



Evolving Kirat:

Negotiating Identity Across Time and Space

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Abstract: The article "Evolving Kirat: Negotiating Identity Across Time and Space" comprehensively explores the intricacies within the Kirat community in Nepal. It delves into various facets, including linguistic ties, cultural practices, historical roots, and shared cultural kinship that define the Kirat identity. A key focus is recognizing the internal diversity among Kirat subgroups, which speak distinct languages such as Limbu, Rai, Sunwar, Yakha, and Thakali. Simultaneously, the article underscores the cultural and historical elements that bind these subgroups together, emphasizing unity amid diversity.

The dynamic and evolving nature of identity construction in diverse societies is a central theme, acknowledging the ongoing discussions within the heterogeneous Kirat community about their identity, historical origins, cultural practices, and linguistic affiliations. The article advocates for a comprehensive approach, urging consideration of varied anthropological and historical perspectives. It critiques narrow definitions of Kirat's identity that solely focus on language, proposing instead embracing the community's diversity and history.

A crucial aspect of the article is its call for acknowledging complexity, emphasizing that doing so can create a more inclusive and equitable society. The report envisions fostering harmonious and fair coexistence by respecting and accommodating the various dimensions of Kirat's identity. Furthermore, the document extends its exploration to lesser-known Kirat groups in regions such as Uttarakhand, Nepal, Assam, Sikkim, West Bengal, Tibet, and Myanmar. Doing so provides an anthropological perspective on the distinct identities and shared connections of these lesser-known Kirat groups, enriching our understanding of the broader Kirat community across diverse geographical spaces.

IndexTerms - Kirat identity, Narrow and broad definition, Intersectional definition, Evolving Kirat definition.

I. INTRODUCTION

Exploring early references reveals that Kirat mentions are found in ancient Sanskrit epics such as the Mahabharata and Ramayana, portraying them as warrior communities dwelling in forests, as discussed by Bhatta (2019). These portrayals emphasize the Kirat people's close association with nature and martial prowess, offering insights into their historical roles and societal contributions.

The classification of Kiratas in Sanskrit texts like the Manusmriti and Yajnavalkya Smriti adds complexity to their societal position. These texts categorize Kiratas within the "Kshatriya" (warrior) caste or the "Sudra" (laboring) class, underscoring the intricate and evolving relationship between Kirat communities and the Hindu caste system, as explored by Tamang (2011). This classification reflects the nuanced historical dynamics that shaped the social standing of Kirat communities in ancient times.

The term 'Kirat' itself has an intriguing etymology. It is derived from the Moabite language spoken in tropical regions, specifically from words like 'Kiriya,' 'Kiriya,' or 'Kiriya,' meaning a fortress, settlement, or city, according to The New Biblical Atlas and Scripture Gazetteer (1860). Although linguistic connections seem distant, some scholars, such as Van Driem (2007), propose a potential link between the Kirati language and the extinct ancient Moabite language spoken in the Mediterranean region. This theory, albeit controversial, suggests the possibility of shared ancestry or historical interactions between these geographically distant communities.

An essential aspect of Kirat's identity lies in their rich oral tradition, Mundhum. Mundhum encompasses sacred texts and verbal narratives that transmit stories, rituals, and knowledge across Kirat generations, as highlighted by Yonzon (2015). These narratives often portray Kirats as the land's original inhabitants, emphasizing their deep connection to nature, spirits, and ancestral wisdom. However, diverse origins and interpretations exist within Mundhum narratives across different Kirati groups and regions, contributing to a rich tapestry of perspectives on Kirat identity, as noted by Bhatta (2019). This diversity underscores the complexity of Kirat's identity and how it is understood and expressed within the community.

The identity of the Kirat people is intricate and diverse, demanding a nuanced understanding that goes beyond superficial categorizations. It is imperative to delve into the complexities of their linguistic diversity, shared historical and cultural elements, and internal variations within the community to define the Kirat people. This multifaceted approach is essential for comprehending the depth and richness of the Kirat identity and fostering a respectful understanding of this vibrant community.

The Kirat people in Nepal constitute a heterogeneous group, prompting ongoing discussions encompassing various aspects of their identity, including historical origins, cultural practices, and linguistic affiliations. This article endeavors to navigate the intricate terrain of defining "Kirat" by adopting a comprehensive perspective that spans both narrow and broader anthropological considerations.

A crucial aspect of this exploration involves an in-depth examination and discussion of historical narratives, linguistic nuances, and social realities. By scrutinizing the historical trajectory of the Kirat people, one gains insights into the roots and evolution of their identity. Additionally, linguistic analyses contribute to understanding the diverse languages spoken within the Kirat community, shedding light on the linguistic intricacies that contribute to their cultural tapestry.

The article emphasizes that defining the Kirat people necessitates a holistic approach that considers the interplay of linguistic diversity, historical narratives, and internal variations. By doing so, it seeks to contribute to a more informed and respectful understanding of the Kirat community within the broader fabric of Nepalese society.

Moreover, the article recognizes the importance of acknowledging the internal variations within the Kirat community. These variations encompass differences in customs, traditions, and experiences among different subgroups. This recognition is crucial for preventing oversimplified generalizations and promoting a nuanced understanding of the diverse identities present within the broader Kirat community.

II. DISCUSSION

The Kirat people, residing predominantly in the Himalayan regions of Nepal and India, form a diverse and heterogeneous population, distinguished by physical attributes, varied languages, shared ethnicity, and unique cultural customs, as Gurung (2003) noted. This diversity is evident in their physical characteristics, where some individuals exhibit light skin and Mongoloid features. In contrast, others display darker skin tones and Austro-Asian features, reflecting the complex history of migration and intermixing within the Kirat population, as highlighted by Rai (2019).

Kirat identity is not confined to simplistic categories of race, ethnicity, or culture; instead, it is a nuanced amalgamation of historical, social, and cultural factors. To truly understand Kirat's identity, one must recognize the interconnectedness of these factors, embracing the internal diversity and dynamic nature inherent within the community. This comprehensive understanding requires a multidisciplinary approach, examining Kirat's identities through the lenses of history, anthropology, and sociology to capture their identities' complex and evolving nature.

Crucially, the concept of ethnicity itself is dynamic and fluid, continuously shaped by historical and social factors. As scholars such as Brubaker (2004) and Jenkins (1997) emphasize, ethnicity is not a static construct but a dynamic one, adapting and evolving in response to changing circumstances and influences. Globalization, migration patterns, and intergroup interactions play significant roles in shaping how individuals perceive and express their ethnic identity, as discussed by Vertovec (2007). Additionally, the boundaries between ethnic groups are often porous and overlapping, giving rise to hybrid identities that challenge rigid categorizations.

In the specific context of the Kirat Limbu, it is evident that their ethnic identity is not fixed but flexible and dynamic. The uniqueness of Kirat and Limbu are not mutually exclusive; individuals may identify with both, and the choice of identification can vary based on the social setting and the desired level of inclusion or exclusion, as observed by Hagen (1999).

Understanding Kirat ethnicity requires an appreciation of its dynamic and multifaceted nature, acknowledging the interplay of historical, social, and cultural factors. By adopting a holistic and interdisciplinary perspective, scholars can grasp the complexity of Kirat identities and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of their rich and evolving ethnic tapestry.

Geographical Distribution and Linguistic Diversity

The Kirat people predominantly inhabit the eastern Himalayan region, with significant populations distributed across Nepal and India. They are especially noticeable in places like Uttarakhand, West Bengal, and Sikkim. Within the Kirat community, a diverse array of subgroups exists, each characterized by using distinct languages. Limbu, Rai, Sunwar, Yakha, and Thakali are notable among these languages, reflecting the linguistic richness within the Kirat community, as observed by scholars such as Sharma (1992) and Gutsch (2000).

The linguistic landscape of the Kirat people is a subject of scholarly discourse and remains a matter of ongoing debate. The exact number and classification of Kirat languages remain in contention within academic circles. Despite these debates, there is a consensus that Kirat languages are distinct from Indo-Aryan and Dravidian language families. Scholars, including Hutt (1983), have suggested possible linguistic connections to the Tibeto-Burman language family, adding a layer of complexity to the linguistic diversity within the broader Himalayan region.

The linguistic diversity among the Kirat people contributes to the richness of their cultural tapestry and serves as a marker of their unique identity. These distinct languages, each spoken by specific subgroups, contribute to the mosaic of Kirat culture, providing a linguistic dimension integral to their heritage. The ongoing scholarly exploration of Kirat languages and their potential connections to broader language families contributes to our understanding of this vibrant community's historical and cultural intricacies in the eastern Himalayas.

Kirat Ethnic Groups Beyond the Widely Recognized: An Anthropological Exploration

While Rai, Limbu, Sunwar, and Yakha are prominent Kirat groups. The Kirat identity encompasses diverse ethnic communities scattered across the Himalayan region. This response explores lesser-known Kirat groups living in Uttarakhand, Nepal, Assam, Sikkim, West Bengal, Tibet, and Myanmar, offering an anthropological perspective on their distinct identities and shared connections.

1. **Uttarakhand:** The **Thangmi:** Inhabiting the Garhwal Himalayas, the Thangmi practice unique animistic rituals and speak their Tibeto-Burman language, Thangmi. They struggle with land rights and cultural preservation due to their small population (Gutsch, 2000). The **Rongpa:** Located in the Darma Valley, the Rongpa speak Rongpo, a Tibeto-Burman language, and practice Tibetan Buddhism influenced by Bon traditions. They face the challenges of assimilation and cultural erosion due to their proximity to Tibetan communities (Sharma, 1992).

2. **Nepal:** The **Hayu:** This small group resides in the eastern hills, speaking Hayu, a Kirati language distinct from Limbu and Rai. They practice animism and face marginalization due to their small size and limited resources (Hutt, 2083). The **Kulung:** Found in the eastern districts, the Kulung speak their own Kirati language, Kulung. They practice animism and nature worship with distinct rituals and traditions (Sharma, 1992). In his book *Kumaon*, Rahul Sankrityayan claims that although the **Magar** and **Gurung** people

of 18th-century Nepal did not recognize themselves as Kirat, they were Kirat in humanity (Sankrityayan, 1959). **Tharu and Dhimal** are brothers who live on the plain, according to the Kirat Mundhum (Chemjong, 2003).

3. **Assam: The Koch:** Though some classify them as Indo-Aryan, others recognize their Kirati ancestry due to their language, Koch, and cultural practices like animism and nature worship. They face challenges of identity assertion within a complex socio-political context (Gutsch, 2000).

4. **Sikkim: The Tamang:** While widely recognized as a distinct group, Tamangs in Sikkim speak a Kirati language, Sikkimese Tamang. They practice a blend of Tibetan Buddhism and indigenous beliefs, contributing to their unique cultural identity (Hutt, 2083).

5. **West Bengal: The Toto:** This small community in North Bengal speaks Toto, a critically endangered Kirati language. They practice animism and face challenges of cultural preservation and marginalization (Sharma, 1992).

6. **Tibet: The Sherpa:** Though often associated with Tibetan ethnicity, Sherpas speak Kirati. Their cultural practices, including animistic beliefs, reflect a distinct Kirati heritage within the broader Tibetan context (Gutsch, 2000).

7. **Myanmar:** Little known about Kirati communities in Myanmar due to their remoteness and limited research. However, some scholars suggest their presence in the northern regions, speaking distinct Kirati languages and practicing indigenous traditions (Hutt, 1983).

Recognizing Internal Diversity

Understanding and acknowledging the internal diversity within the Kirat people is an essential aspect that warrants careful consideration. The Kirat community comprises various subgroups characterized by distinct languages, customs, and unique historical experiences. This diversity extends beyond mere linguistic differences, encompassing a rich tapestry of cultural practices and varied narratives that have shaped each subgroup over time.

The significance of recognizing internal diversity lies in avoiding homogenization, which is the tendency to treat the entire Kirat community as a singular, undifferentiated entity. By acknowledging and appreciating the distinctiveness of each subgroup, there is a mitigation of the risk of oversimplification and stereotyping. This recognition fosters a more nuanced understanding of the Kirat people, moving beyond superficial generalizations and allowing for a deeper exploration of their identity's intricate layers.

Moreover, acknowledging internal diversity promotes a culture of respect for individual identities within the broader Kirat community. It highlights the importance of valuing each subgroup's unique contributions to the overall cultural mosaic of the Kirat people. This approach goes beyond a superficial unity and encourages a more inclusive perspective that embraces the richness of the community's multifaceted identity.

Recognizing internal diversity within the Kirat people safeguards against oversimplification, contributing to a more accurate and respectful portrayal of their identity. This understanding enhances scholarly research and promotes a broader societal appreciation for the complexity and depth inherent in the Kirat community's cultural tapestry.

Shared Historical and Cultural Elements

The unity among the Kirat people transcends linguistic differences, as they share a profound connection through certain unifying cultural and historical elements. These cohesive elements are integral to their collective identity and include:

Ancient Traditions: Kirat communities take pride in their rich oral tradition, comprising myths, legends, and historical narratives passed down through generations. These narratives often trace the ancestral roots of Kirat people to Kirata kings mentioned in ancient Indian epics like the Mahabharata, as documented by Sharma (1992). This historical linkage is foundational to their identity, creating a sense of continuity and shared heritage among the Kirat communities.

Social Structures and Rituals: Traditional Kirat societies exhibit distinctive social structures and community practices, reflecting variations in clan systems, land ownership, and ritualistic ceremonies. The diversity in these practices adds depth to the Kirat cultural tapestry, with many communities embracing animism and nature worship. The Kirat people display a profound reverence for the natural world, manifesting in rituals that celebrate mountains, rivers, and the spirits inhabiting their environment, as explored by Gutsch (2000). These rituals not only foster a spiritual connection but also contribute to the social cohesion of Kirat communities.

Arts and Crafts: Kirat communities celebrate their vibrant and diverse artistic expressions. This heritage includes intricate wood carvings, skillfully crafted handloom textiles and traditional music and dance forms. These creative endeavors serve as tangible expressions of the Kirat people's connection to nature and their celebration of cultural heritage. The works of art embody the essence of Kirat's identity, capturing the beauty and significance of their artistic expressions, as highlighted by Hutt (1983).

In summary, the shared ancient traditions, social structures, rituals, and arts and crafts form a cohesive cultural framework that binds the Kirat people together. These elements not only contribute to the preservation of their identity but also serve as vibrant markers of their rich cultural heritage.

Narrow Versus Wider Anthropological Definitions of the Kirat

There are narrow versus wide anthropological Definitions of the Kirat People navigating Identity, Language, and History in Nepal. Defining the Kirat people can be approached from various perspectives, each offering valuable insights into their complex and diverse identity. Here is a comparison of a narrow and a broader anthropological perspective:

Narrow Definitions: Language as the Anchor

Traditionally, a narrow definition of Kirat has been primarily based on linguistic affiliation. This perspective identifies Kirati languages, a group of Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in eastern Nepal, as the defining criterion for Kirat identity. Languages like Limbu, Sunwar, Rai, Yakha, and Lohorung fall under this classification. Proponents of this narrow definition argue that shared linguistic ancestry forms the core of Kirat identity, providing a historical link and cultural cohesion (Bhattacharya, 2008). For

instance, the Kirat Yakthung Chumlung, a prominent Kirat organization, emphasizes this linguistic criterion in its definition of Kirat membership (Kirat Yakthung Chumlung, 2023).

This narrow definition, however, raises several challenges. Firstly, it excludes Kirat communities that have transitioned to speaking Nepali as their primary language, mainly due to historical socio-political pressures and language assimilation policies (Gorkhal, 2014). This exclusion can be viewed as disenfranchising and ignores the lived realities of many Kirat individuals who identify with their heritage despite linguistic shifts.

Secondly, focusing solely on language overlooks the diverse cultural practices, customs, and belief systems within the Kirati communities. Each Kirati language group possesses unique cultural expressions, rituals, and social structures, not always readily explained by belonging to a shared linguistic family (Van Driem, 2007).

A narrow Perspective might focus on specific, unifying elements shared by a majority of Kirat communities, emphasizing:

- **Linguistic Similarities:** Identifying language families and features shared by Kirat languages, like potential connections to Tibeto-Burman linguistics.
- **Cultural Threads:** Highlighting recurring cultural practices, such as animistic beliefs, nature worship, and specific rituals or festivals observed across various Kirat groups.
- **Historical Narratives:** Drawing on shared myths, legends, and references to Kirata kings in Ancient Indian epics to establish a common historical thread. This narrow perspective provides a clear and concise framework for understanding the Kirat people, but it risks:
- **Overlooking Internal Diversity:** Failing to acknowledge the significant linguistic variations, distinct customs, and diverse experiences of different Kirat subgroups.
- **Essentializing Identity:** Presenting a homogenized image that erases the unique characteristics and struggles of individual Kirat communities.
- **Ignoring Contemporary Dynamics:** Downplaying the impact of modern influences, adaptations, and evolving identities within the Kirat community.

Wider Definitions: Embracing Diversity and History

In response to the limitations of the narrow definition, some scholars and Kirat activists advocate for a broader conceptualization of Kirat's identity. This perspective expands beyond language to encompass historical narratives, shared experiences of marginalization, and a sense of cultural kinship (Yonzon, 2015).

Proponents of this broader definition argue that historical oppression and marginalization by successive Nepali regimes have forged a sense of solidarity among Kirati communities (Tamang, 2011). This shared history of exclusion from political and economic power has fostered a collective consciousness and a desire for recognition amongst Kiratis, regardless of their specific language (Gurung, 2013).

Furthermore, this broader definition acknowledges the internal diversity within Kirati communities. It embraces the heterogeneity of cultural practices, traditions, and belief systems, recognizing that Kirat's identity is not monolithic but a dynamic and evolving concept shaped by internal dialogues and external influences (Bhatta, 2019).

The broader Anthropological definition approach seeks to capture the full complexity of the Kirat identity by encompassing: There is Internal Diversity that recognizes the linguistic variations, distinct cultural practices, and historical experiences of different Kirat subgroups, avoiding generalizations. The broader definition covers Social and Political Context that analyses the impact of geographical dispersal, interactions with neighboring groups, and contemporary challenges in Kirat communities. There are evolving identities in the broad scene that acknowledge the dynamic nature of the Kirat identity in the face of globalization, internal movements, and political struggles for recognition.

The broader perspective offers a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding, but It can be more complex and challenging to grasp and requires engagement with diverse sources and viewpoints, avoiding oversimplification. It may not provide a clear-cut definition: Emphasizes the fluidity and ongoing evolution of the Kirat identity, which does not fit easily into a static definition.

Navigating the Nuances: An Intersectional Approach

Defining Kirat identity remains a complex and multifaceted endeavor. Both the narrow and broader perspectives offer valuable insights but also present limitations. Recognizing the limitations of any singular definition is crucial. Instead, an intersectional approach that acknowledges the interplay of language, history, culture, and individual experiences can provide a more nuanced understanding of Kirat's identity.

Firstly, acknowledging internal diversity within Kirati communities is essential. Each Kirati group has its history, cultural practices, and internal dynamics. A blanket definition that homogenizes these diverse groups would be inaccurate and insensitive.

Secondly, recognizing the role of historical contexts and socio-political pressures is crucial. Understanding how historical exclusion and marginalization have shaped Kirat's identity and fostered a sense of solidarity is vital for appreciating the broader implications of Kiratness.

Finally, considering the individual experiences and self-identification of Kirat individuals is paramount. Ultimately, it is up to each individual to define their own Kirat identity and negotiate its meaning within Nepal's broader social and cultural fabric.

Moving Forward: Recognizing Multifaceted Identities

The debate surrounding the definition of Kiratness reveals the complexities of identity construction in diverse societies. They recognize that identities are not static but fluid and context-dependent, which is crucial. While language and history play significant roles in shaping Kirat's identity, a more inclusive approach that encompasses internal diversity, shared experiences, and individual self-identification offers a more comprehensive understanding.

As Nepal strives towards a more inclusive and equitable society, acknowledging the multifaceted nature of Kirat's identity and valuing the voices and experiences of its diverse communities becomes essential. Only through respectful dialogue, engagement, and

appreciation of difference can we move towards a future where Kirat communities are recognized and empowered to define their narratives and place within the Nepali nation.

Ultimately, choosing the appropriate perspective depends on the specific context and purpose. Sometimes, a narrow, unifying definition might be sufficient for basic understanding. However, for a deeper and more accurate representation, the broader anthropological approach, acknowledging internal diversity and dynamic shifts, offers a more holistic and respectful way to appreciate the rich tapestry of the Kirat people's identity.

Remember, both strategic perspectives hold merit, and utilizing them can provide a multifaceted understanding of the Kirat people's complex and ever-evolving identity.

The Kirat people represent a diverse group with a rich history and cultural heritage spanning the Himalayan region, primarily in Nepal and India. A comprehensive definition requires acknowledging their internal diversity while recognizing their shared historical and cultural threads.

Contemporary Identity Challenge

Recently, Kirat communities have encountered many challenges, encompassing issues related to land rights, cultural preservation, and political representation. These challenges have prompted a heightened significance of initiatives aimed at revitalizing their languages, documenting age-old traditions, and asserting their distinct identities, as noted by Sharma (1992).

One key aspect demanding attention is the internal diversity within each Kirati subgroup. Recognizing and understanding this internal diversity is paramount, considering cultural practices and languages may exhibit notable variations even within Kirati subgroups. This acknowledgment safeguards against generalizations that oversimplify the rich and intricate tapestry of Kirat identities, promoting a more nuanced and accurate comprehension of the diversity within these communities.

Moreover, the concept of Kirat identities is inherently dynamic, subject to continuous evolution influenced by historical, political, and social factors. This dynamism necessitates ongoing research efforts and a commitment to respectful engagement with diverse communities to capture Kirat identities' complexities and nuances comprehensively. By acknowledging the fluid nature of these identities, scholars and communities alike can better adapt to changes and ensure a more accurate representation of Kirat people in the context of their evolving socio-political landscape.

However, a notable challenge exists in limited research on some Kirati groups, creating a gap in our understanding of their specific characteristics and lived experiences. This scarcity hampers comprehensive insights into the unique aspects of specific Kirati communities, underscoring the need for increased scholarly attention and dedicated research efforts to fill these gaps and foster a more comprehensive understanding of the diverse Kirat identities and experiences.

III. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this review article on the Kirat community in Nepal comprehensively explores their identity, highlighting the complexities, diversity, and evolving nature of Kirat's identity construction. The paper emphasizes the importance of considering linguistic ties, cultural practices, historical roots, and shared cultural kinship in understanding the Kirat community. It recognizes the internal diversity among Kirat subgroups, such as Limbu, Rai, Sunwar, Yakha, and Thakali, while also emphasizing the cultural and historical elements that unify them.

The article calls for a comprehensive approach that considers varied anthropological and historical perspectives, filling the research gaps to understand the Kirat community's unique characteristics better and lived experiences. It discusses the potential pitfalls of narrowly defining Kirat's identity solely based on language and instead encourages embracing the diversity and historical context within the community. This approach can foster a more inclusive and equitable society, respecting the various dimensions of Kirat's identity and contributing to harmonious and fair coexistence.

Furthermore, the article explores lesser-known Kirat groups in Uttarakhand, Nepal, Assam, Sikkim, West Bengal, Tibet, and Myanmar, highlighting their distinct identities and shared connections from an anthropological perspective. This review expands our understanding of Kirat's identity beyond the widely recognized subgroups and emphasizes the need to identify and empower the diverse Kirat communities.

Overall, this review article emphasizes Kirat's identity's dynamic and multifaceted nature, urging a holistic understanding encompassing linguistic diversity, historical narratives, and internal variations. By acknowledging the complexities and embracing the diversity within the Kirat community, a more respectful and inclusive society can be fostered, respecting the individual self-identification and shared cultural elements that bind the community together.

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