

Living the Nepali Diaspora in India: An Autobiographical Essay

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Abstract. The Nepalis form one of the largest and most widespread diasporic communities in India numbering about 5 million and found in almost every part of India with greater concentrations in the states bordering Nepal. Their large-scale immigration was the result of the British colonial needs for brave soldiers, agriculturists, plantation workers, construction workers and so on as much as the lack of opportunities for employment in the feudal, poverty-stricken Nepal. Hence, the British administrators did not have to struggle very hard to ensure a steady flow of them to wherever they were most needed in India. All this is well known. What is not known is what the diasporic Nepalis as individuals with identity, emotions and aspirations encountered and experienced in India. The present article tries to fill this gap in existing literature with an autobiographical account of encounter and experience in India.

[Nepalis, diaspora, home, identity, Gorkhaland]

The Original Homeland

One of the questions I am often asked by the people I meet is "What is the country of your origin?" to which my routine answer is "India". Most of them pull their chins and say "but your name suggests that you are from Nepal!" as though name always, or often, indicated the nationality of a person, although names do indicate one's ethnicity a lot more correctly. Their sense of civility stops them from asking a more direct question, which the more rustic of them have asked me, "Are you from Nepal?" People have asked me this question many times since January 1978, when I first went down to Siliguri – the chicken-neck that connects Northeast India with the rest of the country – for my postgraduate studies. Initially I did not feel infuriated or hurt when I would be asked this question. As a simpleton from the hills, who had not yet seen a train or vast flat land like the area around Siliguri, the question did not carry any extra meanings. It was for the first time during the Gorkhaland movement,¹ on which I later

¹ The Gorkhaland movement refers to the movement for attaining a federal statehood within the Union of India and proposed to be carved out of Darjeeling District and Dooars area of Jalpaiguri District of West Bengal. The demand for political separation from West Bengal had started as early as 1907 but it turned violent only in the middle of 1986 and remained so till August 1988 when a tripartite agreement leading to the creation of the present Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council was arrived at between the West Bengal government, the government of India and the Gorkha National Liberation Front that spearheaded the movement since July 1980.

wrote a book (1992), that I first began to realize what it meant to be thought of foreign origin, how it was associated with the questions of nationality, loyalty, and right to employment, etc.

My own understanding of "original homeland" has thus evolved out of my personal experience of living in Siliguri for 13 long years and another 15 years or so in Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya, a state in northeastern region of India. When a Khasi in Shillong asks me where I am from the reply I give is "from Sikkim". It puts me in a category different from the rest of Nepalis here in Shillong, who number about 50 thousand and who are believed by the local people to have come from Nepal, although most of them are born there and a few have come from Nepal as well as Darjeeling, Sikkim and other parts of India. After some conversation, I find that the persons who would readily accept me as a Sikkimese would often not have visited Sikkim or known to whom a "Sikkimese"² actually refers. It is simply assumed to be an identity like "Bodo" or "Khasi", but most importantly, different from the so-called Nepalis. Thus, my "Sikkimese" identity gives the Khasis I meet a positive ring, which may certainly not be the case if my reply was "Nepali", or if I looked different from what I do.

The question of "where one is from and not who one is" is apparently one of the basic questions related to diasporic studies.³ Critiquing the work titled *Displacement, Diaspora and Geographies of Identity* by Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg (1996) Sura P. Rath (2000:2) writes, "Yet the most common manifestation of one's other-ness in an alien culture is a question one encounters from time to time: 'where are you from?', 'not' *who/what* are you?" (emphasis in original). This is further corroborated by Sandhya Shukla (2001:551) in a review article thus: "The subject of diaspora immediately elicits basic questions of origins and locations. Where do people come from? Where do they pause, rest, live? What routes have they traveled? And yet the real and imagined worlds of all peoples, especially migrant peoples, have proven far too complex and contradictory to be easily serviced by any attempt to respond in the singular to such compelling questions."

I was actually born in Bagha, a remote hill village in the Sankhuwasabha district of East Nepal, in the house of my maternal grandparents. My father had wandered into this village in one of his youthful forays and had begun to teach in the school that my

² The word "Sikkimese" is one of the most misunderstood identities both within and outside Sikkim. At one level, it refers to all the inhabitants of Sikkim, whereas at another level, it refers to the Bhutias only and even the Lepchas, Limbus, and Magars, who are original inhabitants of Sikkim, are excluded from this category. This has been possible because of over three centuries long rule by Bhutia theocrats in Sikkim.

³ In fact, there is quite a boom in diasporic literature recently (see Safran 1991, Clifford 1994, Brah 1996, Cohen 1997, Misra 1998, Patel 1999, Charterjee 1999, Karim 1999, Khan 1999, Shukla 2001, Hansen 2002, Tsagarousianou 2004, etc.), and "Diasporic Studies" has already entered the university syllabi in many countries.

maternal grandfather had established with his own resources. There he met my mother, who already was a mother of two daughters – Hari and Durga – but a widow. I do not know why my father left Bagha when I was little less than two years old without me or my mother to return to Tanek – the village that I claim to be mine now – but I never asked the reason to either of my parents. At the age of two years, I was brought to Tanek village, which is located in the Kalimpong subdivision of Darjeeling district, West Bengal. Kalimpong was a part of Sikkim till 1706 when, following a war between Sikkim and Bhutan, it went under the latter kingdom and remained so till 1864, when following another war, this time the Anglo-Bhutanese War of 1864–65, it came under the British India.

When we all, including Hari and Durga, arrived in Tanek my paternal grandparents, who had plenty of land and wealth, did not like it for reasons that I did not understand then. My paternal grandmother, who was a matriarch, decided to let us fend for ourselves. Hence, there was a situation where instead of analyzing the consequences of patriarchy on individuals, as Carolyn Steedman wonderfully does (2000:77–82), I could write painful accounts of a matriarchal arrogance almost jeopardizing an entire family. My half-sisters, one of which was still a minor, began to work as coolies by the roadside and the first ever aluminum vessel we had for cooking was bought out of the elder sister's first weekly wage. Until then a woman belonging to the Sitling clan of my community living close to our house had lent us a brass pot to cook rice. We began to cultivate the land of one of my father's friends on sharecropping basis and rear a milch cow. When the situation turned worse my father also had to start working as a coolie. This actually turned out to be the opportunity for my father. One day, while my father was digging on the roadside, one of his childhood friends, who had now become the Director of Education Department in Bhutan, saw my father and requested him to accept an offer to work as a school headmaster in Dogar, eastern Bhutan, which my father readily accepted. Things gradually improved after that and even my grandparents gave us our share of land and allowed us to share the huge house they owned in the middle of a paddy field. I still needed to carry milk in an aluminum can to the town when I went to school and bring it back when I returned home. I remember how shy I felt to carry the can in front of the girls of St. Joseph's Convent and St. Philomena's School, whom I passed every morning and afternoon, and how I hid the can behind me or hated the sound the loosely fitted cover of the aluminum can made. And I had to bear with such a feeling till I completed Class XI from Kumudini Homes, which was about five kilometres uphill walk from my home.

I began to hate rich people early in my life and when my contemporaries read textbooks for their school examinations I read Marxist literature, absented myself from classes and joined party processions in school dress, and pasted party posters at night as an auxiliary group member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), which I left in 1977, when it formed the Left Front government in West Bengal, to join the Marxist-Leninist group during my post graduation days. The reason for joining the CPI(M) at the tender age of 14 years, in retrospect, was mainly psychological and has a close

resonance in the experiences of growing as a child, as the weaver's daughter, in the life of Carolyn Steedman (2000). I possibly could not accept the fact that we were living the life of a pauper whereas my grandparents had plenty of food to eat. Several of my age-mates in the village went to "English" schools, wore expensive clothes, ate meat and sweets frequently, whereas I was deprived of all that. Steedman calls this "envy entry", which if employed for political understanding means, "the proper struggles of people in a state of dispossession to gain their inheritance might be seen not as sordid and mindless greed for the things of the market place, but attempts to alter a world that has produced in them states of unfulfilled desire" (Steedman 2000:123).

My father, who is now about 80 years, and my paternal grandfather, who died about two decades back at the age of about 84 were both born in Tanek village. My great grandfather is known to have migrated from Ravongla in South Sikkim, which is now occupied by the Tibetan refugees who had to flee their homeland in 1959, following the Chinese occupation of their country. He left behind his land and settled in Kalimpong during the British regime for the education of his children. And no one knows where my great great grandfather came from. My community being pastoralists and shifting cultivators till as late as the end of the eighteenth century, it is indeed difficult to identify the exact place of our origin. It is however believed on the authority of *mundhum*⁴ that the Samba clan to which I belong originated from Mewa Khola in east Nepal.

Although I revisited Bagha in the winter of 1992 during the course of my fieldwork for writing *Politics of Culture* (1999), I have absolutely no memories nor sentiments built around that village. This makes the concept of "home" a lot more complex than usually made out to be. If home refers to the desired place of return Bagha is certainly not my home; it is Tanek in the sense of "a lived experience of a locality" (Brah 1996: 192). I did return to Bagha once, but not because I was fired by what might be called a "diasporic desire to return", but because not doing so would be very rude on my part. I was staying in a nearby village – Madi Mulkharka – for my research on Kiratas and my maternal uncle came several times during my stay there to invite me to Bagha. I am however not sure if I would feel the same way if I had to spend my childhood in Bagha. Would my childhood memories overpower me to return to that village? Perhaps yes.

All my memories are associated with Tanek village, the Mangbar Reserve Forest below it, and the Teesta River at its bottom. They are connected with the terraced

⁴ *Mundhum* has a special significance in Limbu culture and society. It is essentially a collection of origin stories about clans, animals, birds, and even plants and insects, which when told in a manner that is typical of the shamans creates a mystic effect on the listeners. Such stories are also about birth, marriage and death and are narrated by the sacred specialists called *Pbedangma*. In the absence of any written history of their ancient past, or any standard procedure for conducting their social and religious rites and rituals, *mundhum* serves as the modern cultural ready-reckoner for such purposes. Although, subject to interpretation, it has almost become a symbol of Limbu culture and identity.

fields and bamboo groves of the village, with its threshing grounds, and with its primary school without walls or roof, where I began to learn the Devanagari alphabets with the help of stone pebbles in 1961–62. They are associated with its streams, which I often scanned for castaway footballs, or its rich landlords whose orchards I sneaked in to satiate my hunger. Similarly, my father's memories are associated with the night-long singing and dancing on the threshing grounds of Tanek village or neighbouring villages, with the fist fights he participated in, or the games like football, long jump, high jump, and pole vault he played with his friends in the village. And my grandfather's memories were associated with his role as an assistant to his "shaman"⁵ father, and later, as he grew up, with the forests of Darjeeling and Sikkim, as a first class licensed contractor with his own iron seal. One of his major problems was to speak Nepali language correctly and fluently: he never spoke to my grandmother or my other senior relatives in the village in any language other than the Limbu.⁶ I sometimes teased my grandparents for pronouncing "ghar" (home/house) as "khar" (a wild grass used for thatching). This happened because the sound /ghal probably did not exist in the Limbu language.

I must say here a few words about my mother. Her memories were obviously associated with the village I was born in. But I guess it had a lot to do with her opulent life in Bagha as a daughter of a rich landlord, who had established a school, paid salaries to the teachers, and constructed bridges over turbulent hill streams with his own resources. He had about 90 families belonging mostly to Chhetri and Bahun castes cultivating his land for a container of yoghurt and prostration before him once in a year during the Nepali festival called *Dashain*,⁷ which generally falls in the month of October and which was celebrated by all Hindu, Animist, and Buddhist Nepalis till 1990s when the *janajati* (literally "tribal") movement labeled it as a "Hindu" festival and exhorted the "tribal" Nepalis to boycott it. This festival actually has a direct relevance to diaspora studies because it is during this festival that the sons who are working away in India or the daughters who have been married away return to their natal homes to meet their parents, relatives, and friends, to celebrate their meet, to drink and eat good

⁵ The use of the word "shaman" here is to facilitate the understanding of an English reader. The native word for this is *Phedangma* who essentially communicates between the living and the dead. Such a person is often possessed by his master deity and/or the spirit of the dead person and speaks through such a medium. Divination is a part of his job while in a state of trance or outside such a state. He becomes a shaman not out of his choice: he has to be born with such a destiny. Due perhaps to this reason, shamans are a vanishing category of people from all over the world. The "shamans" are actually of various categories, depending on the level of their knowledge of curing the sick and negotiating with the supernatural powers for the benefit of the people.

⁶ The Limbu language is one of the Himalayan languages belonging to the Tibeto-Burman group and is widely spoken by the Limbus living in Darjeeling, West Sikkim and East Nepal. The language is written in a script called Srijanja.

⁷ This festival came under attack from the leaders of the *janajati* as well as the Maoist movement in Nepal since 1990s.

food, and to receive blessings of parents and grandparents before going back. This festival keeps the kinship and village ties in good repair and links Nepal with the diasporic Nepalis in a manner that no other Nepali festival does. The children have their own fun, as they receive new clothes from their parents, and collect some money by paying obeisance to their senior relatives. The married daughters, in particular, look forward to this festival every year, as it gives them an opportunity to share their feelings and experiences in their husbands' houses with their parents, and the pleasure of giving something to their own parents until they are alive.

My mother's childhood affluence was in sharp contrast to what she had to endure as my mother, with my father working in a remote village of eastern Bhutan for 28 long years on a meagre salary. My father visited home for about a month in December, but could rarely send money between his annual visits. My mother had to look after three growing children without any regular source of income. Her few gold ornaments would always be mortgaged with Marwari goldsmiths in Kalimpong town and there would be substantial debt accumulated at the Bihari grocers' in town as well as the village by the time my father came home in December and cleared the debts and mortgages that would be renewed soon after he returned to Bhutan. Sometimes she could not provide evening meals for us, nor did we always have enough kerosene to light the brass lamps she had brought from her natal home. And, when she had something to cook, it would always be the poorest quality rice distributed through the public distribution system. The only new dress she could afford to buy for us was school dress during the *Dashain* festival. Meat was a great luxury we could afford just a couple of times in a year, during *Dashain* and when my father came home in winter. If conditions after her marriage with my father were not as bad as they were she would perhaps have lesser reasons to be nostalgic about her life in Nepal, as I found her fictive brother⁸ or *mit bhai* was.

Phago Mama, who happened to be her fictive brother in Tanek, came from Nepal along with his newly married wife about 20 years ago. Life was pretty tough for him to begin with but he has no regrets for having left Nepal. The couple was given shelter by the same woman of Sitling clan mentioned above. The couple worked hard and soon was in a position to buy a small homestead from the same old woman, build a hut, and give a decent education to their children. Whenever I met him I asked him about Nepal, as I last did during January 2003 when I went home for my mother's funeral, but he did not want to talk about Nepal any more, as though his memories of Nepal were not worth keeping alive. He had after all never gone back to his "original home-

⁸ "Fictive brother" is locally called *mit bhai*. This is a ritual or ceremonial relationship between two persons who are not related to one another, either consanguinally or affinally. The children of those who have entered into such a relationship use kinship terminologies for each other and do not intermarry for at least three generations, violation of which is taken as an incest. For details, see Prindle (1975).

land” ever since he left it and had not even tried to get in touch with any of his relatives there. His friends and relatives back in Nepal must have declared him as a “*Muglan bhasiyeko manche*” or someone vanished in Muglan, the land of the Mughals, as India is still referred so in Nepal, or simply believed to be dead. He would, I guess, certainly keep an interest in his place of origin and be sometimes nostalgic, like my mother, if his life back home had been better than the one here in Tanek village. This indicates, contrary to what Clifford (1994:311) says, that diasporic cultures do not always “mediate... the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place”.

Phago Mama goes by a simple logic. According to him, one has to work hard in order to live, whether in Nepal or in India. Whereas in India, he further reasons, one can earn “*dui paisa*” (metaphorically, some money) if one works hard the same opportunity is not there in Nepal. “Tell me if I am wrong!” he says. No one who has seen him from the times he wore half-torn shorts and vest would disagree. I would say, “Yes, *mama*”. Clearly encouraged by what I, the highest educated villager and a “nephew” at that, said he would turn towards his two sons and say, “Look, I sent them to Kumudini Homes because you went to that school and I wanted them to be like you, but they are not at all hard-working. They only want good clothes, guitar, and good shoes. Speak to them and put some sense into their heads!” I would try and tell my *mama* that he should not get disheartened so easily, reminded him how I also played guitar when I went to college, and slowly made my way for departure wondering what my parents had expected of me when I was small.

When I was small enough to hang around my mother I did not have the slightest idea about what a country meant, or in what sense was Nepal not India or vice versa. Occasionally, I heard my mother narrating her story near the hearth but I rarely had as much interest in her Nepal tales as I had in her fairy tales of which the most repeated and liked was the tale about a queen with golden hair. I must have asked her to repeat this story a hundred times. She did not teach me Limbu language but certainly taught me a lot about plants and insects while I accompanied her to the Mangbar forest for collecting firewood or fodder during summer and winter holidays. Whatever little I know of Limbu language is what I learnt from my paternal grandparents. A lot of what my mother told me while accompanying her to the forest were words of praise for the Chhetri-Bahun and critique of the Limbus of Bagha. She would often refer to the former as clever and intelligent, and the latter as simple and stupid; the former as thrifty, the latter spendthrift; the former able to swallow anger easily, the latter showed it without any difficulty. She would narrate how some Limbu landlords like her own father gradually lost their lands for which she blamed the gambling habit and short temperedness of the Limbus more than the cunningness of the Chhetri-Bahun. Little did I understand then that after the political unification of Nepal by King Prithivinarayan Shah in 1769 the Limbus were not only politically marginalized but also alienated from their ancestral lands by passing such laws which would legalize the occupation of Limbu lands by the immigrant Chhetri-Bahun (Caplan 1970). Since the revenue, po-

lice, and judicial officials belonged to the high caste Chhetri-Bahun and since there was no freedom of expression about the state-sponsored discrimination against the indigenous peoples of Nepal the latter had little choice but to migrate to India, which they did in large numbers from early nineteenth century.

Creation and Construction of the Nepali Diaspora in India

There is indeed no dearth of literature on Indian, or South Asian diaspora in the United States, Canada, in the Caribbean Islands, and other Asian countries like Mauritius and Fiji. However, very little is known about the South Asian diaspora in India such as the Nepali diaspora, the Bangladeshi diaspora, the Kuki-Chin diaspora, etc. These diasporas are different from what normally goes in the name of Indian or Southasian diaspora: whereas the latter is characterized by geographical discontinuity from the country of their origin the former diasporas are geographical extensions of their original homelands. The geographical contiguity has also been reinforced by historical and cultural contiguities between their places of origin and places of migration. However, very little is known about this category of diasporic societies.

During my doctoral research in early 1980s on the Nepalis of Darjeeling and Sikkim (1986), I came across several historical sources that indicated how this region was devoid of Nepalis before the British came, and how they were brought in by the British to work in the tea plantations, agriculture, forests, and construction of roads and bungalows. I also learnt about the *gallawalas*, who went to the hills of Nepal selling dreams to the young men and women of an exciting life in Company (after East India Company), as India was also called in Nepal then. These dream merchants knew exactly where to sell their merchandise in Nepal. They often received fat commissions from both the British administrators who desperately wanted the services of the hardy, sincere and loyal Nepalis, as well as from the people who were desperate to get a job in India. Most young men dreamt of returning home with enough money to pay back the loans taken by their parents from the Chhetri-Bahun or Newar moneylenders against land mortgage. Others hoped to marry when they returned home. They were rarely cautioned about the threat to their life and health while working in the malarial plains, forests, tea gardens, coal mines, agricultural fields, or while fighting in the battlefields. Even if they were to be cautioned the compulsion or temptation to migrate was so strong that they would certainly ignore such cautions. Their dreams were obviously far stronger than the fear of losing an eye or a limb, or even life. It was these brave men who laid the foundation of the deterritorialized, supra-caste, supra-ethnic Nepali diaspora in India tied together by the Nepali *lingua franca* and fired by a common challenge to their survival.

Unlike what one often reads about the people from Nepal they did not always come to India because the conditions of life and living in Nepal were worse for them. This is particularly true of Chhetri-Bahun who always received state patronage in Ne-

pal and had satisfactory social, if not equally satisfactory economic, status until the beginning of the twentieth century, which delayed their migration to India. For instance, till 1951, out of 445,000 total Nepalis in Darjeeling only 11,000 were Bahuns (Hutt 1997:114). When they finally migrated they had to settle in climatically less desirable areas like the malarial plains and foothills of Assam. Needless to say that some of the Chhetri-Bahuns migrated to India quite early and not necessarily for economic reasons. Phago Mama, who I have mentioned above, and his wife had, for instance, migrated to Tanek because his wife reportedly could not adjust with her mother-in-law. He had heard of Kalimpong, and that many Limbus lived there, although he did not know a single Limbu (or non-Limbu) family personally before arriving in Tanek. During one of my annual visits to my village several years back I remember him telling me: "I knew that some Limbu family would certainly give us refuge. Thus, we headed straight for Kalebung (read Kalimpong). Getting down at Teesta bazaar from a Gangtok-bound bus, we walked through a deep forest (Mangbar Reserve Forest) to reach this village." I have also heard of stories about how others settled in the village. As if to make their migration stories sound more adventurous, I rarely have heard anyone say that he knew so and so person in the village, or so and so was related to him.

I wish to present here briefly a story that relates to the migration of a Rai⁹ woman of Chamling clan who most villagers in Tanek referred to as "Simma Ama" (mother of Simma, her only daughter) so that my account of Nepali diasporic experiences do not become over gendered, which most diasporic experiences are (Clifford 1994:313). When I was small I spent a lot of time in her house. She rarely moved out of her house. Her main job was to order everyone at home what to do next and drive chicken away from the courtyard where some paddy, maize or millet would always be drying. She used a long thin bamboo stick and her loud voice to do this job effectively without moving an inch. She continued with this chore until she died some years ago.

Simma Ama left her home in east Nepal at an age of 20 years in search of her elder brother, who was among the many hundred "missing" Nepalis (see Russell 2000 for a theoretical treatment of the "missing" Nepalis). When she left her home, leaving a word only with her friend, she had no idea where exactly she was going and how long would it take her to find her brother. She carried some roasted maize, a few silver coins, and a sickle to defend herself should such a necessity arise. No clothes to change. Nothing else. She arrived at Tanek after five days, walking barefoot, and eating whatever she was offered on her way. She was first given refuge in Tanek by an old man of her own clan. She started working in the old man's house but did not give up the hope of finding her brother until she married someone in Tanek and settled down there. Although the World War II widowed her early she took very good care of her son and daughter and another two male dependents who were also given small plots of land by her.

⁹ Rai is one of the numerous communities living in the eastern Himalayas. The community is known for dialectical diversity within it, although all the dialects belong to the Tibeto-Burman group.

One other dimension of diasporic studies that has received scant or no attention is the way a diasporic society is constructed by its host or neighbouring society. As Roza Tsagarousianou rightly observes, diasporas, as imagined communities, are continuously reconstructed and reinvented (2004:52).

The diasporic Nepalis had one of the oldest associations with the Bengalis of the present day West Bengal. Had it not been for the Bengalis, many Darjeeling Nepalis argue, there would be no celebration of Poet Bhanubhakta's birth anniversary every year in the middle of July. The Nepalis of Darjeeling wished to celebrate some poet's birth anniversary because the Bengalis there celebrated the birth anniversary of Rabin-dranath Tagore every year in May with lot of fanfare. For every Nepali family in Darjeeling the Bengalis were a reference group by which I mean a model group whose members exhibit habits and performances worthy of emulation. Desperate Nepali parents, whose biggest challenge was to make their children take interest in studies and to make them worth something when they grew up, praised the values Bengalis attached to education. There is a myth among the Nepalis in the Darjeeling hills that Bengalis are intelligent because they eat fish head. With or without fish head, the Bengalis became a reference group for the entire Nepali community in Darjeeling, West Bengal.

In West Bengal, Bengalis are not only in absolute majority but are far more advanced than Nepalis and other hill communities in every respect – be it professions, literature, music or arts. They created tremendous pressure on the Nepalis to show that they are not just a horde of illiterate people but also have rich literary tradition and culture. It was this burden that gave birth to Poet Bhanubhakta as the literary symbol of the Indian Nepalis, the poet who is credited to have unified Nepal linguistically by translating the *Ramayana* into simple, colloquial, Nepali language and thereby making it possible for ordinary Nepalis to understand it (for details, see Onta 1996). Celebrating Poet Bhanubhakta's birth anniversary would, in the eyes of many Indian Nepalis, go against their struggle for a clear Indian identity that is distinct from that of Nepal Nepalis because he was a poet of Nepal. Therefore, during the Gorkhaland movement the bust of Bhanubhakta at Chowrasta in Darjeeling was broken down by the supporters of the movement who instead began to celebrate the birth anniversary of Agam Singh Giri, a lesser known Nepali poet but born and brought up in Darjeeling. However, the Nepalis in Sikkim continue to celebrate Poet Bhanubhakta's birth anniversary, probably because they are in absolute majority in the State, which makes the search for an Indian identity much less significant for them than it has been the case for the Nepalis living as minorities such as in West Bengal and Northeast India.

After the first Puja vacation in 1978, when I returned to my hostel on the campus of North Bengal University, which is located about eight kilometres away from the Siliguri town, I heard several of my friends saying one evening "*Sar-ke pronam kore aasi*" (let me touch Sir's feet and come back). Touching the feet of teachers by students returning to the university campus after Puja vacation is part of the Bengali culture in the university I studied. I also decided to go and touch Sir's feet, but when I did so he was as happy as he was taken aback. He said, "but, this is not your culture..." I told

him that it was part of my culture as well. Then he said, “*kintu suncheelam je, tomra parents-er songe bese drink trink karo*” (but I have heard that you drink with your parents!) I said “*haen, ta-o kori*” (yes, we do that, too). I could by then speak Bengali quite fluently and had learnt to read and write as well. He was definitely very curious to go on but apparently decided not to probe any further into my culture.

When I left his quarters on the university campus there were two of my classmates from West Dinajpur district of West Bengal with me. We had hardly taken 20 steps away from our Sir’s house one of them lit a Charminar brand cigarette and asked me: “*Tongka, ki to-ra suwor goru-r mangso tangso khas na ki sunlaam?* (I have heard that you take pork and beef?). The other one said in Bengali that he had heard so, too. I could not understand then why this question was so important to both of them, because my room mate, who was also a Bengali, ate beef and pork *momos* (Chinese dumplings) with me in Siliguri restaurants without ever dropping a hint that such meat is generally a taboo among Bengalis. “But, Jnan (my room mate) eats, too!” I made a hopeless attempt to defend, but they considered Jnan’s habits to be an aberration rather than the rule.

By the time I had spent the second year with them I knew how ignorant they were of the social, cultural, and religious fabric of the people of Darjeeling. They considered the people from the hills quite exotic and the few Bengalis who came down from the hills apparently tried to mystify Nepalis even more. The Nepalis of Darjeeling who met the Bengalis from the plains of West Bengal on the university campus were equally ignorant about the latter.

I became more acutely aware of the Bengali construction of the Nepalis during the “People of India” mega project of the Anthropological Survey of India launched in mid-1980s and conducted under the director-generalship of a bureaucrat-historian, Late Dr. Kumar Suresh Singh. Under this project, each Nepali caste was taken as a community in itself and several Bengali scholars from Kolkata prepared reports on them on the basis of one or two days’ fieldwork on each “community”, which were read out and discussed in Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim, in 1988–89. All of them had written that the Nepali married women wear vermilion on their forehead. But this practice was actually more prominent among the married Bahun and Chhetri¹⁰ women than among the Limbu, Rai or Yakkha married women. I had rarely seen my women relatives ever wearing this symbol of married Hindu women, although they were otherwise labeled as “Hindu”. And yet no one ever questioned if they were married and if they were Hindu. Wearing of vermilion is something rare even among the

¹⁰ The Chhetris (or Khastriyas) are lower than the Bahuns (Nepali Hill Brahmins) in the ritual hierarchy of the Nepali society but they are often categorized together because they are similar in many (ritual) respects, although they also have significant differences between them. In fact, there are considerable occupational and ritualistic differences even within the Bahuns. For instance, a Jaisi Bahun can be an astrologer but cannot practise domestic priesthood, which is the prerogative of the Upadhaya Bahuns only.

Tamang, Sherpa, Yolmu, Magar, or Gurung married women. They however all wear a necklace made of small green or red glass beads called *pote* as a symbol of being married.

The Nepalis of Darjeeling have a long history of struggle for administrative autonomy from Bengal and the first attempt towards this was made as early as 1907 when the three hill communities of West Bengal – Lepcha, Bhutia and Nepali – jointly demanded a “separate administrative unit” for the district of Darjeeling. Similar demands were raised in 1919, 1929, 1934, 1949, etc. But it was only in 1980s that a systematic and concerted demand was made for a separate statehood called “Gorkhaland” within the Union of India, which the Nepalis thought would give them a sense of security in India. Experiences of large-scale evictions of the Nepalis from different parts of North-east India were recalled to justify the demand for a separate homeland, for, as Clifford has rightly said, the term diaspora “is a signifier, not simply of transnationality and movement, but of political struggles to define the local, as distinctive community, in historical contexts of displacement” (1994:303). The demand was first raised by an organization known as Pranta Parishad in April 1980 and soon by Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) in July the same year. The former was based in Kalimpong and the latter in Darjeeling but little was known about them outside Darjeeling until the movement turned violent in 1986 and was marked by frequent attacks on policemen, and fratricidal clashes and killings between the supporters of the GNLF and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) cadres (see Subba 1992 for details). There was some violence almost every day until August 1988 when a tripartite agreement was signed between the GNLF, West Bengal government, and the Government of India, which gave birth to the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council, although with limited powers and functions over the hill areas of Darjeeling (see Subba 1998 for details).

When the Gorkhaland movement turned violent in 1986 it took every intellectual at North Bengal University by surprise. The Centre for Himalayan Studies at the university, which was mandated by the University Grants Commission of India to study the eastern Himalayas, including the Darjeeling hills, invited several scholars to speak on the movement. Incidentally their lectures turned out to be more an anti-Gorkhaland propaganda than a true academic exercise. The speakers overtly or covertly legitimized the police atrocities in the hills unleashed by the government of West Bengal, and gave intellectual mandate to what the journalists from Kolkata were already doing to prevent West Bengal from being “re-partitioned”. Almost every speaker projected the Nepalis in Darjeeling more or less in the same vein – as immigrants from Nepal (see Hutt 1997:122) and people having double citizenship – and thereby declared their demand for a separate statehood not only illegitimate but also dangerous. Most intellectuals at North Bengal University lost complete sight of the issue, as they could not transcend their own ethnic identity as Bengalis. Instead, as Bengalis, they considered it their moral and intellectual responsibility to defend the state of West Bengal. Some of them went to the extent of keeping a constant watch over my movements and activities, as I was suspected to be an ideologue of the movement. On the other hand, the

GNLF cadres were after my head due to my Marxist background and an article I wrote against the movement titled "Darjeeling and Statehood" early in 1980 in a local English weekly, *Himalayan Observer*. I was actually not against the demand but was very critical of the violent, arrogant and ethnically insensitive ways of making the demand.

Nepal Nepalis vis-à-vis Indian Nepalis

Due to open border and free movement of people between Nepal and India there is someone from Nepal joining the diasporic Nepali community in India almost every evening, which might also be the case to a lesser extent with Indian diasporic society in Nepal. And this has been happening nearly for the past two centuries. Some of the very first people to come to India in any significant numbers were the Lahures, called so after Lahore located in present Pakistan, which was one of the first and biggest recruitment centres for the Magars and Gurungs of western Nepal, and which was established soon after the Anglo-Nepalese War of 1814–16. Even today many young men leave the hills of Nepal for trying their luck at the recruitment centres for army and paramilitary forces like the Assam Rifles, Border Security Force, and the Central Reserve Police Force. When they return after successful completion of their training, they are referred to as "Lahure" even though Lahore is not in India any more. Then there were others who were less focussed and were ready to take up any means of livelihood, be it construction work on the roads, clearing forest, plantation or agricultural work. In the years after India's independence many seasonal labourers came to the hills of Darjeeling and Sikkim to carry oranges from the remote villages to the nearest towns. Several of them would stay back each year and swell the diasporic Nepali population. But rarely any rich Nepalis migrated to India until about 1996. The nation-wide Maoist violence in Nepal and the fear of being extorted by them forced many rich Nepalis, mostly the retired personnel from armed services abroad, to settle in Nepali-populated areas in India.

Thus, the forces driving them out of Nepal have always been much stronger than the ones pulling them behind. The government of Nepal did launch the "*Gaon Pharkda*" (literally, "return to village", but metaphorically "return to Nepal") campaign for the diasporic Nepalis soon after the Rana regime came to an end in 1951. The response to this campaign was limited. Otherwise it would probably advance the precipitation of tension between Nepal Nepalis and Indian Nepalis in Nepal. If the former category of Nepalis were anxious about their jobs being usurped by the better educated Indian Nepalis, the latter were worried that they might be thrown out of Nepal sooner or later on grounds of false citizenship certificates that many Indian Nepalis had allegedly acquired in Nepal. A clear indication of this has been noticed during the past ten years or so when most of the schools established in Nepal by Indian Nepalis have been forced to close down by the students' wing of the Maoists.

One other source of Nepal Nepalis-Indian Nepalis tension in Nepal is the increasingly complicated relationship in Nepal between Nepal Nepalis and Nepali Indians or

“Nepalese of Indian origin”. There is an increasing feeling in India that India should treat the Indian Nepalis in India the same way as Nepal treats the Nepali Indians in Nepal. Some Indians also refer to the fact that India has recognized Nepali as one of its national languages but Nepal has not reciprocated this by recognizing Hindi as one of its national languages. Although Nepal has given due recognition to Indian languages like Awadhi, Magadhi, and Bhojpuri spoken by the Nepalis of Indian origin in the long *terai* region of Nepal bordering the various states of India this remains a bone of contention in India-Nepal relations affecting the Indian diaspora in Nepal as well as Nepali diaspora in India.

There is a small section of diasporic Nepalis in India who consider the provisions under Articles VI and VII of the Indo-Nepal Friendship Treaty of 1950 to be an important source of tension between Nepal Nepalis and Indian Nepalis. According to them, the treaty provisions give the Indian Nepalis in India and the Nepali Indians in Nepal a reciprocal status as “nationals”¹¹ of Nepal and India, respectively, and will be considered so as long as the treaty is in place. But the Indian Nepalis have been exercising adult franchise in most parts of India as Indian nationals, a right normally not extended to the nationals of another country. Yet, the stereotype of the Indian Nepalis in India as immigrants from Nepal and that of Nepali Indians in Nepal as emigrants from India have stuck in the psyche of Indians as well as Nepalese. This is probably why the Nepali Indians in Nepal and Indian Nepalis in India are often victims of the host societies’ ire. For instance, when violence erupted in Kathmandu against the Nepali traders of Indian origin on an alleged remark by the popular Hindi film hero from Mumbai, Hritik Roshan against Nepal some years ago, there was some fear among the Nepalis living in Delhi, Kolkata and Mumbai for a possible Indian backlash on them, but in the Northeast no Nepalis experienced such fear. The educated Nepalis in these metros felt that the Kathmandu Nepalis did not behave responsibly and did not bother about the possible, even probable, backlash on Indian Nepalis, least realizing the possibility that the anti-Indian vandalism in the streets of Kathmandu was engineered by the avidly anti-Indian Maoist insurgents. One of my Nepali friends settled in Delhi sent an email to me then saying “For God’s sake, if the people of Kathmandu cannot help us, let them also not create any problem for us!” Even as a fellow diasporic I could not appreciate his concern much because I was located in a city where the Kathmandu vandalism on Nepali Indians – mostly Marwaris – did not arouse any anti-Indian Nepali sentiment.

¹¹ The word “national” is used in the 1950 treaty of friendship between Nepal and India ostensibly to mean “citizens” of a sovereign country like India and Nepal, although in case of the “nationals” of Nepal, the word used frequently in official circles in India, is “subject”. There is a possibility that all Nepalis in India may be labeled as “nationals of Nepal” under this treaty, which is indeed a matter of great concern to the Indian Nepalis. That is why a leading scholar of the Nepali diaspora in India and Bhutan correctly writes that this treaty “is one of the principal causes of the Indian Nepalis’ sense of insecurity” (Hutt 1997:124).

One notices a rich source of Nepal Nepali-Indian Nepali tension at popular level in the folk songs composed in Nepal as well as in India. Several such songs depict the plight of the young men – married or unmarried – who come to India hoping to return with a lot of money. In reality they rarely succeed in fulfilling their dream. Hence they often fail to return to Nepal. What face would they show to their friends and family members if they returned empty-handed? Hence their folksongs tell sad stories of those who leave their near and dear ones in Nepal with a hope to return with a lot of money, but who end up languishing in India. What keeps them going is the hope that one day they would be able to make it. Such tension is beautifully depicted in the following folk song.

Original song

Asadai mainama pani paryo rujhaune
Eklo yo mero mann kasari bujhaune
Bhanthin hai maichyangle rundai barara

Asadai mainama . . .

Yo bela Maichyang ke gardai holi
Kahile hansdi ho, kahile rundi ho

Malai nai samjhera
Asadai mainama

Aba ta chhora kudne bho hola
Sanjh pare pachhee amalai soddho ho
Khai baba bhanera
Asadai mainama . . .¹²

Free translation by author

When it rains in the month of *Asad*
 How shall I console my lonely soul?
 So asked Maichyang* with tears rolling
 down her eyes

When it rains . . .

What might my Maichyang be doing now
 Must be laughing one moment and crying
 another

Thinking about me . . .

When it rains . . .

Now my son must be running about
 Asking her mother every evening
 Where is his father gone . . .

When it rains

* a Tamang word for woman, an antonym for Chyangba.

This song tells the story of a Nepali, who comes to India in search of job, but fails to return home. One evening, as he returns from work and takes rest on his cot, with one leg over the other and his hands behind his head serving as pillow, he remembers his young wife and just-born son who he left behind some years ago. He then imagines, with his eyes overflowing with tears, how his son must have started to play and how his wife and son must be remembering him.

¹² This song was written by my paternal uncle, Dambar Hang Subba, composed by Late Tulsi Gajmer, and sung by Chusang Drukpa, all from Kalimpong. Much before the song was recorded we sang this extremely popular song at every house in our village during the Diwali as well as Christmas nights.

There are several, indeed numerous, cases where members of the same family are divided by the border between India and Nepal. This is common with Nepal Nepalis joining the Indian army, as they mostly leave their family members behind either because family quarters are not available or because they are posted in frontier areas where families are not allowed. Some seasonal labourers from Nepal, who migrate to India during winter, also do not go back. I often shuddered to know how several families in East Nepal did not know if those who left home for India were at all alive until such people actually returned, which rarely happened for whatever reasons. I was thus not surprised that during my fieldwork in East Nepal villages I rarely came across any migration story that included the return journey as well. Almost all such stories were about a single direction migrations, although multi-point ones at times.¹³ I often was loaded with requests to trace some such "missing" (see Russell 2000) persons from there in Northeast India. The pain of those who have been left behind or of those who have left their dear ones in Nepal is indeed indescribable.

Despite an open border and a friendship treaty in place between India and Nepal, several charges have been leveled by Nepal Nepalis against India for its "big brotherly", "arms-twisting" tactics against Nepal and one never stops hearing from them about the oil embargo imposed on Nepal during the prime minister-ship of Rajiv Gandhi. This was indeed a shortsighted act of India, which is often capitalized by some Nepal Nepalis to prove their point against India. In fact, the way India sees the hand of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) in whatever bad happens in India, Nepal sees the hand of India's Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) in whatever bad happens there. In the psyche of Nepal Nepalis, the border with India is far more vulnerable than the one with China. This is also the reason why they are much more sensitive about their southern border than their northern one. There are formidable natural barriers on the north but the same is not the case regarding the southern border of Nepal.

India shares its history, mythologies, epics, culture, religion, and its ecology with Nepal. There have been age-old exchanges of royal brides and priests between Nepal and India. Due to the long and practically unmanned border between the two countries there are thousands of people who have their relatives across the border and who cross the border everyday to earn their livelihood, for grazing, for education, for medical help, etc. Being landlocked, Nepal is dependent on India and Indian aid, which is indeed the lifeline of Nepal. Yet, paradoxically, a few Nepal Nepali intellectuals leave no opportunity to criticize India, as do some intellectuals in Bangladesh. This might have to do with India's poor management of its foreign relations, particularly with its neighbouring countries. But one key factor for their anti-Indian stance is perhaps their fear of India's expansionary designs. The takeover of Sikkim in 1975, no matter what might have been the political status of Sikkim prior to that year or India's strategic compulsion to do so, is an example that most neighbouring countries cite as what India can do.

¹³ In a recent article (2000) Andrew Russell draws our attention to return migration.

Such a relation between the two countries has also affected the relationship between the Nepalis on either side of the border. Due to lack of any visible difference between them, the Indian Nepalis are often treated in India as Nepal Nepalis, which the Indian Nepalis find both humiliating and hurtful. They are born and brought up in India and consider them to be Indians, but when they are taken as Nepal Nepalis by common people in India or by the constables at immigration check-gates the question of their national identity becomes one of the most important issues engaging their mind. In the process, they even tend to over-emphasize their Indian identity and ignore the long historical, linguistic, religious, and cultural linkages with the Nepal Nepalis.

The relationship between Nepal Nepalis and Indian Nepalis is also partly influenced by the fact that, unlike Indian Nepalis, who are generally agriculturists, dairymen, army personnel or wage labourers in plantations and construction sites, the Nepali Indians control most of the trade and business of Nepal. This control has not weakened despite Nepal opening its market to cheaper articles from China, which has caused much heartburn among some Indian businessmen. But India must realize that Nepal is a free market and thus India must be prepared to compete with countries like China and Korea, rather than try and control Nepal, as some Nepal Nepalis believe it does. As a matter of fact, the Nepali traders of Indian origin are already trading on non-Indian articles rather than the more expensive but not necessarily better quality Indian articles.

India sees itself, rightly so, as the greatest benefactor of Nepal. Besides supporting Nepal in almost every field, including military hardware and training to the armed forces, such as in the recent armed operations to flush out the Maoist guerillas from Nepal, India also takes care of the educational, health, and employment needs of a huge number of Nepal's nationals. Thus, it is perhaps quite natural for India to expect Nepal to reciprocate by promoting Indian articles and disallowing the agents of Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence to operate from its soil. But the fact remains that even if Nepal wishes to oblige India in these matters it has very limited capability to do so. It did not even condemn the mass evictions of Nepalis from several states of Northeast India and Bhutan over the past few decades.

These are some of the reasons why Indian Nepalis have tried to carve a separate identity from that of Nepal Nepalis. Towards this goal, they have experimented with various nomenclatures like Gorkha, Gorkhali, Bharpali or Bharatiya Nepali and Bhargoli or Bharatiya Gorkhali but have not succeeded yet (Hutt 1997:109). They have also tried, with some success, to develop and teach an exclusively Indian Nepali literature at undergraduate and postgraduate levels in Indian colleges and universities. But all this made little or no difference regarding how they are seen or treated by their neighbouring communities in India. It appears that an Indian Nepali identity is not an easy goal. It further appears that developing regional identities that reflect a blending of the Nepali and local cultures is one of the best things to happen. This would also be in consonance with the fact that Indian Nepalis do not enjoy the same rights

and privileges everywhere in India. Their social, legal, economic and political status often vary according to how early they have settled in India or the size of their population in a given area. Growing up as an Indian Nepali in Darjeeling or Sikkim is quite different from what it is to do so in Meghalaya or Manipur. The insecurity of life and property, which is embedded with growing up in the latter areas, is rarely experienced by the former category of Indian Nepalis, although all of them suffer from a common handicap – the perception of Indians about Indian Nepalis as immigrants from or nationals of Nepal (Sinha and Subba 2003).

Conclusion

The Indian Nepalis show a transition from an illiterate, poor, and exploited lot to an educated, enterprising and increasingly “assertive community” (Hutt 1997:101–02). Such confidence of the Indian Nepalis is particularly evident in events like the Gorkhaland movement in Darjeeling in 1980s, in their successful struggle for inclusion of the Nepali language in the Eighth Schedule to the Constitution of India in 1990s, in the demand raised occasionally by them to abrogate the 1950 Treaty, or in various locale-specific demands.

The Indian Nepali diasporic society has, in a sense, distanced itself from Nepal, although in certain senses Nepal continues to throw its long shadow over the Nepali diaspora in India, for “their status in India is still dependent upon Nepalese government policies, in which they have no say whatsoever” (Hutt 1997:124). The point of reference for the diasporic Nepalis is, and perhaps will always be, Nepal. But they no longer depend on Nepal for cultural or literary reinforcements, as they once did, and are no more oriented towards Kathmandu, as they were till about 1970s. They already have a critical mass of cultural and literary development within India that makes them self-sustaining. But the desire among Indian Nepalis to evolve an identity different and distinct from that of Nepal Nepalis seems neither easy nor desirable to all diasporic Nepalis, particularly those who still have close linkages with the Nepal Nepalis. I for one see little or no sense in denying historical and other linkages between the same people divided by an international border. Instead I argue in favour of a complementary relationship between the Nepal Nepalis and the diasporic Nepalis. I would further argue that linkages with neighbouring communities as well as with those in Nepal should be strengthened to improve the local as well as bilateral relationship between Nepal and India. All this can be done without compromising on their struggle for a separate identity as Indian Nepalis.

Whether or not to go back to Nepal has never been an issue for consideration of the Indian Nepalis. Most of them are born in India and have no memories – collective or otherwise – of Nepal. They have neither visited Nepal nor do they particularly wish to do so. They may be poor, starving, and living under inhuman conditions in India. They may be harassed and humiliated at immigration check-gates or elsewhere in

Northeast India. Some rowdy local boys may empty their milk cans or slap them on the street. Yet they cannot think of going back for they have nowhere to go.

During the past 10 years or so a lot of changes have come about in the life of both Nepal Nepalis and Indian Nepalis. One of the biggest events that engulfed both Nepal and Indian Nepali diaspora since 1990 was the *janajati* (literally "tribal") movement demanding, among others, abolition of monarchy, secularism, and a more inclusive democracy generally. This movement was characterized by mobilization and consolidation of supporters at the level of individual ethnic groups like Rai, Limbu, Magar and Gurung as well as at the level of their conglomeration. Such activities are related to reinventing their history, culture, religion, language, etc. and fighting for recognition of the same. This was a peaceful movement in Nepal as well as the Nepali diaspora in India, but neutralized completely, at least in Nepal, from 1996 onwards when the violent Maoist movement overshadowed the peaceful *janajati* movement in the country. The Maoist movement became highly effective not only due to its violent means but also because it successfully hijacked the key demands of the *janajati* movement stated above. The impact of this movement, the assassination of King Birendra in June 2001, and clipping the wings of democratically elected governments by King Gyanendra had significant consequences even among the diasporic Nepalis in terms of rich Nepal Nepalis joining the Indian Nepali diaspora. The overall sense of exasperation about economic stagnation, political instability, and a highly exclusionary Nepal is pushing more and more Nepal Nepalis to join the Nepali diaspora in India, further diluting the movement of the latter to carve out an exclusive Indian identity.

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