

## RELEVANCE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF PROVERBS AMONG THE LIMBOOS OF SIKKIM: A SOCIO- CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract:** The study aims to understand and examine the significance and relevance of proverbs among the Limboos of Sikkim from a socio-cultural lens. Even amidst a cultural mosaic of various communities in Sikkim, Limboo tribe enjoys a distinct socio-cultural identity exhibited often through their vast and rich oral tradition. Since Limboo proverbs have been transmitted orally for generations, they bear the socio-cultural traces from the past. Proverbs reflect the collective perception and attitude of the tribe towards life and all the phenomena of the world around them. In addition, Limboo proverbs are also a manifestation of their ancestral knowledge that has relevance even today in everyday life of the Limboos as is evident from the way proverbs have been preserved as an opulent piece of folklore tradition and used widely by Limboos in their everyday conversation.

**Key words:** Proverbs, Limboo, folklore, tradition, society, community, tribe, culture.

### Introduction

Limboo tribe of Sikkim has a rich folklore tradition embedded in their culture which they have preserved orally for centuries. Proverb perhaps is the most widely used genre of folklore that is preserved so effortlessly by Limboos in their everyday life through common speech. Proverbs provide a window through which we can peep into the life of the Limboos – their culture, belief system, superstitions, custom, tribal idiosyncrasies and most importantly, their socio-economic status, both in the past and present.

As a folklore genre, proverb is said to be a short pithy saying in common use, which is held to express some truth ascertained by experience or observation (Sen, 1997). Furthermore, proverbs are also regarded as a quintessence of accumulated wisdom or experience of any literate or non-literate society. As Roger Abrahams defines, “Proverbs are sententious, witty, used to embody wisdom and are traditional expressions that arise as a part of everyday discourse.” To borrow famous words of Cervantes, proverbs are “short sentences drawn from long experience”. All these definitions, perhaps, cover everything that can be said about Limboo proverbs. These proverbs are the clear manifestations of an accumulated wisdom and knowledge that the community has acquired through

experiences and observations over the years.

Proverbs can be found in every interactional setting in Limboo society ranging from casual conversation to formal speech. It is not merely a reliable source of wisdom for Limboos but, they also play a significant role of a social authority that maintains the traditional balance in this interminably changing world.

From the technical aspect, it has been observed that these proverbs are often used by elders of the community and invariably targeted to young listeners. It can be attributed to its high didactic tones and stirring educative contents. The speaker or user of proverbs is often found to be superior in terms of age or kinship hierarchy. There are unwritten rules of etiquette in Limboo society affecting who can address proverbs to whom. It is considered impolite for those of subordinate status to address proverbs to those of higher status in terms of age or relation. This conforms to the general rule of Limboo verbal etiquette that maintains a strict social norm regarding verbal interaction among the people within the tribe. When one addresses his/her elders or those of higher status, the choice of words will be essentially polite and humble.

Not surprisingly, proverbs are most typically used to age group peers or between others that view themselves as somewhat equal in status. For instance, proverbs like “sing sweet, talk polite” (Ikla nu gara samlo re, Sutla nu gara panpare) , “laborious will get good work; idle will get chastise” (kedhumballe kudhum cha, Keleballe kulem cha), “learn from calculation, recognize the way to prosperity” (khanima a:ng chasing nipma, Thowon lammin kusiñ nipma), “you suffer if you lack wisdom, you are doomed if you lack creativity” (Nisik hopmare tukhe chama, Minso hopmare kuhijet mama) are seldom used by the younger speaker or user targeting the superior listener/receiver because such act, basically, falls outside the established code of the etiquette of the Limboo community. This hierarchical concept in the usage of proverbs is deeply rooted in the tribal reverence for everything that is ancestral and traditional. A strict age equation is followed by Limboos in which age is given much respect in this society which is well reflected through this restrictive usage of proverbs. It is also observed that sometimes these proverbs take a shape of wise authority when older members of the community take liberty of using these proverbs, even without an appropriate context, merely for the purpose of reminding the younger ones some essential moral codes and conduct within the confinement of their society. This is how a piece of folklore transforms into a social authority to ascertain a cultural tradition of their community.

### **Methodology**

All the texts (proverbs) used for the study were documented from primary sources during a fieldwork conducted by the researcher. The settlements visited were Darap, Uttarey and Hee-Yangthang in the Western part of Sikkim in which Limboo population is found in majority. The informants of the oral texts were from various occupational backgrounds like farming, government employment, small entrepreneurs, students, etc. The oral texts were documented through

informal interactions as well as formal interviews.

Three-tier process was followed for the documentation of oral texts – transliteration, transcription and translation. The oral Limboo texts (proverbs), first, were transliterated to Roman script followed by transcription of the same based on the IPA mode. Finally, the texts were translated into English with emphasis on semantic aspect of the texts rather than the structure as it is difficult to maintain structural originality of the oral texts into translation. The translated texts have been used for the study to bring out the significance and relevance of proverbs with a socio-cultural approach.

### **Purpose and Relevance of Proverbs in Limboo Society**

It is, perhaps, a matter of profound interest to understand the socio-cultural relevance of proverbs in Limboo society even in an age of multiculturalism, globalization and advanced information technology. Westermarck says, “Proverbs are not only reflections of life; they also play an active part in it.” Likewise, it has been observed that proverbs are not just the reflection of life but has a multi-dimensional role in a society. In his article „Four Functions of Folklore”, William Bascom states four main functions of folklore –escape, validation, education and social control (1954).

Interestingly, it has been studied that Limboo proverbs serve similar socio-cultural functions as discussed by Bascom in his quintessential work. Proverbs are seen to be used as a significant social tool in a traditional Limboo society for maintaining the age-old tradition and keeping a cultural balance against the varied diversions of the new world. Some Limboo proverbs are preserved and are conspicuously used for establishing authority and validating certain customs, rituals and beliefs within the community. For instance, “You will get illness if ancestral spirits are displeased, you will get curses for your misdeeds” (Himman phɛkmare minde po:k, Layo chokmare sakmura thok).

(1) “Lack of wisdom provokes quarrel, Bloodbath brings ghost in body (Muki ho:pmarey khezek pok, Samakhi lakse chyadlak thok)

(2) “Mother tongue unites, other tongue divides” (Ma pa:ndanle thikhup a:jok; we? Pa:ndanle asen alo:k).

(3) “Goddess is bigger than god, king is bigger than law” (Samman nulle man yamba, Yabhan nulle han yambha) Apparently, these proverbs are often used as warning to deter the impudent persons from treading the wrong path by projecting proverbial and psychological fear of supernatural existence. Thus, conformity of the tribe is enforced on somebody, who, knowingly or unknowingly, attempts to break the social norms by rejecting or questioning the belief system of the community.

These proverbs (1) and (2) bring us face to face with the deep-rooted tribal belief system that emphasizes on the existence of supernatural phenomena that often exhibit power through various means as is well expressed in these proverbs. Since the worshipping of ancestral spirits is the core part of their

spiritual life, the ritual is regarded as esoteric in nature within the tribe as is illustrated and emphasized in proverb (1).

The proverb such as (4) is reflective of the tribal faith on the supreme Goddess Tagera Ningwaphuma as is established through Yumaism.<sup>2</sup> Hence, this common belief is reminded frequently and kept alive through various sources of folk traditions and oratures. The proverb such as (3) states a plain fact about the importance of mother tongue and its role as a binding factor of the tribe. Hence, the proverb is used often by concerned elders as a constant reminder to youngsters who are exposed to different language and culture and might stray away from their cultural root.

It is also observed that some proverbs in Limboo are reflective of the socio-economic condition of the tribe. Moreover, economic backwardness has been a recurrent concern of many proverbs among the tribe. Hence, it is not surprising that we find numerous proverbs that deal with the issues of economic helplessness and vulnerability. Such themes can be viewed within the larger context of Limboo society. It is a sharp reflection of their deprived economic condition that has forced them to live in the margin of a larger mainstream society. Poverty has always been a stark social reality as is reflected in the following proverbs:

- (4) "One cannot eat the bark of a tree, neither can he hide his poverty" (Sassin phetla khinja medetin, Yaᅇsa? ma chinja medetin)
- (5) "Domestic problems are blazing, poverty is whirling" (Sayombhey papma phereklekpa, Yaᅇ maᅇa kureklekpa)
- (6) "No fire without firewood, no food without fire (Siᅇ menne mi mebokin, Mi menne tak medhokin)
- (7) "You eat and drink while you have wealth; you live with tears when it ends" (Yaᅇsa waro thisan; Yaᅇsa hoplo mikwanu)
- (8) "When there is wealth, you indulge in food and drinks, when wealth gets over, you shake your legs" (Yaᅇsa katung thisa chaᅇ, Yaᅇsa manduᅇ yaᅇma syaᅇ)
- (9) "One feels joy when money comes, one goes mad once it is over" (Yaᅇsa kattu haᅇ haᅇ la; Yaᅇsa ma:ndu naᅇ naᅇ la)

Proverbs such as (5), (6) and (7) provide a harsh picture of social reality of the Limboo tribe who has always been marginalized by the larger mainstream society on various aspects. Economic backwardness is expressed collectively in the forms of these proverbs which openly deal with darker side of poverty. However, some within the tribe also agree that their excessive indulgence on alcohol and inconsiderate expenses add to their economic woes. Thus, proverbs (8), (9) and (10) hold up the mirror to the unconstructive practices of the tribe, such as alcoholism and wastefulness which further exacerbate their economic backwardness. These proverbs are sometimes used as light advices and other times, also, as a sharp warning.

### Proverbs and its Significance

Proverbs also serve as an ideal guide to thought and action of every individual within the community. In this world of narrow visions, mad competitions, chauvinism and conflicts, proverbs have been considered as a treasure-house of wisdom for inducing sensibility, humanity and righteousness into human beings. Therefore, proverbs are widely acknowledged as remedies for various social maladies born out of selfish individual instinct, conflicting attitudes and behaviours.

The following texts of Limboo proverbs can be read as an emphatic effort to discourage objectionable attitude and unconstructive qualities like malice, greed, arrogance, conceit, ignorance, frivolity, inconsistency, drunkenness, laziness, insolence, etc. and hence guiding them towards the right direction of life:

- (10) "Face is an open door, flattery by a sly person is a deceit" (Mura bha? In lamdhekpa, Iswa tamswarey aamdhekpa)
- (11) Top of the tree invites Dove of many kinds; if married many times, it invites troubles (Siṅbuṅ choṅthaṅ puttu-kay, Yepme:t te? Ma yettuk khay)
- (12) "Man recalls his relatives when he loses, but refuses and forgets when he possesses" (Saklay maṅlay au:khu?khu?, Tonglay maṅlay ae:t lè?lè?)
- (13) "A spark of fire burns down the house, Anger brings injury to ourselves" (Misek le him handu, Siksek le thak khandu)
- (14) Alcohol drains lots of wealth, and makes you fall upside down" (Thim chamare yaṅsa meng, Lamdho lamyo yambe keng)
- (15) "Laziness will lead to servility; Diligence will lead to kingship" (Illemmare yo:k a:get, I:thummare haṅ a:get)
- (16) "Ego fetches scorn, Diligence fetches prosperity" (kehenchiṅban nasumba, kemunchiṅban yaṅ sumba)
- (17) "A sincere fellow directs you, an insincere fellow misleads you" (Tondonballe lamtondu, Pega:kpalle lamsendu)
- (18) "A wise maintains peace, a wicked brings disputes" (Ingnuwalle mana taṅkhu, Ingphemballe khejek Laṅfu)
- (19) "Lack of signal leads to misdirection, lack of sense leads to slip of tongue" (Miksen ho:pmare lambe lek, Nisik ho:pmare panbe lek)

All these proverbs have common elements of advice, warning and guidance against the ills and malpractices found both at the individual and social levels within the Limboo society. Various maladies such as deceit, polygamy, selfishness, anger, drunkenness, laziness, arrogance, insincerity, wickedness, and ignorance are incorporated as themes of these proverbs. Therefore, these proverbs are a reliable source of guidance for youngsters and adults alike. However, these proverbs can also be interpreted as the reflection of social maladies that exist within the community itself. Besides, it can be argued that their own sufferings and hardships may have inspired these wise and witty proverbs.

Interestingly, the Limbu proverbs are not merely the vehicles of serious ideas or corrective measures but, also used as a source of light amusement in this society. Limboos, by temperament, are considered as jovial and highly vibrant peoples. They seem to be celebrating their life everyday despite harsh socio-economic challenges. It is vividly reflected through these proverbs:

(20) “If steps are matched, you can cross the river; if thoughts are matched, you can get married” (Langañ tañmarey chwa:n phoklo; Niñwa tañmarey him boklo)

(21) “If accepted you will be taken willingly; if denied you will be taken right away” (Tenne gara ya? Yakkañ; Mennè gara pa? Yakkañ)

In proverb (21), the possible romantic bonding between a man and a woman is suggested through a simple metaphor of “river crossing” and the proposal to marry an unwilling bride is suggested with a light-hearted message of obstinacy in the proverb (22). Semantically, the words here lack a deeper meaning. It cannot be interpreted beyond the surface level. Even if one tries to explore beyond, there is a risk of overstatement. Perhaps such sayings are meant only to serve the purpose of occasional delight and bring smile on otherwise tough life of people in this community.

Some element of light humour is also found in some proverbs which light-heartedly states facts about life and people:

(22) “Good-hearted daughter brings gifts, ill-hearted daughter brings complaints” (kunu essalle chasuñ taru, Kubhe:n essalle che?yakaru)

(23) “Growing strength gives you pig energy, waning strength gives you chicken energy” (Sakma pora phaksakma, Sakma mara wa?sakma)

(24) “One must marry one day, one must build a golden bridge” (Tendham mèkhim lakmai po:ng, Samyang tarañ chakmai po:ng)

(25) “Love leads to waiting, waiting leads to meeting” (Nanu siñma kosingma. kosiñma a:ng khosiñma) “If it is light, it will be lifted; if it is energetic, it will be dragged” (Yañ yañ la? Gara kubañnu; Lumlum la? Gara ku:uñ nu)

Constructed as lyrical couplets wrapped in catchy rhymes with underlying humour, these proverbs are quite appealing to old and young alike. This can be seen as a poetic folklore that delights children while it brings pleasure to old. Therefore these proverbs are used mainly to serve the purpose of light amusement through its apparent humour and music.

It is observed that all these proverbs are more metrical oriented than meaning oriented. Therefore, these proverbs are often used by speakers for its rhythmic and lyrical essence to make his/her speech more effective and rhetorical. Proverbs such as (24), (25) and (27) undermine the semantic aspect and shift its entire focus on morphological aspect. Interestingly, in these proverbs, metaphorical meaning takes a back seat and sound becomes primary. However, proverbs such as (23) and (26) have a perfect blend of meaning and melody.

There are numerous examples of proverbs among the tribe that reveal

some popular philosophies of the universe based on their own understanding and concept. Some of these proverbs have a close resemblance to parables in which it states general truths laden with high moral overtones:

(28) “Beggar never quits begging despite prosperity, charitable never quits giving despite poverty” (Kenak palle wasaṅ naktu, Kehawalle hopsaṅ hassu)

(29) “The world adores when you are young, even pig leaves when you are old” (Benchasapo:kha nanu?ru ka:kle; Khadakim po:kha hina?ru pha:kle)

(30) “One is afraid that child should not die while he is young, when he grows one is afraid he should not kill” (Hinja mewa sayombhè; Wencha meget payombhè) “Animals walk on four feet, birds fly on wings” (Pusa pema kulap pat; Thaksa lokma kulaṅ pat)

(31) “Fat will burst; tall will break” (Ayamille a: bhek, Agemille a: jek)

(32) “Bamboo blooms to perish” (Fa fekgara mek)

(33) “Brag and brag then sleep” (Henchiṅ henchiṅ ipna nenchiṅ)

Proverb (29) provides a glimpse of human nature with both negative and positive aspects. It clearly shows a deeper understanding of Limboos about human mind and emotions. In addition to that, proverbs (29) and (30) are illustrative of their understanding of human life as transient and human nature as inconsistent.

Apparently, proverbs such as (31), (32),

(33) and (34) are quite perplexing and inane at a first glance. However, on a closer look, all these proverbs are laden with the idea of a deeper philosophy of life. Proverb (31) is often used by a speaker in the context where one needs some courage and strength. Thus, this proverb can be used to instill courage by stating that everyone has his own natural strength to depend on, just like animals have four feet to walk and birds have wings to fly. In the same way, proverb (32) can be used in the context of limitation of growth or elevation in human life in one hand and inevitable destruction fetched by human obsession for more of everything on the other. Proverbs (33) and (34) may seem little absurd but these can be interpreted in several ways and can be fit to many contexts. For instance, proverb (33) may be interpreted in the context of human life and situation in general. It can be used appropriately to explain the phenomena of inevitable human end. Furthermore, the same proverb can be used as a metaphor to explain the negative consequences of some unusual human action, just like the rare phenomena of bamboo blooming brings its end. Although, proverb (34) seem to be merely a play of terse alliteration, it can be interpreted as a metaphor for one’s helplessness due to his/her social position and is left with no option than to brag at first and then face the reality eventually.

### Conclusion

Encompassing a wide variety of themes with a remarkable metrical construction, Limboo proverbs indeed enrich the treasure of Limboo folklore and form an integral part of Limboo oral tradition. Despite the fact that these

proverbs have been transmitted orally for generations from time immemorial, they have not lost its charm and appeal even today. In fact, its relevance and significance in the life of Limboo peoples are seen to be increasing at the face of new challenges of cultural encroachment from the various quarters of the world.

In this fast changing world with growing phenomena of modernity, sophistication and technology, it is a daunting task for the tribe to preserve their folklore in its authentic form and to protect it from distortion and dilution. However, this insecurity and anticipated threat has instilled in them the values and importance of folklore even more. Young generation is observed to be keen and motivated to initiate the work for documentation and preservation of their rich folklore both in academic and non-academic space.

Since proverbs among Limboos are regarded as a manifestation of ancestral knowledge, it remains as an integral and inseparable part of their everyday life. Since proverbs are the most reliable source of knowledge and wisdom, the tradition of passing this knowledge to the succeeding generation is ever more visible among Limboos these days as is evident from the way the present generation Limboos are involved in preserving and documenting their folklore tradition. Moreover, Limboos are seen to be relying on these wise and witty words of proverbs in times of adversity and misfortune despite their changing outlook towards life and the world around them.

In a nutshell, proverbs are used by Limboos as a source of inspiration, information, enlightenment and their way-of-life is often guided by it. Furthermore, proverbs provide an insight into their socio-cultural life and give a glimpse of inner complexity of Limboo peoples and their community life. Proverbs are not merely a part of their folklore but a very much a living part of their life.

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