

Restoration and Resistance through Names: The Study of Naming Patterns among the Kirat Rai Community

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how the name/ naming pattern among the Rai community of Nepal serves as a means of identity reclamation and resistance to state-sponsored homogenization in recent times. It focuses, in general, on Indigenous naming patterns and the Kirat Rai naming pattern, in particular, their transformation during the nation-state building process, and their revival as restoration and resistance to homogenization in the contemporary identity movement. By analyzing the naming pattern, socio-political contexts, and oral history/traditions, the study situates Kirat Rai names/naming pattern as powerful symbols in the struggle for ethnic recognition, cultural survival, and reclaiming their vulnerable identity in recent days. It is the everyday form of resistance (Scott, 1985) to the nation-state building process in general, and homogenization/assimilation, in particular.

Keywords: Naming pattern, ethnic identity, identity restoration, homogenization, resistance.

INTRODUCTION

Naming is claiming. This paper examines how names and naming patterns reflect identity reclaiming, cultural restoration, and ethnic resistance to homogenization or assimilation in the nation-state building process in the Kirat Rai community. Since names are cultural artifacts that carry symbolic meaning, they are given within specific social, historical, and cultural contexts; they reflect histories, values, lineage, expectations, and power hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1990). Recent names and naming patterns of Kirat Rai's children are studied here to examine their symbolic meaning and implications. It also explores how marginalized indigenous nationalities reclaim distorted or suppressed identities as a form of resistance (Scott, 1985, 2009) to the dominant power structure, like the nation-state and hegemonic cultures.

Since names and naming patterns explore the social fact and shape and reflect identity, power relations, historical process, and cultural norms, they are not a purely linguistic act of labelling a person as an identifier. It is rather a social and historically conditioned phenomenon. A particular kind of social and historical condition persuades a particular kind of naming pattern. Names and naming patterns, therefore, are socially embedded, politically charged, and symbolically powerful (Bourdieu, 1991; Foucault, 2013).

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Consequently, names and naming patterns are changed in different historical epochs; they are also dissimilar in diverse classes, castes, and communities because of their historical legacy and tradition.

The Kirat Rai is one of the indigenous nationalities of Nepal that include 26 linguistic groups (Rai, 2025). This group possesses a rich, homegrown, and unique cultural tradition, including naming patterns tied to their clan [thar], ancestry, myth, and ritual. However, with the advent of the nation-state building process in Nepal, along with the military annexation of small principalities by Prithvi Narayan Shah (PN Shah), the Hindu king of Gorkha, the state policies and Hinduization process diluted the unique culture of the indigenous nationalities, including naming customs. The nation-state building process includes an effort of the state to create a homogenous national identity through a top-down approach (Stepan, Linz, & Yadav, 2011). Hinduization, in Nepal, was one of the processes of building a nation-state in a multiethnic, multilingual, multicultural Nepali society. For this purpose, the non-Hindu indigenous nationalities, as well were categorized into the fourfold Hindu Varna system through the *Muluki Ain* of 1854 and watered down the unique cultures of indigenous nationalities, including their naming system/customs. It was initiated by PN Shah, declaring Nepal as *Asali Hindustan* [pure land of Hindus].

However, along with the rise of the identity movement after the political change of 2006, particularly, indigenous nationalities particularly reclaimed their identity, institutional recognition, and self-rule. They resisted the nation-state building process in general and homogenization/assimilation, in particular. They started revitalizing their cultural and customary practices. They started reclaiming their indigeneity. This process was advanced, individually and forming their communal social organization. Naming patterns are one of the sectors of the restoration of indigenous culture and resistance to assimilation.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted among the Kirat Rai community residing in Kathmandu, Lalitpur, and Bhaktapur. The Kirat Rai people have been living in these places for a long time, though they originally came from Khotang, Okhaldhunga, Bhojpur, Solukhumbu, and Sangkhuwasava. They have been continuing their traditional cultural practices and rituals here too, without interruption. Some of them conduct cultural rituals here, and others in their place of origin. Among them, naming newly born children based on the mother tongue, culturally important things, mythical character, etc, has become interesting and important.

This research primarily adopts a qualitative method supported by an interpretive research design to examine how naming practice among the Kirat Rai people functions as a process of cultural restoration and resistance. Interpretive research design is appropriate to understand culture through “thick description” as Geertz (1973) argues. Thick description is the detailed interpretation of meaning embedded in symbols, rituals, and narratives (ibid.). It also helps uncover historical consciousness. Through the interpretation of the names of Kirat Rai, I have tried to uncover their historical consciousness.

Naming is approached as a socially embedded symbolic practice through which cultural identity and historical memory are claimed/reclaimed and articulated, as Bourdieu (1991) and Halbwachs (1992) argue. It is also interpreted as resistance to homogenizing the diverse population in the nation-state-building process within the theoretical framework of Scott (2009).

The primary information was collected from the parents, particularly the fathers, of those whose names are from their cultural, linguistic, and historical context. They were my informants. I interviewed with 15 informants and stopped as I thought that my information was saturated. They were purposively selected. The five key informants were interviewed for primary information. This enabled me to interpret and understand the naming pattern and its meaning.

The data were thematically categorized to understand their views on their cultural restoration and resistance. Particular attention was given to the historical naming pattern and the emerging naming pattern to compare and contrast the patterns.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Sociology of Naming

Names are identities. They are a personal identifier (Hough, 2016). However, names or naming patterns are not merely a linguistic and symbolic act of labelling (Goffman, 1951; McConnell-Gnet, 2003) an individual or group as an identity or personal identifier. They are social markers (Raheem & Akanda, 2019). They convey social identity, ethnicity, caste, sex, and nationality. For example, surnames like Rai, Limbu, Sharma, Pokhrel, Mahato, Chaudhari, etc., are linked with caste and ethnicity in Nepal. As identities, a name generally has two different but associated identities. One is an individualized "I" identity, and the other (surname) is a single "we" communitarian identity. The individualized "I" identity has significance in studying the historical, social, and cultural claims of the community since people may express their perspectives (Likaka, 2009) and claims through names, whereas 'we' is important to study community identity.

Names are, generally, studied in relation to language, culture, and identity (Edward & Cabllero, 2008; Hoffman, 1951; Gordon, 1968). However, they are quite deeply embedded in social structure, identity politics, cultural practice, and power relations (Bourdieu, 1991; Foucault, 1982). Naming, hence, is both a symbolic and a material act through which individuals and groups are classified in society. Based on the classification, they are located in a social hierarchy and regulated within society (Zacher, 2010). In many societies, names directly locate a person within a social hierarchy. That is why, particular kind of society has a particular kind of names and naming patterns/systems.

Name is a social fact. A social fact is a way of acting that is external to the individual, according to Durkheim (2023). As a social fact, names shape and reflect historical process, identity, cultural norms, historical memories, and power relations. It is a marker of identity and stratification. Naming enables the registration, categorization, and administration of individuals (Bourdieu, 1990). The registration, categorization, and administration are done by the state through names. According to Foucault (2013), naming is a disciplinary technique. For him, naming renders the individual understandable to power. Once named, they can be characterized, traced, and controlled (ibid.). The name makes a person visible. Or naming is a tool of visibility. For Foucault (2013), visibility is a trap since, in modern society, visibility is what allows the state to control and discipline individuals. Naming, thus, is not a purely linguistic act; it is socially embedded, symbolically potent, and politically charged. It is, therefore, not neutral. Names and naming practices reflect and reproduce social hierarchies, collective memories, and resistance.

Name is a social fact (Durkheim, 2023) and also a social and cultural artefact (Bourdieu, 2018) based on the historical condition of a particular society and culture. As a

social fact, it is a collective representation that exercises external control over individuals. As a social and cultural artefact, it carries a symbolic meaning embedded in the social and historical context and reflects value, expectation, and power hierarchy. For Bourdieu (1990), name is a part of the symbolic capital tied to class, religion, caste, prestige, and distinction. For him, the name functions as symbolic capital – forms of recognition, status that are socially constructed and not equally distributed (ibid.). Name carries social standing. Naming practice underpins social hierarchies and perpetuates dominant caste, class structures. It is also internalized as part of one's habitus- the system of dispositions shaped by past experiences. One's clan name, particularly, stimulates how one sees oneself and is seen by others. This, therefore, shapes behaviour, expectation, and access to social opportunity (Bourdieu, 1990).

Since the name/naming plays a critical role in constructing both individual and collective identities, changes in names every so often reflect resistance and assimilation of identity, depending on the social context. It is the everyday form of resistance, as Scott (1985) argues. Such changes can be seen in the nation-state building process in a multiethnic society. In the context of indigenous nationalities, changes in names through assimilation or imposition are symbolic violence – the internalization of domination as legitimate.

Name/naming is profoundly political. According to Foucault (2013), naming is a discourse of control. It is tied to identity, power, and control. Naming is central to governmentality (ibid.). Caste-based naming is a mode of social stratification. It is not just a label, but a tool within a broader system of knowledge. The act of naming is a way of producing subjects – identities that can be counted, governed, excluded, or included (1982). For him, naming is also an act of epistemic power that defines who matters and how one fits within the social order (ibid.). Indigenous nationalities who resist the imposed naming system are engaging in epistemic resistance. In indigenous communities, names are also repositories of historical memory. Many take it as a tool of resistance to hegemonic state power. Reclaiming indigenous names by indigenous people challenges the erasure of their identity and colonization.

The nation-state building process crushes diversity to standardize names and naming patterns for administrative convenience and create a shared identity. This process crushes diversity to build a shared national identity. This process privileges dominant naming patterns or names over minority's names and naming patterns to build national identity. The naming patterns or names, then, become a tool of cultural hegemony. The cultural hegemony promotes a dominant worldview as common and universal, and the indigenous worldview is crushed.

Naming Practices of Indigenous People and Their Implications

Names/naming practices, in general, and the names/naming practices of indigenous people are deeply embedded in social identity, geography, memory, and resistance, depending on the historical context (Retzlaff, 2005). For example, in a decolonial and diasporic context, names are a tool of resistance (Masaka Gwaravanda, & Mukusha, 2012). They carry spiritual meaning, cultural traits, ecological knowledge, and oral histories. They are, therefore, a cultural expression since they are embedded in their culture. They are their worldview since they are embedded in ecological knowledge and oral histories. However, they are also a political act since they are rarely neutral but embedded in power relations, history, and struggle over meaning, as Foucault (2013) says. They reflect shared beliefs and social values.

Indigenous names often indicate lineage or clan. They indicate genealogical roots (Barten, 2015). For example, in Nepal, among the Kirat Rai community, names like *Chamling*, *Bantawa*, *Kulung*, etc. identify distinct linguistic and clan affiliations. Actually, they have their own cultural names, too, besides common names by which they are identified to the people. Their cultural rites are performed based on their cultural names. This system functions as a living archive of ancestry embedded in collective memory. Indigenous naming sometimes resists hegemonic or colonial imposition. They may reject the state-imposed surname and reclaim their indigenous names in this context. Reclaiming their indigenous names, therefore, is the decolonial act. That is why names are also taken as a tool of resistance.

Impact of Hinduization on the Traditional Kirat Rai Naming System

Hinduization refers to the process through which non-Hindu indigenous nationalities were absorbed into a dominant Hindu religious and cultural framework. The Hinduization process is a profoundly entrenched and multi-layered phenomenon in Nepal. This was the central process in the nation-state building during the Shah's monarchy. The Hindu religion, in this process, was not only promoted but also constitutionally declared as the national religion by the state. The festivals related to the Hindu religion were declared national festivals and holidays. Dasai, Tihar, Shivaratri, Janai Purnima, etc., festivals related to the Hindus were declared as national festivals and holidays. Khas Nepali language, previously known as *Khas Kura* or *Parbate Kura*, the mother tongue of Brahmin and Chhetri/Khas, was declared constitutionally the national and official language, whereas other languages, particularly, mother tongues of indigenous nationalities, were disregarded.

Historically, the process of Hinduization began along with the unification campaigns that forcibly brought together various indigenous and ethnic principalities under a centralized Hindu monarch in Nepal. The Muluki Ain (1854), the first legal code, legally institutionalized the caste system based on the Hindu Varna system. It classified the entire population, including non-Hindu indigenous nationalities who previously had no caste, into a varna-based caste system. Hinduism, thus, became synonymous with Nepali identity and the indigenous belief system, institutions, practices, and culture were marginalized or absorbed into the Hindu pantheon. The indigenous nationalities were encouraged or forced to adopt Sanskrit / Hindu names, rituals, festivals, and even dress codes to gain social legitimacy. For example, the photograph with the cap must be pasted on the citizenship card. Indigenous nationalities had to adopt Hindu surnames to be recognized by the state. Consequently, the ethnic and cultural recognition, along with the name and naming system of indigenous nationalities, were unceasingly erased.

The Hinduization process, in Nepal, was the cultural hegemony, as Gramsci (2009) argues. Under cultural hegemony, the dominant social class/caste, the Brahman, Chhetri, in Nepal, dominated through ideology rather than coercion (Whelpton, 2005) since the hegemony operates through consent (Gramsci, 2009). Hegemonic ideas, in their unique character, are internalized as "just the way things are" as consent. The consent or "just the way things are" is built through not only coercion but also the media and market (Gramsci, 2009). The ruling class/caste maintains power by convincing subordinate groups that their interests align with the dominant group's ideology (ibid.). Institutions like schools and media are the vehicles of cultural hegemony. In Nepal, the history and textbooks glorified Hindu kings and nationalism (Onta, 1996), downplayed indigenous narratives. Cultural hegemony, therefore, masks itself as traditional or neutral, confusing its origins. It is made

to make common sense and be natural.

In Nepal, Hindu culture became the symbolic power, as Bourdieu (1991) argues. Symbolic power is the power to construct reality. It not only shapes perception but also legitimizes meaning. It is the power to define what is true or legitimate (ibid.). It also imposes categorizes of understanding. Such a power is exercised through education, language, culture, etc. In Nepal, Hinduization operates through disciplinary power as Foucault (1982) argues. It shaped not only identity but also behaviour. Hinduization parallels coloniality of power, where a dominant group imposes its epistemology, as Ndlovu-Gtsheni (2013) argues.

HowIn Nepal, the dominant ethnic or linguistic group, e.g. Khas-Arya, imposes its religion (Hindu), language (Khas Nepali), and Hindu festivals, norms and values in the nation-state building process as shared identity. Indigenous nationalities were persuaded to adopt those values as a condition of advancement and national unity. In this process, Sanskritic / Hindu names and naming systems were taken as a sign of being “truly Nepali” instead of the unique and indigenous names and naming systems. Non-Hindu, non-Khas Nepali speakers, non-Hill people were portrayed as non-Nepali. The indigenous/ethnic names and naming systems were also portrayed as irrational, old-style, or ridiculous.

The Hinduization process, thus, had a grave impact on the names and naming patterns of the Kirat Rai community. They also started naming their children Hinduized names. Now, instead of Paruhang, they name *Ram Bahadur*. Instead of *Naema*, they name *Sita Kumari*.

Field Insights: Names as Restoration and Resistance

Kirat Rai people, particularly educated ones, residing in Kathmandu, have started naming their children based on their oral history, myth, and cultural traits like *Sikurima*, *Naema*, *Yelambar*, *Raichakule*, instead of Hinduized names like *Ram*, *Sita*, *Hari*, etc. Hinduized names often carry '*Bahadur*', '*Kumar*', '*Prasad*', etc., like *Ram Bahadur*, *Hari Prasad*, *Sita Kumari*, as middle names, whereas non-Hinduized names do not have '*Bahadur*' and '*Kumar*', '*Prasad*' as middle names. Chamling Rai, one of the linguistic communities of Kirat Rai, had no '*Bahadur*' and '*Kumar*' as middle names 3 generations ago; one of my respondents (key informant) answered me as I asked him about the name and naming pattern with him (interview, 2081-02-5). Previously, the names were like '*Karchanda*', '*Narsing*', '*Ghamsing*', etc. However, he expressed his ignorance about when and how Hinduized names started being named. He further said that they have their cultural names, which are unchanged names known by our forefathers as well, based on the lineage given by their '*Nokchung*' [Saman]. It is called "*Michlung*". It is not individual but their collective name linked with their '*Chula*' [oven]. The separation of '*Chula*' is followed by the separation of '*Michlung*'. The cultural ceremonies are performed based on the '*Michlung*'. For them, the personal name is just an identifier of a person.

Besides the cultural name, nowadays, particularly along with the rise of identity politics, Indigenous nationalities, in general, and Chamling Rai, in particular, started naming their newborn children based on their myth, oral history, language, and culture. Mostly, names of males carry '*hang*' at the end like *Paruhang*, *Namsuhang*, *Babihang*, etc. '*Hang*' means king in the Chamling Rai language. Such names, thus, symbolize that they are the offspring of the king since the Kirat ruled Nepal for about eight hundred years (Acharya, 2063 BS.). From the word '*hang*', used in the name, they have tried to identify themselves as

the offspring of the king. They, nowadays, do not write just Rai, only they write 'Chamling Rai'. 'Chamling' is their mother tongue. So, 'Chamling Rai' refers to a Chamling language-speaking Rai or a Rai who speaks the Chamling language. It is because there are more than 28 languages spoken among the Kirat Rai people.

The names are also related to their myth, oral history, or mythical characters. For example, *Sikurima*, *Naema*, *Raichakule*, etc., are the names of mythical characters based on oral history related to them. They are supposed to be their forefathers according to their myth / oral history. For example, *Naema* is, according to their myth / oral history, their first woman, whereas *Paruhang* is the first man. They are supposed to be the offspring of *Paruhang* and *Sumnima*, according to their myth / oral history. One of my respondents said that such names tell us who we are- our ancestral history that we should know (interview, 2081-3-2).

Such a name and naming pattern have whys and wherefores, according to them. One of my respondents said, "The name is who he or she is. I want my child to know from his name. The name I have given to my child is my history, my recognition". He further said that, "the state-imposed Hinduism and our names also were Hinduized. We almost lost our cultural identity because of state-imposed assimilation. However, the time has come to regenerate it because if we do not regenerate it again, we shall be lost culturally" (interview, 2081-02-10). Some emotions of the respondent could be read in his face while talking about it. It indicates the attachment to the issue and realization of the past.

It is found that the newly born children are given names, basically, based on the myth, mythical character, forefather, lineage, language, and important symbols for their community. According to them, they want to restore and revitalize their identity, culture, and language through names. It is because a name is an identity. One of my respondents stated, "It is our claiming of ownness. Actually, we claim our recognition through names. We want our political rights of autonomy and self-rule. For this, we want to identify differences through our names" (Interview, 2081-02-25).

The names/naming pattern, thus, have become an area of restoration of indigenous names/naming or culture. Due to the process of Hinduization, the Kirat Rai almost lost their indigenous culture, language, including their indigenous name and naming pattern. However, along with the rise of identity politics, Kirat Rai has started naming their newly born children based on their oral history, myth, language, and aspiration. It has become an area of resistance to the hegemonic state in everyday form, as Scott (1985) argues. For the revival of the clan/indigenous names, ethnic organization and scholars have played an important role, especially following the movement of 2062 BS. The organizations have advocated for name-based cultural and political rights. It is the re-politicization of naming, and it has become central to the identity movement. The re-politicization of naming has become a tool of symbolic resistance to state homogenization.

CONCLUSION

Name is identity. It is a personal and communal identifier. However, it is not merely an identifier; it is a tool of claim-making and resistance. The historical condition determines the name of a person. Therefore, naming patterns are a historically conditioned phenomenon. It is a symbolic power or capital. In Nepal, indigenous nationalities, particularly Kirat Rai, are more and more reclaiming ancestral names as acts of cultural restoration and resistance to the Hinduized naming pattern influenced by the state. The impact of Hinduization, as cultural hegemony, on the Rai naming pattern is not merely

a loss of ethnic identity but a form of epistemic and symbolic violence. So, the restoration of the indigenous naming pattern is the reclaiming of their identity. The contemporary revival of names based on ancestry and their mythic marks is also a powerful act of ethnic resistance to assimilation for cultural sovereignty. It is an act of symbolic resistance or an everyday form of resistance, as Scott (1985) argues.

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