

To Be or Not To Be "Nepali"

*Blurry definitions needlessly target the Nepalis of India.
Terminology must come to the rescue.*

by Tanka Subba

A 'nomenclative crisis' today confronts all Nepali speakers in India. What to call oneself?

Some would argue, "What's in a name?" But India being what it is, the name given to a language or people does matter. Morarji Desai, when he was Prime Minister, declared that Nepali was a "foreign language". The next step is to label all those who speak this "foreign language" foreigners, as does happen all over India, and especially in the Northeast.

It matters little to the people of Nepal, secure in their citizenship, whether they are called Gorkhali of Nepali. But for the Nepalis of India, the search for a term which indicates their Indian nationality and does not confuse them with the Nepalese of Nepal has is urgent.

Besides Nepal, sizeable concentrations of Nepalis exist in Bhutan, West Bengal, Sikkim, Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Manipur in the Northeast. Nepalis are also found in parts of Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, and diffused throughout the Subcontinent.

Though the crisis of identity affects Nepalis of India wherever they are, there are regional nuances.

West Bengal: The history of Nepalis in West Bengal is in complex. Since they have the numbers in the three hill subdivisions of West Bengal's northern-most district, Nepalis were able to create a viable pressure-group, even though their voice tends to be feeble in the State Assembly in Calcutta. Since 1907, there have been efforts to carve out a separate political and administrative unit for Nepalis. These efforts were unsuccessful because of opposition by Lepcha and Bhutia tribes of the northern valleys and due to sharp ideological divisions among the Nepalis. Though the All India Gorkha League and the undivided Communist Party of India shared the same platform in the beginning, for example, they were soon to separate.

The recognition of the Nepali language in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution has been another major Nepali demand. After achieving the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council in August 1988, however, President of the Gorkha National Liberation Front Subhas Ghisingh has been harping on the 'Gorkha' identity, and condemning the term 'Nepali'.

Ghisingh may be ignored, but we must address the issue, whether the Nepalis of India should forever cling to 'Nepali' and all that it connotes. Those in favour of 'Nepali' point out

that the term is accepted by national institutions like the Sahitya Akademi. The Calcutta Doordarshan broadcasts in 'Nepali'. They mention resolutions which have been passed in the legislative assemblies of West Bengal, Sikkim, Tripura and Himachal Pradesh for constitutional recognition of 'Nepali'. In themselves, such references are a weak basis to retain the term 'Nepali', although Ghisingh for his part has yet to explain how use of 'Gorkha' or 'Gorkhali' will resolve the main problem, which is that Indian Nepalis continue to be regarded as foreigners. There is also the question whether a word, no matter how appropriate, can be imposed by an individual leader on people spread out over the length and breadth of India.

Sikkim: There were many supporters of the Gorkhaland movement in Sikkim, but there is no inclination here towards the word 'Gorkha'. Chief Minister Nar Bahadur Bhandari has, in fact, emerged as the champion and propagator of 'Nepali'. To him, 'Gorkha' merely refers to an occupational category, or those who are in the Gorkha regiments. This conflict between Bhandari and Ghisingh, this battle between the two heavyweights of Darjeeling and Sikkim, has merely strengthened the position of the Union Government in Delhi vis-a-vis the language issue.

Due to historical reasons, one finds that 'Nepali' often is not extended to include the Chongs or Limbus of Sikkim. They are regarded as a distinct community like the Lepcha and Bhutia. There was reservation of seats for the Chongs in the Sikkim State Assembly up till 1978. The Chong language and script is taught in school up to Class XII, and this language is recognised as one of Sikkim's four state languages (the others being Lepcha, Bhutia and Nepali).

North-East India: Nepalis are found all over the seven states of north-eastern India and they all suffer from common social and political problems, primarily deriving from their identity. Nepali numbers are most significant in Assam, Meghalaya and Manipur. Most local tribes and communities, as well as the administration of the Northeast understand all 'Nepalis' to be the

'people of Nepal', that is, foreigners. The mockery of the 1950 Indo-Nepal Friendship Treaty is nowhere as glaring as it is here in the Northeast, where thousands of Nepalis have been evicted, most recently from Meghalaya.

Nepalis are discriminated and exploited in the Northeast even though they have shown an inclination to assimilate more than other groups. In fact, their assimilation into the local cultures is sometimes so successful that it is difficult to call them 'Nepali'. They have embraced the local languages and inter-married with local tribes. In some parts of Assam, Nepalis are reported to have rejected their surnames and adopted Assamese ones. In Meghalaya, the children of Nepali fathers and tribal mothers have taken the surnames of their mothers. Children cannot manage even a simple sentence in Nepali, and adults hesitate to divulge their Nepali identity.

It is easy to pass judgement from the distance of Darjeeling and Kathmandu. On the ground in the Northeast, Nepalis do what they have to do to survive in a hostile cultural milieu.

Conceptual Lag

The gradual shaping of a "common identity" as a strong binding force among Nepalis of India has been splintered by factionalism or recent years, which finds expression in the tilt towards 'Nepali', 'Gorkha' or 'Gorkhali'. The understanding of these terms has not changed with evolving reality. This conceptual lag has allowed primordial values to find nourishment.

One major hurdle in any effort to rename a people is created by 'other' people whose interests may lie in perpetuating the old terminology. A new name might threaten the existing control of resources and privileges. But this does not mean that there should be no effort to change the boundaries of a concept — which a name is — along with changing times. Time has probably come to look for a multiplicity of mutually compatible symbols rather than a single symbol.

T. Subba is Reader of Anthropology at the North-Eastern Hill University in Shillong. His book *Ethnicity, State and Development* is reviewed on page 44.

