

Indigenous People, Latest Controversy: A Case Study Gurkhas of Assam

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Abstract: *The recent controversy on the issue, who are the indigenous people of Assam, has kicked off a controversy locally whether the Gurkhas are indigenous or not. To me, the Gurkhas are indigenous which has been proved by various historical literary sources. Both Primary and Secondary methods have been applied to unearth the truth while mostly historical literature has been taken into account. The topic even influences the recent updation of National Registration of Citizenship, 1951. Therefore, it has become the need of the time to find out whether the Gurkhas are indigenous or not. Various records and sources suggest that they are indigenous who have, largely, contributed to the growth and development of the Assamese society. This paper takes positive approach to the issue and contends that the growth and dynamics of the Gurkhas of Assam are relevant in the context of formulating and implementing policies for social and economic development of the community.*

Keywords: Indigenous, Gurkhas, Kiratas, Mongoloid etc

1. Introduction

The word *indigenous* actually means dwelling of people in a particular place from generation to generations. According to Longman, some people who live in a place all the time or have been there for a long time are indigenous. The Assamese dictionary, *Hemkosh*, emphasizes that the people those who live for generations in a particular place are indigenous people. In other words, the word indigenous means the people those who live at a particular place for generations or ancient aboriginal people are indigenous.

These definitions clearly prove that it is not very difficult to ascertain who the indigenous people of Assam are. The answer is very simple. Ancient Indian sources speak volume about the people who live for generations in Assam. During the ancient period in India the people who migrated to ancient Kamrupa, like Aostrics, Mongoloids, Kiratas etc. are indigenous people of Assam. Further the tribes which are mentioned in the Indian civilization are indigenous people. The ancient literature like *Yogini Tantra*, *Kalika Purana*, also, mention the ancient people living in Assam. *Yogini Tantra* mentions the boundaries of ancient Kamrupa which also clarifies who are the indigenous people of Assam. Religious tourism also speak volume about the issue that the presence of Gurkhas in ancient Kamarupa.[1] The Boundaries Of Kamarupa Spread upto Magadha regions. As mentioned in *Yogini Tantra*, the Gurkhas are indigenous people of Kamrupa and their contributions to Assamese societies really praiseworthy [2].

2. The Presence of Nepalis in Assam:

The presence of Nepalis in Assam is historical and their role in the formation and development of this region is of great importance. The human movement across the border is as old as the Kingdom of Kamrupa. The ancient Kamrupa Kingdom in those days was extended up to eastern Nepal. The boundary of Kamrupa, according to *Yoginitantra*, was extended "from the Mountain Kanchana in Nepal up to the confluence of the Brahmaputra, from Karatoya to Dikkarasini the northern limit in the mount Kanya, in the

west the Karatoya in the East Diksu O' daughter of the mountains! In the south the confluence of Lake with Brahmaputra; this is the territory which all treatises call by the name of Kamrupa[3].

There existed close cultural as well as marital relationship between the Kingdom of Kamarupa and Nepal in the days of past. Rajyamati, the daughter of Harsh Varmandeva, the ruler of Kamrupa was married to Joydev II, the Raja of Nepal. On the other hand, Ratnakanti, Princess of Nepal was married to Bishwa Singha, the founder of Koch Kingdom. Further Rupmati, the Princess of Koch King was married to Pratap Malla, the Raja of Nepal. Such cultural and other forms of relation augmented human movement into Assam right from ancient time. Pandit H.P. Sastri successfully could recover a book in the Nepal Durbar Library entitled, 'Yoga-Satanka'[4]. It contains hundred prescriptions attributed to Nagarjuna. Nagarjuna's *Pills (bori)* are still famous in the Assam Valley. Tibetan records claim that Rahula, a Buddhist teacher, in Nepal was a *sudra* from Kamrupa who was the disciple of Nagarjuna. Nagarjuna was a physician as well as a chemist. In the Kamrupi Ayurvedic Pharmacopoeia, there are still certain specific remedies which are associated with the name of Nagarjuna[5]. Narakasur was born in Baraha, the lateral area of river Kosi in Nepal. This area was ruled by Kamrupi Kings earlier but later on, lost to the king of Nepal. The Kamarupa King made many efforts to regain the possession of this tract of land. When the Gupta power declined, the Kamarupa kings taking the advantage of the situation prevailed, extended their Kingdom towards the northeast as far as Kosi. Towards the end of the 6th century, a conflict broke out between the Gupta King, Mahasena Gupta and Kamarup King, Sushthivarman[6]. As a result, the Kamarupa boundary was pushed to the Karatoya river. Kumar Bhaskar Varman and Sri Harsha Vardhana conquered Gauda and Karna Suvarna which again, pushed Kamrupa boundary back to the river Kosi[7]. It has, therefore, been established that in the pre-colonial period, some territories of Nepal were included in the Kamrupa Kingdom. The fact is corroborated by the truth that Mahabthivarman granted land to 205 Brahmanas on the bank of the river Kosi in the 6th century [8]. The

boundary of Kamrupa was extended till the rule of the later Mauryas or the early Guptas upto Kosi which include the district of Purnea, the whole of Morung, and South Nepal [9]. Varaha-tirth, the birth place of Naraksur, was within the region of Mourung, near the junction of the Koka-Kota with the river Kosi. The early Kamarupa king possessed this tract of area, which contained the birth place of their progenitor. [10] Hereby, it has been confirmed that King Naraka ruled over Pragjyotisha Kingdom and the extension remained beyond Kosi. [11]

Literary history of the 5th century A.D. also, has confirmed the age-old relations between the Kingdom of Kamarupa and the Kingdom of Nepal and its subject people. Machindranath of Kamrupa along with Purnachandi and Minannath visited Nepal. [12] Gorakhnath, the disciple of Minanath had written 'Kamratnatantra', Hastamuktavali was written by, Subhankarkavi Dakarna of Vajrayana literature which are available in Nepal Darbar Library speak volumes of Kamarupa linkage to Nepal Kingdom[13].The factor of religious necessity worked behind the settlement of Nepalis in ancient Kamrupa Mahabhutivarman, invited some Brahmins from Mithila (within Nepal then) in North Bihar. The Brahmins and the Kayasthas of Assam are all invited from Northern India, mostly from North Bihar (Mithila). This was the beginning of the settlement of Nepalis in Assam. The Ahoms also invited the Brahmins of Nepal to perform rituals, especially with Vedic rites and work on with astrology and were given land settlement[14].Narakasur also employed the Nepali Brahmins in the temple of Kamakhya as priests for daily prayers. They became famous as *Lal Mohari Puzaris* [15].

3. Vaisnavite Movement and Participation of Gurkhas

The Vaisnavite movement has played an important role in the formation of Assamese nationality. One among the forefathers of Arirudhadeva, Sasabindhu was related to the clan of King Bhagadatta and they ruled Nepal Desh .[16]His grandson, Rambar, came to Soumar and presently, has been dwelling in Narayanpur in North Lakhimpur and came to be known as *gomosta* or Bhuyan. Satradhikar, Anirudha deva (1553-1626) was predecessor to Rambar[17]. This fact is also supported by Kedar Brahmachari, Bhudev Mukharjee, C. Bronson etc. The ancestors of Anirudhadeva were migrated from Nepal[18].The founder of Nepali Satra in Teok, Ratikanta was a Nepali Brahmin[19]. The two Satras in Teok (Sibasagar) and Jaluguti (Nowgong) known as Nepali Satras were founded by Ratikanta during the time Chatturbhuj Thakur. Chatturbhuj Thakur proposed to appoint *Dharmacharya*, six Brahmins and six Kayasthas as disciples to propagate Vaisnava religion where Ratikanta was one among of these Brahmanas[20]. It has been confirmed that on the day of appointing these *dharmacharyas*,Ratikanta could not turn out in time and hence, Chatturbhuj Thakur, on the request of mother Kanaklata, appointed Ratikanta as *Dharmacharya*.[21]Among these *Dharmacharyas* ,*Nepali Po* (son of Nepali) was Ratikanta[22]. All these facts prove that there was substantial movement of people across the border when Gurkhas continued to visit and settle to this part of land uninterrupted.Ratikanta was the founder of *Nepali*

Satra who came from Kanauja to Kamarupa. He belonged to Dharanidhar Bhattacharjee's family and settled permanently in Kamarupa.[23] Anruddhadeva was born in 1475 *saka* era at Bishnubalikunchi near Narayanapura of present North Lakhimpura district of Assam. His father was Gonda Giri and mother Ajali whose ancestors hailed from Nepal[24].Aniruddhadeva was the disciple of Gopaldeva of *Kalasanhati Satra* of Vaisnavism propagated by Sankardeva. Basudeva Than, which at present situated in the Lakhimpur district of Assam, proves substantial human movement during the period. In the Basudeva Than at Naroasatra, *Bihu Melaas* were organized annually where the people from Nepal visited regularly. The Raja of Nepal donated *Ghanta* made of Bronze. [25]

4. Conclusion

It is generally believed that the Nepalis served in the British as mercenaries in subduing the national movement in different parts of the country. If this predicament is true then why the British with such huge armies failed to suppress the national movement should be viewed seriously. Many Nepalis had participated in the national movement and were consequently imprisoned or sentenced to death.The early Gurkha settlers, came into contact with local population and also involves themselves in other vocations as well. To fulfill the colonial interest, their integration with the local population also encouraged. Thus in the entire North-East a large section of Nepalis settled permanently and peacefully. Their descendants are to-day part and parcel of the local population. But one of the distinguishable features is that the community retained their language, culture and identity intact, while adapting itself to the new environment.²By the end of the 19th century, the British attitude underwent a sea change. While the Gurkhas remained the most reliable elements in its army and police, the settlers, still retaining their identity, had become a part of resurgent India which was seriously viewed by the British. On the other hand Henry Cotton, the Chief Commissioner of Assam, noted in 1898 that many of the retired Gurkha sepoys who were fond of settle down in Assam, preferred cattle grazing to cultivation and they were migration from Jalpaiguri district of present West Bengal due to increase of grazing fees in the district. This report clearly states that the British tried to generate more revenue by bringing more wastelands under production and encouraged cash crop production and commercial activity. Under the circumstance the settlers emerged in course of time to be an integral part of the Assamese society. Their settlement was either in wastelands or in the jungles granted by the British administration which never endangered any conflict with local people. National unity and integration is of paramount importance, now-a-days. Under such situation their grievances needs reasonable attention from the receiving community. The genuine attention of the problems of the community will full fill the cherished objectives of national integration and communal harmony.The Nepali settlement was not only condition by British interest alone, to deploy in army in Assam, to clear jungle, to tape additional resources etc. but also to substantially practice the other professions. The availability of grazing land and the growing business of milk supply to the growing urban economies.⁶One of the important characteristics of the Assamese mentality was that they

never opposed migration of Nepalis into Assam. Rather, they welcomed this large scale immigration of productive labour for economic progress without which it was not possible to develop the agriculture and grazing sector of Assam. AJM Mills himself admitted that in 1853, that settlers be induced to come into the country⁷. Whether this people can be separated from Assamese mainstream or not? This can be surely denied that it is impossible and impractical to do it. In 1937, Krishna Ram Medhi, Sub-Deputy Collector of Samuguri observed that “.....these people have been living in Assam for about a century, have already mixed up with the indigenous people and it will be impossible to separate them”. Again their numbers were “....far less than the numbers of East Bengali migrants and there is no such heavy influx of these people.” The Nepalis were mostly graziers and not interested to grab large tract of lands. The Deputy Commissioner of Darrang in 1937 observed in his official report that “...the Nepalis...freely mix with the indigenous people, adopt their language and (mother) tongue, create no trouble”.⁸ “.....the Nepalis are not half as violent (as East Bengal migrants) and never make mass attack on Assamese population”.⁹ The Asamiya Sub Divisional Officer at Barpeta observed in 1938 that “.....the Assamese women flock do not get molested by these people in their daily pursuits of work, they having the same sort of female liberation like the Assamese”. The colonization officer at Dalgaon observed that “.....the Nepalis.....those who are in Assam for one generation can easily pass themselves off as Assamese”. Therefore, the Assamese middle class did not, in reality perceive the communities of Nepali origin in Assam as a threat to their class interest. The Nepali migration was encouraged by the colonial state, as it required cheap labour for building infrastructure for its hill-stations and also to clear the jungles in the Northeast India. The British turned the hill-men into a reified commodity. The colonial Raj transformed the martial Gurkhas into mere wage earner. In most cases the host community never opposed the Gurkha settlement in Assam, rather they welcomed them and thus by adopting local language, vernacular school, local traditions and culture, they got themselves Assamasized. In Magaldoi Session of Asom Sahitya Sabha in 1974, Dr, Maheswar Neog, in his presidential address remarked that, “ For all practical purposes, the Nepalis are Asmiyas”. Thirtha Nath sarmah mentioned that during the time of Sri Manta Sankardeva, the Nepalis practically became Asamiya by identifying themselves with Vaisnavite movement in Assam. Ratikanta, was a Nepali Brahmin who was the first preacher, (*Agyaprapta Purush*) of the Nepali *Satras* situated in Teok and Jaluguti. Homen Borgohain in his presidential address at Dibrugarh Session of the Assam Sahitya Sabha, 2001, had remarked, “there is no objection for the Nepalis of Assam to become pure Assamese without losing their language and literature.” Sanjib Baruah has written that the Nepalis are not always seen as migrants.

The Nepalis living in Assam for generations created a symbiosis of two ethnic communities and culture that the Nepalis and the Asamiya. Assimilation was observed in all aspect of their life, language, living styles, education, customs and traditions began to have the flavor of the host society.¹⁵ After thorough investigation, it is confirmed that the Gurkhas must be considered as the first non-locals to

come to settle in Assam for centuries. They shed their blood or sacrificed their life property and honour in protecting the frontiers of Assam, in driving out the Burmese, in clearing the dense forests infested by wild animals, in checking turbulent hill-tribes etc. “There is a hill, send up a Gurkha,” was the British policy of ethnic assimilation to safeguard their colonial empire in India. The Nepalis had the great capacity to assimilate themselves with the hill-communities. They adopted the language of their neighborhood, contract matrimonial alliances and turn out to be an inseparable part of the local economy. The Nepalis have always been involved in the nation building project. Assam today is at a critical situation with sharply divided political and socio-cultural forces regarding the issue of Nepalis’ position in Assam. In such situation our duty is to create a road map to find out solution which is the need of the hour. In such a critical juncture national integration is of paramount importance. The Nepali grievance needs genuine and justifiable attention from the host community. If we fail to provide security and equal status to this community than it will undermine the cherished objectives of communal harmony which in turn will surely endanger national unity and integration. In such a situation certainly, it is our responsibility to accommodate them in our greater cultural milieu of Assamese society that community have been continuously contributing to the nation building project for centuries in this part of the land.

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