

International Migration and Ethnicity: The Case of Nepalis in Northeast India

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Migration from one place to another has brought about the inter-mingling of different people, languages and cultures. While in some case, this inter-mingling of ethnic groups have brought great prosperity; in most cases it has brought ethnic conflicts. North East region of India is considered the hotbed of ethnic conflicts in the recent times. Keeping this in view, the present paper studies the Nepali community and their migration to the region. The Nepali speaking people, who represent Nepali community, makes one of the largest ethnic groups of the population of North-East states. The paper brings out the irregularities observed in the estimation of international migration in the region on the basis of the two definitions used in Census of India.

Keywords: Nepali, Migration, Northeast India

Introduction

Migration from one area to another in search of improved livelihood is a key feature of human history. While some regions and sectors fall behind in their capacity to support populations, other move ahead and people migrate to access these emerging opportunities. Migration has become a universal phenomenon in modern times. Due to the expansion of transport and communication, it has become a part of worldwide process of urbanization and industrialisation.

With the decline in the fertility and mortality rates, migration has emerged as the core component of population changes throughout the world (Beck, 1985). Apart from influencing the size, composition and distribution of population, migration influences the social, political and economic life of the people. It is the most volatile component of population growth and most sensitive to economic, political and cultural factors (Singh, 1998).

Migration is defined as a move from one migration defining area to another, usually crossing administrative boundaries made during a given migration interval and involv-

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ing a change of residence (UN 1993). The change in residence can take place either permanent or semipermanent or temporary basis (Premi, 1990). A recent survey shows that census is the largest source of information on migration at the crosscountry level. (Bell, 2003).

Since 1971, Censuses in India have collected information on migration based on place of birth (POB) and place of last residence (POLR). If the place of birth or place of last residence is different from the place of enumeration, a person is defined as a migrant. On the other hand, if the place of birth and place of enumeration is the same, the person is a non-migrant (Bhagat, 2005).

Ethnicity

The terms 'ethnicity' and 'ethnic group' are derived from the Greek word 'ethnos' normally translated as 'people' or 'tribe'. An ethnic group is a group of human beings whose members identify with each other, through a common heritage that is real or presumed (Smith 1978, Barth 1969). Ethnic identity is further marked by the recognition from others of a group's distinctiveness (Eidheim 1969, Encyclopedia Britannica 2007) and the recognition of common cultural, linguistic, religious, behavioral or biological traits (Leach 1954, Smith 1996), real or presumed, as indicators of contrast to other groups (Eriksen 1992). Ethnic diversity, the legacy of political conquests and migrations, is one aspect of the social complexity found in most contemporary societies.

Language has long been recognized as an important marker of ethnic identity. The identification is usually made in terms of some specific language or dialect, the use of which coincides more or less well with the boundaries of some particular ethnic group (Dorian 1980). It is commonplace in the body of literature on ethnicity to find language identified as one of the chief markers of ethnic identity (Giles et al 1977, Chapman et al 1977). There are even cases reported in which language seems to be almost the sole marker of ethnic identity.

In India, ethnic groups are not categorized, but the population is instead categorized in terms of the 1,652 mother tongues spoken and/or the scheduled tribes which they belong to. The paper uses language data from Census 2001 which was released recently to define the ethnic group 'Nepali'. The population enumerated with their mother tongue as Nepali is considered to belong to the ethnic group 'Nepali'.

The Northeast India consists of the seven states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. These states form a gateway from India into South Asia, bordering Bhutan, China, Bangladesh and Myanmar. The history of northeastern part of India has been a history of migration. Before written history, the flow was mainly from the eastern direction, so that most of the ethnicities that today claim to be the autochthons can trace their ancestries to the east of India, mostly to Southeast Asia. Subsequently, people from the western direction also began coming in and the communities like the caste Hindu Axamiya – speaking population of Assam often trace their origin back to parts of mainland India (Goswami 2007). There has been a consistent flow of migration in this region because of employment opportunities in tea

garden, availability of cultivable land and other related factors (Bandyopadhyay and Chakraborty, 1999). Studies also revealed that these states are experiencing higher influx of migration, both internal migration and international migration. Mukherjee (1982) has found substantial in-migration in north-eastern states. Census 2001 recorded 95.7 lakhs migrants in the Northeast, which constitute about 25 percent of the total population in the region. This shows an increase of about 24 lakhs migrants from census 1991.

Nepali migration to Northeast India

The movement of people from Nepal to Northeast India is not a recent phenomenon. Since mid 19th century, Nepalis from the central hill areas have been continuously emigrating. From the mid-19th century the British actively recruited Nepalese into the imperial armies in whose service Nepalese travelled throughout India which in turn led to some permanent Nepalese settlements. Nepalis migration and settlement in the past have occurred mainly through official sponsorship of the British. The British policy to try and take care of its loyal soldiers often took the form of ex-servicemen's re-settlement colonies which served the dual purpose of rewarding ex-soldiers as well as playing a strategic role. Following such policy, Nepalese settlement of exservicemen in northeast India was actively encouraged by the British, as in the case of Manipur immediately following the First World War. Active British encouragement to Nepalese settlement in the north-east was not always confined to ex-soldiers but also included many other Nepalese peasants, particularly those from Eastern Nepal, the Kiratis (Dutt 1981).

At the dawn of independence, India inherited a huge amount of Nepali people from the colonial rulers. Moreover, under the terms of the Indo-Nepal Friendship Treaty of 1950, the Tri-partite Delhi agreement of 1951, and the 1956 revised Indo-Nepal Agreement, free interchange and flow of both countries' nationals as well as their right to own property in either country is allowed, unhindered and without restrictions. These agreements only made official a situation which had existed *de facto* from the British period. The reciprocity which the agreements formulated indeed continues today, with at least 3-4.5 million overseas Indians resident in Nepal (Parmanand 1986, Dutt 1981). Nepal and India are the only countries in South Asia that permit the free circulation of people across national boundaries (Myron Weiner 1993).

The analysis of migration data from Census 2001 for the Northeast states is given in Table 1. On the basis of place of birth definition, 46,619 Nepalis are enumerated as migrants, while only 32,174 are enumerated as migrants on the place of last residence definition. In all the states, migrants enumerated on the basis of place of birth definition exceed the number of migrants on place of last residence definition. This suggests that many migrants from Nepal have moved to Northeast India after living in different regions of the country. More than one-third of total immigrants to Northeast have come from East India that comprises the states of West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa and Sikkim (Lusome 2008). Even though Census data does not permit the study of step wise migration, it is believed that many of the Nepali migrants in Northeast India have stayed in East India before their move to Northeast India. None of the Northeast states has border with Nepal unlike the states comprising East India. Among the states of North-east, Assam received the maximum number of Nepali migrants (17,896) followed by

Arunachal Pradesh (14,504). Nagaland and Meghalaya received five thousand migrants each from Nepal. The state of Manipur which has a huge stock of Nepali population received just 781 migrants from Nepal. A look at the sex wise distribution of Nepali migrants clearly indicates the dominance of males in all the states of Northeast India.

Table 1 Population of Northeast States and migration from Nepal by sex, 2001

States	<u>Population</u>			<u>POB</u>			<u>PLR</u>		
	Person	Males	Females	Person	Males	Females	Person	Males	Females
Arunachal	1097968	579941	518027	14504	9231	5273	9090	5630	3460
Nagaland	1990036	1047141	942895	5619	3584	2035	4905	3109	1796
Manipur	2166788	1095634	1071154	781	463	318	551	319	232
Mizoram	888573	459109	429,464	1889	1426	463	1486	1093	393
Tripura	3199203	1642225	1,556,978	385	228	157	309	171	138
Meghalaya	2318822	1176087	1142735	5545	3794	1751	4624	3219	1405
Assam	26655528	13777037	12878491	17896	10608	7288	11209	6558	4651
Northeast	38316918	19777174	18539744	46619	29334	17285	32174	20099	12075

Source: Census of India 2001

Table 2 gives the rural and urban distribution of Nepali migrants in the Northeast states along with the share of migrants to their respective population. It is seen that more Nepalis migrate to rural areas of the northeast states except for the state of Mizoram.

Table 2 Nepali migration by rural urban status

States	<u>Population</u>		<u>Migrants</u>		<u>% to Pop</u>	
	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban
Arunachal	870087	227881	11283	3221	1.30	1.41
Nagaland	1647249	342787	3145	2474	0.19	0.72
Manipur	1590820	575968	573	208	0.04	0.04
Mizoram	447567	441006	562	1327	0.13	0.30
Tripura	2653453	545750	291	94	0.01	0.02
Meghalaya	1864711	454111	3540	2005	0.19	0.44
Assam	23216288	3439240	12863	5033	0.06	0.15
Northeast	32290175	6026743	32257	14362	0.10	0.24

Source: Census of India 2001

About 32 thousands migrated to rural as compared to 14 thousands moving to rural areas. However, given the fact that only 19 percent of the region is urban, it is seen that the share of Nepali migrants to the respective population is much higher in the urban areas as compared to rural areas. The share of Nepali migrants is highest in urban Arunachal (141 Nepali migrants per 1000 population) and lowest in rural Tripura with just 1 Nepali migrant in every 1000 population. Northeast region as a whole has 10 Nepali migrants for every 1000 population in the rural areas as compared to 24 migrants per 1000 population in the urban areas.

The duration of stay among Nepali migrants in the northeast states is given in Table 3. It is seen that 45 percent of the Nepali migrants have stayed for 20 or more years in the region. This is because about 66 percent of the migrants in Assam, which has the highest number of Nepali migrants in the region, have reported to have stayed in the state for 20 or more years. About 21 percent stayed for 0- 9 years, but in the state of Mizoram it is about 43 percent. Fifteen percent have not stated their duration of stay in the region, with a large percentage in the states of Meghalaya and Manipur (for details about the lived experiences of Nepalis in Meghalaya see Haokip, 2014: 310-312).

Table 3 Duration of stay among Nepali migrants

States	Duration of residence					DNS*
	<1 yr	1-4 yrs	5-9 yrs	10-19 yrs	20+ yrs	
Arunachal	1.64	10.78	13.11	27.92	38.37	8.17
Nagaland	0.69	14.90	12.38	24.69	30.17	17.17
Manipur	0.54	13.61	6.53	17.42	35.21	26.68
Mizoram	2.56	22.14	18.03	27.52	24.16	5.59
Tripura	9.06	11.97	7.12	13.92	41.10	16.83
Meghalaya	1.10	11.22	7.22	13.32	31.94	35.19
Assam	0.84	7.54	4.54	11.64	65.73	9.71
Northeast	1.23	10.93	9.22	19.33	45.05	14.24

Source: Census of India 2001, *Duration not stated

Nepali Community in the Northeast

Ethnic community in India is not categorized. However, the recently released data on the mother tongue of the population make it possible to classify the population into distinct groups and communities. The Nepali speaking population in the Northeast given in Table 4 shows the volume and magnitude of Nepali community in the region. The region has 804,409 Nepali in 2001, which mean about 21 people in every thousand population in the region are Nepalis.

Assam has the highest number of Nepalis community in the region followed by Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Manipur and Nagaland. The states of Tripura and Mizoram have lesser Nepalis as compared to other states of the region. In the state of Arunachal Pradesh, the proportion of Nepali migrants to the population is quite significant. Out of every 1000 population, there are about 86 Nepalis in the state. In urban areas of Arunachal Pradesh, one of every 10 people is a Nepali. Similar trend is observed in the urban areas of Meghalaya and Nagaland, though to a lesser degree. While there are 68 Nepali for every 1000 people in urban Meghalaya, it is about 42 Nepali per 1000 population in urban Nagaland. The share of Nepali community in most of northeast states is greater in urban areas as compared to rural areas.

However, in Assam and Manipur, the share of Nepali community is greater in the rural areas as compared to urban areas. The table indicates that in the region the share of Nepali community is slightly higher in urban areas (24 Nepali in every 1000 population) than rural areas (20 Nepali per 1000 population). This necessitates a relook at the earlier

proposition that Nepalis in Northeast are mainly occupied in agricultural activities, cow herding etc. Though the data limits analysis on the occupation of the Nepali community, the large share of the community in urban areas seems to suggest that more and more Nepali are leaving their traditional occupation of agricultural activities, cow herding etc. and are taking advantages of the opportunities available in the urban areas of the region. The suggestion of Nepali community taking advantage of the sparsely populated area does not seem to hold in most of the northeast states excepting Assam and Manipur as it is clearly seen from the table that the percentage of Nepali community living in urban areas is much higher than the percentage of the total population.

Table 4 Nepali speaking population in Northeast states

States	Person	NSP*		Person	% of NSP*		Pop	NSP*
		Rural	Urban		Rural	Urban		
Arunachal	94919	70186	24733	8.64	8.07	10.85	20.8	26.1
Nagaland	34222	19938	14284	1.72	1.21	4.17	17.2	41.7
Manipur	45998	41763	4235	2.12	2.63	0.74	26.6	9.2
Mizoram	8948	1210	7738	1.01	0.27	1.75	49.6	86.5
Tripura	3377	2526	851	0.11	0.10	0.16	17.1	25.2
Meghalaya	52155	21095	31060	2.25	1.13	6.84	19.6	59.5
Assam	564790	503057	61733	2.12	2.17	1.79	12.9	10.9
Northeast	804409	659775	144634	2.10	2.04	2.40	15.7	17.9

Source: Census of India 200, * Nepali speaking population

The concept of 'sons of the soil' is not a new concept in the northeast region of the country. The frightening sentiment of the indigenous people becoming a minority in their own state has fuelled anti-outsider movement in almost all the states of the region. Anti-Nepali feeling has occurred in Meghalaya and Mizoram in the 1970s, and still occurs in states like Manipur and Nagaland. In view of the huge volume of Nepali community in the Northeast, it is important to look at the position of the ethnic group in the states.

Table 5 Percentage of Nepali speaking population and their ranking in Northeast states

States	Total		Rural		Urban	
	Percent	Rank	Percent	Rank	Percent	Rank
Arunachal	8.64	4	8.07	3	10.85	5
Nagaland	1.72	17	1.21	17	4.17	8
Manipur	2.12	6	2.63	7	0.74	7
Mizoram	1.01	9	0.27	11	1.75	4
Tripura	0.11	15	0.10	15	0.16	7
Meghalaya	2.25	4	1.13	8	6.84	5
Assam	2.12	5	2.17	6	1.79	4

Source: Census of India 2001

Table 5 provides the ranking of the Nepali community by rural and urban in the North-east states. This has been computed using the language data of the Census 2001. In Arunachal Pradesh, population whose mother tongue is Nepali forms the fourth largest group, following groups that speak Nissi/Dafla, Adi and Bengali. Nepali speakers overtake Bengali speaking people in rural areas making them the third largest group. However, in urban Arunachal Pradesh, Hindi and Bengali speaking population outnumber Nepali speaking population apart from the groups speaking Adi and Nissi/dafila. Similarly in Meghalaya, Nepali community maintains the fourth position following Khasi, Garo and Bengali speaking population. Ranking the population based on their mother tongue, it is seen that in urban areas, Nepali has emerged as one of the most important language spoken. In the case of urban Assam, it is seen that Nepali is ranked fourth after Assamese, Bengali and Hindi. This means that in urban Assam the number of Nepali people is larger than other ethnic groups including the Bodos.

Summary and discussion

On independence, India inherited in the northeast a pattern of Nepalese settlement which had been a part of imperial security policy in frontier regions. In some of these areas India ambivalently allowed this policy to continue. This has resulted in a high concentration of Nepali people in the region. There can be no disagreement on the contribution of the community to the development of the region. However, many in the region feels that one of the main factors responsible for the present explosive situation in the North East Region is the presence of and incoming large number of international migrants or infiltrators from neighboring countries particularly Bangladesh and Nepal. Their presence have caused immense social, political, economic and ethnic imbalance in this region. These international migrants who find easy access to Government jobs, easy bank loans to set up business in the region and constant exploitation of the region's vast forest resources are not only politically exploited by the national and regional parties for their vote-banks, but also have political ambitions of their own as well. Their political ambition is seen in the case of Tripura, one of the seven States of the region where, once basically a Tribal State, the tribal population has now been reduced to a minority of less than 25 percent, the government and all key Government posts being run and held by these migrants (CWIS 2006).

Contrary to popular understanding, the paper shows that international migration on the basis of Place of Residence (PLR) definition is larger than defined on the basis of Place of Birth (POB). In view of the fact that none of the northeast states shares a border with Nepal, many of these migrants have come via some other states. If the information is restricted to Place of Last Residence, most of the Nepali migrants in northeast would be enumerated as interstate migrants on the basis of their last place of residence. This could prove contentious among the northeast states which are yet to reconcile with the presence of international migrants.

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