

Nepali Transmigrants: An Examination of Transnational Ties Among Nepali Immigrants in the United States

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One of my research participants, who has now added me as a “friend” on Facebook, the internet-based social networking site, recently posted a video clip from his son’s pasni. In the film, taken in his New York apartment, is Ravi, a Nepali who had come to the US to study and currently holds a well-paid job in New York City; his wife, a national of Eastern Europe; the baby whose surname hyphenates Ravi’s and his wife’s last names; an Indian priest who had been called to perform the “Nepali” rituals; and a mixed groups of friends—whites, South Asians, African-Americans, East Asians, and Nepalis. The video came with the caption: “For Buwa and Ama”—Ravi’s parents in Nepal.

Ravi’s attempt at transcontinental communication not only epitomizes the onset of globalization facilitated by the advancement in communication technology, but also speaks of the ties that Nepali immigrants to the United States have sustained and nurtured across boundaries. However sporadic and trivial these ties might be in the larger context of socio-political relationships between nation-states, they carry significant meanings in the everyday lives of people who experience and enact these ties—in this instance, Ravi being able to allow his parents to “participate” vicariously in the ceremony despite the geographical distance between Nepal and the US.

Drawing from this anecdote, this paper, which is part of a larger study on Nepali students who have come to the United States to pursue higher education, seeks to map the ways in which Nepali youths as well as the larger community of Nepali transmigrants have become participants in transnational practices that mark the current world order. These transnational ties, I argue, not only affect their daily lives and experiences but also family structures, community ties, socio-economic relations, and political structures both in the US and Nepal.

From Nepal to the USA: Exploring Nepali Transnational Fields

The number of Nepali immigrants in the United States is still relatively small compared to the total immigrant population in the US as well as to the numbers leaving Nepal as laborers to India, the Gulf States or countries in East and Southeast Asia (Dhungel 1999, Tamot 2008). The US Census figures for the year 2000 reported the total number of people born in Nepal and residing in the US at 11,715 individuals though informal estimates, particularly those made by Non-Resident Nepali (NRNs)

associations, now place the figure at between 80,000 and 150,000 individuals (Udas 2004, Sharma 2007). Undoubtedly, the number reported in the 2000 census would have increased rapidly since then with greater numbers of Nepalis entering the US, especially through the Diversity Visa scheme.

But the greater significance, though less documented, of the Nepali population in the US lies in the number of Nepali youths arriving for higher education in the US. According to the Institute of International Education, in the academic year 2007/08, a total of 8,936 Nepalis were enrolled in colleges and universities in the United States. This is an increase of 15.2% compared to the previous year, making Nepal the eleventh leading place of origin for students entering the United States (IIE 2008).

In this paper, I will map the multiple relationships and networks that these Nepali youths in the US have maintained in Nepal through a series of fluid concentric circles. For heuristic purposes, I will focus primarily on three layers of networks—family and kinship ties; immigrant organizational networks; and more diffuse public domain networks that spread across the boundaries of the home and host countries, thus forming a significant part of the “transnational social field” that the Nepali community, including the youths, are embedded in (Figure 1).

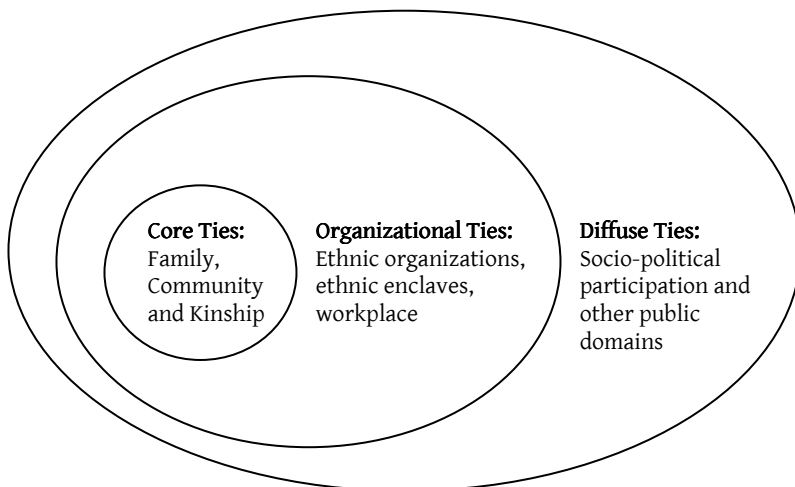


Figure 1: An Exploratory Framework for Understanding Transnational Networks and Ties

Before looking into the specifics of this framework, it is important to note that these circles are “fluid” in nature since the relationships bounded in one circle also percolate to the next at times and influence the relations contained therein. Similarly, not all Nepali youths participate equally in all these networks; instead, there are ties, such as “core ties”, constituted by family, kinship and friends that are frequented more regularly than the ties that are institutionalized or “political” in nature. The significance of these ties nevertheless stems from the fact that they present the youths with many different avenues for remaining active in their home country.

Core Transnationalism: Families, Communities and Kinship

One of the strongest transnational ties that persist among Nepali immigrants in the United States is that of family and kinship ties in Nepal. Benefiting tremendously from advances in communications such as telephones, the internet, and air transportation, Nepali immigrants talk on the phone and/or send emails to family members as well as close friends on a regular basis, and those who can afford it (for many, airfares remain rather expensive), make occasional trips to Nepal (generally, once a year or every two years) whenever “time and money” permits.

The relationships enacted over the telephone, internet, etc, are not limited to casual exchanges of greetings between family members and friends as would have happened in the past. On the contrary, mediated by modern technology, members of the family, despite the geographical distance, continue with their prescribed roles and responsibilities. For instance, during the course of the study, Nepali youths, especially males, indicated that they continue to partake in household decisions—family members in Nepal often seek their advice on matters ranging from the education of their siblings and managing household finances to broader issues about political changes and which party the parents should support. As Subir mentioned: “I am the eldest son in the family, so I have the responsibility to take care of my family and also look out for my siblings. I send money home regularly for household expenses. Even though I am doing odd jobs here, my siblings have been able to attend good schools in India and in Nepal...Earlier, it was not like this. My parents have now started to treat me like an adult and they ask for my opinion in every decision they make... I am happy that even though I am far away from home, I have not discarded my responsibilities as the eldest son of the family...”

DeSipio (2000: 25) notes that “remitting...reflects the migrant’s underlying notions of who he or she is and where his or her responsibilities lie”, which, in the case of Nepali immigrants, means

contributing to families' financial and social needs and assuming the responsibilities, i.e., of a son, particularly, the eldest one as was the case of Subir. This is, however, not to say that all Nepali youths are involved in remitting money. On the contrary, several of the participants in my research, especially full-time students or youths, who are paying for their education while holding a full-time job, mentioned, "life in America is difficult and being able to support one's family back home is simply out of the question." But most of these youths also expressed their desire to at least be able to contribute to their family once they are "financially able" and if there is a "need in the family."

In addition to helping families back home, core ties are also of major significance to the immigrants as they lead their daily lives in the US. Confirming Basch *et al.*'s (1994: 239-240) assertion, many participants in the study admitted that family relationships and support in Nepal had served as a "symbolic and at times actual security net" during their transition to the US. Nirmala's narrative is a case in point: "...the US, especially a place like New York, is so crowded with so many people but yet in the crowd, I feel alone. There are people I hang out with in college and outside every now and then, but I would not call them my 'friends'—they are only acquaintances, just passers-by... The only way I make myself feel better is by talking to my family and friends back home at least once a week. This serves as a reminder about who I am and why it is that I am in the US but, more importantly, it helps me realize that I have others who care about me."

Thus, locating support, especially the "security net" back in Nepal becomes one of the ways in which these immigrants reconstitute family and friendship ties over time and space on a daily basis. Furthermore, to fill the void created by isolation, and, in some cases, even marginalization from mainstream America, Nepali immigrants seek to re-create their homeland in their homes, dorm rooms, offices, etc, in the United States. While visiting migrant youths, whether in their rented homes or college dormitories, I spotted Nepali paraphernalia such as pictures, Nepali flags, decorative ornaments, etc, that these individuals had "imported" from Nepal either themselves or through others who had later joined them. Sarup (1994: 94) has described this phenomenon, as an act of turning their homes into "private museums" which help migrants "create a shield from the world they had entered through migration" (see also Werbner 2002, Naficy 1991). Bimala's account helps elucidate this point further: "My husband works in an Indian restaurant, while I work as a domestic helper for an Indian family. I find it quite amusing that I don't remember uttering a single word of English for a few months now, I just haven't had to since I talk with my employers in Hindi and with my room-mates and husband in Nepali. The way my husband and I live our lives is very Nepali as well—we

have decorated our apartment in the same way that we used to in Nepal; we follow Nepali rituals and customs; we eat Nepali food; I fast during *teej*; I savor the Nepali delicacies people bring from Nepal...When I enter my apartment, it does not even feel like I am in America, but then given that I have been in the US for almost three years now, I cannot deny that I am not in America either..."

For many like Bimala who remain in the US with little or no access to "mainstream" American life, there are contradictions and ambiguities that affect their construction of their selves. On the one hand, there is a deep sense of desire to be part of mainstream society, and yet, because they are removed and isolated from that aspect of American life, the only way they can continue with their daily routine in the US, as well as achieve some coherence in their lives, is by ensuring some continuity with their customs and practices carried over from Nepal.

Organizational Ties: Enclaves, Workplaces and Networks

Over time, with the increase in the number of Nepalis living in the US, the informal networks discussed in the previous section have grown and become what Appadurai (1996) aptly calls "ethnoscapes." These "ethnoscapes," though at incipient stages of development in the case of Nepali immigrants, include small ethnic enclaves, professions that have been "ethnicized," and formal organizations and associations. Since Nepali immigrants are scattered throughout the United States and comprise a relatively small and young immigrant community, extensive and thriving ethnic enclaves like "Little India" in Jackson Heights in Queens, New York City, or "Chinatown" in Los Angeles do not exist. But, along with other smaller immigrant groups, Nepalis are gradually carving out their own territorial spaces within the larger immigrant enclaves. For example, there are apartment buildings in localities like Jackson Heights and Ridgewood in New York City that are exclusively occupied by Nepali immigrants. In Jackson Heights, Nepali youths congregate at weekends in Nepali as well as Indian restaurants and shops to touch base with each other. As Saroj, a 28-year-old taxi driver, mentioned: "I live with eight other Nepalis [in a one-bedroom apartment] but because we all work for about 16 hours a day, we hardly get to see each other. As a ritual, we have decided to take a day off on Saturdays. So, we all go to Jackson Heights around 11 a.m., have our lunch there and go hang out in the Nepali video store or Indian restaurants just sipping tea. We end up meeting so many of our Nepali friends and acquaintances that we spend the whole day sipping tea after tea and just chit-chatting about many things ranging from politics, to families back home, to which Nepali girl is the hottest

[laughs]...It is just like what youths in Nepal do and what we used to do when we were back home.”

This process of giving continuity to practices from the home country is facilitated by the fact that the first point of contact for most of these individuals when they first arrive from Nepal are the networks of kinship, family contacts, friendships, neighborhood ties, organizational affiliations, etc, formed amongst the Nepali immigrant community already in the US. As network theorists have observed, these networks serve as a form of social capital that recent arrivals draw upon to receive assistance, including in finding housing, gaining access to employment, understanding the ins and outs of life in America, etc. (Massey 1990, Massey *et al.* 1993, Mora and Taylor 2006). To cite an example, participants who had gone to Budhanilkantha School in Kathmandu invariably mentioned their seniors or contemporaries from the same school as being one of their first points of contact when they arrived in the US. Kapil, who recently graduated from a top liberal arts college in the US and is currently working in San Francisco, told me: “During weekdays, I hardly find any time to do anything in terms of social activities. However, weekends are there to hang out with friends. There are so many Budha [Budhanilkantha] guys here that it is really nice. It is really nice, you know, to be in a group with like-minded people. Basically, people who grew up in the same way as you did and people who share the same background as yourself. We talk, we drink, we discuss the stock market, we ruminate on current developments in Nepal, we sing Nepali songs and we usually end up making momos [dumplings]. Very Nepali, right?”

Despite their small numbers, Nepalis have also begun to create a niche for themselves in certain professions. For instance, in New York City, when they first arrive, most Nepali youths who have to self-finance their studies engage in entry-level jobs as bus boys in restaurants or at cash registers, primarily in the Jackson Heights area. In addition to being able to find jobs close to their place of residence, working in the South Asian ethnic enclave provides these immigrants with the option of speaking in Hindi, especially when they have little confidence in speaking English. After having saved enough money (and, mostly, dropped out of college/university), men generally start working as cab drivers while women tend to move to “nail parlors,” which have, by and large, made these professions a niche for Nepalis in New York City. Similarly, in Northern Virginia, many Nepali women are employed as baby-sitters in day-care centers. Anecdotal evidence suggests that in the DC metropolitan area, in a well-renowned chain of 14 daycare centers owned by a Polish woman, almost 95 percent of the care-givers are Nepali women.

Finally, despite their small and scattered nature, there has been a considerable proliferation of Nepali associations and organizations that

have played a significant role in strengthening transnational ties between immigrants in the US and Nepal. While a reliable record of the total number of Nepali organizations does not exist, a quick internet search revealed more than 80 different Nepali organizations and associations in the US itself. Broadly speaking, these organizations can be grouped into six categories: (i) student organizations housed in different colleges and universities with a large Nepali student population; (ii) political and rights-based groups like the Alliance for Human Rights and Democracy in Nepal, Nepalese Democratic Youth Council, etc; (iii) group-based organizations that cater to specific Nepali ethnic groups, gender or localities in Nepal; (iv) regional organizations of Nepalis, such as the Association of Nepalis in Midwest America; (v) professional associations such as Nepali Entrepreneurs in North America; and (vi) broader Nepali organizations such as the Association of the Nepalis in the Americas (ANA).

While some of these organizations and associations still operate as “informal” groups, others are registered as non-profit organizations with 501(c)(3) status under the Internal Revenue Code of the US government. Registered formally as charitable or educational organizations, these associations usually claim to have been established to help the Nepali immigrant community or preserve the identity and culture of the Nepalis in the US. As such, most of these organizations have included “America” or regions of America in their names such as the Association of the Nepalis in the Americas, Nepalis Living in Texas, etc, to reflect their being in America and helping the Nepali immigrant population. However, the Nepali component of their organizational mandate is equally, if not more, significant than the American part. This is because most of these organizations offer the Nepali community in the US many different avenues to remain active in Nepal, despite the long distance (see Levitt 2001a, Levitt 2001b for a similar phenomenon amongst the Dominicans in the US).

In terms of activities, these networks of Nepali organizations periodically organize social and cultural events such as picnics, conferences, Dasain parties, Nepali New Year celebrations, etc, that are of cultural significance and also bring the Nepali immigrant community together. For example, by 2008, the Association of the Nepalis in the Americas (ANA), the oldest and perhaps the largest Nepali organization in the US, that aims “to promote preservation of Nepali identity and culture in the Americas,” had organized 26 annual conventions in various cities throughout the US and Canada. In addition, ANA has purchased a 3.4-acre property in Maryland to establish the Nepal Education and Cultural Center that serves as a “window to Nepal, Nepali art, music, crafts” as well as functioning as a center for Nepali religious activities, though most of their

activities have been exclusively based on Hindu traditions with sporadic intervals of Buddhist ones, such as the celebration of Buddha Jayanti. In addition, despite being a relatively young community in the US, Nepalis have also brought out their own publications as well as produced radio and television programs. These include the ANA newsletter, web-based journals like *Antardrishti*, news magazines like *Nepali Post*, *Nepali Awaz* and *Nepal Abroad*, and Nepali radio stations in North America like *Radio Dovan*, *Everest Radio* and *Sagarmatha Television* (see also Sharma 2007).

To illustrate how these organizations have been “creating new possibilities of membership across boundaries” (Levitt 2001a: 202), I will use the case of the United Sherpa Association (Sherpa Kyidug). In its by-laws, the Kyidug has mentioned the following as its objectives:

- A) To provide the necessary means of bringing all Sherpas together as one family.
- B) To organize social, cultural, and religious events for the enjoyment of members.
- C) To look after the members who are in need of any kind of help.
- D) To preserve Sherpa culture and the Buddhist religion.
- E) To help less fortunate Sherpas in Nepal at the right time

These objectives indicate that the Sherpa Kyidug aspires to promote not only a sense of common culture, history and identity as “Sherpas” living in the US but also seeks to extend support to other Sherpas in Nepal. As one of the members of the Sherpa Kyidug mentioned: “We face what you might call double discrimination—on the one hand, we are discriminated against by American society for being immigrants or foreigners in their land. And on the other hand, the stereotype of Sherpas as porters has also sustained discrimination against us by the larger Nepali immigrant community in the US...We need to tell everyone, including our own community, that while Sherpas might have served as porters in the past, there are Sherpas who have been to top institutions like Harvard, Columbia, Stanford, etc, and also those who work for institutions like Lehman Brothers, the World Bank, Goldman Sachs, etc...Coming together through the [Sherpa] Kyidug helps us bond together as Sherpas and overcome the stereotypes and discrimination targeted at us.”

In many cases, like that of the Sherpas, strengthening of ethnic identification through immigrant networks has helped individuals moderate the experiences of discrimination they face as “foreigners” while also developing a deeper sense of connectedness amongst each

other as an ethnic minority within the broader Nepali immigrant community.

For many Nepali immigrants, immigrant networks also serve as a vehicle to obtain and reinforce their social position. During the course of my fieldwork, it was quite evident that “illegal immigrants” in the US invariably introduced themselves as an office-holder of an organization based in the US followed by the positions they held in Nepal prior to emigrating. To cite an example, the president of one of the Nepali organizations in New York introduced himself as a member of the Nepal Students’ Union and a journalist for a leading newspaper in Nepal. When I asked him what his current profession was, he hesitated and said that he does “things here and there for fun.” It was only during the later part of the interview that he admitted that he was a cab driver in New York and has been in the profession for almost six years. Evidently, as pointed by Basch *et al.* (1994: 249), joining, and even more significantly, leading, these organizations and associations provide migrants with a chance for “public validation and recognition.” Such status validation is of significant importance particularly to immigrants who were well positioned in Nepal but are engaged in jobs conferring significantly lower social status.

This is, however, not to suggest that only those in marginal positions are predisposed to joining these immigrant organizations. On the contrary, very successful individuals are active members in these organizations and are often sought after to take up advisory roles if they refuse active membership. As a lawyer who serves on the advisory board of one such organization said: “I have a well-paying job. I don’t have to worry about my visa status since I have already acquired American citizenship. So, I feel that this is the time for me to do something for Nepal and also for the Nepali community here in the United States.”

This example negates the widely held view which equates acquisition of American citizenship to severing ties with the home country. Instead, since these “successful” individuals, particularly those who have acquired American citizenship by virtue of their legal status and security in the US, are equally predisposed to supporting and volunteering in these transnational associations and organizations so as to “do something for their homeland.”

Diffuse Ties, Public Domains and (Un)institutionalized Transnationalism

The third layer of transnational ties comprises of diffuse ties which are sporadic and uninstitutionalized, especially as they relate to broader socio-political issues in Nepal. These ties generally extend beyond the immediate networks of kin and family, and sometimes even ethnic organizations, to evolve as “transnational social fields” which involve

public spheres that “traverse the boundaries of home and host countries” (Basch *et al.*, 1994).

In the case of Nepali immigrants, one of the significant ways in which these diffuse ties have manifested themselves is through the electronic mass media. During the course of the fieldwork, Nepali immigrants almost exclusively said that it had become a habit for them to regularly skim through Nepali news sites, such as nepalnews.com or ekantipur.com. The immediacy afforded by electronic transmission not only helps immigrants keep abreast with developments in Nepal but also to react to them instantaneously despite the geographic distance. To give one example, following the news of an attempt to vandalize the former king’s vehicle while he was making a trip to Pashupati Temple in February 2007, within a week members of a Nepali religious group in New York put out an appeal, claiming that such behavior was unwarranted and inexcusable.

The internet has also become a site for political engagement among Nepalis living abroad. In addition to formal organizations like the ones discussed above, immigrants have developed discussion groups like liberaldemocracynepal.org, sajha.com, demrepubnepal.blogspot.com, samudaya.org, etc, that allow them to engage with as well as participate in social and political discussions related to Nepal. For instance, Prem, who spends much of his time as a blogger in the US, told me that he would like to consider himself a “virtual activist—an activist who is striving to bring about social and political change in Nepal by creating awareness among both Nepalis and non-Nepalis through the internet.”

In addition to these “virtual spaces,” Nepalis living in the US have also organized themselves in multifarious ways to bring about socio-political changes in Nepal. For instance, in the aftermath of the royal takeover on 1 February 2005 by King Gyanendra, organizations such as Liberal Democracy Nepal, Alliance for Democracy and Human Rights and Nepalese Democratic Youth Council, declared its support for the anti-monarchy movement in Nepal. Cognizant of the fact that calls for democracy would resonate with western political discourse, these organizations also sent letters to the then US President George W. Bush, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and Jose Manuel Barroso, president of the European Union, requesting them to put pressure on the King’s regime to release all political prisoners and restore democracy in Nepal. Similarly, some from the Nepali community in the US also staged rallies in front of the State Department and the White House in Washington DC, and at the Dag Hammarskjold Plaza Park in front of the UN in New York, to protest against the royal takeover and to draw the attention of world leaders to the political crisis in Nepal. As Sushil, one of the organizers of these protest events, explained,

The main purpose of organizing and mobilizing the Nepali community here in the US is to draw attention of world leaders to the political crisis in Nepal. And what better venue to organize these demonstrations than in New York where the United Nations is located and Washington DC where the American government is seated? The access that we [Nepali diaspora] have to the international community is unmatched to the one in Nepal.

Pro-democracy activists among the diaspora, like Sushil, claim that events like George Bush's pointed snub to King Gyanendra by not inviting him to a reception on the occasion of the opening of the 60th General Assembly of the United Nations in September 2005, and the subsequent reinstatement of the dissolved parliament in April 2006, were a direct result of their lobbying efforts. While it cannot be ascertained whether the Nepali diaspora in the US was ultimately responsible for this outcome, the significance of the campaigns in the US against the King's takeover provides evidence of the "globalization of domestic politics" (Koslowski 2007; Basch *et al.*, 1994, See also Tamot 2008) in that it shows how the Nepali immigrant community, while geographically distant, was able to organize and stage protest rallies to push for political change in Nepal.

Political transnationalism amongst the diaspora is also strengthened by the fact that while on official visits to the US, Nepali dignitaries also spend time with the Nepali diaspora, briefing them on current affairs. Usually, such gatherings are organized by Nepali organizations and sometimes held in conference halls of "prestigious universities" that Nepali students attending the universities are able to secure for the occasion. After these formal events, the Nepali hosts of the events often invite the delegates to their place for dinner and/or overnight stays, thus strengthening the ties between the immigrant community and the Nepali political leadership. Full of heated discussions, these encounters, both formal and informal, become sites of political and ideological contestations and in the process open up channels for migrants and their associations to exercise political influence on home country politics and society.

In addition to political engagement, diffuse ties also consist of a variety of projects and charities "back home" that the Nepal immigrant network is engaged in. For example, the America-Nepal Medical Foundation, an organization which aims to support the advancement of medical training and practice in Nepal has supported 40 health-related projects in Nepal. Similarly, HelpNepal Network, with the philosophy "Nepalis for Nepal," has helped build several schools, run health camps, set up shelters for children affected by the Maoist conflict, and established electronic libraries in village schools. Smaller and more disparate efforts include fund-raising events organized to help the families of "martyrs"—people

killed during the April 2006 pro-democracy movement in Nepal. Evidently, these charities are small and intermittent especially when compared to the type of demands the Nepali diaspora has been making on the Nepali State. Nevertheless, they do speak of the Nepali diaspora's interest in engaging more in both political and socio-economic developments in the home country.

Long-distance political participation by Nepali immigrants has also been facilitated by political interest in Nepal acknowledging, directly or otherwise, the Nepali diaspora in the US, as well as in other countries, as being a vital part of Nepal's body politic. The public call by the then finance minister, Baburam Bhattarai, to the Nepali diaspora, "Let's return and do something good for the country...Our inner soul will haunt us if we do not return to the country," is a case in point. Similarly, the Nepali Congress Party has established, Nepali Janasamparka Samiti, America (also known as Nepali Public Relations Committee, America) to serve as the party's platform in the US. The Nepali diaspora is also recognized through various means such as granting some of its members the opportunity to meet top political leaders during their visits to Nepal. For example, in October 2008 after the celebration of "NRN Day," some of the NRN representatives were given the chance to meet the President, the Prime Minister and others, who, in addition to appreciating the role played by the Nepali diaspora, also asked them to "come forth to build a new Nepal." Other such recent efforts acknowledging the role played by the diaspora include the "Send Home a Friend" campaign launched by the Ministry of Tourism in an attempt to involve the diaspora in developing the country's tourism sector. In addition, the Nepali diaspora has also established the NRN Constitution Suggestion Committee to submit their recommendations to the Constituent Assembly, and a "Coalition Advancing the Rights of Marginalized Peoples of Nepal," to advance the concerns of marginalized communities in the constitution-making process of Nepal.

This, however, is not to suggest that the Nepali State has always been sympathetic to its diaspora, including Nepalis in the US. On the contrary, it was only after years of consistent lobbying that the government finally promulgated the Non-Resident Nepali Act in August 2007. While the Act does indeed address some of the demands of the NRN such as allowing them to possess a certain amount of property and exercise the same privileges as foreign investors in terms of repatriation of deposits and assets, the Act remains silent on the core demand of NRNs, that of granting them dual citizenship status. The fact that the issue of dual citizenship remains unresolved is hardly surprising since the concept of the NRN itself is contested and vague given the nature of the types of exodus from Nepal. During the course of my fieldwork itself, Nepalis were

unsure about who should be granted dual citizenship even if the Nepali government were to support such an initiative. Should it be provided to all Nepalis, including those living in India? Can the millions of Nepalis working in the Gulf countries as laborers qualify for it? Or, should it be only limited to those living in the “West”, as some of the interviewees suggested. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate on the discussions of dual citizenship, let it suffice to say here that the discourse on dual citizenship is perhaps one of the central issues that divides the Nepali diaspora living in various parts of the world, especially along class and caste lines, with privileged members of the diaspora calling for a selective administration of dual citizenship distribution.

In the same vein, despite numerous lobbying efforts, the government of Nepal also rejected the diaspora’s demand for a provision to allow NRNs to vote during the Constituent Assembly. As Ashutosh, the chairperson of one of the political organizations in New York, mentioned: “I will give it to the government for not honoring some of NRN’s demands immediately...like the issue of dual citizenship. But not giving voting rights to Nepalis is simply not acceptable. There are countries throughout the world that have set up voting booths in their embassies in the US and we need to have the same privileges here...people who are willing to pay airfare or whatever it takes to go to the US embassy in DC or consular office in New York should be able to come and cast their votes...”

The appeal from the Nepali Americas Council to choose one member from the NRN community among the 26 that were to be nominated by the government to the Constituent Assembly received the same fate. Based on the divergence between the demands of the diaspora and the unresponsive attitude of the Nepali State’s towards it, Tamot (2008: 301) has pointed out that while Nepali immigrants are interested in “thickening” their membership in the Nepali nation-state, the government is only interested in institutionalizing a “weak and ‘thin’ form of Diasporic membership for Nepali nationals living abroad.”

Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to provide an exploratory framework for mapping the experiences of transmigrants who simultaneously traverse geographical boundaries between home and host countries at multiple levels—familial, community, economic, political, religious and organizational. By envisioning these transnational ties and practices as a series of fluid concentric circles with the inner-most circle constituting the “core” relationships, practices and ties, which nevertheless gets more diffuse as one crosses the layers of circles away from the core, I have

mapped the social fields that Nepali transmigrants in the United States are embedded in.

The case of Nepalis in the United States also shows that despite being a relatively small, scattered and young community, they have been successful in nourishing multiple ties between the host and home countries. These transnational linkages that the Nepali diaspora has maintained, transformed and reconstituted as they tread between two nation-states have, as a result, created new possibilities for political and social membership across borders.

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