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Migrant warriors and transnational lives: constructing a Gurkha diaspora

Kelvin E. Y. Low

Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore, Singapore, Singapore

ABSTRACT

The Nepalese Gurkhas have often been regarded as brave warriors in the scheme of British military recruitment since the 1800s. Today, their descendants have settled in various parts of South East and South Asia. How can one conceive of a Gurkha diaspora, and what are the Gurkhas and their families' experiences of belonging in relation to varied migratory routes? This paper locates Gurkhas as migrants by deliberating upon the connection between military service and migration paths. I employ the lens of methodological transnationalism to elucidate how the Gurkha diaspora is both constructed and experienced. Diasporic consciousness and formation undergo modification alongside subsequent cycles of migration for different members of a diaspora. The article thus evaluates the transnational lives of migrants, and how these are connected to re-territorialized dimensions of identity and belonging.

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Introduction

The Nepalese Gurkhas have often been regarded as brave warriors in the scheme of British military recruitment and overseas service since the 1800s. Although never a part of the English colonial empire, the British wielded informal influence over Nepal and started recruiting Nepalese soldiers as an 'ethnic "martial race"' (Enloe 1980) or 'mercenaries'¹ (Bruslé 2012; Ware 2012) since the Anglo-Nepalese War of 1814–1816. Today, their descendants have settled in various parts of South East and South Asia such as Myanmar (Burma) and India. How can one conceive of a Gurkha diaspora, and what are the Gurkhas and their families' experiences of belonging? This paper locates Gurkhas as migrants and explores the Gurkha diaspora in terms of different migratory flows from Nepal to the UK, or Singapore, including their second-career moves that bring them to other countries such as Hong Kong, Malaysia and Brunei. I interrogate notions of return- and step-migration

CONTACT Kelvin E. Y. Low  socleyk@nus.edu.sg

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vis-à-vis Yamanaka's (2000) 'culture of emigration' and thereby theorize the notion of diaspora in relation to different generations of Gurkha families. By deliberating upon the connection between military service and migration paths, I construct a Gurkha diaspora in Asia and map out different phases of migration. Para/military services serve as recruitment structures that lead to the placement of Gurkhas in Asia and other regions. This has implications in terms of the various migratory cycles that they undergo, including their children who may or may not 'return' to Nepal upon the completion of their father's career, as well as immigration controls and residency rights of different countries that determine where they settle down. Gurkha families are then viewed as migrant actors whose mobility is largely determined by regimental waged labour (Des Chene 1991). Overall, this paper rests upon two key trajectories: how a Gurkha diaspora is *made*, and how this diaspora is *experienced* (Parreñas and Siu 2007).

This essay forms part of an ongoing study on migrant experiences of Gurkha families in the UK, Nepal, Singapore and Hong Kong. The data are drawn from interviews I conducted with more than fifty retired Gurkhas and their family members, materials collected from online sources, and other works on the Gurkhas. The age range of retired Gurkhas and their wives span between those in their early to mid-forties, and earlier generations of retired Gurkhas, with the oldest who is now in his nineties. The ages of Gurkha children range from six to forty-five. The wide age spans make it useful to compare the diasporic experiences of different generations that would shed light on diverse sentiments of belonging and displacement, similar to what Berg (2011, 46) has termed the 'different turning points' for each diasporic generation.

Directions

I deliberate on Gurkha mobilities by first documenting different para/military contexts in colonial and postcolonial periods with reference to the links between Britain and Asian countries like Nepal, India, Singapore, Brunei, Myanmar and Hong Kong. The succeeding section discusses how the Gurkha diaspora is experienced. Sentiments of belonging and not belonging, individual and group identities are subsequently sketched in a critique of the home/host country binary. I conclude by reiterating how diasporic analyses are useful for appraising Gurkha families as migrants leading transnational lives, and return to the utility of transnational perspectives to show the various entanglements between nations that impact upon migration flows.

I subscribe to the perspective of transnational history that is interested in movements of people, including border crossings and diaspora (Epple 2012). Adopting this perspective arises as a result of scale (Struck, Ferris, and Revel 2011, 574) in terms of focusing on a region and looking at

'individuals in various contexts, including nations' (Iriye 2013, 15). In doing so, methodological transnationalism serves as a useful optic, comprising both historical and empirical accounts of migration or 'new' types of data that unveil transnational processes and forms (Khagram and Levitt 2007; Schrooten 2012). My use of military histories represents a different source of data that aids in constructing a Gurkha diaspora with closer attention paid to transnational connections. I establish the relation between Gurkha migration and military service by mapping their regional dispersal that is contingent on regimental vicissitudes and nation-specific structures in terms of citizenship and political rights. It is not so much that the nation is jettisoned (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002), but that the focus should be recalibrated to demonstrate how the mobilities of Gurkha families as a diaspora are enacted through these institutions and structures across time and space.

Where the term diaspora usually invokes the prototypical Jewish, Armenian and Greek cases (Vertovec 2009) with a yearning for the homeland, the implication is that homeland needs to be territorially specific, and where living away from it is undesirable (Ang 2007). Today, the term is expanded into a larger semantic domain that comprises immigrants, expatriates, refugees, ethnic minorities, overseas communities, exile communities and guest workers (Ang 2007; Brubaker 2005; Gellner 2013). I add the Gurkhas as a category of military-labour migrants to this vocabulary.

Employing methodological transnationalism as a lens implies that diaspora is not only about the binary of home/host land (Parreñas and Siu 2007). My treatment of diaspora instead acts as a critical enquiry into what constitutes homeland for both the Gurkhas and their children, such as those who work and live in Singapore or Hong Kong. While Gurkhas may regard Nepal as their country of origin, the same cannot be applied to their children whose birthplace is Singapore or Hong Kong. The latter's connection to Nepal is only realized through their parents' inculcation. As a consequence of Singapore's contractual management of the Gurkha contingent, both Gurkhas and their families would have to return to Nepal upon the completion of service at age forty-five, or on early retirement. In this sense, the bifocality of homeland/place of residence needs further examination given that the experiences of each generation are more particular and historically contingent than generalizable (Berg 2014). Furthermore, Safran (2009) argues that while diaspora is space-related, such spatiality ought to include a consideration of not one but several host lands, to which I add the possibility of more than one homeland as well (cf. Berg 2011).

Clarke, Peach, and Vertovec (1990) suggest that mass migrations from South Asia in the last three centuries have taken place vis-à-vis two broad periods. The first occurred under imperialism with large numbers of South Asians serving as indentured labourers in various colonies, and the second phase (also taking place currently) has involved migrants of South Asian

descent in various occupations who travel freely to Western countries and the Middle East. However, the South Asia diaspora that has been studied by scholars tends to eclipse the mobilities of Gurkhas and their families. This notwithstanding, I avoid using the rubric of South Asian diaspora, as the Gurkhas' experience of work and migration has taken place under somewhat different circumstances in relation to regimental service. Besides, the term South Asian diaspora implies a 'regional political identity' (Koshy 2008, 9) that should not be unreflexively conflated with being a Nepali or a Gurkha. Additionally, Brown (2006) questions whether it is appropriate to speak of one South Asian diaspora given the vast diversity of migrants from the region who are of different religions, linguistic backgrounds and nation states. The case of the Gurkha diaspora differs from other South Asian diasporic groups such as the Sindhis (Cohen 2009), the Sri Lankan Tamils (Orjuela and Sriskandarajah 2008), or the Indians in South Africa (Lemon 1990) because of regimental structures as compared to different labour migratory circumstances of these other groups.

Following Brown (2006), I propose that the Gurkha diaspora is one of the many strands of South Asian diasporic formations that needs to be adequately contextualized. To achieve this, this paper investigates the Gurkha diaspora by examining how such a diaspora is *made* (with reference to military recruitment of Gurkhas, their right to remain in a particular context, etc.) and how diasporization is *experienced* (with reference to one's sense of belonging in different contexts). By analysing the latter, I contend that instead of looking at diaspora as a bounded entity and therefore succumb to problems of groupism, we should think of diaspora as a 'category of practice' where diaspora may 'make claims ... articulate projects ... formulate expectations ... mobilize energies ... [and] appeal to loyalties' (Brubaker 2005, 12). Diaspora studies are therefore useful in challenging calcified assumptions about identity, belonging and citizenship.

Constructing a Gurkha diaspora

Extant works on Gurkhas as a 'martial race' (Caplan 1991; Rai 2009) address their colonial military experiences, or in recent years, draw attention to their rights to remain in the UK (Carroll 2012; Ware 2010). While these are important issues, it is also pertinent to examine their biographies as migrants in the larger scheme of migratory dispersal in historical and contemporary times. Streams and cycles of Gurkha recruitment and migrant mobility that build up to a Gurkha diaspora are accompanied by shifting notions of belonging, self-identity and national identity. Given the limitations of space, I focus on transnational connections between the British and Asian countries in order to flesh out the interpellations that structurally determine Gurkha mobilities.

The Anglo-Nepal war of 1814–1816 was where the British first ‘discovered’ the Gurkhas’ military prowess (Caplan 1991). Since then, Gurkha soldiers began to serve under the British crown with the East India Company as the first employer, later to be replaced by the Indian Army after the mutiny, and then by the British and the Indian Army following India’s independence (Uesugi 2007). With Indian independence in 1947, a fully fledged ‘contract migration’ between the employers, the British and the Indian Army, and the ‘supplier of Gurkhas, Nepal’ was formed (Uesugi 2007, 386). The Gurkhas have since been regular soldiers in the British Army, where the 1947 Tripartite Agreement ‘provides the basis for employment policies until today’ (Uesugi 2007, 386). Under this agreement, the transnational employment of Nepalese citizens by the British and Indian armies was governed. Bellamy (2011) notes that presently, 176 out of around 11,000 Gurkha applicants are selected annually by the British Army. India recruits about 2,000 candidates yearly, although the number varies based on need.

In Singapore, the first Gurkha Contingent of the Singapore Police Force was assembled on 9 April 1949 (Rai 2009). By 1952, the Gurkha Contingent grew to a total of 300 Gurkhas (Leathart 1996). When race riots broke out in the 1950s and 1960s, the Gurkhas were looked upon as a neutral group to maintain order (Bellamy 2011). In 1958, the British, Nepalese and the new Singapore government reached an agreement concerning the terms of Gurkha service. One of the items agreed upon was that the Gurkha Contingent was to be led only by British and Gurkha officers in order to sustain ‘political impartiality essential in a paramilitary unit of a police force’ (Leathart 1996, 261). Today, Gurkhas in Singapore secure important facilities in the country, and also guard the residences of top politicians. They function as a paramilitary force in maintaining internal security, comprising approximately 1,850 officers (13% of the total police force). The Gurkha Contingent presently recruits eighty Gurkhas annually (Bellamy 2011). Gurkhas and their families reside in Mount Vernon camp in central Singapore, which serves both as a training and a self-contained residential complex that is out of bounds to Singaporeans and other non-Nepalese. In order to remain as a neutral force, Gurkhas are discouraged from integrating with the locals and are not allowed to marry Singaporean women. It is for these reasons that they are permitted to bring their wives and family from Nepal to Singapore. Most of the children, however, are born and educated in Singapore. The wives and children are not allowed to seek employment in Singapore. Upon the Gurkha father’s retirement from service, the whole family would have to be repatriated to Nepal.

Gurkha presence in Brunei comprises connections between the UK, Brunei and Singapore, which elucidates upon transnational historical links (Struck, Ferris, and Revel 2011). This began from 1962 where defence arrangements led to their post-imperial security of the Brunei Sultanate (Menon 1988). Prior to this, Brunei was a protectorate of the British Empire based on the

September 1959 Brunei Constitution, whereby the UK was responsible for handling Brunei's foreign relations, defence and security (Lim 1976). In December 1962, a revolt staged by the Partai Rakyat (Brunei People's Party) took place due to dissatisfaction with the prospect of Brunei becoming part of the then proposed Federation of Malaysia (Lim 1976). The revolt was put down with the aid of British Gurkha troops that were 'flown in from British bases in Singapore' (Lim 1976, 159). The Gurkha battalion has since remained in Brunei, with its upkeep paid for through Brunei's oil revenues (Kershaw 2003). This arrangement has since been renewed every five years and also continued after the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997, thereby providing the British Gurkha troops a permanent base in South East Asia (Kershaw 2003). Throughout the 1960s, the Gurkhas were involved in Brunei, fighting against guerillas and guarding oil installations (Dutt 1981). As the Sultan of Brunei wanted to fortify the country's security, he later recruited retired Gurkhas to form the Gurkha Reserve Unit (Kershaw 2003), providing an avenue for what is known as a second career for these Gurkhas. About 2,200 former Gurkha soldiers serve as the Sultan's security guards (Yamanaka 2000).

Haaland and Gurung (2007) note that as a result of Gurkha service with the British Army since the 1800s, descendants of these Gurkha settlers may be found in parts of India such as Assam, Sikkim and Darjeeling, as well as Myanmar. In Myanmar, the census of 1901, recorded in the Myitkyina district in Kachin State, noted that almost 10% of the population comprised so-called 'others', composed mainly of settled pensioned Gurkha soldiers. These retirees found that settling in Myitkyina was more attractive than the densely settled valleys in Pahad (hills of Nepal), or the malaria-infested Tarai (lowlands of Nepal) (Haaland and Gurung 2007). They practised Hinduism and carried out 'ritual forms current in the home country' (Haaland and Gurung 2007, 78), representing diasporic connections between 'host' and 'homeland'. Although there was relative peace between the Nepalese and other ethnic groups in the Kachin hills under British colonial rule, the situation changed after independence in 1948. The state-controlled economy ended in a state of high inflation, and movements organized by students and ethnic groups soon took place. Following the Kachin independence movement, many Nepalese left Myanmar for Nepal, or looked for opportunities elsewhere, including India (e.g. in Manipur and Assam) and Thailand (Haaland and Gurung 2007). These various vicissitudes, representing both colonial and local contexts of empire and governance, hence set the stage for non/return migration and also, step migration that further explain how Gurkha families and descendants are dispersed in the region.

British imperialist presence in Hong Kong commenced after the Opium War of 1841, where Hong Kong was transformed into a colony. Gurkha troops were stationed there from 1948 (Rai 2009). Whereas the first wave of South Asian migration to colonial Hong Kong comprised different Indian ethnic groups

such as the Parsis, Sikhs and also Muslims from Punjab, the second wave was made up of Gurkhas transferred from Malaya to Hong Kong (Law and Lee 2013). Indian independence from British colonial rule meant that employing Indians in the Hong Kong police force became problematic for the colonial government. Moreover, it was easier for the British to recruit Gurkhas since they had an agreement with Nepal. When the Chinese Communist Party took power in 1949, mass numbers of refugees from China went to Hong Kong. It was then that the first Gurkha battalion was transferred from British Malaya to Hong Kong, where Gurkha engineers built the border between China and Hong Kong (Bellamy 2011). The Gurkhas patrolled this border in the 1950s and 1960s when massive streams of Chinese immigrants left China due to famines and economic calamities. Security duties were also carried out during the Chinese Cultural Revolution in order to manage refugees attempting to enter Hong Kong. Before the Hong Kong handover in 1997, it was the main home and training centre for the Gurkhas, with numbers then standing at 8,000 (Law and Lee 2013).

Before 1997, Gurkhas were able to have their families live with them in the married quarters of the military barracks in Hong Kong. Their children were born in Hong Kong, but families were only allowed to stay with the Gurkhas for no more than three years, after which they had to return to Nepal (Law and Lee 2013). Accordingly, Gurkha children born in Hong Kong before 1983 were able to attain Hong Kong residency. Many second-generation Gurkhas thus returned to Hong Kong (their birthplace) from Nepal after the mid-1990s. In the post-1997 Hong Kong context, Britain drastically reduced its Gurkha Brigades. About 600 Gurkha retirees now work in the security industry in Hong Kong (Yamanaka 2000).

Notwithstanding this decrease, Yamanaka (2000, 70) notes that given Nepal's culture of emigration where Nepalese young men follow their fathers' footsteps to become Gurkhas, this tradition has fostered the 'construction of extensive information networks – often called "the Gurkha connection" – throughout the Asia-Pacific region where troops were stationed'. The centre of these networks may be traced to Hong Kong, which was once home to more than 10,000 Gurkha families. In the four decades before the 1997 handover, many Gurkha babies were born in the military and civil hospitals of Hong Kong (Rai 2009). In the 1980s, the British government had granted Hong Kong citizenship to approximately 7,000 Gurkha children, out of whom a substantial proportion had returned to Hong Kong to take up unskilled labour jobs (Yamanaka 2000). These children, from the 1990s onwards, were given a 'Right to Abode' status, thereby enabling them to bring their spouses and children as their dependents to become Hong Kong residents (Rai 2009).²

While I have presented the national contexts in which the Gurkhas are located, the above accounts also point to local and transnational configurations where different sets of transnational relations and institutional

arrangements among these countries – including security and cooperative policies, military recruitment and agreements, residency rights, and second-career options – led to the subsequent dispersion of the Gurkhas. Gurkhas as a diasporic community has therefore emerged under such entangled historical circumstances and contract migration that determine their country of sojourn and/or settlement.

Gurkha connections and diasporic features

If the preceding cases illustrate the imbricated dispersal and migratory routes of Gurkha families, how is this diaspora experienced in terms of their everyday practices, their further/future mobilities, and their identity construction? I examine here, the lives of members of the Gurkha diaspora by engaging beyond the home/host land binary. Drawing on my narrative interviews collected over the past three years, along with secondary materials from online sources, I also locate newer platforms of diasporic connections and practices through such online media as Facebook and blogs. Three themes are employed for analysis: (1) notions of return/step migration; (2) notions of home/land; and (3) e-diasporic connections.

Return/step migration

I first met Muna in Kathmandu in 2012. She had grown up in Singapore and later married at the age of twenty-one. Having spent a few years in Nepal after her father's retirement from the Singapore Gurkha Contingent, she presently lives in the UK with her husband, with plans to further her studies. When asked why she opted to study nursing in Singapore, she replied:

Because they heard from others that for nursing right, you have a lot of job opportunities overseas, so easier for you to go abroad ... Because once you come back here [Nepal] right, it's difficult if your subject, like your diploma is based like in business or other areas right, it's very difficult for you to get a job and everything ... Eventually you cannot go abroad. So it's mainly the job opportunities that you are forced to take the subject that you don't like.

Muna's return and later onward migration shows that Nepal was not her settlement destination. Marriage has brought her to the UK where her husband is working, illustrating how return migration does not necessarily imply that the migratory cycle is completed (Cassarino 2004). There is instead a 'perennial openness to further movement at distinctive passages in the life cycle' (Ley and Kobayashi 2009, 134). As with the experiences of other Gurkha children, Muna's case shows how some diasporans were considering step migration and that this influenced their choice of study discipline, which they selected as a stepping stone for the next migratory path. Her

friend, Ganga, now based in Kathmandu, is likewise thinking of furthering her studies in Australia for a nursing degree.

A parallel example may be found in Sirish's biography. Sirish was born and bred in Singapore and returned to Nepal when he turned seventeen. He currently works in the fashion industry. Having been back in Kathmandu for four years at the time of our meeting, he plans to pursue overseas studies:

I knew it was going to happen. But leaving Singapore was still so hard for me. It was so depressing ... I remember, like before flying off, all my friends were messaging me, like "goodbye bro", "take care" ... and I felt like crying ... Then when I came here [Nepal], it was like, "ok ... new lifestyle". But from a positive point of view, what one of the good thing is that coming from Singapore and then coming to Nepal, staying in these two countries balances out ... the high life and then the village life, and everything. So now that I've lived in Singapore and I've lived in Nepal, send me wherever and I'll adapt ... If I can adapt in Nepal, I can adapt anywhere ... In Singapore it was the small country, there wasn't much problem. In Nepal, we have to be more careful as well ... That's why like, after coming here ... actually in a way Nepal has prepared me for the future. So wherever country I decide to go, I know that I will handle it well ... That's why I say it's a blessing in disguise. There's good and bad ... That's why I feel that Singapore was chapter one of my life, Nepal is chapter two. And in the future, I am sure that US or somewhere is going to be chapter three. That's why these two chapters have prepared me well for the next chapter of my life.

Looking towards 'chapter three' of his life, return migration is therefore more relevant for Sirish's parents where Nepal is their country of origin. For Sirish, Nepal is a 'place of transit' (Laguerre 2009) before he relocates later on. Overall, narratives of return of Gurkha children illustrate that they are transitory in their outlook and have plans for onward migration. This is especially so given that return migration for children of Singapore Gurkhas is not voluntary but enforced. Such repatriated return was not always understood by the children, especially those of a tender age. Arjun opted for early retirement from the Singapore Gurkha Contingent as he was concerned about whether his two young children – aged eleven and nine – would be able to cope with life in Nepal. He joined the Gurkha service when he was twenty years old, and decided to retire after serving seventeen years. Not only were his children reluctant to leave Singapore, the same sentiment was also shared by his wife:

They [the children] were not so very clear of what is wrong and right. I just try to make understanding, Nepal is our motherland. Now I know ... Singapore is better. But you cannot continue your study here. Finally, you must stop your study, and then you have to go overseas Australia or US something like that and you need very big amount. And at that time, and also ... You go back to Nepal, you know nothing in Nepal at that time. So if you go now, you have basic there, you have sufficient time to acclimatize, mix with the Nepal environment, Nepalese society, so that easy for you and next time you can get the job also. But if you, because if they complete O Levels there, they come to Nepal,

they have no job ... That's the problem, because they have no Nepali, because our office need Nepali subject in their certificate.

Arjun's narrative points to return migration in lieu of the children's long-term welfare, indicating that Nepal was their 'motherland' after all. At the same time, he is concerned about onward education migration for his children. His own onward migration was enacted through an attempt at a second career in Brunei in the security industry. However, this stint lasted five months before he returned to Kathmandu again. Having saved money from his Gurkha service in Singapore, invested in land and built a house there, Arjun's migratory biography – a case of moving back and forth between home and host countries (Berg 2014) – is an example of how early voluntary return was planned in such a way as to also pave the future steps for his children.

Meanings of homeland

The relationship between homeland and host land is a key feature of diasporic theorizing. I problematize this relationship by arguing that both categories may be multiple instead of singular, and that shifting meanings of both may be discerned among Gurkha diasporans. In the following focus group interview, Ganga, Riju and Dipesh (all in their twenties) discuss how the notion of home is complicated as they possess an outlook of what they call 'neither here nor there':

Ganga: Very funny you know, like when we were in Singapore, like, we used to tell people that we are from Nepal. You know, that we are Nepali, like so proud of our, you know, our country. And when we come here, we ... (laughs) ... tell them that we are from Singapore.

Riju: In Singapore, they ask you where are you from, and you are like, "I'm from Nepal". You don't look like you're born there. Then when come here, "where are you from?" "I am from Singapore". Oh my god it is so confusing.

Author: Why so?

Dipesh: Aiya, we are from neither here nor there.

Riju: Yeah, we are from neither here nor there.

The group interview suggests that the issue of home/host land needs to be rethought in terms of diasporans' territorial and affective senses of belonging. As Riju says, they are 'neither here nor there', illustrating how the home/host binary transcends its bifocality to indicate ambivalence as to where one feels at 'home'. Correspondingly, Berg (2011) recommends that it would be unhelpful to think of homeland and host land in singular terms, especially when

different generations of a diaspora possess heterogeneous experiences. Ganga's and Riju's responses reflect upon how *both* Nepal and Singapore can be referred to as their homeland, depending on the context. Another respondent, Manisha, tells me that she has gradually got used to life in Nepal, having returned there from Singapore when she was sixteen. The home/host land distinction does not apply in singular terms. Instead, both Nepal and Singapore simultaneously qualify as 'home'. At the same time, however, she says that she was constantly reminded by her father (while living in Singapore) to know that she is Nepalese despite getting the 'whole Singapore experience', and thus was cautioned not to 'blend too completely' in Singapore society. Learning the Nepali language is therefore an important aspect of their Nepalese identity, and this applies to the different Gurkha families that have resided in Singapore, Hong Kong and the UK. In Singapore, for instance, Gurkha children learn Nepali from their mothers or from other Gurkha wives when they return home from school, as the language is not part of the curriculum in Singapore schools.

Furthermore, where identity and diaspora consciousness is place-based, such awareness is also tied to a set of sociocultural practices that diasporans are most familiar with. Renu mentions:

I don't know, because from the time I came from Singapore, and ever since I started to live here [Nepal], everything I come across I just ... Everything is about comparing it with Singapore. Whatever it is Singapore never goes out of the picture.

Singapore is to her the place of 'origin', as she grew up there as opposed to Nepal. As such, Renu identifies more with her Singapore experience. This therefore begs the question of the notion of 'origin' in the larger scheme of Gurkha mobilities, including identification with the country where she was residing as compared with disidentification with her current experience in Kathmandu.

Ram was recruited into the British Army at the age of nineteen. He spent five years training in Hong Kong, and first arrived in England in 1994. He has three daughters. The first two were born in Nepal, and the youngest was born in England. When I asked how often they returned to Nepal, he said this of his youngest child, Sumira:

My little one [Sumira] says "I'm born here, I'm English". Then we keep asking her, "where are your parents from?", then she say "Nepal obviously". Then we say "ya then you are Nepalese", but she says no she's English. It is hard.

Sumira has identified herself as English in association with her birth country. Although Ram and his wife make it a point to teach the children Nepali, and to 'encourage children to wear our culture dress, and dance or perform', Sumira prefers to speak in English and is not very fond of Nepalese food. Ram also said that while he and his wife plan on returning to Nepal once

their children are independent, they would let their daughters 'decide whether they want to go'.

Evidently, these varied experiences point to a need to transcend the home/host land relationship that is homogeneously applied to members of a given diaspora. Where Nepal is Arjun's 'motherland', the same does not apply to his children. A parallel is observed in the case of Ram and Sumira. In these instances, and by interpreting the experiences of Gurkhas (and their children) as migrants, mandatory return migration – as in the case of Singapore Gurkha families – thereby wields influence over what is home and how sentiments of belonging shape the identity of these individuals vis-à-vis their transnational affiliations and comparisons. In short, the meanings of home/host land hold different import for inter- and intra-generational diasporans. Pertinently, the roots and routes of different generations of the Gurkha diaspora are thus to be carefully differentiated in order to lend further critique and engagement with diasporic theorizing.

E-diaspora

Since diasporic communities have always relied on networks (Yamanaka 2000), the internet 'is now the central framework for such networks, so that observing online structures can provide insights into diasporic community characteristics' (Kissau and Hunger 2010, 246). The growing use of the internet – email, Skype, Facebook, Twitter, blogs and others – has provided a different platform through which transnational communities connect to each other. These online avenues provide an interesting source whereby everyday diasporic life in terms of memory-making, transnational connections, information networks, participatory channels and others may thrive regardless of territorial position. Inter-diasporic ties³ are thus evident whereby some of my Hong Kong-based respondents maintain contact with their Gurkha relations in Singapore through Facebook, while those in Nepal keep abreast of news and the lives of their relations and friends living in Singapore through Facebook and other social media forms. Following the exchange of information on these online media therefore accords a glimpse into how members of the Gurkha diaspora enact inter-diasporic experiences. These experiences may include the retention or reawakening of identities and imagined homelands, sharing information about job opportunities, and updating members on Gurkha-related issues. Studying online communication also facilitates overcoming problems of methodological nationalism and groupism as Internet users on the whole do not respect boundaries at the national or group level. These online networks are instead grouped around similar interests and topics (Kissau and Hunger 2010).

The topics that I identify through e-diasporic channels indicate diasporic connectivity as a feature of migrant transnationalism. They include sharing

memories of growing up in Singapore, connecting with Gurkha children of different cohorts, and information networks for job opportunities. Memories of migration and sojourn are pivotal for both individual and group identity formation. They also have bearings on experiences of belonging to a particular place or home. The excerpts below were posted on the 'Gurkha Contingent Confessions – Singapore' Facebook, pointing to recollections of growing up:

Playing 7stones, shooting, baseball from 4pm along the pathway of Pokhara Garden and Everest Heights has got to be the best childhood memory for the 90s kid. (14 May 2013)

Remember that one time during the old GC [Gurkha Contingent] days. There was always some sort of a trend. One does it and then everyone's into it. Rollerblades, kite flying, skippy caps, digimon, kang catching (Feed your kang saliva rampart Horip huncha) haha, fighting fish, go Bartley longkang explore ... Miss those golden 80s days man. (14 May 2013)

These entries generated further posts from other Gurkha children who joined in by reminiscing about their days in Singapore through such online 'dialogues', which represent relatable good days of the past. There is a sense of 'online togetherness' where these posts serve as nostalgic expressions that contribute towards shared imaginations and group solidarity (Schrooten 2012). This would form an important aspect of their migratory lives and how they view 'home' through such experiences.

Such collective behaviour is further reflected through an assumed shared experience of identification, as the next post demonstrates:

Every bhanja and bhanji's conversation with outsiders usually start like this:

Outsider: Are you Malay or Chinese?

GC Kid: I'm Nepalese from Nepal.

Outsider: Oh.. How long you stay in Singapore?

GC Kid: I was born here.

Outsider: Oh so you're Singaporean ah?

GC Kid: No.

*go kuna cry ;('

(17 May 2013, emphasis added)

This post reveals a number of issues pertaining to self-identification and identification by others in the context of multiracial Singapore. 'Outsider' is employing two out of the four official race categories (Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others) that the Singapore state endorses as part of its multiracial ideology, in an attempt to classify 'GC Kid'. When 'GC Kid' replies that he/she is Nepalese, the next answers are unexpected since for Gurkha children, being born in Singapore does not qualify them for citizenship. This is an issue that

has been heavily criticized and lobbied among the Singapore Gurkhas and their adult children. While outsiders may be trying to 'place' Gurkha children in the local context, the latter are facing identity struggles concerning their legal rights.

Where information networks are concerned, the following two Facebook group posts show how different cohorts of Gurkha children are connected, and how e-diasporic channels may serve as a job network platform:

Good to know that there are so many bhanjas and bhanjis who are living a successful life as a doctor, nurse, etc. Why don't you guys share the difficulties and the sacrifices that you had to make to reach this stage? I guess it can help the younger bhanjas and bhanjis who are clueless to be prepared for what they are going to face in the coming days if they want to be successful like you guys. Particularly the life after GC because this is where most of the bhanjas and bhanjis get lost. ('Gurkha Contingent Confessions – Singapore', 6 June 2013)

i like to say that gurkhas in brunei happy new year 2013 my name is hum bdr. jhendi magar i am ex police in singapore i just want request how to found the gurkhas job in brunei at the moment i am in macau thanks my contact no 85362579021. ('Gurkha Reserve Unit (GRU), Brunei', 13 April 2013)

Diasporic experiences of migration are reflected not only through narrative interviews but also through online social media presented above. Despite such limitations as lacking face-to-face interaction, ascertaining migrants' location and anonymity, which makes it difficult to link web phenomena to social groups or individuals (Kissau and Hunger 2010), online connectivity is a feature of contemporary transnational realities and should be included in diaspora studies. If research on migrant transnationalism is about flows and connections, it is then crucial to add e-activities to the inventory of newer forms of migrant transnationalism (Nedelcu 2012).

Conclusion

This paper conceived of Gurkhas and their families as migrants who lead transnational lives by employing methodological transnationalism as an analytical apparatus. Taking a closer look at military histories, the patterns and mechanisms of Gurkha dispersal across a range of Asian countries demonstrate that the transnational history approach is useful in grounding methodological transnationalism empirically. I have shown that analysing diasporic formation is about unpacking the logic of dispersion in terms of how the Gurkha diaspora was created, resulting from military and paramilitary contexts of service and retirement policies. The historical connections between the Gurkhas and Britain has implications in terms of their countries of settlement, including the next cycles of migration for those who have chosen not to remain in Nepal.

Subscribing to methodological transnationalism goes beyond the assumption of the nation state as the central social context within which migration takes place (Amelina and Faist 2012) that thereby also aid in reframing the singular binary of 'home' and 'host' country and the subsequent experiences of belonging. Identification with home/host lands may be multiple and simultaneous; there is more than one binary – therefore moving away from territorial limitation (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002) – that Gurkhas and their family members relate to in the present and the future in their regard for transnational ties between what counts as 'home' and from where they are based. Diasporic consciousness and formation are not static processes but undergo modification alongside subsequent cycles of migration for different members of the diaspora. Possibilities for further migratory mobility – either for work (second-career options for retired Gurkhas) or education (Gurkha children) – have also been illustrated, thereby demonstrating that both generations do harbour hopes to realize further transnational decisions. There are, of course, also differences among different generations; examining the Gurkha diaspora and their varied senses of belonging also throws light onto the different migratory aspirations or turning points. For most of the retired Gurkhas, the interest in a second career is perhaps the last stop before they return to Nepal to settle down. For the younger generation of Gurkha children, however, they possess a more transnational outlook given the fairly early stage of their lives where embarking either upon the pursuit of higher education or work mobility contrasts against the Gurkhas for whom Nepal as homeland wields more significance. In sum, because of their contrasting migratory biographies different diasporic members elucidate the extent to which transnational outlook and mobility may vary considerably. This relates back to how we ought to examine diaspora as a 'category of practice' (Brubaker 2005) and not as a static, homogeneous collective. Overall, this paper has thus evaluated Gurkha transnational lives, and how these are connected to re-territorialized dimensions of identity and belonging.

As this paper also shows, the intensity and frequency of transnational connections across the Gurkha diaspora may also be found through the e-diaspora platform, which serves as a meeting point for different diasporic members who are in their own ways and through varied memories, connected both to Nepal and to their country of settlement or sojourn. The Gurkha e-diaspora therefore has the potential to enhance the transnational connection of migrants in mobilizing sentiments of belonging, support for causes such as pension issues and the right to remain for the Gurkha children, among other agendas.

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Notes

1. Other scholars point out that the Gurkhas were not treated as mercenaries but were fully integrated soldiers in the British Army (Bellamy 2011; Rai 2009).
2. Although retired British Gurkhas now have the option of settling in the UK, my respondents tell me that they prefer living in Hong Kong due to more manageable living costs, and the familiarity of 'Asian faces'. Some say that they hope to continue working in Hong Kong and when they are no longer able to do so, they may return to Nepal.
3. There have been distinctions made among the Gurkhas who serve in the British Army, the Singapore Police Force and the Indian Army, hierarchized as such. In order to make a distinction between the British and Singapore Gurkhas, for example, the latter pointed out to me that they wished to show the Nepalese government that they are doing something for Nepal, and to differentiate themselves from their British Gurkha counterparts where the British government does not appear to be contributing enough to retired servicemen in Nepal. Other instances of inter-diasporic relations may be traced to how some British Gurkha children and Singapore Gurkha children regard each other in negative ways, with both stereotyping each group as being 'spoilt' and very different in terms of upbringing and their accent, among other factors. Examples of relations between overseas Gurkhas and those in Nepal include active Gurkha servicemen who contribute about S\$10 of their monthly income towards a widows' pension scheme initiated by retired Gurkhas in Pokhara, as well as a day's salary to the Gurkha Welfare Scheme in Nepal.

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