

Tibetan Migration in Nepal: Contested Issues and Research Gaps

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Abstract:

Globally, the Tibetan diaspora has been taking an emergent concern of social science research in terms of its understanding, conceptualization and theorization. It truly rings in Nepal where around 13000 Tibetan migrants had once settled in the different regions of the country and most of the studies about them have been insulated around the political dimension of the migration at the macro level. To speak this research gap, this paper aims to highlight the historical dimension of Tibetan migration in Nepal, their status of settlement, and the contemporary research issues. The key arguments on this paper reflect that within a broader transboundary ethnic identity of Tibetan migrants in Nepal, their political economic construction should be viewed from a plural perspective. Following a social constructivist ontological position, this paper, however, does not take methodological insights from any particular empirical field, rather it allows reviews of the already accessed research publications and secondary information on the Tibetan studies.

Key Word: Tibetan study; refugee; migration; research issues; Nepal

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I. INTRODUCTION

Migration is an interesting phenomenon in Nepali history in terms of both inward and outbound mobility. Nepal has been a host to many communities with non-national Nepali identity, including the Bhutanese (since early 1990s) and the Tibetans (since late 1950s). It is estimated that there are currently around 13,000 Tibetan migrants in Nepal living in different camps, though there is no official data and it is also decreasing¹. Many of them before 1989 were granted refugee status, though after 1989 could not get such de-jure status and they do not have legal status and cannot own property, or be employed in public services lawfully as like Nepali nationals. However, they are not restricted to conduct any kind of entrepreneurial and business activities as per the rule of Nepal. The Nepalese government historically has maintained an accommodating attitude toward Tibetan migrants. Currently there are twelve Tibetan Refugee camps in Nepal^{2,3,4}. Most of the Tibetan migrants have been settled in Nepal in their proximate camps and shared distinct livelihood patterns, ethnic clusters, and cultural identity. There are other categories of Tibetan people who have got married to Nepali male or female and thus got Nepali citizenship as per the constitutional provision of Nepal.

Most of the studies about the Tibetan community have been insulated around the political dimension of the migration at the macro level. To speak this research gap, this paper aims to highlight the historical dimension of Tibetan migration in Nepal, their status of settlement, and the contemporary research issues. The key analytical outlook on this paper reflects that within a broader transboundary ethnic identity of Tibetan migrants in Nepal, their political economic construction should be viewed in a plural perspective of diverse issues, challenges and opportunities.

II. MATERIAL AND METHODS

Main purpose of this paper is to synthesize the empirical issues and research agendas on Tibetan migration in Nepal from livelihood perspective. Methodologically, no any field studies or empirical studies are done in developing this paper, and the researcher has used only secondary literatures and already published knowledge sources.

III. SCHOLARLY REVIEW OF THE TIBETAN ISSUE

Globally, Tibetan studies has gained increasing attention due its larger diaspora^{5,6}, including in the South Asian context⁷. Moreover it has been a part of globalization⁸ and migration studies^{9,10} in contemporary social science research. In Nepal, the studies on Tibetan community and their migration have got both historical as well as political perspectives. However, settlement status, mobility trends, acculturation, cross-cultural

relations and livelihood issues of the Tibetans residing in Nepal have been less researched academically.

Historically Nepal-Tibet relations started formally in the middle of the seventh century as two independent states. Tibetan studies have been widely done in Nepal in the post-1950s context, which also surrounds the Trans-Himalayan context of social life and Tibetan culture¹¹¹²¹³. However, most of them are either took religious perspective or political perspective¹⁴¹⁵¹⁶. A few, on the other hand, are following conceptual and theoretical perspectives of adaptation, diaspora studies and ethnic identities¹⁷¹⁸. Moreover, studies on the emerging issues of Tibetan people are rarely available in changing context of social relations, livelihood, transboundary ethnic identity, and international politics. The Tibetan people are based on their cluster of household settings in different settlements. Most of their livelihood is small-scale entrepreneurship including Thangka production/ selling, business of carpets and painted clothes, trade of wooden artefacts, performing Buddhism tantric-based healing, business of herbal products of Himalayan region, engagement in tourism-related activities (guide, translator and potter)¹⁹. A few Tibetan people living in rural areas (e.g. Baglung, Rasuwa and Dhorpatan) have been engaged in small-scale agricultural activities on leasing the land and producing vegetables as well as some cereals and cash crops²⁰.

IV. HISTORICAL SETTING

The Tibetan Empire emerged in the 7th century, but with the fall of the empire, the region remained a suzerainty of the Mongol and later Chinese rulers in Nanjing and Beijing, with reasonable autonomy given to the Tibetan leaders²¹. Nepal was a trade route for both Tibet and India for centuries and there were high level social-economic relations due to geographic location and physical proximity of these regions. Following on, both the Nepali state and Tibet region signed treaties on 1645, 1789, 1792 and 1856²²²³.

Along with the revolution in China, Nepal has further strengthened its relationship with Tibetan territory which eventually reconstructed with the formation of Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) in 1965 and Nepal's commitment for 'One China Policy'. Since 1959, however, a group of Tibetans have chosen to leave Tibet for political reasons and live in India and Nepal²⁴²⁵. A Tibetan refugee camp was established in 1960 in Jawalakhel, which was the first-ever settlement centre in the Kathmandu valley of Nepal. Subsequently, other three temporary camps were established, which include Chilsae (Solukhumbu), Tashi Parikhiel (nearby Pokhara) and Dhorpatan (Baglung)²⁶.

With the earlier phases of Tibetan migration to Nepal, the Government of Nepal sought assistance from the International Commission of the Red Cross (ICRC) which launched emergency relief programs for the refugees since May 1960. Moreover, government of Nepal and the Swiss government entered into an agreement on November 22, 1964 to settle refugees and provide them vocational training. Nepal Red Cross (NRC) and some other international organizations including USAID, Norwegian Refugees Council, Services for Technical Co-operation Switzerland, and Australian Refugees Committee and the UN-affiliated agencies like WHO and UNICEF got involved in providing housing facilities, establishing carpet factories and launching educational and health care facilities for the new settlers. In August 1964, the Nepal government authorized the UNHCR to open an office in Kathmandu to liaison between the refugee community and the government. However, the Nepal government has refused to recognize the newcomers from Tibet as refugees and stopped allowing them to live in camps since 31 December 1989. Those who arrived before 1989 were granted refugee ID cards, but more recent arrivals have no legal status. As comprehensive registration exercise has not been undertaken and as a large number of Tibetan refugees were born and raised in Nepal, many Tibetans are now undocumented²⁷(Shrestha 2015). A study conducted by Human Rights Organization Nepal in 2017 showed that there are 12,331 Tibetan Refugees without Refugee Cards, out of which 40% are under the age of 16 Years who are born in Nepal²⁸.

Though Nepal has enacted a number of international treaties and conventions on Human Rights and social justice, it has not acceded to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, its 1967 Protocol. Nepal is also not a State party to the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons (the 1954 Convention) or the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness (the 1961 Convention). However, Nepal has acceded the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Moreover, Nepal has not established a domestic legal framework concerning refugees and asylum-seekers to ensure the legal status and economic rights of refugees. Nevertheless, Article 51(b)(3) of the Constitution of Nepal, 2015 obligates the state to pursue policies related to "implementing international treaties and agreements to which Nepal is a state party"²⁹. Therefore, there is no scientific database maintained and the exact number of refugees is uncertain. Yet, 22268 persons of concern are identified by UNHCR living in Nepal in 2017, which were 26170 in 2016 and 33,068 in 2015, most of them are Tibetans and Bhutanese³⁰. Particularly to the over 100,000 refugees from Bhutan, of whom 90 percent have now been resettled to the third countries including Canada and USA. This is not the case for the Tibetans.

Moreover, there are some illegal Tibetan migrants in Nepal. Because of the open border between Nepal and India, the Tibetans living in these countries can easily enter into Nepal or India; and such Tibetans are living illegally in Nepal in different places of Nepal, including Kathmandu and Lumbini. Moreover, additional cases of urban refugees have been recorded in recent years as a few numbers (around 700) of refugees from Pakistan, Somalia and Sri-Lanka. There is no official record upon this kind of refugee status. The government of Nepal has asked UNHCR Nepal not to recognize the urban refugees who entered in Nepal (preferably in Kathmandu) due to various causes including the Ahmadiya community that fled religious persecution (Pakistani), victims of human trafficking and drug abuse (Somali) and Rohingya people affected from ethnic/ religious conflict (Sri Lankan).

V. LIVELIHOOD AND SETTLEMENT STATUS

Currently, there are 12 compact settlements of the Tibetan refugees in Nepal. There are 58 Tibetan settlements in India, Nepal, and Bhutan of which 39 settlements in India, 12 in Nepal and 7 in Bhutan. According to Nepal's Foreign Ministry, there were Tibetan refugees in 21 districts. The refugee camps were formerly established as detention camps which later on were transformed into permanent settlements. Each of the settlement camps is supervised by a representative appointed by the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA). The CTA is also called Tibetan Government in Exile, which is based in India and has never been recognized by China. The settlements in Nepal are primarily assisted by the Government of India and other aid agencies and donor organizations. They are clustered in terms of livelihood strategies based either on agriculture or Agro industries or Handicrafts. Out of the total 12 settlements in Nepal, there are 4 settlements with agriculture-based livelihood strategy, while 6 are handicraft based and 2 are community-based clusters. To illustrate further, the list below represents these clusters of Tibetan settlements as per the categorization of CTA:

- (1) **Agriculture-based:** Delekling (Chilsa, Solukhumbu); Norziling Tibetan Settlement (Dorpatan, Baglung); Jampaling (Lodrik, Tanahu); and Namgyeling (Tserok, Mustang)
- (2) **Handicraft-based:** Paljorling (Lodrik, Pokhara); Gyegayling (Rasuwa, Dunche); Samdupling (Jawalakhel, Lalitpur); Tashi Palkhiel (Pokhara); Tashiling (Pokhara); and Sampheling (Walung, Taplejung)
- (3) **Cluster communities:** Choejor (Chorten & Jorpati); and Phakshing & Gyalsa

These camps have been set up with a build settlement cluster having *Gompa* (Buddhist monastery), *Chorten* (stupa), and school and health clinic. For other large scale managerial services, the representatives of settlement office in Nepal are held at the seven official premises as listed below³¹:

- Gadhen Khangsar, Office of the Representative, Lazimpat, Kathmandu
- Sha-Wa-Ra Sum Office, Office of the Representative (Solukhumbhu, Walung and Rasuwa), Gadhen Khangsar, Lazimpat, Kathmandu
- Choe-Jor Settlement office, Chorten & Jorpati, Near Boudhnath Stupa, Kathmandu; Gyal-Phak (Kathmandu & Swayambhu), Settlement Office, Kathmandu
- Lodrik Tibetan Settlements, Settlement Office (Jampaling/ Paljorling/ Tashigang), Prithivi Chock, Pokhara
- Tashiling Tibetan Handicraft Centre, Settlement Office (Tashiling/ Manang/ Dhorpatan), Chorepatan (Near Davis Fall, Pokhara)
- Tashi Palkhiel Settlement office, Dudh Kharka, Pokhara
- Samdupling Tibetan Refugee Camp, Settlement Office, Jawalakhel Handicraft Centre, Ekantakuna, Lalitpur

VI. THE POLITICAL DIMENSION

Nepal is geopolitically positioned between two emerging economies –China and India. Both the Asian economic giants are also the nuclear states and have become unavoidable actors in the international political economy. While India surrounds Nepal with open border from three sides, it borders with China's sensitive Tibetan Autonomous Region of China to the north. Nepal and the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) of China share 141488-kilometre common border.

Nepal and Tibet share a long history of friendship and interdependence. The TAR is Nepal's first geographical channel of interaction with china for trade and commerce. Political stability and economic prosperity are mutually inclusive in nature to affect the security concerns of both the countries– Nepal and China. The Chinese government does not recognize the Tibetans living in Nepal and other countries as refugees. If the sovereignty of TAR is disturbed by any actors or forces (including separatists and external interventionists), Nepal would suffer adversely because the TAR of China in Nepal has been a sole basis for

economic and trade linkages. It has been an alternative supply and support in case of blockade and intervention from other side, particularly from India. In this way, peace, stability and prosperity in TAR has been a political interest of Nepal. Similarly, peaceful, stable and prosperous Nepal is in China's interest because external forces and separatist elements can easily misuse the Nepalese territory against China if instability reigns in Nepal³². In this context, while Nepal has positioned 'One China Policy' of foreign affairs which assumes Tibet as an integral part of China. Both the countries reject any kind of "third part interference" in Nepal-China good neighbourly relations.

Nepal-China relations have been bound with a long historical, political and geo-cultural context. Historically, the relation is deepened into the people-to-people bonding in the Trans-Himalaya context of Nepal and Tibet. The diplomatic relation between Nepal and China established on 1 August 1955 while bilateral relations further formalized with the Sino-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship signed on April 28, 1960. In changing context of global power dynamics, Nepal could not remain in isolation from the strategic project of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). With the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation under the BRI on 12 May 2017 in Kathmandu between Nepal and China, it is highly expected that strategic implications of this initiative could contribute to Nepal's socio-economic development and cross borders connections. After the promulgation of new Constitution in Nepal in 2015, China has further accelerated its engagement in various sectors including political stability as well post-earthquake reconstruction in the country. Nepal has signed the Transit and Transportation Agreement (TTA) with China in March 2016, which opened a door to reduce the dependence of this land-locked country upon India. The text of the protocols of TTA has been finalized and agreed on June 2018. However, there has been a Tibet dimension as a cross border transactions and connectivity for both the countries.

VII. RESEARCH AGENDAS

Based on historical and contemporary trends of Tibetan studies and emerging research gaps, the following key issues are highlighted:

Political economy of Tibetan issue:

- Political economic landscape of Tibetan issues in Nepal; its historical constructions and contemporary manifestations
- The political economy of Tibetan issue in Nepal in terms of: a) state-actor's perspective (Nepal and China); and b) non-state actor's perspective (donor and foreign actors, including activists and campaigners)
- The national and international actors engaged and affiliated in this issue, and the position of foreign powers and agencies
- The potential measures to be taken by Nepal-China authorities to make arrangements for border security and cooperation in the Northern Himalayan region

Tibetan migration:

- Important issues and factors of socio-cultural and migratory trans-boundary relations between Nepali and Tibetans
- The causes, consequences and nature of Tibetan migration in Nepal
- The construction of culture, religious value and social bonding of Tibetan migrants
- Types of markets and cross-border (China-Nepal) which could matter Tibetan migration in Nepal
- The open border relations between Nepal and India which has affected the legal and empirical status of Tibetan's migratory move to Nepal and India
- Nexus of Tibetan migration, social crime and human trafficking in Tibet, Nepal and beyond

Economy and livelihood studies:

- Livelihood strategies of Tibetan migrants in Nepal (in general) and in their respective settlement camps (in particular)
- Recent economic engagements of the Tibetan migrants in place of destination
- The status of poverty and inequality among the Tibetan migrants
- Differences in the livelihood behaviour of Tibetan migrants in terms of their settlement locality: urban (e.g. Kathmandu and Pokhara) and rural (Rasuwa and Baglung)
- Manifestation of the livelihood behaviours of Tibetan people in different settlements of Nepal
- Changing status/ trend of the livelihood strategies (types, scales and exposure) of Tibetan people
- Implications of mountain livelihoods and trans-Himalayan tourism in Nepal, in particular context of Tibet
- Well-being status (material and non-material) of Tibetan people in their settlements of Nepal

Gender dimension of livelihood:

- Livelihood and entrepreneurial behaviours of Tibetan women and their gender-sensitive nature
- Major changes in livelihood strategies of Tibetan settlement in general and their changing implications on women in particular
- Entrepreneurial behaviours of Tibetan women and their impacts in making of the livelihood
- Role of gender relations in making (and deconstructing) the livelihood strategy of Tibetan women and their cultural and religious values within the Tibetan community

Specific context of BRI:

- Contemporary international relations, security concerns and strategic issues that can be applied on Nepal and China's multi-dimensional relations
- Potential implications of BRI on the socio-economic development of Nepal in particular; and its trilateral linkages: China, India and Nepal
- The nexus of BRI and Tibetan issue
- The future of BRI and Nepal's 'One China Policy'

Gaps on the generation and gender relations:

- Nature and type of generational gaps (in terms of and knowledge transformation and cultural/ religious construct) that exist among the Tibetan migrants in Nepal
- Gender gaps (e.g. in terms of HH decision making, political participation/ representation, citizenship, and other services of education, health and recreation) within the Tibetan community and among the Tibetans and non-Tibetans

Legal, security and documentation issues:

- The issue of documentation, certification, legal proofs and status/ indemnity cards of Tibetan migrants who have been staying in Nepal since a long time
- Psychological needs and challenges to the Tibetan people who have been resettling in the new places (in terms of their identity, livelihood security and personality development)
- Physical and social security issues of the Tibetan migrants in Nepal

Civic and political engagements:

- Types of civic and political activities of the Tibetan migrants who often engage to promote their exposure and diaspora
- Possibility of Tibetan community to maintain their international relations with other governments and states
- The relation between the Tibetan refugee community and donor institutions, and the trend of fund flow in their community in particular
- Critical aspects of socio-cultural and political relations among the Tibetan community and the host community in particular locality
- Implication of south-south collaboration in Tibetan issues through civil societies, think tanks and Universities (Chinese/ Tibetan and Nepal)

Diaspora studies:

- The historical context of political diplomacy and trade diplomacy between Nepal and China, Nepal and Tibet and Tibet-Nepal-India
- Diaspora of Nepali in Tibet, and Tibetans in Nepal
- Diaspora of Nepali in Mainland China and Chinese in Nepal
- Nepali in Hong Kong
- Non-residential Nepalis (NRNs) in Macao
- NRNs in Taiwan
- A 'Little China' in Thamel, Kathmandu
- Bouddhanath-the 'Vatican' of Tibetan Buddhism
- Tibetan Lamas and Nepali Tantriks

Difficulty and challenges of researching Tibetans in Nepal:

- Tibetan issue in Nepal is taken as more political and humanitarian; so it is methodologically sensitive to carry out research on this. The administrative and security forces of the Government of Nepal watches cautiously near and around the camps.
- The role of western donor agencies also plays a critical role in this regard as they are at times blamed for sensitizing the Tibetan migrants in the Free Tibet Campaign.
- A researcher from outside of Tibetan community has other barriers to language and ethnic recognition. The people might not share their personal and ethnographic narratives to any outsiders.
- Though the research participants can be found in Tibetan settlement camps, they are frequently traveling outside of the camps; so accessibility is another issue. Moreover, the researcher should have formal permission through respective settlement chiefs or liaison representatives before entering into the camp and initiate any research activities including data collection.
- Research among the women and elderly persons is even more difficult as they hardly express their personal stories and feelings as the researcher could have expectations.

Methodological issues:

- Cross-sectional and longitudinal studies of Tibetan settlers
- Mixed approach: Qualitative and quantitative (triangulate the data)
- Historical approach (Tibetan historical context of migration; factors associated with it)
- Trans-Himalayan ecological studies
- Trans-Himalayan ethnic boundaries and cultural studies
- Comparative study of different settlements; rural and urban, and male/ female within Nepal
- Critical epistemological approach (realist perspective of International Relations)
- Social constructivist and interpretive ontological perspective
- Ethnographic and narrative analysis (anthropological, post-modernist)

Significance and Innovations:

- Knowledge contribution in the field of Tibetan studies in particular context of Nepal
- Publications of scientific papers in the national and international peer-reviewed journals and anthologies
- International exposure of the research findings through sharing of the ideas, understanding and findings. It can further foster Nepal-China academic collaboration through university levels as well as through think tanks and researchers/ research fellows

VIII. CONCLUSION

The paper has highlighted the historical dimension of Tibetan migration in Nepal and their status of the settlement. Then it offered a set of analytical questions for contemporary research agendas on the Tibetan studies in particular context of Nepal. The key arguments on this paper reflect that within a broader transboundary ethnic identity of Tibetan migrants in Nepal, it has diverse issues of political economy, migration, livelihood, gender, legal and security problems. Moreover, there are some methodological and ethical issues on Tibetan research. Thus, the paper concludes that:

- No single idea or perspective is enough to understand and theorize the Tibetan issue in the changing context of international relations in Nepal and China and in the international diaspora as well.
- There are significant research gaps and agendas on Tibetan studies that occasionally mislead the grassroots narratives of livelihood, gender relations, citizenship, and cross-cultural relations.
- Though the Tibetan studies in Nepal has been politically contested, there are non-political issues to be addressed on the ground of humanitarian and social justice.

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