CHAPTER VII

THE ASSAMESE NEPALIS IN THE WIDER SOCIETY AND THEIR ASSIMILATION

THE ASSAMESE NEPALIS AND THEIR NEIGHBOURS

Social situations found in many villages of Assam in which Assamese and Assamese Nepalis live as members of the same village. While each of these communities maintains their separate identity largely through their exclusive socio-political and community organizations, it is reasonable to expect that spatial proximity and the sharing of common village level institutions like the school, the panchayat, the market and so on, would provide many opportunities of social contact between the Assamese and the Assamese Nepalis. This sort of situation was observed in the
study area where both Assamese and the Assamese Nepalis live as members of a single village community.

All the three study villages are very old. The inhabitants of these villages identify themselves as Assamese. Both Assamese and Assamese Nepalis inhabit Hirabari village. In Kiringbori and Tekeliakur Grant villages, there are a few Assamese families in each village. The Assamese caste villages surround Hirabari village. The Bodo, Assamese Hindu and Assamese Muslim villages surround Kiringbori village. On the other hand, Assamese Hindu, Garo, Assamese Muslim and Bengali Hindu inhabited villages surround Tekeliakur Grant village.

The villagers of all the three study villages always maintain various relations with the wider society in the context of day-to-day activities, economic activities, religion and festivals. Nowadays, the villagers of all the three study villages share many common elements from wider Assamese society.

In describing the social relations between the Assamese and Assamese Nepalis, it would be convenient to draw a distinction between formal and informal relations. When persons exchange greetings, visit one another on neighbourhood or friendship bases or associate in the pursuit of some common pleasures and interests; we may term these interactions as occurring in an
informal context. However, it should be noted that the grouping of interpersonal relations into formal and informal categories is at times only a descriptive device. The two are complementary and may exist within the same framework. For example, interactions between men at their places of work take place in formal contexts. But the same men also interact informally. Thus, the experiences of working together might be carried into other spheres.

The relationship between the Assamese Nepalis with their neighbours may broadly be divided into formal and informal relations.

(i) Informal Relations

The villagers of the three study villages visit their neighbouring villages and they also come to their houses for social visits. The primary occupation of the study villages and their neighbouring villages is cultivation. So the common mode of livelihood pattern has resulted various relations among them.

There are some families of the study villages and nearby Assamese and Bodo villages who work in other's cultivable land on the basis of sharecropping. Thus, they have sharecropping ties. Borrowing or lending of agricultural implements, bullocks, etc. from one another, help in ploughing, transplanting, reaping, etc. are common features observed among the villagers with their
neighbouring Assamese and Bodo villagers. Such borrowing and help are done on the basis of personal friendship, neighbourly relationship, etc. The womenfolk of the study villages also visit the neighbouring villages for gossiping and for different finine activities such as weaving, husking, etc. So, a homely informal relationship is observed among the women of the study villages with the women of nearby Assamese and Bodo villages.

Personal friendship begins from their childhood. In Hirabari village, there is no educational institution. Hence, the children of this village have to go to nearby school. In Kiringbori village, there is only one Lower Primary School. After passing class IV, the pupils have to read in schools outside the village. Likewise, in Tekeliakur Grant village also, the students go either to Kurua Higher Secondary School or to Khalihai Anchalik High School for high school education. They meet many boys and girls, coming from different villages and places and thus friendship develops among them. Sometimes such friendship continues up to the old age.

There are occasions when other neighbouring villagers visit the Assamese Nepali villages or the villagers of the study villages visit neighbouring villages. Such visits are informal and casual in nature. Sometimes they visit for a specific purpose. For instance,
there are a few medicinemen (dhonis) in Kiringbori and Tekeliakur Grant villages. So, the nearby Assamese villagers often come to them for herbal treatment. Again, there are also a few bej (folk medicineman) and ojha (sorcerer) in the neighbouring Assamese villages. The Assamese Nepalis often visit their houses for the herbal treatment of men and animals.

The Assamese Nepalis of the study villages use their own kinship terms to address other elderly Assamese Nepalis. But they use Assamese kinship terms while addressing persons of nearby Assamese villages or any other non-Nepalis. The Assamese villagers also address them in Assamese kinship terms.

(ii) Formal Relations

The Assamese Nepalis of the study villages and the neighbouring villagers maintain various kinds of formal relations in such situations as marriage and other household level functions and ceremonies.

The Assamese Nepalis invite their non-Nepali friends, neighbours, etc. of their neighbouring villages in their marriage ceremony. They also participate as groom’s party in marriage ceremony. Their neighbouring Assamese and Bodo villagers also invite them. Gifts and presents are given among them in such occasions.
When a person of any community dies, visiting to deceased’s family is a formal practice among the people outside one’s own community or village. They also participate in funeral rituals, feasts, etc.

Religious functions, rituals and festivals are some of the important occasions through which the Assamese Nepalis of the study villages establish a close relationship with the villagers of neighbouring villages.

Every year, the villagers of the study villages celebrate Bhanu Jayanti (Acharya Bhanu Bhakta is regarded as the founder poet of the Nepali community who translated the Ramayana into Nepali from Sanskrit) on 13th July where neighbouring villagers are invited. Besides, in Durga Puja, cultural function is held. Local artistes are also invited to take part in the function. Tihar is another joyful festival of the Assamese Nepalis where they sing a special kind of song with dance, called as deushi and bhoili. Nowadays, neighbouring Assamese and Bodo young boys also participate in this dance together with their Assamese Nepali friends. The Assamese Nepalis also go to nearby Assamese and Bodo villages to sing deushi and bhoili.

Likewise, the Assamese Nepalis of the study villages also participate in different religious ceremonies and festivals in their
nearby Assamese villages. The Assamese villagers invite them to participate in birth and death anniversaries of different great saints of Assam such as Srimanta Sankardev (a great saint-philosopher, social reformer and litterateur of Assam of 15th century), Madhavdev (disciple of Sankardev), etc. These rituals are performed in the village namghar (community prayer house).

They also enjoy bhaona (folk drama) and go to enjoy Rash festival (a festival in honour of Lord Krishna on the full moon of the month of Kartika) to Sipajhar, Mangaldai, Palashbari and Nalbari by hiring buses.

The main festival of the Assamese is Bihu. They invite their Assamese Nepali friends to this festival. Bihu song is very popular among the Assamese Nepalis. In Bohag Bihu, huchori is sung by the young boys in every household. Some Assamese Nepali boys also participate with them in the Bihu festival.

A branch of Assam Gorkha Sammelan and Nepali Sahitya Parishad of each was opened at Tekeliakur Grant village in 2008. Both are state level organisations of the Assamese Nepalis. The former is a social organisation and the latter is a literary forum. These organisations discuss problems of the Assamese Nepalis and try to find out ways of those problems. Besides, with the initiation of these organisations, Bhanu Jayanti is celebrated on
13th July of every year. The neighbouring Assamese people are also invited to take part in this anniversary.

Samannoy Sahitya Gosthi is a socio-cultural and literary organisation. It was established in 1999. This organisation covers the entire Kalihihai area. There are teachers, social workers, litterateurs and students in this organisation. It includes all the communities of Kalihihai area.

The primary goal of this organisation is to develop Kalihihai area from all sides such as arts, literature, culture and promote peace and harmony among the neighbouring communities. Every year Silpi Divas\(^1\) and Rabha Divas\(^2\) are celebrated by this organisation with great pomp. The president of this organisation is Sarbeswar Kalita (an Assamese), chief secretary is Palash Boro (a Bodo) and assistant secretary is Dhakman Shrestha (an Assamese Nepali).

---

1. **Silpi Divas** is celebrated on the death anniversary of Jyotiprasad Agarwala (17.06.1903 - 17.01.1951) who was a great patriot, freedom fighter, poet, dramatist, producer-director of the first Assamese film *Joimati* and musician. He had revitalised the music of Assam and created a new trend of music in modern Assam.

2. **Rabha Divas** is celebrated on the death anniversary of Bishnuprasad Rabha (31.01.1909 - 20.06.1969) who was a genius of music in modern Assam. He was multi-faceted personality having great contribution to the enrichment of modern Assamese music. He was at a stretch a poet, singer, dancer, painter, writer, playwright, actor, essayist, politician and a revolutionist who believed in communism.
Colson (1953) has observed the following in the context of contact between the Makah Indians and the white Americans who live within the Makah reservation:

"If people are closely associated in their daily lives, they must have some understanding of each other's habits, customs, motivations, and symbols, and be prepared to show these some degree of respect. Where the association is close, the two may be said to share common definitions of the situations within which they meet and to exhibit similar habits of behaviour. To this extent, they then share a common culture.... As contacts include more and more of the total range of human relationships, the field of common definitions also widens" (1953 : 88).

The situation obtaining in the case of the Assamese Nepalis in the wider society also resembles to a considerable extant to those of the observations of Colson quoted above.

ASSIMILATION OF THE ASSAMESE NEPALIS

Assimilation is a dynamic process, which necessarily involves a certain amount of acculturative contact between members of different cultures. Assimilation may involve individual groups or both.
Assimilation operates in one direction only: a part or all of one community is incorporated into another. The host community must willingly accept or adopt the migrant individual or group. Assimilation is not an all or nothing, either or phenomenon, but a set of distinctive, variable processes. Generally these processes involve the reenculturation or resocialization of individuals and groups originally enculturized in one society. The assimilated group is to be accepted as members by host community (Bay 1976).

The process of assimilation of the Nepalis in Assam started during the pre-independence period following their migration to this region. This process is still continuing. Authors like Barua (1973), Bhandari (1996), Bharali (2006), Bhuyan (2006), Borgohain (1979), Chetri (1983), Guha (1977), Hussain (1993), Nath (2002), Neog (1974), Nepal (2007), Sarma (1976), Thapa (2004), Upadhyay (1994), Upadhyaya (1998), etc. have discussed about the various aspects of assimilation of the Nepalis in Assam.

**Language and Education**

Nepali settlement areas grew up adjacent to or amidst Assamese villages and settlement areas. The adaptability of the Nepali labourers to carry out any chore from a dairy farmer, agricultural labourer to a watchman, security personnel, an
orderly, etc. found him intermingling with the Assamese people at all walks of life. The first effect or result of this intermingling was the learning and later adoption of the Assamese language. Gradually the Nepalis in Assam become bilingual and also came to be regarded by themselves as Assamese Nepalis.

The Assamese Nepalis in 1972 fought for the official recognition of Assamese as the medium of instruction upto the graduate level at par with English. As mentioned by Neog (1974) in his presidential address of the Asam Sahitya Sabha (highest literary forum of Assam) at Mangaldoi in 1974 "for all practical purposes the Nepalis are Assamese". Almost all the Nepalis can speak Assamese and majority can also write it. The Nepali students studying in Assamese schools have Assamese as their vernacular.

After adopting the Assamese language, a section of educated Nepalis took an active interest in spreading education in different parts of the state. As early as 1919-20, noted freedom fighter Chhambilal Upadhyay, took active part in establishing national schools in the Assamese medium. A number of Assamese schools in the erstwhile Darrang District took shape due to the endeavour and financial assistance of the Nepali people. For instance, the Behali High School in Sonitpur District was set-up in 1943 with
the initiative and hard endeavour of the educated Nepalis of that locality. Again, it was due to the initiative of Babudhan Thapa, the Jawaharlal Uchcha Buniyadi Vidyalaya of Naojan in Golaghat district was established in 1954 (Handique 1998). Another Nepali person of Bajipohumara of Dibrugarh District, Lal Bahadur Newar, established the Bajipohumara Late Nar Bahadur Primary school in 1973*. Worthwhile to mention here the names of Prajapati Rizal, Prabhuram Karki, Bhimlal Upadhyay of Darrang District, Nar Singh Thapa and Padma Singh Chetri of the undivided Dibrugarh District, Siblal Sharma of Golaghat District, who took an active part in establishing educational institutions in their respective localities. These institutions played a major role in the education of not only the Nepalis but also the Assamese students of the area. In the study area also the Assamese Nepalis extended financial assistance and physical labour in the establishment of Khalihai Anchalik High School, Kurua Higher Secondary School, Khalihai Anusuchita Jati-Janajati Middle English School and Bajana Pathar Girls’ Middle English School.

* Lal Bahadur Newar donated money for the construction of concrete building to the Bajipohumara Late Nar Bahadur Primary School and for the construction of Bajipohumara Middle English School in 1973.
It is worthy to mention here that the Assamese Nepalis also offered financial contribution to the establishment of Gauhati University, the first premier institution of North East India, which was establish in 1948 (Thapa 2004).

**Literary Contribution**

The Assamese Nepali litterateurs and writers have contributed significantly through their Assamese writings to Assamese literature and language. One of the earliest contributors to Assamese language and literature was Hari Prasad Gorkha Rai (1912-2007) of Kohima and Dhan Bahadur Sonar (1917-1994) of Shillong. They were whole-heartedly associated with the Asam Sahitya Sabha from its early days, and also immensely enriched Assamese literature by their short stories, articles, etc. Haribhakta Kotuwal (1935-1980) was also an eminent poet, writer who wrote both in Assamese and Nepali. He was one of the assistant editors of *Rodali*, a souvenir published at the Digboi session of the Asam Sahitya Sabha. Worthwhile to mention the names of established litterateurs like Dr. Rudraman Thapa, Ms. Gita Upadhyay, Dr. Khemraj Nepal, Dr. Jamadagni Upadhyay, Bishnulal Upadhyay, Gyan Bahadur Chetry, Dal Bahadur Chetry, Tikaram Upadhyay, Drona Upadhyay, Tarapati Upadhyay, Devraj Sapcota, Rewati
Raman Sapcota, Bidyapati Dahal, Gayatree Bhattarai, Subhit Kumar Chetri, Niru Sharma Parajuli, Indu Prabha Devi, Dr. Jayanta Krishna Sharma, Rosy Rani Sharma, Rashmi Rekha Sharma, Padma Dhakal, Tikaram Upadhyay, Dr. Lalu Prasad Upadhyay, Dr. Harka Bahadur Chetry, Dr. Laxmi Parajuli, Dr. Loknath Sharma, Laxmi Prasad Sedai, Dr. Khagen Sharma, Dambar Dahal, Bishnulal Sharma, Hari Gajurel, Dr. Bhim Kanta Upadhyay, Dr. Shanti Thapa, Naba Sapcota, Gopal Bahadur Nepali, Durga Khatiwada, Indra Kanta Karki, Hemanta Bharali, Somnath Nepal, Bal Bahadur Chetri, Dhakman Shrestha, Bikash Chetry, Deba Subba, Tanka Prasad Bhattacharai, etc. belonging to different districts of Assam, have made significant contributions to Assamese literature. Another important writer is Mon Bahadur Chetri of Digboi whose *Asamiya Nepali Samaj Aru Sanskritir Ruprekha* (1983) was published by the Asam Sahitya Sabha. Agni Bahadur Kshattry who translated Shyamraj Jaishi's book by the name of *Itihashar Adharat Asomar Nepali* (1996), is a major contribution not only to the Assamese literature but also to the history of Assamese Nepalis. Worthwhile to mention a modern Assamese poetry book entitled *Tumiyei Mor Nepathyat Priya* (1984) by Avinash Shrestha and the Assamese drama *Shesh Ratipuwa* (1964) by dramatist Sherman Thapa deserve special mention.
Participation in social life

Though the Nepalis in Assam have preserved and maintained their traditional social customs, there is enough evidence of their actively taking part in many of the social functions and festivals of the Assamese community.

There are some ceremonies performed by the Assamese Nepalis in addition to their traditional religious ceremonies. These show a significant level of assimilation of the Assamese Nepalis. Besides, the Assamese Nepalis actively participate in the most important local festivals of Assam called Bihu. Their girls excel in the Bihu dance competitions as Bihu kunwaris (Bihu princess).

Religion

The Nepalis in Assam are generally Hindu by faith and are divided into many castes and sub-castes. This division is only within the community, as to others they transcend these caste divisions and are known as 'Nepali' or 'Gorkhali'. In Assam they have carved a niche for themselves in the religious field as priests, pundits and even astrologers. Another important factor of assimilation is the adoption of the Mahapurushiya Dharma or Neo-Vaishnavism, as propagated by Srimanta Sankardev (1449-1568) and his disciple Madhavdev (1448-1596) and others to bring the different ethnic groups under one banner. There are two satras
(Vaishnavite monastery), one at Teok in Jorhat District and another at Nagaon in Nagaon District named 'Nepali Satra' because a Nepali Brahmin called Ratikanta Upadhyay established these *satras*. Again, an Assamese Nepali named Jagannath Upadhyay donated one complete Namghar (community prayer house) with land at podumoni near Sarupathar of Golaghat District in 1998.

**Matrimonial Relations**

Though largely endogamous in nature, in course of time, matrimonial relations between the Nepalis and the Assamese have occurred. These inter-community alliances have been attributed to the personal preferences of the boys and the girls, who wish to marry outside their community. But these relations are well accepted by both the communities. These alliances are nowadays, not limited only to love marriage but are also arranged with proper social customs.

The process of assimilation of the Nepalis in Assam is an ongoing process. Assam, which has had a long history of receiving migrants, provided a congenial atmosphere, which allowed the people to assimilate imperceptibility. The Nepalis who came to this part of the land since long back and also in the early rush of the colonial conquest assimilated into the host society and contributed much to the social, economic and political
development of the state. Their affinity with the other ethnic linguistic communities of the valleys and hills and their occupational versatility also made them easily acceptable to these communities. This led to admixture of cultures, which in turn led to the evolution of a distinct Assamese Nepali identity. The Assamese people and other communities also largely attend rituals, festivals and celebrations of the birth anniversaries of Nepali poet Bhanubhakta Acharya, Laxmi Prasad Devcota and other litterateurs and social workers, etc. At various meets of the Nepali Sahitya Parishad, Asam; Asam Nepali Sahitya Sabha, All Assam Nepali Students Union (AANSU), All Assam Gorkha Students Union (AAGSU), etc. the dignitaries are felicitated with both the Nepali topi (cap) and the Assamese gamocha (traditional towel). All these examples are indicative of a very significant degree of cultural and social assimilation of the Assamese Nepalis.

The preceding discussion implies that there have been definite signs of assimilationist tendency among the Assamese Nepalis during the last nineteen decades or so.

In Wirth's (1949) words, we can call the Assamese Nepalis as assimilationists whose aim is to merge with the indigenous society.

The assimilation of the migrant Nepalis may be stated as essentially 'cultural assimilation' and partly 'structural
assimilation' (Eisenstadt 1965; Gordon 1964). The migrant Nepalis are learning the manners and style of the Assamese society. The members of this group are not widely related to the members of the Assamese society, including the Hindus, on the intimate levels of family formation and so on.

It has been observed that there are different stages in the process of assimilation of immigrant and minority groups into new environment. Greeley (1970: 53-59) outlines a progression to understand the process of assimilation of immigrant and minority groups. There are six steps in the process: 'cultural shock'; 'organization and emergent self-consciousness'; 'assimilation of the elite'; 'militancy'; 'self hearted and antimilitancy'; and 'emerging adjustment'. In view of Greeley's outline and the theories of assimilation (Krausz 1971: 128-129), the present analysis of the process of assimilation of the migrant Nepalis is rather an oversimplification. The process of assimilation continues for a prolonged period and different stages in the process occur in successive generations of the assimilationist. In so far as the Nepalis are concerned, their seventh generation is in the process of assimilation. In view of the trend existing among the Nepalis, it is reasonable to expect that they will be able to merge fully with the Assamese society in the near future.