

**Dynamics of Nepali Migration: Assimilation with the Assamese Society A Study of Sonitpur and Tinsukia Districts of Assam**

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**Abstract**

Migration is an ancient global flow contributing to economic development, and over the ages its form and impetus have changed significantly. Migration brings both qualitative and quantitative changes in the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of a region. Thus, it is now recognized as an important factor in determining plans for social, economic and political development, especially in developing countries. Migration studies have attracted much attention in the recent studies of the world as it has shaped human civilization all over the world. Although, migration has been reasoned for political, economic and various other conflicts, it is important to understand the dynamics of population change in the form of migration for resolving ethnic, religious and military conflicts across the globe. Assam had a long history of receiving migrants, however in the pre-colonial times the inflows were smaller and people assimilated more imperceptibly. The Nepali migrants who came during the colonial period assimilated into the host society and contributed to the social, economic and political development of the state. The Nepali migrants who came during the colonial period assimilated into the host society and contributed to the social, economic and political development of the state.

The present study attempts to understand the Nepali migration from the historical perspective and at the same time comprehend the mechanism in the recent past in its transformative character particularly in the Sonitpur and Tinsukia districts of Assam. Their presence is attested through literacy evidence by about 1000 BC. In the Mahabharata, historical core of which probably goes back to the 10<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. There are suggestions those Sino-Tibetans as Kiratas belong to the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam. The presence of Nepalis in the Northeast India (earlier Assam) has long history and their role in unification and economic development of this region is very crucial. But the real immigration of the Nepalis to northeast India began in early nineteenth century, 1817 to be

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exact, when their first direct contact with the region took place with the deployment of the Gurkhas in the Sylhet Operation as a part of Cuttack legion (Shakespeare 1977:58-94). The Cuttack Legion to be known as Assam Light Infantry, after its permanent location in Assam, it consisted mainly of Hindustanis and Gurkhas. The expansion of British rule in India, the various expeditions against wild tribes of the North-East, the two world wars, large scale lumbering and clearing of jungles for agriculture and plantations, all of this required physically strong labourers like Nepali soldiers. A number of Nepali soldiers got the opportunity to enter into North-East or Assam when British came here to rescue Assam from Burmese invasion in 1826. The retired Nepali soldiers in India were engaged by the British for many non-military works like clearing of jungles, laying railway tracks and constructing roads, drilling oilfields and mining in coalfields, etc. In due course of time all these economic expansion activities helped a lot to accelerate common Nepali migration into Assam.

Migration of Nepali people has increasingly appeared as an important theme in national politics and economies in South Asian countries. Recent studies in Nepal show that there are more than a million migrants out of a total population of some 28 million who live away from their homes and send back remittances to the tune of approximately \$ 604 million (Borbora 2008). However, existence of Nepali settlements engaged in professions like agriculture, forestry, and allied activities like farming, etc, pulled Nepali migrants to Assam in a more pronounced way, and second only to West Bengal (Darjeeling and its greater adjoining areas) (Rai 2008:110-38).

These migrants found it easier to move into the already existing milieu of the Nepali settlers who were in fact brought by the erstwhile British rulers of India. This process of flow of migrants from Nepal, for the reasons discussed earlier, was very strong during the British era and continued unabated even in the post-Independent Assam.

The unprecedented 82% growth of population during a period of 20 years, from 1951 to 1971, with a bulk of educated unemployment in Assam, accelerated the anti-outsider feelings within the host community. The impact of immigrants on the fragile economy of Assam led to conflicts between the communities. Thus, the population of Assam witnessed higher growth and that included both the growth of the indigenous population groups and that of the migrants of all groups. Moreover, flow of residents of other states of India to Assam also grew, albeit at a slower rate. Pre and post Indo-Pakistan war of 1971 was the history of movement of huge masses of people from East Pakistan and suddenly Assam was home to many, war and politically,

economically and environmentally ravaged people of Bangladeshi origin. This definitely put pressure on the economy of Assam. This was followed by the Assam agitation of the 1979-1985. Though this movement was basically a movement against the unabated flow of illegal migrants from Bangladesh, it did incite displacement of Nepalis in some places of Assam. The policies of the state governments to restrict immigration of the Nepalis boosted their sentiment of foreigner. This fear may have been further intensified by the Gorkhaland movement in Darjeeling. In the recent times, multiplication of ethnic clashes, claim by the indigenous people to their roots and origins, political and economic reassertion of the ethnic tribes and groups have tremendously increased in the whole of north-east as well as in Assam. Besides, government intervention in the economic expansion was haphazard and could hardly absorb the already plummeting indigenous unemployed work force. Assam has one of the largest contingents of educated unemployed in India. Naturally, flight of capital caused by Assam Agitation worsened the situation. Therefore, these events along with lack of economic expansion or more because of economic stagnation of the economy of Assam during the decades of 80s and till mid 90s in the recent history of Assam, and in the post Indo-Bangladesh war, started acting as reasons for slowing down of the flow of the Nepali migrants from Nepal to Assam.

Moreover, compared to the other sectors of the state economy, the situation of agricultural growth and development has been worse. Data relating to average agricultural productivity, rate of irrigation, multi-cropping, disguised or seasonal unemployment, etc indicates that agricultural reforms has not taken place in Assam. Thus the capacity of the agricultural sector to absorb additional work force has not increased and due to increasing growth of the population of Assam, pressure on land has also increased over the years. The riverine and forest areas, where the Nepali migrants traditionally used to settle down are already pre-occupied by either their ancestors or other groups like by the immigrants from Bangladesh.

The present research work finds the forefathers of the current Nepali population in Assam as international migrants. From the survey conducted in Tinsukia and Sonitpur districts made it clear that the possibility of group migration in cluster is totally absent especially after the Assam movement. However, it can not be totally denied that at individual level on and off people from Nepal are coming either in search for job opportunity or for temporary settlement. But no official record of such migration is available and respondents are not confident enough to speak on that. The only cause of immigration, of which the respondents spoke openly of was migration caused due to marriage, the economic significance of which is very

low. Regarding forced migration or displacement of Nepali people during the recent past no primary data was found.

As assimilation is a logical follow up of migration, the paper tries to find the areas and degree of social assimilation with the Assamese society. An extensive survey in the 1000 sample households from 39 Nepali villages from two sample districts, namely, Tinsukia and Sonitpur have been conducted. The basic indicators considered here are *marriage, costumes and ornaments, festivals observed, education, kinship*, etc to measure the socio-cultural assimilation of the said community.

In deeply stratified caste communities, migration can be seen as a means to move away from constraining traditional occupations. Economic assimilation of migratory community with the host society can be measured from the differentiation of occupational patterns between the host and the immigrant communities or occupational mobility of the migratory group over a period of time, duration of stay, etc. During the decade of 70s and till then, the Nepalis were mostly confined to economic activities like dairy farming, cultivation of various kinds of grains like rice, sugarcane or corn, pulses, etc. In the survey, it has been found that though, the dairy farming activity in Assam is mostly handled by the Nepali people, yet most of them have gradually adopted modern techniques of cattle rearing like rearing Jersey Cows and keeping cattle along with their own premises, etc. furthermore they have access to bank loans that has helped in their efforts to use modern techniques. Besides, there is also an increasing trend shown that maximum numbers of Nepali people who have moved spatially are now working in educational institutions as staff of different grades including teachers. Moreover, the rest are found diversifying their traditional occupation of farming and cattle rearing. Assimilation in political sphere of any immigrant community to host community is another area of concern while studying overall assimilation of both the communities. Due to lack of a strong ethnic solidarity among the Nepalis in India these aspirations are yet to be fulfilled properly. The indicators to measure political assimilation are taken as having membership in any association (political or apolitical) which is formed for the protection and preservation of the basic interest of the immigrant communities or any organization which represent the host communities and the number of participation in the General and Assembly poll of Assam by the Nepali people. These people are still engaged in their economic rehabilitation and till date evidence of strong ethnic political aspiration is not found. There is a growing trend observed during investigation to become members of the organizations (formed by the Nepali people) among the Nepali youth, whereas this was rarely shown in

case of the elderly people. They have membership mostly of the literary forums. But, majority of the Nepali youth feel that these organizations are necessary to preserve the culture and tradition and sometimes the very existence of them. The Nepali people in Assam are demanding the representation of their community on population basis (Upadhaya, 2003) in autonomous councils, parliament and state assembly. The growing numerical strength of these people provides considerable bargaining capacity with the ruling elite for a legitimate share in the administration of the state. They also feel that the participation of the Nepali people in the electoral politics of Assam is low in comparison to other ethnic groups. The general people of Assam in some areas have accepted the leadership of the Nepali community leaders. Most of the constituencies belong to Sonitpur than Tinsukia district showing gradual enhancement in political assimilation of the State from the Nepali dominated areas. Another strong observation is that in majority of the cases the candidates nominated from nationalist party won and there is rare case of candidate nominated from regional parties capable enough to win in electoral poll. The observation made regarding assimilation of Nepali community with the local society is rapidly progressing. The rate of assimilation is faster in case of the young generations (below 30 years) than the older ones. Moreover, the level of economic assimilation is higher than that of social and political assimilation. Political assimilation is still in progress. Besides, in case of social assimilation, most of the indicators are found progressing except few, especially among the young stars. The degree of assimilation is seen less in case of the indicators, like, marriage, kinship, etc, where whole social system is involved. Generally, in case of family centric indicators assimilation is more rapid.