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Locating Nepalese Mobility: A Historical Reappraisal with Reference to North East India, Burma and Tibet

Gaurab KC* & Pranab Kharel**

Abstract

Most literature published on migration in Nepal makes the point of reference from 19th century by stressing the Labure culture—confining the trend's history centering itself on the 200 years of Nepali men serving in British imperial army. However, the larger story of those non-military and non-janajati (ethnic) Nepali pilgrimages, pastoralists, cultivators and tradesmen who domiciled themselves in Burma, North East India and Tibet has not been well documented in the mobility studies and is least entertained in the popular imagination. Therefore, this paper attempts to catalog this often neglected outmigration trajectory of Nepalis. Migrants venturing into Burma and North East India consist of an inclusive nature as the imperial army saw the overwhelming presence of hill janajatis in their ranks whereas Brahmins (popularly known as Bahuns) and Chettris were largely self-employed in dairy farming and animal husbandry. In tracing out the mobility of Nepalis to North East, Burma and Tibet it can be argued that the migrating population took various forms such as wanderers (later they became settlers), mercantilist, laborers, mercenary soldiers, and those settlers finally forced to become returnees. In this connection, documenting lived experiences of the living members or their ancestors is of paramount importance before the memory crosses the Rubicon.

Introduction:

In the contemporary Nepali landscape, the issue of migration has raised new interests for multiple actors like academicians, administrators, activists, development organizations, planners, policymakers, and students. This study would historically unravel the mobility pattern of Nepalis and try to understand its nature and trajectories beyond the current preoccupation of scholars focusing on labor migration from Nepal to the Gulf and south-east Asia.

The literature on Nepali migration point to the long history of mobility towards India. While many make 19th century a point of reference in relation to recruitment in the Sikh Army of Ranjit Singh, some even claim that Nepalis were migrating even before

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that period. David Seddon, Jagganath Adhikari and Ganesh Gurung highlighted on the Lahure notion:¹

‘Foreign labor migration has a long history in Nepal. It started even before the first Nepali men travelled to Lahore in the early 19th century to join the army of the Sikh ruler, Ranjit Singh (earning themselves- and all those subsequently employed in foreign armies abroad- the nickname ‘Lahure’) and even before the recruitment of the first Nepalis to the British ‘Gurkhas’ in 1815/16.’²

Therefore, most of the literature produced on migration from Nepal has shaped our popular imagination from the Gurkha³ or Lahure narratives. But, the history of Nepali out-migration can also be located beyond this timeline including an alternative to Lahure narratives. For instance, the larger story of those Nepali pilgrimages, pastoralists, cultivators, and tradesmen who settled or domiciled themselves in Tibet, Myanmar (previously known as Burma) and North East India has not been well documented. This paper attempts to catalog the oft-neglected mobility trajectory to the aforementioned destinations.

In this light, the paper intends to focus on non-military and non-janajati⁴ migration of Nepalis to Tibet, North East India and Burma and unfolds the events and ruptures following this mobility. Therefore, the paper has historically brought to fore an important facet of migration which helps in understanding the Nepalis out-migratory trend at different time and space.

The paper relies on the personal narratives of the family members of those who migrated to these destinations. These members memorialize their family’s mobility on the basis of the inherited narratives; either they experienced in their early childhood or passed on to them later as part of their family history. The importance of the narrative lies in the fact that Nepali society historically has relied on oral traditions. Therefore, there is an urgent need to include oral narratives as an important method to conduct any study. The memorized recollections of the migrants and their family members today are the important and significant threads in interweaving ideas of Nepalis mobility. Moreover, this reminiscence re-invokes individual to locate once past in the present and enables them to evaluate their past and present.

¹ The authors do not cite any relevant source to prove where and how the term Lahure came into being and rely on hearsay that it was first used for men serving in the army of Sikh ruler Ranjit Singh. Singh had a camp in the city of Lahore (presently in Pakistan) and the term Lahure is believed to have come from it.

² David Seddon, Jagannath Adhikari & Ganesh Gurung, *The New Lahures: Foreign Employment and remittance Economy of Nepal*, Nepal Institute of Development Studies, Kathmandu, 2001, pp. xx-xxv.

³ British recruited some of the ethnic groups from Nepal like Rai, Magar, Gurung and Pun in their army considering them as a ‘martial race’. These people were called Gurkhas and were recruited in various countries as mercenary soldiers. Later the term was so popular that every Nepalis residing in North East and Burma were perceived and called Gurkhas. Back in Nepal they were also known as Lahures.

⁴ The accepted word for the English term ethnic/ethnicity in Nepali is janajati. This refers to certain stock of groups claiming to have Mongoloid origin and claim to have originated in the Hills of Nepal. They have distinct language and culture.

In linking the past to the present and remembering the events in forms of memorials, Ravinder Kaur analyzes:

‘In everyday life, the scholarly distinctions between past and present hardly make sense, as people narrate and remember their situations and personal stories in a historically linear context, in which their individual present lives get connected with distant ancestors, journeys, and events in faraway places, time periods, and traditions that have roots in an ancient historical past. Thus past is frequently invoked in ones everyday life. Past connects distant places and events with people who, through their singular experiences, bear the burden of collective memory’.⁵

It is important to record these scattered memories before they fade away. In everyday life, the memories of the past are remembered and are expressed in forms of various narratives on numerous occasions. Kaur further states:

‘The remembrance of the memory is expressed through the narratives. At a casual level, narrative very simply suggests a story or an account of an event that is currently taking place or has already taken place in the past. Narratives mainly comprise verbal or written communications, in which an event or a series of events are transmitted between the narrator and the audience. The narrator often collates different scattered events or happenings into a single, inextricably connected body. Narrators may position themselves as eyewitnesses to the events being described, as participants, or simply as neutral bearers of an oral tradition that hands down narratives of the past from one generation to another.’⁶

The paper adopts a historical approach to Nepali mobility to decipher the trajectories of movements of people towards different locales and destinations. In keeping track of this mobility, the authors have looked into memoirs, travelogues, journals, books and conducted few semi-structured interviews with the returnee family members from Burma and Tibet.⁷ The mobility to North-Eastern India finds few mentions in the mainstream literature on Nepali migration. Therefore, the co-edited works of Tanka Subba⁸, AC Sinha⁹ and Khemraj Sharma¹⁰ would provide a fresh insight into the mobility undertaken by Nepalis. Similarly, in case of Tibet, authors referred to the work

⁵ Ravinder Kaur, *1947: Partition Narratives among Punjabi Migrants of Delhi*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2007, pp. 1-41.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ However, the authors did not undertake field visits to these destinations owing to the constraint of time and resource.

⁸ Tanka B. Subba & A.C. Sinha (eds). *Nepali Diaspora In A Globalized Era*, Routledge, New Delhi, 2016.

⁹ AC Sinha & Tanka B. Subba (eds). *The Nepalis in Northeast India: A Community in Search of Indian Identity*, Indus Publishing Company, New Delhi, 2004.

¹⁰ Khemraj Sharma, *The Nepalis of North Eastern Frontier of India*, Abhijeet Publications, New Delhi, 2012.

of Kesar Lal¹¹, Kamal Tuladhar¹², Corneille Jest¹³, Tirtha Mishra¹⁴ and Tina Harris¹⁵ to build their arguments. Through these references, the paper tries to come close with different facets and personal details of individuals who have explored the presence of Nepalis in these destinations.

The article is divided into four sections. The first section deals with the Nepalese migration to Tibet. The second charts out the Nepalis mobility, primarily non-Gurkhas who migrated and domiciled in Burma (including those in Thailand). The third section unfolds the mobility to North East India. The final section is a reappraisal of the Nepalis mobility to these destinations.

Nepalis Mobility to Tibet

History of Nepalis mobility towards the north goes back to the early journeys mentioned before the Christian era. This has been recorded by historians. “The chronicles record that in the seventh century AD a Nepali Princess, Bhrikuti, was married to a strong Tibetan King, Srong Tsen Gampo. He helped King Narendradev, who took refuge in Tibet after the dethronement of his father by his uncle, to get back the throne of Nepal. It was followed by an exchange of official missions between the two countries.¹⁶ During the course of history both the country went through ups and downs.

Traveler’s account and colonial records mention the mobility of Nepalis to Tibet. Among those that frequently traveled to Tibet were the Newars of the Kathmandu valley who were engaged in trade. Certain Newari caste groups like Shakya, Bajracharya, Tuladhar, Tamrakar, Kansakar belonging to Uray grouping had monopolized the trade, particularly import of various goods into Tibet.¹⁷ Those Newars who traded in Lasha, capital of Tibet, were given the honorary title of “Lasha Newar”. In addition to these groups, there were also Shrestha and Dhakhwas from Kathmandu, Sakwa (known as Sankhu), Patan and Bhaktapur involved in the Tibetan trade.¹⁸

As Newars received the right to trade in Lasha following their defeat with Kathmandu

¹¹ Kesar Lal, *The Newar Merchants in Lhasa*, Ratna Pustak Bhandar, Kathmandu, 2001.

¹² Kamal Tuladhar, *Caravan to Lhasa: Newar Merchants of Kathmandu in Traditional Tibet*, Tuladhar Family, Kathmandu, 2004.

¹³ Corneille Jest, The Newar Merchant Community in Tibet: An Interface of Newar and Tibetan Cultures-A Century of Trans Himalayan Trade and Recent Developments, in Gerard Toffin(ed), *Nepal: Past and Present*, Sterling Publishers Private Limited, New Delhi, 1990, pp. 159-168.

¹⁴ Tirtha P. Mishra, ‘Nepalese in Tibet: A Case study of Nepalese Half-Breeds’, vol.30, *Journal of Contribution to Nepalese Studies*, 2003, pp. 1-18.

¹⁵ Tina Harris, *Geographical Diversions: Tibetan Trade, Global Transcations*, University of Georgia Press, Athens. 2013.

¹⁶ Triratna Manandhar, ‘Crisis with Tibet (1883-84)’, vol.3, *Voice of History*, 1977, p.7.

¹⁷ While Newars from Kathmandu played an influential role in Lasha, there were other trading communities residing in the mountain region of Nepal such as Thakalis who had received monopoly to trade goods such as salt on behalf of the Nepali state. However, transactional relationship existed between different cultural groups living on either side of the border.

¹⁸ H Tuladhar, (n 12), p.13.

during the reign of Laxmi Narsingh Malla, the bilateral agreement between Kathmandu and Tibet gave the opportunity to 32 business houses from Kathmandu valley to establish trading houses in Lasha.¹⁹ The presence of Newars in Lasha not just had an impact on the business front but also left a lasting impression on how the socio-cultural dynamics between and among Newari society would evolve. This section charts out not just the business side of the story, but also focuses on the socio-cultural aspect including the intimate relationships between Newar men and Tibetan women. The section would also include the life history of a son of Lasha returned trader.

Nepalis Newars going to Tibet for trade had a special reputation which fell in between the categories of trader, foreigner and native. Nepalis in Tibet had control over certain trades. They were also in relationships with Tibetan women. However, a complex relation had emerged between Nepali men, Tibetan women, and their children. Jest²⁰ and Mishra²¹ offer the dynamics of this complex relationship.

The traditional routes used for travel to Lasha by Newars were Kerung and Kuti which lie to the North of Kathmandu. Kerung was a destination adjacent to present-day Rasuwa district and Kuti which is next to present-day Sindhupalchowk district. The alternative route to reach Kuti was explored through Jagati to Panchkhal in Kavre and to the Tibetan side. The entire travel from the mentioned place to Lhasa was tentatively 30 days. According to Kesar Lall "It took nearly a month for the traveller in the early days to reach Lhasa on foot and horseback".²²

The cultural, emotional and geographical bond between Nepal and Tibet dates back to when Bhrikuti, the daughter of the Licchavi King Amsuvarma was married to a Tibetan King Srong Tsen Gampo. The marital alliance paved the way for cultural exchange between Tibet and Kathmandu. The lasting testimonies have been the reflections in art and architecture on both sides. It is often claimed that the presence of Bhrikuti helped spread Buddhist philosophy in Tibet. Later, the cultural dimensions also saw the addition of commerce as mentioned by Dhungel.

"At that time, several prominent Buddhist scholars were also sent to Tibet from Nepal to support the Mahayanist trans-missionary movement. Records show that Buddhists of Licchavi origin were also transmigrated to Tibet and played a prominent role in the movement...Syncretically, commercial transactions also increased between the two neighbors, especially from ninth/tenth centuries A.D".²³

The mobility towards Tibet happened for two reasons, one for the Buddhist pilgrimage and second for the middlemen trade done by the Newari merchants. As historian Ludwig

¹⁹ Interview with Kamal Tuladhar at Kantipur Publications Premises, Thapathali, Kathmandu on 22 June, 2018. Tuladhar is one of our major informant who is the son of Karuna Ratna Tuladhar a popular tradesmen in Tibet.

²⁰ Jest (n 13), pp. 159-168.

²¹ Mishra (n 14), pp. 1-18.

²² Kesar Lall, *The Newar Merchants in Lhasa*, Ratna Pustak Bhandar, Kathmandu, 2001, pp. i-iv.

²³ Ramesh Kumar Dhungel, 'Nepal-Tibet Cultural Relations and the Zhva-Dmar-Pa (Shyamarpa) Lamas of Tibet', vol. 26, *Journal of Contribution to Nepalese Studies*, 1999, pp. 183-210.

Stiller writes in *The Rise of the House of Gorkha*, 'The trade of the valley was largely Tibet-oriented, dealing with Lhasa and points along the Kathmandu Valley-Lhasa trade route. It was in this northern trade that the major profits were to be found'.²⁴

Moreover, Uray caste, that controlled the trade, was highly influenced by Tibetan cultural values in their everyday life. These wayfarers' tradesmen conducted back and forth migration between India, Tibet, and Nepal in pony and horse. Some of them married the Tibetan women and settled in Tibet and the offspring born from them were known as Khacharas. Khacharas are offsprings of Newar father and a Tibetan mother.²⁵

The term carries derogatory meaning implying half-breed. The child was treated according to its gender. If a son was born he could have the father's name but could not stake a claim in the family property. But, was given Nepali citizenship. However, in the case of a female child, they were given Tibetan citizenship and had no contact whatsoever with the father's family. It is interesting to note that none of the tradesmen were accompanied by their Newari wife. Therefore, some of them took Tibetan wives. In fact, as stated by Kamal Tuladhar during the interview, the Newar traders were staying in Tibet for at least five years in one go given the harsh travel route.

Coming back to the trading, it is important to note that the Tibet-Kathmandu trade also had an important connection to Calcutta following the establishment of East India Company. The Company traded in goods which became popular substitutes to those imported from Kathmandu. In fact, a trading house based in Lasha would have representatives (mostly family members) in Calcutta and Kalinpon in addition to Kathmandu. Most of the trade happened between Lasha-Kalinpon-Calcutta route. According to Anthropologist Tina Harris, Kalinpon not only saw the presence of Newar merchants but was also filled by Marwari moneylenders and Tibetan Muslim muleteers.²⁶

However, this trade which actually played an important role in shaping and connecting certain Newar families in the important trade circuit in this part of the world experienced rupture following the Chinese takeover of the Tibet in 1959. In fact, the beginning of the 1960s saw Nepalis traders come back from Tibet and almost closing the family business. Kamal Tuladhar reminisces his family presence in Tibet in the following paragraph:

The family business of Kamal Tuladhar had been migrating to Tibet for trade for 300 years. The Tuladhars belonged to the 32 business houses which secured the trading rights in Tibet during the reign of Laxmi Narsingh Malla in 17th century. His grandfather Pushpa Sundar Tuladhar and his father Karuna Ratna Tuladhar were both

²⁴ Ludwig F. Stiller, *The Rise of the House of Gorkha*, Human Resources Development Research Center, Kathmandu, 1995, p.16.

²⁵ Mishra (n 14); Jest (n 13).

²⁶ Harris (n 15).

popular businessmen among the Newar business community in Kathmandu. In fact, the members of Tuladhar family received an invitation to the palace of Shahs along with other trading families on different occasions. This lasted until the time of King Tribhuvan.

Till the time of his grandfather, the Keroung was a major departure junction to Tibet but the route changed to Kalinpon in Karuna Ratna's time. Karuna Ratna made his maiden trip to Lasha in 1934 via Kalinpon. One of his father's brothers used to be located in Calcutta from where he would mount 100 kg of loads of item demanded on a single mule in a caravan of 50. The demand was communicated between family members in Lasha-Kalinpon-Calcutta through letters.

They especially traded clothes which they bought from Calcutta and sent to Tibet. Apart from the clothes, the other items in the caravan were shoes, cotton clothes, matchbox, and glasses. Other items included utensils from Kathmandu made of brass and copper. Tuladhars were also involved in supplying silver to Tibet from Calcutta. This very silver was used in minting coins for circulations in Tibet.²⁷

Nepalis who had hoarded these items during the Second World War profited as the demand soared. It is interesting to note that Lasha never offered any major trade in itself. It was rather a trading hub where goods were exchanged between and among traders from Kathmandu, Kashmir, Ladhak, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. Kamal Ratna also attempts to debunk the myth that Lasha had large depositories of gold. In fact, he argues that the gold circulating in Lasha came from Calcutta. Lasha only offered raw gold dust which was processed in Calcutta itself as the former did not have metal processing technology.

In fact, Nepali traders in Tibet were spread across three locations. Many of the traders from Kathmandu were located at Lasha while those from Patan were at Shigatse and some others were located at Gyantse.

Following the Chinese takeover of Tibet in 1959, the business started to dwindle. In fact, Kamal's father Karuna Ratna had already returned to Kathmandu in 1954. The situation deteriorated after the Sino-India war of 1962. In 1964 the Tuladhar family completely shut their business, which was being managed for a decade by the staffs hired by the family. In Kamal's own word 'It was a huge tragedy as it ruined our economy and brought a rupture to an age'.

²⁷ Tuladhar stressed on the fact that it was not gold rather silver that dominated the trade.

Nepalis in Burma (including those in Thailand)

The history of Nepalis migration to Burma offers an interesting trajectory to point out that Nepalis (almost exclusively from the hill) was a mobile community even though the reasons for such efforts may vary. The mobility of Nepalis towards Burma can be seen in two ways—recruitment in the colonial army and migration sought for better life chances in areas other than the military service.

The Nepalis who were taken by the British as a part of imperial army falls under the first category, whereas, the Nepalis who independently traveled²⁸ to Burma and settled for living by engaging in agriculture especially, horticulture and dairy farming belong to the second category. During the Second World War, when Burma was occupied by Japanese, the Gurkha battalion represented by Nepalis was recruited to Burma and these Nepalis later settled there.²⁹ Majority of the published literature on Nepali migration to Burma focuses on British recruitment and do not give adequate attention to the non-military trajectory.

Nepalis migrating to Burma comprises not only Janajati but also Brahmins and Chettris.³⁰ Some of the Nepalis eventually established themselves in precious ruby stone trade and even owned the ruby mines. In fact, the owners of these mines maintained relations with high ranking officials of the Burmese state to the extent of forging marital relations among the Nepalis and the Burmese.³¹

Dilli Ram Sharma currently works as an assistant CEO in Nepal Bank based at Kathmandu. His ancestral home is in Argakhachi. At the age of sixteen, his grandfather Keshav Raj Parajuli went to Calcutta, India in search of a job and worked as a loader in the ship.³² One day when he was traveling by ship it decked somewhere in the border between Thailand and Burma. He saw a lot of cows and grazing pastures in that area and decided to settle there. He married Nepali women there.

He was already married back in Nepal. The newlywed couple migrated towards central Burma in Mandalay where they started cattle farming and started the butter business. From Mandalay, the

²⁸ The information on the routes was provided by the three of our informants used in the Burma section. According to the informants, their grandfathers had reached Burma via Calcutta through ship.

²⁹ Tejimala Gurung, 'Human Movement and the Colonial State: The Nepalis of Northeast India Under the British Empire', in A.C. Sinha & Tanka B. Subba (eds), *The Nepalis in Northeast India: A Community in Search of Indian Identity*, Indus Publishing Company, New Delhi, 2003, pp. 172-183; Tejimala Gurung, 'Gurkha Displacement from Burma in 1942', in Tanka B. Subba and A.C. Sinha (eds), *Nepali Diaspora: In a Globalized Era*, Routledge, New Delhi, 2016, pp.203-320.

³⁰ The immigrants themselves are considered to be ethnic outside, here we need to categorize bahun/chhetri vs janajati.

³¹ Interview with Dilli Ram Sharma, 18 June, 2018. (Sharma is an assistant CEO at Nepal Bank based at Kathmandu. He is a returnee from Burma. Sharma's younger brother, who still lives in Burma, is married to a daughter of high ranking Burmese military officer.)

³² Dilli Ram could not ascertain the date of his grandfather's travel to Burma.

Parajuli family migrated to North Myanmar. Thereafter his father, Hom Nath Parajuli who was also born in Burma gave up cattle rearing and eventually became a successful business person in the ruby business.

He even owned a ruby mine. This was later nationalized by the Burmese government. In fact, Hom Nath maintained cordial relations with British administrators as a result of which Dilli Ram got an opportunity to do his primary schooling in a military-run school. In Burma, the Parajulis had three houses. But upon Keshav Parajuli's request that one of his sons, Hom Nath, return to Nepal, Dilli Ram's father gave those family houses to his brothers and came back in 1972 to fulfill his father's dying wish. The returnees initially settled in Bhairawa, Western Nepal, even though they had wanted to go to Eastern side. Later, the family shifted to Butwal where they had family contact. The migrating Parajuli family received land from the government under the resettlement program for Nepalese from Burma.

Table A.1

Not every story is as successful as that of Sharma. People have had their fair share of hardship while moving out of Burma and into Nepal. Bal Bahadur Subedi and Krishna Hari Adhikari's case is something different than Dilli Ram.

Bal Bahadur Subedi returned to Nepal in 1967 at the age of 18 from Shilanjung in the Shan state of Burma after Ne Win's take over. Since his ancestor home was in Gulmi, Western Nepal, he settled in Rupandehi, where his brother had earlier acquired a shop. According to Subedi, he received four bighas³³ of land from Nepali state upon showing his Burmese passport. Subedi recounts that his family had sold in a priceless amount to their belongings in Burma and had received money through the *bundi* system in Nepal. Asked how his family reached Burma, Subedi recalls that his father migrated upon receiving a call from a fellow villager who had gone to Burma earlier. However, he could not ascertain the exact date of his father's itinerary to Burma, although he remembers that the old man had traveled by ship.

Krishna Adhikari came back to Nepal from central Burma in 1975 at a young age of 14. This hinders him from recalling much about his life back at Burma. His family was engaged in farming and dairy. Krishna's father, Khimananda had migrated to Burma. But he was unable to give the exact date. He cites the stifling environment back in Burma under the military rule that prompted his family to migrate

³³ It is a measurement unit used for majoring land in the Tarai belt of Nepal. One bigha is equal to 6772.41 square meters.

back to Nepal. Before emigrating, the Adhikari family sold all their belongings at a meager price. Adhikari recounts that his family decided to settle in Bhairawa, where his brother-in-law owned a shop. But, Adhikari also recalls that they did not receive land from Nepali state as the latter had stopped such facility to the Burmese Nepalis.

Table A.2

It is interesting to note that the term *Gurkha* has been used to refer to all the Nepalis whether in military or non-military service in Burma. Citing a letter dated June 29, 1942, which the British officer Geoffery Bentham sent to the Government of India External Affairs Department in Delhi, Tejimala Gurung mentions that there were ‘some 200,000 Gurkhas domiciled in Burma’.³⁴ Anthropologist Sushma Joshi³⁵ also presents statistics on the Nepalis in Burma. Citing a Punjabi informant of hers, Joshi claims that there are around 500000 Nepalis (all Hindus) residing in Burma at present.³⁶

The first generation Nepalis who migrated for non-military reasons had to undertake immense hardships. This is mentioned in an essay by Prakash Chandra Thakur where he refers that Nepalis settled in the midst of dense forests in the Northern Hilly regions of Kachin, Chin and Shan states.³⁷ The number gradually increased following the policy of the colonial authorities to inhabit the frontier regions with a loyal population. For this, the British encouraged the settlement of ex-Gurkha soldiers in the area. Further, these states also saw the arrival of new members who came there as part of the migration network. People residing in these areas offered word-of-mouth account back in Nepal creating an atmosphere of excitement among new aspirants seeking to eke out better living. The flow of the Nepalis must have increased following the flow from North East India as Nepalis were already there and these mobile men played a crucial role in inviting their kith and kins.

The new arrivals also engaged in agriculture, animal husbandry, and dairy farming especially in making and producing butter and buttermilk. An account of Nepalis in Burma points to the hardship of the immigrants. According to Kumar Karki, who now commutes between Burma, Thailand, and Nepal and is an entrepreneur in Thailand, recounts in his memoir that it was the Nepalis who engaged in selling milk and milk products like ghee and butter.³⁸ In addition, the Nepalis are often credited with introducing terrace farming, cattle-breeding and even rotation of crops.³⁹ This equally

³⁴ Gurung, (n 29) p. 203.

³⁵ Sushma Joshi, ‘The Religious Life of The Gorkhals of Myanmar’, in David N. Gellner & Sondra L. Hausner (eds), *Global Nepalis: Religion, Culture and Community in a New and Old Diaspora*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2018, pp. 80-102.

³⁶ In her ethnographic account Joshi presents the statistics by relying on a punjabi informant. She, however, does not take the effort of corroborating her informant’s statistics with relevant government or other sources.

³⁷ Prakash Chandra Thakur, ‘Nepalese in Burma’, vol.12, no. 4, *Vashuda*, 1969, pp.7-11.

³⁸ Kumar Karki, *Jeevan Sangharsha*, Media Service Nepal, Kathmandu, 2074 B.S.

³⁹ Thakur, (n 37), p.7.

applies in the case of the North East.⁴⁰

But, the history of Nepalis in Burma is not limited to agriculture. Their participation in the military and police service also gives a glimpse of diversity in an occupation that the Nepalis immigrants were exercising. They were recruited for the military purpose since the 19th century including in the military police to serve the purpose of policing. But, things started to take a turn following the military takeover of General Ne Win in 1962.

The Ne Win government in Rangoon adopted a policy of nationalization leading to a state of panic among different groups. Nepalis were no exception. Many felt insecure and decided to march on. Some of them started to migrate in the 1960s as they had relatives in Nepal. The process galvanized after the visit of King Mahendra in 1970. Nepalis in Mandalay, Burma had invited the visiting monarch to a cultural program. A popular singer by the name of Rocky Thapa presented the agony of the Nepalis domiciled in Burma through a song titled *Surya Ko Jyoti Candrako Chaya*. The song reads as follows:

*Surya ko jyoti candra ko chhaya parena hamimathi
Phakarena kabile hamro Lali Gurans Lalupate.
Dukha ko bhari bisauna bhaniyethe Nepali,
Bharile thici kamala miciyehinaibilaye
Phailai biruna char dishatira dararakara mathi
Tuhura bhai ekalai basetapani pirena ukasailai,
Chharenau hamibolirabbasa purkheuli ritilai
Lukkekochbaina chhau hami pan iyabidhartimatamathi.
Hamkai deula himale bataskabile ho hamilai
Swarganai chhune Sagarmatha dekhenau hamilai
Eka himul kopani hau hami panirakhaajulimathi⁴¹*

Flowers Have Blossomed Colourful and Bright

*Marigold has blossomed everywhere with its golden hue
How did this flower spread all over this foreign land?
The seed of this beautiful flower is ours,
Let it not disappear in this foreign land.
We will paint the silver Himalayas with a golden hue,
Marigold in thousands, let us take them with us, keeping them in our hearts, And adorn our
mother's body in garlands of marigold.
We, the Nepalis, have our homeland in the lap of the Himalayas
And the pure blood of Nepalis run through our body;
This day is ending and the darkness of night has reached this
foreign land, This flower is withering, oh Brother! Let us take it back to our country.⁴²*

⁴⁰ Sharma (n 10).

⁴¹ Gunnar Haaland, 'Cultural Landscape and Migration', *Dhaulagiri Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, vol.4, 2010, pp. 99-110.

⁴² Ibid. (English translation)

According to Anthropologist Gunnar Haaland, Rocky through his songs was pointing out to the diaspora condition by comparing Nepalis in Burma as orphans following the changed political context of the military takeover in 1962 which saw the restriction being imposed on the Nepalis along with other non-Burmese.

The visit of King Mahendra to Burma also accentuated the repatriation program of Nepali state for Nepalis in Burma. According to the returnees from Burma such as Dilli Ram Sharma, Krishna Adhikari, and Bal Bahadur Subedi, the Nepalis government gave them land in various places in Western Terai Nepal such as Bhairawa, Butwal, and Bardiya. But the presence of relatives and acquaintances also played a role in resettlement as some of the returnees went to Eastern Terai, whereas others were settled in Far West and Mid-West⁴³ Nepal to live close to the dear ones.⁴⁴ According to them, one adult was given four bighas of land which they had to clear and create a settlement.⁴⁵

While there is much talk about Nepalis migration to Burma, very few materials are found on an adjacent and important destination, Thailand. Nepalis who had earlier gone to Burma often switched to the porous border with Thailand in search of better livelihood following the hardship of agriculture. Nepalis are found to take up the task of tradesmen. Arguing that it is difficult for the emigrants to find employment in core sectors such as in the Army or in the bureaucratic and political office. Haaland maintains that they become a member of the 'Marginal Trading Minority'. They enhance their skill in the trading sector. They are involved in marginal trade such as tailoring.

In fact, Haaland in his ethnographic study outlines the life stories of those Burmese of Nepalis origin who migrated to Thailand and took up tailoring business in Phuket, Thailand.⁴⁶ But what prompted these Nepalis in Burma to migrate to Thailand? One of the major reasons seems to be the change in policies adopted by Burma following General Ne Win's coup in 1962. The situation aggravated after the nationalization of the property by the military government. This created fear in the minds of the migrated population and they sought livelihood and security in the neighboring countries. Newin's government nationalized different business entities including land and this prompted many groups to migrate. Nepalis chose to go to neighboring Thailand where some Nepalis had been residing since the 19th century.⁴⁷

⁴³ Currently the Far West in province number 7 while Midwest is province no 5 and Eastern Nepal is Province 1.

⁴⁴ Interviews with Sharma, Subedi and Adhikari was carried out on June 18, 2018 in the office (Nepal Bank) of Sharma.

⁴⁵ Even though the respondent claims that they were provided with four bigha of land, none of the reports on resettlement make a mention of the total number of land allotted or the number of families who received it. But there is a mention that lands were allotted.

⁴⁶ Gunnar Halland, 'Explaining Causes in Evolving Contexts: From Nepali Hill Farmers to Business Managers in Thailand', in B. Walters & B. McCay(eds), *Against the Tides.Festschrift to Professor Andrew Vayda*, Alta Mira Press, Lanham, 2008, pp. 33-55.

⁴⁷ Anil Sakya, 'Creating Nepali Ethno escapes in Thailand, 2019', in David N. Gellner & Sondra L. Hausner (eds), *Global Nepalis: Religion, Culture and Community in a New and Old Diaspora*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2019, pp.103-136.

It is not just in Thailand that the Burmese of Nepalis origin migrated. Documents point to the migration of Nepalis to other South East Asian destinations such as Malaysia. According to E. V Gangadharam and P. H Stauffer, such Burmese-Nepalis were selling Tektites, a precious stone, brought from Burma in Kuala Lumpur.⁴⁸ This also indicated the trajectory of mobility to another trend. The section on Burma also includes the life history of some those that returned to Nepal.

Nepalis in North East India

Migration to North East India, like those in Burma, is projected to have begun only with the recruitment of Nepalis in the British Army in the 19th century which has been popularized as 'Gurkhas'. These Gurkhas were encouraged by the British to settle in the barren unused land like forest and lands around the riverside.⁴⁹ The Nepalis migrating to the North East were found to engage themselves in an occupation other than Army. Nepalis settlement can be found in Assam, Meghalaya, and Manipur among others.

They were into agriculture particularly, dairy farming. Even those that retired from the military service took up cattle rearing and agriculture. Some of them were also used by the British colonialists in a rubber plantation, coal mines, tea gardens and jute in addition to working as laborers in constructing the railway tracks⁵⁰

The migration to North East India has a long history of over two century. The reasons for migration to the destination differed. Some went in search of better living (primarily agricultural), while others reached as members of the British Army. Still, others have migrated as late as the 1950s from Eastern Nepal following the changes of 1950s.⁵¹ Moreover, during the 1950s the Nepalis who left Burma were also settled in the North East.

People were migrating in search of better pastoral and agricultural setup and they often relied on kinship network for such migration. In fact, this network facilitated the pull factor for new aspirants to migrate. If any member of the kin network including the village member may have gone elsewhere for a job, then s/he acted as a catalyst. For, the story brought back by the person about the new place created excitement at the prospect of better livelihood. It is interesting to note that Nepalis migrating to North East India have been clubbed under the same heading and there is no disaggregation along the ethnic line. The focus nonetheless is on those janajatis participating in the military service. The non janajati workers who were recruited in coal mines, rubber plantation, tea gardens and in making railway tracts are missing in the larger narratives.

⁴⁸ E.V.Gangadharam & P. H Stauffer, 'Tektites from Burma? A suspected new tektite locality in Southeast Asia', vol.4, *Newsletter of the Geological Society of Malaysia*, 1978, p.13.

⁴⁹ Sharma (n 10).

⁵⁰ Susan Thieme, *Social Networks and Migration: Far West Nepalese Migrants in Delhi*, NCCR North South dialogue, Bern, 2006.

⁵¹ Based on the conversation with Shreekrishna Anirudh Gautam on June 19, 2018 in Baudha, Kathmandu. Gautam has family members in the North East India who went there following the change of 1950. He and his kin members maintain back and forth relation.

Nepalis migrating to North East who took up cattle rearing are also mentioned in the British colonial accounts. Colonial records point to the fees levied on them for grazing purpose. They were also recorded as part of settlers working in jute, sugarcane and tea plantation. Historian Tejimala Gurung elaborates the British record. She mentions:

‘Under the British, the grazing right was gradually encroached upon to bring forth additional revenue to the government. It was primarily the Nepalis who were involved in cattle rearing and grazing as a profession.’⁵²

Gurung goes on to cite the *Administrative Report of Assam 1912-1913*, a colonial document that points to the increasing migration of Nepali graziers to Assam from adjoining districts owing to the hike in grazing fee levied by the colonial authorities.

Another scholar Sanjib Kumar Chetry also cites the colonial records to showcase the levy imposed on Nepalis for grazing. According to Chetry, ‘in 1886 a tax of 4 *annas*⁵³ per buffalo was imposed as grazing tax, which was raised to 8 *annas* in 1888 in Lakhimpur district’.⁵⁴ Both Gurung and Chetry ascertain that the overwhelming majority of graziers who owned the cattle were Nepalis. In fact, dairy was one of the important areas which saw an overwhelming presence of Nepalis. The term *Gwala* (milkmen) was almost exclusively associated with the Nepali immigrants in the region. Arguing that Nepali migration to North East in the dairy sector is as important as those for military service, historian Lopita Nath asserts that even colonial administrators took note of this.

She cites a communication between Governor-General Sir William Morris and his Chief Secretary A. W. Botham regarding the advent of Nepalis to Assam which the former maintains is not only confined to military service:

"It is rather farfetched to suggest that the prospect of employment in the Assam Rifles has anything to do with the advent of the Gurkhas into Assam for either temporary settlement, in search of work, or to make their homes in the province. The majority of those, who come here seeking employment come primarily to work as Gwalas (milkmen), others are imported by sawing contractors. Both these avocations seem more alluring to the immigrants than service under discipline in the Assam Rifles..."⁵⁵

In fact, Nepalis Brahmins (Bahuns) and Chettris were found to engage more in dairy farming as they were not prioritized for military service. Even colonial accounts make a mention of this. Nath cites A C Sinha :

⁵² Gurung (n 29), p.178.

⁵³ Anna is a unit of exchange relating to commodities. This unit is no longer in usage at the moment.

⁵⁴ Sanjib Kumar Chetry, ‘Nepalis in Assam: A Historical Perspective (1816-1985)’, vol.3, no. 3, *Research Journal of Language, Literature and Humanities*, 2016, pp. 22-25.

⁵⁵ Lopita Nath, ‘Migration, Insecurity and Identity: The Nepali Dairywomen in India’s Northeast’, vol.7, no. 2, *Asian Ethnicity Journal*, 2006, pp. 129-148.

"In a report to the Foreign Secretary of the Government of Assam dated 13 May 1930, the Chief Secretary to the Government of Assam advised, "The greater numbers of numerous Nepali graziers in Assam are Jaisis and Upadhyay Brahmins or Chettris of non-martial classes".⁵⁶

Nepalis in North East are also credited with introducing terrace farming to the population already residing there. For instance, Khem Raj Sharma points out how Nepalis who settled in Arunanchal Pradesh shared the technique of terrace wet rice cultivation.⁵⁷ Therefore, those Nepalis who went to North East moved from Nepal in two ways—one was as part of the imperial army and another one went through the process of social networking.

According to Srikant Dutt by the mid of the 20th century, 60 percent of the population in Sikkim was Nepalese and it was the Nepalis who introduced hill terracing to Sikkimese.⁵⁸ Even though the Nepalis played an important role such as introducing terrace farming, they were treated as outsiders by the locals. The Nepalis were discouraged to speak in the Nepali language as they fear to speak Nepali and speak in Hindi if any Nepali visited there.⁵⁹

Nepalis Mobility: a reappraisal

Nepalis mobility to Tibet, Burma, and North East India offer interesting insight into the reasons and factors that may have propelled people to migrate. In addition, a look at the mobility also suggests that the migration pandered out in varied ways in the respective destinations. For instance, those migrating to Tibet (especially in Lasha, Shigatse, and Gyantse) were doing for a specific reason—trade.

People involved were also coming from specific cultural groups namely Buddhist Newars (exclusively males) from Kathmandu valley. Migration to Lasha has caught the popular imagination which revolves around fairytale-like stories. It is difficult to say whether Nepalis developed any specific entrepreneurial skills or acted merely as conduits in trans-Himalayan trade that actually revolved between Lasha-Kalinpon-Calcutta route. In fact, Newars trading along this route were only one of the many involved.

According to Anthropologist Tina Harris, who has conducted an ethnographic study of the trade-in Tibet, raises an important point on the working of such trade. While much of our discussion revolves around the Newars, Harris points out the presence of other trading groups such as the Marwaris who played a crucial role as money lenders. In fact, Harris points to the concept of geographical diversion which may occur because of

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Sharma (n 10).

⁵⁸ Srikant Dutt, 'Migration and Development- The Nepalese in North East', vol. 16,no. 24, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1981, pp. 1053-1055

⁵⁹ Sharma (n 10).

certain alterations in the existing patterns. For instance, she points out how a disruption in an existing trade route owing to political change creates a diversion and the ability of the actors to look for alternatives. She points out:

‘After 1962 (emphasis added: following Sino-India War), then, trade along the Lhasa–Kalinpon routes was almost completely cut off, significantly transforming the economic geography of the region.’⁶⁰

Harris goes on to add that this created diversion in the existing route as it led to the creation of an alternative route connecting Kathmandu with Lasha. To quote Harris again:

‘Many traders, some of whom were given only twenty- four hours’ notice to vacate their shops in the border marts, shifted their businesses by settling in Kathmandu and rerouting their trading links with Tibet through Nepal. Since the Newars were originally from Kathmandu, it was slightly easier for some of these families to create these trading links. This new route was the next closest officially open route to Lhasa, passing from Kathmandu through the border checkpoint at Kodari on the Nepal side, then through Dram (Khasa in Nepali, Zhangmu in Chinese in Tibet, and on through Gyantse to Lhasa.’⁶¹

If one is to understand the Nepal Tibet trade than one has to enquire into the changing dynamics in that route following the advent of East India Company. During the interview, Kamal Tuladhar mentions ‘goods supplied through East India Company were far cheap and of higher quality prompting Nepali traders in Tibet to rework their route to Calcutta, Kalinpon, Tibet and Kathmandu’.

But, what is troubling is the over glorification of such migration. Even people who served in diplomatic capacities tend to hype the glory. For instance, Dor Bahadur Bista who served as the consul general in 1970s in Lasha asserts that ‘There were more Nepalis in Tibet than anywhere else outside Nepal, and there were more people of Tibetan than of Indian origin in Nepal’.⁶²

Tibetan migration of the Nepalis traders is a telling story of how political dynamics shapes and reshapes individual decisions. The presence of Nepalis in Tibet had been a matter of concern to the Tibetan authorities as they were there under an agreement which robbed Tibet of its sovereignty. However, changes, later on, moved the scale in Tibet’s favor. But, how did these changes affect the individual trader? According to Kamal Tuladhar, if his family business had been thriving, he would not be an employee of someone else’.

⁶⁰ Harris (n 15) p.12.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Dor Bahadur Bista, ‘Nepalis in Tibet’, in James F. Fisher (ed), *Himalayan Anthropology: The Indo-Tibetan Interface*, 1978, pp. 187-204.

But, the Tibet story doesn't end there. As Harris points out 'Greater attention needs to be paid to individuals' complex experiences of spatial transformations such as border openings or closings, asking how they, in turn, create diversions by fixing or making their own trading places in answer to these major geographical shifts'.⁶³ Therefore, it is not only the political dynamics that need to be considered but also its implication on how geographical diversions are created from those developments.

As for the migration to Burma and North East India, certain things stand out. First and foremost is the fact that Nepalis did not migrate to these destinations for the service in the imperial army alone. Agriculture was one of the areas that attracted and employed many Nepalis. It is interesting to note that the group of people going to Burma and North East India consists of an inclusive nature. For instance, the imperial army saw the overwhelming presence of hill janajatis in their ranks whereas Brahmins (popular known as Bahuns) and Chettris were largely employed in dairy farming. The possibility of ownership of land in the frontier regions propelled the Nepalis to migrate at that time. Back in Nepal state owned and controlled the land giving little incentive to the individual.

Nepalis in both these destinations lived in a quagmire. In some cases, they found it difficult to strike a balance between their citizenship and their cultural affinity. For instance, respondents to whom the authors spoke for the Burma section asserted that their way of celebrating Nepali festivals back in Burma was much elaborate than here. But, all of those respondents who have spent a significant portion of their life in Nepal appear to be failing to reconcile that they now possess Nepali citizenship and only have a cultural connection with Burma given that some of their family members are still there. The inability to connect the two also lies with the fact that there is to and fro movement between Nepal and those destinations. The hardships of these migrants have been included in the Nepali literature. Janak Raj Sapkota has offered a comprehensive review of these literary publications spanning the period of 80 years between them.⁶⁴

It is not clear how many Nepalis from Nepal migrated to Burma and North East India and how many came back. This leads to a situation of speculation. But what is significant is that Panchayat appeared to have made use of these returnees to bolster its political project of furthering Nepali language speaker as 'sons of the soil' thesis. During the Panchayat the sentiment of nationalism has been largely propagated and mobility to a foreign land was perceived something against the spirit of nationalism.⁶⁵ Whatever is the case the returnees till the date highly lauded king Mahendra for the re-settlement at various districts in Nepal.

An appraisal of Nepalis presence during colonial times is also required. Former Nepali

⁶³ Harris (n 15).

⁶⁴ Janak Raj Sapkota, *Nepali Upanyasma Basaisarai: Dukhha Dekhi Dukhha Samma*, Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility and Himal Kitab, Kathmandu, 2018.

⁶⁵ Gaurab KC, *Kamaune: The Cultural and Economic Imaginaries of Migration*, Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility, Social Science Baha, Kathmandu, 2014.

diplomat Prakash Chandra Thakur makes a reference to the relationship between Burmese state and the Nepalis employed in the colonial army.

“The role of the Nepalese in Burma during the period of Burmese struggle for independence remained passive, in so far as most of the service holders dared not go against their British masters, and even if some of them did indulge in such activities their entire family members had to undergo untold privations and hardships in concentration camps and jails⁶⁶”

However, one could argue that when Burma gained independence from the British in 1948 there appeared a difference between those serving in the imperial army and those that did not. The former was absorbed in the newly formed military. But, the latter found it difficult to cope and some even migrated back to Nepal. This insecurity continued up until the takeover by Ne Win in 1962 and the nationalization project that ensued.

In tracing out the mobility of Nepalis to North East, Burma and Tibet it can be argued that the migrating population took various forms such as wanderers (later they became settlers) mercantilist, laborers, mercenary soldiers, and those settlers finally forced to become returnees.

It is interesting to observe that the idea of mobility has undergone tremendous change. In the 19th century or before, when migration to North East India and Burma took place, the idea of territorial nationality did not hold sway. People were migrating without bureaucratic norms. But, this underwent significant change in the 20th century with the institutionalization of state-centric citizenship.

⁶⁶ Thakur, (n 37), p.10.