

NEPAL AND HIMALAYAN STUDIES

NEPALI DIASPORA

IN A GLOBALISED ERA



EDITED BY TANKA B. SUBBA AND A. C. SINHA

SOUTH ASIA EDITION

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‘This book is a pioneering exploration of the global Nepali diaspora and an outstanding addition to the comparative study of contemporary trans-continental migrations from South Asia. The volume brings out in a subtle and masterly way the global scenario of identity and livelihood predicaments of overseas Nepali communities. The distinguished editors and contributors deserve our thanks and congratulations for having admirably filled an existing gap in diaspora studies from the sub-continent.’

Ravindra K. Jain, Former Professor and Dean, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India

This is one of the first books to explore Nepali diaspora in a global context, across India and other parts of South Asia, South-East Asia, Europe and Australia. It discusses the social, political and economic status and aspirations of the Nepali community worldwide. The chapters in the volume cover a range of themes, including belonging and identity politics among Nepalese migrants, representation of Indian Nepalis in literature, diasporic consciousness, forceful eviction and displacement, social movements and ritual practices among migrant communities. Drawing attention to the lives of Nepali emigrants, the volume presents a sensitive and balanced understanding of their options and constraints, and their ambivalences about who they are.

This work will be invaluable to scholars and students of Nepal studies, area studies, diaspora and migration studies, social anthropology, cultural studies and literature.

Tanka B. Subba is Vice Chancellor of Sikkim University, Gangtok, India.

A. C. Sinha is National Fellow at the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Teen Murti House, New Delhi, India.

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PREFACE

This book is the last of the series on Nepalis living outside Nepal on whom we started working together at North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong in 2001. Although the departments we belonged to did not enjoy the best of relationships, having been born as one and later separated, the two of us met and often discussed the plight of the Nepalis in north-east India in general, and Meghalaya in particular. We were also among the few social scientists in India who had done some research and publication on this community. It is unfortunate that few Indians know about the contribution of the Nepalis to India's security and freedom struggle and even fewer know about the sacrifice and contribution made by them to the development of the north-east region. They are religiously believed to belong to Nepal and many youths of the region consider it their right to harass, destroy their property and even evict them en masse. Organising a seminar on them was thus not a politically correct thing to do in Shillong, but we did it the very first time in 2001 and repeated our feat in 2011.

Our 2001 seminar in Shillong was held with a small fund available under the Special Assistance Programme of the University Grants Commission given to the Sociology Department of our university. The seminar turned out to be more successful than we had anticipated and it led to the publication of *Nepalis in Northeast India: A Community in Search of Indian Identity* (2003). Emboldened by its success, we held the next seminar in Gangtok in 2006 at the all-India level. It was funded by the Indian Council of Social Research and the Government of Sikkim, and supported by Sri D. R. Nepal, Joint Secretary (Home) with the Government of Sikkim and Prof. G.S. Nepal from North Bengal University, who also joined us as editors of the volume. The Gangtok seminar also turned out to be a huge success. Our sincere thanks goes to Sri Pawan Chamling, the Chief Minister of Sikkim, for providing all the financial and logistic support for organising a national-level seminar with more than six dozen papers presented in several sessions simultaneously. We chose some of

the best submissions made in English at the seminar and published the second volume on the Nepali diaspora titled *Indian Nepalis: Issues and Perspectives* (2009). We regret our failure to bring out another volume based on submissions made in the Nepali language.

The next logical step we wanted to take was to hold a seminar on the Nepalis at the international level, and for this, we wanted the venue to be Kathmandu so that the intellectual and political elites there could be sensitised about the plight of the Nepalis living outside Nepal, but the country was in utter chaos after 1996 and it would be unfair on our part if we insisted on our friends there to organise it. We also thought that Delhi was another good location, but that would need a lot more funds than we were able to collect for the seminar. Finally, we decided to hold it in Shillong, partly because it was much cheaper to do so and partly because we wanted to prove that the local youths of this hill city can be reasonable and not everyone is itching to evict the Nepalis. Once again, thanks to our friends, well-wishers and the Indian Council of Social Science Research standing solidly behind our mission and making the seminar a grand success. We wish to profusely thank Dr Joshua Thomas of the ICSSR's North Eastern Regional Centre and our own North-Eastern Hill University for giving us all the freedom to indulge in this exercise and even provide financial support for the seminar. Although media attention was missing, we had a very intensive seminar for three days with participants from India, Nepal and several European countries. Some of those who could not make it to the seminar have also contributed to the volume and we thank them for kindly accepting our request.

While putting this volume together, we had several moments of confusion, dilemma and ambivalence about the identity, nomenclatures and the history of the Nepalis. Thus, we do not think that we have given to the people what we think is the last word on them. But it is for others now to take the baton ahead. We have done what we wanted and what we could with our meagre resources and limited knowledge. But, like the previous two books, we are confident that this book will also prove to be a valuable reference material on the community. If this book is discussed, criticised and commented upon by the readers, we will consider our mission to be accomplished.

Tanka B. Subba and A. C. Sinha

ABBREVIATIONS

AAGSU	All Assam Gorkha Students' Union
ABA	Association of Bhutanese in America
ABGL	Akhil Bharatiya Gorkha League
AGP	Asom Gana Parishad
ASEAN	Association of South East Asian Nations
BA	Burma Army
BCP	Communist Party of Bhutan
BFF	Burma Frontier Force
BFM	Swiss Federal Office of Migration
BGP	Bharatiya Gorkha Parisangh
BMP	Burma Military Police
BRCF	Bhutan Refugees Children Forum
CBS	Central Bureau of Statistics, Government of Nepal
CPI(M)	Communist Party of India (Marxist)
CPRM	Communist Party of Revolutionary Marxists
DFE	Department of Foreign Employment, Government of Nepal
DGHC	Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council
GAESO	Gurkha Army Ex-Servicemen's Organisation
GJM	Gorkha Janamukti Morcha
GNLF	Gorkha National Liberation Front
GSG	Gurkha Security Guards
GTA	Gorkhaland Territorial Administration
ILTA	Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association
INA	Indian National Army
ITA	Indian Tea Association
JRAI	Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute
JVT	Joint Verification Team
LDC	Lepcha Development Council
MNO	Mongol National Organisation

ABBREVIATIONS

NCO	Nepali Community of Oxford
NPR	Nepal Rupees
NRB	Non-Resident Bhutanese
OBC	Other Backward Classes
OBCA	Organisation of Bhutanese Community in America
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
RGB	Royal Government of Bhutan
RGN	Royal Government of Nepal
SC	Scheduled Caste
SGA	All Sikkim Gurung (Tamu) Buddhist Association
SGC	Singapore Gurkha Contingent
SGPA	Singapore Gurkha Pensioners' Association
ST	Scheduled Tribe
TMC	Trinamul Congress
UCPN (Maoist)	United Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist)
ULFA	United Liberation Force of Assam
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission on Refugees
VDC	Village Development Council
WOREC	Women's Rehabilitation Centre

CONTRIBUTORS

Vijaylakshmi Brara is a sociologist and is presently Associate Professor at the Centre for Manipur Studies, Manipur University. Her major areas of academic interests are gender, culture and grassroots political institutions. Her research area has been north-east India for over a decade. She is the author of the widely acclaimed book, *Politics, Society and Cosmology in India's North-East*. She has many published articles to her credit.

Tristan Bruslé is a geographer at the National Center for Scientific Research, France. His main interests are international labour migration and diaspora. Recent publications include 'Daily Life, Privacy and the Inmate Metaphor in a Nepalese Workers' Labour Camp (Qatar)' (2012); 'Nepalese Diasporic Websites: Signs and Conditions of a Diaspora in the Making?' (2012).

D. N. S. Dhakal is acting president of the Bhutan National Democratic Party and was an official of the Royal Government of Bhutan before becoming a political activist in 1992. He is currently a senior fellow at the Duke Center for International Development (DCID), Duke University, USA, and has been working in Executive Programmes of DCID on Project Appraisal and Risk Management and Fiscal Decentralization and Local Government since 2001.

Rajendra P. Dhakal is the principal of Kalimpong College, Kalimpong. His research interests include state and society, identity politics and politico-literary narratives. He participated in the US Studies Program 2010 as a guest of the State Department at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. His PhD was on 'Organisation and Management of Rural Development in India with reference to the Hill Areas of Darjeeling'.

Tejimala Gurung is associate professor at the Department of History, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong. Her research interests include

Nepali migration, social formation and gender history in north-east India, on which she has several published articles. She has edited (with Sajal Nag and Abhijit Choudhury) *Making of the Indian Union: Merger of Princely States and Excluded Areas* (2007).

Pravesh G. Jung teaches philosophy at the Indian Institute of Technology, Mumbai. Some of his areas of interest relate to identity and belonging.

Hema Kiruppalini was research associate at the Institute of South Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore. Her thesis titled "Travelling Dwellers: Nepalese Lahure in Singapore" was among the pioneering works on the Gurkha community in Singapore. She is also the Assistant Editor of *The Encyclopedia of the Sri Lankan Diaspora*. Her research interests are in the areas of migration, diaspora studies, ethnic conflicts and identity politics in South Asia and South-East Asia.

Ulrike Müller-Böker is professor of human geography at the Department of Geography, University of Zurich in Switzerland, and head of National Centre of Competence North-South program component 'institutions, livelihoods, conflicts'. Her fields of competence include the analysis of institutional dimensions of livelihood strategies, the impact of globalisation processes, local resource-use conflicts, labour migration patterns, nature conservation and development and participation processes focusing on South Asia, Central Asia and Switzerland.

Promode Kumar Misra is retired professor of anthropology at the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong. He was visiting professor of anthropology at the University of Oregon, Eugene, USA; visiting professor of Indian studies at the University of West Indies, Trinidad; and visiting professor of anthropology at the University of Mysore, Mysore. He is currently national fellow of the Indian Council of Social Science Research at the Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore, and founder-president of Anthropological Association, Mysore.

Mitra Pariyar is a PhD candidate at the Department of Sociology, Macquarie University, Sydney, and has just completed an ethnographic research on Nepalese/Gurkha immigrants in the United Kingdom. He has contributed numerous articles to different publications. He is also interested in the issues of race and racism, multiculturalism, militarism, as well as wider diasporic experiences.

Geetika Ranjan is associate professor in the Department of Anthropology, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, India. Her major publications are 'Tribe as a Category: Perspective from Within and Without', *The Oriental*

Anthropologist; 'Bidesia: The Saga of Migration, Separation and Loss', *The Eastern Anthropologist*; 'Ethnography of Development: Challenges and Promises', *The NEHU Journal*; and 'From Tribe to Social Integration: Bhoksa Youth and the Challenges of Transformation', *Journal of Social Sciences*.

Jens Seeberg is associate professor at the Department of Culture and Society, Aarhus University, Denmark, and is chair of Platform for Stability, Democracy and Rights at the university since 2011. He has researched in several Asian countries such as India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand and has published several articles. He currently heads a major DANIDA-funded project titled 'Nepal on the Move: Conflict, Migration and Stability'.

Utpala Ghaley Sewa was educated in Darjeeling and Shillong. She completed her post-graduation, MPhil and doctorate from North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, and has worked at colleges in Shillong and Kolkata. She now teaches at the Department of English, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong. She has published a book titled *Memory as Vision: The Poetry of Thomas Hardy* and contributed chapters to edited volumes and articles in some national journals.

A. C. Sinha was trained in anthropology at the University of Ranchi and in sociology at the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur. He conducted field study in Sikkim, Bhutan and north-east India, taught at Gujarat Vidyapeeth, Ahmedabad, the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur and Delhi, and North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong. He was Smut Scholar at Cambridge University, UK, and Senior Fulbright Visiting Professor at California University, Santa Cruz, USA. He has authored about a dozen books on politics, nation-building, urbanization, social change, ethnicity and environment, including *Politics of Sikkim* (1975), *Bhutan: Ethnic Identity and National Dilemma* (1991, 1998), *Hill Cities in Eastern Himalayas* (1994), *Bhutan: Tradition, Transition and Transformation* (2001, 2004), *Sikkim: Feudal and Democratic* (2008) and two volumes on Nepalis in India with T. B. Subba. Currently, he is a national fellow of the Indian Council of Social Science Research at Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Teen Murti House, New Delhi.

Tanka B. Subba is the vice-chancellor of Sikkim University, Gangtok, India. He has authored and edited about a dozen books and over 70 articles on various issues related to the eastern Himalayas. He was the editor of the internationally refereed biannual journal, *The NEHU Journal*, until October 2012 and was a member of the editorial advisory boards of several international journals, including *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (Institute

of Economic Growth, Delhi) and *Asian Anthropology* (Chinese University of Hong Kong). His current areas of interest are ethnicity and development, health and disease, politics of culture and identity and diaspora. He has published two books on Nepalis titled *Nepalis in Northeast India: In Search of Indian Identity* (edited with A. C. Sinha) and *Indian Nepalis: Issues and Perspectives* (edited with A. C. Sinha, G. S. Nepal and D. R. Nepal).

Bhim Prasad Subedi is professor of geography and former head of the Central Department of Geography, Tribhuvan University. He has been actively involved in teaching and research at Tribhuvan University. He has published widely on migration and ethnic diversification, livelihood, state structuring and social geography, youth-bulge, exclusion – social or spatial, and population redistribution policies.

Gopal Subedi was born in Bhutan but has spent his early childhood as a refugee in a camp in Nepal. He is currently pursuing his master's degree in medical physics from Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana. He takes keen interest in human rights, democracy and international affairs and writes frequently on issues related to them. He is also an active volunteer who aids in facilitating the transition of the resettled refugees in the United States.

Anastasia M. Turnbull is a PhD candidate at the Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education at OISE, The University of Toronto in Canada. Her research interests include historical Darjeeling, elderly populations, autobiography and arts-informed life history inquiry and representation.

Melanie Vandenhelsken is a researcher at the Institute for Social Anthropology (Austrian Academy of Sciences). Her current work is on the modes of construction of ethnicity (approached as a cognitive category) in Sikkim, in particular on the role of relations between states, transnational networks and various agencies with ethnic groups in ethnic self-identifications making.

Miriam Wenner is a PhD student at Zurich University, Switzerland. Her thesis, titled 'Contested Spaces – Gorkhaland and the Production of New Geographies of Darjeeling', deals with the contested nature of political authority and sovereignty in Darjeeling. She is equally interested in questions of development and food security in Nepal and the Himalayas generally.

INTRODUCTION

Tanka B. Subba and A.C. Sinha

Human migration is one of the most ancient and global phenomena, as millions of human beings have moved from one place to another due to war, epidemic or other reasons over the centuries. However, statistics shows that this phenomenon has accelerated in the recent past. For example, there were 160 million international migrants in 2000, which rose to 192 million in 2005. About 190 countries of the world are either points of origin, transit or destination of international migrants today. There is a tendency among migrants to move from developing countries to the developed ones, probably for reasons such as better transport, health, employment opportunities and communication facilities. In the process, while developed countries receive inexpensive labour, migrant countries receive income from remittance – a necessary boost to their economy. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), such remittances increased from US\$ 2,000 million in 1970 to US\$ 8,000 million in 2000. About a million and a half South Asians migrate every year. Among them, India alone claims to have over 20 million people spread across five dozen countries or so. In the year 2007, the World Bank estimated that the South Asian migrants sent about US\$ 40,000 million to their native countries. Out of that figure, India received US\$ 27,000 million, Bangladesh US\$ 6,400 million, Pakistan US\$ 6,100 million, Sri Lanka US\$ 2,700 million and Nepal US\$ 1,600 million as remittances. However, international migration has also proved to be a disaster for many countries, due to demographic imbalance, resource crunch, opportunity appropriation and so on by incoming migrants and the resultant ethnic conflicts and political disorder.

Human migration and the idea of diaspora

Taking a cue from the extensive presence of people of Indian origin all over the world, Indian scholars and policymakers began to study the history of migrant Indians in Mauritius, Fiji, the West Indies, South and East Africa, the Middle East, Great Britain, Canada, the United States of America, Malaysia, Singapore and elsewhere. Their cultural, societal, political and economic contributions to the host countries were the foci of serious academic concerns. As many of the former British colonies gained independence, Indians tried to reach out to India in search of their roots and cultural moorings. With its reputation as an emerging economic power, India has also tried to reach Indians wherever they were living. This paved the way for what came to be known as diasporic studies.

The idea of diaspora is believed to have originated with the Jews' search for their historical/mythical homeland – Israel – and their desire to return home. The term 'diaspora' has Greek origins¹ and refers to the scattering of seeds as they are sown over a wide area. William Safran considered diaspora to be characterised by dispersal from the original homeland, retention of collective memory, vision or myth of the original homeland, partial assimilation with the host society, desirable commitment to restoration of the homeland and continuous renewed linkage with the homeland.² On the contrary, Khachig Tölölyan included the 'immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest worker, exile community, overseas community and ethnic community in the semantic domain of transmigration' as being part of the diaspora.³ A working definition of diaspora was suggested by Nicholas Van Hear as the 'dispersal from original homeland to two or more places; movement between homeland and new host and; social, cultural or economic exchange between or among the diaspora community'.⁴ Coming to the Indian situation, Jain's extensive and prolonged study⁵ refers to the broadest possible canvas of the diasporic expansion in terms of a civilisational theory of the Indian diaspora.

A migrant community may be defined as diasporic if it has an ethnic consciousness, an active associative life, contact with the land of origin – real and imaginary – and relations with other groups of the same origin spread over the world. According to Judith Shuval, 'A diaspora is a social construct founded on feeling, consciousness, memory, mythology, history, meaningful narratives, group identity, longings, and dreams, allegorical and ritual elements, all of which play an important role in establishing a diaspora reality. At the given moment of time, the sense of connection to the homeland must be strong enough to resist forgetting assimilating or

distancing'.⁶ Paul Brass finds three sets of struggles influencing diasporic ethnic identities: one, there is struggle within the ethnic group for control over its 'material and symbolic resources', which will determine the group's boundaries and the conditions that will ascertain inclusion or exclusion. Two, there is struggle between ethnic groups as they compete for resources, rights and privileges. And three, there is struggle between the state and the groups which dominate it and the other ethnic groups in the country.⁷ A significant feature of all diasporic communities is their linkage, 'real or imaginary', with the motherland. However, the intensity of such links depends on a number of factors such as geographical and cultural locations, physical distance between the host country and the mother country, affordability of the immigrants and cultural continuity and retention of the mother tongue. Further, the diasporic communities consciously maintain a collective memory of their homeland, which provides fundamental ingredients to their identity. Similarly, diasporic communities consciously patrol their boundaries, which works against their assimilation with the host country.

After World War II, when Jews were the worst sufferers at the hands of the fascists, the international community managed to thrust the Jews on Palestine with a mandate to share the same with the resident Islamists. This led to a militant Jewry to converge on Israel and turn it into a garrison state. However, Israel continues to be the holy homeland of the Jews spread all over the world.

With the advent of colonial powers, inexpensive labour was required for the industrial growth of the imperial territories. Thus, the Chinese, Indian, Filipino and Sri Lankan labourers spread far away from the shores of their mother countries. Once the colonial powers declined and new nations came into being, those countries began to look at those labourers as an economic and cultural resource. Conversely, the emigrants too began to look to their mother countries as sources of cultural and literary sustenance. Thus, diaspora became a fashionable idea among the countries that had exported labour to the colonies in the past, and along with Jew and Armenian diasporas, Chinese and Indian diasporas began to be discussed by the middle of the 20th century.

However, the Anglo-Saxon migrants across the globe in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, South Africa and the United States of America are not known as 'diaspora'. Similarly, the Germans in Chile and Argentina, Spaniards in Latin American countries and the Portuguese in Brazil, Angola and elsewhere are not referred to as diasporic peoples. Thus, the idea of diaspora has to do with something more than homeland, i.e. more in relation to the 'Other' or subjugated peoples. For Jews, Africans, Asians,

Palestinians and Armenians, the term actually 'signifies a collective trauma, banishment, where one dreamed of home, but lived in exile'.⁸

Nepali diaspora

The Nepalis, also called 'Gurkhas', are known as a 'martial race' in the colonial literature. But that was not the only reason why they were preferred as soldiers by the British; they were also encouraged to migrate to India for road construction, clearing of forests, agriculture, work on tea plantations and so on. There is a long history of their connection with the British, beginning in 1814, when the British fought against the expansionist Gurkhas and discovered their courage and fighting skills. The Nepalese rulers were initially reluctant to permit the British to recruit the Gurkhas, as they saw the British as their adversaries. But once the Ranas came to power in Nepal, a new phase of friendship emerged between them and the British. They also formally permitted the British to recruit their men, which led to the opening of recruitment depots at Dehradun, Gorakhpur, Laheriasarai, Darjeeling and Shillong.

The Gurkhas were also recruited in armed constabulary and police forces in the provinces of Bengal, Assam and Burma, whereas the 'non-martial Gurkhas' were encouraged to migrate due to their hardworking habits. Subsequently, the British adopted a policy to settle the retired Gurkhas near armed cantonments in north-east India for a variety of reasons. Though India-born Gurkhas, labelled as line boys, were not considered suitable for recruitment to the British Army, they were encouraged to settle on thinly inhabited strategic locations in eastern parts of India. Thus, one finds a concentration of the Nepali-speaking population in the Darjeeling hills, Sikkim, Bhutanese foothills, foothills of Arunachal Pradesh, Patkoi Hills and Burma.

By the end of the British rule in India, there were 10 regiments of the Gurkhas serving in the British Army. When India became independent, six Gurkha regiments opted to remain in India and four opted to go to Britain, who were required by the British for their service in far-flung imperial outposts such as Malaya, Singapore, Hong Kong, Latin America, Caribbean islands and the Falkland Islands. However, with the independence of the British colonies all over the world, the requirement for Gurkha forces was drastically reduced. Thus, at present, Great Britain has just about 2,500 Gurkha soldiers on its roll and the present regime has decided to reduce them further by 500 as an austerity measure. However, the British Gurkhas have recently won the battle for 'one rank one pay' and the right to settle in Britain after superannuation, which

may further discourage the UK government from recruiting Gurkhas for their army.

There was a demand in the Nepalese Parliament on March 9, 2012 to stop recruitment of the Gurkha soldiers by the British and Indian armies, as they were seen to be a mercenary force – a view resented by the Gurkha soldiers themselves. In the opinion of a parliamentary panel, ‘Nepal’s government is put on further loss after the British decided to provide citizenship to Gorkha soldiers, and time has come to evaluate Nepal’s foreign policy in regard to Gorkha recruitment’.⁹ Incidentally, it was the Maoists who were most opposed to their recruitment in foreign armed forces. Needless to add that remittance from the soldiers in foreign service or post-retirement benefits of the superannuated soldiers has always been a significant source of income to the Nepalese exchequer.

Unlike soldiers in uniform, unskilled Nepalese labourers migrate to India unhindered, facilitated as they are by the Indo-Nepalese Friendship Treaty of 1950. They are engaged invariably in the least remunerative jobs and lead the most deprived life in crowded Indian cities or most isolated frontier posts. They often bring their family members to the place of their work or settlement. They are everywhere in India – in its metropolises, cities, towns, agricultural farmlands, forests, mines, factories, ports, roads, studios, movies and most sophisticated information technology sectors. Their exact number is rarely to be found in statistical data, as they live a submerged life away from the glare of media, politics and organised unions. In course of time, their children are born as legal citizens of India unless they choose to surrender their claims themselves by returning to Nepal or migrating to some other country.

Given the above backdrop, the idea of ‘Nepali diaspora’ is rather novel for the people of Nepal themselves. For them, going out for earning meant – until the 1950s – going to India, Britain, Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and so on. With the opening of the West and East Asian countries to Nepalese labour, however, new opportunities have emerged for them. These are, however, not only new opportunities, but also new challenges, as they have no or little knowledge about these new destinations.

As editors of the volume, we do not claim that all those who have migrated to India or elsewhere constitute the Nepali diaspora – not because some of them are averse to the idea of a diasporic community because they may be questioned about their relationship to the place where they live, but indeed many of the criteria of a diasporic community discussed in the earlier section do not fit in neatly with the ground realities of the Nepalis living outside Nepal. There have been attempts in India to underplay their connection with Nepal or not to imagine Nepal

as their 'homeland', but elsewhere, the non-resident Nepali associations are active. Since no final word is possible on what a diasporic community is or is not, we have considered all those who have left Nepal for various purposes and for various lengths of time as constituting the Nepali diaspora. In this sense, the word 'diaspora' is certainly not used in its strictest sense as we would have loved to do, but we wonder if any community in the world today can qualify as a diasporic community in the strictest sense of the term. We are also of the view that the Hindi/Nepali word 'prawasi' (meaning, 'living in other lands'), which is often associated with diasporic people, is a poor substitute for the word 'diaspora', but we have used the latter word in the sense of its poor substitute, hoping that someday, we would be able to use the latter word in more precise sense in which it deserves to be used.

About the book

The book begins with the keynote delivered by P.K. Misra, whose work on the indentured labourers from eastern India to Trinidad and Tobago is well known. Misra particularly looks at the adaptive capacities of labourers and their ability to interpret their cultural symbols to their advantage. Although the Nepalis did not constitute indentured labourers per se, they were nonetheless labourers hired for clearing forests, construction of roads or for work in tea plantations. He uses the metaphor of 'junctions' to understand the diasporic society, thereby recognising travel and movement as essential components of diasporic societies.

The next chapter by Bhim Subedi is a comprehensive account of the migration of people from and to Nepal as well as within Nepal over the past four centuries or so. Subedi advocates the 'home-reach' model for a comprehensive understanding of Nepalese migration. He argues that the concept of *ghumphir* (short-term moves, including wandering around) must be separated from the concept of *basai sarai* (permanent and/or long-term migration) and their bi- or multi-locality should not be ignored if we are to understand their movement and the emerging Nepalese diaspora.

Drawing her inspiration from Amartya Sen, in the next chapter, Ulrike Müller-Böker (or Mueller-Boeker) argues that social and territorial belonging of an individual is multi-layered and dynamic. The sense of belonging as a symbolic dimension of social relations and interactions reflects also the need for networks essential for different livelihood strategies. She argues that the previous home becomes important to diasporic people only if they have the concept of returning home, but it becomes

less important if they want to leave their home behind in search of 'another' life, as observed among the Nepalis in Switzerland.

In the next chapter, Jens Seeberg draws on de Castro's 'perspectival anthropology' to understand changes in the symbolism of 'Gurkha' in Nepal. Drawing on multiple sources of data, including TV clips and videos from the Internet, he compares different perspectives on 'Gurkhas', mainly those found in colonial discourses and Nepali literary narratives, and he links these to the 'Gurkha Justice Campaign' in the UK as well as to recent politics in Nepal.

Pravesh G. Jung, in the next chapter, makes a strong theoretical engagement with the concept of 'diaspora'. He considers the idea of 'homeland' as central to this debate, wherein the 'home' is understood as a space where one is at peace with one's own self. He has also engaged with discourses around the 'martial' character of the Gurkhas, like Seeberg in the previous chapter. However, Jung not only sees a Nepali entrapped in colonial construction of his character, but also sees others who are engaged in Nepali studies as being entrapped in the same construction.

Relying on Nepali literary and social science sources, Rajendra P. Dhakal takes us through three major phases in the orientation of the Indian Gorkhas in general, and the Gorkhas of Darjeeling in particular. The three phases are the evolution of a common Nepali identity; awakening of and building of an economic, social and political space for themselves; and finally, a phase of assertion of their sense of belonging to India.

The next chapter by Miriam Wenner looks at the demand for Gorkhaland as a 'strategic imaginative geography' and discusses how the Gorkha organisations employ their own mental appropriations of the space and the history of Darjeeling not only to justify their demand, but also to carve out a sense of hope among the masses for their future.

In the next chapter, Anastasia Turnbull presents the pangs of fragmented identity in her account of her personal journey to Darjeeling, which she considers her ancestral 'home'. In a way, the chapter embodies her own search for 'home' and what it means to herself and to those who interact with her.

How neighbouring communities, especially the dominant ones, look at Nepalis in India is discussed in the next chapter by Geetika Ranjan. Based on her reading of *The Inheritance of Loss*, a novel set in Kalimpong in the district of Darjeeling and written by Kiran Desai, Ranjan critiques the novelist on the ethics of the art of fiction writing.

In the next chapter, we move from Kalimpong to Sikkim, where Mélanie Vandenhelsken analyses the construction of Gurung cultural 'self-understanding'. Based on her comparative fieldwork in Gangtok and

Yangang village, she shows how the state's affirmative policies, also being a mechanism of control, triggers conflicts within a community. Additionally, and more importantly, she shows how the means and categories of the state are appropriated by politically marginalised people to claim equal rights and access political representation. This chapter also shows how various relations, in particular, the confrontation between varying political projects and views of cultural 'identity' within the Gurung community, lead to changes in cultural practices.

Next, we move to Assam with a chapter by Tristan Bruslé. Like Subedi and Müller-Böker in this volume, Bruslé brings out the multi-layered identity of the Nepalis in Assam on the basis of his fieldwork in a Nepali settlement in Assam called Bokakhat. He argues that the Assamese Nepalis need not underplay their links with Nepal because those links exist and were stronger in earlier generations than they are now. He supports the view of Hutt that Nepal should be seen as a resource, as a horizon of hope in times of crisis in host lands, and what Indian Nepalis need is a state that grants them equal rights as its citizens, more than an hypothetical trans-national form of belonging.

The next chapter is also on Assam, based on a re-reading of a novel titled *Brahmaputraka Cheuchau* by Lil Bahadur Chhetri. This Sahitya Academy award-winning novel describes how the exploitative structure that existed in Nepal is re-enacted in Assam. The relationship between Gumane and Khalal – the hero and the villain – dominates the novel. At the symbolic level, the novel shows how Assamese society has finally accepted the Nepalis as one of their own people.

In the next chapter, Tejimala Gurung describes the sordid condition of the Burmese Gurkha families fleeing Burma across the mountains and rivers to India without food and rest and under constant fear of being bombarded by the Japanese in 1942. The majority of such families who survived the long and treacherous journey were from India, a few from Nepal and the rest from Burma itself. The last category of Nepalis was not acceptable to the king of Nepal on account of their defiled culture and religion.

Vijaylakshmi Brara, in the next chapter, brings out the facts about the scholars not writing about the migrant communities in Manipur although they have been living there since colonial times and have contributed immensely to the development of the state. She shows how even permanent land deeds were issued particularly to the Nepalis of Manipur by the Manipur State Council in 1947, which has now become a source of tension between them and the hill tribes of Manipur, who want such deeds to be nullified by bringing the areas settled by them under the Hill Areas Act, under which the Nepalis, being labelled as non-tribals, cannot hold

land ownership. According to her, the only hope for the Nepalis of Manipur lies in the possibility of the Iroquois-type confederacy.

Next, we have two chapters on Bhutan. Both the chapters describe the circumstances leading to the eviction of the southern Bhutanese people called 'Lhotshampas', who are of Nepali origin and have contributed immensely to the development of Bhutan. Both the chapters show how the Bhutanese operation to flush them out from southern Bhutan was ignored by India and the international community whereas Nepal itself did precious little. The two chapters also bring out the internal weakness of the community such as the lack of experienced leadership. Finally, both the chapters deal with the issues of their recent settlement in Europe and America and how that is viewed with helplessness by the elderly and with excitement by the youths.

In the next chapter, Hema Kiruppalini writes that since 1949 the Gurkha Contingent (GC) has been a part of the Singapore Police Force, and yet their families are not allowed to mingle with the citizens of the country and are repatriated to Nepal on their retirement. Drawing attention to the racial riots that occurred in Singapore during the 1950s and 1960s, this article seeks to assess the role of the Gurkhas as a neutral force in the maintenance of the country's internal security. By providing insights into questions of home, identity and belonging, this chapter argues that the atypical migratory dynamics of the Singapore Gurkhas problematises key concepts of diasporic community formations.

The last chapter by Mitra Pariyar on the UK-settled ex-Gurkhas shows that a true Nepali diaspora has not been able to emerge in the UK due to strict laws of the land. The ex-Gurkhas, the author notes, have acquired the right to settle there after a lengthy fight, but they do not feel 'at home' there because they cannot perform certain rituals and cultural practices the way they practice back in Nepal. Thus, the UK-based ex-Gurkhas fought for a home, but yet the elderly among them are not able to treat it like their 'original home' in Nepal.

Notes

- 1 Origin, Greek *diaspeirein*, meaning 'disperse', the term originated in the phrase 'thou shalt be dispersion in all kingdoms of the earth' (*The New Oxford Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 510–11.) Diaspora originally referred to the dispersal of the Jews outside Palestine during the Greek and Roman periods. All the areas of dispersion created by forced captivity and exile, whose people were often subject to persecution and discrimination, were held together by a common religion, customs and the hope for 'return to Zion', the homeland of the Jewish people (*Encyclopedia Americana*, Vol. 9, 1969, pp. 68–9).

- 2 William Safran, 1991, 'Diaspora in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return', *Diaspora*, 1(1): 83-9.
- 3 Khachig Tölölyan, 1991, 'The Nation State and its Others: In Lieu of a Preface', *Diaspora*, 1(1): 37.
- 4 Nicholas Van Hear, 1998, *New Diasporas: The Mass Exodus, Dispersal and Regrouping of Migrant Communities*, London, University of California Press.
- 5 R. K. Jain, 2010, *Nation, Diaspora, Trans-nation: Reflections from India*, New Delhi, Routledge.
- 6 Judith Shuval, 2000, 'Diaspora Migration: Definitional Ambiguities and Theoretical Paradigm', *International Migration*, 38(5): 41-55.
- 7 Paul R. Brass, 1985, *Ethnic Groups and the State*, London, Croom Helm.
- 8 A. K. Sahoo and Brij Maharaj, 2007, *Sociology of Diaspora: A Reader*, Jaipur, Rawat Publications.
- 9 *The Asian Age*, March 19, 2012.

DIASPORIC JUNCTIONS

An eternal journey of mankind

P.K. Misra

The globe has no borders when viewed from outer space. Yet, a closer view begins to show the different geographical regions of the world. When one finally descends on the globe, one begins to realise that one cannot move freely: besides passports and visas, there are several other restrictions for crossing from one territory into another.

It has been confirmed that humankind originated in Africa (Wells 2002), and in a very short span of approximately 60,000 years, they moved and colonised different parts of the world. There were also waves of settlers, one displacing the other, or one blending with the other. In the process, identities of weaker groups were often subdued by the stronger groups, temporarily or forever.

The idea of homeland, and hence the idea of diaspora, is wrapped up in the imaginations and mythologies of the people who moved from their place of origin. But to consider that human beings moved only in search of resources for survival or due to certain natural or man-made calamities is, however, too restrictive of the facts for they are versatile and are also endowed with a sense of curiosity to explore what lies beyond a territory, a sense of adventure, a sense of experimentation and also a sense of aesthetic appreciation. Every society is a rich storehouse of myths and stories about their origin and migration. Human beings travelled amazing distances in spite of the limitations of their knowledge of technology and geography. Certainly, the early human movements raise many fundamental questions about human beings. Disciplines such as archaeology, anthropology, linguistics, paleobotany and paleoecology provide some clues regarding the places and routes they took, what they carried, what they incorporated in their language and culture and what they created.

Irrespective of how far they travelled or what they encountered en route, they often stopped at some junctions before setting out for another destination. Human movement continued even after they learned the art of domestication of crops and animals. Mobility and sedenterisation went hand in hand, as they are dialectically related (Misra 1986: 179–88). Even the indigenous populations of the world are migrants from somewhere at some point of time in their history. But it is important to understand the underlying critical differences between the early human movements and the recent diasporic movements, although both were, to a greater or lesser extent, influenced by jostling for resources, subjugation of 'others' and establishment of domination by one group over others. Diasporic movements, which are essentially characterised by a larger scale than the early human migrations, were a creation of colonial rule. In many ways, colonialism changed the world order by introducing new concepts among the colonised people (Chattopadhyaya 2012). It challenged national boundaries and induced rapid economic and technological changes.

India and Nepal are neighbouring countries. They have a long shared history in which geography has played an important role. The two countries still have a special relationship in the sense that the movement of people between the two countries is not restricted by any visa regime. The Himalayas, in general, have played an important role in shaping the religious philosophy of the Hindus and Buddhists in India; they are regarded with a certain degree of awe and veneration. From time immemorial, Indian ascetics have been going to the Himalayas for spiritual fulfilment, retreat, introspection and for wisdom. Therefore, it is pertinent to ask, like some Nepali scholars have themselves done, if it is correct to speak about a Nepali diaspora in India.

Studies have shown that voluntary migration of people normally results in improvement of their economy, health and education. It broadens their world view and knowledge. It also improves their survival skills and entrepreneurship by locating gaps in the supply of goods and services in host societies, which, in turn, derive multiple benefits besides getting cheap labour. Migrants add to the social, cultural and linguistic diversity of the host society. The home society too derives benefits through their economic, cultural and political remittances.

Diasporic studies initially referred to the dispersal of Jews, but now, it refers to any people living outside their homeland. The features of a diaspora are dispersal of population from the homeland, retention of imagination of the homeland in collective memory, cultivation of a variety of myths about the homeland, partial assimilation in the host society, wish or hope to return to the homeland, some kind of commitment for restoration

of prosperity of the homeland and continued interest in keeping linkages with the homeland. Thus, diasporic studies focus on the role of networks that interconnect relatives, friends, fellow countrymen at home and abroad and float formal and informal associations. Such networks – although at times exploitative of new migrants – provide the much-needed information, provide assistance of various types, facilitate employment, accommodation and fulfil social, cultural and emotional needs.

Anthropological literature is so obsessed with discovering the patterns of social structure that the role of the individual in society does not get sufficient space. Diasporic studies, on the contrary, bring out the innovative and creative aspects of the individual in social formation. Such studies also demonstrate that individuals, in order to meet their aspirations, transcend social and cultural boundaries and establish new networks. In any diasporic movement, the decision of the individual to migrate is of prime importance; he/she assesses the physical, economic, political, social and cultural situations in his place of migration. Such situations are at times not only unfamiliar but even adverse. The case of Indian indentured labourers in the plantations of Trinidad or Guyana is exemplary and instructive; exemplary because Indians had a long heritage of textual and oral traditions to fall back upon while reconstructing their community, and instructive because they negotiated a hitherto untreaded path by deciding to work on contract.

Having made the decision to undertake the journey, they travelled together with strangers, lived with them under agonising circumstances and under strange rules. Their caste, religion, dialect, food habits, universe of rituals or social norms were of no consideration to those who were handling the human cargo. The sole responsibility of the labour contractors was to deliver the 'human goods' safely to the planters and earn their commission. A three-month-long journey in ramshackle ships on rough seas could be traumatic for any human being, particularly for those who had no experience of sea travel, such as those who were indentured from many parts of north and east India. During this perilous journey, they not only became lifelong friends but also established fictive relationships as *jahaji bhai/behen*, which continued for generations. The commonalities they shared were physical features, physical conditions and some aspects of their cultural heritage, both textual and oral. After landing in Trinidad or Guyana, they were assigned to different plantations where living conditions were extremely harsh. They were not allowed to go out of their barracks and mix with fellow *coolis*. Their work was supervised by 'drivers', who were themselves ex-slaves and who had experienced harsher conditions when they were supervised by their white masters. Yet, the Indians successfully reconstructed their community there.

This would not have been possible if they did not have a minimum number of people to form a community away from homeland. They also needed to have some commonality among them, a common adversary and an effective leadership for a community to be created in an alien world. Since they had to survive in an alien and hostile environment, they needed to adapt. They reinforced some aspects of their cultural baggage, discarded some others and created some new ones. In all this, the role of individuals, the quality of leadership and ability to pick up issues for mobilisation and create a consciousness of some kind were important.

The formation of the Indian identity in Trinidad illustrates these points (Vertovec 1992; Misra 1995: 201–26). Approximately 143,939 Indian indentured labourers were sent to Trinidad over close to 70 years (1845–1917). Thus, there were sufficient Indians to form their own community. Since every year new consignment of labourers arrived in Trinidad, they refreshed memories of the homeland and old linkages were reinforced. Gradually, non-Indians were identified as adversaries and strategies were devised to counteract them. In this respect, opting to settle down in Trinidad and obtaining land in lieu of surrendering their right to claim free passage back home was the turning point in their history. Their status suddenly changed from being transient to permanent settlers. This was a point of critical importance. The lands acquired by them became the nuclei for the formation of villages. Coming as they did from peasant backgrounds, they soon made their land productive, which gave them economic stability and helped them move up the social ladder. These material developments cannot be undermined while trying to understand the formation of the Indian community in Trinidad.

The stories of the struggle for independence in India and ruthless suppression by the British not only generated empathy for the homeland but also gave them some degree of confidence to launch their own struggle for their rights and restoration of their traditions in Trinidad. They followed the Gandhian path of non-violence. They organised themselves, launched trade union movements and finally joined the cry for independence of Trinidad. Eventually the country gained independence and they began to participate in the political arena there. The political parties dominated by Indians successfully formed governments several times there.

It has been a long journey from being indentured labourers to becoming full-fledged citizens of the country. In this journey, celebration of life-cycle rituals and religious festivals and development of art forms played an important role in the political mobilisation of Indians. They fought for the right to cremate their dead and organise their marriages according to their own traditions. Their traditional marriages were not recognised as

lawful by the government, and hence, children born of such unions were declared as illegitimate. In fact, they were given a 'certificate of illegitimacy' by the government. Hence, the risk the Indian emigrants took by not registering their marriages in the registrar's office was indeed a huge one. In this manner, they made a statement of protest against the state as well as the church, which then were in the dominant position.

They were not simply reproducing Indian cultural practices on foreign soil but were also constantly reconstructing and reinterpreting them. The reconstruction of their cultures was not easy, as they did not belong to a homogenous cultural stock. It depended on what was considered significant in a given context. For example, the Hindu Indians in Trinidad did not find any difficulty in adopting the Christian method of Sunday service for organising their pujas in temples. They even created a pulpit (though it was called *asana*, for the priest to sit on), from where the pundit conducted ceremonies and gave sermons. The devotees sat in front of him on benches, much like in a church. Or, take the case of Kali worship in Trinidad. Since Afro-Trinidadians were identified as adversaries, the Indian deity Kali, who the Hindus worshipped with reverence and awe, could not be of the same colour. Hence, they painted Kali in pink, which is a clear deviation from tradition.

Such cultural strategies connect people, create ideas, mythologies and so on and generate an appropriate atmosphere for action. A culture is reconstructed, a pattern begins to emerge, its boundaries get marked and a feel-good situation is created until some other pressure is perceived. For instance, Indians arrived in Trinidad as indentured labourers, but in course of time, Hindu and Muslim identities emerged, and soon, temples and mosques were erected. Within the Hindu fold, the reformist Arya Samajis, who were opposed to the Sanatanis, emerged, and later, devotees of Kali, Sai Baba and Brahma Kumaris appeared. The Muslims too experienced divisions among Sunnis, Shias and Ahemadias, besides the emergence of a strong group of Islamist purifiers who wanted the Indian Muslims to get rid of their defiling cultural baggage brought from India. This group provided economic incentives to attract followers. In the beginning, the Indian Muslims were caught in the euphoria of purification, but in course of time, they began to feel uncomfortable about giving up their cultural practices and breaking their relationship with other Indians with whom they had even formed fictive relationships. Many of them reverted to their traditions (see de Kruijf 2006: 147–67). This story is not isolated. Culture has the tendency to re-establish its significance over and over again. Culture helps people manage their crisis by explaining and interpreting the complex and often conflicting realities around them.

Coping with the uncertainties of life and ensuring the well-being of people are recurrent issues before any diasporic community, which often devises its own set of mechanisms to handle them. There may be contradictions within them, but each culture has a tendency 'to incorporate competing ideas in distinct and unrelated schemes' (de Kruijf 2006: 364). I cite here one of the most telling examples to clinch the point.

An Indian couple had settled in the USA. Both husband and wife were highly educated and worked as leading scientists in an advanced research institute there. One day, they decided to give the contract of building their house to a leading construction company. But the contractor was not allowed to start the work until they heard from their family priest back in their native place in Bihar, India. The priest, after consulting the almanac and also the horoscopes of his clients, fixed an auspicious date for the *bhumi puja*, which was about two months away from the date on which the construction was to start. The contractor had to wait till this arrangement was made. On the appointed day for *bhumi puja*, the couple arrived at the site complete with all the paraphernalia for the puja and were accompanied by their friends. The puja was conducted by the family priest live over the iPhone for over two hours. The priest gave all the instructions live from Bihar for the couple to perform the rituals, including the direction in which they should face. There was no taking a chance where supernatural forces were involved, as house construction is a sacred activity back home in India. It had to commence at an auspicious moment as per the *sastras* so that gods and goddesses watching the event bless the ones performing the sacred activity called *yagna*.

Today, performing life cycle rituals, organising festivals, learning Indian music, dance and other performing arts, erecting temples and mosques are common among the Indian communities settled abroad. It is quite clear that technological development has contributed towards reviving and strengthening the traditional links between 'home' and the diaspora. Information can now be easily transferred from one place to another without any physical movement. This has certainly made diasporic networks more important than ever before.

Once a group of people settle down in a new place, a vibrant interplay of social, cultural, economic and political forces takes place, giving rise to situations in which individuals with entrepreneurship, imagination, aspiration and creativity achieve unimaginable success. While the role of cultural baggage in making them successful cannot be denied here, it will not be wise to underplay the role of individuals either. The largely successful migration and adjustment of Nepalis wherever they migrated shows that they are good at reinterpreting their cultural symbols the way the Indians

in Trinidad did. Their eviction from Bhutan and some parts of India's north-east in the 1980s and 1990s should not influence our assessment of them as a diasporic community.

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