payment. So, the Limbus did not receive equal treatment from the successive rulers of Sikkim as the Bhutias and Lepchas did. There is no record of Limbus being appointed as *Dzongpons* (governors) as well as *Kalons* (ministers) like that of the Lepchas and Bhutias in the Royal Palace. They were granted mere Decrees “*Lahalmor*,” permitting the Limbu chiefs to look after the affairs of their “*thums*,” administrative centers as *Mandals*<sup>9</sup> and to use their customary drums like *Negra* (royal kettle drum) and *Kay* (Chyabrung) while observing their religious gathering, rituals and festivals (Gurung, 1985, p. 69).

In 1917, when the Revenue Order No. 1 was implemented, the Limbus were not protected as the members of the Chogyal’s citizens. They were treated unequally with Bhutia-Lepchas but on par with the Nepalis and had to pay higher revenue (Gurung, 2011, p. 129). Even when the Sikkim State Council was created in 1925, none of the Limbus were included in the Sikkim Council. In 1952, the Darbar of Sikkim introduced the Parity System according to which, six seats were allotted to the Bhutia-Lepchas and six seats to the Nepalis in the Sikkim State Council. But no seat was allotted to the Limbus of Sikkim. Henceforth, the Limbus continuously made arguments and put constant pressure upon the Chogyal of Sikkim for the grant of a “*Tsong Seat*” in the Sikkim State Council, reiterating the historical record of the treaty “*Lho-Men-Tsong-Sum*” and Indigeneity of Limbus of Sikkim.

In 1958, in due respect and recognition of their historical records, the Chogyal of Sikkim nominated Indra Prasad Tsong as a Tsong councilor to represent the Limbus in the Sikkim Council. In 1961, on the basis of the Tripartite Agreement “*Lho-Men-Tsong-Sum*,” the Limbus were provided “*subject-hood*”<sup>10</sup> through the Sikkim Subject Regulation along with the Sikkimese Bhutias and Lepchas (Sikkim Government Notification No 5/277/61, dated: 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1961, Rao, 1978; Datta, 1991, 1994; Kharel, 2002, p.33). In 1966 through a Royal Proclamation, the Twelfth Chogyal of Sikkim, Palden Thendup Namgyal, provided the Tsongs with one reserved seat, the “*Tsong Seat*,” in the Sikkim Council for the restoration of their political rights and protection of their distinct identity (Sikkim Darbar, 21<sup>st</sup> December, 1966). Therefrom, Harka Dhoj Tsong (Mandal) became a counselor to represent the Limbus in the Sikkim Council in 1967. This change, however, was not welcomed by the leaders of the Sikkim National Congress and the Sikkim State Congress. In response, the Chogyal Palden Thendup Namgyal reiterated that the Tsongs were not Nepalis and they actually had a separate and distinct identity since ancient times; as such were they granted a “*Tsong Seat*” (Kazi, 1983, p. 1). A committee consisting of two members, Man Bahadur Khamdhak and Padam Singh Subba, under

<sup>9</sup> Head of the village who collected taxes.

<sup>10</sup> The status was called i.e., aadibashi haak in Nepali, ‘right of indigenous people’.

the Chairmanship of the Gyalmo Hope Cook to assess the need of Limbu textbooks in Sikkim in 1969 (Proceeding of Sikkim Council, 8<sup>th</sup> March, 1969, p. 17). Ichha Purna Das (Limbu) was appointed as a Tsong (Limbu) teacher at Bara Samdong Primary School by the School Committee. Thereafter the committee voluntarily contributed money for Tsong texts at the schools. On 23 February 1970, Ichha Purna Das received official appointment order of Tsong (Limbu) teacher from the Government of Sikkim (Mangyung, S.B, 1998, p. 1).

The separate seat for the Tsongs in the Sikkim Council remained until it was abolished on May, 8<sup>th</sup> 1973 when a tripartite agreement was signed between the Chogyal of Sikkim, the leaders of the major political parties of Sikkim, and the Government of India. Thereafter, the Limbus were merged with the Nepalis. While abolishing the “*Tsong Seat*,” none of the Limbus were consulted, and Limbus did not consent. This undemocratic act of abolishing the “*Tsong Seat*” paved the way for the gradual erosion and dilution of the Limbus’ distinct identity.

The act of combining the Tsongs with the Nepali community became unacceptable by the Limbus, who advocated that the Limbus of Sikkim had a separate and distinct identity with strong historical, linguistic, religious, and cultural aspects, deeply rooted into the soil and history of Sikkim. Thus, the merging of the Limbus with the Nepalis had no solid ground. As a reaction to this, on May, 23<sup>rd</sup> 1973, the Akhil Sikkim Kirat Limbu Chumlung (ASKLC) was established in Tharpu, West Sikkim by Ashok Kumar Tsong. In its first meeting held on July, 19<sup>th</sup> 1973 at Soreng Bazar, West Sikkim, under the Chairmanship of Harka Dhoj Tsong, the Chumlung passed a resolution declaring that the “Tsongs (Limbus) were not Nepalis but one of the indigenous tribes of Sikkim” (Gurung, 2011, p. 129; Chaudhury, 2006, p. 25). Since then, the Akhil Sikkim Kirat Limbu Chumlung time and again kept on highlighting the concept of the historical testimony, “*Lho-Men-Tsong-Sum*,” and expressing their aspirations and demands.

## Conclusion

As I mentioned previously, when Phuntsok Namgyal was consecrated as the first King of Sikkim in 1642, the entire territory of Limbuwan came under the Kingdom of Sikkim. Since then, Limbus lived under the sway of the Tibetan theocracy and Buddhist culture and religion. Thus, the Limbus of present Sikkim became the permanent citizens of the country (Wangchuk & Zulca, 2007, pp. 61; Timsina, *The Sikkimese*, 1998). But unfortunately, in the aftermath of the Gorkha invasion, Limbuwan, which was within the fold of Sikkim, got straddled into two nations, Sikkim under Namgyal Dynasty (1642) and Nepal under the Shah Dynasty (1774). As a result, the Limbus of Limbuwan were also divided into two folds. One under the Hindu ruler, Prithivinarayan Shah in Nepal, and another under the Buddhist ruler, the Chogyal, in Sikkim. When such an event took place,

the Limbus in Sikkim were assimilated and acculturised with both Buddhist and Hindu culture.

Sikkimese Tsongs are neither the immigrants of Nepal or of any other place outside Sikkim, but bonafide, Sikkimese citizens who have become Limbus of Sikkimese origin along with their land when Sikkim emerged as one of the independent Himalayan Kingdoms in 1642. They inhabited Sikkim from time immemorial and they are as old as Sikkim itself and their history is as ancient as those mountains, rivers and hills of Sikkim. Even the word “*Sikkim*” itself authenticates the Indigeneity of the Limbus in Sikkim. Many old documents and the ancient history of Sikkim go on to prove these facts. Therefore, in the context of Sikkim, proper historical review has to be made accounting the sacrifices and valuable contributions made for Sikkim by the Sikkimese Tsongs or Limbus through the changing times.

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