

# From Sentries to Skilled Migrants: The transitory residence of the Nepali community in Singapore

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## Introduction

After a special treaty between the government of Nepal and the Khalsa (Sikh) government was signed in 1839, Nepali hill men began to travel to Lahore to join the army of the Sikh king Ranjit Singh (Kansakar 2003: 92-93). Therefore, from the early nineteenth century onward, Nepali hill men who served in the Sikh Army at Lahore were termed *lāhure*, which can be translated as 'one who goes to Lahore'. A soldier who has travelled abroad is still popularly known as a *lāhure* in Nepal. A prefix is attached to the term *lāhure*, depending on the country of the soldier's service, e.g., Singapore *lāhure*, British *lāhure*, Brunei *lāhure*, Hong Kong *lāhure*, etc. It has been argued that what all the men who are called *lāhures* share is a relationship with a foreign place, an experience of a world beyond the familiar (des Chene 1991: 237).

The term *lāhure* is increasingly used as a term to refer to all Nepalis who secure foreign employment. In their study of international labour migration from Nepal, Seddon, Adhikari and Gurung (2001) have characterised the new category of Nepalis abroad as 'New Lahures'. In 1991, des Chene postulated that men who undertake civilian jobs in India or travel to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states to work in the oil fields are called *lāhures*, regardless of whether they have first been soldiers (des Chene 1991: 237). As one informant in Singapore remarked,

*Lāhures* no longer refers to just the Gurkhas. It also refers to those going to the Middle East or elsewhere. My father was a Singapore *lāhure*, but I am a new *lāhure* since I am doing a medical related Ph.D in Singapore.<sup>1</sup>

The Gurkha Contingent was formed as a special paramilitary unit under the Singapore Police Force on 9 April 1949. The timing of its creation was

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1 Personal communication, anonymous informant, Singapore, 10 January 2010.

significant, because it coincided with a period of racial riots: the Contingent was expected to function impartially as an anti-riot squad. The Gurkhas are now famed as sentries who guard Singapore's key installations, and their key role continues to define the Contingent's purpose as a neutral force. Over the last 63 years, Gurkha policemen have rendered invaluable service to Singapore, and their gated residence at Mount Vernon Camp, an entirely self-sufficient township, distinguishes them as an independent and impartial unit. Gurkha families are politically disenfranchised and are repatriated to Nepal after a Gurkha's service in Singapore ends, usually after 20 or 25 years.

In Singapore, apart from the Gurkhas (the original *lāhures*) there are other groups of Nepalis (the new *lāhures*) who reside temporarily or permanently in growing numbers. They include Nepalis who emigrate to Singapore in search of job opportunities, primarily in the food and beverage sector; students who look to Singapore to further their education, mainly in the field of hotel management, tourism and hospitality; and a sizeable number of professionals who work as engineers, doctors, educators, etc.

Over a period of two years of fieldwork in Singapore and Nepal from 2008-2010, I conducted detailed and semi-structured interviews with 45 individuals: Nepali restaurateurs, professionals and students in Singapore and ministry officials, ambassadors and academics from both Singapore and Nepal, plus a number of Singapore Gurkhas. An examination of the Nepali community in Singapore must take account of a variety of factors. Therefore, my research adopts an interdisciplinary method as a framework of analysis and draws on diasporic theory to study the dynamics of the migratory formation of this community. Primary sources in the form of oral interviews and archival material constitute the backbone of my methodology.

In order to obtain information about the Nepalis concentrated in the food and beverage sector in Singapore, I met individuals from the Nepal Academy of Tourism & Hotel Management (NATHM). I also visited the Ministry of Education in Kathmandu to obtain statistical data on the number of Nepali students studying in Singapore. In terms of archival material, the National Archives of Singapore, newspaper articles in the Singapore Press Holdings and online newspaper articles by Lexis Nexis Academic have also been useful sources of information.

Nepal continues to be a largely agrarian society. However, declining

crop productivity and a lack of employment prospects in other sectors are some of the reasons for international migration. This has been compounded by the Maoist insurgency which erupted in 1996. Although the internal conflict has ended, continued political uncertainty continues to hamper economic growth, pushing many Nepalis to seek a livelihood in foreign lands.

Singapore is regarded as an economically viable and politically stable country, and this has drawn Nepalis who have chosen to reside there, either temporarily or permanently. Ganesh Gurung, a sociologist at the Nepal Institute of Development Studies, has exclaimed that Singapore is seen as a 'dream country' because Nepali politicians frequently express an aspiration to make Nepal 'like Singapore' in the speeches they give at political rallies.<sup>2</sup> In addition, according to various Nepali informants, a feeling of affinity with the island city-state is also based on Singapore's multiracial composition and Asian culture. The image of Singapore as a safe and secure country, coupled with its relative proximity to Nepal (compared with distant countries such as the USA and the United Kingdom) has attracted Nepalis to Singapore.

The sudden influx of Nepali emigrants into Singapore during the 1990s and at the turn of the millennium begs the question of why this particular period saw these particular trajectories. Changes in state policies towards foreign employment in Nepal and Singapore, the role of social networks, and the growth of private recruitment agencies are critical factors.

### **The profile of the new *lāhures***

Foreign labour migration is highest in those regions of Nepal that have a longstanding history of emigration. According to David Seddon, a majority of the new *lāhures* come from the western and eastern hill regions from which enlistment into the British army began in the early nineteenth century (Seddon 2002: 28). Seddon, Adhikari and Gurung contend that a majority of the Nepali migrants working in East Asia and Southeast Asia comprise Gurungs, Magars and Thakalis from the western hills and mountains, Rais, Limbus and Sherpas from the eastern hills and mountains, and Newars from the Kathmandu Valley and elsewhere (Seddon *et al* 2001:

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2 Personal communication, Ganesh Gurung, Nepal Institute of Development Studies (NIDS), Kathmandu, 5 May 2010.

76-77). These findings are mirrored in the case of Singapore. Figure 1 shows that the majority of the Nepalis in Singapore hail from the Eastern (38.3%) and Western (36.3%) regions of Nepal.

In Singapore, most professionals are Newars hailing from the Kathmandu Valley, alongside a small number of Bahuns, Chetris, Magars, Rais and Gurungs. However, those working in restaurants usually have a different regional and ethnic profile. Data drawn from eleven ethnic Nepali restaurants suggest that a majority of the Nepali owners and employees hail from Baglung and Gulmi districts in the Western region and Jhapa and Ilam districts in the Eastern region. Those who work in restaurants include several from the Kathmandu Valley and the Tarai. A substantial number of English-speaking Nepalis work in other food and beverage outlets in Singapore, in both managerial and non-managerial positions.

Tables 1 and 2 reproduce the official statistical data on the number of Nepalis abroad in 2001. Table 2 shows the distribution of the emigrant population from Nepal by country of destination and reason for absence. In 2001, 3363 of the 762,181 Nepalis living abroad were residing in Singapore. Of these 3363 Nepalis, 1249 were classified as having undertaken jobs in the personal service line, 1044 were employed in institutional services, 347 had emigrated for educational purposes, and 145 had emigrated for marital reasons. The pursuit of business opportunities is the least important reason given for emigration to Singapore, with only thirty Nepalis recorded as having emigrated for this purpose.

These figures are a gross underestimate of the current Nepali population of Singapore, because large numbers of Nepalis have left Nepal during the almost eleven years since they were compiled. The figures are also lacking in accuracy, both in relation to the number of Nepalis temporarily or permanently residing in Singapore, and the nature of the jobs they pursue. According to officials from Nepal's Central Bureau of Statistics, the data do not take the Gurkhas into account, because they were not present in Nepal at the time of the survey.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, it is evident that the new *lāhures* in Singapore are prominent in the business field (e.g., restaurants, travel agencies, trade in precious gem stones and

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3 Personal communication, Rudra Suwal, Deputy Director, Chief of National Accounts Section. Central Bureau of Statistics. Kathmandu, 9 June 2009.

Table 1: Source regions of population absent in Nepal and countries of destination (CBS 2001: 113)

Countries	Nepal		EDR		CDR		WDR		MWDR		FWDR	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
Total	762181	100.0	121911	16.0	107631	14.1	331890	43.54	94724	12.43	106035	13.91
India	589050	100.0	67388	11.4	63508	10.5	263150	44.63	90006	15.28	105018	17.83
Pakistan	558	100.0	107	19.2	232	41.6	138	24.73	36	6.45	45	5.06
Bangladesh	952	100.0	133	14.0	410	43.1	239	25.11	65	7.25	101	10.61
Sri Lanka	201	100.0	44	22.0	52	40.8	62	30.85	8	3.98	5	2.49
Maldives	370	100.0	130	35.1	56	23.2	129	34.9	17	4.59	8	2.2
China	1354	100.0	225	16.0	706	52.1	305	22.5	58	4.28	60	4.4
Korea	2679	100.0	484	18.1	567	21.2	1541	57.5	67	2.50	20	0.8
Russia and others	747	100.0	126	16.9	358	47.9	153	24.5	41	5.49	39	5.2
Japan	3726	100.0	358	9.0	1509	42.1	1752	46.3	47	1.26	27	0.7
Hong Kong	12001	100.0	4111	34.3	1821	15.2	5952	49.6	87	0.72	30	0.3
Singapore	3363	100.0		38.9	628	18.7	1221	36.3	213	6.33	13	0.4
Malaysia	6813	100.0	2562	37.0	1026	15.1	2983	43.8	153	2.65	59	0.9
Australia	2491	100.0	365	14.7	1476	59.3	556	22.3	53	2.13	41	1.7
South Africa	67460	100.0	23179	34.4	13873	20.6	27775	41.2	2475	3.67	158	0.2
Qatar	24397	100.0	9256	37.9	4547	15.6	10164	41.7	376	1.54	54	0.2
Kuwait	3688	100.0	1457	39.5	692	16.3	1450	39.3	69	1.87	20	0.5
United Arab Emirates	12544	100.0	4157	33.1	2590	20.7	5408	43.1	321	2.56	68	0.5
Bahrain	2737	100.0	1511	55.2	272	9.9	918	33.5	33	1.21	3	0.1
Other Asian Countries	3845	100.0	921	23.5	1334	34.7	1440	37.4	127	3.30	27	0.7

Countries	Nepal		EDR	CDR	WDR	MWDR	FWDR	%				
	Total	%										
United Kingdom	7271	100.0	1645	22.0	2602	35.3	2811	38.7	160	2.20	52	0.7
Germany	1638	100.0	270	16.5	671	41.0	653	39.9	33	2.01	11	0.7
France	250	100.0	40	16.0	156	62.4	50	20.0	4	1.60	0	0.0
Other European Countries	1958	100.0	210	10.5	931	45.6	818	40.9	22	1.10	17	0.9
USA, Canada and Mexico	9557	100.0	1147	12.0	6661	69.7	1566	16.4	116	1.21	67	0.7
Other Countries	1877	100.0	534	28.5	617	32.9	568	30.3	86	4.58	72	3.8

Table 2: Distribution of the population absent from Nepal by countries of destination and by reasons for absence 2001 (CBS 2001: 114-5)

Country of Destination	Reasons of Absence							
	Total	Agri-culture	Busi-ness	Per-sonal Service	Institu-tional Service	Study/ Training	Mar-riage	Others
Total	762181	7763	12050	506221	94329	31747	14101	95970
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
India	589050	7763	10832	385062	69102	19337	12772	84182
	77.28	100.00	89.89	76.07	73.26	60.91	90.58	87.72
Pakistan	558	0	66	211	41	160	12	68
	0.07		0.54	0.04	0.04	0.50	0.08	0.07
Bangladesh	952	0	40	277	71	411	14	139
	0.12		0.33	0.05	0.08	1.29	0.10	0.14
Bhutan	610	0	28	328	71	33	15	135
	0.08		0.23	0.06	0.08	0.10	0.11	0.14
Sri Lanka	201	0	7	88	22	50	6	28
	0.03		0.01	0.02	0.01	0.16	0.04	0.03
Maldives	370	0	8	268	46	7	9	32
	0.05		0.01	0.05	0.05	0.02	0.06	0.03
China	1354	0	44	587	154	382	16	171
	0.18		0.37	0.12	0.16	1.20	0.11	0.18
Korea	2679	0	28	1990	462	83	16	100
	0.35		0.23	0.39	0.49	0.26	0.11	0.10
Russia and Others	747	0	12	142	53	330	11	199
	0.10		0.10	0.03	0.06	1.04	0.08	0.21
Japan	3726	0	88	2172	492	585	97	292
	0.49		0.73	0.43	0.52	1.84	0.69	0.30
Hong Kong	12001	0	111	8249	1902	331	224	1184
	1.57		0.92	1.63	2.02	1.04	1.59	1.23
Singapore	3363	0	30	1249	1044	347	145	548
	0.44		0.25	0.05	1.00	1.09	1.03	0.57
Malaysia	6813	0	18	5521	892	37	5	340
	0.89		0.15	1.09	0.95	0.12	0.03	0.35
Australia	2491	0	20	579	176	1487	62	167
	0.33		0.16	0.11	0.19	4.68	0.44	0.17
Saudi Arabia	67460	0	123	54902	8907	56	18	3454
	8.85		1.02	10.85	9.44	0.18	0.13	3.60

Country of Destination	Reasons of Absence							
	Total	Agri-culture	Busi-ness	Per-sonal Service	Institu-tional Service	Study/Train-ing	Mar-riage	Others
Qatar	24397	0	38	19278	3351	17	4	1259
	3.20		0.31	3.90	3.55	0.05	0.03	1.31
Kuwait	3688	0	4	2957	543	4	2	178
	0.48		0.03	0.58	0.58	0.01	0.01	0.19
United Arab Emirates	12544	0	28	9963	1932	50	10	561
	1.65		0.23	1.91	2.05	0.16	0.07	0.58
Bahrain	2737	0	6	2180	421	9	2	119
	0.36		0.05	0.43	0.45	0.03	0.01	0.12
Other Asian Countries	3849	0	70	1947	917	453	79	383
	0.50		0.58	0.38	0.97	1.43	0.56	0.40
United Kingdom	7271	0	101	2513	2088	1631	200	738
	0.95		0.84	0.50	2.21	5.14	1.42	0.77
Germany	1638	0	37	948	207	262	28	156
	0.21		0.31	0.19	0.22	0.83	0.20	0.16
France	250	0	9	86	26	75	9	45
	0.03		0.07	0.02	0.03	0.24	0.06	0.05
Other Euro-pean Coun-tries	1998	0	35	892	339	504	56	172
	0.26		0.29	0.18	0.36	1.59	0.40	0.18
USA, Canada and Mexico	9557	0	238	2482	770	4930	261	876
	1.25		1.98	0.49	0.82	15.53	1.42	0.91
Other Coun-tries	444	0	1877	29	900	300	176	28
	0.06		15.58	0.0	0.95	0.94	1.25	0.03

Source: Population Census of Nepal 2001

*rudraksa*, garment stores etc.) and it is unlikely that business pursuits are the least significant reason for their absence from Nepal. In addition, after Singapore was marketed as a 'Global Schoolhouse' in 2003, students from Nepal flocked into the state, especially between 2004 and 2008. This large number of students is absent from the official 'Study/Training' tabulation because many of them came to Singapore on the pretext of being tourists but in actuality were students searching for places in private schools.

There are approximately seven thousand Nepalis in Singapore. Approximately six thousand are from the Gurkha Contingent and about



one thousand are professionals and semi-skilled workers.<sup>4</sup> According to the President of the Nepali Singapore Society, there are only about thirty Nepalis who are Singapore citizens, and most of these are professionals.

### **Historicising the new *lāhures*: state policies, social networks and agents**

#### *State policies*

During the 1980s, the Nepal government's policies impeded Nepali emigration to foreign countries. From the middle of 2005 onward, positive shifts were apparent in its attitude to foreign employment. The gradual liberalisation of policies concerning international migration led to a growth in the number of recruitment agencies, especially in Kathmandu. It has been noted that as of July 2002 301 recruiting agencies had been registered in Nepal, mostly in Kathmandu, and that Singapore was one of the listed destinations for Nepali workers to be officially recruited (UNIFEM 2006: 12).

Singapore's immigration policies are also instrumental in determining the nature of emigration from Nepal. One can easily notice the concentration of Nepali migrants in the food and beverage sector and as semi-skilled restaurant workers, and it is also clear that students who look to Singapore to further their education do so mainly in the field of hotel management, tourism and hospitality. There is also an increasing number of Nepali professionals who reside in Singapore, either temporarily or permanently. The nature of employment undertaken by the new *lāhures* is very different from that undertaken by the other South Asian migrant workers in Singapore. Nepalis neither work as construction or industrial workers like those from India and Bangladesh, nor as female domestic workers like those from India and Sri Lanka.

Given this situation, questions arise as to why there is a selective streamlining of the Nepali immigrants in Singapore. Apart from a small number who are citizens or permanent residents, most of the new *lāhures* are holders of Employment Passes or Business Passes. These categories

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4 Personal communication, Amar Chitrakar, President of the Nepali Singapore Society, Singapore, 9 March 2010; Ong Keng Yong, Former Non-Resident Ambassador to Nepal, Singapore, 4 May 2010. See also: Jamie En Wen Wei, 'Ex-Nepalese prince and family relocate here', *The Straits Times*, 20 July 2008.

require holders to be either skilled, professionally qualified or have a decent level of education, e.g. SLC and above. The majority of the Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan and Indian workers only hold work permits issued to foreign unskilled workers and they enter Singapore as construction workers or domestic maids.

Nepalis are not eligible for this kind of work permit. On 16 June 1995, in a response to an enquiry from maid employment agencies about the implications of the Memorandum of Understanding signed between Nepal and Singapore, the latter state's Ministry of Labour said that Nepal was not approved as a source of foreign domestic workers, and that only domestic workers from India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and the Philippines were eligible for work permits (National Archives of Singapore: June 1995). A few weeks later, it was maintained that there would be no move towards opening the labour market to non-traditional sources like Nepal (ibid: July 1995).

In trying to explain why there is a concentration of Nepalis in selected job scopes within the context of Singapore's policy towards these immigrants, it is apparent that the non-Gurkha Nepalis are concentrated in the food and beverage sector, and there are substantial numbers of professionals. It may therefore be concluded that the pattern of Nepali emigration to Singapore is distinct from the pattern of Nepali emigration to elsewhere in the world. Nepalis work in menial jobs in India and Malaysia and as construction workers in Hong Kong and Gulf countries, and they are known to lead a B-grade lifestyle in America. However, in the case of Singapore, a select group of Nepalis enters via professional or skilled categories. Many of these are educated and from privileged backgrounds.

#### *Social networks in ethnic Nepali restaurants*

At present, there are about nine Nepali restaurants in Singapore. Most of them were set up from the late 1990s onward. They include: Everest Kitchen, Shish Mahal North Indian and Nepali Cuisine, Albert Café and Restaurant, Kantipur Tandoori Restaurant, New Everest Kitchen, Gurkha Palace, Gorkha Kitchen, Himalaya Kitchen, and Kathmandu House.

Seddon, Adhkari and Gurung draw our attention to the idea of 'paths of migration', based on the notion that social networks have contributed to alleviating the risks involved in migration. According to them, these 'paths' are established on the basis of social networks and linkages, which

are themselves framed by kinship, caste, ethnicity, gender and class (Seddon *et al* 2001: 66).

Interviews conducted in several of the restaurants in Singapore suggest that most of the workers are directly employed by the restaurant owners. Harvey Choldin explains that 'chain migration' facilitates the movement of prospective migrants who have their initial accommodation and employment arranged by means of primary social relationships with earlier migrants (Choldin 1973: 164-65). This pattern of 'chain migration' is evident amongst the Nepali semi-skilled workers in the restaurants.

Most of the managers and waiters in the various Nepali restaurants in Singapore are relatives, distant relatives, or friends of one another, and hence most of them have managed to secure their jobs through recommendations and kinship ties. Churamani Kharal, the owner of Pardesh Restaurant and Café, related that one of the main reasons he came to Singapore in 1993 is because he had a friend there.<sup>5</sup> Binraj Dahjol, a waiter at Shish Mahal Tandoori restaurant, who came as a student in 2004 to undertake a food and beverage course, said that his brother Muni Raj, who works at Kantipur Tandoori restaurant, assisted him in coming to Singapore.<sup>6</sup> Khagen Limbu, a chef at the Gurkha Palace Restaurant, was directly employed by the owner of the restaurant who was his neighbour in Nepal.<sup>7</sup> The ethnic affinity present in the Nepali restaurants was further affirmed by Krishna Bahadur Pun, who related that he came to Singapore through a recommendation by his relative, and that his wife is now also working in the New Everest Kitchen restaurant.<sup>8</sup> Employees of various Nepali restaurants in Singapore offer an insight into how tapping into kinship networks and mobilising social capital ensures job security. These emigrants depend heavily on informal and personal connections to make a living in Singapore.

Furthermore, a connection between the old and new *lāhures* is evident: some respondents explained that the Gurkha Contingent played a part

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5 Personal communication, Churamani Kharal, owner of 'Pardesh Restaurant and Café'. Singapore, 10 December 2009.

6 Personal communication, Biniraj Maharjan Dahjol, waiter at 'Shish Mahal Nepali and North Indian Restaurant'. Singapore, 24 September 2008.

7 Personal communication, Khagen Limbu, chef at 'Gurkha Palace Restaurant'. Singapore, 6 April 2010.

8 Personal communication, Krishna Pun, manager at 'New Everest Kitchen'. Singapore, 16 April 2010.

in their decision to come to Singapore. One informant explained that his uncle, who had worked as a Gurkha, showed him around Singapore and helped him settle in.<sup>9</sup> Another informant, Laxmi Gurung, related that one of the reasons he came to Singapore was because he has relatives and friends inside Mount Vernon Camp.<sup>10</sup> Several of the Nepalis working in the food and beverage sector are relatives, distant relatives or friends of Gurkhas, thus indicating the direct connection between the Gurkha families and the food and beverage sector in Singapore.



Plate 1: An example of the hundreds of posters that encourage Nepali students to go abroad to study in Singapore.

The serving and repatriated Gurkhas have created an awareness of Singapore in Nepal, and this further explains why the Nepalis there primarily hail from the Eastern and Western regions of Nepal, and also accounts for their ethnic/clan similarities. The fact that the *lāhures* and new *lāhures* hail from similar regions is in part explained by the existence of an exclusive informal network.

### *Nepali students and professionals*

The role of intermediaries is critical to our understanding of the impact

9 Personal communication, Ujjwal Satya, Head of Department (Human Resource) at the NATHM. Kathmandu, 15 May 2009.

10 Personal communication, Laxmi Gurung, Assistant Floor and Bar Manager at 'Serenity: Spanish Bar and Restaurant'. Singapore, 19 December 2009.

that agents have often had in catalysing migration. Sometime between 2004 and 2008, hospitality, hotel management and tourism were popular educational choices among Nepali students who sought the assistance of agents to secure a place in a private school in Singapore. In the course of trying to establish links with Singapore, many students chose to get trapped by agents rather than go through the formal process of sourcing an educational institution.

At the turn of the century, as the Maoist insurgency continued to disrupt the country, educational prospects in Nepal were bleak. It therefore became imperative for Nepali students to go abroad and it was during this period that hundreds of posters and advertisements produced by private educational agencies mushroomed across Kathmandu, capitalising on students' desire to go abroad to countries like the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Australia, Singapore, and Cyprus. These posters encouraged prospective students to pursue further studies, especially in the field of hotel management and hospitality, or to work as waiters and chefs in restaurants.



Plate 2: 2011. Nepali Restaurants in Singapore.

Furthermore, according to Ujjwal Satya from the Nepal Academy of Tourism and Hotel Management (NATHM), subjects such as hotel management were introduced at the post-SLC level in Nepali schools during the late 1990s. This subject became immensely popular among students and approximately fifteen thousand students enrolled as it was

deemed easier than other subjects.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, due to the dire state of higher educational institutions in Nepal, only 4% of the cohort could be accommodated within Nepal (*ibid.*), leaving the rest to pursue their interest in this field abroad.

As a result of a massive advertising campaign for studying abroad, and given that there was a large number of eager students in this field of study who could not be accommodated in Nepal, Singapore was envisioned as one of the prime destinations for the pursuit of higher education. Nepal's Education Ministry data confirm that the courses most commonly undertaken by Nepali students in Singapore included a Diploma in Hospitality Management, and a Diploma in Tourism and Hospitality Management (Report of 'No Objection Letter' 2008).

Coincidentally, in 2003 Singapore launched its education hub plan and was marketed as a 'Global Schoolhouse'. This plan chimed well with the thousands of students from Nepal who were seeking a reputable country where they could study abroad. Singapore was considered to be more affordable compared to the exorbitant costs of studying in the United States or the United Kingdom. In addition, the close proximity of Singapore to Nepal (direct flights; approximately five hours), the stable social and political environment, and the perceived affinity of an Asian country, all in all placed Singapore in a favourable light among prospective Nepali students.

More importantly, unlike the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia, most of the private institutes in Singapore did not require a 'No-Objection Letter' from Nepal's Education Ministry (Report of 'No Objection Letter' 2008). The absence of this administrative procedure in Singapore, together with the easy availability of on-arrival visas for Nepali students, contributed to an influx of Nepali students during the period 2004-2008.

Although they came on the pretext of being students, many of the Nepali migrants were keen to find a job. Among them, several were caught working illegally (the Student Pass prohibits them from working) and had to leave Singapore without completing their courses.<sup>12</sup> The euphoria of coming to Singapore was also short-lived for hundreds of students who

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11 Personal communication, Ujjwal Satya, Head of Department (Human Resource) at the NATHM. Kathmandu, 15 May 2009.

12 Personal communication, Pujan Rai. Singapore, 19 October 2008.

were left stranded after being cheated by unscrupulous agents. One, Subhas, was cheated by an agent, and subsequently his student visa was cancelled. He lamented over how much money his family had had to fork out for him to receive an education in Singapore, and how he is now back in Nepal with no certificate.<sup>13</sup> Nepalis were among other foreign students from India, Sri Lanka, China, Vietnam and elsewhere who were trapped by agents or were caught working illegally with a Student Pass. It was reported that as of March 2009 there were 99,000 foreign students in Singapore (Toh 2009). The number of private schools in Singapore had expanded from just 305 in 1997 to 1,200 in 2007.<sup>14</sup> Many of these private schools, despite lacking reputable credentials, managed to successfully market themselves and lure foreign students.

Against a background of burgeoning complaints, a large number of newspaper articles between 2008 and 2009 brought to light the issues plaguing foreign students (see Sim 2008 and Davie 2009). These articles, together with the testimonies of returning foreign students, served to shatter Singapore's image as an education hub. Compelled to address the criticisms confronting Singapore's global education hub, new rules have been promulgated by the Singapore government. The fiasco created by shady agents and shoddy schools has contributed to a decline in the number of Nepali students entering Singapore. These students have since returned to Nepal to embark on yet another journey to fulfill their education and employment related dreams.

Unlike the students from Nepal, whose experiences in Singapore were often intertwined with stories about unscrupulous agents, the Nepali professionals exercised self-agency in their employment in Singapore. However, like the students, the Nepali professionals are largely in Singapore for a short period of time, and they are at best ambivalent about making Singapore their permanent place of residence.

Many of the recent batch of professionals perceive Singapore to be a launching pad for their subsequent ambitions, and have made their way to Singapore on a transitory basis after completing their degrees in other foreign countries. Many of the Nepali professionals working as doctors, accountants, engineers, or in banks, have studied in Canada, England or

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13 Personal communication, Subhas. Kathmandu, 29 April 2009.

14 'New Rules for Private Schools' *The Business Times*, 11 February 2009.

Australia, and thereafter decided to transit in Singapore to find a job and acquire work experience.

### **The transitory residence of the new *lāhures***

A large proportion of the new *lāhures* reside in Singapore for less than five years and there are a variety of reasons for them forming part of a larger circulatory migration. Among the professionals, Singapore is seen as a country where experience can be gained before aiming for something better in countries like Australia, the United Kingdom or America. The Nepali students and restaurant workers who are keen on prolonging their stay in Singapore after two or four years are hindered by immigration regulations. In recent times, the inability of Nepali nationals to extend their employment passes is most evident among those in the food and beverage sectors or in other service-oriented industries. The liberal immigration policies that led to the influx of Nepalis have been amended and this has led to a downsizing of the immigrant population. Informants related that:

I have worked in 'Welcome Om' (restaurant) for slightly over 2 years but my employment pass did not get renewed. I do not know why I cannot continue to work in Singapore. I have to return to Nepal and then try to come to Singapore again. Otherwise, I will have to go to another country.<sup>15</sup>

Two years ago, those working in my restaurant were largely Nepali. But of late, almost all their employment passes are not getting renewed and they have gone back. I do not know what has caused this change in immigration rules concerning Nepalis.<sup>16</sup>

Most of the contemporary Singapore-based Nepali professionals obtained their tertiary education in Australia before coming to Singapore to get jobs. Several have permanent residence status in both Singapore and Australia. At this point, while there are a growing number whose options are constrained by immigration rules, they are also others who are

15 Personal communication, Ramesh Shrestha, waiter at 'Welcome Om'. Singapore, 14 November 2011.

16 Personal communication, Dan Bahadur Shahi, owner of 'Everest Kitchen'. Singapore, 3 May 2010.



undecided about settling down in Singapore, Australia or a third country. Some respondents commented that:

...it is not only the Nepali restaurateurs who have to return. Even among the professionals, many of my friends are not able to extend their employment pass or in some cases, their application for permanent residency has been unsuccessful. They have gone back to Nepal and perhaps they might re-migrate to the West... As for me, I feel that it is convenient to live in Singapore. It is neat, tidy and there is a good infrastructure in place. It is very Asian and I don't feel so foreign here. But, whatever I'm doing here, I always say it is temporary.<sup>17</sup>

I knew this Nepali girl who studied in Australia, and she worked in Singapore for five or six years. She was doing well. But she decided not to settle here. Instead she went back to Sydney since she got a better offer.<sup>18</sup>

Various informants who work as professionals admitted the possibility of becoming a citizen but at same time expressed their reluctance to make Singapore their home. They would frankly state:

I came to Singapore to get my MBA and my employment happened by chance. I've been here for about 2 years or so but have never tried to settle in Singapore. I will go back to my country, even my family wants me back home.<sup>19</sup>

There are benefits if I become Singapore citizen. But I do not know if I want to settle here. I do not know where I am going to be, I could be anywhere.<sup>20</sup>

There is no problem for me to get a Singapore PR but I am definitely going back to Nepal. I spent my childhood in Nepal but left my country for 30 years. It is only fair I give back something.<sup>21</sup>

17 Personal communication, Kishore Dev Pant, engineer. Singapore, 10 January 2010.

18 Personal communication, Amar Chitrakar, President of the Nepali Singapore Society. Singapore, 9 March 2010.

19 Personal communication, Dhoroj Shrestha, Academic Executive Officer. Singapore, 22 April 2009.

20 Personal communication, anonymous teacher. Singapore, 18 March 2010.

21 Personal communication, anonymous academic. Singapore, 24 March 2010.

The transitory residence of the new *lāhures* is a poignant feature of their migration to Singapore. The length of the migrants' stay in Singapore is determined not only by their occupation type and personal ambition but also on the immigration rules relating to their respective vocation. In general, Nepali migrants stay in Singapore for less than five years. The exceptions are found mainly in professional categories who have lived in Singapore for a longer period of time.

### **A Nepali quasi-diaspora in Singapore**

The Nepalis in Singapore live in a situation of temporality. If they are conceptualised as a quasi-diaspora, this accounts for the permanent transience of the Nepali diasporic movement to Singapore. The ambiguous diasporic position of the professionals who are undecided as to whether to take up Permanent Residence (PR) in Singapore or return to Nepal in order to venture into another country is striking. Paradoxically, as much as they would like to settle down in Singapore, which they regard as an ideal place to live, there remains an inclination to return to Nepal and/or venture to a country in the West. Most of the new *lāhures* have lived in Singapore for approximately five years, thus giving their residence some permanence. Yet, given the transient and complex nature of their migratory movements, their settlement in Singapore lacks a permanent character.

William Saffran has discussed a variety of collective experiences. He defines diasporas as follows: a historical trajectory of dispersal, conjuring up memories of the homeland; feelings of exclusion in the host country; a longing for eventual return and a strong myth of return; rendering support to the homeland; and a collective identity importantly defined by this relationship (Saffran 1999: 364-65). The hallmarks of diaspora include settlement in a foreign country; racialised discourses that underscore the power dynamics and social relations between different groups of people; and identity quandaries that render visible the tensions produced by laying one's roots elsewhere (Clifford 2006; Brah 2006; Hall 2006).

A pertinent question which then arises is whether the Nepalis in Singapore are 'transmigrants' or 'temporary migrants'. Are they 'diasporic' or are the dynamics of the Nepali community in Singapore exceptional? The community embodies two types of migratory flows. While the Singapore Gurkhas are defined by a British colonial immigration heritage,

the relatively recent movement of the new *lāhures* is a product of various factors (e.g. Nepal's and Singapore's foreign policies, kinship networks, and the role of agents). The Nepali community in Singapore is fissured by differentiated histories and patterns of migration.

Rupa Chanda critically questions the classical tenets of diaspora theory, postulating that

...while diaspora refers to people from one country who are settled abroad permanently, does this only mean those who have changed nationality, or does this also include those who have retained their nationality but changed their permanent residence, or might it include those staying abroad for a long time, without changing either, perhaps because they are not permitted to do so as in the case with the expatriate community in Gulf countries? (Chanda 2008: 3).

The concept of 'diaspora' has long tended to be equated with permanent settlement abroad. Chanda questions this very notion. Similar to the expatriate community in Gulf countries, the Gurkhas are perceivably a diasporic community. This is despite the fact that they stay in Singapore for a very long time without integrating into their host country, they retain their nationality, and their permanent residence in Nepal usually remains unchanged. Similarly, the new *lāhures* can also be considered to be diasporic, although they have retained their Nepali nationality, have resided in Singapore for a substantial period of time, and are still vacillating between leaving or staying in Singapore.

The Nepali community in Singapore simultaneously conforms to and contests the classical bedrock of diasporic theory. In terms of conjuring up memories of the homeland, it resonates with classical notions of diaspora theory. At the same time, disengagements are evident when one tries to situate the community within the context of notions such as a historical trajectory of dispersal, a strong myth of return, and a collective identity. The unique dynamics of the Nepalis in Singapore serve as a case study which challenges some of the classical prerequisites normally associated with diasporic communities.

First, the Maoist insurgency in Nepal might have pressured Nepalis to emigrate to some extent, but nonetheless their migration to Singapore does not entail being 'dispersed' as it does in the Jewish and Armenian

contexts. Second, Saffran contends that diasporic communities retain memories of their homeland, and this is evident amongst the new *lāhures* in Singapore. The Nepali Society in Singapore was formed in 2008 as an initiative undertaken by members of the new *lāhure* community. The society seeks to maintain its cultural and traditional identification with Nepal. Through various events (e.g., *Dasai*, Nepali *Naya Barsa*, etc) organised by the society, memories of Nepal are conjured up and retained.

Third, in relation to the Nepalis in Singapore, the issue of 'return' is not a myth. The new *lāhures* are allowed to settle in Singapore provided they meet the necessary criteria to gain permanent residency. However, as explained earlier, a negligible percentage of new *lāhures* are Singapore citizens. A majority of them return to Nepal either because they want to venture into another country or because they are unable to prolong their stay in Singapore due to the immigration rules. This makes the 'myth of return' a misnomer among the Nepali community in Singapore.

Fourth, given the diversity present in the Nepali community in Singapore, it is difficult to speak of a collective identity and group consciousness amongst them. The *lāhures* and new *lāhures* live polarised lifestyles in Singapore, and are subject to different rules and regulations. To some extent, the expansion of the ethnic Nepali restaurants over the last fifteen years has helped to bridge the gap between the two groups, thus facilitating the development of an overarching Nepali identity in Singapore. Gurkha families patronise the restaurants and sometimes participate in the events organised in restaurants by the Nepali Singapore Society. Nevertheless, a discord is prevalent between the two groups, and there continues to be minimal interaction between the *lāhures* and new *lāhures*, given the formers' role in Singapore's national security. According to Singapore's Ministry of Home Affairs, the Gurkhas' principal roles now are to act as a specialist guard force at key installations and to serve as a force supporting police operations. They have also provided security for major events such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank meetings in 2006 and the 13<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit in 2007.<sup>22</sup> Increasingly, the Gurkhas assist the police in guarding Singapore against terrorism.

Although it conforms to some of the classical notions of diaspora

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22 Personal communication, Charlotte Loh, Senior Public Communications Executive, Ministry of Home Affairs. Singapore, 16 October 2008.

theory, the new *lāhure* community in Singapore exhibits some peculiar features. In terms of relating to their homeland and defining themselves with reference to Nepal, the new *lāhures* lend themselves to the classical notion of diaspora. However, the unique dynamics of the community serve to reconfigure notions such as a historical trajectory of dispersal, a strong myth of return, and a collective identity.

Whilst recognizing that the *lāhures* are sojourners and politically disenfranchised individuals, the Gurkha Contingent as a community has thrived in Singapore for 61 years and the longevity of the Nepalese 'settlement' in Singapore vis-à-vis *lāhure* families allows them to be constructed as a diasporic community. Return is not a myth for them, because *lāhure* families return to Nepal after living in Singapore for 20 to 25 years. The nostalgia experienced by various *lāhures* for Nepal during their service in Singapore is just as salient as their exilic nostalgia for Singapore when they resettle in Nepal. In this context, notions of 'host-country' and 'homeland' undergo complex negotiations, shaping a dual sense of belonging.

On the other hand, the new *lāhures* in Singapore are still at an early stage of community formation. Composed of pioneer immigrants who are gradually putting down roots in Singapore, after having had Singapore-born children, they are arguably a community in the making. Still in an embryonic stage, the Singapore Nepali community is yet to fully develop, and thus the term 'quasi-diaspora' would be apt as it articulates the incipient nature of the community.

## Conclusion

Nepali emigration to Singapore began in 1949 with the movement of Gurkhas. The second phase gained momentum after 1991 and intensified following the turn of the twenty-first century with the advent of new *lāhures*. It is clear from the profile of the new *lāhure* community in Singapore that a majority of them hails from the Eastern and Western regions of Nepal, similar to the Gurkhas, and also from the Kathmandu Valley. Possibly, the Gurkhas have created awareness about Singapore, and an exclusive informal network between the Gurkhas and the new *lāhures* serves to explain the regional and even ethnic/clan affinity between the two groups.

Seddon, Adhikari and Gurung postulate that it is not only in the

Gulf that Nepali migrants encounter 'dirty, degrading and dangerous' conditions at work. Whether in Korea or Kuwait, Singapore or Saudi Arabia, the risks and the hardships are real (Seddon *et al* 2001: 16). However, it has been demonstrated that Singapore's immigration policies pertaining to the Nepalis hinge on the need for them to be educated and skilled. The job scope for the new *lāhures* in Singapore is distinct, considering that Nepalis are largely categorised as blue-collared workers in other parts of the world. Singapore's immigration polices continue to define the occupational niches of new *lāhures*.

In spite of the bulge in the numbers of new *lāhures* in Singapore, a majority of them are not permanent residents. The mobilisation of social networks in the ethnic Nepali restaurants has contributed to facilitating the movement of semi-skilled workers in the food and beverage sector. Some of the owners of these restaurants are Singapore citizens, and have integrated into the island-city because the stable political and economic environment is perceived to be conducive for their business. However, the workers are cornered by immigration regulations that require regular renewals of their Employment Passes. It is often the case that such workers live in a constant state of uncertainty in Singapore.

After the controversy over shady agents and shoddy private schools, Nepali students have become a negligible part of the Singapore Nepali population because a majority of them have returned to their homeland. While there are a handful of professionals who have become Singapore citizens, the majority of recently-arrived professionals are uncertain about making Singapore their permanent residence. This uncertainty is further compounded by their transnational motives, because many of them have ambitions to migrate to Australia, America and other countries in the West.

The transitory nature of the new *lāhures'* residence in Singapore is a crucial aspect of their migration pattern. Arguably, the new *lāhures* form part of a larger circulatory migration pattern. Their sojourn in Singapore demonstrates that there are either structural impediments to their ability to settle in Singapore or that they are themselves searching for better economic opportunities.

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