Satyahangma rituals: commemorating Phalgunanda in eastern Nepal

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Introduction

This contribution deals with a saintly leader who was once a widely known and influential figure in Nepal, much respected among the Kirati and dreaded by the Rana state for his ‘seditious’ activities. After his death, however, he almost fell into oblivion. Today he is remembered as the founder of the so-called Satyahangma (lit ‘goddess of truth’) ‘religion’ (dharma), and his birthday is widely celebrated in eastern Nepal and in the Kathmandu Valley – and beyond. Among the Limbu community, his memory is still very much alive and in recent years he has become something of a national hero. Yet there is still a certain vagueness about the historical person and – more specifically – about his legacy.
Phalgunanda was born Nardhoj Lingden in 1885 in a small Limbu village in eastern Nepal. He grew up in a poor family, eventually left to join the British Army and to fight in World War I (in France) and became a spiritual leader who preached a reformed religion among his Limbu brethren. He exhorted them to lead a ‘pure’ and ‘truthful’ life, giving up eating meat and drinking alcohol, and promulgated education by disseminating the Limbu script, a distinct script introduced in the mid-18th century by a Limbu monk from Sikkim. When he died in 1949, the Mahaguru left behind a small group of disciples, but his Satyahangma Dharma religious movement almost died out. Only in the 1970s was it revived with the emergence of a successor, some say the Guru’s ‘reincarnation’, Dharmaguru Atmananda Lingden (born 1954), who is now seen by many as the ‘spiritual leader’ of all Kirati groups in eastern Nepal, ie not only the Limbu but also the various Rai, Yakkha and Sunwar.

In spite of his great popularity (both in Nepal and in some parts of India) in the 1930s and 1940s, today Phalgunanda is relatively little known outside the country and only vaguely outside the community. Shortly after his death, the Rana autocracy ended and Nepal opened to the outside world in the 1950s. It seems that in the first decades of post-Rana Nepal the Satyahangma movement began to wane and the Guru’s teachings had little effect. At a time of new liberties (in terms of politics, mobility and consumption), the ascetic ethos of abstinence was apparently rather unattractive among the Kirati community. In villages, blood sacrifice and beer offerings for ancestors continued unabated. And at the time of Panchayat nationalism, an ethnic
movement such as Satyahangma was looked upon with suspicion. The new dharma remained marginal.

4 It is probably due to this that scholars have so far shown little interest in the study of the movement. But the lack of knowledge is also partly due to the fact that few historical documents are left to testify to its activities. There are very few photographs: I found only two original ones, one – see Figure 1 – has been widely copied and photoshopped, the other (on which a new painting is based, Figures 30 and 31) has only recently come to light. To my knowledge, there are no sound recordings and practically no authentic writing, except for some letters, has been preserved. One of the few scholars who have contributed significantly to a historical understanding is Bairagi Kahila (1990).

5 Nevertheless, Phalgunanda’s memory is kept very much alive in contemporary Nepal, and not only by his followers. In 2009, the Government of Nepal officially declared Phalgunanda the 16th National Luminary (raṣṭra vibhūti) along with King Janak, Sita, the Buddha, Ram Shah, Prithvi Narayan Shah and others (about half are kings and ministers, only two are women, with Phalgunanda apparently being included to represent the Janajati). Since then he has become the founding ethnic culture hero of the modern-minded, largely urban Kirati community. This national significance is most visible at the annual event to celebrate Phalgunanda’s birthday on Kartik 25, which is an important ritual performed not only in eastern Nepal but also in the capital Kathmandu (Fig 2) and is of great significance for the Kirati as a whole.

The key question I wish to pursue in this contribution is the following: how is Phalgunanda remembered more than seventy years after his demise? What kind of image is retained of this exceptional yet somewhat elusive leader and holy man who

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Fig 2. Journal published on Phalgunanda’s ‘116th birthday’ in 2000 when a large conference was held in Kathmandu: Kirat dharma tathā sāhitya utthān sanghko mahāsammelan (Conference of the Association for the Promotion of Kirat Religion and Literature) at the Birendra International Convention Centre

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gathered a large following? What ideas does he stand for today? And which political forces are behind this construction of a memory? In other words: who controls his legacy?

In order to answer these questions, I will focus more specifically on rituals performed by the Satyahangma community. What I want to show here is that Phalgunanda and his ideas are commemorated above all in ritual performances, i.e. worshipping practices, textual recitations, but also in the construction and use of objects (statues, images), architecture (especially temples – manghim) and memorials. After all, Phalgunanda has fundamentally transformed the Mundhum, the traditional religion of the Kirati, which includes animal sacrifice (chicken, pigs, sheep) and the offerings of home-brewed beer. So, these crucial parts of the Mundhum ritual tradition aside, what remains of it? Is it still the Mundhum (as it is claimed to be) or is it just a Hinduised version – as denounced by others, in particular ethnic activists?

According to Paul Connerton, communities can be seen as re-enacting a narrative through repeated ritual action (Connerton 1989: 45). Rituals contribute significantly to a social and cultural memory, not only by transmitting ideas and knowledge but also by maintaining an ‘embodied’ form of memory. Thus, by taking a closer look at the rituals, I hope to understand how the ‘spirit’ of Phalgunanda is kept alive. As it turns out, there is not only one version of this spirit but several competing views.

This leads me to broader sociological issues – somewhat more Weberian in scope. On the one hand, Phalgunanda can be seen as a religious reformer who tried to bring about not only a sanitised, even modernised, religion but who also initiated a process of rationalisation through the promotion of education and social awareness. Yet on the other hand, he was a typical charismatic leader whose power derived from his personal character and his innovative religious devotion. Does this not constitute a contradiction that is bound to create tension among his followers? In Nepal, where the weight of tradition and the clearly defined social roles often overlay the prominence of individual character traits, such charismatic leadership is unique. One of the few other examples that comes to mind is Lakhan Thapa, the rebel king among the Magar, who gathered a following around him to topple the Rana regime (see Lecomte-Tilouine 2002). Though clearly a man of peace, Phalgunanda similarly appears almost like a revolutionary figure, a kind of ‘game-changer’ who had significant political clout and was therefore viewed with suspicion by the Ranas. He brought about long-lasting change by initiating a new style of living and a new synthesis of ethnic parochialism and rational reform. It comes as no surprise that, as will become clear in what follows, the teaching of this somewhat ambivalent figure has not been handed down in a unanimous way – and that the canonisation of this tradition is a rather contentious issue. The current leadership has not been accepted by all followers of the founding member and therefore an institutionalisation of charisma (Max Weber) which secures transgenerational continuity has not (yet) been established. Phalgunanda’s influence has also left multiple traces in India, in particular in Sikkim and Darjeeling, and thus the making of a tradition proves to be far from uniform.

First, I will look at everyday rituals, as commonly practised by followers of Satyahangma. This will include a description of shrines, altars and temples. I will take a closer look at some typical ritual sites, in particular Sankhadevi (in Lubhu in the Kathmandu valley) and Labrekuti (in Phidim in eastern Nepal) in order to understand
the structures of sacred space, including the more modern phenomenon of statues as memorials.

11 In the second part, I will deal with the textual tradition of the Satyahangma since books are an important part of the Satyahangma religion. However, there is practically no writing by the Mahaguru himself. Nevertheless, there is a rich written tradition. Manuscripts have been produced by his disciples Ranadhoj Nembang and Badrinanda Tumbapho. These Limbu language texts have been published in two main versions: the Camcik Mundhum (edited by Nayamhang Nembang, priest in Silauti), which can be seen as the ‘original’ traditional line and the Sāmjik Mundhum (published by Atmananda Lingden). There are also early testimonies of oracular speech by Phalgunanda: these relatively short texts have been published (Subba and Nembang 1991, Kainla 1991).

12 In the third part, I will give an account of the birthday celebrations, Phalgunanda Janmajayanti (‘birth jubilee’), having experienced them as participant observer in Phidim on 10–11 November 2018. This is a two-day event: on the eve of the birthday, there is a grand sacrifice celebrated by followers on Sumhatlung ridge, which includes the reading of the Sāmjik Mundhum (by sewā saba priests). On the following day, the main public event takes place with the Dharmaguru Atmananda at the Phidim Sports Ground. This part consists in a secular performance of a public ritual: it contains above all political messages.

**Everyday rituals**

13 Ordinary followers of Phalgunanda usually have a small shrine at home where simple daily rituals are celebrated, once in the morning and once in the evening. For example, the shrine outside the house of a Satyahangma follower may only contain a small batti (lamp) which burns day and night and offerings of fruit for the goddess, represented by two sickles and a stone. Besides this ‘outside’ shrine, there is usually one inside the house. This is all that is required for daily worship.

14 A more elaborate symbolism is found in the public temple compounds of Satyahangma manghim (‘god houses’). Note that followers of Phalgunanda’s successor, Atmananda Lingden, have developed their own idiosyncratic style, though the basic structure is the same for all temples. I have seen the situation in Labrekuti and Silauti (Panchthar district), the oldest temples built by the Mahaguru in the 1920s, and more recent ones built over the last period: there is clearly remarkable continuity. It is quite evident that the idea of temples, which is alien to traditional Kirati religion, has been introduced or at least popularised by Phalgunanda.

15 The typical compound consists of the following three basic parts: a temple (manghim), an open fireplace and an outside area for various Limbu territorial divinities. The images (Fig 3–6, 9) are from Sankhadevi/Lubhu.
Fig 3. Old (middle) and new temple (to the right) with roofed fireplace in Sankhadevi/Lubhu

The main temple contains an eight-level pyramidal structure (Fig 4), the typical ‘uniconic’ shrine found in all Satyahangma temples. This shrine is known as mujoklung. The number of levels varies: one also finds shrines with seven levels, though eight is the commonest. This is the main place for worship and offerings: fruits, pure water, oil lamps (batti), flowers, etc are gifted here.
The term mujoklung has the following meanings (according to the Limbu-Nepali-English Dictionary, Chemjong and Kainla 2010: 341): ‘creation, creator; self-manifest emerging god, svayambhu’. The main divinity is thus worshiped as an abstract ‘form-less’ (nirguna) deity. As I have argued elsewhere, this shrine, already used by Phalgunanda, appears to be inspired by the Josmani Sant tradition, a Bhakti sect influential in eastern Nepal (see Gaenszle 2018). It has been reported that Phalgunanda was initiated into the Josmani panth in 1913 by a Guru who gave him the religious name Phalgunanda. Today the Josmani use similar abstract shrines for worship.

Inside the temple there is a special tripartite shrine (Fig 5) consisting of three covered spaces for the three domestic divinities – from left to right: Yuma (‘grandmother’), Himmang (‘house deity’) and Theba (‘ancestor deity’) – which are ‘inside’ deities. This setup is widespread among the Limbu. However, note that several images of the Mahaguru are to be found here. This is quite typical and shows that the mujoklung shrine is closely associated with its founding hero, Phalgunanda. Images of Atmananda are also common but not as frequent.
No temple compound is complete without its *khijoklung* (Fig 6), a fireplace made up of an eight-pointed star used for fire sacrifices (*hom*). The latter, however, are celebrated only on special occasions, such as on the eve of Phalgunanda *Janmjayanti*, the birthday celebrations (see below).

**Fig 5.** Here a layman reads from the *Sāmjik Mundhum*, addressing domestic divinities

**Fig 6.** *Khijoklung* for worship of *midhung mirak mang*, a ceremony included in the *Sāmjik mundhum*
In fact, the term *mijoklung khijoklung* is used as a ritual binomial term (twin word), so the two are closely associated (cf Angdembe 2011: 76). It is the main temple that is used for everyday rituals which above all include the reading of Mundhum texts. As these texts are now easily available in print, anyone who wishes to can perform worship without the assistance of a priest. A more recent example of the temple outline is the newly installed shrine in Phidim, which was inaugurated during the *Janmajayanti* in 2018 (Fig 7 and 8).

Fig 7. Newly installed *mujoklung* in a new temple recently built on Sumhatlungs ridge, Phidim

Photo: Martin Gaenszle, taken on 12 November 2018, HAV. CC-BY-NC-ND licence.
Fig 8. Under the same roof of the new temple (in the background) is the open *khijoklung* area

![Image of the new temple with open khijoklung area](Photo: Martin Gaenszle, taken on 12 November 2018, HAV. CC-BY-NC-ND licence.)

The third constituent of a Satyahangma temple compound is the space for 'outside' divinities (*i:kudapa*): namely, Pungsamang (hunting deity), Lajedangma (earth/soil deity), Teneba (known as Aitabare in Nepali), in addition to other minor divinities. These divinities are usually first presented with offerings.

Fig 9. 'Outside' divinities worshiped in Sankhadevi temple compound

![Image of 'outside' divinities worshiped in Sankhadevi temple compound](Photo: Martin Gaenszle, taken on 9 November 2013, HAV. CC-BY-NC-ND licence.)
Thus, the layout and symbolism of the temple compounds represent the unique synthesis or combination of the traditional Kirati religion (Mundhum), where divinities are worshiped at domestic shrines and temporary altars, with a temple-based religion where divinities have their own house and permanent residence. The *manghim* of the new religion are therefore a manifestation of Phalgunanda’s cultural innovation. It comes as no surprise then that his images are omnipresent in these temples.

These images take various forms. Inside temples, they are in the form of photographs or coloured prints. Outside temples, they are printed on multiple little flags reminiscent of Tibetan prayer flags. These also include sacred letters in Srijanga script and, above all, the syllable ‘ot’, as used by Atmananda and his followers (Fig 10).

Fig 10. Prayer flags with the syllable ‘ot’ and an image of Phalgunanda, outside the Manghim in Sankhadevi

There is also a more modern form of commemorating Phalgunanda: one encounters more and more often statues (memorials) of the Mahaguru, which are usually donated by wealthy, pious individuals or financed through fundraising. These memorials can be found inside or next to temple areas, such as the one in Labrekuti (Fig 11) which is regarded as one of the oldest temples founded by Phalgunanda. However, they are also built at other prominent locations.
Thus, today such memorials are found throughout the Limbu region. There are at least four in Phidim alone: three on Sumhatlung ridge and one at the bazaar. In fact, two of these were recently inaugurated in 2018 on the occasion of Phalgunanda Janmajayanti. Most memorials are recent constructions and one can see in this trend the increasing popularity of the Mahaguru – and the growing potential of his followers to fund memorials.
Though most of these memorials are situated near shrines and have become places of worship (see the one in Phidim Bazaar, Fig 12), there are also more secular kinds of memorials. These can be found at the beginning of and at some points along ‘Phalgunanda Rajmarga’ (Phalgunanda Highway), which begins at the Mahendra Highway in Damak (Jhapa) and passes through Larumba (Ilam) and Ravi to go as far as Ranke (both in Panchthar) where it joins up with the Mechi Highway (Fig 13).
The memory of the Mahaguru is thereby even inscribed in the roadmap of Nepal. Though the road is in a poor state, this is likely to change soon because the road passes through Larumba where the current leader of the movement, Atmananda, who is planning to make Larumba the centre of Kirat country, has his headquarters.

Textual tradition

As is clear from the short outline and the photographs of daily rituals presented so far, the reading of sacred texts is a major feature of Satyahangma religious practice. What kind of texts are these and how did they come about in the first place? Fundamentally, all the texts are regarded as special variants of the ancestral Mundhum, which was ‘received’ in divine inspiration (or possession) by Phalgunanda. The texts are largely invocations of divine beings, recited from a book on certain ritual occasions. Satyahangma dharma is certainly a book-based religion which cherishes the written letter (cf Gaenszle 2021).

Interestingly, though the Mahaguru is known as a keen disseminator of the Srijanga script, he himself apparently has not left any written texts. There does seem to be an exceptional case of some letters being penned by him, but almost all the texts that are attributed to him are handwritten manuscripts in which some of his main disciples have noted down his sayings (Fig 14).
It is generally agreed that the two most important and eminent disciples who carried on the teaching of Phalgunanda were Ranadhoj Nembang (1918–1961) and Badrinanda Tumbapo (1907–1970; Fig 15). Both are Limbus from the area where Phalgunanda was born and they travelled with him for many years until his death. The former was highly productive in writing down sermons and recitations by the Mahaguru and left many manuscripts that are in private collections. The latter, Badrinanda, also wrote down texts but is mainly well known for his role in taking care of Phalgunanda’s successor, Atmananda Lingden, whom he basically brought up and prepared for this role. The difference between the two disciples has had repercussions on the transmission of the tradition because, today, there are basically two lines or spiritual lineages that compete with each other.
One such text, which portrays Phalgunanda’s lively way of speaking (and can be seen as authentic) is to be found in the collections of his divine speeches: the ‘Sivā Khāhun’ or, in Nepali, ‘Amar Vāṇi’. These are religious instructions or exhortations which come with a moral but also a shamanic character, as they are spoken in the way a medium would voice them, channelling the spirit of the main divinity, Tagera Ningwaphu. These ‘divine speeches’ have precise dates and locations, ie they are singular historical events. In a small collection put together by Nayamhang Kailasi Nembang, priest of the Silauti Manghim, and translated by Asman Subba, these speeches date from the years 1930 and 1931 (cf Subba and Nembang 1991). It was the period before the great meeting on Silauti Danda and they convey an idea of how Phalgunanda brought the Limbu together by expressing warnings of cultural decline and the need for reform. However, the vast majority of the texts are ritual texts of the Mundhum, which he recited orally in the context of daily or annual rituals, life-cycle ceremonies and special occasions.

There are basically two forms of transmission, both supposedly the authentic words of the Mahaguru: one is known as the Camcik Mundhum, the other as the Sāmjik Mundhum (both terms mean ‘spiritual /philosophical mundhum’. The former has been edited and published by Nayamhang Kailasi Nembang and closely follows the manuscripts that are available (Nembang 1993). The latter is the most widely used version published by Atmananda and his advisors: it is the ‘official’ book of the Larumba line of the Satyahangma movement (Fig 16 and 17).
This is not the time or the place to launch into a comparison of the two mundhums, though followers regard the difference as significant. This is most visible in the use of ‘ot’ as a holy syllable by the followers of Atmananda, whereas the original sources clearly contain the syllable ‘om’. In a way, this can be seen as the ‘signature’ of the Atmananda lineage. It also highlights the view that this is the ‘updated’ version of the Guru’s Mundhum – it is not the same one but the one endorsed by Dharmacārī Atmananda. Note that the Camcik Mundhum is not widely available, whereas the Sāmjik Mundhum published by Atmananda and his organisation is far more widespread. It is a professionally printed edition in large numbers and distributed not only in Nepal but beyond. Apart from differing in terms of their ‘spiritual lineage’, the two traditions also have a different political weight and outlook. This will become evident in the next section dealing with the celebration of the Phālgunanda Janmājyantī festival in Phidim.

**Phālgunanda Janmājyantī in Phidim**

The most elaborate and most important ritual event in the Satyahangma tradition is the celebration of Phālgunanda’s birthday on Kartik 25. This in itself is interesting because, in South Asian traditions, birthdays (at least of humans) are not usually of great significance, and therefore it comes across as a modern idea. The celebration is a unique mixture of religious and secular rituals. It is performed in a spirit of worship and devotion but can be celebrated by anyone, not only by followers of the Satyahangma tradition, and this is indeed the case. At the same time, however, the event is of national significance and is used by various players to push forward not only religious but also political claims.
The Phālgunanda Janmjayantī is generally celebrated in two stages. On the day before the birthday itself, there are religious offerings and recitations performed by Satyahangma priests, whereas on the day itself the key event is a large public gathering with auspicious guests and thus has a more secular character. To illustrate these processes, I will in what follows give a description and analysis of the event as I observed it in Phidim, eastern Nepal, on 10 and 11 November 2018.

Eve of the birthday: fire offering at Sumhatlung

The main ritual action on Kartik 24, the day preceding the birthday, took place on the ridge above Phidim (Fig 18–23). It should be mentioned that Phidim is not only the district capital of Panchthar but is also regarded by many as the ‘unofficial’ capital of Limbuwan, the land of the Limbus. Thus, the celebrations here are of special symbolic significance. The ridge above the town, known as Sumhatlung, is the site of an old Kiranti shrine, the Sumjiri Sumhatlung temple area. The word sum means ‘three’ and hatlung refers to the stones of a fireplace (ie ‘three hearth stones’): in Kirat culture this is generally a seat of the ancestors.

Sumhatlung’s main shrine is in a walled but open compound, under a large old mango tree, beside various other smaller shrines for Limbu divinities such as Pungsam, Taksangba, Lajedangba. In a prominent position just after the entrance is a stone figure of Phalgunanda (Fig 18–19) which is included in the round of offerings. More recently, another statue of Phalgunanda was built just next to the temple area. And a third one was inaugurated on the following day in the premises of the nearby ‘Mechi English School’. Clearly, Phalgunanda has acquired a privileged position at this sacred site. Outside the walled compound of the main divinities is the tripartite structure of the shrine to Yuma, Himmang, Theba and Wagumang’s tree shrine: all these divinities are worshiped as part of the birthday celebrations.
However, the main ritual on this day was performed in an open temple structure used exclusively for fire offerings, just outside the compound walls. The ritual is organised by the *Sumhatlung Mandir Vyavasthāpan Samiti* (Sumhatlung Temple Management Organisation), i.e. it is not an institution linked directly to a Satyahangma organisation but simply to the temple administration trust.

The ritual started shortly after noon. About a good dozen reciters (known as *sewā sabās*) dressed in white clothing, with white topis, gathered around the fireplace. This group included men and a few women (Fig 20). The sacred place with the pile of wood at the centre was decorated with ‘pure’ offerings, such as fruit, flowers, water etc. Pictures of Phalgunanda were also offered up and added to the shrine (Fig 21).
The main activity for the next two hours, apart from the offerings of flowers and oil lamps (battis), was the recitation of Mundhum verses from the book. Interestingly, various kinds of books were used, the most prominent one being the red-cloth-bound Sāmjik Mundhum used by followers of Atmananda: this book was also the one the chief reciter with the microphone read from (Fig 22).
Fig 22. Chief reciter reading Sāmjik Mundhum

Photo: Martin Gaenszle, taken on 10 November 2018, HAV. CC-BY-NC-ND licence.

Other variants could also be seen. Some photocopied versions had been produced for this event containing the texts used on this occasion. And some handwritten books were used – apparently dating from former times when printing was not yet a widely used practice (Fig 23).

Fig 23. Sewā saba reading handwritten Mundhum

Photo: Martin Gaenszle, taken on 10 November 2018, HAV. CC-BY-NC-ND licence.
All in all, the event was not sectarian, ie exclusively performed by one particular line of the Satyahangma tradition. Nevertheless, the Atmananda faction seemed to dominate in terms of numbers.

At the end, the fire was lit and everyone threw several handfuls of rice grains into the flames. In fact, many kilos of paddy were sacrificed in this way. My Nepali companion, who is not a follower of Atmananda, wryly told me that this is something that Jyotinanda, another follower of Phalgunanda, who died early (in 1984), would not have done since it is a waste of precious food.

Main day. *Janmajayantī*

The main celebration began with the sound of loud noises coming from the sky: two helicopters were trying to land. These rare interruptions to Phidim’s rather leisurely pace of life were a harbinger of what was to come: the visit of prominent leaders. Several high-ranking leaders were expected: especially Atmananda Lingden, the official successor to Phalgunanda who usually celebrates Mahaguru’s birthday with his following in Larumba (in nearby Lam district) but who was to pay an exceptional visit to the Phidim event that year. The scheduled chief guest in 2018 was no less than the incumbent Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli of the Nepal Republic, as announced at the main venue, the Phidim Sports Ground (Fig 24). Unfortunately, Prime Minister Oli could not make the journey (for health reasons) and therefore the Deputy Prime Minister, Defense Minister Ishwar Pokharel came instead from Kathmandu. Thus, one could say that ‘dual sovereignty’ (Rodney Needham 1980, Ch3) of spiritual and temporal power was represented in these two leaders.

Fig 24. Entrance to the main memorial celebration site at the sports ground, Phidim, 11 November 2018

Photo: Martin Gaenszle, taken on 11 November 2018, HAV. CC-BY-NC-ND licence.
Let us now look at the programme in detail. The whole event consisted of various ceremonies that were partly religious and partly secular in character. The first scheduled ceremony was the inauguration of a new Phalgunanda statue donated by the headmaster of the Mechi English School on Sumhatlung Ridge, along with the inauguration of a new temple nearby. For this, the Dharmaguru Atmananda was expected to be the inaugurator and therefore hundreds of devotees stood by the helipad on top of the hill waiting for him to arrive. There was some delay and confusion as the helicopter could not land due to dust, but the Dharmaguru eventually did land and the memorial was unveiled.

The main event, however, took place at the sports ground where several hundred people gathered and a stage for the honorary guests was set up, along with dozens of sacred lamps and a large light in the middle (Fig 25). Several dance groups representing various folk traditions ensured the entertainment (Fig 26). Due to the helicopter landing problem, the whole programme was delayed by two hours, but the honorary guests did eventually arrive: first the Dharmaguru Atmananda and his wife ‘Guru-āmā Pavitrahaṅgā’, accompanied by a host of associates and bodyguards, mounted the stage (Fig 27) and were seated in prominent places.

Fig 25. Main stage for chief guests

Photo: Martin Gaenszle, taken on 11 November 2018, HAV. CC-BY-NC-ND licence.
Fig 26. Folk dances at the sports ground, Phidim

Photo: Martin Gaenszle, taken on 11 November 2018, HAV. CC-BY-NC-ND licence.

Fig 27. Arrival of Atmananda and Pavitranhangma Lingden (with bodyguard)

Photo: Martin Gaenszle, taken on 11 November 2018, HAV. CC-BY-NC-ND licence.
The politicians then arrived, were garlanded (Fig 28) and attributed special seats to the right of Atmananda. In terms of the seating, there was clear precedence of the Dharmaguru and his wife, who occupied the white couch in the centre of the stage, over all the other guests (Fig 29). A special ceremony was performed to unveil a new painting of Phalgunanda, along with a historical photograph on which it was based: this had been taken during a pilgrimage to Khumbakarna in 1938 and is the only other photograph of the Mahaguru that seems to exist (Fig 30).
Atmananda then delivered a speech. Though he is apparently perceived as a charismatic person, to an outside observer he comes across as not very impressive. What he said in plain language was certainly nothing particularly new for the audience. He praised his predecessor’s deeds and spelt out the relevance of his teaching for today: above all, the need for non-violence, vegetarianism and abstinence (from alcohol). He
further elaborated on the importance of education, and – with a further modernising twist – stressed the need for gender-equality.

Immediately after his speech, the Dharmaguru and his following left the Khelmaidan. The subsequent speakers similarly pointed out the topicality of the Mahaguru. The first was Subash Nembang, former Speaker of the Constituent Assembly and a Limbu from Panchthar. Then came Deputy Prime Minister Ishvar Pokharel, then Upper-House Member of Parliament Dr Vijay Subba (UML). As there was a long line of about a dozen speakers of diminishing political importance, the event slowly fizzled out and was followed by a tea party for the special guests.

What can this half religious-half secular ritual tell us about the spiritual identity and political aspirations of the movement? The ceremonial proceedings follow a hierarchical structure: at the top there is the Dharmaguru Atmananda, then come the politicians. First among them was the most senior person – and a Limbu – holding the highest rank (former Speaker of the House), followed the Deputy Prime Minister, and then all the others according to their status. The message is clear: this sequence corroborates the claim of Atmananda to be Phalgunanda’s legitimate successor. This is also clearly expressed in the stage set-up and the banners decorating the dais. The Dharmaguru was celebrated as a quasi-divine figure who occupies the throne of Satyahangma leadership and thus claims a share of the founder’s charisma.

Interestingly, Phidim’s daily newspaper, ‘Phidim Today’, dated 12 November 2018 had a somewhat different order of precedence. Here, the person mentioned first in line was the Deputy Prime Minister, followed by Subash Nembang and another politician. The presence and speech of Atmananda was only mentioned afterwards. Perhaps this merely goes to show the primary focus of journalists, yet it may also be an indication that not everyone is happy with Atmananda’s claim to the highest authority and leadership.

**Conclusion**

All together, the commemorative celebrations in Phidim show in an exemplary manner the importance that Phalgunanda continues to have in contemporary eastern Nepal – and beyond.10 The control over his memory lies in the hands of various actors who do not all have the same background and ideology. The form of the commemoration is to some extent a contested issue and the way the rituals take place reveals the fault lines of this struggle. Though the Satyahangma movement can be seen as a typical manifestation of reformed religiosity that especially appeals to the new middle classes in urban contexts,11 different interpretations of the tradition and organisational structure persist.

The day before the birthday is devoted to the Satyahangma rituals of fire offerings and here it is above all the community and the sewā sabas who run the event. This is a rather inclusive religious performance and everyone who wishes to take part is welcome. In this context, Phalgunanda is commemorated through offerings, ritual speech and the recitation of Mundhum texts that have been passed down to devotees in the form of books in Srijanga script. The Mahaguru is celebrated through ritual practice, emulating the ritual actions he himself established. The collective memory is ensured by mimesis and performance. The reading of books is common practice for all
followers and enforces the canonisation of a not yet completely canonised book tradition. Here the charisma of the founding Guru Phalgunanda is manifest in his teaching and texts: no successor is required for these rituals.

54 On the day itself, the birthday on Kartik 25, the ceremonies take on a more secular hue. Here celebrations make up a large-scale public event with clear political implications. The Mahaguru is also commemorated as the founder of a religious revival: but above all he is celebrated as a national figure who is also a leader with a social message. As Minister Ishwar Pokharel (NCP-UML) stressed in his speech: ‘In today’s situation Phalgunanda’s message of unity is of great importance. He is not only the Guru of the Kiratis but of all Nepal. It is necessary to take the path shown by Phalgunanda in order to establish mutual brotherhood and social goodwill’ (*Phidim Today*, 13 November 2018).

55 However, at the same time, the event at the Phidim Sports Ground is also an opportunity to underline the true legacy of the Mahaguru and the legitimacy of the movement’s current leadership. There is no doubt that, for the Dharmaguru Atmananda, this is an ideal occasion to emphasise his claim to be the only rightful successor to Phalgunanda.22 As Atmananda is from the same Limbu clan (Lingden) as Phalgunanda, this can be seen as a case of inherited charisma, though it is not yet clear which attributes count as legitimising factors. The process of an institutionalisation of charisma has started to be consolidated but is still open-ended. As we have seen, there is at least one other ‘spiritual lineage’ with a different reading of the tradition and in which no new Guru is required, so the leadership of Atmananda remains a contested issue.23 On the whole, the birthday celebration described here is a win-win situation for both the political leaders from the capital, who vie for the vote of the eastern districts, and for the current religious head of the movement, whose followers like to present him as the spiritual leader of all Kiratis.

56 How would the real, historical Phalgunanda have seen these developments in the movement he initiated? Of course, it is difficult to say as we have relatively little information about his personal character.24 Nevertheless, we know that he did not designate a single successor but rather relied on a group of faithful followers whom he trusted to carry on his teaching. Therefore, I doubt that he would have been happy with the current personality cult manifested in the numerous memorial statues that are worshiped today. Considering his background in the Josmani tradition, which is a nirguna Sant sampradâya, he probably would not have condoned such a form of image worship. What counted for him was the right mental and moral attitude. What exactly this means remains an issue for interpretation and contestation – in the ongoing process of commemoration and canonisation.
Fig 31. Phalgunanda with followers, Khumbakarna 1938

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NOTES

1. For biographical details, see Gaenszle 2013, Gurung and Dahal 1990. For a general account of Limbu history, religion and community, see Vandenhelsken and Gaenszle 2019.

2. I have dealt with the current situation of Phalgunanda’s followers and their reformed religion in Gaenszle 2016 and 2018. It is difficult to say how many followers there are, as there is no formal initiation required, but the largest concentration of Satyahangma adepts is to be found in the village of Larumba (Ilam District) where a whole settlement of Atmananda’s followers has been established. However, as will be clear in what follows, not all those who hold Phalgunanda in respect are followers of this contemporary Guru.

3. Note that, though the majority of Limbus today regard Phalgunanda as an important historical figure who fought for Limbu rights, they do not follow his path, especially the ideas of vegetarianism and abstention from alcoholic drinks. Rather, the Kirat Yakthung Chumlung (KYC), the main ethnic Limbu organisation, stands for the preservation of traditional culture, including shamanic rituals and sumptuous communal festivals. Apparent indications of a ‘Hindu influence’ are generally rejected (though the recurrent trishul is not seen as problematic). It is significant that at the Hattiban temple (Kathmandu Valley), an important Kirati shrine which includes Satyahangma rituals, the worship of Atmananda is clearly not welcome.

4. A further example is Yogmaya, a widowed Brahman woman turned female ascetic who led a resistance movement against the Ranas around the same time (the 1930s) as Phalgunanda’s movement, located in the Arun Valley (east Nepal), not far from the Limbu area. It is said that she and some sixty of her followers died by drowning themselves in the Arun River in 1941 after the Rana government rejected their demands (Aziz 2001, Hutt 2013).


6. Unfortunately, I only have a copy of a poor-quality, blurred photograph of Ranadhoj Nembang. This is published in Serma 2011: 118.

7. I am grateful to Mélanie Vandenhelsken for giving me access to the photographs she made of a copy in the Kirat Yakthung Chumlung Library in Patan.

8. I also witnessed the rituals once at the Manghim in the Pashupati temple compound, Kathmandu, in 2013. There were some differences in scope but the basic structure appeared to be the same.

9. Both men and women can become sewā sabas, provided they have the necessary knowledge of reading texts in the Limbu script and have taken a course at a special school in Larumba, the ‘Kirat Mundhum Nisam Him’, where senior sewā sabas also teach the performance of the accompanying rituals.

10. Note that Phalgunanda’s birthday is celebrated not only in other places in Nepal, in particular in the Kathmandu Valley, but also among the diaspora, eg in the UK where many Limbu and other Kirati reside due to their strong link with the British Army’s Gurkha Brigade. However, the celebrations in Phidim take precedence over the latter.

11. This is often accompanied by a rise in individualism and new codes of behaviour (Gellner & Letizia 2016: 16).
12. In earlier times, another follower of Phalgunanda was seen as a potential successor: Jyotinanda, a Rai from Bhojpur. However, he died prematurely at the age of 27 in 1984 and was therefore never a serious competitor. Another, younger candidate was Omnanda, also a Rai, who showed signs of incarnation, but he founded his own sectarian community based on his creed of ‘lovism’ (Gaenszle 2013: 69–70).

13. It seems likely that, sooner or later, those who do not follow Atmananda and perform rituals according to the Camcik Mundhum will formally break away. Such a fission or segmentation into different sectarian factions is, of course, not uncommon in South Asia. See for example the case of the Krishna Pranami studied by Toffin (2011).

14. Most eyewitnesses describe him as a rather modest, down-to-earth person. An elder in Phidim, who remembered meeting him in his childhood days, recounted the following: ’the Mahaguru would calmly do his ritual recitations in the morning, go around giving emphatic and strict moral sermons during the daytime and mingle to chat casually with elders in the evening’.

ABSTRACTS

The new Kirati religion founded by the spiritual leader and ‘national luminary’ Mahaguru Phalgunanda Lingden (1885–1949) is a unique blend of an ethnic tradition marked by shamanic practice and elements of Hinduism. Little is known about the ritual practice performed by the Mahaguru himself and his disciples. However, today, the principal successor, Atmananda Lingden, is propagating his version of the Satyahangma religion and building a large community of followers. Rituals are based on the Sāmjik Mundhum, a red book containing the canonical text. My contribution here will take a look at the making of this ritual tradition and the controversies that have resulted from different interpretations of Phalgunanda’s heritage. The biggest event in the year is the celebration of Phalgunanda’s birthday on Kartik 25 (ca 11 November). In eastern Nepal in particular, this is an event of great spiritual as well as political importance, as could be observed in 2018.

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Keywords: Limbu culture, Kirat, reformed religion, birthday celebration, ritual practice, secularism

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