



## IDENTITY AND SOCIO-FORMATION OF GORKHA GRAZIERS IN ASSAM

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### ABSTRACT

*Identity in a broader sense implies the existence of what a being is. Nothing can be addressed or spell out without its identical name or recognising identity. Human being and society are also never been exceptional case in this regards. Assam is also a conglomeration of various such groups of different identities. In case of Assam, Gorkha Grazier community has a long and deep rooted history in the State. But this community sometimes have to face a critical identity crisis in general and particular. An attempt has also been made to figure out the penetrating issues of Gorkha Graziers' community to bring up to academic and policy making arena.*

**Keywords:** Gorkha, Graziers, Nepali, Brahmaputra Valley.

### Introduction

Every human being is recognised with his/her identity and the individual of similar background constitute their kind of society with a sense of common belonging. Identity of human society appears in various forms i.e., individual identity, professional group identity, religious identity, linguistic identity, nationalistic identity and ethnic identity so forth. Human Identity implies a certain characteristic of persons or groups from other persons or groups. Identity can be considered to be strongly influenced by

community identity that the sense of belonging is maintained. One identity can dominate the other passed on the environment and how one chooses to identify. As Benedict Anderson has stated that, the sense of society on one's identity is imagined through communities same experience (Anderson, 1983). Suman Raj Timsinna, says that the sense of identity and uniqueness develops as the result of membership in a specific group based on socio-cultural features such as race, language, religion, history and geographical location. Moreover, the occupation is mostly

found the interplay a crucial role in designing the identity of communities. In this regards, an experience of common socio-political deprivation and a sense of marginalization among the members of the group which owns the sense of belongingness is found to resulting the cohesion of identity (Timsina, 1992). The Social Identity formation in Assam could be seen through such lens.

Assam one of the major states of North Eastern India, being strategically located at the base of the Eastern Himalayas, lies on the various social groups with different identity based dominantly on culture of occupation who at sometimes or the other in the region's history made their home. Among such identity of occupation graziers and domestication of herds had have been one of the crucial one and occupation nurtured by the graziers had been an important sources of India since the deeper past age of the history. Graziers' societies are characterized by the domestication of the animals. The necessity of this occupation was deeply realised by the British Colonial administration and hence, they had mentioned the necessary mechanism of Grazing and some ethnic communities were clubbed up with the identity of "Graziers" in which the Gorkha ethnic community was the central one. During the colonial epoch, Gorkhas were synonymously, in fact, dominantly known as the Graziers' community.

The multi-ethnic and, multi-linguistic and cultural space of Assam is composed of various ethnic, tribes and sub-tribes and linguistic groups and their societies with the

sense of common belongings and affinities. And in this regards, Gorkha graziers are also an inseparable part of larger society in Assam. In the domain of multi-ethnic space, Gorkha Graziers own a distinct identity with a distinct history, language, culture, food habits, livestock etc. Gorkha Graziers, as a community possess such distinctiveness in Assam since centuries but, because of the research sightlessness this crucial part of Assamese society is far from a necessary notice. This paper will be an attempt to fill up such gap.

### **Gorkha or Nepali**

In Indian context both the term Gorkha and Nepali are interchangeable and are applied to mean one. Both the term 'Gorkha' and Nepali is representing Nepali linguistic community of India in general and Assam in particular. However, different arguments on Gorkha and Nepali exist. In many cases Gorkha word is used synonymously to Nepali. In Nepal the term Gorkha is used to restricted meaning while the term Nepali connotes the people of the country. In other words Gorkha may be said to indicate the nation or country while Nepali stands for the nationality. To understand the meaning of the term 'Gorkha' more clearly, we have to go the root from where the word was coined (Muktan, 2015). The word Gorkha has emerged from the root 'Go-ra-kh', the abbreviation of Gorakhnath, the patron saint of the principality called Gorkha, that was located in the 'Choubisi' region west of Kathmandu. Prithvi Narayan Shah, the king of Gorkha who is credited to have unified present Nepal in the eighteenth century, was from this Gorkha principality. He was

known as the Gorkha king and his army which conquered the whole of Nepal was known as Gorkha palton. It was the same Gorkhali force which fought against the British in the Anglo-Nepal war of 1814-16, under the leadership of General Amarsingh Thapa and earned the praise of the British. These Gorkhas were recruited in the Indian army by the British since 1815 and ever since then till today the Gorkhas are continuing in the Indian army. The contemporary Indian Gorkhas living in different parts of India are mostly the descendants of the Gorkhas soldiers who settled down permanently in India after their retirement. This is the reason why the Indian Nepalis like to be called themselves as Gorkhas (Muktan, 2015). Subhas Ghising, the supreme leader of the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF), believes that the word "Gorkha" should be used instead of "Nepali." According to him, the term "Nepali" denoted a nationality from Nepal. Since then, the debate over whether to refer to Indian Nepalis as Nepalis, Gorkhas, or Gorkhalis has lingered among Indian Nepalis without reaching a wider consensus. Other authors have proposed additional words, such as "Bharpali" (Bhartiya Nepali), "Bhargoli" (Bhartiya Gorkhali), "Nepamul" (Nepali root) (Subba, 2003), etc. Social scientists such as A. C. Sinha, T. B. Subha, and others have referred to this situation as an identity crisis. In this regard, the initiative of Ramkrishna Sharma, Ex-Judge of the Calcutta High Court, Subhas Ghising, Chief of the GNLF, and many others to use Gorkha nomenclature instead of Nepali is understandable and sounds like a viable and acceptable alternative to Nepali. It also

appears justified for us to elevate the name of our illustrious forefathers who served in the Indian army and gave their lives for India's safety and sovereignty by adopting their proud name 'Gorkha' for Identity (Muktan, 2015). According to K. Sharma, the British used the Gorkha' or Gurkha' word when recruiting Nepali speakers for the British Indian Army. He also states that the terms Gorkha and Nepali are used interchangeably. Gorkha is an identity, and Nepali is the language they speak. He also claims that Nepali speakers are known as Nepalese in Nepal and Gurkha/Gorkhali/Pahari outside of Nepal. He also claims that Nepalese is primarily used to represent the people of Nepal.

### **History of Gorkha Graziers in Assam**

The Gorkha community in the Northeast states in general and Assam in particular has been a major group to engage in animal herding, in fact it can be regarded as the largest group in the Brahmaputra valley (Gurung, 2003). Active British encouragement to Gorkha settlements in Assam has brought number of Gorkha in Northeast region weather as Gorkha soldiers, or as labourer of tea plantation or coal miners. After their retirement many of them had settled in Northeast states and had practised their traditional form of subsistence farming throughout their world. Assam has a rich history of the graziers. The Graziers were primarily involved in cattle rearing as their chief source of income and they were charged with the grazing privilege. The Graziers mainly had settled and established their khuties in Kaziranga and Burachapori present Tezpur area

(Ghimrei, 1983). But later on with the steady extension of a number of cattle's, the colonial administrator revived the concept of grazing tax. To escape the bludgeoning taxes, many of the graziers would shift camp either near some forest or some village that offered ideal environment for their cattle. In 1920 the Britisher ordered all the Graziers to vacate from their grazing land which made them worry. The house of hundred of Graziers families were burnt down away by forest rangers. This situation forcibly evicted from their land and livelihood. This incidence was also the beginning of the dawn of the political consciousness in the grazing community. In this regards a fellow Graziers name Chabilal Upadhaya, (he was the first president of Assam Pradesh congress committee and had wielded lot of power and prestige in Assam) led an anti colonial feeling and started to raise their voice (Bhandari, 1996). Sajal Nag says that as a result of Upadhayas endeavour, The Assam Graziers Association came into existence in 1933. The Association worked for the safety and the growth of the grazing community (Upadhaya, 2009). Besides kaziranga episodes they faced another violent challenge by immigrants from Mymensing where the people of Mymensing also started the herding animal as a occupation which later turn violent between the two communities Bengali Muslim and Nepali. The association took up the fight against the Mymensing immigrants under the leadership of Prasad singh subhha. During the period of 1939-42, the Gorkha Graziers faced another problems in a place like Behali and Gameri of (present Biswanath district of Assam) Were number

of domiciled Nepalis were delete from voter list. Through the Association took initiative to protect against the move and get the names included. The association also submitted several memorandum to the Sadullah government but it was of no used because the government opened up all land to the immigrants from Mymensing which threat to the Gorkha community (Nag, 1990) Unable to withstand the onslaught of the encroachers the graziers shifted to the safer places like, Udalguri, Orang, Rowta, Habigaon, Majbat etc.

This community is also found to maintain and preserve its customs and socio-cultural institution. The symbolic expression of Gorkha Graziers' cultural and linguistic perfection is expanding beyond the political domain (Upadhaya, 2009). Religious functions, rituals and festivals are some of the important occasions through which Assamese Gorkhas of the villages establish a close relationship with the villagers of neighbouring villages.

### **Problems and issues of the Gorkha Grazier Community**

In 1947, the Gorkha Graziers which were given a 'protected class' status in the constitution of tribal belts and blocks, It deals with welfare of protection to certain backward classes in so far as settlement of land and other allied matters are concerned but in 1969 they were excluded from the list of protected classes right. This has made negative repercussion in the society, they were called as foreigners or outsiders and in this tactics the situation was made more serious by the general public ,media ,leaders. The Gorkha Graziers were

questioned about their identity, the community which existence in the northeast region has a long history and their role in its unification, development, and reconstruction has been crucial was asked to show their valid identity. At long last, after a lapse in 1996, the Hiteshwar Saikia government restored the protected class status to the Nepali cultivators-Graziers, probably as a vote-buying tactic (Bhandari, 1996). The worst exclusions were carried out during the Assam Movement (1979–1985), with anti-foreigner student agitation that rocked the entire state and was re-enacted in many other states of the region. This movement was marked by serious programme targeting the immigrants from Bangladesh, but it also targeted the Nepali speaking. Many Gorkha in the region fled from their homes owing to harassment, threats of deportation, eviction and insecurity to their life and property (Chhetry & Sharma, 2009).

### **Conclusion**

In the domain of multi-ethnic space, Gorkha Graziers own a distinct identity with a distinct history, language, culture, food habits, livestock etc. Gorkha Graziers, as a community possess such distinctiveness in Assam since centuries. Notwithstanding it, in certain cases, the assimilation of the community with larger society in the state of Assam and the region at large is detectable. Starting from the nature of the celebration of several festivals, food habits and relation in regards of matrimony and so forth, the extent of assimilation is noticeable. Although they were indivisible part of the collective past, it is scarcely found the space

for Gorkha Graziers placed or mentioned in the history of Assam and the region.

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