

Agriculture and Settlement of the Gurkhas in Assam

Dr. R.P. Powrel

*HOD, Department of History
NOWGONG COLLEGE (Autonomous)*

ABSTRACT

The recruitment of the Gurkhas in the Indian Army was linked up with the question of settlement of the Gurkhas in different part of India. The British adopted the policy of encouraging the settlement of Gurkhas specially soldiers and their relatives for the purpose of colonization. After their retirement most of the soldiers settled along the regimental centres which was the beginning of the Gorkha settlement in Assam. These Nepali speaking people thus spread all over the seven states of North East India. Although the settlement of Nepalis in Assam has different dimension yet, here I would like to concentrate only in settlement of Gorkhas interms of defence strategy of colonial India. As stated the Gurkhas constitute 50% in the Assam Rifles and ever ready for any kind of service. The role of the Gurkhas in the Assam Rifle was recognized in 1865, when Nepali Khukri replaced the short sword, which had impeded their progress through the jungle. At this juncture the British realised the permanent settlement in Assam. The first step in the direction of Gurkha settlement in India was started by 1864, when the British government issued charter providing for the Gurkha Regiment to buy land for settlement, stations at Dharmasala, Deradun, Almora and Gorakhpur.

KEYWORD: *Gurkhas, colonization, regimental centres, Khukri, 1864*

Date of Submission: 15-01-2022

Date of acceptance: 30-01-2022

I. INTRODUCTION

The second half of the 19th century witnessed change of colonial policy in terms of enlisting Gurkhas in Indian regiments. The British could not entirely depend on the Gurkhas from across the border and started gradual introduction of the children of ex-Gurkha soldiers who settled down in India. The growing demand of Gurkha soldiers prompted the British to adopt policy of providing settlement after their retirement. Col. Berkeley was originator of the theory that if the ex-soldiers could be rehabilitated in India, it would be feasible on their part to recruit children

of these rehabilitated soldiers and Govt. would become less dependent on Nepal for Gurkha recruits. In the Lushai Hills ex-Assam Rifles men and other Gurkhas were settled at Thingdawl on the Aizawl-Silchar road, then known as the Dwarbond road. Its population was increased to 3770 in 1931 from 3150 in 1921. Early Gurkha settlers who came into contact with local regiment or paramilitary force were instrumental in causing fresh migration of their fellow countrymen to Assam. The ex-soldiers, who settled in and around the locations where they last served, became subsequently administrative centres. Further some Gurkhas were also put into local militia in different expeditions to serve in transport or carrier units by the British. The Assam Rifles adopted the system of 'Movable Columns' in the middle of 1920s which in turn encouraged settlement of Gurkha labourers at battalion headquarters. The presence of Nepali was such that Thurnton records in his memoris SLI consisting mainly of Gurkhas was stationed at Jowai in the Jaintia Hills during the 1862 rebellion. Thurnton's memoris confirmed the presence of Nepalis in 1867 when he found that an excellent cricket ground had been formed on the smooth and level floor of a valley and cricket was played several times a week. The Gurkhas are very fond of games like cricket and Football and sometimes excelled in them.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study is descriptive in nature and it was based on various secondary sources like Books, Magazines, Journals and internet.

III. DISCUSSION

Gurkhas had the great Capacity for colonisation and in early 19th century Assam was depopulated due to devastation of Moamorias and later on by the Burmese Singphos. It created great difficulty for the British to consolidate newly acquired North east hill-tract. Under the chaotic situation Pemberton submitted a joint report in August 1832 which stated that: "An increase to our cultivation and villages is beyond all doubt of the greatest importance to the present as well as future prosperity of this barren province, and might be accomplished by admitting monied speculating foreigners to hold lands on a long lease and encouraging

Manipuris and Gurkhas and other After this report, David Scott had authorised captain Neufville to grant to these Gurkhas who had brought their families with them lands at the very moderate rate of eight *annas* per annually¹¹. The Gurkhas availed this facility and established Gurkha village as reported by the Magistrate who allotted lands to those Gurkhas. His reports stated. "There was an extensive village of Gurkhas established with a flourishing crop of *dhan* (paddy) on a spot which before was a jungle¹²" "On the wastes at our disposal to locate an extensive colony of their countrymen on some chosen situation in the hills at a comparatively in considerable advance of money" stated by Jenkins in settling Gurkha colonies in Cachars northern hills. Jenkins believed that such colonization will be helpful for future European colonisation in India where a fine climate is combined with unbounded fertility, a great diversity of situation and proximity of markets.

Settlement by way of Agriculture:

The existence of Nepali agriculturalist in Assam since the 19th century is evident from colonial administrative and forest reports. From time immemorial the graziers enjoyed traditional right to graze their cattle in the village and neighbouring forests.¹⁵ The Chief Commissioner of Assam reported in 1886: "To settle the wastelands of Assam with people and increase the revenue collection of the province the Govt. had been making serious efforts to encourage immigration to Assam from the neighbouring district of Bengal. As far as Nepalis were concerned, besides grant of waste-lands on favourable terms, the Nepali immigrants were reported to have given pecuniary assistance for their onward journey to upper Assam".¹⁶ There were only 26 Nepalis in Assam, according 1872 census which was rose to 21, 347 according to 1901 census. Soldiers encouraged more settlers to take up the profession of graziers, sugarcane cultivation, dairy farming, rubber cutters, sawyers etc. Only in the then Darrang district there were 17,000 acres of cultivable lands held by the Nepalis.

IV. CONCLUSION

In the first half of the 19th century there existed the Nepali herdsmen and marginal farmers who were settled in different districts of Assam .The Chief Secretary to the Govt. of Assam informed the Foreign Secretary to the Govt. of India on 13th May 1930 that : "The greatest numbers of the Nepali graziers in Assam are Jaisis and Upadhyaya Brahmins or Chetries of non-martial classes. Some of the Gurkhalis of the fighting classes, who have served in the Gurkha regiments in the Assam Rifles, settled down in Assam when they leave the service." But it is true that the Nepali graziers settled in the professional reserve forest in the last quarter of 19th century in the

Brahmaputra valley. Colonial government encroach the traditional right of grazing by imposing tax on the herds of the graziers. Burachapari in Tezpur was the first recognized grazing forest under colonial rule.²⁵The Nepali graziers had to pay grazing fee per cow and buffalo as fixed by

the government. In the year 1892-93, 13,025 buffaloes and 1162 cows paid grazing fees amounting to Rs. 6772.²⁶For the settlement of people and grazing purpose some forest areas were kept reserved. As for instance, in the Goalpara division of Assam, 105 sq. meter of reserved

forest were left open for grazing in return for assistance in fire protection.²⁷Then really grazing fees were realized at the rate of 8 *annas* per head of buffalo and 4 *annas* per other horned cattle. The Administrative Report of Assam 1912-1913 indicated that a large numbers of Nepali graziers were entering Assam due to increase in grazing fees in neighbouring areas of Jalpaiguri.³⁰ The grazing fee was increased to per buffalo at Rs. 3/- and other horned cattle, at 6

annas per head in Assam Valley including Garo-Hills and the North East Frontier.³¹This resulted the increase of revenue of the govt. and it rose to 2,77,000 in 1919-20. The cattle belonged to 6319 professional graziers of who except a few hundred, all were Nepali migrants.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Barpujari, H. K. *The Comprehensive History of Assam, Vol. V*, Guwahati 1993, p-61.
- [2]. Report on the land Revenue Administration of the Assam Valley Division, 1934-35, p-4.
- [3]. Report on the Administration of Eastern Bengal and Assam.1905-06.
- [4]. Shillong,1907, p-165.
- [5]. Guha. A. *Planters Raj to Swaraj*, New Delhi, Reprint 1998,pp-91-94.
- [6]. Barpujari H. K.,*Francis Jenkin's Report on the North-East Frontier*1995, Guwhati, pp-154-155
- [7]. Rana Sanjay. A History of the Gorkhas in Shillong M. Phil thesis, NEHU, Shillong 1996