CHAPTER 5

Marwari Collaborators and Nepali Subalterns
Two Integrative Social Forces in North-East India

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Present North-east India was known as Pragyajyotisha and Kamarup in the ancient period before the Ahoms turned it into Assam. It is difficult to identify the earliest autochthones of the land, as the most of the regional communities have their own tradition of migration to the region. The early ethnographers reported unique physical features, myths of origin, kinship ties, social organizations, economy, food, dress, hair-do, and so on of the various communities, as if they were the isolates. However, the points to be noted with interest is that the traditional communities were stable in their practices and were happily located on the various ecological niche in the region. Inter-ethnic interaction was invariably reduced to bartering of the commodities, occasional feuds leading to even head hunting and stray marital alliances. The reports one gets from these ethnographies give the impression that the communities were frozen in time and space.

This popular ethnographic picture provides a partial view of the reality. In fact, no community of the region remained static and all of them were exposed to the various rates of change. It goes without saying that indigenous factors of change provided dynamism and uniqueness to the communities, and carved out contours of their individuality. On the other hand, the exogenous

factors of change mediated between the intervening forces and the individual communities, leading to the texture of the regional character. For that too, there were a number of models available to the region and at least some of them are still operative, linking them with some or other ethnic groups in side and out side the region.

This takes us to the concept of 'region'. It is essentially a geographical one, in which ethnic, economic, political, even historical factors play critical roles. In this way, present north-east India was known to the British as Assam plus the princely states of Tripura and Manipur. This geographical unit has its distinct personality in the Indian Union and it is surrounded by international boundaries. It is linked with rest of India with a thin land mass, which in the absence of a dependable communication and transportation network gives birth to an enclave mentality. The seven political units in the region have their distinct ethnic and historical traditions, which naturally encourages them to look within their limits most of the time for the purpose of development. The 'region' as such is left to the north-east Council and the Central Government in New Delhi.

I here propose to uncover some of the exogenous factors as models of integrative mechanism affecting the life style and world-view of the region. My identification with the models is indicative and not exhaustive. First of such models is that of the ruling chiefs elevating themselves to the status of the Hindu warrior castes, what anthropologist Surajit C. Sinha terms as Rajputization. This was the case in Manipur, when the ruling Meitei Chief, adopted name and adopted other paraphernalia of Khatriya caste. In a limited way, the same was the case of the Jaintiya and the Ahom kings as well. This pattern of adopting the Hindu ruling model was very soon changed to sanskritization in religio-cultural context. The various shades of this process is still operative in the region in the form of the Hindu sects, shastras, saints, seers, khetrās, etc. The second model was introduced by the British colonial administration, which facilitated a series of formal structures as forms of behaviour. Apart from a political administration, recruitment to bureaucracy and armed forces, and introduction of monetary economy, the British introduced some novel institutions, which not only affected the people of the

region vitally, but gave strength to the regional character of Assam. Among them, mention may be made of a new set of ethnic migration, commercialization of the regional resources, Christian missions and rudiments of an emerging middle class. Many of these institutions began tentatively in the colonial regime, but they continued to operate and their functionaries are, in fact, the regional operators linking the region with their Indian counterparts and even the world economy at large.

Hills and forests of the region have always provided sanctuary to the fugitives, fortune seekers, hunting bands, marginal peasants, vanquished and persecuted chiefs. The hilly and mountainous tracts of the Eastern Himalayas continue to be alive and migrant bands from across the borders of Tibet and Burma do not find the watershed dividing line or the international boundary an insurmountable obstacle to cross or re-cross. The migrants' expectations are so limited that they rarely pose a threat to the hosts and, thus, they easily melt away in the human multitude of the hills. Tibetan migrants from the north, Lisus' migration to Arunachal Pradesh in 1960s led by the American Baptist Missionary, Rev. Morse and the on-going migration from the Chin hills in Burma to Mizoram may be cited as examples. Whatever might be the factors pushing the communities from their abode, there are impressive pull factors operating in the region. The image of fertile land and resourceful forests attracts the migrants with anticipation that some way or other they would live comfortably in the region.

Conversion of 'posa' in the 1830s into case payment to the hill communities introduced monetary economy even in these isolated hill tribes. The cash was invariably disbursed among the tribes either at the trade fairs organized by the Government or at the towns with marketing facilities like Tezpur and Dibrugarh, where the recipients could spend the amount in buying factory produced consumer goods invariably from the Marwari shop keepers. Establishment of markets at strategic locations along with police outposts in the foothills were the next step initiated by the British. A number of trade fairs were organized at the cost of the provincial and the district funds at Sadiya, Doimara, Udalguri, Dalma, Dewangiri, Golaghat, Tipaimukh, etc. These fairs would continue from 15 days to three months and the Government would not only invite the tribes from the distant hills to visit them, but also make

arrangements for their food and lodging. Similarly, all police protection would be given to Marwari, Europeans and Chinese shop-keepers to bring in their shops. With a view to do away with the tribal raids on settlements in the foothills and tea plantations, Inner Line Regulation was introduced in 1873 in three areas considered sensitive at the time: Naga Hills, Mizo Hills and Arunachal Pradesh. This provision could eliminate the tribal raids in the plains to a great extent, but the Marwari traders managed to operate within the Inner line from places such as Sadiya. All these steps indicated in one direction; that is the extension of monetary transaction to the farthest corner of the region and effectively introducing elements conducive to the new dispensation.

In the same way, the Bengali speaking communities from the Surma valley have been the part and parcel of the region from the ancient times, as one of the most developed surplus producing valleys. Naturally, many of them moved in course of time to the Brahmputra valley and foothills in the region. As the most literate community in the region, they were employed by the British in their office establishments all over the region. They as well produced some of the leading professionals such as teachers, legal practitioners, medical doctors, over-seers and engineers, and trained foresters etc; paving the way for an early emergence of a rudimentary regional middle class. Partition of India in 1947 leading to a massive Bengali migration to the region within a short span of time shocked the regional psyche and the host communities realized that the on-going Bengali migration was much beyond their absorbing capacity. And thus, yesterdays neighbouring Bengalis were painted as if they were strange invaders coming down from the Mars.

As the region emerges as the eastern most province of the British Indian Empire in the second quarter of the 19th century, one finds extensive organized human migration to Assam from elsewhere with a view to serve the empire. Among such migrants, we have identified Marwari traders and Nepamul for our descriptive analysis as case studies. We have heavily drawn from the works of historians like J.B. Bhattacharjee and Sajal Nag on Marwaris[1] and the works of Sinha[2] and Subba[3] on Nepamul. These two examples of integrative communities, chosen on the basis that they are spread all over the region. They may not be significant demographically in the region, but the service and network they

have provided are unique in the sense that these have proved their utility, relevance and resilience in the region. There have been occasions, when they were maligned, intimidated and even persecuted, but they continue to operate in the region, as there is no alternative to their effective region-wise network. Scholars like Roy Burman have found certain communities of the region as the ethnic 'bridge' and 'buffer' with reference to other communities, which are traditionally located on a distinct topographical niche and are in interaction with their neighbours. However, there are communities in the region, who are spread across the region and function something like a tunnel or a highway across the ethnic bridge and buffers. Among such communities, we have selected only two for a descriptive analysis: Marwaris and Nepamul (Indians of Nepal Origin or INOs).

Marwaris

Who are the Marwaris?

Marwari is a generic term, which refers to the residents of Marwar, a district in the western Indian State of Rajasthan, known for its Hindu tradition based ancient Hindu political system. Ajmer and Marwar were the two districts in the heartland of the feudal principalities of Rajputana under the British colonial rule. Bravery, chivalry, riding, swordsman ship, pride and seeking revenge against enemies were the cardinal elements of these Hindu polities. The region has been an arid zone prone to chronic draught. The traders among the residents could hoard grains and other commodities during the harvest and sell them to anybody including the rulers during off-seasons after charging a handsome profit. Once the Hindu patrons of these traders were defeated by the Great Mughals, the Marwaris moved to northern India to the Mughal domain, which extended up to Bengal. The Mughals lost their territories to various forces by 18th century and among them the principal one was the British East India Company.

All the traders known as the Marwaris, are not necessarily from Marwar. They may be from any part of Rajasthan, adjoining Haryana, western Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh or even Jains from Gujarat. Again all the Marwaris are not essentially from Vaishya trading caste in spite of their predominance. Smattering of the Brahmins, marginal Khatriyas, and other lower castes may

be included among the Marwaris, but rarely occupational or untouchable castes are included among them. They speak Marwari or Rajasthani at home, Hindi in bazaar and maintain their 'notorious red long *khata*', their account book in *Deonagri* script. They have their guild like organizations, in which credit has to be honoured; transactions can be contracted through *hundi* or word of mouth; kinship or fraternal ties are used as transaction lines; huge warehouses of commodities are to be maintained and whosoever may be in the control of the land, is to be courted. Moneylending, shop keeping, whole sale trading and entrepreneurship — all are aspects of their operation and individual Marwaris easily change these roles as the situation demands.

Eastward Marwari Migration

Historians inform us that when the Mughal army went on military expeditions, a type of bazaar moved along with them. These moving columns included apart from soldiers, arms and riding animals, shop-keepers, retailers, creditors and even entertainers. The Marwaris came to Bengal as part of the Mughal expeditionary forces after they had traveled through Hindustan. In the same tradition, they joined the British colonial military expeditions, who took pride in displaying that they were the successors of the great Mughals. Thus, whenever and wherever the British army moved in north-east India, the Marwari traders, suppliers, creditors and moneylenders accompanied as a permanent fixture. Once the area in question was occupied by the British, the Marwaris would settle down in the main market square as the resident wholesalers, retailers, moneylenders and suppliers for the settlement. They would naturally cultivate the British functionaries, local landed gentry and would maintain kinship and commercial links with kinsmen and fraternal bodies in the region, Calcutta and their ancestral homeland in Rajasthan. I am aware of the family history of Marwari traders from Darjeeling and Gangtok, who trace their origin in the region from the beginning of the British rule in Darjeeling and Sikkim.

It was easy for them to move to Calcutta, once the new rulers of north India established their capital in Calcutta. But even before that, H.K. Barpujari found them spreading to the Brahmaputra valley: "From 13th to 17th centuries, there was an influx of

outsiders in Assam and encouragements were given to such outsiders to settle in Assam as it would contribute culturally and materially. Of the latter, the Keyas (or the Kaias), the merchants of Marwar, had trading establishments at Jogighopa, Goalpara and Gauhati, where from they had been carrying out their business, ...and within a few years of British occupation not only did they set up their golahs at the head quarters, but extended their activities even beyond the frontiers. They had the monopoly of the external trade; besides they served as bankers, speculators, and farmers of Government revenue. During his visit to the district of Darang in early 1838 (Francis) Jenkins found at Gumiri a Marwari merchant not only carrying on his own trade but performing the duties of the Government as the Mauzadar and manager of the hats of Charduar.... As a set of practical businessmen, they never failed to take advantage of any circumstances in order to make money, but it must be remembered that they rescued many from impending ruin by providing funds at a time when money could not be had from any other source. Moreover, they gave impetus to a few Assamese by opening their eyes to the profit that could be earned through agricultural and industrial activities."[4] Sajal Nag notes that the Marwaris came to Calcutta in three waves: first in 1564, second in 1813 at the end of (the British East India) Company's monopoly trade, and the third in 1890s. And the Marwaris that entered Assam in a big way, were mostly in the last wave.[5] It was that wave which Barpujari notes as the earliest presence of the Marwaris at the western most marts of pre-British Assam at Dhubri, Joghigopa, Goalpara and Gauhati. As there was little competition from the local population due to their lack of commercial links and experience to commercial transactions, the Marwaris spread from the western markets to every sub-division and the district towns in Assam.

The Marwari moneylenders

They even spread to the distant tea gardens, interior villages and penetrated even the Inner Line to the tribal heart lands. They would visit the weekly *haats*, which were held at the strategic locations on scheduled dates of the week. They would maintain their *golas* (stocked ware house/wholesale cum retail shop) in the market places; conduct sale and purchase of commodities and local

products; advance money on credit to the villagers against their crops and engage in money lending on compound interest. They would purchase local handicrafts cheaply such as silk clothes, natural rubber, elephant tusk and indulge in contraband like opium sale and slave trade. The commercial transactions would not necessarily affect their shops and the markets. In fact, the kaias would send their agents to the houses and farms of the villagers with a view to collecting paddy, pulses, jute, and mustard as mortgage items.

Sajal Nag notes that Kamala Kanta Bhattacharjee's collection of poems, *Chintanol*, published in Calcutta in 1890 as an expression of antagonism and rebellion against the Marwari exploitation in the form of a spiritual complain.[6] This anthology of poems had themes about the deplorable predicament of the Assamese people resulting from usurious exploitations of the Marwari moneylenders. The poet depicts the poverty and exploitation of the Assamese in a harsh manner invoking a sense of rebellion. It is another matter that the collection of the poems did not have a very high literary value and perhaps it had a limited readership.

The Marwaris as traders

The Marwaris combined trading and shop-keeping in consumer goods with money lending to the farmers on exorbitant compound interests. Land, livestock and household utensils were mortgaged to the Kaia usurers against the debt taken by the farmers. So much so ultimately the land would pass into the hands of the Marwaris, who would sell them to any body, who could pay for it. The Marwaris controlled the profitable export and import business of Assam and transported them to and from Bengal by streamers and barges. Assam exported timber, paddy, silk, fish, cotton, betel-nuts, jute, mustard, coal, hide, and imported European pieces, salt, hardware, oil, tobacco, flour, sugar, spices, pulses, iron and opium. One side effect of the Kaia operation in Assam was the transformation of the Assamese agriculture from subsistence level to monetized level and transportation of the saleable commodities to the urban centres. The profit earned by the Marwaris in Assam was invested outside the province, as they did not establish industries in the region.

Another effect of all these Marwari transactions in Assam was the emergence of a network of urban centres, which came

to be linked with road, river and rail transport. It also generated interest in the economic potential of the region and certain resources such as timber, tea, oil, coal and limestone were thus turned into industrial goods. They did inspire a section of the Assamese cultivators to graduate ultimately to trading cum business enterprises in the course of time. Furthermore, while the British tea planters had taken tea export to the world metropolitan economy, it was the Marwaris, who were instrumental in getting the isolated regional economy integrated to the Indian economic system. In this new situation, for the first time, Assam was deficient in labour and thus, the migrants, from all over India, began to look eastward to Assam. By and large, the Marwaris in Assam continued to be in the stage of primitive accumulation of the capital by means of trading and usury and they hardly felt confident enough to give a foundation for industrialization in the region.

The Marwaris themselves did not remain untouched from the milieu of the region and, in fact, some of them joined their regional counterparts in a type of renaissance. In this context, contributions of Jyoti Prasad Agrawal, as a pioneer in Indian film industry turned out to be a trend-setter for the future, linking the nascent Assamese efforts to an all India forum. Similarly, in the fields of culture and literature, much maligned Marwaris came forward with their socio-cultural forums on occasions. By the middle of the 20th century, when the British were withdrawing from India, the regional Marwaris had accumulated enough profit from internal trade that they stepped in the shoes of the British tea planters. And many of the Marwaris invested in the only regional modern enterprise available, i.e., tea plantation. Presently, a highly trained, self-confident and motivated generation of the Marwaris are in control of their enterprise, who are not ashamed of their past; they are equally proud of their entrepreneurship and are determined to identify with the problems and prospects of the region.

The Nepamuls

Who is a Nepali?

Nepal is a relatively small country, but ethnologically it is a heterogeneous social world. Theoretically, it is the only Hindu

Kingdom in the world, but besides the Hindus, it has Budhmargis, Muslims, animists and lately even Christians. Though the country's laws are based on the Hindu scriptures, there are a variety of ethnic groups, which are governed by their own traditional code. Besides Nepali, the official language of the state, the various ethnic groups speak their own tongues. To most of the Indians, the above heterogeneity looks blurred, Nepali is like Bengali or Malayali, a cultural linguistic group. The notion of being a Nepali is an inherent part of the consciousness of the Nepalese people and its articulation is not always an easy one. There are problems in its articulation by the Nepalese as such and its acceptance by the 'others' as well.[7]

For example, firstly, 'one who speaks Nepali language' is a Nepali (ethnically speaking). But there are such Nepali speakers in India and Bhutan as well. Moreover, besides bilingual ethnic groups such as Gurung, Limbu, Rai, etc., among the Nepalese, Bhoṭia, Lepcha, Sherpa, etc. also speak Nepali, but ethnically they do not belong to the Nepali stock. Secondly, there are a number of Nepalese who have their surnames, which are common among various Hindu castes in different cultural regions of India. Singh, Pande, Tiwari, Sharma, Bhandari, Adhikari, Shah, Pant, Joshi, Pradhan, Dixit, Das, Malla, Biswakarma, Rai and many more not uniquely Nepali. However, the Nepali Bahun, Chhetri and at least some of the other castes have a distinct regional flavour. Thirdly, the country of their origin may indicate their identity. For example, the Nepalese are those, who come to India from Nepal. But at what point of time one entered India is not clear to anybody. One must not forget the Treaty of Friendship, 1950 between India and Nepal which stipulates an open border between the two and a right of each other's citizens to settle down and own property in their country of domicile. Indian constitution emphasizes birth in India and parentage for awarding citizenship, by which criteria, numerous Nepali speakers may be considered citizens of both the countries. Similarly, race, culture and religion are other inappropriate considerations on which Nepalese cannot be exclusively identified. Moreover, Kirati stock consisting of Limbu, Lepcha, Rai, Magar, etc. who are significant constituents of Nepalese, were the original settlers of Sikkim, which is a state of India.

A further complication has been added by the Indian Nepalese themselves. With a view to distinguishing themselves

from other Nepalese, a number of terms were proposed: Bharpali (Bharatiya Nepali), Bhargoli (Bhartiya Gorkhali), Nepali (against settlers of Nepal, the Nepalese) and Gorkha (not the British Gurkha). None of them have been accepted either by the Indian Nepalese or by 'others' as appropriate nomenclature to the community. In this context, the most serious efforts were made by Subhash Ghishing to term the Indian Nepalese as the Gorkhas. This is not new. The All India Gorkha League (AIGL) formed at Dehradun in 1923 had been demanding a Gorkha homeland in India since then. Incidentally, the legendary Prithwi Narain Shah was known as the 'Gorkha King' and his forces were known as the Gorkhas because he was from a little Nepalese principality of Gorkha. Further more, both the terms, 'Nepali' and 'Gorkha', are used for official purposes in India as well as Nepal.

Lahure — The Gorkha Soldiers

In the words of a Nepalese intellectual, a significant out-migration was linked with the increased population in the Nepal hills: "The decades of 1600s had seen a sharp increase in hill population, thanks partly to New World imports such as maize and potato (which could provide much more calorific value per hectare and less efforts to grow than the ingenious food grains). The economic needs of this growing mass could not be met under the tributary system the feudals wished to maintain. To contain social pressure, therefore, they opened the doors to out-migration. Mercenary soldiers were allowed to join the imperial British Indian army, and mass migration of labourers began to the north Indian plains, the eastern Himalayas and as far as the sugarcane fields of Fiji islands. The only assets these mercenaries and migrants brought with them to the market mill were their hands."[8] In the beginning of the 19th century, an appreciable number of Nepalese young men fought away from Nepal under non-Nepalese officers and offered themselves as professional soldiers by enlisting in the Sikh army of Raja Ranajit Singh. The term most commonly used by the Nepalese to denote a solder serving in a foreign army came to be known as the Lahure (a soldier, who had returned from Lahore, the capital city of Raja Ranajit Singh), a corruption of Lahore. In course of time, many myths were created about the ferocious mercenary Gorkha — *lahures*.

The British were impressed by the tenacity of the Gorkha forces during the Anglo-Nepalese war, 1814–15 and decided to entice the hill men to organized soldiering. The impoverished Gorkhas from the hills appreciated the gesture and preferred the secure return of being a British soldier than that of their earlier incarnation as a mercenary. With the change in the recruitment policy of the British after 1857, the Gorkhas were preferred as a model of crude innocence devoid of a questioning mind. The Victorian ethos of the age helped to create a myth out of proportion to the empirical reality. Thus, we find ideal Gorkha soldiers among the less exposed, isolated, wild and hill tribes such as Magars, Gurungs, Rais and Limbus. Incidentally the Nepalese laws considered them enslavable. The British appreciated the cruelty and brutality of these martial communities as fighting spirit and their status of being unburdened by intelligence and education further endeared them to the colonial officers. Thus, a Gorkha soldier remains in a perpetual childhood (backward?) innocence and is largely a construct of the British mind.

The period between 1860 to 1940 saw the maximum recruitment of the Gorkhas in the British Indian army. Recruitment depots were opened at Dehradun, Gorakhpur, Laheriaserai, Darjeeling and Shillong exclusively for Gorkha recruitment. Nepal was treated as if it was soldier farm. So much emphasis was placed on the ideal suitability of the hill martial communities for the recruitment that even the children of the Gorkha soldiers at various cantonments in India were contemptuously rejected as the 'line boys' not suitable to the forces. No doubt, the Gorkha settlement colonies in the north-east India were treated as suitable for coolie corps and errand boys required for the forces. The British army officers were certain that the Gorkhas would serve only under their command and once they would withdraw from the Indian army, there would be a crisis of leadership. However, they were for a shock once the results of the referendum held among the Gorkha regiments prior to the Indian independence were announced. Bulk of the Gorkha soldiers preferred to stay as integral part of the Indian army. And ultimately, six out of ten regiments continued to be part of the Indian army and the rest were taken as the British Gurkhas. A point to be noted here is that besides the army, an appreciable number of Nepalese were recruited in the paramilitary forces such as the Assam Rifles.

Ethnological Nepalese

From an ethnological point of view, the Gorkha or the Nepalese can be divided into three major stocks. Firstly, the Thakuris or the Gorkhalis from ancient principalities of Baisi and Chaubisi as the Indian counterparts of the four fold caste system who claimed to have migrated to Nepal from India during the Muslim rule in India. These are proud Hindus divided into endogamous castes, follow caste hierarchy, ritual purity and religious pollution. The Brahmins, the Nepalese bahuns, have been spokesmen and the role setters of the Nepalese Hindu model of worldview. The Chhetris, derived from the Kshatriyas, are the rulers of Nepal and have contributed immensely to the consolidation of the Nepalese nation. Though they are found in all parts of Nepal, they have settled mainly in the Western, Central region and the Kathmandu valley. They are immensely proud of Hinduism, their martial tradition and they project themselves as the protectors of the Hindu traditions. Besides the Brahmin and Kshatriya varnas, there are a number of trading, occupational and artisan castes spread all over Nepal as inseparable elements of the rural economy. Among them, mention may be made of Kami, Saraki and Damai who work on metal, stone and leather, tailor clothes and play music on religious and social occasions.

Secondly, the Newars, located mainly in Kathmandu valley and the Eastern Nepal are divided into a number of castes among themselves. They were also the rulers of the Kathmandu valley prior to the present Shah dynasty. They possess their own language, script, architecture, art and craft. They follow Buddhism and Hinduism and their contribution to a distinct Nepalese tradition is immense. They are an enterprising stock providing a social bridge between the Thakuris and the Kirati stocks. Thus, they form one of the pillars of the three tier Nepalese ruling elite — the Bahun-Chhetri-Newar.

Thirdly, the Kiratis, claimed to be the earliest settlers of the land — the Janajatis — the auchthonous tribesmen of Nepal, are divided into a number of endogamous tribes such as Rai, Magar, Limbu, Tamang, Sunawar, etc. They are either animists, Hindus or Buddhists, speak their own tongues, and are settled in the eastern and north eastern part of Nepal. By tradition, they are hill men, fond of forests, are nearly omnivorous and are ethnologically

closer to the tribals of north-east India. Incidentally, they form the bulk of the Gorkha martial race and are preferred as army recruits. At another plane, the Nepalese society is divided into two notional social worlds: the tagadharis (those who are entitled to the sacred thread, the high caste Hindus) and the matwalis (those, who are permitted to drink intoxicant beverages and, thus, are outside the caste orthodoxy). Needless to add that Kiratis, Newaris and a significant segment of the Gorkhalis are considered to be matwalis.[9]

Immigration of Nepalese into North-East India

The British found the Nepalese as an effective tool in their hands, who could serve as the cushion and contain the Bhotia aristocracy in Sikkim and Bhutan.[10] Even before that, they were recruited in the various constabulary forces, which went on pacification expeditions in the tribal areas of Assam hills. Col. Shakespeare records the unique role of the Nepalese in the Assam Rifles, the custodian of the region. The Nepalese constituted as much as half of its forces and by 1865, the Nepalese Khukheri was accepted as its emblem which continues to be embossed even today.[11] We have noted above that the Nepalese began to be recruited soon after the Sugawlee Treaty, 1815, but it got momentum only after 1857. However, the Nepalese peasants, herdsmen, traders, lumbermen and even unskilled labourers were first encouraged to move to Darjeeling from the 1840s and then to Assam hills. Similarly, from 1865 onwards, the Nepalese were welcomed by the British to be active in Sikkim and Bhutan and from 1890s they were legally permitted to settle in the two Himalayan states. So much so that within a hundred years the Nepalese constitute at least two thirds population of Sikkim, Darjeeling and Lhotshampa inhabited five districts of southern Bhutan.

Prior to British annexation of Assam, there was no appreciable Nepalese settlement in north-east region. Within the next 175 years not a single state of the region is without Nepalese settlements. It is instructive to know the social background of the Nepalese settlers in north-east:

(i) *The Gorkha Settlement Colonies and the Ex-soldiers:* After their release from the armed forces, a number of Nepalese were encouraged to settle down around the army stations. Besides the

other agencies, the Assam Rifles alone established 40 resettlement colonies to settle as many as 3,000 Gorkha ex-soldiers in the region: Assam-13, Manipur-8, Mizoram-7, Nagaland-7, Arunachal-3, Meghalaya-1 and Tripura-1. Some of these sites such as Sadiya in Assam, Matripokhari in Manipur, Aizwal in Mizoram and Mokokchung in Nagaland are about 125 years old. Most of the settlers have completely adopted themselves to the local situation in such a way that they are counted among the indigenous people with all the benefits given to the scheduled tribes. They have shown great capacity to assimilate themselves with the hill communities. Besides their own, they speak the language of the host communities, contract inter-community marriages occasionally and turn out to be inseparable part of the local economy.

These ex-soldiers were encouraged to settle down in the foothills, forest fringes and other strategic points on the frontiers. In this way certain compact pockets of Nepalese settlements in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Nagaland and Manipur have emerged. The new settlers with their peasant background and military discipline acquired an image of loyal citizens with pro-establishment orientations. With their hard work, persèverance and investment of their retirement benefits in agriculture, they have been able to turn out their newly acquired settlements into thriving centers of prosperous peasantry. Their apparent and visible prosperity among the relatively indolent and less achievement-oriented indigenous communities attract jealousies. There is another aspect of the ex-soldiers' presence in the region. A number of settlements are located in areas, where there is considerable movement of armed forces to contain the extremist and secessionist activities. The host communities occasionally accuse the settlers of providing information on strategy and logistics to the armed forces. In such situations, the settlers suffer at the hands of the local insurgent groups. Such examples of intimidation, violence, arson and eviction from Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram and Assam can easily be enumerated.

(ii) *Peasants and Grazers/ Herdsmen:* The non-martial Nepalese — especially the illiterate, poor Bahun peasants — moved out of Nepal hills in search of opportunities alone or in small group of unskilled labourers or herdsmen. The only capital they carry with themselves is their personal qualities as cheerful, perseverant and

sturdy hand, ubiquitous khukheri and a readiness to do anything to make a living. Such marginal men very easily combine a number of roles in themselves as grazers, labourers, porter, axe men, share croppers and even as an errand boys. They locate themselves invariably away from the tribal village on uninhabited forest fringe, when they come to the hills. Many a time, they are guilty of felling forests, grazing illegally and even settling down on reserve forests in connivance with the local tribesmen. With their hard labour, frugal habits, perseverance and industriousness they make a difficult living. Their role in local economy turns out to be a significant and complementary one. Their near cosmopolitan social outlook, frugal food habits and prevalence of polygamy among them help them to integrate locally. The number of wives a Nepali may have added to his biological and economic prosperity. "The Nepalese are phenomenally fertile people, it is not unusual to find among them families where there are four to five wives and 20 to 30 children".[12]

The Nepalese easily enmesh in fast changing agrarian scenario from shifting to settled cultivation and then even to cash crop cultivation. Besides the Nepalese labour, their cattle also contribute manure, plough, milk and meat to the local population. Slowly but steadily, they are found occupying agricultural lands, which as per local practice, are community property. While the local tribal shifting cultivator remains a marginal peasant like his forefathers, the newcomer Nepalese have added to a modest affluence. Naturally, the tribesmen feel that the Nepalese were alienating them from their patrimony, while the Nepalese plead that their modest affluence had a long story of exploitation by the local people. Here is a potential and an explosive area of conflict over land ownership. Against the legal and constitutional protection to the tribal rights, any role of the Nepalese ownership over local resources such as land and forests easily appear to be encroachment. Further, the local scheduled tribes have developed an ambivalent attitude to the Nepalese, which does not help the Nepalese in their hours of crisis. In such a situation, communal flare-up leading to violence, which has become a recurrent phenomenon, is not difficult to imagine. I have enumerated instances of violent clashes between the Nepalese and the local communities elsewhere.[13]

(iii) *Artisans and Semi-skilled Professionals:* There is a sizeable Nepalese population floating in urban centres, who are employed in various semi-skilled labour intensive professions. Some of them are engaged in caste occupations such as carpenters, smiths and traders. In the absence of caste bound professionals among the tribals, the Nepalese have easily stepped into fill the role of intermediary semi-skilled professionals between the unskilled locals and skilled white collar professionals from elsewhere. With the emphasis on developmental activities, demand for semi-skilled persons has been on the increase in the region. Thus, new professions of plumbers, electricians, cleaners, masons, mechanics, drivers, scavengers, porters, watchmen, cooks, etc., have emerged in the hill areas of the region. For most of these chores, the obvious choice is the Nepalese, who invariably combine a number of roles into their person on a modest remuneration.

The type of work in which the Nepalese are engaged are relatively new to the region. Unlike their peasant and soldier farmer counterparts, the semi-skilled urban Nepalese are scattered in the towns keeping in mind the availability of jobs they are engaged in. They rarely come into conflict with the local community because of their inexpensive relevant skill locally required by almost everybody. Moreover, the urban Nepalese lead a near cosmopolitan life in which their expenses are in tune with their income. They do not attract envy of their neighbours, because they rarely add to an appreciable affluence. They join their Hindu, Buddhist and Christian counterparts for social, cultural and religious celebrations unlike their rural counterparts. Being a Nepali does not help them in an appreciable way to get those jobs they do; rather their skills are being marketed. Thus, in spite of their significant contribution to the local economy, they maintain a submerged identity.

(iv) *The White-collar and the Educated Youth:* This newly emerging category is born, brought up and educated in the region. They have friends, patrons and even enemies from among the indigenous communities and they are invariably affiliated to the local voluntary associations. They know the north-east as their only home and speak the local dialects besides their own mother tongue. Most of them have never been to Nepal and, in fact, they have lost all ties to that land. These third and fourth generation Indians of the Nepalese origin vividly remember the sufferings of

their forefathers. They are born Indians like their neighbours and behave like average Indians struggling at every stage for making a living. They are politically aware and culturally conscious of their status in the state of their domicile and the Indian Union as the citizen. Moreover, they are the individuals, who compete with the local aspirants for the scarce white collar jobs, which invariably go to the indigenous communities. Thus, they are unconsciously made aware that they do not belong to the local dominant communities, for whom there is constitutional guarantee in jobs and welfare schemes.

The ego of the educated INOs is hurt at every step in everyday life. Naturally, they begin identifying themselves with the great Gorkha past, Hindu traditionalism and various aspects of the pan-Nepalese solidarity movements. Naturally, they provide leadership for airing the genuine and putative grievances of the community. Such behaviours generate suspicion in the eyes of the local communities wielding power in the state. The constitutionally guaranteed fundamental rights to organize themselves, express the opinions on the issues affecting them and agitate for the democratic rights are considered enamical by the local indigenous communities. Thus, these INOs are pushed to the status of an 'other' — the enemy — conspiring against the interests of the sons of the soil. A little provocation is sufficient to ignite violence in such a surcharged ethnic atmosphere. And it is the INOs — Nepamul Bharatiya, who are always at the receiving end.

The confused reactions of the INOs

The INOs — Nepamul Bhartiya — naturally consider Nepal as their ethnic, racial, linguistic and cultural fount. The king, 5 Shree Maharajadhiraj, the incarnation of Lord Vishnu on the earth, is the only Hindu king in the world. The INOs take pride that the king's precursors remained independent even during the Mughal and the British rule in India. In fact, India is contemptuously referred as Mughlan by the high brow orthodox Hindu Nepalese. So much so, they perform purificatory rituals once they return from a travel to Mughlan — the unclean land. However, the INOs — Nepamul Bhartiya — do not see a contradiction in their orientation to Nepal and reference to the Nepalese king and their being a citizen of secular India. But they also realize that the Nepalese regime is not in a position to help them get their real or

putative grievances redressed against the Indian state. They know that in the ethnically crowded Indian union they have themselves to negotiate their status suitable to their aspirations. For that they have reacted in the following ways:

(a) *The Issue of the Maha Nepal — the Greater Nepal:* The Kingdom of Nepal was secured by Prithwi Narain Shah's vision by integrating multi-ethnic groups through strong arms, Hindu ethos, caste system and the Gorkhali language. He prided himself to be called as the King of the hills — *parbat ka raja*. His successors overran the central Himalayan principalities between river Sutlej in the west and the Teesta in the east. He and his successors had a vision to invade even Koch and Ahom kingdoms in the Brahmputra valley in association with Bhutan. From 1790's they even ruled over the territories between Sikkim to Uttaranchal for about two decades. To their misfortune, they collided with the emerging British Indian empire leading to the Anglo-Nepal War, 1814–1815. What resulted at the end of the war were the present boundaries of Nepal and the beginning of the Gorkha recruitment in the British Indian army. But the past empirical glory got stuck in the Nepalese psyche that they had ruled over the entire central Himalaya, which they identified with Maha Nepal — the Greater Nepal. In course of time, the Nepalese got settled at Dalhausie, Landsdowne, Kangra, Simla, Dehradun, Darjeeling, Shillong and various other 'stations', where the British had their army cantonments.

Kanak Mani Dixit explains the background and poses the problem of Nepalese concentration in the Himalayan region: "Even if the historical Greater Nepal went into eclipse, there began a process of migration out of the central Himalaya, which would lead to demographic conflicts more than a century later... the pressures of the state (of Nepal) on the ethnic and other hill communities increased dramatically. Political repression, economic exploitation and possibly, over population, pushed peasants eastwards along hill and Duar towards the Indian north-east, where the British needed Nepali brown to harvest timber and to open up territories for settlement and tea gardens. Over decades and well into 1900's, Nepalis became heavily concentrated into lower hills of Sikkim, Bhutan and the Duars. In lesser numbers, they extended themselves right across the north-east and as far as today's Myanmar. Would this scattered community of Nepali

labour/peasantry ever come together to form a Greater Nepal?" Then he traces the genesis of the idea in recent years. Way back in 1950's the poet Dharam Raj Thapa gave it a poetic expression:

"What Happened to Us Nepalis?
Our songs have all been lost.
We did take Sutlej and Kangra,
But today our voice is heard no more."

Then in July 1991 a 'Greater Nepal Committee' was formed in Kathmandu and the editor of a little known Kathmandu weekly, Surendra Dhakal, issued a letter to some embassies as a member of the Committee. The objectives of the committee were "to create a world-wide public opinion in favour of the Greater Nepal and to achieve it". A plea was made on behalf of the committee that India restores unconditionally to Nepal the territories east of the Mechi river and west of the Mahakali. All the major Nepalese political parties have publicly decried the above demand so much so that former Prime Minister, Girija Prasad Koirala, termed the demand as 'the product of the unsound mind'. Dixit notes that the bogey of the Greater Nepal is raised more vigorously outside Nepal. Subhash Ghishing in Darjeeling, Dawa Tshering in Thimphu, Bengali chauvinistic elements in Calcutta and even former bureaucrats such as B.S. Das in Delhi have expressed their apprehensions on the possibility of a Greater Nepal. However, nobody has come out with evidence that it has taken the shape of a movement among the INOs — Nepamul Bhartiya.

We feel comfortable with Dixit's conclusion that while it is the language that binds the Nepali speakers of South Asia, it is a weak thread. The feeling of Nepaliness in the Nepali diaspora is culturally charged, but not politically.[14] Furthermore, no public men of stature have made a demand for the Greater Nepal, which has to be at the cost of Indian territory. Even Subhash Ghishing, etc., have charged the Nepalese design on the Indian territory, but no body from the Indian soil, at least no known Indian of Nepalese origin, has demanded or supported the creation of a Greater Nepal. Thus, we feel that while a large portion of the population of the region is able to appropriate the cultural attributes of Nepaliness, the feeling does not go deep enough to emerge as a movement for Greater Nepal in near future, posing a threat to the national boundaries of South Asian states.

(b) *The Demand for a Gorkha Homeland:* The oldest INO organization in India, All India Gorkha League (AIGL), established at Dehradun in 1923, demanded a Nepali speaking state in India for the INOs. In course of time, the AIGL concentrated more on Darjeeling and the Duar. So much so, in emotionally surcharged period of the 1940s, the AIGL even demanded the areas to be integrated to Nepal in the event of Assam going to Pakistan. The State Reorganization Commission did not find the demand of a Nepali speaking state in India acceptable in 1956 and since then the AIGL remained a political party with limited following in Darjeeling hills. The credit for reviving the demand for a Gorkha homeland —Gorkhaland — rightly goes to Subhash Ghishing in the 1980s, the GNLF leader. The GNLF populist movement turned violent and intimidating, cutting Darjeeling hills, Sikkim and Bhutan from the rest of India in terms of communication. In an enigmatic and dramatic way, Ghishing termed the INOs Gorkhas, their language as the Gorkhali and their imagined state to be the Gorkhaland. This move led to further controversy and confusion among the INOs. Ghishing's agitation resulted in the establishment of the Darjeeling Hills District Council (DHDC) in West Bengal and Ghishing was elected to be its Chairmanship.

Once the Gorkhaland movement settled for a peaceful DHDC, the GNLF got divided into a number of rival factions. A number of GNLF activists did not reconcile to the peaceful solution and took to arms. This was the time Lhotshampa trouble started in Bhutan.[15] Many of the former GNLF members assisted the Lhotshampa in a variety of ways. The turmoil in Darjeeling hills and Bhutan Duars did not leave even tiny INO dominated Sikkim untouched. Even an academic plea to revive the old Bhutia state of Sukhim consisting of Darjeeling and Sikkim as a possible INO homeland generated apprehensions.[16] The suggestion raised a hornet of apprehensions in the Indian press and it was seen as a conspiracy to take Darjeeling, Sikkim and Duar away from India. Even it was linked to the demand for Greater Nepal. However, whether one likes it or not, the demand for an INO homeland has got a strong support from the INOs of north-east, because in their hours of frequent evictions from their settlements they see such a homeland as their possible sanctuary. The INOs know that even if the demand for their homeland is accepted it cannot contain all the INOs within its boundaries. However, its supporters from

north-east feel that they would always look to an Indian Nepali homeland as a support base in their hours of distress.

(c) *The Identity of the INOs:* The popular image of a Gorkha in India is either of a mercenary soldier or a modest watchman. However, we have seen above that the Nepalese are complex, sophisticated and cultured people. Many of them are bilingual and multi-lingual. Even religiously all of them are not necessarily Hindus. It is not a cohesive community. As long as the migrants were not aware of their rights as Indians, it mattered little what others thought of them. Any way, they were earning their bread with hard labour and they hardly had time to think of their rights, their future and the destiny of their offspring. However, time has changed and with five decades long association with the Indian democratic system, the INOs — specially educated and white-collar professionals among them — are worried about their identity. Though culturally they do not have any other label, they are sure that legally they are not Nepalese. Then what type of Indians they are? In case of north-east, they are not counted among the scheduled tribes, though they had been living with them for over a hundred years. Then they are not among the scheduled castes, but what about Kami, Saraki, Damai castes among them? Why are these Nepalese untouchable castes not listed under the scheduled castes? They are loosely referred to the counterparts of Punjabi, Gujarati or Malayali. But once more such apparent similarities confuse the INOs. These Indian sub-nationalities have their homeland (states) in India, which provide a support base to their brethren in hours of need.

The khaki uniform of a soldier and a watchman is no more attractive enough to the INOs — Nepamul Bharatiya — and they are no more content with the marginal role assigned to them. The mental churning among the INO youth is on. When they see that their tribal playmates have been given place of privilege or taken to arms, and they are being rejected even by the regiments of their grandfathers for the lowly job of a soldier, they feel angry to say the least. They get utterly confused and ask themselves: what type of Indians are we? In the absence of patronage, how do they survive in such a surcharged atmosphere? Then comes the shock: as the progenies of the ex-soldier settlers they are seen as the natural allies of the evil (or civil) state by the local dissenters. In this

unsettled, ambiguous and unemployed background, the INO youth may easily be roped in by their playmates-turned insurgents as warriors and conspirators in anti-state activities. In such a way it is possible that the loyal Gokha has now taken to arms against the institutions for which their forefathers proudly shed their blood. This explains the nexus of the alleged armed traffic between Kathmandu, Dhaka, Bangkok and across the porous borders in the north-east.

In the words of a 'Nepamul Bharatiya' (INO), they are subjected to numerous predicaments of being the citizens of a 'privileged nation', e.g., India. The INOs and the Indians at large, both together, have to provide them with a distinct identity, separate from the subjects of Nepal. A case, for example, is that of the Lhotshampas from that of Bhutan. Further, nuances of Indo-Nepalese Treaty, 1950 and the open border between the two countries have to be kept in mind. Secondly, with eclipse of the concept of martial race, myth of Gorkha soldiers also need to be looked at. In case we do not get ideal recruits — either from Maoist-polluted Nepal or insurgency-infected north-east — for turning them into ideal Gorkha soldiers, how safe is it to leave the internal peace and external security in their hands? Thirdly, the INO settlements in the north-east must not be left to them. They are already in bad shape. Before this former chain of security turns into a chain of security risk, a policy has to be evolved to galvanize these settlements into national ethos. This is possible only when the settlers' genuine aspirations and expectations are taken care of. Otherwise, they are subjected to frequent evictions by powers to be and New Delhi's insensitivity. "The Nepalese will learn to adopt and live, (will) not leave (the region). And they leave if they must, they will return soon after as they did in 1979 and 1987."[17]

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