'Are You from Nepal?': Interrogating the Monolithic Identity of Nepalis in India

T. B. Subba

INTRODUCTION

In a seminal article titled 'Nationalism and Citizenship', David McCrone and Richard Kiely (2000) discuss the problem of the relationship between these two concepts, especially in the second half of the twentieth century, in perhaps one of the most succinct manner. The development of multiculturalism in the past five decades or so has indeed made this relationship confusing for many. However, this chapter is more or less confined to such nationalities whose citizenship has never been contested. On the other hand, the present chapter deals with the Nepalis in India whose nationality and citizenship both are contested at various points of time due to an identity that makes them vulnerable to dominant constructions.

The Nepalis are found all over India, although they are generally concentrated in clusters of villages in different parts of Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, and Nagaland in the east of Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalayas, and Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Uttarakhand towards its west. They are also found, in much smaller numbers in metropolises like Kolkata, New Delhi and Mumbai. But the only areas, geographically contiguous to eastern Nepal, where they are in a numerically dominant position, is Darjeeling in West Bengal and Sikkim. Nowhere else in India do they constitute more than three per cent of a state's total population, although the exact population of Nepalis has never been easy to ascertain, for a certain percentage of their population continues to float across the Indo-Nepal border.

The Nepalis in India thus consist of two categories – those who are citizens of India and those who are citizens of Nepal – although there might also be a third but small category of those who are citizens of both India and Nepal, as is often alleged about them. The first category of Nepalis enjoys full status as Indian

citizens, especially in the Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalayas, where they are in a clear majority. But where they are an insignificant minority and are known as 'migrants from Nepal', they have the status of second-class citizens in terms of employment opportunities, right to purchase land, right to contest elections or cast votes, etc. Even in Darjeeling and Sikkim, they are at times labelled by national leaders or the media as 'nationals of Nepal' and not as 'nationals of India' like the Biharis, Bengalis, and Punjabis, who too have their relatives across the national boundaries of India. This has been the most disturbing factor for Indian Nepalis and they express their sense of frustration through their literary works and musical programmes as well as through various memoranda that are submitted to visiting dignitaries from time to time. This category of Nepalis to which I myself belong fails to understand why Indian society does not accept them as Indian nationals just as it has accepted Bengalis, Biharis, Kashmiris and Punjabis. They ask why they are singled out for sharing historical, linguistic, cultural and religious affinities with people across the international border, or why they are asked, 'Are you from Nepal?', or told, 'Go back to Nepal', as the Governor of Assam said in 2005 when Nepali students of Assam met him to demand that Nepali be made the medium of instruction in Nepali schools.

The aim of this chapter is therefore to make a humble attempt to understand some issues of their identity, their nationality as well as citizenship a matter of contestation in the eyes of both the state and society.

IS NEPAL/INDIA 'FOREIGN' OR 'OTHER' COUNTRY?

Nepal, strictly speaking, is not a foreign country for Indians, nor is India so for the people of Nepal. The people of either country can migrate to the other country freely, hold jobs, do business, buy property, get married and do many other things. No passport or visa is required to visit either country as it is required to go to a foreign country, like Bangladesh, Myanmar or Pakistan. Many Nepal Nepalis, Indian Nepalis and other Indians cross the Indo-Nepal border every day to procure various objects for their daily needs. Even cattle cross the border every day and so do wild animals and birds. Indian currency can be used all over Nepal and Nepalese currency can be used in many border towns and villages within India. Even the symbolic border is not there except where border check gates have been erected.

As a result of all this, there has been a huge movement of people from one country to the other through numerous check gates as well as by crossing the open border for temporary work or even for settling down permanently. The two countries have a long history, common cultural traditions, epics and Upanishads, religious rites, temples and temple priests, and common people as well as members of royal families have often interacted and intermarried across the present political boundary between the two countries. The delimitation of the present political boundary between the two countries itself has been a legacy of the British and does not date prior to the nineteenth century, whereas social and cultural

interactions between the people of both the countries can be traced back to ancient times.

Nepal or India is therefore *paradesh* (another country) and not *bidesh* (a foreign country) for the people of either country. Nepal is as much a *paradesh* for a Marwari from Haryana as India is for a Newar of Kathmandu. Pakistan, or for that matter Bangladesh, is referred to as *bidesh*, whereas India or Nepal is simply referred to as *paradesh*. This is especially true for a Nepali leaving Nepal for India. Such a person considers himself, and is considered by others in his village, as simply going to *paradesh*. This distinction is subtle but very important for people who cross the border as well as for scholars who study it. It would of course be very difficult to sustain this distinction without historical, cultural, religious and linguistic kinship and other ties existing between the two countries, which make the act of crossing the border much less difficult or traumatic than one can otherwise. Such a distinction is further sanctified by the Indo-Nepal Friendship Treaty of 1950.

This treaty, signed on 31 July 1950 by Chandreshwar Prasad Narain Singh on behalf of the Government of India and by Mohan Shamsher Jang Bahadur Rana on behalf of the Government of Nepal, has 10 Articles, of which Articles VI and VII being particularly important are reproduced as follows:

Article VI. Each government undertakes, in token of the neighbourly friendship between India and Nepal, to give to the nationals of the other, in its territory, national treatment with regard to participation in industrial and economic development of such territory and to the grant of concessions and contracts relating to such development.
Article VII. The governments of India and Nepal agree to grant, on a reciprocal basis, to the nationals of one country in the territories of the other the same privileges in the matter of residence, ownership of property, participation in trade and commerce, movement and other privileges of a similar nature.

Empowered by this treaty, the nationals of Nepal and India cross the border every day without any difficulty.[1] This kind of free movement has given rise to an increasing opposition to the continuation of this treaty in both Nepal and India. Such a feeling is mainly found among the earlier Nepali inhabitants in India and Indians in Nepal, probably because the continued inflow of people from across the border means more competitors for the limited natural and state resources, and constant blurring of their national identities. Such opposition is also found among Indians in India about the Nepalis and among Nepalese about Indians. Since it is virtually impossible to make a clear distinction between the early migrants and recent migrants from Nepal or India the citizenship and/or nationality aspirations of the early migrants are in a way affected by the influx of recent migrants . It is perhaps why there have been demands by the early Nepalis in certain parts of India to seal the Indo-Nepal border, issue work permits and identity cards to them, which are obviously aimed at drawing a clear line between themselves and recent migrants from Nepal so that they may integrate themselves better into the national mainstream of India. Indian Nepalis in India have this dream, which may or may not be shared by Indians in Nepal, that once the

boundary line between them and the other category is drawn their problems will be solved.

It may be recalled that one of the first steps of the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF), which spearheaded the movement for a separate state for Nepalis in Darjeeling and Dooar areas of West Bengal, which they called 'Gorkhaland', was to burn copies of this treaty, as it considered the treaty responsible for making the national status of Indian Nepalis ambivalent in the eyes of the state as well as society. The Gorkhaland movement wanted, among other things, a clear boundary to be drawn between Indian Nepalis and Nepal Nepalis, and also suggested the use of the word 'Gorkha' to refer to the former, as the word 'Nepali', according to Subhas Gheising, the army corporal-turned GNLF supremo, associated them directly with Nepal Nepalis (for more details, see Subba 1992). While most intellectuals in Darjeeling and Sikkim disagreed with the stand taken by the GNLF supremo, rarely any Indian Nepali contested the need for drawing such a distinction between the two categories of Nepalis in India. Incidentally, the Gorkha-Nepali debate still continues in Darjeeling and Sikkim, but it has divided the two Nepali-dominated areas rather than united them. Although pro-Nepali areas and pro-Gorkha areas are found in both Darjeeling and Sikkim, the former is largely a constituency of the Gorkhas and the latter of the Nepalis in India.

In this respect the following facts need to be kept in mind. First, according to the provisions of the Indo-Nepal Friendship Treaty of 1950, especially Articles VI and VII, both India and Nepal have to treat nationals of either country, in certain respects, as nationals of their own countries. Second, it is not easy to brush aside historical linkages between the two countries, and between the Nepal Nepalis and Indian Nepalis. Third, the two countries share a very long and open border, the fencing of which would involve colossal expenses that even India, leave alone Nepal, may find difficult to meet. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, sealing the border or abrogating the treaty, which can of course be done unilaterally by either country by giving one year's notice (Article X), cannot do away with the notion that the Nepalis in India and Indians in Nepal are migrants from the other country. No matter for how many generations Indians may have been living in Nepal they continue to be called 'Indians' in Nepal; similarly, Nepalis in India are, and perhaps may always have to live with the label, 'people from Nepal'.

ARE NEPALIS IN INDIA FROM NEPAL?

The answer to this question is both yes and no. First, yes, because the bulk of the Nepalis residing in India have either migrated from Nepal during the past two centuries or are descendants of migrants from Nepal. Second, no, because the Limbus and Magars of Sikkim, who are now known as 'Nepalis' for all practical purposes, are the original inhabitants of that erstwhile kingdom, which included the present district of Darjeeling in West Bengal until the mid-nineteenth century and merged with India only in 1975 (Namgyal and Drolma 1908, Subba 1999).

Further, if we extend the timeframe of Nepali migration to medieval times, there remains no doubt about the fact that numerically or otherwise dominant Nepali high castes, like Bahun, Chhetri, and Thakuri, are of Indian origin (Bista 1980). The Bahuns are descendants of Hindu priests of different parts of India, who had emigrated to Nepal through the Kumaon-Garhwal Himalayas to escape the growing atrocities of Mughal rulers in India. The Chhetris are the offspring of Brahmin emigrants from India and Magar women of western Nepal, and the Thakuris ar descendants of Thakur kings who had emigrated from India and established sm. principalities in Nepal prior to their subjugation by the Thakur kings, Prithv. Narayan Shah, in 1769. Even today they have many things in common with Indian Brahmins and Kshatriyas, like their *gotras*, family names, family deities, customs, etc. Do we call them 'Nepalis' because 'Nepali' was their mother tongue when they migrated from Nepal to India in the latter half of the nineteenth century or do we call them 'Indians' because they emigrated from India in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries?

If the timeframe of migration of people from one territory to another is not taken into consideration, a huge population of Nepalis living in Sikkim and in Darjeeling district, excluding its Kalimpong subdivision, can legitimately claim that they did not come from Nepal but the boundaries of Nepal were actually shifted when one-third of its territory was ceded to British India following the Anglo-Nepalese War of 1814-1816. Until then, all these areas (and also some areas in the present-day Uttarakhand state) had been within Nepalese territory for about two to three decades. References to this aspect of history had actually been made by some Nepali leaders of Nepal as well as India from various political platforms in the past. Can this historical period of about three decades or so be completely ignored or blacked out?

As several scholars have convincingly written, the British encouraged the people of Nepal to migrate to India not only for meeting their own requirements for brave soldiers to advance their imperialist interests in different parts of the world but also to turn forests and wastelands in India into revenue-earning agricultural fields or plantations, or to construct roads, bungalows, bridges and schools. When the World Wars came to an end they still needed the Nepalis to protect their territories. The British found the Nepalis to be loyal, intelligent, brave, disciplined, and having all those qualities which they were looking for in order to consolidate their rule in India. The abject poverty, exploitation and suppression by the rulers, discrimination on grounds of caste or ethnicity, lack of employment opportunities, etc., in Nepal were moot suitable conditions for the British to go there, hunting for the all-purpose Nepalis to meet their requirements in India (Sinha 1990).

Thousands of such Nepalis died in the two World Wars and in other colonial wars in undivided India as well as after India's independence (see Moktan 2002). Many of those who survived went back to their villages in Nepal whereas others settled down in various parts of India, especially in north-east India, and in the Darjeeling-Sikkim and Bhagsu-Dehradun areas. They terraced the fields,

domesticated animals, developed dairying, and yet continued to provide soldiers to defend independent India from external enemies and also to participate in counter-insurgency operations in various parts of India, including the north-east and northern India.

Indian Nepalis do not wear the Nepali dress except very few of them who wear it on some occasions. They do not speak the Nepali dialect spoken in Nepal. They do not use words, like *dhoka*, which means door and, *jhyal*, which means window in Nepal. Their lexicon and intonation are influenced by Hindi, Bangla, Assamese, Meitei, Khasi, Bodo and whatever dominant languages they have come in contact with. Their national heroes are Indian, their national anthem is Indian, their national flag is Indian, and they take pride in being Indians. Their spouses are often from neighbouring areas and their children are bilingual or multilingual. They have never visited Nepal, not even as pilgrims. They were born in India and in most cases their parents, grandparents, and great grandparents too were born in India. They have no idea as to when their forefathers had migrated from Nepal and from which villages or districts of Nepal, let alone why they had migrated to India.

If these people are to be described as the 'people of Nepal', then we are not keeping the timeframe of migration in mind and are committing the usual blunder of clubbing together Nepali citizens of India with the subjects of Nepal even if there are many commonalities between them. We are being selective about the timeframe that suits us best to categorise an entire people as 'migrants' and as the 'people of Nepal'. We are treating those who were brought over to India by the British in the beginning of the nineteenth century on a par with those who had emigrated into India about two centuries earlier and whose family members continue to maintain all kinds of linkages with the people in their ancestors' villages and who make regular remittances to Nepal, no matter howsoever small the amount. We are also ignoring here those Nepalis who became Indian citizens in 1975 when Sikkim became the 22nd state of India and also the Magars and the Limbus of Sikkim who are some of the original inhabitants of that state. And we are forgetting the fact that but for the British, the Darjeeling-Sikkim areas would have been parts of Nepal today rather than of India. Above all, we are being racist because we are not categorising the Marwaris, Biharis, Tharus, Santals, Tibetans, etc., who are migrating from Nepal to India every day, as the 'people of Nepal' or 'Nepalis'. They too speak Nepali and have migrated from a sovereign country, called 'Nepal'. Why can we not then call them 'Nepalis?' If the answer, as usual, is 'because Nepali is not their mother tongue', then it is also not the mother tongue of the Limbus, Rais, Magars, Gurungs, Sunuwars, etc. Why then are the latter communities called 'Nepalis'?

MULTIPLICITY OF IDENTITY

I want to show in this section, through the ethnography of the Nepalis in India, that Nepalis have multiple identities like most of the other communities in India or elsewhere. First, the regional identities among Nepalis are quite marked and

such identities are often indicated by different dialects. Thus we have Sikkimeli Nepalis, Darjeelinge Nepalis, Dooarseli Nepalis, Assamiya Nepalis, Dehradune Nepalis, etc. Besides the different dialects they speak, they often have different histories, different social compositions, different predicaments, different opportunities, and have been subjected to different cultured and linguistic influences. They also have different rights and privileges in different states of India. It would be too much to expect the Sikkimeli Nepalis to share their prosperity and development opportunities with the resource-strapped Darjeeling Nepalis, or to compare Nepalis in Darjeeling with the Nepalis in Mizoram and Meghalaya.

There is also much misconception about the religious identity of the Nepalis in India. They are all believed to be Hindus, as Nepal was known as the only Hindu country in the world until early 2006. Hinduism, in whatever sense it is understood, is strictly the religion of only the following castes: Bahun, Thakuri, Chhetri, Kami, Sarki, and Damai. Tamang, Sherpa, Gurung, and Yolmu are Buddhists and Rai, Limbu, Yakkha, Magar, Bhujel, Sunwar, Thami, etc., are Animists. However, during the last two centuries the Buddhist and Animist Nepalis have been considerably Hinduised, while Hindus have also adopted some Buddhist or Animist traits (Subba 1999). Since the 1990s the Buddhist and Animist Nepalis have made huge efforts to revive their traditional, non-Hindu religious beliefs and practices. But this revivalism came to a grinding halt in Nepal when it turned violent after 1996 and it slowed down significantly even in the Nepali diaspora in India.

Let us now take the case of the Nepali language, which has been accorded the status of a national language of India and has been included in Schedule VIII of the Constitution of India and which is recognised by the Sahitya Akademi as one of the literary languages of India. It is a language that has undergone tremendous changes over the past several centuries as it travelled from western India to the Kumaon-Garhwal Himalayas from where it moved towards the east, borrowing words from languages spoken by the Magars and Gurungs of western Nepal and also from the Newari language of Kathmandu valley. However, it is written in the Devanagari script and its root words (*tatsam sabda*) are all Sanskrit words on which are based all Indo-Aryan languages. This is perhaps why even a rustic Nepali from a remote corner of Nepal, who has had no opportunity to learn any Indian language and who had no opportunity of schooling, never has any tension before migrating to India as he can understand and speak Hindi rather easily.

One must not, however, forget the fact that various Buddhist and Animist communities had their own languages and the Nepali language was only a *lingua franca* for them to begin with. But with the state's proclivity or insistence to impart education in the Darjeeling hills, Sikkim, and Nepal through the Nepali medium, Nepali has over the years become their language and one of the most important identity markers of the Nepalis in India. It has a highly developed literature and is taught even at the university level. It is taught in a couple of

universities in India. But in the process, we have ignored a large number of Tibeto-Burman languages, like Tamang, Magar, Gurung, Rai, Limbu, Sunuwar, Thami and Bhujel and allowed them to decay and disappear almost totally from Nepal as well as from India. Until recently, the speakers of these languages were looked down upon by high-caste Nepalis and also by the educated people who themselves spoke various Tibeto-Burman languages. Their languages were called 'cannibals' language'. Even the Limbu and Newari languages that are highly developed languages and have their own scripts were swept away by the dominant wave of one of the killer languages of the Himalayas, that is, Nepali. The condition of the dozen-odd Tibeto-Burman languages remains pathetic in Nepal and among the Nepali diaspora in India despite growing awareness about their respective languages since the 1990s. There are some persons who are spending their own money, to spread their languages in Darjeeling, whereas in Sikkim and Nepal state support is being provided for development of many of the Tibeto-Burman languages.

It is quite common to come across the word 'Gorkha' or 'Gorkhali' prefixed with names of various organisations, ethnic, cultural, literary, and even religious, among the Nepali diaspora in India. The All India Gorkha League, with its branches in many parts of India, was once one of the most important political parties in the Nepali-speaking areas of India, especially in the Darjeeling hills of West Bengal where it flourished in the mid-twentieth century after coming into existence in Dehradun in the early decades of the same century. The popularity of the word 'Gorkha' had begun to wane when the Gorkha National Liberation Front-led Gorkhaland movement took a violent turn and reaffirmed the importance of this word. Even the government of West Bengal and the Government of India gave official acceptance to this word by signing an accord, in August 1988, relating to the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council. However, in Indian films and media and in Indian metropolises the word 'Gorkha' is apparently less popular than the word 'Nepali', as the former is usually associated with the uniformed occupational groups like gate-keepers and domestic servants. Although the word 'Nepali' tends to associate them instantaneously with the people of Nepal, it is considered more acceptable by most Nepalis and they are usually referred to by other Indians by the same word. The word 'Gorkha' has, in a sense, failed to draw a clear conceptual line between the Indian Nepalis and Nepal Nepalis, which was the most important reason for this word being adopted by supporters of the Gorkhaland movement.

Even racially, Gorkhas or Nepalis represent three of the four major races of the world, the three races being Caucasoid, Mongoloid and Proto-Austroloid. Hence no picture of any face can represent a Nepali face, although a Nepali cap or dress may help one to identify a Nepali much more easily than a Nepali not wearing the same. It is often not possible even for a fellow-Nepali to guess whether the person sitting next to him/her is a Nepali unless the person opens his/her mouth to speak in Nepali.

It is quite obvious from ethnographic account that emphasising the singularity of Nepali identity tantamounts to doing epistemic violence to this

nationality. Although various competing identities may be dormant at present, it is likely that some of them may some day challenge the monolithic identity from within and when that happens even the *etic* constructions of the Nepali identity may be revisited. After all, how many people now remember that Nyishis were once known as Daflas, Adis as Abors, Mizos as Lusheis, Karbis as Mikirs and so on. It is possible that half a century later Khasis may be known as Hynniewtreps, Garos as Achiks, Lepchas as Rongs, Gurungs as Tamus, and so on. There is growing a dislike for *etic* identities, but not every *etic* identity is likely to disappear partly or completely.

CONCLUSION

Identities are multiple and people do use different identities at different times and on different occasions to best negotiate a local situation. And they are neither permanent nor non-negotiable. However, a state and/or a locally dominant community, or a surrogate state, may choose that particular identity of a minority or migrant community that makes it most vulnerable to local situations so that it can be kept out of the scarce state resources, be they employment opportunities or opportunities of access to other natural resources. If that is not enough to contain the aspirations of such a community, various legislative measures are taken to officially deprive it of its human and natural rights. And if that too is not effective, local student bodies and/or ethnic organisations are mobilised to strengthen the state's hand vis-à-vis such a community. As a last measure, members of such a community may even be evicted by the majority community with the connivance of the concerned state, as the Nepalis were evicted from various parts of northeast India in the past four decades (Subba 1992).

Even where Nepalis are in a sizeable number, such as in the Darjeeling hills of West Bengal, the migrant slur was never allowed to be removed from their identity in the writings of many journalists and academicians during the Gorkhaland movement in the mid-1980s. Labelling them as 'migrants' was one of the most effective means of weakening their position in society, delegitimising their demand as a free people, and even justifying human rights violence perpetrated against them.

The identity of a migrant community makes it socially and politically vulnerable, especially if that community is also a minority community. Such an identity virtually cripples the community and makes it difficult for it to make legitimate claims to state recognition or resources. Such an identity also makes it difficult for such a community to integrate itself with the local dominant community, let alone engage with it on an equal footing as free people of a sovereign democratic republic. The only way this can perhaps be prevented is by coming out of the community paradigm and re-engaging in an identity based on personal virtues and merits rather than on one's colour, language, religion, etc. But it is more of wishful thinking than a practical reality. If post-industrial societies provide us any lead in this direction, the present scenario in India, may continue for a fairly long time.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Presented at the international seminar on 'Identity, Cultural Pluralism and State' held at the India International Centre, New Delhi, and organised by the Anthropological Survey of India from 27February to 1March 2006. I am thankful to the participants of the conference for their valuable comments.

NOTE

1. Until a couple of years ago, the Nepalis were not allowed to travel through the northeast of India, beyond the immigration check posts situated at Srirampurhat in Assam and Byrnihat in Meghalaya. However, they could easily bribe their way past these check posts until the Gauhati High Court declared it illegal to stop the Nepalis at these check gates in view of the Indo-Nepal Friendship Treaty of 1950.

REFERENCES

Bista, D.B., *People of Nepal*, Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar, 1980.

McCrone, David and Richard Kiely, 'Nationalism and Citizenship in Harry Goulbourne ed., *Race and Ethnicity: Critical Concepts in Sociology*, Vol. II. London and New York, Routledge, 2001, pp. 165-81.

Muktan, K.K., *The Legendary Gorkhas*, Guwahati, Spectrum Publications, 2002.

Namgyal, T. and Yeshi Drolma, *History of Sikkim*, Translated and typed manuscript, 1908.

Sinha, A.C., 'The Indian North-East Frontier and the Nepalese Immigrants' in N.K. Rustomji and Charles Ramble eds., *Himalayan Environment and Culture*, Shimla, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1990.

Sinha, A.C. and T.B. Subba, eds., *The Nepalis in Northeast India: A Community in Search of Indian Identity*, New Delhi, Indus Publishing Company, 2003.

Subba, T.B., *Ethnicity, State and Development: A Case Study of Gorkhaland Movement in Darjeeling*, New Delhi, Vikas, 1992.

Subba, T.B., 'The Nepalis in India: Political Aspirations and Ethnicity' in A.K. Danda, et al. eds., *North-East India: Ethno-Cultural Perspectives and Process*, Calcutta, Indian Anthropological Society, 1997.

Subba, T.B., *Politics of Culture: A Study of Three Kirata Communities in Eastern Himalayas*, Hyderabad, Orient Longman, 1999.

Subba, T.B., 'Nepal and the Indian Nepalis' in Kanak Mani Dixit and Shastri Ramachandaran eds., *State of Nepal*, Kathmandu, Himal Books, 2002.