

Suptulung as indigenous knowledge of Kirat Rai people

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Abstract

Among the indigenous peoples around the world, Rai people belong to the Kirat community. Mundhum is their religio-cultural philosophy, which is practiced orally in their everyday lifestyle with full of ritual activities. Suptulung composed by three stones that hold spiritual and cultural meanings to the community. According to their belief, the Suptulung as one of the main shrines of the household is the sacred place, from where the development and enhancement of knowledge emanates. All rituals and rites from birth to death conducted herein oral form. Suptulung is their main identity and holds cultural importance too. Their spirituality or supernaturalism is connected to nature, as they are nature-worshippers and nature- protectors. As an indigenous belief system and marginalized cultural practice, Suptulung is on the verge of extinction due to the mainstream socio-cultural pressures as well as marginality. Although this oral tradition performance at Suptulung has been continuing generation to generation yet, is facing serious hard times. It is so because its educational value as a form of indigenous knowledge system has not been realized in federal, provincial and local level curriculum. In this article, I have used primary data and discussed the knowledge of Suptulung and Mundum, which support to understand Mundumic education.

Keywords: *Kirat Rai, Mundum, Suptulung, shrine, spirituality, indigenous belief system*

Conceptual and Philosophical Knowledge of Suptulung

In the world, there are 5,000 indigenous groups among which 59 indigenous groups live in Nepal, within them; the Kirat Rai community has its own importance and its own historical aspects. They follow the religio-cultural philosophy of Mundum. From birth until death, each and every ceremony that is needed to be conducted in a Kirat Rai community is through Mundum (Rai 2016). They are slightly different from the other groups of indigenous Kirat people but closely related to each other, culturally, ethnically and linguistically. Their ritual activities are to be conducted in front of the Suptulung as a form of witness and respect as stated in the Mundum itself. This is a belief system that the Suptulung is the Kirat Rai people's shrine, where their family member's deceased ancestors' spirits do rest here therefore it should be venerated according to Mundum.

Mundum is the religious scripture of the Kirat people (Rai, 2016). It is a form of life's guide of the Kirat community for them to conduct the rituals and all other ritual activities that are needed to be conducted to continue their identity in their respective society. It can also be taken as the social law of the Kirat society. Comparatively, the scriptures of Mundum are more in oral practices than in written forms (ibid. 2016) due to which the use of Mundum seems to have been degrading gradually day by day.

Today, the people, who are originally meant to be practicing Mundum, have been shifting to alien cultures of other dominant groups of people. Until Mundum's most part has not been documented and made public in a formal written form except for Iman S. Chemjong, Bairagi Kaila and Bhogiraj Chamling. Due to the diversities in the languages of the types of Rai people in the Kirat Rai community, their linguistic barrier causes difficulties in understanding Mundum rituals among different linguistic groups, who practice it. Therefore, it causes problems for Mundum to be documented in written form in a single language and apply in all linguistic communities equally. Rai (2016) argues that there are various reasons behind the people not properly practicing the ideologies of Suptulung—the main important shrine of the Kirat Rai household as mentioned in Mundum. One of such obvious reasons, nowadays, is that the Kirat people have become ignorant towards their own indigenous culture and have been shifting their original culture and are removing Suptulung from their households.

Another reason of shifting is inability to acquire the proper knowledge and understanding about Suptulung available in the scriptures of Mundum amongst the Kirat Rai people, which have made them ignorant towards their own cultural background. Rai (2016) explains that carelessness of the older generation in not practicing the oral guidance about the scriptures of the Mundum is also another reason behind the decrease in the rate of Mundum practitioners in their daily lives.

The lack of proper practice of Suptulung in the Mundum, has led the Kirat people in having negative ideas towards it. Due to advancement in the technologies of current time, people are switching to modern cooking methods and neglecting the Suptulung.

Suptulung is a three-important-stoned composition of a household. It holds a great importance as the principles of Mundum is practiced only in the presence of Suptulung. Suptulung and Mundum are interrelated to each other and Mundum cannot be properly practiced in absence of Suptulung. It is very important to know the ways to practice different rituals on the Suptulung in order to get Mundum's related and relative knowledge. Why and how the ceremonies are conducted and what time it is done are important things one must know if they are in need of conducting any rituals. If the knowledge of the Kirat Rai's Suptulung and Mundum is not recognized and protected properly, the identity of the Kirat Rai people and their culture will not take too long to be extinct. Therefore, it is very important to know about Suptulung and the basic importance of Suptulung and its co-relation with Mundum.

The word "Suptulung" is a Kirati-Rodung (Chamling) term and in Nepali language, it is called "Tinchulo" (तीनचुलो). The use of Suptulung is basically seen to be practiced in the Kirat Rai community. Suptulung is seen as a necessity inside the Kirat Rai household. All the rituals that are needed to be conducted are done in front of the Suptulung. The good-fates in one's life are confessed in front of Suptulung by thanking the ancestors reciting in front of the Suptulung and the ill-fates happening in one's life are also brought up in front of the Suptulung and asked

to look after the bearer of the good or ill-happenings. The identity of the Kirat community is in their customs and traditions and in order to put their customs intact in practice and to conduct their rituals—the Suptulung plays a vital and very important role for their community.

Suptlung geographically is practiced particularly in the eastern hilly parts of Nepal historically known as “Wallo Kirat” (hither, near Kirat), “Majh Kirat” (mid Kirat) and “Pallo Kirat” (far Kirat). Those hilly areas are identified as the origin and core territories of the Kirat (Kõits कौँच) ‘Sunwar/Mukhiya, Rai, Limbu and Yakkha) communities. In between of these territories, Majh Kirat is the central habitation of the Kirat Rai people. Even if the eastern part of Nepal is taken as the foremost habitation of the Kirat Rai community, they seem to have shifting their residence to the foreign lands like Sikkim, Bhutan, Burma, Britain, Hong Kong, America, Singapore, Germany, Canada, New Zealand and beyond. But, in absence of the pedagogy of Suptulung, it seems that many people are not able to conduct the basic important rituals of the Mundum. The Kirat Rai people are living in a state of confusion due to the lack of knowledge related to the Suptulung and Mundum.

Nepal was and is under the Hindu religion’s influence for a long time and people of all caste, ethnicity and culture were and are affected by it. Such negative influence leads to Kirat people’s ignorance towards their own indigenous religion due to the lack of freedom of learning their own culture and practice their own customs through education. While living in a foreign land, the Kirat people were highly influenced by the foreign culture, environment and that led them in forgetting (e.g., Hinduization and Christianization etc.) their own culture and practicing them.

Hopefully, the Kirat people have engaged themselves in many activities to protect their culture by opening small organizations to increase awareness and by writing songs and producing movies to portray their culture and also by publishing some books in the languages or in the language understandable to the readers (see Chemjong, Kaila and Chamling). But this has not yet created a strong impact in the society. Some norms of Suptulung have also been exposed in the movie named “Binayo”.

Rai (2016) has published some books and written some articles on the Kirat cultural norms, traditions, languages, Suptulung and their basic characteristics, festivals, scriptures and the vital components of the Kirat community in many languages understandable to the readers but it has not yet created much impacts due to the lack of interest of the people themselves.

By engraving the Suptulung in one’s household, the family is needed to act responsibly and respectfully towards it. By conducting all the rituals in the Suptulung, one learns many things from it. The Mangpa (Nochhung), who is the conductor of all the rituals transfers knowledge to the house members so that they can act disciplined and be careful inside their home. Suptulung is said to be a disciplining factor of the Kirat community, which helps one learn about a lot of moral lessons giving them important knowledge to live and run the family and the society but this fact is not written and published in books (Rai,2018).

The knowledge learned by an individual about the Suptulung and Mundum are not concrete as they are not visibly to be found in books or any other written form. The government of Nepal has also not taken interest on this topic. In school level textbooks, there are many chapters written focused on temples, mosque, Buddhist temples, churches etc. However, except in sociology in the higher-level educational system, no chapters or stories are written on the Kirat culture and traditions. Since the government of Nepal is not interested in introducing the indigenous topic in school levels education system, no topics and text books are written about the Kirat people and their culture though the government policy states about local curriculum and mother tongue-based education. Therefore, from now on such topics and textbooks should be included in formal education in Nepal's federal, provincial and local education system.

Constitutional Provision for Local Knowledge

Bhattachan (2008) has stated that article 18 (b) of the constitution ensures fundamental right of freedom to get education in one's own mother language as partial in primary education. The establishment of democracy in 1991 has provided as a form of compulsion for provisions of different cultures and languages, however, the government yet has not properly implemented it (Rana 2018). Due to the lack of proper scholars and the lack of written forms of knowledge and academic manpower to construct the necessary institutions, the people are away from being able to get the proper education based on their own local knowledge. Such issues are also discussed in symposiums, conferences and seminars that the implementation of the constitution is necessary in the educational field too but without out puts.

Precisely, it is necessary to implement what is sought by the constitution to create an impact on the Kirat community so that people can come together to learn and earn education about their local culture and traditions in order to meet the global challenges. Since the knowledge about the scriptures of Mundum is orally transferred to the younger generation as it has always been, it is important that the Kirat people get involved in getting indigenous local knowledge so that they can implement them in their daily lifestyle. Since Suptulung is the main location of one's household in the Kirat community, it is important that everyone should learn and earn the proper way to respect and practice their culture and conduct their rituals in order to protect their cultural identity for the future.

The Kirat Indigenous Knowledge of Holiness in Holy Places

According to Was (2003), holy place is a platform of completeness, home of god. Suptulung is also a holy place of the Kirat and the Kirat Rai people. Mundum is the religio-cultural philosophy of the Kirati people. Most of the Mundum rituals of the Kirat and the Kirat Rai people have to be performed in Suptulung. Therefore, they suppose Suptulung as their holy place. According to Collins (2003: 241), "Holy lands are significant in many religious faiths. Their sacred character can arise from human acts of consecration of buildings, shrines, and burial sites; from miraculous events; or from the presence of revered persons". This is relatable

with the Kirat community because inside the sacred place impure or filthy words are forbidden. In case anyone pronounces or speaks any dirty words they have to promise in the name of Suptulung and ask for forgiveness. Simmi (2008: 80) in his PhD dissertation has explained that “Indigenous people equally seek and pray for pureness everywhere”. Every ritual is conducted through Mangpa (Nochhung), Rishimi/Purkha (elders) into the Suptulung is called Mundum, and pureness is expressed equally before starting it by liquor (mixed of Marcha/yeast and water). The rituals are especially performed by Mangpa or specialist in Mundum and Purkha/Rishimi, who believe on rituals. During the process, the Mangpa gets supernatural power, which can bring prosperous health issues as well. Furthermore, before starting Mundum rituals and remembering the ancestors, they pray, bend over into the Suptulung by joining the two hands with pure words and pure heart.

According to Mankiller (2009),” Indigenous people have different language, culture and history but they aren’t different in natural world, every indigenous people are attached with nature and are trying to preserve and stay with the nature”. No matter in which corner of the world, indigenous people have always stayed close up to the nature. They keep knowledge and information about every stone, soil, water, fauna, and flora, which they respect. Grieves (2009) states that “...the main philosophy was created at the time when the world was united by languages, human ancestors, birds, animals, trees when ancestors had supernatural power to change themselves through knowledge.” The ancestors of the Kirati people have similar knowledge and power which can be found in Mundum. An example is the creator of Kirat, Paruhang. According to Kirat myth, Paruhang was in the form of Jupiter or Salapa/Ruwapaand sometimes in the form of god. Sometimes he was who could melt the mountains and dry every river that was seen as powerful god and also as lion.

Just like one of the Hindu mantras deception (Indra jaal—a powerful mantra), it is compulsory to pronounce Paruhang’s name before pronouncing any mantra. Similarly, in this way, human creation, invisible power and knowledge are seen among the Kirati people. In order to preserve and manage the power and knowledge, Suptulung was/is established and founded since time immemorial. In every house, the first lung ‘stone’ is kept in the name of ancestors and householder father (Same, Bobby, Mechinung), which is also the main lung.

Simmis (2008) reassures that “My first experience is to get the opportunity to understand holy place through music where song and music plays an important role”. It gives more pleasure and purity sense while performing rituals of Suptulung, Mundum chanting Risiya (mantra songs) makes people even stronger and it brings peace, which cures common sickness and acts as a therapy. According to Diawuo and Issuifu (2015),” When something comes in the form of pureness there is either great happiness or sorrow.” During the worship of Suptulung while chanting Risiya (Mantra), it brings people great joy but others find it sorrowful and cry it out. Based on circumstances and the nature of work, the Kirat Rai people are able to experience it in the holy place of Suptulung.

Dignity and Knowledge of Shrine in World Cultures: A Case of Suptulung

Holy place has not only been defined by indigenous people but also the holy place of every people in general. The Romanian scholar of Religion, Eliad (1948) has described about “hierophany” and was not it accepted as universal? In the context of the Kirat community, the Suptulung has supernatural meaning and is related to shamanism. The stones of the Suptulung are hierophants for the community. The stones themselves are not just stones but they hold far more meaning than just being stones. The three stones have their own respective names and have their own particular meaning and importance. Nicoletti (2004) opines that each of these stones has its own name and performs an equally specific ritual function. Pakhalung is the “male” stone associated with figure of the family head. Makhalung is on the contrary the “female” stone thus connected with the mother; lastly, Sambelung is the “guardian” stone, destined to protect the dwelling from infestation by evil powers.

Suptulung is physically only a natural stove for the purpose of cooking and burning fire for warmth but in depth, it has an extended meaning and importance culturally. According to McDougal (1979), the apex stone is Pakalung and the two stones forming the base are Makalung (towards the rear end of the house). Pakalung brings good things such as health, crops, and wealth; Makalung and Sombelung drive away bad things such as famine, disasters and death. Similarly, Robert Cohn (1981) has claimed that the mountains are the holy places to Yahudi. The Yahudi people were attracted to mountains and had a spiritual connection to it. They believed that the spirits and the souls of their departed ancestors were residing on the mountains and looking over them and guiding them throughout life.

Rai (2018) notes that Suptulung of the Kirat Rai people plays the same role as mountains did for the Yahudi people. Moreover, Simmins (2008) links that the spiritual connection and beliefs are equally strong in both indigenous groups. Himalaya Mountains and the Ganga River are the holy places of Hindu believers. Jewish people also claim the mountains as holy places. They believe that pure spirits live in the mountain, which is a peaceful place as parodies. Islamic people claim their normal living to be a holy place whose last wish is to visit Mecca. In this way, the Hindu people have made their holy places even purer and more peaceful. Mountains and rivers are holy but some special names are given to them to make them even holier, for example, Badrinath (Himalayan Mountain), Jagnath (ocean). While travelling, they differentiate between four directions, which are holy due to its destination, for instance, Kedarnath (mountain) in the northern side, Jagganath Puri in the east, Rameshwar (Indian Ocean) in the south and Arab Ocean in the west, where the Buddhists and Jain also claim their monasteries and temples as holy place. Thus, the Hindu people living in America’s Tithsburg, California lying in eastern side, Livermore, Toronto in the southern side and Montreal in northern and Huston in the western part consider their pilgrimage to be holy.

Similarly, the Kirat and the Kirat Rai people believe that North–East direction is

fortunate and eastern side is much better while travelling. Before heading for any important work, worshipping Suptulung will bring good luck. When there arises any kind of obstacles, it is said that if someone rubs a pure stone under the holy Mundum and remembers his/her ancestors s/he can get power and blessings. After the completion of the rubbing act, the Mundum has to be laid down and then only walk away from it. While reaching home, a proper ritual has to be performed into the Suptulung based on their necessity.

All the spirits residing inside the home are considered to being Suptulung. The Kiratologist Chemjong (2003) notes that the Limbu Mundum can make anything pure by burying oval type's long stone and by taking dubo in the hand. In Taoism (Chinese indigenous belief system) also is also the concept of holy place exists. Amongst the nine holy places at mountains of China, it is believed that five holy places exist in Taoism whereas other four exist in Buddhism. Simmins (2008) recalls, "Sikh people of Amritsar, India worship the temples as holy places." For Indian Jainism "Mount Abba" is considered as the mountain of bravery as well as a holy place. The Japanese people, who follow Shinto culture, consider "Ise" as a holy place. The sun, the moon and the stars are considered as the spirits in Buddhist religious philosophy. Rivers, roads, thunders, peals and trees are also the form of holiness. In the same manner, the Kirat and the Kirat Rai people respect and worship Suptulung as the symbol of nature worship and as a holy shrine.

Those places, which are considered to be holy, the people are also holy because they worship those holy shrines. Yahudi, Isaiah and Islam are three religions whose holy place is Israel. In the cultural identity of the Kirat Rai communities, too their seniors have beliefs about trust and happiness, which should be gained through Mangpa (Nochhung), and Purkha Mundum rituals in the presence of Suptulung. Thus, the Suptulung is considered to be a holy place for the Kirat and the Kirat Rai people.

May it be any different indigenous people or those who belong to any other cultural community, everyone has his/her own holy place(s). Many communities have similar holy places as well. However, Suptulung is a unique and different from any other holy places which respects and preserves nature and ancestors. It is believed that life on this planet is possible because of their ancestors' blissful blessings. Therefore, it remained in the past, is remaining at present and will remain in the future since it took a long time to develop mental and physical state of the people. They believe more in hard work and labour rather than rambling. They believe in offering and showing their hard-earned cash, gold, silver, copper at first sight to the Suptulung for a lasting prosperity.

If they do not offer and show their hard-earned property in this way, the Suptulung is supposed to be angry as it is believed that it will be one's disgrace to his/her ancestors which will bring bad lucks. Their primary focus is to preserve the nature and nature-related traditional beliefs. The community has a tradition to plant banyan trees and erect chautari (erected usually

under a Bunyan tree). It is said that once upon a time in the past the people used to understand nature's language too. The philosophy of Kirat Mundum claims Sumnima and Paruhang as creators, ancestors and source of life on this mother planet. Thus, the Kirat Rai people's ancestors reside in Suptulung—a holy place, where each ritual for the ancestors, living beings and nature is performed with respect and meaningful prayers.

Conclusion

Suptulung also known as Tayulung in the Kirat Rai Mundum is a powerhouse of indigenous and local knowledge in the physical as well as spiritual form of shrine and sacred place as in the world's major cultures. Besides, Suptulung is the center of day-to-day life cycle of the Kirat Rai community members having a major role in identity formation for ages. Mangpa (Nochhung), Risihmi and senior members of the community play a role of socio-cultural agency to worship ancestors in this holy place widely known as Suptulung. They believe that Suptulung is the source life and cultural civilization. It is one of the main shrines within the household and is a sacred place, from where the development and enhancement of knowledge emanates. Suptulung as an indigenous belief system and indigenous knowledge of holiness is on the verge of extinction due to the mainstream socio-cultural pressures as well as marginality. In order to preserve and promote this belief and indigenous knowledge system, it is urgent to include this local knowledge in federal, provincial and local level curriculum of the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal.

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