A Primordial Ethnic Evaluation of Gurkhas of India

Bijaya Gautam

Mphil Scholar, Department of Rural Devoploment, TU

Abstract

The Gurkha people also known as Nepali people, renowned for their valor and loyalty in the world, have a longstanding historical presence in India. This paper through an in-depth analysis of historical recordsexamines the multifaceted ethnicidentity aspects of the Gurkha community's existence in India, encompassing their historical evolution, socio-cultural significance, and contemporary challenges.The research further investigates the contemporary challenges faced by the Gurkha community and uses a primordial lens to evaluate the unique identity and contributions of the Gurkha people in India. The Gurkhas' primordial identity fosters unity and cooperation, transcending geographical boundaries and creating a global shared identity. The concept of primordial ethnicity is crucial for understanding ethnic dynamics and cultural heritage's role in shaping their resilience. The Gurkhas' condition is influenced by historical experiences, economic opportunities, and political recognition, offering valuable insights into primordial ethnic identity.

Keywords:Primordial, Ethnicity, identity, Gurkha, Nepali

Introduction

Primordial ethnicity is a concept that delves into the deep-seated and often enduring aspects of ethnic identity, rooted in perceived ancient origins and cultural heritage. Unlike instrumentalist or constructivist views, which see ethnicity as fluid and shaped by contemporary social, economic, and political contexts, the primordial perspective emphasizes the intrinsic and immutable elements of ethnic identity.Ethnic identity is ascribed from birth, inherent in human nature, and transmitted genealogically from one generation to the next. Consequently, ethnic identity remains constant over time within the primordial perspective. Drawing on the concept of "common blood" shared within each ethnic group, primordialists expect camaraderie and cooperation among in-group members, while they anticipate animosity and conflict towards out-groups (Smith, 1996). According to the primordial view, ethnic groups, including the Gurkhas in India, possess deep-rooted and unchanging identities that shape their behavior and relationships with other groups. This perspective highlights the importance of cultural heritage,

historical legacies, and a sense of belonging in maintaining the cohesiveness of primordial ethnic communities.

The Indian Gorkhas, an indigenous ethnic group can be found in various states in the northeastern part of India, encompassing a diverse range of castes and ethno-tribe clans. As per Michael Hutt Indian Gorkhas are made up of the Khas-Parbatiyas, such as Bahun (hill Brahmins), Chhetri (Khas), Thakuri, Badi, Kami, Damai, Sarki, Gandarbha, Kumal, and others among the Gorkhali Parbatiya ethnic groups (Gellner et al., 2012). Additionally, there are other Tibeto-ethnic groups like Tamang, Gurung, Magar, Newar, Bhujel (Khawas), Sherpa, and Thami. The Kirati people also form part of this community which includes Khambu (Rai), Limbu (Subba), Sunuwar (Mukhiya), Yakkha (Dewan), Dhimal, and more. Each of the ethnic groups possesses its own language, belonging to either the Tibeto-Burman or Indo-Aryan language families, but the Nepali language, written in Devanagari script, serves as the lingua franca among the Gorkhas. The Nepali language is also recognized as one of the official languages by the Indian constitution since 1992 (Bhardwaj, 1995). The Nepali language is alternatively referred to as "Gorkha Bhasa" in certain regions. During Indian census operations, various other names like "Khaskura", "Gorkhali", "Gurkhiya", "Gorkdhi", or "Naipali" have been employed to denote this language.

The Gurkhas or Nepali Speakers have a long and distinguished history as a martial community originating from the region of Nepal, a northern neighbor of India. They have been renowned for their bravery and military skills, and their reputation as formidable soldiers has earned them a respected place in the Indian and British armies (Caplan, 1991). Despite their service to security forces for such a long time, they are still considered immigrants in many Indian states (Subba, 2018). Hence, there exists a state of confusion aboutthe identity of Gorkhas in India both ethnically and politically.

The primordial ethnicity perspective Pariyar (2019) suggests that the Gurkha identity is deeply rooted in their shared ancestral ties, cultural practices, and language, which have been passed down through generations. Their strong sense of belonging to a distinct ethnic group with a rich history fosters a collective identity and solidarity among the Gurkhas. Whereas, Golay (2006) seesthe Gorkha identityas a state-led constructive colonial phenomenon relating to their service to the British and Indian armed forces. Despite living in different regions of India and Britain the Gurkha community has maintained its cultural heritage and traditions, which are considered integral to their identity. Their shared history of military service has also contributed to a sense of camaraderie and mutual respect within the community (Caplan, 1991).

It is essential to recognize that the identity of the Gurkha people is not static and unchanging. Like any ethnic group, the Gurkhas' identity has been influenced by social, political, and historical factors. Over time, their experiences of migration, integration into Indian society, and exposure to diverse cultural influences may lead to the evolution and adaptation of their identity (Pariyar, 2019). Furthermore, the primordial ethnicity perspective has been challenged by scholars who argue for a more fluid and context-specific understanding of ethnicity. They emphasize the significance of ongoing social interactions, power dynamics, and contemporary issues in shaping ethnic identities. However, primordial ethnicity perspective remains still worthy to study Gurkhas' identity.

Research Objectives

This paper aims to enrich the existing knowledge about the Gurkha people in India, highlighting their historical significance, cultural richness, and contemporary challenges. Through a comprehensive investigation, this research endeavors to advocate for policies that promote the Gurkha community's socio-economic development and enhance their harmonious integration into the diverse fabric of Indian society. By acknowledging the invaluable contributions and unique identity of the Gurkha people, this study seeks to foster a deeper appreciation and understanding among policymakers, scholars, and society. The Gurkhas are an ethnic group with a unique cultural and historical background, and their identity is often viewed through the lens of primordial ethnicity. This research aims to evaluate if the concept of primordial ethnicity is relevant to understanding the identity and history of the Gurkha people in India or not.

Methodology

This research delves into a comprehensive exploration of the Gurkha community in India, drawing on a meticulous analysis of secondary data and scholarly literature. The primary data source utilized for understanding the demographic aspects of the Gurkha community is the 2011 Census report published by the Government of India. This vital source of information provides valuable insights into the population distribution, regional concentration, and socio-economic characteristics of the Gurkha people across various states in northeastern India.

In addition to the Census report, this study extensively relies on the seminal work of Michael Hutt, particularly his chapter titled "Being Nepali without Nepal: Reflections on a South Asian Diaspora," which is part of the book "Nationalism and Ethnicity in Nepal" (Fisher, 1999). Hutt's work offers a profound understanding of the Gurkha diaspora, shedding light on their historical background, migratory patterns, and cultural connections with Nepal.

By synthesizing these secondary data sources and literature, the research aims to construct a comprehensive narrative of the Gurkha community's socio-economic and cultural contributions in India. Furthermore, this study endeavors to highlight the condition of the primordial ethnic group that the Gurkhas represent. Their historical legacy, strong sense of identity and belonging to ancestral lands, and the impact of the social and political context on their well-being are among the key factors examined. Additionally, the research investigates the extent of cultural preservation efforts undertaken by the Gurkha community amid modernization and globalization challenges.

Settlement Patterns of Gurkha People in India

According to the 2011 Census, a total of 2,926,168 individuals in India identified Nepali as their native language. The highest concentration of Nepali speakers was observed in West Bengal, with a population of 1,155,375, marking a significant increase of 12.97% compared to the 2001 Census (Office of The Registrar General, India [ORG, INDIA], 2011).The population of Gurkha people is shown in Table 1.

As of the 2011 Census, in India, there were a total of 2,926,168 individuals who reported speaking Nepali as their mother tongue. West Bengal had the largest number of speakers with 1,155,375 people which was an increase of 12.97% from the previous census (Office of the Registrar General, INDIA [ORG INDIA], 2011). The population of Gurkhasin Indian states isshown in Table 1.

Table 1
Settlement patterns of Gurkha people in India

State	Population	Compared tothe 2001 Census
West Bengal	1,155,375	+12.97%
Assam	596,210	+5.56%
Sikkim	382,200	+12.87%
Uttarakhand	106,399	+16.86%
Arunachal Pradesh	95,317	+00.42%
Himachal Pradesh	89,508	+27.37%
Maharashtra	75,683	+19.22%
Manipur	63,756	+38.61%
Meghalaya	54,716	+4.91%
Nagaland	43,481	+27.06%
Mizoram	8,994	+0.51%

Note: As per Indian Census 2011 ([ORG, INDIA], 2011).

Apart from Nepali as a native language speaker, there are additional Gorkha language speakers as well such as Limbu (40,835), Tamang (20,154), Sherpa (16,012), and Rai (15,644). The combined strength of Nepali and the other four Gorkha languages comes to 3,018,813.

Table 2
The population of Nepali Speakers in India

Census Year	Population
1971	1,419,835
1981	1,360,636
1991	2,076,645
2001	2,871,749
2011	2,926,168

Note: As per Indian Census 2011 ([ORG, INDIA], 2011).

Nepali language speakers are 0.24% of the total population of India. Despite their contribution to the national security interest of India, the Gurkhas are a minority population in India, who face unique challenges related to representation, access to resources, and protection of their cultural rights. The Nepali-speaking community in the Northeastern states of India has been subjected to violence and ethnic cleansing over the years (Subba, 2018). In 1967, Mizoram witnessed the forced expulsion of Nepali-speaking individuals, while Manipur faced a similar fate in 1980. In subsequent years thousands of Nepali-speaking people were banished from Assam (in 1979) and Meghalaya (in 1987). Table 2 shows the population of Nepali speakers in India since 1971. Understanding these complexities is crucial in devising policies and initiatives that empower and support the Gurkha community while fostering diversity and social harmony.

Though Gurkhas are an indigenous community sometimes they face displacement threats from other communities of India. The most significant displacement occurred in Meghalaya, where the Khasi Students Union (KSU) specifically targeted Nepali speakers residing in the eastern part of the state. More than 15,000 Nepali speakers were forcibly removed, and around 10,000 others were left to endure subhuman living conditions in refugee camps in Shillong (Menon, 2014). Gorkha laborers working in coal mines in Jowai also faced targeting, resulting in the tragic deaths of several Gorkha children from starvation in the subsequent weeks. Additionally, there were riots between Khasis and Gorkhas in 2010, resulting in several Gorkha fatalities, including the gruesome burning of an elderly Gorkha man. In the 1980s, the Gorkha community in Nagaland faced severe land forfeitures, with 200 of them being tragically murdered near Merapani in the Wokha district (Sinha, 2013). These instances reflect the challenges and adversities faced by the Nepali-speaking population in the Northeastern states, highlighting the urgent need for the protection of their rights and safety.

Socio-economic and Cultural Contributions

Language and identity play pivotal roles in shaping the Gurkha community's cohesion, and the lingua franca among them is the Nepali language written in Devnagari script, which also serves as one of India's official languages. The research explores the significance of this language as a binding force, contributing to their collective consciousness and fostering a sense of unity and shared heritage. The Gurkha/Nepali community in India has made significant socio-economic and cultural contributions to the country. Over the years, they have played an essential role in various sectors, enriching India's diversity and contributing to its social fabric. Some of their contributions include:

Military Service: One of the most notable contributions of the Gurkha community in India is their service in the Indian and British armies. Gurkhas have a long history of serving in the Indian military, known for their bravery, loyalty, and exceptional combat skills. Their valor and dedication have earned them respect and admiration from fellow soldiers and citizens alike (Bellamy, 2011).

Cultural Diversity: The Gurkha/Nepali community adds to India's rich cultural tapestry. They bring their unique traditions, language, music, dance, and festivals, enriching the cultural landscape of the regions where they reside. Festivals like Dashain, Tihar, and Teej are celebrated with fervor in Nepali communities, creating a sense of unity and shared heritage.

Trade and Business: Many Gurkhas have ventured into business and trade, contributing to the local economy. In areas with significant Gurkha populations, their entrepreneurship has led to the growth of small businesses and enterprises, generating employment opportunities and stimulating economic activity.

Agriculture: In rural areas, Gurkhas are actively involved in agriculture, contributing to food production and sustainability. Their expertise in farming practices and agriculture-based livelihoods has been instrumental in the development of rural communities.

Education and Academia: Gurkha/Nepali community members have excelled in various fields of education and academia. They have made significant contributions to literature, arts, and education, enriching India's intellectual capital.

Social Services: Gurkha/Nepali communities have been actively involved in social services and community development projects. They have established educational institutions, health clinics, and community centers to cater to the needs of their community and the broader society.

Sports: Gurkhas have participated and excelled in various sports and athletic events, bringing pride to the nation. Their passion for sports and physical fitness has also inspired many young individuals to pursue a career in sports. Overall, the socio-economic and cultural contributions of the Gurkha/Nepali community in India have been substantial and have enriched the country's multicultural fabric. Their commitment to nation-building, service, and cultural preservation demonstrates their resilience and enduring spirit.

Gurkha a primordial ethnic group

Primordialists argue that ethnic conflict primarily arises from distinctions in ethnic identities (Vanhanen, 1999). In the primordialism framework, ethnic dissimilarities are seen as deep-rooted, ancestral, and insurmountable, leading to inevitable ethnic conflicts fueled by "ancient hatreds" and a sense of "mutual fear" among ethnic groups, fearing domination, expulsion, or even extinction (Geertz 1963). The condition of a primordial ethnic group can vary significantly based on historical, social, and political factors. Primordial ethnic groups are those that have a deep-rooted and long-standing existence, often tracing their origins to ancient times. The condition of such groups can be influenced by various factors, including (Smith, 1996):

Historical Legacy: Primordial ethnic groups may have a rich historical legacy that includes cultural traditions, customs, and practices passed down through generations. The preservation of their cultural heritage can contribute to their identity and cohesion as a community. The Gurkha community qualifies for this factor.

Identity and Belonging: Primordial ethnic groups often have a strong sense of identity and belonging to their ancestral land. This connection to their roots can shape their social cohesion and collective consciousness, fostering a shared sense of history and destiny. The strong sense of Gurkha identity and various revolutions in history for separate states of

"Gurkhaland" (Sarkar, 2014) confirms that the Gurkha community holds a strong sense of belongingness to their identity.

Social and Political Context: The condition of a primordial ethnic group can be influenced by the social and political context in which they exist. Factors such as governance policies, recognition of cultural rights, and historical interactions with other groups can impact their well-being and status within society. The presence of polity like Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council and Gorkhaland Territorial Administration implies the importance of the Gurkha community in the political context

Cultural Preservation: The extent to which a primordial ethnic group can preserve its cultural traditions and practices can play a crucial role in determining its condition. Cultural preservation efforts may be affected by assimilation pressures, globalization, and modernization. Gurkha community has established schools, and colleges for the education of Nepali language to their new generation (Roy, 2012).

Minority Status: In some cases, primordial ethnic groups may be minority populations within a larger society. As minorities, they may face challenges related to representation, access to resources, and protection of their cultural rights. The Gurkha community has received minority status in various states of India. Overall, it stands for 0.24% of the population.

Economic Opportunities: The economic conditions and opportunities available to a primordial ethnic group can significantly influence their well-being. As Gurkha is mostly engaged in military service, agriculture, and local business, Economic disparities or long-term marginalization may affect their social and economic status.

Recognition and Inclusion: Recognition and inclusion of primordial ethnic groups in national and regional policies can have a substantial impact on their condition. Ensuring their rights are protected and their voices are heard is essential for their empowerment and well-being. Overall, the condition of a primordial ethnic group is complex and multifaceted, and it requires a holistic understanding of historical, cultural, social, and political dynamics. Empowering and supporting these groups in preserving their cultural heritage and identities is vital for fostering diversity and promoting social harmony in a multiethnic society. However, the Gorkha community seems to fit into this model and hence we can confirm that Gurkhas as a primordial ethnic group as the Gurkhas have maintained their cultural traditions despite historical migrations and interactions with other ethnic groups. They have a strong sense of belonging and pride in their ancestral roots, contributing to their cohesiveness as a community.

The Gurkhas' primordial identity has played a significant role in shaping their social cohesion, resistance to assimilation, and resilience in the face of challenges. Their history and cultural distinctiveness have also forged a collective consciousness that transcends geographical boundaries, creating a sense of unity and shared identity among Gurkhas living in various parts of the world. Overall, the primordial nature of the Gurkha ethnic group underscores the enduring significance of their cultural heritage and the importance of preserving and understanding their contributions to the diverse tapestry of human history and civilization.

Conclusion

The condition of Gurkhas in India is influenced by a variety of factors, ranging from historical experiences to economic opportunities and political recognition. Despite facing challenges and being a minority in larger societies, the Gurkhas have maintained their cultural traditions and a primordial ethnic group like identity, which have acted as sources of resilience and resistance against assimilation. The Gurkhas' primordial identity not only fosters unity and cooperation within their community but also transcends geographical boundaries, forging a sense of shared identity among Gurkhas residing in different parts of the world. This enduring significance of their cultural heritage underscores the importance of preserving and understanding their contributions to the diverse tapestry of human history and civilization. Empowering and supporting primordial ethnic groups like the Gurkhas in preserving their cultural heritage and identities is essential for promoting diversity and social harmony in multicultural societies.

By recognizing their rights and providing opportunities for socio-economic development, policymakers can create an inclusive and harmonious environment for these communities. In conclusion, the concept of primordial ethnicity serves as a valuable lens through which to understand the complexities of ethnic dynamics and the significance of cultural heritage in shaping the condition and resilience of primordial ethnic groups like the Gurkhas. As we appreciate and celebrate the diversity brought about by such communities, we also recognize their enduring contributions to the rich tapestry of human history and civilization.

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