

A Study of Nepali Labourers, Graziers and Dairy Farmers in Colonial Assam

Introduction

Human movement is a natural phenomenon. In different period people migrated and settled in different places of the world. Such kind of migration took place during the colonial period when the greatest human movement and settlement of people resulting in the transfer and distribution of diverse population groups in different parts of the world. Certain historical movement of people's migration also took place in Assam during the colonial period. The treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, paved the way for the downfall of 600 years old Ahom monarchy in Assam and ultimately Assam was annexed to the British Indian Empire. Assam during the colonial rule, transfer and redistribution of population took place in the form of indentured labourers, settlement of population in the vast waste lands, to serve as buffer from hostile threats and settlement of ex-plantation workers and ex-servicemen. The commercialization and industrialization under the colonial government also served to stimulate the natural migratory movement of people to Assam.

The British East India Company primarily motivated to annex Assam for their trade and economy. The discovery of tea in Assam served the East India Company the alternative source of supply after they lost their monopoly of China tea trade. The East India Company Government immediately after the annexation of the province, initiated major economic transformation by monetization of the revenue in place of personal service associated with *paik* system, and assessing each *paik* in a lump sum of Rs. 3/- for his homestead garden and paddy field¹. Money became the medium of exchange. The sudden structural changes that occurred in the Assam economy, failed to get respond positively from the Assamese people. Massive colonial investment was made in the tea, coal and oil industries. But the local people were reluctant to work as wage earners under the Company Government. Therefore no other option was left to the Company Government but to encourage immigration into the province.

¹ E.A. Gait, *The Assam Land Revenue Manual, Eastern Bengal and Assam*, Assam Secretariat, 1906, p. xvii.

One of the important migratory movements that took place in the province during the nineteenth and twentieth century's was that of the people of Nepal. The active policies pursued by the Colonial Government to open up the valley to the Nepalis, encouraged the poor Nepali population to migrate Assam. The migration of Nepalis into Assam was important in more than one ways: first to supply an indentured labour force to the province, secondly, to increase the land and grazing revenue by settlement as cultivators or graziers on lands that remained fallow for years together in the Brahmaputra Valley due to the scantiness of population. The scantiness of population was caused by internal dissensions (1770-1810) and Burmese invasions (1819-1826), and then by cholera, small-pox and Kala-azar when Assam lost a considerable number of their population. Consequently large numbers of population were imported from outside the province to meet the labour requirement in the province.

The Nepali speaking people, who are variously denoted as Nepalis, Gurkhalis or Gurkhas constitute at present one of the important population groups in northeast India. Nepali migration to the northeast took place from the nineteenth century onwards. They came primarily in search of a living as soldiers, porters, herdsmen and marginal farmers. The establishment and consolidation of British rule facilitated such migration to the region, which was primarily from Nepal and to some extent from Darjeeling and Sikkim. The southernmost and Tarai region of Nepal being malaria-infested, migration flowed eastward towards the thinly inhabited areas of Assam where the scope of employment in the colonial army, the abundance of land both in the plains and hills for grazing and cultivation as well as the conscious patronage extended by the colonial state to such migration and settlements served as positive pull factors encouraging Nepali migration to the northeast.

The Problem

South Asia, for a long time has been a scene for movements of the people from one part to another. In this context, the movements of the Nepali people into the neighbouring areas were assumed to have tremendous historical, sociological, political and demographic importance. The migration of these people since the turn of the century,

west to east, through Sikkim, Bhutan, Assam and as far as Myanmar etc. began to have serious socio-political ramifications.

Assam, the pivotal state of Northeast India, being strategically located at the base of the Eastern Himalayas, lies on the path of various migratory groups, who at some time or the other in the region's history made it their home. This is what gave Assam its pluralistic, multi-cultural ethos. These migrant groups assimilated into the host society to become a part of the distinct *Assamiya* identity. The society also accepted them and the merger was almost complete. The Nepalis, who migrated in to the pre-colonial times merged almost imperceptibly into the *Assamiya* society.

Large scale Nepali migration into the Northeast Assam began only with the colonial intervention in the 19th century. The colonial vision of Assam as the last land frontier of British India turned into a reality, when the economic transformations that began with tea plantations set off economic forces that gave an impetus to immigration. The active policies pursued by the colonialists opened up the valley to the Nepali Highlanders. The colonials required a pliant labour force for all and sundry work from clearing forests to lumbering to domestic help, which was effectively provided by the versatile Nepali. They thus moved from the hills to the valleys and slowly infiltrated into the urban areas. In the process, they assimilated into the *Assamiya* society, almost completely and contributed largely to the social, economic and political development of the state.

Scope

The study of an immigrant community, which is also an ethnic minority in the region to which they immigrated, is important both to society as well as history. The present study deals with the study of Nepalis in Assam, their migration into the region and its consequences from a socio-historical perspective. Although the Nepali migration with serious ramifications took place only in the colonial context, Nepal's relations with India date back to the early times of Buddhism and Ashoka. Assam-Nepal relations can also be dated to the 8th century A.D. As such a look into Nepal's own history from the ancient period to the modern period would provide a strong basis for our study of the community in Assam. It would also be necessary to look into the patterns of migration in Nepal, as

well as the colonial migration to India/Assam, the trends and causes to understand the present status of the Nepalis in Assam. The study will primarily focus on the Nepalis in Assam, both in Upper Assam as well as in Lower Assam.

Colonial Patronage and Nepali migration into Assam

Nepal has close connection with India and Assam from the ancient times². Both the countries had close cultural and religious ties and people visited both the countries without any restrictions. But the historical trend of migration of the people of the hills of Nepal actually began following the Anglo-Gorkha war and the Treaty of Sagauli in 1816. The Gorkha conquered the heart of the British by their skill and spirit of fighting. John Ship, an eye witness to the war, exclaimed:

“I never saw more steadiness or bravery exhibited in my life. Run they would not, and death, they seem to have no fear, though their comrades were falling thick around them, for we were so near...”³.

The British General David Ochterlony who conducted the Anglo-Nepali war was so much impressed by the fighting qualities and bravery of Gorkhas that the British went heading with the scheme of enlisting the Gorkha prisoners of war even before the end of the war⁴. Gorkha soldiers came to be recruited for the British Indian army. Initially, the Nepal government opposed the inclusion of its citizens in the British army. In such situation the only alternative left with the company was to resort to clandestine recruitment by enticing Gorkha young boys through the help of Gorkha Non

² According to the mythological sources Ayodha Prince Rama married Sita, King of Nepal. Gurkha King Prithvi Narayan Shah traces his decent to the Rajputs, India. The boundary of ancient Kamrupa was from the mountain Kancana in Nepal upto the confluence of the Brahmaputra from Karatoya to Dikkarasini. Salastambha King Harsha Deva's daughter was married to Jayadeva, King of Nepal. In 16th Century Koch King Biswa Sinha married Ratnakantidevi of Nepal. According to S.K. Chatterji Limbu, Tamang, Lepcha, Magar, Gurung, Sherpa, Bodos, Kacharis, Rabha and Mishing belong to the same Kirata group.

³ Francis Toker, *The Story of Gorkhas of Nepal* (London, 1957), p.236.

⁴ K.K. Muktan, “Gorkhas’ Contribution to the Security of India”, in *The Nepalis in North-East India: A Community in Search of Indian Identity*, eds., Sinha, A.C. & T. B. Subba, (New Delhi: Indus Publishing Company, 2007), p.124.

Commissioned Officer serving in the Indian Army. Recruitment centers were established in border town of Gorakhpur and Ghoom on the Indian side. In between 1816-1885, Nepalese villagers, eager to enlist, began to migrate towards India. By the year 1858, the total number of Gorkha battalion raised in the way rose to five⁵.

In 1885, an Agreement of Mutual Concession was concluded between Viceroy Lord Dufferin and the Prime minister of Nepal Ranudip Singh which for the first time enabled the Government of India to recruit in stipulated number in exchange of equal number of arms to be supplied to Nepal⁶. In the following year the 6th Gorkha Rifles was raised with the name of 42nd Bengal (Gorkha) Infantry and this was closely followed by formation of another two regiments called 7th and 8th Gorkha Rifles in 1903. By the year 1908 the Gorkha Brigade reached the highest peak time strength of twenty battalions⁷. These migrations led to settlements of Nepali people in Kangra, Nainital, Dharamasala, Darjeeling, Dehradun and Shillong. According to estimates given by Bolt (1997), about 243,000 soldiers enlisted during World War I with further 1,60,000 recruits in World War II, the number of Gorkha battalions had increased from 3 in 1816 to 51 in 1945⁸.

The increased emigration to India in a great extent was from the Eastern Tarai, the Eastern Hills, the Western Hills and the Kathmandu Valley was mainly because these regions were more developed than the others⁹. Various historical accounts point out that permanent migration across the borders of Sikkim, Bengal, Assam, Darjeeling, Bhutan and Burma accelerated after the 1850s. These people provided the greater part of the labour force for tea estates located in that region and contributed greatly to the Tea Industry in Bengal and Assam. The vast majority of these migrants consist of former slaves and debtors. In addition to their work on tea estates, Nepalese migrants in India in

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.126.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Jagannath Adhikari, *The Beginning of Agrarian Change: A Case study in Central Nepal* (Kathmandu: TM Publication, 1996), p.83.

⁹ Lopita Nath, *The Nepalis in Assam: Ethnicity and cross Border Movement in the North East* (Kolkata: Makais Publication, 2003), p.34.

the 19th century were also heavily involved in the development of the coal mining industry as well as land reclamation and resettlement in some parts of India¹⁰.

Nepali Migration into Assam:

Migration of human being from one place to another place is a natural phenomenon of human civilization. Assam was not an exceptional from this force of nature. Migration of population takes place due to several reasons. These movements of the people are entirely induced or encouraged or compelled by the cumulative actions and reactions of the prevalent socio-economic and ecological environments. Migration is thus induced by strong incentives to move, along with the human will to do so. Besides, there are economic and non-economic causes, which can be summarized within the framework of push and pull hypothesis. In the case of the Nepali migration to the Northeast, Assam in particular, these push and pull factors have played a major role¹¹.

The reasons for such a significant human movement of the Nepalis to Assam may broadly divided into two. Firstly, the internal situation within Nepal made the lives of at least some of the subjects so difficult that they preferred to move out of the country was the push factor and secondly, many of them discovered that the British Indian Government had created a situation in which they were not only welcomed, but also preferred as more useful compared to the 'natives'. Furthermore, they found that life was relatively comfortable and they could even save some surplus for their kinsfolk left behind in the hill.

There were certain pull factors, which attracted a large number of the Nepalis to migrate to Assam and the Northeast. They were:-

1. Abundance of land both in the plains and the hills of Assam.
2. Colonial Assam's socio-economic condition.
3. Economic opportunities.
4. The colonial patronage.

¹⁰ Jagannath Adhikari, *The Beginning of Agrarian Change: A Case study in Central Nepal* (Kathmandu: TM Publication, 1996), pp.78-79.

¹¹ Nath, *Op.cit.*, p. 39.

Throughout the ancient and medieval times, Assam remained a thinly populated region because of its different terrains, an agriculturally related tribal population and its forest and swamps¹². Only some 24,000 square miles of its flat alluvial plains were habitable¹³. Finding large-scale wastelands, which were beneficial for cultivation of various agricultural products as well as for habitable places, flow of human races in to Assam took place from time to time. According to D.D. Mali

“at the time of British annexation of Assam, vast area of province, particularly the plains portions were wasteland. The Government had thought to dispose it, except in the permanent settled portion of the District of Goalpara...”¹⁴.

W.W. Hunter in his accounts also highlighted about the various land abundant district of Assam, especially in the Bramhaputra valley. According to him “there is very large quantity of spare of land in Sibsagar”¹⁵. Writing about the district of Darrang he remarked that: “there is a great deal of cultivable wasteland in the district of Darrang but most of it now bears heavy grass, jungles, reeds of forests, very expensive to clear”¹⁶. It was clear from the report of Hunter that there was vast spare cultivable land in the district but Hunter observed that “none of the rivers and marshes in the district Nagaon have been embanked with a view to cultivation, as there is, the fact, more cultivable land lying waste than the existing population can till”¹⁷. The thinly populated area was also responsible of large wasteland in Assam as Hunter stated that “here are large tract of river and marsh land in Lakhimpur, which could be reclaimed, if required, but at present

¹² A. Guha, *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society, Polity, Economy* (Calcutta: K. P. Bagchi and Company, Published for Centre for Social Sciences, 1991), p.39.

¹³ Shahiuz Zaman Ahmed, “Factors Leading to the Migration from East Bengal to Assam (1871-1971)”, *India History Congress, 66th Session*, (Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan: IHC, 2006), p.999.

¹⁴ D.D. Mali, *Revenue Administration in Assam* (Guwahati: Omsons Publications, 1985), p.149.

¹⁵ Hunter, W.W. (1998). *A Statistical Account of Assam, Vol. I*. Guwahati: Spectrum Publication. p.257 (Original work Published 1879).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.175.

the population is not sufficiently numerous to bring under tillage the land already cultivable”¹⁸.

The Colonial British Government had undertaken first census in India in the year of 1872. Though this census was incomplete in many respects, it even gave a rough demographic picture of Assam in 1879’s. The report indicates that except in the district of Sibsagar and Kamrup, the rest of Assam had a remarkably low density of population. It further indicates that there was abundant of waste habitable land as well as fertile cultivable lands in Assam.

Table No. 1.1 Wasteland in Assam (1872)

District in square miles	Area in square miles	Population	No. of Houses	Persons/ sq. miles	Houses/ sq. miles	Persons per house
Kamrup	3,631	561681	103908	155	29	5.40
Darrang	3,418	236009	45558	69	13	5.40
Nowgaon	3,415	256390	44050	75	12	5.80
Sibsagar	2,855	296609	55604	104	19	5.30
Lakhimpur	3,192	121267	16398	38	8	4.60

Source: W.W. Hunter, A Statistical Account of Assam.

From the above statistical data, it was found that Assam had large acres of uncultivated as well as uninhabited wastelands. The devastation and depopulation during the period of civil wars and Burmese invasion left vast tracts of wastelands throughout the province. Flood and inundations and in their wake of cholera, kala-azar, dysentery, which were endemic, accelerated the pace of deteriorations.

The local authorities were aware from the very beginning to the fact that unless these wastelands re-occupied and brought under tillage, neither revenues of the Government nor the resources of the people could be improved¹⁹. The British Government wanted that these vast tracts of wastelands should be opened so that they could increase their

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.299.

¹⁹ H.K. Barpujari, *The Comprehensive History of Assam, Vol. V* (Guwahati: Publication Board Assam, 2004), p.37.

revenues. In 1897, the Government of Assam forwarded a proposal for colonization of wastelands²⁰. Even the company correspondents also advanced forward similar points of view. In a letter to A.J.M. Mills in 1853, Major H. Vetch, the then Deputy Commissioner of Assam wrote/said-

“In a country so abounding with wasteland as Assam and with so scanty of population Government may well part with a portion on many terms, if hereby settlers were induced to come into the country”²¹.

Even some indigenous local intellectuals also felt the need to bring the wastelands under cultivable and habitable existence. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, one of the best leading Assamese intellectuals in his observation on the province of Assam wrote- ‘More than one half of the country is now vast exert of waste’²². Thus in order to maximize the population of Assam, Dhekial Phukan wrote to Mills:

“...The Government will be leased to bring out from and Upper India a sufficient number of men as well versed in the art of agriculture...”²³.

In the nineteenth century, there was an economic distress over the people of Assam. In 1883, the black fever (Kala-azar), epidemic appeared in Goalpara and later it re-appeared into Assam proper in 1888 and gradually spread throughout its length and breadth. During 1891 to 1901, the population of Goalpara subdivision was decreased by 18 per cent and that of Kamrup District by 16 per cent. During the next decade, the population

²⁰ Mali, *Op.cit.*, p.160.

²¹A. J. M. Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*. (Guwahati: Publication Board, Assam, 1984), (original work published in 1854), p. XIV.

²² *Ibid.*, p. XXXVIII.

²³ Mills, *Ibid.*, p.103.

of Kamrup district was decreased by 7.10 per cent; that of Mangaldoi subdivision of Darrang by 9 per cent and Nowgaon by 24.80 per cent²⁴.

Besides black fever, malaria, cholera etc., the long drawn civil war in the last year of Ahom monarchy, the Burmese wars and subsequent occupations and misrule of Assam led to the loss of a large number of Assamese people's lives. The abduction of a large number of Assamese by the Burmese as they retreated following the defeat in the hands of the British forces and the great earthquake of 1897 that destroyed both lives and large acres of farmlands, led to economic imbalance in Assam.

The people of Nepal origin and Nepali people within India also left their hearth homes came to Assam and settled down in various parts of the Northeast region, especially in the Assam. After the annexation of Assam the British found that the revenue paid by the local people, who were in less number was not sufficient enough to meet the demands of the British government. Moreover the British Government had to spend a large amount of money in order to maintain a British favourable administration in the state. Thus to strengthen their own treasury and smooth administration encouraged the poor people of Nepal to leave the country and settle in Assam. The colonial Government required a pliant labour force for all and sundry work from clearing forests to lumbering for domestic help, which was effectively provided by the versatile Nepali.

The employment opportunities provided the incentives to Nepali people to migrate India/ Assam. The Gorkha soldiers were recruited in the Indian army after the Treaty of Sagauli (1816). The recruited process continuing throughout the 1st and 2nd World Wars by the British Government as a soldiers and member of the coolie crops was a trendsetter for the Nepalis to migrate in search of similar appointments. 'The Assam Company' was founded in 1838 as a joint stock company to introduce organized tea plantation mainly for exporting it to Europe²⁵. The development required a reliable and inexpensive labour force to clear the jungle for making way to the plantation. The British developed a policy

²⁴ A. Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle & Electoral Politics in Assam* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2006), p.31.

²⁵ A.C. Sinha & T.B. Subba., (eds), *The Nepalis in Northeast India: A Community in Search of Indian Identity* (New Delhi: Indus Publishing Company, 2007), p. 16.

of forest reservation and management in 1860, these forests required periodic commercial timber extraction. Commercial timber extraction required strong muscle power as ‘*arakasias*’ (sawyers) or ‘*tangaits*’ (axemen), who cleared the forests from Bhutan to Arakan Hills²⁶. Required labourers for drilling oil in upper Assam, coal mines, tea gardens, road construction, coolies carriers (in military expedition) and labour in agricultural field attracted Nepali people to migrate to Assam. Furthermore, pension disbursement centers, welfare schemes such as soldier boards and medical facilities made it very attractive for the Nepalis to enlist for the job in the British establishments. Such earning from India in cash starved rural Nepal was considered prestigious thing for an average Nepali family²⁷.

British interest in India, before and after colonization, was primarily commercial. They reached India, and its prosperous regions, for trade; trade led to conquest and empire. Even after conquest, the trade and profit continued to be the key motive of the Colonial Government. The actual conqueror was an enterprising commercial organization- the English East India Company. The transfer of authority to the British Crown (1858), a hundred years later, did not change the mercantile character of the Raj²⁸. It’s aimed at revenue maximization and increasing the wealth of Britain at the cost of India. As R.C. Dutta said:

“They considered India as a vast estate or plantation, the profits of which were to be withdrawn from India and deposited in Europe. They reserved all the high appointments in India for their own nominee seeking a lucrative career in the East. They brought their merchandise out of the revenue of India, and sold it in Europe for their own profit. They vigorously exacted from India a high interest on their stock-in-trade. In one shape or another all that could be raised in India

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²⁸ J.B. Bhattacharjee, *Trade and Colony: The British Colonisation of North East India* (Shillong: NEIHA, 2000), p.2.

by an excessive taxation flowed to Europe, after paying a starved administration²⁹.

The Nepalis were recruited to the British Indian army in a big way after 1815. They not only turned out to be a strong ally and mercenary force but also became pioneers of the British penetration into the eastern Himalayas. The British were engaged in developing the eastern Himalayan foothills for tea planting, an attractive proposition for the gregarious and thriving Nepalis. Moreover, in their efforts to contain the Bhutias of the eastern frontiers, the British used the Nepalis as a wedge between themselves stationed in the plains and the indigenous people³⁰.

East India Company being a profit making body was apprehensive of entering Assam without having sufficient knowledge of its potentialities. Assam was essentially a self-supporting village economy based on agriculture. But people of the province lacked entrepreneur. Since the eighteenth century the prospect of trade and commerce in the Assam valley had maintained by some Bengal based European mercantile and drew particular attention of the East India Company during the war against the Burmese³¹. Discovery of tea, coal and oil in the eighteenth and nineteenth century added incentives to the East India Company's policy of promotion of commerce in the province. Circumstances were not favourable for the growth and accumulation of local capital which was a definite hindrance towards industrialization. While natural resources were available in Assam in abundance, other factors are of production viz. labour and capitals were not easily available. Assam was essentially a self supporting village economy based on agriculture for which they were reluctant to serve as subservient factory workers. During the Ahom rule, Assam followed a policy of virtual aloofness in matters of trade and her connection with Indian mainstream market was confined to border trade with Bengal. All these explain the relative backwardness of the province in the industrial

²⁹ R.C. Dutta, *Economic History of India-Early British Rule, Vol. I* (London: 1902), p.36.

³⁰ A.C. Sinha, "The Indian Northeast Frontier and the Nepali Immigrants", in *The Nepalis in North-East India: A Community in Search of Indian Identity*, eds., Sinha, A.C. & T. B. Subba, (New Delhi: Indus Publishing Company, 2007), p.38.

³¹ D. Banarjee, *Labour Movement in Assam* (New Delhi: Anamika Publishers, 2005), p.26.

sector. British gave importance to import cheap labour from outside. The economic development and industrial development were possible for that cheap labour importation.

Review of Literature

Guha, A. (1977). His book *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, deals with how the British Capitalist brought transition in the socio-economic and cultural spheres after annexing Assam by the colonial rule. The author also highlighted how the profit and exploitation had been the prime concern of the colonial rule in Assam. The early discoveries and exploration operation of natural resources, development of railways and so on was the part of such capitalist exploitation of resources from Assam. The Colonial Government of Assam did not left any stone unturned to maximization of revenue collection in the province, whether it may be the wasteland settlement or opium or grazing fees. Further he discussed the migration issues of East Bengalis into Assam. But the matter of Nepali migration, settlement into Assam hardly found a space. However, labour movement in the province of Assam – both plantation and non-plantation and information regarding the grazing issues served as a base to reconstruct the grazing history in Assam.

Weiner, M. (1978). *Sons of the Soil, Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India*. This book deals with the roots of ethnic conflicts in India and as one of its case study tries to focus on the conflicts that had taken place between the different immigrant groups that had migrated into Assam during the colonial period and the indigenous Assamese population, on a range of unresolved and controversial questions like identity, economic domination of the migrants.

Bhuyan, A. C. and De, S. (2008). *Political History of Assam*, Vol. II, 3rd edition, deals mainly with the national movement but at the same time also highlighted labour protest in the non-plantation sectors like Assam Match Company and Assam Oil Company worker's strike along with the India freedom Movement.

Bhuyan, A. C. and De, S. (2008). *Political History of Assam*, Vol. III, 3rd edition, deals mainly with the events of the final struggle for India's freedom movement and participation of Assamese into the Quit India movement. At the same time it also contained valuable information regarding the East Bengali Immigration issues on the

plea of 'Grow More Food Campaign' of the Saadullah Government and the eviction issues of East Bengali from the grazing reserves during the Bordoloi Government.

Phukan, U. (1984). *The Ex- tea Garden Labour population in Assam*, provides an insight into the historical perspective of discovery of the tea and the importation of labour from the outside Assam on the ground that the local labour was not available for the manual work. He further highlighted how pathetic communication system create obstruction for the coolies who were brought under contracts to serve the tea gardens for a period of 5 years, after which they had the option to return to their native places, could not return after the expiry of the terms. Most of them opted or were compelled to opt for further terms and other settled as independent cultivators, tenants and agricultural labourers in neighbouring villages.

Mali, D.D. (1985). *Revenue Administration in Assam*. This book mainly focusses on the Revenue Administration in Assam where the author tried to give a comprehensive account of the system of revenue administration during the Ahom period. This book also analysed about land revenue settlement, demand and collection of revenue and settlement of waste land within colonial period.

Borooah, G.L. (1985). *Population Geography of Assam: A study of Dibrugarh District 1872-1971*, deals with the demographic changes that occurred after 1870 due to the industrial development and labour immigration into the province. This book also reveal how the discovery of Tea, Coal, Oil and forest based industries attracted the people from outside of the province to migrate Assam where enough economic and employment scope was available.

Goswami, S. (1987). *Aspects of Revenue Administration in Assam (1826-1874)*. This book focuses on the revenue administration of Assam between 1826, the year in which Assam passed under the control of East India Company and 1874, when it was separated from Bengal and constituted into a chief Commissioner's province. The book also presents a detail account of how the unfavourable internal atmosphere, the British, in initial years, desisted from making a radical change in the existing revenue system but retained it with such minor modification as were considered absolutely necessary. But

how in the name of to meet the expenses of state machinery the British imposed tax on opium, *abkaree*, custom and inland-duty, forest and forest product, stamp, fishery, gold-washing, lime-quarry, house poll and income-tax etc. and its impact on the nineteenth century Assamese society.

Hussain, M. (1993). *Assam Movement, Class Ideology and Identity*, This book mainly examines the various aspects and issues of the Assam Movement of the late 1970's and early 80's but the author also tried to analyze the issues of immigration and Assamese nationalism from a historical perspective tracing the roots of the problem of immigration from the colonial period.

Guha, A. (1991). *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam: Society, Polity, Economy*, This book mainly deals with the socio-economic, and political structures during the Ahom rule and also focuses on the early impact of the British rule in Assam. This book also focuses on the overhauling of the revenue system, the monetization of the economy, the beginning of the tea industry in Assam, the issues associated with the opium trade and the impact of the 19th century's Bengal renaissance on the social fabric of Assam.

Bista, D.B. (1991). *Fatalism and Development*, where the book highlights the caste and social system of Nepal. This book further deals with the politics and government, poverty, lack of education during the monarchical rule of Rana dynasty in Nepal forced people to search a new land.

Rose, Leo (1994). *The Nepali Ethnic Community in the Northeast of the Sub-continent*. This book deals with the migration of Nepalis into Assam during the colonial periods, which traces the growth of the Nepalis as an ethnic community in the North-east.

Bhandari, P. (1996). *Freedom Movement and Role of Indian Nepalis 1800-1950*, deals as the title suggests, with the Nepali contribution to the Freedom Movement in India. This book also highlighted the contribution of Chabilal Upadhyay, Dalbir Singh Lohar, Bhakta Bahadur Pradhan in the freedom struggle of Assam. This book also focuses on the relation between Nepal and India and also with Assam from the *Vedic* period to the British colonial rule in India. He further asserted how Nepalis (Gurkhas) were recruited in the army and police forces and also coolies in drilling oil in the dense forest of Digboi

and surrounding areas where Cholera, Malaria, Dysentery was common . But here also he did not mention the role of Nepali labourers in other fields.

Barpujari, H.K. (1996). *Assam in the Days of the Company*. This book deals with the history of Assam under the Company rule (1826-1858), where the author gave a brief account about the British rule and changes that took place in Assam along with material progress through the tea plantation, trade and commerce. This book also focuses on the waste land grant, agricultural backwardness, problem of labour shortage into the province.

Bhattacharjee, J.B. (2000). *Trade and Colony: The British Colonisation of North East India*. This book highlights how the British colonizer first appeared as traders and then gradually took over the regions of administration and converted it into a colony of their home country. He also described how the Britishers desired to control the North East India through which the traditional trade route of China, Tibet and Burma would be under their control. But the discovery of coal and oil in the Brahmaputra valley and also indigenous tea plants in the Brahmaputra and Barak Valley served as an important motivation for immediate colonization of Assam at the first instance and then the neighbouring areas by phases and installments for the security of the raw-material providing and revenue yielding sector of the region.

Dirks, N.B. (2003). *Caste of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, he discussed the caste system which was transformed under the colonial rule. He highlighted the term of caste in colonialism that was a cultural project of control, where cultural forms in the Indian societies were newly classified as colonizer and colonized, European and Asia, modern and 'traditional'. According to him, beliefs, customs, practices, and convictions those have been designated as tradition is the byproduct of colonial history. While in the name of modernity, India's traditional *varna* system was classified into nationality and racial terms. Caste in colonial India became politicalised when the first decennial Census of 1872 was conducted and caste had become the primary subject of social classification and knowledge. He also argued that caste became the colonial form of civil society where India's past history was also colonized where traditional Varna system reclassified into Brahmin, warrior and peasant class. Even

colonial rule defined famous revolt of 1857 in class background. The author also highlighted how the colonial government took non-intervention policy regarding the caste system, which they believe as a quintessential form of civil society, which according to Dirks is responsible for India's weakness.

Gait, E. (2003). *A History of Assam*. This book is a comprehensive history of Assam from ancient to the consolidation of British Empire in Assam. The book further deals with the discovery of tea and development of railways, steamers and tea industry in Assam during the colonial period.

Nath, L. (2003). This work *The Nepalis in Assam Ethnicity and Cross Border Movement in the North-East* is based on her Ph.D. Thesis focusing the relation between Indo-Nepal and Assam-Nepal from the pre-historic time to the Assam Movement and Bodo Movement in Assam. This book also reveals how the opportunities created under the Colonial rule served as pull factor, which attracted large number of Gorkha people to left their native place and enlisted themselves as army and police. Poverty and lack of employment in their native place compelled the Nepalis to migrate to the province of Assam. This book also highlights how the Assam Movement (1979-84) created the identity crisis of the Nepalis who have been in Assam for more than a century. Further this book also focuses on the ethnic movement of Bodo who were demanding sovereign Bodo state perpetrated ethnic violence, which caused wholesale 'displacement' among the non-Bodos in which Nepalis were included.

Barpujari, H.K. (2004). *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, Vol. V. This book deals with the early history of British colonial rule in Assam. This book also highlights the early exploration operation of oil and coal and influx of labour immigrants in tea, coal and oil industry due to the scantiness of population in Assam. But this comprehensive work, spread in five volumes, has not touched the subject of Nepali labour and their contribution in Assam.

Karna, M.N. (2004). *Agrarian Structure and Reforms in Assam*. This book deals with the land reform measures, agrarian structure and agrarian discontent and mobilization in

Assam. He also traced the development on the backdrop of the Ahom period and land reform as well as clashes with governmental measures in colonial times.

Thapa, R. (2004). His book *Asomar Tholuwa Nepali Samaj* (Assamese) (A Critical Study) is mainly a collection of articles published in Assamese Dailies which led to good amount of intellectual debates on various aspects of Nepali people's life in Assam, like migrating their customs and tradition along with participation in Digboi Oil strike.

Banerjee, D. (2005). *Labour Movement in Assam: A Study of Non-plantation Workers' Strike till 1939*. In this book the author highlighted the nature of the working class movement in Assam during the period intervening the two world wars in the non-plantation sector with special reference to the Assam Oil Company Workers' Strike of 1939 which got the unique distinction of being the most important labour movement in the province during the pre-independence era where Nepali labourers were also participated. In addition, the book also throws light on the strike of the Workers at the Assam Government Press, Dibru-Sadiya Railways, Assam Bengal Railways, Assam Match Company and Railway and Trading Company and the strike by the Police Force at Jorhat. But the roles played by the Nepalis in the labour strikes were not highlighted altogether.

Gurung, T. (2007). "Human Movement and the Colonial State: The Nepalis of Northeast India under the British Empire" in Sinha, A.C. and Subba, T.B. (eds.), *The Nepalis in Northeast India: A Community in search of Indian Identity*. In this article the author tried to highlight that though the human movement had been a natural process of the world of Civilization, but according to her it was the commercialization and industrialization under the Colonial rule and sponsorship in the 19th and 20th century that served to stimulate such migratory movement of the people, and the people of Nepal was one of such group. She also focused on how after the Anglo-Nepalese war (1814-16), Nepali migration flowed into thinly inhabited Assam, and scope of employment in the army, the abundance of land, suitable for grazing and the conscious patronage extended by Colonial state to Nepalis served as positive pull factors. She also revealed how the Colonial Government in the name of collecting 'additional revenue', encouraged the Nepali Graziers into Assam. She also tried to highlight how the heavy grazing taxation

and encroachment of grazing reserves by the land hungry East Bengali forced the versatile Nepalis to changed their profession from grazing to cultivators.

Nag, S. (2007). “*Fei-isation of the Nepalis of Northeast India*” in A.C. Sinha & T. B. Subba, (ed.) *The Nepalis in Northeast India: A Community in search of Indian Identity*. In this article the author revealed that the Nepalis were brought and encouraged to settle in Assam under colonial patronage. According to him, Nepalis were after grant of waste lands on favourable terms, and they were reported to be provided with pecuniary assistance for their journey to upper Assam. Large numbers of Nepali graziers who run their dairy business within Kaziranga areas were asked to vacate the area and got dismantling their houses. Chabilal Upadhyaya, one of the prominent businessman in dairy farming popularised the issues amongst the middleclass of Assam, and had the honour of being the first President of APCC. He also highlighted how the growing number of the East Bengalis and encroachment on the grazing reserves forced the Nepalis to organise under a banner. Accordingly under the leadership of Chabilal Upadhyaya, the Tezpur Graziers’ Association came into existence in 1933 at Singri. He also revealed that how the Nepalis fully associated with the sentiment of Assamese people opposed the grouping plan and enumerated themselves as Assamese to protect them from inclusion of Assam into Pakistan. He argued that even though Nepalis contributed immensely to the protection of the interest of the Assamese nationality, hard to find their space in the written history of Assam.

Baruah, P. (2008). *The Tea Industry of Assam: Origin and Development*, as like the title, the book covers the history of tea industry of Assam since its inception. It covers the aspects of origin, development over years, production, marketing, labour, contribution to the economy of Assam, problems and prospects. Further this book highlighted the scarcity of local labour in the plantation resulted labour migration in large scale from outside Assam.

Upadhyaya, J. (ed.) (2009). In *History and Culture of Assamese- Nepali*, contains VI chapters and 60(sixty) articles of noted scholars. This work though tried to highlight history of Nepalis in Assam, has not included all stories of the Nepali labourers except

the oil and coal mines but enough to highlight in this particular areas. This book also deals with the contribution of the Nepalis in Agriculture, Grazing and Cattle breeding.

Subba, T.B., et.al. (2009). *Indian Nepalis: Issues and Perspectives*, which deals with the different phases of Nepali migration into Assam and also highlighted how the colonial government encouraged the poor Nepalis to migrate to scanty populated and labour shortage province Assam. The Labour Enquiry Committee recommended recruiting the hardy Gorkhas as colliery labour in the mines and opening labour recruiting center in Gorakhpur. And also described how the Colonial government encourages the retired Gorkha soldiers to settle in Assam by constituting Professional Grazing Reserve (PGR), Village Grazing Reserve (VGR), for cattle rearing which not only encouraged the large number of Nepali people to migrate in Assam but also increased the revenue in the British ex-chequer.

Gurung, T. (2009). Gurkhas as Colliers: Labour Recruitment and Racial Discourse in the Coal Mines of Assam. In T.B. Subba *et.al.* (eds.). *Indian Nepalis: Issues and perspectives*. In this article the author tried to focus on how the British East India Company had to rely upon the labours from the outside of the province for their manual works. After the discovery of Coal and other industrial development, Company faced labour shortage in the province, as local people were unwilling to serve as wage earners. On the other hand the Company need tough quality men in the coal mines who were not only industrious but also loyal and 'martial', Gorkhas were suitable for that. Recruitment depot was also opened at Gorakhpur, and from where the martial Gorkhas were recruited for the coal mines of Makum, Ledo, Tikak, Bargolai, Rangring (Namdang), Lekhapani, Margherita etc. in Assam. She also revealed how these poor Gorkhas had been lured by false inducements under the *Sardari* system, and were compelled to work hard in an unhealthy condition. Large numbers of Nepali coolies were recruited for a year but they were forcibly kept at coal mines year after years. The author also highlighted how even after the opposed of the Nepali Government for such recruitment, Nepalis had been continuously recruited by the Company.

Bhuyan, S.K. (2010). *Early British Relation with Assam*, this book deals with the historical information on published records of the East India Company. This book also

deals with large amount of documents and records in the offices of District, Divisional and Provincial Headquarters, references found in the writings of great British ruler and civil servants like David Scott, General Jenkins, and Mr. A.J. Moffat Mills.

Saikia, A. (2011). 'Imperialism, Geology and Petroleum: History of Oil in Colonial Assam', *Economic and Political Weekly*. This article provides valuable inputs in tracing out the genesis of the early surveys of oil exploration and extraction in the province of Assam. The author also highlighted how these early surveys and exploration operation had been conducted in an area which was covered by dense forest, unhealthy and away from the knowledge of the world. As the oil industry during the Colonial counterpart was crucially dependent on imperial capital mechanism, labour unrest was also noticed in the industry. He argued that the Digboi AOC strike, 1939 was the conflict of interest between the Provincial Congress Government and Imperial interest.

Proceedings of the North East India History Association (NEIHA). – Research papers submitted by numerous scholars during the annual proceedings of the North East India History Association have focused on a range of issues relating to the polity and history of North East India. But in the Proceedings volumes of the North- East India History Association and North East Council for Social Research, history of Nepali labours and the working class struggle in Assam is also remained an unexplored area of research. However, among such scholarly works, papers contributed by Ramesh Kalita and D. Banerjee are relevant for the present work.

Kalita, Ramesh. (1993). '*Immigration into Assam, British Policy and Assamese Middle Class*', (1826 – 1900), Volume, XIII, and Kalita, Ramesh. (1994). *Immigration into Assam, British Policy and Assamese Middle Class*, (1930 - 1947), Volume, XIV, - This set of two articles focuses on the issue of migration during the colonial period in Assam and the policy followed by the British colonial government in encouraging migration and the supportive response of the emerging middle class of Assam towards migration during the period as they believe that the Assam would not be prosper unless the flood-gate for the immigration from outside Assam opened.

Dipankar Banerjee's article 'Genesis of Labour Movement among the Non-plantation workers and also White Collar Employees' in the *Proceedings of North-East India History Association* in its Sixth Session, Agartala, 1985, (pp.383-392) tried to highlight how the World War I increased the prices of all commodities, which led to the wide spread discontentment among the plantation as well as non-plantation wage-earning labours. This article also focuses on how from 1918 onwards Assam witnessed the labour discontentment and struck working. The strike of the Assam Government Press in 1918, the Dibru-Sadiya Railways Workers' Strike in 1920, The Assam-Bengal Railway workers' strike in 1921, the Dibru-Sadiya Railways Strike in 1928, Assam Match Company Workers' Strike 1928, Jorhat Police Strike 1929, Assam Oil Company Workers' strike 1929, where workers not only demanded high rate of payment but also a hygienic working condition.

Objectives of the Study

1. To study the Colonial discourse on the scarcity of labour in the province.
2. To study the labourers used as marketable colonial capitalism.
3. To study the martial races and castes recruited as labourers in colonial Assam.
4. To study the land settlement and colonial mode of revenue collection in Assam.
5. To study the various sectors where Nepali labour was employed.
6. To study labour protest and Nepali participation.

Research Questions

1. Whether there was labour scarcity in the colonial Assam?
2. What are the causes of importation of Labour?
3. Why the colonial government recruited martial castes and races as labourers?
4. How the grazing ground turned to be agricultural land revenue?

5. What are the causes of Digboi Oil strike and participation of Nepali labour?

Methodology

The methodologies adopted in this research work are empirical as well as analytical. In the process of historical enquiry of the research both primary and secondary data will be used for the present study.

Organisation of the thesis

The main findings of the thesis have been arranged in the following order. The chapter I titled *Introduction* deal with the colonial structure of economic policies which ultimately capture the province Assam by the East India Company in 1826 by the treaty of Yandaboo. East India Company interested to capture Assam due to the prosperous nature of the province which had been depicted in their earlier official reports. But after acquiring the province Company came to know that there was vast area of waste land. The company government realised that neither the resources nor the revenue of the province would increase without these vast waste land brought under tillage. The chapter reveals that people from Nepal and outside of the province were encouraged to immigrate and settle permanently in Assam. The chapter also deals with the scope of the study, review of available literature, methodology of the study and organisation of the work.

The Chapter II titled *The Notion of Indolent Native and the Causes of Importation of Labour from outside* discusses the story scarcity of labour in the province high mortality which was caused ,by the internal dissensions, Burmese invasion then by communicable diseases like cholera, small-pox, and kala-azar, a considerable number of people lost their life. The East India Company after annexing Assam felt the dearth of knowledge about the province and the limited scope of revenue collection. The chapter reveals that maximizing the revenue of the province British Government advocated the sale of opium then the popular drugs in the province. After the discovery of tea and other avenues of employment British Government needed labours. The popular notion amongst the British Officials was that Assamese people were mostly lazy, indolent and opium addicted and

imported labours from outside the province. The chapter reveals that the reluctance of Assamese peoples to do work as a labour as they felt that it would degrade them from the social status. The chapter explores that certain tribes and Assamese were induced to work as hired labour during their spare time and as they had a local and solid social base they had a better bargaining power with the management. The Government of Assam therefore alleged the Assamese as lazy, indolent and opium addicted and attempted to encourage immigration of labour mostly from the famine affected and poverty stricken areas.

The Chapter III titled *Mining Industry and Nepali Labour in Colonial Assam*; shows the history of coal in the province and exploration operation in the early nineteenth century till the Assam Railways and Trading Company took the charges of the coal extraction operations. The company was formed to develop the railway communication into the province to be engaged in coal exploration and extraction from Makum, Tikak, Ledo and Margherita in the eastern Assam. By the discovery of tea, coal market was growing incredibly for the ferry and railway communication in the province. The exploration and extraction of coal were encouraged by the Colonial Government locally. The study of mining industry also reveals the fact that the extraction of coal was never been an easy task as the mines were located in the jungle areas. It needed tough people and according to the class distinction by the colonial Government Nepali martial classes were considered as tough people. Large numbers of people were recruited through agents for extraction of coal in Assam. Gorakhpur depot was opened to recruit Nepalis for the purpose. The chapter further reveals the wages, working condition and treatment meted by the coolies in the coal mines of the province.

The Chapter IV titled *Graziers and Dairy Farmers in Colonial Assam*, deals with the colonial concept of maximisation of revenue, encouraged the Nepalis to run the grazing business in the province. This would help the Government in two ways; first they opened up the valley for cultivation by destroying impregnable forest used as pasturage for the graziers buffaloes, second easy for recruiting of Nepalis for military purposes. By nineteenth century, the British Company had enough knowledge about Assam's forest and mineral resources which resulted in the control over the collection and production of

those resources. By early twentieth century, British State imposed Grazing Rules to control the grazing business and also to stop the free movement of graziers in the province. The focus of the chapter is also to study the migration of East Bengali peasants and land encroachment issues. The continuous inflow of the East Bengalis into Assam and occupy land raised discontent amongst the Assamese in the province, as a result the concept of Line System was introduced to protect East Bengali immigrant peasants. They were further encouraged to migrate Assam during the Md. Saadullah ministry under the slogan of 'Grow More Food' campaign, grazing reserves were also suggested to open for cultivation. Numerous clashes between graziers and East Bengali peasants in the grazing reserves were registered. The chapter reveals the various Assamese agencies and intellectuals and politicians also came forward to support Nepali graziers and urged the Government to evict land hungry East Bengalis from the grazing reserves. Congress Government under the leadership Gopinath Bordoloi tried to evict such land encroachers from the grazing reserves which made the situation politically chaos.

The Chapter V titled *Labour Protest and Nepali Participation in Colonial Assam* is a study of early exploration of oil in the province and the role played by the Assam Oil Company in the development of petroleum industry at Digboi in eastern Assam. People from outside of the province were recruited in the exploration operations due to the scantiness of population in the province. The migrations of workers were further increased after the establishment of refinery at Digboi. Large numbers of Nepalis were employed from the date of early oil exploration operation. The World War I also increased expenses of all commodities in the province. Workers denied to work in such a small remunerations and urged the Company to increase their payment. In 1929, workers of AOC struck work demanding their salary hike. Nepalis were actively participated in the strike. The study reveals that remarkable class solidarity when the workers stood up against the management in 1939. The strike took place in an atmosphere of growing politics of nationalism and reactionary imperialism. The worker's expectation rose high with Assamese taking control of the provincial government after election 1937. The workers expected that the provincial government would support the long standing demands of workers concerning their hours of works, better wages and remuneration, increase participation in the management and security against arbitrary dismissals. The

wake of World War II and the failure of the provincial Congress Government the strike failed, yet it had a profound influence on the Nepalis of Assam to raise their voice against the Colonial Government and support freedom of the country from the British yoke.

The Chapter VI is the concluding chapter that summarises the major findings of the thesis. The thesis argues that demographic changes of Assam occurred during the colonial rule. There was popular notion amongst the British officials that the native Assamese were lazy, opium addicted and indolent which resulted in a large scale of labour importation into province. The importation of labour was executed as Colonial Government expected that they would extract more works as possible as they had not the bargaining right as like local labourers. Colonial Government encouraged people from outside of the province to migrate and offered revenue free land for cultivation from which the Government expected the maximization of revenue. The discovery and exploration operation of mineral resources in Assam in the late nineteenth century needed a section of labour class to work in jungle and malaria infested mines in Assam. The racial discourse under the British Government categorised Nepali martial classes of people as 'tough' people. They tried to recruit 'tough' Nepalis through various agent and depot which was opened at Gorakhpur for the purpose. But Nepal Government strongly opposed such recruitment as Durbar felt that it was the wastage of human resources to engage the martial Gorkhas in the lowly working professions. A large number of Gurkhas who served under the colonial Government choose to habitat in Assam after their retirement. Most of them engaged themselves in agriculture and grazing business which was duly encouraged by Colonial Government. The discovery of tea and other related industry in the province led the Colonial Government to discourage the Grazing profession by imposing various taxes and rules.

The discouragement and imposing unorthodox grazing tax brought a consciousness amongst the Nepalis in Assam. Under the active leadership of Chabilal Upadhaya, Nepalis not only opposed government policy but also actively participated in the India's freedom struggle for independence. The political consciousness was also observed during the AOC strike 1929 and 1939 where large numbers of Nepalis came forward to

oppose the management and went for strike. Chabilal Upadhyaya, Dalbirsingh Lohar, Bhakta Bahadur Pradhan lead the Nepalis of Assam to took part actively in the freedom movement of India.