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Advent of the Nepali People to the Present Day

B.T.C. Assam – A Glimpse

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Abstract

India is culturally diversified country. Nepali or Gorkha people are one of the ancient inhabitants of this part. They have been living in Assam and North East region since long. Though the ancestors of almost all ethnic groups and communities once had to migrate from one place to another with the tide of circumstances, the advent of the Nepali people to this region has some historic evidences. It is undoubtedly admitted that the Nepali people living in this region bear a great deal of resemblance to that of Nepal. But the acculturation and its impact has led them to adopt some cultural and social customs of Assam as well. Since the regime of Lord William Bentinck as the Governor General of India, several agreements, pacts, treaties land cession and accession were common factors that led the present day Nepali people to move towards this region.

Introduction: It is a universal phenomenon of human race to migrate from one place to another. There is perhaps no race in this globe that has never been migrated. Being stationary by nature, a nation cannot think of its socio-economic and cultural development. History itself evidences the migratory nature of all linguistic, ethnic and religious communities of the world. The *homo-sapiens* of the 21st century is an offshoot of this nature.

Discussion: Before discussing the socio-cultural and artistic milieu of the Nepali people of B. T. C. (Bodoland Territorial Council), Assam it seems mandatory to say what prompts them to migrate to India and to this region. The words ‘Nepali’ and ‘Gorkha’ are usually used as synonymous to signify Indian citizens either by being indigenous people of the region or those who migrated from Nepal to India and adopted Indian citizenship and nationality. However, it is needless to say that all Indian Nepalese are from Nepal. Again, the word ‘Nepali’ immediately associates with the sovereign country, Nepal. In the mind of non-Nepali speakers of India somehow creates a perception, however false that Nepalese are the people who have the option to go back to their land of origin.

It is a great misunderstanding on the part of some sections of Indian sociologists and even historians to identify the Nepalese/Gorkhas as aborigines of present day Nepal. The word ‘Nepali’ implies the language and its speakers anywhere in the world notwithstanding their citizenship. A language may be spoken in more than one country. Not only foreign languages, but even languages widely spoken in India like Bengali is used in Bangladesh,

Tamil in Sri Lanka, Sindhi, Urdu and Kashmiri are spoken in Pakistan. So it is certainly wrong to assume that the speaker's language signify his nationality.

The present Nepalese of Darjeeling, Sikkim and Uttaranchal barring Assam and the North East India did not migrate but incorporated into the then British India along with the annexation of the lands they lived in during different periods of history¹. As a result, they and their succeeding generations became Indians. So far as the advent of the Nepalese of the North East Region, particularly of Kokrajhar district of BTAD or former undivided Goalpara district of Assam is concerned, they had their own history filled with bliss and sorrows. Some of authentic reasons traced so far are as stated.

Assam is historically known as Kamrup. In the Puranic Age, Nepal and Kamrup comprised a single domain. Matsyendranath, a great mystic yogi of Kamrup, is said to have gone to Nepal and settled there. This ancient link between Nepal and Assam was resurrected in modern times in the 19th Century. Pages of history unfold all those evidences.

One of the important reasons of Nepalese (s) advent to India is their racial pride. The bravery of the Gorkhas is still seen with due esteem. The Gorkhas or Gurkhas was given an identity with a "martial race²." The concept of 'martial race' was very nicely summarized by Lieutenant General Sir George Mc Munn in his *The Armies of India* (1911) thus: *'It is one of the essential differences between the East and the West, that in the East, with certain exceptions, only certain clans and classes can bear arms; others have not the physical courage necessary for the warrior. In Europe as we know, every able bodied man, given food and arms, is a fighting man of sort...In the East or certainly in India, this is not so ... Nor are appearances of any use as a criteria. Some of the manliest looking people in India are in this respect despicable.* The propounded concept basically reveals two aspects. Firstly, it was based on the ideas of natural qualities, emphasizing that martiality was an inherited trait and therefore an aspect of the 'race.' Secondly, a geographical and environmental element boosted determinism. It was argued that war like people are to be found in hilly, cooler places, while 'servile', 'timid' and unwarlike races are found in hot, flat regions³. It is true that the Gurkha soldiers reserved the British admiration and it was also a common belief that the 'Gurkhas' could realize their enormous potential only under the guidance of leadership of British officers. Thus it was a deliberate policy of the British to recruit from remote regions of Nepal. It was commonly believed that the Magars and Gurungs, who had migrated to east Nepal, would cease to be martial because intermarriage would lead to the contamination of their blood which carried military qualities. Under colonial regime three battalions of Gorkha regiments were raised as early as 1815⁴. By the time Sepoy mutiny was crushed, a series of recruiting depots came up along the long areas of bordering Nepal. By 1864, the British government issued a charter providing for the Gorkha Regiment to buy land for settlement stations at Dharmasala, Dehradun, Almora, Gorakhpur Shillong etc. In Darjeeling, the Gorkha Recruitment Depot was opened in 1890, and it continued to draw recruit from in and around Darjeeling and neighboring Nepal. By January, 1904 nearly 57 per cent of the Indian army (86,841) came from Punjab, Nepal or the Frontier⁵. Though some changes have been brought about in the recruiting policy since Independence, the fact of the martial race continues to be the guiding principle for recruiting groups like Gorkhas to the Indian Army and hence the reason of saturation of Nepali people in India⁶ on basis of martial race.

Advent of the Nepalese in BTAD, Assam (India), as Indian nation and nationality of today has some authentic evidences on the basis of historical perspectives. It is mentionable that the Treaty of Segowlee (1815-16) packed between Nepal and the East India Company clearly reflects how Nepal had to cede its territory namely the districts Kumao and Garhwal and parts of Terai to be annexed into India. The sovereign Nepal had also to surrender all the hilly regions situated in between Mechi River and Tista River up to Sikkim and its original part.⁷

When Lord William Bentinck chaired Governor General of India, Darjeeling, a part of Sikkim was annexed to India in 1835, as a gift from the king to the East India Company which was agreed as the Deed of Grant (1835). Under the Treaty of Sinchula (1865), signed between British India and the King of Bhutan, where Bhutan had to cede Kalimpong Sub-divisions and a part of Doars (entrance areas) to British India that were later made parts of Darjeeling districts.⁸ The Siliguri Sub-divisions was annexed to India by the British in 1850.

Gradually, the influence of the British in Sikkim was also made through the Treaty of Titalia (1817) signed between the East India Company & Sikkim. The British, thus, continued to gain foothold in Sikkim by the Treaty of Tumlong (1861) and consequently Sikkim became a de facto state, i.e., protectorate state of the British India. When the British lost its grip in India, an agreement, The Indi-Sikkim Peace Treaty (1950) accentuated India's complete authority over Sikkim for its defense, external affairs, custom and communication. Ultimately, Sikkim was recognized as the 22nd state of the Indian Union in 1974-75⁹.

In the long span of 160 years (1815-1975), the land cession and accession was common phenomenon which was witnessed by all. This process facilitated the Nepali of those lands to be proud Indians. Barring the facts discussed, there is one of the most significant grounds for the flight and settlement of the Nepalese of this region. Many Gorkha soldiers of the East India Company, who served in India's North East, settled in the region after their retirement and adopted cattle rearing for their livelihood.

Due to Mowamaria insurrection and the Burmese invasion, almost entire part of the erstwhile North East region was devastated and depopulated in a large scale. The British had to combat many such aspects in Assam like flood and epidemics etc. Many regions within the state were also selected for extraction of oil, coal, and lime, plantation of tea, construction of roads and bridges for surface communication. Hence for most of these purposes a large number of Nepalese were recruited from outside the state as labourers and manual workers. For assisting in various works of the company and the state, they were freely engaged as bearers, drivers, peons, porters etc. After retirement or while in service, they settled permanently in the vicinity of those industries or elsewhere in Assam.

The rule of the Ranas (1846-1950) in Nepal also attributed to be one of the causes of a large scale movement of people to India from Nepal, particularly to the North East region.

Cattle-breeders, cultivators, ex-servicemen, mining workers and others who came to this region since early 19th century, by various means, lived here permanently. They cleared dense jungles infested with dreaded animals, reptiles and insects and in the process many felt easy prey to them. Many died in malaria, kalzar and other dreaded diseases which were the endemic in Assam. Even then they made many parts of this land suitable for human habitation, cultivation, cattle rearing, for establishing institutions etc. One more significant reason of the movement of the Nepali People to this region correlates with the historic facts.

Assam was invaded twice from 1817 to 1819 by the Burmese. Due to frequent torture and atrocities by those Burmese invaders, the socio-economic condition of the people of Assam became miserable. It was also known as *Manar Upadrap* (Torture by Burmese) in the rustic term. The then king Purandar Singh fled from Assam and requested the East India Company to fight against the Mann (Burmese). The East India Company brought the Assam Light Infantry from Cuttack which comprised of Gorkha soldiers. A war broke out on 5th March, 1824 and the Gorkha soldiers showed extra ordinary courage to send back the Burmese forces to their country. The Yandaboo Treaty was completed in 1826 and Assam was brought under the British rule. During that time Assam was covered with thick forest and the Gorkhas / Nepalese were employed for clearing the forest, necessary surveys and settlement activities. Company insisted that the Gorkha soldiers should reside in Assam after retirement so that their next generations could also be recruited in the army.

Conclusion: The existence of Nepalese in Assam and its surrounding areas are evident from their works rendered in socio-economic fields. There are many permanent villages, temples and other shrines built exclusively by them. Despite the fact there are many personalities like Dalbir Singh Lohar,¹⁰ from Assamese Nepali who joined the procession led by the Congress in 1921 during Gandhiji's visit at Dibrugarh and Deuchand Upadhyaya who was one of the hardcore freedom fighters, participated in the Non-cooperation Movement and was imprisoned. They are some of vibrant examples of the contribution made by the race towards the nation since time immemorial. As Assam is bestowed with vast and limitless forests and greeneries, Nepalese chose this region as their peaceful abode. It is very significant to mention the one of the important factors that facilitated Nepalese to establish themselves in Assam and in the North East is The Treaty of Segowlee (1915-16). This treaty led the then British rulers to form some army units comprising especially of the Nepalese/Gorkhas who were later named as Gorkha Regiments. After retirements these soldiers and their generations did not return to their home and consequently settled in Assam and present in BTAD (Bodoland Territorial Area District) as well.

Notes:

1. According to the historian Kanaklal Barua, Rajyamati, daughter of Harsha Barman, the famous king of Kamrupa (653 saka) was married to Jaydev II, King of Nepal. Another historian named Surya Bikram Gyawali has mentioned that Rupamati, a princess of Koch dynasty was married to Pratap Malla, King of Nepal. Ratnakumari, a princess of Nepal, on the other hand was married to king Biswasingha, who established the Koch dynasty of Kamrup.
2. In writings of the West the word Gorkh is spelt as 'Gurhka' or 'Goorkha'.

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