



The Gateway Structure: Hierarchical Integration and Indigenous Agency in *Satyahangma's* Bhakti Songs

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Abstract

This paper examines selected Bhakti songs of *Satyahangma* (true religion), a Limbu religious cult from the collection of Bairagi Kainla's *The Preaching of Phalgunanda and the Hymns of Satyahangma* (1990). The corpus informs Phalgunanda Lingden's early twentieth-century reformation movement operating within Limbu indigenous communities of eastern Nepal as an illustration of reformative syncretism. Drawing theory from the corpus itself, the article argues that Phalgunanda's syncretism constitutes the structured act of religious border navigation strategy. The gateway structure selectively incorporates elements from Hindu *Josmani* devotional practice and Buddhist ritual technology. Yet, it prioritizes the *Mundhum* consciousness, the foundational epistemological matrix of Limbu identity as the interpretive authority governing all external borrowings. Therefore, the syncretism does not imply the religious capitulation to dominant religious forces but informs the resistance against their overriding influence upon the indigenous practice. The corpus theorizes religious syncretism as a principle through which Limbu communities traverse religious borders without surrendering their *Mundhum* core. The inductive analysis of *Satyahangma* Bhakti songs reveals them as theoretically generative instance of indigenous agency. They complicate the essentialist notion of syncretism as assimilation and the postcolonial reading of religious hybridity as subversion.

Keywords: Border, Cultural Autonomy, Limbu Poetry, *Mundhum* Epistemology, Reformative Syncretism, Resistance



Contextualizing Phalgunanda, Satyahangma and the Bhakti Songs

Phalgunanda Lingden (1885–1949) occupies a paradoxical position in the contested domain of Limbu cultural history. His followers consider him as the architect of Limbu cultural revival. They read his *Satyahangma* movement, literally "True Religion" or "Pure Religion" as a successful act of cultural preservation. Conversely, the *Yumanists* (the followers of traditional religion) condemn him as a Hinduizing agent. They allege his religious reformation as a luring project turning Limbu devotional life uncomfortably close to dominant Hindu norms. Their allegation rests on the movement's adoption of Hindu *Josmani* traditions. However, their critique cannot account the principled logic governing those borrowings. In between these two lines of criticism, *Satyahangma* practice has rarely been examined through a framework adequate to his project manifested in the cult's Bhakti songs.

What remains untheorized by the celebratory or the alleged account on Phalgunanda is the strategic structure of religious borrowing. Borrowing is not a major issue but what external elements is borrowed by organizing principle, from where, and how they are positioned in subordination to the indigenous is significant. Bairagi Kainla's compilation has comprehensively documented the entire religious activity of *Satyahangma's* devotees expressed through their devotional songs. The details of the songs provide thematic relevance to this study. The analysis of the corpus identifies Phalgunanda's strategy as governing principle through which the group navigates the dominant religious borders. The analysis also conceptualizes the principle not as religious confusion or compromise but as strategic selection where external components are utilized to preserve the indigenous authority. In this strategy, what changes is the ritual periphery; and what remains non-negotiable is the *Mundhum* core.

The article makes a theoretically grounded reading of the Bhakti songs representing the spirit of the reformation. It argues that the corpus manifests Phalgunanda's distinct mode of religious border navigation characterized by three simultaneous operations. The strategy makes internal critique of existing shamanic practices deemed inconsistent to the practical life of the community members; selectively appropriates external devotional techniques from Hindu *Josmani* traditions and Buddhist ritual repertoires; and organizes systematic hierarchical integration of all borrowings within the indigenous framework that preserves *Mundhum* epistemology as the non-negotiable center of Limbu religious system.

Historical and Religious Context: *Satyahangma* and its Emergence

Phalgunanda's *Satyahangma* movement did not emerge from the historical vacuum. Its logic responds to the pattern of political, religious, and cultural pressures accumulating across the century. The understanding of these pressures enables to grasp why *Satyahangma* embraces the specific form and why the principled strategy represents a sophisticated response to them. The Limbu people endonymically identifying themselves as *Yakthung* had maintained semi-autonomous rule over their ancestral territory *Limbuwan* in the eastern Himalayan region until the late eighteenth century. The Saltwater Treaty of 1774 forced their submission to the Gorkha state. The long process of political centralization eroded Limbu institutions, land tenure systems, and cultural autonomy.



The *Sugauli* Treaty of 1816 fractured *Limbuwan*, (the politically coherent territory of Limbu) into fragmented colonial and post-colonial jurisdictions across Nepal, Sikkim, and British-controlled India. The Rana period (1846-1951) established the form of Hindu nationalism that marginalized indigenous religions. The Panchayat regime (1960-1990) further enforced "one nation, one language" policy to institutionalize cultural homogenization. The policy restricted Limbu people's culture and identity to the extent of diminishing the *kipat* (traditional communal land tenure system). Within these contexts of accelerating marginalization from multiple directions, Limbu cultural system faced the sanitizing pressure. The practice of animal sacrifice and alcoholic culture had become sites of internal tension within Limbu communities themselves.

Phalgunanda's movement emerged as a grand response to this entire configuration of pressures. The *Satya Dharma Muchulka* (Charter of Edicts on True Religion) of 1931, its founding document established a ten-point declaration. Nopal Kishor Rai parallels the document with "Buddha's *Panchasheel* [the five principles of peaceful coexistence] and Christianity's Ten Commandments" [a foundational set of religious, moral, and ethical laws] (Rai, 2010, p. 30). Rai positions the movement's consciousness within a broader scope of ethical-religious reformation. Although the very act of written charter borrows the documentary genre from Sanskrit administrative culture, it represents the instance of principled religious borrowing. The charter adopts the dominant conventions to legitimize and protect indigenous epistemology.

Phalgunanda identified that dominant religious authority was institutionalized through texts, architecture, and organized communities. He replicated the dominant practices but provided the rhythmic cadence of the Limbu *Mundhum*. This strategy served two politics. First, it functioned as the form of strategic compliance projecting an illusion to the rulers that the group was assimilating to the dominant state religion. Second and more critically, it utilized the dominant framework as a protective mask to preserve and revitalize *Mundhum* culture and the script facing imminent marginalization and erasure under the influence of state religion. Martin Gaenzle also assesses that Phalgunanda's politics of propagating *Satyahangma* "was to revitalize Kiranti traditions. He urged people to speak only their Limbu language and popularized . . . Kiranti [Sirijanga] script. Sirijanga script resisted the hegemonic policies of the Ranas" (Gaenzle, 2002, p. 335). Gaenzle exclusively highlights Phalgunanda's politics of disseminating Bhakti songs in Limbu script aimed to preserve the indigeneity and to defy the ban of literary activities under Rana rule. Nonetheless, his conclusion regarding the sole influence of *Josmani* practice on *Satyahangma* movement overlooks Phalgunanda's esoteric strategy to protect the indigenous character from the external influences.

The *Josmani* cult, a Sant Hindu tradition flourishing in Nepal during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries provided the most appropriate model to *Satyahangma's* selective borrowings. Gaenzle characterizes Phalgunanda's strategy as "a unique blend of an ethnic tradition marked by shamanic practice and elements of Hinduism" (Gaenzle, 2021, p. 28). Similarly, Arjunbabu Mabuhang and Amit Thebe identify specific connections to *Josmani* practice (Mabuhang & Thebe, 2022, p. 85). Particularly, Bairagi Kainla's observation that



Phalgunanda's invocation of "Om" symbolizing the conversion of Limbu people into Hindu people represents the most prominent critical view on *Satyahangma's* syncretism. His argument "Phalgunanda seems to convert Limbu into Hindu Chhetri with the use of 'Om' of Hindu discourse in his hymns" (Kainla, 1990, p. xxxiii) illustrates the critical ambivalence. The trio critics' readings of Phalgunanda's *Satyahangma* as crypto-Hinduization obscures the movement's more sophisticated epistemological logic. Their critique reflecting the position of essentialist purism seeks the answer to why these misreading occurs and what the stakes of *Satyahangma's* project reveal otherwise.

The *Josmani* tradition itself reformed Nepali Hinduism democratizing the Vedic ritual complexity into devotional simplicity favorable to non-Brahmin communities. In Timalsina's reading, *Josmani* culture "unfolds as a self-criticism of the Hindu system and a revolt against the elitist, central Vedic system" (Timalsina, 2002, p. 202). Its emphasis on ethical conduct, vegetarianism, and congregational singing provided a structurally compatible model for Phalgunanda's project of reforming Limbu religious practice but without abandoning its indigenous core. *Satyahangma* cult favors nonviolence and puritan spirit against traditional *Yumanist's* shamanism, animal sacrifice, and rituals of alcohol. The Bhakti song exemplifying the *Josmani* literariness but interfaced with the adherence to own Sirijanga script and the ethnic language indicates Phalgunanda's integrative vision of self-critical ethnic transformation from the negotiation and interaction.

The Bhakti Songs: Hierarchical Integration in Devotional Rhetoric

Invocation and Hierarchy

The distinctive character of *Satyahangma's* syncretic strategy becomes most legible through close analysis of the literary dimension of its practice. It reveals a consistent organizational logic where external forms are adopted, but their content and interpretive authority are routed through *Mundhum* epistemology. The hierarchical integration that distinguishes reformative syncretism from either assimilation or mere coexistence of religious elements is evident in Dilli Tumbapo's self-reflective opening: "Hey! Human race of the *Yakthung* [Limbu]! / Ignorant and sightless we are / Offer the bloods of pigs and buffalos, sacrificed / Blood we worship for adoring and praying to our gods" (as cited in Kainla, 1990, lines 1–4). This address to fellow Limbu community members structures *Satyahangma* as an internally generated religious reformation rather than the externally influenced transformation. The critical vocabulary is significant. The implication on "ignorant and sightless" refers not to the judgments based on Hindu reformational frame that would condemn the traditional practice. Instead, it represents the Limbu voice adhering *Mundhum's* own ethical principles to communal practice. The reference to 'blood sacrifice' claims the practice not authentically steered to *Mundhum* but the corruption of it. Tumbapo's position gives the movement both its critical leverage and its legitimizing authority.

The hierarchical integration of external elements into the Limbu matrix becomes structurally visible in the mantra and the prayers of *Satyahangma* practice. One of the aspirational expressions reads: "Is *Tagera Ningwaphuma* satisfied? Is she happy? / Mised we



are / Flowers, *naivedyas* (food items as offerings to God) and incense are the true offerings / The voice of a great ascetic Phalgunanda I expressed / in which the spirit of *Tagera Ningwaphuma* entered" (as cited in Kainla, 1990, lines 5–10). The Limbu recipient of term *naivedyas* borrowed from Sanskrit devotional vocabulary and deployed extensively in Hindu ritual practice manifests the syncretism. Yet the invocation of *Tagera Ningwaphuma*, the supreme Limbu goddess in the prayer prior to Hindu agency maintains the hierarchy. The external Hindu element and the Sanskrit term associated with the devotional procedure of vegetarian offering is appropriated but addressed to the indigenous divine figure. Therefore, the direction of the appropriation is oriented toward the indigenous center, not away from it.

The Role of Mantras

This syncretic pattern reverberates with intensity in the bathing mantra frequently practiced in the *Satyahangma* tradition: "Om Mang! Se ak, Mu ak, Khe ak, Segima, Tagama [Limbu deities] / Vasuki Naga [Hindu deity] / dwelling in nether world / I vow on your feet" (as cited in Kainla, 1990, lines 1–2). In the hierarchical sequence of the mantra, Limbu deities are coded first in Limbu language followed by the invocation of Hindu deity *Vasuki Naga*. *Satyahangma* devotional practice borrows the sacred syllable "Om" from Hindu and Buddhist tradition and mobilizes into its matrix. In the practice, it functions as an invocatory device that follows the reverence toward Limbu Gods. The prayer song evokes the Hindu deity but positions within a sequence that begins with and structured around Limbu religious figures. The Western syncretism theory might consider this as the assemblage of equal representation. Nevertheless, it demonstrates the structured hierarchy in which indigenous authority precedes and contains external religious elements.

The morning ablution mantra extends this borrowing logic into the domain of purification practice. One of the mantras reveals the intensity of the intersections: "Om the god of water! The god of the ocean! / Hereby the body I purify / where dwells in *Tagera Ningwaphuma*, the almighty / hail the Ganges, hail the Ganges! / sacred water, sacred land! / clean, serene and holy service to the almighty" (as cited in Kainla, 1990, lines 3–8). *Satyahangma's* morning ablution adapting the Vedic Hindu daily ritual also borrows its philosophy of the purity of mind and soul and the removal of negative energies. The mantra invokes Ganga River symbolizing the Hindu goddess of purification and forgiveness but directs its message to the recipient *Tagera Ningwaphuma*. The borrowing of Hindu sacred agency manifests the negotiation with dominant religious tradition. Despite this, the deliberate hierarchical structuring remains functional to the ritual service of the Limbu goddess.

The Geographical, Syllabic, and Numerological References

The gateway structure invites external religious elements like Sanskrit syllables, Hindu sacred geography, Hindu/Buddhist numerological systems through a recognizable devotional doorway. Nevertheless, once inside, they serve indigenous religious purposes. This structure allows *Satyahangma* practice to appear familiar and legible to the observers from dominant religious authority while remaining organized around Limbu epistemological priorities within its deep logic. The use of the number 108 demonstrates its elegant instance. Tumbapo's invocation, "Om! almighty *Tagera Ningwaphuma* / I vow to praise you with hundred and eight



lights ignited for you" (as cited in Kainla, 1990, lines 1–2) utilizes external numerological implication for Limbu devotional practices to address own indigenous significance. In Hinduism, the number signifies cosmic completeness (Pandit, 2017). The Buddhist appropriation of the number reflects Buddha's overcoming of the impurities (Evamratna, 2024). Similarly, yogic reinterpretation aligns the number with human physiology (Himalayan Yoga Institute, 2019). *Satyahangma* enhances indigenous appropriation to these meanings within its spiritual context of praying *Tagera Ningwaphuma*. The group's adaptive reinterpretation of the borrowed practice highlights syncretism as a creative transformation where external religious systems receive new meanings in its compatibility with indigenous frameworks.

The Communal Body in Ritual Prescriptions

The congregational dimension evident in the community assembly for devotional singing, shared worship, and ethical instruction represents another strategic borrowing from external religions. The collective prayer form reveals the movement mobilizing external devotional practices with the intent of building and consolidating Limbu ethnic solidarity: "Take away those pervasive *Tamoguna* (the dark qualities) in ten Limbus / Bestow in them the quality of right path and right deed / Bear away their vengeful thought / Lead them from falsehood to truth" (as cited in Kainla, 1990, lines 1–4).). The term *tamoguna*, borrowed from the Samkhya philosophical vocabulary of Hindu tradition designates one of the three fundamental qualities of material nature. The prayer explicitly addresses "ten Limbus" to invoke the traditional Limbu kinship and territorial unit of ten clans across seventeen forts. The prayer song demonstrates the selections at work. It appropriates Sanskrit philosophical vocabulary but explicitly utilizes its meaning among the Limbu ethnic community.

Bhakti songs embody the ritual prescriptions necessary for communal ritual life. The bhakti movement of *Josmani* cult employing congregational devotional practice within its religious frame functioned as a powerful institutional strategy for community building and social reform. Phalgunanda recognized and replicated this insight in his domestic frame. His dimension of syncretism adopts the external institutional forms to confer social and political legibility by prioritizing Limbu indigenous epistemology. *Satyahangma* movement operationalized texts, leaders, congregations, and ethical codes to become recognizable as a religion to the external observers. However, this legibility of adopting the institutional grammar of dominant religions was strategically protective. The analysis illustrates that Phalgunanda's deliberate syncretism was not the surrender but a strategy to establish *Mundhum's* hierarchical priority over external religious forces.

Theorizing *Satyahangma's* Reformatory Syncretism

The empirical study of its Bhakti songs establishes *Satyahangma's* reformatory syncretism as a distinct mode of indigenous border navigation strategy. The strategic pattern designates the religious borders as permeable and navigable sites. This indigenous border epistemology departs from mainstream borderland studies and syncretism theory. The principle of religious syncretism disseminates the maintenance of *Mundhum* cosmology as foundational matrix while selectively incorporating dominant religious elements from Hinduism and Buddhism. The account of the songs reveals that *Satyahangma* functionalizes the principle through three



simultaneous but interdependent operations namely internal critique, selective appropriation, and hierarchical integration.

The reformative syncretism begins with a critical assessment of existing practice from within Limbu indigenous epistemological frameworks. Phalgunanda's rejection of animal sacrifice and alcoholism was grounded in his reading of *Thimjik Mundhum*, the ethical principle that emphasize right action and communal wellbeing. Through the reformation, he also critiqued shamanic tendencies as cultural parochialism. His criticism of internal Limbu dysfunctions rooted with superstition, alcoholism and violence transforms into the urgency of reformed ethnic awareness. Therefore, Phalgunanda's corrective measures are not motivated by Hindu squeamishness about blood and alcoholism. Even when the reformed practice seems like the resemblance of Hindu devotional norms, it is indigenous in its origin. This operation of internal critique distinguishes his strategy from mere imitation of Hindu norms.

The framework does not borrow all available external elements. It only brings specific forms, symbols and technologies, and symbols in terms of their compatibility with indigenous matrix and their strategic utility for institutional consolidation. *Satyahangma* employs the form of Bhakti song, practices of vegetarian offerings, written tendency of ethical codes, the manner of congregational worship from *Josmani* tradition, and the sacred numerology from Hindu/Buddhist traditions. Nonetheless, it does not borrow monastic culture of Buddhism and the system of caste hierarchy, Brahminic ritual exclusivity and the sole use of Sanskrit from Hinduism. Since it strictly maintains *Mundhum* practice, it departs from specific theological claims of either tradition regarding the nature of divinity. Therefore, the selection is strategically principled rather than random.

Satyahangma's strategy does not simply add selected external elements into its existing practice but positions them within a hierarchical structure in which *Mundhum* authority occupies the centre. Invocation to *Tagera Ningwaphuma* and the *Mundhum* agencies function as the interpretive frame that governs external inclusions. External religious elements entered through the selective doorways only serves a secondary function in the indigenous purposes. It maintains the mechanism of hierarchical integration to achieve its goal of securing the *Mundhum* priority. The strategy facilitates the movement across religious borders to contest the dilution of indigenous authority.

Departure from Western Border Theory

The framework of *Satyahangma* departs significantly from the frameworks that have dominated Western border studies. Acknowledging these departures clarifies the contribution of Limbu indigenous case to the broader theoretical conversation. Gloria Anzaldúa's coinage of "mestiza consciousness" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 77) offers the insights of observing borderland as contested terrain of identity formation. This foundational concept of contemporary border theory theorizes border identity as emerging from the painful, unresolved tension between incommensurable cultural systems. This concept considers the border as wound that generates hybrid consciousness through trauma and suffering.

Conversely, *Satyahangma* does not fit the wound and trauma model since it regards borders as normalized and traversable spaces. Phalgunanda's encounter with Hindu and



Buddhist religious forms does not result into the ambivalence and contradiction. Instead, it operates a structured and hierarchically organized response that acknowledges precisely which elements to incorporate and in what position to preserve the *Mundhum* epistemology from the dominant religious influences.

Mary Louise Pratt's theory of "contact zone" emphasizes improvised linguistic and cultural mixing in asymmetrical power encounters. She acknowledges the power relations characterizing the zones of possibilities and perils where "cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other" (Pratt, 1999, p. 34). In the field of linguistics, Pratt's term refers to a contact language, an improvised code by the native speakers of two different languages "in a coalescence" (Pratt, 1999, p. 6) or a hybrid between them in coexistence. Her framework does not fit for the principled, structured, and non-improvised character of *Satyahangma's* borrowings. It contradicts with *Satyahangma's* syncretic choices. The choices are not improvised responses to encounter the external religions. Rather, they are deliberate strategic decisions made within an indigenous epistemological framework that operates principled criteria for selection.

The principle of religious syncretism contests Homi K. Bhabha's idea of "third space". He defines it as, "the in-between space [of the cultures] that carries the burden of the meaning of culture" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 141). He employs the concept to highlight the cultural hybridity and colonial mimicry that generate ambivalence and displace the authority of original cultural forms. His framework of intermediate space foregrounds the deliberate multiplication or fragmentation of collective groups presupposing that displacement is a progressive transition towards novelty. Nevertheless, his interpretation is not compatible to the ways Limbu religious navigation preserves ties to *Mundhum* consciousness as continuing authority. *Satyahangma's* articulations do not create a displaced third space that would destabilize both Limbu and Hindu/Buddhist religious authority. Rather, it generates a reformed Limbu religious space that deploys dominant devotional ways in service of undiminished Limbu religious authority.

Departure from Syncretism Theory

The framework also departs from the dominant theoretical models in syncretism studies. According to Andre Droogers, the dynamics of religious mixing comprises the inseparable power struggles between official religious producers and the lay practitioners in which the legitimate producers normally defend their monopoly against trespassers (Droogers, 2004, p. 225). Similarly, Gustavo Benavides situates indigenous religious agency within the frame of colonial power. In his view, syncretism underpins "not only who works and who makes use of the fruits of labor, but also the power to design the structures" (Benavides, 2004, p. 198). In Droogers and Benavides' frameworks, indigenous communities appear as passive respondents and absorbers of asymmetrical power relations employed by the dominant religious authorities. *Satyahangma's* frame does not fit this reactive schema since it does not generate syncretism by any encounter with dominant religious authority but organizes it from within a pre-existing *Mundhum* epistemological framework that already contains the criteria for selective incorporation.



The borrowed practices from *Josmani* devotional practice and Buddhist numerology into indigenous matrix do not mean the passive adaptations to the external pressure but the deliberate strategic deployments structured from the position of internal coherence. The syncretic strategy employs centripetal directionality as it draws the external elements inward toward an indigenous core. It does not apply centrifugal direction that would disperse indigenous identity into a blended or hybrid composite. Unlike Droogers's model of locating agency in the contested interplay between power-wielding religious elites and lay practitioners, or Benavides's framework of syncretism as a colonial power network wherein religious legitimacy is always already determined by the terms of dominant discourse, *Satyahangma's* syncretism positions agency in the indigenous principle that determines the terms, hierarchy, and purpose of any mixing.

Conclusion

Satyahangma's Bhakti songs articulating the spirit of the movement represents a theoretically generative instance of reformative syncretism, a mode of religious border navigation. The navigation borrows the external contents in terms of their compatibility with indigenous contents where *Mundhum* epistemology remains as the non-negotiable centre of religious authority. The framework developed through close analysis of selected corpus contributes to understanding *Satyahangma* in three respects. First, it dismisses the critical impasse of essentialist purism. Second, it provides a theoretically principled account of *Satyahangma* contesting the assimilative views that considers marginal religion vulnerable to the dominant ones. Third, it demonstrates the broader applicability of its framework beyond the literary context across linguistic, territorial, cultural and political domains in ways that confirm the framework's analytical comprehensiveness. The research combining close textual analysis with indigenous interpretive frameworks provides a replicable model to future research. Its implications would extend to decolonial theory and religious studies. In each of these domains, the active strategy of *Satyahangma* movement provides the frame of challenging the prevailing assumptions about indigenous communities as passive recipients. Decolonial scholarship would generate marginal indigenous epistemologies in systematic textual analysis of oral traditions, folk songs, and poetry as validate sources of decolonial acts. Religious studies would make the critiques of the colonial religious encounter including Christian mission activity, Hindu nationalist reform movements, and Buddhist modernism influencing indigenous religious practices.

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