

## Migration and Identity: The Nepalese in North – East India

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**Abstract:** *The Nepalese constituted a major bulk of the population in seven states of North East India. The British encouraged the Nepalese to settle down on the foothills, forest fringes and river banks. Many of the retired Gurkha soldiers after their retirement also took up diary farming and agriculture. They were accepted both by the rulers and the local communities and transformed newly acquired settlements as good agricultural field. But at recent times, they have been identified as a threat to the identity and socio – economic prosperity of the local indigenous people. The Nepalese, as a consequence, suffer from social and political problems, mainly crisis of identity. Such anti – Nepali feeling forced them to depart from North East and took shelter in West Bengal, Sikkim and other parts of India. The present day ‘Gorkhaland Movement’ demanding for a separate homeland is the product of such anti – Nepali feeling. Thus an attempt has been made here to make a study in this field.*

**Key Words:** *Gurkha soldiers, First World War, Gurkha Colonies, Indo – Nepal Friendship Treaty 1950, Anti – Nepali feeling, Gorkhaland Movement.*

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### I. Introduction

In North – East India, the Nepalese, in addition to recruits in the Gurkha army, migrated and settled in various states like Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh, to open up the forestlands, for lumbering and tea plantation industry. This article draws attention on the Nepalese in North East India who are historically, racially, culturally and linguistically heterogeneous but socially constructed as a homogenous community in India or elsewhere outside India.

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## II. Migration of Nepalese in North – East

The process of migration of the Nepalese in North East India, Darjeeling and southern Bhutan began about two centuries ago with the recruitment of Gorkha soldiers into the British Indian Army after the treaty of Sagauli (1816). The settlement of Nepali people in North East began in 1817 when the Cuttack Legion consisting of 1,000 Hindusthanis and Gorkhas took part in Sylhet operation. However, the background of Nepali settlement in North East India during the British Raj have been suitably described in the ‘History of the Assam Rifles; written by Colonel Shakespeare. It is said that Subedar Jai Chand Thakur, a retired soldier of the Eighth Gurkha Platoon was said to have built up a Radha Krishna temple. The Gurkhas constituted a major portion of the Assam Rifles. They always played a vital role in several military operations with the Assam Rifles such as Bhutan wars or the Manipur uprisings. It has been found through the pages of the book written by Colonel Shakespeare that the Gurkhas played a very crucial role during the Surma Valley expedition took place in 1871. This was probably because the British wanted their own stock of Gurkhas rather than have to rely on Nepal all the time.

However, after their retirement and release from the British army, the British encouraged the Nepalese to settle down on the foothills, forest fringes and river banks. Many of the retired Gurkha soldiers after their retirement also took up diary farming and agriculture. In this process, certain compact pockets of the Nepalese settlements in Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Assam, Nagaland emerged. They have transformed such newly acquired settlements as good agricultural field. The Nepali ex – soldier settlers were accepted both by the rulers and the local communities. They have settled at various places in North East India like Sadiya in Assam, Mantripokhri in Manipur, Aizwal in Mizoram and Mokokchung in Nagaland. They modestly mingle with the local people, adopted the language of their neighbourhood, set up matrimonial alliances with them<sup>1</sup>. The Deputy Commissioner of Darang in his official report has remarked that “... the Nepalese freely mix with the indigenous people, adopt their language and create no trouble...”<sup>2</sup>.

There is a sizeable Nepalese population floating from one urban centre to another. Many of them engaged in traditional occupations such as smiths, carpenters, tailors and traders. They played a vital role as intermediary semi – skilled professionals in society. With

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the expansion of the construction works, electrification programmes, commercialisation, industrialisation, development of communication system and other welfare activities, the demand of semi skill muscle power increased. Under this backdrop, the Nepalese were the automatic choice and it added another sublime behind the influx of Nepalese in North – East India <sup>3</sup>.

### **III. Settlement of Nepalese in Assam**

It has been found in the Puranas, epics, Yoginitantra and other historical sources that from the ancient times the Nepali speaking people migrating and residing in different parts of Assam. Some tribes of Assam and Nepal are of the same origin. India and Nepal both the countries have been referred in Puranic tradition as *Kirata desa* and the aboriginals were known as *kiratas* <sup>4</sup>.

The introduction of tea plantation in Assam by the East India Company in 1853 bought a large number of Nepalese from Nepal. They settled and lived there by generations. These people further engaged them in farming and diary. It is said that Jit Bahadur Pradhan bought many Nepali workers from Darjeeling hill and Duars to secure the oil fields in Digboi, Assam. They had to settle permanently by generations in various places surrounding Digboi like Rasthpati, Nalapatti, Itabhatti, Muliabari, Topabasti, Goru Phatak and so on.

#### **Growth of Nepali Population in Assam (1901 – 1991)**

Year	Nepali Population in Assam	Percentage
1901	21,347	0.35
1911	47,654	.67
1921	70,344	.94
1931	88,306	1.01
1951	1,01,338	1.26
1961	2,15,213	1.98
1971	3,49,116	2.38
1991	4,32,519	1.93

(Source: Lopia Nath, Migrnts in Flight, Conflict – Induces Internal Displacement of Nepalese in North East India', *Peace and Democracy in South Asia*, Vol. 1, No.1, January 2005, p. 65.)

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The Gurkhas served India from the times of the Great Mughals, colloquially called ‘Mugalayan’. Impressed by the warfare capabilities showed by the Gurkhas during the Anglo – Nepal War, Sir David Ochterlony gave a proposal to the British government to form a separate unit of the British Indian army consisting of the Gurkhas. This led the birth of the first battalion of the Gurkhas in April 1815 namely the ‘Nasiri Regiment’. They played a pivotal role in numerous warfare took place against the British Raj like the Anglo – Sikh War, Anglo – Afgan War and side by side, provided military assistance behind the expansion and consolidation of the British Empire throughout the Indian subcontinent. Since then the British recruited the Gurkas in the British Indian Army <sup>5</sup>.

Under this backdrop, the Assam Rifles was formed in Cachar in 1835 comprising with the Gurkha soldiers. Since then it has been used for extending administrative control over remote tribal areas in North – East. In 1865 after the gargantuan success in the Anglo – Bhutan War, Hindustanis were replaced by the Gurkhas, Nepalese and Garhwalis. However, at Gorakhpur and Darjeeling a depot was opened to recruit Gurkha soldiers. This situation indubitably encouraged the Nepalese to settle in Assam <sup>6</sup>.

**Number of Gurkhas in the Assam Rifles**

<b>Assam Rifle</b>	<b>Gurkhas</b>	<b>Jharuas</b>	<b>Hill Tribes</b>	<b>Others</b>
1 <sup>st</sup> Battalion	762	48	39	03
2 <sup>nd</sup> Battalion	647	137	01	09
3 <sup>rd</sup> Battalion	592	166	35	38
4 <sup>th</sup> Battalion	614	108	79	02
5 <sup>th</sup> Battalion	552	200	38	03

**Manipur**

The first migration of Nepalese in Manipur began in 1824 during the period of Raja Gambhir Singh. He formed an army in 1825 consisting of the Gorkhas of Syhlet to secure the boundaries from the Burmese aggression. Another influx of Gorkhas in Manipur took place with the establishment of 8<sup>th</sup> Gorkha Rifles in Manipur. Beside this, they were further recruited in Assam Military Police and posted at numerous places such as Darang Police

Station, Garo Hills Battalion at Tura, Lakhimpur Battalion in Dibrugarh and Silchar. The settlement of ex – Nepali military men were started in Manipur following the World War I. The colonial government allotted those lands at Thangmaiband, Kalapahar, Chink, Tangri, Imphal, and Irang. They took up cattle farming and agriculture there.

### Mizoram

The influx of Nepalese in Mizoram was carried out by Colonel Lewin. They settled on the bank of Myani River (now in Bangladesh). The main purpose was to secure the areas from the fear of Marauding Lushais in general and safeguard the boundaries in particular. This resulted in the creation of few villages consisting of Gorkhas who served as the buffer between the Mong Raja's territory and the independent Lushais to the east. They also served the Frontier Police Battalion and the Surma Valley Military Police Battalion established by General Tregears in 1889. After getting retirement from their service, they settled at Lushai hills and made it as their homeland. At present they are the most socially organised Gorkha community in whole North – East India.

### Meghalaya

The advent of Gorkhas in Meghalaya was started with the establishment of several Gorkha social organisations at Shillong like the Gorkha Thakurbari (1824), Gorkha Durga Puja Committee (1872) and the Gorkha Union (1866). The formation of the Eighth Gorkha Rifles further added an impetus behind this process. Lieutenant W.J. Williamson the then Commissioner of the Garo Hills had to establish a police force at Tura and most of its personnel were Gorkhas migrated from Goalpara, Assam. The construction of roads, bridges and other utilities for developing the communication system bought about many Nepalese in Meghalaya<sup>7</sup>.

With the expansion of the construction works, commercialisation, advent of modest industrialisation, development of transport facilities and other welfare extension activities, demand for skilled labourer have been on increase. The indigenous tribal's, being their lazy

and indolent character, were not able to meet the demand. However, for all the above reasons the most obvious choice was the Nepalese.

Another batch of Nepali people migrated into North East India from the seventeen Terai districts of Nepal. As we know that this is the most developed region of Nepal. Almost all the significant industrial units are there and the region contributes a sizeable amount of national revenue to the state exchequer. This region is thickly inhabited by the Indians from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. They have made attempt to set up their predominance over the region through the state administrative apparatus. This situation compelled a number of Nepalese of Indian origin move out from their patrimonial possessions in Nepal. As a consequence, they took shelter in the Indian villages inhabited by their kinsmen across India and in this way a major portion of Nepali people migrated into North East India <sup>8</sup>.

After 1947, India received a large number of Nepali people from the colonial rulers. The terms of the Indo – Nepal Friendship treaty of 1950, the Tripartite Delhi Agreement of 1951 and the revised Indo – Nepal Agreement of 1956 accelerated the tempo behind the migration of Nepali people into India and a lion share of it moved to North – East India. Under the terms of these treaties, free inter – change and flow of both countries nationals as well as their right to own property in either country is allowed, without restrictions <sup>9</sup>. However, it is to be mentioned here that Nepal and India are the only countries in South Asia that permit the free circulation of people across National boundaries <sup>10</sup>.

The Nepalese population in Assam was 101,335 in 1951, 132925 in 1961 and it increased up to 353,673 in 1971. Besides Assam, there are Nepalese in Tripura, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh. More than one – third of the total migrants of North East India have come from East India that comprises the states of West Bengal, Jharkhand, Orissa and Sikkim. It is believed that Assam received the maximum number of Nepali migrants (17,896) followed by Arunachal Pradesh (14,504), Manipur received 981 migrants from Nepal, Nagaland and Meghalaya received 5000 migrants each from Nepal. The Nepali language ranked as the fifth major language of the State Assam. It has been found that in the hill districts of Assam like Dibrugarh, Darr, Sibsagar, Karbi Anglong every fifteenth Assamese is a Nepali. This trend of demographical changes was also common on Sikkim, Bhutan and North Bengal. Unlike the past soldier migrants, the immigrants are unskilled farm hands of rural peasant background, known for their hard work and

industriousness. They reach the uninhabited forest fringes and the marshy Brahmaputra valley, clear the forest areas and start dairy farming <sup>11</sup>.

**Demography of the Nepalese in North East India (1951 – 1991)**

States	1951	1961	1971	1976	1981	1991
Arunachal Praesh	NA	10,610 (25,000)	30,912 (85,000)	NA	45,508	NA
Assam	101,338*	215,213 132,925*	349,116 353,673*	NA	NA	432,519
Manipur	(2860)	13,571	26,381	36,604	37,046	
Meghalaya	NA	32,288 (6000)	44,445 (10,111)	NA	61,259	
Mizoram	NA	2042 (2000)	NA (4000)	NA	5983	
Nagaland	NA	10,400	17,536	NA	24,918	
Tripura	NA	1696	2107	NA	2190	

(Source: Lopia Nath, ‘Migrants in Flight, Conflict – Induces Internal Displacement of Nepalese in North East India’, *Peace and Democracy in South Asia*, Vol. 1, No.1, January 2005, p. 65. Figures in brackets from Dutt, Srikant 1981 and figures in asterisks from Sinha, A.C.1982)

**IV. Causes of Conflicts**

The tribal communities in North – East India by generations were engaged in rotational cultivation (*Jhum*). But because of education, development of communication, welfare activities both from Government and the Christian activities and constitutional safeguards, the present generation are continuously set aside from their forefather’s profession like cultivation and have been induced to white – collar jobs. These white collar tribesmen build up their residences in the urban centres and invest their cash income in transforming community land into private landed property. They employ the Nepalese in various capacities on their farms because their present generation are incompetent for agricultural work. The local tribal communities are fully dependent on the Nepalese immigrants for the local

economic resources. Thus the tribesmen remain isolated from their forefather's profession, communal ownership of the land. With the contrivance of some of the tribal's, a few Nepalese have been able to acquire landed property and in this way, the Nepalese slowly but steadily are found occupying the agricultural land. Here lies the actual reason of conflict between the immigrant Nepalese and the tribal communities. However, such a situation frequently leads to the inter – ethnic conflicts.

For examples, we can point out the clash between the tribal and the Nepalese over the right of land in the Marapani region situated between the border of Wokha (Nagaland) and Sibsagar (Assam districts). Although this region was inhabited by the tribal's by generations but after independence, a number of Nepali ex – soldiers settled there. Moreover, a large number of Bengali and Bihari people also settled in Marapani region along with their Nepali counterparts and received title papers from both the State Governments. But where lies the problem that both the Nepalese and the Bengalis encroached upon the disputed land on the Nagaland side through the assistance given by the Assam police. This led a sudden raid by the Lhota Naga in 1978 by which a large number of immigrants were devastated in general and uprooted from the region in particular. Another onslaught took place on the tri - junction of Wokha, Mokukchung (Nagaland) and Sibsagar (Assam) in March 1978 where a large number of migrated Nepali people breather their last ones. In both the cases, we can easily observe that a sense of occupying the tribal land by the immigrant Nepalese appears to be main cause of the inter – ethnic conflicts <sup>12</sup>.

Two centuries after the Nepalese started migrating to India, following the Anglo – Nepalese War of 1814 – 1815, which provided the opportunity to the British to appreciate the bravery of the Gurkhas and started recruiting them into their army right after the war. But their descendents are still labelled as 'immigrants' and 'foreigners' in various parts of India. They are even stopped at immigration check posts like Srirampur Hat in Assam and Byrnihat in Meghalaya. They have been evicted from Burma in 1940s, North Eastern states like Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Manipur in 1980s and from southern Bhutan in 1990s whereas the Indo – Nepal Friendship Treaty of 1950 allowed them to enter India freely and settle there. According to Professor Tanka B. Subba 'a Garo or a Khasi from Bangladesh becomes local or indigenous the day he/she enters Meghalaya whereas even a Seventh generation Nepali or for that matter a Bengali in Assam, remains an 'immigrant'. This indicated that



some are not immigrants even if they have come from another state or Country, whereas others like the Nepalese and Bengalis are immigrants even they have been residing in North – East India for several generations<sup>13</sup>.

There is a lot of confusion in our country regarding the identity of Nepali language. As we know this language has been recognised as the official language for the hill areas of Darjeeling in 1972 and by the Government of Sikkim as their State language. Even the Sahitya Academy in New Delhi recognised the language and it was included in the Eighth Schedule of our Constitution in 1992 as one of the literary language of India. But the visit of our former Prime Minister Morarji Desai in Darjeeling hill in 1979 created a chaotic situation while he described the Nepali language as the foreign language. It, no doubt, genesis huge confusion among the Nepalese and finally led a protest movement against this announcement all over India. It is unfortunate to say that since then many Indians associated Nepali language with Nepal and even recognise it as the foreign language whereas the Nepali is an Indo – Aryan language with its origin in India. Even many important political leaders argued that Nepal should recognise Hindi as one of its national language<sup>14</sup>.

A section of Nepalese are claiming that they are not Nepalese rather they are Gurkhas. They belong to Gurkha race and have separate identity like Nepalese and Assamese. These ethnic Nepali origin people are known as Nepali Gurkha. But according to Human Rights Philosophy, these Nepalese have no identity at present; they are false and fictitious Gurkhas. They are identity less persons. They are agitating for the creation of separate state ‘Gorkhaland’ by dividing the State of West Bengal.

At recent times the emergence of urban white collar Nepalese added a root of ethnic conflicts in North – East. They brought in the soil of North East and educated there. They know North East as their homeland, have many friends from local communities and even speak the local dialects. They are politically aware and culturally conscious of their status both in the state and India. Though they grew up in the soil of North East but are facing challenges in achieving white collar jobs due to the reservation system for the local indigenous people of North East India. Here comes their ego and thus they start identifying themselves with the great Gurkha past. This led the birth of Pan – Nepalese solidarity movement and ultimately assimilated with the demand of ‘Greater Nepal’.

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Alarmed at the deportation of the Nepalese from Meghalaya and other parts of North – East, Subash Ghishing – the Supremo of Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) argued in one of his speech at Chakbazar, Darjeeling on 7<sup>th</sup> May 1986 that “if the Nepalese of Meghalaya are driven out on the ground of being foreigners, then the Nepalese of Darjeeling may be driven out in future in the same way. Who will come forward to save them? The Government of West Bengal is there for the Bengalis..... Had there been a state for the Nepalese today? There is Bihar for the Biharis, Punjab for the Punjabis, Gujrat for the Gujratis and West Bengal for the Bengalis. Then why would not there be a Gorkhasthan for the Gorkhas?”<sup>15</sup>.

### **V. Anti – Nepali Movement**

In the post – colonial years, the slow pace of development and the neglect of the region led to a feeling of disappointment among the local people who soon realised that these migrated people or non – indigenous people are a threat to their identity as well as their socio – economic prosperity. This issue was first raised by the then Chief Commissioner of India S.L. Shakdar in 1978 and later frightened by the AASU (All Assam Student’s Union) and AAGSP (All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad) in 1980<sup>16</sup>. Anti - Nepali feeling in North East India was first observed during the Assam Movement. Though at first the illegal migrants from Bangladesh were the prime target but later the Nepalese were also included in this anti – foreigner discourse. The Nepali population in the Bodo Autonomous Council (BAC) areas in Western Assam was only 2.5 per cent. Moreover, the Nepalese people in non – Bodo areas constituted near about 63 per cent population. This statistics, no doubt, became a headache to the Bodo leaders. The policies of the state Government to restrict the immigration of the Nepalese again boosted the sentiment. These unwanted foreigners continuously threading the socio – cultural and political identity of the Asamiyas in their traditional homeland<sup>17</sup>.

In this way, they launched anti – Nepali movement to overthrow them from the entire BAC areas like Patabari, Malivita, Amteka and Koila. In Manipur, the same agitation was there and ultimately turned into an anti – Nepali feeling movement in 1980s. Similar sectarian violence took place in Meghalaya in 1987<sup>18</sup>. The Nepalese living in Shillong, Jowai other parts of Meghalaya were heavily targeted. The Nepali diary workers had to give up their occupation and leave the state. Today, most of the Nepalese displaced from Meghalaya and Manipur are

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settled in Rupandehi, Jhapa, Banke and other parts Nepal's Terai region like Dhulabari, Biratnagar, Kankarvita, Dharan, besides Kathmandu and Pokhara <sup>19</sup>.

### **VI. Conclusion**

The main cause of confrontation in North – East is that these migrant people coming from Bangladesh and Nepal at present occupied all important posts in Government sectors, easily draw loans to set up their business and have built up their own political images with the help of political parties both Central and regional. Sometimes, these international migrants enjoying undue privileges from the political parties by showing their large vote banks. Moreover, the political ambition of such migrant people added a new headache to the indigenous people of the region. For example, Tripura although primarily a tribal State but the tribal population has now stands only 25 per cent of the total population of the State. Moreover, all important and semi – important government posts are now being enjoyed by such outsiders <sup>20</sup>.

All these factors emboldened the 'Son of the Soil' theory to launch movements demanding for separate statehood. They began to realise that they are becoming minority in their own land and this sentiment, as a consequence, made the platform to launch anti – outsider movement in North – East. This movement sought out the Nepali migrants to be deported to their respective countries of origin and ultimately made them vulnerable. The present day 'Gorkhaland Movement' demanding for a separate homeland is the product of such anti – Nepali feeling not only in North East but across the whole India. Lastly, the internal displacement question in the North – East is an issue of concern not only in India but also for the whole South Asia.

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