

Language Preservation, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, and Cultural Identity among the Limbu Community: A Narrative Review

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Abstract

The Limbu community, one amongst the most prominent indigenous group of the Eastern Himalayas, has a rich cultural heritage which stems from its distinct language, the oral scripture called Mundhum and expressive traditions such as Palam songs and Yumaism. In a globalizing world, context of urbanization and digitalization, these traditions are increasingly challenged by developments of language assimilation, disconnection with the generations, and insufficient institutional support. This narrative review reflects the harmony of peer-reviewed scholarship spanning the past 22 years (2003-2024) and explores the nexus between language preservation, indigenous knowledge systems, and cultural identity within the Limbu community. Based on the findings of the anthropological, linguistic, cultural, educational, and communication research, the review defines five clusters: language as a means of cultural identity, Mundhum as an indigenous epistemological system, digital media as a platform for revitalization, representation and identity politics, and structural challenges to cultural sustainability. The results show that the Limbu language is irreplaceable as a vehicle for traditional knowledge and that its disappearance will lead to loss of whole healing practices, ecological thoughts, and oral governance. Digital platforms have opened up opportunities for cultural participation and diaspora connection, but their effect on language vitality is uneven. Structural barriers such as dominant language policies, insufficient mother tongue education and less institutional support remain as the main obstacles to cultural continuity. The review ends by highlighting research gaps in the analysis of communication, digital engagement, comparative indigenous studies and gender-inclusive frameworks, and implications for scholars with the intersection of communication theory and indigenous studies.

Keywords: *limbu community, language preservation, indigenous identity, Mundhum, cultural heritage, digital media*

1. Introduction

New technologies of digital communication and globalised media have greatly changed the contexts in which indigenous communities maintain and share their cultural heritage. Along with the new avenues that digital connectivity has opened for cultural participation, it has also increased the forces of linguistic assimilation and cultural homogenisation. Indigenous communities throughout the world face the problem of bridging the gap between contemporary

modes of communication with resisting the loss of their cultural and linguistic identity.

Particularly the Limbu people maintain their unique significance among the indigenous population of Eastern Himalayan region. The Limbu community is distributed in seven different parts of eastern Nepal, Sikkim, Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Assam and have maintained a unique cultural identity since then based on their language (which they write in the ancient Sirijonga script), their knowledge tradition in the oral form called Mundhum, and their expressive cultural practices, such as Palam songs and the indigenous religious system of the community called Yumaism (Debnath, 2020; Limbu, 2019; Subba, 2023). The community is rich, but it is facing increasing challenges due to language shift, urban migration, the dominance of the major regional languages and a low uptake of traditional knowledge by the young people.

Specific aspects of Limbu life have already been discussed in the scholarship, such as language vitality, indigenous literature, social or economic life, etc., but these aspects are somewhat isolated within the various disciplines. These contributions have been neither synthesised through the prism of communication and media studies, nor explored through the lens of how digital technologies are impacting upon cultural continuity among the Limbu. This article fills this void using a narrative review of current literature. It targets to: (a) review the current literature related to language conservation and indigenous knowledge; (b) analyse cultural identity and cultural representation of the Limbu people; and (c) propose future research directions and challenges in the era of globalisation and digital communication.

2. Methodology

The research used in this study is a method of literature review, a qualitative method in the form of a narrative study. Narrative reviews are appropriate when reviewing information across disciplines, summarising conceptual themes, and understanding the intellectual history of a topic (Baumeister & Leary, 1997). Peer-reviewed journal articles, doctoral dissertations, book chapters and research theses were used for literature. The main time frame is from 2003 to 2024, encompassing the evolution of research knowledge and digital communication practices.

Studies that met the selection criteria focused on the Limbu community in India, Nepal, or the larger Eastern Himalayan region and involved language, culture, identity, or communication. Thematic analysis was used to detect patterns. Five thematic areas were identified: language and cultural preservation; Mundhum as indigenous knowledge; digital media and language revitalisation; cultural identity and representation; and challenges of cultural sustainability. The review is organized around these themes.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Language and Cultural Preservation

Language is one of the most significant indicators of indigenous identity, serving as a medium of communication as well as a repository of collective memory, traditional knowledge and

cultural value systems (Fishman, 1991). The Limbu language, using the old Sirijonga script, can be used to convey oral traditions, religious stories, social histories and ecological knowledge that have been passed down from generation to generation among the Limbu community.

Subba (2023) explains about the rich cultural identity of the Limbu people, noting that their oral narratives, mythological beliefs, and traditional religious customs are embedded in the community-specific linguistic frameworks. Overall, the study calls for collective efforts towards documentation, acknowledging that linguistic vitality and cultural vitality are mutually reinforcing. Similarly, Sundas (2023) takes an ethnomedical perspective, which indicates that traditional healing knowledge is intricately linked and transmitted through the Limbu language. The native language is used to perform healing rituals and spiritual practices, providing it a carrier of healthcare epistemology. Sundas focuses on the historical Bhasa Andolan in India and linguistic unification process in Nepal, two factors that have contributed to the marginalisation of minority languages such as Limbu in the Nepali-speaking sociolinguistic landscape.

Gautam and Thakur (2016) offer a sociolinguistic view which shows interesting trends in language shift, especially in formal education for children. The study promotes the use of mother tongue based multilingual education and supports language promotion as a tool for resisting linguistic assimilation through a community based approach. But the development of community based Literacy programmes by Subba and Subba (2003) under the Kirat Yakthung Chumlung (KYC) lesson project shows that educational programmes can be developed within the community, focused on the revitalization of the Sirijonga script, and that this can lead to the empowerment of indigenous communities linguistically and, consequently, to a larger part in the cultural field.

3.2 Mundhum as an Indigenous Knowledge System

In the constellation of the elements that make up the culture of the Limbu, the Mundhum clearly holds a unique place. The Mundhum is the oral literature of the Limbu, which at the same time represents a religious text, a historical archive, an ecological philosophy and a social charter (Edingo, 2007; Limbu, 2020). While Limbu (2020) provides a more nuanced analysis that differentiates ritual and everyday registers. The study uses ethnolinguistic approaches to examine specific characteristics of ritual language (figurative constructions, parallelisms and appositives) that make the Mundhum register different from the ordinary Limbu language. The study argues that the Mundhum language constitutes a socio-cultural phenomenon analogous to customary law, guiding ethics, customs, and spiritual practices.

Tumbahang (2013) investigates the Mundhum from a linguistic perspective, discovering that there exists a certain uniformity in the dialects that strengthens their role as a cultural signal that binds the different communities in the Limbu region. Lungeli (2020) reads Mundhum in an ecocritical way, with the reference of the deep ecology of Arne Naess and the land ethic of Aldo Leopold. The findings indicate that Mundhum narratives are grounded in an ecocentric

view of the world that integrates humans into ecological systems and provide indigenous alternatives to extractive approaches to the world. Chongbang (2022) investigates the disruption of intergenerational transmission of Mundhum-based rituals in the context of urbanisation and concludes that the low use of the Mundhum language in the urban household environment presents big challenges for the transmission of the ritual.

3.3 Digital Media and Language Revitalization

The digital communications technologies have opened new opportunities for indigenous cultural involvement. Lawati and Rana (2022) have found that Limbu poets use Facebook to share indigenous language poetry and found that Limbu language poetry is having less interaction than Nepali or English language poems. This gap highlights the continued social marginalization of the indigenous language even in supposedly open digital environment. The study, however, does confirm that social media has great potential as a medium of language revitalisation.

In Limbu's (2017) perspective, community organisations have used social networks and online platforms to assert sovereignty over the process of cultural colonisation and to recover their own indigenous epistemologies based on a tripartite concept of "delinking, relinking, and linking. Niamir (2017) continues this argument and looks at the role of digital communication in the maintenance of ethnic/ cultural identity among members of the Limbu diaspora in South Wales, specifically second generation individuals accessing cultural information online and engaging in community discourse through the use of online networks. According to Subba (2018), community organisations in the Darjeeling District have started to use digital technologies to archive and promote Limbu religio-cultural knowledge, and he warns that digital preservation should go hand-in-hand with active community involvement.

3.4 Cultural Identity and Representation

Cultural identity is a dynamic process, built through communication, social interaction, political participation and historical memory. The ability to represent oneself is continually discussed as a key factor in the ability to preserve indigenous identity (Smith, 1999). In this study, Lungeli (2023) explores the role of the contemporary Limbu poets in defending indigeneness and subverting the hegemonic narratives by means of ekphrastic poetry. These poets, in their poetic forms, reclaim the Limbu identity and oppose its marginalisation in the mainstream Nepali literary culture while incorporating the Mundhum philosophy and indigenous aesthetics.

Vandenhelsken and Khamdhak (2021) explore the political aspects of Limbu identity by examining the roles of the Limbu community in the politics of Sikkim in history, which has been influenced by the concepts of loyalty, resistance, and marginalisation. In the article presented here, Chemjong (2017) examines identity politics in the eastern region of Nepal, and how the Limbu community uses the concept of identity and refers to their ancestral history and territorial claims in their political struggle for the recognition of the Limbuwan. Chatterjee

(2021) offers a gendered perspective that shows Limbu women are at the heart of agriculture and culture, but are not central to household decision-making. Adding to it, Limbu (2018) records that women contribute 60-70 per cent of the labour force in the plantation sector of the Teesta Valley Tea Garden and they play an important role in maintaining and passing down the cultural knowledge through words and oral communication.

3.5 Challenges to Cultural Preservation

The literature consulted reveals a uniform set of structural difficulties in the preservation of the Limbu language, culture and identity. The most common concern is language shift, which has been because of the growing dominance of Nepali, Hindi, Bengali and English in education, administration and public sphere (Gautam & Thakur 2016, Hakala 2014). In urban environments, the social networks that facilitate the transmission of cultural knowledge are fragmented, and access to elders, involvement in community rituals and customs, and the presence of indigenous language environments are no longer present, which are typical of the village setting (Chongbang, 2022; Debnath, 2020).

A related concern is the decrease in the engagement of young people in cultural activities. Traditional Palam songs play an important role in cultural transmission but their importance is not known to all younger members of the community (Tumbahang 2023). The transmission of Mundhum knowledge is becoming vulnerable as the number of younger people who know the language and ritual decreases and elder knowledge-holders age (Tumbahang, 2013). These run alongside limited institutional support: although the constitution of India and Nepal mandates mother-tongue education, indigenous languages are rarely found in formal educational programs or the mainstream media (Hakala, 2014; Subba & Subba, 2003).

4. Discussion

The literature review synthesis identified three major points to consider: in relation to communication and media studies. First, there is a consistent treatment of language in the literature, where it is not just a communication system, but the main means of maintaining indigenous knowledge, indigenous identity, and cultural memory. The language decline of the Limbu language is an indication of the loss of an entire epistemological tradition that includes the Mundhum tradition of knowledge, traditional healing, ecological philosophy and the oral literature (Limbu, 2020; Sundas, 2023).

On the other hand, the literature suggests a relationship between the digitization of indigenous culture and the preservation of it, although this connection is not well theorized. Digital spaces have enabled some level of cultural interactions and community connection, albeit not always successful (Lawati & Rana, 2022; Niamir, 2017). But digital engagement does not necessarily lead to linguistic vitality – major languages can dominate digital platforms and perpetuate existing language imbalances. Third, the political aspects of cultural preservation, which are generally overlooked in communication scholarship, have been noted in the literature. Questions of power, recognition and rights are intertwined with cultural preservation

(Chemjong, 2017; Lungeli, 2023; Vandenhelsken & Khamdhak, 2021) and digital media is not just a preservation tool, it is also a political platform that enables indigenous people to gain visibility and contest dominant narratives.

5. Conclusion

This narrative review has brought together the latest knowledge about the preservation of the language, indigenous knowledge systems and the cultural identity of the Limbu community. The reviewed literature finds that language, Mundhum knowledge, and cultural practice are integral and interdependent aspects of Limbu cultural life and their preservation demands integrated approach and attention of the scholars, communities and policy makers. Despite the potential of digital media as a valuable tool for cultural revival, and the engagement of diasporas, structural problems such as language shift, urbanisation, youth disengagement and reduced institutional support persist, presenting a risk to cultural sustainability.

The review reveals major gaps in research, such as the lack of communication-specific frameworks for analysing indigenous cultural preservation, a lack of empirical studies on digital engagement among the Limbu community, comparative indigenous research in other Himalayan communities, insufficient investigation of the mainstream media representation of Limbu culture, and insufficient theorisation of gender dimensions of language use and digital engagement. Future studies should focus on mixed methods research on digital cultural engagement; comparative indigenous communication and media representation research; and gender-based cultural preservation research. These studies will help to maintain cultural diversity in the era of globalisation.

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