

Tribhuvan University Journal
Vol 40, No 2: 54-67, December 2025
Research Directorate, Tribhuvan University (TU)
Kathmandu, Nepal
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/tuj.v40i2.88003>



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THE INDIGENOUS VOICE IN MUKARUNG'S *DAMINI BHIR* AND SUBBA'S *LATO PAHAD*: QUEST FOR JUSTICE AND IDENTITY

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Received date: 26 Aug. 2025 –Accepted date: 15 Dec. 2025

ABSTRACT

This research aims to explore the indigenous voices embedded in Rajan Mukarung's *Damini Bhir* and Upendra Subba's *Lato Pahad* and investigate the factors influencing the indigenous integrity and identity. The voices, both heard and hidden, are based on the indigenous epistemologies and they advocate justice, parity and solidarity for indigenous identity, specifically diverse identity of the Rai and Limbu communities in the eastern hilly region of Nepal. The study of the indigenous voices can significantly help promote humanity and kinship, and moreover, it can awaken the state power to hear the marginalized voices for a justifiable society. The research employs indigenous perspectives based on Native American theorists Chadwick Allen's trans-indigenous insights, Daniel Heath Justice's kinship phenomena and Jace Weaver's concepts of communitism. Various existing scholarships and the primary texts have been analytically consulted for the consolidation of the research. The research reveals indigenous people's activism, resilience and mutuality which can promote a pan-indigenous vision. The Rai and Limbu communities adhere to the indigenous phenomena of memory, spirituality, kinship and reciprocity, and shared identity.

Keywords: Dumbness, indigenous voice, kinship, shared identity, trans-indigenous

INTRODUCTION

The research analyzes the novel *Damini Bhir* by Rajan Mukarung and the title story "Lato Pahad" compiled in the story anthology *Lato Pahad* by Upendra Subba. As these primary texts and even some secondary sources

employed in this research have been written in Nepali, the researcher has translated the citations from these sources into English in italics within inverted commas. He has changed the book/journal/newspaper titles in Nepali into Romanized forms in italics and the title story included in the anthology *Lato Pahad* into Romanized form within inverted commas-“Lato Pahad”. Mukarung’s novel *Damini Bhir*, published in 2012, won the Madan Prize in the same year. The novel fictionalizes the socio-cultural and political situations of the marginalized people, mainly of the Rai people of Bhojpur, a northeastern district and its periphery, in Nepal. It raises a question of the Rai identity. The novelist focuses on the events and episodes that took place before, during and after the Maoist movement.

Damini Bhir meaning *Damini Cliff* in English speaks of the past, connects it with the present and suggests for a better future. The characterization of Bhujel Khanchha, Lachchhi, Chetan, Namdeng, Ramva etc. presents a realistic portrayal of the community. The novel stresses the political struggles for identity-based federalism and points to the lacking of its fulfillment, however, it connotes to some hope indicating less gravity. Mukarung (2023), the novelist, puts, “*Long live identity-based federalism or the restlessness of those including Nisam*” (p. 285).

Subba’s *Lato Pahad* meaning *The Dumb Mountain* in English, a story collection text that won the Padmashree Literature Award in 2015, was first published in 2014. The author belongs to the Limbu community in Panchthar, another northeastern district in the country. *Lato Pahad* comprises thirteen stories and, in the research, the title story “Lato Pahad,” the longest story in the collection has been selected for the analysis. This story deals with the integrity of the Limbu people. It underscores the supposed dumbness of this community. It primarily raises a question of identity crisis due to the lack of education in the mother tongue.

Subba’s book-title story “Lato Pahad” symbolically stipulates the domination and difference the Limbu community experiences. The author presents the story as a film at Sabha Griha. It reads “Ke:Ba Kokma” in Limbu and “Lato Pahad” in Nepali. Characters like Fangjung, Kokma Thule and Naspate Budha are portrayed as if they are real and live. The Chyabrung, a musical instrument, highlights the significance of the Limbu voice, tradition, culture and identity. On the first page of the fourth edition of *Lato Pahad*, Abhi Subedi comments, “*The stories in the anthology create the feelings like the vibrations emitted from the chimes of the Chyabrung*”

(as cited in Subba, 2023, p.1). Thus *Lato Pahad* raises an indigenous voice for parity, justice and identity.

The study investigates the explicit and implicit indigenous voices deep-rooted in the both primary texts. The dances, music, instruments and relationships depicted in the works explicitly disseminate the indigenous voices of love for traditional norms and ancestry, identity and kinship. These voices represent the indigenous lifestyles and worldviews. Moreover, the characters openly talk about their suffering and activism for ethnic identity in terms of language and dignity. Despite their innocence, hard work and talent, they are not well cared by the state. In such a context, they have a dominant hidden voice for their justice and parity. In *Damini Bhir*, the characters express their voice against the ignoring environment created by the state towards the ethnic and marginalized communities. The implicit voices inherent in both texts include resistance, memory and silence. The characters in the texts intend to promote harmony between/among different marginalized communities. Symbolically, and both openly and implicitly, they fear possible identity loss and past ethnic history. In “*Lato Pahad*”, the whole hill or mountain symbolically connotes the supposed dumbness and silence of the people. Actually, the supposed dumbness and silence are beauty and power of ethnic people. The dumb hill has a power to teach humans how to be humane and promote the sense of oneness.

The Rai and Limbu communities belong to the Kirat culture despite some variations between them. They are two different indigenous groups, so simply put, they are distinct from each other, however, they are overwhelmingly similar pertaining to cultures, customs, lifestyles, spirituality, integrity, and identity issues. In other words, they share pan-indigenous voices and visions. Shedding light on Rai and Limbu people's pursuit of Kirat culture and their religious scripture *Mundhum*, Subba (2021) argues, “Kirat gave birth to numerous branches including Rai and Limbu. There was blood mixing and cultural convergence both inside and outside the communities during the ethnic construction” (p. 31).

In this study, the researcher employs indigenous perspectives and insights as developed by indigenous theorists and critics like Daniel Heath Justice, Chadwick Allen and Jace Weaver. The problem of the statement arises that the ethnic/indigenous and marginalized people in the primary texts in terms of their identity have the challenges to concentrate- state's neglect, monolingual teaching system and possible religious conversion.

It is important to carry out academic research addressing this issue for identifying indigenous or marginalized voices and solidarity so that such a research document can contribute to voice the voiceless and inspire the recognition of indigenous integrity, freedom, kinship and identity. Although the existing sources available on the primary texts share indigenous insights, they, to a lesser extent, reveal kinship and pan-indigenous phenomena, so this research departs to view the primary texts via indigenous epistemological framework based on kinship and solidarity, and broadly captures them as testimonies advocating indigenous identity and reciprocity. The research investigates to find answers to these questions: What strategies do these texts follow to foreground the voices of the indigenous communities? Why is it necessary to study these indigenous voices? How do the texts help promote indigenous identity and solidarity? The specific objectives of the research include: To explore the strategies the primary texts follow to foreground the voices of the indigenous communities; to underscore the significance of examining the texts via indigenous lenses and to help disseminate the texts as testimonies appealing for indigenous identity and mutuality.

The scope of the study lies in the domain of indigenous literary study. It is limited to the analysis of the mentioned primary texts via indigenous epistemological perspectives and insights. Juxtaposing the two texts presents overwhelming commonalities between the Rai and Limbu communities, which exhibits inter-tribal coalitions and solidarity. Moreover, this research digs out the voices and visions of indigenous people, mainly Rais and Limbus, for their rights and freedom, and helps disseminate the primary texts as useful sources for the inquiry of justice, humanity and identity.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Pertaining to the indigenous integrity and calibre in Nepal, the state has paid less attention to indigenous communities and undermined their roles in the nation. In this light, pointing to the confidence of indigenous people in terms of their strong presence in the nationhood, despite the state's lack of care for them, Rai (2024) contends, "More importantly, although the nation failed to inculcate a sense of wholeness in Indigenous people and ratify their cultural symbol, their markers are permanently everywhere because they are entangled with the soil, air, rocks, peaks, and snow" (p. 166). The critic underscores indigenous people's inseparable position from the notion of nationhood in the context of Nepal; however, his argument

focuses less on the indigenous perspectives and more on the insights about nationalism and cultural psychology.

As to Rajan Mukarung's *Damini Bhir* staged as an adapted play at the Mandala theatre in Kathmandu, Ghimire (2023) comments in *The Kathmandu Post*, a daily newspaper in Nepal, "...Whether you're a fan of romance, concerned about societal issues and revolution, or intrigued by the exploration of the human psyche, "Damini Bhir" offers something for every viewer to savor and appreciate." The critic points out various contexts and conditions the novel embraces. He expresses the play's success in drawing attention of the audience; however, he lacks to state indigenous ethos a work of indigenous literatures inculcates. Indigenous literatures are more real and ethical than recreational and fanciful.

Critics opine that Mukarung's novel makes a quest for identity. Concerning the author's response to the prestigious award won by his novel *Damini Bhir*, Acharya Mishra (2019) states, "...he shares that to award Madan Puraskar to his novel *Damini Bhir* is an acknowledgement of the diverse identity of the nation..." (p. 44). This critic stresses the identity issue raised in the novel. In the context of very limited critical scholarships available on *Damini Bhir*, her article on the text is really important and interesting, however, it arises with a feminist lens and lacks an indigenous interpretation. Gobinda Prasad Dulal analyses *Damini Bhir* via a sociological perspective. His study focuses on culture and community. He opines that the marginalized people in the community are oppressed by the elites. He appreciates the consciousness of the people to be free from domination and takes this consciousness as "the worldview that the subordinate class wants liberation" (Dulal, 2016, p. 130). This criticism lacks adequate indigenous phenomena.

The primary texts emerge and appeal to the domain of Nepali literature; however, the critical scholarships on both of them have so far emerged very limited. Like *Damini Bhir*, *Lato Pahad* also arises popular. The title story "Lato Pahad" in it also raises a strong voice for justice and identity. It points to the problems and aesthetics of indigenous people, mainly the Limbu community. Acharya Mishra looks into Subba's ways of portraying female characters in order to find how this portrayal surpasses the mainstream notion of females in Nepali literature. She argues:

...Subba's *Dumb Hill*, as most of the stories are set in the Limbu society, deals with the Limbu culture. ...Thus, I want to explore the images of

women in them to examine in what ways his portrayal of female characters subverts the notion of ideal femininity envisioned by the mainstream Nepali literature, which has been alleged as being patriarchal written from the perspective of Brahmin and Chhetri males (Acharya Mishra, 2021, p. 53).

Acharya Mishra's examination of the images of women in the story presents the female characters with respectable roles, which also signifies female identity in the story, however, she has employed the perspectives of third wave feminism, which prioritizes diverse identity of women, whereas, indigenous feminism underscores women's identity in connection with the indigenous ethos of community solidarity, ancestry, culture, nature and generations. Ramesh Ijam Limbu opines that the stories in *Lato Pahad* depict reality of the Limbu people in the eastern hills of Nepal and convey a similar indigenous worldview. He argues, "...these stories via the local consciousness succeed to connect the sky of world literature" (Limbu, 2015). His opinions convey a sense of indigenous insight, yet, the specific perspective is not pronounced in the comment.

In "Lato Pahad," Limbu children are bound to get educated in Nepali, not in their mother-tongue which is their identity marker. Rai opines that Subba's *Lato Pahad* deals with the themes of marginalized people, specifically the Limbus, like suffering and exploitation (2019, p. 97). This critic points to the ethnic problems, however, missing indigenous insights, he employs Stuart Hall's representation and Michael Foucault's power-knowledge concepts. The critics in general have critiqued the primary texts, basing their views on the themes like marginalization, culture and identity. They have employed theories based on concepts like cultural psychology, feminism, power and representation. The sources available show that the primary texts have been studied with insufficient focus on indigenous insights. The review has helped the researcher understand about the texts and research frameworks. The inadequacies inspire to further research the texts for a new, fresh trajectory of indigenous literary study.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

The research paper is based on the qualitative research design in analyzing *Damini Bhir* and "Lato Pahad". The researcher being interested in contemporary indigenous Nepali literature collected some Nepali

novels and stories adhering to indigenous knowledge and aesthetics and preferred to research on the primary texts. He had a sense of appreciation for the inclusive voice inherent in them and for the authors' campaign of creative anarchism implying the voice for the inclusion of indigenous attributes and insights in the mainstream literatures in Nepal. The research will, at minimum, help disseminate these texts as testimonies advocating indigenous voices for identity, mutuality and solidarity.

The researcher collected the available works both onsite and online like books, journals and previous studies associated with the research. Despite various theories in application, indigenous critics and scholars opine that indigenous theories should be applied to interpret indigenous texts in order to see them genuinely. Indigenous critic Penelope Myrtle Kelsey emphasizes indigenous knowledge as a theoretical tool, "Central to the transformation of the field is more engagement of Indigenous texts with these sorts of theoretical strategies and with the clear claim to using these Native knowledges as theory" (2008, p. 14). The indigenous knowledge system based on the idea of Stewart- Harawira emphasizes ethical values like humanity, identity, coexistence and reverence for land and ancestry (2009, p. 220). This knowledge system acknowledges indigenous integrity, mutual human respect, interconnectedness and interdependence. As theoretical tools, Native American theorist Daniel Heath Justice's opinions about kinship and indigenous integrity as depicted in his *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* are mentioned in the study. His questions that arise in the book like "How Do We Behave as Good Relatives?" and "How Do We Learn to Live Together?" strikingly enhance the notion and need of human responsibility and relationship. His explanation of these questions strengthens the indigenous voice to justify the integrity and identity of indigenous communities.

Jace Weaver's *That the People Might Live* was employed in the study to analyze how indigenous people struggle for their survival, culture and identity. The book emphasizes indigenous responsibility and activism. Likewise, Stuart Christie points to the existing significance of the English language and anticipates the indigenous language use in a more extent in the future. He argues, "... in the coming generations, 'English-only' will no longer represent the sole conduit of sovereign written tradition. Rather, English will be one important language resource" (2009, p. 13). This opinion in the context of Nepal resembles the prevalence of the Nepali language and the possible increase of the indigenous mother tongues in the

future. The study includes Christie's insights in his *Plural Sovereignties and Contemporary Indigenous Literature*. Likewise, Allen's insights inherent in his book *Trans-Indigenous: Methodologies for Global Native Literary Studies* are employed in the study in order to show the significant commonalities between the Rai and the Limbu communities as depicted in the primary texts *Damini Bhiri* and *Lato Pahad* respectively.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In both texts, the state structure dominates and marginalizes the villagers. Due to the disregard from the state and the impact of the increasing multicultural trends on their local cultures, the people experience neglect and difference. Limbu (2015) argues, "Getting no equal treatment from the state, they live with a feeling of statelessness even in their own state. Their voices remained unheard and their contributions were ignored" (p. 22). All people, ethnic and non-ethnic, are equally capable and respectable. To enable them all to grow, the state should create equal care and opportunity for every community. After the restoration of democracy in 1990, ethnic and marginalized people embraced some congenial environment to raise their voice and after the mass movement of 2006, they enjoyed enough space for the promotion of their consciousness and communication. Limbu (2015) further argues, "The question of ethnicity in Nepal was started... as a subject of discourse mainly after the People's Movement of 1990, and the People's Second Movement- 2006 has further opened up the ground for wider debate for social inclusion" (p. 21).

In the late 1990s, the authors of the primary texts in this research Rajan Mukarung and Upendra Subba and another writer Hangyug Agyat campaigned a literary movement called "Srijanshil Arajakata" meaning Creative Anarchism. This movement boldly raised the voice for the inclusion of indigenous consciousness, integrity and identity into mainstream literatures. They raised their voice for identity, freedom and parity. They wanted mainstream literatures to include and recognize ethnic, marginalized people's culture, history and politics. Pointing to this trajectory, Timsina (2019) contends, "The literary creations of the group with the philosophy of Creative Anarchism (Srijansheel Araajakataa) that includes the ideas and activities of Rajan Mukarung, Hangyug Agyat and Upendra Subba make prominent experiments with this new conscience" (p. 75).

Damini Bhiri raises a strong voice of the eastern hill people in Nepal for identity. The Maoist movement as depicted in the novel arouses

the people's consciousness for their right and identity. The characters in the novel express their voices through song, dance, memory, communal practice, and participation in political movements. The villagers express their disillusionment since they could not enjoy happiness in the past political changes like the restoration of the multiparty democratic system. They are frustrated due to the increasing situation of partiality created by the state power. Mukarung (2023) writes, "*Nothing will happen even after being educated,' Deuman... said, 'Everywhere a favoring man is needed. If not, job won't be offered. A foreign land is reliable, then'*" (p.109). The novelist's this expression stipulates that the state power has created a disappointing, unfair environment for youths to live and work in the country. At this juncture, the novel can communicate a message to the state for building a fair system of governance so that the people's voices can be explored and addressed.

The villagers strive for their identity. Their collective consciousness enhanced by the political movement inspires them to raise their voice for identity- diverse identity. They demand to embrace not a unitary state but the identity-based federal state. In the novel, identity is sought via political struggles. Rai opines that historical and political circumstances influence identity. He presents Sanjeev Uprety's contention "*But as per the constructivist thought, identities are formed and guided in the historical and political context and background*" (as Cited in Rai, 2021, p. 53).

In the novel, the village activists are optimistic for the fulfillment of their demand for identity- based federalism. However, the movements of indigenous ethnicities or Adivasi Janajatis get twisted as they are, to some extent, misunderstood as caste-based struggles. In response to the Constitutional Assembly dissolution, Namdeng opines it is the defeat of identity-based federalism campaigners. The novelist states, "At midnight the news of the dissolution of the Constitutional Assembly is broadcast. Namdeng said- 'Again identitarians got defeated.' 'What might happen next, Brother?' asked Khuksang. 'The alliance formation against the anti-identitarians'" (Mukarung, 2023, p. 277).] Again, the indigenous community in the novel has to struggle for their diverse identity. There can be lots of delights and dilemmas about the concept of identity-based political status. However, the novel disseminates the insights that identity-based federalism does not exclude any caste and culture. Everybody's and every community's identity and dignity should be honored and cared.

Subba's *Lato Pahad* also raises the indigenous voices against domination and language barrier. These voices embrace the ethos of kinship and the emphasis on identity. The Limbu community have their own language but it is not used as the medium of instruction for their children. They dance, sing and enjoy the chimes of the Chyabrung. These are also their voices to rise and avoid cruelty and injustice. Lungeli (2023) asserts, "Music and dance, the fundamental assets of culture pertaining to particular community, evoke a cultural identity" (p. 38). The Chyabrung dance and the Chyabrung itself are the voices of the Limbus. The dumb mountain and the people are relational and metaphorical. Kinship binds humans and other-than-human species together. Justice (2018) claims, "...Indigenous writers have been returning to our own cultural ideas of kinship, ...reminding us of the profound power of our relationships to one another and to our other-than-human relations..." (p. 78). The indigenous epistemologies like villagers' lifestyles, cultural practices, connection with nature etc. in the novel reveal how indigenous communities remain dumb and silent in quest of justice, parity and identity.

In the story, Fangjung, a Mongolian boy, in a primary school appears dumb, odd and stupid in the eyes of the teachers and his Aryan friends. He hesitates to go to school. The teachers lack rationality; scold and punish him. Actually, Fangjung does not well understand languages other than his mother tongue. So, due to this problem in major, he does not like going to school. The novelist puts, "*Naspate Budha: Does Fangjunge not go to school, Sister-in-law? Fangjungkumma: He himself stopped going, Uncle. Fangjung: Won't go...(They) speak Bahun language alone*" (Subba, 2023, p. 177). The novel raises no hatred towards any other languages but stresses the need for the medium of instruction in a local or mother tongue. This important concern raises a point to ponder the teaching-learning process in the context of Nepal where many communities dwell and speak different dialects and languages. This is an issue the state must address and equally benefit students like Fangjung. Like the opinion expressed by Stuart Christie regarding indigenous writers' use of the English language, in the context of Nepal, the Nepali language may be highly prevalent in writing and teaching but gradually the increase of the indigenous mother tongue can be seen in the future.

Narrating an innocent character's sentence for the charge of killing a cow, the author also inspires the people to be educated even in an institution where there is no teaching medium of the mother tongue. Subba (2023)

mentions, “*Who is there in our village... a literate person? You do not obey when asked to educate your children even in a different language... There may be someone to voice the voiceless like us having not our own voice*” (p. 220). The story displayed as a film ends. One of the responses from young generation audiences goes like this, “The cow had, of course, died falling. Why impose a law on it” (Subba, 2023, p. 222)? He congratulates the director of the film. The film director thanks him and says, “The Dumb Mountain made by a dumb Limbu” (p. 222).] This dumbness is the hidden voice of the indigenous people in the eastern hills of Nepal.

The indigenous voices both texts embrace matter in terms of justice, parity and dignity for indigenous people. These voices enhance indigenous awareness; pressurize the state power for a justifiable national environment; promote a sense of indigenous mutuality and encourage humans to understand the insights of oneness. Both texts reveal the overwhelmingly similar indigenous traits. They dig into the indigenous attributes like memory, kinship, ethical values, ancestral and cultural symbols, orality, language, ecology and pan-indigeneity. Native American critic Allen inspires readers to juxtapose indigenous texts and comparatively see them across the communities and countries. He emphasizes global indigenous literary study that compares between/among indigenous texts. Indigenous scholars underscore this phenomenon. In this light, Durdin (2011) argues, “However, many white postcolonial critics... will not compare white-authored texts to Native-authored texts” (p. 3). Indigenous intellectuals want Native or indigenous texts to be interpreted on the ground of indigenous knowledges.

The theoretical lenses developed by Native Americans or Māori, though they come from different contexts, can be apt and admirable to interpret the primary texts as they also share global indigenous characteristics. They further inspire different indigenous groups mainly the Rai and Limbu communities for solidarity and mutual coalition.

Mainly in *Damini Bhir*, Weaver’s insights help interpret the villagers’ struggle for their identity. Jace Weaver in his *That the People Might Live* emphasizes the need of indigenous people’s struggle for identity and self-determination. He excerpts Simon Ortiz’s lines, “We must struggle for our lives/...With that humanity and strength/which comes from our shared responsibility/for this life, the People shall continue” (as cited in Weaver, 1997, p. 3). These opinions inspire every community to carry out

shared responsibility for the fulfillment of their mission to achieve justice, dignity and identity.

CONCLUSION

The research identifies the indigenous voices of memory, mutuality, struggle, language and dignity embedded in the primary texts. In both primary texts, these voices make a quest for justice and identity for indigenous solidarity. The voices are associated with the indigenous epistemologies of orality, resilience, kinship, flashbacks, and marginalization. The villagers' silence and dumbness, and also their activism become the strong voices for reciprocity and identity. The study stipulates the significance of the indigenous voices not only for a particular community's sake, but as a whole for humanity and for oneness. In a broader context, it presents the texts as trans-indigenous sources for global indigenous solidarity. The current research employs the theoretical insights developed by celebrated indigenous scholars like Allen, Justice and Weaver. Despite these scholars being Native American, their opinions can be significantly relevant in the interpretations of the primary texts pertaining to the increasing global trends of pan-indigenous conversation. The research encourages an indigenous research trajectory so that lots of studies on the indigenous texts in Nepal will be made via indigenous lenses. Moreover, it will disseminate a message of oneness, that is, everything including all humans and non-humans exists in a relational status.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my hearty gratitude to The Research Directorate, The Rector's Office, Tribhuvan University for the financial support to conduct small-research, and I have prepared this article related to the research.

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