Nepalis have been a migratory people. Be it the common citizens or the ruling class, their origin and frequency of mobility are a matter of careful observation from historical, sociological and anthropological perspectives. More than immigration, however, out-migration has been a conspicuous historical phenomenon ever since the eighteenth century unification of the country, and particularly, at such unstable times as when there were frequent power clashes among the rulers and courtiers, leading to the eviction of many opposition groups. Four different historical times during the nineteenth century have seen the displacement of a large number of Nepalis into India: first, the time of Bhimsen Thapa (the first three decades) when he forced his opponents, mainly the Pandes, to leave the country; second, the period of consecutive power struggle between Pandes and Thapas following the decline of Bhimesn til Janga Bahadur Rana came to power after the Kot Massacre in 1846; third, the period of Janga Bahadur when he either massacred or evicted most of his rivals; fourth, when Bir Shamsher massacred or evicted people from Janga Bahadur’s lineage and established a chain of rule for his brothers.

Apart from such recorded cases, Nepalis’ migration into Indian lands has been a silent everyday trend for about two centuries. Such silent cases, in particular, have been highly frequent and phenomenal to areas as diverse and far as the Northeastern region – mainly Assam, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura and Mizoram – and Burma. According to A.C. Sinha, the initial Nepali settlement in Assam began as early as 1824 when Jaichand Thakur, a retired Subedar from the English Gorkha Platoon, Sylhet, settled down at Shillong (42). Ever since the first settlement, Nepalis have migrated to Assam for various reasons. Sinha reveals that majority of Nepalis moved to Assam as “the life in the hills [of Nepal] was so difficult because there was very limited arable land in the forested and snow-bound mountain” (14). Moreover, during the British rule, Nepalis were encouraged to migrate into this region by the British rulers as laborers to the vast tea plantations or to coal mines. So, apart from spontaneous out-migration, Nepali settlement of North-east was the result of “sponsored immigration and settlement by the colonial administration” (Nag 192). Today, the area has been highly populated by different generations of Nepali migrants. And, despite prolonged stay in the place, they suffer the “twin issue of ‘foreigners’ and ‘displacement’” and live through “underdevelopment, deprivation, insecurity and lack of proper facilities” (Nath 225-6). The Northeast thus is a centre of debates on Nepalis’ identity politics involving such profound issues as citizenship validation, property ownership, political representation and cultural assimilation.

This essay examines the literary representation of the lives of Nepali settlers in Northeast India, especially of the state of Assam. I have selected Lil Bahadur Chhetri’s Brahmaputraka Chheuchhau for this purpose. I have made this selection for the following two reasons. First, the writer himself is a man born, brought up, educated and living in Assam.
He is a member of the community of Nepali immigrants, and, I believe, a participant and witness of the lives of Nepalis there. The second reason is the geographical-historical character of the novel. The writer himself clarifies, “The novel, as the title suggests, mostly revolves around the Brahmaputra” (“Lekhak ka Kehi Shabda”).\(^1\) Thus it can be assumed that the places the novel covers are near and along (\textit{chheuchhau}) the Brahmaputra river, and the life portrayed here tells the history of those Nepalis who live in the Brahmaputra watershed surviving both the productive and destructive forces of this river.

Published in 1986, \textit{Brahmaputraka}... covers the period of about 25 years from early 1940s to late 1960s. Chhetri’s own words about the book suffice to illustrate this point:

> Based on the events related to the lives of Nepalis in Assam during the period of 24 years from 1943 to 1969-70, the book systematically covers the story of the relationship of Nepalis with the Assamese society. . . . Being an attempt to render a realistic picture of the Nepalis in Assam, the book contains more elements of history than of a novel, and probably lacks the usual taste of a novel (“Lekhak ka Kehi Shabda”).

Krishna Chandra Singh Pradhan, senior Nepali writer and critic, writes that the story of \textit{Brahmaputraka}... complements and continues the story of Chhetri’s first novel \textit{Basain}. He remarks that Man Bir’s departure from Nepal in \textit{Brahmaaputraka}... resembles Dhané’s departure from the village in \textit{Basain}. Both novels present exploitation of poor villagers by feudal lords as the causes of migration, the main push factors. So, both novels, taken together, constitute the story of a Nepali family’s suffering, first in Nepal in the hands of Nepali feudal lords, and then in Assam under Nepali Mahajans (Pradhan 276). Pradhan thus sees in \textit{Brahmaputraka}... the aspect of exploitation and suffering as a dominant theme, both as the cause of displacement from homeland and of suffering in the host country. Chhetri’s assertion of \textit{Brahmaputraka}... as a realistic-historical novel implies an underlying history of Nepali settlers in it. The present essay, however, dwells on the claim that \textit{Brahmaputraka}... is the portrayal of Nepali settlers’ failure to establish their identity in Assam, particularly in the Brahmaputra belt. The sections that follow briefly put forward four major relevant areas of discussion in this order:

i) concept of identity formation in relation to the migrants,
ii) history of Nepali settlers as presented in the novel
iii) history of Nepalis’ attempt to establish identity in Assam
iv) textual evidences for Nepali settlers’ failure to establish identity

**The Concept of Identity Formation**

Manuel Castells defines identity as “people’s source of meaning and experience,” and indicates that its formation stems from the need to construct meaning “on the basis of a cultural attribute or a set of cultural attributes...” (6). This is the concept that identity depends more on people’s cultural heritage and in being able to preserve it, than on the geographical space they occupy. So,

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\(^1\) This and any other citations from and about \textit{Brahmaputraka Chheuchhau} taken from Nepali sources are my own translations.
even if people are deprived of a geographical space, they continue to feel the meaning of their existence with the collective memory of their history, myths and achievements. This idea is applicable to the case of the migrants also. The migrants, in this connection, are only required to preserve the collective experiences and achievements of their community. These experiences help them define new spaces through unity and strength. However, they are bound to face two major types of problems of identity formation: internal and external. The internal problem underlies the question of their success or failure to assimilate into the social systems of the host country. Castells’ idea of constructing the meaning through cultural attributes presupposes the solution to this problem in that preservation of cultural heritage determines the recognition of a community. The external problem, on the other hand, involves the political question of their legal status in the new place. Such problem demands the Hegelian solution. Hegel, Fiona Tolan states, argued that a human being, as a conscious being, achieves a sense of identity entering into a “struggle for recognition with every other conscious being” and concluding that “he or she is the essential subject (the ‘self’), whilst all others are the inessential object (the ‘other’)” (321). In this regard, the project of identity formation in the case of migrants calls for the “struggle for recognition,” or a claim for the formation of ‘self’ which nevertheless is one of the complications in a new land because of its stronghold with mechanisms of containing internal security and order against outsiders. The migrants cannot challenge the hegemony of the host country and have no other choice but accept the condition of being the “other” because the host already has an overpowering identity. Furthermore, the effort to find combined solution to the cultural and political problems leads to the formation of plural identities as there may be diverse cultural attributes and social actors in the society. Castells postulates that “the social construction of identity always takes place in a context marked by power relationship” on the basis of which three kinds of identities emerge: first, “legitimizing identity,” which is “introduced by the dominant institutions of the society to extend and rationalize their domination vis à vis social actors”; second, “resistance identity,” formed by those in the condition “devalued and/or stigmatized by the logic of domination” with an aim to “build trenches of resistance and survival”; and third, “project identity,” developed by social actors being based on “available cultural materials” to “redefine” their position for the “transformation of overall social structure” (7-8). We will observe these three types of identity in the analysis of Chhetri’s Brahmaputraka chheuchhau in the sections that follow.

**Brahmaputraka chheuchhau: History and Story**

The history of migration

One striking characteristic of Brahmaputraka...is a nested presence of a history and a story. The mention of the struggle for Independence from British “Raj” led by Gandhiji and Subash Chandra Basu, and the participation of Nepalis like Chhabi Lal Upadhyaya and Dal Bir Singh Lohar in the struggle are notable historical references in the book. Similarly, the allusion to the wars of India in 1962 and 1965, against China and Pakistan respectively recapitulate both the history of India and the contribution of Gorkha soldiers (143-44). Apart from these events of Indian history, the novel contains the story of Nepalis’ attempt to take part in Assamese politics
from 1946 to 1967 (145). The historical dates also form a background time for the social history of the migration of Nepali families into Assam. For example, when Man Bir’s family leave Nepal, the Second World War is at its height. It is the time “when many Gorkha soldiers were joining the British regiments and plunging into the War” (6).

When Man Bir’s family arrived Assam in early 1940s, there already were around one lakh Nepalis there. The census record of 1931 shows the total number of Nepalis to be 88,306 while that of 1951 is 1,01,338 (Nath 211). This illustrates that Assam was a regular land of destination for Nepalis throughout the last century. The novel shows that poverty was the main cause of migration in Nepal at that time. People in the hills of Nepal had no choice but leave the country in search of better place since the life in the hills was difficult in the hands of feudal lords. Man Bir leaves Nepal as he discovers that he was very badly entrapped into a net of exploitation and powerlessness imposed by the keepers of feudalism (7). The stories of the families of Man Bir and other Nepalis in Assam form a strong background history of the vicissitudes undergone by Nepali settlers from early 1940s to late 1960s.

Attempts of Identity Formation

Besides being the social history of the immigrant Nepalis of the Brahmaputra belt, Brahmputraka... also outlines the history of their efforts to maintain identity as Nepalis. The novel presents three different types of identity maintained by Nepalis there. The first type simply is the attempt to retain Nepaliness by continuing to observe their traditional “cultural attributes,” the rites and rituals. The writer gives a detailed description of how Nepalis of Bage Chhapadi, a typical old settlement of farmers and graziers on the bank of the Brahmaputra, preserve their cultural heritage by celebrating the Hindu festivals like Dashain and Tihar, observing other different rituals like pujas and dances, and retaining traditional domestic practices (49). The second type of identity comprises the effort of some Nepalis to modernize Nepali settlements with the light of education. Nepalis in Pahumara and Mahakhuti have established schools and encouraged the children of peasants and graziers to join them (43-4). Other example is the attempt of Kharel Baje to renovate and continue a school in Aath Miles in Gumane’s service and supervision (78). The library Gumane establishes in Kakati Babu’s land in order to help the youths of Pahumara and Mahakhuti is another landmark attempt in this direction (166).

The third category of Nepali identity in Assam is the efforts of Nepalis to be united. The formation of Assam Gorkha League has come in the form of Castells’ model of “project identity” with an aim to “redefine” their position in the new place. Also there are mentions of graziers’ associations formed with the aim to unite graziers of the region to resist the oppression of the local government and the invasion by tribal farmers (50). Such associations are attempts to establish “resistance identity” so as to secure the position of Nepalis against potential atrocities of the invaders. One such example is Gumane’s work for uniting the settlers of Mainapada to evade their eviction by the local authority (130).
In this way, the ultimate goal of Nepalis’ attempt to maintain unity preludes the formation of “legitimizing identity,” in the form of attainment of status of first class citizens through participation in the electoral processes and representation in the local government. Gumane’s participation in the parliamentary election on behalf of Nepalis of Pahumara, Mahakhuti and Mainapada is exemplary (147).

**Portrayal of Identity Crisis**

Despite the attempts of identity formation mentioned above, Nepalis are shown to be failing to attain the identity of respectable citizens in Assam. The failure can be accorded to mainly of two types of crises: external and internal. External crises refer to the complexities imposed by the socio-political factors isolating and discriminating Nepalis. Internal crises are those which Nepalis have created and imposed on themselves. Some of the external crises have continued through the history of Nepali settlement in the whole of Northeast India. Purushottam L. Bhandari, senior lecturer in Jagirroad College, Assam, considers the main problem of Nepalis in Assam to be the condition of being “treated like second class citizens” (122). They also face residential instability and insecurity because they have not been issued land registration certificates even after years of settlement in the region. Lack of permanent residency has deprived them of legal and electoral rights. Besides, local and national media do not give enough coverage to the issues of Nepalis. Above all, “. . . the pressure of regionalism, local chauvinism and terrorism, especially extortion activities, are very high on the ever-oppressed Nepali community” (Bhandari 122). A condition of constant fear and skepticism about the future dominates their every day psyche. The foremost “predicament,” in words of T.B. Subba, a professor of anthropology in North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, “is the constant fear of eviction” because cases of eviction and atrocities are “a possibility no one can deny” (205). Moreover, Nepalis are occasional targets of violence from local communities, which again leads to their displacement from the area. The burning of a Nepali village by insurgent groups in Sagamong area in April 1980 best exemplifies the intensity of unpredictability Nepalis undergo there. Such predicaments prove that the history of Nepalis in Northeast India in general has not only been one of a long struggle for identity, but also of a permanent question of survival.

The above identity crises can be taken as all time issues in the saga of Nepali settlements in Assam. Chhetri presents identical types of external problems in the novel. As the novel is more focused on the lives of peasants and graziers, and less on their political aspirations and requirements, the number of external problems is limited in his list. He presents natural calamities like Brahmaputra flood (46-47) as the main cause of displacement and instability. Based on a historical time when opportunities were limited, the novel revolves mainly around the problems of peasantry and cattle-grazing. There is some mention about the question of security from invaders (51) and evictors (130). However, there are some issues similar to those mentioned by Bhandari and Subba. One notable case is that Nepalis are made to run away from invaded lands but the local authorities do not listen to their misfortunes (51). This has always pushed them into nomadic life, in search of new grazing lands for their cows and buffaloes.
**Internal Causes: Failure to Establish Identity**

We now arrive our principal claim: *Brahmaputraka*... is a portrayal of Nepali settlers’ failure to establish identity in Assam. This section uncovers Chhetri’s perception that Nepalis are responsible for the failure to establish their identity in the Indian soil. What follows here is the outline of four important causes of Nepalis’ failure to build identity as portrayed in the novel: exploitation of Nepali by Nepali, unwillingness to modernize, inability to unite and self-imposed instability.

**Exploitation of Nepali by Nepali**

Exploitation of poor Nepalis by Mahajans is a theme that runs throughout the novel. The life of Gumane, the hero, symbolizes the struggle of new generation Nepalis to resist and end exploitation. But Gumane cannot end the exploitation of Dairy Mahajan. He only manages to escape the Mahajan’s trap such as his plot to get him married to the speech-impaired daughter Muna. (101). Man Bir, Gumane’s father, the first generation immigrant in the family, does not rebel, perhaps because living under Dairy Mahajan appears to him better than his condition of homelessness after the emigration from Nepal. He compromises with the oppression and submits his identity to the hegemony of the Mahajan. Another man, Bam Bahadur Subba chooses to escape the clutches of the Mahajan even without taking his salary of two years. The first generation of the immigrants like Man Bir and Bam Bahadur appear helpless against subjugation and fail to claim independent identity. In other words, they are not capable of building “resistance identity.” Dairy Mahajan obtains power through high-interest loans to poverty-stricken Nepalis always with an air of benefaction. Such tactics condition the poor to fall prey of his hegemony in Mahakhuti and Pahumara enfeebling them to the extent of impossibility to come up with a claim of independent identity.

**Unwillingness to Modernize**

Apart from the problem of exploitation and inability to rebel against it, Nepalis in the novel lack the willingness to modernize. Majority of them live either in the farms or in the cattle-sheds. They are hardworking and determined to withstand crises underlying their usual work, but they are unwilling to take challenges of a change. Such unwillingness is seen in the way they avoid living in the cities. For example, when Gumane arrives Guwahati in search of work, the proprietor of a hotel informs him that Nepalis who initially lived in that part of the city moved to the villages for cattle farming. The man says, “Why would my race leave the tails of cows and buffaloes and live in the city?” (77). This implies that many Nepalis of the place liked to continue the traditional ways of living with cattle and no challenges of mingling into the life of modern cities. The novel also exposes Nepalis’ disregard for schooling and education. The school in Kachhugaun run by Kakati Babu often lacks Nepali students because Nepalis do not show interest to send their children there. In Aath Miles, Gumane finds a school in pitiable condition. The Nepalis there are too busy with their cattle to renovate the school. He later sets up a library in Pahumara in Kakati Babu’s land. There he finds that the youths lack enthusiasm to use the library to the point of its closure in a short course of time.
Disunity

Nepalis of the Brahmaputra belt are spiritually divided despite sharing the predicaments of living in a foreign land. The feudal lords mould the opinions of older generation during elections to such an extent that the attempts of young people like Gumane and Tope Master to work for Nepalis repeatedly fail. Majority of Nepalis in Pahumara and Mahakhuti are under Dairy Mahajan’s control. Poverty is a chief cause of division. It is the weapon for the Mahajan to trap the people in his favour. The division further has its roots in jealousy. Dairy Mahajan tries to stop Gumane’s progress only on the ground that he is Man Bir, his subordinate’s son. Gumane tries to unite people of Mainapada against their eviction by the local authority, but later they accuse him of creating trouble by antagonism with the authority (129). They would rather withdraw and run away with their belongings than unite and claim stability in the place.

Chhetri reveals that Nepalis of the Brahmaputra belt are unable to unite because of the inefficacy of Nepali organisations to bring solutions to common problems. “Such organisations’ solutions,” he says, “work as well as a mended bicycle tube. Nepalis’ problems are like innumerable holes in the tube, and they recur in a vicious circle of same nature every year. Nepalis neither have a good organization nor an able leadership” (167). But it is not only the lack of able leadership that has prevented Nepali organisations from functioning well, but also Nepalis’ own inability to integrate among themselves. Kakati Babu’s words to Gumane introduce Nepalis in this way: “Nepalis always drag each other backwards, but don’t hesitate to capitulate to strangers” (161). With this perception through an Assamese character, Chhetri lampoons Nepali character of disintegration among themselves but submission of their dignity to a higher foreign authority. The knowledge of this character has helped local authority to bring division among Nepalis. Dairy Mahajan worships the power of local authority to contain his hegemony over his Nepali compatriots. He bribes the local officers, flatters the Nepali leaders and brings them round to the line of his work. People like the Mahajan can be considered the main obstruction to the unity of Nepalis in Assam.

Self-imposed Instability and Disintegration

The older generation Nepalis in Brahmaputraka... find themselves outsiders in the Brahmaputra belt. They actually bear a typical diaspora characteristic of nostalgia and craving for the homeland. This is the consequence of their only partial detachment from Nepal. Some of them have gone to Assam in search of work. They even do not want to build big houses and invest their earnings in the foreign land. The community of Nepalis in Aath Miles, and especially Kharel Baje, who is the head of the community, represent this group of Nepalis. Kharel Baje sends all his earning to his family in Bhairahawa. He believes, “Ultimately there is no choice but return to our own country. What’s the use buying land here?... They will finally chase us away one day. You cannot carry your land and house on your back when it happens” (81). Kharel Baje’s plan to return to Nepal is not only the result of his fear of instability in Assam; it is his inner desire to go back to Nepal. Unlike Man Bir, who has already lost touch with and has no chance of return to the homeland and Gumane, who does not know anything about Nepal or knows that there is nothing left for him, the people like Kharel Baje have no compulsion to remain in Assam. Neither
are they concerned about being recognized with a name or a voting right. They always “look westward” towards Nepal as the only alternative in case of the escalation of crisis in Assam.

In addition to the lack of the sense of belonging to Assam, Nepalis impose constant instability upon themselves by frequent migration. The families of graziers remain in forest sides, particularly shunning the possibility of alternatives in education and agriculture. They move to alternative places in case of danger of the Brahmaputra flood, or of wild animals, tribal invaders and the local authority. They choose to remain in small huts even for years, and avoid making big houses as they have to move to other parts. Grazing has made them like nomads. Even if there is no chance of return to Nepal, there are other grazing areas and forests to take shelter in Assam. If grazing areas are not available, some of them “quit cattle-farming and go to coal mines” (88). This indicates the impossibility of a conspicuous identity building in Nepali community there.

Because they don’t aspire for the position of legal citizens due to lack of exposure and education, they are in constant chance of remaining obscure from the mainstream life just with the limited identity of graziers or miners.

The novel shows that Nepalis of older generation are also conditioned to resist assimilation with the host communities of Assam. A strong racial consciousness has developed in the Nepali community, a spirit of difference from the indigenous people. This difference has deprived them of the chance of coexistence and affinity with the latter. It has equally allowed the host community to regard Nepalis as outsiders. However, racial prejudice of Assamese community is equally responsible for the disintegration. Kakati Babu’s wife and son, Haren, who always spurned Gumane and prevent his marriage with Malati ((Kakati’s daughter) represent this class of Assamese people. But it is for the Nepalis to realize the need of promoting affinity with the Assamese for their own identity in the new land. The new-fangled Gumane comes closer to integration with the indigenous people. His older compatriots, brainwashed by Dairy Mahajan, are against it. Integration would empower both races and threaten the Mahajan’s autocratic mahajanship. For instance, affinity with Kakati Babu has enabled Gumane to challenge the Mahajan’s domination. Therefore, the Mahajan raises the issue of race and ethnicity against the relationship between Gumane and Malati, and tries to prevent their union. Thus, control of orthodox Mahajan has impeded the Nepalis’ potential advancement to the formation of identity propitious to the land of Assam.

**Conclusion**

Chhetri’s *Brahmaputrika Chheuchhau* is the story of Nepalis in Assam. More than that, it is a history of Nepalis’ own failure to build identity there. Contemporary scholars like T.B Subba and Purushottam L. Bhandari attribute such identity crisis to external political causes like extortion, eviction, and deprivation from civil rights. But Chhetri deems internal causes such as exploitation, backwardness, disunity and self-imposed instability and disintegration to be responsible. The novel, set in a period between 1940s and 1960s, presents the most formative years of the life of Nepalis in the Brahmaputra belt. It foregrounds the issue of identity crisis of...
the diaspora of that time with reference to the then social history of Assam. The story of the hardships undergone by Man Bir’s family underlines exploitation and poverty as the fundamental causes of suffering before and after the migration. At the same time, the theme of the crisis of unity among Nepalis backgrounds the political causes of identity crises. The novel, nevertheless, is not an advocacy of the need to overthrow the hegemony of the host society. It is only an urge to the Nepali community to work for redefining their position as respectable citizens and human beings.

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