Redefining the Nation and Exploring the Self: Reading Contemporary Kirant Poetry

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Abstract
This paper critically analyzes how the poets belonging to the indigenous Kirant ethnic background perceive and interrogate the narratives of Nepali national identities and nationalism in their creative expressions. Six different poets belonging to Rai and Limbu communities—Shrawan Mukarung, Bhupal Rai, Upendra Subba, Swapnil Smriti, Chandrabir Tumbapo, and Heman Yatri— are purposefully selected for this study who embrace the Kirant as their common identity. Most of the poems selected here are composed against the backdrop of People's Movement II in 2006 and reflect the marginalized ethnic perspectives about nation, nationalism, cultural identity, and indigenous consciousness. The theoretical notion of nationalism is employed in the study, drawing upon theorists like Ernest Renan, Ernest Gellner, and David Steven. A critical analysis of the selected body of poetry offers the findings that the contemporary Kirant poets attempt to redraw the discourse of Nepali nationalism in two different ways: 1) by exposing the gaps and fissures inherent in the national narratives; and 2) by exploring and incorporating their unique selves in their compositions— in the forms of local myths, folklore, ritualistic elements, indigenous symbols, socio-cultural values, and ethnic concerns. The study concludes that literature helps redress the crises created by the state in the past, and contemporary Nepali poetry, particularly those composed by the Kirant ethnic community, is a response that voices sentiments of the margin.

Keywords: Kirant poetry, nation, nationalism, identities, indigenous people, ethnicity

Introduction
The People's Movement II 2006 brought several changes in the political and socio-cultural aspects of Nepali society. As the post-movement period is generally noted for the restructuring and reforming of the various spheres of society, it paved the way for redefining the established conventional values. In this scenario, a bulk of indigenous ethnic poets appeared in the post-revolution era along with new forms of experimental
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poetry, displaying a strong desire to change the existing nuances of mainstream Nepali poetry. The emergence of ethnic poetry with distinct form and diction and a clear shift in the tone brings forth some researchable questions: Is there any close and adjacent relationship between poetry and nation? How do poets belonging to the marginalized ethnic community use poetry as a medium of expression but carve out new aesthetics and politics in their creations? To respond to these questions, this paper explores the aesthetic and the redressive features of some selected contemporary Nepali poems written by the poets Shrawan Mukarung, Bhupal Rai, Upendra Subba, Swapnil Smriti, Chandrabir Tumbo, and Heman Yatri belong to the Kirant ethnic community.

The rationale behind specifically opting for the poets from the Kirant ethnic community is that its poetry exhibits a noticeable departure in terms of themes, style, and motifs. The poets bring local colours and unique flavour in their poems exploiting local myths, cultural values, ethnic practices, and rituals. In the meantime, the poets significantly address the breaches that Nepal, as a modern nation-state, has committed against ethnic languages, cultures, and identities. Hence, this paper aims to critically engage in the poetic language crafted by the indigenous minds in their works. The present study has two different objectives: first, to bring forth discourse of nationalism in conversation to analyze how the contemporary Kirant poets perceive the nation and national identity in the socio-politically transforming scenario; second, to explore the way the ethnic poets use literature as a medium of exploring and expressing their unique identity and cultural dynamism.

This paper is divided into five parts: the first part introduces the subject matter, while the second part is a literature review that presents the research gap and a brief synopsis of the previous research on Kirant poetry and the individual poets selected for this study. The third part introduces the theoretical notion of nationalism along with critical insights from different critics. The fourth part is the results and discussion of the study, in which the first section presents how Kirant poetry critiques and questions the hegemonic national identities in their poems, and the next section discusses how the Kirant poets explore their self in their texts. The fifth part of the paper is the conclusion, which summarizes the main points and presents the significance of this research.

Literature Review

Different scholars have diversely interpreted contemporary Nepali ethnic literature as it offers vigorous discussions and multifarious cultural, social, and political interpretations. Kirant poetry, as a representative of Nepali ethnic literature, provokes various thematic-linguistic interpretations. Therefore, the critics have approached Kirant poetry from different frames of reference. For instance, Abhi Subedi, in his article, “A Study in the Shift of Self and Lyricism in the Post-conflict Poetry of Young Limbu Poets,” observes Kirant poetry as minor literature that holds the features of Deleuze-Guattari’s notion of minor literature. He writes, “I find the Deluze Guattari observation about the minor literature very productive mode of discussion to use in the context of the Limbu poets’ use of Nepali language and their pattern of intervention and their sense of immediacy” (5). Subedi views that minor literature employs a dominant language with a high sense of ‘de-territorialisation’, thus, the Limbu poetry is considered a question raised by the margin to the center. Likewise, Dipak Lungeli finds ekphrasis to be a dominant form and feature of contemporary Limbu poetry. He has studied the Limbu poetry in association with body and culture. He argues that the Limbu poetry “[. . .] capture(s) visual dimension of Limbu body conveying distinctive poetic experimentation from the margin, making rupture with the mainstream literary trends and modes” (35). Lungeli
asserts that the incorporation of aesthetic dynamism and incorporation of ekphrasis makes it unique and distinct from mainstream literary expressions.

Apart from the above-mentioned literatures, there are not significant studies carried out based on a collective approach. In other words, most of the Kirant and Limbu poets selected for this study have been taken into consideration pertaining to an individual poetic style. Namely, Shrawan Mukarung has gained a wide range of attention due to his language choice and literary techniques. He is one of the celebrity poets during the People's Movement II era. In his poem “Bise Nagarchiko Bayan” (Testimony of Bise Nagarchi), he tries to revive the historically forgotten character to portray the agony and pain faced by the common people under despotic rule. In his article “We the People You the Populace,” C.K. Lal considers Mukarung's poem a song of rebellion: “Shrawan's ode to Bise Nagarchi captures the continuous agony of two centuries in its simplest form: the protagonist's rebellion expresses itself in feigned insanity” (61). Lal views that the awakening of a historically neglected character, Bise, is a rebirth of a rebel to protest the atrocity and superficiality of the state.

In the meantime, the poet Upendra Subba is also recognized for the use of local dialect and cultural allusions in his poems. In the article, “Kavi Khojdai Jada” (In Search of Poets), Basanta Basnet highlights the trends and features of Subba's poetry. Basnet observes, “Upendra does not hatch grand symbols. He uses local dialects, Mundhums, Chumlung, history and society. While searching for new tastes in the Jamboree of the poets, Upendra's presence is different and striking” (11). Similarly, Sushanta Gurung also perceives Subba's anthology of poems, Kholako Geet Ra Purana Kavitaharu [The Songs of Rivers and Old Poems], as the expression of Kirant consciousness. He argues that Subba's poetry is an example of how literature can expose concealed social chapters and expose the dark reality of the society. Gurung further praises Subba for using Kirant myths in his poetry, where Kirant collective consciousness is intertwined with feelings and sentiments of the people (6).

Likewise, another poet, Swapnil Smriti, has also been hailed by the critics for his lucid messages and racial concerns. Amar Giri connects Swapnil's writing to the world of faith, justice, consciousness, and a new generation. Giri opines, “Swapnil is a poet of light, hope, dream, struggle, new consciousness, new generation, and new era. He is a critique of distorted reality, irony, and conflict” (46). At the same time, Sanjeev Upreti is impressed by Smriti’s minute presentation of his experiences in the poetry. Upreti writes on the blurb of the anthology Baduli Ra Sudur Samjhannaharu (Hiccup and Past Memories), “Swapnil Smriti’s poems are beautiful; they flow in tune and touch both mind and heart. Some poems are revolutionary; they advocate for social justice” (1).

Like Smriti, the poet Heman Yatri also depicts social injustices and historical marginalization of ethnic communities in his poetry. Manu Manjil considers Yatri as a sincere poet who paints a beautiful canvas in his poems, incorporating his own world. Manjil mentions, “Heman is a voice of cultural margin, and his sincere poems are beautiful examples for the civilization of the marginalized world” (3).

For Abhi Subedi, the poet Bhupal Rai brings the history of his community in his poems. Rai writes about the pains and sufferings perpetuated by the state upon the indigenous groups and ethnic communities. Subedi observes Rai's poems to be “replenished with the ethnic expression” in his article "Bhupal, Diamond Ra Pipa." Subedi further writes, “Bhupal Rai's poems express a history of bloodshed caused by a powerful race and force upon ethnic groups, especially Kirant” (6). In a similar vein, Chandrabir Tumbapo, another Kirant poet, is presented as a "colourist poet" by Govindaraj Bhattarai, who regards Tumbapo as “[O]ne of six members of Rangabadi samooha (the colourist poets) who introduced a novelty in style, theme, and
interpretation of poetry and so of life” (135). As a member of the colourist poets, Tumbapoo and his fellow members attempt to bring racially, religiously, linguistically, and politically divided people into one colour. In the same journal, Abhi Subedi also writes about the poetic style of Tumbapo. According to Subedi, “[Tumbapo] projects a strong sense of poetic pragmatism and looks at his people's identity in the emergent post-conflict Nepal” (7).

It is evident from the review of extant literature in Kirant poetry that the poets have been approached to highlight individual poetic traits. Rather than studying them in a cluster or a cohort, most of these studies primarily revolve around one poet. There are only nominal studies available that foreground the shared common literary traits and features of the Kirant poets. In this regard, this study makes a departure from the previous studies as it employs a collective approach to study the Limbu and Rai ethnic poets under the corpus—Kirant. Moreover, the present study contributes to the research gap concerning the ethnic Kirant poetry by bringing the ethnic perspective to analyze the discourse of nationalism. As almost no literature has studied the Kirant poets in relation to the concepts of nation, nationalism, and self-exploration, the ongoing research has foregrounded how Kirant poetry, composed in contemporary times, upholds the indigenous cultural consciousness to interrogate the discourse of Nepali nationalism.

Nationalism as a Theoretical Framework

This paper attempts to study the relationship between ethnicity and nationalism by foregrounding the nexus between literature and the state, drawing on the idea of nationalism in interrogation. The discourse of nationalism or nation is often associated with the collective identity of people. It is a tie of binding people with a nation. As B.P. Koirala, in his *Atmabrittanta* (*Autobiography*), states, ”A nation is not some geographical entity; it is a place which is loved and liked by the people” (289). Nationalism is a mode of defining, expressing, and recognizing oneself with the state. It is constructed along with the formation of nation-states and incorporates several elements like people, language, culture, religion, history, social structures, and political conditions.

Talking about the development of the concept of nationalism, it is dated to the development of nation-states. Nationalism plays a central role in shaping individual consciousness, beliefs, value systems, and self-perception. The concept involves myths, symbols, discourses, and ideologies that relate an individual to group consciousness. It is a modernist idea that spread from Europe to all over the world. Different scholars have viewed nationalism in different ways. They have defined it mainly as a cultural or historical product or even an imagined community or psychological construction. Ernest Renan, a French scholar, relates nationalism with the nation. He considers the nation as a spiritual entity or a common bond among the people. It is related to everyday experiences like joy, pain, grief, national sacrifice, and other historical and cultural commonalities. In his essay "What is Nation?” Renan views the nation as consent to live together in a group:

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul a spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy or memories; the other is a present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form. (19)

Renan's take on nationalism projects it as a cultural entity. He regards the nation as an expression of the agreement to live together by sharing memories and experiences, and nationalism is the feelings of the people. Renan states, "The nation, like the individual, is the culmination of a long past endeavors, sacrifice, and devotion" (19). Renan takes the
nation as a cultural entity primarily related to the sentiments of the people rather than physical boundaries. He argues that combining the idea of nationhood with race, religion, and geography is appropriate. Drawing upon Renan's views about the nation as the historical efforts, sacrifice, and devotion of the people and nationalism as the spiritual and emotional bonding, this study tries to view how contemporary ethnic poets consider Nepali national identity.

Similarly, Ernest Gellner also hints at the emotional-spiritual aspect of nation and nationality. He considers nationalism as distinctively modern terminology and is not strictly the result of prior ethnicity, race, or culture: "Nationalism is not the awakening and assertion of these mythical, supposedly natural and given units. It is on the contrary, the crystallization of new units, suitable for the conditions now prevailing [. . .]" (49). Gellner opines that nationalism is the acceptance and assertions of new conditions of living. Rather than the perpetuation of the hegemonic units, nationalism tries to form and reform over time. It is fluid in nature and thus can be reinvented and reshaped by people's experiences. Gellner's premise of the unstable and fluid nature of nationalism fits in this study as it explores how the marginalized sphere of society interrogates the given monolithic national identity. In other words, his idea of nationalism as the perception and experience of the people helps to foreground the voices of the ethnic Kirant poets who wish to restructure and redefine the idea of nation in their poems.

Some scholars like Benedict Anderson treat the nation as a larger imagined community, as most of the members of this community share a common identity and feelings. According to Anderson, the formation of the nation occurs in the minds of the people in relation to the shared history, culture, language, and myths. In this regard, looking back to the history or the personal root is the process of forming an identity as a nation:

It [nation] is an imagined political community [. . .] It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the mind of each lives the image of their communion [. . .] The nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations [. . .] Finally, it is imagined as a *community* because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. (6-7)

Anderson views that emotional aspects of cultural identities are basic elements of the nation. Nations are created, nourished, and sustained through the emotional bond of the people. People express themselves in different ways, like associating with cultural myths, heroism, unsurpassed achievements, language, literature, food, and cultural artifacts. In this process, a nation is formed as an imaginative community or collective identity shared among individuals. It is a bond, or a social solidarity based on the characteristics and symbols of nationhood. Hence, a nation is an intense feeling rather than a fixed boundary, or political construct.

David Steven's idea of nationalism encompasses an exchange of various socio-cultural forms and symbols. It is manifested in several elements like myths, history, cultural entities, rituals, and values systems, which are fundamental elements of a nation. Here, Steven remarks,

The stories, symbolism and ceremony of the nation - the rituals and the myths - are of very considerable importance for they engage the deepest popular emotion and aspirations. Myths tell the story; rituals re-enact it. Thus, memories and stories of historic events and parades, remembrances ceremonies, celebrations,
monuments to the fallen oaths, anthems, coinage, uniforms, flags - all the aesthetics of nationalism - are the things that provide a strong community of history and destiny. They are the things that bind people together. (256)

Nationalism is a whole complex of ideas, attitudes, events, political movements, and forces. Steven regards it as a belief held by a group of people that functions through myths, symbols, culture, and shared memories. Significantly, he argues that the national symbols should bind the people together rather than create a rift between the members of the nation. Building upon the thoughts of him, the present paper tries to explore whether the defining symbols created by Nepal as a modern nation-state possess the ownership of all the people living in this country. At the same time, it has analyzed how the poets selected under study perceive the national signs, symbols, history, rituals, and cultural values.

In a nutshell, nationalism is proposed as a theoretical tool in this article as it provides a conceptual lens to explore the connection between ethnic groups and national identity. The choice of theory appropriates the interpretation because nationalism, as a conceptual framework, offers a critical perspective to explore how marginalized ethnic communities use literature as a medium of conveying their expectations and dissatisfaction about the nation. The present paper builds on the ideas of Renan, Gellner, and Steven, who associate the concepts of nation and nationalism more with spiritual/emotional aspects rather than with a physical or geographical location. Specifically, Renan's idea of the nation as a constituent of shared effort and devotion, Gellner's take on nationalism as a fluid and unstable category, and Steven's concept of nationalism as a collectively shared memory has been the critical framework to analyze contemporary Kirant poetry.

**Results and Discussion**

Kirant poetry is writing against the grain – an attempt to deconstruct the established rigid centers. Nationalism is one such pervasive and hegemonic center that evades the minority voices from the national narratives. According to some critics, there is an inherent flaw in the formation of Nepali nationalism as it does not uphold the views, sentiments, and aspirations of the margin. The state perpetuated violence and exerted coercive political forces during the formation of national identity and nationalism. Susan Hanegen, in her "Creating a New Nepal: Ethnic Dimensions," talks about the nature of Nepali nationalism as dominated by high hill caste and Hindu culture. She asserts, "The state has promoted the idea of unified nation by downplaying or eliminating cultural differences with its population" (11). The state has committed several breaches during the development of nationalism by ignoring or marginalizing ethnic cultures and their best practices. Perpetuation and articulation of hegemonic national identities through the various means of expression have marginalized ethnic language, cultures, and even their modes of expression in the past. In this context, the following two sections show how Kirant poetry critiques hegemonic national identities and explores the unique self to challenge the monolithic state-perpetuated identity.

**Kirant Poetry as a Critique of Hegemonic National Identities**

Kirant poetry represents the voices of different Nepali ethnic, racial, and cultural communities who are sidelined from the official narratives of the nation. The Kirant poets are critical of their historical marginalization, and they urge the rewriting of the history of this nation. For instance, Shrawan Mukarung's poem, "Bise Nagarchiko Bayan" (Bise Nagarchi's Testimony), represents the view of the margin. The poem is about the sequential agony of all the marginalized people who are sidelined and crushed...
by the brutal power of the state for centuries. Written from the perspective of a historically forgotten character, Bise Nagarchi, who is considered as a 'low caste' or 'untouchable' in the Hindu caste system, is a character of memory. Bise encouraged and supported the king of Gorkha state Prithivi Narayan Shah during his unification campaign but was neglected and almost forgotten by the official history of the nation. Mukarung brings forth Bise's persona and madness as a form of rebellion in the poem. Bise he has gone insane due to perpetual traumas:

Master!
After 250 years in this Gorkha kingdom
I have lost my mind
My head is spinning
I see the sky beneath my feet
And earth above me
In my dizziness,
I see ten heads on your shoulder
I am searching for my ground
Where is Bise Nagarchi?
Master!
I have lost my mind. (3; Trans. is mine)

Mukarung has tried to reflect socio-political reality from the eyes of a historical character that remained insignificant to the state. The history shaped by the power and constructed by the state ignored 'minor' realities and eulogized the ruler. Hence, in response, Mukarung makes an invisible, visible where Bise is questioning his 'master' over his existence in this poem.

Similarly, the poet Bhupal Rai also refers to the history of cruelty, injustice, and cultural intrusion. His poetic anthology, *Simanta Saundarya (Aesthetics of Margin)*, brings forth his perspective on indigenous art, culture, society, and human life. His poem "Dui Saya Tis Barsa Pachhi- Ek Jabaaaf" (After Two Hundred Thirty Years: A Response) is about the history of cruelty and injustice inflicted upon the Kirant people during the unification campaign of Prithivi Narayan Shah. He tries to portray a picture of Hatuwagadhi (the then capital of the Kirant state in the eastern part of Nepal) and Waling Hang (a Kirati king who was killed in the attack of 1773 A.D.) to question the history of evasion and domination. He writes:

An afternoon in 2003 A.D.
Waling Hang Kirati of new millennium
Stands under Prithivi Narayan Shah’s statue
And ponders-
I have seen this man somewhere. (4; Suresh Hachekali’s trans.)

Rai here brings the anecdote of Waling Hang Kiranti in order to show how people lost their territory, culture, and civilization along with the fall of Hatuwagadhi Fort. He equates all Kiranti people to King Waling Hang, who met a treacherous death at the hands of the settlers. He believes that the pains and sufferings of indigenous ethnic Kiranti people are a collective pain that hurts each individual belonging to the Kirant community as they share similar history, myths, and legends.

Moreover, the poets attempt to make Kiranti people aware of the loss of their historical, social, and cultural values due to external domination. The Kirant poets regard the unification campaign of Prithivi Narayan Shah as the beginning of the invasion of their identity. As argued by Krishna Hachhethu, the Shah rulers consolidated their power based on "... [a]bsolute control in political authority, monopolization of economic
resources, and penetration and expansion of social value systems of the victorious groups in vanquished areas" (221).

Talking about the poet Upendra Subba, he tries to rediscover his personal world, identity, culture, and civilization in his anthology, *Kholako Geet (The Songs of River)*. Like other Kiranti poets, Subba writes about the depravation and marginalization of the Kirant community and his reservation towards the national history of the nation. Subba's poem "Mero Aamako Naam" (My Mother's Name) is about the quest for identity amidst the harsh and unjust socio-political system of the country. The poet is speaking on behalf of those who are nameless and identityless in the official documents of the nation. In the poem, the poet is dismayed as he does not find the name of his mother in any of his official documents. He expresses, "In my citizenship, certificate or in other documents/Nowhere it is mentioned" (43; Trans. is mine). It is a great irony that life is wiped out of the national history and official narratives, even being a citizen of a particular nation. Moreover, Subba has a great confusion over the name of his mother:

- Chaappati?
- Fulmat
- Dilmati?
- Or Khawoti, Naamwoti, Lawoti?

What Might be my mother’s name? (42; Trans. is mine)

The 'mother' described in the verses above is not only the mother or one particular woman, but also represents all people living an unrecognized and devalued life. They are remaining as unknown citizens even in their own country where their life is buried under layers of hardships and struggles.

To bring another poet into the discussion, poet Swapnil Smriti is noted for crafting his creative strength against all forms of social brutality and malfunctioning. Smriti's poem "Durbar" (Palace) excavates the history of modern Nepal. The poet contends how the Gorkhali soldiers occupied the then-Kirant territory. He views the foundation of modern Nepal as weaker as it is laid by violence and threats. The 'Palace' Smriti is talking about in this poem is suggestive of the modern nation, which is built upon the numerous dead bodies of his ancestors. He vehemently criticizes the use of excessive threats and violence during the war. Furthermore, the poet considers the unification process as a campaign for spreading rigorous and monolithic sort of culture and civilization:

- Two thousand years ago
- A skinny foreigner speared a Trishul
- And killed my ancestors
- Buried the corpse near the main pillar of the home
- And by licking a gory Trishul,
- Declared himself a lord thereafter. (15; Trans. is mine)

Closely observing the above verses, we infer that the poet is very concerned about his ancestral history. He has a deeper longing for the lost tradition, culture, and civilization of his race. He mourns over the decay of his culture, evasion of his territory, and disintegration of his rituals or heritages. More importantly, he claims the territorial loss as the loss of his sovereignty, freedom, and identity. The poet tries to bring forth contradictions and anomalies prevalent in the national history of this nation. Even after the geographical expansion of this nation, the nation became uglier and disfigured, which is the primary concern of the poet. Smriti is critical of the disintegration and devastation of the historical and cultural values of his community. In this sense, the poem is his conscious and creative attempt to question and challenge the ideals in which this nation has been built upon.
Likewise, the poet Chandrabir Tumbapo advocates for the incorporation of heterogeneous socio-cultural elements in his poems. His poems are also filled with ethnic consciousness, an urge for total freedom, nostalgia about ancestral history, and a quest for ethnic identity. For example, Tumbapo raises a serious question in one of his poems, "Sandharva Itihasko" (A Reference to History), where he questions the official history of this nation. He asks the questions: "Who made it? /Why was it made? / The history of the winners". He believes history usually narrates the story of the winners and eulogizes them, thereby ignoring numerous tricks, flaws, and treacheries of the so-called winners. In another stanza of the poem, Tumbapo raises a striking question: "Is history factory of the winners/ For producing murderers?" As the history of this nation has remained as the history of bloodshed and violence, the poet believes that after the arrival of the outsiders, the indigenous people in this land are mistreated. They are displaced and chased away from their land. The poet asserts his feeling of loss through the following lines:

After your arrival,
Like a shrunken size of a country-
From the world map,
I have been disappearing from the crowd.
I have been chased away by the crowd.
And I am displaced. (5; Trans is mine)

Tumbapo views the chains of historical injustices, brutalities, and prejudicial treatments upon the people as responsible factors for the historical subjugation of local people, their culture, and tradition. He claims it to be started right after the emergence of the outsiders in the ethnic land.

Heman Yatri is another poet whose poem "Dungma," collected in his anthology, Pahad Ma Sangai Yatra Garchha (Travelling along the Mountain), portrays the picture of archeological and a historically significant Kirant place, Dungma of eastern Nepal. The poet has tried to highlight the importance of this place, which has almost been forgotten by the state, people, and even the Kirant community. Yatri considers this place as a palimpsest of the Kirant indigenous history:

This archeological breeze
Still buzzing at the Dungmali chorus
Reminding the song of ancient Hangbas;
Of Pungbat, Pauben, and Chhibatpangs
The state has forgotten
Such clear-translucent mirrors
That can reflect its real face. (60; Trans. is mine)

The lines emphasize the importance of one of the Kirant historical places, Dungma. Although Dungma was a place of historical and cultural glory, it is almost wiped out from the official history of this nation due to the prejudicial mindset of the rulers. Yatri has used different images in this poem that stimulate his senses to perceive the greatness of this place. As he feels the wind, hears the song, and looks after the ruins of Dungma, he finds his ancestral roots in that place. Moreover, the ruins of houses, old palaces, graveyards, historical objects, tattered scriptures, and dilapidated structures of the present Dungma correlate with the history and culture of the Kiranti people.

Exploration of Self: Expression of Indigenous Consciousness in Kirant Poetry
While analyzing the features of Kirant poetry, an exploration of the self or an expression of indigenous consciousness is also one of the major themes of their poems. Kirant poetry includes the elements of Kirant tradition and culture as significant subject matter of their poetry. The transformation of communal identity to national identity is
made possible in the poems through an articulation of personal history. Hence, the portrayal of the lifestyle of the Kirant community in their poetry is a continual search for their position in the national narratives.

For instance, a celebration of local colour is one of the major themes of Shrawan Mukarung's poems. He worships nature, rural lifestyle, and its surroundings in his poems. He creates the similarities between the mother and the village in his poem "Gaun ra Aama" (Village and Mother). He believes that the village is to be the best place for creativity, simplicity, and peace. Comparing the village with the different body parts of the mother, the poet is placing nature at the top of everything. He considers nature as the greatest pleasure and divine soul:

Returning from the city,
Returning from the city,
Far-
The village looks like Mother.
Forest and frost like her hair
Hill like forehead
School and monastery as eyes
Healthpost, V.D.C. office;
Glittering Fuli and Bulaki of mother’s nose. (45; Trans. is mine)

Here, the poet glorifies the nature. He admires the hills, mountains, woods, and rivers located in the village. This poem is an expression of an idyllic picture of the village, glimmered by joy, happiness, and peace. Here, the mother symbolizes the poet’s ethnic identity and communal cultural roots that the poet admires utmost.

Upendra Subba's uniqueness and departure from mainstream Nepali poetry lies in his use of local diction and tone. As one of the members of a poetic group called "Shrijanshil Aarajakta" (Creative Anarchist), Subba's poetry has unique features and forms. He is basically noted for the subtle style, themes, and motifs in his poems. By bringing local myths, symbols, and allusions, he portrays the flavor of local colors in his poems. The most striking feature of his poetry is the incorporation of mythical allusions and ritualistic elements. In his poem "Singhkhyaile," he highlights the popular dance practice of the Limbu community. He has created a visual imagery of Singhkhyaile to highlight the importance of this dance in his community. He considers it as the Limbu identity and cultural bond that unites people within a harmonious cultural tie. For instance, Subba writes:

Come on chaps with your strength full
Let’s clash in Singhkhyaile
Scuffle our fists
Chanting, squealing, and blaring
Chhui khyap khyap
chhui khyap khyap (74; Dipak Lungeli’s trans.)

In this poem, Subba has tried to recreate the historical heritage and cultural aesthetic neglected and marginalized by the nation. Singhkhyaile is a dance in the Limbu community where people of any age or sex play in groups, pushing each other by their hand, shoulder, elbow, and hips. The poet wants to portray the aesthetic aspect of this dance to highlight its importance. It can also be regarded as an intervention into the mainstream poetic tradition by the poet where he wants to add 'marginal' or 'peripheral' subject matters as a theme of his poetry.

Likewise, Swapnil Smriti also explores his ethnic and cultural identity in his poems. Smriti is nostalgic about his childhood, village life, and the joy he perceived in the nature of the countryside. For instance, Smriti longs for his roots and originality in
his poem "Pashcim Kshitiz Bata" (From Western Horizon). Here, the poet shows a great yearning for his belongings in his countryside. He remembers his mother, her dreams, pains, and struggles of raising him. He also talks about the life of a village that is full of joy and freedom; it was full of fun with the colours of Dhan naach, the foodstuff of Haat (market fair), local festivals, and rituals. The poet tries to reconnect his memory with the hills, mountains, woods, and wildflowers of his village:

When thunder strikes at a distant horizon,
When lightning occurs far away,
I remember my mother,
I stare towards the eastern horizon.
There is no nation for me far from there.
There is no human settlement across that. (74; Trans. is mine)

As the poet is from eastern Nepal, he is delighted by the memory of this direction. The East is his origin, which relates to his individuality and originality. Smriti is feeling distressed due to his detachment from his birthplace. For Smriti, the East is the cradle of civilization, which indicates that the poet is very concerned about indigenous civilization, history, culture, and tradition. He reveres the eastern horizon, which is his tribute to his race and soil.

Chandrabir Tumbapo's poem "Kumbhakarna Urf Phaktanglung" (Kumbhakarna Alias Phaktanglung) is lauded with mythological and cultural allusions where the poet has a firm rejection of the political subjugation and cultural intrusion upon indigenous culture. Phaktanglung is the Kirant name of Kumbhakarna Mountain, and it is considered one of the sacred religious symbols among the Kirant community. According to the Kirant scripture Mundhum, Phaktanglung protects the people from the natural calamities and other disasters. Kumbhakarna, on the other hand, is a Hindu mythological character from the Ramayana, where he has been described as a symbol of 'sleep.' Tumbapo compares the names Kumbhakarna and Phaktanglung to dig out their associative values. The name Phaktanglung is associated with Kirant identity, originality, and the organic values of the Kirant community. The poet accounts for sequences of tragic events after a 'tale-teller' arrives in his land. The 'tale-teller' here refers to an outsider or an invader who has created a hegemonic effect upon the mind of the innocent people, changing name of Phaktanglung to Kumbhakarna:

Arriving after millions of years
The tale-teller bathed me with his tales.
Slowly, I started to drowse thereafter.
Finally, I entered,
Into the endless tunnel of sleep
Yes, from that time
I; Phaktanglung, changed into Kumbhakarna. (5; Trans. is mine)

The poet asserts that the transformation of Phaktanglung to Kumbhakarna has led to various adverse effects. He believes the history of violence, jealousy, and hatred started from that time. The poet is concerned over the loss of the Kirant cultural identity. He is annoyed for portraying Phaktanglung in a narcoleptic Hindu cultural image.

In a similar vein, Heman Yatri's indigenous consciousness is remarkably expressed in his poem "Museumma Kokpako Mochhapma" (The Forlorn Museum). Here, Yatri has an intense desire to explore his forefathers' personal cultural and mythological history. He provides the details of cultural rites practiced by his forefathers and exposes how this tradition is under threat of extinction. On a pathetic note, the poet has tried to capture the emotions of Kokpa (the grandfather in the Kirant, Rai community) after his religious utensils have been thrown away from his house. The poet
expresses, "[Kokpa's] Mochhapma shall be flung out of home/And the picture of a stranger Shall squat the family shrine/And with it the first page of the Bible shall slowly unfold" (66; Mahesh Paudyal’s trans.). As Kokpa’s offspring do not like their ancestral 'burden' to carry on, the old traditions, values, practices, and religious objects will remain only in the museum. The poet fears that his culture will become only a matter of museum research. Therefore, he satirically expresses his feelings:

> From a distant land of time
> If ever you happen to remember Kokpa
> Make it a point to visit
> The Yalambar Museum Hall
> Wherein, I have treasured
> Kokpa's remaining souvenir:
> *soloinba wabu*¹
> Drum
> Cymbals
> Bow and arrow
> *And pomi*². (66; Mahesh Paudyal’s trans.)

The act of replacing the grandfather’s utensil has important significance in this poem. It shows a tendency of interchanging ancient values with the so-called modern values. It has not only hurt the grandfather, but the poet is also equally sad due to the loss of the original culture and identity of their community. In this poem, Yatri, on the one hand, hints at the fact that blind acceptance and adherence to the so-called modern values can lead to an unavoidable crisis in the cultural identity of racial and ethnic communities. On the other hand, he also senses a fear of complete displacement or demise of the local traditional practices.

As discussed above, the findings of the study indicate that the contemporary Nepali poetry, particularly those composed by the Kirant ethnic community, is a response to the monolithic state that overlooks the voice and sentiments of the margin. There are inherent contradictions in the discourse of Nepali nationalism because it negates the concern of the common people. Hence, the ethnic poets treat poetry as a redressive mechanism that voices the previously forgotten and excluded people from the official memory of the state. Kirant poetry, composed in recent times, advocates for a compensation for the historical injustices and makes a plea for restructuring and rewriting the history of those marginalized and dominated people. The poets explore their Kiranti identity in the forms of local myths, cultural heritages, and ethnic values. Therefore, self-exploration— the infusion of cultural myths and indigenous symbols, exploitation of religious and cultural allusions, the blending of historical anecdotes, and layman’s perspective— is one of the remarkable features of poetry composed by the Kirant poets.

**Conclusion**

The People's Movement II, as a landmark in Nepali socio-political history, invigorated the ages long silenced voices with the new perspectives and consciousness. Kirant poetry composed vis-a-vis the political movement embodies an interventionist attitude against the hegemonic nationalism and exclusivist national politics. As an expression of change and renovation, Kirant poetry is filled with the optimism of rebuilding and rewriting the narratives of nation and nationalism. Thus, poetry urges to

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¹ a pitcher
² yak’s tail—locally called *Chammar*—used during the Sakela dance of the Kirats

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restructure the nation and redefine nationality. Significantly, these poems are infused with a sense of self-exploration—a device of redefining and articulating the self—where the poets use their primitive cultural practices, myths, symbols, historical anecdotes, and religious allusions as the primary elements of their poetry. In the process of self-exploration, the poets are simultaneously rewriting the nuances of national narratives and nationalism blended with indigenous consciousness.

This paper contributes significantly to the marginalized literature in Nepal by filling the empirical gap in the ethnic poetry in general and Kirant poetry in particular. It marks a departure from previous studies as it employs the concepts of nation and nationalism as a theoretical concept to interpret the ethnic poetry. In other words, it invites indigenous consciousness to reinterpret the discourse of Nepali nationalism. At the same time, rather than revolving around one particular poet, as done by most of the previous studies, this study uses a collective approach—inviting the Limbu and Rai poets under the cohort, Kirant. The findings suggest that there is a close and adjacent relationship between poetry and nationalism since poetry as a mode of expression can unfold the grievances and sufferings of the people caused by the unfair state. At the same time, poetry redresses the past by making the invisible visible and the unheard heard through the creation of alternative aesthetics. Finally, the study can be a point of reference for the critical readers who wish to analyze the Nepali literary texts from a wide range of sociocultural, linguistics, and other inter or cross-disciplinary perspectives.

Works Cited


To cite this article [MLA style]: