



Nepalis in Assam: A Historical Perspective (1816-1985)

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Abstract

Several streams of migration had occurred towards Assam during pre and post independence period. Among them, a group of martial races of poor country Nepal migrated to Assam in search of food and employment during the colonial periods. The migration and settlement of Nepalis in Assam have played a pivotal role in the formation into the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society of the region. Most of the Nepalis were soldiers, graziers, coolies, peon and chaukidars. Apart from the deployment in army and police, a section of Nepalis took grazing as a profession. Encouragement from the part of the British number of Nepali migration was increased leaps and bound. As the population of Assam increased in a considerable amount which ultimately led to the ethnic movement and deliberate attempts to define as foreigners. The present study is a descriptive study of the Assam-Nepal relation their settlement in the region.

Keywords: Acculturation, Assamese, Assimilation, Nepali, Gurkha, Gopalak, Graziers, Khuti.

Introduction

The Eastern most part of Indian State, Assam is the land of exceptional interest which covers area of 78,438 sq km. with the population of 3,11,69,272¹. Assam is situated in the extreme North-east frontier of India in between 24°10' and 27°58'N Latitude and 89°49' to 97°26'E Longitudes and borders are touched on the north by Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh, and Nagaland, and Manipur in the east, Mizoram and Tripura in the south and Meghalaya in the west. Famous for green tea and one horned Rhinoceros to the world are known to abroad by its earlier name Pragjyotishpur and Kamrup, also known as the land of magic and witch craft with its famous *Tantrik* shrine Kamakhya. In the epigraphic record the name Kamakhya first mentioned in the Samudra Gupta's famous Allahabad Pillar Inscription². Assam is situated in one of the greatest routes of migration of mankind. Across the geographical boundaries there came men, ideas and means of production to mingle together with the aboriginals and shape a new mode of living and rich culture³. The contacts so achieved, with both inside and outside India, were lasting and ever increasing. People of Assam from the ancient periods not only maintain trade, but also for the exchange of ideas between China, Tibet, Nepal, Burma and others. In different periods of time different races and tribes entered Assam and constitute a composite Assamese culture. The modern name 'Assam' is associated with the Shan invaders who under the leadership of Sukapha invaded and penetrated to this land in about 1228 A.D. They established the Ahom rule for about six hundred years upto 1826 A.D. Finally the British occupy this land and incorporated within company's territory. As the country lies in the migration routes, people of different origin, such as Mongoloid, the Austric, the Negriots and Aryans entered Assam become the meeting ground and the place of

cultural interchanges of these races, enriched Assamese culture at large.

Historical Background

This is the worldwide phenomenon that the history of the people of the world is the history of migration. The history of man is not static rather it is ever changing. From the time immemorial different groups of people entered this part of the land and constitute composite Assamese culture. It is found in the Puranas, Epics, Yoginitantra and other historical sources that from the olden times Nepali speaking people migrated and residing in different parts of Assam. The anthropological and cultural history of Assam is the history of the admixture of the races, tribes, languages, customs, rites and rituals, manners and behaviors and other aspects of civilization. It is found that some tribes of Assam and Nepal are of the same origin. Both the countries viz. India and Nepal and their parts referred as *Kirata desa* and the aboriginals were known as *Kiratas* of the Tibeto-Burman groups⁴, perhaps migrated to this region. References of the relation between Assam and Nepal are found from the remote past to the recent time. In the different periods of history the boundary of the two states touched each other boundaries. Having racial and cultural similarities with the people of Assam they are not so negligible in numerical strength and found in the process of acculturation. In some places, the process of assimilation is also found with the Assamese society. The role of the Assamese-Nepali in the economic growth of the state, Assam, is not ignorable at all.

But it is not possible to cover all the aspects the in the limited scope, the present study aims at making a comprehensive analysis of the perspective of the life and problems of Nepalese

in Assam and to find out the status quo of the ethnic Nepali community in Assam.

Colonial Impetus and Nepali Migration into Assam: The colonial period has witnessed the greatest human movement and settlement of people resulting in the transfer and distribution of diverse population group in different parts of the world. The commercialization and industrialization of the economy under the aegis of the colonial state also served to stimulate the natural migratory movement of the people. After the British occupation of Assam, under the patronage of the colonial government large number of Nepalese migrated to this region in search of life as *Gopalak* and Soldiers. The British came to Assam with a lot of hope and aspiration, but they could not reach their goal, as Assam was not a populous state. The devastation and wholesale depopulation during the period of civil wars and Burmese invasions left 'vast tracts of waste land throughout the province'. Every encouragement should be given to the immigrants to come and settle in the province. In an industry less country, Assam had no other option rather than to increase in land revenue. Lands were leased out to the people in favourable terms. British government had not missed any opportunity to maximize their revenue collection. Accordingly grazing which was free from time immortal in Assam was taxed. To attract the people and increase the revenue of the region, Company introduced the Wasteland Rules on 6th March, 1838. According to the Rules, one-fourth of a land grant was to remain revenue-free in perpetuity. The remaining portion of the grant, too, was to remain revenue-free for initial five to twenty years, the period according to the nature of the waste land concerned⁵.

'Large scale' Nepali migration into the Assam began only with the colonial intervention. British official view toward the native people was that they are 'lazy', 'opium addicted' and 'indolent' and encouraged the surplus Nepali population to immigrate Assam. The active policies pursued by the colonial government opened up the valley to the Nepalis. The colonial government required a pliant labour force for all and sundry work from clearing forests to lumbering to domestic help, which was effectively provided by the 'versatile Nepali'. Apart from the recruitment of Nepali martial classes in police and military, what seems to have attracted the Nepalis most to Assam were the vast expanse of greenery dense forests and hills, abundance of wastelands which was full of lush green vegetation. This was, indeed, an ideal scenario for cattle-breeding.

Gurkha Soldier: One of the important migratory movements took place in the subcontinent during the nineteenth and twentieth century's were that of people of Nepal, an independent state subsequently having treaty relationship with the British Govt. in India.

The Anglo-Nepali war 1814 came to an end with the treaty of Sougulee on 2nd December, 1815⁶. The permanent settlement of the Nepalese people in the North-Eastern region began after the

treaty of Sougulee. The British quickly recognized the magnificent fighting qualities of the Gurkhas. A large number of Gurkhas were recruited in the Cuttack Legion (later known as the Assam Light Infantry), which was formed in Cuttack in 1817⁴. It was transferred to Assam under Captain Neufville. This Cuttack Legion took part in the Sylhet operation ostensibly to drive out the Burmese which had 1000 Hindustani and Gurkha soldiers⁷. In 1835 the Assam Rifle was formed and the Gorkha presence was enhanced. In 1865 after the disastrous performance in the Bhutan war, Hindustanis were ordered to be replaced by "Gorkhas, Nepalese and Garhwalis⁸". At Gorakhpur and Darjeeling a depot was opened to recruit Gurkha soldiers.

The number of Gurkhas in the Assam Rifles remained substantial as the class composition return of each battalion in 1922 would show⁸

Table-1
Number of Gurkhas in the Assam Rifles

Assam Rifle	Gurkhas	Jharuas	Hill Tribes	Others
1 st Battalion	762	48	39	3
2 nd Battalion	647	137	1	9
3 rd Battalion	592	166	35	38
4 th Battalion	614	108	79	2
5 th Battalion	552	200	38	3

Constituting a sizeable component in the Gurkha Rifles and in Assam, Nepalis were encouraged to settled in Assam. Suitable men for the army were not easy to enlist. Therefore the Gurkhas who were brought to North-East region different regiments were settled by British after their retirement so that it would be easier for the British to recruit their sons in the army. The census reports shows that Nepali Population from 21,347 (.35%) in 1901⁹ to 88,306 (1.02%) in 1931⁹.

Table-2
Growth of Nepali population in Assam, 1901-1991⁹

Year	Nepalis in Assam	Percentage of total population in Assam
1901	21,347	0.35
1911	47,654	0.67
1921	70,344	0.94
1931	88,306	1.02
1951	1,01,338	1.26
1961	2,15,213	1.98
1971	3,49,116	2.38
1991	4,32,519	1.93

Nepali Graziers: In Assam what seems to have attracted Nepalis most were the vast expanse of greenery dense forests and hills, abundance of land and the ‘Chars’ of mighty Brahmaputra and its tributaries, dotted with verdant full of lush green vegetation. This was, indeed, an ideal scenario for cattle-breeding. Some of pensioners of the retired soldiers took milk production as their occupation. In a land-abundant Assam peasant enjoyed from time immemorial the traditional right to graze their cattle freely on the village commons and neighbouring forests, colonial British government imposed tax on grazing¹⁰. Accordingly in 1886 tax of 4 *annas* per buffalo was imposed as a grazing tax, which was raised 8 *annas* in 1888 in Lakhimpur district. In 1890 a definite instruction were issued to levy of grazing fee at the rate of 8 *annas* per buffalo and 4 *annas* for other horned cattle. The continuous Nepali migration in the province as a grazier, increased the grazing fee in time to time. In 1907 grazing tax was raised to Re. 1 per buffaloes raised Rs. 2 and 6 *annas* for other horned cattle in 1915¹¹. This rate of grazing fee was again raised Rs. 3 per head per buffalo and *annas* 6 for other horned cattle in the province¹². Thereafter, this grazing fee continued to be Rs. 3 per head per buffalo and *annas* 6 for other horned cattle.

Table-3
Increasing the grazing cattle and Revenue 1910-1925 in Assam

	1910	1915	1920	1925
No. of cattle Assessed	12993	44199	135690	182605
No of Professional graziers	90	184	6626	9165
Total Revenue collection	12525	64007	301077	361947

Source: ALCP, 1928, Vol.I, part IV, pp. 81-89

No doubt most of the professional graziers in the province were Nepali *khutiwalas*. According to A. Guha “the overwhelming bulk of these cattle, excepting a few hundred, all were Nepali professional graziers⁵.”

Role of Nepalese in India Freedom Struggle: The Nepali community of Northeastern region took active part in the freedom movement from 1920. The freedom movement took a new turn after the visit of Mahatma Gandhi to Assam as the Assam Association led by Chabilal Upadhyaya ceased to function. Chabilal Upadhyaya took the leadership of Nepali community in the Non-Cooperation Movement in Assam. Chabilal and his brother Hari Prasad Upadhyaya was sentenced a period of three month imprisonment¹³. During the Civil Disobedience movement Dalbir Singh Lohar, Bir Bahadur Chettri, Anantlal Sarma, Bhakta Bahadur Pradhan were punished imprisonment¹³. During the Quit India Movement, the Nepali freedom fighters of Assam were also sentenced to rigorous imprisonment and kept in different jails of Assam.

More than three hundred Nepali volunteers were recruited in *Shanti Sena* and *Mrityu Bahini* from different places of the Brahmaputra Valley.

Nepalese in Assam after Independence: The Nepalis in Assam have preserved and maintained their own traditional social customs. In the process a certain degree of assimilation with the Assamese society has been noted. This is evident from the festivals celebrated, food habits and matrimonial relation where a high degree of assimilation is noted.

There are some ceremonies performed by the Nepalis in Assam in addition to their traditional religious ceremonies. This shows a high level of assimilation into the Assamese fold. Besides these, the Nepalis of Assam actively participated in the local festival called *Bihu*. Assam celebrated three *Bihus- Magh, Rangali* and *Kati*. The *Magh Bihu* celebrated in the month of January/*Magh* has a Nepali equivalent in *Makar Sankranti*. The *Bohag/Rangali Bihu* celebrated in April or *Baisakha*, is also equally participated by the Nepalis of Assam.

The history of the people of Assam is the history of the migrated people. People of different caste, religion, language had been migrated into the province from the time immemorial. Among these migrated people, Nepalis are also one of the groups. It should be mentioned that though technically Nepal is foreign country, the Nepalis were never treated as foreign nationals in India, so was the status of the Indians in Nepal. This was obviously a mutually accepted understanding between two nations with a history of cordial, social, political and economic relations without a natural physical boundary to demarcate distinctly. The Indo-Nepal Friendship Treaty in 1950, the Tripartite Delhi Agreement of 1951 and Revised Indo-Nepal Treaty of 1956 cleared the way for free interchange, and flow of Nationals of both countries with the right to own property and accord citizenship¹⁴.

Assam witnessed a popular mass movement against the illegal immigrants that continued from 1979-85, popularly known as Assam Movement. As a result of Assam Movement, a settlement treaty (Assam Accord) was signed in 1985 with Central Government. According to ‘Assam Accord’ all those foreigners those who entered Assam after 1971 were to be deported under the Illegal Migrants Determination by Tribunal Act (IMDT), 1983 as amended in 1985. The political status of the communities of Nepali origin continued to remain confusing even after the Assam Accord. On the one hand, in Assam, all foreigners entering without valid travel papers after 25 March, 1971 were to be considered illegal immigrants, on other hand, the 1950 Treaty continued to grant the Nepalis a reciprocal right to settle in India (with no time-bound curtailment). The irony of the situation is that this tension between central government directive and sons-of-soil movement over the political status of the communities of Nepali origin in Assam was an unnecessary byproduct of the Assam Movement¹⁵. Although Nepalis were part and parcel of the

collective past of the region they hardly find any space or mention in the history of the region¹⁴. Prof. Sajal Nag arguments in this matter as “Nepalis are often seen as ‘rejected’, ‘excluded’, and ‘historyless’ people” is somehow acceptable¹⁴.

Conclusion

In the conclusion, it may be referred that absorption and integration of the people is the main characteristic of the history of Assam. Under the patronage of the British government Nepalese were permanently settled here. As a result, they become bonafide citizens and showed their contribution for the promotion of political, economic and cultural life of Assam. They have sacrificed their lives for the preservation of national unity and integrity being the protector of border as well as freedom fighter. Many races and tribes are found mixed up with the Assamese people and constitute a composite Assamese culture. Now in Assam Nepalese also liked to give their identification as ‘Asomiya Nepali’ continuing their own traditional socio-cultural life like others of Assam and is seen in the process of acculturation with it. Nepalis in Assam make the Assamese society and culture more extensive.

In the different periods of history many people migrated from Nepal, established themselves permanently in Assam and integrated with the Assamese society and culture by process of acculturation and in some localities assimilation in the aspects of language, culture and education. Assimilation also found in food habits, social, religious and matrimonial relations. The Nepalis who came to these parts of the land since long back and in the early rush of the colonial conquest assimilated into the host society and contributed much to the social, economic, and political development of the state. The Assamese Nepali had actively participated in the freedom struggle led by Indian National Congress. In various phases of the National freedom struggle, their wholehearted participation and their courage to face adverse consequences thereof were really praiseworthy. But where by the Indo-Nepal treaty of 1950, 1951, and 1952 grants to the Nepalis a reciprocal right to settle India, on the other hand IMDT Act 1885, make the political status of the Nepalis continued to remain confusing.

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