

## Kirat and Bhote: A conspectus

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### Abstract

*Anthropologists and Nepali cultural historians and literates, including Tibetologists and South Asian cultural historians have commonly conceptualized Himalayan peoples and their civilization as an “Indo-Tibetan Interface.” Consequently, the Himalayan peoples have been explained within very generic terms given by their neighbors, scholars, and then state administrators such as Kirati and Bhote. This review article also shows that using such generic terms Kirati and Bhote are a little problematic because these terms have been used in a way that emphasizes many differences as if they have nothing in common. In his review article, I argue that understanding Kirati and Bhote people requires a perceptive of common racial, religious, cultural, and historical origin, rather than dichotomizing them. Thus, Bhote and Kirati might have come to be used as ethnic names in the same sense and purpose as Edward Said (1978) identified how Westerners used “binary grammar” to describe “the Orient” to themselves. Thus, it will not result in pinpointing any ethnic group, present or in past. I argue that both Kirati and Bhote are not specific ethnonyms and not the only ones of this kind and are referential terms of a most general kind, perhaps like paharia.*

**Key words :** Kirati, Bhote, culture, Himalaya, Tibet, Vedic Aryan, and Himalaya.

### Introduction

Regarding the ethnonyms of the Himalayan people, Katsuo Nawa, a Japanese anthropologist who studied Baynsi people of Darchula, explicitly suggested that “more theoretical attention should be paid to the study of the ethnonym” (2000, p. 37) because the ethnonym given to a particular group by others has created great confusion regarding inter-ethnic relations in the Himalayan ethnographic studies. Exactly, the same case exists among Shingsaba Bhote and Yakkhaba Kirati. This review article explicates the terms Kirati and Bhote and shows that neither term “Kirat” or “Bhote” designates a specific population. I argue that most of the ethnonyms used to refer to various ethnic groups we know today in Nepal do not derive from indigenous ethnonyms of the respective groups since the “Nwaran” (naming) of these groups was done by their neighbors, scholars and then state administrators.

This review article is based on my Ph.D. study that focuses on inter-ethnic relations between Kirati and Bhote of the upper Arun valley, Northeast Nepal. As a part of my study, *conducting an archival study in Kathmandu in 2018 and over subsequent years, I carried out an in-depth review of related literature and historical documents.* My engagement with Shingsaba and Yakkhaba Kirati has been since my M.A. (2007), and M. Phil (2014) studies which have explicitly indicated that singled Kirats and Shingsaba are

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close to each other, a mixture of racial and cultural groups. This aroused considerable interest and to substantiate it, I have been doing further investigation on them.

In the valley, Shingsaba Bhote are cross-border and highlander people between Nepal and Tibet, whereas Yakkhaba Kiratis, to some extent Hindunized, are lowlander people of the Arun valley. Shingsaba are considered of Tibetan origin because they resemble a Tibetan way of life. The Kiratis in the valley constitute three groups – Yamphu, Lohorung, and Mewahang – who are identified with the common term Yakkhaba. Though these people identify themselves as Kirati and Bhote, ethnographic evidence shows that there is no clear ethnic boundary between those who are Kirati and who are Bhote (Yamphu, 2014; 2016).

### **Kirati is a referential term given by Vedic Aaryan to diverse mountain dwellers**

Drawing on the Vedic sources, several scholars have suggested that the ancient Kiratis had occupied the entire regions from the Gangetic plains to the northeastern Himalayas during the Vedic era (Hodgson, 1880; Atkinson 1884; and Prapannacharya, 2000). Choudhury (1953) argues that the ancient Kirat territories were extended from Southeast Bengal to China, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Himalayas region. Having reviewed the sources of classical writers and Epic references, Choudhury concludes the ancient Kiratis had occupied the marshy region of southeast Bengal and the hilly regions of Assam and they were Mongolian. Having considered linguistic evidence, Shafer also insists that “Sino-Tibetan people or peoples had pushed west and had occupied the Gangetic valley, the richest part of the Madhyadesa, before the time of the Mahabharata” (1954, p.14).

Some have tried to give an etymological explanation that the term Kirati derives from the term *Kiruwa* (Pradhan, 2009; Acharya, 2009 VS, p. 4 footnote; my translation), as a derogatory word given by the Aryan when they observed an established tradition of chasing, hunting and rising the pigs. Etymologically, *Kiruwa* = kir +wa, where “Kir” means pig and “wa” is a human signifier (Sharma, 2067 VS, p. 251). Having seen the mythical-religious-ritual significance of pigs in Kirati culture and religion, it may be very possible that the Aryans named those mountain people Kirati.

The history of Kirat people begins with stating Vedic sources, Hindu epics, and Puranas. In those sources, they were called by different terms such as *Kirata*, *Kiliat*, *Kailaita*, *Kairatika*. In Prakrit language, they were called *Cilada* (Witzel, 1995, p. 106) under which various groups such as Mleccha, Kamboja, Arusa, Yaunnas or Yavanas, Gandharas, etc. were subsumed (Atkinson, 1884; Chattarji, 1998; Law, 1943; Shafer 1954; Sinha, 2008; Shrestha, 2016; & Witzel, 1990). Prapannacharya (2000 [1994]) mentions that the term Kirat, as “Kirata” first appeared in *Rig-Veda* and gradually in *Yajurveda* and *Atharvaveda* where an unmarried Kirati girl is described as digging out medicine, herbs, and shrubs in the mountains with a sickle wrought of gold. They are also described in a contemptuous sense such as “gibberish talking people, ugly, savage, and wild, “impure infields” (Hamilton, 2007), “bad person,” and “robber,” and “non-Aryan mountain dwellers” (Pradhan, 2009, p. 53; Prapannacharya, 2000; Chatterji 1998; & Hermanns 1951). They

are also described as uncivilized, barbarians, possessing a “rude culture”(Law, 1943, p. 282).<sup>i</sup>

However, this is only one side of the coin. Kirat also meant a high level of Himalayan civilization (Shafer, 1954) or prosperous and advanced people (Chatterji, 1998, p. 33) or "Merchant" and “money lenders” (Hermanns, 1951, p. 131). Hermanns, therefore, maintains that these etymological meanings of Kirat are speculative, and argues, “it is certainly the rendering of a foreign name in a Sanskrit transcript.” Vishnu Purana mentions, “Kirata lived to the east of Bharata” (Atkinson 1884, p. 357). In the Mahabharata, Kiratas are described as jungle dwellers, or “Kuruvarnakas (or ‘dwellers in the Kuru Jungles’) whereas “in the Ramayana, they are described as “with sharp-pointed hair-knots, gold-colored and pleasant to behold” (Atkinson, 1884, p. 364).

Apart from these Epic and Pauranic references, some historical studies offer an interesting interpretation of the ancient Kiratis. In this regard, the earliest reference comes from Ptolemy, a Greek geographer, and navigator of about the First Century who mentions that the eastern part of the Ganges was called “Arrihadoi” which means “Kiratas” or Kirrhadaia” (Gerini, 1909; McCrindle 1885; Sinha 2008). In that time, Ptolemy “met with flat nosed Kirrhadaes and other tribes” in his voyage to the Gangetic delta (Nath, 1948, p. 13). He maintains that originally, the word “Kirata” is not an ethnic appellation of a particular tribal group; rather, it was a generic term used to refer to different ethnic groups who were involved in the production and trade of Silk. Nath writes, “the word Scyritae, Kirrhadae, and Kirata appears to have had originally referred to as dealer in Silk. Silk was originally produced in China and it was catered by merchants of Turkestan through Tibetan intermediaries to India and Assam” (p. 14). Therefore, Kirats were *silk traders* and *expert navigators*. Nath suggests, “Syrites, Kirrhadioi, Kirrhades, Kirrhadae refer to the same people who are described as Kiratas in the Indian records” (p. 14) because, at that time, several silk trade routes connected different parts of Tibet, China, and Central Asia, and Assam and silk traders were “called Seres – Kirrhadioi (in modern sense Se-ek cloth wall) Syrites – Kirrhadae – Kirata” (p. 15). These all suggest that Kirat does not indicate a population as today we have, rather it is a generic term that was designated to the Himalayan people.

Today’s Yakthumba (Tambar Khole), Yakkhaba and Yakkha (Arun Khole), Khombu, and Sunuwar (Sunkhosi) identified themselves as Kirati. In fact, when and how the Kirati became ethnonym of these groups is uncertain. In this regard, some have argued that both Bhote and “Kirat/Kirant” came to be used as the collective autonym of the present-day Kiratis in the wake of the Gorkha conquest. Schackow (2015), for example, claims that the term Kirat evolved as a common ethnonym in the wake of the Gorkha conquest. She also claims that before the Gorkha conquest, the Kiratis had no “common feeling of being Kirati: clan affinities were most important, and autonoms such as Khambo/Khombo (for the Rai) and Yakthumba (for the Limbu) were used among the Kirati groups” (2015, p. 22). According to Schackow, “*Kiranti* in the present sense came to be used only with the advent of the Gorkha kings, when a common Kiranti identity began to evolve under Hindu dominance” (2015, p. 22). Gaenzleopines that “*Kiranti* was not used as a self-designation

before the conquest of the Kirat by the Gorkha Kings in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century” (Gaenszle, 2016, p. 340). Several years ago, Hodgson also signaled that the word Kirat was not established as an autonym of the Khumbu, Limbu, and Yakkha as we have today. Hodgson observes:

...it is remarkable that the Kirantis themselves do not readily admit the genuineness or propriety of those terms, but prefer the names Khwombo vel Khombo and Kirawa as their general personal designations, and seem to have none at all for their country. (1880 [1858], p. 398).

Even though the term Kirati is given by others and carries a contemptuous sense, it will be interesting to know that as Pradhan (2009 [1991], p. 53) writes, “yet, it is also not clear as to why, among all others, the Rais have retained the Kirati nomenclature.” The logic behind this, as put forward, is that the present-day Kiratis prefer to be identified with the term “Kirat” or “Kirati” because it will show a direct link with the Kirat dynasty, which would be, in Gaenszle’s words, “prestigious association” for them (2016, p. 1). Schlemmer writes:

And by the simple fact that the Rai and Limbu still bear the name of Kirant, these populations acquire the status of the purest and archetypal representatives of this ethnic entity. It provides them with historical depth, a prestigious past, and origins that are used to express their autochthony and ethnic specificity in opposition to the “Arya” (e.g., Indo-Nepalese), the “invaders” associated with the Sanskrit heritage and India. (2003/2004, p. 125)

Such a view may be partially true, but it seems more instrumental and ahistorical. One fact is clear. Before the Gorkha conquest, the present-day Kiratis preferred to be identified themselves as Yakthumba (Limbu), Yakkhaba, Yakkha, Khumbu, and Sunuwar, instead of Kirati. Later, state-coined words “Kirat” “Limbu” or “Rai” replaced these indigenous ethnonyms Yakthumba, Yakkhaba, Yakkha, or Khumbu and came to be used as the collective autonym of the present-day Kiratis in the wake of the Gorkha conquest (Subba, 1998 [1995]). As the state’s ideological mission was “making Asali Hindustan”, then rulers picked up those Vedic names to designate the eastern people as Kirati/Kiranti and their land as Kirat/Kiranti without proper interpretation. Historical documents suggest that the terms Kirat or Kirant were used by Gorkhali rules to denote “purely geographical and administrative exonyms before this time (van Driem 2001, p. 569, as cited in Schackow, 2015, p. 22) such as Wallo Kirant, Majh Kirant, and Pallo Kirant. Over time, the inhabitants of that region began to be called Kirati or Kiranti, suggesting the peopling living in the Kirant lands. The fact is that there aren’t any Kirati/Kiranti words in *mindum* per se. Subsequently, the new generation began to identify themselves as Kirati even though their *mindum* does not explain them as Kirati. since then the eastern people came to be known as “Kirati/Kiranti.”

### **Bhote is not an ethnonym, but a referential term, like Paharia**

Like Kirati, the term Bhote, also known as Bhutiya and Bhotia, are also as problematic as the term Kirati because there are no specific people to whom we can refer as Bhote. What is

widely understood is Bhote are of Tibetan origin. From this point of view, all the people living in the borderland areas of Tibet are called “Bhote” – who originated in and emigrated from Tibet. Indeed, this is not true, at least in the eastern Himalayas. Several scholars have, therefore, failed to give an exact number of Kirati and Bhote.

The word Bhote is “a Sanskrit word that was frequently used for the Tibetan region from the medieval time onwards” (Bergmann et. al, 2008, p. 210). Hodgson writes that the term, Bhot is Sanskrit, and Tibet is Persian, the name of the country. The native name is Bod, a mere corruption of the Sanskrit appellation, proving that the Tibetans had not reached a general designation for their country when the Indian teachers came among them (1874, p. 22 footnote). Some have suggested that the term “Bhotia” is the corrupted form of *Bod*, the native name of Tibet (Atkinson 1884 and Saklani 1998). But, for Bell (1968 [1928], p. 1), in the Arabia language, “it [Tibet] is termed *Tobbat, Tubbat, Tibat,*” and Western scholars used the word Tibet deriving “from two Tibetan words *To Po* meaning Upper Tibet.” In this regard, Bell writes, “European and Indian style them Bhutias or Bhotiyas. This term is applied to all of Tibetan race, being derived from Bhot, the Indian name for Tibet” (p. 5).

With the same meaning, the term Bhotiya or Bhote is used to refer to people who resemble the Tibetan way of life but not to a particular population. Here, it is noteworthy to cite Das and Rana who write:

...Botia is a generic term, commonly attributed to several socially unrelated groups... the native people of Bhutan state, some groups found in the Nepal-Tibet borderland, the northern highlanders of Kumaon, and Garhwal of the central Himalaya regions of India – all share the same designation although there exist main socio-cultural differences among them. (1984, p. 250-251)

In the Muliki Ain of 1856, the term Bhote designated “a number of groups exhibiting considerably varying linguistic and cultural characteristics, namely the Tibetans proper and those groups which we have Tibetanids and Tibetanoids” (Hofer, 2004, p. 124). Later, the term Bhote and the people subsumed under this ethnic label came to be considered as degraded people on the account of their tradition that they consume beef. Hofer (p. 125) writes, “even nowadays, Bhote is a synonym for ‘savage’, ‘dirty fellow’, ‘serf’, ‘beef-eater’ and the like.” As it was and is the social stigma associated with the ethnic label Bhote, several ethnic groups began to place themselves out of the Bhote ethnic category to escape from the social stigmatization and discrimination they would suffer from their fellow groups.<sup>ii</sup>

Bhote is a referential term, like Paharia. There are arguments that Bhote are not of only Tibetan origin. Though Hofer (2004, p. 118) mentions Bhote as Tibetanid (Tibetan people) that includes “Sherpa (syarpa) and other local groups of Tibetan cultural and linguistic affiliation in the high mountains from Limi to Walung”, the fact is that Bhote people are not only of Tibetan origins we presume. Instead, it should be noted that “the Bhotiyas are actually an agglomeration of independent and mutually exclusive sub-groups” (Saklani, 1998, p. 59-60). That means several ethnic groups of non-Tibetan

origin who live in the trans-border areas in the Himalayan ranges that were once parts of Tibet (Hundes) are subsumed under the term Bhote. He also mentions that various tribal communities of the Himalayas who had an original homeland in India, “but were gradually driven from the plains into the hilly regions, forests and other inaccessible tracts, which they made their homes, and in which till the present day” are Bhotiyas, Kiratas, Nagas and so on (1998, p. 59). Brown opines that Bhote or Bhotya is not an incantation of a collective identity referred to or professed by a particular group of people; rather, it should be understood as a generic term used to refer to all the Tibeto-Burman speaking people living in the Himalayas ranges. Brown (1984, p. 18) adds to that term Bhote refers to “all the hill regions of modern Assam” and the native people of Sikkim and “to any Buddhist highlander residing in the Himalayas, from Ladakh to Arunachal Pradesh, who speaks some dialect of Tibetan language” (Balicki, 2008, p.7).

Babu Ram Acharya suggested that the term Bhote was used to designate three groups – Tamang, Shyarpa of Kuti and Bigu, and Tibetan proper after the Gorkha conquest (Acharya, 2024, V. S, as cited in Hofer, p.125). Scholars have suggested that colonial administration brought the term Bhote in the use “to distinguish “Bhotea from the Pahari or Khasa people of the hills as well as from the “Huniyas” or the Tibetan proper of Hundes” (Brown, 1984, p. 19). Bergmann et.al, also opine that the application of the term Bhote as ethnonym is “connected to British expansion from Bengal past Nepal to the Western Himalayas in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.” They write:

Especially its application for Buddhist groups in Nepal played a crucial role in establishing the association with this great variety of groups involved in the trans-Himalayan trade and living along the Indo-Tibetan border. Subsequently, administrators, scholars, and explorers widely adopted this local term for the populations situated at the northernmost spheres of colonial influence to delimit them from both residents of Tibet and the major local Hindu hill population ... (2008, p. 210).

## Conclusion

Since the term Kirati was used by Vedic Aryan in a contemptuous sense, it seems that Vedic Aryan used the word “Kirat” to express both ethnocentric, prejudiced, and acknowledgment of difference, rather than an ethnonym of a population. Though the term Kirat existed since Vedic times that was used to refer to all the Tibeto-Burman-speaking peoples, it is only after the Gorkha conquest that it came to be used as an ethnonym for a certain population of the east. Later, the state rulers used the term Bhote to designate all the Himalayan borderland people who were identified as Kirati since the Vedic period. As a result, the same people began to be known by two different ethnic names. In fact, some scholars have already mentioned that both Bhote and Kirati are the same people, arguing that the Kiratis were also identified as Bhote. For example, Schoff (1912, p. 253) mentions, “Cirrhadæ was a Bhota tribe, whose descendants, still known as Kirata, live in the Morung, west of Sikkim.” Referring to Christian Lassen, ’s idea on the antiquity of the Bhote people, Schoff writes the name Bhote “survives in modern Bhutan. They were

allied to the Tibetans and inhabited much of Bengal at the time of the Aryan migration” (p. 253).

Therefore, from Colonial Officers and scholars (Campbell, 1869; Das 1904; Hermanns, 1954; Hodgson (1880 [1858]; Hooker, 1854; Morris 1936; Risely, 1891; Vansittart, 1992; 1918, to modern ethnographers (Allen, 2012; Gaenszle 2000; Chattarji, 1998; Hardman, 2000b; McDougal, 1979; Sagant 1996; Sharma 1973; & others), including Nepali historians and literary figures (Acharya 1997; Chemjong, 2003; Dhungel 2006; Gyawali (1974); Pradhan 2000; Rana & Malla 1973; Shrestha 1985; Shrestha, 2010 & others), have all commonly suggested that present-day Kiratis have descended from a mixed group intermingled with the various ethnic groups from North (Tibet) and South. Thus, it can be concluded that the terms Kirati and Bhotedo not pinpoint any ethnic group, present or in the past, and are only referential terms of a most general kind like *paharia*. Given the admixture nature of people of the Himalayas, describing a particular group as Kirati or Bhot under such generic terms level will be misleading.

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<sup>1</sup> However, Robert Shafer assumed that the term “Barbara did not originally refer to any foreigner – somewhat as in Greek – but to a people who lived near the Kiratas” (1954, p. 12)

<sup>1</sup> A good example provided by Hofer is the case of Tamang and Gurung. Hofer writes, “as ethnographic evidence shows, the Tamang regard themselves – at least today – as an autonomous caste. They refuse to accept the label Bhote and decline an identification with the various Tibetanid groups, even if they are also followers of Lamaism and, according to their own tradition, descendants of immigrants from Tibet” (p. 125). He further mentions that “it is striking that, according to the context, the Tamang cease to be called Bhote but continue to be regarded as belonging to the Bhote” (Hofer, 2004, p. 126).