

Review Article

MAPPING CONTEMPORARY SCHOLARSHIP ON THE LIMBU COMMUNITY (2003-2024): COMMUNICATION, INDIGENOUS REPRESENTATION AND RESEARCH TRENDS

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ABSTRACT

The last two decades have seen significant research works on the indigenous Limbu people in the fields of anthropology, sociology, linguistics, education, political science, indigenous studies and more recently, media and communication studies. Despite its expansion, scholarship to-date is still scattered by discipline, preventing a broader picture of the development of its ideas and the new communication orientations. This can be done by systematically reviewing the scholarly work published from the year 2003 to 2024 and to chart the developments of contemporary Limbu scholarship, its significant research areas, methodological trends, interdisciplinary influences, and future research directions. The review is a synthesis of evidence from peer-reviewed journal articles, doctoral dissertations, scholarly books, book chapters, conference papers and research reports. The results show a progressive shift from an ethnographic approach that mainly documented the indigenous culture to interdisciplinary studies on language revitalization, education, participation in politics, gender, TEC, digital communication, media representation and indigenous identity. In contrast with cultural studies, the field of cultural preservation, there is comparatively little focus on issues of media representation, communication technologies, comparative indigenous studies, quantitative studies, and contemporary socio-economic shifts. The review highlights the increasing importance of communication and media studies in the context of lived indigenous identity in a digital world and calls for more methodological diversity, interdisciplinary research and communication studies. This study is an effort to map the intellectual trajectory of Limbu scholarship which will be useful for the indigenous studies and be helpful in the future research of media and mass communication.

Keywords: Limbu Community, Indigenous Studies, Media Representation, Digital Communication, Narrative Review, Research Trends

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous knowledge systems have been acknowledged and embraced by the mainstream of current social science studies, and triggered significant scholarly engagement with the documentation, analysis and interpretation of global indigenous histories, cultures, identities and experiences.

The Limbu community is an intriguing group of people with its unique cultural legacy, belief system, language, socio-political history and changing relationships with the modern social institutions in the Eastern Himalayan region and has become an important focus of academic research. Over the last 20 years, and especially the last decade, there has been an increasing amount of research on the Limbu people spread across a variety of disciplines, resulting in a relatively large but disjointed literature. Previous

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scholarship has taken a range of disciplinary perspectives to the Limbu community. Traditional cultural practices, kinship, ethnic belief system and socio-economic life has been studied by anthropological and ethnographic studies [Debnath \(2020\)](#), [Limbu \(2019\)](#). A lot of works have been carried out on the language preservation, ritual language, indigenous literacy, and educational development [Gautam and Thakur \(2016\)](#), [Limbu \(2020\)](#), [Tumbahang \(2013\)](#). Cultural studies have contributed to the analysis of Mundhum philosophy, indigenous literature, oral traditions, ecological worldviews and identity formation [Lungeli \(2020\)](#), [Lungeli \(2023\)](#). These discussions have slowly begun to shift towards political participation, gender relations, social media engagement, and digital communication in more recent scholarship, much of which is increasingly interdisciplinary in its focus on indigenous research [Lawati and Rana \(2022\)](#), [Chatterjee \(2021\)](#), [Vandenhelsken and Khamdhak \(2021\)](#).

The field of indigenous studies has also grown in recent years with the emergence of new approaches to media and communication, which have opened new perspectives on the representation of culture, the construction of indigenous identity, the participation of digital culture, and the preservation of knowledge. New research has looked at the importance of indigenous cultural identity as expressed through traditional media, new media and online communication, as well as the media's contribution to language revitalisation, cultural stories and raising public awareness. The developments show that communication processes have become part of comprehending the current indigenous realities, and thus the study of Limbu should be conducted from an interdisciplinary perspective, as well as involving media and communication studies and other social science studies. While these studies have provided important knowledge, the bodies of research and knowledge are spread across various academic disciplines and research traditions. There have been various reviews focusing on specific cultural and/or linguistic aspects with relatively fewer research focusing on development of Limbu scholarship in general. As a result, little is known about the changing interests of researchers over time, the methodologies that have dominated the discipline, and what is yet to be well studied.

In this context, the present review traces the intellectual context of the contemporary Limbu scholarship written from 2003 to 2024. The study does not just consider one dimension of socio-cultural studies, but rather collates the literature to create themes, methods, discipline developments, and research trends. This review not only helps consolidate a better understanding of the current status and future directions of indigenous studies research but also by looking at the evolution of scholarship itself, helps to strengthen indigenous studies.

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative narrative review method is used in this study to explore scholarly studies on the Limbu people from 2003 to 2024. Narrative reviews allow for the synthesis and critical analysis of literature from several disciplines of research and are suitable for a review that will explain the intellectual evolution of a research area rather than the empirical findings of a specific study. The review is based on literature published in peer-reviewed journals, doctoral dissertations, books, book chapters, conference papers and research reports related to different aspects of the Limbu community. The literature chosen for this research comes from anthropology, sociology, linguistics, indigenous studies, education, cultural studies, political science, communication, ethnomedicine and environmental studies. The period of review (2003-2024) has been selected to reflect the massive increase of academic research on the Limbu people that occurred during the 21st century.

The studies were identified in accordance with the following criteria: They were directly concerned with the Limbu community or they contributed to some aspect of the cultural, linguistic, historical, social, political, educational, ecological, or communication-related aspects of the community. The selected literature was not analysed statistically, but thematically analysed to determine common research issues, methodologies, disciplinary advances and areas of investigation. The analytical method allowed the review to trace the historical developments of current scholarship about the Limbu community and pinpoint those that were relatively underdeveloped.

EVOLUTION OF SCHOLARSHIP ON THE LIMBU COMMUNITY (2003-2024)

The last 20 years have seen a significant change in the academic scholarship concerning the Limbu community. Initial research focussed mainly on the documentation of the indigenous traditions, language, customs and social organisation using ethnographic and anthropological methods. The primary studies were intended to document traditional knowledge, rituals, cultural institutions, and historical narratives that had not been subjected to extensive research by scholars until now. Most of the research during this time focused on the descriptive documentation of the cultural heritage of the community, consistent with the other studies that were conducted in the Eastern Himalayan region, to preserve indigenous identities [Subba and Subba \(2003\)](#), [Edingo \(2007\)](#), [Tumbahang \(2013\)](#). The range of Limbu scholarship has greatly increased since the mid-2010s. Aside from cultural documentation, researchers started to look at topics that have deeply cultural relevance such as language revitalisation, indigenous education, gender relations, political participation, ethnomedicine, ecological knowledge, migration and identity politics. During this time, there was also an increasing interdisciplinary interaction, as Limbu scholars adopted approaches from sociology, education, communication studies,

political science, literary studies and environmental humanities to help them better understand the evolving situation of the Limbu community [Gautam and Thakur \(2016\)](#), [Hakala \(2014\)](#), [Chemjong \(2017\)](#), [Lungeli \(2020\)](#). Later scholarship recognizes another important turn towards social change in the modern world that impacts on indigenous peoples. The progress made in the

research on Limbu community has shifted from describing cultural continuity to analysing dynamic relations between indigenous traditions and social change in the present day [Lawati and Rana \(2022\)](#), [Chatterjee \(2021\)](#), [Vandenhelsken and Khamdhak \(2021\)](#).

In general, the course of modern Limbu scholarship can be said to be an interdisciplinary subject which is growing in its scope of themes and methods. The importance of cultural preservation is still a key area of concern but recent research suggests that there is a growing awareness to consider the community in broader debates on development, governance, communications, education, environmental sustainability and indigenous rights. The development in this sense reflects the sophistication of Limbu studies and ongoing possibilities for innovative interdisciplinary research.

MAJOR RESEARCH DOMAINS IN CONTEMPORARY LIMBU SCHOLARSHIP

A literature review from 2003 to 2024 shows that research on the Limbu people has now branched out into a number of related areas of scholarship. While across disciplines topics differ, in total literature, it is a growing effort to document the indigenous knowledge, interpret changes in their socio-cultural landscape and explore the contemporary realities of the community from different academic paradigms. The development of these research areas is also a reflection of the growing interdisciplinary nature of indigenous studies.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL AND ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDIES

The oldest and most significant area of knowledge about the Limbu is anthropology and ethnography. The studies mainly record traditional social organisation, kinship arrangement, customary institutions, indigenous belief systems, settlement pattern, ritual, festivity and daily cultural activities. Preliminary ethnographic descriptions have been the means by which cultural knowledge has been preserved, while the relationship between tradition and social change has been studied. Such investigations have been useful to document the historical development of the community and can be used as baseline information for future interdisciplinary research [Debnath \(2020\)](#), [Limbu \(2019\)](#).

LINGUISTIC AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE RESEARCH

Language-related scholarship is one of the more widely studied fields in the field of Limbu studies. Previous studies have examined language maintenance, the Sirijonga script, multilingual education, ritual discourse, oral traditions and how indigenous knowledge is passed on through language.

Special focus has been given to Mundhum, which has been studied as a religious scripture, but also as a source of historical memory, moral values, ecological thinking and indigenous knowledge. Overall, these studies indicate that language preservation is not just about communication but is also crucial to the continuity of indigenous culture [Tumbahang \(2013\)](#), [Gautam and Thakur \(2016\)](#), [Edingo \(2007\)](#), [Limbu \(2020\)](#).

POLITICAL, HISTORICAL, AND IDENTITY STUDIES

Another major area of research is to explore the historical experiences and political identity of the Limbu community. Researchers have explored aspects of indigenous rights, the mobilisation of ethnic groups, regional identity, indigenous involvement in governance and calls for cultural recognition. Historical studies have shown the temporal development of construction and negotiation of Limbu identity in terms of colonial experiences, state policies and the changing political landscapes. There is an emerging trend in these studies that has recategorized indigenous identity as a socio-political process and not a fixed cultural category [Chemjong \(2017\)](#), [Vandenhelsken and Khamdhak \(2021\)](#).

GENDER, EDUCATION, AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Recent scholarship has expanded from the traditional field of cultural documentation, and has looked at issues of gender relations, educational participation, and community development. Significant role of the Limbu women in the household economy, agricultural activities, cultural continuity and community life have been emphasized by the research and the persistent inequalities of their position in decision making process have also been identified. Research on mother tongue instruction, indigenous literacy programs, and issues of incorporating indigenous languages into formal education systems has been conducted. These studies are but a snapshot of the increasing scholarly focus on social inclusion and sustainable community development [Chatterjee \(2021\)](#), [Hakala \(2014\)](#), [Subba and Subba \(2003\)](#).

EMERGING INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES

The interdisciplinary scholarship that combines studies of communication, the environment, literary criticism, digital media, ethno medicine, and cultural sustainability is one of the most prominent advances of the last few years. The research has focused on

indigenous ecological knowledge, traditional healing, digital communication, social media engagement, and indigenous identity in literary works. These regions are still relatively under-researched when compared to the anthropological and linguistic, but points to the evolution of an analytical perspective that could be used to work with current problems of indigenous peoples. Such a diversification has indicated the evolution of Limbu studies from a single discipline-oriented research to more complex integrated approaches that can address the social, cultural, political, and technological changes [Lawati and Rana \(2022\)](#), [Lungeli \(2020\)](#), [Sundas \(2023\)](#).

Table 1

Table 1 Major Research Domains, Methodological Approaches, and Representative Studies in Contemporary Limbu Scholarship (2003–2024)			
Research Domain	Major Focus	Common Methods	Representative Studies
Anthropology	Culture, rituals, kinship	Ethnography	Debnath (2020) , Limbu (2019)
Linguistics	Language, Sirijonga, Mundhum	Sociolinguistic analysis	Gautam and Thakur (2016) , Tumbahang (2013)
Political Studies	Identity, governance	Historical analysis	Chemjong (2017)
Gender	Women, labour	Qualitative interviews	Chatterjee (2021)
Communication	Social media, digital platforms	Case studies	Lawati and Rana (2022)

Source: Compiled by the author based on the reviewed literature (2003–2024).

METHODOLOGICAL PATTERNS IN LIMBU RESEARCH

The interdisciplinary scholarship that combines studies of communication, the environment, literary criticism, digital media, ethnomedicine, and cultural sustainability is one of the most prominent advances of the last few years. The research has focused on indigenous ecological knowledge, traditional healing, digital communication, social media engagement, and indigenous identity in literary works. These regions are still relatively under-researched when compared to the anthropological and linguistic, but points to the evolution of an analytical perspective that could be used to work with current problems of indigenous peoples. Such a diversification has indicated the evolution of Limbu studies from a single discipline-oriented research to more complex integrated approaches that can address the social, cultural, political, and technological changes [Lawati and Rana \(2022\)](#), [Lungeli \(2020\)](#), [Sundas \(2023\)](#).

One significant aspect of the current scholarship on the Limbu people is that it heavily depends on qualitative research traditions. Most of the published work uses ethnographic inquiry, participant observation, historical analysis, narrative interpretation, qualitative interviews and textual analysis to explore different facets of indigenous life. These strategies have allowed the recording of oral histories, rituals, customary laws, attitudes and values, and of the community experiences and have helped to document indigenous knowledge that is unavailable in the official historical record. The ethnographic method is still the main one used in Limbu studies. Long-term community engagement,

observing rituals and festivals, engaging with oral narratives, and engaging with key informants from culture, has been used to inform cultural practices and indigenous worldviews. These approaches have helped to make the social organisation, belief systems and the language traditions of the Limbu people and their daily life visible and have enabled rich contextual interpretations of indigenous cultural practices [Debnath \(2020\)](#), [Tumbahang \(2013\)](#), [Edingo \(2007\)](#). There are also historical and documentary analyses that have an important position in the literature. Studies focus on the analysis of archival material, historical documents, government policies, community publications and indigenous stories to explore political change, identity continuity, education and culture, and customary institutions.

The focus of these investigations has broadened the scope of Limbu studies from descriptive cultural documentation to the situating of indigenous experiences in larger historical and socio-political contexts [Chemjong \(2017\)](#), [Vandenhelsken and Khamdhak \(2021\)](#). The last few years have shown methodological variety. The researchers have applied sociolinguistic analysis, discourse analysis,

literary criticism, case study methods and digital communication analysis in the study of language revitalisation, internet involvement of indigenous people, indigenous literature, ecological philosophy, and media involvement. These developments suggest increasing interdisciplinary cooperation but empirical quantitative investigations are still rather scarce. Similarly, there are only a few studies that combine qualitative and quantitative data in the literature. In short, the methodological evolution of Limbu scholarship is a gradual movement from traditional ethnographic documentation to a more interdisciplinary qualitative research. However, further studies could benefit from greater methodological diversity, comparative designs, longitudinal studies, participatory action research, and mixed-methods that would provide more empirical evidence, yet maintain the contextual richness of indigenous research.

EMERGING GAPS IN CONTEMPORARY LIMBU SCHOLARSHIP

Although the research on the Limbu people has been ongoing, there are a number of areas that are unclear from the existing studies. The main drawback is that the research focuses on rather limited themes, such as the preservation of the language, cultural identity, indigenous traditions, and rituals. Compared to these subjects, there has been relatively less academic interest in more dynamic socio-economic contexts, urbanization, migration, jobs, entrepreneurship, public policies, health communication, and in the lived realities of younger generations. The other gap that can be observed is methodological diversity. As mentioned above, qualitative and ethnographic studies have received the majority of attention in the literature, while quantitative studies, mixed methods and large-scale comparative studies are less commonly used. This methodological focus restricts the scope of discussion about the wider demographic trends, policy outcomes and evolving social behaviours in varying geographic settings. To broaden the method range would thus better support future studies' empirical basis.

Comparative research and analysis between the Limbu community and other indigenous communities in the Eastern Himalayan region and/or elsewhere is also limited as seen in the review. Comparative research might offer interesting opportunities for learning about common practices, strategies for language retention, governments, and the approaches to globalisation and more, and assist with broader theory discussions in indigenous studies. Moreover, the current communicative context is not sufficiently studied from various angles.

A substantial amount of research is still required regarding media representation, AI, digital heritage preservation, community building online, algorithmic visibility, digital activism and new communication technologies, and recent studies are starting to grapple with these topics. These research could help to clarify the nature of the technological transformation of indigenous identities in the twenty first century. Lastly, more interdisciplinary efforts, incorporating the fields of anthropology, sociology, communication, education, environment, politics, economics and digital humanities would benefit future scholarship. This partnership would yield a more holistic knowledge of the complex mechanisms impacting the evolving situation of the Limbu, and would enrich the theoretical and methodological framework of indigenous studies.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR LIMBU SCHOLARSHIP

Indigenous studies are on the rise, offering great potential to further expand and deepen research into the Limbu community. Although, much of the literature has been useful in documenting the cultural traditions, linguistic heritage, and indigenous knowledge systems, future studies need to increasingly take into account the contemporary social, political, economic and technological shifts impacting indigenous populations. This would help to give a better idea about the dynamic situation of the Limbu people and make indigenous scholarship more relevant in the broader social science arena. A key focus for future research is to embrace interdisciplinary approaches. The use of anthropological, sociological, communication and media studies, education, political science, environmental studies, economics, and digital humanities perspectives would help to conduct more thorough analyses of Indigenous experiences. This interdisciplinary approach would allow for a more comprehensive analysis of the interconnections among cultural continuity, governance, sustainable development, education, environmental change, technological innovation, and community well-being. Further, more methodologically different scholarship should be fostered. Although qualitative studies and approaches are indispensable for understanding indigenous knowledge systems, quantitative studies, mixed methods, longitudinal studies and comparative regional studies ought to be implemented to generate a broader empirical evidence and bolster the theoretical development. Comparative research with other indigenous communities in the Eastern Himalayan region could also help in understanding common experiences and unique features of indigenous communities.

Yet another promising field is the role of new technologies for indigenous peoples. The rapid evolution of digital communication, AI, digital archives, virtual heritage and online cultural participation has changed the way indigenous identities are represented, negotiated and preserved. Ethically, socially, and politically exploring these developments will be of growing significance as indigenous peoples continue to interact with increasingly changing digital contexts. Last but not least, improved partnerships among academic institutions, indigenous groups, policy makers and community groups will facilitate more participatory and community-focused research. Collaborations can lead to culturally responsive research methods, better documentation of indigenous knowledge, and methods of research that honor the needs and goals of the research community.

DISCUSSION

The present review illustrates that the scholarship on the Limbu has developed significantly in the past 20 years, as has the indigenous studies and social sciences fields in general. Initial studies focused on the documentation of cultural traditions, oral history, indigenous belief systems, language preservation and customary law. The field developed and over time, a variety of new topics gained increasing attention in the research world related to education, political engagement, gender, ecology, digital communication, and the media aspects of indigenous life. This trajectory suggests a movement from descriptive documentation to more interdisciplinary and analytical perspectives that analyze indigenous communities in broader social, political, and communication contexts. The review also suggests that whilst the themes of cultural preservation and indigenous identity remain

key, new themes, such as media representation, digital communication, online cultural participation, and communication technologies have seen comparatively little scholarly work. These are potential areas for future research as digital media has become an integral part of the public discourse and identity formation. Media and communication studies offers useful theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of how indigenous communities negotiate identity, how they preserve cultural heritage and how they relate to the broader society within traditional and digital media channels.

A second important remark has to be made here on the methodological aspect of the modern Limbu scholarship. Ethnographic, participatory observation, historical analysis, narrative interpretation and textual analysis are the approaches that historically have predominated, where they can effectively account for indigenous experience and cultural knowledge. However, the use of small-scale mixed-methods, comparative studies, longitudinal studies, and quantitative studies are limited, thus limiting broader understanding of the contemporary realities of indigenous peoples. A more diverse framework of methods would support evidence-based research and augment the rich context provided by qualitative traditions.

Another important theme that emerges in this review is that of interdisciplinary cooperation. Indigenous concerns today cannot be addressed with a single discipline. Issues such as media representation, migration, education, governance, environmental change and socio-economic development all require a multi-disciplinary approach to Indigenous concerns today. Communication and media studies are better integrated with the study of anthropology and sociology, political science, education, environmental studies, and indigenous studies to gain a more holistic perspective on the realities of indigenous peoples and for better theory and practice. In general, it has been found that there is a process of thematic and methodological diversification of Limbu scholarship. The documentation of indigenous traditions is essential, but future studies need to focus on communication processes, media narratives, digital participation, artificial intelligence and new communication technology which are affecting indigenous identities and cultural representation in ever increasing ways. This interdisciplinary and communication-based approach to scholarship will not only deepen the research study of indigenous studies but also serve as a valuable addition to the body of media & mass communication scholarship in terms of representation, cultural diversity, and inclusive communication practices.

CONCLUSION

The current review consisted of analyzing the development of the contemporary research on the Limbu community from 2003 to 2024, which included identifying the various research themes, approaches, disciplinary growth, and research priority areas. The results show that academic scholarship has shifted from a more ethnographic approach to documenting native culture to interdisciplinary studies that include linguistics, education, political science, gender studies, environmental humanities, communication studies, and indigenous knowledge systems. Although much has been documented on the cultural heritage, language and social reality of the Limbu people, there are many areas of research that remain unaddressed, including media representation, digital communication, comparative indigenous studies, technological transformation, and current socio-economic change. The review also points to the need for methodological diversity in the use of mixed methods, comparative and longitudinal study, and enhanced interdisciplinary collaboration. The field of media and communication studies provides valuable insights into how communication technologies are shaping indigenous identities, cultural heritage, and public discourse, which is important for understanding the evolving context of indigenous communities in the digital age. Continued studies that combine representations of the media, digital participation, artificial intelligence and indigenous communication approaches will help to tell a more complete story of the reality that exists today. The review aims at charting the intellectual journey of Limbu scholarship which would serve as an invaluable reference point for researchers, teachers, policymakers and future scholars and enhance the linkage between indigenous studies and media and mass communication. The study also provides a basis for future theoretically-oriented, methodologically plural and socially engaged interdisciplinary research.

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