Migration and Development: The Nepalese in Northeast

Srikant Dutt
Editor’s Note

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1 The problem of outsiders or immigrants has been one of the prime issues raised by a number of movements currently under way in the northeast. The Nepalese are one such group of outsiders, or ‘foreigners’ as some of the movements style them; but they are only technically foreign, and to simply dismiss them as foreigners would be incorrect. Nepalese migration has taken place throughout South Asia, not just in the northeast alone, and as such must be viewed on a world scale.

2 Migration occurs throughout the world for a number of reasons and its several features must be borne in mind when examining the case of Nepalese migration in northeast India.

3 It may seem obvious, but the frontier status of the region must be reaffirmed. A contentious argument has often been raised concerning just how much land was or is available for settlement in the region or, more properly, for economic expansion. It is true, despite arguments to the contrary, that the northeast, particularly its hill areas, were until recently sparsely populated and land was ‘open’ to settlement by outsiders. Further, frontier lands on the periphery have on a world scale gradually become subject to penetration and exploitation by a wider economic system — in other words, according to the dictates of world capitalist development. No one should argue, however, that at a given level of technology and with relatively sparse populations, hill peoples find the slash and burn agriculture best suited to their needs. What is at stake is that as economic pressures from more developed areas (ie, exploited areas) become
ever more acute, the peripheral areas are drawn into the process; rising populations and technological levels in hill areas will increasingly find hill terracing more desirable. Add to this the fact that from the political-strategic point of view as well as from the view of economic exploitation, hill terracing and a commensurate growing population makes more sense to centralised patterns of political and economic power.

4 A frontier by its nature is a tempting area for penetration and such penetration is in fact inevitable. Administrative measures inspired by paternal feelings to defend 'quaint' peoples can do little to stem the process; in fact can only slow it down at best.

5 Migrants, particularly peasant settlers, are always spurred on by a particular set of economic motivations. It is not so much the prospect of avariciously exploiting the defenceless indigenous people of the northeast (the prospect of land is a strong motive) but the fact that outsiders are driven to migrate through their own dire poverty and are seeking a means of continued survival. Migration, besides that of merchants, refugees (driven by political upheavals) or individuals (such as through marriage links), is caused by particular economic factors in which the migrants' local environment offers little hope of economic advancement while a new environment does.

6 This is the case of the Nepali migrant who in general is a hill peasant cultivator. The economic crisis forcing Nepali migration has been briefly: increasing fragmentation of landholding, indebtedness, ecological crisis through intense cultivation and deforestation, rising population without further land to cultivate and chronic deficits in food production in the hill areas of central Nepal. These pahari migrants are relatively more skilled hill agriculturists than other hill peoples and readily fit in to hill environments elsewhere in South Asia.

7 Beginning in the mid-19th century Nepalese from the central hill areas have been continuously emigrating, many of them permanently. The central region of Nepal contains 60 per cent of that country's population but only a quarter of Nepal's cultivated land. Between 1911 and 1971 Nepal's population doubled in spite of continuous emigration; and the ecological and economic crisis in the hill areas of Nepal has grown ever more acute. Even in 1900, over 2,50,000 Nepalese — one in every 20 — were already living in North India. Most of these found jobs as watchmen in factories, policemen and domestics, a role they maintain to the present day.

8 The other important factor was that from the mid-19th century the British actively recruited Nepalese into the imperial armies in whose service Nepalese travelled throughout India and abroad which in turn led to some permanent Nepalese settlements abroad. In the First World War 1,10,000 Gurkhas served the British, 56,580 of them outside India. This service in foreign armies continues to the present day, notably in the British and Indian forces. So valued are Nepalese as soldiers that the Sultan of Brunei pays over £ 1 million a year for the upkeep of Gurkha brigades in his country. It was through such army service that some Nepalese, beginning in the late 19th century, began to settle outside South Asia, in Fiji, Malaysia, Singapore, China and Mauritius. (The Nepalese living in Tibet were a different category, being mostly of Tibetan stock, a legacy of Nepal's victory over Tibet and exaction of trade concessions after 1856. Most such Nepali Tibetans were expelled in the 1960s.)

9 By the mid-20th century one in every 10 Nepalese had emigrated. In India alone, by 1970, there were 1.5 million Nepalese, out of a population of 11.55 million in Nepal. The annual rate of migration in 1961 was 82,000 a year, 20,000 of whom remained in India permanently each year.1 While the total Nepalese living outside Nepal might reach
almost 2.5 million, the majority of these emigrants have settled in North India, comprising a working class whose presence is an accepted part of the landscape.

Under the terms of the Indo-Nepal Friendship Treaty of 1950, the Tripartite Delhi agreement of 1951, and the 1956 revised Indo-Nepal Agreement, free interchange and flow of both countries' nationals as well as their right to own property in either country is allowed, unhindered and without restrictions. These agreements only made official a situation which had existed de facto from the British period. The reciprocity which the agreements formulated indeed continues today, with at least 3-4 million overseas Indians resident in Nepal. Therefore before one accepts or adopts the 'silent invasion' rhetoric of some of the chauvinistic movements in the northeast one must understand the actual history of Nepalese migration and settlement in South Asia.

This brings the discussion to an important facet of Nepalese immigration and settlement in the past, namely where it occurred through official sponsorship. As already stated Nepalese have long served in foreign armies. It was British policy to try and take care of its demobbed soldiers who had given years of loyal service. This often took the form of ex-servicemen's resettlement colonies which could serve a dual purpose; to reward ex-soldiers and to play a strategic role. Following such policy, Nepalese settlement of ex-servicemen in northeast India was actively encouraged by the British, as in the case of Manipur immediately following the First World War.

Active British encouragement to Nepalese settlement in the northeast was not always confined to ex-soldiers but also included many other Nepalese peasants, particularly those from Eastern Nepal, the Kiratis. However, while the British were pursuing a deliberate plan, the people so involved, namely the Nepalese, were not acting out of some sinister expansionist design. It was their economic condition which allowed their use in imperial schemes. If it had not been Nepalese, others would have stepped in to play a similar role.

The British recognised early that the Nepalese, as hardy hill cultivators, could constitute an ideal group, with which to penetrate and form strategic buffers in the northeast and, even more than this, actually demographically change the composition of the local populations in some northeast hill areas. An interesting element in this process was the fact that the Nepalese were and are nominally Hindu, having more direct links to the cultural heartland of South Asia, whereas the areas in which they were to be encouraged to settle were culturally and religiously different, often Tibetan-Buddhist, animist and later Christian, with ties in other directions.

It was in Sikkim and Bhutan that the British, perceiving the relatively empty land in the southern tiers of these two states, encouraged Nepalese settlement from the late 19th century. This was done with a view to binding these states more closely to the Indian empire and keeping out what they saw as threatening Chinese and Tibetan influence. Claude White, the Political Agent in Gangtok in the late 19th century, was a major architect of this policy, although the roots of this policy can be traced to Nepalese settlement in Darjeeling following the British lease-annexation of the area in the 1840s.

So successful was this policy in Sikkim and Bhutan that by the mid-20th century 60 per cent of the population in Sikkim was Nepalese; and in Bhutan while the official figures speak of a Nepalese population of 25 per cent (2,25,000) the actual figure is closer to 40 per cent (4,00,000). Through a deliberate policy, coupled with economic causes outlined earlier, Bhutan and Sikkim have become transformed in 100 years into containing
sizeable populations who are more 'Indian' oriented. Emphasising their role as pioneer agriculturists is the fact that in Sikkim it was the Nepalese who introduced hill terracing. The settlement of Nepalese in the colonial period was thus tied to notions of accelerating demographic change to enhance colonial security.

At the same time it is important to bear in mind that the areas in which Nepalese settled in Bhutan and Sikkim were, until their advent, lightly inhabited, thickly forested and often malarial. Nepalese settlement was not just encouraged by the British; a role was also played by local feudal elites. In both Sikkim and Bhutan certain local aristocrats gained lucrative incomes by giving tenancy and land rights to Nepalese immigrants in jungle areas. In Sikkim the Kazis of Khangsarpa were from the 1870s intimately involved in Nepali settlement. This has translated itself into patterns of political mobilisation in Sikkim in the present day. In Bhutan the powerful Dorji family, previously of low rank in the feudal aristocracy, enhanced its political and economic status by playing an intimate part in Nepalese settlement in southern Bhutan. In Manipur it was the royal court which gained financially by granting lands for Nepalese settlement. While the British did not allow other outsiders to settle in Manipur they exempted Nepalese who settled, significantly, on Khas and forest grazing land not previously under cultivation.

On independence, then, India inherited in the northeast a pattern of Nepalese settlement which had been a part of imperial security policy in frontier regions. In some areas India ambivalently allowed this policy to continue; in others India formulated a new policy — that of favouring the indigenous populations.

The development efforts launched in the region, as roads and projects began to be built which required large quantities of labour, were other new factors. The Border Roads Organisation found Nepalese labour most suited and this process injected further numbers of Nepalese into the hill regions of northeast India as well as Bhutan. Again this labour migration became the precursor of some permanent settlement.

In Sikkim, while demographic change was complete by 1947, India chose to play a political balancing game between the court and the Lepcha-Bhutia minority and the Nepalese majority. In Bhutan, after 1955, India virtually abandoned the Nepalese cause, foregoing a lever against the Bhutanese monarchy. In other regions of the northeast the attitude of the Indian government seems to have been more ambivalent.

For security reasons, specifically to contain the various insurgent movements in the northeast, large numbers of Nepalese serving in the Indian army and paramilitary have been present in the northeast from 1950. This in turn may have played a part in further Nepalese settlement. While engaged in security duties, Nepalese have naturally looked to protect their kin settled in the region and this has fuelled anti-Nepalese feeling as occurred in Mizoram and Meghalaya in 1967 and now occurs in Manipur. Unwittingly or knowingly, the Nepalese continue to play a vital security role for the Indian government in the region.

Even as India has continued inherited administrative norms such as the Inner Line and other restrictions, their breach in the case of Nepalese is significant. Not just as road labour, but even as peasant settlers, the Nepalese do not usually pass formally through checkpoints or apply for meaningless scraps of paper; they merely clear the land, often with the connivance of local vested interests. It can often be several years before the authorities take any notice.
In Manipur, from 1951 to 1976 the number of Nepalese rose from 2,860 to 36,604; they began to settle in hill areas in that state in the 1960s. A disguised number of Nepalese began settling in Arunachal Pradesh as it gradually began to be opened up, from about 25,000 in 1961 to 85,000 in 1971. In Meghalaya too, the number of Nepalese rose from 6,000 to at least 10,000 in 1971. In Mizoram due to insurgency their number has remained stable at between 2,000 and 4,000. In Nagaland the figure was 10,400 in 1961. In Assam there were 2,15,213 Nepalese in 1971.

The political implications of post-1947 Nepalese settlement in India have been scarcely explored. While the key role which Nepalese personnel have played in India's armed forces has been highlighted, their role in the wider political system has been barely understood. The demands which the Gurkha League and others in North Bengal have made for the official recognition of Nepalese language has important if tantalising implications. One reason that India has not acceded to the demand is that it has not wished to legitimise the presence of almost two million Nepalese residing in India. Rather, India has wished to ambivalently keep the Nepalese beneath the surface of India's political and economic life. The fear has been that by recognising the Nepalese presence, India would bolster the legitimacy of the kingdom of Nepal, or play into the hands of a 'Greater Nepal'. A contrary view might however suggest somewhat different implications. By recognising and legitimising the Nepalese presence in India, the kingdom of Nepal would be destabilised and Nepalese brought further into the Indian system, with a means to voice their grievances. By following such a course India would be returning to British imperial policy: but such a prospect is remote at present.

Nepalese settlement in the northeast has not been part of an insidious scheme but is the outcome of the development process itself, in which the Nepalese as a poor and mobile hill community play a part in frontier areas, where roads are being built, towns are being founded or expanded and the area is being more fully exploited. As long as the peoples of the northeast do not analyse the economic realities of their own position and the economic realities of any frontier region, they will persist in pursuing millennial dreams of a glorious past. One set of outsiders will merely be replaced by others if those who are indigenous to the area do not seek to develop their own resources through their own efforts.

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