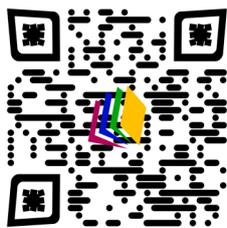


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Soldering as Work, Work for Livelihood: The Discourse of 'Outsiders within' among the Nepalese Migrants' of North East India

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ABSTRACT:

This paper proposes to understand the historical meaning of the concept of “work” within the changing definition of labour relations and their social status. This turn in the labour relations reveal two aspects: first, how the “world of work” can be conceptualized through the performance in a disciplinary apparatus rendered to the service of the nation (Geoffrey Field, 2011), and in analyzing the cases of the historical past where it is seen how the bodies of the workers were placed for the cost of the production in the British colonies (Dipesh Chakraborty, 2002). This paradox though helps us better understand the dynamicity of a work regime, but yet unanswered of how work defines social status.

The proposed paper has made an attempt to fill this gap through an analysis of the recruitment of the Gurkhas (a martial race among the Nepalese) in the British imperial army and the importation of the Nepalese migrants (other than Gurkhas) for various colonial pursuits especially in the plantations, mining and railways which were based in north east India. This will be followed by looking into the dimension of how the presence of the Nepalese population in north east India has become a matter of concern to the post-colonial political discourse which led to the emergence of the idea of social ‘inclusion’ and ‘exclusion’ within the Nepalese speaking community based on their occupational status.

In tracing these trajectories, I will take the attention of the reader to the third section of the paper where the emphasis is given to locating the ‘factors’ responsible for the growing concern of social exclusion among the labouring population of the Nepalese whereas the social status of the Gurkhas is marked safe remembering their wartime mobilization of labor. The paper will conclude by discussing how the wave of nationalism and sub-nationalism has been working as driving force for cultivating the field of ‘inclusion’ and ‘exclusion’ respectively in many parts of north east India.

KEY WORDS: Nepalese, Labour, Military, Inclusion, Exclusion.

For a long time, labour historians have not regarded the activities of soldiers as work, though military and the working classes have intersected in myriad ways, especially in the era of mass conscription. The labour historians have long ignored the history of the people who execute repression and violence on behalf of the state, even though in most cases by far- they are workers. This is quite feasible if we opt for a more neutral definition of work. For example, it can be stated that “work is the purposive production of useful objects or services”.⁵⁸ Thus, work is both a purposive activity and creates objects or services that are useful to the people for whom work is done. There are debates concerning Soldiering and working. Question is raised: “Are Soldiering and Working Same?”. It has been argued⁵⁹ that soldiering cannot be work because work is as an activity yielding surplus value whereas the effort of soldiers is essentially destructive rather than productive. However, this assumption that military work is necessarily destructive and does not produce surplus value is debated by scholars like Alf Ludtke, Nick Mansfield, Joshua B. Freeman and Geoffrey Field and Erik-Jan Zürcher⁶⁰ on the basis of two reasons. The first is that soldiers everywhere spend far more time in barracks than on campaign and, while they are garrisoned, they have very often been employed as cheap labour in agriculture or in building works and road repair. Many of the greatest infrastructural works in countries as far apart as France and China – city walls, dikes, canals – would never have been realized except for the massive use of military manpower. The second, more profound reason is that, as Peter Way has argued, the end result of warfare, if successful, is that surplus value for states and their elites is created through territorial gain or economic advantage. Whatever the merits of the argument, the result of the view is that what a soldier does is not work has been that military

labour has not become the object of research in the same way as the labour of, for instance, If we decide to regard the work of the military as labour, one legitimate question to ask is, whether military labour is in any fundamental sense different from other forms of labour. One could argue that one aspect of military work is unique in that it explicitly transcends humankind’s greatest taboo: killing members of the same species. Even if soldiers spend far more time in barracks or on the march than in actual battles, the fact that the ultimate purpose of an army is to fight and kill makes it different – more so, certainly, than the fact that there is risk involved, as for most people in most societies exposure to risk has been the normal condition, be from violence, starvation, childbirth, or contagious disease. But whatever its exceptionality, ultimately an army is built on the factors of capital and labour just like any other industry and it is this that makes it possible to analyse the activities of the soldier as just another form of work establishing that Soldiers are workers.⁶¹

Question can be asked, if Soldiering is nothing but a ‘job’ then why this occupation is glorified and soldiers bestowed with high social statuses than others? The answer to this is very simple and based on the need of the state; it is very difficult to get people to devote themselves exclusively or predominantly, on a permanent basis, to fighting, killing, and dying in the service of distant entities of the state/center or the nation. Yet this is exactly what states/centre need. Faced with the need to raise soldiers, states have a basic choice between two options. To put it in Gramscian terms they can either coerce people into serving or convince them to do so through the establishment of a hegemonic cultural code, in other words, to create a measure of consent. Coercion may seem cheap, but it is more

expensive than it appears at first sight, because of the need for forceful recruitment and constant supervision after soldiers have been recruited. Like slaves, coerced soldiers may also be less motivated or “productive” than those who have joined the colours of their own free will. Thus, in such a scenario in order to generate consent and to attract the people to the occupation, moral and nationalistic approach is attached to it, people who died in the battle portrayed as martyr and soldering glorified.

Gurkhas⁶², ‘Nepalese subjects of fighting classes’⁶³ are one such example of the British creation of glorified community. Ensign John Shipp describes the qualities of Gurkhas in the following terms:

*‘I never saw more steadiness or bravery exhibited in my life. Run they would not; and of death they seem to have no fear, though their comrades were falling thick around them, for we were so near that every shot told’.*⁶⁴

Invented as one of the martial race group in the early Nineteen century, militarily, the Nepali soldiers came in contact with the British during the Anglo-Nepal War of 1814-1816 and were subsequently recruited into their military and military police. The *Dibya Upadesh* highlights the creation of military tradition in Nepal which began with the amalgamation of the practices of the hill recruits with the social customs and practices of the plain Kshatriyas. A series of Nepalese Government orders, issued during the time of Anglo-Nepal War shows that not all the groups were expected to fight thus, pre-dating the creation of ‘martial race’ theory in the nineteenth century. While ‘weapon-bearing castes’ were instructed to report with their swords, shields, bows and arrows and muskets, members of the untouchables castes (Kami) were required to make themselves available for metal work at munitions factories and forts; Damais (musicians

also untouchables) were instructed to bring their musical instruments to accompany the troops; and Brahmins were to pray for victory.⁶⁵ The *Muluki Ain* i.e. the Nepali civil code was commissioned by Jung Bahadur Rana after his European tour and enacted in 1854. It was an attempt to include the entire population of that time into a single hierarchic Civil Code from the perspective of the Khas rulers. Table below shows the hierarchies of major castes/ethnic groups in Nepal according to *Muluk Ain*⁶⁶:

Caste division	Caste and Ethnic Groups
Tagadhari (wearers of the holy thread)	Khas-Bhaun, Chetri, Thakuri, Newar, Rajopadhyaya Brahman and Chathariya Srestha. Terai- Brahmin (referred in the code of Indian Brahmin)
Namasinya matwali (non-caste Alcohol Drinkers)	Newar Hindu Vaishya- Panchthariya srestha and Newar Buddhist- Gubhaju/Bare, Uray (tuladars and others), Jyapu and other smaller ‘pure’ occupational castes Gurkha tribes- Gurung, Magars, Rai and Limbus
Masinya Matwali Non-caste Alcohol Drinkers	Bhote including Tamang and Sherpa, Thakali, Chapang, Ghart, Hayu, Kumal and Tharus
Pani na chalne Chhlocchito Halnu Naparne (Water unacceptable but touchable)	Newar lower impure occupational castes- Bha, andhar, Kapali, Khadgi, Kasai, Dhobi : Muslims and Europeans
Pani na Chalne Chhlocchito Halnu parne (Water unacceptable and untouchable)	Terai occupational- Dhobi, Halkhor, Chamar, Dushad, Musahars; Newar lowest occupational castes, Kulu/Dom, Pode, Chyama, Khala etc.

Muluki-Ain categorized the people of Nepal into five categories: *Tagadhari* (those wearing the sacred thread called Janai across the torso), *Masinay Matwali* (enslavable liquor drinkers), *Namasinay Matawali* (un-enslavable liquor drinkers), *Pani nachalne chhoichito halnu parne* (impure but touchable including foreigners, Muslims and Christians also fell into this category and *Pani nachalne chhoi chhito halnu parne* (impure and untouchable, upon touching whom one needed to purify themselves by sprinkling gold-dipped water.⁶⁷ This code became one of the factors for dividing the people on the basis of their caste which was complex where status and large part of the identity were predetermined. Strong evidence of such unjust codes are also seen in the Prithvi Narayan Shah’s army in which some communities

were blocked by the Raja to take up military duties as they were not considered 'martial' enough to fight for the country.

As the interest of the British in the enlistment of Gurkhas increased, the existing criteria followed by the Gurkha kings in the employment of only certain 'fit to fight classes' into their army was inherited by the British. Thus, initially it was only the Thakurs, Chettris, Magars, Gurungs, Rais, Limbus, Duras, Sunwars and Ranabhats⁶⁸ which were considered fighting classes of Nepal and were favored in the Imperial Army. However, the rejected Gurkhas and the other less preferred Nepali communities were blocked by their caste took up less preferred services in the form of tea labourers, minners, cooliers, porters, herders, agriculturists, dairy farmers. Thus, we see hierarchy within the Nepali community which has their origin in the caste system of Nepal which had and has become 'habit of mind' of future Nepali recruiters. Such stereotypical notion is seen in the statement made by Colonial Officers commanding Gurkhas. Lieutenant Colonel H.W.G Cole of Surma Valley Military Police Battalion made a statement in connection to Gurkha recruitment in Assam Police Corps:

*"Magars and Gurungs are too scare and valuable to be wasted in Police Corps, for which 'inferior' classes of Gurkhas are believed to answer well enough."*⁶⁹

The presence of Gurkha migrants and settlers in Northeast India owes its origin to the Anglo-Burmese war of 1824-26, the desire of British to 'manage and subjugate' the hill tribes of the Brahmaputra valley and also to meet the economic demands of the British by converting themselves into income generators in the form of agriculturists, tea laborers, coolies, miners, cattle rarer and dairy

farmers. Thus, diving the Nepali communities into two major categories (i) Gurkha soldiers and (ii) Labouring classes. The Nepalis came into the region in different migratory phases. Their migration was sponsored in the case of soldiers and sometimes voluntary as in the case of laboring classes. For the defence of the frontier in early nineteenth century they were organized into 'Local Corps'⁷⁰ - the Rangpur Local Battalion⁷¹ (1822), the Sylhet Light Infantry (1824: subsequently became part of Gurkha Rifles) and in para-military troops like Assam Sebundy corps (1835). At the initial stage the Gurkha element was not very high in the imperial army due to variety of factors⁷², some of them being not being easily available and the contacts with the main recruiting areas with Nepal border were few and the Nepal Government was against the recruitment of the 'martial' Gurkhas in military police battalions:

*"The Government of Nepal is much alarmed at the prospect of man-power of Nepal being depleted by the Government in India of Gurkha of military age...they have urged Government of India to take steps to ensure that Gurkhas should not be employed in India in other than a strictly military capacity..."*⁷³

It was during the time of Captain Neufville who already had an experience with the Gurkha companies in the Champaran and Dinajpur Light Infantry Battalion in the operation against the Burmese that the employment of Gurkhas increased. He granted to his Gurkhas land at a very moderate rate of eight annas per *pura* annually. Captain Francis Jenkins was equally optimistic about settling the Gurkha colonies in Cachar. It did appear to him practicable to locate an extensive colony of their countrymen on some chosen situation in the hills at an inconsiderable advance of money He was of opinion that "...They would

bring superior energy, arts and industry into the hills and secure perfect tranquility to the country and confidence to future colonists. Their known fidelity, bravery, intelligence and laborious habits of this people would prepare the way for European settlers in the only extensive tract of country in India where a fine climate is combined with unbounded fertility, a great diversity of situation and proximity of markets.”⁷⁴ Jenkins also recommended that instead of pensions the ex-soldiers of the local corps should be given grant of lands. However, as mentioned earlier, not all of them came in the pursuit of the same vocation. For instance, the winter migration of the hill particularly from the Darjeeling district was directed towards temporal employment. At any rate by the opening of the twentieth century, service in the military police was no longer the only attraction for the migrants and the occasional visitors as we see a large number of Gurkhas were periodically brought in to serve in transport or carrier units in the numerous frontier expeditions conducted by the British. Like the ex-sepoys, the laboring classes were also encouraged to settle in the region to meet the economic demands of the British. The colonial government was earning by taxing their cattle’s and houses. There is also mention of collection of house tax. At the same time the Nepali migrant settlers were used by the British as a safety valve against the autochthonous communities which has been bought under their control. With their taking up of non-military pursuits, they also attributed to the dairy farming (which for a very brief period was monopolized by the Nepalis) and the agricultural productivity of the region.

Besides settled as graziers, labourers and agriculturists, many of the Gurkha pensioners and ex-sepoys along with their families on their retirement were encouraged to settle in India by the British.⁷⁵ In course of time the retired soldiers of

the Gurkha Rifles and Assam Rifles were settled by the British by opening colonies. Besides other agencies, the Assam Rifles alone established 40 re-settlement colonies to settle as many as 3,000 Gurkhas in the region: Assam-13, Manipur-8, Nagaland-7, Arunachal-3, Meghalaya-1 and Tripura-1.⁷⁶ Sites such as Sadiya in Assam, Mantripokhari in Manipur, Aizwal in Mizoram, Mokokchung in Nagaland have identifiable Nepali population. In Manipur, many retired soldiers were settled in Kanglatombi, pangei, Mantripokheri, Kangpokpi, Kalapahar, Korang. In Shillong 1891, a plot of land near the contentment was leased out from the Syiem of Myllem for establishing a Gurkha village. Thus, in Manipur the number of Nepalis rose from 2,860 in 1951 to 36,604 in 1976. In Arunachal Pradesh it increased from 25,000 in 1961 to 85,000 in 1971. In Meghalaya from 6,000 in 1961 to 10,000 in 1971. And in Assam from 21,347 in 1901 to 349,116 in 1971. All these led to the emergence of certain compact of Nepali settlements throughout the region and consequently an increase in the number of Nepali speaking people.

The progressive extensive and changes in military and police locations thus resulted in a discernible pattern of Gurkha settlements in different parts of northeast India. In the closing years of colonial rule, British attitude towards the Gurkhas was marked by a certain ambivalence that in many ways mirrored Britain’s own predicament. While the Gurkha soldiers remained reliable element in their army and police, the settlers, while still retaining their identity, had become a part of an assertive and resurgent India. In the occupation and defence of British India’s eastern most provinces, the Gurkhas had significant factor in expanding colonial power in the region.

With their hard work the Nepali settlers have been able to turn out their newly acquired settlement as a thriving centers as prosperous peasantry. Their apparent and visible prosperity became matter of concerns with the oriented indigenous communities. In such situations, the settlers suffer at the hands of local groups. The Nepalis easily enmesh in fast changing scenario from shifting cultivation to settle and then even to cash crop cultivation. Besides the Nepali labor, their cattle also contribute manure, plough and meat to the local population. While the local shifting cultivator remains a marginal peasant like their forefathers, the new comer Nepalis has achieved a modest affluence. Naturally, the tribes' men feel that the Nepalis were alienating them from patrimony. Hence are a potential and an explosive area of conflict between the immigrant and autochthonous communities over the question of land ownership. Thus, with the waves of nationalism and sub-nationalism, we see inclusion and exclusion of the Nepalis in northeast India. The Gurkha soldiers serving in the army and the ex-soldiers settled in the region were marked safe owing to their war time mobilization. In fact owing to the importance of military for the creation of nationalities, and its significance, the societies in general has placed the Gurkhas and ex-Gurkha soldiers at a high pedestal than the laboring classes engaged in other non-military pursuits, thus, leading to the inclusion of the Gurkha soldiers whereas marginalizing the contribution of the laboring Nepali classes in Northeast India. It is this laboring class which is mostly violated and is treated as intruders and considered a threat to the tribal identity. Against the legal and constitutional protection of the tribal rights, any Nepali ownership over local resources such as land and forests easily appears to be encroachment. Further, the local scheduled tribes have developed an ambivalent attitude towards the Nepalis. In such as situation, a

communal flare-up leading to violence has become a recurrent phenomenon between Nepalis and local communities.⁷⁷ During the early twentieth century the demand for separation in Assam Assembly were already a concern, it was in this context that the Chief Secretary's complaint of the 'expanding activities of Nepalese settlers' is to be viewed. It was cited as potential ground of danger to the hill districts and so a ground for excluding them from the constitutional reforms.

Sajal Nag in his article⁷⁸ talks about the Fei-isation of the Nepali community in Northeast India. By Fei-isation there is a denial of their role in history. The Nepalis are often seen as 'rejected people', 'excluded' and 'history less people'. The literature available on Northeast India deals with Nepalis not as 'people' but as 'migrants'⁷⁹. While people are central to history, migrants are appendages of it. No doubt we do have some popular writings on their hard-working, loyalty and good nature, but despite that the Gurkhas were and remained for the British an essentially mercenary people and their children nothing but future stock of hardy soldiers whom they called 'line-boys'. They were encouraged to settle down in different parts of the region so that the British dependence on the Nepal government for the manpower can be reduced. Once, their service was over, in many cases their employers' sole interest seemed to be on their return to Nepal. And so at the end of British rule, the Gurkhas formed two distinct entities: the one in highly decorated uniform and the other in intruding outsider.