

Labour Migration in an Earlier Phase of Global Restructuring : The Nepali Dairy Farmers in Assam

Lopita Nath

Migration of labour is a prominent feature of the latest round of global restructuring, reflecting ongoing changes in the international division of work. Currently at least 150 million people live outside their countries of origin and more than half the global flow of migrants is between developing countries. The large-scale movement of workers over short and long distances is anything but a new phenomenon. Colonial intervention in the 19th century created conditions in South-Asia, which generated large-scale movements of labour and commodities across borders. The work-related migration that took place during the colonial period signaled fundamental shifts in the global economy, transforming the relationship between capital and labour outside the metropolitan zone and in a way that was till then beyond the reach of market and state. Today, there is an urgent need for a better comparative understanding of the historical links between the colonial migration and the post-colonial trajectories of cultural pluriform societies and states.

This paper focuses on the Nepali migration into Assam during the colonial period as a labour-force and their settlement in the region. The ubiquitous presence of the Nepalis settled in the hills and valleys, towns and villages of Assam has become a significant feature of the labour force of this region, whether in the tea gardens, coal mines or oil refineries or as potters, carpenters, marginal cultivators, skilled and unskilled workers. The most significant feature of the Nepali presence is the foundation of their own economic base as pastoralists and dairy farmers, with an established trade in milk supply. Many of them today live in the outskirts of the urban areas supplying milk and fuel to the urban dwellers. The Nepalis today almost have a monopoly of the dairy farming in the state.

Having established themselves economically, the Nepali migration has continued into the North-east and Assam as a chain migration relying on the social networks and support from migrant bridgehead's already established in the region. The paper shall examine the real motives of migration of these dairy farmers. Did the farmers belong to the land-poor

of landless milieu in Nepal? Were they original labour intenders, who converted to dairy farming? What is their present status in the society and economy of the region? An examination of the relevant data points to the fact that contrary to popular belief, all Nepalis are not dairy farmers or the typified *dudhwala*, and that all dairy farmers were not original herdsmen but migrated in search of opportunities but later converted to dairy farming. In this paper, an attempt is made to understand the historical links of the colonial migration of the Nepali dairy farmers and their socio-economic status in the post-colonial plural society of Assam.

Causes of Nepali Labour Migration

Migration patterns in South Asia, are distinct to the region, cutting across national boundaries. The existing social theory of migration has been the argument put forward by neoclassical political economists, which centers around the push and pull theory i.e. gains to be won by movement from areas of relatively low productivity to areas of high productivity motivate migration. Ranabir Samadar¹ argues that the push factors, which include such circumstances as over-population, unemployment, scarcity of land, low wages, natural calamities, and 'pull' factors, which attract people due to employment opportunities, high wages, educational and cultural facilities for personal enrichment do not operate in their neo-classical neatness in South Asia. It is an integrated labour market, howsoever imperfectly integrated. Again people often migrate to take up sweat labour jobs, violence, ethnic network, lack of confidence in the nation's stability or even a historically established tradition of seasonal migration, typical of the peasantry in South Asia - all these defy the conceptual neatness of the push and pull theory of migration. The Nepali migration, typical of the South Asia pattern draws a little from both the Social Theory, as well as alterations of that theory. The political and economic situation in Nepal in the 18th century was such that it provided the push for out-migration from Nepal. The immigration of the 'Indo-Aryan' people i.e. mainly Brahmins and Chettris to the villages of hilly areas brought changes in the modes of production and pattern of property ownership followed by the earlier 'Tibeto-Burman' settlers.² The communal mode of production, soon yielded over the years to a relatively more advanced farming technology (wet-rice cultivation) brought by the Indo-Aryan migrants.³ This led to changes in the agricultural system, from pastoralism and shifting cultivation to settled intensive agriculture.⁴ Lowland fields and lower slopes were terraced and irrigated for the

cultivation of rice. Those ethnic groups, who had inhabited the lowland areas were forced up the hillsides, to less fertile agricultural lands in response to the gradual acquisition of the more productive land by high caste Hindus. This eventually led to the political ascendancy of Hindu people in most of the microstates, which existed in the area of present day Nepal.⁵

The technological advancement in agriculture - rice, ploughing, irrigation and terracing, intensified the division of labour in the society. As a result a class structure based on the ownership of land and labour began to develop. By the 16th century, there was a well-established high caste Hindu landlord class, unified by their common political and cultural traditions in the society, thus strengthening their position in the society. Anthropologists conducting research in Nepal, such as Caplan,⁶ McDougal,⁷ Poffenberger,⁸ have remarked that this process resulted in a concentration of wealth and land in the hands of particular high caste families and a corresponding loss of land, wealth by tribal groups and people of low caste.

The position of the higher caste in Nepal was further consolidated by the political process in Nepal. In the 18th century, 1769, Prithvi Narayan Shah of Gorkha, unified the many principalities, ruled by the feudal chiefs (Chettri by caste) to constitute the unified modern Nepal. After unification of the country, most of the land under community control (*Kipat*) was brought under state ownership, and tax or rent called *raikar*⁹ was imposed. The major portion of the cultivators was engaged in the cultivation of *raikar* land.

In the process of unification, an enormous supply of labour was required for army and other ancillary services, construction works (forts, temples, etc.) as well as needs of the royal palaces. The continuous demand for labour in the face of low density of population, created chronic shortage of labour. The Government thus, forced it expedient to fulfil its labour requirements through the *Corvee*, 'the time honoured system of exacting works from its subjects on a compulsory basis.

The *Corvee* system called *Jhara* emerged in Nepal during this period. *Jhara* labour was used for military purposes as well as other state services. Such labourers were not only required to leave their villages for service in distant places, but were also required to furnish arms and equipments. The villagers' enroute to war zones were also required to supply arms, ammunition, etc. within their village boundaries. This relay

system called *hulak*, although meant to minimize the *Jhara* system was considered a burden to the villages on the route to the battlefield. *Corvee* not only became a serve hardship for the peasants of Nepal (in the 18th and 19th centuries) but also downgraded their economic position. In some households' agricultural production declined due to the shortage of labour.¹⁰ The Mongoloid people mainly the Gurungs and Magars, who were important elements of the *Corvee* system were used mainly for fighting. For transportation and other supplementary work, peasants belonging to Indo-Aryan groups were also used.¹¹ Though Brahmins were also required to render free labour, the nature of work assigned was different and they were also exempted at times from these obligations, especially after 1803. High family connections also merited exemptions from *Corvee*.

People with high connections, high caste and highly placed, in the administrative and military organizations, in addition to exemptions, were actually paid in terms of Land Grants called *Birta* and *Jagir*¹² as a mark of special favour. In addition, these influential people also utilized the *corvee* or *jhara* labour for their personal benefit. Further, the land grants and assignments were used as rewards to people as also to ensure their loyalty. These grants, mostly in the Terai region not only led to clearance of the land, but also to the rise of a landlord class and absentee landlordism, as most of the recipients of such grants in the Terai, stayed in Kathmandu and other regional centres. Only high caste people benefited from this policy. The low caste Gurungs and Magars were deprived of such favours, even though they sacrificed much in the process of unification.

Similar, to the system of land grants, was the system of taxation, which favoured members of the higher castes and influential families. These families, which obtained their land as grants (*birta and jagir*) were not required to pay the exorbitant taxes for their land. These taxes were levied from 1747 to 1816 because of the need for revenue to finance the process of territorial expansion and to meet the needs of the royal palace. At the same time, the exorbitant taxes were a heavy burden for the peasants.

The peasants were also exploited by the landholders. The *Birta* and *Jagir* landholders employed tenants and peasants to cultivate their lands and in return appropriated higher rents and larger shares of production. Regmi and others argue that these processes caused disparity in access

to resources and overall depletion of the land and forest resources. At the same time, the system of *corvee* labour, excessive taxation and exploitation by landlords caused indebtedness among peasants. Since the majority of the peasants did not own much land and other material goods, moneylenders were more concerned with using the labour of defaulters of their loans. This process adversely affected the economic condition of members of low caste minority ethnic groups.

The system of excessive taxation and land grants continued even during the administration of the Ranas, who ruled the country under hereditary prime ministership from 1846 to 1951. Further, with the passage of the *legal code* in 1854, division of work, maintenance of law and order and treatment of people were all based on the caste system. The members of the occupational castes (the untouchables), who were also artisans, suffered most as the caste-based system denied them access to education and government service, ignoring their artisan skills. The system forced these people into the lower classes, not only in terms of social prestige, but also in terms of economic position. In addition, the excessive burden of tax or *corvee* obligations imposed by the government pushed many materially and culturally rich ethnic groups into a precarious position.¹³

The policy of the Rana government (before 1951) in making land grants (*birta* and *Jagir*) affected agricultural production in central Nepal. The policy of the central government controlling the various states and territories minimized the role of the feudal lords, who were also owners of the *birta* and *Jagirs*, making their position in the power hierarchy very unclear. Never strong enough to challenge central authority, they held lands at the discretion of the central government, which could renew or confiscate the grants. The insecurity of the grants thus prevented them from developing strong social bonds with their tenants of making improvements on lands, introduce new methods of conserve resources. Because of excessive taxation and the need to share production, tenants were also not in a position to make technical improvements in farming.

On the Indian side the colonial intervention following the Treaty of Sagauli (1816) and the economic transformation that followed created the pull factors for the Nepali migration to continue and grow. They were: (1) The colonial patronage, (2) abundance of land both in the plains and the hills of Assam, (3) thinness of the local population and their refusal to work in certain hard fields opened up after colonization, (4) similarity of natural environment, (5) scope for employment in the colonial army and

police, in the offices as *chaukidars*, *darwans*, *chaprasis* and *peons* and (6) avenues in the agricultural sector, dairy, transport and construction of roads and buildings.

Pattern of Migration

The first wave of Nepali migration to the N.E. was the Gorkha soldiers for the Indian army. They first came in the wake of the Treaty of Sagauli (1815 - 16) with the deployment of the Gorkha in the Sylhet operation, known as the Assam Light Infantry.¹⁴ These soldiers belonged mostly to the low-caste Magars and Gurungs from the Central Hills, who were in a very low economic position. Discrimination for high ranks in the army at home during the Rana regime also encouraged many Magar and Gurung men to enter long-term military service outside the country. Western and Central Nepal inhabited largely by the Gurungs and Magars was one main recruiting area. Other ethnic groups were the Chettris, Rais, Limbus, Tamangs, Thakuri, Sunwar and others from the East.¹⁵ It was only during World War II, that a small number of Brahmins and Newars were recruited. Even though there was Government opposition, many youths fled the country because of the difficult economic conditions to settle near the Nepalese border¹⁶ so that they could easily enlist in the army service. As a result of such migrations, settlements of Nepali people were established in Kangra, Naintal, Dharamsala, Dehradun, Darjeeling and even Shillong in the North-east.

The Gorkha soldiers in the North-east after their retirement were encouraged to settle in the foothills between Aarunachal Pradesh and Assam, forest fringes and the river banks in Assam and the Naga Hills. Meghalaya, Manipur, Sikkim and Bhutan. Leo Rose¹⁷ in his account of the Nepali migration to the entire region writes that except for Arunachal Pradesh, Nepalis were allowed to settle in some of the excluded areas from which even the plains Assamese were excluding specially visible in the Lower hill areas. They soon emerged as loyal citizens and faithful allies of the British government.

The second wave of migration came as a consequence of the British colonial expansion. The various expeditions against the 'wild' tribes of the North-east, large-scale lumbering and clearing of forest lands for settlement, agriculture and plantation required hardly as well as pliant labourers. The Nepali migrants unlettered and unexposed perfectly fitted this need and they were attracted in large numbers to the forests, road

construction sites, mines, fields, plantations and so on. Large wastelands granted on favourable terms as well as pecuniary assistance were given by the colonials for their journey to Upper Assam. In the years 1897, 1898 and 1899, the Nepali labourers employed in the tea gardens throughout the province and in the oil refineries at Margherita, in the coal mines and a few saw mills in Upper Assam was considerable in the early years but decreased over the years.

Table showing Nepali labourers employed

Year	Total
1897	179
1898	231
1899	188
1901	272*
1902	102
1903	184*

Source : Report on Labour immigration into Assam, 1898, 1899. Resolution on Labour Immigration into Assam, 1902-03, 1903-04, Shillong.

*These includes figures for Bombay and Nepal

In the years 1902 and 1903, the total percentage of the Nepali labour force in the entire labour market was only 03% and 04%. It increased in 1906 to .07%.

Nepali migration into Assam was also considerably dependent on a chain network created by the early migrants. Migrant Nepali settlements emerged in Shillong and others areas of the North-east. Further, the colonials also encouraged migration of the Gurkhas with their families. This provided the incentive to ex-army personnel to smuggle out people for recruitment. Again the presence of a large body of Nepalis in the Regiment and Frontier Police encouraged the immigrants from Siliguri to move to the District of Lakhimpur. Some of them were rubber cutters and dealers in buffaloes, but many bonafide settlers carried on large-scale sugarcane cultivation and dairy farming (Census of 1901, 1911, 1921, 1931).

It was only in the post-colonial period, after 1950 that Nepali population increased significantly in Assam, indicating that the volume of migration suddenly expanded in the mid-20th century. The earlier trends

of migration found formal manifestation in the Indo-Nepal Friendship Treaty of 1950, the Tripartite Delhi Agreement of 1951 and the revised Indo-Nepal Agreement of 1956. The treaty provisions permit the people of Nepal to engage in business, to acquire property, to settle themselves, seek employment and live without any restrictions in India and allow similar privileges to Indians in Nepal. This accelerated the Nepali migration, tabulating their growth rate between 1951-71 from, 1,01,338 in 1951 to 3,49,116 in 1971; a rise of 3.5 times in 20 years.

This continued well into the 60s and 70s, when the peasantry burst through the porous Indo-Nepal border to take advantage of work opportunities available in the modernizing economy of independent India. Industrialization, urbanization, development of roads and other public infrastructure and above all the growth of an Indian middle class threw up a great demand for unskilled worker effectively provided by the Nepali worker. In 1991 census, the Nepali population was 4,32,519.

Dairy Farmers in Assam

A significant feature of the economy of north-eastern region is the ubiquitous presence of the Nepali dairy men in the hills, open grassland and in the plains outskirts of the urban areas. Side by side with working in the mines, refineries and plantations, the Nepalis began to lay the foundations of their own economic base as pastoralists and dairy farmers. The Nepali hardsmen and marginal farmers trickled down to Assam at least from the last part of the nineteenth and the first quarter of the twentieth century. While the earlier immigrants tended to be from the hills ethnic groups and were martial, the later migrants also included 'high caste' but impoverished Bahuns and Chettris. In a report to the Foreign Secretary of the Government of Assam on May 13, 1930, the Chief Secretary to the Government of Assam informed that : 'The greater number of the numerous Nepali grazings in Assam are Jaisis and Upadhyay Brahmins or Chettris of non-martial classes'.¹⁸ The grazers in fact belonged to a separate social category than those, who had settled after their retirement from service. The caste background of this category were "mainly Magar and Gurung and there were hardly and Brahmin or Chettri".¹⁹ This fact has been often corroborated from the accounts of the present dairy farmers in the course of our field study. They are mostly Brahmins (Sharmas, Upadhyays and Jaisis) and Chettris.²⁰

The primary cause of the migration of these graziers was the lack of grasslands to graze their cattle in Nepal, when the lowland fields and lower slopes were terraced and irrigated for the cultivation of rice. Most of the dairy farmers within the region, respondents in my field investigation and third generation migrants stated that : "we are originally dairy farmers. We lived in a place in Nepal, but that place was hardly suitable for dairy farming. Searching for an easy and suitable land, we came to Assam and established ourselves here".²¹

The available of vast wastelands, which double up as excellent grazing reserves and the undulating topography made it easy for the Nepali herdsmen to migrate eastward. It was just an extension of their natural habitat. The earliest Nepali settlements were thus in the middle hills eastwards from Nepal, offering more or less similar climatic conditions as prevailed in the places from where they had come. The Nepali move into the valleys and plains came relatively later.²² Although the present day, third and fourth generation migrant dairy farmer, cannot recall why these forefathers actually migrated, the reasons can be found in the symptomatic economic hardships in Nepal after unification. They belonged to a class of landless milieu in Nepal, who were of centralization and caste distinctions downgraded them not only economically but also socially. Migration eastwards in search of land, grazing grounds for their cattle and opportunities became the only alternative.

To a causal reader, every Nepali in Assam is identified as a dairy farmer or the *dudhwala*. Even the district gazetteer records that, "the Nepalese for the most part were graziers, who keep large herds of cows and buffaloes. They have penetrated deep into the interior of the district and have established Khunties (herdsmen's temporary sheds). Some have taken to cultivation also (Dutta 1979). There are also instances that the Nepalis had settled in the *Char* areas. A number of *Chars* bearing names of Nepali origin like Forse Tapu, Rani Tapu, Shordar Tapu etc.²³ have been found in Nagaon and Morigaon area believed to have been inhabited by the Nepalis, milkmen by profession or *Khuniwallahs*. The *Chars* had rich growth of grass used by the Nepali graziers, before the migrant Muslims put the vast expanses to plough. Once ploughing started, the *Khuniwallahs* started moving out of the chars to places, where there was still enough greenery left for the cattle to graze on. Similar instances can also be found in the Bhaganamari (Mukalmua Char) in the Nalbari District of Assam, where about 100-150 families of Nepali graziers and dairy farmers had

settled. With the coming of the Muslim immigrants, they started moving to Tamulpur, Chaygaon, Tezpur, Sonitpur and other greener pastures.²⁴

Contrary to popular belief that every Nepali is a dairy farmer, it has been found that the Nepali herdsmen and farmers move out of Nepal in search of new opportunities also. The only capital he carries with himself are his personal qualities as a cheerful, perseverant and study hand, his ubiquitous *Khukri* and readiness to do anything to make a living.²⁵ With such temperament, they easily combine in themselves a number of roles as dairymen, sharecroppers, agricultural labourers, porters, smith, carpenters and errand boys. Although caste distinctions do prevail, with the Brahmins only working as dairymen and farmers, there is a noticeable versatility in his demeanour.

While Nepali dairy men in the eastern regions of Assam (Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh etc.) are original dairy farmers and cultivators, those in the western regions, i.e. Kamrup had originally come as soldiers in the Gurkha army or as unskilled labourer and later shifted to dairy farming. In the course of our field work, Min Raj Joshi, former President of Brihattar Guwahati Gopalak Sanstha, told us that, "My father came from Nepal, when he was seven years old to Gauhati. Joined the British Army and went to Nagaland. After the war..... Left the army, came to Gauhati during World II., when there was a big demand, he was engaged in milk supplying and bought cows with a loan of Rs.300 from one Chandi Charan Bharati of Maligaon area in '57". Ram Prasad Joshi, Min Raj Joshi's father became an established dairy farmer. They later shifted to Noonmati area and has about 30/35 cows in Panikheti area.²⁶ There are others as well. Our local milk supplier, Narayan Sharma²⁷ also came to Assam from Baglung in Nepal. He was however born here as his father was a dairy farmer in Milanpur, Guwahati. Having returned to Nepal, he came back to join the Assam Rifles, but since he could not get appointment, turned to dairy business.

There is another noticeable distinction. The dairy farmer in the eastern regions are third/fourth generation migrants. They are bonafide settlers of the region and have almost become indigenous to the area, where they have settled \. They have no links with Nepal and their business is developed and marketed here. Their returns are also utilized here. Some, those who are educated are effectively employed as teachers or in some government. posts, Ramji Chetry, a fourth generation migrant from Muga, a hilly place of Dhankuta district of Nepal and living in Ouguri Nepali gaon, Jaji, in Jorhat district of Assam, is a cashier of Jorhat

Government dairy farm, while his wife is a teacher.²⁸ He also has 8 *puras* of land, where he grows paddy. In the western regions, they have their connections with Nepal. Matrimonial relations and fraternal relations, with a part of the family having migrated back,²⁹ is at the root of these relations. They have land here as well as in Nepal, and a part of the profits are sent back as remittances to Nepal. These men are motivated more by economic interests than any in their residence in Assam.

The dairy farmers in Assam belong to two distinct categories : (i) Those, who own land and cattle, (ii) and those, who supply milk. The first category belong to the upper caste Jaisis and Upadhyays and have large farms. They rear the cattle and produce milk, but do not supply on a house to house basis. The second category belongs to the Chetris and in some cases Magars, Gurungs, Thapas, etc. who are only milk suppliers. Not finding employment in the army, or elsewhere, they had taken to milk supply as an easy alternative. They do not own land or cattle. Having established contacts with the prospective customers, they buy the milk from the producers and supply it on a door to door basis. Their customers for the most part are individual households, sweetshops and restaurants and hotels. These milk suppliers are known as *Paikari* or not owning cows. In Guwahati alone there are about 220 Paikari dairy men.

**Table showing the paikari milk men in Greater Guwahati City
(from Silpukhuri, Paltan Bazar and Bonda areas)**

No. (approx.)	Their Origin
80	Tezpur
50	Nepal (Land here as well as in Nepal)
90	Nepal (No land/house etc. here, but only for business)

This above table has been based on field investigation. These men are engaged in the business only.

Socio-Economic Status

The Nepalis since their migration have monopolized the dairy farming industry of the region. The annual turnover in the economy of the region is approximately about 20 crores. They are further supplying milk to about 80% of the region region's population.

As mentioned earlier, having established themselves economically, the Nepali immigration into the North-east continued as a chain migration relying on the network already laid down by the previous migrants. There was already an uncle or a brother here, already in the business and ready to help the nephew or brother, get some opportunity here. This increased further, following the 1950 Indo-Nepal Friendship Treaty, which gave them a legal *locus standi* to engage in business, to acquire property, to settle themselves, seek employment and to freely anywhere in India they like. This Treaty gave a formal sanction to their residence in the region as well as a status in the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic society of Assam.

The Nepali settlers in Eastern or Upper Assam have well assimilated themselves in the society of the region. While maintaining their own special cultural traits and customs, they have adapted themselves to everything Assamese. They are well accepted by members of the society. We have been told that. "My social status is good. My father is a Gaon Bura (village headman). Now I am a teacher and a respected man of the area".³⁰ Others are similarly employed in government and private farms, in addition to their dairy business and enjoy a good social position. Further, their children are also being educated in the best schools and colleges and do not suffer any discrimination. Socially, integrated, the Nepalis identify with the region and chose to call themselves, "Nepali Asamiya".

The *Paikari* milkmen, those from Nepal come and go as they like. They stayed in the area of destination for only a few months or a few years. Important determinants for their return home were social factors notably family conditions and economic considerations such as land ownership. Weiner found that, "the bulk of annual (Nepali) immigrants leave (there are of residence in India) within five years. While almost all of those, who remain longer than five years are life-long residents".³¹ These migrants returned, when they had saved enough for the purposed of their migration. These milk suppliers return home every year or in two years with the profits they make. Narayan Sharma, our local milkman told us, "My family has land and agriculture in Nepal, in which from time to time. I have to lend a hand. I frequently go to my village, in Baglung in Nepal, sometimes once a year or in six months and sometimes even after 3 months if the need arises". They do not have any aspirations and maintain a low profile in the region. Their standards of living and style (living along with the cowshed, or in temporary makeshift quarters) are indicative of the temporary nature of their stay in Assam. They are here to earn their livelihood and eventually return to Nepal.

Economically, they have carved a significant position for themselves. The Nepal dairymen is the largest milk producer and supplier in the state. There are others (Biharis and the local Asamiya) but none knows his cattle better than a Nepali. Tulsi Upadhyay has about 200 buffaloes producing about 300 to 500 litres of milk. His farm is situated at Brahmaputra Chapari and he sends his milk to Dibrugarh. Ramji Chetri with 150 and 200 - 300 litres of milk sends his milk to Tinsukia town from his farm at Dhola, on the outskirts of Tinsukia. There are other similar examples. There are others, who are only traders. Homlal Sharma, collects about 150 to 200 litres of milk and sells it in Gogamukh town. Most of them reported a profit of about 50% with some loss. Narayan Sharma, a paikari milkman reported a monthly profit of Rs. 3000 - 4000. While in the earlier instances, the money is spent here, in the case of the *Paikari*, the remittances are sent to Nepal to be used there. This does not benefit the local economy.

Those, who are producers here face a lot of obstacles of their business. They can be listed as : (a) defective breeding policy of the Government, as in the artificial insemination program, low quality semen is used, (b) where quality is good, the cost is very high; (c) good breed is not given; (d) cannot control prices, (e) cannot meet the demands; (f) fluctuating production, (g) diseased and malaria prone areas; (h) labour intensive. In Guwahati alone, where the daily demand is for over 1 lakh litres of milk, the total production is only 50,000-60,000 litres and even less during June to October. This leads to ways and means of supplying the demand - by mixing skimmed milk and water without ensuring strict quality control.³² Since this does not meet the required standards laid down by the government, which is 1.2% solid and fat (s&f), ((Assam milk has 3.5% s&f), 80% of the milk suppliers have adulteration cases over them.³³ This is however done by the suppliers and not the producers, who would never allow adulteration of their own farm milk. Their problem is however increased by the influx of the co-operative and other companies, ready to drink milk packets in to the market, though they do not admit to losing business on that ground.

Their role in the local economy also turns out to be significant because of their availability for any type of chore. Besides being graziers and dairymen, they have also emerged as artisans and semi-skilled professionals and white-collar employees. They have been able to fill the role of intermediary semi-skilled professionals between the unskilled local and highly sophisticated from other parts of India. The type of work in

which the urban Nepalis are engaged in are new to the region and thus rarely comes into conflict with the local communities. This factor alone makes their dairy farming business, labour intensive and manually operated, viable in an otherwise developing economy. The local communities do not know the nuances of the business as well as a Nepali dairy farmer.

Conclusion

The present day Nepali dairy farmers in Assam belongs to that section of labour migrants, who emigrated out of Nepal in search of work-related opportunities. For the most part, they come from the land-poor or landless milieu of Nepal. To them, the vast uninhabited wastelands were not only grazing grounds for their cattle but a land of opportunities. This dispels the common notion that every Nepali is a dairy farmer or milkman. Furthermore, every dairy farmer was not an original herdsman. There are many, who came in search of other opportunities but later shifted to dairy farming. This migration continues to this day as a chain relying on social networks and support from migrant bridgeheads. By almost monopolizing the milk trade of the region, they have become indispensable to the economy of the region. Socially, they have well integrated themselves into the plural society of the region.

Today, when the social and economic forces in Assam are at crossroads in their attitudes to development, evaluating the role of the Nepalis in the economy of the state, will go a long way in recognizing the services of a marginal community, who had fed and nurtured millions during their growing years.

Notes and References

1. Ranabir Samadar, *"The Marginal Nation : Transborder Migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal"*. N. Delhi, 1999, p. 39.
2. The Tibeto-Burman settlers practiced the communal mode of production characterized by pastoralism and sudden cultivation with production based on kinship relations and community solidarity. Property relations were characterized by communal ownerships. This system was called *Kipat* and survived until the 1950s. in some villages in Eastern Nepal inhabited by the Kirati people, like the Rais and the Limbu. M.C. Regmi, *A Study in Nepali Economic History; 1768 - 1846*, Delhi, 1971, p. 27.

3. Jagannath Adhikari, *The Beginnings of Agrarian Change : A case study in Central Nepal*, Kathmandu, 1996, p. 67.
4. *Ibid*, p. 67.
5. *Ibid*, p. 67.
6. Lionel Caplan, *Land and Social Change in East Nepal : A Study of Hindu-Tribal Relations*, Berkeley, C.A. University of California Press.
7. Charles McDougal, *Village and Household Economy in Far Western Nepal*, T.U. Press, Kathmandu, 1968.
8. Mark Poffenberger, *Pattern of Change in Nepal Himalaya*, MacMillan, Madras, 1980.
9. The *raikar* land tenure system implied lands under direct control management of the government and the cultivars were under control of the govt. Only the government was entitled to collect land tax and levy any other taxes on them. Krishna B. Thapa, 'Main Aspects of Social, Economic and Administrative History of Modern Nepal', Kathmandu, 1995, p. 121, Regmi, 1978.
10. J. Adhikari, *op. cit.*, p. 69.
11. During the process of unification, the *Corvee* labour was made universal in 1799 to meet the chronic labour shortage.
12. *Birta* means grants made by the King to individuals, usually on an inheritance and tax-exempt basis. *Jagir* means the land assigned to government employees and functionaries, or jagirdars, in lieu of their emolument, M.C. Regmi, *Thatched Huts and Stucco Palaces*, New Delhi, 1978, pp. 161-62.
13. An example are the Tharus in the Terai, who were required to provide one member per family for *corvee* work for hunting trips of royal palace. To minimize the effects of this obligation, these Tharus developed a joint family system, so that many Tharu families has 50, 100 or even more than that number. Further, under the Ranas, any sign of good living among them was considered a sign, of savings and their house and property were confiscated. As such these settlers of the Terai never attempted to save, as their savings could not be utilized, but were consumed as feasts. Their position thus became economically vulnerable.
14. A.C. Sinha, "The Indian North-east Frontier and the Nepalese Immigrants," in *Himalayan Environment and Culture*, Simla, IIAS, 1990, pp. 226-27.

15. Ethnic background of Gurkha soldiers in the British army in World War (1914 - 18) were as follows : J. Adhikari, op. cit., p. 85.

Ethnic Group	&	Ethnic Group	%
Magar	35	Tamang	6
Gurung	17	Thakuri	3
Chettri	16	Sunwar	1
Rai	12	Others	35
Limbus	7		

16. To facilitate recruitment, the British established recruitment centers at Gorakhpur and Ghoom on the Indian side of the Nepal border.
17. Leo E. Rose. "The Nepali Ethnic Community in the North-east of the Sub-continent". *Ethnic Studies Report*, 12th January, 1994.
18. A.C. Sinha. "The Indian North-east Frontier and the Nepalese Immigrants", in *Himalayan Environment and Culture*, Simla, IAS, 1999. p. 229.
19. T.B. Subha, "The Nepalīs in North-east India : Political Aspirations and Ethnicity", in A.K. Danda et. al. (Eds.), *India Ethno-Cultural Perspectives and Process*, Calcutta, 1998. p. 43.
20. Unless otherwise noted, this and other quoted comments are taken from interviews with Nepali dairy farmers 3rd or 4th generation migrants in various places of Assam.
21. Interview with Tulsī Upadhyay, 52 years, dairy farmer in Sisimukh Nepali Gaon. Dhemajī district.
22. T.B. Subha, "Nepali and the Indian Nepalīs" in *State of Nepal* (ed.), Kanak Mani Dixit & Shastri Ramachandran, Himal Books, Nepal.
23. The name 'Forse' in Nepalese meant pumpkin or mintha Iao in Asamiya. Forest officers mention that there were large pumpkin plantations there. Again it may be that the *Char* was named after a popular or rich milkman or Khuntiwallah, whose name was Forse. Anindita Dasgupta. 'Emergence of a community-Muslims of East Bengal Origin in Assam in the Colonial and Post-Colonial. Period', Unpublished Thesis, G.U. 2002.
24. Interview with Tegh Bahadur Chetri, 58 yrs. a government employee of PWD, in Chandmari, Guwahati.
25. A.C. Sinha, "The Indian North-east Frontier and the Nepalese Immigrants", in *Himalayan Environment and Culture*, Simla, IAS, 1990. p. 230.

26. Interview with Min Raj Joshi, 45 yrs. Dairy farmer in Noonmati, Guwahati.
27. Interview with Narayan Sharma, 30 yrs. a *paikari* milk supplier from Nepal, in Guwahati.
28. Interview with Ram Chetri, 45 yrs. a dairy farmer in Jorhat.
29. Interview with Man Raj Joshi.
30. Interview with Tulsi Upadhyay, 52 yrs. a dairy farmer and cultivator of Sisimukh Nepali Gaon of Sisimukh, Dhemaji district.
31. Myron Weiner, "The Politics of Demography in Nepal", Paper presented at a seminar on Population and Development in Tribhuvan University, CEDA, Kathmandu.
32. "Lack of quality testing of milk-consumers facing Health Hazards", *The Assam Tribune*, 17 September, 2002, Guwahati.
33. Interview with Man Raj Joshi.