

## Being a Nepali in Northeast India: Predicaments of a 'Privileged Nation'

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### The Prologue

In the summer of 1987, I was travelling from New Jalpaiguri (NJP) railway station in West Bengal to Delhi by the train, Northeast Express. In my compartment were some young men, who towards the evening started discussing the Gorkhaland movement. They were unable to understand why the Nepalis wanted to call themselves Gorkhas, why they wanted a separate statehood, and why they should be granted such a privilege. "Will Nepal accede if the Indians there demand a separate statehood?" One of them asked. "Will Gorkhaland be able to accommodate all those Nepalis who are living in India? Where will they go? Back to Nepal?" Others asked.

In the same year, I travelled from Siliguri in West Bengal to Shillong in Meghalaya for the first time for attending one of the annual sociological conferences, which I did regularly till about a decade back as a member of the Indian Sociological Society. There was excitement when I boarded the bus in Siliguri at 5 p.m. for Guwahati in Assam. I was fantasizing about Shillong until I was fast asleep, when I heard someone shouting, in the rudest possible Hindi, "All Nepalis get down from the bus!" I asked the next person about where we were and what was happening. Before the name Srirampur Hat at the Assam-West Bengal border sank into my still half-asleep mind, a constable asked me to get down. It was about 1 a.m. I went inside a makeshift hut, where I was told that I would have to give money if I wanted to proceed further. I told the policeman that I was an Indian, and a lecturer at Jharkhand University. He did not hear what I said as he was busy

collecting whatever was given to him by the helpless-and half-awake like myself-Nepalis, including two Bhutia-a scheduled tribe of Sikkim and West Bengal-nurses from Darjeeling. I saw no point in explaining to them about the Indo-Nepal Friendship Treaty of 1950, which I knew by heart, and decided to bribe my way to farther northeast.. The next morning, as the bus gradually started to ascend the mountains of Meghalaya, and I had again fallen asleep I was once more asked to get down. This time it was Byrnihat in Assam-Meghalaya border.. I did not speak a word, took out a hundred-rupee note from my wallet, kept it on the table, and walked back to the bus. On my return to Siliguri I was prepared to pay again but I was not asked to get down anywhere, except for food somewhere in Howli in Assam in late evening.

The above experience was repeated innumerable times between 1990 and 1995 when I mostly travelled by bus. From 1996 I have not boarded a long-distance bus and have not had to bribe the policemen at the check-gates either. The sense of being treated by the policemen as a foreigner had begun to erode when the sad incident of royal massacre took place in Kathmandu. At least half a dozen colleagues asked me what was happening there. One of my closest friends living outside Shillong gave me a call to enquire about the shocking news of the royal family in Nepal but referred to the king of Nepal as my king. When I asked "whose?" the reply was "But aren't the Nepalis all over in India bereaving his death?" The sense of hurt that all this brought to me was mine but the analysis of the same could be of relevance to many. And this is what I intend to do in this chapter.

### **Who is a Nepali?**

Such a question has been raised sometimes about various communities in the northeast like the Bodo, Assamese, Khasi, and the like and the answer is never easy no matter how small the community in question is. The difficulty arises primarily because of the internal heterogeneity, which is often not taken care of while subsuming a group of people under a name. The internal variation is sometimes so drastic that any effort to answer such a question either lapses into ideological squabbles or arbitrary constructions of an ideal past.. After a point the answer simply boils down to "one who considers oneself so and is considered by others to be so". In other words, the primordial characteristics an:

to be reconstructed to give an answer to such a question.

The notion of who is a Nepali has always been an inherent part of the consciousness of people known as Nepalis although the articulation of such a notion has often been difficult. One of the foremost defining characteristics has, for instance, been "one who speaks the Nepali language". But this cannot be relied on because there are members of various other communities living in Darjeeling and Sikkim like the Lepcha, Bhutia, Marwari, Bihari, Bengali, and Punjabi, who speak the Nepali language as good as the so-called Nepalis do. Many members of these communities living there study in schools with Nepali as the medium of instruction and many of their children know no language other than the Nepali. Such children are categorised by people as "Nepalis for all practical purposes", which means not truly Nepali. This also means that a true Nepali has to qualify in respect of other criteria as well. Let us examine a few other such criteria here.

The other criterion is that one must belong to one of the so-called Nepali castes. But the problem is that the surname one uses does not often indicate which caste one belongs to. A Thapa could be a Chhetri or a Magar but is still a Nepali. The situation becomes particularly tricky when one uses the surnames like Adhikari, Pradhan, Dixit, Sharma, Malia, Das, Biswakarma, and Joshi. Such a person may or may not be a Nepali! Such a person may be a Nepali Das or a Bengali Das. A Nepali Pradhan or an Oriya Pradhan. Of course, a Pradhan who speaks Nepali is more likely to be a Nepali than an Oriya but what if one is a Nepali speaking Oriya Pradhan? Such a situation is not too difficult to come by.

The third criterion that I would like to discuss here is the country of origin, which in the present context is Nepal. If one thinks, as one often tends to do, that Nepalis are those who have come from Nepal nothing can be farther from the truth. First of all, this amounts to assuming that only Nepalis live in Nepal, which is an atrocious assumption by any standard. This also amounts to assuming that the word 'Nepali' refers only to a nationality and not a culture, which is not acceptable, either. For instance, a Bihari or Marwari from Nepal is considered as Indian the moment s/he steps on Indian soil. It is also pertinent to talk about a time framework while discussing the question of 'country of origin'. Or else many Indian communities will be found

to have their origin in countries other than India, which can lead to serious implications.

Other criteria like race, religion, and culture are even less reliable in identifying a Nepali. And yet, the people concerned never consider it as a problem. Actually, it is not much of a problem even for members of other communities to identify a Nepali. The real problem lies in segregating the bonafide citizens of India and those who have just come from Nepal. This is a problem not only because of the similarities between these two categories of people but also because this cannot be sorted out even if the India-Nepal border is sealed. With or without 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship, and with or without a closed border, the movement of people will continue between India and Nepal and that will make every effort to segregate the native Nepali from the migrant one virtually impossible.

#### A Nepali or a Gorkha?

This question has assumed serious proportions particularly after the insistence in the 1980s by the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) chief Subhas Ghising that 'Gorkha' should replace the word 'Nepali'. The GNLF chief even asked all 'Nepalis' to leave Darjeeling. By 'Nepalis' he meant the people of Nepal. In other words, the Gorkhas alone had the right to stay in Darjeeling. This led to a lot of debate within the community in India but as expected there was no consensus emerging over the choice of one nomenclature over the other. Although the demand was made by a leader, who himself had very little credibility as regards language or literature, there is a lot of substance in this demand and a brief discussion on the issue is worthwhile here.

The rationale of the GNLF chief for asking the people as well as the West Bengal and Union governments to use the word 'Gorkha' in lieu of 'Nepali' is to give the Nepalis of India a different identity from those of Nepal. The use of the word 'Nepali', according to him, immediately associates them with Nepal whereas the word 'Gorkha' does not. This is certainly not correct, but the idea behind advocating the use of the word 'Gorkha' should be appreciated in the context of Indian Nepalis wanting for almost half a century now to have a separate identity from that of the Nepalis of Nepal. To be mistaken as a Nepali from Nepal or to be asked "Are you from Nepal?" is quite a common experience for

any Indian Nepali and this experience is certainly not something that she/he would like to repeat.

In this respect it is necessary to remember other suggestions as well. The words like 'Bharpali', which is an acronym of 'Bharatiya Nepali' and 'Bhargoli', an acronym of 'Bharatiya Gorkhali' have also been proposed at different points of their struggle for carving a separate Indian identity for themselves. There are also suggestions to call them (in English) "Indians of Nepali origin". However, none of these suggestions seems to have received wide acceptance even among them, leave alone the acceptance by other Indians, which is equally important, if not more. The nomenclature, which is most widely accepted and used in India, as much as it is so in Nepal, is 'Nepali' and not 'Gorkha'. 'Nepali' is a national language of India as well as Nepal. This is also the word used widely by the national media like Doordarshan, Radio Nepal, and All India Radio. There are of course very important organisations that have been using the word 'Gorkha' from much earlier times than Subhas Ghising started using it. Mention may particularly be made here of the All India Gorkha League, established in 1923 in Dehradun and later, in 1943, in Darjeeling.

The genealogy of the word 'Gorkha' may be briefly traced here in order to see if this can take care of the aspirations of such a large population in India. It was originally the name of a principality located on the west of Kathmandu Valley. Prithivinarayan Shah, the king who is credited to have unified the present Nepal in late eighteenth century, was from this principality. He was known as a Gorkha king and his force, Gorkhali force. It was the same force that fought with the British in the Anglo-Nepal War of 1814-16 and won the praise of the British to the extent that the latter began to raise Gorkha forces soon after the war was over. The word gained a wide currency primarily due to the British writings on them, which were full of praise for their bravery and honesty. Over the years, they have become legends of sorts in the history of wars. Many of them, who served the British India, finally settled down in various parts of India after retirement from service. The British settled many of them in strategic locations in Assam, Nagaland, and other parts of the region.

In Nepal both 'Nepali' and 'Gorkha' are used for official purposes although the former is more popular than the latter. The official

newspaper of Nepal is still called *Gorkhapatra*. For reasons like this, a large number of them think that the word 'Gorkha' will not give the Nepalis in India a distinct identity. There are also other reasons why many Nepalis do not favour the word 'Gorkha'. One such reason is the low status associated with the latter word, which is used in India's metropolises to refer to security men or other domestic servants. The Hindi films have also contributed to the dissemination of such an image of them. Thus, the change in the connotation of this word from a brave soldier to a watchman has made it difficult for the word to be accepted by the community as a whole. After all, they all know, the two words refer to the same group of people.

### **Once a Nepali, Always a Nepali**

Being born in India, of parents and grandparents and great grandparents who too were born in the present India, does not make a Nepali an 'Indian'. This is exactly what the analysis of the struggle for Indian identity by Indian Nepalis shows. This is because of the overlap, or lack of clear boundary, between culture and nationality. If one is a Nepali, one's historical and/or cultural linkage with Nepal is quite understood. What is not politically correct but repeatedly reminded to the Indian Nepalis is that they have all immigrated from Nepal. While diffusionist theory in classical anthropology is long discredited, this diffusionist idea about the Nepalis persists in the minds of most Indians. The historical fact about their having emigrated from India, particularly those representing the Hindu-Aryan culture, during the rise of Muslim rule in India is conveniently pushed to the background because that is neither in the interest of the ruling elite in Nepal nor in the interest of Indians at large. Not in the interest of the former because they are of Indian origin in the sense Nepalis in India are of Nepalese origin, and not in the interest of the second because they will suddenly find the cultural boundary between them and the Nepalis blurring beyond recognition. This is certainly not something all Indians would welcome.

Like the cultural Indian, who is extremely diverse, the cultural Nepali is highly heterogeneous. *She* represents a number of languages, races, cultures, religions, traditions, etc. (see for details, Sinha 1982, 1990, Subba 1997). And yet there is a stereotyped Nepali, the way there is a stereotyped Indian. Unfortunately, it is this stereotyped Indian or Nepali

that seems more important than the actual Indian or Nepali, which is always very difficult to define. This stereotyped Nepali in the northeast is from Nepal, whereas the actual Nepali may have been born there or migrated from Sikkim or Darjeeling, and since *slhe* is a stereotyped Nepali, *slhe* is always perceived to be so no matter where *slhe* actually comes from.

How Nepali is a Nepali in the Northeast?

When I first began to interact with the Nepalis in Shillong in late 1991 one of the first impressions I had of them was that they were different from the Nepalis in Darjeeling or Sikkim to which I belong and am familiar with. I could not often understand the words used by them and I found the accent very strange, as my own Nepali speech might have sounded to them, which is likely but of which I am not quite sure. The other experience was even more shocking: I often failed in recognizing from face whether or not someone is a Nepali—a capability that I thought I possessed. When I discovered persons not at all looking Nepali to be Nepalis I could not help asking them whether either of their parents was of non-Nepali origin, obviously expecting them to reply in affirmative. But very often the answer was not in affirmative and yet they not only spoke a different Nepali but also often bore a different look,

I brushed aside such experiences as my ethnocentrism, evaluating them as I was on the basis of my own Darjeeling-Sikkim version of Nepali. There is no reason why the Nepalis of Assam or Meghalaya should speak the same dialect or look similar. In fact, to experience otherwise is unnatural. It is most natural thing to observe in a community some reflection of its habitat, neighbouring languages, and cultures. Yet each Nepali from Sikkim or Darjeeling finds the experience of speaking and meeting the Nepalis in the northeast quite unique and tends to think often that they are not 'quite Nepalis', which is pure ethnocentrism. After all every Nepali speaks in one of the Nepali dialects and the gap between the written and spoken language is universal. Hence, the oft-wondered question of how Nepali is a Nepali in the northeast is meaningless.

The more important question is who identifies oneself as a Nepali? This question is prompted by the view of many Nepalis that every Nepali

does not identify himself or herself as a Nepali. Such a person is alleged to be either a successful person or one who has married a non-Nepali person. Although it is always more important how one is identified by others than how one identifies oneself the hesitation of many who do not want to identify themselves as Nepalis indicate their perception of how others perceive of the Nepali community in the region. Others often perceive of them as chowkidars, coolies, peons, porters, and the like. None of these really evokes any negative image but none of which evokes respectability either. I have myself met a couple of such persons in Shillong, who were mentioned to be Nepalis by my acquaintances, but when I met them and spoke in Nepali they replied in English.

Still more serious is the issue of non-identification as Nepalis as a consequence of the *janajati* movement that swept Nepal, Darjeeling and Sikkim during the last decade of the past century. A large number of communities subsumed under the generic identity 'Nepali' but having their own religion, culture, language, etc. like the Rai, Limbu, Gurung, Tamang, Sherpa, and Newar are desperately trying to dissociate themselves from the Nepali identity for the past ten years or so (Subba 1999). It appears that the Nepali society in the northeast was not untouched by this wave as there are reports of people not celebrating the Nepali festivals like *Dashain* and *Tihar* from some parts of Assam. If the various organisations of the communities mentioned above do not have their branches here in the northeast it is merely due to the fact that their survival as a Nepali community itself is at stake here. This is a point that I would like to elaborate on now.

### **Predicaments of a 'Privileged Nation'**

In the eyes of the people of India, the Nepalis in India are a 'privileged nation'. In their opinion, the government of India has accepted the immigrants from Nepal with open arms, given them jobs, allowed them to guard its most strategic locations, own property, and you name it. They can come and go anytime they want and live in India temporarily or permanently without any formal permission from the government of India. They are even alleged to have monopolised the flesh trade in India's metropolises, particularly Mumbai. For many Indians on the street, all this is "for nothing in return from Nepal".

Such a view is not surprising because India is a huge country where

almost half the population is still illiterate. Not more than 2 per cent of India's non-Nepali population could have visited Nepal at any point of time and even lesser percentage of them could be aware of the reciprocal relationship India has with Nepal.. The status of the people on the other side of the border is even more deplorable, ruled and exploited as they were by hereditary kings and their corrupt officials for more than three centuries.

What is interesting to note here is that the Nepalis themselves share the above view. Many of them compare their present socio-economic status with what they had in Nepal.. Others compare the fundamental rights in India and those in Nepal till 1990. Still others compare the salaries that the employees are paid in Nepal with that of the salaries in India, which becomes more significant due to the exchange value of Indian rupee *vis-a-vis* Nepalese rupee. There are also others who compare the educational institutions of the two countries, other professional institutions, and the like. On the whole, they consider themselves more fortunate than those who stayed back in the mountains of Nepal, tilling those small plots of land, trading in exotic articles, tending animals, doing wickerwork, and singing some folk tunes. When asked if they could identify anything that is better in Nepal than in India, they often answer "air and water".

Yet the Indian Nepalis face certain predicaments, which are experienced in various degrees in various parts of India depending, among others, on their size and visibility. Some of these are discussed in the following paragraphs.

One, the foremost predicament is the fear of eviction (see *The Independent*, Nov. 1, 1995, *The Sentinel*, Jul. 26, 1995, *The Observer*, May 17, 1996, for instance). This fear is based on past experiences of their eviction from states like Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Assam, and Meghalaya (Subba 1992). That they may be evicted again, from any part of the region, is a possibility no one can deny. Any escalation of violence between them and the local communities would mean their eviction and such violence has often erupted on earlier occasions from very flimsy grounds. This fear is also there among the Nepalis living in a compact area and in fairly large size (*Sunchari* May 10, 1997).

Two, one of the main reasons why they fear eviction is their political status in the region as "foreigners". Most of them are bonafide citizens

of the country with voting rights and with ownership of immovable properties. But politically, they are categorised as "foreigners" and treated at par with the immigrants from Bangladesh. This is absolutely wrong but this is how the state governments and various students' organisations in the region look at them whereas the government at the Centre cannot care less (see *The Assam Tribune*, Apr. 29, 1994; *The Sentinel* September 30, 1994 and March 23, 1995, etc.).

Three, on account of the open border between Nepal and India, even the descendants of those Nepalīs who got settled in India in early nineteenth century and those who are very much of Indian origin may be suspected to have just come from Nepal. This is one of the most fundamental issues engaging the minds of the Nepalīs in India for the past several decades. This is precisely the reason why the Nepalīs in Darjeeling demanded some kind of political autonomy since the beginning of the twentieth century and almost every Nepali organisation in the northeast has demanded abrogation of the (Indo-Nepalese) 1950 Treaty, which is perceived to have made them vulnerable and a subject of suspicion in the eyes of fellow Indians. The need to segregate those who are Nepalīs by culture and Indian by nationality from those who are Nepali in terms of both culture and nationality is genuine but virtually impossible because such a distinction is first of all made meaningless by the above treaty.

Four, the Nepalīs in the region have been experiencing a loss of their identity. Although this is not articulated strongly there is an increasing concern among them for reviving their "Hindu" identity in view of the growing dominance of both Muslim and Christian communities in the region. The Hindu identity of the Nepalīs is internally contested but externally being Hindu and being Nepali are coterminous. The external identity has become increasingly significant for them and they are moving closer to other Hindu communities, including the trading communities like the Marwari and the Bihari. This is perhaps due to the need to form such a solidarity in view of the increasingly hostile and mostly non-Hindu host communities in the region.

## **Conclusion**

While the third predicament of being a Nepali in the northeast is common to all the Nepalīs in India the other three are rather specific to the region

in question. There are some location specific predicaments too but the same have been ignored here for want of details.

I do not think that these predicaments will vanish in future. On the contrary, some of them may assume more alarming proportions than they are now. With more and more indigenous people competing for the various limited resources in the region the Nepalis will have to prepare themselves to face more hostile environments in future. The possibilities of such hostilities growing in future are fairly certain and they will increasingly have to remain at the mercy of the local communities and state governments. New Delhi is not only physically very far from the region but it is even psychologically insensitive. The Nepalis will learn to adapt and live where they are but not leave. And leave if they must, they will return soon after as they did in Assam in 1979 and in Meghalaya in 1987.

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