

NEPALI MIGRATION IN EASTERN AND NORTHEASTERN INDIA (1816-2001)

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ABSTRACT

The main focus of the paper is that to find out the historical facts of Nepali migration into Eastern and Northeastern parts of India and its impact. Sikkim, which at once was scarcely populated, has become predominant by the Nepalis. By the middle of the 20th century the Nepali population of Sikkim rose to 60 percent and the demographic feature of the state has changed¹. With the passing of time the local ruling elites Lepcha-Bhutias has become minority and the Nepalis become majority. According to Banerji's West Bengal District Gazetteers in 1941, 61 percent of the residents were of Nepalis origin in Darjeeling district². Volume of migration that had taken place from Nepal is much larger than migration from any other state or district. While in the case of Manipur British did not permit other outsiders except Nepalis to be settled. They exempted the Nepalis to be settled in Khas and forest grazing land not previously under cultivation. It is a reality that Nepalis have become predominant in the various belts of Eastern and Northeastern India. In the Colonial period, retired Gorkha soldiers were encouraged to settle in Northeastern India rather to return their homeland. After independence, Indian government also favoured the Nepalis to be settled in the Eastern and Northeastern India. Thus the growth of Nepali population changed the demographic composition in various parts of the Eastern and Northeastern India. The growth was largely because of the Nepali migration. Therefore, there is a need to study the phenomenon of Nepali migration in Eastern and Northeastern India in its totality: the causes and push factor in the Nepali migration, the migratory routes and favoured destination, the politics of migration, the settlement and conflict over resource showering in the host area and the overall impact of such migration.

KEYWORDS: *Nepali Migration, Push and Pull Factors, Impact of Nepali Migration, Colonial Intervention, Eastern and Northeastern India*

INTRODUCTION

Cross-border migration of Nepali-speaking people in India is a historical phenomenon. Colonial intervention in the 19th century created the conditions which generated large-scale movements of labour and enterprise across borders. The movement of Nepal is since the nineteenth century into the neighboring regions of Sikkim, Bhutan, West Bengal, Myanmar and Northeastern parts of India, is an important point of focus in the study of migration. Nepalis have a long history of migration towards Eastern and Northeastern parts of India. In the pre-colonial times, the population inflows across the border were smaller and the incoming migrants assimilated imperceptibly into the host society. In the colonial

¹ Dutt, Srikant, Jun.1981, "Migration and Development: The Nepalis in Northeast", *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol-16, No-24, p. 1054.

² Banerji, A. K. *et. al.*, *West Bengal District Gazetteers*; Darjeeling, Calcutta: Govt. of West Bengal. 1980. p. 101- 104.

times, however, the flow of Nepal is to India increased and assimilation became more complex. This flow of migrants has however continued right up to the present times in the postcolonial era, adding to the complexities of the situation.

Concept of Migration and the Nepal

If we look at the history we can see four kind of migration in history Barbarian invasion and migration, Conquest and migration, Colonization and migration and General emigration. In Barbarian invasion one cultural group establish their supremacy over other cultural group. In Conquest a higher cultural section have established rule on a lower cultural section. Here a small number of members of superior culture have transplanted themselves to new lands and often enjoy privileged in conquest land. In the colonization a large number of foreign nationals organized a movement out of the country and settled them in other parts of the world which was sparsely populated and established hegemony over people of the area and enjoy all type of privileged. Migration from Nepal to India is a historical phenomenon as well as an issue of present day.

Nepali as a single ethnic group emerged in the beginning of the twentieth century in India, besides their separate Limbu, Rai, Mangar, Tamang, Chhetri identities. To differentiate the people of Nepal and India-born Nepali, various nomenclatures like Nepalese, Nepalis, Gorkha etc. are in use. The word Nepalese is used to identify the citizens of Nepal, whereas Nepalis, Gorkha and Nepamul are used to identify the Indians of Nepalese Origin or the Indian Nepalis. But to eliminate the confusion, the nomenclature 'Nepalis' has been used throughout the study. This study focuses on the Nepali migrant community but not on the people who have settled in the eastern or northeastern India before 1816 and who have come under Nepali identity on a later date. Subba has mentioned in "Ethnicity, State and Development: A Case Study of Gorkhaland Movement in Darjeeling" that Limbus and Mangars who are recognized as "Nepalis" at present are not people of Nepali origin. So the term Nepali immigrant is not at all appropriate for the Limbus and Mangars³

Push and Pull Factors

Event of Nepal migration to Eastern and Northeastern India has been discussed under the push and pull conceptual frame. Various economic, socio-political pull and push conditions, historical and political legacies, open border and treaty of peace and friendship of 1950 between Nepal and India facilitated such migration. Nearly 83 percent of the landscape of the country is mountainous. High man-land ratio and shortage of cultivable land has affected the livelihood of the hill people. Traditional methods of agriculture, land fragmentation according to Hindu law because of property division among the sons and soil erosion because of harsh topography affect the agriculture in the hills. The Central Bureau of Statistics in a report noted that in 1941, 98.63 percent of foreign Nepali emigrants were from the hills and mountains of Nepal. Migration from Nepal to India has basically taken place from the far western region and mid-western region.

Poverty remains one of the major causes of Nepali emigration. Over 90percent of the economically active labor force is engaged in subsistence agriculture. Very few people are engaged in business and industrial work. Vast areas of cultivated land in Nepal are held by very few and the rest of the population is either landless or has small landholdings. Unequal arrangements of land ownership have, for hundreds of years, forced the people to go for work elsewhere.

³ Subba, T. B., 1992, *Ethnicity, State and Development: A Case Study of Gorkhaland Movement in Darjeeling*, Vikas Publishing House Pvt Ltd, New Delhi, p. 41.

Nepali Migration and Settlement into Eastern India in Colonial and Post-Colonial Phase

Nepali migrant in Eastern India has concentrated mainly in Darjeeling district and in the Jalpaiguri doars of West Bengal. The trend of migration has continued and large volume of it has taken place in nineteenth century with the efforts of British. With the development of the region and with growth of construction work in Darjeeling and Duars area bulk of migration to the place was witnessed from Nepal. Side apart temporary work like construction of road, woodcutting, carrying of load, seasonal agriculture etc was also attracted the Nepalis to the area. Nepalis in huge number were started to migrate to the area and took the job of those temporary natures.

Geographical location of the place has attracted the Nepali migrant largely into the area. Whenever there was necessity, Nepal is has crossed the boundary and has migrated to Darjeeling area.

With the development tea plantation in the region large number of tea estates were setup in the area. As the tea industry is labor oriented industry huge number of labor was needed for the growth of the industry. Nepalis from Nepal started to come to the place for supply of labor in tea plantation. In addition to it agriculture, domestication of animals, and related economic activities encouraged Nepal is to migrate to the area. Plantation industry and agricultural development in hilly area proved to be the strongest pull factors of Nepali migration. Nepal is who came into the land also involved themselves in the construction of buildings, roadways and railway track.

In the post colonial period Nepali migration has been witnessed largely after the treaty of 1950. Migration of Bhutanese Nepali mainly to Duars of West Bengal was an important event. Even illegal trafficking and migration has significantly

Witnessed though 2001 has witnessed large scale migration from Nepal to India but Darjeeling and Dooars has not been the main concentration area.

It has been seen that in 1921 there were 143,044 Nepali people in Darjeeling and in 1931 there were 157,944; of which, 59016 were born in Nepal and mainly concentrated in Rangli-Rangliot, Jore Bungalow, Kalimpong, and Kurseong. In Jalpaiguri there were 28,878 Nepali speaking people in 1931 and majourly concentrated in Kalchini, Madarihath, Mitiali, Kumargram and Nagrakata⁴.

Impact of Nepali Migration

In certain cases Nepali migration has benefited the migrant communities and sometime it has become the cause of misery of migrant. It also helps to develop the overall economy of their native place. Migration also benefits the place of destination mainly with the labor provided by the migrants. Migration has changed the demographic structure of various corners of Eastern and Northeastern India. Vast demographic change has been witnessed in the state Sikkim. Mostly in Darjeeling, many areas of Jalpaiguri district are majourly populated by the Nepalis. In various area of Tinsukia, North Cachher Hills, Somitpur, Karbi Anglong district of Assam Nepalis are in majority now a day. In Arunachal Pradesh, the districts like Lohit, Dibang Valley, Upper Siang has attracted Nepali settlement. Likewise other pocket of northeast has also populated by Nepalis. Cultural exchange, acculturation has been seen among the Nepalis and local people. Nepalis in India for the first time gets the united Nepali identity. Identity consciousness emerged among them leads to the movement

⁴ Census India, 1931, Vol. 5, Part-1, Bengal and Sikkim.

for separate state demand and demand for getting Indian identity. Nepali language, literature has enriched with the writing of Nepalis scholar born in India. Migrant people have extended their helping hand for the economic enrichment of the country. Migrant Nepalis contributed a lot for the Indian freedom movement.

Impact of migration has also seen in Nepal. Nepal has been benefitted by the remittance flow of migrant. On other hand country faced difficulties due to the migration of able male parsons. Nepal government several times has shouted in against the male migration from the country. Older people have suffered for migration even female has got the opportunity to lead the family in absence of male person. Migration has differentiated the migrant with non migrant in the society. Thus Nepali migrant has it effect in every aspect of life of host country and the country of origin.

CONCLUSIONS

Nepalis in India are today striving for a united Nepali identity. Identity consciousness emerging among them has led to the movement for a separate state and the demand to be regarded as Indians. Nepali language and literature has been enriched by the writings of Nepali scholars born in India. Migrant people have extended their helping hand for the economic enrichment of the country. Migrant Nepalis also contributed towards the Indian freedom movement.

The impact of migration is seen in Nepal as well. Nepal has benefited from the remittance flow sent by migrants. On the other hand, the country faces difficulties due to the emigration of able-bodied men. The Nepal government has on several occasions voiced opposition against male migration. Older people too have suffered due to migration, though women get the opportunity to lead the family in the absence of men. Migration has differentiated the migrant from the non migrant in Nepali society. Thus Nepali migration has affected almost every aspect of life in their country of origin.

To conclude, the British colonizers spurred the migration of Nepalis to India for their own colonial interest. In the process, they released the common people of Nepal from the oppression of higher castes and classes but transferred them as a migrant community into India, which became their permanent status. Despite staying in India for more than a hundred years, the Nepal is are still considered as migrants in this country.

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