

'Belonging and Not-Belonging: Experiences of
Nepali Gurkha Families on Returning from Singapore.'

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BELONGING AND NOT BELONGING
EXPERIENCES OF NEPALI GURKHA FAMILIES
ON RETURNING FROM SINGAPORE

Kelvin E.Y. Low

THE GURKHAS, WHOSE HISTORY OF migration from Nepal to Southeast Asia and other regions dates back to the period of British colonial-ism, have established themselves in former British colonies that include Singapore, Hong Kong, and India (Nath 2009), as well as the UK itself. They were first recruited by the British Army in 1815 in the middle of the Anglo-Nepalese War of 1814–16, as the British were impressed with their bravery and hardiness (Banskota 1994; Parker 1999). In certain contexts of military labour migration, they are allowed to bring their immediate families to settle down and receive education, while in others, Gurkhas who have retired have also gone into collaboration with private companies including those in Singapore, Malaysia, and Hong Kong. It is apparent that over the last two centuries, Gurkhas and their families have had a palpable global presence, working and residing not only in the countries for which they serve in the army (Britain, India, Brunei, Malaysia) or police force (Singapore), but also in other contexts where they have retired

or embarked on a second career overseas in the private military and security industries (Bharadwaj 2003; Chakrabarti 2008; Davis 2000; Francis 1999; Uesugi 2007), cruise tourism (Jackman 2009; Wood 2002), and manual labour (Yamanaka 2000).

Their migrant life worlds and aspirations, however, have seldom been addressed in scholarly literature, with a few exceptions (for example, Bellamy 2011; Caplan 1995; Des Chene 1991, 1993). Other works based on Gurkha experiences include popular historical writings by British writers (or former British-Gurkha officers; see, for example, Bolt 1967; Bullock 2009; Smith 1973) and various other sources (Crew 2004; Cross and Gurung 2007; Karki 2009; Laksamba et al. 2013). In order to comprehend these global dispersions, and more pertinently, to query the migratory processes and their implications for both Gurkhas and their children, this chapter deals with notions of 'belonging' and 'not belonging'—terms that have been taken up in the scholarly literature in migration of late. Specific attention is paid to ex-Gurkhas who have retired from the Singapore Police Force and whose children were born and schooled in Singapore.¹ The chapter thus deliberates upon various migratory processes and experiences of Singapore Gurkha families in order to examine the transnationalization of Gurkha service against the backcloth of military historiography.

Formed in 1949, the Gurkha contingent in Singapore is one of the smallest in the world, where Nepali males between the ages of 17.5 and 21 are recruited in Nepal through the agency of the British Army (Gould 1999). It is estimated that there are about 2,000 Gurkhas at present serving in the Singapore Police Force (Chong 2014). Upon the retirement of their Gurkha fathers (usually in their forties), the children have to cease their education in Singapore and return to Nepal.

¹ The chapter forms part of an ongoing larger project where I analyse the migrant experiences of Gurkhas and their families through interviews, media reports, relevant websites and other Internet sources, archival materials, and regimental histories. Thus far, over 50 ex-Gurkhas and their family members have been interviewed in English (with the exception of one retired Gurkha who is in his nineties, who spoke in Nepali). Upon consent granted from respondents, these interviews were voice-recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

What does having to curtail one's schooling years mean in terms of sentiments of attachment to place, social ties that have been established, and the process of returning 'home' to Nepal which at times feels more foreign than Singapore? By exiting Singapore not based on one's choice, how do the children adapt to life in Nepal and what are the available opportunities for education and employment as they undergo various socio-cultural adjustments (Conway and Potter 2009)? How do Gurkhas and their family members negotiate transnational interfaces (Long and Long 1992) in terms of their migrant experiences of work, belonging, and notions of 'home'? How are they positioned with regard to citizenship, belonging, rights, and privileges (Kabeer 2005; Kivisto and Faist 2007)? These adjustments therefore shore up the different meanings and attachments that conjoin belonging and the notion of 'home' for Gurkha families. Christou queries the polyvalent layers of 'home' and belonging:

Home is as much fluid as it is rigid, it is flexible and complex. It seeks to ground and localise, but it is also an integral part of a world of movement, it is relative and contested, a site of ambivalence and a source of anxiety. Home as a concept that raises issues of belongingness can become complicated and difficult to deconstruct and even to contextualise and situate. It may trigger memories, trauma, indifference and evoke struggles over selfhood and nationhood. (Christou 2009: 112)

Following Christou, how do different members of Gurkha families relate to Nepal or Singapore as 'home'?²

I first deliberate on notions of belonging and not belonging. These notions are particularly helpful for framing narratives of ex-Gurkhas and their family members who have returned to Kathmandu and Pokhara to settle down after working for the Singapore Police Force (SPF) for at least fifteen years or more.³ Then I analyse the politics of belonging in relation to organizational efforts put forward by two groups in Pokhara, namely the 'Everest Association' and the 'Annapurna Community'.⁴ The chapter concludes by reflecting on

² Cf. Teerling (2011) and Teo (2011).

³ The narrative interviews were conducted during a fieldtrip to Nepal in 2012.

⁴ All names of informants and organizations are pseudonyms.

how belonging and the politics of belonging, in the case of Gurkha families, demonstrate that Gurkha labour recruitment and migration are intertwined with emotive and affective belonging, as well as issues revolving around legal rights to citizenship and residence.

CONCEPTUALIZING 'BELONGING' AND 'NOT BELONGING'

Two central research queries guide the analytical thrust of this chapter: (1) What is belonging, and what is its character? and (2) What are the politics of belonging, and how do such politics shift over time, across and within generations, and through changing socio-political climates? The first question can be answered by understanding what belonging (and by extension, not belonging) means to individual Gurkha family members. The second, then, deals with what is at stake for those families, contextualized within the constraints and the freedoms that social actors exercise as they assess their own contexts of (not)-belonging. In short, I am interested in exploring what belonging looks and feels like personally (or at the individual and social group level), as well as what it means in political or structural terms (or at the collective level).⁵

The distinction between these two main queries corresponds with Yuval-Davis's (2006) differentiation of belonging and the politics of belonging. For her, the former refers to tangible dimensions of belonging that include emotional attachment and a sense of 'home' that one experiences. The latter has to do with how belonging is connected to collectives in particular ways, dovetailing discourses on nationalism, citizenship, and racism. Antonsich (2010) makes a very similar distinction between belonging as 'place-belongingness' and personal and intimate sentiments of feeling 'at home', and the 'politics of belonging' as a 'discursive resource' that is related to claims or resistance revolving inclusion and exclusion. His typology comprises five factors that elucidate belonging as felt and experienced:

⁵ This distinction is in line with the way Mee and Wright (2009) distinguish between the formal and informal aspects of belonging in relation to citizenship and civic identity.

autobiographical, relational, cultural, economic, and legal. These five elements will provide the necessary trajectory for analysing my data, resembling what Yuval Davis includes as “social locations; identifications and emotional attachments; and ethical and political values” (2006: 199).

Such discourses on belonging need to be framed within a set of specific historical and contemporary conditions (Teerling 2011) that confront Gurkhas and their families. For instance, one major difference between working for the British Army and the SPF is that while both British and Singapore Gurkhas took their families to live with them in their respective country of service, the latter was not allowed to remain in Singapore upon retirement, as compared to the former. Such conditions of employment and residence therefore influence and shape both sentiments and structures of belonging that conjoin the two interrelated queries outlined above.

There is another important point to be noted in the discussion to follow. While Gurkhas themselves are subject to contractual terms with the SPF which determine the length of their service, children of Gurkhas are by association affected by these terms. However, it is interesting to consider the experiences of Gurkha children in relation to ‘return migration’—for which the term needs to be further interrogated as the children are, in a manner of speaking, not really ‘returning’ to Nepal since they were born and educated in Singapore. They are, as second-generation children, not migrants themselves (cf. Haikkola 2011); they are returning to *their parents’* birth country and not their own. This has consequences for the way they relate and adjust to living in Nepal, having spent almost two formative decades of their lives overseas as Singaporean-born Nepalis.⁶ This is unlike their parents’ biographies of being natives of Nepal. Where they are concerned, the notion of ‘return migration’ is then more applicable for the first generation, that is, Gurkhas and their wives. Teerling’s explanation concerning second-generation migrants and ‘return’ is useful here, “For the second generation, the term ‘return’

⁶ The official term used in Singapore and around the world, as at least one of my Gurkha children respondents knew, is NRN (Non-Resident Nepali) (see Chapter 17 in this volume).

is ambiguous; it is not a return in terms of birthplace statistics, but rather an emigration to another country. Nevertheless, these migrants often do have a sentimental relationship with the parental homeland. Hence the 'return' has empirical meaning even if it breaches the logic of migration statistics." (Teerling 2011: 1080).

In this regard, what then is the significance of 'return' for both generations and how do they differ in terms of their capacities for engendering a sense of belonging or not belonging given the different linguistic, cultural, and national backgrounds? Overall, the notions of both belonging and not belonging require reflection on (1) distinguishing between senses of belonging and the politics of belonging; (2) addressing the multiple levels of belonging which may be complementary or contradictory depending on context; and (3) shifts in belonging over time. The third point on shifts warns us not to take belonging as a static and fixed category (Antonsich 2010), but rather to recall that social actors' senses of belonging acquire different meanings and saliences across the different periods of their lives. Besides, belonging and not belonging may not necessarily be mutually exclusive, as individuals may simultaneously subscribe to both in relation to Singapore and/or Nepal (cf. Cassarino 2004; Nath 2009).⁷

In order to explicate more clearly the shifts in belonging and not belonging, I will focus on the narrative accounts of Manisha, the 23-year-old daughter of a retired Gurkha who, at the time, had been in Nepal for four years following her father's retirement. The analysis will also be interspersed with experiences of other Gurkhas and their children so as to establish the patterns of belonging and not belonging that may be identified. By attempting to account for discernible shifts that have arisen through my analyses of interview material, my assessment of the notion of belonging points toward its fluidity, thereby adding to conceptions of belonging as an on-going, multi-dimensional process, rather than as an unchanging, discrete status (Mee and Wright 2009; Pfaff-Czarnecka 2011; Schein 2009; Teerling 2011; Teo 2011).

⁷ Cf. Ehrkamp and Leitner (2006), who raise the possibility of 'multiple allegiances' that traverse national borders and communities.

**BETWEEN BELONGING AND NOT BELONGING:
SENTIMENTS AND POLITICS**

Markers of belonging include the myriad knowledge and practices of everyday life that one acquires and sustains or recollects. This is concisely expressed by Yuval-Davis (2006:199):

People can 'belong' in many different ways and to many different objects of attachments. These can vary from a particular person to the whole of humanity, in a concrete or abstract way; belonging can be an act of self-identification or identification by others, in a stable, contested or transient way. Even in its most stable 'primordial' forms, however, belonging is always a dynamic process, not a reified fixity, which is only a naturalised construction of a particular hegemonic form of power relations.

In my conversations with ex-Gurkhas, their wives and children, narratives of belonging are replete with references to everyday practices and encounters which cover the range of informal and formal contexts of sociality. Food and foodways appear to be a salient and recurring index that connotes one's sense of belonging, given the familiarity and comfort that they provide. As Abdullah argues: "Food and the attendant sensory registers ... readily become quotidian expressions of multiple belongings and embodied connections social actors have with 'home'" (2010: 157). The fond recollections that informants articulate vis-à-vis gastronomy thereby reflect their sense of attachment and belonging to Singapore, as the following quotes depict:

I think we all, even me, we are so deeply rooted to the sense that sometimes we just wake up, and then there's that, that smell of carrot cake, no I need to go to a hawker centre!

I think there's like two of my friends there now. I think they also got married to someone in the Force, so now they are wives, the rest of us we are all here. So when we meet it's like eh Hokkien mee, and then roti prata ...

Gauri and Malashree, who were both born, bred, and schooled in Singapore, but then returned to Kathmandu, told me that whenever they missed Singapore food, they would troop down to a restaurant in Kathmandu known as 'Sing-ma Foodcourt', an eatery opened by a Singaporean who serves both Singaporean and Malaysian cuisine

including nasi lemak, chicken rice, and beef rendang.⁸ Missing Singapore *and* Nepali food thus appears to be part of the processes of migration and return migration in the context of transnationalism. Manisha relates how her aunt first felt homesick about having to leave Nepal. Later on, the same feelings became apparent for Singapore food when her aunt returned to Nepal on holiday during her Gurkha-husband's leave. Manisha relates her aunt's experience as follows:

I can't wait to go back to Singapore, when I first was a newly-wed I went to Singapore, I was so homesick I missed all my family and all the Nepali food back home. Now I stay in Singapore, I can't wait to have chicken rice and all the hokkien mee ... I'm so sick already, I can't wait to go [back] to Singapore, I don't know about the kids but I need to be back in Singapore already.

According to Manisha, then, she believes that her aunt "has a sense of belonging to Singapore, and all the food there". Such everyday practices as eating reflect "the process of incorporating the 'nation' into everyday life" (Christou 2009: 109). That is to say, the yearning for Singaporean cuisine represents returnees' subjective identification with the country, mediated through food and food practices as part of everyday senses of belonging. Recreating memories of Singapore through gastronomy would thereby mirror Antonsich's (2010: 647) take on autobiographical factors relating to one's past as a component of 'place-belongingness'.

Lalita, who is the wife of a retired Gurkha Chief Inspector, told me that she maintains an account with a local bank in Singapore so that they can easily withdraw local currency whenever in Singapore. Furthermore, Lalita proudly declared: "Singapore is my country". Similarly, Hires, who retired from the SPF in 2005 after 27 years of service, receives his pension from the Singapore government through a Singapore bank account. Beyond the practicality of having monthly amounts transferred into this account, he remarks: "... even though [I'm] retired, my heart is still there [Singapore]". He tells me that he continues to keep abreast with news on Singapore, making the reading of blogs and other websites for 3 to 4 hours a day as part of his daily routine.

⁸ See www.singmafoodcourt.com. Accessed on 7 June 2012.

These instances of recounting what Gurkha families miss about Singapore, and what they still retain in/of Singapore, represent senses of meaningful belonging, which, according to Kendall, Woodward, and Skrbis (2009: 33; original emphasis) are not “reducible to human-focused social interaction but ... can be derived from relationships with *places, objects and ideas*”. The various material and non-material aspects of how life in Singapore is reconstructed assume emotional valence for informants. These aspects are significant as they provide a sense of connection to Singapore. They parallel what Hedetoft (2004: 24) calls the “sources of belonging” that include “familiarity, sensual experience, human interaction and local knowledge” which are rooted in place. Together, these elements form the “sources of homeness” (Hedetoft 2004: 24).

To be a student in Singapore is to recite the national pledge and to sing the national anthem on a daily basis. To be a Nepali studying in Singapore is likewise to both sing and recite what Singaporean students do. Gauri, for example, claims that she feels more Singaporean than Nepali, given that reciting the pledge and singing the national anthem has become her daily routine during her school years in Singapore. In fact, she shared that she thought she was Singaporean till she had to return to Nepal at the age of twenty-three. In this respect, her sense of ‘Singaporeanness’ thereby acts as a foil to the lack of knowledge or affective ties to Nepal, a point that Manisha reflected similarly:

You know I was just thinking about it this morning, what are the significant dates in Nepal—in Singapore it was always 9th August, you know? National day is coming! And then there’s the Padang, and everything, and then here [Nepal] I don’t know anything. I know nuts, you know. It was so funny because I was thinking of ... I think this morning or the morning before, yah, so in a way that just shows like how Singaporean we really are. But yah, like I said, it’s slowly coming to terms with acceptance, yah.

While Gurkha children do feel that Singapore is ‘home’ for them, such sentiments of belonging cannot be translated into legislative and political terms, as Singapore is still a host society in which they grew up and spent their formative years as non-citizens. I visited a former Gurkha chief inspector of the SPF in Pokhara, where I spoke with his wife and daughter as well, about their experiences and memories of having lived and studied in Singapore. When asked about citizenship,

the Inspector's wife went into the house (we were chatting over tea at the verandah) and subsequently brought out her daughter's birth certificate to show me. It was a certificate issued by a Singapore hospital which explicitly states that 'the child is not a citizen of Singapore at the time of birth'.⁹ By virtue of showing me the birth certificate that clearly and officially marks her daughter as a non-citizen, the Inspector's wife indicated that belonging to Singapore was not possible in legislative terms.

Thus far, the various examples both demonstrate feelings of belonging and otherwise. The ease and familiarity with which membership to Singapore society and everyday practices are experienced and recounted suggest that there is a felt sense of belonging to the country in which they were born and bred, which is not Nepal. These senses of belonging should not merely be read as 'cognitive stories' (Yuval-Davis 2006: 202). They instead stand for emotional connections and desires for attachment, expressing both individual longings and collective social interactions or initiatives in their migrant biographies.

Some of the Gurkha children in Kathmandu meet occasionally under the auspices of what they have termed the 'Merlion Club', a reference to Singapore's iconic tourist symbol of a half-fish/half-lion mythical figure. Such attachments relate to what Mee and Wright (2009: 772) term as the "affective aspects of belonging". Through the Merlion Club, as well as other gatherings, a sense of belonging is bolstered through different affiliative configurations that add to identity formation as collectives (cf. Fortier 1999). Gurkha wives told me that they often get together to reminisce about their time in Singapore; comparisons are made between their country of origin (Nepal) and the host country (Singapore). These examples would also exemplify what Brubaker (2010: 65) terms as "everyday membership practices of identification and categorization".

ON NOT BELONGING

Gurkha children are connected both to their birthplace (Singapore) and their place of 'origin' (Nepal). The word 'origin' needs to be clarified.

⁹ One vital component of belonging, Antonsich (2010) argues, comprises legal factors such as citizenship or residence permits.

Gurkha children are by virtue of their parents' nationality, Nepali. Hence, even if they were not born in Nepal, it is because of their parents that Nepal has to be their place of origin or their ancestral homeland. This then accounts for how Manisha's father constantly reminded Manisha and her siblings that they cannot assimilate too much into Singapore society since the eventual locale of settlement would be Nepal and not Singapore. The sense of belonging that Gurkhas instil in their children links them to their country of 'origin'. As she recounted how her father constantly reminded them:

I don't know about my friends' fathers, but my father would say like, he'll be the one ... he's a man of a few words, he will be the one to say like, erm yes, be grateful that you have a chance to grow up as a Singaporean, and it's taken somewhat like a social experiment, you know, you are Nepali but you get the whole Singapore experience, from birth all the way up, but never forget that actually you are Nepali, so in in trying to blend in here (Singapore), do keep a note at the back of your mind, that at one time you have to leave ... yah, so while blending in, like remember or be careful not to blend too completely to the extent that it becomes a weakness somewhat. (Intervention is author's own)

As a corollary, the idea of 'origin' requires further examination, as it takes on different nuances for the first and second generation of Nepalese who worked, studied, or assumed household duties in Singapore. Manisha conveys what her mother thought of having left Nepal after getting married, and having to return upon her husband's retirement. She describes:

And then I think more than for us she was speaking for herself and the other wives, so, I mean, we stayed there for a good eighteen, twenty years, and then like now we're here (Nepal), it's a very pathetic state for us because for us we're neither here nor there ... so where do we pick up from, you know, where do we pick up and where did we really leave, leave Singapore or leave Nepal? (Intervention is author's own)

For the children of Gurkhas, and in the case of Manisha's mother, there is therefore a sense of displacement (Yuval-Davis 2006) in Nepal (where belonging is meant to naturally arise), as a consequence of having spent many years in Singapore.

Manisha returned to Nepal after she had completed her 'O' levels in Singapore. Her recollection of first impressions of her return tells

how little she felt she belonged. This sense of distance arose from having been brought up in Singapore. Such exposure instilled mores and social norms that Manisha found lacking in Nepal.

So when I was taking the taxi ride back home [from the airport in Kathmandu], as offerings we got like Mandarin oranges ... and then we were having the oranges in the taxi, and then you know how Singapore is like, you know, it's a 'fine' city, you don't litter, and then, er, like you always keep your litter in a plastic bag or in your pockets, so I was eating the Mandarin oranges, the peels were on my hands, on my lap, and then I'm looking at my aunt, looking at the scenery, I'm like, "where's the dustbin?" and my aunt points out of the window, and [says] "That's the dustbin". She pointed to the ground [outside of the taxi]. So I'm like, "No, I mean the dustbin", I'm still looking for the dustbin, and then later I comprehend that the dustbin was the open road, and then she just takes the peel from my hand, then she tossed it out the window [while the taxi was still moving]. And until I get home I was still trying to digest like did that really happen? In front of my bare eyes? Or I am just, that was some crazy dream or something? Because I have never done that in my whole life. (Intervention is author's own)

Ostensibly, Manisha faces different cultural frameworks (Wilding 2007) in her experience of 'return' migration, where the materialities of everyday life in the two countries to which she is connected are markedly dissimilar. On top of the orange peel incident, the following 'phlegm' experience also remains etched in Manisha's memory and highlights the distinction between Singapore and Nepal:

Even when it comes to like ... er ... dispelling phlegm, we are always taught to spit into our tissue paper, excuse ourselves to the washroom, and here [in Nepal] people just do it in the open. And I was like, hmm, I'm gonna hold it, I'm gonna go home and then I'd gonna like, yah, then go the toilet, and then I talk. Then my aunt was like, "why are you so quiet, why are you so quiet?" She was elbowing me, but then I was pointing to my mouth, she said, "Just spit it out the window!" It was a second shock in the taxi ride, so already ... it was really an eye-opener, I couldn't I don't think I could get a shocking, more realistic eye-opener than a taxi ride to home [Nepal] ... yah ... [the basic everyday things] that I never in my wildest imagination thought would happen in Nepal. There it was, in front of my eyes. (Intervention is author's own)

Having to relocate to Nepal because of her father's retirement from the SPF, Manisha's process of relocation may be regarded as a 'project

of the self' which include both difficulties and successes that operate in tandem as one relocates to one's homeland (Christou 2009: 110).

From the initial stages of adjusting to life in Nepal, to four years later where she is presently working as a hotel guest relations officer in Kathmandu, Manisha has gone through *shifts* in sentiments of belonging where she has gradually become used to life in Nepal. For instance, she recounts the story of a Nepali friend who was brought up in India, who later came back to Nepal as a young child. Although Manisha says she does not regard this friend as a 'true Nepali', she acknowledges that this friend is "more Nepali than me (Manisha) because of the years that she's here". However, her friend thinks otherwise, as Manisha herself explains:

And yet she says to me that "I'm amazed by the way you've settled in, because when I look at you I feel like you are now the local and I'm the tourist." So I take it as a positive feedback that I've really put myself out here, and challenged myself to fit in, and learn erm ... erm learn not by the book but by observation and everything that happens around me, and I haven't just challenged myself, I've succeeded actually. Yah, so ... initially the challenges are there but then it's up to the individual, whether to succeed and just stick it in, or still deny that you are Nepali and still speak Singlish and you know just brag whatever thing Singaporean. Because that's sort of an illusion. You are not really holding that red [Singaporean] passport, you have a green passport and you are here [in Nepal].¹⁰ (Intervention is author's own)

In Manisha's own evaluation of returning to Nepal, she realizes and embraces the challenges that she had to overcome. On the basis of her friend's opinion among other factors, she arrives at the conclusion that she has in fact managed well in (re)incorporating into Nepali society. Such an admission is then rounded off by way of referring to belonging in official and legislative dimensions, where Manisha raises the bureaucratic distinction between passports that connote the different nationalities in this context. Having said that, one should note, in subscribing to Brubaker's (2010: 64) contention, that the

¹⁰ Singlish refers to a mixture of local languages and dialects that is spoken in Singapore. The red passport and green passport that Manisha points to, refer to passports of Singapore and Nepal respectively.

politics of citizenship and of belonging “can be distinguished analytically”. In spite of the connotations of ‘*formal* state membership’ that is granted vis-à-vis citizenship, social actors can still possess a sense of belonging to more than one country, as Manisha’s biography suggests. While there is no formal belonging to the Singapore state given that she is not in possession of the red passport, Manisha’s narrative nonetheless reflects the presence of substantive or felt membership with Singapore.

Simultaneous senses of belonging to both Singapore and Nepal may be discerned from Manisha’s account of reminiscing about the ‘good days’ that she and her cousin experienced in Singapore:

You know, like, “Oh you know Singapore won a gold medal in the Olympics, or you know, National day is coming, and did you check the photographs on Facebook and what they are doing different this year ...” Yah so it’s ... yah so for me, it’s sort of like, I think I’m trying ... I’m becoming more Nepali, and then just when I feel like yah, I’m working there, I mean I don’t force myself to work there but I see it happening. Then something happens that brings me back to Singapore. So it’s just I think another loud statement that yah I can’t deny that it will always be a part of me. It will have a ... permanent space in my heart. Yes.

Concurrent sentiments of belonging to both countries, in the above account, are represented through Manisha’s subscription to the Singapore community and its success or celebrations with regard to international sports performance or national day as a mark of the nation’s independence.¹¹ Manisha’s account also indicates a shift in belonging, as she feels that she is ‘becoming more Nepali’, and yet acknowledges at the same time that Singapore will hold a ‘permanent space’ in her heart: belonging to one country slowly becomes belonging to two. In other words, sentiments of belonging and not belonging—and indeed multiple belonging—ought to be perceived as sharing the same plane on a continuum instead of a dichotomous polarity.

¹¹ This sense of belonging resonates with Anderson’s (1983) notion of imagined communities, which takes on an added dimension of felt sense of membership within Singapore society as Gurkha children themselves imagine.

THE POLITICS OF BELONGING: WHAT IS AT STAKE?

The politics of belonging may be examined in two ways: the first, how claims to belonging are rationalized, leads to the second: the ways Gurkha families wish to assert the rights that arise from those claims. Overall, there are benefits and costs of (not) belonging to different constellations, representing the valuing and judging of belonging (Yuval-Davis 2006). These may pertain to economic and medical entitlements, as well as community development in the country of settlement. In other words, when belongingness is created, claims to belonging can then be formulated and put forward, in this case, to the Singapore government. As such, belonging becomes a resource (Antonsich 2010) that can be mobilized whereby social actors assert the right to stay, or to work in a place (Ervine 2008), among other claims.

The chairmen of the Everest Association and the Annapurna Community have organized themselves as a collective. It was agreed that the Everest Association would press claims in Singapore and the Annapurna Community would concentrate on contributing to the Nepali community in their post-retirement years. In my meeting with Hiresh, he enumerated seven requests to the Singapore government through the SPF, which demonstrate what is at stake if and when claims (built upon belonging) are successfully pursued. They were as follows:¹²

1. A review of retired servicemen's pensions, given that the inflation rate [in Nepal] has not been taken into account.
2. An increase of allowance for current servicemen.
3. Review of existing partial medical coverage that can only be reimbursed in Singapore; different medical coverage for servicemen who retired before and after 1994.
4. Permanent residency [in Singapore] for Gurkha children.
5. Wives and children to be allowed to work in Singapore.
6. Re-employment opportunities for retired servicemen.
7. Gurkha widows' pension.

¹² These requests were made to the SPF in recent years but have not met with any success so far.

The above requests were put forward by the Everest Association, crafted on the basis of rights of belonging that thereby engender these claims. As Hiresh put it:

So, erm ... once our group retired in 2004, we think, there is no harm requesting to the government. ... because we are requesting ... if we don't request ... we spent half our lives there, we serve, surviving with the pension given by the Singapore government, where [can] we go [to request]? We are not serving the government of Nepal, we were serving [Singapore] so we should request. I think morally, that should not be any problem. Yah. We should request. Yah. (Intervention is author's own)

The rationale for requesting is contingent on having served Singapore, and not the government of Nepal, which therefore prompted Hiresh and his group of ex-Gurkhas with the right to claim based on moral grounds of service and sacrifice. Hiresh cited the example of an ex-Gurkha who, having retired in 1962, continued to receive S\$62 (£31) as his pension. The response to this request from the Singapore Police Headquarters was that every retired serviceman who had served in Singapore could, from 2005, receive no more than S\$218 (£110) per month.

Further claims to permanent residency for their children were also raised, given that they were born and bred in Singapore, and that they would therefore not be able to fit in Nepal.¹³

We also request with the government that ... children who were born there, they be given PR, because they are born [there], they are brought up there! They studied there, and er ... they come here [Nepal], they are treated by Nepalese government like alien. Because they don't know any rule ... they don't know any rule, they don't know Nepali, they don't know the system here, here you have a lot of under the table things you know? They don't know, they are very straight, they are like Singaporean. (Intervention is author's own)

Following the rationale that these children would know and therefore could survive and adapt in Singapore society, Hiresh reiterated such

¹³ This may be interpreted as an instrumental move in order to legitimize PR claims, given that Gurkha children whom I discuss in this chapter have largely learnt to adapt in Nepal, though not without difficulties in their adjustments.

adaptability by arguing that they were brought up the ‘Singaporean way’. This meant to him that the children deserved the right to remain, “I think, for them, surviving in Singapore, they are qualified also. They studied there, they adapted there, so ... we requested, if they are given, and then, it will be much more better.” (sic).

Having a PR status would then mean that the children could continue to pursue their education and eventually work in Singapore, despite their Gurkha fathers’ retirement and mandatory return to Nepal. Hiresh elaborated further as to why PR status ought to be awarded to the children, in part due to their families’ ability to finance their education costs:

The other thing is, one thing is, once the father retires, whole family have to retire you know? We are repatriated. Can’t stay on. Problem. That is a difficult fact. Children don’t want to come [to Nepal]. Children want to stay there, want to study there! Also cannot! Not given the opportunity. The amazing thing is, if the people want to go for tertiary education, or somebody want to go further studies, in Singapore, er ... they also have money, and they are given the opportunity. But the children of the Gurkhas, they have CPF, they have gratuity everything, so they can support their [children’s education], because why? Every parent want to support their children. For their education, yah. Even though they have CPF, they have gratuity, they ... money accumulated for the children, they want to give them also, it’s not given the opportunity you know. That’s the ... erm ... very sad ... and very ... disappointing fact. So ... we raised this point also.¹⁴
(Intervention is author’s own)

Similar stances were also adopted by other retired Gurkha servicemen who claimed it was puzzling and frustrating that in spite of their children having been schooled and trained as nurses in Singapore, they were not allowed to work as nurses thereafter. Furthermore, these servicemen also pointed out that there are many foreigners in Singapore working mainly as nurses in the medical industry, and who come from such countries as China, the Philippines, and India. One ex-Gurkha noted that some nurses from China could not speak

¹⁴ CPF stands for Central Provident Fund, where it is mandatory for every Singaporean who works to contribute a portion of their monthly salary to the fund as their individual retirement fund. The same terms and conditions apply to Gurkhas working in the SPF as well.

English: “But they can’t even speak English. We can speak English but [are] not allowed to work in Singapore”. Hiresh’s frustration is discernible here:

Singapore employing the nurses from Philippines, from China, and India as well. But the Gurkhas’ children, study there, and born there, brought up there, and did the nursing course there! Staff nurse course. But not allowed to work. Yah ... so they migrated to elsewhere. Some erm ... er ... Australia, some in United Kingdom, some in the States. Since their degree is accepted in those countries, why not in Singapore? This is the problem. Because the children are penalized because the father is Gurkha. Very sad case.

Beyond the impossibility of working in Singapore, Hiresh’s extract raises another point in the cycles or processes of migration that are associated with not belonging in this instance. That is to say, while Gurkha children who have earned the relevant qualifications are not permitted to put their skills to good use in the Singapore medical field, and where return migration to Nepal is not a desirable option for these children. According to Hiresh, they would be regarded as ‘aliens’ in Nepal. Migrating to other countries outside of Asia for further studies or work then becomes another option in their migratory journeys. In sum, the politics of belonging, documented through the foregoing discussion, is connected to citizenship and its rights and duties, including “the right to migrate, the right of abode, the right to work and, more and more recently, the right to plan a future where you live” (Yuval-Davis 2006: 208). This sentiment has been echoed by both former Gurkhas and their children who worked and studied in Singapore. What is at stake in the politics of belonging—where belonging translates into a resource as discussed earlier—has to do with securing both educational and economic stability.

In order to expand upon the varying registers of belonging across different generations, and what is at stake, I draw attention to the seventh requested item that has to do with establishing a widows’ pension. Hiresh mentioned that in comparison to the widows’ pension that is made available for the wives of deceased Gurkhas in the British and the Indian army, there is no similar scheme in the case of Singapore. He then explains why such a pension is important:

Of course we understand that there’s no pension for Singaporean also. Yah, we understand. But, the Singaporean widow have (sic) much more

advantage. They can work. The Gurkha wives, they remain as dependents. Whole ... whole ... time, all the way, the husband works there. Can't work. And erm ... the time when she can work, time has gone you know! By the time the husband reaches the 45, 45 years, then it's too late. She come back here (Nepal), she has nothing. So that's why, er ... we requested the government that the, at least, er ... yah, that's why we have a, one widows' fund. We created our own.

Asking for the widows' pension therefore connects to the other request on allowing Gurkha wives to seek employment in Singapore, through which they can then be economically self-sufficient should their spouses pass on.

While waiting for this request to be considered, the Everest Association has, on its own, initiated a widows' pension. Active servicemen contribute S\$10 (£5) per month to this cause. Hiresh cited a case of one Gurkha policeman who was in Chitwan on leave from service in Singapore, and who met with a tragic accident when the boat he was in capsized. His wife and children had to return to Nepal and had no form of support; the widows' fund was subsequently established as a way to help such widows cope with the loss of their only source of income. In this respect, belonging is counter-posed to economic dispossession (Stratford 2009) in the recommendation for a pension scheme for Gurkha widows. In other words, belonging here is transformed into a resource for these widows to obtain economic stability as a 'right' to be exercised.

The other dimension of belonging, politics, and what is at stake, has to do with Gurkha initiatives relating to community-building efforts. At the same time, pursuing these endeavours with the larger good of the community in mind would thereby enhance the visibility of ex-Gurkhas in Pokhara.¹⁵ Where earlier deliberations on politics of belonging and citizenship dealt with claims to rights, the following discussion on such politics is related to the notion of 'cultural citizenship' which has to do with community activism as the main signifier

¹⁵ In this example on Pokhara, I am moving beyond the case of Singapore Gurkhas to consider Gurkhas more generally. Note that where Singapore Gurkhas do not possess the right of settlement, the opposite is true for British and Indian Gurkhas. Such a difference would mean that the politics of belonging applies in varying degrees in each case.

of belonging and membership (Pawley 2008; Yuval-Davis 2006). To begin with, Banskota notes that,

... the British Gurkha soldiers became the first common people to get mass education in the country. They were also the first source of public contact with the outside world. They visited different countries ... and worked side by side with nationals of different countries. This gave them an opportunity to familiarise themselves with new and progressive ideas abroad with which they compared what they found at home. On their return home from abroad they became the vehicle for spreading among their families, friends and communities the importance of education and development. Thus, indirectly the British Gurkha soldiers were instrumental for enlightening the masses about the political, social, economic and education reconstruction of their nation ... the Gurkhas were the first among the common people who became conscious of their rights and duties and tried to bring changes in their country. (Banskota 1994: 166-7)

Through the auspices of the Annapurna Community, four 'institutes'¹⁶ have been established since 2009 in an attempt to contribute to community building. They include (1) a cooperative (savings and credit) only for Gurkhas and their families; (2) a grocery shop that caters to the general public; (3) a Gurkhali Radio Station; and (4) a joint-venture jewellery shop. The chair of the Community, Lagan, states that, "This [is] our country, [we] take the challenge, try to do something. ... We are doing every bit to attract and unite our people ... to highlight our people's activities. ... We make our identity here [in Pokhara] ... not only [as] brave fighters ... we can prove that we have other ways to contribute to this country".

Having served with the British Army for over twenty years, and having travelled to many places including Brunei and Singapore, Lagan reasons that instead of "keeping the West with me ... [I'd] rather expose [Nepal] to all these kind of things". With an interest in harnessing the varied experiences that he had accumulated over the course of two decades of serving in the British Army, the four institutes are a way of fostering community bonds through self-help services. Gurkhas and retired servicemen may be shareholders of these institutes, regardless of whether they are/were working with

¹⁶ The term 'institute' was employed by the chairman, Lagan.

the British Army or the SPF. Gurkhas serving in the UK, residing in Kathmandu, in Singapore, whether they are in active service or otherwise, all contribute to these four organizations. Their contributions indicate the diasporic outreach and inflow of financial assistance or investment into Nepal, or what Seddon et al. (2002: 34) might term the “(unrecognised) remittance economy”. This would also relate to Yamanaka’s (2000) contention that as a result of the tradition of British Gurkha army service (to which I add Gurkha Singapore Police service), a remittance economy in Nepal has been created in both rural and urban areas. Interestingly, Lagan delineated four categories of Gurkhas who have retired from active service. The four types of retired servicemen are, in his words, as follows:

1. “I had enough ... I have pension ... and want to do nothing.”
2. “They go for [a] second career.” (Usually in the security industry.)
3. “They ... enjoy drinking, playing cards, gambling ... womanizing ...”
4. “[They get] involved with community and social work.”

Ostensibly, Lagan, together with ex-Gurkhas who form individual working committees of each of the four institutes, belong to the fourth category of retired Gurkhas or what Cassarino (2004: 270) would call ‘actors of change’. Lagan explains why he decided to return to Nepal to settle down, despite a recent ruling in the UK which awarded ex-Gurkhas the right to remain in Britain:

Having served ... so many years outside the country, where er ... I think every single person, wish to ... die ... do something for everyone. So, my ... resettlement, right to remain in the UK, I prefer myself not to go because you already spent so many years outside of your country, serve for others, so I decided myself to do something for the community, for the people, who need our help. ... I learned something, I gained a lot of experience ... so I decided to get involved in community, social service work.

Across the four ‘institutes’ that have been established in the last few years, Lagan details the number of shareholders per institute, where he also mentions the amount that each shareholder has to invest. For example, there are about 278 shareholders for the cooperative, and approximately 128 who have invested in the grocery shop, with amounts ranging between Rs 25,000 and Rs 500,000 (approximately

£180 to £3640). The minimum share for investing in the radio station, Lagan says, is Rs 10,000 (or £73). Apart from disseminating local, regional, and international news, Gurkhali Radio 106 MHz also broadcasts a weekly, one-hour programme hosted by Lagan himself (Figure 7.1). He interviews ex-Gurkhas about their individual experiences of serving overseas. As for the jewellery shop (Figure 7.2), he says that Gurkha families would go there to purchase accessories for weddings and other special occasions, where they would receive a discount given their Gurkha background.

The four institutes that Lagan oversees represent a cultivated sense of belonging to Nepal or Pokhara as a way of contributing



Figure 7.1 Gurkhali Radio Station, Pokhara.

Source: K. Low (2012).



Figure 7.2 Gurkha and Barah Jewellery Store, Pokhara.

Source: K. Low (2012).

to the community. These institutes represent a way for Lagan to articulate and further foster his belonging to Nepal, and specifically to Pokhara, by providing services and opportunities to fellow ex-Gurkhas. However, Lagan also points out that such contributions only involve Gurkhas and their families, and not to the non-Gurkha locals (in terms of investments). With an intention to transcend the image of Gurkhas as brave and loyal (and not good at business), and therefore to demonstrate that they can make contributions to the country, Lagan is however of the opinion that locals cannot be trusted. He therefore manages the four institutes for the Gurkha community exclusively. This then raises an interesting point with regard to the issue of belonging that is constructed on the basis of community

services. Belonging as performed after return migration means the re-establishment of boundaries when one is back in the homeland. While belonging seems to be a desirable intention after having served a foreign country for two decades or more, such belonging in Nepal concurrently produces exclusionary mechanisms. As we see in Lagan's case, exclusion of those *not* belonging to these Gurkha initiatives take place as well. One might argue that, as return migrants, they have also changed in terms of the cultural and social frameworks that they have been exposed to and subsequently subscribed to, which thereby leads to the distinction between migrants and non-migrants in the context of Nepal.

In my attempts to evaluate what belonging means, as well as the accompanying stakes that come into play in relation to (not)-belonging, I have argued that belonging first needs to be empirically realized so as to draw attention to what it means to belong or not belong to a particular country. From the Gurkha to his wife, and his children who were born in Singapore, the idea of 'origin' and therefore 'return migration' take on perceptible differences given contrasting biographical backgrounds of these social actors. Where the Gurkhas and their wives have left Nepal for Singapore, their children have not experienced the same type of departure as Singapore-born Nepalis. Instead, their departure from Singapore may very well connote this country as 'origin'; having to 'return' to Nepal, at first, makes no sense. Cassarino (2004: 268) is right when he contends that, instead of comprehending 'return' as marking the end of the migration cycle, it must be seen as one of many stages in the migratory process. Given the problematization of 'return' as a process and not as an end point in the larger scheme of migration, it remains to be seen whether senses of belonging and not belonging may take on different permutations for retired Gurkhas and their families in varying host-origin contexts.

Second, belonging and not belonging should not be treated in a dichotomous manner. Through the narratives that I have presented above, it is clear that belonging and not belonging may take place concurrently, given the simultaneous subscription to felt senses of familiarity, comfort, and longing for both Nepal and Singapore that

thread across different phases of informants' lives. Third, belonging also shifts in meaning and through context. Having a stake in a country means asserting one's rights, such as the claims that have been put forward by Gurkha families with regard to education, medical, and employment entitlements in or from Singapore. Returning to Nepal also means organizing Gurkha families as a collective, so as to deliver community-based initiatives as Nepal is also their country of belonging in their retirement milieu.

The final point to note is that while much scholarship has made conceptual distinctions between belonging, identity, citizenship, and other cognate notions within the wider discussion on migration, it is also pertinent to acknowledge that these imbricated categories of experience, be they experienced at the level of the everyday, or at the structural sociolegal levels, need to be addressed concurrently so as to provide a fuller, and both empirical and categorical, means of unpacking what belonging, not belonging, and the politics of belonging connote for different generations of migrants. As I have suggested, belonging and not belonging are not to be regarded as occupying two opposite ends of a dichotomy but rather as different points along a continuum. It is therefore crucial to realize why and how migrants of different generations occupy varying points on this continuum, and how best conceptual notions of (not)-belonging can account for the heterogeneity of experiences. Indeed, and while I concur with Brubaker (2010: 76) that questions of migration, membership, and belonging are "as old as human history", it is nonetheless paramount to re-examine these notions with regard to the multifaceted makeup of diasporic populations contingent upon the varying cycles, generations, and types of migrant trajectories that together animate cross-border and cross-cultural encounters within specific sociocultural and political structural milieus.