Overseas Caste among Military Migrants

The Migration and Settlement of Nepalese Gurkhas in Britain

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Statement of Candidate

I certify that the work presented in this thesis titled '**Overseas Caste among Military Migrants: The Migration and Settlement of Nepalese Gurkhas in Britain'** has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree to any other university or institution other than Macquarie University.

I also certify that the thesis is an original piece of research and it has been written by me. Any help and assistance that I have received in my research work and the preparation of this thesis itself have been appropriately acknowledged.

In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

The research presented in this thesis was approved by Macquarie University Ethics Review Committee, reference number: **5201200238 on 20/06/2012.**

……..

Mr Mitra Pariyar (42662591)

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Abstract

Overseas caste remains under-researched. Many scholars including Max Weber and Luis Dumont have identified the caste system as a fundamental part of life among Hindus, Sikhs and others within South Asia. Now millions of the same people live abroad. Despite this, however, there is little knowledge of caste among South Asian migrants and their descendants, particularly in the West. The purpose of this thesis is to explore how and why Nepalese Gurkha immigrants – retired soldiers who migrated to Britain en masse *following the change of Gurkha immigration policies in 2004 and 2009 – have actively reproduced caste from the outset.*

This study is based on ethnographic field research involving participant observation and semi-structured interviews, conducted in England between 2012 and 2013. I am not a soldier, but I was born and brought up in a Gurkha village and town of western Nepal. I have known many Gurkhas and their families for a long time, both in Nepal and England. As a student, I lived in a Gurkha community in East Oxford in 2008 – 2012. I was in England, closely observing actress Joanna Lumley's popular campaign for Gurkha settlement rights – which she won in the spring of 2009.

The British have traditionally recruited Nepalese men from specific castes/ethnic groups from particular locations. Thus, majority Gurkha immigrants belong to the four middle castes of Nepal: the Gurung, Magar, Rai and Limbu. So, the mass migration of Gurkhas dramatically changed the composition of castes within the Nepalese community in the

UK. Until recently, the latter was dominated by, as elsewhere, Nepal's elite groups, i.e., high-caste Bahuns and Chhetris. Now they suddenly found themselves in the minority in the UK. Furthermore, over the years, Gurkha caste associations have risen up rapidly, both in their numbers and sizes. In this rare diasporic vantage, the Gurkhas became not only preponderant, but increasingly assertive. I will demonstrate that, as Gurkhas attempted to mobilize themselves against the traditional authority of high castes, the diasporic community became increasingly polarized along the caste line.

I argue that this fast-paced reinstitution of caste among Gurkha immigrants must be understood in the contexts of: 1) The transnational influence of Nepal's ethnic politics, spearheaded by many middle castes and/or ethnic groups in Nepal, which has sought to challenge the traditional authority of high castes; and, 2) Post/colonial policies on the recruitment and organization of the British Gurkha Army, wherein caste has been a central principle. In other words, I show that in part Britain itself is responsible for strengthening Nepalese caste on its soil.

My thesis thus presents new lenses for understanding diasporic caste: British colonial history and transnationalism. Much of the past research on overseas caste, which were mainly centred on indentured communities in former British planation colonies like the Caribbean, Fiji and Mauritius, have claimed that caste lost its force. These historiographical analyses blame colonial policies of recruiting and organizing coolies on the estates, wherein caste seemed to have little significance. There are some studies of caste among Indians and Pakistanis in Western countries, who emigrated after the

World War II. These scholars demonstrate some significance of caste overseas, but they do not pay attention to the postcolonial impacts. Nor do they delve into transnational connections, which may have either directly or indirectly contributed to the revival of caste in the diaspora.

Lastly, this study informs policy. Over the years, Britain's political class has been divided on proposed caste legislation. The UK is grappling with the first issue of this kind in the Western world. In an unprecedented move, low-caste Indians spearheaded a campaign to outlaw caste discrimination, which they claim is essential to protect them from alleged bigotry and intolerance in the hands of high-caste Indians. The latter, however, have vehemently opposed this demand, claiming that caste has never been a problem in the diasporic community. The debate has also divided a few scholars that dared to delve into this sensitive topic. I suggest here that the debate needs to be widened. Here I demonstrate the saliency of employing particularly the concepts of transnationalism and colonial history in order to get a better understanding of diasporic caste.

Introduction

Joanna Lumley's Joyful Scream: "The Gurkhas are Coming!"

One sunny afternoon, on 21 May 2009, along with some retired Gurkha[1] soldiers, I was watching a live television broadcast of a planned government announcement on Gurkha immigration. We had gathered in a Gurkha house in East Oxford, England. Some of us were drinking beer, others tea and coffee, while intensely focusing on what was to unfold both inside and outside of the British Parliament. Even though the new policy was going to be made public in parliament, an event that had rendered the House of Representatives unusually full of MPs, media attention was also centred on actress Joanna Lumley.[2] Standing outside the Parliament House with a crowd of Gurkha campaigners, their supporters and media persons, Lumley was eagerly awaiting the government's response to a popular campaign for Gurkha settlement rights which she had spearheaded since 2008.

Following a previous review of Gurkha immigration policy in 2004, some younger retirees – i.e., those completing their tenure after July 1997, when Hong Kong was handed back to China and Gurkha Headquarters subsequently transferred from the city to England – had already been let into the country (Ware 2012: 18) (these earlier arrivals included my friends in Oxford). However, the vast majority of veterans, those

[1] Gurkha soldiers: Nepalese men serving the British Army. I use the term here specifically to refer to mostly ex-military men. Until recently, a soldier's tenure lasted 15 years; thus, many veterans to be discussed here were of working age.

[2] It is said that actress Lumley famously supported the Gurkha campaign in part due to Gurkhas saving the life of her father, a major in the British Army, while fighting together in Burma in the Second World War.

who retired before July 1997, were still effectively barred from entering Britain as per the age-old policy of Gurkha service. Lumley and her team of campaigners had demanded that all Gurkhas be delivered "justice" by granting them settlement rights. The Lumley-led campaign not only generated the support of the popular media, but galvanized the support of opposition parties.[3] The issue of Gurkha immigration thus became one of the heated policy debates in Britain's national politics at the time. Lumley's claim that Nepalese veterans must be allowed into the country by virtue of their – and their ancestors' – fighting and dying for Britain for 200 years had gained popular support.[4] This unprecedented movement resulted in the House of Representatives voting in favour of Gurkha immigration/settlement in April 2009. However, given the Labour Government's persistent position that older veterans must retire in Nepal, it was uncertain until the last minute whether the government would act upon the legislators' mandate.

As expected, Home Secretary Jacqui Smith announced the policy review, which allowed all retired Gurkhas and their dependents to migrate and settle in the UK. The minister stated:[5] "All former Gurkhas who retired before 1997, and who have served more than four years, will now be eligible to apply for settlement in the UK." This was a big win for the Gurkhas, who were now entitled to immigrate into Britain. Immediately the minister completed her statement in parliament, Lumley started to address the crowd (picture 1).

[3] So much so that some right-wing tabloids, e.g., the *Daily Mail*, which had never tired of opposing immigration, also supported the Gurkha case.
[4] Gurkha campaigners claim that at least 60,000 Nepalese men died fighting for Britain, including many in the First and Second World Wars.
[5] See parts of the announcement and Lumley's speech at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=heULiw_BZdg *[Last accessed 1 March 2015].*

Wiping away tears of joy, she lauded the Government for heeding public' support of the Gurkha veterans, thus enabling the British people to pay the Gurkhas "debt of honour". She concluded by screaming: ""For the people of Great Britain, what could be greater than to be able to open our arms and say, the Gurkhas are coming: *Ayo Gurkhali!"*[6]

Picture 1. Joanna Lumley and the Gurkhas celebrate their immigration victory

(Source: *Daily Mail,* 15 Nov 2016)

The Gurkhas gathered around Lumley raised their hands and screamed in unison with her: the sound reverberated throughout our Gurkha neighbourhood in East Oxford as well. Impromptu parties started in ex-soldier households not just in Oxford, but in other towns and suburbs of the UK. In the meantime, my friends started calling their families, relatives and friends in the towns and villages of Nepal, as well as those living and working abroad, in Hong Kong and Brunei, for example. We drank beer and enjoyed an

[6] *Ayo Gurkhali,* a famous Gurkha battle cry, became an apt metaphor for their victory in their political and legal battles against the UK for settlement rights.

early dinner of barbecued chicken wings and pork ribs, Gurkhas and their families seemed very happy and excited by the day's policy review.

While this new policy did not directly impact upon those Gurkhas who along with their families had already settled in the UK, they too had reason to celebrate. Now their parents, grandparents and many other adult relatives were entitled to emigrate to England. There would be incredible family reunions, something few had not thought possible until a moment before. Like our hosts, many Gurkha families had a long history of Gurkha service. This meant that almost every Gurkha in Britain could expect to welcome at least some members of their extended family and relations. For Gurkhas, who, like other Nepalis, placed high value on family and community and in taking care of elderly relatives, this was great news.

Gurkha Migration and Transnationalism

This is a study of recent Gurkha mass migration and settlement in the United Kingdom. It traces their migration to Britain post 2004 and looks at how these new immigrants have been rebuilding their families and communities overseas. In particular, this thesis examines the extent to which the processes of migration and settlement, in the historical context of 200-year Gurkha service, have shaped – and been shaped by – caste. Furthermore, it seeks to understand how these processes have been informed and influenced by the ex-soldiers' experiences in Nepal, and in the army, vis-à-vis the caste system. The Gurkha lives depicted here are therefore transnational. Broadly, I seek to demonstrate how transnational processes have contributed to the resurgence of caste-

based networks and communities, in the process, both challenging and reviving caste hierarchy (Dumont 1980) in the diaspora.

But first, it will be useful here to explain what I mean by the term ‘Gurkha’. It originated from Gorkha, a small historical town in mid-western Nepal. In 1768, King Prithvi Narayan Shah of Gorkha fought and conquered all the other principalities in the region including the Kathmandu Valley and created a much bigger, modern Nepal (Whelpton 2005: 35). Part of the reason why the British started recruiting Nepalese men into its Indian forces in 1815 was this glorious military history of the original Gorkha Army. The term changed slightly and became ‘Gurkha’ in the British tongue. Some of the Gurkha regiments raised by colonial India continue to serve the Indian Army, and they are still called the ‘Gorkha’ army. Given this history, the term ‘Gurkha’ is often used differently. Some outsiders use it synonymous with Nepalese citizens, both military and civilian (Dhakal 2016: 53). Others refer it to the Gurkha regiment, an elite and ethnically segregated unit of the British Army, including British commanders (Gurkha units have always been controlled by a few white British men). Gurkha officer and novelist John Masters’s (2002) autobiography, *Bugles and a Tiger: My Life in the Gurkhas,* is an example of this.

In this thesis, I use the term ‘Gurkha’ specifically for a Nepalese man who has served a British Gurkha regiment. I do not include other Gurkhas: Indian Gorkhas and members of the Gurkha Contingent of the Singapore Police, for example. Neither do I include Nepalese men working for private security around the world without any stint with the British Army. And I exclude British officers of the Gurkha forces. And, because this

study is focused on the migration and settlement of former soldiers/mercenaries, most men discussed here are no longer in active service.

It is also important to note that my analysis does not treat the ‘Gurkha’ as a particular social class or caste or ethnic group of Nepal. As I we shall see, most Gurkha soldiers have been recruited from the four select castes/ethnic groups from specific geographical regions of Nepal (certainly those that formed the bulk of the original Gorkha Army). So, in the thinking of most Nepalis, including the soldiers themselves, Gurkhas automatically refer to citizens from specific social groups. It may be similarly understood in my analysis in the thesis.

Moreover, it will become clear that the Gurkhas are incredibly proud of their renown as world-class warriors forever loyal to the British Crown. This has fostered their sense of belonging to Britain. Despite arriving in the country very recently, they took the UK as their second home, so much so that many asked me not to call them ‘immigrants’. Given the preponderance of just a few castes in Gurkha regiments, therefore in the diasporic community, this military pride among ex-soldiers has translated into ethnic/caste pride. This has had a significant impact upon the overseas community. Importantly, it is caste/ethnicity identity, rather than the more popular Gurkha identity, which has impacted upon the diasporic community more profoundly. This is my main justification for concentrating on individual Gurkha castes instead of analysing them collectively as the ‘Gurkhas’.

Returning to the main topic in this section, i.e., Gurkha migration, it is important to note that Gurkhas had moved overseas long before migrating to the UK. As Low (2015) has shown, Gurkha soldiers, who have served the British from their bases in South and South East Asia since the early 19th century, have been the principal sources of Nepalese diaspora in these regions. And, importantly, Gurkha lives have always been highly transnational in the main due to the nature of their military careers. Gurkhas have not just fought on behalf of the British virtually all around the world, including some 200,000 men in each of the World Wars (Pettigrew 2013: 30); over time, they have been stationed in multiple countries.

Since 1815, when the Gurkha Army was raised as part of the colonial Bengal Army (Raugh 2004: 156), Gurkha regiments have been stationed in various locations in North India. Following the 1947 Indian Independence, when Gurkha forces were divided between independent India and Britain, the latter transferred its share of four Gurkha regiments to Sungai Patani, Malaya (now called Malaysia) (Hack 2013: 111). While Malaya was their principal base when they were deployed in various conflicts of the Far-East in the 1950s and 1960s, the end of hostilities in the region, and the decline of the British Empire, led to the shifting of Gurkha forces to Hong Kong. In this city controlled by the British, the Gurkhas not only protected vital installations, but patrolled borders against an influx of illegal immigrants arriving by boat from mainland China (Erni and Leung 2014: 40). After July 1997, when Hong Kong was returned to China, Gurkha Headquarters were permanently shifted to the UK (Gellner 2013: 144). Even though the British Gurkha forces have been largely based in England since that time, there is still

some presence in the Far East. An infantry of British Gurkhas is stationed in Brunei. Thus, there is a long history of the Gurkhas moving abroad for work.

Moreover, the policies and practices of Gurkha service actively promoted transnationalism. Conditions of service meant that the Gurkha soldiers had to maintain intimate ties with their villages and towns in Nepal. This was important because: first, unlike soldiers of the British military from Commonwealth countries, the Gurkhas were required to retire in their home country (Ware 2012). As clearly stated in the 1947 Tripartite Treaty, (the only public document that details terms and conditions of Gurkha service) all soldiers were immediately dispatched to Nepal upon the completion of their 15-year tenures.

Second, perhaps most importantly, Gurkha army careers have been marked by long, painful separation from family. Until 2006, Gurkha service followed a very restricted married accompanied service. Only a quarter of Gurkha soldiers in the regiment were permitted to bring their wives and dependent children to the barracks at any one time.[7] In other words, during careers that spanned 15 years, the soldiers were only allowed to bring their wives and dependent children to their stations for periods of up to three years. Moreover, the soldiers were forbidden to marry foreign women and to start families overseas. Thus split transnationally, Gurkhas supported their families, often extended families, in Nepal by remitting much of their income from the army (Ahearn 2001: 18). Unable to settle abroad, most Gurkhas built their houses and bought

[7] See the contexts for allowing married accompanied service to all Gurkhas, on a par with their counterparts in the British Army, in this parliamentary report: www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN04671.pdf *[Accessed 10 April 2016].*

properties in Nepalese towns and villages. Furthermore, and particularly since the 1990s, many retirees went abroad for a second career, thus extending their absence from home. In this way, long before entering Britain as immigrants, the Gurkhas have had much experience of transnational living.

As a concept referring to “migrants’ durable ties across countries” (Faist 2010a: 9), transnationalism has attracted considerable scholarly attention. In the 1990s, the anthropologists Glick-Schiller, Basch and Blanc pioneered the theory of transnationalism (Glick-Schiller *et al.* 1992; Basch *et al.* 1994). Building on previous scholarship on Caribbean, African and Latin American immigrants in the US, the authors highlighted the saliency of enduring trans-border connections in migration research and analysis. As a distinct analytical framework, transnationalism is defined as “the process by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement” (Basch *et al.* 1994: 27). In an historical re-examination of human migration through a transnational lens, Glick-Schiller *et al.* made a distinction between migration today and that of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Previously, migrants were to some degree “uprooted” from their original societies and cultures, and located almost entirely in the socio-cultural, economic and political spheres of the host society or country (Schiller 2013: 30). Things changed dramatically, however, with the ease of travel and advancement in communications technologies. As a consequence, today’s immigrant lives “cut across national boundaries and bring two societies into a single social field” (Glick-Schiller *et al.* 1992: 1). In other words, their activities, patterns and networks encompass both nation-states.

During the heyday of transnationalism, i.e., in the 1990s, a lot of research and analysis surrounding the analytical framework was seen. And, inevitably, many specific areas of migrant living were explored using this perspective. As a consequence, the original concept of transnationalism was further developed, expanded and critiqued. This increasingly popular area of research across the disciplines evolved in diverse ways. Concomitant with the expansion of the concept, however, was the risk of the theory losing its saliency. To counter this threat, some prominent scholars made an effort to reconceptualise the theory in the hope it would remain viable (e.g., Vertovec 1999; 2009 and Faist 2000). For example, the Princeton scholar Portes, who developed transnationalism theory and whose particular focus was on post-1965 migration to the United States, is credited for popularizing and advancing the theory (e.g., Portes 1996; 1999; Portes *et al.* 1999).

This thesis is an ethnography of various transnational Gurkha communities, their activities, symbols and artefacts, and of events centred on their caste and cultural identities. Different political and cultural processes of creating transnational spaces (Faist 2000) in the UK will be explored. My depiction of caste-based transnationalism – or transnational caste – can specifically be described by what some scholars have called 'transnationalism from below' (Smith and Guarnizo 1998). In fact, the initial and fundamental concept of transnationalism can, in general, be seen as transnationalism from below: it has focused mainly on grassroots activities that are often in opposition to global capitalism. Smith and Guarnizo (1998: 6), however, develop the theory of

transnationalism from below as an analytic paradigm in itself. The authors suggest five important analytical themes to characterize their theory: “Political organization of transnational spaces”; “the constitution and reproduction of transnational networks through material and symbolic exchange”; “transnationalism and identity politics”; “the centrality of ‘locality’ in a historicized sense”; and, “the development of viable approaches for studying transnationalism”. Many of these are useful paradigms for my analysis of the reproduction and revival of caste among newly-arrived Gurkha immigrants in Britain. Identity, for example, is of particular significance in the Gurkha case. As Vertovec (2001) suggests, transnational exchange and participation often require the construction of some sort of common identity among agents cross nation-states which, understandably, involves political and cultural processes.

Even though transnationalism theory may not be as popular as in earlier times, many recent studies have explored various aspects of South Asian lives using this framework; for example: Pakistani communities in the US (Afzal 2014); marriage networks of Muslim families across England and Pakistan (Charsley 2013); transnational lives of Indian students in Australia (Baas 2012); and, Indian online transnationalism (Sahoo and de Kruijf 2014). Despite research into these and many other aspects of South Asian diasporas in the West, the reproduction of caste remains under-researched. And, in particular, overseas/migrant caste has not been properly investigated through a lens of transnationalism. My study aims to fill this gap by emphasizing Gurkhas’ transnational activities, imaginaries, cultural practices and ethnic formations.

Nepalis have become a significant migrant community in Britain following the recent mass migration of Gurkhas and their dependents. Prior to the arrival of the Gurkhas, Nepalis were a much smaller diaspora comprising mostly civilians. Since the 1970s, they have immigrated as students, workers and entrepreneurs. In 2001, a UK charity estimated that there were 6,000 Nepalis in Britain. However, Nepalese organizations contested this figure, putting their estimates at approximately 50,000 (Hausner 2014: 187). Today, more than 150,000 Nepalis are believed to be residing in the UK; and, more than two-thirds of them are military men and their families. This large presence of military men and their families has made the UK Nepalis a unique diaspora. Apart from a few places like Hong Kong, most Nepalese overseas communities including in the US, Canada and Australia have been dominated by the high castes, who are not in the main non-military. This peculiarity of Nepalis in Britain is an important context for my analysis of diasporic caste.

Research Questions

In this thesis, I explore the reproduction of caste overseas as an important outcome of transnational political and cultural processes, and of post/colonial policies and practices of Gurkha recruitment. The following is the core research question:

> *How have recently-arrived Gurkha immigrants reproduced their caste communities – by extension, deepening historical divisions and entrenching internecine conflict among fellow Nepalis in the UK – and*

what are the historical and transnational factors contributing to this development?

This core problematic will be examined through a set of supplementary questions:

- Historically speaking, how have the long-term military policies and practices of the Brigade of Gurkhas directly, and perhaps indirectly, contributed to the consolidation of Nepalese caste hierarchy?

- What has been the significance of unique Gurkha migration and settlement in terms of the Gurkhas' ability to reconstitute caste in the diaspora?

- How has Nepal's ongoing ethnic politics, i.e., the politics of anti-caste, polarized Gurkhas around the axis of their caste identities; and, how have they set about challenging the traditional dominance of the high caste?

- To what extent have low castes been exposed to traditional forms of discrimination and prejudice from fellow Nepalis in the UK, and how is it linked to militarism?

- How has the type of reception of new Gurkha immigrants by the host society, particularly by members of the dominant white community in the locality, led to the entrenchment of caste among Gurkhas in England?

Caste: A Changing Concept

Caste is often a confusing issue; it can mean different things to different people at different times. Before delving into its complexities, it will be useful to understand the basic concept of caste. An Oxford English dictionary defines caste as "each of the hereditary classes of Hindu society, distinguished by relative degrees of ritual purity or pollution and of social status" (Stevenson 2010: 271). The basis of caste is the ancient Hindu categorization of the masses, which divides social groups into four hierarchical social groups known as the *varna.* Each *varna* is assigned a specific role in society, which also determines varying prestige levels. The Brahmins (priestly caste) constitute the superior group, followed by the Kshatriya (warriors) and the Vaishya (merchants). The Shudra (peasants and manual labourers), who are relegated to the perceived lowest ranks, occupy the ritually impure space. But there is yet another group, even lower and more ritually polluted than the Shudra, known as the Untouchable, who are considered outside of the *varna* system.

According to the ancient Hindu texts, i.e., *Rig Veda* and *Manusmriti* (also known as the *Law of Manu*), the divinity set out the *varna* system. The caste system's genesis is explained in terms of the human creation. According to these age-old scriptures, each *varna* is born out of the body Brahma, the Hindu God of creation (one of the top three gods of the Hindu pantheon) (Kara 2012: 19). Emerging from Brahma's head, the

Brahmin or Brahman acts as the source of all knowledge. And, as the ultimate interpreter of divine knowledge, the Brahmin commands the utmost respect in society. Similarly, the Kshatriya, born out of the God's chest, are endowed with great physical strength and martial qualities (Illaiah 2010: 44 – 45). Warrior kings and military commanders belong to this second tier. The Vaishya, it is believed, emerged from the thighs and the Shudra from the feet. The latter are socially and religiously sanctioned to serve the upper castes (Illaiah 2010: 21). Each *varna* was later subdivided into thousands of endogamous castes or sub-castes known as the *jati* (Gupta 1999: 5). The term 'caste' is commonly used to refer to *varna, jati,* as well as to the system of classification.

Many native and Western scholars including Marx, Weber and Hegel have been fascinated by the prevalence of the ancient caste system in modern India. For example, Weber (1958: 34 – 38) depicted caste as completely different from the guild in the West, with the former creating a 'magical distance' between social groups. In his view, the caste system was intrinsic to the Hindu religion. Among the scholars studying India's caste system, Dumont's watershed work titled *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications,* written in French in 1966, has elicited much discussion and debate. Analysing the caste system based on Lévi-Strauss's influential theory of structuralism, and building on Weber's theory, Dumont argued that caste should be understood primarily as an ideology, which he defines as a "system of ideas and values" (1980: 36-37). These ideological values, which become meaningful in the context of the whole, i.e., the caste system, are rooted in the Hindu religion. In other words, each caste in

itself is meaningless: they make sense only in connection to the caste system seen in its totality. Furthermore, he claimed, secular power is subordinate to and encompassed by religious values. As to the question of what keeps the wheel of caste turning in modern times, he argued that the ideas firmly implanted in people's heads were mainly responsible, more so than other issues such as power, material condition and other factors. He further argued that the caste system functions on a single principle of hierarchical opposition between the notions of ritual purity and pollution (Dumont 1980: 38). In Dumont's view, the opposition between the pure Brahmins at the top and the polluted/impure Shudras and Untouchables at the bottom, is the defining characteristic of the caste system.

Significantly, Dumont (1980) argued, people belonging to all levels of ritual hierarchy – including those occupying the lowest ranks – readily accept their place in the system. He attributes this apparent universal acceptance of the religio-social hierarchy to the Hindu religious faith. Other considerations, e.g., political power and economic systems, may have some impact on the caste system; but, the religiously sanctioned notions of ritual purity and pollution constitute its backbone. So, as Dumont (1980: 70) claimed, although people may invoke the problem of hygiene to justify the perceived impurity and lower status of the Untouchables (owing to their filthy jobs that include scavenging, cleaning the streets and disposing of human faeces), physical impurity is not the real cause of their position. They acquire impurity at birth. Thus, in effect, they would still be treated as Untouchables by others even after they abandoned their traditional roles.

Dumont is credited for developing a comprehensive, all-encompassing theory to explain why the ancient system of caste remains in force in modern India.

While Dumont's work inspired much scholarship – e.g., by Madan (1971), Moffatt (1989) and Milner (1994) – it has also been severely criticized. Many of his critics have attacked both his theoretical model as well as his ethnographic representation of the caste system (Fuller 1996: 4). Berreman (1971), one of his early critics, for example, witheringly opposed Dumont for over-emphasizing the apparently textual interpretation of caste at the cost of the lived reality. Accusing Dumont of presenting, if not justifying, the Brahmanic view, i.e., the voice of the dominant groups greatly benefitting from the caste system, Berreman lamented that the issues of the economically exploited and socially marginalized masses had been largely ignored. He observed: "Those who experience the system as oppression are hardly heard from in this book" (Berreman 1971: 23). Berreman emphasized instead that, contrary to Dumont, power and economic exploitation are in fact the main drivers of the ancient tradition of caste in the contemporary era.

Similarly, many other sociologists and anthropologists have held unequal distribution of economic resources and power as the major cause of the perpetuation of social hierarchy or stratification (e.g., Thorat and Neuman 2012; Quigley 2005; Kolenda 1985; Deliège 1999; Mencher 1974). In their views, while the issues of ritual purity and pollution may be important in social life, they are little more than ancillary factors of modern-day caste. A common example of socio-economic inequality is the ritualized

patron-client system between castes, known as the *Jajmani* (Jayapalan 2001: 301). This system of hierarchized economic transactions, first comprehensively studied by Wiser (1932), is a life-long indentureship which has greatly disadvantaged particularly the low-caste service providers, who are often economically exploited and socially marginalized owing to their ancestral trades (e.g., Sharma 2004: 142 – 148; Raheja 1988; Wiser 1932). And, this typical traditional social structure, invariably skewed towards the upper castes, perpetuates unequal sharing of economic resources and political power.

Over the past two decades, increasing numbers of scholars have emphasized a more secular caste, often detached from the traditional system. Political scientists Rudolph and Rudolph (1960) are among the pioneering scholars who argued that caste has acquired a political role in modern India through the formation of the formal caste association. In one of their later works, the authors demonstrate that caste associations are "paracommunities" that empower members of castes to seek "social mobility, political power and economic advantage" (Rudolph and Rudolph 1967: 29-35). Evaluating the dominant themes of caste-related scholarship in the past decades, eminent Indian sociologist Gupta (2000, 2004) stresses that caste is no longer understood in social analysis as a system of hierarchy. On the contrary, what one sees everywhere is less of the acceptance or internalization of one's debased social position. Far from following the processes of Sanskritization – as Srinivas (1966) famously suggested, the copying of cultures and customs of the higher castes in an effort to enhance one's status – and internalization, there has been a rise in resistance to the

traditional caste hierarchy. Within this process, identity has “trumped” hierarchy” (Gupta 2004). In their bid to change their social socio-cultural status and increase their access to power, many middle and lower castes have effectively ethnicized their castes. In other words, castes have essentially turned into public platforms for forging collective identities and staging political claims-making. In this way, as Wyatt (2010: 21) asserts, in the modern period, “political entrepreneurs have seen the possibilities of caste as a form of political identity”.

Much of the contemporary scholarship on caste has centred on the ethnicity of caste (e.g., Still 2014; Thorat 2009; Jaffrelot 2005; Michelutti 2004; Michael 1999; Deliège 1999; Omvedt 1994). Scholars describe and analyse tales of previously suppressed or marginalized caste groups mobilizing themselves in their villages, towns, states and nationally (e.g., Dr Ambedkar’s mass movement against the caste system) to challenge the traditional social hierarchy. There is a long history of India’s lower castes politically challenging their subordination by the higher castes. However, Nepal has seen mass mobilization against the perpetual domination of the higher castes only in the past two decades, albeit in the guise of ethnic/indigenous movements.

Nepal’s Caste System and the Gurkhas

The general perception of caste as a central pillar of Hindu society means that it is applied universally across the Indian Subcontinent, with India as the starting point. Nepal was the world’s only officially Hindu state until 2006, where over 80 per cent of the population is Hindu (Baral 2012: 133). Even though Nepal is not a big country, its

citizens belong to very diverse ecological, religious, cultural, linguistic and ethnic communities. And caste is prevalent in most communities. Various strands of the caste system operating under the same basic principles are found in different parts of the country. At least three of those systems have been studied well. First, there is a lot of literature on caste among the Newar of the Kathmandu Valley (Shrestha 2012; Shrestha 2007; Gellner and Quigley 1995; Parish 1997; Quigley 1993; Rosser 1966). There are high castes and low castes, ritually pure and impure occupations, as well as untouchability within this community. Strong 'hierarchy of ritual' is observed among Buddhist Newars as well (Gellner 1992). Second, ethnographies have demonstrated that a different variant of caste order is salient in Nepal's southern plains or the *terai,* i.e., among Madhesis and Tharus (Bhandari 1985; Guneratne 2002). The caste system in this region is similar to that in parts of North India. The situation of *terai* Dalits is often described as worse than that of other Nepalese Dalits (Bhattachan 2013: 10).

The third and most pervasive of all has been the hill caste system. Much of the Western anthropological research into hill communities of Nepal has focused on the so-called tribal groups often resident in foothills of the Himalayas, including those that have been supplying young men for Gurkha regiments. These ethnographies – for example, of the Gurung (e.g., Mumford 1989; MacFarlane 1976; Andors 1976), Magar (e.g., Ahearn 2001; Lecomte-Tilouine 1996; Molnar 1981), Limbu (e.g., Olsson-Steel 1985; Jones 1973) and Rai (e.g., Hansson 1991; Allen 1981, 1976) – describe and analyse many issues related to their village cultures, customs, rituals, dialects, social organization, as well as changes in these societies over time. These are fascinating anthropologies;

however, some have criticized them for not paying much attention to the often interrelated issues of caste. For example, even though often Dalit hamlets form part of these mountain villages, they rarely feature in the ethnographies (Folmar *et al.* 2015).

Despite this, however, hill caste system has attracted considerable ethnographic research. Scholars like Folmar (2013) and Cameron (1998) have presented detailed accounts of the ways in which Dalits continue to be subjugated, segregated and humiliated in Nepalese towns and villages, at homes and public venues. Other researchers including Nepali academics have explored Dalit experiences, including their struggles to overcome their historical domination and injustices (Pariyar and Lovett 2016; Bishwakarma 2010; Parajuli 2007; Cameron 2007; Folmar 2007; Kisan 2005 and Bhattachan 2003). Thus, different variants of the caste system are found across Nepal. But, importantly, they often intersect. In this section, I will demonstrate: a) How the Nepalese state enforced the caste system upon the hill population – and eventually across the length and breadth of Nepal – using formal policies; b) Why Gurkhas are treated as castes rather than ethnic groups; and, c) How the Nepalese caste system has been used in the formation and organization of Gurkha regiments.

- ***The Nepalese Caste System – Enforced by the State***

For centuries, Nepalese rulers used the caste system as a fulcrum of social organization (Fisher 1978). The ruling elites, consisting of exclusively high-caste Hindus from the hills, imposed orthodox Hinduism including the caste system upon all citizens.

Even Buddhists, Muslims, Christian converts and other religionists were subjected to the strictures of caste. Kathmandu, which is home to the Newar, a mix of Hindus and Buddhists, was one of the earliest towns where caste gained saliency as a system of governance. In the late 14th century, following the advice of eminent Brahmins in India, King Jayasthiti Malla used the caste system as a formal state policy applicable to everybody in the Kathmandu Valley (Adhikari 2015: 67). In similar vein, in the first half of the 17th century, King Ram Shah of Gorkha, which was then another statelet in the hills of western Nepal, adopted the caste system to organize his people (Pyakurel 2013: 147).

Caste remained a cornerstone of the state policy when Nepal evolved into a bigger nation-state from the middle of the 18th century (Stiller 1973). Of all the high-caste Hindu kings and rulers, dictatorial Prime Minister Jang Bahadur Rana is credited for rigidly enforcing the caste system upon the entire population of his country. In 1854 (two years after his historic tour of Britain and France), Rana introduced the Civil Code *(Muluki Ain),* which incorporated all the hill citizens including Muslims, Christians and other religionists into a single caste hierarchy (Table 1). Caste codes controlled people's lives to such a degree that everyday interactions were often dictated by caste norms (Lecomte-Tilouine 2009: 342).

The 1854 *Muluki Ain* identified many middle castes, including the Gurung, Magar, Rai and Limbu which supplied most of the Gurkha soldiers, as "nonenslavable alcohol drinkers". Unlike the higher castes, who were required to preserve their status by

observing vegetarianism and shunning alcohol, Gurkha groups were allowed to drink and eat meat, a freedom that cost them their prestige. Similarly, their identity as a people who could not be 'enslaved' marked them off from the lower castes, the most segregated and exploited masses. Despite their relatively better status, however, these middle castes were systematically excluded and marginalized. Education was denied them: they were required to work as soldiers, peasants and menial labourers. Moreover, like the lower castes, they had to observe obeisance to the superior castes, i.e., the Bahun and Chhetri. Many Gurkha research participants remembered quite angrily that as children, they had to prostrate before high-caste men and touch their feet with their heads. And, they could not share food and drink with the higher castes.

Hierarchy status	***Category***	***Social Group***
1	Wearers of the holy cord	Bahun, Chhetri, Newar Brahman, Terai Brahman, Newar Hindu
2	Nonenslavable alcohol drinkers	Gurung, Magar, Sunuwar, Newar and similar groups (that consider themselves *Janajatis* or ethnic groups)
3	Enslavable alcohol drinkers	Bhote, Chepang, Kumal, Hayu, Tharu, Gharti and other *Janajati* groups
4	Impure but touchable	Muslim, Christian, low-caste Newar
5	Impure and untouchable	Hill and Newar Dalits: including the Kami, Damai, Sarki

Table 1. Caste category of Nepal's *Muluki Ain* (Civil Code) 1854 (Source: Thapa 2012: 44)

Nepal has changed politically and legally over time. In 1963, King Mahendra Shah, after reviewing the *Muliki Ain,* outlawed caste discrimination and untouchability for the first time (Rothchild 2006: 35). Subsequently, at least in theory, every Nepali became an equal citizen. However, this change in the statute made little difference in practice:

caste discrimination and untouchability continued unabated. Unlike the illustrious examples of Gandhi and Ambedkar in India, who vigorously fought against caste (Jaffrelot 2005), Nepal has no history of rulers or influential figures committing themselves to ending the oppression of the lower ranks (Agrwal 1974: 94). The people themselves were prevented from fighting for change until recently; earlier, there was no democracy in the country (Gellner *et al.* 2008: 18-19).

The democratic change that occurred in 1990, when the dictatorial regime of the king ended, created an opportunity for the suppressed masses to fight for their rights. Some caste groups, including the Gurkhas, have been organizing protests, demanding inclusion and identity in the face of the continued monopoly of the high caste in government, bureaucracy, political parties, army and police (Hangen 2010; Lawoti and Hangen 2013). A decade-long violent insurgency spearheaded by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) since 1996, which has claimed over 15000 lives, also mobilized the lower rungs of society (Hutt 2004; Pettigrew 2013). Following a peace deal and the entry of the communists into the mainstream democratic parties, Nepal deposed the monarchy in 2008. Despite these dramatic political changes, however, the dominance of the higher castes in every sphere has continued. Disproportionately higher numbers of the poor belong to the lower and middle castes. Therefore, as Thapa (2012: 46) observes, social inequality between the privileged and subordinated caste groups, originally envisaged by the 1854 *Muluki Ain,* is still largely intact in contemporary Nepal.

- ***Why are Gurkha Groups Treated Here as Castes – Not Ethnic Groups?***

At this point, it will be pertinent to make explicit why I opted to analyse Gurkha groups as 'castes' rather than 'ethnic' groups. This has been the current fashion among some Nepalese communities including those supplying Gurkha soldiers. Since the early 1990s, many marginalized ethnocultrural groups of Nepal have been organizing their movements under the banner of 'ethnic minorities' (*Janajatis)* and 'indigenous nationalities' (Lawoti and Hangen 2013; Hangen 2010; Gellner *et al.* 1997). These groups have been claiming the protection and preservation of their ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identities in the face of dominant high-caste Hindu culture (Bhattachan 2013: 39). Moreover, the agitators have demanded their greater access to state power and resources, which have been monopolized by hill high castes – the Bahun and Chhetri – for centuries. Thus, their interest to raise their movements against the dominance of high castes on a par with other ethnic identity movements around the world seems to be the principal reason for agitating groups to self-identify themselves as ethnic groups rather than castes.

Some scholars have simply followed activists' claims and analysed them as 'ethnic groups' rather than 'castes'. Both Western and Nepalese academics (e.g., Hangen 2010; Lawoti and Hangen 2013; Gellner 2009; Bhattachan 2013) seem to endorse the activists' position that they are originally separate from the caste system and therefore distinct from high and low castes – so-called 'caste Hindus'. Although analytic criteria for identifying certain groups as ethnic groups and not castes have not been properly

explained, scholars seem to take these groups' separate mother tongues, as well as their distinct religio-cultural traditions seem to be the major factors for their ethnic identities (Hangen 2010: 50; Guneratne 2003). Another obvious reason is the fact that the Nepalese Government officially recognized certain groups including those supplying Gurkha soldiers as 'ethnic groups' after the 1990 democratic changes.

While fully understanding and appreciating the position of ethnic activists and academics, for my purposes here I treat Gurkha groups as castes, not ethnic groups. There are various reasons for using this alternative framework. First, as we have seen, high-caste dominated Nepali state has brought all its hill citizens under the umbrella of the caste system through formal rules such as the *Muluki Ain* for centuries (Höfer 1979: 153). Even though the code no longer advocates caste discrimination now, its consequences have been far-reaching. Thus, practically speaking, caste has become deeply embedded in cultural and religious traditions of most Nepalese communities across social divides (Yadav 2016: 50). Bhandari (2014: 179) observes: "Chhetris are untouchable for Brahmins; *Janajatis* are untouchable for Brahmins and Chhetris; the segregated groups [low castes or Dalits] are untouchable for all Brahmins, Chhetris and Janajatis." Thus, unlike the claims of *Janajati* activists, caste discrimination is not limited to caste Hindus.

Second, importantly, there is a debate among scholars on the conceptual distinction between Nepal's ethnic groups and castes. As mentioned before, scholars writing about ethnicity have rarely provided sufficient analytic criteria for separating ethnic groups from castes (Valentin 2005: 24). Furthermore, issues of caste and ethnicity have been heavily contested in post-1990 Nepal. Part of the confusion has emanated from the lack of distinction between the two terms in colloquial Nepali (Yadav 2015: 36). And, there is much overlap between 'ethnic' cultures and 'caste-Hindu' cultures in contemporary Nepal. Therefore, unlike the claims of *Janajati* activists, rigid classification between the apparently egalitarian ethnic communities and hierarchical castes is problematic.

Third, ethnic claims cannot be seen as exclusive to certain groups, particularly in a country like Nepal. Those making the distinction between caste Hindus and ethnic groups overlook the fact that high and low castes too have their ethnic identities. In response to growing opposition to their monopoly in Nepal's power and resources, already high-caste Bahuns and Chhetris have started asserting their ethnic identities (Bhattachan 2013: 43). This is not surprising given that ethnicity is relational and socially constructed, often with specific goals in mind (Barth 1969).

And lastly, caste and ethnicity are difficult to separate, particularly in the Nepalese context. Part of the difficulty is the fact that, as I showed earlier, there are often internal and complex stratification systems within the ethnic groups. Newars of Kathmandu

consider themselves a prominent ethnic group who wish to challenge the authority of hill high castes. This is fair enough, but, as mentioned earlier, the Newars too practise a parallel caste system (Gellner and Quigley 1995; Parish 1997; Shrestha 2012). In this situation, how could they be considered separate from the caste structure? Due to these and many other facts, which will become self-evident through the thesis, I have analysed Gurkha groups as castes rather than ethnic groups.

- ***Colonialism and Caste – The Gurkha Project***

One of my important claims in this thesis is that British colonialism has promoted Nepal's caste system. How is this possible when Nepal was never colonized? Even though the country itself was not taken over, the British have used – and abused (des Chene 1993) – large numbers of Nepalese men for its imperial missions. In fact, Nepal is the only non-Commonwealth country that sends its citizens to fight for Britain. However, historically, the Gurkhas have been used as part of the colonial Indian Army wherein similar sets of rules governed both forces. So, even though Gurkha service has not been discussed vis-à-vis the caste system, it is possible to see the connection trough the literature on the colonial Indian Army.

Castes	***Roles***	***Approximate Proportion***	***Comments***
Gurung	Infantry fighters	70%	Specially recruited from select regions/villages of the hills in western Nepal
Magar	Infantry fighters	20%	Deliberately recruited from areas dominated by the Gurung
Other castes similar to majority groups, e.g., Tamang, Thakali, Sherpa, Newar	Infantry fighters	9%	Gained entry mostly disguised as Gurung
Kami (lower caste)	Armoury/blacksmithing/gun smithing	<1%	Recruited from Gurung villages under a caste-specific quota system
Damai (low caste)	Tailoring: Prepare Gurkha hats, alter uniforms and other clothing	<1%	Drawn from Gurung villages under fixed quotas
Sarki (low caste)	Shoemaking and other leather-related work	<1%	Taken from Gurung villages under a quota system
A mix of castes, dominated by Rais and Limbus	Clerical support	<1%	Many drawn from the Indian border town of Darjeeling
Bahun	Control religious affairs of the regiment from a Hindu temple	<1%	Likely to be inherited from the fathers and grandfathers

Table 2. Caste-specific division of labour in a typical Gurkha regiment with majority Gurung.[8]

Anthropologists and historians have shown that there was a symbiotic relation between colonialism and caste in India (Bayly 1999; Dirks 2001; Cohn 1996). In his seminal book titled *Castes of Mind,* Dirks (2001) argues that caste was not a central part of Indian civilization, that it became a modern phenomenon and the central symbol of Indian society only during the colonial period. Especially the 1857 Sepoy Revolt (that saw the capture and murder of British officers by Indian soldiers across key towns in North India including Delhi, the capital of British India) made it imperative for the British to

[8] This breakdown is based on information gleaned from many Gurkha soldiers. Clearly, the two remaining Gurkha infantry regiments – 1st Royal Gurkha Rifles and 2nd Royal Gurkha Rifles – have changed over the past decade, and they no longer select lower castes through a quota system. However, overall, the proportions of castes reflect the existing situation in the barracks.

consolidate its authority over the Indian peoples. In this process, caste became the primary and fundamental marker of identity, for both understanding Indian society and administrating the socio-culturally diverse masses (Dirks 2001: 123). In fact, the British had been using caste as an important source of group identity through various means, including the population census (Cohn 1996); however, caste emerged as a more salient feature of British rule in post-Mutiny India. One of the important fall-outs of the crisis was the redefinition of the concept of martial race theory, wherein caste became a much more central concern in military recruitment and organization (Cohen 2013, Streets 2004).

This increased sensitivity of caste in the formation of the colonial military inevitably impacted upon the Nepalese regiments. While a lot has been written about the Gurkhas, mainly by their own former British commanders,[9] little is known about the caste-sensitive Gurkha selection and organization. Not only were the regiments populated with mainly fighters from the select castes – the 2nd Gurkha Rifles, 6th Gurkha Rifles, 7th Gurkha Rifles and 10th Gurkha Rifles comprising mainly the Magar, Gurung, Rai and Limbu, respectively – but orthodox Hinduism and caste hierarchy was maintained in the regiment as well. Only high-caste Bahun served as regimental priests. Ritually polluting roles such as tailoring, blacksmithing and shoemaking were strictly performed by respective low castes. And, they were not permitted to work as proper infantry soldiers, for which the Gurkhas are renowned (See the caste-based division of labour in a Gurkha regiment in Table 2).

[9] These works include memoirs, autobiographies, regimental histories, picture books and novels. John Masters, a Gurkha commander, who later became a novelist, has written about the Gurkhas with the colonial Indian Army, e.g., his autobiography titled *Bugles and the Tiger: My Life in the Gurkhas.*

In sum, this history of high-caste Nepalese rulers imposing the caste system upon all citizens, as well as the British using caste as an important marker of Nepalese identity for the purposes of Gurkha recruitment, is important for my analysis in this thesis. As I have shown, while there have been fundamental changes in Nepal's political situation in the contemporary era, the domination of the high caste has not changed; nor has the policy of the Brigade of Gurkhas, which continues to draw men mostly from the four traditional castes. These colonial historical facts are critical to understanding why many Gurkhas have been active in transnational politics of caste or anti-caste in the UK, and why the four middle castes – the Gurung, Magar. Rai and Limbu – dominate today's Nepalese diaspora in the UK, even though Nepalis in most other countries are overwhelmingly high caste.

Overseas Caste: An Under-Researched Topic

As suggested earlier, many scholars have researched and analysed the ancient system of caste as a modern phenomenon. However, its overseas avatar has received little scholarly attention. Despite the existence of some studies, diasporic caste has not been researched and analysed as a central problematic, particularly among Indians and other South Asians in the West. Given that approximately 12 million Indians live abroad (Kumar 2015: 2), there is a need to scrutinize the status of caste in these overseas communities. In this section, I present some of the research findings that have emerged to date. First, there is an exploration of the situation of caste among ex-indentured coolies and their descendants in former British plantation colonies. Next, I will discuss a

unique policy debate surrounding the issue of caste among Indians in the UK, which has special relevance to overseas Gurkha castes.

Most of the past studies of overseas caste have concentrated on Indian communities of former indentured coolies. Between 1833 and the early decades of the 20th century, following acute labour shortages due to the end of slavery, millions of Indian men and women were transported to work on colonial tea, rubber, sugarcane and other plantations on distant islands. Conducted mostly in the 1950s and 1960s, much of the research into Indians in, for example, the Caribbean, Fiji and Mauritius has argued that, by and large, caste struggled to revive overseas. Schwartz's (1967) edited book titled *Caste in Overseas Indian Communities* is probably the first book-length treatise on diasporic caste, wherein the editors and contributors announce the death of caste. While this remained the only book on the topic for a long time, some works have been published in more recent times. While recent scholarship exclusively centred on caste is scarce, almost all of the literature discussing overseas Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims has observed, albeit tangentially, the situation of caste (See Vertovec's (2000) work on the Hindu diaspora in Trinidad). Notwithstanding the lingering vestige of caste in the spheres of marriage partners, the religious and community leadership of the high-caste Brahmin, as well as extant stigmatization of the low castes and their ancestral trades, overall, the caste system is depicted as dysfunctional (See Mayer 1967; Jayawardena 1980; Grieco 1998; Velayutham and Wise 2005; Jain 2010; Lal 2012; Lal 2013).

While these observations about the failure of caste abroad may seem to refute my argument in this thesis, the aforesaid past studies have value for my argument. I will demonstrate that caste has been rapidly reproduced as newly-arrived Gurkhas set about establishing their new homes in the UK. In a way, these contradictory findings are not surprising, given that contemporary British society is different from its erstwhile overseas colonies, and that Gurkhas are not indentured migrants. Despite the obvious differences in contexts, at least two elements of these studies are analytically useful for my thesis: 1) the significant difference between indentured, i.e., bonded, emigrants and free emigrants, in terms of their ability to reconstitute caste; and, 2) a colonial historiographical analysis of the status of overseas caste. In the main, the above studies have stated that caste has done much better overseas among free emigrants; for example, among Gujarati clerks and businessmen and traders in East African countries. Vertovec (2000: 25) observes: "In order to better liaise with government authorities and to provide all kinds of secular and religious facilities to their members, caste groups in East Africa increasingly [transformed] into formal associations". Similarly, many of the analyses of indentured labourers and their descendants have pointed to the system of indenture – in terms of its recruitment and organization policies, that paid hardly any attention to caste (more recent comments on this include Mahasay 2012: 15; Singh 2014: 242), – as the principal cause of the failure of caste in those communities. As suggested earlier, this is just the opposite of highly caste-sensitive Gurkha selection and organization.

Apart from the dominant literature focused on the ex-indentured, some studies have examined caste among Indians and Pakistanis in the West. The UK, where a large South Asian population has lived since the 1950s, has obviously been one of the important countries. Providing one of the early remarks on caste among Hindus in Britain, Burghart (1987: 12) stated: “castes have survived, but not the system”. He further noted that many regional and national caste associations had been established whose functions were mainly religious and charitable. Similarly, Nesbitt (1994) wrote about the emergence of a separate community among low-caste Valmikis in the city of Coventry. While not problematizing the issue of untouchability, and the discrimination that the Valmikis continued to face from fellow Indians (which I address later), the author demonstrated the growing saliency of caste-based organizations overseas. Similarly, Werbner (1989), who examined the Pakistani Muslim community in the city of Manchester through a caste lens, maintained that many Pakistani Muslims practised caste while despising it. These occasional one-off articles aside, the issue of caste in Britain – and in the western world – was largely unknown to those outside of the concerned groups.

However, this has changed dramatically over the past decade in the UK, where a public conversation on caste has begun. An unprecedented uprising of the Indian lower castes broke the silence about caste in the UK and, by extension, in the Western world. Around 2005, low-caste Indians domiciled in England started publicly raising their voices against their continued plight due to caste discrimination and untouchability within their communities. Various campaign groups such as the Anti-Caste

Discrimination Alliance (ACDA), Dalit Solidarity Network (DSN) and Voice of Dalit International (Dhanda 2014) started raising public awareness of the continued saliency of caste in the diaspora and seeking legislative change to tackle the problems of caste. Activists have been campaigning and lobbying for the introduction of anti-caste discrimination legislation, hitherto absent from British law (and indeed in the rest of the Western world) (Waughray 2009). They have mobilized the media, academics, as well as members of parliament sympathetic to their cause. For the first time, some influential British media including the BBC have featured issues of caste in Britain. Moreover, policymakers have debated the topic in parliament. Even though their movements have not yet been successful, there has thus been a much better awareness of the existing problem of caste discrimination and untouchability among Indians in the UK and, by extension, in other South Asian communities in the country and other Western nations.

Significantly, this has also generated some scholarly research into the issues of caste and casteism in the UK. Ghuman's (2011) ethnography titled *British Untouchables: A Study of Dalit Identity and Education* ranks among the most notable works. Using his extensive knowledge of the Indian communities in the English Midlands, as well as his past experiences in his home town in the Punjab in the 1950s, Ghuman's study examines caste, particularly the situation of the low castes, both historically and transnationally. His work examines: 1) the reproduction of caste among Indians in the UK; 2) the awareness of caste among Indians in Britain; 3) the role of overseas religious and other institutions in perpetuating caste divisions; and, 4) the impact of education initiatives and low-caste movements in terms of mitigating the negative consequences

of continued caste discrimination and untouchability. Despite the inevitable changes derived from decades of existence in England, many things have changed. However, certain forms of caste discrimination have persisted, including in the public domain such as Hindu temples and Sikh *gurdwaras,* community events, workplaces, even schools. In Chapter 6, he explores how low-caste students, many of them British-born, continue to be teased, ridiculed and excluded by fellow Indian students at schools and colleges. He emphasises how little teachers and authorities in schools understand the damaging legacy of the caste system upon sections of overseas Indians.

Overall, Ghuman's aims are two-fold. First, his book encourages more research into overseas caste by demonstrating its saliency in the UK. The writer maintains that studies of overseas caste are sparse mainly due to lack of knowledge of the topic (Ghuman 2011: 8). Second, the book is a strong testament to the suffering of the low caste in Britain. Quite clearly, the aim seems to be to support the low castes' demands for anti-caste legislation to be introduced into British law, specifically as a protected category under the 2010 Equality Act (Dhanda 2014). The book successfully demonstrates that while educating people about the damaging impacts of caste within the diasporic communities is important, it is clearly not sufficient. The ubiquitous problem of caste discrimination and untouchability must be tackled using legislation as well. This is a strong statement at a time when the British Government has not shown any interest in protecting the low castes on its soil by outlawing caste.

My research into caste among Nepalese Gurkhas strongly supports Ghuman's (2011) central argument about caste in the UK, and adds to it in many ways. First, my study will reveal that similar issues of caste are possible among other South Asians abroad. Thus far the UK caste debate has entirely focused upon Indians, in particular Hindus and Sikhs. Other nationals and religionists from the region are absent from the public and policy discourses, and they are not part of the Dalit activism either. This thesis will show that there are deep-rooted issues of caste hurting sections of overseas Nepalis too: it may be the case among Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans and Bhutanis in the UK as well. My study will thus help to expand the debate to include a wider cross section of South Asian groups.

Second, my research is wider than merely focusing on the low caste. While one Chapter explores the continued plight of low-caste Nepalis in the hands of their fellow nationals, overall the study aims to examine caste from a wider perspective with the Gurkhas, i.e., the majority among Nepalis in the Britain, at the centre. In other words, exploration of the middle castes is central to my thesis. This work thus significantly expands the overseas caste question. There is no mention of the middle ranks of Indian society in the UK's current caste debate. Furthermore, I also examine the situation of the high castes, who have become a minority group among Nepalis since the mass arrival of the Gurkhas and their dependents. While this change in demographic may not necessarily alter their ritual superiority, their status in the diasporic community has certainly changed now from the earlier times, when they were predominant within the diasporic community.

Third, using the case of caste in the Gurkha regiments, my analysis identifies the historical legacy of British colonialism in consolidating caste, by extension contributing to the perpetuation of caste abroad. Pro-caste activists in Britain would do well to highlight this important fact: it will possibly put moral pressure on the Government to act. Fourth, and most importantly, a more nuanced study of overseas caste among Gurkhas shows that the issue needs to be discussed from a transnational perspective. Ghuman (2011) has, to some extent, highlighted the transnational nature of caste, but merely as an historical background. What I show here is a much more intimate and immediate connection between what is happening concurrently in the diaspora and at home. This is self-evident in the Indian caste activism in Britain as well. Campaign groups, e.g., Voice of Dalit International and International Dalit Solidarity Network, suggest transnational origins and links.

Research Method and Methodology

This study, which employs an ethnographic field research, typically includes both participant observation and semi-structured interviews (Murchison 2010: 41). I was born in a mountain village of Western Nepal; so, I have known Gurkha communities for a long time. Some of childhood friends are still serving in British and Indian Army regiments. I am a Nepali; but, I am not a Gurkha. A low-caste Damai, I was born into the wrong caste. During the 1990s, I grew up watching the annual Gurkha selection in the village. I completed my secondary education in Pokhara, western Nepal, a town built on Gurkha remittance. A key Gurkha settlement, it was where the regional and central

Gurkha recruitment depots were located. Over the years I gained intimate knowledge of Gurkha lives in both rural and urban Nepal. Further, from 2001 to 2008 I worked as a media officer at the British Embassy in Kathmandu. During this time, I was able to closely observe and understand Gurkha connection as probably the most important aspect of Britain-Nepal relations. And, as suggested earlier, I stayed with Gurkhas while studying in England. I was thus able to witness the migration and settlement of Gurkhas in England, particularly after the second wave of their migration. This ready knowledge of the Gurkhas in their original habitat as well as overseas enabled me to undertake PhD research into transnational Gurkha lives.

A blend of close observation and in-depth interviews make ethnographic research very useful, particularly for the study of immigrants (Foner 2000: 50). From the early 20th century, British social anthropologists and American sociologists developed ethnography as an important method and methodology of social research (Brewer 2000: 11). British anthropologists, Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown and Evans-Prichard, for example, studied and analysed cultures of remote islands. The object here is to research and analyse exotic communities previously unfamiliar to the researcher. Similarly, American sociologists used the same methods to study the peoples of their own cities. In the 1920s and 1930s, scholars with the Chicago School of Sociology extensively employed observational techniques to study people relegated to the margins of US urban society, e.g., prostitutes, drug dealers, street gangs, and taxi dance hostesses. As well, they studied Polish immigrants and Jewish ghettos. Irrespective of who conducts an ethnographical study and where it is undertaken, the

basic principles are the same. It is often an immersive project, involving extended stay in the community. This requires knowledge of the local culture including language skills (Hymes 1971: 75). The participant takes part in community affairs and carefully observes them, with minimal influence upon the functioning of the group (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011).

As a Nepali familiar with the Gurkhas, I understood their cultures well. Although most Gurkhas used their mother tongues, they frequently communicated in fluent Nepali, my first language. So there was no need for me to learn a new language. As indicated at the beginning of this chapter, I lived with Gurkha families in East Oxford from 2008 to 2012. My family shared a house with a Limbu family, and I participated in a number of their cultural functions every year across Gurkha settlements in England. Moreover, some of the Gurkhas residing in bigger settlements like Aldershot and Farnborough were my villagers, people I had known since childhood. In this way, I had good exposure to Gurkha communities in the UK before starting my PhD project.

After embarking upon my PhD research, I returned to England for one month in the summer of 2012 and for six months in the first half of 2013. I spent much of that time in the town of Aldershot, Hampshire County. This smallish town evolved as the largest Gurkha/Nepalese settlement following the influx of Gurkhas and their dependents since the winter of 2004. According to the Rushmoor Borough Council, Aldershot and nearby Farnborough consist of approximately 10 per cent of the local population. As a large Gurkha settlement, Aldershot hosted many events, both big and small, attended by

Gurkhas from around Britain. So, I had an opportunity to meet and speak with ex-servicemen from virtually all over Britain. Apart from these large communal events, I met many Gurkhas at Nirmaya Rodhi Ghar, a Nepalese restaurant and dance bar at the heart of Aldershot town centre, which has become a popular venue for Gurkha celebration.

My participant observation was supplemented by recorded semi-structured interviews[10] with 35 Gurkhas. As required by research ethics, every interviewee signed a consent form, designed by my university, prior to being interviewed. The interviewees, most of whom I was already acquainted with, included a mix of castes (with the obvious dominance of the Gurung, Magar, Rai and Limbu). Included also in the mix were regions (eastern and western Nepal, villagers and townsfolks), regiments (mostly infantry, some from clerical, signals, engineers and logistics regiments) and ages (ranging from recent retirees in their mid-thirties to some in their eighties). Some prominent community leaders, mainly chairpersons of caste associations, took part in the interviews. The latter were based on a set of approved questions which aimed to capture how the caste system influenced their experiences of being recruited into the army, serving as soldiers, as well as their migration and settlement in England. (See the questionnaire in the Appendix). However, depending on the situation, respondents were allowed to discuss some areas more than others, even avoid some topics altogether.

[10] Conducted in Nepali, the interviews have been translated and edited. All the informal interviews also took place in the Nepalese language.

Given the sensitivity of the topic, the identities of the interviewees including those interacting informally have ben concealed. Nobody's exact name is used, nor are their addresses in England and/or Nepal revealed. The regiments or other army units in which they served are not identified, because many people tend to know fellow soldiers in a unit. The surnames have been retained in many cases. I considered it safe to use them because many shared the same family name. There is an exception to this rule, however. Some community leaders, for example, the chairs of Tamu Dhee UK and Magar Association UK, head large organizations that are well-known among the Gurkhas and other Nepalis in Britain.

One of the limitations of this study is that it has given limited space to women. Even though they may have played a role in making caste a more prominent part of diasporic life, they are not central to this research. There are many reasons for their exclusion including: 1) Gurkha regiments have never employed women in any capacity; 2) As suggested earlier, spouses had extremely limited access to the regiments until 2006. And, this research is closely linked to Gurkha experiences of military life; 3) As Gurkha/Nepalese society is patriarchal, virtually all of the overseas community organizations, including the influential caste associations to be discussed here, are led and controlled by mostly military men; and, 4) Women are perceived to have a greater role at home. They may be promoting caste in the domestic space, some aspects of which are covered. In effect, the major focus of this study is caste in the public sphere, a space wherein Nepalese women's role is limited. The mere fact that ex-soldiers are at

the centre of this study put Gurkha spouses – along with their children – outside of the radar.

The Question of Native Anthropology

Anthropology evolved as a study of unfamiliar cultures, those distant from the researcher's "home turf" (Caputo 1995). Therefore, there is often a tendency to question the value of ethnographic knowledge generated by so-called "native" anthropologists. As anthropological enterprise became no longer the exclusive preserve of British and American scholars, questions have been asked about, among other things, the insider researcher's accountability, positionality and voice (Jacobs-Huey 2002). It is often assumed, for example, that a person studying his/her own ethnic group tends to take things for granted, in reality, risks failing to see the peculiarities and nuances of the culture under study. Moreover, there are concerns about researchers from the same community being politically biased towards one group or issue, thus reducing the scientific value of their intellectual product.

Such negative assumptions about native anthropology have been increasingly challenged in the recent decades. There is growing recognition of the fact that both native and non-native researchers are "partial outsiders" from the people being studied (Tsuda 2015). Challenging the assumption that researching familiar cultures is an easy venture, Kenny and Smillie (2015: 6) argue to the effect that: "Being an 'insider' is far more complex than simply speaking the same language, living in the same community, or being committed to the same cause." In other words, depending on the local contexts

of the field site, even the insider can be seen as an outsider by the people in certain respects. In their edited volume titled *Insider Research on Migration and Mobility,* Voloder and Kirpinchenko (2014), together with other ethnic scholars researching their respective overseas cultures in Australia, contest this simple dichotomy between the insider and outsider, stressing that even for insider researchers, their positionalities keep changing. They further argue that the challenges of the native ethnographer will be evident when enough attention is paid to the fact that like other groups, migrant communities are often internally heterogeneous. Thus, even if the researcher and the researched belonged to the same ethnic/religious/cultural/national group, intragroup divisions and differences can still create challenges for the researcher.

Afzal (2015), a Pakistani Muslim conducting a PhD study of Pakistani Muslims in the US, had the same experience of finding himself both an insider and outsider simultaneously. Afzal was a Sunni Muslim from the Punjab region, whereas majority population under study were Shia from other parts of Pakistan. He not only belonged to a different religious sect (a rival sect), but also lacked family and close relatives. This often made his research difficult. As a consequence, despite being a Muslim, he often had to seek permission to attend functions and commemorations hosted by the Muslim community (Afzal 2015: 24 – 25).

Like Afzal, I found research among Gurkha immigrants challenging for a number of factors. First, as previously mentioned, I was not a soldier myself, nor did I belong to a Gurkha family. This made a big difference because often the veterans and their families

tended to associate among themselves, not mix easily with civilians. Second, because I was a student on a temporary visa, I was unlikely to settle in England, contrary to most Gurkhas, who arrived on permanent residency permits and intended to stay. As many students experienced, immigration status often made a big difference in terms of who was included in the community.

Third, and most importantly, I belong to a lower-caste tailoring community known as the Damai. My surname made my caste status apparent to everyone, in effect exposing me to a degree of discrimination and exclusion. And, although I was allowed to take part in many Gurkha events, I was consciously let in as an outsider. I was not likely to be involved in the meetings that took decisions about events, for example. Due to my caste, I could only belong to a few small Dalit groups. But, even there I was a partial insider because, unlike the majority participants, I was a civilian man.

Similarly, research participants from my village, many of whom I had known since childhood, were not always easy to deal with. While they actively supported me in many ways, sometimes they tended to return to the old ways of behaving with me as an outcast. For example, although they gave me company, and ate and drank with me in Nepalese restaurants, they would not include me in their social circles. Furthermore, some villagers would not take me seriously as a researcher. This negative attitude sometimes made it difficult to get them to respond to my questions, so much so that I had to actually cancel two interviews in the middle.

Overall, due to my caste identity, often Gurkhas were hesitant to talk about the problem of caste among Nepalis in the UK. Some refused to acknowledge the existence of caste discrimination in the UK, while others laid blame on members of other castes, and on allegedly conservative elders, for the continued plight of the low caste in the diaspora. So, while I was a total insider in the Nepalese/Gurkha community in the eyes of the local whites in England, for the majority of Nepalis I was an outcast due to my caste, immigration status, occupation, region of domicile and a host of other reasons. Like other researchers from interesting backgrounds, I too experienced my share of challenges and opportunities.

Summary of the Chapters

This thesis is divided into six chapters. **Chapter One**, which explores a colonial historiography of Gurkha service through a caste lens, seeks to discern the extent to which the principle of caste has been important to the recruitment of Gurkha soldiers and their organization in the regiments. It explores the theoretical bases and practical purposes – from the military point of view – for including only four castes, out of Nepal's 125 castes. In the absence of similar studies of Gurkha service, the historiography is based on the lived experiences of retired Gurkha soldiers. Moreover, relevant literature on the colonial Indian Army, which encompassed the Gurkha military, supplements the Gurkha experience.

Chapter Two traces the recent history of Gurkha migration to the UK. It explores the significance of the Gurkha migration trajectory in enabling many ex-servicemen to

rapidly revive and revamp their caste-based communities overseas. Starting with the illegal entry of a few hundred ex-soldiers around 2000, this chapter describes the circumstances – i.e., transnational Gurkha rights movements – that ultimately led to the mass migration of Gurkhas and their dependents in two phases. The significance of the migration trajectory in both rounds, after 2004 and 2009, in recreating caste-based communities and greatly reviving caste consciousness in the UK will be investigated here.

Chapter Three, in which focus is upon the local consequences of transnational politics of caste or anti-caste, demonstrates how caste/ethnic identity politics, spearheaded by many marginalized groups including the Gurkhas in Nepal since the early 1990s, have had a direct impact upon the revival of caste and casteism in the UK. I specifically examine this important transnational link by describing various large public celebrations organized by influential Gurkha caste associations. The export of cultural politics of the four pre-eminent Gurkha castes to the UK will be evident here. On the surface, the aim of these mass gatherings has been to preserve and promote caste-specific religious and cultural traditions, as a way of familiarising the unfamiliar in a foreign country. My analysis will reveal, however, that these functions contain strong political statements as well, wherein the dominance of the high caste is challenged.

The changing status of higher castes in the Nepalese community in Britain is the focus of **Chapter Four**. I explore the extent to which the previously dominant Bahun and Chhetri have come under pressure due to growing Gurkha assertion of what I call their

‘diasporic vantage’. I present empirical data about the declining influence of the higher castes in the diasporic community leadership since the arrival of the Gurkhas. Moreover, the chapter also explores the growing problem of reverse casteism, to which the upper castes have been exposed.

Chapter Five looks into the problems of the minority within the minority group – the Dalit. It seeks to understand what forms of traditional discrimination and prejudice Nepalese Dalits continue to face within the Gurkha community in Britain. As well, I analyse why they have been subjected to at least some forms of oppression despite living in a free and largely secular country like the UK, and why they have been unable to fight for change in the diasporic community. Part of the problem will be scrutinized from a postcolonial perspective, particularly in terms of how Dalits have been discriminated against and forced to do ritually polluting jobs in the Gurkha regiments.

Chapter Six presents an analysis of how, despite caste being a South Asian phenomenon, the circumstances of the host country can engender it. While the connections between the receiving society and caste may not be direct, it is nonetheless clear. I will show how even though caste is an alien concept in the UK, the evolution of Gurkhas as an ethnic group has contributed to the strengthening of caste groups. Many factors of the receiving society may have impacted upon the resurrection of caste, but I particularly examine here the effect of exclusion and discrimination by members of the dominant white population. Issues of racist attacks including verbal and physical abuses in the streets of Aldershot, Hampshire, will be explored. Alongside this

local exclusion and discrimination, the immigrants' fear of cultural assimilation will also be probed as a major source of ethnic identity formation among the Gurkhas. Given the uniqueness of their migration and settlement, this ethnicization in relation to the receiving society has also led to the further entrenchment of caste.

In the **Conclusion**, I consider how this study contributes to the current understanding of diasporic caste, particularly in the West. Explaining the theoretical and empirical values of my research, I suggest possible ways to attract scholarly attention to this important but still hidden issue of caste among South Asians in the western world. Further, the significance of the ongoing caste politics spearheaded by Indian Dalits in Britain will be evaluated in the light of my findings. The aim is to inform policy. While firmly supporting the call of Indian low castes to outlaw caste, I will present a case for trying to understand caste in a wider perspective beyond the binary of the low caste vs high caste.

Chapter One

Caste in the Gurkha Regiment: A Colonial Historiography

A group of semi-naked young men in shorts is standing in a queue and someone is daubing numbers and letters on the bare chests, each in turn. These are the first glimpses of an Al Jazeera TV documentary on 2011 Gurkha selection at a recruiting depot in the town of Pokhara, western Nepal.[11] The selection commences with a British officer in charge of recruitment, Deputy Recruiting Officer (DRO) Major Beven, addressing the candidates: "Our selection is free, fair, transparent." He stresses that neither money nor any other external influence would earn the boys a coveted place in the regiment. The documentary covers many of the requisite fitness and endurance tests, including some really arduous tasks such as the infamous *doko race.*[12] The boys were also tested for their mental alertness, and academic skills in mathematics and the English language. Those contestants who failed went away in tears and just a small group made it through to the final. The documentary concluded with the little group of successful candidates swearing an oath of allegiance to the British Queen Elizabeth II in a ceremony attended by their proud parents and relatives. It successfully demonstrated how competitive Gurkha recruitment has become, particularly in the past few decades (Ware 2012: 122). However, the unspoken was clear as well: most of the boys taking part in the recruitment process were drawn from the traditional Gurkha castes.

[11] This 47-minute documentary, which was made by Kesang Tsetsen, and aired by Al Jazeera, is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d8mXWxLfB94 *[Accessed 12 June 2015].*

[12] The contestants had to run along a steep and rough trail up the Sarangkot Hill, each carrying a 25 kg rock in a bamboo basket carried on his back with a rope strapped across his forehead.

The visible lack of caste/ethnic diversity among those candidates, shortlisted from the first round of selection, was striking. Most of the candidates were Chinese-looking, suggesting a preponderance of traditional Gurkha castes – the Gurung, Magar, Rai and Limbu (Erni and Leung 2014: 18). This further suggested that few high and low-caste candidates, often identified by their somewhat different physical features (Bennett 1983: 10), were competing. Moreover, there was no regional diversity, evident in the absence of contestants originally from the southern lowlands of Nepal, i.e., the Terai – who account for approximately 32 per cent of the country's population (Onta and Tamang 2014: 333). Physically and culturally similar to the Indian populations of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, their historical exclusion from the Gurkha forces thus seemed to perpetuate. On reflection, it is understandable why there were so many applicants from the traditional groups: concerned castes and families have a long history of working for foreign militaries (Lohani-Chase 2008: 186). However, given the rising tide of politics centred on ethnic/regional/caste inclusion in Nepal over the recent decades (Gellner *et al.* 1997; Lawoti and Hangen 2013), a movement actively supported by Britain through its foreign aid programme,[13] it is reasonable to expect a degree of inclusivity in Gurkha selection in the contemporary era.

[13] The UK's Department for International Development (DfID), the largest bilateral donor to Nepal, has been promoting the inclusion of Dalits and deprived castes/ethnic groups in Nepal mainly through its support for NGOs. A 2007 review report suggested that one of the key areas supported by Britain in Nepal was social inclusion, the goal being to "to help women and excluded caste and ethnic groups to achieve more equitable access to resources and opportunities" (Chapman *et al.* 2007: 45). A detailed report available at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/67768/ev679.pdf

This chapter seeks to ascertain why and how post/colonial Britain has sought fighters only from a handful of castes/ethnic groups out of 125 different caste/ethnic groups in Nepal (Townsend *et al.* 2015: 321). What were the theoretical bases and practical purposes of this highly caste-sensitive recruitment? And, practically speaking, how did the recruiters ensure that only young men from the favoured castes were selected from such a diverse population? Furthermore, I examine the saliency of the concept of caste in not just recruiting the soldiers, but organizing them as well. Given the lack of documentary evidence on Gurkha forces vis-à-vis the caste system, I will find answers to these questions mainly through the past experiences of retired Gurkha soldiers. I complement this narrated history with literature on caste in the colonial Indian Army, wherein Gurkha regiments formed an integral part (des Chene 1991: 187).

An historiography of Gurkha service explored through a caste lens will prove useful for properly understanding the status of caste among present-day Gurkha immigrants in the UK. Recently, some prominent scholars of migrant studies have stressed the exploration of past experiences of immigrants to properly understand their current lives. As Foner and Alba (2010: 815) suggest: “Much remains to be done to better understand how the past lives on in and exerts an influence on, the present.” Studies have shown the persistent impact of the Holocaust, and of legal racism in the US, on present-day immigrants in many ways. Other studies have shown that even ordinary experiences of the past – such as a career in the military with or without involvement in war – as opposed to the more traumatic experiences explored by the above authors, can greatly influence migrants’ everyday lived realities (Glynn and Kleist 2012).

Many studies of overseas castes have analysed them in the colonial historical contexts. Much of the literature on diasporic castes has focused upon post-indentured Indian communities in former British colonies: the Caribbean, Fiji, South Africa, Malaya and Mauritius, for example (Hiralal 2015; Vertovec 2000; Jayawardena 1980; Schwartz 1967). During the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries, the coolies – men and women – were transported in large numbers to work in sugarcane, tea, coffee and rubber plantations. Although some returned after completing their indenture, many remained and settled in the colonies. The immigrants, who had "bittersweet" (Lal 2004) experiences in a new place, set about recreating their communities in a new place. While they may have succeeded in reviving many aspects of their cultures and customs overseas, they had little success in reinstituting the caste system. Most scholars have almost uniformly claimed that caste in these post-plantation colonies struggled to revive, and mainly hold colonial policies surrounding the recruitment and organization of the coolies responsible for the apparent failure of overseas caste (Vertovec 2000: 41; Grieco 1998; Jayawardena 1980; Mayer 1967). Pursuing the same line of argument, I will demonstrate here that caste in effect flourished among Gurkha immigrants in the UK right from the outset due to highly caste-sensitive Gurkha policy.

This chapter comprises three parts. The first presents an historical account of the Indian Army during the period of British Raj. Specific focus is upon how and why caste became a central concern after the middle of the 19th century. The Indian story is important given that the Gurkhas formed the bulk of the colonial Bengal Army. Even today the

conditions of the British Gurkhas are partly governed by Indian policy, e.g., India's pension policy.[14] The second part explores the central principle of caste in the formation and operation of Gurkha regiments. The lived experiences of retired Gurkha soldiers will be used here. In order to cover the longest possible time period, the views of ex-servicemen from different ages, including some in their late thirties, and those in their seventies and eighties will be incorporated. The last part, which analyses the role of military history in actively reviving Gurkha caste overseas, compares Gurkha service with the Indian indenture system. As well, the *kangani* system, a smaller system of employment in colonial plantations particularly in Sri Lanka and Malaya, will be discussed in terms of its similarity to Gurkha service.

Martial Race Theory and the Colonial Indian Army

Historically, the concept of 'martial race' has been critical to the formation and organization of the British Army, including in its colonies (Streets 2004). In the colonial mind-set, not everybody was capable of bearing arms; the ability to fight was an inherent quality. The British saw themselves as born warriors, of course; but many native tribes or clans or castes were not. Only people from certain groups had the potential to become skilled fighters and were formally identified as "martial races" (Pasha 1998: 25). There were many criteria for judging a group from a particular part of the world as martial material. Relevant to the case under scrutiny, many martial races who inhabited cold frontier regions came from peasant communities domiciled in the

[14] Retired Gurkhas receive less pensions than their British counterparts in the British Army because their pension policy has been traditionally tied to that of the Indian Army during the colonial period (Laksamba *et al.* 2014).

highlands (Roy 2013: 77–78). For example, the Kamba of Kenya, the Kaffir and Zulu of South Africa, and the Maori of New Zealand were the well-known martial races.

In colonial India, where caste had become a “dominant system of differentiation and identity” by the nineteenth century (Dirks 2001: 92), only select castes were seen as fit for military service. Others were not. Initially, it was understood that the higher the social status, the better the ability to fight. They wanted “the handsomest and cleanest men” for their battalions (Yong 2005: 32). The lower castes, i.e., the ritually impure, were discarded. Therefore, by the middle of the 19th century, the colonial Indian Army was largely populated by the high-caste Rajput and Brahmin from Bihar and Oudh (Srinivas 1995: 72).

The balance of caste in the Indian Army changed dramatically, however, after the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny. This violent uprising of Indian soldiers of the Indian Army against their British officers in northern and central India shook the very foundations of the British Empire. The mutineers captured and killed many British officers and their families in many towns including Delhi, Lucknow and Arrah (Fitchett 2009). After the violence was contained, the British took stock. The authorities and writers agreed that the uprising of this scale was caused by reasons beyond poor pay and terms of service; some analysts even saw this as a form of peasant revolt (Llewellyn-Jones 2007: 5-6). The colonial authorities, however, chiefly saw the caste system as a big factor. The high castes were suspected of triggering violence due to their excessive concerns with the sensitive issues of caste purity. This understanding was backed by the rumours that newly-

introduced Enfield rifles apparently used cartridges greased with cow and pig fat. The soldiers fought back, because they realized that they were being forced into this worst possible form of ritual pollution (Streets 2004: 28). The problem with the cartridges was particularly offensive, because the soldiers had to bite them while loading their rifles. This was, therefore, seen as forcing high-caste Hindus to eat substances from the holy cow.

Post-1857 Mutiny, the Indian Army saw a massive overhaul wherein most of the high castes, now perceived as rogue elements, were expelled. In accordance with a new interpretation of the martial race concept, high-caste soldiers were described as non-martial because they were “weak and emasculated due to the debilitating influence of caste ritual” (Streets 2004: 179). Brahmins in particular were excluded from the Bengal Army and from many other units of the Indian Army (Singh 2013: 126). Most of the Brahmin, Rajput and Pathan regiments were quickly disbanded. Even though higher-caste soldiers may have been accepted by other units in time, the Bengal Army strictly prohibited the recruitment of higher castes from that time on. Thus, every effort was made to prevent further troubles in the army.

Therefore, following the Mutiny, issues of caste in general became a much more central concern of British officers in charge of the Indian soldiers. If caste-related troubles were to be avoided, it was also important to remove the lower castes from the battalions (Omissi 1998: 5). So now some of the lower castes that had been traditionally employed by the British Indian Army were quickly discarded. Among those losing their status as

the martial race were the Mang and Mahar of western India (Constable 2001). Similarly, the Chamar of North India, who served in some regiments of the Bengal Army, were now excluded (Cohen 1969: 455). Thus, an important fall out of the 1857 Revolt was the exclusion of both the high and low caste from the Indian Army. Who, then, would fill the vacancies?

Punjabi Sikhs and Nepalese Gurkhas emerged as the winners of this drastic change to military recruitment. Some had already been recruited into some regiments of the Bengal Army, but their strengths were quite small. Sikhs were included following the annexation of the Punjab by the East India Company in 1849, while Nepalis were enlisted since 1815. After the Mutiny, Sikhs and Gurkhas were identified as the prominent martial races. They had proven themselves to be trustworthy, for they had not taken part in the uprising. On the contrary, they had played important part in ruthlessly crushing the mutineers. The British therefore now started recruiting Sikhs and Gurkhas in large numbers (Cohen 1969: 456).

Even though the Sikhs and Gurkhas replaced the high castes and low castes of the Bengal Army, the principle of caste continued to guide their recruitment and organization. Similar to the Hindus, the Sikhs are divided into different castes (even though their Guru Nanak was opposed to the caste system) (Jodhka and Myrvold 2015). Only Sikh men from select castes, particularly the Jat, were drawn to the regiments. High-caste Sikhs, however, were not accepted due to their greater adherence to caste norms. Many low-caste Sikhs were deemed unacceptable on the

grounds of their supposed criminality (Singh 2013: 116). While excluding most Sikh lower castes, some were employed in specific regiments, particularly the Mazbhi and Ramdasia. They principally populated the Pioneer regiments, those engaged in engineering and construction. Thus, despite Sikhs being identified as the martial race, hardly any low-caste Sikh was recruited into the infantry regiments, the actual fighting forces (Marston 2014: 11).

The most favoured caste among the Sikhs were the Jat. They were seen as fit for military work not just because they mainly comprised peasants and land owners, but also as they belonged to the middle ranks of the caste system. While they were the dominant caste in the Punjab, they were not at the top of caste hierarchy within Sikhism (Singh 2014: 84). Even though they were proud of their identity, they were "less rigid about caste purity than the Brahmans and Rajputs" (Nijjar 2008: 69). Thus, the Jats formed the bulk of the Sikh Regiments, who made a name for themselves as skilled warriors – "Lions of the Punjab" (Fox 1985). Thus, caste was a central principle of Sikh Army under British rule and, similar caste-centred rules dictated the recruitment and organization of Gurkha regiments.

The Gurkhas in the British Indian Army

In 1815, as part of its geopolitical interest on the Indian Subcontinent, the British started hiring Nepalese men for its Indian Army. The interest in men from Nepal grew out of an attempt to annex the Himalayan nation to the Empire. In 1814, the East India Company attacked Nepal, leading to a two-year conflict. Poorly resourced and vastly

outnumbered, the Nepalese soldiers fought so well that their enemy became greatly impressed with them – and sought to recruit them. Even before the Anglo-Nepal War had ended, the British started enlisting Nepalese men, which led to the formation of the Sirmoor Battalion, the first Gurkha Army unit set up by the British (Nicholson 1974: 23).

The hostility between the two countries ended in a peace agreement, the Saghauli Treaty, which resulted in Nepal losing parts of its territories in the east and the west (Whelpton 2005: 42). And, while there was no mention of military recruitment in the treaty, and despite the initial opposition of the Nepalese rulers, the British continued to draw Nepalese men for its Indian troops. In the meantime, the tensions between British India and Nepal continued. This was a time of East India Company rapidly expanding its sphere of influence upon the nooks and corners of the Subcontinent, and Nepal attempting to expand its territory. Mutual suspicions were fuelled by the fear that the other would encroach upon its boundary. In an attempt to ameliorate the situation, Brian Hodgson, an influential British diplomat assigned to Kathmandu in the 1830s, strongly recommended that Gurkha recruitment be expanded as a deliberate strategy to keep the small, belligerent Himalayan nation in check (Pels and Salemink 1999: 94). He strongly believed that Nepal's position could be significantly weakened by depleting its "excess military manpower" (Whelpton 2005: 43).

In a bid to sap the strength of the Nepalese military, the East India Company needed not only to recruit Nepalis in large numbers, but also to draw the recruits mostly from the groups that traditionally dominated the Nepalese (originally Gorkha) troops. This must

be, I argue, part of the reason for starting to incorporate recruits only from a handful of castes and limited areas of the country. Indeed, the British could have taken men from many other caste groups, which was possible in a country marked by diverse caste/ethnic groupings. While this would have provided them the fighters, the strength of the Nepalese Army would not have downscaled the strength of the Nepalese Army. It thus became obvious which castes to target. Nepal, as a nation, was created by King Prithvi Narayan Shah of Gorkha – which was initially as a statelet – following his legendary conquests of other small kingdoms in the Himalayan region in 1769 (Stiller 1975). The Nepalese troops were dominated by three principal castes: The Gurung, Magar and Khas (now called the Chhetri) (Whelpton 1997: 43–44). This is the historical context of Gurkha regiments' preference for just a few castes of Nepal.

Hodgson's recommendations were taken seriously, and Gurkhas systematically sought after by the British only after the 1857 Sepoy Revolt (Pels and Salemink 1999: 94). In doing so, as suggested earlier, the caste-conscious British also took into account the overarching martial race theory. As I shall show, caste now became the central principle of Gurkha regiments, in line with other parts of the colonial Indian Army. However, following the 1854 Mutiny, a big shakeup of the Gurkha troops was not considered essential. Unlike the other arms of the Indian Army, the two prominent Nepalese caste groups–the Gurung and Magar–perfectly matched the Indian Army's new description of martial race. These castes were highland peasants and, importantly, they occupied the middle ranks of Nepalese society. Therefore, like the Jat Sikhs, they were perceived to be less strict than the high castes when observing caste ritual. My understanding is

reflected, for example, in former Gurkha commander Tony Gould's (1999: 107) observations of the Gurung and Magar vis-à-vis Gurkha service: "They might be Hindus, at least nominally, but they were not concerned with caste restrictions in the way the Company's Brahman and Rajput sepoys were."

Over time, Gurkha regiments increased in strengths. When the recruiters failed to find enough men from the specified castes, they looked for other castes that matched the description of Gurung and Magar. So now the Rai and Limbu from the hills of eastern Nepal started being recruited as well. They were middle castes and therefore considered relatively less strict about caste norms (they took pork like Magar, for example). Although these soldiers were initially seen as "inferior" to the Gurung and Magar, the prejudice gradually disappeared (Caplan 1970: 114). Now Rais and Limbus were recruited in significant numbers. In 1890, a new recruiting depot was established in the town of Darjeeling, an Indian border town close to East Nepal – in order to draw Rai and Limbu men annually (Gould 1999: 127).

The Gurkha soldiers were not only drawn from the selected caste groups, but organized along caste lines as well. Every Gurkha regiment was dedicated to a favoured caste (Caplan 1995: 12; des Chene 1991: 68). For example, the 2nd Gurkha Rifles were mainly Magar, while the 6th Gurkha Rifles were mainly Gurung. The 7th Gurkha Rifles was dominated by the Rai, and the 10th Gurkha Rifles by the Limbu. There were usually 10 Gurkha regiments, most of them comprised of the above four castes. There was one

exception, however; the 9th Gurkha Rifles. This peculiar regiment enlisted mostly high-caste Chhetri and Thakuri from the traditional Gurkha recruiting regions of Nepal.

While the Chhetri and Thakuri-dominated 9th Gurkha Rifles was not immediately disbanded following the 1857 Sepoy Revolt, unlike Rajput and Brahmin regiments of the Indian Army, it appears British officers' distaste for the high castes in the Gurkha Army continued nonetheless. Even though Nepalese high castes had not actually cause any problems, the officers tended to see them as potential troublemakers. As Brigadier Shelford Bidwell (1979: 116–117) observed:

> The 3/9th and 4/9th were Thakuris and Chhetris, these names indicating a claim to membership of the Rajput caste, famous for its military tradition. They were stricter in their adherence to the Hindu religion and so known to the other British officers as the 'High Church Party'.

Picture 2: Gurkhas comprise the same or similar castes (Source: Facebook)

This apparent suspicion of the Nepalese high castes seems to have lasted a long time. The officers were probably keen to disband them, an aim they fulfilled during India's

independence in 1947. Military writers allude to the intense confusion and concern surrounding the future of the Gurkha project at the time (Parker 2013; Gould 1999; Farwell 1990). The Gurkhas themselves were worried about their careers. They feared that both India and the UK could decide to terminate Gurkha service altogether. As fortune would have it, following intense negotiations, the British and India's Nehru Government agreed to retain the Gurkhas and to re-distribute them. India took the 1st, 3rd, 5th, 8th and 9th Gurkha Rifles – while Britain retained the 2nd, 6th, 7th and 10th and took it to Malaya (Gellner 2013: 143). There is neither space nor time here to go into the details of the basis of this distribution; but one thing is clear. The British only retained the Magar (2nd Gurkha Rifles), Gurung (6th Gurkha Rifles), Rai (7th Gurkha Rifles) and Limbu (10th Gurkha Rifles) regiments. They opted against retaining the 9th Gurkha Rifles, populated by high-caste Chhetri and Thakuri. Caste may not have been the only concern, but the 9th Gurkha Rifles was consciously handed over to India probably to get rid of the high caste from the future Brigade of Gurkhas.

In sum, while the inclusion or exclusion of a group in the colonial Indian military clearly depended upon various factors, the principle of caste was among the more critical considerations. Indeed, high and low castes may not have been excluded from all wings of the Indian Army following the 1857 Sepoy Revolt. Similarly, historians may be able to highlight other reasons why only the four Nepalese castes were accepted into the Gurkha regiments, out of some 125 of them. The interests of the Nepalese state, which were invariably dominated by the high castes, may certainly have played a role as well (Des Chene 1993). The sum of these different possibilities notwithstanding, it is clear

that the principle of caste played a central role in the formation of the regiments of the colonial Bengal Army, including the Gurkhas. And, by and large, highly caste-sensitive recruitment to the Brigade of Gurkhas[15] – established in Sungei Patani, Malaya, in 1951 (Lunt 1994: 93) – continues even today. In the following section, I demonstrate the continued saliency of caste in the Gurkha forces, as experienced by the ex-servicemen themselves.

Caste in the Brigade of Gurkhas: Ex-Soldiers' Lived Realities

Gurkha selection centred on just four specific castes from designated geographical areas is well-known among Nepalis. Despite this long tradition of caste-based Gurkha troops, there is little understanding of the practical working of caste in the military. For example, how do the recruiters ensure that only certain castes are selected and not others? How and in what ways does the principle of caste shape the military career overall? What difference does a soldier's caste make to his life in the barracks? There is little awareness about such issues. I fill this gap here by exploring the experiences of some retired Gurkhas. The first section explores the recruiting process, particularly the first round of selection conducted in the village wherein the screening of castes is most visible. The second section examines the influence of caste in the barracks. The experiences of different castes are used to understand the force of the caste system in the army.

[15] The Brigade of Gurkhas is an umbrella of all Gurkha units including the infantry as well as support regiments such as the signals, logistics and engineers.

- ***Hill Selection through Native Recruiters***

Until about 2005, the process of Gurkha selection started in the mountain villages, particularly traditional Gurkha recruiting hubs. This first stage of recruitment, known in the Gurkha parlance as the 'hill selection', was a critical step for both hopeful candidates and recruiters. Born and bred in a Gurkha village, I have watched Gurkha selection on several occasions in the late 1980s and 1990s. Applicants were tested for their physical fitness and mental alertness, though the tests were not as arduous and extensive as those in the final round mentioned at the beginning of the chapter. Hundreds applied for a few places allocated to each recruiting centre, and the best and brightest made it through. Boys with even the slightest deformity or physical weakness got rejected outright. However, physical and mental abilities alone would not suffice. I argue here that the first round of village selection was critical for ensuring the caste integrity of Gurkha regiments. The questions asked here include: Who conducted the selection in the village and, importantly, what strategies were used to ensure that right candidates got shortlisted only from the select castes? In other words, I explore here the strategic importance of the hill selection in particular for filtering out applicants from unwanted castes at the source.

A most crucial method for the filtering of "proper" castes for the regiments in the village itself was the strategic use of native recruiters, popularly known as the *galla walla*. These authorized men, retired Gurkhas, were dispatched to the villages to initiate the recruitment process. Native recruiters' role was critical for ensuring the purity of caste of the Gurkha regiments for a number of reasons. Importantly, he was given the full

authority to conduct recruitment in the village on his own. He could select or reject anybody as he wished, in keeping with the instructions. Even though British officers oversaw the entire recruiting process, these native recruiters were usually dispatched to the village by themselves; British officers rarely made an appearance in the village selection. There was nobody to supervise him directly – which is peculiar, given that all Gurkha units have always been under the control of white British officers.

The role of the *galla walla* was perhaps more important in the 1950s and 60s, when it was difficult to find enough recruits. Earlier, Gurkha service was not very popular and many parents were unwilling to send their children to fight for foreigners. Hari Gurung, who had served as a *galla walla* in the late 1960s, recounted: "It was damn difficult to pick up boys in my time. The memory of so many Gurkha deaths and injuries and disappearances in the Second World War, and some in the Far East, were still fresh. Some of my colleagues were caught and locked up in goat pens by angry parents of potential boys." Indeed, many older veterans enlisting around that time recalled having to get out of the village in the cover of darkness to join the Gurkha forces. Prem Magar said: "I was secretly contacted by a recruiter in a village fair and enticed to enlist. Although I was aware of my parents' serious objection, I trusted the recruiter when he said that Gurkha service would make my family financially better off."

After the 1970s, when the Gurkha Army became increasingly popular, the role of the *galla walla* in selecting perfect candidates from the right castes became even more salient. With the conflicts in the Far East ending, few Gurkhas were deployed to war.

While there was much less risk of dying in foreign wars, prospects in Nepal remained grim. Mass unemployment aside, as Lal Limbu said, “most of the government jobs went to the high castes, who were better educated and better connected to people in power”. Therefore, a career in the British Gurkhas became very attractive for many young men living in the hills and mountains. But, as increasing numbers of men sought to enlist, the competition grew accordingly. The competition intensified also due to the Brigade of Gurkhas being massively downscaled after the end of the Borneo Confrontation in the late 1960s (Macdonald *et al.* 2005: 65).

So now Gurkha parents fiercely competed to get their sons enlisted (des Chene 1991: 277). They raised their sons with the dream of making them Gurkha soldiers, and they dreamt of marrying their daughters to Gurkha soldiers. This competition for a career with the British Gurkhas has further grown in the recent years with the significant rise in Gurkha pay, pensions and other benefits – as well as the lure of UK citizenship since 2004. This huge attraction for limited seats in a heavily downsized Brigade of Gurkhas (currently 3000-strong) meant that the *galla walla,* previously a hated figure, became almost a deity, someone capable of transforming a young man’s life. Many Gurkhas also accused some *galla wallas* of taking huge bribes to have some boys selected through unfair means. Not all *galla wallas* accepted this accusation, but most did concede that they gave preference to their own family and relatives whenever possible, as I shall show later. The point, however, is that, in such a time of extremely high demand, *galla wallas* were in a position to act on their own accord. Their job was challenging in the sense that they had to pick a few men out of hundreds of hopeful

applicants. A further downside of this was that, with this level of attraction to Gurkha service, it became increasingly challenging to filter out boys from the unwanted castes; the risk of their 'slipping through the net' was real.

So, in order to preserve the caste/ethnic purity of the Gurkha regiments, a number of "caste filters", as a former *galla walla* called them, were used. The first filter was the family name, which made one's caste obvious in most cases. Unlike in South India, many surnames in Nepal readily identify respective castes; for example, Gurung, Magar, Rai, Limbu, Damai, Kami and Sarki. *Galla wallas* checked the names verbally and through official papers such as citizenship certificates and passports, which also contained the names of fathers and grandfathers. This enabled the *galla walla* to stop people with a different surname from competing. Mohan Bishwakarma said:

> I grew up watching Gurkha selection in my village in the 1980s. Before starting the tests, the *galla walla* made a little speech to the applicants in a long queue as well as the crowds of onlookers. I felt very sad every time I heard the recruiter proclaim that nobody from the top (high castes) and bottom (low castes) were allowed to take part in the contention. Even though I greatly desired to work as a soldier, I did not queue up, for I knew I would be thrown out the moment I mentioned my name to him.

According to the *galla wallas,* this method of identifying castes with family names was very effective, but not always reliable. For one, some surnames could be confusing. For example, the surname Thapa was shared by some high-caste Chhetris and middle-ranking Magars. Similarly, Lamichhane indicated either a Magar or a high-caste Bahun. Lama could be a surname for either the Tamang or Gurung. Thus, there were many confusing shared family names. Moreover, there was the risk of boys 'tweaking' their family names to meet the recruitment criteria. Bhakta Gurung observed: "I had quite a few fellow soldiers in my platoon who were actually Tamang but had enlisted as

Gurung." In addition, some government officials accepted bribes and were amenable to applicants changing their surnames, suiting them to Gurkha service.

In order to minimize these potential "risks of contaminating" the castes of the Gurkha regiments, native recruiters used a second method; i.e., careful examination of the applicants' physical features. The recruiters carefully observed the body structure, physiognomy in particular, not only to identify any physical deformities or disabilities, but also to minimize the chances of undesired castes cheating. Men with darker skins were suspected of being a low-caste blacksmith, Kami, for example. Santa Rai laughed when he recalled the way a *galla walla* treated him when he was being considered for the army in 1992:

> The *galla* kept staring at me for unusually long time. Even after I did very well in all my physical and mental tests, he looked still confused about taking me. He and his helpers kept inquiring me about my social identity. I knew what was bothering them: my skin colour. The recruiters normally favoured fair skin to darker one. More importantly, they were worried that I might turn out to be a Kami.

Most of the four favoured castes were identified by their apparently distinct features such as flat noses and high cheek bones. They often had sturdy bodies, a result of toiling in their fields and walking up and down the hills and mountains. They were thus visibly identifiable from many other caste groups, particularly high and low castes, who were perceived to have distinct features. The latter groups, forbidden into the Gurkha regiment, have more pointed noses, for example. Such common physical differences meant that men from these particular groups had little chance of lying about their castes when attempting to enlist. A former *galla walla* joked: "In a way, recruitment was a nose

job: just throw out anyone with a pointed nose!" Thus, ethnicity – or even race – was crucial when separating the acceptable from the unacceptable.

Many recruiters noted, however, that ethnicity/race was not always a determining factor for castes. Part of the problem was that there were many caste groups living in the mountains and hills who looked exactly the same as or similar to the Gurung, Magar, Rai or Limbu. For example, it was often difficult to distinguish a Gurung from a Tamang, a Sherpa from or Limbu, or a Sunuwar from a Rai. Despite castes like the Tamang, Sherpa, Sunuwar being ethnically and linguistically similar to predominant Gurkha castes, they were not accepted into the Gurkha regiments (Banskota 1994: 137). So the *galla walla* had yet another challenge in correctly identifying the genuine castes.

Importantly, to overcome these and many other potential problems in correctly identifying the social background of the candidates, the *galla walla* was usually dispatched to his own original village. This was one of the highly efficient recruitment strategies for minimizing the chances of "caste cheating". The nature of the village community in Nepalese hills and mountains is such that it is tight-knit, where everyone knows everyone's business (Lindsey 2005: 272). This meant that many people would be either members of the *galla walla's* family, e.g., relatives, and/or friends and neighbours. Even if he did not know some people intimately, he would most likely know their castes because of where they lived. The village caste system meant that a village usually has a majority of one particular caste, so much so that villages are often named after castes or subcastes; for example, the Magar *gaun* (village), Gurung *gaun,* Ghale

gaun, Damai *gaun,* Bahun *danda* (hill). Even in very mixed towns, certain neighbourhoods could belong to one particular caste, such as Rai *tol* (street). Moreover, often traditional occupations identified a caste, particularly among the low and high castes. The Damai, for example, engaged in tailoring and music making, the Sarki in tannery, and the Kami in ironwork (Whelpton 1997: 35). Most priests, astrologers and school teachers belonged to the high-caste Bahun, who were often rich land owners as well. Thus, using one or other means of identification, the *galla walla* made sure that nobody lied to him about his caste in a bid to win a place in the Brigade of Gurkhas, something a British officer would not be able to do.

More importantly, the use of the local *galla wallas* was strategic in targeting specific villages and families.[16] In the 1950s and 60s, when it was difficult to find enough candidates in the villages, the support from family and friends was critical to ensuring the continuity of recruitment. Quite often, family and relatives could not resist the *galla walla's* request to enlist due to family obligations. In those difficult times, the recruiters often invoked family honour[17] to get reluctant young men to enlist. Ram Limbu, 77, was a typical case among the older veterans:

> Initially, I had no intention of enlisting. I had seen the suffering of my father, who had died after many years of pain and hardship because of serious injuries to his backbone while fighting for Britain in the First World War. My mother did not want me to follow my father's footsteps. However, the galla walla, one of my own distant uncles, asked me to join the Gurkha forces to pay my father his debt of honour. He said it was a son's duty to avenge those that hurt his father, which I thought was a good idea.

[16] The UK Ministry of Defence (MoD), the Gurkhas employer, publicly acknowledged that Gurkha service has become a family tradition: http://www.army.mod.uk/infantry/regiments/30364.aspx *[Last accessed 19 June 2015].*

[17] For example, anthropologist McHugh (2011) emphasises the power of family honour and social obligations in a Gurung village of Nepal.

With the changed situation after the 1970s, as noted earlier, the *galla walla* came under pressure from their own family and kin to enlist their own boys. This pressure grew in tandem with increasing competition to gain entry into Gurkha service. Now the recruiters had to fulfil their obligation to their relations. Hari Bahadur Thapa, a village recruiter in the early 1990s admitted:

> Whenever possible, I selected the boys from my extended family and kinship network. You may think of it as nepotism, but it was a common practice. My superiors did not mind bringing my family and relatives; in fact, they encouraged it. And I personally do not regret it either. My obligations to my family were far more important than my casual job as a local recruiter.

Moreover, this family and village-orientated recruitment took place only in specific geographical regions. Out of the 75 administrative districts of Nepal, hill selection took place only in a few of them; e.g., Gorkha, Lamjung, Tanahun, Kaski, Parbat, Myagdi and Syangja of western Nepal, as well as in some districts in the east including Taplejung, Panchthar, Terathum and Illam. So, not even all the hills are included, let alone the southern lowlands, as suggested earlier. Often not all villages in the same district get the same preference. For example, Kaski District supplies many Gurkha soldiers, most of whom come from certain villages. The village of Ghandruk is a well-known Gurkha village in Kaski, while many other villages in the district have few soldiers. Similarly, the Barpak village in Gorkha District (dominated by the Ghale clan of the Gurung) has Gurkha soldiers in almost every household, while many villages in the district have few soldiers. Deeper exploration revealed that specific families had a long history of Gurkha service with men serving through the generations. Many Gurkhas told me that boys from Gurkha families had a higher chance of getting recruited than those with civilian parents – even within the same castes.

In sum, this part has demonstrated how the British made strategic use of local native recruiters known as *galla wallas* to recruit men from specific castes, sub-castes, villages and families. Indeed, most Gurkha veterans in the UK had served through multiple generations and were living in England with their families and relations. It thus becomes clear that the British sought to maintain caste homogeneity of the regiments by involving the same villagers and families in the fighting forces. But a question follows: What role did caste play in the organization of Gurkha regiments and battalions, and how did this shape the soldier's career overall?

- ***Caste in the Gurkha Regiment***

In the mid-1990s, a murder occurred in the 6th Gurkha Rifles, which still shocked many ex-soldiers. While on duty, patrolling the Hong Kong borders, a Gurkha soldier drew his *kukri* (Gurkha knife) and cut and killed his superior, a Nepalese captain. In the military court, the accused pleaded guilty, and presented his diary showing how he had been constantly harassed and bullied by the deceased captain. He argued that the captain had given him a hard time because of the caste difference: the captain was a Gurung and the soldier belonged to a minority Chhetri caste. Interestingly, many Gurkhas sympathized with the soldier, while condemn his action. In fact, most soldiers, both members of the minority and pre-eminent castes recounted some negative experiences in the army mainly due to their social backgrounds. In this section, I will demonstrate how caste has been a central principle of the Gurkha regiment, and how Gurkhas have

been greatly exposed to caste and casteism in the army as a result of this longstanding pro-caste policy. I argue that this made Gurkhas much more traditionalist in terms of observing caste rules than perhaps their civilian caste fellows or co-ethnics in Nepal.

In discussing the dynamics of Nepalese caste in the Gurkha army, it is important to note the radically different experiences of the members of the majority and minority castes in a regiment. Despite great efforts made, as above, to screen only members of the desired castes, at least a few other castes gained access to the regiments every year. Some concealed their castes and passed as member of the favoured group, while few others were deliberately picked up. Among those lying about their castes, for example, I found approximately 1,000 Gurkha veterans from the Tamang caste currently resident in the UK, who had enlisted as Gurung. A low-caste Kami had worked as a Magar officer. Moreover, there was policy of some intermixing among the favoured castes. There were similarly many other castes who managed to trickle into the Gurkha regiments by concealing their social identities. In terms of the deliberate policy of the Brigade of Gurkhas, in some cases regions mattered more than castes. So, for example, the 6th Gurkha Rifles dominated by the Gurung contained at least some Magar, mainly those living in close proximity with the Gurung. Similarly, the 2nd Gurkha Rifles of the Magar had some Gurungs; the 10th had some Rais and the 7th some Limbus. On the contrary, the Gurung residing in eastern Nepal were not generally favoured in the Gurkha Army, and those few who got selected were placed with the Rai or Limbu regiments. Most soldiers placed in the “wrong” regiments for whatever reason

complained of having a terrible time in the army as members of the minority castes, despite their cultural and geographical proximity in Nepal.

Besides this intended or unintended mixing of the favoured castes, every regiment had at least some members of the undesired castes, men selected for support roles. First, some low-caste men were hired specifically to perform their traditional occupations: the Damai for tailoring, the Kami for blacksmithing, and the Sarki for leatherwork. Even though Nepal has many other low caste groups, only members of these three were recruited under a specific quota. Every regiment usually had a section comprising men from each of these castes, a total of some 10 or 12 men. Second, among the clerical staff were at least a few high-caste Chhetri and Thakuri, low castes, and some other non-traditional castes as well. Because better educated men with a good command of the English language were essential for these roles, the caste rules were relaxed a bit here. And third, one or two high-caste Bahun priests were recruited to take care of the religious affairs of the regiment. So, despite the preponderance of one particular caste in every regiment, often some high and low castes always existed, whose small presence made a big difference in terms of promoting caste in the army units.

For many members of the dominant caste groups, caste-based military formation made their lives in the army both enjoyable and fulfilling. The military unit became very much an extension of their village and family networks. No matter how far they were from their country, they always felt at home in the barracks, as they were usually in the company of their fellow villagers and relatives. Those who served through the generations at one

time or another, lived and worked with their fathers and uncles and cousins. Most Gurkha veterans in the UK had at least a few members of their extended family with them; a clear reflection of life in the regiment. Every unit was thus a tight-knit community of familiar and related men.

It thus comes as no surprise that loneliness, depression and mental health issues are rare among the Gurkhas, even among those who have served and been injured during the wars in the Far East, the Falklands, Iraq and Afghanistan, for example.[18] Mohan Gurung, 75, who had spent many years deep in the rainforests of Indonesia in the 1960s, recalled them with an unusually broad smile:

> The forests were thick and dark, and God knew how many dangerous creatures lurked there. Besides, we were deployed to flush out deadly communist insurgents hiding in the jungles. Worse still, we often ran out of supplies for weeks and had to survive on wild roots. In retrospect, it was a frightening situation. I did not get scared, however, because my uncle, two in-laws and a few villagers were always with me.

Indeed, many ex-soldiers thought that having family and villagers around made them better fighters. After all, they were not fighting for their country or a cause. A British victory hardly meant anything to them; it did nothing to extend their tenure, nor did it increase their pensions. However, strong family obligations meant that the soldiers could rely upon one another even in most difficult and dangerous frontlines. As a Gurkha captain explained:

> Gurkha soldiers are psychologically better prepared than other members of the British Army. For British and other armies, if a man is down, they will lose a fellow soldier whom they might hardly know. When a Gurkha falls, however, some will lose a brother or a cousin or an uncle or a villager. They will have to give answers to the dead man's family when they visit their villages. Thus, they will be prepared to take extra risks to protect one another and to fight on for revenge after the fatalities.

[18] This is significant because there has been a high prevalence of depression and post-traumatic stress among US soldiers returning from wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (Crawford 2013: 254).

In contrast, many soldiers from the minority castes experienced considerable hardship and marginalization while working and fighting alongside the dominant castes. A Thakuri man in his early seventies had a terrible experience in the Borneo Confrontation. While patrolling a forest area infiltrated by the enemy, he shot and killed twelve men with little help from others. Returning to his base, he was hailed as a hero and offered free drinks, even cash. He was told that he had accomplished a task worthy of a Victoria Cross. However, while most of the received awards, he did not even get a trophy. What was the problem? The old man wiped away his tears, then said:

> I was horrified the day many people, including men fighting alongside me, were awarded while I received nothing – despite doing the best work in my section. I cried for several days, and even thought of quitting service for good. On reflection, I was denied the honour because of my social background: I was a lone Thakuri man fighting alongside Magar soldiers in a thick forest. British *sahibs* did not see what I had achieved (the killing of many enemies) and the Gurkhas who saw it did not report the facts to the superiors.

This Thakuri man was not alone in complaining about their weakened or damaged career prospects in the army because of a mismatch of castes. There is a widespread perception in the Gurkha community that a Gurkha needs three "qualifications" in order to do well and get promoted in the Brigade of Gurkhas: qualified, *gaulefied* and *molified.* Certainly, there is recognition that one needs to be really diligent, hardworking and well-disciplined in order to succeed. However, being qualified alone would not guarantee a promotion. Someone whose *gaule* (literally villager) was in a position of power, i.e., a captain or a major, was deemed to be in a much better position to achieve promotion quickly. The prospects were even better for those who had family and/or kin in these positions. And those who did not have anyone, but could bribe the officers (*molmal),* would also receive promotion easily.

Even though many former Gurkha captains and majors dismissed the above as baseless allegations, favouritism based on caste and sub-caste and village is widely considered to be a big issue in the army. I am not insinuating that British officers could not be influenced through unfair means, but many soldiers mostly blamed their native commanders. This may have been partly due to the fact that Nepalese men usually controlled the Gurkha soldiers with minimal supervision by a few British commanders. The native officers were, therefore, seen as mean, self-serving, harsh military commanders. The problem became worse for the soldiers and support staff from the minority caste groups. The Gurung Gurkhas based in Rai- or Limbu-dominated regiments shared their tales of exclusion and hardship. Similarly, many Magars working for the 6th Gurkha Rifles, Gurungs for the 2nd Gurkha Rifles, and others placed in the "wrong" regiments, had many stories to tell not only of harassment, but of exclusion from soldiers of the dominant caste. Other minority groups similarly suffered in the regiment, and the plight of low castes was even worse, as I will demonstrate later.

Another source of frustration for many soldiers, particularly for the more politically conscious, was the enforcement of Brahmanic Hinduism in the army. Soldiers were required to attend Hindu temples and to listen to high-caste at the cost of their indigenous traditions.[19] Even though many soldiers were originally Buddhist, Hindu, Kiranti, or Shamanist, there was no religious freedom in the barracks. Everyone was required to enlist as a Hindu and to remain so throughout their tenures. As suggested earlier, while majority castes were selected partly because of their perceived less strict

[19] Since 2007, most regiments now have a Buddhist monk as well. As noted at the 10 Queen's Own Gurkha Logistics Regiment (10 QOGLR) based in Aldershot, the monk had a small monastery in an outer room of the Hindu temple. According to the monk working there, many soldiers followed mixed practices.

adherence to Hindu principles and caste hierarchy, paradoxically, they were rigorously trained in Brahmanic Hinduism in the barracks. Each favoured caste had its own indigenous ritual experts and priests; for example, the *ghyabri* of the Gurung and *Phedangma* of the Limbu. But they still had no place in the regiment. Their distinct languages, customs and religious traditions are still not officially recognized.

This pro-high caste religious policy of the British Gurkhas has made politically conscious ex-servicemen angry. Nar Rai, who retired in 2010 on medical grounds, represents a significant section of ex-soldiers who are particularly unhappy about this:

> My forefathers might not have realized the sinister design of the British, but we now understand how our communities have been effectively stripped of our cultural and religious traditions in the Gurkha Army. Even though I am a Kiranti, a worshipper of nature, I was required to take part in a Hindu temple parade every Sunday. I had to salute the bloody high-caste pundit and receive his supposedly auspicious tika (red mark on the forehead). None of us understood his Hindu scriptures in Sanskrit, but he never stopped chanting them.

The British instituted caste hierarchy in the Brigade of Gurkhas by employing not only high-caste Hindu priests, but low castes to work strictly in accordance with their traditional occupations. Although these were vital roles for the military, – tailors, tanners and blacksmiths – these professions were socially stigmatized in Nepalese society. Using the respective castes to perform these tasks made a lot of sense in practice: first, other castes were usually reluctant to take these positions for fear of losing social honour; and, second, it made economic sense to hire a person already expert in the trade. Even though this gave a few low-caste families a ticket out of poverty, these Gurkhas experienced a lot of caste discrimination and prejudice in the barracks, practices which to some extent continue even today.

Name calling and vilification were commonplace, according to many former and serving soldiers. Caste names, for example, Kami, Damai and Sarki, were used derogatorily, as metaphors for somebody considered dirty and unreliable, and out of his social sphere. Other soldiers used the pejoratively collective name, KDS, to demean low castes going about their everyday interactions. Thus, verbal abuse of low castes has been widespread in the Gurkha regiment. Mohan Damai, who retired in 1996, said:

> I faced more caste discrimination and harassment in the regiment than in my village. It was worse in the barracks, because I worked in a corner with ten or eleven other men of my own caste. We spent the whole day making Gurkha hats and altering uniforms and dresses, and we had no chance to train ourselves as fighters. This made us distinctly lower in the eyes of the infantry men. Moreover, unlike in the village, I did not have family or friends to support me. I pretended not to have seen or heard anything when soldiers made fun of me or demeaned me in every possible way.

According to the older veterans, the Dalit faced a worse situation in the past, when there were formal rules of untouchability. For example, until the 1960s or early 70s, written rules posted on walls required the low castes to eat separately in the kitchen. They were forbidden to touch the commonly used food, and water and utensils. 81-year-old Man Damai was still very angry about how he had been treated in the kitchen of the 6th Gurkha Rifles:

> Meal times were stressful for me. Cooks hurled food on my plate, making sure that the saddle did not touch me or my plate. I was beaten up once when I accidentally touched the container with cooked rice. I had to eat on a separate table, well away from everyone else. On another occasion, I was reported for serving myself tea. Luckily, my boss, a kindly Gurung man, accepted my excuse that I had nobody to pour tea for me there.

Despite the absence of the formal policies of caste segregation, prejudice remained strong nonetheless. And it negatively affected the career prospects of many low-caste

soldiers. The fact that they were only support staff rather than fighters automatically lowered their chances of gaining higher ranks. There were, however, a few exceptional cases of low-caste support staff being promoted, albeit with great difficulty. Bir Bahadur Kami, a qualified Gurkha, aspired to become the first low-caste officer in the Brigade of Gurkhas in the eighties. His great sporting prowess had made him a famous man of the regiment, “despite” his caste. However, sadly his dreams were never realized:

> My British sahibs kept assuring me that I would one day become a lieutenant, but this never happened. I later learnt that some Gurkha officers had blocked my promotion, mainly because they did not want a low caste in the Gurkha officers’ mess. There were also worries about making upper–caste soldiers of the regiment, Limbu men, salute a Kami officer – a terrible mismatch between social and military hierarchies that could potentially demotivate the majority soldiers.

In sum, the recruitment process, conducted through local native recruiters in the first round, was a critical stage for filtering out perceived undesirable castes while maintaining the official line that recruitment was open to all Nepalis. This highly caste-sensitive selection process served the military purpose in terms of effectively mobilizing the forces and getting the best out of them in times of war. However, it also raised the consciousness of caste and deepened the social divisions among the military men and their families. Moreover, the recruitment of high-caste priests and low-caste artisans effectively introduced social hierarchy into the barracks. Exposed to such a pro-caste environment imposed through military discipline, the behaviour patterns and attitudes of the soldiers changed accordingly, a transition which is having a direct impact upon their new lives overseas. The following section advances this argument by comparing Gurkhas with the plantation workers from colonial India.

Military Experience and Overseas Caste: An Analysis

In his remarkable book *Base Camp Freedom*, East (2012: 63–64), an author with a long experience of serving in the US Army, makes an important observation: “It was not until much later that I discovered what countless military personnel throughout the centuries have also discovered. People change after serving in the military.” It has been my personal contention that Gurkhas changed a lot in the army, change which has impacted upon their retired lives overseas. I argue that the Gurkhas’ substantial caste-related experiences in the military must be taken into account to understand their active revival of caste in Britain. Most veterans were exposed to the very caste-sensitive environment of the regiment for at least 15 years. During this time, their lives were mostly limited to the barracks: they had little freedom of movement outside of the cantonments in Malaya, Hong Kong, Brunei and Singapore. They were allowed home leave only once in every three years. This was long enough exposure to and rigorous enough training vis-à-vis caste, long enough to fundamentally change their behaviour and attitudes. This change not only reshaped their communities in Nepal: it shaped their lives in Britain. Noted native scholar Harka Gurung observed that returning Gurkhas played a critical role in “disseminating” Hindu religion and Nepalese language in their remote mountain communities (1998: 195). No doubt this further sensitized the mountain people about the caste system, just as it has contributed to an active revival of caste in the UK. I advance this theory here by comparing Gurkha service with the indenture and *kangani* systems of recruiting and mobilizing Indian labour for colonial plantations.

Most scholars of diasporic caste have in the main tended to blame the employment policies appertaining to indentured Indian labourers for the apparent failure of caste in former British plantation colonies (Singh 2014: chapter 7; Vertovec 2000, Jayawardena 1980, Schwartz 1967). Millions of workers were transported to tea, sugarcane, rubber and coffee estates in the Caribbean, Fiji, South Africa, Mauritius and Malaya in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The conditions for men and women on the long sea voyages and on the plantations were terrible, and their caste sensitivities were least considered. Scholar of overseas Indians Lal, himself a grandson of an indentured labourer in Fiji, has written a lot about Fiji Indians. The following conclusions he reached are widely shared: "Indenture violated many of the values and subverted the social and cultural practices and institutions…among its most notable victims being the caste system" (Lal 2012: 53).

But what do the scholars mean by this? How does this analysis compare with my argument about overseas Gurkha caste in connection with their employment in the post/colonial British Army? In order to make an effective comparison, it is necessary to examine the recruitment and organization of indentured coolies.

In many ways, the recruitment of indentured coolies was similar to that of the Gurkhas. The coolies – both men and women – were mostly drawn from peasant village. Licensed native recruiters scoured the villages looking for proper candidates (just as *galla wallas* did to find candidates for the Gurkha regiments). They met potential candidates in market towns and local bazaars, often discreetly, and convinced them to

accept the offer. Those who agreed to join were dispatched to the recruiting depots and tested for physical fitness and health. The recruiters preferred those who had a long experience of physical labour, evident in their hard hands, and active and strong bodies (Metcalf 2008: chapter 5). The major concern was the candidate's ability to engage in physically challenging labour on the plantations for up to ten years.

These similarities notwithstanding, an important difference from the Gurkhas was that the coolies were recruited from a range of castes and tribes (Lal 2012: 91). Men and women from virtually all castes were accepted, including low-, middle- and high-caste Hindus and Muslims. For example, in 1898, the coolies dispatched to Trinidad from the port of Calcutta consisted of 16 per cent high castes, 41 per cent agriculturalists, 7 per cent artisans and 22 per cent low castes (Mahase 2012: 15). And while the ratio of castes or tribes may have varied in other instances, but it was usually a socially diverse group of recruits.

Another significant difference from Gurkha recruitment was the selection of coolies from diverse geographical regions. For example, by 1871, some 29 per cent of coolies working on Trinidad's sugarcane estates were from Bihar; 41 per cent from Central India, Oudh and Agra; 22 per cent from West Bengal and a few from South India and the Punjab (Mahase 2012: 15). With the exception of a few reserved areas, the recruiters gathered workers from wide areas of the Indian Subcontinent. The colonial authorities in India prevented recruitment from Assam and Darjeeling because local tea estates required cheap labour. Similarly, Nepal was a potential recruiting zone; it was

reserved for the supply of military manpower. “Again and again into the 1890s, the emigration agent had to remind recruiters that they were not to enlist Nepalis” (Metcalf 2008: 146).

Coming as they did from such incredibly diverse social and regional backgrounds, the indentured immigrants struggled to revive the caste system (Schwartz 1967). Once freed from indenture, they started rebuilding their lives abroad; but, in the process, caste was destined to take a hit. While not totally forgotten or neglected, confusion and disagreement vis-à-vis which caste belonged to what rank and which caste code should be followed combined to damage its prospects. As caste was influential and meaningful locally, there could, by and large, be “no agreement on single standards of behaviour or status in the new country” (Mayer 1967: 3). This was inevitable given the difficulties of determining caste status even within India itself. Take the Panchamas (also known as the Chandalas), for example. Acknowledged as one of the Untouchable groups of India, there is no uniformity of decision as to how they should be socially ranked in different parts of India (Pruthi 2004). The Panchamas settled in the hills have a higher status than those on the plains; and, as with other castes, “among the Panchamas too there are various sub-castes with varying social status” (Pruthi 2004: 26). If such difficulties exist with a single caste in India, one can imagine the confusion surrounding the caste status of indentured coolies randomly collected from the vast territories of the country.

Aside from the recruitment policies not strict about castes, the organization of indentured coolies on the colonial plantations further weakened the prospects of caste

overseas. Unlike in a Gurkha regiment, the principle of caste was not a dominant theme for mobilizing the workers on the plantations. Little care was taken about the caste sensitivities of the workers, starting from the recruiting depots and ship journeys. Kelly (1991: 29) summarised the common experience of the indentured coolies: “food is mixed, black water is crossed, caste is ignored by Europeans in command. Those refusing to eat are forced to eat off dirty plates.”

Furthermore, unlike in a Gurkha regiment, there was no division of labour based on caste on the colonial estates. Everyone was reduced to the status of a coolie. They all basically did the same work: taking care of the tea or sugarcane or rubber plantations, harvesting the crops, and processing them. Some high-caste Brahmans worked as priests as a part-time profession, but this was not part of the contract. The managers or owners of the plantations did not offer them any especial honour or incentive out of respect for their religious role: they were required to toil like everyone else (Senauth 2011: 61). Moreover, they had to work alongside Untouchables and middle castes, something they would never have done in their home villages. In many ways, therefore, indenture was a great “leveller in terms of occupation” (Singh 2014: 242).

It should thus come as no surprise that caste struggled to reinstitute itself in the former colonies around the globe. Vertovec (2000: 41) observes that caste has largely disappeared among post-indentured migrants and their descendants in the Caribbean. Similarly, Jayawardena (1980: 436) notes that caste has lost its significance as an occupational and ritual hierarchy in Guyana and Fiji because of the conditions of

indenture. Likewise, Hollup (1994: 304–307) notes the “disintegration” of caste in Mauritius due to various factors including the end of caste-ordained occupations, and the gradual breakdown of the barriers impending inter-caste marriage after people started emphasizing other considerations, e.g., education, income, property and occupation. A consensus reached among the editor and contributors to Schwartz’s 1967 work titled *Caste among Overseas Indian Communities* was that caste failed among former indentured coolies and their children and grandchildren because of the legacies of indenture.

Particularly salient for my argument is the fact that scholars have demonstrated the direct impact of colonial policies of recruiting and organizing workers on overseas caste by comparing the indenture system with another system of employing cheap labour, called the *kangani* system (Jayawardena 1968; Hollup 2000). Even though this was a civilian – not a military – enterprise, the process of employing workers for rubber and coffee plantations in Malaya and Sri Lanka was strikingly similar to that appertaining to the Gurkhas, with similar consequences for overseas castes.

In a striking similarity to Gurkha recruitment, *kangani* workers were drawn from particular regions of South India. Moreover, many recruits were drawn from specific villages and extended families by a native recruiter known as the *kangani*. Usually the headman of his village, he worked as a foreman on the estate, often returning to his village to collect workers who were there (Sandhu 1969: 90). He usually selected men and women from his own family and kinship circle, just as the *galla wallas* in their

villages during the recruiting process. What the *kangani* did in a Tamil village was part of the policy of the plantation owners' and managers' policy. "In the *kangani* system…the maintenance of village, kinship and caste ties was encouraged" (Hollup 2000: 229). Therefore, similar to the Gurkha regiment, overseas communities of plantation workers became very much an extension of their original communities.

As a result, the caste system remained strong among post-*kangani* Tamil workers and their descendants in Malaya and Sri Lanka. In addition, the local systems of caste have survived as well. Caste among the Tamils in Sri Lanka "derives from the Brahmin-dominated system of Southern India" (Ross and Savada: 2002: 153). It is known to be influential even among Indian communities in the urban areas of Malaysia. In his study of caste among Indians in a Malaysian town, Mearns (1987: 305) concluded: "Whatever it is, *jati* (caste) is certainly a continuing part of the 'lived experience' of Hindus in Melaka."

It thus becomes clear from both the indenture and *kangani* systems of colonial recruitment that the policies of selecting and mobilizing Indian coolies for work on the colonial plantations in former British colonies has had a direct influence upon the scope of overseas caste. Indeed, one could see many other factors directly or indirectly impacting on the prospects of caste in the diaspora over time; for example, the geographical proximity of Sri Lanka to the Tamil lands of South India. However, as evident here, the recruitment and organization of workers with or without considering the caste factor *did* make a significant difference from the outset. This historical and

comparative analysis has enabled me to argue that caste among a very new Gurkha diaspora in Britain is already flourishing. This is in part due to the fact that Gurkha service was distinctly different from indenture, and largely similar to the *kangani* system in terms of colonial policies on caste when employing Indian labour.

Conclusion

In his work titled *Gurkha Warriors,* author and former Gurkha commander Crew (2003: 40) describes the Gurkha as the "perfect soldier" because he is "a born killer, amenable to discipline, unquestioningly loyal [and] utterly dependable…" This is the well-known image of the Gurkhas as a popular martial race of the Himalayan region. Most of the literature, which has invariably been produced by British men with experience in controlling the Gurkhas, alludes to the Nepalese soldiers/mercenaries as "natural born warriors" – similar to some other prominent groups from around the world. However, as the historian Streets (2004) argued, martial race theory, while appearing biological, is in effect a colonial construct. Her exposition of the preference for different caste groups for the Indian military at different times in colonial history – high and low castes until the mid-nineteenth century and mostly Gurkhas and Sikhs after the 1857 Sepoy Revolt – clearly exposes the martial race concept as purely political.

My analysis here has a) supported Streets' deconstruction of the martial race ideology in South Asia, and b) taken it a step further by ethnographically demonstrating a very careful design of the Gurkha forces using caste, among other elements, as a central principle. This is something that has hitherto not been covered by scholars of Indian

military history. I have shown here how only members of select castes from specific regions and villages and families were recruited and organized, mainly through native officers, giving the martial aspect the appearance of an inherited trait. However, the actual purpose of this strategy was not only to make the control and mobilization of the forces easier, but to get the best out of the mountain men in terms of their ability to fight.

My main contention in this chapter has been that this highly caste-sensitive Gurkha project, implemented with a specific military strategy in mind, significantly impacted upon the migrant lives of Gurkhas and their families in Britain, particularly in terms of their reproduction of caste. This is one critical factor among others contributing to the rapid reinstitution of overseas caste. As already observed, this argument fits well with analyses of overseas caste among former colonial plantation workers and their descendants. Many scholars–from Schwartz (1967) to Singh (2014)–observe that indentured coolies struggled to revive their caste because they came from diverse regions and castes, and plantation owners and managers paid little attention to caste differences. Travelling by ship and working on the estates together, with little room for observing caste restrictions, resulted in the coolies coming together across caste divides and forming what some scholars call a *jahaji bhai* (brotherhood of the boat) (Landy 2004: 207). This was just the opposite of the Gurkha experience, wherein caste was a central concern right from the day the candidates queued up to be considered by native recruiters in the village. And their situation matches that of the Tamil plantation workers transported to Malaya and Sri Lanka, where caste and village and family connections remained largely intact on the estates, thereby making it a lot easier for the

workers to revive their caste-based customs after freedom from the *kangani* contract (Jayawardena 1968).

Overall, this insight into Gurkha military history is critical to understanding not only which Nepalese castes and ethnic groups immigrated to the UK, but how they have been interacting with members of their own castes and/or other castes. The majority of the ex-soldiers currently resident in the UK served the Brigade of Gurkhas between the 1970s and the 1990s, when there were four Gurkha infantry regiments each dedicated to a particular caste. Thus, this historiography is a key to understanding why caste has become such a central issue in the formation of Gurkha communities overseas now. In the next chapter, I will analyse the recent migration history of the Gurkhas in the context of increasing saliency of Nepalese caste in the UK.

Chapter Two

Unbroken Chains: Gurkha Migration and Caste

It's uncertain when you will return,
How shall I live?
Hong Kong Malaya; Hong Kong Malaya
Dear, although you are physically afar,
Keep sending me a letter

- *A Nepalese folk song*

Gurkha migration to Britain has not only been unique in many ways: it has had momentous consequences for overseas caste. One has rarely seen mass migration of free migrants in the post-War II period; only refugees followed this trajectory. Gurkhas were not forced out of their homeland; yet, their newfound opportunity engendered an exodus of tens of thousands of them, starting with the first round of legal migration post 2004. One comparable example was the arrival in the UK of some 30,000 Gujaratis and Pakistani refugees, who had been forced out of Uganda in 1972 during the Idi Amin regime (Ember *et al.* 2005: 290). Among the voluntary migrants, the Gurkha case may be compared with the mass immigration of semiskilled and unskilled workers from the Indian Subcontinent in the 1950s and 1960s to fill the manpower shortages in the booming industrial sector of England (Singh and Tatla 2006: 148; Ballard 1994).

However, Gurkha migration was different from Indian labour migration to England in certain respects. Apart from different periods of history, Gurkha migration was not purely driven by economic interests. Gurkhas qualified for UK residency – and ultimately citizenship – through a separate policy in recognition of their contribution to the British

Empire for so long. Of course, many ex-soldiers emigrated for economic reasons; however, they also had a strong sense of entitlement. Many Gurkha immigrants said that they had chosen to move to Britain not necessarily to escape economic hardships in their home country; their lives were not bad with their savings from the army as well as regular pensions. Rather, they wanted to make Britain pay for the historical contribution of Gurkha soldiers. It was a way of ending perceived injustices of the UK upon the loyal soldiers from Nepal, who had been denied UK residency for so long, even though Commonwealth soldiers always qualified for the same after four years' service (Ware 2012). In other words, the context of Gurkha migration was unique.

Furthermore, Gurkha migration is different from the Indian in terms of family reunion. Most Hindus immigrating to the UK in the 1950s and 1960s were single men, who were joined by their wives and children only in the 1970s and 1980s (Jones and Ryan 2007: 132). Evidently, it took a considerable period of time for Indian families and communities to revive overseas. This is in contrast to the Gurkhas, who did not need to wait for years to reconnect with their families. Not only did they arrive in Britain together with their wives and children, but they were soon joined by at least some of their extended family and kin. The Gurkhas did not have a special permission to bring their elderly parents and many other relations, of course. Given the long tradition of village, caste and family-centred recruitment, as discussed in Chapter One, other relatives arrived because they too were military families.

This chapter traces the recent history of Gurkha migration to the United Kingdom. I seek to understand here how the process of migration, on the back of a highly caste-sensitive Gurkha selection, has contributed to a rapid reproduction of caste among Gurkhas in the UK. It is my contention that Gurkha migration trajectory has paved the way for the swift reformation of caste-based communities in Britain. My analysis makes use of the popular theoretical concept of chain migration (Tilley 1978), which describes the way in which family and kin networks play a part in not only facilitating migration, but resurrecting primordial networks in the diaspora. This chapter describes the Gurkha migration process starting with the arrival of a few hundred undocumented Gurkhas by the turn of the century. Then I analyse the first and second phases of mass migration, following the review of Gurkha immigration policies in the winter of 2004 and autumn of 2009. In the end, it demonstrates the saliency of the theory of chain migration, albeit fast-forwarded, in the reconstitution of Gurkha castes in Britain.

Chain Migration

The theory of chain migration, which was originally used to describe post-War migration and settlement, has undergone further elaboration and redefinition. MacDonald and MacDonald (1964: 82), who first introduced the concept of chain migration, define it as "that movement in which prospective migrants learn of opportunities, are provided with transportation, and have initial accommodation and employment arranged by means of primary social relationships with previous migrants." In the following decade, Tilly (1978: 53) offered a similar definition, whereby chain migration was seen as a "social process" that facilitated the movement of related individuals and households with support from

related people in the receiving country in the form of “aid, information and encouragement”. When a member of the family or kinship network enters a new country, that person makes every effort through funding, information, sponsorship or whatever resources he can deploy to assist his family and relatives to join him. Thus, chain migration implies the later migration or immigration of family and close relatives, e.g., spouses, dependent children and parents. However, the notion can also be applied to distant relatives, friends (Werbner 1990: xxii), “even acquaintances” (Ciment and Radzilowski 2014: 11).

But this early concept of chain migration had its limitations. A criticism of the migratory chain framework is that it fails to capture multiple destinations, and multi-directional and complex flows of people, information and money, and other forms of support in sustaining the chain. In other words, it may not always be the person at the destination offering support to relatives in the source country: considered also must be the complex exchange of information, monetary support and advice, as well as the conditions in both countries. Nigerian sociologist Akanle (2014: 34) stresses that it is important to consider the impact of the returned migrants, whose consumption patterns and information about the diaspora could encourage people to emigrate. According to my interviewees, the pomp and pride of the returning soldiers – their foreign clothing, perfume and electronic gadgets, for example – encouraged many Nepalese youths to join the Gurkha Army, despite their awareness of the potential risk to their lives. Another reason why some scholars may have opted not want to use the framework of migratory chain is their difficulty with the use of the metaphor of “chain” (Borges 2009: 155) – the term could

also be understood in a negative sense to mean bondage and lack of freedom. Due to these perceived limitations, some scholars have preferred to use the notion of "migratory network" instead of "migratory chain" (Mestres 2014: 69).

These limitations notwithstanding, the concept of chain migration has endured as an analytic framework. As Borges (2009: 156) notes: "The 'chain' provides a powerful image widely used in migration studies." The concept of migratory chain has been popularly used with reference to South Asian migration and settlement as well. Shaw (2000: 34) notes vis-à-vis Pakistani migrants: "The links of kinship and village that shaped the process of chain migration continued to influence patterns of employment and residence in Oxford." Similarly, Akhtar (2013: 95) shows that Pakistani Muslims have been able to effectively revive their *biredari* (caste and/or kinship group) networks in the United Kingdom because these networks have "facilitated" chain migration over time. Similarly, the chain migration that occurred in the 1970s and 80s has been identified as a critical factor in the formation of diasporic Punjabi Sikh communities in Britain (Singh and Tatla 2006; Helweg 1986). The chain migration of Punjabi Sikhs resulted in the establishment of Sikh overseas communities – which prominently manifested in the form of their religious institutions, *gurdwaras* (Sikh temples) – along the Pacific coast of America in the post-War II period (Shani 2008: 116).

The saliency of the chain migration theory has been recognized and used as a policy framework by governments of many countries. Some Australian policies permit

immigrants to bring their dependents.[20] Significantly, in July 2014, the state of South Australia introduced an additional policy called "chain migration", allowing Australian citizens or permanent residents domiciled in the state to sponsor their overseas relatives – siblings, parents, grandparents and/or adoptive parents or siblings – to join them under certain conditions.[21] Similarly, many European countries allow their migrants to bring their wives and dependent children. Many Pakistanis, for example, have used marriage as a gateway to enter Britain (Charsley *et al.* 2012). But, in recent times, family migration has proven a problem in Europe. Some countries, including Britain, have imposed strict conditions in an attempt to limit the volume of immigrants entering via legal chain migration. For example, the UK has introduced restrictive measures, e.g., the income of the sponsor, as well as the skills in the English language of the person intending to immigrate (Hampshire 2013: 79), measures that have often, as a BBC report noted, "split" families apart.[22] Nonetheless, in Europe, as in America and Australia, "family reunion is…by far the biggest source of legal migration" (Bale 2013: 345; Charsley *et al* 2012).

It is important to note that chain migration often takes a considerable amount of time and resources. As Faist (2010b: 82) observes: "It takes time to develop the chain and this is the reason why we see it fully-fledged only in later phases of international migration." However, Gurkha chain migration did not take long. Within less than 10 years, many Gurkhas started living in Britain with their dependents and other relatives.

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[20] http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/current%20series/rpp/121-140/rpp124/07_background.html *[Last accessed 10 December 2015].*

[21] For details, see the government sites: http://www.migrationsolutions.com.au/news/graduates-with-family-in-sa-eligible-for-state-nomination/ *[Accessed 10 December 2015].*

[22] See the report at http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-20207357 *[Last accessed 12 December 2015].*

Given the caste, village and family-oriented recruitment policy of the Brigade of Gurkhas, many migrant families were already related to each other. Most of the research participants, particularly those from the pre-eminent castes, had their extended family and kin living with them. Gurkha chain migration therefore has been an accelerated one. Because of this unique migration trajectory, Gurkha family and kin networks remained by and large 'unbroken' – as the title of the chapter suggests. Even though some of their civilian relatives obviously remained in Nepal, the process of Gurkha migration caused a rapid reunion of families, kin, villages – which greatly enabled the immigrants to quickly revive and revitalize their caste communities.

Illegal Entry of Pioneer Gurkhas and Struggle for Settlement

For the first time, a few hundred retired Gurkhas started living in England around the turn of the 21st century. Most of them were undocumented. They defied the Gurkha Army convention by illegally entering the UK, particularly after having spent a substantial amount of time in the country. Previously, perhaps few ex-servicemen were attracted to the country in part because, having served mostly outside the country, they had hardly spent any time there. They were based in India (until 1947), Malaya (1947 – 1970s), Hong Kong (1970s to 1997). Only after the handback of Hong Kong to China in July 1997, and the subsequent transfer of the Gurkha headquarters from Hong Kong to England (Felton 2013: 174), did they start living and working in the UK for several years. Having properly experienced British way of life, now many retiring soldiers (and their dependents) aspired to continue to stay in the UK – even though Gurkha policy would not allow this.

For example, Warrant Officer Mohan Gurung, 50, who retired from his regiment in the summer of 2001, had a typical experience:

> When I completed my service at Tidworth barracks, I had lived in Britain for over five years. My wife and two children were also with me in England at the time. When the time came for us to be dispatched to Nepal, it was really hard for me and my family. Wiltshire had already become our new home. My son, who was doing really well in his school, wanted to continue with his schooling; he did not want to start schooling under a completely new system in Nepal. Similarly, my wife, working as a cleaner at a local hotel, was training to become a registered aged-care worker. She wanted to live and work in the UK as much as I did.

The lure of a better quality of life in Britain aside, many retiring soldiers did not want to return to Nepal also due to the situation in their home country. The circumstances in the country were bad at the time. First, as one of the poorest countries in the world, Nepal suffered from mass unemployment. When even the highly educated were struggling to find work, Gurkhas and their spouses had little scope for employment. Even if they did find some work, the income probably would not be able to afford middle class life in a town. And the pensions were tiny; they are still a fraction of what everyone else in the British Army gets (Laksamba *et al. 2013*). Second, Nepal had been reeling under a violent communist insurgency since 1996. With widespread violence and intimidation, thousands of citizens, including many innocent civilians had died; thousands others had been wounded or disappeared (Pettigrew 2013: 16). So, there was a real threat to personal safety and security. Moreover, people with some sources of regular income including many Gurkhas had been extorted. Schools and colleges closed for days, sometimes weeks, due to the Maoist strikes and their threat of violence (Sijapati 2011: 10). Due to these dangerous circumstances at home, many retiring soldiers naturally preferred the safety and security of the United Kingdom.

Despite their keen eagerness to continue to live and work in Britain, nearly all of the retired soldiers were repatriated to Nepal. But some clever men managed to either remain in the UK or return from Nepal. Initially, they applied for UK residency permits or work visas, most of which were turned down. Although immigration officials made different excuses to deny them entry into the UK,[23] many Gurkhas thought the real cause was the Ministry of Defence (MoD), which apparently wanted to stick to the rule of keeping retired Gurkha soldiers outside the British soil. With their legal path blocked, some e-soldiers chose illegal routes to gain entry to the UK. Some escaped being dispatched to Nepal and stayed in the UK as illegal immigrants, while others 'conned' immigration into allowing them to enter the British Isles.

Different strategies were used by individual retired Gurkhas to return to the UK illegally. One of the more devious methods of returning to Britain involved the clever use of army ID cards. Retired Sergeant Hari Pun, 45, was one of those who used the technique successfully:

> When I retired from the Gurkha Army in England in 1999, I concealed my ID cards instead of returning them to the regiment as required. I told them that I had lost them. After being dispatched to Kathmandu, I travelled to Mauritius. Then I obtained a visa to Belgium, and I travelled to England. I showed my ID cards to the border officials to enter the country. The UK Border Security let me through when I produced my cards thinking that I was a serving Gurkha – therefore entitled to travel without a visa.

[23] As an employee of the British Embassy, I personally saw several of these immigration letters, announcing the refusal of visa applications to Gurkha veterans. Most letters insinuated that the applicants could not be trusted to return to their country after visiting Britain.

Other Gurkhas paid large sums of money to international human smugglers to travel to the UK via several countries, often through difficult and dangerous routes. Retired Warrant Officer Prem Limbu was one of those who braved this treacherous journey:

> At first, I went to New Delhi and then Qatar. In a small group, we then secretly travelled to Romania then onwards to Britain. It was very difficult and often risky to dodge or bribe the security forces of several countries and travel in the shadows. The most difficult stretch of my journey was from Calais, France to southern England. I hitched a ride in the back of a truck loaded with sacks of potato. I nearly suffocated and died deep in the Channel Tunnel.

A few more fortunate Gurkhas managed to fly to London from Kathmandu on temporary visas. As suggested earlier, it was very difficult for most of the ex-servicemen to secure permits even to see their friends and family in the UK. However, some secured tourist visas which allowed them to stay in Britain for some months. Om Gurung, 65, almost cried with joy when he was offered a six-month tourist visa to visit the UK in May 2000 following the earlier rejection of his applications on two occasions. He intended to visit his eldest daughter who was then a resident of Farnborough, Hampshire. She had married her cousin, a serving Gurkha (cross-cousin marriage is common among the Gurung), and was expecting her first baby. Naturally she wanted her parents with her on that happy occasion. But Om had a longer term plan as well: he overstayed his visa. Similarly, Gopal Rai, 50, obtained a visa to see his son, who was on active service. The young soldier had recently been injured in a landmine explosion in Afghanistan; therefore, his father was allowed to visit him on compassionate grounds. Gopal, too, did not return when his visa expired. Similarly, Dev Magar from Kaski District entered England in 2003 to attend the graduation ceremony of his daughter, who had just completed her undergraduate degree in engineering from Reading University. He

stayed on in the UK. In this way, some ex-soldiers entered the UK legally but continued to stay in the country illegally.

Pursuing these and many other trajectories, some 400-500 ex-Gurkha soldiers had arrived in England by 2004.[24] In the eyes of the vast majority still in Nepal, these ex-servicemen had made a remarkable achievement. Despite this success in dodging immigration, their lives in England became difficult. As undocumented immigrants with no work rights or entitlements, they were forced to live their lives in the shadow (Jose 2014). Because they lacked official papers, they could not achieve even the very basic things like seeking taxable income, opening a bank account, renting accommodation, buying a car, and using the health services and public resources. In the absence of right to work, they struggled to find employment. And whatever backstreet jobs they found were typically underpaid and exploitative. A further issue was that they, living away from family and relatives, had little or no support network. Even if they had some relatives in active service, the latter had to be careful about supporting their illegal kin for the sake of their own future. If the authorities at the Brigade of Gurkhas got the information about its soldiers supporting their family and friends to stay illegally in the UK, there was a risk of being expelled from service.[25]

The biggest issue for these illegal ex-servicemen in England was the threat of deportation. They were under pressure; a few had already been arrested, detained and

[24] Personal communication with Gurkha community leaders, particularly (Retired.) Major Tikendra Dewan, who was in England on a work permit in the early 2000s.
[25] Even though, as shown earlier, most Gurkhas had at least some family and relatives in the Gurkhas, few were in England before 2004, mainly due to the massive downsizing of the Brigade of Gurkhas before 1997, as discussed earlier.

deported to Nepal. As Bal Gurung said: “I was so scared that the sight of police on the street made me hide.” According to my interviewees, they felt considerably more insecure than other illegals because they were aware that both the Home Office and the Ministry of Defence (MoD) were working together to remove them. Under the influence of the Brigade of Gurkhas, the MoD was apparently actively supporting Home Office officials to track down these “recalcitrant” ex-servicemen and dispatch them back to Nepal. According to many Gurkhas, their British commanders feared that by allowing these few illegal Gurkhas to settle in the UK, more would come. It is a well-known fact that the Brigade of Gurkhas opposed the proposals to settle the ex-servicemen in Britain until the last minute.[26] Thus, these unfortunate pioneer Gurkha veterans initially lived a very stressful life, with the challenge of finding food and shelter, and a constant fear of being arrested and deported.

Caught in a legal trap, Gurkhas now came together to fight for what they considered their right to live and work in a country they and their ancestors had supported for so long with their “blood and sweat.” Many men became angry: why did they have to live like criminals, despite their renown as brave soldiers always loyal to the British Crown. In response, they initiated an organization called the British Gurkha Welfare Society (BGWS) in 2004, arranging meetings and organizing protest rallies. According to the founding members of this society, their primary objective was to try to stop the deportation of ex-servicemen. Under the capable leadership of retired major Tikendra Dewan – now one of the few Gurkha community leaders known to the British public – the group started lobbying local politicians and government officials as well as the

[26] Gurkha campaigner Joanna Lumley has publicly stated this on a number of occasions.

media. Some sections of the British press, after raising the issues of ex-soldiers' suffering, questioned the moral grounds of the government's intention to deport Gurkha soldiers, men who had risked their lives for the nation.

In the early September 2004, the BGWS organized a daring and decisive protest march on the Home Office. Some 400 ex-army personnel bravely gathered in front of the Home Office Immigration and Nationality Directorate in Liverpool, shouting slogans and claiming their right to live and work in Britain.[27] It was an extraordinary demonstration of mostly illegal migrants, who were directly exposing themselves in front of Home Office officials. One of the protestors, Dhan Gurung said: "Many of us were privately worried about possible deportation, but we were desperate and had to hit where it mattered." The rally was covered by some national press: this put further pressure on the Blair Government to consider the voices of these loyal military men.[28] Fortunately, nothing threatening to the protestors occurred. Instead, the Home Office held talks with Major Dewan and his colleagues during which the protestors received an assurance that there would be no further deportations until further notice. And that the Government would review Gurkha policies in light of their demand for residency.

On 30 September 2004, barely a month after the Home Office meeting with the BGWS, Prime Minister Tony Blair announced a new Gurkha immigration policy, granting settlement to all Gurkha veterans who retired after July 1997 (when the Brigade of

[27] For example, this was a BBC online report: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/merseyside/3616892.stm *[Last accessed 21 July 2015].*
[28] For example, BBC online story: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/merseyside/3616892.stm *[Last accessed 26 July 2015].*

Gurkhas was shifted from Hong Kong to the United Kingdom) and their dependents.[29] All ex-servicemen, who had served for at least four years during that period, would qualify for UK residency. The offer was quite extraordinary: it marked a major shift in the centuries-old Gurkha policy. Soon, all of the eligible veterans already in the UK received their residency permits and were able to bring their wives and dependent children to join them. Many other eligible men and their families quickly applied from Kathmandu, triggering the first wave of Gurkha mass migration to Britain.

To conclude this section, the illegal entry of a few hundred pioneer Gurkhas into England in the late 1990s and early 2000s played a critical role in opening the UK's immigration doors to all ex-servicemen and their families. Despite the initial difficulties involved in getting into and settling in England, their migration, which primarily aimed at the benefitting their families, opened a new chapter in the history of Gurkha service. The age-old policy and practice of keeping Gurkha soldiers and their dependents out of the British soil after retirement came to an end. While many other factors may have contributed to bringing about this historical change, the organized campaigns of a few hundred Gurkha activists, most of them illegally residing in England at the time, and consisting of a range of castes, were mainly responsible for the change. In other words, this was a successful outcome of a great unity and social support among the ex-military men across caste divides. However, this solidarity among diverse social groups would gradually diminish concomitant with the rising population of Gurkhas and their families through ensuing legal migration.

[29] See http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/3702436.stm *[Last accessed 21 July 2015].*

First Wave of Migration: A Great Reunion of Families and Kin

With UK immigration doors open, there was an opportunity for Gurkha veterans to not only live and work in Britain, but reconnect with many members of their extended families and kinship networks, and with the village folk. Given that migrants – free or forced – often experience dislocation and dislocation, and alienation from their social circles, above observations about Gurkha immigrants may appear paradoxical. But it is true to some extent. Many retired soldiers, in particular younger ones, i.e., the majority of those who entered the UK in the first phase, often went abroad for a second career. While financial imperatives made men pursue a second career overseas, their wives and children mostly remained in Nepal (Chisholm 2015). The latter stayed in towns, often away from their older kin in their original villages. Some of their brothers and cousins were either serving in the Gurkha forces in Britain or Brunei, or were in other countries for their post-retirement works. Many relatives were living and working in Hong Kong, for example. Thus, many post-1997 retirees, who qualified for immigration to the UK in the first phase, were widely dispersed and often separated from their families. And, moving legally to England with their dependents after 2004, often dispersed families, relatives and villagers reconnected in their new homes in the new country. Here are some empirical and historical data that support my argument that migration caused an extraordinary reunion of Gurkha families, kin and villagers overseas, which founded the rapidly rising Gurkha caste communities in the diaspora.

One of the ex-servicemen who immediately started planning his trip to Britain after the change of Gurkha immigration policy in September 2004 was Moti Gurung from the

town of Pokhara. He admitted that there was little financial incentive for him to emigrate. He had built a large, four-storied house by the side of beautiful Few Lake with his savings from the army. His children were studying well in private schools, and his wife worked in a local branch of an international bank. He had been working as a security guard on a cruise ship based in Singapore, where he was paid much higher than he was in the British Army. He was aspiring to live an upper-middle class life with his family in this prime location in the town of Pokhara after working a few more years. And yet, why did he opt to emigrate?

> Well, the first thing that came to my mind was family reunion. Working for the British Gurkhas for 16 years and then going abroad for a second career, I had made good money. People in my town called me a rich man. But I deeply regretted having to be away from my wife and kids for so long. I wanted to go to England so that I would be permanently reunited with my family right now. Moreover, some of my relatives were ex-soldiers and were going there too. I therefore decided to move to the UK, despite the fact that I might not make as much money there and that our standard of living would go down overseas.

It is important to note that Gurkha rural-to-urban migration in the decades prior to their international migration further dispersed Gurkha families and kin within and without Nepal. Even though most of the older veterans returned to their peasant roots in their mountain villages post retirement, many among the younger had saved enough to purchase properties in the towns, enabling them to shift their families away from their ancestral villages. Pettigrew (2000: 8) notes “Until the 1970s, Tamu ex-Gurkha soldiers returned to their villages and their previous farming livelihoods”. Gurkha migration to the town intensified in the 1980s, so much so that the development of certain towns – mainly Pokhara and Dharan, in which the Gurkha recruitment depots are located – has been attributed largely to the remittances and pensions of British Gurkhas (Adhikari and Seddon 2002: 128; Nepal 2012). Some of the grandest and most elaborate houses in

these towns belong to ex-serviceman families; and they have proven to be the backbone of the local economies. This transfer to urban living from toilsome peasant life was popularly seen as a sign of progress, a big motivation for working with foreign militaries. Modern amenities like hospitals, trained doctors, private schooling for children, roads, electric power and running water made life a lot easier in the towns, amenities that were not available in the mountain villages. Despite this, however, there was a ‘catch’ in this move: the cost of living in the town was a lot higher.

Financially speaking, Gurkha families had no problems while the men were still serving. Especially since the 1990s, Gurkha pay and perks had increased significantly, equivalent to the pay of other servicemen in the British Army (Laksamba *et al.* 2013). For these reasons, the soldiers were able to save enough to afford their families’ middle class living in the town. Indeed, Gurkha wives are stereotyped in Nepal as women living lives of great luxury and extravagance without having to do any work. Their children could go to good quality English medium schools and colleges, rather than to poorly-resourced public institutions. All of these luxuries were possible by the incomes earned by the Gurkha. This lucrative career lasted for only 15 years (a bit longer for more recent servicemen). After their retirement, however, their families suffered a financial crisis: Gurkha pensions were too small to meet the family expenses of urban living. The rates, still governed by the Indian Army pay code, are to date a fraction of what other retirees of the British army get (Laksamba *et al.* 2013).

Madan Magar, a Gurkha who retired in 1999, recalls a typical crisis he experienced upon retiring in his home town of Dharan:

> When I completed my tenure and went to Dharan to live with my family, I realized my terrible financial trouble. My pensions in the year 2000 were less than 10 pounds a month, barely enough for my son's school fees. Most of my savings from the 15-year service had been spent on building my three-storeyed house in town, and on paying the bills. Having lived away from my family for so long, I did not want to depart from them yet again; but I did not have much of a choice, did I?

A second career in the foreign country became imperative for many retirees whose chances of finding a job in Nepal were extremely slim. As one of the poorest countries of the world, there was mass unemployment in Nepal. And there is no social security for the poor and unemployed (Dowling and Chin-Fang 2009: 383). In addition, the violent Maoist insurgency since 1996 had caused further damage to the nation's ailing economy. Gurkhas in general had no other vocational training or college education apart from their distinguished careers with the British Army.[30] As recent retirees, many were still in their late thirties or early forties, and therefore capable of working hard. And, while they were especially well trained for security jobs, there were very few vacancies within the country. Thus, apart from the few men who found work as private security officers in the diplomatic missions and international aid agencies based in Nepal, most of the Gurkhas had to seek employment outside of the country.

In a desperate search for additional income to make their families' urban living possible, ex-Gurkha soldiers spread across the world mainly to work in the private security business sphere. Some of the more fortunate managed to win a second Gurkha career with the 2,000 strong Gurkha Reserve Unit (GRU), a Company privately owned by the

[30] Many men enlisted around the age of 17-20 when they had hardly completed their public high school education in their ancestral villages.

Sultan of Brunei (in honour and appreciation of the great service offered by the Gurkhas on behalf of the British in preserving the sultanate during times of trouble in the colonial period (Welman 2013: 21)). Many others went to Hong Kong, a city in which they had formerly worked, protecting vital installations and guarding the Hong Kong borders from illegal infiltration by immigrants arriving from mainland China and Vietnam. For them, Hong Kong was particularly attractive because some Gurkha children were already living and working there. The colonial Government granted residency to Gurkha children born to Gurkhas serving in Hong Kong in the early 1980s; thus the dependents of these Gurkha children were also allowed to live and work there (Connelly *et al.* 2013: 13). Ex-servicemen who were permitted to remain in Hong Kong after 1997 were able to sponsor any dependents who were not born in the city (Constable 2014: 104).

Other ex-servicemen worked in countries including Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, South Africa and India, as well as in the war-torn countries of Afghanistan and Iraq. The largest employer has been G4S, a private security company with its headquarters in Britain that operates world-wide (Brogden and Ellison 2013: 60). Chisholm, who has written prolifically about Gurkhas forming a significant part of the private security contractor business worldwide, describes how the image of the Gurkhas has changed in past decades “from warriors of empire to martial contractors” (Chisholm 2015). This shift is a visible result of the massive downsizing of Gurkha forces in the British Army following the collapse of the British Empire and the end of the Cold War. And, as I have shown here, it was largely due to Gurkha families’ financial issues following their rural-to-urban migration in Nepal.

Most of the Gurkhas of working age I met and interviewed in England (including many immigrating in the second phase) had worked in at least one more country after retirement. Some had sojourned in Hong Kong, together with their wives and children. But most of the others had been away from their families and kin even after retirement, working for G4S and other private security companies in India, Malaysia, South Africa, Taiwan, and the Gulf States. But, because they worked as guest workers, they were rarely accompanied by their wives and dependent children, as was the case with the British Army.

I will now present two empirical cases of how dispersed Gurkha families and their kin came together in the diaspora. Dhan Kaji Gurung, 47, had been working as a security guard for the Standard Chartered Bank in Cyprus since 2001. His elderly parents, themselves a Gurkha family, along with a brother's family, had settled in their ancestral village in Lamjung District. His parents did not want to move out of their village, even though they were quite elderly and often ill. There were no hospitals or health centres nearby. Dhan Kaji's son was completing his engineering degree in a private college in Delhi. His wife and two daughters were at home in the town of Butwal, southern Nepal. His wife's task was to make sure that the tenants properly farmed their land which was located some 20 kilometers from the town.

When the Blair Government announced the change of Gurkha immigration policy in September 2004, Dhan Kaji immediately resigned from his position at Standard

Chartered in Cyprus and returned to his family in Nepal. He quickly started preparing applications for the residency of his family in Britain. Because there were no additional health, criminal or finance checks, he and his dependents were immediately granted migrant visas. The one exception in his family was his eldest son, who, being above 18 years, was rejected for UK residency.[31] By the beginning of 2005, Dhan Kaji, his wife and daughters were already in Farnborough, England. After renting accommodation, he found work as a security guard at Farnborough's Sainsbury's shopping mall. His wife started working as a cleaner in a local Travelodge hotel. When properly settled, Dhan Kaji and his wife encouraging and supporting their eligible kin still living in Nepal to join them. Dhan Kaji said:

> I have lots of Gurkha soldiers in my family and kinship circle. My uncles could not come to the UK then because they had retired much earlier than 1997, but my two young cousins and brother-in-law qualified for UK residency. Following my active support and encouragement, they moved into our neighbourhood in Farnborough about six months after our arrival. When here, I helped them with finding work and houses, and schools and colleges for their children. Over time, more members of our extended family and kinship circle started arriving as well.

Retired Sergeant Prem Limbu, 48, was among the hundreds of retired Gurkhas employed by the private security company ArmourGroup in war-torn Iraq (Isenberg 2009: 75). He had been part of an elite team providing security to the executives with the US company Brown & Root in Baghdad since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003. Although the pay and perks were very good, his job was obviously dangerous. Not surprisingly, the announcement of UK immigration for Gurkhas came as a pleasant surprise and huge relief for Prem.

[31] Some Gurkhas have been unable to bring their adult children with them to the United Kingdom because of the conditions related to age of the children. Some Gurkha organizations have been campaigning for the "right" of their over-18 children to join them in the UK.

After he left ArmourGroup, like other ex-servicemen, he went to his family in the town of Birtamod, eastern Nepal. His parents were still living in a remote village in Taplejung District: his two sons were studying in a private school across the border in Darjeeling. He quickly commenced the application for his and his family's UK residency. In less than six months they were in England, where they headed straight for the town of Ashford in Kent. Why? Sergeant Prem explained:

> Having served a few years in Shorncliffe barracks, south of England was my obvious choice. Besides, my junior brother, who was still serving in the same regiment, 1RGR, assisted me in finding a house as well as work for me and my wife. Moreover, some of my distant relatives and neighbours were settled in Ashford. Where else would I go?

In this way, thousands of Gurkhas and their families and relatives immigrated to the United Kingdom after 2004. This not only boosted the Gurkha/Nepalese population in England, but reunited families and kin from across Nepal and the world. According to my interviewees, who migrated during this period permanently reunited with kin after a long separation. True, by emigrating, the Gurkha had not only distanced themselves from their cultural roots, but from many members of their families and communities: those who were civilians and therefore unable to move to the UK. And yet their experiences were far from those of lonely students arriving in England, separated from friends and relations. Gurkhas' support network thus became even stronger overseas, instead of diminishing, because of their unique migration trajectory on the back of a long tradition of caste-sensitive Gurkha recruitment.

This is not to suggest, however, that the Gurkhas had special permission to summon their distant relatives. Like many other immigrants, they were not allowed to bring their extended family including brothers, sisters, in-laws and cousins with them. And it was

not easy to bring their elderly parents and grandparents to live with them. However, many of their kin moved to the UK because they too were either soldiers or from families. And, for them, the fact that Gurkha recruitment targeted specific castes, villages and families may have been providential. The consequences were both positive and negative. On the one hand, Gurkha extended family networks as well as caste and village groups greatly strengthened in Britain and, transnationally. This enabled them to quickly revive their cultures and customs, fostering their "transnational belonging" (Levitt and Schiller 2004). On the other hand, this rapid change in the diasporic community with the rise of Gurkha population exacerbated historic divisions in Nepalese society. With caste at the centre of Gurkhas' transnational social field, the Nepalese diasporic community in Britain now began to polarize along lines of caste – a process further accelerated by the second and larger wave of Gurkha migration.

Second Wave: Older Relatives Straight out of the Village

In May 2009, Home Secretary Jacqui Smith announced in the British Parliament a further amendment to the Gurkha immigration policy, granting settlement to all men with a minimum of four years' service and their dependents. This move followed a popular Gurkha Justice Campaign launched in 2008-2009 and led by actress Joanna Lumley (Gellner 2013: 144). A subsequent vote in Parliament in April 2009 triggered a second wave of Gurkha migration (see Introductory Chapter for more details of the Lumley campaign). Because there were now no restrictions based on retirement period, age, health condition, financial situation, and/or criminal records, the subsequent migration in this phase was much bigger in volume. Tens of thousands of men and their dependents

arrived within a few years. I will argue here that the volume and speed of this migration was facilitated by, *inter alia,* chain migration. As people moved into cities and towns where their families, kin and villagers had established themselves, certain pockets saw a big rise in Gurkha population figures. For example, the town of Aldershot was identified as the largest Nepalese settlement in the United Kingdom (Pariyar *et al.* 2014: 136). Prior to the influx of Gurkha families, the migrant population before the influx of Gurkha families had always been less than 2 per cent (Rushmoor Borough Council). This dramatic change in the demographic obviously impacted upon the host society as well as the diasporic community itself. My concern here is with the latter. In this section, I examine some critical factors that made the second wave of Gurkha migration particularly conducive to overseas caste.

First, as in the first round, Gurkha families and kin hitherto dispersed within Nepal and across the world came together. Many ex-servicemen of working age had been working abroad, often away from their families and kin. This separation ended when they were able to migrate to the UK together with their families. Many relatives who had been employed by the Brigade of Gurkhas were reunited like never before in the diaspora.

Given the village- and family-centered recruitment, some extended families had more members in England than in Nepal. Hari Magar, a typical example, said:

> When I first came here in 2001, none of my relatives lived in England. I sometimes blamed myself for alienating myself from my family and community, most of them in Nepal at the time. After the Lumley affair, however, many members of my extended family and kinship circle is in England than in Nepal. I now live with my relatives and extended family. Even my parent-in-law in their early eighties and late seventies have been living with us now!

This was the second important contribution of the second phase of Gurkha migration towards the propagation and reinforcing of caste: the migration of significant numbers of elderly Gurkhas. The towns of Aldershot and Farnborough now had some 1,500 to 2,000 elderly Gurkha couples surviving on pension credits and state benefits. Significantly, many lived as joint families with the families of their sons, daughters or other younger relatives. The extended family and the joint household are still the norm in Nepal, as in other countries of South Asia (Chohan 199: 269). And, somewhat significantly, out of hundreds of elderly veterans I met in Aldershot, Farnborough, Ashford and Oxford, including some really ill and frail persons, not a single one had been put in either a nursing or care home. Das (2011: 33) observes that care of the children and the elderly is highly valued by Indians in the UK; and this very true of Gurkha families as well. It would cause quite a scandal in the community if a Gurkha placed his elderly relatives in an institution. The presence of older people in the family is important because they exert an influence upon everyone in the joint family. Thus, parental authority is still strong, as is the case among, for example, South Asians in Canada (Rahim 2014: 108).

The arrival of the older Gurkhas and their spouses led to the heightened sensitivity of caste in the diaspora. I am not implying, however, that their age was the major cause of this. It would be too easy to assume that older Nepalis are stricter about caste: many younger Gurkhas and their relatives tend to lay the blame on the older generation for

propagating caste in the diaspora. But, are the older men and women more rigid about traditional values? While this is a common assumption, gerontologists reject this generalization. Some elders are certainly more conservative than younger people, but others are liberal and adaptive as well (Aiken 2014: 185). Thus, many older Gurkhas may be more sensitive about maintaining a physical and social distance from other castes. But, I contend, this is not entirely due to their age.

This leads to my third point about why this phase of migration has promoted caste in the diaspora more vigorously: the fact that many new immigrants originated in the village. A large number of the new arrivals included men who retired in the 1960s and 1970s, when their pay and perks were a lot less than now. Lack of savings, among other factors, deterred these older veterans from moving their families to the towns, as had their sons and younger relatives. Most of the older veterans had retired in their peasant villages. According to the Gurkha organizations, approximately 10,000 soldiers were made redundant without compensation and pensions following the end of hostilities in the 1960s in the Far East. Due to their lack of pensions and any other forms of support, many of these older solders had been living in desperate poverty in Nepal's remote mountain villages. They would comprise a significant size of the newcomers after 2009. Thus, for many veterans migrating to Britain in this phase, this was a move not just from one country to another, but from peasant villages to English towns. This phenomenal transition made a difference to the diasporic community in many ways, including caste.

Migrants' village origins are an important consideration when explaining the propagation of caste overseas, mainly because caste is generally understood to be a lot more influential in the rural areas than in the towns and cities of South Asia (Desai 1969; Bhat 1984). Taken together, modernization, urbanization and development have weakened caste (Benhart and Pomeroy 2006: 48). Anthropologists and sociologists researching South Asia have broadly divided caste into two categories: attributional (based on ascription as defined by the broad system) and interactional (based on the local empirical context) (Marriot 1959). Apropos of the former, caste identity and rank are dependent upon occupation, as allocated by the caste system. Caste is markedly visible in the ways in which people interact with each other in their everyday lived reality; everyone's caste rank is known to everyone else. This common knowledge dictates people's behavior and attitudes. Thus, under the attributional definition of caste, many low castes suffer at the hands of the upper castes: structured inequality is their enemy. However, if one observes them through an interactive lens, it may emerge that there is a degree of untouchability and discrimination among the low castes, too. Of the above two forms, attributional caste is more prominent in towns and cities, whereas interactional caste is much more prevalent in the villages. Little wonder, then, that most ethnographies of caste have focused on village India. As Cort (2004: 99) notes: "General theories of caste have taken the village society as the norm." It is difficult to escape caste in the village because of what Gupta (2006: 64) alludes to as a "dense interactive nexus".

The entrenched status of caste in the village is evidenced in a recent ethnography of a Himalayan village in the state of Uttarakhand, India, undertaken by social geographer Dyson (2014). Although the traditional and often exploitative patron-client system (Raheja 1988) is on the wane, notions of purity and pollution continue to dictate the ways in which one caste relates to another. Moreover, everyday caste discrimination against the members of the low castes is common and very much built into each person's *habitus*. Spatial movement is also limited for the lower castes who are compelled to reside on the fringes of society, use separate sources of water, and are not allowed to share food and water with others (Dyson 2014: 35). Thus, caste continued to be a strong driver of social life in today's India, including mountainous settlements in the north.

The situation in the Uttarakhand village is descriptive of a typical Gurkha village in the Nepalese mountains in terms of caste. Often a specific Gurkha caste is dominant in a village such as the Gurung village and the Magar village, and the local system operates under the control of the locally dominant group, irrespective of their status in the overall caste system. Coming as they did straight from a rural society wherein caste is etched on people's everyday lives, the older veterans were understandably much more sensitive to issues of caste than their younger counterparts. As I suggest below, whereas the younger veterans have been active in promoting caste as a group identity and community which is often visible, the older veterans have been promoting interactional caste that shapes individual behaviour and attitudes. Because many immigrants came from specific villages and kinship networks, they know many people.

Thus, they do not want to change the ways they have traditionally dealt with those from certain castes, e.g., the low and the high castes. Clearly, caste continues to be sustained in their everyday lives, despite the fact that now they are living in a completely different society in the United Kingdom.

Visible Impacts of Chain Migration

The rapid reproduction of overseas caste, a result of fast-paced Gurkha chain migration, has manifested in different forms in Britain, some of the most visible being the residential pattern and the formal caste association. As regards residential pattern, most of the Gurkha families have settled in England (not in other parts of the UK); and, from the beginning of the migration, a pattern of residential clusters dominated by specific castes have emerged. The most prominent spatial division is found (as in Nepal) between the Gurung and Magar of western Nepal and the Rai and Limbu of the east (a division exacerbated by the Gurkha army tradition). In terms of the clustering of castes, the east-west division in Nepal has translated into the north-south divide in England. Even though many Gurkha settlements are mixed-caste, the majority of the Gurung and Magar (with geographical and cultural proximity) have concentrated in Hampshire County, mainly in the towns of Aldershot and Farnborough. The Limbu and Rai (both Kirantis) have established themselves in the south, Kent County, around the towns of Ashford and Folkestone.

On closer observation, it emerges that a town or suburb is often dominated by one particular Gurkha caste. Aldershot, the biggest Nepalese town in the UK, is mainly a

Gurung settlement. The Magar live there in significant numbers; but, their numbers are much smaller than those of the Gurung. Rai and Limbu, along with other castes, live in tiny numbers. The Magar are slightly spread out in other Hampshire towns. Ashford in Kent is predominantly a Limbu town, albeit the Rai form a significant size as well. Often the same pattern is evidenced in other smaller Gurkha settlements as well. For example, East Oxford (where I lived from late 2008 to early 2012) has approximately 100 Gurkha households, a majority of whom are Limbus, particularly those from the easternmost districts of Nepal, e.g., Taplejung. A significant number of Rai, along with high-caste Nepalis, live there as well. But, notwithstanding, Oxford is considered a Limbu settlement. Interestingly, the town of Andover, which is barely 35 miles from Aldershot, is home to a few hundred Gurkha households, the majority being the low-caste Kami. While many Nepalis in other British cities and towns may not be aware of this, low-caste Kamis in Andover prided themselves in being able to form a little hub of their own.

The question then arises: how did chain migration help create this caste-based residential pattern? Gurkha families had complete freedom vis-à-vis where they wanted to live in the whole of the UK. Unlike asylum seekers, they were not required to move to specific towns or provinces. Moreover, the Gurkha organizations (BGWS and GAESO) or charities (mainly the Gurkha Welfare Trust) that assisted Gurkha families in the migration and settlement process did not necessarily dictate where people should go or not go. Given the choice, newcomers obviously considered a range of issues including the availability of jobs, affordable housing, the familiarity of the place (where applicable),

and educational institutions for the children. But the support of family and relatives in the allocation of these was critical for the newly arrived. Families had to help their newly arrived family members to find work, housing, schools and colleges. The major consideration of many immigrants was, therefore, close proximity to their families and other relatives.

Nobody consciously selected particular locations as Gurkha settlements. The Gurkha settlements grew spontaneously as people followed their families and relatives. This is the only plausible explanation for the emergence of Gurkha clusters including, importantly, caste hubs. True, many settled in garrison towns which were familiar to many Gurkhas. Aldershot might not have become a prominent Gurkha town had nearby village of Church Crookham not hosted the Gurkhas since the 1970s. Similarly, Shorncliffe barracks explains the Gurkha concentration in Ashford and Folkestone. But the military bases alone do not sufficiently explain why only certain castes went to a particular town. I argue that this was mainly due to the growing sizes and numbers of extended families and kinship networks, the microcosms of the caste community.

This extraordinary reunion of extended families and kinship groups has led to the rise of not only caste clusters, but of formal caste associations also. The Gurung set up their Tamu Dhee UK in 2000 with less than a hundred members (according to Kamal Gurung, Chair of Tamu Dhee UK in 2013). Now the largest and most influential organization in the Nepalese community, it hosts some of the most popular gatherings, such as the annual Nepalese Festival and Gurkha Cup – attended by some 5,000

Nepalis. Similarly, the Magar announced their Magar Association UK in 2002, a caste organization that has massively grown in membership and influence in the community since legal migration of Gurkhas commenced. The Limbus' Kirant Yakthung Chumlung, which was initiated in 2003, and Kirant Rai Yayokkha established in 2004 have also become increasingly influential. They are the largest Nepalese subgroups in Britain, and their respective caste fellows take active part in them (also see Gellner 2015).

Moreover, more recently, smaller village-based caste organizations – as well as those based on original towns and districts and regions – have proliferated. According to Tamu Dhee Chair Kamal Gurung, some 64 local Gurung associations have identified with the Tamu Dhee UK; and there are probably more yet to be identified. My estimate is that, overall, there are least 500 to 600 smaller caste associations across the UK (including those belonging to minority Gurkha castes). For example, there are more than 10 caste-based associations of Gurkhas originally from one administrative district, Gorkha. And, there are 75 such districts in Nepal. True, not all of these regions have been represented by the Brigade of Gurkhas (see Chapter One); but, there are many local associations from some of the more popular districts, e.g., Kaski, Syangja, Parbat, Myagdi, Baglung, Tanahun, Gorkha, Lamjung, Taplejung and Bhojpur. And new village-based caste groups are announced almost every week.

The Indian community in the UK proves my central argument about the rapidly-paced chain migration swiftly reviving overseas caste. As suggested earlier, most of the Indian migrant workers, including many Punjabi Sikhs (comprising ex-army men), arrived in

England in the 1950s and 1960s. in the early days, these men left their wives and children at home: many hoped to return after making some money from laboring in British cotton mills and other industries. Many ended up staying, however: their dependents joined them in the 1960s and 1970s. Only after their reunions with their families did Indian communities take shape and caste consciousness become heightened. In his work on caste and casteism in Britain, Ghuman (2011: 97) notes: “Acute caste awareness began in the 1970s in Indian enclaves.” Consequently, high castes began to exclude lower castes from the houses of worship. And, in response, lower-caste Sikhs started their own *gurdwaras* (Ghuman 2011: 97). Sato (2012) observes how the four Sikh temples in the city of Leicester were bitterly divided due to controversy pertinent to caste divisions in the late 1960s and 1970s. Partly due to this, caste became “deeply ingrained” among diasporic Sikhs in Britain (Rait 2005: 164). Today there are now hundreds of *gurdwaras* in the United Kingdom (Sato 2012: 3), their proliferation paralleling that of Gurkha caste associations above. The two are comparable because for the Sikh, a *gurdwara* is not just a place of worship, but an important community centre, an arena for community politics (Dietrich 1987: 124; Mansukhani 1977: 126). Sikh migrants comparable with the Gurkhas because many among the former belong to military families.

However, despite these similarities, there is an important difference. Whereas first-generation Sikhs in Britain clearly took decades to divide their communities in line with hundreds of *gurdwaras*, many of them based on caste, hundreds of caste associations emerged within a few years of the Gurkha arrival in the country. I will argue that this

difference can be partly attributed to the varied speeds of chain migration: their families and relatives joined Gurkha migrants a lot faster than did those of Sikh (and, indeed, of other Indian) migrants.

Conclusion

Clearly, Gurkha migration to the UK occurred in two sizable waves: 1) younger, post-1997 retired soldiers, who migrated following the September 2004 change of Gurkha immigration policy; and, 2) pre-1997 retirees, including some elderly veterans, after the successful Joanna Lumley-led campaign for Gurkha settlement in May 2009. As I have shown here, both phases of migration were marked by rapidly-paced chain migration. In the first phase, many younger retirees working in various countries immigrated to England and settled in different cities and towns together with their families, who were in Nepal. In the experiences of many ex-servicemen I spoke with, their migration brought ex-soldiers closer to their wives and dependent children, hitherto scattered internationally. This process took a quantum leap, as it were, in the second phase, wherein the older relatives arrived. This enabled extended families and relations to come together in the diaspora, something that had not happened even in Nepal in the past decades: many older veterans had been living in their villages, whereas the younger relations had relocated to different towns. Given the Gurkha Army tradition of recruiting mostly from the select castes, often from specific villages and families, it became possible for parents and grandparents to emigrate, and to live with their younger relations in the UK. This has thus been an extraordinarily fast reunion of migrant families and kin in Britain, something uncommon among free migrants.

My central argument here is that this speedy chain migration (Tilly 1978; Borges 2009) – facilitated by, among other factors, changing UK government policies on Gurkha immigration, and the financial imperatives of the retired soldiers in a poor and politically unstable Nepal – has been partly responsible for strengthening Gurkha caste from the outset. First, the natural clustering of relatives, including members of extended families, in specific British towns and suburbs gave rise to the concentration of castes in specific locations. Two major factors contributed to the emergence of caste clusters in this process: 1) among the Gurkhas, caste is an endogamous category; they mostly marry, in line with the wider tradition in South Asia, within their castes and without their sub-castes; and, 2) Gurkha regiments themselves have been *de facto* caste organizations (see Chapter One) and, unsurprisingly, the same pattern emerged in the overseas communities of ex-servicemen. Caste groups thus became stronger in the diaspora without anyone consciously planning for them to be so. No individual or group decided, for example, to make Aldershot a Gurung hub, and Ashford a Limbu town: they just emerged as such spontaneously. Gurkha migration trajectory, marked with the flow of large volumes of immigrants together with their families and kin, is, therefore, a logical explanation for the spatial segregation of Gurkha castes in the UK.

Second, chain migration greatly contributed to the rapid rise of formal Gurkha caste associations in the diaspora. Some of the more ambitious and politically conscious Gurkhas domiciled in the UK quickly seized the opportunity, and used these ready clusters of castes, sub-castes and villages to launch their formal caste associations. I

will examine some of the transnational and host-country contexts of the rapid rise of these caste associations – mainly the Tamu Dhee UK, Magar Association UK, Kirant Yakthung Chumlung and Kirant Rai Yayokkha UK – in the forthcoming chapters. However, it is clear that these organizations found their constituents easily accessible in the UK due to the trajectory of Gurkha migration. It became relatively easier to gather their members, and to mobilize them, because the supporters and/or members already existed as clusters of extended families, relatives and village groups in specific British towns and suburbs. And these groups consisted of older men and women coming straight out of their villages, where caste is much more of an everyday phenomenon; and the younger veterans, who had lived urban middle class lives in the towns, and were perhaps politically more aware and active.

As a consequence, formal Gurkha caste groups, with less than a hundred members in their early days, swiftly rose to prominence in the Nepalese diasporic community. Extended families and kin groups, as well as village-based caste groups, became the building blocks of larger caste associations. In Chapters three and four, I will demonstrate the growing strengths and influence of these caste associations among Nepalese communities in Britain. Perhaps inspired by the success of these large caste associations, increasing numbers of formal but smaller, and more local, caste groups – based on original villages, towns and the places of current residences – have become a more recent trend. This extraordinary rise of overseas caste associations so swiftly would probably not have been possible if, as Faist (2010b) and other scholars have claimed about most other free migrants, Gurkha chain migration had not been as rapid.

And, equally importantly, all this became possible due to a long tradition of caste, village and family-centred Gurkha recruitment and organization.

Volumes of Gurkha immigrants were important, no doubt, as was the Gurkha experience of caste in their regiments (as noted in Chapter One): however, these factors alone do not sufficiently explain why caste became so salient so quickly in the diaspora. I have demonstrated here that migration trajectory is a key consideration. A rapid chain migration of the Gurkhas, facilitated by the mass flow of ex-soldiers together with their wives, dependent children and other relatives, afforded overseas caste a big boost. In consequence, large caste associations – that Indians took decades to establish in the UK and other Western countries – rapidly emerged among Gurkha immigrants. Similar to Gurkha experience in the army and migration trajectory, transnational politics of caste is another critical factor leading to an extraordinary rise of Gurkha castes in the UK. In Chapter Three, I will examine transnational cultural politics initiated by Gurkha caste associations in their new settlements in Britain.

Chapter Three

Performed Caste Identities: Diasporic Public Sphere

During my stay in England, I attended a number of festivals hosted by Limbu caste groups in England. One of the major attractions was their traditional ritual dance known as *Chyabrung Nach.* The male and female dancers, often wearing their traditional attire, began the performance by standing in a line. Some men had big, double-sided drums strapped across their shoulders. They start by beating the drums with sticks, dancing slowly, and singing to the tune of the drum. Everyone else then joined in the chorus. The dancers slowly formed a curve, and ultimately a circle (Picture 1). The performance of *Chyabrung Nach* thus symbolises how the Limbu construct their ethnic/caste identity in the diasporic public sphere.

Picture 3. The *Chyabrung Nach* of the Limbu (Source: author)

As Habermas (1989) envisioned, public sphere is an important intersection between the private sphere, e.g., family and kinship groups, and the state. In this median space of

plebeian public, where personal and official arenas overlap, individuals develop the capacity to construct their social identities (Calhoun 1992). This discursive space, wherein individuals become most creative in terms of creating their identities, continues to be a fundamental concept in the study of civil society, including the construction of ethnic identity through public performance (Turner 1987). However, the Habermasian overarching theory has been critiqued for, among other things, over-emphasizing rational unity and universal consensus (Robbins 1993). In other words, his analysis does not sufficiently take into account the competition and contestation that often feature alongside solidarities. Young (1997: 401), among others, has emphasized that plurality is the fundamental characteristic of public. This is significant, for example, in the construction of ethnic identity. Following Barth (1969), ethnic identity is constructed through a constant negotiation of group boundaries, which include the processes of inclusion and exclusion. Thus, as Fraser (1992: 122) stresses, there is a need to consider “contestation among a plurality of competing publics”.

Many scholars have empirically proven the saliency of the concept of identity construction through performance in the public sphere. For example, historian and theologian Orsi (1985) showed how Italian identity was constructed in New York through a public celebration. In 1882, in order to honour a local deity in their home town in Italy, a mutual aid society of Italians initiated a public feast in Harlem (Orsi 1985: 52). Concomitant with the rise of the Italian population in Harlem, the feast evolved into a major annual religious festival, so much so that it became a defining feature of the Italian identity in New York. Similarly, Irish identity is constructed in US towns and cities

through the public performance of Irish culture (Negra 2006). Several other examine the degree to which publicly performed transnational migrant festivals and rituals have brought people together in the diaspora (e.g., Tondo 2010; Zeng and Lee 2009). But, as well as being celebratory, public performance has exacerbated internecine divisions within the diasporic communities (e.g., Ye 2002; Paerregaard (2010: 51).

Werbner, an anthropologist who studied Pakistani Muslims in England for decades, used the notion of the diasporic public space to demonstrate how migrants/ethnic minorities have constantly constructed their multiple identities. Werbner's (2002) work titled *Imagined Diasporas among Manchester Muslims: The Public Performance of Pakistani Transnational Identity Politics,* which she based upon her extensive field research during the 1980s and 1990s, is an ethnographically dense and sophisticated work on diaspora and identity. The public performances she examines range from loud protest marches on the streets to heated community meetings, dinners, fundraising events and pageants, functions that evoke combined or separate identities attached to nation, religion, local community and the diaspora. Much of the activism in these public spaces, wherein "pleasures and predicaments of diaspora are debated" (Werbner 2002: 15), is animated by the particulars' deep sense of moral responsibility towards their home country, town or village. Their involvement with their original societies is mainly in two areas: financial (e.g., raising funds to support development projects in their villages) and political (for example, supporting different political parties or candidates during the elections in Pakistan). And, of course, Pakistanis constantly negotiate their space in relation to the host country in the changing contexts of the aftermath of the Rushdie

Affair, the September 11 attacks on the Twin Towers, and the two Gulf Wars. Thus, through various public performances, one or more aspects of their identities as British, Pakistanis, Muslims, South Asians and Blacks are emphasized.

Werbner (2002) further demonstrates the constant struggles between competing parties among the Pakistani Muslims. In the main, older men, younger men and women have been the chief aspirants to influence and power in the migrant communities, goals that are reflected in their public engagements. While on the one hand, the elders, who continue to monopolize community leadership, and who disparage youth culture, have been intent upon retaining and consolidating their traditional authority in the community, on the other, male youth, who emphasize youth culture and cricket, and seek change to some aspects of their religio-cultural heritage, have been vocal in opposing the dominance of the elders. And, although Pakistani women have a limited role outside of their domestic spaces, they too have been making their presence felt in public by conducting traditional aesthetic events related to fashion, film and Qurani recitation. In this way, Werbner portrays a very messy and idiosyncratic process of the formation of Pakistani Muslim identities on multiple fronts.

Like other immigrants, overseas Nepalis are actively engaged in public functions as a way of developing their distinct identities in the diaspora. As Campbell (2014) demonstrates, using a Nepalese festival in Manchester, they often highlight their nation as a principal means of their identity in the UK. These events often feature a rich display of national signs, symbols, language and religion as a way of stressing their Nepaliness

– distinct from other South Asians – overseas. I have attended some Nepalese public functions in the UK. Significantly, over the years, I saw a dramatic change in the way Nepalese identity is performed, such that caste has marginalized the nation. This is radically different from similar events organized by Nepalis in other countries like the US and Australia,[32] where national identity is paramount.

In this chapter, I will demonstrate how identity formation among Nepalis in the UK is changing dramatically, particularly after the mass migration of Gurkhas and their dependents since 2004. Not only has there been a rapid rise in the numbers of public celebrations, but increasing emphasis is being placed upon identities other than national. Gellner (2015) alludes to this important change in the way the Nepalese diaspora has been presenting itself in recent years as "associational profusion and multiple belonging". In other words, the Nepal publicly displayed in the UK is very multicultural and multi-ethnic. My research found that new formal groups are announced almost every week. On most weekends, public venues in principal Gurkha settlements like Aldershot and Farnborough are packed with Nepalis, who gather for dancing, singing, eating and drinking, reconnecting with friends and family and, perhaps more importantly, to create or sustain a diasporic community based on the different issues of nation, region, religion, locality, profession, ethnicity and caste.

The newly-arrived Gurkhas have in particular been most active in this area. The Gurkhas, who are middle-caste men, have been increasingly active in forming new

[32] I have watched YouTube videos of Nepalese festivals in New York, and participated in some similar gatherings in Sydney, where, according to community leaders, approximately 30,000 Nepalis live.

groups and hosting community festivals and ritual performances. Further, as I suggest in Chapter Two, caste associations have become increasingly prolific and powerful. I argue here that, following Gurkha migration, caste has become the central axis of Nepalese identity in the UK, an eventuation which must be understood in the transnational context of Nepal's ongoing ethnic/caste politics (Gellner 2009; Hangen 2010; Lawoti and Hangen 2013). The major caste associations set up by Gurkha immigrants have played a critical role in skewing Nepalese identity towards caste.

I will now demonstrate the growing saliency of caste as the marker and/or source of Nepalese identity in the UK using ethnographic description and analysis of the *Nepali Mela* (Nepalese festival), one of the largest and most colourful diasporic events in Britain. I will first offer a background to explicate the issue of ethnic identity, particularly how it is constructed and negotiated. Next, I discuss how caste in India and Nepal has been ethnicized. Then, the evolution of caste associations, including Gurkha caste associations in Nepal after the advent of democracy in 1990, is explored. Many of the caste associations active in Britain today are overseas avatars of these politically active groups in Nepal. This leads to the core of this chapter, my analysis of the *Nepali Mela.* My aim here is to demonstrate the significance of this festival – an important part of Nepalese diasporic sphere – in consolidating Gurkha castes and, consequently, spreading the consciousness of caste in the overseas community.

Constructing Ethnic Identity

Before delving into the issues of ethnicized Gurkha castes, it will be useful to consider here the basic concepts of how ethnic identities are constructed in general. While the issue of ethnic identity has attracted the attention of many anthropologists, sociologists and social psychologists, they do not always agree on what it is and how it is constituted. There are at least two distinct lines of understanding about the formation of ethnic identity: primordial (Weber 1968[1922]; Geertz 1973; Shils 1975; van den Berghe 1981) and circumstantial or situational (Glazer and Moynihan 1975; Gleason 1983). Geertz (1963), the main proponent of primordialism, claimed that ethnic identity emerges from the natural attachments and social 'givens', e.g., family and kin, as well as from shared languages, dialects, customs and religions. According to this model, ethnic groups are, therefore, immutable as their identities are derived at birth, identities that are singular, fixed and exogenous. Therefore, as van den Berghe (1981: 17) suggested, ethnic identities are not only concrete and independent, but "deeply rooted."

However, the many scholars who disagree with the primordialist notion of ethnic identity take issue with its essentialized character. They criticize the primordialist theory for representing groups as a 'container', as it were, of distinct cultures, customs and traditions; and, given its emphasis on natural origin, for conflating ethnicity with race (Roitman 2009: 63). Joireman (2003: 29-33) considers the primordialist approach problematic on four main grounds: 1) scholars today no longer emphasize blood ties as a major source of group identity, an analytic shift that occurred particularly after inter-ethnic horrors like the Holocaust; 2) the primordialist view of fixed identities limits the

scope for explaining or examining the change in ethnicity. It is obviously difficult to theorize possible changes and modifications to ethnic identity according to the changed contexts if they are seen as permanent and bounded; 3) this concept fails to explain the simultaneous existence of multiple identities. Joireman argues that the multiple identities commonly found among many migrants in the US cannot be properly examined using the primordialist paradigm (2003: 32); and, 4) often the ties traditionally considered primordial may not always be fixed and permanent. For example, even the issues of kinship or relatedness have been increasingly viewed by anthropology as more of a social construct.

The trend has thus been a second model of the ethnic group; i.e., social constructionism. Barth (1969), whose influential theory on ethnic identity has proven a landmark in this area, argued that ethnic groups are highly contextual, and that the focus of the study of ethnic groups should be upon inter-group boundaries rather than on their presumed cultural traits. Furthermore, Barth suggested that the boundaries that define an ethnic group or identity are themselves flexible and fluid so much so that members can cross them easily to match their interests at any given time. Similarly, the prominent sociologist Hall (1995) has also argued that ethnic identities are fluid, constantly negotiated and re-negotiated. He has further stressed that the configuration of identity is invariably complex and varied (Hall 1996). According to this perspective, cultural difference is a result of a long social process and not due to some inborn quality (Eriksen 1993: 37-38). Instrumentalism is the key here; for, as Guibernau and Rex (2010: 7) observe: “They (ethnic groups) must be seen as constituted to serve particular

purposes, whether unconsciously by all members of the *ethnie* (a large group), or by leaders who use the appeal to ethnicity to serve their own purposes."

But, I will suggest that this social constructionist or situational model of ethnicity has its limitations. As Zuber (2013: 193) points out, a purely constructionist approach to ethnicity can lead to "an overestimation of ethnic entrepreneurs' capacity to strategically manipulate flexible – qua constructed – ethnic categories." Zuber stresses the risk of overemphasizing this approach, of overlooking the often widespread ideas about the existence of co-ethnics. This is seen clearly evident, for example, in Baumann's study of migrants in a highly multicultural suburb of Southall, London. Baumann (1996), who uses social constructionism of cultural/community difference quite productively here, demonstrates how individual migrants and their descendants discursively negotiate and renegotiate their ethnic boundaries (national, racial, religious and linguistic), stressing certain aspects and downplaying others at any given time. Baumann (1996) points to the need to differentiate between "official discourse' that clearly demarcates ethnic groups based on concrete facts like nationality, religion and language, and "demotic discourse". Within the latter, ethnic identity is considerably more fluid and situational in this analysis of migrant identities in the host countries. Despite the saliency of Baumann's argument, some scholars find this depiction of migrant culture, community and identity somewhat insufficient. In his criticism of Baumann's argument, Bader (2001) maintains that social constructionism has effectively reduced culture, community and identity to mere narrative discourses, processes and identities. In his view, this

approach has impeded a deeper understanding of cultural change, community/identity formation, and the processes involved in them (Bader 2001: 252).

Apropos of this ongoing debate surrounding which models may best explain ethnic identity formation among migrants, I concur with Brubaker's (2002) salient argument that the primordialist and constructionist models need not be seen as opposites: they can be used as complimentary approaches. In his defence of primordialism, Brubaker argues that it is not necessarily the researchers and analysts who essentialize and reify ethnic groups using a primordialist approach. Rather, it is the members of ethnic groups who represent their groups or communities as natural and immutable (Brubaker 2002). I see this as a valid analysis of the primordialist approach. Although the ethnicity that analysts and others imply and the ethnicity that people themselves claim and feel could be totally different, the two sides could nonetheless prove mutually reinforcing (Guiberman and Rex 2010: 7-8).

Ethnicizing Castes through Public Performance

In this section, in which I explore aspects of caste politics, I contend that the politics of caste among Gurkhas in Britain is intimately connected to the ethnic/caste movement in Nepal. And, although Nepal's anti-high-caste activism only started in the early 1990s, it should be understood in the context of a much longer and more widespread history of caste identity politics in post/colonial India (Dirks 2001; Gupta 2004). I have discussed this history in the Introduction, wherein I have demonstrated how caste has been increasingly understood in secular terms and used as an effective vehicle for political

mobilization. The aim of this section is to consider: 1) How the ethnicization of caste occurs through the performance of culture in the public sphere; and, 2) What role caste associations play in the above process. The latter is important because often prominent Gurkha caste associations in the UK bear the same names and operate with the same or similar ideologies as their counterparts in Nepal and elsewhere in the world. And, importantly, there is a degree of mutual co-operation and sharing of cultural items, ideologies and finance transnationally.

- ***Caste Politics and Public Performance***

As suggested earlier, Dumont's (1980) classic concept of a universally accepted hierarchical system based on religious faith no longer has relevance today. Far from placidly accepting the degraded positions assigned them by the Hindu religious belief and social system, many lower and middle castes have started resisting their historic oppression. To this end, they have organized regional and national political campaigns, determined to end their suffering and to challenge the religious, cultural, political dominance of the high caste (e.g., Jaffrelot 2010; Thorat 2009; Baylay 2001; Michael 1999).

Those scholars exploring this extraordinary change have increasingly emphasized caste as a potent driving force in ethnic identity politics in South Asia. Indian sociologist Gupta's (2005) analysis, which is most salient in this regard, claims that caste hierarchy has been "trumped" by caste identity in contemporary society. Not only is caste now

less important as a marker of socio-economic and religious divide, but the traditional pattern of society based on the principle of caste is becoming less and less relevant today. For example, due to the growing penetration of a market economy, the traditional patron-client system typical of the village society is losing its force (Deshpande and Palshikar 2008). This relative freedom from the clutches of the caste system has allowed previously suppressed castes to organize themselves to fight for their collective rights, and for the privileges hitherto denied them.

Caste has thus transformed itself in South Asian societies; in Aktor and Deliège's (2010) terms, 'from stigma to assertion'. This caste battle is often fought through public celebrations of religious and other festivals and rituals. For example, ethnomusicologist Sherinian (2014) shows how the Dalits in Tamil Nadu, South India, have been using local folk music as a symbol of liberation. The traditional role of the low-caste Paraiyar is to play the drum (*parai*), an occupation which has been traditionally considered ritually polluting. Part of the reason why the drum and the drummer have been associated with impurity is the former's use at Tamil funeral services. In order to culturally fight the stigma, many Christian Dalit converts have started using the drum as a central part of their church service. The use of this instrument in what is considered sacred domain has enabled the Paraiyar to culturally claim a better status in traditional Tamil society, made possible through "transforming the psyche of [the] Dalits with a sense of healing pride in their culture" (Sherinian 2014: 119). Performative culture has thus played an important part in combating the age-old stigma associated with caste.

It is not just the Dalits who have been using performative culture to make their claims for better status and representation. The previously lower or middle Yadav caste have also become a significant political force in the Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar over the past four decades (Michelutti 2012: 48). According to Michelutti (2004), the Yadav have successfully established a sense of pride in their identity and community by making new claims about their ancestry. Yadav activists claim that they were once a great people because they descended directly from Lord Krishna, a revered mythological Hindu hero who features prominently in the Mahabharata. They were relegated later to the lower ranks by the corrupt social system. Nowadays, they culturally legitimate their claims to greatness – higher status – using folk festivals, mainly the annual Kamsa Festival and Krishna Lila celebrations during which the life and glory of Lord Krishna are publicly enacted. Previously, the Kamsa Festival was hosted by high-caste Brahmins in the holy towns of Mathura and Braj in Uttar Pradesh. The politically aware Yadav claim that as the self-identified descendants of Lord Krishna, the festivals belonged to them; in fact, they had always been theirs until they were allegedly stolen by the high-caste Brahmins. In 1984, the Yadav obtained permission to host the Kamsa Festival (the enactment of the evil King Kamsa's death at the hands of the virtuous god Krishna) (Michelutti 2004: 63). The Yadav then reinterpreted the death of the evil king in religious drama as the defeat of the apparently unjust and domineering high caste (Michelutti 2004: 63). This was achieved through the activism of local caste-based parties and their increasingly influential caste association, the All India Yadav Mahasabha. Thus, even though different national and regional parties have used the aspirations of the deprived castes for their electoral purposes, in

the main, caste associations have been instrumental in challenging the hegemony of the high castes through the politics of public culture, among other measures.

- ***Caste Associations: Vehicles for Caste Politics***

According to Rudolph and Rudolph (1960), the first scholars to recognize the saliency of caste association in the Indian political landscape, caste associations are a form of voluntary organization with membership limited to members of the concerned caste groups. Given their stress on primordial loyalties – such as families and relatives – caste associations can have wide appeal, even among those not politically conscious and those "submerged in traditional society and culture" (Rudolph and Rudolph 1960: 448; Narayan 2004: 198). It comes as no surprise, then, that caste associations have become a potent force in Indian politics, particularly for the purposes of mobilization at the grassroots level (Michelutti 2012; Jaffrelot 2010).

Even though caste associations have been active in India for a long time, they appeared in the Nepalese political landscape relatively recently after Nepal became a multi-party democracy in 1990 (Lawoti 2005: 70). In fact, a few groups had emerged prior to that; but, they had been banned. The old Panchayat regime headed by the monarchy outlawed all forms of political association. However, in Nepal's new democratic and largely free political environment, many caste associations emerged in the guise of ethnic and indigenous groups (See the Introduction chapter) (Whelpton 2010). Unlike in

India, the Nepalese Dalits or low castes, who suffer like their Indian counterparts, have not been able to raise their movements effectively (Folmar 2013, 2007).

Many middle ranking groups, in particular the Gurung, Magar, Rai and Limbu, have been at the forefront of their joint struggle for status and privilege. Many former Gurkha soldiers have been active in these movements (Hangen 2010: 29). Perhaps their exposure to the outside world imbued them with liberal and democratic values that made them aware of their collective rights. And, their regular income from Gurkha service gave them economic advantage compared to many other *Janajati* groups that had no access to foreign militaries. From the early 1990s, similar to other groups, some Gurung ethnic/caste rights activists organized meetings in towns including Kathmandu and Pokhara. They organized discourses about what their cultural identity in Nepalese society was, and what they considered it ought to be (Macfarlane 2006). In other words, they planned to resurrect, if not re/invent, their religio-cultural and linguistic traditions in the face of the dominant Hindu high-caste cultures and religions. After much discussion and debate, they decided upon a new term to represent themselves, i.e., Tamu. Subsequently, many changed their surnames from Gurung to Tamu: both retained their saliency. They then set about asserting their indigenous cultural rights and claiming representation in the state through their nation-wide association called *Tamu Dhee*[33] (Acharya 2002: 76).

Their actions inspired various other caste groups to aim for the same objectives. The Nepal Magar Association, for example, was formed in 1993. Its aim from the beginning

[33] *Dhee* is a Gurung term for home; thus, Tamu Dhee literally means the home of the Tamu or Gurung.

was to forge a unified voice from the culturally and linguistically diverse Magar populations in order to challenge the cultural, politico-economic and religious supremacy of the Bahun and Chhetri (Millard 2007: 297). Magar activists and politicians, Gore Bahadur Khapangi for example, visited their constituents across Nepal and preached about their "glorious" cultural and religious heritage. They not only asked their constituents to abandon their high-caste Hindu customs and traditions, but urged them to return to their "Buddhist roots" (even though their religious traditions show little indications of Buddhism) (Ahearn 2001: 15). Concomitant with the growing ethnicization of their caste, many of the Magar abandoned their Hindu ritual practice such as the wearing of the red mark – *tika* – on the forehead on festive occasions and on the national holiday of the Hindu festival Dashain (Makito 2007). Indeed, some Magar stopped celebrating the festival altogether, while others retained it as a minor practice. They instead increasingly emphasized their ethnic festivities, i.e., Buddha's birthday in May and Maghe Sankranti in January, which eventually became their community's major holidays.

Around the same time, the Limbu, a group predominantly domiciled in eastern Nepal, started their movement. In 1989, they announced their caste association, the Kirant Yakthung Chumlung. In the beginning, when they were not free to operate publicly, there were only 68 members. But, by 1995, membership had grown to 1200 (Hangen 2010: 41). As part of the revival process, Limbu caste/ethnic activists held seminars and symposiums in Kathmandu, and in some eastern towns, e.g., Dharan, in a bid to redefine and promote various aspects of Limbu culture and traditions. The purpose was

to unite the Limbu, and to challenge their political and cultural subordination by the upper castes (Subba 1999: 118). Before long, the Rai, Tamang and Sunuwar, along with many other caste associations, also emerged, each promoting their own religious and cultural identity – real or imagined – in order to fight their long-term oppression by the high castes.

A result of this recent ethnicization of Nepal's middle castes has been an explosion of cultural expression along caste lines. Folk cultural performances, lfor example, dances are proving instrumental in forging ethnic groups by "choreographing identities" (Shay 2006). Furthermore, rituals and festivals symbolize and strengthen group "corporateness" and common bonds (Obeng 2007: 140). In Nepal, Indigenous songs, dances, and drums and cymbals have now become powerful weapons of cultural politics. The use of these cultural artefacts may not be new; but, now they have become powerful symbols of collective identity, that is, of caste identity across the country and beyond. As a consequence, many ethnic festivals and celebrations, which may have previously been salient at the local level, have now become national – and transnational – events. Often, the celebrations that in earlier times were significant in terms of religious observation, have now become much more important politically. Hangen (2007: 17) for example notes, the dramatic shift in events in the Gurung community: "The Gurung New Year, Lhochhar, was an obscure holiday that few Gurungs celebrated in the early 1990s; since the mid-1990s, however, it has become a major festival bringing thousands of Gurungs together in Kathmandu" (Hangen 2007: 17).

Thus, the cultural politics of caste, similar to that exercised in India, has thrived in Nepal since the early 1990s. Caste associations have been at the forefront of asserting collective rights and identities, often through public gatherings. In this context, it seems pertinent to ask if and how the Gurkha immigrants may have recreated the same organizations and festivals in their new cities and towns in the United Kingdom. Above all, this chapter seeks to understand if and how caste associations have exacerbated the historic divisions based on caste, clan and village within the Nepalese communities in Britain. I explore these questions below using the ethnographic case of an important annual Nepalese festival celebrated in London.

Nepali Mela *in London*

Concomitant with the proliferation of diasporic organizations, the Nepalese community in Britain has seen growing numbers of public festivals and rituals. One of the biggest festival is the annual *Nepali Mela* (Nepalese festival), which has been organized in England every summer since 2009. This iconic event sees the gathering of over 5,000 Nepalis from virtually all social backgrounds across the UK. Given the popularity of the event, the role of the festival in bringing Nepalis together is beyond doubt. This extraordinary gathering is used as a spatial and institutional space for showcasing identities primarily based on caste. In this section, I use the ethnographic case of the 2013 *Nepali Mela* in London to demonstrate how prominent Gurkha caste associations have used the popular public festival to consolidate their identities.

A gloomy morning in late summer 2013 in Sunbury-on-Thames, Surrey. It was drizzling, but the crowd would not be deterred. Hundreds of people, including old men and women and children, wearing colourful dresses and a variety of ethnic costumes were queued up in front of an especially constructed temporary gate. A big banner on the gate said: 'Welcome to *Nepali Mela'* and 'Organized by Tamu Dhee UK'. The latter clarified that a prominent caste association of the Gurung has been the sole organizer of the function. Inside, the auditorium, as well as the sprawling ground of the 210-acre Kempton Park Race Course, was filling up as the audience arrived. Loud music was playing from a makeshift covered stage in front of the crowd: I heard songs praising the ethnic identity of the Gurung, and their cultural and religious traditions.

The transnational character of the event was visible. The stage was emblazoned with posters of the flags of Britain, Nepal, and of Tamu Dhee UK. In one corner of the large venue, three flags fluttered on tall poles: the flags of Nepal, Britain and Tamu Dhee UK. Official guests included the Nepalese ambassador to the UK as well as a few officials representing the host country government. A few delegates from Tamu Dhee, a prominent Gurung association in Nepal, were present at the function. According to research participants, Tamu Dhee in the UK and Nepal were largely autonomous; unlike the overseas wings of the political parties, Tamu Dhee in Nepal did not directly control its UK counterpart. Yet, many of the symbols and political messages used clearly originated in the Tamu Dhee movement in Nepal, which resonated with the wider ethnic movement by similar other Gurungs in Nepal and beyond.

The event started with a short official programme. Then, the national anthems of Nepal and Britain were played and everybody stood in honour of the two nations. Next, the chair of Tamu Dhee UK Kamal Gurung and the Nepalese ambassador to Britain jointly inaugurated the festival by cutting the red ribbon stretched before them across the stage (See Picture 4). Then, on behalf of the organizers of the event, chairman Gurung addressed the gathering. He thanked the participants for taking part in such large numbers, as in previous years. Interestingly, he kept stressing the attendants as collectives, particularly caste groups, rather than as individual revellers. He said:

> We Nepalis belonging to 4 varnas and 36 castes. It is wonderful that we see this wonderful diversity of the Nepalese population reflected in our gathering today. We are delighted that so many castes and regions have come together under one umbrella in a foreign country. We must do this often to preserve our culture and traditions, which are our valuable treasure.

Picture 4. Opening *Nepali Mela* 2013 (Source: TDUK website)

Then a relay cultural rally, which was the major highlight of the day, commenced on the paved stretch in front of the stage. Over 30 different groups performed, each procession

accompanied by a running commentary in Nepali. As the organizing team, Tamu Dhee UK led the procession with a typically colourful and musical performance. Some women clad in traditional Gurung attire walked in front bearing the organization's banner, while a man walked on each side holding the Nepalese flag. They were followed by a group of men who proudly raised their long and shiny paper swords (interestingly not Gurkha knives, *kukri*), perhaps showcasing the Gurung's well-known martial identity. They were followed by a traditional religious enactment. Some fifteen men wearing long white skirts and special ritual hats draped with eagle feathers acted as Gurung shamans performing a ritual. Each carried a ritual drum, *dhyangro,* on one hand, and beat it with a curved stick held in the other. The garlands of small bells worn across their shoulders jingled as the men danced to the tune of their drums and chanting.

The second group to demonstrate their culture was a sub-caste of the Magar, Pun Samaj UK (See Pictures 5 & 6). This group, which has been awarded 'Best Performer' in the *Nepali Mela* for some years, won again in 2013. Similar to Tamu Dhee UK, the procession was led by women wearing traditional Pun Magar attire, proudly displaying their association's big banner. Next came several men waving the national flag of Nepal and the Union Jack. They were followed by some 25-30 men and women enacting the peasant life of their villages in the western Nepal hills. Each woman carried a *doko* (a wicker basket more than half the height of a man) tethered to her back with a rope strapped across her forehead. Some of these baskets contained fresh green leaves and branches, fodder for the animals. Walking together, men carried paper models of ploughs and yokes on their shoulders, indicating that they were heading for work in their

farmlands. With the majority of the Magar still living as peasants in the Nepalese hills, ploughing the earth has an important place in their cultural and spiritual realms (Lecomte-Tilouine 1996: 30-31). Behind them came more males, including some young boys, bearing long bows and arrows, probably symbolizing their hunter-gatherer ancestry. In another impressive dramatization of the Pun culture, a man demonstrated the traditional processing of butter from cow or buffalo milk. He sat on the ground and pulled on the ropes attached to a bamboo paddle dipped in a cylindrical wooden vessel. The vessel contained home-made yogurt and, when churned, butter was produced and manually separated from the yogurt.

Picture 5. Pun Samaj UK rally (Source: TDUK)

Picture 6. Display of culture by Pun Society UK (Source: TDUK)

In the meantime, many men and women, boys and girls sang and danced to the traditional folk music popular in their respective areas. They played cymbals and a *madal* (a small double-sided ceremonial drum (See Picture 6)) at the two-hundred strong Pun Samaj cultural rally. They greatly entertained the audience with their improvised singing and dancing in Salaijo, and with a variety of hit folk tunes. Like others in the relay rally, they were not professional performers; but, they seemed to expertly perform their folk culture including songs, dances and enactments. One of the highlights was the quasi-sacred Sorathi Dance: the boys played the *madal* and cymbals, while the women and girls sang in chorus. A small group of young girls in their early teens danced in the centre, gradually forming a circle. As they continued to dance to the rhythmic chanting and music, the girls became hypnotized, a state interpreted as coming under the influence of the traditional spirits associated with music and dance. Sorathi, a narrative dance, id performed in many ethnic/caste communities in central

Nepal. However, the Magar claimed its traditional ownership as part of their ethnic revival after the 1990s (Lecomte-Tilouine and Dollfus 2003: 160).

The Pun Samaj rally was followed by another exciting musical performance by a local community of Gurung named after their original village – Charbhanjyang Tamu Samaj UK. Even though this was an association of Gurung Gurkhas and their families from a few villages in Parbat District, western Nepal,[34] its procession was far bigger and energetic than those of many other pan-Nepalese groups. Like Tamu Dhee UK, this rally was rich in Gurung culture. It featured the costumes, dialect, and songs and dances typical of the Gurung communities in their particular part of the region. One of their major attractions was the improvised performance of the popular folk musical genre Salaijo. This involved the playing of drums and cymbals and an impromptu duet involving amorous exchanges between males and females.

The next big caste group was the Magar. Magar Association UK, probably the second largest caste/community organization in Britain, (second only to Tamu Dhee UK) organized a sizable rally of its own. As well, its many branches spread across England presented their impressive cultural shows. In addition, many other independent Magar groups based on caste, sub-caste or clan, village and town also took an active part in showcasing Magar identity. Hundreds of Magars participating in the cultural rally performed their caste and region-specific songs, dances as well as religious rituals. In accordance with Magar's recent claims to Tibetan Theravada Buddhism, as part of their

[34] For more information about this group, see their website: http://www.charbhanjyang.com/ *[Accessed 14 September 2015].*

ethnic movement aimed at undermining high-caste Hinduism (Lecomte-Tilouine 2009: 317), the rally included signs, symbols and messages of Buddhism as a more egalitarian religion.

In this way, one group followed another in the cultural parade. Many other castes, sub-castes and village organizations also performed with great pomp and pride. And, while the smaller caste groups – mostly middle castes, i.e., those actively taking part in Nepal's ethnic movement – could not match the strengths of the four predominant castes, their presentations were also full of colour, music and drama. The rallies of particularly castes like the Newar, Thakali, Sherpa and Tamang were rich in their ethnic dresses and dances as well as their enactment of religious rituals.

However, few high and low-caste associations participated in the rally. One tiny Dalit group marched without any performance, which is understandable given their very small numbers and their relatively wider spread across England. But the absence of the upper castes was significant. This clearly did not reflect the size of the high-caste cohort in the Nepalese diaspora in the UK (about a third) and, perhaps more importantly, their continued hold on many community leaderships. The Thakuri Samaj and Khas Ekata Samaj were among the high castes participating in the procession. As few as 20-30 men and women walked, with their banners held in front, without any performance.

Several non-caste diasporic organizations also took part in the procession, again without any cultural performance. These included an association of Nepalese nurses;

two groups of journalists, who have been working for the vernacular media in Britain; and, one or two small Christian associations (not at all comparable to the large procession of Buddhists associated with a newly-built Buddhist monastery in Aldershot).

In effect, the majority of the large rallies featuring culturally rich performances were organized by caste associations. In particular, there was clear domination by Gurung and Magar associations. High-caste participant Harka Chhetri could not hide his frustration: “Why do they call it Nepal Festival when this is essentially a Gurung-Magar cultural display?” Not everyone articulated their anger, but any high-caste participants were not positive with the show. In this regard, many research participants from minority castes shared the view that in the UK the title *Nepali Mela* had, in reality, become a misnomer. This has also been my understanding, not just from observing this particular celebration, but several others including those before and after 2013 (I watched the more recent melas on YouTube). Despite Tamu Dhee UK’s proclamation that all sections of overseas Nepalis have taken part in this iconic festival, and despite not having any stated policy to exclude or promote any group, it is common knowledge that just two pre-eminent castes have always dominated the show. This indicates, among other things, the changing dynamics of caste in the diaspora, a topic I analyse in the following section.

Nepali Mela: *Cultural Politics in the Diaspora*

The annual *Nepali Mela* held in London has typically served to both unite and divide overseas Nepalis along the lines of caste. As demonstrated above, caste associations

of prominent Gurkha groups have created solidarities and deepened historic divisions by ethnicizing their caste identities, similar to events in their home country. The creation of unity is obvious from the empirical data. The Gurungs and Magars themselves are not single, homogenous groups; in fact, none of the ethnic groups of Nepal is homogenous. They are, as Guneratne (2002) describes the Tharu, another prominent ethnic group from Nepal's southern lowlands, i.e., "many tongues one people". In other words, Gurkha castes can claim diverse linguistic, regional, religious and cultural backgrounds. And yet, the *Nepali Mela* has been instrumental in bringing thousands of Gurung and Magar together. Similarly, Magar, Rai and Limbu have served to unite their own diverse populations through various public celebrations. Although there are many non-caste organizations in the UK, including those claiming to represent all Nepalis (such as the NRN UK), these groups, unlike the prominent caste associations, have been unable to forge unity among the masses. This has indeed offered great support to members of the dominant castes; in particular, it has enhanced their sense of being and belonging, both in a new country and transnationally (Levitt and Schiller 2004). Thus, the positive outcomes of festivals like this are really great.

While *Nepali Mela* celebrations are ostensibly meant to unite all Nepalis in the diaspora, they have also evolved as sites of intense competition among overseas caste identities. Viewed through the prism of transnational ethnic politics, the festival clearly made strong political statements in terms of contested caste identities between castes and often within a caste category as well. As I will argue here, the central aim of the festival, similar to many other large gatherings of Nepalis in Britain, has been to assert the caste

identity of the Gurkha castes, i.e., Nepal's ethnic minorities, and challenge the traditional authority of the high caste from the vantage point of the diaspora in the UK. and, while some of these forms of insubordination are obvious, others are more symbolic.

I will argue here that the *Nepali Mela* has created a diasporic public space for open contestation between and within castes. The first and the most obvious fact is that the *Mela* demonstrates the ascendancy of Gurkha castes, particularly the Gurung, in the diasporic community. In other words, this is a visible sign of the erosion of the traditional authority of high-caste Bahun and Chhetri in the UK. This is evident in the fact that this large and iconic festival, meant to be for and by all Nepalis, has been fully owned and run by Tamu Dhee UK, a prominent Gurung association. Other Gurung organizations, e.g., the Tamu Pye Lhu Sangh UK and Tamu Samaj UK, are not part of the organizing team. Nor are other caste, national or regional groups. The Tamu Dhee UK, which initiated the Mela in 2009, has moved from strength to strength over the years. All of the expenses are raised and managed solely by Tamu Dhee UK.

In Britain, the *Nepali Mela* is unique. Nepalis in other countries including the US, Australia and Canada also host similar functions. I have watched some Nepalese fêtes in the US on YouTube, and participated in a similar festival in Sydney, Australia. These events, while similar in their stated claims to represent Nepal in foreign lands and expose Nepalis to their homeland cultures, are actually different. One important difference is that events organized in other countries are owned and operated by

national organizations, mainly Non-Resident Nepalis (NRN) in association with the Nepalese embassy in the respective countries. Caste associations are not known to host any big gatherings, particularly those meant for all Nepalis, unlike in the UK.

Britain's *Nepali Mela* is a visible marker of, among other things, the growing power and influence of Gurkha communities as well as the increasing displacement of high castes from leadership. I explore the latter in greater detail in Chapter Four. In Britain, as elsewhere, many national organizations including the Nepalese embassy continue to be led by high-caste Bahun and Chhetri, a situation which politically active Gurkhas despise and are eager to change. Their involvement has served to lessen the appeal of the national organizations for the Gurkhas even though they too love their country dearly. So, as the festival shows, ethnically active Gurkhas are becoming increasingly influential in the community. This popular anti-high caste sentiment that has emerged among Gurkha masses is in part reflected in events convened by national organizations. Unlike the gatherings of caste groups, the events run by national organizations tend to be often a lot smaller and culturally unattractive. For example, during the Hindu festival of Dashain, the Nepalese Embassy in London organizes a dinner at its prestigious venue at Kensington Gardens, London. Even though free food and drinks are offered, and anyone is welcome to attend, barely a few hundred people actually participate.

Second, the *Nepali Mela* has challenged Nepal's cultural norms. Its rejection is mainly due to the norms traditionally peculiar to the cultures and religions of the upper castes.

As suggested earlier, Nepal's national holiday is Dashain: this is also the case with Gurkha regiments. As Gellner *et al.* (2014) show, many Nepalis n the UK – including the Gurkhas – practise a mix of religious faiths including Hinduism, Buddhism and a local tradition of the Rai and Limbu called Kirantism. However, due to the rising ethnic consciousness among the majority Gurkha populations in the diaspora, inspired by their fellow ethnic activists' call for the boycotting of the festival as a cultural fight against the subordination of the high caste in Nepal (Hangen 2013; Bhandari 2014: 106), Dashain is no longer the biggest festival celebrated by Nepalis in Britain. Thus, broadly speaking, what ethnic activists in Nepal have been trying to achieve in Nepalese society for decades, Gurkha immigrants have achieved in the UK fairly quickly. The *Nepali Mela* is not conducted during Dashain, nor on any other Hindu festival. Moreover, some of the largest gatherings occur not during Dashain, but during the religious festivals of the middle castes, a fact that the four prominent Gurkha castes have been stressing as part of their anti-high caste cultural movement; e.g., the Tamu Lhochhar of the Gurung, the Maghe Sankranti and Buddha Purnima of the Magar, and the Chasok Tangnam and Sisekpa Tangnam of the Limbu. These gatherings also attract thousands of members of the respective castes. Gurkhas' eagerness to abandon the dominant cultures and customs of Nepal in the diaspora is thus clearly reflected in the *Nepali Mela.*

Furthermore, on closer observation, it becomes apparent how the Tamu Dhee UK has carefully avoided using national symbols deemed culturally and religiously belonging to the high caste (including those that have now become popular among Gurkha groups in everyday life). In other words, Gurkhas are engaged in what Hetherington (1998: 145)

has called “symbolic confrontation with symbolic targets”. During the festival, Nepal’s national symbols were displayed very selectively. As suggested earlier, there was an elaborate display of Nepalese flags and other symbols, e.g., pictures of Mount Everest and the Buddha. The national anthem was sung with great pride and dignity. The Nepalese language was used extensively as a lingua franca between Gurkhas who have their separate dialects as well. However, some of the key national symbols deemed part of the subversive high-caste Hindu culture were rejected. For example, with the exception of a few officials, the majority of officials and attendees did not wear the *daura suruwal,* Nepal’s national dress, albeit currently contested. Most of the participants wore ethnic uniforms specific to their castes and sub-castes. And, significantly, the symbol of the holy cow, which is sacred to the Hindu, did not feature anywhere. This is interesting given that a) the cow is a national symbol; and, b) Nepal still bans cow slaughter, even though it became a secular state in 2006.

Most importantly, cultural performances at the *Nepali Mela* effectively concealed the Hindu character of Nepalese society. Officially a Hindu state until recently, the vast majority of Nepalis, i.e., 81 per cent, are Hindus (Townsend *et al.* 2015: 322). So, despite the fact that Nepal is now a secular republic, most public events continue to feature Hindu rituals. For example, the President still presides over some of the key Hindu celebrations held in Kathmandu; e.g., the *Kumari* and *Bhote Jatra*. Hindu rituals are performed while inaugurating significant public projects. During the *Nepal Mela* in London, while rituals were performed by Buddhist groups, there were no such performances by Hindus. A small group representing the worshippers of the Hindu Lord

Shiva marched in the cultural rally. But, there was no evidence of religious symbolism apart from the banner signalling their organization. Neither the hosts nor other groups organized any Hindu shows. No deities appeared on banners: no Sanskrit texts were recited; and, no Bahun priest was involved in any form of worship. While there was no stated policy to exclude Hindu religious performances from the show, given the preponderance of Gurung and Magar, no one thought of representing Nepal's most popular religion in the diaspora.

Third, *Nepali Mela* performances evince contestation not only between the Gurkha castes and high castes, but within Gurkha castes as well. Here, two cases involving Gurung and Magar groups are worthy of mention. Based on caste and religious differences, the Gurung have been sharply divided into two rival groups: The Tamu Dhee and the Tamu Pye Lhu Sangh. Members of the former, who are largely representative of the four sub-castes who claim superior status, are predominantly Buddhist (Gurung 2015). They mostly employ Tibetan Buddhist lamas to conduct their key lifecycle and religious rituals. But, those belonging to the Tamu Pye Lhu Sangh, who are mainly representative of the 16 allegedly "inferior" subgroups of the Gurung, are more inclined towards observing their traditional Bon religious customs. Instead of Buddhist lamas, they prefer to call upon their own indigenous ritual experts, e.g., *ghyabri* and *paichu.* Although many Gurung interviewees were keen to dismiss this sharp division within the Gurung community in the UK (and Nepal), the divisions were visible at the *Nepali Mela* celebrations.

In the views of many Gurungs from both sides of the rival camps, the Tamu Pye Lhu Sanga used the festival as an opportunity to publicly assert its separate identity from the dominant Tamu Dhee UK. The number of Tamu Pye Lhu Sang UK adherents is much smaller than that of the Tamu Dhee UK; however, members of the former are unwilling to be encompassed by their increasingly pervasive rivals. The Tamu Pye Lhu Sangh present their own cultural performances which are rich in rituals involving shamanistic traditions. While the songs and dances were similar to those of other Gurungs, their separate identity was marked by their adherence to different ritual traditions, a difference clearly reflected in the cultural rally. Towards the end, representatives of the Tamu Pye Lhu Sangh made a formal presentation of flowers, food and drinks, which many Gurungs interpreted as the group's attempt to maintain friendly relations with the Tamu Dhee in the diaspora, while at the same time refusing to assimilate with them. As Gurung (2015) has shown, there have been attempts to unite both groups in the UK, albeit unsuccessfully. This was clearly evident during the *Nepali Mela.*

Similarly, the different cultural expressions evident during the *Nepali Mela* highlighted the deep divisions among the Pun vis-à-vis caste and cultural identity. Although many Pun consider themselves to be part of the Magar identity, others think they are a separate caste category. While on the one hand, Pun Samaj UK is trying to assert a separate identity from the Magar, on the other, those Pun wanting to be part of the Magar identity have set up a separate group known as Pun Magar Samaj UK. They too took part in the rally as a separate group. These Puns argue that the Pun are simply a clan, not a separate caste altogether. And, they seek to assert this in the diaspora. Even

though culturally they were largely similar, there were certain differences. For example, one group insisted that the yellow female waist band (*patuki*) was the genuine Pun dress, while another insisted on green *patuki.* Addressing the audience in his introduction to the Pun culture, a member of Pun Magar Samaj UK stated:

> We Puns are an integral part of the wider Magar category: we are brothers of other Magar subgroups. We were identified as a distinct group simply because the British gave us this separate identity to suit its own military purposes – and kept us in a separate battalion of the Magar regiment – the 1st/2nd Gurkha Rifles. It is natural for people settled in different geographical regions to develop slightly variant cultural traditions. But we do not care about these subtle differences in language and culture; we are part of the same Magar family.

Although not openly evident, this division caused by the Mela was a shared understanding among many Nepalis, particularly those from minority castes. There was a strong sense of the Nepalese identity being hijacked by a dominant caste group through the appropriation of the iconic celebration. An ex-serviceman from a minority caste, Harka Sunuwar, expressed his frustration with the way in which the festival had been hosted:

> Perhaps TDUK deserve to host this important function given that they are the biggest organization and well organized, too. However, many people feel, privately, that it would have been a lot better to keep this iconic festival under some pan-Nepalese organization. An alternative could be Nepalese embassy in London co-ordinating the show in co-operation and participation of key community and caste associations. This way perhaps all Nepalis from different social backgrounds would see the festival as their own.

It thus becomes clear that the *Nepali Mela* in London has created a diasporic public space where ethnic identities based on caste are openly contested, negotiated and renegotiated. Performance of rituals and public culture, naturally meant for public entertainment, are more than that: they are effectively unifying some Nepalis and dividing others. Within this politics of culture, given their advantageous position, Gurkha castes, particularly the Gurung and Magar, have used the festival to consolidate their

identities, enhance their pride and, inevitably, to widen the gap with other Nepalis, particularly the high caste.

Transnational Influences, Local Consequences: A Discussion

As suggested earlier, while the cultural politics of caste among Nepalis has been a transnational phenomenon, its influence seems to be more pronounced in the United Kingdom. Hangen (2014) argues that the Gurung are organizing themselves on a global scale. They are becoming organized by their various associations such as Tamu Dhee, and by celebrating their traditional festivals (for example, the Tamu Lhochhar) even in countries like the US wherein their numbers are very small. Using an ethnography of the Tamu Lhochhar celebration in New York, Hangen argues that on one of the principal aims is to reinforce the category Gurung. Similarly, I have seen Gurung, Magar, Rai, Limbu, Tamang and other *Janajati* groups in Australia establishing caste associations and reviving their communal festivals, some of which I have attended in Sydney. Here too, the goal is to essentialize group boundaries based on caste or ethnic divisions in Nepalese society. In America and Australia (and elsewhere), these caste-centred festivals have had minimal impact upon the wider diasporic communities. Similarly, in Nepal, despite the bourgeoning cultural politics of caste/ethnicity (the more overt politics will be explored in Chapter Four), these movements still remain there what Hangen (2010) alludes to as 'democracy in the margins'. In other words, politics of caste or anti-caste spearheaded by *Janajati* groups including Gurkhas are strong, but they do not occupy a central place in the national politics. However, as I have suggested here, the cultural politics of caste has had a much bigger influence upon the Gurkha communities

in the UK, such that the entire diasporic community has been rapidly transformed. In this section, I briefly analyse how the increasing saliency of caste-centred festivals and functions has not only consolidated caste identities and communities but, by extension, has weakened all of the all-inclusive groups in Britain.

The rise in the number of caste-specific festivals and functions has drastically reduced the appeal of other programmes and functions hosted by all-inclusive associations. My study found that more than 90 per cent of Gurkhas and their families attend events run by their castes, sub-castes and village associations. Consequently, they have fewer opportunities to mix with people from different social backgrounds. The problem has become such that a group of teenagers, Gurkha children, attending Farnborough Technical College, said that they were sad because they were unable to celebrate parties with their friends. As one Magar girl said:

> It's so frustrating that I cannot attend functions together with my friends. My best mates are a mix of castes, mostly Rais and Gurungs and Limbus. We are expected to attend the functions, with our parents and other relatives, separately organized by our caste groups. We friends are thus split up on most occasions. I find that the situation has become worse in England than in Nepal.

Looking at it from another perspective, caste-based gatherings have to some degree intensified contacts among people from the same or similar social backgrounds, thereby maximizing their chances of developing friendships and having affairs within a same caste category. By extension, this is increasing the chances of caste endogamy, a social norm that most Gurkha parents want their children to observe.

The declining appeal of pan-Nepalese organizations is evident across the UK. For example, the Nepalese Embassy in London organizes a gathering of Nepalis in its high-

profile premises in Kensington Gardens on Nepal's biggest Hindu festival of Dashain in September-October. Free food and drinks are supplied and music is played. Yet few Nepalis attend, other than some official guests representing the different caste and other diasporic groups. At the two gatherings that I attended, I saw hardly one hundred participants. According to the officials in earlier times, the Dashain celebration at the Nepal Embassy used to be much more popular. I saw a similar decline in the participation of Nepalis in events organized by the Greater Rushmoor Nepalese Community (GNRC), an association for all Nepalis in the Aldershot area. I attended one of their cultural programmes in the spring of 2013 at Princes Hall, Aldershot. Approximately 200 revellers enjoyed the food and watched singing and dancing performances on the stage. Interestingly, some tables were booked by representatives of the local units of Gurung, Magar and Limbu associations: the official representation was marked in writing on the respective tables. When I asked a high-caste member of the GNRC why organized caste members attended this pan-Nepalese event, he replied: "We had difficulty filling the hall, although this is not a very big venue. Some wanted to participate strictly as official members of their caste groups and we could not object to that, could we?"

In recent years, caste categories have become greatly reinforced and group boundaries essentialized and reified, perhaps more so than in Nepal itself. As Brubaker (2002: 166-167) observes: "Reifying groups is precisely what ethnopolitical entrepreuners are in the business of doing." Supporting Brubaker's line of argument, Gellner (2011: 52) argues that ethnic politics in Nepal have essentialized caste/ethnic identities, such that they are

projected as natural: that every Nepali is born into one and only one caste or ethnic group; membership of that group is decided at birth; and membership of a group can never be altered. This notion of inborn difference among Nepalis seems to have become further reified by caste-specific festivals and functions in the UK over the years. In earlier times, caste was a much more discreet and private affair among high-caste Nepalis, who then formed the bulk of the Nepalese population in Britain. They took it seriously only for marriage and family relations and perhaps for some religious rituals (the exclusion of the low castes from prayer rooms, for example). But, nowadays, caste has become the principle axis of social organization, signalling a big change in diasporic thinking since the mass migration of Gurkhas. The large gatherings organized by caste groups for all Nepalis or for their caste members only have led to this new consciousness among the masses, thereby entrenching caste in the UK like nowhere else.

This has signalled a significant change in the status of Gurkha castes. In Nepal, Gurkhas are using their drums, cymbals, songs and dances – as well as "invented" festival traditions – as a way of challenging the social stigma and changing their status as a beleaguered minority. Their intention at home has been to try to undermine the social, cultural, economic and political dominance of the high-caste Bahun and Chhetri (and Newar, too, although they are also part of the *Janajati* movement). Even after many changes, including the transition of Nepal from a Hindu monarchy to a secular Republic in 2008 (Bhandari 2014: 47), the high castes continue to control, not only of politics but of almost everything else. High-caste Hindu cultures and customs continue

to dominate Nepalese society both at home and in most overseas communities. Their control of many diasporic organizations notwithstanding, the structural dominance of the high caste is no longer found among Nepalis in the United Kingdom. This is attributable not only to their greater numbers, but to their transnational politics of identity. This phenomenon in a foreign country has to be understood from the point of view of the history and memory of the Gurkhas, who are not just first-generation migrants but new arrivals. As already noted, cultural politics is aimed at breaking the hegemony of the high castes not only in religious, cultural and political spheres in Nepal, but overseas as well. This continued homeland politics, among other elements, has greatly divided the overseas community.

Conclusion

Transnational social and cultural practices are an important part of migrants' lives as they settle in a new country (Babacan and Singh 2010: 1). In other words, the cultural traditions of the home country often become the key to migrant belonging. This may change over time in subsequent generations; but, first-generation migrants generally "cling to the cultural values and practices of their home countries" (Kalule-Sabiti *et al.* 2012: 163). As Pluck (2000) demonstrates, the cultural traditions of home, including the older and contemporary traditions, are renegotiated and reinvented in the migration context. And, these practices, particularly in the public domain, become important vehicles for constructing and reconstructing ethnic identities in the diaspora. I have demonstrated in this chapter how Gurkha castes have, under the influence of ethnic

politics in Nepal, recreated their caste-based identities in the UK through performance in the diasporic public sphere.

Newly-arrived Gurkhas migrated (See Chapter Two) *en masse,* together with their families and many kin. Due to the long policy and practice of Gurkha selection, most of the Gurkha immigrants belong to just four Nepalese castes; i.e., the Gurung, Magar, Rai and Limbu. Interestingly, these are the same groups that have been active in Nepal's cultural politics since the early 1990s. Their principal aim is to challenge the long-term cultural, religious, economic and political domination of the high-caste Hindus from the hills. Nepal's ethnicized castes have long decried state policies and programmes that have not only marginalized their people, but also their indigenous religio-cultural traditions, customs and languages as well (Lawoti and Hangen 2013).

Due to the transnational influence of Nepal's ethnic/caste politics, a person observing the Nepalese community in the UK would struggle to find one single Nepalese cultural identity. Most of these events alluded to in this chapter were organized by and for specific castes, sub-castes or villages. This meant that traditions regarding different dances, songs, dresses and religious rituals were observed. But, each caste was keen to preserve and promote its own unique culture: this was the *raison détre* for most caste-related festivals and gatherings. Nepalese national culture and customs were despised, not necessarily because the people did not like them, but because the politically-conscious attendees hated the pro-high-caste Hindu flavour of the Nepalese national culture. As one Gurkha observed: "I absolutely love my country, but hate its

dominant cultural, religious and linguistic traditions. They are mostly the culture and religion of the Bahun, who are our oppressors."

The thrust of my argument here is that the Nepalese diaspora in the UK has been greatly influenced by Nepal's ongoing politics of culture spearheaded by middle caste associations such as the Gurkhas. Of course, the UK is far from Nepal; but, but Gurkha immigrants arrived with their religio-cultural baggage and, importantly, a political activism aimed at fighting caste with caste. This is the principal cause of much of the Nepalese diasporic sphere being dominated by caste groups. The intracommunity competition and contestation between different sections of the migrant community occur largely in the public domain, as Werbner (2002) showed vis-à-vis Pakistani Muslim mgrants. The tussle among Nepalis is not as messy and complicated as that which occurred in Pakistani community. While Werbner comments on the role of caste, kinship and family in community politics, but her ethnography shows no sign of caste in being as prominent as among the Gurkhas. This is partly because she does not delve into the problem of caste in her analysis of Pakistani diasporic public sphere.

It may be that this level of ethnic organizing around caste would not have been possible had the Gurkhas migrated prior to the 1990s, when Nepal's ethnic politics was not in existence. This could also suggest that perhaps caste among the Gurkhas may become a lot less salient into the future, especially in public life, once Nepal's caste/ethnic issues are resolved. One might then see greater unity among the Nepalis in the UK across the caste and cultural divide. So far, however, there are no signs of the current

tension easing. As I will show in the forthcoming chapters, other castes, i.e., minorities among minorities, are under growing pressure. Chapter Four explores how previously dominant high castes contend with the growing caste politics aimed at undermining their authority, launched by the newly-dominant Gurkha castes.

Chapter Four

Caste as Anti-Caste: Contesting High-Caste Authority

It was meant to be an enjoyable charity dinner as well as an opportunity for representatives of various diasporic Nepalese organizations to come together for a good cause. In July 2013, approximately 200 people, including many ex-servicemen, attended a charity dinner hosted by the pan-Nepalese association Non Resident Nepalis UK (NRN UK) in a community hall in London.[35] The programme typically consisted of a combination of enjoyable socializing and some formal speeches. Gagan Thapa, a young and popular member of the Nepali Congress Party (and typically from a higher caste) was the guest of honour. After receiving a standing ovation as he arrived, he was then taken to an elevated stage and welcomed by who draped garlands of *khada* (a ceremonial floral scarf popularly used for public events) around his neck. Some time later, just as the ceremony concluded, Thapa, along with many other people attending, was startled by a sudden loud screaming at the back of the hall. Some 20 angry Gurkhas stood up and started taunting the guest: some waved black flags along with the flags of the group of protesters, i.e., the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities UK (NEFIN UK), (a cluster of Gurkha caste associations in Britain). Amidst the screaming, whistling and shouting, Naresh Kangmang Rai, a recently retired rifleman and a firebrand caste/ethnic rights activist, climbed onto a table and addressed the guest of honour: "You are not welcome in a country where more than 120,000

[35] The above incident was related to me by some informants who attended the dinner. Parts of the programme are available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CDc0hxdZfRs *[Last accessed 30 December 2015].*

Janajatis and their families live. You should get out now! Your party and you personally have denied us our identity by opposing ethnic federalism!" Then, the protesters started chanting "Get out!" The Gurkhas continued to disrupt the party for more than an hour before marching out, shouting slogans as they left.

While the protest was perhaps not entirely unexpected, the level of anger surprised many, not least Thapa, the high-caste politician, and the leaders of NRN UK. It was a tumultuous period in Nepal's transitional politics which obviously reverberated throughout the overseas communities. In May 2012, a much vaunted four-year Constituent Assembly had ended without producing a new constitution. Another election to the second Assembly was called for later that year (Bhandari 2014: 55). The major parties had failed to agree on a number of issues, one of the most contentious being the subject of regional autonomy for select castes or ethnic minorities – including the Gurung, Magar, Rai and Limbu – under the proposed new federal structure of the country. The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), the largest party in the Assembly at the time, had been pushing for caste-based autonomous states as per its long-term agenda. The other two major democratic parties, the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist Leninist), vigorously opposed the motion (Edrisinha 2015: 307–309). Once more, the debate surrounding the topic of caste/ethnic identity in the form of regional autonomy had now peaked in Nepal and overseas, leaving many Gurkhas unhappy with the mainstream democratic parties. Despite their reaction, it may be that Gagan Thapa had not quite anticipated this intense level of passion among overseas Gurkhas regarding the political issues at home.

Transnational activism has been recognized as increasingly salient in the political system of any country (Tarrow 1998, 2005; Smith 2013). These cross-border activities are often associated with broad topics such as women's rights (e.g., Rupp 1997; Yasutake 2004), human rights (Sikkink 1998) and global justice (de Greiff and Cronin 2002). Particularly important for the analysis here is the fact that migrants are often actively engaged in transnational politics for change, both at home and in the diaspora. Lafleur (2013) claims that many in the diaspora become actively involved in politics in order to be able to exercise voting rights in their homelands (as do the transnational movement of Nepalis under NRN). Vertovec's (1997: 4) analysis of Irish and Jewish lobbies in America is useful for understanding what motivates migrants to become involved in transnational politics: "Individual immigrants may be significant actors, or collective associations may be powerful pressure groups, in the domestic politics of their host countries as well as in the international political arena, usually prompted by their interest in the political plight of a country of origin." Appadurai (1990) maintains, especially in the South Asian context, that the process of migration itself inspires keen political activism overseas. The experience of deterritorialization is very important it can result in "exaggerated and intensified senses of criticism or attachment to politics in the home state" (Appadurai 1990: 301). Appadurai further argues that the emergence of religious fundamentalism, including Hindu and Sikh and Muslim fundamentalisms, has been directly fuelled by activists and supporters among their overseas populations. For example, 'Khalistan', a separate country from India that Punjabi Sikhs sought to establish through an (unsuccessful) armed campaign in the 1980s and 1990s, was an

“invented homeland”, the brainchild of Sikhs domiciled in England and Canada and America (Appadurai 1990: 302).

This chapter deals with transnational politics of caste – anti-caste – among Gurkha immigrants, and the consequent change in the relationships between the majority Gurkhas and the previously dominant high-caste Bahun and Chhetri in the Nepalese diaspora community of the UK. Before exploring these issues, it will be useful here to offer a conceptual clarity vis-à-vis the politics of caste and anti-caste. Although some scholars seek to keep the distinction between these terms (e.g., Natrajan 2011: 185), they are often used interchangeably by scholars and activists alike. More importantly, the designation depends mainly upon what a particular movement aims to achieve. A genuine anti-caste politics would aspire to abolish the caste system altogether (Thorat *et al.* 2005: 269). Popular Dalit leader Ambedkar’s campaigns were geared towards dismantling the institution of caste and liberating the suffering masses. For him, caste was intrinsic to the Hindu religion (a notion later supported by sociologists including Weber and Dumont); therefore, the only hope of ending the historical oppression of the low caste was, as the title of his popular work suggested, the *annihilation of caste* (Ambedkar 1936). He thus asked the Dalits to “destroy the sacredness and divinity with which caste has been invested” (Ambedkar 1936: 291). Ambedkar converted to Buddhism (which he considered more egalitarian) in 1956. Millions of Dalits in his home state of Maharashtra and in other areas of India followed suit, eager to escape the stigma associated with caste (Deegalle 2015: 73).

However, contemporary Dalit politics – as well as the politics of other caste groups opposed to the domination of the high caste – has undergone a paradigm shift in as much as annihilating caste is no longer the activists' principal agenda (Kumar 2000: 3979). This change is due to the growing ethnicization of caste in modern times whereby identity politics has challenged the hierarchically ranked order of society which positions high-caste Brahmins (Bahun in Nepal) at the top (Dirks 2001; Gupta 2004; Reddy 2005). As different groups challenge the dominance of the high castes, and jockey for power and status, caste as a traditional hierarchical system has weakened. But concomitantly, caste as a social category has become strengthened, a transformation that has seen social boundaries rendered more visible. Reflecting on the bourgeoning caste/ethnic politics in Nepal since the early 1990s, Gellner (2005: 5-6) indicates how this politics has rendered caste boundaries more salient. Far from diminishing social difference, as per their stated objectives, these movements have spread the assumption that: 1) everyone in Nepal belongs to a particular caste or ethnic group; 2) membership to his or her group is strictly through birth; and, 3) it is impossible to change that group. In this chapter, I take Gellner's argument a step further by demonstrating that anti-caste politics in Nepal and the diaspora is not aimed at dismantling the caste system *per se.* Rather, this is a movement with a common goal, i.e., to challenge the authority of the higher castes. In that regard, this is a strictly anti-Bahun movement, rather than an anti-caste campaign.

This shift in identity politics has meant that caste has become a source of pride, of cultural identity; and, as hinted in Chapter Three, a tool for snatching power and

prestige from the elite castes. I argue here that the transnational politics of anti-caste among impassioned Gurung, Magar, Rai and Limbu activist ex-military men in the UK has, among other things, drastically altered the dynamics of power within the diasporic community, by extension increasingly challenging the traditional authority of the high castes.

In Chapter Three I discussed the bourgeoning cultural politics of prominent Gurkha caste groups in Britain. Focus now shifts to some of the more overt forms of mobilization of transnational caste identities. The political activism alluded to here is separate from party politics, albeit some caste associations are allied with smaller caste-based parties of Nepal, and a few caste-based parties have opened overseas branches in the UK. The first section examines anti-caste political movements in Nepal since the 1990s, organized by many marginalized sections of society (self-identified as indigenous or Janajati/Madhesi movements). Gurkha castes have played a prominent role in these movements. The analysis here will be closely linked to direct political participation rather than to the cultural politics. The second section presents empirical evidence of the rising tide of anti-Bahun-Chhetri sentiment among the general Gurkha population, mainly the issues related to the reverse casteism being levelled against the high castes. In a further section, I demonstrate the growing success of ex-Gurkhas in dislodging high castes from leadership positions in the diasporic community. Then, I provide an analysis of the ways in which high castes have been attempting to fight back in the face of a powerful Gurkha assertion. In the final section, I analyse some of the critical factors pertinent to migration and diaspora living that have provided an edge to

Gurkha ethnic rights activists in Britain. Overall, I argue that the assertion of Gurkha caste identity politics in Britain is largely influenced by similar developments in Nepal and the transnational circulation of political and activist ideologies across national borders. 287

Politics of *Anti-Caste in Nepal*

24 August 2015 saw one of the worst forms of caste violence ever perpetrated in the town of Tikapur in far-western Nepal. On that day, angry protestors from a minority Tharu community brutally murdered two local security officers. One policeman was burnt alive, and a senior police officer was speared to death by a group of protestors carrying domestic weapons. The violence shocked and surprised many people, especially as it was to have been peaceful rally called by the Tharu caste association The Tharu Kalyankarini Sabha, which is generally considered less confrontationalist and militant than other Tharu groups (Guneratne 2010: 26). This deadly violence heralded bigger and often more violent protests centred in the central plains, called by an alliance of regional fringe parties that self-identify as the Madhesi groups. An escalation of the Madhesi violence caused the death of over 50 protestors and a number of security personnel in different parts of the Terai region. An extended strike shut down shops, transports, and schools and colleges, and industries for several months. In addition, the protestors picketed some of the key trading posts between India and Nepal along the southern border, blocking the supply of basic goods from India; e.g., fuel, food and medicine. In effect, the entire population of the country has suffered as a result of the

Madhesi and Tharu fights for their identity in the form of regional autonomy based on caste/ethnicity.

Unlike in India, caste became a vehicle for political mobilization in Nepal much later. Many minority castes, including Gurkha groups and Dalits, deeply resented Bahunism – the structural domination of the high-caste Bahun-Chhetri – for blocking their access to resources and state power (Hangen 2010: 40). The end of a 30-year royal dictatorship and the restoration of civic freedoms unlocked subordinated caste groups' potential to fight the authority of the higher castes. They accordingly organized themselves into community organizations and political parties, bent upon claiming a better identity, status, and inclusion in the government system. Their fight has aimed at ending the high-caste Bahun-Chhetri's historical domination of the government, bureaucracy, military as well as social, religious, economic and cultural arenas. In Chapter Three, I showed how different caste associations have been campaigning for their cultural rights through ethnicized festivals and rituals. I will now consider some of the ways in which these disgruntled caste groups have become involved in confrontational political processes, led by activists associated with caste associations and caste-based political parties.[36] It is important to consider these developments in Nepal to understand the changing inter-caste relations in the diaspora. Even though Nepal's ethnic/caste activism is focused on challenging the domination of the higher castes, it is having

[36] Unfortunately, these groups do not include Dalits. Although they are some of the most oppressed and segregated groups, unlike in India, Dalit movements have not been able to make their mark in Nepal (Folmar 2007).

significant impact upon the diasporic community in Britain (and perhaps in other Nepalese diasporas as well).

Different caste associations in Nepal have been carrying out their anti-caste movements through a united front called the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) established in Kathmandu in 1991. This organization currently consists of 54 different caste groups from across Nepal,[37] who combine to operate under the banner of ethnic minorities (*Janajatis*) and indigenous nationalities (*Adivasis*). This recent self-identification as an ethnic and indigenous movement is strategic for two reasons: 1) to claim distinct identity from so-called caste Hindus (high and low castes); and, 2) to ensure international legitimacy and support (thus putting these caste groups on a par with, for example, the Aborigines of Australia and the Maori of New Zealand). In addition, by publishing their plight, these agitating groups have been able to secure international funding from Western governments and non-government organizations. These overseas funds, which are often directly channeled to NEFIN (rather than through the Nepal Government agencies), have been used for projects aimed at "empowering" the caste groups so that they may be better able to claim their status and inclusion in a high-caste dominated state. For example, in 2004, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) donated 1.2 million pounds to NEFIN to fund its iconic Janajati Empowerment Project, which aimed to sensitize marginalized groups vis-à-vis their cultural identity, inclusion in the state, and various aspects of their political rights (Shneiderman 2015: 166). These projects sensitized the marginalized populations

[37] For further details of NEFIN and its activities, see http://www.nefin.org.np/ *[Last accessed 29 September 2015].*

vis-à-vis their civic rights and troubled relationship with the state. Over time, such projects funded by foreign donations and local resources significantly increased the participation of the marginalized groups into the country's political processes. Thus, from the early 2000s, "NEFIN underwent a major shift and became increasingly engaged in overtly political activities" (Hangen 2010: 40).

The *Janajati* groups' growing political participation and militancy have been further fueled by the changing political situation in the country. All of the mainstream parties have advocated the rights of marginalized groups and mobilized them in their struggles against the King's dictatorial regimes in 1990 and 2006. As well, these parties have dedicated Dalit and *Janajati* wings, even though their leadership is invariably controlled by the high-caste Bahun and Chhetri. More importantly, a decade-long communist insurgency spearheaded by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) since 1996, greatly raised the aspirations of marginalized castes. It mobilized these frustrated groups in its violent campaigns against monarchy and the democratic system – with the stated aim of establishing a communist state – causing some 16,000 deaths, innumerable injuries, and the destruction of public and private property (Hutt 2004). Although the Maoist leadership was also predominantly high caste, the insurgents preached vociferously against the cultural and political domination of the high caste, effectively expressing anti-Bahun-Chhetri sentiment. They mobilized grassroots support, employing units which they named after particular castes. And, they argued, the best method of checking the predominance of the high castes and guaranteeing the identity and inclusion of the Dalit, *Janajati*, Madhesi and Tharu, would be the implementation of their

plans for caste-based regional autonomy with the rights to self-determination (Bhandari 2014). Accordingly, in 2001, the rebels proposed a number of caste- or ethnicity-based autonomous regions, among them Magarant for the Magar, Tamuwan for the Gurung, and Kirant for the Rai and Limbu (for further information, see de Sales 2010: 39).

Often using members of the marginalized castes, the Maoists employed different tactics to intimidate the local elites, high-caste local politicians, other parties and wealthy landowners to flee their villages (Baral 2004: 210). Interestingly, some of the methods of intimidation and violence used to target the local high caste were similar to those used by earlier Dalit groups in southern India; e.g., the Dravida Kazhagam (DK). Initiated by charismatic Dalit leader Periyar as the 'Self -Respect Movement' in the 1920s, this violent movement ferociously attacked Brahmanism and publicly mocked Brahmins (Fuller and Narasimhan 2014: 12). During the 1950s, the DK gained notoriety for employing heretical politics. Activists not only destroyed the images of Hindu deities and desecrated Hindu temples, but extended their attacks to Brahmin homes. Often the militants cut off the Brahmin men's sacred topknots or tufts of the Brahman as a means of intimidating them (Fuller and Narasimhan 2014: 12). Similarly, the Maoists intimidated and attacked elite Hindus and their religious icons. In some areas, they killed cows and hung their entrails in Hindu temples (Sherchan 2001: 105). Dalit militants entered Hindu temples which were hitherto out of bounds to them; and Dalit and *Janajati* guerillas forcibly entered the dwellings of high-caste pundits, thereby ritually polluting not only the food and water, but other sacred objects and spaces in the high-caste Bahun-Chhetri dwellings (Pettigrew 2013). The most heinous form of

physical attack on high-caste Hindus and their faith was the murder of the Hindu preacher and Nepal chair of the World Hindu Federation, Narayan Prasad Pokhrel, in May 2005 (Asian Centre for Human Rights 2006: 30).

The caste groups from which most Gurkhas originated, i.e., the Gurung, Magar, Rai and Limbu, were very active in the Maoist war. And, according to my research participants, many ex-soldiers were valuable assets to the violent campaigns. Either voluntarily or through coercion, many retired soldiers not only provided weapons training and courses on jungle warfare, but donated money out of their personal savings and pensions. Notably, among Gurkha caste groups, the Magar emerged as most active in the armed rebellion. From the outset, Maoist leaders spent a lot of time with the Kham Magar of mid-western Nepal, educating them not only about the oppression of the state, but also about Maoist communism and how it would offer them freedom from endemic poverty, illiteracy and backwardness (Pahari 2010: 205). Even though almost every part of Nepal was affected to some extent by communist violence, the Magar-dominated mountainous regions of Rolpa, Rukum, Jajarkot and Salyan became the epicentres of the insurgency (Upreti 2008: 104).

In addition to the Maoists, several Gurkha groups also launched political movements through their own political parties; for example, the small *Janajati*-based party known as the National Liberation Front is led by MS Thapa, a veteran Magar politician. Since its inception in the early 1990s, this party has been advocating ethnic federalism to the marginalized caste groups (Bhattachan 2013: 40), well before the Maoists advocated

the same issue albeit with much greater force. Similarly, various other caste-based parties emerged over time, mainly during the past decade as the debate over ethnic/caste autonomy intensified in the national politics. A number of smaller parties that contested the April 2013 elections to a second Constituent Assembly were based on caste: the Khambuwan National Front, Tharuhat Terai Party, Federal Democratic National Front (Tharuhat), Limbuwan Liberation Front, Limbuwan Liberation Front Nepal, Nepa: National Party, Backward Dalit Janajati Party, Dalit Janajati Party, Bahujan Samaj Party, Federal Limbuwan State Council, Federal Socialist Party and Tamangsaling National People's Unity Party.[38] None of these newly formed groups won a seat in the first-past-the-post system; but some places were won through proportional representation. In the words of my informants, despite their electoral failure, these parties have played a significant role in spreading ethnic/caste consciousness among the marginalized masses at grassroots level.

The Limbu stand out as probably the most active *Janajati* group in terms of political mobilization for ethnic/caste rights. This single caste group has formed more caste-based parties than other castes, including some violent parties. In the early 1990s, a Limbu man Gopal Kirati set up an insurgent group called the Khambuwan National Front (KNF): it mainly mobilized the Limbu and Rai of eastern Nepal. Over time, it carried out numerous violent attacks against people and public property. In July 1997, the KNF bombed several public schools in Bhojpur and Solukhumbu Districts, apparently due to their insistence on continuing to teach Sanskrit, a perceived esoteric

[38] For a complete list of the parties taking part in the 2013 Constituent Assembly elections, see http://election.gov.np/CA2070/CAResults/reportBody.php?selectedMenu=2&rand=1443757553 *[Last accessed 2 October 2015].*

language symbolizing high-caste Hindu superiority (Adhikari 2014). The Maoists came later, triggering clashes between the two forces in the villages and towns of East Nepal. The KNF became part of the Maoist movement in September-October 2001 when KNF militants enlisted with the People's Liberation Army – the Maoist's guerilla forces – and leader Kirati joined the Maoist leadership (Lawoti 2007: 37-38).

Even though the KNF merged with the Maoists, some other independent Limbu parties emerged in recent years with the establishment of an autonomous Limbuwan state in eastern Nepal as their central agendum. For example, Kumar Lingden, a young and charismatic Limbu activist, launched the Federal Limbuwan State Council (FLSC). Similarly, Sanjuhang Palungwa established another party with the same name. The other three Limbu political groups were Sanjbir Nembang's Limbuwan Liberation Front, Kamal Chharanhang's Federal Democratic Party and the Limbuwan Liberation Front led by Ram Bhakta Kurumbang.[39] These groups organized separate campaigns against the dominance of the high-caste Bahun-Chhetri, both in their respective regions and nationally. They included some violent activities; and, like the Maoists, they often drove out the supporters of other parties. On occasion, they targeted the local Bahun elites, who were considered newcomers to the Limbu region. The Bahun were accused of spreading Hindu values and asserting the dominance of the high-caste Hindu economically, culturally and religiously with the active support of the rulers in Kathmandu, not least through the appropriation of their traditionally collectively owned lands (Kaplan 1970).

[39] Information derived from the national newspapers of Nepal and from my research participants.

Thus, different caste groups have continued to exercise their anti-caste politics with the support of former Maoist rebels and various other groups. But, because the demands of key caste groups for regional autonomy under federal structuralism continue to be rejected by the mainstream parties, the debate surrounding the issue is sharply dividing Nepalese society, including the overseas contingent. As a consequence, many *Janajati* groups have grown even more antagonistic towards the high castes. Given the preponderance of Gurkha castes, the issue of rift between the middle ranks of Gurkha castes and higher castes has inevitably become pronounced in the UK. As the politically active Gurkhas mobilize their resources in support of their groups and parties in Nepal, the divisions between the Gurkhas and the high castes have widened in the diaspora. As I will suggest below, inter-caste relations have changed significantly even among the ordinary people due to this transnational politics of anti-caste.

Mocking the Bahun-Chhetri: Reverse Discrimination Overseas

Such impassioned movements against the persistent dominance of Nepal's higher caste, both in the home country and transnationally, have generated strong anti-high-caste sentiments among recently arrived Gurkhas in Britain. They have served to heighten their criticism of the high-caste Bahun and Chhetri in the diasporic community. And, although there have been no violent conflicts between the two sides, as I will show in this section, tensions are running high. The previously dominant high castes are now feeling increasing pressure within the Nepalese communities both at home and abroad. According to my informants from both the pre-eminent Gurkha groups and the Bahun and Chhetri castes, the high castes are being faced with reverse casteism in both the

private and public spheres. In this section, I describe some instances of Gurkhas humiliating and mocking the higher castes in the public sphere, and of similar treatment by *Janajati* activists in their political statements. I have also used the statements of both Gurkhas and high castes, along with ethnographic information, to demonstrate how Gurkhas express their discomfort with, if not hatred for, the high-caste Bahun and Chhetri. I have used interview material, as well as statements at public meetings, to demonstrate the rising anti-caste feeling among the majority of Gurkhas, consequence of the transnational politics of anti-caste.

Nepalis in Britain have witnessed a surge in incidents of verbal abuse against the higher castes in England subsequent to the mass migration of Gurkhas and their dependents. A rising tide of anti-caste movements has given rise to ubiquitous Bahun-bashing, a common phenomenon in contemporary Nepal (Sharma 2004: 219). But, in the diaspora, there is perhaps more vilification, joking and name-calling levelled against the Bahun and Chhetri, particularly in Gurkha-dominant settlements like the towns of Aldershot, Farnborough and Ashford. I personally heard ubiquitous anti-Bahun comments made in the everyday interactions of many Gurkhas and their families. The high castes were despised and ridiculed as “clever and cunning”, and “greedy and self-centred”. A disparaging term commonly used against the high castes was “pointy nose” (a racist term used against higher castes by the Gurkhas). They were avoided in order to escape their allegedly stigmatizing and discriminatory attitudes and behaviour.

Somewhat significantly, this vilification of the high-caste Bahun and Chhetri has been actively encouraged by activists associated with caste-based associations and parties. On several occasions, community leaders openly criticized and disparaged the high castes in their public statements, stereotyping the allegedly corrupt and self-promoting Bahun-Chhetri. My study found that these anti-high-caste attitudes were often fuelled by visiting *Janajati* politicians and community leaders from Nepal. I will now present three empirical examples of the high castes being humiliated and disparaged at public meetings by *Janajati* activists, both those visiting from Nepal and those active in the diaspora.

The first case involves Ang Kaji Sherpa, a well-known *Janajati* leader in Nepal, who has become rather notorious for his visceral anti-Bahun/ism remarks. He was visiting the UK – as many other Nepalese politicians and anti-caste activists do – to mobilize his supporters and raise funds for the *Janajati* movements. Even though citizens living abroad are not allowed to vote in Nepal, many people, particularly members of *Janajati* groups, have been actively engaged in financing and participating in the discourses overseas as well. Therefore, Sherpa was invited to give a talk at many Gurkha gatherings across Britain. On this particular occasion, he was the keynote speaker at a public meeting of Magar Association UK. It was a fitting occasion given that it was the death anniversary of a legendary Magar hero Lakhan Thapa, who is believed to have lost his life while fighting against the oppressive Rana oligarchy in the 1870s (Lecomte-Tilouine 2007: 246-247). The event was attended by representatives of different organizations, including some higher castes. In his hour-long speech, Sherpa accused

the higher castes of continuing to monopolize Nepal's power and resources despite recent political changes, of depriving other castes, mainly *Janajatis*, of opportunities in the state. And, importantly, he condemned them for thwarting the aspirations of many *Janajatis* for their identity in the form of regional autonomy. He cared little about the presence of some high-caste Bahun and Chhetri in his sharp criticism of these groups. Sherpa even mocked one of the guests of honour, the Nepalese ambassador to Britain, who was a high-caste Bahun.

While Sherpa was speaking, the ambassador, who was seated on the stage, got up and walked out of the hall. Seizing the moment, Sherpa said:

> Well, well, has our excellency found my words unbearable? Is he walking out because of what I have just said about his caste? I have reasons to suspect. Earlier, Nepalese ambassador to Belgium (who was also a high caste) walked away as I spoke, as I have been doing today, against the high castes in a formal gathering of *Janajatis* there. I just want to make sure our ambassador here is not similarly offended.

The audience laughed and cheered and clapped. Within moments, however, someone informed Sherpa that the ambassador had not, in fact, left: he had simply gone to the toilet. But this did not deter Sherpa from making further jokes about the honoured guest: "That's good then: there is no reason for him to take my comments personally. But I do hope that he does not spend an hour or so in the bathroom (waiting for my address to end)!"

More laughter and cheering followed. But the high-caste guests appeared disgusted. The tension in the hall was palpable in the form of looks, winks and other gestures. Interestingly, the organizers of the event did not apologize for the main speaker's sharp

castigation of the most important representative of the Nepalese Government. Nor did any high castes raise an objection directly. The ambassador returned to his seat shortly afterwards and the function continued without interruption. However, when I questioned some high-caste participants later, they expressed their shock and dismay. They could not believe that the speaker would insult the top Nepalese official in this manner. They supported any criticism of the ambassador for his faults or weakness in delivering his services: that would be justifiable. But he was mocked purely for his birth into a Bahun family, behaviour totally unsuitable particularly in a free and democratic society like the UK.

The second instance of high castes being publicly humiliated by a visiting *Janajati* leader happened at a much larger gathering, i.e., the Buddha Purnima celebrations organized by the Magar Association UK at Farnborough in the summer of 2013. It was an annual Open Concert attended by a few thousand men, women, children and the elderly, most of them Magars but some higher castes, low castes and others. The function typically involved a chief guest from Nepal; on this occasion it was MS Thapa, a veteran Magar politician I have mentioned earlier. He also spoke for over an hour, urging his constituents, the Magar, not to forget their cultural and religious identity, and asking them to actively support the anti-caste movement at home. He asked the Magar to take pride in their identity, not be ashamed of their status in their traditional society, “falsely” assigned by clever Bahun. In order to make his case, he provided evidence of the apparent greatness of the Magar history, wherein they topped the high-caste Bahun-Chhetri in many ways.

For example, Thapa kept insisting that the Magar were descendants of the Buddha. With the founder of a world religion as their ancestor, the Magar could well be proud of their collective identity. He related a story to emphasize his point, saying that the Buddha was much more knowledgeable and truthful than the Brahmins of his time (and, by implication, that the Magar were cleverer than the Bahun):

> When asked how children were produced, the Buddha just explained the natural process: sexual union between male and female leads to the fertilization of the egg, and babies are born. Some Brahmin pundits contradicted Him, however. They claimed that they were not born through the usual process, that they came out of the mother's mouth instead. Amused, the Buddha reminded the learned men that they should not confuse the orifice through which babies came out with the mouth!

This remark triggered cheering and whistling from the crowd. Later, when I talked to some Bahun and Chhetri participants, they expressed their unhappiness with this subtle mockery of their traditional status, and of their faith. And they suspected that Thapa's story was probably untrue, despite his claim that it was taken from a Buddhist scripture in the Pali language. Derived from reliable sources or not, the anecdote had its effect on both the Magar and the Bahun-Chhetri.

A third case involved a Rai Gurkha living in England, whose anti-Bahun-Chhetri remarks in an important meeting in London in early 2013 captured the imagination of the of the diasporic community. The event occurred at a gathering of Gurkhas and others, who had come together to oppose the Nepalese Government's plans to sell the lease of the Nepal Embassy property in London. I did not personally attend the meeting; but, some people who were present, informed me of what had happened. During the meeting, which was held at the embassy, the ambassador told the protestors that Kathmandu

was struggling to meet the expenses of maintaining this expensive property in Kensington Gardens, a prime location of London. By selling the lease, the embassy would be able to purchase a new property in a relatively less expensive part of London. However, the protestors, who did not want this plan to be implemented, argued that the Crown property had been very generously leased by the Queen of Britain in honour of the Gurkha sacrifice to her country. As the discussion proceeded, a Rai man stood up and said:

> We all know the real purpose of the plans to sell the lease of this wonderful building. It has nothing to do with the costs of maintaining the property; instead, people in power are after a lucrative commission from the sale. These pointy noses are not satisfied having virtually 'eaten' most of the resources of our country, and they now want to exploit this property as well. This building represents British gratitude for Gurkhas' sacrifice to this nation, so we will not let greedy rulers benefit from it.

Even though his comment was in line with the protestors' claims, everyone was shocked by his openly casteist remark (pointy nose) which targeted the high castes who were present in significant numbers. He had offended the ambassador himself. Those at meeting were so stunned that they stayed quiet for some time before the discussion resumed.

Clearly, from the above, casteist vilification of the high-caste Bahun and Chhetri was ubiquitous among the Nepalese communities in Britain. Even though my main focus was on the towns of Aldershot and Farnborough, I found the same degree of vilification in some other Gurkha settlements as well. According to my research participants, incidences of reverse casteism increased dramatically in recent years, particularly following the Kathmandu parties' decision not to grant regional autonomy to the Gurkhas and some other agitating castes. Public and private discourses have

intensified anti-high-caste sentiments, despite the fact that nearly all of these high castes were not in any way connected to power in Nepal. Although there were some overseas wings of the major parties under the control of the higher castes, these groups had little impact upon the diasporic community. And I found that many Gurkhas were unapologetic about the discourses fuelling anti-high-caste feelings: they tended to blame the higher castes for this as well. As retired Captain Hari Magar said: “We should not discriminate against any caste, but those who consider themselves superior castes also must change in a new country. I know, for example, that many high castes are unhappy with the rise of some Gurung, Magar, Rai and Limbu leaders in the community.” Perhaps this level of audacity on the part of the Gurkhas is due to a number of factors including the history and memory of their oppression in the hands of the high castes, and their dominant position in the UK, unlike in Nepal and elsewhere. In the following section, I will explicate how the Gurkhas have been challenging the higher castes’ monopoly of community leadership overseas.

Challenging High-Caste Leadership

The growing saliency of the large Gurkha caste associations in the cultural and religious realms of the Gurkha immigrants in Britain has translated into political power. As a consequence, the leaderships of Tamu Dhee UK, Magar Association UK, Kirant Yakthung Chumlung and Kirant Rai Yayokkha (as well as some other caste-based groups) exercise growing influence, not just within their respective caste circles, but over the entire Nepalese community. It must be noted, however, that these caste associations do not function like the village Panchayat in traditional societies of South

Asia; in other words, they do not act as local judicial tribunals (Sinha 1972: 91). But, notwithstanding, they are becoming increasingly influential in the community. The leaders of large caste associations have great power now to influence decision-making in the community. As one Gurkha noted: “Who dare oppose the decisions of the four big caste associations when they represent nearly two-thirds of Nepalis in the UK?” For example, whoever wins an election in national, regional, religious, and/or professional organizations, as well as in the diasporic wings of Nepal’s important political parties, will depend to a large extent on the support of the key players in the caste associations. This has meant a change in community leadership. The Gurung, Magar, Rai and Limbu are being elected to positions of power in the community in growing numbers in the face of the traditional predominance of the high-caste Bahun, Chhetri and Newar (Bell 2014: 213–214).

I will now provide two recent ethnographic cases of Gurkhas prevailing over higher castes in leadership roles in the migrant community. The first case involved a 2010 incident at the office of the vernacular fortnightly newspaper, the *Everest Times*, published in Farnborough. An unusually public tussle between some high castes and Gurung ultimately led to the forced exit of a Bahun editor. A bitter row erupted when a local Chhetri man published an angry opinion piece in the newspaper accusing his in-laws of discriminating against him on the basis of caste. He was married to a Gurung woman; and, when his father-in-law died in Reading, this high-caste man was prevented from touching the dead body because he belonged to a different caste. The writer denounced this practice, arguing that discrimination should have no place in a free and

democratic country like England. Such a public outcry about casteism by a Gurung family angered many of the local Gurung, who confronted the editor of the newspaper, himself a Bahun, and demanded that he publish an apology. They maintained that it was their religious custom not to let non-Gurung touch the deceased; therefore, this should not be seen as an act of caste discrimination.

The debate became even more divisive when the editor of the *Everest Times* persistently refused to rebut the controversial article. When he was thus seen to be supporting the high-caste writer, the Gurung targeted the editor personally. They mobilized their influence in the community through their powerful organizations (Tamu Dhee UK and other groups) ultimately forcing the Bahun editor to resign from the newspaper. Even though most of the other vernacular newspapers were controlled by the high castes, the Gurkhas now took charge of the *Everest Times,* and some Gurung and Magar edited and managed it. By the time of my research in 2013, it was managed by a team led by retired Warrant Officer Dut Bahadur Pun, who was also Chair of the Magar Association UK. A Gurung journalist edited the paper, supported by a popular Gurung journalist based in Kathmandu. In this way, the Gurung and Magar have kept the *Everest Times* free from the Bahun and Chhetri; and they used it, together with its online version, to highlight their caste-related activities in the UK, Hong Kong and Nepal.[40] The *Everest Times* case is well-known among Nepalis in the diaspora, one of the few that has appeared in the public domain. But, according to my informants, many Gurkhas in other settlements and localities in the UK have also been assiduously

[40] Written reports and analyses, as well as pictures and videos of Gurkha events, are regularly updated online at http://www.everesttimes.net/ *[Last accessed 2 January 2015].*

working towards dislodging the high castes from positions of influence in the community.

This means that in effect, the Gurkhas have been actively breaking the traditional monopoly of high-caste leadership at the national level as well. In recent years, increasing numbers of Gurkhas have assumed leadership roles in diaspora organizations open to all Nepalis. This is evident in the NRN UK – an important transnational organization that boasts the largest the largest mobilization of overseas Nepalis from over 70 countries,[41] similar to the Non Resident Indian (NRI) movements among overseas Indians. The stated aims of the NRN have been to consolidate all diasporic Nepalis, who have permanently or temporarily emigrated, and to mobilize their resources – mainly financial resources – for development in the homeland. Every year, NRNs from around the world hold elections in every member country before organizing a joint meeting in Kathmandu, where global leadership representing different geographical regions of the world are elected. NRN UK has been at the centre of these movements since its inception.

The election of Gurkhas to executive positions in NRN UK is a new phenomenon in NRN politics. Since the NRN movement started from Kathmandu in 2003 (Sharma 2009), NRNs in all countries have been recognized as elitist groups invariably controlled by people with wealth, and with access to party leaders in the homeland, most of whom are high-caste Bahun and Chhetri and Newar. Until recently, even in the UK, few people

[41] For further details of this global association of NRNs called NRNA, see their official sites: http://nrna.org.np/ *[Last accessed 2 January 2015].*

believed that one could secure an influential position in NRN unless he or she had money and/or support of influential figures within the major parties in Kathmandu, i.e., the Nepali Congress, CPN (UML) and CPN (Maoist) parties. When NRN UK was announced in 2005, Mahantha Shrestha (a high-caste Newar) was appointed chair,[42] and prominent businessman Ashok Shrestha – another upper-caste Newar – succeeded him in 2006. By this time, Gurkha mass migration had boosted their population numbers and gradually rendered caste associations increasingly powerful in the diaspora community (See Chapters two and three). In 2008, Consequently, retired Gurkha Major Dambar Ghale was elected chair of NRN UK. Due to his rank in the army, he had the strong backing of the ex-soldiers. Earlier, from 2005 to 2006, he was leader of Gurung organization, the Tamu Dhee UK. He has since remained a powerful and very influential personality within the Nepalese community. He led the joint team appointed to oppose the Government lans to sell the lease of the Nepal Embassy property in London. Ghale was succeeded by Surya Gurung, a Gurung restaurateur in Farnborough, and an active member of Tamu Dhee UK. According to my informants, this successful rise of the Gurung men to eminence in the diaspora community came as a big surprise to many high castes.

The September 2015 elections to NRN UK held in Plumstead, London,[43] proved to be the biggest win for Gurkha caste associations The executive committee now consists of

[42] Past executive committees of NRN UK as well as some other factual details about the organization can be found on their official website http://www.nrnuk.org/ *[Last accessed 7 October 2015].*

[43] See the declaration of the 2015 General Assembly Meeting in London on http://www.nrnuk.org/?page_id=1312 *[Accessed 13 October 2015].*

more members of Gurkha castes than ever before.[44] Muchhetra Gurung was elected chair of the organization and Bijay Bikram Lingden Limbu General Secretary; thus, both key positions are now occupied by Gurkha castes. The appointment of these men in particular demonstrates the strength of *Janajati* caste politics in the UK. Gurung was a former chair of Tamu Dhee UK and Limbu a past General Secretary of his caste association the Kirant Yakthung Chumlung UK. I have personally known these two men for some years, and I know for a fact that they have not been active in mainstream party politics of Nepal. In his interview, Gurung, who is a restaurateur based in Aldershot, claimed that he was not aligned with any Nepalese political party. Limbu's case is even more interesting: he has been active in anti-caste politics, and is known as an activist of the transnational Limbuwan movement. While not directly connected to the major parties, he has been working with smaller Limbu parties active in the eastern Nepal. Unlike Gurung, he is not a wealthy businessman. Gaining the support of their respective caste associations was, therefore, the key to their electoral success in the overseas community. And, overall, the 2015 NRN UK election results proved the growing power and influence of dominant caste associations within the Nepalese community in the UK.

In more recent times, increasingly numbers of Gurkhas – Nepal's marginalized castes – have thus been rising to leadership positions in the UK. With their massive population boost, strong caste associations, and tight-knit village and kinship networks, activists among Gurkha castes have proven increasingly capable of replacing the high castes in at least some leadership roles, a phenomenon hitherto not seen in Nepal or anywhere

[44] A full list of newly-elected NRN UK members is available at http://www.nrnuk.org/?page_id=1280 *[Accessed 8 October 2015].*

else in the diaspora (except perhaps in Hong Kong where Gurkhas and their children predominate). While this may be beneficial for Nepal's marginalized castes – even a source of inspiration for their brethren in Nepal – this increasing competition on the basis of caste affiliations, rather than on individual merit, has obviously widened the gulf between Gurkha castes and the currently minority Bahun, Chhetri and Newar. On occasion, my informants tended to minimize this growing rift between the two sides, but the increasing divisions are obvious in the community. Additionally, anti-high-caste stereotyping has also led to further bigotry within the community. In essence, the Nepalese diaspora has become a vantage point for Gurkhas keen on challenging the traditional authority of the high castes, a changing situation that now poses a substantial threat to the previously dominant groups. The impact on the high castes will be examined in the following section.

High Castes: Worried and Confused

Despite ongoing pressure from the Gurkhas, the high-caste Bahun and Chhetri in Britain have not totally lost their standing in the community; however, to date, they have failed to produce any clear and collective strategies to deal with issues of reverse casteism. Many wealthy businessmen, and the better educated and more well-settled people in the Nepalese community are high castes. They have been in the country longer than the Gurkhas, and many are members of educated families in Nepal. They continue to control many diasporic organizations, including the overseas wings of Nepal's political parties and other pan-Nepalese groups. For these reasons, they can still exert considerable influence upon the community, despite being dwarfed by the growing

Gurkha caste associations. However, my research revealed that many members of high castes were legitimately worried about their status in the community, about what may happen to them in the long term if the current trend continues.[45] And, somewhat conspicuously, the more influential and wealthy among these communities seem to lack any clear vision of how to deal with the situation. Prospective programmes have not been debated during formal meetings. The perceived or real threats of reverse casteism have, therefore, been dealt with by concerned persons/families individually.

One of the coping strategies that many higher castes have employed to minimize their chances of being openly ridiculed and taunted by the Gurkhas and their dependents was withdrawal. For example, many high-caste parents living in Gurkha-dominated settlements have made sure that their children have as little contact with Gurkha children as possible. This was in part due to their stereotyped views of Gurkha children as "spoilt" and "morally corrupt". Any association with them would be strongly discouraged by the relatively strict Hindu religious households of the higher caste (Bennett 1983). However, more critically, one of their major considerations was the physical safety of their children. Many among them feared that the growing hatred for

[45] Although I do not delve into that area here, many Gurkhas complained that the higher castes often ill-treated the Gurung and Magar as lower castes on the ritual hierarchy. I heard some instances of the Bahun not allowing the Gurung and Magar, Rai and Limbu, to enter their kitchens. And the high castes would seriously object to their children marrying Gurkha boys or girls, let alone Dalits. Hence, clearly there is a level of discriminatory behaviour against the middle-ranking Gurkhas from the higher castes mainly in the private spheres, which is further dividing the community.

the higher castes could result in some sort of violence among the youth within the Nepalese community.

Furthermore, there was evidence of higher-caste adults trying to distance themselves from the Gurkhas. This occurred at both the individual and institutional levels. A Chhetri businessman shared his typical experience while associating with a large caste group:

> Previously, some of us used to be included in the Tamu Dhee UK leadership as 'honorary members'. This was a respectable position despite being officially treated as the outsider (hence the title 'honorary'). But I have not been in the groups over the past years. Some Gurung community leaders still ask me to return to their organization, but I tell them that I cannot tolerate so much Bahun-Chhetri bashing that goes on in that group.

Similarly, often high castes struggled to do business in Gurkha-dominated areas. One day, a high-caste man successfully managing a grocery store in Aldershot said: "The Gurkhas may give some respect to a dog, but not us high castes!" Such anecdotes about the negative attitude of the Gurkhas and their families towards the high castes abounded the Bahun-Chhetri circles. A high-caste restaurant manager in a Hampshire town said:

> I am happy running the business in partnership with some Gurkhas, and our business is doing well. However, I am often annoyed, and insulted, by anti-Bahun-Chhetri comments I often overhear from the customers. Whether it is a formal meeting hosted by a community group, or an informal gathering of families and friends, jokes and innuendos targeted at our castes are common. On occasion, people tend to misbehave with me, and to verbally abuse me, purely because of my position on caste hierarchy.

Given the growing pressure to which they are subjected, individuals and families often ask their influential members to take measures to alleviate the problem of caste in the community. For example, a retired Gurkha officer from the Bahun caste (a scarce entity) told me that many caste fellows contacted him to share their concerns. They were

increasingly concerned by bourgeoning anti-high caste sentiments in the community. He said that large and popular Gurkha caste associations were often seen by everyday higher castes as a potential threat, especially because they did not have one. Himself confused, one day, he spoke to some influential Indian high-caste Hindu community leaders in England. He informed the Indian leaders about the perilous situation of the high castes among Nepalis in the UK, and sought their advice vis-à-vis ameliorating the situation. He received assurances that this Gurkhas' emphasis on caste – anti-caste – would not last long:

> Indian community leaders told me that there was no need to panic, for caste identity would not endure in the UK. Over time, national identity would triumph over caste identity, and Nepalis would begin to live in harmony and solidarity. I have faith in what they said. Despite the current problems, one day our national organizations will flourish and caste associations will lose their appeal. I am sure of that.

However, some high-caste Chhetris and others had already opened their formal caste associations in Britain; i.e., Khas Ekata Samaj UK, Thakuri Samaj UK and Chhetri Samaj UK. According to those who initiated these groups, like the Gurkha caste associations, they aimed at preserving and promoting their religious and cultural traditions in the face of many adversities overseas, including, as already suggested, adversity within Nepalese community. However, these associations are still in their embryonic phases; very few caste fellows actively participate in them; perhaps because they lack the kind of transnational motivation that Gurkhas have to change things at home as well as in the diaspora. However, if the ubiquitous and open casteism against the high castes continues, increasing numbers of members might become active in the diaspora. And, while this threat could trigger the emergence of significant sizes of high-caste associations thus far there is no indication that this could happen. Despite this

limited interest among the high castes in their caste associations, there are indications that these groups have started to at least discuss and debate possible ways of tackling the issues of casteism levelled against them.

I found that Chhetri Samaj UK has already taken small steps towards addressing the problem. As one group leader said:

> Our organization is extremely worried by what has been happening in our community recently; that is, the issue of caste vilification and taunting against us. We have now started sharing these experiences among our members and considering possible steps for resolving the issues. In early 2013, we formally decided to take legal action against anyone who attempts to humiliate and discriminate against us in public.

To summarize this section, ubiquitous caste discrimination – or reverse casteism – against members of the higher castes has clearly negatively influenced the diaspora lives of high-caste Nepalis in Britain. Many are frustrated and angry at being constantly attacked and ridiculed as members of the elite groups governing Nepal, who have controlled the nation's resources and power for centuries. Despite their growing frustration, however, these mostly civilian higher castes have not become over-agitated. To date, they have not moved to organize campaigns or strategies to deal with the problems of casteism; instead, they are tackling the issues of discrimination and domination at family and individual levels. Some, however, have initiated their caste associations, but the latter seem to have limited power to mobilize the masses for change. In the following section, I examine some of the contexts of the migration that uniquely privileged the Gurkhas over higher castes in the diaspora and enabled them to quickly challenge the traditional dominance of the higher castes.

Gurkha Political Activism: A Discussion

When I mentioned the extraordinary activism of ex-Gurkha soldiers in Britain, i.e., the swiftly changing dynamics of power in the diaspora, Nepalis in Nepal and Australia expressed their utter surprise. A common curiosity was: How did these men who have worked for military/private security requiring strict discipline, and among whom few were college educated, who have spent a great deal of time outside of their country and, perhaps more importantly, are seen to rarely occupy leadership positions of parties and civil society in their home country, become so politically so savvy overseas? While the influence of Nepal's anti-caste politics is obvious from the above, one needs to consider the specific conditions of the Gurkhas as military migrants that have enabled them to realize their extraordinary leadership potential in the UK. I will now discuss some of the core issues related to the nature of their military careers as well as the spread of strong anti-colonial sentiments that have created a conducive environment for ex-military men to ascend to leadership roles in the diaspora.

First, their military careers have proven an important factor enabling the Gurkhas to become politically active in civil society movements, particularly in terms of their experience in the army, and of the regular incomes they earned throughout their lives. True, most of the ex-soldiers under scrutiny were strictly controlled in the barracks, wherein no form of dissent was tolerated. There was, therefore, little scope for directly engaging in political activities while still serving in their regiments. Nonetheless, they had their own little oases in terms of a culturally and religiously homogenous

environment in their military bases. Given the policy of recruitment (See Chapter One), most of the soldiers in a regiment belonged to a particular caste; and often many in a battalion belonged to the same sub-caste or clan. So, even though a few high-caste Bahun priests controlled their religious affairs, and Hinduism was the official religion and culture of the barracks, the soldiers had their caste-specific religious, cultural and linguistic environment in the regiment; i.e., the *regimental kaida.* The cultural and religious differences between the regiments were so stark that even the British officers struggled to cope when being posted from one Gurkha regiment to another (from the Gurung-dominated 6th Gurkha Rifles to the Limbu's 10th Gurkha Rifles, for example). Consequently, most of the Gurkha officers, who controlled the men along with minimal supervision by a few British officers, belonged to the same castes. The Gurkha Major, who acted as the deputy head of an entire regiment, who had the greatest power among the under his command. Soldiers from other castes or cultural groups, including the higher castes, had to abide by the rules set by the dominant castes.

The environment of the barracks created a mind-set among the predominant Gurkha castes and communities that military men were to be highly valued. During my long association with retired soldiers in Nepal and Britain, I noted that their ways of thinking and behaving have been deeply influenced by their army careers, so much so that they often consider themselves as above other professions. And they want to continue to live as they did in the army. Even long after retirement, they often address each other on the basis of their rank in the army (Captain sahib, Major sahib, Lieutenant sahib, Sergeant

sahib); and those higher up the ranks continue to exercise greater prestige, to exert greater influence upon the Gurkha community than ordinary soldiers – and indeed civilians – in the diasporic community. Thus, one could suggest that the Gurkha community overseas is living some kind of military order *at large.*

Studies have shown that their military experiences have made a marked difference in the lives of the veterans. Burland and Lundquist (2013: 171 – 173) maintain that an ex-servicemen's and their families' successful reintegration into society depends on his (or her) career. If the soldier had been killed, suffered injury or psychological trauma, his family would struggle to reintegrate into society. They would easily forget the past if the soldier had been spared traumatic experiences. Eminent Israeli sociologist Herzog (2005) observes that, given the security challenges to the everyday lives of Israelis in the face of continued hostilities with the neighbouring Palestinians, and the central role of soldiers in protecting the lives and communities in danger, the Israeli society as a whole is deeply influenced by military thinking. Men with military experience enjoy considerably more prestige in society than those engaged in other professions. They are favoured to represent local schools, colleges, civil society groups and political parties. Herzog further argues that this environment has created a "civilian culture that is deeply influenced by the masculine-military mind-set" (2005: 217).

Imbued with this military mind-set, Gurkhas in Britain tend to think that unlike civilian migrants, they have the genuine right to live and work in Britain. They and their forefathers, they claim, have served long and hard often shedding their blood for the

British Crown. They may have excluded from Britain's shores until recently, but they felt that they always belonged to the nation by virtue of their extraordinary service to the country. There is thus a sense that whereas they have earned their place in the United Kingdom civilian Nepalis (mostly high castes) have not. These 'Other' Nepalis have made no contribution to the British Crown: hardly any of their fathers and grandfathers and fought and died for this country.[46] Their sense of pride is further enhanced by the fact that they arrived in the country not as a rag-tag group of unwanted immigrants in desperate search of a better life, but as proud military-oriented Gurkhas. They defeated the British Government in parliament in order to pave their way for immigration (see Chapter Two). Many research participants asked me not to call them 'immigrants'. They said that Britain had always been their home: that there was a relationship of blood. They considered themselves to be *de facto* citizens of the British Crown. And it is this incredible sense of pride that encouraged them to mobilize for a change in their status, both within the community and in British society.

Another boost that the Gurkhas received from their military careers is a source of regular income in the form of pay and pensions, new forms of income that have transformed them from rural peasants into urban middle classes. Studies have shown that in order for a civil society movement to have any chance of succeeding in developing countries, there has to be growth in the middle class (White 1994). Koo (2002) observes that in South Korea the rise of the middle class has led to the

[46] As I have shown in Chapter One, with some Gurkha regiments of the colonial Indian Army recruiting Chhetris and Thakuris, some high castes have fought and died for the UK, including in the two World Wars. But this historical fact is not taken into account in Gurkha discourses when they differentiate themselves from the civilian, i.e., mostly high-caste, Nepalis in the UK. It is also true, however, that few high-caste Nepalis in the UK are descendants of military men.

expansion of civil society, and to a consequent democratization. Furthermore, the author argues, the role of the similar class factor has been prominent in the democratization of many newly-industrialized countries in South East Asia (Koo 2002: 325). In the Indian context, Gudavarthy (2013) has shown that the rise of the urban middle class and professional groups has led to the spread of democratic processes at the grassroots level, including rural areas previously ruled by traditional laws. As I have shown in Chapter Two, many Gurkhas shifted to the towns particularly since the 1970s and 80s. It became possible to move out of the peasant villages due to the significant rise in the soldiers' pay and perks. Thus, for most Gurkha communities, change of class was directly linked to work with a foreign military. They did not make their mark in other areas; Nepal's business, commerce and trade have been controlled by mostly higher castes, including the Newar (Rankin 2004). It thus becomes clear that the Gurkhas' move to the towns of Nepal paved the way for the ethnicizing of their castes; i.e., for bringing the traditional celebrations of Lhochhar festival, a local tradition of the Gurung villages, not only to the large public grounds in Kathmandu and Pokhara, but to the towns and suburbs of England (see Chapter Three).

The third important factor that has contributed to the Gurkhas' ability to assume leadership roles in the UK is the extraordinary growth of anti-colonial sentiment among contemporary ex-servicemen. Some years ago, in her PhD dissertation titled "Relic of Empire", which she undertook at Stanford University, des Chene (1991) criticized the exploitation of Nepalese citizens by the British Empire throughout the centuries. She decried the British deployment of hundreds of thousands of citizens of an independent

country to fight and die for Britain's imperial interests in various parts of the world. In a later work, des Chene (1993) condemns both the colonial British authorities in India and Nepalese high-caste rulers for using – and abusing – Gurkhas' bodies as "diplomatic currency". Politically speaking, the Maoist insurgents vigorously opposed the recruitment of Nepalis into foreign militaries (Indian and British) and police (Singapore Police) as part of their central policies (Sing 2010: 63). They made efforts to stop the recruitment in various areas of the Nepalese hills. In 2003, in a prominent attack against the recruitment, militants abducted a senior British officer, who was also a Gurkha commander, overseeing the recruitment in rural Kaski, western Nepal (Palin 2004). Even though the officer and some of his Gurkha colleagues were later released unharmed, this was a strategic strike in terms of international publicity. It so happened that popular BBC documentary maker Michael Palin was in the area filming the recruitment as part of his Himalayan journey.

All of these anti-colonial efforts seem to have paid off. True, most of the young and old Gurkha soldiers to whom I spoke were incredibly proud of what they and their forefathers had achieved. They were delighted by the international fame they had once attracted. However, they were extremely resentful of the way in which they, especially their fathers and grandfathers, had been made to fight and die in terrible conditions around the world for little compensation. The oldest Gurkha campaign group Gurkha Army Ex-Servicemen's Organization (GAESO) has been at the forefront of this anti-colonial struggle. The group has been fighting both politically and legally for equal terms and conditions of service, including pay and pensions, since the early 1990s. But a few

other groups have been active as well, i.e., British Gurkha Welfare Society (BGWS) and some smaller others. As I have shown in Chapter Two, these groups' activism provided the platform for Gurkha migration. Even Lumley's famous campaign rode on the back of GAESO's extraordinary activism. Recently, the Gurkhas rallied outside the British Parliament and the Prime Minister's Office at Number 10 Downing Street, shouting slogans and carrying placards demanding equal pensions and settlement rights for their adult children. In 2014, a Gurkha bus driver named Gyan Raj Rai made the headlines by staging a hunger strike in front of the Prime Minister's residence. He wanted a set of Gurkha demands met, including those mentioned above. While Gurkha campaign groups are officially separate from the caste associations and caste-based parties, the same people are active in both. Given that recruitment was limited to specific castes, anti-colonial feeling imbricates with anti-high-caste sentiment.

There was a strong feeling among many activist Gurkhas that *qua* des Chene (1993), the high castes used "straightforward" and "illiterate" and "docile" Gurung, Magar, Rai and Limbu to lure them into go and fighting on behalf of the foreigners. There was the sense that both the British and Nepal's high-caste rulers reaped much of the benefits, but at the cost of terrible losses to the Gurkha men, their families and communities. A leader of Magar Association said:

> I believe the tradition of Gurkha service has done more harm to the Magar than good. If we had not been dispatched to fight and die in foreign lands for little returns for so long, perhaps most of us would have stayed in the country, and we could have become better educated. In that case, we would probably have been now in a much better position to challenge the hegemony of these Bahuns!

In sum, my analysis has shown that the Gurkhas' military careers and their unprecedented self-awareness of their rights as citizens of Nepal, as members of the Brigade of Gurkhas, provided the background for many ex-servicemen to be active in their ethnic movements in Nepal and abroad. The caste-specific Gurkha regiments meant that they were experienced in organizing themselves on the basis of caste, and in controlling members of other castes, including high castes, present in the regiment albeit in minuscule numbers. Moreover, the men's army careers not only gave them social prestige in their communities, but, in addition, provided them with a regular source of income, which has become substantial enough in recent times to enable them to live middle class lives in the towns of Nepal. Given that military service was the only way out of a toilsome peasant life in the village, the Gurkhas migrating internally played a critical role in ethnicizing their castes, and in building their politicized caste organizations in towns. And the extraordinary rise of anti-colonial sentiment, due in the main to the changing political scenario in Nepal, made them actively seek better status and terms of service in the Brigade of Gurkhas and, by extension, in their country as well as abroad. While there is little doubt that various other factors played a part in creating the activist in the loyal and dutiful soldier, the above seem to be the most prominent.

Conclusion

I have argued here that many Gurkhas have become enthusiastically involved in anti-caste activism in the UK, even though higher castes are no longer in charge of the host country, as in Nepal. This is mainly due to the influence of and reaction to what has

been happening in contemporary Nepal. This is actually evolving into a two-way process, such that overseas activism has also been influencing politics and activism at home in terms of both funding, and the mobilization of support. I have been focused here, however, on the impact of Nepal's anti-caste politics upon the diasporic community. This influence has been significant due to: first, the rise of ethnic and indigenous movements since the early 1990s (Hangen 2010) prompted many of Nepal's marginalized castes to assert their rights to inclusion in a high-caste dominated state. Second, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) launched a violent campaign for a socialist state. The anti-caste sentiments of the marginalized groups, including the Gurkhas, were used to mobilize grassroots support (Hutt 2004). Even though the higher castes dominated the insurgent leadership, many of the campaigners in the villages and towns were Gurkhas with civilian brothers and sisters. This activism and participation in the civil war greatly sensitized the Gurkhas vis-à-vis their status in a high-caste-dominated Nepalese society, with consequences for the diaspora community.

Even though the anti-caste activism effectuated by the Gurkhas in Britain was principally aimed at undermining the political and cultural hegemony of the high-caste Bahun and Chhetri in Nepal, it had a significantly negative impact upon the diasporic community. Throughout this study, I have argued that the transnational politics of anti-caste has increased the anti-Bahun-Chhetri sentiment intrinsic to the Gurkhas and their dependents in Britain. In particular, anti-caste campaigners visiting the UK from Nepal have also played a prominent part in promoting the identity of the marginalized castes

and, by extension, encouraging anti-high-caste attitudes and behaviour. As a consequence, high castes have been publicly vilified and humiliated by both everyday men and women and by activists. I will suggest that this surge in reverse discrimination has contributed to exacerbating the caste divide, and to minimizing the chances of overseas Nepalis coming together to meet the challenges of living in a foreign country.

These changes have also led to the change in the dynamics of power within the migrant community. Whereas until recently, high-caste Bahun, Chhetri and Newar monopolized the community leadership, in Nepal – and in most overseas communities – things are changing. The past years have seen assuming control. Of the four pre-eminent Gurkha castes, the Gurung have proven the most successful in snatching power from high castes. A number of presidents of the most important diaspora organization NRN UK have been Gurungs. The Limbu are gaining prominence also. They were given a second prominent role in the NRN UK after the April 2015 elections. The high castes have not totally lost out: many Bahun and Chhetri men continue to control several diasporic communities. However, their prospects of re-election have become tougher. Moreover, it has become vitally important to secure the support of the leaders of large Gurkha caste associations not only to ensure election to positions of power, but to take any important decision affecting the whole of the diasporic community. In effect, the Gurkhas are probably doing better in terms of snatching power from the higher castes in the UK than in Nepal and elsewhere.

Many of the high castes in Britain, who are rapidly losing prestige and power among the Nepalis, feel cornered many high castes in Britain felt cornered and unjustly treated in a new society wherein they are not regarded as different from the Gurkhas. The increasingly disparaging attitudes of the now dominant Gurkhas, and the perceived threat of their large, tight-knit caste associations, have made many Bahuns and Chhetris nervous. They feel imperative to fight back, but do not quite know how. Keeping a physical and social distance from the Gurkhas has been one of their coping strategies, so much so that fewer of them attended festivals and functions of the Gurkhas than earlier. Some Chhetris have opened their own caste associations, i.e., the Chhetri Samaj UK, and have started discussing the problems of reverse casteism. But, to date, these associations have been unable to mobilize their members to counter the threat of the Gurkhas.

As I have demonstrated in Chapter Three, due to the cultural politics of the Gurkha caste groups, the traditionally hegemonic religious and cultural traditions of the higher castes are encountered serious challenges among the Nepalese community in Britain. Not only is their prestige as superior castes being challenged: their traditional authority in the community is being eroded. In this chapter, I have attempted to demonstrate the many ways in which the middle ranks of the Gurkhas have been actively overtaking the high castes in terms of political power and prestige overseas, and how transnational politics (Tarrow 2005) has proven the key. In Chapter Five, I will explore the various ways in which the lower-caste Nepalis are adapting to this changing scenario.

Chapter Five

Perpetual Suffering: British Nepalese 'Untouchables'[47]

In November 2011, an atrocious act committed on a low-caste (Dalit) man in the village of Ghandruk, a well-known Gurkha community of western Nepal, made the headlines.[48] A group of Gurung assaulted the head teacher of the local primary school, smeared his face with soot, then paraded him around the village. He had angered the villagers by insisting that members of the local Dalit community be included in a communal feast to celebrate the successful completion of a drinking water project. Despite the preponderance of Gurung in the village, some 25 households were occupied by low-caste tailors and blacksmiths, who had always been ostracized by the community due to their perceived ritual impurity and lowly status. The Dalit headmaster had been attacked for attempting to breach the traditional codes of caste that advocate segregation of the untouchables. The man received so many threats from the villagers that he finally fled to the town of Pokhara for safety.

Acts of violence and intimidation perpetrated on Nepal's three million plus low castes[49] in Nepal are common, particularly in the rural areas of the county (Folmar 2013; Bhattachan 2003; Cameron 1998). The middle ranking castes – including the Gurkha castes and others who identify themselves as *Janajatis*, and Madhesis and Tharus –

[47] Given the sensitivity of the issue of caste discrimination and untouchability, and the visible identity of many people from a tiny low-caste community, I will not provide the names (not even pseudonyms used elsewhere) or locations of the informants in this chapter.

[48] http://www.ekantipur.com/the-kathmandu-post/2011/11/16/nation/dalit-man-smeared-with-soot/228298.html *[Last accessed 27 June 2015].*

[49] According to the Nepal Population Census 2001, there were 3,030,067 Dalits – 13 per cent of the total population – in the country (Niroula 2011: 76).

also suffer exclusion and marginalization by the higher castes; but, in turn, they discriminate against those considered lower than themselves (Hangen 2010: 26 – 27). As I suggest in the Introduction, Nepal's untouchables are at the bottom of the traditional social hierarchy, below the middle-ranking Gurkhas. This widespread notion of social hierarchy is a result of centuries of social practice and legal system adopted by the Nepalese authorities. Although the caste system was first promoted as a legal system by Jayasthiti Malla, a ruler of Kathmandu Valley in the second half of the fourteenth century, the 1854 Civil Code (*Muluki Ain)* prepared a more comprehensive framework of the traditional caste system (Höfer 1979). The 1854 Code included all Nepalese castes and ethnic groups in a single hierarchy, with the 'impure and untouchable' castes – the Kami, Sarki, Damai, Khadara, Gaine, Badi, Pode and Chame – at the base (Pandey 2005: 81).

The traditional caste system defines the untouchables as ritually impure: they are not to have physical contact with other castes. Earlier officially identified as *pani nachalne jat* (those with whom no water-related transactions are possible), they were forbidden to exchange water and food, and to share residence with others (Rankin 2004: 139). No person from another caste may marry a low caste. Their extremely limited individual freedom meant that, earlier, they were barred from: owning property, pursuing education, choosing a career, and practising religion. They had no option but to follow their highly stigmatized ancestral occupations, e.g., tailoring, blacksmithing, scavenging, playing drums, leather work, and to serve the higher castes for little or no return (Höfer 1979). Nepal has obviously changed in many ways in the recent past, so much so that

today, both constitutionally and legally, low castes are equal to other citizens (Sajjad 2013: 62-63). However, certain forms of discrimination exercised against them, especially as ritually impure untouchables, persist. Cameron's (1998) ethnography of a hill village in far-western Nepal reveals the degree to which the low castes have been socially and religiously discriminated against and economically exploited. They are not allowed into private homes, temples and shops, nor are they allowed access to public resources like wells and, sometimes, schools. Verbal abuse and physical violence, especially when they are found flouting the caste rules, are commonplace. Cameron's fieldwork was undertaken in a remote village some time ago, in the 1990s. But, even today, many low castes continue to suffer discrimination and violence across Nepalese villages and towns (Folmar 2013; Katuwal 2008). Nepalese anthropologist Bhattachan (2003) has identified more than 200 different types of abuse and discriminatory practices perpetrated against the low castes in modern Nepal.

The following question may be asked: Why does this inhumane practice of untouchability based on an ancient caste system still prevail in modern times? To date, there has been little scholarly research on the issues of untouchability and discrimination levelled against Nepalese Dalits (Folmar *et al.* 2015); but the various studies of the caste system in India reveal that over 150 million Dalits suffer a similar fate (Still 2014: 8; Shah 2006: 13). Those scholars who have studied low-caste communities have sought to understand why this ancient tradition continues to thrive in democratic and neo-liberal India (Thorat and Neuman 2012; Aktor and Deliège 2010; Omvedt 2006; Deliège 1999; Michael 1999; Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998; Srinivas

1976). One scholar, whose work on caste evoked much discussion, is Dumont (1980), who argued that the Hindu religion is the foundation of the caste system. Because the latter has its roots in religious faith, Hindus accept their ranking in society without question, including those perceived as lowest of the low, who suffer great material disadvantage. Dumont claimed that it is not material situation but ritual purity that forms the backbone of India's social hierarchy, where inborn purity of the apex-caste Brahmin is complimentary to the impurity of the low caste. Moffatt's (1979) ethnography of a Dalit community in South India revealed that low castes expressed their consent to the values and culture of the caste system by replicating the social hierarchy within their social structure. However, Deliège (1997), a long-term researcher of India's low caste, after studying the same Dalit community – the Paraiyar of Tamil Nadu – strongly contests Moffatt's thesis. He stresses that their replication of hierarchy among themselves does not mean the low castes accept their debased position in society, that they accept their ranking below the Brahmins. Many of the more recent studies of Indian caste centre upon the Dalit's struggle for freedom, on their fight for access to the power and resources traditionally denied them (Still 2014; Aktor and Deliège 2010; Bose 2009; Jaffrelot 2000; Sadangi 2008).

So far, my focus has been upon untouchables struggling to overcome discrimination and stigma in their home countries. But how are they faring overseas? Does migration offer them freedom from the oppressive caste systems that dominate their home countries, or do they travel with them, continue to hurt them in some way? According to the very few research who have studied overseas Dalits, there has been a big change

in the latter's status. While some scholars (Shah 2015a, 2015b; Singh 2-14) flatly deny the existence of any discrimination against the low castes abroad, i.e., in Britain, others note some degree of discrimination albeit not quite as bad as in the home country. For example, Lum (2011: 185), writing about low-caste Sikhs, the Ravidasias living in Spain, notes that while there was a degree of discrimination against the low caste by dominant Jat Sikhs, "they are not treated as untouchables and hence do not experience the same degree and intensity of discrimination." Kumar (2004: 114) divides the Indian Dalit diasporas into two groups: old and new. The older comprises mainly Dalits who were transported as indentured coolies or contractors to work on colonial plantations and projects in former British colonies (See Chapter One). The new diaspora comprises those semi-literate or professional Dalits who emigrated to the UK and the US in the second half of the twentieth century. Kumar argues that overseas untouchables in both categories have suffered some form of injustice and indignity in their overseas communities, have recently joined the Dalits of India in their fight for their rights and dignity.

A recent lobby by various organized Indian Dalit groups in Britain, e.g., the Anti-Caste Discrimination Alliance, International Dalit Solidarity Network and Voice of Dalit International, to introduce an anti-caste discrimination law to challenge their continued stigmatization by fellow Indians has evoked an unprecedented debate among academics, policymakers and journalists. Scholars sympathetic to the Dalit call have emphasized several examples of discriminatory practices perpetuated by Hindu and Sikh communities (Dhanda 2014; Ghuman 2011; Waughray 2009). High-caste

lobbyists, who are doing everything in their power to block the anti-caste discrimination bill, claim that caste discrimination does not simply exist in the United Kingdom (Shah 2015b). These conflicting views from within the Indian diaspora community have not only further complicated the debate, but led to inaction by the government and political parties. In an attempt to present a more to present a more comprehensive picture of the situation of low-caste Hindus and Sikhs in the UK, Professor Ghuman wrote *British Untouchables,* probably the first book-length treatise on the issue of untouchability among overseas communities. Ghuman used his extensive knowledge of the Indian communities in North England, and of Indian society in general in his home village in the Punjab, to make the case that, despite many inevitable changes, prejudice against the lower castes has persisted. It has impacted upon their lives in many ways, including on the education of their children and grandchildren. The author's central argument is that the institutions of family, kinship and religion have been fundamental in perpetuating caste discrimination and untouchability abroad (Ghuman 2011: 6 – 7).

This chapter in part contributes to the growing literature on the Dalits in diaspora, particularly in the UK. And, my study is the first research on Nepalese Hindu Dalits' situation in the diaspora. It confirms Ghuman's (2011) findings that caste discrimination and untouchability continue to be a real problem within various South Asian migrant communities, and adds to the dimensions of his analysis on overseas caste. Regarding his argument, I find that the notion of ritual impurity is the primary basis of the 'othering' of low castes by fellow nationals in the diaspora. Unlike the high-caste Nepalis discussed in the previous chapter, most low-caste Nepalis are ex-military, and their

families immigrated recently together with other Gurkhas. In reality, they are part of the regiment albeit not actual fighting soldiers: they provide support as tailors, cobblers/shoemakers and blacksmiths. As suggested in Chapter One, those Dalits who have been recruited into the Gurkha regiment (in small numbers) find that their traditional roles continue to attract stigma. The essential artisan does work no one else will do due to the ritual pollution associated with his/her work. However, the Dalit members of the regiment are paid exactly the same as every other Gurkha soldier. Therefore, unlike their mostly impoverished brethren in Nepal, they are considered middle class in Nepalese society and equal to most of the other ex-soldiers in class terms. For this reason, the Nepalese Dalit diaspora in Britain is an interesting case to examine to determine how caste persists even when socio-economic status improves. My analysis here adds to Ghuman's study in at least two ways: first, given the recent migration of Gurkhas, I am able to investigate how discrimination and untouchability persisted, and determined the lives of migrants living in the twenty-first century (given that most Indians arrived in the UK half a century ago); and, second, my analysis of the Dalit experience is closely tied to their military experience, phenomenon absent from Ghuman's analysis. Given that many Sikh migrants in the UK belong to military families, it is possible that, like the Gurkhas, the dynamics of caste among the Sikh diaspora should be shaped – at least to some degree – by their long and celebrated tradition of military service.

In this chapter, I seek to demonstrate how Nepalese Dalits, particularly retired regimental tailors, blacksmiths and cobblers (and their families) have been plagued by

problems associated with caste discrimination and untouchability in the UK. I detail the efforts that individuals and families have made some efforts to fight back; and explore the reasons why they find themselves exposed to discrimination in the UK. First I describe some of the discriminatory practices experienced by the low castes, both anecdotal and observed. I present the views of both Dalit perpetrators and victims to discover where the conflict/tension lies. Most of these actions go unchecked; but some Dalits make an effort to fight back, an issue I explore in the second part of the chapter. In the last section, I seek to identify some of the more critical factors, including those related to military policies and practices, which have made the low-caste members vulnerable to traditional discrimination and prejudice in English cities and towns.

Forms of Caste Discrimination and Untouchability Overseas

While Nepalese Dalits in Britain are not faced with the same levels of violence, intimidation and discrimination they experience in their own country, they continue to be treated as a distinct group, i.e., untouchables, by fellow Nepalis. The traditional religious notion of ritual pollution has proven a major source of differentiating and demeaning them. And, although I did not see or hear of any physical attack against the Dalits in the in the UK, many were fearful of the castes perceived higher than them, – contrary to the Gurung, Magar, Rai and Limbu who are more brave – particularly the majority Gurkhas. They tended to be extremely careful when dealing with the upper castes, especially in areas of social life in which traditional caste norms might be potentially breached. I am not suggesting that all members of the dominant castes honour the traditional rules of caste, but many did, at least to some extent. Many had changed and adopted more

liberal values, but not in every way; thus, the unpredictability of people's behaviour was a cause of concern in Dalits' dealings with the dominant castes.

Their fear of the majority Gurkhas was evident also in my informal and formal interviews with many Dalits. They did not necessarily fear the violent behaviour of the Gurung, Magar, Rai and Limbu (in part due to their trust in British law and order), but they worried about other forms of possible reprisals. For example, they feared that their jobs or businesses might suffer, and that their cross-caste support networks based on village or regiment might break. Due to the serious anxiety expressed by my informants, I assured them that I would not use any of their names and I omit their reference to specific locations in this chapter. Despite the silence surrounding the problems of caste, and often the very subtle nature of untouchability, I was able to comprehend the problems and worries of many low castes in Britain. I had come to know many of them personally after attending several parties and functions hosted by them when I was living in England (Pariyar 2011). As well, I socialized with many Dalits during my extended stay for research. In this section, I present some of the core themes that delineate Nepalese Dalit identity in the UK: spatial segregation, commensality, restrictions on marriage choices and, most disturbing of all, ubiquitous verbal abuse.

One of the traditions of the caste system that many Gurkhas (and, of course, other civilian Nepalis) have continued to observe in the diaspora is the exclusion of untouchables from their domestic space. This was most visible in the unwritten rules about renting properties from Nepalese landlords. Many Nepalis sought to rent or lease

properties to fellow countrymen, arrangements often negotiated through informal contacts. During these negotiations, one of the first things that a landlord seeks to establish about a potential tenant is his or her surname (which usually indicates caste). The first preference would be someone from their own caste; and, if this was not possible, someone from a similar caste (for example, Gurung/Magar, Rai/Limbu, Bahun/Chhetri). If perceived compatible castes were not available, they would then select some other castes, but never those of low caste.

I personally tested this by making some phone calls to potential landlords in Aldershot, Farnborough, Reading and Ashford. I first collected details of the available properties from local Nepalese grocery stores; then, I phoned the landlords. In most cases, ex-servicemen received the phone – not their wives or children – and dealt with the request for renting. At the outset, they usually hinted their interest to know whether it was a man or woman who wanted to rent the house, then they asked about caste. In more than 80 per cent of cases, the landlords declined tenancy when I told them that it was a – fictional – Kami, Damai or Sarki wanting to rent their property. The rejection rate was much higher if the landlord planned to share the house with his/her tenants.

Most low castes were aware of the difficulties they could face when renting properties from Nepalese landlords: many had personally experienced them. Among the predominant Gurkha castes, often one group tended to blame another group more. The Dalits themselves, however, did not make any such distinctions. In order to avoid unpleasant experiences, many low-caste renters approached low-caste landlords where

possible. If not, they sometimes concealed their caste identities from upper-caste landlords, a practice commonly seen in Nepalese towns. There, too, renting is a huge issue for the low castes: often they are evicted when their caste is found out.[50] Interestingly, some similar incidents occurred in the UK as well. A Sarki man recalled:

> I was sharing two rooms with a lovely Gurung family from Pokhara in Wembley, London. Initially, I had no problem because I had told the hosts that I was a Thapa – Chhetri. We had become great friends, almost like a family, until someone from my village came to see me one fateful day. As we chatted in the shared lounge room, the brute told me how much he appreciated the tailoring skills of my father. The woman in the house overheard him, and, within hours of the visitor's departure, her husband told me to find somewhere else to live. He made a false excuse, saying that one of his relatives was moving in immediately. But, doubtless, my caste identity was the only issue for them.

During the interviews, many Gurkhas admitted that Dalits struggled to rent Nepalese houses in England. A Gurung man said that some 90 per cent of the households would not agree to sharing a flat or house with a low caste, while another put it at 70 per cent. Some even flatly refused to accept this problem, arguing that it was natural for anyone to prefer to live with their own kind. However, my close observation revealed that there was not a single Gurkha home sharing accommodation with low castes in the towns of Aldershot and Farnborough. Given the sudden influx of Gurkha families, and the limited number of affordable properties in these small towns, many Nepalese families shared houses. Bu the Dalits were effectively kept out. Even the close family friends and villagers often observed this caste rule in the domestic space. Many low castes, particularly the elderly couples, said that their villagers from dominant castes greatly assisted them when they arrived in England, a support vital for those who did not have

[50] For example, in February 2013, *Kathmandu Post* highlighted the persistent problem of Dalits in renting properties in Nepalese towns, including the capital city, Kathmandu. It reported a typical incident in which a goldsmith was removed from his rented room in Kathmandu after the landlord found out about his low-caste identity. He had called himself an upper caste in order to secure the rented property two weeks ago. See http://kathmandupost.ekantipur.com/printedition/news/2013-02-11/problems-in-renting-rooms.html *[Accessed 20 January 2016].*

their families and kin in England. The Gurung and Magar picked them up from the airport, bought them food and drinks, found them an accommodation and helped with processing their applications for state benefits and pension credit. However, in the words of an elderly Damai man, “our kind villagers did everything they could to enable us to settle in our new country; but, interestingly, they did not host us in their homes – not even for a single night.”

Many working-age retired tailors, blacksmiths and cobblers/shoemakers told me that their exclusion from domestic space had been a growing pattern in their community. Because many Dalit ex-servicemen were recruited from Gurkha villages, they had many friends and neighbours living in the same towns or suburbs in England. But they rarely met in their homes. When required, the villagers contacted them, usually in pubs and restaurants. A retired blacksmith in his early fifties found this change in the diaspora quite remarkable:

> I find it extraordinary how me and my family have been avoided by my villagers, including some of our close family friends over a long time. The men I grew up with, and enlisted and served in the regiment together, live in the same town in England. Although they used to always invite us in their family functions in Nepal, they rarely do so here. We do meet at public gatherings and festivals, and sometimes in restaurants and pubs. But I am no longer welcome at their homes, no longer to their social circles. I do not know what caused this, but, clearly, caste seems to have hardened overseas.

Part of the reason for keeping Dalits out of the domestic sphere is attributable to the traditional caste rules about commensality, a second form of caste discrimination I want to explore here. Rules of commensality mean that the low castes are forbidden to share food with other castes, and their social mixing is restricted, so much so that they are forced to live on the margins of villages or towns, drink from separate wells, and even avoid their shadows falling on other castes (Bates 2007: 8). As ritual purity is a relative

concept, other castes, too, suffer to an extent, but not as much as the low castes. In Nepal, high-caste Bahun and Chhetri may not accept food and water from other groups including the Gurung (Macfarlane 1990: 2). Like the higher castes, the middle castes in turn treat the Kami, Damai and Sarki in the same way. For example, while the Thulung Rai of eastern Nepal mix quite freely in public, they avoid taking food – particularly cooked rice and water – from the low castes as part of their cultural and religious tradition (Allen 1997: 313). Even when Dalits are employed in upper-caste households as domestic labour, they are not allowed into the kitchen. And the utensils they use are often purified using cow's urine (Riaz and Basu 2007: 81). The same attitudinal and behavioural pattern is observed, at least to some extent, by many Nepalis (including Gurkha households) in England.

It is important here to make a distinction between the public and private spheres when discussing problems associated with caste-induced restrictions vis-à-vis social interaction in the diaspora. When I raised this issue, many community leaders and activists of predominant Gurkhas castes refuted it, referring to people mixing freely and inter-dining at public venues. The Gurkhas provided the example of a popular restaurant in an English town fully-owned and operated by a blacksmith family. One ex-serviceman asked: "If people were sensitive to pollution of food and water touched by the lower castes, why is this restaurant still doing business, particularly in terms of catering to big community functions?" Another example was that of a popular Gurkha restaurant (owned by a Gurung man) in a Hampshire town, which had a former blacksmith working as the head chef. Even at parties and functions, and in restaurants and pubs, people

often sat and ate at different tables or in corners of the venue. But there was definitely no issue with having to take food from the same containers and drink water from the same fountains. Clearly, there is a level of intermixing and inter-dining in public venues; however, this belies the sensitivities of many upper-caste Nepalis about dining with low caste in the private domain, i.e., in their homes. This public-private dichotomy is conceptually significant conceptual point in terms of caste sensitivities. In the public venues, for example, due to the growth of cities like Kathmandu and Mumbai, consumers' socio-economic status become important. Therefore, it is difficult to police caste. Similarly, caste in the migration context also gets de-emphasized in the public venues (which may as well be shared by other non-Nepalese groups). But the private domain is different; as it is under the absolute control of the individual. It is therefore possible to observe caste strictures here.

Unlike in Nepalese villages, it is obviously difficult to observe how Dalits are treated at home by the Gurkhas and other upper castes, partly because, as I have explained earlier, there is little socialization with the Dalits. For this reason, I had to collect much of the information about discriminatory practices in private spaces, mainly through people's personal recollections. And I found many anecdotal instances of patronizing behaviour in, for example, Gurung and Magar homes.

I met one elderly Damai man and his wife, who were among the few Dalits sometimes invited for dinner by Gurung villagers at their homes in a Hampshire town; and there they were treated much the same way as they were in Nepal. His wife said:

> When we have dinner at our villagers' homes, they make us eat on a separate table outside the kitchen. Once we have eaten, we are expected to do our own dishes, and keep the plates and cutlery in a special place. I do not know if they purify these items after we have left, as in the village, but it is bad enough that we are treated as untouchables. I am not worried about having to do the dishes: I would happily do theirs too. It is not about having to clean our own plates; we would happily clean theirs too! But it is hurtful, though not totally surprising, to see untouchability at work despite coming so far from home.

Another Sarki couple said that they were not invited to people's houses; but sometimes the villagers visited them in their little rented flat. They were very happy to have people visit them and talk to them about their new life in England, and about what was going on in their dear home village. Again they did not have any relatives or family in England, so for them anyone visiting was a happy occasion. The woman made attempts to welcome their visitors by offering them food and drink, but, sadly they would not accept anything. Visitors brought them food and drinks, including beer and whisky, but they would not consume anything with them, not even the beer they had brought as a gift.

The elderly Sarki man recalled an instance when they did manage to get a visiting man to drink some tea but not his wife:

> We were really excited to receive the major sahib and his wife from our village; we have known them all our lives, including in the regiment. I hesitatingly offered them the tea and, luckily, the man accepted it. When my wife brought tea for them, the man drank it while the woman did not take it. She made an excuse about too much sugar in the tea. Her excuse was that there was too much sugar in it – but this was a lie: lips had not even touched the cup! So the real problem was sugar-coated caste!

A retired blacksmith in his early fifties had a regrettable experience in late 2012 in terms of social exclusion from the domestic/ritual sphere. He was close to a Gurkha family originally from his village, such that they were fictive kin (*miteri saino)*. He used to call the Gurkha 'brother' and his parents were the blacksmith's 'parents' according to

kinship. One day, he received a phone call saying that the old Gurkha, the father, had died. He immediately left his work (in the armoury division of a local garrison), collected his wife from her workplace (cleaner in a local Travelodge hotel), and drove to join his fictive kin. When they were about to arrive, he received another call from his fictive brother, telling him not to come to the funeral that day. He indicated that although he and his wife had no problem welcoming him, his elderly mother, as well as some other members of the extended family and kin, were “uncomfortable” inviting a low-caste. He would be welcome the following day when the rituals were over and most of his relatives had gone. “This was the worst moment of my life in England,” said the blacksmith. Following that terrible experience, their relationship abruptly ended.

In addition to these anecdotes, sometimes I personally observed low castes being excluded from Gurkha social circles, including from the exchange of consumables. For example, I spent many afternoons talking to a tailor and his wife: they ran a modest tailoring business in their little flat. Given the popularity of the man for his great tailoring skills in his home village, he always had customers from the region. Often women came, asking him to make new dresses or alter used clothing. They spent several hours conversing with the tailors, and watching them work expertly at their sewing machines. Sometimes the women stayed there for several hours until their dresses were made or older clothes revamped. Curiously, however, they did not accept anything from the tailors, not even water when they were thirsty. And, despite the hospitable Nepalese custom to offer tea, drinks and food to visitors, the tailors opted not to offer, conscious of their social status. They later told me that they feared they could offend the

customers if they made an offer; so it was better to just keep working and not mention any food or drink. Thus, even if Dalits had known the Gurkhas and their families over a very long time, the traditional social distance was usually retained.

Another well-known identity of Nepalese Dalit in the UK, as in Nepal, is the group with whom social relationships, particularly marriage, are to be strictly avoided. Ghuman (2011) cogently argues that marriage has been an important factor fuelling caste discrimination among the Hindus and Sikhs in England. This is very true among Nepalis as well. Caste is an endogamous category, the norm being to marry within one's own caste. As Widdess (2013: 14) observes, in Nepal "caste endogamy is still largely observed." Because, as suggested earlier, ritual purity is a relative concept between each caste category, one group will try to avoid union with another, particularly those considered of a lower caste. For example, a high-caste Bahun family will not accept a Gurung or Magar as a bride or bridegroom. Sometimes endogamy is strong among sub-castes or clans within a caste group as well. Some men belonging to the Ghale clan of the Gurung, originally from the Barpak village of Gorkha district, told me that traditionally they would not approve of their sons marrying Gurung women. Nor would they approve their marriages to women of other castes. If marriage did occur with other Gurung clans by individual choice, the Gurung bride would never be considered a genuine member of the household; and, she would be barred from touching the hearth in the house.

According to the traditions of caste in Nepal (and in many areas of South Asia), there is often punishment for intermarriage between different caste groups. But this should not

dilute, as some Gurkhas attempted to do during their interviews, the issue with the low castes. The greatest social sanctions are against marriage with a low caste (Sajjad 2013: 62). In most South Asian societies, and certainly in Gurkha communities, this type of union would cause a serious loss of prestige and honour – *izzat* – in an upper-caste family; and, invariably the onus would be on the woman (Kalpagam and Arunachalam 2008: 244). Once the rule is broken, the higher-caste partner is usually banished from his family and stripped of his social status, by extension rendering him/her a new untouchable. In some cases, the couple and the low-caste family could face violence from the upper-caste family in defence of the latter's honour.

For example, according to human rights groups, in central Nepal, in August 2011, a family of an upper-caste girl attacked a tailor's family and killed a 50-year-old man.[51] It was a revenge attack by the high-caste family after their daughter eloped with the tailor's son, who was later revealed to have been her secret lover for some time. This is a typical case of caste violence occurring in Nepal, and in many areas of South Asia, when customary codes vis-à-vis intermarriage are breached. According to the Human Rights Watch (2007: 70), "condemnation of marriage between Dalits and caste members can be quite severe, ranging from social ostracism to punitive violence, including large-scale attacks on Dalit communities."

Fortunately, I have neither seen nor heard of physical attacks against the low castes for marrying into another caste group in the UK, mainly because most of the marriages –

[51] Further details on the incident are available at: http://www.minorityvoices.org/news.php/en/831/nepal-killing-underscores-persistent-problem-of-inter-caste-discrimination *[Accessed 12 January 2015].*

either arranged by parents and relatives, or out of individual choice of the partners – were endogamous. But, notwithstanding, the threat of excommunication from one's family and community for committing this "crime" is real. I saw many instances of love affairs among young Gurkhas: they had greater freedom to be in a relationship before marriage (although cohabitation is rare) than their high caste counterparts. However, the young people were well aware of the consequences should they fall in love with another caste, particularly an untouchable. Having said this, however, I did find a few inter-caste marriages between low and upper castes; but, invariably, they were excommunicated from the upper-caste family and community. These examples were evidence to the rest of the young population of what would happen to them if they made the "mistake" of marrying a low caste. During my research, I spoke with young Gurkha children from a range of castes and they were well aware of how the sensitivities of caste could impact on their relationships. Many said that their parents kept nagging at them to ensure that they did not form attachments to lower-caste boys or girls at schools or colleges.

And, indubitably, this often led to discrimination against low-caste students in the country's education institutions. Ghuman (2011) found ubiquitous caste discrimination in schools and colleges dominated by Indian students in North England. Sometimes the problem was so serious that the whole family was affected. And some Nepalese students faced similar problems. One blacksmith family was shocked by how their young daughter had been treated by some of her best friends at college. The father said:

> One day, our daughter came home crying. She said that she did not wish to go to college anymore. One of her male friends, a Magar man, had told everyone in the class about his parents constantly reminding him to stay clear of her in case he would fall in love with her. They had been alerting him always to avoid dishonour to his family by choosing an untouchable woman. British classmates took it as a joke, as they did not understand the depth of the matter, which further insulted my daughter. I was terribly upset about my daughter having to face the same problem of caste in a western country, but there was nothing I could really do about it.

This takes me to my final and most important aspect of caste discrimination that profoundly hurts the lower castes in their daily lives in the diaspora: humiliating verbal abuse and caste bullying. There is a lot of bullying of Dalits in South Asian societies, including widespread use of abusive language and name calling, in contemporary India (Solotaroff and Pande 2014: 117). And, it is no different in Nepal. As Bhattachan (2003) shows, low-caste names are popularly used as abusive terms by non-Dalits in Nepal, some of the notorious being the Kami, Damai and Sarki. These are the original names of the castes, which also refer to their traditional occupations. But, these terms have come to represent a very low status in society marked by segregation, poverty and filth. So the terms ‘Kami’, ‘Damai’ and ‘Sarki’ have become metaphors for everything that is bad and anti-social, i.e., poverty, low morality, laziness, filthy habits, lack of hygiene, dirt, ignorance and black faces.

I saw that with the rising tide of caste politics in the diasporic community over the years (see Chapters three and four), and the consequent increase in caste consciousness among the masses, casteism has become salient among overseas Nepalis in the UK. There has been a sharp increase in the cases of vilification and name calling of Dalits in Gurkha communities. And, according to my research participants, Gurkhas and their dependents tend to use stereotypical terms against low castes more often than high-

caste Bahun and Chhetri (also cautioning that my research did not explore the settlements dominated by the high-caste Bahun and Chhetri). An old Sarki man whispered in my ears one day: “You know, there is more caste here than in Nepal – and Gurung and Magar have become the new Bahun and Chhetri in terms of humiliating us here! They frequently demean us, calling us filthy Kami-Damai-Sarki, as they used to in Nepal and in the regiment.”

The problem of caste bullying and name calling was widespread in the Nepalese community in the UK, so much so that many Dalits dreaded meeting upper-caste Nepalis. The low castes feared even those Nepalis who they did not know earlier because, in many instances, they wanted to become acquainted after first inquiring about the caste of the new person. And, in the experience of many low castes, people’s attitude changed immediately after discovering that a new person is a Dalit. On occasion, I personally felt this while meeting Nepalis. One day, an elderly Rai Gurkha asked me in front of everyone: “Are you really a Damai; how could a Damai do a PhD?” (These issues have been elaborated further upon in the research section of the Introduction). So, Dalits of all ages and sexes, and with different educational qualifications and wealth, fear being ridiculed and abused by the Gurkhas and other higher castes publicly, either in subtle ways or more directly. I will now relate some of the typically direct forms of verbal abuse directed by fellow Nepalis against the low castes.

During my interview with a 75-year-old Sarki man – a retired regimental shoemaker – and his wife, the former became very angry when recalling his recent experience in a Gurkha community hall:

> I was watching a folk music programme on a Nepalese TV channel together with other elderly Gurkhas and their spouses in the hall. Suddenly, an old man sitting next to me said: "You stink like cow's hide, old Sarki; you eat my testicles!" He said this in the Gurung tongue, probably hoping that I would not understand him; but I did. Born and brought up in the outskirts of a Gurung village, and having served in the 6th Gurkha Rifles (populated by the Gurung) more than 12 years, I was fluent in the Gurung dialect. So, as people were laughing at me, I stood up and told him to eat my genitals instead. Then, I walked out.

Such abuse occurs – either out of the influence of *habitus* or consciously – even at formal meetings. A retired regimental blacksmith, and current businessman and community leader, recalled his utter humiliation and embarrassment during an important meeting attended by the representatives of several diasporic organizations. Because a man continued to speak longer than the time allocated to him, the chair of the meeting – a respected community leader and retired Gurkha officer – said to the speaker: "Come on, state your point of view quickly instead of blathering like Kami-Damai!" The chairman's words silenced not only the speaker, but everyone in the hall. It was a tense and awkward moment. People were visibly shocked not by what had been uttered, but due to the presence of a blacksmith man, a prominent member of the community, right there among them! He obviously felt greatly insulted, but he just kept quiet and tried to remain composed for the rest of the programme. This incident caused quite a scandal in the community.

Many Dalits recalled having to tolerate humiliating casteist jokes and remarks at work as well. A wife of a tailor once had a terrible experience with her colleagues in a hotel in

Basingstoke, where she worked, together with some other Gurkha spouses, as a cleaner. They were kept very busy and were allowed a very short lunch break, during which they either ate the food they had brought from home, or bought something from the nearby McDonald's. One afternoon, McDonald's had run out of chicken burgers. The women were hungry but did not have the time to wait longer. Then a Rai woman said to the tailor's wife: "Why don't you take beef: an untouchable, you can eat anything, can't you?" The tailor's wife was so humiliated that she started sobbing. She did not go to work for several days after the incident.

In sum, Dalits in the UK suffer different forms of exclusion and vilification due to the low or untouchable status forced on them by the caste system. They are not subjected to the same level of social persecution and marginalization they experienced in Nepal, but they are abused and humiliated by other Nepalis at every opportunity. This may not be a frequent problem in every town or city, but it was certainly the experience of most Dalits of all ages who either lived or sojourned in major Gurkha settlements, such as Aldershot, Farnborough, Reading, London, Ashford and Folkestone. It is not possible to enumerate all of the forms of caste discrimination that Dalits are subjected to in the diaspora. But I have identified at least some of the most common problems in this section. The question may then arise: Are these overseas Dalits passive victims, or do they make an effort to fight back? I seek to provide an answer in the following section.

Dalit Individuals and Families Fighting Casteism Abroad

Despite the extraordinary rise of anti-caste politics in Nepal, spearheaded by caste groups calling themselves *Janajatis*, Madhesis and Tharus, the most oppressed groups, i.e., the Dalits, have been left far behind. As Tara Lal Shrestha, a *Janajati* academic in Kathmandu studying the Dalits has lamented, both at seminars and privately, the deep-rooted caste divisions mean that there is no unity between agitating ethnic/caste groups and Dalits, even though they share a common enemy, the high-caste Hindu. The impressive assertion of Dalit identity in India (Aktor and Deliège 2010) is nowhere to be found in the neighbouring Himalayan nation. Some Nepalese low castes have organized themselves through the dedicated wings of the political parties, non-government organizations (NGOs) and a couple of their own political parties. But the Dalit social movement for change has failed to take off (Folmar 2013; Cameron 2007). This lack of political movement for the liberation of Dalits may give the impression that they simply internalize their status and naively accept oppressive behaviour. Folmar (2007), who disagrees with this supposition, insists that the Dalit often attempt to subvert high-caste domination in their everyday practice, albeit in subtle ways. Based on his fieldwork among Dalits households in a Lamjung village, he argues: “Through the constant application of subtle subversive pressure, Dalits thread together a tapestry of resistance that can appear as acceptance” (Folmar 2007: 48). As I shall show below, this is very true of the Nepalese Dalits living in the UK. Unlike the Indian Dalits, they lack strong lobby groups; and, while they are not even part of the overseas anti-caste movement, they are using different means to challenge their continued subordination wherever possible, both as individuals and families.

One of the subtler forms of resistance employed by the Nepalese Dalits in Britain has been the formation of their own caste associations. Three groups belong to these caste associations: the pioneering Srijanshil Nepali Samaj comprising the tailors, blacksmiths and shoemakers; Bishwakarma Samaj UK, consisting of only members of the Kami caste only; and, the more recently opened Sangam Nepali Samaj, which comprises only the Damai, including many retired tailors from the regiments. Unlike the Indian Dalit lobby groups and prominent Gurkha caste associations, these Dalit associations are not active as campaign groups against caste oppression. They do not officially debate the issues of caste, nor do they make any representations at Nepalese gatherings on issues of caste discrimination, partly because these groups are too small, less than a hundred families in each. Nonetheless, according to my research participants, the small functions and gatherings organized by Dalit groups provide public platforms for people to enjoy and meet people in an environment free from the threat of casteist remarks and jokes. There is also an opportunity to share experiences, including that of casteism, informally, among members of the group. Indeed, much of the information I collected for my study was collected from informal discussions in the different parties and functions hosted by these Dalit associations.

Another prominent reaction to the real or perceived threat of caste discrimination by fellow Nepalis overseas has been to geographically isolate themselves from other castes. As one Gurkha said: “The less Nepalis of different castes you meet, the less likely are you to be discriminated against.” A prominent example of the clustering of

lower castes is Andover, a Hampshire town not too close and not too far – approximately 40 miles – from the hub of the Gurkhas, i.e., Aldershot and Farnborough. According to a pioneering Dalit ex-serviceman settled in Andover, there were very few Nepalis there when he arrived in 2007. Then, he purposely "pulled" other Nepalis, particularly those from his own caste, the Bishwakarma or Kami. Many members of this caste relocated there from other towns and cities. According to this Gurkha, there is a small population of Nepalis, approximately 500 individuals, in Andover. Nearly half of them are Kamis; and there is not a single person from the other Dalit castes, the Damai and Sarki. According to some of these Dalit residents of Andover, they feel a lot more secure there than when they visit Aldershot, for example. One man said: "I don't understand why some of our caste fellows still live in Aldershot and Farnborough, despite being daily vilified by Gurungs and Magars. They should move their houses here, even if they have business or work in the Aldershot area." Significantly less discrimination is levelled against the blacksmiths in Andover, a fact evident from the election of one of the blacksmith men as leader of the entire Nepalese community in the town. In the words of one Dalit, "it is completely unimaginable for a low caste to assume leadership positions in larger Nepalese/Gurkha settlements like Aldershot and Ashford."

In terms of actual discrimination, many Dalits said they felt powerless to counter the dominant castes and tended to stay silent. But some did make an effort to fight for dignity. The Sarki man who was humiliated and told to eat genitals, prided himself on being one of the few Dalits capable of directly confronting the abusers. He said that despite his age, he had challenged many abusers to fight him in the streets of his little

town. Similarly, a community leader in Andover revealed how he challenged a Gurkha who had tried to demean him at a meeting:

> It was an important meeting called by a charity, Gurkha Welfare Trust, in Salisbury, and many ex-soldiers representing different overseas organizations had gathered. I met a retired officer, who I had known a long time. He asked me: "What's up, Kanchha?" I was offended by his addressing me, derogatorily, as a junior brother. I immediately told him that I was not his "kanchha" and asked him to call me by my name instead. I also reminded him that his military rank did not matter now that we were on the civvy street. My outburst surprised a lot of people in the meeting.

Other Dalits made various efforts to counter the abusers within the community, some more indirectly. A Dalit man managing a restaurant in a major Nepalese settlement said: "My business is feeling increasing pressure with growing caste sensitivities in the community over the years, but I am not going to leave it that easily. Keeping my restaurant running is my way of challenging the casteist mind-set." Similarly, a goldsmith who ran a successful jewellery business said: "Those Gurung and Magar officers who used to give me a hard time in the army hardly dare to look at my flourishing gold shop now." While not unduly proud of his success in ethnic business, he realized that his money gave him at least some prestige in the caste-governed community. But, notwithstanding, he was conscious of the fact that his goldsmithing business itself reaffirmed his status in the caste system, and was well aware that, even as a relatively wealthy man, many Gurkhas were unlikely to rent their houses to him, for example.

On another occasion, a Dalit man in London initiated a campaign to make Dalit identity less prominent by obliterating the direct or indirect indications of caste from their surnames. I attended one of his sessions with Dalits in Aldershot in the summer of 2012. I had been in the field for about a month when he called a meeting of some Dalit

men and urged them to sign up for his name changing mission. He had formulated certain rules about altering the family names in accordance with which it would be impossible for other Nepalis to identify caste. The likely chances of his project in reducing the exposure of the Dalits in the community were vigorously debated. Although not everyone was eager, some Dalit participants in the group expressed a fair amount of amount of interest. expressed by Dalit participants in the group. This leads to the problem of the exposure of Dalits in the diaspora, a topic I explore below.

Why are the Dalits Exposed in the UK?

The question of whether migration brings liberation especially out of old forms of oppression cannot be generalized: it depends on the group under scrutiny, and several factors pertaining to it. Research has shown, however, that many Dalits experience some degree of freedom as they move out of their caste-ridden village societies to settle in cities and towns, not least because their caste identity becomes much less conspicuous there. Mander (2002: 152) observed a significant change in the lives of the lower castes as they moved from the rural to the urban areas of India. He finds scope for liberation in this migration because “there is in towns and cities far greater anonymity and occupational mobility, which enables [the] blurring of caste identities.” In similar vein, Reddy *et al.* (2004: 224) observe that the relatively secular environment of the city offers new avenues to Dalit migrants pursuing their professions of choice. This occurs only when they live life well away from rigidly-ranked societies of the village. Similarly, in an earlier study, Kuthiala (1973) compared the levels of awareness of working class people in the towns and villages of India about the traditional identity of the low-caste

Harijan. For example, only 27 per cent of the industrial workers in a city thought that the Harijan were born to serve others, compared to 46 per cent of agricultural laborers in a village (Kuthiala 1973: 138).

Following such paplable changes in the urban areas, it seems logical to believe that Dalits in overseas cities must enjoy even more anonymity and the consequent freedom from caste. I personally know a small number of Nepalese Dalit students and workers in Sydney; but they are difficult to detect unless their family names are known. And it is not too difficult to lie about one's caste identity among those with whom one shares accommodation. Therefore, although these Dalits in Australia sometimes encountered demeaning attitudes of other Nepalis, they did not find themselves always exposed to casteism on the street, for example. But my research has shown that this is not a luxury many Dalits, particularly ex-military men and their families, enjoy in British cities and towns. Even those Dalits using their Christian or westernized names are easily detected in the community. One of the first pieces of advice I received from my Dalit friends upon arriving in England in the 2008 was never to lie about my caste identity. I would soon be found out mainly through my villagers. So, why are Nepalese Dalits in the UK so exposed? I will argue here that Gurkha military tradition has played a prominent role in exposing (particularly) ex-military Dalits and their families in the Gurkha communities in Britain.

The problem begins with the recruitment process. As suggested in Chapter One, Gurkha selection has been centred on specific castes and sub-castes from particular

geographical locations. Often specific villages and families have been pinpointed for recruitment over the generations. Most of the low castes recruited in small numbers to work as tailors, shoemakers and blacksmiths were also picked from traditional recruiting grounds. Those servicemen who came from the same village, where everyone knows everyone else's business, knew Dalit men and their families long before. Moreover, their fathers and forefathers would have served Gurkha families using their traditional skills in the village. Dealing with the same people, Gurkha soldiers had little incentive to change their behaviour in the regiment. Many treat the low castes now in the diaspora; in effect, while places have changed, the people have not. This intimate knowledge of the Dalit, and fresh memories of the way they had been treated over the generations, made it impossible for lower castes in England to conceal their identities and to escape casteism.

The Gurkha military organization itself has been largely designed with caste as the central principle (see Chapter One). Until recently, Dalits have been hired for their stigmatized skills. Therefore, most of the Dalit ex-servicemen currently resident in Britain are retired tailors, blacksmiths and shoemakers. Even though there are no official rules in the Brigade of Gurkhas to employ men of specific castes for specific roles – although regimental priests continue to be drawn from high-caste Bahuns – the stigma vis-à-vis Dalits' occupations are strong in the army. According to my research participants, these artisans were holed up in little corners of the barracks, working as tailors, blacksmiths and shoemakers. Moreover, apart from the separation of the

workstations, there were in/formal rules separating the Dalit artisans from other soldiers. Until about the 1970s, they were required to eat separately, and were forbidden to touch food and water to be used by others. While these written rules no longer exist, certain informal rules of caste discrimination and untouchability is still practiced in the barracks. And, above all else, the Gurkhas were highly visible in the regiment. Given their assigned trades, essential services used by all ex-servicemen and their dependents, they were easily identifiable. Most Gurkha interviewees were able to name their tailors and blacksmiths in the regiment. As one Gurung Gurkha said: “There were some 15 tailors in our regiment, and we frequented their workstations to alter our clothes, and, sometimes, just to have a chat about our home village. While we had to work hard to train as soldiers, these guys had a fantastic time sitting on their chairs and toying with their sewing machines and needles all day!”

Apart from the same places of origin and trades, Dalits were easily identifiable from their somewhat different looks in contrast to the majority Gurkha soldiers. Given that there were few soldiers from the higher castes, who had similar looks to the low castes, it was easy to tell who was a low caste. But, irrespective of their skills and looks, Gurkha Army policies and practices over the centuries have made it not only impossible for tailors, blacksmiths and shoemakers to remain anonymous in the regiment, but also in the diaspora.

Another factor contributing to the exposure of Dalits in the diaspora has been their resumption of their traditional occupations, highly charged with social stigma. Even though many have been working as security guards (similar to ex-soldiers from the majority castes) some have started ethnic businesses using their traditional skills. In the town of Aldershot, for example, there are growing numbers of tailoring centres that offer services and readymade dresses to Nepalese customers. Some among them are good business: others barely meet family expenses. But their proprietors were well aware of the cost to their social prestige if they opted to return to their ancestral trades. While it was a lot easier, and perhaps profitable as well, to do what they had been doing all their lives, their trades evoked a village situation with the resurgence of traditional attitudes to them and other people from their castes. Unlike in the village, there was no economically exploitative relationship based on the traditional patron-client system (Cameron 1998); however, the same practices by the same low castes actively promoted traditional attitudes towards these low castes. When a retired tailor from opened a new tailoring shop, the first thing he said to me was: “Look, here’s our caste shop!” The question is: Why did they take such risks instead of making use of the opportunity for occupational mobility in English cities and towns?

I found that even though the actions of some retired regimental tailors were driven by profit, most of the others were forced to return to their stigmatized traditional professions because of the diasporic situation. A mix of economic imperative and caste discrimination urged them, however reluctantly, to return to their traditional trades. One Damai man in his early fifties shared his reasons for opening a little tailoring centre:

> When I arrived in England in 2006, I found work as a security guard in a department store. It was not a hard job, and the pay was good. But I found it increasingly difficult to work with my colleagues, Magar ex-servicemen. Although they seldom abused me directly, they were clearly not happy to include me in their team. They sometimes ridiculed me as a low caste in subtle ways. For example, they often joked amongst themselves about a dark-skinned Kami and a lying Damai and an alcoholic Sarki. While these comments were not directly targeted at me, I nonetheless felt really bad. Worse still, they tried to make me look insincere in my responsibilities before our boss, a British ex-army man. On one occasion, when I made a slight mistake in following the roster, one of the men told me to find work somewhere else. He said that security was not an appropriate job for me, as I had never worked as a fighting soldier. They suggested that I start a tailoring business instead, in accordance with my skills. Following a few unsuccessful attempts at security work in other companies, I started this tailoring shop.

One of the traditional occupations of the low castes deemed more profitable was goldsmithing. And, as suggested earlier, some of these businesses in England were profitable. However, this too attracted stigma and the people involved in the trade were exposed to discrimination. The blacksmiths who traditionally worked with gold and silver jewellery and similar items often used the family name Sunar. Many among them catered for the Nepalese customers in Aldershot. Later some members of the majority castes also started investing in gold business; however, the caste stigma associated with the trades persisted. Their jewellery designers, who work in the backrooms, are invariably Sunars and Bishwakarmas. Despite being a potentially profitable craftsmanship, other castes are unwilling to try them. Nothing compares to social prestige accorded by the caste system for many Gurkhas and their dependents in Britain.

In effect, the Dalits domiciled in the UK feel under increasing threat from the dominant castes. This is attributable to, similar to the higher castes (See Chapter Four), the growing popularity of the large Gurkha caste associations. These groups, despite fighting for their identities in Nepal and abroad, have inevitably increased vilification of

other castes. While the majority Gurkha castes have been keen to undermine the superiority of the higher castes, they are keen to maintain their traditional distance from the lower castes. The beleaguered low castes find themselves in a kind of trap for two reasons: first, they are a small a population; therefore, their groups are very small, too small to challenge upper-caste groups. And, second, there is no provision in the legal system of Britain to counter casteism. The UK anti-discrimination laws do not contain the word 'caste' (Dhanda 2014). So, even if some lower castes went to court over caste abuse, the chances of punishing the perpetrators are minimal; that is, unless physical violence is involved. So, in this regard, the Dalit find themselves worse off than they were in Nepal. A retired regimental shoemaker said: "In Nepal, we have laws banning caste discrimination. Even if the police and judges did not take the law seriously, we have Dalit NGOs that could support the victims of caste discrimination. In Britain, however, we neither have our organizations, nor the legal system to protect our rights."

Dalits living in the UK today are greatly exposed to casteism. This is due to several factors appertaining to the historical tradition of Gurkha recruitment and organization. As one Dalit Gurkha observed: "If Chhetris and Thakuris had been recruited in significant numbers, this would have provided at least some some cover for the Dalits." Phenotypically, high castes and low castes look similar, often making it difficult to distinguish one caste from another. The ideology of the Brigade of Gurkhas has changed over the years. Yet, according to many informants, the attitudes of young serving soldiers are still very casteist. A Rai Gurkha who retired in 2010 on medical

grounds said: “Old habits die hard. Why would not the Dalits suffer in the diaspora, when there is still a lot of stigma and prejudice against them in the regiment?”

Conclusion

My study of Nepalese low castes – most of whom were retired military men and their descendants – has both vindicated Ghuman’s (2011) admirable work on Indian Dalits and expanded on it. Similar to their Indian counterparts, Nepalese Dalits living in the UK are suffering various forms of discrimination in the overseas community, including untouchability, exclusion and abuse. The Gurkhas’ behaviour is affecting Dalits in schools, work places, streets, as well as in other public spheres. I have added to Ghuman’s argument by showing that the exclusion of Dalits from the private sphere – e.g., domestic space – is a further important factor to consider. Some might say that private is private: scholars should not take issue with this domain. But I have proven that these are still critical areas for research for the simple fact that many Dalits feel excluded and discriminated against in their daily lived reality in the UK. Like many Gurkhas, some might be tempted to think that there is no problem attached to inter-dining; that is, castes eating and mixing together at various parties and functions. But, this is not enough. Often the distinctions between the public and private become blurred. Issues related to the problem of renting Gurkha properties, for example, involve both spheres, and this one of the areas in which Dalit identity becomes particularly problematic for the upper castes.

Unlike the case of Indian low castes, religion does not seem to be the primary factor for marginalizing Nepalese Dalits in the diaspora. Yes, there were some concerns about excluding Dalits from prayer rooms. But, in general, they have no problem accessing Hindu temples, the newly-built Buddhist monastery in Aldershot, and other public religious places temporarily set up in different venues. Ghuman (2011) notes that Indian Hindus and Sikhs started to drift away from the other castes in the 1970s mainly because upper-caste priests began to identify worshippers by caste. But none of this is seen among Nepalis in public places of worship. On the contrary, the higher-caste Bahun and Chhetri – themselves under pressure from the dominant Gurkha castes (see Chapter Four) – and low castes have been working together to set up a new Shiva temple (an ongoing project) in England, with some low-caste members occupying senior positions in the group. And, in their enthusiasm to emphasize Buddhism as a way of undermining high-caste Hindus, some majority Gurkhas have vilified the religious traditions of the upper castes, their mixed religious practices notwithstanding. By saying that, limited access of Dalits to Gurkha homes is partly guided by religion-induced caste sensitivities across Hinduism, Buddhism, shamanism and Kirantism (and even among a small population of Christian converts).

One of my central arguments here has been that the Gurkha military tradition has directly contributed to the current plight of the low-caste Gurkhas and their dependents domiciled in the United Kingdom. The burden of history weighs heavily upon them in their efforts to try to live a more dignified life in the UK. As in the case of other castes, the difficulty lies in the fact that there is no anti-caste discrimination legislation. Although

this is a common problem for all South Asian low castes living in Britain, unlike their Indian counterparts, Nepalese Dalits are in trouble not just because they are in small numbers, but they lack family, kin and organizational support. They do not have sufficient numbers, for example, to launch campaign groups to challenge continued problems of caste discrimination and untouchability. A long-term policy of the British colonial administration that treated the low castes both of India and Nepal as non-martial, has cemented their status as low castes and untouchables. This is a major historical legacy from which Dalit Gurkhas in the diaspora have been struggling to unshackle themselves. from in the diaspora. Ghuman, Dhanda, Waughray and other scholars sympathetic to the situation of overseas Dalits have to date not explored this issue of military background, and of colonial legacy in general, while problematizing the issue of overseas Dalits. I have demonstrated the centrality of this issue in this chapter, as in others. Emphasizing this element of the overseas caste will be useful inasmuch as it will help academics, journalists, and policymakers to understand the moral responsibility of the United Kingdom to realize its own historical role in fostering caste division and conflict, and the peril to which these factors have exposed the low castes. This focus could put more pressure on the British Government to act on the Dalit demands for introducing caste into the country's anti-discrimination laws.

Chapter Six

Caste in an Unlikely Country: Contexts of the Host Society

Empirically speaking, there is not just one but many Nepalese Gurkha identities in Britain.[52] In a recent study, Gellner (2015) demonstrated this by examining the "associational profusion" and "multiple belonging" among Nepalis in the United Kingdom, who have been divided into hundreds of different groups based on region, village, locality, religion, profession, language, hobbies or interests and ethnicity. Given this incredible internal diversity, Gellner concludes that it is "seriously misleading" to think of the Nepalese diaspora community as single or internally homogenous (2015: 82). Caste grouping must also be added to this list of internal differences. As I have demonstrated in Chapter Three, in the UK, ethnicized caste has been the biggest source of community formation among Nepalis, particularly among ex-Gurkha soldiers. This pro-caste development since the mass migration of Gurkhas in two phases – following the change of Gurkha immigration policies in 2004 and 2009 – have been so dramatic that caste organizations have effectively overshadowed national, religious and professional groups. In other words, caste has become the most prominent marker of Nepalese ethnic identity – or identities – in the United Kingdom.

In this chapter, I concentrate on the host-country context of overseas caste. As Soysal (1994: 84) argues, migrants often bring with them their own organizational repertoire,

[52] This is despite a still popular concept of methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Schiller 2002) in policy and scholarly discourses that tends to lump citizens of one country as a bounded and natural ethnic group.

but “their practices acquire new forms and characteristics through interaction with host polity institutions.” In previous chapters, I demonstrated various factors contributing to the rapid reproduction of Gurkha castes in Britain; e.g., highly caste-sensitive Gurkha recruitment policy, caste-based military organization as well as a unique migration pathway where family and kin and village networks have remained largely intact. Furthermore, I showed that Gurkha castes’ strong transnational politics of caste/ethnic identity also actively promoted caste and casteism in the diasporic community. All these factors causing the entrenchment of Gurkha castes in the UK are based on Gurkha homeland and their diaspora communities. How about the possible impact of the receiving society upon the retention and invigoration of caste overseas?

In her recent study of overseas Turks and Kurds, Baser (2015: 26) argues that: “While diasporas are a subset of transnational movements, their capacity is very much dependent upon the space provided for them by the host country.” She highlights the central role of policies and institutions in migrant incorporation. The migrant experience in the diaspora is often so radical that it can make a huge difference to their new lives abroad. Rosenblum and Tichenor (2012: 15) maintain that immigrant experiences in receiving countries are often deeply influenced by the ethnic, religious and racial hierarchies of the receiving societies, which, when combined, may greatly shape migrant identities. And these changed identities decide the nature and extent of social and civil participation. The central question this chapter seeks to address is: what was the nature of their early experiences of English society that led Gurkhas to form their

distinct ethnic identity/identities, and how has caste came to be the fulcrum of that process?

There is significance in the fact that Gurkhas migrated to the United Kingdom at a time of the rising tide of anti-immigrant sentiment in Western Europe and across the Western world. This was also the time of raging policy and public discourses against migration and multiculturalism (Modood 2013; Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010; Kymlicka 2007). Consequently, "policies and programmes [have become] heavily influenced by an assimilationist philosophy, rather than by a focus on making diversity work" (Vasta 2009: 19). This dramatic anti-immigrant and anti-multiculturalism discourse was prompted by, among other events, the terrorist attacks on the West, notably the 11 September 2001 attacks on the Twin Towers in New York, and the 7 July 2005 bombings in London. Different Islamic groups have been blamed for these and similar other attacks on civilian populations. Muslim minorities in particular have been subject to scrutiny by both the left and right of the political spectrum. In many cases, poorly informed media focus has led to widespread hatred and intolerance of Muslim minorities (Mustafa 2015; Yasmeen and Marković 2014; Abbas 2005), fuelling public perceptions that Islamophobia is on the rise (Kundnani 2014; Allen 2010). Although non-Muslim migrants have largely escaped this degree of discrimination, this changing politics of governing diversity – and the continuing very strong current of anti-immigrant discourses – have obviously affected all migrants, particularly those who are coloured. Under the previous Labour and current Conservative Governments, Britain has actively backtracked from its earlier multiculturalism policies. Since its ascent to power in 2010

(initially in coalition with the Lib Dems), the right-wing Conservative Government has introduced measures to drastically limit the numbers of immigrants entering the country every year. In its bid to win public support for its declared policies against immigration, the government has been advancing "the politics of fear" (Wodak 2015), by extension fuelling both racism and intolerance towards immigrants.

This strongly anti-immigrant sentiment in the United Kingdom has impacted upon the Gurkhas' lives, despite their unique status as celebrated migrants. As I have discussed in some detail in the Introduction Chapter, the mass support exhibited in the UK, including that of the influential press for Joanna Lumley's Gurkha Justice Campaign in 2008-09, was extraordinary (Ware 2012: xiv). When the parliament voted in favour of Gurkha immigration, many people celebrated and thanked Ms Lumley for her efforts to allow the British public to pay the Gurkhas their debt of honour. Even the *Daily Mail*, which seems always heavily against immigration, celebrated the event. But when the Gurkhas started arriving in England in large numbers, the ex-servicemen and their families did not receive the same amount of affection from members of the public. Like many new immigrants, they have been subjected to racial/ethnic discrimination and prejudice. The degree of hostility that the locals directed towards them was such that the town of Aldershot made negative headlines in the national newspapers. Local MP Gerald Howarth made anti-Gurkha remarks in public, condemning Lumley, along with many of his constituents, for her "disgraceful" Gurkha campaign.[53] In this chapter, I argue that their experience of racism and exclusion from the host society – as well as

[53] http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2012/03/27/gurkhas-sleeping-on-park-benches-gerald-howarth_n_1381743.html *[Accessed 6 December 2015].*

their fear of cultural assimilation – has shaped Gurkha ethnic identity in Britain such a way that caste has become the principle axis of identity formation.

In this chapter, I mainly investigate how recently-arrived Gurkhas and their relatives have been constructing their ethnic identity surrounding caste particularly in response to how they have been received by the dominant white population in the local community. As Hall (1996) has argued, the process of identity construction is often decided by experience in the present. In analysing personal experiences of Gurkha immigrants in the streets of Aldershot and Farnborough, I will use some relevant psychosocial studies as well. Further, I will also reflect upon my personal experiences of discrimination and vilification by the local white population. Aside from these physical and psychological threats, cultural threats will also be examined. So, in part, Gurkha identity construction based on caste will be analysed in response to their fear of losing culture in the face of dominant English culture.

Caste as Migrant Identity

Much of the concept of caste used in this dissertation, as outlined in the introductory Chapter and Chapter Three, is what Reddy (2005) refers to as “the ethnicity of caste”. To briefly reiterate the notion of ethnicized caste, the process started with the linking of caste with race in the colonial discourses. Two examples were: Risley’s use of European race science in his anthropometric study of caste in India in the late 19th century, and Mueller’s investigation of caste employing the Aryan race theory (Robb

1997). In earlier times, caste was more of a local tradition. But in the 19th century British India used it as a central part of its administrative tool, classifying the masses according to caste, and attributing specific traits to different castes (Dirks 2001; Cohn 1996). This British practice greatly essentialized caste groups and encouraged the ethnicization of caste. Different groups united under the banners of their castes, claiming better status, identity and privilege from the state. Whereas Barnett (1975) likened the modern transformation of caste to "ethnicization", Washbrook (1989) not only saw castes – together with religion, regionalism and language – as powerful "symbols of ethnicity", but as important marks of Indian modernity. In the introduction to his book titled *Caste Today,* Fuller (1996: 26) notes that "castes…are being historically constructed, or perhaps more aptly being 'deconstructed', as vertically integrated hierarchy decays into a horizontally disconnected ethnic array." The process of historical de/construction of castes over time have greatly transformed them from local community phenomena to important vehicles for political mobilization regionally and nationally. Gupta (2004) observes that caste has changed so much that identity has "trumped" hierarchy: Dumont's paradigm of caste as a widely accepted and religiously sanctioned ideology of social hierarchy has been replaced with caste as a symbol of ethnic identity, and as a platform for political activism. And I have argued in this thesis that an impressive ethnic identity politics spearheaded by Gurkha and some other groups in Nepal over the past two decades (Hangen 2010) has effectively been a politics of caste or anti-caste.

Research has shown that caste can be a resource for ethnic identity, or community, formation in the diaspora as well, despite the change in context (Bhana and Bhoola

2011; Kumar 2012; Dhupelia Mesthrie 2012; Grieco 1998). However, there is a significant gap in the literature on overseas caste in terms of its saliency as part of migrant living. Not enough attention has been given to the questions of how policies and practices in the host society or country may have impacted upon immigrants' ability to reconstitute their cultures and communities including caste. If host society affects virtually all aspects of migrant living, there is no reason why caste would remain untouched. Therefore, even if the receiving society was originally unaware of caste, the latter has to be analysed in relation to the contact between immigrants and their hosts. This imperative is evident in the controversial issue of anti-caste legislation in Britain.

As I suggested earlier, in the British context, Indian Dalit migrants have been actively ethnicizing their overseas caste identities by mobilizing themselves around the issues of untouchability and caste discrimination. And, most importantly, they have been seeking the support of the host country in terms of legal remedies to enhance their status within the migrant community (Dhanda *et al.* 2014; Ghuman 2011; Waughray 2009). In other words, unlike high castes, activist low castes do not want to limit caste as an internal matter of Indian Hindu and Sikh communities. They want to bring caste out into the open and link it to the wider society. They have been fighting to ameliorate their situation within their communities by using legal measures. This clear statement of the UK Dalit movement has not been properly investigated. Ghuman (2011) has not dealt with it in detail, although he has shown how little school teachers know about caste and casteism deeply impacting upon Indian students in the class and beyond.

Clearly, the situation of Indian Dalits is worse in Britain than in India due to: 1) the absence of caste legislation; and, 2) lack of public awareness about the caste system. By persistently refusing to incorporate caste into its anti-discrimination laws, and deliberately downplaying the plight of the low castes within their national and/or religious groups, the British state has been denying recognition of caste-based migrant identities. This lack of interest from the host government and political parties has further consolidated socially diverse individuals and groups, thereby rendering the ethnic identity of low-caste Indians even stronger. In the remaining part of this chapter, I explore how the discrimination levelled against the Gurkhas and their families by local white residents, and their exclusion from white society in general, has further entrenched Gurkha overseas caste.

Local Racism and the Exclusion of the Gurkhas

Despite the popular appreciation of Gurkha soldiers for their long and dedicated service to the British Crown, their status changed to unwanted immigrants following their migration to the United Kingdom. In particular, the locals of towns and suburbs wherein Gurkha families have concentrated in larger numbers, e.g., Aldershot and Farnborough, have been hostile to the newcomers. The situation was similar in the City of Leicester in the 1970s, when the settled population became very intolerant towards the Indian immigrants, particularly after thousands of Indians arrived from East Africa (Herbert 2012). In Aldershot, at the time of my extended stay for research in the first half of 2013, the predominantly white local community was so hostile and angry vis-à-vis the influx of

Gurkhas that many feared a violent backlash – if not deadly race riots – similar to those seen in North England towns in 2001 (Blackledge 2004: 77).

A retired Gurkha managing a successful grocery store in the heart of the Aldershot town said:

> The locals seem very unhappy with our presence in this town. Clearly, the whites of all ages have been frustrated by the flow of Gurkhas and their families in large numbers over the past years. If the local situation does not improve, the town could see an ethnic conflict, including violence, any moment. Not many people will tell you this, but many local Nepalese residents are fearful.

During my six-month stay in Aldershot, I personally saw the scale of local anger and frustration resulting from the influx of Gurkha immigrants to their towns. I spent a lot of time in public venues frequented by both Nepalis and local whites, e.g., pubs, restaurants, gaming centres, streets and parks. I noted that the two communities rarely talked to each other. However, they rarely talked to each other: nor did they mix together. They walked in the park, enjoyed beer and a game of pool in the pub, and watched horse racing in Coral separately. They hardly looked at each other, despite being so close. Most people did not smile when I looked at them, and they avoided me when I attempted to speak to them. The situation did not improve even after I explained to them that I was not a Gurkhas and had no intention of settling in England. When I did interact with white local politicians and community activists in Costa Coffee (a popular British chain), people sitting at other tables appeared to listen furtively to our conversation, to glance suspiciously at us.

Moreover, I personally experienced and observed racist attacks. One day when I was walking in Aldershot, two young white men kept throwing pebbles at me from the top floor of a multi-storey car park. On another occasion, as I walked alone in a quiet part of Farnborough, some white people threw pieces of bread at me from a moving car. They screamed abuse and laughed and raised their middle fingers towards me. Similarly, one Friday afternoon, as I walked along the pavement in the northern part of Aldershot, two girls screamed at me from their car, repeatedly yelling “go back”. One Saturday evening, I was approached by a small group of slightly drunk men in Victoria Street. They teased me about the clothes I was wearing. I tried to placate them and to start a conversation, but they kept making jokes about me, and about Nepalis in general. For example, one man said: “Oh, your coat looks great; you surely bought it in a shitty part of Kathmandu, didn’t you?” Another man said: “And, look at his pants. All these bloody Neps order their attires from another planet, don’t they?” A common racist term frustrated locals used against Nepalis was ‘bloody Neps’.

During that time, I saw some sad incidents involving racist attacks against older Gurkhas. One morning, as I was waiting for a Nepalese function to begin in a church hall in Farnborough, I saw a Gurkha being insulted by two white youths. They were riding their bikes along the pavement and approached a Gurkha couple walking towards the church. They reached out at the old Gurkha, pushed his Nepalese hat from his head, then fled laughing gleefully. Poor old Gurkha looked angrily after the boys, then picked up his hat from the pavement. Although angry, he was not surprised because, as he told me later, this was not the first time he had been insulted by disrespectful locals.

Similarly, one sunny morning in mid-May 2013, when I was walking towards Manor Park, I saw a small group of white youths annoying an elderly Gurkha couple. The girls ran towards the elderly woman, grabbed her tartan shawl, and tried to pull it away. After a short struggle, the elderly man drove them away by screaming and pointing his walking cane at them. But the bullies did not go away. They stayed close to the couple and hurled pebbles at them for some time. Now very angry, the old man challenged them to fight him if they dared (in his broken English):

> Don't get the wrong idea that we came to live here because we had no house, no food, no support in our country. We came because we have earned a place here. Our fathers and grandfathers have fought and died for this nation. Ask yourself: what have you done for your own country? Come and fight me if you dare. I may look old and frail, but I am still strong: I am a Gurkha soldier.

Another elderly Gurkha told me about the worst form of attack they faced from local whites at the beginning of 2013 in Farnborough. As he and his wife were walking along the street, some local white men came up to them and started taunting them. Given their lack of knowledge of the English language, they did not understand what was actually being said, but they were scared. After the bullies went away, they smelled something burning but did not see any fire nearby. Then, the wife noticed a trail of smoke seemingly from her husband's head. The white men had dropped a burning cigarette butt in the folds of the old Gurkha's Nepalese hat. These and many other stories involving racist attacks against Gurkhas abounded in the Aldershot area (as well as in other larger settlements like Ashford, Folkestone and Reading).

Young Gurkha children were particularly vulnerable to racism and intolerance. Gerstenfeld (2013: Chapter 4) opines that most of the people engaged in hate crime are not hard-core bigots or members of organized groups; rather, they are youth with some level of prejudice against other groups. Aldershot and Farnborough have witnessed interracial gang fights between frustrated local young white and Gurkha boys since the mass migration of Gurkhas commenced in 2004. The problem has been so widespread that the police had to close off certain public venues – Manor Park, for example – on a number of occasions to prevent Gurkha boys and local whites fighting. There have been casualties on both sides, and some offenders were either imprisoned or fined. I met a local white boy who was well-known for fighting with Gurkha boys. He was awaiting the court decision on his case. He showed me the scars on his hand and said that he would probably go to jail for a few years. He showed little regret. He said that he had to fight to preserve the integrity of his town in the face of a virtual "Gurkha invasion." Although many whites tended to blame allegedly knife-yielding and drug-taking Gurkha boys, it was clear that the youth violence was mainly triggered by intolerance of the new immigrants.

In addition to the problems of physical attacks in public venues, many frustrated locals have been exacerbating the ethnic/racial tensions in Aldershot and Farnborough through their use of social media, particularly Facebook. As anthropologist Miller (2011) has shown, Facebook often has a profound impact upon people's lives, so much so that it can make and/or break marital relations. Psychologists Rauch and Schanz (2013) state that Facebook plays a significant role in spreading racism among its users. It was

found that overtly racist remarks are easily accepted with significant changes to the behaviour of the intended persons. Some angry Aldershot residents have been using Facebook to promote intolerance and spread hatred against Gurkha immigrants in their area so effectively that it drew the attention of some national press.[54]

The year 2011 saw the first anti-Gurkha Facebook page initiated by Aldershot residents: it was called "Joanna Lumley Fucked up Aldershot ", and was later renamed Lumley's Legacy. The actress was targeted for her role in causing the second – and bigger – phase of Gurkha migration from 2009 on through her popular Gurkha Justice Campaign. Even though the name suggested an anti-Lumley movement, the members primarily targeted the local Gurkhas. The group consisted of over 1300 local members, many of whom wrote anti-Gurkha remarks and comments on public walls, including some openly racist and xenophobic comments. The official position of the group was its concern about apparently excessive strain on local resources – including schools, hospitals, police and housing – as a result of the sudden influx of Gurkhas and their families. The group, however, mainly spread information – mostly misinformation – about the alleged misbehaviour, dirty habits and impolite manners of Gurkha immigrants in the town. They spread the word that the whole area had been infested with third-world diseases such as tuberculosis and typhoid imported by the Gurkhas from Nepal. They posted news about Gurkhas allegedly fornicating in car parks, stealing flowers and

[54] For example, in September 2011, *The Telegraph* said: "Actress Joanna Lumley has become the target of a Facebook hate campaign for her role in attracting a 'massive influx' of Gurkhas to the country. See full report at: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/facebook/8768123/Joanna-Lumley-targeted-in-Facebook-campaign-against-Gurkha-influx.html *[Accessed 30 November 2015].*

fertilizer from public gardens, defecating and urinating in public parks, among other distasteful misdemeanours. They also accused Gurkhas of living in overcrowded houses, not keeping their surroundings clean, and not maintaining personal health and hygiene. They presented cases of alleged theft by Gurkhas and their spouses from grocery stores and other shops. Interestingly, I did not see any of this personally. The local police told me that while there had been some acts of public indecency and misdemeanour, they were nonetheless proportionate to those committed by the local whites.

A hard-core group of approximately 300 members of Lumley's Legacy defected and opened another Facebook group – *Enough is Enough* – in late 2012. Their wall posts have been far angrier towards Gurkhas and their families in the areas. Moreover, they distributed pamphlets against Lumley and the government, indeed against everyone who contributed to the Gurkha migration and the consequent "flooding" of immigrants into their towns. Some even wrote graffiti on the walls close to the houses of local Labour and Lib Dem councillors who supported the arrival of Gurkha immigrants. They also attempted to organize protest rallies on a number of occasions, including when Lumley was expected to participate on a panel during BBC Question Time, a programme hosted in Princes Hall, Aldershot, in April 2013. At the last minute, the police did not permit the group to proceed with the protest rally (and Lumley did not turn up to participate in the BBC talk-show).

Enough is Enough's radical activities attracted the attention of the local Council and politicians. When I started my field research at the beginning of 2013, many local Labour and Liberal Democratic Party members believed that Enough is Enough was being influenced by far-right extremist groups such as the English Defence League (EDL) and the British Nationalist Party (BNP). Because this claim was not substantiated, Rushmoor Borough Council organized direct talks with the frontline members of the angry group. I took part in one of these crucial meetings in May 2013. Representatives of different areas of the local authorities listened to the group's concerns and attempted to address them. In general, the local authorities tried to convince the group that much of the information being disseminated about Nepalis taking over the town – and about their alleged dirty habits and contagious third-world illnesses –were false. The officials made every effort to help the group to overcome its sense of moral panic by telling them that just 10 per cent of the town's population were Gurkhas. Therefore, it was highly unlikely that Aldershot would turn into an ethnic ghetto like Southall, London (dominated by Indians, particularly Punjabis).

When I talked to the members of the group later, they were still sceptical about the Council's claims. On reflection, I think there was little the officials could do to make the frustrated locals abandon their anti-Gurkha sentiments, at least not straight away. This was because the violence between the interracial gangs and the sense of moral panic spread by Facebook campaigners were, in effect, symptoms of a much bigger and widespread frustration and anger among the local population, many of whom did not actively campaign. I learned from my conversations with some members of the host

community that the real problem was not the Gurkha community itself, but the rapid growth of the Gurkha population in a small – therefore very visible – deprived town. A common notion expressed by almost everyone was that too many Gurkhas had immigrated too quickly. Yes, they understood the contributions these ex-servicemen had made to the UK; but most respondents asked: “Why should only we take all the newcomers: why can they not settle in other parts of Britain?”

The Aldershot situation parallels that of the Sydney suburb of Ashfield, where the long-term Australian residents have been struggling to cope with the drastic changes that have taken place as a result of the mass migration of Chinese people. Wise (2010) identifies an important aspect of this “discomfort of strangers” (Noble 2005) as something she calls “sensuous multiculturalism”. Due to the sudden influx of Chinese immigrants, and the consequent rise in the numbers of ethnic businesses on the high street, the sight, smell and colour of the locality changed so dramatically that local settlers became emotionally affected, even disoriented. Reflecting back upon Aldershot, I am not prepared to say that the town of Aldershot is more intolerant of and racist towards immigrants than other British towns or cities. Rather, the widespread unhappiness experienced by the locals is more to do with the dramatic changes to the town in a very short span of time. Furthermore, the sudden mass arrival of newcomers disoriented the settled population in many other ways. For example, as McDermott (2013: 163) notes: “A rapid growth rate and a small initial immigrant population are likely to engender a period of confusion about the immigrant newcomers among the native population, followed by the activation of a sense of group threat.”

I will now provide a few examples of the drastic changes in Aldershot's demographic. As well, I will attempt to demonstrate how the sight, smell, and colour of the town have changed of Aldershot over the past years. Ethnic businesses have been opening on the high street rapidly (See Pictures 7 – 9). Nearly all of the shops on Station Street (leading to the railway station) are Nepalese; they include jewellers, grocers, hairdressers, tailors, restaurants and takeaways. I myself saw many British-owned shops closing down and being replaced by Nepalese shops. An English café at the heart of the town centre shut down in early 2013. The property was quickly rented by a recently retired Gurkha, who converted it into a tailoring centre catering to the Nepalese customers. Similarly, Aldershot town centre's Costa Coffee has a most unlikely next-door neighbour; i.e., a Nepalese jewellery shop that designs and sells gold and silver jewellery. Aside from this massive ethnicization of the town, the global financial crisis resulted in many British owned local businesses closing down; many shop units, such as those in the Arcade, remained unoccupied for years. Many already disenchanted locals seized the opportunity to lay blame on the newcomers.

Picture 7. Nepalese businesses on Station Road, Aldershot (Source: author)

Picture 8. Nepalis abound on Aldershot high street (Source: author)

Picture 9. Nepalese restaurants on Grosvenor Road, Aldershot (Source: author)

Thus, due to the deep-rooted frustration and anger that spread among the local residents of Aldershot and Farnborough subsequent to the influx of Gurkha immigrants – which often manifested in racist attacks and remarks – the Nepalis had already become greatly marginalized from the host society. This obviously exacerbated their sense of insecurity and non-belonging in the new country, inevitably drawing them closer together. The hostile environment thus heightened ethnic identity among both individuals and groups.

Local Hostility and Strengthened Caste Identity

The identity and self-esteem of migrants are often greatly shaped by how they are perceived and treated by the dominant group. Min and Kim (1999: 25) argue that for many migrants in the US, “their experiences with prejudice and discrimination largely

determine their ethnic and racial identities." In this section, I deal with the following two-fold question: How has ethnic consciousness grown in tandem with the rise in immigrant population numbers, and why caste in particular came at the centre of Gurkha ethnic identity formation vis-à-vis local exclusion and discrimination? This problematic is investigated through the narrated history of Gurkha migration and settlement over the past two decades.

It is important to note at the outset that Gurkhas were not new to the town of Aldershot when the mass migration began in 2004. A UK-based Gurkha battalion had been stationed in the nearby village of Church Crookham since the late 1970s (Perry 1997: 322). Although the Gurkha regiments were largely stationed outside of Britain until 1997, most of the soldiers (and sometimes their wives and children) temporarily posted to Britain in the line of duty visited the town of Aldershot. According to ex-servicemen of the time, the town was their main place for shopping, enjoying beer in the pub, watching movies, and for gambling in the ubiquitous gaming centres.

At the time, visiting Gurkha soldiers were eagerly welcomed by the Aldershot community. As former Gurkhas and their spouses and some Aldershot residents told me, those were happy days when everybody appreciated Gurkha soldiers for their extraordinary contribution to Britain over the centuries. A local white man in his early fifties explained the difference between the early 1990s and now:

> I have been friends with many Gurkha soldiers since the early 1980s. I remember partying with them together in restaurants and pubs; our favourite place for hanging out was a restaurant run by a Gurkha called Johnny Gurkha on Victoria Road. Many locals wanted to hang out with these smart young men from the barracks. We loved their

> company and they loved ours. Sadly, this is history now. There are so many of them around, but we hardly communicate.

The past experience of the Gurkhas matched that of the local residents. They recalled the huge appreciation expressed by the local residents for their – and their forefathers' – commitment and sacrifice to their country. Mohan Gurung, 55, remembered his time in Aldershot: he did a short tour of duty in the mid-1980s:

> Everywhere I went, white people in Aldershot and Farnborough wanted to be friends with me. On the street, they often said hello, shook hands, and even stopped to have a quick chat. We enjoyed beer together in the pub, sometimes paid by the locals. Young white ladies were keen to dance with us Nepalese soldiers. A few British women even proposed to marry me, which I rejected because of the strict army rules against marrying a non-Nepali.

This appreciation of and fondness for Gurkhas among the local population began to decline, however, after a few hundred Gurkhas arrived in England, initially illegally, in the first years of the 2000s. No longer guest workers, as they were in the past; they intended to work and make a new life in familiar towns like Aldershot. This shift in intention meant that their previously welcoming hosts now became somewhat indifferent. And, while members of the host community were not exactly hostile at this point, they were less keen to offer their support and to show their affection towards the ex-servicemen. In effect, in the Madan Rai's words, "the locals began to perceive us like most other immigrants, rather than as special people to be respected and admired."

Among other factors, this increasing social distance between the Gurkhas and the local white population revived ethnic consciousness among the newly-arrived Gurkha immigrants. Gurkhas were forced to ask who they were and where they truly belonged or did not belonged. As Harka Magar said: "I began to question if I had done the right

thing fighting for this nation, if I had taken the correct decision to immigrate into a country that did not quite look grateful for risking my life for it." In other words, before the commencement of Gurkha mass migration in 2004, Nepalese nationality was at the centre of Gurkha ethnic identity formation.

This ultimately meant that other issues, e.g., religion and region, were not important to Gurkha ethnic identity in Britain at the time. Nepalese grocery owner Bir Thakalai recalled:

> Until the first few years of the new century, every new Nepalese face in town was a welcome change. Everyone talked to one another; nobody remained a stranger among Nepalis. And we actively supported newcomers, for example with finding work, accommodation, and schools for kids. I myself sheltered and fed some retired soldiers, including a few low-caste men, for several weeks at my house before they moved to their own accommodations.

When thousands of Gurkhas, and their wives and dependent children, began arriving in England following the change of Gurkha immigration policy in September 2004, the social distance between the local whites and Nepalis, and among Nepalese groups, rapidly widened. The attitude of the locals changed from indifference to hostility. In addition to the "flooding" of foreigners for the first time into their town, other issues like increased competition for local jobs, housing, hospital beds and appointments with the local GPs frustrated and angered the native population. The Gurkha mass migration caused perhaps more tension in Aldershot than elsewhere also because, as indicated earlier, it was already a deprived and rundown town.

The start of interracial gang violence between young Gurkha boys and British lads in the locality heralded a significant change in the already troubled inter-ethnic relations. They clashed at different parks, car parks, and on the street. The problem became so bad that the local police had to intervene to prevent the fighting: some of these incidents became news stories in the national press. For example, on 26 September 2005, the BBC reported on the persistent problem of "racial violence" in the town of Farnborough.[55] According to the news reports, the town police stopped and searched young white and Nepalese boys over a several-week period in an effort to prevent further interracial clashes. Weapons were also recovered from some boys. When I spoke to some of these Nepalese boys involved in these fights, they said that they fought basically for self-defence. They had to defend themselves given the continued threats from the local white boys who did not like so many foreigners in their territory. The Gurkha boys accused the local police of supporting the racist or xenophobic gangs in the area.

Even though the youth were at the forefront of expressing local frustration and anger in a violent manner, other forms of racist attacks occurred frequently from the beginning of Gurkha settlement. One among the common problems was, for example, attacks on Gurkha properties. When the Gurkha organization British Gurkha Welfare Society (BGWS)[56] purchased a property, Gurkha Bhavan, in 2005 in rural Farnborough, some

[55] See the full story at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/hampshire/4278544.stm *[Accessed 1 December 2015].*

[56] As I wrote in Chapter Two, this group started fighting with the British Government for Gurkha settlement rights – and not necessarily in response to the local hostility.

living in the immediate vicinity hurled rocks at the windows, breaking the glass.[57] The building was broken into, and property stolen on several occasions. Many Gurkha settlers complained of issues with unhappy neighbours (something I saw to some extent in East Oxford as well). Several Gurkhas living in Aldershot and Farnborough said that their neighbours threw garbage into their back gardens, while others targeted them in various other ways. Sometimes the neighbours called the police, making false claims that Gurkha families were creating too much noise. They often overheard their white neighbours talking in their gardens about their fear of contracting third-world diseases such as tuberculosis, typhoid and malaria from their Gurkha neighbours. Obviously not all neighbours were so unkind, but many Gurkhas faced problems with their neighbours from the outset.

Thus, racist and xenophobic attitudes, and the biased perceptions of the local residents in the towns of Aldershot and Farnborough (and, to some extent, in many other English towns and suburbs with significant Gurkha populations increased quite dramatically following the first phase of Gurkha mass migration after the end of 2004. While young Gurkha sons physically fought and counterattacked the intolerant young white boys in public parks and street, older Gurkhas distanced themselves from the hostile receiving community, a situation that has had inevitable consequences for Gurkha ethnic identity formation in an alien environment.

[57] Based on an interview with BGWS chair (retired) Major Tikendra Dewan.

Research has shown that there is direct correlation between how much emphasis migrants/minorities place on their ethnic identity and the attitude of the dominant groups. Social psychological studies have shown that the higher the levels of racial or ethnic discrimination, the stronger the ethnic identity (Wakefeld and Hudley 2005; Wong *et al* 2003). Thus, ethnic identity formation could be considered a natural reaction, a form of defence mechanism employed by immigrants when they are faced with exclusion and prejudice from the host society. In their recent study of African American boys in the United States, Belgrave *et al.* (2015) claim that ethnic identities are formed as a protective shield in a hostile environment. After examining the self-worth, self-concept and self-esteem of the black boys, the authors concluded that "high levels of ethnic identity are a protective factor and serve as a buffer under stressful and adverse conditions (Belgrave *et al.* 2015: 19).

It is thus understandable that many Gurkhas began to stress their ethnic identity partly as a buffer against the increasing ethnic and racial discrimination – and overall marginalization – exercised by frustrated and angry members of the local host society. Whereas some youths physically fought abusive and bullying youths in public parks and streets, most of the Gurkhas and their spouses and children aligned themselves with their ethnic organizations, a practical measure for escaping racism and exclusion from the wider community. As I have shown in the previous chapters, this ethnic clustering – though not residentially – was partly due to the strong current of transnational ethnic/caste politics. The hostile environment of the host country brought the Gurkhas together for practical purposes, in the process encouraging even those least interested

in transnational politics to increasingly affiliate themselves to their ethnic organizations. Among other factors, their ethnic groups provide individuals with a degree of physical and psychological security and freedom from the stress of living as unwanted immigrants. Mandara *et al.* (2009) found in their study of depression and anxiety among African American adolescents that racial/ethnic identity was as important as self-esteem for the mental health wellbeing of the young black people. In another important research into the effect of ethnic identity on black youth in the US, Wong *et al.* (2003: 1221) argue that "a strong connection with one's ethnic group heritage and culture promotes positive development." Thus the growing affiliation of the Gurkhas, their spouses and children to their cultural groups has proven meaningful for personal happiness and development and psychological wellbeing in a hostile host society.

The question then remains: Why did many Gurkhas and their families emphasize caste as a principal source of their identity overseas rather than other issues like nationality, religion, and their honourable military history? Indubitably, there was a degree of cross-caste unity among Gurkhas and civilian Nepalis to fight exclusion and racism from the host society. For example, in Aldershot and Farnborough, the group representing local Nepalis is Greater Rushmoor Nepalese Community (GRNC). This cross-caste organization, led by popular Gurkha leader Tikendra Dewan, held a few meetings with representatives of the Rushmoor Council and *Enough is Enough* a few times while I was in the town for research. Moreover, Dewan has been the main person publicly countering local MP Gerald Howarth's frequent anti-Gurkha remarks. Despite this,

however, GNRC was not as popular as caste associations among Nepalis. A question I asked all my interviewees was: why did local racism and exclusion fail to bring Gurkhas from different castes together? Why did local hostility instead foster caste communities? I will suggest here that, for a number of considerations, many Gurkhas and their families have felt better protected in their caste groups, rather than in cross-caste associations.

Three factors are important in considering how fear of racism and xenophobia in the wider community has strengthened caste communities. First, as an endogamous group, many family members and relatives belong to the same caste. In this way, bigger caste groups are perceived as an extension of family and kinship networks. Therefore, members of caste associations, particularly those based on village, not only shared dialects, cultures, languages and religious traditions, but were emotionally attached to each other. They were also bound by their family and kin obligations to support each other. As we have seen, there has been a reproduction of Gurkha villages particularly in larger Gurkha settlements like Aldershot and Farnborough. Therefore, whenever any issues arose, including racism, as in the village, people gathered together amongst their extended family, relatives and villagers. And they attempted to resolve any problems within the community first as far as possible. Hari Gurung from Farnborough said:

> Recently, one of my cousins was physically assaulted by two white guys in Farnborough. His mother called me, and our extended family came together to discuss the issue. We went to the police and asked that the culprits be brought to justice as soon as possible. We also insisted that, given the peaceful nature of our boy, the attack should be treated as racially motivated. Importantly, we asked the police not to release the story to the press; we did not want other Nepalis to know about the attack on our boy.

This takes me to the second reason racism and exclusion strengthened caste community, i.e., the concern about family honour – *izzat.* So, even if the Gurkhas and

their dependents suffered indignities on the street, e.g., being ridiculed or physically attacked, they would not reveal it with other people. They would share such experiences only with their families and close relatives, and attempt to resolve them among themselves. Involving police was always the last resort. And they made every effort to hide their problems from other Nepalis, particularly those from outside their family, kin and caste. When I saw instances of elderly veterans being troubled by white youths on the street, the former felt bad at being seen by me and others more than being attacked by the racist people. When I talked to them about it later, they normally seemed to downplay their problems. Shanta Man Magar from Aldershot said: “I know lots of Nepalis have been suffering in the hands of supremacist whites, but they keep their problems to themselves, to their families. As far as possible, they pretend to show that everything is alright.” In a case of gang fights between Gurkha boys and local whites in Oxford, one of our Gurkha friend’s son was briefly detained by the police to interrogate. However, very few people in the Nepalese community were aware of the incident and, when the father learnt that a community leader had spread the news of his son’s arrest, he became very angry. More than the future of his son, he appeared to be greatly concerned about other Nepalis knowing about it at the cost of his *izzat.*

Third, the numbers of family, kin and villagers were important factors behind caste groups being further strengthened by the hostility they faced in the receiving society. As we have seen earlier chapters, given the Gurkha recruitment policy targeting specific castes, communities and families, many ex-servicemen in Britain came from the same villages and were related. In many ways, the village had been effectively reproduced in

the diaspora. So, as in Magar, Gurung, Rai and Limbu villages of Nepal, caste fellows came together to resolve any issues of individuals and families in their communities. In other words, local caste groups became the natural platforms for dealing with any individual or group crisis, such as racism and xenophobia.

The Gurkha experience is similar to that of other migrants. In most cases, given the opportunity, immigrants in general are likely to seek the support of their families and kin during their initial years of struggle in a new country. Flores-Yeffal *et al.'s* (2011) study of support networks among Mexicans in the US has proven particularly useful for my analysis. The authors argue that the use of social capital among immigrants varies according to the population size. In the beginning, when they first arrive, immigrants tend to seek assistance from people or kin from their home villages or locales. But, as the population grows, they tend more to build their social capital – support networks – around their families and kin. This is exactly what has happened among the Gurkhas. In the early stages of migration, Nepalis supported other Nepalis of whatever social background. Later, when a few hundred ex-servicemen had settled in England, people from the same villages, towns or districts came forward to provide the necessary assistance. After the towns of Aldershot and Farnborough were populated by thousands of Gurkha families, however, everyone attempted to rebuild their families and kinship networks. This shift occurred quickly due to the mass migration of many related Gurkhas. Given the endogamous nature of Gurkha castes, these tightly-knit families and their relatives formed caste clusters at the grass-roots level, clusters that ultimately became the building blocks of large caste associations.

In sum, Gurkha immigrants – along with their wives and children – started forging their ethnic identity at the beginning of their stay in the United Kingdom partly in response to increasing racial/ethnic discrimination and prejudice, and to the wider issue of hostility exercised by the receiving society. While Aldershot is a typical case, Gurkhas from other cities and towns also reported some levels of discrimination and exclusion. Ethnic identities, therefore, became important for the Gurkhas' sense of security and psychological wellbeing, and for the overall development of ex-soldiers and their young children and relatives. And caste came to the centre of Gurkha identity formation in the United Kingdom because their families, relatives and fellow villagers usually belonged to the same caste. Caste also became important because it is popularly seen as distinguishing a particular cultural group with shared languages, religious and cultural traditions. Although caste is definitely a distinct cultural group at the local level, Nepal's ethnic politics has meant that often the same caste from across Nepal is represented as a bounded cultural cluster. In the following section, I consider Gurkha ethnic identity formation within the homogenizing and hegemonic cultural environment of the host nation.

Resisting Cultural Assimilation

During the process of acculturation in a foreign country, many newcomers fear losing their identities and connections to their native culture (Brilliant 2000). Of the hundreds of Gurkhas I interacted with, nearly all of them shared their great fear of losing their religious and cultural traditions in the face of what they perceived a homogenizing and

hegemonic Western culture. They particularly worried about the future generations forgetting their cultural heritage through total assimilation into British society. They wanted their future generations to economically integrate into British society through quality education and successful careers – but not culturally. A Gurung community leader explained the common perception: “If culture is lost, everything will be lost.” In this section, I contend that this fear of assimilation into the majority host culture has also contributed to the promotion of Gurkha ethnic identity with caste at the centre.

New immigrants often face cultural threats when they settle in a new country with a new culture, language and religion (Ainslie 2009: 290). What was taken for granted in the original country suddenly becomes a precious thing, something to be preserved and promoted in an alien cultural environment. These stresses together with the emotional implications of losing one’s homeland, family and community heighten the sense of dislocation, and of the loss of identity. This feeling of loss and insecurity often makes migrants emphasize their original cultures and communities. Anthropologist Cousins (2014: 114) observes: “Pressures from the majority and the powerful to assimilate may provide the impetus to and rationale for resorting to their own cultural and group values to help them make sense and cope with the challenges facing them in the host nation/community context.”

The ways in which migrants deal with this perceived pressure for cultural assimilation often vary from group to group, and situation to situation (Phinney *et al.* 2001). Social psychologist Berry (1997) broadly identifies four modes of migrant relationships with the

host country within a dominant culture: separation, assimilation, integration and marginalization. Those migrants who wish to retain their original culture, and to avoid interaction with others in a plural society may opt for separation as their principle acculturation strategy (Berry 1997: 9). Those adopting assimilation as their principle strategy give little importance to their original culture and emphasize interaction with the host culture/s. Similarly, when migrants value their original culture and at the same time interact with others, integration becomes the dominant theme. But when migrants do not feel part of either the original culture or the receiving culture, and when they show little interest in maintaining their home culture or adopting the host culture, marginalization becomes the dominant strategy for acculturation. However, there is a high level of stress and anxiety in this mode. Those migrants tend towards it "see themselves solely as victims of both societies" (Fernández 2007: 123). Yet, for some it may prove to be the most creative strategy: it allows migrants to negate both their original and adopted cultures, and build something new (Berry 2005).

My contention is that, given their unique position, most Gurkhas have followed marginalization as their principle strategy for acculturation in the United Kingdom (but this could change over time). As I have suggested in previous chapters, Gurkhas see little value in the Nepalese national culture. The dominance of the high-caste Hindu culture in the Nepalese cultural norm has been a problem for these ethnically conscious ex-servicemen (and their relatives). And, as this research has shown, Gurkhas live at the margins of Nepalese society; they have been excluded and discriminated against by the dominant groups; i.e., the high castes. In this regard, little has changed in the status

of Gurkha immigrants: they have changed from ethnic minorities of one country to that of another. Madan Limbu expressed this realization:

> In a way, our status has not changed after the migration at all. We were minorities worried about the loss of our indigenous culture, language and religion in the face of high-caste Hindu traditions in Nepal. Our brothers and sisters are still fighting for our cultural rights and identity there. And we have encountered another threat, perhaps an even bigger one, from the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture in the UK.

A consequence of this perceived threat to their culture at the hands of a new dominant culture overseas has been the strengthening of caste communities. Due to the cultural politics imported from Nepal, caste groups are often seen as the repositories of indigenous cultures and customs. Despite the diverse traditions within caste, it is often portrayed as a bounded and homogenous ethnic group. Therefore, even those Gurkhas and their families who were least knowledgeable and/or concerned about caste/ethnic politics in Nepal, i.e., about the notion of the high caste domination, opt to attend functions and festivals organized by caste associations. This is not to say that they opt not to participate in national, religious and regional functions; in the main, their enthusiasm is directed towards caste associations. When I asked why caste clusters were deemed so important, even in a caste-less society in Britain, Harka Gurung, 54, said:

> My family attends at least 10 community functions every year, most of them run by our Gurung organizations. I ask my children to participate actively in these events, even more than when we were in Nepal. I would not have been so keen if we were living in our Nepalese village, where the Gurung culture is still alive. But, here in England, we have no exposure to our indigenous culture. There is, therefore, a much greater risk of our losing our cultural, religious and linguistic heritage faster. It is thus important that we take part in as many caste events as possible.

The views of most interviewees were similar to the above, which perhaps helps explain why caste associations have become increasingly popular among Gurkhas in Britain. As

shown in Chapter Three, almost all Gurkha families attend events and functions organized in the Gurkha community. And more than 90 per cent of said events are hosted by caste groups, both big and small. While caste associations are becoming increasingly popular, non-caste Nepalese organizations are losing their appeal at the same time (as also argued in Chapter Three). I spoke to many youths who complained privately that their inter-caste friendships were suffering because they had little opportunity to enjoy parties together – they had to attend festivals and functions specific to their respective castes. I asked a young Gurkha named Birman Magar, 28, why he did not take part in functions organized by pan-Nepalese organization Non Resident Nepalis (NRN UK). He answered:

> I have respect for NRN as a national organization with branches in many countries. I also support its principal agenda: dual citizenship for all Nepalis abroad, and financial investment in and support for our homeland. However, I find it an elitist club of mostly upper-caste and wealthy Nepalis. Much as I appreciate what they are doing, and what they have been attempting to achieve for us and for our country, I feel that I do not belong to that group.

Thus, Gurkha ethnic identity in Britain is greatly influenced by a strong sense of the immigrants' marginalized status both at home and abroad. Because they are culturally at the peripheries of both Nepalese and British society, their self-awareness of being "neither here nor there" puts them under greater stress than other Nepalis. Given the pressure stemming from this dual marginality, their mode of acculturation in British society has been what psychologists allude to as marginalization (Berry 1997). While this is the least favourable of the migrant responses in terms of their cultural integration into the host society, at the same time, it is often the most creative response. They need to forge new identities based on a culture that does not fully match either the dominant culture at home or that of the host society. These are the reasons why Gurkhas have

been emphasizing caste as the major source of their ethnic identity in Britain. Given their continued fight against the marginalization and exclusion imposed upon them by high-caste Hindu domination at home, caste – ethnicized caste – has become the most salient mode of identification in their country of settlement. In other words, the same strategy fulfilled separate objectives in the radically different contexts of the two nations. This, I have argued, explains what many Gurkhas themselves find quite inexplicable; that is, the rapid rise of caste as a major source of identity and community in a most unlikely place like England.

Conclusion

Similar to the public assertions by high-caste Indian community leaders and academics in Britain (Shah 2015), some Nepalis, including some Gurkhas, continue to deny the existence of caste in the diasporic community. They argue to the effect that the ancient tradition of caste has neither place nor scope in a secular and democratic society like England. I personally had heated discussions about this with some Gurkhas during the course of my research. And some were not convinced even after I presented many substantiating facts. Even some Dalits or low-caste people, who were traditionally dominated by the caste system, were eager to attest to the non-existence of caste, for whatever reason. In one particularly strange case, a retired Dalit Gurkha felt offended when I urged him to reveal any caste-related incidents he had experienced, both in the army and overseas. Interestingly, I later heard that the same man was elected chair of his caste association! However, I am not implying that either he – or indeed anyone else claiming the absence of caste in the migrant community – were necessarily wrong. This

is because, as I have explained in the Introduction, caste can mean different things to different people in different situations (Béteille 1965: 45). In this chapter, I have used caste specifically as a source of migrant community formation – and thus their new identity – in British society.

In many ways, Nepalese/Gurkha migrant identity has fused with diasporic caste identity. As shown in Chapter Three, most of the largest Gurkha events and functions in the Nepalese community in the United Kingdom are organized by the four predominant Gurkha castes: the Gurung, Magar, Rai and Limbu. These functions naturally display caste-specific cultural and religious traditions. Thus, for an outsider, it is difficult to discern one common Nepalese identity. The identity of overseas Nepalis in Britain has become very multi-cultural; in effect, multi-caste. There are several different identities based on nationality, religion (Hindu, Buddhist, Kiranti, Bon, Christian) and profession (Gurkha military and civilian occupations, including doctors and nurses). However, caste has become the fulcrum of overseas community – identity – formation. In this work, I have analysed this impressive new development among Nepalis in Britain (rarely seen elsewhere) since the mass migration of Gurkhas from 2004 onwards from the perspective of transnational Gurkha caste/ethnic identity politics (See Chapter Three). In this chapter, I have examined the same problem from the point of view of migrant identity formation. And I have argued that the contexts of the host country have played an important part in making caste a major source of overseas community or identity.

I have demonstrated that the Gurkha's experience of racism and exclusion from the beginning of their new life in British society has directly or indirectly promoted their caste as the principal marker of their ethnic identity in a foreign country. The hostile reception they received from the predominantly white settled population has made many Gurkhas increasingly associate with their own kind. In the beginning, when there were few Nepalis in Britain, national identity was paramount. Then, with the gradual rise in population figures, they increasingly associated with their fellow villagers. This changed drastically, however, with the start of the mass migration at the end of 2004. Given the form of Gurkha recruitment, a majority of the new immigrants belonged to the four castes, select regions, and often to specific families and kinship groups. Due to their dislike of and oppression by high-caste Nepalis, they increasingly aligned with their families and kin groups and caste fellows. This led to the swift formation of local communities based on caste, i.e., endogamous groups which ultimately became the building blocks of politically motivated and large caste associations across the United Kingdom.

In sum, a central argument of this chapter has been that caste-based communities have become popular among the Gurkhas in Britain, partly due to their negative experiences in the host country. They have used ethnic formation around caste as an effective strategy not only to protect themselves from the negative impacts of widespread racism and discrimination, but to minimize the risk of cultural loss. Many psychological studies have shown that migrants and minorities stress their ethnic identities to ensure their individual wellbeing in the face of hostile host societies (Phinney *et al.* 2001). Ethnic

identity is associated with the issues of self-esteem, assimilation with or dissimilation from into the wider society (Rumbaut 1994). Further, as Mossakowski (2003) shows, ethnic identity “buffers” the ethnic and racial discrimination. However, these studies have not given enough attention to why migrants and minorities stress one type of ethnic identity over another in any given situation. This would therefore have to be analysed in conjunction with different other related issues.

Conclusion

This research has investigated the practice of caste among Nepalis in the UK, seeking to understand in particular how and why caste was further reproduced as a social reality since the mass arrival of Gurkhas post 2004. I interviewed 35 veterans and informally conversed with hundreds of them. One of the memorable interviews I conducted was with a serving Gurkha Major. Second in command, or the most senior Nepalese officer in his regiment, he controlled all men in his regiment under instruction from a British officer. Despite his busy schedule, he offered me more than an hour of his time in his office to discuss an issue he did not really want to discuss. At first, my questions shocked and confused him. He rejected all notions of caste prevailing in the regiment and the diaspora in the UK, maintaining that it was a thing of the past, something that belonged to Nepal and could not possibly get "exported" to a rich, largely secular and free society such as the UK. His persistent dismissal of the existence of caste among Nepalis in the UK notwithstanding, he continued with the conversation nonetheless. When I gave him some concrete examples of caste having a direct impact upon Nepalese lives in Gurkha regiments and in the diaspora in England, after a great deal of hesitation, he said: "You may be right, brother; but, you surely do not wish to cause bloodshed in the community by flagging up the issue of caste division here, do you?"

Throughout my research, I had many such encounters with people both military and civilian – including a few British men who have commanded the Gurkhas as well as

aspiring scholars – who were uncomfortable with my project. Many thought, similar to the Gurkha officer above, that caste was something impossible to thrive in a country like the UK. So, essentially I was chasing a non-issue. Others suspected my real motive behind raising the issue of caste in the diaspora. Some may have thought that, given my low-caste background, this research was a mere intellectual exercise aimed at attacking the higher castes. Some might have even suspected that I was a hard-line communist, perhaps an unreformed member of Nepal's Maoist Party, which had once vigorously campaigned against Gurkha recruitment for restoring national honour and prestige (they no longer criticize Gurkha service). Still others might have thought that some anti-Nepalese or anti-Hindu forces might have used me to unfairly criticize and defame Nepalese and/or Hindu/indigenous culture and religion.

Given the sensitivity of the topic, I was not surprised by the general sense of unease, nor deterred from my determination. Indian Dalits have been accused of acting against Indian/Hindu religion and culture in the interests of Christians and other anti-Hindu elements, when they clamour for dignity and respect within their own communities (Shah 2015a; 2015b). Scholars such as Ghuman (2011) who have greatly exposed the deep-rooted problem of caste in the Indian community in Britain, have been condemned by high-caste Indians, including some scholars supporting the latter, for allegedly unfairly misrepresenting and defaming Indian/Hindu culture and religion.

What really triggered my interest in Nepalese caste in the UK was the wide prevalence of caste in its multiple forms, which I personally observed and, to some extent, experienced. Irrespective of whether people denied or accepted the occurrence of caste in the diaspora, the everyday lives of most Nepalis in Britain were deeply influenced by caste. It is not just about consciousness of caste *per se*. While caste is an issue of conceptual scholarly interest among academic writers; for these Nepalis, it is far from an abstract concept. Despite living thousands of miles from home, caste is not a distant reality. On the contrary, caste is something they have to live with every moment of their lives. Their activities and imaginaries, goals and ambitions, opportunities and challenges, successes and failures both at home and overseas are often intricately tied to their caste. This was the reality for most Gurkha soldiers in the army (See **Chapter One**); it is the fact now in the diaspora. Importantly, unlike the popular assumption, it is not just the low castes who were having to constantly negotiate and re-negotiate their caste identities to fit in with the diasporic community.

My research findings counter the claims of *Janajati* activists and some academics that certain groups of Nepal including predominant Gurkha groups are purely ethnic groups, not castes (e.g., Hangen 2010; Bhattachan 2013). It is clear that, irrespective of how they might project their groups for specific political purposes, most of the Gurkhas saw themselves very much part of the Nepalese caste hierarchy. This reflected in their everyday lives. For one thing, whereas many Gurkhas were keen to challenge the ritual, religious and political superiority of high-caste Bahuns and Chhetris, counterintuitively perhaps, the same people were actively reproducing discrimination and prejudice

levelled against those considered lower or ritually impure. True, in terms of their community formation, the Gurkha activists were keen to undermine their internal hierarchies. But, they made no secret of their eagerness to maintain the traditional distance from the lower castes. I would suggest therefore that these *Janajati* movements do not fully want to dismantle the traditional caste hierarchy. Instead, they want to reinvent it in the diaspora in their favour.

Given the above, caste affects all Nepalese groups in Britain. For many members of the Dalit community, caste has become a constant source of anxiety and fear. They worry not only about racial discrimination at the hands of majority Whites, but about possible caste-based humiliation in the form of ubiquitous jokes, innuendos, direct or indirect references by fellow Nepalis. As I have shown in **Chapter Five**, most Dalits in Britain feared being taunted as a 'black Kami', 'smelly Sarki' or 'lying Damai' by Nepalis, more than being pelted with pebbles or told to 'go back where you came from' by truant White British boys. Interestingly, with the growing saliency of the Gurkhas in the community, high-caste Bahun and Chhetri--who are traditionally blamed for sustaining caste hierarchy and subordinating other groups--are also feeling the pressure. As shown in **Chapter Four**, deep-rooted suspicion among the majority Gurkhas and hatred towards the high castes have started to gain public expression. Even high-ranking officials such as the Nepalese ambassador have been exposed to ridicule and condemnation in the main due to their caste backgrounds. So much so that a high-caste group, the Chhetri Samaj UK, has officially decided to take legal action against any Nepali publicly vilifying and humiliating them. Even if they did follow legal recourse, their chances of punishing

the perpetrator are limited, because their Indian counterparts, i.e., Indian high-caste Hindus and Sikhs, have effectively blocked anti-caste discrimination legislation in the UK.

Then again, as I have demonstrated in **Chapter Four**, for many members of the majority Gurkha castes, caste is a gift. It has become, among other things, a principle axis of their social organization in a new country. Most of the largest groups are caste associations, which has been pivotal in defining their belonging to a new country. Caste, as expressed in cultural forms in the diasporic public sphere, has enabled them not only to forge their greater unity among caste fellows from diverse regional, religious and linguistic backgrounds, but to challenge the religio-cultural domination of the high caste from Gurkhas's 'diasporic vantage' in England.

So, the majority Gurkha castes – notwithstanding their growing postcolonial anti-high caste sensitivities – must be grateful to the British for recruiting only members of their castes, often from the same villages and families over two centuries (See **Chapter Two).** The British created caste-specific Gurkha regiments to serve their own military interests, which has now fulfilled the purposes of the Gurkha immigrants. Just as Gurkha forces were divided into four infantry regiments, each populated by a particular caste – the Gurung (6th Gurkha Rifles), Magar (2nd Gurkha Rifles), Rai (7th Gurkha Rifles) and Limbu (10th Gurkha Rifles) – the Gurkha diaspora is now split into four major

caste groups, represented by the four pre-eminent caste associations – the Tamu Dhee UK, Magar Association UK, Kirant Yakthung Chumlung UK and Kirant Rai Yayokkha UK. This is certainly a good thing for the Gurkhas, which, I will suggest, has greatly contributed to their swift social integration into British society.

I have argued that this level of focus on caste as a social phenomenon has obviously heightened the sensitivities of caste and bred much bigotry and intolerance within the community. I have demonstrated that this unique situation emerging in the Nepalese community in the UK must be understood in the contexts of colonialism – that promoted caste and casteism through its military policy – and transnationalism, which has animated the majority Gurkhas to increasingly forge their communities and identities around the issues of caste – ethnicized caste – even though caste is an alien concept in British society. In the remaining section, I will elaborate on my possible contributions to academic and policy research into caste through using fresh approaches including transnationalism.

Diasporic Caste in a New Light

My research has shown that the question of whether caste exists in the diaspora – the central problematic of an ongoing caste discourse in Britain – is largely irrelevant among Nepalis in the United Kingdom. Unarguably, the many low castes, who are the targets of

traditional prejudice, will benefit from the proposed anti-caste discrimination legislation in the UK. But, this is just part of the overseas-caste story. In reality, caste must be understood from a much wider perspective.

First, drawing upon Gupta (2004) and other prominent scholars of caste in modern India, I have used the concept of caste as a form of ethnic identity. There has been a significant shift in the way the problematic of caste is understood by both native and Western scholars which must be made better use of while analysing overseas caste. In the past, according to Dumont (1980) and his supporters, caste was a cultural practice based on religious ideology. The place of everyone in a neat and universal system of hierarchy was clear. In this understanding of caste, issues of ritual purity and pollution are at the centre of the caste system: issues of economy and political power are only marginally influential. Contrary to this understanding, much of the more recent scholarship on caste demonstrates how the lower and middle castes have been actively resisting their subordination. As I have explained in the Introduction, this new understanding of caste as an effective political tool or vehicle for mobilization must be employed to better understand caste in the UK and elsewhere. The claim that caste cannot survive in the totally new socio-economic environment of an increasingly secular British/western society, very much reflects the Dumontian view of caste, rather than the latest trend towards ethnic activism.

I have shown how the Gurkhas, given their greater numbers and inspired by a similar movement in Nepal (Hangen 2010), have been actively resisting the traditional authority

of the high caste from what I have called their 'diasporic vantage' in Britain. As Chapter Three demonstrates, the Gurkhas have swiftly reformed their caste associations, so much so that Tamu Dhee UK (of the Gurung) has become the largest Nepalese community organization in Britain. Its ability to mobilize the Nepalese masses is unparalleled, evidently in the participation of thousands of Nepalis in the annual *Nepali Mela* held in London. It also owns and runs the Gurkha Cup[58] that attracted a gathering of approximately 15,000 Nepalis from the UK, Portugal and Belgium in 2014. Other prominent Gurkha castes, i.e., the Magar, Limbu and Rai, organize their own large events as well.

These mega events have redefined Nepalese identity with caste at the centre. While not totally forgetting their national heritage, aspects considered part of the hegemonic high-caste culture and religion – e.g., Brahmanic Hinduism, symbols including the cow and the Sanskrit language – are totally shunned. While this form of cultural insubordination is understandable in terms of asserting Gurkha groups' rights and identities in the face of continued high-caste domination of political, cultural, religious and other spheres in Nepal, it has also served to greatly polarize the entire Nepalese community with caste as the central axis. This has inevitably increased caste consciousness, deepened historical divides, and increased competition, suspicion and disharmony among the various caste groups. In other words, as in any ethnic movement, the politics of anti-

[58] An annual football league for Nepalis in Britain, which has recently started inviting Nepalese teams from some other European countries as well.

caste hierarchy has fostered the return of claims to biological difference, strengthened caste boundaries, consolidated caste-based groups and bred intra-community hatred and bigotry (Brubaker 2015).

Second, I have demonstrated the need to take the middle castes more seriously. Most of the prominent Gurkha caste groups explored in this study belong to middle ranks of Nepal's social hierarchy. The Nepalese diaspora in the UK differs from the Indian community in the sense that in the former, it is the middle castes that have been publicly challenging the elite castes. Although there are a few Dalit caste groups among the Gurkhas, they have not been politically active in asserting their freedom from traditional discrimination and prejudice. Angry discussions of caste domination, which I address in **Chapter Five**, are limited to the private sphere. Although the situation of the Nepalese low castes is similar to, if not worse than, that of the Indian Dalits, this has not come to public notice.

Thus, my argument here is that the UK caste debate needs to be expanded in terms of whose voices are heard. I believe it is not only the high and low castes that comprise the Indian diaspora in the UK: there must be many other caste groups in the middle as well. To date, there seems no knowledge of how these intermediate groups may have played a part in actively reproducing or suppressing overseas caste. Exploration of these middle groups may enable academic researchers and policymakers to arrive at better conclusions regarding, among other things, the question of anti-caste discrimination legislation.

Fourth, which partly relates to the first point, is my analysis of overseas caste from a transnational perspective. Ghuman (2011) initiates this by devoting a chapter to how caste operates in the Punjabi village in which he grew up. This is not sufficient, however, given that he uses caste in India more as a background. There is no analysis of the direct or indirect link between Dalit politics in contemporary India and the UK. I suggest that, as evidenced by the literature produced by campaign groups such as Voice of Dalit International and International Dalit Solidarity Network, the rise of the Indian Dalits in the UK is partly fuelled by the much longer history of the Dalit movement in India that extends as far back as the times of Phule and Ambedkar in the 19th and 20th centuries, respectively.

I have shown in **Chapters Three** and **Four** how the ethnic uprisings of prominent Gurkha caste associations in the UK have been inspired and influenced by Nepal's ongoing politics of anti-high caste in the guise of an ethnic identity movement (Lawoti and Hangen 2013; Gellner 2009). Gurkha activists are also raising funds and support for their brethren's fight against the Bahun and Chhetri in Nepal, which has been raging since the early 1990s (although it is relatively dormant now). It becomes clear now that had these Gurkhas immigrated at a different time in history, or had they comprised mostly high or low castes, the Nepalese diaspora would possibly not have been as sharply divided as it is in the UK today. This is because a) there would probably not have been so many caste associations; and, b) they would not have been so active.

Whereas the high castes have been in the UK since the 1980s in significant numbers, they have established few caste associations. As members of the dominant castes in Nepal, there is no need for them to ethnicize their identities in Nepal and in diasporic communities. It would have been a totally different scenario had the majority Gurkhas been the Dalits. Would they have initiated a strong Dalit movement against the hegemony of the higher castes? This would certainly have put the Dalit in a much better position than that which they are in now; however, it is difficult to predict whether they would have initiated a movement from the diaspora, in part because, unlike in India, there has been no influential Dalit movement in Nepal (Folmar 2013).

This takes me to the fifth contribution that my research makes to the study of overseas caste; i.e., the important context of colonialism, in particular military recruitment. This has indeed been a major focus of analysis in previous studies of overseas Indians in which caste has been of central interest (See Chapter One). In their edited collection on overseas caste, Schwartz (1967) – along with other scholars' more recent studies of Indians in former British plantation colonies – agreed upon two basic findings about diasporic caste: 1) Caste generally failed to resurrect when indentured coolies became free and set about rebuilding their lives outside of the plantations; and, 2) the failure of caste was greatly attributable to the colonial policies and practices of recruiting and organizing the coolies. Driven solely by economic rationality aimed at maximizing profit, both recruiters and plantation owners treated the coolies very poorly. And, significantly, they neither selected specific castes for recruitment nor respected caste norms on the

estates. Consequently, as Lal (2013) who is himself a descendant of a coolie, has written about Fiji Indians – following Jayawardena (1980) and others – the freed labourers struggled to recreate the fine-tuned caste order of village India. Whereas the broader *varna* system, which reifies the superiority of the Brahmin and inferiority of the low caste, eventually came into force, the actual caste system was not revived. Coming as they did from vast regions of northern and central India, people could easily pass as members of a different caste; and, lower castes could claim higher status. So, as Singh (2014) asserts, the indenture system acted as a leveller of caste. This continues to be the dominant theme of scholarship on overseas caste, particularly in the context of indentured coolies and their descendants.

Using the case of Gurkha service, I have demonstrated that the same postcolonial analysis of caste is useful to better understand modern and free migrants to the West. As shown in **Chapter One**, colonial Britain, while not conquering Nepal, used the same principle of caste with the British Gurkhas that it used with the Indian Army. Caste-selective recruitment and organization became much more central after the 1857 Sepoy Revolt, which was, in the British understanding at the time, triggered mainly by the caste sensitivities of the high-caste Rajput and Brahmin soldiers (Streets 2004). This heightened sensitivity of caste continued to guide the Brigade of Gurkhas, which was formed after India's independence in 1947. And, to date, the same principle more or less holds. The British have not only operated caste-specific regiments but also, counterintuitively perhaps, enforced Brahmanic Hinduism upon these soldiers who

belonged to more mixed and localized religious traditions. Even today, when Gurkha castes and others are clamouring for their separate religio-cultural identities in the face of the dominant high caste in Nepal, the Gurkha regiments continue to predominantly observe orthodox Hinduism as their official religion. They continue to observe the Hindu festival of Dashain, for example, as their major holiday.

This colonial historiography of the caste-sensitive policy of the Gurkha Army is useful for understanding (See **Chapter Two**) the migration of Gurkha veterans. For example: a) Why was the trajectory of Gurkha migration marked by a sudden flow of tens of thousands of retired soldiers and their dependents after the change in immigration policies in 2004 and 2009; b) why do the Gurkha immigrants mainly comprise the four middle castes; and, c) how was it possible that many of the veterans' families were actually related to each other and often hailed from the same regions in Nepal? All these questions are, as I have earlier argued, crucial to understanding the ability of the Gurkhas to quickly reconstitute their caste communities, and to use caste as a central principle of their community organization. The connection is very clear. Up until the mid 1990s, there were only four Gurkha infantry regiments specific to the four castes; i.e., the Gurung, Magar, Rai ad Limbu. Today, the entire Gurkha community in the UK is broadly divided into four caste-specific formal organizations. Furthermore, similar to the environment in the regiment, the high and low castes are disparaged and despised.

I believe that a comparable analysis is possible among at least some of the South Asian migrants currently domiciled in the West, particularly the Sikhs. It is common knowledge

that the Sikhs in the diaspora are divided into numerous *gurdwaras,* which are both religious centres and communities. Moreover, most of them are divided along caste lines. Although various scholars have described and analysed this situation in the UK, US and some European countries, they have not paid particular attention to the fact that a majority of these Sikhs were the Jat from specific regions of the Punjab, who were recruited into the colonial Indian Army in large numbers. And, as suggested earlier, caste was a central principle in Sikh regiments.

A particularly important contribution of my study has been my analysis of the reproduction of caste among Nepalis in response to the local exclusion and discrimination by members of the dominant White British community. As I show in **Chapter Six**, contrary to the deep admiration extended to them by the British, as reflected in the media coverage prior to their arrival, many Gurkhas and their relatives have subsequently been subjected to discrimination and racial prejudice now they have settled in Britain. This is very clear in the towns of Aldershot and Farnborough, for example, where local MP Gerald Howarth has personally made numerous anti-immigrant comments in public. The newcomers, particularly the elderly, have been physically targeted and harassed in the streets. This should have brought the castes together, cemented the ties among the Nepalis. But, this has not happened. Due to the various reasons outlined above, their hostile reception by the local host community has further exacerbated the problem of separation of castes. This has not happened as a matter of policy; rather, it has happened spontaneously. When under threat, immigrants seek their place of safety and security. Many Gurkhas have sought such refuge in their

own caste, sub-caste, village communities as well their extended families and kinship groups.

Transnationalism and Gurkhas

Thus, from every perspective, Gurkha lives are intertwined with home and host countries, original and receiving societies. Gurkha being and belonging are being constantly constructed and reconstructed in transnational social fields (Levitt and Schiller 2004), and in the process, caste identities are becoming increasingly salient. Only by utilizing the concept of transnationalism can we properly understand why the Gurkhas have been so keen to reconstitute their castes, even though these communities are distinct from family and state. And, perhaps more importantly, caste is an alien concept in the UK.

My argument is that caste consciousness has spread like wildfire, massively dividing the diasporic community. Following the argument of Werbner (2002), this has mainly been due to the transnational politics being played out in the diasporic public sphere. Werbner's analysis of intra-community politics among Pakistani Muslims currently domiciled in Manchester, England, is highly comparable. However, she depicts a messier picture that demonstrates the competing interests of different constituents including conservative older men, more liberal-minded youth and women. While she claims that family, kinship and caste support make an important difference to an individual's ability to achieve leadership positions, she does not expand on this

proposition. In similar vein, Gellner (2015) shows that in Britain today, Nepalis are increasingly segmented vis-à-vis several issues including religion, region, language, occupation and ethnicity. He, however, seems reluctant to spell out the issue of caste, although it is embedded in the repertoire of ethnicity.

So, my thesis has validated the claims of many scholars such as Glick-Schiller *et al.* (1994), Portes (1999; 2015), Levitt and Schiller (2004), Vertovec (2009), Schiller (2013) that migrant lives should be understood through a lens of transnationalism. Gurkha caste, as used in this thesis, cannot be properly understood without this perspective. The issues of identity and politics, including those seen within and without migrant communities, must be understood in this light for a better understanding of migration and settlement. As Vertovec (2001) asserts, identities are often constructed and negotiated transnationally.

Analysing caste through this transnational framework may enable scholars to identify new forms of caste, perhaps resurgence of it even in communities of the ex-indentured in former British plantation colonies. Accepted, the colonial policies of recruiting and organizing the coolies greatly deterred the revival of caste overseas. However, perhaps this is time, *contra* Shah (2015a, 2015b) and Singh (2014), to look beyond colonial history and focus instead upon what is happening in the contemporary world, where lives are lived; identities are forged, and reformed across national boundaries – where ideas float instantly, and honour and prestige need to be defended constantly on the

Internet (Sahoo and de Kruijf 204). In this changing environment, even in Haiti and Fiji, where caste originally lost ground, it may have found a new lease of life.

In the end, having seen such a rapid and forceful resurgence, and reconfiguration, of Nepalese caste and casteism among Gurkhas in the UK, a question may arise: What is likely to happen to the Nepalese community in future? Will caste ultimately triumph over nation, or vice versa? In fact, I did put this question to all of my interviewees, and they were quite confused. Whereas some thought caste would probably be important within the diasporic community for a long time, others struggled to believe this because British society would continue to identify them with their nationality as a distinct ethnic group. Caste was considered strong given its notions of biological connection (family, relatives, villages), but then whether this level of internal diversity – and division – could sustain in a foreign country over a period of time remained questionable.

I believe really the future depends upon what happens in the world, particularly in Nepal and the UK. For example, if and when Nepal's ethnic/*janajati* issues are resolved, many Gurkhas may become much less radicalized. This will possibly weaken the caste associations, with many Nepalis abandoning their caste groups and joining national organizations. But, this will also depend upon the extent to which the high-caste diaspora can accept the eventualities and accommodate the changing situation in the diaspora – as well, upon how well British society will treat these military men and their families.

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