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## **The Nepalis in Assam: Migration, Identity and Political Mobilization**

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### **Abstract**

*The Nepalis are scattered all over Assam. It was the British who encouraged the migration of Nepalis to the region. The community almost lived peacefully with the local inhabitants until 1979 when the Assam movement began. Along with so called “Bangladeshis”, many Nepalis were also expelled during the movement. Ever since, the Nepalis have lived in constant fear. They have mobilized under different banners to protect their existence. The article will discuss about the Nepali community since its arrival in Assam to the present date. It is being written at a time when the government of Assam has decided to upgrade the National Register of Citizens (NRC). The fear of the past has returned to haunt the Nepalis once again as many of their names were deleted from the electoral rolls after the Assam movement.*

**Key words: Migration, Identity, Expulsion, Government, Mobilization.**

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**Introduction:** The Nepalis came to Assam for the first time as a part of the British forces which was fighting against the Burmese in the beginning of nineteenth century. Being considered hardy and loyal, they were encouraged to settle down after retirement in order to fulfill the future supply of Gorkha soldiers as well as to act as a buffer against the ‘ferocious’ tribes. As the region was sparsely populated, there was hardly any resistance from the local tribes against their settlement. The situation, however, changed with the emergence of the Assam movement in 1979. Along with the so-called ‘Bangladeshis’, many Nepalis were also attacked and expelled from the state in spite of the fact that the 1950 Treaty between India and Nepal allowed the citizens of both the countries to freedom of residence. Ever since the Assam movement, the Nepalis have lived in constant fear. They decided to organize under different banners in order to ensure their security. The article will discuss the various phases of Nepali community in Assam since their arrival in the beginning of nineteenth century.

**History of Migration and Settlement:** There is no evidence or record of any settlement of Nepalis in the north-eastern region before the eighteenth century. The first meaningful contact between the Nepalis and this region took place in 1817, when the East India

Company brought the Cuttack legion (later renamed as the Assam Light Infantry) consisting of 1,000 Hindustanis and Gorkhas to take part in Sylhet operation (Sinha 1982: 87). The British adopted a policy of encouraging the settlement of Nepali soldiers particularly in the foothills after retirement which served two purposes—one, the ex-soldiers acted as buffer between the British administration and the restive tribal chiefs and two, families of the retired army men provided a more dependable source and channel for fresh recruitment of Gorkhas. This they considered would make them less dependent on Nepal for future recruitment of Gorkhas. Once the narrative of land abundant region with vast expanse of greenery, deep forests and hills was taken back home by the soldiers, other fellow Nepalis also arrived to test their destiny and took to cattle-breeding, dairy farming, sugar-cane cultivation etc.. Many found odd jobs in government offices such as peons, guards, gardeners and the like (Chetry 2009: 353). The Chief Commissioner of Assam reported in 1886: “To settle the wastelands of Assam with people and increase the revenue collection of the province the Government had been making serious efforts to encourage immigration in Assam from the neighbouring districts of Bengal” (Nag 2003: 186). As far as the Nepalis were concerned, besides grant of waste lands on favourable terms, the Nepalis were also reported to have been granted pecuniary assistance for their onward journey to upper Assam. After 1947, the Nepalese migration to the Assam continued unabated. Unlike the past soldier migrants, the immigrants were unskilled farm hands of rural peasant background, known for their thrift hard work and industriousness. They reached the barren uninhabited forest fringes and the marshy Brahmaputra quagmire, clear the forest plots; start dairy farming, and get settled as inalienable partner of the local economy. The above situation, apart from creating economic, political and cultural consequences has also generated the regional demographic imbalance (Sinha 1982: 87). The Nepali population in Assam increased from 1,01,338 in 1951 to 3,49,116 in 1971, indicating an almost 3.5 times growth in these twenty years (Dasgupta 2003: 237).

**Political Violence and Expulsion:** There were no instances of anti-Nepali feeling before the Assam Movement (1979-1985). After independence, the slow pace of development and neglect of the region led to a feeling of disappointment and alienation among the local inhabitants, who began to see the migrants as the cause of their situation and a threat to their identity and opportunity. The issue was highlighted by the Chief Commissioner of India, S.L. Shakdar in 1978 and reiterated by the AASU and AAGSP (All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad) in 1980, who suggested that the infiltration of illegal foreigners had created a “monstrous problem”. Although the targets were the illegal migrants from Bangladesh, the Nepalis were also included in the anti-foreigner discourse (Nath 2005: 65). Consequently, during the intensive revision of electoral rolls prior to the 1985 General Elections in Assam, thousands of Nepali names were unceremoniously struck off. A sense of injustice and deprivation pervaded the community (Chetry 2009: 354). During the movement, the unprecedented violence in various areas, demonstrations, collective threats and sporadic assaults, targeting mainly the illegal immigrants from Bangladesh forced the Nepalis residing in those areas to leave their homes. Following the violence in Nellie, Chowl Khowa Chapari and other areas, about 500 families left various parts of Assam. Although no

official records are available, many went back to Nepal or settled in the border areas of Kankarbhita, Biratnagar, Dhulabari, Dharan, etc. (Nath 2005: 66). Although the government of India had clarified its position on the Nepalis early in February 1984, and that those in possession of the RAP (Restricted Area Permit) would not come within the definition of 'illegal migrants' and stood protected, their position was very soon threatened by the agitation for a separate Bodoland since 1986. The Nepali population in the Bodo Autonomous Council (BAC) areas in Assam, which the Bodos saw as constituting their homeland was only 2.5 per cent on an average and in no way large enough to constitute a threat to the Bodos. But the presence of the Nepalis along with the 63 per cent non-Bodos (Bodos were 34 per cent) constituted a major threat. In the ethnic cleansing of these areas a considerable number of Nepalis were displaced from the villages of Amteka (Betini), Patabari, Malivita, Koila etc. Besides, these in, an attack on the Amteka Betini village in the Kokrajhar district, which had combined Nepali and Adivasi residents, along with the Adivasis, about 15 – 20 Nepali families also shifted to nearby villages. Similarly about 20 – 25 families from the Mangalchara forest village and about 20 – 25 families from the Khalasi forest villages were displaced in the ethnic clashes. In all these cases it was apparent that the Nepalis were not directly hit but were caught in the crossfire. The leadership of both these movement very deliberately ignored the provisions of the Indo-Nepal Friendship Treaty of 1950, which ensured equal rights and privileges in terms of residence, property, employment, movement and the non-requirement of a visa or passport for entry into the country (Nath 2003: 215).

**Crisis of Identity:** Many Nepalis of Assam have accepted Assamese not only as a medium of communication but also as a medium of instruction in the schools in the primary level. Many of them have earned reputation in Assamese literary circles for their contribution to Assamese language at different levels of education (Devi 2009: 254). So, the expulsion came as a shock. After the attacks, many Nepalis felt rootless with an uncertain future. The centuries-old cordial relation between the Nepalis and local people came under severe strain after the movement. Suddenly, they found themselves as 'foreigners' (Chhetry 2009: 354). Ever since the movement, the Nepalis have lived in constant fear. They have undergone through a serious crisis of identity. The Nepalis of the region are often subjected to police harassment due to mistaken identity of being foreigners. It is ironic that only Nepalis are asked to produce citizenship certificates while moving in different places across the country. In some of the places like Srirampur, Boxirhat, Rangia, Baihata Chariali and Byrnihat check gates and other route/sub-gates they are wantonly looted and extorted. The policemen behave with them as if they are not human beings. On many occasions, they have been treated as second class citizens (Bhandari 2003: 119). In the name of detection and deportation of foreigners in the northeast, they are required to produce National Register of Citizenship (NRC) of 1951, voters list of 1955, 1965 and 1971; land records and court judgement. The AASU leaders signed an agreement with the Central Government on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1985, which is known as the "Assam Accord". The cut-off year to deport illegal migrants from Assam was fixed on 24<sup>th</sup> March 1971. But still in many places, Nepalis are

required to produce the records prior to 1950. In certain cases, they are also brought under Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunal) Act, 1983 (Bhandari 2003: 120).

In March 1995, the Minister for Assam Accord implementation stated on the floor of the State Assembly that 47, 432 Nepali persons were identified as ‘foreigners’ and had been deported. Although their status and presence in India is completely legal (either by citizenship or by virtue of the 1950 treaty), they have been treated as if they were Bangladeshi immigrants by the locals as well as by the state apparatus. The authorities arrests both Nepali speakers and Bangladeshis under the same law, the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act of 1983 (Subba 2002: 132-133). Thus, the Nepalis live in constant fear of eviction. This fear is based on past experiences of their eviction from states like Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland. 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 (Subba 2003: 205).

**Political Mobilization:** The first political mobilization of the Nepalis was observed in the year 1920 when the British government ordered the graziers of Kaziranga to vacate their grazing lands. The atrocities on the tax-paying graziers of Kaziranga compelled the leaders of the Nepali community to organise politically. Thus, the Tezpur Graziers Association was established in 1933 at Singri under the leadership of Chabilal Upadhaya (Gurung 2003: 179). Along with protection of the interest of the graziers, the Association faced another challenge in the form of aggressive encroachment of grazing lands by the Bengali Muslim immigrants from Mymensingh. This led to severe clashes between both groups. During 1939-42, the confrontation between the two communities became too violent (Nag 2003: 190). According to Nag (2003), the Nepalis associated themselves with the politics of the Assamese nationality in their struggle against the perceived threats to their existence. Threatened by the increasing number of Muslims in Assam and the fear of being included in Pakistan, the Assamese intelligentsia led a campaign before the 1941 census so that all the Hindu population of Assam declared themselves as Assamese speakers to the enumerators. Prominent Nepali leaders like Chabilal Upadhyay, Bhakta Bahadur Pradhan, Dalbir Singh Lohar and others mobilized the Nepalis to comply with the request of the Assamese leaders. The Nepalis stood by the side of the Assamese during another crisis when the Cabinet Mission Plan undertook proposals to tag Assam with the Muslim majority province of Bengal. This would be disastrous for the struggling Assamese community (Nag 2003: 191). The far-reaching implication of this was the eventual inclusion of Assam in the proposed State of Pakistan. The Nepali leadership of Assam fully associated with the sentiment of the Assamese and strongly rejected the plan (Nag 2003: 192).

After independence, under the leadership of emerging educated elite, the Nepalis became increasingly articulate and organized in a bid to maintain their distinct identity in Assam. The growing numerical strength of the Nepalis helped them in this regard. Consequently, the Nepalis became assertive of their rights and a considerable capacity to bargain with the ruling elite for a “legitimate share’ in the administration of the state. At the

same time, the Assamese ruling elite needed the support of the Nepalis in the game of power politics. Being a permanently settled community, it was the obvious choice of the Nepalis to remain with the ruling party so as to derive maximum benefits for the community. The interest of the community could well be preserved, they thought, if they remained with the party in power. As such, the various socio-cultural organizations of the Nepalis seemed to persuade the party in power to accommodate a considerable number of them as their candidates for election. The major political parties also realized that due to their organizational capability, the Nepalis emerged as a significant political force in Assam. Therefore, different political parties (ruling and non-ruling) preferred to nominate Nepali candidates in those constituencies where they constituted a sizable number of voters (Upadhaya 2003: 252). After the Assam movement, there has been a resurgence of the Nepali identity under various organizations. They have demanded legal and constitutional protection, to be recognized as 'Special Protected Class' with equal rights at par with the other "protected indigenous people" of the state, representations of the Nepali speaking people in the Parliament, State Assemblies and proposed Legislative Councils of Assam and Autonomous Districts and Regional Councils and effective implementation of Nepali language as official language, as a constitutionally recognized language and Nepali vernacular in schools (Nath 2003: 226). In the aftermath of the movement, organizations like the All Assam Nepali Students Union (AANSU) and Nepali Jana Sangram Parishad (NSJP) have protested against the attacks on Nepalis. The AANSU and NSJP while protesting against the killings in Bodoland presented a memorandum to the government for adequate compensation and security to life and properties of the Nepalis in the interior and vulnerable regions of the district (Nath 2003: 216-221). They also demanded the abrogation of the Clauses VI and VII of the 1950 Indo-Nepal Treaty and also for the introduction of the visa-passport system between India and Nepal so as to facilitate a clear cut demarcation between the 'Nepalese' in Assam from 'Nepalis' in Assam (Upadhaya 2003: 250).

**Conclusion:** Since the migration of Nepalis in the beginning of nineteenth century, the community has immensely contributed to the development of Assam in various fields. They have cleared dense forests and made them inhabitable. During the independence movement, they have sided with the Assamese in order to prevent Assam to be a part of Pakistan. The violence which took place against them during the Assam movement went against their sacrifices to ultimately make them helpless and fearful. The government of Assam's recent decision to upgrade the NRC has again brought many speculations in the minds of Nepalis regarding their citizenship. This has again provided them with an impetus to politically unite for the realization of their rights.

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