

The Indian North-East Frontier and the Nepalese Immigrants

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Territorially large societies such as India provide challenges to the analysts because of their expanse and complexity. There is another obvious dimension: whether the Indian state and the Indian society are the same. While the former has a legal, formal, and constitutional existence, the same cannot be said about the latter. The frequent cliché about the Indian society is that of 'unity in diversity', acknowledging its plurality. Looking at the situation from an entirely territorial point of view, the Himalayas, and for that matter the north-eastern frontier region, is peripheral to the mainstream. The Nepalese, nestling in the Himalayas and immigrating to the north-eastern frontier region are the focus of our present analysis. We propose to examine briefly the Indian mainstream and the north-eastern periphery. Secondly, we intend to examine the issue of the Nepalese immigrants in India and analyse its various aspects. And finally, we would like to examine the questions of identity and the dilemma faced by the Indian Nepalese. We find the Indian Nepalese with conflicting identities—as Nepalese and as Indians—which have to be resolved for a happier Indian social scene and a harmonious way of life.

MAINSTREAM AND PERIPHERY

Among the two approaches to understanding a large state such as India, the first may be identified as politico-cybernetic-communicational, in which the key concern is with power and related concepts such as authority, control, dominance, influence, coercion, surveillance, and so on. The control of the state, defined as a political system with monopoly of the use of force over its territory, over the physical and human resources and its deployment of coercive devices are considered natural. In this context, the state is presumed to be like a unicellular organism with nuclei (core, centre, and capital), bodies (territorial expanse), and outer membranes (the boundary) with stomi (border passes, ports). It is considered as a system in which a continuous surveillance by the dominant of their subordinates' behaviour, and the deployment of threats and punishments are normal ingredients (Strassold 1980). All these are performed in terms of power, which is defined as control over communication flows, located in the state, at a point where selection is possible, decisions are made, and information is transmitted. Naturally, commands flow down from the

centre to the periphery and information is demanded in the opposite direction. From this point of view, the extensive territory of India may be understood as a hierarchy of power centres branching out from a seat of ultimate decision making.

Alternatively, in the normative approach to understanding the phenomenon of state, power is substituted with a collective consensus on shared goals and values. Emphasis is placed on society, and social order is achieved through the spontaneous co-ordination of individual behaviour and not through a coercive power system. Status and prestige are peacefully and unanimously accorded to those who fill the most strategic roles in society. It is presumed that there is a central zone as a realm of values, beliefs, and emotions in the structure of society. This central zone also provides a set of activities, roles, and personnel within the network of institutions. In this way, the central zone is intimately connected with what society considers to be sacred and ideal, espoused by the ruling authority (Shils 1961). From this point of view, larger territorial entities such as India have a number of subsystems which are organized through common and overlapping sets of values, ideals, and personnel. Needless to say the above subsystems characterize the pattern of authorities symbolized by individual behaviour.

These two approaches may appear apparently contradictory. However, as Strassold argues,

real societies are mixture of both models; the political-cybernetic one strongly tied to a spatial pattern of centre-periphery, and the sociological-culturological one, which is much more volatile in its spatial reference. No wonder then that both the 'materialistic' model based on power and communication and the symbolic model based on consent and shared meaning have been subjected to analysis through spatial categories such as centre-periphery (1980:40).

If one examines the expanse of the Indian Union closely from the centre to the periphery from the points of view of religion, language, and political control as indicators of power structure, certain interesting patterns emerge. First, predominantly Hindu, Hindi-speaking and traditionally a Congress-supporting Rajasthan, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Delhi may be identified with the core or mainstream of the Indian system.¹ In terms of political power,

¹ 'The world Hindu denotes a joint family of different faiths, different peoples. . . . It is evolved out of the heterogeneous ways of life of hundreds of tribes and communities that lived in India for ages. This form of Hinduism is a multi-centred, decentralized structure formation of the ways of life of all those people. Of course, the central norms of Hinduism are represented by the beliefs and thoughts of the Indo-Aryan groups because of the dominating role of those people in the making of Indian history. But influences of the non-Aryan communities should not be minimized. Thus, while peripheral beliefs will have no place in the religious books of the Hindus, some of these beliefs will certainly be part of Hindu practice' (Barlinge 1986:1-2).

40 per cent of the seats in the Indian Parliament, the sovereign authority over the Indian landmass, are controlled by them. Secondly, as associates to the core or mainstream we may identify states such as Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, West Bengal, Tripura, and Assam. These are also predominantly Hindu (though non-Hindi speaking), but also constitute a stronghold of the Congress or some 'national' parties with a few exceptions. They control 52 per cent of the states in the Indian Parliament. Thirdly, on the outer fringe of these two zones there are states such as Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab, Goa, Lakshadwip, the Andaman Islands, Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, and Sikkim. These units are inhabited by predominantly non-Hindu, non-Hindi speaking communities and have a strong tradition of regional political parties (Chaube 1984:235-37). They elect only 8 per cent of the members to the Indian Parliament. It may not be out of place to put on record that Jammu and Kashmir and Lakshadwip are the two Muslim majority states. Punjab is the only Sikh state, Sikkim is the only predominantly Buddhist state and Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Arunachal Pradesh are the scheduled tribal states within the Indian Union. As a broad generalization, the first two categories may be identified with the core or mainstream, while the third zone may profitably be thought of as the periphery.

If one examines the north-eastern frontier from the mainstream it appears vague, distant, and amorphous. Physical distance from the core is coupled with the insufficiency of the communication network. There is no quick, effective, and convenient means of communication between the core and this region. In such a situation, those who go to the region consider themselves rather as pioneers, explorers, and adventurers. The white-collar functionaries come to the region on punishment, occasional promotions and out-of-routine postings. Very rarely does a functionary opt for a posting in this region. And why should he? After all, no significant decisions, even those affecting the local situations, are taken in the region. Consequently, a frontier functionary, who lives a deprived and inconvenient life, plays no role in the process of decision making; rather he is supposed to obey 'orders' from 'above' and to keep on filing the information.

On the other hand, the frontier communities equally feel the core to be complex, manipulative, mysterious, devoid of sensibility, and a jungle of rules. The moment they get out of their native environment, they confront language, food, transport and communication that are uncomfortable and unfamiliar. It is a fact that the better parts of the region became part of India effectively only during the last 150 years or so. Even Assam, the traditional Ahom land, came effectively under the Hindu fold (and thus to the mainstream) as late as the seventeenth century. That is why social structure, commensality, marital pattern, and festivals are uniquely Assamese. In such a situation, the various states in the region are not in a

position to identify a collective code of conduct, a shared belief, and historically transmitted traditions along with the mainstream. This picture becomes all the more muddled when we examine the issues pertaining to the Nepalese immigrants in the region, who are identified neither with the mainstream nor with the associates to the mainstream or even to the periphery or indeed any distinct territory of their own within the Indian Union.

NEPALESE IDENTITY

In the traditional view, Nepal has been on the cultural frontiers of India and China. The legend goes that a celebrated ascetic called Ne 'cherished' or 'looked after' the land known as Nepal (Ne + *pal*: the country looked after by the ascetic Ne). In ancient Indian tradition Ne was a benevolent patron saint, the guardian of Nepal (Patterson 1983:126). According to another tradition the bodhisattva Manjusri, coming down from China, drained the Kathmandu valley by opening the southern rocks and permitting water to flow down to the Indian plains as the river Bagmati (Pemble 1971:1). The earliest inhabitants of the land are said to be Kiratas—a loose generic term for numerous tribes, who are claimed to have immigrated from Assam and north-east India to Nepal. The Newars, a literate and cultured race, came to Nepal either from India or Tibet several centuries before the Christian era. Their industry, artistry, sculpture, architecture, language, and urbanity were identified as uniquely Nepalese.

Another Indian wave of immigrants came to Nepal in the form of Lacchhari Hindu Rajputs, who introduced to classical Hindu institutions of *varna*. More urbane Newars tried to assimilate the new role among themselves and for this reason they are known as *Buddhamargis* (worshippers of the Buddha) and *Shivamargis* (worshippers of the Hindu deity Shiva). Thus, Hinduism and Buddhism mingled to co-exist in Nepal, a state of affairs epitomized by the sacred centres of the Hindu Pashupati and the Buddhist Swayambhunath temples in Kathmandu. It appears that *the Kiratas were pushed to the north-eastern part of the country, where their descendants are found as Rais, Magars, Limbus, and other tribes even today.*

The contemporary usage of the terms Gurkha and Nepalese has a recent history. In the beginning of the eighteenth century, the land between the valley of Kathmandu and Kumaon was fragmented into forty-six lordships, grouped into two loose confederations. The Baisis (twenty-two principalities) were located in the Karnali basin and the Chaubis (twenty-four principalities) were in the Narayani (Gandaki) basin. These principalities were theoretically under the Mughal emperor of India, but in practice they were autonomous. The Shah family of Gurkha, a small

state in Chaubisi and alleged to be immigrants from Chittor in Rajasthan, emerged as the strong force under their ruler, Prithvi Narayan Shah, in the middle of the eighteenth century. The Gurkhas proceeded to conquer the entire valley, defeating the Malla rulers of Kathmandu and Patan in 1768 and Bhatgaon in 1769, and the Gurkha ruler thus acquired for himself the title of 'the king of the hills'. The Gurkha forces increased their might and by 1815 they had subjugated the territories from the Tista river in the east to the Sutlej river in the west, and from the northern Gangetic plains to the high Himalayan ranges. In the course of time, the Gurkhas, or 'Nepalese', turned out to be a nation of several tribes and castes, who claimed to be the descendants of the original subjects of the Gurkhas and who speak the language called Gurkhali or Nepali.

From an ethnological point of view the Gurkhas or Nepalese can be divided into three major ethnic stocks. First the Kiratis, claimed to be the earliest inhabitants of the land, are divided into a number of largely endogamous tribes such as Rai, Magar, Limbu, Lepcha, Tamang, etc., who speak their own dialects, are either Hindus, Buddhists, or animists and are located in the north-eastern and eastern part of Nepal (Sinha 1975:7). They are traditionally hillmen, are fond of forests and ethnologically closer to the north-eastern tribal region of India. Secondly, the Newars, an urban trading and commercial stock located mainly in the Kathmandu valley and eastern Nepal, are also divided into a number of castes among themselves (Rosser 1978). The Newars, who possess their own script, language, arts, crafts, and architecture, are bilingual like the Kiratis, since besides their native Newari they also speak Gurkhali. Their contribution to the Nepalese tradition is immense and they are one of the three pillars of the present Nepalese rule (Gaige 1975; Sinha 1984:86). It is an enterprising community, spread all over Kathmandu valley, eastern Nepal, Sikkim, Tibet, Darjeeling and north-eastern India. Thirdly, the Thakuris or the Gurkhalis are the Nepalese counterpart of the Indian Hindu endogamous caste system, with their concept of purity and pollution. The Chetris, a term which is a corruption of *kshatriya*, are the rulers of Nepal and have contributed to the consolidation of the Nepalese nation. They are very proud of their Hinduism and their martial tradition. Though they are found in all parts of Nepal, they are settled mainly in the western and central regions and the Kathmandu valley. On another plane, the Nepalese can be divided into two groups (Sinha 1975:8): the *tagadharis* (those who are entitled to the sacred thread) and *matwalis* (those who are outside Hindu orthodoxy and are permitted to drink intoxicating beverages). While all the Kiratis, most of the Newars, and some of Thakuris are known as *matwali*, the high caste Newar Hindus and Gurkhas are included among the *tagadhari*.

NEPALESE IMMIGRATION TO INDIA

The Nepalese presence in the north-eastern region has a long history and their role in its unification, development, and reconstruction has been crucial. It is claimed that the ancient Pragjyotish state was extended from Sunkosi (Subansri) in the east to Kushma (Kosi) in the west. Similarly, the ancient kingdom of Kamrup extend up to eastern Nepal (Dungel 1983; Amanatullah 1936). Much later in the second decade of the sixteenth century the Coch king, Vishwa Singh, married Ratna Kanti Devi, the daughter of the Malla king of Kantipur (Kathmandu). It is claimed that the Coch king brought from Nepal to his kingdom a number of Brahmin priests, woodwork artisans, stone and metal sculptors and the pagoda-style temples. Similarly, Nildhwaj and Narnarain, the two Kamrup kings, were married in Nepal. Apart from their consorts they brought to their kingdom Brahmin priests, Chetri warriors, farmers, herdsman, and artisans from Nepal and granted them rent-free land (Dungel 1983).

It is claimed that a mountain contingent from the Nepal hills fought on the British side at the battle of Plassey in 1757. That was one of the glorious periods of the Nepalese history, as noted above, when Prithvi Narayan Shah was consolidating his Gurkha kingdom between the Sutlej and the Tista. He had a plan to attack the Coch and Ahom kings in collusion with the Deb Judhir of Bhutan. The British intervention in the Coch-Bhutan dispute on behalf of the Coch and the subsequent removal of the Deb Judhir from power temporarily contained the Gurkhas' eastward expansion. However, from 1780 to 1813 they raided Sikkim, and its south-western part, known as Vijaypur Sikkim, came under Nepalese control to the extent that the plains district of Rangpur in Bengal Presidency touched the Nepalese and the Bhutanese territories in 1813. Ultimately, the Nepalese ambitions clashed with the British, resulting in the present political boundaries of Nepal. The Indo-Nepalese Treaty of Sugauli, 1815, stipulated that the territory east of Mechi river would be taken away from the Nepalese, and it was restored to Sikkim following the Treaty of Titalia. The British arm-twisting tactics with Sikkim for the next five decades and the Indo-Bhutan war of 1864 resulted in the creation of the British districts of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Kamrup, Goalpara, and Daranga.

An 88,320 acre (or 138 square mile) area of Darjeeling with about 100 persons was acquired by the British in 1835 as the site for a health resort. The Sikkim Durbar used to get a revenue of about twenty rupees in those days, and this was handsomely compensated by the British, a point which was later contested by Hope Namgyal, the consort of the last ruler of Sikkim (Namgyal 1966). The mountainous parts of the district were inhabited by a few Lepcha, Limbu and Bhutia families. However, it is claimed that the annual revenue in 1845 from the Sikkimese Terai used to be about Rs. 50,000 to Rs. 55,000 (Namgyal and Dolma 1908). About a

dozen headmen are named, who paid land revenue, cattle tax, timber royalty, pig tax, ferry duties on goods, and incomes from lawsuits in estate properties. By 1849, the revenue to the Sikkim Durbar had fallen to Rs. 15,878/12/6. The reason for the declining revenue was not lost sight of by the royal couple:

In 1839, Darjeeling contained about a hundred *bastiwallahs* but within ten years more than 10,000 houses had settled there. People from all parts of the country flocked there. It having become a great market, the slaves and menial classes of Sikkim, Bhutan and Nepal—all—took refuge there. The Sikkim people, not being aware of or used to the usages of powerful government, used to pursue their slaves and kidnap them back from Darjeeling. And the criminals from Darjeeling sought refuge in Sikkim. These things brought about an ill-will [between the British and Sikkim] (Namgyal and Dolma 1908).

The Nepalese were recruited to the British Indian army in a big way after 1815. They not only turned out to be a strong ally and mercenary force but also became pioneers of the British penetration into the eastern Himalayas. The British were engaged in developing the eastern Himalayan foothills for tea-planting, an attractive proposition for the gregarious and thriving Nepalese. Moreover, in their efforts to contain the Bhutias of Sikkim and Bhutan and in a limited way even the tribes of the eastern frontiers, the British used the Nepalese as a wedge between themselves stationed in the plains and the indigenous people. Thus, they formed 34 per cent of the population of Darjeeling out of 94,712 in 1872, a proportion which had increased to more than 50 per cent of the total by 1901 (O'Malley 1985:41).

Between 1869 to 1907 the population increased by about three times. According to the census of 1941, Nepal provided 45 per cent of foreign immigrants to India. According to the 1961 census the number of immigrants per 100 persons over the period 1931–61 averaged around 35 persons in the hill areas of Darjeeling. Needless to say, in the early period it was still higher (Dasgupta 1985: 52).

By the middle of 1980s more than 90 per cent of the population in the hill district of Darjeeling are claimed to be of Nepalese origin. It appears that the Nepalese prefer grazing and farming in the hilly and forested areas. Their presence is noted by eloquent absence elsewhere in the tea growing districts, Darjeeling excepted. The Royal Commission on Labour in India, 1930, recorded that even in Jalpaiguri, the plains district with the highest number of Nepalese tea plantation labourers, there was a decline of 30 per cent in the Nepalese plantation force between 1911 and 1921. Possibly the Nepalese were lured to the adjoining northern Bhutan as graziers and farmers, as Nepalese were immigrating to southern Bhutan in considerable numbers in those days.

Even before the British emerged as the masters of Sikkim, there were Newar coin minters (*taksharis*) such as Laxidhar and Chandrabir Pradhans,

who were permitted to mine copper for coinage on behalf of the Durbar (Bhattacharya 1980:220–226; Sinha 1975:8). Sikkim effectively came under the British empire in 1889, when John C. White was appointed the Political Officer at Gangtok. White, an engineer by profession, took the job of infrastructural and economic development of his charge seriously. In his zeal for development he took the Nepalese under his wing at the cost of alienating even the royal couple. This appears to have been part of the British ethnic policy in the eastern Himalayas in the 1890's. Herbert Risley, the British scholar-administrator, wrote in 1894:

The Lepchas are rapidly dying out; while from the west, the industrious Newars and Gurkhas of Nepal are pressing forward. . . . Here also religion will play a leading part. In Sikkim, as in India, Hinduism will assuredly cast out Buddhism, and the praying wheel of the Lama will give place to the sacrificial implements of the Brahmins. The land will follow the creed; the Tibetan proprietors will gradually be disposed and will be taken themselves to petty trade. . . . Thus, race and religion, the prime movers of the Asiatic world, will settle the Sikkim difficulty for us in their own way (Risley 1894).

However, within fifty years, the British ethnic policy in Sikkim changed completely. The new Indian Union was advised by the political officer to encourage Sikkim and Bhutan to distance themselves from India so that a new element of Buddhism should not be added to the existing Indian communalism.

The excerpt from Risley lays bare the British ethnic policy in Sikkim. Consequently, from 1891 to 1986 the Nepalese population in Sikkim had increased phenomenally. With a view to creating a better future, they joined the movement for democratization against the feudal anachronism. It was primarily a movement by the Nepalese peasants led by semi-educated persons of lower middle class. Neither did they have any ideological sophistication nor organizational skill. They altogether lacked a sense of larger political perspective. It was a confused movement against vague targets. Their slogans, symbols and programmes were largely irrelevant to the local situations. That is why when the Political Officer of the independent India dismissed the first popular government in Sikkim in May 1949, the Sikkim State Congress leadership was thoroughly puzzled. This dismissal was, in the typical British colonial style, in utter disregard of the fact that the State Congress was practically the Sikkimese branch of the Indian National Congress which was ruling India at that time. In the new situation, Sikkim meant the Maharaja of Sikkim, and not the people of Sikkim. Thus, the administration was once more handed over to the paternalistic care of the ICS, who saw to it that the staggering feudal structure was strengthened at the cost of the democratic forces.

What resulted on the Sikkimese political scene came to be known as

the democratic fraud of the parity formula, a concession to the feudal authority and deception of democracy to the people of Sikkim. The crown prince and later the last Chogyal, Palden Thondup, organized the Sikkim National Party, an antithesis of the State Congress. It is an open secret that in typical British colonial style, New Delhi encouraged the Durbar in its manoeuvring against the State Congress. No doubt it was a vulnerable movement because of its weak social base. In this way, what happened in Sikkim between 1973 and 1975 was neither an invasion nor a revolution. It was simply a matter of changed priority from New Delhi's point of view. The Chogyal had overplayed his limited role, gone beyond his brief, and was already nursing hopes of an international role and identity which he never had. In the new dispensation, while the Lepcha-Bhutias were recognized as the scheduled tribes with twelve out of thirty-two elective seats in the State Assembly, the Nepalese felt cheated, as the rest of the unreserved seats were declared open to be contested by any Indian citizen. By then four-fifths of an estimated four lakh of the total Sikkimese population belonged to the Nepalese and another 30,000 stateless Nepalese were waiting for formal citizenship certificates. The Nepalese leaders in Sikkim have been demanding reservation of the seats in the State Assembly for the Nepalese, recognition of Nepali as one of the Indian regional languages and granting of citizenship to the stateless Nepalese. Though these issues have been hanging fire for nearly a decade now, the state is ruled by the Nepalese and Nepali is one of the state languages of Sikkim. It is the only state of the Indian Union in which the language has been accorded such a privilege.

Nepalese sources claim that the Dharmaraja Namgyal settled some Nepalese in the Dalimkote region of Bhutan in the seventeenth century (Dungel 1983). However, the effective Nepalese colonization of Bhutan started with the Indo-Bhutanese war of 1864. It was the Zungta Kazi and Ha Dzongpen, the effective ruler of western Bhutan, who invited the industrious and sturdy Nepalese to clear the difficult Duars with British encouragement. Charles A. Bell, the settlement officer in Kalimpong, provided statistics on 500 square miles of western Bhutan in 1904 (Bell 1904). According to him, the Siphchu and Sangbe Kazis had 750 and 50 houses of the Nepalese under their respective controls. The three Nepalese *thikadars*—the contractual settlers—Nandlal Chhetri, Garajman Gurung, and Lalsing Gurung, could count 800, 1,000, and 130 houses of the Nepalese in their command. Bell worked out a population of 15,000 Nepalese in the region calculated at the rate of 5.5 persons per house; an apparent underestimate, because the native Bhutanese families were always smaller than those of the Nepalese. He found the Nepalese under oppressive Bhutanese control and even then he identified four reasons for immigration. First, the land was much more abundant in Bhutan than in the

adjoining British territory. Secondly, tenants in Bhutan could cultivate any unoccupied land and burn the jungle as they pleased. In fact, in view of the backward state of cultivation the situation was much appreciated by the Bhutanese authorities although extensive forests were exposed to wanton burning and grazing. Thirdly, they could brew all kinds of liquor without restriction both for their consumption and for sale. And lastly, they could cut wood wherever they desired, as there were no reserve forests in Bhutan.

Some three decades after Bell's survey, Capt. C. J. Morris undertook an extensive tour of southern Bhutanese districts to assess the possibilities for Nepalese recruitment into the Assam Rifles stationed at Shillong. He worked out a rough estimate of about 5,494 Nepalese houses from the places he could visit. However, he could not visit all areas of Bhutan, such as Siphchu, which were inhabited by the Nepalese. Thus he estimated an approximate 6,000 Nepalese houses and worked out a population of about 60,000 at the rate of ten persons per family. However, he had good reasons to believe that the correct population figure of the Nepalese in Bhutan was considerably more than the estimate. The Bhutanese system of taxation encouraged large immigrant families, as land rent was levied on each house, not on the family. Estimating the population of Bhutan as 300,000, he found more than 20 per cent of the total to be Nepalese (Morris 1932).

There has been no formal census in Bhutan, though the authorities occasionally claim to provide the latest population figures of the country. The latest official population of Bhutan was claimed to be 1,165,000 in 1981, distributed through eighteen districts. The Nepalese immigrants are huddled in large settlements, unlike their indigenous northern neighbours, in three south Bhutanese districts. Though the state does not provide an ethnic breakdown of the population figures, it is claimed officially that 15 per cent of the total Bhutanese are from Nepal. The Nepalese, settled as peasants in large villages, provide almost the entire urban-industrial unskilled labour force of the country. They claim to contribute at least 60 per cent of the total population of Bhutan. One may safely say that while the official population figure is patently underestimated, the Nepalese claim is equally wild. On balance it would be fair to estimate at least one-third of the total population of twelve lakh Bhutanese to be of Nepalese origin.

THE NEPALESE ON THE EASTERN FRONTIERS

'There is a hill; send up a Gurkha' is more appropriate in the context of the seven states of the North-Eastern Council (Chandler 1913). The first direct contact between the Nepalese and this region appears to have occurred in 1817, when 1,000 Hindustanis and Gurkhas took part in the

Sylhet operation as part of the Cuttack Legion (later known as the Assam Light Infantry; Shakespeare 1977:6). It is claimed that one Subedar Jaichand Thakur, retired from the Eighth Gurkha Platoon, Sylhet, got settled as early as 1824 at Shillong. He is credited to have built a Radha Krishna temple at the place of his residence (Dungel 1983). Some four decades after that Thurnton records in his memoirs that an irregular corps of the Sylhet Light Infantry consisting mainly of Gurkhas was stationed at Jowai in the Jaintia Hills during the 1862 rebellion (Thurnton 1895:104). The Nepalese presence was such that even before the capital of Assam was shifted to Shillong Thurnton found, in 1867, that 'an excellent cricket ground had been formed on the smooth and level floor of a valley . . . and cricket was played several times a week. . . . The Gurkhas are very fond of games like cricket and football and sometimes excelled in them' (Thurnton 1895:153).

The story of Nepalese involvement in the consolidation of the region under the British empire is ably presented through the pages of Col. Shakespeare's *History of Assam Rifles* (1977). Whether it was Sylhet or the Shillong plateau, Naga Hills or Lushai Hills, Chittagong Hill tracts or Sadiya Frontier tracts, the Bhutan wars or the Manipur rebellion, the Gurkhas constituted half the Assam Rifles and were always there in operation. Their important role in the Assam Rifles was recognized as early as 1865, when the Nepalese *khuksi* replaced the short sword which had impeded their progress through the jungle (Shakespeare 1977:23). It may be appropriate to inform the readers that in the course of time the crossed *khukri* was accepted as the emblem of the Assam Rifles, the custodians of the security of the region.

The Gurkhas could perform any odd and sundry job, including specialized jobs, assigned to them. Col. Shakespeare records an incident revealing the versatility of the Gurkhas. It was during the Surma Valley expedition in 1871, recorded by Lord. F. Roberts, the senior Staff Officer. To begin the construction of the first bridge

he sent for the Sapper Officer. . . . It would take time, the Officer said, as he first had to calculate the force of the current, weight to be borne by the bridge, strength of the timber required etc. He left to make his calculations and plans, and some of the Frontier Police came up to Lord Roberts to ask if he needed a bridge there. On hearing this was the case, the men, together with some Gurkhas of the 42nd ALI, set to at once, some felling bamboos and trees, others cutting them to required length, while others waded to their chest in the stream and drove uprights into the river bed, to which the bamboo flooring was then rapidly attached. The bridge was completed in a rough but efficient way, and was being tested by marching men over it before the Sapper Officer returned with all his calculations ready to begin his work. His surprise at seeing this unscientific but practical method of bridging can be imagined, and matters of this nature were henceforth left to those better acquainted with such work in this country (Shakespeare 1977:69).

L.S.S. O'Malley, the editor of the Bengal District Gazetteers, echoed this spirit when he recorded that the Nepalese 'are a capable, cheerful and alert people, and are essentially a virile race. Though quick tempered and keen to resent an injustice, they are remarkably willing, and loyal, if treated with consideration. . . . Though small in stature, these Nepalese have big hearts. . . . Naturally vigorous, excitable and aggressive, they are very law abiding' (O'Malley 1985:44). This was also testified in an intelligence report on the official account of the Abor Expedition of 1911-1912:

The greater part of the striking force consisted of Gurkhas. The latter is to great extent a savage himself and remarkably well able to look after himself in the jungle, if he is encouraged to use his own initiative, and this instinct coupled with the fact that he has been trained to think makes him quite able to cope with almost any jungle man (Intelligence Branch, Army Headquarters, 1983: 33-34).

Half of the fighting force and carrier coolies on this expedition were Nepalese.

Besides the Assam Rifles, the Gurkha training centre and various battalions of the armed forces were stationed at and around the district towns and strategic locations on the hills. After their release from service, a number of Gurkhas settled down around these places. Besides the other agencies, the Assam Rifles alone has rehabilitated its Gurkha ex-soldiers on at least thirty-eight sites numbering as many as three thousand individuals. Some of the sites such as Sadiya in Assam, Mantripokhari in Manipur, Aizawl in Mizoram and Mokokchung in Nagaland are as old as a hundred years. Of such sites, Assam alone has thirteen, Manipur eight, Mizoram and Nagaland seven each, Arunachal Pradesh three and Meghalaya and Tripura one each. These are predominantly Nepalese settlements, though there may be a smattering of others. Most of these residents have adapted themselves to the local situation in such a way that they are counted among the indigenous people with all the benefits, even though they have their own communities and their own way of life, speak their language and maintain their own traditions. But the Nepalese have a great capacity to assimilate themselves with the hill communities. They adopt the languages of their neighbourhood, contract marital alliances, and turn out to be an inseparable part of the local economy. In the Mon and Ao areas they have been adopted as members of the tribal communities where they are counted as legally indigenous people and secure the amenities to which the hill tribes are constitutionally entitled. It is said that a former Chief Minister of Nagaland is heavily dependent on the Nepalese electorate of his constituency from Mokokchung. So much so that his father, who was an interpreter in the British days, had adopted a Nepali as his son in accordance with Ao tradition. This adopted Nepali brother of the leader is claimed to be his right hand man in matters of political support.

The Nepalese ex-soldiers were encouraged to settle down in the foothills, forest fringes and in other strategic points on the frontiers. In this way certain compact pockets of Nepalese settlements in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Nagaland, and Manipur emerged. These new settlers, with their peasant background and the discipline of their strict military training, acquired an image as loyal citizens with pro-establishment attitudes towards the government. With their hard work, perseverance and investment of their pensions in agriculture, they have been able to turn out their newly acquired settlements as thriving centres of prosperous peasantry. Their apparent and visible prosperity among the relatively indolent and less achievement-oriented indigenous communities attracts jealousies. There is another aspect of the ex-soldiers' presence in the region. A number of settlements is located in areas where there is considerable movement of armed forces to contain secessionist and extremist activities. The Nepalese ex-soldiers are accused of providing information on strategy and logistics to the armed forces. In such a situation, the Nepalese at times suffer at the hands of the local insurgent groups. That is exactly what happened in April 1980 in the Sagomong area in the Sadar sub-division of the Manipur Central District, when several Nepalese villages were burnt by the suspected insurgents (Sinha 1982:92).

As far as the plains from the Bengal Duars to the Barak Valley are concerned, in terms of Nepalese settlement, a distinct trend may be noted. The less skilful and marginal farmers and pastoralists turned to pastoral grazing on the hilly and forested tracts of the region. The Nepalese herdsmen and marginal farmers trickled down to Assam at least from the first quarter of the present century. The Chief Secretary of the Government of Assam informed the Foreign Secretary of the Government of India on 13 May 1930 that:

The greater number of the numerous Nepali graziers in Assam are Jaisis and Upadhyay Brahmins or Chhetris of non-martial classes. Some of the Gurkhalis of the fighting classes, who have served in the Gurkha regiments in the Assam Rifles, settled down in Assam when they leave the service. During the cold weather many Gurkhalis of martial castes, Rais, Limbus, come to work as sawyers in the Assam forests. Very few of them, however, settle down permanently in Assam. . . . The immigration of the Nepalese into Assam may be described as an administrative nuisance rather than a political menace.

He adds that: 'As the province of Assam develops, the proclivities of the Nepali immigrants for illicit distillation, poaching and avoiding payment of the government revenue will be defeated.'²

Within a decade or so the situation changed. J. H. Hutton initiated a

² India Office Library Records: MSS/EMR/p.7607/1930, confidential letter No. 892-

policy to remove the Nepalese settlers from the Naga Hills on economic and not political considerations. In his view, the Nepalese breed very fast and they would soon be eating up tracts of land in the hills badly needed by the Nagas, already themselves short of land.³ Furthermore, an Intelligence Officer cautioned the government:

That there has been great infiltration of Nepalese eastwards from Nepal is very true and very noticeable. It is impossible for anybody who has lived in Assam, as I have for the last 16 years, not to have noticed the remarkable number of Nepalese that one sees all over the province, particularly in the Assam valley, the hill districts and the frontier tracts.⁴

In this context, the agrarian activities of the Nepalese in the Karbi Anglong and Khasi Hills districts may be referred to as representative cases. The district gazetteer records that 'the Nepalese for the most part were graziers, who keep large herds of cows and buffaloes. They have penetrated deep into the interior of the district and have established *khunties* (herdsmen's temporary sheds). Some of them have taken to cultivation also' (Dutta 1979).

The Nepalese herdsman and farmer moves out of Nepal or its immediate eastern neighbouring Indian districts in search of new opportunities alone or sometimes in small groups of unskilled labourers. The only capital he carries with himself are his personal qualities as a cheerful, perseverant and sturdy hand, his ubiquitous *khukri* and a readiness to do anything to make a living. With this temperament, he easily combines a number of roles in himself as a dairyman, share-cropper, landless labourer, porter, smith, carpenter and even errand boy. When he comes to the eastern hill tracts, he invariably locates himself away from the tribal village on an uninhabited, possibly barren, forest fringe. Often he is guilty of felling forest trees, grazing and even clandestine settlements on the reserve forests.

With his frugal habits, perseverance, and industriousness he makes a difficult living for himself to begin with. His role in the local economy within no time turns out to be significant, because of his availability for any type of agricultural chores. The lonely porter of yesterday begins to be locally identified. He too feels comfortable enough to realize his physical, psychological, and social needs. His cosmopolitan social outlook, relative freedom from restrictions of purity and pollution in terms of food and drink and the prevalence of polygyny enable him easily to acquire a female partner. The number of wives a Nepali may have increases his productive capabilities not only biologically, but also in economic terms. In many cases, it has been found that the larger the family of the Nepali the more prosperous it is. An administrator with about four decades of

³ Confidential File No. C125/47, Political, Assam Secretariat, Fortnightly.

⁴ Report No. 61/24 April 1946 of the Central Intelligence Office, Govt. of Assam.

experience in the region came to the same conclusion: The Nepalese . . . are phenomenally fertile people, and it is not unusual to find among them families where there are four or five wives and twenty to thirty children' (Rustomji 1971:141).

Besides the ex-soldiers and the marginal farmer-graziers, there are artisans and semi-skilled professionals and a newly emerging category of white collar employees among the Nepalese of the region. In the urban centres of the region, where caste-bound professional specialist artisans are non-existent, the Nepalese have been able to fill the role of intermediary semi-skilled professionals between the unskilled local and highly sophisticated professionals from other parts of India. The types of work in which the urban Nepalese are engaged are new to the region. Thus there is little competition from the local indigenous communities, and unlike the rural ex-soldier and farmer Nepalese, they rarely come into conflict with the local community. The urban Nepalese lead a near-cosmopolitan life in which their expenses are in tune with their income. Being a Nepalese does not help a semi-skilled professional, who thus maintains a submerged identity and joins his Hindu, Buddhist, or Christian neighbours for social, cultural, and religious celebrations. The newly emerged white-collar Nepalese, on the other hand, are born, brought up, and educated in the region, speak the local dominant languages besides their mother tongue and remember the sufferings of their fathers. They are politically aware and culturally conscious of their status in the region and the Indian Union as citizens. As they compete for the scarce white-collar jobs with indigenous communities, for whom the positions are reserved in accordance with the law of the land, the educated Nepalese aspirants are unconsciously made aware that they do not belong to the dominant local community. What else can they do but fall back upon the Gurkha past, Hindu traditionalism, and pan-Nepalese solidarity as the panacea?

The Nepalese demographic claim in Assam has always been exaggerated.⁵ There were only 1.9 per cent Nepali speakers in Assam according to the 1961 census. This figure went up to 2.3 per cent in 1971. The Nepali language ranked as the fifth major language of the state. With the exception of plains districts (such as Goalpara, Kamrup, Nowgaon, and Cachar), approximately every fifteenth Assamese is a Nepali in the hill districts (Darrang 5.05 per cent, Dibrugarh 11.05 per cent, Karbi Anglong 6.43 per cent, Sibsagar 2.05 per cent and N.C. Hills 6.17 per cent. Dey 1977: 91-92). While the decennial growth rate between 1961 and 1971 for Assam

⁵ The All India Gurkha League claimed thirteen lakh Gurkhas in Assam on 1 January, 1946 at Gauhati; while their spokesman in the Constituent Assembly, Capt. Dambar Singh Gurung, claimed thirty lakh Gurkhas in India. B. P. Dungal informs us that there were more than thirty-nine lakh Gurkhas in India, though he does not disclose the sources for his estimate.

was 34.95 per cent, for the Nepalese in Assam it turned out to be 48 per cent. Keeping this in view, an estimated number of the Nepalese in the region inclusive of Sikkim, Bhutan, and North Bengal may be anything between three and three and a half million. One may be reminded of the demand in the 1940s of the All India Gurkha League for inclusion of North Bengal in Assam; and later, in the confusing situation of the British withdrawal from India and partition of the country, of their claim made to integrate Nepali-speaking Darjeeling, Sikkim, and Jalpaiguri with Nepal, a proposal endorsed by H. S. Suhrawardy, the Muslim League Premier of Bengal (Deb and Lahiri 1982: 196–199).

THE CONFLICTING IDENTITIES AND THE DILEMMA OF THE INDIAN NEPALESE

The Nepalese are proud of their history, culture, religion, language and traditions. In their exuberance they naturally draw on the experiences of their perennial source, Nepal. Nepal is the only Hindu monarchy in the world, and maintained a shadowy sovereignty even during the British days. The ancestors of the Nepalese ruling oligarchy claim to have successfully fought the Mughal emperors, and conventional Nepalese still refer to India as Mughlan. As orthodox Hindus, Nepalese share the same traditions with their Indian counterparts—scriptures, legendary and mythological heritage, sacred shrines and places of pilgrimage, language and script, and a host of other folk traditions. The Nepalese, proud of their Nepalese identity, naturally consider the average Indian (Hindu) to be familiar and not dissimilar to themselves. Before the present Indo-Nepalese boundaries were recognized as such, an average Nepali was vaguely aware of their existence and could cross and re-cross them for multifarious activities, which was considered normal. The Nepalese kings, who believe that their forefathers immigrated to Nepal from Rajasthan, had been contracting marital alliances from among the Indian princely states. The common Nepalese, subjects of the king and loyal to the royal family, automatically feel related to the common people of these ex-princely states from which their nobility brought their consorts. In their heart of hearts, the Nepalese know that they do not belong to the Indian core. However, they are equally certain that from a cultural, religious, historical, and over-all traditional standpoint they are as good associates of the Indian core as Gujaratis, Keralites; or Maharashtrians. Obviously, from the historical, cultural, religious, and even geographical perspectives, Nepal is an associate to the Indian core.

The Indian core, it appears, accords Nepal a peripheral and not an associate status. Religious, cultural, and historical similarities provide an irritant between the two. For example, Nepal claims to be the only Hindu state in the world while predominantly Hindu India is a secular state. The

Nepalese insistence on its cultural distinctiveness from India does not provide enough scope to chart out the course of affinity. Similarly, the Nepalese historical claim to maintain an equal distance between India and China (Tibet as well) makes the Indian core reluctant to accept it. Nepalese dress, food habits, caste structure, and commensality, an admixture of Buddhism even in Nepalese Hinduism, and a host of similar claims, blur the common original heritage of the two. As a sovereign state, Nepal figures in the Indian mainstream as a formal entity, which does not materially affect normal behavioural patterns and vital interests. Thus Nepal, in spite of its historical, cultural, religious, and geographical proximity remains on the periphery of the Indian mainstream. The Nepalese—the immigrants from Nepal and those who were born and brought up in India—are accorded the same status as a peripheral community. This differential identification creates a host of problems which remain unresolved.

The actual status of the Nepalese, a large immigrant community from another sovereign state, has to be determined. How do they belong to the Indian commonwealth of cultures and religions? In what ways do their history, culture, language, and traditions become Indian? Will the efforts of the Nepalese to seek an Indian identity be construed as the extension of the genuine policies, programmes, and traditions of Nepal? What will be the economic cost and political implications of the transformation of the Nepalese into Indians? Might not the Hindu identity claimed by the Nepalese and the Indian secular political culture lead to a possible conflict of values? What will happen to those Nepalese who possess multiple citizenship as Nepalese, Bhutanese, and Indian? The Nepalese, unlike the Indians, have access to Tibet. Will the acceptance of the Nepalese as Indians in such a situation affect the Indian defence interest?

Before one tries to answer the above issues, one must be honest to accept certain reservations in India about Nepalese credentials. The leaders of the Indian freedom movement identified the Nepalese as faithful allies of the British and, even worse for the Nepalese, they were popularly known as British mercenaries. There is plenty of evidence to show that the Nepalese took sides with the British. Jung Bahadur Rana's march to Gorakhpur to help the British in the 1857 rebellion and the posting of Gurkhas by the British to contain the Congress agitators on various occasions during the British rule are two examples. However, two points must be made here. First, the Nepalese were not the only ones to be used by the British in such a way. Secondly, the Nepalese did contribute in the integration, consolidation, development, and reconstruction of the Indian state, especially the north-eastern states, a point which should not be forgotten.

Thirdly, the issue of the Indian Nepalese is intricately linked with the problems of the immigrant Indians in Nepal. Over at the least the last 200

years, the Nepalese rulers encouraged the land-hungry peasants from the Gangetic plains to clear the hot, humid, malarial, and 'negative' terai forests. While the hillmen from the interior and the east of Nepal were migrating eastwards to India, the *deswalis* were engaged in turning the negative terai into the most prosperous economic bastion of Nepal. It is also a fact that the *deswalis* (Indian) and *paharis* (Nepalese) fought soldier to soldier against feudal tyranny. Both have their kinsmen across the border and share a common cultural and religious tradition. Moreover, the privileged among them were educated at Varanasi, Patna, Calcutta, and Lucknow and saw little difference between Hindi and Nepali, which are both written in the same Devanagari script. Since 1960 resurgent ('rising' as they call it) Nepal has changed its priorities. Instead of a common heritage of culture, religion, and history, she emphasizes her distinct identity. In such a situation, the immigrant Indians are not only no more welcome, but they are suspected of carrying 'the democratic germs' to the monolithic Panchayat system of Nepal. On the other hand, Nepal considers herself the natural custodian of the larger Nepalese interests. And that is why voices are raised against real and putative problems of the Nepalese immigrants in the north-eastern frontiers of India.

The Bhutias in Sikkim, the Bengalis in West Bengal and the Khasis in Meghalaya invariably inform their visitors that most of the Nepalese have multiple identities—Nepalese, Bhutanese, and Indian. Many of them are reported to have immovable property and voting rights in Nepal. It is said that Nepalese politics in India are not autonomous. Worst of all, it is alleged that the Nepalese are either passing information to, or taking orders from, Nepal. And that, it is claimed, is one of the reasons why no Indian Nepali has risen to national stature in Indian politics during the past four decades. This atmosphere of suspicion and past reservations have to be changed into something positive. As Indians, perhaps we have to ask ourselves how far the genuine aspirations of the Nepalese have been accommodated in the body politic of India.

The Indian states were carved out on the principles of language, ethnicity, and regional historical peculiarities. The Nepalese claims for their territorial aspirations are not new and they should not be lightly brushed aside. However, too much reliance on historical background may lead one to draw the wrong conclusions. Since the indigenous communities on the eastern frontier region, such as Lepcha, Bhutia and other scheduled tribes, have been properly accommodated in the Indian framework, it is now the turn of the Nepalese. For their part, they must not leave any scope for anybody to suspect their credentials as Indians. As the dominant ethnic group in Sikkim and Darjeeling they must demonstrate their political maturity, eschew violence, rise above immediate and parochial issues,

and integrate themselves into the national political structure. But much greater responsibility lies with the Indian mainstream. Some positive and sincere efforts must be made to acknowledge the Nepalese role in the body politic of India.

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