

Who are the Protestors and What are they Demanding?

There had been non-stop protests in Biratnagar, other eastern parts and Maitighar Mandala by the concerned indigenous groups demanding the identity-based nomenclature of Province 1. Kiranti groups were calling for the province to be named Kirant Pradesh after the ancient historical civilization that had existed in the very soil.

Yugsan Kirati, president of the Kirat Rai Yaokkha's Khotang chapter remarked that naming the province Koshi Province had denied the demands of those in favour of an identity-based name. To that effect, a memorandum had been submitted to the Province Chief Minister Hikmat Karki through the Chief District Office. He added that the memorandum demanded the removal of the newly adopted name, and endorsed Kirant Province as a suitable one since it was based on their ethnic identity.

What Prompted Them to Protest?

A session at the Provincial Assembly of Province 1 on March 1, 2023, named the province Koshi. Article 295 (2) of the constitution states that the name of a province has to be endorsed by a two-thirds majority of the total members of the provincial assembly concerned. The name proposed by the CPN-UML was endorsed by an overwhelming majority. Besides the UML(40 seats), assembly members from the Nepali Congress(29), the CPN (Maoist Centre)(13), and the Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP)(6) voted in the proposal in favour. Eighty-six members barring the Speaker participated in the voting in the 93-strong assembly, with 82 members endorsing the name and four members from the CPN (Unified Socialist) voting in opposition. Six members were absent. Earlier, the Unified Socialist (4) and the Janata Samajbadi Party (1) had registered a different proposal demanding that the province be named Kirat-Limbuwan-Sagarmatha. Speaker Baburam Gautam said the proposal was rejected by a huge majority of the assembly. Anticipating that there may be protests before and after the naming of the province, the District Administration Office, Morang had prohibited mass assembly and processions around the provincial assembly secretariat, the chief minister's residence, the office of the council of ministers and the district administration office in Morang after three o'clock that day and would do the same in the future too.

The number of participants in favour of renaming the province has increased mainly after the death of Padam Limbu Lajehang on March 24, 2023. The police allegedly baton-charged protesters, during which Lajehang sustained severe head injuries in Biratnagar on March 19. Lajehang was under treatment at home despite suffering a severe head injury. On the night of 22 March, Lajehang fell unconscious after vomiting. He was taken to Dharam-based BP Koirala Institute of Health Sciences and admitted to the intensive care unit. Preparations were underway to medivac Lajehang to Kathmandu when he passed away at 2:30 am on the morning of 24 March while undergoing treatment. Lajehang, 42, of Dharam-15 was the central co-commander of the Limbuwan Volunteer. Martyrdom was rendered to him on

7 April 2023.

Still, their fight for their identity has not been responded to at all since Chief Minister Karki only commented that the province name will not be changed regarding the ongoing protests in the province under his ministry.

To know if the demand of the Kirants is actually reasonable, we first have to know who Kirants are.

Who are the Kirants?

In general, the ethnic communities of Rai, Limbu, Yakkha, Sunuwar, Koche, and Meche are Kirants. If so, according to the National Census of 2078, the population of Kirant amounts to about 13 lakhs. However, according to numerous experts such as Iman Singh Chemjong, Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, Dr Swami Prapannacharya, and Dr Gopal Shivakoti, even Magar, Gurung, Tamang, Tharu and Newar, people have their roots in the Kirant civilization and therefore also Kirant in the broad sense. Then the number will increase to more than 80 lakhs. Dr Chandra Kumar Sherma had said that even before the advent of Nepal, Kirantis had been living on the hills and riversides of the place. It is found that the Kirant civilization has an intricate history with rivers like Arun, Tamor, Sunkoshi, and Dudhkoshi, and lakes like Salpa Pokhari, Sabha Pokhari and Sagarmatha as well. In ancient times, Kirantis had lived in coexistence with other communities in areas like Mesopotamia, Mishra and the Hwang Ho River. Historically, Kirantis have also ruled over Nepal for over 1,225 years (800 BC 300 AD). Their reign had 29 kings. The Kirant Kingdom had their capital in Kathmandu and span east towards upto Darjeeling and Sikkim. In the present context, mountainous and east hilly regions of Nepal have been considered to be the ancestral locations of the Kirantis.

Etymologically, the word Kirant is said to originate from किराँटो which means thread/fiber. In the past, Kiranti women used to weave clothes where as men used to hunt animals. At present, such symbols of culture are preserved when Kirantis perform veneration of their ancestors. They require a bow and roots of Kimbu (mulberry) or similar fibrous plants for worship. There is also the use of the word Kirant in several Vedas, Upanishads and Puranas. Mahabharata and Ramayan also frequently mention Kirants. During the battle of Kurukshetra, Lord Krishna stopped

Barbarika (King Yalamber) from participating in the war as he was so powerful that he could end the war singly. Yalamber, the first king of the Kirant dynasty was planning to fight from the weaker side (Kauravas).

In general, the history of Kirant can be divided into three periods:

1. Prehistoric Period (From Mishra Civilization to King Yalamber)
2. Historic Period (From King Yalamber to King Gasti)
3. Modern Period (From Rise of King Prithivi Narayan Shah to present).

The Historic Period can be further divided into two subperiods. The first is the reign of the Kirant dynasty and the second is the Kirant Dark Age from the fall of King Gasti to the reign of Prithivi Narayan Shah. It is called so because no history of the Kirants could be found in this period.

There are numerous languages spoken among the groups claiming to be Kirants. There are even different languages within the subgroups of those groups. All those languages belong to the Tibeto-Burman family.

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within the Rai community, there are 28 lingual communities that do not understand each other's language completely. Nevertheless, there are some common words. Inside the Limbu community, there are four lingual communities; Panchthare, Chathare, Fedappe, and Tamorkhole. For any linguist, the Kirant community proves to be a fertile area of research.

The culture of various Kiranti groups is similar in nature as they all follow Mundhum. Their life philosophy is based on this important book which is also their religious scripture and contains folk literature. Moreover, although outsiders recognize them to be Dhami Jhakris, their role inside the community is significant as they protect, conserve and ensure the succession of culture, language and indigenous knowledge. Sakela, Dhan Naach and Chyabrug Naach are the major cultural recreations. Every cultural and religious activity symbolises the intricate relationships

among ancestors, nature and Mundhum. They believe in asking for blessings from their ancestors during or before the commencement of an action. They strongly adhere to principles of coexistence and harmony so much that they believe that they have to give a respectable position to their enemies as well.

Informally, the common religion of Kirantis is called the Kirant religion. They pray to nature and worship natural objects like stones, plants, rivers, etc. Paruhang(Sun God) and Sumnima (Earth Goddess) are the deities worshipped. There is a Kiranti myth of Paruhang proposing to Sumnima with a beautiful comb, which she accepted. After that, it was said that the heavens and the earth were joined in marriage. Kirants worship a feminine supreme power in different names and beliefs. There is also no description of hell and heaven in the Kirant religion but rather an emphasis on life and living.

The physical features of Kirant are similar to what the world calls the Asian race. Medium and robust bodies,

broad cheeks, flat noses, thin whiskers, and small eyes are the major characteristics of Kiranti people. Due to their strong physique, most of the Kirantis are able to enrol in the British, Indian Army and the Singaporean Police. The reason behind the Gurkhas being fearless and becoming renowned all over the world could be contributed to the Kirantis itself. The British had recruited Gurkhas ethnicity-wise; four regiments were composed of Kirati tribes: Yakkha, Limbu, Rai, and Sunuwar. The 7th Gurkha Rifles was raised in 1902 and recruited Rai, Limbu, Yakkha, and Sunuwar from Eastern Nepal. The 10th Gurkha Rifles and the regiment maintained its assigned recruiting areas in the Kirant tribal areas of eastern Nepal as part of a broad reorganisation on 13 September 1901. 11 Gorkha Rifles composed entirely of Kiranti non-optees for the British Gorkhas.

Is their Demand Valid?

Since the Kirants have a long and rich history in the soils of Nepal, and districts of Province 1; Ilam, Panchthar, Taplejung, Sankhuwasabha, Terhathum, Bhojpur, Dhankuta, Khotang, Sunsari, and Solukhumbu have major settlements of such Kirants, it is not invalid that the Kirants have their identity reflected in the name of the province. The main reason for the conception of federalism in Nepal was to recognize the identities of such marginalised groups. We are not a large country like the US, and India where federalism increases efficiency through decentralisation of power.

Why is it more than just a name?

Martyr Padam Limbu Lajehang

There is not much benefit to adopting federalism if we are naming the provinces the same as zones named during the Panchayat unitary system. It is in the interest of the state to recognize the existence, identity and contribution of the Kirant community. It directly helps the

Conclusion

satisfaction of the native people and the conservation of the indigenous culture which is deteriorating rapidly.

The protestors are mainly from the Kirant community demanding the renaming of Province 1 from Koshi to Kirant. They felt that the state has done injustice to them by disregarding their identity, culture, religion and history. They say federalism has done more harm than good to them which is unintended by the Constitution. By giving an ethnicity-based name, the state is acknowledging that the Kirants are an important part of Nepal which they are.

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