

Tillers of the High Lands: Tracing the Agrarian Roots of the Khasas and Kiratas in the Sub-Himalayan Region Including Sikkim through History and Archaeology.

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I. INTRODUCTION

A region of unparalleled geographical and cultural complexity can be found along the dramatic transition between the North Indian plains and the high Himalayas. This sub-Himalayan belt, encompassing the ancient lands of modern-day Sikkim, eastern today's Nepal, Darjeeling hills, and parts of Bhutan, is more than just a geographical entity; it is a historical stage shaped by the flow of rivers and the movements of peoples. It is a realm deeply inscribed in the early cultural memory of South Asia as the domain of the Kiratas and the Khasas, two broad ethno-linguistic groups whose legacy forms a foundational layer of Himalayan civilization.

Geographically, this is a world of profound verticality. The rugged, snow-fed ranges that lead to mountains like Kangchenjunga, river-cut gorges of the Teesta, Rangit, and Kosi systems make up the north. The densely forested folds of the Siwalik (or *Churia*) hills can be found to the south. This mosaic of microclimates and terrains from the temperate *bhot* (high valleys) to the subtropical tars and duns (valleys and dun valleys), created distinct ecological niches that profoundly influenced human settlement.

The Gangetic plains have frequently dominated mainstream historiography, portraying the Himalayas as a “tribal” frontier at a distance. By focusing on the Kirata and Khas heartland, we challenge this narrative. While interacting with, resisting, and absorbing influences from both Tibet and India, this region was an individual creator of its own sophisticated social, political, and economic systems rather than a passive receiver of culture.

In these valleys, the region's ancient cultures flourished. Early Sanskrit literature such as the Yajurveda and the Mahabharata mention an ancient

indigenous people known as the Kiratas, who were traditionally linked to the eastern portions of this region. It is common to describe them as skilled hunters, archers, and shifting farmers with a profound, primitive respect for the mountainous environment. They grow while moving around as well. The languages and cultural traditions of the Limbu, Rai, Yakkha, and Sunuwar Kirati communities their contemporary descendants, are a significant Tibeto-Burman strand in the area.

Sharing this vast terrain were the Khas (or Khasas), an Indo-Aryan speaking people who migrated into the central and western Himalayas in ancient times. They were primarily agro-pastoralists and laid the groundwork for the hill state system. They also brought early influences from Vedic culture, which would later form a distinct Pahari Hindu identity. Many of the Chhetri, Bahun, and Thakuri communities in the region have their ancestors in the Khas. The interaction, overlap, and synthesis between the indigenous Kirata traditions and the incoming Khas culture created a unique and dynamic socio-cultural sphere.

The Khas community consists of Kami, Damai, Sarki, Gharti, Gainey, Dasmaney, Barapanthi, Chhetri, Bahun and even Sanyasi (Dasnamey Sanyasi). The Kiratas community consists of Rai, Limbu, Magar, Dewan, Yakha, Mukhia, Gurung, Chepang, Danuwar, Thami, Tamang, Lepcha and Newar. However, the Newar community have their distinct way of life, society, and religion.

Sikkim, the 22nd state of the Indian Union represents a unique ethnological amalgamation combined with a distinctive natural and cultural heritage. The Eastern Himalayas, specifically between 27°–28° North latitude and 88°–89° East longitude, primarily cover the entire state of Sikkim in India. It is spread on or

over an area of 7,896 sq km. The Tista and its tributaries are the main river system, namely Lochen, Lochung, Rungeet and Rungnu-chhu. The earliest settlers in Sikkim or *Dejong* 'the land of rice' were the Lepchas, who called themselves *Rondpa* or dwellers in the valley (Agarwal 2006-2007). They seem to have migrated from the hills of Assam and Upper Myanmar (Basnet, 1973). Gangtok is a fast-developing city where little curio shops exist in harmony with shopping arcades. Currently, Sikkim is divided into six districts Mangan, Gangtok, Pkayong, Namchi, Soreng, and Gazing.

Geologically the State is mostly covered by Proterozoic Precambrian metamorphoses of low to medium-grade, high-grade gneissose, Chungthang formations with intrusive granites and phanerozoic rocks. Soils in the valley are clayey alluvium and rich in organic content. The landscapes of the State are generally green. The forest types range from tropical evergreens in the foothills through temperate greens in the middle ranges to coniferous on the higher elevations.

Archaeological findings and its resemblances

The Stone Age civilization was the first phase of human cultural development. Three major categories may be used to study the Stone Age cultures: typology, function of stone tools, and stratigraphical sequence of occurrence. These three periods are the Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic. It is only possible to trace the relics of the Neolithic period in Sikkim to contemporary times.

The domestication of plants and animals (such as sheep, goats, pigs, dogs, etc.), the presence of polished stone axes, the establishment of permanent sedentary communities, and the appearance of pottery are all characteristics of the Neolithic period. Hunting and gathering (small game, poultry, and fishing) as well as the domestication of plants and animals constituted the primary sustenance pattern. Agriculture and husbandry were the primary sources of livelihood since the emphasis was on sedentary lifestyles.

In India, the Neolithic culture is based on its various features has been divided into six different parts of the country, namely the Northwest including Kashmir; the Eastern part including Assam, Sikkim, Darjeeling, and

other sub-Himalayans regions, the Chota Nagpur plateau with its pencil-plains in Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Bihar, Orissa and West Bengal, and the Mid-Eastern region covering Peninsular India. Among these areas, according to the late emeritus pre-historian Prof. H.D. Sankalia only the Eastern Neolithic in India is the pure Neolithic devoid of any metal (Mishra 2008: 2).

Early Records

The delightful country of Sikkim has been mentioned hundreds of times over in the most eulogistic style by the Ugyen Guru Padmasambhava in his writings which he left in bulk and smaller quantities in various hidden stores (Atkinson, 1883).

Indeed, several hidden countries have been mentioned in the prophecies and apocalyptic books of Avalokitesvara and the Omnipresent Guru Padmasambhava who have blessed these places and sanctified them by consecrating them to purposes of retirement for devotional purposes (Morey, 1823). Out of all such hidden sacred places, Sikkim is said to be the most sacred and sanctified compared to paradise itself. Except for a few stray finds of Neolithic from the southern part of Sikkim and around Darjeeling, nothing was known about the prehistory of Sikkim till 1980, when exploration work was undertaken by the Pre-history Branch of ASI under the guidance of the then Superintending Archaeologist K.D. Banerjee in the north and South districts of Sikkim (Mishra 2008: 11). With this background, the Pre-history branch undertook work in the East Sikkim and North Sikkim districts in the year 2002-2004 under the guidance of the Superintending Archaeologist Dr P. K. Mishra (2008: 11).

In this exploration, tools were collected from the field, under step cultivation and from the personal possessions of old Nepali and Bhutia folks. The tools, all Neolithic are referred to in Nepali as *Chatang ka Dunga* as well as *Vajra dunga* and are believed to have fallen on the earth during thunderstorms. In one of the villages, a villager showed a huge crater, claimed to have been caused by the fall of *Vajra dunga*, which was a Neolithic axe. According to the local inhabitants, this axe has come from heaven in the form of a thunderbolt (Mishra 2008: 11).

This exploration work in East Sikkim and North Sikkim resulted in the discovery of 29 Neolithic sites. It yielded 10 axes, 7 adzes, 14 celts, 2 perforated celts, an unfinished harvester and 1 unfinished sling ball (Mishra 2008: 11). (Fig 5, 6, 7, 8, 9)

The typological analysis of the tools suggests (i) an early phase with tools being wholly chipped and the edge ground and (ii) a late phase with pecked and edge ground and fully ground tools. The early phase shows a common feature with the Hoabinhian culture of South East Asia dating to 10,000 BCE and the late phase shows a close affinity with that of South China and South East Asia. The Neolithic tools were mainly manufactured in four stages called flaking, pecking, grinding and polishing. After polishing, the outcome is a well-polished Neolithic tool (Mishra 2008: 3).

According to one school of thought, scholars consider that the region (eastern India) served as a corridor through which the Neolithic celt-making techniques entered India from South East Asia. The tools in these regions are made of dolerite, quartzite, shale, slate, and fossil wood. Whilst East Indian Neolithic culture cannot be ascertained due to a lack of absolute dates, by typological comparison and cross-cultural dating methods an approximate chronology can be fixed (Mishra 2008: 3).

In a recent ethno-archaeological exploration (2023) organized by the Sikkim government, the same toolkit was traced among local priests. In Sikkim these stone celts are found in a good number by regional priests; technologically and typologically all are like the eastern Indian Neolithic toolkit but there is an urgent need to find out the archaeological context of these stone tools. Archaeologically it will help us to reconstruct the settlement and subsistence pattern of Ancient Sikkim and surrounding regions.

Stone tool kit of Sikkim: Stone tools of this region are celts, axes, mace heads, harvesters, picks, hoes, chisels, ring stones, and adzes. Most of the findings from the faith healers of this region comprise axes, adzes, celts and fluted quartz. These are twenty-four in number of which seven are polished stone celt, seven are adze and others are fluted quartz, stone hammer, sling ball, etc.

The archaeological findings from Sikkim through various exploration and data collection indicate a significant history of early human activity, especially from the Neolithic period. The tools found, like axes, adzes, celts, perforated celts, harvesters, and sling balls, are primary sources that show that the people who lived in the area hunted, gathered, and farmed in the past. These tools, made of stone like schist, shale, and basalt, show that a group of people is moving from a nomadic way of life to a settled way of life that focuses on growing and producing food. The presence of well-polished stone tools from various parts of Sikkim, such as axes, harvesters, and celts, indicates the emergence of specialized crafts linked to food gathering and primitive agricultural practices. For instance, perforated harvesters, which were common in Neolithic communities in South China, were used to gather crops and are seen as a big step forward in technology. Finding these tools in places like Lingchen, Lingdon, and Gytong shows how old the area is and suggests that Sikkim was part of a larger Neolithic cultural area that reached into the Himalayas and East Asia. Most scholars have tried to link these Neolithic implements with the Neolithic culture of Hoabinhian of Vietnam, this indicates that people living in this region have the knowledge of agriculture with hunting gathering and now it is crystal clear that the area of today's Sikkim and its adjoining areas were inhabited by humans long ago.

The discovery of a fossilized maize variety in Sikkim in the 1950s, which is often called "Sikkim Primitive," is strong evidence that farming has been going on in the area for a long time. This fossil shows that people were growing maize and, by extension, doing systematic agriculture long before modern records. This makes Sikkim the second place after Mexico where maize originated. The unique traits of the Sikkim Primitive maize show that local communities have been growing crops for a long time and that they developed their own farming methods before the rest of the world knew about the crop.

Historical Origins of Khasas and Kiratas living In Sub-Himalayan region including Sikkim.

Sikkim is the vibrant center of the sub-Himalayan region, and its history is not limited to being written on paper or in stone. Echoing through the deep river gorges and mist-shrouded valleys, it is a symphony of

movements, a tapestry made from the threads of numerous cultures, languages, and peoples. Because the histories of these mountain communities have often been marginalized by the dominant narratives of the Indian subcontinent, they have been enshrouded in the romanticized mists of mystery and legend for centuries. This chapter sets out on a rigorous academic quest to clear those hazes and transition from speculation to history supported by facts. To reconstruct the ancient and long-lasting existence of two of the most fundamental communities of the Eastern Himalayas, the Khas and the Kiratas, we will critically synthesize a vast corpus of literary sources from the sacred to the secular, from the native to the foreign, and support them with thorough archaeological fieldwork (Chatterjee, 1936).

The Kiratas: From Sanskrit Epic to Himalayan Reality
The Kiratas emerge from the chronicles of Indian literature not as a vague tribal concept, but as a distinct, respected, and often formidable people.

In the Sacred Epics: The Mahabharata and the Ramayana serve as the earliest literary milestones. In the Mahabharata, the Kiratas are frequently listed among the numerous tribes of ancient India, often placed in the eastern and Himalayan regions. Their prowess as hunters and warriors is acknowledged. A pivotal moment is Bhagadatta, the king of Pragjyotisha (Assam), who leads a legion of Kiratas in the Kurukshetra war, fighting along-side the Kauravas. This places Kirat groups firmly in the north-eastern landscape. The Shanti Parva even describes a philosophical discourse between a Brahmin and a Kirata chieftain, underscoring their perceived wisdom. In the Ramayana, during their exile, Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita traverse through the Dandakaranya and regions inhabited by forest tribes, which scholars like Ronnow (Chatterjee, 1974) (in his seminal work *Kirata: A Study of an Ancient Indian Tribe*) interpret as including Kirata territories, establishing their presence in the forested foothills and mid-hills.

In Classical Literature and Linguistics:

Kalidasa, the quintessential Sanskrit poet, immortalizes the Kirata in his masterpiece *Kumarasambhava*. He uses the powerful metaphor of Lord Shiva taking on the form of a Kirata hunter to test Arjuna's bravery and gives the Kirata way of life both

divine approval and social standing. In addition, Patanjali's *Mahabhasya*, the great commentary on the *Ashtadhyayi* of Panini, which is the foundational text of Sanskrit grammar, and the *Kiratas* are specifically mentioned in both of these works. They analyze the speech of the Kiratas and place it in the known geographical and social lexicon of ancient India. This linguistic evidence is crucial, moving them from mythical figures to a documented community with a distinct identity.

A more historical and less mythological account of Kashmir is provided in *Historical Chronicles*: Kalhana's *Rajatarangini*, a magnificent 12th century chronicle. It mentions the Kiratas as a people living in the mountainous regions, interacting with, and sometimes militarily engaging, the kings of Kashmir. This places them squarely in the western Himalayan context as well, suggesting a wide dispersal along the entire arc.

Corroboration from afar: The indigenous narrative is solidly supported by foreign accounts in *The Foreign Gaze*. The most significant is Megasthenes' *Indica*. While his original work is lost, fragments preserved in later Greek texts describe a people in the mountainous regions of India, whom many historians identify as the Kiratas. He notes their distinct physical features, their hunter-gatherer lifestyle, and their unique social customs, observations that align perfectly with the descriptions in Sanskrit literature. This external perspective is invaluable, offering an ethnographical snapshot free from the literary conventions of Sanskrit *kavya*.

The Khasas: The Pioneers of the Sub- Himalayas

While the Kiratas dominate the eastern narratives, the westward movement and consolidation of the Khas people is a story etched in law, politics, and linguistics. The *Dharma Sutras* and *Smritis*: The *Manu Smriti* and the *Vedvyasa Smriti*, among other legal texts, list the Khasas as a people living outside the pale of orthodox Brahmanical society, often categorizing them as fallen *Kshatriyas*. While this reflects a social prejudice, it simultaneously confirms their widespread presence and political organization. The heartland of the Brahmins could not ignore them as a force. Their mention in these texts' points to their significant

presence in the regions between present-day Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, and Kumaon.

Secular Drama and Prose: Vishakadatta's political drama, *Mudrarakshasa*, provides a brilliant glimpse into the realpolitik of ancient India. It mentions the Khasas as forming part of the military levies recruited by the Mauryan Empire. This is a critical detail, confirming that the Khasas were not an isolated tribal entity but were actively engaged in the geopolitical dynamics of the subcontinent, recognized for their martial qualities. Centuries later, Banabhatta's poetic prose in *Kadambari* describes the landscape of the Himalayas and its peoples, alluding to communities that can be identified as the Khas, further cementing their literary footprint.

The Khas' Linguistic Legacy:

In the Himalayan region, the Khas community and related groups relied heavily on the original Khas language, called Khas-Kura, for communication. Later, this language developed into what is now known as Nepali, and it is now the primary language in many Himalayan regions, such as Sikkim and West Bengal.

The Pahari languages, which include contemporary Nepali, Kumaoni, Jaunsari, and others, are thought to have descended from the Khas language. The Khas tribe played a crucial part in the Indo-Aryan linguistic expansion across the lower Himalayas, according to Irish linguist George Abraham Grierson (Grierson, 2000), who also identified them as the first speakers of Western Pahari to be documented.

The Khas linguistic legacy is their most enduring evidence. The modern Pahari languages of the central Himalayas and Sub-Himalayas, notably Nepali (Khas Kura), Garhwali, and Kumaoni, are direct descendants of the ancient Khasa Prakrit. This linguistic spread, from west to east, maps the migration and cultural hegemony of the Khas people across the Himalayas, a movement that would eventually bring them into contact and confluence with the Kiratas in regions like Nepal and later, Sikkim. Due to its legacy and ethnicity Govt. of India, 1991 added the Nepali, *Gorkha bhasa*, *khas kura*, *Pahari* language in the same category in 8th Schedule of Indian constitution. The

language itself is a proof that the people like khas kitatas were living in this region since immemorial.

Historical legacy of Khas and Kiratas which makes them the Agrarian Community since Ancient times. After going through every source and every corners of written evidences, it is quite clear that the earliest inhabitants of the southern Himalayan region including today's Sikkim, and its adjoining areas were inhabited by the agrarian cum hunting gathering community, who had the knowledge of agriculture as well as hunting gathering, the evidences falls upon the two communities of Sub Himalayan region who have been residing in this region since the Neolithic era, they are khasas and Kiratas.

Mahabharata is the one of the ancient texts where we can extract the historical presence of Khas and Kirata community residing in this Sub-Himalayan region, it proves the strong presence of both communities in this subcontinent, the Mahabharata, makes repeated references to the Khasas as a separate tribe that lived in the northern and northwest parts of the Indian subcontinent. Their role and recognition in the sociopolitical landscape of that era, which was approximately between 400 BCE and 400 CE, are established by their presence in several significant epic episodes. Puranas and Dharmashastras which is one of the ancient texts to reconstruct the ancient communities and society refers: The Khasas are also mentioned in the Manusmriti and other Puranas, such as the Bhagavata Purana, Markandeya Purana, and Vayu Purana. They are frequently characterized as a warrior (Kshatriya) tribe that lost favor because they disregarded Vedic rites. This implies that they were an Indo-Aryan group that, because of their isolation in the mountains, created their own cultural customs, which caused the people of the plains to label them "fallen" or "mlecchas" (foreigners/barbarians).

The famed Sanskrit encyclopedic work Varahamihira's *Brihatsamhita*, written in the sixth century CE, covers an incredible array of subjects from geography, natural history, and cultural customs to astronomy and astrology. Varahamihira meticulously places the Khasas alongside other Himalayan peoples in this extensive work, clearly demonstrating their long-standing and ancient presence in the area. The *Brihatsamhita* presents a

distinct ethnographic image of the subcontinent during Varahamihira's time by purposefully classifying the Khasas alongside other important northern Himalayan tribes, rather than just mentioning them in passing. This inclusion confirms that the Khasas were acknowledged as a separate ethnic group with Himalayan cultural roots. Varahamihira not only talks about the historical legacy of the existence of the Khas tribe in the north and north eastern part of subcontinent but it also throws light in geographical distribution of the khas community in subcontinent and their nature, Varahamihira's work summarizes the distribution of tribes and communities, frequently in relation to weather, environmental patterns, and cultural customs, by drawing on historical traditions and geographical knowledge. Brihatsamhita highlights the Khasas adaptation to the highland environment and their enduring role in regional life when listing them alongside other Himalayan people (Bal.K.Pokhrel, 1998). This book predominantly stresses on the fact that the Khasas were consistently acknowledged as a northern tribe in literary sources from the ancient and early medieval eras, with their settlements existing before many later communities. The Khasas continued prominence in the region's history is further supported by other classical texts that echo Varahamihira's grouping of them with Himalayan peoples.

In the same way the Kiratas also has the existence from epic era from Mahabharata, even kirts, are mentions in Ramayana too, the kirat legacy is more influencing, the Puaranas, chronicles , Vedic literature like Yajurveda, Atharvaveda, Manu's Dharmashastra, ancient Chinese travelers, Greek travelers, Muslim travelers have hugely mentioned about the existence of kirat community in the Himalayan region.

The Kiratas are described as expert archers, warriors, and hunters who live in the untamed Himalayan regions in the Mahabharata, one of India's greatest epics. They are portrayed as important allies, especially of the Pandavas, and their participation in the Kurukshetra War and fighting prowess underscore their cultural and strategic importance. Their royal status and incorporation with other legendary figures were further cemented by the Mahabharata's depiction of interactions with Kirata kings (like Yalambar) and their contributions of gold, mountain medicines, and other valuable resources.

The Kiratas are also mentioned in the Ramayana, which emphasizes the mystique and respect given to their homeland by mainly linking them to the Himalayan ranges. The epic places the Kiratas near heavenly landscapes, giving their ethnic identity a spiritual meaning.

The Puranas, Swasthani Brata Katha, and other Sanskrit literature regularly include the Kiratas in lists of Himalayan peoples, confirming their long-standing status as native mountain dwellers and custodians of distinctive festivals and rituals (like Gil Puja). Buddhist and Jain texts also make reference to the Kiratas' kingdoms and cultural customs, and the Yoga Vasistha describes them as jungle trappers and kings. The Kirata are acknowledged as inhabitants of the Himalayas in ancient Chinese, Greek, and Sikh texts; they are frequently linked to the modern-day Rai, Limbu, and Sunuwar, Yakha, Dewan, Thami, Magar, people of Sikkim and Adjoining areas including Sub-Himalayan region. Their historical legacy as native Himalayan rulers is further cemented by their dynastic histories, particularly the protracted Kirat rule in this Sub-Himalayan region.

Historically Khasas and Kiratas were only the original inhabitants of Sub Hiamalayan region, although we do find the ample of references in the ancient text till the 10th century CE, but due to the lack of writing interest of the historians, ethnographers, we do find less writing in the middle century, but there are enough references to make these two communities as the original inhabitants of this region with the art of agriculture and hunting gathering.

Till date mostly 99% of people engaged in agriculture are Khas and kiratas, in Sub-Himalayan region including Sikkim, it clear that the sense of agriculture and especially the method of terrace cultivation in the brainchild of khas and kirati people who had the sense of doing agriculture in hilly region, the practice of Jhum like culture is still prevalent in this region, slash and burn, where the people move towards the virgin land in search of good agriculture. Agriculture has always been the main source of income for the Khas and Kirati communities, and this is still the case today. Every Neolithic tool found during archaeological excavations in the sub-Himalayan regions was in the possession of Jhakri (ritual specialists) or Khas and

Kirati shamans. This link implies that these tools had spiritual as well as financial value. In these cultures, Neolithic implements, like sickles, stone axes, and grinding stones, are frequently revered artifacts that represent the beginnings of farming and the ancestors control over the natural world.

Neolithic tools are regarded as the offspring of agriculture, signifying the beginning and development of prehistoric agricultural methods. In Khas and Kirati cosmology, farming is not just a material activity but a sacred inheritance passed down through generations, and the shamans possession of these artifacts demonstrates the close connection between spirituality and agriculture.

You can experience a living museum of agricultural history if you walk through an agricultural land where the very landscape bears witness to a profound truth: the Khas and Kirati communities possess the unique and accurate knowledge of hill agriculture in ancient times they have been doing this since immemorial, from the first plowing of the land to the last harvest cutting. This sacred legacy has been preserved so thoroughly that the entire cycle of cultivation is encoded within their culture and spoken through the names of their tools. The halo for tilling, the *doko* for carrying, the *hasiya* for harvesting, and the *khukuri* for a hundred daily tasks are just a few examples of the essential tools that make up this integrated cultural system. Their nomenclature, which is only in the Nepali and Pahari local language or the local tribal tongues, demonstrates an unbroken lineage of indigenous innovation and a deep, immemorial ownership of a way of life that was born from and perfectly adapted to the rugged mountain terrain they have called home for a very long time.

Ecological Adaptation of Mountain Agriculture by Khas and Kiratas

Through the art of terracing, mountain communities have created a cascading mosaic of fertile steps on steep and erosion-prone slopes. With the help of stone or earthen walls that retain soil and moisture, each terrace is painstakingly carved out of the hillsides. The method demonstrates a balance between human labor and the natural environment by converting vertical obstacles into useful horizontal surfaces. Terraces are works of indigenous engineering in addition to being

aesthetically pleasing. Contour marking, bonding, and the use of vegetative barriers to anchor the soil are techniques used by farmers in areas such as Sikkim and the sub-Himalayan region. To reduce runoff, avoid landslides, and guarantee uniform water distribution, communities have refined the gradient, width, and orientation of terrace risers over many generations. Additionally, these systems produce microclimates, which are warmer, moister niches that sustain a variety of crops, ranging from barley and millet at higher elevations to paddy and maize at lower elevations.

Terraces are living cultural landscapes rather than just agricultural structures. For example, terrace systems developed in the Sikkim Himalaya in tandem with local beliefs that regard the land as sacred and receptive to human care. Terracing knowledge, transmitted orally through clans and ritual experts, represents a lengthy conversation between survival, spirituality, and ecology. Terraces thus symbolize human dominance over the mountains, both literally and figuratively, as they sustainably shape the terrain to suit their agricultural needs without cutting off their connection to the natural world.

One of the first societies in Southeast Asia to experiment with wetland irrigation, rice domestication, and turning slopes into terraced fields was the Hoabinhian Neolithic culture. These methods eventually impacted the foothills of the Himalayas as they progressively extended westward and northward. Along with spiritual and technical knowledge, the concepts of water control, seed selection, and slope management were passed down as communities moved and exchanged. The terraced landscapes that are currently found in parts of Sikkim and the sub-Himalayan region were made possible by this cross-cultural interaction.

The Khasas and Kiratas were among the first peoples in the sub-Himalayan region to adopt these practices, according to archeological and ethnographic evidence. They showed a profound awareness of ecological balance in addition to their mastery of terracing by adapting the cultivation of rice and millet to harsh, high-altitude environments. Long before modern agricultural science codified such ideas, their settlements frequently arose around fertile river

valleys and stepped slopes, demonstrating a sophisticated understanding of crop rotation systems, irrigation channels, and soil conservation.

These early Himalayan communities possessed existential agricultural intelligence in addition to technical knowledge. Their cosmology, rituals, and social structure were all entwined with agriculture, creating a worldview that regarded mountains, water, and fertility as both sacred and practical. The fact that these societies have endured for millennia in one of the most hostile environments on earth is evidence of how successful their methods were. Therefore, it is reasonable to consider the Khas and Kiratas to be the descendants of an ancient agrarian continuum that stretches from Southeast Asian Hoabinhian cultures to the modern adaptive terrace-farming systems of the Himalayan region.

Rituals and Shamanism in the Agrarian life of Khas and Kiratas

Shamanism, as practiced locally by *Jhankri* or *Phedangma*, *Mangpa*, or *Dhami*, (Fig.1, 2) practitioners, is the spiritual cornerstone of communal life among the Khas and Kirati peoples of the Himalayan and sub-Himalayan regions. These shamans act as healers, diviners, and go-betweens for people and the natural or spiritual realms. Their cosmology is based on the idea that nature is sentient and conscious, and that prosperity, fertility, and health are guaranteed when humans and the environment coexist in harmony. The Khas and Kiratas, shamans who have a strong affinity for the natural world, including mountains, rivers, forests, and celestial bodies, which they revere as living gods. Offerings of grains, flowers, and rice beer to the nature gods are common rituals that invoke rain, abundant harvests, and protection from disasters. By presenting people as stewards of the environment rather than its exploiters, this worldview promotes ecological balance.

Among the Khas and Kirati peoples, the shaman plays a crucial role in the celebration of the seasonal festivals *Ubghauli* and *Udghauli*, (Fig.3,4) which symbolize the cyclical movement of communities and their herds in balance with the natural world. With the shaman serving as the essential mediator, these festivals represent the complex interrelationship between people, the natural world, and spiritual forces

and go beyond simple agricultural customs. Celebrated during the spring planting season, *Ubghauli* symbolizes the upward migration of people and their animals to higher elevations where the climate is more conducive to grazing and cultivation. On the other hand, *Udghauli* denotes the wintertime drop in elevation in response to the weather. During both festivals, shamans perform ceremonies to elicit blessings from the gods of nature, safeguard crops from natural disasters, and maintain the wellbeing of herds. Chanting, tool and instrument purification, and offerings to the earth, ancestors, and deities represented by sacred stones are all part of their rituals. The worship and respect of nature as a living, sentient being are central to the shamans' rituals. Shamans uphold the Khas and Kirati identity as nature worshippers by paying respect to mountains, rivers, the earth, and ancestral spirits. This spiritual connection highlights an ecological wisdom in which the stewardship of natural resources, the seasonal movement of communities, and the shifting cultivation practices are all in harmony with the cycles of natural regeneration. By serving as a link between the natural and spiritual worlds, the shaman ensures survival through peaceful coexistence.

The deep connection between the Khas people and nature is eloquently depicted in the Masta Puja of the Khas community. To ensure the welfare of the community, their livestock, and agricultural prosperity, the Khas *Dhammi* (shamanic priests) perform this sacred ceremony on *Baishak Purnima*, which falls during the full moon in the month of *Baishakh*, which is in April or May. Through complex rituals that include drumming, chanting, music, and trance, the Khas *Dhammi* invoke the local Masta deities, ancestral spirits, and natural guardians, during Masta Puja. These gods are thought to live in mountains, rivers, forests, and landscapes; they represent the vitality of the natural world that the Khas rely on. Offerings like flowers, grains, and animal sacrifices are part of the ceremony, which expresses appreciation and respect for nature and the forces that support farming and animal husbandry. The community's solemn commitment to respecting nature's cycles and guardianship forms the basis of the Masta Puja. It asks for divine protection for a bountiful agricultural season, soil fertility, and the health of animals raised. The ceremony highlights ecological

balance, tying the health of natural resources to the well-being of humans. This demonstrates how the Khas worldview is based on stewardship and animism rather than dominance.

The nature-centered spirituality of the Khas community is evident in this puja. The shaman's function as a go-between for people and spirits is a reflection of a long-standing custom in which farming, raising livestock, and worshiping nature are all intertwined. The Masta Puja is a solemn ceremony that establishes and upholds the Khas' collective identity as stewards of the mountain ecosystems they live in.

Therefore, the living relationship between the Khas people, their sacred natural environment, and the spiritual forces that guarantee their survival and prosperity is embodied in Masta Puja during *Baishak Purnima*.

The worship and respect of nature as a living, sentient being are central to the shamans' rituals. Shamans uphold the Khas and Kirati identity as nature worshippers by paying respect to mountains, rivers, the earth, and ancestral spirits. This spiritual connection highlights an ecological wisdom in which the stewardship of natural resources, the seasonal movement of communities, and the shifting cultivation practices are all in harmony with the cycles of natural regeneration. The shaman's job is to keep this equilibrium, serving as a conduit between the natural and spiritual worlds and guaranteeing survival via peaceful coexistence.

Farming cycles and herd movements are entwined and ceremonially approved by shamans. Just as herds change with the seasons, so do agricultural practices, which are both controlled by the information passed down through customs. By facilitating these changes regarding the land and ancestors, the shamans promote sustainable adaptation as opposed to exploitation. Therefore, the shamanic traditions of the Khas and Kirati people strengthen their identity as pastoralists and farmers who value nature, constantly adapting to and prospering in the harsh Himalayan environment.

CONCLUSION

The ancient cultures of the Khas and Kirata peoples—the first known inhabitants of the Sikkim and the Sub-Himalayan region—shaped the historical legacies of this region. Since the Neolithic and pre-Vedic periods, they have played an important role to develop the process to living in the Himalayas. Examination of the archaeological and historical records, and the ecology of the region, sheds light on the indigenous Himalayan societies and how they interacted with the region's topography and the integrated culture of the region during historical times. As told in the Indian and Nepalese traditions, the Khas and Kirata peoples have played a part in the civilization of the region.

The Khas and Kiratas, alongside other ancient peoples of the region, expanded the practice of settler agrarian society, practicing early forms of terraced farming, and integrated pastoral and forest-based subsistence economies. The high Eastern Himalayan foothills, and the agrarian, pastoral and forestry landscapes around them, contain evidence of extensive ancient agrarian civilizations that interacted with and transformed the region's topography and ecology. Long before agricultural science was organized, these societies demonstrated a high degree of ecological awareness and innovativeness in their farming and pastoral systems.

The Khas and Kirata peoples developed a cultural amalgamation of animism, shamanism, and beginner Hinduism, with a primary focus on nature worship, ancestor, and spirit mediation. Such anthropocentric views demonstrated a bond with nature and the environment. Even today, the ancient Kiratas' descendants, the Lepcha, Limbu, and Rai, continue similar practices. In shamanic practices, oral traditions, and seasonal agricultural festivals, ancient ecological wisdom is preserved and transmitted.

The socio-historical framework of the Kirata-Khas continuum sheds light on the cultural identity of Sikkim as well. The intersection of these peoples with later Indo-Tibetan and Buddhist traditions brought forth new cultural and spiritual syncretism. The Buddhist monasteries with sacred groves and animistic shrines is a testament to the spiritual culture of Sikkim and illustrates a continuum of coexistence

for millennia. Linguistic traces remain as cultural evidence, found in the Tibeto-Burman dialects and local place names such as Sikkim.

Although this region is centred by the Khas and the Kirata peoples, however they have yet to receive the appropriate attention for their contributory role in the defining the Himalayan ethos. A large part of their cultural and historical value is likely to remain unprocessed and undocumented in written form. Consequently, interdisciplinary approaches leveraging archaeology, ethnography, linguistics, and environmental studies need to be placed to retrieve that legacy.

Acknowledging the Khas and Kirata heritage is a cultural necessity. Such recognition articulates the presence of Indigenous peoples who have maintained the inner ecological and spiritual harmony of the Himalayan range. This further positions Sikkim tribal culture as a fundamental part of the world's most fragile mountain ecosystems and a testament to human resilience, and cultural and environmental continuity.



Fig No 1. Dhammi of khas community



Fig No 2. Mangpa of Kirat Community



Fig No. 3 (Ubhaul/Udauli of Khas Community)



Fig No 4 Ubhaul/Udauli of Kirat (Thami Community).



(Fig No. 5 Polished dolerite celt)



(Fig No. 6 Polished Quarzite adze)



(Fig No. 7 Polished dolerite adze)



(Fig No. 8 Polished dolerite celt)



Fig No 9 Perforated lunate shaped Pendent made up of slate

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