CHAPTER IV

Introduction:

Historiography of the advent and settlement of the Nepalese in Assam is mainly concerned with the waves of emigration that started happening nearly two centuries ago when the British colonial army raised the first Gorkha regiment to offset the Burmese incursion into the province of Assam. The first Nepali settlement in the North East India is credited with the British policy of granting liberal land settlement to the Gorkha soldiers in places like Mizoram, Manipur, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya. It then goes on to include the terms of references in the Treaty of Seagouli at the culmination of the Anglo-Gorkha war and how the British annexed large tracts of hill terrain from the Kingdom of Nepal and how the Nepali subjects became British colonial subjects in places like Dehradun, the Garhwal and Kumaon districts of North India as well as the gifting of the Darjeeling Hills by the Sikkimese king to the British and the same phenomenon happened as large number of Nepali inhabitants of the Darjeeling and Kalimpong area became de jure settlers of British Colonial India. Historiography dealing with these colonial times also dwells at length on the pull factor in Nepali emigration and cites the large-scale advent of labourers from the adjoining hill regions of Nepal to the tea gardens set up by colonial planters in the Doars region of Bengal. The narrative on Nepalese advent into the North East gains further ground when the Nepalese settlement in the coal mines and oilfields of Upper Assam in the latter half of the 19th century is taken into account. There is also a considerable body of scholarship on the arrival of Nepali cultivators, marginal farmers and graziers into the plains of the Brahmaputra valley in search of better livelihood and opportunities. And last but not the least, there is also the mention of the semi-professional Nepali lumberjacks, roadlayers, stone-crushers, fellers of forest trees for clearing for villages and semi-literate Nepalese seeking employment in government and army establishments. In all these narratives, the thrust of the historiography is to treat the Nepalese as a homogenous group having caste orientations of their own.

In this chapter, the present researcher seeks to look into the complex ethnography of the Nepalese as a people and to proceed to gain insights on the phenomenon of their socio-cultural and economic make-up before the dispersal and displacement from the
country to which they were genetically connected. In the first part of the chapter, the coming into being of the Nepalese as a race (*Jaat* within many *Jaats*) shall be considered with a historical overview. This overview will, it is hoped, build the perspective on the extremely complex phenomenon of the coming into being of the Nepali linguistic nationalism that went through the tyrannies of history. The second part shall seek to examine the historiography related to the emigration and settlement of the Nepalese in the state of Assam referred to above. Since the Bodoland Territorial Council as an arrangement of political administration came up only as late as the beginning of the current century, it must be underscored that the sociopolitical and cultural upheavals described below apply equally to the Assamese Nepalis living within the BTC. In fact, the Assamese Nepalis of the BTAD area went through the same process of historical churning as their counterparts elsewhere in Assam and even now, except in the change in their political fortune, the cultural entity of these people does not fundamentally differ from the others.

**Part I**

In his sermon given to his princes, entitled Dibyopadesh, the royal unifier of Nepal, King Prithvi Narayan Shah described Nepal as a yam between two rocks (Stiller: 8). What the shrewd Maharaja was sensitizing his sons about was the historical connections Nepal had between the two great nations of China in the north and India in the south. His focus was mainly on the diplomatic balance that was needed to forge ties with the two great forces of South Asia. But the thrust of the extended sermon was on promoting just and equal opportunities to people belonging to castes hailing from Indian origin like the Khasas comprising the Bahuns, Chhetris and Thakuris and the attendant occupational castes based on the Varna system of the Hindus like the Sarki, Damai, Ruchal, Sunar, Lohar, Kami etc. as well as ethnicities which hailed from Tibeto-Burman speaking groups like Newars, Magars, Gurungs, Rais and Limbus among others.
The Complex Ethnography of the Nepali People:

The Italian anthropologist Guiseppe Tucci, who conducted a pioneering scientific ethnography of Nepal understood the extremely intermixed population of Nepal, went on to say that the ethnographic study of Nepal is one of the most complex in the world (Tucci cited in Pradhan: 1991). The history of the Nepali people is also the history of the coalescence of the two great traditions of people: the cultural practices and knowledge base of the Tibeto-Burman speaking group of people who migrated into the hills and plains of Nepal from the higher Himalayas and the Indo-Aryan speaking group of people of the Northern Indian plains. The two groups of people moved to the hills and valleys of the South Asian country called Nepal from ancient and medieval times from the two great nations which sandwich the landlocked country. The Indo-Aryan speaking groups of people belong to the dominant Hindu faith and have been occupying important entitlements in terms of land and other resources in the middle and lower hills and valleys of the country. The Tibeto-Burman speakers, mostly Buddhists and shamanists, but many of them Hinduised through centuries of enculturation, like the Newars, are mostly confined to the middle and higher Himalayan hills of Nepal. Then there are ethnic tribal groups who have been the autochthons of the Terai region of Nepal.

The Tibeto-Burman Speakers’ Migration:

Scholars agree on three distinct phases of migration and settlement of the Tibeto-Burman group of people in Nepal (Caplan 1970). The first group to have access to Nepal were the Kirati group comprising of the Rais, Limbus, the Mech, the Lepchas and the Dhimals who are believed to have migrated from Mongolia and settled in the eastern hills of Nepal and present day Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Sikkim. It is interesting to note here that the migration of this group of people also coincides with the migration of the great Bodo group of people in the Brahmaputra valley. So the first trans-Himalayan migration of the Kirati group of people must have taken place in one single phase (Chatterji, 1952).

The second phase of migration of Tibeto-Burman speakers took place when Gurungs and Magars migrated from Tibet and settled down in the lower valleys of mid-western parts of Nepal. The third phase of migration took place in the higher
Himalayan region when nomadic tribes like the Sherpas and Dolpos made semi-permanent abodes in the higher Himalayas of Nepal. Mainly pastoralists by profession, this miniscule population of nomads is still a floating group transgressing into the Tibetan Autonomous Territory in search of pasture and smalltime trade. Most Tibeto-Burman groups over the centuries have become Hindus, some have retained their shamanism and some have taken to the Buddhist way of life.

**The Indo-Aryan Speakers’ Migration and Settlement:**

Ancient Hindu texts, edicts and rock inscriptions abound in terms of references to Indo-Aryan speakers linking a shared cultural ancestry between India and Nepal. Nepal in these written records is valourized as a Hindu kingdom in the popular imagination of the people of India in the same breath as other celebrated sites such as Anga, Banga, Kalinga, Ustra, Poundra and Magadha:

Anga Banga KalingaaschavatasashcheivodraMagadha

Poundra Nepalkashcheiva Antirgiri Bahirdura (Natya Sastra 14/43)

Ancient shrines in Nepal form part of the holy pilgrimage circuit of Hindu devotees of India, whereas Indian holy places have been frequented by Nepali pilgrims for centuries together. Gautam Buddha was born in Nepal and hence the Himalayan kingdom has a place in the imagination of the Buddhists of India. Two famous religious gurus from Nepal, Maitreyanath and Goraknath have common followers in both India (with large following in Assam, Bengal, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh) and Nepal. From the times of the Ramayan and the Mahabharat, there has been a continuous flow of ideas, of people and of trade and culture between India and Nepal. Scholars have identified three main phases of migration from India to Nepal over centuries. These three phases involve the advent of the Khas people in ancient times, the flight of upper caste Hindus to escape the tyranny of Muslim rulers in medieval times and the migration of peasant classes to fill in the vacuum of agricultural and forest labour, who are known as Madhise today, in the Terai region in the British colonial times.
Establishment of Power Elite of Thakuri/Rajput, Bahun and Chhetri over the Tibeto-Burman group of people:

The Khas or Khasa are an ancient group of Aryan people who entered into Nepal through the mid-Western and Western route in search of better entitlement and opportunities. The Khasas are as ancient as the Ramayan and the Mahabharat. In the Sabha Parva of the Mahabharata there are references to the Khas people as in the following line:

“Khasa ekashana jyoha pradara deerghavenhava: (the Mahabharat, Sabha Parva 48/3)

The Khas people were spread across the length of Northern India, concentrated mainly in the areas adjacent to present day Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Garhwal and Kumaon areas of Uttarakhand and Western Nepal. They comprised of the three upper castes of Hindus, namely, the Rajput/Thakuris or the royal clan, the Bahuns or the Brahmins and the Chhetris or the Khsatriyas. In course of time, the three powerful group of people incorporated the occupational caste Hindus into their fold by invoking the codes enshrined in the Manusmriti and formed one of the most formidable power elite which went on to rule the kingdom of Nepal for centuries. According to Pradhan, the high caste Indo-Aryan people migrated from their power base in western Nepal to the east through the hills (that is why Parbate or Pahade or hill people are appellations used to describe the Khas people). In the process, they established control over the Tibeto-Burman speaking communities (Pradhan: 1991:162).

The Tibeto-Burman people were essentially nomadic people with pastoral background. They followed a semi-permanent agricultural practice in the early days of their settlement in Nepal. Like many tribes and ethnicities in the North Eastern region, they also followed the primitive technique of slash and burn agriculture before the Indo-Aryans arrived in the hills and valleys of Nepal. Their arrival and settlement in Nepal had great impact on the socio-cultural life of the ethnic people of the Tibetan origin. As against the community land entitlement known as the kipat of the Tibeto-Burman, the Indo-Aryans practised individual land ownership with occupational specialization. This change in the way of economic production was handled by the Indo-Aryans resulted in the large-scale subjugation of the Tibeto-Burmans by the
highly specialized dominant Hindu elite. Apart from economic control, the Hindus also wielded considerable social and political power either by way of coercion or by way of intermarriage with the ethnic groups, especially in the Eastern Hills of Nepal:

“Today Nepal has inherited a people of mixed race. Its Hindus carry a great deal of tribal blood in their ethnic make-up. This is just one form of syncretism that has taken place between Hinduism and Buddhism. The significance of a socially accepted racial intermingling like this would probably not mean much for people in other regions of India, but it does bestow a distinct ethnic character to the Nepalese, giving them a further basis for asserting their independent national identity.” (Sharma: 1978:10)

**The Newar Exception:**

Amidst all this experimentation with caste engineering, if one may, there was an exception with regard to the Tibeto-Burman group of people, and it had to do with the Newars. Of all the Tibeto-Burman speakers, the Newars stand out as the most complex ethnic entity having specialized and sophisticated caste system within their own fold. There were historical reasons for this phenomenon.

The Kathmandu valley, which was the home of the Newars, a group who spoke a highly developed form of Tibeto-Burman language, was an exception to the experimentation of racial intermingling. The domination of the Khas elite was thwarted in the Kathmandu valley by the Newars. The Newari society was already a highly stratified and sophisticated hill society when the Khas made their entry into the power centre of Kathmandu. Hinduism had already supplanted the Buddhist and shamanist origins of the Newars but the powerful Newar elites, notably under the leadership of King Jayasthiti Malla, had fashioned the Newar society into a highly specialized caste system based on occupation in the model of Hindu caste system enshrined in the codes of the Manusmriti. This Newar King in the 14th century made many caste specific rules regarding food, dress, house types, and social interaction. Thus, even today, we have a Newar Brahmin like the Vajracharya, Ksatriya and Kayastha like the Sakya and Amatya respectively, Baishya like Pradhan, Shrestha (business caste), Manandhar or Tamrakar (occupational caste) and Sudra like Jyapu (common farmhand) and even the untouchable like the Pode (Chamar or Nishad in
Hindu system) or Dum (Kaibarta) among the Newars, all Tibetan in origin but modeled after the Chaturvarna of the Hindus. Another factor that went into making the Newars formidable was their urban base. The Newars had control over the trade with China and they thrived economically thanks to this trade relationship. In art, architecture, music and general standard of living, the Newars excelled way over the other tribes, castes and ethnicities including the Khas people who were basically an agrarian people with advanced techniques of agricultural production compared to the primitive methods of agriculture adopted by the Tibeto-Burman group of speakers. When the Khasas finally conquered Kathmandu valley under the leadership of Prithvi Narayan Shah, the Newars still continued to wield their political and economic power. A good example of their power sharing can be deduced from the fact that although the Bahuns and Chhettris with the help of their Thakuri rulers took control over the numerous temples and pagodas across the Kathmandu valley, the Newars negotiated with the new regime to still retain the trusteeship of all the temples and pagodas by way of a legal code through which the king granted land belonging to the temple to the Newar elite. The land ownership was called Guthi and even today the Newars are the inheritors of the Guthi grant of land pertaining to the Kathmandu valley. Such was the power of the Newar elite that along with the Khas elements, they continue to form the backbone of Nepali bureaucracy in terms of revenue, finance, law and general administration (Regmi Research Series, vol 1 – 21, Cornell University Library).

**Unified Control of the Realm of Gorkha over the Territory and People of Nepal:**

The conquest of the Kathmandu valley and the subsequent fall of the three Newar city states of Bhaktapur, Lalitpur and Kathmandu by the Khas people under the leadership of Prithvi Narayan Shah (1768) culminated in the supreme consolidation of the Thakuri-Bahun-Chhetri clique in the history of Nepal. The new dispensation was declared as the Gorkha Sarkar and its sway extended throughout the length and breadth of Nepal’s hills and valleys. The unifying force of the Shah dynasty was cemented through a series of reforms in the revenue policy which had a far-reaching consequence on the formation of a ruling class which held the common people under the control. According to the new land policy, the entire territory was divided into four land revenue divisions as follows:
1) Birta land – a liberal grant of land to the Bahuns and Chhetris across the middle hills. The Bahuns and Chhetris could now enjoy the grant by cultivating land by themselves or by employing common farm hands from the occupational castes. The Birta system consolidated the domination of the Khas people all over Nepal, from the easternmost Hills of Jhapa to the westernmost corners of Achham.

In matters of arbitration and dispute, powerful Chhetri clans were appointed as Jimdars or justices of peace who would report directly to the royal court in Kathmandu. Mention must also be made here that the Royal government used to offer land instead of salary to its meritorious army and civil officers through the award of Birta and in this way also the hold of the Khas people was retained in Nepal as most officers belonged to the same Khas stock. Rather than calling it Birta, the government preferred to call it Jagir or Rakam.

2) Kipat Land – The community land belonging to the Tibeto-Burman speakers’ group was retained by royal decree. The Kipat was quite akin to the commons in the European land management system and the ethnic or tribal community enjoyed the proceeds of the land collectively. There were instances when the Kipat land was sought to be usurped by the all-powerful Birta-wals belonging to the Khas orientation which was one of the reasons as to why migration of the ethnic population began to Indian territories of Darjeeling, Dooars and Assam in the middle of the 19th Century.

3) Guthi Land - this type of land was owned by the powerful temple trustees belonging to the Newar community in the urban centres of Kathmandu, Bhaktapur and Patan which housed innumerable temples having large tracts of urban land at their disposal.

4) Raikar Land – this kind of land was revenue land for which certain revenue was fixed on the tenant in which the tenant was never granted permanent ownership of the land.
The Muluki Ain of 1854 and the Codification and Division of the Nepali Society under the Strict Observance of Caste and Untouchability:

The Muluki Ain was promulgated by the Prime Minister of Nepal, Jang Bahadur Rana in 1854. Jang Bahadur Kunwar had a meteoric rise in the politics of Kathmandu in the 1830s and within a span of 15 years he became the most powerful person in the history of Nepal. By first spearheading the Kot Massacre in which a score of royals from the Shah dynasty were brutally murdered in 1846, he declared himself as the prime minister and foisted a titular Shah prince into the throne of Nepal. By way of a fake claim of ancestry to the Rana rulers of Rajputana in western India, but, arguably a military upstart and son of a nondescript chieftain, Jang Bahadur Kunwar assumed the title of Jang Bahadur Rana with a three star decoration of the title of the Prime Minister. In order to amass political power, he banned the use of the term ‘Khas’ from all official records to be replaced by ‘Gorkhali’ and got royal promulgation for the Code of Caste Division known as the ‘Muluki Ain’ in 1854. Since this royal promulgation had far-reaching consequences for the Nepali social formation, it is imperative to understand the salient features of the Ain.

Broad Division of the Society into Tagadhari and Matwali Orientations:

The Muluki Ain divided the Nepali people into two broad categories: Tagadhari (those wearing the Janai or the sacred thread) and Matwali (alcohol-drinkers). What this division actually did was to differentiate between the Khas people and the rest, although the usage of the term ‘Khas’ was strictly banned. The Tagadhari were divided into three categories, i.e. Bahun (Upadhyay), Jaisi and Chhetri. The Matwali were divided into many sub groups and they are as follows:

a) Maasiney Matwali (enslavable liquor drinkers) – people belonging to the occupational castes within the Varna system fell within this category.

b) Namaasiney Matwali (Unenslavable alcohol-drinkers) – people belonging to the ethnic and tribal orientation but within the fold of Hinduism or Buddhism belonged to this category.
c) Pani Nachalne Chhuachitio Halnu Naparne (Impure but touchables including foreigners and Muslims and Christians belonged to this category.

d) Pani Nachalne Chhuachito Halnu Parne (Impure and untouchable, upon touching whom one needed to purify by sprinking gold-dipped water or gomutra or cow urine.

In terms of privileges and punishment, graded provisions were accorded to the members of these categories. For example, if a Bahun drank water from the hands of a Matwali, his punishment differed from that of a Jaisi or a Chhetri (he would be let off with a Godan or gift of a cow or prayschita or penance, whereas the latter would be imposed a fine as well. Individuals of different caste groups were subjected to different punishments for the same crime.

By invoking the codes of Muluki Ain, the Rana rulers unleashed a reign of terror among the common people of the Nepali society. Caste lines were sharply defined, strict punishment was meted out to the violators of the caste rules, as a result of which the population was deeply riven along caste lines. It may be mentioned here that one of the main reasons of the migration of the Nepali people from the eastern parts of Nepal was the obnoxious impact of the Muluki Ain coupled with the policy of the Rana rulers to impose a stringent tax regime on the well-endowed people of the eastern hills and Terai reason.

It is pertinent here to quote eminent scholar T. B. Subba on the policy of the Rana regime to subjugate the ethnic people of the Eastern Hills in order to understand the impact of the Muluki Ain and a stringent tax regime vis-à-vis emigration:

“There is an interesting reference in Volume 64 of the Regmi Research Collections, published from Kathmandu, which provides an additional perspective on the departure of Nepalis for foreign climes. The context is an order by Prime Minister Jang Bahadur Rana to Colonel Krishnadhwaj Kunwar regarding ‘emigration from the Eastern Hill Region’. The order, among other things, says:

“We have received reports that Limbus and Yakhas are leaving their kipat (community owned) lands and homesteads and migrating to Sikkim and Darjeeling.
Find out why they are doing so, and keep them satisfied so that they may nor do so in the future. Do not allow any inhabitant from that area to abroad. (Dated June, 1850’).

The order was thought to be related to the Limbu, Yakha and Rai ethnic groups of Nepal’s east – the last group to be subjugated by the House of Gorkha into the Bhairvanath Paltan (regiment). However, the migration seems not to have been in response to the recruitment drive. The order, in particular, says to the Limbus:

“We have received reports that you are leaving your kipat lands and going abroad because of the pressure of moneylenders and the oppression of amalis (court officials), revenue collectors and government officials…”.

This document adds to a large volume of anecdotal information which supports the view that to a large extent it was the direct and indirect pressures of state taxation which led to the initial thrust of out-migration soon after the establishment of the unitary Nepali state.”  Subba in Dixit 2003:12.

The Nepali Language - Origin and Growth as a Marker of Cultural Identity:

The appellation ‘Nepali’ to designate the language spoken by the Nepali people seems to be of fairly recent origin. It is inferred that the Khas people called their own language Khas Kura (Grierson, Part iv Vol ix). However, there is no extant record which conclusively proves that the Khas had a distinctive name for the language. It is possible that an appellation of some antiquity is preserved in the Newari term khay bhay i.e. khas bhasa, which the Newaris used and still use, to distinguish Nepali from their own language, neva bhay, i.e. Nepali bhasa.

Hamilton throws more light on the language: “The language spoken by the mountain Hindus in the vicinity of Kathmandu, is usually called the Parbatiya Bhasa or mountain dialect; but west of Kathmandu, it is more commonly known by the name Khas bhasa, or the dialect of the Khas country, because it seemed to have been first introduced into the territory by that name.”, Hamilton, Francis (Buchanan): An Account of the Kingdom of Nepal, Edinburgh, 16:1819. Hodgson also employs both terms, khas bhasa and parbatiya bhasa in Hodgson, B. H. The languages, literature
and religion of Nepal and Tibet 1(London, 1874). From Hodgson’s scholarship, it becomes clear that both the terms Khas and Parbatiya were in currency in terms of the name of the language as late as the mid-19th Century.

According to a tradition still to be heard in Kathmandu, Jang Bahadur decreed that the khas was to be discontinued and replaced by Chhetri or Gorkha. This story would seem to find confirmation by the occurrence in a drill manual issued in 1874 by order Rana Uddip Simha Rana, Jang Bahadur Rana’s successor, of a note that the manual had been translated from English into ‘gorkhali bhasa nagari aksharbata’, i.e. ‘into the Gorkhali language in the Nagari script’. (Personal Interview with Durga Prasad Upadhyay, 2015)

In a grammar book written at the turn of the 20th Century, a Benaras-based Nepali scholar, Hemraj Pandit uses the term Gorkhabhasa in the title and elsewhere, but in the body of his grammar, he intermittently uses the term Nepali Bhasa (Gururaj Hemraj Pandit, Chandrika Gorkhabhasa Vyakaran, 1912, cited in Clark.)

In British India, the first grammar book published from Kolkata uses the term ‘the Nepalese Language in Ayrton’s A Grammar of the Nepalese Language, 1920.

The Darjeeling-based philologist, Turnbull, for the first time uses the appellation Nepali in his Nepali grammar (Nepali Grammar and Vocabulary, Darjeeling, 1887).

Grierson declared both terms to be of foreign coinage, and he was probably right at the time. ‘Europeans call it Nepali or Naipali. This is a misnomer for it is not the language of Nepal, but only of the Aryan rulers of the country. The inhabitants of the country give this name to the principal Tibeto-Burman language of the country, Newari, and call the Aryan language Khashkura or Khasa-speech. It is also called Gorkhali. Another name is Parbatiya… I shall as a rule employ the name Khashkura, this being the name employed in British India by the people who speak it.” (Ibid)

When Turner began writing his dictionary of the Nepali language, he had active support and patronage of the King of Nepal. So it can be inferred that Turner’s title ‘Nepali Dictionary’ had royal approval. It must also be added that in 1930, the royal literary and censorship committee was renamed Nepalibhasa Prakasini Samiti
from Gorkhabhasa Prakasini Samiti, implying that in all effect, the word Nepali had been accepted as the statutory appellation of the national language of Nepal.

**Formation of Nepali Identity:**

According to historian Burghart (1994:3-4), while the political entity of Nepal existed throughout, the preoccupation with the national question that Nepal is a country of Nepalese people dates only from the early 1930s in the Rana period. As has been pointed out, even the current word ‘Nepali’ for the language of the people of Nepal is derived from the British usage based on their appellation of the Kingdom of Gorkha as the Kingdom of Nepal in the 19th century. But it came into official effect from 1930, when the Gorkha Government began to refer to its kingdom as the ‘realm of Nepal’ (Burghart, 1984: 118-119). Prior to the 1930s, the ‘kingdom of Nepal’ was referred to only by the British colonial rulers of India. For the common people of Nepal, it was the Gorkha Sarkar. After 1930, the Kingdom of Nepal began to refer itself as ‘Kingdom of Nepal’ or Nepal Sarkar, thereby bringing state and territory, people and language, together as a single cultural entity.

It is the argument of the present researcher that although the people of Nepal were united under one centrist rule politically, which sought to subjugate the rich diversity of the country into a caste-based Hinduised model, there was no palpable cultural and nationalistic strand uniting the people in any manner when they began to move away from their territory into the Indian territory in the early 19th century. There were many reasons for the emigration of the people, particularly from the eastern districts of Nepal, and the only uniting factor that seems possible was the language that these people spoke. It was the Nepali language which had been adopted by all the castes, ethnicities and tribal groups.

**United in Suffering and against Tyranny:**

If, at all, the various strands of caste, race and ethnicity were united, it was in terms of, and against, an extremely exploitative and regressive centrist regime by virtue of being fellow sufferers. Extreme punishment meted out to people for offences related to caste pollution and purification, tough and tyrannical land tenure provisions
for infringement and gross apathy to people’s woes united the victims of the Rana rule into one collective unit.

The Sahitya Akademi Award winning novel, *Basai*, by the Assamese Nepali writer Lil Bahadur Chetri graphically delineates the suffering and the consequent migration of the hapless Nepalese of Eastern Hill region of Nepal. The fate of the protagonist of the novel, Dhan Bahadur or Dhane, his sister Jhuma and the good Samaritan Mote Karki is representative of all eastern Nepal hill peasants who at one point or the other of their personal history thought of ‘basai sarai’ or emigration to a land less plagued by hardship and trials and tribulations that these hapless peasants had to face. So when dispersal of these victims actually took place, they continued to forge the unity as fellow sufferers in the new destinations in which they ultimately sought to settle down – the hills of Darjeeling and Sikkim and the valleys of Dooars and Assam and even beyond in the hills and valleys of other North Eastern states like Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh.

**PART II**

**Emigration of the Nepalese and their Advent to the North East Region of India:**

Some of the historiographical commonplaces regarding the link between Nepal and Assam are concerned with ancient periods of history, in which the scholars interested in the subject invoke the hoary past as a great cultural exchange that took place between rulers, scholars and priests. There are credible historical evidence as well to strengthen such invocations. Colonial historiography with its penchant for records, documents and narratives throws important light on the advent of the Nepalese, first in the form of Gorkha soldiers who were encouraged to settle down in many parts of the undivided Assam. There is also available record to show how graziers and marginal farmers particularly from eastern hills of Nepal came over to the Brahmaputra valley in search of fertile land and grazing ground for their cattle.
Kamrupa’s Princess Rajyamati’s Marriage with King Joy Dev II of Nepal:

Attempts have been made to establish a link between Nepal and Assam in order to trace the cultural exchange between the two ancient kingdoms of Kamrupa and Nepal. The basis of such narrative is a solid historical proof in the form of a rock inscription inside the sanctum of the Pashupatinath Temple in Kathmandu which goes as follows:

Madyaddantisamuhadantamusalkhsunnharibhubrichhiro Gaudodradikalinga
Koshalapati Sriharshadevatmaja | Devi Rajyamati Kulochita
Gunheiryuktaprabhuta
Kuleiryenodha Bhagaduttarajakulaja Lakshmiriva kshsamabhuja
Angashriya parigato jitakamarupah kanchigunadhyvanita
Abhirupasya – Mana: …… (Verse 15, Pashupari Vansha Prashasti Shilalekh)

“Master of enemy kings of Gaud, Udra and other lands whose heads are torn apart by pestle-like tusks of intoxicated herd of elephants, King of Kalinga and Kaushal Shri Harshadev’s Lakshmi-like daughter Rajyamati having lineal qualities, born in Royal Dynasty of Bhagadutta of Kamarupa was married to the King (Joydev II), (Krishna Dev Agarwal “Arvind”; Importance of Nepalese Sanskrit Inscriptions, Rastriya Sanskrit Sansthan, New Delhi, 147.)

Charyapada and the Nepal-Assam Link:

The second important document that testifies to the age-old cultural ties between the two kingdoms is in the form of a collection of a composition of Buddhist songs of realization found in Nepal at the turn of the 20th Century. In 1907, a scholar by the name of Haraprasad Shastri discovered a palm-leaf manuscript at the Nepal Royal Court Library. The text contained verses written in the Assamese, Bengali, Odiya, Nepali and Maithili languages. These verses had to do with songs related to the spiritual realization (hence charya geet) written in the Vajrayana tradition of Buddhism. Scholars have ascertained the dates of composition to be between the 10th to the 12th century A.D. (Sen, S. 1991 [1940] Bangla Sahityer Itihas, P 55, Vol I
Kolkata, Ananda Publishers). Two of the groups of poets who composed the songs happen to be from Assam – Luipa was from Kamrupa and Sarahapa was from the hamlet of Rani near the present day Guwahati. The discovery of the Charyapada and the involvement of the Assamese poets in the composition indicates a high degree of intellectual and artistic exchange that existed between Assam and Nepal.

**The Cooch Behar-Nepal Link:**

It is another historiographical commonplace that there were close cultural ties between the royal houses of Cooch Behar and Nepal during medieval times. Biswa Singha, the founder of the Cooch Behar kingdom entered into a matrimonial alliance with a princess of Nepal. Biswa Singha is credited with inviting artisans, sculptors, scholarly Brahmin and Kayastha aristocrats into his kingdom for its enrichment. Niladhwaj and Naranarayan, subsequent Koch princes are claimed to have married with princesses from Nepal.

**The Advent of the Gorkha Soldier: Paradigm Shift in Nepalese’ Arrival in Assam:**

Large-scale emigration of Nepalese into Assam was triggered off by the British policy to recruit the sturdy Gorkhas into the Imperial Army. The irony of the Anglo-Gorkha war was that although the Gorkhas were defeated by the British Army, they won the hearts of the British commanders by their valour and courage. It is instructive to quote a British official, Sir Charles Matcalfe in this regard who paid glowing tribute to the valour of the enemy Gorkha soldiers:

“We have met with an enemy who shows decidedly greater bravery and greater steadiness than our troops possess; and it is impossible to say what might be the end of such reverse of order of things. Europeans and natives have been repulsed by inferior number with sticks and stones. In others our troops have been beaten by the enemy, sword (khukuri) in hand and driven miles like a flock of sheep… In this war, dreadful to say, we have had number on our side, and skill and bravery on the side of the enemy.” (Thomson Garaffs, Rise and Fulfilment of British Rule in India, 256 cited in Muktan in Sinha and Subba)
Impressed by the heroic deeds and sturdy character of the valiant Gorkha, the colonial government decided to raise a number of Gorkha Regiments by recruiting Gorkha soldiers:

“By the time the war [the Anglo-Gorkha War] had ended in 1815, about 4,650 Gorkhali army had deserted their homes and sought service with the company in response to the invitations of the British Commanders and the British raised three regiments from the Gorkhalis which later became the I, II and III Gurkha Rifles. Sensing the resistance offered by the Gorkhali army to the British, Sikh King Ranjit Singh recruited Gorkhalis in the Khalsa army by offering high pay and also entered into treaty with the Nepal government in 1839. Gorkhalis who went to Lahore for recruitment since then have been termed Lahure (one who goes to Lahore) by the Nepalese…”

The British commanders went on to raise as many as 11 Gurkha Rifles or regiments in India. They are as follows:

i) King George V’s Own Gurkha Rifles
ii) King Edward VII’s Own Gurkha Rifles
iii) Queen Alexandra’s Own Gurkha Rifles
iv) Prince of Wales’ Own Gurkha Rifles
v) Royal Gurkha Rifles
vi) 6th Gurkha Rifles
vii) 7th Gurkha Rifles
viii) 8th Gurkha Rifles
ix) 9th Gurkha Rifles
x) Princess Mary’s Own Gurkha Rifles
xi) 11th Gurkha Rifles

Of these eleven regiments, the 6th, 7th and 8th Gurkha Rifles were deployed in the Assam Province by the British Colonial Army serving under the East India Company.

6th Gurkha Rifles: According to Edward Gait, this regiment was raised in Cuttack by Captain Fraser at first with the nomenclature of ‘Cuttack Legion’ in 1817 two years
after the Anglo-Gorkha War. Gait states, “Captain Neufville also commanded the Assam Light Infantry, a corps of about a thousand men, who had been raised in Cuttack in 1817, under the name of Cuttack Legion, and was subsequently transferred to the Rangpur district of Bengal. After its permanent location in Assam, it consisted mainly of Hindustanis and Gurkhas, with a sprinkling of Manipuris and the natives of the province. In 1828, it became the Assam Light Infantry.”

The British policy of recruiting Gorkhas in the frontier posts of Assam had the tacit support of the Governor-General William Bentinck who described the Gorkhas as ‘brave and energetic’. He averred, “For two companies I would gladly see them composed exclusively by Gorkhas” (F. P. C. 23 July, 1832 No. 9, Minute of the Govern General Lord William Bentinck, cited in Muktan in Sinha and Subba, 146, 2007)

It must be noted that within a span of six years, from 1833 to 1839, nearly one third of the battalion in the Assam Light Infantry came to be composed of Gorkhas (Muktan in Sinha and Subba, 146, 2007).

The British encouraged the Gorkhas to settle down in undivided Assam and there seems to be a policy in this regard. After retirement, the Gorkha soldiers were given land allotments to settle down so that their sons could be drafted into the army.

It must also be added that the advent of the Gorkhas was further impacted by the British policy to recruit them in the Imperial police force. Although in the higher echelons in the army circles it was thought that recruiting Gorkhas in the Police Force was a sheer waste at the cost of the army, the events unfolding post-1857 forced the British government to increase the number of recruits in the police force in Assam. An added facet of the recruitment was that the Gorkhas successfully thwarted the minor skirmishes in the frontier posts in their encounters with tribes like the Singphos and the Garos. The settlement plan for retired Gorkhas in the frontier areas was to offer a buffer of peaceful Gorkha settlers with their turbulent tribal neighbours. As a historical process, the Gorkha soldiers became naturalized domiciles of the land they served and got integrated into the mainstream as Assamese Nepali.
The Gift of Darjeeling and Subsequent Events Leading to Nepalese Settlements:

In 1835, the East India Company entered into a Deed of Grant by virtue of which Darjeeling was gifted to the British by the Kingdom of Sikkim so that a sanatorium for British officials could be built. The entire population of the Darjeeling district was co-opted into British India, thereby strengthening the claim of the Nepalese that they are de facto subjects of British India. Later, Darjeeling became an important recruiting centre for the Gorkha soldiers. In 1850, the Company annexed the Siliguri subdivision into British India.

Under the Treaty of Sincula (1965), the Kingdom of Bhutan had to cede Kalimpong and 18 Dooars of the plains of what is now known as the Jalpaiguri District. It must be mentioned here that the discovery of tea in the hill tracts of Upper Assam and the subsequent Company policy of commercial plantation of the exotic brew was implemented in the Dooars region in the plains and the hill region of Darjeeling with as much enthusiasm as it was done in the Brahmaputra valley and Cachar in Assam and the Chittagong region of Bengal. Large scale employment of Nepalese labourers was encouraged in the Dooars and Darjeeling tea plantation areas mainly from marginal and landless farmers from Nepal.

Advent of Nepalese Graziers and Farmers:

Gorkha soldiers on furlough back home in Nepal in the mid 19th century conjured up the image of a country with ample resources when it came to recounting the tales from their experiences in the frontier posts in places like Assam to their fellow villagers. The fact that most of these soldiers also settled down to a retired life of cattle breeding and farming also must have been a source of incentive for the unsuspecting rustics from Nepal to light out of the territory, as it were, in search of fortune. These impressionable Nepali villagers were the next band of emigrants to descend on the plains of the Brahmaputra valley in the middle of the 19th century. Most of these hills men were breeders of cattle and marginal farmers who used to produce rice, millet and maize in the middle hills of eastern Nepal. Some of these new entrants into the Brahmaputra valley brought in their own breed of buffaloes with them and set up khusis in the basin of the Brahmaputra around the chars and river islands.
Eminent social scientist A. C. Sinha vividly describes the advent of the Nepali settlers in the Brahmaputra valley in the following terms:

“The Nepali herdsmen and farmers move out of Nepal or its immediate eastern neighbouring Indian districts in search of new opportunities alone or sometimes in small groups of unskilled labourers. The only capital he carries with him are his personal qualities as a cheerful, perseverant and sturdy hand, his ubiquitous khukuri and a readiness to do anything to make a living. With his temperament, he easily combines a number of roles in himself as a dairyman, sharecropper, landless labourer, porter, smith, carpenter and even errand boy.

With his frugal habits, perseverance and industriousness he makes a difficult living for himself to begin with. His role in the local economy within no time turns out to be significant, because of his availability for any type of agricultural chores… His cosmopolitan social outlook, creative freedom from restrictions of purity and pollution in terms of food and drink and the prevalence of polygyny enable him to easily acquire a female partner…”

The socio-cultural and economic impact of the Nepali grazier and farmer is beautifully illustrated in the Bihu Geet reflective of the early days of the Nepali settlers in Assam:

“Ujai ahile bhatideshor Nepali
Mohgarhor mukhate rol
Mainamaji gaonore Senduri Pomili noite ga dhubole gol
Agot jay Senduri pasot jay Pomili
Majot jay Nepali
Borgharor mudhote Sendurir tant sal
Nepalir jiruwa thai
Makok bhulale mohor doi gakhire
Bapekok bhulale dhane
Sendurik bhulale senduror temare

Pomilik bhulale longe…”

The Bihu folk song quoted above pointedly alludes to the growing social acceptance of the Nepali settler as he grew in his stature as a herdsman and farmer besides his propensity to set up a family on a permanent basis in the Brahmaputra valley.

**Distinction between the Gorkhali Soldiers and Nepali Grazier-Farmers:**

It must be born in mind that the British fondness for the Gorkha as a virile armyman was restricted to the speakers of the Tibeto-Burman stock among the Nepalis, particularly Magars, Puns and Gurungs of central Nepal region and in later days after the Ghoom recruitment centre came up in Darjeeling, for the Rais, Limbus and the Newars. It is true that among the high caste Hindus among the Nepalis, only certain subclans of the Chhetris like Thapa, Basnet and Karki were encouraged for enlistment. The rest of the Hindu castes were deemed inferior for army recruitment with only few stray exceptions. On the other hand, most of the graziers and farmers belonged to the high caste Hindu families. A report submitted by the Chief Secretary of Assam to the Govt of Assam as late as in 1930 corroborates this historical fact about the settlement of the Nepali Graziers and farmers in the Brahmaputra plains:

“The greater number of the numerous Nepali graziers in Assam are Jaisis and Upadhyay Brahmins or Chhetris of non-martial classes. Some of the Gorkhalis of the fighting classes who have served in the Gorkha regiments in the Assam Rifles settled down in Assam when they leave the service.”

It is clear from the report cited above that the British had a clear notion about the formation of the nationality of the Nepalis; they chose to call the martial classes as Gorkhalis or Gorkha and the caste Hindus as Nepalis. Whatever that may be, it will be seen that these martial and non-martial classes among the Nepali settlers were bound by a common thread of linguistic nationalism and as things begin to develop in the 20th century, as they become more and more politically conscious, a cultural nationalism also grew among them under whose light they chose to fashion their future as Assamese Nepali in the decades to come.
The Elite among the Settlers: Former *Birtawals to Mahajans*

One feature which has often got neglected or overlooked in the narrative of the Nepali settlement in Assam is with regard to the profiling of the Nepali settlers as small or marginal farmers and herdsmen. The present writer is of the view that the flight of the high-caste Brahmin and Chhetri farmers and herdsmen has to be studied in the context of the changing political climate in the mid-19th century eastern hills of Nepal. After the rise of the Ranas in the post-1846 developments in the royal court and the subsequent consolidation of power in the hands of Prime Minister Jang Bahadur Rana, the landed gentry of the eastern hills faced a cruel regime of tax extraction from the *amlis, dwares, jimdars* and *patwaris* – all tax officials of the royal court. The Rana regime also had a skewed policy of land reforms in the forest-rich Terai region adjacent to the hills in districts like Morang and Sunchari which displaced many common farmers and herdsmen. The fact that many of the landed gentry left their well-endowed *birta* land and set out for the plains of the Brahmaputra valley has been under-emphasized in most narratives related to the migration of Nepalis to Assam. The pain of leaving behind their beloved land and belongings as well as a loss of the code of honour which the earlier royal regimes adhered to has not been adequately addressed. During field studies, the present writer came across many families in which the *Bahun* elderly family head is still addressed with the honorific of *Baje*, the *Chhetri* headman as *Mukhiya* and the *Kirat* patriarch as *Subba*, honorifics which were exclusively preserved for the well-endowed landed gentry. It is also a fact that once the *birtaval* of a hillock in an eastern hill like Taplejung or Okhaldhunga or Ilam decided to leave his beloved land and property and head towards an unknown land, the retinues and farmhands also threw in the dice and left their homes alongside. It is also true that most of the occupational classes based on rigid caste system advocating ritual purity and pollution were living in a wretched condition of penury. When they landed in the river islands and riverbanks of the Brahmaputra, they were free to chart their own territory. However, most preferred to set new villages in which the formerly well-endowed and the penury-stricken Nepalis co-existed. The well-endowed among them saw their fortunes rise because of their diligence and perseverance and came to be known as *Mahajans*, a new honorific in a new setting which was shorn of all feudal trappings. The *Mahajan* was semi-literate in secular
studies but knew his Yajurveda inside out, (all eastern hill-originated settlers caste Hindus in Assam follow the Shukla Yajurveda as their master scripture in matters of religious rituals), could recite all the 1975 suktas of it, apart from excelling in calculating horoscopes and reciting texts from the Bhanubhakta Ramayana. It is this figure of the well-endowed Mahajan who actually instilled the pioneering sense of political awakening among his fellow brethren in the beginning of the 20th century.

**The Kaziranga Eviction and the Rallying Point for Political Activism:**

The Nepali settlers were allowed to set their dairy farms or khuntis on the banks and river islands which the Nepalis called Tapu. In return for the grant to use forest land for professional grazier, the government had levied taxes on the buffaloes. It is pertinent to quote Nath here who has some valuable insights to offer on the levy of taxes on Nepali graziers:

“From the early times, the peasants in land-abundant Assam had enjoyed the traditional right to graze their cattle freely in the village commons and neighbouring forests (Guha, 1988, pp. 99-4). But under the colonial regime, this right was curtailed to produce additional revenue for the exchequer. Although initially an insignificant source of revenue, with the steady rise of immigration and settlement of the Nepali graziers, it soon became an important source of income. In the unclassed forests, the ryots (peasants) were allowed unlimited grazing rights free of payment for their plough and domestic cattle, but Nepalis rearing cattle for dairy farming were charged for the grazing privilege. …The grazing fees, which were introduced over head of horned animal in 1888, were gradually increased over the years, causing resentment among the graziers.” (Nath 141 2006)

It must be noted here that the graziers were liberally granted grazing land by the British government in order to encourage the production of dairy items like milk, curd, cream and cottage cheese. Such grants of grazing land were classified under the following lines’

i) Professional Grazing Reserve (PGR) – under this grant, the Kaziranga forest land was earmarked before the said eviction happened
ii) Village Grazing Reserve (VGR) --- large tracts of unoccupied land was granted around the settlers’ villages to encourage animal husbandry

iii) Village Grazing Ground (VGG) – fallow land was commonly used for raising cattles but such land was not reserved.

There was a *moh sirdar* on commission to collect the taxes who used to report to a Grazing Superintendent equivalent in today’s parlance to the rank of an S. D. C. The government was hugely successful in collecting taxes from the buffaloes; for example, the total revenue collected from buffalo tax amounted to an impressive Rs. 251510/- from the Brahmaputra valley alone. It goes without saying that majority of the cattle rearers were the Nepali settlers along the Brahmaputra river.

Ironically, it was in the next financial year, 1920-21, that the Nepali graziers in the Kaziranga area towards the riverbank of the Brahmaputra were handed over notices to vacate the grazing reserve. “In 1920, the British government ordered all the graziers of Kaziranga to vacate their grazing lands within 24 hours. The forest rangers and forester burnt the households of the graziers to expedite the move, causing harassment and considerable loss of property…” (Nath 143, 2006). The Kaziranga incident was a turning point in the awakening of the political consciousness in the Assamese Nepali, a fact highlighted by the following observations by the eminent social scientist, Sajal Nag:

“The atrocities on the tax-paying graziers of Kaziranga compelled the leaders of the Nepali community in northeast India to think of politically organizing themselves. In fact, the idea of a Graziers’ Association was in the mind of Gangadhar Upadhyay of Shillong in 1913. He invoked Chhabilal Upadhyay, himself a grazer and Mahajan, to take up the cause of these evicted Nepali graziers…. As a result of his (Chhabilal Upadhyay’s) effort, the Tezpur Graziers’ Association came into existence in 1933 at Singri… The main objectives of the Association which was later renamed as Assam Graziers’ Association were laid down as (i) protection and preservation of grazing lands in Assam, (ii) stop cultivation in professional grazing reserves, (iii) prevention of immigrants in Burha Chapari, (iv) protection of forests of Assam for the survival of Nepali community in Assam, (v) involvement of domiciled Nepali in Assam in the freedom movement of India, and (vi) preservation of social
integration between the Assamese and Nepali communities.” (Nag 191 in Sinha and Subba 2007)

**Chhabilal Upadhyay and the Growth of Assamese Nepali Subnationalism:**

Chhabilal Upadhyay was a descendant of former *birtawals* and a mahajan, who rose among equals by dint of diligence, courage and political acumen. He rallied his fellow brothers with a strong voice of protest and opened channels of communication with the influential Assamese intellectuals and political forces so that the injustice meted out to the graziers could be addressed. Amalendu Guha, the most respected expert on economic history of Assam, has the following to state regarding the role of Upadhyay:

“The Assam Association, which had changed its name and virtually turned itself into a Congress platform in its Tezpur Session, had its last meeting at Jorhat with Chhabilal Upadhyay in the chair in April, 1921. Besides condemning the recent evictions of Nepali graziers in the Kaziranga Forest Reserve and police atrocities on them, the meeting also discussed the non-cooperation programme and organizational matters.” (Guha 1988: 125)

Upadhyay, and others of his ilk, faced the major heat of their organizational career when the Saadulla government changed the policy of land grant with the slogan of ‘grow more food’ in order to accommodate large scale settlement of Bengali Muslim immigrants. “..[T]he Association faced a major challenge from the aggressive encroachment of grazing lands by the Bengali Muslim immigrants from Mymensing. In fact, this fight was physical rather than official…. The Association submitted several memoranda against the ‘Grow more Food’ scheme of the Muslim League Ministry led by Sir Saadulla.” (ibid).

“Again in 1942, to accommodate the Muslim immigrants …, the colonial government from erstwhile East Pakistan, changed its policies towards the Nepali graziers. All the grazing reserves that according to earlier notifications should have been cleared of the (Nepali) encroachers, were now allowed to be overrun by the Muslim immigrants, resulting in daily riots and bloodshed as local graziers fought against the settlement of Muslim immigrants (Chetri, 1996, p. 109). A 1944 report on
the Professional Grazing Reserves mentions the Muslim immigrants’ continuous encroachment on the grazing reserves, at which the Nepali graziers protested and complained to the local authorities, but it notes that the ‘Government have taken no action nor do they seem to have given any direction to the local revenue officers as regards their duties and responsibilities in regard to the protection of the rights of the graziers…’ (Report of the Special Officer Appointed for the Examination of the Professional Grazing Reserves in the Assam Valley, 1944, p 11). The Nepali graziers, along with their Assamese counterparts, submitted petitions to the king emperor, but to no avail. As they saw it, then, the colonial government that had long been the protector and custodian of their interests, had failed them.”

It must be noted that the contribution of Chhabilal Upadhyay in helping form the tendencies of subnational consciousness of Assamese Nepalis was appreciably complimented by the leading Assamese nationalistic intelligentsia. Threatened by the increasing number of Muslims in Assam and the fear of being included in Pakistan, the Assamese intelligentsia led a campaign before the 1941 census so that all the Hindu population of Assam declared themselves as Assamese to the enumerators. Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury, the leading figure of Assamese nationalism visited Chhabilal Upadhyay’s native village Majgaon in Behali and gave a clarion call to the Assamese Nepalis to help their Assamese brethren in this hour of crisis. He exhorted the Nepalis in the following lines:

“Dear workers and Nepali brothers, you are always observing that we the Assamese have never opposed your entry in Assam. Rather they have embraced you as their own. Therefore, in the census you please enumerate your mother tongue as Assamese, your religion as Hindu and your community as the Assamese community to the census enumerators and thus assimilate yourselves with the greater interests of the Assamese nation. In return to this, we assure you of all the political, economic and national rights in Assam as those enjoyed by the Assamese themselves. This is the only request your Assamese brothers have for you!” (Nag in Sinha and Subba 191 2006)

The process of assimilation of the Assamese Nepali into the mainstream national consciousness continued when hundreds of Nepali farmers joined the Mukti
Bahini camps set up by Jyoti Prasad Agarwala during the Quit India Movement. The ‘Thaluwa Nepali’ as described by Jyotiprasad in his song came out in hordes to support the national movement and many new leaders were born as a legacy of Chhabilal Updhyay’s pioneering contribution to the formation of a socio-cultural and political consciousness among the Assamese Nepalis in the 1940s. It was thanks to this legacy that a new crop of young, educated leaders like the trade unionist Dalbir Sing Lohar and the Gandhian Bishnulal Upadhyay catapulted themselves into the firmament of the politically conscious Assamese Nepali intelligentsia and went on to assume important political roles. It is remarkable that within a span of a few decades, Dalbir Singh Lohar rose from the ranks to become a member in the Prime Minister Gopinath Bordoloi-led provincial assembly council in 1946 and Bishnulal Upadhyay became a member of the 2nd Assam Legislative Assembly in 1957. In the process, the Assamese Nepalis established themselves firmly as a formidable subnational entity within the scheme of things in Assam’s socio-political and cultural field.

The Assam Agitation and a Sense of Betrayal:

It is a queer irony of history that the exhortations and fiery writings of Ambikagiri Roy Choudhury which fuelled the Assam Agitation against foreigners in the 1970s and 1980s could not safeguard the interests of the Assamese Nepalis. As against the clarion call that he gave to the Assamese Nepalis in his Behali address, there was widespread resentment against them. As against the assurance which the nationalist leader gave to the Assamese Nepalis that they would be embraced with open arms as the brothers of the mainstream Assamese, an air of suspicion and high-handedness was allowed by the leaders of the Assam Agitation to prevail. Thousands of genuine Assamese Nepalis were persecuted, their names deleted from the voters’ lists and their citizenship challenged in the foreigners’ tribunals. As a reaction to this, a more hardened political consciousness grew among the young and the influential opinion-makers among the Assamese Nepalis and a new consciousness of nationalism set in. The result of this was palpable: a more well-defined cultural boundary was imaginarily erected, new symbolisms of language and costume and national pride were injected into the minds of the new generation Assamese Nepali youths. In this new age of political bargain and brinkmanship, the Assamese Nepalis, like so many other ethnic orientations and denominations, have been rooting for self-
determination and self-right. Like so many others, they have been able to extract some political mileage, for ex., the granting of the Nepali Language as a viii schedule language within the provisions of the Indian Constitution and lately the formation of the Gorkha Development Council for the safeguard and promotion of the language, art and culture of the Assamese Nepali.

Assamese Nepalis: More Nepalis than the Nepalese in Nepal:

From a cultural point of view, the present researcher is of the view that the rise of the subnational consciousness among the Assamese Nepali is marked by a spirit of egalitarian principles based on brotherhood which seeks to transcend the barriers of casteism and sectarianism in public discourse and cultural practice. It has been rightly said that a Nepali is a Bahun or a Chetri or a Magar or a Kami or a Tharu only within Nepal. In Assam, he is a Nepali and then an Assamese or an Indian. The blurring of caste faultlines in the psyche of the Assamese Nepali is remarkable considering the fact that he had been genetically linked to a cultural practice in which untouchability and caste promotion at the cost of gross human rights violations was embedded by established and punitive rules of law. The very fact that the Assamese Nepalis unanimously accepted and projected Dalbir Singh Lohar, belonging to a caste decreed by the former law of the Rana regime as untouchable, is a remarkable achievement and symbol of the farsightedness of the leaders of the Assamese Nepalis in the middle of the 20th Century. The Assamese Nepalis, many of them, now symbolically seek to call themselves as Gorkhalis in an attempt to further integrate the ethnic Tibeto-Burman groups of speakers with the majority Brahminical groups. The Assamese Nepalis clearly seek to define their cultural boundary vis-à-vis the Nepalese in Nepal in this regard. One must remember that the Janjati Andolan that rocked Nepal in the 1990s and the tumultuous events that have followed in that land-locked country have completely destroyed the fabric of social cohesion and the country has plunged into a internecine struggle between Bahunvad and the asmita (pride) of Janjatived, a morass out of which the Nepalese society is still struggling to wriggle out with little signs of any reconciliation. The Assamese Nepalis know that they do not have any lessons to draw from the Nepalese in Nepal.
Conclusion:

The Assamese Nepalis have traversed a historical path beginning nearly two centuries in the plains and hills of the Brahmaputra valley, constantly reinventing and renegotiating their social, cultural and political identity. For them, it has been a long and painful process of integration into the larger society, be it with the Bodos in the newly formed BTAD, or with the Assamese society at large. It has also been a process of discovering self-identity. From a disparate group of fortune seekers, their entity has emerged as a formidable and cohesive social group which has discarded many ills from within their social and cultural structures and adopted fresh insights gained from hard-fought struggle for co-existence in a multi-lingual, multi-racial and pluralistic society. Oftentimes, the insights have given way to palpable forms in the arena of politics and culture, but most of the time, they have informed the everyday experience of living in which the perennial subnational features of the Assamese Nepalis to adopt and adjust to any changed situation confronting them has stood them in good stead. Thus, behind the countenance of the mild-mannered Assamese Nepalis, new encounters and experiences have hardened their resolve to carry on with the business of leading personal and community life with a certain characteristic cheerfulness for which they have always been known. This is a process of churning which every social group goes through, and the Assamese Nepalis have accounted themselves well in this inevitable process of churning.