

POLITICS OF CULTURE

A Study of Three Kirata Communities
in the Eastern Himalayas



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T B SUBBA



This book traces the cultural proximity and the similar destinies of three Kirata communities living in the eastern Himalayas—the Limbu, the Rai and the Yakkha. Spanning the last two hundred years, this book outlines the process of economic, linguistic, religious and cultural degeneration that the groups faced at the hands of the powerful Gorkhas in Nepal and the Namgyals in Sikkim, resulting in their becoming victims of state-formation in these two erstwhile Himalayan kingdoms.

The author reconstructs the story of these communities on the basis of historical as well as ethnographic data, and explains their need to reconstruct (imagine) today, an identity for themselves despite the time and cultural resources they have lost.

This incisive study of a region and of communities largely silenced through a lack of visibility in academic research, is an outcome of the work Professor Subba undertook as a Homi Bhabha Fellow.

Professor T B Subba is presently Head of the Department of Anthropology, North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU), Shillong. A Homi Bhabha Fellow from 1992 to 1994, his area of research is the eastern Himalayan region. He is a member of the Editorial Board of the *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* (Shillong), published by the North-Eastern Hill University, and a member of the Advisory Board of the *Journal of Human Ecology* (New Delhi).

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T. B. SUBBA



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The maps in this book are not to scale. The external boundary of India as depicted is neither correct nor authentic.

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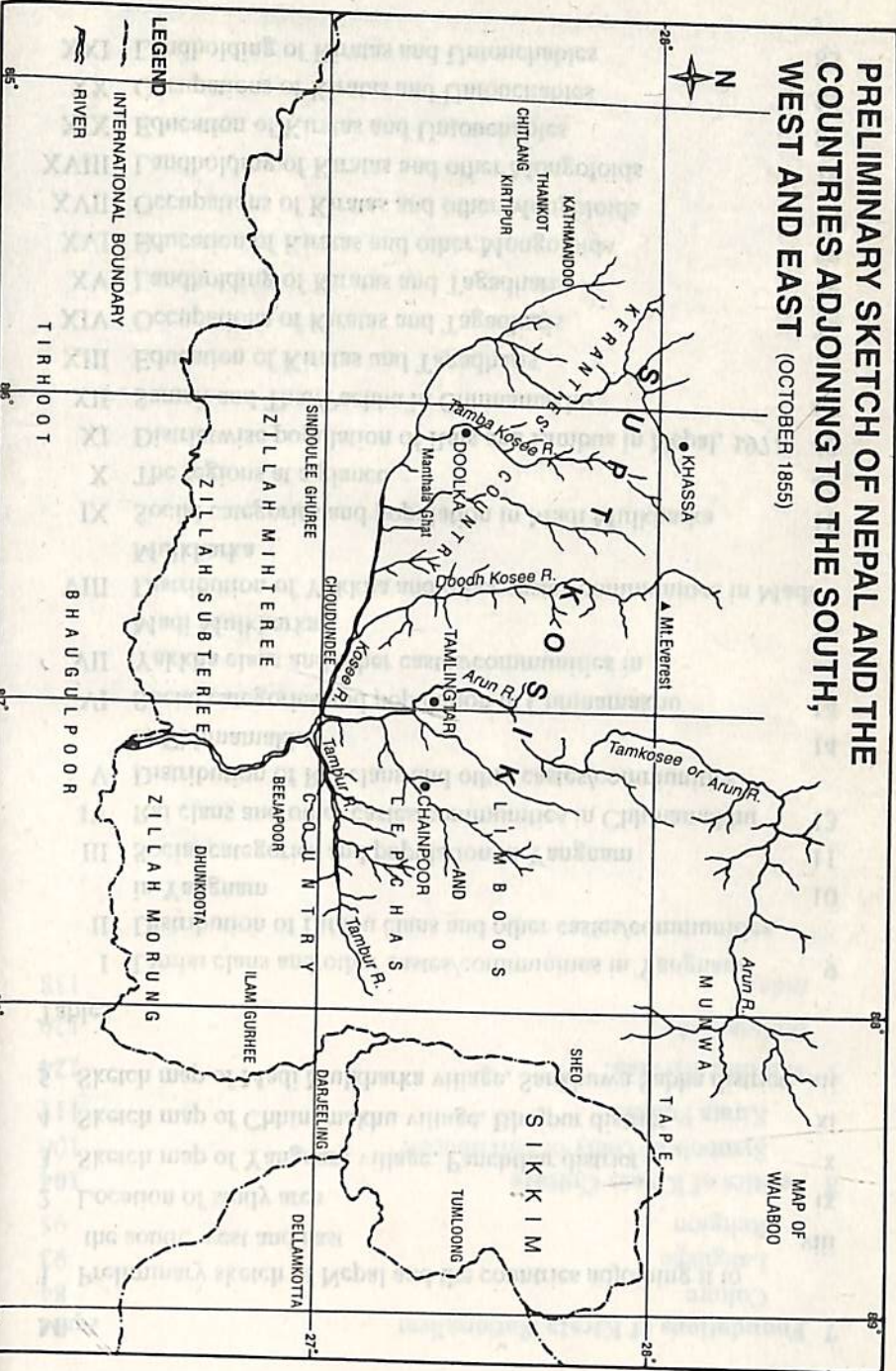
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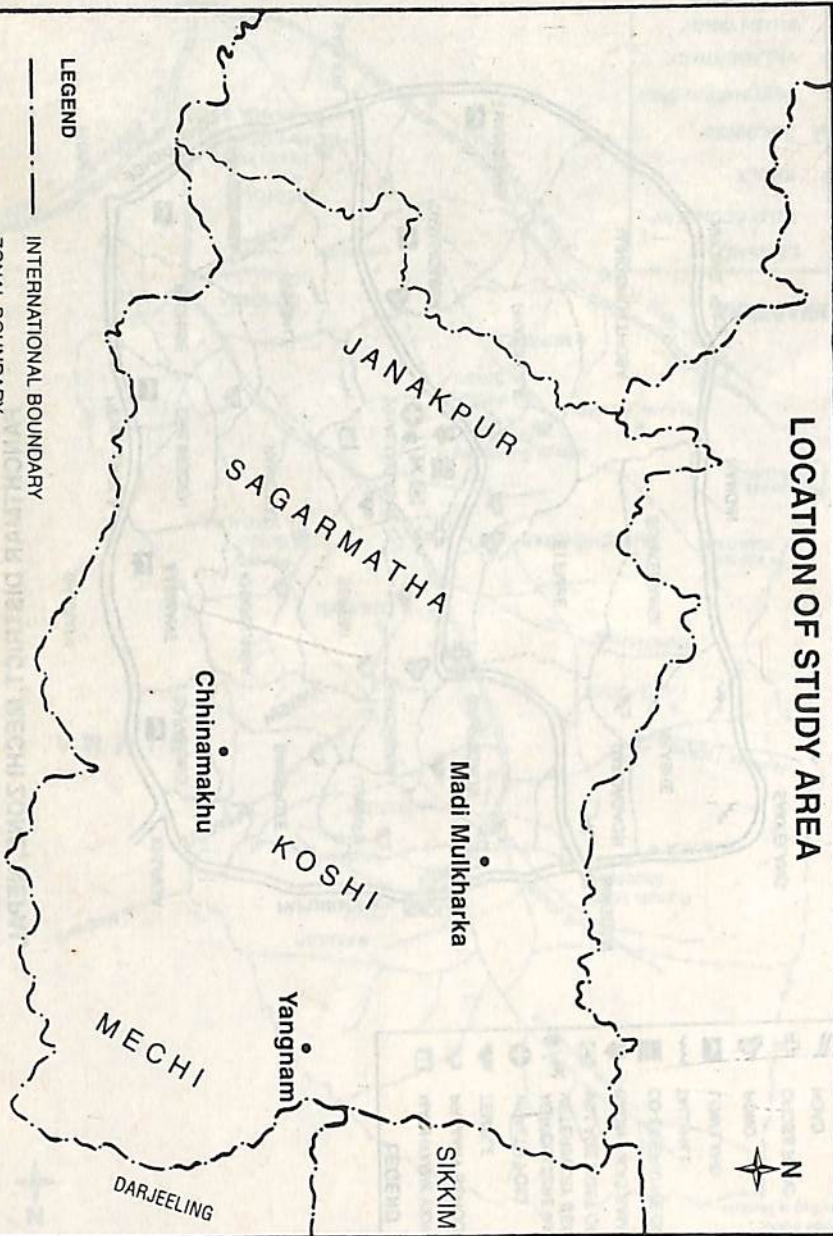
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MAP OF WALABOO

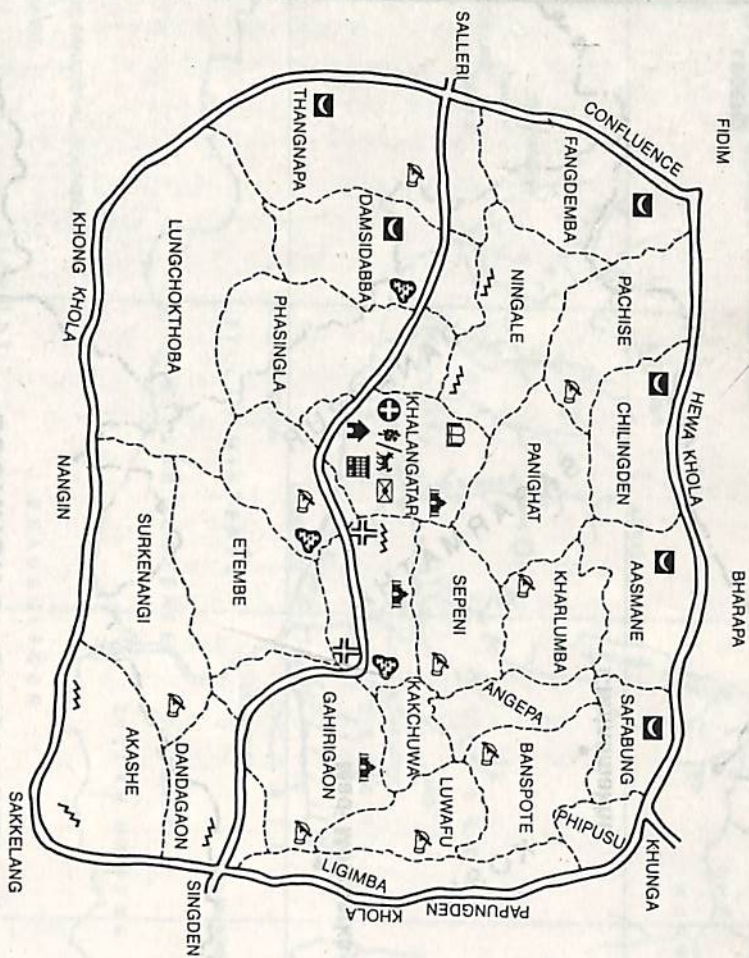


LOCATION OF STUDY AREA














- LEGEND
- INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARY
 - ZONAL BOUNDARY



SKETCH MAP OF YANGNAM VILLAGE PANCHTAR DISTRICT, MECHI ZONE, NEPAL



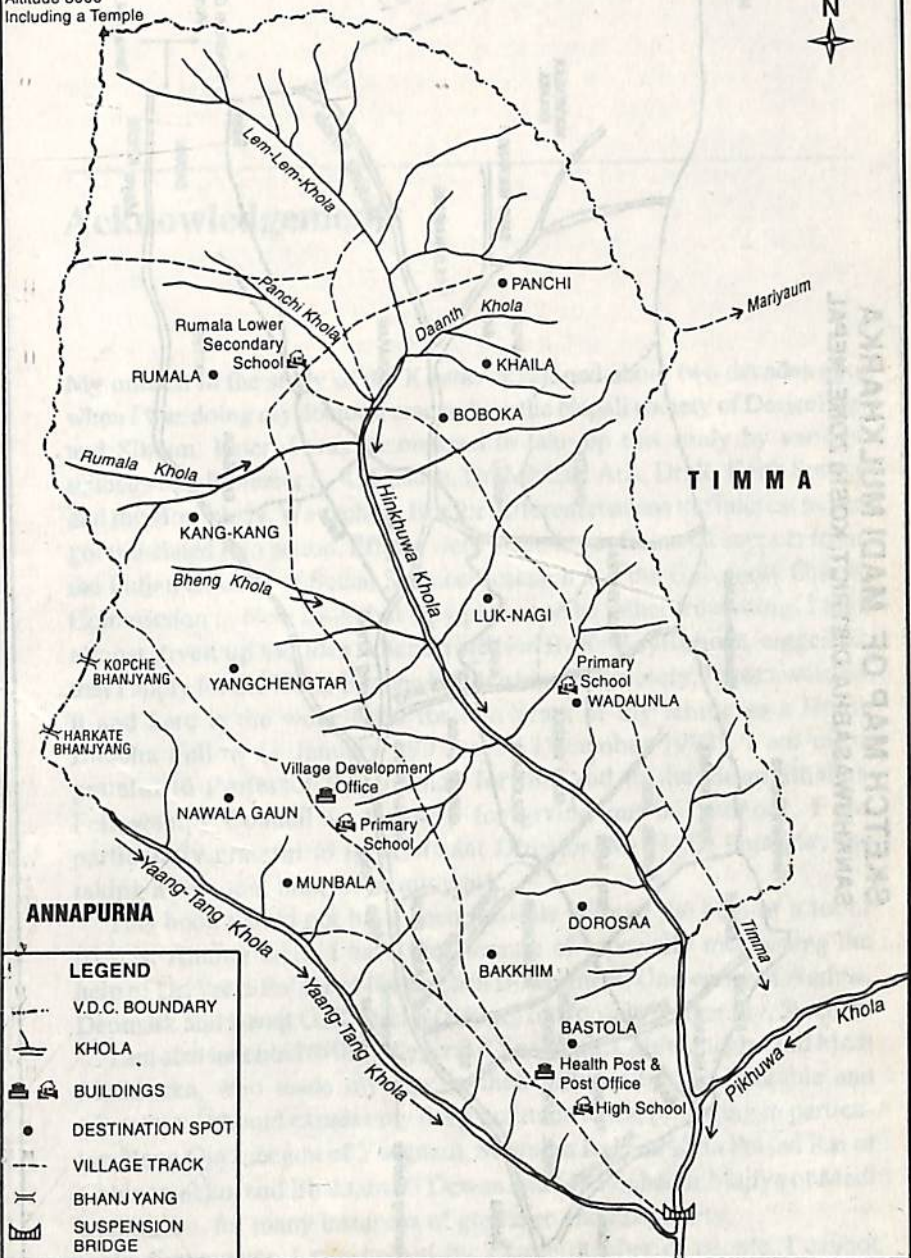
LEGEND

-  MADHYAMIK VIDYALAYA
-  PRIMARY SCHOOL
-  TEMPLE
-  HEALTH POST
-  AGRICULTURE AND VETERINARY CENTRE
-  VILLAGE POST OFFICE
-  GAON VIKAS SAMITI BUILDING
-  CO-OPERATIVE OFFICE
-  TALL HILL
-  LOW LAND
-  POND
-  CROSS ROAD
-  ROAD

SKETCH MAP OF CHHINAMAKHU VILLAGE

BHOJPUR DISTRICT, KOSHI ZONE, NEPAL








Peak Merong
Altitude 8000
Including a Temple



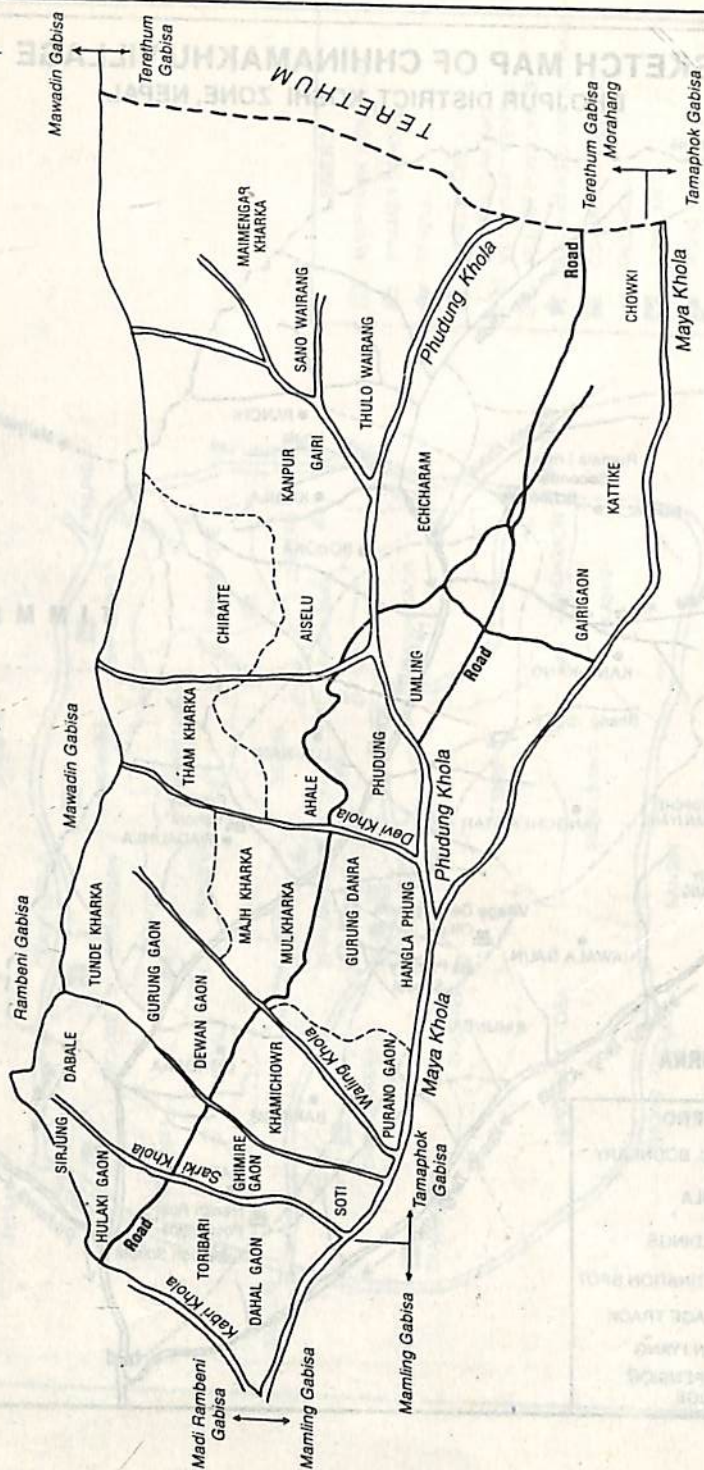
ANNAPURNA

TIMMA

LEGEND

-  V.D.C. BOUNDARY
-  KHOLA
-  BUILDINGS
-  DESTINATION SPOT
-  VILLAGE TRACK
-  BHANJ YANG
-  SUSPENSION BRIDGE

SKETCH MAP OF MADI MULKHARKA SANKHUWASABHA DISTRICT, KOSHI ZONE, NEPAL



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Introduction

The Problem

In the geographically contiguous areas of Darjeeling, Sikkim and Nepal there has recently been a mushrooming of organisations which seek to preserve and develop their indigenous culture, language and religion. More than a dozen such groups in Nepal have established their branches wherever their members live. Another half dozen have emerged in Sikkim. However, in Darjeeling, some of these associations date back to the beginning of this century while a few are fairly recent. Darjeeling became a part of India in the mid-nineteenth century and its relative political openness allowed such organisations to come up quite early. In contrast, the hereditary and theocratic rule in Sikkim and Nepal have opened up only very recently.

Despite an earlier emergence, most of Darjeeling's indigenous organisations have had little impact on the cultural and political history of the region. The living conditions in Darjeeling after it came under Bengal in 1866 were not conducive to their growth. The political and cultural pressures of a numerically dominant and educationally far 'superior' Bengali 'race' (see Smith 1993 for the concept) forced the various communities like the Gurung, Tamang, Mangar, Rai and Limbu to come under the umbrella of the Nepali or Gorkhali nation (nation meaning peoples here, not nation-state). Their respective identities had to be submerged in order to constitute a force strong enough to resist Bengali domination and ensure their common survival. Thus, they became a part of the Gorkhali or Nepali people and the Nepali language became their language as well. In the process, their own languages and scripts were pushed into oblivion, often unable to be revived due to inadequate numbers of speakers in a particular locality.

If such were the reasons for the various communities like the Limbu, Newar, Rai and Gurung to be deprived of their culture, language and religion in Darjeeling, the conditions in Sikkim were similar to those existing in Nepal. The Buddhist theocratic and hereditary rulers there did not allow such groups to come together nor did they recognise the cultural, linguistic and religious heterogeneity within the so-called Nepalis. To them, such communities were basically 'migrants' from Nepal, Hindus by religion and 'troublesome as neighbours'.

This perception of the Bhutia rulers in Sikkim was primarily shaped by their long historical interaction with the Gorkhas. Such interactions were characterised by internecine wars which forced the Bhutias to gradually shift their capital from the west to the east of the kingdom. With little social involvement with the Nepalis even after 1890, which marked the end of the Gorkha-Sikkim wars, they remained oblivious of the cultural and other kinds of heterogeneity within the Nepalis. This happened due to ecological as well as political reasons. The Bhutias lived in the higher elevations and were concentrated in the present northern district of Sikkim, entry into which was politically forbidden to the Nepalis. However, they made one exception in this regard—to recognise the Limbus or Chongs as a separate community from the rest of the Nepalis and extend some privileges to them.

In Nepal, the Gorkha rulers were acutely aware of the cultural, linguistic and other differences across communities but they were not officially recognised as separate nationalities. They were essentially treated as subjugated or conquered peoples who needed to be brought under the Nepali nation. Prithivinarayan Shah, the Gorkha king who was responsible for politically demarcating the present boundaries of Nepal in the early 1770s, had metaphorically set the official attitude towards such people when he described Nepal as 'a garden of four varnas and thirty-six jats'. The different peoples were, in other words, just different flowers in a garden, or 'castes' which are organically related to each other. This analogy has great symbolic value for the ruling elite and most mainstream scholars in Nepal even today represent the official attitude towards the various nationalities there.

The situation, however, changed when Sikkim became a part of India in 1975, Darjeeling suspended the Gorkhaland Movement and settled for the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council in 1988, and Nepal yielded to democratic forces in 1990. While the background of the national leaders in Nepal is still largely the same, Sikkim was briefly ruled by a Bhutia Chief Minister (Kazi Lhendup Dorjee Khangsarpa) before it came under the rule

of a Chhetri Chief Minister (Nar Bahadur Bhandari) in 1979 and remained so for about fifteen years. Darjeeling has a Tamang (Subhas Ghisingh) holding the post of the chairman of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council. The Bhandari rule in Sikkim was, however, possible not only due to Nar Bahadur Bhandari's charisma, as some argue, but also to the synthesised Nepali nationalism developed there over a long period of time by the Bhutia rulers.

The United Nations declaration of 1993 as the Year of the Indigenous Peoples gave further impetus to the already changed political climate and brought a new lease of life to the marginalised and subjugated communities in the region. They began to organise themselves vigorously in search of lost identities.

The present situation is characterised by an active process of reinventing linkages not only within such classified groups like Limbu, Rai and Tamang but also at the level of cognate concepts like 'Kirata', 'Janajati' and 'Mongol'. The profile of various such organisations provided in Chapter 8 indicates that they are trying to recreate their culture, religion and language primarily at the former level. While the Tagadhari category representing the Bahun, Thakuri and Chhetri castes constitutes an objective entity, the essentialised Kirata, Janajati or Mongol identity is yet to evolve fully as its anti-thesis. The people designated as 'Kiratas' here are yet to crystallise their ideology and culture. They still seem to vacillate between the relatively single and simple delineations such as the Limbu or Khambu and the more compound and complex characterisations like Kirata, Janajati or Mongol.

Due to the changed situation, the historically marginalised communities are now seeking to challenge the hegemony of the Tagadharis (high castes like the Bahun, Thakuri and Chhetri) and are in the process of 'inventing' their national consciousness. There has begun, to borrow from Foucault, an 'insurrection of subjugated knowledges'. The 'subjugated knowledges', according to him, refer to "a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity" (1980:82). This would not be possible without the changed political climate of the region. But it is desirable to understand why there is a sudden need to 'imagine' these nationalities.

Politics of Culture

The concept of 'culture' not only varies according to the aspects emphasised by various anthropologists but also according to the time it has

passed through. There are endless—some already dated—debates over whether it is value-free or value-loaded, society-specific or universal, hierarchical or differential, process or structure, material or non-material, and so on. One also notices a shift in its focus on material artefacts to the more abstract, formal and conceptual aspects in the post 1950s (see Bauman 1973). Recent conceptualisations of culture, for instance, speak of it as a system of meanings, ideologies, unconscious structures.

Towards further elaboration of this concept, Laitin (1977) draws attention to the hegemonic nature of culture. According to him, the “[p]olitical elites in any society will act strategically and ideologically in the hope of defining and delimiting which strands of their society’s culture should become dominant. Those who are successful in establishing a dominant cultural framework form a ‘hegemonic bloc’” (1977:171). But since hegemony can only create a dominant subsystem and cannot “create a congruent and harmonious social system”, he concludes that the “non-marginal affronts to the commonsensical order are inherent in all hegemonic structures” (1977:183).

Another aspect of culture that may be brought to bear on the discussion here is its use in what is called ‘reconstructive ethnography’. Such an ethnography overlooks the social and historical conditioning of culture because it presupposes that the indigenous cultures succumb under the impact of ‘civilisation’ and exist as a category of ‘traditional remains’. Such cultures are not only assumed to be ‘static’ but the people representing them are even branded as people without a culture (Devalle 1992:40).

Culture may perhaps be seen here as a symbolic system within which a group of people operate in order to perpetuate or fight against a ‘hegemony’ which is defined as “the political forging—whether through coercion or elite bargaining—and institutionalization of a pattern of group activity in a state and the concurrent idealization of that schema into a dominant symbolic framework that reigns as common sense” (Laitin 1977:183). In other words, culture is not an independent or isolated symbol in harmonious equilibrium with another culture but it is a system in constant conflict within and with other cultures for better appropriation of the available resources of a state. This should not, however, be construed to mean that there was no culture prior to the emergence of the state. It was there, in hierarchical relationship with other cultures, but it was then governed by traditions. The hierarchy assumed the relationships of superordination and subordination after the emergence of the state.

Another concept which is politically akin to the concept of culture is 'nationalism' which, according to Gellner, is "primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent" (1987:1). P. H. van der Plank makes it more explicit when he defines it as "an ideology consisting of values, symbols, norms and expectations, living in a social collectivity (group) and based on belief in a common descent and, as a consequence, a common destiny, strong enough to desire to maintain, strengthen or create a formally and legally organized society" (1975:9).

One of the problems with this concept is that such an 'ideology' may be confined to a nation or, more frequently, extended to a nation-state (Kohn 1968:63). When it is used in the former sense it is often qualified as 'ethno-nationalism', 'proto-nationalism', 'sub-nationalism', 'fissiparous-nationalism', 'mini-nationalism', and what have you.

Nationalism, as it is understood by Louis L. Snyder, is: "A condition of mind, feeling, or sentiment of a group of people living in a well-defined geographic area, speaking a common language, possessing a literature in which their aspirations are expressed, attached to common traditions and customs, venerating their own heroes, and, in some cases, having the same religion" (1982:xv). The problem here is that there are many nations like the Jewish and the Palestinian which cannot be fitted into this.

The boundaries of a culture or nation and a nation-state seldom overlap but both involve a similar process of nation-building. This process invariably involves homogenisation of cultural and ideological values within a group or a number of groups, which means imposition of the ideology, norms and values of the hegemonic group on the marginal groups. While the Limbus (or the Rais) resist cultural or linguistic standardisation by the Tagadharis, they also carry out the same process within their own groups. What is resisted at the level of the nation-state is thus perpetrated at the level of a culture or nation.

The appeal of culture in all such nation-building processes is unquestionable. Spencer has illustrated this well with his study of Sinhala culture and nationalism (1990). Gellner has gone even further to define 'nation' in terms of culture though he is equally aware of the 'voluntaristic' aspect of the concept of nation. According to him, "Two men are of the same nation if and only if they share the same culture, where culture in turn means a system of ideas and signs and associations and ways of behaving and communicating" (1987:7).

The relationship between culture and nationalism has assumed renewed significance after the emergence of the concept of 'national

culture'. Its relationship with the nationalist ideology is, according to Richard Fox, "contingent and processual: the creation of nationalist ideologies anticipates a larger project, the forming or reforming of a national culture" (1990:4). He further writes: "A national culture starts out as a nationalist ideology, that is, a consciousness or perception of what the nation is or should be, which then may gain public meaning and be put into action. Usually there are several co-existing and even contradictory perceptions, which constitute competitive nationalist ideologies" (1990:4).

It is here that Benedict Anderson's phrase 'imagined community' (1991) becomes contextual. Like national culture, the imagined community is not given but consciously created. The word 'imagined' may be, perhaps justifiably, equated with Hobsbawm's 'invention' and defined operationally as a 'construction'. In this sense, a nation is 'imagined' because, as Anderson writes, "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 minds of each lives the image of their communion" (1991:6). He goes on to explain the nationalist upsurges in modern times as functions of "cultural roots" rather than "self-consciously-held political ideologies" (1991:12). The importance of culture in relation to nationalism has also been recently illustrated with the case of the Oromo speakers in Africa (see Baxter 1993).

However, the link between culture and nationalism has assumed added significance particularly because the state has grown conceptually incompatible with culture (Nandy 1997) and it has virtually turned out to be the patron of the dominant culture. It is such a failure of the state that has been primarily responsible for the subjugated cultures redefining their cultural and national boundaries.

The present study is an attempt to establish the relationship between the state or the surrogate community and the politics of marginalised cultures or nations on the basis of historical as well as ethnographic data on three Kirata communities living in the eastern Himalayas—the Limbu, Khambu or Rai, and the Yakkha.

The Fieldwork and the Field

Fieldwork is considered indispensable in any anthropological study that deals with contemporary society. The early fieldwork tradition established by anthropologists like Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown is still taken as the ideal, particularly in terms of the length of stay and acquisition of the

native languages. Many European and American universities are trying to live up to this ideal even today. But much has changed in this tradition after the 1950s, particularly in studies of the post-colonial world. This anthropology operates mostly within a familiar universe though the exact language/dialect and place may not have been known before. The norms and values are not as different as they were between the European anthropologists and their *Oriental*.

In India, post-colonial anthropology cannot be considered to be different from the colonial. The old boundaries between Subject and Object are redrawn within the country. Only certain categories of people such as the tribals, minorities or frontier peoples are taken as Objects and certain others take on the role of Subjects (though they themselves may have been Objects for the European or American anthropologists). The language and mind-set of the Subjects in terms of ethnographic representation are much the same as in colonial anthropology (Po'dar and Subba, 1991).

Where do I place my study of the Kiratas in such a tradition? I belong to one of the Kirata communities dealt with here – the Limbu – and have a distant Yakkha matrilineage as well. I was trained in an ethnographic tradition which was largely colonial but I have felt a strong sense of dissatisfaction with it. I feel dishonest when I write 'they' when I refer to my own community. I have lived and grown up with many of them. Will my research be branded as 'unscientific' or 'biased' if I write 'we'? Do I have to refer to my own people as 'they'? I do not seem to have much of a choice.

The selection of field sites for this study was governed by my 'subconscious mind', shaped by my conviction that the villages should be representative. But I could not afford to study more than three villages, one each for the three Kirata communities. My teaching and administrative responsibilities would not allow time for fieldwork outside of vacations and semester breaks.

I discussed the objectives of my study and the villages where I could possibly conduct my fieldwork with knowledgeable persons in Kathmandu and Kalimpong. I soon had an exhaustive list of the districts and villages. Deciding on the Sankhuwa Sabha and Bhojpur districts to study the Yakkhas and Rais respectively was rather easy as only one or two persons had suggested otherwise. But in the case of the Limbus, the Panchthar district was decided upon after due deliberation over the merits of the Terethum district in east Nepal and the West district of Sikkim, each promising to be more representative of the Limbu culture and society than the other. But, since I had already done my doctoral research in Sikkim, I

decided to work in Nepal for this study. Between May 1992 and January 1993, I undertook reconnaissance visits to the three districts chosen and finally settled on Yangnam village in Panchthar district, Madi Mulkharka in Sankhuwa Sabha district, and Chhinamakhu in Bhojpur district as the best possible sites for my fieldwork.

During this period, I spent some time in Kathmandu, working in various libraries and interviewing scholars and Kirata leaders. I also went to Darjeeling and Sikkim to do similar work. A village in east Nepal often extends over a whole mountain and walking from one end to the other, vertically or horizontally, may take about half a day or more. In terms of geographical area it may extend between fifty and a hundred square kilometres and comprise about 800 to 1200 households. Each ward is often as big as a whole village in Darjeeling and Sikkim. Even the altitude range of a village in east Nepal is at least 1000 metres whereas it is only about 300 metres in Darjeeling and Sikkim. Despite the vastness and an apparent lack of compactness, villagers in Nepal can count and identify almost every household in their village. Almost every educated male head of a household is able to map out clans and lineages in the entire village.

For these reasons, the strategy of fieldwork in east Nepal villages had to be different from that in Darjeeling and Sikkim. Merely taking the census of household members, livestock and land for about a thousand households, spread over at least fifty square kilometres, and with an altitude range of about 1000 metres would have taken at least six months. Time was at a premium and I had, therefore, to be content with scaling down the work. I made a list of the various social groups in each village and simultaneously collected information on the approximate number of households as well as their distribution. On the basis of this list, I made a stratified random sampling of about ten per cent of the households which I visited and collected census data as well as information on their culture and nationalism.

The Field Sites

Yangnam: The village of Yangnam is located in the Panchthar district of east Nepal. The nearest urban centre is Fidim, the headquarters of this district, which is about twenty kilometres away. It is about a six to eight hours' walk from Fidim to Yangnam though many young men of the village can reportedly reach Fidim and return to Yangnam on the same day. Hiley is another town where the villagers of the northern fringe buy

their necessities but this town is inaccessible during the rainy season due to landslides and flooding rivers.

Yangnam is bounded on the north by the Hewa khola (*khola*=river), on the east by the Papungden khola, and on the south and west by the Khong khola. Thus, it is surrounded by rivers which are almost totally dry in winter but difficult to cross in summer. There is a concrete bridge constructed recently over the Hewa and there are temporary bridges of logs and bamboo over other streams. The village is divided horizontally by an arterial road which is about five feet wide whereas other village roads are rather narrow and not well maintained.

The altitude of this village ranges approximately from 610 metres at Hewa khola to about 2200 metres at Akashe hamlet. Beyond this altitude extend uninhabited areas which are used only for grazing in summer. The temperature varies from 0 to about 27 degrees centigrade and the village receives adequate rainfall. Except for some hamlets in the eastern part, the village receives adequate sunshine too.

There is one Madhyamik Vidyalaya (upto Class X), nine primary schools, two temples, a health post, an agriculture centre, a veterinary centre, the village post office, the Gaon Vikas Samiti building and the cooperative office. Khalangatar hamlet, where most of these are concentrated, looks like a semi-urban settlement. It also has general stores and tailoring shops. The ruins of an ancient fort, which was once a royal outpost, is also visible near the Madhyamik Vidyalaya.

The number of households in the village is not known exactly. My own estimate of the total is 873, of which I covered 112 households. Table I shows the distribution of households over the various Limbu clans and other castes/communities in the village.

Table I: Limbu clans and other castes/communities in Yangnam

<i>Limbu clans & other castes/communities</i>	<i>Estimated No. of households</i>	<i>No. of actually covered households</i>
Angbo	2	1
Ekten	15	3
Hangsurumba	77	8
Jabegou	321	32
Kerung	142	14
Khajum	19	3
Kurungbang	3	1
Lawati	2	1
Lowa	23	4
Manglak	2	1
Mangmu	24	4

<i>Limbu clans & other castes/communities</i>	<i>Estimated No. of households</i>	<i>No. of actually covered households</i>
Nembeku	2	1
Nembhang	10	2
Phago	17	3
Songpangphe	2	1
Suhang	1	1
Tamling	7	1
Thamsuhang	94	11
Thebe	1	1
Yokwa	1	1
Younghang	1	1
Bahun	32	3
Chhetri	14	2
Damai	11	3
Kami	23	3
Newar	1	1
Rai	14	3
Sarki	12	2
Total	873	112

Source: Fieldwork, 1992-93

During the fieldwork I observed that the clans/castes/communities with the larger number of households are the earlier settlers of the village. Table II shows their distribution over various hamlets and wards.

Table II: Distribution of Limbu clans and other castes/communities in Yangnam

<i>Ward No.</i>	<i>Tols/Hamlets</i>	<i>Limbu clans & other castes/communities</i>
1	Aasmane, Pachise, Chilingden	Lowa, Hangsurumba, Lawati, Jabegou, Thamsuhang, Sarki, Bahun, Rai
2	Thangnapa	Jabegou, Thamsuhang, Bahun
3	Damsidabba, Phasingla	Jabegou, Nembhang, Nembeku, Angbo, Damai
4	Etembe, Lungchokthoba	Jabegou, Thamsuhang
5	Magarcheppa, Khalangatar, Sapnuwa, Padamdhoka	Jabegou, Kerung, Hangsurumba, Ekten, Khajum, Kami
6	Gahirigaon, Kakchuwa	Jabegou, Kerung, Hangsurumba, Ekten, Damai
7	Akashu, Surkenangi	Jabegou, Ekten, Khajum, Songpangphe, Kurungbang, Thamsuhang
8	Angepa, Bansbote, Hamrang	Jabegou, Lowa, Kerung, Tamling, Rai, Mangmu, Bahun
9	Luwafu, Tercheni	Kerung, Mangmu, Tamling, Jabegou, Bahun

Source: Fieldwork, 1992

Table II shows that some larger groups are distributed over more than one hamlet and ward. In other words, there is no clear concentration of any clan/caste/community in any ward. In view of this distribution, the argument of some respondents that the village was originally inhabited by the Thegim clan seems plausible. This clan had four lineages, viz., Chabegou (later adapted as Jabegou), Kerung, Hangsurumba and Thaklehang, of which the last seems to have been replaced by the term Thamsuhang. It is quite probable that other Limbu clans and non-Limbu castes/communities joined them later and contributed to the heterogeneity of each hamlet found today.

Table III: *Social categories and population in Yangnam*

<i>Social categories</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>%</i>
Tagadhari	17	14	31	4.3
Kirata	305	326	631	87.3
Other	3	3	6	0.8
Untouchable	32	23	55	7.6
Total	357	366	723	100.0

Source: Fieldwork, 1992

In Table III the people of the village have been classified under four social categories and this classification has been followed throughout this book. The Tagadhari category includes the Bahun, Thakuri and Chhetri; the Kiratas include the Limbu, Rai and Yakkha; Other Mongoloids include communities some of which are considered as Kiratas by a few people but are not included under the 'Kirata' category in this book; and finally, the Untouchable castes—Kami, Sarki and Damai or Darji.

Srikhalangtar Madhyamik Vidyalaya, the only secondary school in the village, was established as a primary school in 1971 and upgraded in 1979. There are about 450 students and 18 teachers. Of the 18 teachers, nine are Bahun, eight Limbu and one Yadav from the terai of Nepal. This school also serves as the venue for the Gaon Vikas Samiti meetings and polling centres.

The houses in the village are remarkably similar. The walls are made of stone and mud and daubed with red mud or ochre. The architecture is also monotonously similar: houses are diagonal and normally consist of three storeys; the lowest storey being used for cooking, storing water and receiving guests or visitors; the middle for sleeping and storing food grains, malts or liquor; and the uppermost floor for household or clan deities. There are small wooden windows and doors but no ventilation for smoke to escape except through the square apertures between the storeys

created by the wooden beams. Though it affects the lungs and eyes of the inhabitants, the smoke is valued for its ability to protect the timber and bamboo from insects and to preserve meat and food grains.

The houses are generally solidly built. The windows and doors are fitted without nails or hinges. The roof is normally thatched with wild grass of different varieties, or with locally made terracotta tiles. Only a few rich families have their roofs covered with corrugated or galvanized iron sheets. Every house has a front verandah where visitors are received and bamboo baskets are woven when it is hot or raining outside.

The denuding of neighbourhood forests has led to an increasing scarcity of firewood and fodder for cattle. And the people need firewood in plenty in order to cook, prepare malt or liquor, cook fodder for their cattle and to keep themselves warm. Many spring water sources have also dried up. Though the government has now made provisions for supplying water through iron pipes in many villages, such water is often available only for a couple of hours a day.

Chhinamakhu: Chhinamakhu is situated in the Bhojpur district of Nepal. The nearest urban centre is Bhojpur town, which is also the administrative headquarters of this district. The village is roughly 20 kilometres to the northeast of this town and it takes about eight hours on foot to get there. The road passes through a number of villages and rivers. Chhinamakhu is bounded on the east by Timma village, on the west by Annapurna, on the north by dense forested hills including the Merong peak, and on the south by the Yangtang and Pikhua rivers. There is a suspension bridge over the Pikhua which makes it possible for the villagers of Annapurna and Chhinamakhu to go to Bhojpur even during the rainy season. Innumerable small streams flow down the hills and can be crossed easily on small bamboo bridges.

The altitude of this village and other geographical features are similar to those of Yangnam, but the land is generally more fertile and a number of perennial streams have made irrigation possible over a much larger area. The dense forest at the top of the village serves as the catchment area for the rivers and as a pasture for cattle during the summer. In winter, the forest area is usually covered with snow. Chhinamakhu also receives better sunshine than Yangnam.

Apart from its well-carved terraces and sweet oranges, Chhinamakhu is famous in the district for the leaders it has produced. Dhyan Bahadur Rai, once a minister and now a Raj Sabha (Upper House of the Parliament of Nepal) member; Sangram Rai, once the president of the Bhojpur

District Development Council; and Shashi Bhushan Kirant, the present incumbent of this office, are all from this village. It has also produced doctors, engineers, and accomplished musicians like Bulu Mukarung. Foreign scholars like Simon Sinclair from England, Richard English of the New School for Social Research, New York, and the noted linguist Boyd Michailovsky have all stayed here at various times.

Like in Yangnam, there is only one Madhyamik school though there are primary schools in each ward. The hamlet Devithan closely resembles Khalangatar of Yangnam, with the temple, post office, shops, health centre, agriculture and veterinary office, and most importantly, the Sri Tribhuwan Dharmodaya Madhyamik Vidyalaya located within it. Like Khalangatar again, this hamlet is the cultural, business and political centre of the village.

Some data on Rai clans and other castes/communities are presented in Table IV.

Table IV: Rai clans and other castes/communities in Chhinamakhu

<i>Rai clans & other castes/communities</i>	<i>Estimated No. of households</i>	<i>No. of actually covered households</i>
Chamling	3	1
Charghare	22	2
Dilpali	13	2
Dumi	2	1
Huongchen	13	2
Ishara	2	1
Khamtu	40	4
Khamyoungkha	7	1
Kulunge	22	3
Kwoyu	300	25
Pewang	1	1
Rupabung	6	1
Sangpang	2	1
Siptungkha	200	19
Thulunge	9	2
Bahun	2	1
Chhetri	60	6
Damai	14	2
Gurung	22	2
Kami	15	2
Sherpa	12	1
Tamang	4	1
Total	771	81

The number of Kwoyu households being higher than that of the Siptungkhas theoretically suggests that the former are earlier settlers than the latter. But even the Kwoyus admit that they are later settlers than the Siptungkhas, who were the first to settle in this village after driving away a group called the Chongdongs.

Table V: *Distribution of Rai clans and other castes/communities in Chhinamakhu*

Ward No.	Tols/Hamlets	Rai clans & other castes/communities
1	Choudhe, Ekhang, Khebang, Ambote, Sheerdalee, Chamlakha, Kokachong, Thalakhm, Suntale	Huongchen, Siptungkha, Charghare, Kwoyu, Thulunge, Khamtu, Chhetri, Sangpang, Ishara, Chamling, Dumi
2	Devithan, Begtuwa, Banstola, Kwoyutola, Sakewatol	Khamyongkha, Charghare, Kwoyu, Dilpali, Khamtu
3	Tentola, Bakhim, Neware, Danra, Maksahut	Huongchen, Siptungkha, Charghare, Kwoyu, Thulunge, Khamtu, Kami, Damai
4	Munbala, Churbuk, Tamlakha	Kwoyu, Kulunge, Khamtu, Tamang
5	Naulagaon, Ghorenangi	Kami, Gurung, Sherpa, Chhetri, Bahun
6	Dhunge, Chukhalung, Dorosa, Bhirkuna	Siptungkha, Dilpali, Khamtu
7	Yangchentar	Kami, Tamang, Chhetri
8	Rumla, Panche, Kangkang	Kami, Gurung, Sherpa, Chhetri
9	Khaila, Wadungla, Bobob, Luknagi	Khamyongkha, Gurung, Chhetri

Source: Fieldwork, 1993

Table V shows that the numerically important clan/caste/community is distributed over more than one *tol* or ward and there is no *tol* which is homogenous in composition. However, most of the hamlets are numerically dominated by a single or two clans/castes/communities. The heterogeneity continues to grow with migrants trickling in mainly from the west.

Table VI: *Social categories and population in Chhinamakhu*

Social categories	Male	Female	Total	%
Tagadhari	52	56	108	23.5
Kirata	146	133	279	60.6
Other Mongoloid	35	26	61	13.3
Untouchable	7	5	12	2.6
Total	240	220	460	100.0

Source: Fieldwork, 1993

The percentage of the Kirata population in this village is much lower (60.6) than in Yangnam (87.3). On the other hand, the Tagadharis and

Other Mongoloids have a much higher percentage (23.5 and 13.3 respectively) compared to Yangnam (4.3 and 0.8 respectively). The higher percentage of the non-Kiratas in this village is perhaps partly due to its location, which is more accessible to people of other origins migrating from the west.

The architecture, painting and other details of the houses in Chhinamakhu are almost the same as those observed in Yangnam. The only difference, though rather important culturally, between a Limbu and a Rai house is that the latter has a separate room for the household deity. This room is normally located on the top floor though it may also be located on the middle floor. The Rai houses also have separate hearths made of three stones erected vertically and non-Kiratas are not allowed to go or sit near them.

Another interesting feature of this village which is conspicuous by its absence in Yangnam and elsewhere in Panchthar is the memorial stone slabs prominently erected on road sides, specially at resting places. Such slabs contain carvings of the sun, half-moon, bow and arrow, the trident of Lord Shiva and the name and dates of birth and death of the deceased person. This is not only interesting as a register of the indigenous population, but it also indicates that the art of writing or carving has existed among them from earlier times. The names and other details being written in the Devanagari script also shows that this script has found better acceptance than with the Limbus who are proud of their own script, although most of them can neither read nor write it.

Further evidence of the Rais being more Nepalicised is found in their day-to-day conversation which is rarely in their own language. This is not so in Yangnam. The Limbus not only have a better command over their language but also use it more commonly than do the Rais, who often use their language only to communicate some secret information in the presence of non-Rai strangers.

Madi Mulkharka: Madi Mulkharka is in the Sankhuwa Sabha district which was historically within the territory of Limbuan. Basantpur town is about a six hour walk and Tumlingtar which has an aerodrome and which is situated on the bank of the Sabha river is almost equally distant. But since the former town is much larger and the shopping cheaper, the villagers prefer to go there rather than to Tumlingtar. A weekly market is held at Madi Rambeni village and most people go there to collect their daily necessities.

Madi Mulkharka is bounded on the east by Terethum district, on the west by Madi Rambeni village, on the north by Mawdin village, and on

the south by the Maya khola and Tamaphok village across this river. The road from Madi Rambeni to Terethum divides the village horizontally into two equal halves. There are many streams flowing down to Maya khola and there are innumerable bamboo bridges over those streams, most of which dry up in winter. Each of these bridges is maintained by a rich household nearby.

The altitude range and temperature variation in the village are almost the same as in the other two villages. A greater part of the village faces east, and so there is plenty of sunlight. But compared to the other two villages, the extent of cultivable land is less. However, cardamom cultivation in the wastelands along the streams is more extensive in this village. There is little forest cover in the pasture lands at the top of the village and scarcity of firewood is more acute here. The cardamom fields have several trees but they are not cut.

Madi Mulkharka is famous for its extensive cardamom cultivation. An annual fete of three days is held in this village at the end of January when people from all surrounding villages and districts gather to gamble and merry-make. There is also a huge playground donated by one Man Bahadur Majiya, where inter-village volleyball and football tournaments are held during the fete. Some of the people of this village have also risen to the status of ministers, college teachers and important leaders of the district.

Like in Yangnam and Chhinamakhu, there is one prominent hamlet called Mulkharka which has the semblance of a small township. Though primary schools are established in every ward, only this hamlet has a secondary school. It also has shops, a health centre, an agriculture and a veterinary office, a Gaon Vikas Samiti office, a post office and the Nepal Red Cross Society office, besides a mill run on hydro-electricity for grinding rice, wheat, millets and mustard seeds. The demand for this mill is so great that its owner has recently acquired another run on diesel.

Table VII depicts the number of households in 1987 belonging to Yakkhas and other castes/communities.

Table VII: Yakkhas and other castes/communities in Madi Mulkharka

<i>Yakkhas & other castes/communities</i>	<i>Total No. of households (1987)</i>	<i>No. of actually covered households</i>
Bahun	118	9
Chhetri	578	41
Damai	48	3
Gharti/Bhujel	12	2
Gurung	187	13
Jimi (Yakha)	234	17

<i>Yakkhas & other castes/communities</i>	<i>Total No. of households (1987)</i>	<i>No. of actually covered households</i>
Kami	62	5
Limbu	9	2
Newar	47	3
Sarki	11	1
Sherpa	118	3
Tamang	46	4
Total	1470	103

Source: Gaon Vikas Samiti Office, Madi Mulkharka, 1993

It is clear that the Kiratas in the village do not constitute more than 16.5% of the total number of households in the village. Here it should be pointed out that the actual numerical status of the Jimis or Yakkhas as 234 households is misleading because even ethnic Rais have been reportedly mistaken for Yakkhas. For instance, the Nechali, Amchoke and Mangpang Rais of Thulo Wairang (Ward No. 8) have been counted along with other Yakkhas but these are ethnic Rai clans. This confusion is because of the absence of widespread ethnic consciousness among the Yakkhas living there. One may also interpret this phenomenon as a case of the existence of fluid ethnic boundaries between them and the native Rais as a consequence of the granting of various titles (like 'Rai') since the 1770s in Nepal. Other reasons that may be attributed to this phenomenon are the Yakkhas' small numerical size and intermarriages with the Rais and Limbus of the surrounding areas. The fictive kinship network that has developed over the years between them and other social groups, particularly the Bahun, Chhetri and the Gurung is also a factor in this regard.

Table VIII: Distribution of Yakkha and other castes/communities in Madi Mulkharka

<i>Ward No.</i>	<i>Tols/Hamlets</i>	<i>Yakkhas & other castes/communities</i>
1	Hulaki Gaon, Srijung, Toribari, Pindalu Danra	Bahun, Limbu, Bhujel, Kami, Sarki, Damai
2	Ghimire Gaon, Dabale, Soti	Bahun, Chhetri, Newar, Sherpa, Bhujel, Kami
3	Chowki, Kattike Gufa, Ale Danra, Danratol, Madamsingh, Solaban	Chhetri, Tamang, Bahun, Kami
4	Waling, Jimi Gaon	Yakkha, Damai
5	Madi, Singhare Bhir, Tham Kharka, Siddhanagi	Yakkha, Gurung, Sherpa
6	Majh Kharka, Hanglafu, Mulkharka	Yakkha, Gurung, Bahun, Newar, Kami
7	Ahale, Mele, Phudung	Gurung, Chhetri, Yakkha

<i>Ward No.</i>	<i>Tols/Hamlets</i>	<i>Yakkhas & other castes/communities</i>
8	Kanpur, Wairang, Gahiri Gaon, Aiselu	Yakkha, Chhetri, Rai, Limbu, Newar, Gurung
9	Umling, Echcharam	Yakkha, Chhetri, Rai, Damai

Source: Fieldwork, 1993

In the table above, a few hamlets like Ghimire Gaon and Jimi Gaon have been named after a sub-caste or community but in fact no hamlet is entirely inhabited by any particular caste or community though each is numerically dominated by a particular Yakkha clan, caste, or community.

Table IX: Social categories and population in Madi Mulkharka

<i>Social categories</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>%</i>
Tagadhari	108	92	200	42.4
Kirata	35	43	78	16.5
Other Mongoloid	69	74	143	30.3
Untouchable	27	24	51	10.8
Total	239	233	472	100.0

Source: Fieldwork, 1993

Table IX clearly shows the numerical insignificance of the Kiratas whose percentage is only slightly higher than that of the Untouchables. However, due to certain historical and other reasons, it is still the Yakkhas who call the shots there, so to speak, and only recently are the Chhetris and Gurungs trying to challenge the political hegemony of the Yakkhas in the village.

The relative absence of the memorial stone slabs is striking after crossing the Sabha river which separates Limbuan from Khambuan. This is another indication of the fact that the Yakkhas are culturally closer to the Limbus than the Rais. Otherwise, the architecture, raw materials and other details of the houses are, internally as well as externally, quite the same as observed in the other two villages. However, the use of corrugated and galvanized iron sheets for roofing is more common here which is probably due to the relative closeness to Basantpur and the economic surplus generated by cardamom cultivation in this village.

Forty-five per cent of the Yakkha respondents claimed that they could speak their language though in practice they seldom did so. Their condition is, in fact, worse than that of the Rais some of whom can speak their language at least within the family. Thus their Nepalisation seems to be

greater than that of the Rais of Chhinamakhu. This may perhaps be, as already discussed, attributed to their insignificant demographic size and the lack of ethnic consciousness among them.

The description of Yangnam, Chhinamakhu and Madi Mulkharka villages reveals many similarities among them which are briefly summarised here. First, the altitude range, temperature variation and other environmental conditions are similar in the three villages. Even the vegetation, animals reared and crops grown are the same.

Second, the raw materials, architecture and other details of their houses are also similar. Besides, the way their houses are daubed or painted are the same. The internal arrangement of the Rai houses is slightly different from the arrangement of Limbu and Yakkha houses but there is little external difference across the three villages.

Third, the settlement pattern, which is highly heterogeneous down to the *tol* level, is also similar in the three villages studied. Each *tol* may be dominated by a particular clan, caste or community but no *tol* is completely homogenous in composition. The settlement pattern is uniformly scattered except in one hamlet in each village where some clustering of the houses can be seen.

Fourth, the original inhabitants are gradually turning into a minority due primarily to migration of people from outside. Despite the three villages being more or less equidistant from the nearest urban centre, the Yakkhas already seem to have turned into an insignificant minority in their village. If this is taken as an indication of the demographic change in east Nepal, the same fate may befall the Rais and Limbus after some decades.

Fifth, proficiency in their native language seems to be declining gradually in the whole of east Nepal and the influence of the Nepali language is becoming all pervasive. While the Limbus are still successful to some extent in retaining their language they have already become bilingual. Even with the strong sense of their identity, the future of their language perhaps depends more on the state apparatus than their own ethnic organisations.

Sixth, natural resources like water, fodder and firewood are gradually shrinking due to population increase and continued land reclamation for various uses. If this continues unabated, a time may soon come when the social matrix may have to be changed in order to ensure survival in a competitive situation. The relationship between the 'original inhabitants' and 'later migrants' may change and create new ethnic boundaries as witnessed in many parts of the eastern Himalayas.

Finally, a word about rampant alcoholism. While the cultural milieu is congenial to imbibing alcohol, excessive indulgence is not always

appreciated by the people. There are several excessive drinkers in every village especially among the non-Tagadhari categories, thereby justifying the appellation 'matwali' for them. Worse still, there are some in every village who are addicted to taking harmful drugs, which is a habit they attribute to their stay in the northeastern parts of India. Smoking cheap cigarettes or bidis is common among both men and women, adults as well as adolescents. The situation is now so deplorable that no one will undertake paid work in the fields unless some kind of alcohol is offered to him or her. Even the Tagadharis are sometimes compelled to offer alcohol to their non-Tagadhari workers though there is a strong cultural inhibition among them to do so.

Darjeeling and Sikkim

No intensive fieldwork was proposed to be conducted in Darjeeling and Sikkim for the purpose of the present study. However, for the benefit of those who are not acquainted with this region, the description of a few salient features may be in order (for details, see Subba 1985b, 1989).

The Kirata communities cannot claim to be wholly native to this region. Written history shows that the ancestors of many Kirata people living here have come from Nepal. The only community which is known to have originally inhabited this region is the Lepcha. Though, notionally, most of the land here once belonged to this community, over the last 150 years or so this community, like the Kiratas in east Nepal, has been reduced to an insignificant minority.

The villages in Darjeeling and Sikkim are socially much more complex. Each village represents many more castes, communities and religions than do the villages in east Nepal. Though much smaller in geographical area, the villages here are in every respect more plural in composition as well as character. There is hardly any linguistic community which has a number sizeable enough to sustain its own language. As a result, 'Nepali' is not only the lingua franca but the mother-tongue of almost all the inhabitants. Knowledge of one's own language is definitely very poor, even non-existent. Thus 'Nepali' assumes a distinct identity of a community in the Indian diaspora whereas in Nepal, it only refers to their nationality or *rastriyata*. The peoples living in Nepal belong to specific communities like Newar, Rai, Limbu, Mangar and Gurung but never to a 'Nepali' community. It is for this reason that each community has retained the knowledge of its language, customs and traditions to a great extent in Nepal. It is only recently that the various communities in

Darjeeling and Sikkim have become aware of the need for a revival of their own languages and cultures.

The architecture of the houses in the region is more varied due, perhaps, to greater economic and cultural differentiation within villages. However, there are basically two major cultural strands noticeable. One is characterised by the style described earlier in east Nepal and the other is what may be called the Lepcha style. The early Nepali settlers had brought their own house-building techniques and these were quite different from the Lepcha techniques. But over the decades a kind of blending of these two styles of architecture can be seen. The houses are of various shapes and sizes but mostly single-storeyed with a living room and a separate kitchen.

The villages also have better infrastructural facilities and are therefore better linked with the market centres. This also means that the economy here is more monetised and there is higher incidence of hired labour than in east Nepal. Crops grown are also more market-oriented than for self-consumption. For instance, growing various kinds of flowers, vegetables and fruits is common. In short, the villagers of Darjeeling and Sikkim have more alternative sources of livelihood than those living in east Nepal.

The region has the three 'Ts'—tea, tourism and trade—none of which is significant in east Nepal. The tea gardens, though over a hundred years old now and many of them sick, are a major employment avenue for the illiterate and semi-literate. Similarly, tourism as an industry is fairly well entrenched. There is also trade in leather, carpets, milk products and bags with neighbouring regions. Such trade is yet to develop in east Nepal.

Finally, Darjeeling and Sikkim are much more advanced in the fields of education, art and literature than east Nepal. This holds true even when we compare the same set of communities or cultures living in the two areas.

Armed with such features, one would imagine that this region would provide leadership to the cultural movements in the entire eastern Himalayas. But this has not occurred. Exposure to various ideas and ideologies, greater interdependence with other cultures, lack of grip over one's traditional beliefs and customs, and the relatively secular state have all been responsible for the lesser enthusiasm and competence of the people of this region than those of Nepal as regards the politics of culture.

Kiratas in the Past

The identification of Kiratas in terms of current geographical, cultural and racial distribution in India and its hinterland has been, inevitably perhaps, based almost entirely on Aryan literature such as the epics, the Vedas and the Upanishads. In this regard, the use of historical and archaeological sources of data has been limited, particularly for ancient and medieval times. As a result, there is serious difficulty in ascertaining whether or not the present Kiratas have a traceable descent from those mentioned in the ancient Aryan literature.

The agendum of relooking into the various controversies centering around their origin and identity is still valid. For many cultural organisations of this region, the word 'Kirata' still evokes a sense of being both aboriginal and 'advanced'. It is worthwhile to look into the arguments behind some seemingly innocent theories dealing with their origin and identity, and to reveal the various forms of appropriation of the Kiratas as a race, culture, nation and tribe by the dominant discourse in India as well as Nepal.

Origin

I begin with the etymology of the word 'Kirata'. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, in his celebrated work, *Kirata-jana-krti*, makes an exhaustive survey of the ancient connotations of the word and those akin to it in the Indo-Aryan languages (1951:17-19). From what he has illustrated, the word 'Kirata' had a negative, sub-human or animal connotation. For instance, in the Vedic as well as other Indo-Aryan literature, this word referred to an ugly man, a wild man, a cruel and mean person, a corn-

chandler, a robber, a forester, and the like. This is similar to Leo Kuper's remarks:

Dehumanization is the most common process in the characterization of subordinate races by a dominant race. It is expressed, in its extreme form, in conceptions of the subject race as animals or demons or objects, and in a less extreme form, in the conception that the subject race is characterized by a falling-off from the fullness of human quality and human dignity (1974:11).

That it is the dominant Other which always defines its subordinate categories is very well brought out by Aloka Parasher in her *Mlechhas in Early India* (1991). But it is perhaps more important to note the (un)conscious borrowing of the dominant discourse by the subjugated. Witness, for instance, the effort of a Kirata scholar, Narad Muni Thulung, to interpret this word. To him, it is derived from two words: *Kira* meaning 'lion', and *ti* meaning 'people', or 'people with lion's nature' (1985:85). Iman Singh Chemjong, a noted Kirata scholar, champions the view that the word 'Kirata' is a "corrupt form of Kiriati, Kiryat or Kirjath which means a fort or town in [the] Moabite language of [the] Mediterranean region" (1966:2). Yet another instance is found in the contention of G. P. Singh, a historian from Manipur University, who considers this word to have possibly originated from *Cireta*, *Cirata* or *Cirayeta* (1990:96). This is the name of a herb which is famous for its bitter taste and high medicinal value, and which is known to be one of the important articles acquired by the Aryans from the Kirata mountain-dwellers.

With regard to the region where they probably originated, Chatterjee locates it "in the mountains, particularly the Himalayas and in the North-eastern areas of India" (1951:16). But Chemjong has a different theory. According to him, the place of their origin is Babylon from where they were driven out by the Hebrews under the leadership of Moses and were forced to migrate towards the east. One of those migrant groups is inferred to have lived in Mesopotamia about 2400 BC, prior to leaving for northern India via northern Persia (1966:3).

This hypothesis is based on the assumption that the Greeks knew them by the name of *Kirhadi* and that they are mentioned in the Old Testament (2 Samuel 15, 18) as a martial tribe during the reign of the Syrian king David in 1049 BC. In support of this, Chemjong also cites Kirata folklore which connects them with the Hazara tribe of Kabul or Golku (Chemjong 1966:5). Bikram Singh Hasrat, a noted historian, is also of the view that

the Kiratas migrated from Mesopotamia to northern India and the Himalayan region (1970:xxiv).

G. P. Singh, quoted earlier, argues that “[m]ost of the Kirata tribes of northern and eastern Himalayas were of indigenous region [sic]”, but, admits that the Kirata regions received waves of migrants who were slowly absorbed into their fold (1990:79–81).

Chemjong’s hypothesis, supported by Hasrat, deals with ancient migrations from the West, which probably took place earlier than the coming of the Aryans to India. This is perhaps the reason why Chatterjee, whose sources of information are primarily the Indo-Aryan texts, locates them in the eastern Himalayas and northeastern areas of India. But it is perhaps difficult to support either the migration theory or the indigenous origin theory outside of a specific time frame. They were, perhaps, indigenous in comparison to the Aryans but one cannot be equally sure of a period much earlier than that.

It appears from various historical writings that there was a Kirata substratum in the eastern Himalayas, which absorbed migrants from different directions at different periods in history. It is also indicated that such migrations occurred in trickles: the glaciers on the north and the long malarial terai in the south must have dissuaded many aspirants from migrating to the Himalayas. It is also not difficult to visualise that the indigenous people moved about on account of shifting cultivation, pastoralism and trade.

There is little doubt, however, that the Kiratas are of Mongoloid origin. Chatterjee writes that Indologists agree that the Kiratas have a “non-Aryan” or “Mongoloid” origin (1951:6). This is endorsed by Chemjong too, though he mistakes ‘nationalities’ for ‘races’ (1966:4). Other later scholars like Hari Ram Joshi (1985:23) and K. C. Mishra (1987:98) have also reiterated the Mongoloid origin of the Kiratas.

There are, of course, some scholars who disagree. In a widely read book written in Nepali, *Vedma ke Chha?* (1981), Swami Prapannacharya (a Rai) puts forward an antithesis. Drawing extensively from the Vedas, he contends that the Kiratas are of ‘Aryan’ and not of ‘Mongoloid’ origin. Though apparently it seems to be a simple case of mistaking ‘culture’ for ‘race’, one can trace in his writings a great sense of obligation to show that the Kiratas are as ‘advanced’ as the Aryans. Having come in close contact with Aryan religious institutions and practitioners in India, he must have felt this sense of responsibility towards his own ‘people’. Thus it is, perhaps, not justified to brand him a ‘traitor’ or a ‘stooge of the Aryans’, as is occasionally done in some Kirata texts published subsequently.

Here one may refer to an important article on the Aryan identity by A. K. Danda (1992:78–84). After examining the four distinct parameters of their identity—as a physical type, as a spatio-demographic expression, as a philological identity, and as a techno-cultural category—he concludes that “... the Aryans in India, despite their apparent linguistic homogeneity, appear techno-culturally diverse and ethnically heterogeneous” (1992:84).

The burden of Prapannacharya is also shared by G. P. Singh. This is probably why his views about the racial origin of the Kiratas are ambiguous: he occasionally considers them to be of mixed origin and at other times, of pure Aryan origin. For instance, he writes (1990:62) that they were “both of Aryan and non-Aryan extraction” but a little later he says that “after having deeper insight into all the details their Kstriya origin can be proved beyond all doubts” (1990:66). With specific reference to the Tripuri Kiratas, he writes that they belonged to “both Kstriya and Mongoloid stock” and of the Kiratas of ancient Nepal, that they were of “Kstriya origin of Aryan stock” (1990:88).

Prima facie, this ambiguity has arisen out of the conceptual meddling of culture and race, and from the sense of obligation which many Kirata scholars share in proving that they were as advanced as the Aryans. Apart from these two major factors, one should not ignore the ambiguous character of the Aryan texts themselves which not only emanates from the very nature of the language (Pali or Sanskrit) which is susceptible to multiple interpretations but also from the fact that the authors of those texts used different historical, social and cultural sources.

Geographical Spread

The literature on the geographical spread of the ancient Kiratas is rather inconclusive, partly due to the reasons discussed above. While Chatterjee associates them with the northeastern Himalayas, he does not negate the view of Gopal Chandra Praharaj who locates them in “Northern India” nor does he refute Jnanendra Mohan Das who claims that their ancient habitat was “the Eastern Himalayan tracts, including Sikkim and Bhutan, and Manipur and other adjacent tracts, which are exactly the lands of Mongoloid settlement in India” (Chatterjee 1951:18).

With Chemjong, the geography of the Kirata settlement gets further widened. Quoting the *Markendya Purana*, he writes that “the famous seven Kirat[a] kingdoms during the Mahabharata time were Aswa Kut or Kabul, Kulya or Kulu Valley, Matsya or North Bihar, Paundra or Bengal,

Sumer or Assam, Malak or Mlek or Lohit, Kinnaur Kirat[a] or Garhwal and Nepal" (1966:9).

There are others who restrict Kirata settlement to well-defined present-day political boundaries. For instance, Milton Sangma, a noted historian, writes that the word 'Kirata' referred to the "peoples now represented by the Mongoloid group inhabiting different parts of North-East India" (1985:59). Contrast this with the following claim of K. C. Mishra: "Geographically, racially and linguistically they (Kiratas) are identified with the Kirantis or the people of Kiratadesa situated between Dudh-Kosi and Kanki river in east Nepal" (1987:99). These two views, however, appear to be based (rather inadequately) on contemporary racial, cultural and linguistic aspects.

One of the few scholars who has made a meticulous effort to locate the geography of the Kiratas is perhaps G. P. Singh, but even he has found it difficult to assign any particular location to them. For instance, at one point he writes about the Kirata settlements in "the Gangetic plain[s], the valley of Nepal, the hills and mountains of northern, central and eastern Himalayas, Vindhya region, etc." (1990:95) but later he mentions their expansion into "north-western, northern, central (Madhya-desa), eastern, western, northern and greater India" (1990:121). And the 'proof' of such a claim is the fact that the word 'Kirata', or its variants, are found in the various classical texts dealing with those regions. Even when allowance is made for a little sporadic archaeological and other evidence it is difficult to ascertain if the reference is made to the same Kiratas or to an altogether different category of people.

A major reason for this ambiguity is certainly the absence of a clear conception of who the Kiratas were or are. As long as this is so, the question of their geographical spread will remain unresolved. But deciding the space/time framework for conceptualising Kirata identity is not easy. Certain groups of people who are identified as Kiratas or who used to be referred to as such no longer desire this classification whereas others have appropriated and actively propagated it in order to establish their historical antiquity in a given geographical area. For instance, the Meities of Imphal Valley and the Garos of Meghalaya still claim to be of Kirata stock. Those who have disowned this identity are basically people who underwent a process of 'Sanskritisation' during the last couple of centuries and discovered the Kirata identity to be inadequate to represent their changed status. The fact that the Sanskritisation process had established the hegemony of what may be described as the Aryan discourse and relegated the Kirata status to the periphery, both geographically and

culturally, must be underlined. Incidentally, such people are recently showing renewed interest in Kirata society and culture. An identity which appeared to be a 'liability' is gradually being appreciated as a 'resource' today.

Consequently, the exercise of identifying the geographical location of the Kiratas at any point of time in history can perhaps never be fully satisfactorily carried out. Even when it is confined to the ancient period there can be no unanimity, because while there may be agreement on when this period ended there may be no agreement on when it began.

Relationship with the Aryans

Any discussion on the Kiratas will remain incomplete without reference to the Aryans because it is essentially the latter who have constructed the former. The Aryan discourse on the Himalayas, which has hitherto remained unchallenged, shows the status of the Kiratas as being subordinated to the Aryans. But it seems that this subjugation was more cultural and discursive rather than political, administrative, or even economic.

The claim of cultural superiority can be traced in numerous Aryan stereotypes existing in their literature. Though these are not a completely valid index for understanding the structural locations of the two categories of people, there is hardly any alternative to this problem. Most Aryan stereotypes about the Kiratas can be translated as 'uncouth', 'unpleasant', 'barbarous' and 'sinful' (Chatterjee 1951:18; Mishra 1987:99). Counter views about the Aryans like 'treacherous' and 'untrustworthy' exist in the oral traditions of the Kiratas. As such, these merely indicate that the Kiratas did not consider the Aryans to be a superior race, but only unfriendly and uncooperative. On the other hand, most Aryan stereotypes seem to indicate that they treated the Kiratas as an inferior race.

In dealing with the Aryan-Kirata relationship a clear paradox is apparent in the orientalism of the texts. Orientalism, according to Said (1978), necessarily presupposes the existence and opposition of two worlds, two geographical areas (or mindscapes, if you like): the privileged term Occident exploring/studying/reconstructing the object of its study—the Orient. What we notice in the oriental texts of the Aryans is, however, "a further division of the Orient (in this case, India and Nepal) in which the received dominant discourse of the West is assimilated without really challenging it and continues to carry forward its hegemony in imposing the same values and weaknesses on their subjects of inquiry which are thereby rendered marginal" (Po'dar and Subba 1991:78).

This thesis is substantiated by innumerable instances of the 'othering' of the Kiratas by the Aryans, so well brought out by Parasher (1991). This was possible because the Kiratas, while refusing to fully assimilate with the dominant Indo-Aryan social organisation, were not completely isolated from it either. Thus, if not geographically and historically, at least at the level of discourse, the Aryans represented the Occident and consciously 'othered' the Kiratas, their Orient.

G. P. Singh draws an interesting instance from the *Brahma Purana* (110, 8, 9) which indicates that the Aryan 'othering' was not confined to their texts but was practised by them though the Kiratas resisted such forms of domination. For instance, Singh writes that the "Kiratas, Yamnas, Sakas, Hunas, Khasas, Andhrakas, etc. as mlecchas, were well known for their hostile attitudes towards the class of Brahmanas" (1990:73). This hostility was probably cultural rather than political and economic, though political hostility cannot be ruled out completely.

In the economic field, it appears that the Aryans and Kiratas had trading relationships rather than a clash of interests. It has already been mentioned that the bitter medicinal plant called *Cireta* or *Cirata* was bought by the Aryans in exchange for hides, mats and the like. The *soma* plant was also acquired by the Vedic saints from the Kiratas as they were not allowed to deal with this trade themselves according to *Smṛti*, *Mānu* and *Yajñavalkya* (Singh 1990:197). But Singh notes that the trade accounts in classical sources are often confusing and sometimes even contradictory (1990:203).

Sources show that the important articles of trade between the Aryans and the Kiratas were cotton, silk, gold, iron, *malbathrum* and so on. But it is not yet clearly established whether silk was bought or sold by the Kiratas. While it is evident that the Assamese Kiratas were expert silk cultivators and weavers in the early centuries of the Christian era, it is likely that as a trade article silk flowed from north to south rather than the other way around (Singh 1990:209-10).

From this brief sketch of the ancient trade between the Kiratas and the Aryans it appears that they had some kind of interdependence. The cultural, ideological and other forms of inequalities between them do not seem to have posed any obstacle to economic transactions.

Kirata Dynasty

The tradition of keeping chronicles of rulers is as old as the writing of history. Such chronicles are an important source of history even today

though they do not always meet the standards set by modern historians, particularly after the rise of Subaltern Studies. The native historian today is often not aware of what Perceval Landon realised at the beginning of the present century. Citing a Kirata chronicle, he shows the "unwisdom of applying western scientific tests to the statements of such a chronicle as the Vamshavali..." (Landon 1928/1976:228).

It should first of all be remembered that all the available information on the Kirata dynasty refers to a place called 'Nepal' whose boundaries in earlier times were different from what they are now. Most literature shows that 'Nepal' in ancient times referred to the present-day Kathmandu Valley only, though, according to Chemjong, it was bounded by the Trisuli river to the west and the Tambakoshi river to the east, Chitlang to the south and the glaciers to the north (1966:7). Even if the boundaries suggested by Chemjong are accepted, it is clear that the eastern and western parts of modern Nepal were not part of 'Nepal' earlier.

But even with regard to ancient Nepal, there is no unanimity among scholars about its dynastic history. Opinions also differ over the total number of Kirata rulers between 3102 BC and AD 600. According to some it was 22 and to others 32, whereas Singh considers 29 to be the most plausible figure. Similarly, the total number of years under their rule is found to range from between 1100 to 1500 years. In this regard, Singh makes a safe and rational statement: "they ruled over the valley of Nepal tentatively for one thousand years in both pre- and post- Asokan period" (1990:404).

It may be further noted that almost every scholar has drawn the genealogy of the Kirata rulers from Yalambar [also spelt 'Ilamb' by Padmagiri, 'Yellong' by Kirkpatrick, 'Yalambara' by Wright, 'Yalamba' by Levi and 'Yalambhang' by others] (see Hasrat 1970:xxv). But Chemjong does not seem to agree with this view. According to him, the first Kirata king of central Nepal was Banashur who was conquered and slain by King Bhuktaman. But, after eight generations, when King Bhuvansingh was ruling, a Kirata king of east Nepal called Yalambar slew him in battle and re-established the Kirata dynasty there (Chemjong 1966:6-7).

In short, the available literature provides limited knowledge about the Kirata dynasty in present-day central Nepal. What is certain is that the Kiratas ruled over this part of Nepal for a considerable period of time until they were overthrown by the Licchavis, whose dynasty is fairly well documented.

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