

INDUS

**THE
NEPALIS
IN
NORTHEAST INDIA**

**A Community in Search of
Indian Identity**

**Editors
A.C. SINHA & T.B. SUBBA**

The book presents pioneering efforts of numerous scholars from India and Nepal to uncover various aspects of the life of the Indians of Nepalese origin—The Nepamul Bharatiya. It is divided into twenty-one chapters and three parts: The Background; Predicament of Existence; and Issues: Imagined and Real. Many of the authors have written about their own communities: history, culture, recruitment in the armed forces, politics, settlement pattern, and language & literature. Apart from that, it documents the contributions of the community in consolidation of the Indian Union, its shrinking employment opportunity, its efforts to carve out a distinct Indian identity and its resolve to emphasize its Indian destiny. This book will be read by every educated Nepamul, historians, sociologists, soldiers, planners, anthropologists, political scientists and any body who is concerned with the Himalayan studies.

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Prof. A. C. Sinha

Dedicated To

NETRA PRASAD SHARMA

Born, educated and married in Kathmandu and employed as a peon in North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong in 1977, Netra Prasad was transferred to the Department of Sociology in 1981 and worked there for the next 18 years. He got separated from his first wife after the birth of a son, married a second time in Kathmandu and had two children from his second wife. He passed Matriculation, Bachelor of Arts, and a certificate course in computers privately. He got married to a Christian tribal lady in late 1980s in Shillong and died at her residence on March 25, 1999. It was his tribal Christian wife, who arranged for his last rites and rituals with late Sharma's relatives and Hindu friends in Shillong. She took none of the service benefits provided by his employer after his death and, in fact, she is getting his eldest son educated by providing him food and lodging. Though there was nothing against him on his service records, he was promoted as a Lower Division Clerk after 22 years of service, for which the order was received after his death. Sharma's life represents a poignant tale of an average Nepamul Bharatiya.

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CHAPTER 2

The Nepalis in Northeast India: Political Aspirations and Ethnicity*

T.B. Subba

Introduction

A significant feature of northeast India is the ubiquitous presence of a loose confederation of peoples generally known as “Nepalis” and/or “Gorkhas”. Settled in the hills and valleys, towns and villages of this region, they initially came as construction workers, tea and mining labourers, and military personnel to fit into the colonial designs of the British. Little did they know then that they would later become an eyesore of the local peoples, tribal or non-tribal. Today, their national status in the region is often treated at par with the illegal immigrants from Bangladesh and few Indians, including the Nepalis themselves, seem to be aware of the Indo-Nepal Peace and Friendship Treaty of 1950, which legalises their immigration to India as it does so about Indian emigrants to Nepal. But they are sweepingly bracketed as “foreigners”, which is unfortunate, and are forcefully driven out of the region or harassed in the slightest pretext and sometimes even killed.

One reason why such incidents occur is the fact that the local peoples are scarcely aware of the history, society, and culture of the Nepalis. Writings on them are very few and far between. Srikant Dutt (1981) was perhaps one of the first to write on them in a national journal. He was followed by A.C. Sinha (1982, 1990). But these writings are not easily accessible to peoples here and do not adequately reflect the perceptions of the Nepalis. The few Nepali scholars from this region

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have written mostly in the Nepali language and confined themselves to their respective states (see, for instance, Mishra 1987, Rai 1987). Sumanraj Timsina's work (1992) based on his M.Phil dissertation devotes some pages on the northeastern Nepalis also but his main objective was to trace the evolution of the Gorkhaland movement in West Bengal. Scholars from Nepal would probably have done some work in this region but for the Restricted Area Permit system it has not been possible so far. Efforts made by the faculty members of the Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies, Tribhuvan University, are reported to have been forestalled by Indian authorities. And my own study has been mostly confined to Darjeeling and Sikkim (1989).

It may be added here that the region called "northeast" has today acquired a distinct identity with Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura as the constituent units commonly benefacted by the North Eastern Council. Scholars like Dutt (1981) and Sinha (1982, 1990) seem to have refused to be bound by this political delimitation of the "northeast" and considered appropriate to discuss Darjeeling, Sikkim, and even Bhutan within the purview of this region. This cultural definition does not, however, seem to be widely accepted. The overtures of Sikkim to be refuged under the North Eastern Council have not been reciprocated and instead there are strong reservations against such a proposal from certain quarters here. For the purpose of this paper, I have thus confined myself to the political jurisdiction of this region.

My objective in this chapter is limited—to introduce the Nepalis of northeast India conceptually, historically, demographically, and politically. This, I hope, will dispel the misconceptions of many people including fellow academicians.

Nepali Versus Nepalese

One may wonder what 'Nepali *versus* Nepalese' is all about when there is apparently a much greater controversy about Nepali *versus* Gorkhas. The latter may be politically more significant but conceptually the former is perhaps more important. Originally used in the 1950s by Late Ramkrishna Sharma, an All India Gorkha League (AIGL) leader and ex-judge of the Calcutta High Court and reiterated in late 80s by Subhas Ghisingh, the president of Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF),

to distinguish the Indian Nepalis from those of Nepal, the word "Gorkha", however, could not compete with "Nepali" though both the words refer to the same conglomeration of peoples.

The word "Nepali" is conceptually broader than the word "Nepalese" in the sense that the former represents a culturo-linguistic denomination while the latter restricts its meaning to the language and people of Nepal. The use of the suffix "ese" in English refers to, according to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, the "names of foreign countries and towns meaning (inhabitants or language) of". Thus, if someone in India writes "Nepalese", unless unknowingly, it refers to the language or inhabitant of Nepal, which is probably not the sense in which Dutt, Sinha, and a host of other Nepali writers like Dungal (1983) have used this word. This use is incorrect but perhaps inadvertent.

The empirical situation in the northeast shows that there are many 'Nepalese' here who cannot be differentiated from Indian Nepalis. While even the Nepalese have the right to free movement and ownership of property in India, under the 1950 Treaty some of them have acquired even political rights. But if because of this every Indian Nepali is treated as a Nepalese or a citizen of Nepal, as often witnessed in India, the sentiments of genuine Indian Nepalis would naturally be hurt. This problem is not likely to be resolved easily and a simple replacement of the word "Nepali" by "Gorkha", as argued by the GNLFF president, is not definitely going to help this crisis.

Who are Nepalis?

Despite more than two centuries of political consolidation of Nepal if any one there is asked about his/her identity one will invariably come across the name of an ethnic group or community. S/he will say Newar, Rai, Limbu, Mangar, Gurung, Chhetri, or Bahun but never a Nepali. S/he transcends this identity as soon as s/he goes out of Nepal and becomes a "Nepali" to others not only because others understand this identity but also because s/he feels more secure to be identified so. A Newar may not come across another Newar, or a Gurung another Gurung but s/he does certainly come across another Nepali. This grants some kind of security to him/her. On the other hand, introducing oneself as a Newar or a Gurung will, for Indian Nepalis as well as Nepalese, encounter queer responses.

Thus, it is the etic situation that brings a large number of historically, racially, culturally, linguistically, and religiously divergent groups under a common identity called “Nepali” or “Gorkha”. Whether he is a Bahun or a Kami makes no difference to a Naga as it does not matter whether he is an Ao or a Sema to a Nepali. But since the diversity within the so-called Nepalis is multiple, it is necessary here to briefly discuss the fabric of the Nepali society. This is first summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Socio-cultural fabric of the Nepalis

History	Caste	Race	Language	Religion	Number
Emigrants					
Bahun	High	Caucasoid	Indo-Aryan	Hindu	20% Approx.
Thakuri					
Chhetri					
Kami	Low				
Sarki					
Damal					
Immigrants					
Newar				Hindu/Buddhist	
Tamang	Middle	Mongoloid	Tibeto-Burmese	Buddhist	80%
Sherpa					
Yolmu					
Limbu				Tribal/Animist	
Rai					
Yakha					
Mangar					
Gurung					

The above Table indicates, first of all, that many Nepali castes are of Indian origin. They had emigrated to Nepal during the fourteenth century when the Muslim power was on the rise in India (Bista, 1980: 2; Sharma, 1982: 81-82). They may be better called ‘return migrants’ rather than ‘immigrants’. The second group consists of those who were there in Nepal at the time of the emigration of the first group members there. Of the various castes included in this group, the Limbus are also known to be one of the earliest inhabitants of Darjeeling and Sikkim.

The division of Nepalis in three caste groups—high, middle, and

low—is rather crude because there are hierarchical differences within the first two groups and sometimes even within a caste. For instance, the Bahuns rank at the top of the caste hierarchy, followed by Thakuris and Chhetris but within the Bahuns, the Upadhyayas rank above the Jaisis and only the former can perform priestly functions. In the middle caste group, the Newars have their own elaborate caste hierarchy while others have segmentary clan divisions with little or no regard for the principles of purity and pollution. (For details, see Subba 1989, Chapter III).

Racially, the Nepalis are divided into two broad groups, viz., Caucasoids and Mongoloids. Linguistically, the Caucasoids have no other language except the Indo-Aryan Nepali language, while the Mongoloids have a large number of Tibeto-Burman languages which are mutually unintelligible. Some of these languages like the Newari and the Limbu have their own scripts and distinct grammatical systems. The simultaneous use of these languages is still found in Nepal but outside it they have almost completely switched over to the Nepali language due to intermixed living and lack of adequate number of speakers living in a compact area. This has been possible only for the Limbus in West Sikkim where they have a significant concentration.

With regard to religion, a common misbelief held by many in India and elsewhere is that they are Hindus. Though it is difficult to define who a Hindu is, it is perhaps incorrect to consider all of them to be Hindus. In the strict sense, the actual Hindus are the members of the high and low caste groups only: the Tamangs, Sherpas, Yolmus (or Kagates), and a section of the Newars called Buddhamargi Newars are Buddhists while the religion of the Rai, Limbu, Yakha, Mangar, Gurung, etc. may be better called 'tribal' or 'animist'. In their religious system, Brahmin priests, temples, idol-worship, sacred texts, etc. have little or no significance. They have their own priests and own system of propitiating the God or gods and goddesses. Their religious beliefs and values are passed on from one generation to another orally, through certain specialists who become so not by learning or by birth but by the will of some supernatural beings. If their religion is called 'Hindu' all tribal religions of northeast India or elsewhere should perhaps be called so.

Finally, it is by and large agreed that the Caucasoid Hindus speaking

the Indo-Aryan Nepali language constitute approximately 20 per cent of the total Nepali population.

Migration to Northeast

It has been fairly established by now that Nepal had strong links with Assam from ancient times. The ancient Kamrup kingdom is, for instance, known to have its boundaries extended right up to eastern Nepal and in the 1520s the two Kamrup kings—Nildhwaj and Naranarayan—had married the princesses of Nepal. Apart from such royal unions, Brahmin priests, Chhetri warriors, farmers, herdsman, and artisans from Nepal were brought to Assam and given revenue-free land (Sinha, 1990: 222). Shyamraj Jaisi (1990) has added such instances in the historical study of the Nepalis in Assam.

But the real immigration of the Nepalis to northeast India began in early nineteenth century, in 1817 to be exact, when their first direct contact with the region took place with the deployment of the Gorkhas in the Sylhet Operation as a part of the Cuttack Legion to be later known as Assam Light Infantry (Sinha, 1990: 226-27). It was one Subedar Jaichand Thakur of the 8th Gurkha Rifles who settled in Shillong as early as 1824. Later, in 1867 also, Thurnton is quoted to have seen the Gorkhas playing cricket and football in Shillong (Sinha, 1990: 227). In this regard, the following extract from Sinha's article (1990: 228) is informative:

Besides the Assam Rifles, the Gurkha training centre and various battalions of the armed forces were stationed at and around the district towns and strategic locations on the hills. After their release from service, a number of Gurkhas settled down around those places. Besides the other agencies, the Assam Rifles alone has rehabilitated its Gurkha soldiers on at least thirty-eight sites numbering as many as three thousand individuals. Some of the sites such as Sadiya in Assam, Mantripokhari in Manipur, Aizawl in Mizoram and Mokokchung in Nagaland are as old as a hundred years. Of such sites, Assam alone has thirteen, Manipur eight, Mizoram and Nagaland seven each, Arunachal Pradesh three and Meghalaya and Tripura one each. These are

predominantly Nepalese settlements, though there may be a smattering of others.

The above extract not only provides an insight into the background of the Nepali settlements but also informs us about the places of their settlements in the northeast. With regard to the caste background of the Nepalis in this region, the report of the Chief Secretary to the Government of Assam dated 13 May 1930 says that “the greater number of the numerous Nepali graziers in Assam are Jaisis and Upadhyay Brahmins, or Chhetris of non-martial classes” (quoted in Sinha, 1990: 229).

What may be missed here by a casual reader is the fact that the graziers were socially a separate category from those who had settled there after release from their services. The caste backgrounds of this category of settlers were mainly Mangar, Gurung, Rai and Limbu and hardly any Brahmin or Chhetri, whose recruitment in the British army had lost their favour particularly after 1857 due to their alleged allegiance to Indian national movement even while in the service of the British army (Hodgson, 1874: 40).

Due to unavailability of relevant historical materials with me, I am not in a position here to provide any insight into those Nepalis who came here to work in the tea and sugarcane plantations, for road and railway lines constructions, and other such colonial purposes. What one gathers from Dutt’s article is that “the Border Roads Organisation found Nepalese labour most suited and this process injected further numbers of Nepalese into the hill regions of northeast India as well as Bhutan” (1981: 1054). But I do not know how old is the immigration of such Nepalis to this region or what were there caste backgrounds.

Distribution of Nepalis in Northeast

There is perhaps no other tribe or community which is distributed all over the seven states of northeast India as the Nepalis are. In this regard, the position of the Nepalis here is indeed unique but, as the following table will show, there is no proper record of their population here.

The figures in the table are not entirely dependable, which is mainly due to the unstable political situation in the region for the past three decades or so. However, the demographic size of the Nepalis, whether

Table 2. Demography of the Nepalis in Northeast

States	1951	1961	1971	1976	1981
Arunachal Pradesh	NA	10,610 (25,000)	30,912 (85,000)	NA	45,508
Assam	101,335*	32,213 132,925*	252,673 353,673*	NA	NA
Manipur	(2860)	13,571	26,381	(36,604)	37,046
Meghalaya	NA	NA (6000)	44,445 (10,111)	NA	61,259
Mizoram	NA	NA (2000)	NA (4000)	NA	5983
Nagaland	NA	10,400	17,536	NA	24,918
Tripura	NA	1696	2107	NA	2190

Source: Timsina, 1992. Figures in brackets from Dutt, 1981 and figures in asterisks from Sinha, 1982.

taken together for the whole of northeast India or statewise, does not seem as alarming as it is often made out to be by some politicians. Their total percentage does not exceed 3 even in Assam where their population is believed to be the most numerous of all states in the region. As a matter of fact, their population in this state was considered so large that the All India Gorkha League in 1955 demanded the merging of Darjeeling with Assam and the Nepalis were a major target of the 1979 movement against “foreigners” spearheaded by the All Assam Students Union.

Political Aspirations and Ethnicity

In order to understand the political aspirations and ethnicity of the Nepalis in northeast India, it is desirable to understand how they identify themselves in India or in the region concerned. In this context, the following contention of Sinha is worth reproducing:

But to our mind, the Nepalese in the northeast India in particular and in India in general, may identify themselves ideologically as the Nepalese sub-nationals against their 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 overlapping traits with ‘others’ (e.g., the non-

Nepalese) and restrict themselves to their distinctiveness (1982: 96-97).

This observation, though made by one of the authorities on the region, suffers from the following limitations. One, the Nepali identity as against Hindu, caste or tribal identities is there not because it is "rewarding", as he contends, but because it is a compulsion since no matter how they would like to be identified they are identified by others, including their Hindu, caste or tribal counterparts, as "Nepalese", which is proved to be more harmful than rewarding, particularly for the Indian Nepalis. Here I would like to cite a personal instance. Whenever I came to Shillong by bus I was asked to get down at Srirampur Hat and other check-posts at midnight and at Byrnihat check-post the next morning. The reason? I am a 'Nepalese'. I had to bribe the constables at least four times to let me through despite my showing the identity card and once even my passport. Who would like to get down in the middle of forest at mid-night? And who would listen to me when they even refused to see the identity cards?

Two, the boundaries of ethnic identity are seldom fixed and immutable. In fact, such boundaries wax and wane depending on the exigencies of time as seen in October 1992 when the Nepalis, Bengalis, and Biharis put up a joint front against the Khasis of Shillong.

Thirdly, there are plenty of instances to show that ever since the eve of Independence there has been concerted efforts by Indian Nepalis to give a separate identity to themselves from that of the Nepalese. The former category of Nepalis have often been humiliated and jeered at by their fellow countrymen by mistaking them to be Nepalese. It is precisely for this reason that Late Ramkrishna Sharma had pleaded for the use of the word "Gorkha" to represent the Indian Nepalis. It was also for the same reason that the GNLFF president had emphasized on the use of the word "Gorkha" in lieu of "Nepali" and demanded the abrogation of the 1950 Treaty between Nepal and India, which he thought would jeopardise any such effort. Even those who did not support the GNLFF view always admitted of this identity crisis and many have also suggested alternative identities for Indian Nepalis like "Bharatiya Nepali", "Bharpali", and "Bhargoli". Thus, the separation from the Nepalese has long been a major crisis of identity for Indian Nepalis, as it is for the Nepalese to be separated from Indian Nepalis in Nepal particularly in the last 10

years or so. The Indian Nepalis, particularly from Darjeeling, being allegedly superior in the English language and having better educational background, have surpassed the local Nepalese in hoteliering, tourism and trekking, and boarding school establishments in Nepal and thereby earned much jealousy of the Nepalese there. The Indian Nepalis are called “Prawasi”, “Munglane”, etc. with a feeling bordering on apathy. So what is often written in the Indian newspapers about the ill-treatment meted out to the “Indians of Nepalese origin” in Nepal is also true of the Nepalis of Indian origin in Nepal.

One of the reasons why Indians, particularly in the northeast, are sore about the Nepalis is the fact that they have been deployed first by the British and later by Indian governments for quelling various separatist or insurgent movements since the second decade of the last century till date. In this context, the following Table is worthwhile.

Table 3. Deployment of 8th Gorkha Rifles in the northeast

Place/Tribe	Year
Khasi	1827, 1835-36, 1847, 1861-62
Naga	1839, 1850-51, 1875, 1879-80, 1912-13
Mizo (Lushai)	1851, 1869-71, 1890
Jaintia Hills	1861-63
Garo Hills	1873
Dafla (Nishi)	1873
Mishmi	1881-82, 1899
Aka (Hrusso)	1883-84
Manipur	1891, 1944
Abor (Adi)	1893-94, 1911-12
Burma and Assam	1943-45

Source: Jaisi, 1990: 170-71.

On the top of such sustained deployment of the Nepalis in the northeast, it is reported that the Nepalese ex-soldiers are accused of providing data on strategy and logistics (of the insurgents) to the armed forces” (Sinha, 1982: 92). Hence, it is no wonder that there are numerous attacks on their life and properties. For instance, in 1967, about 8,000 Nepalis were driven out of Mizoram (Lal, 1968: 346); in 1978, about 200 houses of Nepalis were burnt in Nagaland and about

2000 Nepalis fled Manipur in 1980 (Sinha, 1982: 91-92), not to speak of the deportation of much larger numbers of Nepalis from Assam in 1979 and from Meghalaya in 1987 (Subba, 1992: 115-16).

It is also important to recall here the widespread belief of the Indians, though not completely unfounded, that the Nepalis served the British as 'mercenaries' in subduing the national movement in different parts of the country. While it is not meaningless to speculate on what would be the political boundaries of India if the British had failed to subdue the national movement in the beginning the fellow citizens need to be reminded again and again that many Nepalis had also participated in the national movement and were consequently imprisoned or sentenced to death (Jaisi, 1990: 105-51; Subba, 1992: 59).

Here I would like to add that it was mainly the high caste Nepalis who had participated in the national movement, which is not surprising in view of their Indian origin and close culturo-religious interaction with their counterparts in India during their stay in Nepal. But it should not be concluded from this that the middle and low caste members had a strong sense of Nepalese nationalism: their exploitation and suppression by the Nepalese high castes for so many centuries had totally alienated them from the same. It is a fact that the very state policies and Acts of Nepal were aimed at marginalizing them. That they did not participate in the national movement like the high caste members was also due to their large-scale engagement in the British army right from 1816 and their age-old reservation about rallying with the high caste members.

The participation in the nationalist movement is no bank balance to be encashed now for legitimising certain special rights and privileges. But some Indians often cite this as a pointer to the Nepalis' alleged lack of the sense of belonging to India. This is a dangerous gesture as it castigates even those who had sacrificed their lives and others who, for no fault of theirs, could not participate in the same. In any case, as Sinha rightly points out, "the Nepalese were not the only ones to be used by the British in such a way" (1990: 233).

But it is not so much the suspicion of Indians about Nepalis, which is responsible for many disabilities they suffer from as it is their numerical minority status, wherever they are settled, with the exception of Sikkim, which is accountable for the same. Their problems are not so much the problems of a people struggling for national identity as they are of

an unrecognised and often uncared for minority whose voice is seldom loud enough to be heard by those who allocate the development rewards. In the ultimate analysis, it appears that their organizations, wherever they are and whether cultural, literary, or political, seem to have the objective of achieving what others, mainly majority communities, have already achieved. Even their desire to be separated from the Nepalese seems to have been conditioned by their hope of more equitable distribution of the development rewards in their respective states.

Conclusion

The political aspirations of the Nepalis in northeast India are therefore woven around the struggle for equal economic and political rights as other Indian citizens. Such aspirations have often taken very long to be fulfilled or have remained unfulfilled even today. The most important reason for this is the lack of a strong ethnic solidarity among them. Their ethnicity is actually much weaker than what is made out to be. The historical, racial, cultural, spatial, and now, class and occupational, diversities have been successful in acting as a deterrent to the emergence of a strong ethnic solidarity among them. This could not emerge even in Darjeeling. Otherwise there would not occur so many fratricidal clashes and killings between the supporters of the GNLFF and the Communist party of India (Marxist), and between the former and the Gorkha Volunteer Cell members (For details, see Subba 1992, Chapter VI).

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