

MIGRANTS IN FLIGHT: CONFLICT-INDUCED INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT OF NEPALIS IN NORTHEAST INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Ethnic violence, which has become endemic to the states of postcolonial Northeast India, has often targeted populations of migrant origin as foreigners or illegal immigrants to be sent back to their lands of origin. The Nepalis from the neighbouring kingdom of Nepal, who have been migrating to Northeast India since the colonial times have long integrated into the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society of the region. Settled in almost all the states of the region they have, in recent times, been frequently identified as foreigners as their growing numbers have caused worry in a backward region of India, as well as the seemingly deliberate attempts of the ethnic movements to loosely define the term 'foreigner'. They have suffered large-scale evictions and internal displacement. This paper looks at the conflict-induced displacement of the Nepalis in Northeast India. It argues that the internal displacement of the Nepalis in Northeast India has not received much attention or concern, partly because their inherent mobility and proclivity to migrate tends to draw attention away from this new phenomenon and partly because they have social networks, which allow them to resettle with ease in the new areas to which they migrated. The paper also looks at the government attitude towards rehabilitating and providing relief to these victims of internal displacement.

INTRODUCTION

The closing years of the twentieth century and the opening years of the twenty-first century witnessed large-scale evictions and expulsions of migrants from various regions in South Asia in the wake of identity assertions and growing ethnic conflict. The exodus of the *Lhotshampas* from Bhutan and the eviction of Nepalis settled for approximately two hundred years in various parts of Northeast India following anti-foreigner agitations beginning in late nineteen seventies, are recent examples of such evictions. This paper looks at conflict-induced internal displacement of the Nepalis settled in the seven states of Northeast India.

Social scientists have long attributed the Nepalis settled in Northeast India since 1820s with a migratory nature, either in search of economic opportunities or grazing lands for cattle crucial for their primary business of milk production, which finds them constantly moving; not only across the open India-Nepal border but also across the seven states that constitute Northeast India. In the postcolonial years, the extent of such internal migration has increased. Although it may be for the reasons mentioned above, the escalation in the incidence of ethnic conflict in the various states of Northeast India in which Nepalis have often been victimised as the ethnic 'other' has been the most convincing. During the last years of the twentieth century almost every state in Northeast India has experienced discrimination and persecution against the Nepalis, often forcing them to flee their place of settlement, thus leading to massive internal displacement of Nepali settlers. Anti-foreigner movements almost all over Northeast India, triggered by the son of the soil agitation in Assam, the Assam Movement (1979-85), which sought out Nepali and Bangladeshi migrants to be deported to their respective countries of origin, have made these migrants vulnerable to growing instances of nativist backlash.

This is ironical since the Nepali colonial settlers in Northeast India are distinguished by a high level of integration with the local indigenous communities amongst whom they have lived for centuries.¹ Again, the word 'Nepali' immediately associates Indian Nepalis with the sovereign country, Nepal, in the mind of the larger Indian population² and somehow creates a perception, however false, that they are a population who have the option to return to their land of origin. The continuous recharge of the Indian/Northeastern labour market by the out-migrating people of Nepal, courtesy the 1950 Indo-Nepal Treaty, which ensures equal rights and privileges for nationals of India and Nepal in both countries and the open border between the two countries, reinforces the belief among Indians that Indian Nepalis are also citizens of Nepal. This myth of a 'double homeland' makes them soft targets of ethnic group assertions fighting over available scarce resources often leading to loss of home, hearth and livelihood. Like other internally displaced populations (IDP) such as the Reangs moving from Mizoram to Tripura and the Kukis and Nagas into Manipur and Nagaland respectively, the case of the Nepalis has a 'spillover' impact of IDPs that has practically linked every state of the Northeast to one another in a chain movement. Yet, the issue of the Nepali IDPs has failed to draw much attention first, due to their small numbers and second, due to the apparently mobile nature of the community that makes it easy to ignore the many complexities that affect this community in recent times in Northeast India.

INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT: THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

IDPs are the largest 'at risk' population in the world. Yet, the international community has not been able to establish a formal, legal and precise definition of the term. There continues to be debates over who are IDPs and how can they be defined as such. Efforts made to fill this conceptual gap have tended to be either too broad or too narrow to be of proper analytical or operational purpose and be evenly applicable to all situations within its paradigm. The early working definition of 'Internally Displaced Persons' presented in a 1992 report of the Secretary General of the United Nations³ excludes from its paradigm many serious cases, which are not in very large numbers and/or are marginal communities and those, who did not flee but were expelled⁴. The framing of the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement led to a broader and a more operational definition of IDPs. In this paper, I shall use the modified version according to which, 'internally displaced persons are persons or groups of persons, who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border'⁵.

The primary cause in many postcolonial instances of internal displacement has been ascribed to conflict. Analysts attribute conflict to the following reasons:

1. Differences of identity based on ethnic or religious grounds.
2. Consequences of those differences, when it comes to sharing power and distributing the nation's resources and opportunities.

3. The manipulation of these differences by government authorities for political or military purposes⁶.

The U.S. Committee for Refugees considers 'conflict between a government and a minority' to be one of the principal causes of internal displacement. In a recent publication, Ranabir Samaddar calls it a 'democratic deficit'; which also produces a humanitarian deficit⁷. Victimized by the agencies of power, minorities and government often seek to reverse power imbalances and foment civil war/ethnic conflict accompanied by violence and terror and at times ethnic cleansing as a part of the strategy to justify their ends⁸.

Often it is noticed that the impact of displacement is long term and disrupts lives of not only the individuals and families but also of whole communities and societies extending well beyond the numbers counted as being displaced. Major ethical dilemmas have also emerged in treating displacement:

- a. The norm of responsibility.
- b. The administration of quick and proper care.
- c. Prioritization of issues.

State governments and authorities are often found to ignore these issues while dealing with displacement compounding the effects on the displaced people and their families.

Often, the ground for determination of the status of the internally displaced is the 'well founded fear', also mentioned in the Convention⁹. This translation of fear into knowledge and reason by the legal machinery to be measured as adequate to be deserving of care, as well as assume responsibility, has often resulted in the victim receiving no care at all. Where the victims of ethnic violence, justification for fear and the reasons for it have been more or less based on an indirect effect of the violence, this has often resulted in a disproportionate treatment¹⁰ and non recognition thereof.

Since neither a 'well found fear' nor its translation by the agencies of power have been able to solve the ethical dilemmas of the kind of care, kindness and hospitality and the norm and degree of responsibility to be adopted, the international community has sought to identify the internally displaced as a special category. The purpose of identifying the internally displaced is not to confer on them a privileged status but to ensure that in a given situation, their unique needs are addressed along with those of others¹¹. The United Nations Development Programme¹² and the Oslo Declaration and Plan of Action, which synthesized the proposals of hundreds of NGOs and UNHCR, recognized the value of identifying the internally displaced as a specific group to aid in their return and re-integration. In socio-economically backward areas like Northeast India where international concern does not reach well, and for marginalized groups like the Nepalis, there is a need for a special focus. It is important to recognize the victims as IDPs to extend them help. In Northeast India, the internally displaced among the Nepalis have not received proper focus due to their small numbers and easy mobility, which makes them for the most part inconspicuous. The trauma of being internally displaced remains and so also the need for care, hospitality and responsibility. The issue of victimisation of the Nepalis is not only

endemic to Northeast India, but also in other areas of South Bhutan where it has drawn some international attention.

SITUATING NORTHEAST INDIA: OVERVIEW OF INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS (1947 TO THE PRESENT)

Northeast India today consists of eight states: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim. The region is ethnically and linguistically more diverse than the rest of India; of the 430 recognised tribes in India, some 200 make their home in the Northeast and an estimated 25% of the Northeast's 31 million inhabitants belong to tribal groups. The colonial British practice of settling ethnic outsiders in the various industries as cheap labour or as farmers to sow the enormous fallow fields of the Brahmaputra valley or as clerks in the lower echelons of the bureaucracy, added the migrant-native dimension to ethnic indigenous in the region. The colonial province soon evolved into a shared homeland of Asamiyas¹³, tribals and migrants resulting in marked changes in the demographic composition of the land.

In the postcolonial period, a new dimension was added to the already growing complex scenario as the strategic location of India's Northeastern region in South Asia made it prone to undocumented immigration from across porous, land and long river borders¹⁴. In the past century the region has received immigrants as refugees, economic migrants and ecological victims from the neighbouring countries of Nepal and Bangladesh (erstwhile East Pakistan) primarily and also Chins, Nagas and Burmese from Myanmar. This has caused the Northeast's population to swell from around one million to more than 20 million. The increase in population led to a competition for resources and jobs, as both land and opportunities ceased to be abundant and soon such competition singled out migrant communities as people to be sent back to their countries of origin. Almost all the states of Northeast India have, at some time or the other, experienced political mobilization and organized violence against migrants, anti-outsider movements leading to victimization and expulsion of the communities of migrant origin and at times even ethnic cleansing of the non-indigenous groups. This 'identity politics', which became the defining theme of postcolonial Northeast Indian political agenda, laid an exclusive claim to a land that had emerged as a shared homeland since the earliest times. The anti-outsider politics came sharply into focus by the 'son of the soil' agitation in Assam (the Assam Movement, 1979-85), which became a point of reference for many of the subsequent nativist movements in the rest of the Northeastern region. These tensions, overtly organized against illegal immigrants, also spilled over to some Indian citizens because the categories were never clearly defined and perhaps intentionally left hazy, and these soon came to include tribals and descendants of migrants in the various states of Northeast India. What began as ethnic strife between 'indigenous' and 'foreign' groups turned into ethnic clashes between populations that had essentially become local to the area¹⁵. In most cases, the violence has often been directed against civilians, as the rebels and secessionist groups attack villages, massacre residents and burn houses to compel other ethnic groups to vacate disputed territory and move to ill-equipped and inadequately defended displacement camps¹⁶.

There have been at least seven major cases of conflict-induced internal displacement in Northeast India in the fifty years of independence. These are: the

displacement of the (a) *Na-Asamiya* or the New Assamese Muslims, Bengalis, Santhals and Nepalis in Assam; (b) the Bengalis from Tripura, (c) the Reangs from Mizoram; (d) the Nagas, Paite and Kukis from Manipur, (e) Chakmas from Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram. The following statistics gives an overview of internal displacement in the states of Northeast India. The figures are approximate and computed from various sources¹⁷, but verifiable, cross checkable and factual.

Table 1. Internal Displacement in Northeast India (1947-Present)

State	Year	Causes	No. of Displaced Persons	Ethic Groups
Assam	1947	Partition/Riots	53,000	Muslims
	1961 – 67	Prevention of Infiltration from Pakistan (PIP) Scheme	192,097	Muslims
	1960	Asamiya Language Movement	Unknown	Hindu Bengalis
	1972	AASU (Asamiya Language Movement)	Unknown	Hindu Bengalis
	1980	Assam Movement (Lok Sabha Elections), Nellie Massacre	1200 – 3000	Na-Asamiya Muslims
	1984	Choulkhowa Chapori (Darrang), Silapathar (Lakhimpur), Gohpur (Darrang)	Unknown	Bengali Hindus, Ex-refugee/displaced East Pakistan, ethnic Nepalis
	1991 – 93	Bodoland Movement	60,000	Bengalis
	1994 (July)	Massacres at Kokrajhar, Barpeta, Bongaigaon	1,000 persons (60 villages)	Na-Asamiya Muslim peasants
	1995 (Oct)	Massacre at relief camp at Bansbari in Barpeta	70,000	Na-Asamiya Muslims, Hindu Bengalis, Santhals, Nepalis
	1996 (May – June)	Ethnic Cleansing (Bodoland Movement)	2,50,000	Ethnic Santhals, Bodos, Nepalis
	1998	Ethnic Cleansing (Bodoland Movement)	82,000	Santhals, Bengalis, Bodos, Nepalis
Manipur	1992	Kuki/Naga ethnic conflict	11,000	Kukis & Nagas

	1993 – 1997	Thadous, Paites, Meiteis, Pangal Muslims	15,000 7,500 1000	Thadous, Paites, Meiteis, Pangal Muslims
		Naga Ceasefire Extension	7000	Nagas
	1980	Anti-foreigner Movement	60 – 100 families	Nepalis
Mizoram	1967	Grouping of Villages ¹⁸	45,000	Mizos
	1997	Bru (Reang) National Liberation Front	15,000 – 50,000	Reangs
	1997	Ethnic Violence	62,880	Kukis/Paites
	1999	Anti-foreigner ¹⁹	Unknown	Nepalis
	2001	Anti-foreigner	1466	Burmese, Nepalis
Tripura	1980 – 1992	NLFT attacks	30,000	Non-tribals
	1997	ATTF attack on non-tribals	2614	2434 non-tribals
	1998-2001	Conflict between Tripura Tribals and Bengali migrants ²⁰	25,000	Bengalis
Nagaland	1980s	Anti-foreigner/extortion	Not known	Nepalis
		Border/clashes, Merapani, Bokajan	”	Nepalis
Meghalaya	1980, 1987, 1991	Foreign National Movement	7,000 – 10,000	Nepalis, Bengalis

Sources: C. Joshua Thomas, ed., *Dimensions of Displaced People in North-East India*, New Delhi, 2002; USCR (1999): Country Reports: India (www.refugees.com); Human Rights Features (2001): No Refuge: The Plight of the Internally displaced persons in India, Embargoed for 16 March (www.hrdc.net); M. Hussain, State Identity Movements and Internal Displacement in the Northeast, *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 16, 2000.

Table 2. Internally Displaced Muslims in Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon Districts since 1993

Name of Relief Camps	No. of Families	No. of Persons	No. of Deaths in the Family
Malvita	450	1570	8
Jamunaguri	475	1972	11
Ananda Bazar	89	389	1
Patabari	750	3184	2
Jaipur	1244	5696	4
Bhowraguri	550	2554	57
Amteka Bhowraguri	141	622	1
Amteka Sidabari	47	196	0
Amteka Bazar	21	103	0

Tasuldangi	141	776	2
No. 1 Koila Moila	15	73	0
No. 2 Koila Moila	81	427	0
Pachim Amguri (Rajpara)	58	382	0
Pachim Amguri (Simlaguri)	52	265	1
Narayanpur	76	511	3
Amguri (Bhoraguri)	20	102	0
Kachimari	596	1230	3
Tapatari	276	1140	
Total [18]	5043	20812	93

Source: Memorandum to the Chief Minister, Assam submitted by the Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon Saranarathi Committee, 1996. See Hussain, 2000.

NEPALIS IN NORTHEAST INDIA

The Nepali speaking people are settled in all the seven states of Northeast India. The process of migration of the Nepalis into Northeast India, Darjeeling, and Southern Bhutan and their subsequent settlement began about two centuries ago with the British imperial penetration and the recruitment of Gorkha soldiers to the British Indian Army after the treaty of Sugauli (1816). Recruitment centres were established in the border towns of Gorakhpur and Ghoom located on the Indo-Nepal Border of the present states of Bihar and Darjeeling and Nepali villagers eager to enlist began to migrate towards India. Permanent migrations across the borders accelerated after the 1850s. The first major Nepali migration to India, as Leo Rose writes, was into the virtually unpopulated areas in Darjeeling district in Bengal, and from there into the southwest section of Sikkim in the late 19th century. The British who wanted a hardy labour force for their tea plantations facilitated the Nepali migration to Darjeeling. In Sikkim the Nepalis served as a wedge to contain the Bhutias of Sikkim and Bhutan. The Nepalis fitted admirably and became critical actors in the tremendous expansion of both Darjeeling and Sikkim economies from the mid nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. By 1900 the Nepalis formed more than 50% of the total population in Sikkim and Darjeeling, strong enough in the past century to form a government in one and demand a separate homeland in the other.

The second wave of Nepali migration was to Northeast India and the foothills of Southern Bhutan accelerating in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century. Following the Indo-Bhutanese war of 1864, a section of the sturdy and industrious Nepalis entered Bhutan, on the invitation of the Raja, with British encouragement to clear the *Duars* or the foothills of Southern Bhutan, while others came in search of cultivable land. In 1909 a British officer noted with some concern that, 'The remaining inhabitants are *Paharias*, the same as those in Sikkim, who are creeping along the foothills and now form a considerable community extending the whole length of Bhutan where the outer hills join the plains of India.'²¹ Mostly farmers, the *Lhotshampas*, as they were called by the native Bhutanese, paid taxes to the Bhutanese regime in cash and kind but in the absence of a formal immigration policy, their status remained undefined. In the 1950s the Bhutanese government inaugurated a policy that denied the existence of these *Lhotshampas*, followed by

stringent citizenship laws. Faced with visible persecution and an uncertain future, many fled Bhutan seeking refuge at the relief camps at Jhapa in Nepal, while others reacted by politically mobilizing forces against the Royal Government of Bhutan.

In Northeast India, the Nepalis, in addition to recruits in the Gurkha army, migrated for the purpose of labour, to open up forestlands, for lumbering, settlements and tea plantations in the colonial period. In the last part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, even the 'non-martial Jaisis, Brahmins and Chettris'²², began to migrate to take up grazing, dairy farming and agriculture attracted by the availability of grazing land and the growing business of milk supply. After their retirement from the armed forces, the Gurkhas (as the Nepalis were also called) were encouraged to settle down in the foothills, forest fringes and other strategic locations on the frontier thus creating compact pockets of Nepali settlements at Sadiya in Assam, Mantripokhari in Manipur, Aizawl in Mizoram and Mokokchung in Nagaland, besides others at Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya²³ and Tripura. This was probably because the British wanted their own stock of Gurkhas rather than have to rely on Nepal all the time. Many of the retired Gurkha soldiers after their retirement also took up dairy farming and agriculture²⁴, many even preferred cattle grazing to cultivation. In Assam also, the eminent historian Amalendu Guha writes about the vast majority of 'professional cattle graziers of Nepali origin'²⁵.

The Nepali migration in Northeast India, once it began followed a dynamics of its own. The Census of 1941 records that Nepal provided 45% immigrants to India. In the postcolonial period, the Indo-Nepal Friendship Treaty of 1950, revised in 1956, and the Tripartite Delhi Agreement of 1951 which gave them rights to engage in business, acquire property, settle, seek employment and move freely anywhere in India allowed them to escape Nepal's underdevelopment and economic pressures. Nepali migration to the Northeast increased overwhelmingly. The following tables give the statistics on the Nepali population in Northeast India.

Table 3. Demography of the Nepalis in Northeast India (1951-1991)

States	1951	1961	1971	1976	1981	1991
Arunachal Pradesh	NA	10,610 (25,000)	30,912 (85,000)	NA	45,508	NA
Assam	101,338*	215,213 132,925*	349,116 353,673 *	NA	NA	432,519
Manipur	(2860)	13,571	26,381	(36,604)	37,046	
Meghalaya	NA	32,288 (6000)	44,445 (10,111)	NA	61,259	
Mizoram	NA	2042 (2000)	NA (4000)	NA	5983	
Nagaland	NA	10,400	17,536	NA	24,918	
Tripura	NA	1696	2107	NA	2190	

Sources: Timsina, 1992. Figures in brackets from Dutt, 1981 and figures in asterisks from Sinha, 1982.

Table 4 Growth of Nepali Population in Assam (1901-1991)

Year	Nepali Population in Assam	Percentage
1901	21,347	0.35
1911	47,654	.67
1921	70,344	.94
1931	88,306	1.02
1951	1,01,338	1.26
1961	2,15,213	1.98
1971	3,49,116	2.38
1991	4,32,519	1.93

Source: Census of India 1901-71; 1991; M. Hussain, 1993: 258.

The larger section of the people in Northeast India did not protest against the migration of the Nepalis to the region and even welcomed them as they provided the labour requirements that the locals would not since their early migration. This allowed them an opportunity to assimilate with the locals adopting the language and the customs of the region where they settled. There are enough official reports, which testify that the Nepalis have lived in peace.²⁶ The Deputy Commissioner of Darrang observed in his official report in 1937, that '... the Nepalis freely mix with the indigenous people, adopt their language and mother and create no trouble ...'.²⁷ Even in the other states of Northeast India, the Nepalis have lived and worked among the locals. In Manipur, the Nepalis were also made a domiciled community in 1947, while in Mizoram, the Nepali settlers were awarded power and privileges at par with the Lushai Chiefs, which fostered a sense of belonging²⁸

Anti-Nepali feeling in Northeast India was first observed during the Assam Movement. In the post colonial years the slow pace of development and neglect of the region led to a feeling of disappointment and alienation among the indigenous people, who began to see the migrants or the non-indigenous groups as the cause of their predicament and a threat to their identity and opportunity. The issue was highlighted by the Chief Commissioner of India, S.L. Shakdar in 1978 and reiterated by the AASU (All Assam Students' Union) and AAGSP (All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad) in 1980, who suggested that the infiltration of illegal foreigners had created a 'monstrous problem'. Although the targets were the illegal migrants from Bangladesh, the Nepalis were also included in the anti-foreigner discourse. The key to understanding the Asamiya psyche in labeling the communities of Nepali origin as 'foreigners' in spite of their having been accepted unconditionally for several decades as insiders within the greater Assamese society and culture was the legal definition of the movement. In order to legitimise the demands of the Assam movement, it was necessary to express it in precise legal terms and therefore the Nepalis came within the definition of the 'foreigner' in Assam and be victimised by the rhetoric of the movement²⁹. 'The Nepalis', as Monirul Hussain writes, 'irrespective of their length of stay in Assam virtually became dangerous unwanted foreigners, who were threatening the socio-cultural and political identity of the Asamiyas in their traditional homeland'³⁰.

This became a point of reference for the other regions of Northeast India. To the ethno-sensitive tribals in the states of Manipur, Mizoram and

Meghalaya, apart from the dimension of intensification of competition for resources, the 'unabated' migration was seen as a threat to their identities that may arise in the long run. The policies of the state governments to restrict immigration of the Nepalis boosted this sentiment. This fear may have been further intensified by the Gorkhaland movement in Darjeeling, the politics of Nar Bahadur Bhandari of Sikkim and by the mobilization of the Lhotshampas in Bhutan, which began to assume some international dimension³¹. This created the 'myth' of a greater Nepal. Probably, allegations of Nepalis from Northeast India having crossed over to side with the Lhotshampas and their leaders having fled over to Assam, India³², and this movement having received stimulus from Darjeeling have made the Nepalis in Northeast India soft spots for ethnic assertions and backlashes. Few scholars, Nepali as well as non-Nepali, are in agreement with the idea of a greater Nepal; the feeling of Nepaliness in the Nepali diaspora is 'culturally charged but not politically so'. It is clear that they do not pose a political threat and the idea of a greater Nepal is indeed remote. They were largely caught in the crossfire (Assam Movement and anti-foreigner agitation) and minority assertions for land and resources (Bodo Movement) in Assam and other parts of the Northeast.

NEPALI IDPs IN NORTHEAST INDIA

The first organized expulsion of the Nepalis in Northeast India occurred in the postcolonial period. However, there had been a few instances of displacement in the colonial period from the *Char*³³ (mid-stream sand bars) and the *Chapari*³⁴ (grazing reserve) areas, and again in 1920 from the Kaziranga Reserve Forests³⁵ in Assam. These were imperceptible, without use of violence, and the numbers smaller unlike in postcolonial years. During the Assam Movement (1979-85) the unprecedented violence in various areas, demonstrations, collective threats and sporadic assaults, targeting mainly the illegal immigrants from Bangladesh forced the Nepalis living in those areas to leave their homes. Following the violence in Nellie, Chowl Khowa Chapari and other areas, about 500 families left various parts of Assam. Although no official records are available, many moved back to Nepal or settled in the border areas of Kankarbhitia, Biratnagar, Dhulabari, Dharan, etc. Many of the Nepalis settled in these places hailed from Tezpur, Sonitpur, etc.³⁶

Although the government of India had clarified its position on the Nepalis early in February 1984, and that those in possession of the RAP (Restricted Area Permit) would not come within the definition of 'illegal migrants' and stood protected³⁷, their position was very soon threatened by the agitation for a separate Bodoland. The Nepali population in the Bodo Autonomous Council (BAC) areas in Western Assam, which the Bodos see constituting their own homeland was only 2.5% on an average and in no way large enough to constitute a threat to the Bodos. But the presence of the Nepalis along with the 63% non-Bodos (Bodos are 34%) constituted a major threat. In the ethnic cleansing of these areas a considerable number of Nepalis were displaced from the villages of Amteka (Betini), Patabari, Malivita, Koila etc. Besides, these in an attack on the Amteka Betini village in the Kokrajhar district, which had combined Nepali and Adivasi residents, along with the Adivasis, about 15 – 20 Nepali families also shifted to nearby villages. Similarly about 20 – 25 families from the Mangalchara forest village and about 20 – 25 families from the Khalasi forest villages were displaced in the ethnic clashes. In all these cases it was apparent that the Nepalis were not directly hit but were caught in the crossfire.

A report of the Regional Centre for Strategic Studies mentions that about 20 to 30 thousand Lhotshampa refugees had fled to Northeast India and are currently living in the Jalpaiguri Doars and Darjeeling Hill Council in West Bengal, and in Kokrajhar and Darrang districts in Assam. This had coincided with the anti-foreigner upsurge in Assam and parts of the Northeast. Again the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and the Bodo militants from Assam were allegedly used by the authorities in Bhutan to carry out intimidatory tactics regularly against the *Lhotshampas* who had not fled Bhutan during the ethnic cleansing campaigns when many had fled to Nepal and had taken refuge at the camps in Jhapa in Nepal. This has perhaps created an anti-Nepali consensus in the region and is responsible for much of the threats and backlashes on the Nepalis in the recent years. Although in Assam except for one incident where the ULFA attacked the Nepalis, there were no further instances of ULFA atrocities on the Nepalis. Presently, all Nepalis suspected as illegal migrants are harassed and searched at the checkgates at Srirampur on the Assam-Bengal border as well as other points while traveling to and from Nepal.³⁸

The anti-foreigner sentiment was evident in the other states of Northeast India as well. In Manipur, the sentiment took the form of a movement, manifesting itself in direct attacks on the Nepalis in 1980 compelling many of them (who were made the domicile community in 1947) to shift houses and flee to safer areas³⁹. Meghalaya, another state in the Northeast, saw similar sectarian violence in 1987. Actually, in Meghalaya, tensions existed since 1931 between the Nepalis and the Khasis because of the damage done by the former's buffaloes and the indiscriminate cutting down of forests by them to make room for their increasing herds⁴⁰. In 1987, the violence primarily targeted the Nepali minority living in Shillong, Jowai and other parts of Meghalaya, which had over 150,000 Nepali population. The Nepali labourers in the coalmines in Jowai were the first targets, from where it spread to other parts of Meghalaya. A weekly magazine reported: 'Dozens of innocent children of Nepalese working in Jowai coal-mines died of hunger because their parents did not return to their home even weeks after the incident.'⁴¹ Violence involved killings, burning of Nepali villages and schools and finally their deportation by the state government in complicity with the police⁴². Most of the Nepali people fled and the worst affected were the dairy farmers who had to give up their occupation and leave the state. Today, most of the displaced from Meghalaya and Manipur are settled in Rupandehi, Jhapa, and Banke and other parts of Nepal's *terai*, besides Kathmandu and Pokhara.⁴³ The anti-foreigner upsurge also spread to Mizoram and Nagaland where the Nepalis who have been domiciled for years, suffered violence and eviction.⁴⁴

Like the Lhotshampas, Nepalis in Northeast India also mobilised forces though not very strongly against their predicament. In 1986, the Nepalis of Assam were unhappy at Rajiv Gandhi's statement in Darjeeling that there was no question of granting citizenship to those who immigrated after 1950.⁴⁵ There was a resurgence of ethnic consciousness and they rallied under the banner of the existing organizations like the All India Gorkha League, and the All Assam Gorkha League which was formed way back in 1944. Recent organisations are the All Assam Nepali Students Union (AANSU), Nepali Suraksha Parishad and the Tribal Peoples' Front. These organisations have made the welfare of the Nepalis their main agenda. In a recent meeting the AANSU demanded safeguard for their rights.⁴⁶ Proponents of the

Greater Nepal idea suggest that the Nepalis in Northeast India have often tried to find a support base in the Gorkhaland movement in Darjeeling. But it is more ideological than practical as they feel that allying with the larger Nepali movement would give them a stronger base to seek redress for their grievances.

RELIEF AND REHABILITATION

The issue of population displacement in Northeast India, which was between 170,000 and 230,000 in 1998, has failed to raise any serious international response, except for a visit by the U.S. Committee for Refugees to the region in 1998. It is true that India, like many other countries, lacks any mechanism or formal structure to deal with internal displacement and thereby take ad-hoc measures. In Manipur, for instance, the state and central government limits its responsibilities to distribution of relief-blankets, essential commodities, *ex-gratia* payment and setting up camps, and has not taken any steps to either assess the ground realities or rehabilitate the displaced. But the Kukis managed to air their grievances to the government and have even filed a public interest litigation in the Supreme Court of India, which drew some attention to the case of the Kukis although no real action has been taken. In Tripura the government provided relief to the displaced Reangs from Mizoram by setting up relief camps and some effort came from the government in providing them with housing and jobs. In Mizoram also the state government set up a camp for the Reangs in Kanchan district and provided some relief. In Assam relief camps had been set up in Kokrajhar and Gossaigaon districts to house the Bodos, Santhals and the Bengalis displaced from Bodo-dominated areas. The Human Rights Features has reported poor living, sanitary conditions as well as medical and malnutrition in the relief camps. A recent report estimated that more than 1.61 *lakh* persons affected by the ethnic riots in Kokrajhar district in 1996 and 1998 are still languishing in 49 relief camps spread all over the district – 26 in Gossaigaon and 23 in Kokrajhar sub-divisions⁴⁷.

The internally displaced Nepalis had also been settled in relief camps. The Patgaon Relief Camp in Kokrajhar housed about 134 Nepali families and a total population of 581 Nepalis as told to us by the Sub Divisional Officer, Kokrajhar. (According to USCR, there were 158 Nepali families in the camp). Other camps at Telipara near Gossaigaon and Saralpara near Sarfunguri also had considerable number of Nepalis. Government aid at the Patgaon camp was insufficient and sporadic. The group leader at Patgaon camp, K.B. Rana, told USCR ‘... we are receiving some assistance like rice, lentils, oil, salt, etc. But the Deputy Commissioner said he can assist only temporarily and that we should move on from here’ (USCR, Jan 2000). The Lutheran World Service from Kolkata provided relief in the form of ration, clothes, blankets, education, etc. but had to move on to other crisis areas. The State Government also offered some gratuitous relief to the camp inmates at Telipara and Saralpara but it was not much. Further, although there are provisions for rehabilitation grants of Rs.10,000 (US\$230) to help re-establish/resettle the victims from where they came, most of the Nepalis of the Patgaon camp belonged to the forest villages and encroached areas⁴⁸ and could not return due to fear. Availing of the grant, they resettled in places like Golaghat and Darrang, which were far away from their original homes, leading to further displacement. Even in other areas of the Northeast, the onus of rehabilitating and resettling lay on the victims themselves. The only advantage they had was their tremendous fluidity of movement, which allowed them to resettle at any given time with ease in their small-time occupations and within their own

communities. Further, the small numbers of the displaced, scattered almost all over Northeast India with conditions less serious compared to the Santhals and the Bodos displaced in Assam, or the Kukis and Meiteis in other parts of the region, or even the Lhotshampas in southern Bhutan, did not warrant much concern and hence interference from national and international organizations

Yet it has been seen that the impact of displacement continues to disrupt their lives. Internal displacement has often been regarded as one of the reasons for their backwardness. As many camps have closed down, the Nepalis are deemed to be rehabilitated. That the threats of further displacement still exist, and whether they have been effectively rehabilitated are matters that have been studiously ignored.

Keeping in view the strategic location of Northeast India in South Asia, sharing borders with Bangladesh, Myanmar, China and Nepal, the question of IDPs will not always remain internal to the nation-states. There is always a chance that due to lack of attention, there might be a spillover across the borders, affecting peace in South Asia. As such, the internal displacement question in the Northeast, taking the example of the Nepalis, is an issue of concern, not only of the Indian state but also of the whole of South Asia.

NOTES & REFERENCES:

¹ Lopita Nath, *The Nepali in Assam: Ethnicity and Cross-border Movements in the Northeast*, Minerva Publications, New Delhi, 2003, p.53.

² T.B. Subba, Nepal and the Indian Nepalis, in K.M. Dixit & Shastri Ramachandaran, ed., *State of Nepal*, Kathmandu: Himal Books, 2002, p. 130.

³ The 1992 UN definition identifies IDPs as “persons, who have been forced to flee their homes suddenly or unexpectedly in large numbers, as a result of armed conflict, internal strife, systematic violations of human rights or natural or man-made disasters and who are within the territory of their own country”.

⁴ A case can be found in Colombia, where the displaced often flee in small numbers in order to make themselves less conspicuous. Again, Bosnian Muslims or countless from Myanmar, Iraq or Ethiopia did not flee; they were expelled from their homes on ethnic or religious grounds, or as in the latter cases, forcibly moved by their governments for political and ethnic reasons.

⁵ It should be borne in mind that ‘internal displacement’ is a descriptive term that can be applied to a broad range of situations.

⁶ Roberta Chen and Francis Deng, Global Overview, in *Masses in Flight: The Global Crisis of Internal Displacement*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington D.C., 1998, p. 21.

⁷ R. Samaddar, Power, Fear, Ethics, in C. Joshua Thomas ed., *Dimensions of Displaced People in Northeast India*, Regency Publications, New Delhi, 2002, p. 7.

⁸ Roberta Chen and Francis Deng, op. cit., 1998, p. 21. By repressing minorities, refusing to see them as legitimate members of the nation, the government often strengthens the separatist movements they fear. In South Asia, Hindus and Muslims and Hindus and Sikhs are often pitted against each other.

⁹ As Samaddar writes, “If fear is well founded, it must match up to the language of law, justice and the judge, if not, the refugee is lying. If the refugee is inarticulate, he is not in fear” (Samaddar, 2002, op. cit., p.11.).

¹⁰ Samaddar quotes Kafka in the Penal Colony, “There is no objective basis for fear as you are under no real and substantial risk” (Samaddar, 2002, op. cit.).

¹¹ Roberta Chen and Francis Deng, op. cit., 1998, p. 27. It has been seen that agencies like the International Committee of the Red Cross does not make any distinction between the civilian victims of armed conflict in providing assistance and protection, favouring the ‘needs approach’ or targeting assistance on the basis of need and not individual circumstance.

¹²It has found it effective to consider the internally displaced 'a distinct target group', when they live in camps, specific areas or shanty towns around towns or cities. Only after they return or resettle in communities does it advocate that programming for their reintegration begins to focus on the wider community. In addition, the internally displaced often face protection problems upon their return and reintegration. Thus, although comprehensive programmes are essential and most practical, special attention must also be paid during return and reintegration, to the distinct problems of vulnerable groups. See Cohen and Deng, 1998, op. cit.

¹³ The term 'Asamiya' instead of 'Assamese' has been used to specifically mean those people who have accepted/adopted the Asamiya language as their mother tongue. The term also includes the Na-Asamiya Muslims, Nepalis and many other tribal groups speaking the Asamiya language. See Lopita Nath, Conflict Afflicted Nepalis in Assam: The Reality, in A.C.Sinha and T.B.Subba (ed) *The Nepalis in Northeast India: A Community in Search of Indian Identity*, Indus Publishing Company, Delhi, 2003, p.212.

¹⁴ Gurudas Das, Immigration into Northeast India: The Security Dimensions published in C.J. Thomas, 2002, p.73. About 33 percent of the country's total international border falls in this region. Out of the country's total land border length of 15,851 kms, the region alone shares 5,249 kms. long border with four neighbouring countries - China, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Myanmar.

¹⁵ Subir Bhaumik, February 2000, www.idpproject.org, pp. 22 – 24.

¹⁶ HRF/33/01, Embargoed for 16 March 2001, www.hrdc.net/sahrdc/hrfeatures.p.1.

¹⁷ C. Joshua Thomas (ed) *Dimensions of Displaced People in North-East India*, Regency Publications, New Delhi, 2002; USCR (1999): Country Reports: India (www.refugees.com); Human Rights Features (2001): No Refuge: The Plight of the Internally Displaced Persons in India, Embargoed for 16 March (www.hrdc.net); M. Hussain, State Identity Movements and Internal Displacement in the Northeast, *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 16, 2000.

¹⁸ This grouping of villages envisaged that the scattered habitations should be brought under grouped villages and termed as Progressive and Protected Villages (PPUS). People in the villages were compelled to move out of their old villages. The twin objectives of this were to contain the rebel activities of the Mizo National Front and also to accelerate economic development of Mizoram. Lianzela, Internally Displaced Persons in Mizoram in C. Joshua Thomas (ed) 2002, pp. 241 – 251.

¹⁹ Mizoram recorded the second highest decadal growth rate in India during 1981 – 1991, while during 1991 – 2001 it was 29.18 against the national average of 21.34. According to the 1981 census, 74.53 percent of the total migrants were national, while 25.47 were international migrants. In 1981 census, migrants from Bangladesh were 51.15 percent, Myanmar 22.35% and Nepal 22.33%. In 1991, migrants from Myanmar rose to 59.82% and Bangladesh came down to 24.50. See Lianzela, 2002, pp. 241 – 251.

²⁰ Mahadev Chakravarti, Internally Displaced Persons in Tripura in C.J. Thomas, 2002, p. 270. In Khowai sub-division alone, about 30,000 non-tribals were forced out in 1997. In West Tripura district between January 1998 and March 2001, the total number of displaced families was 2,614, of whom 2,434 were non-tribals.

²¹ Aruni John, Potential for militancy among Bhutanese Refugee youth, Regional Centre for Strategic Studies, Policy Studies No. 15.

²² The martial races consisted of the Magars, Gurungs, Limbus and Rais, who were mainly recruited to the Gurkha army.

²³ A.C. Sinha, India's Northeast Frontier and the Nepalese Immigrants in *Himalayan Environment and Culture*, Shimla, Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, 1990, p. 227. It is claimed that one Subedar Jaichand Thakur of the 8th Gurkha Platoon after retirement settled in Shillong as early as 1824. Thurston later in 1867 recorded in his memoirs that he had seen the Gurkhas playing football and cricket in Shillong .

²⁴ In Manipur, especially the settled Gurkhas started taking up cattle farming and agriculture at Kanglatombi-Kangpokpi, and in neighbouring Sekmai, North of Imphal. See G.K.N. Chetry, The Nepalis of Manipur: Movement and Settlement, in A.C. Sinha and T.B.Subba (ed) *The Nepalis in Northeast India: A Community in Search of Indian Identity*, Delhi, 2003, p. 309.

²⁵ A. Guha, *Planter Raj To Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826-1947*, New Delhi, 1977, p. 92.

²⁶ With reference to the Nepalis in Assam, Krishna Ram Medhi, Sub Deputy Collector, Samuguri in 1937 remarked: "... these people have been living in Assam for about a century, have already mixed with the indigenous

people and it will be impossible to separate them”. Cited in A. Dasgupta, Othering of the ‘Not-so-other’: A study of the Nepalis of Assam, in A.C.Sinha & T.B.Subba (ed), 2003, pp.230-249.

²⁷ Cited in Anindita Dasgupta, Othering of the ‘Not –so-other’: A study of the Nepalis of Assam, in A.C.Sinha & T.B.Subba (ed), 2003, p.237.

²⁸ Kishan Lal Pradhan, The Gorkhas of Mizoram, and G.K.N.Chetry The Nepalis of Manipur: Movement and Settlement, in Sinha and Subba (ed), 2003, pp.298, 313.

²⁹ A. Dasgupta, Othering of the ‘Not –so-other’: A study of the Nepalis of Assam, in A.C.Sinha & T.B.Subba (ed), 2003, pp.230-249.

³⁰ Monirul Hussain, *The Assam Movement: Class, Ideology and Identity*, New Delhi, 1993, p. 260.

³¹ Ghosh, 2001, pp. 42-3. The GNLf movement had assumed international dimension when on 23 December 1986, Ghishing wrote a letter to the king of Nepal, with copies to the UN and the South Asian States, pleading for justice for the ‘unpardonable and historical crimes against humanity or still unresolved question of the very political existence or future status of the Gorkhas in the Indian Union’.

³² The submission of a particularly strong-worded petition drafted by himself and a group of seven other high ranking officials, resulted in Royal Advisory Councillor T.N. Rizal being jailed for three days on grounds of “treason”. He was then freed with the caveat that he should be seen with no more than two others at one time. This warning signal caused T.N. Rizal to flee first to Assam, India and then to southern Nepal, where he pledged to fight for the rights of the Lhotshampa people in exile. RCSS Policy Studies No.15.

³³ A. Dasgupta, Emergence of a Community: Muslims of East Bengal Origin in Assam in the Colonial and Post-Colonial period, 2002, Unpublished Thesis, Gauhati University, pp. 273 – 274. In her thesis Dasgupta mentions a number of *Chars* bearing names of Nepali origin like *Forse Tapu*, *Rani Tapu*, *Shordar Tapu* etc. in Nagaon and Morigaon areas. The name ‘*Forse*’ in Nepali language means pumpkin or *mitha lao* in Asamiya. An officer of the Forest Department has also mentioned that there were large pumpkin plantations there. Another explanation was that ‘*Forse*’ was a rich milkman or *Khuntiwallah* and the *Char* was thus named *Forse Khuntiwallah’s Char*. What emerges from this and similar explanations are that *Chars* with Nepali names had been settled earlier than those with Asamiya or Bengali names. On entering Assam, the Nepali dairy farmers had settled in these *Chars*. But with the migration of Muslims from Bangladesh, who put the vast expanses of the *Chars* to plough, the *Khuntiwallahs* (*Khunti*-Herdsman sheds; *Wallahs*-man) started moving out of these areas to where there was still land for grazing.

³⁴ In the Brahmaputra Valley, the Nepalis initially settled in the grazing reserves, i.e., the Chapari areas. The Burha Chapari of Tezpur was declared a professional grazing reserve as early as 1881. Purushottam Bhandari, *Freedom Movement and Role of Indian Nepalis*, Jagiroad, 1996, p. 42.

³⁵ The proposal to declare Kaziranga as a reserved forest was initiated in 1903 – 04 and the preliminary notification was issued in 1905 to cover an area of 57,273,60 acres. Vide notification no. 37F dated 3rd January 1908, 56,544 acres was declared reserved. The Chief Commissioner is said to have commented, “... it is at present used as a grazing ground, the presence of herds of tamed buffaloes in this locality means that sooner or later cattle disease will spread into the same reserve and interesting fauna of the province will be destroyed. The entire object of the existing reserve will in fact be nullified”. On 28 January 1913, an additional 13,506 acres was added. Following the government order to vacate the reserve in 24 hrs, the rangers and foresters, burnt the houses of the graziers and the latter, terrified and forcefully evicted, looked for alternatives. See *Assam Forest Bulletin*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Department of Forests, Government of Assam, July 1995.

³⁶ Interview with Lil Bahadur Chetri, retired professor of Arya Vidyapeeth College & Sahitya Academi Award Winner at Guwahati, October 2000.

³⁷ The Assam Accord of 1985 had decided 1971 as a cut off date for detection and deportation of migrants, but for the Nepalis, it was taken as 1976 (30th July), when the RAP (Restricted Area Permit) System for the Nepalis was introduced.

³⁸ Lopita Nath, Conflict-Afflicted Nepalis in Assam: The Reality, in A.C. Sinha and T.B. Subba (ed), 2003, p. 223.

³⁹ In April 1980, several villages in the Sagolmong areas in Sadar sub-division inhabited by Nepalis were burnt. Those who visited the area witnessed the most horrific sight of devastation, some corners being unapproachable because of the rotting carcasses of cattle which were burnt to death. This was the worst anti-foreigner violence in an area with a history of extremist activity (*The Sunday*, 8th June, 1980).

⁴⁰ *Census of India 1931*, Vol. 3, Part 1, Central Publication Branch, Calcutta, Vol. 3, Shillong, 1932, p. 53.

⁴¹ *The Kathmandu Post*, 29 September 2003.

⁴² In the agitation against the foreigners, the Khasi students and the Government of Meghalaya were in agreement on the deportation of the Nepalis. About 12,000 Nepalis were detected as foreigners of whom 7,000 to 10,000 were expelled in February – March 1987. Thereafter as a result of an understanding between the governments of Meghalaya and Assam, these evicted persons were jointly escorted to the Assam-Bengal Border from where the exodus was guided up to the Indo-Nepal border.

⁴³ *The Kathmandu Post*, op. cit.

⁴⁴ In Mizoram the immigration of Nepalis from Nepal and other areas since the 1980s to work as labourers, cow-herds or lumber-jacks created problems for the domiciled Gurkhas. Since there was no criterion to distinguish permanent settlers from newcomers, the Government of Mizoram categorized all Nepalis as foreigners. In 1992, when the Government withdrew certain benefits extended to the Gurkhas of pre-1950 settlement, a number of families left Mizoram. In Nagaland in the 1980s, extortion was used as a means to terrorise the Nepalis, who were pre-1940 settlers and treated as indigenous non-Naga local residents. These settlers, who had substantial landed property were forced to resort to distress sale. In the Marapani region located on the border of Wokha (Nagaland) and Sibsagar (Assam) clashes occurred in which about 200 Nepalis lost their lives.

⁴⁵ Lok Raj Baral, *Regional Migrations, Ethnicity and Security: The South Asian Case*, New Delhi, 1990, p. 55.

⁴⁶ Nepalis seek to safeguard their rights, in *The Telegraph*, October 20, 2003.

⁴⁷ *The Assam Tribune*, February 19, 2003.

⁴⁸ The displaced people in the camps belong to three categories of villages: (i) Revenue villages, (ii) Recognised forest villages settled by the Forest Department, and (iii) Encroached areas. The IDPs from revenue villages owning *patta* (land certificate) had returned although the threat existed but their numbers were not large. Those from the forest villages dared not return for fear of being attacked and there was a judicial bar against resettlement inside the reserved forests. Those from the encroached areas could not return, as there was no revenue land to be given to them. See Lopita Nath, Conflict Afflicted Nepalis in Assam: The Reality, in A.C. Sinha & T.B. Subba (ed), 2003, pp.221-223.