

The Nepalese in North-East India : Ethnicity and Resource Appropriation

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The Nepalese, a cultural unit of the Indian sub-continent, are the hillmen of Nepal with excellent martial tradition. Socially, they are divided among various castes and tribes with Hinduism, Lamaism and Animism as their predominant faiths. The Nepali (or Gorkhali) is their *lingua-franca* with a number of dialects for various segments. The Nepalese dress with their cap symbolizing the *Sagarmatha* (the highest peak of the Himalaya's Mt. Everest), their particular knife—*Khukhri*, their valour in the battle field and their calm and carefree life even in the most trying circumstances give them a unique and distinct national character. They have traditionally co-existed with the Lamaist highlanders and the inhabitants of *Muglan* (i. e. the Gangetic plain). The Gorkha kingdom extended its hegemony in all four directions upto the 19th century. However, with the establishment of the British empire in India, the political boundaries came to be defined and independence recognized. In addition, the preverence, industriousness, soldiery and mercinariness of the Gorkhas were widely acclaimed. As a recognition to the above qualities, the British decided to recruit the Gorkhas in the Indian army and encourage them to settle on the mountain tracts of the eastern frontiers. The less fortunate among them started migrating to the Indian cities as night-watch-men, porters, and domestic servants. Many of the unskilled farm-hands turned to the north-east India which was thinly populated.

The present paper is an exploratory exercise to delineate the historical context and geographical expanse of the Nepalese in north-east India. It briefly reports who are the Nepalese

and how do they identify themselves? It uncovers the cultural and social context of the Nepalese immigrants and portrays the social ecology of their new home. It describes the economic opportunities available to them and how have they used such opportunities to make a living, build a saving and lead a comfortable life in an alien land. We have ventured to report on the changing ethos of the now new Nepalese neighbourhood—the north-east Indian autochthonous communities—and the areas of possible and potential conflict. And lastly, we propose to examine the character of the Nepalese ethnic ideology as an idiom for the apparent tangible benefits.

Ethnic Composition

The Nepalese are themselves divided into three major sub-ethnic stocks: the Thakuris or Gorkhas of western and central Nepal, the Newaris of the Kathmandu valley and eastern Nepal, and, the Kiratis of the north-eastern and eastern Nepal. The Thakuris or the Gorkhas are caste Hindus; divided into a number of indogenous castes; maintain certain level of great traditional Hindu practices such as purity and pollution in social intercourse and food habits and contain a high percentage of non-indigenous elements in the Nepalese population. With the advent of the Gorkha power in the form of Prithvinarain Shah in the middle of the eighteenth century, a number of raids were conducted eastwards. And that is how some Gorkhals such as Khas (Basnet), the Brahmin, the Chhetris and other service castes such as Kami, Saraki and Damai came to settle down in the Eastern Nepal, Sikkim and Darjeeling district. Prior to the establishment of the Gorkha rule, the Kathmandu valley was ruled by the Newaris. With the loss of political power in the Kathmandu valley, the Newaris expanded eastwards. It is an industrious, urban and sophisticated trading community. The Newaris follow Buddhism and Hinduism, speak their own dialect along with the Gorkhali language and are divided into a number of ritual and occupational segments. While the Gorkhas are proud of the rough and tough martial tradition, the Newaris

are known for more abstract aspect of culture such as learning, art, craft, architect and literature. On the more mundane side of the achievement, in the past they had monopoly over copper mining and coin minting in the central Himalayan region. They have special knack for trade and commercial transactions. From Kathmandu valley, they moved to eastern Nepal, from there to Darjeeling and Sikkim and, slowly, but steadily, they have moved to the small and big urban and market centres of the north-east India in search of small commercial transactions.

The Kirati sub-ethnic stock is said to be autochthonous inhabitants of eastern Nepal, Darjeeling and Sikkim. Limbu, Lepcha, Rai, Magar, Gurung, Sherpa, Tamang and a host of other small tribal stocks are counted among them. They speak their own dialects, maintain a more primival life-style and by and large abound more in the mountainous and forest clad distant Himalayan regions. The Kiratis, with a stronger tribal ethos, may broadly be divided into three groups on the basis of their absorption into the larger civilizations; the Animists (Magar, Gurung and a section of the Limba), Hindualized (the Rai) and the Buddhists (Tsongs, Tamang, Sherpa etc). They make excellent solidiers, specially in undulating topography; are used to harsh climatic conditions, a frugal and deprived living and a very primitive technological order. They are temperamentally closer to the tribal population of the north-east India to the extent that eastward migration is just an extention of their natural habitat.

On the socio-ritual level, the Nepalese are normally divided into two: the 'tagadhari' and the 'matwali'. While the former refers to those who are traditionally entitled for the sacred-thread ceremony and maintain a level of purity and pollution in their social intercourse, the later are those who are permitted to drink liquor. This is a significant cleavage in which while only the high caste Gorkhas are counted among the former, the later is the joint stock of the Kirati, Newari and the Thakuri castes. All the three ethnic stocks speak Nepali language as their *linguafranca*, they dress themselves alike and follow a similar style of life. Apart from the above,

the Nepalese social context may be summed up in a very general way in the following : prevalence of inter-caste and inter-tribal polygamous and polyandrous marriages, a very liberal concept of purity and pollution, a frugal and almost omnivorousness in food habit. As a whole, they are proud of their martial tradition. They highly value their affiliation to the great traditional Hinduism. The only political systems they are acquainted with are that of paternalistic feudal and theocratic rules. As a result, obedience, loyalty, conformity and sub-ordination are inseparable aspects of the Nepalese personality and character.

The North-eastern Settlements

No Nepalese settlement is known in the north-eastern region prior to the eighteenth century. The first meaningful contact between the Nepalese and this region occurred in 1817, when the Cuttack Legion (later christened as the Assam Light Infantry) consisting of 1,000 Hindustanis and Gorkhas took part in Sylhet Operation. After their retirement and release from the army, the British encouraged the Nepalese to settle in the administrative centres as faithful allies of the government. The region as a whole was then sparsely populated. The isolated, illiterate and, at times, hostile hill tribes were administered through the British officers, and the Christian missionaries were encouraged in evangelical works. In such a situation, the Nepalese ex-soldier settlers, used to undulating topography and temperamentally closer to the tribal communities, were naturally accepted by both the rulers and the local communities.

With the departure of the British in 1947 from India, the north-eastern region was no longer controlled by the distant rulers. The local communities were encouraged as per the provisions of the Indian participative democratic system to maintain their own political affairs. Along with political awareness and participation, certain amount of education and a better means of communication have also been introduced in recent decades. Meanwhile the Nepalese migration to the

north-east region continued unabated. In recent years, the Nepalese migration to the Sikkim and Bhutan has greatly been contained. Consequently, there has been a tremendous increase in the Nepalese migration to this region. Unlike the past soldier migrants, the immigrants are unskilled farm hands of rural peasant background, known for their thrift, hardwork and industriousness. They reach the barren uninhabited forest fringes and the marshy Brahmaputra quagmire, clear the forest plots; start dairy farming and get settled as inalienable partner of the local economy.

The above situation, apart from creating economic, political and cultural consequences has generated the regional demographic imbalance. The Nepalese population in Assam was 101, 335 in 1951, 132 925 in 1961 and it increased to 353, 673 in 1971. While the decennial growth rate between 1961 to 1971 for Assam was 34.95 per cent, for the Nepalese in Assam it turned out to be 48 per cent. Besides Assam, there are Nepalese in Tripura, Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh. In case we add up the Nepalese population from Bhutan (200,000 : 1969), Sikkim (180, 000 : 1971) and North Bengal (a rough estimate of 1,200,000 to 1,500,000) to the above figure from Assam, it turns out about two and half million. The base of this figure is the year 1971. Even if a modest rate of 25 per cent increase during the last eight years is calculated, the number of the Nepalese in the north-eastern India comes about anything between three to three and half a million. It goes without saying that this large scale migration within a short span of time has created a host of problems for the indigenous communities as well as immigrants. Before we examine such problems, it will be rewarding to uncover the economic base of the Nepalese immigrants to north-east India.

The Economic Base

The Nepalese who had been migrating to north-east India may empirically be divided into three broad categories : (i) the pastoralists and marginal farmers, (ii) the ex-soldiers,

and (iii) the artisans and the semi-skilled professionals.

(i) Pastoralists and marginal farmers: The Nepalese herdsman or farmer moves out of his hills in search of new opportunities alone or sometimes in small groups of unskilled agricultural labourers. The only capital he carries with himself are his personal qualities as a cheerful, perseverent and sturdy hand, his ubiquitous *Khukhri* and a readiness to do anything to make a living. Such marginal men very easily combine a number of roles in themselves, as dairymen, sharecroppers, agricultural labourers, porters, smiths, carpenters and even as errand boys. When they come to north-east Indian hilly tract, they locate themselves away from the tribal village, on the uninhabited, barren forest fringes. Many a time, they have been guilty of felling the forest trees and even stealthily settling down even on the reserve forests. With their frugal habit, perseverance and industriousness they make a living. Their role in local economy turns out to be significant because of their availability for any type of agricultural chore. The lonely porter—*Bahadur*—begins to be identified locally. He too feels comfortable enough to realize his psychological, social and physical needs. His near cosmopolitan social outlook, freedom from purity and pollution of the food and drink and prevalence of polygyny enable him to acquire a partner. Number of wives a Nepalese may have increases his productive capabilities economically and biologically. Emperically, we have come across larger the size of the Nepalese families, more prosperous they are. Even the small kids in the family are not liabilities as they add to the working force of family from infancy. This trend has been observed in Sikkim (Chie, N. : 1966), Meghalaya (Sinha, A. C. : 1978) and elsewhere in north-east India.

The tribal communities in the north-eastern hills are engaged in slash-and-burn-type of rotational cultivation, and the families are scattered on the hill slopes keeping in mind the 'Jhum' land and availability of water. However, because of education, road communication, conversion to christianity, welfare schemes of the government and constitutional safe-

guards, many of the tribals have been induced to white-collar jobs ; and in the process are weaned away from the '*Jhum*' cultivation and communal ownership of the land. These white collar tribesmen build up their residences in the urban centres and invest their cash income in transforming a portion of more profitable community land into private landed property. Cash crops like potato, vegetables, spices, fruits etc. induce them further. In this way permanent settled cultivation is being introduced largely by the absentee urban based tribal owners. They invariably employ the Nepalese in various capacities on their farms because by tradition their tribal brethren are neither available for nor proved the competence for agricultural work on cash payment. Not only the Nepalese labour, but his cattle heads also contribute manure, ploughing and meat to the local population. Slowly but steadily, the Nepalese are found occupying the agriculturally valuable land, which as per local practice, is a communal property. While the local tribal shifting cultivator, remains a marginal farmer like his fore-fathers, the new comer Nepalese has added a modest affluence, which makes a perceptible change in his case. Naturally, the locals feels that the Nepalese are stealthily alienating them from their traditional rights, while the Nepalese plead that their modest affluence has a long story of exploitation by the local people.

Here is the explosive and a potential area of conflict between the immigrant Nepalese and the autochthonous tribal communities which is rooted in the question of the land ownership. In this regard, the legal and the constitutional safeguards have been made to preserve the traditional authority of the tribal people over the land. But, with the contrivance of some of the tribals, a few Nepalese have been able to acquire landed property. Against this legal and constitutional background, the Nepalese landownership appears as of criminal transgression of the law of the land. However, the local tribal communities have an ambivalent attitude towards the Nepalese immigrants because the Nepalese have been instrumental in development of the local economic resources (fruits of which are mostly enjoyed by the educated tribals) and

added a modest affluence for themselves at the cost of the rural and uneducated tribals. Such a situation frequently leads to the inter-ethnic clashes.

To illustrate the above point, two instances of such clashes may be referred. The Marapani region is located on the border of Wokha (Nagaland) and Sibsagar (Assam) districts. This was marked as the reserved forest and, by tradition, is known as the Lhota area. In 1946 some ex-soldiers were settled there. Slowly and slowly, more Nepalese immigrated to Marapani and along with came a number of Bengalis and Biharis. Incidentally, this is a disputed border region between Assam and Nagaland. The Nepalese are settled on this disputed patch of land and some of them have got title papers from both the governments. Some of the Nepalese among themselves are engaged in land disputes because of the claims and counter-claims of the two states on the forest tract. It so happened that the Assam domiciled Nepalese and the Bengalis with the help of the Assam police encroached upon the disputed land on the Nagaland side. This led to a serious raid, secretly planned in the night by the Lhota Naga in 1978 in which a number of immigrants not only lost their lives, but were also completely uprooted. Another incident of (Sema) tribal and the Nepalese clash occurred in March 1978 on the trijunction of Wokha, Mokukchung (Nagaland) and Sibsagar (Assam) districts in which about 200 Nepalese lost their lives. In both these cases, a sense of alienation of tribal land by the Nepalese farmers appears to be the main cause of the inter-communal violence.

(ii) Ex-soldier settlers: Since the end of the second world war the Nepalese soldiers after their retirement and or release from the armed forces, have been encouraged to settle down on the foothills, forest fringes and river banks, which can be acclaimed for agricultural purposes. Certain compact pockets of the Nepalese settlement in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Nagaland and Manipur emerged in the process. These settlers have all the qualities of a good peasant coupled with training in the armed forces. They have acquired an image of loyal citizens, proestablishment by temperament, and even

as the mercenaries. With their inborn qualities of industry, perseverance and military discipline, they have turned out their newly acquired settlements as thriving centres of prosperous peasantry. They have an added advantage of regular cash income in the form of the pension from their units. Invariably this pension amount is invested on the landed property. Their apparent and visible prosperity appears at times as the oasis in the deserts of the relatively indolent and less achievement oriented tribal and local settlement. Naturally, they attract jealousies of the unscrupulous eyes.

There is another aspect of the ex-soldier-settlers' presence in the north-east India. They are invariably settled in the frontier regions, where there is considerable movement of the armed forces. These are also some of the regions, where there have been extremist and secessionist activities. The Nepalese ex-soldiers are accused of providing data on strategy and logistics to the armed forces. In this way, at times, they come on head-on collusion with the local population. The best example of such a situation may be cited from what happened in Manipur in April 1980. "There several villages (in Sagolmong area in the Sadar sub-division of the Central district), inhabited by Nepalese, were burned. Those who visited the area a couple of days later witnessed a most horrific sight of devastation, some corners being unapproachable because of the stink of rotted carcasses of cattle which were burnt to death. This is no ordinary area. It is from here that R. K. Tulachandra, the PREPAK leader, and some of his comrades were captured recently. Four more extremists were captured from here in early June. Much further back in history, in the (Ninteen) Forties, the area was the storming ground of Manipur's first and (the) most illustrious progressive leader, Irabot Singh. Thus, the worst antforeigner (nonindigenous) violence took place in an area with a history of extremist activity" (*Sunday*, 8 June 1980).

(iii) Artisans and semi-skilled professionals: There is a sizeable Nepalese population floating from one urban centres to another. They are employed partly, fully, occasionally and even seasonally in various semi-skilled professions.

A number of them are engaged in traditional (Castes?) occupations such as smiths, carpenters, tailors and traders. In the urban centres of north-east specially in the states where caste bound professional specialists are non-existent by tradition—the Nepalese have been able to fill the role of the intermediary semi-skilled professionals between the unskilled local community and the white collar sophisticated professionals from other parts of India. With the expansion of the construction works, electrification programmes, commercialization, advent of modest industrialization, extension of transport communication, and other welfare extension activities, demand for semi skilled muscle power has been on increase. Thus, besides smiths and carpenters, plumbers, cleaners, masons, mechanics, tailors, drivers, electricians, scavengers, porters, construction workers, pony cart drivers, mulateers, vulcanizers, watch men, gardeners, bus conductors etcetera are required. For all the above chores the most obvious choice is the Nepalese who invariably combine a number of roles into their persons. They are always available to any private or corporate agency for any sundry work on a modest payment.

The type of works in which the urban Nepalese are engaged in are relatively new to the region. Thus, there is little competition from the local indigenous communities to the Nepalese hold over these professions. Unlike their pastoralist and soldier-farmer counterparts, the semi-skilled urban Nepalese are scattered in the townships keeping in view the availability of such jobs they are engaged in. They rarely come into direct conflict with the local community because such specializations in which they have developed skills are limited in supply locally. The urban Nepalese lead a near cosmopolitan life in which their expenses are in tune with their income. Accordingly, they do not attract envy of their non-Nepalese neighbours, because they rarely add to an affluence. That is why in spite of their sizeable contribution to the local economy, they maintain a submerged identity. Being a Nepalese does not help them in any significant way. For social, cultural and religious purposes, they join their Hindu, Buddhist, or Christian counterparts.

There are two other significant categories of Nepalese in the north-east India: the unskilled construction workers employed by the Border Road Organization, the Indian Railways etc. and the emerging urban white collar employees. The former are invariably a floating population, being shifted from one construction site to another as per work requirements. They are rarely organized; without much political consciousness and little awareness to their unenviable state of affairs. The urban white collar is an emerging new category among the Nepalese. They are invariably born, brought up and educated in the region. They know north-east as their home, speak the local dialects; have a number of friends, patrons, and enemies from among the local community and are organizationally affiliated to the local voluntary associations. These second and third generation Nepalese of north-east India, remember the sufferings of their fathers and grandfathers. They are politically aware and culturally conscious of their status in the state and the Indian Union as citizens. They are unconsciously made aware that they do not belong to the dominant local community. Here comes their ego and all of a sudden they start identifying themselves with the great Gorkha past the Hindu traditionalism and the pan-Nepalese solidarity movement. Naturally, they provide the lead for airing the genuine Nepalese grievances. They are the people who compete with the local people for the scarce white collar jobs. Accordingly, they are suspect in the eyes of the dominant communities wielding powers in the state.

Aspects of the Nepalese Issue

The political and economic structure in Nepal is feudal, and northern and north-eastern parts of the country are still primeval. The political system is based on monarchical paternalism in which loyalty is naturally demanded. The Nepalese ruling class and the masses have been culturally closer to the Gangetic plains of India. The Nepalese had been visiting their places of pilgrimage in India for the last several

centuries. For more mundane aspects also (e. g. in search of employment) they had been turning to their southern neighbours. In recent decades the international border between the two countries are being made effective. But for the simple rural Nepalese it becomes difficult to understand the nuances of the legal citizenship. There is another problem. A distinction has to be made between the Nepalese and the Indian Nepalese. This distinction is impossible to be maintained because of open border between India, Nepal and Bhutan and the given geopolitical situation in the Indian sub-continent.

The Indian versus Nepalese identity looms larger on the political horizon these days. It goes without saying that seventeen Tarai districts of Nepal are thickly inhabited by the Indians from Utter Pradesh and Bihar. This is the most developed region of Nepal. It has the surplus agricultural produce, almost all the significant industrial units, almost total industrial working force, and the region contributes a sizeable amount of national revenue to the state exchequer. Besides that the region has also been noted for the democratic movements against the feudal system. In fact, the democratic political parties such as the Nepali Congress has their strong hold in the region. However, the political and economic power in contemporary Nepal is in the hands of the 'hill-Brahmin-Chhetri-Newar', combine of the Kathmandu valley. Naturally, the Tarai is denied of its rightful role in the administrative and decision-making process of the country. There have been deliberate efforts to lessen the hold of plains Indian over the Tarai through the state administrative apparatus. A number of Nepalese of Indian origin have been evicted from their patrimonial possessions in Nepal. Naturally, they take refuge in the Indian villages inhabited by their kinsmen across the border. There is another point of irritantation between the two countries. Hindi and Nepali, both the languages, claim to have a common origin, are written in the *Dewnagari* script and were the joint state languages of Nepal till 1960. Now, the Hindi has not only been denied of this privilege, but the Hindi-speakers are also counted as the speakers of a numbers

of dialects such as Bhojpuri, Maithili and Awadhi. The Government of India is in a fix. They have to decide their stand on the issues of the Nepalese of the Indian origin and the status of Hindi in Nepal. And here comes the question of recognizing the Nepali language in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution and protecting the genuine rights of the Nepalese in India.

There has been a heightened expectation among the hill communities of the north-east India after the Indian independence. This was mainly because of the participative politics of the Indian liberalism. Now it is no more possible to let some "small groups" exist and pursue some stray activities on the forest fringes unnoticed and without civic rights. The traditional tribal practice of loyalty to the chiefs is no longer effective. The non-tribal (Nepalese) dependents of the local chiefs are required to be registered as the voters so that they may exercise their constitutional obligations by taking part in the universal franchise. Now the perspective has changed. Every (legal) settler on the Indian soil, who claims to be an Indian, is to be permitted to take part in the decision-making process at the local, regional, state and national levels. This is the situation in which the expectations of the local hill communities of the north-east and the Nepalese settlers are bound to clash.

In the light of the above, how will the Nepalese identify themselves? Like their neighbours, the Nepalese too have a number of meaningful identities: being a citizen and a soldier of the Indian armed forces; being a Hindu, proud of the great traditional Hinduism and a sense of allegiance to the only Hindu Kingdom of the world today, e.g., Nepal; and empirical identity of the caste or tribe e.g., Chhetri or Gurung; and being Nepalese as one of the several sub-nationalities in the Indian cultural common wealth. All the above identities are meaningful to the Nepalese and the Nepalese as an organized group or as individuals would be using these identities as and when they are relevant with a view to appropriation of the distinct resources. But to our mind, the Nepalese in the north-east India in particular

and in India in general, may identify themselves ideologically as the Nepalese sub-nationals against their Indian, Hindu and caste tribal identities. This is an empirical situation in which the most rewarding identity for them would be to follow the ethnic ideology so they could separate themselves from the over-lapping traits with 'others' (e.g. the non-Nepalese) and restrict themselves to their distinctiveness. The Nepalese leaders would be hardpressed to disengage their community from class, political, regional and even religio-cultural affiliations with 'others'. This is the logical situation for an immigrant and economically weak community to emphasize its cultural identity as an organizational tool to acquire a bargaining situation in a plural society. "If consciousness of deprivation and concomitant organization (the class ideology of Marxism) are not sufficient to unite the migrants in a labour organization, what other factor is available to an organizer? The answer to that question is ideology. In this case, specifically, ethnic ideology or pride in one's ethnic identity (Provinzano, James : 1976). Thus, the Nepalese may get themselves organized to preserve, propagate and even increase their ethnic solidarity. And this newly acquired Nepalese solidarity would naturally clash with the heightened expectations of the host communities in north-east India.

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