

Lhotshampa, Madhesi, Nepamul

The deprived of Bhutan, Nepal and India

Despite the fact that they have been living in their respective countries for centuries, the Lhotshampa, Nepamul Bharatiya and Madhesi have in common the fact that they are all underdogs.

BY A C SINHA

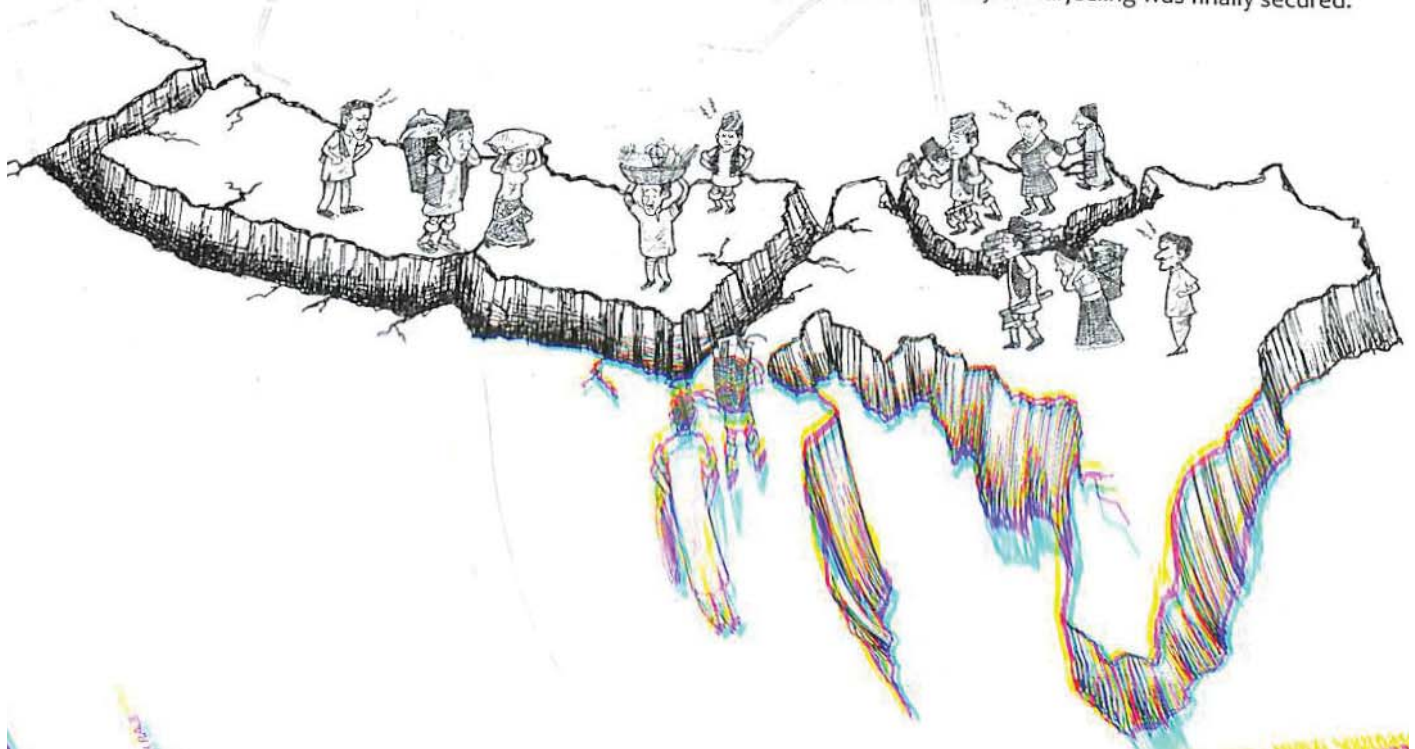
The thin stretch of land from Dehradun eastwards to Arunachal Pradesh, variously identified as the *bhabar*, *tarai* or *duar*, is today much in the news, particularly in the Nepal context. But just a century and a half ago, this was not known as a densely populated area. Only a few ethnic groups and stray settlers populated this land, infamous for flash floods, wild animals and, especially, malaria. Today, however, these resource-rich plains of Nepal, Bhutan and India have turned into a hotbed of dissent – an area of continued neglect and exploitation, often ignored by decision-makers, and largely circumvented by nation-building efforts. Uncovering various aspects of deprivation inevitably leads to the lost opportunities of three significant communities: the Madhesi, the Lhotshampa and what can be referred to as the *nepamul bharatiya*, or Indian citizens of Nepali origin.

In Nepal, it is usually claimed that those today referred to as Madhesi are the land-hungry migrants from the Indian plains who came to the Tarai after the so-called Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, purportedly with a view to clearing the area's forests and occupying its fertile agricultural lands. For their part, in India it is similarly maintained that, around the same time, Nepalis were invited by the British to develop Darjeeling and to mine copper and mint coins in Sikkim. Finally, in Bhutan the claim is that the Lhotshampa were recent illegal migrants to the country. Yet there is sufficient historical evidence to show that the ancestors of the

Madhesi in the Tarai, the Nepamul in Sikkim and Darjeeling, and the Lhotshampa in Bhutan were already in these areas well before the 1814-15 Anglo-Nepali war. Indeed, not only should these groups not be called 'migrants', but some of them have good claim to be considered sons and daughters of the soil.

As a result of the 1815 Treaty of Sugauli, Nepal was forced to surrender the entire Tarai to the British, though much of this was later returned. All of the land east of the Mechi River was ceded to the East India Company, while the rulers of Nepal renounced their claims to the territories west of the Kali River. In addition, Nepal was not to "disturb" the Raja of Sikkim, with the British vested with powers of arbitration in case of differences. Soon, the East India Company carved out the buffer state of Sikkim between Nepal and Bhutan, and, under the 1817 Treaty of Titalia, the British ceded the eastern lands secured from Nepal to this new state, which was in effect a British feudatory.

Soon thereafter, the British began to develop Darjeeling, whereupon the adjoining feudatories became increasingly worried about controlling their serfs and peasants, who were suddenly attracted by the possibilities of working in this thriving hill station. By the 1860s, this turmoil resulted in two additional treaties, between the East India Company and Sikkim, and between the Company and Bhutan – the treaties of Tumlong and Sinchula, respectively. Under these, the thinly populated territory of Darjeeling was finally secured.



Gurkha farm

At this time, the British were also busy laying out tea plantations and railway tracks, for the eventual commercial exploitation of the region from Darjeeling and continuing eastward to Burma. Apart from the inexpensive, willing and industrious Nepali labour that was used to clear the dense, undulating forests of the Indian Northeast for these purposes, the British also invented the myth of the Gurkha 'martial race'. In the aftermath of the Sepoy Mutiny, the British were determined to 'prove' that the Bengalis and high-caste Hindus from the Gangetic plains had 'effeminate' traits and were, thus, unsuitable for inclusion in the armed forces. Those groups that had not taken part in the Mutiny – the 'Gurkhas', Sikhs, Marathas and others – were elevated to a heralded status as 'martial races', supposedly as a reward for their loyalty. Systematic attempts at their induction into the British Army subsequently began.

During a 1932 survey of the southern districts of Bhutan, an Indian Army recruitment officer named C J Morris found the southern Duars thickly settled with Nepali communities. He estimated that from the approximately 60,000 Nepalis, a sufficient number of recruits from the ethnic Rai, Limbu, Magar, Gurung and Tamang (and Chhetri) communities could be found to make up the equivalent of two infantry battalions. While the government of Bhutan was reluctant to permit the induction of Bhutani Nepalis into the Indian armed forces, Morris's recommendations were nonetheless acted upon, and some recruits were sent to Shillong for training. In fact, it was this batch of India-trained soldiers who later served as the nucleus of the first Palace Guards for the royal household in Thimphu.

As long as the British were in India, they treated Nepal as something of a farm for coolies and soldiers. There was so much stress placed on Gurkha recruitment that even the progeny of the same Gurkha settlers in and around the army cantonments in India were considered unfit, as they were assumed to have been 'polluted' by the peoples of the plains. This arrangement continued after Indian Independence, when, according to an agreement between Great Britain, India and Nepal, six Gurkha regiments out of 10 opted to continue serving in India, under Indian officers.

A significant step was also undertaken by the governments of Nepal and India, when the Treaty of Peace and Friendship was signed in July 1950, in Kathmandu. According to Article 7 of this agreement, "the governments of India and Nepal agree to grant, on reciprocal basis, to the nationals of one country in the territory of other, the same privileges in matters of residence, ownership of property, participation in trade and commerce, movement and other privileges of a similar nature." The egalitarian sentiments of these words notwithstanding, we shall soon see how the Nepamul Bharatiya have come to see Article 7 as detrimental to their interests as Indian nationals, and how a section of Nepamul today feel that the Treaty has outlived its relevance.

Druk Yul

Following the Anglo-Bhutan war of 1864, the Sinchula Treaty fixed the present western, southern and eastern boundaries of Bhutan with India. By this time, Bhutan's western neighbours, Darjeeling and Sikkim, had come under British

control, and the districts of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri, adjoining Bhutan, were turning into thriving tea plantations, aided by inexpensive and hard-working Nepali labour.

Also at this time, ethnic Bhotia, Lepcha and communities of Nepali origin were moving across the current boundaries of Darjeeling into Sikkim, Bhutan and Nepal. Likewise, Nepali herdsmen, lumbermen and casual labour were seasonally migrating into southwestern Bhutan, where they were contributing cash revenue to the Bhutani exchequer. From 1865, it took about two decades for Bhutan to allow the Samchi Kazis (contractors and tax collectors originally

As movements for ethnic assertion in the name of 'sons of the soil' have spread, especially in the Northeast, anti-foreigner agitations have often degenerated into anti-Nepamul actions.

from Sikkim) to settle the *paharias* (the Nepalis) in the southwestern corner of Bhutan. Once this area became a settled, revenue-paying district, there was no looking back: within three decades, about one-third of the total Bhutani population consisted of people of Nepali origin.

Bhutan had been a theocratic polity for as much as two and a half centuries before the founder of the present ruling dynasty, Ugyen Wangchuck, was crowned ruler in December 1907. Four decades later, with the end of the colonial era, Bhutan wanted to remain under British protection. Nonetheless, the new rulers of independent India, through a bilateral treaty signed in 1949, stepped in to provide protection for Bhutan. But a hands-off policy by the government of India towards its counterpart in Thimphu became entrenched during the 1950s. At that time, activists with the fledgling Bhutan State Congress tried to take refuge in Indian territory during a crackdown by the royal regime. New Delhi officials assured Thimphu that the agitators would not be permitted to use Indian territory for anti-Bhutan activities; as the two countries maintained an open border, however, the dissidents of the one country began to expect peaceful residence in the other.

In 1958, Jawaharlal Nehru undertook an arduous journey to Bhutan through the Chumbi Valley in Tibet, and persuaded the third Bhutani king, Jigme Dorji, to open up his country's society and economy. This was to be accomplished by constructing roads, monetising Bhutan's barter economy, and introducing social and economic reforms through five-year development plans. Needless to say, India has been main financier of every one of these development plans ever since.

Here and gone

The early visitors to the Bhutan Duars had been seasonal migrants, who would return home before the rainy season. Bhutan provided ample land on which to graze and expand, while unregulated forests offered a variety of resources. But by the 1860s, as had long been the case due to the hot, malarial climate, the Bhutani portion of the Duars was still

devoid of a perennial population. As there was a lack of effective administration at the lower level in what was then the largely lawless land of Bhutan, the early Lhotshampa settlers, of Nepali origin, considered themselves subjects of the king of Nepal. Naturally, their everyday lives were thus governed by Nepali social custom. Those who could afford it and were adventurous enough continued to visit Nepal during festivals to participate in social events at 'home' and even negotiate marital ties.

Within the next two decades, by the 1880s, the Lhotshampa quickly moved to populate what are today known as the districts of Samchi, Chhukha, Tsirang and parts of

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Sarpang. Isolated in remote hamlets, their living conditions were quite miserable, devoid of any amenities, amidst a complete lack of administration. Indeed, it was as if these communities had simply been dropped into the Duar's malarial forests from the sky, waiting for wild animals and the occasional Drukpa (highlanders who adhered to the Druk school of Lamasim) collecting house tax.

But within their settlements, the Lhotshampa inhabitants were able to build little islands of Nepali social and cultural

life, and were quite self-sufficient. From woodcutters and herdsmen, they gradually moved on to settled peasantry, growing cash crops and engaging in barter and trade. As the Lhotshampa slowly developed immunities against the harsh environment, as well as the endemic malaria, their numbers began to grow correspondingly. By 1932, the Lhotshampa made up about 20 percent of an estimated Bhutan population of 300,000. Indeed, of the 20 districts in Bhutan at the time, five of the most densely populated were in the Duars, inhabited by the Lhotshampa. As Bhutan population figures have been fluctuating as per political expediency of the royal government (anywhere from 1.1 million to six million), and with more than 100,000 Lhotshampa being forced into exile during the early 1990s, it is difficult to come up with exact figures of Lhotshampa currently living in Bhutan. But their numbers can be safely estimated at making up between 25 and 40 percent of the total population.

With a view to nullifying the reformist demands of the Bhutan State Congress, and ensuring the cheap labour required for various development projects, Bhutan granted citizenship to the Lhotshampa in 1958. For the next 25 years, Thimphu tried to integrate the community into the country's national life – through state-sponsored financial grants, and by encouraging inter-ethnic marriages, allowing the teaching of Nepali and Sanskrit, and offering scholarships to deserving students of Nepali origin to pursue their studies abroad. It was King Jigme Singye Wangchuck who, in 1975, ordered that Bhutanis of Nepali extraction would no longer be known as Nepalis or *paharias*, but rather as 'inhabitants of southern Bhutan' – Lhotshampa.

Things began to change quickly thereafter, however,

as educated Lhotshampa began to oppose ethnic discrimination that continued despite the king's proclamation. Suspicious of Lhotshampa political ambitions, during the 1980s the royal government took a series of restrictive steps against the community, which led to strong reaction among the Lhotshampa. In August 1990, the Nepali-speakers assembled in large numbers in the southern towns of Samchi and Phuntshiling, to demonstrate against alleged atrocities committed by Bhutani officials towards rural householders in southern Bhutan. The agitators were fired upon and forced to retreat across the border to West Bengal. Thereafter, a reign of terror was unleashed by the Bhutani state machinery against the Lhotshampa, leading to extensive evictions and the subsequent expulsion of many from the country. New Delhi again warned the aggrieved Lhotshampa not to use Indian territory to organise political agitations against Thimphu, and disallowed them from even forming exile colonies in northern West Bengal.

Today the Lhotshampa live as pariahs in Bhutan, under constant threat of eviction, expulsion and cultural extinction. Over the past two decades, their schools, temples, houses and other common properties have been vandalised, and the teaching of Nepali and Sanskrit has been banned. And as per official diktat, every Bhutani citizen has to follow the *driglam-nazha* – one king, one country, and one dress – code of public conduct. Punishment for violators is harsh.

Ironically, it was the Lhotshampa who had originally raised the demand for the democratisation of Bhutan, back in 1952. Likewise, against the backdrop of the royal government's discrimination of the mid-1980s, it was again the Lhotshampa who demanded a constitutional monarchy, a written Constitution, a political-party system and direct elections to the Parliament. With the recent elections, these dispensations have been put into action; but Thimphu has seen to it that the Lhotshampa – much less those 107,000 in exile in southeast Nepal – barely figure in the new arrangements. Indeed, even as Bhutan is engaged in becoming a palace-sponsored democracy, a new wave of discrimination has begun against the Lhotshampa in Bhutan. A number of village headmen have been stripped of their positions due to their political aspirations.

Stirring in the Nepali Tarai

Between the 1860s and 1951, the Kathmandu government encouraged economic development in the Tarai, and made efforts to settle hill people in the plains. But the response from the hill people was poor, due to the hot, malarial climate. As such, the Rana regime of Nepal had no choice but to depend on migrants from across the border to clear the dense Tarai forests and transform the area into a thriving agrarian economy. Yet during the 1960s, citizenship legislation framed by representatives of the nationally dominant hill culture was still characterised by a suspicion of the plains dwellers, making the acquisition of citizenship significantly more difficult for peoples of plains origin living in the Tarai.

King Mahendra's elimination of the political-party system in 1960 returned Nepal to a set-up in which the traditional elite could assert its influence more exclusively. But the people's uprising of 1990, referred to as Jana Andolan I, re-oriented the Nepali polity from the absolute authority of the

king to a dual sovereignty of the constitutional monarchy and parliamentary democracy. In turn, the Jana Andolan II, of April 2006, led to the beginning of a dramatic restructuring of the Nepali state.

This situation led to an explosion of expectations at all levels, in particular among the *janajatis*, the ethnic groups, as well as an ethno-regional identity on the part of Madhesi in the Tarai. The latter has been particularly significant.

Common scripts and mutually intelligible languages make for a common cause with which to sensitise the states of Nepal, India and Bhutan on the distinct common heritage of the Lhotshampa, Nepamul and Madhesis.

There has been a marked shift afoot in the make-up of the recent Madhesi movement, as peoples of the Tarai cannot generally be equated with the Madhesis. The term *madhesi* literally means a dweller in Madhes, or the plains. In theory, anyone living in the Tarai could be considered a Madhesi, but this term has instead come to have an ethnic connotation – similar to *parbatiya* or *pahade*, which mean 'hill-dwellers'. *Madhesi* now refers to plain-dwellers of 'Indian', Hindu origin. Usages differ, but it is clear that certain groups, such as the ethnic Tharu, who originally dominated the forest clearings of the Tarai, do not wish to be included in this category. Likewise, the pahades settled in the plains are definitely not included, and it seems neither are the plains' Muslim communities.

Current estimates suggest that as much as 33 percent of Nepalis are of Madhesi origin. But the state of Nepal has long denied Madhesis genuine representation in the legislature, by a number of means. For example, population-wise, Tarai constituencies are much larger than those in the hills. In addition, the division of constituencies has always been carried out from north to south (rather than east to west), with a view to including hill people and thereby working against the possible dominance of Tarai peoples in any given constituency. Irrespective of party affiliation, during the last parliamentary election, in 1999, only 40 Madhesis were elected throughout Nepal in a house of 205.

The first population census, conducted in 1952-54, recorded 58,181 Hindi-speaking Nepalis, but Bhojpuri, Maithil and Awadhi speakers claimed that the figure was much higher. But despite the fact that several prominent Madhesi figures, including Bedanand Jha, a leader of the Nepali Tarai Congress, urged the recognition of Hindi as the lingua franca of the Tarai, the state did not recognise the importance of this call. Instead, it declared the Tarai to be an area dominated by a set of mother tongues: Mathili, Bhojpuri, Awadhi, Tharu and so on.

Hindi was not permitted to be spoken on the floor of the national legislature till after the People's Movement in 1990 ushered in a freer atmosphere. Though the language is today taught at some universities, its continued non-recognition by the government discourages its study. Amongst

other things, this has caused many Hindi periodicals to die a premature death. Moreover, in spite of the overwhelming demand of Madhesis to include Hindi in national examinations, Nepali remains the only medium of entrance exams for government jobs. Similar has been the case of the *dhoti-kurta*, the traditional attire of Madhesis, which has never been recognised as proper 'formal' dress for a Nepali.

On a national level, much of this is currently changing quickly. In recent times, a host of powerful political and militant Madhesi groups have sprung up and forcefully exerted their voices. Despite suspicions that the palace – or a Hindutva brigade from India – was instigating the demonstrations that have wracked the Tarai since the winter of 2006-7, there is no doubt that the Madhesis have been able to send a clear signal: that regardless of who ends up guiding the destiny of Nepal after the Constituent Assembly elections, Madhesis will no longer take their lot lying down. In fact, the Madhesi people have sent a clear signal by putting up the Madhesi Janaadhikar Forum (MJF) as the main representatives of the Tarai population – the MJF having led the 'Madhes Andolan' of last year.

Nepamul Bharatiya

For a discussion of the Nepamul Bharatiya, or Indians of Nepali origin, some clarifications are first needed. Besides those Nepamul who were already in Sikkim before the extensive migration of Nepalis to India of the mid-19th century, Nepali traders, pilgrims, roving holy men, marital partners

and seasonal migrants had long moved between what are now considered Nepal and India. In addition, there were hill communities of Nepali origin who felt more at home in the hilly Indian Northeast, and who slowly moved to Darjeeling and Sikkim, and then to the foothills of western Bhutan, in addition to other places in India.

The hills of British Assam likewise had pockets of Nepali settlements, invariably around cantonments. This particularly spiked in 1817, when 1000 Hindustanis and 'Gurkhas' took part in an expedition in Sylhet as a part of the Cuttack Legion, later known as the Assam Light Infantry. Whether deployed in Sylhet or the Shillong plateau, the Naga or Lushai hills, the Chittagong Hill Tracts or the Sadiya Frontier Tract, during the Bhutan War or the Manipur rebellion, the Gurkhas constituted half of the Assam Rifles. Their crucial role in this force was officially recognised in 1865, when the Nepali *khukuri* became the standard-issue tool to cut their ways through the dense jungles of Assam. In time, the crossed *khukuri* was even accepted as the Rifles' official emblem. Eventually, between three and six million Gurkha soldiers and their families settled down after discharge, mostly in Assam, Manipur, Nagaland and Mizoram. They have since adapted to the local social and cultural environment, and have become inseparable parts of the local economy.

Broader hard numbers of Nepamul in India are equally unclear. Besides the large numbers of migrant workers who cross over from both sides of the open Nepal-India border

for work, there are large numbers of Nepamul in various urban centres of India. Due to the absence of documentation, however, estimates are very hard to come by. The Akhil Bharatiya Gorkha Parishad, for one, claims there are as many as 10 million Nepamul in India.

Since 1993, the Nepali language (also referred to as Gorkhali) has been recognised as an official language of India, and is taught in a number of universities at various levels. For years, Sahitya Academy, the official organisation in India that promotes local-language literature, recognised Nepali literature and Nepali authors, and many such writers such as Lil Bahadur Chhetri have received awards for their work. Indeed, there is a huge corpus of Nepali literature of high standard and quality produced in India. Despite this cultural freedom, however, employment opportunities are very limited for the Nepamul. Other than those who work for the armed forces, they are mostly forced to labour in poorly paid, unskilled, physical-labour jobs. They are invariably typed as a community of *chowkidars*, coolies or porters, hotel help or sundry errand boys.

The case of the Nepamul in India is actually quite similar to that of the Madhesis in Nepal. But unlike the Nepamul vis-à-vis the Indian armed forces, the Nepali military and police have almost completely ignored the presence of Madhesis in terms of recruitment. Indeed, Madhesis have alleged that there is an 'undeclared' ban on the recruitment of the Madhesis in the Nepal Army. In the lead-up to the recent Constituent Assembly elections, the call for proportional representation of Madhesis in the Nepal Army was a foremost demand.

Nowhere people

The Lhotshampa, Nepamul and Madhesis have in common the fact that they are all underdogs in their chosen countries, where they are also both legal and illegal residents. Nepal discriminated against Madhesis as state policy, as incorporation of the Madhesis – such as the Maithils – without a relatively sophisticated cultural background in the hill culture as a distinctive mark of Nepal, was almost impossible. So, the government of Nepal made it almost impossible for a large number of Madhesis to possess citizenship documents. In the absence of such documents, it was not only that Madhesis were forbidden from political participation, even leading a normal life was difficult – being unable to sell or buy property, secure a license to start a business, be admitted to higher education and so on. An official report in 1995 found more than three million Madhesis lacked citizenship certificates. To be fair, as a result of the assertion of rights by the Madhesi leadership over the last year, the interim government has in recent times sent teams of functionaries to distribute citizenship certificates to more than 2.6 million Madhesis. Still, many Madhesis continue to be without citizenship in Nepal.

The issue in Bhutan is said to be a matter of economic migration. The Thimphu government alleges that, due to the better welfare facilities available in the kingdom, impoverished Nepalis have for decades been taking advantage of open borders, and moving stealthily into Bhutan. But Bhutan appears to have scant regard for its official records, as the 1958 citizenship rules (which had given citizenship

rights to long-settled Bhutanis of Nepali extraction, as well as opportunities almost equal to those given to Drukpas, by providing scholarship to study outside Bhutan) were revised retrospectively during the 1980s. Likewise, as noted previously, the country's official population numbers have been arbitrarily changed several times as per political exigencies.

In the Indian case, citizens of Nepal have the right to uninterrupted stay in any part of India, to engage any vocation, and even to own property. But the visitor from the Nepali hills and the Nepamul speak the same set of languages, dress similarly, look alike and follow the same set of cultural practices. For this reason, as movements for ethnic assertion in the name of 'sons of the soil' have

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spread, especially in the Northeast, anti-foreigner agitations have often degenerated into anti-Nepamul actions. This has led to the eviction even of old settlers, who are supposed to have acquired all rights as Indian nationals. As many as 35,000 stateless Nepamul citizens were given citizenship 15 years after Sikkim's 1975 merger with India, but this did not solve the larger problem.

The Nepamul rule the state of Sikkim as per the law of the land, as they have demographic majority in the state. In addition, they also decide all significant issues in Darjeeling District, and are represented in the state assemblies of Assam, Meghalaya and West Bengal as per their population. At the Centre, however, there are currently less than ten representatives from the community, out of a total 750 in both houses of Parliament. Thus, despite some achievements, the Nepamul community today has very little effective political voice, and hardly any economic clout.

Not that the community has not been politicised. The oldest Nepamul forum, the All India Gorkha League (AIGL), was established at Dehradun in 1923, and it demanded a Nepali-speaking state within India. But after the demand for a state of Gorkhaland was officially refused in 1956, the AIGL became a rudderless party without a clear political agenda. In such a vacuum, the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF), led by the former soldier Subhas Ghisingh, emerged during the 1980s with aggressive demands for a 'Gorkha' homeland in Darjeeling. (Some former GNLF members also assisted the Lhotshampa during the early 1990s.) In a dramatic way, Ghisingh termed the Nepamul as Gorkhas, their language as Gorkhali, and their imagined state as Gorkhaland. But this has only led to further controversy and confusion among the Nepamul community in other parts of India.

Meanwhile, Ghisingh's autocratic rule over the Darjeeling Gorkha Hills District Council, which he helped set up, recently came to an inglorious end (see *Himal April 2008*, "A 'dictator' deposed"). The GNLF has been usurped by the Gorkha Janamukti Morcha (GJM), a new outfit led by Ghisingh's former protégé, Bimal Gurung. The latter

opposes designating Darjeeling as a scheduled district (with special privileges) within West Bengal, as Ghising had eventually come to advocate. Instead, Gurung has reclaimed Ghising's earlier rhetoric, and has re-pitched the creation of a Gorkhaland state. But the larger 'Ghising effect' has yet to dissipate: the community has not recovered from his creation of the division of 'Gorkha versus Nepali'. Today, the community's resources are split, with parallel Gorkha and Nepali associations in effect in the political, social, cultural, literary and other forums of Darjeeling, all of which are purportedly espousing the cause of the Nepamul.

Regionwide samman and nyay

The Madhesi, Nepamul and Lhotshampa community write in the Nagari script, and their two main link languages, Hindi and Nepali, are mutually intelligible. These characteristics, combined with others, make for a common cause with which to sensitise the states of Nepal, India and Bhutan on the distinct common heritage of these groups. Both Nepal and India must incorporate the ethnic, linguistic, economic and political demands of their citizens into their national agenda. In this context, the demand for a 'Gorkha' homeland in India deserves all serious consideration. Similarly, had there been concern in Nepal for treating the Madhes fairly and equally for the past half-century, the recent violent upsurge in the Tarai would not have emerged. Meanwhile, efforts need to be made to understand the plight of the Lhotshampa as a human tragedy of Southasia, and to debunk once and for all the myth that this community is in Bhutan in order to usurp the Drukpa nation.

At present, there is a crisis of perception in the region on all counts. While India and Bhutan imagine encountering the phantom of a 'Greater Nepal' in eastern India and the Duars, Nepal has found its own hallucination in the form of Madhes, and decided to live under the shadow of an alleged 'expansive India'. The Nepali policy pursued by King Mahendra of '*ek raja, ek desh, ek vesh*' (one king, one country, one dress) was extended to the principle of 'one language' (*ek bhasha*). Just as Nepal created a myth that nobody speaks Hindi in Nepal, Bhutan has been busy convincing itself that nobody speaks Nepali in Bhutan.

While Nepal tried to divide Madhes among Maithili, Awadhi and Bhojpuri, it is the Nepamul themselves who debate whether *Gorkhali* or *Nepali* is the appropriate nomenclature for their language. But all the while, there is considerable language loss among the Nepali migrants to India. The immigrant Newar, Limbu, Magar, Gurung, Rai, Tamang, Sunawar, Sherpa and others have invariably ceased to speak their mother tongues in the Indian North-east and urban centres, and have largely adopted only Nepali. Since these communities left Nepal, their myths and folktales have also largely been lost. In addition, most Nepamul, leading largely deprived lives, have little scope to correct the view of most Indians that they are merely part of the homogenous 'Nepali' community, a situation that is compounded by the desire to create for themselves a distinct identity.

The problem in India is that the system is conceived as an 'open' one, in which every ethnic group or sub-nationality is meant to compete with others for political space and

resources. Though there are constitutional guarantees for equality among these groups, this does not automatically ensure equality on the ground. Nonetheless, the Nepamul community itself has not helped matters by, for instance, tactfully articulating its grievances in peaceful, democratic ways. Perhaps a good example to follow is currently being provided by their Nepali counterparts, the Madhesis, who have recently forced the hill-based powers to take note of their demands – characterising their struggle as a fight for *samman* and *nyay*, respect and justice.

Cooperation or bust

The situation in the Himalayan foothills and adjacent plains has the potential to explode at any time, in any form. There are lessons to be learned, in particular for India, in the expulsion of the Lhotshampa during the 1990s, and in the Nepali Tarai upheaval 15 years later. Indeed, the Indian Union cannot simply wait around for its turn to get embroiled in another ethnic conflict in its northeastern region. But in fact, the ethnic and identity issues of these foothills and plains are not a baby of any one country; rather, all three countries will need to handle the issue jointly, and find a solution that is workable for all.

Nepal and Bhutan are already parties to the on-going ethnic conflicts, and may understandably be reluctant to take the initiative. As such, it is India, which connects all three of these groups – the Nepamul, the Madhesis and the Lhotshampa – that must take up the mantle to do so. New Delhi is, of course, on slippery ground in claiming that the Lhotshampa issue is a bilateral one between Bhutan and Nepal, or that the Madhes issue is an internal problem for Nepal. Instead, India must set an example of neighbourly co-existence. This could also be an opportunity to reclaim the old Southasian democratic tradition of anti-colonial and anti-feudal struggles waged by the Indian National Congress, Nepali Congress and Bhutan State Congress, which deserve to be revived as a true 'people's war' against poverty, illiteracy and backwardness. This harks back to a short-lived phase in regional history, starting in the 1940s, when the Indian National Congress provided a model for a democratic future after ending colonial and feudal oppression.

This is undoubtedly a challenge. At the moment, most of the countries of Southasia are so immersed in nation-building exercises around their dominant politico-ethnic ethos that certain ethnic struggles somehow appear to be outside the national domain. For their part, many of these groups – the Madhesis, Nepamul and Lhotshampa, as well as the Ahmaddiya in Pakistan, Hindus and Adivasis in Bangladesh, Tamils in Sri Lanka, Adivasis and Rohingya Muslims in Burma – are so tied to struggles for daily existence that they have little scope to take up their own issues at institutional levels. Most have neither platforms on which to raise their voice, nor a leadership effective enough to fight for their cause. The moribund SAARC has not even considered the issues associated with these ethnic groups worthy of its deliberations. Neither is such a discussion a possibility in the near future, as national governments guard against perceived interventions in 'national affairs'. These communities have very limited options, and time is running out. ▲