

STATE OF NEPAL

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Nepal and the Indian Nepalis

T.B. SUBBA

The relationship between Nepal, a sovereign country, and the Nepali-speakers of India has grown extremely complex in the evolving political, social and cultural context of the last century. The complexity of this relationship is little appreciated amidst the more publicised crises of South Asia, and those who lose out due to this non-recognition are the Nepali-speakers of India, who are forced to live in a kind of cultural shadow, without full recognition of their rights and identity in the land of their birth.

The exact number of Nepali-speakers in India is not known, but it is probably over six million. What we know for sure is that they are spread over almost every state and union territory of India, including states such as Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh, access to which requires an 'Inner Line Permit'. The Nepali-speakers live in rural areas as well as in urban metropolises, taking up all kinds of work although in the past they have gravitated towards the armed services and private security in addition to dairy farming and agriculture.

Meanwhile, the process of immigration from Nepal to India, which started about two centuries ago, continues till date. Although there has been some movement of Nepali-speakers back to Nepal in the past few decades, particularly by the educated of Darjeeling, to take advantage of economic opportunities in Kathmandu Valley, the flow of Nepalis into India is much greater in comparison. And this movement continues despite continuous reports about how Nepali-speakers are harassed and humiliated in some parts of India, and how they are evicted from their home and hearth, as has happened in the Northeast. While Nepalis who can raise some money have

now started heading to the Gulf region as well as Southeast Asia and Japan, the poorest among them still go to India, primarily for work and the possibility of sending back some earnings to the impoverished homestead back in Nepal. The fallout of the Maoist 'people's war' has seen a rise in the numbers of Nepalis fleeing Nepal's midhills.

The Nepali-speaking diaspora in India presents the widest possible variation in terms of occupation, expectations, status and, not least, their relationship with Nepal as the 'country of origin'. There is a large number of Nepali-speakers in India who are citizens of Nepal, own immovable property there, have regular interaction with relatives back home, take active interest in the events of both countries and frequently visit their native country. Then, there is a large number of migrant labourers who constantly move back and forth between their home in the Nepali hills and their place of work in India. Finally, there are Nepali-speakers who are Indian citizens and are fully committed to fashioning an identity for themselves that is separate from that of the Nepalis of Nepal.

While the well-to-do among these 'Indian Nepalis' generally maintain links with Nepal, a majority remain cut off. Among these, there are many for whom Nepal is today a mythical country about which they have heard stories from their parents or grandparents, but which they have never visited and have no reason to. If this category is forced to go to Nepal as a result of some social upheaval in India, they would immediately turn into refugees. For this group, Nepal is politically as distant as Bhutan or Bangladesh. Among the large mass of Nepali-speakers in India, therefore, there is a movement underway today to make every effort to distance themselves from their 'country of origin' and instead search for an identity within India and the region where they have established themselves. In many areas, particularly of the Indian Northeast, many have even integrated into local cultures by learning the local languages, marrying into local communities, and even adjusting their diet, clothing and rituals.

Despite such a multi-layered reality, Nepali-speakers in India retain one thing in common, and that is a reputation for being 'honest' and 'brave'. This is due mainly to the earlier writings of the British colonialists, who found particular use for the hill people of Nepal in their fighting forces. One reason the Nepali-speakers are found in the Northeast, which is regarded as a strategic hotspot today, has

to do with their placement there by the British, who wanted to make a hedge of 'the brave Gorkhas' all along the northern frontier.

There were, of course, many economic reasons that brought the Nepali-speakers out of Nepal: to cite two prime examples, recruitment in the British Indian army, and jobs in the forests and tea plantations of the Northeast. However, the employment opportunities cannot adequately explain all of the movement. Indeed, the lack of comprehensive research into why the Nepalis left their home and hearth over the last two centuries has led to some amount of conjecture. Various researchers such as Srikant Dutt (1981), A.C. Sinha (1982, 1990) and this writer (1998) have written about the 'push' and 'pull' factors responsible for this movement, but much more work needs to be done.

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 Krishnadhvaj Kunwar regarding 'emigration from the Eastern Hill Region'. The order, among other things, says:

We have received reports that Limbus and Yakkhas are leaving their *kipat* [communally 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 not do so in the future. Do not allow any inhabitant of that area to go abroad. (dated June 1850)

The order was thought to be related to the decision by Jang Bahadur to recruit the Limbu, Yakkha and Rai ethnic groups of Nepal's east—the last groups to be subjugated by the House of Gorkha—into the Sri Bhairavanath 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. The state's demand for revenue seems to have been related,

initially, to paying for the cost of the Gorkhali state's expansionary wars and then for consolidation of territory conquered. With the rise of the Ranas, revenue was required for the upkeep of the unproductive elite classes, as evident in the massive palaces dotting Kathmandu Valley to this day, built upon the toil and sweat of the poor hill peasantry.

Once it started, the emigration from Nepal followed a dynamic of its own, and accelerated over the latter period of the nineteenth century, through the twentieth, and up to the present. There are numerically significant communities of Nepali-speakers all over India, although in no state are they dominant except in Sikkim, which merged into the Republic of India in 1975.

The relationship between Indian Nepalis, particularly those who live concentrated in regions, and the people of Nepal has been marked over the years by a certain lack of mutual understanding. This is partly due to the fact that Nepalis of Nepal, or at least the country's educated classes, have not had to grapple with problems of national identity the way the Nepali-speakers of India have had to. Many Indian Nepalis now see a clear need to establish their own identity as Indian citizens for the sake of personal advancement as well as psychological sustenance in a situation where the nation-state of Nepal will have little or no bearing on their future. In recent years, they have seen a need to draw a line between themselves and the Nepalis of Nepal. This is why, for example, there are efforts to replace the 'first' Nepali poet, Bhanubhakta, with Agam Singh Giri, a native of Darjeeling, as the literary icon, or to exclude Nepali litterateurs from Nepali textbooks meant for Indian Nepali graduate students. Under the leadership of Subhas Ghising, the 'supremo' of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council, there was even an attempt to call the Nepali language 'Gorkha' or 'Gorkhali'. While the attempt to do away with the most significant marker of one's identity—the historically evolved term 'Nepali'—may not appeal to the rational mind, it cannot be simply brushed aside as irrelevant. After all, it is the same attitude that is betrayed by the people of Nepal when they refer to historical migrants to India as 'Prawasi Nepali' or 'Muglanay'.

But drawing a line between themselves and the Nepalis of Nepal is not easy and such an effort may not, in the end, prove successful. For, it is often forgotten that the linkages between the Indian Nepalis and 'Nepali Nepalis' are much deeper and complex than perhaps both sides realise. The fact that the two population groups are citizens

of two sovereign countries does not alter the more fundamental and older linkages. This is a reality that must be understood by the Nepali intelligentsia on both sides of the open border that exists between Nepal and India.

To illustrate how the lives of the two communities are intertwined, it is worth noting that Nepali-speakers of India are increasingly held answerable for what Nepal is perceived to be doing, and what 'happens' to Indians in Nepal. A glaring instance was the attack on some Indians and 'Indian-looking' people on the streets of Kathmandu in December 2000 in the wake of the unsubstantiated rumour that a Hindi film actor had made some anti-Nepal comments. While there was no backlash against Nepali-speakers across the length of India that some felt could have occurred, it came too close for comfort. Hopefully the so-called 'Hrithik Roshan incident' will lead to some sensitivity among Nepal's politicians in future before they go about enflaming passions against 'Indians' on Kathmandu streets. The state of bilateral relations between the two countries does affect the lives and interests of the communities on either side of the border, and for this reason alone the Kathmandu intelligentsia must realise that Nepal cannot absolve itself of its responsibility towards the large Nepali-speaking population in India, be they Indian citizens. And, like it or not, even as they try to create an Indian reality for themselves, the latter too must understand that they are bound to be affected by actions taken by and within Nepal.

Although Nepal certainly has more than its own share of domestic problems, a policy towards the large Nepali-speaking population working or living outside is long overdue on the part of His Majesty's Government, even if a majority of the Nepali-speakers of India may now not even be citizens of Nepal. This is important first and foremost for self-preservation, particularly in emergent situations when there are dislocations that tend to push Nepali-speaking populations willy-nilly back into Nepal. One of the reasons why Kathmandu's foreign policy has failed so miserably in respect to Bhutan's Lhotsampa refugees in Nepal is because Nepal had (and has) no policy regarding Nepali-speakers living outside the country. If Nepal fails to learn from the Lhotsampa episode, there is a likelihood that more such population influxes could occur in future as well. This lack of policy also informs the disinterest of Nepal's analysts and journalists towards the problems of Nepali-speakers in India, such as the en masse evictions they have had to suffer in

Northeast India in the recent past, and the continuous harassment they undergo when they travel there.

While the lack of interest of Kathmandu's educated classes regarding problems faced by Nepali-speakers in India is regrettable, it is also true that many educated Indian Nepalis feel that Nepal should not interfere in their affairs because there is little it can do. The rationale follows the view that direct support from Nepal based on primordial cultural linkages is perhaps not desirable if Indian Nepalis are to try and build their own future within India. This wanting of Nepal to turn a blind eye to the events that affect Nepali-speakers in other parts of the Subcontinent is, again, an attempt to ignore ties that run deeper than nationhood. There are enough instances in international affairs, the most recent being the reaction of New Delhi to events in Fiji, where a country can and does take a humanitarian interest in the welfare of people with whom it has a historical bond, even when they are not its citizens. This level of 'state intervention' is perfectly acceptable in international relations.

Nepal's policy-makers also have to keep in mind how their government's policy of equidistance vis-à-vis India and China is perceived by the Nepali-speaking intelligentsia in India. It is a fact that Kathmandu tends to prop up its relationship with Beijing at an unnaturally high level in order to balance the polity's and economy's overwhelming reliance on India. Whereas the reality is as clear as day; Nepal's stake in India is large and its involvement in China pales in comparison. A balanced relation towards both India and China certainly gives Nepal some geopolitical breathing space, but it suffocates the huge Nepali-speaking people in India.

Indian Nepalis, with a perspective somewhat different from that of the Kathmandu elite, see India's shadow over Nepal as much thicker, broader and real than China's. India is a much more familiar country to the people of Nepal, if one takes into account the largely common history, the shared mythologies, the rivers, the languages, the cultures, the kinship groups and even marriages which link the two countries since the historical period. In modern times, Hindi films, the Indian press and satellite television, as well as Indian products and services, overwhelm the Nepali society and economy. Compared to the intellectual, ideological, cultural or linguistic influence of India over Nepal, the influence of China is almost negligible.

Delving further into the ties that bind Nepal's Nepalis to India—

even though it is true that the Kathmandu intelligentsia prefers to avoid discussing it—a large proportion of educated and talented Nepalis studied in India. Another uncomfortable fact of South Asian geopolitics is that Nepali citizens do enlist into the Indian army, by formal agreement between the two governments. It can be argued that nothing can bring any two countries closer in embrace than when one allows its citizens to fight for the other country.

'Nepalis' outside Nepal

The peopling of the midhills of the central Himalayan region has been a process that has received little study. It can be said, however, that in the first instance there was a movement of Mongoloid people from the north and east—as far afield as present-day China and Mongolia—who arrived in various stages of pre-history and history to become what are known today as the indigenous people or ethnic groups of Nepal. This was followed by an emigration of Caucasoid people from the Indo-Gangetic plains in the 12th century and after.

For a region that saw settlement as a result of successive waves of in-migration from the north, east and south, the most recent period of history has had Nepalis continuously migrating outwards. The first surge of departure seems to have begun in the wake of the so-called unification of Nepal by King Prithvi Narayan Shah, which required the unmaking of many smaller principalities, and the resultant subjugation and usury by the conquerors. More displacement took place due to unfamiliar and crippling laws and orders passed by the various Gorkhali rulers from 1769 onwards which benefited only the high-caste Nepalis close to the ruling dynasty (and later, the Ranas).

This process of out-migration accelerated following the British decision to recruit Gorkhali soldiers after the Anglo-Nepal War of 1814-16. The British established recruiting centres close to the Indo-Nepal border, targeting Magars and Gurungs from the central hills, and later Rais and Limbus from the east. The expansion of British rule in India, the various expeditions against the 'wild' tribes of the Northeast, the two world wars, large-scale lumbering and clearing of jungles for agriculture and plantations, all of this required hardy labourers. The Nepalis were just the people to fill the need, and so they were attracted in numbers large and small to the forests, roads, construction sites, mines, fields, plantations, and so on. While the

earlier immigrants tended to be from the hill ethnic groups, more recent out-migrants also included 'high-caste' but impoverished Bahuns and Chhetris. This historical trend has been maintained even today as bad governance and a stagnant economy continue to push able-bodied Nepalis in large numbers away from their own country.¹

The strength of Nepali-speakers of India today, almost two centuries after they started settling in India as per recorded history, is their Nepali identity which subsumes their individual caste, racial, religious or even linguistic traits. This, indeed, would seem to be the ideal situation for the national goal of a truly integrated Nepal. Indeed, the true nation-building exercise seems to have taken place outside the boundaries of Nepal, whereas the country itself is beset by caste, racial, religious and linguistic differences. The reasons for this apparent paradox are many but two are most significant.

Firstly, the colonisation of India by the British for over two hundred years made it a qualitatively different country from the theocratic/monarchical system of Nepal. Democracy in Nepal is of very recent origin, and hence the process of delivering equity among the population is just beginning to take root. In India, on the other hand, the Nepalis who migrated out were socialised into a situation which allowed a more broad-ranging equality among the migrant population, and the neutralising of various kinds of cultural prejudices. Secondly, whereas the process of planned development is already more than half a century old in India, the development history of Nepal is just being written, amidst confusion over what truly constitutes the national interest. Linked to this is the absolute control retained by 'high-caste' Nepalis on educational institutions, academia, media, bureaucracy, the military and the medical and engineering professions. The Bahun-Chhetri-Newar 'trinity' has been so dominating in every walk of life in Nepal that those who do not belong to these categories feel stifled and discontented.

The situation outside Nepal is significantly different. The majority of the first immigrants from Nepal belonged to communities such as the Rai, Limbu, Gurung, Magar and Tamang. Although things changed later, at first members of the Nepali trinity had strong reason not to migrate, because the kingdom offered them all that was required in the form of land, ritual status and state patronage. Nepali society in India emerged as more egalitarian because, to begin with, its original members came from a variety of non-hierarchical ethnic backgrounds. These migrants, further, had a reason to come together

as 'Nepalis' because they had to contend with dominant neighbouring communities of India. Although their physical survival might not always have been at stake, their cultural, linguistic and religious survival certainly was, and so there emerged an overarching 'Nepali' identity which strengthened itself at the cost of the original ethnic or caste identities. Further, the particular linguistic, cultural or religious groups tended to be so small and scattered that they could not form a viable community of their own.

Within Nepal, however, there was no such threat to the individual castes or communities except from the state itself. As a result, Nepal's communities tended to retain their discrete identities because of lack of communication and commerce between the various location-specific groups. In the latest instance, the authoritarian character of the Panchayat system kept these tendencies under the surface, which is why ethnic assertion quickly became one of the defining societal trends in Nepal after the advent of democracy in 1990. This need of Nepal's diverse communities to assert themselves within the Nepali nation-state contrasts sharply with the Indian-Nepalis' need to subsume primary identities and present a unified Nepali-speaking front vis-à-vis the Indian state and regional power structures.

Writings by scholars like Srikant Dutt and A.C. Sinha on the settlement of Nepalis in India's Northeast show it to be part and parcel of the colonial expansion project. The ex-soldiers serving in the British Army were the first Nepalis to settle in various parts of the region. Writes Sinha: 'The Nepalese ex-soldiers were encouraged to settle down in the foothills, forest fringes and in other strategic points on the frontiers. In this way certain compact pockets of Nepalese settlements in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Nagaland and Manipur emerged.' As stated earlier, the later Nepali settlements emerged out of colonial activities such as construction of roads and railways, and reclamation of land for cultivation and plantation. The result of the exodus out of Nepal was the absolute dominance of Nepali-speakers in the hill areas of Darjeeling and Sikkim. Besides, there are, to this day, predominantly Nepali villages in almost every state of the Northeast and even elsewhere, in the states such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

The earliest Nepali settlements were in the middle hills eastwards from Nepal, offering more or less similar climatic conditions as prevailed in places from where they had come. The Nepali move into the valleys and plains came relatively later. It was only when

the economic downturn became progressively worse that Nepalis from the hills seemed to have migrated to the hottest plains of India for menial labour.

The Nepali cultural region

Cultural boundaries are always much older than political boundaries, which are often drawn at random and create tremendous problems of nationhood and identity for a people divided. While Nepal's boundaries were not defined by a departing colonial power as were those of the rest of South Asia, there is nevertheless by virtue of migration a 'cultural Nepal' beyond the borders of the political Nepal. Just as cultural India or cultural Bangladesh extend further than their political boundaries, the same is the case with cultural Nepal. One major factor that keeps the Nepali cultural region constantly fed are the ties that exist between the Nepalis of Nepal and the Nepali-speakers of India and elsewhere. This assumes importance in particular because of the growing desire at some levels, on both sides, to draw cultural boundaries that would also run along the political boundaries that divide Nepal and India.

To describe first the apparent differences between the Nepalis within Nepal and without, a significant dissimilarity can be detected in the dialect. This is natural when members of a linguistic community are spread out over a wide area. There are significant dialectical variations in the Nepali language within Nepal itself. But the differences between the standard Nepali spoken in Nepal, Darjeeling-Sikkim and the Northeast tend to be quite pronounced in terms of lexicon as well as phonetics. While these differences sometimes tends to be exaggerated by some Indian scholars who are keen to carve out a separate identity of Indian Nepalis from the Nepalis of Nepal, the fact is that dialectical variations are endless and do not necessarily follow the political boundaries of the nation-state.

Caste hierarchy is much more strongly defended in Nepal than outside, whereas both commensal and marital relations among the Indian Nepalis are greatly influenced by secular values in education, occupation, status and the like. It is also a fact that there are fewer marital choices for those Indian Nepalis who want to stay within one's caste and sub-caste, and it is only the wealthier ones who are able seek brides or grooms from fellow caste members in Nepal. This is also why inter-caste or inter-community marriages are more

frequent in the Nepali society in India, which has led in turn to its being more 'open' and less hierarchical than in Nepal.

Indian Nepalis are also distinguishable from the Nepalis of Nepal from the way they use their surnames. Whereas Bahuns in Nepal often use their clan names such as Timilsina, Rijal and Adhikari, it is very common for the Bahuns of India to use the generic 'Sharma', and for Chhetris to use simply 'Chhetri' instead of clan names like Khadka, Thapa or Basnet. Similarly, 'Subba' is a common surname for the Limbus outside Nepal but is rarely used by Nepali Limbus, who have stayed with clan names such as Maden, Songpangphe or Lawati. Likewise, the Newars of the Nepali diaspora commonly use 'Pradhan', whereas in Kathmandu, the valley of their origin, the full range of clan names are in use. This striking difference in the use of surnames between the Nepali population of India and Nepal points, above all, to the contrasting cultural survival strategies of the people—subsuming differences outside Nepal and highlighting it within the country.

Nepali identity in Nepal and India

It would be wrong to think that the problem of identity is confined to Indian Nepalis and does not touch the population of Nepal. The search for identity in Nepal is actually as deep and widespread. From the available literature, it appears that there is increasing concern among the scholars of Nepal about the difficulty faced by many of its peoples, particularly those of hill ethnicity and by the tarai population, in identifying themselves with the given Nepali national identity. The Tibeto-Burman hill communities have challenged the notion of 'one nation, one dress, one language, one religion' propagated by Kathmandu officialdom, putting many mainstream scholars on the defensive about the history and sociology of Nepal. In short, the question of national identity has rapidly become one of the most contentious issues in the country.

The crisis of Nepali identity in Nepal seems to have developed mainly due to two reasons. First, identities such as those of the Rai, Limbu, Magar or Gurung are still very strong there, with various parts of Nepal being the historical home regions of these groups. Additionally, such identities seem to have actually become stronger over the last decade or so with the rise of ethnic assertion. Secondly, the state has made both overt and covert attempts in the modern

era, spearheaded by the Panchayat regime, to impose a monolithic and homogeneous Nepali identity on all the peoples of Nepal. The Nepali identity within Nepal therefore is state-generated and tends sometimes to be involuntary, whereas among Indian Nepalis it is self-generated and voluntary. This is the major aspect that differentiates Indian Nepalis and 'Nepali Nepalis' culturally.

At one level, the Nepali identity in both Nepal and India is influenced by orthodox Hinduism, even among non-Hindu and Buddhist communities. But the influence of such orthodoxy is much more prevalent in Nepal than in India. For example, caste status is not as important among the Indian Nepalis as it is among the population in Nepal. When this writer, who is from the Darjeeling hills, did research in the adjacent regions of east Nepal, he could feel the palpable presence of 'caste' in a way he had never experienced in India. For example, a Sarki woman at the foot of the village of Yangnam, hesitated when asked to provide a jug of water. She was shocked that I—a Limbu—would accept water from her hands. Similarly, there was the Damai lady in Bhojpur district who confided that it was getting difficult for her to survive without other members of her caste living in the locality. In stark contrast, while Indian Nepalis would certainly be aware of the caste position of the persons they interact with, they seldom act out caste prejudices the way it is done in Nepal.²

As far as Nepal's Nepalis are concerned, their national identity already secure, the tendency is to reach for deeper identities based on caste or ethnicity. However, for Indian Nepalis, the problem of primary identity is not yet resolved. The word 'Nepali' immediately associates the Indian Nepalis with the country Nepal in the mind of the larger Indian population. This instantaneous, and almost natural, association with Nepal hurts the social, political and economic standing of Nepali-speakers of India. The confusion is exacerbated, to the detriment of Indian Nepalis and their social standing, because the open border between the two countries allows unrestricted passage for labour-exporting Nepal to send out migrant labour to India. Thus, the continuous recharge of the Indian market by the out-migrating people of Nepal reinforces the belief among Indians that all Indian Nepalis are also citizens of Nepal. It is in order to do away with the endless confusion which affects their political standing in India that some Indian Nepalis would want the India-Nepal border to be sealed; the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship between the

two countries, which provides for the open border to be renegotiated, and a visa system introduced.

Amidst so many secessionist agitations all over India, such an integrationist attitude among the Indian Nepalis should have been welcome by the Indian establishment. It is interesting therefore to find mainstream Indian academics and analysts silent on this unique undercurrent among the Nepali-speakers of India. However, would such a distancing from Nepal the nation-state actually help take care of the identity problem of Indian Nepalis? The answer is a definite no.

The Indo-Nepal treaty of 1950

If there is any one document that is considered by many Indian Nepali scholars, particularly from Darjeeling and Sikkim, to be one of the most important hurdles in their struggle for a clear and unambiguous Indian identity, it is the India Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship of 1950, ratified by the tripartite Delhi Settlement of 1951, and the 1956 revised Indo-Nepal Agreement. In essence, what this treaty does is declare the border between the two countries completely open for passage by the population on either side, and stipulate that 'nationals' of each country be treated by the other at par with one's own. The treaty provisions permit the people of Nepal to have a vocation, own property, and live without any restriction in India and allows similar privileges to Indians in Nepal.

Indian Nepali scholars believe that as long as these provisions exist through the 1950 treaty, the Nepali-speakers of India will be, for all practical purposes, treated as nationals of Nepal. Even though Nepalis settled in India prior to the adoption of the Indian Constitution in 1950 were declared natural citizens of India, the general notion of other Indians is that the Indian Nepalis are immigrants. This suspicion that Indian Nepalis are actually Nepali citizens was most evident in various writings that appeared in the Calcutta-based newspapers and magazines during the Gorkhaland movement of the 1980s. Further, it is difficult to erase this suspicion because there is no simple way to tell Indian Nepalis from those who settled in India after 1950 and those who continue to come down from the hills of Nepal into the Indian plains and cities. As for documents to prove pre-1950 domicile, these were never considered necessary by the illiterate Nepalis living in various parts of India

from much earlier times. By and large, many Indian Nepalis are not even aware of the treaty that has created such difficulty in their lives, and they take all the humiliation, harassment (and in more than one instance, mass evictions) from the Northeast as something that is fated.

One of the reasons this happens is the wide dispersal of Indian Nepalis in the region, making it extremely difficult for them to organise against atrocities. The apathy of the respective state governments towards the Nepalis makes them less confident than they would otherwise feel. Besides, most of those who are affected by such misdemeanours are the illiterate, labouring people, who are not aware of their rights in India, even as nationals of Nepal. Further, members of this Nepali-speaking labouring class are acutely conscious of the idea that they are outsiders, even though they may have their origins within India. They all admit that they are not from 'this place' even if they may have nowhere else to go.

Indian Nepalis have expressed their rejection of the 1950 treaty in the past and remain resentful of the political cul-de-sac into which this document relegates them. The Gorkha National Liberation Front of Darjeeling, for example, has more than once burnt copies of the treaty, asserting that the Nepalis of India are not also 'nationals of Nepal', as the treaty makes them out to be, but legitimate citizens of sovereign India. Indian Nepali intellectuals from the Northeast, too, have strong reservations about the treaty, blaming it for the treatment of Nepali-speaking Indian citizens in that region.

In point of fact, even the existing provisions of the treaty, whatever their flaws, have not been implemented according to letter and spirit. For instance, Nepalis (both Indian citizens and Nepalis of Nepal) have been deported from various parts of the Northeast since the late 1960s. Although their status and presence in India is completely legal (either by citizenship or by virtue of the 1950 treaty), they have been treated as if they were Bangladeshi immigrants by the locals as well as by the state apparatus. The authorities arrest both Nepali-speakers and Bangladeshis under the same law, the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act of 1983.

The supposedly special bilateral relationship between Nepal and India is flouted time and again by various communities and state governments in the region, while the governments of India and Nepal remain mute spectators. The Indian Nepalis as well as Nepali migrants in the Northeast live with a constant threat to their property and

personal security, because they know that the administrative machinery of either country could not care less about their wellbeing. As late as March 1995, the Minister for Assam Accord Implementation stated on the floor of the state assembly that 47,432 Nepali persons were identified as 'foreigners' and had been deported. It is unlikely, to take a hypothetical situation, that the Nepali government would dare take similar action against Indians in Nepal or Nepalis thought to be of 'Indian origin'.

There are many Indians who believe that Nepal is the main beneficiary of the 1950 treaty, for it allows the country to push out its huge unemployed youth force into India and does little to provide employment within the country itself. If India takes care of Nepal's unemployment, why should the latter bother to solve the problem? What if the large numbers of Nepal's under-educated young were to stay back and seek employment within Nepal itself? Against such queries, does India, for its part, gain anything from the 1950 treaty? Yes, it does. Firstly, it gains the Nepali market. A major chunk of what the people of Nepal earn in India is also spent in India, and what little they take back to Nepal is again spent on Indian goods and services. The Nepali market as a whole, which is becoming rapidly integrated with the growth of highways and monetisation of the economy, is captive to Indian producers due in no small part to the 1950 treaty. Secondly, India also gains the image of benefactor as the safety valve to Nepal's economy by providing employment, even as New Delhi gains enormous political leverage vis-à-vis Kathmandu by granting such a facility.

Nevertheless, let us assume for a moment that the treaty is scrapped, would this guarantee that there would be no movement of people between Nepal and India? If the movement of people across the border continues, which is a certainty, will the problem of mixed-identities disappear? Further, in the absence of the treaty, would it not be the migrant Nepalis themselves who would lose even the little protection they presently get from the treaty? Let us further assume that India succeeds in getting the entire border fenced, introduces a visa system as desired by many Indian Nepalis, and regulates the flow of people across the border. Will this solve the problem of identity that Indian Nepalis are facing? The answer is a clear no, because their identity depends more on how they are perceived by Indian communities and less on how they would themselves like to fashion it. The fact is, whatever name they give

themselves or their language—'Gorkha' or 'Gorkhali'—the larger population of India will not perceive them any differently than how they are viewed today. It would be naïve to assume that mere playing with names, to delink Indian Nepalis from the Nepalis of Nepal, would give them an unencumbered Indian identity.

Greater identities

While there is without doubt a strong tendency among the Nepali-speakers on both sides of the Indo-Nepal border to segregate, there is an equally powerful impulse to go beyond identities defined by the political boundaries of nation-states. Thus, we hear partially revivalist cries of 'Greater Nepal', 'Greater Sikkim', 'Greater Darjeeling', which seek to redraw the political boundaries to coincide with what was once in existence, and which largely overlapped with cultural boundaries of that past and still do so to some extent. It is perhaps for this reason that any discourse on greater identities is seen as sinister, a national security threat engineered by the ubiquitous 'foreign hand'.

Nevertheless, in a region such as South Asia, rather than creating ever more rigid political boundaries which constrict the cultures that traverse them, it is important to build bridges so that cultural ties remain strong without threatening the political structures. In this sense, the special relationship between Nepal and India provides the ideal setting for trying out the great cultural experiment which looks at issues of identity that are perhaps greater and longer-lasting than those made available by the modern nation-state. In order to appreciate such a possibility one must be ready to accept the premise that the existing boundaries of nation-states need not be sacrosanct when it comes to the interflow of identities, and that same identities can exist with equal comfort in more than one nation-state.

The loss suffered by the Indian Nepalis as a result of the 1950 treaty and being perceived as 'foreigners' in India is palpably real. But redrafting or abrogating the treaty is going to change neither the reality of lived experience nor its perception. It is therefore necessary to research, write and lobby to educate the Indian masses that the diverse citizenry of India includes Indian Nepalis as well, Nepali-speakers who are as much citizens of the Republic as the next person. As far as the relationship between Indian Nepalis and the Nepalis of Nepal are concerned, it is clear that their cultural linkages

will remain strong far into the future. Just as Kathmandu benefited from the cultural renaissance of Darjeeling in the 1960s and 1970s, today it is the cultural dynamism of Kathmandu that has begun to act as a beacon to the Nepalis of Nepal as well as the Nepali-speakers in India and elsewhere.

The Nepali experience across the open border proves to the rest of South Asia that cultural, linguistic, religious, and literary interactions cannot be prevented by the boundaries of nation-states, and that they will continue with or without such nationalist identities. In short, the relationship between Nepalis of Nepal and the Nepali-speakers of India have the capability of creating a new cross-border relationship paradigm for the Subcontinent as a whole, setting in motion a movement in which the boundaries are narrower in one sense and broader in another.

Notes

- 1 An interesting aspect of the making of this diaspora is the chronological pattern of group-wise migration. The earliest immigrants from Nepal were the Buddhist, animist and 'Hinduised' Nepalis, followed by those who occupied the lower strata of the caste hierarchy, the Kami, Sarki and Damai. The 'high-caste' Tagadharis came later, seemingly pushed by their own economic impoverishment, although stray examples of their very early settlement in some parts of India are known.
- 2 One might add, however, that the caste barrier was also effectively surmounted in the process of migration to India, with those from the 'lower' castes changing their names to indicate 'high-caste' status.

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