

Ancient Kirata and Kirata Today: A case of the Lepchas of West Bengal

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Based on textual interpretation and an analysis of the geo-spatial, socio-cultural conditions the paper examines the relative position of Lepchas in Eastern Nepal and in Eastern Himalaya (Sikkim and Darjeeling) while dealing with the question whether the Lepchas could be included in the Kirata group of people.

Keywords: Puranic texts, Kirata, Eastern Himalaya, Suniti Kumar Chatterji, Kirata Region, Lepcha.

Introduction

Kirata is a generic or composite term which geographically indicates a specific area in the eastern Himalayan region and sociologically it identifies some communities who reside in this area. Kirata is an ancient term and has been mentioned in Yajurveda, Mahabharata and Puranas of Hindu tradition. But there is no unanimity among the scholars and researchers over the origin, settlement pattern, specification of linguistic group and other details of the community which have been included under the composite word Kirata. In its broad-spectrum Kiratas include all inhabitants of the Eastern Himalayan region starting from Nepal in the west up to Nagaland and Burma in the east. So all those who live in Nepal, Sikkim, Hills of Darjeeling, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura, Mizoram, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and Burma can be termed as Kirata in the broad sense of the term. But in its narrow sense Kirata region includes the eastern part of Nepal bordering Sikkim and Darjeeling and the communities that reside in this region like the Rai, Yakkha, Limbu and other are known as Kirata. All such communities who are included under Kiratas are non-Aryan and non-Hindu people and possess distinct culture, religion, language and tradition.

On the Eastern Himalayan region a good number of studies have been carried out on the ethnicity, religion, politics, history and various other socio-anthropological aspects but no systematic study has so far been done on the Kiratas and there is lamentable dearth of literature on the life and problems Kirata groups of people. Available literature uses the term Kirata but does not specify the ethnic groups that are included or excluded. The present article aims to analyze the Kirata tribes in both broad and narrow senses and examine if the Lepchas, a Tibeto-Burman linguistic group of Eastern Himalayan region, could be included under the umbrella term Kirata.

Ancient or broad meaning of Kirata

The term Kirata has been derived from the Sanskrit words 'Kiriāt', 'Kirant', 'Kiryat', 'Kyranti', or 'Kiranti', which was used to designate hunter people of the mountain. Early reference of the term Kirata is found in Yajurveda (Sukla Yajurveda, Vajasaneyi Samhita). Kirata also finds mention in Atharva Veda. Kirata is an ancient term and its reference has been found in the classical Indian texts like Mahabharata, Ramayana, Purana and even in Ptolemy's writings. Macdonell & Keith (1912) mentioned that the pronominalized Tibeto-Burman language speaking *Kirāta* people are found first in several of the Vedic (1000-500 BC) texts [(the Vājasaneyi Samhitā (xxx.16) of the Shukla-yajur-veda, Atharva-veda (x.4.14), the Taittiriya Brāhmana (iii. 4.12.1) of the Krishna-yajur-veda) and the Atharva-veda (10.4.14)]. Chatterji (1974:58) notes that a Mongoloid ruler named Bhagadatta participated in the Mahabharata war (950 BC) in Kuruchetra.

The five Pandavas spent their years of disguise in palaces of Kirata king Viratha in the Terai of eastern Nepal. During those periods, there were only Kiratas in the eastern Himalayan region whom the Aryans called Mlechha and the region as Mlechha desh i.e. country of Mlech or Mech people. Mlechha is a derogatory term used for the tribes living in the Himalayan region.

In the map given by Macdonell and Keith (1912) the so-called Kiratas are shown to have occupied western Nepal in the Vedic period. Here, the name Kirata simply means the Tibeto-Burman pronominalized language speaking Mongoloid peoples, the

predecessors of the present day Kanauri, Lahuli, Manchadi, Chaudangsi, Byangsi, Raji, Raute, Kham, Magar, Bhujel, Chepang and Newar speaking peoples. It is unlikely that the Vedic Aryans (1500-500 BC) could have been the neighbors of the Kirata language speaking populations of eastern Nepal although today the word Kirata only refers to them (Pokharel, M.P).

The old Sanskrit word has been used in two different meanings. The first meaning identifies the highlanders and referred to a form of Shiva. There is a complex link between Shiva and the mountain and tribals. The other meaning, which is most commonly used in literature, refers in a disparaging manner to the Himalayan tribe without further precision (Schlemmer, 2004).

According to *Markandey Puran*, the famous seven Kirata kingdoms during the Mahabharata time were: 1. Aswakut or Kabul, 2. Kulya or Kulu Valley, 3. Matsya or North Bihar Paundra or Bengal, 4. Sumer or Assam, 5. Malak or Mlek or Lohit, 6. Kinner Kirat or Garhwal and 7. Nepal. Thus, Kirat region included a vast geographical area and all those who reside in these areas were known as Kiratas.

Manu Smriti mentions about Narakashur, the first Kirata king of Mlechha desh, who built his capital at Pragjyotishpur, the present day Assam. King Bhagadatta, the son of King Narakasur, led two regiments of Kirat and Chinese soldiers and fought on the side of Kauravas against Pandavas in the battle of Kuruchetra. In the battle king Bhagadatta was slain. Another Kirata king Jitedasti, who was fighting the Kauravas, was also slain and the Kirata force fought under the command of Bhimsen.

As per Kirata folklore Lord Krishna of Mahabharata sent a strong force of Yadava tribe under the command of Bhuktaman to conquer the kingdom of Banashur, the first Kirata king who ruled central Nepal. Bhuktaman attacked and killed Banashur and established new Yadav kingdom in central Nepal for eight generations.

There is no unanimity on the route of migration of Kiratas in their present location of Eastern Himalayan tracts. T.B. Subba is of the view that 'there was a Kirata substratum in the eastern Himalayas, which absorbed migrants from different directions at different

periods of history. It is also indicated that such migrations occurred in trickles: the glaciers on the north and the long malarial terai in the south must have dissuaded many aspirants from migrating to the Himalayas. It is not difficult to visualise that the indigenous people moved about on account of shifting cultivation, pastoralism and trade' (Subba 1999: 24). Whichever might have been the route of migration, it has been accepted by all that the Kiratas have the Mongoloid origin and they are not Aryan.

In his *Kirata-Jana-Krti* (1951) Suniti Kumar Chatterji has discussed about the settlement pattern of the Kiratas. He has written: 'During the centuries immediately before Christ, and in the early Christian centuries, the Kiratas were known to the Hindu world as a group of people whose original home was in the Himalayan slopes and in the mountains of the East, in Assam in particular, who were yellow in colour and presented a distinct type of culture. They had spread all over the plains of Bengal up to the sea, and appear to have penetrated as far as West Bengal' (Chatterjee, 1935: 35). In another place, the Prof. Chatterji has specified the region over which the Kiratas were in majority saying: 'They had occupied the southern tracts of the Himalayas and the whole of north Eastern India, North Bihar contiguous to Nepal and to the north of Ganges, the greater part of Bengal, and Assam, including the areas through which the Ganges (the Padma or Padda of the present day) passed into the sea. Eastern Nepal and the Lauhitya or the Brahmaputra Valley were the lands specially connected with them. The Greeks in the 1st century A.D. had heard of them (during their visits to Western India and South India). As a wild people with the characteristic flat nose of the Mangol race, living to the north-east of Orissa, by the sea, possibly in the delta of the Ganges' (Chatterjee, 1951: 36-37).

If we take a geographical division of the present day Eastern Himalayan region Kiratas are found in Nepal, hills and foothills of Darjeeling, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura, Mizoram, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. Linguistically Kirata tribes fall under Sino-Tibetan family which has been categorized into two groups - Tibeto-Burman and Siamese Chinese. For those who live in Nepal, Prof S.K.Chatterji (1951) gave detailed description about the Newars and sporadically mentioned about the Magars, Gurungs, Rais, Dhimals, Khanbus, Lepchas, and so on.

Descriptions are available for the Tibetans and the Lepchas of Sikkim and Koches in the foothills of Darjeeling district of West Bengal. Extensive analysis of Ahoms in particular and other tribes of Assam like the Bodos, Kukis, Koches, Meches, Chutiyas are available. Khasi, Jaintia and Garo of Meghalaya; Manipuris of Manipur; Tipra and Bodo of Tripura; other small tribes like Abor, Miri, Aka, Dafla, Naga, Kuki, Mikir, Mizo, Kachari of North East India find mention under the broad category Kirat. Chemjong (1966) includes almost all the Mongoloid groups of Nepal like 'Lepcha, Maangar, Gurung, Tamang, Sunuwar and Hayu under the umbrella term Kirata.

Both the communities under Kiratas and their geographical spread remain inconclusive and unsolved. T.B.Subba writes: 'while Chatterjee associates them with the northern Himalayas, he does not negate the view of Gopal Chandra Praharaj who locates them in Northern India nor does he refute Jnanendra Mohan Das who claims that their ancient habitat was 'the Eastern Himalayan tracts, including Sikkim and Bhutan, and Manipur and other adjacent tracts, which are exactly the lands of Mongoloid settlement in India' (Chatterjee, 1951:18, as cited in Subba, 1999: 25).

Contemporary or narrow meaning of Kirata

Although Kirata is an ancient term in its modern meaning, coverage and significance it is substantially different from its earlier connotation. In this section, we would try to (a) identify the geographical area (popularly known as Kirata region) over which the Kiratas are spread out, and (b) identify the ethnic groups which are included under the generic term Kirata in the modern time.

(a) Kirata region

Tracing the Kirata history it is found that the ancestral homeland of the Kirata was in Sapta Sindhu (present day Jammu Kashmir and Himachal in northwest India), which was called Indus-Saraswati Region over 5000 years ago (Tiwari, 2002). The seventh Mandala of the Rigveda contains references to the Battle of the Ten Kings (notably, hymns 18 and 83), where king Suda defeated a confederation of hostile Aryan and Dasyu tribes. In other word the battle of the Ten Kings was between the Aryans, who conform

to the Vedic teachings and those who did not. Kiratas joined the 'Dasyu', who were non-Aryans and had a culture different from Vedic culture. Rig-Veda mentions that in the famous war between Kirata emperor Sambara and king Divo-das of Sindhu-Saraswoti Region, Lord Indra helped the latter. Sage Bharadwaja was Divo-dasa's royal priest. He had ordered the King to annihilate the Kiratas from the northern frontier of Sapta Sindhu. Thus, the Aryans of Early Rig-Vedic times kept on moving towards the east, fighting with both Kirata as well as Nishadhas (Indo-Austroloids). The Kiratas, on the other hand, marched towards the east of Himalayas and arrived in present day Northeast Himalayan region.

The first Kirata king was Yalambar, who fought at the second great war of Kuruchetra on the Kaurava side and was killed by Krishna. The last Kirata king was Gasti who was a weak ruler and was overran by the Sombashi ruler Nimisha and brought an end to the Kirata dynasty (Tiwari, 2002). The Kiratas lost control over the Kathmandu valley and moved eastward to settle in small principalities of Wallo Kirata, Maj Kirata and Pallo Kirata. Later, in 1769, Wallo Kirata and Maj Kirata and in 1774 Pallo Kirata signed treaty with Gorkha king Prithvinarayan Shah who unified Nepal in its present form. The Gorkha king Prithvinarayan Shah captured Wallo Kirata first which lies in the east of Kathmandu and was the stronghold of the Sunuwar, Thami, Chepang and Hayu communities. This act of horror surprised the Rais and Yakkhas of Maj Kirata or central Kirata but they fought bravely and was about to win the battle. King Prithvinarayan Shah used more troops consisting of Gurungs and Magars from Kathmandu and used guns and muskets and ultimately captured Maj Kirata. The extreme eastern part of Nepal, Pallo Kirata, was the stronghold of Limbu, Dhimal and Lepchas and came under Gorkha rule in 1774 and peace was established in the region. Many communities with their distinct identity inhabited the Kirata region. It was a common practice that all the communities use their ethnic community name as their surname. The Gorkha ruler gave new title to these communities; the Khambu Rai got the title Jimder; Yakkha Rai became Dewan; Sunuwar Rai got Mukhiya; Yakhumba Limbu became Subba and the Rong Pa became Lepcha. None of the ethnic community use Kirata as their title.

The present day Kirata region constitutes the eastern part of Nepal,

bordering India. In 2007, when Nepal became a secular country, many suggestions had come up about the formation of the provinces and their boundaries. Most draft maps have shown Kirata region as a separate province. For example the maps prepared by Nepal Communist Party (Maoist), Amresh Kumar Singh, Gobinda Neupane, Kumar Yonzone and others have shown the eastern part of Nepal, bordering India, as Kirata Region (Rimal, 2007). The ten eastern districts out of total seventy five districts of Nepal that lie between Darjeeling district and Sikkim in the east and Dudh-Koshi river in the west has been marked as Kirata region or Kirat-Autonomous Region. The ten districts are: Solukhumbu, Okhaldhunga, Khotang, Dhankuta, Bhojpur, Sankhuwasabha, Taplejung, Terhathum, Panchthar and Ilam. Total area of the region is 15,860 square kms., which is 10.77 percent of the total geographical area of the country. The population of Kirata region is 17, 57,144, which is 7.59 percent of total population of Nepal.

(b) Kirata ethnic groups

The present Kirata region in the eastern part of Nepal bordering India is constituted of ten districts of Nepal. The major ethnic group reside in the region are Rai, Limbu, Sunuwar, Sherpa, Tamang, Chhetri, Magar, Newar, Brahmin (hill) and Yakkha. Some other communities reside in the Kirata region but they are insignificant in number.

We have used religion as one of the markers of identifying the ethnic groups under the generic term Kirata. The Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) could identify eight different religious groups in Nepal, namely, Hindu, Buddhist, Islam, Kirati, Jain, Christian, Sikh, Bahai and Others. Kirata religion is the animistic form of traditional belief where all the objects such as tree, stone, wind etc are believed to have souls. The Kiratas worship all such natural objects as god.

Kirata religion has been included in the census since 1991 and the followers of Kirata religion have increased from 3, 18,389 (1.72% of total population of Nepal) to 8,18,106 (3.60% of total population of Nepal) i.e. an increase of 157% in one decade, i.e. between 1991 and 2001. Ethnic consciousness among the population of Nepal has been reflected in decline of the population under Hindu category and the consequent increase of the followers of Kirata

religion. The proportion of the followers of Hindu religion in Nepal has decreased from 88.87 per cent (73,18,392) in 1952 to 87.69 per cent (82,54,403) in 1961 and then increased to 89.39 per cent (1,03,30,009) in 1971 and further increased to 89.50 per cent (1,34,45,787) in 1981. The proportion of Hindu population on the other hand decreased to 86.51 per cent (1, 59, 96,653) in 1991 and further to 80.62 per cent (1, 83, 30,121) in 2001. Although the absolute number of Hindu population has increased over the census periods their relative proportion has decreased in recent years – a reflection of the trend that the Kiratas want to distinguish them from the Hindu. Thus, both the absolute number of Kirata and their proportion to total population have increased during 1991-2001. The Buddhism and Kirata religions appear to be increasingly invoked in the ethnic identity politics in Nepal after 1990. Out of the total 2,27,36,934 enumerated populations in the 2001 census, 1,83,30,121 (80.6%) are Hindu 24,42,520 are Buddhist (10.74%), 9,54,023 (4.2%) are Muslim and 8,18,106 (3.60%) are Kiratas.

In 2001 census the major ethnic groups that follow the Kirata religion are given in Table 1.

Table 1: Major ethnic groups following Kirata religion by number and percentage, 2001 Census.

<i>Ethnic Group</i>	<i>Total Population</i>	<i>Kirata Religion Followers</i>
Major four groups		
Limbu	359,379	310,108 (86.3%)
Yakha	17,003	13,846 (81.4%)
Rai	635,157	450,283 (70.9%)
Sunuwar	95,254	16,553 (17.4%)
Total	1106793	790790 (71.4%)
Other groups above 1000 followers		
Dhimal	19537	1494 (7.65%)
Magar	1622421	2789 (0.17%)
Kami	895954	1302 (0.14%)
Tamang	1282304	1000 (0.08%)
Total	4927009	797375 (16.18%)
Total followers of Kirat religion:		
	818,106	797375 (97.46%)

Total population of Nepal:**22736934****818106 (3.59%)***Source: CBS, Nepal, 2001 Census*

Limbu, Yakha, Rai and Sunuwar collectively call themselves as Kiratas or declare their religion as Kirata. Table-1 shows that only 17.4% of Sunuwar population follows Kirata religion. As high as 86.3 percent Limbus follows Kirata religion, followed by the Yakkhas (81.4%) and Rais (70.9%). According to the 2001 census, 79.5% of Sunuwars are Hindus. Nevertheless, these four groups together represent 96.7% of the total Kirata religion followers. In addition, 29.10% of Hayu, 14.6% of Thami and 7.64% of Dhimal population follow Kirata religion. Among the other ethnic groups with at least 1000 persons following Kirata religion are Magar, Kami and Tamang. But they constitute a very negligible proportion of their total population. The followers of Kirata religion among the Lepchas is only 0.14 percent.

Limbu, Yakkha, Rai and Sunuwar are the main followers of Kirata religion. There are twelve other ethnic groups who also follow the Kirata religion and they are: Thami, Lepcha, Majhi, Bote, Magar, Sherpa, Chepang, Raji, Tamang, Gurung, Kumal and Danuwar. One can notice that the proportion of population who follow Kirata religion has increased for all the ethnic groups (core nationalities and the peripheral nationalities) over the 1991-2001 period. The four-core nationalities comprise as high as 96.7% of the total Kirata religion followers in Nepal. All the remaining twelve peripheral Kirata nationalities comprise only 3.3 percent of the Kirata followers.

The Kiratas, who were once the dominant political and cultural force in Nepal and ruled over the Kathmandu Valley at the time of Buddha, are generally believed to have been the progenitors of various presently Tibeto-Burman peoples (Davids & van Driem, 1985: 117). Although Kirata influence was once wide-spread in central Nepal, at present they are mostly confined to eastern Nepal. Rai, Limbu, Yakkha and Sunuwar have common racial and linguistic origins as well as a body of oral tradition which show traces of common ancestry and identities (Madan et al., 2008: 13). On the basis of literacy rate, housing unit, land holding status and

economic assets, the Indigenous nationalities of Nepal are grouped in five categories: endangered group, highly marginalized group, marginalized group, disadvantaged group and advantaged group. All the major three core Kirata ethnic groups, i.e., Limbu, Yakkha and Rai, belong to disadvantaged group and Sunuwar under marginalized group. Among the peripheral Kirata groups, Lepcha and Raji fall under endangered group; Thami, Majhi, Chepang and Danuwar under highly marginalized group; Magar, Sherpa and Gurung under disadvantage group; and none in the advantaged group. None of the Kirata ethnic groups, whether core or peripheral, is categorized as advantage group, and this is indicative of their socio-economic backwardness.

Both the core and peripheral Kirata nationalities not only follow Kirata religion but they also belong to the Kirata region which comprises of ten eastern districts of Nepal. For example Rai dominates in the districts of Khotang (38.7%), Bhojpur (34.1%), Solukhumbu (31.5%), Ilam (24.4%), Dhankuta (23.0%), Sankhuwasabha (22.4%), Panchthar (13.9%) and Okhaldunga (11.9%). Total population of Kirata Rai in these eight districts is 3,82,523 which is 60.23 % of the Rai population of Nepal. Limbu dominates in five districts of Kirata Region; Taplejung (41.8%), Panchthar (40.3%), Terhathum (35.4%) Ilam (14.3%) and Dhankuta (13.7%). Limbu population in these five districts comprises nearly 70% of total Limbu population of Nepal.

Thus, in a narrow or modern sense Kirata region located in the eastern part of Nepal bordering Darjeeling and Sikkim. It comprises an approximate area of 15,860 square km which is 10.77 percent of the total geographical area of the country. The population of Kirata region is 17, 57,144 which is 7.59 percent of the total population of Nepal. The major or core ethnic groups who follow Kirata religion are Limbu, Yakha, Rai and Sunuwar. These four groups together represent 96.7% of people who follow Kirat religion in Nepal. It is important to note that the present day Kiratas are largely confined to ten districts of eastern Nepal instead of the entire Eastern Himalayan region starting from west Nepal to Burma. In narrow sense the term recognizes only four core nationalities under the generic name Kirata. Regmi in his *Ancient Nepal* prefers yet another narrower definition of Kirata which includes only the 'Khambus and Limbus' as Kirata (Regmi, 1969: 16).

Lepchas and their Kirata option

The Lepchas, a Tibeto-Burman linguistic group of Eastern Himalayan region, have their distinct language, religion, language, culture and tradition. Majority of the Lepchas live in Sikkim (40,568 in 2001), Darjeeling district of West Bengal (32,377 in 2001) but a good number of them are found in Nepal (3660 in 2001) and Bhutan (figure not known). In the pre-historic period, the whole southeastern Himalayan region was once occupied only by the Lepchas. They as nomads used to move from one place to another for food and shelter over Sikkim-Darjeeling-Nepal-Bhutan region where there was no concept of political boundary like today. The Lepchas are widely regarded as the earliest settlers and are the autochthonous people of this tract. The origin of the Lepchas is obscure and there is still no unanimous theory about the migration route of the Lepchas in their present settlements. Some indicate that they had migrated through Tibet in the north while others opine that the Lepchas came via Khasi hills, Naga Hills and Assam. Overall, it has been accepted by the historians and the social scientists that the Lepchas are the early settlers and are the indigenous people of the region. After political arrangements over different periods, the Lepcha land has been divided and they fell in different countries namely India, Nepal and Bhutan. The present section examines the rationale for inclusion/exclusion of the Lepchas into the composite term Kirat.

Rationale for inclusion of Lepchas under Kirata

Kirata is a generic term and in a broad sense, it is used to designate all the ethnic groups who reside in the Eastern Himalayan region. Generally speaking, the Lepchas being a resident of Eastern Himalayan region, particularly in Nepal, Darjeeling and Sikkim, can be included under the generic term Kirata.

Prof. Suniti Kumar Chatterji (1951) included the Lepchas within the category of Kirata since they were the residents of Eastern Himalayan region and spends five pages (22, 25, 41, 78 and 79) discussing the possible route of migration, linguistic group, literature, alphabet, religion, life style and so on in his book *Kirata-Jana-Krti*. The author never specifically attach the word Kirata for the Lepchas but the simple reason of spending five pages on the

community in his book on Kirata signifies his 'intent' for inclusion of the Lepchas in the category Kirata. Prof. Chatterji not only mentions Lepchas in his book but most of the tribes of Nepal and North-east India like Newar, Khasi, Jaintia, Naga, Garo, Mizo, Bodo, Koch, Ahoms, Kukis, Tipra etc find mention in his book. Prof Chatterji placed the Lepchas in the same linguistic group alongside the Newar, Magar, Gurung, Murmi, Sunwari, Kirati and Toto but differentiates them from other linguistic groups of Nepal like Dhimal, Thami, Limbu, Yakha, Khambu, Rai, Vayu etc. which fall under the Pronominalise Himalayan dialects of Tibeto-Burman sub-family. Chatterji considers the whole of eastern Himalayan region as Kirata region and all those who live in this area, including the Lepchas, qualify to be included under the composite term Kiratas.

Iman Singh Chemjong in his book *History and Culture of Kirat People* (1966) included Lepchas as Kiratas. While discussing the 'The Munlom Faith of Rong Kirat People' the author states: 'The Mun or the female priest of the Rong Kirat populace instructs her people about the existence of Rum God or Tukbo Thing, one of the most powerful and celebrated good spirit. Her abode is Bo-inda or heaven and she dwells in the midst of a bright light and Moong or Chhuge-Moong-Pano and the malignant king of evil spirits or who permanently dwells in Nyok or hell...' (Chatterjee, 1966: 97). Although the author sporadically mentions about other tribes of eastern Himalayas the focus of discussion is on the Limbu and Rai communities of Nepal. Chemjong has included the Lepchas under the category of Kiratas because he understood the term in a broad sense.

Many scholars have examined the structure of Lepcha language and alphabet while trying to identify the similarities with the other languages of the Kirata group. Kirat is a composite word and it consists of good number of ethnic groups with distinct language and dialect. Limbus have been identified as a core Kirata group and their language has been simply termed as Kirat language. The Limbu or Kirata alphabet is structurally similar to Lepcha script and it is said that the Limbu script has been modelled on the Lepcha alphabet. According to many historians, King Sirijonga invented the Limbu script in the late 9th century. It has 20 consonants, 8 vowel signs, and 7 final consonants. Letters like YA, RA, WA in Limbu are subscribed in the manner similar to that of Lepcha script.

Following Shafer, Lepcha language has been grouped under Tibeto-Burman language family. Under Tibeto-Burman family there are five sub groups - Tibetan, Non-pronominalised, Pronominalised, North Assam group and Assam-Burma Group. Each of these groups has again been classified into several sub-groups. The Lepchas fall under Naga dialect of Bodo-Naga group of Assam-Burman family. Some of the other Tibeto-Burman language families are: Burmese, Dzonkha, Garo, Kayahli, Limbu, Lisu, Manipuri, Mizo, Navi, Newari, Sunuwar, Tangut, Tibetan, Tujia, Yi and so on.

Kirata and Kipat are the two concepts used in a similar sense in Nepal. Kipat was a communal land tenure system that existed in the eastern part of Nepal, particularly in Maj and Pallo Kirata areas. After the unification of Nepal, King Prithvi Narayan Shah established the same land tenure system as it was during the control of the tiny Kirat principalities. In Kipat, land cannot be sold to other person and it remained the property of the king who can change its use for social purposes. The list of the populations which received land under the Kipat system are 'Limbu, Rai, Majhiya [?], Bhote, Yakkba, Tamang, Hayu, Chepang, Baramu, Danuwar, Sunuwar, Kumhal, Pahari, Thami, Sherpa, Majhi and Lepcha' (Regmi, 1978). One can see that all the populations associated with the Kirata ensemble appear on this list; but all the populations with Kipat rights are not identified as Kirant. Some of them are probably not included because they have other identity referents which are more obvious than this default category. This is clearly the case for the Buddhist populations (Bhote, Tamang, and Sherpa) (Schlemmer, 2004). After the Land Reform Act, 1964, Kipat was abolished in Nepal but the Lepchas, being a follower of Kipat land tenure system in early days, have remained under the simple bracket of Kirata.

As the Lepchas of Nepal are residing in the Kirata region and some writings included them under Kirat group; most people knowingly or unknowingly identify Lepchas as Kirata in the broad sense of the term without finding the rationale of their inclusion.

Arguments against inclusion of Lepchas under Kirata

At present the Lepchas primarily reside in Nepal, Sikkim,

Darjeeling and Bhutan. If the Lepchas of Nepal are identified as Kirata then their counterparts in India and Bhutan should also be so identified. But the existing literature does not identify the Lepchas as Kirata nor they themselves want to be recognized as Kirata; they prefer to be identified as Lepchas only.

The eastern part of Nepal, popularly known as Kirata region, is dominated by the Rai and Limbu communities. These two communities feel themselves proud to be identified as Kiratas. Both the groups had their history of kings, kingdom, and war against the rivals and have a long association with the area. The eastern Nepal has a long history of ethnic and revivalist movement in the name of Kirata solidarity. The revivalists have tried to unify all the communities living in the region under the term Kirata and have gone to the extent of demanding a separate Kirata state. Lepchas, a small and insignificant community of Nepal, have become the victims of the majority will and the historical developments in the region. Their opinion was never sought in the process. Like the other Buddhist communities, namely, Tamang, Sherpa, and Bhutia, the Lepchas have their own identity and they do not feel any insecurity in being clubbed with the Kiratas in Nepal.

Only 0.14 percent of the Lepchas in Nepal follow Kirata religion. But since most of the Lepchas are animists by tradition some of them might have included their names under Kirata religion. As per 2001 census, in Nepal, 88.79% Lepchas are Buddhist, 7.62% Hindu, 3.33% Christian, 0.14% Kirata, 0.03% Jain and 0.82% follow other religions. Thus on consideration of religion there is no justification to incorporate the Lepchas under Kirata category. For the Lepchas living in Sikkim, Bhutan and Darjeeling, Kirata religion does not bear any relevance.

Kirata and Kipat land tenure system applied only to Nepal and all those who follow Kipat land system are identified as Kirata. Some historians link Kipat with the Limbus. Bhandari is of the view that Kipat has been derived from Limbu word where 'Ki' means 'Kirati' and 'pat' means 'fallow or barren land'. Shrestha is of the view that the word kipat has been derived from Limbu language which means 'revenue free land' (Bhandari, 1985: 51). In Sikkim-Darjeeling there is no Kipat land so a large majority of the Lepcha of Sikkim-Darjeeling cannot be included into Kirata category.

Rai, Limbu and other Kiratas who have settled in Sikkim-Darjeeling have been enlisted as 'Gorkha' and get the benefit of reservation for recruitment in the Indian army. However, the Government Order No. 13-229/200/Estt, dated 10/09/2004 of Ministry of Culture, Government of India, denied Lepchas of the 'reservation' that the Gorkhas enjoy. Lepchas are a Scheduled Tribe of India and they are non-Gorkhas. They have their unique origin and culture and are the autochthonous people of Sikkim-Darjeeling Himalayan tract, who are not clubbed with other Kirata communities.

So far as religion is concerned there is none among the Indian Lepchas who has claimed to practice Kirata religion. Most of the Lepchas are either Buddhist or Christian, and a few are Hindu. Kirata religion has never been recognized in Indian census and no tribe in India fall under this category. Kirata religion is practiced in Nepal is followed mostly by the Rai, Limbu, Yakkha and Sunuwar communities there. Thus in terms of religion the Lepchas living in eastern Himalayas can in no way be placed under the Kirata category.

The Europeans, Indians and the ethnic writers have enriched the literature on the Lepchas. In fact, Lepchas have a rich language, literature and culture of their own. In none of the writings, Lepchas have ever been identified as Kiratas. It is only in a few writings on Kirata History of Nepal that a few writers have incorporated Lepchas under the category of Kirata. Most of the scholars have refused to include the Lepchas into the Kirata groups.

There are a number of social organizations in Nepal, Sikkim and Darjeeling Himalayan tracts whose basic aim is to retain their culture, language and religion. Although these organizations use the word Kirata but 'many so called Kirata organizations are essentially Limbu organizations' (Subba, 1999: 126). 'All India Lepcha Association' and 'Indigenous Lepcha Tribal association' are the two main organizations of the Lepchas in Darjeeling and none of them use the term Kirata. Lepcha organizations in Sikkim also do not use the word Kirata but prefer to use 'Lepcha' in order to segregate them from the Kirata organizations which are controlled by the Limbus and the Rais. Lepcha folktales talk about the origin of the Lepchas from the lap of Kanchenjunga and their subsequent dispersal over the Sikkim-Darjeeling Himalayan tracts.

There are at least two evidences which narrate the migration of one section of the Sikkim Lepchas to Ilam in Nepal in the early days. The first version says: 'about 10 years previously 1200 able-bodied Lepchas, forming, according to Captain Herbert, two-thirds of the population of Sikkim, had been forced by oppression of the Raja to fly from Darjeeling and its neighbourhood, and to take refuge to Nepal' (O'Malley, 1907: 22). Another incidence occurred due to the assassination of Lepcha Prime Minister Bolod by the Tibetan King of Sikkim. 'The murder of Prime Minister was immediately followed by the flight of some of his relatives to Unthoo, on the border of Nepal. When Bolod was assassinated by the Maharaja Tsugphud Namgyal's orders, his nephews, the sons of Kotaba Kungha named Dathup and Jerung Denon and Kazi Gorok left Sikkim, taking with them about 800 houses of Lepcha subjects from Childam and Namthang and went towards Ilam and settled down there' (Sprigg, 2005: 11-12). The above two incidences amply prove that Ilam is by no means the original homeland of the Lepchas rather they were forced to take refuge there in distant past. If the origin of the Lepchas of Nepal is in Sikkim, there is no reason to place even the Lepchas of Nepal under the Kirat category because their predecessors in Sikkim were not the Kiratas.

T.B. Subba clearly distinguishes Lepchas from Kiratas. He observes: 'Kirata communities cannot claim to be wholly native to the region. Written history shows that the ancestors of many Kirata people living here have come from Nepal. The only community which is known to have originally inhabited this region is the Lepcha' (Subba, 1999: 20). Although Subba made his remark on the Lepchas of Darjeeling the logic can easily be extended to the Lepchas of Sikkim and in broad sense to those in Nepal. Subba's work *Politics of Culture* (1999) confines to the three Kirata communities of Nepal, Sikkim and Darjeeling and excludes the Lepchas. This is a clear indication that he does not prefer to include Lepchas under the composite category Kirata.

Conclusion

Some opinion surveys conducted in Darjeeling part of Himalayan region among the Kiratas and non-Kiratas reveals mixed response. However the view that emerges strongly is that for all practical

purposes Lepchas are not and should not be included under Kirata. While the Limbu and Rai communities call themselves as Kirata the Lepchas vehemently oppose the idea of their inclusion into the Kirata category. The information and facts available are insufficient to come to any final conclusion. The present exercise would open up avenues of further research on the question. In dealing with the question one has to take the political and social history of eastern Nepal into cognizance since the historical, social and political locates of the Lepchas living in Sikkim and Darjeeling Himalaya could be substantially different. In Nepal, the unification of different groups and ensuing supra-local identities are in part the result of state influences: those of the ancient Hindu kingdoms of the plain, of the Nepalese state and perhaps of the Sikkim monarchy. It seems that it was with respect to outside powers that the region's populations felt the need to unite - and/or were united, by outside influences - in encompassing ensembles. Denomination is an eminently political act, and all groups are the product of a history. But the case is different for the Lepchas of India.

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