Rereading Srikant Dutt’s ‘Migration and Development: The Nepalese in Northeast’
The Srikant Dutt Memorial Lecture

Tanka B Subba
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Introduction

Six months before Srikant Dutt breathed his last at the young age of 27, his article titled ‘Migration and Development: The Nepalese in Northeast’ (1981) was published in the Economic and Political Weekly, one of the most respected and widely circulated social science journals published in Mumbai. I first read it in 1982, when I was writing my doctoral thesis on the Nepalis of Darjeeling and Sikkim, who have ethnic affinity with Nepalis in Northeast India but who are not as vulnerable as the latter. Hence, rereading it almost four decades after its publication for the purpose of writing this essay took me on a journey back in time. Kaushik Basu, who later became Chief Economic Advisor to the Government of India headed by Dr Man Mohan Singh, as well as becoming Chief Economist of the World Bank from 2012 to 2016, wrote the following in his obituary of Srikant Dutt:

In the summer of 1981 he [ie Srikant Dutt] had trekked through the Himalayas because he was interested in the hill people and wanted to write about them. During his last days, one of his main preoccupations was with North-Eastern India and the plight of its people (Basu 1982: 216).

The article in question, by Srikant Dutt, does not come as a surprise against the backdrop of what Kaushik Basu has written about him, as someone preoccupied with the hill people of Northeast India. Basu knew Dutt personally and thought very highly of the latter’s ability to critique the policies of the government of India regarding various issues. It was unfortunate that Dutt did not survive for long after a road accident he met with rather early in his very promising life.
Nepalis as ‘Foreigners’

Srikant Dutt begins his article with one of the most important issues concerning Northeast India, that is the issue of foreigners or immigrants who are seen as a threat to the demography of the local indigenous peoples in the region and to the country’s security. This security concern has in fact been the most important guiding principle for the government of India in its dealings with the region and beyond for the past seven decades or so (Datta 2021). But the demographic threat is no less important to the indigenous people of the region who never miss an opportunity of reminding one about Tripura where people from erstwhile East Bengal have reduced local people to a minority, and about Sikkim where Nepalis from Nepal and Darjeeling have overwhelmed the local population over the years and have made them politically insignificant in spite of special constitutional provisions protecting the interest of indigenous communities such as the Lepchas and the Bhutias.

The responses of indigenous people in the region to the threats perceived by them have often been violent and at times gruesome. One may recall what happened during the Nellie Massacre of 1983 in Assam, which led to the death of more than two thousand members of the Muslim community at the hands of members of the Tiwa tribe and Assamese caste Hindus. The massacre took place in an already tense atmosphere of assembly elections which were opposed by caste and tribal Assamese populations and supported by Bengali Muslims from erstwhile east Pakistan who feared deportation if they did not take part in the elections. It appears that factors such as fear, rumour and memories of violence played an important role in the lead-up to this massacre in a village not too far from Guwahati (Kimura 2013, Sonowal 2017).

One may also recall what happened during the 1979–1985 anti-foreigner movement led by the All Assam Students’ Union (AASU) who chanted slogans against ‘foreigners’ (bidexi), ‘outsiders’ (bohiragoto) or ‘immigrants’ (obhixati) (Gohain 1982, Weiner 1983), which made tens of thousands of Bengalis and Nepalis homeless, spurring similar evictions from a few other states of the region, such as Meghalaya, Manipur, Nagaland and Mizoram (Subba 2003: 204–06). There was a lesser scale of violence against Nepalis in other states of the region compared to what happened in Assam and Meghalaya. There had no doubt been simmering tension between Nepalis and local people for a while because the former had been settling in the region for almost two centuries, starting with those who had retired from the British army in the mid-nineteenth century and who had been settled in strategic places of the region by the colonial government to protect colonial interests. However, the 1980s saw the region erupt into widespread violence perpetrated by student unions that followed in the footsteps of AASU and carried out similar movements in their respective states. This resulted in the forcible eviction of tens of thousands of Bengalis and Nepalis from their lands and in the destruction of their houses and other properties partly because the state administration chose to look the other way or acted too late. One of the consequences of these events was the severing of trust between local and so-called outside communities: this trust had taken decades to build and to nurture by learning each other’s language, exchanging food during their respective festivals and intermarrying.

Srikant Dutt is quite right when he writes that the ‘Nepalese’ are ‘only technically foreign(ers), and to simply dismiss them as foreigners would be incorrect’ (p1053).
According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary, the suffix ‘ese’ refers to the inhabitants or the language of a country. Hence ‘Nepalese’, as spelt by Dutt, refers to the inhabitants or the language of Nepal, whereas ‘Nepali’, without the suffix ‘ese’, may or may not refer to the inhabitants or the language of Nepal. That is why I prefer to use the word ‘Nepali’ and, by this, I mean the Gorkhas, Gorkhalis and the Nepalese. Indeed, a large number of so-called immigrants are actually citizens of India and their lingua franca – Nepali – has been one of the national languages of India since 1992. The Nepali language is also recognised by the Sahitya Akademi, which is India’s National Academy of Letters, and by several Indian universities such as Calcutta University, North Bengal University, Gauhati University and Banaras Hindu University. It is not only an Indian language by virtue of being included in the VIII Schedule to the Constitution of India: even its roots are Indian (Subba 2009: 154–55). It travelled to Nepal with the Hindus who fled India during the rise of the Mughal rule in the early sixteenth century (Bista 1980), became somewhat different on account of interactions with the languages of the Kumaon-Garhwal Himalayas and later the Gurung, Magar and Newari languages of Nepal, and came back to India in the nineteenth century only to be labelled a foreign language not just by ordinary citizens of India but even by persons of authority such as Lt General S K Sinha, former Governor of Assam, and Sri Morarji Desai, former prime minister of India. The latter was actually responsible for having instigated a demand for a separate state called Gorkhaland since 1980 by declaring the Nepali language a foreign language during his visit to Darjeeling in 1979, which was followed by large-scale protests in the hills there (see Subba 1992 for details). Against the backdrop of such ignorance in India about Nepalis and the Nepali language, Srikant Dutt’s article is a welcome publication because it reconciles the differences between Nepali history and Nepali nationhood.

Nepalis as ‘nominal Hindus’

Nepalis are generally identified as Hindus all over the world, which may be partly due to the status of Nepal as a Hindu country, for all practical purposes, till as late as 2007. However, Dutt is correct when he writes:

... the Nepalese were and are nominally Hindu, having more direct links to the cultural heartland of South Asia (i.e. the Indo-Gangetic Valley), whereas the areas in which they were to be (i.e. Northeast India) encouraged to settle were culturally and religiously different, often Tibetan-Buddhist, animist and later Christian, with ties in other directions. (p1054)

In fact, it may not be wrong to label most Nepalis in India, much as diasporic Nepalis in the United Kingdom, multi-religious (Gellner 2019). Most of them are simultaneously animist and Hindu, if not Buddhist or Christian as well. Hence, there is no reason why there should not be one category for people professing more than one religion. Even for the purpose of the census, such a category could be created, but it does not perhaps exist anywhere in the world. Among Nepalis, it is common to see them go to a Buddhist monastery, to a Christian church as well as to a Hindu temple to offer prayers, while also subscribing to many animist beliefs and practices. Similarly, the ethno-medicine men and sacred priests of the region, who officially belong to one religion, are invited by followers of other religions as well.
Nepali Migration to Northeast India

As regards the reasons for the migration of Nepalis to Northeast India, Dutt alludes to ‘the dictates of world capitalist development’ (p1053). According to him, the frontier or peripheral areas are drawn into this form of development under pressure from more developed areas and the frontier areas, by their very nature, fall prey to the capitalist mode of development. He writes:

It is not so much the prospect of avariciously exploiting the defenceless indigenous people of the northeast (the prospect of land is a strong motive) but the fact that outsiders are driven to migrate through their own dire poverty and are seeking a means of continued survival. (p1053)

And he adds: ‘this is the case of the Nepali migrants’ who are ‘relatively more skilled hill agriculturists than other hill peoples’ of the region (p1053). He also mentions the lack of cultivable land, the explosion of the population and the overall ecological and economic crisis in Nepal as factors that force them to migrate to different countries in South Asia.

Dutt also identifies several strong pull factors for the migration of Nepalis to Northeast India. One of these is the active encouragement from the British to join their armed forces, which ultimately led to their settlement in different parts of India and other British dominions in South Asia since the early nineteenth century. He also draws our attention to the Indo-Nepal Friendship Treaty of 1950, the Tripartite Delhi Agreement of 1951 and the revised Indo-Nepal Agreement of 1956, which grant reciprocal rights to Nepali nationals in India and to Indians in Nepal. He writes: ‘Therefore before one accepts or adopts the ‘silent invasion’ rhetoric of some of the chauvinistic movements in the northeast one must understand the actual history of Nepalese migration and settlement in South Asia’ (p1053).

According to his estimates, there were about 2.5 million Nepalis living outside Nepal, a large majority of whom were in India, and 3 to 4 million Indians residing in Nepal. However, I think these estimates are a little misleading for Nepalis in India as well as for Indians in Nepal. The 1,758km-long border between India and Nepal being porous and unregulated, it is virtually impossible for anyone to give the exact figures for Indian immigrants to Nepal or for Nepali immigrants to India at any particular date.

Dutt shows how many Nepali settlements in India actually came into being with British patronage. By creating resettlement colonies for retired soldiers from the Gorkha army or from paramilitary forces in different strategic locations of the country, especially in Northeast India, the British not only rewarded their former loyal soldiers but also addressed their own strategic needs which Dutt does not discuss but which, to the best of my knowledge, were not only to constitute a reserve of trained military personnel to keep a close watch on and prevent rebellious hill tribes from plundering the revenue-rich plains and plantations, but also to enlist soldiers from within British territory because recruiting them from Nepal was not always easy, nor did all the rulers of Nepal (Pradhan 1991) allow it. Dutt points out, however, that not only were retired soldiers encouraged by the British to settle but also peasants, especially those from the eastern part of Nepal, who subsequently taught people in the region terrace farming techniques. According to him, this encouragement from the British government in Darjeeling, Sikkim and Bhutan in particular was ‘done with a view to binding these states more closely to the Indian empire and keeping out what they saw as threatening
Chinese and Tibetan influence’ (p1054). He also mentions that the Border Roads Organisation played a significant role in the migration of construction workers to the hill areas of Northeast India, which eventually led to their settling in those areas. And he knew the modus operandi of Nepali migrants perhaps better than any other scholar of his time, which is clear from what he wrote:

Not just as road labour, but even as peasant settlers, the Nepalese do not usually pass formally through checkpoints or apply for meaningless scraps of paper; they merely clear the land, often with the connivance of local vested interests. It can often be several years before the authorities take any notice. (p1054)

Talking about checkpoints allows me to summarise briefly here what I have personally experienced and written extensively about (Subba 1994, 2003, 2009). In spite of the Indo-Nepal treaties and protocols, every Nepali travelling by bus from Siliguri in West Bengal to Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya, used to be asked to stop at two immigration checkposts, one at Srirampur Hat in Assam and another at Byrnihat in Meghalaya. I was a victim of harassment at these checkposts every time I travelled by bus despite, in my capacity of university lecturer, holding an identity card. I was never detained but had to bribe my way to be able to reach my destination in time. Fortunately for me and for others of the same ethnicity, the High Court of Gauhati passed a judgment sometime in 2006 on a Public Interest Litigation filed by a Nepali lawyer practising at the same court, which rendered illegal the stopping of Nepalis at immigration checkposts. Following the judgment, even Manipuris who travelled through Assam and/or Meghalaya by bus must have felt a sense of relief because they were usually mistaken for Nepalis on account of their facial traits as well as of their names.

Besides the official British policy of encouraging Nepalis to settle in different parts of the region, Dutt mentions the active connivance of local elites. For instance, he writes the following about the migration of Nepalis to Sikkim and Bhutan:

Nepalese settlement was not just encouraged by the British; a role was also played by local feudal elites. In both Sikkim and Bhutan certain local aristocrats gained lucrative incomes by giving tenancy and land rights to Nepalese immigrants in jungle areas. In Sikkim the Kazis of Khangsarpa (clan) were from the 1870s intimately involved in Nepali settlement... In Bhutan the powerful Dorji family, previously of low rank in the feudal aristocracy, enhanced its political and economic status by playing an intimate part in Nepalese settlement in southern Bhutan. In Manipur it was the royal court which gained financially by granting lands for Nepali settlement. (p1054)

Official Recognition of the Nepali Language

It may be recalled that the demand for the Nepali language to be listed as one of the national languages in the VIII Schedule of the Constitution of India had been actively pursued by Nepalis in Assam, Dehradun, Darjeeling and Sikkim as of the early 1970s, but there had been no response to this from the government of India. Hence, all kinds of theories to explain why the government of India had not decided on the matter floated around. In this context, Dutt wrote:

One reason that India has not acceded to the demand is that it has not wished to legitimise the presence of almost two million Nepalese residing in India. Rather, India has wished to ambivalently keep the Nepalese beneath the surface of India’s political and economic life. (pp1054–55)
The Nepali language was finally recognised as a national language in August 1992, along with the Konkani and Manipuri languages, after a relentless struggle that lasted about two decades. There are no doubt various reasons for which the government of India did not grant this demand till 1992, but one probable reason in the eyes of the government of India was that it was a 'foreign' language. As someone who participated in the 1970s language movement, I remember another reason for the delay: the non-recognition of Hindi as a national language by Nepal. What seemed to have finally prompted recognition by the government of India was the active lobbying of influential national leaders by Nar Bahadur Bhandari, that is the then Chief Minister of Sikkim, and his wife Dil Kumari Bhandari, who at the time was a Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha) from Sikkim. However, two years later Bhandari had to relinquish power, making way for the uninterrupted 25-year rule over the state by Pawan Chamling, which is a record of sorts for chief ministers of India.

Concluding Remarks

Allow me to quote the last paragraph where Dutt sums up his thoughts on Nepalis of the Northeast thus:

Nepalese settlement in the northeast has not been part of an insidious scheme but is the outcome of the development process itself, in which the Nepalese as a poor and mobile hill community play a part in frontier areas, where roads are being built, towns are being founded or expanded and the area is being more fully exploited. As long as the peoples of the northeast do not analyse the economic realities of their own position and the economic realities of any frontier region, they will persist in pursuing millennial dreams of a glorious past. One set of outsiders will merely be replaced by others if those who are indigenous to the area do not seek to develop their own resources through their own efforts. (p1055)

One may draw the following conclusions from Dutt’s article. First, he placed the migration of Nepalis to Northeast India in the theoretical framework of a frontier region exposed to an exploitative world economy. He also argued that their migration was not part of a sinister design, as suspected by protagonists of the ‘Greater Nepal’ theory. According to this conspiracy theory, populating border regions like Darjeeling and Sikkim with Nepalis is part of Nepal’s plan to subsequently claim these neighbouring territories. The bogey of ‘Greater Nepal’ is raised by locally dominant groups whenever Indian Nepalis make any demands, whether it be recognition of their language or of statehood. However, Dutt did not subscribe to such a view; instead, he considered this to be an inevitable development typical of frontier regions that are sparsely populated. For him, if Nepalis had not gone there, it would have been other people. It appears that he was inspired by the world systems theory of Immanuel Wallerstein (1976), although he does not mention the source of his intellectual inspiration in his write-up.

Second, although he does not provide his sources of information about Nepal and Nepalis, except for one book edited by Upadhyaya and Abueva (1975), there is no doubt that he was very well read in matters concerning Nepal and Nepalis living outside Nepal. Without such knowledge, it would not have been possible for him to have such a good understanding of one of the most diverse migrant communities in terms of history, language, culture, religion, race, etc.
Third, in April 1980, a Kalimpong-based organisation called Pranta Parishad, led by CK Shrestha, a well-known theatre artist, launched the Gorkhaland Movement and, in July of the same year, another organisation called the Gorkha National Liberation Front led by Subhas Ghisingh from Darjeeling, a former corporal of the Indian army, launched a violent movement to achieve the same goal, ie a separate state called Gorkhaland within the Union of India, comprising Darjeeling district and the Dooars area of Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal. The years 1980–88 saw a great deal of violence and counter-violence in the hill areas of Darjeeling, leading to a loss of property, career and even life among numerous hill people. Regional newspapers in English and Bangla reported on the movement daily. However, most media coverage of the movement portrayed it as ‘illegitimate’, not only because those demanding independence from West Bengal were all ‘immigrants’ from Nepal, but because they were considered to be part of a sinister design by Nepal to wrest away Nepali-speaking areas of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri from India and to form a ‘Greater Nepal’. The media even justified the violent clampdown and the gross violation of hill people’s human rights by the government of West Bengal headed by none other than Jyoti Basu, one of the greatest communist leaders who was literally worshipped by a huge section of Nepali CPI(M) cadres living in the tea gardens of Darjeeling or in Kalimpong’s farming villages. ‘Banga bhanga hote debo na’ (We will not allow Bengal to be ‘broken’) was the bottom line for his government no matter how many Nepalis were subjected to third-degree torture at local police stations, crippling many of them for life (Subba 1992). These police atrocities would not have happened without clear orders from the state government, with the lower judiciary even turning a proverbial blind eye to police excesses in the hills during those eight years. Dutt’s article stands out against this backdrop. Although written by a Bengali, his article shows no sign of Bengali chauvinism that informed most writings by Bengali writers about the Gorkhaland movement in those tumultuous years in Darjeeling.

I myself published two newspaper articles in 1980 in the English weekly Himalayan Observer, condemning the Gorkhaland Movement, but when I learnt that almost every academic and journalist from Kolkata and North Bengal was deriding my community rather than deriding the movement, which they were perfectly entitled to do, I turned supporter of the movement and wrote several issues of an English pamphlet titled The Gorkha Diary and later wrote the now out-of-print book Ethnicity, State and Development: a case study of Gorkhaland movement in Darjeeling (1992). I knew I was standing on the wrong side of history but someone had to give voice, no matter how feeble, to the marginalised hill people of West Bengal.

To conclude, I would like to state that while a modest class of intellectuals has emerged among Indian Nepalis, there is little improvement in the predicament of working-class Nepalis even after more than seven decades of India’s independence. They continue to be targets of locally dominant communities wherever they settle, be it in the coal-mining areas of the Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya or when eking out a paltry living in some forest or border villages of the region. Finally, I think the community needs a lot more informed writings such as the one by Srikant Dutt, because there are always more ignorant people than informed individuals in this world.

This essay is the revised version of the Srikant Dutt Memorial Lecture delivered at Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML), New Delhi on 21 November 2019. The author is grateful...
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ABSTRACTS

Initially delivered as the Srikant Dutt Memorial Lecture, this essay discusses the status of Nepalis in Northeast India on the basis of an article written in 1981 by Srikant Dutt, and provides commentaries based on the present author’s own research. The article deals with some stereotypes associated with Nepalis in the region, such as ‘foreigners’ and ‘immigrants’, though their ancestors were settled by the then colonial government in several strategic locations of the region after they retired from the Gurkha army. Some Nepalis came, by the agency of the capitalist imperialism, to the sparsely populated frontier areas of India. The article also argues that Nepalis in the region are ‘nominal Hindus’, as opposed to orthodox Hindus, a term based on their lax religious habits.

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Keywords: Nepalis, Northeast India, migration, Indo-Nepal Friendship Treaty, Nepali language, Gorkhaland movement

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